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Governance, Growth and Social Inclusion in Tripura: Debunking the Insurgency Paradigm¹

Tripura, located in India's North East, remains the best governed State in the region, and one of the best in India since the 1980s. A small hilly State with a population of 3.7 million and with major ethnic cleavages, Tripura has scored remarkable records in terms of governance, growth and social inclusion. Militancy in the State has nearly dissipated. This paper seeks to answer the question: what accounts for better governance, growth and social inclusion in difficult Tripura in the age of India's reforms, and what policy lessons it holds for others regions, and beyond? The paper argues that debunking the prevalent insurgency paradigm in understanding the region is long overdue.

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Tripura, one of the federal units of India in India's North East (comprising eight States with the inclusion of Sikkim in 2012) remains the region's best governed State since the early 1980s. With

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a population around 3.7 million and ethnic diversity between the original tribals (19 sub-groups) and the settlers - Bengalis, comprising about 69 per cent of the total population- Tripura's records of governance are the results of long years of efforts by the government. Surrounded by Bangladesh on three sides and with a small corridor to Assam in the north, the only land link with the rest of India, Tripura also suffered not so much by insurgency, as the others, but unlike the rest, the insurgents in Tripura never made much headway. The ethnic peace accords signed in Tripura with the militant Tripura National Volunteers (TNV) in 1988 did not result in any territorial concession for the tribal minority. The CPI-M led Left Front government in Tripura has been in office since 1978 (except a brief interlude of 1988-93) (when Congress entered into an alliance with its now-defunct arch rival Tripura Upajati Yuba Samity (TUJS). That period witnessed growing political instability due incessant cabinet formation and the attendant political crisis. The Left Front under the leadership of the CPI-M, which has strong bases in the State, particularly among tribals, and with the leadership of Mr. Manik Sarkar, as the pragmatic Chief Minister since the early 1990s, has won successively the State Assembly elections with a big margin of votes and nearly two-thirds of the seats, all elections to the Tribal District Autonomous Council---a sub-state level institutionalization of decentralization with two-thirds of the territory since 1982 (and under the sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution since 1985), a majority of Panchayats and Nagar panchayats and Municipalities in elections whose fairness has seldom been questioned. In the last elections in 2013, the Left Front was returned with 51 seats out of 60 and a popular vote share of more than 60 per cent---which sharply contrast with the poor performance of the Marxists in West Bengal in 2011 and 2015.

What sustains the Marxist rule in Tripura for over three decades? How does one explain the relation between Marxist rule and governance in Tripura? To be sure, the difficulties Tripura faced are not to be underestimated. A former tribal State later transformed into a Bengali dominated State in the wake of Partition of India in 1947, the ethnic cleavages and discontent in the State were very genuine. In 1980, the State witnessed for the first time ever a major ethnic riot which killed a few thousand people, more tribals than Bengalis, in the wake of the major legislation passed by the Marxist government for introducing Autonomous District Council for the tribals as part of their election manifesto and their long term pledge to the tribal community. But the situation was handled very clumsily. The then Chief Minister (the Late) Nripen Chakabarty and a divided State leadership---the legendary left tribal leader (the Late) Dasarath Dev(-barma) (known then as the

uncrowned king of the tribals) who felt deprived being made a Deputy Chief Minister contributed to the general unrest. However, after the death of Dasarath Devbarma, the leadership came to the hands of Manik Sarkar who has remained the Chief Minister since the early 1990s.

The main factor that has given continuity in public policy in Tripura, especially since the early 1990s, is cabinet stability---a very important criterion identified as the most essential requirement of governance in the conventional literature on the subject. In Tripura, this has been possible because of a cohesive and discipline party of the CPI-M which has not witnessed any splits since its formation in 1965.

Tripura represents a case of governance in which growth has been accompanied by social inclusion. But the political resource for governance and growth was prepared by a combination of factors: namely, institutionalized political participation, power-sharing at the sub-state level and constitutional reforms to empower such power-sharing, and identity accommodation. The legitimacy of institutionalized political participation is well-established in the State (Voter turnout in the State Assembly elections has been above 80 per cent since the early 1980s), so that even the ethnic militant outfits had to take part in elections and even once became the governing party at the ADC (sub-state level tribal self-governing body) although it was short-lived. Unlike other States in the region, ethnic radicalism has never held sway over left radicalism. Tripura's left politics has provided for the required ethnic space for the marginalized and minority tribals.

