

"Cross-Border Interactions: Migration, Identity, and Multiculturalism in Tripura and Its Neighbours"

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Abstract:

This paper investigates the complex dynamics of cross-border interactions, focusing on migration, identity, and multiculturalism in Tripura and its neighbouring regions. Positioned at a strategic juncture between India and Bangladesh, Tripura's cultural and demographic landscape has been significantly influenced by historical and ongoing migratory flows. This study examines how these cross-border movements shape and redefine identities, fostering a multicultural environment within the region.

Utilizing a multidisciplinary approach that combines historical analysis, ethnographic research, and qualitative interviews, the paper explores the lived experiences of both indigenous populations and migrant communities in Tripura. It delves into the socio-cultural processes through which these groups negotiate their identities amidst the challenges and opportunities presented by migration. The research also considers the role of political and economic factors in facilitating or hindering cross-border interactions.

The findings highlight the emergence of hybrid identities and cultural practices resulting from the interplay of diverse ethnic groups. These interactions contribute to a unique multicultural tapestry that characterizes Tripura and its borderlands. Additionally, the study addresses the tensions and conflicts that arise from such cultural convergence, offering insights into the mechanisms of cultural integration and identity transformation.

By shedding light on the impact of migration on identity and multiculturalism in a borderland context, this research contributes to broader discussions on globalization, cultural diversity, and regional integration. The paper underscores the importance of fostering inclusive policies that embrace cultural diversity and promote social cohesion in border regions.

Keywords: Tripura, Cross-border interactions, Migration, Identity, Multiculturalism.

Introduction

Tripura, a small state in north-eastern India, is uniquely positioned both geographically and culturally. Bordered by Bangladesh on three sides and the Indian states of Assam and Mizoram, Tripura has been a significant crossroads of migration, trade, and cultural exchange. Historically, the state's demographic composition and cultural identity have been shaped by waves of migration, particularly from Bengal and more recently from Bangladesh. This interplay of diverse ethnicities, cultures, and identities makes Tripura an intriguing case study for examining the impacts of cross-border interactions.

Migration into Tripura is not a new phenomenon. Indigenous tribes such as the Tripuri, Reang, and Chakma have inhabited the region for centuries. The establishment of the Manikya dynasty in the 14th century heralded significant cultural and political changes, with increased Bengali influences due to trade and matrimonial alliances (Bhattacharjee, 2016). The British colonial period further catalyzed migration, as the colonial administration encouraged Bengali settlement to aid in economic development and administration (Bhaumik, 2009). The partition of India in 1947 was a pivotal moment in Tripura's demographic history. The creation of East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) led to massive migration waves, as Bengali Hindus fled communal violence and persecution. Tripura, due to its geographical proximity, became a primary refuge, leading to a dramatic demographic shift. This influx of refugees significantly altered the state's socio-political landscape, creating a complex interplay of ethnic and cultural identities (Datta, 2004).

In contemporary times, migration continues to shape Tripura's demographic and cultural landscape. Economic opportunities in sectors such as agriculture, small-scale industries, and government services attract migrants from neighbouring states and Bangladesh (Hazarika, 2018). However, the issue of illegal migration remains contentious, with significant numbers of Bangladeshis residing in the state illegally. This has led to concerns over security, cultural erosion, and resource strain, influencing political and social movements aimed at addressing these issues (Singh, 2017). The formation of identity in Tripura is deeply influenced by its diverse demographic composition. Indigenous tribes maintain distinct cultural identities rooted in their traditions, languages, and social practices (Debbarma, 2015). The Bengali influence, however, has led to a unique cultural synthesis, evident in festivals, cuisine, and daily social practices (Roy, 2019). Political identity is often intertwined with ethnic affiliations, with indigenous tribes seeking greater autonomy and recognition of their rights through movements such as the Tripura Tribal Areas Autonomous District Council (TTAADC) (Chakraborty, 2007).

