

CHAPTER-I
ADVENT OF THE BRITISH

The link between the kingdom of Cooch Behar and the East India Company started with the "Treaty" which was concluded in the year 1773¹. Prior to the advent of the British, Cooch Behar State had experienced independence since time immemorial. An analysis of the then existing political milieu which helped the British to institute their own hegemony over the kingdom of Cooch Behar would not be out of place here.

The origin of the Koch dynasty can be traced back to the sixteenth century A.D. when Bishwa Singha, the son of a tribal chief, was sworn into the throne of Cooch Behar kingdom². During the reign of Maharaja Naranarayan, son of Bishwa Singha, the geo-political boundary of Cooch Behar had been profoundly extended covering the whole North Eastern India³. To Corroborate Hodgson mentions "the boundary of Cooch Behar included the western half of Assam on the one side and eastern

half of Morung on the other, with all the intervening country, reaching East and West from Dhansri river to the Konki, whilst North and South is stretched from Dalimkot to Ghoraghat. In other words the Koch Raj extended from 88 to 93½ east longitude and 25 to 27 North latitude"⁴.

An interesting feature of the Kingdom of Cooch Behar is that at her very embryonic stage, the rulers sought to establish a social connection through marital linkages with the various Indian kings along with the great Mughals⁵. This corroborates the fact that the element of heterogeneity has been an in-built feature of the Koch dynasty which infact, along inter-alia, had led to the process of modernization in following years.

In the first half of the seventeenth century the expansion of geo-political boundary of Cooch Behar kingdom came to a halt with the hegemonistic attitude of the Mughals⁶. The constant encroachment over the boundary of Cooch Behar and the aggression of the Mughals, especially by Meerjumla during the time of Aurangzeb in the eighteenth century, turned Cooch Behar into a petty small state⁷.

Despite being a small state Cooch Behar had been able to, maintain her independence even after the inception of East India Company's administration in Bengal. The reason is obvious. The strategic location of Cooch Behar at the North

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Eastern part of Bengal served to perform the role of a buffer state between Bhutan and the Company-administered Bengal⁸.

The Cooch Behar State lay between 25°57'40" and 26°32'30" North latitude and between 88°47'40" and 89°54'35"^{East} longitude⁹. The State has a total area of 1,332.6 square miles according to the Director of Land Records and Surveys, West Bengal¹⁰. The country was surrounded by Bhutan in the North, Assam and the river Brahmaputra in the East, the river Teesta in the West and Rangpur District in the South¹¹. Throughout the years both these rivers (Teesta and Brahmaputra) used to be navigated. In fact water ways had been the main source of communication and linkages to the Sub-Himalayan regions. The importance of Cooch Behar had been ensured by her strategic position.

With the passage of time and specially in the third quarter of the eighteenth century, Cooch Behar dynasty had to face serious internecine struggle arising out of the gap created soon after the death of king Upendra Narayan. The nobles and the influential persons of the palace were involved in the dispute regarding the actual inheritor to the "Throne". At last the minor son of king Upendra Narayan, Debendra Narayan by name, ascended the throne. The administration was carried out by a council of ministers on behalf of the minor Raja Debendra Narayan¹².

Taking the opportunity of the internal conflicts, the neighbouring state, Bhutan, extended her powerful hands to exert influence over the Cooch Behar administration¹³. The influence was so great that a permanent Bhutani representative with a band of Bhutani soldiers started residing continuously at the capital of Cooch Behar. The Bhutani representative had been so powerful that no policy decision could be undertaken by the Cooch Behar administration without his affirmation¹⁴.

The Bhutani representative during this time was Pensutoma who was in close touch with the Dewan Deo¹⁵ Ram Narayan. The officers of the Court along with the king hatched a plot¹⁶ against the Dewan Deo, who became very powerful with the assistance of the Bhutanese. The Dewan Deo was murdered treacherously at the instance of the Raja. This murder enraged the Debraja of Bhutan. To avenge the murder, the Debraja of Bhutan organised a plot against Dhairjendra Narayan, the then Raja and Nazir Deo who were mainly responsible for the murder. They were invited at a feast, the motive behind this arrangement was to seize both of them¹⁷. The Maharaja was carried off, from the feast at Chechakhata as a prisoner in 1770 by the Bhutanese¹⁸. They raised the captive king's brother Rajendra Narayan to the throne but actually they became the real authority of the State. But within a short period of two years the Raja died¹⁹. At this juncture, on hearing the news of the death of Raja Rajendra Narayan, the Nazir Deo

Khogendra Narayan, who managed to escape from the captivity of Bhutan, installed Dharendra Narayan, the son of the imprisoned king Dhairjendra Narayan, over the throne of Cooch Behar²⁰.

