



Research Paper

A Case Study of Neermahal in Architectural Heritage Conservation and Sustainable Tourism Development

H Theresa Darlong

Assistant Professor,
Department of Sociology,
Maharaja Bir Bikram College, Agartala

Abstract

Neermahal is a grand water palace located in Tripura, India, representing architectural excellence and cultural legacy. Constructed by Maharaja Bir Bikram Kishore Manikya, it functioned as a royal getaway and a symbol of the area's abundant history. The Neermahal Water Festival, occurring yearly in August, draws tourists globally with cultural activities and the prestigious boat race on Rudrasagar Lake. This presentation delves into the festival's importance in advocating for sustainable tourism and the preservation of culture. It also addresses the difficulties encountered in preserving Neermahal and the significance of protecting the surrounding habitat. Neermahal stands as a symbol of Tripura's cultural heritage, welcoming visitors to explore its intriguing history and scenic charm.

Keywords

Neermahal, Tripura, Sustainable, Architectural Heritage, Conservation

Received 05 Mar., 2024; Revised 16 Mar., 2024; Accepted 18 Mar., 2024 © The author(s) 2024.

Published with open access at www.questjournals.org

I. Introduction

Neermahal, situated in the Indian state of Tripura, stands as a testament to architectural ingenuity and cultural heritage. The Neer Mahal, also known as the Water Palace, was built in 1938 by Maharaja Bir Bikram Manikya Bahadur as a private palace and summer retreat. The area is situated approximately 53 kilometers from Agartala in Melagarh, Sepahijala District, near present-day Bangladesh. The Palace is located in the center of Lake Rudrasagar, showcasing a blend of Hindu and Mughal architectural styles. The land originally comprised approximately 5.3 square kilometers, but a significant portion has been encroached upon. This has left the Palace at risk of demolition because of the weaker foundation caused by the lack of water. The lake has been designated as a wetland site under the Ramsar Convention, aiming to safeguard and enhance its biodiversity and hydrological equilibrium.

Tripura is a beautiful state located in the enchanting North-East region of India. Tripura is a mesmerising with its incredible ancient history and vibrant cultural heritage. Before 1949, Tripura was princely state with a mighty kingdom ruled by 184 Maharajas of the Manikya dynasty. Bir Bikram Kishore Manikya, the last Maharaja of Tripura, was a visionary. His extensive travels in Europe and America, shaped his modern world view. Maharaja Manikya was endowed with a dignified and imposing personality and he ruled with great foresight, wisdom, insight, and goodwill earning him the title "Modern Architect of Tripura".

contribute to its overall appearance. The Maharaja gave explicit instructions to architects and builders to build a magnificent palace for himself. Marble and sandstone bridges, galleries, balconies, and towers adorn the palace.



Neer Mahal consisted of 24 rooms and was divided into two sections; the western section, known as the Andar Mahal, was used by the immediate royal family, while the eastern section was reserved for the staff and guardians. The inner palace has two wings: one of the Maharajas and the other for executive use of the Maharani in the North-Western side floats a tiny island, thick with bamboo groves that play their invisible flute, changed by the breeze. Even the seating is constructed from bamboo.

On the western side of the palace was a magnificent garden with an open stage where the immediate family of the Maharaja would typically listen to musical performances and theatrical soirees.

Since the Ujjayanta Palace in Agartala was primarily used for administrative and official functions, the Neer Mahal served as a residence for the Maharaja's family and children. Fishing and boating on the where popular recreational activities were some of the leisurely past times for the Royal family during those days. Regrettably, the facts have been distorted, and the information presented at the Palace today is entirely false.

These issues require immediate correction, such as the absence of amusement or dancing areas. In the past, people enjoyed activities such as fishing, boating, and picnics on the extensive grounds.

Keeping with the modern vision of the Maharaja, electricity was installed in the palace. Electricity was generated on the Palace grounds, and there was also a power and pump house.

