



## THE STATES REORGANISATION COMMISSION AND THE ANTI-MERGER MOVEMENT IN TRIPURA (1953–1956): A HISTORICAL ANALYSIS

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### ABSTRACT

*The States Reorganisation Commission and Anti Merger Movement in Tripura (1953-1956) is an important period of constitutional and political history of contemporary Tripura. After the merger of Tripura with the Indian Union in 1949, the State was administered as Part 'C' State under the direct control of the Central Government. Though democratic institutions were being introduced gradually in different parts of India after independence, Tripura still did not have any representative government. This resulted in increased political dissatisfaction among the people of Tripura. The formation of the States Reorganisation Commission in 1953 was an important landmark in this regard in deciding the future constitutional status of Tripura. The Commission's recommendation to combine Tripura with Assam was vehemently opposed and resulted in a vigorous anti-merger campaign across the state.*

*The present study deals with the political background of the proposed merger and with the growth and evolution of the anti-merger movement from 1953 to 1956. It highlights the role played by the Swatantra Tripura Committee, political parties, teachers, students, government employees and a host of tribal and non-tribal organizations in building up resistance to the proposed merger. The movement was the expression of the aspiration to preserve the distinct political-administrative identity of Tripura and the growing demand for democratic rights and representative bodies.*

**KEYWORDS:** Tripura, State Reorganisation Commission, Anti Merger Movement, Swatantra Tripura Committee, integration

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## INTRODUCTION:

The integration and constitutional change of the princely states since independence constituted one of the greatest challenges for the newly independent India. Tripura's case in this larger process of nation building is a special one. Unlike many princely states which were either merged with neighbouring provinces or re-organised soon after accession, Tripura went through a long period of constitutional change, administrative turmoil, democratic aspirations and political movements. Maharani KanchanPrava Devi signed the Merger Agreement on 9 September 1949, after which Tripura was officially merged with the Indian Union on 15 October 1949. (Tripura Merger Agreement, 1949). After the merger, the region was managed as a centrally controlled area under the Chief Commissioner system and subsequently turned into a Part 'C' State according to the Constitution of India in 1950 (Menon, 1956, pp.542-543). Though parliamentary democracy was introduced in independent India and the people of Tripura aspired for a representative government, the state was without democratic institutions like a Legislative Assembly and a Council of Ministers for a long time. The absence of good governance resulted in political discontent and organized democratic movements in the state. The demand for representative government in Tripura became stronger particularly after the constitution of elected bodies in some other Part 'C' States under the Government of Part C States Act, 1951. The political parties, democratic groups and progressive leaders of Tripura have condemned the Central Government for denying equal constitutional rights to the people of the state. The creation of an advisory council appointed by the Centre and not by elected legislatures added to the public discontent. Here, the problem of democratic rights got linked up intimately with the larger problem of the constitutional position of Tripura within the Indian Union.

In the context of increasing political tensions, the Government of India formed the States Reorganisation Commission to assess the restructuring of Indian states; nonetheless, its suggestions about merging Tripura with Assam met significant resistance from the state's population, thereby altering the political climate of the area, as the proposal sparked considerable public unease and eventually led to the emergence of a vigorous anti-merger movement throughout Tripura. This study seeks to analyze the influence of the States Reorganisation Commission and its effect on the rise of the anti-merger movement in Tripura. It examines the political conditions that resulted in the merger suggestion, the reactions of various political groups and leaders, and the character of the grassroots opposition that emerged against the proposal. The research additionally aims to comprehend how the anti-merger movement aided in the development of democratic awareness and established a basis for Tripura's future quest for complete statehood.

## METHODOLOGY

This study is based on the historical method and focuses primarily on qualitative analysis of primary and secondary sources. Primary sources including government reports, proceedings of the States Reorganisation Commission, official notifications, memoranda, contemporary newspapers, archival records, and Tripura State Gazettes have been examined to comprehend the political changes between 1953 and 1956. Secondary sources such as books, scholarly articles, and academic writings concerning Tripura's political history, state restructuring, and democratic movements have been utilized as well. The gathered materials have been thoroughly examined to assess the effect of the States Reorganisation Commission and the rise of the anti-merger movement in Tripura.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Numerous researchers have examined the political changes in Tripura and the socio-political movements that arose after independence. Nonetheless, just a small number of research efforts have specifically focused on the effects of the States Reorganisation Commission and the anti-merger campaign in Tripura.

