Traditional Governance Systems among Tripura's Indigenous Tribes: *Examining the Role of Traditional Indigenous Tribal Councils in Modern Era*

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Abstract- This article explores the dynamic interplay between traditional tribal governance systems and modern state-led institutions among the indigenous communities of Tripura, a northeastern state in India. With nineteen constitutionally recognized Scheduled Tribes, Tripura presents a unique context where clan-based, customary law-driven systems such as the *Hoda* among the Jamatia and *Chaudhury* leadership among the Halam continue to shape local governance. The study traces the historical evolution of these traditional councils, their core functions in maintaining social order, conflict resolution, and cultural preservation, and their transformation in response to colonial and post-colonial administrative changes. Through critical analysis, the paper highlights how institutions like the Tripura Tribal Areas Autonomous District Council (TTAADC) have both conflicted with and coexisted alongside traditional systems, creating a complex legal and governance landscape. It argues for a nuanced, pluralistic approach that recognizes and strengthens the role of traditional councils while aligning them with constitutional values. The article concludes with recommendations for integrating these governance forms to ensure culturally appropriate and participatory development among Tripura's tribal populations.

Keywords: Indigenous Tribal Councils, Legal Pluralism, TTAADC, Customary Law.

I. INTRODUCTION

Tripura, a small yet culturally vibrant state in Northeast India, is home to 19 officially recognized indigenous tribes, including the Tripuri (Debbarma), Jamatia, Reang (Bru), Noatia, Halam, Chakma, Mog, Kuki, Mizo, Uchoi, and others. These communities, collectively referred to as "Scheduled Tribes" under the Constitution of India, constitute over 30% of the state's population and are largely concentrated in the hill and forested regions administered under the Tripura Tribal Areas Autonomous District Council (TTAADC).[1, 2]

The way of life among Tripura's Indigenous communities is rooted in simplicity and sustainability. Traditionally, they practice jhum cultivation (shifting agriculture), depend on forest resources, and maintain clan-based social structures that emphasize kinship, mutual aid, and collective decision-making.[3] Villages are often small, closely-knit settlements, where daily life is marked by strong interpersonal bonds and shared responsibilities. Their lifestyle is largely subsistence-oriented and modern influences, though growing, remain secondary in many remote areas.[4]

Crucial to their socio-political organization are traditional Indigenous tribal councils, which operate on the basis of customary laws that have been passed down orally through generations. These indigenous governance systems are deeply respected and strictly adhered to by community members, often more than state-imposed legal frameworks. Village disputes, ranging from land use, domestic conflicts, theft, or ritual violations, are handled internally, without recourse to external legal authorities. The authority of these councils ensures swift justice, sometimes through punishments considered harsh by modern standards, but

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[1] Census of India. *Tripura: Primary Census Abstract Data Highlight – 2011*. Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India.
[2] Bhaumik, Subir. *Troubled Periphery: Crisis of India's North East*. SAGE Publications India, 2009.

[3] Debbarma, B. K. *Tribal Traditional Self-Governance and Development: The Case of Tripura*. Akansha Publishing House, 2017.
[4] Roy, Bijoy B. *Decentralised Governance in Tribal India: A Study of the Autonomous District Councils in Tripura*. Mittal Publications, 2010.

effectively deterring misconduct and reinforcing social order.

The village leader, who presides over the council, is known by different titles in different communities such as "Kalim" or "Chaudhury" among the Halam tribe, "Okra" among the Reangs, and "Sardar" among the Jamatias. These leaders are usually selected from within the clan and are seen as custodians of customary law, moral conduct, and village cohesion.

Despite the increasing penetration of formal governance structures like the Panchayati Raj Institutions and the TTAADC, these traditional councils continue to function parallelly, especially in interior regions, often enjoying greater legitimacy among the Indigenous populace than formal authorities.[5] Their endurance in the face of modern administrative expansion is a testament to their cultural embeddedness and functional utility in indigenous society.

