



Indian federalism and tribal self-rule

Ethnic conflicts and secessionism result in a delegation of powers to sub-state councils to protect aboriginal identity and culture.

BY HARIHAR BHATTACHARYYA

On February 10, 2003, India signed a tripartite ethnic accord with the Bodos, an aboriginal tribe, and the state government of Assam. All three parties hope the accord will end more than a decade of agitation by the Bodos, who have demanded their own homeland. The Bodoland Territorial Council may be brand new, but it is just the latest group to achieve aboriginal self-rule, in which tribal councils have begun to take powers away from the state governments within India's isolated North-East region.

The North-East and autonomy

India's North-East is an ethnically complex region that is virtually cut off from the rest of the country by Bangladesh. The North-east comprises seven states — Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura. The home of about five million aboriginal peoples (known as 'tribals' in India), the region is geographically isolated, hilly, relatively underdeveloped, and poverty-stricken. Multireligious, multiethnic, and multiracial in composition, there is widespread discontent and political extremism, especially among the aboriginal peoples, including calls for separation. Tribals are in the majority in four out of seven states, and have significant presence in the rest (See table "Tribal Population...").

Three of the states are Christian-dominated, while two others were previously princely kingdoms.

The constitution and tribal self-governance

India's constitution contains a number of special provisions under schedules five to seven for the self-governance of various tribal groups. The most empowering is the Sixth Schedule, which enshrines the devolution of powers. Aspects of this schedule that promote tribal self-governance include the exercise of certain legislative, executive and judicial functions by autonomous district councils in areas such as "management of forests, agriculture, community projects, co-operative societies, social welfare, village planning, inheritance of property, marriage, and social custom".

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Mass migration

The Bodoland unrest was encouraged by other experiments in aboriginal self-rule in the North-East, the most successful of which has been the Tripura Autonomous District Council (ADC). The need for a district council was felt more acutely by tribals in Tripura than perhaps anywhere else. Tripura was originally a tribal majority state with a tribal dynasty ruling for centuries. However, the Partition of India in 1947 left the state surrounded by Bangladesh — East Bengal until 1947 — on three sides! A huge influx of Hindu refugees from neighbouring Bengal raised the population to around three million by 1991 and overturned the state's demographic balance so much that the tribals became a minority in their own land. This has created persistent ethnic conflicts between the indigenous peoples and the immigrant Bengalis.



Honey-sellers in Agartala, Tripura state in India's North-East

The tribals have fought for the protection of their identity ever since the late 1940s. The Tripura Legislative Assembly reserved about one-third of its seats for tribals, but it clearly wasn't enough to provide them with cultural and territorial protection. Then in 1982, the Tripura Tribal Autonomous District Council was established to govern two-thirds of the state's area.

The new council's powers

The council covers 68 per cent of the total area of Tripura and 32 per cent of the state's population. Within that group, 77 per cent are tribals and the rest are Scheduled Caste (formerly known as "untouchables") and

others. There are non-tribal people in the council area and tribals in the non-council areas, too.

The council is a 30-member body, with two seats nominated by the Governor of Tripura, and 28 seats elected on the basis of universal adult suffrage, with 25 of those reserved for tribals only. The council operates as a legislative branch which must meet at least four times a year. A chairman is elected from among the members for a period of five years. He summons and prorogues the council. An executive committee is also elected from among the council members.

Tribal Population in India's Northeast (1991)

States	Total Population (millions)	Tribal people as % of total population	Number of Tribes
Arunachal Pradesh	0.9	79.0	101
Assam	22.4	10.8	23
Manipur	1.8	31.2	28
Meghalaya	1.8	80.5	14
Mizoram	0.7	94.3	05
Nagaland	1.2	88.2	20
Tripura	2.8	29.0	18

Source: Census Report of India, 1991.

Under the direction of the political executive, the permanent administrative body of the council is headed by a Chief Executive Officer, a civil servant belonging to the Indian Administrative Service. Principal Officers are in charge of departments such as tribal welfare, health, animal husbandry, and education. As a further measure of decentralized administration, the council has also set up four Zonal Development Offices, and 27 Sub-Zonal Offices.

The Tripura council was formed initially under the Seventh Schedule of the Indian Constitution, with very limited powers. The first Tripura council to be formed under the broader Sixth Schedule was in 1985. Elections have always been contested in a multi-party environment. Over several elections, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) led its coalition, the Left and Democratic Front, to an overwhelming majority. However, in the current council, formed in 2000, the Indigenous Peoples Front of Tripura (IPFT), a tribal party, captured a majority for the first time with 18 out of 28 seats. The council in Tripura demonstrates a delicate case of power-sharing, with a Marxist coalition in control of the state administration, while the council is now controlled by its political rival, the IPFT.

