

The Economic Content of the State Formation Process in Medieval Tripura

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"How the state developed, some of the organs of the gentile constitution being transformed, some displaced, by the intrusion of new organs, and finally, all superseded by real governmental authorities - while the place of the actual 'People in arms' defending itself through its gentes, phratries and tribe was taken by an around 'public power' at the service of these authorities and, therefore, also available against the people—all this can nowhere traced better, at least in its initial stage, than in ancient Athens. The forms of the changes are in the main, described by Morgan (Lewis H. Morgan, Ancient Society, or Researches in the Lives of Human Progress from Savagery through Barbarism to Civilization, London, 1877) ; the economic content which gave rise to them I had largely to add myself". (Engels, p. 179)

In tracing the state formation processes in Athens, Rome and in Germany, Engels emphasized the economic contents like the higher order of division of labour rather than that based on sex as in the primitive society and the division of society into classes. An essential feature of this development was the growth of the institution of the ownership of property (mainly in land) by individual families which became the economic units rather than the clan or the tribe. Division of labour led to diversification of productive activities and generation of surplus and the system of exchange of products. The use of metal money as the medium of exchange, rise of the class of merchants which did not take part in production but engaged itself 'exclusively in exchanging products', accumulation of wealth by the few at the cost of the many and the system of moneylending and usuary were the other economic contents of the state formation process. Since these changes resulted in a marked rise in the productivity of labour the value of human labour power necessarily increased.

This was behind the rise of slavery 'as an essential part of the social system' in some cases.

Under the impact of these changes "The old society based on sex groups bursts as under in the collision of the newly-developed social classes; in its place a new society appears, constituted in a state, the lower units of which are no longer sex-groups but territorial groups, a society in which the family system is entirely dominated by the property system, and in which the class antagonisms and class struggles, which make up the content of all hitherto written history, now freely develop". (Engels, Preface, pp. 9-10). This development signifies the breakdown of the gentile constitution in bringing about which not only the conflict of interests between the wealthy and the poor played its part but also that between the tribals and the 'new inhabitants, strangers to the gentile associations' (Engels, p. 275) played a role.

What Engels has characterized as the economic content of the state formation process may perhaps be more specifically explained in terms of the changing mode of production.

Samir Amin has categorized four pre-capitalist modes of production, namely, (1) the 'primitive-communal', (2) the "tribute-paying", (3) the 'slave-owning', and (4) the 'simple petty-commodity'. (Amin, pp. 13-14).

If we look at the historical order of sequence of the emergence of these modes of production, we may safely observe that the primitive-communal mode preceded all the others. Its main characteristics were that labour was organized partly family-wise and partly the class or the village-wise. Besides labour, land was the principal means of production and it was collectively owned. Its use was free for the clan-members although there were customary rules to regulate the utilization of land for productive purpose by the individual families. The distribution of the product among the members was regulated by the rules that were closely 'bound up with kinship organization'. In such a milieu there was neither division of labour nor the generation of surplus production leading to accumulation. (The transition from such a classless to class-based society is usually slow and gradual). Such a mode of production covers a wide spectrum of kinship organizations. Variations in such types have been largely the outcomes of variations in physical environment.

The primitive-communal mode of production did contain the seeds of the transition from the class-less to the class-based social formation. Access of the individual families to the land,

excepting in the most primitive stage, was not on an equal basis. Some families were in a privileged position in enjoying access to better and bigger holdings. Such privileges were "closely connected with a hierarchy of political and religious authority". The element of hierarchy was more marked among some tribes and less so in some others. One thing was however common, namely, that each member of the clan had access to a part of the clan's territory. Since this ensured the absence of the separation of the producer from the means of production there was no division of the society into classes. But it definitely provided 'a basis for an embryonic class distinction'. And, therefore, over a period of time the tribute-paying mode of production could emerge out of the communal mode.

Under tribute-paying mode of production the society is divided "into two main classes : the peasantry, organized in communities, and the ruling class, which monopolizes the functions of the given society's political organization and exacts a tribute (not in commodity form) from the rural communities. This mode of production, when it assumes an advanced form, almost always tends to become feudal - that is, the ruling class ousts the community from *dominium eminens* of the soil." (p. 15)

The transition from the "primitive-communal" to the "tribute - paying" mode of production, seems to correspond roughly to what Engels characterizes as the breakdown of the 'gentile constitution' (i.e. tribal customary practices dealing with the individuals' access to resources and distribution of products among the members of the tribe) and the rise of the state.

