

Some documents on Economic situation in Tripura, 1929 - 1936

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The Directorate of Education, Government of Tripura, has published two excellent collections of documents entitled 'Tripura State Gazette Sankalan'¹ and 'Rajgi Tripura Sarkari Bangla'². These collections of important official documents of the State contain some interesting data on the economic condition of the state during the period that coincided at least with the last fifty years of British Rule in India. Although a princely state, Tripura's economy was linked with rest of India (in any case with the rest of Bengal), particularly due to the monetization process accomplished as an inevitable consequence of the British colonialism, and in the process, integrated into world economic order. It is in this context that we intend to examine the data available in these documents on the economy of the State in the years of Great Depression.

Select Data

In an attempt to examine the possible impact of the world-wide economic depression on the small princely state in India's North-East, we first looked into the annual reports of Tripura for the relevant years. 'The Report on the Administration of the Tripura State for 1340 TE (1930-31)' stated,

.....with bumper crops of jute, cotton and other commodities, against prices dwindling below the cost of production, the agricultural population found themselves in a more or less hopeless position...
...Abundant harvest of rice and other food crops no doubt proved a relieving factor, but the low prices everything faced generally, created a very depressing atmosphere, the pinch of which was felt by all most keenly. Scarcity of money was the order of things, and a disquieting unrest manifested itself all round, which led occasionally to organised propaganda against the moneylender and the landowner.

The tension mounted up so high in the tribal predominated Khowai division that a few cases of arson and assault were reported by the local officials. This occasioned the visit of the Maharaja of Tripura to Kalyanpur in the same division on 14 February 1931. The Maharaja

camped for a week, moving about freely in different places, meeting a number of hill tribals and ascertaining first hand the local economic situation. His Highness was pleased to select on the occasion, a large tract in the locality for the exclusive use of the hill people with the object of inducing them to take to plough cultivation and a more stable life³.

The reservation of the tract in Khowai was immediately notified in the State Gazette⁴ which stated that an area of 11000 drona of land has been reserved by the government for the settlement of the hill tribes like Tripuri, Noatia, Jamatia, Rieng and Malam with an object to encourage them to plough cultivation. An individual could get a lease of 10 drona. The Chief Secretary was authorised to write off revenue demand upto rupees one thousand for the entire reserved area. The Maharaja also took steps for the improvement of general facilities in the division. A Khowai Improvement Fund of Rs. 6,772/- was raised with contributions from the Zamindars, Lawyers and businessmen and the Khowai Improvement Committee was constituted with the representatives of the landowners, lawyers, businessmen and the Tripuri community for the construction of roads and implementation of water-supply scheme⁵.

The cotton, jute and tea growers faced serious problems as the export rate of these commodities drastically went down. In fact, the export of cotton, oil seeds and timber was the main source of earning for the state⁶. The hill tribals were cotton growers and they had been supplying cotton to Bengal for a long time. Ever since the British merchants had taken interest in Indian cotton for supply to cloth-mills in England the demand for the commodity had shown an upward trend. The rulers of Tripura encouraged the people in the state to grow more cotton. It was in this context that in 1903 the Maharaja notified the people that

cotton in India was being exported to England in larger quantity and that the price of cotton was going up. There was an indication that the cotton shall be sold at still higher price in the following year. The Maharaja had no doubt that this shall be beneficial to the hill people. The hill people should be encouraged and advised to grow more cotton. The choudhuries of the areas were to be called to the divisional offices and police stations where the benefit of more cultivation should be explained to them. This was also to be announced in the markets by beating of drums. The divisional officers and the police officials were asked to do so.

The government of the Maharaja also took steps for the improvement of the quality of cotton. In 1918 they decided to experiment the cultivation of the Dharwar variety in rainy season and distributed the seeds of this variety to the cotton growers in the hills. In 1923 the Dharwar cotton grown in Tripura was sent to the Central Cotton Committee in Bombay and to the Banga Laksmi Cotton Mills, Kettlewell Bullin & Co. and the Dhakeswari Cotton Mills in Bengal to be satisfied about the quality. The Government Botanist of Dacca observed that the problem of long-staple cotton for the mills in Bengal could be solved by encouraging the cotton growers of Tripura to grow more cotton. In 1924 the area of cultivation was extended in higher altitudes, the seeds of the Dharwar long-staple variety was distributed to 2000 tribal cotton growers, and a total area of 19,000 acres was brought under cultivation.

A notice issued by the government in 1931, however, gives the impression that the export market was not encouraging to the state. It stated that in the 'present situation' it was necessary for all to learn weaving and spinning and that for the promotion of this art arrangement has been made to train a few students in the Agartala Weaving and Spinning Centre. Admission fee was fixed at Rs. 5/-. The notice further stated that those who could attain proficiency in work would be given employment in the same Centre at the end of the first year. It appears from another source that the average export of cotton was 22,944 maunds between

1934-35, and 1936-37 and in 1937-38, it was 16,440 maunds.¹⁰ The Table 1 below suggests that there was a downward trend in cotton price during 1929 to 1937. The price registered an increase in 1939 but in that year marketing was reported from only four of the nine divisions and in 1940 from only one division.

