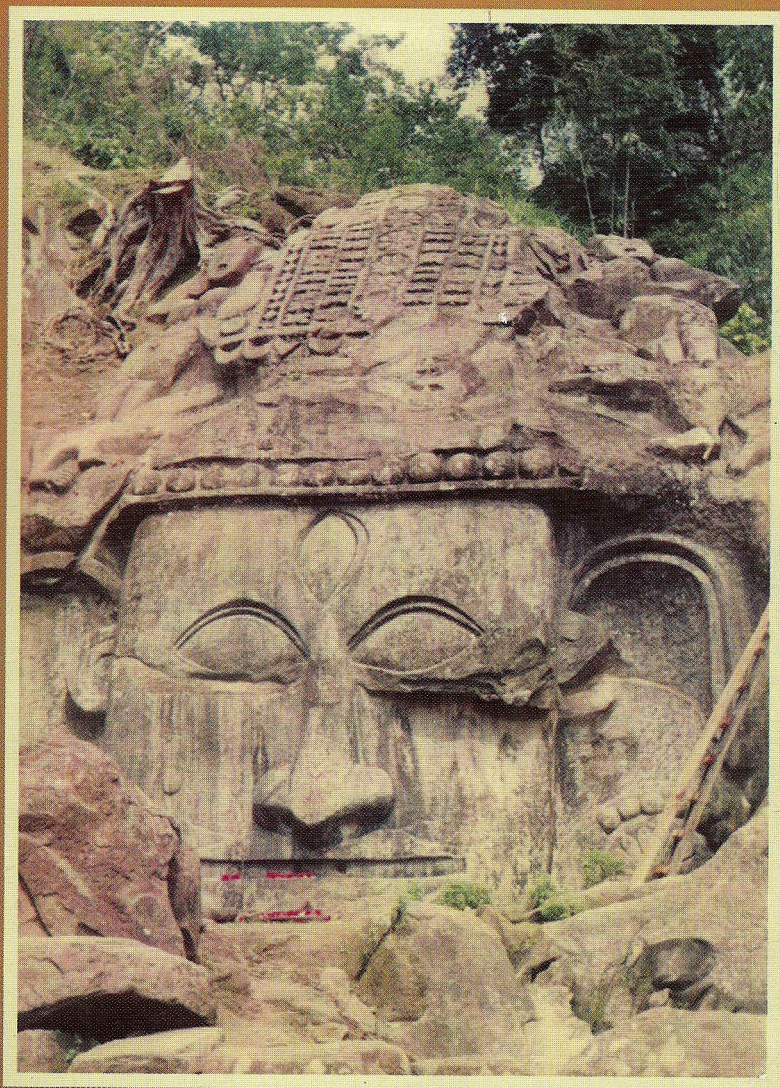


HISTORY OF RELIGION IN TRIPURA



Projit Kumar Palit

Indo-Tibetan Studies Series

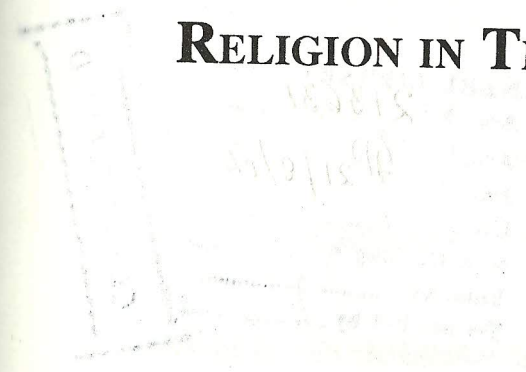
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Indo-Tibetan Studies Series-III

**HISTORY OF
RELIGION IN TRIPURA**



Projit Kumar Palit



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 Prof. Pranabananda Jash
 &
 Mrs. Sikha Jash
 as a
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PROLOGUE

The Department of Indo-Tibetan Studies is a centre for Studies in Indological research in general and Buddhism in particular. This Department is first of its kind to introduce Area Study in the University system under the guidance of Dr. Prabodh Chandra Bagchi. The Department is regularly publishing research works on various subjects related to Indo-Tibetan Studies. I am happy that Kaveri Books is going to publish the third volume of the Indo-Tibetan Studies Series entitled 'History of Religion in Tripura'. I do hope the volume will attract the notice of the academicians.

