

## ***Rajmala* and the Historical Writings in Tripura\***

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The *Rajmala* is legitimately considered as an important source of the history of Precolonial Tripura. Like many others of the type in Eastern India, this royal chronicle of Tripura is said to have been originally composed in the fifteenth century AD in Sanskrit and Bengali in metric verses. The authors of the first part (*khanada or lahar*) were the royal priest (*chantai*) Durlabendra and two poets from Srihatta (Sylhet), named, Sukreswara and Baneswara, who were in the court of Maharaja Dharmamanikya (AD 1431-62). Though written as late as 15th century AD, this part of the chronicle records the reigns of the Tripura rulers for 138 generations, including a divine origin of the founder of the lineage (Druhya) and his association with the Lunar Dynasty. In an attempt of this nature, the facts and fictions were bound to mix and mingle freely. The later portions must have been added subsequently by other poets to bring the narrative to times of their respective patron kings. As contemporary narratives these later portions may serve the cause of historical information better, though the nature of relationship of the narrator with the king (i.e. the central character in the narrative) should merit consideration of the historians. It is stated in the text that the second part of the *Rajmala* was added by Ranachatur Narayan during the reign of Amar Manikya (1581-86), the third by Pandit Siddhantavagish during the reign of Govinda Manikya (1660-76), fourth by Jaydeb Uzir during the reign of Krishna Manikya (1760-83), and the fifth and the sixth parts by Durgamani Uzir during the reigns of Kashi Chandra Manikya (1826-29) and Krishna Kishore Manikya (1830-49) respectively. In the text, each part has been christened as a *lahar*. We have not been able to study the Sanskrit version of the *Rajmala* (entitled *Shri Shri Rajaratnakara*), a copy of which is preserved in the collection of the State Museum, Agartala. However, this 'museum copy' of the Sanskrit *Rajamala* is also incomplete (as some pages are missing) and it must be only a copy of the original, because, although the language is Sanskrit, the script used is Bengali. Therefore, the transcript might have been prepared much later. Similarly, the Bengali version of the *Rajmala*, published by the Directorate of Education, Government of Tripura, Agartala, in 1967, which has been

widely used by the scholars (including the present writer), is indeed a narrative of the Tripura kings from the beginning of the dynasty to the reign of Maharaja Krishna Kishore Manikya (1830-49).<sup>1</sup> This version of the *Rajmala* was updated by Durgamani Uzir. The manuscript of this version, found in the collection of Bangiya Sahitya Parishad, Calcutta, was copied from the original by one Ramnarayan Deb. It was donated to the Parishad by one Manindranath Ganguly. The Directorate of Education decided to publish the manuscript when it was brought to the notice of the Director by one Dwijendra Chandra Dutta.<sup>2</sup> The year of publication is 1967. Nevertheless, the *Rajmala* had already set up a lasting tradition of history writings in Tripura much before it was published by the Education Directorate. A survey and analysis of the writings of the modern historians on early history of Tripura will bring home this point.

As early as 1896, Kailash Chandra Singha published a history of Tripura in Bengali under the title *Rajmala Ba Tripurar Itivritta* (meaning *Rajmala* or History of Tripura).<sup>3</sup> Written in Bengali prose-style, the author used, besides *Rajmala*, the epigraphic, numismatic, archaeological and literary sources (not only of Tripura but also of the neighbouring territories) to the extent those had come to light by the end of the nineteenth century. His literary style, organisation of the text and treatment of the sources conformed to the contemporary historical writings in India of that period by European and Indian scholars by beginning with the land and the people. It was clear that he wanted to make his work independent of *Rajmala* and to use *Rajmala* only as a source of history to the extent the royal chronicle was acceptable as a source of history. Nevertheless, he started the early history with an uncritical appreciation of the *Rajmala*, reproduced the genealogy of the Tripura kings as found in the *Rajmala*, relied heavily on *Rajmala* for information about the early period, and above all, he decided to use *Rajmala* as the main title of his work. The author thus gave legitimacy to the claim of *Rajmala* as the history of Tripura, although he made a new beginning in the history of history writing in Tripura. In the process, '*Rajmala*' and the 'history of Tripura' became synonymous.

Before Kailas Chandra Singha, at least two scholars, viz, Rev James Long and W W Hunter had made use of *Rajmala* not just as a source of history of Tripura but as the history of Tripura. Rev Long published a review of *Rajmala* in the *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* in 1850.<sup>4</sup> In fact, it was due to this paper of Rev Long that *Rajmala* came to be known to the scholars as an important source of history. Rev.

