

## Tripura : Maharaja and His Subjects

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The demographic history of Tripura is far too difficult to trace from the past when a reliable account of dynastical rule is not even found chronologically. High hills, deep valleys, ever-green forests are abode of the hill people happy, unconcerned about the morrow, moving about freely like gently breeze bound in the dark hills, unfettered by dictates of modern world, which care a little to know about them. These people live in the deep recesses of nature far away from the turbulent currents of human history.

Such hill-tribes of Tripura had only a distant relation with their Maharaja, who lived in a village-like town near civilised locality, had ambitions to conquer the neighbouring countries, wished to live in pomp and luxury, as far as possible. His life began to wear a new look during the middle ages when he came in contact with the Mughals. Big trades of elephants and forest products developed with other parts of the country ; a longing to identify themselves with the main stream of Indian culture was also cherished by the Maharaja.

The people in the hills still lived in their forest abode under the natural poverty, meeting their bare necessities of life from the forest resources and a form of agriculture peculiar to them called jooming. Even in intolerable poverty, deprived of, and unacquainted with, the amenities of civilised life, they were said to be most loyal subjects of the Maharaja in the chronicles of Tripura, perhaps so, except when they were subject to cruel exactions and unequal favour distributed among different sects and sections. No measure of relief was extended to them during the days of draught, famine and pestilence.

These conditions of life sometimes moved them to disregard and discontent, sometimes even to armed revolt. These were also fomented by the family strifes over the throne, contesting claimants sometimes tried to occupy it with the help of some discontented and disfavoured tribe or tribes. Thus both economic and political reasons played their roles in raising these weak, modest,

unconcerned, simple creatures of nature to disloyalty, to revolt and struggle against the Maharajas of the past.

The earliest account of a revolt, so far available, is that of Samser Gazi, found in the Gazinama composed by Shaikh Manohar. It was an event of the sixth decade of the 18th century. Samser Gazi, son of a *pir*, working under a Zamindar, Nasir Muhammed, as a revenue clerk in Dakshinsik paragona, was moved with poverty of the subjects exploited by the Zamindars. He organised a band of soldiers by training up the poor pressants and became the Zamindar of Dakshinsik by killing Nasir Mahammed, his master, a Zamindar of oppressive nature. Maharaj Indra Manikya sent a force under a minister to suppress him.<sup>1</sup> But the royal force was defeated and the minister was forced to recognise Samser as Zamindar of Dakshinsik.<sup>2</sup> Gradually he became the ruler of Chakla-Roshnabad with help of Hazi Hussain, a representative of Nawab.

After the death of Vijoy Manikya, the ruler of Tripura, Krishnamoni, the brother of Indra Manikya, was trying to occupy the throne ; Samser defeated him and captured Udaipur.

Samser was a good administrator and an efficient ruler, benevolent to the poor, as he came from the same class ; the revenue of Roshanabad increased during the tenure of Samser Gazi.<sup>3</sup> He built several forts, fixed the of prices of essential commodities and introduced a standared weight in the market.<sup>4</sup> He did many other things for the welfare of the people.

Still, he was not recognised by the people, for which he had to place a puppet Raja, Lakshan Manikya, on the throne during the first part of his rule. Besides, the event was mostly related to the subjects of the plains and Samser secured the help and cooperation of the Kukis only during his campaigns at Udaipur against Krishnamoni. The royalists belonging to Zamindar and middle class brought his downfall by appealing to the Muslim rulers of Bengal alleging him to be an oppressive ruler and a dracoit. Nevertheless, there were royalists among the poor also. The role of the tribes, other than Kukis was not clear, but a folk-song composed at that time expressed deep feeling of the people for the king.

“Raja Koi gala Re Tomar Sonar Udaipur Kare dia gala”.

“Oh Raja, where have you fled ? To whom you have bestowed the golden capital of Udaipur ?” It also states in the subsequent lines that the birds in the forest, the kites in the sky and the fish-eaters under the water are crying for you, the people are eagerly waiting for your return with tears in their eyes.