In fact the Debraja of Bhutan considered it an open violation of his authority and did not like that the captive's son should be on the throne of the State and remonstrated the Nazir-Deo Khogendra Narayan against the selection of the Raja. In order to take reprisal, the Bhutanese came down from the hills under the command of Jimpe (a Bhutani General) and forced upon the capital in 1772, meeting with little resistance from the natives. They gained possession of the territory and Nazir Deo and Raja Dharendra Narayan fled from the country and sought the help of the East India Company's Collector of Rangpur²¹.

Thus the opportunity of penetration into the affairs of Cooch Behar State came to the East India Company as an invitation. The importance of Cooch Behar was acknowledged by the East India Company. The control over the administration and the exertions of influence over the tiny State had also become one of the most important aims of the British imperialism. The long cherished interventionist motive of the Company had been satisfied by the open invitation as stated above.

The Nazir Deo Khogendra Narayan sought the help of the Company in order to get rid of the Bhutanese and to restore the State to the king of Cooch Behar. The East India Company so long was watching with concern the growing power of the

Bhutanese, very close to their boundary. Naturally the appeal for assistance of the Nazir Deo was cordially accepted with some conditions²². Accordingly a treaty was arranged upon between the East India Company and the Raja of Cooch Behar Dharendra Narayan. It is interesting to note that when the negotiations for the treaty was in progress, the Collector of Rangpur, Mr. Purling, despatched a Company of soldier to combat the advancing Bhutanese. The proposal of a treaty was sent to the President and His Council by Mr. Purling and finally it was approved by the Governor General and his Council²³.

The Company's troops expelled the Bhutanese from Cooch Behar and recaptured the capital from their hands. The king and the Nazir Deo acquired their lost territory but it was at the cost of the sovereign right of the Maharaja of Cooch Behar. By the terms of the treaty, Raja Dharendra Narayan who signed on behalf of Cooch Behar agreed to acknowledge the suzerainty of the English East India Company and to pay one half of the annual state revenue²⁴. The treaty was finally signed by the Honourable President and Council at Fort William on 5th April, 1773. The substance of the concluding treaty was that the Company should expel the Raja's enemies out of his territory and protect it from any inroads from outsiders in future; the Raja would bear the expenses of the British army and agree to the subjection of the Company and would pay half of the revenues of the State²⁵.

The Company's army under Captain Jones pushed the Bhutanese upto the hills and at this moment the Debraja of Bhutan sought the good office of Teshoo Lama of Tibet and through his mediation the war with Bhutan finally came to an end on the 25th April 1774²⁶ and as a part of the condition of the said treaty Maharaja Dhairjendra Narayan and his Dewan were released²⁷. The Maharaja being released from his captivity refused to ascend the throne and allowed his son Dharendra Narayan to continue as king of Cooch Behar. This was because of the fact that the captive king had been disgusted about the terms of the treaty of 1773 concluded by his son and Nazir Deo with the English East India Company. This treaty of 1773 had shattered the sovereign right of the king of Cooch Behar and ultimately it became a tributary State of the East India Company²⁸.

The question as to why the East India Company interfered into the affairs of Cooch Behar is not difficult to answer. The motive of the Company can be traced from different angles. It was, in the first instance, guided by the political interest of the British. It is evident from the subsequent report of Walter Hamilton (1820) that "the peace and security of the adjacent British territories were more to be considered than any pecuniary advantage to be derived from the new acquisition, as prior to this period the Rungpur District had been much exposed to incursions from Bootan"²⁹ (sic). Thus the maintenance of peace and security became a matter of direct interest

and naturally the offer of the treaty proposal of 1772 was forthwith accepted by the Company. The political interest i.e. the protection of the northern flank of the company's expanding empire in Bengal was their main concern³⁰. The political motive of Warren Hastings, the then Governor General of Bengal is also to be mentioned, "He was glad at the opportunity to annex the territory though he firmly disclaimed 'remote projects of conquest and stressed that his only aim was to complete the outline of the Company's dominions"³¹.

Secondly, the political motive was further strengthened with the commercial interest of the East India Company. The Company's commerce in the Himalayan region was so long carried on through Nepal, but during this time the political commo- tions of Nepal badly hampered the commercial interests of the English East India Company³². The Company, as a result, was eager to open trade route to Tibet through Bhutan, Assam and Cooch Behar and Warren Hasting's policy in this regard was to by-pass the Gurkhas³³. *even at the cost of war with Bhutan* But the relation between the East India Company and Bhutan was not even firmly established and cordial. Naturally the annexation of Cooch Behar by Bhutan would prevent their commercial interest in this region. To obtain free access for trade routes it was essentially important on the part of the East India Company to clear the trade routes and obviously the war with Bhutan was necessary³⁴.

