

## **Partition, Migration and the Ethnic Movement in Tripura.**

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**Abstract:** The unity and integrity of India is under severe challenge due to the rise of separatist movements in different parts of the country. The North-Eastern part of the country has been traditionally prone to a large number of secessionist and separatist movements. Tripura, the smallest of the North East Indian states has been caught in a vortex of highly destructive militant violence, deadly ethnic conflicts and a planned destruction of the relations between the tribal and non-tribal population of the state. A large number of factors have been held responsible for the growth of insurgency in this region. The most important cause of rise of the secessionist movement has been the massive demographic changes and the consequent loss of land and livelihood the tribal used to enjoy earlier. The partition of the region and the following upheavals led to an unprecedented rise in the population which in turn led to social, economic and political problems. The lack of development among the tribal populace was identified as a key factor in the growth of tribal sense of alienation. This entire phenomenon led to the rise of ethnic movement in Tripura. The present paper is an attempt to analyze the impact of partition of India, the subsequent migration and the rise of ethnic movement in Tripura.

**Keywords:** Partition, Migration, Land-Alienation, Ethnic Movement.

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

Tripura, a tiny and hilly state of 10,486 sq. Km in the North-East region of India comprises beautiful hills, green valleys and dense forests. It is bounded by Bangladesh in the North, West, South and Assam and Mizoram in the East. Tripura has an international boundary of 832.20 Km with Bangladesh. In the pre-independence period Tripura enjoyed special status among the native princely states. It enjoyed an independent status subject to the recognition of British as paramount power by the Rulers of Tripura. After independence it formally acceded to the Union of India in October 1949 as part C state and subsequently became a union territory from 1<sup>st</sup> Nov. 1956 and attained statehood on 21<sup>st</sup>, January 1972.

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> and the early 20<sup>th</sup> century Tripura was a tribal majority state as can be seen from the census figures of 1881 and 1921 with tribal population at 52.19% and 56.37% of the total population respectively. Following the independence of the country and partition, the state witnessed large scale influx of refugees from the erstwhile East Pakistan and subsequently from Bangladesh. Tripura's tribal majority demography underwent a sea change as a result of this unhindered migration. The tribals were pushed to the hills and the politics and administration came to be dominated by Bengali speaking locals and migrants. The expansion in the population of the non-tribals also led to large scale transfer of land from the tribals to the non-tribals. This created a sense of fear and resentment among the tribal populace and it was precisely against this phenomenon that the tribal movement started in Tripura in the early 1950's.

Tensions were inherent in a situation in which a relatively backward and mostly illiterate community consisting of 19 separate tribal groups found it not only out-numbered but also increasingly overwhelmed in many ways by a more cohesive community which comprised largely of Bengali immigrants. The disparity in life-styles of the two communities and their respective economic situations resulted in a growing rancor between the immigrant groups and the tribals of the state. All this resulted in the rise of ethno-centric movements in Tripura. The present paper is an attempt to analyze the phenomenon of land alienation and establish its correlation with the rise of ethnic movement in Tripura.

### **II. PRE-PARTITION MIGRATION**

The tiny border state of Tripura which shares almost three-fourths of her boundary with Bangladesh has always been susceptible to migration. The Indo-Mongoloid races migrated from the northern part in search of fertile and arable land. This partially accounts for the fact the indigenous people of the state such as the Tripuris, Reangs, Halams etc. bear an ethnic resemblance towards the Tibeto-Burmese groups such as the Bodos

and the Kukis inhabiting the adjacent states. The report of the political agent (1872) observes that the entire population of the state could be divided into two distinct categories- the inhabitants of the hills and those of the plains. Around the same time about 4000 Chakma families came to Tripura in search of *Jhum* land (Hunter 1870:502). The coming of the Chakmas proved beneficial for the economy of Tripura as they brought large areas under cultivation. In fact the Chakma influx continued unabated during the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. They turned to Tripura due to a plethora of factors such as the dearth of agricultural land and population growth in the Chittagong Hill Tracts from where they migrated. The Kukis, a war-like tribe of the same ethnicity as the Lushais joined the royal army in large numbers and proved their military prowess. All these tribal immigration obviously added to the local populace thereby inflating the total population of the state.

