

CHAPTER – VII

PROBLEMS AND ISSUES

The problems and issues that are noticeable in Tripura during the period under review may be grouped under three major heads and these are: Ethnic, Tribal-nontribal Schism, and problems of insurgency. Let us now discuss these problems one by one.

a) Ethnic problem: The ethnic factors play not an unimportant role in Tripura politics. The economic and social safeguards to the tribals-the original inhabitants of Tripura- have been a major issue in Tripura Legislature and hence laws after laws were enacted in the Assembly during the period under discussion with those ends in view.

It is known to us all that previously most of the inhabitants of Tripura were tribals. According to the census of 1941, the total population of this hill state was 5,13010 majority of whom were tribals belonging to 19 tribes.¹ The influx of refugees to Tripura in 1942 and 1946 from the then East Bengal totally upset the demographic character of the state and the tribals were reduced to minority. The immigration that ensued then and continued in a faster pace subsequently brought in its wake manifold problems for the tribals. Grant of permanent land rights to the refugees even deep into the interior and ever expanding reserve forests led to the shrinkage of jhumland and it added to the misery of the tribals more than 50% of whom had to subsist on shifting cultivation. The other portion of the Tribals, who were land-owners and learnt plough cultivation were also losing grip on their land due to the tricky moves of the nontribal moneylenders.²

The change of the demographic pattern would become clear from the fact that tribal population in the state went down according to 1951,1961,1971,and 1981 Census Reports to 36.85%,31.53%,28.95% and 28.44% respectively.³ The lurking fear-psychosis of the tribal people is easily understandable in such a situation where they are reduced to a minority position. Therefore, immediately after Independence, the forces demanding a definite area reserved for the tribal people came to the fore. In a note to the Dhebar Commission , the Chief Commissioner of Tripura pointed out in 1961 that a specified area should be declared as reserved for the tribal people under Schedule V of the constitution.⁴ The Dhebar Commission recommended the setting up of Tribal Development Blocks in tribal areas and if that measure failed to bring any material change and improvement , then steps under Schedule V of the Constitution might be given a trial.⁵ Again , the Administrative Reforms Commission also recommended Tribal Councils in predominantly tribal areas of Manipur and Tripura. ⁶ Thus from the official side, there was, no doubt , some recommendations that some degree of autonomy should be extended to the Tribal people , but no step worth the name was taken by the government upto 1977(a part).

As a result, problems of the tribals and poorer sections among them in particular, went on rising. In order to mitigate the problems, the demand for an Autonomous Tribal District Council was raised vigorously and it took the shape of a strong movement in which large majority of both tribals and non-tribals took part .The then government responded to the demand and it took the initiative in placing and passing the TTAADC Bill in March, 1979 under the 7th Schedule of the Constitution. It is also to be mentioned, in this context that it was possible to introduce the TTAADC because of the long heritage of democratic struggles by both the tribals and the non-tribals. It does not,

however, mean that there was no opposition to the TTAADC from any section of the non-tribals. There was and it created a lot of tension at the time of the introduction of the TTAADC. But history shows that fear and tensions were inherent in a situation where a relatively backward tribal people found them not only outnumbered but overwhelmed in many ways by comparatively advanced non-tribal sections. No one can underestimate the fear –psychosis of the tribal people. ⁷ The answer to the above fear is believed by many to be the constitution of the TTAADC and formulation and implementation of continuous development programmes in the ADC area.

The tribals of Tripura have got in the ADC their long cherished aspiration for self-government. The purpose of the council is to protect the social, economic and cultural interest of the tribal people of Tripura. The introduction of the Sixth Schedule provides for greater autonomy of the Tribals. Now the Autonomous Council is expected to play a more effective role in improving the living condition of both the tribals and the non-tribals living in its area. It can look, in particular, into the development of tribal lands, language and culture and can protect the tribal right to land. ⁸

ADC is a bond of unity between the tribals and the non-tribals in Tripura as it was the product of a united struggle of both the communities. This bond of unity may be further strengthened by removing the material disparities that separate the advanced and backward sections of society. The realities of the present situation underline the fact that a comprehensive well being of the tribal people cannot be achieved by fomenting separatist and communal feeling, or whipping up linguistic and social hatred against any fraternal community. It can only be achieved by cementing the bond of unity and harmony between the tribal and non-tribal communities. The Tripura Tribal Areas Autonomous District Council opens up a vista in that direction. ⁹

