

Tripura: A Chronicle of Politicisation of the Refugees and Ethnic Tribals

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Abstract

The emergence of political consciousness and introduction of democratic institutions took long time in the Princely State of Tripura. After Partition, Tripura formally joined the Indian Union and the major crisis arose from the political and cultural hegemony of the Bengali refugees over the domicile tribals. The refugees had earned respectable spaces in the socio-cultural milieu of the state. They could situate them in a new political framework, which gave birth to a political structure different from other two major Bengali refugee absorbent states, West Bengal and Assam. The paper would try to locate the transformation process in the political order from the structure of a princely state to a democratic government within the Centre-State binaries. It seeks to explore the root causes of refugee - tribal agitations, strategies and changes. It attempts to find out how the huge refugee population itself became a decisive factor in the political arena of the post-partition Tripura.

I. Introduction

The end of colonial rule in the Indian subcontinent and birth of two nations, India and Pakistan, was accompanied by communal politics and riots, and consequently, significantly a large portion of the paranoid religious minorities in both the nations moved to the other as refugees. Absorption of the massive number of refugees had huge ramification in the receiving areas of both the nations. Besides resulting in demographic imbalance, it inescapably led to ethnic divide and social tension, competition for scarce resources as well as struggle for political hegemony. One of the classic examples of this is the present state of Tripura, which was a convenient site for the Indian State to accommodate a large chunk of the Bengali refugees from East Pakistan for the history shared in common by the colonial Princely State and East Bengal renamed as East Pakistan after the partition. Notwithstanding the common people of Tripura initially welcomed the people migrated from East Pakistan as they

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were all Bengali speaking people and had traditional socio-cultural links, the attitudes of the hosts changed with every additional wave of refugees migrated to the tiny political unit of the Indian State. Sentimentalism changed to apprehension, care changed to fear and amity transformed to hostility. With this backdrop, this paper tries to locate the transformation process in the political order, the process of transformation from the structure of the Princely State to a democratic government within the ambit of the Indian federal structure. It also seeks to explore the root causes of refugee and tribal agitations alongside other political discourses involving myriad strategies and changes including the political leaderships in Tripura. Attempt has also been made to find out how the refugee population became a decisive political factor in the electoral politics in the state marked by remarkable ethnic diversity. Certainly it demands a critical engagement especially with growing political apprehension and fear of the host society of being loser of political hegemony with the every wave of refugee moved in.

II. The Broad Political Scenario of Tripura during the Pre-Partition Period

Tripura, comprising of both hills and plain territory, was geographically situated in the peripheral quarters of Bengal, amidst the migration routes. It was beside the Ahom state and connected up till Arakan.¹ Thus, it had experienced some turbulence caused by the centre of the Mughal dynasty as well as crises due to foreign invasion from time to time since the fifteenth century. The original inhabitants of the hill portion, which was indeed the other side of the Chittagong Hill Tracts of the then East Bengal, were tribals. However, the tendency of in-migration and out-migration of the tribes from the mythical period proves its popular identity of a hospitable and accommodative state.² According to *Rajmala*, the court chronicle of the Tripura Maharajas, about 150 Hindu kings had ruled Tripura for an uninterrupted period of about 350 years from the legendary period.³ The strategic location of Tripura was such that it necessitated constant interaction between the Nawab rulers of adjacent Bengal and Maharajas of Tripura, which began almost simultaneously with the establishment of the Manikya dynasty (1280 AD).⁴ Thus, the Maharajas had to negotiate with the internal issues of crises and continue regular warfare against the external invaders, especially the Sultans of Bengal, essentially to keep control over the Chittagong-Sylhet region, the plain portion of Tripura.

As there were two separate divisions in the Princely State of Tripura, the community identities of the subjects were indeed diverse. The inhabitants of the plain Tripura territory or the Chakla Roshanabad were Bengalis, both Hindus and Muslims. When the Hindus mostly belonged to the educated professional classes, the Muslims were

¹ This area was described as 'Pratikara' in *Maharajoang* and also described as 'Khuratan' in *Rajoang*, both published from Arakan (Brohmadesh). 'Rajmala Barnito Amader Tripura' (Tripura Rajya and Tripura Jela) in *Amader Tripura* (in Bengali), Baishak, 1377 BS, p. 18

² O. S. Adhikari, *Four Immigrant Tribes of Tripura- Their Life and culture*, Directorate of Research, Tribal Welfare Department, Government of Tripura, Agartala, 1988, p. 10

³ Jitendra Chandra Pal, *Rajmalar Tripura: Kichhu Tothyo, Kichhu Bitarko* (in Bengali), Saikat, Agartala, 2003, pp. 15-17

⁴ R. C. Majumdar, *History and Culture of Indian People: The Delhi Sultanate*, vol. VI, p. 209

primarily farmers or sharecroppers. It was in the year 1658; Tripura went under the direct control of the Mughals.⁵ Although the Mughals could capture the territory popularly known as *Parbotyo Tripura* or Hill Tipperah, they were not familiar with the misty climate and humid environment there. It was, therefore, decided to shift the military base from Udaypur, the capital of the hill Tripura portion to plain Tripura, chiefly to make their soldiers comfortable.⁶ The occupied portion of plain Tripura entered into the Mughal rent roll as *Sarkar Udaipur*. They gave the state a status named *Udaypur Rajosyo Pargana*.⁷ The taxes had mainly to be collected from the plains, as the hill portion had little surplus production. In 1764, the British East India Company took control of whole of Bengal. Thus, some other parts of Bengal, which had been under the Mughal Empire was naturally taken over by the British administration too.⁸ Tripura became a British protectorate in 1809 and the Maharajas were recognised as sovereigns by the British in 1838. In that particular process, Tripura became a Princely State, and the British Government appointed an agent to assist the Maharaja in the administration in 1871.⁹

