

CHAPTER-V

AGE OF CATALYSM : THE ROLE OF THE BRAHMO SAMAJ

The role of religion in shaping and moulding the character of the state can hardly be exaggerated. Since time immemorial religion had been and is still playing a role of immense value. The kingdoms of the earlier civilization, irrespective of the geographical and cultural boundary, had been influenced by the religious scriptures. The papacy of the middle age of Europe and the christianity had their definite role to play to bring about politico-socio-economic transformation. It is no wonder that a state dominated by the Hindu Maharajas obviously would have its religious essence. It should be pointed out that while religion sometimes plays as an active agency of social control and change, religious fanaticism blended with traditionalism would bar the progress of a particular society and this was the case of Cooch Behar which was undergoing a tremendous crisis resulting out of religious fanaticism and dogmatism.

The new religious movement of the nineteenth century Bengal which had sprung up as an alternative to the religious traditionalism, had a positive outlook on life and aimed at reforming the socio-cultural maladies of the peoples¹. This new movement was called the 'Brahmo' movement which had become the state religion of Cooch Behar, committed to fight out the evils rooted deeply into the vortex of the society. The role played by the Brahmo Samajists in modernizing the State of Cooch Behar with the help of Maharaja Nripendra Narayan needs to be pointed out in the following paragraphs.

Brahmoism represented in their ideology, it played a progressive role in the socio-cultural history of Bengal. The Brahmo Samaj was founded by Raja Rammohan Roy in 1828 based on his conception of theism and ethical precepts. From the beginning the members of the Brahmo Samaj were drawn from the 'Bhadralok' intelligentsia². The Brahmo movement spread gradually all over India and Babu Keshab Chandra Sen played the prominent role in introducing changes in the Bengal society. He considered the contact of the Indian society with the West as a source of cultural and moral redemption for India and pleaded for whole-hearted emulation of the western cultural values of humanism, rationalism and science³.

The members of the Samaj pledged that they would promote female education in their own families⁴. They also took the

lead in social experimentation during the 1850's and 1870's. They had considerable scope for departure from conventional behaviour, as many of them had been dis-inherited and forcibly cut off from their Hindu families for embracing Brahmoism⁵.

The Brahmo Samaj had set up its branches in different parts of Bengal and other places in India. In Cooch Behar too the Brahmo Samaj opened its branch in the 1860's⁶.

In the process of socio-cultural transformation the Brahmo movement had a direct interventionist approach. They had some particular motives. These were : (i) to promote of moral, spiritual and humane education; (ii) to eradicate of untouchability and casteism; (iii) to encourage intercaste marriage; (iv) to discourage Kulin poligamy; (v) to eliminate prostitution, (vi) to extend equality of education to women⁷.

To fulfill the above objectives the leading exponent of the Brahmo Samaj, Babu Keshab Chandra Sen gave his daughter's (Suniti Devi) marriage to the Hindu king of Cooch Behar. The ostensible motive of the marriage was narrated by him in his letter to Maxmuller, "It was a political marriage, a whole kingdom was to be reformed and all my individual interests were absorbed in the vastness of God's saving economy, in what people would call public good"⁸. He was convinced of the British plan to modernize Cooch Behar and visualized side by side the necessity of an enlightened wife for the Maharaja.

This marriage had its tremendous impact both at Cooch Behar and outside the state. It marked an epoch in the social history of India⁹. It was a great breakthrough in the tradition ridden Cooch Behar Royal family¹⁰. Maharani Sunity Devi wrote, "In marrying a Brahma girl, the Raja makes a great concession to the enlightened ideas, but it is most desirable that this connection should be softened as much as possible in the eyes of his relatives, at Cooch Behar and elsewhere, who are still wedded to the old superstitions and who would look with horror upon any departure from the old Hindu formula"¹¹. In fact the marriage opened the kingdom to enlightened Bengali influences from Calcutta and the Maharaja came into closer contact with the intellectuals of Bengal¹².

The motive behind the marriage of Nripendra Narayan and Sunity Devi, was a missionary act of trying to win over the tribal kingdom to the Brahma faith. The facts about the aftermath of the marriage do seem to substantiate the hypothesis that, "rather than Keshab selling out to Hinduism in Cooch Behar, it was Cooch Behar that adopted Brahmaism to its own condition"¹³. The Brahma movement in Cooch Behar had made a great impact on the policies pursued by the Raja and succeeded in carrying through many radical humanistic social reforms.