Narendra K. Dash
Head

Dept. of Indo-Tibetan Studies
Visva-Bharati, Santiniketan
West Bengal - 731 235

FOREWORD

It is with pleasure that I introduce this book, *History of Religion in Tripura*, by Sri Projit Kumar Palit. This work covers the period from early times to c. 1775 A.D., which marks practically the end of the Manikya dynasty when Mr. Ralph Leak was appointed the first British Resident of Tripperah. Formerly known as Hill Tripperah during the British rule, Tripura is popularly known as the land of *Chaturdasa Devata* (i.e., fourteen gods and goddesses), and it has been a confluence of diverse religious and cultural traditions with traces of Brahmanism of various hues, as also later Buddhism and indigenous tribal religions. This has been substantiated by the discovery of innumerable archaeological artefacts, sculptural representations, and numismatic illustrations.

Buddhism—in particular the Mahayana form of it—has held sway over this region since the first decade of the sixth century A.D., as has been revealed in the religious practices of the tribals. Since the eighth century Tantric Buddhism, an offshoot of Mahayana Buddhism, has become quite popular, especially among the tribal folk of the Chakmas and Maghs. Then immigration of people from the plains brought in Brahmanism of various shades, and thus Saivism, Vaisnavism, Saktism, and other minor sects flourished there, though each invariably bore a conspicuous regional imprint. The interplay of these historical forces during the medieval period greatly influenced the folk literature and traditions. Besides this, the rites and ritual practices and faiths of the tribals flowed down the stream of time almost unchanged. These two co-existent streams markedly influenced the culture of Tripura. And though after that, the socio-political situation in Tripura became rather muddled, the religious spirit of

the people remained strong, even as Islam, Christianity, and Brahmoism came in. This period needs serious study now.

I hope this work, with its painstaking research, will be well received by all, particularly by scholars of Indological studies.



Swami Prabhananda

Secretary

Ramakrishna Mission
Institute of Culture,
Gol Park, Kolkata - 29

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

- ABORI : Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, Poona
- AR, ASB : Annual Report of Archaeological Survey of Burma
- ASI : Archaeological Survey of India
- ASI-AR : Archaeological Survey of India - Annual Report
- ASR : Archaeological Survey Report
- EHI : Elements of Hindu Iconography
- EI : Epigraphia Indica
- IAR : Indian Archaeology - A Review
- IC : Indian Culture
- IHQ : Indian Historical Quarterly
- ISS : In The Sylvan Shadows
- JAIH : Journal of Ancient Indian History, Calcutta University
- JAS : Journal of the Asiatic Society
- JASB : Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal
- JNSI : Journal of the Numismatic Society of India
- JBORS : Journal of the Bihar and Orissa Research Society, Patna
- JRASB : Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal
- JRASB(L) : Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal: Letters
- Maha : Mahānārāyaṇa Upaniṣad
- MASI : Memoirs of the Archaeological Survey of India
- Mbh/ : Mahābhārata
- PA : Pakistan Archaeology
- PIHC : Proceedings of Indian History Congress

SYSTEM OF TRANSLITERATION

Roman equivalents of Devanāgarī Letters

a	अ	ka	क	da	द
ā	आ	kha	ख	dha	ध
i	इ	ga	ग	na	न
ī	ई	gha	घ	pa	प
u	उ	ñ	ङ	pha	फ
ū	ऊ	ca/cha	च	ba	ब
ṛ	ऋ	cha/chha	छ	bha	भ
e	ए	ja	ज	ma	म
ai	ऐ	jha	झ	ya	य
o	ओ	ñ	ञ	ra	र
au	औ	ṭa	ट	la	ल
		ṭha	ठ	va	व
		ḍa	ड	śa	श
		ḍha	ढ	ṣa/sha	ष
		ṇa	ण	sa	स
		ta	त	ha	ह
		tha	थ	m̐	.
				ḥ	:

INTRODUCTION

Tripura, the land of '*Chaturdaśa-devatā*' (fourteen Gods and Goddesses) in the north-eastern India with its capital at Agartala is located between 20°56' and 24°32' north latitude and 91°10' and 91°21' east longitude measuring 10,477 square kilometres. It is a small state with a population 3191168 of whom 29 per cent belong to the tribal communities. It is bounded in the north, west, south-east by the international boundary of Bānglādesh in the present districts of Sylhet, Comilla, Noakhali, Chittagong and Chittagong Hill Tracts. In the east it has a common boundary with the Cachar district of Assam and Mizo district of Mizoram. The geographical continuity with the Indian mainland is maintained only in the north-east by an outlet through Cachar district of Assam. The region is rich in natural resources and ethnologically interesting as a habitat of several tribal communities such as Tripuris, Riangs, Hālāms, Maghs, Jāmātiās, Chāk māś, etc. The present state of Tripura was known as "*Hill Tripperah*" in the British period. It was ruled by the lunar dynasty of members with Māṇikya ending names since the beginning of 15th century A.D. The British Government gave 'Tripura' the status of "Native State" under the general supervision of a Political agent. It merged with India on October 15, 1949 and became a full-fledged state on January 21, 1972.

It is not known how and when this land was named as Tripura. A common belief is that the name has originated from "*Tripurasundarī*", the presiding goddess of the land, who was installed by the king Dhanya Māṇikya (śaka 1412-37/1490-1515 A.D.) According to some, the name Tripura is much older than *Tripurasundarī* and one of them sought to derive the name Tripura

from the word "*Tuipsra*" which means "places adjoining water". However, the word Tripura is met with for the first time on the coins of Dhanya Māṅikya carrying *Tripurendra* as the royal epithet. And the name is not known to have been in use until the reign of Dhanya Māṅikya. It is reasonable to hold that the name of this state is the Sanskritized form, the Tripura, a name borne by a well-known Tribe of the land.

This state has a rich cultural and religious background. But unfortunately no comprehensive and systematic study of all the religious sects of Tripura like Buddhism, Brahmanism and various indigenous tribal religions from the early times to the time of Māṅikya dynasty has so far been attempted. The region has flourished as repository of ancient religion and sculpture for centuries. It has archaeological evidence to show the presence of various religious sects of Tripura at one time or the other in its history. The fact Buddhism flourished in different parts of Tripura from very early times has been attested by the discovery of various archaeological materials. The immigration of the plain people, marked the rise of Brahmanism and its diverse sectarian beliefs and practices in Tripura. The religious history of Tripura prior to the twelfth century A.D. is mixed up with the religious history of ancient Sylhet, Samatāṭa, Noakhali and Chittagong. Brahmanism is the earliest religion of Tripura and its various sects in their fullfledged form flourished here for long.

The main obstacle in the study of religion of Tripura, as in most cases in regard to other parts of India, is the problem of determining the date of undated sculptures. As regards the religious sculptures, not a single specimen with any dedicatory inscription on it, has so far been found in Tripura. Still, an attempt has been made to ascertain the period mainly on the basis of some archaeological evidences: first, the style of the relevant sculpture and secondly, where available, its affiliation with allied fields (sometimes dated) hailing from the neighbouring regions like Assam, West Bengal, etc. or from the neighbouring countries like Bāṅglādes̄h and Burma. We are in a better position, however, as regards temples and monuments where dedicatory inscriptions having dates of the foundation of the shrines as well as names of the founders are engraved on the walls of the majority of the temples of the land.

