

Art & Culture in Tripura

Past Glory and Future Vision

*Dr. Sumangal Sen

Tripura has a rich cultural heritage. Its plastic art, painting folk arts are known the world over. The Maharajahs who ruled the state prior to independence patronised them adding sheen to the grace and glory of the art and culture of the state. The author narrates in detail his experience of travelling across the state and seeing the magnificent artistic and cultural monuments there.

Art and culture are two separate words with maniplendoured dimensions. While the word 'art' can hardly find a synonym in our Indian languages — 'Shilpa' or 'Kala' are inadequate — the word 'culture' has 'sanskriti' as a good synonym. Before I proceed with my story of Tripura, I seek your permission to dilate upon these two words a little. The word 'art' suggests special skill. The dictionary gives the meaning as 'human skill as opposed to nature'. But then it goes on to elaborate the scope as imitative or imaginative skill applied to design, as in paintings, architecture, etc. Further, elaboration suggests (in plural) certain branches of university or school courses.- literature etc. But when art and culture are discussed, art is limited to visual arts-painting, sculpture, architecture, designing, folk arts, etc.

In matters of culture Rabindranath Tagore gives us a very interesting definition. He says, a piece of crystal-cut diamond may be termed as learning or education, and the rays that it reflects to all directions are culture. The Dictionary gives us the meaning, in the relevant context, as the sum total of a nation's aesthetic and intellectual achievements.

Nature is abundantly generous here in Tripura; undulating topography, hills and hillocks, meadows and bamboo groves are eternally romantic. The sky is cobalt blue, the folk-life is ever pulsating with rituals and festivals. And the folk-life is rather a bouquet of Manipuris. Together the life has assumed a festive appearance with the enormous backdrop of the cultural history and legends.

The state is small, but the canvas is large. It has a tremendous heritage of plastic art- the mighty sculpture of Devtamura, the exquisite finds of Udaipur, the terracotta of Pilak and the enormous gallery of the rock-sculpture of Unokati.

The story goes on to tell us of the Royal patronage, rather of the Royal participation, in the cultural panorama of Tripura. Their forefathers were great, but the last four rulers of Tripura were even greater. They were benevolent, they were farsighted and great poets of Vaishnav Padabali. And they were great artists by any standard and great patrons of art. We intend to discuss about their roles and contributions in greater details later.

A casual visit to the Tripura Government Museum and the Uma-Maheswar Temple in Agartala will convince a visitor of our contention of the greatness and glory of the plastic art of Tripura. The history of the sculpture of the eternal couple Uma and Maheswara consecrated and worshipped in the temple, goes back by the style and inscription to the 11th century. The image was found in Khandal, in present Bangladesh, which until the independence of India, was within the Zamindari of the Maharajas of Tripura. The Shakti image of Matabari, the Tripursundari Devi of Udaipur, South Tripura, was also a collection of a Maharaja after his Chittagong conquest. Similar sort of story surrounds the image of Kasba Kalibari, the image of which was brought from Sylhet town in Bangladesh.

The Manikya rulers of Tripura bearing the title 'Fa' at the end of their names, suggest close link among respectable Burmese families, the rulers of Tripura and the Ahom rulers.

Religion has ever been the underlying or the guiding spirit in plastic art, painting, folk arts all over the world since time immemorial, except perhaps those done in the prehistoric age, about which our knowledge is very limited, and except the art of modern age which is essentially

individualistic and secular in character. Plastic art of Tripura provides ample examples of works produced with the backdrops of Shaiva, Ganapatya Vaishnava, Buddhism, and religious practices of the tribal folks.

In an attempt to walk along the corridor of the art history of Tripura we may for the present start from the southernmost geographical point and proceed northwards, which will often coincide with the historical timeline as well.

So we start from Pilak-Jolaibari with the finds there. Agricultural activities undertaken by the people of the area have brought to our knowledge the vast wealth of art — stone and metal sculptures, terracotta plaques and sealings — surviving human onslaught. The art activity was not an isolated endeavour — the area has adjacent Mainamati, the terracotta of which area has found a prestigious place in the history of terracotta/art.

In Bengal and Tripura terracotta art is among the greatest contributions to the world of art although this art form is a part of temple-architecture and temple-sculpture. The term “terracotta” borrowed from Italy, means nothing more than baked clay, done in the same way as a common flowerpot or a water-pitcher is baked. The finds of Pilak-Jolaibari region testify to the prevalence of Brahmanical and Buddhist faiths. The area comes under Belonia which is still regarded as a place of the Maghs who are Buddhists. The art of terracotta of this area may be ascribed to the 7th to the 12th centuries.

