

Tripura
Beyond the Insurgency-Politics
Nexus
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Discourse on the post-colonial conflict situation in Tripura has primarily emphasised three factors: the underlying socio-economic dimensions, the insurgency-politics nexus and the external support mechanism of insurgency. Analysts widely converge on the point that the demographic imbalance due to illegal migration from Bangladesh (East Pakistan before 1971) that turned the indigenous tribal population into a minority had generated a feeling of exclusion from mainstream social economic processes, leading to the rise of insurgency in the State. It is, moreover, an established fact that over-ground political groups and the insurgent outfits selectively support each other for purposes of mutual benefit. Bangladesh has remained a safe haven for the insurgents and also remains the most potent route for weapons procurement and training ground of the insurgent cadres. Alternatively, there is a need at this point to go beyond and establish unambiguously that such groups remain a negation of both the state as well as civil society. Once such groups emerge, civil society no longer remains a realm of either equality or freedom. The state, on the other hand, is constantly engaged in

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providing physical security to its citizens and other installations of vital importance in the affected areas and the process of development gets retarded. Further, the idea that the generation of social capital strengthens and widens democracy within the broader agenda of good governance tends to be considerably weakened in a society marked by incessant violence.

Immigration, Land and Language

Sanjib Baruah cites the portrayal of Tripura as depicted in a song by Assamese cultural icon Bhupen Hazarika as the “home in the frontier of Bengal to keep an eye on enemy’s movement”¹. Baruah further writes, “...of all the north-eastern states, Tripura, which borders Bangladesh has changed its demographic picture the most as a result of immigration from East Bengal – the indigenous Tripuris are now a small minority and hence the motif of recognition and identity.”² In a similar context, Verghese has noted, “Tripura is the Northeast’s nightmare being a State whose demographic transformation has rendered its original inhabitants a minority...”³ Verghese further says that this alien invasion in the social, political, economic and cultural domain has “hurt the Tripuri psyche.”⁴ Views such as these rightly point out the role of illegal migration in producing a feeling of exclusion among the native tribal population. However, the historical context of migration in the State differs. Immigration did not emerge only as a post-colonial phenomenon in Tripura. In the pre-Independence and even in the pre-colonial period, the rulers of Manikya dynasty in Tripura first invited high caste Bengalis towards the end of 13th century.⁵ Bengali cultivators were encouraged, particularly at the advent of the 20th century, for the purpose of collecting greater revenue through wet-rice cultivation as the local tribal populace

¹ Sanjib Baruah, "Politics of Subnationalism: Society versus State in Assam" in Partha Chatterjee, ed., *State and Politics in India*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997, p. 509. Also see, Baruah, *India Against Itself: Assam and the Politics of Nationality*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001, p. 112.

² Baruah, "Politics of Subnationalism", p. 509.

³ B. G. Verghese, *India's Northeast Resurgent: Ethnicity, Insurgency, Governance, Development*, Delhi: Konark Publishers, 1996, p. 166.

⁴ Verghese, *India's Northeast Resurgent*, p. 166.

⁵ Subir Bhaumik, "Disaster in Tripura", *Seminar*, no. 510, February 2002, Delhi, p. 68.

practiced *Jhum* (shifting) cultivation⁶ and also was, “initially, reluctant to take to wet-rice cultivation.”⁷ They even encouraged the Bengali middle class to take up administrative posts in Tripura to manage a land revenue system along the lines of the system of Permanent Settlement⁸ introduced by the British Governor General, Lord Cornwallis, in the province of Bengal. Thus, for the native Manikya rulers, Bengali immigration was a means for their economic and administrative safety and also an inspiration for the arts and culture.⁹ During the British occupation of Indian territories, Tripura remained a princely State. But it was after Independence in 1947, during the period between 1951 and 1971 that the demography of this State underwent fundamental changes, first due to India’s Partition, and later due to the India-Pakistan War resulting in the liberation of Bangladesh in 1971.¹⁰ Thus, three distinct phases of immigration into Tripura can be identified: immigration occurring till the pre-Independence era, immigration caused by the partition and immigration during and following the 1971 India-Pakistan War. While the first was regime encouraged, a curious mixture of regime and push-factors caused the last two.

⁶ A mode of ‘slash and burn’ cultivation primarily associated with the tribal way of life where forest lands are cleared for farming and later abandoned after harvest.

⁷ J. B. Ganguly, “Tripura Tribals and Mainstream: Tripura Politics”, in Virendra Grover and Ranjana Arora eds., *Encyclopaedia of India and Her States*, vol. 9, Delhi: Deep and Deep Publications, 1998, p. 666.

⁸ Lord Cornwallis introduced the system of Permanent Settlement in 1793 in Bihar and Bengal to increase the revenue of the East India Company from Indian agriculture. According to this settlement, the peasants were made the owners of the land and had to give 10 per cent to the Government from the total production of the land. If any landlord failed to fulfil these conditions, he was ousted from the land and the English did not hesitate in putting his land on auction. See Harihar Bhattacharya, “The State and Social Changes in Colonial Tripura”, in Grover and Arora eds., *Encyclopaedia of India and Her States*, p. 641.

⁹ See Pradip Kumar Basu, “The Communist Movement in Tripura: Its Evolution (1935-75)”, in Grover and Arora eds., *Encyclopaedia of India and Her States*, pp. 651-662. By an account, the number of Bengali migrants was estimated to be 114,383 in the year 1931. See Verghese, *India’s Northeast Resurgent*, p. 167.

¹⁰ K. S. Singh, *People of India Tripura*, vol. XLI, Anthropological Survey of India, Calcutta: Seagull Books, 1996, p. 5.

Table 1
Immigration in Tripura in the pre-Independence period¹¹

Census Year	Number of Migrants
1901	43,894
1911	81,666
1921	96,374
1931	1,13,383

Table 2
Year-wise influx of Displaced Persons into Tripura¹²

Year	Number of Migrants
1947	8,124
1948	9,554
1949	10,575
1950	67,151 (Till February)
1951	184,000
1952	233,000
1953	80,000
1954	3,2 00
1955	4,700
1956	17,500
1957	57,700
1958	3,600
1959-63	Registration discontinued
1964-65	100,340
1965-66	13,073
1966-67	1,654
1967-68	12,299
1968-69	3,120
1969-70	4,334
1970-71	5,774 (Till March 24)
Total	609,998

¹¹ Source: S Debbarma, Census Biharani (report), Tripura State Press. Cited in Ganguli, "Tripura Tribals and Mainstream", p. 666.

