



FROM CHIEF COMMISSIONER TO GOVERNOR: TRIPURA'S STRUGGLE FOR STATEHOOD

RAJIB DAS
AGARTALA, TRIPURA, INDIA

ABSTRACT

Tripura is situated in the Northeastern region of India. It shares an international boundary with Bangladesh and a state boundary with Assam and Mizoram. Tripura was ruled by the Manikya dynasty for centuries, even after the occupation of India by British Manikya monarchs continued their rule. It was after the merger of Tripura with the Indian Union in 1949 marked the end of the Monarchy in Tripura. At the beginning of the twentieth century with the strengthening of the anti-British movement for self-rule in the British provinces in various parts of the Indian subcontinent, people of Tripura also wanted to set up a responsible government chosen by people of Tripura. This movement for setting up of responsible movement in Tripura began during the rule of Bir Bikram Kishore Manikya, the last Maharaja of Tripura. He tried to democratize and decentralize Tripura's administration but his untimely death ruined all his plans. The independence of India and the subsequent merger of Tripura aroused the hopes of the people of Tripura for a responsible government but it does not happen as expected. Then people of Tripura started the struggle for it and after two decades since its merger with Indian Union, it was fulfilled with the grant of statehood on 21st January 1972. In this paper, I tried to present a vivid sketch of the role played by different political associations in this movement. It also attempts to provide information about the major administrative changes which happened in Tripura before it became a state under Indian Union.

Keywords: Monarchy, statehood, Union Territory, Commissioner, Governor.

INTRODUCTION

The story of the struggle for a responsible government in Tripura started during the reign of Maharaja Bir Bikram Kishore Manikya, the last powerful monarch of Tripura. This demand was inspired by the establishment of elected governments in 1937 in the British Indian provinces under the Government of India act 1935.

This election has built confidence among the people under British India to fight for self-government. The wave of self-government in the mainstream struck the princely Tripura and aroused aspirations in its people for a responsible government under the aegis of Maharaja of Tripura¹ and this wave came into Tripura in various ways, Bijan Mahanta Presumes that it came through political leaders and workers who used to take shelter in Tripura to evade arrest from British provinces. Another way was the opening of branches of different national political parties in Tripura after World War II². As the demand for responsible government strengthened the then maharaja of Tripura took many steps for democratizing the administration but could not

satisfy the people. After the merger, Tripura was accepted as a 'C' category state that would be ruled by the central government.

Again, the people were not satisfied with the arrangement of administration. Under the Indian union, the dream of responsible government was not fulfilled then once again different political parties of Tripura expressed their grave discontent with the rule of Chief Commissioner and demanded immediate introduction of responsible government in the state³. This was fulfilled with the attainment of statehood in Tripura in 1972.

ROLE PLAYED BY POLITICAL ASSOCIATIONS

During the British rule in India, native states were usually ruled by the local kings. In these states the common people had virtually no civil rights and no law except that of the ruler, at that time condition of Tripura was also the same. There was no common room for carrying out political activities party allowed to function.

Political associations started to establish in Tripura in the 1930s. before that the people of Tripura first adopted novel methods of organizing public opinion by organizing and establishing local libraries, clubs, associations, sabha, Samiti, sangha, and welfare societies in various names⁴. Some of the early associations are Sabuj Samiti, Bhatri Sangha, Matri Sangha, Dharmanagar Hisadhani Sabha, and others. These associations have to propose simple objectives such as local social welfare, literary activities to avoid retaliation.

A. Tripura Rajya Gana Parishad

It is commonly accepted as TRGP, which was founded in 1935. Members of this organization were Sachindra Lal Singha (President), Hariganga Basak (Secretary), Ashu Mukherjee, Umesh Lal Singha, and others. Initially, it started the demand for agrarian reform, later on, demand for a responsible government was raised. The demands were too much for the Maharaja to accept and therefore he expelled most of the leaders from the state. Their demand for a responsible government was further carried out by other organizations.

B. Janamangal Samiti (JMS)

It was founded in 1938 under the leadership of funded Ganga Prasad Sharma, Amarendra Debbarma, Prabhat Chandra Ray, Sukumar Bhowmik, and others. JMS raised its voice not only against the Princely tyranny in Tripura but also against British imperialism in India. It stood for civil liberties and a responsible government in Tripura.

C. Tripura Rajya Praja Mandal Samiti (TRPM)

The national movement in the princely states is usually called the Praja Mandal movement. The participants of this movement fought against their feudal princess and British Administration for their Democratic rights. TRPM was founded in 1946 by the left-oriented leadership in Tripura. Jogesh Chandra Debbarma was its first president and its first Secretary was Bir Chandra Debbarma. The formation of a responsible government without the King was first voiced by the TRPM.

