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## Elections in Tripura

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# Congress party takes over the left 'fortress' in northeast India

by Ramtanu Maitra and Susan Maitra

The dramatic victory of the Congress-I and its electoral ally over the ruling Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M) in the Feb. 2 election in the strife-torn northeastern state of Tripura has given the ruling party a much-needed boost and dampened the Indian left's hope of becoming the only viable alternative to the Rajiv Gandhi government.

The elections for control of the 60-seat state assembly saw the Congress-I and its poll partner, the Tripura Upajati Juba Samaj (TUJS), gain a slender majority over the Left Front—strongly dominated by the CPI-M. The CPI-M controls two state governments, West Bengal and Kerala in the south. Although the party began as a pro-Chinese split-off from the Communist Party of India, it is now engaged in its own "rapprochement" with Moscow, and CPI-M leader Jyoti Basu met with Soviet Central Committee secretary Anatolii Dobrynin when the latter visited India in July 1987.

The CPI-M, which came to power in 1977, winning 54 of the 60 seats, has long been proclaiming the border state its "fortress." For this reason alone, the Congress-I victory is significant. More important, New Delhi will now have an opportunity to put a stop to the 10-year-old insurgency which has been terrorizing the citizens, and brought about the CPI-M defeat.

Tripura, a Hindu kingdom which joined the Indian Union in 1949, juts into Bangladesh, whose inaccessible hill range—known as the Chittagong Hill Tracts—surrounds the state on three sides. These rugged hills and the dense forests—60% of the state is under forest cover—serve as hide-outs and escape routes for the insurgents. In 1949, when Tripura joined the Union, the state was thinly populated with a little more than 1 million people, half of whom were members of various tribes. But over the years, the demographic pattern in the state has gone through a drastic change.

Bengalis from East Pakistan (later Bangladesh), Assam, and West Bengal came to settle in Tripura, sometimes lured by abundant land and timber, sometimes to escape torture

and oppression by the Pakistani Army. A significant number of Buddhist Chakma tribes have also come to settle in Tripura from Bangladesh. The land that they occupied historically belonged to the local tribals—a fact which has brought about many deaths since. By 1981, the year of the last Indian census report, Tripura's demography had become lopsided, with the non-tribals dominant and the tribal population reduced to only 30% of the total.

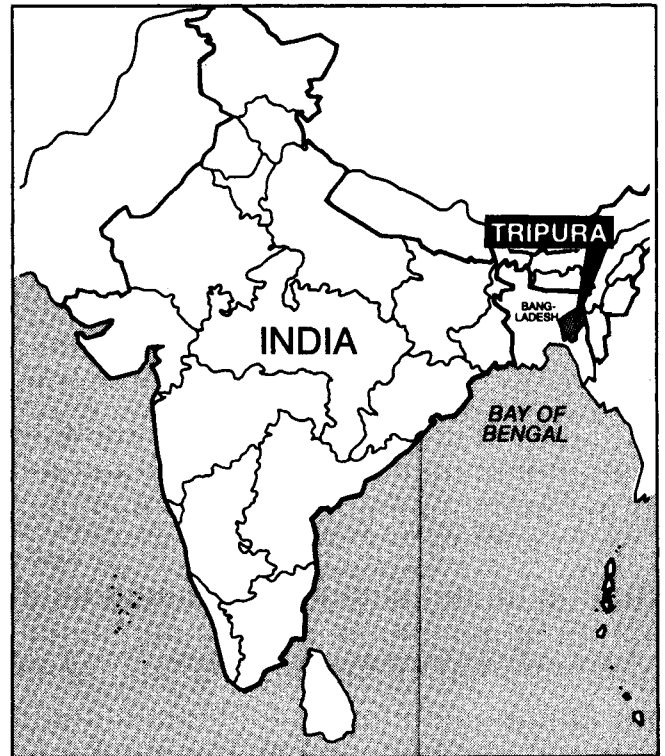
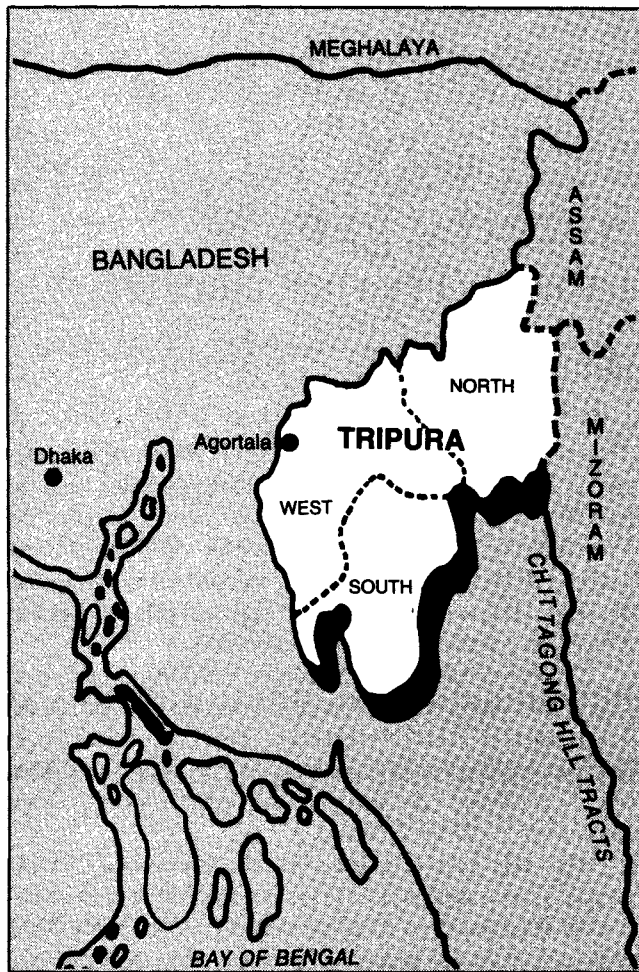
### Seeds of insurgency

