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Immigration, Identity Politics and the Demand for a Separate Tribal State in Tripura

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Abstract

Immigration connotes the movement of peoples across international boundaries to a country where they are not citizens. There are two types of immigration: legal immigration and illegal immigration. The state of Tripura has been the host to both legal and illegal immigration, particularly from the Bangladesh (formerly East Pakistan). This unabated immigration has relegated the tribals of Tripura to a minority in their own homeland. This paper seeks to map of the nature of this immigration and its consequential identity politics in the form of demand for separate tribal state.

KEYWORDS: Immigration, Identity Politics, State, Tipraland, and Tribals

Introduction

Immigration refers to the movement from one country to another for, inter alia, better livelihood, survival, and opportunities. Immigrants can be legal or illegal. The former have official documents such as passports, visas, and citizenship. The latter, on the other hand, have no official documents and cross the international borders without valid documents. They are also known as undocumented immigrants (D' Sami, 2016). India's north-eastern state of Tripura has been the host to both legal and illegal migration for ages. Following the partition of India and the formation of Bangladesh, in particular, there has been a persistent rise in the influx of both legal and illegal migration across the border from Bangladesh (formerly East-Pakistan). Given this historical legacy, the indigenous people in the state have been reduced to a minority their own homeland.

Through a qualitative analysis, this paper seeks to explore how this continuous wave of immigration has impacted the native people of the state, particularly in terms of how it has shaped the extant identity politics in the state and its culmination into the enduring demand for a separate tribal state, i.e., Tipraland.

The Contextual Background

Tripura, the third smallest state in India, is situated in the country's north-eastern region. Before joining the Indian Union in October 1949, Tripura was a princely state for more than 1300 years (Ghosh, 2003). The state covers a land area of 10,491 square kilometres and shares an international border with Bangladesh in the northwest, south and southeast and shares internal border with the Indian state of Assam and Mizoram. The erstwhile princely state's Regent Maharani Kanchan Prava Devi signed the Instrument of Accession, which declared Tripura a member of Indian State on October 15, 1949 as a "C" category state. In November 1956, it became a Union Territory, and on January 21, 1972 acquired full status of statehood (Government of Tripura, 2007).

As per official records the state of Tripura is home to nineteen tribes: Tripuri, Reang, Jamatia, Chakma, Lushai, Magh, Chaimal, Uchoi, Halam, Khasi, Bhutia, Munda, Orang, Lepcha, Santhal, Bhil, Kuki, Noatia, and Garo (Government of Tripura, 2013). Linguistically, nine indigenous tribes speak Kokborok (Tibeto-Burman) language. They are Debbarma (sub-tribe of Tripuri), Reang, Jamatia, Uchoi, Koloj, Murasingh, Noatia, Rupini and Tripura.

The unabated wave of immigration saw the growth of non-tribals in tribal areas, as well as the transfer of tribal land to the new settlers. This has led to a sense of insecurity and fear among the tribals, giving rise to the "us vs them" discourse. It led to the emergence of three ethnic-based organisations in the late 1960s – Tripura National Volunteers (TNV-an armed insurgent group) led by BK Hrangkhawl, Tripura Student Federation (now Twipra Student Federation) and Tripura Upajati Juba Samity (TUJS) – which championed the cause of pan-tribal nationalism. The common thread running in their demands include, among others, the restoration of tribal land lost to the non-tribal, to set up Autonomous District Council, recognition of "Kokborok" as an official language and to adopt Roman Script for "Kokborok" language (Ghosh, 2003). After much deliberation and struggle, the enactment of Tripura Tribal Autonomous Areas District Council (TTAADC) Bill was passed by the Tripura State Legislative Assembly that came into being on 3 March, 1979 as per Seventh Scheduled of the constitution of India covering the total areas of 7132.56 sq. km out of 10478.78. sq. km. Later, TTAADC was upgraded to the Sixth Schedule on April 1, 1985.

Following the proscription of National Liberation Front of Tripura (NLFT- an armed insurgent group) by the Government of India (GoI), Indigenous People's Front of Tripura (IPFT) was formed in 1996. Subsequently, the IPFT merged with TUJS and TNV and renamed their party as Indigenous Nationalist Front of Tripura (INPT) in 2003. However, INPT has witnessed the rise of numerous factions as a result of internal conflicts and ideological differences after the state legislative election in 2003 (Longkumer, 2021).

Resurgence of Indigenous People's Front of Tripura and their Separate Statehood Demand

Indigenous Tiprasa people are concerned as their grievances remain unaddressed due to prolong domination of the Left Front government in the state. Moreover, they experienced leadership crisis in the political domain that failed to address the issues with regard to their land, autonomy, and language, among others. Thus, separate statehood, known as Tipraland, began to animate the tribals and with the IPFT reviving the demand for it in 23rd August 2009. This separate tribal state is supposed to coincide with the territorial jurisdiction of the present TTAADC (Mahato and Deb, 2017).

