

CHAPTER IV

POLITICAL PROCESS AND PARTY CONFIGURATIONS

The Tripura State Legislative Assembly was constituted six times during 1972-1998 through the Fifth, Sixth, Seventh, Eighth, Ninth and Tenth general Elections. The First, Second, Third and Fourth general Elections were held to elect the members of the Electoral College in 1952, members of the Tripura Territorial Council in 1957, and 1962 (who became members of the Legislative Assembly under the Union Territories Act of 1963) and members of the Legislative Assembly in 1967. The first state Legislative Assembly was constituted in 1972 as Tripura became a full-fledged state in that year.

The Delimitation of Assembly Constituencies of the first full-fledged Tripura Legislature was done as per section 4 of the North – Eastern Areas (Regulation) Act 1971 which provided that the total number of seats in the Legislative Assembly of Tripura would be 60 out of which 6 seats would be reserved for the Scheduled Casts and 19 seats for the Scheduled Tribes.

In the Assembly Election of 1972 six political parties besides a number of independent candidates took part. The political parties were Indian National Congress (INC), the Communist Party of India (Marxist) [CPI(M)], the Communist Party of India (CPI), Bharatiya Jana Sangh, the All India Forward Block (FB) and the Tripura Upajati Juba Samiti (TUJS). Among the Independent candidates two were supported by the CPI (M). Out of the political parties that contested the election, the TUJS was a regional party formed by a section of Tripura Tribals in 1967 and contested the election for the first time, but it could not make any dent on electoral politics in Tripura till then.

The major issues that came to the fore in the election campaign in the state in 1972 were: unemployment, the grievances of the government school teachers and employees, and of the government employees, socioeconomic development of the Tribal people, introduction of Bengali as the official language etc.

In the election campaign, the main points of thrust of the INC were (a) solution of unemployment problem (b) supply of electricity to every village (c) making arrangement of supply of pure drinking water to every village (d) rehabilitation of all Jhumia (shifting cultivation) families (e) imparting education to the tribal students through Tribal language at the primary stage and (f) providing a government job to each family in which there was no government service holder. The Party also laid emphasis on 'Garibi Hatao' – a slogan of the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi at the national level.¹

On the other hand, the main opposition Party, the CPI(M) fought the election with its election manifesto which emphasized on (a) jobs for the unemployed and provision for unemployed allowance to the unemployed (b) revocation of all Punitive measures against the government school teachers and govt. employees for raising voices for redress of their grievances, (c) pay and allowances at an increased rate and upgradation of service conditions for the government servants, (d) creating pressure for extension of railway line from Dharmanagar to Sabroom, (e) introduction of Bengali as the official language in the state (f) ensuring all admissible benefits to the members of Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe Communities, (g) land reforms and writing off all arrears of land tax etc. ²

From the above it is seen that there were some common agenda in the election manifesto of both the INC and the CPI (M). Thus, unemployment

problem and the problem of the state government employees constituted a common agenda.

During that period, the INC had more influence on the Bengali voters than the tribal voters in Tripura. On the other hand, the CPI (M) had more influence on the Tribal voters than the Bengali voters. The Congress was at the helm of affairs of the state during the period when it was under the administration of Territorial council and later on, under Union Territory. At that time, a large number of displaced persons from erstwhile East Pakistan were rendered rehabilitation in Tripura. The Congress, being in power in the state, seized the opportunity of the situation and spread its influence over the refugees.

The CPI (M) had a traditional stronghold in the hill areas of the state. Moreover, the Party was also in the movement for refugees' rehabilitation in the state. As a result, it could also spread some influence over a portion of refugees.