Travelling about 40 km northwards, we arrive at Udaipur, by the river Gomati, a capital of Tripura till the first half of the 18th century. Udaipur is famous for the Tripurasundari image and her temple. This happens to be one of the 51 Peethasthanas of the shakti cult traditional concept. Udaipur is also famous for Temples and lakes. Important finds are Vishnu, Surya, Uma-Maheswara. The workmanship and the quality of stone used in the work suggest the 8th century to the 12th century period when these works were done. Besides these, a good number of terracotta plaques belonging to the 17th century have also been discovered here. Although this place is about 50 km. from Comilla, the cultural tie was strong enough for retaining link between this place and Bengal, and if these sculptural works were not done in Udaipur itself, as some scholars suspect, the religion-cultural link must have made the bridge.

Now we walk towards a little east of Udaipur. Here is Amarapur Division. The capital Amarapur was named after Maharaja Amar Manikya. There in the dense forest, by the river Gomoti, is a great feast of eyes of the beholders. A colossal series of relief sculpture, carved out of the riverside rock itself, and ascribed to the post-14th century, will remind the viewers of similar galleries on both sides of the river Nile, in Egypt and Sudan.

Further north, and we arrive at Bishalgarh, a place very close to Agartala. The name of the place suggests that sometime in the past there was a big fortress here. Also very close by there is a place named Golaghati. This suggests that an armoury was there. Among the number of finds a metal statuette of a goddess and a stone-image of Mahishamardini are worth special mention.

We skip the capital city of Agartala for the present for the sake of historical time-line and arrive at Unokoti in the north. A cool breeze will transport you to the realm of legends, and the cool gentle wind will tell you the stories of Unokoti. Unokoti that is one short of a crore—that is what is believed to be the number of pieces of sculpture hewed there by some Kalu Karmakar. The legend goes that Kalu was commissioned to carve a crore of images of deities before the crow crows the following morning. Only one short of a crore had been carved and a crow crows. The curse was upon the sculptor and upon the crow. The crow we still see in the form of a stone.

Let me tell you another legend. Shiva and all other deities had arrived at the place for the night halt. Shiva asked everyone to sleep for the night and at daybreak they would resume journey to Varanasi. The gods overslept and an angry Shiva cursed the deities and left the place. The deities became petrified.

A series of colossal sculptures, certainly works of different hands over several centuries, suggest that some splendidly finished and round sculptures were brought from other areas for them to occupy their rightful seats and make the heavenly assembly of gods complete.

Going down the stream, the cool breeze, the icy waters, composing the jingling of music, will tell us of a gap of about a couple of centuries between the earlier sculptures of Tripura and the art-activities of Unokoti. Stagnation of art around 13th century chiefly due to Muslim domination was responsible for the gap and the loss of the rich heritage. Thus the art of Unokoti may be placed around the 15th century.

It is believed that the origin of Unokoti can be traced from a Hindu dynasty of Indo-Mongoloid race. The Unokoti school forms a class by itself and presents a style exotic and sporadic. Some hold this place of worship as Kapil Tirtha, and some, mostly on the basis of the 33 ft high bust of Shiva and the assembly of gods, hold it as Shiva Tirtha. Ashokastami Mela is a regular feature here.

Now we are going to touch the datelines that suggest the reign of the Manikya rulers. Some legends again surround the history, but from around 15th century onwards the history of rulers is more or less consistent. Amarapur and Udaipur bear eloquent testimony to their achievements. Mighty temples and palaces were erected by them. Towns were planned and built and it was Maharaja Birchandra Manikya who, like a colossus, brought the tiny and hilly state of Tripura to the gateway of the modern age. Birchandra Manikya whose period spans between 1862 AD and 1896 AD was a visionary, a great Vaisnav poet, an accomplished artist and photographer, a musician of rare talent and capable of speaking Urdu as fluently as he could speak his mother tongue. He felicitated Rabindranath Tagore when the poet was very young, and the link he thus established continued till the end of the poet's life through the reign of all the three subsequent rulers till the period of Maharaja Bir Bikram Kishore Manikya. All the kings after Birchandra-Maharaja Radhakishore Manikya, Maharaja Birendra Kishore Manikya and lastly Maharaja Bir Bikram Kishore Manikya were great scholars, great poets of Vaishnav Padavali, rulers of unusual farsightedness. Birendra Kishore was an accomplished painter of international standard besides being a musician par excellence. It was a period of Renaissance when the kings themselves were great in all respects and their court used to welcome such diverse and great talents as Jadu Bhatta, Kashem Ali, Alam Karigar, Shasi Hesse and Rabindranath Tagore. The Maharajas patronised the scientific pursuits of Sir Jagadish Chandra Bose. Queens hailed from Tripura and other states from distinguished families and with them came the cultures of these places namely, Rajasthan, Manipur and Nepal. Vaishnav culture from Manipur added a distinguished flavour of rare quality and fragrance to enrich and influence the culture of Tripura, which already was a unique admixture of Bengali culture and Tripura culture. Needlework had been perfected by Maharanis coming from Manipur and great and numerous temples in and around Agartala town were their contributions. Temples of great name - Shiv Bari was established by Maharani Mahadevi Bhagabati Devi, queen of Birendra Kishore, Jagannath temple by Tulasibari Devi, Maharani of Radhakishore, Kishorelal Temple by Maharaj Kumari Kamalprava Devi, Durgabari by Maharaja Birendra Kishore Manikya.

