

## **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	Jhumming and Cultivation
Mogs	-do-	5687	-do-
Garos	Assam Hills	2740	-do-
Lushais	-do-	2000	-do-
Bodos	-do-	181	-do-
Khasis	-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 primitive 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 coffers. 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 Tripura 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 into full-fledged ethnic movement with the formation of *Tripura Upajati Juba Samiti* (TUPS).

## 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 *Rajya 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 *Khax* (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 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 Debbarna, 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 Sunitijvan Chakma in 1952.

### *Tripura Rajya Adivasi Sangha-*

The urban and educated tribal people of the capital city of Agartala came forward to organise the association in 1953. The prime movers of this organisation were Jiten Debbarna, Lafit Debbarna and Bura 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 these 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 watershed 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 TUIS) 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 TUIS 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 TUIS became amply clear in its adoption of the slogan- "*Kachak Koofor Chung Chua, Buni Tala Tanglud*" (We are neither rods 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 TUIS 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 TUIS expanded its footprints in the politics of Tripura and developed organisations among tribal employees, the students and the youths.

An important figure in TUIS 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 TUIS 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 TUIS 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 TUIS had initial backing from the communist party as the CPM was keen that the TUIS 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- 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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## Land alienation and its impact on jhumias: A case study of 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 ethnic violence, deadly ethnic conflicts and a planned destruction of the relation between the tribal and non-tribal people 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 livelihood among the tribal populace of Tripura. The main aim of the paper is to highlight the growing pauperisation of the tribals in Tripura through a study of the system of Jhum Cultivation.

**Keywords:** insurgency, *jhum* cultivation, bangladesh, land-alienation, development

### 1. 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. In fact, the tribal population in Tripura constituted about 28.95 per cent of the total population in 1971. 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.

There is no doubt that the tribals were reduced to a position of insignificance in a place where they were once dominant. 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 group and the tribals of the state. The present paper is an attempt to analyze the phenomenon of land alienation and its impact on the Jhumia's (Shifting Cultivators) of Tripura. In fact the transformation in the socio-economic condition of the tribal populace is best illustrated by the changing conditions of the shifting cultivators or the *Jhumia's* of the state as a direct consequence of unbridled migration after the partition of India in 1947. The tiny state of Tripura has always been susceptible to migration but it was post-partition migration which had an adverse impact on the fate of autochthons in Tripura. The article for the sake of discussion is divided into four parts-

1. Pre-Partition Migration.
2. Post-Partition Migration.
3. Loss of traditional Livelihood/Impact on *Jhumia's*
4. Ecological Factors and Land Alienation.
5. Results/Consequence

### 2. 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 non-migrated from the northern part in search of fertile and arable land. This partially accounts for the fact that indigenous people of the state such as the Tripuris, Reangs, Halams etc. bear an ethnic resemblance towards the Thais, Burmese groups such as the Bodos and the Kukis inhabiting the adjacent states. The report of the political agent observed 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 Chakmas came to Tripura in search of *Jhum* land. 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 latter 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 immigrations 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<sup>[2]</sup>. The first tea-estate was established in 1916 in the Kailasahar subdivision 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, Bhiis 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.

Table 1

Name of the Tribe	Hailing From	Population	Occupation
Chakmas	Chittagong Hill Tracts	8613	Jhuming and Cultivation
Mogs	-do-	5687	-do-
Garos	Assam Hills	2740	-do-
Lushais	-do-	2000	-do-
Bodos	-do-	181	-do-
Khasis	-do-	23	-do-
Oraons	Chottanagpur	979	Tea-Garden Labourer
Kandis	Orissa	667	-do-
Kurms	Kurms	338	Agriculture
Munda	Chottanagpur	2058	Tea-Garden Labourer
Santhal	Santhal Pargana	735	-do-

Source: Census Reports

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 prime 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<sup>[3]</sup>. 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<sup>[4]</sup>. 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.

### 3. 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. 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<sup>[5]</sup>. Riots also broke out in Chittagong,



Barisal and Naakhali and as a result about 200,000 refugees migrated to Tripura<sup>24</sup>. 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, Jampujala, 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.

Table 2

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 the stream of migration as the tribal population was initially not aware of the dangers to their lives and livelihoods the migrants could pose. Thirdly, the presence of a sizable Bengali-speaking population in the state also contributed to this demographic change as it readily provided all necessary to their incoming brethren.

#### 4. Impact on Jhumia's

In the local parlance of Tripura, a *Jhumia* is a person who practises shifting cultivation or *Jhuming*. Under this form of cultivation, more appropriately called 'slash and burn' which is set on fire and several crops like paddy, cotton, chillies, maize, and vegetables are sown. The crops mature at different times of the year. *Jhum* fields are abandoned after the crops are harvested and the *Jhumia* move to new *Jhum* sites after harvesting is over. The *Jhum* was once prevalent in Tripura in the past. According to W.W. Hunter<sup>25</sup>, till about 1830 there was "little or no plough cultivation and as late as 1908 the Imperial Gazetteer reported that the nomadic tillage known as *Jhum* cultivation is almost universal. Even today, there are a sizeable number of *Jhumia* families in the State. In 1955, it was estimated that there were 25,000 *Jhumia* families in Tripura and the total amount of land under shifting cultivation was 14, 08,000 acres.

B.P. Misra in his extensive study of the *Jhum* cultivation has shown that the *Jhumia* cultivators were quite well-off as the "per acre yield of *Jhum* paddy was about 27 maunds which compared well with the per acre yield of a double-cropped land which was also 27 maunds between 1934-35 and 1957-38"<sup>26</sup>. This indicates that in good years at least, the *Jhumia* were not badly off even in the late thirties. *Jhuming* also provided them with commercial crops which could be sold in exchange for money, providing the *Jhumia* with the wherewithal for purchasing items of their daily necessity which they did not themselves produce. The *Jhum* economy was also an egalitarian one as land was not privately owned under this system of cultivation. There is no private ownership of land where *Jhum* is practised. In fact T.A. Lewin in describing the economic and social life of the tribals living in the Chittagong Hill Tracts with whom the tribals of Tripura have much in common has pointed out that "they enjoy perfect social equality"<sup>27</sup>. In this way *Jhum* cultivation formed an integral part of the life of the tribals of Tripura.

However, things gradually changed for the *Jhumia* of Tripura as *Jhuming* ceased to be a viable system. It could no longer provide the *Jhumia* with enough to avoid starvation, leave alone provide them with surplus. Several factors were probably responsible for these changes. The growth of population among the *Jhumias* and the steady reduction in the amount of land available for *Jhuming* led to a shortening of the *Jhum* cycle. The shortening of the *Jhum* cycle and repeated *Jhuming* on the same land without a long enough period of fallowing led to a lowering of the fertility of soil. The policy of the government towards the *Jhumia* also underwent a change. From the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, restrictions started being imposed on *Jhuming* in forest lands by declaring more and more forest areas as reserved lands and restricting the rights of the *Jhumia* from carrying on *Jhuming* in the reserved forests in order to increase the revenue earned by the Maharaja from the forests of Tripura.



[10] But according to Malabika Dasgupta the *Jhumias* started facing a genuine problem of land shortage after the partition of the country as it resulted in the continuous migration of people from erstwhile East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) [11]. The tribal *Jhumias* who were earlier marginal forest dwellers were pushed further inside the forest.

The Government also took various measures which actively discouraged the practise of *Jhum* cultivation. It considered the practise of *Jhum* cultivation to be destructive of the environment. In order to change their system, the government started distributing government land to the tribal's. Under the scheme each family was given two standard acres of land. The process of transfer from collective ownership to individual ownership started soon after independence. In this regard the main thing to note is that the tribals lost their community land and started cultivating land on an individual proprietary basis. The tribals who were used to community ownership of land started cultivating land under a new system of private ownership and it led to the inevitable- they lost their land to the more Bengali immigrants who took up plough cultivation in the plains.

Transfer of land from tribals to non-tribals is 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 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 to pay 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 of Tripura District to enquire 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. In almost all the tribal areas the non-tribals possessed disproportionately large areas of land.

In this way tribals lost their land to the immigrant Bengalis with the progress of agricultural modernisation. Most of the tribals who used to cultivate their own land slowly and gradually became landless agricultural workers on the very land which was once possessed by them or by their forefathers. Those who still owned land became marginal farmers, cultivating less than 1 hectare of land. So land came to be concentrated in the hands of non-tribals. Thus, a once egalitarian society became non-egalitarian and class-ridden.

The second decision which added fuel to fire was the commissioning of the Dumbur Dam in 1976. In fact, another group of tribal's lost their land to the development initiatives of the state- the so-called ecological refugees. A classic example of this is furnished by the case of the Dumbur tribals. The reservoir of the Gumti Hydro-electric Project was created by inundating eight *monjals*. Many of the tribes who lived in these *monjals* were prosperous cultivators but they were not given any rehabilitation after being driven out from their lands. They therefore, had no option but to take up the work of agricultural laborers in

order to eke out a precarious living on the brink of starvation.

## 5. Ecological Factors and Land Alienation

The unrest caused by the steady land loss in Tripura was further exacerbated by the submergence of a huge swathe of arable land owned by the tribals in the Raima valley as a result of the commissioning of the Gumti project. This project not only disturbed the fragile ecology of the Raima valley, it also left a permanent scar on the tribal psyche. All tribal organizations including the communist-backed *Gana Mukti Parishad* fiercely protested the commissioning of the Gumti hydroelectric project in 1976. But the Congress government turned a deaf ear to the protests as it was determined to augment Tripura's power supply but only ended in augmenting tribal unrest by dispossessing thousands, denying them of their only economic resource and collective symbol - their land.