Tripura also witnessed immigration of other tribal people from Assam namely the Garos, the Bodos and also Khasis in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. They came mainly in search of agricultural pursuits- the Garos for *Jhum* land and the Khasis settled in the region of Dharmanagar where they grew beetle leaves. Apart from the above-mentioned tribes, a number of other tribes bearing no ethnic affinity to the region also migrated mainly as tea-garden labourers (Chakraborty 2004:34). The first tea-estate was established in 1916 in the Kailasahar sub-division of the state. This resulted in the need for tea garden labourers as the indigenous tribes were quite unwilling to work in the tea gardens. Hence, coolie labourers were brought in from a number of eastern states such as Bihar and Orissa and as result tribes such as Munda, Oraons, Bhils and Santhals immigrated to Tripura.

The table below shows the total tribal immigrant population of the state since the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century till the 1931 census.

Source: Census Reports

Name of the Tribe	Hailing From	Population	Occupation
Chakmas	Chittagong Hill Tracts.	8613	Jhuming and Cultivation
Mogs	-do-	5687	-do-
Garo	Assam Hills	2740	-do-
Lushai	-do-	2000	-do-
Bodo	-do-	181	-do-
Khashi	-do-	23	-do-
Oraon	Chottanagpur	979	Tea-Garden Labourer
Kanda	Orissa	667	-do-
Kurmi	Kurmi	338	Agriculture
Munda	Chottanagpur	2058	Tea-Garden Labourer
Santhal	Santhal Pargana	735	-do-

However, these tribal immigrants were far out-numbered by the plain-Landers. They comprised mainly of Hindu and Muslim migrants from the erstwhile province of East Bengal. The Manikya rulers of Tripura for genuine economic reasons openly invited the Bengali settlers to develop settled cultivation and pay the much sought after revenue. The primate mode of slash and burn or *Jhum* cultivation could not meet the growing revenue demands of the rulers who incurred considerable expenditure in running the administration, in keeping the British government officials in good humour as also defraying the expenses of the royal household. In the famous '*Jangal-Abadi*' system, a tenant who accepted a lease for reclamation of hilly lands by clearing jungles got remission of rent for at least three years from the date of the lease. Needless to say, this policy of low land tax and often tax exemption for initial few years attracted peasants of nearby areas of Bengal in labour-short and thinly populated state like Tripura. Thus, easy availability of land together with the slow and steady arrival of non-tribal farmers capable of exploiting this favourable situation started impacting the socio-economic and subsequently the political life in the state.

In fact, with the settlement of this population from East Bengal the Kings of Tripura were benefitted as the migrants introduced plough cultivation which increased the revenue returns of the king. However, in the absence of reliable records on land system prior to the later part of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, it is difficult to form any exact idea about the collection of land revenue. However it can be safely assumed that the plain land areas, populated exclusively by non-tribal Bengalis, were the only viable source of revenue for the royal coffer. Once we enter the later part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century we are on firmer ground as far records of revenue collection are concerned. In fact, the records notice a rise in state revenue from a paltry Rs 2.4 lakhs in 1881-82 to Rs 4.6 lakhs in 1892-93 i.e. an increase of nearly 100% in ten years (Imperial Gazetteer 1909:119). This momentum of growth was maintained in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century as in 1903-04 out of the total revenue which amounted to Rs 8.17 lakhs nearly 2.32 lakhs were obtained from land revenue and this was paid almost entirely by holders of agricultural land in plains (Chakraborty 2004:36). In this way a large number of Hindus and laborious Muslims who were mainly agriculturists were induced by the kings of Tripura to settle in the state on easy terms of rent.

This process of so called invitation added a sizeable chunk to the population of the state. Moreover various jobs in the state particularly in the departments of judiciary, forest and education were also filled in by Bengali migrants. Land grants were also made frequently for religious and charitable purposes. All this migration did not create any problem in Tripura as surplus land was available and the migrants settled only in selective pockets of the state. The situation however changed with the independence and partition of the country in 1947.

