

Remembering Comrade Dasarath Deb barma (1916 – 1998)



Comrade Dasarath Deb barma, a legendary leader of the Indian Communist movement, was born into a poor peasant family in remote Ampura village of Khowai subdivision on 2nd February, 1916, in an era when Tripura was ruled by a feudal tribal king. The king was never interested in establishing even primary schools for the tribal subject living in villages and hills. Neither there was any pucca road nor any provision of safe drinking water in the tribal-dominated villages of Tripura. Only a few schools were set up in capital town of Agartala and some other towns for the wards of royal families and those of bureaucrats and employees of the administration. Since childhood, Deb was very eager to obtain education. But it was hardly affordable for his poor family to send him to town for education. Due to his indomitable eagerness, he was later admitted in Khowai primary school. And after he passed matriculation examinations, he was admitted in Brindaban College of Habiganj of Sylhet District under erstwhile East Bengal, as Tripura had no college then. After passing Intermediate and BA, Debbarma got admitted in Calcutta University for MA. Simultaneously, he pursued a law degree.

In 1940, #CPI Comilla District Committee working under the Bengal Provincial Committee initiated formation of a Party unit in Tripura. The first unit of the Party in Agartala was formed with some local youths including Comrade Biren Datta who, besides Debbarma, was elected to the first Lok Sabha from Tripura. The Agartala Branch of CPI first started building up mass organisations with the working people of Agartala, mostly Bengalis. The tribal masses, though subjected to tremendous exploitation and repression by the feudal kings, were loyal subjects of the monarchy. Since the royal administration was totally against providing education to the tribal masses, the Communist Party gave priority to providing education to the tribal people. Comrade Biren Datta held a secret discussion about spreading the light of education among the tribal people with boarding inmates of Umakanta Academy, the oldest educational institution of Agartala. Only a handful of tribal students joined the first meeting. It was decided that an organisation would be formed with the core objective of spreading education among the tribal people. Comrade Debbarma was contacted in Kolkata and apprised of the mission. Soon, he came to Tripura, leaving his post-graduate study never to go back again.

On 27th December, 1945, a group of 11 educated tribal youths formed the historic Janashiksha Samity with Dasaratha Debbarma as its vice-president. Within a few months of its inception, it established no less than 400 schools in tribal-dominated hills and villages. The educated and moderately educated tribal youths were appointed as teachers. The villagers constructed school buildings, provided accommodation and food, and paid minimal allowance to the teachers. Subsequently, the tribal people in their large numbers came out in support of Janashiksha Samity. Alongside establishment of new schools, the leaders of Janashiksha Samity raised demand for recognition of these schools by the royal administration. They submitted a deputation to Mr Brown, a retired British Army Officer who was the then education minister of the king's administration. After visiting many schools founded by the Samity, Mr Brown accorded recognition to 300 of these schools. Naturally, Maharaja Bir Bikram Kishore Debbarma got very much annoyed with his education minister for according recognition to these schools and Mr Brown had to resign and leave the state.

In 1946, the king passed a secret order to the police to book Janashiksha Samity leaders. On the other hand, the king convened a conference of tribal sardars (village chiefs) with a view to form a parallel organisation to Janashiksha Samity in the name of 'Tripur Sangha'. Some of the tribal sardars in writing proposed to the king to invite Janashiksha Samity leaders also. But the night before the conference, the police arrested three Janashiksha Samity leaders including its secretary Hemanta Debbarma. Since then Comrade Dasaratha Debbarma had been underground only to come out in public after withdrawal of the arrest warrant at the instance of the Lok Sabha Speaker following his election to Parliament in 1952.

After Maharaja Bir Bikram Kishore Debbarma's death in 1946, his widow was appointed as Regent King and the central government deputed some ICS officers, all Bengalis, to act as Dewan for assisting the Regent Administration. During the Dewani rule in Tripura, state terror and repression on Janashiksha Samity leaders and supporters was widened and intensified. Military and police forces were given free hand to carry out raids and arsons in tribal villages and arrest tribal youths indiscriminately and kill them at whims. This one-sided drive of barbarism on the innocent tribal people by police and Army jawans continued in 1947 and 1948. To cope with this most adverse situation, the leaders of Janashiksha Samity felt it necessary to form an armed organisation to combat this state terror and for self-defence. Comrade Dasaratha Debbarma discussed the situation with the Communist leaders of the state. In March, 1948, Tripura Rajya Mukti Parishad, headed by Dasaratha Deb, was formed. The Mukti Parishad had two wings -- political and armed. Comrade Dasaratha Debbarma and his colleagues worked hard to form Mukti Parishad units in every village to combat the police and army atrocities. Simultaneously, they outlined a secret political move to hold a massive rally and procession in the capital town of Agartala.

