

**PROCEEDINGS OF
NORTH EAST INDIA
HISTORY ASSOCIATION**

ELEVENTH SESSION

IMPHAL : 1990

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NORTH EAST INDIA
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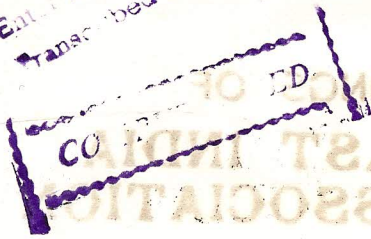
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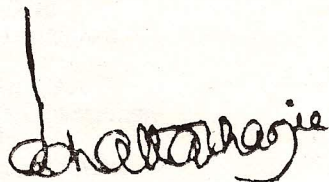
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P R E F A C E

The Eleventh Session of the North East India History Association was held at the Manipur University, Imphal, amidst great enthusiasm and gay. This was for the second time that we were invited by the Manipur University and Professor Gangmumei Kabui, Head, Department of History, Manipur University, created a history for the Association being the Local Secretary for the second time. The delegates will cherish the fond memory of the session for a long time due to the warm hospitality and colourful entertainment programmes, besides the high standard of the academic sessions in keeping with the tradition of the Association.

Shri Chintamani Panigrahi, the Governor of Manipur, inaugurated the session and Shri R. K. Ranbir Singh, the Chief Minister of Manipur, graced the inaugural function as a Guest of Honour. Professor V. K. Ahluwalia, Vice-Chancellor of Manipur University, did the Association a great honour as the Chairman of the Organising Committee and by his welcome address. Shri Kh. Amutombi Singh, Deputy Chief Minister of Manipur, released the publications. About one hundred and seventy delegates attended the session in which more than eighty papers were presented in nine panels. The First H. K. Barpujari Endowment Lectures by Professor B. N. Mukherjee, Carmichael Professor, Calcutta University, was an added feature of the session. Professor Tarasankar Banerjee, Dean, Faculty of Arts, Viswa-Bharati University, presided over the session.

The volume is the proceedings of the eleventh session of the North East India History Association held at the Manipur University on October 25-27, 1990. I am thankful to my colleagues Professor J. P. Singh, Prof. M. S. Sangma, Dr. D. R. Syiemlieh and Shri Atul Dev Sarmah for their help in selecting and editing the papers and publishing the volume. We are thankful to the Indian Council of Historical Research for generous financial assistance to the Association for the session and for publication of the proceedings.



(J. B. Bhattacharjee)
General Secretary

Shillong,
The 15th June 1991

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Socio-economic Tensions in Tripura during the First World War

Ranjit Kumar De

The relations between the Native States and the paramount power constitute an important aspect of British colonialism in India. The two World Wars of the present century provided an excellent opportunity for the rulers of the Indian States to demonstrate their loyalty and thereby extracted from them the maximum contributions to the war efforts.¹ In this paper an attempt is made to assess the socio-economic situation and tension in Tripura State during the First World War periods.

On the outbreak of the first World War in August 1914, when the All India National Congress at Madras (1914) resolved "to stand by the Empire at all hazards and at all costs"², His Highness the Maharaja Bir Bikram Kishore Manikya placed his personal services and the resources of his State at the disposal of the Imperial Government and he gave a suitable donation to the Provincial War Relief Fund, a branch of which was successfully started in this State.³

The offer of the king was accepted by the British Government. The following war contributions and gifts were made by the king during 1914-18 :⁴

	Rs
1. Credited to His Majesty's Government towards the general expenses of the war	1,00,000
2. Imperial Indian Relief Fund :-	
1st instalment	12,000
2nd instalment	3,750
3rd instalment	15,000
4th instalment	1,00,000
3. Bengali Battalion Patriotic Fund ..	5,360
4. Lady Carmichael Women's War Fund, from Her Highness the Maharani ..	5,700
5. Y. M. C. A.	100
6. St. Dunstan's Day Fund	150
7. Maintenance of an ambulance car in France for one year	3,600
8. British Day Fund	1,000
9. Bonas to recruits	1,025
10. Uniform for recruits	336
11. Travelling and other expenses for recruits ..	380
12. 800 Khaki Shirts for the 11th Rajputs serving in Mesopotamia ..	1,812
13. Gift of one Motor boat for ambulance work in Mesopotamia, worth about ..	25,000

The war contributions in various heads of Rs. 2,75,233 from Tripura whose total population stood at 2,29,613 and 3,04,437 in 1911 and 1921 respectively were not small. These semi compulsory war contributions was made to swell up the British military expenditure at the cost of the productive and development works of the State. ⁵

