



SHAPING HISTORY: FEMININE FIGURES IN THE EARLY VOLUMES OF 'SRI RAJMALA'

Rohan Ray

Guest Lecturer, Maharaja Bir Bikram College, Agartala, Tripura

Abstract: Tripura is one of the northeastern states of India. On the scale of the geographical area, it appears small but on the aspect of history, culture, and heritage it has a vast sphere. From being ruled by the Kings of the Manikya dynasty to a full-fledged state under the Indian Union it has witnessed a long journey of constitutional transformation. To unearth the royal history, acquaint with the past, and reconstruct the chronology of Tripura, scholars are still heavily dependent on a primary source named, 'Sri Rajmala', a chronicle of the royal family of Tripura. Women played an equally pivotal role along with men in shaping the history of mankind but surprisingly most of the time history remains silent about them. Through this paper, I have attempted to find out about the prominent feminine figures mentioned in the first two volumes of 'Sri Rajmala' who shaped the course of Tripura's history. The fundamental objective of this paper is to know the influential females represented in the the first two volumes of the 'Sri Rajmala' minutely and present their contribution in a systematic synthesis. This paper is also a small initiative for the history enthusiast to see Tripura's history from a different perspective of 'women & history' and to carry out further study and enhance subjective knowledge.

Keywords: Rajmala, Women, Tripura, Manikya, Kings

Introduction

Tripura is a small hilly state in northeastern India which Bangladesh surrounds from three sides. Before independence, it was a princely state ruled by as many as 185 kings of the Manikya dynasty who claimed their descent from the legendary Lunar dynasty. 'Literary sources' in history played an important role in reconstructing past events and systematically analysing them. The sources available to reconstruct the history of Tripura are inadequate but among all these available sources 'Sri Rajmala' is considered as the most important one. As the title suggests here, I limit all the discussion centred around a few influential female characters of Tripura's history on the lines of 'Sri Rajmala'. While discussing the stories and contributions of these notable female figures few references to women's position in the erstwhile society come along naturally. As we know despite innumerable achievements or accomplishments history is silent about women most of the time. 'Sri Rajmala' is also not beyond this cliché. But it should be accepted that this chronicle contains

valuable information regarding a few influential women and most of them were queens. However, it doesn't hold adequate information regarding the common woman and their stories of that time.

About 'Sri Rajmala'

Earlier the deeds and achievements of the kings of Tripura used to be memorised and passed on to the next generation orally by the royal priest. Maharaja Dharma Manikya (C. 1431-1462 A. D.) was the first King who took the initiative to compile these stories into a text. In this connection, he employed two of his court poets, Sukresvar Deva Sarman & Banerdeva Sarman in the middle of the 15th century. They were guided by Durlabhendra chantai¹. Subsequently, five other Kings Maharaja Amar Manikya, Maharaja Govinda Manikya, Maharaja Ramganga Manikya, Maharaja, Maharaja Kashi Chandra Manikya & Maharaja Krishna Kishore Manikya continued the legacy as they patronised the compilation work of the other volumes of the text. Thus, 'Sri Rajmala' consists of six volumes from different timelines. Apart from Sukresvar & Banerdeva the other composers of the remaining volumes were Rana Chatur Narayan (Vol. II), Gangadhar Siddhanta-Vagisa (Vol. III), Durgamani Uzir, Jaydeb Uzir (Vol. IV) & Durgamani Uzir (Vol. V & VI) respectively. In the 20th century, all these books were systematically arranged and published (1341 T. E.) under the editorship of Shri K. P. Sen, who named it 'Sri Rajmala' though, 'Sri' does not occur in any colophon. Unfortunately, the last two volumes of this series have been lost in recent times along with a lot of valuable information. 'Sri Rajmala' is considered as the most reliant among all the available sources to rewrite the past of Tripura. Along with serving as the chronology of the Kings and chronicle of the royal family, it sketches a vivid picture of the socio-economic and political life of that time. All the volumes of 'Sri Rajmala' were composed in Bengali verses in different periods of the timeline and considered as celebrated literary works hence, it is a dependable source and indicates the chronic evolution of the Bengali language and literature as well. The first volume of the 'Sri Rajmala' contains various accounts of divine intervention and legends and one should extract historical evidence cautiously by overlooking such biases. In comparison to this, other volumes have much more dependable and logical explanations of the events.