The Princely State, however, had to suffer severe crisis, especially, in every succession of the royal family members besides ravages caused by several Kuki invaders between 1826 and 1862.¹⁰ Hence, the monarchy had to negotiate with both internal and external threats constantly. The original inhabitants of Tripura were tribals, and the monarchy that dominated was based on the idea of divinity. The common illiterate tribals were comfortable with the existing socio-political arrangements of the monarchy. However, with gradual colonial interventions, the state machinery assumed a bureaucratic pattern and economy became monetized.¹¹ The changes led to emergence of a 'non-tribal middle class' which led the anti-monarchical and anti-imperialist movements within the state.¹² This educated Hindus were settled down in the state with the invitation from the monarchy, chiefly to work for the administration. Therefore, there was an expectation amongst them that the monarchy would be benevolent and enlightened to introduce structural reforms, but it received divergent reactions.¹³

⁵ Pannalal Roy, *Tripurar Raj Amole Praja Bidroho* (in Bengali), Tripura Bani Prakashani, Agartala, 2008, p. 16

⁶ Dipak Kumar Choudhury, *Political Agent o Deshio Rajyo, Sanghat Sahajogita Unnoyon: Tripura 1971-1890* (in Bengali), Progressive Publishers, Kolkata, p. 26

⁷ Pannalal Roy, *Tripurar Rajnoitik Itihas* (in Bengali), Naba Chandana Prakashani, Agartala, 2014, pp. 30-34

⁸ Dipak Kumar Chaudhuri (ed.), *Administration Report of the Political Agency, Hill Tipperah (1878-79 to 1889-1890)*, Vol. II, Tripura State Tribal Cultural Research Institute and Museum, Government of Tripura, Agartala, 1996, p. 1

⁹ Dinesh Chandra Saha, *Adhunik Tripura* (in Bengali), Writer's Publications, Agartala, 2015, p. 43

¹⁰ Jagadish Gan Choudhury, *A Constitutional History of Tripura*, Parul Prakashani, Agartala, 2004, pp. 12-14

¹¹ Malaya Banerjee, 'State Formation Process of Tripura: The Economic Roots', *Proceedings of North East India History Association (NEIHA)*, Eighteenth Session, Agartala, 1998, p. 337

¹² Samir Kumar Das, 'Wrestling with my Shadow': The State and Immigrant Muslims in Contemporary West Bengal' in Abhijit Dasgupta, Masahiko Tagawa and Abul Barkat (ed.), *Minorities and the State: Changing Social and Political Landscape of Bengal*, Sage, New Delhi, 2011, p.49

¹³ Ranjit Kr. Dey, *Socio- Political Movements in India: A Historical Study of Tripura*, Mittal Publications, New Delhi, 1998, 151

The demand for responsible form of government in Tripura was first heard in late 1920s. The concretization of political movement towards this was developed in two stages. Organized political activities flourished during the nationalist struggle and it finally graduated to a certain type of resistance movement, chiefly against the oppressive aspects of the princely rule and its administration.¹⁴ Revolutionary organizations like Anushilan and Jugantar groups contributed in emergence of so-called organised political movements in Tripura. The Swadeshi Movement, followed by Khilafat and Non-cooperation added further political awareness and change in the ideology towards the nationalist movements.¹⁵ It facilitated emergence of few semi-political and kind of reformist organizations such as Chhartra Sangha or Bharati Sangha (1927) under the aegis of the Anushilan Samiti. Consolidation of a modern political structure and the role of government in that culture began from 1930s.¹⁶ The Act of 1935 had changed equations of Indian States with the Raj, made it the 'Crown Representative'.¹⁷

However, consolidation of more organised political movements in Tripura began with the formation of the Tripura Rajya Gana Parishad in 1935. That was the first declared political organization in Tripura. It pointed out categorically in a resolution that ideologically the organisation 'would follow the line of Congress'.¹⁸ Notwithstanding the organisation was pioneered by some of the tribal leaders such as Sachindra Lal Singha, Hariganga Basak, Sukhamoy Sengupta, Umesh Lal Singha, they could not popularize the organization among the common tribal people. In 1939, with '20-point Charter of Demand', they conveyed public resentment against all feudal privileges.¹⁹ The Parishad demanded land reforms. Another premier political organisation, Rajya Janamangal Samiti formed in 1939. It had roots in progressive-left associations. They worked as 'appropriate political platform' within heterogeneous groups. The Samiti was formed by young communists such as Biren Datta, Bansi Thakur, Pravat Chandra Roy, Sukumar Bhowmik and Kriti Singha. They raised slogan to create responsible government under the aegis of the Maharaja with '10-point political' and '16-point social and economic' demands.²⁰ They identified 'indifference and unsympathetic attitude of the State officials that contributed to' miseries of tribals and non-tribals, and emphasised the crises of illiteracy, indebt condition and over taxation. Their primary agenda was development of awareness amongst the tribals to uplift their material

¹⁴ Nalini Ranjan Roychoudhury, *Tripura Through the Ages: A Short History from the Earliest Times to 1947 A.D.*, Sterling Publishers, New Delhi, 1983, p. 69

¹⁵ Tapas Debnath, *Amar Shahar Agartala: Itihas, Andolan Nagarayan* (in Bengali), Book World, Agartala, 2010, pp. 62-63

¹⁶ Ramaprasad Dutta, *Agartalar Itibrittya* (in Bengali), Pounomi Prakashan, Agartala, 2006, p. 16

¹⁷ K. B. Jamatia, *Modernity in Tradition: A Historical Study of the Jamatia Tribe of Tripura*, Akshar Publications, Agartala, 2007, p. 206

¹⁸ Tripur Chandra Sen, *Tripura in Transition (1923-1957 AD)*, First Edition, Published by the Author, Agartala, 1970, p. 22

¹⁹ Hariganga Basak, *Tripura Rajye Praja Andolaner Gorar Katha, Samaj* (Weekly Newspaper in Bengali), August 15, 1956

²⁰ Benimadhab Majumder, *The Legislative Opposition in Tripura*, Tripura State Tribal Cultural Research Institute and Museum, Government of Tripura, Agartala, 1997, p. 9

condition.²¹ They experimented with two political tactics. One, they were not against the Maharaja, two, their chief propaganda and attack was against the state officials.