Thirdly, the motives of the East India Company are explained by Gayatri Devi, the princess of Cooch Behar and the Maharanee of Jaipur. She is of the opinion that "the links between Cooch Behar and the British grew stronger and more diverse. Placed as it was geographically, Cooch Behar was constantly involved in the expansionist schemes and political intrigues of Bhutan, Sikkim and Assam, which in their turn were involved with Nepal and Tibet. It was important for the British to have a foot hold in this troubled and strategically important area and when life in the State was further complicated by constant domestic dissensions, eventually in 1788, a British Resident was appointed to keep order"³⁵. (sic)

Fourthly, the East India Company was perturbed by the activities of the 'Sannyasis' (Mendicants) who were posing as a threat to the peace and security in the neighbouring areas of Cooch Behar. The problem to tackle the 'Sannyasis' became a concern of the British. So when, the treaty with Bhutan was concluded in 1774, a condition regarding the 'Sannyasis' was included in the treaty³⁶.

Thus, from the above discussion it is evident that upto the first half of the nineteenth century the East India Company did not develop any definite policy towards the State although there was a growing trend towards the liquidation of the native states.

Thus, when the request for assistance was offered by the Nazir Deo of Cooch Behar to the Collector of Rangpur, it was accepted without any delay and without having any prior assent from the East India Company's Authority of Calcutta, a contingent was sent to combat the approaching Bhutias³⁷.

The advent of the British in Cooch Behar was precipitated by the internal dissensions, foreign incursions and internal squabbles'. For all these reasons, the period on the eve of the advent of the Company can be called the period of confusion and dark age in the history of Cooch Behar³⁸. Though the third article of the treaty of 1773 envisaged the complete subjection of Cooch Behar territory with the Company's dominion in India, it was not properly implemented at the beginning of the Company's intercourse with Cooch Behar for two reasons. Firstly, the East India Company had engaged their entire attention in extending their sphere of influence in Central and Western India; and secondly, the oversimplification of the fact that to the Company the loyalty of this tiny State, Cooch Behar, had been above question particularly after the reinstallation of Raja Dharendra Narayan.

The Company was mainly concerned with the revenue and remained satisfied with the "Tribute" which was agreed upon by the said "Treaty". It was arranged that the tribute was to be collected by the Collector of Rangpur³⁹. Upto 1780 the

"Tribute" was realised by committing the total collections of the State by the persons nominated by the Company called Sezwals or Teshildars. Out of the total collections the Sezwals deducted the half share of Government according to the provisions of the "Treaty" and paid over the other half to the State. ✓ The amount of "Tribute" was not fixed until 1780⁴⁰. / Finally the amount was fixed for perpetual at Rs. 67,700 per annum in the same year on the strength of the Hastobund of the revenue of the Raja, prepared by Mr. Purling, the Collector of Rangpur.⁴¹

It is to be mentioned here that the half of revenue was to be paid as a "tribute" and not as a tax. A date which is twenty years prior to the permanent settlement of Cornwallis⁴² was also agreed upon. Thus, it was not a zamindari as mentioned by Aitchison⁴³. As regards the terms of the treaty it may be mentioned that the option and ratification implied in the clause 9 (See Appendix A) does not appear to have been carried into effect. In the meanwhile Dharendra Narayan died and his father Dhairjendra Narayan became the Raja of Cooch Behar. He was disgusted with the loss of sovereign rights⁴⁴. Dhairjendra Narayan tried through a European gentleman, Tobias Wagner, to improve the terms of the treaty of Warren Hastings, but the Governor General, refused to undertake any alteration of the terms of the treaty of 1773 and responded unceremoniously calling the person as a "European Vagabond"⁴⁵.

Raja Dhairjendra Narayan was aged and unable to rule the country directly. As a matter of fact the administration of the State ultimately fell into the hands of Maharanee Cumeswari Devi and her Agent Sarbananda Gossain. The old Raja appeared to be an insane and had become the de jure ruler⁴⁶.

The active interference into administration of the State by the Company came after the death of Raja Dhairjendra Narayan. At the time of his death his successor to the throne was Harendra Narayan who was just above three years of age. This resulted in confusion. Troubles arose out of the rivalry between Maharanee Cumeswari who was acting as guardian under the cover of a will of the deceased Raja along with the assistance of Dewan Deo, and Nazir Deo⁴⁷. The Maharanee was able to manage with the assistance of the highly powerful Rajguru (head priest) Sarbananda Gossain⁴⁸. A conflict developed and the bone of contention was the share of the revenue between the Raja, Dewan Deo and Nazir Deo. The matter became more complicated by the injudicious interference of the Collector of Rangpur⁴⁹. For thirteen years the peace and stability of the State and the administration was immensely hampered owing to the prolonged troubles. The Nazir Deo, an aspirant for more power and privileges seized the "Royal Seal" and proclaimed his son 'Jubraj'⁵⁰. At the exigency of the situation, the Collector of Rangpur interfered into the affair and was able to return the "Royal Seal" to the Maharanee. The troubles did not

