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MOVEMENT FOR PROTECTING SEPARATE POLITICO-ADMINISTRATIVE ENTITY OF TRIPURA

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Abstract

Tripura was a princely state before merger with the Indian Union. The *Tripuri* dynasty ruled over Tripura for several centuries. It has never been come under direct control of British rule. Maharaja Bir Bikram Manikya, the last king of Tripura made a wish to merge with India, before his last breath on 17 May 1947. After independence, India faced the problems of consolidation, the integration of the princely states and the framing of a constitution. In 1950, when the new Constitution came into existence, the constituent units of the Indian union thus found themselves classified into part A, B, C and D states. Tripura became a centrally administered state since 15.10.1949, and was included in the C-category of states. In 1955, the State Reorganization Commission (SRC) recommended for merger of Tripura with Assam by abolishing its distinct politico-administrative entity as a part of 'C' State. With an objective to protect the already existing politico-administrative entity of Tripura state, there was a movement in Tripura against the recommendation of the State SRC. The movement was steered by the *Swatantra Tripura Committee*. The focus of the movement was resisting the plan of Tripura's merger with Assam. The movement was organized during the years 1955-56 and succeeded in protecting Tripura's separate entity.

Key Words: Swatantra, Commission, Entity, Reorganization, Recommendation

Introduction

Tripura was a princely state before merger with the Indian Union. The *Tripuri* dynasty ruled over Tripura for several centuries. It has never been come under direct control of British rule. Maharaja Bir Bikram Manikya, the last king of Tripura made a wish to merge with India, before his last breath on 17 May 1947. A violent storm soon burst over Tripura. The regent *Maharani* Kanchanprabha Devi handed over the administration of Tripura in 1949. After merger with Indian federation, the political status of Tripura underwent several changes and attained full-fledged statehood in 1972.

After independence India faced the problems of consolidation, the integration of the princely states and the framing of a constitution of Independent India. Once the princely states had acceded to India, the process of integration was begun. Smaller states were merged with neighboring provinces; others were consolidated as centrally administered areas. Demands of formation of linguistic states intensified when the Constituent Assembly was framing the Constitution.

In 1950, when the new Constitution came into existence, the constituent units of the Indian union were classified into part A, B, C and D states. Part A states included the erstwhile Governor's provinces; Part B states were the erstwhile Princely states; Part C states the erstwhile Chief Commissioner's provinces as well as some of the erstwhile Princely states and Andaman-Nicobar islands were kept as the solitary Part D states. Tripura became a centrally administered state since 15.10.1949, and was included in the C-category of states headed by the Chief



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Commissioner. Parliament passed the Government of Part C States' Act 1951, providing for the setting up of Council of Advisers in part C states.

After creation of Andhra Pradesh State in 1953, demands for reorganization of states intensified again and the Government of India formed The States Reorganization Commission (SRC) under the chairmanship of Fazal Ali, a judge of the Supreme Court. The other two members of the Commission were H.N Kunzur and K.M Panikkar, to study the question of reorganization of states on linguistic basis. The SRC recommended for merger of Tripura with Assam by abolishing its distinct politico-administrative entity as a part 'C' State,

With an objective to protect the already existing politico-administrative entity of Tripura State, there was continuous movement in Tripura against the recommendation of the State Reorganization Commission (S.R.C.). The movement was steered by the Swatantra Tripura Committee. The focus of the movement was resisting the plan of Tripura's merger with Assam. The movement was organized during the years 1955-56 and succeeded in protecting Tripura's separate entity.

Objectives of the Study:

The objective of the study is to explore the nature and expansion of movement of civil society organizations and political parties of Tripura against the recommendation of SRC for merger of Tripura with Assam, to protect its politico-administrative identity.

Methods and Materials:

The study is analytical in nature. Required Data for the study has been collected from secondary sources like, books, journals, articles and proceedings etc.