The demand for 'Tipraland' can be interpreted as a reflection of the need for autonomy, equitable allocation of resources and recognition. This movement arises as a reaction to the perceived unfairness and disregard endured by the indigenous Tiprasa people throughout the years as a result of the measures taken by the ruling regimes.

After being revived, the IPFT party submitted series of memorandums to the Union Home Minister of India since 2009. Between October 2010 and August 2013, the IPFT party altogether submitted six memorandums. In the memorandum, IPFT claimed that the arrival of foreign nationals in Tripura during and in the aftermath of the partition, followed by Independence of Bangladesh in 1971, had an enormous impact on the demographic structure of the state (Deb Barman, 2014, para 6). These non-violent movements however did not yield any tangible results. Moreover, all the national parties such as CPI (M), Congress, Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and ethnic based party like Amra Bangali remained opposed to the demand of the tribals for Tipraland.

In 2018 State legislative election, the IPFT and BJP formed the government by defeating the Left Front that ruled the state for two and half decades. It did provide hope to the indigenous population, especially the young individuals, who were brimmed with wave of optimism and enthusiasm. Following the establishment of the new BJP government, the Central government formed a High-power Modality

Committee (HPC) to address the socio-economic, linguistic, cultural, and land rights issues of the tribals. The committee was created as an alternative scheme for a separate state and in return IPFT offered to rescind their demand. The Government of Tripura (GoT) submitted a project proposal valued at Rs. 8882 crores to the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA), Government of India. The proposal was produced using the suggestions provided by a HPC and data obtained from key ministries (Tribune, 2021).

Nevertheless, no fund has been released nor the reports about implementations of the proposed schemes are available in the public domain. Following their victory in the 2023 state legislative election, IPFT deviated from their core ideological demand and the party got weakened.

Emergence of TIPRA Motha: Demand from Tipraland to Greater-Tipraland

In a period of uncertainty and a crisis in leadership among the tribal community, a new era began in the political realm of the Tigrasa people with the rise of Pradyot Bikram Manikya Debbarma – a royal scion popularly known as Bubagra. He established TIPRA (The Indigenous Progressive Regional Alliance) as a social organization on December 24, 2019, primarily as a reaction against the proposed implementation of Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), 2019. The indigenous Tigrasa community has raised concerns that the implementation of the CAA may further diminish their already marginalized status, jeopardizing their survival and existence. It is in this context TIPRA spearheaded their movement for separate statehood demand, popularly known as “Greater-Tipraland” under Article 2 and 3 of the Indian Constitution. They frame their demand through their famous slogan, *puila jati and ulo-party* meaning ‘community first’, ‘party secondary’.

Contrary to IPFT’s ‘Tipraland’, which supports formation of a new state within autonomous areas of TTAADC, ‘Greater-Tipraland’ aims to encompass not just the TTAADC area but also territories outside its scope that have a substantial population of Tigrasa people. As pointed out in the preceding discussion, Bangladeshi immigrants not only impacted the demographic makeup of the state, but also brought numerous challenges to the tribal community. For example, Pradyot Bikram Manikya Debbarma, the founder of TIPRA, stated that the cultural dominance of the Bengali, who currently constitute the majority, has led to the erosion of tribal languages, culture, and tradition. Schools and universities have been adapted to meet the needs of non-tribal individuals, while neglecting the interests of tribal communities. He also asserted that tribals have been deprived of income opportunities and have become powerless in their own state (Murasing, 2022). Many voice that this can be rectified only with the creation of a separate state for tribals where the tribals themselves would control the levers of state power. The tribals also

frame their demand as aimed at ensuring that the tribals are vested with powers to craft their own political destiny and that their demand is not aimed at furthering animosity with the Bengalis or any other community. A significant number of Bengalis reside under the jurisdiction of the tribal council region. In fact, in the princely state of Tripura, "the Bengalis and tribals coexisted harmoniously" (Murasing, 2022).

In 2021, leaders of Tipraland State Party (TSP), Indigenous People's Front of Tripura- Ha (a splinter group of IPFT) and INPT merged with TIPRA and rename their party as Tipra Ha Indigenous Progressive Regional Alliance to establish the TIPRA Motha Party (TMP). Currently, the TIPRA Motha is the governing body of the TTAADC. It served as the primary party opposing the ruling party in the Tripura State Legislative Assembly until March 7, 2024 when they joined the BJP-IPFT coalition government ahead of parliamentary election.