The Tripura Rajya Jana Siksha Samiti was the first ethno-nationalist outfit in Tripura, with the mission of tribal emancipation. It was established in 1945 by eleven educated youths under the leadership of Biren Datta. The other members were Sudhannya Deb Burma, Dasarath Deb Burma, Hemanta Deb Burma, Aghore Deb Burma and Nilmoni Deb Burma.²² The veteran leaders of the Jana Mangal Samiti started working among the tribals in the hilly areas primarily to enlighten them for their freedom from the world of superstition and various mystic beliefs. The boarding (for tribal students) attached with the Umakanta Academy in Agartala and Puratan or Natun boarding in Khowai became centres of their ideological base. Their two principal objectives were eradication of illiteracy and superstition and struggle against poverty.²³ The Siksha Samiti tried to question tribal's absolute allegiance and faith in the institutionalised kingship. They organized them against social injustice and feudal oppression of the Maharajas.²⁴ The Siksha Samiti was firm on their demand of compulsory participation of the tribals in education to uplift their society from the 'curse of illiteracy and poverty that have descended on the tribal society of Tripura during the thirteen hundred and fifty years of princely regime'.²⁵ D.A.W. Brown, the then Education Minister of Tripura was a patron of mass education. He helped the Samiti to establish 400 schools, out of which the state recognized as many as 300 schools, primarily founded in secluded hilly areas.²⁶

The Jana Siksha Movement acted as window in the lives of both rural tribals and non-tribals. It made them a political category, struggling within neglected landscapes, it laid foundation of democratic movements. They got hold over hills and plains by such initiatives.²⁷ Tribals became enlightened and alert about unfair demands, customary exploitations imposed by the Maharaja and his administration.²⁸ Apart from the Bengalis, the Reangs rose to revolt in 1942-43 under the leadership of Ratanmani Noatia against the royal agents.²⁹ Though the Royal Forces suppressed it ruthlessly, it however betrayed unsympathetic attitude of the rulers towards tribals. Communal organizations like Anjuman Islamia (1945), Tripura Rajya Moslem Praja Majlish (1946) and Hindu Mahasabha also became operational in the pre-Partition phase. The Bengali Hindu Sammelani, another faction in Hindu communal line merged with the Tripura branch

²¹ Mahadev Chakravarti (ed.), *Biren Datta o Tar Rachana Sangraha* (in Bengali), Naba Chandana Prakashani, Agartala, 2011, p. 23

²² Agartala, 2008, p. 15

²³ Nilmani Deb Burman, *Gadyasangraha: Janasiksha Andolan o Anyanya Prabandha* (in Bengali), Bhasa, Agartala, 2005, pp. 10-11

²⁴ *Jwala*, Part- 2, Vol. 4

²⁵ R. K. Debbarma, *Heroes and Histories: Making of Rival Geographies of Tripura*, NMMML Occasional Paper, History and Society, No. 34, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, 2013, p. 14

²⁶ *Tripura Administrative Reports, 1937-1946*, File No V/10/2109, IOR

²⁷ *Iapri*, July 11, 1945

²⁸ Notification No 176-C, *Tripura District Gazetteers*. File No. B 52/ S.9/ A.3, Adm. Deptt. (Unpublished), 1945, TSA

²⁹ JagatJyoti Roy, *Bidroho Bibortan o Tripura* (in Bengali), Tripura Darpan, Agartala, 1999, p. 34

of Mahasabha in 1946.³⁰ The Tripura Rajya Praja Mandal appealed to the Administration for treatment of the riot stricken refugees as guests. The government agreed to be generous by extending help and support to the distressed.³¹

The Praja Mandal had demanded 'responsible government through elections' and it might introduced a broad-based political platform. They urged for democratic system, offered strong resistance against pro-Pakistani conspirators and opposed anti-Bengali propaganda of the Seng-Krak, the militant wing of Bir Bikram Tripura Sangha. They began to incite the tribals, introduced the cult of 'clenched fist' against Bengalis.³² They started publishing a bulletin, *Tripura Rajyer Katha* edited by Biren Datta.³³ Maharaja Bir Bikram and the Administration were frightened by such developments. He premeditated tri-polar politics by launching an organization called Tripur Sangha with help of the tribal Sardars. It emphasized on the ethnic solidarity.³⁴ The Maharaja tried to divide the communities on material interests. The tenure of this organization was short lived. It was eventually wiped out in fourteen months after the sudden death of Maharaja Bir Bikramon May 17, 1947, just before the Partition.

III. The Post-Partition Political landscape: Politics and Policies around the Refugees

The Partition had major impact on Tripura. The earlier equations changed with amalgamation of Samities and political parties. With the decision of merger of Tripura with India in 1949, 'the second phase of the unfortunate fate' of the tribals started for 'living in land of Bengalis'.³⁵ Along with the change of demographic profiles, the question of 'right over land' became a debated issue for designing further settlement plans for the Hindu middle or lower middle classes. The Ceiling Act introduced after 1949, land ownership of the royal family was identified.³⁶ However, all the categories of surplus lands were naturally left out from settlement plans for the refugees. Consequently, the crisis coupled with encroachment of tribal lands and purchasing it at high price by the Bengalis, both in urban and rural areas, aggravated the situation. The Communists demanded for 'fundamental social transformation of the agrarian structure' for refugee rehabilitation.³⁷ The Central Relief and Rehabilitation Department decided to encroach the reserved tribal lands. Some tribal clans were forcibly evicted too. The tribals were not even aware of the capture of two major avenues of economy by the Bengali refugees, i.e. professional recruitments and hold over forestlands. The gravity of the crises went unidentified for long time. The tribals were confined within their closed society, with definite social values and their traditional beliefs.

