

TRIPURA DIARY

## Options Are Limited

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AGARTALA LOOKS LIKE AN outpost of Bengal that is yet to become a state capital and perhaps never will. A few stately government buildings placed inappropriately in a post-war Bengali settlement town adds to the ugliness of the town or is it city. Open drains skirted by crowded dwelling houses and business establishments adds to the general ugliness of the place. Pedestrians are jostled out of place by tattered cycle rickshaws, dust covered auto rickshaws, meandering bicycles and the ubiquitous fume spewing and fuel guzzling motor vehicles. Young boys with their line of vision barely rising above the windscreen and with not too many job opportunities are employed as day drivers on a daily wage of Rs 100/- . This act of empowerment coupled with the driver's feeling of deprivation results in a tremendous road rage and a Kokborok version of Dhanush's 'Why this kolaveri di?' is crying to be sung. Grotesque and oddly coloured statues and busts of bhadralok Bengali icons are awkwardly placed at busy traffic junctions but one may be hard pressed to find a replica of Sachin Dev Burman, the indigenous bard from this state who went all the way to Mumbai to make a decent living. The government tourist lodges follow this rule as if it's a law. This correspondent did get to see a photograph of S D Burman in far away Eden tourist lodge in the Jampui hills but more of this later.

Tripura is home to no less than 19 Scheduled Tribes, so says the 'Cultural Synthesis' booklet on Tripura published by the government of India's ministry of tourism. However an occasional visitor may have to go around with a magnifying glass in and around urban areas to spot a tribal face. The urban space has been completely usurped by the Bangla speaking intruder and it is high time to pronounce them as 'diku' or outsider. Hindi, the language that acts as palanquin bearer to Indian capital has been barred entry into Tripura and it is Bangla and Bangla it is, all the way. While Bangla is the language that carries the message of Indian capital all around the state and more emphatically in the urban areas, the political vehicle that keeps the settlers in their position of power and is itself hand in glove with Indian capital is none other than the CPI(M) and its friendly Congress rival. Mamata Banerjee's TMC is yet to mark its presence although this correspondent did come across her cutouts in the dingy bye lanes.

There are not too many major Industrial establishments to be seen in or around the urban centers nor in the rural areas. Other than a Jute mill on the outskirts of the Agartala, the other looming presence is that of Tripura Natural Gas Company Ltd which is an effort to garner the natural gas resources of the state. However, cell phones of all makes and mobile service providers of all hues are available across the breadth of the state but it is only public sector BSNL services that ring in the remotest areas. The same holds true for internet services spread and connectivity. The more damaging import from the plains is that of private motor vehicles. Cars of all make zip dangerously across smooth roads in the plains. Environmental arguments

have become passe but the commercial justification of giving a boost to the private motor vehicle industry in a country that imports 75% of its crude is fanatic madness. The underlying thrust is actually to boost the hunger for imported crude which in turn boosts the appetite for convertible foreign currency. The recent fall in the Rupee's exchange rate from Rs 46 to Rs 52 may signify this malaise. It is no surprise that the FM or the Vice Chairman of the Planning Commission or the Chief Economic Advisor and many of their ilk did not issue statements with exclamation marks on this significant fall. How could they ? Are they not part of this 'crude' game?

Travelling away from urban settlements is soothing to the eye. The post-harvest barren fields and the lush greenery of the wild vegetation adds to the atmosphere. One encounters more and more indigenous people and in the verdant orange orchards of Jampui hills, the settlers are mercifully absent. For this encounter to take place one can take the Agartala-Lumding express and hop of it at Dharmanagar, a mere 172 km away. Stations in this part of the country are big and reasonably clean but not so the trains and people complained that coaches rejected on other routes are generally employed on this particular stretch of North Eastern Frontier Railway. Trains routinely run late and passengers normally arrive at the stations much after the scheduled departure time knowing fully well that they will still be there in good time to avail the train. In this part of the world an early bird catches no worm and it's better to be late forever.

Dharmanagar in North Tripura is next in importance to Agartala and competes with the capital in clumsiness and disorder. Mercifully it's a smaller version of the original sin. Places of worship dedicated to Kali and Shiva occupy prominent places in the town as do ugly concrete structures but there are localities where single storey houses with corrugated tin roofs nestle cosily in a rectangular space, inadequately shaded by Areca nut trees. Jampui hills is another 88 km away but the road to this paradise is paved with stones, literally. It must be pointed out that roads in Tripura are uniformly good but this rule is turned on its head in the hills. Kanchanpur is a market place at the foot of the Jampui hills. The road to this small town is bad, bumpy and dusty. Beyond Kanchanpur, the climb to Jampui hills is a test to one's driving skills as well as the sturdiness of the vehicle. In most places the asphalt has been washed away exposing the clay and brick base of the road and in places big craters reduce the vehicle's speed to a crawl. The pristine hills at the end of the road are truly enchanting.

