

‘Shreshtha Kabi’ to ‘Bharat Bhaskar’: Analysis of Tagore’s Soulful Alliance with Tripura

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History has proved that an alliance that happens between two evolved and selfless individuals brings about immense impact not only on the individuals concerned but also on numerous other people of the society for generations to come. Such an alliance happened between Kabiguru Rabindranath Tagore with the Manikyas of Tripura. The term ‘Manikya’ or jewel is used to address the Royal kings of Tripura. These Manikyas are known for their appreciation and generous patronage for the arts, craft, music and literature apart from displaying their benevolence in other causes of the society. But what’s new? Even other royalties belonging to other states of India have funded noble causes of the society. The specialty of the Manikyas was that they themselves unlike some of their contemporaries were not only well-versed in music, literature, languages, photography, fine arts etc. but also actively practiced the various art forms along with having exceptional command over language and literature which inspired people not only in their own family but also commoners to practice various art forms as well as literary skills through which an individual’s ‘soft power’ may be tapped in for the moral construct of the society.

Noble Laureate Tagore’s alliance with the Royalty of Tripura happened in a fairytailish manner. And herein ‘*Bhagna Hriday*’, the first book of verses written by Tagore at the age of 18, played a vital role in building a strong bridge between the young aspiring poet and the Royalty of Tripura.

In the present article with a purpose to analyze the period of association that occurred between Tagore and Manikyas, a time period has been specified on the basis of reception of two prestigious felicitations namely ‘*Shreshtha Kabi*’ & ‘*Bharat Bhaskar*’ by Tagore in the first and last quarters of his life respectively from the Manikya regime.

Keyword: Tagore, Manikya, music, art, literature, *Bhagna Hriday*, *Shreshtha Kabi*, *Bharat Bhaskar*, Tripura

Introduction

Noble laureate Rabindranath Tagore is indisputably a world renowned figure and hardly anything is left unexplored concerning his social as well as personal life. Much has been written, researched, explored and analyzed bringing in new facets of his personality. But there was a time even in the life of this renowned genius when he was leading a life of anonymity. This was the

time of Tagore's adolescence when his creative genius was still in the process of blossoming. In such a time when little was known about a prospective Noble Laureate and Vishva-kabi, foundation was laid of a timeless bond with four generation Royalty of Tripura who were known as the 'Manikya'.

Majority of people may be unaware of this timeless bond between Tagore and the Manikya Kings of Tripura. This eternal mutual relationship between the two has significantly influenced the socio-cultural environment of both the states of Tripura and Bengal.

Analysis of Rajmala-Chronicle of the Political History of Tripura

Before we discuss about the phase of history of Tripura's Maharaja Birchandra Manikya and his first interaction with Rabindranath Tagore, it would be essential to cite a brief political history of the ancient Hindu state of Tripura which was known as Tribeg or *Kiratbhum*. It is a land of great antiquity and is one of the most ancient of all former Princely states of India. During the Mughal period as well as the British period, Tripura retained its independence and continued to maintain its separate entity as a Princely state. Tripura was thus, ruled by the Maharajas for a long and unbroken period until it acceded to the Indian Union soon after India became an independent nation. 'It is one of the oldest States of India having plenty of mythological references in the Mahabharata and other classical texts. The history of Tripura is replete with the saga of both tradition and legend. Tradition has it that royal dynasty of Tripura came down from lunar race of epic age.

Tripura kings who are said to be of Tibeto-Burmese origin ruled the State from time immemorial. They, according to Rajmala, the State chronicle, claim their descent from Druhya, the third son of Yayati of Mahabharata, a scion of the lunar dynasty whose deeds are chronicled in the Rig Veda. Daitya, one of his descendants is said to have come to Kirata-desh and established his kingdom in Tribeg region. His son Trilochan succeeded Tripur, the son and heir of Daitya.'¹

Rajmala, the oldest literary document of the State, is the chronicle of the Royal Family. The first part of Rajmala was compiled in the 15th century AD during the reign of Dharma Manikya I (1431-62) and the second part was composed in the 16th century AD at the time of Amar Manikya (1581-86). The third part was written in 17th cent. AD during the reign of Govind Manikya (1660-76) and the fourth part was composed in the middle of 19th cent. AD during the rule of Krishna Manikya (1760-83). The fifth part was written during the time of Kashi Chandra Manikya (1826-29) and the sixth part was written during the reign of Krishna Kishore Manikya (1830-49).²

Kailash Chandra Singha wrote 'Rajmala Ba Tripurar Itibritta' in 1896. Sri Chandrodaya Vidyabinod also compiled the Bengali Rajmala in six volumes during the reign of Radhakishore Manikya. Kali Prasanna Sen Vidyabhushan edited Sri Rajmala in 4 volumes (Pratham, Dwittiya,

Tritiya and Chaturtha Lahar) during the reign of Maharaja Bir Bikram Kishore Manikya (1923-47). The Sanskrit version of Rajmalais called Shri Shri Rajratnakara.

