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REGENCY, ACCESSION, AND THE CHALLENGES OF PERIPHERAL STATE FORMATION: TRIPURA'S INTEGRATION INTO THE INDIAN UNION, 1947-1949

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ABSTRACT

The Accession and integration of princely states into the Indian Union after India's independence represents a foundational moment in the making of modern India. While larger states have received substantial scholarly attention, the experience of smaller frontier kingdoms such as Tripura reveals equally complex processes of negotiation and state formation. This study examines regency, accession, and the challenges of peripheral state formation in the princely state of Tripura, focusing on its political, administrative, and diplomatic integration into the Indian Union between 1947 and 1949. The sudden death of Maharaja Bir Bikram Kishore Manikya in May 1947 created a constitutional vacuum, leading to the establishment of a Regency under Maharani Kanchan Prabha Devi. The regency became a crucial institutional mechanism that maintained administrative continuity while negotiating accession amid geopolitical uncertainty, demographic diversity, and post-Partition instability. Alleged pro-Pakistani conspiracies, refugee influx, and Tripura's geographical isolation intensified the need for decisive intervention by the Government of India. Through administrative restructuring, including the appointment of a Dewan and the dissolution of the Regency Council, sovereignty was gradually recalibrated. The signing of the Merger Agreement in September 1949 marked the culmination of this negotiated transition. Tripura's integration thus reflects a multi-layered process of regency politics, frontier geopolitics, and postcolonial state formation.



KEYWORDS: Tripura, Regency, Manikya Dynasty, Accession, State Formation.

INTRODUCTION:

The integration of the princely states into the Indian Union after independence (1947) remains one of the most significant processes in the making of modern India. While much academic focus has been dedicated to the larger states, the experience of smaller frontier kingdoms reveal equally complex trajectories of negotiation, adaptation and the state formation. Tripura is one of the small and hilly states in the northeastern corner of India and the third smallest state in the country in terms of area (10,477 sq.km), bordered by Bangladesh on the north, west, and southeast, while sharing its eastern common boundary with Assam and Mizoram. According to the most recent census, there are 3,673,917 people living in Tripura, with 1,874,376 men and 1,799,541 women (Census, 2011). The population of

the state consists of nineteen group of Scheduled Tribes, among them the prominent are Tripuri, Reang, Jamatia, Noatia, Halam, Kuki, Lushai, Mog, and Chakma (Varman, 2012) and the remaining are primarily comprised of Bengali Hindus, Muslims, and the Manipuris, including both the Bishnupriyas and Meiteis. This diverse ethnic composition has contributed to a unique cultural assimilation within Tripura.

From the very beginning, the Manikya dynasty ruled over Tripura, establishing a long-standing monarchical system that shaped the political, administrative, and cultural foundations of the kingdom for several centuries. Their authority, though periodically influenced by Mughal suzerainty and later by British paramountcy, remained internally autonomous, enabling the dynasty to consolidate territorial control, develop courtly institutions, and maintain a distinct regional identity until the mid-twentieth century. According to the Rajmala (The Royal Chronicles of the king of Tripura) a total 185 kings of Manikya dynasty ruled for about five thousand years since the mythological prehistoric times. As a result, a deeply ingrained political culture was produced by this lengthy continuity of monarchical power, where legitimacy was derived from sacral kingship and dynastic succession. This long tradition of sacral kingship and dynastic legitimacy continued to shape the political consciousness of Tripura well into the twentieth century. Yet, the transition from a hereditary monarchy to a modern administrative unit within the Indian Union was neither abrupt nor uncomplicated. The death of Maharaja Bir Bikram Kishore Manikya in 1947 created a constitutional and political vacuum, which led to the establishment of a regency under Maharani Kanchan Prabha Devi on behalf of her minor son. In this context, the accession of Tripura was not merely a formal diplomatic act but a complex process shaped by internal administrative constraints, demographic diversity, frontier geopolitics, and the pressures of post-Partition realities, including refugee influx and economic dislocation. The shift from monarchy to democratic governance required the reorganisation of revenue, law and order, and communication systems, thereby initiating the early stages of state formation.

