



Land alienation and its impact on jhumias: A case study of Tripura

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Abstract

The unity and integrity of India is under severe challenge due to the rise of separatist movements in different parts of the country. The North-Eastern part of the country has been traditionally prone to a large number of secessionist and separatist movements. Tripura, the smallest of the North East Indian states has been caught in a vortex of highly destructive militant violence, deadly ethnic conflicts and a planned destruction of the relation between the tribal and non-tribal people of the state. A large number of factors have been held responsible for the growth of insurgency in this region. The most important cause of rise of the secessionist movement has been the massive demographic changes and the consequent loss of livelihood among the tribal populace of Tripura. The main aim of the paper is to highlight the growing pauperisation of the tribal's in Tripura through a study of the system of Jhum Cultivation.

Keywords: insurgency, *jhum* cultivation, bangladesh, land-alienation, development

1. Introduction

Tripura, a tiny and hilly state of 10,486 sq. Km in the North-East region of India comprises beautiful hills, green valleys and dense forests. It is bounded by Bangladesh in the North, West, South and Assam and Mizoram in the East. Tripura has an international boundary of 832.20 Km with Bangladesh. In the pre- independence period Tripura enjoyed special status among the native princely states. It enjoyed an independent status subject to the recognition of British as paramount power by the Rulers of Tripura. After independence it formally acceded to the Union of India in October 1949 as part C state and subsequently became a union territory from 1st Nov. 1956 and attained statehood on 21st, January 1972.

In the late 19th and the early 20th century Tripura was a tribal majority state as can be seen from the census figures of 1881 and 1921 with tribal population at 52.19% and 56.37% of the total population respectively. Following the independence of the country and partition, the state witnessed large scale influx of refugees from the erstwhile East Pakistan and subsequently from Bangladesh. Tripura's tribal majority demography underwent a sea change as a result of this unhindered migration. The tribals were pushed to the hills and the politics and administration came to be dominated by Bengali speaking locals and migrants. In fact, the tribal population in Tripura constituted about 28.95 per cent of the total population in 1971. The expansion in the population of the non- tribals also led to large scale transfer of land from the tribals to the non tribals. This created a sense of fear and resentment among the tribal populace and it was precisely against this phenomenon that the tribal movement started in Tripura in the early 1950's.

There is no doubt that the tribals were reduced to a position of insignificance in a place where they were once dominant. Tensions were inherent in a situation in which a relatively backward and mostly illiterate community consisting of 19 separate tribal groups found it not only out-numbered but also increasingly overwhelmed in many ways by a more cohesive community which comprised largely of Bengali

immigrants. The disparity in life-styles of the two communities and their respective economic situations resulted in a growing rancor between the immigrant groups and the tribals of the state. The present paper is an attempt to analyze the phenomenon of land alienation and its impact on the Jhumia's (Shifting Cultivators) of Tripura. In fact, the transformation in the socio-economic condition of the tribal populace is best illustrated by the changing conditions of the shifting cultivators or the *Jhumia's* of the state as a direct consequence of unbridled migration after the partition of India in 1947. The tiny state of Tripura has always been susceptible to migration but it was post-partition migration which had an adverse impact on the fate of autochthons in Tripura. The article for the sake of discussion is divided into four parts-

1. Pre-Partition Migration.
2. Post-Partition Migration.
3. Loss of traditional Livelihood/Impact on Jhumia's.
4. Ecological Factors and Land Alienation.
5. Results/Consequence

2. Pre-Partition Migration

The tiny border state of Tripura which shares almost three-fourths of her boundary with Bangladesh has always been susceptible to migration. The Indo-Mongoloid races migrated from the northern part in search of fertile and arable land. This partially accounts for the fact the indigenous people of the state such as the Tripuris, Reangs, Halams etc. bear an ethnic resemblance towards the Tibeto-Burmese groups such as the Bodos and the Kukis inhabiting the adjacent states. The report of the political agent observes that the entire population of the state could be divided into two distinct categories- the inhabitants of the hills and those of the plains. Around the same time about 4000 Chakma families came to Tripura in search of *Jhum* land ^[1]. The coming of the Chakmas proved beneficial for the economy of Tripura as they brought large areas under cultivation. In fact the Chakma influx continued unabated during the last quarter of the 19th century. They turned to Tripura due to a

plethora of factors such as the dearth of agricultural land and population growth in the Chittagong Hill Tracts from where they migrated. The Kukis, a war-like tribe of the same ethnicity as the Lushais joined the royal army in large numbers and proved their military prowess. All these tribal immigrations obviously added to the local populace thereby inflating the total population of the state.