Mention may be made, at this point, of a unique feature of the ADC in Tripura in comparison with the District Councils of North East India. In other Tribal inhabited states of the region, there exists state-basis autonomous council. But in Tripura a single Tribal Autonomous Council is envisaged for all the nineteen distinct tribes. It is thus a biggest one of its kind and a new experiment in the country toward solution of the ethnic problem.

b) Tribal-non-tribal Schism: Tribal-nontribal Schism also posed and still poses a major problem in the way of unity and integrity of Tripura and of the country at large. It is a fact that the tribals of Tripura once constituted the majority of the population and they were outnumbered subsequently by the immigrant. At the same breath, it is to be mentioned that refugees from erstwhile East Pakistan, who came to Tripura after 1947, took shelter in the state under a historic compulsion and that most of them came as destitutes. Only a small fraction of the immigrants who started and continued money lending and various other deceitful trades in the tribal areas of Tripura went on grabbing the lands of the tribals in alarming proportions. What worsened the situation was the step of the then government to give settlement to many immigrants even in interior tribal majority areas. This led to make the land problems of the tribals very acute.¹⁰ At the sight of the gravity of the problem, the commissioner for scheduled tribes in his report of 1956-57 recommended that alienation of Tribals' Land inside and outside the 'Tribal Reserve' (as constituted by the last king of Tripura in 1931) be stopped immediately. ¹¹ But no effective step was taken by the government in that direction.

Side by side with the land problem, the continuous influx of refugees into Tripura and the contact of the tribal people with them brought for the latter a new challenge—a challenge of keeping up their racial entity. There was a high rate of illiteracy among the Tribals. Moreover, they dwelled in pre-

feudal mode of production and abysmal economic backwardness. In this situation, the general tribals became a prey to an uneven competition of life. Naturally, they suffered from lurking fear if they would be able to live up to their ethnic identity. They also feared that they would be swamped and engulfed by the non-tribals, their distinctive identity would be at stake and endangered too would be their language, culture and every sphere of their way of life. The situation warranted for a constitutional safety-valve for the tribals. It was specially needed again to win the confidence of the peace loving tribal people for the unity and integrity of the country in the situation when a section of misguided tribals were politicized in a dangerous way and they indulged in giving the slogan of 'separate tribal state' or 'Independent Tribal State'. 'The Tribal Union', (formed in 1955), for instance raised the slogans'.

'Bengali refugees—go to Delhi'; 'Seal the border; Drive out the Bengalees'; 'Make Tripura a Tribal State'.

Similarly, in November 1967, wall posters in the Kanchanpur area of North Tripura appeared in the name of 'Sengkrak' which directed the Bengalees to vacate Tripura.¹²

Political waywardness of this kind is a menace to the unity and integrity of the country. In the circumstances, the question arose as to how to reconcile the apparently irreconcilable demand of such politically misguided groups and set an example of beneficent working of the State-administration, but the response of the then Government (1972-1977[a part]) was anything but positive. The next Government took the initiative to constitute the TTAADC in 1979 and formed the same under the seventh schedule of the constitution. But in June, 1980 a dangerous fratricidal riot took place in which extremist elements of both the communities took part. The government took immediate

steps and peace and tranquillity were brought back in the state within a short time.

But the Schism that went down for that time continued to raise its head from time to time. The State governments left no stone unturned to bring back the misguided youths to the mainstream, and to counteract the terrorist and extremist activities. But the state government alone cannot put down this menace. The Union government also should come forward to assist the state governments in their continuous efforts to face the challenge successfully.

c) Problems of insurgency: Discussion on the root and growth of insurgency has been made in course of our deliberations on Tribal –nontribal Schism. But much more remains to be discussed in this regard. These are: 1) Failure of the Congress Government to solve the problem of continuous influx of refugees, and 2) Its failure to provide economic safeguards to the tribals and bring about their rapid development.

