

Changing Mentality of the Bengalee Refugees: The Story of Tripura (1946-1971)

By

Anindita Ghoshal *

Tripura, situated in India's Northeastern region, was a princely state in the colonial period. According to *Rajmala*, a Bengali court chronicle of the Tripura kings, about 150 kings had ruled Tripura for an uninterrupted period of about 350 years since the legendary period. As per tradition, the tribal kings of Tripura or the Manikyas were believed to be the representative of tribal Gods, and hence identified with legends of popular mythologies or folklore. Prior to the partition of the Indian subcontinent, Tripura had access to the rest of India by a rail route through the eastern part of the Bengal province. The last king of Tripura before independence, Maharaja Bir Bikram Kishore Manikya (1923-1947), was a distinguished member of the Chamber of Princes and subsequently was elected President of the Council of Rulers for Eastern States. But after partition, the situation of Tripura changed radically. After the death of Maharaja Bir Bikram on 17 May 1947, Tripura faced its greatest-ever crisis. On 3 November 1947, the Intelligence Bureau of India reported, 'This information is confirmed by an independent source which says that the Muslim League National Guards in East Bengal are carrying (sic) an open propaganda that Tripura State belongs to Eastern Pakistan and that preparations are [being] made to invade Tripura. Several pamphlets inciting Muslims to conquer Tripura and annex it to East Bengal are in circulation in Eastern Pakistan.'¹ On the very next day, Prime Minister Nehru wrote to Home Minister Vallabhbhai Patel, 'You are no doubt aware of the reports that there is trouble brewing on the borders of Tripura (Agartala) State. It is said that the Muslim National Guards from East Pakistan, Tripura District, have started an agitation against accession of Tripura to the Indian Union and they may well have raids.'² The Government of India immediately responded by 'by sending men and material to put end to the inimical external inroads and influences'.³

* Assistant Prof. in History, Rishi Bankim Chandra College, Naihati
Refugee Watch, 39 & 40, June and December 2012

However, after partition, Tripura's north, south and western borders were suddenly blocked by the newly formed East Pakistan and it was cut off from the rest of India.⁴ Tripura's road link with Assam across its eastern boundary was also obstructed by a chain of hills and thus post-partition Tripura was suddenly locked in. Merger appeared to be the only plausible way to restore its traditional links with India. Princely rule in Tripura came to an end with the accession of Tripura State to the Indian Union on 15 October 1949.⁵

By this agreement, the Maharaja of Tripura ceded to the dominion government 'full and the exclusive authority, jurisdiction and powers for and in relation to Government of the State and agreed to transfer the administration of the State to the Dominion Government on the fifteenth day of October, 1949'.⁶

The Tripura State and Hill Tipperah

From early times, the state of Tripura was often described as *Parbatya Tripura* because 70 per cent of its total area consisted of hills or small hillocks, and the rest of the area was plains land situated in river valleys or in narrow strips of land between the *tilas* called *loonga-land*. During the reign of Dharma Manikya II (1714-1729), the Nawab of Bengal granted the ruler of Tripura the *zamindari* right of the portions of plain Tripura known as Chakla Roshanabad (now in Comilla district of Bangladesh).⁷ The *sanad* of Indra Manikya issued to the farmers in 1743 provides most valuable information about the land system obtaining in the maharaja's zamindari in Chakla Roshanabad contiguous to Hill Tipperah. It referred to about nine types of cultivable land in these areas, classified in accordance with the fertility of soil or the crops that could be cultivated on it in Chakla Roshanabad zamindari. From that particular *sanad* or some contemporary declarations of the Tripura administration, it is quite evident that the source of income for the State was mainly the revenue from the plains. The integration of the Chakla Roshanabad plains thus strengthened the economic base of the Manikyas.⁸

The original inhabitants of Tripura were tribals, known for their tolerance and passive obedience to the maharajas of the Manikya dynasty for centuries. They had their own life patterns and their traditional economy consisted of food-gathering and producing, animal domestication, cottage industry, etc. The food-gathering activities of the tribals were supplemented by shifting cultivation or *jhum* cultivation.⁹ Before the 15th century, the maharajas of Tripura had no effective command over the tribes. From the time of Ratna Manikya, the tribal chiefs started giving the rajas annual tributes or the family tax (*gharchukti*).¹⁰ State-formation in Tripura was an evolutionary process, which began with a pattern of families, clans and villages. The royal order of Durga Manikya issued in 1811 mentioned popular settlements in Hill Tipperah and clearly stated that while the farming out of the jungle land was the usual practice, its settlement directly with the tenants was also not uncommon.¹¹ The Tripuri and Reang tribes

were the two major *jhumia* communities, but there were at least 15 other tribes that practised shifting cultivation in the hill slopes of Tripura. *Jhum* is a highly labour-intensive operation and requires more land than settled cultivation. Moreover, it does not yield the level of surplus needed for the maintenance of the ruling class or a state.

Bengali Connections with Tripura

Historically, the Hindu rulers of Tripura's Manikya dynasty had always encouraged the immigration of and settlement of non-tribals, especially Bengalis to Tripura. *Rajmala* authenticates the fact that Ratna Manikya (1464-1468) was the first to 'settle 4000 Bengalis in four places' in Tripura.¹² Gradually, the tribal kings had started adopting Hinduism as state religion and assimilated Bengali language and literature into their culture. Most interestingly, the tribal chiefs of Tripura even adopted Bengali as the 'state language'; however, it is difficult to state exactly the date when Bengali was made state language.¹³ The tribal kings even issued postal stamps bearing legends in Bengali. Another rationale behind this adoption of Bengali as the 'state language' might be the fact that the conversational language of the tribals in Tripura was *Kakbarak* in most cases, which didn't have a script (*lipi*) and adopted the Bengali one, as it was the only feasible option for the rulers and the nobility.

