

Coin and Culture: A Study of Tripura Coinage (1464-1761 A.D.)

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The study of Indian coins has been undertaken to unravel the political history of India viz. fixing the chronology of a ruler or the accession or fall of a ruler or span of his period of rule. Recently some scholars (like-Shirin Moosvi, Irfan Habib, John S. Deyell, Frank Perlin, etc.) have tried to reconstruct the economic history, specifically the trade and prices through the aid of coins. But the numismatic evidences have not yet been properly used to delineate the cultural history of a region.

Tripura during the medieval period was a native state ruled by a royal family of the Tipra tribe with their names ending with 'Manikya'.¹ Tripura always remained as a bastion against the Muslim invasions from Bengal. '*Rajamala*' is the only prime source for the history of the region². Some inscriptions found on the temples and the remarkable series of coins of the region also shed light on the provincial history. Tripura as a kingdom under the earlier Manikyas also included Tippera, Naokhali, Chittagong, and a portion of Sylhet (Bangladesh).³

Coinage is an important source of history. The Tripura coins are very interesting in the Indian coin series. They well depict the chronology of the Tripura rulers, as well as the culture of the region. The early Manikya coins that contain several devices on it represent various phases of Tripura history. The present paper attempts to trace the cultural history of Tripura through their coins.

According to the '*Rajamala*', the Manikya dynasty seems to have started from the reign of Dharma Manikya or his predecessor Maha Manikya, as no other reliable source is known yet. More or less thirty-six rulers ruled the area during the period from A.D. 1464-1947 and there was a continuous issuance of coins, since they became vassals under the British from 1761 onwards (as it was the period when the British were trying to get Dewani rights over Bengal). After the death of Dharma Manikya, the country was divided into seventeen divisions, under the control of his seventeen sons⁴. His youngest son Ratna Fa, was sent as a hostage to Gaur, the capital of the Sultan of Bengal, Tughril. Tughril

helped him against his eldest brother Raja Fa. He invaded Tripura and defeated Raja Fa and put Ratna Fa on the throne of Tripura. Tughril henceforth conferred on Ratna Fa, the title of 'Manikya' which the ruling princes of Tripura had thenceforth borne⁵.

It was from the middle of the fifteenth century that the Tripura rulers started issuing coins. Coins were generally struck in gold and silver. The coins are die-struck and are generally round in shape. Coins are found in six denominations viz. full, half, quarter, one-eighth, one-sixteenth and one-thirty second. The species carry date, while the obverse bears legends only, the reverse device only contains lions figure. Figures of various other deities are also found on the coins.⁶

It was the credit of Ratna Manikya I for inaugurating the numismatic series as well as for introducing many other reforms. His coins bearing his name and epithet and sometimes also the date of issue, of the pieces concerned, have helped to reconstruct the early history of the Manikyas. He stabilized the Manikya rule in Tripura on a strong foundation. Initially the coins were issued in thin broad fabric.⁷

There are many rituals in Tripura that are very well depicted on the coins and from this we can get an idea about their culture and tradition. Occasions like – coronation, marriages, pilgrimage, holy-baths, military conquests, donations, etc. are well depicted on the coins. We will now move on to these rituals in details one by one which depict their culture.

Tripura kings like all other sovereigns, struck their initial coins at the time of their 'Coronation'. Issuing coins during such occasions is a common practice of the rulers. More important rulers, however, issued more than one series of coins with more than one date of issue, subsequent to the respective coronations.



Figure of bird diety, Nowi, standing facing right in circle. Legend reading-Narayan-Sri-Sri-Mukut Manikya Devah

Legend reading Sri-Sri-Mukut Manikya Devah

Taking bath on auspicious occasions has traditionally been a strong practice in the Indian culture. 'Holy-bath' has been an important ritual of Tripura also. In Tripura royal families', holy-baths were generally taken in course of their pilgrimage or military conquests. These were generally taken to do 'tarpana' (a practice of being pure or 'suddh' by taking bath in sacred rivers) after some victory or conquests. Holy baths were taken in course of their pilgrimage as penance for the sins they have done during their life. The first ruler who struck such an epithet on the coin was Deva Manikya (1522-36), the one-fifty third ruler of Tripura as per *Rajamala*. He struck coins with the date Saka 1449 or A.D. 1527. Three coins have so far been found with such dates and epithets. His coin legend reads - *Durasara-snayi-Tripurasri-Sri-Sri-Deva Manikya Padmavatyau* (Bathed at Durasara, the Lord of Tripura). The *Rajamala* also corroborates the fact of the holy bath as well as the coins being struck by Deva Manikya to commemorate the occasion⁸ (victory over Bhulua, Saka 1449 or A.D. 1527).

