Tripura — The People

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At the height of its glory, the Tripura raj kissed the sacred waters of the Brahmaputra and the Padma and challenged the might of the Mohammedan conquerors. But due to the dissipation of its effete ruling class and the challenge posed by modern weaponry, the proud Tripuris were at last subdued by the Mughals in the early 18th century and forced to cede the greater part of their plains territories and pay tribute for the retention of the rest.

Thus in 1765, when Tripura came under British rule, it had been reduced to a small state of less than 10,000 square kilometres and a population of less than 50,000. Most of the country lay wasted by years of warfare and internecine conflict and the people writhed in agony after each Kuki raid left their homes and fields in shambles. To add to their woes, cholera and small-pox continued to take their annual toll keeping the people precariously perched on the razor's edge of life and death and struggling to eke out a miserable existence.

The hill people, left largely undisturbed over the years due to the inaccessibility of their territory and the unremunerative nature of the undertaking, continued to sweat out a subsistence level living for themselves. There was enough paddy, chilies, vegetables and cotton to meet their meagre needs and leave a surplus to be bartered for salt and other essential manufactured goods from the plains on the periodical bazar days. The ruling clan, which could get an adequate income (over Rs. 300,000 in 1765 when Tripura came under the hegemony of the British) from its plain territories, did not bother the hill people with monetary demands, satisfying themselves with occasional call-ups for their army of a specified number of tribals.

The elements, however, did not spare these people from their ire and they continued to be plagued with small-pox, cholera and malaria. But the Mongolian traits of self-reliance and courage together with “a great optimism and cheerfulness of temper, combined with a bon-homie and a camaraderie that are the result of a happy-go-lucky freedom”, which they had brought with them, stood them in good stead. All misfortunes were submerged in their sense of colour and rhythm and all their woes were swept away by the cool winds that blew through their villages on the hilltops.

Writing in 1869, Lewin, the then Deputy Commissioner of Chittagong Hill Tracts, had shown that a jhumia family could comfortably meet their needs from its jhum and have enough surplus left over for festival and puja expenses, sickness, ornaments and clothes. He estimated that a man and his wife could jhum 9 kanies (3.6 acres) of land every year. The man had to put in 176 days labour and his wife 146 days, leaving the wife enough time for household chores and him for cutting firewood and collecting other forest produce for sale. They produced Rs. 72 worth of paddy and cotton and Rs. 4 worth of vegetables. The man could make an additional thirty rupees by wood-cutting, bamboo or boat-cutting, making a total income of Rs. 106. Of this about Rs. 41 were spent on rice, fish, oil and salt, Rs. 10 on betel and tobacco, Rs. 12 on cloth, Rs. 14 on rituals and festivals, Rs. 7 on sickness, Rs. 15 on ornaments and Rs. 7 on seeds and implements for the jhum.

Therefore, the tribal, though virtually on subsistence level, cannot be said to be worse off than his counterpart in the plains. The condition of the tribal in neighbouring Tripura was not much different. By the turn of the century there was no significant gap in the living condition of the tribals in the hills and the settled cultivator in the plains.

When the rulers of Tripura were deprived of their plains territories, they were at the same time robbed of their only source of income. They had therefore, to increasingly rely on their hill territories to provide the revenues to meet not only their princely requirements but also the heavy demands the English rulers made of them. (At one stage in the latter part of the 19th century the nazur was fixed at a whole year's revenue in the case of indirect succession and half that amount in case of direct succession. In A.D. 1785 the English collected a revenue of over Rs. 1,39,000). The hill people came under increasing pressure to contribute to the State exchequer. This pressure eased to some extent when some plains territories were ceded to the raja, but by then a
new danger signal appeared on the horizon which, if materialised, threatened to wipe out their existence completely.

The heavy and crushing burden of taxation imposed by the English trading company and their successors and the ruthlessness with which they realised it led to a steady stream of immigration from British India to Tripura of the maharaja’s former subjects.