A 30 meter high gravity dam was constructed across the Gumti River about 3.5 km. upstream of Tirthamukh in the south Tripura district, for generating 8.60 MW of power from an installed capacity of 10 MW. The dam submerged a valley area of 46.34 sq. km. This was one of the most fertile valleys in an otherwise hilly state, where arable flatlands suitable for wet rice agriculture make up a mere 28% of the total land area. In fact, the commissioning of the Gumti Dam provides the most glaring example of government's apathy towards the tribal populace. According to a study carried out by 'Integrated Watershed Management' of the Gumti River Valley a total of 2,117 tribal families were ousted from their traditional *jhum* land. Among them 805 families had proper land papers and they were *Jote* (land registered in someone's name) land-owners. On the other hand 1312 were owners of *Khas* land (land not registered in someone's name i.e. government land). Out of 728 Bengali families 378 were holders of *Jote* land while 350 were settled in *Khas* land. Thus, a total of 1183 *Jote* land owners and 1662 *Khas* land-owners were evicted due to the project. The total number of families thus evicted stands at 2,845. However, the official records suggest that 2,117 tribal families were displaced from the Gumti project area, but this only includes families who could produce land deeds and were thus 'official' owners of land [12]. Unofficial estimates vary between 8,000 to 10,000 families or about 60 to 70,000 tribes' people displaced by the project. One writer Khakhang Tripura observes that more than ten to fifteen thousand tribes were displaced from the Dumbur dam submerged area [13].

The reason for such disparity in figures is that in the tribal societies of the northeast, land ownership is rarely personal and the system of recording land deeds against individual names is only a recent phenomenon. Most of those ousted by the Dumbur dam failed to get any rehabilitation grant and were forced to settle in the hills around the project, returning to slash-and-burn (*jhum*) agriculture. The dam destroyed the once bountiful tribal peasant economy of the state. Tripura's leading economist Malabika Dasgupta has shown in her study of the Gumti hydel project that "attempts either to protect the environment to the exclusion of considerations for the well-being of the people or to improve their level of well-being without consideration for the environmental impact of such policies can neither protect the environment nor improve the standard of living of the people" [14].



The tribal populace of Tripura which was already reeling under severe land alienation due to unprecedented migration of Hindu refugees from East Pakistan and Bangladesh came under further pressure as there was large-scale displacement due to the commissioning of the dam. Pauperization of Dumbur's once prosperous tribal peasantry for the sake of Bengali urban dwellers who were to be benefitted by the production of electricity was not lost on a generation of angry tribal youths who took up arms and left for jungles to fight an administration that they believed was only working in the interests of Bengali refugees.

In other words, the commissioning of the Dam caused a great amount of resentment among the tribes of Tripura and these ecological refugees who were left at large by the apathy of the government swelled the ranks of disgruntled tribesmen. It resulted in increasing pauperization of the tribal society in Tripura.

#### 6. Results/Consequences

All this in fact provided the material condition for the efforts by the tribals to organize themselves politically. The first organized tribal movement *Seng-Krak* (it means folded finger in the tribal Kok-Borok Language) originated as a reaction to the settling down of the non-tribal refugees in the tribal areas. Its leaders opposed the influx of refugees and its preaching was anti-Bengali. This organisation carried out propaganda among the ordinary tribal folk to resist the influx of refugees. It also carried out violent attacks on many refugee camps. Subsequently this organization was banned by Dewan A.B. Chattopadhyay. *Seng-krak* being outlawed some of its members took the initiative in forming Paharia Union in 1951. Chandra Sadhu Rupini who was an influential leader of the Hallam community took the main initiative in forming the Union<sup>[11]</sup>.

However, the most important of the tribal organizations was the *Tripura Upajati Juba Samiti* formed in June 1967. The main objectives of this organization were the restoration of tribal land, formation of district council for the tribal people and the introduction of the Kok-Borok language in the Roman script as a state language. Following the state assembly elections of 1977 in which the Communist Party of India (Marxists) came to power it was announced that the process for initiating the setting up of District Councils would be taken up very soon. Some Bengalis living in the hills strongly opposed this decision and set up an organization called *Amra Bangali* in 1978. This led to clashes involving both the tribals and the non-tribals in west Tripura. It is against this background that some extremist tribal youths under the leadership of Bijoy Kumar Hrangchawl founded the *Tripura National volunteers* (TNV) in July 1979 and this marked the beginning of insurgency in Tripura<sup>[12]</sup>.

Thus, we can very well assert that the process of land alienation in Tripura which was first initiated by the Maharaja of Tripura as an innocuous measure to bring more land under cultivation for increased revenue assumed alarming proportions following the partition of the country and it contributed in large measure to the growth of insurgency in Tripura. The changing demographic situation has intensified the search for a secure place and identity on the part of tribal communities. Assertion of widened ethnicity may thus be viewed as a mechanism of responding to the new demands of changing times. It has been suggested by Mahadev Chakravarti that the fear of

submergence of the tribal culture and ethos within the dominant non-tribal culture and also lack of economic opportunity bred insurgency<sup>[13]</sup>.

#### 7. Conclusion

To conclude, the partition of India in 1947 and the consequent migration of refugees led to immense pressure on the traditional economy of Tripura which in turn led to the loss of traditional livelihood among the tribes of Tripura. All this in turn contributed to the rise of insurgency in Tripura.

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## TRIBAL REBELLION AND PROGRESSIVE MOVEMENTS IN TRIPURA : AN ANALYSIS

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**ABSTRACT :** Tripura, the North-eastern frontier state of Indian nation has had a long history of Princely rulers who had continuously ruled the state for more than 300 years. However, it was first in the 18th century that the state of Tripura came in contact with the English East India Company and then in the second half of 19th century with the British government. All this led to the introduction of several new political and administrative measures particularly in the field of revenue administration as the policy of British was revenue maximisation. This put enhanced burden on the tribal peasants and led to a series of tribal rebellions. Tripura's history particularly in the latter half of the 19th century witnessed a slew of tribal uprisings such as the Tripuri Revolt of 1850, the Kuki raids of 1860-61 and the Jamatia revolt of 1863 culminating in the Reang revolt of 1943 in the 20th Century. The effects of British rule in Tripura were both destructive as well as regenerative. It also inspired a number of progressive movements among the tribes, particularly educational and democratic movements. The present paper is not only an attempt to provide a chronological account of the tribal movements in princely Tripura but to analyse the changing character and objective of the movements.

**Keywords :** Progressive Movement, Tripura, Tribal Rebellion.

### Introduction

The State of Tripura is claimed to be one of the oldest Kingdoms in Ancient India ruled by Princely rulers, who were believed to be descendents of King Yayati, belonging to the lunar dynasty in the Mahabharata era.<sup>1</sup> There are many versions of this story, based on mythology and references made in the Rajmala

and other scriptures. According to Rajmala, a Bengali chronicle of the Tripura kings about one hundred fifty kings had ruled Tripura for an uninterrupted period of about 1350 years. However, the transformation of this monarchy to its present democratic State as part of the Union of India ushered in substantial social, economic and political changes which in turn engendered many socio-political movements.

The present paper is an attempt to survey the tribal movements in Tripura from the pre-independence period to the Gana Mukti movement of the late 1940s which gave rise to modern political consciousness among the tribal populace of the state. It is also intended to analyse the roots, course and nature of the movements so as to bring out the changing character of the movements in terms of its goal and pattern of mobilisation.

Tripura is a small land locked North Eastern State of the Union of India, which covers an area of 10,477 sq. km. It is bounded by the North-West, South and South-East by Bangladesh with a long and open border of 829 Km. On the north, west, south and south-east border of Tripura are the Bangladesh districts of Sylhet, Comilla, Noakhali and Chittagong Hill Tracts respectively. It shares a boundary with the district of Karimganj in Assam to the North and on the East with the State of Mizoram. The topography of the Western part of Tripura is almost the same as the Eastern part of Bangladesh, with six hill ranges of varying heights ranging from 1000 ft. to 3000 ft. emerging from Bangladesh and traversing through Tripura in a west to east direction. The principal hill ranges are Bara-Mura, Athara-Mura, Deura-Mura, Longtharai, Jampui and Sakhan. The eight principal rivers or streams are Juri, Maia, Dhalai, Khurai, Gomati, Howrah, Mulari and Feni originating in the hill ranges. These rivers and streams are not perennial but rain-fed.

The origin of the name of Tripura has been a subject of controversy among the scholars. According to the Rajmala the territory was known in the ancient times as 'Kirat' after the name of the ruler. He was succeeded by his son Trigra after whom the country was known as 'Tripura'. But this view is not supported by the majority of the scholars. J.F. Brown is of the opinion that the name Tripura may originate from the name of the deity Bhawarwar whose temple is in Udaipur. According to him, "there

can be no doubt that the country took its name from the goddess. The appellation was given by the Aryan-speaking immigrants to be the majority of the scholars consider this untenable as because the name Tripura goes into currency even before the installation of Trigraaswami temple at Udaipur during the rule of Dhama Manikya in the first half of the 18th Century. It is quite likely that the name might be named after the name of the country. In this matter the view of Kailash Chandra Singha is widely accepted. He is of the opinion that the word 'Tripura' originates from two Tripuri words 'Tul' and 'Pra'. In Tani language Tul means water and Pra means land. The land, according to him, was originally known as 'Tulpra' meaning thereby the land near waters. He reaches this conclusion from the fact that once the boundaries of the country stretched up to Bay of Bengal when the principality included the Arakan. 'Tulpra' later became Sanskritised and came to be known as 'Tripura'.

#### History of Princely Tripura

The kingdom of Tripura in the pre-colonial period was ruled by the rulers of the Manikya dynasty.<sup>1</sup> The ancient period in the history of Tripura began around in the 7th century when Tripuri kings ruled from Kailashar in west Tripura and used 'Fa' as their title. 'Fa' or 'Kokborok' means 'Father' or 'Head'. In the 14th century the Kings of Tripura adopted 'Manikya' title and shifted their capital to Udaipur on the banks of river Gomti in south Tripura. It has been suggested that King Raima Pha was living in exile at the court of Sultan Tughril Khan of Gaur and was restored to the throne by the Sultan. King Raima Pha as a mark of gratitude sent valuable presents to the Sultan of Gaur which included elephants and precious rubies. The Sultan now bestowed upon the King the title of Manikya in 1279.<sup>2</sup>

In fact, the period from 1400 to 1861

was considered as the Golden phase, often referred to as the 'era of expansion', whereas, the period from 1861 to 1792 was known as the 'era of decline', while the era from 1792 to 1948 is often described as the 'era of change'. In all these three phases of its history, the kingdom was at constant logger-heads and at war with its neighbouring kingdoms. The kingdom Tripura was involved in frequent and active conflict with the neighbouring kings of Kachari, Cachar, Assam and also, the rulers of Gaur across Brahmaputra. Dhama Manikya (1431-62) the first great king of Tripura was a great patron of Bengali language and literature. It was under his patronage and active encouragement that the Rajmala or the chronicles of the Kings of Tripura was composed in Bengali. He also took steps for the establishment of the Brahmin settlements in different parts of the state and himself became an ardent follower of Hinduism. Thus, even today the tribal belief and practices are a synthesis of animism and ritualism of Bengali Hindu.