According to Pragya Debburman (Bankumari Praghya Debbarma) her father Kirit Bikram Kishore Manikya Deb Barma Bahadur Maharaja would tell stories that Rudi-jala was a marshland bordered by extensive areas of barren land, overrun with insects and untamed vegetation. To address this issue, the Maharaja accepted the challenge of transforming the region into a magnificent palace with a beautiful and scenic environment. The area was filled with numerous arches, detailed Jaali work, charming bridges, and chambers designed in Mughal style with Persian and Indian furniture and draperies. The garden featured a traditional pattern adorned with Italian marble, floral shrubs, and marble urns strategically placed around the path. Rudi-jala was a marshland encircled by extensive areas of barren land, overrun with insects and untamed vegetation. To address this issue, the Maharaja accepted the task of transforming the region into a magnificent palace with a beautiful and scenic environment.

The architecture exudes elegance, adorned with arches, intricate Jaali work, quaint bridges, and Mughal-styled rooms boasting Persian and Indian style furniture and drapery. The use of Italian marble adds to its grandeur, while the formal garden layout is adorned with flowering shrubs and marble urns, creating a visually stunning ambiance. Today Tripura is home to one of the most spectacular heritage sites in South Asia. Neer mahal has become a favoured tourist destination in Tripura.

When you see the majestic Neer Mahal, you realise that Maharaj Bir Bikram was an ardent patron of the arts, literature, and culture. Maharaja Bir Bikram Kishore Manikya helped Tripura prosper economically. He developed factories, industries, agriculture, animal husbandry, and forestry in the region. He also built roadways, bridges, and other facilities for trade. Bir Bikram Kishore Manikya, the Maharaja of Tripura, supported higher education and created several notable schools. He supported expanding technical and vocational schools. During his rule, he effectively administered the state with the full power and prestige of the family behind him. He encouraged the growth of the region's musical, theatrical, and dance traditions. During his reign, the entire planning of modern-day Tripura was initiated. He was considered a pioneer in the land reform movement in Tripura.

Rabindranath Tagore observed that while many Indian monarchs are wealthy, the Tripura ruler is truly blessed. Rabindranath Tagore was a remarkable poet, philosopher, playwright, dramatist, musician, social reformer, and painter. Gitanjali, his poetry collection, earned Rabindranath Tagore the first Asian Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913. Gurudev, Kabiguru, and Biswakabi were his titles, while Rabindrasangeet were his melodies.

The princely state of Tripura and its rulers were close to Rabindranath Tagore. Rabindranath Tagore visited Tripura seven times and established good contacts with three royal generations. This lasting partnership is a key chapter in the state's rich history. Maharaja Bir Bikram's legacy of supporting art, culture, and education endures. His enthusiasm for Bengali culture and literature fostered vibrant Bengal-Tripura cultural relations. Maharaj Bir Bikram encouraged and respected Rabindranath Tagore during his travels to Tripura.

The Nobel laureate became a personal friend and appreciated the monarch's intellect. At least five famous and poignant songs were written by Tagore in Tripura, demonstrating the kingdom's and its rulers' significant influence on his creativity. The Manikya dynasty, from Bir Chandra to Bir Bikram Kishore, financially supported Rabindranath and his ambition for Viswa Bharati University in Bolpur, West Bengal. On Rabindranath Tagore's eightieth birthday in 1941, Maharaja Bir Bikram Manikya named him "Bharat Bhaskar" or "Son of India." Their friendship and the poet's appreciation for the monarch's enlightened governance were significant.

The year 1947 changed Tripura's history. Maharaja Bir Bikram Manikya died abruptly on May 17, 1947, leaving his young son, Kirit Bikram Kishore. The Council of Regency under Rajmata Maharani Kanchan Prava Devi ruled the state while Kirit Bikram Kishore Manikya was a minor.

Maharani Kanchan Prabha Devi signed the Merger Agreement on September 9, 1949, and Tripura joined the Indian Union on October 15, 1949, ending the regent's rule.

The essence of Tripura's heritage is its rich historical past, which was moulded by a distinct social and cultural synthesis. Tripura's population is ethnically and religiously diverse. There are 19 recognised tribes and a sizable non-tribal population, predominantly Bengali and Manipuris, who all have distinctive, rich cultural traditions.