¹² Cited in Bhaumik, "Disaster in Tripura", p. 70.

Further, in the wake of 1971-war Tripura received immigrants at the rate of 10,000 per month¹³.

Table 3
Percentage of tribal population against total population in Tripura¹⁴

Census Year	Tripura Population	Tribal Population	Percent Tribal population
1901	173,325	91,679	52.81
1921	304,437	191,610	56.37
1941	513,010	256,991	50.91
1951	645,707	237,953	36.85
1961	1,142,005	360,070	31.53
1971	1,556,342	450,544	28.95
1981	2,053,058	583,920	28.45
1991	2,757,205	853,345	30.95
2001	3,191,168	NA	NA

Even as Bengali immigration was outnumbering the physical presence of tribals in Tripura, the Manikya rulers also adopted Bengali as the official language of the State.¹⁵ This had twin effects on the native tribals. One, they perceived their native *Kok Borok* language being marginalised and gradually dominated by Bengali. At the other end, language was increasingly perceived as a means to achieve social position, particularly in the post-Independence period, and the Bengali language was seen as a symbol of Bengali domination in the socio-economic arena as well.

Such large levels of immigration, moreover, also led to increased pressure on land. Whereas the tribals were used to practicing *Jhum*, wet-rice cultivation by the Bengali immigrants restricted the tribals' freedom to choose and abandon land at will for purposes of production. Although a system of reserving lands for the tribals was, indeed, adopted by the Kings, it failed to

¹³ Verghese, *India's Northeast Resurgent* p. 170.

¹⁴ Compiled from various census reports.

¹⁵ Verghese, *India's Northeast Resurgent*, p. 167.

deliver any far-reaching economic benefits to them. In 1930-31, an area of 70,400 acres in the Khowai sub-division of what is now West Tripura district was reserved for the tribals and this was raised to 12,48,000 acres in 1941.¹⁶ The Tripuri, Jamatiya and Naotia tribes of Tripura did take the lead in adopting settled plough cultivation. Ganguli notes that “the period around the thirties and forties of the present (20th) century witnessed the expression of the tribals’ urge for the spread of literacy and education and asserting their separate ethnic and cultural identity.”¹⁷ Thus what Tripura was witnessing at this stage has aptly been summarised by Myron Weiner in another context: “...middle class nativist movements in opposition to migrants tend to emerge in those communities where the local population has recently produced its own educated class that aspires to move into jobs held by migrants – in the civil service, as teachers in the local schools, as clerks, managers and technicians.”¹⁸ He further notes, “Conflict may occur when a change in the power structure stimulates competition by giving one group the political resources for modifying or transforming the ethnic division of labour.”¹⁹ In the ongoing social transformation of Tripura, the native tribals and Bengali immigrants, thus, were positioned to take up confrontational roles against each other.

An earlier mobilisation in Tripura had a distinct objective that aimed to “solve the problems of ill-health, poor communication and backward economy of all the tribes.”²⁰ Thus a group of Young Tripuris organised themselves into the Tripura Jana Siksha Samiti (TJSS) in 1945. This movement did not apparently include any ‘anti-immigration agitation’ as part of its agenda. However, an anti-immigration stance, a demand for the restoration of lands to the tribals, and the promotion of the native *Kok Borok* language formed the basis of later movements that

¹⁶ Ganguli, “Tripura Tribals and Mainstream”, p. 667. Verghese says the lands were reserved for five tribes—Tripuris, Reangs, Jamatiyas, Noatias and Halams for settled cultivation. See Verghese, *India’s Northeast Resurgent*, p. 168.

¹⁷ Ganguli, “Tripura Tribals and Mainstream”, p. 668.

¹⁸ Myron Weiner, *Sons of the Soil, Migration and Ethnic Conflict in India*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1978, p. 8.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ J Gana Chaudhuri, *A Political History of Tripura*, Delhi: Inter India Publications, 1985, p. 51.

were launched, purportedly to safeguard tribal rights in Tripura. These were the factors that eventually came to be exploited by later insurgent groups to justify their violent activities. However, an incident of police firing in which seven persons, including six tribals, were killed did occur in October 1948, and this “marked the beginning of the first phase of tribal insurgency in post-partition Tripura.”²¹ The tribals who were among the debtors of a local *mahajan* (moneylender) had, allegedly with the active support of the Tripura Ganamukti Parishad (TGP), laid a siege to prevent the *mahajans* from taking away agricultural produce.²² Earlier, *Seng Krak* (Clenched Fist) had been created in 1947 as a secret and militant tribal group, with an anti-Bengali immigration orientation, by Balai Devbarman, Durjay Karta, Prabhat Ray and Bansi Thakur, among others.²³ The *Seng Krak* was short lived and also had little impact on the tribal population. The organisation was banned in 1948 for allegedly indulging in violence against the refugees. The group is believed to have been revived in 1967, but its activities again did not have much impact.

Although varying degrees of mobilisation for the ‘tribal cause’ were present, it was with the formation of the Tripura Upajati Juba Samiti [Tripura Tribals’ Youth League (TUJS)] in 1967²⁴ that the central issues were articulated in an organised form. The TUJS raised questions, *inter alia*, regarding the unification of cognate tribes, restoration of lands transformed from ‘tribal’ to ‘non-tribal’, recognition of the tribal language (*Kok Borok*) as the medium of instruction, more reservation for

²¹ Subir Bhaumik, *Insurgent Crossfire: North-East India*, Delhi: Lancers Publishers, 1996, p. 97.

²² Tripura Ganamukti Parishad (TGP) was formed in 1948 by Aghor Debbarmann, Dasarath Debbarmann and Sudhanava Debbarmann along with their political leader Biren Datta to wage an ‘armed communist struggle’. Their objective also included formation of democratic government through adult franchise in Tripura. The organisation even supported the personnel of abandoned Tripura First Rifles (TFR) in an abortive *coup d’etat* in 1948 to overthrow Regency under the widow of late King Bir Bikram Kishore Manikya, Kanchanprabhadevi. See Chaudhuri, *A Political History of Tripura*, p. 53.

²³ Chaudhuri, *A Political History of Tripura*, p. 58. Also see S R Bhattacharjee, *Tribal Insurgency in Tripura*, Delhi: Inter-India Publications, 1989, p. 127.