Accordingly, thousands of tribal masses were mobilised in various points, 10 to 20 km away from Agartala. On 15th August, 1948, a stream of thousands of tribal people from Durga Chowdhury Para, a tribal village, 12 km from Agartala, converged in Agartala

flooding the entire town and held a rally at the heart of the city and dispersed peacefully. The people of Agartala town were spellbound to see such an undeclared, huge but regimented rally of Mukti Parishad and the police administration including its intelligence wing got baffled as they were completely in dark about it. Before commencing the procession from Durga Chowdhury Para, Dasaratha Deb addressed a gathering there. Mukti Parishad leaders decided not to send Deb to Agartala because they rightly anticipated that if the Supreme Commander of the resistance movement was arrested, it would be a serious setback to the resistance movement. Following the successful rally and procession in Agartala town, Mukti Parishad was fast gaining popularity among the villagers and on the contrary, the Regent administration more aggressively unleashed its barbarism by means of police and military actions. On the advice of Nishan Sardar, a senior tribal sardar, Dasaratha Debbarma attended a meeting of tribal sardars in a village in Khowai subdivision. He addressed the meeting attended by more than thousand sardars, explaining ideals and objectives of the Mukti Parishad and distributed its manifesto among them. This move helped expansion of the organisation in the entire state.

When the Golaghati mass killing in October 1948 evoked tremendous resentment among the tribal masses against the Bengali population, the Mukti Parishad led by Dasaratha Debbarma cautioned the tribal people against this suicidal anti-Bengali ethnic spite. After the Golaghati incident, Deb felt the urgency of forming guerrilla squads to resist police and army atrocities. Mukti Parishad leaders started contacting with tribal youths serving in the police force and those who were appointed in army during the Second World War. Dasaratha Debbarma put priority to form such armed guerrilla units of Mukti Parishad first in Khowai and Sadar subdivisions because these two subdivisions were the worst hit by police and army barbarism.

On 26th March, 1949, the military carried out a raid at Padmabill village at Khowai subdivision in search of Dasarath Deb. In the process, faced with resistance from women and young girls of the village, the military opened fire on the unarmed women and three young women -- Kumari Debbarma, Madhuti Debbarma and Rupashree Debbarma -- were shot to death on the spot. Mukti Parishad decided to form cultural squads to highlight the tales of heroic martyrdom of these three tribal women through folk songs and folk dances. Even today, 26th March is being observed as "Martyrs' Day" in remembrance of these three young women of Padmabill, the first women martyrs of the state in the movement for democracy. These killings of the tribal farmers at Golaghati and tribal women at Padmabill made the armed resistance movement of the Mukti Parishad even more effective and it spread further with many tribal and non-tribal youths joining the movement.

On 15th October 1949, Tripura acceded to Indian Union, thus ending the 'regency council' and 'Dewani' rule. The central government led by Congress party appointed civil service officer V Nanjappa as the chief commissioner of the state. Nanjappa boastfully declared that he crushed the armed struggle of Telangana in Andhra Pradesh, so it would be matter of a few days to crush the armed struggle led by the Mukti Parishad in Tripura. With the help of Congress leader Sachindra Lal Singha,

Nanjappa revived 'Tripur Sangha' to counter Mukti Parishad. Nanjappa first declared 'military rule' in whole of the state. But his boastful utterances were soon proved to be a hoax by the guerrilla fighters of the Mukti Parishad. Most of the tribal dominated areas of the state turned 'free-land' where the leadership of the Mukti Parishad established a parallel administration. Tribal population of the state would call Dasaratha Debbarma as a 'King without a Crown'. The relationship between Dasaratha Debbarma, his colleagues and the Communist Party became more cordial during this phase of armed struggle. The news of the armed struggle of the people of Telangana, the armed struggle of the farmers of Kakdwip of West Bengal or the armed struggle of the peasants of Hajong in East Pakistan highly inspired the leaders and followers of the Mukti Parishad. In early fifties, Dasarath Deb and his co-fighter Hemanta Debbarma deduced that the Communists were the only people who stood behind their movement from its beginning. After prolonged discussions, Dasrath Deb sent Hemanta Debbarma to Agartala to contact the leaders of the Communist Party.