Maharani Hiravati

In the 'Tripur Khanda' of the first volume, a king named, Tripur became the King after his father Daitya passed away. He was an oppressive ruler by nature and indulged himself in every sort of evil deeds and sins. "He considered himself to be a God. He forbade others to perform sacrifices & make gifts."² Long years passed in like this and at the end of Dvapara Yuga, lord Shiva killed him to save the oppressed. Without a King, the subjects of Tripura faced destitution and anarchy. They migrated to the neighbouring Hedamba kingdom to live upon begging. However, there they faced extreme humiliation and to get rid of all the difficulties they worshipped lord Shiva with various sacrifices and offerings for 7 days & 7 nights. Being impressed with their devotion Shiva granted a boon in the form of a great King who will be born to Queen Hiravati. Regarding this, Shiva instructed her to perform 'madan puja' and also propagated that the child would be known as Shiva's son. At the end of the ten months, a child was born to Queen Hiravati who became famous in the name of Trilochana and marked himself one of the legendary kings of Tripura.

¹ Chantai: Royal priest and prime worshipper of the fourteen deities.

² Nath, Dr. N. C., Sri Rajmala (Vol-I to Vol-IV), p. 19, 20.

Here the intervention of lord Shiva depicted in this part of the book is a result of the fertile imagination and exaggeration of the composer to legitimise the authority of the King among the subjects. But apart from this, we witnessed the mention of Queen Hiravati here which asserts that she was defiantly an important figure at that time hence, got mentioned in the chronicle. There must be a power vacuum between the death of Tripur and the emergence of Trilochana as a powerful King. During this turbulent time, Hirvati might have acted as an interim ruler with the help of her council of ministers and provided the distressed subjects with an able King later on. Maybe to commemorate Queen Hiravati's able leadership during turmoil and defend the royal lineage she was mentioned multiple times in this part.

Bravery of Mahadevi

The Chemthum Fa Khandas of the first volume talks about the bravery of Mahadevi. Chemthung Fa was a King of Tripura who picked up a contention with the sultan of Gauda.³ According to Bengali Rajmala, there was a Samanta or feudatory of the Sultan of Bengal named, Hiravanta Khan. He earned the zamindari rights of Meharkul in lieu of sending a boat full of jewels annually as a tribute to the Sultan of Bengal. According to this arrangement, a vessel full of valuables was en route to Gauda but it was plundered in the middle by the King of Tripura. In addition to this, his principality Meherkul was also sacked. As soon as the news reached to the Sultan, he dispatched a strong army consisting of two to three lakh troops in retaliation. Being frightened by the number of the Gauda army Maharaja Chemthum Fa made up his mind to conclude peace with the invaders without putting any resistance and his generals and ministers gave their concurrence. Then Mahadevi or the chief queen appeared in the picture. She rebuked Maharaja by calling him 'jackal of the forest'⁴ for his unwillingness to defend his kingdom and for making such a cowardly decision to conclude peace. A meeting consisting of army generals was arranged immediately in her presence where she addressed the troops and encouraged them to fight against the invaders under her leadership. Before leaving for the battle Mahadevi arranged a feast for the warriors and served them heaps of rice, the meat of mutton, pork, goats, deer ducks and wild fowl along with wine. All the army men ate joyfully and the next morning, they marched with a promise to defend the Kingdom. Both armies encountered each other on the battlefield, a fierce conflict took place. Mahadevi led the army on the battlefield climbing upon an elephant, while Maharaja Chemthum Fa sat on tusk. In this battle, Tripura forces stood victorious and chased the retreating Sultani army in three routes. In this way, Meherkul was annexed by Tripura.