It is generally accepted by the scholars that the historical account of Tripura began from the middle of 15th century with Maha Manikya founding the Manikya dynasty that ruled the kingdom for over five hundred years till the rule of the last Maharaja Bir Bikram Kishore Manikya Bahadur.

Past Connection of Manikya dynasty with the Family of Tagores

Family of Tagore had a past history of association with the Manikyas much before the birth of Rabindranath Tagore. Maharaja Krishnakishore Manikya, father of Bir Chandra Manikya was helped by Prince Dwarkanath Tagore, grandfather of Rabindranath Tagore in the time of political crisis. Prince Dwarkanath was a very influential figure and carried significant impact in the society of elite in those times. It is said that he with his political power, helped Maharaja Krishnakishore Manikya in his time of crisis. ‘The young poet himself in a letter writes to Maharaja Bir Chandra Manikya, ‘We have been having a past relationship that I have been made aware of recently. That is why I have gathered courage to write directly to you. Hope you are aware of our past close alliance.’ To which Maharaja Bir Chandra Manikya had written, ‘I have not forgotten about that alliance rather I would say that you have further taken it to another level.’³ Afterwards Maharaja Krishnakishore Manikya for the purpose of political guidance sought the help and availability of the renowned political advisor of those times Dakshinaranjan Mukhopadhyay through Prince Dwarkanath as well. This way Maharaja Krishnakishore Manikya took the help of Prince Dwarkanath Tagore to protect the independence of Tripura in the British ruled India.

Laying the foundation of a Timeless relationship

The association of Rabindranath Tagore with Manikyas was initiated by Maharaja Bir Chandra Manikya and concluded with Maharaja Bir Bikram Manikya, the last ruling king of Manikyas. During this time Tagore visited this beautiful emerald land of Tripura seven times on the invitation of the Manikyas.

The regime of Maharaja Birchandra Manikya held special significance since during his reign (1862-1896) Tagore was officially introduced to the Royal family of Manikyas of Tripura. ‘Maharaja Bir Chandra is given the credit for laying the foundation of a modern era in Tripura. It was in his tenure that the very first ‘Pura Parishad’ was established in the year 1831 in Agartala just 6 years after a ‘Pura-Parishad’ was established in Calcutta (Now Kolkata). In those times, Agartala, which was the capital of Tripura was still covered with jungles and disconnected from the rest of the country. W.W Hunter writes in his ‘Statistical Account of Hill Tipperah: “ There are no roads worthy of a name in Hill Tiperah, the Capital itself is cut off from rest of the world for want of land communication, the route by water being only open in the rains.’⁴

This gives a clear picture of the remoteness of Agartala, the capital city of Tripura some two centuries ago. And therefore, the contribution of the kings in the development of their region becomes far more commendable as there were limited resources of communication and connection with the rest of the country and the world. Maharaja Bir Chandra Manikya in spite of several challenges on geographical, political and home fronts executed excellent leadership in making his state of Tripura take its first steps towards modernism. Moreover, he himself took special interest and invested time and money to nurture the cultural ambience of his region through his motivation and patronization for performing arts, literature, fine arts and photography.

Maharaja Bir Chandra was known to be a generous patron of art and artists, musicians and litterateurs, painters and sculptors alike. 'He was known as the 'Vikramaditya' of Bengal and his Royal court was renowned for its 'Navratnas'.⁵ 'His Royal court had the most elite musicians of those times namely the renowned maestro of Vishnupur Gharana Pandit Jadubhatt, Kalender Baksha, the maestro of Kathak Dance from Kashmir, Kasem ali Khan, the illustrious descendant of Tansen, the renowned Esraj player of Gwalior Ustad Hyder Khan, Sitar Maestro Nisar Hussein, the famous singer of Benaras Chand Baijee, Pakhawaj player Panchanan Mitra, renowned musician Keshav Mitra (elder brother of Sir Ramesh Mitra), famous Sitar player Navin Goswami, Kolkata's renowned Behala player Haridas,, singer Bholanath Chakraborty, poet and singer Madan Mitra and Ramkanai Shil from Bangura village (Now situated in Bangladesh) who was a versatile musician expert in playing pakhawaj, tabla, esraj and singing Indian Classical music, semi-classical and Jaydeva's kirtan songs. All these artists used to receive handsome remuneration as per their performances from the Royal treasury.'⁶

