

CHAPTER VII

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The reigns of the last three rulers of the Native State of Cooch Behar (1911 - 1949 A.D.) formed the most volatile and crucial period in modern Indian history. The year 1911 A.D. is memorable in the history of Cooch Behar State because of the death of Nripendranarayan whose reign witnessed the climax of Anglo-Cooch Behar relationship as well as colonial modernisation of the State administration. The years following 1911 A.D. saw the rise of national upsurge in the country against foreign domination, ushering in an era of freedom and democracy for India. Its repercussions were strongly felt in the Native States like Cooch Behar, thereby giving rise to people's movement under the leadership of the AISPC for the democratic system of government there. Within a short period of two and half years following India's independence, the odd 552 Native States whose separate existence posed a great threat to the unity of the post-partition India, were integrated with the Indian Union within the year 1949. Some historians like R. C. Majumder has described the integration of the states as a 'great ... revolution.'¹ The Princely States had become 'an anachronistic counter-weight against nationalism'² and their demise naturally followed the withdrawal of the Imperial Power which had protected them amidst 'all hostile trends and ideals of the age'.³ Therefore, 'The abolition of the feudal states, which constituted a reactionary social force and which was artificially perpetuated by the British for political strategic reasons, was a progressive measure resulting in a uniform political pattern of India.'⁴

In spite of the anti-nationalistic stand adopted by the Koch rulers, there gradually emerged a powerful anti-monarchy movement in Cooch Behar in favour of independence and democracy as well as the merger with the Indian Dominion and later with the Province of West Bengal under the umbrella of the Praja Mandal Samity and other nationalist and leftist groups. Apart from this, the period under study also witnessed some significant developments in the domains of administrative, socio-economic, cultural and religious affairs in Cooch Behar. Thus the penultimate stage of the Koch Raj and the enchanting drama associated with it formed a grand theme that had been unfolded with the help of latest known documents specially from different archives scattered in different parts of India.

Maharaja Nripendranarayan (1863 - 1911 A.D.) the father of Raj Rajendranarayan, as a loyal native chief played the role of a collaborator with the British Government not only in the field of war but also in the arena of politics. Nripendranarayan believed that the British Government was for the good of India and expressed his strong dissatisfaction with the middle class-led nationalist movement in India. He also made it clear that he would take drastic measures against any nationalist activities in Cooch Behar.⁵ This pro-British and anti-nationalist stance taken by Nripendranarayan was practically pursued by his successors, i.e., Raj Rajendranarayan, Jitendranarayan and Jagaddipendranarayan during the period of our study.

Following in the foot steps of his illustrious father, Raj Rajendranarayan (1911 - 1913 A.D.) did his best to discharge his duties. He issued a proclamation in which he announced his intention to continue the present system of administration with such modification as, from time to time, he might consider necessary for the welfare of his people, to extend the principle of representation in the Legislative Council which was established during the reign of his father, and to espouse the cause of education, specially the cause of primary and secondary education. In spite of the very short period of his reign, he evinced a dynamic attitude towards the administration and 'constant solicitude for the welfare of his subjects'. Raj Rajendranarayan attended the Imperial Durbar held at Delhi in December, 1911 to celebrate the Coronation of King George V, Emperor of India and Queen Mary. He played the key role for the reception of the King Emperor and Queen Empress in Calcutta and it was a grand success. Like his father, Raj Rajendranarayan was also opposed to the revolutionary movement. In 1909, he participated in a meeting held at Caxton Hall in London in protest against the assassination of Curzon Wylie by Madanlal Dhingra.