II. HISTORICAL EVOLUTION OF TTRADITIONAL INDIGENOUS TRIBAL COUNCILS IN TRIPURA

The origin of traditional Indigenous tribal governance in Tripura predates the integration of the region into the modern Indian state. These indigenous governance systems evolved organically over centuries, rooted in the specific environmental, economic, and cultural contexts of the tribes. Each Indigenous community had its own council of elders or leaders, tasked with preserving social harmony, resolving disputes, and managing communal resources based on customary law.[6] This form of governance was not written, but rather oral, precedent-based, and highly contextual, relying on memory, experience, and social consensus.

The Jamatia community, for instance, has one of the most structured and formalized traditional systems in Tripura. Their apex body, the Jamatia Hoda, functions as a central institution that governs both civil and spiritual matters across Jamatia villages. It maintains strict discipline among members and continues to enforce rules that affect marriage, inheritance, religious ceremonies, and dispute resolution. The Jamatia Hoda has even established written rules in recent decades to protect its authority in the face of modernization.[7]

In the case of the Halam community, traditional governance revolves around local councils headed by the Kalim & Kabur who are respected elders appointed by consensus or inherited through family lines. These leaders conduct village meetings, adjudicate disputes, and organize communal rituals. Like other tribes, Halam councils often use symbolic fines or public shaming as mechanisms for justice, though they can also impose harsher sanctions, including social ostracization for serious offenses.[8]

During the pre-colonial period, the indigenous governance systems operated autonomously under the overarching authority of the Tripura Maharajas, who largely allowed these Indigenous tribal communities to govern themselves according to local norms. However, with the onset of British colonial administration, and later the integration of Tripura into the Indian Union in 1949, these autonomous systems were gradually reshaped. Revenue systems, codified laws, and formal courts began replacing or undermining the customary authority of Indigenous tribal councils.[9]

The establishment of the Tripura Tribal Areas Autonomous District Council (TTAADC) in 1985 under the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution was intended to address this marginalization by granting legislative and executive powers over Indigenous tribal affairs to an autonomous body. However, while TTAADC created a framework for self-governance, it did not

[5] Baruah, Sanjib. *India Against Itself: Assam and the Politics of Nationality*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003.

[6] Debbarma, B. K. *Tribal Traditional Self-Governance and Development: The Case of Tripura*. Akansha Publishing House, 2017.

[7] Roy, Bijoy B. *Decentralised Governance in Tribal India: A Study of the Autonomous District Councils in Tripura*. Mittal Publications, 2010.

[8] Bhattacharjee, J.B. *Social and Political Life in the Hill Areas of Northeast India*. Omsons Publications, 1996.

[9] Mackenzie, Alexander. *History of the Relations of the Government with the Hill Tribes of the North-East Frontier of Bengal*. Government Printing Office, 1884.

fully integrate or institutionalize the traditional councils. Instead, these traditional bodies and the state-imposed institutions now coexist, often with overlapping jurisdictions and conflicting legitimacy.

III. GOVERNANCE IN TRANSITION: CONFLICT AND COEXISTENCE BETWEEN TRADITIONAL AND MODERN INSTITUTIONS

The integration of Tripura into the Indian Union brought with it a new administrative and legal framework that often conflicted with the traditional governance systems of indigenous tribes. The introduction of formal institutions such as the Tripura State Government, district administrations, and judiciary, along with development agencies, significantly altered the political landscape for Indigenous communities. Most notably, the establishment of the Tripura Tribal Areas Autonomous District Council (TTAADC) in 1985 under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution created a unique layer of decentralized governance meant to uphold tribal autonomy and cultural preservation.[10]

Despite its progressive intent, the functioning of the TTAADC has often led to jurisdictional overlaps with pre-existing Indigenous tribal councils. Traditional institutions that were once the sole arbiters of justice and governance now share space with bureaucratic systems, including Village Development Committees, gram sabhas, and Panchayati Raj Institutions. This institutional dualism has resulted in confusion and power struggles. In several instances, disputes resolved by traditional councils have later been challenged or overturned by formal authorities, leading to tensions between the two systems.[11]

The conflict is particularly evident in matters of land rights, customary marriage laws, and minor criminal disputes. For instance, in some cases, decisions taken by village councils based on customary law have clashed with Indian constitutional provisions, especially when punishments or decisions violate fundamental rights or legal safeguards. This has led to accusations of traditional councils being undemocratic or authoritarian, despite their legitimacy and community acceptance.