³⁰ 'Tripura Bengali Hindu Sammelani', A Leaflet, 18 Chaitra 1356 T. E. (1946), Manimaya Deb Burma, 'Tripura Bengali Hindu Sammelani', *Dainik Sambad*, February 2, 1978

³¹ Biren Dutta, *Nirbachito Rachona* (in Bengali), Gana Sahitya Prakashan, Agartala, 1993, p. 45

³² Bijan Mahanta, *Tripura in the Light of Socio-Political Movements since 1945*, Progressive Publishers, Kolkata, 2004, pp. 31-32

³³ Biren Datta, 'Prajari Dabi' (in Bengali), *Dainik Sambad*, December 13, 1977

³⁴ Kamal Roy Choudhury, 'Jana Siksha Andolan' in *Gomati Quarterly* (in Bengali), Vol. 79, Agartala, 1978

³⁵ Sudhanya Deb Burma, *Hakuch Khurich* (in *Kak-barok*) *Paharer Kole* (Bengali translation), Akshar Publication, Agartala, 2004, pp. 165-166

³⁶ Pannalal Roy, *Tripurar Bharatbhukti o Chakla Roshanabad*, Tripura Darpan, Agartala, 2003, p. 70

³⁷ *Tripurar Katha* (in Bengali), No. 1, March 1951

Like West Bengal and Assam, the refugees were initially dependent on the Congress, as it had consented to Partition, and was, therefore, considered responsible for the emergence of a category called 'refugees'.³⁸ The ruling Congress government at the Centre and the state were desperate to keep their reputation. The Congress Udbastu Sahajya Samiti was created to look after issues on refugees. The veteran leftist leaders working in hills were determined to resist the *mahajan*-police-military nexus related to land issues, and repression on tribals. They sought to organise the tribal and non-tribals (refugees) to exercise 'democratic rights' in hills and plains of Tripura.³⁹ The Tripura Rajya Mukti Parishad came into being at this crucial juncture. Its success was derived from the trust acquired by activists of the Jana Siksha Samiti.⁴⁰ The Mukti Parishad organized a procession in Agartala on August 15, 1948 and carried out armed struggle against the Congress government. The state government declared Martial Law in entire hills to stamp out the opposition in 1949.⁴¹ The imposition of the military rule led to Golaghati carnage (1949) in Padmabil and Champa-haor. The death of 6 tribals made the domiciles apprehensive about the Bengalis, they lost faith in the Congress. In order to defy atrocities, a strong volunteer crop and military organ named the 'Shanti Sena Bahini' was formed.⁴² It kept close watch on the feudal oppression and social evil. Even anti-famine committee was established during the temporary periods of crisis.

The Tripura Rajya Mukti Parishad was renamed as Gana Mukti Parishad in 1950. It started mobilization to introduce democracy by conducting election and making ministers through the vote of the citizens. It started running parallel government in a portion of hills, inhabited by few lakhs of tribal *jhumias* and Bengali refugees. The Government had taken measures against 'anti-state' activities of the Communists, irrespective of the initiatives of the Gana Mukti Parishad for working uniformly on refugee and tribal fronts. But resentments among the communities started from early 1950s. The policy makers were concerned for the cause of the Bengali refugees.⁴³ While getting liquid cash was decisive for the poverty-ridden tribals, government distributed regular cash among the refugees. With dissolution of kingship, when the Princely State of Tripura had joined Indian Union in 1949, huge number of Bengali government servants lost their jobs. Some professionally qualified Bengali refugees made job market more vulnerable and competitive.

The Congress was working for the refugees essentially on vote-bank politics, while the Communists voiced for all the downtrodden classes including the refugees and tribals,

³⁸ Debaprasad Sengupta, *Tripurar Ganaandolan o Communist Partyr Itikatha* (in Bengali), Tripura Darpan, Agartala, 1991, pp. 24-25

³⁹ *Barta*, August 4, 1949

⁴⁰ *Tripurar Katha*, An Essay by Dasharath Deb Burma, 3rd Year, 2nd Issue, Agartala, May 25, 1953

⁴¹ Saroj Chanda (ed.), *Two Unpublished Documents of the Party in the Period of its Formation* (in Bengali), Tripura Darpan, Agartala, 1983, p. 11

⁴² BimanDhar, *Tripurae Communist Party: Prekhit Golaghati Bidroho* (in Bengali), Poulomi Prakashan, Agartala, 2012, p. Introduction, p.6

⁴³ Bhismodeb Bhattacharyya, *Sekaler Agartala* (in Bengali), Published by the Author, Agartala, 1989, p. 12

demanding for introduction of schemes for both refugees and tribals.⁴⁴In 1950, 'The condition of the refugees stationed at Agartala was turning from bad to worse. One refugee committed suicide on the 10th July 1950 in Durgabari Camp near the Maharaja Palace. It was learnt that the deceased could not secure food or money from the Relief Officer. Next day, another refugee was reported to have died as a result of starvation at Maharajganj Camp'.⁴⁵They realized the need to organize themselves under political parties, as the administration was not providing with adequate doles or getting essentials from the relief office. Organizations like Purbabanga Sankhalaghu Kalyan Samiti (left) and Congress Udbastu Sahajya Samiti had strong political affiliations. But, the Bastutyagi Janakalyan Samiti, Tripura Rajya Nath Samiti or Tripura Rudrapal Samity were just working for refugee causes. A branch of the East Bengal Relief Committee established in Agartala. Shyama Prasad Mookerjee first talked about amalgamation of these groups, advised to fight through a common political platform.⁴⁶

Accordingly, Tripura Central Relief and Rehabilitation Association was formed and it raised 18 demands, including voting rights of the migrants.⁴⁷ It organized rallies and introduced hunger strikes and *satyagraha* with demands of schemes for better living and speedy resettlement procedure. The Chief Minister Sachindralal Singh failed to foresee the danger of placing the land hungry peasants belonging to relatively advanced Bengalis in direct confrontation with backward *jhumias*.⁴⁸ The state government provided them with land, along with other facilities like ration cards at Mandai, Takarjala, Jampuijala, Khowai and Kalyanpur in West Tripura.⁴⁹Most of the refugee colonies were built in tribal lands, surrounded by tribal villages, as per the recommendation from the state government. The government had taken projects to grow cash crops in the hilly regions⁵⁰ and consequently, the Tribals lost their natural rights over forests. After the formation of democratic government in Tripura, the administration headed by the Congress got involved in refugee rehabilitation on a war footing. They were extra cautious as the General Election of 1952 was ahead.⁵¹ However, the leftists were successful in achieving its primary goal in the first General Election of 1952. Biren Dutta and Dasharath Deb were elected as representatives' and the Members of Parliament, when they were in underground.⁵² A National Conference was held in 1952 when Nehru visited Tripura for discussing the problems of scheduled castes and tribes, after