Nevertheless, probably the convincing motive behind providing patronage to Bengalis was not only the cultural contact with Bengal, but genuine economic reasons. As with the development of kingship in Tripura, the question of surplus production became significant. Shifting cultivation hardly yielded any surplus to maintain the monarchical system.¹⁴ To facilitate revenue collection for the state exchequer through expansion of wet rice cultivation, the rulers whole-heartedly invited Bengali settlers. This not only yielded revenue for the exchequer but led to an increase in agricultural production as well. Besides, given that there was a dearth of trained personnel, the kings encouraged immigration of Bengali professionals like doctors, teachers, lawyers, priests, bureaucrats, etc. from neighbouring Bengal. While the immigration of the Brahmins and other upper castes was encouraged to enhance the status of the state and to run its administration, encouragement to lower-caste people and landless Muslim cultivators or sharecroppers from the then East Bengal was only for reclaiming fallow lands, to increase revenue. The rulers were so desperate to bring the land under tillage that they even introduced the *jangal-abadi* system¹⁵ in this land-abundant and thinly populated State.

The fiscal and land management history of Tripura is a bit confusing because of inadequate sources. From some stray mentions in *Rajmala* and other financial documents from the Durbar and a few declarations, however, it is clear that there was conflict and frequent clashes for dominance over the plains part of Tripura, subsequently known as Nurnagar or Chakla Roshanabad, between the Mughals and the kings. The

Mughals were, however, indifferent towards the Hill Tipperah territory, because it yielded less revenue.¹⁶ In fact, written laws on land management came into force only from the second half of the 19th century, or to be more specific, from the reign of Birchandra Manikya (1862-1896). In 1880, an act called Rajoswo Samondhiyo Niyomabali (rules relating to land revenue) was first enacted in Tripura, to regulate collection of revenue from *kayemi taluk* (perpetually settled estate), *khas mahals* (government-owned lands) and *karsha praja* (cultivating tenants), etc. Subsequently, another law entitled Praja Bhumyadhikari (tenant land-owners act) was introduced in 1886. The third important act came into force in 1899, which was called Jaripi Bandababasto Samondhiyo Niyomabali (rules and regulations on survey and settlement). Although gharchutki (family tax) was already in vogue, a comprehensive act was designed regulate house tax only in 1919.¹⁷ W.W. Hunter also mentioned that the Tripura kings used to make grants of land in perpetuity in favour of upper-class people against fixed rentals.¹⁸ It is fascinating to note that such grants were made to the tillers as well against nominal rentals against services rendered to the state. A resolution signed by B.K. Burman, the private secretary to the then maharaja, on 13 September 1909, said: 'We should by all means encourage immigration and discourage emigration. Systematic efforts may be made to establish colonies of cultivators in the interior.'¹⁹ Needless to say, this policy attracted, mostly, Muslim peasants of the lower strata from nearby areas of then East Bengal (like Comilla, Sylhet and Chittagong) and created an economic surplus Tripura. It was actually a one-sided demographic flow for better employment opportunities of the Bengali peasants for decades. Easy availability of agricultural land in Tripura coupled with the slow but steady arrival of non-tribal farmers (mostly Bengalis), capable of exploiting this favourable situation started making an impact on the socio-economic and, subsequently, political life of the state, though this gain was for the princely rulers. With the increase in rice cultivation and introduction of cash crops in Tripura (especially jute), state revenue increased steadily.²⁰

Refugee Scenario before Partition

In the reign of Bir Bikram Kishore Manikya, the first batch of Hindu Bengali refugees received by Tripura fled East Bengal fearing communal after the unprecedented Raipur (Dhaka) riot of 1941. Around 15,000 people entered Tripura. Some of them were *jiratia prajas*²¹ of the Chakla Roshanabad estate and hence subjects of Tripura state, in one way or the other. The royal administration provided them free and planned rehabilitation and arranged camps in a place near Agartala, called Arundhatinagar. The common people also treated them as guests of the State with the support of the royal family and political parties like Congress, Hindu Mahasabha and Left groups in Tripura. Most of them even offered permanent rehabilitation either in the form of employment or settlement on freehold land.²² From that time onwards, Agartala became an important

urban space for agricultural immigrants who subsequently converted themselves into professional people because of the liberal attitude of the state, administration.

A huge number of refugees migrated to Tripura from Noakhali district and Chandpur subdivision of Tipperah District (Comilla) when horrific communal riots broke out as a counter-effect of 'Direct Action Day' declared by the Muslim League in Calcutta on 16 August 1946.²³ Maharaja Bir Bikram Kishore Manikya formed an official Relief Committee with the support of the royal administration to help these riot-stricken people. The maharaja himself contributed by building six shelters for them, and created a specific fund for that purpose. Indeed, it is noteworthy that when communal frenzy overtook different parts of undivided India, Tripura remained insulated by and large.²⁴ Rana Bodhyung, the then secretary of the New Zealand Baptist Mission, and Tamizuddin, a minister of Tripura State, were two important members. Clearly, the maharaja was sensitive to the communal circumstances in both his territories, as Tripura consisted of mostly Hindus (either tribals or Bengalis), whereas the majority of jiratia prajas in Chakla Roshanabad estate were Muslims.