The growth of population during 1911-1921 and specifically from 1916-17 as a result of immigration from the neighbouring British districts posed problems. So the population figures are tabulated below :-

	1911	1921
Tippera District	35,302	25,689
Noakhali	4,759	4,583
Chittagong	5,577	9,891
Chittagong Hill Tracts	105	1,469
Dacca	1,434	2,616 ⁶
Sylhet	25,549	33,929 ⁷
<hr/>		
Total number of immigrants from six contiguous districts	72,726	73,177
Immigrants from different parts of India	81,666	96,374 ⁸
<hr/>		
Total immigrant population	1,54,392	1,74,551

The total population of Tripura State in 1911 and 1921 including immigrants was 2,29,613 and 3,04,437 respectively. ⁹ The addition of immigrant population numbering 1,74,551 to the original population in 1921 is a matter of serious concern for a tiny State like Tripura.

It will be seen from the above table that out of these British districts, Sylhet and Tippera were the largest source of migration. As Tripura had plenty of waste land, so the people of the densely populated Sub-Divisions of Sylhet, Noakhali and Trippera were attracted to come here in the search of cultivable land. ¹⁰ With the opening of the tea-gardens in Kailashahar and Dharmanagar Divisions during 1916-17 ¹¹ by the then Maharaja Birendra Kishore Manikya with the recommendations of Dr. A. C. Bhattacharyya, Ph. D., there took place daily flocking of labourers from the above mentioned British districts to this State. They formed a big labour colony. ¹² This migration, of course, on the one hand increased the revenue of the State and dreary tracts were transformed into smiling lands ; but on the other hand the sudden increase in population specially from 1916-17 bore the germ of the socio-economic tensions in the unforeseen future. The war and its ramifications had already produced a situation where the life of the people was affected ¹³ in many ways and thus simultaneously sharpened the socio-economic tensions within the society. ¹⁴

In this context came an allegation from the British, of loose administration in certain parts of Tripura. ¹⁵ Taking the advantage of the war time lawlessness the clan chiefs in hills began to defy the

norms of the state and administer according to their own wish and caprices. This caused much tension among the hill people. In 1917, in a reply to this allegations of loose administration, Dewan Bejay Kumar Sen, the Chief Secretary of Tripura State, also agreed that the administration was facing difficulties in carrying on through the agency of clan chiefs.¹⁶

The equilibrium of the commercial world was also disturbed by the war. Tripura through the ages had been mainly an agricultural State, hence it is natural that its imports of foreign manufactured articles were comparatively higher. The items of import were mainly cloth, salt, kerosine etc. These became scarce and their prices rose sharply.¹⁷ The situation was aggravated by the speculating activities of the unscrupulous merchants from the adjoining British Districts.

The principal export of the State were timber, cotton, oil-seeds, jute and various kinds of forest produce.¹⁸ Export goods got little encouragement in war time.¹⁹ Take cotton for example and how the export of cotton²⁰ from Tripura during the five years was affected due to war conditions can be had from the following table :

1912	1913	1914	1915	1916
93,559 mds.	44,659 mds.	20,171 mds.	57,939 mds.	18,951 mds.

Source : Administration Reports, Tripura State, 1916-17, p. 17.

It will be seen that the export of cotton from the Tripura State during these years was unprecedentedly small. The gross out-turn was much below the normal and it was apprehended that the continued slump in the market due to the First World War had been discouraging the growers.²¹

As a sequel to the collapse of the cotton market the revenue collection from this head along with other seven to nine heads (land revenue, family tax in the hills, Reserved Sal Trees, Nazars etc) was far from satisfactory.²²

The gradual decline in the revenue realisation in the cotton head during the last five years is tabulated below :-

1912	1913	1914	1915	1916
Rs.	Rs.	Rs.	Rs.	Rs.
1,85,585	94,875	87,250	1,24,218	63,378

Source : Administration Reports, Tripura State, 1913-16, p. 16.

