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Ethnic Conflict, Militancy
&
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**Tripura:
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Subir Bhaumik

2012

Tripura: Ethnic Conflict, Militancy and Counterinsurgency

Subir Bhaumik*

British India's partition in 1947 left princely Tripura with no choice but to join one of the two post-colonial South Asian nation-states – India or Pakistan. After much palace intrigue and political activity, the Regent Maharani Kanchanprava Devi, who was running the state on behalf of the minor king, Kirit Bikram Manikya Bahadur, decided to exercise the Instrument of Accession to join India. Just before Partition, she had got wind of a brewing conspiracy to merge Tripura with East Pakistan. An Islamic party, the Anjuman-e-Islamia, led by a rich contractor Abdul Barik, alias Gedu Miah, had managed to win the support of some leading palace nobles like Durjoy Karta for his plans to merge Tripura with East Pakistan. He had strong support from the Muslim League, which had been bolstered by its effortless takeover of the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT), despite strong local resistance. But determined action by all political parties and ethnic organisations foiled Barik's conspiracy and the Regent Maharani Devi moved rather swiftly to sign the Instrument of Accession that made Tripura a part of the Indian Union on 15 October, 1949.

But the Partition and Tripura's merger with the Indian Union opened the floodgates of Bengali migration from East Pakistan that forever changed the demography of the erstwhile princely state, leading to a fierce ethnic conflict that ravaged the tiny state for more than three decades. Peace has now returned to Tripura after a uniquely successful counter-insurgency campaign by the state's Communist Party of India (Marxist)-led Left Front government that included several elements not witnessed in other states afflicted by insurgency and violence. But this writer will argue that unless social justice on ethnic lines is reinforced by economic development, in which the tribals are stakeholders rather than silent rejects and their land and livelihoods are restored, tribal insurgency and violence may resurface in the tiny state. Tripura is now a red rag to those who seek to protect the rights of indigenous peoples in India's troubled North-East. Powerful nativist movements in neighbouring Assam and Meghalaya and elsewhere in the region hold up Tripura's example of demographic transformation to justify their campaign against unrestrained migration from neighbouring countries. That, in turn, intensifies the nativist-settler conflicts and unsettles the volatile region. So, this writer will argue that only if Tripura takes the lead in restoration of tribal lands and rights and in undoing the marginalisation of the indigenous peoples by some innovative socio-political engineering, its success in economic development and in providing relatively corruption-free governance will be undermined by festering ethnic rancour that may explode into bouts of anomic violence anytime soon. Hence, the need to look beyond counter-insurgency, as indeed suggested by a recent Oxford University Press title edited by Assam's leading political scientist, Sanjib Baruah.¹

* He is a Member of CRG and an Eminent Journalist

The Land beside Water

Twipra, as the indigenous tribes-people of the state call it, means 'land beside water.' In Tripura's days of yore, some of its kings controlled large tracts of eastern Bengal. Maharaja Bijoy Manikya is said to have 'taken bath in several rivers of Bengal.' So, Tripura's 'Bengal connection' is no post-Partition phenomenon. When the Manikya kings controlled Comilla and parts of Chittagong, Noakhali and Dhaka divisions of contemporary Bangladesh, they ruled over tens of thousands of Bengali subjects. In 1280 AD, following the submission of Ratna Fa to Mughisuddin Tughril, the Tripura kings first invited many Bengalis of high castes. Many of them were related to the 'Baro Bhuiyans' or twelve warlords of Bengal.² Further, it was not just for the love of Bengali culture and language or to be able to utilize its potential as the *lingua franca* between several tribes speaking different dialects that the Manikya kings encouraged Bengali migration into the hill state. Bengalis were also used to organise and maintain the structure of a modern administration and the hardy peasantry of eastern Bengal was issued *jungle-avadi* leases to reclaim large tracts of the undulating Tripura terrain for wet-rice settled agriculture that boosted royal revenues.

This Bengali migration had started gathering momentum from the beginning of the twentieth century. Hence, on the eve of Partition, the indigenous tribes of Tripura were not as decisive a majority as the tribespeople of the neighbouring CHT, where Bengali-speakers were less than two per cent of the population in 1947. In Hill Tipperah, since the end of the nineteenth century, Bengalis accounted for more than 40 per cent of the population and the tribespeople were barely ahead as a majority (see Table 1). Even perhaps in the normal course of migration, the tribespeople may have become a minority, but the Partition speeded up the process and reduced them into a minority within a quarter-century after 1947.

TABLE 1
Decadal Variation of Population and Percentage of Tribals Population

Year	Total Population	Percentage Variation	Total Tribal Population	Percentage of Tribal Population
11874-75	74,523	—	47,523	63.77
11881	95,637	28.33	49,915	52.19
11891	137,575	43.85	70,292	51.09
11901	173,325	25.99	91,679	52.89
11911	229,613	32.48	111,303	48.47
11921	304,347	32.59	171,610	56.37
11931	382,450	25.63	203,327	52.00
11941	513,010	34.14	256,991	53.16
11951	639,028	24.56	237,953	37.23

11961	11,42,005	28.71	360,070	31.50
11971	15,56,342	36.28	450,554	28.95
11981	20,53,058	31.92	583,920	28.44

The Author has prepared this table from the relevant census reports

End of Monarchy

The end of princely rule and the introduction of Indian style ballot-box democracy left the tribespeople, as they lost out on numbers, facing the threat of imminent marginalisation in share of political power. Forty years after the end of monarchy, Tripura got its first, and only, tribal chief minister in Dasarath Deb (born Dasarath Debbarma and popularly known as “Raja Dasarath” in the hills), when the ailing hero of the state’s first armed insurrection took over as chief minister for four years after the Left Front returned to power in 1993. Tripura has thus become the bogey-boy for other states in North-East that live in the dread of its indigenous populations being outnumbered and marginalised by East Bengali and Nepali migrants. The example of rapid demographic change, with which it has come to be associated, finds a parallel in Sikkim, where the Lepcha-Bhutias have been outnumbered by the Nepalis in the last century and the end of royal power has denied them any significant political clout in a post-Chogyal scenario. The fear of a Tripura repeat in their own homelands has inspired powerful nativist movements in neighbouring Assam and Meghalaya.

When the CPI(M)-led Left Front first came to power in 1978, the founder of the Tripura communist movement, Biren Dutta, pleaded with the CPI(M) state committee and the party’s top leadership to install Dasarath Deb as the chief minister. But the party’s Politburo observer Promode Dasgupta pushed Nripen Chakrabarty to the top job, on grounds that he was a more experienced administrator and the state was a Bengali majority state. This, in Dutta’s opinion, was the ‘one big mistake by our party in Tripura’.³ He argued that had the CPI(M) made Dasarath Deb the chief minister in 1978, it would have gone a long way to assuage tribal apprehensions and would have reinforced their faith in the communist movement. “Tribal extremism would never have taken off had Deb been made the chief minister and we would have been able to spread the communist movement to other tribal-dominated states of the North-East. But we missed that great chance by foisting Nripen Chakrabarty who was then described by tribal extremists as the refugee chief minister’.⁴

In fact, until the communists came to power in 1978, successive Congress governments had shown hardly any concern for tribal sensitivities. They allowed thousands of Bengali refugees into core tribal areas earmarked by King Bir Bikram Manikya Bahadur as a Tribal Reserve. The tribespeople had good reasons to feel that they were being reduced to ‘foreigners in their own land’. In 1943, King Bir Bikram had earmarked 1950 sq. miles as Tribal Reserve, but in 1948, the Regent Maharani’s Dewan, A.B. Chatterji (vide order no. 325 dated 10th Aswin, 1358 Tripura Era or 1948 AD) threw open 300 sq. miles of this reserve for refugee settlement. Later, more of these areas were opened up for refugee settlement. (Table 2 shows year wise influx of displaced persons to give us an idea of the intensity of the migration)

TABLE 2
Year-wise Influx of Displaced Persons into Tripura

Year	Number of Displaced Persons
1947	8124
1948	9554
1949	10575
1950	67151 (up to February)
1951	184,000
1952	233,000
1953	80,000
1954	3,200
1955	4,700
1956	17,500
1957	57,700
1958	3,600
1964-65	1,00,340
1965-66	13,073
1966-67	1,654
1967-68	12,299
1968-69	3,120
1969-70	4,334
1970-71 (upto 24 March)	5,774
Total	6,09,998

Source: The data of displaced persons is from the records of the Tripura Relief and Rehabilitation Department, cited in Gaythri Bhattacharjee, *Refugee Rehabilitation and Its impact on Tripura's Economy*, Om Sons Publications, Delhi, 1988, pp 38-39

Communist, Clenched Fist and Tribal Militancy

The end of princely rule affected all sections of the tribals and left them with a sense of 'being orphaned'.⁵ Their demographic majority was tenuous, the influx from East Pakistan seemed endless, and the administration of the state from Delhi seemed to depend almost wholly on the Bengali-dominated bureaucracy. Delhi's attempt to crush the Upajati Gana Mukti Parishad and the fledgling communist movement that had grown round it also aggravated tribal insecurity.

