

Tribal Political Parties in Tripura: Agents of Democratic Consolidation or Fragmentation?

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Abstract: This article examines whether tribal political parties in Tripura, which saw their ascendancy in the aftermath of tribal insurgency, function as agents of democratic consolidation or democratic instability, ethnic divisions, and polarisation. It argues that these parties play a dual role in shaping the state's democratic processes—both deepening and undermining democracy. By providing the marginalised tribal communities a platform to articulate their political interests, tribal-centric parties have functioned to promote democratic inclusion and participation. On the other hand, they have also contributed to democratic fragmentation by accentuating existing ethnic cleavages and political polarisation. In the face of these two contrasting roles, the article contends that through accommodative responses by the state and the dominant societal groups, tribal political parties in Tripura can be transformed into positive agents of democratisation.

Keywords: Conflict, Democracy, Immigration, Insurgency, Land, Political Parties, Tribal

INTRODUCTION

One of the marked distinguishing features of Tripura's recent political history is the end of violent tribal insurgencies and the subsequent phenomenal ascendancy of tribal-centric political parties, some of which have been formed by former insurgent leaders, after signing peace agreements with the Indian state. At the core, these parties represent the democratic political mobilisation of tribals, unlike the former insurgent groups that adopted violent and non-democratic methods to achieve their political objectives.

Within academic, media and political circles, this transition from violent insurgency to formal democratic political processes has been met with a euphoric reception, seeing it as underscoring the growing faith in India's democracy and also as having the potential to usher in an era of peace, political stability, and democratic consolidation in the state. This optimism primarily emanates from the monochromatic view that trading violence with democratic politics, regardless of its challenges and limitations, is a legitimate or more effective pathway for pursuing political goals, and by lending political agency to the marginalised tribals, these tribal-centric political parties are deemed as democratising agents.

This article critically examines the role of tribal political parties in the context of Tripura on the question of whether they function as agents of democratic consolidation or as agents of democratic fragmentation. I explore this question by examining emerging tribal political parties. As explained in the discussion that follows, tribal political parties have served as the main political platform to represent tribal grievances and aspirations. The study adopts a qualitative case study approach. It analyses manifestos of political parties, memorandums submitted to state authorities, media reports, and the existing relevant secondary literature. It has also relied upon interviews with a cross-section of political party leaders and civil society leaders in Tripura, including other nonethnic based/mainstream political parties. These data streams are vital for the overall analysis of the multifaceted role played by tribal political parties.

ETHNIC PARTIES AND DEMOCRATISATION

Political parties, ethnic or otherwise, play a central role in electoral democracies. The question of whether ethnic political parties promote or undermine democracy has long been a subject of intense debate within the existing literature. Broadly, there are two streams of theoretical orientations about the role played by ethnic political parties in democratic consolidation or fragmentation. The inclusivist approach, also known as consociational theory, suggests that ethnic-based political parties play an instrumental role in the consolidation of democracy by lending a voice to groups that have been marginalised from the mainstream political process. Ethnic political parties provide the space to express

political grievances and demands, bridge ethnic rifts, and accommodate competing ethnic interests. They are particularly seen as promoting inclusivity, stability, and harmonious co-existence in multiethnic societies (Lijphart, 1974; Cohen, 1997).

However, some scholars have argued that ethnic political parties are not necessarily conducive to democratic consolidation. Given their inherently exclusive tendencies, ethnic-based parties can rather aggravate ethnic divisions and conflicts, threaten political integration, and destabilise democratic institutions (Brass, 1991). The appearance of an ethnic party can lead to a process called 'ethnic outbidding', that is, the politicisation of ethnicity can constrain others to adopt a similar political strategy (Horowitz, 1985). This generates competitive ethnic mobilisations, accentuating societal cleavages and promoting zero-sum politics, which are considered to militate against the fundamental characteristics of democracy. Thus, to put it in a nutshell, the dominance of ethnic political parties in electoral democracies is seen as posing a threat to the health of democracies.

