

Women at the Crossroads: Insurgency and Internal Displacement in Tripura

Dr. Lincoln Reang

Associate Professor of History, Tripura University

&

Dr. Susmita Banerjee

Guest Lecturer, Holy Cross College, Agartala

Abstract: *The tribal people of Tripura faced escalating threats during Bangladesh's independence struggle due to illegal migration from East Pakistan. In the 1970s, a substantial influx of Hindu and Muslim refugees from East Pakistan's border regions settled in Tripura, displacing indigenous populations. Despite a deal reached by Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Mujibur Rahman to recognize pre-1971 migrants as citizens, Tripura's demographics shifted drastically, with a 78% population increase by the next census. This displacement resulted in significant political and socio-economic ramifications, including an identity crisis and growth of insurgency among the tribal communities seeking to preserve their rights and land. The displacement crisis reshaped Tripura's demographic profile and led to the establishment of temporary camps and eventual resettlement initiatives. Displaced individuals, including those from both Bengali and Tribal communities, encountered numerous difficulties, such as poor living circumstances and restricted access to needs and requirements. Despite these challenges, displaced women have played a crucial role in advocating for their rights and contributing to resettlement efforts. The Governing concepts for internal diffusion draw attention to the need of providing safety and aid to Internally Displaced People (IDPs), emphasizing their right to basic necessities, healthcare, education, and participation in decision-making processes. However, these principles were often overlooked during the insurgency days in Tripura, leading to widespread abuse and neglect of displaced women. This research paper provides an overview of the reason and consequences of internal displacement in Tripura.*

Keywords: Internal Displacement, Women, Tripura, Insurgency.

The Prelude:

The tribal people of Tripura faced increased threats during the struggle for the

independence of Bangladesh due to the issue of illegal migration towards Tripura. In the 1970s, a significant number of Hindus and Muslims from the border regions of East Pakistan sought refuge in Tripura to escape the Pakistani military.¹ At this juncture, the infiltration effort commenced. This happened at the same time in both Tripura and neighbouring Assam. However, after the Bangladesh Liberation War came to a close, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, who was then recently elected Prime Minister of Bangladesh, initiated talks with India's then Prime Minister, Smt. Indira Gandhi. A mutual agreement was reached, stating that individuals who had moved to Bangladesh or India prior to March 31, 1971 would be recognised as citizens of the respective countries.² This ruling affected both Bangladesh and India. The situation became significantly more challenging due to this development. After the Bangladesh Liberation War came to an end, there was a significant increase in the population of Tripura, despite its small land size. Since the previous census conducted in 1971, the population of Tripura has experienced a remarkable growth, with an increase of seventy-eight per cent.³ The Bengalis began to dominate the fertile plains of Tripura due to the absence of a proper resettlement process. This led to a displacement of the tribal populations of Tripura, pushing them further into the interior hilly areas.⁴ Consequently, the tribal population in Tripura was then facing an identity crisis. As a result, the tribal people of Tripura found themselves in the minority within their own land. Nevertheless, the migration in Tripura began in 1947 and was further intensified during various periods such as the 1950s and 1964, as a result of the violent conflicts targeting religious minorities in East Pakistan. These events naturally had a profound impact on the tribal population in Tripura. Hence, the identity crisis and political discrimination experienced by the tribal people in Tripura have greatly contributed to the rise of insurgents and the resulting insurgency. Insurgency in Tripura was a direct result of the tribal population's struggle to protect their socio-political and economic rights. Some organisations pushed for the establishment of an independent region within the state dedicated to the different tribes. While another group argued for the allocation of separate land for tribal communities, with the aim of ensuring equality and providing an environment of security for refugees from Bengal. As a result, the insurgency's objective underwent a transformation, becoming a socio-political revolution aimed at protecting the tribal residents within their own land. Over time, the situation in Tripura escalated from insurgency to horrifying acts of violence such as mass killings, abductions, rape, assaults, and extortion. Consequently, numerous individuals were compelled to abandon their residences in pursuit of security, finding sanctuary in urban regions. The internal displacement had a lasting impact on the demographic situation of the state.