Tripura also witnessed immigration of other tribal people from Assam namely the Garos, the Bodos and also Khasis in the early part of the 20th century. They came mainly in search of agricultural pursuits- the Garos for *Jhum* land and the Khasis settled in the region of Dharmanagar where they grew beetle leaves. Apart from the above-mentioned tribes, a number of other tribes bearing no ethnic affinity to the region also migrated mainly as tea-garden labourers [2]. The first tea-estate was established in 1916 in the Kailasahar sub-division of the state. This resulted in the need for tea garden labourers as the indigenous tribes were quite unwilling to work in the tea gardens. Hence, coolie labourers were brought in from a number of eastern states such as Bihar and Orissa and as result tribes such as Munda, Oraons, Bhils and Santhals immigrated to Tripura.

The table below shows the total tribal immigrant population of the state since the last quarter of the 19th century till the 1931 census.

Table 1

Name of the Tribe	Hailing From	Population	Occupation
Chakmas	Chittagong Hill Tracts.	8613	Jhuming and Cultivation
Mogs	-do-	5687	-do-
Garos	Assam Hills	2740	-do-
Lushai	-do-	2000	-do-
Bodo	-do-	181	-do-
Khashi	-do-	23	-do-
Oraon	Chottanagpur	979	Tea-Garden Labourer
Kanda	Orissa	667	-do-
Kurmi	Kurmi	338	Agriculture
Munda	Chottanagpur	2058	Tea-Garden Labourer
Santhal	Santhal Pargana	735	-do-

Source: Census Reports

However, these tribal immigrants were far out-numbered by the plain-Landers. They comprised mainly of Hindu and Muslim migrants from the erstwhile province of East Bengal. The Manikya rulers of Tripura for genuine economic reasons openly invited the Bengali settlers to develop settled cultivation and pay the much sought after revenue. The primate mode of slash and burn or *Jhum* cultivation could not meet the growing revenue demands of the rulers who incurred considerable expenditure in running the administration, in keeping the British government officials in good humour as also defraying the expenses of the royal household. In the famous '*Jangal-Abadi*' system, a tenant who accepted a lease for reclamation of hilly lands by clearing jungles got remission of rent for at least three years from the date of the lease. Needless to say, this policy of low land tax and often tax exemption for initial few years attracted peasants of nearby areas of Bengal in labour-short and thinly populated state like Tripura. Thus, easy availability of land together with the slow and steady arrival of non-tribal farmers capable of exploiting this favourable

situation started impacting the socio-economic and subsequently the political life in the state.

In fact, with the settlement of this population from East Bengal the Kings of Tripura were benefitted as the migrants introduced plough cultivation which increased the revenue returns of the king. However, in the absence of reliable records on land system prior to the later part of the 19th Century, it is difficult to form any exact idea about the collection of land revenue. However it can be safely assumed that the plain land areas, populated exclusively by non-tribal Bengalis, were the only viable source of revenue for the royal coffer. Once we enter the later part of the 19th century we are on firmer ground as far records of revenue collection are concerned. In fact, the records notice a rise in state revenue from a paltry Rs 2.4 lakhs in 1881-82 to Rs 4.6 lakhs in 1892-93 i.e. an increase of nearly 100% in ten years [3]. This momentum of growth was maintained in the early 20th century as in 1903-04 out of the total revenue which amounted to Rs 8.17 lakhs nearly 2.32 lakhs were obtained from land revenue and this was paid almost entirely by holders of agricultural land in plains [4]. In this way a large number of Hindus and laborious Muslims who were mainly agriculturists were induced by the kings of Tripura to settle in the state on easy terms of rent.