Therefore, the integration of Tripura between 1947 and 1949 must be examined as a multi-layered historical process in which regency politics, the legacy of the Manikya state, and the strategic priorities of the Indian Union intersected.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE:

The existing literature on this study is very limited. However an attempt has been made to examine the available literature within this limitation. Mahadev Chakraborty's *Tripura in Transition: Monarchy to Democracy* offers a complete account of the political transformation of Tripura from Manikya rule to democratic governance. The work highlights the monarchy in Tripura, struggle for democracy, accession to merger, the rise of popular political mobilisation, particularly among tribal communities and the gradual institutional evolution from the administration of Chief Commissioner to full statehood in 1972. However, the study gives limited attention to the regency period (1947–1949) and the constitutional processes of accession, leaving scope for further research on the dynamics of sovereignty, negotiation, and early postcolonial state formation. The political relations of Tripura with the British are examined by Dr. Hirendra Kumar Sur's in his book *British Relations with the State of Tripura (1760–1947)*. He also highlighted the administrative reorganisation and the Maharani's function as a prelude to merger with India in Chapter IX. Nevertheless, it continues to be state-centric and ignores popular politics, socio economic transformation, and the dynamics of state formation associated with accession. *Tripura Administration : The Era of Modernisation* by Banikantha Bhattacharyya investigates the administrative framework of the Manikya dynasty as well as the influence of British institutional practices on governance. In this book, Chapter VII is related to this topic because it describes how Indian state structures replaced princely administration between 1947 and 1956. However, political negotiations, public participation, and the dynamics of accession and state formation are not given much attention in this mostly institutional work.

Objectives -

- To analyse the nature and functioning of the regency administration in Tripura after 1947, and its role in shaping the political decision-making process leading to accession to the Indian Union.

- To examine the process of Tripura's accession and administrative integration (1947-1949), highlighting the negotiations, legal frameworks, and the role of the Manikya dynasty and Government of India.
- To investigate the major challenges of peripheral state formation in Tripura, including political uncertainty, security concerns, refugee influx, administrative transition, and centre-periphery relations during the early postcolonial period.

METHODOLOGY

This study is based on qualitative analysis of both primary and secondary sources, using the historical-analytical method. Primary sources are state notifications, government letters, telegrams, records of the Constituent Assembly and the Tripura Merger Agreement. These sources are supplemented by memoirs, official reports and academic studies of princely state integration and the political history of Northeast India. A comparative/experimental framework assists us to understand the transition in Tripura as part of a larger process of state formation in post-colonial India.

RESEARCH QUESTION:

1. How did the regency administration shape the political and administrative decisions that led to Tripura's accession to the Indian Union (1947-1949)?
2. What were the key constitutional and political processes involved in Tripura's integration into the Indian Union?
3. What major challenges did Tripura face as a peripheral princely state during its transition from monarchy to incorporation into the postcolonial Indian state?

DISCUSSION:

The last ruler of Tripura, Maharaja Bir Bikram Kishor Manikya Bahadur born in August 1908 and ascended the throne in the Manikya dynasty in 1923, upon the death of his father Maharaja Birendrakishor (Chakraborty, 2019). He was regarded as progressive monarch due to his visionary reforms across diverse sectors. Maharaja Bir Bikram Kishore Manikya played a crucial and formative role in preparing Tripura for its eventual integration with the Indian Union. During his lifetime, he expressed his clear intention that after independence Tripura would join the Indian Union. Accordingly, on 28 April 1947, he nominated his trusted minister, Girija Sankar Guha, to represent Tripura in the Indian Constituent Assembly. (Govt. of Tripura, 1971, p176). But he was unable to realize this aspiration during his lifetime as he passed away on 17th May, 1947. His death was officially communicated to the Government of India on 18 May 1947 by Chief Minister Tripura through a telegram addressed to the Home Minister, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel. The telegram conveyed the gravity and suddenness of the event, stating: "EXTREMELY GRIEVED TO INFORM THAT HIS HIGHNESS TRIPURA EXPIRED LAST NIGHT." (Das, 1973, p. 421).

