

THE FORMATION OF THE TRIPURA CONGRESS COMMITTEE AND ITS WORK, 1939-1942

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The All-India National Congress was established by the end of the year 1885. The Tripura Congress Committee was established not before 1939. Is the commonly accepted date 1939 tenable? Why was the Congress movement so late in organizing itself in the Tripura State? To seek answers to these two questions, we have consulted contemporary political leaflets and the Tripura Secretariat Archival sources. We have interviewed old political workers also, to obtain information relating to the formation and early work of the Congress movement in Tripura.

I

To answer the first question, the general policy of the Congress is to be taken into consideration. British Imperialism divided India into British India and the Indian States. The old Roman motto, "Divide et impera" was brought into practice. The States were; in a sense, comparable with pre-nineteenth century German and Italian States, impeding the political unity of Germany and Italy. The Indian States were 563 in number and nearly one quarter of the total Indian population lived in "Indian India". The Native Princes were the strong supporters of the British rule in India. The alien rule of the British in India maintained these feudal units as essential supports for their "Break-waters policy" in Indian politics since 1860.

Till the 1930's, the Indian National Congress maintained a non-interference policy in regard to the Indian States. Popular direct agitation against the Indian rulerships was discouraged by the National Congress in order not to make double enemies. Gandhiji also had his confidence in the patriotism of

the princes.² But in course of time, this non-interference policy of the National Congress proved disastrous for people living in the States. The beginnings of the popular unrest in Tripura gained sympathy of the National Congress leaders, in the 1930's in the wake of Civil Disobedience Movement. Revolutionary propaganda materials appeared and a few revolutionary Sanghas, like Bhratri Sangha, Matri Sangha, and Milan Sangha were organized in Tripura.³ A letter from the Government of India addressed to the residents at Hyderabad and Mysore, was sent to Tripura also, for taking ~~the~~ necessary action against political agitators. The States were requested "to cooperate in ensuring that special activities of the Civil Disobedience Movement such as the boycott of British goods are not allowed to be practised in their states and their states are not used as a basis for agitation in British India".⁴ This proves the existence of popular agitation in Tripura in support of the National Congress movement. The question of the support of the Civil Disobedience Movement in the states became a live issue in the National Congress deliberations. The intervention in the states on the part of the National Congress appeared necessary.

The Congress Policy of intervention in the Native States was inaugurated in the year 1938. In that year, at the Hariपुरa Session of the Indian National Congress, it was resolved that the independent organizations should be started for the purpose of promoting popular movements in the States.⁵ At the Tripuri Session of the Congress in 1939, All-India Congress intervention in popular movements in the States was favoured whenever the interests of India demanded it.⁶ The general policy of the Congress no longer stood in the way of the formation of a Congress Committee in Tripura, from the year 1939.

Some local factors also help to explain the delay in the formation of the Tripura Congress Committee. The political situation of the state was not very much favourable for its formation earlier than 1939. The political consciousness of the Tripura people grew by the impact of the political movements in the neighbouring British Districts of Comilla, Chittagong and Sylhet. The activities of the revolutionaries of Chittagong Armoury Raid inspired the Tripura youths. Political consciousness was, at that time, limited among the middle class youth. A few secret revolutionary Sanghas were organized in Tripura. The arrest of some of the young political activists for their involvement in the revolutionary movement led to popular protest. There was unrest and dissatisfaction among the Hindus, Muslims and various tribal people. This spread of political awareness contributed towards the formation of the Congress Committee in the State.

The leaders of nationalist opinion were not free from differences and vacillation. From our talks with the Congress leaders of the state, it appears that, in the 1930's, they could not decide about the political ideology to be adopted by them. Some of the Congress leaders of later days were inclined, at first, towards Marxism. Sri Sachindralal Singh, the founder of the Bhratri Sangha and the Congress Committee in Tripura had kept contact with M.N. Roy, the Radical Congress leader. He went to Bejura, Sylhet, in a peasant conference in 1930's and hoisted a red flag there.¹⁰ But the materialistic philosophy of Marxism did not find favour with a section of the Tripura revolutionaries. The Marxist denial of existence of God was not acceptable to many of them as they were born and brought up in the traditional Indian cultural background. The nationalists in Tripura were freed from their ideological vacillation, and began to think in terms of the ideology of All-India National Congress, during the late 1930's.