Unfortunately, this official committee did not work very well, because of high levels of corruption in relief work. Thus, another organisation was formed only for immediate relief and temporary rehabilitation of the refugees as an alternative measure. It was called the Tripura Rajya Praja Mandal Relief Committee, under the leadership of Kumar Ramendra Kishor Deb Burman, which comprised ex-members of Janamangal Samiti, Janasiksha Samiti and some independent members with progressive ideas. The committee made an appeal through a printed leaflet dated 2 Kartik 1356 T.E. (corresponding to 20 October 1946) requesting the people to donate, in cash or kind, to the relief fund.²⁵ The Communist Party of India (CPI) had already started working actively among refugees in Tripura from 1945; a relief committee was created under the aegis of CPI. In this connection, Dr. Bijay Kumar Basu came to Agartala and rendered services to the refugees. Indeed, a medical mission was sent to Tripura by the Bengal Provincial Congress Committee, Calcutta, and a medical camp was opened in Agartala for the refugees. Congress and CPI volunteers also worked simultaneously in Agartala and joined hands with members of the Dharmanagar Hitasadhini Sabha, established by Kala Chandra Nath Choudhury and Makbul Ali Bhuiyan in 1940. It was an organisation that worked primarily for Hindu-Muslim unity and distributed relief materials to refugees. The year 1946 also saw the formal inception of the Tripura State Congress. Although the Congress ideology was evident in Tripura from early 1940s, the amalgamation of the Tripura Rajya Gana Parishad with the Tripura State Congress was what made a formal institutional presence possible. In November 1946, Gandhiji visited Noakhali and young Congress leaders like Sachindra Lal Singh, Sukhamay Sengupta, Umesh Lal Singha, Hariganga Basak went to Chowmohani in Noakhali district to discuss the refugee situation in Tripura.²⁶

Post-Partition Refugee Situation

After Partition, Tripura was bordered by Chittagong, Noakhali, Comilla and Sylhet districts of East Pakistan (now Bangladesh). Four-fifths (83 per cent) of Tripura's 1,001-km-long frontier constituted the border with erstwhile East Pakistan. But it was only an imaginary line drawn by Lord Cyril Radcliffe in 1946-47. In fact, that frontier was open and unguarded till the early 1980s.²⁷ It was because of the proximity of the state of Tripura to these districts that it received such large numbers of displaced persons in waves after partition, after 1971 – the liberation of East Pakistan and the formation of Bangladesh – and thereafter. While the poor and disadvantaged refugees usually lost whatever little they may have possessed, the affluent or educated classes could sometimes remain ahead of the game by exchanging property with those going the other way.²⁸ During the first two years following partition, there was no immediate interchange of population; not even much by way of panic in Tripura and its borderlands. Rather, partition in the eastern and north-eastern parts of India was typically characterised by the illusion of the establishment that 12 million Hindus in East Pakistan would not be disturbed. Thus, until 1950, there was considerable reluctance on the part of the central government to acknowledge that the displaced persons from East Pakistan were to stay permanently in Tripura. The Liaquat-Nehru Pact (Delhi Pact) was signed in 1950 for the eastern borderlands and was largely based on the assumption that the influx from East Pakistan, unlike that from West Pakistan, was a temporary affair.²⁹ But instead of improving the conditions of the refugees, the Delhi Pact became the source of most of the problems which beset refugees from East Pakistan settled in Tripura, as well as in other parts of India. Especially after the riots of 1950, there was persecution, mainly psychological to begin with, followed by physical violence resulting in huge migration.

About 175,000 Hindu Bengali refugees crossed the border and took shelter in Tripura from adjoining districts.³⁰ The situation was so acute that the government arranged temporary camps for them on the outskirts of Agartala and in other small towns. Before the riots of 1950, government policy was to keep refugees around Agartala, so that the government and social organisations could reach them easily in times of need. But in 1950, the refugee influx increased so massively that the government could not accommodate them in Agartala or neighbouring areas. Strong steps were taken by the Tripura administration for the safe return of Muslim migrants who had previously gone to East Pakistan after partition. The provisions of the Delhi Pact and consequent instructions or assurances from the central government stressed that refugees would get back their pre-existing property and would enjoy security. Indeed, the Tripura government arranged necessary measures for their proper rehabilitation.³¹

Central Policy towards the Refugees: Initiative of the Tripura Government

From 1951, there was a spurt in the influx of displaced persons. The rush was so acute that normal arrangements for their immediate relief became impossible for the government. Up to 1950, the Tripura government did not even ask for any help in providing rehabilitation measures from the central government, which allotted funds for Assam and West Bengal. In 1950, the Tripura government stated in a press release that the hindrances to rehabilitation in Tripura were its topography and lack of communication facilities. However, it claimed that in March-June 1950, 3,866 families had been settled on 23,450 acres and 39 colonies had been set up at a total cost of Rs. 19,52,783.³² Refuting the claims of the administration, refugee organisations opined that the press release of the Tripura government was making exaggerated claims. After 1952, to tackle the refugee problem in Tripura, the Government of India adopted different rehabilitation measures. These included the colony scheme, type scheme, proto-type scheme, land purchase scheme, etc. About 75 colonies were set up accordingly.³³ Investment by the central government on the rehabilitation schemes, of course, benefited the economy of this State in various ways. However, the Tripura government stopped the process of official registration of refugees from 1 May 1958. Their argument was that the refugee inflow was decreasing day by day and neither government should encourage or allow refugees to come to Tripura and settle down permanently. They even discontinued the issuing of border slips or migration certificates, which was essential to get doles, jobs, property and citizenship. The central government also insisted that the state governments of West Bengal, Assam and Tripura curtail expenses on refugees and stop settling them temporarily or permanently.³⁴ In 1956, the central government initiated a plan to resettle refugees in Dandakaranya, Madhya Pradesh. Still migrants continued to trickle in till 1958. This is illustrated in the table below.