Multiculturalism in Tripura is both strength and a challenge. Efforts to promote socio-cultural integration include state policies aimed at protecting the rights of indigenous tribes while ensuring the welfare of migrant communities (Deb,

2012). However, ethnic tensions, competition for resources, and political rivalries sometimes lead to conflicts (Banerjee, 2016). Civil society organizations play a crucial role in promoting multiculturalism, advocating for minority rights, and fostering dialogue among different communities (Saha, 2018). Cross-border interactions significantly impact Tripura's economy and cultural landscape. Trade with Bangladesh, facilitated by initiatives like the Agartala-Akhaura rail link and border markets, boosts the local economy and fosters people-to-people connections (Dasgupta, 2015). However, security concerns related to illegal migration, smuggling, and cross-border terrorism require robust measures and cooperation between Indian and Bangladeshi authorities (Singh, 2017). Understanding Tripura's unique position and the intricate dynamics of migration, identity, and multiculturalism offers valuable insights into managing similar issues in other border regions. By examining Tripura's experiences and comparing them with those of neighbouring states like Assam, Mizoram, and Meghalaya, this paper aims to contribute to a broader understanding of cross-border interactions and their impacts on regional stability and development.

Historical Context of Migration

Tripura's history of migration is deeply intertwined with its political and cultural revolution. The subsequent decades witnessed continued migration driven by economic opportunities and political unrest in neighbouring Bangladesh. The Liberation War of 1971, which led to the creation of Bangladesh, prompted another wave of migration as people crossed into Tripura seeking safety and stability (Das, 2016). This period reinforced Tripura's role as a haven for those escaping conflict and economic hardship.

In more recent times, economic migration has remained a key factor influencing Tripura's demographics. The state's growing economy, driven by agriculture, small-scale industries, and government services, attracts migrants from neighbouring Indian states and Bangladesh (Hazarika, 2018). However, this migration is not without challenges. Issues such as illegal immigration, cultural tensions, and competition for resources have necessitated policy responses aimed at balancing economic growth with social harmony (Singh, 2017). Tripura's historical context of migration underscores the region's complex and dynamic socio-cultural fabric. From pre-colonial times to the contemporary era, migration has played a crucial role in shaping the state's demographic trends, cultural identity, and socio-political dynamics. Understanding this history is essential for addressing current challenges and fostering a more inclusive and harmonious society.

Identity Formation in Tripura: Ethnic, Cultural, and Political Identity

The formation of identity in Tripura is a multifaceted process influenced by its complex demographic composition, historical migration patterns, and socio-political dynamics. Tripura National Volunteers (TNV) formed in 1978, the TNV was a tribal militant group that sought to protect indigenous rights through armed struggle. This group eventually transitioned into a political entity after a peace accord in 1988. The TNV played a crucial role in bringing the issues of tribal identity and rights to the forefront (Scroll. in, 2016). Indigenous People's Front of Tripura (IPFT), the IPFT, formed in 1997, has been a central player in the demand for a separate state, 'Tipra land' for the indigenous people. The party has organized numerous demonstrations and has been involved in several violent incidents, highlighting the ongoing struggle for political recognition and autonomy (Scroll. in, 2016).

Ethnic Identity

Tripura is home to several indigenous tribes, including the Tripuri, Reang, Chakma, Halam etc, each with its own distinct ethnic identity. These communities have maintained unique cultural practices, languages, and social structures despite significant demographic changes over the centuries (Debbarma, 2015). The Tripuri, the largest tribal group, speak Kokborok and have rich traditions of dance, music, and oral literature that are central to their identity. The influx of Bengali migrants, particularly following the partition of India in 1947, has significantly altered the ethnic composition of Tripura. This demographic shift has sometimes led to tensions between indigenous communities and Bengali settlers, as the latter group became numerically dominant and economically influential reducing the indigenous population from 52.89% in 1901 to 30.95 in 1991 (Bhaumik, 2009; Scroll.in, 2016; Datta, 2004). The indigenous tribes have responded by reinforcing their ethnic identities through cultural revival movements and advocacy for greater autonomy and rights.

