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The social stratification and political formation in mediaeval tripura

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A B S T R A C T

The social stratification and political phenomenon in Tripura had experienced the rudiments during the mediaeval period. The Brahmanical influence and the resultant process of sanskritisation had made a considerable headway during this period. The process of state formation had also entered the most crucial phase during this period. The ruling family of Tripura by a historical process assimilated themselves linguistically and culturally with the majority community in the state. The royal family came to be known as Thakur occupied the highest position in the society and higher posts in the state. The lower classes were available for service to the ruler and the aristocracy. Gradually monarchy was developed and the king was a pivot where all system of the state was evolved around him. The tribal base political system of Tripura in the medieval period gradually developed into monarchy. The caste system was there but it was no rigid as we found in Northern India. The leadership of the tribe had passed into the hands of a single personality that resulted in social stratification and political legitimization of the status of the ruler. The protective position of the ruler and his social status helped him in organizing an elaborate hierarchical order.

Introduction

The Tipperah tribe by which the royal family of Tripura belonged was in the Kapili valley of Assam till the 13th century. After that they moved to the Cachar valley and finally to present Tripura where in ultimately Agartala became the capital. Till 16th century. The Cachar valley and parts of

Sylhet, Noakhali and Chittagong districts of present Bangladesh formed parts of the kingdom (Bhattacharjee, 1991). During the Mughal period, the Tripura kingdom became limited to the present state and parts of Comilla district of Bangladesh (Tripura District Gazetteers, 1975).

Throughout the British colonial period, the king was treated as an independent ruler of Tripura state. The sovereign princely state of Tripura was designated by the British Government as Hill Tipperah (Roychoudhury, 1977). When India achieved her independence, Tripura joined the Indian union through the Instrument of Accession.

In the beginning of the 15th century, the Tripuris established a principality extending from Sylhet to Chittagong and their ruler Mahamanikya was a contemporary of Raja Ganesa of Bengal (Majumdar, 1973). He was succeeded by his son, Dharma Manikya (Sen, 1890) who was a patron of art and letters, settled a large number of Brahmins in his realm, excavated a tank (Dharmasagar) at Comilla and engaged the royal priest Dhurlabendra and two Brahmins from Sylhet – Sukreswar and Bameswar to compose the first part of ‘Rajmala’, the Royal Chronicle, in parallel Sanskrit and Bengali (Roychoudhury, 1977).

Tripura entered into a most crucial phase during the reign of RatnaMahikya in the sixties of the 15th century A.D. His father, DangarFa had eighteen sons of whom, Ratna was the youngest. DangarFa had divided his kingdom into seventeen divisions and placed a son each in charge of a division, while Ratna was sent to the court of Gour (Bengal) as a hostage. But Ratna by dint of his charming personality and intelligence won the confidence of the Sultan of Bengal – Barbak Shah (1455 – 1476), who gave him military support to conquer Rangmati. DangarFa fled to the hills where he died, while Ratna Manikya defeated all his brothers and made himself the ruler of the Tripura principality (Bhattacharjee, 1991). Ratna Manikya also presented some elephants and a ruby to the

sultan (Roychoudhury, 1977) in consideration of the military support from the sultan in establishing himself as the ruler (Majumdar, 1973).

The territorial extent of old Tripura that covered Comilla and parts of Cachar, Sylhet and Chittagong is clearly suggestive of the fact that the major portion of the state in those days was in the plains and peopled mainly by the Bengalee. The Bengalee population in the state had also increased further in the subsequent years (Bhattacharjee, 1991), partly due to the initiative of the rulers to encourage fresh settlement and partly to the population explosion in the neighbouring regions as a historical process.

Social Stratification and political Formation

The social stratification that occurred had facilitated the growth of a hierarchical state order. The political aristocracy was drawn from the Thakur section and the Tripuri Raja himself belonged to this group (Bhattacharjee, 1991). The Raja took the title of ‘Manikya’ while the nobles were known as ‘Narayan’ and were kinsmen of the Raja. The positions held by the nobles were hereditary of the management and the state affairs were virtually their privilege. The authority of the Raja was absolute and the state was based on the divine theory of kingship (Bhattacharjee, 1991). The Raja could maintain his position as long as he could ensure the support of the nobles (Roychoudhury, 1977).

However, the socio-political stratification attained considerable perfections in the hands of the king Ratna Manikya, who was also responsible for restricting the administrative pattern and modeled it on the Muslim system of Bengal. He created

four high posts in the center, viz. – i) *Suba* (Commander in Chief), ii) *Uzir* (minister), (iii) *Nazir* (In-charge of law and order), (iv) *Dewan* (in charge of finance). The post of *Subawas* reserved for the members of the ‘Royal Family’ and the *Uzir* and *Dewan* were originally held by the Bengalees (Sinha, 1896). King Krishna Manikya (1760 – 1782), for the first time, appointed one of his relatives as *Uzir*. He also increased the post of *Dewan* to two and appointed a Bengalee for the plains and a relative of the Raja in the hills (Sinha, 1896). The head of the state was the king and succession to the throne was according to the Hindu laws. The crown prince was next to the monarch in power and dignity. He was in charge of revenue, elephants and soldiers. Next to the crown prince in power and position was the ‘Barthakur’ and his responsibility was to supervise the collection of elephants from forest (Sinha, 1896).

