

Tripura's Tryst with Literacy

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As the public discourse today scrutinizes the “development model” of the state of Gujarat ever so furiously, a significant milestone achieved by a small state in the much ignored North-East curiously has been given little coverage to. Tripura has become the most literate state in the country overtaking Kerala (itself, the owner of another “model” and a success story in social development). Manik Sarkar, the Chief Minister of Tripura in a press conference stated that as on date the literacy rate in the state was 94.65%. He also pointed out that Tripura is still short of attaining full literacy which the government will try and achieve soon (*The Hindu*, 9 September 2013). This achievement of Tripura shows how initiatives at the level of governance, peoples’ participation and political will can ensure education for all.

Improvement in Literacy

The remarkable improvement of Tripura in literacy is shown in the following table, alongwith other North-Eastern states, as well as with Kerala and Gujarat.

Table 1: Literacy Rates in Tripura and Other States

State	1991	2001	2011
Tripura	60.44	73.19	87.75
Arunachal Pradesh	41.59	54.34	66.95
Nagaland	61.65	66.59	80.11
Manipur	59.89	70.53	79.85
Mizoram	82.26	88.80	91.58
Meghalaya	49.1	62.56	75.48
Assam	52.89	63.25	73.18
Kerala	89.81	90.86	93.91
Gujarat	61.29	69.14	79.31

Source: Economic Survey, Government of India, 2012-13

Table 1 shows that Tripura has increased its literacy rate by around 27 percentage points between 1991 and 2011. In the North-Eastern region, Tripura’s literacy rate is second highest after Mizoram. This quantum jump in the literacy rate of Tripura has resulted in an improvement in its rank amongst the Indian states, from 13th in 2001 to 4th in 2011. This is a remarkable achievement for the state.

This achievement needs to be placed in proper perspective within the growth vs. development debate that has generated much heat in the media particularly epitomised by the views of Amartya Sen and Jagdish Bhagwati. A comparison of Tripura is warranted in this regard. In 1991, the literacy rate in Gujarat was 61.29% (higher than Tripura during the same year) which increased to 79.31% in 2011. Thus while in 1991 Gujarat was ahead of Tripura in terms of literacy rate, by 2011 Tripura “surpassed” Gujarat by quite a distance. If we compare the per-capita Net State Domestic Product (NSDP) of Gujarat and Tripura (at current prices), then it is seen that in 2010-11, Gujarat’s per-capita NSDP was Rs 75115 while that of Tripura was only Rs 44965. In other words, Gujarat’s per-capita NSDP was 67% higher than Tripura but its literacy rate is lower than Tripura. If we compare the growth rates of Gujarat and Tripura, then it is seen that between 2006-07 and 2010-11, the economy of Gujarat grew at a rate of 14.76%, which is higher than Tripura’s growth rate of 11.05% during the same period.¹ In other words, a comparison of Gujarat and Tripura shows that high income or growth rate is not a sufficient condition for improving development indicators like education. In order to improve these indicators, the policy direction must emphasise issues other than growth, which we will elaborate subsequently.

If we look at the gender wise literacy rate in Tripura, it is observed that 92.18% males and 83.15% females are literate in 2011. In 2001, the literacy rate of males and females were 81.02% and 64.91% respectively. During the ten year period from 2001 to 2011, the state managed to increase the literacy rate of females by 18 percentage points. As a result, Tripura now has the distinction of reducing the gender gap in literacy by the most in the country between 2001 and 2011.² During the same time period in India the female literacy rate increased from 53.67% to 65.46% or by around 12 percentage points.

District-wise literacy rates in the state are mentioned in table 2.

Table 2: Literacy Rate by Sex for Tripura and Its Districts

State/District	Literacy rate					
	Persons		Males		Females	
	2001	2011	2001	2011	2001	2011
Tripura	73.19	87.75	81.0	92.18	64.91	83.15
West Tripura District	77.26	88.91	84.6	92.91	69.55	84.76
South Tripura District	69.90	85.41	78.9	90.94	60.33	79.64
Dhalai District	60.93	86.82	70.2	92.45	50.99	80.83
North Tripura District	72.99	88.29	80.0	91.77	65.60	84.69

Source: Census of India, 2011

From the above table, it is seen that in 2011, there is not much disparity in terms of the literacy rate achieved across the districts of Tripura. But it should be noted that the maximum increase in the literacy rate occurred in Dhalai District. In Dhalai, the literacy rate increased