⁴⁴ Suchintya Bhattachayya, *Genesis of Tribal Extremism in Tripura*, Gian Publishing House, New Delhi, 1991, pp. 130-131

⁴⁵ Report of the Assistant Central Intelligence Officer, Tripura State, to the Joint Secretary, Rehabilitation Department, Government of India. File No. 20-R/50 II (Secret), Rehabilitation Branch, Ministry of States, NAI

⁴⁶ *Janakalyan*, July 26, 1950

⁴⁷ *A Leaflet*, signed by Nibaran Chandra Ghosh, President, Tripura Central Refugee and Rehabilitation Organization, and Convener, All Tripura Refugee Convention, January 4, 1951

⁴⁸ File No. F. 21(19)- PD/56, Police Deptt. Annexure A, TSA

⁴⁹ Manas Paul, *The Eye Witness: Tales from Tripura's Ethnic Conflict*, Lancer, New Delhi-Frankfurt, 2009, p. 33

⁵⁰ File No. F. A, Year- 1950, Political Deptt. TSA

⁵¹ Suchintya Bhattachayya, *Genesis of Tribal Extremism in Tripura*, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 130-131

⁵² Dasharath Deb, '*Mukti Parishader Itikatha*', *Op. Cit.*, pp. 17-18

the Congress was defeated in that Election.⁵³ Dasharath Deb emphatically stated ‘Some area or areas of Tripura shall have to be set aside for the tribal alone and no other persons belonging to non-tribal communities should be allowed to settle there’.⁵⁴ He advocated for an Advisory Board on behalf of the Gana Mukti Parishad for settlement of refugees in those areas, but with members of all political organizations for issuing an ordinance. The Parishad advised to approach different political organizations like Communist Party, Kisan Samitis, Ganatantrik Sangha and Praja Socialist Party to represent this Advisory Board.⁵⁵

The tribal experience of having refugees in their lands was naturally a bit complex. The whole idea of enduring peaceful life suddenly confronted with land-hungry Bengali refugees.⁵⁶ The Ministry of States stated about pitiable condition of tribals in South Charilam and Khas Brajapur, Bishalgarh in 1953 that ‘It will be noticed that there is some trouble over the requisition of cultivable land by Government for the purpose of rehabilitating the displaced persons, with the result that the rightful owners are being deprived of the land which is the only means of livelihood’.⁵⁷ The migration of refugees pushed the tribals in the edge. The price of daily necessities like salt and dried fish sky rocketed. The refugees were grabbing plain lands and targeting the hills. The hilly terrain, which was the tribal territory by birth, was the first choice of the rehabilitation department for providing lands to the refugees under various schemes proposed by the Centre.⁵⁸

The hilly areas were considered as the sole source of survival and economic base of the tribals. With the building up of refugee colonies, the concept of ‘private property’ first emerged in ‘Hill Tripura’.⁵⁹ It led to the curtailing of the complete freedom of choosing portions of hills for *jhum* cultivations by the tribals.⁶⁰ The scientific measures taken by the state government to protect the environment and logical restrictions imposed on the tribals to give up *jhum*, posed a challenge to tribal entity for the first time. The imposition of ban on *jhum* was the final blow on their life and culture. The tribals lost their identity and romanticism of life around it. They started agitating against tribal land transfer and insisted that the Congress Government not to allow any more migration

⁵³ Krishna Bandyopadhyay (ed.), *Abiram Raktapat Tripuranarir Sangram* (in Bengali), Mahanirban Calcutta Research Group, Kolkata, 2005, p. 3

⁵⁴ ‘Memorandum Submitted to the Eighth Finance Commission by Tripura Tribal Areas Autonomous District Council’, 1960, Agartala, p. 1

⁵⁵ File No. 22 (240)- PA/ 53, Political A Section, Ministry of States, NAI

⁵⁶ The government continuously held it up. File No. F. 8(15)-GA/53, Home- General Administration Department, TSA

⁵⁷ File No. 49 (2)- P.P & R (53), P.P.R Section, Ministry of States, NAI

⁵⁸ Bikach Kumar Choudhury, *Genesis of Chakma Movement (1772-1989): Historical Background*, Agartala, Tripura Darpan, 1991, p. 10

⁵⁹ Interview with Bodhrong Deb Burma, a *Kok-barok* teacher by profession, taken in Agartala on 30 December 2012

⁶⁰ Malabika Das Gupta, ‘The Impact of militancy on the Economy of the *Jhumias* of the Northeast: A Study of Tripura’ in Abu Naser Saied Ahmed (ed.), *National Security Issues: Northeast India Perspective*, Omeo Kumar Das Institute of Social Change and Development, Akansha Publishing House, New Delhi, 2007, pp. 166-167

to Tripura from 1954.⁶¹The impact of such changes in demographic profile could be clearly visible in the city of Agartala. Anjali Barman, a refugee herself remarked, 'In early 1950s, Krishnanagar was full of houses owned by the tribals and later, it mostly occupied by the Bengalis'⁶²

The Gana Mukti Parishad had affirmed, 'in the present scramble of land, it is not possible for the tribals, particularly for tribal *jhumias* to secure land'.⁶³ So, in the areas inhabited by tribal people, all khas lands should be reserved for rehabilitation of tribals. The Communists had accordingly broadened their appeal, earned conviction of the masses by supporting rehabilitation of the *jhumias* along the line of the Bengali refugees, respectively.⁶⁴The Mukti Parishad demanded establishment of industry, commerce and agricultural cooperatives in Tripura in the conference of Sanjukta Bastuhara Parishad in 1953, for providing job to both the refugees and tribals.⁶⁵Gobind Ballav Panth, the Union Home Minister, stated in the Parliament in 1955 that the resettlement of refugees had reached a 'saturation point' and it would not be advisable to rehabilitate additional people in Tripura.⁶⁶The government of Tripura was firm to carry on the decision of the Centre and the Rehabilitation Department closed down its branch office in Agartala. They 'refused to accept the co-operation of Tripura Ganatantrik Samiti in providing refugee relief, inauguration of schools and industrial centers'.⁶⁸ The refugees started hunger strike in Durgabari under the leadership of Dasharath Deb, in which Bisymbor Nomo Das, a caste refugee died. The situation became so volatile that Indira Gandhi was compelled to visit Tripura for inspecting the condition of the refugees.⁶⁹

