

## Tribal Elements in the Coinage of Tripura

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The tribal people of Tripura are supposed to belong to the Bodo group. They are supposed to have once occupied parts of Assam, Bengal, Bangladesh<sup>1</sup> and other adjacent regions. Tipras, in earlier times, must have been numerically strong. Perhaps due to the increasing pressure of their population and able military leadership of its chieftains the Tipras became politically dominant and established their authority over all other tribes of the area. Sources for the study of the history of the Tipras are available at least from the fifteenth century. There are, however, certain indications in their coinage that reflect the tribal elements of their culture which forms the subject of this paper.

A silver rupee of King Ratnamanikya I was published by Vasant Choudhury and Parimal Ray.<sup>2</sup> Its reverse in the upper half contains fourteen vertical lines, over some of which passes a concave curve, possibly representing a garland of flowers. In the lower half is a three line legend in Assamese script that identifies the lines in the upper half as *chaturdasadeva*.<sup>3</sup> The legend does not contain any other worth while reference about the deities, hence, we have to look for their identification elsewhere.

The *Rajamala*<sup>4</sup> gives the names of the fourteen deities as Siva, Uma, Hari, Ma (or Lakshmi), Vani, Kumara, Ganesa, Brahma, Prithvi, Ganga, Abdi, Agni Kama and Himalaya. This however, is a Brahmanisation of the deities as visualised by the author of the *Rajamala*. Elsewhere<sup>5</sup>, we have shown that these Brahmanical deities are not likely to be the fourteen deities referred to on the coin mentioned above. This is also because we do not know of any Brahmanical group of fourteen deities. Not only this, the representation of the deities on the coin under discussion is totally different in nature than the iconography of the Brahmanical deities mentioned in the *Rajamala*.

The group of fourteen deities mentioned on the coin of Ratnamanikya, therefore, must represent the group of fourteen tribal deities of the Tipras of Tripura. The actual number of these deities is more than fourteen.<sup>6</sup> On the basis of the coin under discussion we can say that the number of these tribal deities originally was fourteen but later some more got added to it.

Another point of interest is that the evidence of Ratnamanikyas coin shows that the fourteen tribal deities were perhaps conceived of as human beings. The straight vertical lines on the coin may be taken as representing standing human figures. This is supported to some extent by two Tripura legends. One of these legends shows that the fourteen deities had climbed on top of a tree being afraid of a wild buffalo standing under the tree. Later a queen who happened to pass by that way rescued them by throwing her *risa* over the buffalo and taming it thereby. After this the deities came down and blessed her.<sup>7</sup> Another legend possibly originated to explain the origin of the deities in the form of heads. According to this legend, Dakshina, a king of Tripura, being defeated in a war fled from the scene of the battle with the fourteen heads of the killed deities.<sup>8</sup> This story implies their human form but was perhaps later invented to explain the worship of the deities in the form of heads.

We do not know why the fourteen *devata* type was not continued by the successors of Ratnamanikya. There is, however, some evidence that the Royal family continued to worship the fourteen tribal deities even in later times. A Chaturdasa devata temple was built at Udaipur in Saka 1572 (=A.D. 1650). This is perhaps the earliest known temple of Tripura.<sup>9</sup>

There is indication of some rivalry and conflict between the Tribalists and the Brahmanists in Tripura. The first indication is that the temple of the fourteen deities was built originally for Gopinath in 1572 Saka.<sup>10</sup> Tribal priests are also known to have espoused the cause of Chhatramanikya against Govindamanikya who was ousted later.<sup>11</sup> This shows that the two main religious groups - the tribal priests and the Brahmanas - were constantly trying to secure royal patronage to further their own vested interests.

The other figure of a tribal nature is found on a coin of King Mukutamanikya. This figure that is depicted on the reverse of a coin dated in Saka 1411 (=A.D. 1490) is identified

with Garuda.<sup>12</sup> By some it has also been described as "the figure of an Eagle-like (?) bird".<sup>13</sup> We have elsewhere<sup>14</sup> shown that the depiction cannot be taken as that of a Garuda as it does not bear any of the characteristic iconographic features of Garuda.