Year	Total Number of Refugees
1946 (riot year)	3,327
1947 (year of partition)	8,124
1948	1,554
1949 (communal disturbances)	11,575
1950 (serious communal riots)	67,151
1951	2,016
1952 (serious riots)	80,000
1953	32,000
1954	4,700
1955	17,500
1956	50,700
1957	3,600

Source: Bangladesh Documents, No. 15, Chap.V, Bangla Prakash, Dhaka, 1978, p. 91

There were three factors that encouraged the flood of refugees into this state. One, there was little local resistance to the immigrants. Two, a sizeable Bengali-speaking population already lived in the state, which provided all assistance to their incoming brethren. Three, the land-man ratio was comfortable till the 1950s in Tripura. So, the original inhabitants, or the tribals, were also not that aware of the dangers of demographic change, which might affect their lives and livelihoods.

Refugee Waves up to 1970s

Finally, towards the end of the 1960s, the central government declared that relief and rehabilitation work in Tripura had been comprehensive. It wound up the rehabilitation department and sacked its employees. But another refugee exodus began from the middle of 1963 due to huge riots in Khulna, Jessore and other districts of East Pakistan. The problem was aggravated after the riots of 1964. Refugee registration, which had stopped for the first time with effect from 1 May 1958, resumed in 1964 and finally stopped on 26 March 1971.³⁵ But, for a change, the migration of refugees was two-way this time. There were also reports of communal propaganda and mass evictions of Muslims from Assam and Tripura in the newspapers of East Pakistan.³⁶ The number of refugee colonies funded by the Government of India in various towns till 1970 was as follows:

Places	Govt. Colony	Proto-type Colony	Land-purchase Colony	Total Number
Sadar	17	6	2	25
Dharmanagar	-	4	-	4
Kailashahar	4	4	1	9
Kamalpur	4	3	2	9
Khowai	2	1	-	3
Udaypur	2	-	-	2
Bilonia	2	3	1	6
Sonamura	3	-	-	4
Sabrum	2	8	-	10
Amarpur	1	2	-	3
Total	37	31	6	74

Source: Report of the Relief and Rehabilitation Department, Government of Tripura, 1970-71

Again, during the period of the Bangladesh War, refugee migration increased exponentially: the number of refugees (14, 16,491) that came to Tripura in 1971 was a little less than the state's total population (15,36,342).³⁷ Tripura's open frontier on the north, south and west made it easier for migrants from Sylhet, Comilla, Noakhali and Chittagong districts to take refuge in this state. The central government refused to take responsibility for such a large number of temporary refugees, though it joined hands with the state government to open 276 refugee camps for them, for a whole year, mostly near Akhaura.³⁸ Apart from the government's effort, the political parties and common people welcomed the refugees and gave them shelter. But after the creation of Bangladesh in 1971, large numbers stayed back, many as illegal migrants initially who later managed to get citizenship. The density of population per square kilometre changed radically in Tripura from 1901 to 1981 which is evident from the chart below:

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

From the early 1970s, Tripura experienced a different type of migration, especially after the Liberation War of 1971. Tribals, especially the Chakmas in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, faced a new regime of discrimination and marginalisation.³⁹ As a result of persecution due to reasons of race and religion, almost 70,000 Chakmas sought asylum in Tripura.⁴⁰ With funds provided by the central government, the Tripura government was given the

task of arranging the supply of food rations, clothing, water, medical facilities and education for the Chakma refugees in six camps in Kathalchari, Kakbook, Pancharampara, Silachari, Tukumbari, Lebachari in the Amarpur and Sabrum sub-divisions located in the South Tripura districts.⁴¹ The large refugee population started creating a different type of demographic and, especially, environmental concerns in South Tripura. It also generated conflicts between locals and refugees in Tripura. This situation, as a whole, made the ethnic minorities in Tripura panicky and apprehensive about their future.⁴²

Struggle for Survival: Refugee Movement

The story of refugee absorption in Tripura was different from the two other neighbouring states in eastern and Northeastern India, i.e. West Bengal and Assam. Historically, the maharajas of Tripura had been quite eager to settle Bengalis in Tripura for the benefit and betterment of the state. From 1946, the burden of the relief and rehabilitation of refugees fell either on the Tripura administration or on local Bengali residents, by and large in Agartala. After the horrifying Noakhali riots, the evacuees formed the Bastutyagi Janakalyan Samity. In 1949, a similar organisation was formed under the leadership of Fanindra Prasad Sur in Udaipur called Tripura Sabalambi Udbastu Sangha. A unit of the East Bengal Relief Committee founded by Dr. Meghnad Saha in Calcutta was also opened at Agartala by refugee leaders like Jogesh Chandra Chakrabarty.⁴³

