

Modernization And Administrative Reforms During the Reign Of Birendra Kishore Manikya (1909–1923 CE) In Princely Tripura: A Study

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Abstract: This study paper offers a comprehensive analysis of the reforms and modernization implemented in the princely state of Tripura during the rule of Birendra Kishore Manikya (1909–1923 CE). Rajamala, the royal chronicle of Tripura, states that Tripura was a princely kingdom during British rule in India. It possesses a distinct system of governance, socio-economic structure, and cultural practices, shaped by the Bengal Renaissance and British reforms. The king of Tripura, together with their competent administrative personnel, has initiated numerous reforms and renovations to modernize the princely realm of Tripura. The Modernization process commenced during the reign of Bir Chandra Manikya (1862–1897 CE) and was furthered by Radha Kishore Manikya (1897–1909 CE). Maharaja Birendra Kishore Manikya, the son of Radha Kishore Manikya and grandson of Bir Chandra Manikya, continued this Modernization in Tripura. He implemented numerous reforms in administration, education, health, municipal governance, economics, and the structural framework of the Princely State of Tripura.

Keywords: Rajamala, Princely state, Bengal Renaissance, Economic, Modernization, Administration, Education, Health.

Introduction

Tripura, a small, mountainous state in India's northeastern region, is celebrated for its varied culture and extensive history as a former royal state (Bhattacharya, 2012). It is geographically unique, bordering by Bangladesh on three sides (north, south, and west), with a substantial international boundary of 856 km (Goswami, 2002). Conversely, it is linked to the remainder of India solely through the states of Assam and Mizoram, sharing a scant total of 162 km of boundary. Tripura encompasses a total surface area of 10,491.69 square kilometers, rendering it the third-smallest state in India. For roughly 1358 years and 6 months (from the inception of the Tripura Era, TE, which was started in 590 CE), Tripura functioned as an autonomous kingdom, with its documented history commencing from the settlement of Yayāti's evacuated son, Druhyu.

The state, referred to as Princely Tripura, possessed some distinctive characteristics among India's princely states. Monarchical Governance by a Sole Dynasty: The Manikya dynasty governed virtually continuously from at least the 15th century, a genealogy purported to encompass 184 rulers as per the royal chronicle, the Rajmala. According to Rajmala the title "Manikya was" was bestowed to the rulers of Tripura by the sovereign of ruler of Bengal, with Ratna Manikya being the ^{inaugural} recipient.

Lack of Treaty contacts: The kings maintained no formal treaty contacts with the British and only offered a nominal nazarana upon ascending to the throne (Roychoudhury, 2023).

Dual Status of Sovereigns: The state had a unique territorial and administrative oddity. The territory was partitioned into two sections: Hill Tripura (Tipperah) and Chakla Roshnabad. The eastern mountainous region, where autonomous Rajas governed with their own administration, laws, military, and police, functioning beyond British jurisdiction, is referred to as Hill Tripura. The western plains, where Zamindars (landlords) operated under the British Permanent Settlement, are referred to as Chakla Roshnabad inside British rule. This resulted in an odd circumstance in which the Chakla was concurrently a component of British India and a 'integral part of an imparible Raj' governed by the Tripura rulers. The state, administered feudally for many years, underwent a phase of reformation and modernization under the reign of the final four Manikya rulers, influenced by developments in British India, especially the Bengal Presidency, subsequent to the Battle of Plassey. This initiative was frequently instigated by Bengali officers. Modernization initiatives commenced during the tenure of Bir Chandra Manikya (1862–1896 CE) and persisted throughout the reigns of his successors.

The tenure of Maharaja Birendra Kishore Manikya (1909–1923 CE) was notably consequential, as he implemented ambitious reforms. His contributions encompassed the reorganization of the State Civil Service, the establishment of essential administrative positions such as chief secretary and police superintendent, and the division of the state into ten administrative units to enhance governance, thereby facilitating its evolution into a modern state. The drive for modernization persisted till the rule of Bir Bikram Kishore Manikya (1923–1947 CE), signifying the conclusion of the princely era.

Study Objectives

- i. To analyze the characteristics and scope of administrative reforms implemented during the tenure of Maharaja Birendra Kishore Manikya (1909–1923 CE) in Princely Tripura, focusing specifically on revenue administration, judicial reforms, and institutional restructuring.
- ii. To examine the modernization process in Princely Tripura under Birendra Kishore Manikya by evaluating improvements in governance, infrastructure, education, and public administration within the framework of current princely states in colonial India.
- iii. To assess the influence and importance of these changes on the socio-administrative advancement of Tripura and their contribution to establishing the principles of contemporary government in the region.

