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Ramendranath Chakravorty and the Rajmala: Reimagining Tripura's Royal Chronicle

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Abstract: This essay examines the visual culture of Tripura through the historical relationship between the royal court, the Rajmala, Santiniketan, and modern Indian art. It traces the development of Tripura's artistic practice from its long history of royal patronage to the emergence of new visual practices during the colonial and post-colonial periods. The essay focuses particularly on Ramendranath Chakravorty, whose education at Kala Bhavana and association with Nandalal Bose shaped his artistic practice. His engagement with graphic art, Neo Indian aesthetics, and different artistic techniques created a distinctive visual language. The study gives special attention to his eight Rajmala tempera panels, which transform historical and legendary narratives of the Manikya dynasty into visual form. These paintings bring together literary history, royal patronage, local landscape, cultural memory, and modern Indian artistic ideas. The essay also considers the influence of Rabindranath Tagore, the Bengal School, and Santiniketan on the changing artistic consciousness of Tripura. It argues that Ramendranath's Rajmala paintings represent an important transition from court-centred artistic practice to a broader modern visual culture. His work demonstrates how regional traditions could be reinterpreted through modern artistic language without losing their connection to local history and cultural identity. The study therefore positions Ramendranath Chakravorty and his Rajmala paintings within the wider history of modern Indian art and the visual culture of Northeast India.

Index Terms - Rajmala, Tripura Royal Court, Visual Culture, Bengal School.



Ramendranath Chakravorty, Rajmala Series (image 1&2), Tempera on Board, 245x123cm, Collection-Tripura State Museum.

Introduction: A Socio-Cultural History of Tripura

The princely state of Tripura developed a strong and diverse artistic practice. It was not a cultural periphery but an important meeting ground for pluralistic traditions. Before the Partition of 1947, Tripura maintained close social, linguistic, and cultural links with regions that are now part of Bangladesh. These connections shaped its cultural identity while allowing local traditions to evolve in distinctive ways.

The Partition of 1947 changed this cultural landscape. The new border disrupted many of Tripura's earlier social and cultural connections. Its accession to India in 1949 further introduced a new political and social context. The decline of royal patronage also brought changes to the court-centred traditions of art and culture. However, Tripura continued to develop as a culturally diverse region through the interaction of indigenous traditions, different ethnic communities, and migrant cultures.

Tripura's centuries-long visual heritage owes much to the Manikya court, where royal patronage went hand in hand with royal practice. The rulers were avid collectors, generous patrons, and, at times, practitioners of the arts. Artists from different parts of India and beyond were associated with the court. This artistic environment was also influenced by wider developments in Bengal, including the Bengal School and the artistic ideas of Santiniketan. These influences contributed to the changing visual language and artistic consciousness of Tripura.

Within this history of court-centred art, Ramendranath Chakravorty holds an important position. His illustrations of the Rajmala, the historical chronicle of the Tripura royal family, provide an important link between history, literature, and visual art. The Rajmala records the genealogy and history of the Manikya dynasty and remains an important source for understanding Tripura's royal past.

Although the Rajmala has considerable historical importance, its visual tradition has received limited attention in wider art historical studies. This essay therefore examines Ramendranath Chakravorty's Rajmala paintings and explores their place within the visual culture of Tripura. It also considers how royal patronage, the Bengal School, and Santiniketan shaped the artistic context in which these works emerged.

From Rajmala to Santiniketan: A Cultural Transition

The development of Tripura's literary and visual culture has a long history. An important stage began in the fifteenth century during the reign of the Manikya rulers. Under King Dharma Manikya (c. 1431–1462), the Sanskrit chronicle *Raja Ratnakar* was translated into Bengali verse and became known as the *Rajmala*. It later became one of the most important historical and literary sources for understanding the history of the Tripura royal family. Historian Ramesh Chandra Majumdar described the *Rajmala* as an invaluable treasure of the Bengali language (Choudhury, 2001).

