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## A High-stakes Poll for 'Red Fort' Tripura

Subir Bhaumik

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File Photo: Tripura Chief Minister Manik Sarkar files his nomination papers for the Tripura Assembly election in Dhanpur.

PTI

*Tripura appears set to witness an electoral battle between the Communist Party of India (Marxist) [CPI (M)], which has been re-elected for 25 years to head the State government, and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which holds power in New Delhi and sees itself in an expansionist mode in the States. **Subir Bhaumik, Senior Fellow, Centre for Study in International Relations and Development (CSIRD), Kolkata, analyses Tripura's political configurations and points out that not much of the BJP's saffron wave has washed into the State where ethnicity and ideology, not religion, have been the political driving forces.***

**T**iny Tripura goes to the polls on February 18, just ahead of two other north-eastern States, Nagaland and Meghalaya, where elections will be held on February 27. Though all three contests in India's north east are important, the electoral battle in Tripura is significant for the country's politics for two reasons. Firstly, the survival of the Left as a political force in India depends on its ability to preserve its last apparently unassailable bastion, Tripura. Secondly, for the BJP—a party that is on the verge of replacing the Congress as the number two party in the State—this election will be the litmus test of its ability to break into a Bengali majority State, with any notable success likely to influence its political fortunes in West Bengal.

The Left Front, led by the CPI (M), has been in power continuously in Tripura since 1993, and before that, from 1978 to 1988. Between 1978 and 1988, the Left Front in Tripura was led by three of its greatest leaders ever.

Nripen Chakraborty—a Gandhian-turned-Communist of East Bengali descent who had played a major role in the armed Communist insurrection in West Bengal (1948-49) before he was sent by the CPI to Tripura to provide political leadership to the fledgling tribal insurgency under Communist leadership—was selected as Chief Minister by the party leadership when the Left swept the polls in Tripura in 1978.

Dasarath Deb (born Debbarma), the tallest tribal Communist leader in India so far, had led the Gana Mukti Parishad-sponsored insurgency under CPI leadership and then entered Parliament, winning the East Tripura (ST reserved) seat in 1952 after the Communists abandoned B.T. Ranadive's "armed insurrection" line and accepted Ajoy Ghosh's call to "return to parliamentary politics".

Biren Dutta, the founder of the Communist movement in Tripura, completed the triumvirate. A violent revolutionary in Bengal's anti-British underground, Dutta had converted to Communism in a British jail and then picked up Dasarath Deb as his first recruit in the tribal hostel of Agartala's Umakanta Academy. In 1978, Dutta wrestled with West Bengal's redoubtable CPI (M) leader Promode Dasgupta over the leadership question in the party's Tripura unit. Dasgupta, the unquestioned party builder in West Bengal, insisted that Nripen Chakraborty should be made Chief Minister in keeping with Tripura's fast changing demographic realities that had led to a decisive Bengali majority by the 1970s. Dutta, on his part, favoured Deb's candidature to arrest the growing alienation of the tribals from the Communist movement, as it had failed to prevent the marginalisation of the sons of the soil following a Bengali influx from East Pakistan, then Bangladesh.

In an interview to this writer later, Dutta said the Left's failure to come up with a tribal chief minister [Deb] was a "historic blunder"—akin, perhaps, to former West Bengal Chief Minister Jyoti Basu's description of the Left's decision not to join the United Front government at the Centre in 1996 as a "historic blunder" <sup>1</sup>.

Dasgupta prevailed because of his clout as a powerful CPI (M) politburo member who had led the Left's charge to wrest power in West Bengal earlier in 1978. Dutta believed that Dasgupta did not understand the unique ethnic politics of Tripura, where it was imperative to take on board tribal sentiments, failing which it would be impossible for the Left to prevent the outbreak of a tribal insurgency as a natural reaction to the drastic demographic change.

