

CHAPTER IV

MAKING OF A MODERN RULER : NRIPENDRA NARAYAN

With the completion of the period of transition, attempts were made by the Company to infuse modern innovations in Cooch Behar State affairs and to this effect the Company's intention was to catch hold of the minor Nripendra Narayan through whom the British mission could be satisfied.

Nripendra Narayan, the beloved son of Maharaja Narendra Narayan, born on October 4, 1862,¹ was sworn into the throne when he was nearing the completion of his first year of age. But this significant event did not take place in a smooth manner. Maharanee Nistarini Devi desired to place his nephew ✓ Kumar Jateendra Narayan to the throne instead of Nripendra Narayan, since the later's succession right was being questioned² on the ground that Nripendra Narayan, was the son of a lady whom Raja Narendra Narayan married through the

Gundharba system of marriage³. In such controversies on the question of succession to the throne the other Maharanees of the State sought the help of the British Indian authority to preserve the privileges and the dignity of Nripendra Narayan as the Raja⁴.

The request of the Maharanees were heeded and the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal recognized the claim of Nripendra Narayan as the legitimate son of the deceased Maharaja Narendra Narayan⁵. He, however, imposed the condition that the title of "Maharaja" would be conferred upon him (Nripendra Narayan) after he attains majority⁵.

Admittedly the British did not give even a second thought while they tilted their balance in favour of Nripendra Narayan. It should be noted that the selection of Nripendra Narayan as the legitimate heir to the throne has been a clear deviation from their earlier policies when the question of succession came to the fore at a crisis. For example, the Company had chosen Shibendra Narayan by depriving Rajendra Narayan of his legitimate claim⁷. This only reveals that the British hardly had a consistent policy in this regard. Instead the British policy in relation to the throne of Cooch Behar had been decided according to the time and situation and directed to the British imperialist interests.

The restrictions on conferring the title "Maharaja")
 expresses the British intention to dominate the regime with
 their fullest control. Firstly, the transitional period of
 Nripendra Narayan from his minority to the time of his gain-
 ing majority would be the harvesting ground for the British.
 Secondly, the British did not leave any scope of loosing
 their foot hold over Cooch Behar and thus the conferring of
 the title of "Maharaja" to Nripendra Narayan was deferred.

The British government of India immediately took steps to
 protect the "Raj" of a toddler and sent Colonel Haughton as
 the Commissioner of Cooch Behar³. The British, thus, wanted
 to bring change in every affair of State life under the direct
 sponsorship of the Commissioner on behalf of the Government of
 India at the time when Nripendra Narayan was a minor. The
 changes the British ^{wanted} to bring in Cooch Behar, are truly
 revealed from the letter which reads :

"... the first duty of this officer would be to scruti-
 nize most carefully each Department of the State Government.
 The police will claim his earliest attention. I believe the
 present force is entirely underpaid. It may with advantage be
 at once organised upon the footing of our new police
 The courts of Law and Justice will next demand attention.
 Report speaks all of these Courts which are conducted on the
 model of our own In fact, under the system an indepen-
 dent administration of justice was simply impossible, the Judge

being liable to removal at any moment through the intrigues of any powerful person I recommend the loan of a principal Sudder Ammen and a few Subordinate officers from the British Government. The Regulations and Acts of Government are, I believe the ordinary guides of the existing Courts. The revenue of the State is more than sufficient for its wants - therefore, no increase of taxation should be allowed, but for the benefit of the people. ... I would recommend that a separate arrangement from surplus revenue made yearly for the expenses of not only maintaining an educational establishment suited to the wants of the country, but also for public works"⁹.

The letter is of immense value, on the ostensible ground that the Government's intention to modernize Cooch Behar, along interalia, police and military administration, the security of the administrative staff and management of court and entire legal system, revenue administration, stopping unnecessary over imposition of taxation on the subjects, educational system and societal affairs. Accordingly, the Commissioner had been entrusted with the responsibility of carrying out the directives intended to be implemented by the British Government in Cooch Behar¹⁰.

