



Newspapers and Proto-Media in Tripura under the Manikya Rulers: A Historical Inquiry

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Introduction:

The princely state of Tripura, governed by the Manikya rulers (Lunar Dynasty) from circa 1400 CE until its integration into the Indian Union in 1949, offers a compelling case study in the evolution of communication systems in Northeast India. The absence of formal newspapers during the early centuries of Manikya rule does not imply a lack of media consciousness. Instead, the dynasty cultivated a robust tradition of record-keeping, oral dissemination, and literary patronage that would later influence the emergence of newspapers in the region.

The Manikya Dynasty's Communication Ethos

Founded by Maha Manikya, the Lunar dynasty established a centralized administration that relied heavily on documentation and oral transmission. A notable example of this is the *Rajmala*, a royal chronicle initiated by Dharma Manikya I and expanded by successive rulers. Composed in Bengali and Sanskrit, the *Rajmala* served as a historical record, political narrative, and cultural repository (Bhattacharjee, 2005). It was periodically updated and circulated among scholars and officials, functioning as a proto-newspaper in its role of informing and legitimizing.

Oral Transmission and Royal Messengers

In the absence of print technology, oral communication played a vital role in disseminating royal decrees and news. The Manikya rulers employed *Chowkis* (messenger posts) and *Paiks* (foot soldiers) to relay information across the kingdom's hilly terrain. These messengers ensured that even remote regions remained informed of administrative changes, military campaigns, and royal ceremonies (Debbarma, 2012).



(The use of *Paiks* and *Chowkis* is documented in local administrative records and referenced in Tripuri folklore.)

Cultural Patronage and Literary Traditions

The Manikya rulers were patrons of literature, music, and visual arts. This cultural investment fostered a literate elite who engaged in manuscript production and storytelling. Maharaja Krishna Kishore Manikya (r. 1830–1849) and Maharaja Birchandra Manikya (r. 1862–1896) were particularly instrumental in promoting education and literary activities. Birchandra Manikya, in particular, introduced modern schooling and encouraged the publication of handwritten newsletters and pamphlets (Tripura State Gazetteer, 1987).

These early publications, though limited in circulation, served as precursors to formal newspapers. They covered royal events, social reforms, and cultural developments, reflecting the dynasty's evolving media consciousness.

Arrival of print in Tripura and the earliest publications

Scholars of print in the Northeast identify the late 19th century as the period when routine print and periodical activity began to take root across the region. In Tripura, evidence points to several early milestones:

- Literary and monthly publications connected to Bengali print networks appeared in and around the 1860s onward; local press histories trace antecedents such as monthly literary printouts associated with the larger Bengali cultural sphere. (Agartala Press Club Website)
- By the 1890s, vernacular and local newspapers appeared more visibly. Notably, the 1890s saw the publication of *Hira* (1894), a double demi white print newspaper edited by Bhagaban Sen and published by Anukul Chandra Chakraborty (then from Brahmanbaria); *Hitobarta* and other short-lived titles also appear in accounts of the period. These printed items indicate both local entrepreneurial printing efforts and the movement of print culture across the porous Bengal–Tripura boundary. (Charvak, 2015)
- A key institutional milestone was the launch of the **Tripura State Gazette**, which is recorded in secondary sources as beginning publication in the 1890s—often connected to the coronation of Maharaja Radha Kishore Manikya (c. 1897). The Gazette functioned as the official organ for



proclamations, administrative notices, and, importantly, as a vehicle through which the state shaped the information environment. (Charvak, 2015)

- In 1903, a newspaper named “**Dhumketu**” was started under the editorship of **Maharajkumar Mahendra Debbarman**, but it stopped publishing after two years. The same year, another newspaper called “**Bangabhasha**” was published in **Agartala**, edited by **Surendra Mohan Debbarman** and printed at **Cumilla’s Koilash Press**. The **Assistant Editor** of this paper was **Lolit Mohan Bhattacharya**. Later, in **1905**, during the **Bangabhanga Andolon (Partition of Bengal Movement)**, an important newspaper named “**Arun**” was published from Tripura by **Pandit Chandrodoy Vidyavinod (Das, 2021)**.

Taken together, these developments show a transition from informal manuscript and oral cultures to printed periodicals and state-run print instruments by the close of the 19th century.

Colonial Influence and the Advent of Print

The British colonial presence in Bengal and Assam influenced Tripura’s exposure to print technology. As the Manikya rulers entered into subsidiary alliances with the British, they gained access to printing presses, administrative reforms, and educational models. By the late 19th century, Tripura witnessed the emergence of printed materials, including government bulletins and cultural journals.

The *Tripura Gazette*, a government publication, began circulating official notices and administrative updates (Chakraborty, 2010).

Legacy of the Manikya Communication System

The legacy of the Manikya rulers (Lunar Dynasty) in shaping Tripura’s media landscape lies in their commitment to structured communication, cultural patronage, and historical documentation. The *Rajmala* continues to be a vital source for historians and journalists, offering insights into Tripura’s political evolution and cultural heritage.

Moreover, the dynasty’s emphasis on education and public engagement created a fertile ground for the emergence of newspapers in the modern era. Their communication ethos—rooted in oral traditions, literary production, and administrative transparency—remains influential in Tripura’s contemporary media practices.



Conclusion

While formal newspapers did not exist during the early Manikya rule, the dynasty's communication systems laid the foundation for later media development in Tripura. From royal chronicles to handwritten newsletters and printed journals, the evolution of media in Tripura reflects a unique blend of indigenous traditions and colonial influences. Understanding this trajectory offers valuable insights into the role of monarchy in media history and the distinct path of Northeast India's communication systems.

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