The Communist Party of India (CPI) was into its armed struggle phase with B.T. Ranadive at the helm of its leadership. Tripura was one of the 'base areas' where the party fought a guerrilla struggle on the strength of the Mukti Parishad which merged with the CPI in 1949. The ranks of the Parishad were strengthened by hundreds of former soldiers of the Tripura Rifles (the disbanded royal constabulary), who had seen action in Burma alongside British troops. They were battle-tested, if not properly armed, when they defected to the Mukti Parishad's armed wing, the Shanti Sena.

The communists exploited the tribesmen's sense of insecurity and the emergence of Dasarath Deb as the supreme leader of the tribals (he was looked upon as the new king in the hills) helped the CPI build up a formidable base amongst them.⁶ The activities of rapacious Bengali moneylenders like Hari Saha added an ethnic dimension to the conflict. But the communists controlled the ethnic outpour and never allowed it to dominate the idiom of state politics. As the CPI abandoned its line of 'armed revolution' and took to electoral politics, it won both the parliament seats from Tripura in 1952, repeating that success in the next two parliament elections as well. If Tripura had a legislative assembly at that point of time, the Communists would have formed their first government in India in the tiny former kingdom and not in Kerala. But that was not to be because Tripura remained a Union Territory administered by Chief Commissioners and a Lieutenant-Governor until it became a full-fledged state 23 years after its merger with India.

The Congress, outmanoeuvred in the tribal areas, went out of its way to promote refugee settlements even in areas marked as Tribal Reserve by the late king. Hundreds of Bengali refugee settlements started springing up in the hills, often bearing names like 'Atharacard' (Eighteen Cards) or 'Baiscard' (Twenty-two Cards) after the number of card-holding refugee families. As a result of these settlements, by 1961, the tribals had become a clear minority and Tripura had become a state dominated by East Bengali refugees. In 1967, for the first time, the communists lost both the Parliament seats in Tripura. Even the legendary Dasarath Deb lost the East Tripura (Reserved) seat to Congress candidate Kirit Bikram Manikya, the last independent king of the state. The demographic impact of Bengali settlement was beginning to make a political impact and the Congress was edging past the communists on the strength of the 'refugee vote'.

In 1967, the year the communists lost both the Parliament seats, two political groups surfaced in the tribal areas. The Tripura Upajati Juba Samity (TUJS) was born with the slogan 'Kachak koofoor chung chia, buni tala tanglia' (We are neither white nor red but we are for the tribal cause). The TUJS challenged the communists in the tribal areas, constantly out-radicalising them on emotive tribal issues like land alienation and eviction from forest areas. But while the TUJS restricted itself to militant mobilisation and stopped short of taking the insurgent path, the Sengkrak (Clenched Fist) took the course of direct violence. It surfaced in North Tripura, especially in areas inhabited by the relatively backward Reang tribe where organised land grabbing by refugee organisations like the Swasti Samity was directly backed by the Congress. The Sengkrak tried to secure support from East Pakistan and developed some links with the Mizo National Front (MNF) but it was crushed by the Tripura police which infiltrated its ranks and even engineered the assassination of its leader, Ananta Reang. Failing to gain any worthwhile support among the growing mass of Bengali refugees, the

communists now faced a strong challenge from the TUJS and tribal militant groups like the Sengkrak in the tribal areas.

Caught in a nutcracker, they turned increasingly to winning Bengali support through a combination of employee, student and youth movements. But in the process, they slowly surrendered their strongest base areas to the tribal parties and militant groups. So, if Partition gave the communists a great chance to build a political base by utilising the dynamics of the nationality question, it also created a space for bitter ethnic conflict that subsequently undermined it. Over the years, the ethnic conflict between the Bengali settlers and the indigenous tribesmen has only intensified. The massacre at Mandai, in which nearly 350 Bengalis were killed in one night on 5 June 1980, was followed by unprecedented ethnic riots in which more than 1000 people, mostly Bengalis, died. More than 5000 Bengalis have died in violence perpetrated by different rebel groups in the last 20 years, hundreds more kidnapped and released for huge ransoms that have economically crippled their families and many hundreds have been declared missing. The US Committee for Refugees estimated the internal displacement of Bengalis in various parts of Tripura at more than 200,000 at the peak of tribal militancy between 1995 and 2000.⁷

Towards the end of 1999, the Bengalis started hitting back, though the scale of their retaliation was minimal. A Bengali militia vigilante group called the United Bengal Liberation Front (UBLF), bombed vehicles carrying tribals and markets frequented by them, killing more than 20 tribespeople in 1999-2000. The UBLF grew out of the remnants of the Amra Bangali (*we are Bengalis*) that had surfaced in Tripura after the communists first came to power in 1978 and took immediate steps to provide the tribespeople with an autonomous district council under the Seventh Schedule and later, under the Sixth Schedule. The Amra Bangali had close connections with the Indian incarnation of the Global Proutist Body called Ananda Marg (Blissful Path). The Left governments in Bengal and Tripura ruthlessly crushed the Ananda Marg in Bengal and the Amra Bangali in Tripura, but it failed to check both the Gorkha separate statehood movement in the hills of Darjeeling and the fledgling tribal insurgency in Tripura led by the Tribal National Volunteers (TNV). Finally, the CPI (M)-led Left Front lost the state assembly elections in 1988 amidst massive violence unleashed on Bengali settlers by the TNV that left 117 Bengalis dead in a month in the run-up to the polls. Within four months of the Left's defeat, the TNV walked out of the jungles, signing a ridiculous accord with Delhi that gave the tribals just three more reserved seats in the assembly and its supremo, BK Hrangkhawl, the chairmanship of the Tripura Rehabilitation Plantation Corporation (TRPC).

But a pattern had been set. The Left had good reasons to believe that the TNV violence that undermined the Bengali refugee-settler's faith in the CPI(M) had been deliberately engineered by the Congress government at the Centre. Letters exchanged between TNV chief Bijoy Kumar Hrangkhawl and Mizoram's Congress Chief Minister Lalthanhawla just before the Tripura polls surfaced in the Mizo weekly *Zoeng* within two months of the Tripura elections, giving clear indication of a pre-poll deal to unsettle the Left. A dangerous trend had been set, one that would be repeated in future. The linkage between over-ground political parties and underground rebel groups hereafter became an inseparable part of tribal politics in Tripura.

The TNV movement that lasted ten years changed the character of tribal insurgency in Tripura. Though the tribal Communist guerillas were mobilised by the CPI in the 1948-50 phase with a clear ethnic appeal, they never targeted Bengali settlers at random. Neither did the short-lived Sengkrak. But the TNV-led insurgency was characterised by a continuous wave of attacks on Bengali settlements, specially on the new refugee colonies, in which the villagers were massacred at random

and arson was rampant. The message was ethnic rather than political: 'Bengali refugees, leave Tripura and go', as TNV propaganda material would highlight.

This offensive served a three-fold purpose: (a) it forced the state police and central paramilitary forces into a static deployment mode to guard as many Bengali settlements in mixed populated areas as possible and therefore left the government with hardly any force surplus to initiate a counter-offensive against TNV bases, big and small, inside Indian territory or even threaten their ingress-egress routes from Tripura into their main base area in Bangladesh's CHT; (b) it caused a panic amongst Bengali settlers and forced thousands of them to leave tribal-compact zones where they had started moving into in the late 1950s and early 1960s. This relocation was aimed at ensuring a decisive tribal majority at least in the tribal areas autonomous council area. The killings also gave the TNV a sense of victory, of being able to provide the tribals some kind of a security against loss of land and livelihood in the face of growing economic competition with the incoming Bengali settler trader-peasant class; (c) the killings also helped the TNV create conditions for a possible takeover of the Tripura Tribal Areas Autonomous District Council by tribal parties close to the underground in view of the ethnic passions let loose, especially when some tribals died in Bengali retaliatory attacks. That would mean the communists, the main target of the TNV (and later other tribal insurgent groups), would be hit from both ends of the ethnic spectrum – the Bengalis would lose faith in the CPI(M)-led government's ability to protect them and would veer towards the Congress, whereas the Communists would be isolated in tribal areas and loose out to the TUJS (and later the INPT) in an electoral exercise, where the TNV's gun-power would be of great help in winning elections by forcing Communist supporters to stay indoors.