Discussion:

Observation of SRC regarding Part C and Part D states:

There were three alternative courses of action: First, to allow Part 'C' States to continue with an equal status with Part 'A' States; secondly, to maintain status quo and thirdly, to abolish their separate entity.

Prime observation of the Commission was that the Part 'C' States have larger economic, linguistic and cultural similarity with neighbouring states than with each other; the Part-C states were Politically, economically and educationally in varying phases of development; even in the constitutional field, they do not follow a uniform pattern- some of them have legislatures and ministries and other only advisory councils. Two were administered through Lt. Governors and the remaining states were administered through Chief Commissioners (SRC, 1955).

The Commission summed up with the statement, "..... the position is that there a general consensus of opinion that the existing setup of the Part 'C' States is unsatisfactory. The solution suggested by the official representatives of the Part 'C' States, namely, a constitutional status which is identical with that of the Part 'A' States, will remove only the constitutional anomalies. These small units will still continue to be economically unbalanced, financially weak and administratively and politically unstable" (SRC, 1955).

According to the Commission, these States were not in a position to "subsist as separate administrative units without excessive dependence on the Centre, which will lead to all the undesirable consequences of divorcing the responsibility for expenditure from that for finding the resources." (SRC,1955).

Considering all these factors, the Commission was of the view that except the two centrally administered states, the other Part 'C' States should be merged with the adjoining States.



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Protests of civil society before publishing the report of SRC:

Listening the whispering in the air about the merger of Tripura with Assam, much before the report of the SRC was published, altogether eleven organizations of Tripura placed their views before the SRC and all were against the merger of Tripura with Assam. Some organizations opined for maintaining Tripura's separate entity; while others demanded for creation of a 'Greater Tripura' including Cachar district of Assam. Also it was opined by some groups that if there was no alternative other than merger, Tripura should be merged with West Bengal from the consideration of affinity of language, culture and heritage, but in no case with Assam.

It may be noted that the West Bengal State Congress, PSP, Hindu Mahasabha and the Nagarik Samity placed the demand before the SRC, that Tripura should be merged with the West Bengal (Tripurar Katha, 1955).

The Central Committee of the Communist Party of India (CPI) submitted a Memorandum to the State Reorganization Commission, demanding elected legislature and Government in Tripura and Manipur.

For granting the status of a separate State both for Tripura and Manipur, it was argued in the memorandum: "Although Tripura and Manipur are small in area and population, we have urged their continuation as two separate provinces for the following reasons:

- i) Although they are situated contiguous to Assam, they are mountainous areas with very sparse communication with Assam.
- ii) The languages are different from those of Assam and the main demand of the democratic movement has been for greater democratic rights.
- iii) The people of these States might have been willing to be within the state of Assam, if the tribal areas within Assam had been conferred full local autonomy, with their own executive. But today the democratic urge of the people in these areas cannot be satisfied until their own demand for a legislative and executive is first satisfied" (Basu, Jyoti and Others, 1954)

The Swatantra Tripura Committee:

As a step towards preparation for a greater movement, the Swatantra Tripura Committee had been formed before the actual publication of the report of the SRC. On 1st October, 1955, some leading persons of Agartala assembled at the residence of Advocate Nibaran Chandra Ghosh. After preliminary discussions an ad-hoc committee was formed with a decision to hold a bigger meeting on 8th October with representatives of the people of all shades, colour and ideology being invited to prepare movement programme.

In the meantime, a students' Strike was observed on 4th October 1955 and a rally was held as a mark of protest against the plan of merger. The non-government school teachers observed a strike and held a rally on 7 October 1955. The Government Employees' Association, the Bar Association and other organizations sent telegrams to the Prime Minister of India protesting against the merger (The Swatantra Tripura Bulletin-1, 1955).

The proposed meeting of the representatives of various organizations was held on 8th October 1955 at Hotel 'Tripur' at Agartala. The State Congress was invited but it did not attend. In the meeting a movement programme was chalked out and some resolutions were adopted. A 62-member 'Swatantra Tripura Committee' was formed with provision to include further in the Committee three representatives from each Division, one representative from each of the mass organizations and five students' representatives.