Land, literacy, and employment

By promoting the welfare and development of the tribals, the council has provided an effective institutional safeguard for tribal identity. Within its first term, the council restored 2,946 acres of tribal land to 3,006 landless tribal families. Primary schools in the council areas were handed over to the council by the state government in 1986. Various federal and state special developmental programs are now implemented by the council, thereby establishing institutional linkages between these three layers of government in India.

On the legislative front, the council passed 31 Bills during 1985-92, including the Village Committee Bill which was designed to ensure grassroots participation under the council. The latter did not have a smooth passage and, after much revision and redrafting, finally became an Act in January 1994. This act provided for the election of as many as 434 village committees in the council areas. Such committees are yet to be formed though, because some requirements have not yet been completed.

Financially, the council is dependent on funds released by the state government. During 1994-95, for instance, the Council's Own Fund constituted only 8 per cent of the revenues, while funds from the state government provided around 92 per cent. In the very depressed areas of the council the scope for mobilization of resources is limited but the council has made a small but good beginning: it has earned thousands of rupees by issuing trade licenses. These self-employment schemes have been established by the Animal Husbandry and Fisheries Departments, with 35 thousand beneficiaries.

The council provides improved institutional protection to the state's threatened tribes, as evidenced by advances in population growth and literacy. Between 1981 and 1991, the proportion of tribals to the total population of Tripura rose from 28 per cent to 31 per cent. This is an important index of the level of confidence and security among tribals. In 1981, only 23 per cent of tribals living in the rural areas were literate, but that rose to 39 per cent by 1991.

The council represents a major institutional innovation at the sub-state level to accommodate tribal identity and manage

Recent Conflict in India's North-East

- **India - Northeast (1979 - first combat deaths) - Update: November 2002**

"2002: Fighting (in India's North-East) claimed close to 1,000 lives this year, despite the initiation of peace negotiations between a number of north-eastern rebel groups and the Indian government."

- *Armed Conflict Reports 2002*, from Project Ploughshares, an ecumenical peace centre of the Canadian Council of Churches

- **Erstwhile rebels in self-help venture**

"Tihu, June 22, 2003: A large number of youths, both male and female of Baska area in the northern part of Nalbari district in general and the villages of that area nearing Indo-Bhutan border in particular have come forward to engage themselves in enterprises in the fields of trade and commerce, agriculture, small scale industrial units, various other productive schemes and commercial units. ... According to an administrative source, [152 members of different armed groups from] different parts of the area, throwing away their arms, have returned to join the 'mainstream' and moved on the path of self-employment. "

- *Northeast Times*, India, June 23, 2003

- **Thirty-eight insurgents surrender in Tripura**

"A total of 38 insurgents of different outfits on Thursday surrendered with arms and ammunition to the Central Reserve Police Force at its headquarters in Agartala."

"Agartala, June 5 - Among them eight insurgents were of the banned National Liberation Front of Tripura (NLFT) led by one Hemanta Debbarma, who surrendered to the Inspector General, Sukhjinder Singh and deposited three AK series rifles ..."

- *Hindustan Times*, India, June 5, 2003

ethnic conflicts. While the Tripura state government has had the difficult task of surrendering many of its powers to the council, this action has helped to ease secessionism in Tripura. However, the council cannot provide all the answers to the aboriginal peoples' overriding need for protection of their identity in Tripura. The council has problems, both structural and operational, in developing 'meaningful autonomy'. However, it can be said that a good beginning has been made.

Federalization at the local level

Three aspects of the council experiment deserve special attention. First, it has provided a democratic platform for former separatists to become a party of governance, and thereby reduced significantly the bases of political secessionism in the state. Second, the multi-party electoral competitions have been a training ground for aspiring aboriginal leaders, preparing them for higher responsibilities. It has simultaneously had a democratizing effect on tribal life. Third, the council has served as a basis for India's further federalization below the state level.

The district councils have had varying degrees of success in protecting endangered tribal identity, threatened by the more advanced non-tribals, and immigrants from other parts of India. The success of councils in areas such as Tripura will serve as a constructive example for tribes such as the Bodos, who are just now establishing their own version of decentralized governance under the Indian constitution. (6)