The economic root of the revolt lies in the stringent poverty

of the people and cruel oppression of Zamindars and the political root in the lawlessness due to absence of an efficient ruler and in the intrigues of the lower cadre of Muslim rulers against the Tripura Raj. But to understand the mixed feeling of the ordinary subjects towards the Maharaja, the real nature of administration of the rulers and that of the revolting leader, and the actual economic condition of the people belonging to different tribes and those of the plains should be excavated.

Looking towards the condition of the nineteenth century, a superficial report of the special commissioner in 1808, regarding the political set-up of that period, which reveals the relation between the Maharaja and his subjects, is found quoted by Alexander Mackenzie in his *History of the Relations of the Government with the Hill Tribes of the North East Frontier of Bengal*, which states, "The person composing the Government or possessing the chief management of the country (says the narrative) are the Hindoos. Among the Kookie vassals, however, as well as among the Hindoo inhabitants, a distinction of rank prevails. The chief men among the Kookies are called Roys, Ghalims, Chuppias, and Gaboors ; those of the Hindoos are called Senaputty and Burroahs. The persons holding the rank now mentioned are called sirdars or petty chiefs, and they, in all classes, are the immediate authority and sole connection between the Government and the inferior vassals. The power or influence of these chiefs over the vassals within their respective jurisdiction is of the strongest kind".<sup>5</sup>

This statement shows the distant relation between the Maharaja and his vassals who looked at him with awe and respect, and this caused the spread of a divine hallow round the Maharaja.

This divine hallow could not always attract the whole-hearted loyalty from all sections of the tribes nor prevent the causes of discontent among them. There are glimpses of historical records of a few events which confirm this contention.

Such an event is recorded in Alexander Mackenzie's "Memorandum on the North-East Frontier of Bengal" quoted in W. W. Hunter's '*A Statistical Account of Bengal*' Vol. VI, (pp. 468-69). In brief, it is a story of rampaging the plains of Tipperah at Chhagalnaiya by four hundred Kookies early in January, 1860. They burnt and plundered fifteen villages, butchered one hundred and eightyfive British subjects, and carried off about one hundred captives. In analysing the causes of the event, Mackenzie rejected the supposition of a connivance on the part of certain near relations of the Maharaja against him intended to involve him in

trouble with the English Government, and states, "But it was afterwards ascertained with considerable certainty, the main instigators of the invasion were three or four thakurs who had lived sometime among the Kukis, and who took advantage of the ill-feeling caused by an attack made by the Raja's subjects, to excite a rising that unfortunately became directed to British territory. Driven by the Raja from his dominions, these men had formed alliances among the various Kuki tribes of the interior; and year by year villages, supposed to be friendly to the Raja, had been attacked and plundered. Some of the Raja's own subjects, moreover, exasperated by his constant exactions, were believed to have invited the Kukis to ravage his territories".

In this account, the fact that the "Raja's own subjects exasperated by his constant exactions" may be noted and a careful enquiry of the mode of exactions may enlighten us of the real condition of the people, their sufferings and miseries, their toils and tears under the oppressive rule of the Maharaja. In this respect it may also be mentioned that the Magistrate of Tipperah in his account of the administration of the Maharaja reported in 1863 that rents were collected at the point of bayonet.<sup>7</sup> This fact reveals the nature and method of exactions followed by the officials in Tripura.

An outcome of this condition was the Jamatia Revolt in 1863,<sup>8</sup> the direct causes of which lay in the harsh attitude of a tax-collector, Oakhirai Hazari and the political turmoil after the death of Maharaj Ishanbhadra. The officer tried to exact from them some undue privileges specially forced coolie labour, to which they vehemently protested and refused to cooperate in collection of rents. The matter was reported; the Maharaja sent a force which was defeated and ultimately the revolt was suppressed with unprecedented cruelty, by the Kuki soldiers. After this event, the District Magistrate complained that the disturbances in the Hills had now occurred in one form or another for several years past, and no proper remedy has as yet been applied to this constantly recurring evil. It means that there are many such occurrences of uprisings and bitter expressions of feelings on the part of the hill-subjects against the authority of the state during the nineteenth century, the accounts of which had not yet been traced.