The present dissertation consists of four chapters covering a period from the earliest times till c. 1775 A.D. The first chapter deals with the geographical and socio-ethnic background of Tripura. Geographically Tripura is located in areas where in diverse civilizations, religions and cultures met in the past. Lying at the cross-roads of Assam and Bengal, it was probably connected with Burma, via land-routes through Gomati, Surmā and Cāchār valley, Lushai hills and Manipur on the one hand and via Chittagong, Arākān on the other. Perhaps it was through the latter route in the eleventh-twelfth centuries A.D. that the kingdoms of Paṭṭikera and Burma maintained relations among themselves. Although the city of Paṭṭikera cannot be identified, it must have been situated within the district of Tripura, for an important place near Maināmāti hills is still known as Paitkora, which had been under the administration of the Māṅikya rulers of Tripura even before the partition of India. Tripura's link with Arākān appears to have been effected via Chittagong and Govinda Māṅikya (1661-67 A.D.), a ruler of Tripura is said to have taken shelter in Arākān court due to turmoil in his motherland and he most probably used the same route. From the north through Assam valley came the Chinese as well as different tribal immigrants of Indo-Mongoloid race of whom the Bodo speaking group deserves a special mention. They spread over the whole of Brahmaputra valley and extended to Tripura in the shape of Tripura tribe. Bengal had a happy cultural relation with Burma and probably it was through the passes of Tripura, this cultural religious trend migrated. Moreover, where colonization and trade linked together parts of south-east Asia or Buddhist missionaries came from the said region via sea routes to visit Bodhgayā, they had to pass through land routes via Tripura to reach the destination. As a result, apart from other factors, this both way assimilation of elements with the local idioms gave rise to a regional mixed culture and religion of Tripura which is an important phase towards the development of religion, art and culture of north eastern India.

The second chapter traces the political background of the pre-Māṅikya period and its development and progress in the Māṅikya period till 1775 A.D. The archaeological evidences found in the region prove the fact that a large portion of the region, particularly south-western part of the present state of Tripura, was politically attached

to the kingdoms of eastern Bengal known as Samataṭa, Vaṅga and Harikela.

The second phase of Māṅkya dynasty begins with the establishment of political power by a successor of eneong-Phā, during the later half of the fifteenth century A.D. The king of Gauḍa entitled him by "Māṅkya". From that time the kings of this dynasty have been using the title permanently. According to historical chronology the king of Gauḍa Sultan Ruknuddin Barbak Shah (1455 A.D. to 1476 A.D.) of Bengal was the contemporary of Ratna Māṅkya. From Ratna Māṅkya upto the death of Kṛṣṇa Māṅkya, Tripura passed through constant political turmoil caused by internal and external factors and the socio-religious condition in that time suffered a serious setback in consequence.

The third chapter deals with religion in Tripura. From the early time, people of the plains and the royal family appear to have remained within the fold of Buddhism and Brahmanism. Side by side, tribal religion with its faiths and beliefs, rites and rituals appear to have flourished in Tripura. This kind of assimilation in religions is reflected in various kinds of evidences, both literary and archaeological, which are mainly found from this tiny state. In order to make the investigation critically and comprehensively the present chapter is divided into the following sub titles:

(a) Buddhism

Tripura and its adjoining regions became an important centre of Buddhism since the period of Aśoka and continued to be so for several centuries thereafter. A copper-plate of Gunaigar proves that Buddhism flourished here around 507-508 A.D. Before the sixth century A.D. the *Mahāyāna* form of Buddhism had found its way all over Tripura. Hiuen Tsang on a visit to Samataṭa noticed thirty Buddhist monasteries with 2000 priests, all of the *Sthavira* school. Another Chinese pilgrim Sen-chi noticed that *Mahāyāna* Buddhism had been established in different parts of Samataṭa mainly through the patronage of the Khadga dynasty. It is from the eighth century A.D. onwards that Tantric Buddhism flourished and it became the most widely prevalent and popular religion of this region, especially with the Chākmā and the Magh tribes of Tripura.

(b) Śaivism

Śaivism also attained a predominant position along with Vaiṣṇavism in Tripura during the sixth century A.D. The copper-plate inscription from Gunaigar in Comilla informs that the cult of Śiva had secured royal patronage in Tippera region. Śaivism as identified in the above inscription is a federation of cults, which had combined in it the various cults of *Rudra*, Śiva and *Liṅga*. So far as Tripura is concerned, a collection of antiquities dating from c. 700-1200 A.D. have come to light from *Unakoti*, *Pilāk* and some other parts of Tripura.