However, there are also cases of coexistence and cooperation. In interior villages, where access to courts and formal administration is limited, state agencies often recognize and defer to traditional authorities for resolving day-to-day matters. Some officials under the TTAADC or state departments even engage tribal leaders in decision-making processes, particularly in development projects, natural resource management, and cultural events. This cooperation demonstrates the potential for a hybrid governance model, where traditional institutions complement the formal state structure, ensuring culturally sensitive and participatory governance.

Scholars have argued that such a pluralistic approach can bridge the gap between customary legitimacy and constitutional legality. However, this requires deliberate efforts to codify the roles of traditional councils, provide them with legal recognition, and train community leaders in constitutional rights, gender sensitivity, and inclusive governance.

IV. CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE, CHALLENGES AND THE WAY FORWARD

Despite the expansion of state authority and formal democratic institutions in Tripura, traditional tribal councils remain highly relevant in the socio-political lives of indigenous communities. These bodies continue to command moral and cultural legitimacy, especially in interior regions where state institutions have limited reach. Village elders or council heads such as "Kalim," "Chaudhury," or "Okra" are often the first point of contact for dispute resolution, moral arbitration, and community coordination.

One of the key strengths of these traditional institutions is their cultural rootedness and participatory nature. Decisions are often made in open forums with community input, and judgments are rendered in a language, tone, and context that resonate with the local people. Moreover, the deterrent effect of customary sanctions, including

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[10] Baruah, Sanjib. *India Against Itself: Assam and the Politics of Nationality*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003.

[11] Bhaumik, Subir. *Troubled Periphery: Crisis of India's North East*. SAGE Publications India, 2009.

social boycott, fines, or ritual cleansing, maintains discipline in a way that the formal legal system often fails to do in tribal areas.

However, these systems are not without challenges. In some instances, customary practices conflict with constitutional principles, particularly regarding gender equality, child rights, or personal freedoms. For example, women are often excluded from decision-making roles, and some punishments administered by tribal councils may violate human right. Furthermore, the lack of formal legal recognition for these councils means their decisions are not enforceable beyond the community, leaving them vulnerable to state overrides or political interference.

Another emerging challenge is generational disconnect. With increasing migration, education, and exposure to modern institutions, younger tribal members may view traditional councils as out-dated or authoritarian. This poses a risk of erosion of indigenous governance, especially if no mechanisms are in place to modernize these systems while preserving their cultural essence.

To address these issues, a multi-pronged approach is necessary:

1. *Codification and Recognition:* Where appropriate, customary laws and procedures should be codified in consultation with the community, and recognized under state law, especially within the Sixth Schedule framework.

2. *Capacity Building:* Training programs for traditional leaders on human rights, constitutional law, and inclusive governance can help align customary practices with democratic values.

3. *Collaborative Governance:* Institutional mechanisms should be developed to integrate traditional leaders into decision-making processes of the TTAADC, particularly in matters of land use, local justice, and cultural preservation.

4. Legal Pluralism: The state can promote a pluralistic legal framework that accommodates both formal and informal systems, ensuring community autonomy while upholding constitutional rights.

V. CONCLUSION

The persistence of traditional Indigenous tribal councils in Tripura is a testament to their adaptive capacity and cultural relevance. These councils offer a model of grassroots governance that is community-driven, socially embedded, and historically tested. However, to ensure their sustainability and justice in the modern era, constructive engagement with state structures is essential. Recognizing these institutions not as relics of the past but as living systems of governance can enrich Tripura's administrative landscape and contribute meaningfully to culturally responsive and participatory governance for indigenous communities.

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