It is in the above framework that an attempt is made in this paper to trace the development of the state formation process in Tripura.

Tribal Polity

The Bodo-speaking Tripura tribes belonging to the Indo-Mongoloid stock settled in Tripura in the remote past. They came to Tripura through Assam, Sylhet and Cachar in successive waves (Chatterjee, 172-73). These people practised slash-and-burn agriculture (*jhum chash*) and the bamboo forest of Tripura hills were very suitable for their economic pursuits. Around the 13th century the main tribal groups living in Tripura were the Kukis, Tripuras, Riangs and Jamatiyas. These tribals had their own systems of administration at the levels of the tribe as well as the village. In some cases there were regional level functionaries also.

Among the Kukies there was the chief or the Raja, called *Halancha*, who led his community in its relations with other communities and tribes and also decided about the extension of village settlements to new areas. He was the ultimate interpreter of customs and conventions. At the village level, the chief called *Sangalthong* was elected by the villagers from among a certain group of families. The person so elected could not decline office. If he did so, he had to pay a fine. *Sangalthong* headed the village council which included other elders. This council settled all village disputes. The grand chief or 'Lal' appointed some chiefs under him for settling inter-village disputes (Singh, p 40).

The village council of the Tripuras was headed by the *Choudhuri* who along with the other members were selected by the villagers through discussion. They held office ordinarily for one year. The *Choudhuri* was assisted by *Karbari* who was something like a secretary to him. There was a *Khandal* or messenger to circulate the decisions of the council among the villagers. Women were excluded from the membership of the council. The council settled all disputes about selection of sites for jhuming, marriage settlements, punished persons for breach of customary laws and code of conduct, etc. The *Choudhuri's* house was the office of the village council.

The chief of the village council of the Riangs was known as *Kamifang*. The other officials were the *Kerpang* (store-keeper), *Akcai* (priest), *Kandal* (peon-cum-bodyguard) and *Daoa* (messenger). There were three zonal chiefs called *Huklai Chaudhury* whose main duties were to organize the annual puja *Hamui taimi*, to maintain inter-village communication and serve as the link between *Kami Kachhkao* (the king of the Riangs) and the village heads. *Kami Kachhkao* had a number of officials under him, such as, *Chapia Khan* (the chief minister), *Chapia* (minister), *Chheng Krak* (army-chief), *Khang Kalem* (tax - collector), *Hazra* (administrator in charge of a group of villages under the *Huklai Choudhuri*), *Karma* (orderly), *Akcai* (priest), *Daoa* (massenger), *Kandal* (Bodyguard), *Duguria* (Band-party manager), *Muria* (flute-player), *Musonai* (dance master), *Reianai* (musician), *Son-nai* (cook), *Bau nai* (organizer of feasts), etc (Gan Chaudhuri, p. 78-79).

The supreme council of the *Jamatiyas* was called *hoda*, and its head, *Hoda-Okra*, who was elected by the representatives of the village councils. The village-level and the regional-level

councils were known as *luku* and *moyal*. The Chief of the village council, *Chokdiri* had two or more assistants known as *Khandals*. The *chokdiri* was elected by the senior male members of the *luku*. None other than a married man having a family and who is economically resourceful would be elected. In settling disputes he used to take the help of the old and influential villagers. The head of the regional council, *moyal panchay* was elected by the *adongs* (representatives) of the *lukus* within that region. In any matter, *Hoda-Okra's* order was final. Appeals against the decisions of the *luku* and *moyal* could be made to him. He had religious functions also. He organized the pujas, such as, the Garia puja, Ganga puja, Lampra puja, etc. He was the main authority to ensure the unity and integrity of the *Jamatiyas* living in villages scattered over a large area in the hills of Tripura. (Bhattacharjee, pp. 40-42)