come to an end and the palace conspiracy continued in an unabated manner. The Maharanee at the insistence of Sarbananda Gossain, tried to deprive the Nazir Deo of his share of rent which was fixed earlier through mutual understanding among the Raja, Nazir Deo and Dewan Deo⁵¹. Skirmishes between the two contending parties i.e. Maharanee and Sarbananda Gossain on behalf of the Raja and the Nazir Deo were frequent. The matter became so grave that the Company for their own interest did not refrain from interfering into the affairs of the State⁵². Thus the State of Cooch Behar had become the hunting ground for constant interference of the British into the affairs of the State.

The troubles in the State not only disrupted the State administration, but at the same time revenue also fell to a low ebb. "The harassed and oppressed ryots were obliged to leave their native country and the revenue falling short in consequence of this and from the alienation of lands the remaining inhabitants were obliged to make good the deficiency"⁵³. So not only the question of political disturbances but also the fall of the revenue in the subsequent years, was the main concern of the Company, that ultimately led them to take effective action. / Meanwhile the Collector of Rangpur had been changed and Peter More succeeded Mr. Goodlad as the Collector of Rangpur⁵⁴. He came with an unprejudiced mind and took in the situation at once. Active attempts of interference in the

internal affairs of Cooch Behar by the English East India Company became a reality.

The situation of the State turned worse. Marichmati, the aunt of the Nazir Deo, with the help of Ganesh Giri, a leader of the Sannyasis (mendicants) and Bhagavanta Narayan, the elder brother of Nazir Deo, made desperate attempts and captured the king and the queen regent⁵⁵. They were taken away to Balarampur as prisoner. This act of sedition necessitated the Company's interference and Captain Ratan freed the king and returned them to the capital⁵⁶.

Taking account of this disturbed state of affairs in the neighbouring district of Bengal, the Governor General Lord Cornwallis, in a resolution dated 12th April 1793, appointed a Commission with Lawrence Mercer and John Lewis Chauvet⁵⁷. The Commission was appointed on the one hand to settle the disputes of the contesting parties and on the other they were instructed with the duty to report on the administrative system of Cooch Behar⁵⁸. The members of the Commission thoroughly inquired into the matter and heard from the conflicting parties about their views. Finally they submitted a report, in which they made some positive recommendations, relating to the rights of the Raja and the privileges of the Nazir and the Dewan Deo. The Commission also prescribed that in order to bring the State out of the turmoil, it would be essential on the part of the

East India Company to appoint a Resident Commissioner at Cooch Behar⁵⁹.

It can be said that the British administrative officers, designated either as Resident or Political Agent, were deputed to the State mainly to watch over the proceedings of the Durbars. These officers were instructed to assist the rulers in solving the problems of their states. At the same time they were entrusted with the duty to promote the Company's interests in the princely state. They also counteracted the hostile forces both within and without the State of Cooch Behar.

Thus for the first time attempts were being made by the East India Company to interfere directly into the affairs of the State administration. It appears however, that a more limited interpretation has been given to the conditions of the treaty, and that the Raja of Cooch Behar had been permitted subsequent to the date of the "Treaty", to coin money, to administer justice and to exercise other powers.

The privileges enjoyed by the Raja were curtailed after 1789 and in the near future led to the confrontation with Raja Harendra Narayanan, after attaining his majority while he took over the administration in his own hands. As regards the Company's attitude towards the Raja, it is explained that "to provide for the management of the affairs of the Rajah, during the minority to the present Rajah, it was expressly declared

that it was not the intention of the Government in any respect, to injure independent right of the Rajah"⁶⁰. (sic) It was also declared that the terms of the treaty of 1772 would be adhered to⁶¹.

On the basis of the recommendations of the Commission of Mercer and Chauvet the Governor General in Council thought it necessary to appoint a Commissioner to restore peace and tranquillity in this troubled area. Accordingly, Henry Douglass was appointed as the Resident Commissioner of Cooch Behar. He applied himself mainly to regularise the Revenue Administration of the State⁶².

The conflict between the King, Nazir and Dewan Deo led to the appointment of the first Commissioner in the State. This marked a change of the traditional system of administration and crippled the power that Nazir Deo as the military head of the State enjoyed for a long time past. Thus, the appointment of the Commissioner, a direct representative of the East India Company, for the Cooch Behar State administration, opened a new vista to the Company to institute the British system of administration in every field of State life. This situation affected the indigenous rulers of Cooch Behar also. Consequently, discontent and dichotomy between the Company's Commissioner and the native rulers on issues of policy decision had been at the fore. The tensions - transition and relaxation would be dealt in the chapter following.

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