These agitations compelled the government to resettle the migrants at Nalkata in Kailashahar (North Tripura), Amtoli and Arundhatinagar (outskirts of Agartala). But, these incidents led the tribals to think that the refugees were the 'pet sons of the government' who were getting 'at least rupees one thousand a month'.⁷⁰ The demographic expansion and idyllic existence of tribals in a tradition-bound backward society were not the only factors responsible for their impoverishment. Exploitation by non- tribals and well off tribal families towards the poor tribals was significant. There was always a wide gap between what the tribal families were earning and how much they needed

⁶¹ Biman Dhar, *Onno Manus Onna Rajniti* (in Bengali), Tripura Darpan, Agartala, 2010, pp. 30-31

⁶² Such stories of exploitation of the uneducated and simple tribals can hear everywhere in Tripura. Quoted in Ritonkar Mukhopadhyay, 'OnyaAk Udbastu Upakhyan', in Sudipta Bandyapadhyay (ed.), *Charbaka* (in Bengali), Popular Culture- 3, Vol. 2, Issue. 3, 2015, p. 20

⁶³ Suchintya Bhattachayya, 'Genesis of Tribal Extremism', *Op. Cit.*, p. 131

⁶⁴ Narendra Chandra Debburma, Goutami Roy Chiran, Kumud Kundu Choudhry (ed.), *Tripurar Ganatantrik Andolonar Agrapathik: Prabhat Raer Rachana Sangraha o Smritikatha* (in Bengali), Agartala, 2002, p. 343

⁶⁵ BijanMahanta, 'Tripura in the Light of Socio-Political Movements', *Op. Cit.*, pp. 84-85

⁶⁶ Manas Paul, 'The Eye Witness', *Op. Cit.*, p. 30

⁶⁷ *Jagaran*, August 10, 1958

⁶⁸ File No. 22 (48)- PA/ 53, Political A Section, Ministry of States, NAI

⁶⁹ Dinesh Chandra Saha, *Tripurae Gana Andolonar Bichitra Dhara* (in Bengali), Writers Publication, Agartala, 2009, pp. 119-120

⁷⁰ Nripen Ckkrabarty, *Longtorai Amar Ghor* (in Bengali), Tripura Darpan, Agartala, 1996, pp. 6-7

to survive.⁷¹ Small sizes of their holdings, lack of irrigation and institutional credit facilities, paucity of non-farm job opportunities at the localities and unwillingness to adopt new means, ways of living increased their indebtedness. They had a tendency of taking money from moneylenders by mortgaging a piece of land and household. If the creditor did not possess anything, he had to render labour for the moneylender who would decide the duration of the period.⁷²

Some Bengali refugees started money lending business, land grabbing and practicing unfair means in trading with their tribal neighbours.⁷³ Thus, there was an unequal economic competition with the culturally advanced non-tribals, who later formed a middle class in Tripura. It increased their alienation from large tracts of land.⁷⁴ The government started conducting rehabilitation of the *jhumias* and refugees with equal precedence by then. But, crash programmes like allotting of lands; giving bullocks, milch cows, poultry birds, other subsidies were not feasible solutions for them. They had to be economically rehabilitated within their own ways of living, their geo-physical and psychic framework. The tribals were gladly accepted the majoritarian presence of the Bengali refugees in their land, they tolerated their dominance in cultural issues and in other privileged sectors, like education and administrative jobs in Tripura.

IV. Conflict of Interests between the Communities

As compulsions of electoral politics and party system, the indigenous tribals remained in the receiving end. However, they became more marginalized and their population was decreasing in every decade.⁷⁵ In 1921, percentage of total tribal population was 54.7, in 1941 it was 50.1, in 1961 it was 31.5 and in 1971 it was 28.9.⁷⁶ The official figures showed total 609,998 Bengalis migrated to Tripura in between 1947-1971, who had taken financial assistance from both the governments.⁷⁷ During the seventy-year period, 1901-1971, while the percentage increase in population for India as a whole was 129.6, the ratio for the north eastern India in general and Tripura in particular was 358.4 and 797.9 respectively.⁷⁸ The Townsman first encroached the villages and then the *jhum* lands of the hills.

Some extremist tribal organizations became vocal in those issues. From late 1950s, Tripuri identity politics took definite shape marked by ideological breaks from earlier

⁷¹ O. S. Adhikari, *The Problem of Indebtedness among the Tribals in Sadar Sub- Division of Tripura*, Directorate of Research, Department of Welfare for Schedule Tribes, Government of Tripura, Agartala, 1982, pp. 5-6

⁷² Interview with Nityananda Das, a school teacher by profession, taken on 29.12.2013 in Agartala, Tripura

⁷³ *Chiniha*, May 7, 1952

⁷⁴ B.P. Singh, 'North-East India: Demography, Culture and Identity Crisis' in *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 21, No. 2, 1987, p. 265

⁷⁵ *Boiri* (article in Bengali), Agartala, Sharodia Sankhya 1993, p. 6

⁷⁶ S. B. Saha, Socio-Economic Survey of the Noatia Tribes, Government of Tripura, Agartala, p. 3

⁷⁷ Subir Bhaumik, 'India's Northeast: Nobody's People in No-Man's Land' in Paula Banerjee, Sabyasachi Basu Roy Chaudhury, Samir Kumar Das (ed.), *Internal Displacement in South Asia: The Relevance of the UN's Guiding Principles*, Sage, New Delhi, 2005, p. 146