The above thumb-nail sketches of the polity of the four tribes are based on some recent studies on the tribes concerned. The authors of these studies have largely depended on heresay and oral testimony of some members of the tribes concerned. Even as the historical value of such studies may be called into question, it would be reasonable to presume that until the King of Tripura subjugated the other tribes and formed a monorchal state, each tribe was ruled by its chief whose office was not, normally, hereditary. The village-council was the basic unit to dispense with justice and mobilize the villagers for collective action. As the tribe was a supra-village entity, there was a hierarchy of leaders -at the tribal, regional and village levels. The leader of the whole tribe was the most powerful among the functionaries and he was assisted by a number of professional office-bearers. The office of the store-keeper seems to be common among the tribes. This is an indication of the fact that some collections, obviously in kind, were made from the individual families for meeting the needs of the officials as well as those who were in distress. The whole system could depend on the slash-and-burn agriculture which was the main form of productive activities of these tribes. Yet the signs of some social stratification and specialization in economic activities in rudimentary form were discernible. It can be said that the primitive-communal mode of production was on the threshold of a transition to the tribute-paying mode of production. The tribal polity was under strain. At this juncture, how and why the Tripura tribe succeeded in subjugating the other tribes and esta-

blished its hegemony over them is the most important historical question pertaining to that period.

Subjugation of other tribes by the Tripura Tribe

Amalendu Guha in his enquiry into the state formation process in medieval Assam aptly presumed that no tribe could leap into statehood "while it was still at its pristine stage, when it still lacked a sedentary agricultural population, a degree of division of labour and social stratification". (Guha, 1983, p. 4). In an earlier work of this author (Ganguly, 1983, pp. 2-3) he also similarly felt when he stated : "The practice of shifting cultivation is not conducive to the emergence of a political entity covering any considerable area." This is because shifting cultivation being a non-surplus producing economic system could not support a political system having a sizeable number of non-producing functionaries, such as, the ruling class and the administrative, army and police personnel. Professor Guha has elaborated the point as follow :

"Statehood emerged only when a community was either itself capable of producing a surplus sufficient for the maintenance of a non-producing public authority, or of systematically appropriating as tribute the requisite surplus from subject community or both. Smaller the surplus, less elaborate was its public authority structure. In north-east India, tribal state formation, early or medieval, were made possible by the generation of the requisite surplus from either their own or other people's wet rice cultivation" (ibid, p. 4).

While agreeing with this view, we have reasons to believe that contact with the neighbouring people of Bengal and trade relations with them also played an important part in facilitating tribal state formation in Tripura. According to Samir Amin, none of the "modes of production has ever existed in a pure state : the societies known to history are 'formations' that on the one hand combine modes of production and on the other organize relations between the local society and other societies, expressed in the existence of long-distance trade relations". (Amin, P. 16).

B. P. Misra has proved with evidence that : "the association of tribals of Tripura with the non-tribals of Sylhet-Comilla - Noakhali - Chittagong region is very old, even thoughthe Bangalis moved physically to the present

Tripura state only in the time of King Ratna Manikya I (14th century A. D.)" (Misra, p. 33).

In answering the question as to how the Tripura tribe could win the struggle for power Misra mentioned two particularly important factors though he felt that the factors must have been many. Firstly, the Tripuras were the first among the tribes to come in contact with the neighbouring Bengali people. Misra emphasized two important effects of such a contact. The rulers of Bengal became interested in subjugating Tripura to have access to the rich source of elephants in Tripura as elephants were highly useful in warfare of that age. They, however, preferred installing feudatory kings in Tripura to directly ruling over the difficult hilly terrain. This is borne out by the historical fact that Ratnamanikya I was installed as the king of Tripura by the Lord of Goud and the former presented the latter with some elephants and a ruby.

The other advantage flowing from such contacts, according to Misra, was that the King of Tripura tribe could avail himself of the 'shrewed and wise counsel' of the Bengali brahmins, particularly from Sylhet, 'to consolidate his authority over other tribes'. He continues to say : "The hinduisation of the royal family and the progressive association of brahmins with the same helped to make kingship the privilege of one tribe only, namely, Tripura". (Misra, p. 35-36)

Secondly, the Tripura tribe enjoyed numerical superiority over the other tribes. Mentioning particularly about the failure of the Kukis, ('who were highly war-like') to take on the Tripuras, Misra says, "Numerically they were a minority in Tripura. Again they did not have any patron either among Kings of the Bengal plains or among the brahmins." (Ibid, p. 37).