The British Government not only assumed the responsibility of maintaining the affairs of the state but at the same

time had taken special care to educate the infant Raja according to the modern line of thought. Admittedly, the British choice of imparting modern education to the young Raja was not without some motive. Firstly, by educating the Raja in the British line of thought and making him imbibe modern ideas the British hope to project the grown up Raja as the symbol of loyalty and allegiance. Secondly, a matured, politicized Raja, oriented to modern European culture could best serve for reforming his tradition-ridden and age-old society. This had been the policy of the British Government in relation to the other princely States also and exemplifies the imperialist "One Charge Theory" which connotes the British supremacy over the princes in a single line of control and command¹¹.

Thus the British gave much importance to the nature of education to be imparted to him from the very beginning of his boyhood may be exemplified from the following facts. Firstly, the Raja, educated in the modern Westernised fashion, will lead the country to the path of prosperity. Secondly, if he was educated in the indigenous fashion it would only produce a ruler of indolence, luxury and slothfulness. Thirdly, a trained Raja in the modern system of administration could give justice to the ryots and steer the revenue administration. Fourthly, an educated modern Raja could have been the first hindrance to the neighbouring prince's desire of intervening

into the affairs of Cooch Behar. Fifthly, a modern educated Raja could be the living symbol of development and the welfare of the subjects¹².

Accordingly, Colonel Haughton made sincere efforts to train the boy Nripendra Narayan with the British objectives mentioned above. Regarding the progress of education of Nripendra Narayan in the British direction, important observations have been made by the Deputy Commissioner of Benaras. The observation was " ... if he continues in the same course the State will reap all the advantages to be gained from a good ruler"¹³. While studying in Patna Collegiate School his mental development greatly accelerated and finally he was admitted to the Presidency College for the law course¹⁴. During the course of his study the Maharaja made tours in different places such as North Western Provinces, Oudh and Punjab under the guidance of his tutor Mr. H.H. John Kneller, and in December 1877 he went to the Imperial Assemblage in Delhi under the guidance of Lord Browne, and met the Viceroy Lord Lytton on March 6th, 1878¹⁵.

Thus, these tours and visits helped Nripendra Narayan to have interactions with the various British functionaries and the Indian princes of different places of India. Automatically the formative process of the personality building was complete through observation, education and mutual interaction.

When Nripendra Narayan was at the age of sixteen, his guardian (British) wanted to send him to England to benefit from what was unquestionably the best education he could receive¹⁵. On this matter, however, the British met with fierce opposition from within and without (in British Bengal) the palace. The first opposition came from the ladies of the palace, who were of the view that firstly, the education of a decadent Western society would be of no use to this young boy; and secondly, the most hated thing to them was the fear of social ostracization by the orthodox Hindus, if Nripendra Narayan would cross "The Black Water"¹⁷. The second opposition came from the contemporary News Papers especially Somaprakash, had been of the view that if Nripendra Narayan be sent to England, that would mean the interference of the British, with the religious customs of the native people¹⁸. In spite of this strong under currents of criticism, the British persuaded the palace ladies who agreed on the condition that Nripendra Narayan should be married before his voyage to England¹⁹.

It was difficult to find a suitable bride to match the young Nripendra Narayan that would also keep his modern orientation intact. The case of Abala Basu, the daughter of Durgamohan Das, was first proposed as a match but it did not materialise owing to the objection of Durgamohan Das²⁰. The British also did not show any keen interest and naturally

they looked to other persons.

The British acted as a catalyst to make Nripendra Narayan married and to their venture they select Sunity Devi, the eldest daughter of Babu Keshab Chandra Sen, the leading exponent of Brahma movement with the following objectives; (i) the infusion of Brahma ideas into the palace of Cooch Behar would ensure the safe continuation of British influence in the State as the Brahma Samaj along with the British had been carrying out the task of modernizing India²¹; (ii) the introduction of modern reform would be possible for Cooch Behar Raja would have been mutually interacted and influenced by the enlightened Bengalis led by the Brahma Samaj²². Ultimately the marriage was accomplished on 5th March, 1873, with Sunity Devi²³.