The Royalty of Tripura namely the Manikyas had a long history of being ardent lovers of music and literature. It is quite evident from the list of musicians which served the royal court of Maharaja Bir Chandra Manikya that he was a fervent connoisseur of art. Musicians used to seek his appreciation and approval in their various art forms which instead made them revered everywhere else in India. The instance of Pandit Jadubhatt exemplifies the high pedestal on which Maharaja Bir Chandra Manikya was perceived in the then cultural ambience of India. Jadubhatt was advised by the then King of Kashmir to try to gain the appreciation of Bir Chandra Manikya if he wanted to increase his musical status! On listening to this advice, Jadubhatt made a visit to the royal court of Tripura and gave a soulful performance in front of Maharaja Bir Chandra Manikya. The Maharaja loved his performance and felicitated him with the title of 'Taanraj'. This is just one instance amongst many others which states that not only Maharaja Bir Chandra had keen musical ears but also that his opinions regarding art was held in high esteem.

Kaviguru Rabindranath Tagore was personally introduced to this benevolent Royal family of Manikyas when he was merely 18 and when incidentally his first book of poems called '*Bhagna Hriday*' or Broken Heart was published. On an analytical note, Krishna Kripalini makes the following observations regarding this first publication of the young Tagore in the following lines: "'*Bhagna Hriday*' is more a string of lyrics than anything else-a lengthy exercise of lyrical

effusion, in 34 cantos or scenes with over 4000 lines. The plot is thin and almost reminiscent of the earlier narrative poems. There is the inevitable poet, young and dream-entranced; breaking others' hearts and not knowing what he himself wants. His friend and companion since boyhood is a girl called 'Murala' who is deeply in love with him. The poet is too obsessed with his own chaotic ego to notice her love for him, though he values her friendship and shares his 'sorrows' with her...He sees a beautiful girl and wayward girl and thinks that he is in love with her. She is Nalini---a name that never ceased to haunt young Rabi's imagination. But Nalini is a *belle dame sans merci*, who enjoys playing with others' hearts without giving her own. The disappointed poet wanders away. When he returns and finds Murala on her death-bed he realizes that it is she he had always loved. But it is too late. There are several other characters in the drama and they all manage to break each other's heart. There is as usual some philosophing too, as when Murala discovers at the end that "one who owns nothing has everything; the homeless may make the whole world his own; to the friendless no one is a stranger." But neither the tragedy nor the philosophy is real for the author was too young to have deeply experienced what he was trying to express. And yet the need to exercise his poetic gift was real and the poem had some lovely lyrical passages which show that the young author was steadily gaining mastery of the form."⁷

This book of poems was not as per Tagore's expectations as critics termed it as 'puerile pastime'. Tagore was so disheartened that he cancelled his plan to publish the second part of this book. At such a delicate time, Tagore gets a surprise visit from Radha Raman Ghosh, an elderly minister who was sent to Joransanko Thakurbadi (Tagore's ancestral house at Kolkata) all the way from Tripura by Maharaja Birchandra Manikya just to convey to the young poet that His Highness had read the work '*Bhagna Hriday*' discerning in him the promise and prospect of a 'great poet' and therefore conferred upon him the title of '*Shrestha Kabi*'.

Here it must be noted that young Tagore just did not receive any random appreciation from any random King. Pannalal Ray writes in his book Birchandra O Nishiddhakabi : 'Maharaja Bir Chandra Manikya at the time of appreciating young Tagore for his first book of poems '*Bhagna Hriday*' was himself a renowned Vaishnav Poet. Additionally he was also himself a musician, painter and an expert photographer of his times. All in all he was a versatile genius. Besides, he was known to be an able administrator, a very wise communicator and a diplomat.'⁸ Perhaps his own brilliance made him discover the talent of Tagore even before others could do.

