

Legitimization Process in Tripuri State Formation: Accommodating Sanskritization & Primordial Culture

Deepayan Chakraborty¹

Abstract

Researchers since the second half of the 20th Century have been emphasizing on the importance of legitimization as a causative behind early state formation. The present paper tries to examine the way the Tripuri kingship and the Tripura kingdom acquired legitimacy. Like similar other early states of India (including North East India) and South East Asia, sanskritization played its part as a legitimizing ideology in this early state too. Bestowing the kṣatriya status upon the Māṇikyā kings, building Hindu temples, digging ponds, donating lands to the Brahmins, patronage given to the Bengali and, to a lesser extent, Sanskrit languages, etc, are instances of this process. However, one unique feature of the legitimization process in Tripura was the co-existence of the Hindu and primordial/tribal beliefs, and this is the most important theme of the present paper.

KEYWORDS: *Sanskritization, Hinduisation, legitimization, Shaivism, Tripura*

Introduction

Since the formulations of Marx and Engels in the Mid-19th Century on the subject, especially since the mid-twentieth century, a number of new ideas have been emerging in study of state formation. One of such is the role of legitimacy in early states. Marc J. Swartz, V. Turner and A. Tuden were among the first to point out the importance of this causative behind state formation¹. Henry J. M Claessen and Peter Skalnik too included legitimization as one of the factors for the rise of early states². State power is essentially a coercive authority. This was more so in the case of early states. But the loyalty of the ruled cannot be ensured by force alone.

¹ Assistant Professor of History, Michael Madhusudan Dutta College, Sabroom, Tripura (South)

Thus, it is seen in the early states arising out of tribal bases in India and South East Asia that to acquire ruling authorities patronized ideologies pertaining to religion and other aspects of culture — mostly belonging to groups outside the tribal ones from which these states emerged. Often these ideologies or beliefs belonged to the groups which were the chief sources of tax or surplus for these states. These helped in raising the status of the ruling class (of the tribes) and drawing consent from the ruled. The present paper attempts to study this phenomenon in the Tripuri state formation in North East India.

In the Indian context historians like Ram Sharan Sharma³, Romila Thapar⁴, B.P Sahu⁵ and B.D Chattopadhyaya⁶ brought out the importance of ideology in legitimizing various ruling dynasties in Ancient and Early Medieval India. Of particular importance here are the works of Hermann Kulke and his associates in relation to the Indian and South East Asian early states⁷. All these have put forward the importance of sanskritization/Hinduization⁸ as the legitimizing ideology in these regions. These studies are all the more interesting since some of these historians belong to the Marxist school of historiography. With the coming of Islam, a new ‘sanctifying’ ideology arose in Medieval India, as is seen during the Turko-Afghan and Mughal rules. However, this type of legitimization was not relevant for the Kingdom of Tripura.

In the North East Indian context Surajit C. Sinha was one of the first to identify the importance of cultural factors behind the early state formations in the region⁹. J.B. Bhattacharjee did some important works in theorizing about the role of sanskritization (termed *Pan-Indian Culture Continuum* by him) as the legitimizing ideology in the North East Indian early states¹⁰. As regards Tripura, the present paper is the first attempt in this respect. The traditional historical works of the Tripura Kingdom, e.g. Rājmaḷā¹¹ and Rājaratnākara¹² have been used as the primary literary sources for the present study. Some archaeological sources too have come up for discussion. Secondary sources on the general histories of the state have been referred to in the relevant sections. Secondary sources related to the legitimation in other regions of India and South East Asia (some already mentioned in this paper) have also been of use for this study. Besides, some

personal experiences of the present author regarding the tribal religious customs in Tripura too have been put in use.