The Election to constitute the first state Legislative Assembly of Tripura as a full –fledged state was held in time. In the Election INC again came to power securing 41 seats out of 60. The CPI (M) won 18 seats along with 2 Independent supported by the Party. And the CPI won only 1 seat.³ The war of Independence for Bangladesh, in which India played a very important role, had influenced the voters to vote for the Congress. In spite of that, Congress got 45.60% of the valid votes and CPI (M) got 41.3% votes (inclusive of votes polled by Independent candidates with its support). Thus, by getting only 4.57 percent more votes, congress got 23 more seats than the CPI (M)-led front in 1972.⁴

A nine member Council of Ministers headed by Sukhamoy Sengupta took over the charge of administration of the state in March, 1972 and in the next month, 2 more ministers were inducted. But within 2 years of Congress rule factional in fighting started and aggravated. The opposition in the Assembly took advantage of this split in the ruling party and utilized the situation in such a manner that its candidate for the biennial election of the Rajya Sabha of 1974 won the race by defeating the congress candidate. Being enthused, the opposition stepped up its move which reached the point of toppling the Sengupta Ministry from power, and in order to combat it, the Government caused the arrest of most of the opposition members including their leader on the eve of the Budget Session of 1975-76 and detained them in jail. During the emergency rule Trade Union right and individual's right were throttled in the state. Even MLAs of the opposition and a section of the ruling party were arrested and sent to the jail outside the state. ⁵ Attacks came down on the government employees also to suppress their legitimate demands.

After the national emergency was withdrawn, major portion of Congress MLAs of Tripura defected from the party and joined the CFD (Centre for Democracy as founded at all India Level by Jagjivan Ram) and they formed a coalition government with the CPI (M) with Prafulla Das as the Chief Minister and Nripen Chakraborty as the Finance Minister. But after 4 months, most of the CFD MLAs defected again and joined the Janata Party, and another coalition govt. between Janata Party and CPI (M) was formed with Radhika Ranjan Gupta as the Chief Minister and Nripen Chakraborty as the Finance Minister. But this govt. also fell after 4 months as the Janata Ministers went on opposing all the Pro-people proposals of their communist counter

parts. As a result, the first state Legislative Assembly of Tripura was dissolved and this paved the way for holding elections to the second state Legislature.

The Assembly elections of 1977 and after

The Assembly election held on the 31st day of December, 1977 marked a new chapter in the history of this hilly state. The 2nd state Legislative Assembly was constituted through this election. Out of 60 seats, this time 17 seats were reserved for Scheduled Tribes and 7 seats were reserved for Scheduled Castes.

A lot of major issues involving people's life and problems came to the fore in this election. The issue of constitution of an Autonomous District Council within the Tribal-dominated areas under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution was a very important issue as raised by the Left Front. Demand for distribution of 10-12 essentials through Fair Price Shops was also a popular issue of the Front in the election. Further, the Front promised that, if voted to power, it would write off land tax up to 7.5 Kanis (3 acres). It also promised to de-reserve 25 percent of reserved forest for enabling the landless poor to earn their bread and for construction of their houses.

The Front also gave commitment to set up a pay commission for improvement of the salaries and allowances of the employees and teachers of the state government. The minorities, especially the Muslims were assured that steps would be taken for development of their cultural and religious traditions and education. Cases of misuse of power during the period of emergency was also a major issue in the elections. Restoration of democracy in the state was an ardent issue among people of all walks of life during those days and this was evident later on. Another important major issue was holding elections to Gaon Panchayats through secret ballots.⁶

The INC that lost power shortly after the withdrawal of the emergency could not present any concrete prospects before the people as the party was in disarray during that time. In the elections the Left Front won 56 out of 60 seats of which the CPI (M) alone bagged 53 seats including one independent supported by it; RSP got 2, FBI 1 seat while TUJS secured 4 seats. INC, CFD and Janata Party lost all the seats they contested. ⁷

After the result of the elections was declared, the first Left Front Government was formed in the state under the leadership of CPI (M), Shri Nripen Chakraborty became the Chief Minister of the First Left Front Government, other constituents of the Ministry were RSP and Forward Block.

From the very beginning of its assumption of power, the question of ethnic harmony became a major issue to the Left Front Government. The Front and especially its major constituent the CPI (M) (in accordance with its election manifesto) decided to form a district council in the tribal majority area of the state and declared that restoration of illegally alienated tribal land would be taken up soon. But 'Amra Bengali' a Bengali chauvinist party called for Tripura Bundh and organised mass meetings to oppose the formation of district council.