The result is a deep sense of insecurity among the tribals, who had only their land. Since almost no industrial development occurred, land and language have become the issues of deadly fights. The tribals, handicapped by poverty and a tradition-bound slash-and-burn agricultural method, found themselves stuck at the bottom of the economic totem pole while the migrants, using tribal land, moved ahead.

Trouble started in the early 1970s, but in 1978, a militant-extremist group called the Tripura National Volunteers (TNV) was formed. Their demand was to get back the land from the non-tribals and take control of the state, by then in the hands of the overwhelmingly non-tribal CPI-M. Like other extremist groups, the TNV soon called for an independent "Free Tripura" and took to the gun. The forests and hills gave them the cover to retreat and regroup after "guerrilla actions"—which in the real world means terrorizing helpless non-tribal families living in tribal-dominated areas.

TNV soon developed ties with other extremists in the tribal-dominated northeastern states. The group began to have close collaboration with the Mizo separatists in the neighboring State of Mizoram, and, according to some reports, with some Bangladeshi Army men on the Bangladesh side of the hills.

The tribal insurgents made national news headlines in early June 1980, when non-tribals were massacred. Whether the killers were all TNV members is not known, but it is



*The Indian state of Tripura, jutting into Bangladesh and surrounded on three sides by inaccessible hills, has for 10 years been under siege by terrorist insurgents.*

known that the TNV had masterminded the carnage. Since then, the TNV has been involved in sporadic killings of non-tribal landholders. Just before the last election, following incessant killings by the TNV, the entire state was declared a “disturbed area” and put under Indian Army control.

### **The game called politics**

During its 10-year rule, the CPI-M’s Left Front in Tripura proved incapable of coming to grips with the insurgency. First, to defuse the extremist demands, the CPI-M made the tribal language the language of the state, though only 30%—the tribal population, that is—of the state’s population speak it.

Another move was a demarcation of 65% of the state’s land as the Autonomous District Council (ADC), where no new non-tribal will be allowed to settle. It seemed a good tack, but then the removal of those who had already settled became a serious matter. The tribal leaders wanted all non-tribals settled after January 1960 to be forced off the land. Under pressure of a large non-tribal voting bloc, the CPI-M could never agree, and compromised with an agreement to remove only those who had settled after January 1969.

The “solution” prompted a new problem. Formation of the ADC provided the TNV with the logic of founding their “Free Tripura”—cut out of the state. The pattern of TNV attacks in the last seven years indicates the targeting of those non-tribals living in the tribal-dominated ADC, not soldiers, paramilitary groups, or other obvious targets.

### **Caught in its own web**

There is a deeper logic to the Left Front’s failure in Tripura. In its early days, CPI-M had organized the tribals, encouraging them to aggressively retain their tribal identity to fight the “class struggle” against exploitation. Being poor and dependent on land, many tribals were caught up by the CPI-M campaign. The majority of non-tribals, threatened by the surging tribals, continued to support the Congress Party.

Meanwhile, the changing demography slowly but surely made the non-tribals the king-makers, increasingly dominating the voting. Hedging their own bets, they courted CPI-M, too. The CPI-M had to bind itself more closely to the same non-tribals against whom it had originally agitated the tribals.

The insurgency was an ideological as well as a practical child of the Communist movement of the state. As the late

Prime Minister Indira Gandhi had emphasized in a famous parliamentary exchange with a Communist MP, the Marxists have a communalist, blood-and-soil notion of "nation" that is antithetical to India's democratic republican constitution.

