

1 Introduction

1.1 Tripura's Human Development: Setting the Stage

In both public discussions and policy debates Tripura routinely features as a hill state, a small state, or a part of the 'undifferentiated' cluster of states constituting the North East, to the relative neglect of its rich social history, heterogeneous demographic composition and distinctive democratic politics. The constellation of all these forces and their complex interactions assume particular significance when we ask a basic question about their enabling (or enervating) influence on people's basic capability development. **Human development is quintessentially a social, political and collective process and not a matter of 'bowling alone'**. This report is an attempt to examine the human development goals, conditions and achievements in the state of Tripura by delving deep into its broader social processes, policy initiatives and larger public action. Also of relevance are its background characteristics, namely, its geo-political features and challenges (international borders, hilly terrains and consequent difficulties of communication and transport as well as of insufficiency of cultivable land) and its troubled past of the Partition, with wide-ranging demographic and economic ramifications.

Keeping this general backdrop in mind, this study seeks to examine, albeit in a limited manner, the ways in which social interactions and even social tensions and conflicts between different ethnic groups residing in the state have been mediated with relative success, in order to nurture a climate conducive to human development. This is not to imply that social interactions between tribal and non-tribal groups in the state are in perfect harmony. There are issues of relative deprivation and marginalization and hence of human development challenges that need to be addressed. Yet, there is evidence of concerted efforts to foster inter-community interactions such that the diverse social groups with different cultural riches not only exist side by side but also interact with each other. In other words, there is evidence, in policy debates and in the larger democratic politics, of an understanding that, **to improve human development conditions and outcomes in the state what is necessary is not just "plural monoculturalism", but interactive**

multiculturalism (Sen 2006). The present report, therefore, aims to build a socio-political understanding of both human development achievements and deficits in the state.

To that end, the report analyses, in the following pages, the political history of inter-community interactions in the state with a particular focus on issues of land ownership, forest rights and political representation of major social groups in the state, and the spatial-economic and demographic context of Tripura within which its human development performance is embedded. Against this social and economic backdrop the report examines the extent of literacy and educational progress in the state and its policy underpinnings, its economic development and opportunities, its social protection policies and their effects, its healthcare provisioning and their outcomes, and the gender dimension of these efforts and achievements. Above all, the study aims to focus on the nature of democratic politics in the state which, in the final analysis, determines the direction of its human development initiatives.

Before we delve into these details, however, we briefly introduce the core ideas and principles of human development that motivate this study.

1.2 Human Development as a Social Commitment

The central thesis that inspires this report is that human development and human flourishing are quintessentially a derivative of social commitment, which denies by no means the role of individual enterprise and action in human empowerment. To put it differently, the report begins with the premise that while it is unhelpful to take a none-or-all position with respect to private pursuit and public purpose of human advance (indeed a complementarity between the two will be always necessary, as also a combination of individual, community, governmental, non-governmental, and environmental resources for people), it is good to recognize that many opportunities, undertakings and doings that are critical to human development are offered, not in the realm of the family or the market, but in the public domain, in the social space, cultivated through a shared commitment to the human development of all people. Understandably, therefore, the focus of this report is on social policies, and social protection measures that help create an enabling environment for people to enjoy freedom that follows from a decent level of education, health, and income. **This attention to social support-led human development assumes special significance at a time when we observe more and more a kind of dismantling of**

institutions of social protection in different parts of the country, a growing aversion to social expenditure as well as an imposition of what is described as a ‘fiscal squeeze’ on public goods (UNDP 1999). As an illustration of the more recent manifestations of such fiscal contraction, we quote from Dreze (2016: 15), ‘In the last Union budget, for 2015-16, there were large cuts (more than 50 per cent in some cases, including ICDS) in central allocations for many social programmes.’