This process of so called invitation added a sizeable chunk to the population of the state. Moreover various jobs in the state particularly in the departments of judiciary, forest and education were also filled in by Bengali migrants. Land grants were also made frequently for religious and charitable purposes. All this migration did not create any problem in Tripura as surplus land was available and the migrants settled only in selective pockets of the state. The situation however changed with the independence and partition of the country in 1947.

3. Post-Partition Scenario

Following Partition, Tripura was bordered by Chittagong, Noakhali, Comilla and Sylhet districts of East Pakistan (present day Bangladesh). In fact about 83% of Tripura's 1,001 km long frontier formed the border with erstwhile East Pakistan. However it was only an imaginary line drawn by Cyril Radcliffe in 1946-47 as the border remained open and porous till the early 1980's. It was because this close proximity to the districts of East Pakistan and unguarded frontiers that Tripura received waves of migrants after partition in 1947 and the liberation of East Pakistan and formation of Bangladesh in 1971. Partition played havoc with the demographic structure of North-eastern India and Tripura was no exception. In fact, a Directorate of Rehabilitation was set up in 1949 to 'settle' the refugees in Tripura who spilled over from erstwhile East Pakistan mainly in three phases in 1947, 1967 and 1971 permanently altering the demographic balance against the tribals.

But during the first two years following the partition there was not much panic in Tripura or its borderlands as there was a widespread belief in official circles that the 12 million Hindus in East Pakistan would not be disturbed. In fact, until the 1950's there was considerable reluctance on part of the central government to acknowledge that the displaced population from East Pakistan were to stay permanently in Tripura. However in February-March 1950 there were widespread communal riots in different parts of East Pakistan and in Barisal district alone about 2,500 Hindus were massacred [5]. Riots also broke out in Chittagong,

Barisal and Naokhali and as a result about 200,000 refugees migrated to Tripura [6]. The situation soon turned alarming as the refugee influx turned into a deluge. This incessant influx of refugees led to a change in the demographic profile of Tripura. The tribal natives, who constituted a dominant 64 percent of the total population in 1874, formed a reduced component of the population in successive Census enumerations: 52 percent in 1931, 37 percent in 1951, 28.44 percent in 1981, 29.59 percent in 1991 and 26.74 percent in 2001. In fact, between 1947 and 1971, 6, 09,998 Bengalis came to Tripura from East Pakistan, in view of the fact that the population of the state in 1951 was 6, 45,707; it is not difficult to understand the enormity of the problem. This unbridled migration led to the marginalization of the tribal peasants and elite and created a psychological trauma of being reduced to a minority in ‘tribal state’. The numerical domination of the Bengalis in Tripura gradually translated into their economic, political and cultural domination with a corresponding pressure on the tribes for survival.

The economy of Tripura has traditionally been dependent on agriculture, forestry and fishing. In other words for the tribal people of Tripura, land was their only means of subsistence and hence losing this natural resource was unthinkable for them. But the first impact of the refugee influx into Tripura was the opening of the state’s land resources for the settlement of refugees. The state government under the Chief Ministership of Sachindra Lal Singh failed to foresee the imminent danger of placing the land hungry peasants belonging to relatively developed community in direct confrontation with the underdeveloped ‘*jhumias*’. His government had provided the Bengali migrants with land and other facilities like ration cards at various places like Mandai, Takarjala, Jampuijala, Khowai and Kalyanpur in West Tripura district. The outbreak of the Bangladesh War in 1971 led to a further exponential increase in the number of refugees that came to Tripura. In fact, the number of refugees arriving in Tripura in 1971 was 14, 16,491 which was little less than the state’s total population of 15, 36,342 (Various Census Reports). Tripura’s open frontier on the north, south and the west made it easier for migrants from Sylhet, Comilla, Noakhali and Chittagong districts to pour into Tripura. The central government and the Tripura government opened 276 refugee camps for them near Akhaura.

But even after the cessation of hostilities and the creation of Bangladesh in 1971, a large section of the refugees stayed back, initially as illegal migrants but were later able to secure citizenship. This is very well illustrated by the changing density of population in Tripura from 1901 to 1981.