The Maharaja of Cooch Behar and the Maharaja of Tripura enjoyed a salute of 13 guns and were entitled to be received by the Viceroy, but not a return visit from His Excellency. Raj Rajendranarayan addressed the Government of India on the subject and requested that the honour might be extended to him. Eventually the Government of India sanctioned the privilege of a return visit from the Viceroy to the next Maharaja Jitendranarayan as Raj Rajendranarayan had already met a premature death. Raj Rajendranarayan also raised the question of the appointment of a Political Agent for Cooch Behar and sought the sanction of the Government of Bengal. But the Government of Bengal did not comply with the Maharaja's proposal. Some boundary disputes were settled amicably between the Cooch Behar State on the one hand and the districts of Goalpara and Rangpur on the other hand during his reign. At the beginning of his reign, the Commissioner of Bhagalpur was ex-officio Political Agent for the State in respect of extradition cases and later the Commissioner of the Rajshahi Division became ex-officio Political Agent for the State for the same purpose. It is during the time of Raj Rajendranarayan Lord Carmichael, the Governor of Bengal, visited Cooch Behar, in April, 1930. Sunity Devi, the mother of the Maharaja, mentioned in her Autobiography that Raj Rajendranarayan was influenced by the advice of Lord Carmichael who had always been their best friend. The Rajbansi Kshatriya Movement under the leadership of Thakur Panchanan Barma also made headway in the Cooch Behar State during the reign of Raj Rajendranarayan. As in the neighbouring British Districts, the Rajbansis in the State who formed the bulk of the Hindu population were anxious to have themselves entered as Kshatriyas in the column of caste in the census operations of 1911 and submitted their memorials to the authorities. But their request could not be granted by the State authorities.⁶

At the outbreak of the First World War, Jitendranarayan, the next Maharaja of Cooch Behar (1913-1922 A.D.), conveyed his 'deep and steadfast loyalty to the Throne and Person of the King Emperor and placed his own personal services and those of his two brothers and also the resources of his State at the disposal of the Government

of India. In recognition of his assistance and Co-operation during the World War, The Maharaja was invested with the insignia of the knight Commander of the most exalted order of the Star of India in January, 1917.⁷ During the war time the minority issue also became a focal point of discussion and the role of Jitendranarayan must be recognised in this regard. It has been pointed out that the Political Officers had used minority periods to remove long standing abuses and improved the finance of the States, but also their methods had shaken the adherence of the people to their traditional customs and ways. In order to remove the suspicion in the minds of the Princes, the Viceroy Hardinge appointed a Committee consisting of certain Rulers and Political Officers. The Committee recorded their recommendations in a Memorandum and the most important recommendation was that any measure introduced during a minority 'will be liable to revocation by the minor ruler at any time after he obtains his full powers.' The minority issue was also the main subject of discussion at a Conference of Ruling Princes and Chiefs held at Delhi and it was attended by Maharaja Jitendranarayan and other rulers. Jitendranarayan participated in the deliberations of the minority issue and expressed his considered opinion. Finally this Conference unanimously endorsed the recent memorandum on the subject.⁸ The Chamber of Princes, a consultative and advisory body, was brought into being by a Royal proclamation in February, 1921 and Maharaja Jitendranarayan attended the inauguration ceremony of the Chamber of Princes held at Delhi. As the Cooch Behar State enjoyed dynastic salutes of 13 guns, it was one of 108 rulers who were members of the Chamber in their own right. It has been pointed out that the British had created the Chamber of Princes with a view to making Princes a separate political force to stem the tide of growing national awakening.

Indian nationalism had spread from British India to the Princely States and gradually created an environment for launching the national struggle there. The Non-cooperation movement from 1920 penetrated into the territory of Cooch Behar and stirred all the sections of its people, thereby becoming a concern to the State Authority.⁹ In order to stamp out the movement, the activities of the political volunteers, viz, publicity of the use of swadeshi goods, picketing, no revenue, no rent programmes etc. were declared illegal in Cooch Behar territory. Despite the repressive arrangements and orders, the movement spread into the rural areas and the hats were the centres where from Gandhiji's message spread into the interior region. In spite of State's prohibitory orders, Political meetings were held in the countryside and political activists were arrested by the State Police. The movement gripped the areas such as Sitai, Pundibari and Dinhat and there were several incidents of clashes between violent mob and the armed police, resulting in the death of several men. Ultimately the Maharaja succeeded in crushing the movement by resorting to repressive measures.