1.3 Human Development Conditions

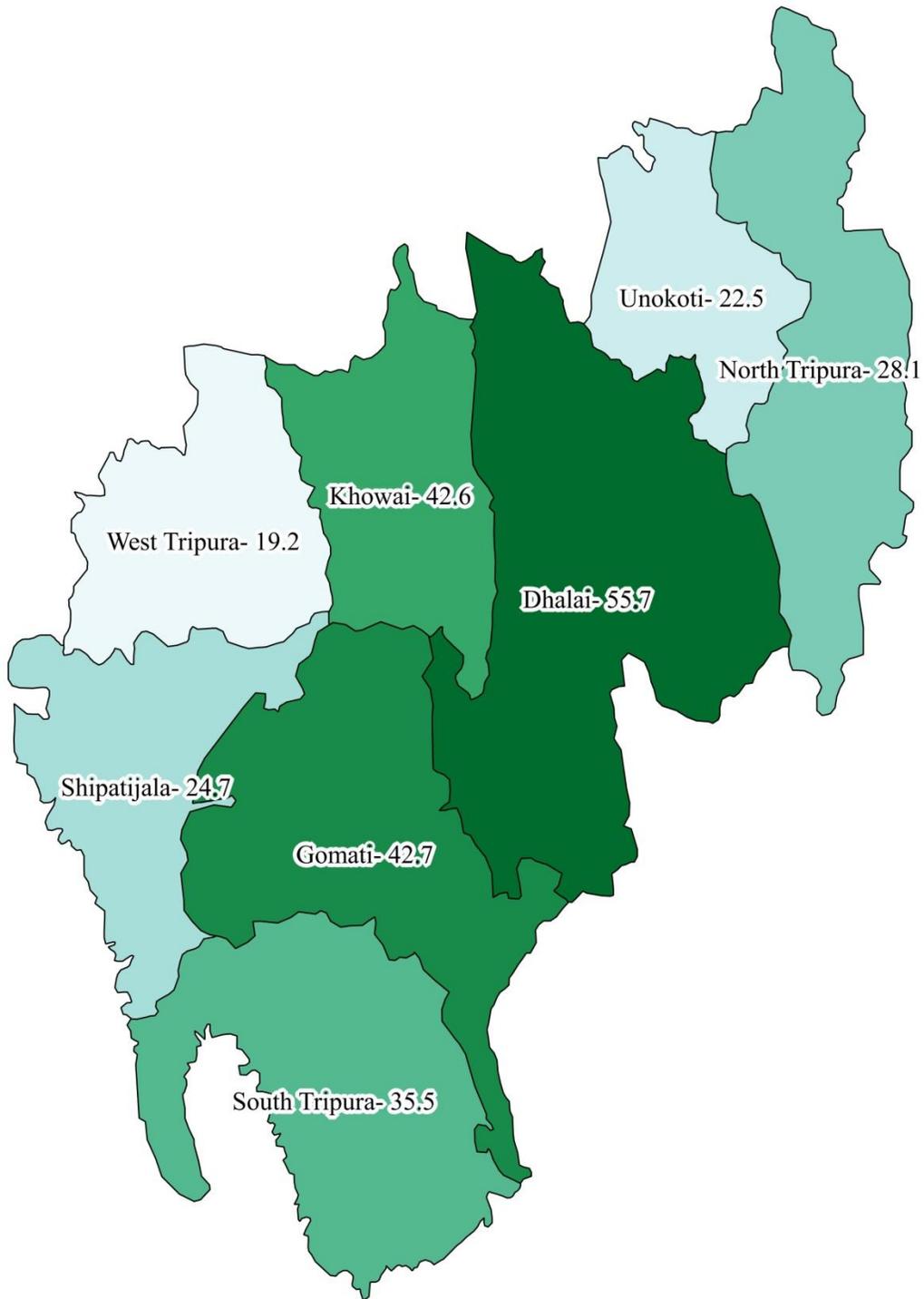
Probing further, this report also dwells, albeit less than ideally, on the underlying human development conditions prevailing in the state of Tripura, that come either to its advancement or abatement. These conditions – genial or unfavourable – include, among others, the geographic location and spatial features of the state, its demographic attributes, its socio-cultural specificities and economic challenges, and above all the nature of its democratic politics. A look at these background conditions will hopefully shed light on whether the state and its people benefit from social and political stability and community cohesion, whether they respect social diversity and difference and yet strive to enhance equity, and whether social unrest and conflict in the state are kept within limits so as to prevent greater vulnerability and human insecurity. The report presumes that a brief foray into these broader social, political and security challenges will give a vantage point from where a meaningful discussion on human development can be launched.