Moreover, communists who had migrated from East Bengal to Tripura before partition became active among the tribals and founded organisations like the Janasiksha Samity (1945) and Tripura Rajya Mukti Parishad (1948) to fight against the maharajas and disseminate education among the original inhabitants of Tripura.⁴⁴ Against this background, some communist leaders formed a branch of the Calcutta-based refugee organisation Purbabanga Sankhaloghu Kalyan Samity in Agartala. Similarly, the more politically established Congress leaders had their Congress Udbastu Sahitya Samity. Caste- and community-based organizations like the Tripura Rajya Nath Samity and Tripura Rudrapal Samity also championed the refugee cause.⁴⁵ Thus, up to 1950, the number of refugee organisations in Tripura was 10 to 12. In 1950, Dr Syama Prasad Mookerjee came to Agartala deliver a public address and appealed to the refugee leaders across ideological divides to fight collectively for refugee causes, especially enfranchisement.⁴⁶ The organisational base of the Hindu Mahasabha and Congress was quite strong in the 1947-50 period because of the former's record of social work and the latter's role in the nationalist movement.

Mookerjee's initiative led to the creation of the Tripura Central Relief and Rehabilitation Association in July 1950, with a conference being organised. It was attended by representatives of diverse refugee organisations. They organised rallies and adopted five resolutions in respect of the government's rehabilitation policy. Meanwhile, the date for the first

general elections was deferred and consequently the question of voting right was raised afresh.⁴⁷ However, ideological conflicts among various groups of the association prevented it from being a true representative body of all refugee organisations. Therefore, refugee leaders decided to arrange a state-level refugee convention to pave the way for a bigger struggle. This convention adopted 18 resolutions and specifically demanded that the exchange of property should be legalised by the governments of India and Pakistan.⁴⁸ Following resolution no. 12 of the All Tripura Refugee Convention, an all-party refugee forum called the Tripura Central Refugee Association was mooted, which finally came to being as the All Tripura Refugee Association (ATRA) in 1952. ATRA adopted strategies similar to those of UCRC (United Central Refugee Council) to organise refugee movements in West Bengal and observed 'East Bengal Day' at Agartala and Udaipur on 26 November 1952.⁴⁹

Shift to the Left

The ideological background for the spread of communist ideas in Tripura was created long before partition. The Janasiksha Samity had worked consistently among the tribals and migrants to prepare the ground. Though refugees initially gravitated towards the Congress reckoning that as the largest party in the country it would be able to tackle the refugee/migrant problem, after the first five years of partition they were disillusioned and became more supportive of the strategies of leftist leaders or organisations.⁵⁰ In 1953, veteran communist leaders like Biren Dutta and Amulya Kanchan Dutta Roy founded their own organisation, named Sanjukta Bastuhara Parishad, which soon became very popular. It observed 'Refugee Demand Day' and laid stress on some points regarding the proper professional rehabilitation of refugees, without encroaching upon tribal lands.⁵¹

By this time, some refugee colonies emerged in the *kebas* land of tribal areas like Gandhigram, Nutan Nagar, Patunagar, Barjala, Bishramganj, Jirania, Champaknagar in the Sadar sub-division.⁵² The Tripura Rajya Mukti Parishad, which was actually a tribal organisation, was formed with the help of the Sanjukta Bastuhara Parishad. Dasaratha Deb, the president of Mukti Parishad strongly believed that a democratic movement in Tripura could not succeed unless there was a unity between tribal and non-tribal people. The followers of the Mukti Parishad were mostly tribals.⁵³ Since the Mukti Parishad had a communist ideological mooring, it was deliberately equated with other tribal groups by political opponents initially, who often termed their demands as Bongal Kheda in Tripura. The refugee movement reached its climax in 1955-56, when Dasaratha Deb invited Mehr Chand Khanna, union minister for rehabilitation, to visit two or three colonies in Tripura and see the actual condition of refugees. The CPI's Tripura State Committee also submitted a memorandum in the Lok Sabha demanding loans for refugees at an easy rate and allotment of five *kanis* of paddy land to all

peasant families as decided earlier.⁵⁴ In the late 1950s, the Government of India decided that to lessen the population pressure in Tripura, migrants would be settled in other parts of the country. Accordingly, programmes were chalked out to resettle the refugees at Mana in Dandakaranya, Betia in Bihar and the Andamans. A total of 20,198 persons belonging to 7,065 families were rehabilitated in these places.⁵⁵ By 1959, communist leaders like Biren Dutta, Dasaratha Deb and Nripen Chakrabarty started agitations demanding that refugees should not be taken out of Tripura and should be rehabilitated in the state itself.

From the early 1960s, the CPI started organising *anasan satyagrahas* (hunger strikes) as an effective method of agitation and submitted a 26-point charter of demands to the central government on behalf of both the East Bengali refugees and tribal jhumias. In 1964, Nripen Chakrabarty also joined the satyagraha in Durgabari (the heart of Agartala) to demand economic rehabilitation for them.⁵⁶ Nevertheless, it was due to their agitation that the rest of the migrants were resettled in Nalkata in Kaolashahar (North Tripura), Amtali and Arundhutinagar (on the outskirts of Agartala).⁵⁷ A few schools and two colleges were also founded primarily for the refugee students by 1969, which were eventually brought under the grants-in-aid system of the government to run properly.⁵⁸ So, even as the compulsions of electoral politics remained salient, in which the logic of number dictated the course of events and continued to dominate politics and programmes of parties, the indigenous tribals remained at the receiving end of the changing demographic pattern and the socio-economic upheavals brought about by it.

