Statehood Movement in Northeast India: Understanding the Demand of the Greater Tripura Land

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Abstract:

Northeast India has witnessed various statehood movements throughout the years, with factions desiring independent states or autonomous areas based on ethnic, cultural, and historical considerations. Many examples include the Bodo community's aspiration for a separate state of Bodoland in Assam, the Naga Movement for an independent state for the Naga people. For the autonomy of Mizoram, the Mizo National Front has started the movements. Similarly, one of Tripura's regional parties supports an additional state for the indigenous peoples. This article investigates the Tipra Motha Party's demand for "Greater Tripura Land," as well as the distinction between IPFT, also known as the Indigenous Peoples Front of Tripura demand for "Tipraland". Hence, the article analyzes challenges encountered by the Tribals in their homeland, as well as the benefits and drawbacks of the Greater Tripura Land.

Keywords: Greater Tipraland, Tipraland, Tipra Motha Party, IPFT, Political development of Tripura. Tribal Politics.

Introduction:

India in the 21st century has become one of the most influential countries in the world by emerging as a global leader. Despite being a young nation, India has witnessed several crises and challenges since the inception of its independence. India is a diverse state with a wide geographical area that borders numerous other countries. Similarly, all the states in the Northeast have international borders, except Tripura, which shares around 83% of the 1,001-kilometer border with former East Pakistan.[1] In the Northeast, Sikkim is the smallest state, and Tripura comes second. Despite its size, it ranks as the most populous state in Northeast India, behind Assam.[2] It has 10,486 sq. km and, like the rest of the Northeast state, it has diverse cultures and tribes. Tripura has 19 Scheduled Tribes, including the Riang (Bru), Tripuri, Lushai, Jamatia, Khasi, Uchoi, Mog, Noatia, Kuki, Chakma, Garos, Halam, Bhutia, Orang, Bhil, Munda, Lepcha, Santhal, and Chaimal.[3] Tripura, like Manipur, was a princely state during Indian independence.

Several etymologists have interpreted the name Tripura. The original name "Tripura" is believed to be a compound word formed from the terms "tui" (water) and "pra" (near), which together mean "near water." This theory for the state's name appears to be backed by its geographic location, which places it near the extensive water reserves of eastern Bengal, along with the common name of the state's ancient people, known as "Tipra" or "Twipra."[4] Tripura was one of the princely states in ancient India. The royal rulers of Tripura claimed that their ancestor was the Yoyati from the Lunar Dynasty of the Mahabharata. King

Druhya, King Bavru, King Pratardan, King Daitya, King Tripur, and King Trilochana succeeded King Yoyati. The reign of Maharaja Maha Manikya marked the beginning of the Manikya Dynasty.[5] He is also known as **Chhengthung Fa**. Between approximately 1400 to 1431, it is believed that Maha Manikya served as the cornerstone of the monarchy after gaining control over the surrounding tribes at the beginning of the 15th century. It is also said that he was the first person to be called "Manikya," a title given to him in recognition of a momentous victory over his neighbor, the Bengal Sultanate.[6] He was succeeded by Dangar Fa, also known as Dharma Manikya I. Dangar Fa was the Maharaja of Tripura from 1431 until 1462. Along with his religious and cultural accomplishments, his reign was noteworthy for its territorial expansions. It is believed that the kingdom was ruled by 185 rulers, starting with the legendary Druhya and concluding with Kirit Bikram Kishore Manikya, the last king to be crowned.[7] [8] Over 547 years, the Manikya kingdom was ruled by 35 Maharajas. Maharaja Bir Bikram Kishore Mangakya Bahadur, the last king, ruled from 1923 till 1947. He was a wise and adaptable monarch who passed away on May 17, 1947.[9]