The Left government could not effectively thwart the TNV game-plan because it stuck to (a) a static deployment of security forces to protect Bengali settlements under threat of attack; (b) it failed to generate a force surplus for a counter-offensive against the TNV; (c) the political action of the CPI(M) to wean away the TNV fighters from the rebel fold was largely unsuccessful and no major split or surrender happened in the TNV ranks; (d) the surrendered rebels of the All Tripura Peoples Liberation Organisation (an insurgent group that had surfaced after the 1980 riots but which gave up the path of insurgency in 1983 and most of its leaders joined the CPI(M) and other Left parties) could not properly be used as 'force multiplier' by the security forces and their leaders ended up as political surrogates of the Left parties, especially the CPI(M); (e) the security forces could not effectively block the international border and the TNV gangs moved back and forth across the East Tripura-CHT frontier with ease (f) because the security forces failed to match the rebel mobility, they often fell victim to ambushes that further restricted their operational radius and left large tracts of the state's hill regions totally dominated by the insurgents; (g) no cooperation from Bangladesh's military government was forthcoming to hit out at the TNV bases in the CHT and the federal intelligence agencies appeared reluctant to use the India-backed Shanti Bahini dominated by the Chakmas against the TNV, in the way they had been used against the Mizo National Front (MNF);⁸ (h) the state government had started to raise the Tripura State Rifles (TSR), now a fairly successful counter-insurgency force, in the mid-1980s, but it hardly got any specialist training at that stage; (i) Many CPI(M) tribal leaders also argue that Nripen Chakrabarty's refusal to let the party cadres arm themselves to fight the TNV was a crucial mistake that cost the party and the Left coalition dearly, but analysts say Chakrabarty's – and later Manik Sarkar's – decision was the right one, keeping in mind the counter-productive experience of the CPI(M)'s decision to arm party cadres in West Bengal, because it 'criminalised' the party rank and file, as they overstepped the limits of justified resistance and operated as 'extra-constitutional forces' in Midnapore and contributed to the party's loss of faith and face.

But Nripen Chakrabarty had set a powerful economic force in motion that would ultimately undermine the roots of tribal insurgency in Tripura. The introduction of plantation crops, especially the large-scale cultivation of rubber, triggered the creation of a new class of agro-entrepreneurs in tribal society, who would change the dynamics of a relatively classless society. The tribal rubber cultivators, initially a mix of poor jhumias (slash-and-burn cultivators) and small-time tribal government employees, teachers or petty traders, have now emerged as a powerful social block in Tripura's tribal society, who would like to get control of more land in an autonomous dispensation and benefit from the ethnic cleansing caused by successive insurgent groups – but they greatly depend on the state and the Bengali industrial class for processing latex into sheets, promotion through transport subsidies, sale and marketing to industries in West Bengal, where they get the best price. The rising international price of rubber has pushed up domestic prices and the gestation period of seven years before production starts has been worth the wait for the tribal rubber cultivators.

Tripura's Tribal Welfare Minister Jiten Choudhury says rubber cultivation has not only drawn the tribals away from slash-and-burn cultivation (jhum) but also from insurgency and in the process has turned the tiny state into India's second largest producer of natural rubber. Tripura now has nearly 45,000 hectares of rubber plantations, with nearly 1500 to 2000 hectares added every year. More than half this acreage contains mature trees producing latex – the rest are in various stages of attaining maturity. Tripura now produces around 18,000 million tonnes of latex annually but Choudhury claims Tripura has realised only thirty percent of its potential and, according to estimates of the National Bureau of Soil Survey and Land Use, the state is actually capable of cultivating rubber on 100,000 hectares.⁹

Tripura's forest department experimented with rubber cultivation as a soil conservation method as far back as 1963 and the Tripura Forest Department and Plantation Corporation (TFDPC) was set up in 1976, during the time of a coalition government in which Nripen Chakrabarty was a key minister and his party, CPI (M), was an important constituent. Later, after the Left coalition came to power with Chakrabarty as chief minister, the state government set up the Tripura Rehabilitation Plantation Corporation (TRPC) in 1983. By 2004, the TFDPC had raised rubber in 7,550 hectares of land. Additionally, 2,762 hectares of rubber plantation have been raised for rehabilitation of tribal shifting cultivators, scheduled castes and other socially backward people. It has also provided permanent employment for around 6,500 families. According to the annual report of TFDPC, prepared in 2005-06, the company has rehabilitated 2700 tribal families, and these families earn between Rs10,000 and 20,000 each month from one hectare of rubber plantation. For its part, the TRPC has raised 5,094 hectares of rubber plantation, rehabilitating an additional 3,977 tribal families permanently. The Rubber Board also set up its regional office in Agartala in 1979, and introduced cash subsidies for new plantations in 1980. Originally set at Rs10,000 for the gestation period earlier, this has been increased to Rs50,000 per family by now.

In January 2006, the Tripura Rubber Mission was formed at the initiative of the state government, following the recommendations made by VK Bahuguna, Managing Director, TFDPC. The primary objective of the Mission is to build the capacity of various stakeholders to achieve the targeted expansion of rubber in the state. Up to 85,000 hectares of land have been identified for rubber plantation, as the state pursues its target of 100,000 acres for the crop. The project aims at generation of 41,200 permanent jobs through TFDPC and TRPC and another 35,000 jobs in private sectors. It also aims at permanent settlement of 30,000 tribal families on rubber.

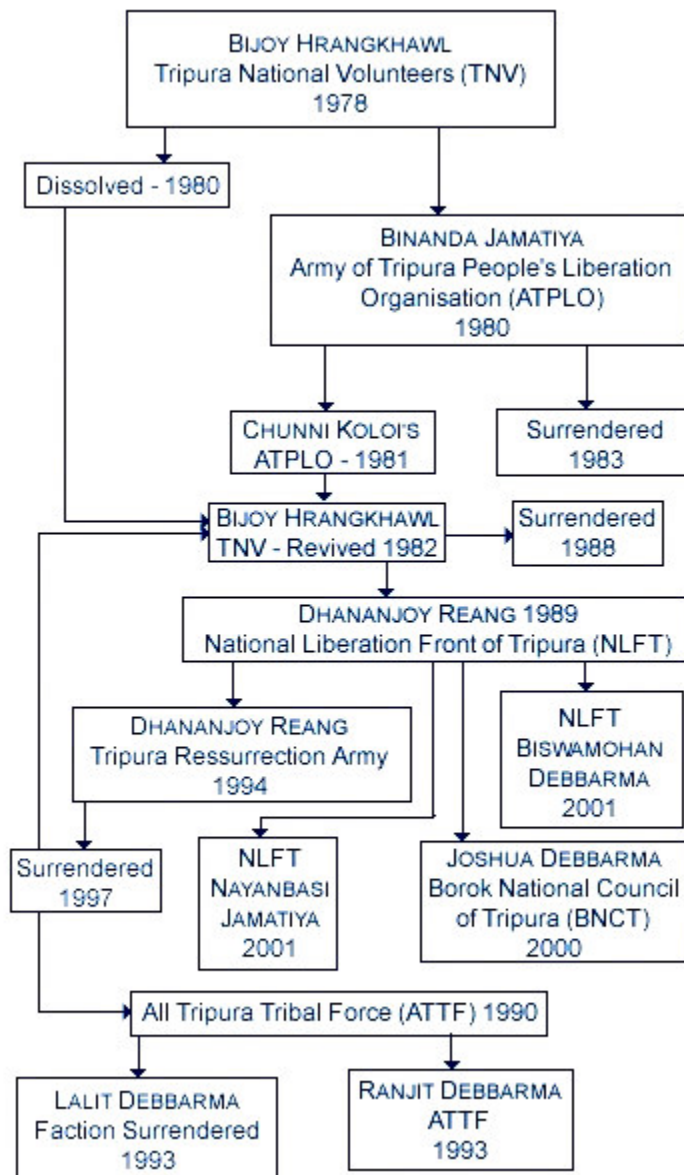
The empowerment of the rubber growers, in particular by forming societies of their own, has been the most important step. These societies hold regular meetings at certain intervals to discuss decisions regarding plantations, nurturing of the estates, tapping, processing and other challenges.