### III. Post-Partition Scenario

Following Partition, Tripura was bordered by Chittagong, Noakhali, Comilla and Sylhet districts of East Pakistan (present day Bangladesh). In fact about 83% of Tripura's 1,001 km long frontier formed the border with erstwhile East Pakistan. However it was only an imaginary line drawn by Cyril Radcliffe in 1946-47 as the border remained open and porous till the early 1980's. It was because this close proximity to the districts of East Pakistan and unguarded frontiers that Tripura received waves of migrants after partition in 1947 and the liberation of East Pakistan and formation of Bangladesh in 1971. Partition played havoc with the demographic structure of North-eastern India and Tripura was no exception. In fact, a Directorate of Rehabilitation was set up in 1949 to 'settle' the refugees in Tripura who spilled over from erstwhile East Pakistan mainly in three phases in 1947, 1967 and 1971 permanently altering the demographic balance against the tribals.

But during the first two years following the partition there was not much panic in Tripura or its borderlands as there was a widespread belief in official circles that the 12 million Hindus in East Pakistan would not be disturbed. In fact, until the 1950's there was considerable reluctance on part of the central government to acknowledge that the displaced population from East Pakistan were to stay permanently in Tripura (U. Bhaskar Rao 1967:145). However in February-March 1950 there were widespread communal riots in different parts of East Pakistan and in Barisal district alone about 2,500 Hindus were massacred (Sinha 2012:85). Riots also broke out in Chittagong, Barisal and Noakhali and as a result about 200,000 refugees migrated to Tripura (Karma 2000:136). The situation soon turned alarming as the refugee influx turned into a deluge. This incessant influx of refugees led to a change in the demographic profile of Tripura. The tribal natives, who constituted a dominant 64 percent of the total population in 1874, formed a reduced component of the population in successive Census enumerations: 52 percent in 1931, 37 percent in 1951, 28.44 percent in 1981, 29.59 percent in 1991 and 26.74 percent in 2001. In fact, between 1947 and 1971, 6, 09,998 Bengalis came to Tripura from East Pakistan, in view of the fact that the population of the state in 1951 was 6, 45,707; it is not difficult to understand the enormity of the problem. This unbridled migration led to the marginalization of the tribal peasants and elite and created a psychological trauma of being reduced to a minority in 'tribal state'. The numerical domination of the Bengalis in Tripura gradually translated into their economic, political and cultural domination with a corresponding pressure on the tribes for survival.

The economy of Tripura has traditionally been dependent on agriculture, forestry and fishing. In other words for the tribal people of Tripura, land was their only means of subsistence and hence losing this natural resource was unthinkable for them. But the first impact of the refugee influx into Tripura was the opening of the state's land resources for the settlement of refugees. The state government under the Chief Ministership of Sachindra Lal Singh failed to foresee the imminent danger of placing the land hungry peasants belonging to relatively developed community in direct confrontation with the underdeveloped '*jhumias*'. His government had provided the Bengali migrants with land and other facilities like ration cards at various places like Mandai, Takarjala, Jampuijala, Khowai and Kalyanpur in West Tripura district. The outbreak of the Bangladesh War in 1971 led to a further exponential increase in the number of refugees that came to Tripura. In fact, the number of refugees arriving in Tripura in 1971 was 14, 16,491 which was little less than the state's total population of 15, 36,342 (Various Census Reports). Tripura's open frontier on the north, south and the west made it easier for migrants from Sylhet, Comilla, Noakhali and Chittagong districts to pour into Tripura. The central government and the Tripura government opened 276 refugee camps for them near Akhaura.

But even after the cessation of hostilities and the creation of Bangladesh in 1971, a large section of the refugees stayed back, initially as illegal migrants but were later able to secure citizenship. This is very well illustrated by the changing density of population in Tripura from 1901 to 1981.