Table - 1
Cotton Price During 1925-40 (in rupees)

Division	1925	1929	1930	1931	1932	1933	1935	1937	1939	1940
Agartala	18-0	-	2-0	-	-	2-8	3-0	2-12	7-0	5-0
Kailasahar	10-0	4-8	3-8	5-4	3-1	4-8	5-0	4-8	8-0	-
Sonamura	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Belonia	12-0	6-4	-	-	3-12	-	4-12	-	-	-
Khowai	8-8	2-8	1-8	3-8	1-0	2-0	3-0	2-8	7-0	-
Dharmanagar	7-0	10-0	10-0	-	1-4	-	-	-	-	-
Udaipur	8-0	5-0	5-0	-	-	-	2-8	5-0	-	-
Sabroom	12-0	10-0	5-0	6-0	4-0	4-4	5-0	5-4	-	-
Amarpur	6-0	4-0	2-0	3-0	-	2-8	-	3-0	3-0	-

Source : *Sankalan*, pp.423-43.

Jute was cultivated only in the plains of Tripura mainly as an export items as the state had no jute mills. In an announcement through the state gazette in 1930 the government informed the people about the decline in the export of jute from Bengal. It was stated that jute produced in 1928 was 18500000 maunds, in 1929, 5600000 maunds and in 1930, 74500000 maunds. It was further state that in the current year (1930-31) for use in the mills all over India and for export to foreign countries only 42500000 maunds of jute shall be required. The production was, therefore, much higher than what could be sold. In this context the government asked the jute growers of Tripura to stop sale if the price is less than Rs. 7/- per naund. Even if the price is Rs. 7/, only 50% of the production should be sold and the rest stored. When the price would go up in future, the stock could be profitably released. The announcement further urged upon the jute growers to limit the cultivation in the following year to one-fourth

of the area cultivated in current year so that the excess quantity of the current year could be disposed off at a higher price¹¹. In another notification in 1933 the government informed the people that in 1932 and in 1933 the area cultivated and jute produced in Tripura were 1200 acres and 1400 acres and 2000 bailes and 2300 bailes respectively¹².

Tea plantation started in Tripura in 1919 and in 1930, there were 40 tea gardens in the state.¹³ In 1934 the Maharaja notified that it was necessary to control the extension of tea plantation in the state. He ordered that the Indian Tea Control Act of 1933 generally and particularly chapters 4 and 5 of the said Act relating to extension of tea, and penalties and procedures shall be applicable to Tripura. All cases in this connection were to be adjudicated by the divisional magistrates¹⁴.

The decline in revenue from the agricultural products was also noticed during this period. In 1874-75 land revenue earned the state only 20.75 percent of the total income, but in 1934-35 it earned 40.80 percent. The export duties on cotton and oilseeds, which contributed more than 25 percent of the total revenue in 1874-75, declined in importance and contributed less than 10 percent of the total earning in 1934-35¹⁵. The Table II below clearly suggests a slump in gross revenue in the relevant point of time only.

Table - II
Gross Revenue of the State

year	Revenue (Rupees)
1873-74	1,63,350
1903-04	8,16,930
1913-14	10,36,123
1923-24	15,82,035
1933-34	13,39,810
1943-44	32,60,208

Source : B.P. Misra, **Socioeconomic Adjustment of Tribals**, p.59.

The Government of Tripura adopted a number of measures to economise the expenses of the state. In a circular issued in February 1931 the government

announced the introduction of an economic slip which could be pasted outside the envelope so that the same envelope could be used more than once for postal services within the state. The circular made it clear that it was found necessary to reduce the cost of the envelope. It also claimed that a similar method has been adopted by the British Government of India¹⁶. In 1932 the government for the first time introduced admission and tuition fees in infant sections in the schools¹⁷. As the enrolment fell due to this measure, a teachers conference held in Agartala demanded the abolition of such fees¹⁸. The fees were accordingly abolished by the Government in 1933¹⁹. However, in 1935, the rates of remuneration for the examiners for various examinations were reduced and the system of payment of such remunerations to moderators was discontinued. The notification made it clear that such measures had to be taken as the budget was not enough²⁰. Earlier, in 1933, the T.A.²¹ and D.A. rates of the touring officials were also reduced. Same year, the government had to prepare a revised budget in the middle of the financial year. The circular issued in this connection stated that the revenue collection so far was far less than the income estimated in the original budget and it was difficult to say whether this deficit could be made up in the remaining period. The heads of the concerned departments were, accordingly, asked to keep this financial position of the state in view while proposing expenditure²².

The Tripura State Bank took off in this period. In 1931 the Government started a Banking Department in the Treasury and made provision for fixed deposits for one, two, three and four years' terms at rates of interests of 6, 6.25, 6.5 and 7 percents. The interest was payable to the depositors twice every year²³. On 4 July 1934 the Tripura State Bank was established²⁴. In 1935 the Bank announced the fixed deposits scheme for 6 months, 1 year²⁵ and 2 years at 3%, 4% and 5% interests respectively.