### **Tribal identities**

Dutta was prophetic: 1978, the year the Left came to power in Tripura, also witnessed the creation of the Tribal National Volunteers (TNV) by Bijoy Hrangkhawl, who had controlled the hard-line elements of the Tripura Upajati Juba Samity (TUJS) until he felt that the TUJS' politics of parliamentary participation and protest would not be able to prevent the political and economic marginalisation of the tribals and decided to launch a violent armed movement aimed at ethnic cleansing of Bengali settlers in areas under the Tripura Tribal Areas Autonomous Council <sup>2</sup>.

With the deaths of Chakraborty, Deb and Dutta, the Left Front in Tripura is now led by Chief Minister Manik Sarkar, a no-nonsense soft-spoken leader with a clean image. Unlike the three party builders who came to power after long years in the underground with a rich experience of leading tribal and peasant struggles, trade unions, and employee movements, Sarkar shot to the top as a student organiser and a party office apparatchik. A protégé of Chakraborty, he later disowned his mentor when the latter was expelled for his unrelenting criticism of Basu's lifestyle and the many controversies surrounding his son, Chandan. Now Sarkar backs former CPI(M) general secretary Prakash Karat's line of Left unity and equidistance from the Congress (so far the Left's prime adversary in Tripura and Kerala) and the "authoritarian but not yet fascist BJP".

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The Left in Tripura has so far proved it has deeper roots in the State than in Kerala and West Bengal, the two other States which have experienced very long phases of Left rule<sup>3</sup>. After losing West Bengal in 2011, the Left has clawed back to power in Kerala. Over the last few decades, the Left front and the Congress-led United Democratic Front (UDF) have ruled by turn in the southern State. With little chance of the Left being able to challenge Mamata Banerjee's All India Trinamool Congress (AITC) in West Bengal in the near future, Tripura is seen as the only unassailable Left bastion in India.

The Left is no longer anywhere near its 2004 peak nationally when it won 59 seats in the Lok Sabha and became kingmaker in the Congress-led first United Progressive Alliance (UPA-1) government at the Centre. Given this political history and present context, if it fails to retain Tripura, its survival in Indian politics as a force will come under question.

India's ruling BJP is seeking to make inroads in all these Left bastions: in West Bengal, Banerjee's AITC has stopped the saffron steamroller in its tracks, and it has, so far, not made significant progress in Kerala. So Tripura is a State where the BJP has high stakes—if it emerges as the principal opposition by pushing the Congress to third place, the party may be able to carry that message to Bengal. Both Tripura and West Bengal are Bengali-majority States with long years of Left rule and any major progress made by the BJP in Tripura will be a source of concern for both Mamata Banerjee's AITC and the Left in Bengal.

In Tripura, the BJP has teamed up with a tribal party, the Indigenous Peoples Front of Tripura (IPFT). Ruling out the possibility of an alliance with any other regional party, the BJP's Himanta Biswa Sarma, who heads the party's Northeast Democratic Alliance (NEDA), told reporters recently, "We have struck a seat sharing deal with the IPFT, which will contest in nine seats. The BJP will contest in rest (of the) 51 seats." When asked about the IPFT's contentious demand—to carve out a state of Tipraland from Tripura's tribal areas—he said the BJP would address "only socio-economic, cultural and linguistic issues of tribals in the State"<sup>4</sup>.

### **Stoking Bengali insecurity**

There lies the catch. Biswa Sarma, a former Congressman, joined the BJP just before the 2016 polls in Assam, a State in which the BJP gained power. But he has already put the BJP in a tight spot by publicly threatening to send Manik Sarkar to Bangladesh if the Left is defeated. In a State where more than 70 per cent of the population are of East Bengali origin with a deep emotional connect to Bangladesh, this comment has upset all segments of the Bengali population.

"Even those who are opposed to Sarkar and his party are determined to teach Biswa Sarma and the BJP a lesson of sorts. These threats work in Assam, not in Tripura," said local political commentator Sitangshu Ranjan Dey. The northeast's leading political commentator Utpal Bordoloi added, "Sarkar is a popular Chief Minister with a very clean image. His popularity cuts across party lines and bureaucrats are particularly fond of him, while Biswa Sarma is a very controversial politician involved in scores of scams."

