

## **Royal Custodians of Tripura: A Brief Study with reference to Indian Classical Music**

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### **Abstract**

*Royalty from different states has had a long term relationship with the disciplines of music and arts in the history of Indian culture. On a general note, known to be generous patrons of Indian art and culture, the Indian kings and monarchs have ruled their kingdom as true guardians of performing arts and fine arts during their regime so much so that the musicians not only grew in leaps and bounds under their canopy of luxury and abundance in their art form but also in name and fame. These royal custodians of art, culture and literature were usually themselves well-versed in almost all disciplines of performing arts, fine arts or literature.*

*The present article focuses on the contributions of these Royal connoisseurs of the emerald land of Tripura in the field of arts, particularly music.*

**Key words:** Royalty, Music, Tripura, patron

In the Hindu mythology, the Lunar dynasty (or the *Chandravansha/ Somvansha*) is considered as one of the four principal houses of Kshatriya Varna. The Rulers of Tripura, namely known as Manikya Dynasty are known to belong to the *Chandra Vanshiya* dynasty.

### **Title Manikya and its origin:**

Earlier the rulers of Tripura used the title of 'Fa'. 'It is known that Tripura's Dharma Fa who was the contemporary of King Balbhadr, the then Ruler of Mithila converted himself from

Buddhism to Hinduism and on this occasion organized a large Yagna for which he invited five Brahmanas from the state of Mithila. These Brahmanas were Srinand, Anand, Govind, Sripati and Puroshottam. This was in the year 641 A.D.<sup>1</sup>

It is believed that the title Manikya was originally given by the Nawab of Gaud to Ratna Fa who belonged to the ancient lineage of Manikya dynasty for his incredible gallantry.

### **Ancient Roots of the Manikya Dynasty:**

As the narrative goes, the Yadav King Yayati cursed and banished one of his sons named Druhya. Druhya was forced to reach the North-East corner of the country where he is said to have defeated the king of the ‘Kirat’ community. ‘According to the most ancient Rajmala of Tripura, this king Druhya became the *Adipurusha* or the first known forefather of the kings of Tripura or Manikya Dynasty. Scholars predict that the king Druhya reigned 150 years before the legendary battlefield of Kurukshetra happened.

The grandson of Druhya, named Tripur was notorious and is known to have plundered and looted his subjects. However cruel he maybe, but he was full of valor. It is believed that he extended his rule to the various neighboring regions by conquering them and founded the name ‘Tripura’ after his own name.

Some other scholars believe that the word Tripura is the modified form of ‘Tui’ meaning water and ‘Pra’ meaning ‘close to’. Tuipra eventually turned into Tripura which meant the region which is close to water or ocean. Therefore, some historians believe that maybe once the land of Tripura extended up to the ocean.<sup>2</sup>

Whatever might be the reason behind the origin of this name but the rulers of this region were indisputably known to be patrons of art, literature, dance and music. ‘The marriage ceremony of Maharaja Trilochana, another mighty ruler of Tripura was celebrated for seven long days. The

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<sup>1</sup> Manikya Shashnadhin Tripurar Itihash - Dr. Naliniranjan Roychaudhuri, p. 20

<sup>2</sup> Rajmalar Tripura – S.P. Roy, p. 13

festival was full of dance and music.’<sup>3</sup> This excerpt indicates the cultural ambience of the then Tripura.

Maharaja Trilochana was a contemporary of the legendary King Yudhishtira of the Mahabharata period. This is evident from this excerpt which says, ‘Maharaja Trilochana went to Hastinapur on the invitation of Yudhishtira to attend the epic Rajsuya Yagna.’<sup>4</sup>

The above excerpts present a brief picture of the ancient roots of the Manikya Dynasty and their gradual succession through generations of valorous kings. The rich cultural ambience prevailing in the kingdoms of these kings is also fairly evident.

### **Glimpses through the Cultural Corridors of Various Royalties:**

Many of the kings and members of the Manikya dynasty were themselves experts in the different disciplines of arts.

In the year 1830 in the court of Maharaja Krishna Manikya there was painter named Alam Karigar. He made a portrait of king after the fashion of the Mughal miniatures. The references to the artists of Tripura are found to be far and wide.



Towards the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century, Tripura was ushered in a new era. With the accession of Maharaja Bir Chandra Manikya from 1862-96, Tripura entered into a new era. Besides, developing Tripura in an overall manner which included law and order, administration, education, social culture etc., Maharaja Bir Chandra Manikya particularly supported the cause of preserving the arts and culture as he believed it to be the eternal heritage of the country.

It is a well-known fact that Noble Laureate Rabindranath Tagore and the Manikyas of three generations shared a soulful

<sup>3</sup> Rajmalar Tripura – S.P. Roy, p. 15

<sup>4</sup> Rajmalar Tripura – S.P. Roy, p.16

relationship. Right from the regime of Maharaja Bir Chandra Manikya to Maharaja Bir Bikram Kishore Manikya , Tripura saw a golden period of a vibrant cultural exchange between Tagore and Manikyas. Tagore got inspired with the Manipuri dancing style he experienced at Tripura and requested the kings to provide him with a few expert teachers of Manipuri dance to teach at his institution at Santiniketan which the kings gladly provided. Here an important point may be noted that because of the contribution and willingness of the Kings of Tripura, Tagore’s Visva-Bharati was enriched with Manipuri dance maestros. This clearly states the benevolent character and generous nature of the Rulers of Tripura along with their interest in cultural exchange. ‘The harem of the kings especially represented the elite cultural environment of Tripura.’<sup>5</sup>