Not that all the immigrants were from the plains only. As long back as in 1884-86 immigration of over 4000 Chakmas was reported from the Chittagong Hill Tracts to the Udaipur division. The number of tribals immigrating every year exceeded the number of those emigrating.

That the immigration remained confined to the non-tribal population of the plains is illustrated clearly by the fact that the family tax in the hills went up only marginally in all these years. It stood at Rs. 39,009 in 1899-90 and forty years later in 1940-41 only Rs. 42,712 were collected under this head. In the year 1945-46 the figure seems to have gone up to Rs. 68,544 probably due to better collection.

The Maharaja appears to have made some effort initially to alleviate the economic position of the hill people and to save them from famine and hunger. The report on the Administration of the Tripura State (A.D. 1899-1900) mentions that “to bring the hill people to settled mode of life — without which all efforts to improve their condition seem futile — has been the care of the Administration for a considerable time”. It adds that “for this purpose the first necessity is that they should give up jhuming and adopt plough cultivation”. The Report optimistically notes that “there is a growing inclination at least among the more intelligent of them to introduce this desirable change and some have already adopted the better mode of agriculture with very hopeful results”.

Forests having proved to be great money-spinners now got due attention from the rulers of the state. The forest staff was strengthened to check revenue evasions and illegal fellings. The income from permits increased from Rs. 54,409 in the year 1915-16, when the system was extended to the whole state, to Rs. 1,86,622 in 1945-46. To manage the forests scientifically and prepare them for future use, it was necessary to reserve certain areas for this purpose. The first forest regulation protecting certain species of three was passed in 1887 and by 1946 total of 2637 sq. kilometres had been constituted into a forest reserve and jhuming was made a penal offence there.

These measures of the government, though they boosted the revenue of the state, proved disastrous for the tribal whose fast depleting jhum areas were further restricted. And this came at a time when the fast increasing immigration rate was pushing up the population at about 3 per cent a year. The introduction of the permit system came as a further blow to the already hard-pressed tribals. For ages they used to supplement their income by selling firewood and other minor forest produce in the plains. Now, when the need for such supplementary income was more acutely felt, their rights in this regard were curtailed.

There were protests from the tribals against these measures of the authorities. There was rioting and violence in 1908 when the forest regulation as regards export of forest produce was extended to Sonamura. The number of persons charged with forest offences rose from year to year. From about 90 cases in the twenties, the number went up to about 200 in the thirties and forties. Hundreds of persons were jailed for these violations over the years. The regulation which was most defied was the one relating to permits.

The elements too were not kind to the unfortunate hill people of Tripura. The twentieth century began under good auspices for agricultural crops. The rain set in well in time and there were no storms or hails. The rainfall was sufficient and well distributed. The price of rice was Rs. 3.75 to Rs. 7.25 per quintal and the agriculturalists found a fair market for their surplus crop.

The condition of the people improved somewhat in the next few years. The price of rice came down and the export of cotton and oil seeds, sown mainly in the hills, had improved. In the year 1910-11, the toll tax on the export of these two commodities was Rs. 2,01,840, the best ever till then. But the war struck a heavy blow, especially to the hill people. There was barely any market for jute and cotton, and the prices of imported commodities rose. To add to this, the rain (230 cm) was unseasonable throughout : while the aus crop suffered due to heavy rains, the jhum and aman suffered because of lack of it. The price of rice shot up to Rs. 8.75 to Rs. 20 per quintal.
In 1923-24 Birendra Kishore Manikya expired and he was succeeded by Bir Bikram Manikya (1923-1946). The condition of the people improved considerably initially under his reign and he even had a *durbar* with the hill chiefs at Kailashahar in 1925 and visited some interior areas. The export of cotton picked up and 85,321 maunds were exported in 1925-26. The price of cotton also showed an upward trend. It stood at Rs. 15 - Rs. 60 per maund in 1925-26 as compared to Rs. 12 and Rs. 25 per maund in 1924-25. This also benefited the hill people, who, however, suffered a setback in 1926-27 when the rain was unsatisfactory in the hills and the 'rat pest' appeared, as it had been doing with unflinching regularity every twenty years, following the curious phenomena of the flowering of bamboos. The agricultural population of the plains, however, fared well, owing to the high prices that generally prevailed, “sowing the suspicion that the plains people were making capital out of the misery of their kinsmen in the hills.”

