



NEERMAHAL WAS BUILT BY BIR BIKRAM BAHADUR OF THE MANIKYA DYNASTY. LEGENDARY MUSIC COMPOSERS SD BURMAN AND RD BURMAN ORIGINALLY BELONGED TO THIS ROYAL FAMILY BEFORE THEY MIGRATED TO BENGAL

India's unknown lake palace

A blend of Hindu and Muslim architecture, Neermahal gets to see over three lakh people every year. SOMEN SENGUPTA visits Tripura's now endangered lake palace to tell us more about it

TRAVEL LOGISTICS

Agartala, the capital of Tripura, is well-connected via air with Kolkata, Guwahati and New Delhi

The town Melaghar is situated about 53 km from Agartala.

Rudrasagar lake is just 2 km from the town

Night stay is not required; you can be back to Agartala on the same day

Boat can be hired from the bank; tickets are available from tourism counter

Little shopping of cane-made products can be done

Sagarmahal Tourist Lodge, run by Tripura tourism, is a decent place to stay

Packed food and water bottles are available

Photography is allowed

Helpful website: www.tripuratourism.nic.in

In India there are only two lake palaces which, by their size, shape and history, can make your jaw drop in awe. The first one is the well-known lake palace of Udaipur, which has now been converted into a luxury hotel. While many people would easily tell you about the Rajasthan lake palace, the one which remains lost in our collective consciousness is Tripura's Neermahal. Thankfully, I saw this palace for the first time in a poster of Tripura tourism at Calcutta Airport. Captivated by its majestic presence over a huge water body, I got excited to explore this place.

While one finds a plethora of information on Internet about the Udaipur lake palace, the Tripura masterpiece hardly finds much mention. Looking at some local magazines I made myself a bit informed about Neermahal. *Neer* in Bengali means water. And *mahal* is palace.

Before I plan my visit to the State I look at its history. Or, is it mythology? One of the seven Northeastern States, it is pregnant with an exciting legend. It tells us about demons who were vanquished by gods. This made three sons of a demon named Tarakashur pray to Lord Brahma. Pleased with their devotion, the Lord made three different worlds for them: *Swarnamoypur* in heaven for Tarakaksha, *Rajatmoypur* for Kamalaksha in sky and *Louhamoypur* for Bidyutmal on earth. These three worlds are collectively called *Tripur* and from this emerged the name Tripura. In the middle ages, Nawab Sujauddin of Bengal conquered

the region and renamed it Roshanabad (the land of light).

Soon I am on my way to Agartala to explore Neermahal. It is a journey full of ordinary things on both sides of the road. Small shops, poor people, crowded market and CPI(M)'s red flags. However, the green landscape is truly enchanting.

After a forgettable journey of two hours, I am at the bank of Rudrasagar lake, a vast water body at the end of Melaghar town. The tranquil ambience of the lake presents a splendid sight. Situated over an area of 5.3 sq km, the lake is one of the biggest water bodies in the Northeast. A heaven for migratory birds and fish-catchers, the lake is now more popular for its palace — Neermahal.

Known as the 'lake palace' of Tripura, Neermahal was constructed as a summer residence of Maharaja Bir Bikram Bahadur, who belonged to the Manikya dynasty, which is regarded as the second longest dynasty from a single line in the world today. (It will be worth mentioning that legendary music composers Sachin Deb Burman and Rahul Deb Burman originally belonged to this royal family before they migrated to Bengal.) In 1921, Maharaja Bir Bikram decided to build the palace in Rudrasagar lake. He accredited a British company to construct the palace for him. The company took nine years to complete the work.

The red-and-white palace makes me awestruck. I hire a boat from a counter set up by the tourism department of Tripura and sail near the palace

in 25 minutes. As I inch closer to it, its majestic architectural presence begins to cast a magic spell on me.

A blend of Hindu and Muslim architecture, this palace — designed and executed by a British firm, Martin & Burns of Calcutta — is today a popular tourist destination. According to an estimate, more than three lakh people visit Neermahal every year. As I look at the palace, I wonder the huge logistical challenge that a project like this might have posed nearly 90 years ago when there was hardly any modern technology available in the State.

Its domes are all onion-shaped, while its curved arches are made of Indo-Islamic design. The 24 room palace is divided into two sides. The western side of the palace is known as *Andar Mahal*. It was made for the royal family. The eastern side is an open-air theatre where drama, theatre, dance and other cultural events were organised for the enjoyment of *maharajas* and the royal families.

The *Andar Mahal* is endowed with 15 luxurious and elegantly-decorated rooms that overlook the breathtaking backdrop of a beautiful garden. The garden also has an open-air amphitheatre where musical concerts and dramas are organised in the evenings. Neermahal has two stairways inside, leading down to a landing on the water of Rudrasagar lake.

All, however, is not well with Neermahal. Today, the palace is in a dilapidated state. Human activities around the lake in the past 50 years have almost destroyed the water body.

Experts believe that the lake has shrunk by more than 40 per cent since the 1960s, thanks to heavy siltation and pollution from the six brick kilns nearby. The blame lies with rising population in the region. There were only 12 families living in the vicinity of the lake when the *maharaja* decided to build the palace ninety years ago. Today, more than 200,000 people are dependent on the lake. Add to this the ever growing influx of Bangladeshi immigrants who have been coming incessantly since 1951.

Rising population necessitated the need for increasing farmland. No wonder, the water of Rudrasagar lake is drained to serve agriculture around the lake and this has reduced the water level of the lake to mere 374 hectare today from 2,066 hectare in 1947. A large part of the lake is now full of mud, silt and weeds. The palace itself is largely surrounded with green weeds.

Worse, there is not even a guide available to tell you about the glorious past of the palace. It is learnt that a gala plan of ₹40 crore has been put in place to promote this region as a mega-tourist destination. This includes a ring road around the lake, renovation of the building, development of catchment areas of the lake, preservation of biodiversity, and rehabilitation of the fishermen's community. The State Government is also planning to build two resorts offering nearly 180 rooms on the shore of the lake.

One hopes this architectural marvel is saved from government apathy. Any delay will totally destroy the palace.

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