From this particular portion of 'Sri Rajmala' we get a clear picture of the position and power of the chief Queen. When the King suffered from trembling determination and fear of the enemy, it was his consort and queen of the state who took up the leadership of the army. In this text, it is stated that Mahadevi led the army in the middle of the battleground riding on an elephant which indicates that during that time particularly few women of the royal family used to have arm training and knowledge of war strategy. Heroism or bravery was seen as a virtue and was gender-neutral as it could be associated with both males and females. This win against the Sultan of Gauda was indeed a big achievement under the strong statesmanship of Mahadevi and surely inspired generation after generation. This might be the reason when Pratham Lahar or the first part of the 'Sri

³ Gauda was the capital of the Bengal Sultanate.

⁴ Nath, Dr. N. C., Sri Rajmala (Vol-I to Vol-IV), p. 53.

Rajmala' was composed in Bengali later on in the 14th century the accomplishment of Mahadevi was mentioned there extensively. It also breaks the patriarchal stereotype at that age and establishes the idea of feminism.

Kamaladevi

The mention of Maharani Kamaladevi is there in the 'Dhanya Manikya Khanda' of the Dwitiya Lahar or the second volume of 'Sri Rajmala'. Maharaja Dhanya Manikya was regarded as the greatest ruler of Tripura in the medieval period and Kamaladevi was his chief queen. The Dhanya Manikya Khanda is full of the accounts of Maharaja's personal achievements, war victories and noble deeds. In this part, Maharani Kamaladevi, the chief queen was mentioned multiple times. In the early years of the King's regime, his power was checked and the state was virtually ruled by the ten generals who distributed five thousand royal army to each. Kamaladevi was the daughter of Daitya Narayan, the supreme general of this military aristocracy controlling the state machinery virtually. Being the daughter of the Senapati it is evident that she was an influential figure. "Queen Kamala had a number of big ponds (dirghika) excavated in different places. Owing to her good fortune no grass grew on them. She was devoted to gods, brahmanas and her preceptors. She had an excellent character. She resembled Kamala of Visnu and Parvati of Siva."⁵ This is how she was depicted in the verses of 'Sri Rajmala.' Earlier the Kings used to excavate lakes to assert their authority, here we witness the chief queen did so. Kamalasagar Lake near Kasba is one of her glorious deeds. The locals believe that one can get rid of diseases by drinking its holy water. Apart from this, there is another Kamalasagar in Udaipur. While analysing this, we should also take into account that then the power of the generals was not curtailed and the King was dependent upon them. So, Kamaladevi must have some prerogatives due to her father's position which was enhanced further because of the marriage. After that King took the initiative to consolidate his power by destroying this military aristocracy. As part of this, a conspiracy was hatched in the palace and all the generals were put to death including his father-in-law, Daitya Naryan. But no resentment from Kamaladevi was recorded meaning, she took the side of her husband and supported this act of the King. Maharaja Dhanya Manikya founded a monastery (temple) called Dharma Matha and dedicated a large lake named, Dhanya Sagar. It took two years to excavate this lake. He settled various castes of people on the four sides of this lake. "The chief queen wanted to see the digging of the Dhanya Sagara. So she went there at night attended by a number of women of the army personnel. One some moon-lit night she visited the place along with other women, and fed those present with meat and drink to her great delight. Thus King Dhanya Manikya and the great queen (Maharani) Kamala passed their days in great joy."⁶ These verses depict the queen's visit to the lake on a moonlit night raising an apprehension regarding the 'Purdah system.' This event can be seen as a simple will of Maharani to visit the place at night. But if it was not the case then there could have been two reasons behind that either it was due to the purdah system or must be a ritual to visit on a moonlit night. However, these interpretations were solely based on logical inference and no such evidence exists to prove them historically. But we have clear evidence to establish the fact that the practice of 'Sati' prevailed. In the Second Lahar of Rajmala there is a verse that goes like this –

⁵ Nath, Dr. N. C., Sri Rajmala (Vol-I to Vol-IV), p. 71.

⁶ Nath, Dr. N. C., Sri Rajmala (Vol-I to Vol-IV), p. 77.

