



# Outlines Of State Administration In Medieval Tripura (15<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> Century C.E)

Dr. Deepayan Chakraborty

Assistant Professor, Department of History

Rabindranath Thakur Mahavidyalaya

Bishalgarh, Tripura

**Abstract:** 'Early state' is a term used in state formation study to denote pre-modern non-industrialised state. The medieval kingdom of Tripura under the rule of the Māṇikya dynasty was one of such states. The present paper intends to shed light on the administrative structure of this state during the 15<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> Century period. It will solely concentrate on the civil aspect of the administration during the chosen time-period. The contours of this administration in terms of the nature of kingship, officials manning this structure, tribal and non-tribal local administration in the hills and plains, etc., will be reviewed. The traditional literary sources as well as the existing secondary works on the history of the state have been used whenever necessary to prepare the paper.

**Keywords:** Early State, Tripura kingdom, administration, sanskritisation, Rājmalā

## Introduction

'Early state' is a term used in state formation study to denote pre-modern non-industrialised states. The 13<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> Century C.E period saw the formation of several early states in North East India, which arose out of tribal bases. The kingdom of Tripura under the rule of the Māṇikya dynasty is one of such states. The present paper intends to shed light on the administrative structure of this state during the 15<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> Century period. As one published paper of the present contributor on the army and warfare of Medieval Tripura has already discussed the military administration of the state,<sup>1</sup> the present paper will solely concentrate on the civil aspect of the administration during the chosen time-period.

## Literature Survey

As with any research on the history of Tripura pertaining to the 15<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> Century C.E period, the most important primary source for the present paper too is Rājmalā, edited by Kaliprasanna Sen,<sup>2</sup> which was the official political history of the kingdom patronised by the Māṇikya kings. A few studies on the Māṇikya administration have been carried out, but these works focus on the period that starts with the beginning of the British influence in the state.<sup>3</sup> The present paper is the first endeavour to discuss exclusively the medieval state administration under the Māṇikya kings.

## Central Administration

Although the traditional literary sources of the state, e.g. Rājmalā, claim a hoary antiquity for the origin of the kingdom, such claims lack concrete archaeological proof. The first archaeological evidences in support of the existence of the Tripura state come in the form of the silver commemorative coins issued by Ratna Māṇikya I in Śaka 1386 (1464 C.E).<sup>4</sup> Kailas Chandra Singha, one of the earliest to write on the history of the Māṇikya state on modern lines, says that it was during Ratna Māṇikya I's period that a proper state administration was established here.<sup>5</sup> This structure was continued, with some occasional minor modifications, by his descendants at least up to the 18<sup>th</sup> Century. It was modelled, to a great extent,

on the administration of the Bengal Sultanate. The civil administration had two aspects -- the central set-up at the top directly controlled by the king and local administrative bodies among various tribes and non-tribal populace. At the apex of this administrative hierarchy was the king.

### Kingship

Though this paper argues that it was around 1464 C.E that an early state in the proper sense of the term was established in Tripura, this development was the culmination of a long process of migration, displacements and various experiences of ‘statecraft’, which saw the Tripuri tribe<sup>6</sup> moving from the Kapili valley in Assam to the land that later became known as *Tripurā*. A detailed discussion on these has been done by the present contributor in one of his published papers<sup>7</sup> and will not be repeated here.

The Tripuri polity moved decisively from chieftdom to kingdom and kingship got its final shape when Ratna Phā ascended the throne in 1464 C.E (as attested by numismatic evidences) with the help of the then Sultan of Bengal (*Gauḍeśvara*), Ruknuddin Bārbak Shāh and was invested by the latter with the royal title *Māṇikya*, to be used by all the subsequent monarchs of the kingdom. The lion impression, the royal insignia of the Tripuri monarchs found on their coins, came up due to the Bengal Sultanate’s influence.<sup>8</sup> The cult of fourteen gods (originally tribal, but later sanskritised as *caturdaśa deva*), which became the tutelary cult of the *Māṇikya* rulers, has been claimed in *Rājmalā* to have been established by the mythical king Trilocana.<sup>9</sup> Setting aside the historicity of the claim, this myth probably represents the early signs of the legitimisation process that had started even before the entry of the Tripuri tribe into Tripura itself and would later contribute to the founding of the *Māṇikya* state.