During British administration, the State of Tripura, often called Hill Tipperah, was a princely state. A portion of the Mughal-controlled territory was seized by the British in 1764, when they gained control of Bengal. Tripura declared a British protectorate in 1809, and the British recognized the Tripura ruler as sovereign in 1838.[10] When Bengal was divided in the year 1905, the state was a part of East Bengal and Assam. It was in the year 1920, the state was renamed to Tripura. Beginning in 1919, the leader of the Tripura royal dynasty was referred to as the Maharaj. Just before India gained its freedom, in May 1947, Maharaj Vira Vikarama Kishor Manikya passed away. However, the Maharani Kanchan Prava Devi presided over the Council of Regency to run the state because his son Kirit Bikram Kishore was still a minor. The Maharani signed the Instrument of Accession to the Indian Union on August 13, 1947. Ultimately, the Maharani signed the Merger Agreement with the Union on September 9, 1949, and it went into force on October 15, 1949. Tripura consequently joined the Republic of India as a territory, and on January 21, 1972, it attained full statehood within the Indian Union.[11]

Political Development of the Tribals in Tripura

To understand the concept of Greater Tripura Land or Tripura Land, it is very important to understand the political process of Tripura. Since becoming a state in 1972, the state has had 11 chief ministers, with Mr Dasarath Debbarma as the one and only tribal chief minister so far. This denotes that so far, the state of Tripura has had a non-tribal Chief Minister, who is from the Bengali community. This is mainly due to the demographic shift in the state. The state during the British era had a very small non-tribal population, and the state was mainly occupied by the Tripuris. From 1901 to the 1941 census, the tribal population consistently made up the majority, accounting for 62.06 percent of the tribal population in 1941.[12]. However, this changed with the India Independence and the partition of India and Pakistan. After the partition, the districts of Noakhali, Chittagong, Sylhet, and Comilla in East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) bordered Tripura. Tripura shared a 1,001 km border, which is approximately 83% percent of Tripura, with the former East Pakistan. Despite this, the border that Cyril Radcliffe drew in 1946–1947 was an imaginary one. It remained accessible and open until the early 1980s.[13] Tripura experienced a boom in migration following the partition of 1947, with the liberation war of East Pakistan, and its creation of Bangladesh in 1971, owing mostly to its closeness to East Pakistani areas and unsecured borders. North-eastern India's demographic structure was severely disrupted by partition, and Tripura was no exception. The Directorate of Rehabilitation was founded in 1949 to resettle these overwhelming refugees from what was then East

Pakistan. The rehabilitation was completed in three stages: 1947, 1967, and 1971, permanently shifting the population balance against the tribals.[14] As per the 2011 census, 31.05% of the state population consists of indigenous tribes from 19 communities, while 69.95% are non-tribals, with a significant portion of the Manipuri population.[15]

During the early stages of statehood, the tribe did not realize the necessity for a political party. However, only later did the educated young of the period seek more control over their state and more autonomy; therefore, they created the TUJS, also known as Tripura Upajati Juba Samity. This led to the creation of the first indigenous political party of Tripura in 1967. As the TUJS movement gained traction among the native tribes, other political parties that were not affiliated with the TUJS started endorsing their constitutional demand. As a result of this social and political unity, which is exemplified by several parties uniting around a common goal through their electoral battle. This led to the creation of the Tripura Tribal Areas Autonomous District Council, commonly known as TTAADC, under the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution.[16] Tripura's total geographical area is 10491 square kilometres, with TTAADC accounting for 7132.56 square kilometres (68% of the state's land). This gives more autonomy and protects the economic, social, and cultural interests of the entire tribal population. The TTAADC was officially formed on January 15, 1982. Initially, it covered 68% of Tripura's geographical territory, mostly inhabited by tribal groups, and it was elevated under the provision of the 6th schedule of the Indian Constitution on August 23, 1984, by the 49th Constitution (Amendment) Act, 1984, with effect from April 1, 1985.[17]

Tipra Motha Party (TMP)