In his witty sense of humor, the poet later has himself described about his psychological and mental state at the time he wrote the poem: "When I began to write the '*Bhagna Hriday*' I was eighteen --neither in my childhood nor in my youth. This borderlined age is not illumined with the direct rays of Truth-its reflection is seen here and there, and the rest is shadow. And like twilight shades its imaginings are long drawn and vague, making the real world seem like a world of phantasy."⁹

Maharaja Bir Chandra Manikya was aware of the criticism that young Tagore was receiving for writing '*Bhagna Hriday*' and therefore to encourage him even more for his creative pursuits, had

proposed to establish an independent publication house especially committed to Tagore's publications with an investment of one lakh rupees! Additionally Maharaja Bir Chandra Manikya also wished to assign Tagore the task of looking after the publication of various books devoted to Vaishnav Padavalis in Bengali. But destiny had different plans. Sudden demise of Maharaja Bir Chandra after a prolonged illness dismissed every plan that the generous king had had for young Tagore.

Maharaja Radha Kishore Manikya & Tagore

The news of Maharaja's demise shocked young Tagore as the two had developed a mutually close emotional bond. Nevertheless, Tagore now thought that his relation with the royal family of Manikyas of Tripura would come to a halt. But he was wrong. Maharaja Bir Chandra Manikya's son Maharaja Radha Kishore Manikya carried his father's legacy forward in every aspect. He renewed relation with Tagore so much so that the first five visits of Tagore was made by Tagore in his regime.

Tagore had already met Maharaja Radhakishore Manikya while he was still a crown Prince of the State but they did not have formal conversation during those days. The following excerpt cites the significant role that Tagore & King Radhakishore Manikya played in each other's lives:

'Radhakishore befriended Tagore after his father's death. The poet literally became the guardian of the princely state. His advices were sought for critical matters of administration, right from the appointment of the Ministers, tutors for the princes and princesses. It would be interesting to know that Tagore even drafted the budget approach paper for the Tripura royal house...The great scientist J.C.Bose received generous financial support from Maharaja Radhakishore without which humanity would have been deprived of Bose's scientific inventions. For over 50 years, Tagore's Visva-Bharati received regular financial grants from Tripura, which no other princely house in the country can ever boast of.'¹⁰

Tagore was received with tremendous warmth and reverence every time he visited Tripura. The very first visit of Tagore was made memorable when he was welcomed with the traditional Manipuri '*Raasnritya*' along with the traditional attire of Manipur. He was so captivated with the soft and elegant moves of Manipuri dance that he requested the Maharaja to assign few Manipuri dance teachers for his Sangit Bhavan at Visva Bharati, Santiniketan. On his request, Maharaja Radha Kishore sent the stalwarts of Manipuri dance form of Tripura namely Nabkumar Singha, Chandrajit Singha, Nileswhar Mukherjee, Basant Singha etc.who with their hard work and commitment established the divine beauty of Manipuri dance not only in the heart of Visva Bharati but through Tagore in the entire world because Tagore adapted the moves from Manipuri dance and used them for majority of his dance dramas which was staged worldwide and received worldwide accolade. 'After experiencing the divine beauty of 'Vasant Utsab' in Agartala, Tagore started observing Vasant Utsav in Santiniketan which became very popular.'¹¹

Glimpse of Tagore's bond with Maharaja Birendra Kishore Manikya (1909-1923)

Maharaja Birendra Kishore had inherited the intrinsic qualities of his illustrious grandfather Birchandra. He was a distinguished artist and a painter with great passion for music. He was a master of playing numerous musical instruments like Manipuri khol, sitar etc. He was also highly competent in stage crafts and direction of drama and music. It will be interesting to know that Tripura was the first Princely state to stage the Tagore drama 'Visarjan' (Sacrifice) inside the Royal palace in the year 1904. This was done under the direction of the then crown prince Birendra Kishore. Birendra Kishore who ascended the throne in the year 1909 shared similar relationship with Tagore like his father and grandfather. He on invitation by Tagore visited Santiniketan and generously donated for the construction of hospital at Santiniketan.

Maharaja Birbikram Kishore Manikya (1928-1947) & Gurudev Tagore

Maharaja Bir Bikram Kishore Manikya was the last ruling king of independent Tripura and also the last Maharaja to be associated with Noble Laureate Rabindranath Tagore. The Maharaja not only inherited the great ancestral tradition but also made significant contribution of his own in the fields of art, theatre, culture and music. He played Sitar and Esraj with enviable skill so much so that the Gramophone Company recorded his superb musical rendition in two discs. But the Maharaja did not allow the commercial marketing of the records due to publicity-shy nature otherwise it would have been one of the rarest classic collections and phenomenal contribution to the world of Indian classical music.