By the middle of 1979 communal tension in Tripura became very high. The 'expulsion of foreigners' movement in Assam further inflamed the tension in Tripura. On 15th March, 1980, the TUJS in its 12th general meeting held at Taidu (of South Tripura) adopted resolution for expulsion of "foreigners" (all persons who came to Tripura after 15th October 1949) from Tripura. That meeting of Taidu further officially adopted two courses of action---- (a) deputation and demonstration in front of all block offices simultaneously on 21.05.1980 and (b) the boycott of all markets in the state by the Tribal people

during the 1st week of June, 1980. This Bazaar boycott programme created more tension. Mischief mongers and rumormongers took advantage and it came to a flash point on 4th and 5th in June, 1980 to escalate genocide. Numerous villages were laid waste. Thousands of people were rendered homeless and properties destroyed. Hundreds of people of both the communities were murdered. ; Tripura government took prompt actions, and declared pacification programmes with a view to resettle the misguided extremists to which some of them responded.

The Autonomous District Council for the Tribal areas comprising an area of 7, 132, 59 sq. km. came into being on 18th January, 1982 under Schedule III of the Constitution, in terms of Tripura Tribal Areas Autonomous District Council Act, 1979 (It is worthwhile to mention, in this contexts that it was introduced in the form of a bill before the Assembly and was unanimously passed on March 23, 1979 and again on July 20, 1979; and then, received the assent of the President of India). This was the fruit of a long united democratic struggle of both the tribals and non-tribals of Tripura. The TTAADC introduced, for the first time, tribal self-government into Tripura, allowing and elected 28 member council an opportunity to direct tribal life in a compact area comprising 164 revenue villages and 47 tehsils to protect tribal right to land, guarantee employment and to ensure the right against exploitation by village money lenders. ⁸

Although an autonomous District Council in terms of the seventh Schedule was introduced into Tripura, it did not satisfy the aspirations of the tribals as they were for an Autonomous Council under Schedule VI. The Left Front Government in Tripura also tried its utmost to have it for the tribals. The Tripura Assembly also adopted unanimous resolutions on two occasions calling upon the Central Government to introduce the sixth Schedule of the

constitution into the tribal areas of Tripura, but to no effect within the life-time of the second state Assembly.

Assembly elections of 1983

The Assembly election of 1983 in Tripura was held on 5th January, 1983. At that time the Left Front was in office. The main political parties in this election were the ruling Left Front constituted by the CPI (M), CPI, RSP and Forward Block on the one hand and INC and TUJS on the other. Moreover, Amra Bangali candidates and some individual members were there.

As we have already noticed, during the last five years the question of ethnic harmony became a major issue in Tripura, as the people of the state had already experienced the bitter consequences of unfortunate fratricidal riot between a section of tribals and non-tribals. The Left Front, especially its major constituent – the CPI (M) had consistently strived for maintaining amity between the Tribals and the non-tribals. In no other state such issue is so important as it is in Tripura, because the tribals, who were once majority in the state have turned into minority. This was due to a historic compulsion which led a large number of Bengali people to migrate to Tripura and settle here leaving their hearth and home in erstwhile East Pakistan. Hence, the question of ethnic harmony has always been a basic issue in all elections in the state. The Left Front, therefore, promised, as it had done before, steps for development of backward tribal people of all the communities. It also promised steps for development of the language and culture of the tribals, and placed the demand to the union government for amendment of the constitution to delegate more power to the Autonomous District Council under the sixth Schedule. Another issue of the Front was supply of 14 essential items to the people through LAMPS and PACs.⁹

On the part of the opponent, INC gave assurances to the people on the basis of the revised 20 point Economic Programme as propagated by the All India party under the leadership of Prime Minister Smt. Indira Gandhi. ¹⁰

In the Election, the Left Front won the majority of seats to run the state government for the consecutive second term. The Front got 39 seats in total of which CPI (M) captured 37 seats and RSP won 2 seats. The other constituents of the Front--- CPI and FB could not win any seat in this election. In the Opposition camp INC won 14 seats including 2 independents and the TUJS got 6 seats. The Amra Bangali won 1 seat. ¹¹

It is evident from the results of the Election that the INC and TUJS had done better in this election compared to their performance in the Assembly election held in 1977. The ethnic problem and issue was a major factor other than the commissions and omissions of the first left front government. But Pro-people programme of the Left Front Government, at the same time, enabled the CPI (M) to make inroads into the hitherto untouched section of the toiling masses. Again, anti-establishment feelings also played a role in the election. It was evident from the increase of seats of the congress party in the election.

