

Chapter XII

Inter-Ethnic Conflict in Tripura: Causes and Dimensions

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THIS PAPER ATTEMPTS at examining the ideas, causes and consequences of inter-ethnic conflicts in Tripura. Ethnicity is a socio-political phenomenon in most civic societies and in the 20th century inter-ethnic cleavages, competition and conflict appear to have acquired a marked intensity. In the process, ethnic mobilization has posed varied challenges to many 'developed' or 'developing' states. Governments in Afro-Asian countries have been following divergent strategies for dealing with ethnic movements, but all seem to have failed in varying degrees to satisfy minority groups. Ethnicity, like nationalism, seems to defy scientific rationality, yet most of humanity believes in it. Some people are more committed to it than others, but few can deny some emotional attachment to one of these categories or both. Most states survive with numerous significant ethnic groups, yet such nations usually face demands from ethnic groups that remain unfulfilled. How a state manages ethnicity depends on its perception and attitude of these ethnic demands.

The word 'ethnic', derived from the Greek word 'ethnikos' refers to nations or races or large groups of people having common traits and customs.¹ There may be three ways of defining ethnic group in terms of objective attributes, subjective feelings, and in relation to behaviour. An objective definition assumes that though no specific attribute is invariably associated with all active categories, there must be some distinguishing cultural features that clearly separate one group from another, whether that feature or features be language, territory, religion, colour, diet, dress, culture, tradition or any of them. The problem with objective definition is that it is usually extremely difficult to determine the boundaries of ethnic categories.² The difficulty with subjective

definitions is that they make it impossible to answer the basic question of how a group of people arrives at subjective self consciousness in the first place. Behavioural definitions are really a form of objective definition since they assume that there are specific, concrete ways in which ethnic groups behave or do not behave, particularly in relation to and in interaction with other groups. Behavioural definitions merely suggest that there are cultural differences between ethnic groups, but that the critical distinctions reveal themselves only in interaction with other groups.³

Ethnicity is a sense of ethnic identity, which has been defined by De Vos as consisting of the 'subjective, symbolic or emblematic use' by 'a group of people . . . of any aspect of culture, in order to differentiate themselves from other groups'.⁴ An ethnic group that uses cultural symbols in this way is a subjectively self conscious community that establishes criteria for inclusion into and exclusion from the group. At this point, matters of descent, birth, and a sense of kinship may become important to either group members, for the methods of inclusion and exclusion into group often involve the explicit or tacit adoption of rules of endogamy and exogamy. Ethnicity or ethnic identity also involves, in addition to subject self-consciousness, a claim to status and recognition, either as a superior group or as a group at least equal to other groups.

The pattern of ethnic group mobilization has been complex and the demand varies from one ethnic group to another like 'affirmative discrimination', autonomy, and secession. Affirmative discrimination is an articulation of a certain type of inherent inequality in the existing socio-political structures. Affirmative and autonomist measures may be state initiated or sponsored. When such demands emanate from the ethnic groups concerned they may emerge to be issues for bargaining, negotiation, and contention among the groups and the institutions of power and authority at various levels. The principle of 'self determination' is the guiding proposition for the autonomist as well as secessionist demands. In the case of the former, the concerned unit may stake its claim on an ethnic basis. But in the case of the latter, the demand for legitimization is inevitably sought on the plea of the ethnic homogeneity of the contending unit as already being a 'nation'. In this sense, ethnicity and nation building are closely intertwined.⁶

Ethnic identity varies and even changes from one historical period to another, as different issues and ideologies transform ethnicities. Ethnicity exists in some form whether or not it is politicized, and in this sense it is an 'objective' identification. When these marks of identification are utilized in a political movement ethnic boundaries are determined and an ideology formulated. Though most people have an ethnic identity, the objective criteria may be of no importance politically.

However, other identifications may have significance even if its members do not recognize this. Class exploitation can be objective regardless of the perceptions of the participants, while ethnicity has no social significance until participants recognize it as significant.⁷ Cultural and religious invasion and domination over political economy of the minority group by the larger groups can be a significant objective of ethnic movements.

Ethnicity and inter-ethnic conflict in Northeast India is a serious concern particularly in the context of the demand for more autonomy and growing militancy. The question of ethnic identity based on origin, culture, religion and language has been a force to reckon with in the Northeast India. Indeed, the Nagas seeking for a complete independence right from the time of 1950s is a significant development as the same is based on distinct ethnic and cultural identity. Similarly, the creation of separate states of Meghalaya and Mizoram (formerly part of Assam) were the manifestation of not only geographical location but also ethnicity and cultural identity, though today, even within these same territories one may find emergence of multi-ethnic groups for political bargain and promoting their interests. In this backdrop an attempt to examine inter-ethnic conflicts in Tripura is very significant.