¹ Data on per-capita NSDP and NSDP from the Economic Survey, 2012-13

²Census 2011

by around 26 percentage points with the literacy rate of females increasing by around 30 percentage points. This huge increase in the literacy rate in Dhalai district is of special importance because the majority population of this district belongs to the Scheduled Tribe (ST) community. In 2001, 54% of the population in Dhalai was that of tribals while 16.2% were Scheduled Castes (SC) making 70.2% of the population belonging to the SC & ST community.³ This is the highest proportion of SC and ST population in any district in Tripura. Therefore, this huge increase in the literacy rate in Dhalai district must imply that the literacy rate among the SC and STs should have increased significantly. However, the literacy rates for SC and STs have not been published for 2011 census. Therefore, the exact nature of this increase cannot be specified for Tripura.

Following the census survey, the state government in Tripura under the guidance of the Indian Statistical Institute (ISI) Calcutta conducted a survey in August 2012. This survey found that there were 131634 persons who were illiterate in the state. Efforts were taken to ensure that these people are made literate through various programmes.⁴

Expenditure on Education and Increase in Infrastructure

What explains this tremendous success of Tripura in improving the literacy rate over the years? A part of the answer lies in the higher share of resources that the government has spent on education. Between 2000-01 and 2011-12, on an average 17.2% of total expenditure has been spent on education in the state. The average spending on education during the same period in the other North-Eastern States has been 14.4% with only Assam spending more than Tripura as a percentage of total expenditure.⁵

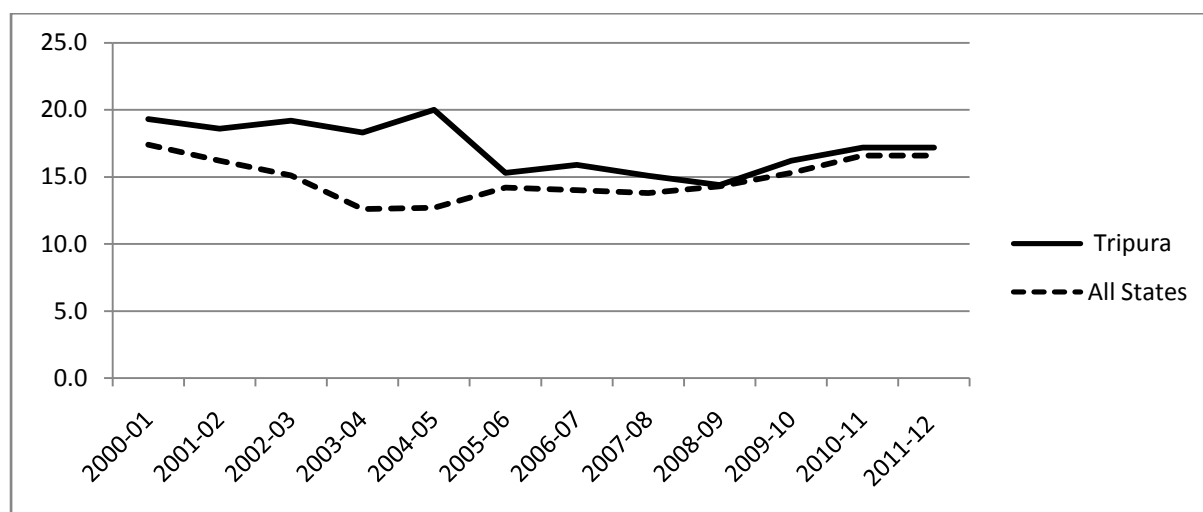
The following graph shows that compared to all states of India taken together, Tripura has spent a higher proportion of its aggregate expenditure on education. However, it needs to be noted that while this proportion is higher than the combined states, it declined for Tripura between 2004-05 and 2008-09 and then increased.

³Tripura Human Development Report, Government of Tripura, 2007.

⁴See 'Tripura beats Kerala in Literacy', Times of India, September 9, 2013

⁵Calculated from State Finances: A Study of Budgets, Reserve Bank of India, 2013

Chart 1: Expenditure on Education as Proportion of Aggregate Expenditure



Source: State Finances: A Study of Budgets, Reserve Bank of India, 2013

In terms of expenditure on education as a percentage of Gross State Domestic Product (GSDP), it is noted in the Human Development Report 2007 of Tripura that in 2002-03, Tripura spent more than 6% of GSDP on education. However, in more recent period this proportion has come down. This is shown in the following table.

