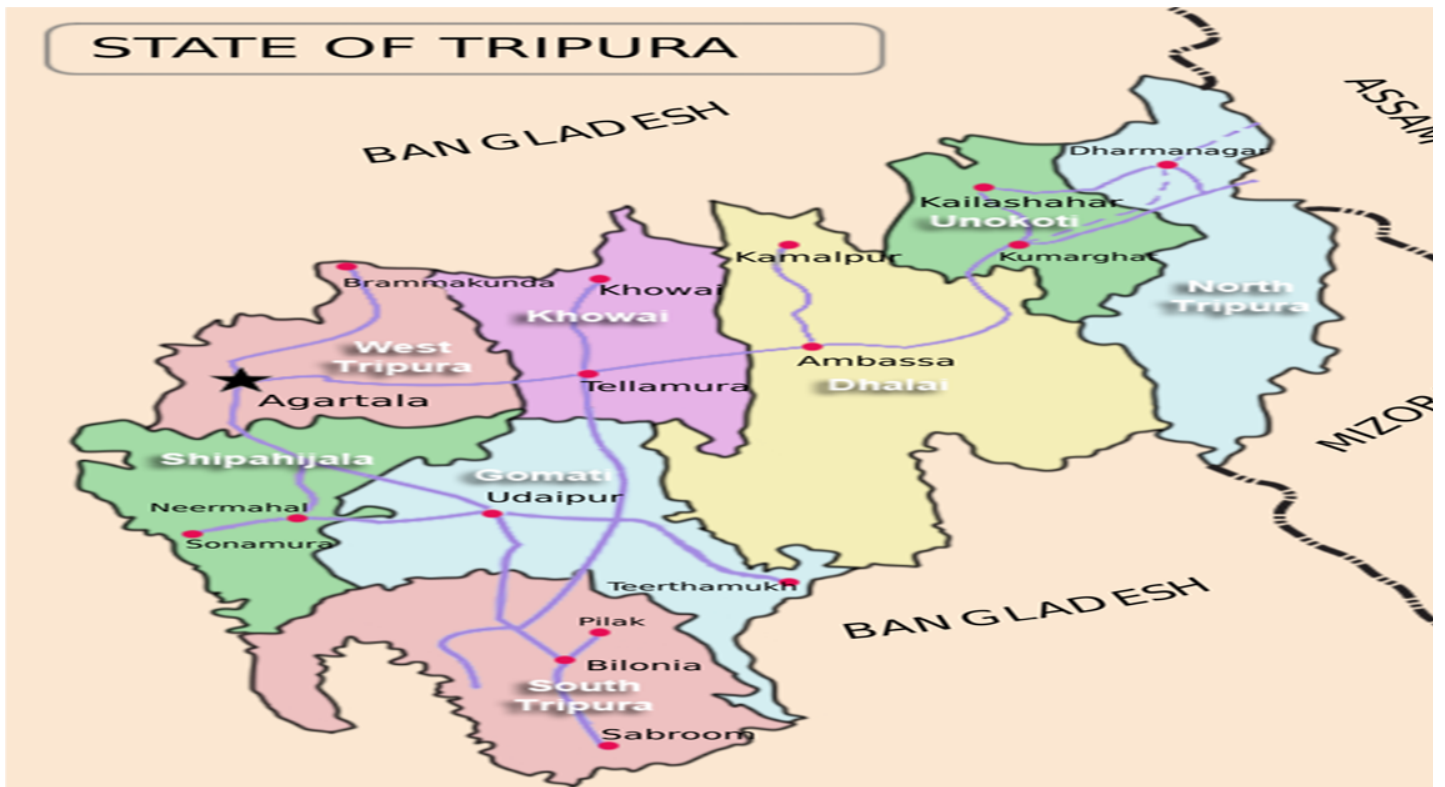




Tripura and a North-Eastern Perspective



30 Jan, 2018 Gautam Sen View2959 Comments 0

India's north-east is a fascinating geo-political entity in the country's internal context. The developments in the region, or rather the continued to have ramifications since the first decade of India's nationhood, both internally and in its south and south-eastern periphery aspect is that each of the components of the region i.e., the North-Eastern States, have different attributes, politically and economically, development and security perspectives. While the region has a predominant mongoloid ethnicity, the North-Eastern State of Tripura (*Kokborok dialect, meaning 'land by the water'*), has been a melting pot of indigenous ethnic-tribal cultural collective of Tibeto-Burman and of Bengali aspirations, traditions and way of life imbibed particularly from the migrants or settlers from the eastern districts of erstwhile Bangladesh.

It may be worthwhile to appraise how the different strands coalesced into a mix of cultures and inescapably impinged on socio-economic political consolidation, economic growth and internal security milieu of Tripura. In a sense, Tripura is mini replica of West Bengal, but is also substantially different. Tripura, at the government level and in its inhabitants' psyche, has not been generally acknowledged as a sister or even its sister state. This has been the outlook even when the Indian National Congress (INC) was in power in both the states. The situation after the Communists came to govern both the states, notwithstanding fraternalisation between the Communist Party of India units of West Bengal Tripura, and their leaders.