Throughout the medieval period, the king remained the supreme authority both in the civil and military affairs. Sanskritisation further provided a halo of sanctity to the rulers. One of the most important features of this sanskritisation process was to claim the *Māṇikya* rulers to be the descendants of the lunar dynasty (*candravaṃśa*) of the *itihāsa-purāṇa* tradition. However, despite such exalted status, kings had to contend with various centrifugal tendencies such as the regional and tribal autonomous authorities and internal revolts. The royal authority often depended on the personality/ability of particular kings, and several times it faced challenges due to palace intrigues and intransigence of some high officials of the state or members of the royal dynasty. The power and prestige of the royal office reached high level during the reigns of strong rulers like Ratna *Māṇikya* I (1464-1488 C.E?), Dhanya *Māṇikya* (1490-1515 C.E?) or Vijaya *Māṇikya* II (1532-1563/64 C.E) and used to reach the nadir during the periods of the ‘weak’ ones.

However, some continuing factors like the identification of the kingship with the royal title *Māṇikya*, the legitimacy gained by the descendants of Ratna *Māṇikya* I, religious orientation, etc., remained attached to the idea of kingship throughout the period of the existence of the kingdom. In fact, these were the props that sustained the *Māṇikya* kingship centuries after centuries and made the dynasty one of the longest-ruling ones in India.

### High Officials from the Royal Dynasty

There is reference in *Rājmalā* of the *Bāro-ghariā* group, formed outside Tripura, who had the exclusive right to become kings.<sup>10</sup> It appears that this was an attempt within the tribe to create a hereditary nobility. The relevant sources do not specify the clans or families who were included in this category. However, references are there regarding some administrative posts being exclusively reserved for the members of the royal dynasty or king’s relations. They were next to the king in the administrative hierarchy. In other words, the entry to such posts required kinship ties. The most important of them was *Yuvarāja* (pronounced *Jubarāj* in local terminology, meaning crown prince) who used to be the anointed successor of the reigning king. King Kalyāṇa *Māṇikya* (1626-1660 C.E) was apparently the first<sup>11</sup> to introduce the post when he selected his son Govindadeva (later Govinda *Māṇikya*) as the *Yuvarāja*. Rāma *Māṇikya* (1676-1685 C.E) selected his brother-in-law Balibhīma Nārāyaṇa as the *Yuvarāja*, though this was an aberration. Traditionally, a prince of royal blood, not necessarily the eldest one, used to be selected for this post. Kalyāṇa *Māṇikya* also started the convention of assigning the title *Thākur* to the princes other than *Yuvarāja*. Earlier they had been using the archaic title *Phā*. These princes had some control over the revenue collection and army.

Rāma *Māṇikya* introduced the post of *Badaṭhākur*. The latter used to be in line to the throne next to *Yuvarāja*. The incumbent of this post had to collect elephants from the jungles to pay the ‘elephant tax’ to the Mughal authority and later, to the Nawab of Bengal. Its introduction created confusion in the succession process and led to the possibilities of intrigues and conspiracies. Its ill effects came to the fore

when Ghanaśyāma Baḍaṭhākur (later known as Mahendra Māṅikya) dethroned and later killed Ratna Māṅikya II in the early 18<sup>th</sup> Century.

### **Nobility and Non-Kin High Officials**

It is difficult for the studies on early states to differentiate between the civil and military functions of the state officials. Like in any other early state, in Medieval Tripura too the king himself used to lead both the wings. Kaliprasanna Sen observed that till Vijaya Māṅikya II's reign, the military generals used to control the civil administration.<sup>12</sup> Sometimes they controlled, killed or installed kings on the throne. Though Dhanya Māṅikya (1490 -1514/1515 C.E) reined in their power to a great extent, he too did not segregate these two organs of administration.

Vijaya Māṅikya II (1532-1563/64 C.E) faced much highhandedness of the military officials during his own rule as a minor and this probably prompted him to take some measures to solve the problem when he came of age. Indeed, the post-names like *Ujir* (Bengali form of *Wazir*), *Nāzir* (*Nājir* in Bengali) were first mentioned in the portion of Rājāmālā describing his reign.<sup>13</sup> But the same account refers to these supposedly civilian officials, particularly the *Nāzir*, performing military duties as well. Moreover, his commander-in-chief as well as the father-in-law of his successor Ananta Māṅikya (1564-1565 C.E), Gopīprasāda Nārāyaṇa, became the all-powerful administrator after his death and even captured the throne, killing Ananta Māṅikya. So, it appears that Vijaya Māṅikya II's efforts in separating the military and civil administration did not fructify properly. In fact, till major reforms took place during Birchandra Manikya's period (1862-1896), the administration had remained the same apart from some minor occasional changes, with the civil and military wings largely intertwined with each other.