Long had no doubt that *Rajmala* was a genuine historical record. In his words, "We may consider this (*Rajmala*) as the most ancient work in Bengali that has come down to us, as the *Chaitanya Charitamrita* was written not before 1557 and Kritibas subsequently translated the *Ramayan*. The *Rajmala* of the Tipperah family which bears all the marks of antiquity is kept with the greatest care. I have every reason to believe it to be a genuine record of the Tipperah family."<sup>5</sup> It may be difficult to accept the view of Rev Long about the earliest extant specimen of Bengali literary works. He was also not aware of the fact that Kritibas's *Ramayana* was not a translation but an original literary work which restated the story of *Ramayan* in an abridged metric form. However, neither Rev Long was an acknowledged authority on the history of Bengali literature nor much of this history was known till his time. What is significant here is that he found *Rajmala* 'to be a genuine record of the Tipperah family', No wonder, the historical section in W W Hunter's *A Statistical Account of Bengal*, vol. VI (Tipperah), published in 1876, was based on Long's summary of the *Rajmala*.<sup>6</sup> Hunter also reproduced a genealogy of the Tipperah kings on the authority of the same source.<sup>7</sup> He might have found Long's review handy to use. Kailash Chandra wrote his book much after that. But it is interesting that about twenty years after Kailash Chandra's work E F Sandys, who wrote a history of Tripura, also drew heavily on the *Rajmala*. In fact, the pre-colonial history is only a summary of the *Rajmala*.<sup>8</sup> All these contributed to the development of a '*Rajmala* tradition' in the history of history-writings in Tripura.

The '*Rajmala* tradition' was further reinforced when Kaliprasanna Sen Vidyabhushan re-wrote *Rajmala* in 1926-31, under the title of *Shrirajmala*, during the reign of Maharaja Bir Bikram Kishore Manikya (1923-47).<sup>9</sup> This *Shrirajmala* of Kaliprasanna Sen was also in Bengali verses. He brought the narrative down to the reign of Bir Bikram Kishore, and reorganised the material into four volumes (*lahar*). A close look into the text may reveal that *Shrirajmala* is indeed an independent work (fresh and original) of Kaliprasanna Sen accomplished under the desire of the ruler of the princely state. He not only re-structured the material into four volumes but also revised the old text and added new facts, including those which can be verified from the texts of the coins, inscriptions, correspondence and other authenticated documents. Nevertheless, the author of this edition of the *Rajmala* also relied on the data of the original *Rajmala* and preferred to call the work *Shrirajmala* (not unlikely, as desired by the Maharaja). Unlike Kailash Chandra Singha's work, this version of the *Rajmala* was prepared and published at the initiative of the royal

government of Tripura and Kaliprasanna Sen has been credited as the 'editor' (and not the 'author') of *Srirajmala*.

The first work in modern lines and in English language which introduced the history of Tripura to outside readers and served as a handy reference for many years is perhaps N R Roychoudhury's *Tripura Through the Ages [A Short History of Tripura from the Earliest Times to 1947 AD]*.<sup>10</sup> Although, very brief and sketchy, this book covered the history of Tripura from the earliest times to 1947. For the medieval period he used important sources like coins and inscriptions and archaeological sites in Tripura and the inscriptions and chronicles of the neighbouring states. He also used the chronicle *Tripura Buranji*<sup>11</sup> (an important Assamese source for the history of Tripura, which was brought to the notice of the Tripura scholars by H L Chatterjee).<sup>12</sup> For modern period, Roychoudhury used archival documents, annual reports, and the correspondence between the Maharajas and the British authorities. The author conformed to the standard style and methods of history writing, and the book is as much documented as a modern historical work should be. However, for the ancient period he also could not go beyond *Rajmala*. He, of course, used the information about the archaeological sites like Pilak and Unakuti, but without analysis. Although the author started with a critique of the *Rajmala*, he ended with uncritically using the information given by this royal chronicle.

The latest work on the history of Tripura in the *Rajmala* tradition is Jagadish Ganchoudhury's *Tripurar Itihas*<sup>13</sup> published in 2000 AD. Beginning with Devayani-Sharmista-Yayati-Sukracharyya legend, the book discusses the history of Tripura during the reigns of 186 kings from Druhya to Kiritbikram Kishore Manikya. Written in Bengal prose, the narrative till the reign of 185th king Birbikram Kishore Manikya conforms to the information given in various versions of the *Rajmala*. The author did not mention anything about the sources of information, there is no documentation or bibliography, and he narrates the history of the kingdom and the unbroken lineage of the kings from the time of the heaven-born king Druhya to that of Maharaja Kiritbikram Kishore Manikya in his own words. He also does not claim that the present book is an updated or a modern version of *Rajmala* in prose-style, although the whole narrative is of the author in one breath in a story-telling fashion without reference to any source. In fact, the book does not have a 'preface'. At the end of the book, in a section entitled "Tripurar Itihas Darshan" it is said that the name of the royal history of Tripura is *Srirajmala* and that, although written in four volumes, it is incomplete.

