

## Geography Dictates Strategy - Tripura in the Context

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The most stable factor upon which the power of a state depends is obviously geography. Geography has been defined as science of the earth and its scope is extremely wide. So, in connection with military activities of an area, a broad knowledge of its geography is very essential. The major elements which are to be considered for this purpose are : location, physiography etc. The great historian Jadunath Sarkar opines that "terrain is the first cardinal factor in war for both strategy and tactics. Geography lays down some inexorable laws for the time and manner of conducting military operation. . . . ." <sup>1</sup> Sun Tzu, author of the world's oldest still existing military treatise, also highlights in the *China of Confucius* the importance of military geography when he says that "we are not fit to lead an army on the march unless we are familiar with the face of the country, the mountains and forests, its pitfalls." <sup>2</sup> Military geography is the application of geographic knowledge, techniques and skills to the solution of problems which confront military forces at any location. Hence, the relevance of a study of the geographical environment of Tripura, for the purpose of a probe in its military activities, is immense.

### Location And Its Significance

Location is one of the important aspects of geography. Tripura, a land-locked state, is located to the south-east of Assam and to the east of Bangladesh at present. The state is strategically important since it lies between the river valleys of Burma and the present Bangladesh. The periphery of Tripura touches both national and international boundaries. Bangladesh encircles it on three-fourth sides : on the north by the districts of Sylhet, on the south by the districts of Noakhali and Chittagong and on the south-east by the Hill Tracts of Chittagong. Only one-fourth side is touched by the Indian Provinces of Assam and Mizoram. The border line between the former native State of Tipperah and the British Indian Province of Bengal was demarcated first in 1854 A.D. in accordance with the awards of two arbitrators, namely, G. P. Leychester representing the British Government and W. F. Campbell representing the Raja of Hill Tipperah and this is still extant.

### Effects of Hill Ranges

Tripura has no mountain proper but numerous hillocks are there. There are a few hill ranges situated in the north-eastern

part of the state. The ranges are : the Jampui, Sakantang, Longtarai, Atharamura, Baramura, Devtamura etc. The hills are clothed with forests very similar in appearance and composition to those of Mizoram, Manipur, Assam and Hill Tracts of Chittagong. The thick forests which clothe the hills provide shelter to wild animals.

From the strategical point of view, it may be said that the numerous hillocks and deep forests, spread almost all over the state, constitute an ideal and natural sanctuary for guerrilla warfare. Osanka's idea on guerrilla warfare is that "the types of geographic environment in which guerrilla wars take place usually contain thick forests, hill ranges, swamps, jungles or a combination of these."<sup>4</sup> In this connection, Nasution, a noted military thinker specially on guerrilla warfare, in his observation mentioned that the territory in which the guerrilla troops operate should consist of 'few high-ways, many mountains and hills, and if possible, forests and undergrowth' which are the hideouts for the guerrillas.<sup>5</sup> Taking advantage of the terrain of Tripura, we have many instances in modern history of different tribal revolts where the hit and run tactics i.e. guerrilla techniques, were followed. Such techniques became very popular among the Tripura National Volunteer (T. N. V.) insurgents of the present day.

### **Influence of Rivers**

Rivers are the most important geographical feature, with reference to the movements of armies. The knowledge of the rivers of Asia or Europe with reference to their importance in the event of war in the countries through which they respectively flow is a *sine qua non* to the right understanding of the strategical operations of several armies.<sup>6</sup>

The principal rivers of Tripura are known, by name at least, to all; many may even know the places of their origin, but this knowledge is very inadequate for military purposes, although the rivers of the state are neither broad nor deep enough for navigation. The rivers are : Gumti, Haora, Khowai, Manu, Deo, Dhalai etc. The drainage is towards the south-west, the west and the north. All the rivers traverse Bangladesh before they fall into the Bay of Bengal. The zig-zag course, the narrow breadth and shallow surface of the rivers combined with heavy rainfall and the loose structure of the soil cause tremendous soil erosion and frequent floods. Most of the sluggish rivers of Tripura take on dangerous appearance during the rainy season. Thus, any military operation during the rainy season was very difficult in Tripura.

We have many instances in the military history of Tripura where rivers were used for war operation, particularly the demolition of embankment to wash away the enemy army as it was done during the days of Dhanya Manikya (C. 1490 - 1520 A. D.).

### **Effects of Forest and Animal**

Forests are important features, both from a strategical and tactical point of view. Strategically, they may compel the

advancing columns to make great detours or they may be favourably situated for covering a march or concealing troops or a manoeuvre etc. They may serve to cover the flank of a position or to cover a retreat etc. The history of every campaign affords more or less prominent examples in support of these assertions.

As Tripura is situated within the monsoonal zone, there is luxuriant growth of bamboos, creepers, trees and various plants in which the several kinds occur together. A perennial verdure spreads almost all over the forests of the state. Forests form a predominant part of Tripura. The open and reserve forests cover about three-fourth of the total area of the state.

Of the fauna, elephant deserves a particular mention. In Tripura hills, there were a large number of elephants. It may be pointed out that in ancient wars elephants were of vital importance in strengthening the military preparedness. The elephantry could offer stubborn resistance to the advancing enemy and could engage them so that the other arms could be withdrawn to safety. There is no denying of the fact that the invasion in Tripura occurred a number of times with a view to compelling the kings to pay elephants as tributes.

### **Transport and Communication**

The overall development of a country either big or small depends largely on its transport and communication system. So far as security of a country is concerned, its importance can hardly be denied because a disciplined army even equipped with sophisticated arms can not prove its worth in absence of proper transport and communication system, as directions of roads, narrow paths, forest ways, river ways and their nature etc. need special attention before detachments.

So far as the then transport and communication of Tripura is concerned, it may be said that such system was totally non-existent and probably the rulers paid little attention to that effect. According to Hunter, "there are no roads worthy of the name in Hill Tipperah, the capital itself is almost cut off from the rest of the world for want of land communication, the route by water being only open in the rains"<sup>8</sup>

However, in the Hill Tipperah, the system 'Foorai'<sup>9</sup> was in vogue. To convey any royal message or order, the king sent one Binandia (carrier of royal message) to the hills. The messenger carried a royal insignia made of iron called 'Foorai'. The order which was circulated by presenting the 'Foorai' the hill men would have to carry instantly. Once a 'Foorai', reached the village, the villagers would themselves carry the same from village to village to announce the proclamation. Here, it may be mentioned that when the state was attacked by the enemy, the system 'Foorai' was specially used to circulate the news all over the state.

In addition, elephant was the only media of transport used specially in remote hilly areas having no road at all for carrying hill products etc. from one place to another<sup>10</sup>.

In view of the peculiarity of geographical condition and resources of warfare mentioned above, it may be said that in early Tripura neither artillery, nor armoured forces but infantry, cavalry and specially elephants were to play a major role.

It is true that in the 1971 war against Pakistan artillery and armoured forces were brought into operation on Tripura soil by the Indian army and those played quite an important role in defeating the enemy forces. But that was an operation of the recent days when the technical know-how of warfare along with engineering skills to prepare roads and construct make-shift bridges had grown much more sophisticated than in yesterages.

### Notes & References

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10. K. D. Menon, op. cit, p. 219.