Maharaja Bir Bikram Kishore also expressed his deep reverence towards Tagore like his forefathers. In the year 1926, the young ruler of Tripura Maharaja Bir Bikram met Tagore for the first time. Maintaining the family tradition, Bir Bikram ensured that Tagore remains the revered guest of Tripura during his regime too.

In the year 1947, just three months before his death, the Tripura Darbar specially celebrated the 80th Birth Anniversary of Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore at a grand royal gathering and the honorific title- '*Bharat Bhaskar*' was conferred on him. A special royal emissary named Bhupendra Chandra Chakraborty was sent to Santiniketan with the Royal proclamation along with 'Swarna Mudra'.

The ailing Gurudev formally received the title at Amrakunja, Santiniketan. On this occasion a highly moved poet in his frail voice recalled his six decade long relationship with the state of Tripura and said this rare honor had 'illuminated the last limits of my life's span'.

Conclusion

Tagore was very fond of Tripura. He immensely valued his relationship with the princely State of Tripura and paid eloquent tributes to its magnanimous rulers- “Gone are the days, I had the distinction of receiving honors in the lands of kings and queens from many parts of the world. But the honor and recognition that I had the privilege to receive from the ruling house (Tripura) of my own country, have immense significance. Such unique relationship between a little known poet and people with royal glories is unprecedented in the entire history of literature.”

It is as if Tagore had found the soul of India in this tiny land and made the universal appeal to the mankind to discover their true selves- closer to their chest in the famous song- ‘*Esho amar Ghore Esho*’ which was composed by Tagore at Agartala in the year 1926 during his one of many sojourns to the State. The English translation of the song is as follows:

“Come to me thou that liest locked within,

Come out in the open,

Open the door of dream and come,

In the first light,

To these eyes entranced,

From a moment’s intimation come for

All time to come

Come unto me.”

It is interesting to note that right from the tenure of Maharaja Bir Chandra Manikya to Maharaja Bir Bikram Manikya, Tripura was a totally musically inclined State and coincidentally this was also the tenure of Tagore’s glorious association with the Manikyas. Some prestigious musical conferences like the Bengal Music conference held in the year 1934 saw the presence of both Rabindranath Tagore and the Royalty of Tripura on the same platform as well. ‘World renowned musicians like Jadubhatt, Kalander Baksh, Nisar Hussein, Panchanan Mitra, Kshetramohan Basu, Ustad Alauddin Khan, Munna Khan, Bismillah Khan and the likes visited Agartala, the capital of Tripura from time to time and filled the environs with their divine music. Today the country is independent. But even in the era of feudal rule, Kings of Tripura ensured the involvement of the common man and their subjects in every cultural and social event. Therefore, it won’t be surprising to know that when Rabindra Sangit was not that popular in Kolkata itself, which was the home state of Tagore, at that time Tagore was welcomed with his own song by

two students at Umakant School (one of the oldest prestigious schools of the State) of Agartala in the year 1901.’¹²

The following lines by Pramath Nath Bishi- a famous writer from Bengal will describe Tagore’s ties with Tripura justifiably: “Such unique relationship between a Poet and a King has hardly any parallel in the history of literature. The only comparison that comes to mind is the relationship between the Duke of Weimer and Goette.”

The beautiful journey of Kaviguru, Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore from receiving the title of ‘*Shrestha Kabi*’ to ‘*Bharat Bhaskar*’ had not only personally enriched Tagore and the four generations of royalties of Tripura but had also contributed to the mutual development and healthy cultural exchange between the two States of Bengal and Tripura.

Moreover, the entire span of this soulful relationship of Tagore and Tripura has brought to the forefront the magnanimity of the Royal Manikyas towards the pious cause of preserving and patronizing the cultural heritage of music, arts and literature of India in the challenging times of feudal rule. Their individual involvement and active participation along with being inspirational not only to their own family members but also to their subjects in pursuing the art forms and literature in their home land of Tripura left a significant impact on the psyche of the common man in Tripura. Meanwhile, Tagore was God sent to the land of Tripura in its foundational days of cultural growth and metamorphosis. Tagore’s association with the royalty of Tripura instead helped Tagore as well his close friends with financial support in numerous ways that is well evident in the body of the article.

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