Table 2

Year	1901	1911	1921	1931	1941	1951	1961	1971	1981
Density of Population	17	22	29	36	49	61	109	148	196

Source: Report of the Relief and Rehabilitation Department, Govt. of Tripura, 1981.

In fact, by this time saturation point had already been reached and land could no longer provide any sustenance to the steady stream of immigrants from the plains. There were several factors which in turn contributed to this refugee influx in Tripura. Firstly, the close proximity of Tripura to East Pakistan and subsequently Bangladesh, secondly, lack

of resistance on part of the local population against this stream of migration as the tribal population was initially not aware of the dangers to their lives and livelihoods that migrants could pose. Thirdly, the presence of a sizeable Bengali-speaking population in the state also contributed to this demographic change as it readily provided all assistance to their incoming brethren.

4. Impact on Jhumia’s

In the local parlance of Tripura, a *Jhumia* is a tribal who practises shifting cultivation or *Jhuming*. Under this form of cultivation, more appropriately called 'slash and burn' cultivation, hill slopes are cleared of their vegetative cover which is set on fire and several crops like paddy, cotton, chillies, maize, and vegetables are sown. The crops mature at different times of the year, *Jhum* fields are abandoned after the crops are harvested and the *Jhumias* move to new *Jhum* sites after harvesting is over. The *Jhum* was widely prevalent in Tripura in the past. According to W.W Hunter [7], till about 1830 there was "little or no plough cultivation and as late as 1908 the Imperial Gazetteer reported that "the nomadic tillage known as *Jhum* cultivation is almost universal. Even today, there are a sizeable number of *Jhumia* families in the State. In 1955, it was estimated that there were 25,000 *Jhumia* families in Tripura and the total amount of land under shifting cultivation was 16, 00,000 acres.

B.P. Misra in his extensive study of the *Jhum* cultivation has shown that the *Jhumia* cultivators were quite well-off as the "per acre yield of *Jhum* paddy was about 27 maunds which compared well with the per acre yield of a double-cropped land which was also 27 maunds between 1934-35 and 1937-38" [8]. This indicates that in good years at least, the *Jhumias* were not badly off even in the late thirties. *Jhuming* also provided them with commercial crops which could be sold in exchange for money, providing the *Jhumias* with the wherewithal for purchasing items of their daily necessity which they did not themselves produce. The *Jhum* economy was also an egalitarian one as land was not privately owned under this system of cultivation. There is no private ownership of land where *Jhum* is practised. In fact T.H. Lewin in describing the economic and social life of the tribals living in the Chittagong Hill Tracts with whom the tribals of Tripura have much in common has pointed out that "they enjoy perfect social equality" [9]. In this way *Jhum* cultivation formed an integral part of the life of the tribals of Tripura.

However, things gradually changed for the *Jhumias* of Tripura as *Jhuming* ceased to be a viable system. It could no longer provide the *Jhumias* with enough to avoid starvation, leave alone provide them with surplus. Several factors were probably responsible for these changes. The growth of population among the *Jhumias* and the steady reduction in the amount of land available for *Jhuming* led to a shortening of the *Jhum* cycle. The shortening of the *Jhum* cycle and repeated *Jhuming* on the same land without a long enough period of fallowing led to a lowering of the fertility of soil. The policy of the government towards the *Jhumias* also underwent a change. From the early 20th century, restrictions started being imposed on *Jhuming* in forest lands by declaring more and more forest areas as reserved and restricting the rights of the *Jhumias* from carrying on *Jhuming* in the reserved forests in order to increase the revenue earned by the Maharaja from the forests of Tripura

[10]. But according to Malabika Dasgupta the *Jhumias* started facing a genuine problem of land shortage after the partition of the country as it resulted in the continuous migration of people from erstwhile East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) [11]. The tribal *Jhumias* who were earlier marginal forest dwellers were pushed further inside the forest.