Methodology of the Study

This study employs a historical-analytical and descriptive research methodology. Both primary and secondary sources have been employed to guarantee academic rigor and impartiality.

Primary sources encompass archival records, royal decrees (farmans), administrative reports, state gazettes, correspondence, and official papers pertaining to the Tripura princely administration, accessible at state archives, libraries, and record rooms. Recent British administrative reports and colonial documents concerning Tripura have been examined to offer comparative and contextual perspectives.

Secondary sources are scholarly publications, research papers, journals, theses, and dissertations that address the political history, administrative development, and modernization of princely states, especially Tripura.

The research utilizes qualitative analysis, complemented by a comparative methodology, to evaluate reforms in comparison to other Indian princely kingdoms in the early twentieth century. The collected data have been rigorously studied to discern patterns of administrative change, trends in modernization, and their long-term ramifications.

Analysis

Maharaja Birendra Kishore Manikya's rule, although relatively short, was a pivotal period in the history of the princely state of Tripura. He inherited a foundation of reforms initiated by his predecessors, notably Maharaja Bir Chandra Manikya, often considered the "father of modern Tripura. However, Birendra Kishore expanded upon these efforts with his own progressive vision. In 1911, the Maharaja made extensive tours throughout the length and breadth of the State to get himself personally acquainted with the conditions of his subjects and to study the possibilities of improving them wherever necessary.

1. Administrative Reforms of Birendra Kishore Manikya

He continued the administrative changes initiated by Bir Chandra Manikya and Radha Kishore Manikya. At the start of the 20th century, Birendra Kishore aimed to improve and dynamize the administration by adopting modern, timely measures, introducing a Gradation system for administrative posts, and forming higher bodies.

(a) Amatya Sabha (Council of Ministers)

He reconstituted the executive council (formed by Radha Kishore Manikya) into the Amatya Sabha on Baisakh 24, 1319 Tripura Era (Tring San), (May, 1909) with the intention of strengthening it. The members were called Amatyas, and the King himself was the President. The post of Minister was reintroduced, and Maharajkumar Nabawip Bahadur was appointed to the post. Later, to ensure that the administration was run by members of the royal family, Maharajkumar Brajendra Kishore was appointed as Minister and Private Secretary on Falgun 28, 1323 TE, (1913) with a *tankha* (special honorarium/allowance, not strictly a salary) of ₹500 per month.

(b) State Civil Service

Maharaja Birendra Kishore Manikya deserves credit for introducing competitive examinations for the recruitment of brilliant and educated youths in the civil service. Like the Indian Civil Service, the king attempted to tighten up efficiency through recruitment through public examination. Introduction to the Tripura civil service in 1915 was a monument of reform. Rules for the reconstitution of the Tripura State Civil Service were published in 1326 TE. Only graduates (B.A.) of Calcutta University were eligible, and candidates had to be 30 years old or older. A four-tiered Gradation system was introduced: ₹200-10-300, ₹150-10-250, ₹100-10-180, and ₹75-5-100.

(c) Sub-division Division (Mahakumar Bibhajan)

For administrative convenience, two new subdivisions, Amarpur and Kalyanpur, were created in 1325 TE. In 1330 TE, proposals were accepted to create the Bishalgarh sub-division (from parts of the Sadar division) and the Kamalpur sub-division (from parts of the Kailashahar division). However, in 1333 TE (1923), the Bishalgarh, Kamalpur, and Kalyanpur sub-divisions were abolished and merged back into the Sadar, Kailashahar, and Khowai divisions as before. The Treasury and judicial powers of the Amarpur sub-division were transferred to Udaipur.

(d) Formation of the State Council

The Tripura State Council was formed on Chaitra 17, 1325 TE (1915), through an order, to move administration from the King's hands to a committee-based system, similar to the British model. An Executive Council of the State Council was formed in 1328 TE. The post of Chief Secretary, on the British pattern, was created in 1327 TE. Following Brajendra Kishore's resignation as Minister, Prasanna Kumar Dasgupta was appointed as Chief Dewan. The title of Chief Dewan was abolished and replaced with the title of Minister again on Baisakh 16, 1330 TE.