Tribal lore of Tripura knows of two bird deities. One of these is the wife of Achu Sibrai. According to the legend Achu Sibrai was meditating on two sacred stones for the creation of the Reangs, while his wife was hatching two eggs. She became hungry after sometime and brought the two stones to her nest to eat. But as she could not eat them she hatched them too.<sup>15</sup>

The other composite figure is suggested by a Rupini folk tale.<sup>16</sup> According to this story, a man after the death of his wife, sent his two daughters to stay with his younger brothers family. His elder daughter being of an independent nature was continuously illtreated by her aunt. When she complained about it to his father he also beat her and asked her to stay with and obey the commands of her aunt. A stork flying above the sky was deeply hurt. He called his flock and they started flying in the sky overhead. One of them asked the girl if they could help her out of her misery. The girl asked them to give her one feather each. All the storks complied and gave her one feather each. Collecting all the feathers the girl stitched two wings for herself, glued them to her body and flew away saying I have become a *Nowi*. I will fly with them, and flew away.

There is another version of the story too. This version is slightly different from the earlier one. According to this version a couple had a daughter and a son. The couple used to go out to work in the fields every day leaving the children at home. Their daughter being elder looked after her brother and cooked meal etc. One day her mother forgot to instruct her about the cooking. When the parents were going, the girl shouted and asked what to cook? *Dangte* curry, her mother shouted back. The girl misunderstood her mother and thought that she was asked to cook the meat of her brother. Therefore, she killed and cooked him. When on their return the parents came to know of it they beat the poor girl, put her inside a basket and kept thus in the *verandah* at the back of the house and left for work. One day a big *Nowi* bird came flying around that side. The girl requested her for some feathers. The bird taking pity

on the girl dropped many feathers. Now the girl requested some children of the village to stuck those feathers into her body and open the basket. Thereafter, the girl flew away with the *Nowi* bird.<sup>17</sup>

Over the centuries this story may have undergone many changes. It is possible that in the original version the girl flew away with the support of the *Nowi* birds.<sup>18</sup> The figure as depicted on our coin is without wings. In place of wings, on her sides are drawn two birds supporting closely the central figure that is almost human bodied with legs ending in what may be called its claws.

### References

1. S. K. Chatterji, *Kirata Jana Kriti* (1974), pp. 45-6.
2. *JNSI*, XXVII, pp. 111-13.
3. *Ibid.*
4. *Rajamala* (Ed. K. P. Sen, Agartala, TE 1336 (1927), pp. 16.
5. Jai Prakash Singh, "On the identification of the Chaturdasa devata on a coin of Ratnamanikya," *Journal of the Indian Academy of Numismatics and Sigilography*.
6. These deities are Matai Katar, Lam, Pra, San-Grama, Himalaya, Tui-ma. Mailu-ma, Khulu-ma, Burha-cha and his sons Banirao and Thani-rao, two brothers, Goraiya and Kalaiya and the seven Budirak sisters, etc. Saigal, *Tripura*, Delhi, 1973, pp. 71-72.
7. J. Gan Chaudhuri, *Tripura, The land and its people* (Delhi, 1980), p. 164 ; of also, O. Saigal, *Tripura*, p.
8. *Ibid.* This legend may also be taken to show that perhaps these were originally military leaders of the Tripuris who were later deified.
9. Adris Banerji, *Temples of Tripura* (Varanasi, 1968), pp. 9, 13 ; cf. also K. D. Menon, *Tripura District Gazeteers* (Tripura, 1975,) p. 69.
10. *Ibid*
11. K. D. Menon, *Tripura District Gazeteers* (Tripura, 1975) p. 89.
12. V. Choudhury and P. Ray, *JAIH*, vol. VII, pp. 171-174 ; R.C. Majumdar, *History of Medieval Bengal*, p. 356 ; Ramanimohan Sarma, *Coinage of Tripura*, p. 16.

13. K. D. Menon, *Tripura District Gazeteers*, p. 76. N. R. Roychoudhury, *Tripura through the Ages*, p. 105, follows Menon.
14. Jai Prakash Singh, *N. I. Bulletin*, vol. 17, No 12 (Dec. 1983), pp. 392-94.
15. O. Saigal, *Tripura* (Delhi, 1978), pp. 100-101.
16. *Ibid*, pp. 144-145. Also Jai Prakash Singh, *N. I. Bulletin*, vol. 17, No. 12 (Dec. 1983), pp. 392-394 for both the stories.
17. J. Gan Choudhury, *Ibid.*, p. 175.
18. Cf. photograph of the coin accompanying the paper in *JAIH*, vol. VII, cited above.