## Election Dates

Tripura: February 18, 2018

Meghalaya: February 27, 2018

Nagaland: February 27, 2018

**Source:** Election Commission of India

Indeed, Sarma's comments and his party's alliance with the IPFT will only whip up insecurity amongst the Bengalis, benefitting the Left. The BJP may be looking to the IPFT to use its underground ally, the National Liberation Front of Tripura (NLFT), (whose guerrillas unsettled the Left in the 2000 polls to the Tribal Areas Autonomous Council) by driving away voters, instilling fear among Left candidates and creating an atmosphere of terror. In the 1988 assembly elections, the Congress had used its ally, the Tripura Upajati Juba Samity (TUJS), the IPFT's predecessor, to deploy the guerrillas of the Tribal National Volunteers (TNV) to unseat the Left—the only time the Left lost power in the state since 1980. "But now that kind of targeted terror may not work because the NLFT is a much weaker force and the tribal regional groups are divided. The tribal vote will be divided between the Left, IPFT and INPT (Indigenous Nationalist Party of Tripura) which has joined the Congress," explained Dey.

## The Left's possible gain

The Left, therefore stands to possibly gain from two counts. One, Sarma's comments and the moves by the BJP and the Congress to align their State units with the tribal parties seeking a division of Tripura and expulsion of Bengali settlers will help the Left consolidate the Bengali settler vote in its favour. Two, the divided tribal regional opposition will also help Left candidates in tribal areas.

In the past, Chief Minister Sarkar's government has ruthlessly crushed tribal insurgency and its record in maintaining law and order is better than in most Indian States. So the BJP's demand for President's Rule to check failing law and order will not cut ice. It will only push the

majority Bengalis more firmly into the Left fold. Sarkar is the only Chief Minister in the country who ordered and executed successfully trans-border covert operations against rebel bases in Bangladesh between 2002 and 2008 <sup>5</sup>. Indeed, even though Sarkar's government may not have much to show by way of pulling in investments and creating jobs despite turning Agartala into India's third internet gateway through a deal with Bangladesh's Awami League government, its record on law and order and in crushing tribal insurgency has endeared it to the majority Bengalis. "If the head remains intact on the shoulders, then comes the question of food for the stomach," said Forward Bloc leader and a senior Left Front functionary, Shyamal Roy, during a recent campaign speech, underlining the thrust the Left Front would give to its law and order record to swing public opinion, especially in the rural areas.

Bengali voters live in fear of a resurgence of tribal extremism in case a party like IPFT finds itself in power with a national party like BJP. "We don't want a Kashmir here," said CPI (M) spokesman Gautam Das, pointing to the alliance the BJP has with the People's Democratic Party in India's troubled northern state.

“ *The BJP must come clean on the IPFT's demand for a separate Tiplaland.* ”

This sentiment could upset the BJP's calculations that the IPFT can secure the majority of the 20 seats reserved for Scheduled Tribes in the State, leaving it to win a dozen-odd seats in Bengali areas to steam past the magic figure of 30 in the 60-member house. "What BJP and its Assam leaders like Sarma do not understand is that their alliance with IPFT creates so much insecurity amongst Bengalis that it could lead to bloc voting from the majority while the tribal vote gets divided," says Tripura's leading political analyst, Jayanta Bhattacharyya. The BJP, he said, must come clean on the IPFT's demand for a separate Tiplaland: "If they support that demand, it will commit political suicide."

As was the outcome in West Bengal, where supporting the Gorkha Jana Mukti Morcha (GJMM) adversely impacted the BJP's political fortunes because it allowed Mamata Banerjee to whip up Bengali passions to counter the BJP's allegations of Muslim appeasement against her, the Left in Tripura will benefit from the questions raised by the BJP-IPFT alliance, while its tribal votes get cut by the Left and the INPT-Congress alliance.

