

Tribal Development in Tripura: Past and Present

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Abstract:

This paper aims to explore the tribal development in Tripura, focusing on the past and present socio-economic changes, particularly the impact of shifting cultivation, land reforms, education, and language preservation. Tripura, a historically rich state, has a complex history, including its evolution from a princely state to its integration into India in 1949. It delves into the historical evolution of the tribal community in Tripura, from the traditional practice of shifting cultivation (huk) that sustained the indigenous population, to the challenges faced due to demographic shifts, deforestation, and land policies. Despite numerous rehabilitation efforts, such as those initiated by the government to settle shifting cultivators through rubber plantations, the success of these schemes has been limited. Education has expanded, yet disparities remain, particularly in tribal areas. Efforts to promote tribal languages, notably Kokborok, have gained momentum since the 1970s, culminating in the establishment of Kokborok language courses in Universities. The paper also examines the rehabilitation efforts for shifting cultivators, the expansion of education, particularly for tribal students, and the recognition and promotion of tribal languages like Kokborok. Additionally, the creation of the Tripura Tribal Areas Autonomous District Council (TTAADC) under the Sixth Schedule was intended to provide autonomy and promote tribal development, but challenges persist, including insufficient funding and a gap between the Council's powers and the aspirations of the indigenous population. Through this analysis, the paper highlights the complex interplay of culture, economy, and politics in shaping tribal development in Tripura.

I. Introduction:

Tripura is a small state but is immensely rich in terms of history, culture and traditions. It's very difficult to ascertain as to how the territory derived the name 'Tripura'. Various scholars put forth their opinion regarding the origin of the nomenclature of Tripura. There are scholars who believed that the name is derived from the ruler's name 'Tripur', some would believe that the name was derived from the goddess Tripura Sundari situated at Udaipur, Gomoti district. The temple was constructed by Maharaja Dhanya Manikya in 1501 A.D. According to Rajmala, the chronicles of the royal family of Tripura composed during the reign of Maharaja Dharma Manikya (1431-1462) gives estimation that about 187 rulers have ruled this princely state. By conquest and possession the area of Tripura used to be Sundarban in the west to Burma in the east, from Kamrup in the north to Burma in the south. Tripura had its own era which began in 590A.D.

The British knew the present Tripura as Tipperah or Hill Tipperah. The earliest contact the British had with the princely state dates back to 1760. Thereafter the then Viceroy, Lord Mayo advocated the posting of Political Agent and on 3rd July, 1871, the first British Political Agent, W.B. Power was appointed. Tripura's relation with the British was most cordial. However, it is pertinent to mention here that unlike any other princely states in India, princely state of Tripura did not have any formal or informal agreement or treaty with the British. Like any other princely state Tripura too made notable contributions in the form of manpower, money and materials, to help the British during the First World War and the Second World War.

Independence of India brought about integration of innumerable princely states into the Indian Union. Tripura was one such princely state, which merged with the Indian Union on 15th October 1949.

Before the partition of India, the progress of settlement of the Bengalees in Tripura was slow and steady but after partition, there was a sudden spurt. The situation can be gauged as within the period of about 24 years i.e. 15th August 1947 to 24th March 1971, there were **6,09,998** refugees officially settled in the state. However, these excluded those refugees settled in Tripura without being registered and any rehabilitation facilities from the Government. The total tribal population as per Census of India (2011) is 11,66,813, which accounts for 31.75 % of the population of the state. There are 19 recognized tribes in Tripura and among them the Reangs are categorized as particularly vulnerable tribal group (PVTG) (earlier: Primitive tribal group).

The need for the special attention for providing socio-economic development of the Scheduled Tribes and Scheduled Castes, led to the creation of the Department of Welfare for Scheduled Tribes and Scheduled Castes in 1970. Subsequent this department was bifurcated as Directorate of Welfare for Scheduled Tribes and Directorate of Welfare for Scheduled Castes in 1982. Since then the Department of Tribal Welfare is the Nodal Department for the overall policy, planning and coordination of programmes for development of Scheduled Tribes.

II. Economy & Shifting Cultivation:

The tribal or indigenous people of Tripura were once solely dependent for their economy on shifting cultivation (*huk*). It can be safely said that this form of cultivation sustained the indigenous tribal population of Tripura from time immemorial. Most of the writers have failed to understand the relationship between the '*huk*' or shifting cultivation and the cultivators. Every aspect of their life is closely interwoven with '*huk*'. The '*huk*' cultivation has made them economically self sufficient, socially proud and help to conserve the culture which has been handed down from generation to generation by way of folk tales and songs, etc. in fact the song, dance, calculation of time and period, religious rites etc. all centered around the '*huk*' (*shifting cultivation*). Their joys and sorrows are also interwoven in it. The young boys and girls select their life partner from the '*huk*' cultivation. Exchange of song from one '*Garing*' to another '*Garing*' between a young boy and a young girl is a common sight to see and hear.⁹ so '*huk*' apart from economy is also a romance.¹⁰

The *huk* (*shifting cultivation*) not only sustained the *tribal* people but also the wild animals. During the course of the field study visit while interacting with the '*huk*' or *shifting* cultivators, was informed that during the time of cultivation and after the wild animals are attracted to the '*huk*' (*shifting cultivation*) as it provides them with many fruits and vegetables. With the declining of the '*huk*' (*shifting cultivation*), the wild animals of Tripura seem to have disappeared.

