

OMESH SAIGAL



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TRIPURA

Tripura on India's eastern frontier is a fascinating land inhabited by equally fascinating people. The scenic beauty, the fauna and flora, the songs and dances of the happy-go-lucky people, the mingling of the hoary past with the contemporary create, for the outsider, a cameo almost unbelievable in sheer variety and charm.

Tripura is a real amalgam of cultures. It is here that Bodo culture still blooms meaningfully amidst the sophisticated Tagore music. The legendary royal family of Tripura claims a two millennium-old dynasty, while ultra-radical politics holds its sway over the people. In many respects the people of Tripura are still living with the kirats of Mahabharat days; singing and dancing with the Mizos of Jampui Hill one cannot believe that the automobile or the aeroplane could be true.

Yet the face of Tripura is being changed every hour as the proud Tripuris are assiduously restructuring their economy to catch up with the rest of India.

The author has studied, researched, and described Tripura and its people with affection, insight and understanding. As he confessed, Tripura grew on him not like a moss but like a beautiful rose creeper. This book is the labour of his love for Tripura and its people, the first authoritative account of the beautiful eastern state of India.



Omesh Saigal (b. 1941) is a mechanical engineering graduate, who chose civil service as his career, and literature as his hobby. He made his mark by a book of verses, **Bapu**, followed up by articles in Hindi and English journals. His maiden novel is entitled **The Revolt**.

Mr. Saigal was Chief Commissioner of Tripura where he fell in love with the land and its people. This book is the product of his years of painstaking research into the history and polity of the exotic land.

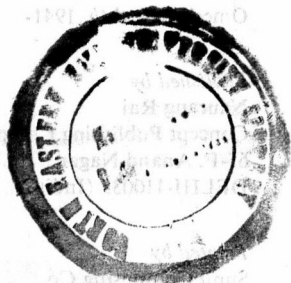
Mr. Saigal is now the President of New Delhi Municipal Committee, and has just completed his second novel.

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TRIPURA

ITS HISTORY AND CULTURE

OMESH SAIGAL



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Introduction

In March 1969, working at the Secretariat of the Delhi Administration, I first learnt of my posting as District Magistrate and Collector of Tripura. I was excited. The idea of getting out of the stifling and restricting atmosphere of the secretariat and the bourgeois-big business culture of Delhi appealed to my youthful mind. And to all young members of my service a district posting is considered 'glamorous'.

My first reaction was to rush to the Secretariat library to get as much information as I could about the land and people whom I would have to serve for the next three or four years. Imagine my dismay when I discovered that not a single book on this state was readily available. Visits to the bookshops proved equally fruitless. The only information I could collect was from the IAC flight schedule ! It was from that day that I was determined to do my little bit to close this information gap.

As my plane glided over Agartala Airport, I witnessed one of the most delightful sights. The whole area was covered by luxuriant, lush green vegetation. The reflection of the sun sparkled like little diamonds from the small ponds and rivulets that dotted the countryside. The little bamboo and mud huts, in their idyllic surroundings, presented the most astonishing beauty that my eyes had beheld for a long time.

I was received by Ajit Bhattacharjee, the Additional District Magistrate, who later proved to be my most trusted and knowledgeable companion when I embarked upon my voyage of discovery of this delightful state and its colourful people.

My very first night, after taking over my new assignment, was a strange one. Loud cries of "Sachin Singher *mundoo chai* !" (we want the severed head of Sachin Singh !) woke me up. Jaladhar, the trusted Jeeves of a generation of Collectors, assured me that this was a normal routine for Agartala and need not disturb me at all. Mobs demanding the 'head' of the

Chief Minister need not be of any concern to the District Magistrate was more than I could comprehend. But then I had not yet been bit by the Tripura bug!

My first few months in the state were the most momentous I had ever spent in my life. On the third day of my arrival at Agartala, I rushed to the Chief Minister's house to find a number of school children, 8 or 9 years old, scuffling with the police to enter the house and *gherao* the Chief Minister. The next day, thirty workers *gheraoed* the Chief Minister in his drawing room, the *gherao* continuing for over 30 hours, and the Chief Minister refusing to be rescued. All this in the background of an incident two years back when an incensed mob dragged him from the Assembly and, but for the presence of mind shown by his personal body guard, would surely have lynched him!

The office of the Sub-Divisional Officer of Khowai was almost continuously under *gherao* for over a month and the position in the other towns was not much better. The pre-monsoon period, when the new *jhum* crop has not yet been sown and the stocks from the previous years crop have been exhausted, is indeed a very difficult one for the tribals. They flock in large number to the government offices for loans and gratuitous relief. This year it was particularly bad. In the month of June alone there were over a dozen *bandhs*, three dozen *gheraos* and over 600 demonstrations and processions. In Agartala, the law and order situation deteriorated so much that curfew had to be imposed for over three days at a stretch.

To top it all there came the floods!