Communist Movement

Some days later, during a meeting of the Mukti Parishad central committee at Chachu Bazar at Sadar, report came in that the Polit Bureau of the Communist Party had sent Comrade Pranesh Biswas of Assam to meet the leaders of Mukti Parishad. Dasarath Deb invited Comrade Biswas to the meeting. In the meeting, Comrade Biswas explained the aims and ideology of the Communist Party and requested the leaders of the Mukti Parishad to join the Communist Party. All the leaders of the then Mukti Parishad accepted the views expressed by Dasarath Deb in joining the CPI. All the 41 central committee members of the Mukti Parishad filled in the 'form for membership' on a white piece of paper and joined the Communist Party. During mid-fifties, the Central Committee of Communist Party sent Comrade Nripen Chakraborty, Dr Bijoy Basu and two other comrades to help build up the Party organisation in Tripura. Comrade Chakraborty and Dr. Basu met Dasarath Deb at an underground place in Khowai for the first time using pseudo names, as the Communist Party was banned during the period.

Dasarath Debbarma was a person with a unique sense of practical intelligence and unparallel organisational acumen who led the armed resistance struggle as its supreme commander, joined the Communist Party in 1950. Within one year he was elected as a member of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of India. In the second half of 1951, the first general election to the Lok Sabha was announced. The situation was fast changing. Although the Mukti Parishad was bent upon to carry on the armed resistance movement, the central government reinforced the army and started setting up of army camps even in remote areas. The situation turned so bad, that it became very hard to carry on the armed struggle. In the Central Committee meeting of the Mukti Parishad, which was attended among others by Nripen Chakraborty and Dr. Bijoy Basu, the new situation was discussed extensively. Dasaratha Debbarma put a proposal in the meeting that Chakraborty should send a note to the party Polit Bureau informing the overall situation of the state and the majority views of Mukti Parishad to take part in the election. But Chakraborty requested Debbarma to write the note. Accordingly, Debbarma prepared a note and sent it to the party central leaders. By this time, the ban on the Communist Party was withdrawn and the Party decided to participate in the

election. CPI nominated Comrade Dasaratha Debbarma from the East Tripura (ST) constituency despite the fact that he was carrying a permanent warrant of arrest. In the electoral roll of 1952 Lok Sabha election, instead of 'Dasaratha Debbarma' his name was printed as 'Dasaratha Deb'. Then he was in underground and had no scope to rectify it. He filed his nomination in the later name and since then he was recognised as 'Dasaratha Deb'.

The name of Tripura Rajya Mukti Parishad was later changed to the Tripura Rajya Gana Mukti Parishad. In 1964 when the Communist Party of India got divided and Communist Party of India (Marxist) Communist Party of India (Marxist) came into existence as a separate political party, the name of Tripura Rajya Gana Mukti Parishad was changed to Tripura Rajya Upajati Gana Mukti Parishad, popularly known as GMP, with Dasarath Debbarma continuing as its president till his death.

In 1947, following the Partition, an unprecedented situation set in. A large number of Bengali Hindus started entering the state for shelter from then East Pakistan (now Bangladesh). This refugee influx reversed the demographic composition of the state, turning the majority tribal population into a minority. The economically and academically backward and unprivileged tribal people were forced to an uneven competition with the comparatively advanced Bengali community. Simultaneously, after the Partition, Tripura geographically became an isolated state from the mainland. The way the then central government dealt with the refugee problem of Punjab with proper rehabilitation, it was not same for the states of West Bengal, Assam and Tripura. On the contrary, the Congress party and its government instigated the Bengali refugees to grab tribal land illegally. A section of vested interests even tried to foment anti-Bengali sentiment among the tribals. Dasaratha Debbarma had to launch an ideological struggle to fight this sectarian tendency.

