

Controversy on the designations 'Maharaja' and 'Manikya': Some Rare Documents of Tripura

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The traditions and history of the kings of Tripura are contained in the *Rajamala*, the chronicle of the kings, said to be the oldest official literary document of the State. The rulers claimed descent from 'Chandravamsa' or lunar dynasty and used 'Barman' or 'Varma' as the surname which means 'Armour' and which is applicable to the kshattriyas. Referring to Tripura and its rulers, Rev. James Long makes the following remarks ¹ as early as 1850 :

Its mountain fastness and lonely jungles enabled its Chieftains like the Welsh of former times, or the Huguenots of the Cevennes, to maintain a spirit of resistance to intruders, and to preserve down to the last century. Its rulers pride themselves on being of the Lunar Race and in their descent from the chivalrous Kshatriyas of Rajputana, whose lofty bearing and prowess have been immortalised by the pen of Todd and Chand. While in Bengal the tide of foreign invasion has swept away almost all the ancient Hindu Royal lines, the family of Bishnupur and Tripura have also remained.

The State was formerly known as 'Swadhin Tripura' and later on as 'Hill Tippera' till 1920 when its name was changed to 'Tripura' at the request of the Tripura Durbar. In the middle ages the rulers of Tripura assumed the title 'Pha' meaning 'Father' and the word is of Halam origin. In the official documents it is mentioned that in 1279 A. D. the title 'Manikya' was first bestowed upon Ratna Pha by the then 'Malik' of Gaur Tugral Khan in return for a friendly present of a 'Manik' or rare gem who also assisted Ratna in overthrowing his elder brother who had usurped the throne. Since then the rulers of Tripura had been described and addressed popularly by the designation 'Manikya Bahadur' for centuries. Some scholars, on the basis of some numismatic evidences, put forward the theory that the 'Manikya' dynasty had begun from the reign of Dharmamanikya and not from Ratna Manikya as it is usually believed. ² Whatever that may be, the point is whether the title 'Manikya' was acceptable to the British.

We have found some interesting documents which prove that the British authorities raised objections against the use of the terms like 'Maharaja,' 'Manikya' etc. by the rulers of Tripura. But like the designations Gaekwar, Scindia, Holkar and similar titles in vogue elsewhere in the country, even the last ruler of Tripura used 'Maharaja' and 'Manikya' both as an appanage to the name and as a title.

As early as 1873, A. Mackenzie, Junior Secretary to the Government of Bengal, in a letter to the Political Agent of Hill Tippera pointed out :

I am to say that the proper title of the Hill Tippera Chief, is, 'Rajah' not 'Maharajah'. A reference to the suits of the old Sadar Dewani Adawlut of 1809 and 1814 will shew that the Chiefs of Hill Tippera styled themselves Rajas at that time, and there is nothing to shew that this title has since been authoritatively changed. Indeed, paragraph 3 of Mr. Eden's letter to the Secretary to the Government of India, Foreign Department No. 3595, dated the 29th July 1870, clearly shews that it was not the intention of Governmnet that the Chief should be addressed by any other title than Rajah, and it was by this title that he was addressed by the Government of India, on the 3rd October following in reply to his petition of the 14th June 1870, remonstrating against the location of a Political Agent at Agartala. The printed list promulgated with the circular from the Political Department at this office, dated 10th September 1870, to which reference is made in paragraph 3 of your letter under reply, was compiled from returns submitted by Commissioners. It was clearly by a mistake that the present Chief was entered as Maharaja in that list, and this mistake has since been rectified in a revised list forwarded to this office by the Foreign Department of the 15th February 1873, a copy of which is hereto unnexed. The list of the 10th September 1870 should be corrected accordingly, and the Chief should for the future be addressed as Rajah.

Two months later A. W. B. Power, the Political Agent, specifically pointed out that :

The reigning Chief not being *universally* designated as the Maharaja, it should be mentioned by whom he has always been designated as such. i.e. by the general public, his own subjects or others - other-wise the statement is open to contradiction. . . . The British Government is Lord Paramount of the whole of India, and recognizes no chiefs as totally independent be they small or great. This has often been pointed out and to make an assertion of total independence would be merely to court a contradiction. Most Native States pay tribute, and are styled Tributary, but the succession duty payable by Hill Tippera, not being called tribute, perhaps Feudatory State would be the more correct designation for it. ⁵