Nripendra Narayan himself adopted the Brahma religious faith and the Brahmaism of the New Dispensation¹⁴ was proclaimed

as state religion in 1833¹⁵. The traditional Hindu customs of the royal family were seriously shakened. It is interesting to note that in spite of being a member of the Brahmo creed the Raja never tried to impose his own religion on the subjects or his relatives. But as an institution the New Dispensation of the Brahmo faith emerged as the strong social reformary institution in the State. Maharaja Nripendra Narayan himself took the initiative for its development and a Brahmo mandir (Church) was established at Cooch Behar which was considered the biggest Brahmo Mandir in the South East Asia¹⁵.

The Maharaja being a member of the New Dispensation also favoured the rival section i.e. the Sadharan Brahmo Samaj of the Brahmo religion¹⁷. Both the sections of the Samaj devoted themselves to the cause of uplifting the socio-cultural edifice of the State. One of the remarkable members of the Sadharan Brahmo Samaj who came to Cooch Behar during the rule of Maharaja Nripendra Narayan, was Acharya Brojendra Nath Seal¹⁹. He was appointed as the Principal of the Victoria College. It was due to his earnestness that this college emerged as the centre for higher learning in this region. As such he contributed to the cultural development of the people of the State.

Among the other important names to be mentioned in the royal family who embraced Brahmoism were Kumar Gajendra Narayan, the cousin of Nripendra Narayan. He married Sabitri Devi

another daughter of Keshab Chandra Sen. Their effort to implement the Brahma principles for the social uplift of the State was specially noteworthy. The establishment of Brahmo Palli, Brahmo boarding and Keshab Asram were the legacy of the Brahma movement in the State¹⁹. Through these institutions the enlightend philosophy of the Brahma religion was propagated among the general people²⁰. This may be considered as the important steps taken by the Brahmos to modernize the people of this **superstitious** and socially backward province.

Another important institution to be organised by the Brahmos in the process of social uplift was the establishment of young Men's Theistic Association in 1905²¹. It had laid down the principle that only those who were believers of monistic theory would be able to be a member of this Association. It had undertaken the policy to promote social ethics among the common people. Besides these the Association also endeavoured to educate the peasants and the people of the lower strata of the society through the opening of Night schools²². Thus, the role of the Brahma Samaj in building a modernized society through the different institutions was a noticeable feature during the rule of Maharaja Nripendra Narayan and this helped in his efforts to modernize the State.

The Brahma movement in the State had got another dimension in the activities of the ladies of the palace. Besides

Suniti Devi and Sabitri Devi, the name of Nirupama Devi, the wife of Victor Nityendra Narayan, son of the Maharaja, deserved special mention. They were actively devoted to the cause of cultural mobilization of the women in this princely State. The establishment of the Sabitri Lodge supplimented the deficiency of the enlightened women of the State. This lodge acted as an association for the Bhadra Mahila Samaj of the State²³. Subsequently this Lodge become the hub of learning of the women of backward class and they were taught about the principles of the Brahma religion and thus helped in the process of cultural mobilisation.

To foster the social mobility the Brahmos took the active initiative with the direct patronage of the Maharaja. One of the important steps taken by the Brahmos was the establishment of the Technical school in 1908²⁴. The School took the leading role in educating the women in sewing and other cottage industries. This step was taken in accordance with the proclaimed principle of the Brahmos about the self sufficiency of women. The school became very attractive and a large number of women used to gather in this technical institution²⁵. This helped the women of the State in coming out from the superstitious belief and resulted in a cultural modernization.

The Brahmos of the State propogated their principles against the system of polygamy, which was one of the declared

principles of the Brahma religion. They were successful in their venture and even the Maharaja himself set an example in this respect. It was the conviction of the king, quoted by Sunity Devi, that, "It was always been my opinion that no man should have more than one wife"²⁶. He hated polygamy and as such he never tried to give his daughters marriage to the Maharajas of Indian territory²⁷.

The Brahmos were always favoured in the State. It was found that during the rule of Nripendra Narayan the higher education was mostly in the hands of the Brahmos²⁸. Sunity Devi took special initiative in this respect and invited the Brahma intellectuals from the different parts of Bengal²⁹.