Text and Context

The financial constraints that Tripura experienced could be a direct consequence of the worldwide economic

depression in the relevant period. As Bipan Chandra observed, Britain and India "were organically linked with each other and participated for nearly two centuries in a common, integrated world economic system, though with dissimilar, indeed opposite, consequences."²⁶ In this kind of relationship it was impossible for India to escape the consequences of the depression when the international economy was temporarily disrupted.

Sumit Sarkar has found that the worldwide depression affected India in two main ways, viz. "through a very sharp fall in prices, particularly of agricultural commodities, and by bringing about a major crisis in the entire export-oriented colonial economy"²⁷. The all-India general price index fell from 203 in 1929 to 171 in 1930, 127 in 1931, 126 in 1932, 121 in 1933 and 119 in 1934. The price of raw cotton fell from 133 in 1929 to 70 in 1931, while that of winter rice went down to 45.9 in 1932 and of jute to 43.5 by 1934. The value of Indian exports fell from Rs. 311 crores in 1929-30 to Rs. 132 crores in 1932-33. On the otherhand, the weakening of the ties with Britain resulted in the growth of some indigenous industries, and the peasants' and workers' movements in that period were closely related to the economic situation²⁸.

The decline in the export of cotton in Tripura and the attempts of the Maharaja to control the cultivation of jute and tea have to be viewed in the context of the impact of depression on India as a whole. Tripura's economic tie with Bengal was established in the mediaeval period and, in fact, this was one of the important factors that influenced²⁹ the Tripuri state formation processes in that period. As a result, it was integrated into the colonial capitalist economic order of the British Indian pattern with the rest of India since 18th century. The Tripura report of 1930-31 clearly stated that there had been bumper crops of jute, cotton and other commodities but the prices had dwindled below the cost of production. The establishment of the Bank could be conneted with the scarcity of money. The encouragement to weaving and spinning by the Maharaja might have been influenced by the policy of protection extended to Indian industries by the British Government, although

Tripura could not claim a share of the growth of indigenous industries that took place in many parts of the country. The official inducements to the tribals to adopt plough cultivation either in place of or alongside the age-old jhumming was perhaps the only beneficial lasting effect indirectly generated by the crisis, besides the efforts for the improvement of the roads made by the state.

The economic situation helped the growth of political activities. In January 1930, the members of the Bhatra Sangha (formed in 1927) called a students' strike and observed independence day. The organisations like Milan Sangha and Matri Sangha were formed in 1930. In 1932 a political robbery took place at Agartala in which members of the Anusilan Samiti of Bengal were involved. The developments in those years led to the formation of two important political organisations in the state, in 1938, namely, (i) Tripura Rajya Gana Parishad and (ii) Tripura Rajya Janamangal Samiti. The Parishad was affiliated to the All-India State People's Conference and championed the cause of the peasants by demanding land reforms, while the Samiti was a leftist organisation and demanded 'responsible government' in the state.²⁹

Notes & References

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2. **Rajgi Tripurar Sarkari Bangla**, Directorate of Education, Government of Tripura, Agartala, 1975 (hereafter **Rajgi**)
3. **The Report on the Administration of the Tripura State for 1340 T.E. (1930-31)**
4. **Sankalan**, p. 143; **Tripura State Gazette**, Vol. 30, no.14/1341 TE.
5. **Ibid.**, pp. 262-63 ; Vol. 31, no.17/1342 TE.
6. B.P.Misra, **Socioeconomic Adjustments of Tribals**, PPH, New Delhi, 1976, p.59.
7. **Rajgi**, p. 216; Dc. no. 37, Memo no, 55.
8. Misra, p.56.
9. **Sankalan**, p.225; vol.29, no.15/1343 TE.
10. Misra, p. 64

11. **Sankalan**, p. 225; vol.29,no.15/1340 TE.
12. **ibid**, p. 429; vol, 32, no.12/1343 TE.
13. K.D.Menon (ed), **Tripura State gazetteers**, Agartala, 1975, p.200.
14. **Sankalan**, p.336; vol.33, no. 1/1344 TE
15. Misra, PP. 59-62.
16. **Sankalan**, p. 262; vol. 19, no. 21/1340 TE
17. **ibid**, p. 211; vol.31, no.3/1343 TE
18. **ibid**, p. 215; vol. 32, no. 3/1343 TE
19. **ibid**,
20. **ibid**, p. 267; vol. 34, no. 9/1345 TE.
21. **ibid**, p. 329; vol. 22, no. 22/1343 TE.
22. **ibid**, p. 328 ; vol. 23, no. 22/1343 Te.
23. **ibid**, p. 328; vol. 23, no. 20/1343 TE.
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28. **ibid**, pp. 257-61.
29. N.R.Roychoudhury, **Tripura Through the Ages**, Sterling Publishers, New Delhi, 1983, pp. 72-73.