The period from 1561 to 1792 is known as the 'era of decline', marked by the advent of the Mughals who finally found a foothold both in Chittagong and Comilla after a Century, resulting in the defeat and shrinking of the empire.<sup>3</sup> The empire lost a substantial expanse of its plains to the Mughals and was left with a meagre 600 sq miles of plain land known as Chakla Rasthabad and 300 sq miles of its hilly terrain.<sup>4</sup> The constant wars with the Mughals and loss of territory meant a loss of revenue for the state. Hence, it was logical for the Maharaja to mitigate this loss by reducing marsh land in the hilly areas and start taxing the tribal populace. He also encouraged Muslim cultivators from Bengal to settle in large numbers so that new land could be brought under cultivation.

In the 18th Century, the situation became far more acute as the empire lost the South

Western portion of his kingdom known as Chakla Rasthabad to the Nawab of Bengal due to internal family feuds. Ultimately, the royal family agreed to hold Chakla Rasthabad as Zamindari, under the British on payment of rupees 5000 as tax per annum.<sup>5</sup> Thus, in the year 1712 during the reign of Dhama Manikya II (1714-33) the kingdom was reduced to the palmy hill area of Tripura with the Zamindari of Rasthabad.

Another important land mark in the pre-independence history of Tripura was the contract with the East India Company. In 1765, the Company secured the Dewani right or the right to collect revenue from Bengal from the Mughal Emperor Shah Alam (1760-1800). This became an issue between the King of Tripura and the English East India Company. This issue was finally settled in 1792, when the Zamindari was awarded to the king for the plain areas with the independent authority over the hill areas of Tripura.

#### Tribal Rebellion

In colonial India, the tribes have resisted more frequently than other community and because violence was endemic to the tribal way of life, but because it was the last resort available to them. The tribals have revolted not only for concrete economic demands but also for protecting their identity which was at stake when confronted with the forces of modernity. In fact, as Ranajit Guha points out, "there existed throughout the colonial period another domain of Indian politics in which the principal actors were not the dominant group of the indigenous society, or the colonial authorities, but the subaltern classes and groups."<sup>6</sup> Tripura was not outside this general trend as the advent of the East India Company and its policy towards the king created conditions of rebellion among the tribes of Tripura, particularly on the issue of revenue collection as the East India Company greatly enhanced the revenue demand



from the Zamindari of Chakla Roshanabad. The term 'rebellion' is used here to mean 'organised armed resistance to established authority'.

During the period from 1761 to 1765 the East India Company increased the amount of rent payable by the Zamindari of Roshanabad from Rs. 66,695 to 1,05,000 which was a very heavy burden on the king, who in turn passed it to the peasants and those who could not pay tax and lost his land rights. The condition was so bad that the peasant of the Mizo community revolted against this subjugation which was suppressed brutally by the king.<sup>11</sup> The second phase of the eighteenth century was traumatic for the tribal population, especially so, when the king's property was shrinking and the demands for tax increased from the East India Company, leading to the corresponding oppression on the citizens ultimately resulting in tribal rebellion.

In the first half of the 19th century, the kingdom became close to the British Empire, by assisting them in the First Anglo-Burmese war of 1824 and later in 1857 during the Sepoy Mutiny of Chittagong. However, the frequent unrest among the tribes during the years and the raid of the Kukis in 1826, 1836 and 1844 against feudal oppression and princely tyranny invited adverse notice of the British on the State of affairs in the kingdom. In fact, Kuki raids became a matter of serious concern for the rulers of Tripura especially during the reign of Maharaja Krishna Kishore Manikya (1830-49). On 16th April 1844 a group of Kukis under the leadership of Lalchokla and Botai carried out a large scale raid at the Manipuri village of Kochuduri in Pratappur Sylhet. They cut off the heads of twenty people and marched off with a number of captives in order to perform the last rites of their father, Laro. An expedition was sent under Captain Blackwood in 1844 which led to the capture of Lalchokla. Such type of attacks and raids became regular

feature in the villages bordering areas of Manipur by the Kukis tribe.

It is in the midst of such adverse circumstances, in the second half of the 19th century, that the king Ishan Chandra Manikya (1849-62) took the ill-advised decision of choosing his religious Guru, Bripin Bishoi, a Hindu Brahmin, to superintend the administration of the State and Islamisation collection. These appointments were made in the insistence of British Government but he to collect more taxes from the Kuki community, ended in a revolt in 1857. The repressive and ruthless policy adopted by the king to collect more taxes from the Kuki tribes, in spite of two successive droughts led to a revolt by the *Reangis* supported by the in 1860. Both these revolts which were the result of oppression and injustice of rulers were put down with an iron hand.

In the 1860's there occurred a series of raids by the Karkis in the British area bordering Tripura which are generally known as the Great Kuki raids of 1860's. In fact, in Chittagong the frontier town of eastern up, 400 to 500 Kukis assembled at the mouth of the river Feni where they burnt down the villages and killed a few people. Then they moved into the plains of Tripura at Chagabek and butchered many British subjects and took about 100 captives. Although raiders were rushed immediately by the British administration of Tipperah but the Kukis already retreated to their hill refuges after one or two days in plains. The raiders were said to have been under the command of King Posa.

The inability of Ishan Chandra Manikya (1849-62) and his Guru Bripin Bishoi in this raid taking place in Chakla Roshanabad led the British authority to come forward to stop these pernicious raids. In Jan. 1861 an

military contingent was sent under Captain Ratan against Ratan Posa's village. But at the very time this expedition was mounted a large body of Kukis launched a fierce attack on Dabura the erstwhile capital of Tripura, killing about 130 persons. On 22nd Jan 1862 another horrible massacre was perpetrated when the Mizo's ransacked three villages, namely, Ramdulah's Bari, Rammojan's Bari and Chantabara, all under Rajrang police station in Sylhet district. The episode is referred to as Adampur Massacre. The attack on Adampur was led by four Mizo chiefs Barmunga, Lalulana, Sukpukhla and Niguchakho. However, these Kuki raids mainly were in the nature of predatory raids which posed no direct challenge to the authority of the princely regime.

In between the period from 1860-65, the issue of succession to the throne came to the fore as following the death of Ishan Chandra Manikya (1849-62), he was succeeded by his brother Maharaja Bir Chandra Manikya (1862-96) instead of the sons of the former. It sent confusing signals to its citizens leading to another revolt by the Jamatia tribes. The Jamatia's apprehending that they may have to pay twice the tax due to the successors problem blatantly refused to do so. They also revolted against the forced labour system adopted by the tax collectors during their tours to the tribal areas.

The Jamatia tribe served the Tripura State in various military capacities from 1240 to 1757 particularly against Afghan and Mughal intrusions. So Rajanala, the chronicler of Tripura states that the Jamatia were the important fighting tribes of Tripura and formed the core of the royal army. The army constituted by the Tripura kings was known as *Jamat* and from that they came to be known as the *Jamatia*. In fact, according to the Jamatia themselves, the word *Jamatia* is derived from the word 'Jama' and 'Twa'.

*Jama* means 'to assemble' and 'Twa' means 'to bear the burden of'. Thus, the word *Jamatia* means a person who does not bear the burden of taxes. However, following the accession of Bir Chandra Manikya (1862-96) in 1862 he decided to impose taxes known as 'Tajam' on the Jamatia community. *Tajam* may be compared with forced labour or *Corvée* of feudal Europe and *Shut* of ancient India. In Tripura it was the free labour by the Jamatia community was used for cutting, clearing or construction of a path in order to ensure a smooth passage for the king and his entourage. The imposition of *Tajam* was one of the major reasons for the Jamatia revolt of 1863. The king inflicted severe punishment on the revolting *Jamatia* and with the support of the Kuki subdued them in an extremely brutal manner. The Kuki ravaged the Jamatia villages, killed about 200 *Jamatia* and created Pankishil the *Hada Akro* or chief of the Jamatia people. The king, subsequently let the leader of the Jamatia tribes Pankishil free, after converting him into Christianity.<sup>12</sup> The Jamatia rebellion was the outcome of a number of complex factors but was launched mainly against the tax collectors of the Tripura rulers.

All these revolts led the British administration to appoint Ambrose William Dunbar as the political agent in 1871 to assist the King in improving his administration.<sup>13</sup> However C.W. Burton the political agent of Tripura, frankly admitted in his reports for the year 1877-78 that he had tried to do away with the abuses of administration of the state but that his advice had produced no effect.<sup>14</sup> On the basis of reports from the political agency the Bengal government began pressing the Maharaja to appoint a person with full powers, particularly in finance matters. The Maharaja appointed some officials from the Bengal Government service from time to time but all of them were made to resign in a short period. In July 1878 it was made known to the Maharaja that unless he acted on the advice of the British political



agent the Bengal Government might make a representation to the Government of India, "to the effect that the system under which Hill Tipperah is allowed to remain outside the jurisdiction of British court should be modified."<sup>19</sup>

The Maharaja realised his mistake and apprehended that the *Zamindaris* of Chakla Roshanabad which were his main source of income might be lost to the British. He now proposed on the advice of his Ex-minister Seimbhu Chandra Mukherjee the name of Umakanta Das, the Assistant Political agent as his minister with full powers. The Bengal Government approved of the proposal and thus Umakanta Das became minister in 1890.<sup>20</sup>

#### Loss of Land and Livelihood and the Reang Revolt

The penultimate phase of the nineteenth century saw the enactment of the Tenancy Act in 1885-86, where the British gave the Bengal subjects tenancy rights at a very low cost to attract cultivation and boost the revenue. A settlement of Plains people was made on 30,000 hectares.<sup>21</sup> The banning of shifting cultivation or *Jhum* in the forest areas in 1887 and the *Jhumia* Rehabilitation Scheme of 1889 attracted more non-tribals to Tripura, making land a scarce commodity for the tribal populace of Tripura. Thus, the economic measures taken by the king based on British instructions, to augment his revenue resources, only resulted in aggravating the condition of the tribal population by the end of 19th century and a break in Tripura's traditional mode of production based on shifting cultivation.