The state of administration, political processes and developments, economy and the security environment of the two provinces i.e. West Bengal and Tripura, have been quite dissimilar. Tripura has been trying to evolve from its princely state antecedents and under-developed past to a modern Indian Union yearning for development, and ethno-cultural and political stability, in harmonious juxtaposition with its neighbouring North-East. Being land-locked and at a distant South-East corner of the region have been the constraints for Tripura. Not that the different state governments or union governments were oblivious to these impediments, but the geopolitical milieu around the North-East and the post-independence

have compounded the constraints. The unfortunate tribal uprising in the 1980's and the Mandwai massacre in June 1980, when slaughtered a large number of Bengalis, were the outcome of politico-economic contestations between different segments of the State's also indicative of successive State Administration's inability to respond to the demand of its indigenous people for land rights, prote resource-base livelihood and culture. Notwithstanding a politically cohesive and livelihood issues-based approach of CPI-M governme decades - to the extent of broadly accommodating indigenous tribal interests harmoniously with those of the settler Bengalis - some unc remained in the socio-political realm of the State.

The State has been unique to the extent that it gave substantive political space to the indigenous tribals through the medium of the Autonomous District Council (TTAADC), headquartered at Khumlung in the West district. The TTAADC was constituted through an Parliament, included in the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution, and made effective from 1st April, 1985. The TTAADC encompasses more the State, with only a few fringe border areas in South-West Tripura outside its territorial ambit. This implies that, nearly the whole of Tr in its administrative structure and disposition. Though functional areas of governance and sanctioning powers are well demarcated Government and the TTAADC, most of Tripura is administered vis-à-vis their respective domains by two entities, i.e. the State Secretar the TTAADC. 15 departments, including management of land other than of government, forests, water resources, public health, scl institutions, and some more, are under the control of TTAADC, with nearly 15 lakh people served by this autonomous body. It has revenu taxing goods, animals, vehicles, boats and professional earnings to mobilise funds for executing programmatic functions pertaining to th it. The State Government also shares a part of its revenue with the TTAADC, apropos central and state finance commissions' rec institutional arrangements cited above have been quite farsighted and has stood the test of more than three decades of governance.

However, a devolutionary arrangement like the TTAADC would not have succeeded had not the bilateral relations between India an conducive. The problem of insurgency, which arose consequent on alienation of the indigenous tribal people, was aggravated becaus provided by Bangladesh governments to the armed cadres of the local insurgent outfits, viz. the National Liberation Front of Tripura (NL Tiger Force (ATFF)), and their leaders. These outfits spearheaded the insurgency and espoused the indigenous peoples' cause, infiltrate across an Tripura-Bangladesh Border traversing riverine terrain, agricultural tracts and forests, and virtually unfenced till the border fenci taken up seriously in the 1990's. The fact that the border guarding forces of India and Bangladesh were not in really friendly disposition, the regime of Sheikh Khaleda Zia and her Bangladesh Nationalist Party, aggravated the internal security situation in Tripura.

Consequent on the Awami League Government coming to power in Bangladesh in 2009, there was substantial improvement in bilatera the two countries. Dhaka took decisive action to close down the hideouts of the NLFT and ATFF insurgents in Bangladesh and deport som India, leading to stability in border management and the security scenario in Tripura. Enhancement of professional prowess of the Stat and effectiveness of administration, with a conjoint approach by the Union and State Governments, notwithstanding that they were (orientation, facilitated this positive change. This is borne out by the National Crime Records Bureau data of the recent years (post-2016) than 5000 cases of reported cognizable offences for a population of approximately 40 lakh.

The issues which presently require attention or intervention are : (a) political adjustment or understanding on the enhancement of po capacity of the TTADC; (b) further strengthening of the State's rights-based economic delivery systems; and, (c) greater institutionalised the India-Tripura frontier areas in terms of sustainable growth, welfare and security. The salience of these issues are highlighted in t recent demand for full statehood encompassing the existing TTAADC area - notwithstanding the demand being politically inspired and p ethnic considerations - for integrated development of the State and obviating sectarian tension. Among the North-Eastern States, performing well towards putting in place effective grassroot delivery systems, agricultural growth, mobilisation of investible resources w ratio of nearly 35 percent insofar as the banking network is concerned, and management of the State's finances. However, towards b economy and its progressive formalisation, employment generation and having a garland network of small-scale development hubs Bangladesh Border, there is a need to reinforce the present scale of development activities and for the authorities at Agartala and New D of one continuum.

In the heat of the approaching State Assembly elections, the demand for statehood of the TTAADC area has been escalated by the Indige of Twipra (IPFT) and the situation in parts of the State become contentious. The IPFT demands are for introduction of an Inner Line Perm inflow of non-indigenous people to Tripura and their settling down into economic activities in the State, recognition of Kokborok tribal lan of official communication and education, and 50 percent reservation of seats for the tribals in the State Legislature. The Central Governm an internal committee to delve into the demands to obtain a viable solution for the indigenous peoples' demand for statehood, as pro without eroding the structure and basis of the Tripura State. The demand, if acceded to in its entirety, will have repercussions on the Sta triggering further demands on similar lines in many other North-Eastern States having ethnic diversity like Assam, Mizoram and Manipu in the West Bengal areas affected by the Gorkhaland agitation.