(e) Judicial Reforms

The state undertook several important judicial reforms during the reign of Maharaja Birendra Kishore Manikya to modernize its legal system and administration, drawing on contemporary concepts and the British model.

Initiatives were launched in 1324 TE to implement the modern concept of separating the executive and judicial branches. This was crucial because, historically, the same officer often performed both the duties of arresting the accused and presiding over the trial, which compromised fair justice. Initially, separate individuals were appointed as Sadar Judge and Collector. However, this separation was difficult to sustain, and the departments were later merged again due to a shortage of qualified personnel.

The highest court in the state, the Privy Council, was established in Bhadra 1326 TE (1916, August/September) on the British model. Its membership and election procedures were codified the following month. To professionalize the legal community, rules for the Lawyer's Examination (Okaloti Pariksha) were codified in 1333 TE (1913). Lawyers were categorized into two classes based on educational qualifications. First Class: Required to have passed the Intermediate in Arts (I.A.) or Science (I.Sc.). Second Class: Eligible with a Matriculation, Normal, or Sanskrit degree.

A directive was also issued to the lawyer community to refrain from engaging in other professions, as doing so was deemed harmful to the client's interests. Additionally, a notification regarding the prescribed official attire for lawyers in government courts and offices was reissued on Magh 22, 1322 TE. The King also addressed the judicial needs of the Manipuri community. Following a petition from Manipuri leaders for the proper management of their social and cultural affairs, the King initially delegated authority to four individuals, including Brajendra Kishore and Colonel Mahim Thakur, in 1319 TE. Later, recognizing that royal dominance might negatively affect the community's self-governance, Maharaja Birendra Kishore reformed the system by creating the post of '*Samajpati*' (Community Head) for the Manipuri community and appointed Rajkumar Buddhimant Singha to the position.

(f) Other Reforms

- The Penal Code Amendment Act and the Arms Act were enforced during his reign.
- The Municipality Act was amended.
- An Account Auditor was appointed in Srabon (July/August) 1328 TE to audit the state's income and expenditure.

2. Educational Reforms

Maharaja Birendra Kishore Manikya prioritized educational expansion in Tripura, focusing on structural improvements and special incentives to foster civic awareness.

(a) Incentives and expansion

Education remained free for the hill people (ParbatyaPraja), Thakurlog, and Manipuris. To boost attendance, a ₹5 monthly stipend was introduced for hill students starting in 1897 and later expanded across all divisions (1907). In 1913 CE, special examinations were introduced for hill students in lower grades, rewarding both passing students and their teachers. Recognizing the enthusiasm of the Manipuri community, a dedicated Manipuri Boarding House was opened next to Umakanta Academy. Structural reforms in 1915 CE converted primary *pathshalas* into Lower Bengali Schools, and the Agartala Girls' School was upgraded to a Middle English School. The administration also oversaw the renaming of key institutions, such as the Agartala High School, becoming Umakanta Academy (1904 CE).

(b) Challenges and Administrative Action

Despite these efforts, education faced challenges. In 1916 CE, a slight decline was noted in state-managed school enrollment. Facing revenue cuts, the state introduced fees in higher English schools, though they remained half the rate of neighboring Comilla District Schools. Crucially, Thakurlog, Manipuri, and hill students remained exempt from these high school fees.

Teachers' salaries were often low and irregular, varying drastically from ₹5 to higher graduate scales (e.g., Umakanta Academy headmaster's scale of ₹100-5-200). Addressing public apathy and enrollment issues in 1920 CE, a directive mandated all government employees - including police and revenue officers - to actively work for educational expansion, placing schools under broad administrative supervision. The inspection system was also reformed, replacing the School Supervisor with a Sub-Inspector post and later adding a specific Sub-Inspector for the hill region's primary schools.

(c) Vocational and Institutional Growth

The reign also saw the establishment of three professional schools: Sericulture, an Agricultural School, and the Edward Memorial Medical Institution. The Woodburn Artisan School was strengthened with new crafts like carpentry, brass casting, and weaving added to its curriculum. Hostels were also planned for Belonia and Kailashahar to support students outside the capital.

(d) Overall Educational Outcome

Despite challenges like public indifference (attributed to the **poverty of the hill people**), low salaries, and inadequate communication, the reign saw a quantitative improvement in education:

School Type	1321 TE (Approx. 1911 CE)	1333 TE (Approx. 1923 CE-End of Reign)
Total Schools	148	158 (Excluding 11 Private Pathshalas)
High English Schools	1	5
Middle English Schools	4 (boys) + 1 (girls)	5 (boys) + 1 (girls)
Vocational/Special	1 Artisan School	4 (Artisan, Silk, Agriculture, and Medical)
Total Students	5,287	5,972

The increase in schools, especially high schools and professional institutions, and the continued focus on stipends demonstrated a progressive intent in educational expansion compared to previous eras.