Māṅikya administration had some hereditary as well as non-hereditary offices which created a class of nobility. True to its pre-modern features, this class had to perform both military and civil duties. However, some of these posts were primarily civil ones, with military duties coming into the fore only during emergencies. Some of such officials are described here:

**Cantāi** : The chief royal priest used to be the incumbent of this post. The nomenclature signifies its pre-sanskritised tribal identity. Cantāi apparently bridged the gap between the tribal and hinduised religious customs prevailing in the kingdom, at least at the elite level. As religion played a major role in the political and other affairs of the realm, Cantāi sometimes played political roles too.

**Ujir** : Modelled on the high office of *Wazir* (minister/prime minister) established in the Bengal Sultanate like some other Indo-Muslim states, this post, Kaliprasanna Sen claims, was introduced by Vijaya Māṅikya II to offset the powers of military generals and put the civil administration outside military influence.<sup>14</sup> However, Sen accepts that this measure did not yield the desired result. On the other hand, it has been averred<sup>15</sup> that this post was created by Ratna Māṅikya I himself, following the Bengal model. Kailas Chandra Singha informs that the incumbents of this post descended from the three Bengali gentlemen Ratna Māṅikya I had met in and brought from Bengal.<sup>16</sup> *Ujir* had to shoulder some military duties as well.

**Nāzir** : Pronounced *Nājir* in Bengali, this post was again an outcome of the Bengal Sultanate's influence. According to one scholar,<sup>17</sup> *Nāzir* was in charge of the police force to maintain internal law and order. They used to be recruited from among the close relatives of the king. They were the heads of the group of soldiers known as *Binandiyā*. Kaliprasanna Sen<sup>18</sup> says that the incumbent of this post used to be in charge of controlling the hill tribal soldiers and jails (*gārad*, probably temporary in nature) established by the hill soldiers in the capital. Informing hill chiefs about royal orders too was probably one of the duties of *Nāzir*.

**Dewān** : Like the same-named post in various Indo-Muslim states, the *Dewān* was in charge of the financial, particularly revenue, matters of the state. Kṛṣṇa Māṅikya appointed a separate *Dewān*, recruited from the hill people, for the hill areas.

Later, posts such as *Kotwāl Musib/Muchhib* (a high police official), *Kārākul* (probably a high clerical staff), *Nemujir* (functions not clearly described in the relevant sources) were introduced. The post of *Laskar* used to be in charge of distant or newly-acquired territories. The capital Rangamati (later renamed Udaipur)<sup>19</sup> remained the centre of the royal administration. Its location gave it equal command over the hilly and plain areas of the kingdom. It was here that the royal court used to sit. Some officials were there to maintain various court etiquette and conventions. However, in 1760 the capital was shifted to the present Old Agartala. From there it was again shifted --- this time to Agartala in the second quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century.

The king was the chief justice of the realm, and some extreme punishments such as beheading or trampling by elephants used to be meted out. But prior to Birchandra Manikya's reforms in the second

half of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, the judicial system was unsystematic and 'primitive'. No mention of any permanent jail maintained by the state is found. Though a hill court was there, the village chiefs were the ones who used to judge petty criminal or civil cases. When this hill court came up is not known. A rudimentary espionage system too was in place.

There were established ways in which the royal orders used to circulate among the tribal subjects.<sup>20</sup> *Kadbā* was a specially-made bamboo stick put in a place to denote the seizure of the concerned or adjoining property or banning entry into the concerned place. *Phurāi* was a royal insignia made of iron to circulate royal order by the *Binandiyā* troops in the hill areas. Rarely put in use during peacetimes, this was generally used to summon the hill subjects to assemble in a particular place. Animal blood-stained *Phurāi* meant the royal order to join the army for war. Every village was bound to pass on the *Phurāi* to the next village as quickly as possible. Bamboo-made *Phurāi* was known as *Wāthlong*. This practice of circulating royal orders continued till Birchandra Manikya's reforms in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century.

### Tribal and Local Autonomous Administrative Systems

There were two broad divisions of the realm which remained constant till its merger with the Union of India in 1949 – the hill areas inhabited almost exclusively by the tribes and the plains, by the Bengalees, both Hindus and Muslims. The former areas geographically correspond almost totally to the present Indian state of Tripura, while the Tripura plains fell in the areas to the east of the river Meghna in the present south-eastern Bangladesh. In both the areas, local administrative institutions and practices were in place. While there were some centrally appointed royal officials for local administration, considerable autonomies were accepted and granted both in the hills and plains.

