



## Tripura Tribal Society: Challenges to Identity and Integrity

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### ABSTRACT

*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. 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 15<sup>th</sup> 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. 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). Thus, ethnic and social unrest is also centered on the issue of encroachment into their lands by the outsiders. 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.*

**Key Words:** *Autonomy, Regionalism, Identity, Migration, Insurgency.*

**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/Tipperia, Riang/Reang (Bru), Jamatia, Noatia, Lushai, Uchoi, Mog, Kuki, Chakma, Khasi, Garo, Halam, Bhutia, Bhil, Munda, Orang, Lepchas, Santhal and Chaimal.

Linguistically, the tribals in Tripura speak Kokborok and Bengali. But there are different other languages spoken other than Kokborok and Bengali. Socio-economic and cultural complexities distinguish tribal groups in Tripura. The tribal communities have diverse subsistence patterns. 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 15<sup>th</sup> 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 1<sup>st</sup> July' 1963 and attained the status of a full-fledged state only on the 21<sup>st</sup> 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 clashes between communities.

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 12<sup>th</sup> 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 15<sup>th</sup> 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 25<sup>th</sup> 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 6<sup>th</sup> 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.









1. The Provisions of 6<sup>th</sup> Schedule of the Constitution of India is suitably amended in order to empower TTAADC to control and manage the land, including the forest, within its jurisdiction.
2. Devolution of fund, function and functionaries are evolved similar to the guidelines of 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment of the Constitution.
3. TTAADC is included fundamentally for regular allotment of fund and special financial and technical assistances from the NITI Commission.
4. Kokborok, one of the official language of the State is included in the 8<sup>th</sup> Schedule by amending the Constitution of India.
5. Minimum Support Price of Minor Forest Produces (MFP) is declared for the benefit of tribal and forest dwellers. TTAADC is funded with required amount of share capital and fund for capital expenditure to build a Co-operative Marketing chain for marketing and optimally utilize the MFPs and enhance the livelihood of the forest dwellers.
6. Allocate fund for economic rehabilitation to the forest dwellers, who got pattas under RoFR. The Act should be suitably amended in order to award pattas to the Traditional Forest Dwellers, who are permanently residing in the forest areas prior to 1971.

Recently, the Indigenous People's Front of Tripura (IPFT), a newly indigenous regional political party under the leadership of Budhu Debbarma, Aghore Debbarma, Mever Kumar Jamatia, Pravir Kr. Kalai and Dhananjoy Tripura started demanding 'Tiplaland', a separate state for the tribals by elevating the Tripura Tribal Areas Autonomous District Council (TTAADC). The demand was made as per the provision of Article 2 and 3 of the Indian Constitution. The TTAADC was created with three fourth geographical areas of the state and one third population mostly inhabited by tribals. The following are some of the grievances of the IPFT leading them to demand for a separate state of Tiplaland from within the periphery of TTAADC:

1. The enormous influx of refugees from Bangladesh (erstwhile East Pakistan) since 1950 leading to population explosion and reducing the indigenous people to minority.
2. Alienation of tribal lands resulting in displacement of indigenous people from their ancestral homestead and cultivable land.
3. Social underdevelopment and educational backwardness leading to identity crisis.
4. Exploitation, oppression, suppression, atrocities and deprivation from basic minimum requirements.
5. Under representation of Schedule tribes in Tripura State Government Services.
6. Non-implementation of developmental scheme of TTAADC as per provision of 6<sup>th</sup> Schedule to the Constitution due to non-commitment of the State government.