Tripura is a small state in Northeast India with only 10,491.69 square kilometers and where there are more than 3 million inhabitants of which the immigrants comprise about 70 per cent thereby reducing the once majority indigenous peoples (*Boroks*) into about 30 per cent. The problem of influx of people from across the international border of erstwhile East Pakistan and now Bangladesh has been seen to be perennial phenomenon which over the years has caused various problems, the most vexing being ethnic conflicts between the indigenous peoples and the immigrant. Indeed, Tripura is passing through a tumultuous political situation due to problems emanating from socio-economic, political and ethnic conflicts generated by series of influx of large-scale population from across the said international border since the partition of Indian sub-continent (1947). Thus, the development of inter-ethnic conflict in Tripura is said to be the by-product of the distinct nature and problems of immigration, which had reduced the indigenous people into minority in their own homeland thereby leading to the subsequent control of the immigrants over the local political economy.

As three sides of the international border areas via Tripura are shared between India and Bangladesh, the problem of immigration became so perennial that it created difficulties for proper records of immigrants. Therefore, it has been found that in addition to the recorded number of 609,998 refugees who had settled in Tripura from 1947 to 1971, there are also innumerable unrecorded illegal immigrants, resulting

in the rapid increase of non-tribal population and the concomitant demographic imbalance in the state. The abnormally high growth rate of non-tribal population is attributed to the continuous influx of population since 1950s and this has been shown in Tables 1 and 2.

Table 1.1 Growth of tribal and non-tribal population in Tripura since 1950s.

Year	Total population	Tribal population	Non-tribal population	Tribal growth %	Non-tribal growth %
1951	654,707	237,953	401,074	-07.40	59.26
1961	1,142,005	360,070	781,935	51.31	91.76
1971	1,556,342	450,544	1,105,798	25.12	41.41
1981	2,053,058	583,290	1,469,360	29.60	32.85
1001	2,757,205	853,345	1,903,360	46.14	29.56

Source: *Census Report of India*, 1991.

Table 1.2. Contribution of Immigration and Natural growth to the increase in population in Tripura and India during 1971-1991.

State/ country	Decennial growth	ABR	ADR	NGR	Net immig.	% sharing to growth NGR immig.	
Tripura							
1971-81	31.92	30.08	10.60	19.48	12.44	61.02	38.98
1981-91	34.30	26.04	08.49	17.55	16.75	51.17	48.83
India							
1971-81	24.66	34.52	14.52	20.00	04.66	81.10	18.90
1981-91	23.50	32.50	11.23	21.02	02.48	89.45	10.55

Note: Col.3 - Col.4 = Col.5; Col.2 - Col. 5 = Col.6; Col.7 = (Col 5) x 100/Col.2; Col 8 = (Col.5) x 100/Col.2, ABR/ADR = Average Birth Rate/Average Death Rate; NGR = Natural Growth rate; Immig. = immigration.

Source: Government of Tripura. Annual Plan 1995-9G. Tripura State Parliament, Planning and Coordination Department Agartala. pp. 3-4

As shown in Table 2, out of the 31.92 and 34.30 per cent decennial growth rate of population during the decades 1971-81 and 1981-91, the immigrants alone contributed 12.44 and 16.75 respectively. This clearly shows that the immigration into Tripura accounts for 38.98 and 48.83 per cent during 1971-81 and 1981-91 respectively towards the over all growth of population. More significantly, an analysis of Tables 1 and 2 reveals the total number of illegal immigrants during the decades 1971-

81 and 1981-91 as 193,620 and 343,835 respectively (total 537,455 net immigrants during 1971-91). Thus, taking into account the number of documented refugees of 609,998 (1947-71) and the illegal immigrants of 537,455 (1971-91) the total figure is depicted as 1,147,453 net detected immigrants (even without considering their natural growth) from 1947 to 1991. Further, taking into account, their natural growth combined with other undetected illegal influx, it is not surprising that the indigenous peoples have become minority in their own homeland.

Expressing concern over the gravity of influx in Tripura, S. R. Bhattacharya, in his book, *Tribal Insurgency in Tripura: A Study in Exploration of Causes* (Inter-India Publications, New Delhi, 1989, pp.29-48), pointed out that Tripura is the only state in India where the early dwellers (Boroks), have been marginalized and outnumbered by the influx of immigrants. Further, J. B. Ganguly in his article, 'Tripura: Influx of Foreigners to Retard Economic Growth' (*The Assam Tribune*, April 9, 1991) says that the continuous influx of foreigners into Tripura would not only upset the demographic profile of the border state but also retard its economic growth. Malabika Das Gupta also has pointed out "while there is a general lack of development in the state by and large, the tribal people of Tripura have been the worst sufferers as a result of this phenomenon". Further, it has also been noticed that "the bulk of the benefits of whatever little development that took place in the state was captured by the Bengali immigrants".⁹ This phenomenon combined with continued increase and presence of immigrants has created a sense of insecurity for the indigenous peoples of state, which led to the serious concern for ethnic identity. Consequently, such threat had given rise to emergence of various socio-political organizations based on ethnic line in the 1970s such as the Tripura Upajati Juba Samity (TUJS) and the Tripura National Volunteers (TNV), the Tripura Tribal Students' Federation (TSF). It may be mentioned here that due to the pressure of these organization, when the State Government decided to create Autonomous District Council in 1978, the immigrants under the banner of an organizations called *Amara Bengali* reacted and opposed the formation of such a council. This aggravated the inter-ethnic conflicts, which finally led to the riot of June 1980 causing the loss of properties and lives of 'both the communities'.¹⁰