In fact, the transformation in the socio-economic condition of the tribal populace is best illustrated by the changing conditions of the shifting cultivators or the *Jhumia*'s of the state. In the local parlance of Tripura, a *Jhumia* is a tribal who practises shifting cultivation or *Jhuming*. Under this form of cultivation, more

appropriately called 'dash and burn' cultivation, hill slopes are cleared of their vegetation which is set on fire and several crops like paddy, cotton, chillies, maize, and vegetables are sown. The crops mature at different times of the year, *Jhum* fields are abandoned when the crops are harvested and the *Jhumia* move to new *Jhum* sites after harvesting is over. *Jhum* was widely prevalent in Tripura in the past. According to W.W. Hunter,<sup>22</sup> "In 1830 there was 'little or no ploughed land' in Tripura and as late as 1908 the Imperial Gazetteer reported that 'the nomadic village *Jhumia* *Jhum* cultivation is almost universal' and today, there are a sizeable number of *Jhumia* families in the State.

Baniprasanna Mahto in his observations of the *Jhum* cultivation has shown that the *Jhumia* cultivators were quite well-off with "per acre yield of *Jhum* paddy was about 27 maunds which compared well with average yield of a double-cropped land which was only 27 maunds between 1914-33 and 1935-36." This indicates that in good years at least *Jhumias* were not badly off even in the thirties. *Jhuming* also provided them with commercial crops which could be sold in exchange for money, providing the *Jhumia* with the wherewithal for purchasing their daily necessity which they did themselves produce. The *Jhum* economy was also an egalitarian one as land was not privately owned under this system of cultivation. There is no private ownership of land where *Jhum* is practised. In this way *Jhum* cultivation was an integral part of the life of the tribes of Tripura.

However, things gradually changed with the *Jhumia* of Tripura as the policy of the government towards the *Jhumia* underwent a change. From the early 19th century, restrictions started being imposed on *Jhuming* in forest lands by declaring more forest areas as reserved and restricting

the rights of the *Jhumia* from carrying on *Jhuming* in the reserved forests in order to increase the revenue earned by the Maharaja from the forests of Tripura.<sup>23</sup> The forest rule of 1903, declared 1861 sq. miles as reserve forest in 1906-07, thus further limiting the acres of land for the tribals in interior areas who were dependent on forest land for their livelihood.<sup>24</sup> Considering the plight of the tribal population, orders were issued in 1913 allowing them to use forest products but it in no way helped to alleviate their problems. Sometime, 28,490 hectares of land in 1939 and 5,05,353 hectares in 1941 were reserved for the six tribes of Tripura, leaving nothing for the remaining 12 tribal communities which once again confirmed the limitations of the land policy of the king.<sup>25</sup> In fact, within a short span of six years from 1943-1949 there were three major tribal revolts, sparking violence against the king, which were ruthlessly crushed.

An untimely surfaced in the hills of Tripura in the 1940s a food scarcity which was a chronic problem in the tribal areas worsened after Maharg Bir Bikram Manikya (1925-47) decided to support the British war effort in the Second World War. Following the Japanese drive through South and South-East Asia and the collapse of British defences the Maharaja decided to put the entire resources of the state at the disposal of the crown. The consequence of all this on the hill tribes of Tripura was destructive as it created an extreme scarcity of food and famine like conditions prevailed in the state. During 1938-43 there occurred a steep rise in price of rice the main staple of the people.

Rice Prices

Year	Price in Rupees per Quintal
1937-38	6.25 to 12.50
1942-45	20.00 to 70.00

Source: Omesh Sangal, *Tripura: Land and its People*, New Delhi, 1980, p.50

#### Tribal Rebellion and Progress

The involvement of the Tripura State in the Allied war effort resulted in imposition of more taxes and also forced conscription. This resulted in the growth of tribal resistance movements. The first revolt was by the Reang who under the leadership of Ratannabi Reang who refused to provide any support for the Second World War and also pay tax, which was the highest among the tribes.<sup>26</sup> In Tripura society, the Reangs had an inferior socio-cultural status and were discriminated by the Tripura rulers. They were predominantly dependent on shifting cultivation land for which was becoming increasingly unavailable due to the land reservation policies of the rulers. Moreover they were the worst sufferers of the Tripura ruler's discriminatory taxation policy. The subjects of the Tripura state were subjected to a tax called *gho-chunt* calculated family-wise. The Reangs shared most of the burden of this tax as they were subjected to a much higher rate than the ruling Tripuris. This system continued well into the 1980s. The unequal tax regime was the most potent factor behind the Reang rebellion.

Ratan Masi was an ascetic who migrated to Tripura from the Chittagong Hill Tracts in 1937 and soon became the rallying point of the oppressed tribals, who began defying the Raja's revenue collectors and refused forced conscription. The revolt started against 'Roi Kanchar' Debi Singh Roy and Kragesh Choudhury who acted as tyrant exploiter against the Reang community. The movement of Ratannabi also showed signs of tribalism. His followers drove away the Bengali Brahmins from the *Poor Mela* in the Tirmamukh, which was a winter festival where the tribals came to pray for the departed souls of their loved ones. In 1941 they chose to perform the *rna* by themselves, song performed by Bengali Brahmins. It is difficult to put point the exact date of the Reang rebellion but by July 1941 the rebellion was its climax. The activities of the rebels included looting of properties of the



Rang Chiefs including rice from the granaries, setting up *gharwal ghar* for distributing food to the poor tribal populace. The rebels also set up a parallel government under Ramesh and organised extensive resistance against monarchical anti-insurgency operation. The Maharaja now despatched a strong force under Lt. Nagesh and Harendra Debbarna with instruction to take harsh measures against the rebels. The state response was an indication of the magnitude of the challenge posed by the rebels.

In the rebel affected areas, the princely rule virtually disappeared as the rebels established an alternative regime and proclaimed Ratan Muni as Maharaja with a bamboo chair serving as the throne. A council of ministers was established with five ministers who were all Rang. The rebels greeted each other with 'Vicary to Ratan Muni' which revealed the depth of anti-monarchy feeling among the rebels. The Rang rebels had a definite political agenda as their activities were based on the repudiation of authority of the existing Tripuri monarch. The revolt lacked the necessary organisational structure and fire-power to stand against the Tripura state machinery. Nevertheless, the revolt continued for up to a year mainly because of the personal charisma of Ratan Muni and the religious mystique which had grown around him as the movement acquired a millennial character. After the fall of the Tulnai camp, Ratan Muni along with his followers fled to Chittagong but were arrested by the British police while crossing the border to Burma.<sup>26</sup> He was lodged in the Agartala jail and from there to the palace prison where he died a tragic unnatural death. The rebellion was ultimately crushed in 1945.

The nature of the Rang rebellion has given rise to a lot of controversy. The official accounts of the Tripura government portray the rebels in a very negative light as deceits or *bandit* party. On the other hand the rebellion of

Ratan Muni has been hailed by the later ethnic leaders as they consider him as the great champion of tribal rights and a great reformer. A number of works have been written by communist writers in Bengal such as *Rang Krishak Badhu* (a *Shakti* book) by Muni (1954) by Agbure Debbarna, *Rang O Rang Badhu* (1974) by Late B. Dasgupta and *Badhu Neta Ratan Muni* by Bhaokata Chatterjee (1977) by M. Debbarna. All of these consider it to be the first peasant struggle of the state and describe a 'spontaneous' revolt which revolved around the following issues – 'enough rice for the people' and 'no more taxes to the oppressor'. The targets of the movement were the tribal Raj and the royal collection and Bengali officials or traders.<sup>27</sup> The movement according to these views, contained various traces of class consciousness though in embryonic form.

It is a stereotypical interpretation of the rebellion. The Rang rebellion was an independent movement which developed in the peasant society of Tripura. It drew its autonomy from the communist movement in Tripura which in turn represented the new of modern 'elite' politics in the state. The rebellion was representative of an indigenous tradition of mass politics with its own modes of mobilisation, idioms and symbols.

The greatest constraint of the Rang rebellion was that although it posed a challenge to existing monarchy but it did not envision structural change in Tripura. It broke the monarchy in many parts of Tripura and replaced it with an alternative monarchy. It lacked any clearly defined objective. In spite of the rebellion contributed to the disintegration of existing political order and socio-economic structure and paved the way for more powerful political movements in Tripura. The Rang rebellion was thus a true precursor to the mass movement led by Jijpu

#### Communist Period Progressive Movement

Apart from the tribal revolts which occurred in different parts of Tripura during the pre-independence period, the closing years of colonial rule witnessed the growth of progressive movements. The term 'Progressive Movement' is used to mean a political movement that works within all levels of government, education, society and economy. In Tripura it also meant an agitation for 'Responsible Government' in place of a monarchical form of the government. The first tribal organisation to be set up was the *Jamajukha Samiti* (People's Welfare Organisation), a mass organisation 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. It also showed concern for the plight of the indigenous populace of Tripura who were living under condition of abysmal poverty and undertook several measures to ameliorate their condition.

