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Proportions of Societal, Religious and the Spiritual Elements in the Music & Culture of Tripura: A Close Review

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Abstract

The emerald land of Tripura has an ethnic and cross-cultural heritage that makes it alluring for all its visitors and inseparable from its residents. Its extraordinary cultural richness and variety in the arts, beliefs, customs, languages and dialects undoubtedly makes Tripura a melting pot of ethnic diversity.

For various socio-political and historical reasons, Tripura has been the meeting ground of various races and such a confluence has introduced an interesting array of temples, mosques, monasteries and churches. Tripura is an abode of nineteen different tribes who proudly own their culture, heritage and tradition. Besides, the culture of these diverse tribes of Tripura, two more distinct cultural heritages, those of Bengali and Manipuri have merged together to give shape and content to a mixed tradition.

Dating back to the Mahabharata era, the name of Tripura finds mention in its Sabha Parva as Kirat Bhumi. There is evidence of many more ancient texts of India like Markandeya Purana, Vishnu Puran etc. where the name of Kirat Bhumi finds mention.

Whatever be it, the glorious history of Tripura had many contributors which today has led this once-upon-a-time 'Kirat-Bhumi' to becoming a culturally rich State of India.

The present article endeavors to explore the musical and cultural ambience of Tripura in the perspective of its religious component and spiritual essence.

Keywords: Tripura, Music, Religion, spiritual, Culture.

Introduction: Legacy of Tripura: The ancient Hindu state of Tripura was known as Tribeg or Kirata Bhumi. It is a land of antiquity and one of the most ancient of all former Princely States of India. During the Mughal period as well as the British period, Tripura retained its independence and continued to maintain its separate entity as a Princely state. Tripura, was thus ruled by the Maharajas for a long and unbroken period until it acceded to the Indian Union soon after India became an independent nation. It is one of the oldest

States of India having plenty of mythological references in the Mahabharata and other classical texts. The history of Tripura is replete with the saga of both the tradition and legend.

‘The Manikyas of Tripura who have ruled Tripura for centuries, according to the Rajmala, the State chronicle claim their descent from Druhya, the third son of Yayati of Mahabharata, a scion of lunar dynasty whose deeds are chronicled in the Rig Veda. Daitya, one of the descendents is said to have come to Kirata-desh and established his kingdom in Tribeg region. His son, Trilochan succeeded Tripura, the son and heir of Daitya.’¹

It is generally accepted by the scholars that the historical account of Tripura began from the middle of 15th century, with Maha Manikya founding the Manikya dynasty that ruled the kingdom of Tripura for over 500 years till the rule of the last Maharaja Bir Bikram Kishore Manikya Bahadur. The modern period of Tripura is considered to have begun with the reign of Maharaja Bir Chandra Manikya (1862-96) who was a great patron of literature, art and music.

Religious Identity: In Tripura religion is a way of life and an integral part of its tradition. For the majority of population, which consists of both the tribal or the indigenous community as well as non-tribal section of the society, religion permeates into every aspect of life ranging from normal day-to-day activities to complex socio-economic-political issues. Common practices have crept into most of the religious faiths in the State and most of the festivals are shared by all the communities.

Nineteen tribes reside in Tripura belonging to diverse ethnic and linguistic groups and widely distributed over different parts of Tripura. Through centuries many of the tribal people of Tripura accepted the religious and ideological prominence of Brahminism but nonetheless they were also dedicated to their own traditional Gods and Goddesses.

From the ancient times, animism flourished in different parts of Tripura. Buddhism and Brahminism also flourished from the very early days along with indigenous tribal faiths and beliefs. The archaeological evidences discovered from the Pilak-Jolaibadi region prove the prevalence of these faiths during the first part of 7th century A.D. The unique images of Surya, Ganesh, Mahisamardini, Vishnu and Sarvamangala are wonderful examples of the sculptures of Brahminical religion during the 7th to 12th century A.D.

In the Manikya period, from the 15th century A.D. onwards, Buddhism did not seem to receive much royal patronage as the Hindu Kings of Tripura had come to establish and act as the spearhead of Brahminical religion and society. They were worshipers of Shiva, Shakti, Vishnu and Chaturdasha Devata.