The first mention of decentralisation in Rājmalā is found in relation to Dāngar Phā *alias* Dharma Māṅikya I, Ratna Māṅikya I's father, who divided his realm among his seventeen sons.<sup>21</sup> However, no evidence from any other source vouches for the historicity of this claimed measure. If at all such divisions had been made, later those were perhaps done away with by Ratna Māṅikya I or his successors. In the relevant sources, there is no reference to any regular division of the kingdom into provinces at any period.

Earlier in this paper the officials called *Laskar* have been referred to. Mentions are there in the relevant primary sources of stationing these officers in areas like Khaṅḍal (corresponding to the Noakhali region of the present Bangladesh) and Kailasahar in the northern part of Tripura.

Having thus discussed some of the royal officials appointed by the Māṅikya rulers from the top for local administration, it is now the turn of the **autonomous local administration** which arose among the **hill tribes**. This discussion is more of an exercise in speculation on the basis of the information pertaining to a later period. Being the majority tribe from which the royal house originated, the Tripuris/Tipras come first in this discussion. Presently they comprise about 60% of the total tribal population of the state. Though having a special position in the kingdom, the legitimisation process of kingship created distance between the exalted royal class and commoner Tripuris. Compared to some other tribes of the realm, they seemingly had lesser autonomy, as the identity of the kingdom itself was derived from them. As a result, they had more proximity to the central administration than other tribes. The Tripuris used to be divided into some branches. Some sections among them were entrusted with tribal religious rituals or carrying the royal insignia. Besides them, there were eleven branches (*dafā*), e.g. *Bāchāl*, *Daityasiṃ*, *Kuwāṅiyā*, *Siyuk*, etc., who had the exclusive right to perform traditional duties related to the royal court. Each village had a *Sardār* (chief) to take care of local affairs and carry out royal orders in their respective areas.

Some of the non-Tripuri tribes of the kingdom had originally been subdued by the Tripuris at the time of the formation of the Māṅikya state, but their administrative structures were incorporated in the new political set-up. Stray references in *Rājmalā* and the existence of internal administrative structures among some of these tribes during the modern era<sup>22</sup> indicate that tribes like the Reang (second largest tribe of the state), Jamatia, Mog, Kuki and Halam had their internal administrative systems with considerable autonomies even during the 15<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> Century C.E period. The present paper argues that most of these structures were originally independent chiefdoms before being absorbed into the Māṅikya realm during the 15<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> Century period. At the apex of each of these multiple-tiered autonomous bodies was a tribal chief (*Sāmanta Rājā*). The chief of the Reangs used to be called 'Rāi' and of the Jamatias, Hadā Akṛā. Similarly, the Kuki chief was known as 'Lāl'.

From within the tribes, the officials named *Missip* used to be nominated by the king. They used to stay in the royal court and maintained links between the royal administration and the tribes.<sup>23</sup> However, they have not been mentioned in *Rājmalā*, which leads one to doubt this post's existence in Medieval

Tripura. There was the tradition of *Hasam Bhojan* in which the hill tribal chiefs used to take part in a royal dinner with the king during the *Durgā Pujā* celebration every year. On these occasions the king used to come into direct contact with the chiefs. These, along with the traditional methods of circulating royal order in the hill villages mentioned earlier in this paper, were the ways in which the king used to keep in touch with his hill tribal subjects.

While the hills gave identity to the kingdom, the **Tripura plains** was its principal source of economic surplus. During the days of the Bengal Sultanate, i.e. in the pre-Mughal period, the areas controlled here by the Māṇikya kings varied, with regions exchanging hands between the Bengal Sultan, Tripura and even Arakan (presently in Myanmar). The landlords and local chiefs paid allegiance to the king and sometimes, when the latter got weakened or lost control, shifted their loyalty to the new ruler (generally the authority in Bengal).

According to *Rājmalā*,<sup>24</sup> the chiefs of Bhuluā, Sarāil, Sylhet, Itā, etc. (all in the present south-eastern Bangladesh), were ‘feudal lords’ (*sāmanta rājā*) under the Māṇikya kings in the medieval age. Kailas Chandra Singha refers to a custom in Medieval Tripura according to which the ‘feudal lord’ of Bhuluā (corresponding roughly to the Noakhali region of Bangladesh) used to apply royal mark (*Rājaṭīkā*) on the forehead of the newly ascending Tripura kings and present the first ‘feudal gift’ (*Nazar/Nazrānā*) to the latter.<sup>25</sup> There are references in the literary and epigraphic sources of Māṇikya kings making land donations to the Brahmins and even to Muslims (*Brahmottara*, *Āymā Sanad*, etc.), digging big ponds and building temples in the region.