Tipra Motha is a newly formed local party in the state of Tripura. Tipra is an acronym for the Tipraha Indigenous Progressive Regional Alliance. This party was founded by Pradyot Bikram Manikya Debbarma, who is the son of Tripura's last ruler, in 2019 as part of a push to demand for Greater Tripura Land.[18] The newly emerging local party in the state of Tripura is known as Tipra Motha. Is the acronym of Tipraha Indigenous Progressive Regional Alliance (TIPRA) Motha. This party was established by Pradyot Bikram Manikya Debbarma, the son of Tripura's last king, in the year 2019 as a movement to demand the Greater Tripura Land. One must first become familiar with the political-historical struggles of the indigenous tribes of Tripura from a dialogical-historical perspective to critically appreciate the birth of indigenous politics in the state of Tripura. The concerns about citizenship rights, land alienation or grabbing, governance, and epistemicide are what fundamentally define the indigenous people of Tripura's struggle in post-independent India. The struggle started as an emotional response to the abnormal demographic changes taking place that began reconfiguring the social and political landscape. Despite the creation of the TTADC for the tribals, the inability of the TTADC to fulfil the needs and demands of the tribals has led to the aspiration to have more autonomy. In 2021, the Indigenous Nationalist Party of Twipra, also known as INPT, one of the state's oldest tribal parties, combined with the Tipraland State Party, also known as TSP, and the IPFT (Tipraha).[19] [20] The TMP alliance with INPT contested in the election of the TTADC won 18 seats and formed the government in the year 2021. The Left-Wing 15-year rule of the government came to an end, and the Tipra Motha Party became the first regional party to form a government in TTADC without allying with a major national party.[21] The Party contested for the first time in the 2023 General Election. The newly created party advocates a separate state for the tribal people known as 'Greater Tipraland'.[22] The party used this cause to unite the tribal and to support their demand, and stated that the only way to achieve their objective is to unite the tribal, which they called 'Thansa'[23]. They contested in 42 constituencies and won 13 seats out of 42 constituencies.[24] The party became the

main opposition party in the legislative assembly of Tripura, making it the first ever tribal party in the state's history.[25]

Indigenous Peoples Front of Tripura.

Another significant regional political party for the tribal peoples of the state of Tripura is the Indigenous Peoples Front of Tripura, also known as IPFT. The Indigenous People's Front of Tripura (IPFT) was established to address the issues and promote the rights of indigenous populations. This party was established to promote the rights and welfare of the indigenous population. Indigenous communities of the Tripuris, comprising tribes such as the Tripuris, Reang, Jamatia, and others, have often faced political and economic challenges. These challenges include issues with land rights, cultural identity, and government representation. In response to these concerns, the IPFT was created to provide a platform for indigenous people to voice their grievances and fight for the defence of their rights.

N C Debbarma and Harinath Debbarma founded the party in 1996 after leaving the Tripura Upjati Juba Samiti, an existing tribal organization, following the government's ban on the National Liberation Front of Tripura. Bijoy Kumar Hrangkhwal, the founder of the outlawed terrorist organization Tripura National Volunteers (TNV), reported in his newspaper, "Tripura Star," that in the 1980s, Harinath Debbarma was the leader of the so-called "Independent Tripura Government." H. Debbarma had demanded in 1980 that Bengalis be extradited from Tripura while he was a member of TUJS. In the year 2000, the armed National Liberation Front of Tripura, also referred to as NLFT, assisted the TTAADC election by scaring the tribal people in an attempt to win seats.[26] By gaining a seat in the Tripura Tribal Areas Autonomous District Council in 2000, the party achieved its first significant political victory with the backing of the NLFT.[27] There are thirty members in the TTAADC, and twenty-eight are elected, and two are appointed by the governor. On May 6, 2000, the election results were announced. The IPFT had 18 seats, CPI(M) had 8 seats, while CPI and Forward Block had one for each.[28] On May 19, 2000, the newly elected members of the IPFT elected Debabrata Koloi as their chief executive member (CEM), and eight elected members as executive members of the TTAADC, and Hirendra Tripura as their chairman, all of whom pledged to respect the Indian Constitution, without the presence of opposition members.[29] In 2002, it amalgamated with Tribal National Volunteers and Tripura Upjati Juba Samiti, a militant organisation that subsequently became a political party. Later, the party was renamed as the Indigenous Nationalist Party of Twipra (INPT). The INPT was split in 2006 when Animesh Debbarma formed a new party National Conference of Tripura (NCT), with defected members of the other party[30]. In 2009, shortly before the Lok Sabha election, N.C. Debbarma left the INPT and resurrected the IPFT, causing the INPT to divide once more. According to Articles 2 and 3 of the Indian Constitution, the IPFT's primary demand is the creation of "Tipraland," a state inside the TTAADC.[31] In the State General Election of 2018, the BJP and the IPFT nominated candidates for 51 and 9 seats, respectively. In Tripura, the 25-year-old CPI(M) government was overthrown by the BJP, which won 36 seats and the IPFT, 8 seats, for a total of 44 Assembly seats.[32] In the general election of 2023, the BJP and the IPFT united to establish a government for the second time, with the BJP securing 32 seats and the IPFT gaining one seat. [33]