The failure of cotton added to the prevailing war situations all round and affected the people, both in the plains and hills seriously.²³

At the commencement of the war the price of such necessities as salt, sugar, cloth, kerosine etc. was high. But the price of rice was low as the stock was large.²⁴ The general failure of the monsoon of 1918 throughout India led to actual famine in the provinces including Bengal, caused short crop and the prices of rice and other

foodstuffs rose rapidly.²⁵ In Tripura also, like Bangal and Assam, the price of rice, the staple food, rose alarmingly due also to export to the adjoining British districts by the blackmarketeers to meet shortage there. As the king was busy with his administration at the capital, the hoarders, the blackmarketeers made the hills their paradise of profits and tension was generated there due to it. Rice was sold at rupees eight a maund against Rs. 4/- before the war and the imported goods had already gone high. ^e

To mitigate the sufferings of the people and to keep the prices of essential commodities under control, the Agartala Municipality in an order in December 1914 fixed the prices of twenty-six articles like rice of various qualities, ghee, milk, sugar, molasses, salt, mustard-oil, kerosine, dal, onion, potato, etc.²⁷ The order was, nothing but an order and the hoarders paid little weight-age to it. The price control measure was limited only at the capital even with little success and in the hills and distant plains coarse qualities of price were sold at rupees 8 and more a maund. Poor people were hit hard also by the differential character of the price rise of rice. Prices of coarse foodgrains tended to go up faster than that for higher quality. Yet the latter remained more expensive. ²⁸

Out of this general discontent caused mainly by the shortage of food-grains, some sort of restlessness was noticed among the people of this State. The poor people all over India particularly in Bombay, Assam, Bengal due to the pressure of time were compelled to take resort to looting of food-grains. In Bombay mill area 115 grain shops were looted. The reports of bazar looting came from Upper Assam and Cachar. ²⁹ In Bengal 38 hat-looting cases with 859 convictions were reported from Noakhali, Chittagong, Sylhet and other places.³⁰ The same mood was not unseem among some of the poorer people of this State. So to prevent any kind of bazar looting in Tripura, Prasanna Kumar Das Gupta, the Chief Dewan, issued two circulars on 26 Pous 1327 T. E. (corresponding to 11 January 1917). In circular No. 2 Chief Dewan pointed out that as a result of price-rise of food, grains and cloth the report of bazar looting cases was pouring in. The Khowai bazar had already been looted. The Divisional Officers were instructed to keep vigilance over the treasury and to take appropriate action against the hoarders and the guilty businessmen.

The Government of Tripura was then making arrangement of importing salt which was very dear.³¹ The circular truly depicted the unrest among the people for want of essential commodities.

The growing unrest and lawlessness began to find a reflection in the economic crimes which was on increase. This increase of crime was due in the number of petty thefts ascribable to scarcity in the State and the neighbouring British districts of Chittagong, Noakhali, Commilla and Sylhet. The picture will be clear from the the following table.

	1913-14	1914-15	1915-16	1917-17	1917-18
Number of offences	725	906	994	1,028	1,243

Source : Administration Reports, Tripura State, 1913-1919, pp. 7-8.

To put a check upon the growing increase of crimes of all kinds, it became absolutely necessary to make the hands of the State police powerful. So the following important rules and regulations were promulgated during 1915-16 ; ³²

1) War regulation about civil suits concerning a volunteer or a member of the British Army.

2) Arms Act circular about possession of more than one gun.

3) Arms Act circular No. 8 of 21-4-25 T. E. under section 30 of the Arms Act, for registration of the names of exempted persons, their retainers and arms.

7) Arms Act circular No. 10 about marking of arms.

The people heavily hit were landless labourers. Although at that time their number was negligible, yet their wages did not keep pace with the rising costs and the price of all essential commodities had gone up. There was no noticeable variation in the usual rates of wages which ranged from annas 6 to annas 12 a day for males and annas 6 for females for ordinary labour and annas 8 to Rs. 1 - 4 per diem for skilled labour. ³³ These rates remained almost static throughout the war years, causing hardship to this class.

We have no direct evidence to know the plight of the people in professions and administration who had to live on fixed salaries. Nevertheless, as the price of necessary articles had gone up in leaps and bounds it can easily be concluded that their lot was not better than worse since other strata of society was hard pressed. ³⁴ However there is also an indication that the fourth grade employees of Rajgi Tripura had staged a demonstration before the Maharaja in 1329 T. E. or 1918-19 so that their allowances could be increased. ³⁵ It was a rare instance that people came before the king for ventilation of their demand. The war time situation had compelled them to do so. But they did not get the immediate redressal yet this became true only in 1920 when their allowances were increased from four to six annas daily. ³⁶ What is significant is not the allowance-rise of two annas but the agitational mood of the people which was a rare phenomenon in the entire history of the Manikyā rulers of Tripura till this date.

All these hardships were the product of the war time situations. But the miseries of the people especially the peasants were aggravated by natural calamities - earthquake, flood, malaria, influenza, small-pox, cholera, Kala-azar and cattle mortality. These visited the state times without number and wrought havoc. A question may be asked as to relevance of relating natural calamities to war time tension. But it is to be said that the king was very much busy with collecting donations. His effort and budget to give relief to

these calamities was not praise worthy. Allowing loan alone could not solve the problem.