*Devamanikya maharaja ati subhajan;
bhula amla kari samudra gaman.
Phalamati tirtha snana kara mahamati;
Duras valia sei thata dana dharma bale;
Snans-tarpana tathate nripati karile.*⁹

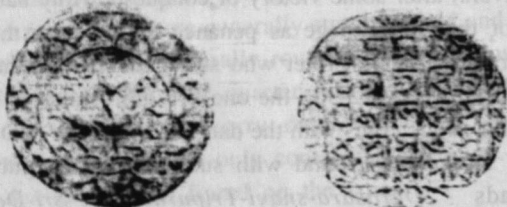
This shows that after a victory over Bhulua, Deva Manikya had his holy-bath at Phalamati Tirtha alias Duras (generally called in Tripura language) and struck a coin to commemorate the occasion.

According to the version of another *Rajamala*,¹⁰ the holy bath was taken by Deva Manikya at Dhurasa after a victory over Bhulua.

*Dhuras kahia sei sthanke kahile;
sekhanete maharaja mohara marila.*

The next king Vijaya Manikya, the one-fifty fourth king, also struck various commemorative issues. According to *Rajamala*, his first commemorative issue states that after his holy-bath in the Brahmaputra, Vijaya Manikya struck coins with the words 'Dhvajaghatasnayi' written on them. His coin reads - *Dhvaja-Ghata-snayi-Sri-Sri-Vijaya Manikya Deva-Sri- Sarasvati-Mahadevyau* (1446 S. or A.D. 1554). He struck the coin in silver and in the denomination of *tanka* of 92 *ratis* or 165 grains, celebrating a ritual bath at Dhvaja Ghat, which is on the Brahmaputra River due west of Tripura. It is said that he took advantage of the

prolonged conflict between the Sultan of Bengal and the Mughal king Akbar, and proceeded to Sonargaon or Suvarnagram in Dacca and occupied it for sometime. During this time Vijaya Manikya is said to have struck coins (tankas) commemorating his holy bath in the Brahmaputra and wrote on them the word *Dhvajaghatasnayi*.¹¹



His second series of commemorative coins are those which refer to his holy-bath in the Lakhi or Lakshya river, a branch of the Brahmaputra that passes close to Sonargaon and Dacca, presumably undertaken during another raid into Muslim territory. These coins are in three consecutive years – Saka 1480 (A.D. 1558), 1482 (A.D. 1559), and 1483 (A.D. 1560), and are interesting in several ways. They have in the (obverse) legend two epithets for the king viz.. *Lakshasnayi* (i.e.the bather in the Lakshya) and *Tripura – mehesa* (“The Lord of Tripura”) and the name of the queen ‘*Lakshmi*’. And on the reverse, instead of ‘Tripura Lion’ these coins depict the composit *Ardhanarisvara*, one half the ten-handed Durga seated on her lion, and the other half the four-handed Shiva seated on his humped bull. The male Siva half has two hands and stands on the *vrisha* or bull, while the female half depicted with five hands stands on the *simha* or lion. Such an ingenious concept was unknown in the history of Indian iconography. This representation of Siva-Durga form of *Ardhanarisvara* might indicate Vijaya Manikya’s personal devotion for Siva and Durga.¹² The coin reads – *Lakshya-snayi-Sri-Sri-Tripura Mehesh-Vijaya Manikya Deva-Sri-Lakshmi-Rani-Devyah, Saka 1482 or A.D. 1559.*



A unique coin dated Saka 1485 or A.D. 1563 issued by Vijaya Manikya is the third series of his commemorative coins. The device on both obverse and reverse of this coin are very important. Besides having two epithets for Vijaya Manikya viz. *Padmavati-snayi* (i.e. the bather in the Padmavati) and *Visvesvara* ("The Lord of the Universe") the coin gives the name of the queen 'Vakdevi'. An unusual aspect of this coin is that the king is not given the usual title Manikya, and instead is denoted as *Visvesvara*. The coin reads – *Padmavati-snayi-Sri-Sri-Visvesvara-Vijaya Deva-Sri-Vakadevya Saka 1485 or A.D. 1563*. Obverse bears in the centre a well defined Siva-Linga in a lined square.¹³

Thus, these issues are unique and rare and are generally not found in other areas. These coins depict the ritual of taking holy-bath in the rivers on some important events.

