Socio-economic scenario of Tripura: An analysis

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Centre for Social Work and Research (CSR), Agartala, is a voluntary organisation run by academics and professionals. They assemble every evening at their office and attend to the work related to their organisation. They are a highly dedicated group concerned with well-being of the people. They are also engaged in serious study and research on different aspects of life in Tripura. The present essay provides a good example of their expertise and concern.

Land and physical background

Tripura, a tiny and hilly state of 10,486 sq. km. in the south-east corner of the North-east region of India, lies between the latitude of 20°05'6" and 24°03'2" north and longitudes of 91°10' and 92°21' east. The maximum length of the state from north to south is 183.54 km. and maximum breadth from east to west is 122.70 km. It is bounded by Bangladesh in the north, west and south and Assam and Mizoram in the east. The state has 10,000 km. long border of which 839 km.(84%) is International Border with Bangladesh, which makes the state open to the movement of people from across the International border and a smuggler’s paradise.

Roughly 60 per cent land of the geographically disadvantaged, land-locked and remote (not only from mainland India but also from other states of north-east India) Tripura is hilly (comprising six major hills that run in the north-south direction and are interspersed by valleys through which flow the ten major rivers of the state).

Tripura enjoys tropical monsoon climate, characterised by moderate temperature with higher humidity. The state receives 210 cm rainfall per year on an average with 90 rainy days in a year and is spread over a period of six months from April to September.

The people, the changing demography and its effect

As per 2001 Census, population of the state is 31,99,203. Among them 30.95 per cent are Scheduled Tribe and 16.36 per cent Scheduled Caste. Among the Scheduled Tribes there are 19 communities (out of 19 communities 6 tribes namely, Munda, Oran Santhal, Bhil, Lepcha and Bhutia are non-indigenous). Both linguistically and ethnically the tribes of Tripura are akin to the Tibeto-Burman sub family of North-East India. The language spoken by the major bulk of tribal population is called ‘KOK-BOROK’ and it is the recognised second official language of the state. The first official language of the state is ‘Bengali’ and it is the mother language of the plainsmen Bengalees and spoken by 67 per cent of the population. Among the recognised Scheduled Castes important ones are Sudra (land holder, farmers, wage labourers etc.) Kaibarta (fishermen), Mali (gardeners), Mahisya Das. The Scheduled Castes in Tripura are by & large Bengalee Hindus. Besides the tribesmen and Bengalees, the other heterogenous sections of population in Tripura include Manipuri, Nepalese, Oriyas, Biharis, Punjabis and Marwaris. The Hindus constitute the major religious group among the tribal and non-tribals of Tripura. The Mog and Chakma communities are Buddhists. Christianity is also taking root in the tribal communities, particularly among the Kukis, Lusais and a section of Garos.

The growth rate of population in the NE Region has always been higher than the national average. Again, among the seven North Eastern states Tripura records highest. In 1951, the population of Tripura was 6.46 lakhs and in 1991 it was 27.45 lakhs. This unusual growth is mainly due to large scale influx of refugees from the erstwhile East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) during the period 1951-71. According to 1991 Census, the annual growth rate of population in the state during the decade 1981-91, has been 3.37% as against the all India growth rate of 2.35% per cent. The density
of population per sq. km. is 263 as against 10 in Arunachal, 82 in Manipur, 79 Meghalaya, 33 in Mizoram, 73 in Nagaland and all India average of 273.

From a position of unfavourable sex ratio in comparison to the National average until 1961. Tripura in 2001 had 948 females to 1000 males against the country’s average of 933. It is the third highest in N-E Region, only next to Manipur (978) & Meghalaya (972). The literate population is 73.2 per cent.

Expansion of population in Tripura created many problems. In the industrially backward state it has created heavy pressure on agricultural land, as only 27 per cent of the total area of the state is available for cultivation.

The population expansion in Tripura also disturbed its ecological equilibrium.

It has also changed the ethnic composition. The proportion of tribals in the total population has declined between 1941(50.39 per cent) and 2001(31 per cent). However, in comparison to 1981 (28.44 per cent) in 2001 it has marginally increased. This change in the ethnic composition led to ethnic tension which is inimical to the economic development of the state. On the other hand, it is also significant to note that apart from 47% population of ST (31%) and SC (16.36%), a substantial among the rest proportion, also consists of the refugees without much real assets to fall back upon.