This has minimised the role of government officials to merely act as facilitators – to provide technical know-how through training and workshops, and to assist in marketing. Even the cash subsidies are given directly to the societies, without any intermediaries. The entire process has resulted in tremendous confidence building among the beneficiaries. Needless to say, the poor jhumias who provide the main recruitment base for the underground militant organisations are no longer turning to the underground, except for those who still have not got any real livelihood option. On the other hand, many of these nouveaux riches amongst the rural tribals have become targets of extortion by the rebels and have naturally turned against them.¹⁰

The Guerrillas Return

Tripura experienced a fresh bout of tribal militancy after the TNV surrendered in 1988. It became obvious that the TNV had played a role in bringing the Congress-TUJS coalition to power in 1988, after which it returned to normal life and its chief BK Hrangkhawl was made the chairman of the Tripura Rehabilitation Plantation Corporation (TRPC). But the coalition failed to address tribal issues seriously and even the rehabilitation process of the surrendered rebels was messed up because funds meant for that purpose were diverted to other heads. The TNV's vice president, Dhananjoy Reang, revolted against Hrangkhawl and with his cohorts disappeared into the jungles to form the National Liberation Front of Tripura (NLFT) in 1992. Later Reang was expelled from the NLFT and he formed his own group, the Tripura Resurrection Army (TRA) in 1994 to maintain his presence in the tribal underground. The TRA later surrendered *en masse* to the Government in 1997. But one of Reang's lieutenants, Biswamohan Debbarma, took over as the president of the NLFT and continues to head one of its factions. The NLFT has split thrice, mostly along tribal lines. The differences between the Halam and Tripuri tribal members of the NLFT is believed to be behind the second split that led to the formation of the Borok National Council of Tripura (BNCT) by Jogendra alias Joshua Debbarma in September 2000. The NLFT split further in February 2001 due to differences between its Christian members and the Hindu tribes, after which the group's most dreaded field commander Nayanbasi Jamatiya came out with 137 guerrillas. He however made some heavy political demands which were rejected, following which he fled back into Bangladesh, but his fighters almost wholly surrendered to the Tripura police. Another group of nearly 80 fighters led by Mantu Koloj also surrendered to the governor, DN Sahay.

On the other hand, the ATTF was formed, earlier as the All Tripura Tribal Force in 1990, by leftist tribal leaders who felt the CPI (M) would not be able to protect them against the depredations of the supporters of the Congress-TUJS alliance. The two main leaders of the ATTF were Lalit Debbarma and Ranjit Debbarma, the latter being a top leader of the CPI(M)-affiliated Democratic Youth Federation of India (DYFI). Lalit Debbarma and his followers signed a Memorandum of Settlement on August 23, 1993, surrendering with 1,633 cadres, but hard-liners led by Ranjit Debbarma rechristened the group as the All Tripura Tiger Force. Factions of the NLFT, ATTF and occasionally the BNCT, unleashed a wave of violence and kidnappings in Tripura between 1996 and 2003.



Source: Praveen Kumar

(<http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/publication/faultlines/volume14/article6.htm> (last accessed on 26/09/2012))

Analysts have argued that these groups never had a coherent idea of *Tripuri* nationalism that drove them to perpetrate relentless attacks on Bengali settler colonies or against Indian security forces. They were driven more by reactions – anger against loss of land to Bengali cultivators and traders, anger at loss of political power and perceived domination by Bengalis who account for majority of assembly seats and higher positions in bureaucracy, police and professions, anger at perceived imposition of Bengali language and culture, drawing on Tripura’s historic links with Bengal

and Rabindranath Tagore. The character and scale of violence by these insurgent groups is also illustrated by the casualty figures over the years in the State: between 1992 and July 13, 2003, these groups had killed 2,278 civilians, including tribals and 354 security force personnel. In 2000, 453 people were killed, as the rebel violence peaked. Through this period (1992-2000), total fatalities among the insurgent ranks remained at a relatively insignificant 306. That the bulk of the fatalities were soft target civilians, specially Bengali settlers in mixed populated areas, testifies to the fact that all the rebel factions adopted ethnic cleansing as their chosen strategy to create tribal compact areas from mixed populated areas so that a future tribal homeland would have the least possible 'unwanted population'. The relatively small fraction of losses inflicted on the security forces as well as those suffered by the insurgents themselves indicate that the rebel groups were keen to conserve their limited strength by avoiding major confrontation with Indian security forces, unlike the separatist groups in the Naga and the Mizo hills or later in Manipur.

Table 3
Fatalities in Terrorist Related Violence in Tripura 1992-2003

Year	Civilians	SF personnel	Terrorists	Total
1992	59	18	21	98
1993	148	28	7	183
1994	206	22	10	238
1995	178	34	45	257
1996	140	31	18	189
1997	205	50	19	274
1998	214	25	26	265
1999	240	41	22	303
2000	453	16	45	514
2001	239	31	42	312
2002	94	43	38	175
2003	195	39	61	295
2004	66	38	63	167
2005	34	8	31	73
2006	11	19	30	60
2007	10	5	21	36
2008	7	4	17	28

2009	9	1	1	11
2010	0	2	1	3
2011	1	0	0	1
2012	0	0	1	1

Source: South Asia Terrorist Portal, www.satp.org (last accessed on 26/08/2012)

Unlike the TNV, though, the NLFT and the ATTF not merely unleashed attacks on Bengali settlers but also resorted to large-scale kidnapping in what appears to be a conscious strategy to ‘extract illegitimate financial benefits, with abductions constituting the main source of revenue.’ According to newspaper reports collated by the author, between January 1997 and December 2000, (the peak of tribal militancy in its second phase) 1,617 persons were abducted for ransom, with demands in most cases ranging between Rs20,000 and Rs50,000. The demands do, however, run into hundreds of thousands of rupees, and even into millions, if the persons abducted were affluent or particularly prominent. Tripura Chief Minister Manik Sarkar admitted on the floor of the Legislative Assembly that, between April 10, 1998, and April 30, 2003, the ATTF and NLFT together abducted 551 persons and 140 of them were killed in captivity. Another 317 were still reportedly being held captive as of May 2003. Rebel groups in Tripura are thus deeply criminalised and have transformed abductions into a lucrative industry. The State, which has barely 8.29 per cent of the Northeast’s population, accounted for over 70 per cent of all abductions in the region until end of 2003.

What helped these rebel groups carry out subversive activities relatively unchallenged was the easy access to hideouts on foreign soil just across the border in Bangladesh, which shares an 856-kilometre border with the State. Reportedly, the NLFT and ATTF together had as many as 51 camps spread over the Sylhet, Hobiganj and Maulvi Bazaar districts and the CHT, from where they would send ‘action squads’ into Tripura. They could also procure weapons and ammunition from the black markets of Southeast Asia through Bangladesh and cache them in these jungle bases, where the new recruits were trained and indoctrinated in the anti-Bengali “hate philosophy” that becomes evident from the propaganda material published in the ATTF journal *Chaoba*. Successive Bangladesh governments continued to deny the presence of these rebel groups, even as reports of help and support from its military intelligence, DGFI, continued to be received by state and central intelligence.

As the rebel groups unleashed a wave of kidnappings and killings, ambushes on security forces and select assassination of powerful politicians like CPI(M)’s health minister, Bimal Sinha, Tripura appeared to be sinking into a “durable disorder” syndrome, from which there seemed to be no respite. Even the Tripura Tribal Areas Autonomous District Council, an instrument envisaged to empower the tribal population, has become a theatre of rebel power assertion where the insurgent groups could ‘effectively alter the poll dynamics through the use of violence.’ The Tripura Assembly had passed the Bill for the formation of the Council in March 1979, though the first Council was constituted only in 1982, under the Seventh Schedule of the Indian Constitution. The Council was reconstituted again in 1985 under the Sixth Schedule. Since its formation, the Left Front had largely controlled the Council, till the elections were held to elect new council members on April 30 and May 3, 2000. It was during these elections that the NLFT directly backed the Indigenous Peoples’ Front of Tripura (IPFT). The NLFT selectively killed people, mostly activists and leaders of the

CPI(M), during these elections. Violence continued even after the elections to leave a strong terror-imprint on the minds of the people. According to an estimate, while 78 persons were killed after the elections to the Council were notified on March 3; another 111 were killed through the elections and in less than three weeks following the election. As a result, the NLFT-backed IPFT managed to gain control of the Council, winning 18 of 28 elected members. The total strength of the Council is 30 with another two members nominated by the State Governor.