The government went in for the first time on a fairly large scale in giving loans and relief to the famine-stricken people. About Rs. 50,000 was spent on relief. The movement of foodgrains from the affected areas was controlled, the first time recourse to such a measure had been taken. The next year, the state spent over Rs. 14 lakhs on the Maharaja and his family and in 1930-31 when a bumper jute and cotton crop had no demand due to the worldwide depression, “the agricultural population found itself in a more or less hopeless position”, Bir Bikram went on a world tour! The next year, when heavy floods had worsened the already hopeless position, Bir Bikram married for the second time with great pomp and show!

The condition of the plains people changed for the better, but the condition of the hill people continued to deteriorate. Cholera, small-pox and malaria broke out almost every year. The export of cotton was picking up when the outbreak of the World War shattered any hopes that the tribals may have had.

The rulers did make attempts, howsoever belated and ineffectual, to reverse this trend. At the turn of the century, the danger facing these people was clearly recognised but nothing much seems to have been done. In 1930 the Maharaja visited Kalyanpur and selected a tract where the tribals could be settled. In the next year, it was reported, the settlement and reclamation work in Kulaihar had made good progress. “Some of the new settlers”, says the Administrative Report, “managed to live in their jhuming system”. About 11,000 drones in this year was reserved for the tribal people in Khowai and survey and settlement was taken up. Subsequently a huge area, a third of the state, was declared a tribal reserve. Howsoever, well-intentioned these moves may have been, they were predestined to fail as sufficient preparations had not been made for them and they were not followed by a survey and settlement operation on a scale required. The result was that in the next decade or so large-scale immigration had reduced its order to a mockery.

Socially also their position deteriorated as was reflected in their fast diminishing share of seats in schools. The frustration of the tribals found expression in occasional revolts and acts of lawlessness. The reaction of the state to this was to streamline the administration of the police and opening more police stations and outposts. They did precious little to meet the aspirations of its most loyal subjects. Whatever else they did, like declaration of a third of the state as a reserve for the tribals, was made ineffectual by an inefficient and corrupt Civil Service. Considering all this, it is indeed a wonder how these people have survived at all over the years, having received such dreadful blows from the hands of both man and nature!

But then, when their luckless fate had led them to the verge of despair, the inexorable march of history took them in its stride and they hopefully waited for the whiff of fresh air of freedom it augured. Even the bleeding wounds of partition were forgotten as the wave of enthusiasm and joy swept the entire country. The hill people of Tripura too looked forward to an era of plenty and prosperity.

### People-II

The flames of communal frenzy lacerated the country on the eve of Independence. Nationalism was presented to the people garbed in the dazzling colours of religious fanaticism. The foreign dispensers of our fate, who then held the reins of power, helped drive us headlong into the abyss of chaos, whilst our fiery passions reduced our souls to ashes. The great traditions of our heritage along with the glorious spirit of understanding and tolerance that characterised our race were alike consigned to the hell fire of our insane urges.
Communal riots broke out in Noakhali and terrified Hindus poured in large numbers into Tripura. The presence of Mahatma Gandhi managed to restore a semblance of sanity there but only temporarily. The fire raged so fiercely that no earthly power could possibly have extinguished it. The embers now and then burst into flames, compelling thousands of innocent persons to leave their hearths and homes and seek sanctuary in Tripura and elsewhere.

On August 15, 1947 India woke to a new dawn. Jawaharlal Nehru pledged to build a new India free of tears and sorrows, cleansed of all its tyranny and repression. After centuries of slavery and oppression, the Indians prepared to advance to keep their “tryst with destiny”.