However, a nuanced reading reveals that ethnic political parties and democratic consolidation or fragmentation may not have a straightforward relationship. They rather play a complex role in electoral democracies; whether they serve as agents of democratic consolidation or fragmentation can be contingent upon a host of factors, the nature of the political system, institutional arrangements, and how societal diversity or division is managed, among others. Lijphart (1977), for instance, argued that the key to enhancing the quality of democracy in deeply divided societies lies in accommodating ethnic differences through a robust power-sharing arrangement. In certain contexts, minority ethnic political parties can be the result of exclusionary majoritarian political systems that marginalise the voice or interests of minority groups. As such, ethnic political parties in multi-ethnic societies can 'produce responsive governments through ethnic inclusion, as well as a more humane government attuned to human diversity' (Chandra, 2005, p. 248)

THE CONTEXTUAL BACKGROUND

Contemporary Tripura has two main ethnic groups: the dominant Bengalis and the minority tribal communities (known variously as *Tripuris* or *Tiprasas*). The tribal communities are made up of 19 ethnic groups that are constitutionally recognised as Scheduled Tribes (STs). The tribals mostly live in the rural hill areas, while the nontribal Bengalis are predominantly concentrated in the plains and urban areas, including the capital city of Agartala. Although Bengali is the dominant language of the state, tribals predominantly speak the Kokborok language. Both are recognised as the two official languages of the state.

Much of post-independence Tripura has been marked by tribal insurgency and conflicts, which were rooted primarily in demographics. Once primarily the abode of the tribals, the state is also now home to non-tribal communities, predominantly of Bengali ethnicity. Contemporary demographic marginalisation of tribals is primarily due to the influx of Bengali refugees from then East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) after India's partition into India and Pakistan (in 1947) and, subsequently, the Bangladesh liberation war (in 1971). According to the 2011 Census, the state has a total population of about 3.6 million, with Bengalis and tribals representing about 68% and 31.8 percent, respectively.

What is noteworthy here is that the tribals constituted about 52.8% of the state's total population in 1901 (Bhaumik, 2012, p.5).

This demographic change has caused a drastically altered the power dynamics between tribals and Bengalis. In the sixty-member state legislature, Bengalis are usually represented by 40 members, while the remaining 20 seats are reserved for the tribals. The non-tribal domination of the state legislature translates into almost complete domination of all institutions of the state, including, *inter alia*, the political executive and coercive institutions, underlining the existence of tribals at the margins. In Tripura, as is the case elsewhere, life on the margins is invariably marked by deprivation, inequitable access to state resources, limited opportunities for upward social mobility, and victimisations. The tribals have suffered land alienation, deprivation, and indebtedness. Large tracts of land/forests were cleared for the resettlement of Bangladeshi refugees under various government schemes, and the increasing number of 'refugee colonies' in the hills, coupled with state policy to regulate jhum cultivation, undermined the traditional economic base of the tribals.

This socio-economic and political marginalisation of the tribals set the stage for spells of violent tribal insurgency movements. Beginning from the late 1960s, several ethnonationalist armed organisations have emerged, championing the cause of the tribals. They include, among others, Tripura Upajati Juba Samit (TUJS), Tripura National Volunteer (TNV), Sengrak (Clinched Fist), National Liberation Front of Tripura (NLFT), All Tripura Tiger Force (ATTf) and Tripura Resurrection Army (TRA). They voiced anti-immigration sentiments and articulated varying demands, such as, *inter alia*, repatriation of refugees, restoration of alienated tribal land, political autonomy within the Indian constitution, and the creation of a separate tribal state, i.e., *Tipraland*. They sought to legitimise their demands by terming the Indian state an 'occupying nation', which involves a 'radical reinterpretation' of histories 'in which the Indian state is considered an external agent and often a colonial power' (Das, 2007, p. 8). Furthermore, ethnonationalist narratives of tribals also portrayed the past as glorious days of tribals, despite the exploitative, repressive and feudalistic aspects of the monarchy (Debbarma, 2013).

For more than three decades (1980s to 2000s), Tripura became a theatre of intense conflict, insurgency, counterinsurgency, and political struggle. Marked by increasing polarisation between the tribals and non-tribals, the period also witnessed episodic bouts of communal conflicts. However, insurgency, ethnic enmity, and conflicts in Tripura saw rapid decline from the late 2000s onwards. The counter-insurgency strategies of the Indian state, which include both security operations against insurgent groups and a political approach, gradually proved effective in bringing the conflict down to manageable levels, if not to a grinding halt. After getting them weakened, the Indian state entered into peace negotiations with various tribal insurgent groups that culminated in the signing of Memoranda of Understanding (MoU), thus paving the way for various tribal insurgent groups to surrender or join the mainstream.