The contemporary news papers generally praised the marriage. The Indian Mirror termed the marriage as "progressive because it was an intercaste marriage between an enlightened modern young couple both educated along the British line"²⁴. Another interesting upshot of this marriage and the observation of the rituals²⁵, was the rift that took place in the Brahma movement. The Brahma Samaj, of which Keshub Chandra Sen was the head, tottered and a new creed came out known as "New Dispensation"²⁶.

Soon after the marriage took place, the British Government sent Nripendra Narayan to England for furthering his modern education and knowledge as well as augmenting his capability

to steer the administrative affairs²⁷. This tour evoked criticism in the different news papers of Bengal²³.

Nripendra Narayan returned to Coxh Behar from England on the 3rd March, 1879²⁹. Having been educated in the modern Western line, Nripendra Narayan had been highly influenced by his father-in-law's religious ideas i.e., the Brahmo faith and that helped a lot in forming his social, ethical, political and personal out-look and efforts were made by him to change the traditional line of thinking regarding religion which prevailed in the palace³⁰. Thus, born of a native backward society and full of superstitious belief, Nripendra Narayan broke off with the past and got Westernized under the able supervision of the British.

He was versed in many languages. The Hindu Patriot, observed "his variety of education and his close contact with the enlightened classes of the Indian and foreign societies enabled him to overcome all superstitions"³¹.

In fact at the very beginning of his studies specially when the British Government started taking care regarding his education, Nripendra Narayan came into direct contact with British scholars, modernized Indian intellectuals and specially the Bengali intellectuals, namely Vidyasagar and Surendra Nath Banerjee³². As it has been stated that all these contacts made up his modern mind and just before the installation to the

throne Nripendra Narayan started taking keen interest in the administration and spend his time in visiting Courts of Law and other offices of the State to get acquainted about the working of the entire Cooch Behar State administration³³.

Thus, prior to the installation ceremony he drew out a sketch for the future course of his action through his past observations³⁴.

Soon after Nripendra Narayan attained majority in the year 1933, according to declaration made by the British to the Maharanees, every arrangement was made to make the coronation ceremony of Nripendra Narayan successful. During the coronation the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal, Rivers Thompson in his speech said; "I congratulate you, Maharajah, upon your accession to your principality. You stand forth this day not at all as succeeding to a princely inheritance to be used in the gratification of selfish or ambitious aims, but as the representative of more than half a million of subjects whom God has committed to your trust. Be faithful to that trust so that when it comes to you in the common fate to lay down principality and power the rejoicing may be that you have earned the commendation of your conscience and the gratitude of posterity"³⁵. In the occasion of the installation ceremony as a ruler of Cooch Behar, the prince is reported to have declared, "it shall be my earnest endeavour to do justice to the great trust which I now undertake"³⁶.

Interestingly enough, it should be noted here that the coronation ceremony had its mixed repercussion. The contemporary Indian news papers, while hailing the assumption of power by the Maharaja Nripendra Narayan, criticised the British policy of appointing Mr. Gordon, as the Superintendent of the State, on the plea that they (British) wanted to make Nripendra Narayan a puppet ruler³⁷. But the activities of the enlightened Maharaja revealed that he only sought the assistance of the British in building Cooch Behar into a modern State without being a mere titular head.

The above glimpse about the nature of Maharaja Nripendra Narayan's policy may be substantiated from the writings of Maharanee Sunity Devi. She wrote "from the day of his accession to the throne, the Maharaja devoted all the earnestness of his nature and great powers of organization of plans for comfort, well being, and education of his subjects"³⁸.

Section-II

As it has been stated that modernization is a process of change and thus it can never be an one shot affair. The continuous interchange of ideas among the men who are at the helm of affair along with the participation of the people whom the affairs affect. Especially, during the period when the

Raja was a minor, directed by the British, the administrators appointed by the British had played a role of immense value. These administrators, in tune with the then on-going flow of change in every affair helped Maharaja Nripendra Narayan to lead the boat of modernity. The British appointed a native Indian, the Dewan of Cooch Behar, since the period of minority of Nripendra Narayan.

Rai Calica Das Dutta joined the State administration of Cooch Behar which had been experiencing a period of transitional break-through. He was in the service of the State for forty-two years³⁹. Most of the reforms introduced in the State both fiscal and revenue had their origin in his wise suggestions.