Year	1901	1911	1921	1931	1941	1951	1961	1971	1981
Density of Population	17	22	29	36	49	61	109	148	196

Source: Report of the Relief and Rehabilitation Department, Govt. of Tripura, 1981.

In fact, by this time saturation point had already been reached and land could no longer provide any sustenance to the steady stream of immigrants from the plains. There were several factors which in turn contributed to this refugee influx in Tripura. Firstly, the close proximity of Tripura to East Pakistan and

subsequently Bangladesh, secondly, lack of resistance on part of the local population against this stream of migration as the tribal population was initially not aware of the dangers to their lives and livelihoods that migrants could pose. Thirdly, the presence of a sizeable Bengali-speaking population in the state also contributed to this demographic change as it readily provided all assistance to their incoming brethren.

#### IV. LOSS OF LAND AND LIVELIHOOD

The continuous trans-border migration resulted in an unprecedented pressure on the meager economic resources of Tripura. The government in order to settle this burgeoning immigrant population indiscriminately gave away forests, low hillocks and even wastes land. In Hatileta about 12.80 acres of forest land were allotted to a few refugee families who cleared it and reclaimed the land for settled agriculture (Tripura State Archives). In the Rangutia mouja of Bamutia tehsil 102.40 acres of plain land and 50 acres of *Tilla* land were given to refugees for plough cultivation. These lands belonged to certain local inhabitants but were waste land according to government officials and hence were given away to the refugees so that it could put to economic use. However neither was their permission sought nor were they provided any sort of compensation. As the process of land acquisition was tedious and lengthy refugee rehabilitation was executed in a hasty manner which in many cases trampled upon the land rights of the indigenous people who had been enjoying it since generations.

In fact, the pro-refugee policy of the government in this period evicted several land owners without proper compensation. Moreover, various dubious means were adopted to settle the immigrants even at the cost of the locals. Transfer of land from tribals to non-tribals became the most crucial problem in Tripura. There was transaction-like '*dhakal bikri*' or sale of possession in which the tribal was given a receipt for the land though the price paid for land was nominal. The most despicable manner of transfer came about when non-tribal moneylenders and petty traders started going to the interior areas. The moneylenders gave tribals loans against land. The rates of interest charged in many cases were more than 100 per cent per annum. Default in paying back the loan in cash or kind resulted in most cases in forced transfer of land. How widespread and effective this method had been in alienating the tribals from their land can be gauged from the official reports of the Tripura government. In 1968 the Chief Commissioner asked an additional District Magistrate to inquire into numerous complaints of such illegal transfers. According to the investigation, 80 per cent of the land in Kanchanpur area in North Tripura had been grabbed by non-tribals through unscrupulous and fraudulent means (Mukherjee and Singh 1982). In almost all the tribal areas the non-tribals possessed disproportionately large areas of land.

In fact, the partition exacerbated the Bengali influx and turned the tribes' people into a hopeless minority by 1971. The most disturbing trend in the population increase in Tripura was that the non-tribal population almost doubled up from 7.82 lakhs in 1961 to 14.69 lakhs in 1981 census which explains the nature of population increase. In fact, within a short period the tribals were reduced to a virtual minority in their homeland. This sea change in the demographic situation of Tripura created conditions for conflict between the local populace and the refugees. The situation as a whole created a sense of fear and apprehension among the tribal populace (Ahmed, Dasgupta and Sinha). All this prepared the background for the rise of ethno-centric movement among the tribes of Tripura.

The migration of the refugees pushed the tribes to the brink of existence. On the one hand while the tribes were losing their lands to the immigrants at an alarming rate, the state Government was designating new areas in the hills as reserve forests. This not only reduced the area under *Jhum* but also denied the tribals the opportunity to collect, use or sell forest produce which they considered to be their natural right and which they had been enjoying since time immemorial. The imposition of the ban on *Jhum* was the final blow on their life and culture. It was a loss of identity and a particular way of life for the tribes. As a result of all these developments a self-sufficient tribal peasantry was reduced within three decades to the status of wage labourers. The tribals comprised only 2% of the state's labour force in 1971 but in 1989 the figure had risen to well over 35%. In this way the tribals were the worst victims of post-partition land alienation.