The tribal movement in the 1930s received an indirect fillip when Maharaja Bir Bikram set up two boarding houses for tribal students – one in Vinakanta Academy Agartala and the other in Khowai High School, 60 Kilometres away from the capital Agartala. Thus, by the end of the 1930s 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 Samiti* (Mass Literacy Movement) in 1945 under the leadership of Biren Datta. Agbure Debbarna was one of the pioneers of Mass Literacy Movement and the moving spirit behind the formation of the organisation. The *Jamajukha Samiti* was formed by eleven students at the house of one Hemanta Debbarna, a State Agriculture Department

employee and later on one of the most important members of the Communist Party in Tripura.<sup>28</sup> The group brought about a new change in the educational landscape of Tripura as it established schools in remote tribal haunts throughout Tripura. It questioned the tribal's absolute allegiance and loyalty to centralised kingdom. The *Jamajukha Samiti* strongly demanded compulsory education for the tribes in order to bring them out of the twin curses of illiteracy and poverty and also free them from the clutches of monarchical rule.

The *Rajya Praja Mandal* (Citizens' Assembly) was set up in 1946 by the liberals and the communists to press for responsible government in Tripura. Bhaokata Debbarna, 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, *Tripora Rajya Kaba* edited by Biren Datta. 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. 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 realise their political aspirations. It is out of the twin needs that a meeting was held in the house of Lakshikanta Debbarna at Raighat in West Tripura (May 1948). This meeting which was attended by the leaders of the *Jamajukha Samiti* and a number of other tribal leaders gave birth to one of the most important tribal organisations the *Tripora Rajya Aboli Parishad*.<sup>29</sup> Dandath Debbarna was appointed its President. Agbure Debbarna became its Secretary and Hemanta Debbarna its Treasurer.

The *Aboli Parishad* rapidly gained strength

In fact, it was an incident of police firing at Ghatghati Village in the Bishalnagar block of West Tripura district on 10th October 1948 which provided the spark for the armed conflict between the tribals and the British in Tripura.<sup>24</sup> The incident occurred when the police opened fire to prevent a tribal group from among thousands of paddy belonging to Hari Singh, a rich mahajan (trader), who had granted *dadans* (loans) to the local tribal peasants and had returned after the harvest to seize the bulk of produce as a way of reclaiming his credit with interest. The *dadans* and declining productivity resulted in the tribal peasants being in perpetual debt. However in the autumn of 1948 these poor peasants organised by the *Mahai Parishad* were determined to prevent the trader from seizing their produce as the area was reeling under acute food shortage. Twelve starving peasants were gunned down and two others were seriously injured in that firing. The Raza regime tribal queen, however, took no action against either the police or the Mahajan. In fact, the legendary communist leader of Tripura, Ouseph Chel-lain Dharwadhi Daimasani rightly observed: "The actual process of administration started not with the Rajmou, Mahadeo Kanchaspraha Devi, but with the firearm. The tribals of Tripura showed the British administration with their

rule. They felt that the Congress, an authority of power at the centre, had decided to give Tripura to the Bengalis. The days of tribal rule had come to an end." It resulted in a spread outrage in tribal areas.

The Golaghat incident not only led to a groundswell of opinion against the District administration but also led to a surge in Bengali sentiments among the tribes. The *Mukd Panchal* decided to champion the cause of the tribes against the administration and at the same time it was to the credit of the *Panchal* that it prevented the movement from taking the easy path of sectarian politics. At the same time the guerrilla organisation of the *Mukd Panchal* grew at a lightning speed. All these activities of the *Mukd Panchal* brought in swift tributions from the state as Martial Law was proclaimed on 9th March 1946.

In 1949, *Majlis Parishad* held its first annual conference at Paimi in the Sodar Sub-division where it was decided that landless labourers possessing more than two *decan*<sup>1</sup> of land would not be allowed to acquire any more State (Government) land, instead the land would be taken over by the *Parishad* and distributed among the landless tribals. The local committees of the *Parishad* were empowered to administer these redistributions and also issue permanent title deeds. The *Parishad* also fixed the land interest: it fixed an upper limit of 25% for the credit advanced on a crop. The money had previously charged up to 200% interest on loan forwarded by it. In this way the *Parishad* established a sort of parallel government in the swadhes of Tripura.

Meanwhile by the early 1950, the *Madrass* leadership realised that it would be impossible to carry on the campaign of armed resistance all by itself. It needed a protective umbrella and the organisation of a network of a national party. All these prepared the ground for the *Madrass Parished* joining the Communist Party, Democratic Left and

tribal leaders formed the United Organising Committee (UOC) with forty-one members at Rudrapur in the Banarasi hills in March 1950. The period also marked the arrival of three charismatic communist leaders in Tripura who helped in expanding the organisational base of party. Nripati Chakraborty was sent to Tripura to help the nascent political party and Chakraborty by his dedication, commitment and indefatigable energy soon became one of the most respected leaders of the Communist Party in Tripura and was elected the first communist chief minister of Tripura in December 1977. Two other senior activists had also arrived in Tripura with Bipul Chakraborty - Bijoy Bhow and Biprasanna Karmachandry. Their arrival in Tripura coincided with the last phase of armed action by the *Maoist Front* and it is gradual integration with the mainstream of Indian left politics. The *Maoist Front* thus played a vital role in not only bringing about a consciousness among the tribespeople of Tripura but also played a pivotal role in growth of democratic polity in Tripura.

The activities of the *Shram Parishad* laid the basis for the growth of Tripartite Communist Party. Meanwhile the Communist Party of India decided to convert the first Parliamentary elections in 1952. In the General Elections held in 1951-52 two members from Communist Party of India were victorious from Tripura. They were Debarati Deb and Harindra Choudhury, both elected from Tripura East and Tripura West constituencies respectively. The sweeping post-victory provided popular endorsement of the struggle it had waged in the tribal areas of Tripura for the rights of the poor and oppressed rights. Following their electoral victory the *Shram Parishad* continued to demand land rights and other safe-guards for the indigenous people of Tripura through parliamentary means in the

of unimpeded migration of Bengalis from East Pakistan. In fact, in the National Conference of the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribes, convened by the Prime Minister of India Jawaharlal Nehru in 1952, Ganesh Deb of Communist Party of India, a Member of Parliament submitted a memorandum and pointed out that "some area or areas of Tripura should be set aside for the tribals alone and no other persons belonging to the area should continuously be allowed to settle there; this conference should take note that this is not a new idea at all. In fact, such areas are prevalent in Tripura since the Maharaja's regime."

However, the most significant aspect of the Makti Parishad movement was that it did not degenerate into an ethno-communalist sectarianism. Although fighting for the rights of the tribes it was free from any communalist prejudice. It believed that the democratic movement in Tripura could not succeed unless there was strong unity among the tribal and non-tribal people.

Then, it is seen from the above discussion that Tripura has had a long tradition of tribal rebellion and peasant movement in the pre-independence period. All these movements paved the way for integrative movements which were aimed at bringing about a structural change in the policy of Tripura by replacing the nontribal government with responsible government. In the years immediately after independence, under a different socio-political context a militant struggle was fought but against all forms of feudalistic oppression by the *Tripura Raita Mukti Parishad*. The *Udhar Parishad* also addressed itself to the socio-economic issues of the tribes. In this way the unity and character of the tribal movement





changed from a very limited objective of protesting against an oppressive monarchy to bringing about a transformation from monarchy to a modern democratic polity in post-independence India.

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## Insurgency and the Role of Militant Christianity: A Case Study of Tripura

Gourishwar Choudhuri

### 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 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. The most important cause of rise of insurgency movement has been the massive demographic changes and the consequent loss of land and livelihood that the tribal used to enjoy earlier. Insurgency in the state began in 1978 with the formation of Tripura National Volunteers (TNV). However, the last phase of insurgency which began in 1989 was the most controversial as it was marked by the use of a militant Christian discourse. The present essay is an attempt to examine the role of Christianity in mobilising support for the militant cause and forging a separatist agenda.

**Keywords:** Partition, Migration, Insurgency, Christianity, Tribal

### Introduction

The recent rise of religiously inspired terrorism is taken as a proof that religion has become the single most important dynamic in conflicts around the world. In fact, in many regions around the globe, faith-based and faith-inspired armed groups have appeared but the global war on terror is mainly viewed as a reaction against a particular religion, where it is increasingly being interpreted as a global conflict between Islam and the Western world. This view is also partly the result of the propaganda by the religious extremists themselves as in order to secure popular support they increasingly portray their struggle as a 'Holy War' against 'infidel', 'evil' and 'west'. At the same time, the views of scholars such as Samuel Huntington and Daniel Pipes, who have portrayed the Muslim world as more prone to violence than the rest of the world, have strengthened these views. Huntington declares that it is Muslims that seem to be involved most in inter-group violence.<sup>1</sup> (Huntington, 1996) On the other hand Daniel Pipes declares, "Muslim countries have the most terrorists and the fewest democracies in the world."<sup>2</sup> (Pipes) The Muslim leaders have reacted to all this by claiming that Islam has been hijacked by extremist groups for political purposes. The popularity of these groups, it is claimed, is not the outcome of a popular desire to create a new social order based on Islam but is caused by the grievances of a marginalized population.

However, it would not be proper to limit the role of religion only as an instrument and mobilizing force in current global conflict as it fails to provide an explanation for the belief of the so-called religious groups or 'jihadist' groups that they are on a sacred mission of opposing the 'evil' in order to establish and protect the good. Juergenmeyer who has examined the social dynamics of religiously inspired violence, concludes that the perpetrators of this violence, among others, act in reaction against what they perceive as a weakened version of the pristine faith and embrace a form of religion that they claim to be a 'pure' and 'original'.<sup>3</sup> (Juergenmeyer, 2000) In fact, even if no religious dynamics are involved in a conflict they claim to be on a divine

mission. Their goal is to reshape society in accordance with their group's creed and ethical beliefs. They reject values of pluralism and individualism which they see as threats to their personal, social and religious identity. At the same time it must be pointed out that even though armed groups and political violence inspired by Islamic values have attracted increasing attention since the start of the global war against terrorism it would be wrong to single out one particular religion as the main source of inspiration for the 'terrorist acts of violence.'