Nilmony Das, the Dewan of Tripura, stated in his reply that the authenticity of the use of the terms 'Maharaja' and 'Manikya' could not be proved otherwise than the *Rajamala* because there were no other official documents. To quote Das :

. there are no such letters which may answer our purpose. Those that we have in possession are of recent dates, consequently we cannot shew by them that the Tippera Rajas were called Maharajas during the time of Nowabs. The Nowabi Sunads are not in our favour. There were some His Highness says which could speak in our favour but unfortunately and most probably burnt into ashes when fire took place some years ago. ⁶

Thus it was officially admitted that the authentic old records and documents of the Tripura Raj were burnt into ashes. Taking advantage of the non-availability of any official document, Captain E. G. Lillingston, the Acting Political Agent, in his letter to the Raja of Hill Tippera, dated 21 March 1874, pointed out :“.....it is useless to insist on what is not the fact and thus lay your petition open to criticism on the ground of misstatement.”⁷

But the arguments from the side of the Maharaja Bir Chandra Manikya were the following :

A Raja is according to the ordinary acceptance of the term the reigning power in a small estate, and the Moharaja is he to whom many Rajas pay their allegiance and pay their annual tribute, and tried by this standard, I submit I am tully entitled to the title of Moharaja. Not to allude to times long gone by when the estate of Hill Trippera was more extensive than it is now, and there were many minor Rajas who were its tributaries and its feudal subjects. Even now there are many who are stlyed Rajas amongst the Kookee tribes who owe allegiance to the reigning Chief of Hill Trippera, to whom they have to pay an annual tribute. The title of the Moharaja is, therefore, both by descent and by the fact of there being many minor Rajas under the Chief of Hill Tippera legitimately his due and hope the Government of India will not deprive him of a honorary title to which he has been entitled and by which he has been accustomed to be addressed from time immemorial.

6th.—*During the Mahomedan Government this style of designation as continued by the several Nobabs and Umras who reigned in this part of the country as is evidenced by the several letters and correspondence which are still preserved amongst the archives of Hill Tippera. The policy of the British Government has always been to respect these honorary titles so far as they are found legitimate and to confer them upon those who deserve it. I am therefore, I presume, justified in asking the Government of India to enquire into these circumstances and not summarily deprive the Chief of Hill Tippera of a title by which he has always been addressed even from the time of the Mahomedan generation.*

7th. *The Chief of Hill Tippera has always done his duty to the British Government and has not by his conduct forfeited the esteem and regard with which he has been always treated by the sovereign power of Hindustan. Not to mention other instances, the poor services rendered by the then Chief of Hill Tippera, Kashi Chandra Manik, Bahadur, during the Burmah war, were thankfully acknowledged by the British Government and nothing I hope has since been done to estrange those feelings of kindness and forbearance. I hope therefore that the Government of India will be pleased to see that the Chief of a semi-independent state, such as Hill Tipperah, has every right to the title in question by which even many subjects of Her Majesty who own no such independent territory are designated.*⁸

Bir Chandra Deb also referred to some published documents

of the British Courts where the title 'Maharaja' was used with respect to the rulers of Tripura. In the words of Bir Chandra:

*...except under the peculiar circumstances under which the litigation of 1809 and 1814 took place, the Chief has been always and invariably styled as Moharaja, whether he has appeared in the case as a plaintiff or defendant.*⁹

But the British authorities did not take into cognizance all the arguments put forward by Bir Chandra Barman. Rather, J. Henvey, the Offg. Under-Secretary to the Government of India, Foreign Department, in his letter¹⁰ to the Secretary to the Government of Bengal, Political Department, dated 10 August 1874, mentioned :

I am directed by the Hon'ble the President in Council to request that the Chief may be informed that it does not appear from the records of this office that a higher title than that of Rajah has been hitherto recognized by the Government of India. Whether or not at any future date the Government of India may be pleased to confer the higher title of Maharajah on him must depend on the Raja's own conduct and the approval by the Government of Bengal of the administration of his State.