EFFORTS BY THE KING TO FORM A RESPONSIBLE GOVERNMENT

As movements for a responsible government strengthened under JMS, TRPM and other, Maharaja Bir Bikram Kishore Manikya, the then king of Tripura announced that some administrative reforms will be made by democratizing and the decentralizing powers as far as practicable⁵.

The following councils were formulated:

- A. Mantrana Sabha (Advisory Council)
- B. Byabasthapak Sabha (Legialative Assembly)
- C. Manti Parishad (Executive Council)

There was also a scheme to constitute Gram Mandal or Village Council to give the Village People the right to manage their own affairs through their elected body. Maharaj also headed a committee to draft a constitution for Tripura in 1939 but remained in papers due to the outbreak of the second world war⁶. After the second world war, the whole scenario has changed and the death of Maharaja virtually marked the end of hope for a responsible government under Maharaja. The independence of India in 1947 and then the merger of Tripura with India in 1949 marked a new phase in this movement for a responsible government in Tripura.

POST MERGER PERIOD

Rule Under Regency

After the death of the last Maharaja, Tripura entered into a new political era as the successor of the late Maharaja was a minor, the British Indian government decided to constitute a council of Regency headed by the Widow of the Maharaja. Kanchan Prabha Devi took over the administration on 8th August 1947. Under the regency's rule, Tripura merged with India and after that, it lost control over administration, a new Chief commissioner was appointed, this marked end of the Regent's rule in Tripura.

Struggle for Popular Government

At the time of the merger, there was an aspiration for a responsible government under the aegis of Maharaja. But after the merger the aim of the movement was changed, now directed towards a popular government under Indian Union like other 'C' Category states such as Himachal, Coorg, and others where there were elected legislators. Tripura also observed be done "Bidhan Sabha Dabi Dibas" on 5th August 1953, the decision was taken in a meeting organized by left parties and progressive-minded persons of Tripura.

APPOINTMENT OF COUNCIL OF ADVISORS

On April 14th, 1953 a three-member Council of advisors was appointed for Tripura to aid and advise the Chief Commissioner in the discharge of his duties. The members were Sachindra Lal Singha and Sukhamay Sengupta of Congress and Jitendra Debbarma of Tripur Sangha. This arrangement also could not satisfy the people of Tripura and those who are steering the movement reacted sharply against the appointment of advisors⁷.

While carrying out a struggle for a responsible government people of Tripura also had to force the central government to retain the position of people as a separate State against the decision of Fazl Ali's commission in 1955 to merge with Assam.

TRIPURA TERRITORIAL COUNCIL

After the second general election, TTC was formed under the Territorial Council Act of 1956. The council consisted of 32 members in all 30 members be elected and the rest members to be selected by the central government according to Bijan Mahanta this new arrangement, though partially fulfilled the demand for the popular government but could not satisfy people's aspiration for self-government.

This arrangement could not stop agitation, some leading persons of Tripura took another step in 1960 when a memorandum signed by them was circulated calling upon their countrymen to support the demand of the people of Tripura for a full-fledged responsible government⁸.

This memorandum was signed on the ground that though TTC's power might be extended it could not either play the role of a legislative assembly. The immediate response from the central government was the elevation of Tripura as a union territory in 1963.

TRIPURA AS A STATE

Though Tripura was awarded a democratic administrative set-up with a legislative assembly and a Council of Ministers, the struggle for a full-fledged popular government continued till the late 1960s and early 1970s. Tripura was joined by Himachal and Manipur in the struggle for attaining statehood.

Previously the left parties were involved in the movement for statehood, later on, Congress also involved itself and demanded a full-fledged statehood⁹. In this situation, the central government at last granted statehood to Manipur and Tripura and Union territory hood to Mizo Hills and NEFA.

A Machinery of government consisting of a governor a constitutional had a legislative assembly with 60 seats filled by persons by direct election from single-member territorial constituencies and a Council of ministers headed by Chief Minister. All these are officially enacted on 21st January 1972.

CONCLUSION

The struggle for responsible government in Tripura was a long-drawn-out democratic movement. Before the independence of Tripura craved for a responsible government under the aegis of the Maharaja these aspirations were not fulfilled. The merger of Tripura with the Indian Union gave hope and a struggle by both tribal and non-tribal forced the government of India to recognize the demand of the people of Tripura.

This was a political movement, in the early phase movement for democratic demand was carried out by CPI¹⁰ and later Congress also took part in this movement and the Communist Party spread the idea of movement through Janamangal Samiti, Praja Mandal, Tripura Rajya Ganamukti Parishad, and others. The congress party did the same thing through Tripura Rajya Mukri Parishad and other Refugee Rehabilitation programs carried out by the central government. This movement stands as a testimony to the unity between the tribals non-tribals, both are equal partners.

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