The Brahmos were also placed in the top places of the different State departments. Among the notable persons the name of Calica Das Dutta deserves special mention who was ✓ posted as Dewan of the State (A detailed analysis of him had been made beforehand). The other notable persons of the Brahma community were Amritalal Sen (Accountant General), Priya Nath ✓ Ghosh (Dewan), Narendra Nath Sen (Dewan). All these persons played a very significant role in the process of modernization of the State.

Keshab Chandra Sen had a deep influence upon the Maharaja in shaping his moral, ethical and social attitudes. Keshab

Chandra Sen was also personally interested about the State Administration³⁰.

The development of media was also made by the Brahmos of the State. For the purpose of preaching the cultural and religious ideas they published a journal named 'Sukatha' and Ram Chandra Singha was the editor of the journal³¹. This Journal became the harbinger of the intellectual and cultural awakening.

The spreading of education as a hall mark of their belief resulted in the automatic abolition of the purdah system in the State. The women who attended schools were inevitably unable to maintain strict purdah system in the State. The appearance of women at public events increased the confidence that modifications in Purdah could be incorporated into the changing social structure without ill effects. Another social reform initiated by the Brahmos, was the establishment of the principles of widow marriage and prohibition of child marriage³². These steps taken by the Brahmos can be considered as the most significant in the process of modernization in the State.

For the observations as depicted in this chapter, a logical conclusion may be deduced. Firstly, the Brahmo religion penetrated in Cooch Behar administration and was able to exert its influence over the Cooch Behar society specially

among the urban **elites**. Secondly, this religion played an active and influential role as a vehicle of modernization. Thirdly, the process of building modern institution in Cooch Behar had made its headway through this religion. Fourthly, being the State religion the process of secularization and sanskritization had been at its take-off stage which the entire State of Cooch Behar was being confronted with. Fifthly, at last for the higher stratum of the society, this religion could make it possible to bring about reformations in the age old tradition ridden Cooch Behar society. Finally it may be commented that the Brahma Samaj has its influential role in modernizing the State of Cooch Behar specially during the rule of Maharaja Nripendra Narayan.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

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2. Borthwick, Meredith, The Changing Role of Women in Bengal - 1849-1905, Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 1984, p.50.
3. Singh, Yogendra, Modernization of Indian Tradition, Reprint, Thompson Press India Limited, Faridabad, 1977, p.91.
4. "Female education was one of the hall-marks of the Brahmo Programme for social reform, wherever a Brahmo was posted, he would set up-often with the help of his wife - Brahmo Samaj, a boy's school, a charitable dispensary, and a school for girls". Borthwick, Meredith, op.cit., p.85.
5. Ibid., p.51.
6. The letter of the Brahmo Samaj of Cooch Behar, 19th February, 1878 (Collet Collection)(S.B.S.L).
7. Kopf, David, op.cit., p.314; Palit, Chittabrata, New View

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8. Borthwick, Meredith, Keshub Chandra Sen, Minerva Associates (Publishing).Ltd., India, 1977, p.178.
 9. Brahmo Public Opinion. August, 9th, 1978, p.228 (S.B.B.L).
 10. Devi Sunity, op.cit., p.69.
 11. Ibid., p.58.
 12. "Those present in the marriage festival of Calcutta were the leading representatives of the English and Indian communities. They were Jatindra Mohan Tagore, Sourendra Mohan Tagore, Peary Chand Mitter, Abdul Latif Khan and Sourendra Nath Banerjee"; Borthwick, Meredith, Keshab Chandra Sen, op.cit., p.183.
 13. Kopf, David, op.cit., p.327.
 14. After the marriage of Sunity Devi, the daughter of Babu Keshab Chandra Sen, in 1878, the protestant of the marriage under Shibnath Shastri, Durgamohan Das, Bijoy Krishna Goswami, etc. break away from the leadership of Keshab Chandra Sen and established Sadharan Brahmo Samaj. Keshab Chandra Sen also organised a new group in 1880 under his leadership known as Nababidhan or New Dispensation". Shastri, Shivnath, History of the Brahmo Samaj, op.cit., p.215.
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 16. Ibid., p.329.
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20. Ibid., p.91.
21. Ibid., p.33.
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23. Ibid., p.91.
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26. Devi Sunity, op.cit., p.53.
27. Sunity Devi wrote that rulers except her husband was
professional Brahmo and as the rulers of the princely
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found it impossible a husband for his daughter; Ibid.,
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