His passing came at a critical moment when the subcontinent was undergoing rapid political transformation, and Tripura urgently needed strong guidance. However, since Kirit Bikram was still a minor at that time, the Government of India's resolution dated 27 August 1917 required that the administration be placed under a Regency Council until he came of age. (Bhattacharya, 1986, p.210). The Regency Council was made up of four members.

1. Maharani Kanchan Prava Devi- President
2. Maharaj Kumar Brajendra Kishore Deb Barman- Vice President
3. Major Bankim Bihari Deb Barman- Member
4. Satyabrata Mukherjee- Member (Bhattacharya, 1986)

Moreover, with the approval of the Resident of the Eastern States, S. V Mukherjee, an ex- High Official of Kathiawar States was appointed Chief Minister of Tripura in the beginning of the rule of the Regency Council (Sur, 2010, p 152). In addition, three non-official ministers were selected, who were to be associated with the Chief minister. They were Captain Maharaj Kumar Durjoy Kishore Dev Varman Bahadur, Kumar Nandalal Dev Varman Bahadur and Moulvi Tamizuddin Ahmed Chowdhury Khan. (Deepak, 2025, p.77-78). However, A week after the Council of Regency assumed charge of Tripura's

administration, the British authorities formally handed over power to the newly formed Indian Dominion on 15th August 1947. On this historic day, Regent Maharani addressed the people of Tripura with a special message marking the transition (Bhattacharyya, 1986, p 2110). She announced that, “with the end of British Paramountcy, she would now serve as the Regent or the official representative of the young ruler, Maharaj Kirit Bikram Kishore Deb Barma.” In her statement, Maharani assured the subjects of Tripura that she would uphold and carry forward the constitutional reforms that had been initiated by her late husband, Maharaj Bir Bikram, in 1941.

It is important to note that the State of Tripura had already expressed its intention to join the Indian Union during the lifetime of Maharaja Bir Bikram Kishore Manikya. This intention did not change after his death. Maharaj Kumar Brajendra Kishore Debbarmar, who was serving as the Chief Minister of Tripura at that time, continued to support the decision to join the Indian Union. On 11 June 1947, he issued a notice appointing G. C. Guha, Minister of the Government of Tripura, as the representative of the State. This notice was also communicated to the Secretary of the Constituent Assembly through a telegram sent on the same day. Around the same period, another important notice was released on 3rd July 1947 by Maharani Kanchan Prabha Debi. In this announcement, she declared that Girija Sankar Guha, Minister of the Government of Tripura, had been formally selected to represent the Tripura, Manipur, and Khasi States Group in the Constituent Assembly of India (Sur, 2010, p 152)

When this was the situation on the other side, the Tripura administration received alarming information regarding a conspiracy planned by Muslim League leaders from Comilla and Feni to annex Tripura to Pakistan (Sur, 2010, p 152). The situation became particularly precarious after the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Chakla Roshnabad, and the Sylhet district were awarded to Pakistan, a development that geographically isolated Tripura and severed its direct connection with the Indian mainland. The Regent Maharani was also alarmed at the precarious condition of Tripura being isolated from the mainland of India by the award of the Boundary Commission. (Bhattacharjee, p215). She personally called on Sardar Patel in July 1947 and requested him to take necessary steps to save Tripura State from isolation. Accordingly, on 21 August 1947, Sardar Patel wrote a telegram to Sir Akbar Hydari, Governor of Assam, to take proper steps for the protection of the state.

It was alleged that the conspiracy was prepared by the ‘Anjuman-i-Islamia’, a socio religious organization, with Abdul Barik Khan (also known as Gadu Mia) and Sirajul Islam (alias Pyera Mia) identified as the principal actors (Roy Choudhury, 2011). It is also important to note that Maharaj Kumar Durjay Kishore Debbarma, the stepbrother of Maharaja Bir Bikram Manikya, was reportedly implicated in this conspiracy. Contemporary accounts indicate that Gadu Mia and other pro-Pakistani elements attempted to influence him by assuring that, should Tripura be incorporated into Pakistan, he would be enthroned as the Maharaja of the state. It was further alleged that S.V Mukherjee, who was serving as the Chief Minister of Tripura at the time, was also involved in the conspiracy.

