Learning From the Ethnic Conflict and the Internal Displacement in Tripura in Northeast India

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Tripura is a tiny hilly state of 10,486 square kilometers in the northeast of India. It is bounded by Bangladesh in the north, west and south, and the states of Assam and Mizoram in the east. The Bengalees and the greater Tripura tribal community, consisting of as many 19 tribes, constitute the bulk of the population. The Tripuris are the numerically largest tribe, followed by the Reangs. The other tribes in the state are Halam, Jamatiya, Bhil, Bhutia, Chaimal, Chakma, Garoo, Khasia, Kuki, Lepcha, Lushai, Mog, Munda, Noatia, Orang, Santhal and Uchais. The state since 1980 has witnessed serious ethnic conflict between the tribals and the non-tribal Bengalees. This paper aims to consider the causes of the ethnic conflict, its impact on the internal displacement and the lessons which can be drawn from this case study.

The Background of the Ethnic Conflict

Tripura was a princely state. It acceded to the Indian Union in October 1949. It became a Union territory on November 1, 1956 and attained statehood on January 21, 1972. The population of Tripura according to 1951 census was “645,707 of which the tribal population was 237,953 which constituted 36.85%.” As of the 1991 census the population of the state was “2.75 million of which the tribal population was 0.85 million which constituted 30.94%.” Tripura saw the first influx of the displaced Bengalees in 1941 when communal riots broke out in the district of Dacca.

After the partition of India in 1947, displaced Bengalees by thousands trekked into Tripura from East Pakistan, now Bangladesh. The inflow of the displaced persons continued in the early fifties. “In 1957, 3637 displaced persons arrived in the state.” The displaced families were given assistance by the state and were resettled through rehabilitation schemes. In mid 1963 communal disturbances broke out in East Pakistan. As a result the Hindus in large numbers migrated from East Pakistan and entered Tripura. “In 1963, 5769 families consisting of 26,041 persons entered...
In the month of January 1964, another serious communal disturbance took place in East Pakistan, affecting almost all districts. This resulted in the migration of a large number of Hindus and Buddhists to Tripura. "In 1964, as many as 21,768 families consisting of 90,641 persons entered Tripura." Influx of displaced persons as well as illegal immigrants continued in subsequent years.

**Tribal Protests in the States**

A political organization of tribals called Seng-krak was formed in 1947 that opposed the influx of the Bengalees. This organization was subsequently outlawed by the state. The majority of the tribals was mobilized by the Communist Party under the leadership of a tribal leader, Dasarath Deb, who later in 1993 became the Chief Minister of the state. The tribals faced by the immigrant waves tended to become more and more militant but were held back by the organization of the Communist Party. In 1967, a political party of tribals called the Tripura Upajati Juba Samity (TUJS) was formed. Its main objectives were restoration of tribal land, formation of an Autonomous District Council (ADC) for the tribals and introduction of the "Kok-barak" language in the Roman script as a state language. In the late 1970s and early 1980s another extremist outfit of the tribals, called the Army of Tripura People's Liberation Organisation (ATPLO), was active.

In the 1977 Assembly Election, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) [CPI(M)] came to power. It declared that necessary steps would be taken for the formation of the District Council and the restoration of land to the tribals. The Bengalees living in the hills vehemently opposed this decision of the Government and formed an organization called the Amra Bangali in September 1978. In July 1979 some tribals formed another organization called the Tripura National Volunteers (TNV), whose aim was to establish an independent Tribal State of Tripura through armed struggle.

On March 15, 1980, TUJS adopted a resolution for the expulsion of "foreigners" from Tripura. In June 1980 violent clashes between the tribals and the non-tribals broke out, spreading from village to village. "The riots amongst tribals and non-tribals claimed 308 lives and 480 persons suffered injuries. Thousands of people were rendered homeless."7

To meet the aspirations of the tribals the Tripura Tribal Autonomous District Council (TTADC), comprising an area of 7132.54 sq.km (70% of the state), came into being on January 18, 1982 under schedule VII of the Constitution of India in terms of the Tripura Tribal Areas Autonomous District Council Act, 1979 passed by the Tripura Legislative Assembly. It was incorporated as an Autonomous District Council under Schedule VI of the Constitution of India after approval of the Parliament in 1984.