

Agartala as a settler-colonial town

On 23 August 2016 the Indigenous Peoples Front of Tripura (IPFT) undertook a rally in the capital of Tripura, Agartala, demanding a separate state for indigenous people. During the rally, a minor scuffle between members of IPFT and Bengali Hindu residents spiralled into a full scale riot, in which fleeing IPFT members were waylaid and subjected to mob violence in front of police and the media. The next day, hundreds of indigenous students fled Agartala, fearing attacks by Bengali Hindu residents. The state government blamed IPFT for provoking residents of Agartala, the local media supported this and described members of IPFT as a violent and unruly mob, who descended into Agartala to deliberately disrupt the peace. Footage of the disturbance, which emerged later on social media, showed how local media distorted the event, amounting to the essentialisation of the 'tribals' as violent.¹ Though the incident, unlike in the past, did not escalate into large scale ethnic violence, it serves as a clue to reading modern Agartala as a settler-colonial town. To identify Agartala, and by extension modern Tripura, as a settler-colony is to demand transformative politics that render coexistence possible.

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IN ANOTHER INCIDENT, in February 2017, scores of indigenous men were subjected to brutal physical assault while executing a *bandh* (general strike), which was restricted to areas under Autonomous District Council (peripheries of Agartala). The *bandh* was called to oppose Delhi's new citizenship bill that plans to grant citizenship to Hindu immigrants from Bangladesh. The *bandh* was organised by a newly formed alliance, the All Tripura Indigenous Regional Parties Forum (ATIRPF), a shaky coalition between the Indigenous Nationalist Party of Twipra (INPT), the Indigenous Peoples Front of Tripura (IPFT), and the National Conference of Tripura (NCT). The local media reported the event as a clash between rival political parties, eliding the ethnic content of the violence.

Two aspects of these instances of violence are important for my purpose here. One, the local media's effort to distort the reporting of ethnic violence, through their casual delineation of victims and perpetrators, can be seen in the casting of innocence on the settlers' presence in Tripura, arising from a perennial anxiety associated with any form of settler-colonialism.² It is strategic political practice to mask the history of the dispossessed indigenous population in modern Tripura. Two, the state government's framing of the indigenous political parties as 'anti-peace' and 'anti-communal harmony', and by extension declaring them responsible for ethnic conflicts in Tripura, marks a shift in the way conflict is explained in Tripura. This shift has been visible in the last two decades or so, motivated mainly by the Left Front Government, which has been at the helm in Tripura for the last 24 years. Prior to this time, ethnic conflict was understood as being a by-product of immigration and settlement of Hindu Bengalis from East Pakistan, now Bangladesh, and subsequent land alienation of indigenous communities. Now the onus has been reversed.

The making of a settler-colony

Tripura, formerly ruled by Manikya kings, is a product of British-India's colonial cartographic surgeries to the Manikyan spatial arrangement.³ The Manikya state was characterised by three spatial realities: fortified state core, hill space and extractive plain space. The state core was located where hills and plains met, formerly at Rangamati and later at present day Agartala. This became a Hinduised space. Manikya's main source of revenue was the large swathes of cultivated plain in present-day Bangladesh, then part of Bengal. The Bengali Hindus who immigrated and settled in Tripura, after the partition of the subcontinent, came from this former extractive space. This spatial arrangement was ultimately disrupted in the eighteenth century when British-India captured these plains, then categorised as British or Plain Tripura. The hills, which were considered to be outside of colonial influence, came to be known as Independent Tripura, till its merger with independent India.

Of course, this did not mean there was not already a Bengali Hindu population in (the hills space) of so-called Independent Tripura. There was a sizeable number of bureaucrats in Agartala, who stayed on Tripura land when their service ended, and there was a large population of Bengali peasants who were induced by the new state to carry out sedentary wet agriculture in its ambitious project to replace the loss of extractive space to British India. However, none of those Bengalis who remained in Tripura lost their British Indian citizenship. And so, when the

Indian subcontinent was partitioned, large numbers of Bengali Hindus already found themselves in Tripura, and the former bureaucrats automatically acquired prominence in the new administration. Soon the hill communities were reduced to a demographic minority, and the new independent state expended much of its resources in rehabilitating the new immigrants. In fact, the new state began to invent, sanction and circulate Tripura's past as one of flourishing tribal and non-tribal communities under the benevolence of great Manikya rulers; a useful narrative to claim space and inscribe presence of Bengali Hindus on the landscape. It did not take long for the new settlers to establish a dominant presence in Tripura. The new social, economic and political arrangement benefited the new settlers, which coincided with the material dispossession and exclusion of the indigenous communities.

By the 1970s a new Tripuri nationalism emerged to oppose the ongoing alienation and material and cultural dispossession of the indigenous communities. The new nationalist groups included the Tribal (now Twipra) Students Federation (TSF), the Tripura Upajati Jubo Samity (TUJS, political party), and the Tripura National Volunteers (TNV, armed insurgency). These three organisations challenged the prevailing idea of Tripura's past, and sought to reinvent and reclaim Manikya history as their nation's glorious past. These groups not only sought to resist the cultural dominance of the Bengali Hindu settlers, but also mobilised nationalist sentiments and became a powerful force in electoral politics. Their later incarnations, especially the various armed groups that espoused the nationalist cause, engaged in violence against the Bengali Hindu population.