The culture of violence as a prelude to the democratic process continued into the most recent State Legislative elections in early 2003, with both the NLFT and ATTF targeting opponents of their political patrons, although the former inflicted more civilian fatalities. Between January 1, 2003, and February 2, 2003, twenty political activists were killed in various incidents by these outfits. Despite the greater violence inflicted by the NLFT, the Indigenous Nationalist Party of Tripura (INPT)-Congress combine backed by this group was unable to secure victory, and the alliance managed to win only 19 seats in the 60-member Assembly. Another intriguing feature underlay the creation of the INPT through the merger of the IPFT and the TUJS: the merger is believed to have occurred on the directions of the NLFT which wanted a single political party representing “tribal interests” in the State. Despite these manoeuvres and the accompanying bloodshed, the voter turnout was 72 per cent, as the people risked their lives to elect their chosen representatives. The risk was compounded by the ATTF’s call to the people to boycott the elections under threat of ‘dire consequences’ for those who participated.

But by then the tide had begun to turn. Beginning 2000, Tripura got two successive police chiefs of very high professional calibre, BL Vohra and GM Srivastava. Vohra, whose personal account *Tripura’s Braveheart* details the fight-back, was a conventional policeman, while GM Srivastava was already famous for his unorthodox approach. Vohra followed a regulation counter-insurgency grammar by concentrating on (a) improving the morale of the Tripura police by intensive training, modernisation, and motivational measures, (b) denying the rebels freedom of movement, (c) using paramilitary troops, both the Tripura State Rifles and the central forces, to go on select offensives in pockets dominated by the rebels, (d) striking a balance between static deployment to protect Bengali settler habitations and generating a force surplus to launch offensive action that got bigger and bigger with the advent of more forces, (e) emphasising area domination to win confidence of local population, after which intelligence about the rebels started flowing, especially in areas where they had committed atrocities even on the tribals, and (f) by establishing greater coordination between police, civil society, media and political parties to isolate the insurgents. Vohra’s biggest achievement was in his effective reorganisation and training of the Tripura Police and the Tripura State Rifles and in motivating them to go on the attack mode. As a result, police units, earlier demoralised by years of ineffective leadership and lack of professional direction, were reorganised with younger officers raring to go. That helped in turning the heat on the insurgents. Vohra effectively managed to hold the downslide and started the fight-back, as a result of which the tide began to turn. He credits his success to the ‘unstinted support’ he received from the political leadership and the state bureaucracy. This is what Vohra says in his memoirs:

Tripura is considered the least corrupt state in the country as the top political leadership including the Chief Minister, who is a CPM leader, is honest. So much so that even today he deposits his government salary into the party funds from where he gets a meager allowance to run his kitchen. This political leadership also had the political will to take on the insurgents and then quickly implement development schemes in areas freed from insurgency. This only proves that if the top political leadership is honest personally and has the political will to take on the insurgents and support its officers who are considered inefficient elsewhere in tackling insurgency can deliver.¹¹

The 2000 TTADC debacle convinced the Left Front leadership, specially Chief Minister Manik Sarkar, that there was no point relying on party elements who promised to fight political rivals by selective patronage of some insurgents to counter others. With Bimal Sinha dead, the main advocate of this line ('pick a thorn using one') within the party was gone. Henceforth, Sarkar reverted fully to his administration and police and backed them wholeheartedly in the fight against tribal militancy. He was ably supported by an efficient chief secretary V Thulasidas, who was all for proactive strategies.

After he took charge, GM Srivastava, who had already made a name in anti-rebel operations but courted many a controversy in Assam over his alleged involvement in the so-called secret killings (assassination of relatives and kinsmen of top ULFA leaders using surrendered militants), took off from where Vohra had left. He used a vastly improved police structure to conduct routine area domination operation using the TSR whose units, after their training at the army Counter-Insurgency and Jungle Warfare School (CIJWS) at Vairengte, could now live off the land long enough to deny rebels access to remote populations for food and recuperation. But Srivastava's real contribution to the success of the Tripura counter-insurgency was (a) creation of an unofficial but extremely effective 'unified command' over which he presided, and (b) initiating a series of trans-border attacks on rebel bases and safe houses as far as Dhaka where NLFT and ATTF leaders used to stay, using a combination of surrendered militants and Bangladeshi mafia lords. In this, he was ably supported by local BSF commanders, local IB and RAW station chiefs and a very intrepid military intelligence officer, Major (now Colonel) Govindan Srikumar.

In the initial months after he took over, Srivastava's tactics of "crossing the border" once too often invited controversy and the chief minister was warned by central intelligence of possible retaliation by Bangladesh and "heightened terror" that the rebels may unleash in sheer desperation. But Srivastava not only continued with his covert operations, he managed to secure the loyalty of the central intelligence units in Tripura, so that many of his operations were kept a secret not only from the prying eyes of Bangladesh intelligence and the rebel scouts but also from the sleuths who report to Delhi. In the 2003-2006 phase, Srivastava and Srikumar, sometimes in tandem and sometimes on their own, managed to launch as many as 17 attacks on NLFT and ATTF bases just across the border. Rebels who had come to surrender were not allowed to – as had been the case in the past. They were motivated and cajoled to launch attacks on their own bases or hideouts with the promise of much higher payouts instead of the simple rehabilitation packages meant for surrenderers. The attacks were planned and executed by Major Srikumar and his MI team who would brief and task the "turned on" rebels on how to launch the attack. The briefings and the training, the sand-modelling and the planning all happened in the secretive MI office and the hillock on which it was located in Lichubagan on the outskirts of Agartala. The attack teams were small – six to seven each, who would easily infiltrate the rebel bases because they were still with the outfits and had not surrendered. The attack duration would be short but focussed – get as many armed rebels knocked out, lob grenades on armouries or set them on fire and pull out before the small assault team would be outnumbered. The police would provide the entire logistics support and the intelligence available with the Special Branch would be provided to the MI for a crosscheck with its own inputs. The BSF would "clear" and "hold the border" for facilitating ingress-egress of the covert assault teams, the police would provide all the logistics support. The SP of Tripura West district Rajesh Kambli worked hand in hand with Major Srikumar to launch these attacks.

These 17 attacks, and the few that followed, drove the rebels away from locations closer to the border. They were forced to relocate their bases deeper inside Bangladesh and the leaders had to leave these bases and relocate themselves with families in safe houses. That is when the second phase

of the covert operations began. Mafia lords from Bangladesh, like the infamous Kala Jahangir's Seven Stars gang, were drafted into action to attack the safe houses. GM Srivastava later said that "unless the leaders are attacked and don't feel safe in their foreign hideouts, insurgency cannot be defeated".¹² But the wily police chiefs also activated his PSYOP to provoke factional feuds, after which surrenders from rebel ranks became so easy to effect. The PSYOP was done by Srivastava's intelligent use of the media. The local press corps, almost wholly Bengali and grateful to the police chief for decimating the rebel forces, came out in full support. The rebels, specially the undisciplined NLFT who would rape and molest tribal women during their foray in villages, only played into Srivastava's well laid trap. Stories of NLFT using tribal girls to produce cheap porn for sale damaged whatever credibility the rebels had. On the other hand, Srivastava managed to exacerbate the feud between Biswamohan Debbarma and Nayanbashi Jamatia by playing on the religious factor and by his deft use of the Jamatia Hada Okra (spiritual leader), Bikram Bahadur Jamatia, who had been attacked by the Christian fanatics of the NLFT.

Srikumar not only stuck to his planned serial assaults using a few teams of willing-to-surrender rebels but also engineered the surrender of Nayanbashi Jamatia. Srivastava forced Nayanbashi to go back to Aizawl to get his whole armoury, without which he said no surrender would be accepted. This meeting took place in the house of a retired police official, Nirmal Majumder. But as Nayanbashi left for Mizoram to get his arms cache, Srivastava got all his 137 fighters to surrender with promise of rehabilitation. Nayanbashi came back to find his force gone and fled to Bangladesh in anger, after which a story was planted in the Bangladesh press that Nayanbashi has been sent back by Indian intelligence to bring out active rebels. The DGFI promptly put him under detention and the rebel leader remains locked up by his one-time friends in Bangladesh intelligence who suspect him to be an Indian agent. While the NLFT fell apart from factional feuds and surrenders, the ATTF wilted under the serial attacks launched from the Simna-Sidhai axis in West Tripura. Even their headquarters at Satcherri was attacked twice by the assault team led by Michael Munda and the whole place was set on fire. The ATTF chief Ranjit Debbarma's safe house in Savar near Dhaka was bombed and he barely escaped death but many of his bodyguards were killed. Srivastava used the currency notes seized from rebel bases to fund the Bangladeshi mafia lords who regularly visited him in Agartala with video-proofs of the operations. Only then were they paid their promised "fees".