Roots Of Insurgency In Tripura:

In 1967, a group of young tribal people in Tripura came together and established

an organisation called the Tripura Upajati Juba Samity (TUJS). Since its establishment in 1967, the TUJS has been at the forefront of advocating for the rights of tribal people in the region. On 11th July, 1968, approximately 324 members of the TUJS embarked on a relentless hunger strike to champion their constitutional rights and autonomy. On 11th March, 1970, members of the TUJS again took part in a hunger strike that lasted for an additional 24 hours across Tripura. Furthermore, the TUJS took the initiative to organise various tribal rallies and submitted multiple petitions to the Indian Government, urging them to address the tribal demands in accordance with the Indian Constitution.⁵ The TUJS movement primarily focused on securing constitutional land rights for tribal communities. Meanwhile, the State Government decided to revoke the Maharaja of Tripura's 'Tribal Reserve Area' through the passing of an Ordinance on February 28, 1974. The decision made by the Tripura Government deeply offended the tribal community. Following that, a fresh perspective emerged in the fight for tribal's autonomy. A gathering of representatives from all political parties was called to address the issue at hand and to express a firm opposition to the recent ordinance that was passed on February 28, 1974. Agartala was chosen as the venue for it on 7th April, 1974. Several organisations, including the Tribal Students' Federation, TUJS, Tripura Rajya Gana Mukti Parishad, and Tripura Rajya Mukti Parishad, participated in the convention.⁶ In addition, the Tripura Upajati Karmachari Samity and the Tribal Youth Federation also delivered presentations. The Conference ended with the acceptance of an Action Plan and the Four-Point Charter of Demands. The Convention led to the establishment of a 'Joint Action Committee' that was tasked with providing guidance to the movement. Two individuals were chosen from each organisation that sent representatives to the All-Party Tribal Convention. On 30th April, 1974, numerous significant meetings and rallies took place, organised by the 'Joint Action Committee,' which brought together individuals from diverse tribal and non-tribal backgrounds.⁷ The protests that took place in front of the Block Development Offices in the state were orchestrated by the 'Joint Action Committee'. On May 3rd, 1974, there was a complete shutdown in Tripura that lasted for an entire day. However, in direct response to the campaign in February of 1975, the Government initiated the creation of a 'Tribal Schedule Area.' Nevertheless, due to the dissatisfaction of the tribal people, they continued to persevere in their endeavours to attain autonomy. As a result of this, a division or rift emerged within the 'All-Party Action Committee' and the collective endeavour of the tribe members proved to be short-lived. There was a clear divide on the issue of whether individuals who are not part of the tribe should be permitted to join the effort to advance tribal goals. After the meeting held on June 5th 1974, the 'Joint Action Committee' no longer existed. After that day, the struggle for tribal's autonomy led to a division along two different ideological paths, resulting in the emergence of tribal politics.⁸ The TUJS reached the conclusion that the most effective approach is to safeguarding tribal culture and

identity, while simultaneously advocating for tribal autonomy, was to embark on an independent path. It emphasised the notion that tribal communities possess the necessary resources to address their own challenges and should take ownership of finding solutions. In 1974, the 'Year of Struggle,' efforts were made to lay the groundwork for a movement plan.⁹ Following several meetings and gatherings, on July 10th 1974, a tribal protest was scheduled to occur in the town of Agartala. The All-Party Action Committee was established by a breakaway organisation led by TUJS. Following the parade that made its way through the town's streets, a gathering of the local community occurred at the Agartala Children's Park. Aghore Debbarma took on the role of host and led the event. It was Harinath Debbarma who provided the statements. Additionally, there were other individuals present, including Shyama Charan Tripura, Debabrata Koloy, and several others. Despite the country's independence, the tribal people of Tripura continued to face significant challenges and remained in a state of backwardness.¹⁰ This led the speakers to strongly criticise the Government's approach after independence. The agitation led by TUJS's Action Committee persisted through a series of meetings and presentations. In September of 1974, a memorandum summarising the Tribal Convention's four requests was presented to the Union Home Minister in New Delhi. The 'Four-point Charter of Demands' was brought up during the 'Tripura Tribal Convention' and was emphasised in the Memorandum. The report ended with several warnings and urged the Indian Government to adhere to these demands. In addition, there was a warning that the protest scheduled for July 10th appears to have been ignored and not taken seriously. Consequently, it is now their responsibility to display an alternative manifestation of the ailment. The individuals were uncertain about the potential directives that might be issued by the agitated members of the tribe who have become disillusioned due to the absence of democracy and non-violent civil resistance. In July of 1978, the TUJS once again alluded to the potential for a violent movement.¹¹ On 21st May 1980, block deputations were organised across Tripura, followed by a week-long 'Bazar Boycott' from 1st-7th June, 1980. These actions were part of a strategy aimed at the deportation of immigrants. During that period, it was impacted by events in nearby states, particularly the uprising in Assam against 'foreigners' and the call for the 'Sovereign Independent State of Mizoram.' This group advocated for the deportation of individuals who migrated to Tripura after 15th October, 1949, the day the state was officially admitted to the Indian Union, considering them as 'foreigners'. In addition, it stated that individuals who had established residence in Tripura prior to that specific date were considered 'locals'.¹² TUJS swiftly gained a significant presence in Tripura's political landscape. In just one year, the organisation experienced significant growth and expanded its reach to include tribal workers, students, women, and young people (TSYB), Tripura Sena, etc. As TUJS continued on its course, some of the younger members began to lose their faith in that direction. The young faction