When Noakhali Riots took place, Bangladesh in what was then in East Pakistan 1946 the Hindu Bengali community came to Rudra Sagar as refugees. The Government rehabilitated a group of 1,000 refugee fishermen in this area known as the theMachbara Community granting them fishing rights in the water body. The nearby area of Rudra Sagar Lake was earlier inhabited by the Jamatia community but today it is inhabited bythe Machbara Community.The Machbara community is one of the most peaceful and harmonious community in Tripura, and they have contributed to the development and diversity of the state.

On November 12, 1951, the Relief and Rehabilitation Department of the Government of Tripura established a Board. This authority oversees 25 villages and provides tourists with boat transportation to Neer Mahal.Presently, the State Government oversees the maintenance of the palace, while RudrasagarUdbastu Fisherman Samabay Samiti Limited manages the Rudra Sagar Lake, primarily for fisheries.

The Neermahal Water Festival, occurring yearly in August, draws tourists from all over the world to honor the region's diverse cultural heritage and promote sustainable tourism. This lecture will explore the importance of the Neermahal Water Festival as a cultural event and a driver for sustainable tourist development. The festival lasts for three days and features a wide variety of colourful cultural activities and festivities that display the lively traditions of the area. The event features traditional folk songs, Dhamad dance performances, and a variety of folk dances that showcase the cultural richness of Tripura. The boat race on Rudrasagar Lake is a significant event that attracts both participants and spectators to see the exciting battle.

The Neermahal Water Festival promotes sustainable tourism, focusing on environmental conservation and community involvement. The Neer Mahal Jal Utsav includes activities such as boat racing, swimming

competitions, and the Manusa Mangal to promote engagement from residents and visitors. The festival's organization incorporates sustainable tourism ideas such as trash management measures, eco-friendly transportation options, and relationships with local communities for cultural preservation.

The Neermahal Water Festival has made a substantial impact on the socio-economic development of the region by creating revenue and employment possibilities for local populations. The festival has increased global awareness and respect for Tripura's cultural legacy by displaying its rich traditions on an international platform.

Continued efforts to improve sustainability and inclusivity in the festival structure will guarantee its long-term success as a benchmark for cultural tourism projects.

The Neermahal Water Festival demonstrates how cultural heritage can be honored and maintained through sustainable tourism methods.

The festival acts as a catalyst for positive social and economic transformation in the region by enhancing the relationship between tourists and the local community.

In the future, the Neermahal Water Festival will progress as a symbol of cultural interaction and environmental responsibility, enhancing the experiences of all participants.

Das (2023) stated that the Machbaracommunity have a rich culture and tradition, Alongside Durga Puja, folk melodies, Dhamad dance, folk songs, and folk dance, among other things. Neermahal holds special significance for Mansa prayers, regularly drawing visitors who partake in the month-long prayer sessions. Mansa Puja at Neer Mahal is a unique and spectacular event that attracts thousands of devotees and tourists every year. The puja is usually held in late July or early August, coinciding with the Bengali month of Shraavan. It is dedicated to the adoration of the daughter of Shiva and Parvati, also known as Manasa. The devotees offer prayers, flowers, fruits, sweets and live snakes to the goddess at the palace premises. Das further stated that they also perform folk dances, songs and dramas depicting the legends of Manasa. The highlight of the puja is the boat race that takes place on the lake, where hundreds of boats compete for the prize. The puja ends with a grand display of fireworks that light up the sky and the palace. For the duration of the month, a group of women (often between 10 and 15) perform the katha vachan together, and once they are finished, a large worship ceremony is held. By worshipping Manasa, the devotees hope to overcome their fears and attain happiness and harmony in their lives.

Besides this, the Neermahal festival is also organized in December every year. Resonating cultural events are held amidst the cold atmosphere during the winter season. The entire area is ornamented with arches, gates, and columns, as well as a large variety of banners, flex, and scrolls displayed across the Neermahal area and downtown Agartala. The area is also embellished with a flag and night lighting. When the festival is held, the palace will be decked out in lights. Neermahal is a remarkable structure that has withstood the test of time to become one of the most magnificent tourist destinations in North East India. Neermahal had experienced neglect over a significant period in history, recent efforts have revived its splendor. However, it faced challenges, such as a hyacinth outbreak in the lake, which diminished its allure.