It would be misleading to consider a single religion as the sole perpetrator of terror and violence. Faith-based violence occurs in different parts of the world and its perpetrators are followers of all major world faiths. This can be very well illustrated by the examples of Hindu nationalistic violence in India, clashes between Christians and Muslims in Nigeria or the history of violence in Northern Ireland. The present essay is an attempt to analyse the role of insurgents in the tiny Northeastern state of Tripura and examine how far their actions were motivated by Christian beliefs and aimed at the creation of a new local society that is guided by religion. It also tries to examine the circumstances in which a conflict that was basically rooted in social change and the erosion of traditional identities, imbalances of power and widening communalist fault lines used religion in its campaign.

#### Background to the conflict

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 1950s.

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 rift between the immigrant groups and the tribals of the state. All this resulted in the rise of ethno-centric movements in Tripura which ultimately gave rise to insurgency.

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 that 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 *Kokos* inhabiting the adjacent states. Tripura also witnessed immigration of other tribal people from Assam namely the *Garo*, the *Jaintia* and also *Khasis* in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. They came mainly in search of agricultural pursuits - the *Garo* for



*Jhum* land and the *Khasis* settled in the region of Dharmamagar 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.<sup>4</sup> (Chakraborty, 2004)

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 prime 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. 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.

#### 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 1980s. It was because of this close proximity to the districts of East Pakistan and ungarded 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.

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 settle permanently in Tripura.<sup>5</sup> (Rao, 1967) 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.<sup>6</sup> (Sinha, 2012) Riots also broke out in Chittagong, Barisal and Noakhali and as a result about 200,000 refugees migrated to Tripura.<sup>7</sup> (Kamra, 2000) 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.<sup>8</sup> (Census Reports) This unbridled migration led to 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 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. 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 the 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.

TABLE 1

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.

### Impact of Migration

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 Harileta about 12,80 acres of forest land were allotted to a few refugee families who cleared it and reclaimed the land for settled agriculture.<sup>9</sup> (Tripura State Archives) In the Rangunia mouja of Bamunia 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 be 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 local. Transfer of land from tribals to non-tribals became the most crucial problem in Tripura. There was transaction-like '*dhakal bhar'* 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. According to an investigation in the Kancharpur area in North Tripura had been grabbed by non-tribals through unscrupulous and fraudulent means. In almost all the tribal areas the non-tribals possessed disproportionately large areas of land.

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 a sense of fear and apprehension among the tribal populace.<sup>10</sup> (Ahmad, Dasgupta, Sinha, 2004) All this prepared the background for the rise of ethno-centric movement among the tribes of Tripura. 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 Jaba Samiti* (TJJS).



### Tribal Insurgency: First Phase

The first organized tribal movement *Seng-Krak*,<sup>11</sup> originated as a reaction to the settling down of the non-tribal refugees in the tribal areas. Its leaders opposed the influx of refugees in the preaching was anti-Bengali. This organisation carried on the propaganda among the ordinary tribal folk to resist the influx of refugees. It also carried out violent attacks on many refugee camps. Subsequently this organization was banned by Dr. A. B. Chattopadhyay. *Seng-Krak* being outlawed some of its members took the initiative in forming Pahnai Union in 1951. Chandra Sadhu Rupini who was an influential leader of the Haldan community took the main initiative in forming the Union.<sup>12</sup> (Ghosh, 1984)

However, the most important of the tribal organizations was the *Tripura Upeyati Juba Samiti* formed in June 1967. The principal objectives of this organization were the restoration of tribal land, formation of district council for the tribal people and the introduction of the Kok-Borak language in the Roman script as a state language. Following the state assembly elections of 1977 in which the Communist Party of India (Marxist) came to power it was announced that the process for initiating the setting up of District Councils would be taken up very soon. Some Borphu living in the hills strongly opposed this decision and set up an organization called *Amra Bangali* in 1978. This led to claims involving both the tribals and the non-tribals in west Tripura. It is against this background that some extremist tribal youths under the leadership of Bijoy Kumar Hrangkhaw founded the *Tripura National Volunteers* (TNV) in July 1978 and this marked the beginning of the first phase of insurgency in Tripura. (Chakravarti, 1995)

The establishment of TNV in 1978 ushered in a completely new chapter in the troubled history of post-independence Tripura as it marked the beginning of full-fledged insurgency in the state. In fact, within a short period of time, the TNV had become successful in attracting the tribal youths in the ideologies of armed

struggle and was responsible for staging several combat operations in the state in the 1980's which led to large scale blood-shed both among the security forces as well as the civil population. The TNV phase of insurgency ended when on 12<sup>th</sup> August 1988, a tripartite agreement was signed between the TNV leaders, the Union Home Ministry and the Tripura Government bringing the curtain down on decade long insurgency in Tripura.<sup>13</sup> (<http://tripulapolic.gov.in>) The peace established by the TNV accord however proved to be short-lived as number of disgruntled elements and factionalist politics within the TNV soon led to the establishment of a new militant outfit to carry out a campaign of terror.

### Tribal Insurgency: The Second Phase

The formation of NLF in 1987 marked the beginning of the second and the most controversial phase of insurgency because of its alleged militant Christian agenda. The National Liberation Front of Tripura (NLF) was formally established at Gandawitha on 12<sup>th</sup> March 1989. Diamanjay Rang became the 'President' of the new organization and Bishwanoban Debbarna was appointed as the 'Vice-President'. Although tribal resistance movements in Tripura emerged as far back as 1967, the insurgency's last phase which started in 1989 with the emergence of armed groups like the National Liberation Front of Tripura (NLF) is the largest and most controversial because of its alleged militant Christian agenda. Officially, the NLF's goals were the establishment of an independent Tripura (the "United State of Twipat") through armed struggle, liberation from "Indian neocolonialism", instilling consciousness against exploitation, and the promotion of indigenous languages and culture.

However, to what extent its ideology and agenda were influenced by militant Christianity is a question that gained prominence since 1998 as the year saw a series of raids where NLF cadres targeted Hindu temples and families of Hindu priests in order to intimidate local tribals into conversion to Christianity. This brings to the question as to what was the role of Christianity in the insurgency movement in Tripura.

### Role of Christianity

Tribal identity and ethnicity are major concerns of the various insurgent groups active in the North-East but religion also had an influence on the agenda of some of these groups. Religious distinctiveness when coterminous with ethnicity exacerbated the sense of "otherness" in the Naga and Mizo hills. Christianity often reinforced the sense of distinct identity among the Nagas and the Mizos as they felt alienated from the mainstream Indian culture which was often dominated by "Hindu Ethos". Groups like the Naga National Council (NNC) and the Mizo National Front (MNF) laced their separatist rhetoric with free use of biblical imagery. The MNF, in fact, even named their first military uprising on 28<sup>th</sup> February 1966 as 'Operation Jericho'. Thus, religion and ethnicity often complemented each other to forge a separatist identity in North-East India.

The spread of Christianity in Tripura, started from November 1938 as a result of the missionary efforts by the New Zealand Baptist Missionary Society that opened its Tripura mission in the same year. It left a deep imprint on the minds of the youth as the health and educational programs of church charities played a role in the rise of an educated tribal elite. The Christian missionaries, although provided education and medical care to the tribes, but at the same time also laid emphasis on forging a sense of distinctiveness and separateness among them. In fact, during 1971-81, the Christian population registered a spectacular growth of 59.29 percent, whereas the total state population grew by 31.88 percent.

The earliest organized tribal resistance against land encroachment and social marginalization came in mid-1967 with the emergence of the *Tripura Upajati Juba Samity* (TUJS). Although the TUJS had no overt religious agenda, it was backed from the very beginning by the Baptist Church of Tripura which hoped to reduce Communist influence among tribals by promoting its role in tribal identity formation and emancipation. In 1978, the Tripura National Volunteers (TNV) emerged as a

more radical cell within the TUJS. It is of interest to note that, although the TNV had no Christian agenda or symbols, first generation Christian converts constituted a significant section of the leadership and cadres of the first major insurgent outfit, TNV. In fact, its chairman, B. K. Hrangkhwal, was himself a devout Christian.

The last phase of insurgency which started in 1989 with the emergence of National Liberation Front of Tripura (NLFT) had a strong Christian overtone. In fact, NLFT's armed wing was named the National Holy Army, and the cadres were obliged to make an oath of allegiance "in the name of God" (Art. 34 of NLFT Constitution).<sup>15</sup> ([www.Satp.org](http://www.Satp.org)). Moreover, as far as the composition of the NLFT's present leadership is considered, it is apparent that close to 90 percent of the NLFT's cadres are Christian and almost all are-generation Baptist converts through education channels established by early Baptist missionary groups. Thus, a militant form of Christianity came to play an increasingly important role in the activities of NLFT.

The NLFT in keeping with its stated objective of turning Tripura into the 'land of Christ' issued orders to tribal communities to convert to Christianity as a whole. It also issued 'notices' on occasions of *Durga Puja* and *Dussehra* among others, defining whether these festivals are to be celebrated at all.<sup>16</sup> (BBC News World) This has led to differences with the predominantly animist Reangs and the Hindu Jamatia tribes. After the NLFT issued diktats banning the worship of Hindu goddess *Durga*, *Laxmi* and *Saraswati* in the hills of Tripura, the spiritual head of the Jamatia tribe, 'Hala Oluah' Bikram Bahadur Jamatia went ahead with worship in order to defy the ban.<sup>17</sup> (*Dainik Sambad*). However, his followers had to face attacks and Jamatia himself escaped two assassination attempts. Significantly, the NLFT split in February 2001 due to differences between its Christian members and the Hindu tribes, the former being led by Birwanchan Debbarna and the latter by Nayanbani Jamatia.

The strongest rebel group in the 1990's, the NLFT insisted on the conversion of non-Christian recruits. The number of Christian



converts has gone up sharply since the TNV and then the NLFT started operating in the hilly interiors of Tripura. In 1981, Tripura Christian population stood at 24,872 and by 1991 it had risen to 46,472. Subir Bhaumik is of the opinion that, contrary to older tribal opposition groups the NLFT increasingly had a more overt evangelical-Christian angle in its discourse. NLFT leaders repeatedly stated that village leaders should convert. Forced conversion of non-Christian tribals by NLFT fighters using various means of intimidation, have become an increasing concern.<sup>18</sup> (Das, 2014).