*"Kata kal sukhe nripe Rajatta karila
Daivagati maharajer basanta hailo
Ei-rupe maharajar swargo prapti hailo
Mahadevi Kama je sahagami gelo"*⁷

Dr. N. C. Nath in his book 'Sri Rajmala' (Vol-I to Vol-IV) interpreted these lines in English as, "The King ruled happily for a pretty long period. Then luck would have it he was attacked with small-pox, and thus he attained heaven. The chief queen Kamala accompanied him laying down her life in the funeral pyre of the king."⁸ This is not the first instance of sati in Rajmala there are so many instances of this practice before and after Kamala Mahadevi.

In another place of Dhanya Manikya Khanda while depicting the books which were written under the royal orders of the King he was addressed as the lord or husband of Kamala.

*"Shri Dhanya Manikya Raja Kamalr Pati
Utkal Khanda Panchali rachaila mahamati
Jyotisher Yatra ratnakara-nidhi ar
Panchali rachaila Raja loke bujhibar"*⁹

Meaning "The following books were written by the orders of the great king Dhanya Manikya, the lord of Kamala (the queen): Utkal Khanda Panchali, Yatra ratnakara-nidhi, a treatise on astrology, and a potential rendering of the same for easy understanding of the people."¹⁰

The Tale of Balagama

'Sri Rajmala' recorded multiple conflicts between Maharaja Dhanya Manikya of Tripura and the sultan of Gauda. On one occasion, the sultan sent a formidable army under the leadership of Gauda Mallik but it was repealed by the General Raykacag of Tripura. In retaliation, Sultan Hossain Shah sent another campaign consisting of a huge army against Tripura under Haitan Khan & Kara Khan. Tripura troops put up stiff resistance but could not check the advancement of the Gauda army. Haitan Khan reached near the capital Rangamati winning one after another fortress in a quick succession. Maharaja Dhanya Manikya then inspected the enemy soldiers and their camps from an upward position and summoned all the dayn or witches of the state. He addressed them by saying,

*"Amar praja khao tora dayn sab lok
Ekhon khao na keno Haitan Khan sanmukh"*¹¹

Meaning, "O, Witches, you always devour any subject. But why not you devour Haitan Khan before your very eyes."¹² On hearing the words of the King one youthful witch Balagama bowed down to the King and assured that she would destroy the invading forces with her supernatural powers. These words pleased the King & he rewarded Balagama instantly with a palace. Accordingly, she made all the arrangements on Tuesday night. As part of this, she fastened two winnowing fans at the upper ends of her arms and flew into the sky at a height

⁷ Sen, K. P., Sri Rajmala, Vol-II, p. 33.

⁸ Nath, Dr. N. C., Sri Rajmala (Vol-I to Vol-IV), p. 91

⁹ Sen, K. P., Sri Rajmala, Vol-II, P. 29

¹⁰ Nath, Dr. N. C., Sri Rajmala (Vol-I to Vol-IV) p. 87

¹¹ Sen, K. P., Sri Rajmala, Vol-II, p. 26.

¹² Nath, Dr. N. C., Sri Rajmala (Vol-I to Vol-IV), p. 85.

of 20 cubits. After flying for some time, she landed into the river water and the river started flowing upwards. As a result of this avichar-karma¹³ the valley of the river dried up. The invading army fell for this trick and put up their tents in the dry river bed. After seven days the witch got out of the water at night and the river Gomati resumed its normal flow at once. The enormous current of the river Gomati washed away their tents with their elephants, and horses leaving them in ultimate shock. Their misery doubled with the surprise raid of the Tripura army. Thus, Haintan Khan and his troops were compelled to retreat and Maharaja Dhanya Manikya had the last laugh.

So many interesting observations can be made from this story. It was evident that witchcraft or Tantra-Sadhana was part of the culture during that time and women used to be active participants in these ritualistic mysterious activities. However, the story is the result of fertile imagination, there must be a decisive battle fought between Tripura and Gauda troops where invading forces were defeated and Balagama, a local lady, played a pivotal role in that battle. The idea of using natural entities like rivers as weapons can be traced in this part which is a great example of war strategy and still relevant in modern times.