⁷⁸ J. P. Sinha, *Human Resources of North Eastern India*, 1982, pp. 59-60

discourses. Tripur Sangha Paharia Union, Adivasi Samiti and Tripura Rajya Adibasi Sangha started opposing Bengali dominance in the job market and state administration on ideological ground. In 1954, all these groups were merged to form Adivasi Sansad and represented modern political construction of Bengali as 'other' and 'outsider'.⁷⁹ A broad based common platform for the tribals of northeast India named Eastern Indian Tribal Union was established in 1957. They voiced that the refugee rehabilitation in Tripura has been standing in the way of tribal rehabilitation in the state, and hence no unqualified support to the refugee rehabilitation in Tripura was ensured from them.⁸⁰

Introduction of new acts and rules became necessary to check further alienation and displacement of tribals, as well as the effort to bring back illegally transferred lands. The Dhebar Commission Report of 1960 suggested formation of tribal development blocs in tribal compact areas as an 'experiment' and stated, 'The influx of displaced persons from Pakistan to Tripura has been enormous and has upset the local economy. It has greatly affected the tribals and has made the tribal problem acute. The right of the tribals in land should be safeguarded'.⁸¹ However, the Government of India enacted the Tripura Land Revenue and Land Reforms Act in 1960.⁸² The TLR & LR Act based on the primary understanding that unless the land ownership of the tribals ensured and protected by law, illegal transfer of their land to the non-tribals would not be stopped. Yet, alienation of indigenous population could not be checked effectively and permanently. The Act barred transfer of land from a tribal owner, under the section 187.⁸³ It was a bold step to protect tribal interests from government's front, yet 'benami' transfer and sale of lands continued.

With the enactment of Government of Union Territories Act, 1963, the Legislative Assembly was constituted in Tripura. It was empowered to make laws under section 18.⁸⁴ The Upajati Gana Mukti Parishad, which renamed again in 1964 from Gana Mukti Parishad, was the only party working to strengthen the tribal base and for their relevant rights.⁸⁵ This new identity politics was represented by three new political formations, the Tripura Upajati Jubo Samity (TUJS, a political party), the Tribal Student Formation (TSF, now Twipra Student Federation), and the Tripura National Volunteer (TNV, an underground group). Unlike previous narratives of Manikya rule as 'feudalistic', the past (prior to merger with India) was imagined as 'glorious'. TUJS was born with a bang in 1967 under the leadership of Sonacharan Debbarma.⁸⁶ TUJS was born apparently as a student organization, but it gradually entered into the political arena of

⁷⁹ Aribam Indubala Devi, *Amazing North East: Tripura*, Vij Books, New Delhi, 2010, p. 179

⁸⁰ Resolutions and Report of the 5th Central Conference of the GMP (unpublished in Bengali), 1960

⁸¹ N. C. Deb Barma, *History of the Land System & Land Management in Tripura (1872-2000 AD)*, Published by the Author, Agartala, 2005, p. 57

⁸² File No. 6/5/69 UTL, UTL Section, Ministry of Home Affairs, NAI

⁸³ The Rules were made under notification no. 74 (14)-Rev/ 60, dated the 13th April 1961, section 197. File No. 19/51/61- Judl. II, Judl. II Section, Ministry of Home Affairs, NAI

⁸⁴ File No. 6/5/69 UTL, UTL Section, Ministry of Home Affairs, NAI

⁸⁵ B.G. Verghese, *India's Northeast Resurgent: Ethnicity, Insurgency, Governance, Development*, Konark Publishing House, New Delhi, 1996, p. 169

⁸⁶ Manas Paul, 'The Eye Witness', *Op. Cit.*, p. 56

the state. It first carried out a long and sustained campaign, focused on decrease of tribal population from 70 to 30 percent.⁸⁷

The TUJS had support to the agenda of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) [CPI(M)] in the very first phase. Initially the party was also keen to portray the TUJS as its youth wing. But, looking at their further aims and ideas, Dasharath Deb felt such an organization might look 'communal', which would have negative impact on the 'democratic movement' initiated by the CPI(M).⁸⁸ The TUJS demanded active participation of tribals in the administration, self-management and adequate control over their own affairs under the Autonomous District Council (ADC) for the tribals, extension of the Inner Line Regulations and restoration of alienated tribal land under TLR & LR Act, 1960.⁸⁹ The Tripura National Volunteers (TNV) had always targeted the Bengali community, not the state. Prior to TNV, the *Seng-krak* (Clenched Fist) surfaced as tribal insurgent group in 1967. It always maintained close links with the Mizo National Front (MNF).⁹⁰

By 1969, TUJS floated a force of armed volunteers *Tripura Sena* and Bijoy Kumar Hrangkhawl was selected as the chief of this new outfit. Considering the sensitive nature of inter-community relations between Bengalis and tribals, particularly after the demographic change after the Liberation War of 1971, it demanded coverage of the Sixth Schedule, as it had enough potential to spark of the explosion. CPI(M)'s support to their demand evoked adverse reaction from the Bengalis. They perceived it as a threat to their land holdings and other rights. The *Amra Bangali*, a communal outfit of the non-tribals and political arm of the *Ananda Marg* had launched a counter campaign 'to protect the Bengalis' right opposing the ADC. The base of TUJS got stronger with their decision to contest in the Election of 1972.⁹¹ They demanded ADC for tribals under the Fifth Schedule of the Constitution.⁹² Right from 1974, they demanded setting up of schools under the banner of Tripura Tribal Linguistic Enterprise. They demanded restoration of *Kokbarok* as one of the official languages, and introduction of *Kokbarok* as medium of instruction for tribal students in Roman scripts.

