

Chapter – VI

BRITISH POLICY TOWARDS THE INDIAN STATES WITH REFERENCE TO COOCH BEHAR (1858 – 1919)

The British Authority in India had consolidated its base during this phase of colonial rule in India. The control over the Princely States was almost complete and the relationship was that of a superior - subordinate system. The Supra-sovereign British power, over the passage of time, had ultimately converted the Princely order as infra-sovereign agency establishing fullest control over the rulers of Indian States. Such a kind of relationship prompted Sir Lee Warner to depict it as 'subordinate Union.'

The term subordinate union means an objective policy of bringing under servitude implying almost total political subordination of the States under either by compulsion or through persuasion in a manifest or latent manner towards the paramountcy. The period ranging from 1858 to 1919 witnessed fundamental changes following the revolt of 1857 along with other changes, the major changes was that the power to govern India shifted from the East India Company to the British Crown by the Act of 1858. Ever since then a Secretary of State for India aided by

a Council was made responsible for the governance of India, such authority used to be wielded by the Directors of the Company prior to the Act of 1858. The policy of Subordinate Union pursued by the British Government brought important changes in its policies towards the Princely States. The earlier policy of annexation was abandoned and the Rulers of the States were now authorised to adopt heirs. However, this authority of the Rulers over particular territories was completely subordinated to the authority of the British and they were converted into a 'Board of Privileged Dependents'. Through this policy the British Government maintained a close check on the States. No Indian Ruler was allowed to maintain relations with other countries except through the British. The British government in India interfered in day to day functioning of the States through their agents called Residents. British Residents and nominated Ministers were posted in almost all the States. The Residents were to protect the British interests and implemented British policies. The right to recognize the successor was also reserved with the British Government. If any Ruler did not fall in line he was replaced with a person of the British choice. Despite restrictions and limitations imposed on the Rulers by the British Paramountcy the Indian Rulers supported the British to secure their status and privileges.

British policy towards princely India underwent a fundamental change after the Sepoy Mutiny. It was admitted on all

hands that one of the important causes of the Mutiny was Dalhousie's policy of wholesale annexation of the Indian States either in one pretext or the other. The Revolt was suppressed with iron hand. But the Indian Rulers for the most part, not only remained aloof from the uprising but also in certain cases extended active assistance to the British in suppressing it. Lord Canning gratefully acknowledged the role of the States as 'breakwaters in the storm which would have swept over us in one great wave'. The realization that the States could play a vital role as one of the bulwarks of British rule led to a radical change of policy. Which found expression in Queen Victoria's Proclamation of 1858. It was declared in the Proclamation of 1858 that the British Government further would not annex the Indian States. It was also declared that all treaties and engagements made with the Native Princes under the authority of the East India Company are to be accepted by the British Crown and will be scrupulously maintained. The Act of 1858 announced that the British Government had no desire of extension of their present territorial possessions. The Indian rulers were to be given the right of adoption in case they had no son to succeed them. The Indian States were to be given *Sanads* and they were assured that no harm would be done to them so long they were to be faithful to the Crown.

Old policy of jealousy and suspicion against the Indian States was given up. Instead of keeping them separate, the British Government tried to bring them together. They had become members of the Empire, and the new position was accepted not

unwillingly¹. But this does not mean that the Indian States were given more independence of action than they enjoyed before. It is to be noted that on many occasions the British Government made declarations of their paramountcy over the Indian States. Regarding the paramountcy Lord Canning declared in 1858, 'The Crown of England stands-forth the unquestioned ruler and paramount power in India. There is a reality in the suzerainty of England which has never existed before and which is not felt but eagerly acknowledged by the Chiefs². Similar statements were made by Lord Mayo, Lord Lytton, Lord Lansdowne, Lord Minto and Lord Reading while attempting to describe the position of British paramount power in relation to India.

The next five decades were occupied with the task of evolving a machinery for controlling the States and this was duly accomplished. A Political Department was set up under the direct charge of the Governor General. The Political Department had Residents and Political Agents in all important States and groups of States. The Secretary of State kept a close control over the activities of the Political Department, mainly because of the interest of the Crown in matters affecting the rights and privileges of the rulers³. During this period, the Governor General in council through the Political Department of the Government of India, exercised complete control over the Indian States. As a matter of fact, the Indian

Princes had absolutely no independence of action. They were under the control of the Residents. The Resident watched the British interests in the State and offered friendly advice to the Princes. He acted as the channel of communication between the State and the paramount power. Evidently, he was the real ruler and master of the Princes. Regarding the state of affairs of the States Panikkar pointed out "all those who have direct experience of Indian States know that the whisper of the Residences is the thunder of the State and there is no matter on which the Resident does not feel to give his advice. His advice was usually an order or a command"⁴.