Records are not available to substantiate the claim that the population of the Tripura tribe was the largest among all the tribes of the area in the medieval period. Even if the Tripuras did not far outnumber the Riangs or the Kukis or the Halams, they had a very significant economic advantage over them. Since in that period the concentration of the Tripuras was in the western part adjoining the plains districts of Bengal they had developed trade relations with the Bengalis of the neighbouring areas. Misra has cited epigraphic evidence indicating the existence of timber trade between Tripura and Sylhet as early as in the 11th century (Misra, p. 65). *Rajmala* mentions an instance of import of 2000 maunds of salt into

Tripura by boat by a merchant for sale in exchange of an elephant. The King paid for the consignment of salt which he distributed among the subjects urging them to remain loyal to him and his descendents (Edn. Dte, pp. 80-81).

The French traveller Jean Baptiste Tavernier, who visited India during 1661 to 1666-67, has recorded that he met one merchant from Tripura at Dacca and two at Patna. The system of keeping accounts with the help of small stones and the weights and scales used by them have been also described by him (Education Directorate, p.89).

Kailash Chandra Singha has recorded that the people in the plains of Bengal were greatly benefitted by the supply of timber, bamboo, cane and sungrass from Tripura. The king also gained from this trade by imposing duties on the export of such products (Singha, p. 14). Since the hills of Tripura abounded in these useful forest products it was but natural for the traders from the plains to import these goods from Tripura. Such trade mainly flowed along two great rivers of Tripura, namely, the Gomati in the south and the Manu in the north. It was on the Gomati that the Kings of Tripura built their capitals, at first at Amarpur, then at Rangamati which was later named as Udaipur. Along this navigable river Muslim armies invaded Tripura a number of times.

Singha has also recorded that as the Kings of Cachar were pushed towards south probably by the Ahoms, similarly the rulers of Tripura, whose boundary was extended up to the Barak river, were also forced to recede back into the further south. At that time the headquarters of the rulers were on the Manu river. (Singha, p. 62) It is this Manu, a reference to which is noted in the Paschimbhag copper-plate inscription of Maharaja Srichandra (10th century A. D.) as pointed out by Misra. He writes : "In the same land grant, western boundary of the said visaya was named as *Kastha-panya-Khataka*, which means a canal or a stream (Khataka) which carries merchandise of timber (Kastha-panya). It is most likely that it was one of these innumerable hill streams through which timber was carried down from the hills of Tripura" (Misra, p. 32).

From all the above accounts it would not be unjustified to conclude that some trade between Tripura and the neighbouring plains of Bengal had been in existence even in the remote past. It may be further asserted that while the exports from Tripura consisted of valuable elephants, timber, bamboo

and cane the imported goods were salt, metals, utensils, ornaments, shells and stones, some textiles and, may be, even food stuff. It need not be presumed that the initiative for such trade was taken by the tribal people. It was most likely that the traders from the plains ventured into Tripura to take down the valuable forest products.

The next important question is : which tribe could benefit most, although not on equal terms with the traders from the plains, from such outflow of forest products? We are inclined to believe that among the different tribes the Tripuras were the highest beneficiaries of this trade. The Tripuras were mainly concentrated along the above-mentioned trade routes. Their productive activities were also perhaps more diversified than those of the other tribes. It was the Tripuras who had developed some cottage industries, particularly handloom, blacksmithy and a little bit of carpentry. Their productive activities were of a more sedentary and stable nature. In history there are recorded accounts of a number of Kuki raids on the plains to loot food and other necessaries but there is hardly any such incident involving the Tripura tribe. The other two tribes, namely, the Jamatiyas and Riangs were living during the period in question, into remote hills. Therefore, their contacts with the plainsmen were few and far between.

To wage war, even a tribal war, and to win it not only the number of and quality as fighters but also the available stock of food, armaments and facilities of movements along hills, dales and rivers, etc., count. In all these respects the Tripura tribe was at an advantageous position compared to the other tribes of the time in medieval Tripura. This accounts for the success of the Tripuras in subducing the other tribes such as the Kukis, Jamatiyas and Riangs. Which Tripura Chief or or Chiefs earned these laurels exactly when and where cannot be conclusively pointed out as no written accounts of the period are available. Since the tribes in question had no written language or languages of their own there cannot be any question of such accounts.