Economy

Tripura is characterised by low income, overwhelming percentage of population below the poverty line, income leakage, unemployment etc.

The state is predominantly rural in character (85.26%). Average land holding size is 0.97 hectare. 90% of the cultivators are either small or marginal. There are 50,000 tribal Jhumia families or shifting cultivators. According to the latest BPL study of the State Govt., 73.58% of the rural population is below the poverty line.

The SDP of the state at current prices was Rs. 1309.00 crore in 1994-95 and Rs. 1537.00 crore in 1995-96, while the average annual rate of growth of SDP at constant prices between 1980-81 to 1992-93 was of the order of 7.21 per cent. The per capita income has been consistently below the national average and also has been declining progressively. The contribution of the primary sector to the SDP is declining over time, the contribution of the secondary sector is small and is showing declining trend, while tertiary sector is showing increasing trend.

The economic classification of the population in 1991 census shows that 20.09 per cent are workers (main), 689.87 per cent non-workers, 2.04 per cent marginal workers. An analysis of the occupational pattern indicates that 64.08 per cent of the workers are engaged in primary sectors, 6.41 per cent in manufacturing sector & 29.51 percent in tertiary sector.

It appears from the employment statistics that the number of registered unemployed increased from 1.76 lakh in 1991 to 2.39 lakh in 1995.

Scenario of basic minimum services

Till now it has not been possible to provide basic minimum services to the people of Tripura. Up to March, 1992 out of 7412 habitants in the state 3469 had no sources of drinking water. 2.25 lakh houses and 424 additional dispensaries, PHCs or CHCs are required. Education constitutes the highest per cent of the total gross expenditure of the Govt. (17.99 per cent in 1997 -98) & up to 1995-96 there were 2026 primary schools, 437 middle schools, 360 high schools, 168 H.S. schools. Both in respect of literacy and enrollment, Tripura is found to be in a better position than other states of India. However, girls are lagging behind. Though enrolment rate of tribal students is better than non-tribal, the tribals are hard hit as far as literacy rate is concerned. Again, dropout rate among tribal students is a matter of great concern.

Resources

I. Forest
60 per cent of its land has been declared as forest, which is higher than the average of 54 per cent for N-E states and the Indian average of 23.42 per cent. However, the actual forest cover is 52.76 per cent as compared to 19.44 per cent in the case of India as a whole and much of the forest cover consists of degraded unclassed forest.

II. Natural Gas

The prognosticated reserves of natural gas in the state are estimated to be of the order of 400 BCM, but the ONGC has not intensified its exploration efforts to turn the prognosticated reserves into confirmed availability.

III. Infrastructure and Financial resources

According to the CMIE’s infrastructure index for 1992-93, Tripura has the second lowest ranking among the N-E states with Arunachal Pradesh limping along behind it.

Tripura has a very poor share in the National Highway system. Only one road (NH-44) links it to the rest of the country. Within the state, its length is 210 kms from Dharmanagar to Agartala, the state capital. Recently, Agartala - Sabroom road (137 kms) has been declared as National Highway, its upgradation work has been started. There are 3653 kms of rural roads in the state. For every 100 sq. km. there are 56 kms of roads in Tripura whereas the all India average is 60.8 kms. 1945 habitations in the state are still uncovered by roads.

With the partition of India, Tripura lost its rail links with the rest of the country. At present the state has rail links with the rest of India through Assam which extends only up to Kumarghat. Out of 2.70 lakh hectares cultivable land only 1.17 lakh hectares have got an irrigational potential and so far only about 0.50 lakh hectares have come under irrigation.

Installed capacity of power is 80.5 MW, but effective generation is only 53 MW. Total availability of power is 94 MW, including the Central share of 42 MW while peak demand is 110 MW. Per capita consumption of power is 90 KW which is much lower than the national average (330 KW).

Revenue collection is very low, and hence state has to rely heavily on grants and plan assistance from the Centre for its developmental activities. Revenue expenditure consumes lion's share. There is also short realisation of negotiated loans from LIC, GIC, NABARD. Per capita plan assistance is the second lowest among all the states of N-E. Till 1994-95 it has received only 6.69 percent of the total investment of N-E Council.