Except for the demand for *Tipraland*, the MoU concluded with various tribal insurgent groups, such as the TNV, ATTf and NLFT, contained agreements on the following: (i) proper/suitable rehabilitation of cadres; (ii) restoration of alienated tribal land; (iii) redrawing of the

territorial jurisdictions of the Tripura Tribal Areas Autonomous District Council (TTAADC) by including the tribal majority areas under it and exclusion of no-tribal majority; (iv) implementation of policies and programmes for the socioeconomic and cultural development of the tribals; and (v) protection and promotion of Kokborok language. These are the issues that constitute the core concerns and grievances of the tribals (Kumar, 2016).

AMPLIFYING TRIBAL VOICES IN DEMOCRATIC POLITICS

The end of tribal insurgencies in Tripura provided political opportunity structure for various tribal leaders to form tribal-centric political parties (see Table 1). In fact, some of the former tribal insurgent leaders have formed their political parties. The most prominent of them is the former TNV militant leader turned politician, BK Hrangkhawl, who founded the political party, namely the Indigenous Nationalist Party of Twipra (INPT) in 2002.

Table 1 Tribal Political Parties in Tripura

Party Name	Estd.
Indigenous Peoples Front of Tripura (IPFT)	1996
Indigenous Nationalist Party of Twipra (INPT)	2002
National Conference of Tripura (NCT)	2005
Indigenous Peoples Front of Tripura (IPFT-NC)	2009
Tipraland State Party (TSP)	2015
Tipra Motha Party (TMP)	2021

What is to be noted here is that most of the political parties noted above have either become defunct or inactive or merged together to form a new party. For example, the Tipra Motha Party was formed in 2021 through the merger of INPT, TSP, and IPFT. It is currently led by Bikram Manikya Deb Barma, the titular king of Tripura, and remains the predominant tribal political party in the state.

Almost all the tribal political parties mentioned above in Tripura have championed the cause of the demand of *Tipraland*, that is, the creation of a new tribal state under Articles 2 & 3 of the Indian Constitution, which would cover the present Sixth Schedule or TTAADC areas. Other common demands include, among others, (i) the inclusion of Kokborok (tribal language) in the Eight Schedule; (ii) the repatriation of all foreign immigrants; (iii) more political and financial autonomy for TTAADC; and (iv) the release of necessary funds and necessary institutional oversight measures for the socio-economic, cultural and language developments of the tribals (IPFT, 2022).

Since their inception, tribal political parties have been using a variety of democratic means to pursue their demands. They include, among others, a combination of submission of memorandums to the authorities of the Indian state, demonstrations, blockades, hartals, public processions, and campaigning and mobilising the masses, among others. On 23 August 2022, the IPFT submitted a memorandum to the Prime Minister of India with a clear demand for the creation *Tipraland*. The premise of its demand for Tipraland is stated as follows.

Tripura indigenous peoples [tribals] have been facing a crisis of identity for the last 75 years, as they have been reduced to a minority in their homeland, Tripura, due to the demographic explosion of foreign nationals in the state. To protect the identity crisis of the indigenous people of Tripura, the creation of a full-fledged statehood, 'Tipraland', based on the planned areas of Tripura is of utmost necessity (IPFT, 2022).

In July 2017, IPFT organised public processes demanding the creation of Tipraland and the resolution of socio-economic grievances of the tribals. They also launched railway blockades and blockade of National Highway No. 44, the surface road that connects Tripura to the rest of the country.

Based on the advocacy of this idea of separate tribal homeland, protection of tribal identity, and land rights, the tribal political parties have gained traction among their tribal constituents. This is evident in TIPRA Motha winning eighteen seats (out of the total twenty-eight seats) in the 2021 TTAADC elections, while other parties, including the BJP and CPI (M), managed to wrest the remaining ten seats; the same was also replicated in the 2023 state assembly elections. In the 20 assembly seats reserved for the tribals, the TIPRA Motha won thirteen seats and became the single largest opposition party, while the BJP formed the government by winning 32 seats out of the sixty assembly seats.

But in March 2024, the TIPRA Motha joined the BJP-led state government. With this, the TIPRA Motha is now in power both in the TTAADC and in the state.

The ascendancy of tribal political parties, particularly TIPRA Motha, in the political landscape of Tripura has given marginalised tribals their much-needed political voice and influence. Their growing political influence has attracted the attention of the state government as well as the central government. For example, on 27 September 2018, the Central government constituted a high-level committee to investigate social-economic grievances of the 'indigenous population in the state of Tripura' (Ministry of Home Affairs, 2018). Further, on 2 March 2024, a tripartite agreement was signed between the Centre, the state government and TIPRA Motha in New Delhi 'to amicably resolve all issues' of tribals relating to history, land, economic development, and cultural identity (Ministry of Home Affairs, 2024).