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An executive Committee was formed with the following persons:

1. President: Swarnakamal Roy
2. Vice Presidents: Nibaran Chandra Ghosh, Bir Chandra Debbarma, Munshi Arman Ali.
3. General Secretary: Dasarath Deb.
4. Joint Secretaries: Jogesh Chandra Chakraborty, Birballab Saha.
5. Cashier: Dr. Jyotish Chandra Chakraborty.
6. Members: Biren Datta, Nripen Chakraborty, Gopi Ballab Saha, Amal Sen, Hemanta Debbarma, Dwijendra Bijoy Dey, Dwijen Dey, Ila Bhattacharjee, Sabita Dhar, Ramendra Neogi (Mahanta, Bijan 2004).

Resolutions of the meeting: Some resolutions were adopted in the meeting held on 8th October 1955.

1. One of the resolutions was adopted expressing a strong note of protest and resentment against merger of Tripura with Assam.
2. In view of varied culture, creed and economic pursuits, if there was any attempt to merge Tripura with Assam, it would be too 'undemocratic' and 'illogical' to be acceptable to any section of people of Tripura.
3. If need, a bigger and stronger movement would be organized to cancel the merger plan and protect Tripura's separate entity.

In the same meeting a movement programme was adopted. Holding of public meeting, general strike and *hartal* as well as holding of a State Level Convention were adopted as parts of the movement programme (The Swatantra Tripura Bulletin-1, 1955).

SRC Recommendation on Tripura:

The SRC Report was published officially on 10th October, 1955. In regard to Tripura the Commission opined: "As a small Part C State, Tripura cannot obviously stand by itself. As the West Bengal Government had not claimed the territory, its merger with Assam, can be supported among other reasons on the ground that it will be desirable to bring the entire border between India and Pakistan in this region under one single control, namely, that of the Assam Government (SRC, 1955).

The Commission further stated: "Such a merger will also make it possible to co-ordinate development in Cachar and the contiguous area of Tripura. The Bengali speaking population after the merger will be a little more than one-fifth of the total population of the state. It should not be difficult for the Assam Government to allay the apprehensions of the Bengali speaking people by treating this area, which requires development, as separate administrative division under a Commissioner. The special position of Bengali in this division should be recognized for official and educational purposes." (SRC,1955).

With the safeguards on these lines, the merger of Tripura with Assam would provide the people of Tripura with the opportunity to fulfill their aspirations for representative government at the state-level without prejudicing their linguistic and cultural interest. The Commission further held: "Suitable safeguards can and should also be provided for the tribal people in the proposed administrative division." (SRC,1955).

Movement for protecting separate (*Swatantra*) politico-administrative identity of Tripura:

The recommendation of the SRC sparked off an anti-merger movement in Tripura. The movement had three distinct streams.



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First, The Swatantra Tripura Committee led by CPI,PSP,RSP and other like minded people raised their voices against the recommendation for Tripura's separate entity and at the same time demanded a 'Vidhan Sabha' (legislative Assembly) for Tripura.

Secondly, there were others who at first remained silent maintaining a status-quo i.e. Tripura should remain as it were without any Legislative Assembly. The Indian National Congress in Tripura was among them.

Thirdly, there was yet another section that opposed the merger issue but raised a demand for a 'Greater' Tripura comprising Cachar District of Assam. Among the supporters of 'Greater' Tripura, were *Nikhil Tripura udbasthu Samiti* (All Tripura Refugee Association), Tripura Scheduled Caste Association, Maharajganj Bazar Byabasyahi Sangha and all Tripura Merchants' Association.