Cultural Identity

Tripura's cultural identity is a tapestry woven from the diverse traditions of its indigenous tribes and Bengali migrants. Indigenous festivals such as Garia Puja, Ker Puja, and Kharchi Puja are celebrated with great enthusiasm, reflecting the deep spiritual and cultural roots of the tribal communities (Roy, 2019). These festivals, along with traditional music, dance, and handicrafts, form the core of tribal cultural identity. Bengali cultural influences are also prominent in Tripura, manifested in the widespread celebration of Durga Puja, Saraswati Puja, and other Bengali festivals. The Bengali language, literature, and arts have become integral to the state's cultural landscape. This blend of tribal and Bengali cultural elements creates a unique multicultural environment where diverse traditions coexist and enrich each other (Bhattacharjee, 2016). The synthesis of indigenous and Bengali cultures is evident in everyday social practices, cuisine, and public celebrations. For instance, Tripuri cuisine, known for its simplicity and use of local ingredients, coexists with

Bengali culinary traditions, creating a diverse gastronomic landscape. Cultural exchange programs, festivals, and state-sponsored events often showcase this harmonious blend, promoting a sense of unity amidst diversity (Deb, 2012).

Political Identity

Political identity in Tripura is closely tied to ethnic and cultural affiliations. The state's political landscape has been shaped by movements advocating for the rights and recognition of indigenous tribes. The establishment of the Tripura Tribal Areas Autonomous District Council (TTAADC) under the sixth schedule of the Indian constitution in 1985 was a significant milestone, providing a measure of self-governance to tribal areas and addressing demands for political representation and autonomy (Chakraborty, 2007). The TTAADC has played a crucial role in preserving tribal identity and promoting socio-economic development in tribal regions. It administers various welfare schemes, educational programs, and cultural initiatives aimed at empowering indigenous communities and safeguarding their heritage (Debbarma, 2015). Movements led by organizations such as the Indigenous People's Front of Tripura (IPFT) have been pivotal in advocating for greater autonomy and even statehood for tribal areas. These movements often resulted in violent clashes, reflecting the intense political struggle for identity and recognition (Scollin, 2016). On the other hand, the Bengali population, being the majority, wields considerable political influence. The interplay between tribal and Bengali political aspirations often shapes state politics, with issues such as land rights, resource allocation, and cultural preservation at the forefront of political discourse (Hazarika, 2018). Political parties and leaders frequently navigate these complex dynamics, balancing the interests of different communities to maintain social harmony and stability. Thus, the formation of identity in Tripura is a dynamic process influenced by historical migration, cultural synthesis, and socio-political developments. The state's ethnic, cultural, and political identities are intertwined, reflecting a rich heritage shaped by the coexistence of indigenous tribes and migrant communities. Understanding these identities is crucial for addressing contemporary challenges and fostering a more inclusive and harmonious society.

Multiculturalism in Tripura

Socio-Cultural Integration

Tripura exemplifies a dynamic model of socio-cultural integration, where diverse communities coexist and interact, enriching the state's cultural landscape. The integration of indigenous tribal cultures with Bengali and other migrant influences has created a unique multicultural environment. State-sponsored initiatives and cultural programs play a crucial role in promoting this integration. Festivals such as Durga Puja, Garia Puja, and Kharchi Puja are celebrated by multiple communities, fostering mutual respect and understanding (Roy, 2019). Educational institutions also serve as melting pots of cultural exchange, where students from different backgrounds learn about each other's traditions and values (Deb, 2012).

Challenges to Multiculturalism

Despite the harmonious blend of cultures, Tripura faces several challenges to sustaining its multicultural ethos. Ethnic tensions occasionally arise due to competition for resources and political representation. The influx of Bengali migrants has historically led to feelings of marginalization among indigenous tribes, who fear cultural dilution and economic displacement (Datta, 2004). Additionally, illegal immigration from Bangladesh exacerbates these tensions, leading to social unrest and conflicts over land and employment (Singh, 2017). Political rivalries often exploit these ethnic divides, further complicating efforts to maintain social harmony (Banerjee, 2016).