Queen Punyavati & Lakshmi

After destroying the power of Maharaja Indra Manikya and his associates all the generals under the leadership of Daitya Narayan decided to reinstate the Manikya dynasty. Accordingly, Daitya Narayan went to Hirapur and brought back Vijay Dev to the capital where his coronation ceremony took place. He was married to the daughter of Daitya Narayan, the supreme general of the state. Maybe her name was Lakshmi and another queen was Punyavati (wedded later). Punyavati was described as the chief queen of Maharaja and described thus in 'Sri Rajmala': "His chief queen was named Punyavati. She was a woman of lucky birth in the Tripura dynasty. As she was by name Punyavati so was she highly esteemed all over the land and abroad. She donated a large number of villages to the outstanding Brahmanas in the Homnabad district as well as Tisina. The deeds of the gift were inscribed on a copper plate in the name of Queen Punyavati. A few verses were written and in them she was mentioned as Punyavati, Sati (chaste) etc. She donated land beyond measure, but in every case with the formalities. As she was named, so did she perform meritorious deeds."¹⁴

As she was dedicated in multiple verses independently in the 'Sri Rajmala,' it is evident that she was influential and hence, mentioned separately, which indicates her importance.

After making Maharaja Vijaya Manikya the King of Tripura his father-in-law Daitya Narayan, the supreme general and his associates vested all the real powers of the administration virtually and made him a mere puppet. Under the favour of Daitya Narayan his brother Durlabh Narayan became reckless and oppressed the subjects miserably. To destroy their supremacy and power Maharaja Vijay Manikya hatched a conspiracy with Madhav who was the eldest brother-in-law of Daitya Narayan. Initially, Madhav did not want to be a part of this plan due to the fear of the chief queen who was also the daughter of Daitya Narayan. But ultimately the King won him and convinced him to assassinate the Daitya Narayan. According to the conspiracy Madhav killed Daitya Narayan, the supreme commander and Maharaja Vijay Manikya suppressed his associates and took over the ultimate control of the state. Madhav was instructed to go to Bhushana and stay there. The King

¹³ Avichar-Karma: Destructive rites.

¹⁴ Nath, Dr. N. C., Sri Rajmala (Vol-I to Vol-IV), p. 96.

said, "If any farman letter in my name is directed to you, you should not carry out the instruction contained therein by my order. When you will see my diamond ring, only then you will have to come in full confidence (that the letter is mine)." Madhav acted according to the instructions of the King and went to Bhushana. In the meantime, Queen Lakshmi, the daughter of Daitya Narayan came to know about the secret plot and decided to avenge Madhav. When the King was on a hunting excursion leaving behind his diamond ring, the queen forged a letter by his name and sent the ring along with the letter to call Madhav. Madhav fell for the trick and he came back. On reaching the capital he was assassinated by the order of the queen. As soon as the King learnt about the incident, he sent her queen to exile in a forest and wedded another who became queen.

So here the observations are that King Vijay Manikya staged the assassination of her father-in-law to establish his power over the kingdom and consolidate his authority. Unlike Maharani Kamaladevi of Dhanya Manikya, Queen Lakshmi did not take her husband's side and killed his sister's wife in connection with the conspiracy against her father, Daitya Narayan which led Maharaja Vijay Manikya to send her to exile in a forest and marry Punyavati who was given the designation of the chief queen. From this, it is evident that marital relationships were established sometimes in the persuasion of political aspirations and interests. Women used to participate in palace politics and conspiracies. It is learned that the place where Queen Lakshmi used to stay during her exile was named after her Lakshmipur which changed later on to 'Hirapur' by Maharaja Uday Manikya.