²⁴ The TUJS had refused to function as the tribal wing of the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M) and a rivalry between the two started since then. See Chaudhuri, *A Political History of Tripura*, p. 60.

tribals in public services, and appointments and formation of district council under the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution.²⁵

Three other events in this context had an impact on the future course of the conflict situation in Tripura. They include:

- ? Provisions of the Tripura Land Revenue and Land Reform Act, 1960 aimed to vest ownership of the lands to the tiller, while declaring that non-claimed lands would belong to the State. The Act also sought to “regulate unrestricted alienation of tribal lands.” However, an amendment by the State Government through an ordinance in 1974 legitimised transfer of lands to non-tribals up to January 1, 1969.²⁶ An agitation that followed witnessed a confrontation between the Ganamukti Parishad and the TUJS, with the latter calling for the exclusion of Bengalis from the agitation, “Since their agitation was against the Bengalees.”²⁷
- ? A State Government official circular in 1974 asked various departments to increasingly use Bengali language for correspondence. The TUJS and other tribal leaders opposed this.²⁸
- ? The 1979 anti-‘foreigners’ agitation in Assam encouraged the TUJS to demand expulsion of all immigrants who came to Tripura after October 15, 1949.²⁹

Though the TUJS remained an over ground political force,³⁰ it had its militant wing, the Tripura Sena (Tripura Army), which was led by Bijoy Kumar Hrangkhawl. Hrangkhawl maintained active links with the erstwhile Mizo insurgent group, the Mizo National Front (MNF). He also led the second phase of insurgency in Tripura by forming the Tribal National Volunteers

²⁵ Chaudhuri, *A Political History of Tripura*, pp. 59-60.

²⁶ Verghese, *India's Northeast Resurgent*, p. 170.

²⁷ Ganguli, “Tripura Tribals and Mainstream”, p. 680.

²⁸ Chaudhuri, *A Political History of Tripura*, p. 61.

²⁹ Tripura was formally merged with the Indian Union on this date. It later became a Part C State after the new Constitution was inaugurated on January 26, 1950, subsequently a Union Territory in November 1956 and finally a full-fledged State in January 1972.

³⁰ TUJS has finally merged with the Indigenous People’s Front of Tripura (IPFT) in 2002 to form the Indigenous Nationalist Party of Tripura (INPT).

(TNV), later rechristened as the Tripura National Volunteers in 1978. Disgruntled leaders of the TNV, who were dissatisfied with Hrangkhawl's decision to surrender in 1988, lead the present phase of the insurgency under various banners, of which the National Liberation Front of Tripura (NLFT) and All Tripura Tiger Force (ATTF) remain dominant.

Group Violence and External Support

Understanding the twin dimensions of group violence and external support mechanisms of the continuing 'little wars' in Tripura³¹ is vital for situating groups like the NLFT and ATTF in a proper context. A definition by the British Army in 1995 is helpful in this regard: insurgency is the "actions of a minority group within a state who are intent on forcing political change by means of a mixture of subversion, propaganda and military pressure, aiming to persuade or intimidate the broad mass of people to accept such a change."³² This combination of 'subversion, propaganda and military pressure' has been integral to the patterns of insurgent violence in Tripura, though such a characterisation does not exhaust the fullest character of the insurgencies in the State. Mackinlay's categorisation is useful in this regard: insurgents groups in Tripura best fit into the category of lumpen insurgents who are "seldom inspired solely by ideology" and "its leadership inspiration is not intellectually developed or even strongly developed."³³

³¹ The Uppasala Conflict Data Project (UCDP) categorises the insurgent activities of the NLFT, ATTF and their predecessor Tripura National Volunteers (TNV) under the category of "minor armed conflict". However, in Tripura's case, the number of casualties has far surpassed the upper limit of 1,000 that should occur during the course of conflict under this category. The Collateral War Project (CoWP) also listed the sub-conventional war in Tripura among 225 conflicts recorded the world over during 1946 to 2001. See the Special Data Feature by Nils Petter Gleditsch, Peter Wallensteen, Michael Eriksson, Margreta Sallenberg and Harvard Strand, "Armed Conflict 1946-2001: A New Dataset", *Journal of Peace Research*, vol. 19, no. 5, September 2002, Sage Publications, London, p. 620 and 630.

³² Cited in John Mackinlay, *Globalisation and Insurgency*, The International Institute of Strategic Studies, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002, p. 12.

³³ Mackinlay categorised insurgent groups into four classes – lumpen, clan, popular and global. See Mackinlay, *Globalisation and Insurgency*, pp. 44-45.

The insurgency in Tripura, right since the formation of the TNV³⁴ to the present date when the ATTF and the NLFT remain the most violent of the 30 groups whose presence has been noticed in the State,³⁵ has been consistently devoid of a significant ideological component. Groups have always been confused about their 'goals',³⁶ and the TNV, from its very inception, depended on external support for its existence. The Mizo National Front (MNF), an erstwhile insurgent group fighting for a separate Mizoram in what were then the Mizo Hills of the Assam State, was its source for arms procurement and training of cadres, while the Chittagong Hills Tracts of Bangladesh provided a place to hide. It is interesting to note that the TUJS – then the most dominant of the tribal groups purportedly fighting for the tribal rights – had expelled Bijoy Hrangkhawl, the 'commander in chief' of its armed wing, the Tripura Sena, for 'anti-party activities' in 1979. Of the violent activities perpetrated by the TNV, its role in instigating ethnic riots in May 1979 and June 1980, in which approximately 1,800 persons were killed and thousands of dwellings torched, was by far the worst.³⁷ After indulging in mindless violence for some time, Hrangkhawl suddenly decided to dissolve the TNV following his arrest in June 1980 and subsequent release in December 1980. There were reports that he had reached a 'political understanding' with the

³⁴ Mahadev Chakravarti notes that "It was not that insurgent activity was first seen with the formation of Tripura National Volunteers' (TNV) which was primarily responsible for the June riots of 1980; but the kind of inhuman violence as seen in 1980 was not seen earlier (in Tripura)." See "Insurgency in Tripura: Some Trends", *Economic and Political Weekly*, Mumbai, June 23, 2001,

<http://www.epw.org.in/showArticles.php?root=2001&leaf=06&filename=3149&filetype=html>

³⁵ For a listing of insurgent groups in Tripura see South Asia Terrorism Portal; States; Tripura; www.satp.org.