The Rulers of Tripura from time immemorial have been practicing religious secularism and proudly own their identity as religious liberals. This is clearly obvious when one hears the details of the *Kuldevata* or the Ancestral Deity of the rulers of Tripura. The *Chaturdasha Debata (Kuldevata)* of the Manikya's (Rulers of Tripura) is all inclusive of

Shaiva, Shakta, Vaishnav faiths. In the Rajmala, i.e. the chronicle of Royalty of Tripura, one of the traits of the royalty of Tripura has been described. It states:

“হরি হর দুর্গা প্রতি দৃঢ় ভক্তি যার।
ত্রিপুর বংশেতে জন্ম নিশ্চয় তাহার।।”

--- ত্রিলোচন খণ্ড ---২৬ পৃ:

Meaning a person who is equally devoted to Hari (Lord Vishnu), Har (Lord Shiv) and Durga (Goddess Durga), is undoubtedly from the Tripura Royal lineage. This description of the characteristics of the Royalty of Tripura specifies the level of religious tolerance, generosity and all-inclusiveness that has been practiced by the rulers of Tripura. Nevertheless there are also instances where due to personal inclinations some rulers of Tripura have shown devotion towards a particular deity and have followed Shakta, Shaiva or Vaishnav belief in their personal lives. However they have shown equal respect to other beliefs as well. This is quite evident from one incident that happened during a conference in Kolkata. Maharaja Dwarbangadeep asked Maharaja Radhakishore Manikya Bahadur of Tripura regarding his religious inclination? To which Maharaja Radhakishore replied saying as the Raja of my State I serve and worship all the Deities, but personally I am a Vaishnava. Listening to this the Dwarbangadhipati was extremely pleased and said on record,

“That’s the sign of a true sovereign King.”²

The above excerpt evidently exemplifies the freedom provided by the Kings of Tripura to their subjects regarding practice of individual faiths. This gave the common man the freedom to practice music and culture related to their religion and spirituality as well. Therefore, the locals have been living in an open, suffocation free environment of independence of cultural and musical expression and that is why one can find a wide range of musical and cultural genres starting from the Kirtan, Rasa, Hori songs to Bhatiyali which originated from West Bengal and Lebang Bumani Dance style of the local Tribal people.

Shades of Tribal Culture: There are about nineteen tribes living in Tripura namely Tripuri, Jamatia, Noatia, Reang, Halam, Chakma, Mog, Garo, Munda, Lushai, Oraon, Santhal, Uchai, Khasi, Bhil, Lepcha, Bhutia, Chaimal and Kuki. The tribal rites, rituals, beliefs and practices including festivals are full of music, song, dance, legends, arts and crafts, textiles etc. These tribal communities are still maintaining their distinctive identities as their integral part. Most of their music and dance are actually a part of their religious or social activity.

Here are few of the characteristics of some of the Tribal communities of Tripura which are being mentioned for a general understanding of the overall culture of the Tribal people; moreover, the aspects of connection of religious beliefs and practices of music in their respective societies are obvious in the following description.

Tripuris: Among the above mentioned tribes of Tripura, the Tripuris are the main inhabitants of Tripura and also the biggest tribe of the State comprising about 60% of the

total tribal population of Tripura. They belong to the Indo-Mongoloid origin and one of the Kokborok linguistic groups. Hinduism dominates this tribe though traits of animism are also found. The Tripuri people have a rich historical, social and cultural heritage which is totally distinct from that of the mainland Indians, their distinctive culture is reflected in their dance, music, festivals, management of community affairs, dress and food habit etc. The great composer father-son duo of S.D. Burman and R.D. Burman belong to the Tripura Royal family who are mainly from this community.

According to the 2001 census, around 90% of the Tripuri adhere to Vaishnav Hinduism, which is heavily influenced by the religious doctrine of the neighboring Bengali people. Most of the remaining are Christians, mainly Baptists. The Tripuri hindus claim Kshatriya status.

The folk songs of different variety of the Tripuri community are Jadukalija or Sarbang, Resekhagra, Mamita, Garia Rumani etc. among the musical instruments are gongs and single reed fiddle. The Tripuri community engages in dances like Garia Dance , Lebang Boomani Dance, Mamita Dance etc.