Tribal Responses: The Question of Land Alienation

The change in the demographic structure had serious effect on tribal society and the tribal psyche. Social and political change had over time marginalised tribals, many of whom had lost access to land. This accelerated the rivalry between them and migrants/refugees/settlers and damaged the 'dignified and peaceful coexistence' of the two ethnic communities. The Tripur Sangha was the first political organisation of the tribals in Tripura, formed in 1946. It acted as welfare association before independence. The emergence of Seng Krak – a militant outfit consisting mostly of Reang youths – was formed in 1947 aimed at running a violent campaign against Bengali migrants.⁵⁹ Their anti-Bengali propaganda and policy became popular among revolutionary Muslim organisations too. Though the Seng Krak, meaning 'clenched fist', could not prolong its insurrection for long, it had the potential to give rise to new ethnocentric organisations. With the initiative of Dewan A. B. Chattopadhyay, the regency under Maharani Kanchan Prava Devi banned this organisation on 1948. Later in 1951, its leaders conceived the idea of starting another party which would maintain equal distance from the ruling party and the opposition. The Pahari Union was formed. Soon after, the Adivasi Samity and the Tripura Rajya Adivasi

Sangha emerged to champion the interests of the indigenous people of the state. Later, all these groups merged to form the Adivasi Sansad in 1954.

The aim of these organisations was to improve the economic condition of the tribal people, ensure greater participation in administration and establish better working relations among the various tribal communities. They tried to resist Bengali refugee rehabilitation in Tripura and nursed a communal and sectarian consciousness in the form of an anti-Bengali feeling. They demanded that the plains area of 300 square miles, which was released in 1949 by the Regent Maharani from the 'Tribal Reserved Area', should be demarcated by well-defined boundaries, so that the remaining portion of the reserved area could be retained for the tribals.⁶⁰ In 1956, M.K. Sahadar Bikram-Kishor from Tripura was sent on a deputation in New Delhi. When he met the prime minister, he modified his stand, saying that the government should be concerned about both the communities, i.e. refugees and tribals, but if tribal welfare was not undertaken carefully along with required refugee rehabilitation, communal relations might deteriorate in future.⁶¹

A broad-based initiative was undertaken within three years (1954-56) to form a common platform for the tribals of Northeast India which resulted in formation of the Eastern Indian Tribal Union, before the election of 1957. The undercurrent of emerging political aspirations and assertion of the indigenous people outside the communist movement was in full swing in the hilly region. Eventually, the Sixth Schedule was drawn up, containing provisions for the inclusion, either by election or by nomination, of a few non-tribals in the district councils. The tribals of Northeast India resented this. The major demands of the East India Tribal Union were formation of a tribal state in the Northeast, inclusion of Tripura within that state, more tribal district councils in the entire hill areas and appointment of non-Bengali officers in Tripura. Moreover, in 1960, the Dhebar commission while looking into the problems of the Scheduled Tribes and Schedule Castes had suggested formation of tribal development blocks in the tribal compact areas, as an experiment.⁶² There was another development in Tripura by then. The Tripura Land Revenue and Land Records Act was passed in 1960. It was a bold step to protect tribal interests insofar as it prohibited any transfer of tribal land anywhere in Tripura. Nevertheless 'benami' transfer and sale continued. The government tried hard to prevent such transfers but in most cases failed.

Against this backdrop, the educated section of the tribal youth formed their own organisation – the Tripura Upajati Juba Samity (TUJS) – in 1967, under the leadership of Sonacharan Deb Burma, as a natural corollary to the socio-political upheavals in the state.⁶³ Their ideology was to fight for and safeguard the interests of the indigenous population. TUJS gradually entered the political arena, demanding active participation in the administration and self-management with considerable control over their own affairs under the Autonomous District Council (ADC) for tribals where no non-tribal could purchase land or settle. Under their pressure, an

ordinance passed in 1973 declared all illegal transfers of land after 1 January 1969 void, admitted all transfers between 1960 and 1968 and also revoked Bir Bikram's order for reservation. Their argument was that reservation had been made by the king for five tribal communities only, whereas there were other tribals whose lands had been encroached on a regular basis by the plains people. Besides, the Tripura Land Reforms and Land Revenue Act of 1960 better protected the interests of all tribes all over the state. They also asked for extension of inner-line regulation in Tripura, introduction of Kokborok as a medium of instruction for tribal students in the Roman script and restoration of alienated tribal land as per the Tripura Land Reforms and Land Revenue Act of 1960.⁶⁴ One should look at demographic trends up till 1971 to understand the primary reasons for insecurity in their own land:

Year	Total Population	Non-tribal Population	Tribal Population	Percentage of Tribal Population	Percentage of Non-tribal Population
1901	173,325	81,646	91,679	52.89	47.11
1911	229,613	119,484	110,129	47.96	52.04
1921	304,437	137,937	166,500	54.67	45.31
1931	382,450	179,123	203,327	53.16	46.84
1941	513,010	256,019	256,991	50.09	49.91
1951	639,029	401,071	237,958	37.23	62.77
1961	1,142,005	781,935	360,070	31.53	68.47
1971	1,556,342	110,5796	450,544	28.95	71.05