Legitimization and the Kingdom : Sanskritization/Hinduization

As in other parts of North East India and other regions of India as well as in South East Asia, sanskritization/hinduization played a pivotal role in legitimizing the Tripuri state under the Māṅikya kings too. The present study has identified some phases in this process. The **first phase** was during the pre-kingdom/pre-state period, i.e. before the mid-15th Century C.E. The Rājṃālā account of this period¹³, though full of mythical elements, apparently does contain the distant memories of this time when the Tripuri tribe was still not settled permanently. Though the Kingdom was not established, the divide between the ‘ruler’/chief and tribal commoners, in howsoever rudimentary form, had been established by this time. ‘King’ Chemthum Phā’s conquest of Meherkul in the plains to the east of the river Meghna (c. early 13th Century C.E)¹⁴ or the reference to Dāṅgar Phā’s residence in North Tripura¹⁵ point to such stratification.

It is natural to assume here that the ideological justification for this exalted position of the tribal chief was given during this period itself. The present paper argues that sanskritization was part of this ‘justification’ even in this early period. The reference to the formal establishment of the cult of *Caturdaśa Deva* (literally meaning the fourteen gods, the tutelary deity of the Māṅikya Dynasty) during the mythical King Trilocana’s reign alludes to such possibilities¹⁶. The Hinduization of this cult started, in whatever rudimentary form, during this phase. It was the Śaiva religious ideology which was the earliest form of ‘Hindu’ influence on the Tripuris. When the tribe was in the Barak Valley or in North Tripura, they probably came under this influence, for the adjoining areas of Sylhet (in the present Bangladesh) were strongholds of Shaivism during the early medieval era. The archaeological remains of Unakoti in North Tripura give evidence of the Śaiva influence in the region during this period. The Tripura-Trilocana episode¹⁷ or ‘King’ Kumāra’s devotion to Śiva¹⁸ symbolizes this influence. Later, Chemthum Phā’s conquest in the present south-eastern Bangladesh brought the tribe further into the contact of the ‘mainstream’ culture of the plains.

The **second phase** of this sanskritization was reached during King Ratna Māṇikya I's reign. His rule marked the establishment of the Tripuri Kingdom. He was the first Māṇikya ruler to issue coins from which the first definite date of Tripura's history (Śaka 1386/1464 C.E) is known. His coins bear invocations of Hindu gods, i.e. Durgā, Śiva and Nārāyaṇa as well as of the Hinduized *Caturdaśa Deva*. The latter cult had been sanskritized or Hinduized, at least partially, by his time. The Kingdom had two parts --- the plains and the hills. By invoking both the Hindu and tribal Hinduized deities Ratna Māṇikya I was apparently trying to make his exalted royal authority legitimate to his subjects in both these areas.

His coins bear similarities with those of the Bengal Sultanate, but the Islamic style thereon was given a new 'Hindu' interpretation. The influence of the coins of Rājā Gaṇeśa/Danuḥamardanadeva and Mahendradeva, the early 15th Century C.E 'Hindu rebels' of Bengal, too are visible¹⁹. All these may have been due to a conscious effort on the Tripuri King's part to position himself as a 'champion/protector of the Hindu ethos'. This might also represent his symbolic declaration of 'independence' from the control of the Bengal Sultan who had 'helped' him in capturing the 'throne'.

Legitimation is one of the causatives of early state formation. This process used to continue even after the formation of such states and contribute to their sustenance. The Tripuri Kingdom under the Māṇikya rulers was no exception in this respect. Thus, the **third phase** of the hinduization process started after Ratna Māṇikya I's reign and continued till the state's merger with the Indian Union. King Dhanya Maṇikya's rule (1490 C.E – c. 1515 C.E) saw the consolidation of the kingship and some successful military clashes, both defensive and offensive, against Bengal. Together with these, this was also an era of more sanskritization. 'On being directed by the Mother Goddess (*Bhagavati/Kālī*) in his dreams'²⁰, the King brought the idol of the Goddess from Chittagong and established it in a temple in his capital (presently Udaipur). Known as the Tripureśvarī Temple, this shrine is considered to be one of the fifty one sacred centres (*pīṭha*) of the Śakti/Śākta cult. Sustained royal patronage added to the prestige of this shrine, and the highly sanctified status of the latter contributed to the legitimacy of the

Māṅikya authority. Dhanya Māṅikya is also credited with founding the old *Caturdaśa Deva* Temple in Udaipur.