Dasaratha Deb was first elected to Parliament in 1952, and was re-elected in 1957, 1962 and 1971. In Lok Sabha, he forcefully raised the problems faced by the people of the state and the need for protecting the identity of the indigenous tribal people. He strongly raised the demands for formation of Autonomous Tribal District Council with the tribal inhabited areas of the state, protection of rights of the tribals on their land, and at the same time, proper and judicious rehabilitation of the Bengali refugees. He carried on relentless struggles in Parliament and outside for all-round development of the state. He played a valiant role in maintaining amity between tribal and non-tribal populations. He was in true sense a bridge between tribal and non-tribal communities and a symbol of unity and friendship in the state.

In 1971, when the people of Bangladesh were fiercely fighting for liberation, Dasaratha Deb speaking in Parliament demanded immediate recognition of independent Bangladesh by the Government of India.

During the 1960s and 70s, GMP and CPIM Tripura started a high pitched mass movement on four-point charter of demands: Formation of Autonomous District Council with the tribal dominated areas of the state according to the 6th Schedule of the

Constitution; Restoration of illegally transferred land to the tribal owners from the non-tribal occupiers; Strictly adherence of the constitutional provisions of reservation in government jobs and education for tribals; and Recognition of 'Kokborok', the mother tongue of the majority tribals of the state as second language and introduction of different tribal languages in the schools as mode of teaching, thus recognition of mother tongue as medium of education.

As a result of the united movement for decades, the people of Tripura gave a historic verdict in the assembly elections in 1977. In the 60-member assembly, the Left Front bagged 56 seats, TUJS own the rest four. Having failed to build any organisation among the tribal people, the Congress party instigated some middle class tribal youths in 1967 to give birth to a regional party -- Tripura Upajati Yuba Samity (TUJS) -- to counter GMP. Comrade Dasaratha Deb, the legendary leader of the historic Janashiksha Samity, became the education minister in the first Left Front government, led by Nripen Chakraborty. Today, Tripura tops in literacy rate in the whole country, thanks to the unforgettable contributions of Comrade Dasaratha Deb in the sphere of education.

The establishment of #LeftFront government in Tripura could not be tolerated by the Congress party as well as the communal, sectarian elements of the state and the imperialist forces. The passage of a bill for formation of Tripura Tribal Autonomous District Council and setting up of a tribunal for restoration of the illegally transferred land to the indigenous tribal owners in a Bengali majority Tripura assembly enraged the vested interests both inside and outside the state who hatched a conspiracy to dethrone the Left Front government. They instigated fierce ethnic riots in June, 1980, in which about 1,400 innocent men and women lost their lives and 3,15,000 people had to take shelter in relief camps. The perpetrators even conducted a raid on the residence of Dasaratha Deb in #Agartala. He was compelled to take shelter in the official residence of the then chief minister, along with his family members.

In December 1978, TUJS started an armed terrorist-secessionist organisation TNV. It sent its cadres to jungles of the Chittagong hills in Bangladesh for arms training, aided by US intelligence agency CIA and Pakistan's ISI. They unleashed a terror reign committing mass killings, abduction of innocent people and arsons, with a slogan for 'Independent Tripura'. The main target of their attacks were the leaders and organisers of #CPIM and #GMP. These killing squads of TNV carried out at least three assassination attempts on Comrade Dasaratha Deb during election campaign in 1983. In two of these attempts, though he was narrowly saved, many of his security guards were killed. In 1993, Comrade Dasaratha Deb became the chief minister of #Tripura.

Comrade Dasaratha Deb was a prolific writer. He had written many articles and booklets shunning fundamentalism, secessionism and sectarianism. Throughout his life he struggled for unity and integrity of the state of Tripura. He played a vigorous role in ideological struggle inside the Party since he was elected to the Central Committee in 1951. In 1964, he was one of the 32 Central Committee members who disassociated themselves from CPI to form Communist Party of India (Marxist) in its 7th Congress in Kolkata. Because of his prolonged illness, he could not attend the 16th Party Congress

in Kolkata in 1998. He wrote to the General Secretary of the Party requesting to be relieved from the #CPIM Central Committee. Just two days after the Party Congress concluded, this great fighting leader of the Indian Communist movement breathed his last on October 14.

Comrade Dasarath Deb shall remain alive among the people of Tripura as well as of the country for eternity as one of the founder leaders of the historic Janashiksha Samity, Pioneer of the communist movement and as an architect of modern, democratic Tripura.