The revolutionary movement also made headway in the Cooch Behar State and many cadres of the revolutionary groups took shelter there. Maharaja Jitendranarayan having no sympathy with the revolutionaries, announced that he would do everything in his power to stamp out sedition in the State. In fact, participation in politics in Cooch Behar invariably meant banishment from the state. Despite the repressive measures adopted by the State Government, some physical cultural clubs known as akhiras and some libraries like the Patakura Adarsha Pathagar

were established which facilitated the purpose of the revolutionaries. The Dacca Anushilon Samity had established its branch in Cooch Behar¹⁰ and succeeded in enlisting members there. The Victoria College of Cooch Behar had attracted numerous students from Eastern Districts of Bengal and many of them had revolutionary leanings. Some of the revolutionaries who were involved the Dharail Dacoity in the Nator Police Station in Rajshahi district in February, 1915 and also in the Raja Bazar Bomb Case had connection with the Cooch Behar State.¹¹

Jitendranarayan was succeeded by his eldest son Jagaddipendranarayan during whose minority period (1923 - 1936 A.D.) the administration of the State was carried on by the Council of Regency with the Queen Dowager Indira Devi, daughter of Sayaji Rao Gaikwar of Baroda State, as Regent and President of the Council. The approval of the Government of India to the constitution of the Regency Council during the minority was conveyed in May, 1923 and Regency Council assumed office in the same month, 1923. Maharani Indira Devi's administrative training had been remarkably good. Besides the Government of India also did their best to help Indira Devi run the administration by sending the best available men as Vice Presidents of the Regency Council. The Cooch Behar State had been placed in direct political relations with the Government of India in November, 1922 and by this arrangement the Governor of Bengal acted as Agent to the Governor-General for the Cooch Behar State and performed exactly the same functions as hitherto been performed by the local Government or the Governor-in-Council referring to the Government of India, only in matters which, under the existing practice, required such references.

A significant development during the period of the Regency Council was that Thakur Panchanan Barman, the undisputed leader of the Rajbansi community, was banished from Cooch Behar State for a period of 5 years. A petition which was signed by numerous inhabitants of Cooch Behar and addressed to the Governor-General of India, solicited his intervention in respect of certain allegations made therein against the Maharani Indira Devi and Nawab Khasru Jung, a guardian of the minor princes.¹² The petition mentioned that a number of shameful allegations were being circulated and therefore, Nawab Khasru Jung and Nawab Zada Karim, the two officers of the State should be removed from Cooch Behar. But the Regency Council thought that this 'forged' petition was got up by Rai Saheb Panchanan Barman with a malicious and mischievous intent. Hence, the Regency Council issued a statement in September, 1926 prohibiting Panchanan Barman from entering the state for a period of 5 years.¹³ The banishment of Panchanan Barman by the Regency Council had raised some questions. Though the allegations in the petition were serious and had agitated the people of the State, the Government of India had maintained silence about the matter. Besides, Panchanan Barman had been deported from the State without full trial.

The Regency Council had always taken an anti-nationalist, anti-revolutionary stand as its predecessor had done before. The Disobedience Movement of 1930s could not make a headway in Cooch Behar State as because earlier the Non-cooperation Movement was suppressed with an iron hand. Besides, by the application of the deportation

law, the State Government could banish any person from the State engaged in anti-government activities. Despite such repressive measures the Bengal revolutionaries had connection with Cooch Behar State during the period of Regency Council. The joint effort of the Bengal Police and the State Police initiated during the reign of Jitendranarayan could not curb the revolutionary activities which were carried on in Cooch Behar State in the subsequent period. On a confidential enquiry in February, 1927 it was found out that a number of revolutionaries formed a party in the State and they were all practically the students of the Victoria College of the State and some of them hailed from Barishal district. It had also been revealed that two revolutionaries organisations, namely, Tarun Association and the Cooch Behar Anushilan Party operated in the State and the latter was connected with the Rajshahi Anushilan Party. The DIB Officers of all the North Bengal Districts including the Cooch Behar State who had met in a Conference in Cooch Behar in April, 1936, were cautioned to be particularly on the look out of the Anushilan activity as this party working very secretly in North Bengal and Assam.¹⁴

