

## **Tripura- Light at the end of the Tunnel!**

Tripura's travails and tragedies stem from the demographic transformation which rendered the Tripuri tribe with an unbroken line of 183 successions into a minority by the first decade of India's independence. When the Rulers of Tripura were encouraging the Bengalis -both Hindu and Muslim - to settle in their state, as well as their estate of Chakla Roshananbad granted to them by Nawab of Bengal in 1720, they could have never imagined their indigenous Kokbork ethos would be on the verge of extinction. When the Tripura royalty was hosting Gurudev Rabindranath Thakur and promoting Bengali art and culture, no one could have imagined the Partition of the country, and its consequences especially for Tripura ; for its extensive Zamindari, which was also the main source of revenue, was assigned to East Pakistan on account of its Muslim majority. While the loss of revenue and territory was a challenge for the new state ( which, like Manipur became a Chief Commissioner's province in 1949 ) , the exodus of Bengali Hindus from East Pakistan changed the fragile demographic balance of the hill state . Just to place some facts in perspective, the tribal population was 64% in 1875, 52% in 1931, but by 1951 it was only 37%. It had dipped to 27% in 2001, but there has been an increase of the tribal population to 31.8 percent in the 2011 census, which is indeed an encouraging sign – certainly there is no further in-flow of population into the state.

The movement of Hindu Bengalis started well before Partition as Tripura was considered to be a safe haven. After the first unprecedented Rajpura (Dhaka ) riots of 1941, Tripura offered free and planned rehabilitation at Arundhutinagar , near Agartala. Hindus also sought shelter in the state after the Noakhali riots in 1946. Another exodus from East Pakistan followed the post partition riots in 1950, 1952 and 1956 when seventy, eighty and fifty thousand refugees stepped in to the state . Although the formal registration of refugees stopped in 1958, there were waves of 'in- migration' before the wars of 1965 and 1971. Till the grant of statehood, and the deployment of BSF in mid-seventies, it was India's most porous border of a thousand kilometers. But 1971 was not the end- of the story. Fleeing persecution on account of race and religion, there was an exodus of Chakmas from the Chittagong Hill tracts (CHT).

Needless to say, the Bengalis who moved into Tripura were politically conscious, keen to assert their citizenship and compared to the tribes people, involved in the mainstream political parties : the Congress and the Communists both of whom tried to woo them by offering concessions /raising demands in their favour, including the use of *Khas* land in tribal areas , which was the last straw on the camel's back. Bir Bikram Tripur Sangha (1947) Pahari Union (1951) and the Tribal Union (1955) resisted rehabilitation efforts , but to the credit of the Congress and Communists , it must be said that they did not give an ethnic colour to the issue . But the mode of agriculture , as well as the world view of settled agriculturists and shifting cultivators (Jhumias) was so different that over time the tribal found that land was no longer in abundance for his way of life and livelihood. The 1960, Land Revenue and Land Reforms Act did prevent further alienation, but a lot of damage had already been done.

By 1967, the Tripura Upjati Juba Samiti was formed for by this time, tribal youth had also been educated and Christianized by the missionaries, and they demanded Kokbork in the Roman script as the language for education and affairs of the state. TUJS also received help from the MNF, and both organizations had set up training camps in CHT with cross border support .

Meanwhile, in a bid to finding a long term solution to the tribal issue, the Tripura Assembly unanimously passed the Tripura Tribal Areas Autonomous District Council Bill in 1979 which was incorporated into the Sixth Schedule in 1984 through the 49<sup>th</sup> Constitutional Amendment. This was a sign of great maturity and sagacity as there were only 17 tribal members in the 60 member Assembly which transferred over 68 % of the area of the state to the Council , which now has its own administrative headquarters at Khumulwng , about 26 km from Agartala.

The end to Tripura's travails are in sight , for the isolation which began with the disruption of road and rail links from Agartala to Kolkata ,increasing the distance from 550 km to 1,645 km will end with the restoration of 12.3 km Akhaura rail line .This along with the bridge over the Feni River near Sabroom will connect the port city of Chittagong to directly to Agartala. The first commercial cargo ship also sailed from Kolkata to Chittagong on July 15,

earlier this year, from where goods will be transhipped by road to Agartala – again a first after the disruptions caused in 1965.

*If all this happens, generations may ask: what are a few decades in the life of a state?*