The years that followed the riot of June 1980, Tripura witnessed the rise of TNV insurgent activities until the signing of a tripartite TNV accord on August 12, 1988. However, the emergence of nationalist/militant organizations namely the All Tripura Tiger Force (ATTF), the *National Liberation Front of Tripura* (NLFT) in the mid 1990s rekindled the burning embers of insurgency. Thus, the various political and socio-economic problems, social and ethnic tensions and

different ethnic-political movements in Tripura have been the by-product of the process of immigration and the subsequent control of the immigrants over the state political economy. The central theme of the ATTF and NLFT is centred on the protection and promotion of the interests of indigenous peoples, which to them could be possible through repatriation of the immigrants and granting them with the right to self determination and more political autonomy.

Since the 1970s, inter-ethnic conflict has created multidimensional effects in the state. The internal displacement of peoples of both the communities is linked up with the inter-ethnic conflict in the state. Many affected people particularly in the rural areas have migrated to relatively safer places like in the Capital city and towns thereby creating a situation of over population in the urban areas. The presence of security personnel and para-military forces encamped in the schools of rural areas made uncertainty of education for rural people. Communal disharmony between the *Boroks* and the immigrants has been the effect of conflict particularly ever since the June riot of 1980. The years that followed the riot have experienced growth of communal clashes leading to the loss of many lives. There are reports of inter-personal clash turning into communal clashes mainly because of the mistrust created by the ethnic conflict following the June riot of 1980. It has been noticed that in the presence of such ethnic conflict the needed developmental works particularly in the rural areas have been found hampered thereby rendering the rural peoples mostly the *Boroks* into lot of sufferings.

In the given conflicting situation and present demographic structure in Tripura, no permanent solution to the on going problem seems to be in offing unless concrete and concerted efforts are made by all political parties. For instance, going by the democratic principles – rule of the majority – the indigenous peoples, being now the minority in their own state, do not seem to have much voice in policies and their implementation that will protect and promote their interests. Thus, unless some extra-constitutional and extra-legal provisions are provided with to protect and promote the long term interests of the indigenous peoples, the ethnic conflicts in Tripura may continue even to the extent creating a more undesirable situation. For such legislations concerted and united effort from all political parties concerned irrespective of their differences in ideologies is required.

Inner Line Permit and Border Fencing have been the demands of various socio-political organizations of the indigenous peoples. Such demands are to be given a serious thought in the larger interest of the State. The Inner Permit system may prevent the infiltration and settlement of non-tribal peoples into the indigenous peoples' belt. The Border Fencing if established will prevent further infiltration of

Bangladeshis into the State. As the State is already over populated beyond the capacity of natural resources for sustenance, thus creating a serious problem of imbalance between the needs of foodstuffs and the State's capacity to produce is a concern today. The State has already witnessed cases of starvation and deaths in several rural areas in the recent past. If proper measures are not taken by the Government, more of such incidents may occur in the future as well. Therefore, it is in the larger interest of the State that the problem of influx in Tripura must be tackled competently.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. *Webster's Third New International Dictionary of the English Language*, Unabridged (Springfield, Mass, G and C Merriam Co., 1978), p.781; *Webster's Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary* (Springfield, Mass, G and C Merriam Co., 1967), p.285; *The Oxford Dictionary*, Vol.3 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1933), pp.31333-14.
2. Even where it is possible to do so, argues Barth, the use of cultural attributes to identify ethnic boundaries may be superficial, confusing form with content; Frederick Barth, "Introduction" and "Pathan Identity and its Maintenance", in Frederick Barth (ed.), *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Cultural Difference*, (Boston, Little Brown, 1969), pp.15, 131-32.
3. *Ibid.* and Harold Eidiem, "When Ethnic Identity is Social Stigma", in Barth *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*, n.2, pp.15 and 39-57.
4. George de Vos, "Ethnic Pluralism" in George de Vos and Lola Romanucci-Ross (eds.), *Ethnic Identity: Cultural Continuities and Change* (Palo Alto, Calif., Mayfield Publishing Co., 1975), p.16.
5. Paul R. Brass, *Ethnicity and Nationalism: Theory and Comparison* (Sage Publications, New Delhi, 1991), pp.18-19.
6. Urmila Phadnis, *Ethnicity and Nation-Building in South Asia* (Sage Publications, New Delhi, 1990), p.1.
7. Achin Vanaik, "A Liberal-Pluralism Paradigm", *The Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol.XXVII, No.3 (Bombay), January 18, 1992, p.95.
8. The indigenous peoples include not only all the kokborok speaking people but also the other non-kokborok speaking tribal people of the state.
9. Das Gupta Malabika, "Regionalism and Separatis Forces in Tripura" in B. Pakem (ed.), *Regionalism in India with Special Reference to North East India* (Har-Anand Publications, New Delhi, 1993), p.309.
10. For details see, Mukherjee, Bhabanand and Singh, S.K., "Tribal Movements in Tripura" in K.S. Singh (ed.), *Tribal Movements in India*, (New Delhi, Manohar Publications, 1982), pp.317-35.