A casual glance at this panorama will convince a visitor of the tremendous synthesis of culture that has taken place in Tripura, especially during the reigns of the last rulers, which has led to the firm foundation on which Tripura stands now.

We have mentioned Jadu Bhatta and Shasi Hesse among others. An unparalleled musician himself, Jadu Bhatta was the guru of Rabindranath in vocal music. He was the court musician during Birchandra's time. Shasi Hesse, an accomplished painter, was decidedly the best portrait painter in India and was in Tripura patronised by Maharajas Radhakishore and Birchandra Kishore.

The king of great vision was Bir Bikram Kishore Manikya who became the ruler at 16. A ruler with modern outlook, a great poet himself, he had his court full of such eminent artists of international repute as Ramendranath Chakraborty, who later became the Principal of the Calcutta Art College and Dhiren Krishna Deb Barma who was the Principal of Shantiniketan Kala Bhavan till retirement. Another great name was Nalini Kanta Majumdar. Then the galaxy consisted of Suresh Ch. Dev Barma, Sailesh Ch. Deb Barma, Shyamacharan Chakraborty, Sukhilal De, among others.

During the princely days there also were such big names of artists in the Royal family as Kumar Samarendra and Anil Krishna of Ujir Bari. Incidentally Dhiren Krishna also hails from Ujir Bari.

The story of great artists of Tripura will never be complete unless we mention two great names in the realm of arts, born of the Royal family, growing into eminence because of diverse scholastic and creative genius. They are Maharaj Kumari Kamalprava Devi, an octogenarian, still retaining the same intellectual and aesthetic alertness, and Maharaj Kumar Sahadev Bikram. While Kamalprava Devi is the daughter of Maharaja Birendra Kishore, Sahadev Bikram Kishore Deb Barman is the son of the last ruler Bir Bikram Kishore Manikya.

We still have to say a little more about Kamalprava Devi. When all is said and done, one reality gets noticed. Maharani Kamalprava Devi, a true genius, elevated the folk art of Tripura created through the ages, to the level of universal acceptability. The name of this genius is again Maharaj Kumari Kamalprava Devi. She used her imagination, her pragmatic vision and her expertise and utilised bamboo, cane, and all other related materials from daily life and directed the enormous flow towards the ocean of art. Just an eye for the applicability, a touch of imagination and the baskets, the lampshades and other items of daily use, were elevated and found a place in the world of aristocracy.

The inspiration still vibrates and expands itself in many other materials, including waste materials and Handicrafts and Textiles of Tripura with endless admixture of idioms created by the tribals, the Bengalis and the Manipuris. They are anybody's choice in the world of connoisseurs. Herself the president of the Craft Council of Tripura, a non-Govt. organisation, it is under Maharaj Kumari Kamalprava's guidance that a good number of courses and workshops have been conducted, experiments carried out, and a recently held workshop was with a waste material namely, coconut shell. When concluded, the result was astonishing. We have to acknowledge with gratitude all sorts of cooperation, financial and otherwise, these programmes received from the Ministry of Textiles. Government of Tripura has a glorious past in the sphere of performing arts — music, dance and drama. Unparalleled in the field of vocal music was Jadu Bhatta. In 'Rabab', there was Kashem Ali. Maharaja Birendra Kishore was a complete musician and his daughter Kamalprava is a worthy descendent.

There was Anil Krishna of Ujir Bari, a musician par excellence besides Maharaj Kumar Hemanta Kishore, a great exponent of Sitar. His daughter Kumari Jharna is again a worthy daughter in vocal music. Recently, we have lost a great artist. He is Anath Bandhu Deb Barma of Ujir Bari. A great sarod player he was. The delicate stepping and mudras of Manipuri Dance has been incorporated by Tagore in his style of dance. He got the inspiration from Tripura.

The future vision of art & culture is wide. The screen is enormously broad. Here we have a Govt. College of Art & Craft, the first of its stature in the Northeast. Founded in 1975, it has grown into a Degree College. Then we have a Govt. Music College offering Degree courses and Bhatkhande courses. There are other private institutions as well, supplementing the above programmes. We have a Government Museum and a private one as well.