³⁶ Chakravarti, "Insurgency in Tripura".

³⁷ See Ajai Sahni, "Survey of Conflict and Resolution in India's Northeast", *Faultlines: Writings on Conflict and Resolution*, vol. 12, May 2002, Delhi, p. 91. According to another account, at least 2,000 persons were killed in the riots and more than 20,000 houses were burnt. See Anindita Dasgupta, "Tripura's brutal cul de sac", *Himal South Asian*, Kathmandu, December 2001, p. 15. The riots had occurred in the wake of announcement for the formation of Tripura Tribal Area Autonomous District Council (TTAADC) by the State Government in 1979. A Bengali communal organisation *Amra Bengali* (we are Bengalis) was also alleged to be involved in these riots.

then CPI-M leadership in the State.³⁸ Dissatisfied with his decision, the Army of Tripura Peoples' Liberation Organisation (ATPLO) was formed by his colleagues in the same year, with Binanda Jamatiya as its President, and Chuni Koloï, among other leaders. The ATPLO indulged in extortion in the interior villages and the group was short-lived, ceasing to exist with the surrender of Binanda Jamatiya in 1983.³⁹ Such a pattern of formation and dissolution of outfits at the will of individual leaders still continues, as is visible in the current activities of the NLFT and the ATTF, which are dominated by the personal agendas of its central leaders, Biswamohan Debbarma and Ranjit Debbarma, respectively.⁴⁰ Even the short-lived ATPLO suffered a split in 1981, with Chuni Koloï breaking away from the group. However, Hrangkhawl was compelled to revive the TNV in 1982 after the Chuni Koloï faction rescued certain members of his family who were being held captive by Binanda Jamatia's group.⁴¹

The TNV eventually signed a tripartite agreement with the Union and State Governments in 1988 and came over ground. The agreement envisaged, *inter alia*, rehabilitation of the erstwhile TNV cadres, measures to prevent infiltration or illegal migration and other measures for tribal empowerment.⁴² The outfit and its leader were both, thus, separated from violent activities. But, insurgency continued in Tripura with disgruntled erstwhile TNV leaders again forming new groups. The role of the personal stakes of the insurgent leaders was again manifest, providing evidence that they were acting under considerations of personal gain and not for the furtherance of any tribal cause.

An enquiry into the genesis of the NLFT and ATTF and their current organisational structure and functional pattern is useful in this context. The NLFT was formed in 1989 with Dhananjay Reang, the former vice president of the erstwhile TNV as its

³⁸ Bhattacharjee, *Tribal Insurgency in Tripura*, p. 133.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 131-4.

⁴⁰ "Factionalism among the insurgents was a direct consequence of the desire and greed to share in the spoils." See Chakravarti, "Insurgency in Tripura."

⁴¹ See <http://tripurapolice.nic.in/amilitancy.htm#b1>.

⁴² For a full text of the Memorandum of Understanding signed by the TNV see South Asia Terrorism Portal; States; Tripura; Documents; Memorandum of Understanding; www.satp.org.

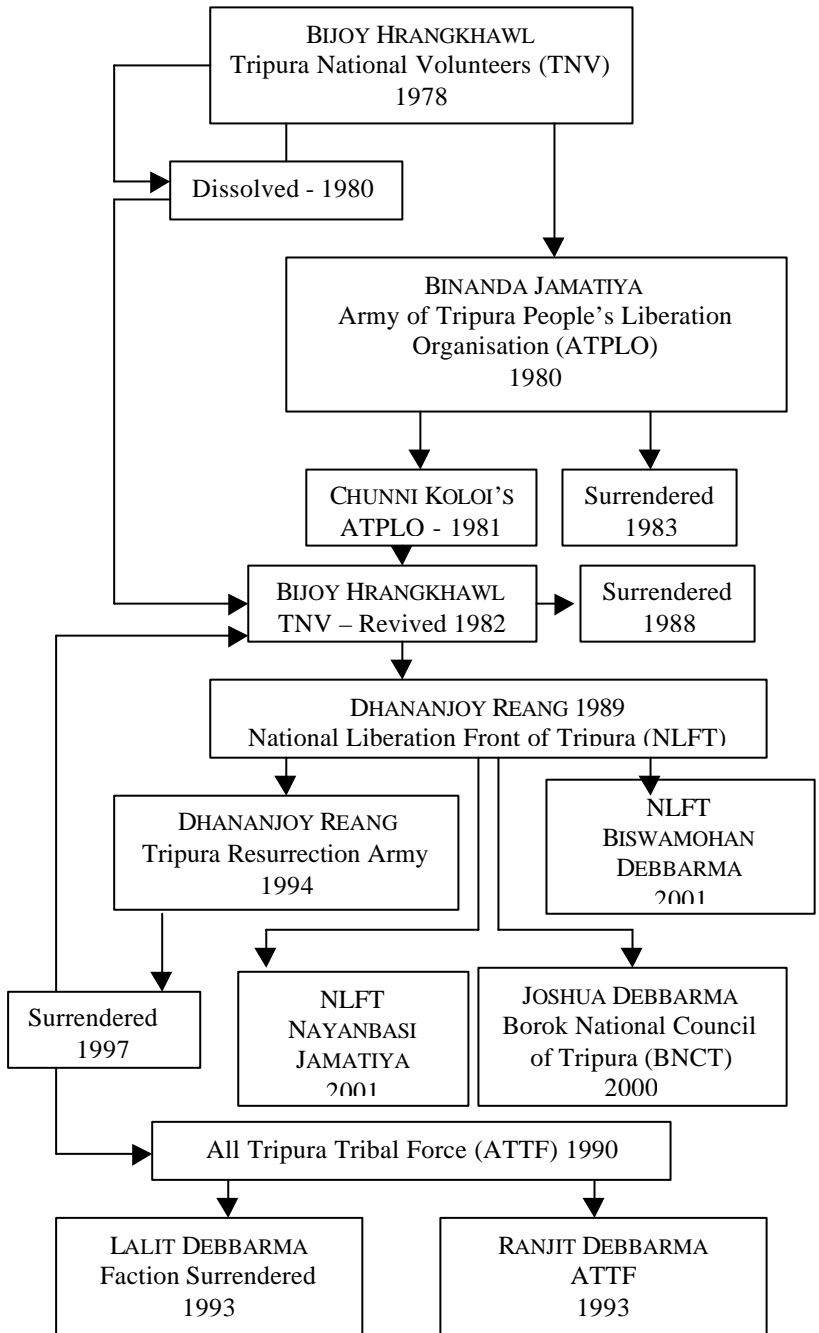
'president'. Dhananjay Reang himself was later expelled from the NLFT and he formed his own group, the Tripura Resurrection Army (TRA) in 1994 to maintain his own 'chain of command'. The latter outfit surrendered *en masse* to the Government in 1997. However, Biswamohan Debbarma became the president of the NLFT and continues to head one of its factions. Without regard for any ideological considerations, this organisation has continued to split along vertical lines on tribal affiliations and even on religious and sectarian considerations. The differences between the Halam and Debbarma tribal members of the NLFT are said to have the reason behind the formation of the Borok National Council of Tripura (BNCT) by Jogendra alias Joshua Debbarma in September 2000. The outfit split further in February 2001 due to differences between its Christian members and the Hindu tribes, the former being led by Biswamohan Debbarma and the latter by Nayanbasi Jamatiya.⁴³