We have already pointed out how the tribal compact area of Tripura ultimately lost its balance after the Partition of the Country, particularly with the mounting refugee problem. In 1955 Pandit Govida Ballav Pant, the-then Home Minister of India had to admit that the pressure of population in Taripura had already reached a 'saturation point' and it would not be advisable to allow any further absorption of additional people from the other side of the border, as the changed demographic pattern created a heavy pressure on land and economy.¹³

For all that, the inflow of the displaced persons to Tripura continued unabated as a result of which the population of Tripura rose from 5,13,010 in 1941 to about 15,56,342 in 1971 and from that point to 20,153,058 in 1981¹⁴

From a government statement of 1963-1964 it was learnt that the government placed a request to the Government of India for settling the refugees (who had migrated to the State after 1963) to Dandakaranya to which the Union Government responded favourably. If the influx of refugees continued, the Government of India would be moved for taking more families for settling them elsewhere, it added.¹⁵ But out of the refugee families who were sent to different states of India for rehabilitation, 5000 families were compelled to come back and continued to stay in Tripura.¹⁶

The influx of refugees continued in a faster pace subsequently. Opposition in the assembly expressed concern that if the present policy of indecision regarding the continuous inflow of the refugees persisted, it would jeopardize the economic foundation of the territory. It, therefore, raised the demand for taking a concrete decision on the issue, but the government paid no heed to the demand.¹⁷ In view of the acuteness of the problem, the Opposition raised the demand that the government should move different state governments for their cooperation for rehabilitation of immigrants, but the demand was rejected.¹⁸ The discussion made so far proves it fairly well that the then government utterly failed to solve the serious problem arising out of continuous influx of the displaced persons from erstwhile East Pakistan which, in its turn, brought manifold problems to the State and played as one of the major causes for the rise of insurgency by some misguided tribal youths.

2) Closely related with the above problem is the failure of the then government to provide economic safeguards to the Tribals. The Scheduled Tribe population of Tripura had been very backward both socially and economically during the period under discussion and therefore adequate protective measures were urgently called for. The Govt. claimed that it had

done a lot for improving the economic condition of the tribals, but the Opposition in the Assembly contradicted the claim with supporting data and contended that the tribal economy, on the other hand, reached the point of collapse due to the indifference of the government. It, therefore, pressurized the government to be up and doing for the economic uplift of the tribals, but not much attention was paid to its demand.¹⁹

The opposition also raised its voice time and again against the exploitation of the tribals by the moneylenders and eviction of the tribals from their land. It also demanded that steps must be taken to prevent eviction and migration of tribals and alienation of their lands and also that provisions of the 5th Schedule of the constitution should be applied to the tribal majority areas in order to safeguard the landed and other interests of the tribes of Tripura; but the government did not pay any heed to its demand²⁰

The Opposition also stood firmly against the alienation of tribal land to non-tribals inside the "Tribal Reserve" as constituted by the last king of Tripura in 1931 and it strongly demanded that steps must be taken for protection of the conditions of the 'Reserve',. Far from doing that, the government repealed the 'Reserve' order itself through an ordinance in 1974. When it was presented in the Assembly in the form of a bill, the Opposition moved several amendments on the Bill, but the amendments were voted down and the bill was accepted. After that the opposition pressurized the government to reconstitute the Reserve, and the government constituted some mouza based reserves, but as no institution was there in those reserves to take steps for socio-economic development of the tribals, those did not come of any real benefit to them.²¹

The failure of the Government in the abovementioned two spheres gave ample scope to insurgency to raise its head in the state and carry on anti-people activities. Let us now give a short account of the extremist groups and their activities in the state following the terrible ethnic riot of 1980 that made the problem of insurgency acute. In and around 1980, an extremist group of the Tripura Upajati Juba Samity (T.U.J.S.) formed an organization named Tripura National Volunteers (TNV). The organization declared that its aim was to transform Tripura into an 'Independent State' and it would be free from the influence of the Bengalees. With that end in view, the organization started and continued armed attacks in the state and in the hill areas in particular from its secret camps in Chittagong of Bangladesh. Many innocent Bengali and Tribal people were killed by the terrorists of TNV. The Government invited Bijoy Hrankhwal , the Chairman of TNV, many a time for discussion with an eye to bring back peace and order in the State, but every time he refused to accept the invitation branding the Government as 'Govt. of the refugees' which the TNV did not recognize.²²

The Government gave proper stress on security measures for combatting the terrorist activities of the TNV. At the same time , the Left Front took a comprehensive political initiative in order to arouse public opinion against terrorism and to keep the Tribal –Non-tribal amity unaffected. Within a few days after the Left Front returned to power following the Election of 1983, a rift within the TNV took place and a group under the leadership of Binanda Jamatia got itself separated and set up a new organization named All Tripura People's Liberation Organization (ATPLC). Of course, within a short time, members of this organization surrendered on the basis of a secret understanding with the government and without any formal memorandum of understanding. After the stage of surrender was over, ATPLO declared its own

dissolution and merged itself with Ganamukti Parishad, the Tribal wing of the CPI (M). Binanda Jamatia was nominated as the Vice-President of the GMP, but unfortunately he was murdered shortly after that by unknown assassins. On the other side, a faction of TUJS also defected opposing its alliance with Congress and formed a new political party named Tripura Hill People's Party. From the very beginning, the party selected CPI (M) and the Left Front as its political ally and this alliance remained unbroken upto the Assembly election of 1993²³