With this background, the Congress-minded people of the state formed the Tripura Rajya Ganaparishad. Its ideas and objects were similar to those of the Indian National Congress. The Ganaparishad was affiliated to the All India State People's Conference, the Ganaparishad got its affiliation to the All-India body. It was not unlikely that the Tripura Rajya Ganaparishad began to work unofficially a year before this date, as some writers have noted.¹² The office of this organisation was situated at Agartala town on the northern side of Mogra Road. The names of Sachindralal Singh, Sukhamay Sengupta, Khirode Sen, Tarit Mohan Dasgupta, Ashu Mukherjee, Nilu Mukherjee, Hariganga Basak, and others were associated with the foundation of this Ganaparishad. In September, 1939, Umeshlal Singh became the President of this of this organization. Its leader,¹³ Sachindralal Singh had been arrested in April 1939.

Various opinions have been noted regarding the exact date of the formation of the Congress Committee in Tripura. Sri Suprakasa Roy,¹⁴ mentions that the Tripura State Congress Committee was established in the beginning of the year 1937. According to Sri Tarit Mohan Dasgupta,¹⁵ it was formed in 1939-40, when Subhash Chandra Bose left the Congress. Sri Sukhamoy Sengupta¹⁶ expressed a similar view. To late Tripura Chandra Sen,¹⁷ the Tripura Congress Committee was established in January 1946. In this respect, we should keep in mind the All India National Congress resolution passed at Haripura in 1938, declaring that in the name of the Congress there could not be in the States any organization, but Congress¹⁸ activities could be performed through organizations bearing other names. The establishment of the Tripura Rajya Ganaparishad fulfilled that purpose. A deputation of Congress-minded people from Tripura saw Mahatma Gandhi, at Malikanda, Dacca, on the occasion of the sixth conference of the Gandhi Seva Sangha (20-27 February 1940). They sought permission of the Congress leaders at Malikanda to

establish a Congress Committee¹⁹ at Tripura. This deputation, failed to obtain the necessary permission, but they were advised by Gandhiji to put up a relentless vigorous fight against the oppressions on the people by the State authorities. So it is not possible to fix the date 1939 or early 1940 as making the inception of the "official" Congress Committee in Tripura. Political awareness among the people of the state was spreading fast, and some sort of 'unofficial' or informal, Congress Committee could have been set up in Tripura in this period. Hence, Sri Taritmohan Dasgupta's assertion that the Tripura Adhoc Congress Committee was formed during 1939-40, seems plausible.²⁰ If Mr. Sachindralal Singh was the first President of this organisation as Mr. Taritmohan Dasgupta maintains, the formation date is to be fixed either before 24.4.1939 or after 24.4.1940, because it is known that Sri Singh was expelled from the Tripura State for this period.²¹ There is a difficulty in accepting the earlier date of 24.4.1939, because the Tripura Rajya Ganaparishad itself was established formally in the later part of the year 1938.²² So the latter date 24.4.1940, seems more probable, in this regard. But the activities of the unofficial Congress Committee in Tripura were not much effective, and the Committee could not draw much attention of the people in this period.

Sri Banikanta Bhattacharjee, from his discussion with the rank and file of the Congress Committee in Tripura, came to the conclusion that there was no Congress Organisation in 1939. But the Tripura Government, in conformity with its treaty obligations, implemented in Tripura the Government of India's orders in August 1942, banning Congress organisations, meetings and processions by Congressmen. The order of 1942 banning Congress movement and organisations in Tripura, according to Bhattacharjee, was an indication of the existence²³ of some sort of Congress movement in the Tripura. There is no denying the

fact that the All India National Congress did not allow direct affiliation to states' organization before 1946, though such organizations adopted the ideals of the National Congress. One should consider, in this respect, the available records and letters that were exchanged between late Umeshlal Singh, Secretary, the Tripura State Congress Committee and the State Government from January 2,²⁴ 1946, to January 21, 1946. From the six letters²⁴ that were exchanged, it appears that a "Congress Committee" was there, though in name only.

II

We may now notice the organization of popular movements in Tripura. A petition of twenty points²⁵ demanding socio-economic-political reforms was submitted to the King of Tripura on 26th September 1939, by the local Congress Committee President, Umeshlal Singh. The important demands included the introduction of responsible government, compulsory primary education, the²⁶ abolition of Taitung, Ghar Chukti, and Ghasuri taxes.