The people of Tripura were not to be left behind. In October, 1949 their state merged into the Indian Union. Considering their backward condition, the state was taken under its wings by the central government. Slowly more and more of their affairs were handed over to them. A territorial council was formed, followed by an Advisory Council and then a Legislative Assembly with restricted functions. The Union Territory was elevated in 1971-72 to the status of a full-fledged state to take its rightful place among the other states of the Union.

During the course of the two World Wars, thousands had seen service in Europe. They returned to narrate the tale of the progress and prosperity that had been achieved in those countries. The new class of educated Indians read with hope the remarkable achievements that the scientific revolution had brought in Europe and America. The people demanded, and their leaders promised, acceleration of economic development so as to not only wipe the tear from every eye but also to herald a new era of growth and prosperity.

The First Five Year Plan was inaugurated in 1951. A community development project was launched on October 2, 1951 to revive and strengthen the half a million village communities and lead them to plenty and prosperity. Rs. 1,70,11,000 were spent over the first Plan in Tripura to develop agriculture, industries, communications and educational facilities, a sum beyond the wildest imagination of its princely rulers. The next five year saw a further spurt in the development activities in the state, a sum of just under ten crores having been spent. The years 1961-66 made even these stupendous efforts seen insignificant. A sum of over Rs. 15 crores was spent for development in the fifteen years after the merger of the state with the Indian Union which was more than three times of the total revenue of the state in the five decades preceding it.

The investments in the subsequent years dwarfed even these efforts. The outlay of Tripura’s Fifth Plan was as high as Rs. 69.68 crores.

The forest area in the state is about 37.08 per cent. Through tree plantations in villages and government land, 52,400 hectares have been covered in the last three decades with valuable tree species. The forest department claims this to be an achievement which is “outstanding and extremely significant as this percentage of man-made forests to the forest area is the highest in the country”. I wonder if the tribals would agree with them. It appears that the Welfare State has taken a leaf out of the Maharaja’s copy book!

It is many years back that every village in Haryana was electrified. Now, thirty years after independence, 94 per cent of Tripura’s 4,727 census villages are still deprived of this gift of science. Tripura’s per capita power consumption is 8.7 units, a very small fraction of the abyssmally low all India average of 120 units.

Poverty looks lovely when it adores the brush of an artist, but when it is the sole garb of a wretched human being it takes a gruesome shape. It kills not only the body but also affects the spirit and soul. It can make a devil of the purest of souls. Tripura must be an artist’s paradise: the poorest people in the world, Congo and Sahel notwithstanding, live within its borders.

The population of Tripura rose marginally from 5,13,010 in 1941 to 6,45,707 in 1951. But then it spurted to 11,42,005 and 15,56,342 in 1961 and 1971 respectively. The main reason for this increase is the large scale immigration from the erstwhile East Pakistan. The population of the tribals only rose marginally from 2,37,953 in 1951 to 3,61,751 in 1961. The latter figure includes the Chakma, Mugh and Reang immigrants from the neighbouring Chittagong Hill Tracts. It appears likely that the indigenous tribal population has remained almost stationery, if it has not actually shrunk. More than half of the original tribes subsist on jhuming, living perpetually on the brink of starvation.
It has been estimated that shifting cultivation is capable of supporting a population of only 20 per square mile. To ensure a reasonable standard of living for all the *Jhumias*, therefore, we need an area of more than 7,500 square miles. The total area of the state, however, is only 4,106 square miles.

After the latest survey and settlement operation, more than 3,000 sq. kms. have been settled as jotes. 3,411.33 sq. kms. had been finally constituted as reserve forest after the earlier declaration of reserve forests was held to be *ultra-vires* the constitution in 1961 out of 3885 sq. km. ultimately proposed to be declared reserve forest. If we take away the land covered by the fast expanding towns, roads, tanks, etc., very little land is left for *jhuming*. This explains the sure and steady march of these luckless people to the jaws of poverty and want.