The Manikya rulers were not only political leaders but also important patrons of literature and the arts. King Dhanya Manikya encouraged literary activities among his subjects through works such as *Utkal Khand* and *Panchali Yatra*. Later rulers like Govinda Manikya, Jagat Manikya, and Krishna Kishore Manikya, supported the translation of *Puranic* and poetic works into Bengali (Gan-Chaudhuri, 2019). This literary tradition created an important cultural foundation for the later development of visual art in the royal court.

The cultural life of Tripura became more closely connected with Bengal during the reigns of Bir Chandra Manikya and Radha Kishore Manikya. Their relationship with the Tagore family of Jorasanko opened new intellectual and artistic possibilities for the royal court. Rabindranath Tagore's visits to Tripura and his encouragement of local writers and artists strengthened these connections. In the 1329 Bengali Era, the *Kishore Sahitya Samaj* was established through the initiative of Brajendra Kishore, with Narendra Kishore Debbarmar as its president. Such literary activities helped create a wider cultural environment in which literature, music, and visual art could develop together.

Tripura's cultural patronage also extended beyond its own geographical boundaries. The royal family supported scholars, writers, and artists from different regions. Dinesh Chandra Sen and other literary figures recognised this contribution. From Mahim Chandra Debbarmar to subsequent cultural personalities, these individuals helped establish a strong intellectual and creative tradition in Tripura (Saha, 2003).

The relationship between Tagore and the Tripura royal family became an important part of this cultural transformation. Bir Chandra Manikya, Radha Kishore Manikya, Birendra Kishore Manikya, and Bir Bikram Kishore Manikya maintained close relations with Tagore. Tagore visited Tripura seven times, and these visits created a sustained exchange between the royal court and the cultural world of Bengal. This relationship also contributed to the changing artistic outlook of the Tripura court.

Artist Dharendra Krishna Debbarma suggested that the importance of Bengali as the language of the royal court was one of the reasons for Tagore's close connection with Tripura (Chakrabarty, 2003). The intellectual interests of the rulers further strengthened this relationship. Bir Chandra Manikya, for example, was a poet and a scholar of Vaishnava literature. The literary interests of the royal family created a receptive environment for new artistic and cultural ideas.

This cultural exchange also influenced education. When *Brahmacharya Vidyalaya* was established at Santiniketan, Maharaja Radha Kishore Manikya provided financial support. The royal family also helped students from Tripura study at Santiniketan. Through these opportunities, young people from Tripura came in contact with Tagore's educational ideas and the artistic environment of Kala Bhavana. Colonel Mahim Thakur also maintained a close friendship with Tagore (Choudhury, 1987).

The connection with Santiniketan had a direct influence on the visual culture of Tripura. Dharendra Krishna Debbarma, Ramendranath Chakravorty and Shailesh Chandra Debbarma were among those who received their artistic education in this environment. After returning to Tripura, they helped introduce new ideas about art, nature, and everyday life. Their work contributed to a gradual shift from a mainly court centred art practice towards a wider visual culture.

The Bengal School and the teaching of Nandalal Bose were important influences in this change. Wash and watercolour techniques became increasingly important, while the earlier dominance of oil painting declined. Dharendra Krishna Debbarma, Ramendranath Chakravorty, and Shailesh Chandra Debbarma explored subjects drawn from the landscape and life of Tripura, including everyday activities, mythology, and royal history. Their use of flowing lines, soft colours, and simplified forms created a distinctive visual language.

For Ramendranath, this new artistic environment was particularly significant. His engagement with the Rajmala brought together literary history and visual representation. By illustrating the history of the Manikya dynasty, he transformed a royal historical narrative into a visual form. His work therefore belongs to a larger transition in Tripura's art, in which the history and traditions of the royal court began to find new forms of visual expression.

The visionary practice of the era-defining artists democratized art beyond the palace grounds, weaving royal themes directly into the broader cultural tapestry of Tripura. As royal patronage gradually declined, the artistic tradition continued through new institutions, artists, and audiences. The legacy of Tagore, Santiniketan, and the Bengal School thus became part of Tripura's emerging modern visual culture. Within this transition, Ramendranath Chakravorty's Rajmala paintings hold a special place as an important meeting point between royal history, literature, and visual art.

