



## The Eighteenth Century Eastern Frontier of India : Crisis in Tripuri State

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### ABSTRACT

*The Eighteenth century India was period of tumultuous development –marked by the decline of the Mughal state, emergence of successor states and their decline and finally subjugation by the British rule. The establishment of the British rule is regarded as departure from the earlier regimes. The paper analyse developments in Tripuri state in the eastern frontier and how the events at the core of the empire affected the peripheral regions like Tripura*

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### I. Tripura State

Lying between 22.56' and 24.32' north latitude and between 91.0' and 92.20' east longitude, Tripura was one of the States that formed the chain of independent states in the eastern region. It was on the frontier of the Mughal State and was thus subject to perpetual Mughal attacks and consequent influence. It was a tribal chieftaindom that evolved into a monarchical state.

There are many theories about the origin of the Tripura dynasty including the theory of divine kingship, most scholars believe that Tripura royal family originally belonged to the Twipra tribe after which the state is called Tripura. The Twipra tribe like the Cachari and other tribes of eastern India were Indo-Mongoloid in origin. Suniti Kumar Chatterjee<sup>1</sup> classified them as Indo-Mongoloids also known as Kiratas. The Twipras are southern Bodos. "The Bodos, who spread over the whole Brahmaputra Valley and north Bengal as well as East Bengal forming a social block in north eastern India, were the most important Indo-Mongoloid people in eastern India and they formed one of the main basis of the present day population of these tracts".<sup>2</sup>

Rajmala, the royal chronicle of the Tripura State, refers to an inscription dated 1457 AD of Dharma Manikya. In this inscription Maha Manikya was regarded as the father of Dharma Manikya and according to Tripura Vansavali, Dharma Manikya ruled from 1431 to 1462 AD. It can be inferred that Mahamanikya ruled before 1431 AD as he was the earliest known king of Tripura having the Manikya title. From the name it can also be presumed that by then the Sanskritisation of the tribals were also complete. It is believed that Mahamanikya had a kingdom during the early years of the reign of Raja Ganesa of Bengal and his newly formed kingdom was lying between Chittagong and Sylhet. These scholars also are of the opinion that the tribal name of the king Maha Manikya was Changthung 'fa'. It was only after the successful defence of his newly founded kingdom against the Muslim force of Bengal that Chengthung Fa assumed the title Mahamanikya<sup>3</sup>

### II. Bengal-Tripura Relation

The historical period of the Manikya dynasty seems to have

started from the reign of Dharma Manikya (1431 AD – 1462 AD) or Mahamanikya (upto 1431 AD). The strategic location of Tripura also necessitated the constant interaction between the Muslims who ruled over Bengal and Tripura which began almost simultaneously with the establishment of the Manikya dynasty. In fact there is a theory that Mahamanikya had temporarily submitted the whole of Tripura to the Sultan of Bengal, Jalauddin (1418-1433 AD).<sup>4</sup>

Dharma Manikya emerged as one of the greatest monarchs of the Manikya dynasty. He started his career by subjugating a number of principalities around his kingdom. Taking advantage of the disorder and chaotic condition in Bengal prior to the accession of Hussain Shah, Dharma Manikya annexed to his kingdom some portions of the Bengal such as Patrikara, Gangamandal, Meherkul, Khandal and so on. Hussein Shah on assumption of the throne also launched a counter attack. According to Rajmala the first attack of Hussein Shah was repulsed with many losses. Hussein Shah despatched a second expedition under the command of Gaura Mallik, which though advanced upto river Gumti, had to retreat. The third expedition was sent under General Hastan Khan and Karab Khan which conquered Kailagarh, Bisalgarh, Jamirkhani and Chaikuria and advanced command capital to Rangamati. But their arrangement was stopped by flushing the water of a dam over river Gumti. The Chittagong Fort however, remained under the Sultan of Bengal. It was Dev Manikya (1520 AD) who recovered Chittagong but counter evidence suggests that Hamza Khan, the Governor of Chittagong defeated Deva Manikya.