The large majority of the land owning agriculturists (about 75 per cent) own less than two and a half acres of land, with a fair proportion of them cultivating less than half an acre of land. 46 per cent of operational holdings are of less than 1.25 acres of land. Till now the production oriented schemes of the government have hardly touched them. They have, however, gained substantially from the steep rise in prices of foodgrains and cereals. Despite this their economic condition remains near the subsistence level.

Not more than 10 per cent of students passing from high schools get seats in colleges, the rest being thrown out on the streets at a stage when they are fit only to become lower division clerks in government offices, or teachers in primary and secondary schools. Initially the problem presented no difficulties as the education department and the other governmental agencies were fast expanding and a good proportion of these boys could be absorbed. But soon the employment opportunities provided by government began to taper off and scores of these young men began to join the ranks of the educated unemployed. The number of job seekers on the live registers of the unemployment exchanges, which was 4,377 in 1961, shot up to 29,892 in 1971 and stood at 56,758 in 1977. The boys in the school started getting restive as they saw their senior colleagues pacing the streets in search of jobs, which did not exist.

Soon the graduates from the colleges joined their ranks and the problem started reaching alarming proportions. *Bekar Samitis* were organised all over the state and huge rallies, public meetings and demonstrations were organised. In the small, peaceful township of Melaghar the police had to resort to firing to keep violent crowds of unemployed in check. Most of them come from agricultural families. It is therefore, natural to think of educated boys going back to the farms and practising new and better modes and techniques, thus effecting a revolution in agriculture. The pressure on land is being increasingly felt. The majority of the farms are small, about 46 per cent being less than 0.5 hectare. The amount of cultivable waste lands now available may not even be sufficient for the large number of agricultural landless and *Jhumias*. These boys could only be engaged on farms to the detriment of those already engaged there and without making any impact on the overall employment position. In any case it has been estimated that 60 per cent of the rural working force is under-employed.

Industry, once it gets going, could absorb all these boys and more. The conditions in Tripura are conducive for setting up small scale industries in handlooms and handicrafts, blacksmithy and carpentry units, agro industries, china wares, jute based industries, etc. But the problem of marketing and the low volume of raw material availability stand in the way of any important development of industry. The tragedy of Tripura is that whatever it can make, Assam can make too. And assam, not a very industrialised state itself, is nearer the markets and sources of raw material than Tripura is. The problem of transport ultimately stands as a great bottleneck in the way of Tripura's industrial progress, and as a key to its solution lies the question of India's relations with Bangladesh and in this tripura has no say at all. A beginning has recently been made with a jute mill and a big paper project is on the anvil.

With increased production in agriculture and a rise of the standard of living, promised by the developmental plans, the volume of business is bound to expand. More shops, markets and warehouses will be opened, providing an outlet for at least some of the unemployed. But the opportunities thus provided will be strictly limited and will serve to merely scratch the surface of the problem, the hard core will remain ready to explore at any moment.

The government has already expanded its bureaucratic organisation almost to the point of bursting. The government employees are too getting restive, putting in more and more demands
with which the government is unable to cope. It is unlikely that the government will go in for large scale expansion in the next few years. Even if they do, it will at best serve to postpone the problem to some near date in the future. In any case it is not possible to absorb more than a small proportion of the unemployed.

The problem is an explosive as it is challenging. If the situation is not faced and the problem solved, the problem is likely to take a huge monstrous shape and cast an evil shadow on the entire future of the state.

More than thirty years after independence, the problem of the jhumia and the landless agriculturist in Tripura poses a challenge to the enterprise and ability of its bureaucracy and the broadness of vision and farsightedness of its statesmen. The task of industrialisation of Tripura, in which lies the real secret of success for its manifold problems and which seems hopeless and impossible, has to be successfully undertaken and completed if Tripura’s march to poverty is to be halted and if Tripura is to be taken away from the twilight between hope and despair to the wonderful dawn of freedom and joy.