In the early 17<sup>th</sup> Century, the Mughals occupied the plains of the state including the capital Udaipur for some time. Though some of these areas were reconquered, the king of Tripura formally became the *Zamindār* (landlord) of the Tripura plains (rechristened *Chāklā Roshanābād*) under the Bengal Nawabs within the overarching but nominal Mughal suzerainty in the first half of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century C.E. The Māṇikya sovereignty was maintained in the hills though. However, as the Tripura kings in relation to the plains became landlords of the Nawabs, the latter began to have say in the internal affairs of the state, albeit in a limited way. In 1761 the British replaced the Nawabs as the sovereign authority of the Tripura plains, with the Māṇikya rulers continuing as landlords of that region.

**Revenue system** is an integral part of civil administration. Compared to the succeeding period,<sup>26</sup> information on this aspect is not aplenty for the 15<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> Century Tripura. Just like the succeeding era, the Tripura plains provided the lion’s share of the state revenue during this period too. The feudal lords (*sāmanta rājā*) were apparently in charge of collecting revenue from this area. When the Māṇikya rulers became landlords of this region from the early 18<sup>th</sup> Century onwards, they began to appoint some subordinate officials to run the revenue extraction process there. In the hills, the tribal chiefs, including the village chiefs, played major roles in revenue collection. However, no land tax used to be collected from the hills, since the tribes were engaged in shifting cultivation and did not develop any notion of private property. A separate study on the economic facet of the Māṇikya state would have helped in understanding the revenue administration of the kingdom, which is not possible within the scope of the present paper.

### Conclusion

An attempt has been made in this paper to study the contours of the administration of the Tripura kingdom during the 15<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> Century C.E period. It has been shown in this study that the early state administration came up in Tripura around 1464 C.E. Several posts were created in the central stratum of administration, which shows the rise of a managerial group to run the polity. This phenomenon is recognised as one of the causatives behind the rise of an early state. At the same time, autonomies were granted to groups both in the hills and plains. This administration apparently had some feudal features. However, since feudalism as a socio-political and economic system is not circumscribed to the arena of administration alone, the scope of the present paper does not permit any deeper analysis on this aspect.

Notes & References

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4. N.G Rhodes and S.K Bose, *The Coinage of Tripura*, Library of Numismatic Studies, Kolkata, 2002, pp.7-8, 44-45.
5. Kailas Chandra Singha, *Rājmalā Bā Tripurār Itibṛtta* (in Bengali), 3<sup>rd</sup> Edn., Akshar Publications, Agartala, 2014, pp.43-44.
6. The Tripuri tribe is the largest among the tribal groups of the state, and the mother tongue of this tribe is Kokborok. At the time of the formation of the Māṇikyā state, the term *Tripuri* probably included, the present paper opines, all the Kokborok-speaking people. Some of them later broke away from the larger group and formed separate identities, e.g. the Jamatia tribe.
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8. N.G Rhodes and S.K Bose *op. cit.*, p.9.
9. *Śrīrājmalā Pratham (1<sup>st</sup>) lahar op cit.*, pp.26-32.
10. *Ibid.*, pp.25-26.
11. *Śrīrājmalā Trītya (3<sup>rd</sup>) lahar op cit.*, p.74.
12. *Ibid.*, p.197.
13. *Śrīrājmalā Dvītya (2<sup>nd</sup>) lahar op cit.*, pp.39-64.
14. *Ibid.*, p.157.
15. Nalini Ranjan Raychaudhury, *Māṇikyā Śāsanādhīn Tripurār Itihās* (in Bengali), revised 2nd Edn., Jnan Bichitra Prakashani, Agartala, 2011, p. 119.
16. Kailas Chandra Singha *op cit.*, p.21.
17. Nalini Ranjan Raychoudhury *op cit.*
18. *Śrīrājmalā op cit.*, p.120.
19. The earliest known name of Rangamati/Udaipur appears to be Ratnapur. Ratna Māṇikyā I's coins attest to it. The name was probably given by Ratna Māṇikyā I himself after his own name.
20. *Śrīrājmalā op cit.*, pp.170-174.
21. *Śrīrājmalā Pratham (1<sup>st</sup>) lahar op cit.*, p.62.
22. For example, see Jagadish Ganchohury, *The Reangs of Tripura*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edn., Tripura Tribal Research and Cultural Institute, Agartala, 2011.
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24. *Śrīrājmalā Trītya (3<sup>rd</sup>) Lahar op cit.*, pp. 337-344.
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