Assembly election of 1988

The election of the Tripura Assembly which was held in February, 1988 to constitute the Fourth State Legislature was held in an unprecedented situation. One month before the election there was a stream of violence organized by the TNV (Tripura National Volunteers), a tribal extremist group that seceded from TUJS under the leadership of Bijoy Hrankhwal). They killed more than one hundred innocent non-tribal people before 2/3 days of the election. The Union Government declared the state as disturbed area 72 hours

before the election and deployed armed forces in the state ignoring the objection of the state government.

In their election campaign CPI (M) and its Front partners mainly highlighted the successes of their previous rule of two terms from 1977 to 1987. They also raised issues like more power for the states, deprivation by the centre etc. Moreover, the Front laid stress on issues like abrogation of Article 356 of the constitution of India, franchise from the age of 18 years, transfer of education to the state list, supply of fourteen essential items to the people at the subsidized rates through Fair Price Shops throughout the country, and problems of extremism aided by the foreign powers to be met, etc.¹²

The Opposition Congress and the TUJS intensified their campaign discrediting the Left Front Government for the extremist movement leading to killings of men and women in the state. This campaign was sharpened against the Left Front and its major constituent the CPI (M).¹³ This campaign influenced sizeable number of voters mainly in the Bengali dominated areas who relied on the promise of peace given by the Opposition.

As a result, the INC bagged 24 seats and its electoral ally TUJS secured 7 seats in the election. The CPI (M) got 26 seats and another partner of the Front Forward Block got 2 seats.¹⁴ Election to one constituency namely Fatikroy constituency remained postponed due to the death of the CPI (M) candidate. In the by-election which was held later on the INC captured this seat which was traditionally a CPI (M) seat.¹⁵ In the Assembly election, the Left Front got 49.26% and congress and TUJS together got 47.48% votes. It is worthy of note in this context that congress won one seat (Matabari seat) by 8

votes and TUJS won 1 seat (Golaghati seat) by 9 votes. Allegation of rigging for 3 seats in the counting centre was raised by the Left Front.

This election of the state Assembly put an end to the one-decade long Left Front rule in Tripura. For the first time the INC and the TUJS together formed a coalition government in the state under the leadership of Sudhir Ranjan Majumdar.

Immediately after coming to power the coalition government dismantled all the elected self-govt. institutions of the state like panchayats and the Agartala Municipality and it did not take step to hold elections of those bodies as long as it was in power. In the Parliamentary elections of 1989 and 1991 to the Tripura (west) Parliamentary seat, shameful rigging was allegedly resorted to by the ruling alliance in order to ensure the victory of congress candidate, Santosh Mohan Deb by such a big margin that was simply unimaginable. It is pertinent to mention ,in this context ,that out of the previous 8 parliamentary elections from 1952 to 1984 in Tripura , Congress won this seat 2 times only and by very narrow margin , CPI won two times, CPI(M) won 3 times and CFD won 1 time and every time by very large margin. In the election to reconstitute the TTAADC in 1990 also, allegation of shameful rigging and terror tactics were raised vigorously by the opposition, and the congress. TUJS alliance captured the ADC, whereas in the previous two elections in 1982 and 1985 the Left Front conducted fair and peaceful polls and its candidates won by big margins. All these attacks on democracy led the left parties and the CPI (M) in particular to raise vigorously the slogan of restoration of democracy from their meetings. The resentment was embroiling in the state police force also towards the end of the regime as the state police Battalion was dissolved and all the personnel of the force were dismissed to put down their movement. This step acted against the alliance

that ruled the state from 1988 -1993(a part). TUJS also lost its base in a remarkable size as a result of going hand in hand with the INC. The shameful incident of mass rape of Tribal women in Ujan Maidan, an interior tribal hamlet under Khowai Sub-division rocked the state. The case was judged by the Supreme Court of India and verdict was in favour of the victims.