Source: Census Report 2001, Department of Tribal Affairs, Government of Tripura

It is interesting to note that at the beginning, TUJS had the full support of the CPI(M), which was keen that it should act like its youth wing. But veteran tribal leaders like Dasaratha Deb and Aghore Deb Burma boycotted TUJS after a few months on the ground that the ideology of this new tribal political was based on communal militancy. Subsequently, some orthodox Bengalis formed the Amra Bangali, as a counter-communal organisation.⁶⁵ During the Bangladesh war, the Tripura Sena also came into existence, as a pure tribal organisation. Bijoy Kumar Hrangkhawl was made the chief of the new outfit in 1969. Indeed, rebel TUJS leaders set up arms training camps around 1971 in the Chittagong Hill Tract, with the help of the Tripura Sena and Mizo National Front. However, their primary concern was to drive out Bengali refugees from this state as well as to protect the rights and privileges of the native tribal communities in the state.⁶⁶

Conclusion

After partition, unlike in other states, migrant Bengali refugees were never evicted from their respective settlements in Tripura. However, they had to work hard, in most cases, to make cultivation possible in virgin lands and create a new, distinct identity for themselves. They helped boost agricultural growth in Tripura. On the other hand, there is no denying the fact that it skewed the demographic profile. This created a problem because there was a shortage of land suitable for wet rice cultivation, and more importantly, there was the problem of alienation of tribal lands. Previously, there was no dearth of land for transformation into jhum-fields for the tribal population. But after partition, the refugee was desperate to own a piece of land, and the Bengali started purchasing lands from the traditional jhumia at comparatively high prices. Tribals eventually lost access to forests, jhum fields and agricultural lands and increasingly became daily wage-earners. Governments at the state and centre undertook legislative measures to protect the interests of the tribals, yet, unfortunately, the overall socio-political position of the tribal population in comparison with the immigrants in Tripura deteriorated.

Notes

¹ Sardar Patel's Correspondence, Vol. 5, 1973, pp. 424-425

² *Ibid*, pp. 426-427

³ *Ibid*

⁴ Jayanta Debnath, *Santrasklanta Tripura* (in Bengali), Dainik Sambad, Agartala, 2001, pp. 120-122

⁵ *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 1 July 1963, p. 9

⁶ *Ibid*, pp. 436-437

⁷ Mahadev Chakrabarty (ed.), *Administration Reports of Tripura State*, Vol. IV, Gyan Publishing House, New Delhi, 1994, pp. vi-vii

⁸ N.R. Roy Choudhury, *Tripura through the Ages*, Published by the Author, Agartala, 1977, p. 127

⁹ Suchintya Bhattacharyya, *Genesis of Tribal Extremism in Tripura*, Gyan Publishing House, New Delhi, 1991, p. 31

¹⁰ N.C. Deb Burma, *History of the Land System & Land Management in Tripura (1872-2000AD)*, Manjushree Publications, Agartala, 2005, pp. 37-39

¹¹ Jagadis Gan-Chaudhury (ed.), *An Anthology of Tripura*, Inter-India Publications, New Delhi, 1985, pp. 40-42

¹² Manas Paul, *The Eyewitness: Tales from Tripura's Ethnic Conflict*, Lancer Publishers, New Delhi, 2009, p. 25

¹³ S. K. Chatterjee, *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal*, Vol. XVI, No. 2, 1950, p. 88

¹⁴ Malaya Banerjee, 'State Formation Process in Tripura: The Economic Roots' (Article), in *Proceedings of North East India History Association*, Eighteenth Session, Tripura University, Agartala, 1998, pp. 332-338