The Swatantra Tripura Committee called out a general strike and *hartal* (cessation of business) at Agartala on 11th October 1955. Shops, educational institutions remained closed and it was for the first time in Tripura that all activities in the Government offices and the Secretariat were closed down due to picketing. The fully crowded meeting held at the ground of 'Pagla Debata' presided over by Swarnakamal Ray, President, Swatantra Tripura Committee and addressed by leaders like Nripen Chakraborty, Ila Bhattacharjee, Dwijen Dey, Amal Sen and others. While addressing the public meeting, Nripen Chakraborty said that unit of Swatantra Tripura Committee would be formed in every part of Tripura. Moreover, he wondered that at the reported cancellation of the proposed visit of G.B. Pant, Union Home Minister, to Tripura in the first week of November and said firmly that "whether Pantji comes or not, the proposed rally at Agartala will be held during the time and it will certainly be a rally of two lakh people"(Jagaran,1955).

The Swatantra Tripura Committee sent telegrams to the Prime Minister, Jawahar Lal Nehru and Union Home Minister, G. B. Pant, conveying deep anxiety and strong indignation of the people of Tripura and demanding for maintaining Tripura's separate entity (Jagaran,1955).

The INC, Tripura branch first supported the merger conceivably for political reason. But, later changed its stand and opined for maintaining a status-quo.

The major factors of consideration to the SRC, for recommending Tripura's merger with Assam were tiny area, small population and little revenue income of Tripura. In order to put off the factors, a counter argument was advanced by another section who opined for a 'Greater' Tripura with Cachar District of Assam. Though a memorandum submitted on 22nd April 1954 and while appeared before the SRC, on 3rd May 1954, the All Tripura Refugee Association (ATRA) argued for creation of a 'Greater Tripura'. Its argument was that, introduction of a responsible government in Tripura was of course, necessary but it could not be viable in a small territory like Tripura. Therefore, it argued for creation of a 'Greater Tripura' with Cachar District of Assam on the ground of viability and pursuant to the accepted principal of reorganization of States on linguistic basis (Jagaran,1956). The Tripura Scheduled Caste Association called upon the Government of India to hold a 'Referendum' on the issue and go to by the result.

A 'Greater Tripura Committee' was formed on 30th October 1955 under the Chairmanship of Advocate Hemchandra Nath. The 'Greater Tripura Committee' consisted of the following members:

President- Hem Chandra Nath

Vice-President- Sanatan Sarkar

General Secretary- Susil Kumar Gupta

Secretaries- Jitendra Chandra Paul, Kartik Bhattacharjee, Kamala Talapatra.

Treasurer- Aswini Kumar Das

Besides them, there were other 24 members in the Committee. It had also power to co-opt members. Seven organizations participated in the meeting -ATRA, Tripura Scheduled Caste Association, Maharajganj Bazar



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Byabasahi Sangha, Tripura Bidi Majdur Union, All Tripura Merchants' Association, Byabasahi Yuba Samity and Sangkatran Samity.

The 'Greater Tripura Committee' decided to place its demand before the Union Home Minister during his proposed visit to Agartala. The Committee organized meetings and processions to popularize its demand.

It implies that the public opinion of Tripura was not unanimous on the issue. However, it raised hue and cry.

Visit of Union Home Minister:

On 4th November 1955, Pandit G.B.Pant, Union Home Minister, A.K.Chandra, Union Deputy Minister of External affairs and Bishnuram Medhi, Chief Minister of Assam came to Agartala on official visit. The Swatantra Tripura Committee lodged with the Union Home Minister, a strong note to protest against the recommendation of the SRC for merger of Tripura with Assam and pleaded for maintaining Tripura's separate politico-administrative entity.

On 5th November, 1955, the Committee organized an unprecedented mass meeting of about seventy five thousand people at Agartala. The meeting was presided over by Swarnakamal Ray, President of Swatantra Tripura Committee and addressed by Nibaran Chandra Ghosh (Advocate), Biren Datta (M.P), Dasarath Deb (M.P), Birchandra Debbarma (Advocate), Dwijen Dey and others. The speakers condemned the 'conspiracy' for merger of Tripura with Assam or any other State.