These initiatives gave a ray of hope to the tribals that their demands and grievances would finally find a settlement. However, the past experiences of the tribals with regard to state policy and practices, compulsions of electoral politics, and the prevailing ethnic dynamics in the state, among others, offer a cautionary tale, as it is one thing for governments to make promises for short-term electoral gain, another to deliver on them. As such, it remains to be seen whether these newfound state initiatives will turn into reality.

PITFALLS OF TRIBAL PARTY POLITICS

The emergence of tribal political parties, their political demands and strategies, and electoral successes bring home the point that the mobilisational agendas of tribals have not undergone any change. They remain the same as the agendas and demands of the earlier tribal insurgency movements. The only conspicuous change is the discarding of violent means and the adoption of non-violent democratic political mobilisation toward achieving political goals. Further, the success of the tribal political parties in tribal dominated constituencies-be it in TTAADC or assembly elections-underscores, at least for the moment, the effective challenge they pose to the established electoral holds of national political parties, such as the Congress and the Communist parties. In the past, these two national parties had predominantly represented tribals in the ballot box.

As indicated previously, tribal political parties have managed to place the longstanding grievances and demands of tribals at the forefront of state attention, both the Centre and the state government. However, in line with the red flags raised by scholars concerning the dark sides of ethnic-based political parties, the ascendancy of tribal political parties in the state has sparked fears of renewed ethnic divisions and conflicts. Bengalis have stoutly opposed the TIPRA Motha's demands for Tipraland, more autonomy for TTAADC, restoration of alienated tribal land, and repatriation of refugees, among others. *Amra Bengali*, a Bengali organisation, termed the *Tipraland* demand as aimed at dividing the state, which it considers as 'the land of the indigenous Bengali people' (*Tripura Times*, December 10, 2022). In 2022, a new Bengali organisation, *Biswa Bangli Jana Jagaran Mancha*, was also formed to champion the rights and interests of the Bengali community.

Predictably, the response of the state government is also no different. In tune with the stated position of the Bengalis or their frontal organisations, successive state governments have been persistent in their opposition to the demand of Tipraland. For example, the current chief minister (CM), Manik Saha, in his public speech in February 2023, outrightly dismissed the demand for *Tipraland* as 'impossible to fulfil', further adding that it will only accentuate the 'divide between tribals and non-tribals' (*Economic Times*, February 5, 2023).

The government's position aligns with the fears of the Bengalis that more political autonomy for tribals or a separate tribal state could pave the way for an exclusionary political arrangement. That the multiethnic state society is increasingly polarised along ethnic lines was also evident in the last assembly elections. While the tribal electorates overwhelmingly voted for the TIPRA Motha, the Bengalis overwhelmingly voted for the BJP. Given the sensitive ethnic landscape of the state, the rise of tribal political parties and the consequent mobilisation of Bengalis do not bode well for the overall peace and stability in the state, as they risk rekindling ethnic tensions and conflicts. Rather than a healthy pluralism where political parties vie for electoral support from across the communities, this increasing mobilisation of political identities along ethnic lines can undermine democracy by prioritising identity over common civic issues and governance.

CONCLUSION

This study has brought to the fore the reality of how tribal political parties in Tripura both deepen and undermine democracy. By acting as the voice of marginalised tribes, they have ensured that the long-standing grievances, interests, and demands of tribals are brought into the mainstream. However, their ascendancy has also raised concerns consistent with the arguments of various scholars about the exclusionary and conflict-fuelling potential of ethnic-based political parties. However, what is noteworthy is that the relationship between ethnic political parties is neither intrinsically positive nor negative, but is mediated, *inter alia*, by the political context, the design or level of accommodation of political institutions, and the nature of state and societal responses.

Given this, there is an imperative need for the state or the majority ethnic group, which controls and dominates state power, to empathetically engage with tribal political parties, that is, to engage them not in terms of their electoral weight but in terms of the weight or genuineness of their grievances. Minority groups in multi-ethnic societies often

demand recognition, proportional access to state's resources, and political voice. Through democratic engagement, respecting their agency, and a robust power-sharing arrangement, tribal political parties can be channelised into a force of democratisation.

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