Demand for Greater Tipraland or Tipraland State

Despite the creation of the state and later being granted power through an Autonomous District Council, the indigenous inhabitants of Tripura still aspire to have more autonomy and want to achieve a separate state for the 19 tribes of the tribal peoples living in Tripura. This was due to the demographic shift of the

state, and the landowner now becomes the one who is deprived of economic, social, and political power, as the majority of the population was Bengali. The idea of the Tipraland state was first championed by the IPFT with the leadership of the NC Debbarma. The demand of the tribal state known as Tipraland State, according to Articles 2 and 3 of the Indian Constitution, was the primary cause of the party's split from the INPT and creation of the IPFT. With the IPFT unable to fulfil its promise of 'Tripuraland', another party known as Tipra Motha Party, commonly known as TMP, began to popularise the same idea by adding Greater Tipraland. They demanded that the government of India establish a new state called " Greater Tripuraland" based on the Indian constitution under Articles 2 and 3.[34] Both parties, which are TMP and IPFT, demand a separate state that should be carved out of Tripura, covering all the tribal inhabitant areas of the Tripura state. This was due to Tripura, which used to be the tribal majority, now becoming the Bengali majority. As the majority are non-tribal immigrants from Bangladesh, the tribal people are now deprived of their socio-economic and political rights. They have since lost the majority of their territory to immigrants, and the tribal culture and language have been lost and assimilated. The indigenous people must now adopt Bengali as the majority language for communication and education. The tribe must now learn the other language to communicate and read in their homeland. The tribal community must now struggle for linguistic recognition on their land. As a result of all these factors has led to the demand for the tribal people to establish their own separate state.

What is Greater Tripuraland, and how does it differ from Tipraland
The IPFT was the first to popularize Tipraland. N C Debbarma and Harinath Debbarma founded it in 1996. In 2002, the party changed its name to the Indigenous Nationalist Party of Twipra (INPT) after merging with Tribal National Volunteers and Tripura Upjati Juba Samiti. However, shortly before the 2009 Lok Sabha election, N.C Debbarma left the INPT and resurrected the IPFT. The creation of "Tipraland," which would be carved out of Tripura state and encompass the TTADC territory, is the primary demand of the IPFT. They also aim to infiltrate the Bengalis from Tripura and especially from the TTADC area. The IPFT also aims to align with the BJP or Congress to counter the Left Front. The party also strongly supports the Tripura Royal Dynasty.[35] The IPFT organized an angry and violent demonstration in Agartala in August 2013, calling for "Tipraland." The party has been more active since 2017. The IPFT disrupted the state's supply of essential commodities in July 2017 by staging a two-week closure of the National Highway, which serves as the state's sole road link to the rest of the nation. After NC Debbarma had a conversation with the PMO office and Home Minister Rajnath Singh of the Central Government, the roadblock was lifted. NC Debbarma stated throughout the presentation that "Twipraland" would soon become a reality.[36] Eventually, in the 2018 General Election, IPFT's alliance with the BJP formed the government, and their demand for Tipraland has become forgotten by the party.

The 'Greater Tipraland' was a demand that was put forward by the Tipra Motha Party (TMP) for the creation of a new state for the indigenous people of Tripura. It aims to create a new state from the state based on the Indian Constitution under Articles 2 and 3. Pradyot Bikram Manikya Debbarma, the leader of TMP, in his interview, explained 'Greater Tipraland' by stating that a new state should be created for the tribals. Also, he added that there are a huge number of Tiprasa living outside of the TTADC area who might be in Mizoram, Assam, or inside Tripura but outside of the TTADC area, as well as the Tiprasa living in Bangladesh. In order to support and safeguard the Tripura indigenous population residing outside the state, he insisted that a development council be established. Since the Tripuri had now lost their language, culture, way of life, and history, this council was necessary. The socioeconomic, cultural, and

political aspects of the Tiprasa shall be safeguarded by this council.[37] Pradyot Bikram Manikya Debbarma stated that this council should be controlled by the central government and not the state government, as it is essential for the survival of the Tiprasa people.[38] In short, the 'Greater Tipraland' demand by the Tipra Motha Party is a little different from the Tipraland demand by the IPFT. Where the Motha Party did not just want a separate state for the tribal, but also wanted to create a development council for those Tiprasa who are living outside of the TTADC, as well as Assam, Mizoram, and Bangladesh.