The Union Home Minister, G.B. Pant said that the question of merger of Tripura with Assam was an undecided matter and it was only the recommendation of the SRC, while speaking in the meeting held at Assam Rifles Ground at Agartala,. The Congress Party, Tripura Government or the Central Government should not be blamed for it. But the words of the union Home Minister could not satisfy all.

Conference of Swatantra Tripura Committee:

On 6th November 1955 a conference held with more than hundred delegates from different Divisions, belonging to different communities like Halam, Kuki, Tripuri, Bengalee Hindu and Muslim.

The conference adopted some resolutions on action programme. It was decided to hold conference of Swatantra Tripura Committee in each sub-Division and to complete within next one month; to observe a week-long anti-merger programme when the report of the SRC would be tabled in parliament for consideration. Moreover, it was decided to send a delegation on behalf of the Swatantra Tripura Committee to Delhi to discuss the matter with the central authority and to press for maintaining Tripura's separate entity. Also it was decided to raise a strong volunteer force and funds to carry on the movement (Jagaran, 1955)

A delegation of Swatra Tripura Committee consisting of four members, namely Swarnakamal Ray, Biren Datta, Jogesh Chandra Chakraborty and Hemanta Bijoy Ray left for Delhi on 14th November 1955.

In a meeting of the Congress Working Committee (CWC) held on 8th November 1955 in New Delhi the recommendations of the SRC was examined. It accepted the recommendations partially. But, matter of future politico-administrative status of Tripura was remained undecided. A sub-committee was constituted with Jwarharlal Nehru, G.B.Panth, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad and U.N. Dhebar to find out a solution to some problems connected with the reorganization of States.

Settlement of the issue:

In April 1956, it was heard that the State Reorganization Bill was ready and it would be tabled in Parliament soon; Tripura and seven other States were proposed to be made into Centrally Administered Territories to be ruled by Chief Commissioners who would enjoy more powers than Chief Commissioners of the existing part 'C' States.



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At this juncture, the Swatantra Tripura Committee demanded that provisions for introduction of democratic governments in the Centrally Administered Territories must be there in the State Reorganization Bill and the Constitution of India should be amended accordingly.

The Joint Select Committee submitted its report on the State Reorganization Bill to the Lok Sabha on 16th July 1956. The Committee recommended for maintaining a separate politico-administrative entity of Tripura.

On 18th July 1956, the members of the Lok Sabha from Tripura: Biren Datta and Dasarath Deb, issued a press statement and stated that, the democratic aspirations of the people of Tripura were honoured by the Joint Select Committee by supporting Tripura's separate entity. But the popular demand for the introduction of democratic governments in the centrally administered areas had been ignored by the Congress members who by their numerical strength pressed for keeping these areas under direct Central rule. Two MPs of Tripura therefore, drew the attention of all the democratic minded members of parliament-Congress and non-Congress, to the point, with a request to consider favourably the matter of introduction of democratic administration in these areas while State Reorganization Bill would be passed. They noted in their statement that the matter of democratization of administration and the success of economic planning of these areas were inter-linked. They said that cause of 'failure of First Five-Year Plan' in the areas was due to the absence of elected governments in the areas. They stress on struggles in a democratic way inside and outside Parliament. 'The demand of the Swatantra Tripura Committee is justified. Therefore, 'the victory of the people is inevitable'-they said (Datta and Deb, 1956).

Conclusion

As a result of a continued movement of the Swatantra Tripura Committee and other civil society organizations for protecting the separate politico-administrative entity of Tripura against the recommendation of SRC, the Central Government at last accepted the demand of the Committee. It was a great victory of the united movement of the people of Tripura. Thus, Tripura could maintain its separate politico-administrative entity. Thereafter, it underwent a constitutional change. A Territorial Council came into being after the reorganization of states affected on the 1st November 1956, and in 1972 Tripura achieved Statehood.

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