### **An improbable Hindu consolidation**

The politics of majority Hindu consolidation helped the BJP climb to power Assam. Bengali Hindus were promised citizenship even if they came to the State after 1971, the cut-off year set by the 1985 Assam Accord. Assamese and tribal Hindus and even tribal Christians were promised protection of land, employment and political power through a cleansing of illegal migrants, a process now being played out through the updating of the National Register of Citizens (NRC). That helped the BJP offset the 36 per cent Muslim vote by a campaign that aggravated religious polarisation before the Lok Sabha elections in 2014 and the State assembly elections in Assam in 2016. Not much of that saffron wave has washed into neighbouring Tripura, where ethnicity and ideology and not religion have been the driving forces of State politics<sup>6</sup>.

After Prime Minister Narendra Modi's whirlwind poll campaign in Tripura this month, the BJP seems to have got a boost. But the rallies drew crowds far less than the one that Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina drew in 2011—or those that Basu drew for the Left, or Pranab Mukherjee for the Congress in the past. The Grand Old Party of Indian Politics, for long the ruling party and then the leading Opposition in Tripura, seems to have been upstaged by the BJP as the dominant challenger in the elections this time, with a large scale desertion of leaders being its worst problem. The royal scion Maharaja Pradyot Kishore Debbarman has added to the Congress's woes by backing tribal irredentism as much as Sarma has added to the BJP's cup of woes by his Assam style anti-migrant posturing. Ballot box democracy at the end of the day is a game of numbers—so, though backing the tribal cause may help both the Congress and the BJP gain some mileage in the tribal-dominant northeast, it may prove to be their electoral undoing in Bengali-majority Tripura.

### **The Left and a disenchanted Gen Next**

If the Left has an Achilles heel, it is that it has not been able to impress the Gen Next, aspirational Bengalis and tribal boys and girls seeking work and opportunities. Its government has a poor record in attracting private investments, limiting the State's ability to create employment. There is also the legal wrangle over the recruitment of 10,323 government teachers in 2010 and 2013 that has damaged the Left's image among Gen Next. The appointment of these teachers was cancelled after the Supreme Court, in March 2017, upheld a 2014 Tripura High Court order stating that they were recruited without following norms laid down by the Right to Education Act.

Soon after, the State government announced the recruitment of 12,000 non-teaching staff in the education department. But the Supreme Court stayed the recruitment process after an

affected youth approached the apex court. Those offered employment as government teachers (and their families) are understandably upset.

It is here that questions are raised over Sarkar's abject failure to leverage Agartala's emergence as India's third internet gateway to bring in info-tech investments. "I had lined up several top IT companies to invest in Tripura after the third internet gateway came through. But Manik Sarkar did not have time to meet the captains of the IT industry, some of whom had come to participate in the second Tripura conclave in 2016," says Saumen Sarkar, who is vice-president for Infotech in Bank of America, and hails from Tripura. "We suggested a follow-up of the Conclave exercise and I was willing to lead a roadshow in southern India for IT majors to show case Tripura's Infotech potential but the State's lethargic bureaucracy and less-than savvy ministers had done nothing," he said.

This is precisely what is going to cost the Left the support of Tripura's aspirational Gen Next. The Left's model of pushing the Centre for more funds to create government jobs is no more a viable option in the market-driven atmosphere. But Sarkar, despite his success in crushing tribal insurgency, is still not able to deal with the new economy and generate a ray of hope for his tiny State. Leveraging Tripura's peace and proximity to Bangladesh to attract investments in high-value, low-weight manufacturing and Infotech has not moved the State government to substantive action and the Left may have to pay for this complacency at some point, if not in this election.

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[All URLs were last accessed on February 14, 2018.]

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*(Subir Bhaumik is BBC's former bureau chief for East & Northeast India and author of three acclaimed books on Northeast India -- "Insurgent Crossfire", "Troubled Periphery", and "Agartala Doctrine". He is now a senior editor of the Dhaka-based bdnews24.com and a consulting editor for Myanmar's Mizzima group. As a senior fellow with the Kolkata-based Centre for Study in International Relations and Development (CSIRD), he is involved in the Track II K2K process involving Indian and Chinese frontier regions.)*

E-mail: [sbhaum@gmail.com](mailto:sbhaum@gmail.com)