As some consideration had been shown to the Chiefs of various Native States of India at the time of the assumption of the title 'Empress of India' by Queen Victoria in 1877. Bir Chandra Deb Burman took that opportunity and again appealed to the Secretary to the Government of India, Foreign Department," to restore to me the Title of Maharajah borne by my ancestors from time immemorial."¹¹ The native Chiefs, who could be unable to attend the Delhi Durbar, were instructed by the Government of India to convene such Durbars at their headquarters to express their loyalty to the British Crown. The Durbar was held accordingly in Tripura. On 28 November 1878. F. B. Peacock, the Commissioner of Dhaka visited Agartala under the directions from the Government of Bengal for delivering the Banner and for presenting the Sanad and Khilat of 'Maharajah' on Bir Chandra Manikya as a personal distinction. It is interesting to read the letter¹² of F. B. Peacock addressed to the Secretary to the Government of Bengal in this connection :

.....I proceeded on the 28th instant to Agartala for the purpose of delivering to the Maharajah of Tipperah the Banner presented to him by His Excellency the Viceroy and Governor General in Council in commemoration of the assumption by Her Majesty the Queen of the title of Empress of India and also of presenting to him the Sunnad and Khellat of Maharajah conferred upon him as a personal distinction.

2. *The Durbar was held at 2 P.M. in a large Shamianah pitched close to the Maharajah's residence and at it were present the Principal Thakur and the Chief Officers of the Administration. Invitations had been issued to the Government officials of Tipperah and Noakhali but owing to the distance of Agartala from those places and the difficulties of the journey none of them were able to attend.*

3. *At five minutes past 2 the Maharajah entered the Shamiana*

and was conducted by the Assistant Political Agent upon which he took his seat on my right hand. After a five minutes' conversation he withdrew to assume the *Khellat* dress and on his return he was again conducted as before to the *dais*. The *Sunnad* conferring the title was then read by the Political Agent and the pearl necklace was fastened round the Maharajah's neck by himself. I then addressed the Maharajah explaining to him the reasons for these honours being conferred upon him. I took the opportunity of impressing seriously on him the necessity for reform in the administration of the Estate and for economising expenditure both public and private ; and I begged the Maharajah to give his personal and close attention to this important matters. I further mentioned that His Honor the Lieutenant Governor had learnt with much satisfaction of the manner in which on the whole justice had been administered; of the recent abolition of slavery; of the withdrawal of the prohibition on the exposition of rice except under a special pass from Agartala and its neighbourhood; and of the advance in education during the past year; noticing, however, in connection with the latter the unsatisfactory condition of the school at Agartala, and expressing a hope that as it was the chief school in the State and the one at which nearly all the *Thakurs'* sons who attend schools at all are educated; its condition might receive due attention.

4. Finally I referrea to the order of the Government of Indja regarding the military posts which the Maharajah is to maintain on his North -Eastern frontier and said that the Government would expect the stockade at Pherun Dhormanagar to be completed during the ensuing cold season that this and the other two stockades at Cherakuti and Kamalpur would be efficiently garrisoned, the force properly equipped and disciplined; the full proportion of Goorkhas maintained and the men punctually paid. I then presented the Banner explaining to the Maharajah that it was a personal gift from the queen herself in commemoration of Her Majesty's assumption of the title of Empress of India and that as such I was sure it would never fail to remind him of this great event, and inspire in him feelings of loyalty and devotion to the Throne of England.

5. N. P. At the conclusion of my speech the Maharajah in a few words expressed his gratitude for the honors that had been conferred upon him; *atar* & *pan* were then distributed and the the *Durbar* broke up.

The Government of India decided in 1884 to address the Maharaja of Tripura as "His Highness" in all official correspondences and a number of official etiquettes were also laid down. The controversy regarding the use of the terms 'Maharaja' and 'Manikya' seemed to be settled and the Maharajas used to pay a big amount of *Nazar* to the British authorities. But contrary to the expectations, the established norms, practices and procedures were deliberately violated by the British authorities causing both resentment and disappointment in the minds of the rulers of Tripura. Now we take the dispute regarding the use of the term 'Manikya'

We have already seen that the title 'Manikya' had always been used by the rulers of Tripura since the thirteenth century. In the famous *Sanad* issued by Amphill, the Viceroy and Governor-General of India, in June 1904 it was declared :

Raja Radha Kishore Manikya may rest assured that nothing shall disturb the operation of this Sanad, so long as he and his heirs are loyal to the Crown and faithful to the British Government.