Tripura's Bengali and tribal societies are not homogenous. Although the Tripuris are the majority (about 54%) of all tribes, there are altogether 19 tribal groups which are distinct from each other in terms of dialects, custom and other practices. Bengalis are equally divided along caste and class lines. This has provided for pursuing a political perspective that cuts across cleavages. The Left in Tripura has pursued exactly that, unlike the Congress which has been a party of the Bengalis and the now-defunct TUJS which was a party of only those tribals who were Christians. The Left's so-called class line has evidently been compromised in pursuing electoral politics and mobilizing support from all sections of society but then that is what keeps it going in the State.

Available statistical evidences on Tripura suggest that the State's rule of law has improved between 1981 and 2011. Following a recent detailed statistical report by Malhotra (2014), Tripura's rule of law index (which is a composite index of other related variables)—not simply

confined to the Government of India's (Home Ministry) IPC defined *riots*---has improved a lot. Its index value of 0.187 was higher than Andhra Pradesh (0.084), Maharashtra (0.109), Gujarat (0.081) and an all-India average of 0.112 in 2011. The latter States are known as India's 'forward States'. In terms of the composite index of policy effectiveness prepared by Malhotra, Tripura is in the same league as India's advanced States except Andhra Pradesh. The sub-variables which constitute the composite policy effectiveness index are socially and economically inclusive: social opportunity, livelihood opportunity, physical infrastructure development index which included access to electricity, safe drinking water, and health care facilities and so on.

Table 1: Tripura's Growth of GSDP (2004-2005 to 2013-2014)

Year	Amount in INR (Crores)
2004-05	8903.53
2007-08	11797.07
2011-12	19973.91
2012-13	22697
2013-14	26809.60

Source: Economic Review 2013-14 (Government of Tripura)

During 2013-14 Tripura's growth rate was very good indeed at 8.9 per cent. (Economic Survey 2013-14) The data on per capita income in Tripura further substantiate the claim that growth, governance and social inclusion can go together. Per capita income in Tripura has registered growth over the years since 2003-04. The data presented above (table 1) reflect the second decade of India's reforms, and record relative prosperity.

Table 2: Per Capita Income in Tripura (2004-05 to 2013-14)

Year	Amount in INR
2004-05	24394
2005-06	24668
2006-07	29081
2007-08	31111
2008-09	35587
2009-10	39815
2010-11	46050
2011-12	50850
2012-13	57402
2013-14	69705

Source: Economic Survey 2013-14 (Government of Tripura)

How has the State coped with the ongoing macro reforms in India? The Ministry of Development of North Eastern Regions (DoNER) in its report (2011) recorded satisfactory improvement for the States in the region in HDI scores, and showed that between 1993-94 and 2004-05, Tripura's record in HDI improved from 0.327 to 0.447 . (DoNER 2011, 4-7) The report stated that '[...] the economic performance of States like Tripura and Sikkim in recent years take their per capita incomes (NSDP) well above those of other North Eastern States.' (DoNER 2011, 6)

Table 3: Policy Effectiveness Index in Tripura compared to Some Forward States in India (1981-2011) (PEI)

States	1981	1991	2001	2011
Tripura	0.193	0.257	0.262	0.302
Andhra Pradesh	0.185	0.205	0.229	0.268
Maharashtra	0.214	0.244	0.261	0.314
Gujarat	0.247	0.255	0.291	0.305
All India	0.205	0.228	0.246	0.285

Source: Malhotra (2014), 148-49. PEI is a function of four variables: rule of law; livelihood opportunity; social opportunity and physical infrastructure development indices.

Social inclusion experienced by India's *dalits* (Scheduled Castes) is universally acclaimed. The statistical evidences in tables 4 and 5 show that in comparison with Bihar, West Bengal and all-India during 1991-2011 that while the rest of the States have made significant improvement (in Bihar since Nitish Kumar took charge and in West Bengal before Mamata Banerjee took charge), Tripura's record has come out as the best of the lot in the case of the SCs, but a little less in the case of the STs. This may have to do with the performance of the ADC in Tripura and also the fact that the STs in Tripura are quite a sizeable section compared to the other States.