In March, 1993 the credit-deposit ratio was 58.5. Since then it has declined to 41.47 in June, 1997. Performance of the banking sector is better in comparison to other states of N-E, but the ratio is well below the national average.

Experience of Negligence, Apathy and Inadequate Development

Before independence, Tripura was a princely state. It became a part of Indian Union on 9th September, 1949. Due to partition, influx of migrated people from erstwhile East Pakistan exerted pressure on land and its resources. All at once population became double & changed the ethnic composition. But there was no serious efforts for proper rehabilitation of the migrated people.

In the N-E Region there was also low quantum of development in comparison to other parts of the country. There were not only regional disparities. Disparities prevailed even among seven sisters of N-E Region. Share of Tripura in the plan of N-E Council is second lowest, and the quantum is also gradually decreasing over the time, whereas it is a fact that even the ST & ST population alone of Tripura is higher than the total population of the states of Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram and Nagaland.

With the partition of India Tripura lost its rail links. But the Union Govt. was not serious to extend rail line even up to Agartala and National Highway up to Sabroom of South Tripura in spite of people's demand. It is only the UF Govt. that has considered the demand. The work on these is needed to be accelerated.

In Tripura land available outside the forest is extremely limited. On the other hand, vast areas of the forest land in true sense are coverless, but utilisation of degraded forest land is also not
allowed even for economic development and/or Jhumia rehabilitation without compensatory afforestation. But from environment point of view, if this culturable waste and coverless land areas remain unutilised for a long time, it may ultimately lead to degradation of these lands. Such blanket restraints are inappropriate in a state like Tripura both in consideration of environment and economic development.

ONGC has shown apathy in its exploration efforts for gas in Tripura. According to several experts, oil may be present in the rocks at great depth i.e. below the high pressure regimes in North Tripura, but ONGC has discontinued its wildcat drilling programme. Tripura is pressing the Govt. of India to evolve a long term policy of concessional pricing of gas in the state without which it is difficult to attract potential investment in gas-based industrial projects, but the efforts have not yielded any tangible results so far.

Congenial relation with neighbouring countries may be positive for development of any country. This is very much applicable to a state like Tripura where 84% of the boundary is congruent with international border (Bangladesh). Unofficial estimates indicate that trade with Bangladesh from Tripura ranges between Rs. 500 to 10,000 crore, but it contributes virtually nothing to the SDP of the state as the bulk of the trade takes the form of smuggling. Transit facilities through Bangladesh to the rest of India and access to the port in Chittagong would have solved the problem of isolation from which Tripura suffers to a very great extent. This initiative would have opened up vast markets in Bangladesh, the rest to India and even south East Asia for Tripura. As these are bilateral issues between two neighbouring countries, needed to be taken up at the national level. But serious effort is lacking till now.

**Youth of Tripura need an alternative to the gun**

In the backdrop of continuous apathy and negligence, isolation and backwardness, a sense of deprivation has generated in the minds of the people of the states. Sometimes, this disappointment turns to anger. The enemies of the nation, within the country or outside, are capitalising this and misleading the potential resourceful youth of our indigenous population towards path of alienation. Unfortunately, now from the benign hills of Tripura secessionist voices are emerging. People are suffering from insurrection. It has created a feeling of instability which damps the investment climate in the state and prevents the full utilisation of its potential.

For the unity and sovereignty of our country, for the development of the state, the youth need alternative to the gun. The alternative path is the development. Along with political efforts and democratisation of the society, we need to ensure development.

The problems of the state are identified. These include development of infrastructure, proper utilisation of land, communication and transport, initiative for utilisation of gas, petroleum and water, border trade, human resource development etc. The country must assist the state on national interest. Attitude of the Central Govt. towards the North East in general and Tripura in particular must be changed. For the purpose, creation of pressure from all patriotic Indians is urgently needed.

We have celebrated the Golden Jubilee of our Independence. In the past we had many bottlenecks/ lacunae in proper & justified planning and launching programme for the overall development of the state. We have already spoiled a long time; the need of the hour is to be more serious in addressing the problem.

Sources:
1. Statistical abstract of Tripura.
2. Census of India.
3. Plan documents of Tripura.