Benefits and drawbacks of the Greater Tripura.

The benefits of Greater Tipraland

1. **Local Governance and Representation:** In the state of Tripura, as the non-tribal population is the majority, almost all the government jobs are occupied by non-tribals. Also, the majority of seats of the State Legislative Assembly are reserved for non-tribal members. By having the Greater Tipraland, the tribal will have full control over the state administration. The government job of the new state would now be filled by the Tribal. It would also increase tribal seats for the State Legislative Assembly for the Tribals. This would make the Tribal influence more in the decision-making process, in turn resulting in policies that better reflect their interests and concerns.

2. **Cultural and Identity Preservation:** The 19 tribes of Tripura are slowly losing their culture and tradition. This was because they were the minority in the state, and they were slowly influenced by the majority of non-tribal people. Without proper preservation of culture, they could lose their identity. Hence, by having a greater Tripuraland, the tribal would now have a better chance of preserving their culture and tradition by passing laws in the state legislature.

3. **Language Preservation:** In Tripura, the Kokborok-speaking communities are the Debbarma, Tripura, Jamatia, Noatia, Kalai, Murasing, Rupini, Uchoi, and Reang. Even though Tripura was one of the princely states during British rule and had an established, strong kingdom before their arrival, it did not have its language script. On January 19, 1979, Kokborok was acknowledged as an official state language. Since then, this day, January 19, has been observed as Kokborok Day.[39] However, Bengali was the most commonly used language and was used as the main official language by the government to carry out its daily duties. Also, the schools and colleges were taught by the Bengali, and most institutions were Bengali medium till today. The Kokborok is also written in Devanagari script as the Kokborok does not have their script. The Kokborok was introduced in the Bachelor's Degree in the college affiliated with the Tripura University only in 2012, and the Master of Arts (Kokborok) was started only in the year 2015.[40] However, till today, the Kokborok has been studied using the Devanagari script below 12 standard. In recent times, the Tripura Students Federation (TSF) has demanded that CBSE students write the Kokborok in Roman script.[41] By having the Greater Tipraland, the tribal peoples would not need to demand to be recognised for their language and their script. The tribal people would be able to choose whatever script is comfortable for them.

4. **Socio-economic and Political benefits:** Through the Greater Tipraland Tripuri, people may emphasise economic development activities that benefit their community. This might involve investments in industries like agriculture, tourism, and infrastructure. With enhanced authority, the new state could pursue social welfare programs, particularly geared to improve underprivileged communities within the Tripuri people, addressing concerns like poverty, education, and healthcare.

5. **Land rights and resource control:** Greater Tripura's creation may provide Tripuri communities more control over regional matters, including resource management, land rights, and socioeconomic

development. Tribes may obtain more control over their native lands and resources, promoting sustainable development and safeguarding against possible exploitation.

The drawback of Greater Tipraland.

1. **Ethnic Conflict:** With the creation of Greater Tripuraland, there is a very good chance that there could be huge conflict and tension between the tribal and non-tribal. This is because many of the non-tribal also reside within the tribal area (TTADC), and with the creation of the state, just like the partition of India, many tribes would have to be resettled in Greater Tipraland and vice versa.

2. **The power struggle among the Tribes:** There are 19 tribes in Tripura. The creation of the state could bring about power struggles and conflict between the tribal communities. With the establishment of the new state, there emerges the possibility of a power struggle between the Tripuri tribes and the non-Tripuri tribes, such as Chakma and Lushai, as they are demanding Autonomous District Council and Regional Council, respectively. It could also bring a potential conflict within the Tripuri tribes, such as between the Debbarma and the Bru/Reang, or with the Jamatia or Tripura. This is evident from the recent fight between the Tripuri Debbarma and Tripuri Reang, as the Reang demand that their Language 'Kau Bru' be recognised in the state of Tripura. Also, many Tripuri tribes in recent years demanded an Autonomous District Council separately for their community. If each of these communities wanted to have their autonomy and were unable to come to terms with each other, there is a potential clash between the tribals.