Outsiders are not to be found on Jampui hills except in the garb of tourists. Much of Jampui hills is under an Autonomous District Council (ADC) which covers 6 Jampui hill gram sabhas between Vanghmun and Phuldungsei. The CPI(M) has come all the way in hot pursuit of the tribal vote and have set up an office in Vanghmun. This office, inaugurated in 2008, is never opened. Nobody opens it even to paste *Deshar Kotha*, the party's local Bangla rag. A local resident said that Vanghmun is well served by the local primary health centre. However, the cultural arrogance of the Bangla speakers powered on by successive state governments is to be seen to be believed. A bill board outside the health centre lists out certain basic dos and donts like 'drink purified water' or 'use a mosquito net' and the like. Unfortunately and insultingly these instructions are written in Bangla, a language that the hill habitants do not read.

Jampui hills is on the border with Mizoram and the ADC villages are populated with Lushais while Rheangs prefer to live in hill settlements. Lushais are overwhelmingly Christians and consider themselves to be more 'advanced' than the Rheangs. Although the party is not welcome and the state barely visible, the looming presence of the church is overwhelming. English medium schools, prayer centres, massive white churches make it apparent that it wields considerable power over the life and property of the people. There is a general air of well being in the Jampui hills villages. Households look neat from the outside, people do not look content and they wear clean clothes and washed clothes hang on lines. It must be noted that villages in Jampui hills have access to piped water provided by the government. The local hill economy is centered around Orange orchards. Jampui hills oranges are sweet and command a brand equity to an extent that sour oranges from other regions get sold in Agartala markets under the name of Jampui oranges. A few years back an attack of pests severely curtailed the productivity of orange orchards. To sustain the local economy a switch was made to the cultivation of Areca nuts.

Coming back to Agartala in West Tripura from Dharmanagar one can avail the Lunding-Agartala express which is guaranteed to run behind time. To one never in a hurry, like this correspondent, the never ending journey is always filled with many possibilities. A short nap, timing minutes spent travelling through tunnels, cramming names of stations which one will never visit carries one through. Agartala jolts one back to reality that very soon one will be in Kolkata. Agartala remains as one had left it, in a continuous state of clumsy languor. There seems to be no excitement in the air about the Bangladesh Prime Minister's impending two day visit to town, commencing on 11 January. Only, as is perhaps the norm under these circumstances, the bureaucrat has to work overtime. What can they do better than wield the heavy arm of the state? Agartala is woefully short of decent lodging accommodation. The tourism department of the state government has set up a well maintained lodge as an annexe to the state guest house. All the rooms in the tourist lodge were requisitioned by the state government for this visit. Like Tajmahal, to symbolise its love affair with the parliamentary left, the Tatas have built a 'Ginger' brand hotel, very near the state guest house. The DM's office was caught working overtime with a threatening finger to requisition all the rooms that Agartala Ginger had within its premises. Till the day preceding this correspondent's departure from Agartala the tug of war was on. Since then the Bangladesh PM came and went nothing more than conferring an honorary doctorate on her by the Tripura University was on the agenda. She also inaugurated a statue of Rabindranath Tagore and discussed trade prospects between the two countries.

The road to Akhaura border check post, just a couple of kilometres away from Agartala, is bumpy and uneven unlike roads in other plains areas of the state. Rows of heavy vehicles and their slow movement are evidence that trade traffic does move slowly and is not much different from their Benapole-Petrapole cousin. The general state of disorder and unruliness also signifies that talks of increased trade movement between the two countries is for public consumption only. The BSF jawan at the border post looked happy and the BSF post was well painted and

lighted. In the fading twilight, Lata Mangeshkar's voice 'Ai mere watan ke logo, jara akhon mein bhar lo pani, jo sahid hue hai unki, jara yad karo kurbanii' was blaring from a loudspeaker. This song is reported to have moved Jawaharlal Nehru to tears after the calamitous days of India-China border conflict of 1962. The continuing popularity of this song implies that nation states love to be in a state of alert under the threat of an impending, even if imaginary, war. □□□