This process of land alienation became a powerful stimulant of ethnic movement in Tripura. The indigenous people of Tripura became apprehensive of this sweeping change in the demographic pattern which not only undermined their majority but also had grave economic and political implications. In the face of a demographic invasion of unprecedented scale which was further aided by the state, ethnic mobilization was perceived as a necessary means to for the autochthons to prevent the 'non-tribals' from spreading its tentacles in the tribal homeland. It was also considered essential to fend off the encroaching nation-state or at best create congenial conditions for striking a bargain that would allow the traditional land tenure system, customary laws and the tribal way of life to continue.

Alongside land, language also became a key factor in strengthening ethnic identity in Tripura. In fact, till 1949 Bengali was the court language of the Manikya Kings of Tripura who did not favour *Kokborok*, the Tibeto-Burman dialect spoken by the Tripuris and the other tribes of the state. As a result all the tribal organisations sought to standardize *Kokborok* and transform it from a dialect to a language that could be used for the formation of Tripuri national identity (Bhattacharya 1989).

Thus, tribal mobilisation in Tripura was the inevitable manifestation of a socio-psychological fear of outsiders which in turn was the result of a process of marginalization that saw the tribal people of Tripura being deprived of the bulk of their land and also excluded from the state's economic and political decision making. This mobilization passed through several phases the initial phase was innocuous and vague before it blossomed it into full-fledged ethnic movement with the formation of *Tripura Upajati Juba Samiti* (TUJS).

## V. THE FIRST PHASE

Movements started among the tribes of Tripura against all forms of oppression and injustice in the pre-independence period. The first tribal organization to be set up was the *Janamangal Samity* (People's Welfare Organization), a mass organization set up by a prominent group of liberal and politically conscious youths in 1938. It demanded inter alia "Responsible Government by popular vote" and the abolition of oppressive royal taxes. Its branches were established in the remote areas of the state and by the early 1940's the movement had gained momentum. The *Janamangal Samity* not only made a steady progress but it showed concern for the plight of the indigenous populace of Tripura who were living under conditions of abysmal poverty and undertook several measures to ameliorate their condition. The tribal movement in the 1930's received an indirect fillip when Maharaja Bir Bikram set up two boarding houses for tribal students- one in Umakanta Academy Agartala and the other in Khowai High School, 60 Kilometers away from the capital. Thus, by the end of the 1930's a new generation of educated tribal youths had made their appearance, challenging the primacy of the educated elites patronised by the court. These youths played a pivotal role in the setting up of *Tripura Rajya Janasiksha Samity* (Mass Literacy Movement) in 1945. Aghore Debbarman was one of the pioneers of Mass Literacy Movement and the moving spirit behind the formation of the organisation. The group brought about a sea-change in the educational landscape of Tripura as it established schools in remote tribal hamlets throughout Tripura. It provided a platform to bring together the educated tribal youths and was used as a launching-pad for attacking the various social evils afflicting tribal society in Tripura. It questioned the tribal's absolute allegiance and faith in institutionalized kingship. The *Samity* found a sympathetic supporter in D.A.W. Brown, a British Army officer and the education minister of the Maharaja of Tripura in the 1940's. He supported the tribal youths campaigning for wider literacy and regularized many of the 450-odd schools set up by the *Janasiksha Samity*.

The *Rajyo Praja Mandal* (Citizens' Assembly) was set up in 1946 by the liberals and the communists to press for responsible government in Tripura. Birchandra Debbarman, one of the prominent members of the communist party and a leading lawyer was the first secretary of the *Praja Mandal*. They started publishing a bulletin, *Tripura Rajyer Katha* edited by Biren Dutta. The Maharaja and the royal administration were frightened by such developments and the *Praja Mandal* leaders like Sudhanwa Debbarma, Bansi Thakur and Hemanta Debbarma were arrested.