Similarly we have instances of other kings of the Manikya dynasty in whose regime we find the conservation of Indian arts and culture. “Maharaja Birendra Kishore had a natural inclination towards arts. Consequently the Royal court had an exceptional and rare collection of almost all the Indian classical musical instruments along with exquisite paintings. His drawing room and library exhibited the most beautiful pieces of art which included expensive carpets; furniture’s carved out of elephant tooth and bamboo. Besides the Royal lounge also exhibited carpets made out of fine elephant tooth and Indian musical instruments along with the bust of Emperor George V.”<sup>6</sup>

The above excerpt from the Souvenir released on the completion of centenary of Ujjayanta Palace indicates the love for arts prevalent in the Royal family.



Nabdeep Chandra Debbarman \_\_\_\_\_

Tripura Royal courts were always employed with court musicians of high order who entertained the Royalty with the Indian forms of music called dhrupadi or margi sangit. One such name comes that of Dhrupadiya Shymacharan Dutta. Many historians mention the names of prevalent singers and musicians of those times who were employed in the Royal court of Tripura to exhibit their extraordinary talent to

<sup>5</sup> Tripuray Rabindranath - Edited by Sri Nilip Poddar, p. 32

<sup>6</sup> Rajmalar Tripura – S.P. Roy, p. 115

the King and courtesans of that time.

‘They say that Nabdeep Chandra Debbarman , father of Sachin Debbarman wished his son to learn from the court singer of Tripura Dhrupadiya Shymacharan Dutta. But it is said that young Sachin who was the lover of folk music did not agree to learn under the master since he was already learning from his father then.’<sup>7</sup> This extract brings forth an important fact that various maestros and scholars of music served as regular recruited employees in the Royal court of Tripura for a profound discussion or an elaborate classical presentation of their repertoire. This in turn reflects the cultural and musical temperament of the Monarchs of Tripura.



Various renowned singers of Cumilla, (now in Bangladesh) like Sursagar Himangshu Dutta, Shaila Devi and Gyan Dutta were the well-known disciples of Shymacharan Dutta. The renowned historian and musical analyst Dilip Kumar mukhopadhyay writes, “The Royal court of Maharaja Bir Chandra Manikya was known to be one of the most elitist and best Courts of India.”<sup>8</sup> So much so that it was even known as the Navratna Sabha of Vikramaditya.

Maharaja Bir Chandra reigned from 1862-1896. His court was known to be one of the finest with respect to musical concerts and discussions. He himself was known to be a fine composer and musician. This is evident through one of the compositions composed in Raga Chayanat by renowned dhrupad singer Jadu Bhatt, the song says – ‘Tripureshwar (Maharaja Bir Chandra)is one of the finest singers one can find, in whose singing one can discover the Lord Shiva himself...’<sup>9</sup>

Jadu Bhatt who was the music mentor of Kabi Guru Rabindranath Tagore, is known to have served Tripura Royal court with his music for around six years. Through the influence of Jadu

<sup>7</sup> Kumar Sachin Debbarman, Centenary Edition, p. 122

<sup>8</sup> Kumar Sachin Debbarman, Centenary Edition, p. 123

<sup>9</sup> Kumar Sachin Debbarman, Centenary Edition, p. 100

Bhatt, the ancient tradition of Indian classical music spread all through eastern Bengal including Cumilla region which is now in Bangladesh.



In the sequence of kings who took keen interest in the cultural growth of Tripura, Maharaja Birendrakishore Manikya's name exists quite pertinently. He took equal interest in the development of the cultural aspect under his regime. He is known to be a well-known artist. Besides he participated in all disciplines of music, literature and science with enthusiasm. He has composed several songs based on the *leelas* of Radha Krishna. Likewise one can trace an entire lineage of the Royal monarchs of Tripura whose contributions enriched the court of Tripura and consequently

Maharaja Bir Chandra Manikya turned the Royal court into a hub of rich musical discussions.

### **Jewels in the Court of Tripura Royalty:**

Others who adorned the court of Bir Chandra Manikya were the renowned Binkar and Rababi Ustad Kasem Ali Khan who belonged to the lineage of Tansen. From Kasem Ali , Sadu Khan learnt sitar. Sadu Khan happened to be the father of the legendary Ustad Alauddin Khan . Sadu Khan's another son namely Aftabuddin was also a talented artist but he was more inclined towards spirituality.

Some other musicians whose raised the bar not only in terms of the cultural status of the royal court of Tripura but also prominently established the dignity of Tripura on a national platform were Surdhan player Nisar Hussein, Dancer from Kashmir Natyacharya Kalandar Baksha, Esraj player from Gwalior Hayder Khan, Sitarist Nabin Chanda Goswami, Pakhawaj player from Kolkata Keshab Mitra, who happened to be the elder brother of renowned philosopher of Kolkata Ramesh Mitra. Besides these artists Pakhawaji Panchanan Mitra, Behala player Haridas and singer Bholanath Chakraborty too rendered their presentations frequently in the Royal Court of Bir Chandra Manikya of Tripura.

The Royal kings of Tripura who find mention not only in the era of Mahabharata but even before that, have time and again proved their valor and strength on the battlefield. These monarchs of Tripura not only protected their subjects from outward invasions but also were agile cultural custodians of their motherland.

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