The various tribes of the state enjoyed local autonomy. The tribal chiefs retained their traditional authority over respective tribes and ruled according to their own system (Roychoudhury, 1977). The Rajas never interfered in the internal affairs of the Lushais and Kukis, as these tribes occupied the bordering areas and were warlike in habits. But the Halams could claim special position in the state as they believed to be the dominant race in the area before the advent of the Tripuris. The Lushai-Kuki chiefs also could be utilized by the monarchs as buffer against the raiding tribes in the upland Lushai (Mizo) hills (Bhattacharjee, 1991).

In return of nominal tax or tribute, the Tripuri tribal groups in Tripura were allowed to retain their internal autonomy. But the plains portion of the state was under direct administration of Rajas. This

portion was divided into a number of ‘Parganas’, each under a choudhury, while the distant areas were administered by Laskars (Sinha, 1896). The military bases in newly conquered areas were known as ‘Thana’ under ‘Thanadar’ each (Sinha, 1896).

The defence of the state was the responsibility of the Raja who maintained a regular army. On the authority of ‘Ain-i-Akbari’ (Ain-i-Akbari by AbulFazl (translated by Jarrett & Sarkar), it is known that Vijay Manikya (1552-1563) possessed two hundred thousand footmen and a thousand elephants. The local chronicles further state that Vijay Manikya recruited ten thousand Afghan horse men in his army and possessed five thousand speedy boats (Sen, 1890). Amar Manikya (1577-1606) maintained Portuguese artillery. The tribal chiefs were bound to assist the army with their men in war times (Roychoudhury, 1977). The Jamatia was a military tribe and all its members were available for wars.

The Tripuri Rajas even borrowed from the Muslim system to revitalize the state structure. There is no evidence to suggest that the laws were ever confined in pre-colonial Tripura. Justice was dispensed with on the basis of equity and good conscience. The Rajas acted as the judge and the punishment was severe to the extent that the criminals were publicly beheaded (Sen, 1890).

The Rajas derived income from the state by virtue of their authority. The revenue from the plains and gifts and tributes from the tribes were the main sources of income. The major portion of the revenue, however, came from the plains where regular land taxation system existed. The tribal chiefs supplied to the Raja elephants, elephant-tusks and various forest products as

acknowledgement of his authority. The Raja also levied a house tax per family in the hills (Roychoudhury, 1977).

The Tripuri Rajas encouraged trade with the neighbouring areas and derived monetary benefits. It flourished inter-state trade between Cachar, Manipur, Assam, Bengal and other regions (Bhuyan (ed), 1939). The Raja owned a gold mine and silk factory where the subjects were obliged to work in rotation. The Tripuri kings supplied gold and silk to China (John Phillip, 1905). The collection of elephants from the hills for supply to Bengal was a profitable business for the Rajas. There was no salary system for the nobles and high officials of the state, but they derived income from the landed property assigned to them and were entitled to free service from the Rajas subjects within their jurisdiction. The revenue of some of the 'Parganas' were allotted for the maintenance of the queens and other members of the royal family (Bhuyan (ed), 1939). The economic condition of the Rajas can be gleaned from their works of art and patronage to temples and Brahmins. The specimen of which are still noticed in Tripura. They also minted coins in gold and silver, mainly to commemorate their great doings (Roychoudhury, 1977).

The character of the Tripuri political system can be discerned from the basic features of the administrative structure. It was a monarchy. The monarch was the head of the state. This position was hereditary and everything in the state belonged to him. The Raja was pivot and the whole system of the state evolved to him. The form of government was, therefore, despotic, although the Brahmanical overtone contributed element of benevolence into the system (Bhattacharjee, 1991).

Conclusion

A study of the history of the social stratification and political system of Tripura in the medieval period reveals the elevation of the political system and social formation from a tribal base to a well-developed monarchy. The military support received from the neighbouring regions enabled the ruler to overcome any possible opposition to his assumed authority and to subdue the bordering hill tribes and his extending the boundary of the state. The Brahmanical influence and the resultant process of Sanskritisation had made a considerable headway during this period. The social stratification as manifested in various sources speaks of a Brahmanical society with remnants of tribal influence here and there. The caste system was there, but it was not strong enough form for formation of 'Chaturvarna' of 'Four caste' society as in classical North Indian model. The high castes were there but the evidence of other castes were available with different high and low status. The Brahmanical domination was there, but it was not as dominant as in Northern India. Tribals were incorporated in the Hindu society as back as when they opted for participation in the plough based agriculture and settled habitation. Evidently, the society was liberal compared to other parts of India of the same period.

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