Nobody who has not been to Agartala can understand the psychology of the people in the face of the threat of floods. Agartala is sandwiched between two rivers (seasonal mountain streams, really), the Hawra and the Katakhal. Towards the side of the Airport there is a small stream and on the fourth side is Bangladesh (then East Pakistan). In the event of a heavy downpour (a rainfall of over 50 cm in a single day is not unknown), these rivers get flooded and sometimes the water is over four metres above the level of the town, kept back only by the earthen flood protection *bunds*. Even a small breach anywhere can widen and wash away the *bund* and flood the whole town. There are only a few high points in the town where people can take shelter and there is no way of leaving the

town as in the event of a flood all exits from the town would be blocked.

In June-July 1969 there was unusually heavy rain both in Agartala and in the catchment areas in the Baramura range. It takes about 2 or 3 days for the muddy waters from the range to reach the town. And so it happened that on a bright, sunny morning a huge crowd apprehensively flocked to the river sides to see the swirling water in the rivers. The water level was steadily rising and small breaches were apparent in a number of places in the *bunds*. The gangs of the PWD were engaged in covering them up by cement bags filled with sand and mud. As the water topped the Agartala Jirania road, the PWD tried to join the two ends of the *bunds* by putting sandbags on the road.

A panic-stricken crowd is a dangerous crowd. Allegations of PWD lethargy or inadequacy of relief arrangements kept pouring into the control room, keeping me constantly on the move. I was almost assaulted in one place where the PWD store, crammed with gunny bags, was padlocked, the sub-overseer having retired. It was only when I authorised them to break open the lock that they calmed down.

Fortunately for us, the flood waters started receding before they crossed the high level mark and we all breathed a sigh of relief again.

Within a few months of my joining, the Prime Minister visited Agartala. The only earlier occasion on which the P.M. had visited Tripura was in 1951! This was a great occasion for this remote state, which always felt neglected. This kept us busy for over two weeks.

The first few months were only a precursor : my entire stay in Tripura was eventful. Politically the territory progressed from a Chief Commissioner's province to a Lieutenant Governor's Union Territory and then in 1971 to full-fledged statehood. There were a number of important changes in the revenue and administrative set-up as well. Tripura was one district with 10 sub-divisions and 23 development blocks. In 1970 it was re-organised into 3 districts and the sub-divisions were further subdivided into more than two dozen revenue circles, and over 175 tehsils (Patwari circles).

In 1971 the administration faced its greatest challenge : to care, feed and shelter the one and a half million refugees from

Bangladesh, a figure equal to its population. I was put in charge of this work as the Director-cum-Secretary of the newly created Department of Refugee Relief.

Despite the onerous burden of my duties, how could I still get time to collect material for this book, one would wonder. But, odd as it may seem, it was precisely for this reason that I could gather the material!

Everything that I did brought me in contact with the people, hundreds of them, and took me across the length and breadth of the state. In the absence of much published data (though there was some as I discovered later) this was the only way to compile the material. I undertook some important tours on foot of the inaccessible and interior areas of the state especially Jampui-Sakhan, Raima-Sharma-Gandacherra, Atharamura and many other areas. This brought me in contact with the old and knowledgeable people of their area and gave me a feel of their environment. Much of the information I have collected directly from them. In addition to this, I dipped into the unpublished records lying in private libraries and in the Collector's record room.

For me it was love at first sight with the people of this state. Whether it was my personal orderly, Jaladhar, or my proud driver, Subol, or my resourceful and efficient personal assistant, *Pal babu*, or it was the remarkable local journalist, Dutta Bhowmik, or that store-house of information, Magistrate Gupta, I have never passed a dull moment in the company of any of the persons with whom I came in contact. Everybody there appears to be related to the other and an outsider is immediately admitted into the fold.

Tripura grows on you, not like moss but like a beautiful rose creeper. In many respects one is still living with the *Kirats* of Mahabharat days; singing and dancing with the Mizos of Jampui hills one cannot believe that the automobile and the aeroplane can be true.

Tripura is a real amalgam of cultures. It is here that the Bodo culture still blooms meaningfully amidst the sophisticated songs of Tagore that one hears so often. A large majority of the people are Bengalis, refugees from East Bengal. The tribals cannot be easily classified, for they overlap each other. For the sake of facility, if for no other reason, they have been classified

as the tribes of the Kuki-Chin language group, the Tripuri group, and the other tribes.

History is usually the story of kings and empires, the people getting a secondary position. While the story of the kings is important politically and has been given its due place, the march of the people has not been ignored in this book. A sample of their songs and tales have been included to show the intellectual attainment of these simple people.

The people of Tripura are happy but poor. They live on the most beautiful land, but the land does not yield anything more than a mere subsistence. To clothe their beautiful souls with material garments will be a challenge to the administrators and politicians for many years to come. If this book contributes even a little bit in this direction and in creating a better awareness of their problems and needs, the author will consider his labour to have been richly rewarded.

New Delhi

OMESH SAIGAL

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