Rajmala, the chronicle of the ruling dynasty of Tripura, which was compiled under the initiative of Dharmamanikya in the 15th century cannot be relied on for the origin of the Tripura Kingdom in the pre-medieval period. But it is beyond doubt, as written by R. C. Majumdar, that the Tripura ruling dynasty is a very old one and that it existed even before the

medieval period, (Majumdar, p. 469).

The historical period of the Tripura Kingdom starts with the reign of Maha Manikya whose original name was Chhengthung Fa. There are some controversies on who was the first ruler of the Manikya dynasty ? We may agree with the stand taken by Majumdar that Chhengthung Fa was the first historical King and he was the first ruler to assume the title of "Manikya". Later on he came to be known as 'Mahamanikya'. (Majumdar, p. 485). He continues to say : "..... according to our assessment some time before Dharmamanikya or Dangarfa ascended the throne in 1431, when some weak Sultan ruled in Gaud, that is, when Danujmardan or Raja Ganesha temporarily established suzerainty over Gaud. Chhengthungfa or Mahamanikya conquered the extensive tract lying between Chittagong and Sylhet and established a new Kingdom." (Majumdar, p. 486, translated from Bengali).

Referring to the finding of some coins of Jalaluddin Muhammad Shah resembling those found in Ratnamanikya's coins some historians believe that Mahamanikya suffered temporary submission to the Sultan of Bengal. Or it may be that some portion of Tripura was conquered by the Sultan. Whatever the actual facts may be, it cannot be disputed that since Mahamanikya's time a line of rulers belonging to this dynasty continuously ruled over the hilly terrain of Tripura. There have been occasional setbacks when the Sultans of Bengal conquered parts of Tripura as Hussain Shah did in the early 16th century ; but the hilly parts always remained beyond the reach of Muslim invaders.

That the ruling Tripura rajas controlled the hill areas is borne out by several historical records. In *Ain-i-Akbari* it is stated : "Adjoining it (the country called Bhati) is an extensive tract of country inhabited by Tipperah tribes. The name of the ruler is Bijaymanik. Whosoever obtains the Chieftainship bears the title of Manik after his name and the nobles that of Narain. He has a force of two hundred thousand footmen and a thousand elephants" (Quoted in Education Directorate, 1975, p. 80).

The rule of the early Manikyas were marked by several tribal rebellions which were eventually subdued. It will, however, be wrong to suppose that the Manikyas' rule over the different tribes was absolute and permeated down to the village level. The tribal villages enjoyed self-rule in accordance with

their customary laws. The chiefs of different tribes paid tributes to the Manikyas in acceptance of their suzerainty. The Tripura Kings organized a community feast, called *Hasam Bhojan*, every year on the Vijaya Dashami day for the soldiers belonging to all the tribes. In this banquet the Halams enjoyed some privileged position because, it is believed, prior to the rule of the Tripura dynasty, they ruled over this area. It is also recorded that these Kukis, who accepted the domination of the Tripura King, came to be known as Halams. Among the Kukis, some Chiefs were conferred the title of Raja by the Manikyas. Those Rajas ruled over their respective clansmen. The grand chief of the Riangs, *Rai*, ruled over his tribesmen as a vassal of the Manikyas. It thus shows that the tribal or gentile constitution did not yet completely break down although the tribal chiefs paid tributes to the Tripura Raja.

State formation process

The tribals still commonly practised slash and burn cultivation and the tributes paid to the King were in the form of forest products. At the time of war some chiefs came to the help of the Rajas with their tribal fighters. But based on merely such collections and uncertain provision of military service a state cannot be formed. Yet in our view, from the time of Mahamanikya Tripura entered the era of the state formation process. This has been possible because the Manikyas coming in contact with the Sultans of Bengal started adopting the Muslim system of administration. And for manning the administration as well as for diversifying the productive activities, such as, practising wet rice cultivation, processing of agricultural products, carpentry, blacksmithy, etc the Manikyas invited and helped the Bengalis to settle in their kingdom. Such settlement in the plains of Tripura led not only to increased agricultural production but also to expansion of trade. Both these developments augmented revenue collection without which the Kings could not have built up the administrative and military structure so essential for consolidating power and the ability to rule over the state. The ruling class consisted of the king and the nobles called 'Narayans' who were the king's blood relations. The king also maintained a regular army. According to Kailash Chandra Singha, Ratnamanikya created the four posts of officials in accordance with the Muslim system

of administration. *Suba* was the Commander-in-Chief under whom were *Hazari*, *Jamadar*, *Dafadar*, etc. The Prime Minister of the King was called *Ujir*. The chief of the police force was known as *Nazir*. The *Dewan* was the finance minister of the king. To the post of *Ujir* Bengalis were generally appointed. But all the other important offices were held by the relatives of the kings.