Cooch Behar State witnessed peasant unrest in some places, particularly in the Sub-division of Mathabhanga during the rule of the Regency Council. The World-wide trade depression of 1930-31 and consequent fall of the prices of agricultural products affected badly the people of the State. The extension of time for payment of Kists and also remissions of revenue granted by the state produced no desired results and defaulting jotes were made khas. There was a large scale of land alienation, as a result of which the cultivators had been degraded into the position of adhiaars. Thakur Panchanan Barman, a native jotedar of Mathabhanga Sub-division and also an elected Member of Bengal Legislative Council, had already made a petition to the Regency Council criticising its settlement policy and its consequent enhancement of land revenue. His activities provided a source of inspiration to the peasant unrest mentioned above, though it did not take the form of a peasant movement. Apart from this, various retrenchments in the administration had to be effected by the Regency Council owing to the financial stringency prevailing in the State. The policy of retrenchment was also applied to the allowance of an influential member of the royal family. A proposal was made in January, 1934 at the instance of Maharani Indira Devi to reduce the allowance of Maharaj Kumar Victor Nityendranarayan, the surviving uncle of the present Maharaja. The Maharani felt the allowance of Rs. 39,000 per annum payable to Victor Nityendranarayan was too great a burden for the resources of the State. Finally she recommended that allowance of Rs. 2,000 a month be granted henceforth to him and the Government of Bengal approved the Maharani's proposal in October, 1934.¹⁵

Cooch Behar being a member State of the Chamber of Princes, the Regency Council maintained regular correspondence with that all-India Princes' organisation and also made yearly contribution (Rs. 800) towards it. Some boundary questions regarding adjustment of boundary between the Cooch Behar State and the districts of Goalpara and Rangpur arose during the period of the Regency Council. As regards the demarcation of the boundary between Cooch Behar State and the district of Goalpara in November, 1923, the Assam Government accepted the proposal of

the Regency Council regarding the claim of the State to village Baniaguri and also directed that the matter be left over till the Maharaja attained his majority. With regard to the demarcation of the Cooch Behar-Rangpur boundary, a Commission was appointed during the year 1933-34 for the purpose. The demarcation of this boundary was completed in 1934 and also the demarcation of Cooch Behar enclaves in the Rangpur district and of the Rangpur enclaves in the Cooch Behar State was completed during the year 1934-35. The complete report submitted by the Boundary Commissioners was adopted by the Cooch Behar State and the Government of Bengal in the year 1935-36.

Following in the foot steps of its predecessors, the Regency Council had always remained steadfast in loyalty and allegiance to His Majesty's Government. Thus the Regency Government made a contribution of Rs. 1,000 to the Viceroy's All India Thanks Giving Fund started in connection with H.M. the King Emperor George V's recovery from a serious and protracted illness. Besides, the Silver Jubilee of H.M. the King Emperor's accession in 1935 was celebrated in the State in a befitting manner. On this occasion, the Maharani Regent of Cooch Behar wrote to the Viceroy and Governor-General of India 'to assure him that her son, like his father and forefathers, would ever remain steadfast in loyalty and devotion to the Throne and Person of His Imperial Majesty'.¹⁶