Table 3: Expenditure on Education as a Percentage of GSDP

	2008-09	2009-10	2010-11
Tripura	5.06	5.37	4.46
Arunachal Pradesh	8.93	5.14	4.55
Nagaland	NA	NA	4.88
Manipur	6.49	5.17	6.08
Mizoram	9.55	7.41	7.3
Meghalaya	5.23	4.02	3.32
Assam	5.9	4.73	4.2
Kerala	3.37	2.66	2.4
India	3.78	3.17	3.14

Source: Analysis of Budgeted Expenditure on Education, Ministry of Human Resource and Development, Government of India, Various issues

Table 3 indicates that currently the expenditure on education as a percentage of GSDP in Tripura is less than 5% but higher than that of India. Most of the states of North-Eastern India are currently spending more on education as a percentage of GSDP compared to that of Tripura. In spite of a fall in the expenditure on education as a percentage of GSDP, the performance in terms of increasing the literacy rate has improved because of two reasons. Firstly, the state government has significantly improved the educational infrastructure. Secondly, political and governmental initiatives have been taken to ensure that education reaches all. Let us first discuss the issue of the educational infrastructure.

In 1998, the number of schools in Tripura was 3123 which has increased to 4789 in 2013. Out of these 2415 are primary schools and 1237 are upper primary schools.⁶ Additionally, Tripura has improved the Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS) significantly. As per the government reports, during 2011-12, 9906 ICDS centres were fully operational in the state where 377016 children in the age group 0-6 years were enrolled.⁷ This comprised 82.31% of the total children in this age group in the state. The other indicators of school infrastructure are shown in the following table.

Table 4: School Education Infrastructure in Tripura

	Primary Only			All Schools		
	2009-10	2010-11	2011-12	2009-10	2010-11	2011-12
% of single teacher school	1.5	1.7	3	1	0.9	1.6
% Single class room school	2.4	2.6	5.7	1.4	1.4	3.2
% school with girls' toilet	12.8	68.3	29.6	29.1	79.1	51.2
% school with drinking water	73.6	76.3	66.8	79.4	82.4	75.3
Pupil-teacher ratio	18	15	14	24	19	19
Total Schools	2390	2285	2317	4303	4386	4503

Source: State Report Cards, District Information System for Education (DISE), Various Issues

Table 4 shows that between 2009-10 and 2011-12, Tripura has made significant improvements in the various infrastructural indices pertaining to school education. Between 2010-11 and 2011-12 there is a drop in these indices which may be because of the increase in the number of schools in this period. The pupil-teacher ratio in the state is very less compared to the figures corresponding to India. For example, for India the pupil teacher ratio for all schools in 2011-12 was 30 while that of Tripura is only 19. That the government occupies a commanding height in the educational sector in Tripura must be noted. Of the total number of 4503 schools in 2011-12, 4275 were government schools of which 4040 are located in rural areas. As a result of this huge intervention by the government in schools, it recruited 29632 teachers out of a total 32004 teachers in the state.⁸

Political and Governmental Initiatives

It is not enough to spend more on education and create physical infrastructure to ensure education for all. Tripura provides a fine example of how administrative and political initiatives involving the people can ensure that all the children are sent to school. There are various tiers of these initiatives in Tripura.

Firstly, the government has tried to ensure that all children who attend Anganwadi are admitted in the primary schools in their locality. In January 2011, for example, Anganwadi

⁶School Education at a Glance, 2013, Department of School Education, Government of Tripura

⁷Economic Review, 2011-12, Government of Tripura

⁸ State Report Cards, DISE 2011-12

workers ensured that 45888 children of 6 years of age are enrolled in formal primary schools.⁹

Secondly, the school education department of the state has started a special enrolment drive (Vidyalaya Chalo Abhiyan or Go to School Campaign) to ensure that no children are left out of school. As a part of this drive government officials along with local elected representative conduct surveys to see whether any child is left out of regular schooling. If they find anyone, it is ensured that they are enrolled in the nearest school.¹⁰ Through this process many children have been admitted to the schools. In 2012-13, 1489 children were identified as being out of school out of which 1411 were later re-inducted in schools.¹¹ Between 2001-02 and 2010-11 134006 out of school children were identified and inducted into schools.¹²

Thirdly, those children who are physically challenged, arrangements have been made for education at home. Fourthly, the state government has implemented the Mid-day Meal Scheme sincerely in order to ensure that children get nutritious food in the schools. The government has prepared a daily menu of food, including eggs, which is given to the children across the state. At the primary stage (Class I-V) 345349 children and at the upper primary stage (Class V-VIII) 212699 children were provided food under the Mid-day Meal Scheme.¹³

A related and significant development that coincides with the increases in development indicators is the reduction in insurgency related violence since the turn of the century. The following chart shows the decline in deaths due to terrorist activities in the state.

