

A Study on the Organisation of Armed Forces of Tripura (1490 to 1586 A. D.)

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“Organisation is a system by which an orderly structure and working order are set to achieve an objective. Any fighting force is organised or built up as a cohesive, balanced, compact and intersupporting body. A chain of command is established to bind the elements of fighting forces into a synchronized machine”.¹ Thus, to get an idea about the military history of any State, a study of the organisation of the armed forces becomes important. It gives an idea of the methods of man-management and of command and control of the soldiers.

The State of Tripura continues to occupy a strategic place in the map of India, yet very little work seems to have been done on its history, and practically, no work on its military history.

In India since the days of the Epics, the fighting forces were well organised in a pyramidal structure, with the king at the apex of the pyramid as the Supreme Commander. It may perhaps, be said that in all monarchical States of the world this was the general principle followed, and the State of Tripura was no exception. Throughout the history of Tripura, the reigning king was always the Supreme Commander. Regarding the military hierarchy, there was the Senapati or a General in overall command of the armed forces, although during any expedition or in any particular operation, some other person used to be appointed as the General Officer or Commanding-in-Chief.

Appointment of Senapati

The king was the sole authority in appointing the Senapati of the Armed Forces, as also the General Officer Commanding-in-Chief of the Army of Expedition. Kings in India and other countries became authoritative, and they used to appoint Senapatis themselves using their personal discretion. In medieval India, no democratic principle was followed by the kings in appointing Senapatis or Faujadars. The king's personal considerations and evaluation of a person military, political, or otherwise were the criteria of making those important appointments. Thus it appears that the Kings of Tripura also followed the general pattern of medieval India in exercising their authority to appoint the Senapati.

A list of some of the Senapatis appointed by the Tripura Kings is given below :

Name of the King	Name of the Senapati
Dhanyamanikya	Datyanarayan (Father-in-law)*
Vijay Manikya	Pratap Narayan
Ananta Manikya,	Gopiprasad Narayan (Father-in-Law)
Uday Manikya	Ranagan Narayan (Brother-in-Law)
Amar Manikya	Rajdhar Narayan (Elder son)

It will be seen from the above list that most of the Senapatis were close relatives of the reigning king. However, at times, the king relied upon the ability of some person irrespective of the person, language, religion or caste. The latter method, it seems, was followed by the kings to meet some special exigencies, though the normal practice was to appoint the Senapati from amongst the close relatives of the king.

Perhaps, with a view to keeping the close relatives from plotting to share royal power as also to ensure better security of his own person, the Kings followed this principle. The persons appointed by the kings of Tripura were, however, efficient in their professions. But they were not always loyal to their masters. On quite a few occasions, the Senapatis in spite of being close relatives of the king encouraged palace intrigues and dissatisfaction among the soldiers against their monarch. Sometimes these disloyal Senapatis could destroy the king through their nefarious machinations and ultimately usurp the throne.

Gradations of Senapatis

The Senapati of the Tripura army was usually conferred with the title of 'Narayana'.² Literally, the word 'Narayana' means Vishnu. According to Hindu mythology, Vishnu is the saviour of creation and he holds the *Shankha*, *Chakra*, *Gada* and *Padma*. Thus it appears that by adorning the Senapati with the title of 'Narayana', the kings of Tripura gave them high honour, dignity and responsibility. It may be mentioned here that since the pala period, the rulers of Bengal used to honour a Senapati with glamorous titles only after the successful completion of a battle. The Afghan

* In brackets is given the relationship of the Senapati to the King.

rulers of India used to confer high titles on their Commanders of forces at the time of appointment and during successive stages of promotion. With this background the use of a standard title i. e. 'Narayana' by the kings of Tripura possibly indicates the importance assigned to the post.