However, it would be unfair to point to the Tripura Baptist Christian Union, or hold Christianity on the whole, as the main culprit for the excesses of the NLFT. Although churches supported initial tribal protests and emancipation movements as a way to expand their social base and counter anti-Christian movements like the Communists, Baptist churches also played a mediating role in the peace processes in other strife-torn states like Nagaland and Mizoram. At the same time it cannot be denied that it could not prevent the NLFT leadership from high jacking Baptism and using it as an ideological framework for a separatist agenda and ethnic cleansing. It cannot be denied that many Christian preachers had sympathies for the group and even participated in forced conversions and in many cases NLFT cadres escorted Baptist preachers to villagers on proselytizing missions.

But it would be most instructive to note that it has been observed elsewhere in North East India that Christian missionary activities increase almost simultaneously with the decline of the indigenous people's traditional livelihoods and control over land and other natural resources. In his research on Baptism and insurgents in Nagaland, Samir Kumar Das states: "Religious radicalism is a relatively new political currency in the Northeast of India. It first of all underlines the importance of religion in clustering a body of adherents around it and making them chart out a separatist path. Religious radicalism serves as the principle of community formation, to set aside internal differences."

A key event in Tripura was the anti-Bengali riots of May 1979 and June 1980. The riots led to a state-wide death toll of about 2000 and

increased animosity and distrust between the tribal and Bengali communities. It is thus created a more pertinent need to affirm a separate tribal identity as opposed to Bengali-Hindu majority in the state which in turn, led to a larger openness towards Christianity and to Baptism in Tripura. In Tripura also, the void caused by the erosion of traditional tribal culture and the loss over traditional livelihoods was easily filled with organized religion represented by Christianity and at the same time the health and education programs of church charities played a role in the rise of an educated tribal elite.

Thus, Christianity served the twin purpose of political mobilisation and nation-building among hill tribes and their sub-clans that shared a common predicament i.e. the gradual loss of traditional livelihoods and control over land and other natural resources at the hand of groups of migrants.

### Conclusion

In the tiny state of Tripura factors such as migration, land alienation, social marginalization and identity crisis, created a social vacuum that was being filled by religion, in this case Christianity. Religion here does not only answer a need to increasingly differentiate itself from the dominant, in this case Hindu-Bengali culture but also to counter assimilation by the dominant culture by reinforcing a new sense of identity. It is because of these reasons that religion became instrumental for more radical tribal movements like the National Liberation Front of Tripura, at least for its leadership and hardcore following.

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## **Sufi Influence in Medieval Mangalkot: The Land of Eighteen Auliya**

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**Abstract:** Mangalkot does considerably push back the proto history of the Burdwan district and all of Bengal. The city had a lease of life for a long time. The advantageous location of Mangalkot both on the road link and its riverine connection through the Ajay and Ganga hastened its rapid growth and prosperity. The principal purpose of this essay is to assess the legacy of Mangalkot, not a well-known site, where one encounters the vicissitudes of time. There is no doubt that the emergence of site as an important Centre from the so called Maurya period onwards, was caused by the growing urban factors in mid and eastern India. Mangalkot is situated present in the Katwa subdivision of Burdwan district. Burdwan district in general and Mangalkot in particular constitutes one of the few medieval sites in Bengal. After the end of the initial conflict, the composite culture developed here under the influence of the Sufis. The medieval Mangalkot considered as a land of Eighteenth Auliya or Pir but their names remained unknown.

The Muslim sufi saints, immigrating from Arabia, Persia and Central Asia were bound to influence the society of Mangalkot. They brought about a great transformation in lives of the people of Mangalkot, both Muslim and non-Muslim. Several cults with common beliefs and practices emerged as a result of the close social and intellectual contact between the Hindus and the Muslims. Many sufi khanqah in Mangalkot became the learning centre. The Khanqah also serves as an academic centre and also a relief camp where the disappointed and the destitute are looked after. The Sulh-i-Kul was the dominant feature of every sufis in medieval Mangalkot. This message of love preached by the Bhakti saints and Muslim sufis can eliminate or at least diminish the hatred between man and man. It will create an atmosphere of tolerance, love and communal harmony.

**Keywords:** Mangalkot; Sufi saint; Khanqah; Mysticism.

### **Introduction**

Mangalkot does considerably push back the proto history of the Burdwan district and all of Bengal. The city had a lease of life for a long time. The advantageous location of Mangalkot both on the road link and its riverine connection through the Ajay and Ganga hastened its rapid growth and prosperity. The principal purpose of this essay is to assess the legacy of Mangalkot, not a well-known site, where one encounters the vicissitudes of time. There is no doubt that the

emergence of site as an important Centre from the so called Maurya period onwards, was caused by the growing urban factors in mid and eastern India.

### **Background**

Mangalkot (23'32" N and 87'54" E) is situated near the confluence of the rivers Ajay and Kunur, in the Katwa subdivision of Burdwan district (Peterson, 1910). From ancient period this historical site became popular in the history of Bengal. The Ajay valley in Burdwan district played an important role in the growth and development of protohistoric culture in Bengal. Mangalkot situated on the southern bank of the Ajay River. The river Ajay was navigable at least till the late medieval period is clear from accounts in Mangalkavya literature. In the various accounts of Chandimangal Kavya, we come across the voyage of Dhanapati Sadagar, a merchant who sailed for Singhal from Ujjaninagar (Sen, 1382). There still exists a village called Ujjani in the vicinity of Mangalkot. Burdwan district in general and Mangalkot in particular constitutes one of the few medieval sites in Bengal. After the end of the initial conflict, the composite culture developed here under the influence of the Sufis.

In the history of Muslim mysticism (sufism) in medieval Mangalkot, which has long been recognized as an important component of the evolution of modern Bengali culture but has not yet received exhaustive treatment. Information about some of the early mystics who lived in Mangalkot during the medieval period is based on local traditions and secondary sources, mostly quoted in some modern publication in Bengali, Urdu and English. But these contain much legendary material, so that it is hard to identify historical facts out of the mass of tradition. Sufism as a means to achieving the highest form of obedience to God had a long course of development in the history of Islam. It is stream of intuitive perceptions with emphasis on an emotional attachment to God. It is personal and experiential in character and in apparent contrast to Islamic theology which lays stress on a received knowledge of God, Laws and rituals. Apart from the obligatory forms of prayers the Sufis developed and used certain practices to make their prayer more effective by practicing love, repentance, renunciation of the world, remembrance, meditation, devotion etcetera. (Arberry, 1979).

The Sufi's aspiration to secure the pleasure of God, created a wider scope for the movement. Within a small period a large number of people were trained in this discipline and were designated as Sufis. With the expansion of the mystic ideology, there was growth of *silsilahs* (orders), generally named after a teacher of substantial following. The *silsilah* was later stabilized with an elaborate system of mystic tradition, centered round the *pir*, *murid* and the *khanqah*. In the mystic organization the *pir* holds the central position. He is supposed to be obeyed and respected by his followers as the Prophet is by the *Umma* (Muslim community). Every *salik* or novice as a general rule takes a preceptor (*i.e.* shaikh, *pir* or *murshid*) ripe in experience and equipped with knowledge. According to



the Sufi belief, a *murid* is like a patient to his *pir*. He should not conceal anything from him if he wants success and he must have complete confidence to him. Changing of *pirs* is denounced in the mystic ethics and is considered a serious offence on the part of the *murid* (Alam, n.d.).

### **Mangalkot in Medieval Period**

The medieval Mangalkot considered as a land of Eighteenth Auliya or *Pir* but their names remained unknown (Haque, 1975). The persons whose names we came to know were – 1. Makdum Shah Mohammad 2. Hazi Firoj 3. Golam Panjatan 4. Syed Shah Tajuddin 5. Abdullah Gujrati 6. Khazauddin Chisti 7. Shah Hazi Ali 8. Shah Siraj Uddin 9. Pir Ghora. The graves of the Auliya or *Pirs* till, existing in Mangalkot are – Hamid Daneshmand, Abdullah Gujrati, Shah Jaker Ali. On the occasion of the sad demise of Hamid Daneshmand, Shah Jaker Ali, Makdum Shah and Abdullah Gujrati the great fair is still held in Mangalkot. It proved that Mangalkot was a Muslim cultural hub in medieval period (Ghosh, 1957).

The principal ruins around Mangalkot include several tombs and *dargahs* dedicated to *pirs* or sufi saints such as Pir Panjatan, Rah Pir and Ghaznavi Ghazi. The other monuments worth mentioning are *Nakra Khana* (room of the musical instruments), *Hammam Khana* (Bathroom) and *Khankah* (one type of resting house). The dates of construction of these tombs and monuments cannot be determined with certainty for the lack of recorded documents. But this type of architectural monuments were much similar with the Mughal style. There is a cluster of mosque in dilapidated conditions and numerous *fakir* tombs in the nearby Natunhat village. Among the Islamic structures the Golam Panjatan- the tomb of five gazis, the mosque of Koar Saheb, the tomb and the mosque of Maulana Hamid Danesmand, the mosque of Hussain Shah and others assume significance. An inscription revealing the name of one Chandrasen, is found in the mosque of Hussain Shah, which belonged to 1439-1519 (Gait, 1917).

A number of Muslim religious divines and saints came to Mangalkot from the different countries of the Islamic world during the medieval period and settled here.

**1) Shaikh Bahram Saqqa:** Shaikh Bahram Saqqa a learned poet, was one of the disciples of Haji Muhammad Khubasham of Nishapur. He gave himself to severe austerities and become a devoted Sufi. He was of Turkish origin and belonged to the tribe of Bayat (Allami, 1873). Perhaps he first came to Agra during the reign of Akbar (Lees & Ali, 1965). During his sojourn at Agra he earned reputation as a mystic and a poet. It is said that at Agra he was seen distributing water to the people walking in the street and hence his poetic name 'saqqa'. He moved from Agra to Mangalkot and worked there. The people of Burdwan had great reverence for him and had built a mausoleum over his grave to preserve his memory (Lees & Ali, 1965).