One more unique feature of the coins of Tripura which also depict their culture is the inclusion of the name of their queens on the coins along with the kings. This is a rare feature. During the time of Guptas-Indo-Greeks - such features are found and also in some of the coins of the Mughals ('Jahangir', where we find the name of Nurjahan on the coins) but the Tripura coins very well depict such features. Ratna Manikya was the first king to put the name of his queen on some of his coins. Subsequently, this practice of putting the name of the queen on the coins was adopted by his successors also. More interestingly some kings placed the name of two or more queens on their coins. Such examples are well depicted in the coins of Yaso Manikya (2nd reign 1600-18). The coin with the name of two queens reads thus –

"Sri•Sri -Yuta-Yasho Manikya Deva-Sri-Lakshmi-Gouri-Mahadevyau"

The coin is in silver and in *tanka* denomination dated *Saka 1522* or A.D. 1600. Another example of placing the name of three queens on the coin reads thus

"Sri-Sri-Yuta-Yasho Manikya Deva-Sri-Lakshmi-Gauri-Jaya-Mahadevyau"



This coin is also in silver and in tanka denomination dated Saka 1522 or A.D. 1600. The reason for the use of the name of the queens on the coins and their regularity of occurrence on coins suggests that they might have some significance.¹⁴ Thus this is a very unique example of putting the name of two or more queens at a time on the coins. Though *Rajamala* did not give any clear reason for such feature of Tripura coins but we assume that the king might be giving equal status or respect to all the queens for which we are getting the names of all the queens on the same coin. Thus, all this shows that in early culture of Tripura women were perhaps given high or equal status and were getting due respect in the religious way.

Queens' names were written variously on the coins. Queens were named after certain other names of the Goddess, named after 'Moon' taken as a symbol in regard to their facial beauty. Names of the queens associated with *dharma* signifying 'good conduct' in other sense to describe the character of the women like Sri Dharmavati, Sri Dharmasila, etc. Some queens have names that are suggestive of variants of fame, like Sri Yasovati, Kirttimani etc. Some were named as some kind of 'jewel' (as per their dynastic title 'Manikya' meaning jewel), Kirttimani suggesting 'jewel of fame'. Some of the queens are indicative of qualities, perhaps the qualities of head and heart, like Gunavati, Kalavati etc.¹⁵

Actually, the kings of Tripura belonged to the Tipra tribe. Some of their queens may have come from other tribes also. Their marriages thus may have been a sort of matrimonial alliance to secure support of other dominant social groups. It can be assumed that the names of the queens may have been depicted on coins to win the loyalty and support of the tribal group concerned to give the impression that their own girl the queen was a part of the administration. Later, however, it became a convention.¹⁶

In some of the coins Ratna Manikya (1464-89) and his son Mukuta Manikya (1489-90) had placed the names of queens before their name or at the starting. This is undoubtedly a rare example in the numismatic history of Tripura. No other rulers of Tripura had used the names of the queens before them in their coins. The coins of Ratna Manikya (Saka 1386 or A.D. 1464) which is a silver coin and in the denomination of tanka, reads –

"Sri-Lakshmi-Mahadevi-Sri-Sri-Ratna Manikya"



Another coin of Mukut Manikya (Saka 1411 or A.D. 1489) having the queen's name at the top reads –

"Sri-Machtri-Mahadevi-Sri-Sri-Mukut Manikya".¹⁷

During the reign of the Mughal ruler 'Jahangir' we find coins with the name of 'Nurjahan' but it had got a clear meaning of dominance of the queen over the king. But here as we are not getting any clear and genuine reason so we can assume that –

- a) Queen's name at the top might have been written whimsically or they might have placed these queens' names before them to satisfy them.
- b) They might have written to show their deep love or to give them respect as ladies.
- c) Or, might be an indication of the matrilineal form of society.
- d) Or, to give them equal status in the society as that of the kings.

Among the tribes of the North-Eastern states of India, matrilineal form of society is found, and Tripura belongs to the 'Tipra' community of Mongoloid group. So, the third assumption is to some extent relevant in this matter. *Rajamala* clearly stated that Ratna Fa or Ratna Manikya brought so many Bengali Hindu families of different sections and gave them settlement in the soil of Tripura. The same was done for the upliftment of the tribal people of acculturation. He was also influenced by the Hindu social customs and he himself was the patron of Hinduism. Ratna Manikya struck only one coin in the name of the tribal goddess 'Chaturdasadevata'. (The Chaturdasa Devata Mandir is situated at Old Agartala about five miles from present Agartala. This temple was built by Krishna Manikya in the middle of the eighteenth century. The original temple, it is believed, was situated at Udaipur, the old capital of Tripura according to local tradition preserved in Rajamala; the *Chaturdasa*

Devatas were first worshipped by king Trilochana a contemporary of Yudhisthira).