Role of Civil Society

Civil society organizations (CSOs) play a pivotal role in promoting and sustaining multiculturalism in Tripura. NGOs, community groups, and cultural associations work tirelessly to bridge ethnic divides and foster a sense of inclusivity. They organize intercultural dialogues, community events, and educational programs that highlight the importance of unity in diversity (Saha, 2018). CSOs also advocate for the rights of marginalized communities, providing platforms for indigenous voices and ensuring their participation in decision-making processes. Their efforts are instrumental in mitigating ethnic tensions and building a more cohesive society (Hazarika, 2018).

While Tripura's multiculturalism is a source of strength and pride, it is not without its challenges. Socio-cultural integration initiatives and the active involvement of civil society are essential in addressing these challenges and promoting a harmonious coexistence of diverse communities. By fostering mutual respect and understanding, Tripura can continue to thrive as a vibrant, multicultural state.

Cross-Border Interactions and Their Impact

Trade and Economic Relations

Cross-border trade between Tripura and Bangladesh plays a crucial role in the region's economy. The establishment of trade routes, such as the Agartala-Akhaura rail link, has significantly boosted economic interactions, facilitating the movement of goods and services (Dasgupta, 2015). Border haats (markets) have emerged as vital economic hubs where people from both sides of the border engage in trade, contributing to local economies and fostering economic

interdependence (Sarma, 2016). These economic activities not only generate income for traders but also create employment opportunities, reducing poverty in border areas.

Cultural Exchanges

Cultural exchanges between Tripura and Bangladesh are vibrant and contribute to the strengthening of social bonds and mutual understanding. Shared cultural heritage, language, and traditions form the basis for numerous cultural programs and festivals that bring people together. Events such as joint musical concerts, literary festivals, and art exhibitions promote a sense of shared identity and cultural continuity (Choudhury, 2013). Academic collaborations and student exchange programs further enhance cultural ties and facilitate the exchange of ideas and knowledge.

Security Concerns

Despite the benefits of cross-border interactions, there are significant security concerns that need to be addressed. Illegal migration from Bangladesh into Tripura remains a contentious issue, leading to social and political tensions (Singh, 2017). This migration puts pressure on local resources, creates competition for jobs, and sometimes results in ethnic conflicts. Additionally, cross-border smuggling of goods, arms, and narcotics poses serious security challenges (Das, 2017). Ensuring robust border security measures and enhancing cooperation between Indian and Bangladeshi authorities are crucial for addressing these issues.

The porous nature of the India-Bangladesh border also raises concerns about potential terrorist infiltrations. Both countries have to work collaboratively to share intelligence and conduct joint operations to prevent any cross-border terrorism (Singh, 2017). Efforts such as the construction of fencing along the border and increased patrolling have been implemented to mitigate these security threats, although maintaining a balance between security and facilitating legitimate cross-border movement remains a challenge (Das, 2017). Cross-border interactions between Tripura and Bangladesh have a multifaceted impact on the region. While trade and cultural exchanges significantly contribute to economic growth and social cohesion, security concerns require vigilant management to ensure the safety and stability of the region. By addressing these challenges and fostering positive interactions, Tripura can leverage its strategic location to promote regional development and harmony.

Comparative Analysis with Neighbouring States

Assam: The Struggle over Citizenship and Identity

Assam has witnessed large-scale migration, particularly from Bangladesh, leading to concerns over demographic changes and ethnic displacement. The National Register of Citizens (NRC) exercise in Assam, initiated to distinguish 'indigenous' inhabitants from 'illegal migrants,' has been a highly controversial process. The NRC has not only created uncertainties regarding citizenship but has also intensified ethnic and communal tensions (Sarma, 2021). The anti-foreigner movements of the 1980s, culminating in the Assam Accord of 1985, highlight the historical anxieties surrounding migration in Assam (Gohain, 2018). While Tripura shares similar demographic concerns, its response has been more focused on reconciliation through economic policies rather than legal mechanisms like the NRC. Assam, like Tripura, has a complex history of migration and ethnic diversity, significantly influenced by its geographical proximity to Bangladesh. Both states have experienced large-scale migration of Bengali Hindus post-partition and during the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War, leading to substantial demographic shifts. In Assam, this influx has often led to ethnic tensions and conflicts, as seen in the Assam Movement (1979-1985), which sought to address the issue of illegal migration and its impact on the Assamese identity (Baruah, 2005).