It was during the reign of Vijay Manikya (1532-1563) that some reorganisation was made on Bengal lines. The king reorganised his army by recruiting some Afghan soldiers and created a new force known as Surya Khariat regiment in which only physically strong could be selected. But the revolt of these Afghan soldiers were taken advantage of by the Sultan of Bengal. He occupied Chittagong. Vijay Manikya recovered it by capturing and killing the General Mubarak Khan. In the meantime struggle had broken out between the Mughals and the Afghans for mastery. Exploiting the situation Vijay Manikya invaded Sonargaon in Bengal and plundered it. In fact

"Vijay Manikya of Tripura marched to Bengal with an army of 26,000 infantry, 5000 horses besides artillery. He went by 500 boats among the streams Brahmaputra and Lakhi to Padma."<sup>5</sup>

Vijay Manikya was a contemporary of Akbar. Ain-i-Akbari of Abul Fazl mentioned

"Adjoining Bhati is an extensional tract of territory inhabited by the Tippera tribals. The name of the ruler is Vijay Manik. Whoever obtains the chieftainship bears the title of Manik after his name and the nobles that of Narayan. He has a force of two hundred thousand footman and a thousand elephant. Horses are scarce."<sup>6</sup>

Chittagong went back to Bengal during the reign of Uday Manikya (1567 AD – 1572 AD). When Suleiman Karrani, Sultan of Bengal defeated the Tripura army. Amar Manikya seized the throne in 1577 AD. He is known for having defeated Fateh Khan ruler of Sylhet and compelled him to pay of tribute of fifty horses a year. He also formed an alliance with the Afghans through their leader Isha Khan of Bengal against the Mughals. Amar Manikya conquered Chittagong with help of Portuguese forces. But Sikandar Shah, the Governor of Arakan invaded Tripura and reached Udaipur in 1584 AD. The Arakan forces plundered Udaypur and committed massacre.

The emergence of the Mughal power in Bengal and assimilation of smaller monarchies of eastern frontier into it, brought Mughals into close contact with Tripura. Tripura had to resist several Mughal expeditions by combined strength of nobility and tribal chieftaincies. The Mughals menace not only unified the different groups in the Tripura state but had also influenced them to reform the administration – civil and military both. The Raja borrowed several system from the Muslim system to revitalise the state structure.<sup>7</sup> The military strength not only enable the Raja to resist the external invasion but also allowed him to suppress internal rebellion as well. He was able to sent expedition against Lushai tribes and Burma border.<sup>8</sup> The most serious counter between Tripura and the Mughal State took place during the reign of Yasodhar Manikya (1600 Ad – 1623 AD). In order to secure a suitable base for military operation against the king of Arakan. Ibrahim Khan Fateh Jang, the Governor of Bengal under Jehangir's order launched an expedition against Tripura in 1618 Ad. The land army was organised into two divisions, one of which under the command of Mirza Isfadiyar attacked Kailagarh on the north east while the second division under the command of Mirza Nuruddin and Musa Khan proceeded eastwards towards Udaypur through Meherkul while the fleet under the charge of Bahadur Khan proceeded up to river Gumti. The Mughal army defeated Tripura and continued the military occupation of Tripura for two and a half years. A severe epidemic forced them to evacuate Tripura. The occupied portion of Tripura entered into the Mughal rent roll as 'Sarkar Udaipur'. In the revenue records of Bengal Suba prepared at the time of Sultan Shuja (1658 AD) Sarkar Udaypur was recorded as revenue paying centre.

The succession rivalry after the deposition of Shajahan in Delhi began to have its influence on Tripura from 1660 Ad. Defeated by Aurangzeb, prince Shuja fled to Arakan through Chittagong hills. Aurangzeb suspected that Shuja was hiding in the hills of Tripura. Accordingly Aurangzeb wrote to king Gobinda Manikya to hand over prince Shuja. Since, Shuja was not hiding in Tripura Gobinda Manikya made peace with Aurangzeb by agreeing to pay a tribute of five elephants annually. But during the reign of Ratnamanikya there was a lapse in the payment of this tribute due to the negligence of the regent Champak Roy. Realising the power of Murshid Quli Khan the Governor of Bengal, Ratnamanikya presented him with elephants and acknowledged paramouncy. In return Murshid Quli Khan sent him Khelak or the robe of known.<sup>9</sup>

Tripura fell from its position of glory during the reign of Dharma Manikya (1713 AD – 1719 AD). Dharma Manikya failed to give regular tribute to the Nawab of Bengal and the latter sent an army against the king. Dharma Manikya who successfully defended Tripura. But a rival claimant to the throne, Jagatram enlisted the support of a Mughal officer Mir Habib. Mir Habib convinced the Nawab of Bengal about the opportunity to subjugate Tripura who proceeded to accomplish the objective.