3. Economic Development Works in Tripura

During the reign of Birendra Kishore Manikya, significant steps were taken to promote economic development, industry, infrastructure, and public services in Tripura.

(a) Tea Cultivation

One of the most important measures taken in the material progress of the State undertaken by the Maharaja in 1916 was the introduction of steps for the development of the extensive waste land of the State, which has led to the establishment of an important and growing industry in the opening of tea gardens. Commercial tea cultivation and marketing were initiated. Following a report by chemist Dr. A.C. Bhattacherjee, which highlighted the suitability of Tripura's soil for tea (comparable to the Surma Valley), Birendra Kishore passed the Tea Cultivation Land Settlement Rules in 1327 TE (1917 CE). Under government control, 40 tea gardens were established in the following 11 years.

In the meantime, an enthusiastic young chemist of Tripura, my friend Dr AC Bhattacharyya, Ph.D., published his first report on the soils of Tripura State, strongly recommending the soils as suitable for tea cultivation, as he found the soils to be as good as that of Surma Valley. The gardens in Tripura State were then opened one after another. During the brief period of 11 years, as many as 40 gardens have been started. Up-to-date, well-equipped factories have been erected in some gardens, and most of the gardens are progressing fairly well.

(b) Mineral resource exploration

Efforts were made to explore the state's mineral potential. Maharaja Birendra Kishore was keen to conduct a thorough survey and, shortly after his accession, appointed the well-known geologist Mr. Ashoke Bose for a geological and mineralogical survey.

Mr. Bose began his work with great earnestness, receiving all possible support from the State. However, the project unfortunately stalled when Mr. Bose died suddenly, without achieving any significant results. Consequently, and due to the lack of a suitable replacement geologist, the Maharaja granted a license for exploring the state's territory in 1916 CE to Messrs. Burma Oil Co. Ltd., specifically for oil exploration.

(c) Agriculture and Industrial Fairs

To encourage agriculture and industry, King organized Agricultural and Industrial Fairs. The 1917 CE fair in Agartala was inaugurated by the Governor of Bengal, Lord Ronaldshay. Prizes and medals were awarded to producers of excellent agricultural and industrial goods.

4. Infrastructure and Public Works

(a) Construction and repair of several roads

The King Birendra Kishore Manukya focused on improving the state's inferior communication network. Most roads in the capital and the state were *kacha* (unpaved). He initiated the construction and repair of several roads, mostly unpaved and only suitable for walking (*padabroje*), but crucial for connectivity, such as

- **Sonamura-Udaipur Road:** Construction continued; wooden bridges and culverts were built.
- **Agartala-Bishalgarh Road:** Earthwork, bridges, and culverts progressed, with a connection established to the Carmichael Bridge in 1327 TE.
- **Birendranagar-Udaipur Road:** Construction began in 1320 TE, becoming usable for walking by 1321 TE.
- **Subrum-Amleeghat Road:** Construction started in 1319 TE and was made accessible after building 45 wooden bridges by 1333 TE.
- **Agartala-Akhaura Road:** Metallization (paving) work continued from 1322 to 1330 TE.
- Other roads like Kamalpur-Singhanala, Agartala-Birendranagar, Kailashahar-Fatikroy, and Khowai-Chebri were repaired or maintained.
- The total PWD expenditure increased significantly from ₹1,32,571 at the start of his reign to over ₹2,79,519 by the end, reflecting the scale of the work.

(b) River Work

Work began on diverting the flow of the Howrah and Khowai rivers to save agricultural land and prevent annual floods, though it was not completed during his reign.

(c) Building Construction

A wide range of administrative, residential, and public buildings were constructed or expanded in a short period (14-15 years), including:

- General Treasury Building, Kunjaban Villa, Subrum School and Jail (1320 TE), Kunjaban Bungalow (1321 TE).
- Durga Bari, Lakshmi Narayan Bari, Tulsibati Girls' School building (1323 TE).
- Carmichael Bridge, Lakshmi Narayan Temple, Sonamura School Building, Kailashahar Post Office (1327 TE).
- Construction of the Khas Adalat (High Court) building began in Agartala in 1329 TE.
- Ponds (Pukur) were excavated, cleaned, and renovated across the state to ensure a supply of drinking water.