Reangs: Reangs are the next biggest tribes of Tripura. Their primary faith is animism. The Reangs practice Hozagiri dance , Dailow dance etc. They play a variety of musical instruments like Changphreng, Violin, Sarinda, Drum etc.

Noatias: Noatias are believed to be a branch of the Tripuris. It is interesting to know that the Noatias put 'Tripuri' as their surname. Traditionally, the festivals and customs of Noatias bear a close resemblance to those of the Tripuri people. The sacred Kerpuja is performed by Noatias for the material success of the collective life of the villagers. On this occasion reverence is paid to Lord Garia and the symbolic representation of Lord Garia is carried from house to house while the drum is beaten rhythmically along with song and dance of young boys and girls.

Jamatia: Kokborok speaking Jamatias are the third largest tribe of Tripura. Jamatia is a Kokborok word in which 'Jama' means tax and 'twiya' means exempted. Since the Jamatias served as soldiers in Tripura Royal force under the rule of Manikya dynasty therefore they were exempted from payment of taxes for their loyalty, service and sacrifice for the royal regime and so the name 'Jamatia' came into being. They are engaged in different cultural activities like music , dance and acting. Besides following their own traditional religion the Jamatias also love to perform Durga puja according to the Bengali custom.

Chakma: The Chakma community is basically follower of Buddhism but some of them worship Shiv and Kali as well. The Chakma tradition of folk music and culture is very rich. They have highly philosophical ideas which they express through their songs. Even the lullabies are thought provoking. Chakmas are fond of Bizu and Jhum Dance. Biju, the three-day long festival of Chakma people is celebrated with singing and dancing.

Mog: The Mogs are said to be the offsprings of Arkanese, Burmese and Chinese stock regarded as a mixed tribe. Therefore, like some other tribes of Tripura, the earlier abode of

the Mogs is not Tripura. They in particular are migrants from the Chittagong hill tracts of Bangladesh. The Mogs are Arkanese descendents who live in the Indian State of Tripura since the Arakan kingdom's control over Tripura in the 16th century. This tribe is follower of Buddhism. Sangrai, is the occasion of special festival for them as they celebrate this day with cultural programs to invite new year. This festival observed on the last day of Chaitra is celebrated for three days. The youngsters of Mog community on this occasion move about from house to house dancing and singing with pious 'Wish Yielding Tree' (Kalpataru) on the head.

Another event named 'Way Festival' is celebrated on the full moon day in the month of Ashwin. The people of this community indulge in merrymaking through songs and dances in the premises of Budhha temple. The traditional dance of the Mog community is known as 'Way Dance' or Lamp Dance. The songs which are performed on this occasion are namely Arouye, Aying, Kapyra, Roddho etc and dance items like Soying, Yoing Baing etc are performed.

Munda: Munda tribe as per historians originated from Bihar and migrated to Tripura mainly as tea garden workers. In their religious faith, mostly Mundas follow 'Sarna' while a good number of them have adopted Christianity. Their cultural festivals include Jadur, Lasur and Gena. They chose these occasions to perform dances like Jhumur Dance. Jatra (open theatre) is another popular item of recreation among them.

Santhals: The Santhals are original residents of Bihar and West Bengal. They came here as laborers in the tea gradens. The Santhal people love music and dance. Like other ethnic groups, their culture has been influenced by mainstream Indian culture and Western culture but their traditional music and dance still remain intact. Santal dance and music traditionally revolves round Santal religious celebrations.

The names of many Santal tunes are derived from the traditional ritual with which they were once associated. Sohrai tunes, for example, were those sung at the Sohrai Festival. Their cultural ceremony begins with the Bahai Festival or Basant Utsav.

Orang: The Orang or Oraon tribe belongs to the Austric family. They were originally animist but later embraced Christianity. The Oraon people have a rich range of folk songs, dances and tales as well as traditional musical instruments. Mandar, nagara and kartal are their main musical instruments. Both men and women participate in dances performed at social events and festivals.