V. Conclusion

In the absence of expansion of non- agricultural job opportunities in Tripura, pressure on the limited land had increased. In 1971, the percentage of agricultural workers to total workers in the state was 74.4 percent. Hence, the non-agricultural employment opportunities required expanding as an alternative. Otherwise, demographic upsurge due to natural increase and influx of immigrants, would effect as overcrowding on land. The non-tribals always tried coming out from lower economic position. They

⁸⁷ Saroj Chanda, *Tripura Ugro Jatiyotabader Birudhye* (article in Bengali), Tripura Darpan, Sharodia Sankhya, 1988, p. 49

⁸⁸ B.G. Verghese, 'India's Northeast Resurgent' *Op. Cit.*, p. 172

⁸⁹ File No. 6/5/69 UTL, UTL Section, Ministry of Home Affairs, NAI

⁹⁰ N. K. Das, 'Identity Politics and Social Exclusion', *Op. Cit.*, p. 1

⁹¹ Manas Paul, 'The Eye Witness', *Op. Cit.*, p. 63

⁹² Suchintya Bhattachayya, 'Genesis of Tribal Extremism in Tripura', *Op. Cit.*, p. 134

indeed tried their luck in new ventures, in which tribals were reluctant. So, they became the natural victims of the demographic pressure on land.⁹³ According to the census of 1971, *Kokborak* was the mother tongue of 360,654 tribals, which was total 79.8 percent of the total tribal population consisted of eighteen tribes and sub-tribes of the state.⁹⁴

The emergence of Bangladesh in 1971 did not fetch any positive change in the fate of the indigenous ethnic communities of Chittagong Hill Tracts. From 1971, the Chakmas of CHT claimed separate homeland for them.⁹⁵ The government supported the ideology of Bengali nationalism rendered patronage and rapid growth of the 'outsider' Bengali settlement in CHT, especially during the reign of General Zia-ur-Rehman and General Ershad.⁹⁶ The Bengali Muslims were systematically depriving the Chakmas by transferring lands and submerging. The first phase of migration of these refugees had started from early 1970s, especially after the War of Liberation.⁹⁷ The Central government provided them with shelter in Tripura and arranged temporary relief, but question of rehabilitation was non-existent.⁹⁸

Despite the regular grants or aid from the Centre, the state started considering the Chakma refugees as their burden.⁹⁹ Their presence had created demographic problem and environmental concerns in South Tripura. The steady rise in birth rate within these camps threatened and strained the state resources.¹⁰⁰ The area surrounding the refugee camps underwent deforestation and the local people faced an acute shortage of natural resources like firewood, wild vegetables, bamboo shoots, and wild potatoes, which constituted primary source of their livelihood.¹⁰¹ Moreover, the Government of India had spent Rs. 13.5 million on the refugees, which became a reason of discontent among the local tribals, as they felt marginalized and harboured resentment for treating those tribal refugees as privileged. It generated conflicts of interest between the local and refugees. Another 55,000 Chakmas entered Tripura as refugees.¹⁰² TUJS based on Amarapur and Subroom sub-divisions, agitated regarding the issue of staying on of these Chakma refugees from the neighbouring CHT. They demanded that the Chakmas should be shifted to other states of India.

⁹³ *Religious Demography of India*, A. P. Joshi, M. D. Srinivas, J. K. Bajaj, Centre for Policy studies, Chennai, 2005, p. 39

⁹⁴ S.R. Bhattacharjee, *Tribal Insurgency in Tripura: A Study in Exploration of Causes*, Inter-India Publications, New Delhi, 1989, p. 31

⁹⁵ *The Chakma Profile*, Government of Tripura, Agartala, 1999, p. 18

⁹⁶ Chinmoy Mutsuddhi, *Ashanta Parbotya Chattagram O Ananya Prasanga* (in Bengali), Dhaka, Agami Prakashani, 1992, pp. 14-15

⁹⁷ Bikach Kumar Choudhury, *Genesis of Chakma Movement (1772-1989): Historical Background*, Agartala, Tripura Darpan, 1991, p. 10

⁹⁸ Chandan Nandy, 'Unwanted Migrants', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 28, No. 40, 1993, p. 2102

⁹⁹ *The Daiik Sambad* (a local Bengali daily), January 25, 1990

¹⁰⁰ Chandrika Basu Majumder, *Genesis of Chakma Movement in Chittagong Hill Tracts*, Kolkata, Progressive Publishers, 2003, p. 93

¹⁰¹ *Annual Report of Voluntary Health Association of Tripura*, Agartala, Tripura, 1996

¹⁰² Sajal Nag, 'Whose Nation is it Anyway: Nation Building and Displacement in Indian Sub-continent' in C. Joshua (ed.), *Dimensions of Displaced People in North-East India*, Regency Publications, New Delhi, 2002, p. 35

The entire decade of 1970s experienced a diverse identity politics in Tripura marked by radically polarized confrontations between the state and ethno-nationalist fronts. The communal conflicts and underlying threat perception of both tribal and non-tribal population reached its nadir in 1977 election results. With the CPI(M) led Left Front in power, demand for ADC got an impetus and created an environment of expectation among the tribals. They, however, urged 'expulsion of the foreigners (Bengalis) who had come to the state since October 15, 1949, the day Tripura joined the Indian Union' as a solution.¹⁰³ This demand for deportation of 'foreigners', implementation of Sixth Schedule (District Council) led to the ethnic riots of 1980 between Bengalis and domicile tribals. The communal riot split the state bureaucracy and police, also the Communist party along ethnic lines. Thus, as the politics continued to play on sharply ethnic lines, the communal divide was widening fast.

Like other major refugee absorbent states, the Bengali refugees never felt as 'rejected populace' or treated as 'uncalled-for immigrants' officially in Tripura. Therefore, they had not faced firm resentment for resettlement. Bimal Sinha in his novel *Titastheke Tripura* rather portrayed complexities in the mentalities of the refugees. They tried to settle down in similar geographical locations so that they could recreate the essence, which they left in their *desh*. The Koibortyas had chosen a riverbank for resettlement, whereas some purchased lands in the border villages of Charipara, Gojaria, Joypur, Shanmura, Lonkamura, Kalikapur. Their argument was, though they left the country, they would be in touch with the land from these areas. But, with the colossal effect of the Bengali immigration and strong impact of their culture, the tribals gradually forgot their own language and culture. In fact, the urban tribal population hardly could converse in *Kokborok* or *Tipra* language.

¹⁰³ Malabika Das Gupta, 'Refugee Influx' in *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 21, No. 44/45, November 1-8, 1986, p. 1665