The rule of Regency Council came to an end with the assumption of ruling power by Maharaja Jagadipendranarayan whose reign (1936-1949) was full of historic events and marked a new era in the history of Cooch Behar. Since the year 1922, direct political relations were of Cooch Behar State were established with the Government of India, who acted through the Government of Bengal and the Commissioner of the Rajshahi Division, who was also the Political Agent for the State. But the channel for the conduct of those relations was transferred by the Government of India from the Government of Bengal to the Eastern States Agency in December, 1936 and henceforth Cooch Behar was placed under the charge of the Agent to the Governor-General, Eastern States Agency. In December, 1936 the Agent to the Governor General, Eastern States Council, informed the Bengal Government that the Governor-General might entrust the Ruler of Cooch Behar with the executive functions of the proposed Federation under the Government of India Act, 1935 and sought their opinion whether the administration of State was of such quality as to admit of this delegation being made to him. In reply, the Bengal Government said that the standard of administration in the State was sufficiently high to justify the delegation to him of executive function of the Federation. As a basis for their accession to the Federation, the Cooch Behar Durbar also framed a revised draft of the Instrument as per recommendations by the Constitutional Committee of the Chamber of Princes.¹⁷ However, the federal scheme of the Government of India Act, 1935 had not come into being.

The Maharaja of Cooch Behar, being invited, attended the Coronation Ceremony of H.M. the King Emperor held in May, 1937 and was accorded the privileges of attending all the principal functions, including Abbey Ceremony. The Maharaja Jagadipendranarayan attended regularly the meetings of the Chamber of Princes held in New Delhi and

other places between 1937 and 1942. The Maharaja became a co-opted Member of Standing Committee of the Chamber of Princes thereby resuming great responsibilities both in the interest of his State and of the order of Princes. As a co-opted Member of the Standing Committee, he took an active part in the deliberations of the Chamber. Besides, Dewan Bahadur R. Subbaya Naidu, Chief Minister of the State was nominated on the Committee of Ministers of the Chamber of Princes in October, 1940 in place of Rai K. C. Ganguli Bahadur, acting Vice-President of the State Council of Cooch Behar.¹⁸

Like his predecessors Maharaja Jagaddipendranarayan offered to His Majesty's Government his personal services and the resources of his State at the outbreak of the Second World War in September, 1939. The Viceroy's appeals for contributions to various war funds were given wide publicity in the State. The Sub-Committees were formed in all Sub-divisions for the purpose of raising subscriptions for the Viceroy's War Purposes Fund. The Village Defence Parties were organised for the civil defence of the whole State. The 'Cooch Behar Darpan', the semi-official vernacular newspaper, published regularly authenticated war news contradicting false rumours and promoting war propaganda. In other words, the State resolved to concentrate all resources to fight against Nazism. After the fall of Singapore in February, 1942 and consequent Japanese advance into Burma, Cooch Behar was quite close to the war zone. The National War Front movement was inaugurated in the State by the Maharaja himself, and sub-leaders and lecturers of the movement visited the interior parts of the state to allay panic created by the World War and counteract false rumours. Elaborate arrangements were taken up by the Durbar to give effect to immediate A.R.P. measures during the year 1942-43. A huge American army base was installed in Cooch Behar State. At the crucial hour of the war, the Maharaja himself joined the Indian army as an Honorary Lt. Colonel and successfully acted as a liaison officer at headquarters in Burma.¹⁹

In the midst of the Second World War, the Quit India Movement penetrated into the Cooch Behar State and made a deep impact there. Following in the foot steps of his predecessors, Maharaja Jagaddipendranarayan introduced repressive measures to stem the tide of the Quit India Movement in the State. Maharaja in his speeches at several meetings held in July and August, 1942, exhorted the citizens to fight the menace of mass civil disobedience by the Congress.²⁰ The Officers of the Civil Defence Department visited the Sub-divisions of the State and appealed to the people not to place any faith on the Congress propoganda for mass civil disobedience. Despite such stern attitude by the State Authorities, the Quit India Movement had a headway in Cooch Behar and created great excitement among the students and youth who were determined to express their solidarity with the movement. The State Police became aware of this anti-British activities, made raids into several houses of Cooch Behar town and arrested the student activists and later expelled them from the state by issuing '24 Hours Notice' of banishment. Besides, during the Quit India Movement many Congress activists coming from neighbouring districts organised meetings in several places in the State and some of them were jailed on various periods of terms. It should be noted here that the political activities