**2) Makhdum Shah Abdullah Gujarati:** According to the tradition, Shaikh Abdullah was a native of Gujrat and had come to Bengal in the reign of Sultan Nusrat Shah (1519-1532). He settled at Mangalkot to propagate the mystic discipline. His tomb is situated at Mangalkot (Haque, 2012).

**3) Shah Mahmud:** Shah Mahmud was another sufi who rose to eminence at Mangalkot. As tradition has it, he waged war with Bikramjit, the raja of Mangalkot and won victory over him. He was a good scholar in Arabic and it said to have worked for the propagation of Islam. He lies buried at Arwal (Gait, 1917).

**4) Shah Sultan Ansari:** His father was a Muslim of the Ansar class of Madina. He left Madina in 900 A.D. and came to India. After the staying in Multan and Lukhnow, he started living in Mangalkot of Burdwan district. Among his three sons, Shah Sultan is more famous. He was a famous saint of Mangalkot who died here.

**5) Khawza Anowar Shah:** There is the tomb of Khawza Anowar Shah in Burdwan. It was built by emperor Faruk Shah. Here he died when he started the Muslim domination. He became died in 1715 A.D.

**6) Shah Mir Jakir Al- Qadri:** It is known from local folklore that Shah Jakir came to Mangalkot after sometime of Hamid Danishmand. He died and buried here. Till his grave was showing full of respect by the people of all religion.

#### **POLITICS IN MEDIEVAL MANGALKOT**

In 1204 Bakhtiyar Khalji captured Bihar, established control over Nabadwip in the District of Nadia (Ray, 1990). Subsequently another Ghori's generals, Muhammad Shiran captured Burdwan. Gradually the greater part of Bengal came under the governors of Bengal. Later Ghiasuddin Iyaz Khalji (1213-1227) captured Gaur and annexed Birbhum in 1214 and his empire extended over Burdwan as well. He created two separate Parganas – Sarifatabad (Birbhum) and Sulaimanabad (Burdwan) and construction of a vital road link from Devkot to Gaur and from Gaur to Rajnagar (Birbhum district). The road is believed to have been later extended to Mangalkot. This crucial road link with Gaur was later extended to Cuttak (Orissa) through Hooghly and Midnapore districts by the Mughal rulers for both strategic and military purposes. This was a vital link road till the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century and it clearly notified by Van-Dan Brouke (1660) in his map. He describes the road as a "Badshahi Sarak" and this road closely connected with Mangalkot (Mukherjee, 2003).

Mangalkot again came into the limelight when it was annexed to the kingdom of Hussain Shah and Nusrat Shah. Hussain Shah credited with the construction of a huge mosque at Natunhat near Mangalkot in 1510 A.D./916 Hijra (Gait, 1917). Nusrat Shah constructed the Jami Masjid at Mangalkot in 1523 A.D. (930 Hijri). But all the mosques now in ruins.



Burdwan is mentioned in the Ain-i-Akbari as a *mahal* or pargana of sarkar Sarifatabad with an assessment of 1,876,142 dam (Lasker, 2014). It was during the rule of the Mughals that Mangalkot became not only a prosperous township but also a great centre of Muslim learning and culture. The place came into prominence for several causes. Prince Khurram who revolted against Jahangir while absconding at Mangalkot came in contact with Maulana Hamid Daneshmand, a renowned Muslim saint. A mosque built in honour of the saint in 1654 A.D. (1065 Hijri), the name of emperor Shah Jahan is mentioned (Gait, 1917; Ahmed, 1960).

There was a legendary story of Meherunnisha and Jahangir heard often which was related to Mangalkot. Burdwan came under Mughal jurisdiction after the conquest of the region in 1575 by Emperor Akbar. During that time prince Salim, Akbar's son fell in love with Meherunnisha, the beautiful wife of Sher Afghan who had been appointed as a faujder of Burdwan by Akbar. After the death of Akbar his son named as Jahangir became the Mughal emperor. He appointed Man Singh as a Subadar of Bengal but transferred him to Bihar in 1605 then he deployed Qutubuddin Khan Koka, his step brother in Bengal as a Subadar. His intention was to achieve Meherunnisha at any cost. According to the direction of Jahangir Qutubuddin Khan Koka met Sher Afghan and tried to kill him during their friendly conversation. Both of them were killed during their fight. After that Jahangir brought Meherunnisha to Delhi to marry her. During their journey to Delhi Meherunnisha spent one night at Mangalkot (Hossain, 2000).

### **IMPORTANT HISTORICAL SITES OF MEDIEVAL MANGALKOT**

**Tomb of Golam Panjatan :** The graveyard of Golam Panjatan was an important historical site here. They came to possess Mangalkot but were killed by certain Hindu ruler. A great fair is held in remembrance of the Pir Panjatan every year.

**Maulana Hamid Daneshmand Mosque :** Hamid Daneshmand mosque which was built by the patronage of Mughal king Shah Jahan in 1665 was another important historical site. There are two mosques the old and the new situated there adjacent to the tomb. The tomb has 22' 2" in length. *Nakara khana* was also noted historical site situated on 18 square feet land and it had close proximity to Hamid Daneshmand mosque. The mosque has undergone subsequent renovations and the present structure, also now in dilapidated condition, was built on its old site by one Maulavi Muhammad Ismail.

**Seven Gazies or Pirs :** Seven Gazies sacrificed their life to occupy the Mangalkot and brought the place under Muslim control. They were buried in that place and their graveyard were considered as a holy place.

### **ARCHAEOLOGICAL EXCAVATION**

The ancient ruins of Mangalkot have been reported from time to time for a long period by different scholars and amateur archaeologists. But the significance of

such antiquities has largely remained unattached to until 1975 when the Department of Archaeology, Calcutta University undertook a systematic exploration in this region. The exploration yielded valuable materials which together have emphasized the importance of the site.

During the first half of the year 1915 Rakhai Das Banerjee visited Mangalkot. During his visit, he observed some religious places and historical elements of the Sultanate period. The main archaeological site was situated at the outer space of the village from the way Natunhat to the Mangalkot. The length of the main archaeological site near about 70 Bighas and width 10 feet to 30 feet But the greater Mangalkot is surrounded by the village- Ujani, Kogram, Natunhat, Boxinagar, Boro Bazar, Padimpur, Debpur and Shripur (Jana, 2002).

According to the sources published in the Statesmen dated 22th April, 1990 the civilization excavated by the Calcutta University Archaeology Department belong to a highly developed civilization during the period from Pre-historic to medieval period. It was during the rules of the Mughals that Mangalkot became not only a prosperous township but also a great centre of Muslim learning and culture. Thus Burdwan district in general and Mangalkot in particular constituted one of the famous historical sites in medieval Bengal. It may have been settled as early as the chalcolithic period because of its advantageous location on both the east-west-north-south trade routes. Directly South is the famous port city Tamralipta which was the most celebrated port of the East by the time of Buddha. Mangalkot was likely replaced by the newer settlement of Burdwan from the Gupta period.

### **IMPACT OF SUFISM IN MANGALKOT**

The Muslim sufi saints, immigrating from Arabia, Persia and Central Asia were bound to influence the society of Mangalkot. They brought about a great transformation in lives of the people of Mangalkot, both Muslim and non-Muslim. Sufi saints influence on houses, food, dress, position of women may be obtained from the following sources. Mukandaram refers to the categories of people/castes among them including those of- Tirakar, Kagchi, Qalandar, Hajjam, Darji (Chakravarti, 1352). The immigrants and converted Muslims mixed together in a social system where both the foreign and the local elements were accommodated. The immigrants who came from the deserted lands had to adopt to the peculiar geography and the climatic condition of Mangalkot. The account of the dress of the immigrants and converted Muslims is available from the sources.

The Chinese account says that the language in universal use was Bangla it may logically be assumed that not only did the local people speak Bangla but also some of the immigrants who had settled in Mangalkot for a long time and had long associations with the local people. While the immigrants learnt the local



language, Arabic and Persian as well. The persianization of the administration gradually ushered in an era of cultural conquest (Rahman, 2001).

Several cults with common beliefs and practices emerged as a result of the close social and intellectual contact between the Hindus and the Muslims. Certain Hindu rites and customs were continued by people newly converted to Islam. They retained many Hindu customs and institutions. The cult of Satyapir reveals the same blending old Hindu and Muslim ideas. God here is called Satyapir (i.e. Truth, the *pir*) by the Muslims and Satyanarayan (i.e. Truth of Narayan) by the Hindus (Sen, 1960). The worship of Panch Pir was popular at various place in Burdwan district, particularly in Mangalkot. It is worshipped even today as a family deity and is represented by a small mound erected on a clay plinth in the north-west corner of the house. Every Wednesday this mound is watered, incense is burnt and offering the flowers is made (Smith, 1919).

Many sufi *khanqah* in Mangalkot became the learning Centre. Where the sufi lives and guided a *Salik*. The *Khanqah* also serves as an academic centre and also a relief camp where the disappointed and the destitute are looked after. Maulana Hamid Danishmand established a Madrasha in Bohar for the development of learning. A lot of students came here from the different part of India (Banerjee, 1321).

### Conclusion

The local converts, no doubt, preferred state services but they were engaged primarily in their old professions. The change from a Hindu Bengali way of life to the Islamic system and culture was mostly due to the influence of the sufis who were the torchbearers of Islam and Islamic life in Mangalkot, especially in its early phase (Ismail, 2011). The *Sulh-i-Kul* was the dominant feature of every sufis in medieval Mangalkot. They preached that no sin is greater than to torture someone. Heart is regarded as the abode of God and it is advised not to hurt the feeling of any one, because to break one heart is worse than demolishing thousands of Kaba. Muslim mystics looked upon service of other as a major aim of their spiritual life and made every effort to create love and affection in the hearts of the people. This message of love preached by the *Bhakti* saints and Muslim sufis can eliminate or at least diminish the hatred between man and man. It will create an atmosphere of tolerance, love and communal harmony and help us to achieve national integration.

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