Ramendranath Chakravorty: Life and Artistic Journey

The history of modern Indian art includes an important chapter in the life and work of Ramendranath Chakravorty. He was a pioneering artist, especially in the field of printmaking. His artistic journey began in the then princely state of Tripura and later connected him with the major centres of Indian art, particularly Kolkata and Santiniketan.

Ramendranath was born in 1902 in Agartala. His father, Shital Chandra Chakravorty, was a respected scholar and educator. While teaching at the Government College in Srihatta (Sylhet), Shital Chandra was invited by the Maharaja of Tripura to Agartala. He was appointed headmaster of Umakanta Academy, one of the oldest schools in the state. He was also a Sanskrit scholar and maintained an intellectual relationship with Rabindranath Tagore through regular correspondence. His literary work on the Rajmala was prescribed as a textbook in schools.

Growing up in this environment had a strong influence on Ramendranath. His father's learning and cultural interests introduced him to literature and the history of Tripura from an early age. The artistic atmosphere of *Jorasanko Thakur Bari* also influenced his early artistic outlook. He became familiar with the Rajmala stories through his father's work and developed a strong interest in drawing. He collected prints of paintings by artists associated with the Bengal School from *Prabasi* and *Bharatbarsha* magazines in his father's collection. During his school years, he often drew pictures in the margins of his textbooks instead of concentrating on his lessons.

Ramendranath passed the Matriculation examination from Umakanta School in 1917 and went to Kolkata for higher education. He enrolled at Bangabasi College, but his growing interest in art soon drew him away from regular academic studies. He frequently visited Abanindranath Tagore and sought his guidance. Recognising his talent and dedication, his guardian eventually admitted him to the Government School of Art in Calcutta in 1919.

At this time, Nandalal Bose was associated with the Indian Society of Oriental Art. Abanindranath introduced Ramendranath to Nandalal Bose. A major turning point came in 1921, when Ramendranath joined Kala Bhavana at Santiniketan. He was encouraged by the artist Asit Kumar Haldar and became a student of Nandalal Bose.

Santiniketan had a lasting influence on Ramendranath's artistic development. He was deeply attracted to its peaceful environment and the life of the surrounding villages. Kala Bhavana offered a different approach to art education. Students learned through observation, practice, nature, and everyday experience. This environment allowed Ramendranath to develop his artistic abilities.

His interest soon expanded beyond painting. He began to explore woodcut and wood engraving as new forms of artistic expression. In early 1922, the French artist Andree Karpeles came to Santiniketan. She gave Ramendranath his first lessons in woodcut. He gradually developed great skill in the technique. In 1938, he published an album containing twenty of his woodcut prints.

He continued to experiment with graphic art and later published another album of coloured woodcuts and wood engravings. In 1943, he published *The Call of the Himalayas*, which included his engraving prints. He also experimented with lithography and drypoint. His interest in different forms of printmaking continued throughout his artistic career.

In his early paintings, Ramendranath used the wash technique associated with the Abanindranath style. He later worked with tempera. However, graphic art gradually became central to his practice. He realised that these techniques suited his subjects and gave him greater freedom of expression. He therefore mastered woodcut, wood engraving, etching, and lithography. He found great satisfaction in working with these techniques and devoted himself to them with great dedication.

Ramendranath eventually emerged as a trailblazing figure in modern Indian art, pioneering the mediums of woodcut, color woodcut, and wood engraving. Later in life, Ramendranath developed a profound affinity for landscape painting, transitioning his primary medium from watercolor to oil. His close association with Rabindranath Tagore exposed him to the vibrant interplay between literature and visual arts at Santiniketan. This cross-disciplinary dialogue culminated in Tagore writing two poems based on Ramendranath's artworks, which were subsequently included in his 1933 anthology, *Bichitrita*.