The Assembly election of 1988 was held in an abnormal situation. As the date of the election was coming near the extremist activities of the TNV also was on the increase. The target of attack was the Bengalees and its aim was to drag them to the position of anti-left front by creating in their mind a sense of lack of security. Within 2/3 days before the election TNV murderers organized mass-murders in which about 100 Bengalees lost their lives. Moreover, declaration of the whole state as 'Disturbed Area' only 72 hours before the Election and alleged rigging in some counting centres allegedly led to the victory of the Cong-TNV alliance to come to power. Within 6 months of its coming to power, the Union Govt., the State Govt. and the representatives of the TNV signed a tripartite pact by dint of which the TNV extremists surrendered to the Govt. with their arms and ammunition. After that pact, Tripura was also relieved from extremist violence for some time. But just after two years, a new extremist organization named All Tripura Tribal Force (ATTF) was born. On the other side, a faction of the TNV went back to jungle life again and announced the formation of a new organization named National Liberation Front of Tripura (NLFT).²⁴

After coming back to power after the Assembly election of 1993, the Left Front Government took the initiative to bring back the extremists to

normal life. A memorandum was signed between the Govt. and the representatives of the ATTF in August of that year and on the basis of that member of a faction of the ATTF completed their process of surrender to the Government. But another faction named All Tripura Tiger Force did not agree to surrender and its members have been carrying on their extremist attacks and violent activities. On the other side, NLFT also was bifurcated and another extremist group named Tripura Resurrection Army (TRA) was formed. This group became the centre of terror in the hilly areas of south Tripura for some time, but all the members of this group surrendered in February, 1997 and announced its own dissolution. Within 5 years of the 3rd L.F. Govt. more than five thousand extremists surrendered to it and came back to normal life, but normalcy did not return in the state. In view of the fact that ferocity and terrorist activities went on increasing day by day, the Govt. had to declare a part of the state as 'Disturbed Area' and to hand over the task of maintaining its law and order on the Army personnel. At the same time, two notorious extremist organization--- ATTF and NLFT were declared banned.²⁵

In the election of 1998, the issue of extremist violence and terrorism was a major issue to both the Opposition Parties and the Left Front. The Opposition Parties, in their election campaigns, held the Govt. responsible for its alleged failure to solve the extremist problem and to provide security of life and property to the people of the state. On the other hand, it was alleged on behalf of the Left Front that the Opposition Parties inclusive of Congress, TUJS and TNV went on giving indulgence to the extremists in their narrow political interest and also in order to destabilize the Front Government.²⁶ In the Election, the Left Front came back to power with an absolute majority, and the fourth Left Front Govt., from the very beginning, took the initiative to subdue the extremist violence. Side by side, it started and continued its

political initiative to persuade and bring back the misguided tribal youths from the clutches of the extremists to the mainstream. The State Government and the police have been earnestly engaged in combating the extremist attacks concentrated in remote Tribal areas. For all that, the innocent people, and the Left Front and GMP cadres continue to be targeted and attacked. There are 51 camps of the NLFT and the ATTF in the bordering areas in Bangladesh from where murderous forays are made into the state. Tripura has 856 Kms. Of international border with Bangladesh. Yet, the Government at Centre has withdrawn the Indian army from the state, the Govt. alleges. The Indian Army continues to conduct operations in Assam against the ULFA. Yet, in Tripura, which is facing armed attacks from three sides of the border, the Centre refuses to deploy the army. The Government has stated time and again, this is not a problem which can be tackled only by the state police; it is the responsibility of the Centre to man the borders. Yet, the BSF has only eight battalions when at least 18 battalions are required to man the entire borders.

²⁷ In view of the above, the Left Front has taken all out initiative in mobilizing all democratic forces to demand that the Centre send adequate security forces to Tripura and deploy the Indian Army here, which, if materialized, will go a long way in successfully combating extremist activities as also in solving the problems of insurgency to a large extent.

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