Election of 1983 and the Major Issues focused by the Parties

In the Assembly elections held in 1993, the Left Front and mainly its major component, was on the offensive while the INC –TUJS alliance was in a retreating position after five year rule.

The Left Front took up the issue of restoration of democracy in the state and safeguarding the tribal and other minorities. It also highlighted the issues of development of O.B.C. people and the people of Scheduled Caste Communities. Further, it assured the unemployed to provide them jobs. The main thrust was given to restore democratic rights of all sections of people. ¹⁶

On the other side, the INC-TUJS alliance reiterated their promises for upliftment of the condition of the poor. The alliance urged for votes highlighting their five –year rule. It propagated that there was no starvation death and riot during the last five years. The INC also gave promises of maintaining peace and harmony in the state and it held the previous Left Front government responsible for the problems of the people citing its failures in different spheres. ¹⁷

The elections for constituting the Fifth State Legislative Assembly was held on 3rd April, 1993 under the President's rule. Before these elections, the INC & TUJS alliance had to quit office as their tenure was lapsed. In this election, the INC & TUJS alliance could not return to power. The Left Front

already on the offensive came back to power securing 47 seats out of which the CPI (M) alone bagged 44 seats and F.B. and R.S.P. got 1 and 2 seats respectively. The INC got 10 seats and its ally TUJS secured 1 seat only. ¹⁸

After coming back to power, the first major step taken by the Left Front government was to take the initiative to bring back the extremists back to normal life. On 23rd August of that year, an agreement was signed between the State Government and the ATTF (All Tripura Tribal Force) representatives and on the basis of that, the ATTF members started to surrender in groups from November of the year and the process was completed within a short period of time. But another group of the ATTF named Tiger Force did not agree to surrender and its members have been continuing their terrorist activities till now. On the other side, the NLFT (National Liberation Front of Tripura) also was divided into two factions as a result of internal contradiction and consequently another extremist organization named TRA (Tripura Resurrection Army) was born, and for some time, it became very fearsome in the hilly areas of small Tripura, but in February, 1997 all the members of the organization surrendered to the government and that marked the dissolution of the organization. Within 1997, more than five thousand tribal extremists surrendered and came back to normal life. For all that, no lasting solution to the extremist problem was possible and normal condition did not come back in the state. In view of the fact that the extremist activities went on unabated, the Left Front government had to declare a portion of the hilly area of the state as "Disturbed Area" and to hand over the responsibility of law and order of that area on the Armed forces. Moreover, two heinous extremist organizations ATTF and NLFT were declared banned.

Election of 1998

On the eve of the Assembly election of 1998, the most fiery issue in Tripura politics was the extremist problem. The opposition parties held the Left Front government responsible for its alleged failure to solve the extremist problem and to protect the life and property of the people of the state and of interior areas in particular. The Left Front, on the other hand, raised the allegation that congress, TUJS and TNV and other opposition parties had been going on instigating the extremist organizations and groups in their narrow political interest and for destabilizing the left Front government.

In the Assembly election of 1993, Janata (B) party and Tripura Hill People's party were in the electoral alliance with the Left Front. But after the Front assumed power after the polls, the relation between the CPI (M), the largest partner of the Front and the abovementioned two parties began to deteriorate. Meantime, the HILL people's Party dissolved its separate entity and merged itself with the 'Indigenous People's Front of Tripura', an anti-left tribal organization. However, the Left Front brought out the lists of candidates for 59 seats keeping 1 seat (won by Janata (B) in the election of 1993) vacant and of the 2 Lok Sabha seats (as the parliamentary election also was to take place at that time). Two eminent candidates of the CPI (M) were dropped from the list of candidates for the Assembly Election that time. One was Nripen Chakraborty, the Chief Minister of the first two Left Front Governments of Tripura, who was expelled from the party in 1995, and the other was Dasarath Deb, the Chief Minister of the third Left Front government, who voluntarily withdrew himself from the electoral battle on ill health ground.²⁰

In the Congress-TUJS alliance, the new entrant was TNV (Tripura National Volunteers). After a good deal of bargaining, the seats were distributed among the partners of the 'Triple Alliance' in the manner as Congress-45, TUJS-10, TNV-5; and Congress to post candidates to both the seats of the Lok Sabha. But ultimately, TNV dissociated itself from the Alliance ultimately, and its chairman Bijoy Hrankhwal contested the election from Kulai (ST) constituency as an independent candidate.