The Committee organized the anti-eviction movement in Ramnagar. Pursuant to the above demands, the Ganaparishad took up the cause of the peasants of Ramnagar. In 1938-39, the Maharaja, Bir Bikram Kishore Manikya, issued an eviction order upon five hundred Muslim peasants of Ramnagar in Agartala. It was said that the Maharaja needed their land for the expansion of his capital. To overcome the strong resistance of the peasants the ruler arranged for a few meetings with the help of the police, Chaukidar, Dafadars and other State functionaries. The Ganaparishad interfered in favour of the Ramnagar peasants and raised the slogan, "land for the tillers, and asserted that no peasant could be evicted from their dwellings at the caprices of the Maharaja". Because of this movement, the Maharaja at last yielded and granted compensation at the rate

of Rs. 90/- per Kani of land to peasants who agreed to be evicted.²⁷

The Harijan Movement in Tripura was promoted by the Ganaparishad. It was the life's mission of Mahatma Gandhi to ameliorate the socio-economic conditions of the Harijans of India. During the Second World War period the economic conditions of the Harijans in Tripura became worse than ever. The prices of rice shot up as high as Rupees fifty per maund.²⁸ A Harijan organization, which was started in 1938-39, under the leadership of Sri Sukhamay Sengupta, gave a strike call against the Agartala Municipality, in 1941. There was a strike for three days, for the ventilation of the following popular demands: war time economic relief, wage increase, leave with full pay to female workers during and after child bearing, permanency in service. The authorities²⁹ acceded to the demands, after three days of strike.

In the Labour movement, the Ganaparishad members took active part along with the Tripura Motor Workers' Association, when the motor workers became unemployed as a result of the monopoly granted to Durjay Kishore Deb Barma, the brother of Maharaja, in motor service over the Agartala-Akhaura Road, for fifteen years. The members of the Association were mostly the owners-cum-drivers of their vehicles numbering 40 to 50. This grant of monopoly business to the Maharaja's brother raised socio-economic tension at the capital. Through meetings and newspapers the Ganaparishad members and other people protested against the injustice meted out to the motor workers, and public sympathy was aroused in their favour. But official repression was intensified, and the motor workers had to withdraw their demands.³⁰ This was a notable experience for the Ganaparishad in organizing labour movement.

A movement for the abolition of Ghasuri Kar was promoted by the Ganaparishad. The peasants of Maharaja's Chakla Rashnabad Zamindary had to pay eight annas for cutting grass and grazing cattle in the border areas as grazing tax. The conditions of the peasants in this area were not enviable.³¹ This Zamindary was already a centre of peasant radicalism because of various Kisan Samitis.³² In 1942-44, the hostilities of the Second World War came very close to the borders of the State. Heavy floods and loss of crops, added to the plight of the people in the State and in the Zamindary.³³ The externed leaders of the Ganaparishad organized the Rashnabad peasants to approach the Maharaja to abolish the feudal 'ghasuri' or grazing tax.³⁴ In the early part of 1941, four thousand peasants under the leadership of Dr. Abdul Rehman of Sonamura, Rudranath Bhattacharjee of Dharmanagar, and Abdul Sobhar of Chaudagram, Comilla, gathered before the Maharaja's palace at Agartala.³⁵ This peaceful representation of peasants, however, failed to achieve any positive gains. Yet, it had its bearing upon the later popular movements in Tripura.

III

In a summing up, we may notice the following points. For ventilating the socio-economic and political grievances of the people of the state, the Ganaparishad in Tripura was formed as a branch of the All India State People's Conference during the later part of the year 1938. The Congress Committee was organized, informally, during 1939-40.³⁶ But it was not able to function as a separate entity in public. Thus the name of the Ganaparishad, and not of the Congress Committee, came to the notice of the Tripura public again and again, in this period. The members of both the above mentioned organisations were, at that time, the Congress-minded people. The Parishad organized a few popular movements.³⁷ But their successful conclusion was not possible, due to the

Gandhian techniques of controlled mass struggle which were adopted by the leaders. They failed to concentrate the fight of the workers, the peasants and even of the most backward sections like hill people for resistance to oppression and attack on the bulwarks of autocracy and rampant feudal exploitation. On the other hand, the Tripura Janamangal Samity and the Jana Siksha Samity made their appearance in 1938 and 1945 respectively.³⁸ These rival organizations which fulfilled the aspirations of the Communists became very popular among the masses including the tribes through numerous³⁹ public meetings and distribution of party leaflets. They influenced the people to raise a war time slogan 'not a pie, not a man'. the policy of army recruitment from the Reang Community during the Second World War became an important cause of the Reang unrest of 1940-42. The groping towards new political ideologies was noticeable after 1946.⁴⁰ The Maharaja reacted sharply to these new developments in Tripura. As an ally of imperialism, he made the arrest or the internment of the political activists of both the old and new ideologies the order of the day. After lifting the ban on political parties in Tripura in December 1945,⁴¹ and freed of some troubles with the successful conclusion⁴² of the Second World War and the Reang unrest, the king liberalised his policy towards the political parties except the Communist Party. The Communist Party launched the Praja Mandal Movement under⁴³ the banner of Tripura State subjects' Association. The mass movement in Tripura under the Communists gave new dimensions to political movements in the State.