The Manikyas were very much loyal to the British Raj, still the Political Agent questioned in 1918 the use of the title 'Manikya' by the rulers of Tripura. The controversy arose with the drawing up of a draft programme of the Governor's visit to Tripura in 1918. It appears that the draft was filled in by the Political Department of the Tripura Durbar from the skeleton Ceremonial Rules prescribed by the British Government, in the body of which neither the term 'Lieutenant Governor of Bengal' nor the 'Maharaja of Tripura' occurred. The former and the latter were referred to therein with the expression 'His Excellency' and 'His Highness' respectively and only in one portion of that long draft there was the mention of 'His Highness the Manikya Bahadur'. But J. Bartley, the Political Agent, raised objection to the use of the designation 'Manikya Bahadur' and deleted that word from the draft and informed the Chief Dewan of Tripura¹³ ;

Many thanks for your letter no. 253 of 11th February enclosing copy of the General Programme for His excellency's visit to Agartala. I am forwarding it to the Private Secretary. I have changed the words 'Manikya Bahadur' in page 1 to 'Raja' as the latter is the only recognised official appellation of His Highness.

It is interesting to note that in spite of the *Sanad* of 1904 Maharaja Birendra Kishore Manikya (1896-1909) was addressed by the Government of India in many official correspondences simply as 'Raja' and nothing else. But Radha Kishore did not contest the issue as it is said that the titles 'Raja', 'Maharaja' or 'Manikya' were of little significance to him because his subjects called him as 'Dharmabatar' (the incarnation of justice).¹⁴ When Birendra Kishore Manikya succeeded his father Radha Kishore Manikya in 1909, Sir Lancelot Hare, the Lieutenant Governor of Eastern Bengal and Assam attended the installation ceremony on behalf of Lord Minto, the Viceroy and Governor General of India. But later on J. Bartley, the Political Agent not simply addressed the ruler of Tripura as 'Raja' instead of 'Maharaja' but asked him not to use the title 'Manikya' in future. This prohibitive order came to Birendra Kishore Manikya (1909-23) as shock and surprise. To Bartley, 'Manikya' was simply a family title and not the distinctive title of the rulers of Tripura. The letter¹⁵ which Birendra Kishore wrote to Bartley in this connection is interesting due to its polite and humble approach although Birendra Kishore Manikya took the audacious comments of the Political Agent as an exception. To read the letter :

I am in receipt of your D. O. No. 874-P of the 22nd ult, intimating that the Government of India have been pleased to

recognize the title of 'Manikya' as hereditary in my family and to permit its use with the addition of the suffix 'Bahadur'. I shall feel obliged by your conveying my grateful thanks to His Excellency the Governor and through him to His Excellency the Viceroy for this generous consideration. But the second paragraph of your letter, in which you say that "this will not entitle the Ruler of the State to be addressed even informally by official as 'Manikya' or 'Manikya Bahadur of Hill Tippera'" and the abbreviated form of address for the Ruler of the state will be "His Highness the Maharaja of Hill Tippera" -- has caused considerable perplexity. With great reluctance I venture to intrude upon the valuable time of His Excellency again for a clear understanding of the situation, as to my mind, the limitations set forth above deserve further consideration.

In my letter of 26th April 1918, it was my endeavour to establish that 'Manikya' was a distinctive historical title of the Ruler of this territory from the time of Ratna Manikya, that it could be adopted only by the Ruler for the time being and the appellation at once marked out the bearer as the reigning Chief--whatever other designation or title he might have in addition. It appears that the Government have accepted this view and recognised the historic value of this ancient title. I am unable to understand how, with this finding, the Government have pleased to prohibit its use in the abbreviated form of address or recitation I may be permitted to state that this prohibition is calculated to take away a good deal from the spirit of the kind of recognition and to make it extremely inconvenient in practice.

In my land and in the neighbouring British Districts very few persons would address or refer to the Rulers of this State by their full name and designation and the usual address or recitation relating to them has been 'Maharaja Manikhya Bahadur'. The omission now contemplated would practically make the title 'Manikya' a dead letter.

The title of 'Maharaja' will be of great value and pride to the Rulers of this State, as the gift from the mightiest of Emperors that the world has ever seen and it can never be the intention of any of the Rulers of this land to prefer to it 'Manikya' or any other title of less importance. But it is my sincere desire to maintain the link with my ancestors by the use of the ancient title along with the present or any future gift from His Gracious Majesty. To be explicit, I would suggest for the consideration of the Government that the recognition of the title 'Manikya' may not be saddled with the inconvenient limitation proposed. If, however, the Government wishes to fix the nature of the abbreviated form of address it may be 'His Highness the Maharaja Manikya Bahadur'.

I am sorry to have troubled His Excellency again, but I feel confident that this appeal will be taken in the spirit in which it is meant and that it will not have been made in vain.

