

Tagore's Ties with Four Manikya Princes of Tripura

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Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore's lifelong intimacy with the Maharajas and other royal dignitaries of the erstwhile princely state of Tripura is a historic phenomenon in the realm of Bengali culture and literature. The close ties of Tagore with Tripura is a subject of absorbing study as well as an object of curiosity to the lovers of Tagore. An interesting fact is that Tagore was always instinctively drawn towards the Maharajas of Tripura because of their intellectual acumen, refined taste for literature, fine arts, music—in short, their penchant for high culture.

Rabindranath first got acquainted with Maharaja Birchandra Manikya Bahadur (1839-1897) through correspondence. Birchandra was in a melancholic mood owing to the sad demise of his beloved queen consort, Bhanumati Devi. About this time he happened to go through 'Bhagna Hriday' ('Broken Heart') of Rabindranath. The Maharaja found echoes of his own heart in the poem, the central thought of which was highly melancholic and sadly sweet. Out of his sense of gratitude, he sent his Minister, Radharaman Ghosh, a scholar of Vaishnava literature, to the poet at Jorasanko with the message that he wanted to bestow on young Rabindranath the distinction of the best poet.

During his lifetime Tagore never forgot to mention that the arrival of a royal representative was a matter of high honour and recognition ever received by him from his own country, though he did not expect it

at that time since he felt that the day of such high honour was still far off. This happy occasion lasted as a happy memory in the mind of Tagore till the end of his eventful life.

Maharaja Birchandra was much senior to the young poet. But he did not allow the barrier of age to stand in the way of their friendship and gave no occasion to Tagore to feel the least shy in his presence. Thus the young poet could easily enjoy the company of the elderly king by entering into serious discussion with him on music, fine arts and Vaishnava literature, though the young poet, as he confessed, had limited experience in the areas of their discussion.

The Maharaja extended full assistance to Tagore at different times, specially when the latter began to write his novel, *Rājarshi* ('Royal Sage'), on the life of the ancient King of Tripura, Govinda Manikya. At the instance of Tagore, Birchandra supplied printed Sanskrit extracts from which Tagore was able to know the authentic annals of Govinda Manikya, who reigned in the 15th century.

Tagore's visit to Tripura

Tagore paid a visit to the capital of Tripura, Agartala, in 1899 for the first time. At that time Maharaja Birchandra was no more and it was Radhakishore's regime. The time was spring, the most favourite season of the poet. The poet was extremely delighted to find himself amidst the idyllic woodlands on the outskirts of Agartala,

where the spring festival with Manipuri dance recital was arranged in his honour. The honourable guest was taken by the people of Agartala as the harbinger of the new spring ('Nava Faguna'). The poet also derived great pleasure for being given such rare honour and felicitation in the backdrop of 'Madhavi' and 'Palash' groves, the most favourite flower plants of the poet.

Radhakishore was highly enamoured of Tagore's poetic genius and was also very interested in the latter's newly established Ashram Vidyalaya at Santiniketan. The Maharaja donated scientific instruments for the laboratory of the school while he went there to pay a visit. He not only arranged for sending students from Agartala with stipends but also sanctioned an annual grant of Rs 1,000 from the very inception of the school.

Tagore was always interested in the welfare of the princely state of Tripura, so much so that even in the selection of ministers he was consulted. It may be mentioned that the appointment of Ramanimohan Chatterjee (a relative of Tagore family) as a minister was made on his recommendation. Tagore also never failed to support the Maharaja's welfare activities.

It is a matter of great pride for Tripura that the great poet made this tiny state immortal by writing two famous books, *Bisarjan* and *Rājarshi*, on the reign of Govinda Manikya.

Radhakishore had profound love and attraction for Bengali language and literature and hence he always craved the company of men of letters and at times gave them rewards. For example, poet Hemchandra Bandyopadhyaya was granted a monthly pension of Rs 30 by the benevolent Maharaja when the former unfortunately became blind. Rai Bahadur Dinesh Chandra Sen, the famous historian of Bengali language and literature, also enjoyed a lifelong monthly pension of

Rs 30 from the state exchequer.

When Sir J. C. Bose was conducting his epoch-making scientific research in London, it was Maharaja Radhakishore Manikya who extended financial help to him for successful completion of the research. The Maharaja also donated a handsome amount at the time of setting up a laboratory for conducting scientific research of Sir J. C. Bose in Calcutta. The Maharaja donated Rs 10,000 for the purpose. It was Tagore who approached the Maharaja for financial assistance to Sir J. C. Bose.