⁹Achievements made during 2001-02 to 2010-11 under SSA programme in Tripura, http://www.ssatripura.com/documents/achievements01_02-10_11.pdf

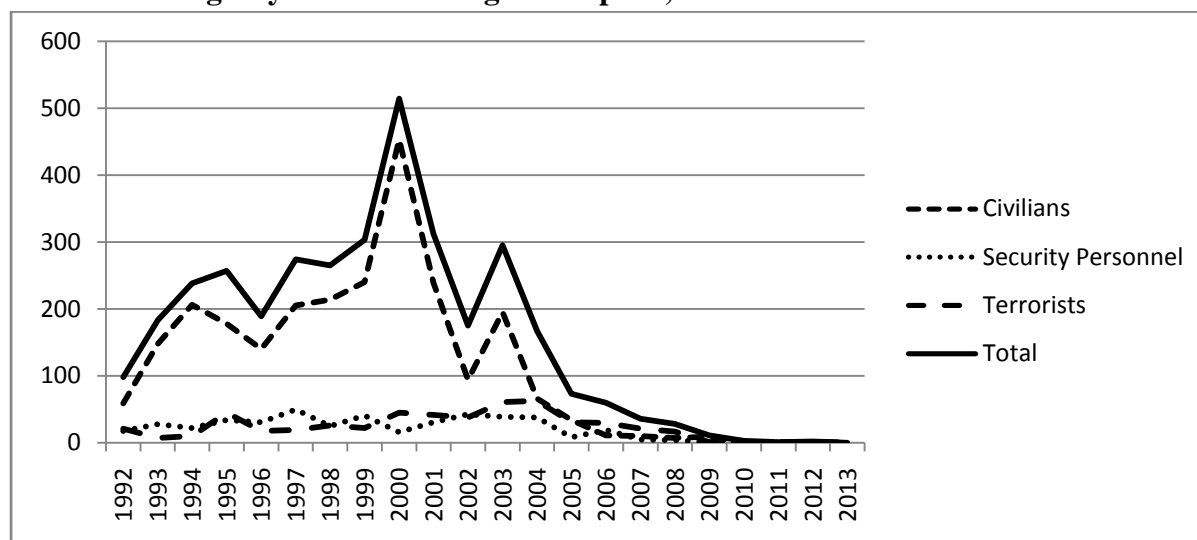
¹⁰ The details of this drive are available at the website of the School Education Department of Government of Tripura, <http://schooleducation.tripura.gov.in/VidyalayaCA.htm>

¹¹Presentation by Tripura at the Project Approval Board Meeting of SarvaSikshaAbhiyan, 13-02-2013. Available at http://ssa.nic.in/pab-doc/pab-minutes/copy_of_pab-minutes-2013-14

¹²Achievements made during 2001-02 to 2010-11 under SSA programme in Tripura, http://www.ssatripura.com/documents/achievements01_02-10_11.pdf

¹³Economic Review, 2011-12, Government of Tripura and for the weekly menu under the Mid-day Meal scheme see School Education at a Glance, 2013, Government of Tripura

Chart 2: Insurgency Related Killings in Tripura, 1992-2013



Source: South Asia Terrorism Portal, www.satp.org

Insurgency related killings peaked around 2000 after which it has witnessed a steady decline to the extent that currently there are no insurgency related killings in Tripura. The causes for the decline in insurgency are complex and merit a separate discussion. However, it can be said that the increase in literacy is both an effect and a cause of the decline in the insurgency. It is because of the decline in the insurgency that teachers could go and teach in the remote hilly areas, where insurgency was quite strong, new schools were also opened in these areas and could function regularly as a result of the prevailing peace. On the other hand, even when the insurgency was at its peak, reports suggest that government and ruling party efforts to mobilize people have worked in favour of economic development including literacy campaigns. Bhaumik (2012) notes that Tripura had a combination of security efforts and economic development to decimate the ‘the most powerful and brutal tribal insurgency in North-East India.’ In his response to a question during an interview with the authors, the Chief Minister of Tripura, Mr. Manik Sarkar pointed out that the government along with the ruling party mobilized people in favour of development and against the insurgents. Wherever it was possible schools were opened and teachers sent to teach along with other developmental interventions. As a result, people perceived that development work is expedited in the absence of terrorist activities and is hampered because of it. This was one way how the terrorists were isolated from the people reducing the problem of insurgency in the state, pointed out Mr. Sarkar.