On the other hand, the ATTF was formed, earlier as the All Tripura Tribal Force in 1990, again by disgruntled leaders of the TNV, Lalit Debbarma and Ranjit Debbarma, among others. Lalit Debbarma and his followers signed a 'Memorandum of Settlement' on August 23, 1993, surrendering with 1,633 cadres,⁴⁴ but hard-liners led by Ranjit Debbarma rechristened the group the All Tripura Tiger Force. Factions of the NLFT, ATTF and occasionally the BNCT are responsible for most of the violent incidents in Tripura. Recent reports have indicated that, while the ATTF has changed its name to 'Republican People's Army', the NLFT has been rechristened as 'Plungers and Rangers'.⁴⁵

⁴³ See Sahni, "Survey of Conflicts," p. 95. Also see Dhirubajyoti Shiva, "Another surrender 'drama'", *North East Sun*, New Delhi, October 1-14, 2000, p. 16.

⁴⁴ See <http://tripurapolice.nic.in/amilitancy.htm#b1>

⁴⁵ See "New name for NLFT", *The Sentinel*, Guwahati, June 6, 2003.



There is, thus, no coherent idea of *Tripuri* sub-nationalism that drives the insurgents operating in Tripura to fight for any purported tribal cause. Ironically, the tribals themselves are the targets of much of the violence.⁴⁶ The character and scale of violence by these insurgent groups is also illustrated by the casualty figures over the years in the State: between 1992 and July 13, 2003, these groups had killed 2,278 civilians, including tribals and 354 security force personnel. Through this period, total fatalities among cadres of these various groups totalled a relatively inexpensive 306. The primary choice of soft targets among the civilian population is apparent in the relatively small fraction of losses inflicted on the security forces, as well as those suffered by the insurgents themselves.

Table 4

Fatalities in terrorist related violence in Tripura 1992-2003⁴⁷

Year	Civilians	SF personnel	Terrorists	Total
1992	59	18	21	98
1993	148	28	7	183
1994	206	22	10	238
1995	178	34	45	257
1996	140	31	18	189
1997	205	50	19	274
1998	214	25	26	265
1999	240	41	22	303
2000	453	16	45	514
2001	239	31	42	312
2002	94	43	38	175
2003*	102	15	13	130
Total	2,278	354	306	2,938

* Data till July 13.

⁴⁶ An editorial in the *Economic and Political Weekly* notes, "It is the NLFT that has, since 1999 unleashed a reign of terror, striking not merely the 'non-tribal' population, but also other rival tribal communities." See "Tripura: Shadow of Hope", September 8, 2001, <http://www.epw.org.in/showArticles.php?root=2001&leaf=09&filename=3430&filetype=html>.

⁴⁷ Compiled from official sources as well as reportage in the English language media. See www.satp.org.

The insurgent groups have primarily adopted violence as a conscious strategy to extract illegitimate financial benefits, with abductions constituting the main source of revenue. According to one source, between January 1997 and December 2000, approximately 1,394 persons were abducted for ransom, with demands in most cases ranging between Rupees 20,000 and 50,000.⁴⁸ The demands do, however, run into hundreds of thousands of Rupees, and even into millions, if the person abducted is affluent or particularly prominent.⁴⁹ Chief Minister Manik Sarkar admitted on the floor of the Legislative Assembly that, between April 10, 1998, and April 30, 2003, the ATTF and NLFT together abducted 551 persons and 140 of them were killed in captivity. Another 317 were still reportedly being held captive as of May 2003.⁵⁰ Terrorist groups in Tripura are thus deeply criminalised and have transformed abductions into a lucrative industry. The State, which has barely 8.29 per cent of the Northeast's population, accounts for over 70 per cent of all abductions in the region.⁵¹

What encourages these outfits to carry out subversive activities relatively unchallenged is the easy access to hideouts on foreign soil just across the border in Bangladesh, which shares an 856-kilometre border with the State. Reportedly, the NLFT and ATTF together have as many as 51 camps spread over the Sylhet, Hobiganj and Mauluvi Bazaar districts and the Chittagong Hill Tracts, from where they carry out strikes in the State.⁵² The outfits

⁴⁸ Cited in Dasgupta, "Tripura's brutal cul de sac", p. 17.

⁴⁹ However even after the payment of ransom terrorists kill the hostages. Some of the hostages even die in captivity. See Dasgupta, "Tripura's brutal cul de sac", p. 17.

⁵⁰ "Ultras kill 1150 people during last 5 years", *The Assam Tribune*, Guwahati, May 29, 2003.

⁵¹ Ajai Sahni, "Tripura: The Politics of Ethnic Terror", *South Asia Intelligence Review*, South Asia Terrorism Portal, vol. 1 no. 6, August 6, 2002, www.satp.org/satporstp/sair/Archives/1_6.htm.