The Government also took various measures which actively discouraged the practise of *Jhum* cultivation. It considered the practise of *Jhum* cultivation to be destructive of the environment. In order to change their system, the government started distributing government land to the tribal's. Under the scheme each family was given two standard acres of land. The process of transfer from collective ownership to individual ownership started soon after independence. In this regard the main thing to note is that the tribals lost their community land and started cultivating land on an individual proprietary basis. The tribals who were used to community ownership of land started cultivating, land under a new system of private ownership and it led to the inevitable- they lost their land to the more Bengali immigrants who took up plough cultivation in the plains.

Transfer of land from tribals to non-tribals is the most crucial problem in Tripura. There was transaction- like '*dhakal bikri*' or sale of possession in which the tribal was given a receipt for the land though the price for land was nominal. The most despicable manner of transfer came about when non-tribal moneylenders and petty traders started going to the interior areas. The moneylenders gave tribals loans against land. The rates of interest charged in many cases were more than 100 per cent per annum. Default to pay back the loan in cash or kind resulted in most cases in forced transfer of land. How widespread and effective this method had been in alienating the tribals from their land can be gauged from the official reports of the Tripura government. In 1968 the Chief Commissioner asked an additional District Magistrate of Tripura District to enquire into numerous complaints of such illegal transfers. According to the investigation, 80 per cent of the land in Kanchanpur area in North Tripura had been grabbed by non-tribals through unscrupulous and fraudulent means. In almost all the tribal areas the non-tribals possessed disproportionately large areas of land.

In this way tribals lost their land to the immigrant Bengalis with the progress of agricultural modernisation. Most of the tribals who used to cultivate their own land slowly and gradually became landless agricultural workers on the very land which was once possessed by them or by their forefathers. Those who still owned land became marginal farmers, cultivating less than 1 hectare of land. So land came to be concentrated in the hands of non-tribals. Thus, a once egalitarian society became non-egalitarian and class-ridden.

The second decision which added fuel to fire was the commissioning of the Dumbur Dam in 1976. In fact, another group of tribal's lost their land to the development initiatives of the state- the so-called ecological refugees. A classic example of this is furnished by the case of the Dumbur tribals. The reservoir of the Gumti Hydro-electric Project was created by inundating eight *moujas*. Many of the tribes who lived in these *moujas* were prosperous cultivators but they were not given any rehabilitation after being driven out from their lands. They therefore, had no option but to take up the work of agricultural laborers in

order to eke out a precarious living on the brink of starvation.

5. Ecological Factors and Land Alienation

The unrest caused by the steady land loss in Tripura was further exacerbated by the submergence of a huge swathe of arable land owned by the tribals in the Raima valley as a result of the commissioning of the Gumti project. This project not only disturbed the fragile ecology of the Raima valley, it also left a permanent scar on the tribal psyche. All tribal organizations including the communist-backed *Gana Mukti Parishad* fiercely protested the commissioning of the Gumti hydroelectric project in 1976. But the Congress government turned a deaf ear to the protests as it was determined to augment Tripura's power supply but only ended in augmenting tribal unrest by dispossessing thousands, denying them of their only economic resource and collective symbol – their land.

A 30 meter high gravity dam was constructed across the Gumti River about 3.5 km. upstream of Tirthamukh in the south Tripura district, for generating 8.60 MW of power from an installed capacity of 10 MW. The dam submerged a valley area of 46.34 sq. km. This was one of the most fertile valleys in an otherwise hilly state, where arable flatlands suitable for wet rice agriculture make up a mere 28% of the total land area. In fact, the commissioning of the Gumti Dam provides the most glaring example of government's apathy towards the tribal populace. According to a study carried out by 'Integrated Watershed Management' of the Gumti River Valley a total of 2,117 tribal families were ousted from their traditional *jhum* land. Among them 805 families had proper land papers and they were *Jote* (land registered in someone's name) land-owners. On the other hand 1312 were owners of *Khas* land (land not registered in someone's name i.e. government land). Out of 728 Bengali families 378 were holders of *Jote* land while 350 were settled in *Khas* land. Thus, a total of 1183 *Jote* land owners and 1662 *Khas* land-owners were evicted due to the project. The total number of families thus evicted stands at 2,845. However, the official records suggest that 2,117 tribal families were displaced from the Gumti project area, but this only includes families who could produce land deeds and were thus 'official' owners of land [12]. Unofficial estimates vary between 8,000 to 10,000 families or about 60 to 70,000 tribes' people displaced by the project. One writer Khakchang Tripura observes that more than ten to fifteen thousand tribes were displaced from the Dumbur dam submerged area [13].