There are examples of such occurrences in the twentieth century also, when the people were politically more conscious. The Riang Revolt of 1942-43 led by Ratanmoni is a significant example of such events where the famine-stricken people belonging to the

Riang community, protesting against the torture and oppression of the chowdhuries, the land lords and sirdars of the community, rose in revolt against the Maharaja and established a parallel Government in the hills. However, their movements were ruthlessly suppressed by the Royal Force. Some articles and a book have been written on this event, but an overall study in complete details of this significant occurrence is still awaiting.

During the first stage of Independence, a movement of the hill people under some popular leaders imbued with leftist ideas presents the crowning event of uprising on the part of the tribal people protesting against the misrule and injustice of the Chief Commissioner's administration. The movement though suppressed for the time being through ruthless measures adopted by the Government, it had an immense bearing on the political consciousness of the people which was reflected in the politics of the State today, even after more than thirty years of the happening.

To realise the financial condition of the hill people in the past a probe into the system of land tenure in the hills may be relevant. Hunter observes, "In the hills there are no tenures at all, the system of agriculture (i. e. Juming) adopted by the hill tribes preventing them from cultivating same plot of land for two years in succession. . . . No rent is paid for land used for Juming ; but in lieu of rent a tax is levied upon each family, the hill-people being assessed according to their tribes. The element of compulsory or customary account enters largely into the conditions which determine the amount of this tax, and no parallel can be drawn between it and rent. Thus the Kukis are sometimes excused from all money payments, on the understanding that they must render military service when required ; and the pure Tipperahs pay at a lower rate than that fixed for some of the other classes, as they have to render personal service at the palace, and also to carry out any orders they may receive from the Raja by letter.

"It is, however, doubtful whether they gain anything by the exemption, as considerable sums of money are extorted from them by the bearers of these royal messages. The assessment for the family tax (*ghar chukti kar*) is made by tribes, the headmen settling with the Raja during the Durga Puja festival. Each tribe is assessed at so much per family, and each family pays the same, no matter what number of members it may contain. The collection of tax gives every opportunity for exactions even to the lowest official concerned. Not only does the actual collector exact his douceur, and have himself and his followers conveyed free of

expense from village to village, but the whole party require to be fed, and a percentage is levied by the peons (benindias). The fees paid under various pretences are said to amount frequently to 50 per cent on the tax as originally settled; nor does the Raja profit by these extra cesses, except in so far that he can thereby afford to underpay his subordinates".

The rates of assessment of different tribes in 1874-75 were Tipperah and Jamatias - Rs. 3 annas 8 per family; Noatias and Riangs Rs. 10 per family; Hallams Rs. 2 to annas 10 or even less per family; Kukis - Rs. 5 annas 4 per family.<sup>9</sup>

Above facts present a picture of injustice and inequality in the system of taxation prevalent in the hills. Same rate of taxes over the family irrespective of the number of members, practice of corruption followed by the party of collectors and inequality of the rates among the different tribes bear the seed of discontent in the heart of the hill people. Though normally it might be accepted, but in time of hardship it might have caused unrest and disloyalty.

What benefit was accorded to them in exchange of the exactions? There was no relief for poverty, famine and pestilence, no security against the attack of ferocious tribes or the troubles at the international border as the Maharaja had no sufficient troops to render security of life and property to the people living in the interior hills. The question of imparting education is not to be thought of when there were only two schools in the whole state - one at the capital, Agartala and the other at the sub-divisional town of Kailashahar during seventies of the last century.<sup>10</sup>

### References

1. N. R. Roy Choudhury, *Tripura through the Ages*, Bureau of Research & publication on Tripura, Agartala 1977, p. 52.
2. Kailash Chandra Sinha, *Rajmala*, p. 122.
3. *Chittagong Records*, Vol. I, p. 11.
4. Kailash Chandra Sinha, op. cit, pp. 125-26.
5. Alexander Mackenzie, *History of the Relations of the Government with the Hill Tribes of North East Frontier of Bengal*, p. 275 (Published in 1884).
6. W. W. Hunter, *A Statistical Account of Bengal*, pp. 468-69.
7. Mackenzie, Op. cit, p. 286.
8. N. R. Roy Choudhuri, Op. cit., pp. 76-79.
9. W. W. Hunter, Op. cit., pp. 505, 508-10.
10. Ibid, p. 518.