⁵² Kalyan Chaudhury, "A verdict against insurgency", *Frontline*, Chennai, <http://www.frontlineonnet.com/fl1906/19060510.htm>. Also see "Increase interaction between Centre, NE States", *Assam Tribune*, November 14, 2002. India has submitted a list of 99 such camps that includes, besides the NLFT and the ATTF, that of the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) that is active in Assam and is suspected to have links with the ATTF and the Isak Muivah faction of the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN-IM). See "India asks Dhaka to hand over militants", *The Indian Express*, New Delhi, November 11, 2002.

not only procure arms and ammunition and train cadres there without any hindrance but it is also believed that the “bulk of the arms that enter the Northeast from Bangladesh do so through Tripura.”⁵³ Foreign soil also provides a convenient route for these groups to come into contact with other lethal international terrorist organisations, including the Al Qaeda. Chief Minister Manik Sarkar has pointed out that, “The State government has information that a group of Al Qaeda activists is active in Bangladesh and is helping the extremists in the North-East.”⁵⁴ However, Bangladesh’s approach towards these outfits is marked by a high degree of duplicity. Even as they provide assurances of containing Indian insurgents on their soil,⁵⁵ on other occasions Bangladeshi authorities deny the presence of these groups in their territories.⁵⁶ Such alternating promises and denials notwithstanding, reliable reports confirm that Indian insurgent groups are, in fact, receiving liberal support from Bangladesh. One such report disclosed that Bangladesh’s military intelligence agency, the Directorate General of Forces Intelligence (DGFI), convened a meeting of the leaders of the ATTF and NLFT where representatives of the Islamist fundamentalist party in Bangladesh, the Jamaat-e-Islami, and Pakistani Inter Services Intelligence (ISI) were also present.⁵⁷ The DGFI may even be playing a surrogate role for the ISI. Secure national boundaries and friendly and cooperative neighbouring states as a complementary factor required for internal security, consequently, remain absent on India’s Northeastern border.⁵⁸ Insurgent groups operating from external bases and with the help of covert foreign agencies hardly feel accountable to the community of their origin or to fellow members of such communities.

A spontaneous wave of sympathy among the local population, which may not be guided by rational considerations,

⁵³ Dasgupta, “Tripura’s brutal cul de sac”, p. 18.

⁵⁴ See “Al Qaeda outfit in Bangladesh helping NE insurgents: Manik”, http://www.outlookindia.com/pti_news.asp?id=124333.

⁵⁵ See “Dhaka assures India it would contain insurgency”, *Indian Express*, April 30, 2003.

⁵⁶ See “No insurgency camps in Bangladesh”, *Indian Express*, June 4, 2003.

⁵⁷ “Tripura rebels”, *Telegraph* (Northeast), June 4, 2003.

⁵⁸ John Mackinlay cites the example of Israel as how surrounded by the non-cooperative neighbourhood the country faces constant security threat. See his *Globalisation and Insurgency*, pp. 31-32.

can be discerned in the initial phase of an insurgency. However, it is by use of force alone that these groups continue to remain in existence because “once they have consolidated their power to use violence at will, (they) evolve a dynamic of their own and become unaccountable to any group.”⁵⁹ The conclusion that it is from its roots in civil society that subnational politics derives much of its power, as also the potential for generating political turmoil,⁶⁰ consequently, appears erroneous in the context of insurgent groups operating in Tripura. The latter, in fact, constrict the space that the people may freely share in the sphere of civil society. Insurgents in Tripura are not only seen issuing *diktats* as to how people should organise their religious life, the use of force is frequent on other occasions of public importance as well, and these include elections to various bodies, including the State Assembly and national Parliament. These groups also issue ‘notices’ on occasions of *Durga Puja* (a ten day religious festival of the Hindus) and *Diwali* (the Hindu festival of lights), among others, defining how these festivals are to be celebrated, and even whether these are to be celebrated at all.⁶¹ Worse still, the NLFT has also been responsible for forcing conversions to Christianity.⁶² The shrinking of the democratic space in Tripura is also visible in the fact that political activists and the electorate have had to suffer incessant violence perpetrated by these groups, which specifically target the whole of the democratic process itself.

⁵⁹ Praveen Kumar, “Tripura: Lethal Strikes from External Bases”, *South Asia Intelligence Review*, South Asia Terrorism Portal, vol.1 no. 43, May 12, 2003, http://www.satp.org/satporstp/sair/Archives/1_43.htm.

⁶⁰ Sanjib Baruah has underlined this in the context of Assam. See his *Politics of Subnationalism*, p. 499.

⁶¹ See “Tripura celebrates Kali Puja, Diwali”, *Assam Tribune*, November 7, 2002. Also see “Separatist group bans Hindu festivities”, http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/south_asia/953200.stm and “NLFT ultras smash Durga idols”, *The Tribune*, Chandigarh, October 19, 1999.

⁶² See Subir Bhaumik, “Church backing Tripura rebels”, www.bbc.co.uk April 18, 2000. http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/south_asia/717775.stm Also see, Tripura: The Conflict Zone <http://tripurainfo.com/insurgency/sekhar6.shtml>

What Happened to Democracy?

Subversion of political processes and considerations of narrow political gains to acquire power at the local level, or to dislodge a political opponent, have created the political support base for the continuing insurgency in Tripura. The State sends only two representatives to the 543-member *Lok Sabha* (Lower House of India's Parliament), a number not considered very significant in its impact on power dynamics at the federal level. The post-Independence migration that is considered to have reduced the indigenous tribal population to a minority is alleged to have been encouraged by local politicians of the Congress party in an effort to reduce the support base of its rival, the Communist Party of India – Marxist (CPI-M). Subir Bhaumik writes that the Congress allegedly promoted refugee settlements even in the hill areas of Tripura that was reserved for the tribals.⁶³ The CPI-M and the Congress have both 'governed' Tripura since it was conferred Statehood in 1972, and have both been accused of using insurgents against each other.⁶⁴ The pattern of violence perpetrated by these outfits during the elections to the State's Legislative Assembly in the years 1988, 1993 and the elections to the Tripura Tribal Area Autonomous District Council (TTAADC) in the year 2000 provide testimony to the fact that these groups act as vote-mercenaries for their political patrons, denying the electorate their political rights in the process. Even during the last Legislative Assembly elections in February 2003, these groups indulged in targeted violence. However, the voters' turnout and the eventual results both indicated that the people risked insurgent violence to participate in the democratic process.

The nexus between political parties and insurgent groups in Tripura has become stable over the years: "the NLFT is said to have close linkages with the Congress (I), while the ATTF is aligned with the ruling left front."⁶⁵ The insurgent organisations have adopted the strategy of election-eve violence specifically targeting the civilian population in an effort to engineer the

⁶³ See Subir Bhaumik, "Disaster in Tripura", p. 71.