After completing his education at Kala Bhavana, Ramendranath began his professional career as an artist and teacher. In 1926, he joined Andhra Pradesh Jatiya Kalashala in Masulipatnam. He returned to Kala Bhavana as a teacher in 1928. In 1929, he was appointed Head Assistant Teacher at the Government Art School in Calcutta. In 1946, he became the Head of the Art Department at Delhi Polytechnic. He also worked for some time in the Publications Division of the Government of India.

In 1948, Ramendranath was appointed Principal of the Government Art School in Calcutta. During his tenure, the school developed into a full-fledged college and became the Government College of Art and Craft. His contribution therefore extended beyond his own artistic practice. He also played an important role as an art educator and institution builder.

In 1937, he travelled to Europe and exhibited his paintings in London, Paris, and Holland. During his European travels, he made a number of sketches. In 1944, he compiled and published twenty-seven of these sketches. In 1946, the Government of India sent him to Paris to organise the Indian section of the contemporary International Art Exhibition. At the same time, arrangements were made for an exhibition of modern Indian art in London. In 1952, he travelled to America for a similar purpose.

Ramendranath was one of the important artists to emerge from the artistic environment of Kala Bhavana. His influence also continued to thrive through his students, many of whom later became established artists. His career brought together painting, printmaking, teaching, and the promotion of Indian art in India and abroad (Bhattacharya, 1955–56).

Ramendranath Chakravorty died on 6 July 1955 while serving as the Principal of the Government College of Art and Craft in Calcutta. While his pioneering printmaking secured his enduring place in modern Indian art, Ramendranath's legacy in Tripura remains inextricably linked to his monumental

paintings for the Rajmala. His early familiarity with the text and his later engagement with its visual representation created a significant link between Tripura's literary heritage and its modern visual culture. This connection is central to understanding his Rajmala paintings and their place within the artistic history of Tripura.

Ramendranath Chakravorty and the Visual Reimagining of Rajmala

The development of Indian painting between 1900 and 1940 was closely connected with the growth of nationalist consciousness. This phase is broadly associated with the Neo-Indian School. The movement did not depend only on the artistic traditions of Ajanta and Mughal painting. It brought together many different Indian traditions. Eastern artistic ideas, folk traditions, miniature painting, Tantric imagery, classical South Indian art, and traditional ornamentation all became part of this wider visual language. The movement also drew from Indian life, nature, religious ideas, and philosophical thought. The Neo-Indian School developed through the combination of these diverse influences (Parimoo, LKC-38).

Ramendranath drew directly from this expansive visual repository, translating its nationalist ethos into his own distinct creative trajectory. He developed his own visual language by combining the Neo-Indian aesthetic of Kala Bhavana with Western techniques of modern printmaking. Although he travelled widely in India and abroad, his connection with Tripura remained strong. He maintained a close relationship with the royal family and worked for a considerable period at the court of Maharaja Bir Bikram Kishore Manikya. Paramount among these endeavors was his visual interpretation of the Rajmala, which gave vibrant pictorial form to the historical chronicle of the Tripura dynasty.

The Rajmala is an important historical source for the Manikya dynasty. Its compilation began in 1458 CE under the patronage of Maharaja Dharma Manikya I. The royal priest Durlabhendra and the scholars Shukreshwar and Baneshwar began the work. Later rulers continued to expand the text over several centuries. It was brought together in a more complete form in the nineteenth century through the work of Durgamani Uzir (Rajmala, 2024).



Ramendranath Chakravorty, Rajmala Series (image 3), Tempera on Board, 245x123cm, Collection-Tripura State Museum.

Ramendranath transformed the narratives of the Rajmala into a series of eight tempera panels. This was an important moment in the visual history of Tripura. The paintings present several important episodes from the history and legends of the royal dynasty. One panel shows Maharani Tripura Sundari Devi entering a battle. Another depicts the suppression of conspirators within the royal inner quarters during the reign of Maharaja Dhanya Manikya.

The series also presents the story of the tyrant King Tripur. According to the narrative, his oppressive rule caused great suffering among his subjects. They prayed to Shiva for relief, and Tripur was eventually killed by the trident of Lord Pashupati. Other panels show Maharaja Ratna Manikya receiving the title “Manikya” from the Sultan of Gaur. Another depicts Durlabhendra, Shukreshwar, and Baneshwar engaged in the preparation of the Rajmala under royal command.