During last two decades we have come across some serious history writings in Tripura, though mostly pertaining to late-medieval and modern periods. The historians have been using the epigraphic, numismatic and archaeological data, besides administrative reports, correspondence and the host of archival records of various categories. The publication of the *Tripura Gazette Sankalan*,<sup>14</sup> *Rajgi Tripurar Sarkari Bangla*,<sup>15</sup> etc by the Government of Tripura gave a fillip to the historical research as the materials provided by these publications are readily available. Jagadish Ganchoudhury has done a great service to the cause of history writing by making the important chronicles like *Krishnamala*<sup>16</sup> and *Champak Vijay*<sup>17</sup> available in print. Mahadev Chakravarti<sup>18</sup> and D K Choudhury<sup>19</sup> took great pains in editing and publishing the Administrative reports of Tripura which are now extensively used by the scholars. Along with the use of new sources, the scholars have been following the standard norms and practices of history writing, and the authentication of the source-material and documentation of facts are accepted as core in the historian's craft. In this context, the publication of Ganchoudhury's *Tripurar Itihas* seems out of place and like putting the clock back.

*Rajmala* is undoubtedly a very important source of the history of Tripura for the reigns of the later Tripura kings during whose times specific portions of the text were added. The historians have great respect for *Rajmala* both as a literary work and as a source of history of the 'Itihasa-Purana' tradition. Tripura has every reason to be proud of this extraordinary piece of medieval literature. Our worry is about uncritical use of this literary work as a source of historical information for the pre-fifteenth century period. In fact, the historiographical problem of *Rajmala* has been noticed by the eminent scholars in the last century. Dinesh Chandra Sen considered the royal family of Tripura as one of the oldest surviving families and the *Rajmala* as a great work, but he felt that the information recorded in the first part (till fifteenth century) are not acceptable, though the most of those in the later parts are reliable.<sup>20</sup> Ramesh Chandra Majumdar was of the view that although myths have crept in many places of the narrative, the historical information recorded in the *Rajmala* are on the whole dependable.<sup>21</sup> According to Suniti Kumar Chatterjee, "The historical value of this chronicle is not much for the period prior to the fifteenth century."<sup>22</sup> As Dinesh Chandra Sarkar said, "I have been emphasizing that the Tripura chronicles, on which the accounts of the kings were formerly based exclusively, were not composed before the close of the eighteenth century so that their narrative of the early rulers are unreliable."<sup>23</sup>

The content analysis of the *Rajmala* on narrative, literary style and linguistic basis reveals that the first part was written in Sanskrit during the reign of Maharaja Dharma Manikya. This must be the original *Rajmala*, but that text is no longer available (at least, this is not to our knowledge). The manuscript of the Sanskrit version (*Sri Rajratmakara*) which is preserved in the State Museum, Agartala, is in Assamese/Bengali script and, therefore, this cannot be the original manuscript of a Sanskrit work in the fifteenth century. The same part was rendered into Bengali during the reign of the same king by Chantai Durlabendra and Pandits Sukreswara and Baneswara. The first part of the Bengali version is, therefore, a translation (and not the original). The researchers in history are well aware of the difference between an original text and a translation in methodological priority. Secondly, this part of the *Rajmala* narrated in one breath the development over a very long period of time, which betrayed the possibility of folkloristic interpolation in a contemporary narration. The second and the third parts were written and added in the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries respectively, the fourth and the fifth in the eighteenth century, and the sixth (i.e. the last) in the nineteenth century. The author of the third part claimed that he had improved the language and added new information in the earlier parts also. It is not unlikely that the author of the later parts also did the same to the preceding parts. All researchers are told that the editing or tempering with a document tells heavily on its acceptability as a primary source of history. Moreover, the manuscript must have been copied and re-copied many times by many scribes till it was published and made available to the researchers. Therefore, a researcher has to be satisfied that there had been no mistake on the part of the copier, either genuine or intentional. The principles of verification/cross-verification or internal/external criticism assumed significance in historical methods due to these possibilities. The source-value of the *Rajmala* published by the Education Directorate in 1967 should be viewed by the researchers in the context of the evolution of its present form in which it is available to us.

#### *Notes and References*

- \* The author is thankful to SAP-DRS, Department of History, NEHU, Shillong for the facilities offered for the preparation of this paper.
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