Objectives and Methodologies

1. To understand the impact of immigration in the tiny state of Tripura, India.
2. To examine the factors leading to the demand of separate tribal state 'Tipraland'.

In terms of methodologies, the present paper is qualitatively in nature and it relies on secondary data, sources namely books, journals articles, internet archives, websites reports and among others have been cited.

Result and Discussion

Demographic Influx and Tribal Marginalisation

The extent of demographic transformations in Tripura can be gauged from the growth in population of Tripura over the years. As evident in the following table 1, it is clear that demographic transformation has been happening since early 1947. It is also makes it clear that the demographic inflows skyrocketed during the early 1950s, indicating the effects of the partition. In 1971, the total population of Tripura was 15.56 lakh, and the number of refugees or immigrants from Bangladesh (East Pakistan) was as high as 13.42 lakh (Ghoshal 2018). The problem with the inflow of refugees was that they had stayed back causing massing transformation in the demographic profile of the state. As Anandita Ghoshal notes:

.....Liberation War of 1971 was the last blow on the tribals when Tripura sheltered huge numbers of mukti joddhas (freedom fighters) and other frightened migrants. Looking at the internal rifts between the two wings of Pakistan and their insecure socio-economic and religious

positions in East Pakistan, most of the Hindus stayed back. This wave confirmed the permanent presence of Bengalis and imposition of their preferences on the agriculture, politics, economy and culture of the state (Ghoshal, 2021 p. 202).

Table No. 1 Refugees Flows over the Years in Tripura

Sr. No.	Year	No. of Refugee Influx
1	1947	8124
2	1948	9554
3	1949	10575
4	1950	67151
5	1951	184000
6	1952	233000
7	1953	80000
8	1954	3200
9	1955	4700
10	1956	17500
11	1957	57700
12	1958	3600
13	1959-1963	N.A.
14	1964-1965	100340
15	1965-1966	13073
16	1966-1967	1654
17	1967-1968	12299
18	1968-1969	3120
19	1969-1970	4334
20	1970-1971	5774

Source: Singh (2014, p. 12)

Refugee Rehabilitation and Politics of land alienation

Following the influx of the immigrants, the state's focus was shifted to refugee rehabilitation. It created a change in the traditional landholding pattern in the tribal society as well (Debbarma, 2012). Therefore, in order to rehabilitate the Bengali refugees, the land belonging to the tribal people have been acquired to provide housing and sheltering the immigrants. A first ever farmer cooperative society was created in 1948 for the Bengali refugees and it was popularly known as Swasti Samati Ltd (Debbarma, 2008). Approximately, 6400 acres of land was given to them from

around 600 indigenous families, especially the Reang communities (Debbarma, 2016). These cooperatives violated the regulations of the tribal reserve and began to grab huge tracts of tribal land (Bhaumik, 2009). As many as 75 colonies and were established under the rehabilitation project and continued up to 1961; moreover, large sections of refugees were rehabilitated who were victims of communal riots of 1964 (Bhattacharya, 1988).

No initiative was taken to restore tribal alienated land till 1960. Later, 777 square miles of land was de-reserved in 1948 by the then Maharani and resolve the rehabilitation crisis. Subsequently, the state government, too, de-reserved 300 square miles of land by an ordinance out of total 2060 square miles (Tripura, 2015).

To check and restrict the transfer of tribal land to the refugees, the Tripura Land Revenue and Land Reforms (TLR & LR) came into force in 1960. According to section 187 of the Act, there shall not be transfer of tribal land to any non-tribal or any other tribe shall be valid without the permission of the district administration in writings (Debbarma, 2018). The drawbacks of the Act however are that it does not recognise community owned land. Due to illiteracy and unfamiliarity with the laws of the land, many tribals were unable to register their land. So, the tribal land which sustained their lives for centuries became the state property (Debbarma, 2016). It is also important to note that the Act did not have any provisions for restoration of illegally transferred land (Tripura, 2015).

At this point, it added more fuel to the fire when projects like Dumbur Hydro-electric in the 1970s that submerged over 23,530.55 acres of tribal land and other additional land for setting up of power house and infrastructure was implemented (Tewari, 2018). Officials estimated that the project displaced more than 2558 families, and few who were able to produce land deeds were able to secure rehabilitation. Whereas it was estimated unofficially over 8000-10000 families or 60000 to 70000 people were displaced by the project, with many deprived of any compensation from the authorities (Bhaumik, 2003). Thus, alienation of the tribal land became one of the major causes of ethnic conflict between the tribal and the non-tribal that led to the famous riot in the 1980s and the prolonged ethnic unrest in the state.