The Tripuri rulers used to perform the *Durgā Pujā* festival every year, though the time this tradition started is not known. Although the Mother Goddess cult had been in vogue in Ancient and Early Medieval India, in Medieval Bengal the celebration of *Durgā Pujā* started as a mark of defiance against the curbs imposed on the Hindu religious practices during the Turko-Afghan rule. The invocation of this deity on Ratna Māṅikya I's coins speaks of the *Durgā* cult's importance in the Tripuri state's legitimization process. On the night of *Vijayā Daśamī* (the last day of the *Durgā Pujā*), the Māṅikya kings used to host a dinner (*Hasam Bhojan*) in which the subordinate hill tribal chiefs from remote areas used to take part. On the following night the royal officials used to hold a parley with these tribal chiefs regarding the situation in the remote areas of the Kingdom. Apart from redistributing the surplus and performing other administrative functions, this was a classic example of using religion to sanctify royal authority.

Kaliprasanna Sen informs²¹ that the Māṅikya kings initially were followers of the Śaiva and Śākta creeds, but later Vaishnavism began to get more royal favour. Vaiṣṇava influence had been there in the Kingdom right from Ratna Māṅikya I's period, as attested by the invocation of Nārāyaṇa inscribed on his coins. Kings like Rājadhara Māṅikya I and Yaśodhara Māṅikya had Vaiṣṇava leanings. But it was from Rāmadeva Māṅikya's reign (c. 1676 – c. 1685 C.E) that the Vaiṣṇava influence became the paramount one over the royal family. This king was formally initiated by a Vaiṣṇava saint named Rasikānanda Gosvāmī. The latter was a descendant of the famous Bengal Vaiṣṇava saint Nityānanda, a close associate of Caitanyadeva, the 'arch patriarch' of Bengal Vaishnavism. Gradually a tradition of Nityānanda's descendants occupying the position of *Rājaguru* (spiritual guide of kings) set in. But initiation to Vaishnavism was not mandatory for all the members or rulers of the Dynasty. The kings never persecuted the Śaiva and Śākta cults, and continued to pay due devotional respect to them. The traditional celebration of the *Durgā Pujā* festival is a pointer in this regard. Temples dedicated to various Hindu deities came up throughout the history of the Māṅikya Tripura. These are important markers of religious history and sanskritization.

Like some other similar early states of North East India as well as of other parts of India, land donations to Brahmins, temple building, digging of wells/big water reservoirs and royal pilgrimages to Hindu religious centers were means of legitimating in Medieval Tripura too. The first of the historically (and almost unanimously) accepted land grants in the Tripuri Kingdom was made by Vijaya Māṇikya I in Śaka 1410/1488 C.E²². Such donations, along with pond-digging and pilgrimages, functioned in various ways to strengthen the royal authority.

Firstly, as land donations and ponds were all in the plain areas, these works helped, like in some other neighbouring early states, the hill tribal ruling class of Tripura to officially stamp their authority on those areas and earmark the territorial boundaries of the Kingdom.

Secondly, one of the features of such land donations in Early Medieval India was to spread Hinduization in new and remote areas. A number of Rājput and other dynasties donated lands to the Brahmins and Hindu temples in lieu of which they were assigned with mythical origins by their beneficiaries. These kingdoms also acted as bulwarks against 'Non-Hindu' cultural and political dominance. The land donations in Medieval Tripura, along with the temple-building, pond-digging and pilgrimages, played the same role. These also showed the religious leanings of the donors.

Thirdly, pond-digging was considered as an act of religious merit. Thus, these ponds were often linked to some religious establishments. Besides, these were also sources of water for the common subjects. These might have been used for agricultural purposes too, though it is not known how much of the water of the ponds dug by the Tripura kings were used for irrigation or whether these were at all used for this purpose. Nevertheless, these water reservoirs were often the places near which new human habitations arose. This trend, one may assume, also contributed to the expansion of agriculture and craft in the realm. Most importantly, by providing water and, indirectly, new habitations the kings were legitimizing their own positions in the eyes of their subjects.