"The invasion caught Tripura unawares. 'Absolutely unprepared for such an attack the Raja fled to the neighbouring

hills, whereupon the Chandigarh fort which had been his residence was stormed by the invaders and the whole of his kingdom fell under the latter's control."<sup>10</sup>

Jagatram who assumed the title Jagat Manikya was raised to the throne on the condition of paying a large portion of the revenue to the Nawab of Bengal. The Mughal commander Aka Sadik was appointed the faujdar. Nawab Shujauddin being pleased with the accomplishment honoured Mir Habib with the title Khan and named the conquered provinces of Tripura as Roshanabad. The deposed king Dharma Manikya then appealed to the Nawab for justice whereupon the throne was returned to him. The Nawab granted him the zamindari right of Roshanabad on an yearly rent of rupees of five thousand. Since then the king of Tripura has been in possession of Roshanabad as zamindar.

### III. Eighteenth Century Crisis in the Tripura State

The eighteenth century in Tripura began with an uprising against the Mughals which was organised by Rudramani – the son of Jagannath Thakur. Rudramani organised a national militia and conspired to kill Haji Masum the faujdar at Udaypur. The Tripura king Mukunda Manikya got wind of the conspiracy and fearing Mughal reprisal informed the faujdar about the plot. But the faujdar suspected the involvement of the king himself and took him prisoner on the plea that he failed to pay the annual tribute of elephants. Rudramani nevertheless attacked Udaipur and occupied it. Unable to resist the attack the Mughals came to terms and left the capital. This was the time when crisis had surfaced in the Mughal State and its decline had begun. Rudramani took the title of Joy Manikya and assumed the throne.

The crisis in the Mughal State had manifested here in another form on the one hand there was the crisis in the forms of breaking discontent against the local zamindars amongst the peasants due to the oppression and extortion of the zamindar. One such zamindari estate was Dakshinsik pargana where Shamsher Ghazi, a revenue clerk of the zamindar organised the rebellious peasants into a militia and revolted against the zamindar Nabi Muhammed. Shamsher Ghazi killed the zamindar, married his daughter and became the 'Raja' of Dakshinsik. The Tripura king Indra Manikya sent a force to suppress the rebel but on being defeated forced to accord recognition to him as the legitimate ruler of Dakshinsik. Soon Samsheer Ghazi was able to secure the support and aid of Hazi Hussein, the envoy of the Nawab of Bengal and on the assurance of paying a huge revenue became the zamindar of Chakla-Roshanabad – the most revenue generating area of Tripura State. It is also to be mentioned here that by the time the Bengal Nazimate had emerged as a successor state to the Mughal Empire in eastern India and by acknowledging the sovereignty of the Nawab, Shamsher Ghazi strengthened the legitimacy of the Bengal Nazimate.

Krishnamani who succeeded Vijaymanikya tried to retrieve Udaypur from Samsheer Ghazi but was defeated in 1748 AD. This victory made Shamsher Ghazi the virtual ruler of Tripura for next twelve years. For the initial period he put Lakshman Manikya as the puppet king to the throne following which he assumed the throne. Instead of calling himself 'Raja' he fashioned himself as 'Shri Shrijut Mohammed Shamsher Choudhury Zamindar'.

Shamsher Ghazi tried to model his administration in the Mughal model. He appointed administrators for each pargana and built several forts. He employed both Hindus and Muslims in the administration as officers. He enforced a regulation in regard to price of commodities, fixed the weight of seer at 832 sicca and made a list of commodities which was displayed in the market. He took effective measures to increase the revenue of Chakla Roshanabad since revenue generation from the hills was poor. To earn the huge annual revenue to be paid to the Nawab of Bengal, he indulged in the perpetration of dacoities in several places and extortion from the rich subjects. The wealthy section of the subjects informed the Nawab of Bengal of the tyranny of the Samsheer Ghazi and

had him killed. Taking advantage of this situation of Tripura, Krishnamani recovered the throne and was recognised by the Nawab of Bengal as such in 1760 AD. Krishnamani took the title of Krishnamanikya and ascended the throne of Tripura in 1760 with old Agartala as his capital.

But by then the political scenario had changed in adjacent Bengal. The Nazimate had been facing internal squabble. The British had defeated Sirajuddaulah in the battle of Plassey (1757) and Mirjafar had been made the puppet Nawab of Bengal with the English as the virtual ruler of Bengal. Krishna Manikya not only came into conflict with Pesa Khan, the Faujdar of Chittagong but also the English.