The whole system of '*huk*' (*shifting cultivation*) got disturbed after Tripura joined the Indian union on 15th October 1949. The merger brought about thousands of refugees from east Bengal (now Bangladesh) and again thousands came over during the Bangladesh liberation war 1971 and were given rehabilitation in Tripura. The impact of such illegal migrants changed the entire demographic situation of the state. They occupied all the lands where the cultivation of '*huk*' (*shifting cultivation*) was done and could have been done. Thus, shrinking areas of land for the '*huk*' or (*shifting cultivation*). Since then the cycle of '*huk*' (*shifting cultivation*) cultivation could not be carried out as before and the cultivation suffered to such an extent that it became beyond recovery. However, even today this form of cultivation is sparsely practiced throughout the state. It must be mentioned here that products of the '*huk*' (*shifting cultivation*) cultivation used to be exported to Bengal such as rice, cotton, sesamum etc.

The land reforms act and the forest act introduced in Tripura did not recognize the '*huk*' or shifting cultivation and the cultivators'. Rather it is to be noted that land earlier solely reserved for the

indigenous tribal people by the maharaja were de-reserved for the rehabilitation of the refugees in spite of the fact that the whole Tripura was thrown open for such rehabilitation. In course of the field study visit a 'huk' or shifting cultivator made an interesting remark, his argument was whether the so called Act came first or the 'huk' or shifting cultivators? If such Act and laws did have little respect and regards for the 'huk' or shifting cultivators who are all indigenous tribal people, their economy would not have been in jeopardy as now. As tribal/ indigenous people we have distinct culture, traditions, defined territories, unique production system- these unique peculiarities along with traditional knowledge makes us the guardians of the forest. Disregards and disrespect of this uniqueness has led to depletion and deforestation in Tripura, Indian and in fact worldwide. Until and unless this self respect is restored to us- any best attempt or effort to conserve forest and biodiversity, it will be a futile exercise. We have natured forest or understood biodiversity with our traditional skills, knowledge, practices which in fact from time immemorial helped us to develop and appreciate a holistic understanding of the environment and nature around us.

Indigenous knowledge pertaining to forest such as shifting cultivation and sustainable development are misunderstood and misinterpreted by those who are ignorant. I must reiterate here that our knowledge is practical and flexible. Knowledge that we have acquired is time tasted, closely interwoven with our cultural identity and traditions. The concept of development of the tribal/ indigenous peoples means sustainable and holistic development.

The National Seminar on the Forest Communities Practicing Shifting Cultivation held on 25th to 26th July, 1980 in Calcutta, pointed out clearly in its recommendations that the shifting were the sole or the main agency that destroyed the forest was not correct. For, there are other agencies which had been in operation, that were far more destructive to the forest. The destruction of forest in Tripura is caused mainly due to three reasons. Over grazing of the cattle population owned by the plain land cultivators causes degradation of the land beyond recovery. Sal and teak trees are planted by the forest department in the fallow 'huk' or shifting cultivated land. Due to such plantations the bamboo, medicinal plants, fruits and vegetables disappeared including wild animals and birds. Not only had that it made the ever flowing streams dry. Felling of trees for construction in the urban areas purposes in the name of development is also responsible for forest degradation. Thus, the cultivation of 'huk' or shifting is in no way responsible for the degradation of forests as viewed by many. How can be indigenous people be blamed for degradation of the forest when their life is so intimately interwoven with forest.

The 'huk' cultivators were given a new nomenclature as 'jhumias'. As per the Bench Mark Survey 1978, a total of 45,854 households with a population of 2, 59,119 were found practicing 'huk'(shifting cultivation) of 23,292 households are completely dependent and 23,565 households were partly dependent. In the Survey Report on the 'huk cultivators or jhumias of Tripura 1987, the total number of 55,049 households with a population of 2,88,390 were found practicing 'huk'(shifting cultivation) of which 21,677 households were fully dependent and 33,372 households were partly dependent on it.

III. Shifting Cultivators Rehabilitation or Jhumia Rehabilitation

It is pertinent to mention here that since 1953 settlement program for rehabilitation of the jhumias have been taken up by the govt. of Tripura, but with little or no success so far. Since the inception of the rehabilitation schemes the main emphasis has been to wean the jhumias away from shifting cultivation through individual resettlement or colony schemes. Along with the Department of Tribal Welfare the Forest Department also started jhumia rehabilitation programmes under two schemes from 1974-75 for the control of shifting cultivation. In 1975-76, the Agriculture Department also

started a scheme under the aegis of the North-Eastern Council for the resettlement of jhumia. Having little success or failed in all attempts to rehabilitate the jhumias, the Government of Tripura came up with a policy of rehabilitation i.e. through rubber plantation. In the backdrop of such a policy the government set up the Tripura Rehabilitation and Plantation Corporation Ltd (TRPC) in 1983 to settle jhumias and landless tribals through growing rubber.