Jaya Mahadevi

Vijay Manikya was one of the greatest kings of the Manikya dynasty. He was the contemporary of the Mughal emperor Akbar. Akbar's courtier Abul Fazal mentioned him in the book named, 'Ain-i-Akbari.' At the end of his reign, he understood that his son, Ananta, heir to the throne was not fit to be a good ruler. To secure Ananta's future Maharaja Vijaya Manikya took the help of a matrimonial tie. He married the prince to the daughter of Gopiprasad Narayan. Gopiprasad Naryan was the army chief or the Pradhan Senapati who reached this position gradually. The farsighted king Vijay Manikya passed away after putting his son under the supervision of an able army chief and Father-in-law. Gopiprasad then enthroned his son-in-law and from this time onwards he came to be known as Ananta Manikya. From the beginning, Gopiprasad captured all the powers making Ananta Manikya a mere puppet. Even the King had to visit Gopiprasad's house to have his daily meals. "The seven-year-old chief queen always pleaded with the King thus. 'Being King why do you take your food daily at the father-in-law's house? You cannot discriminate between good and evil, and have chosen the path of death?'"¹⁵ Hearing these words from the queen the King confessed his inability to override his father-in-law's order as his father handed him over to Gopiprasad. Days passed like these and Gopiprasad became ambitious to become the King. He hatched a conspiracy to kill the king and entrusted this job to his sister's son, Vir Madan. The conspiracy saw success as Vir Madan assassinated Maharaja Ananta Manikya. Thus, Gopiprasad ascended the throne by killing his own son-in-law and took the title of Uday Manikya. The daughter and chief queen of Maharaja Ananta Manikya rebuked his father by saying, "Thou art a vile sinner. Since thou hast cut short this royal dynasty, thou art destined to dwell in the razor-edge like hell. Thou hast earned a stigma in the old age, which will lead thee to the hell. By murdering the King thou hast become a

¹⁵ Nath, Dr. N. C., Sri Rajmala (Vol-I to Vol-IV), p. 116.

sinner.”¹⁶ Maharani Jaya Mahadevi wished to become a Sati along with the dead Maharaja but Uday Manikya held him back from accompanying the King.

“The Chief Queen Jaya, the widow of Ananta Manikya again started speaking with great excitement in her mind; ‘Thou most nefarious sinner, thou hast not allowed me to accompany the king. Thou hast murdered the king and art now well content. By slaying my husband, thou hast misappropriated the Kingdom, and the wife alone remains outside thy grip’. So, saying the queen attempted to ascend the throne. The king uttered ‘Ram, Ram’ and got down from the throne. He then removed the throne to the village Candrapur. ‘You may live in your husband’s capital. I will make a new Capital at the village of Candrapur,’ he said to the queen.”¹⁷

So, from this part, we come to know about the matrimonial relationship between the royal family and the noble family. But the most interesting observation here is the chief queen’s advice to Maharaja, her husband to get rid of her father’s grip which indicates her concern for the husband and as well as for the fate of the royal family. Unlike, Maharani Lakshmi of Vijay Manikya, she took the side of her husband and did not hesitate to rebuke and curse her own father who killed her husband.

Conclusion

‘Sri Rajmala’ is the most reliable literary source on which one could rely to know and understand the history of Tripura. But while considering the chronicle one should extract the facts cautiously as the book is full of divine intervention and fictional stories. All the volumes of ‘Sri Rajmala’ were written under royal patronage so there might be an inherited bias to present the events in the favour of the kings. Here our focus is to extract as much as information about women’s position and their influence over the history of Tripura. From the facts, it is evident that the practice of sati, child marriage and polygamy prevailed at that time. Marriages were sometimes based on political interests and political gains. Various instances are recorded in the text where we witness the authority and power of the queen, though the society used to be patriarchal. There were multiple occasions where we have seen a conflict between the King and the army chief. Many of the times the chief queen used to be the daughter of the army chief and amidst these conflicts, they took either the sides of their husband or the side of their father. In conclusion, we can say that women used to take part in active politics and lead the army often on the battlefield. Like the king instances of places we have found which were named after certain queens. The practice of witchcraft by the females was another aspect that we have extracted in our work. Among the four available volumes here we have only analyzed the first two volumes from the perspective of influential woman characters who shaped the history of Tripura. I hope this paper will lay the foundation to carry out more research on certain topics and the remaining volumes of ‘Sri Rajmala.’

¹⁶ Nath, Dr. N. C., Sri Rajmala (Vol-I to Vol-IV), p. 117.

¹⁷ Nath, Dr. N. C., Sri Rajmala (Vol-I to Vol-IV), p. 118.

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