He was born in a respectable Kayastha family of a village in Burdwan, in 1841.⁴⁰ He had his early education first in the village school and later on was sent to Krishna Nagar Collegiate School which was then one of the important centre for learning. In carrying out his education he had to overcome a number of hurdles of superstitions. As for example, it was then considered as ominous, to cross the river Ganges, by the older members in his family⁴¹. However, he carried on his education with merit and in 1858 passed the senior scholarship examination; got the B.A. degree and finally B.L. in 1861. Throughout his academic career he showed marks of brilliancy⁴².

His vision of life changed while he came into contact with the greatest men such as Babu Debendra Nath Tagore and Shri Keshab Chandra Sen of the Brahma Samaj⁴³. He was greatly influenced by their philosophy of enlightenment and liberal ideas. These formed the very basis of his character in the later part of his life. While in the service his enlightened background helped him to move forward and equipped him with a progressive outlook.

In 1869, when he was a Deputy Magistrate and Deputy Collector of Katwa, he was appointed as Dewan of Cooch Behar State by the British⁴⁴. During the minority period of Nripendra Narayan he contributed greatly in managing the affairs of the State. In 1833, at the time of the installation of Nripendra Narayan as the Maharaja of the State, he was appointed a senior member of the State council which the Maharaja had formed to assist him⁴⁵. It is under his guidance that the Land Revenue settlement was twice revised and improvements were effected in other branches of administration⁴⁶. All these had contributed to the royal treasury and economy was restored. In the spread of female education his role is worth mentioning, specially in the development of Sunity College (School)⁴⁷.

During his tenure of the office of the Dewan, spanning over 42 years, he rendered valuable assistance to His Highness, the Maharaja Nripendra Narayan, in developing the resources of

the State and brought it on the road to prosperity⁴⁸.

Presumably, the role played in the administration of the State by Rai Calica Das Dutta in modernizing the State has not been gainsaid. Not only did the Maharaja acknowledge the activities of the great man but at the time of installation in 1893 he expressed the same regards to him⁴⁹. The people even to-day remember his name along with the Maharaja for the development of the State⁵⁰.

Section-III

In modernizing the State the role of Sunity Devi, the wife of Nripendra Narayan also deserves special mention. Maharaja Nripendra Narayan was assisted and influenced by her in carrying out his modernization programmes. She was born in 1864 to one of the great enlightened exponent of the Brahmo Samajists of Bengal. She was accorded Western education by a European lady tutor at her own residence. She also attended the Bethune College⁵¹. **This education formed her mind to the cause of women emancipation, education and self reliance.** In 1879 at the age of fourteen, she was married to the Raja of Cooch Behar at the special initiative of the British⁵². After becoming the Maharanee of Cooch Behar, the young enlightened modern minded lady had been able to explore the ever untapped

hunting ground where she could induce the best of her modern mind with the patronage of the Maharaja Nripendra Narayan.

As the Maharanee of Cooch Behar she took special interest to augment the cause of Brahmoism in the State and to fight out the evils of religious bigotry and superstitions. She was involved in the affairs of the State to spread the female education in this backward area. It was owing to her insistence, the Raja invited many scholars of Bengal to join in the services of the State⁵³. Sunity Devi not only took keen interest for the development of the Brahma movement in Cooch Behar but also associated herself with the movement of the social uplift for the women outside the State of Cooch Behar⁵⁴. She was gifted with the fluency of pen and composed a number of books both in Bengali and English language of different interests⁵⁵.

With her modern mind, she fought with the prejudices of the society such as purdah, polygamy, child marriage etc. It was owing to her active participation and co-operation, that the Maharaja Nripendra Narayan succeeded in his cause to develop the socio-cultural atmosphere of Cooch Behar. Thus, with the direct patronage of Maharanee Sunity Devi, the informal institutional building process was made possible which in turn developed the capacity to adapting the society to the changes which occurred through out the reign of Maharaja Nripendra Narayan.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

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Proceedings of the Government of Bengal General (Political) Department, February 1864, No.53, p.27.

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