Rajkumari Anangamohini Devi, sister of Radhakishore Manikya, was an eminent poetess of Tripura. She had to her credit three books of poems, namely *Kanikā*, *Shokagānthā* and *Priti*. *Shokagānthā* based on the theme of her mental gloom caused by the death of her husband was highly appreciated by Tagore.

Maharaja Radhakishore, the great friend of Tagore, died in a motor accident at Benaras in 1909. After his sudden death, his son, Birendrakishore Manikya (1909-1923) ascended the throne. Like his father, he also donated liberally to Tagore's school at Santiniketan when it was at a formative stage. He also contributed a handsome amount for setting up the hospital building at Santiniketan. When the idea of introducing Manipuri dance at Santiniketan cropped up in Tagore's mind, he approached Birendrakishore for sending a Manipuri dance teacher from Agartala. Accordingly, he sent Buddhimanta Singh who was an expert in both dance and handicrafts.

It is to be mentioned here that Birendrakishore Manikya, the elder brother of Brajendrakishore (Lalu Karta), had only one or two occasions to meet Tagore. It was Brajendrakishore (the favourite of Tagore), whom the poet would call 'Lalu' and dearly loved him as his son, who used to keep constant and close touch with Tagore. He used to meet the poet personally and

corresponded with him throughout his life.

Maharaja Birendrakishore was succeeded by his son Bikramkishore Manikya Bahadur (1923-1947), the last ruler of the princely state of Tripura. He was very modern in his outlook. Like his great grandfather, Birchandra Manikya, Bir Bikram was also endowed with a poetic faculty, specially in composing Vaishnava lyrics and holy songs.

In 1926, Rabindranath came to Agartala at the special invitation of Brajendrakishore (Lalu Karta), uncle of Bir Bikram Manikya. It was his seventh and last visit to Agartala. Kunjaban Palace (now Raj Bhavan) was chosen for his stay. During this visit, he was given a warm reception by the Kishore Sahitya Samaj at Umakanta Academy, the oldest educational institution in the state. In response to the reception, Tagore delivered a short speech in his inimitable style, saying that on numerous occasions he had been honoured at home and abroad, but the honour received from the native prince was unique in his life.

During his brief stay at Agartala, Tagore had a very busy schedule which included a visit to Pratapgarh agricultural farm, watching Rāsa dance, meeting King Bir Bikram, and holding discussion on editing *Rājymālā* and *Gita Chandrodaya*. He also held talks on the preservation of antiquities such as historic temples, edifices and archaeological relics etc. While passing his happy moments at Kunjaban Palace, Tagore composed five songs two of which were about spring. The songs are: (1) Swings the lily of love (*Dole dole dole premer dolanchānpā*); (2) In the first flush of joy in spring (*Fāguner nabin ānande*); (3) Come unto me (*Eso āmār ghare eso*); (4) Now that flowers blossom in the wood (*Bane jadi futlo kusum*) and (5) Rapt in a reverie, of you I dream (*Āpanhārā mātōārā*).

In 1939, Maharaja Bir Bikram went to

Santiniketan at the invitation of Tagore and enjoyed the hospitality as an honourable royal guest. The Maharaja paid visit to the Ashram school and Sangeet Bhavan and donated Rs 20,000 for extension of both.

In 1941, the birth anniversary of the poet was celebrated with pomp and splendour on his reaching the age of eighty. On that occasion Bir Bikram conferred the title 'Bharat Bhaskar' (Sun of India) on Tagore. Tagore accepted the honour with deep respect and conveyed the following message to the Maharaja. 'Today with utmost rejoicings I like to articulate that the short horizon of my ripe age has been radiated by the reflected glow of honour bestowed on me by the royal dignitaries of the princely state of Tripura. There is one particular reason why I feel delighted today. My heart was filled with pride and joy when I read of the uncommon generosity with which the present Maharaja had given shelter to a large number of oppressed and distress-stricken people. Now I can fully appreciate that hereditary royal munificence has been stamped fruitfully in the mind of Bengali people. The time when the great glory of the royal family reached its zenith I happen to receive the honorific title from the hand of the Maharaja of Tripura. Therefore I deem it to be the brightest moment of my life.'

On 18 June, Maharaja Bir Bikram presided over the function of Tagore's birth anniversary organized by Puri Banga Bhasha Sahitya Parishad and Puri Sangeet Sammilani.

Tagore passed away on 22 Shravana, 1348 Bengali era. Bir Bikram received the sad news on his way to Bangalore from Bombay after attending the conference of rulers of Indian princely states. The Maharaja sent a telegram at once to Agartala to keep closed all government offices and institutions to mourn the great loss. ■

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