Meanwhile following the Second Communist Party Congress at Calcutta in 1948 the Communist party of India decided to launch an armed struggle against the nascent Indian state to capture power. The Communist party was banned throughout India and a massive police crackdown was also launched in Tripura. Biren Dutta and Aghore Debbarma, two leading members of the Communist Party realized that the party was not capable of undertaking or sustaining an armed struggle against statist forces. In this situation it decided to form a tribal organisation committed to the advancement of the tribal people by ending their exploitation at the hands of the non-tribal moneylenders and helping them realize their political aspirations. It is out of this twin needs that one of the most important tribal organisations the *Tripura Rajya Mukti Parishad* was formed. The *Mukti Parishad* rapidly gained strength in the above mentioned areas as it promised to bring about a regeneration of tribal society by freeing them from ages of oppression and deprivation.

In July 1948, a large conference of the *Mukti Parishad* workers was convened at the Kumarbil village. It was decided that a protest meeting would be organised by the Parishad in Agartala on 15<sup>th</sup> August 1948 to demand-

- a) Government by popular vote.
- b) An end to Dewani rule.
- c) Unconditional release of political prisoners in the state.
- d) An end to arrest warrants and police atrocities.
- e) An end to detention without trial.

In support of its demands the *Mukti Parishad* organised a massive demonstration on Independence Day in Tripura. The procession and the demands it raised sent a wakeup call throughout the administration and it decided to intensify repression in order to nip the tribal movement in bud. In 1949, *Mukti Parishad* held their first annual conference at Patni in the Sadar Sub-division where it was declared that landholders possessing more than two *drones* (One drone is approximately 7 acres) of land would not be allowed to acquire any more *Khas* (Government) land; instead the land would be taken over by the *Parishad* and distributed among the landless tribals.

Meanwhile by the early 1950, the *Mukti Parishad* leadership realized that it would no longer be possible to carry on the campaign of armed resistance all by itself. It needed the protective umbrella and the organizational network of a national party. All these prepared the ground for the *Mukti Parishad* joining the Communist Party. The *Mukti Parishad* played a vital role in not only bringing about a consciousness among the tribal populace of Tripura but also played a pivotal role in growth of democratic movement in Tripura. Most of the guerrilla actions of the *Mukti Parishad* took place between March 1949 and November 1951. The armed struggle of the *Mukti Parishad* had begun as a war of resistance against oppression of the tribes of Tripura and perceived alien rule but it gradually became part of the broad communist armed struggle when its members joined the Communist Party in 1950. In any case, the *Mukti Parishad* continued to demand land rights and other safe-guards for the indigenous people of Tripura through parliamentary means in face of unprecedented migration of Bengalis from East Pakistan.

However, the most significant of the *Mukti Parishad* movement was that it did not allow it to degenerate it into an ethno-communal sectarianism. Although fighting for the rights of the tribes it was free from any communal passion. It believed that the democratic movement in Tripura could not succeed unless it was accompanied by unity among the tribal and non-tribal people. The *Mukti Parishad* therefore called upon its workers not to consider all refugees as its enemies. This attitude of the Communist Party was held against them by the later generation of tribal leaders as they were considered weak protectors and incapable of upholding tribal interests and led to the rise of ethno-centric organizations.

## **VI. ETHNIC MOBILISATION AND OTHER TRIBAL ORGANISATIONS**

The failure of the *Mukti Parishad* to safeguard the interests of the tribes of Tripura led to the growth of a number of regional and communal outfits which were responsible for the ethnic mobilisation of tribes in Tripura.

### ***Seng-Krak-***

The first tribal militant tribal outfit to be established in Tripura was the 'Bir Bikram Tripur Sangha' established in 1947 by Durjay Kishore Debbarma, the step-brother of Maharaja Bir Bikram Kishore Manikya. It worked heart and soul to protect the land rights of the permanent inhabitants of Tripura. The secretary of the Sangha was Bidur Kartha and the organisation had its office in Agartala. The military wing of the Sangha was *Seng-Krak*. The word Seng-Krak means 'folded-fingered hand' in the Kok-Borok language. Its leaders were strongly opposed to influx of the refugees and used an anti-Bengali rhetoric.