- ¹⁵ As declared by the Tripura *Durbar*, a tenant who accepted a lease for reclamation of hilly lands by clearing jungles got remission of rent at least for three years from the date of lease is called *jangal-abadi* system.
- ¹⁶ N.C. Deb Burma, *op. cit.*, pp. 18-23
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁸ W.W. Hunter, *Statistical Account of Bengal*, Vol.-VI, Hill Tipperah, 1874, London, p. 509
- ¹⁹ Manas Paul, *op. cit.*, p. 27
- ²⁰ File No. ID/1-21, Year 1948, Home (ID Department), Tripura State Archives
- ²¹ Landless labourers who used to work in *kebas* lands owned by the royal family of Tripura in the zamindari of Chakla Roshanabad for decades. Though they were share croppers, the maharajas of Tripura often treated them as their own subjects, whom they could not evict.
- ²² Interview with Jiten Pal in Agartala on 24 February 2012
- ²³ B.G. Verghese, *India's North East Resurgent: Ethnicity, Insurgency, Governance, Development*, Konark Publishers Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi, 1996, pp. 167-169
- ²⁴ Bijan Mohanta, *Tripura in the Light of Socio-Political Movements since 1945*, Progressive Publishers, Kolkata, 2004, pp. 73-74
- ²⁵ Nalini Ranjan Roychoudhury, *Tripura Through the Ages: A Short History of Tripura from Earlier Times to 1947 A.D.*, Sterling Publishers Private Limited, New Delhi, 1983, p. 59
- ²⁶ Tripur Chandra Sen, *Tripura in Transition (1923-1957)*, First Edition (Published by the Author), Agartala, 1970, p. 25
- ²⁷ Bijan Bihari Purkayastha, *Tripura: Atit, Bartaman o Bhabishyat* (in Bengali), Pustak Bipani, Kolkata, 1955, p. 44
- ²⁸ Interview with N.C. Deb Burma in Agartala on 23 February 2012
- ²⁹ U. Bhaskar Rao, *The Story of Rehabilitation*, issued on behalf of the Department of Rehabilitation, Ministry of Labour, Employment and Rehabilitation, Government of India, Faridabad, 1967, p. 145
- ³⁰ File No. F. 3(1)/57 ADM, Year-1957, Rehabilitation Department, Tripura State Archives
- ³¹ Jagadish Gan-Chaudhury (ed.), *Tripura: The Land and Its People*, Leeladevi Publications, Delhi, 1985, pp. 82-84
- ³² Jagadis Gan-Chaudhuri, *A Political History of Tripura*, Inter-India Publications, New Delhi, 1985, p. 54
- ³³ Press Release of the Tripura Administration, dated 20 July 1950, Published in *Janakalyan* (a Bengali bi-weekly), Agartala
- ³⁴ A.C. Bhattacharyya, *Progressive Tripura*, Inter-India Publications, New Delhi, 1985, pp. 98-99
- ³⁵ Sibopada De, *Illegal Migrations and the North East: A Study of Migrants from Bangladesh*, Anamika Publishers, New Delhi, 2005, p. 107
- ³⁶ Gayatri Bhattacharyya, *Refugee Rehabilitation and its Impact on Tripura's Economy*, Omsons Publications, Guwahati, 1988, p. 33
- ³⁷ *The Pakistan Observer*, 14 May 1964
- ³⁸ Dinesh Chandra Saha, *Prajatantrik Juger Tripura*, Writers Publication, Agartala, 2009, p. 56
- ³⁹ Bikoch Kumar Choudhury, *Genesis of Chakma Movement (1772-1989): Historical Background*, Tripura Darpan, Agartala, 1991, p. 10
- ⁴⁰ Chandrika Basu Majumdar, *Genesis of Chakma Movements in Chittagong Hill Tracts*, Progressive Publishers, Kolkata, 2003, p. 93

- ⁴¹ Imtiaz Ahmed, Abhijit Dasgupta, Kathinka Sinha-Kerkhoff (ed.), *State, Society and Displaced People in South Asia*, The University Press Ltd., Dhaka, 2004, p.180
- ⁴² Interview with Nandan Chakrabarty in Agartala on 23 December 2010
- ⁴³ Nilmani Deb Burman, *Gadyosangraha: Janasiksha Andolan o Onyanyo Prabandha*, Bhasa, Agartala, 2010, pp. 14-15
- ⁴⁴ Interview with Ramaprasad Dutta, founder of the research library *Ramaprasad Gabesanagar* in Agartala
- ⁴⁵ *Janakalyan*, July 1950
- ⁴⁶ *Ibid*, August 1950
- ⁴⁷ Leaflet dated 4 January 1951, signed by Nirbana Chandra Ghosh, President, Tripura Central Relief and Rehabilitation Association, and Convener, All Tripura Refugee Convention, Agartala
- ⁴⁸ *Janakalyan*, November 1952
- ⁴⁹ Aribam Indubala Devi, *Amazing North East: Tripura*, Vij Books India Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi, 2010, pp. 179-181
- ⁵⁰ Interview with Bodhrai Deb Burma in Agartala on 24 February 2012
- ⁵¹ Saraj Chanda (ed.), *Tripurar Communist Party Gorar Juger Duti Aprakashita Dalil* (in Bengali), Tripura Darpan, Agartala, 1983, p. 38
- ⁵² Dasarath Deb, *Samantatrantrik Byabosthar Biruddhe Mukti Parishader Sangram* (in Bengali), Naba Sahitya Parisad, Agartala, 1992, p. 21
- ⁵³ Tripur Chandra Sen, *op.cit.* pp. 74-75
- ⁵⁴ *Tripurar Katha* (Bengali weekly), 20 April 1956
- ⁵⁵ *Samaj* (Bengali Weekly), 7 December 1958
- ⁵⁶ File No. 21 (19)-PD/56, Year-1959, Police Department, Tripura State Archives
- ⁵⁷ *Jagaran* (Bengali daily), 24 October 1960
- ⁵⁸ Interview with Nilmani Deb Burma in Agartala on 24 February 2012
- ⁵⁹ Saroj Chanda, Satyabrata Chakrabarty (ed.), *Tripura e Samaj, Sanskriti Santrasbad* (in Bengali), Tripura Darpan, Agartala, 1999, pp. 48-50
- ⁶⁰ Dinesh Chandra Saha, *Tripura e Gana Andolaner Bichitra Dhara*, Writers Publication, Agartala, 2009, pp. 123-125
- ⁶¹ Jagadis Gan-Chaudhuri, *A Political History of Tripura*, *op. cit.*, pp. 58-59
- ⁶² *Tripura Legislative Assembly Proceedings*, 15 March 1967, pp. 27-28 (amendment by Aghore Deb Burma)
- ⁶³ Benimadhab Majumder, *The Legislative Opposition in Tripura*, Tripura State Tribal Research Institute & Museum, Agartala, 1997, pp. 150-151
- ⁶⁴ K.B. Jamatia, *Modernity in Tradition: A Historical Study of the Jamatia Tribe of Tripura*, Akshar Publication, Agartala, 2007, pp. 64-67
- ⁶⁵ *The Dainik Sambad* (local Bengali daily), 25 January 1990
- ⁶⁶ *The Statesman*, 12 June 1980