The Assam Accord of 1985 was a key political agreement aimed at addressing these tensions by establishing mechanisms to detect and deport illegal migrants. However, implementation has been inconsistent, and the issue remains a source of political and social friction. Similarly, Tripura has faced challenges related to illegal migration from Bangladesh, leading to concerns over cultural dilution and resource allocation (Singh, 2017). Culturally, both states exhibit a blend of indigenous and migrant influences, though Assam's cultural landscape is more varied due to its larger size and greater ethnic diversity. The Assamese culture, with its own language, literature, and festivals like Bihu, contrasts with the Bengali-dominated cultural practices in Tripura (Baruah, 2005).

Mizoram: The Bru-Reang Conflict and Indigenous Rights

Mizoram's experience with migration primarily involves the Bru (Reang) refugee crisis, where thousands of Bru people fled ethnic violence in the state and settled in Tripura. The Mizoram government's stance on repatriating the Bru refugees reflects broader concerns over indigenous rights and demographic balance. While Tripura accommodated the displaced Bru population, Mizoram resisted their return, arguing that their resettlement would alter the state's demographic composition (Chakraborty, 2020). This highlights a critical difference in migration management—Tripura has historically been more accommodating, while Mizoram has pursued more exclusionary policies to protect its indigenous identity. Mizoram presents a different scenario compared to Tripura and Assam. It is predominantly inhabited by the Mizo ethnic group, and the state's demographic composition has remained relatively stable. While Mizoram does experience some migration, it is not on the scale of Tripura or Assam. Instead, Mizoram's migration issues are more focused on refugees from Myanmar, particularly the Chin people, who share ethnic and cultural ties

with the Mizos (Chakma, 2011). The Mizo people is considered to have been sharing the same dialect as like the Chin people which started after their migration to India since they share the same dialect and are being considered to belong from the same genetic. Politically, Mizoram has managed to maintain a relatively peaceful environment since the signing of the Mizoram Peace Accord in 1986, which ended two decades of insurgency. This stability has allowed the state to focus on development and integration of its tribal population, unlike Tripura, which continues to grapple with ethnic tensions and demands for greater autonomy from its indigenous tribes (Chakraborty, 2007). Culturally, Mizoram is distinct due to its strong Christian influence, which shapes its festivals, social norms, and lifestyle. This contrasts with the Hindu and indigenous religious practices predominant in Tripura. The Mizo identity is strongly preserved through local customs, language, and a communal lifestyle that emphasizes solidarity and mutual aid (Lalthangliana, 2014).

Both Assam and Mizoram offer valuable insights for understanding Tripura's socio-political and cultural dynamics. Assam's experience highlights the challenges of managing large-scale migration and the importance of political agreements and policies in addressing ethnic tensions. Mizoram, on the other hand, demonstrates the benefits of political stability and the preservation of indigenous culture in fostering social cohesion.

For Tripura, balancing the interests of its indigenous populations with those of migrant communities remains a critical challenge. Learning from Assam's policy efforts and Mizoram's focus on cultural preservation and political stability could provide pathways for addressing these challenges. Enhancing border security, promoting inclusive governance, and fostering intercultural dialogue are essential steps for Tripura to navigate its complex identity landscape.

Conclusion

The cross-border interactions shaping Tripura and its neighbouring regions underscore the profound and lasting effects of migration on identity and multiculturalism. Over the decades, migration, both voluntary and forced, has significantly altered the demographic, economic, and socio-cultural fabric of Tripura, leading to both enrichment and tensions within local communities. This intricate interplay between migration and identity politics reflects broader global trends where cultural integration, ethnic preservation, and political stability remain at the forefront of discourse on cross-border movements.