The underground tried one last hit back by resorting to the modern anomic terror tactics. On October 1, 2008, the ATTF organised serial explosions in the capital, Agartala. Four explosions, two of them described by the State Police as "powerful", went off within a span of 45 minutes, between 7.30 PM and 8.15 PM, in the Radha Nagar, Gol Bazaar, GB Bazaar and Krishna Nagar localities, injuring 74 persons. Although no one was killed, the targeting of the capital, Agartala, created panic. A live crude bomb was also recovered and defused on the main motor stand in Agartala. Another live bomb was diffused near a temple at Radhanagar in North Agartala. While no organisation claimed responsibility for the explosions, subsequent investigations exposed the role of the All Tripura Tigers Force (ATTF). The Assam-based United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) had trained the militants who had carried out the explosions. On October 12, Tripura Police personnel neutralised an ATTF hideout where the bombs used in the explosions had been prepared. The downward trend of insurgent violence that had started in 2003 towards the end of Vohra's tenure, continued throughout Srivastava's tenure. His successors, Pranay Sahay and K Saleem Ali consolidated the gains by continuing select trans-border attacks, albeit on a reduced scale. Starting 2003, violence in this tiny state in India's North-East, surrounded by Bangladesh on three sides, steadily declined, suggesting that militancy in Tripura "could soon be a thing of the past." Total

fatalities in 2008 declined by over 28 per cent from the relatively low figure of 39 in 2007, though militancy-related incidents increased by 23 per cent. Civilian fatalities were down 50 per cent and Security Force (SF) fatalities, 33 per cent. 17 militant cadres were killed in 2008, compared to 19 cadres in 2007. From 303 deaths in 2001 to 28 in 2008 – figures tell the tale of declining insurgency in Tripura and the state’s Left Front government’s huge success in this regard.

Militancy-Related Fatalities in Tripura: 2001-08

	Incidents	Civilians	SFs	Militants	Total
2001	370	237	36	30	303
2002	292	150	46	22	218
2003	394	207	39	50	296
2004	212	67	46	51	164
2005	115	28	11	21	60
2006	87	14	14	22	50
2007	94	14	06	19	39
2008	116	7	4	17	28

Source: Data 2000-2007: Union Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA), Government of India, and 2008: Provisional Data, South Asia Terrorism Portal www.satp.org (last accessed on 26/09/2012)

Despite the steady erosion of militancy, incidents were reported from all of Tripura’s four districts in 2008. While the West District, in which capital Agartala is located, was the worst affected, with 60 militancy-related incidents, Dhalai, North and South Districts accounted for 26, 21 and 9 incidents, respectively.

On November 25, 2008, Chief Minister Manik Sarkar informed the State Assembly that the combined strength of the two principal militant formations operating in the state, the NLFT and the ATTF had come down to just 300. The NLFT’s cadre strength was estimated at between 180 and 200, the ATTF was believed to have fallen to an all-time low, with no more than 90 to 100 cadres. According to Union Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) data, 295 militants were either arrested or surrendered in the first eight months of 2008. The police domination was further evident from the declining number of fatalities in the ranks of the security forces. Only two encounters involving deaths of SF personnel were reported in 2008. On January 19, unidentified militants killed a Special Police Officer (SPO), Bhajan Bhowmik at the Khedarnal village under Nutanbazar Police Station in the Dhalai District; and on November 29 three BSF personnel were killed in an ambush by the NLFT militants at Wadukcherra under Manikpur Police Station in the Dhalai District.

The improved security situation in Tripura was visible in the largely peaceful elections to the State Legislative Assembly on February 23, 2008. In earlier elections, militants had unleashed a reign of terror, significantly affecting voter participation. In 2008, however, their obstructive activities were confined to snatching Voter Identity Cards on two occasions and carrying out a handful of attacks on political party activists. However, not a single untoward incident took place on polling day on February 23, as a huge 91 per cent of voters turned out for the elections. The incumbent CPI(M)

alone won 46 of Legislative Assembly's 60 seats. The capacities for operation and recruitment among militant groups in the state have been crippled by the strategic deployment of security forces in the high hills, plugging militant routes inside the state. There has also been continuous improvement in the capabilities of the security forces. Crucially, the retreat of militancy has ensured the penetration of State structures into the most remote areas of Tripura, which were once preying zones for the militants.

The electoral victory of the Awami League (AL) in the December, 2008 Parliamentary elections in Bangladesh and the assurance given by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina Wazed that the territory of that country would not be allowed to be used to launch terrorist strikes within India gave further grounds for greater hope in Tripura. Hasina's administration started a systematic action against all North-East Indian rebel groups. Scores of Tripura rebel leaders, including deputy chief of the NLFT, have been arrested and handed over to the Tripura police. "This is cream and butter on toast. We have already decimated these rebel groups, now Hasina's people will do the rest," said a senior CPI(M) leader close to the Awami League. But he was not willing to be identified, because he was playing a crucial political role in coordinating the anti-rebel operation inside Bangladesh in an unofficial but very effective capacity. The "very special relationship" that now exists between the Sheikh Hasina government and that of the Left in Tripura headed by Manik Sarkar has provided further impetus to the already successful counter-insurgency operations. Mr Sarkar has combined effective politics and diplomacy with determined police action, covert action across the border with strong area domination, economic development and infrastructure building to decimate what was once one of the most powerful and brutal tribal insurgency in northeast India. But this writer will argue that his government needs to do more. It must start a durable process of ethnic reconciliation that could begin decommissioning of the rather useless Gumti Dam which could free enough fertile lands to settle a huge percentage of Tripura's landless tribal peasantry.

The huge influx of refugee population into Tripura from what is now Bangladesh has accentuated the problem of the land alienation of the tribespeople and added to their collective sense of loss and marginalisation. Almost all writers on Tripura insurgency have identified land alienation amongst the tribespeople as the major cause that has fuelled the violent insurgency that has eaten into the vitals of a once vibrant state. As long as the tribals had enough land and the Bengali population was limited to certain urban or semi-urban pockets or rural areas around the capital, land alienation of tribals did not emerge as a major problem. That began to change with the Independence and the merger of princely Tripura with the Indian Union. Between 1947 and 1971, 6,09,998 Bengalis displaced from East Pakistan came to Tripura for rehabilitation and resettlement. Since the total population of the state in 1951 was 6, 45,707, it is not difficult to gauge the enormous population pressure created on tiny Tripura by the Partition. During this period, the state government primarily resettled the refugees on land under different schemes, some enabling the refugees to settle down with financial assistance and some just helping them buy land.

The operation of these schemes accelerated the process of large-scale loss of tribal lands. The pauperisation of the tribals can also be discerned from the growing number of tribal agricultural labourers in three decades since the Partition. In 1951, cultivators constituted 62.94 per cent of the total tribal workforce in the state while only 8.93 per cent was in the category of agricultural labourers. But in 1981, only 43.57 per cent of the tribal workforce was cultivators and the number of agricultural labourers had risen to 23.91 per cent. But it would be wrong to assume that tribals alone became landless paupers and their lands were taken over by Bengali settlers who grew at their expense: a stereotype that tribal extremist groups seek to create. It is true that tribals account for 41

per cent of the agricultural landless labourers in Tripura, but the rest are non-tribals, almost wholly Bengalis.

But it is also true that the percentage of landless agricultural labourers in Tripura's rural workforce has sharply raised from 4 per cent to 20 per cent in 1971 to 29 per cent in 1981. It is also true that rest are Bengalis and that it is almost in keeping with the population ratio of the two communities in the state. Of the nearly half a million agrarian population in 1951, 2.5 per cent was rent receivers, 97.5 owner cultivators, 11.6 per cent tenant cultivators and 6.4 per cent was labourers. In 1981, agricultural labourers had become 29 per cent of the total rural workforce. In 1961, 16.9 per cent of the tribals and 29.9 per cent of the Bengali settlers controlled much of Tripura's land. The World Agriculture Census (1970-71) shows that in Tripura, 11 per cent of the total population controlled 46 per cent of the total land while 70 per cent of the population controlled 28 per cent of the operational holdings.

Incidentally the Bengalis who came to Tripura were used to sharp class differences in their erstwhile homeland, East Bengal, whereas the tribespeople were not. At an individual level, they lost lands mostly to Bengalis, rich or poor. Studies made by the Law Research Institute in Guwahati in certain areas of Tripura show the huge land loss suffered by the tribespeople at the hands of the Bengali settlers. The study analysed the land transfer pattern in seven scheduled and seven non-scheduled villages in South and West Tripura. In the seven non-scheduled villages, out of the total 240 plots transferred, 145 plots were transferred by tribals to non-tribals (read Bengalis), 76 by tribals to tribals and 19 by non-tribals to non-tribals. So 60 percent of the land transfers were from tribals to non-tribals. In the seven scheduled villages, the position was worse. Out of 282 plots transferred, 191 were transferred from tribals to non-tribals (68 per cent of the total land transfers). Of the villages under study, the heaviest tribal to non-tribal transfer took place at Hawaibari on the Assam-Agartala road.