Furthermore, a Twipra Tribal province will substantively disrupt the integrity and cohesion of the present Tripura State and pose iss administrative management from politico-economic and security perspectives. The State shares a 856 km long frontier with Bangladesh a high level of coordination between the state and central armed police forces deployed in Tripura. Gradual extension of border 'ha welcome phenomenon for Tripura's development, stability of the border and bilateral relations between India and Bangladesh. Borde functional at Srinagar (South district) and Kamalasangar (Sipahijhala district), and two more at Palbasti (North district) and Kamalpur (Dt the anvil. The haats are informal markets for exchange of local produce of the border and near-border areas and items of household u: Bangladesh on barter basis; to an extent, currencies of the respective countries are validated based on informal understanding on exch: customs duty, that is intended to improve livelihood of the border area residents. An annual turnover of approximately Rs. 10 crore from

anticipated. Substantial improvement in rail connectivity to Tripura through Assam, and to the border point of Agartala-Akhaura for trade and material is also in progress. An integrated check post and transit facility at the Agartala-Akhaura Border Point, is also functioning. The creation of a separate State for the Tripura indigenous people on these institutions and facilities need to be carefully appraised before any political and constitutional disposition of the State.

While the above-referred issue of indigenous peoples' demand for statehood has to be dealt with a mature holistic approach, because of the reasons mentioned above, the juxtaposition of the State with regard to development and stability of India's North-Eastern region, as well as the 'Act East Policy', have also to be suitably reckoned. The upswing in India's relations with Bangladesh during the Awami League regimes of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the fruition of the former's inescapable need for a riverine linkage to Tripura from West Bengal, expeditious transportation of men and infrastructure project stores to Tripura. People-to-people relations through the Agartala-Dhaka bus service and numerous strands of trade within the ambience of Bengali language and culture have also blossomed. It is in India's interest to reinforce these achievements and create opportunities for viable linkages, viz. through air and sea connection between, say, West Bengal, Tripura and South-East Asia. This could be the canopy of the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multilateral Sectoral Technical & Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) and India's 'Act East Policy'. The development model being followed in Tripura can accommodate such linkages. The characteristics of the people of Tripura and the state are likely to facilitate local employment generation in back-end activities of economic ventures and export-oriented establishments of the state with Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries. In the process, a gradual formalisation of the Tripura's economy will be achieved. Increasing the economic viability of the state's rubber plantations, improved latex and other bi-products' processing, and increasing the state's agriculture and allied sectors, viz. horticulture and fisheries, are some of the activities which can be gainfully attempted within the Government of India's development policies for the North-Eastern Region - thus leading to higher employment within Tripura and India and Bangladesh and the ASEAN region. All these activities can co-exist for some time with the rubric of grassroots exchanges through the haats. In such a scenario, Tripura can serve as a model of stability and growth in India's North-Eastern Region, while performing a real role towards promotion of the country's 'Act East' initiative.

Within the intra-north-eastern domain, Tripura has geographical and socio-economic linkages with Assam and Mizoram, States with which it shares state boundaries of 53 km and 109 km respectively. Till recently, National Highway-44, linking Guwahati, Shillong, Badarpur and Agartala, a durable road link between Assam and Tripura. It is necessary to improve this arterial link to all-weather condition and international standard. This infrastructural link has a relevance towards promoting inter-state commerce within North-Eastern Region as well as for providing a lateral prospective Trans-Asian Highway which is to eventually link the region with Myanmar and Thailand. As regards Tripura and Mizoram, ethnic harmony in both the States. The travails of the Reangs and Chakmas in Mizoram in the 1990's and the last decade, consequent to the displacement imposed by that State on their cultural expression and lack of development, are required to be redressed on a long-term basis. The displacement of these communities to Tripura, as in the late 1990's, will only strain the State's resources and adversely impact its internal harmony. Instituting effective autonomous councils for these ethnic communities in Mizoram is the most viable way to prevent negative developments in these states.

Tripura is an energy storehouse of the North-East by virtue of its substantial petroleum and natural gas reserves. A common market and an integrated power grid system, is an inescapable need. Already electricity transmission has commenced from the gas-based power project in Bangladesh. An institutional arrangement is necessary for joint India-Bangladesh management of a Tripura-energy based network under a partnership of assets. Such an arrangement will not require periodic negotiations between India and Bangladesh on product or output prices but based on the overall economics of the joint venture. Tripura State Government will perforce have to be the main Indian stakeholder and investors who evince interest. Energy development and marketing on a partnership basis as above, is likely to provide opportunities for upgrading and modernisation of the gas wells in Tripura, apart from additional employment in the state in ancillary activities.

(The author is a retired senior IDAS officer who has served as Adviser to a North-East State)

(Views expressed are of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the VIF)

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