In the election, the Left Front got 41 seats out of which CPI (M) won 38 and CPI and RSP won 1 and 2 seats respectively. Congress-TUJS alliance won 17 seats out of which congress got 13 seats and TUJS got 4. 2 seats were won by Independent candidates ---one by Bijoy Hrankhwal and the other by Kajal Das, a congress dissident.²¹ The Fourth Left Front government was formed after the result of the election was declared with Sri Manik Sarkar as the Chief Minister and 16 other ministers.

As per the version of the Fourth Left Front Government ever since its assumption of power, it has been taking continuous steps to upgrade the standard of living of the state populace alongside those living below poverty line. Such steps continued in the spheres of housing, agriculture and animal resources development, drinking water supply, rural development including road construction, electrification, irrigation, self-employment schemes and rehabilitation of the landless during the last four years and a half, and solid success were attained in all these fields, it added. It, further, mentioned specially of the 25point package of tribal development with its own commitment to earmark 50 percent of the total plan allocation for development of the tribal areas which were in fact made hardest by violent extremist atrocities delaying such development. It pointed out in this context that it conveyed its special information to the Central Government regarding

51 extremist sanctuaries in Bangladesh territory with an appeal to bust the sanctuaries, but to no effect, it regretted. Tripura has 856 Kms of international border with Bangladesh. But the B.S.F has only 8 battalions when at least 18 battalions are required to man the entire border, it added. ²²

The Assembly Election of 2003 is only a few months away and hence election campaigns are already on. The Congress Party is going ahead with its electoral alliance with the Indigenous Nationalist Party of Tripura (INPT). This is a tie up fraught with dangerous consequences for both the people of Tripura and national unity, alleges the CPI (M). The speech made by INPT President Bijoy Hrangkhwal at Geneva advocating self –determination for the tribal people and an independent state of Tripura has also been highlighted in hundreds of mass meetings organized by the CPI(M) . The Congress national leadership has been asked how it can justify such an ‘opportunist’ and ‘harmful’ alliance with forces who advocate separatism and promote terrorist activities. The answer has been given through the joint rally organized by the congress and the INPT at Agartala on September 8. At this rally, the Congress leadership in Tripura and Mani Shankar Aiyer, the AICC in charge for the state have sought to explain away the written speech delivered by Hrankhwal; at Geneva ‘justifying the terrorist activities of the NLFT and the ATTF and alliance of Congress with the INPT. Aiyer also resorted to the stereotyped anti-Marxist attacks of leveling the CPI (M) as Pro-china and anti-national’, the Party added. ²³

In the address before the biggest ever rally at Agartala on 14.09.2002, Chief Minister Manik Sarker and other speakers gave ‘a fitting and effective reply’ to this ‘display of harmful opportunism’. Sri Sarkar, in his Speech, bombasted the Congress for teaming up with ‘ the political mask of extremists’ instead of pressing for the return of all the army units withdrawn

by the Centre from Tripura and for adequate BSF personnel to combat trans-border terrorism. Refreshing the people's memory of the 1988 'usurpation' of the State power by the Congress led coalition making 'surreptitious' use of Bijoy Hrankhwal –led TNVextremists and the 5 year 'semi-fascist conrrupt' regime that followed, Sri Sarkar expressed confidence that the politically conscious people of the state have thrown the gauntlet to the blatantly opportunist congress-INPT combine going all out to stage a repeat of 1988 .²⁴ The election campaigns of both the alliances are, thus, continuing in full swing, and these will continue till the date of election will be and announced by the State Election Commission.

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