The above letter of Birendra Kishore Manikya clearly expresses the helpless condition of the rulers of a Native State of North East

India during the British Raj. The Political Agent asked Birendra Kishore Manikya not to use the title 'Manikya' in future. But the title was freely used at the time of the previous visit of Lord Carmichael, the Lieutenant Governor of Eastern Bengal and Assam, to Agartala in February 1913. Even the then Political Agent, Captain Williams in reply to an invitation himself used the expression 'His Highness the Manikya Bahadur' on 22 February 1913. It was due to such practices in the past that the prohibitive order of Burtley caused shock and surprise to the Tripura Durbar. The main contention of the Durbar, as evident from different official correspondences, was that it was within the rights of the rulers of Tripura to use in any form, sanctioned by custom, a title attached to his office and enjoyed by his predecessors. A ban on the above could only mean humiliation and loss of dignity of the Rulers of Tripura, although the Durbar was very loyal to the paramount power.

The Imperial Government had freely conferred various high titles and honours to many Indian Princes for their devotion and loyalty ; but in the case of Tripura the Manikya far from getting any new honour upto the World War or recognition of their loyalty were rather about to lose even the title enjoyed for centuries by their predecessors. Maharaja Birendra Kishore Manikya (1709-23) and Maharaja Bir Bikram Kishore Manikya (1923-47) did everything possible within their limited resources to ensure the active participation of Tripura in the cause of the British Empire during the First and the Second World War respectively. The changed attitude of the British Raj was particularly noticeable after the World War I in respect of raising no objection against the use of the titles 'Maharaja' and 'Manikya' by the rulers of Tripura. Rather, the British Government itself conferred the designations perhaps as part of a strategy to bring Tripura closer to it to counteract or weaken the rising tide of nationalism throughout the country, particularly after the World War I.

Notes & References

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2. A. Machenzie, *The North-East Frontier of India*, (Reprint) Delhi 1981, p. 270 ; B. C. Allen et. al. *Gazetteer of Bengal and North-east India*, (Reprint), Delhi, 1984, p. 607.
3. D. C. Sircar, *Some Epigraphic Records of the Medieval Period from Eastern India*, Delhi, 1979, pp. 91-72 ; *Rajamala* (Bangiya Sahitya Parishad Manuscript Version), Education Directorate, Govt. of Tripura, Agartala, 1967 pp. 1-2.
4. Letter from A. Machenzie Esqr. Junior Secretary to the Govt. of Bengal, to the Political Agent, Hill Tippera, No. 4839, 26 November 1873. (Secretariat Archives, Agartala, B51/5 14).
5. Letter from A. W. B. Power, Political Agent, to Babu Nilmony Das, Dewan, Agartala, No. 201, 3 February 1874, (Secy. rch. B51 /S14).

6. Letter of Nilmony Das, Dewan, Hill Tippera, to Captain E.G. Lillingston, Acting Political gent, Hill Tippera, No. 6, 7 February 1874 (secy. Arch. B5 /S 4).
7. Letter from Captain E. G. Lillingston, ctg. Pol. gent, to the Raja of Hill Tippera, Agartala, No. 90, 2 March 1874, (Secy. Arch. B51/S14).
8. Letter from Beer Chandra Deb, the Chief of Hill Tipperah, to the Secretary, Govt. of India Foreign Deptt. No. 17 7 February 1874 Agartala, (Sec . Arch. B51 S14).
9. *Loc. Cit.*
10. Letter from J. Henver, Es., Offg. Under-Secretary to the Govt. of India, Foreign Deppt., to the Secretary to the Government of Bengal, Political Deptt., No. 1726 P., Dated Fort William, 10 Aug. 1874, (Secy. Arch. 51 S14).
11. Letter from Beer Chandra Deb Burman Manikya Bahadur to the Secretary to the Govt. of India, Foreign Deptt., Agartala, | January 1877, Secy. March. B51 S14)
12. Letter from F. B. Peacock, the Commissioner of Dhaka, to th Secretary to the Govt. of Bengal, Political Deptt., No. 68 T, 30 Nov. 187 , (Secy. Arch. B51 S14).
13. Letter from J. Bartley, Ppol. Agent of Hill Tippera, to P. K. Dugupta, Chief Dewan, Tipura State, D. O. No. 273, p., 13 Dec. 1919 (Secy. Arch. B51 S14).
14. Col. Mahimchandra Deb Burman, *Deshiya Rajya*, (in Bengali), Agartala 1334 B.S. p. 121.
15. Letter of Birendra Kishore Manikya to J. Bartley D. O. No. 19 (Secy. Arch. B3 S3). 1916 A.D.