The images are made of an alloy of eight metals. These are only heads without figure. The worship of the fourteen deities is a sort of blending or synthesis between the tribal and orthodox Hindu rites and rituals. The deities have both tribal and Hindu names. The Hindu names are: Hara, Uma, Hari, Ma, Bani, Kumar, Ganapati, Bidhu, Ka, Abadhi, Ganga, Sikhi, Kama, and Himadri, The tribal names of the deities are known only to the priests. They maintain strict secrecy. Tribal priests who are other-wise Kshatriyas officiate in the temple. Throughout the year only three deities Hara, Uma, and Hari are worshipped. The rest of the eleven are put inside a wooden box. They are worshipped in the month of July popularly known as *Kharchi Puja*. Human sacrifice was practiced before, but now human images made of clay, have been substituted. But generally tribal religious culture disappeared from the royal family since the last part of the fifteenth century. After their establishment of '*Tripurasundari*', Hinduism was finally and permanently established in Tripura (Out of the many temples built by the kings of Tripura, the temple of Tripura Sundari is claimed to be one of the 51 *Pithas* mentioned in the *Puranas*. This temple stands on a hillock at Udaipur. It was constructed by Dhanya Manikya in the year 1501-02 AD. There are images in the temple, one called Chhotima and the other of Tripura Sundari. The height of Tripura Sundari is about 5 feet. The image is endowed with four hands, and standing static on the images of Mahadeva. Both of them also wear *Kirita Mukuta* symbolizing royalty and prowess. To worship the goddess with appropriate offerings and sacrifices of a he-goat throughout the year, Brahmin priests have been appointed and granted lands by the kings of Tripura). These coins might be the result of the matriarchal or matrilineal from of society which prevailed in the past but gradually disappeared due to the vigorous influence of Brahmanical culture and civilization. And the 2nd assumption is also to some extent relevant in this matter. Thus, all these coins depict different types of culture the society adapted during the time.¹⁸

Apart from this, religious culture is also very well depicted on the coins of Tripura. The depiction of different deities on the coins proves that the people of Tripura are very religious in nature, e.g. The representation of '*Chaturdasadevata*' on the coins of Ratna Manikya, the figure of *Garuda* - the *vahana* of Vishnu, on the coins of Mukut Manikya. Another unique and complex device of Vishnu being carried

by *Garuda* and flanked by a male and female figure all resting on the *simhasana*, supported by a pair of lions at each corner are displayed on the coins. The composite motif of the flute-playing Krishna standing above the Tripura lion and attended either by one *Gopi* on one side or by two *gopinis* on two sides (the depiction of *gopinis* on the either side is important for the fact that the *Gopi* have worn tribal dress, a skirt type of dress, which is usually worn by the tribal people of Tripura) which shows the reflection of culture through religion. The depiction is seen on the reverse issues of Yashodhara Manikya dated Saka 1552 or A.D 1630.¹⁹

Most of the Tripura rulers were of Saiva *saktas* and professed their allegiance to Parvati Paramesvara (Ratna Manikya I), Saiva Durga (Krishna Manikya) Saiva-Kalika (Ratna Manikya II), or Hara-Gouri (Chhatra Manikya). The Goddess *Kalika* or *Kali* was alone worshipped by Ratna Manikya II and Durga Manikya. Only Vijaya Manikya I spoke of his personal bearing by adopting the epithet *Kumudisa darsi* (looking like the Lord of *Kumuda* i.e. the Moon), other deities were also worshipped by them during different times.



Anant Manikya with Krishna playing flute standing with female attendance on either side.



Rev. -Sri-Sri-Yuta-Ananta Manikya Devah.



Obv.-Krishna Manikya, normal lion left date Saka 1682



Rev. -Shiva-Durga-Pade-Sri-Sri-Yuta-Krishna Manikya Devah.



Vijaya Manikya-Obv. Lion facing right date Saka 1456.



Rev. Kumudisa-Darsi-Sri-Sri-Vijaya Manikya Devah.

All these illustrations show a mixed religious culture prevailing in Tripura. Thus, though the coins have various devices and epithets on them but we can get an idea about the cultural history of Tripura not known so perfectly and genuinely from other sources. In this regard, the Tripura coins are unique in their variety.

Though the coins are mainly pictographic, on one side there is the figure of a lion facing right or left and on the other side the legend. In the initial years the legends are placed in three lines within square depicting only the name of the ruler with the date of issue. Later, the legends are designed in four lines along with their queen's name and their respective devotion to the God or Goddess, within square and design on outer border. Legends with five lines were also seen in the last years. The Tripura rulers started issuing coins from the reign of Ratna Manikya (A.D. 1464). The area was occupied by the British in 1761 but the privilege of striking coins was carefully preserved and exercised, even though coins could hardly be used as currency. These ceremonial issues were given as grants to the Brahmins and priests.

Thus, if we go through the entire coinage of the Manikya rulers, beginning from Ratna Manikya I (1464) to Lakshmana Manikya and first part of the reign of Krishna Manikya 1748-51, 1761-83 (as the state became a vassal state of the British after 1761) these coins depict how the society gradually grew up and enriched itself in various aspects.

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