Breaching of Peace Accord TNV

A tripartite Memorandum of Settlement (MoS) was signed on 12 August 1988 between the GoI, the GoT and the TNV. This MoS contains important resolutions related to restoration of tribal land, to prevent infiltration from Bangladesh (especially the Bengali settlers), reservations of seats in the state legislative assembly, re-demarcation of TTAADC boundaries. The GoI also committed to rehabilitate the undergrounds and settle through economic packages. In return TNV were offered to withdraw insurgency (Rajagopalan, 2008).

Through this MoS, the TNV achieved three tribal seats in the sixty-member legislative assembly constituencies. The GoT established two Delimitation Committees to redefine the borders of District Council Areas (DCA). Based on Committees report, the exercise of Delimitation of DCA was approved in compliance with TTAADC Rules, 1985 (Debbarma, 2006).

The Government did not successfully carry out the implementation of the TLR & LR (Sixth Amendment) Bill 1994, in regard with restoration of alienated tribal land, despite the Bill being passed in the state legislative assembly. This Bill intends to consolidate all sections of the TLR & LR Acts of 1960 (1974, 1975, 1982 as amended), with a specific focus on restoring alienated land to the indigenous Tiprasa people. Furthermore, it provides measures to protect the welfare of the indigenous tribal population who were previously vulnerable to the significant influx of refugees. Nevertheless, the Bill encountered significant resistance from non-tribal communities, particularly the Amra Bengali, well before it was enacted (Debbarma, 2018). This had triggered ethnic animosity between the two communities, which subsequently resulted in multiple conflicts occurring in various regions of the state. Regarding the infiltration of refugees, no individuals have been repatriated to Bangladesh as of today.

Language and the Politics of Script for Kokborok language

Language has significantly contributed to the mobilisation and intensification of ethnic conflicts between the Bengali and the Kokborok speaking tribal communities, alongside demographic and land-related issues. The Bengali language is spoken by a majority of two-thirds of the population, whereas the Kokborok language is spoken by a minority of less than one-third of the population (Singh, 2014).

Although the GoT recognised Kokborok as the state official language, the script issue is still alive and contested. For instance, in 1993, a section of the All-Tripura Tiger Force (ATTF-an armed insurgent group) entered into what is known as the "Agartala Agreement" with the GoT. In return, Government made a commitment to establish a Bhasa Commission for language development. As per the terms of the MoS, the GoT constituted the Bhasa Commission in 2004 under the guidance of Pabitra Sarkar. In 2005, the Committee presented a 102-page study recommending the adoption of the Roman script for Kokborok language. Nevertheless, contrary to the committee's suggestions, the GoT (Left Front) chose for a modified Bengali script rather than the Roman script for the Kokborok language (Singh, 2014). This was despite Kokborok speakers endorsing Roman script. However, under the present ruling Government, a new plan was put in place that sought to put the Kokborok language in Devanagari script.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that the indigenous tribal communities of Tripura, who were once a majority, became minority in their native land. The historical events of 1947 and thereafter in 1971 had brought remarkable changes in the demographic structure of the tribal society as whole. It has also adversely affected the autonomy, socio-economic conditions, and overall security of the tribal communities. Thus, the socio-political landscape of Tripura has been marked by tumultuous conflicts and tensions between the tribals and non-tribals.

This implies that the political demands of the tribals in the form of separate Tipraland needs to be sited in the context of the demographic imbalance and its resultant tribal land alienation. There is a need to address the tribal land alienation if any meaningful political settlement is to be achieved in the state. Further, for protection and security of their identity, importance of catering to tribal demands for recognition of language and use of Roman script for the Kokborok language need to be empathetically examined. The tribals need political autonomy in order to exercise their agency, have a sense of control over their political affairs, and safeguard their identity. The demand for Tipraland is reflective of the deep-seated grievances of the tribals. While the feasibility can be contested, it nevertheless underlines the need to accommodate the autonomy aspirations of the tribals. In fact, their autonomy aspirations can be mitigated if the TTAADC under the Sixth Schedule is honored and allowed to function as per the spirit of the constitution.

The TTAADC, which comes under the Sixth Schedule, should play an important role for the welfare and all-round development of the indigenous communities. The Sixth Schedule was envisaged to act as a bulwark against majoritarian policies and practices. As such, the spirit of this constitutional provision needs to be honored. The State government should refrain from obstructing the functioning of the TTAADC and not treat it as a source of separatism. Rather, it is to be seen as a constitutional accommodation accorded to the marginalised tribal communities so that they have a measure of self-governance and security over their land and identity. Routine subversions of the TTAADC or the Sixth Schedule by the State government not only violates the spirit of the constitution but also contributes to the radical ethno nationalism and the resultant conflicts and instability in the state.

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