Both the TNV, with its Maoist tendencies and an aggressive "tribal identity," and the Tripura Upajati Juba Samaj were formed out of the CPI-M. A parallel can be found in the hills of Darjeeling in West Bengal, where the militant Gorkhas, imbued with an aggressive identity and engaged in a "class struggle" against wealthier low-landers, are claiming their Ghorkhaland. West Bengal's CPI-M government, ideologically strapped, is feebly calling them renegades.

There are reports that the CPI-M in Tripura has been in contact with the TNV leaders all along. On Jan. 10, 1987, the CPI-M chief minister told a journalist of the Madras-based daily *The Hindu*, that had he, the chief minister, been a tribal, he, too, might have been in the TNV. These organic links with the TNV had also prevented the Left Front from acceding to Delhi's requests to deploy more army personnel and crush the TNV's gunmen. Instead, the CPI-M launched a campaign against the *foreign* assistance coming to the TNV guerrillas. The Left Front accused missionaries (many TNV members are reported to be Christians), the Bangladesh Army, extremists and secessionist groups, and renegade Pakistani Army men of acting as the mentors of the TNV.

### The way out

The ethnic conflict is exacerbated by the fact that Tripura has remained underdeveloped, with meager employment opportunities. The sole industry in the state consists of an ancient jute mill that has no power to run.

The only way the tribals can be integrated is through development programs which provide meaningful employment and skills. This implies overthrowing the incompetent national security axiom that has prevailed since Nehru's days, that sensitive border areas should be kept undeveloped for the good and safety of the country.

Once, during a visit to the state in November, Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi said that he is proposing a development package for Tripura which would include expansion of railways, installing a gas-based fertilizer plant, setting up fisheries, and providing better-quality seeds for agriculture.

The defeat of the CPI-M provides Gandhi with the opportunity to solve the Communist-entangled political turmoil in this sensitive border state. His success will depend on the new government's commitment to developing the state economically, while dealing with the TNV with an iron fist.

The Tripura poll results are a setback for the Left Front nationally. Buoyed by recent victories in the West Bengal and Kerala State Assembly elections, the Left Front leaders had begun to project themselves as a national alternative to the Congress-I. They have already planned a month-long demonstration to "Oust Rajiv Gandhi, Save India" beginning Feb. 23. The fall of the "fortress" will no doubt make them less than invincible.

## Imperial games follow Thai ceasefire

by Linda de Hoyos

After talks in Bangkok Feb. 16 and 17, Thailand and Laos agreed to a ceasefire and a general military pullback from the Ban Rom Klao area of the Thai border, which has seen the worst fighting in the region since Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia in 1978. The agreement was worked out between Thai Supreme Commander Chavalit Yongchaiyudh and Laotian Army Chief of Staff Sisavat Koobounphan.

Before the ceasefire, the Laotian and Thai armies stood face to face along the 1,000-mile border, on full alert. In the Ban Rom Klao area in Phitsanulok, Thai and Laotian forces had been battling for two months over a 27-square mile piece of territory which Laos seized in December. Casualties were likely over 2,000 for Thailand.

After two days of talks, Generals Sisavat and Chavalit agreed upon a ceasefire to begin 8 a.m. Feb. 19; the withdrawal of all forces by three kilometers from the battle site at Hill 1428 within 48 hours; and instructions to their troops to avoid armed clashes and coordinate the mutual withdrawal. The agreement also called for "political negotiations in earnest within 15 days from the commencement of the ceasefire" for a formal definition of the border in that region.

The agreement gives the advantage to Thailand, since the three-kilometer withdrawal from Hill 1428 extricates the Laotian troops from Thailand completely.

Although General Chavalit appears to have upstaged Thai Foreign Minister Siddhi Savestila in bringing the clash to an end, Thai government officials, according to the *Bangkok Post*, say that former prime minister Gen. Kriangsak Chomanan was the "key figure" behind the ceasefire. On Feb. 11, Kriangsak, who as prime minister signed the first communiqué of friendship with postwar Laos in 1979, called on Laotian Prime Minister Kaysone Phomvihane in Vientiane. According to Bangkok sources, Kriangsak carried a stern warning that unless Laos left Thai territory, it was in for more than it bargained for. Or, as publicly reported in the *Post*, Kriangsak conveyed Prime Minister Prem's "concern that a localized border clash was threatening to get out of control."

The Ban Rom Klao fighting was an amplified version of the Vietnamese occupation of the Chongbok Pass in the first half of 1987. After steady escalation leading to heavy casualties, the Vietnamese withdrew. The pattern is clear, say