One has to go to Teliamura, once a small village but now a vital road junction connecting West, North and South Tripura. Gunomoni Sardar, the grandfather of the INPT leader Debabrata Koloj and former TNV military wing chief Chuni Koloj, owned almost 70 per cent of the lands in Teliamura. He was a great friend of my grandfather, Kashinath Bhowmik, who established the police station in Khowai town, from where Teliamura was covered in those days. In 30 years, Gunomoni Sardar's descendants have hardly got a few hectares left for themselves by the side of the TRTC bus stand on the Assam-Agartala Road. Under the Congress administration, some Bengali refugee leaders even set up "land cooperatives" like the Swasti Samity in North Tripura. These cooperatives violated the Tribal Reserves regulations and began to take over large swathes of tribal land, a process that was legitimised by conniving bureaucrats. The Communist Party mobilised the tribesmen and even took the matter to the court to secure a favourable verdict that was not honoured by the bureaucracy. Angry at such rampant loss of their traditional lands, large numbers of tribal youths took to the jungles and the first significant underground group in post-Merger Tripura, the Sengkrak (Clenched Fist) was born.

The Sengkrak movement, Tripura's first manifestation of overt ethnic militancy, started in 1967 as the direct fallout of the large-scale alienation of tribal lands, accentuated through state patronage. The ruling Congress government backed the forcible occupation of tribal lands in the Deo valley by Bengali settlers grouped into an organisation called the Swasti Samity and the Reang tribesmen organised themselves into a militant group to hit back at the new Bengali settlers. This writer conducted a correlation analysis between land alienation and tribal insurgency in August 1984 by choosing to interview the family members of 84 extremists of the Tribal National Volunteers. These family members had been gathered at a government hostel as part of Chief Minister Nripen

Chakrabarty's "Motivation Drive" to facilitate the return of the guerrillas to normal life. It was found that 64 per cent of the families had suffered loss of land to Bengalis while 32 per cent of them were from families of jhumias or shifting cultivators who were under increasing pressure to find fresh lands for cultivation due to the growing occupation of hill stretches by Bengali refugees. Only four per cent were from families with enough land that had not been lost to the settlers.

In settled agricultural areas like Khowai and Sadar, all within 100 kilometres of the state's capital Agartala, between 20 to 40 per cent of the tribal lands has been alienated by the end of the 1970s, when tribal insurgency gathered momentum. In some parts of South Tripura district, as much as 60 per cent of the tribal lands were alienated, sold in distress conditions as a sequel to an unequal economic competition with the Bengali settlers. The land loss at the level of the individual was further compounded by large-scale loss of tribal lands to huge government projects like the Dumbur Hydro-electric project, where an estimated 5,000 to 8,000 tribal families lost their lands and only a small percentage of them possessing title deeds to prove ownership managed to secure rehabilitation. The pauperisation of Dumbur's once prosperous tribal peasantry and the huge benefits that Bengali urban dwellers gained by electricity and Bengali fishermen gained by being able to fish in the large reservoir was not lost on a generation of angry tribal youths who took up arms and left for the jungles to fight an administration they felt was only working in the interests of the Bengali refugees. Insurgent leader Bijoy Kumar Hrangkhawl, now back to mainstream politics after his Tribal National Volunteers (TNV) returned to normal life following an accord in 1988, used to refer to Nripen Chakrabarty as the 'refugee chief minister' of Tripura.

The heartburn over steady land loss on a one-to-one basis was further exacerbated by the submergence of a huge swathe of arable lands owned by the tribals in the Raima valley as a result of the commissioning of the Gumti hydel project in South Tripura. This project not only disturbed the fragile ecology of the Raima valley in the south district of Tripura, but also left a permanent sense of loss in the tribal psyche. All tribal organisations including the Communist-backed Gana Mukti Parishad fiercely protested the commissioning of the Gumti hydro-electric project in 1976. But the Congress government crushed the protests. It was determined to augment Tripura's deficit power supply but it ended up augmenting the catchment area of tribal unrest by dispossessing thousands of them of their only economic resource and collective symbol, their land. A 30-metre-high gravity dam was constructed across the river Gumti about 3.5 km upstream of Tirthamukh in south Tripura district for generating 8.60 megawatt of power from an installed capacity of 10 megawatt. The dam submerged a valley area of 46.34 sq km. This was one of the most fertile valley regions in an otherwise hilly state, where arable flatlands suitable for wet rice agriculture are a mere 28 per cent of its total land area. Official records suggest 2,558 tribal families were ousted from the Gumti project area but these were families who could produce land deeds and were officially owners of the land they possessed. Unofficial estimates varied between 8,000 to 10,000 families or about 60,000-70,000 tribespeople displaced by the project.

In the tribal societies of North-East, ownership of land is rarely personal and the system of recording land deeds against individual names is a recent phenomenon. So, most of those ousted by the Dumbur failed to get any rehabilitation grant and were forced to settle in the hills around the project, returning to slash-and-burn agriculture or jhum. The Left government has recently announced that all Dumbur Oustees, wherever they are, will be covered under Kutir Jyoti programme. A list of 500 Dumbur Oustee families were supplied to the Power Department. The Department has given connection to 114 families who do not have power connection under Kutir Jyoti Programme. But what these families need more than free electricity is arable land and resources to earn their livelihood from it.

The dam destroyed the once surplus tribal peasant economy of the state. Tripura's leading economist Malabika Dasgupta has shown in her study on the Gumti hydel project that "attempts either to protect the environment to the exclusion of considerations for the well being of the people or to improve their level of well being without consideration for the environmental impact of such policies can neither protect the environment nor improve the standard of living of the people."¹³

The Gumti, Tripura's principal river, is formed by the confluence of two small rivers, Raima and Sarma, the former flowing out of the Longtharai range, the latter originating from the Atharamura range. Before the dam, the river Gumti flowed southwards through a gorge in the Atharamura range beyond the confluence point of Raima and Sarma. It spilled over a series of rapids which were locally known as the Dumbur falls at the point of Tirthamukh (literally, Pilgrim's Point), a place considered holy by the tribals and also the Bengali settlers who would bathe in the river during the Pous Sankranti every winter. Beyond Tirthamukh, the Gumti flows westwards up to Malbassa village and then changes direction again, cutting through the Deotamura range. After crossing the Deotamura, it flows for another 60 kilometres before it enters Bangladesh. After flowing for about 80 kilometres through eastern Bangladesh, it joins the Meghna river which flows into the Bay of Bengal. The upper catchment of the Gumti comprises of 11 Gaon Sabhas – nearly 60 villages in all, in the Gandacherra block of Tripura's newly formed Dhalai district.

The upper reaches of the catchment area is steep and hilly, located on the east of the river, but as it flows towards Tirthamukh, it is flanked by small flat-topped hills locally called tillas with many lungas or lowlands between them. And as it comes down to Tirthamukh, the Gumti valley waters huge flatlands all the way along its course into Bangladesh. Before the commissioning of the hydel project, the upper catchment supported a small population of tribals. The small Bengali population practised wet-rice cultivation around Boloungbassa and Raima and some were into trading while the tribals, originally almost all slash-and-burn agriculturists called jhumias, had began to settle down to wet-rice cultivation, having learnt it from the Bengali farmers. The kings of Tripura had settled some Bengali farmers even in such remote areas to encourage tribals to pick up wet-rice cultivation and abandon jhum which is ecologically damaging. Before the dam, the hills around the present project area were sparsely populated and the area was almost wholly under dense forest cover supporting wildlife. The Tripura Gazetteer of 1975 talked of sighting "large herds of Indian elephants in the Raima-Sarma region along with some tigers and bears in the dense forests."¹⁴

The vegetation was rich and so was the flora and fauna. But after the hydel project was commissioned, not only did almost half of the tribal families displaced by the dam move into the hills in the river's upper catchment area, but the roads built to first transport construction material and then to support the Hydel project opened up the rich forests of the area to the illegal loggers. The surplus-producing tribal peasantry were not only angry for having lost their rich flatlands and lungas. They were forced to revert to slash-and-burn jhum cultivation that has, in Dasgupta's opinion, "caused irreparable damage to the ecology of the upper catchment of the Gumti."¹⁵

Illegal logging by businessmen backed by politicians has further damaged the ecology. During two extensive trips into the Gumti valley in 1985 and 1998, this writer found extensive felling of trees and no presence of forest guards to check it. The tribal insurgents of the NLFT have not banned tree felling, as some North-East Indian rebel groups like the National Democratic Front of Boroland or the NDFB has done. They have encouraged it. In large parts of the Gumti valley upstream of Tirthamukh, tribal villagers told this writer that the NLFT had allowed loggers to operate freely so long as they paid them off. Relatives of some insurgent leaders were in the business, entering partnership deals with the Bengali-owned saw mills of Amarpur, Udaipur and Sonamura. So

the tribal insurgents who had capitalised on the community's anger at the large-scale displacement at Gumti were now collaborating with the most exploitative segments of settler society to raise funds.