The British Government through the Resident claimed right to control the use and grant of all titles, honour, salutes and matters of precedent. The rulers could not accept foreign title without the consent of the British Government they could not confer any title. The British Government asserted and exercised the right of deposing princes or forcing them to abdicate in certain circumstances. The rulers were not allowed to deal directly with any foreign State or with the subject of any foreign State. They could not receive consular agents in their territories. They could not employ Europeans without the consent of the British Government. All forcing interest of the States was secured through the Government of India⁵. Though constitutionally, the States were not part of British India not were they inhabitants or British subjects and the

British parliament had no power to legislate on the States or their people. But on many occasions the British Crown emphasised their supremacy over the Indian States. In 1876, Queen Victoria assumed the title of Kaiser-I-Hind after the death of the last Mughal Emperor Bahadurshah II. On this occasion, Lord Lytton held a Durbar at Delhi and the rulers of all the Indian States were made to attend this Durbar. It is stated that the rulers of the big States protested against the lowering of their status and dignity but they were made to swear perpetual allegiance to the British Crown and forego their claim to be treated according to the treaties and engagements entered into by them with the company⁶.

A definite pattern of the Government of India's relationship with the States in all its details had been developed by the time the First World War broke out in the year 1914. The rulers failed to fight for the Empire in its hour of peril, offering both their personal services and the resources of their States. Not only did they help British lavishly with men, material and money, but some of them even served as officers in different theatres of war⁷. In welcoming this new development a few of the leading rulers stressed the essential identity between the two halves of India and expressed the hope that what had now become an annual conference would develop into a permanent Council or Assembly of Princes⁸.

During the First World War the tide of national aspiration was rising fast throughout the country. The emergence of Gandhiji and Tilak made the Congress a popular organisation and broadened the hold of the organisation upon the people at large. The Indian National Congress had helped the British on the many theatres of war with a hope that the British Government will introduce some reforms for the Indians. The British Government recognised that the situation needed a fresh handling and that there was an urgent need for a new policy. Accordingly, Edwin Samuel Montague, the Secretary of State for India, made the historic announcement of 1917. It was declared by Montague in 1917 that 'the policy of His Majesty's Government with which the government of India are in complete accord, is that of the increasing association of Indians in every branch of the administration and the gradual development of self-governing institutions with a view to the progressive realization of responsible Government in India as an integral part of the British Empire⁹.

Soon after his announcement Montague came to India and met with the leaders of public opinion in British India and with the several leading rulers. The princes of India appointed a committee which presented a memorandum. In 1918 Montague and Chelmsford published a joint report on constitutional reforms which had a far-reaching consequence into the relations of the States with the rest of India and with the paramount power¹⁰.

The report paid glowing tributes to the princes for the part played by them in the war, which had demonstrated their immense value as part of the policy of India. The report observes that the political stir in British India could not be a matter of indifference to the Princes, since hopes and aspiration were apt to overleap frontier lines. So the authors of the Report recommended that the reforms in the States could not be brought about as a direct result of Constitutional changes in British India, they could come only through the permeation of ideas. It was stressed that the rulers of the States and the politicians in British India should respect each other's bonds. It was also suggested that there was some ambiguity and misunderstanding as to the exact position of the States. So the authors of the Report suggested that the Rulers should be assured in the fullest and freest manner that no constitutional changes that might take place would impair the rights, dignities and privileges secured to them by Treaties, *Sanads* and engagements, or by established practice. Moreover, Montague Chelmsford Report felt that the time had come to end the isolation of the rulers and that steps should be taken for joint consultations and discussions by them for the furtherance of the common interests between the States and the Government of India. The Government of India consulted the rulers in regard to these recommendations. The conference of Ruling Princes and Chiefs met in Delhi in December

1919 and with their consent the Chamber of Princes was brought into being by a Royal Proclamation on 8th February 1921¹¹.

On this broad canvas of all India relationship between the British government and the Indian States we may highlight the actual relation between the British Government and the Cooch Behar State. Soon after the death of Raja Harendra narayan, the character of the relation between the British and Cooch Behar Changed and the essence of this change prepared the ground work of making Cooch Behar a subjugatory State under the British influence. The period of the next king Shibendra Narayan can be marked as the starting point of the era of subjugation and thereafter the British made their headway deep into the territory of Cooch Behar.

The opportunity to bring Cooch Behar under complete influence of the Company was offered just after the death of Raja Harendra Narayan. Soon after the death of Raja Harendra Narayan the State of Cooch Behar had been suffering from the crisis of succession question. The rivalry over the succession of Raja Harendra Narayan offered a scope to the Company to interfere directly into the affair of the State and the succession problem was resolved and for the first time the question of succession over the throne of Cooch Behar had been settled by an alien, the East India Company. The decision of the Company had been justified by the

Cooch Behar Court on the ground that the right of the Company selecting the heir to the throne had been an acknowledged fact.

The British Colonial policy to bring Cooch Behar under complete subordination, thus, had been successful on two basic grounds. Firstly, the Raja of Cooch Behar had been a nominee of the Company who had to prove to be a man always liked by the Company and secondly, the growing internal feuds in the royal family and the rising discontents among the nobility on the question of succession helped the Company to intervene into the royal internal affairs of Cooch Behar under the active patronage of the then Ruler who wanted to strengthen his throne with the Company's support.