Notes & References

1. Dutt, R.P. *India Today*, Calcutta, 1986, p. 438.
2. Dutt, R.P., *Op.cit.*, p. 449.

3. De, R.K., "A Monograph on Terrorist Activities in Tripura (1930-33)." printed in the **Proceedings** of North East India History Association, Shillong, 1985, p.373.
4. Letter, Vigilance Department, The Government of Tripura, Tripura Secretariat Archives, 1932, B52.
5. "Message to the States People", Allahabad, 3 February 1939; in J.N. Correspondence, in N.M.M.L.; Quoted in **Selected Works** of Jawaharlal Nehru, Vol. 9, New Delhi, 1976, p. 412.
6. Presidential Address at the All India States People's Conference, Ludhiana, 15 February 1939; Quoted in **Selected Works** of Jawaharlal Nehru, Vol. 9, p. 419.
7. Menon, K.D. **Tripura District Gazetteers**, Agartala, 1975, p.119. De, R.K., **Terrorist Activities in Tripura 1930-33**, Op.cit., p. 372.
8. Roy, Suprakash, **Bidrohi Bharat**, Calcutta, 1983, p.127.
9. Our Interviews with Sri Sachindralal Singh, Sri Taritmohan Das Gupta and Sri Ramendra Bhattacharjee, Agartala, on 5.10.1985, 10.11.1986, 12.10.1986, respectively.
10. Our interview with Sri Ramendra Bhattacharjee, Agartala, on 26.11.1986. Sri Ramendra Bhattacharjee was among the organisers of this Conference. See, Dutta, Biren, **Amar Samritite Tripurar Communist O Genatantrik Andolaner Patabhumika**, Calcutta, 1982, p. 17.

A change came in this movement in December 1938. In a general meeting held at Agartala by a majority of the members of the Bhratri Sangha, a dominant revolutionary organization of the 1920's, it was resolved unanimously that merely heroic armed action and violence could not dissolve the allegians of the people to the Congress and Gandhiji. In that meeting the Bhratri Sangha organization was declared dissolved. An essay written in Bengali on 5.9.1985, at Dum Dum Jail by Hariganga Basak and published in the Weekly **Samaj Patrika**, 15 August 1956. (in Sri Manimaya Debburma's personal collection, Agartala). Late Hariganga Basak was an activist of mass struggle in Tripura also. He died in a jail in East Pakistan, after the Partition of India.

Sen, Tripurchandra, *Tripura in Transition*, Agartala, 1970, p. 22.

11. A pamphlet of Tripura Rajya Ganaparishad signed by late Umeshlal Singh as its President. The date is mentioned in the pamphlet. At a general meeting, dated Agartala, the 24th February 1939, a twenty-point charter of demands was adopted. This was ratified by another general meeting in July 1939. (Sri Manimaya Debburma's personal Collection, Agartala).
12. Basak, Late Hariganga, "An Essay", Sen, Tripurchandra, *Tripura in Transition*, p. 22.
13. The order of arrest was duly executed at 5 a.m. on 24.4.1939. Bandopadhyaya, Suprasanna, (ed.) *Tripura State Gazette Sankalan*, Agartala, 1971, p. 147.
14. Roy, Suprakash, *Bidrohi Bharat*, p. 127.
15. Dasgupta, Taritmohan, An article on Tripura Congress, in All India Congress Committee, Centenary Volume, North-East India, Guwahati, 1985, p. 60.
16. Our Interview with Mr. Sukhamoy Sengupta, on 25.10.1986, at Agartala.
17. Sen, Tripurchandra, *Tripura in Transition*, p. 23.
18. Dutt, R.P., *India Today*, p. 450.

The Ludhiana Session of the All India States Peoples' Conference was held in February 1939, in which Jawaharlal Nehru was elected as President and Pattabhi Sitaramayya as Vice-President. The Conference welcomed the progress made by the states people in their struggle for "responsible Government".

19. Basak, Hariganga, *An Essay*, Op.cit.
20. This is a statement of the view of the present writer.
21. Bandopadhyaya, Suprasanna, *Tripura State Gazettee Sankalan*, p. 147.