Area-wise, Tripura is the second smallest state in India. It is also a land-locked state that had to sever, as a result of the Partition, all its ties with the ports and cities of Bangladesh (erstwhile East Bengal). Today the state is connected to the rest of the country mainly through one national highway and its spatial isolation and limited urbanization pose a significant challenge to its economic as well as human development.

From a Union Territory, Tripura became a state in 1972. At the time of the release of the First Human Development Report [in 2007](#) the state was divided into four districts which made managing administrative functions difficult owing to the diversity of population, their dispersion across geographical locations and the varying size of the districts. To cater better to people’s demands from state authorities, district administration was reorganized and expanded. The state

now has eight districts, 23 sub-divisions, 58 blocks and also one Tripura Tribal Areas Autonomous District Council (TTAADC). The TTAADC was set up in 1982 under the seventh schedule of the Constitution, which was then brought under the sixth schedule in 1985. The TTAADC covers about two-third of the total area of the state, spanning across all the eight districts and administering about one-third of its population.

Figure 1.1: District-wise percentage of the Scheduled Tribe population



Source: Census of India, 2011

The social composition of the population of Tripura is diverse. The state has one of the highest tribal populations in the country, with scheduled tribes forming 32 percent of the state's population. As many as 19 tribes are found here. Among all these tribes, it is the *Tripuris* who hold the majority followed closely by the *Reang* tribe. Scheduled Castes constitute 18 percent of the total population in the state. On the one hand, with increasing Bengali settlement in the course of time, the state has been influenced by their culture. On the other hand, their cultural domination in the society and the command of Bengali language over school curriculum and pedagogy in particular has been a cause for concern, as it likely poses a threat to tribal languages and culture. For example, perhaps for understandable reasons tribal families living in the capital city of Agartala take cognizance of the importance of learning Bangla. Cultural diversity and cultural domination are thus two sides of the social reality in Tripura. To ensure that multiple cultures in Tripura do not just co-exist but also co-mingle is one of the important human development imperatives in the state.

1.4 Social Policy

Social policy is a capacious combination of various social support programmes and schemes that derive their force from a notion of socio-economic rights and entitlements of people that extend beyond the standard concepts of civil and political rights. Drawing on this expansive framework of rights, it is possible to argue, as this report does argue, that **cultivating core human capabilities will require fulfilment of not just basic rights such as the right to life and right to vote, but also of the right to education, freedom from preventable morbidity and mortality, the right to information and employment opportunities** among others, that together attach deeper meaning to the right to life itself. In different parts of the country as well as at the central level, commitments, at least on paper, have been made to introduce various social protection policies and measures, the fruition of which depends, however, not just on governmental action, but more importantly, on broader public action (Dreze and Sen 2002). Within the same national boundaries of the country, interestingly, the climate of public debate, mobilization, and action surrounding human development activities differ widely, explaining in turn widely divergent records of human development within the same national universe. The positive inspiration to draw from such disparate record is to learn from within India about what works in fuelling human advance. How

the state of Tripura fares in terms of expanding the frontiers of its social support schemes, for example how extensive and effective its social programmes such as those for various categories of informal workers, and non-contributory social security pensions for widows etc. are, occupies a central place in this report.