Some of the Commanders in Tripura army were decorated with the title of 'Khan'.³ The Afghan rulers of India considered the title 'Khan' as a very high honour and they used to confer this title on persons of eminence - irrespective of the individual's mother tongue, religion, and place of origin. Thus it appears that in selecting this title of honour, i.e. 'Khan', the kings of Tripura were influenced by the custom of their contemporary Afghan rulers. According to the *Rajmala*, however, the kings of Tripura used to confer the title of 'Khan' to the Commanders belonging to the hilly tribes.⁴

In the Tripura Army, the following words were used to denote different ranks- 'Sardar', 'Hajari' or 'Hajra' and 'Barua'.⁵ 'Hazari' or 'Hazra' was the Commander of one thousand troops. In this connection, it may be mentioned that in the Army of Vishwa Singh, a famous king of Coochbehar, a Commander of 1000 troops used to be called 'Hazarika'. Thus Hazari of Dhanya Manikya may be same or similar with Hazarika of Vishwa Singh. The Bengali word 'Hazari' means thousand - thus it seems possible that the words 'Hazari', 'Hazra' and 'Hazarika' have the same origin. In Northern India, the word 'Sardar' means Commander of a body of soldiers. But no specific number of soldiers for that body of troops was fixed. Generally, however, the number of soldiers under the command of one Sardar was around one hundred. Taking this into consideration, a Sardar of Dhanya Manikya may also be regarded as a commander of one hundred soldiers.

In the Tripura Army, the word 'Nazir' was also used. Normally a close relative of the king used to be appointed as 'Nazir'. 'Nazir' was the overall commander of 'Vinandiya' troops. The 'Vinandiya' troops were composed of hill tribes and their main responsibility was the protection of the capital town.⁷

Structural Frame Work

No definite structural frame work of the Tripura Army under any king seems to be available. This perhaps is not unnatural. No literary work contemporary to any of the Tripura king has yet been found. In India, however, the importance of an organised structure in the armed forces was realised since the very early days, and a com-

posite structure - having a proportionate number of four elements, e. g. foot-soldiers, cavalry, elephants and chariots-developed at least from the time of the Mahabharata.⁸ The practice of having a composite structure continued for a long time. Kautilya brought a revolutionary change in the concept and pattern or structure. He propounded the idea that any one single arm of war e.g. foot-soldiers or horse or elephant, may be self-sufficient in all respects and on the basis of tactical requirements, two or more arms of war could be combined to develop a composite structure.⁹ Actually the Maurya kings had separate boards, for governance of each arm of war.

Another major change in the structural pattern took place in India with the arrival of Moghul troops from the north-west. The Moghul troops of West Asia were generally organised in the 'Decimal system' developed by Changis Khan (1162-1227 A.D.).¹⁰ It appears that Vishwa Singha, the king of Coochbehar, adopted the 'Decimal system' with some minor modifications.¹¹ Dhanya Manikya, who seems to have been influenced much by Vishwa Singha's military system, might have followed the structural blueprint of Vishwa Singha. In the light of the above discussion the structural pattern of Dhanya Manikya's army may be reconstructed as follows :

Designation of the Commander	Number of solders under his command	Comparable/Equivalent formation of the modern army with approximate manpower
Sardar	100	Company (120 appx.)
Hazari (10 Sardar)	1000	Battalion (1000 appx.)
Narayana (10 Hazari)	10,000	The strength of 'Division' is appx. 20,000. As such the strength of soldiers under the command of one Narayan may be compared with half of a Division.

Actually the whole structure always referred to the strength of foot-soldiers, horses and elephants in terms of thousands. If the above is correct, the smallest sub-unit should have 10 or 20 soldiers, but no reference to this smallest sub-unit has been found in any of the works consulted.

Branches of the Army

From the time of Dhanya Manikya, the main arms of war of Tripura were the foot-soldiers and the elephants, and the riverine navy.¹² Vijay Manikya (1532-1563 AD), however, organized a corps of cavalry, but he employed only Afghan mercenary soldiers in that arm.¹³ Rev. Long states that artillery was also organised by Vijay Manikya.