The great earthquake of July 1918 caused considerable damages to many important buildings besides common houses and added to the difficulty.³⁷ During the years 1915-18, heavy floods occurred in almost all parts of the state and in the Zamindary. Considerable damage was done to property and livestock and great distress prevailed all over the state. Prompt relief measures were to be undertaken on an extensive scale and paddy, rice, pulses etc. were to be imported from outside the state territory to cope with the situation. Influenza, cholera, small-pox appeared in an epidemic form in the State.³⁸ From April 1918 to April 1919 time was very bad in point of health.³⁹

In a summing-up it can safely be argued that the financial contributions exacted from the people for non-voluntary donations by the Maharaja towards the expenditure of the war,⁴⁰ the spiral of prices and the profit making tendencies of the businessmen created socio-economic tensions⁴¹ and conditions of mass misery and impoverishment, which were reflected in the unparalleled toll of the influenza and cholera epidemics.⁴² The increase in population during 1911-21 and its specific pressure from 1916-17 in response to government advertisement⁴³ without a proportionate increase in agricultural and industrial productive activity depressed the standard of living of the people of the state during the First World War. The only silver lining was that a tea garden was set up in 1917 at Hiracherra of Kailashahar Division⁴⁴ and that industry had fetched revenue, through export though in small quantity⁴⁵ only at the end of the war when more tea industries began to grow. The plight of the tea-garden labourers came down bad to worse. They were exploited both in wages and other facilities. The holding out of a rosy picture and promise of better life by the recruiters soon proved to be mischievous to them⁴⁶. In terms of production, 1916-17 was bad, 1917-18 was worse, 1918-19 was worst. This caused the poverty of the people, either in plains or in hills. Though there was no food-riot which was the usual feature during the Second World War there was certainly the instances of grain-looting and burglary at this time.⁴⁷

So the economic pinch was felt mostly by the tenants, joomias, middle and the labouring classes. Naturally their fury knew no bounds against the British Raj and the Maharaja (as the former described the latter as colleague, friend, co-partner in Indian India, see *India's Services in the War*, Vol. I. general, Delhi, Reprint 1985, pp.121-3). Following the Bolshevik Revolution of Russia, 1917, the world situation was transforming rapidly and affected the whole tempo of events in India.⁴⁸ It was not known who were then the Bolshevist or whether anybody was really influenced by the Bolshevik ideas. But there was a certain circular of the British addressed to the king saying, "Be Aware of the Bolshevists" and pointing at the revolutionaries, the circular continued, they were not only the "Terrorist but they were the Bolshevists also".⁴⁹ This shows that even the princely State of Tripura was

not free from the influence of the Revolution of 1917. Some sort of political activity was being initiated by the revolutionaries (terrorists" as the British called them) of the adjoining British districts.⁵⁰ From 1912⁵¹ onwards the benign hills of Tripura, like Chandernagore, became a safe resort for the revolutionaries of Bengal⁵² Though the immediate manifestation of the Russian Revolution was not witnessed then it could be seen in 1930s and 1940s when the Ganaparishad and the Praja Mandal members and the communists of Tripura⁵³ with their independent approaches had plunged into various socio-economic political movements of the State. Thus the First World War was a watershed⁵⁴ in Indian and Tripura's history.

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In 1916 the first tea garden was set up in Kailashahar Division of Tripura. After that the number of tea estates in the State went on increasing steadily till it reached 50 in 1931 covering an area of 8 386 acres (3,394 hectares) and producing 12,49,374 pounds of tea (*Census Biharani*, op. cit., p. 115).

The total number of labourers employed in the tea gardens was 5,451 out of whom 2,896 were men and 2,555 women. All of these labourers came from outside the State. They were the tribal people hailing from Bihar, Orissa, Madras and Madhya Pradesh. These people gradually settled down in this State as permanent inhabitants either as the garden labourers or as cultivators.