1.5 HDI as a basic but partial and unrefined measure

The report acknowledges at the outset that the Human Development Index, and its variants such as the GDI, GEM, Human Poverty Index, Multi-dimensional Poverty Index and so on, are meant to capture some basic elements of a much broader vision of human development. In constructing such an index and ranking the relative position of Tripura against such a benchmark, therefore, this report does not attempt to either disregard the more qualitative and refined texture of the fabric of human enrichment or ignore the simple fact that such an index is only a coarse contraption to capture this complex reality. The inter-state or inter-district rankings that are presented below, therefore, give only a basic, and necessarily partial, view of their respective human development records. The discussions and analyses of the broader processes, practices and policies of human development in Tripura, put forward in the following pages, are thus aimed to complement the index-building exercise.

1.6 Methodological apparatuses

The report follows a strategy of ‘methodological opportunism’ in that it strives to make use of whichever tools that work. To put it more elaborately, the report draws on statistics, figures and analyses available from secondary sources and scholarly works. To be sure, information, documents, and data provided by various departments of the government of Tripura constitute a major evidentiary base for this report. However, data culled from official sources have been routinely compared and triangulated with relevant data available from several other public domain agencies known for their credibility and competence such as the Census, National Sample Survey Organization, National Family Health Survey, District Level Household Survey, Rapid Survey on Children, Indian Human Development Survey etc. To complement this exercise, and to probe deeper, albeit on a modest scale, a primary household survey has been conducted in all eight districts of the state in 2015. The survey has covered nearly 1000 households in 24 rural locations and nine urban locations and collected first-hand information regarding both objective human development conditions as well as people’s perception of their

developmental progress or deficit of it ~~in 24 rural locations and nine urban locations~~ (See Appendix Table A.1.1 and A1.2). Some of the focal themes of this investigation include issues of schooling, living conditions of people including parameters of housing, drinking water and sanitation facilities, benefits received by people under various social protection schemes, their economic conditions and employment situations and the extent of their participation in local political and electoral processes.

1.7 Human Development and Democratic Politics in contemporary Tripura

It is the distinctiveness of Tripura's democratic politics – the left-leaning stance of the ruling party as well as the political attentiveness and engagement of the citizens of the state – that constitutes the larger backdrop against which one can meaningfully discuss its human development programmes and performance. It is the forethought of the existing political regime and the quotidian democratic practices – their strengths as well as weaknesses – that set the direction of policy action and larger public action for human development. To what extent Tripura has been successful in bringing its democratic politics to bear on social policy is what this report asks, though not necessarily adequately. Whether the claims and interests of the disadvantaged groups receive due attention in public policy, and whether through the democratic process human development issues receive political visibility are questions that this report seeks to examine in a number of modest ways.

1.8 Introducing the chapters

Chapter 2 presents a brief history of mediation of social and inter-community conflicts in the state in the interest of its human development goals, keeping in mind its demographic specificities. In Chapter 3, we discuss how far Tripura's economy and its growth have come to the aid of fostering development understood as enhancement of basic capabilities of its people. Chapter 4 examines the State's educational progress and its inclusive nature. The state's relative success on the education front is then compared, in Chapter 5, with its somewhat lackluster record on the health front, paying heed to some of its healthcare challenges. Our analysis of these limitations/insufficiencies is closely linked with our interest in their rectification. Chapter 6 examines various social protection policies in the state that aim to enhance people's basic freedoms such as the freedom from hunger, livelihood security, housing rights, and basic social support at old age. In Chapter 7 we revisit the human development purposes, practices, and

performances of the state through the prism of gender. In Chapter 8 we revert to discussing the nature of democratic politics in the state, with a particular focus on the extent of democratic decentralization. The role of the media in fostering public discussions and their human development implications are discussed in Chapter 9. In Chapter 10 an inter-State ranking is attempted on the basis of their human development records. In the concluding chapter we underline the critical importance of people's agentic role in both conceptualizing as well as actualizing human empowerment.