Foot-Soldiers

It is but natural that the first regular army should consist of foot soldiers, and Tripura was no exception. During the entire period of Tripura's history under the present study, it appears that the main bulk of the army consisted of foot soldiers. People of different ethnic groups used to be recruited in the Tripura army as foot-soldiers and perhaps the regiments were organised ethnically e.g. Kuki, Tripuri, Riang, Jamatia and Bengalees. The Rajmala also mentions some soldiers as 'Parvatya' i.e. mountainous soldiers. Some other soldiers belonging to the mountainous tribes were specially trained for the security and defence of the capital. This group of soldiers was called 'Vinandiya'.¹⁴

The Rajmala refers to another type of soldiers, called 'Kharait'. According to the description given these soldiers were well-built, hefty-bodied soldiers expert in wielding 'Kharaga' - a heavier broad bladed variety of sword. It is further stated that before enrolling anyone into the 'Kharait Regiment', his physical fitness was tested severely. This reference to 'Bengalee' soldiers is intriguing.¹⁵ However, no further reference over the issue has been found. It is not known whether the recruitment of soldiers was limited within the boundaries of the State. But in medieval India, all sovereigns used to employ soldiers recruited from different parts of the Indian subcontinent. In Bengal this practice can be traced from the days of the Palas.¹⁶

During the time of Amar Manikya (1570-87 AD) the organisation of foot-soldiers on the basis of weapons developed well. Mentions of 'Tirandaz' and 'Dhali' are found in the narrative of his period.¹⁷

Elephantry

Since the days of the Mahabharata, elephantry has occupied a place of importance in the military organisation in India. In the medieval period, the elephantry of Gour was a dreaded arm of war. In Tripura, elephants were available in plenty. Therefore, it is only logical that elephantry should be regarded as a natural source of

strength. Considering the peculiar topographical situation of Tripura, elephantry, no doubt, possessed a very important place in the arm of war in Tripura.

Cavalry

Though the horses were used in military activities during the entire ancient period of our country, it is rather difficult to say exactly when the horses were first organised as a distinct arm of war. With the arrival of the Afghan and the Moghul armies, the importance of cavalry steadily increased. Cavalry was a recognised arm of war in the Persian, Greek, Rōman and other armies too. Being influenced by the speed and tactics of this arm of war, all the States in India started developing an efficient cavalry.

But the horse was never a natural fauna of the eastern provinces of the Indian sub-continent. Therefore, the kings of the States of this area had to import horses. In Bangal, this process can be traced to the days of Devapal.¹⁸ During the mediaeval period, the cavalry became the main arm of war in India. Tripura also did not lag behind.

In an effort to medernize the army, Vijay Manikya started organizing the cavalry with the help of one thousand Afghan soldiers.¹⁹ He not only imported the horses, but also employed Afghan soldiers. But the cavalry in Tripura did not develop much. According to Ain-i-Akbari, the strength of the Tripura cavalry was negligible,²⁰ though Sandys²¹ and Rev. Long²² mention that the strength of Vijay Manikya's cavalry developed to 5000.

Riverine Naval Force

Boats are a very old means of communication in Bengal, In Tripura, specially in South Tripura, boats of various descriptions were used since very old days. Rivers on the Comilla border had major significance in the security of Tripura as was marked during the battles of Dhanya Manikya with Hussain Shah of Gour.²³ Thus the importance of riverine navy in the military history of Tripura can not be overlooked. The names of some types of boats used in Tripura navy are given below :

1. PINISH
2. PANSHI
3. KONDA
4. MARKOSH
5. LAKHAI
6. SARANGA
7. PALOAR
8. OTHAR.

Artillery

In Tripura, Vijay Manikya, as it appears from available information, was the first king to organise Artillery as an arm of war.²⁴ In organising this arm, Vijay Manikya depended solely on the

Portuguese - he employed them as soldiers. This process continued to the days of Amar Manikya.²⁵

The kings of Tripura, had to suffer much for such dependence on essentially mercenary soldiers. During Amar Manikya's time, the Portuguese soldiers secretly joined hands with Sikandar Shah, the king of Arakan, and they handed over the thanas in Chittagong to the Arakan king.²⁶ It is inexplicable why the kings of Tripura did not try to train up local soldiers for artillery or to manufacture cannons.

In conclusion, it may be pointed out that the kings of Tripura sought the help of the Afghan and the Portuguese for the proper organisation of the Cavalry and Artillery respectively. This was the period when the British did not appear on the political scene of India. The above feature proves that the kings of Tripura from Dhanya Manikya to Amar Manikya were not narrow minded as they recruited not only the tribals and non-tribals of India for their army but also took the guidance of experts like the Afghan and the Portuguese for the proper organisation of their army.

References

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26. *Ibid.* p. 176.