(d) Municipal Administration

The Agartala Municipality, originally established by Bir Chandra Manikya and typically governed by a committee of royal family members with the Sadar Collector often serving as Chairman, underwent formalization and expansion of its scope. Its initial functions (about 1902-03) were basic, covering road lighting and watering, and maintaining drinking water ponds. By 1905, this expanded to include crucial services such as sanitation, sewage disposal, street sweeping, and disease prevention. The structure was formalized with the drafting, passing, and implementation of a Municipal Act in 1322 TE (December 1912 CE), establishing a new committee led by Dr. Manimay Majumdar as President. To finance these operations, two new taxes were introduced: an annual holding tax of 4 annas and a yearly latrine (Paykhana) Tax of ₹4 and 8 annas. Financially, the municipality heavily relied on a fixed annual government grant of ₹8,000, as tax collection (₹4,112 in 1322 TE) covered only a fraction of the total expenditure (₹8,016). Despite sanitation efforts, public health remained a challenge, with frequent outbreaks of diseases like cholera and smallpox reported, largely attributed to the lack of pure drinking water and public unawareness. To address this, the Director of the Health Department was later made the Chairman of the Municipality.

(e) Health and Medical Services

At the start of his reign, there was one hospital in the capital and 12 charitable dispensaries. This increased to 18 charitable dispensaries by 1331 TE. These facilities were concentrated in the plains and near the capital, with little access in the remote hill areas. To address the shortage of doctors, King founded the Edward Memorial Medical School in 1321 TE at the Victoria Memorial Hospital with 27 students, issuing L.C.M.S. certificates. However, the school had to be closed in 1325 TE due to opposition from the British Government.

While Allopathy was dominant, the Health Department also included provisions for Ayurveda and Homeopathy in the capital (mentioned in 1326 TE/1916-17 CE records), with three *Kabirajes* (Ayurvedic practitioners) and two Homeopathic doctors employed. The Royal Dispensary, which previously treated only the royal and *Thakur* families, was declared a public institution in 1319 TE. Widespread diseases such as Malaria, Cholera, Smallpox, and Kala-azar were common. Despite the availability of vaccinations, the lack of pure drinking water and public health awareness hindered progress.

5. Agriculture Department and Reforms

Efforts were made to modernize agriculture, although the state initially lacked a formal Agriculture Department with a scientific plan for overall crop production increase. Key initiatives included experimental farming at the Birendranagar Agricultural Farm, which tested crops such as paddy, jute, potato, and sugarcane. This work succeeded in introducing potato cultivation to river-side plains. However, the primary focus shifted heavily to cash crop sericulture (silk). To promote this industry:

- A Sericulture Center was established at Kashipur to teach silkworm rearing and thread production.
- Yogesh Choudhury was sent to Japan for specialized training (1319 TE) and returned to work in 1320 TE.

• A dedicated Sericulture Training School was also opened, sustained by an average annual expenditure of about ₹5,000. For the Jhum (shifting) cultivators, loans (*tukairin*) were occasionally advanced every two years to assist their work. Ultimately, we can conclude that the agricultural sector did not achieve overall success during this period, as the shift in focus towards sericulture led to the neglect and overgrowth of the Birendranagar farm.

Limitations of the Study

This study is limited to the tenure of Maharaja Birendra Kishore Manikya (1909–1923 CE) and concentrates solely on administrative reforms in Princely Tripura. Events beyond this timeframe are mentioned solely for contextual clarity. The research is constrained by the availability and accessibility of archival archives, royal decrees, and official papers, many of which are fragmentary or fragmented. Reliance on secondary materials and colonial administrative accounts may add interpretive bias. Furthermore, the qualitative and historical characteristics of the study limit a comprehensive quantitative examination of administrative change.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the reign of Maharaja Birendra Kishore Manikya (1909–1923 CE) signified a pivotal and foundational period in the administrative modernization of Princely Tripura. His approach was not solely reactive to external circumstances but was defined by a proactive, top-down reform program intended to convert the state into an efficient, 20th-century bureaucracy. Birendra Kishore methodically demolished conventional feudal systems by professionalizing the governance apparatus. His efforts were crucial, encompassing the reformation of the State Civil Service and the establishment of specialized administrative positions, notably the chief secretary.

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