Taking advantage of the crisis of 1757-60 at Murshidabad, the Tripura king had withheld the payment of annual revenue. Reza Khan sent Ram Mohan followed by himself to intimidate Krishna Manikya. Reza Khan imposed a cess of two anna on Chittagong revenues to defray cost of the operation. The English authorities at Calcutta were also interested in acquiring further territory hence, it also interfered on 20th January 1761. Governor Vansittart wrote to the President and Council of the factory at Islamabad

“with regard to the Tipperah Rajan as the Nawab’s Faujdar has been obliged from his ill behaviour to take up arms against him, we deserve that you will use your endeavours to reduce him to his due state of obedience to the Government of Islamabad, acquainting us that what advantages may accrue to the company from the possession of that country, and we will answer any representation the Nawab may make on the subject”.<sup>11</sup>

Thus, the operations in Tripura were by then placed under orders of Chittagong Council. Mr. Velrest, the Chief of Islamabad (Chittagong) despatched Mathew with two hundred sepoys and two guns to Tripura on 24th February, 1761. The king of Tripura was prepared to meet them in the fort of Kailagarh. Realising he could not stand against the Faujdar and the English, Krishna Manikya surrendered. Thus, the flag of the English was hoisted over the plains of Tripura. Marriot, the collector was sent from Chittagong Council on 15th March to settle and receive the revenue of Tripura. The Collector found it devastated by the Nawab’s troops and was compelled to take payment by instalment as the King was in desperate condition as far as finances were concerned. The king ‘was made to sign two agreements in one agreed to pay for the changes of the troops, and in the other a salami or nazrana of Rs. 1,11,191,-6anna-3pie both the thirteen monthly instalments’<sup>12</sup> No reference was made about the hills in these arrangements. The paying part of Tripura lay in the plains known as Chakla Roshanabad. The British wrote

“we find it (the plains) a zamindari and as such we treated it. But of the barren hills that fenced it on the east, we took no cognisance. Covered with jungle and inhabited by tribes of whom nothing was known save that they are uncouth in speech and not particular as to clothing, the hills were looked upon as something apparent.”

The Raja claimed to exercise authority within them but did not, as it seemed, derive much profit from them. Accordingly the hills became independent Tipperah and the Raja who is an ordinary Bengali zamindar on the plains reigns as an independent province over 3000 square miles upland and was for many years a more absolute monarch than Scindia or Pattiala, following no law but his sovereign will, bound by treaty, subject to no control, safe in his obscurity from criticism or reform.<sup>13</sup>

Ralph Leak was approved as the first resident of Tripura. Krishna Manikya was recognised later as the zamindar of Chakla Roshanabad. He befriended Verlest and helped the East India Company in their campaign against Cachar and Tripura. But during the later years of his reign dispute arose with the English over the settlement of Chakla Roshanabad. The frequent interference by the resident Mr. Leak on the affairs of Tripura annoyed the king. The king sent his nephew to Calcutta to inform the British Government that he would save a part of the arrears revenue and would give security for the revenue in future only if Leak was recalled. Leak on the other hand reported about the anti-British activities of the king and his nephew. He wrote that the king was collecting men ‘to oppose any measures that may be taken to compel the payments of his arrears’.<sup>14</sup> On his request military assistance was provided to the resident. However, the dispute was settled in 1782 and the Chakla Roshanabad zamindari was taken into ‘khas’ or direct management of the company for ten years. On the completion of the period it was returned back to the ruler of Tripura.

But from the 1780s the state was facing certain internal crisis too. During 1784-85 there was a two years long severe famine that devastated the economy of Tripura.<sup>15</sup> Following this a Kuki revolt broke out. About twenty thousand Paite Kukis residing in the hills of east and north Tripura under the leadership of Sibbut defied the authority of the king and revolted. The king had to wage a war to suppress the revolt who were subdued and forced to pay their regular tribute. This was followed by interactive power rivalry for the throne after the demise of Krishna Manikya. To avoid a civil war Queen Jahnvi Devi (1783-85) took over administration. But during the reign of Vijay Manikya the Reangs tribals broke out in revolt. It threatened the king and tried to occupy the throne under the leadership of Ramchandra, a royal family member. This entailed a war between the rebels and the king who was able to suppress the revolt after three years. Rajdhar Manikya’s death again plunged the state in succession war. But this time there was the British to intervene. By a court order Durgamoni was declared the legitimate successor but usurper Ramganga was allowed to continue the possession of the zamindari. Ramganga tried to wage a war but he himself had to be rescued by the British. In 1809 the Sadar Diwani Adalat gave a judgement in favour of Durgamoni declaring the zamindari ‘an integral portion of an impartible raj’. The Government accordingly insisted him with the insignia of kingship as regards the hills while the court gave him possession of the plains.<sup>16</sup> Thus, Durgamoni ascended the throne in 1809 under the title Durgamanikya and ‘since this date every successive Raja has received investiture from the British Government and has been required to pay the usual nazar or tribute on his accession’.<sup>17</sup> Tripura was thus, reduced to a tributary state to the British Empire.

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