When Manik Sarkar became the Chief Minister in 1998, he not only sought to crush the indigenous armed insurgency, but also the ideological basis of these groups. The war against the insurgency led to a militarisation of indigenous life. Unlike other places in Northeast India, this quiet but violent militarisation did not attract the attention of the outside world; mainly because of the inability of those who were affected to articulate their resistance. And most importantly, Sarkar's government reinvested heavily in the historical narrative of the Tripura-Bengal connection, and the process unleashed violence on the memory of the indigenous people's connection to their land. What began as land alienation, and subsequent material dispossession through various structures and practices, finally culminated in the dispossession of history. Over the past two decades, the state government has renamed various historical sites and has memorialised Hindu Bengali heroes and personalities from present day West Bengal, all over Agartala.

Recreating Agartala as a settler town

Agartala, by virtue of being the capital of Tripura, has been a crucial space for re-inscribing the new spatial discourse of Tripura's past (the Bengal-Tripura connection). This new political project gained urgent ascendancy under Manik Sarkar's regime, who sanctioned the renaming of various historical sites and buildings despite strong opposition by indigenous political parties. His government introduced a Bill in the State Legislature to rename Agartala Airport after Rabindranath Tagore (a famous Bengali author), despite the airport having been built by the last Manikya ruler. The proposal elicited strong opposition

from various indigenous political parties, and was allowed to lapse. Another proposal by Sarkar's government, to rename the Ujjayanta Palace as the Tripura State Museum was also successfully opposed by the same forces. However, these setbacks did not stop the government from renaming the Astable Grounds (sport stadium) after Swami Vivekananda, an Indian nationalist hero from Bengal who became a convenient prop in the rise of right wing forces in India.

The (re) naming of official buildings established by the state are beyond the power of the indigenous political parties to oppose or challenge. All these buildings are named after Hindu Bengali heroes from Bengal; and they are memorialised all over Agartala. Agartala now fully resembles a settler-colonial town, recreated in the image whence the settlers came. The indigenous population feels estranged and excluded, mainly because Agartala no longer represents the ideal past of a flourishing of 'tribal' and 'non-tribal' communities, nor does it seek to commemorate a Manikya past, which is credited with this blossoming. If anything, the Manikya presence is erased, or disavowed by the state. The large statue of Khudiram Bose (see photo), with his chest thrust forward, which stands at the entrance to the Ujjayanta Palace, is an everyday reminder of Agartala as a settler-colonial town: the power to recreate one's place of settlement in the image of one's original home; the power that produces and is produced through the dispossession of the indigenous population.

Importantly though, Bengali Hindus have always been found in the area, also during the Manikya reign. Agartala was also inhabited by a sizeable population of Manipuris and Bengali Muslims. In fact Bengali Muslims constituted the second largest population after Tripuris and other indigenous communities. Indeed, immediately after partition, Bengali Muslims, with the support of a few members of the Royal Family, wanted Tripura to be part of East Pakistan. This desire was expressed through rallies and marches around Agartala. Together with the Tripur Jatiyo Mukti Parishad, before it became a 'tribal wing' within the Communist Party, the Bengali Muslims were seen as a political threat by the Bengali Hindu majority, who were members of the Indian National Congress, and who wanted Tripura to be part of India. Even before Independent Tripura merged with India, the Parishad had already built up a strong support base among the indigenous communities, and were poised to take over the state. The Queen Regent, who had assumed power after her husband Bir Bikram Manikya died in 1947, fled to Shillong (now capital of Meghalaya) with her young son, the heir to the throne. After the merger, power automatically passed into the hands of Congress and the new state banned the Parishad and launched a military offensive against them. Its leaders, sympathisers and members fled Agartala and went underground in the hills. The Bengali Muslims were chased from Agartala and expelled from Tripura.

Over the past two decades or so, it has become impossible to speak of Tripura in terms of dispossession of indigenous population. The desire to block this narrative arises from anxiety inherent to a settler-colony – to tell itself and the outside world about the benefits of their settlement. Groups like IPFT are an impediment to the smooth flow of such a narrative, and as such invite violent disciplining by mobs, and censoring from those in power in Agartala.

Conclusion

The IPFT and other indigenous political parties and armed insurgencies represent the politics arising out of dispossession. The IPFT's demand for a separate state for the indigenous population not only disrupts the tidy story of communal harmony and egalitarian politics, but also serves to remind the settler of their complicity in the making of a settler-colony. Such politics unsettle their self-congratulatory presence in Tripura, a telling indictment of how their presence has impacted the indigenous population. One should read the two instances of protest described at the beginning of this essay as a demand for dismantling of settler-colonial structures, practices and ideologies. This should be read as a demand for transformative politics, both in the ways indigenous politics are envisioned and practiced, and in the social, economic and political arrangements that seek to perpetuate colonial relationships of inequality and exploitation centred on urban Agartala.

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References

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Above: Khudiram Bose at the entrance of Ujjayanta Palace (Photo by Sunil Kalai).