Coins²³ and **inscriptions**²⁴ of the Tripura kings, apart from having other functions, were tools of sanskritization too. As has been shown earlier in this paper, right during Ratna Māṇikya I's reign the coins began to perform this role. The epigraphs too

show signs of this acculturation. The invocations of Hindu (or Brahminical, if one wants to say) deities, use of Śaka era, pattern of poetical compositions in Sanskrit epigraphs, use of Bengali and Sanskrit – all show the Medieval Tripura coins and inscriptions following a pan-Indian cultural pattern.

Adoption of an Indo-Aryan language or a language of the non-tribal plainsmen, an integral part of legitimization in the early state formations in India and South East Asia, can be termed as **linguistic sanskritization**. The use of Bengali and Sanskrit for administrative and cultural purposes in the Tripura Kingdom is an example of such process. In fact, the Māṇikya rulers did not give patronage to any tribal language. Linguistic sanskritization was in operation at the time of the Kingdom's establishment itself, and it continued till the Māṇikya princely state's merger with the Union of India in 1949. The royal chronicles were all composed in Bengali (in Sanskrit, in the case of Rājaratnākara). Patronage to the Bengali language became more prominent from the second half of the 19th Century, i.e. from Birchandra Manikya's time.

However, all these influences were on the royal and upper official circle. The royal historical chronicles linked the Māṇikya Dynasty with the Lunar Dynasty (*candravaṃśa*) of Mahābhārata. The economic importance of the plains and the urge to get linked to a pan-Indian cultural tradition probably led the Tripura royalty to patronize sanskritization, but the Tripuris as a whole never got transformed into any caste within the Hindu society. Gradually, though, some steps were undertaken in that direction. For example, Birchandra Manikya extended the *kṣatriya* (warrior Hindu caste) status to the Tripuri tribal commoners, hitherto reserved exclusively for the kings and their kinsmen. But despite these efforts, the Tripuris remained, as they still are, a tribe.

Discussion on sanskritization/Hinduization will not be complete without some words on **art** and **architecture**. Worshipping full idols is not a feature of the tribal culture in Tripura. But the acceptance of the Hindu cults required the worship of full images. While the royal class followed such practice, its role in the common tribal cultural milieu was marginal. Hindu temples were built wherein full idols were the objects of worship. In temple architecture the four-roofed (*cārcālā*) Bengal style was in

use. However, the evolved Buddhist dome-like (*stūpa*) structure surmounting the temples was the special feature of the state's temple-building²⁵.

Legitimization & the Kingdom : 'Negotiating' Primordial Culture

One interesting aspect in the formation of the early states (especially of India) arising out of tribal bases is the place accorded to the primordial tribal culture therein. This was all the more important in the Kingdom of Tripura where the hill tribes continued to follow their primordial beliefs, and the influence of hinduization over them was (and, to a great extent, still is) superficial. The Tripuri royal class did not disturb this *status quo* and patronized some of the tribal cults. This approach had its role in the legitimation process. Two tribal cults that were important in this respect were those of **Caturdaśa Deva** and **Ker**.

As has been discussed earlier, the *Caturdaśa Deva* (meaning fourteen gods) cult had probably been instituted in its pristine form before the Kingdom was established. The religious festival associated with this cult is known as **Khārci Pujā** which is held in the month of June-July every year. Though some particular deities belonging to the *Caturdaśa Deva* pantheon were and still are worshipped separately in their pristine domestic forms by the hill tribes, the *Caturdaśa Deva* is a deity in collective form. And in this form the deity was to be worshipped exclusively by the royalty. The latter were the ones who had the exclusive right to organize **Khārci Pujā**. Evidently this right put the 'ritual status' of the royalty above the common tribesmen. It was the tutelary cult of the Tripuri royal dynasty. As has been referred to earlier, traditionally Trilocana, a mythical king belonging to the pre-state period, is credited with establishing this cult. This tradition probably alludes to the role this cult played, in whatever rudimentary form, in raising the status of the Tripuri chiefs in the pre-Kingdom period. King Dhanya Māṇikya built the first *Caturdaśa Deva* temple in the capital Ratnapura (presently Udaipur). Later, Kṛṣṇa Māṇikya (1760 C.E – 1783 C.E) re-established the temple in Old Agartala.