3. **Conflict with the surrounding states:** The creation of the state would also bring border conflicts with the other surrounding states. Currently, Tripura has a border issue with Mizoram. The highest peak of Tripura was claimed by Mizoram. Several villages of Jampui Hills are also considered part of Mizoram; however, the Tripura government reinstated that those villages are a part of Tripura. With the creation of the state, without proper demarcation of the state border, the state will have border issues with the neighbouring states.

4. **Administrative Challenges:** Creating and administering a new state necessitates enormous administrative resources and infrastructure. There may be initial difficulties in establishing government institutions, delivering necessary services, and maintaining good governance. Without the help of the central government, the new state will not be able to function properly. The new state's success would be dependent on central government backing, both financially and in terms of policy frameworks. A lack of assistance may impede its capacity to solve socioeconomic difficulties effectively.

5. **Political Instability:** When a state or country is created, the leaders who hold power play a very important role in the progress and development of the state. A state with great leaders will excel and lead its state into modernity. However, without good leaders, the newly created state could become a chaotic and problematic state. The state, which has different tribal groups, would lead to the creation of different political parties that support their own goals. Political instability or power conflicts may accompany the process of establishing a new administrative division, which can have a detrimental impact on governance and growth.

6. **Secessionist Tendencies:** There is a possibility that the establishment of an ethnically based state may feed separatist or secessionist movements, particularly if there are unsolved grievances or desires for more autonomy. With the creation of Greater Tripuraland, there could also be another group of tribes who want a separate state for themselves, as the state comprises 19 tribes. This could also fuel other

communities like the Garo demanding a Garoland in Meghalaya, the Bodo for Bodoland State in Assam, and the Gorkha for the Gorkhaland in West Bengal.

Conclusion

Over the decades, the Greater Tipraland movement, which was founded on the indigenous struggle against demographic marginalization, progressed from insurgency to democratic political engagement. Despite early unity and momentum under parties such as TUJS and subsequently IPFT, the tribal leadership's credibility weakened after the IPFT abandoned the Tipraland demand when it took power in 2018. This move has damaged trust among the tribal Tiprasa community, emphasizing the ongoing disconnect between political pledges and action to satisfy indigenous goals.

The Tipra Motha Party (TMP), founded by Pradyot Bikram Manikya Debbarma, has revived the push for a distinct tribal state—Greater Tipraland—using a constitutional and inclusive approach. TMP has made considerable political gains by emphasizing cultural preservation and tribal solidarity under the slogan "Thansa," winning the 2021 TTADC elections and becoming the main opposition in the 2023 state assembly. Their continuous desire for a constitutional solution culminated in a large mobilization and hunger strike in February 2024, exhibiting tremendous grassroots support and steadfast dedication to the tribal cause.[42] The signing of the historic deal on March 2, 2024, by Pradyot Bikram Manikya Debbarma, the Government of India, the Government of Tripura, and the Tipra Motha Party represents a crucial step in addressing the long-standing concerns of Tripura's indigenous communities. The agreement to work on problems of political rights, land, identity, culture, and development through a joint working group shows a constitutional and collaborative road toward realizing the indigenous population's objectives.[43] The Tipra Motha Party, Tripura's largest opposition party, united with the ruling BJP, causing a significant upheaval in the state's political environment following the deal. This was cemented on March 7, 2024, when senior TMP leaders Animesh Debbarma and Brishaketu Debbarma were appointed Cabinet Minister and Minister of State, respectively, in the BJP-led government. The move is a strategic alliance aimed at jointly tackling tribal challenges through governance.[44] In the year 2017, the IPFT was promised Tipraland after speaking with the Central Government, which has not been fulfilled till today. Now with the Tipra Motha Party, the dreams of every Tiprasa to achieve Greater Tipraland are once again left uncertain. Only time will tell whether the accord will be fulfilled and the Tiprasa will finally enjoy their right and claim to their motherland.

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