With the support of the Raja Shibendra Narayan, the Company interfered into the revenue and judiciary system of the State and introduced to accelerate the pace of the capacity of Cooch Behar State to pay tribute with arrears to the British authority. Judicial reforms were brought in Cooch Behar in accordance with the system of judiciary introduced by the Paramountcy of the British superintendent of Darjeeling Mr. Campbell. The British authority had also solved the border issues of Cooch Behar with Bhutan. During the same year a topographical survey of Cooch Behar State was made by the revenue surveyor J.G. Pemberton appointed by the British Government. The survey map so far drawn had been the first of its kind for Cooch Behar.¹² The complete

control and influence of the Company over the total affairs of the Cooch Behar State had been much more accelerated owing to illness of the Ruler. To remove the irregularities¹³ of the native administrative officials, the Company started sending British officials and these officials tried to exercise their powers over the tiny principality. Officials loyal to the Company were immigrated to Cooch Behar, and with the tacit support of the Company's authority, began to hold important posts in the Cooch Behar administration.¹⁴

After the death of Raja Shibendra Narayan, his adopted son Narendra Narayan who was a minor ascended to the throne. During the minority of Raja Narendra Narayan the active interference in the socio-political sphere resulted in the State's complete subjugation. During the period a notable change occurred in the Company's policy towards the State, until then the management of the State was exclusively in the hands of the Rulers of the State, but in those years a shift in the policies took place and the management of the affairs was placed directly under the Government of Bengal and all the questions of any important political bearing were referred to the Supreme Government.¹⁵

During the minority of Raja Narendra Narayan, the Regent was entrusted with the duty of conducting the State's administration. But nepotism and misuse of administrative powers were very much prevalent and the appointments of some inefficient

officials turned the matter to worse. As a result the Company tried to take some integrated policy towards the State affairs. Firstly, they felt the necessity of appointing a Resident Commissioner after a long time; secondly, to take the entire management of the State at their own hands. These policies of the Company accelerated the process of political subjugation of Cooch Behar.

But Raja Narendra Narayan after attaining majority took the control of Government in his own hands and set himself in improving the State administration, however, in accordance with the principles as laid down by the Company.¹⁶ On the other side, the Government of India granted a *Sanad* to the Maharaja conferring on him and his successors the right of adoption failing natural heirs and further the Government of India recognised the title of Maharaja Bahadur¹⁷ and thus, the political subjugation was almost complete.

Another notable change brought in during the period was the introduction of *Sabha* or Council locally known as *Desh Hitaishini Sabha*¹⁸. Creation of such a Council to aid and advise the Ruler had been a British innovation which used to be represented by local land-lords, aristocrats, big businessmen and intellectuals of high standards.¹⁹ The British intention was to streamline the Cooch Behar State administration both from within and without. The internal control was laid through the British Resident. However, such control was abolished within a very short period of time.²⁰

After the death of Narendra Narayan his son Nripendra Narayan was sworn into the throne when he was nearing the completion of his first year of age.²¹ But, there was a controversy within the royal family over the succession issue and the Maharanees (Queens) of the palace except Nistarini Debi sought the help of the British Indian authority to preserve the privileges and the dignity of Nripendra Narayan as the Raja.²² The British authority of India recognised the claim of Nripendra Narayan as the legitimate heir.²³ However, the British authority imposed the condition that the title of 'Maharaja' would be conferred upon Nripendra Narayan after he attains majority.²⁴ The restrictions of conferring the title 'Maharaja' expressed the British intention to dominate the regime with their fullest control. The transitional period of Nripendra Narayan from his minority to the time of his gaining majority would be the harvesting ground for the British and the British did not leave any scope of losing their foot-hold over Cooch Behar and thus the conferring of the title of 'Maharaja' to Nripendra Narayan was deferred.

The British wanted to bring changes in every aspect of State life under the aegis of Commissioner on behalf of the Government of India at a time when Nripendra Narayan was minor. Till Nripendra Narayan achieved majority, he was sent to different educational institutions of both within Indian and abroad under the direct

sponsorship of the British Government. Indeed, this was for the first time that the Cooch Behar State had been experienced with an English educator Ruler. After attaining majority he was conferred the title 'Maharaja' by the British Government. Both in tune and texture Nripendra Narayan was a liberal personality and a strong follower of liberal development policies brought by the British Paramountcy in India.²⁵ The era of Nripendra Narayan witnessed *collaboration and accommodation between the State of Cooch Behar and the British Paramountcy*. Being termed as moderniser²⁶ of Cooch Behar State, Nripendra Narayan, with the active help, initiative and support of British administration, brought important changes in the fields of general civil administration, agriculture and land reforms, judicial system and specially in the field of education.²⁷ Thus one can well conclude the era of Nripendra Narayan (1881-1911) and the following years the princely State Cooch Behar had almost subordinated to the Paramountcy and can be one of the finest operational fields of the policy of 'subordinate union' pursued by the British Government in relation to the Indian States.

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