This conspiracy was not merely the product of local disaffection; it reflected broader anxieties and ambitions that had been unleashed in the tense post-Partition environment. In Comilla, three public meetings were organised in which Muslim League activists openly demanded Tripura’s accession to Pakistan (Sur, 2010 p 152). Their speeches revealed a deliberate strategy that combined political threats with efforts to mobilise agrarian grievances. The resolutions adopted in these gatherings gave Tripura’s rulers a fifteen-day ultimatum to meet their demands and warned that “Direct Action” would be launched if the State did not comply, an ominous reference to the 1946 campaign that had led to large-scale violence in Bengal.

Although most of the people of Tripura opposed the accession of Tripura to Pakistan (Roy Choudhury, p 96). The Tripura Rajya Praja Mandal initiated a strong resistance movement against the alleged conspiracy to annex Tripura to Pakistan (Mohanta, 2004, p 32). Simultaneously, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of India appealed to the people of Tripura to resist these designs with all available means and to safeguard the territorial integrity of the state. The Tripura State Congress also launched intensive political mobilisation and campaigning during this period. On the other hand, Umeshlal Singha, Secretary of the Tripura State Congress Committee, lost no time in seeking guidance from S. M. Ghosh, President of the Bengal Provincial Congress Committee. S. M. Ghosh, acting

on the situation, deputed Umeshlal Singha, along with two other Congress workers from Tripura, to meet Vallabhbhai Patel, with his letter dated 29th October 1947.

On 3rd November 1947 a telegram was sent from the Intelligence Bureau (M.H.A.) Government of India New Delhi to V. Shankar, Esq. ICS Private Secretary to the Hon'ble Minister for Home Affairs New Delhi regarding the information to invade Tripura by Pakistan.

“SECRET INFORMATION INDICATES POSSIBILITY OF PAKISTAN ATTACK ON TRIPURA STATE ON SAME LINES AS IN KASHMIR. INFILTRATION OF MUSLIM LEAGUE SUPPORTERS AND DISSEMINATION OF PROPAGANDA LITERATURE HAVE BEGUN WITHIN TRIPURA. BURMESE COMMUNISTS AND MANIPURI COMMUNISTS ON THE OTHER HAND OPPOSING POPULAR MOVEMENT IN MANIPUR IN PURSUANCE OF POLICY FOR INCLUSION OF MANIPUR IN BURMA” (Das, 1973 p 422)

After receiving this secret information, Jawaharlal Nehru wrote a telegram on 4th November 1947 to Liaquat Ali Khan, Prime Minister of Pakistan informing that Muslim League National Guards in East Bengal are spreading propaganda and circulating pamphlets inciting the annexation of Tripura to Eastern Pakistan, with alleged preparations underway for invasion. The letter urges immediate action to prevent such hostile activities, emphasizing that Tripura had already acceded to India and any aggression would be considered an act against the Indian Dominion.. Moreover, Jawaharlal Nehru also communicated with Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel regarding this issue through a subsequent telegram.(Das, 1973)

At this time, the Regent Maharani and her son were residing in Shillong for security reasons. According to the local sources four gentlemen of Agartala Town , Namely Prabhat Roy, Joy Sinha Deb Barman, Kalu Chanda and Prafulla Roy reported the conspiracy hatched by some local men of position against the state to Maharani Kanchan Prabha Devi at Shilong (Sur, 2010). Then, the Regent Maharani promptly communicated to Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel who invited her to Delhi for discussion regarding the situation. Accordingly she went to Delhi and held a thorough discussion about the said conspiracy. However, Kshitish Chandra Neogy, Central Minister for Refugee and Rehabilitation, who was earlier associated with Tripura State as Legal and Constitutional Adviser and Dr. Syama Prasad Mukherjee, Central Minister for Industry and Supply separately communicated with Vallabhbhai Patel regarding the situation of Tripura. Sardar Patel assured them that some actions had already been taken and that communications had been put on a proper and secure footing. Moreover, the Eastern Command was put on alert for military assistance in case of need.