IV. Education

There was limited scope for education during the princely days. However, with the merger of Tripura with the Indian on 15th October 1949 the scope for education expanded. Even after the expansion of education we can still see the disparity of education system between urban, rural and TTADC areas. The literacy rate of scheduled tribe in Tripura was 56.5% and 79.05 % respectively in 2001 and 2011 respectively.

As from the chart given we can see that the hundred percent failures in Madhyamik Examinations (TBSE) have increased from 31 to 34 schools in the year 2019.

Schools with 100% failure in Madhyamik Examination (TBSE) X Board

Sl.No	Year	No. of Schools
1	2019	34
2	2018	31
3	2017	12
4	2016	11
5	2015	12
6	2014	16
7	2013	14
8	2012	22
9	2011	26
10	2010	24
11	2009	22

- **Source: Tripura Board of Secondary Education, Agartala.**

In order to further the development and impart quality education among the tribal students particularly those who are living in the far flung remote areas a society named, 'Tripura Tribal Welfare Residential Educational Institutions Society (TTWREIS) was established in 1997 (under Tribal Welfare Department, Government of Tripura). The main objective of the Society is to establish and manage Eklavya Model Residential School (EMR), Residential school and Ashram School in Tribal Sub-Plan (TSP) area and the medium of instruction is English. In these schools the students are prepared for various entrance examinations. At present there are 04 EMR, 01 Residential and 03 Ashram schools. These schools are affiliated under the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE), New Delhi. It may be pertinent to mention here that the performance of the students in AISSE (10) and AISSE (12) is highly encouraging.

Apart from these the Tribal Welfare department has also taken various steps to encourage tribal students for higher education such as sponsoring for Bachelor of Education (B.Ed), Diploma in Elementary Education (D.El. Ed) boarding house stipends drop out coaching centers, nurse training, sponsoring for various competitive examinations etc.

V. Language & Cultural Development

During the princely days Bengali language was adopted as a court language. It is because of this reason that the tribal languages were sidelined. Because of the movement by some few educated

tribal, Kokborok language spoken by majority of the tribes was recognized as a state language in 1979. There after Kokborok language as a medium of instruction was introduced in primary schools in 1981.

In 1970 the Tribal Research and Cultural Institute (TRCI) was established under Tribal Welfare Department for carrying out studies on the socio-economic aspect of the different tribes along with evaluation of all development schemes undertaken for the benefits of the tribes. The Institute has been involved in the socio-economic field, evaluation, documentation of tribal art and culture, preservation of tribal heritage, publication of research studies. Tribal Research and Cultural Institute collects manuscripts on tribal history and tradition, development of languages of different tribes etc. It also publishes a quarterly journal 'TUI' whereby various aspects of tribal life and culture are depicted. In order to further the development of Kokborok and other tribal languages a Directorate of Kokborok and minority languages was created in the year 2012.

Initially Kokborok was taught as Foundation course in the year 2011 in the Government Degree colleges. In Tripura University a one year Diploma Course was introduced in 2002. A full-fledged Department of Kokborok offering post graduate degree (M.A) was opened from the academic session 2015. Doctorate of Philosophy (Ph.D) program was started from the academic session of 2018. Kokborok language as an elective paper was introduced in some colleges in 2012. Now at present there 22 Government Degree Colleges in Tripura where Kokborok language is taught as an elective paper but till date no single permanent teacher have been appointed.

VI. Tripura Tribal Areas Autonomous District Council (TTAADC)

In order to safeguard the interest of the tribal in 1960 Mr. N.M. Patnaik, the then Chief Commissioner of Tripura in a note submitted to Dhebar Commission suggested that specific area should be declared as reserve for the tribal under V Schedule of the Indian constitution. The Commission rather suggested setup Tribal Development Blocks in tribal compact areas failing which V Schedule might be given a trial. At the same time there were movements and demands from various corners-political and non-political by the indigenous people for the protection of their rights. It was against this background that the Autonomous District Council under the VII Schedule was established by an Act 1979 and the elected members were sworn in 18th January 1982. The VI Schedule of the Indian Constitution was introduced with effect from 1st April 1985 (49th Amendment) and led to the creation of the "Tripura Tribal Areas Autonomous District Council (TTAADC)". The election of the TTAADC under the VI Schedule was held on 30th June 1985 and the elected members were sworn in on 19th July 1985. To be more precise the TTAADC was created under the VI Schedule of the Indian Constitution in order to combine tribal development with tribal autonomy.

Thus the various departments in the TTAADC are working for the overall development of the district council. However, impacts of such activities are yet to percolate among the down trodden masses. It is also a fact that the TTAADC have not been able to fulfill the aspirations of the indigenous people of the State for it has been established. The powers and functions of the TTAADC are not well equipped to deal with the kind of aims and objectives set before it. There is a gap between the powers and functions and the aspirations of the indigenous people. The present movement for more autonomy to the TTAADC itself speaks for its own. The TTAADC is entirely dependent on the State government for funds.

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