The *Caturdaśa Deva*, as the name suggests, includes fourteen gods --- Hara (Śiva), Umā (Durgā), Hari (Viṣṇu), Mā (Lakṣmī), Vāṇī (Sarasvatī), Kumāra (Kārttikeya), Gaṇapā (Gaṇeśa), Vidhi (Brahmā), Kṣmā (Pṛthvī/earth god), Abdhi (Samudra, the sea god), Gaṅgā, Śikhi/Agni (the fire-god), Kāma/Kāmadeva (the god of lust) and Himādri

(Himālaya). Despite the claims on the contrary, these are not the original names of the deities. Tribal gods were identified with Hindu puranic deities to put a veneer of sanskritizing influence on the cult. Their original tribal names are --- *Matai Katar* (the Supreme God), *Matai Katarmā* (the Supreme Goddess), *Nakcu Matai* (the tutelary family spirit), *Akhtra* (the sea god), *Gariā* (the god of war), *Kālāiā* (the ancestor spirit), *Māilumā* (the earth goddess), *Sāṃgrām* (the hill god), *Tuimā* (water goddess), etc ²⁶.

Surja Phujā Khelāimāni²⁷ (literal meaning – *to worship the sun-god*), a Kokborok text of tribal religious rituals, gives another list of tribal names for these gods, viz. *Subrāi Rājā/Cibrāi Rājā* (the Supreme God), *Sāngramā* (the Mother Goddess), *Hābuṃ Bubāgrā* (the earth god), *Taibubāgrā* (the water goddess), *Naukhantāi Bubāgrā* (the guardian deity of family), *Bāsuā Bubāgrā* (the custodian of evil), *Mānemphā* (the god granting life), *Mināmphā* (creator of creatures), etc²⁸. As the text was written in the Śaka 1621/1699 C.E, the list given by it can claim much reliability in describing the cult's features during the medieval era. The essentially tribal character of the cult is further proved by the fact that unlike the Tripureśvarī or other fully Hindu cults, **Khārci Pujā** requires the tribal priests, viz. *cantāi* and *deorāi* to perform the main rituals associated with it, not the Hindu traditional priests (*purohita*).

Instead of full idols, only the head images of the deities are found in the *Caturdaśa Deva* Temple. Kailas Chandra Simha²⁹, one of the earliest writers on Tripura's history, refers to an old saying regarding this. It says that having been defeated in the fratricidal war, King Dakṣiṇa (pronounced *Dakkhin* in Bengali, one of the mythical 'kings' belonging to the pre-Ratna Māṇikyā I period) brought the heads of the original full images of the fourteen gods to his new seat of power in the Barak Valley. From that time onwards his descendants were worshipping those head-images. This may lead one to assume that these head-images were the outcome of an intra-tribal or inter-tribal clash during the pre-state period.

However, no historical source, not even Rājmālā, refers to any such saying. It is argued in the present paper that the absence of the full images of the deities may have been due to Tripura's traditional tribal religious practice of worshipping bamboo symbols of deities, instead of full earthen or metallic images. Thus, initially the fourteen gods too

were perhaps worshipped in the forms of bamboo symbols like in **Ker** or other tribal cults. This argument becomes pertinent in view of the fact that some of the gods of this pantheon (with their original tribal names) are still worshipped in the tribal villages in this way. Later probably this custom was sanskritized, and metallic head-images were introduced as a 'compromise'.