⁶⁴ "Tripura: Shadow of Hope", *Economic and Political Weekly*, September 8, 2001.

⁶⁵ Sahni, "Survey of Conflicts and Resolution in India's Northeast", p. 93.

victory of the political party whom they support. Although the first major incidence of pre-poll violence was witnessed in December 1982, ahead of the January 1983 Assembly elections in post-statehood Tripura, it was during the 1988 Assembly elections that insurgent violence as an instrument of electoral strategy was manifested clearly. The CPI-M has alleged that the Congress had reached a tacit understanding with Bijoy Hrangkhawl, who then headed the TNV, and that the latter unleashed a reign of terror on *non-tribals* ahead of the 1988 elections, killing more than a hundred persons “to turn the poll-eve atmosphere in favour of the Congress.”⁶⁶ Hrangkhawl came over ground following the formation of the Congress-TUJS coalition government during that year.⁶⁷ To counter the ‘support’ that the Congress had arranged with the help of the erstwhile TNV, the CPI-M supported the formation of the All Tripura Tribal Force (ATTF), ostensibly to keep away its political rival, the Congress from the tribal council, the TTAADC. The ATTF selectively targeted Congress-TUJS leaders and activists throughout the coalition Government’s rule and also during the Assembly Elections of April 3, 1993,⁶⁸ held after a brief spell of President’s rule. But only a faction of the ATTF led by Lalit Debbarma surrendered after the ‘objective’ of installing a Left Front Government, headed by CPI-M leader Dasharath Deb, was secured through the use of terrorist violence. The other faction, led by Ranjit Debbarma, continues disruptive activities in the State under the name of All Tripura Tiger Force (ATTF), apparently with the motive to continue to reap the benefits of the insurgency-politics nexus.

Even the Tribal Council, an instrument envisaged to empower the tribal population, has become an arena where the insurgents effectively alter the poll dynamics through the use of

⁶⁶ Haripada Das, “Tripura: Congress Has To Account For Complicity With Anti-Nationals,” *People’s Democracy*, vol. XXVI, no. 34, September 1, 2002, http://pd.cpm.org/2002/sept01/09012002_tripura1.htm.

⁶⁷ In fact Hrangkhawl is said to have contacted the then Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi through the then Mizoram chief minister Lalthanhawala for a settlement of the problem through negotiations. See Shekhar Datta, “Tripura: A Bloody Prelude to Elections”, *South Asia Intelligence Review*, South Asia Terrorism Portal, vol. 1, no. 29, February 3, 2003,

⁶⁸ http://www.satp.org/satporctp/sair/Archives/1_29.htm#assessment2.
Ibid.

violence. The Tripura Assembly had passed the Bill for the formation of the Council in March 1979, though the first Council was constituted only in 1982, under the Seventh Schedule of the Indian Constitution.⁶⁹ The Council was reconstituted again in 1985 under the Sixth Schedule,⁷⁰ and the Congress boycotted elections to this Tribal Council. Since its formation, the Left Front had controlled the Council, till the elections were held to elect new Council members on April 30 and May 3, 2000. It was during these elections that the NLFT is alleged to have directly sponsored a political front, the Indigenous Peoples' Front of Tripura (IPFT).⁷¹ The NLFT selectively killed people, including activists and leaders of the CPI-M, during these elections. Violence continued even after the elections to leave a strong terror-imprint on the minds of the people. According to an estimate, while 78 persons were killed after the elections to the Council were notified on March 31⁷² through the elections, another 111 were killed in less than three weeks following the election.⁷³ As a result, the NLFT-backed IPFT managed to gain control of the Council, winning 18 of 28 elected members. The total strength of the Council is 30 with another two members nominated by the State Governor.

The culture of violence as a prelude to the democratic process continued into the most recent State Legislative elections in early 2003, with both the NLFT and ATTF targeting opponents of their

⁶⁹ The Seventh Schedule of the Indian Constitution provides listings of various items over which the Union Government and the State Governments have the power to legislate individually or concurrently. For further details see <http://parliamentofindia.nic.in/const/shed07.htm>.

⁷⁰ Sixth schedule of the Indian Constitution relates to the provisions of the Administration of Tribal Areas, including autonomous districts and autonomous regions in the States of Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura and Mizoram.

For further details see <http://parliamentofindia.nic.in/const/shed06.htm>.

⁷¹ See a commentary on the 2000 TTAADC elections by Mahadev Chakravarti, "Tripura ADC Election, 2000: Terror Tactics Win", *Economic and Political Weekly*, Mumbai, July 22-28, 2000, <http://www.epw.org.in/showArticles.php?root=2000&leaf=07&filename=1537&filetype=html>.

Also see Kalyan Chaudhury, "A victory at gun-point" *Frontline*, vol. 17, no. 11, May 27 - June 9, 2000 <http://www.flonnet.com/fl1711/17110390.htm>.

⁷² Chaudhury, "A victory at gun-point."

⁷³ Kalyan Chaudhury, "Terror in Tripura", *Frontline*, vol. 17, no.12, June 10 - 23, 2000, <http://www.flonnet.com/fl1712/17120410.htm>.

political patrons, although the former inflicted more civilian fatalities. Between January 1, 2003, and February 2, 2003, twenty political activists were killed in various incidents by these outfits.⁷⁴ Despite the greater violence inflicted by the NLFT, the Indigenous Nationalist Party of Tripura (INPT)-Congress combine backed by this group was unable to secure victory, and the alliance managed to win only 19 seats in the 60-member Assembly.⁷⁵ Another intriguing feature underlay the creation of the INPT through the merger of the IPFT and the TUJS: the merger is believed to have occurred on the directions of the NLFT which wanted a single political party representing 'tribal interests' in the State.⁷⁶ Despite these manoeuvres and the accompanying bloodshed, the voter turnout was 72 per cent,⁷⁷ as the people risked their lives to elect their chosen representatives. The risk was compounded by the ATTF's call to the people to boycott the elections under threat of 'dire consequences' for those who participated.⁷⁸

Violence continues routinely in Tripura with the month of May 2003 witnessing the highest number of fatalities this year. The incidents that occurred in the month of May are intriguing: out of the 36 persons killed in the State, 31 were killed in just two incidents over two successive days. These incidents included the May 6 attack by ATTF terrorists, who killed 21 non-tribals at Kalitilla, in Satcharri, a village in the West Tripura district bordering Bangladesh. Kalitilla is considered a stronghold of the CPI-M, the alleged political patron of the ATTF. The following day, NLFT terrorists killed 10 persons at the busy Moharcherra market area under the Kalyanpur police station limits in the North

⁷⁴ See *South Asia Intelligence Review*, vol. 1 no. 29, February 3, 2003, South Asia Terrorism Portal, http://www.satp.org/satporgrp/sair/Archives/1_29.htm#table.