Bijan Mohanta, in *Tripura in the Context of Socio-Political Movements since 1945* (2004), offers one of the most comprehensive narratives of the anti-merger movement and the involvement of the Swatantra Tripura Committee. The study examines the political climate in Tripura throughout the 1950s and elaborates on the involvement of various political parties and social groups in the opposition to the suggested merger with Assam. Mohanta emphasizes the role of the Communist Party of India and other Left groups in shaping public sentiment. Ranjit Kumar De examines the rise of democratic awareness and political activism in Tripura in his studies on socio-political movements following independence. His research outlines how political conflicts in Tripura were tightly linked to calls for a representative government, accountable administration, and constitutional changes.

The State Reorganisation Commission's Report (1955) and The State Reorganisation Act, 1956 are important primary references for this research. Banikantha Bhattacharyya's writings also provide important perspectives on Tripura's governance under Chief Commissioner's rule and the increasing demands for democratic institutions. Research by scholars like B. B. Mohanty, B. K. Roy Burman, and Amalendu Guha offers valuable insights into the political changes in northeastern India, along with the challenges of state reorganisation, ethnicity, and regional identity. These investigations aid in comprehending the wider political landscape where the anti-merger movement emerged. The existing literature highlights the connection between the SRC recommendation, regional identity, and the quest for statehood in Tripura. The current body of work indicates that although numerous researchers have explored Tripura's political shifts and democratic efforts, the anti-merger protests of 1955–56 lack sufficient comprehensive historical examination. Consequently, this study seeks to explore the effect of the States Reorganisation Commission and the anti-merger movement in Tripura within the wider context of democratic goals, regional identity, and constitutional progress.

## OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This study seeks to explore the influence of the States Reorganisation Commission on Tripura and to investigate the rise and progress of the anti-merger movement opposing the suggested integration of Tripura with Assam. It also aims to investigate the role of the Swatantra Tripura Committee and various political entities in galvanizing public sentiment for maintaining Tripura's distinct political-administrative identity and democratic goals.

## DISCUSSION

The Government of India appointed the States Reorganisation Commission on 29 December 1953, chaired by Fazal Ali, with H. N. Kunzru and K. M. Panikkar served as a member (State Reorganisation Commission, 1955). The main objectives of the Commission was to analyze the current administrative framework of Indian states and suggest appropriate steps for their reorganization based on factors like administrative efficiency, linguistic coherence, economic feasibility, geographical integrity, and regional aspects. The Commission faced the challenging task of reconciling regional ambitions with the overarching goal of national unity and administrative effectiveness in India after independence. In northeastern India, special focus was placed on the future of the

smaller Part 'C' states like Tripura and Manipur, viewed as strategically significant due to their border positions and relatively fragile administrative and economic frameworks. The Commission sought to assess if these areas could persist as individual administrative units or if merging with larger adjacent states would be more appropriate for governance and national security. However, upon reviewing the political and administrative situation in Tripura, the Commission ultimately suggested its integration with Assam, claiming that this union would enhance administrative coordination, promote economic growth, and facilitate effective management of the delicate international border area (Reports of State Reorganisation Commission, 1955).

But, prior to the release of the report of the State Reorganisation Commission, there was already considerable conjecture in Tripura about the potential for its merger with Assam. Speculation regarding this proposal had generated significant political unease and ambiguity among the people of Tripura. Hence, the recommendation regarding the merge of Tripura with Assam sparked one of the most important political movements in modern Tripura's history. As the people of Tripura were demanding for responsible governance and democratic institutions, the recommendation to eliminate the State's distinct politico-administrative identity sparked significant concern and discontent among various segments of society. The initiative that arose in resistance to this proposal became recognized as the 'Swatantra Tripura Movement, primarily guided by the Swatantra Tripura Committee (Mohanta, 2004).