within TUJS, led by B.K. Hrangkhawl, the Commander-in-Chief of 'Tripura Sena,' continued their efforts to promote 'Tripura Sena' as an extremist organisation. They began establishing connections with the Mizo National Front (MNF). Therefore, B.K Hrwangkhal was expelled from TUJS due to engaging in activities that were against the party's principles.¹³ Meanwhile, the CPI (M) emerged as the winner in the Assembly Elections in 1977, while TUJS faced defeat in the opposition. As per their election promise, the CPI (M) has stated that they will promptly initiate the necessary procedures to establish a District Council and reclaim tribal land.¹⁴ In this situation, extremist Bengalis felt a sense of alarm. They strongly opposed the Government's decision and formed a group called Aamra Bangali (AB). The Aamra Bangali (AB) held extensive gatherings to express their disagreement with the establishment of the District Council, while also demanding the implementation of a Tripura Bandh (strike). The TUJS took charge of coordinating massive rallies in support of the District Council. During the bandh called by Aamra Bangali, there were unfortunate incidents that occurred in Kamalghat, Lembucherra, Teliamura and Mohorcherra, particularly in West Tripura District.¹⁵ Individuals from both tribal and non-tribal populations were involved in these incidents. In the midst of a turbulent riot situation in Tripura, a group of young individuals from a tribal extremist organisation sought the guidance of Bijoy Kumar Hrangkhawl. Chuni Kalai, Dulal Hrangkhawl and Karnashingh Jamatia were present at the secret gathering that took place in Kachima, situated in South Tripura District. The meeting was led by B.K. Hrangkhawl. In July 1979, a group emerged with the aim of overthrowing the legally recognised Government of Tripura through armed warfare in order to establish an independent tribal state in the region. This group was known as the Tripura National Volunteers (TNV).¹⁶ Consequently, it served as the catalyst for the formation of Tripura's inaugural insurgent group. In addition, the tribal insurgents have formed a new military division known as the Army of Tripura People's Liberation Organisation (ATPLO). It was formed by a group of TNV activists who had previously separated from the organisation under the leadership of Binod Jamatia. The combined efforts of the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) insurgents of Nagaland and the Mizo National Front (MNF) insurgents of Mizoram are considered to be the main driving force behind the ATPLO. Despite this, Binod Jamatia and his supporters eventually surrendered to the Government of Tripura in July of 1983. The main objective of these insurgent groups in Tripura was to uphold the idea of tribalism and establish an independent state that would not permit Bengali immigrants.¹⁷ During the 1980s, another insurgent group named All Tripura Tiger Force (ATTF) emerged with a similar objective. In October 1988, a group of frantic TNV militants, led by Dhananjay Reang and operating covertly, formed the National Liberation Front of Twipra (NLFT). In 1993, Dhananjay Reang decided to break away from the NLFT and founded the Tripura Resurrection Army (TRA). Eventually, both

