

Tripura Elections

The Statesman

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The result of the assembly elections in Tripura has shocked the CPM as much it has surprised the BJP. While anti-incumbency was expected to take its toll, nobody expected such a landslide for the BJP-IPFT combine, or such an abject crumbling of the left citadel. Left finds no reason for losing an election so miserably in a state in which it claims to have brought lasting peace by eliminating the violent militancy that had crippled life and development in the past, and where it was banking on the reputation of its CM's unimpeachable integrity. While it tries to console itself by putting the blame on BJP's money power, the BJP attributes the stupendous victory to its ability to woo the tribal votes through an alliance with the IPFT, its much superior organizational mobilisation and its superb election management strategy. But the truth, as always, lies somewhere in between.

A state with a long history and a composite culture that has evolved over historical times, Tripura was a princely state under colonial rule, and became an UT after accession to India at independence. It was integrated as a full-fledged state of India in 1972, and was accorded the Special Category status making liberal central funding available for its development. Tribals, among which the Kokborok speaking Tripuris constitute the majority, comprise 32% of its population. Non-tribal population mostly comprise Bengalis and Manipuris.

With 70% rural population, it is predominantly a ruralized state as dependent on subsistence agriculture as it was a century ago, and a quarter century of the Left rule has done little to change the subsistence nature of its economy. The state is rich in biodiversity and has resources including natural gas and oil, but practically no industry. It is the second largest producer of natural rubber in India after Kerala, but the entire produce of its 50000 hectares of rubber cultivation is exported outside for processing and value addition. At only Rs 80,027 in 2015-16, Tripura has one of the lowest per capita incomes in the region, way below Rs 2.57 lakh of Sikkim, Rs 1.23 lakh of Arunachal Pradesh or 1.15 lakh of Mizoram. The left should seek answers to their electoral debacle here rather than elsewhere.

It would be unfair to put the entire blame for the lack of development on Left rule alone. The state, like every other north-eastern state, bears the burden of geography and history. Even agriculture, the major source of sustenance for its people, is beset with many handicaps - only 27% of the total land is available for cultivation, the rest lying either in the hilly terrains or under thick forests. Agriculture provides livelihood to half its population, but being dependent on primitive methods like shifting cultivation is a drag unto itself and contributes only one fifth to the state income, without leaving any surplus. Not even a quarter of its net cultivated area had access to irrigation. Industries being absent, there is nothing to change the nature of the state's subsistence economy, which it was even in the 19th century.

In colonial times, its rich forest resources generated revenues but in the absence of any regulation, exploitation of forest resources led to their wanton destruction. The process was further reinforced by

the immigrants from the neighbouring Bengal who cleared the forests and settled there. This created an affluent class of landed gentry, mostly dominated by non-tribals, dependent on cheap immigrant labour for cultivation of their lands, which in turn amplified the social inequality between tribals and non-tribals and also created a third tier consisting of officials and tax collectors. By the turn of the century, the slow-village-centric economy was changing as villages were transforming into towns. The capital Agartala was a village of only 875 persons in 1864, but started growing around its market places where goods were traded between Tripura and Bengal.

Surrounded by the socio-economic framework and infrastructure of colonial Bengal and having a narrow land link with Assam and Mizoram, Tripura became overwhelmingly dependent on Bengal's infrastructure of railways, road networks, waterways, seaports and upon its postal and telecommunication links even for accessing parts of its own territory. With partition, all these links were abruptly snapped and Tripura found itself in complete isolation from the rest of the country. A massive influx of refugees also ensued and their rehabilitation impacted its economy significantly. The refugees contributed to the growth of agriculture, cottage industries, trade and transport. Then followed another massive refugee influx before and after the 1971 Bangladesh war, while illegal immigration across the porous border continued. It led to an abnormal increase in the density of population from 134 in 1970-71 to 350 in 2010-11, altering the demographic landscape unrecognizably. This radically changed the nature of hitherto harmonious relations between the indigenous tribals, now reduced into minorities in their native land and the non-tribals, largely immigrants, culminating in protracted, violent insurgency.

Ethnic strife and violent conflagrations between tribals and non-tribals have long characterised life in the northeast, in which even the non-immigrant Bengali settlers, Muslims and Hindus alike, have often been the targets of tribal wrath. As tribals were dispossessed of their land and pushed to the hills, their socio-economic deprivation and aspirations for political power to counter the growing de-tribalisation of the state ignited and stoked the fire of insurgency which started in 1978 by the Tripura National Volunteers led by the tribal leader Mr. Bijoy Hrangkhawal. The state suffered widespread riots and killing of countless people on ethnic lines, and witnessed mushrooming of terror outfits, including the National Liberation Front of Tripura led by Mr. Biswamohan Debbarma, which was the progenitor of the present BJP-ally IPFT.

The Left-Front government which had enjoyed uninterrupted power in Tripura since 1993, takes credit for eliminating the insurgency. It is forgotten that this would not have been possible without the geopolitics of the region getting altered post-2008 Bangladesh elections, which brought the India-friendly Awami League government to power, displacing the earlier BNP-Jamiat government that was belligerently hostile to India and was actively supporting this insurgency, offering money, arms and safe haven to terrorists after every strike. Being surrounded by Bangladesh on three sides, Tripura bore the brunt of these attacks. Camps in Bangladesh's Chittagong Hill Tracts and Sylhet district were crucial for the survival of these militant outfits. After the change of Government, the Indian Government could successfully persuade Prime Minister Ms. Sheikh Hasina to ensure that the territory of Bangladesh was not allowed to be used for terrorist activities directed against India. She co-operated to the fullest extent, arresting and handing over militant leaders including Mr Debbarma to India, and undertaking counter-insurgency operations

against these outfits. This weakened, frustrated and demoralized them, leading to large-scale surrenders by their cadres. Gradually militancy fizzled out completely.

But this is not to take away the credit due to Mr Manik Sarkar, who created the necessary conditions by establishing police and security force camps in interior areas, minimizing the reaction time for counter-insurgency operations and systematically destroying the intelligence and support networks of militants. Lifeline of militant survival, finance, was cut off by giving enhanced security cover to the traditional targets of extortion and abduction - traders, tea gardens and road construction managers, thereby choking off avenues of extortion. It brought peace to the state, and one can now travel without fear even to the remotest areas, inconceivable even in 2000 when army vehicles used to escort convoys of passenger vehicles, a fact witnessed by myself.

But security, though an essential prerequisite, needs to be backed by other political- economic processes and institutional interventions for development, income generation and employment, and it is here that Mr Sarkar had failed, for which he had to pay this price. While poverty ratio had declined from 34% to 14% during his reign, no industry came up and economic growth was too inadequate to satisfy the increasing aspirations of the State's youth. Though his personal image has remained impeccably clean and incorrupt, he presided over one of the most corrupt and insensitive administrations in the region that dispensed jobs, contracts and favours only to people close to administration and the party. In 2014, the High Court had to terminate the services of 10,323 unqualified teachers appointed during 2010-13, and when the State again tried to reinstate them as non-teaching staff last year, the Supreme Court had to intervene. Just as in the Left-Front ruled West Bengal, coercion and violence has been institutionalized in society, examples of which were seen in the killings of journalists among others on the run up to elections.

Mr Sarkar was rewarded four times by the electorate for bringing peace and stability to the state. Now people will expect the BJP government to deliver where he had failed, by addressing the structural weaknesses that has always plagued the state. The new government does not have much time and no alibi, being in power at the Centre as well.