We have the Govt. Sales Emporiums, Board of Handloom & Handicrafts, we have Purbasha which promotes handicrafts and handloom of Tripura and emphasises them on to the outside world. We have discussed progress of the Non-Govt. Organisations in the fields which are assuming vigorous momentum in diverse fields.

The University of Tripura, although not much old, had eminent scholars to promote several disciplines. Degree Colleges are fairly well equipped, school-level education is satisfactory and the literacy rate is high in Tripura.

The religious and cultural festivals are the unifying occasions of the people of all cross sections. There is free participation in rituals in festivals. Vishuva Samkranti of the Bengalis is Visu of the Jana Jati, Vijihu to the Chakmas and, across the border, Vihu in Assam. They all seem to point at the same origin of Vishuva Samkranti with more or less the same approach to inviting the New Year.

Again, in case of Garia Festival, the day of Hari Visu, the previous day to the Visu, synchronizes with a great event in the history of Tripura with a strong flavour of legend. Maharaja Dhanya Manikya waged war on the Kuki kingdom, defeated the Kukis and Jamatias (a major tribe in Tripura) and captured the golden head of the deity Garia. Incidentally, Garia was the warlord of the Kukis. But to the people of Tripura, Garia is the Lord of Agriculture. Along with Garia Puja of

the Tripuri, the Bengalis observe their Gajan and Charak. Ker Puja follows, then Kharchi Puja comes. The temple of 14 gods is near Agartala. Actually the place is old Agartala. All the communities join here.

Kali Puja at Mata Bari in Udaipur witnesses the same enthusiasm. Bengalis and Tripuris alike, rather all the communities of the tribes, and Manipuris, assemble here. Same fervor is witnessed in Manasamangal, Viju festival of the Chakmas, Jhumur Dance of the Santhals, Ashokastami Mela, Holi Brahmakundu, Buddha Purnima, Christmas and Muharram. Deep down in the soil lies the string of fraternity that ties all the communities. The string garlands the ways of life of different communities, the rituals, the festivals, the arts, the handicrafts, music, dance and all the artistic and moral pursuits.

The short essay ends here. It ends invariably here, where all the souls meet and are garlanded with a single string of cultural affinity amidst diversity, where art comes out of life, music, dance, rituals - all come the same way. There is no quarrel, no hard feeling. For they are the simple folk, the Vertical Men as W.H. Auden names them.

And about whom, Tagore wrote.

They, ever,
pull the oars, keep holding the helm;
they, in the fields,
sow seeds, cut the corn.
They go on working.

**Served as principal/director of the Government Art College of Agartala.*

.....

Dr. Sumangal Sen is no more!

As we were going to press with this issue of Ishani, we received the sad news from Agartala that one of our well wishers and the author of this article breathed his last at a nursing home at Kolkata on the 14th last. He was a patient of some heart ailment and was undergoing treatment there for the past few weeks. Unfortunately he could not return from there to his home at Agartala.

I came to know about Dr. Sen for the first time through the former Vice Chancellor of Tripura University, Prof. J.B.Ganguly, as I had approached him to recommend suitable names of participants at a seminar we had organized in 1998. One of the important names recommended by Prof. Ganguly then was of Dr. Sumangal Sen. The theme of the seminar was, "North East India 1947-97: Continuity and Change". Dr.Sen was kind enough to attend the seminar and he also contributed an interesting paper. I later on met him on a couple of occasions at Agartala.

He was one of our important sources of help when we organized another seminar at Agartala itself on the theme of "Peace and Development in Tripura". He not only helped us in different ways but also contributed a paper of permanent worth on a topic dear to his heart, "Art and Culture of Tripura". It is this paper that we are reproducing in the present special Tripura issue of Ishani.

My acquaintance that began with a seminar gradually flowered into warm hearted friendship. An artist by training and temperament, he also had deep interest in Indian spirituality. He used to regularly address well-attended spiritual discourses at an Ashram dedicated to **Ma Anandamayi** at Agartala. I had the opportunity to attend one when I was on a visit to Agartala. A man of refined taste with rich experience in the field of art and education, he was also a generous host. He was kind enough to regularly send to me beautiful greeting cards created by him for important annual events. I also recall here that he was one of the first to acknowledge the receipt of the inaugural issue of ISHANI and convey his good wishes by a letter dated the 15th January last. That was the last communication I received from him.

I will always remember Dr. Sen as a lover of India and India's rich heritage of art, culture and spirituality. He also loved Tripura greatly and made it his permanent home. I will also remember him as a fine human being with noble sentiments and warm-hearted friendliness. Tripura has lost a luminary and a teacher who enriched the lives of many young citizens of Tripura. I bow my head in his memory and pay my humble tribute to my dear departed friend. May God give strength to his wife and his near ones to bear the irreparable loss!

Guwahati,
18 May 2005. Natwar Thakkar