In this context, the Swatantra Tripura Committee organized a meeting on 1 October 1955 at the residence of Advocate Nibaran Chandra Ghosh in Agartala, where participants felt that a united movement would be necessary if such a recommendation was made. An ad-hoc committee was accordingly formed in the meeting, and it was decided to convene a larger meeting on 8 October with representatives from different political and social groups. Meanwhile, protest activities began to intensify across the state. Students observed a strike on 4 October 1955, followed by a strike and rally by non-government school teachers on 7 October. Various organisations, including the Government Employees' Association and the Bar Association, also sent telegrams to the Prime Minister opposing the proposed merger. As per the decision of the meeting held on 1 October 1955, the larger meeting was held on 8 October 1955 at Hotel Tripur, Agartala. Several resolutions were adopted, and a comprehensive movement programme was prepared (Mohanta, 2004, p.101)

In these circumstances, the State Reorganisation Commission released its report to the public on 10th October, 1955 (Mahajan&Mahajan, 1967, pp. 640–641). The report confirmed the earlier rumours and apprehensions regarding Tripura's proposed merger with Assam. A few important observations made by the States Reorganisation Commission in connection with Tripura are quoted below:

“710. Tripura is a Part C State with a population of 639,029. The predominant language in this State is Bengali, which is spoken by about 59 per cent, of the population. The capital, namely, Agartala, is connected by air with Calcutta, but the State is contiguous to Assam, and while Agartala is equally well-connected by air with Gauhati and Silchar, an important road from Agartala to Churaibari in Assam is now under construction. It will be easy to extend this link and to connect Agartala with Shillong, by means of a road passing through Silchar and Jowai. We recommend that high priority should be accorded to the construction or improvement of these links.

711. As a small Part C State, Tripura cannot obviously stand by itself. The West Bengal Government, moreover, has not claimed this area; and its merger in Assam, in our opinion, can be supported among other reasons on the

ground that it will be desirable to bring the entire border between India and Pakistan in this region under one single control, namely, that of the Assam Government.

712. Such a merger will also make it possible to co-ordinate development in Cachar and the contiguous area of Tripura. The Bengali-speaking population after the merger will be a little more than one-fifth of the total population of the State. It should not be difficult for the Assam Government to allay the apprehensions of the Bengali-speaking people by treating this area, which requires development, as a separate administrative division under a commissioner. The special position of Bengali in this division should be recognised for official and educational purposes.

713. If safeguards on these lines are provided the merger of Tripura in Assam will achieve for its people the fulfilment of their aspirations for representative government at the state-level without prejudicing their linguistic and cultural interests. Suitable safeguards can and should also be provided for the tribal people in the proposed administrative division.” (State Reorganisation Commission, 1955 p.199)

However, the States Reorganisation Commission's recommendation to merge Tripura with Assam sparked a significant anti-merger movement within the state. The progress evolved in three distinct directions. The initial and most dynamic group was headed by the Swatantra Tripura Committee, backed by the CPI, PSP, RSP, and additional progressive entities. They vehemently objected to the merger and insisted on maintaining Tripura's distinct political identity, as well as the creation of a Legislative Assembly. A second faction, comprising parts of the Tripura Congress, initially kept quiet but eventually resisted the merger while supporting the retention of the current administrative setup without a Legislative Assembly. A third section proposed the formation of a “Greater Tripura” by merging Tripura with Assam's Cachar district. This request gained backing from groups like the All Tripura Refugee Association and various commercial and social organizations (Bhattacharyya, 1986).

After the release of the S.R.C. report, the Swatantra Tripura Committee quickly initiated a widespread movement opposing the merger proposal. On 11 October 1955, a general strike and hartal took place in Agartala, resulting in the shutdown of shops, schools, and government offices, including the Secretariat. In the evening, a significant public gathering took place in front of the Pagla Debata temple, led by Swarnakamal Ray. Notable figures including Nripen Chakraborty, Ila Bhattacharjee, Dwijen Dey, and Amal Sen spoke to the audience and urged individuals to bolster the campaign for an independent Tripura. The speakers dismissed the S.R.C. arguments and condemned the disproportionate treatment of Tripura relative to Manipur. Resolutions were also passed urging the Tripura Congress and the Advisers to separate themselves from the administration and back the popular movement opposing the merger proposal (Mohanta, 2004).