as well as political organisations were declared unlawful in Cooch Behar. Besides such repressive measures adopted by the State Authorities, the prevailing political awareness among the state people was very low. These factors stood in the way of organising any powerful political movement in the State and hence, Quit India Movement remained mainly confined to the students community.

In August, 1945 the military assault on the students of the Victoria College of Cooch Behar gave rise to a powerful agitation against the State Authorities, The students community and the residents of Cooch Behar Town launched a powerful agitation against the military outrage and demanded for the open trial and punishment of the guilty military men and called a general strike in Cooch Behar town for the first time in the State. This movement crossed the boundaries of the State and created a strong agitation among the people, specially the students community of Bengal. The then and banned Communist Party played a key role in organising this people's agitation.²¹ In the face of wide spread public agitation, the state authorities had been compelled to constitute a Tribunal where the guilty military men were tried and punished on various periods of terms. It was regarded as the first triumph of the mass agitation against the monarchy. This agitation was gradually converted into a movement of civil rights thereby perparing the ground for a greater movement in favour of democracy and merger in Cooch Behar State in the penultimate years.

With the attainment of India's freedom, the Indian States were free to accede to either of the two Dominions and the suzerainty of His Majesty over the Indian States lapsed. Since Paramountcy was not transferred to the new Dominions, technically the States were independent on the 15th August, 1947 and the danger of further balkanisation of post-partition India loomed large. To tackle this gigantic problem the State Department came into being with Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel as the Minister-in-Charge and V. P. Menon as the Secretary. It had been proposed to ask for the accession of the States to the Indian Union in respect of three subjects : defence, external affairs, communications which the Cabinet Mission Plan had assigned to the Central Government. Sardar Patel, V. P. Menon and Lord Mountbatten played the most inportant parts in the formulation and implementation of this policy.

Sardar Patel issued a conciliatory statement on the 5th July, 1947 making a fervent appeal to the Princes not to utilize their freedom from Paramountcy in a manner which was injurious to the common interest of India. He asked for their accession on the three subjects and also appealed to the Princes to come to the Constituent Assembly. He assured the Princes that their rights and privileges would be fully protected. In the same vein, the Viceroy Lord Mountbatten addressed the Princes in a special session of the Chamber of the Princes on the 25th July, 1947 and appealed to them to join either Union before August 15, 1947. The impact of Sardar Patel's statement and Lord Mountbatten's address was so decisive that all the states geographically contiguous to India, with the exception of Junagarh, Hyderabad and Kashmir, had signed the Instrument of Accession and the Standstill Agreement by August 15, 1947.

The Maharaja of Cooch Behar also decided to join the Indian Dominion and sent his cordial greetings to Sardar Patel on the historic day of Indian Independence in a letter dated the 12th August, 1947.²² In reply, Sardar Patel thanked the Maharaja for his letter of greetings and good wishes on Independence day and also thanked the Maharaja 'for so readily agreeing to accede to the Indian Dominion'.²³ Besides, The Maharaja of Cooch Behar had also decided to take their seat in the Constituent Assembly. The Maharaja had selected his Chief Minister Mr. Himmat Singh K. Maheswari as the State's representative for the Constituent Assembly.²⁴

Even after India's attainment of freedom, political parties were not allowed to function in the State. The dismissal of a Professor of the Victoria College for taking part in active politics in October, 1947 gave rise to a wide-spread students' agitation which, with the support of all parties, soon developed into a mass movement raising demands for civil liberties, liberation of all the political prisoners, end of exploitation of the peasants and so on. Besides, the Cooch Behar State witnessed a peasant movement at Uchhal Pukuri and Dhulia region in the Sub-division of Mekligang under the impact of the Tebhaga movement which was raging the districts of North Bengal. The peasants of Cooch Behar agitated against the exploitation of the Jotedars and took their lands forcefully and established an independent government. The movement was suppressed by the State by resorting to police action and the ring leaders of the movement had been arrested who were known as the Communists.