Historically, migration in Tripura has been shaped by regional conflicts, colonial legacies, and socio-political upheavals. The partition of India in 1947 and the subsequent Bangladesh Liberation War in 1971 were pivotal moments that resulted in massive waves of Bengali refugees seeking shelter in Tripura (Karmakar, 2018). This demographic transformation led to a significant reduction in the indigenous tribal population, giving rise to socio-political movements aimed at preserving tribal identity and rights. The resentment over land alienation, political underrepresentation, and cultural erosion among the indigenous communities has manifested in periodic ethnic conflicts and insurgencies (Chakraborty, 2020).

One of the major implications of migration has been the redefinition of identity within Tripura's socio-political landscape. The contestation over identity in Tripura mirrors similar conflicts in other parts of Northeast India, such as the NRC (National Register of Citizens) exercise in Assam, which sought to distinguish 'indigenous' inhabitants from 'illegal migrants' (Sarma, 2021). The fear of demographic dilution and economic displacement has fueled narratives of exclusion, often leading to tensions between settlers and indigenous groups. While the Indian state has implemented policies to integrate migrants, including granting citizenship and economic opportunities, these measures have not always been met with universal acceptance, especially among the indigenous populace.

Despite the challenges, Tripura's multicultural environment also presents opportunities for cultural synthesis and economic growth. The confluence of Bengali and indigenous Tripuri traditions has fostered unique hybrid identities reflected in cuisine, language, and artistic expressions. Multiculturalism in Tripura is evident in festivals such as the Kharchi Puja, which integrates elements from both Hindu and indigenous tribal traditions, symbolizing the possibilities of cultural harmony despite historical tensions (Debbarma, 2019). Economic interactions resulting from migration have also played a crucial role in shaping Tripura's development. Migrants have contributed significantly to the region's economy through agriculture, trade, and small-scale industries. The cross-border trade with Bangladesh has opened avenues for economic cooperation, boosting local industries and strengthening diplomatic ties (Choudhury, 2021). The Agartala-Akhaura rail link and other infrastructural projects demonstrate the potential of cross-border interactions in fostering economic prosperity, even as socio-political tensions persist.

A comparative analysis of Tripura's experience with its neighbors, particularly Mizoram and Assam, provides insights into different approaches to managing migration and multiculturalism. Mizoram's handling of the Bru (Reang) refugee crisis highlights the difficulties of resettling displaced populations while balancing indigenous rights. Similarly, Assam's struggles with defining 'Assamese identity' amid large-scale migration underscore the complexities of national and regional identity formation (Dutta, 2022). These cases collectively emphasize the need for policy frameworks that address historical grievances while promoting inclusivity. Theoretical perspectives on migration and multiculturalism offer additional layers of understanding. Scholars such as Appadurai (1996) argue that migration creates 'scapes' of cultural fluidity, where identities are continuously negotiated in response to shifting demographics. In the context of Tripura, this perspective helps explain how migration has not only led to conflicts but has also given rise to new hybrid cultural identities. Similarly, Vertovec's (2007) concept of 'super-diversity' highlights the importance of inclusive policies that recognize the complexities of migration rather than treating it as a monolithic phenomenon. Moving

forward, fostering social cohesion in Tripura requires a multidimensional approach. Policies that encourage dialogue between indigenous and migrant communities, economic initiatives that benefit all ethnic groups and education programs that promote cultural appreciation can contribute to a more harmonious society. Learning from global examples of successful multicultural integration, such as Canada's inclusive policies on migration and multiculturalism, could provide valuable insights for Tripura's policymakers (Kymlicka, 2012).

Ultimately, the experiences of Tripura and its neighbors reveal that migration is not merely about movement across borders but also about the continuous negotiation of identity, belonging, and cultural adaptation. While migration has undoubtedly posed challenges to indigenous communities, it has also enriched the socio-cultural landscape of the region. The key to ensuring long-term stability and harmony lies in crafting policies that balance the rights of indigenous populations with the needs and contributions of migrant communities. In an increasingly interconnected world, Tripura serves as a microcosm of the broader challenges and opportunities posed by migration and multiculturalism.

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