The Rudrasagar Lake encompasses diverse habitats that support a rich biological diversity. Within its waters, 14 species of aquatic plants have been reported, including emergent, submergent, free-floating, and rooted floating leaf types. The lake witnesses a wide variety of waterbirds, both resident and migratory, providing sanctuary for species like Ducks, Geese, Coots, Cormorants, Large Whistling Teal, Hooded Crane, and Herons. Migratory birds flock to the revitalized Rudrasagar Lake, adding to its splendor. The fish fauna in the lake comprises approximately 52 species, featuring indigenous and exotic varieties, such as silver carp and common carp. Rudrasagar lake is having a rare turtle.

The aquatic weeds in Rudrasagar Lake boast a unique composition of rare marginal, floating, emergent, and submerged varieties. This thriving ecosystem has earned recognition as a Ramsar site under the Ramsar Convention, dedicated to safeguarding and nurturing its biodiversity and hydrological balance. Remarkably, Rudrasagar Lake is the sole Ramsar site in Tripura, representing the biogeographic region of North-East Brahmaputra Valley.

Rudrasagar Lake enchants with lotus flowers blooming on its waters, accompanied by graceful swans and a dazzling array of fauna. In winter, wild swans gracefully flock in the sky, while the local fishermen showcase their unique fishing techniques, immersing visitors in nature's purest form. Neermahal echoes the silent voices of these natural wonders, extending an inviting call to travelers from far and wide to rediscover the rich history and cultural heritage of Tripura.

World War II had adverse effects nationwide, including in Tripura. During and after the era of Merger and Independence, the Palace was not frequently utilized. The late Maharaja Kirit Bikram Kishore Manikya Bahadur Deb Burman made efforts to personally preserve it, as it was considered private property according to the Merger Agreement. Regrettably, vandalism, theft, and illegal encroachments began to negatively impact this exquisite property. Plans to transform it into a hotel were hindered by legal concerns. The Neer Mahal is a rare and marvelous example of Indian architecture situated in the Rudrasagar Lake. It should be protected for future generations. Maintaining the lake's conservation and water level is crucial for the Palace's longevity.

The inclusion of the Neer Mahal on the list of G20 sites by Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi further enhanced the structure's value. Neermahal, one of the most prominent tourist destinations in Tripura, warmly welcomes the #G20 delegates. At the Neermahal, a notable manifestation of solidarity amidst diversity occurred when several international delegates participated in the customary performance. The program emphasized the dynamic culture of Tripura.

References

- [1]. Debbarman, Suren, (2020) Tagore and Four Princes of Tripura, Tribal Research & Cultural Institute Government of Tripura
- [2]. Chaudhuri, D. K. Administrative Reports of the political Agency, Hill Tipperah *1878-79 to 1889-80) Volume II, Tribal Research & Cultural Institute. Government of Tripura
- [3]. Bhattacharyya, Apurba Chandra, *Progressive Tripura*, The Author, Calcutta, Archaeological Survey of India, New Delhi
- [4]. Rudrasagar Refugee Fisherman cooperative society, Report of executive committee 2021, Maa Xerox and computer centre
- [5]. Tripura Merger Agreement
- [6]. Integrated Management Plan Rudrasagar Wetland Melaghar Tripura. Compiled by Wetland Authority of Tripura, Aranya Bhavan, Office of PCCF, Tripura, Agartala, Under orders of Hon'ble High Court, Tripura, Agartala
- [7]. Special issue on Maharaja Bir Bikram, TNT
- [8]. Debbarma, Boyar (2021) *The Last Dream of Maharaja Bir Bikram the Pre-History of Tripura Merger Agreement*, Notion Press Publication
- [9]. Deb, Biplob Kumar, *The Architect of Modern Tripura*, Maharaja Bir Bikram Kishore Manikya [Premium Leather Bound 2019