A second political trend appeared within parts of the Tripura Congress, which first remained quiet on the merger topic but eventually voiced dissent against the suggestion. Nonetheless, in contrast to the Swatantra Tripura Committee, they opposed the establishment of a Legislative Assembly in Tripura. Rather, they favored the ongoing administrative setup under central oversight and endorsed the preservation of the current situation. Their stance indicated a careful attitude towards political reforms and highlighted their unease about the increasing power of leftist factions in Tripura's political landscape.

In addition to these developments, another group proposed the concept of a "Greater Tripura" by merging Tripura with Assam's Cachar district. Proponents of this proposal contended that this arrangement would enhance Tripura's economic and administrative viability while maintaining its distinct identity from Assam. This call for support was backed by groups including the All Tripura Refugee Association, the Tripura Scheduled Caste Association, the Maharajganj Bazar ByabasahiSangha, and the All Tripura Merchants' Association. To promote this concept, a Greater Tripura Committee was established on 30 October 1955, led by Advocate HemchandraNath, aiming to present the demand to the Government of India (Bhattacharyya, 1986).

In these circumstances, The visit of Union Home Minister Pandit G. B. Pant to Agartala in November 1955 marked a crucial moment in the anti-merger movement in Tripura. On 4 November 1955, G. B. Pant, along with A. K. Chanda and Assam Chief Minister BishnuramMedhi, reached Agartala for an official visit. Seizing this chance, the Swatantra Tripura Committee lodged a vigorous protest against the States Reorganisation Commission's suggestion for merging Tripura with Assam and insisted on safeguarding Tripura's distinct politico-administrative identity. The movement peaked on 5 November 1955 when the Committee arranged a large public gathering in Agartala with close to seventy-five thousand attendees. The meeting, chaired by Swarnakamal Ray, featured speeches from notable leaders such as Nibaran Chandra Ghosh, BirenDatta, Dasaratha Deb, BirchandraDebbarma, and DwijenDey. The speakers vehemently condemned the suggested merger, labeling it as a plot against Tripura's political identity (Mohanta, 2004).

The Swatantra Tripura Committee further strengthened the movement by holding a conference at Agartala on 6 November 1955. Delegates from different communities, including Halam, Kuki, Tripuri, Bengali Hindus, and Muslims, participated in the conference, reflecting a rare unity among tribal and non-tribal groups. The conference adopted several resolutions, including the organisation of anti-merger programmes across subdivisions, the sending of a delegation to Delhi, and the formation of a strong volunteer force to continue the agitation (Chakraborty, 2017).

The ongoing large-scale effort led by the Swatantra Tripura Committee ultimately resulted in significant achievements. Ongoing meetings, demonstrations, and public campaigns forced the Central Government to reevaluate the suggestion from the States Reorganisation Commission. The Joint Select Committee presented its findings on the State Reorganisation Bill to the Lok Sabha on 16 July 1956, and it was released on 31 August 1956 (The States Reorganisation Act, 1956). The Committee advised preserving a distinct politico-administrative entity for Tripura. This recommendation represented a significant shift in the anti-merger movement, highlighting the increasing acknowledgment of democratic hopes and ongoing public demonstrations led by the Swatantra Tripura Committee. As a result, the plan to merge Tripura with Assam was ultimately discarded, enabling Tripura to preserve its unique political identity

## CONCLUSION

The anti-merger movement in Tripura emerged as one of the most significant political movements in the history of modern Tripura. The recommendation of the States Reorganisation Commission to merge Tripura with Assam generated widespread opposition among the people, who feared the loss of their separate politico-administrative identity and democratic rights. The movement clearly reflected the growing political consciousness and regional aspirations of the people of Tripura during the post-independence period.

The study shows that the Swatantra Tripura Committee played the central role in organising and leading the movement. Through strikes, meetings, demonstrations, conferences, and public mobilisations, the movement united different sections of society, including tribal and non-tribal communities, students, teachers, political leaders, and employees. The movement also strengthened the demand for representative government and democratic institutions in Tripura.

One of the major outcomes of the movement was the withdrawal of the proposal to merge Tripura with Assam. The Government of India ultimately retained Tripura as a separate politico-administrative entity, while the introduction of the Territorial Council in 1956 provided a limited form of democratic administration. Thus, the anti-merger movement not only protected Tripura's political identity but also laid the foundation for its later constitutional development and eventual attainment of full-fledged statehood within the Indian Union.

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