It is also significant that the Tripura Rajas almost naturally adopted the Bengali language for official transactions. Maharaja Radhakishore Minikya (1897-1909) claimed : 'Use of Bengali language in administrative matters and organization of various functions for the development of Bengali language have been going on in this state since the ancient times' (quoted in the Preface, Bandopadhyay). It is also proved by the fact that legends on all the Tripura coins were in Sanskrit written in Bengali script. According to Majumdar, Ratnafa or Ratnamanikya was the first Tripura King to issue coins (1300 B.E., p. 480). These coins were issued during the period from 1464 A. D. to 1467 A. D. During his reign Ratnamanikya invited a large number of Brahmin, Vaidya and Kayastha families from Bengal and helped them to settle in the state by land grants and other patronage. This paved the process of, what M. N. Srinivas calls, sanskritization of the Tripura tribe. The regional language, i. e., Bengali was used to transact work at the king's court and Sanskrit was used for expressing the motto of the Kingdom and legend on the coins. The Tripuras directly came under the Hindu influence. N. R. Roy Chowdhury, who has worked on the history of Tripura, mentions : "It was largely through the patronage granted by Ratna Manikya that Hinduism made a significant dent into predominantly tribal society in Tripura" (p. 15). Referring to this development Suniti Kumar Chatterjee was of the opinion that "this led to the closer approximation of both the royal family and the rank and file of the Indo-Mongoloid people of Tripura State to the Bengalis, in religion and culture ; and it meant also the establishment of Bengali and Sanskrit as cultural and religious languages of Tipra people" (*Kirata Jana-Kriti*, 1974, P. 132, quoted in Roychoudhury, p. 16).

Under the impact of these contacts the tribal polity, modes of production, cultural activities, religious performances, etc., had been changing in that period. The process signified, what Engels called, conflict of interests between the tribals and the

“new inhabitants, strangers to the gentile associations.” The outcome of this conflict was that, many tribal families receded into the interior hills while many others adopted the changes and rendered services required by the kings to consolidate their position and power to rule over the whole of Tripura.

As the Bengalis continued to immigrate and settle in the state, the king could utilize their services to project his status and power (through publication of dynastic history), organize administrative and public services, manage forests and other natural resources and impose and collect revenue, duties and taxes. The Bengali settlers were the first to start settled cultivation and produce surplus. Some tribal families also started wet-rice cultivation with the help of immigrant labour. The king established his claim that all land and natural resources ultimately belonged to him. Usufructuary and other rights of land with or without the right to transfer land could be enjoyed by any other person on payment of revenue to the king who had the absolute right of fixing the terms and conditions of such uses. Even the hillmen practising shifting cultivation had to pay house tax for enjoying the right of jhuming in the hills. This signified the breakdown of the basic aspects of tribal polity marked by community ownership of land and natural resources. Settlement of immigrants led also to the expansion of trade, monetization of transactions and usuary.

To sum up : In Tripura the state formation process started from the early 15th century when the Tripura Chief could subjugate the other tribes, namely, the Kukis, Riangs, Jamatiyas and Halams. This was possible because of the numerical superiority of the Tripura tribe and also their early contact with the Bengalis of the neighbouring plains and trade relations with them. This could not have been possible without the emergence of some form of ownership of property. The Tripura king invited and patronised the settlement of Bengalis in Tripura. The kings could thereby build up the administrative machinery to rule the state effectively. The process led to the strengthening of private ownership of property, restrictions on free access of the tribals to forests and other resources, extension of area under wet rice cultivation, monetisation of productive activities and exchange, usuary and collection of land revenue, taxes on commodities and duties on export and import of goods. These developments signified the breakdown of the gentile constitution and the transition from the primitive-communal to the

tribute-paying mode of production.

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