The official correspondence between Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, Jawaharlal Nehru and others leaders, clearly demonstrates that the Government of India responded promptly by dispatching personnel and necessary resources to counter hostile external incursions and influences. Thereafter, in order to deal with the tumultuous situation prevailing in Tripura, the Government of India took some steps towards streamlining administration of Tripura. The Government of India decided to remove S. V. Mukherjee and accordingly he was asked to resign. His resignation was accepted on 27 November 1947. Durjay Kishore Deb Burman was also asked to resign and his resignation was accepted on 17 January 1948. Moreover, he was asked to stay outside Tripura for a certain period of time (Sen, 1970). On 30th November 1947 S N Roy of the Indian Civil Service was appointed as the new Chief Minister or Dewan of Tripura. Maharaj Kumar B K Deb Barman initially expressed his happiness at the news. However, on 1 December, 1947, when he contacted S N Roy, he was informed that the plan had been altered and another person would be recommended for the office. It is pertinent to mention that S N Roy declined the offer on personal ground. Subsequently Maharaj Kumar B K Deb Barman communicated with Sardar Patel regarding this matter.

However, shortly thereafter, as a measure to streamline the Administration of Tripura, the Government of India decided to abolish the office of the Chief Minister of Tripura State. In its place the office of the Dewan was introduced and A B Chatterjee was appointed to the office of the Dewan of Tripura. He joined his office on 20 December 1947 (Sur, 2010 p 155). After his assuming the office, the council of Regency was dissolved according to the advice of the Indian Government and Maharani Kanchan Prava Devi became the sole Regent on 12 January 1948 (Govt. Of Tripura,1971,pp182-83). But Maharani Kanchan Prava Devi was allowed to continue to remain as the sole Regent of Krit Bikram

Kishore Debbarman. (Mohanta, 2004 p 38). She continued in the position till 15 October 1949 when the accession of the Tripura state to the Indian Union was accomplished.

The final phase of Tripura's political transition unfolded within the broader context of the integration of Indian princely States. Integration took multiple forms across the subcontinent, depending on geography, administrative viability, and strategic considerations (Menon, 1956). Tripura's geographical isolation after Partition, its vulnerability to external pressures, and the large influx of refugees from East Pakistan made direct central administration imperative (Bhaumik, 1996). The White Paper on Indian States (1950) succinctly explained that Tripura's unique circumstances required immediate central oversight to ensure effective governance. Accordingly, on 9 September 1949, the Regent Maharani signed the Merger Agreement in New Delhi (Bhattacharyya, 1986) in the presence of the secretary of the Indian Minister of Home Affairs V P Menon and the father of queen Maharaja Yadavendra Singh of Panna and other dignitaries. Tripura formally became a centrally administered Chief Commissioner's province on 15 October 1949 and R. K. Roy, the last Dewan of the princely administration, assumed office the same day as the first Chief Commissioner.

CONCLUSION:

The political transformation of Tripura from 1947 to 1949 signifies a unique and intricate process within the larger context of Indian state integration. In contrast to numerous princely states where accession involved overt conflict or extended negotiations, Tripura's transition occurred through a complex interaction of dynastic continuity, regency governance, geopolitical vulnerability, and central intervention. The passing of Maharaja Bir Bikram Kishore Manikya at a pivotal historical moment created a constitutional void; however, the establishment of the Regency under Maharani Kanchan Prabha Devi ensured both administrative continuity and political stability during a time of significant uncertainty.

The regency did not merely serve as a caretaker arrangement; instead, it evolved into a vital institutional mechanism through which sovereignty was recalibrated and political authority was progressively shifted from monarchical frameworks to the structure of the Indian Union. External pressures, particularly the isolation of Tripura following Partition and the purported conspiracy to integrate the state into Pakistan, further intensified the necessity for decisive administrative reorganization. The swift engagement of the Government of India, the reconfiguration of state administration, and the appointment of a Dewan under central oversight illustrated a shift from dynastic independence to supervised integration.

The signing of the Merger Agreement in September 1949 and the official incorporation of Tripura as a Chief Commissioner's Province in October 1949 represented the apex of this transformation. Therefore, Tripura's accession was not merely a diplomatic maneuver but a negotiated process of state formation influenced by regency politics, frontier geopolitics, and the imperatives of postcolonial nation-building. The situation in Tripura highlights how peripheral princely states managed the dissolution of paramountcy and redefined political authority within the nascent Indian republic.

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