### ***Paharia Union-***

Following the imposition of ban on the *Seng-Krak*, some of its members took the initiative in the formation of a new political union. Chandra Sadhu Rupini, an influential leader of the Hallam community drew a large number of tribes and formed the *Paharia Union* in July 1951.

### ***Adivasi Samiti-***

This organization was mainly the result of the initiative of Chakma community. It was formed mainly as a result of the efforts of Madhab Master and Sunitijivan Chakma in 1952.

### ***Tripura Rajya Adivasi Sangha-***

The urban and educated tribal people of the capital city of Agartala came forward to organise this association in 1953. The prime movers of this organisation were Jiten Debbarma, Lalit Debbarma and Bansi Thakur. They demanded a tribal predominance in the state administration and took an anti-refugee stand.

### ***East India Tribal Union-***

In 1955 when the State Reorganization Commission recommended the merger of Tripura with Assam, a group of tribes in Tripura supported the recommendation in the belief that it would put to an end the 'Bengali-hegemony' in Tripura. Moreover, it appeared to the educated tribal youths of Tripura that the only solution to the problems afflicting Tripura was in linking up the struggle for tribal survival in Tripura with other tribal movements in North East India.

All this organizations failed to make any mark on the political landscape of Tripura and ultimately prepared the ground for the emergence of the foremost ethnic organization in Tripura the *Tripura Upajati Juba Samity* (TUJS) which ushered in a new phase in tribal politics of the state.

## **VII. FORMATION OF THE TRIPURA UPAJATI JUBA SAMITY (TUJS)**

In 1960 the Dhebar Commission looking into the problems of the Schedule Tribes and the Schedule Castes had suggested the formation of tribal development blocs as an experiment. It also proposed, if necessary,

the establishment of tribal reserve under the fifth Schedule of the constitution. Later the Administrative Reform Commission headed by K. Hanumanthiya recommended the setting up of tribal councils in specified tribal compact areas in Tripura.

The suggestions and the recommendations of the two commissions in the early 1960's had created a sense of hope among the tribal populace of the state. The CPM also supported the creation tribal council under the Fifth Schedule. The Bengali migrants viewed the tribal council demand as a potential threat to the land they had turned fertile with their toil feared displacement for a second time vote en masse for the Congress. The results were visible as in the entire country the congress suffered serious reserves in the 1967 general elections but in Tripura the communists, who had won both the Lok Sabha seats of Tripura West and Tripura East in the general elections of 1952 and 1956, lost them to the Congress in 1967. The congress also bagged 27 assembly constituencies out of a total of 30.

The election results dealt a body blow to the tribal hope for a council that they hoped would save and protect the interest of the indigenous populace. The year 1967 forms a water-shed in the ethnicity-driven tribal politics of Tripura as sections of the indigenous tribes' people grew frustrated over communist failure to prevent Bengali refugee influx and protect tribal interest. Need was felt for a strong political party which would be able to defend the interests of the tribesmen and it is in this back drop that a meeting was held at Kainta Kobra Para in the Sadar (East) Sub-division on 10-11 June, 1967 in presence of tribal people from walks of life . In this meeting it was decided to establish a political party which would strengthen the tribal base and fight for their rights. Thus, the *Tripura Upajati Juba Samity* (hereafter TUJS) was born with bang under the leadership of Sonacharan Debbarma (Paul 2009:56). It was born as a youth and student organisation but in course of time became a powerful political platform for the younger generation of the tribal youth. It is significant to note that within two years of its formation the TUJS demanded the formation of an ADC under the sixth Schedule of the constitution.