But while in the case of **Khārci Pujā** the traditional tribal beliefs are mingled with Hindu religious customs and motifs, **Ker Pujā** is a totally tribal religious affair. The latter is performed on the first Saturday or Tuesday after two weeks of Khārci Pujā, though in the hills it takes place more than once at different points of a year. Unlike the Khārci Pujā, it used to be performed both in the royal circle and in the tribal villages. Royal Ker Pujā used to be organized in the Capital, a custom still followed by the Govt. of Tripura. Typical of the tribal culture in the state, a bamboo symbol is the object of worship in **Ker Pujā**. The solemnity and secrecy associated with its rituals together with the fact that even the literary sources desist from Hinduizing or detribalizing this cult speak of its pristine primordial nature. The performance of the **Ker Pujā** in the royal circle helped in the legitimization process. It was a unique example of using a totally tribal religious ideology to elevate kingship in an early state and asserting the tribal link of the ruling class, with no negotiation/mediation by Hinduization.

The Rājmalā reference of 'King' Śikṣma unknowingly taking cooked human flesh³⁰ in all probability points to the prevalence of cannibalism and its corollary custom of human sacrifice in the early Tripuri society. In the medieval era some of these elements merged with the Tantric religious customs to give different impetus to this trend. The Tripurāsundarī/Tripureśvarī and *Caturdaśa Deva* cults initially involved large scale human sacrifice, along with animal slaughter. Dhanya Māṅikya tried to put restrictions on human sacrifice. Later at some point of time in the medieval era itself the custom of human sacrifice was discontinued. The growing Vaiṣṇava influence and increased sanskritization probably effected this change.

Religious history is not the subject matter of this paper. Thus, only those aspects of religion, especially the tribal religion, which had bearings on the legitimization process in the Māṅikya state have been discussed here.

Land grants were made to the Muslim saints and religious establishments too. According to Kailas Chandra Simha, the Muslim Bengalees outnumbered the Hindus in the state³¹. Whether this was the case throughout the Kingdom's history is not known. But these grants recognized the importance of this section of the subjects. Grants to Muslims in Tripura were unique, if compared with other early state formations in North East India. The administration set up by Ratna Māṇikya I had Indo-Muslim influences. But all these did not disturb the main contours of the legitimizing ideology in the Kingdom.

Maintaining relations with other states ensures **external legitimacy** for any state, whether early or modern. The relation with the Bengal Sultanate facilitated the establishment of the Māṇikya Kingdom. Matrimonial relation with the Meitei Kingdom of Manipur, established from the time of Rājadhara Māṇikya II (1785-1804 C.E), was another form of such legitimacy. The Āhom King Rudra Siṃha sent two envoys named Arjundās Bairāgī and Ratna Kandalī Śarmā to the Tripura royal court in the early 18th Century C.E. But the scope of the present work does not permit a more detailed discussion on these external relations.

Conclusion

It has been shown in the present paper that while sanskritization was the major cultural medium of legitimization in Tripura, it was the active patronage given to the tribal cults by the Māṇikya rulers that lends uniqueness to the state formation here. Like similar early states of India and South East Asia, Hinduization/sanskritization was the dominant cultural influence patronized by the Tripuri royalty. This trend had started before the time when the state was established and taken a definite shape by the time Ratna Māṇikya I founded the Kingdom. The process continued throughout the time the state existed, as is seen in the shape of land grants, coins, inscriptions, temple-building, pond-digging, patronage given to the Bengali and Sanskrit languages, etc. However, unlike similar early states, tribal cults were actively used to sanctify the royal authority in the Tripura Kingdom. Hinduization had to negotiate with primordial elements, and sometimes pristine tribal beliefs had to be accepted in the legitimization process in *toto*. Apart from sanskritization and patronage to tribal cults, the Tripuri rulers also granted lands to the

Muslims and incorporated some Indo-Islamic features in the administration. But it did not influence the Kingdom's mainstream cultural orientation. Besides, there was the role of maintaining relations with other states, which earned external legitimacy. However, the latter aspect is of marginal importance for the present study.

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