J.M. Sen, the Minister, signed the order on 23.4.1939 A.D.

22. Subhash Chandra Bose left the Congress and established the Forward Bloc in May 1939. Jasobanta Kar, *The New Horizon*, Calcutta, 1978, p.24.

23. Bhattacharjee, Banikanta, **Bharater Swadhinata Andolane Tripura** (Tripura in the Freedom Struggle of India) in the **Gomati**, a Quarterly Journal, October 15, Agartala, 1974, p. 24.
 24. One of such letters addressed to B.K. Sen, Minister Political Department, Tripura State by late Umeshlal Singh, on January 4, 1946, refers to "the order of the special issue of Tripura State Gazette dated the 25th January 1940, banning processions and meeting of the State Congress". In Tripura Secretariat Archives, 1945, No. B52/S9 (Unpublished).
 25. A pamphlet of the Tripura Rajya Ganaparishad, signed by late Umeshlal Singh as President.
 26. 'Taitung' (by which people were compelled to carry luggage of the officials on tour), 'Kaziana' (a communal tax collected from the Muslim subjects upon the marriage of girls), feudal taxes like 'Ghar Chukti' (family tax on hill people), 'Ghasuri' (grazing tax).
 27. Basak, Hariganga, **An Essay**, & Menon, K.D. (Ed.), **Tripura District Gazetteers, Op.cit.**, p. 125.
 28. **Administration Report for Tripura State, 1940-42 A.D.**, Agartala, p. 1.
 29. Basak, Hariganga, **An Essay, Op.cit.**; & Sen, Tripurchandra, **Tripura in Transition**, p. 26. The main props of this organization were Sukhamay Sengupta, Hariganga Basak, Nilu Mukherjee, but intra-leadership emerged through Sreenibash Budhi, Gopal Dhanuk, Gorakh Harijan and others.
- Regarding the number of strike days, the evidence of two organisers differ. Late Hariganga Basak mentioned that the strike call was given for three days, Late Tripurchandra Sen mentioned it as for seven days. The demands were conceded and hence the strike was withdrawn after three days. Ranjit Pal, **Tripurar Shramik Andolan O Ganatantrik Sangramar Itihas, Vol.I**, Agartala, 1984, p. 48.
30. Sen, Tripurchandra, **Tripura in Transition**, pp. 36-37. Pal, Ranjit, **Tripurar Shramik Andolan O Ganatantrik Sangramar Itihas, Vol. I**, p. 56.
 31. The tenants were exploited by the Tripura Mahareja through the ages; they were ill treated by the League Ministry of Bengal

also. The League Ministry supported the autocratic policy of the Tripura State. The peasants were the victims of repression of both the Tripura Government as well as the Bengal Government. Roy, Suprakash, *Mukti Yudhe Bharatiya Krishak*, Calcutta, 1980, p. 119.

32. Khan, Kazi Samsuddin, A Speech, published in Manimay Debburma's *Tripurar Praja Andolan O Kichhu Tathya*. Mr. K.S. Khan was an active Congressman and a member of Bengal Provincial Congress Committee.
33. **Administration Report for the Tripura State, 1940-42**, p.1.
34. Datta, Dwijan & Bandopadhaya Suprasna ed, **Rajgi Tripurar Sarkari Bangla**, Agartala, 1976, p. 418.
35. **Ibid.**
36. **Ibid.**
37. A newspaper, **Prajar Katha**, 1st Issue, Agartala, dated 15th Baisakh, 1349 T.E., corresponding to May 1939 A.D.
38. Chakravorti, Mahadev, "Communist Activities in Tripura (1939-42)", an article published in the **Proceedings of North-East India History Association**, Sixth Session, Shillong, 1985, p. 364.
39. Ghosh, Kamalini, **Tribal Insurrection in Tripura**, Hyderabad, 1984, p. 72.
40. Weekly Statement of Political and other organizations F.No.5-2 B61/S6, Political Department, Confidential No. 508, in Tripura Secretariat Archives (Unpublished);
41. Misra, Baniprasanna, **Socio-Economic Adjustments of Tribals**, New Delhi, 1976, p. 97.
42. Statement of S.K. Bardhana Roy, dated 14.7.1947, No. B61/S6, in Tripura Secretariat Archives.

A leaflet issued by Tripura State Subjects' Association, dated 13.5.56 T.E. corresponding to September 1946 A.D. (Courtesy, Sri Manimaya Debburma's personal collection).