Challenges in the Education Sector

All these initiatives on the part of the Tripura government have ensured that in 2012 only 0.6% of the children in the age group 6-14 years are not in school while in India 3.5% of children in the same age group were not in school.¹⁴ The Gross Enrolment Ratio as per District Information System on Education (DISE) data is 134.3 in Primary and 97.4 in upper primary level in 2011-12, which for India were 118.6 and 81.1 respectively. Tripura also

¹⁴Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) 2012

succeeded in reducing the dropout rate at the primary and upper primary level significantly. This is shown in the following table.

Table 5: Drop Out Rates for Primary and Upper Primary Level in Tripura

	Primary			Upper Primary		
	SC	ST	Total	SC	ST	Total
2004-05	19.24	26.63	19.68	31.22	35.39	29.86
2005-06	17.61	24.84	17.27	25.67	31.35	26.98
2006-07	10.34	13.81	11.6	20.66	27.59	21.42
2007-08	7.7	8.43	7.81	14.77	16.45	14.79
2008-09	6.35	7.88	6.77	13.23	15.31	12.62
2009-10	4.82	4.13	4.55	9.55	12.77	9.19
2010-11	4.89	4.09	4.05	9.3	12.29	9.68

Source: Achievements Made During 2001-02 to 2010-11 under SarvaSikshaAbhiyan (SSA) in Tripura

From the above table it is seen that Tripura has reduced the dropout rate in both the primary and upper primary levels significantly. It is also noteworthy that the dropout rates within the SC and STs have also witnessed significant decline.

Beyond enrolment alone, apropos the quality of education and in qualitative learning though, Tripura has some distance to cover. The Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) 2012, reports that 20% of children in rural Tripura studying in Class I could not read alphabets properly while 29.8% of children in Class III could read words but not a text of Class I. The ASER report also says that the reading skills of the students improved consistently since 2009 to 2011 but witnessed a slight fall in 2012. The other problematic issue in Tripura is the large scale proliferation of private tuitions. It is estimated by ASER 2012 that 70.2% of children between Class I-VIII take private tuitions in rural areas. This indicates two problems. Firstly, this indicates that the parents or the students are not satisfied with the quality of teaching imparted to them in the schools. Secondly, this also entails an additional expenditure on the family. More importantly, with private tuition becoming the norm within the students the quality of school education will get adversely affected. Interventions are required to deal with these problems. The significant achievements of Tripura on literacy will be further consolidated and expanded if the government addresses these problems earnestly.

Looking Back at History

The saga of peoples' struggle in Tripura for the spread of education has a glorious history. Tripura was a tribal state ruled by monarchy for centuries. Bikram Kishore Manikya was the last king of Tripura during India's independence and the state's merger with India in 1949. During those days, the monarchy and the nobility had complete sway over the tribal masses. The tribals reeled under feudal exploitation and illiteracy. Loyalty to the king and illiteracy went hand in hand and thereby the king and his administration did little for spread of education among the tribals. In this milieu a group of young educated tribals, including Dasarath Deb, (who later on became the first tribal Chief Minister of the state in the year 1993) formed an organisation for mass education called the Jana Siksha Samiti in 1945. This

organisation was formed with active support of the communists who understood that without the spread of education among the tribals they cannot be made conscious of the oppression they are facing and thus cannot be mobilised for changing the system. This Samiti within 3 years opened around 450 primary schools across Tripura and declared that its fight is not merely against illiteracy but also against poverty and social injustice. This is arguably the first organisation within the tribals in India who took up the issue of education and brought that into the arena of public action and mobilisation. This struggle for education started in 1945 by Dasarath Deb and his comrades laid the foundation for the communist movement in the state and made education a tool for political mobilisation. What Amartya Sen argues today that education should become an issue of political mobilization and engagement for it to succeed was perhaps not only understood but implemented in Tripura by the leadership of Jana Siksha Samiti as early as 1945. This is the heritage that is being carried forward by the people of Tripura. By becoming the most literate state in the country, they have lived up to the legacy of their visionary forefathers.

References

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