Additionally, the series includes the conflict between Maharaja Govinda Manikya and Nakshatra Roy, which resulted in Govinda Manikya’s abdication. The final narrative deals with the tragic war of succession among the sons of Maharaja Amar Manikya. Through these scenes, Ramendranath converted the historical and legendary narratives of the Rajmala into a connected visual story.

The Rajmala paintings were created in the Neo-Indian style but also show a strong connection with the landscape and environment of Tripura. Ramendranath incorporated local flora, fauna, and landscape into the compositions. His restrained use of colours and rhythmic lines give the historical narratives a poetic quality. Although the subjects come from history and legend, the paintings also evoke the land, environment, and lived experience of Tripura.

Furthermore, the Rajmala panels mark a pivotal evolution in Tripura’s court art. Transcending mere historical documentation, the royal narratives are reimagined as compelling visual stories through Chakravorty’s distinct creative lens. In doing so, Ramendranath seamlessly bridged the literary tradition of the Rajmala with the emerging idiom of modern Indian art.

Ramendranath’s association with the Tripura royal family became particularly important in the late 1940s. Among his works for the royal collection is the oil painting portrait of Maharaja Bir Bikram Manikya, dated 1942. His other important works include the tempera on board painting Santhal Dance and a mural on the Birth of Krishna, completed between 1937 and 1940. However, his Rajmala Painting Series remains the most significant work in the Tripura royal collection.

Ramendranath Chakravorty’s sudden death left a significant void in the art practice of Tripura and India. His passing also weakened an important connection between Tripura’s royal artistic practice and the wider Indian art. His Rajmala paintings remain an important example of how history, literature, royal patronage, and modern visual art came together in Tripura. They offer a distinctive way of understanding the Rajmala, not only as a historical chronicle but also as a visual expression of Tripura’s cultural memory.

Conclusion: Tradition, Modernity, and the Visual Memory of Tripura

The trajectory of modern Indian art was fundamentally driven by a search for cultural identity against the backdrop of colonial and post-colonial transformation. Movements like the Bengal School and the Neo-Indian School spearheaded this paradigm shift by reclaiming indigenous artistic traditions, folk idioms, classical forms, and mythological motifs. Yet, Indian artistic modernity was far from a monolithic construct; it evolved through an enduring dialogue between tradition and innovation, the local and the global.

Ramendranath Chakravorty's oeuvre exemplifies this nuanced negotiation. While his formative years at Kala Bhavana under Nandalal Bose grounded him in the Neo-Indian ethos, his technical mastery across printmaking—woodcut, wood engraving, etching, lithography—and painting mediums like tempera and oil revealed a remarkable openness to global methodologies. Ultimately, Chakravorty's legacy demonstrates that Indian modernity was realized not through the passive imitation or outright rejection of Western modes, but through a conscious, sophisticated synthesis.

His connection with Tripura gave this artistic journey a distinctive regional dimension. His early familiarity with the Rajmala and his later association with the Tripura royal court brought together literary history, royal patronage, and modern visual practice. Through the eight Rajmala panels, Ramendranath transformed historical and legendary narratives of the Manikya dynasty into a visual form. His restrained colours, rhythmic lines, and references to the landscape and environment of Tripura gave these narratives a strong local character.

The Rajmala paintings therefore represent an important meeting point between the royal past of Tripura and the modern visual language of India. They show that tradition and modernity need not remain separate. Instead, historical memory can become a source for new artistic expression.

While his sudden passing cut short a vital voice in modern Indian art, Chakravorty's Rajmala series endures as a cornerstone for interpreting Tripura's artistic heritage. In transmuting the Rajmala from a historical chronicle into a living visual memory, Ramendranath's paintings stand as an enduring testament to Tripura's pivotal role in shaping the tapestry of modern Indian art. Chakravorty's work also firmly embeds Tripura not at the margins, but at the very heart of modern Indian art history.

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