It is my contention that (a) the present ethnic conflict that pits the Bengali settlers against the indigenous tribespeople in Tripura has much to do with the large-scale land alienation of tribals because land is seen not only as the prime economic resource in a rather backward pre-capitalist agrarian society like Tripura but also as the symbol of the ethnic preponderance (b) the psychological alienation of the tribespeople was further aggravated by the Dumbur hydel project which, in one stroke, contributed the most to the ongoing process of land alienation (c) the Dumbur hydel project has caused huge damage not only to the ecology of the Raima-Sarma valley but also to ethnic relations in the state (d) that the project is now a white elephant and can be decommissioned to make way for large-scale land reclamation that can be used to resettle landless tribespeople in a major gesture of undoing injustice.

Why the Dam Must Go?

The Gumti hydel project must be decommissioned for the following reasons:

(a) The Gumti hydel project is now not producing more than seven megawatts of power even in the peak season when the reservoir is full during monsoon. The state government says that by investing Rs1.18 crores, it has been able to restore the output to the original installed capacity of 10MW. It also says that while the running cost of the project is around Rs3 crores per annum, it rakes in nearly Rs21 crores through sale of electricity. Officials in Tripura Power department describe the project as 'very profitable'. But experts say the siltation levels will continue to increase and unless the reservoir can be dredged, there would be no rise in output. The power output from this project will progressively diminish.

(b) With huge natural gas reserves now discovered in Tripura and major gas thermal power projects in the pipeline (including one with the capacity to generate 500MW against the state's current peak demand of 125MW), it is a waste of funds to invest in the Gumti Hydel project. If the state can produce three times more electricity than it now uses, there is a strong case for decommissioning the dam that will free a huge area for other pressing causes. An ideal power strategy for Tripura would be to produce around 1000-1500MW of electricity, feed half of that into the North-Eastern Grid, use 150-200MW within the state keeping in mind the rising demand, and sell the balance of 500-600 MW to Bangladesh.

In the long run, as Bangladesh augments its own power capacity, the surplus Tripura power could be used locally in the event of major industrialisation or fed into the regional grid for neighbouring perpetually power deficit states like Mizoram which lacks the gas reserves of Tripura.

Since more than 45 sq km can be reclaimed from under water if the Gumti hydel project is decommissioned, a huge fertile tracts of flatland would be opened up for farming and resettlement of the landless tribal peasantry of the state. The fertility of this land is likely to increase after so many years under water. At least 30,000 tribal families, perhaps the whole of its landless population, can be gainfully resettled in this fertile tract. Before the dam, this area's fertility was a talking point in the state. After so many years under water, this is likely to be very fertile. Tripura is a food deficit state and turning this area into a modern agrarian zone will solve the state's food problem forever.

Needless to say, the entire tribal landless population of the state, estimated at between 25,000 to 27,000 families, can be gainfully resettled in the Gumti area, once the entire land in and around the reservoir area is reclaimed. Each family can be given at least one hectare of prime agricultural land – thrice the average landholding size in Tripura. The problem of tribal land

alienation can be tackled in one go. Solution of conflicts need both symbols and substance and this gesture could provide both. Never before has a development project been dismantled to preserve the interests of the indigenous peoples. Since this project is proving to be a bit of a white elephant, it is not very difficult to justify its decommissioning in view of its potential to solve the problem of tribal landlessness in one stroke.

If the entire or almost the entire tribal landless population can be gainfully resettled in the Gumti project area, it will free the hilly forest regions from human pressure. Since most of these landless tribals practise jhum which is dangerous for ecology of the hills and the forests, it is essential to settle this entire population in wet plains like the Gumti area. The hills cannot take the high pressure of human settlements that the plains can. So from an ecological viewpoint, the resettlement of the landless tribals of Tripura in Gumti project area will be welcome. The state's forest cover, now receding, will improve, degraded forests may be turned into gainful plantations by large-scale private investments. The area likely to be reclaimed in Gumti project area should be used only for resettling the tribal landless, a compact area in keeping with Maharaja Bir Bikram's tribal reserve concept.

This decommissioning proposals should be implemented before ethnic polarisation between Bengali settlers and indigenous tribespeople snowballs beyond control. The state is still ruled by the CPI(M)-led Left Front, a left-of-centre coalition which has support both amongst Bengalis and tribespeople. Tribal parties and militant groups will support the dam's decommissioning and Bengali extremist groups are not around to resist it. A dialogue can create the proper climate for decommissioning that could lead to an alternative economy.

Even the security agencies have a benefit from this settlement. A happily settled tribal population, easily monitored, is less of a headache for police than if it is spread out over a huge hill region with a poor economy that creates empty stomachs and angry minds.

I would argue that the Bengalis can buy peace through the process of ethnic reconciliation that decommissioning of Dumbur hydel project and redistribution of the lands reclaimed from the project can start off. That is because the root cause of the tribal insurgency can be addressed. The tribal peasantry can be substantially empowered through this relocation of priorities. If the dam goes, some Bengali fishermen in the area may feel upset at the loss of the Dumbur lake (as the Gumti reservoir is popularly known). But in the larger interest of ethnic reconciliation, the dam must go. Tribal insurgency in Tripura, now largely criminalised, must be fought relentlessly. The tribals must be reminded that these insurgents never addressed grassroots development issues like land. They have focussed only on power-sharing concerns or resorted to mafia-style extortions rather than look at strategies for the empowerment of the tribal peasantry. If more than 400 dams (mostly small dams like Gumti) have been decommissioned in the US alone and the trend is picking up elsewhere in the West, Tripura's Left government must consider doing away with the Gumti Dam as soon as possible. A 2003 study by four American experts has this to say about the decommissioning:

"In contrast to their larger counterparts, smaller dams are typically older, no longer serve their original purpose, have deteriorated and many (though not all) have reservoirs filled sediment. Although they store only small volumes of water and sediment, they may impose other ecological impediments on rivers including migration routes and unique habitats. Removal of these structures is often a cost effective alternative to repair and maintenance." ¹⁶

This policy prescription that is considered relevant in the US will also make much sense to Tripura because (a) the Gumti dam is nearly forty years old (b) has outlived its utility because its reservoir is filled with sediments and huge pools of weeds (c) it can hardly produce any electricity, specially during summer months when rainfall is not sufficient (d) many of its reservoir patches are already cultivated by tribal peasants.

In summer of 2012, towns like Udaipur and Sonamura located on the downstream of Gumti river experienced drinking water crisis and the lift irrigation projects dependent on Gumti also suffered. An argument has now been made that restoring the normal flow of the Gumti river (that is only possible by decommissioning the Gumti Dam) is essential to save the irrigation projects and drinking water projects downstream. If the normal flow is not restored, it will seriously affect agriculture in the Udaipur-Sonamura stretch of the Gumti river, it has been argued. That is one more argument in support of decommissioning the Gumti Dam.

The decommission of Gumti hydel project would lead to a huge availability of hugely fertile lands (so long under water) which can then be gainfully redistributed amongst the tribal peasantry, especially the landless ones who have not benefited from rubber cultivation. The government will have to adopt a planned policy of resettlement once the lands are reclaimed in the Gumti hydel reservoir area – if that does not happen, it could lead to tensions within various tribes like the Tripuris, Jamatias, Chakmas and Reangs, who will all try to get possession of the reclaimed lands of Dumbur region. “We don’t want ethnic feuds over lands erupting in the Dumbur area,” a Tripura minister said.¹⁷

Tripura, so far the bogey boy of the North-East, will become the role model for ethnic reconciliation by capping up its counter-insurgency success with innovative social engineering that emphasizes on justice and seeks to make the disadvantaged tribes people stakeholders in progress and development rather than excluding them from the fruits of growth.

Notes

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⁶ Veteran communist leader late Saroj Chanda, interview with author, 16.2.1989.

⁷ *Special Report on Northeast India*, compiled by Hiram Ruiz, Published by US Committee for Refugees, New York, 2000, page 17

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¹⁴ ibid

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¹⁷ These apprehensions were expressed by Tripura’s forest minister Jiten Choudhury, a tribal himself, in an interview with the writer on 23rd August 2012

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