Table 4: SC Households without Electricity, Safe Drinking Water and Sanitation (1991-2011) (in %)

States	1991	2001	2011
Bihar	41.5 (R-43.5; U-21.3)	16.4 (R-16.8; U-10.7)	3.1 (R-3.1; U-3.9)
Tripura	15.3 (R-17.7; U-2.6)	5.3 (R-6.3; U-1.0)	0.7 (R-0.9; U-0.3)
West Bengal	15.3 (R-17.; U-7.2)	9.7 (R-11.4; U-2.4)	2.3 (R-2.6; U-1.2)
All India	28.1 (R-32.1; U-9.6)	13.3 (R-15.6; U-3.2)	3.9 (R-4.7; U-1.6)

Source: Malhotra 2014, 234. SC=Scheduled Castes

Table 5: ST Households without electricity, safe drinking water and sanitation (%)

States	1991	2001	2011
Bihar	65.9 (R-68.5;U-32.8)	19.4 (R-20.8;U-3.9)	11.5 (R-12.4; U-2.9)
Tripura	52.3 (R-53.4; U-1.2)	34.2 (R-35.3; U-0.9)	22.9 (R-24; U-2.9)
West Bengal	38.3 (R-40.3; U-14.5)	24.8 (R-28.0; U-4.5)	13.4 (R-14.9; U-2.9)
All India	45.3 (R-48.1; U-15.7)	31.2 (R-33.7;U-7.3)	15.4 (R-17.4; U-2.4)

Source: Malhotra, 2014, 235 (R=rural; U=urban) ST=Scheduled Tribes

The above success records of governance, growth and social inclusion in Tripura strongly suggest that the need to give up the prevalent insurgency framework within which the States in the region, or better, the region as a whole, so far has been observed by the Indian media as well as by political scientists. During the British colonial rule, much of the region (except Manipur and Tripura) was declared ‘excluded’ and ‘partially excluded’ (Sikkim was a different story.). But after Independence the whole region came to be branded pejoratively as ‘post-colonial’ (Bhaumik 1999), when in fact each of the States of the region had had different historical trajectories, and many such as Tripura and Manipur, being the erstwhile Princely States, hardly carry any colonial baggage. Sikkim was an independent kingdom, and incorporated into the Union as an associate

State in 1975 though in a manner which aroused many eyebrows. The formerly North East Frontier Province (NEFA) became today's Arunachal Pradesh. Baruah's writings (1999; 2005; 2010) on the region have been widely known but contain a negative assessment of the region and a deep-seated insurgency framework which has gained wide currency.³ Such evocative titles draw, indispensably, greater international attention and at home more security attention---and lesser attention from the investment community, Indian and foreign. The ground reality in the region is far from the picture of the Hobbesian nightmare as depicted by such inaccurate and old-fashioned understanding of the region. Going by the high level of implementation of various central government empowerment and social welfare programmes in the region, reflected in the statistical account of Malhorta, the so-called deprivation and neglect (by the Centre) hypothesis much prevalent in the existing knowledge now has no real ground. Since the onset of India's reforms, many resources have flown down to the region under various schemes and programmes of the Central government, and the States in the region have scored very high in performance.

A separate Ministry for the region called DoNER (Development for the North Easter Regions) (2011) has meant increased official attention to the region's development, although not exactly in the security paradigm. An in-depth knowledge of the States in the region reveal a different story. The democratic political transition in Tripura and the minor role that the militants played in the late 1980s in the State are hardly discussed. That many States after Statehood (fulfillment of identity needs) have been forerunners in maintain law and order is hardly ever treated in-depth. Mitra and Singh's (2009) title 'When Rebels become Stakeholders' are better tuned to the changes than the stereotypes, as above and contains lessons for advancing the alternative paradigm. The current statistics show that in terms of performance in the rule of law index, most of the States in the region are far better off than most of the so-called 'developed' States in India.

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³ The titles of these publications 'India against Itself' (1999); 'Durable Disorder' (2005) are quite indicative of the general thrust of this genre of writing. Sarit Bhaumik's (2016) latest title is 'Troubled Peripheries' (2016), or one of his earlier ones 'Insurgent Cross-fire' (1996) belong to this genre too.