The main festival celebrated by them is known as Karam and the dance performed on this occasion is known as Karma dance. Another occasion they love to celebrate is on the full moon day in the month of Falguna when they perform Fagua dance. Another dance they perform is Jhumur dance. All the dances have both male and female participants accompanied by drum and kartal to keep the rhythm.

Music: The Source of Inspiration in the Tribal Life: Dancing and singing is vitally connected with the Tribal life of Tripura. They dance and sing not only in joy but also in

sorrow; also during work or when observing some rituals or festivals. From very early times, dance and music have been organized to please the pantheon of Gods and Goddesses for getting good harvests or to recover from incurable diseases etc. But in due course of time these songs and dance forms became a part of their social life along with getting entangled with physical labor which is well-reflected in jhum cultivation, festival of new crops, collective hunting, cutting crops etc. The Hozagiri dance of the Reang community is performed on the occasions of Mailuma and Maikhah, to please the Goddess of health and prosperity. The Reangs believe that if the Goddess is pleased with their singing and dancing, then She will bless them with good crops. Garia dance is the prime dance form of Tripuri, Jamatia, Kalai and Noatia communities. It revolves around the festival and worship of Garia deity although agricultural and social elements also find expression in their dance forms. The Lebang Bomani dance is performed by the Tripuris in which the activity of catching 'Lebang' (one kind of insect) which flock the jhum lands during the period of mid April post Garia festival is depicted. Similarly Mamita dance is performed by the Tripuris when new paddy is harvested.

Royalty and their inclination for Music and Dance: The cultivation of music in Tripura has a long history dating back to the 15th century. The liberal patronage of the ancient rulers and the other members of the royal family of Tripura created conducive atmosphere for musical pursuit in the State. "Rajmala, the State chronicle mentions Maharaja Dhanya Manikya (1490-1515 A.D.) as the pioneer of introducing music among the common people of the land by inviting vocal and instrumental musicians from Trihut and Mithila."⁴

The rulers of the State played an important role in bringing about socio-economic changes among the tribal population. Besides bringing in people from other states to serve at various administrative and authoritative positions, there is sufficient historical evidence of the Maharajas of Tripura inviting significant numbers of musicians, poets, percussionists, painters, photographers and litterateurs from other states of India as well as from abroad. The star-studded royal courts buzzing with all these gems are proof enough of the royal inclination towards arts, literature and poetry.

The Kings of Tripura intentionally encouraged the involvement of other communities in Tripura. The following excerpt gives an attestation to this fact:

"The rulers of Tripura encouraged the influx of the Bengali people not only to increase the revenue but also because they valued cultural contact with the Bengalis and wanted to utilize the services of the Bengalis for reorganization of the outdated administrative machinery of the State. From 15th century onwards there had been a continuous immigration of the Bengalis into Tripura resulting in the Sanskritization of the tribal culture to some extent; the tribals became Hindus, learnt Bengali language and adopted much of the Bengali culture. In any plural society the minority groups try to adjust themselves with the wider life by incorporating the cultural traits of the dominant group in their life style."⁵

Although the Manikyas were liberals in their religious approach as stated above, but individually the Royalty of Tripura were devoted Vaishnavites. The Maharaja used to organize musical functions on the occasions of Holi, Jhulan, Rasa and Spring.

Conclusion: Tripura is an abode of various ethnic groups having their own language, religion, social customs and cultural heritage along with their own collection of variety of songs and dance forms.

After a close introspection of the details regarding Tripura's cultural and musical history, it maybe stated that the musical and cultural essence of Tripura majorly revolves around their respective religious and spiritual beliefs as well as social life. In a crux, music forms an indivisible part of the citizens of Tripura. So true are S.D.Burman's evergreen words regarding Tripura:

“There is a proverb about Tripura. In their palaces, starting from the King, the Queen, the Princes, and the Princesses down to the servants, everybody sings. Nobody is said to be born in Tripura who does not have a tune in their voice, or cannot sing. In Tripura's paddy fields, the peasants sing and plough the field. The boatmen cannot row without hitting notes of a song. The fishermen sing and catch fish. The weavers weave with songs and the labourers toil with songs. The voices of the people are a gift from God. I am a son of that soil of Tripura. May be that is why my whole life has been spent just singing. Music is my first love.”

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