Moreover unlike the previous narrative of the royalist Manikya rule as oppressive and feudalistic the past i.e. the history of Tripura prior to its integration with India was imagined as glorious. The assertion of tribal identity by the TUJS became amply clear in its adoption of the slogan- "*Kachak Koofor Chung Chia, Buni Tala Tanglia*" (We are neither reds nor whites, but we stand for the tribal cause). It put forward the following four demands as its *raison d'être*-

1. Restoration of Tribal lands alienated to the non-tribals since 1960 and reconstitution of tribal reserve land as created by the kings.
2. Formation of a Tribal Autonomous District Council in Tripura.
3. Reservation in Government jobs for the tribals.
4. Extension of Inner Line regulations in Tripura.
5. Recognition of Kok-Borak as an official language and medium of instruction and the adoption of Roman script for the Kok-Borak language. (Karam 1967)

The unprecedented migration of Bengali refugees from East Pakistan thus united the tribes of Tripura on a common platform as fears of marginalization grew stronger and the spread of education broke down ethnic barriers. This was manifested in the broad-based character of the TUJS as it was the first tribal party in the state that succeeded in drawing members from all the major and minor tribes of Tripura. Its leadership was more representative of the state's ethnic mosaic. Meanwhile the outbreak of tribal unrest in Mizoram and the establishment of Mizo National Front on 28<sup>th</sup> October 1961 led to the growth of a sense of tribalism in the hills of Tripura. The TUJS expanded its footprints in the politics of Tripura and developed organisations among tribal employees, the students and the youths.

An important figure in TUJS and who later became one of the pioneers of the insurgency movement in Tripura was Bijoy Kumar Hrangkhwal. He hailed from one of the twelve clans of the Halam tribe, which was generally regarded as more close to the Mizos ethnically than the dominant Kokborok-speaking Tripuris. He became the organizing secretary of the TUJS and his enormous enthusiasm, charisma and organizational ability led him to organize the "*Tripur Sena*" with select group of militant youths. It became the armed wing of the TUJS and prepared the base for the subsequent growth of tribal insurgency as it carried out indoctrination among the tribesmen in communal, divisive and sub-national politics. Training in unarmed combat was also imparted to its members. In fact, by 1978 the Tripur Sena units were set up in all the sub-divisions of Tripura.

The TUJS had initial backing from the communist party as the CPM was keen that the TUJS should act as its youth wing but when it asserted its strong tribal identity the rupture became inevitable. Narrow party politics also acted as the main deterrent to coordination between these two organizations. As following the split in the communist party in 1964, the CPI (M) emerged as the major left-party in Tripura. In view of electoral compulsions it realized that over harping on tribal issues would cost it politically.

Further, following its electoral setbacks in the parliamentary elections of 1967, the CPI (M) changed its electoral strategy as without giving up its traditional demand for tribal autonomy it began to mobilise the student and the government employees of the state, a sector that was dominated by the Bengalis. In fact, the communist

party realized that only by following this strategy it would not be able to develop any foot hold among the immigrant Bengali community who were increasingly becoming important in any electoral calculation. Further in the arena of competitive politics the TUJS with its strong tribalism and aggressive rhetoric on issues concerning tribal interest emerged as a direct challenge to the CPM, which had hitherto dominated tribal politics in Tripura through its tribal wing the *Gana Mukti Parishad*. The TUJS thus became the principal tribal party in Tripura and henceforth the politics of Tripura revolved around the ethnic question as the TUJS built high pitched campaign on the issue.

### VIII. CONCLUSION

Land, language and local autonomy are always the principal bones of contention in any conflict between the host and the migrant population. This was particularly true of Tripura as well. The tribal movement in Tripura principally centered on three issues- reservation of land for tribals, recognition of the tribal language Kok-borak and the formation of Autonomous District Councils. The failure of the major political parties-the Congress (I) and the CPI (M) - to address these concerns of the tribes led to the rise of ethno-centric parties of which the TUJS was the most important. Tripura provides the most burning example of changing demography, land loss; shift in political power all running along single axis and ultimately leading to the rise of ethnicity as the avenues of legitimate political power appeared closed due to electoral compulsions. To conclude, the politics of tribal ethnicity in Tripura began in a full-fledged form with the birth of TUJS in 1967 and which ultimately gave rise to insurgency in the tiny border state.

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