Dhananjay Reang and TRA faded into obscurity. Under the leadership of Biswa Mohan Debbarma, the NLFT became a formidable insurgent force within the state. He continues to hold the role of President within the organisation.¹⁸ In 2001, Nayanbasi Jamatia, an SS Major, was expelled from the NLFT due to allegations of corruption and moral turpitude. This event led to a division within the NLFT. Josua Debbarma, a well-known NLFT official, was expelled from the party due to conflicts with Biswamohan Debbarma, the President of NLFT. These disagreements happened at nearly the same time. Josua Debbarma and Nayanbasi Jamatia collaborated to form a second militant group, asserting that it held the distinction of being the original one.¹⁹ Later on, this group would gain recognition as the NLFT-Nayanbasi (NLFT-N), with Josua leading as the supremo and Nayanbasi as the Vice President. On 25th December, 2004, a total of 153 NLFT-N cadres surrendered to the State Government. However, Nayanbasi Jamatia chose a different path and fled to Bangladesh instead of joining the formal surrender ceremony. The Bangladesh Police apprehended him on 10th December, 2008 from the village of Kalacherra, PS Kamalganj in Bangladesh. In contrast to other leaders, Josua Debbarma chose to reject surrender and instead continued his militant activities with a small group of cadres.²⁰ However, the NLFT-J group eventually became completely inactive when all of its members, including two women, decided to surrender to the security forces on January 6th 2006. Josua Debbarma chose not to take part in the surrender, setting himself apart from the other leaders. Josua remains in Bangladesh, but he has not engaged in any violent activities during his time there. Since 2001, Biswamohan has maintained control of NLFT, which is now known as NLFT-B.²¹

Women In Crisis During Insurgency:

Armed conflict has a profound impact on women in various ways. One area of concern is the safety of individuals, particularly women, who face the risk of losing their lives due to various hazards such as landmines, gunshots, explosives, and more. When faced with this situation, women may face challenges in quickly leaving the area due to factors such as their physical condition, pregnancy, or general mobility limitations, unlike men. Consequently, women find themselves in a riskier situation compared to men when confronting extremists head-on. They are at a higher risk of experiencing rape and other forms of sexual assault. Many women feel compelled to restrict their mobility due to concerns about personal safety and the potential for sexual assault. This poses a challenge for individuals to engage in employment opportunities, access food assistance, and benefit from relief programmes. Collecting firewood for cooking and their livelihood becomes even more challenging for them. During this period of conflict, their limited mobility due to safety concerns has had a negative impact on their ability to make a living and survive, which in turn has equally affected their physical and mental well-being. The absence of

reliable transportation, adequate medical services, and effective communication exacerbates the challenges individuals face in accessing necessary medications, ultimately compromising their well-being and safety. In traditional civilizations, the allocation of food resources tends to favour male family members due to the power dynamics that exist within these societies. Due to the impact of violence, women in numerous communities are often left to eat last and bear the consequences of malnutrition. It's no wonder that the social context and gender dynamics have a major influence on how insurgency affects women.²² The second dimension encompasses the realm of one's personal life. Insurgency and war can significantly impact a family's ability to sustain itself, which places a great deal of responsibility on women in particular. When a woman's father or husband passes away, she often finds herself in the position of having to take on the responsibility of managing the household. While facing various challenges, individuals may experience financial, social, and psychological difficulties. Additionally, their support system may become more limited. Take the scenario where a male family member, who was the sole provider for the family, passes away.²³ In such cases, the female members of the family are left with no choice but to step up and take on the daunting tasks of farming or running a business, even if they have no prior experience in these fields. In situations of internal strife, women often find themselves forced to leave their homeland in search of employment and financial stability elsewhere. There are various circumstances in which women are compelled to engage in the sex industry in order to secure their financial survival. The third dimension of the public arena is characterised by a set of laws and social rules that are hostile towards women and infringe upon their fundamental human rights. Throughout various phases of post-conflict reconstruction, women often face exclusion from participation, with their societal roles limited to the family sphere. Women receive minimal support from community structures as these institutions are built on the belief that patriarchal norms are superior. As an example, there was a notable level of opposition to the participation of women in political affairs in the state of Nagaland, which had experienced the longest-running insurgency compared to other states in the country.²⁴ The proposal to allocate 33% of the vote to women in urban local body elections faced strong opposition from the Naga Hoho, which represents the hill tribes of the state. They argued that this move would go against Naga customary laws and traditions. They claimed that this would be a violation. Such resistance not only imposes significant societal pressure on women candidates, but also obstructs their ability to actively participate in public affairs. However, the situation has undergone a transformation, and Nagaland now boasts two female MLAs since 2023.