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 Brajendra Chandra Datta, *Tripura Rajye Trish Bachhar in Bengali*, (Thirty years in Tripura State) Belonia Division, (ed), J. C. Datta, Agartala, 1986, p. iii.
26. Suprasanna Bandopadhyaya, (ed), *Tripura State Gazettee Sankalan*, Agartala, 1971, p. 57.
 Manimaya Majumdar, the Chairman of the Agartala Municipality, issued a notification in 24 Agrahayan 1324 T. E. (corresponding to 10 December 1914) that in consultation with the businessmen and shopkeepers the Municipality had determined the selling price of the following commodities (list included twenty six articles hence all are not mentioned only important articles are mentioned here). It warned the sellers of Agartala of severe punishment if anybody tried to sell at a rate higher than it was fixed.
27. *Tripura State Gazettee Sankalan*, op. cit p. 57.
28. Administration Report, Tripura State, 1916-17, p. 16, Tripura

- State Gazettee Sankalan, op. cit., p. 56-7.
29. H. K. Barpujari (ed), *Political History of Assam, Vol. I.* op. cit., p. 226.
 30. Sumit Sarkar, *Modern India*, op. cit., p. 176.
 31. *Tripura State Gazettee Sankalan*, op. cit., p. 81.
 32. Administration Report, Tripura State, 1915-16, p. 5.
 33. Administration Report, Tripura State, 1916-17, p. 15. Serial Nos. 4, 5, 6, are not relevant to this.
 34. This is a statement of the view of the present writer.
 35. Ranjit Pal, *Tripurar Shramik Andolan O Ganatantrik Sangramer Itihas* in Bengali (History of Labour Movement and Democratic Struggle of Tripura) Vol. I, Agartala, 1984, p. 39.
 36. *Tripura State Gazettee*, 19th Part, Ist Sankhya, Baisakh, Ist Half, 1330 T. E. or April, 1920.
 37. Administration Report, Tripura State, 1918-19, p. ii.
 38. A. C. Bhattacharyya, *Progressive Tripura*, op. cit., p. 58.
 39. Administration Report, Tripura State, 1918-19 p. 22.
A. C. Bhattacharyya quoted the deaths by influenza epidemic wrongly as 3500, (*Progressive Tripura*, op. cit., p. 62). But the deaths by cholera and small-pox were not stated at all. The figure was actually 3545.
 40. As a result of the abnormal economic conditions seriously handicaped the Public Works Department of the State. No original works on any comprehensive scale could be undertaken. (Administration Report, Tripura State, 1918-19, p. ii).
 41. R. Palme Dutt, *India To-day*, Calcutta, Reprint 1986, p. 334.
 42. Bengal Administration Report, 1918-19, p. 334.
 43. For the development of the newly created Sub-Division, named Kalyanpur, it is essential that people of various castes like washermen, barber, blacksmith, potter etc. should settle. Words of benefits were expressed (Tripura State Gazettee, 30th Agrahayanh 1326 T. E. or 24 December 1916).
 44. Ranjit Pal, *Tripurar Shramik Andolan O Ganatantrik Sangramer Itihas*, vol. I. op. cit., p. 16.
 45. Administration Report, Tripura State, 1918-19, p. 16
 46. Ranjit Pal. op. cit., p. 23.
 47. Administration Report, Tripura State, 18, 19, p. 16.
 48. R. Palme Dutt, *India Today*. op. cit., p. 335.
 49. Secret D. O. No. 22, intelligence Branch, Lord Sinha Road, Calcutta, to Dewanghshai, Tripura, B 6, 512, Tripura Secretariat Archives, Agartala.
 50. Official reports from 1919-20 onwards discovered Bolshevik ideas and Soviet agents everywhere, with even people like Gandhi or C. R. Das at times not above suspicion. 'Honest, but a Bolshevik and for that reason very dangerous', was the Bombay Governor Willingdon's description of Gandhi on 5 May 1918. (See Sumit Sarkar, *Modern India*, p. 177).
 51. *Sedition Committee Report*, Calcutta, New print, 1973, p. 100.
Trailokyanath Chakraborty, *Jele Trish Bachhar O Pak-Bharater Yuddha* in Bengali, (Thirty years in Jail and Indo-Pak War) Calcutta, 1981, pp. 14-6.

52. Ladli Mohan Roychowdhury, *Polish Reporte Ramkrishna Mission in Bengali*, (Ramkrishna Mission in Police Reports) Calcutta, 1983, p. 78-9.
53. K. D. Menon (ed), *Tripura District Gazetteers*, Agartala, 1975, pp. 124-8.
 Kamalini Ghosh, *Tribal Insurrection in Tripura*, Hyderabad, 1984, p. 71.
 Mahadev Chakravarti, *Communist Achivities in Tripura*, 1939-42, in *Proceedings of the North East India History Association*, Sixth Session, Agartala, 1985, p. 363-70.
 Tarit Mohan Dasgupta, *Tripuray Swadhinatha Sanggramer Smriti in Bengali* (Reminiscence of Freedom struggle in Tripura) in *Gomati*, Ashar (July), 1990, Agartala, pp. 1-11.
54. Judith M. Brown, *Gandhi's Rise to Power*, op. cit, p. 123.