The reason for such disparity in figures is that in the tribal societies of the northeast, land ownership is rarely personal and the system of recording land deeds against individual names is only a recent phenomenon. Most of those ousted by the Dumbur dam failed to get any rehabilitation grant and were forced to settle in the hills around the project, returning to slash-and-burn (*jhum*) agriculture. The dam destroyed the once bountiful tribal peasant economy of the state. Tripura's leading economist Malabika Dasgupta has shown in her study of 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 [14].

The tribal populace of Tripura which was already reeling under severe land alienation due to unprecedented migration of Hindu refugees from East Pakistan and Bangladesh came under further pressure as there was large-scale displacement due to the commissioning of the dam. Pauperization of Dumbur's once prosperous tribal peasantry for the sake of Bengali urban dwellers who were to be benefitted by the production of electricity was not lost on a generation of angry tribal youths who took up arms and left for jungles to fight an administration that they believed was only working in the interests of Bengali refugees.

In other words, the commissioning of the Dam caused a great amount of resentment among the tribes of Tripura and these ecological refugees who were left at large by the apathy of the government swelled the ranks of disgruntled tribesmen. It resulted in increasing pauperization of the tribal society in Tripura.

6. Results/Consequences

All this in fact provided the material condition for the efforts by the tribals to organize themselves politically. The first organized tribal movement *Seng-Krak* (it means folded finger in the tribal Kok-Borok Language) originated as a reaction to the settling down of the non-tribal refugees in the tribal areas. Its leaders opposed the influx of refugees and its preaching was anti-Bengali. This organisation carried out propaganda among the ordinary tribal folk to resist the influx of refugees. It also carried out violent attacks on many refugee camps. Subsequently this organization was banned by Dewan A.B. Chattopadhyay. *Seng-krak* being outlawed some of its members took the initiative in forming Paharia Union in 1951. Chandra Sadhu Rupini who was an influential leader of the *Hallam* community took the main initiative in forming the Union^[15].

However, the most important of the tribal organizations was the *Tripura Upajati Juba Samiti* formed in June 1967. The main objectives of this organization were the restoration of tribal land, formation of district council for the tribal people and the introduction of the Kok-Borak language in the Roman script as a state language. Following the state assembly elections of 1977 in which the Communist Party of India (Marxists) came to power it was announced that the process for initiating the setting up of District Councils would be taken up very soon. Some Bengalis living in the hills strongly opposed this decision and set up an organization called *Amra Bangali* in 1978. This led to clashes involving both the tribals and the non-tribals in west Tripura. It is against this background that some extremist tribal youths under the leadership of Bijoy Kumar Hrangkhawl founded the *Tripura National volunteers* (TNV) in July 1979 and this marked the beginning of insurgency in Tripura^[16].

Thus, we can very well assert that the process of land alienation in Tripura which was first initiated by the Maharaja of Tripura as an innocuous measure to bring more land under cultivation for increased revenue assumed alarming proportions following the partition of the country and it contributed in large measure to the growth of insurgency in Tripura. The changing demographic situation has intensified the search for a secure place and identity on the part of tribal communities. Assertion of widened ethnicity may thus be viewed as a mechanism of responding to the new demands of changing times. It has been suggested by Mahadev Chakravarti that the fear of

submergence of the tribal culture and ethos within the dominant non-tribal culture and also lack of economic opportunity bred insurgency^[17].

7. Conclusion

To conclude, the partition of India in 1947 and the consequent migration of refugees led to immense pressure on the traditional economy of Tripura which in turn led to the loss of traditional livelihood among the tribes of Tripura. All this in turn contributed to the rise of insurgency in Tripura.

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