⁷⁵ Sekhar Datta, "Tripura: A Vote against Violence" *South Asia Intelligence Review*, vol. 1, no. 33, March 3, 2003, South Asia Terrorism Portal, http://www.satp.org/satporgrp/sair/Archives/1_33.htm#table.

⁷⁶ See Manas Paul and Rajesh Dev, "Tripura: Ethnic Tensions and Democratic Consensus—Assembly Elections 2003", *Economic and Political Weekly*, Mumbai, April 12, 2003, p. 1456.

⁷⁷ See "Polling peaceful, says EC", *The Hindu*, Chennai, February 27, 2003.

⁷⁸ For instance see "Tripura ultras warn voters to boycott polls", *The Hindustan Times*, Delhi, January 29, 2003. Also, "NLFT kills 11 CPM cadres, Tripura CM blames Cong", *The Sentinel*, Guwahati, January 28, 2003.

Tripura district. Reports indicated that the terrorists came to the State from their hideouts in Bangladesh, killed the civilians and escaped back to the other side of the border. These incidents show a change in the pattern of violence perpetrated by the NLFT and the ATTF, as these operations conflict against what were conventionally regarded as the political interests of their 'over ground' political partners.

So where does one locate the current situation in Tripura? A state of low intensity conflict, with rag-tag groups that are accountable to no one – including their political supporters or sponsors – with safe havens on foreign soil, indulge in mindless violence for little apparent purpose other than to underline their own existence, and to secure transient political and pecuniary gains. Their characteristics include what Benjamin Barber attributes to *Jehadi* groups – retribution, balkanization, fanaticism and tyrannical paternalism – a largely pathological orientation associated with violence, intolerance and little respect for human life.⁷⁹ The NLFT and the ATTF in Tripura are nothing but terrorist groups who particularly target non-combatants and they do so *intentionally*. Michael Walzer's views on terrorism would not be out of place here: terrorism, he asserts, has become a 'choice', a "political strategy selected from a range of options." He rightly notes, further, that misery is not necessarily the 'root cause' of terrorism. He cites Africa and Central America to underline this point. "Terrorism," he asserts, "does not require mass mobilization", and is rather "the work of a tiny elite of militants who claim to represent the people" and "who also act in absence of the people."⁸⁰

What Next?

Retrospection and introspection provide effective insights into issues that need resolution in Tripura. It is, however, beyond the scope of this paper to submit any framework of solutions.

⁷⁹ Cited in Roxanne L Fuben, "Killing (for) Politics: Jihad Martyrdom and Political Action", *Political Theory*, vol. 30, no. 1, February 2002, California: Sage Publications, p. 6.

⁸⁰ See Michael Walzer, "Five Questions About Terrorism," *Dissent*, New York, Winter 2002, pp. 5-16.

However, any strategy that seeks the containment and eventual elimination of insurgency in Tripura would also need to erect a bulwark against the future emergence and consolidation of groups such as the NLFT and the ATTF. Twin processes are needed simultaneously to increase the legitimacy of the state and further de-legitimise the insurgent groups. Unless it is unequivocally recognised that the state alone is entitled to use lawful force according to clearly defined Constitutional principles, subject to legislative change as per the needs of contemporary society, such groups will *not* cease to exist. As Mohammed Ayoob notes, “The demands of state-building and democratisation can only be reconciled if the democratising state in the ‘third world’ is able to monopolise credibly the instruments of violence within its territories so as to preclude dissident groups from attempting to change the state’s boundaries when political controls are relaxed.”⁸¹ This point should also be clearer to the states encouraging subversion and sabotage within India’s boundaries. Once it has been established that groups such as the NLFT and ATTF are a threat to the rights and freedom of the masses, indeed, a threat to humanity itself, reason demands that the democratic state must be freed from their activities. Thus, ‘ideological warfare’ has to constitute an important component of state policy. It is only within such a context that overground political groups relying on the support of such extralegal insurgent organisations for electoral advantage would find this option increasingly cost ineffective.

There is, equally, need to strengthen various agencies and instruments promoting liberal democratic ideas and ideals among the local population, at the same time instilling a confidence that the state respects these values. Programmes and projects that tie up the interests of local communities, and that ensure that the benefits of resources within the State flow to them, are required. Such projects would go some way in instilling confidence among these populations that they are not in any irreducible opposition

⁸¹ Mohammed Ayoob, “State-Making, State-Breaking and State Failure: Explaining the roots of Third World Conflict” in Luc van de Goor, Kumar Rupesinghe, Paul Sciarone eds., *Between Development and Destruction: An Enquiry into the Causes of Conflict in Post-Colonial States*, London: Macmillan Press Limited, 1996, pp. 67-90.

against 'outsiders', and that these 'others' can, in fact, be transient and important contributors to the local economy and production processes, and that each terrorist attack on such 'outsiders' is an attack on the interests of the local community as well. A greater openness to the transformations that the world is undergoing could also be encouraged through out-migration, programmes of study in other parts of the country by increasing numbers of students, and other processes that would increase interactions between local populations and other parts of India.

Crucially, however, the international dimension of these conflicts must be addressed with extreme urgency. Bangladesh must be pursued, bilaterally as well as at various multinational fora, to end its support to insurgent and terrorist groups operating on Indian soil. Once this problem has been addressed, it may also be useful to encourage investment under a liberal regime for greater economic benefits to accrue to the border populations within Bangladesh, and India could be its strategic partner in this effort, providing not only capital and required technology but also a large market for the consumption of its products. Improved cross border trade between India and Bangladesh would need to be combined with a regulatory regime that ensured that the revenue generated goes to the local people and to the Government, and not to the underground groups that indulge in violence. Economic improvements and better and legally regulated border trade in the border districts could result in the creation of a class of entrepreneurs and traders on both sides of the border, whose interests would be adversely affected by insurgent activities by groups like the NLFT and the ATTF. A self-sufficient border population within Bangladesh is, moreover, less likely to encourage migration.