(c) Vaiṣṇavism

Vaiṣṇavism was the most widely prevalent and popular religion in Tripura region from the sixth century A.D. A copper-plate inscription of Gunaigar in Comilla speaks of a temple of *Pradūmneśvara* in Tippera. The discovery of a copper-plate of Lokanātha from Tippera proves that the worship of Ananta Nārāyaṇa was prevalent in Tripura region during the seventh century A.D. Another copper-plate inscription of Kailan also indicates that Śrīdharaṇarata a king of Tippera during the seventh century A.D. was a *Paramavaiṣṇava* and a worshipper of *Purushottama*. Therefore, Viṣṇu in his different forms represents the existence of Vaiṣṇava sect in this region from the sixth and seventh centuries A.D.

The development of Vaiṣṇavism was unchecked during the next couple of centuries as a large number of Viṣṇu images of the Pāla-Sena periods have been discovered in different parts of Tripura. The nature of early Vaiṣṇavism during its formative period was probably influenced by Viṣṇu of the Vedic Brahmanism, Nārāyaṇa of the Pāñcharātras and Kṛṣṇa-Vāsudeva of the *Sātvatas*. The earliest image of Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa in Tripura dates back to seventeenth century A.D. only. Almost all the aspects of later Vaiṣṇavism were prevalent as known from the sculptural representations.

(d) Śaktism

Śakti worship prevailed originally among the Indo-Mongoloid race of Tripura as Mataikātārmā. In the religious history of Tripura Śakti seems to be the active goddess who enjoyed wide popularity during seventh century A.D. onwards. An excellent bronze image of

Śarvānī has been discovered in Tripura and it belongs to early centuries of the Christian era. A large number of sculptures, found in Tripura bear evidence to the various manifestations of the Śākta cult. The famous image of the four-handed goddess Kālī, locally called *Tripurasundarī* is worshipped in the temple at Udaipur. Evidence of Śakti cult or the mother goddess worship has come to light from Unakoti, Pilāk and other parts of Tripura.

(e) Other Minor Sects

The worship of Gaṇapati or Gaṇeśa was not unknown to the people of Tripura. Four images of Gaṇeśa of the 11th-12th centuries A.D., were found at *Unakoti*. Of them, the two *Ṣaḍa-bhūja* and rest of *Aṣṭabhūja* Gaṇeśa deserve attention. These sculptural representations do not bear any conspicuous features. Similarly, there is also ample evidence to the popularity of the Sūrya worship in Tripura. The Sun cult appears to have come from north India. The inscribed image of Sūrya discovered from Deulbāḍi in Tripura belongs to the seventh century A.D. There are several other images of this deity, which evidently show his popularity during the medieval period.

In the last chapter, an attempt has been made to throw some light on the various aspects of the tribal religion. A large number of people in Tripura are still the followers of nature worship or spirit and ancestors worship. In fact, their religious beliefs and practices may be characterised as polytheistic. This chapter describes beliefs connected with origins of some of their pūjās, the systems of these and role of the Ochais of different categories and the classifications of their deities. It also describes the origin of the Garia Pūjā, Ker Pūjā, Kharchī Pūjā, Lamprā Pūjā etc. The construction of the images of deities with green bamboo and the specific customs in the arrangement of the bamboo sticks for specific deities are also important aspects of these pūjās. The mantras they chant in their traditional pūjās are quite interesting. Of course, there is no specific cult centered round these worships but the people of non-Brahmanical fold are the main votaries of this type of worship.

The present book 'History of Religion in Tripura' is primarily a revised text of my work. It is my pious responsibility to acknowledge the valuable help I received from different quarters without which it would not have been possible to present the work in the form.

Words fail to express my deep regard and gratitude to Swami Prabhananda Maharaj, Secretary, Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, Golpark, Kolkata, for his valuable 'Foreword'.

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