Internal Displacement In Tripura And Its Challenges:

The term 'Internally Displaced Person' (IDP) refers to individuals who, like refugees, flee their homes for various reasons. However, unlike refugees, they

have not crossed international borders, which mean that the principles of state sovereignty still apply to them. As a term, it is not particularly appealing. Many have criticised it for being awkward, impersonal, and overly complicated, obscuring the true issue at hand and the challenges faced by global efforts to address it. It is worth noting that the tracking of internal displacement as a global phenomenon has not been a priority until recently.²⁵ Until the 1970s, there were no consistent figures available, and even then, the numbers were often limited to those assisted by specific institutions, rather than providing a comprehensive overview. It is important to highlight that the global number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) has consistently surpassed the number of refugees, ever since accurate records have been maintained.²⁶ Similarly, the extensive relocation has completely changed Tripura's demographic profile due to the insurgency. In 2000, Bengalis from different interior regions of Tripura, such as Gabordi, Takarjola, Jampuijala, Khowai and Sidhai Mohanpur, started migrating to urban areas as IDPs. Several people left behind all of their possessions while fleeing. Sajal Podder, a victim of forced displacement from Jampuijala, recounted his harrowing experiences of enduring attacks by insurgents since 1993. They began by pilfering cattle, which eventually escalated to abducting individuals and ending their lives. In addition to the destruction of homes, there were frequent and relentless attacks. Therefore, they began to depart from the locations.²⁷ Additionally, it was mentioned that individuals from tribal groups who tried to assist Bengalis were also targeted and killed by insurgents. In the 2000s, a significant number of families found temporary shelter at different camps in various locations before being asked to move on and resume their lives. There are 6,500 households scattered throughout Tripura, with individuals who have been displaced and are currently living in rented housing. There are approximately 422 of them spread out across the West district and Sepahijala district. Some individuals have been able to acquire property due to their financial stability, while others are still in the process of renting or relying on the hospitality of their relatives.²⁸ As per Gopal Laskar, a fellow displaced individual, upon the resolution of the insurgency issue, the returnees were met with a disheartening reality that their homes were either completely destroyed or occupied by others. They decided to come back to Agartala and started to campaign for their resettlement in the different districts of Tripura by the government.²⁹ In 2011, the 'Sarbadaliyo Pashchimjela o Sepahijala Udbastu Unnayan Committee' was established to raise awareness of their demands to the state administration. Following a four-day hunger strike in 2013, they were finally granted the BPL card and all the benefits that come with it. Finally, in 2017, two districts, West Tripura and Sepahijala, established new colonies, Nehalchandra Nagar and New Aravindapalli respectively, to accommodate the displaced population. Each displaced individual was provided with two Gandas of land, as well as access to electric power and water. Most of them earn a living through different businesses, such as tailoring,

selling vegetables, renting out rickshaws, etc. However, none of them are employed in Government jobs yet. They are striving to provide a proper education to the upcoming generation who have enrolled in different schools in the West district and Sepahijala district. In addition to the Bengali community, tribal communities from remote areas of Tripura also experienced internal displacements due to on-going attacks and extortion by insurgents, primarily from the region that was then West Tripura district, now known as Khowai district.

Internal Displacement In Tripura And Its Effects On Women:

The framework principles on Internal Displacement delineate the essential rights and assurances necessary for safeguarding and aiding those who have experienced internal displacement. Although lacking legal enforceability, the Principles provide practical direction to Governments, NGOs, and other entities engaged in aiding internally displaced persons. The guiding principles are derived from pre-existing human rights and humanitarian law, and are also informed by refugee law via analogy. Displaced women and children, like with other persons are entitled to protection and physical security.³⁰ Nevertheless, it is crucial to acknowledge that they are equally entitled to fundamental human demands as stipulated by international laws and agreements. Access to fundamental essentials such as sustenance, water, hygiene, fuel, housing, garments, comprehensive healthcare services encompassing reproductive health, mental health, and maternal child care, education and skills training to empower women and foster their autonomy, inclusion and participation in decision-making processes that directly affect women, and opportunities for social interaction and involvement. There are certain fundamental criteria that need to be met for internally displaced women.³¹ However, during the period of insurgency related internal displacement in Tripura all these fundamental rights were ignored in the camps. Women irrespective of their communities were the victim of all kind abuse by the insurgents for instance some Chakma women from the interior place of Chawmanu, Dhalai district experienced a horrific incident on 11th March, 2004, when they were subjected to sexual assault by NLFT, an insurgent group in Tripura. They compelled the males to perform dance to entertain the insurgents, while compelling the women to prepare meals and engaged in inappropriate behaviour towards the women. They proceeded to order the male members to lie down before subjecting them to a brutal beating. Then they perpetrated acts of violence and sexual assault against women. No one escaped their grasp, regardless of their marital status, whether they were single or mothers.³² Therefore, in order to ensure the safety of women from the clasp of the insurgents, individuals had to quickly seek refuge in safer locations, such as various camps located in the secure plains, regardless of their identity background. Mira Ray and Haseena Begum, who were displaced from Takarjola and Jampuijala respectively, shared their

terrifying experiences of fleeing their homes as insurgents began to target women. They are now living in a rented house in Bishalgarh, Sepahijala district. They also mentioned that in the villages, they primarily focused on being homemakers. However, after being displaced and moving to urban areas to provide for their families and ensure their children's education and meals, they also took on additional roles as house help and daily wage labourers along with males.³³ Furthermore, the poor hygiene conditions in the refugee camps greatly affected their quality of life when they used to stay there in initial days. Over time, women have become active participants in all of the campaigns aimed at advancing the rights of those who have been forcibly displaced. They have organised themselves and are now making significant contributions.³⁴ In the year 2000, numerous tribal individuals found a refuge in various camps such as Kalyanpur, Dwarikapur, Sitakunda, and more in Khowai District. Regrettably, numerous individuals lost their lives to diarrhoea as a result of inadequate rescue supplies and unsanitary conditions in the camps. Mostly women were affected by this. Tragically, a 30-year-old woman named Sangati Reang passed away at the Tulasikhar refugee camp due to a lack of access to medicine. Similarly, Situ Debbarma, the daughter of Rabindra Debbarma, also lost her life under similar circumstances in Kalyanpur.³⁵ All of these individuals were forced to leave their homes in different areas within the Khowai district to protect themselves from the insurgents.

Conclusion:

The illegal encroachment and unlawful seizure of hill lands, once inhabited by tribal communities in Tripura, during the Bangladesh Liberation War, was a direct consequence of the then ruling Government's negligence. This unfortunate situation gave rise to an insurgency, which ultimately led to the displacement of many innocent people. Both men and women experienced significant hardships during this displacement, but the suffering endured by women was particularly harrowing. Due to the responsibilities of caring for their young children, women were not able to flee as quickly as males. Once again, her entire household was affected, compelling her to endure financial hardship and occasionally sacrifice her own meal to provide for her family. The years spanning from 1979 to 2009 posed significant challenges for the women living in Tripura. The frequency of assaults on women escalated during each occurrence. Based on the findings of Dinesh Singh Committee, these attacks caused the unfortunate loss of 1,300 lives and affected a total of 3,72,048 individuals. Out of the total number of individuals impacted, 227,499 belonged to the Bengali community, while 144,549 were from tribal backgrounds. Approximately 189,919 individuals were compelled to seek alternative housing, with over 34,000 residences being demolished and a staggering 2,091,636,140 worth of property being decimated. But women persisted in battling and never gave up. Because of this, in 2013 a group of women who were internally displaced and led by Mira Roy, Haseena

Begum, Kajol Debnath, Malina Begum, Gauri Debanth, and others were able to get BPL cards for their families. They continue to be vocal in their advocacy for shelters for displaced families who have not yet obtained BPL cards, land, or other benefits. Women are also providing financial support for their children's further education by taking on different occupations. Women and other displaced individuals are progressively working to stabilise the situation slowly but steadily.

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