Excepting the Hitasadhani Sabha, the only State-patronised organisation, there were no other organised political groups in the State. As political activities were strictly prohibited in the State, political parties had to carry on their activities secretly there. Since early 1940's the Communists infiltrated into Cooch Behar and formed a party cell there (1944). There were also other political groups such as the Forward Bloc, the Congress Socialist Party etc. in the State. The Indian National Congress did not open its branch in Cooch Behar in pre-independence day. But the Praja Mondal Samity (the States People's Conference) was founded in 1946 in the state on the pattern of the Congress-sponsored programmes such as independence and democracy. In fact, the Proja Mandal Samity was a platform of various political groups among which the Communists were predominant. The Proja Mandal leaders and followers demanded the establishment of responsible government in the State and supported the merger of Cooch Behar with the Indian Union.

On the other hand, after the formation of the Cooch Behar Hitasadhani Sabha in May, 1947 it led a movement directed against the bhatias or outsiders who were none but the Bengalees coming from East and South Bengal in the State. When this conflict between the Cooch Beharis and Non-Cooch Beharis was vitiating the social atmosphere of Cooch Behar State, the Ministers of the State who were also the Hitasadhani leaders had introduced several communal and repressive measures against the non-Cooch Beharis in the field of service, education and land distribution.²⁵ It has been pointed that the royalist Hitasadhani Sabha endeavoured to divert the attention of the people from anti-

monarchy movement to Cooch Behar non-Cooch Behar conflict. The State Proja Mandal Samiti led predominantly by the left leaders cautioned the people about the dangerous communal politics of the Hitasadhani Sabha and also alleged that the Maharaja of Cooch Behar thought that he could still play the same reactionary role as was done previously during the British era in collusion with his Muslim pro-league and scheduled caste ministers and the Hitasadhani Sabha had been formed to serve his own personal purpose of ruling the people to the detriment of the safety of the Indian Union and therefore, urged the Indian Government to merge the State with the Province of West Bengal.²⁶

Amidst such reports of alleged anti-Indian activities which had been going on in Cooch Behar, the Bengalee leaders like Dr. Bidhan Chandra Roy, the Premier of West Bengal, Sarat Chandra Bose etc. and various parties and organisations drew the attention of the Ministry of States, Government of India to this politically volatile situation in Cooch Behar and sought their immediate intervention to stop such obnoxious activities there. The members of the Cooch Behar State Congress Committee submitted a memorandum in March, 1949 to the Governor of Assam who was also the Dominion Agent of the Cooch Behar State, pointing out that 'the speaking language of Cooch Behar State was Bengali and the Court language as well as the medium of education was also Bengali and not a single Cooch Behar people would understand Assami language in any form.' So they requested that Cooch Behar should be merged with the Province of West Bengal.²⁷ The Cooch Behar People's Association, a social organisation formed in Calcutta, fervently supported the urgency of the merger of Cooch Behar with the Indian Union and later played a leading part in the movement in favour of merger of the State with West Bengal.

On the other hand, the eminent leaders of Assam like Gopinath Bordoloi, the Premier of Assam, Nilmony Phukan, Sarat Chandra Sinha and others countered the arguments of the West Bengal leaders by pointing out that the linguistic, cultural, ethnological and religious affinity between Cooch Behar people and Assamese people. They argued that the people of Cooch Behar and of Assam belonged to the same kingdom till very recently and to merge Cooch Behar with West Bengal would be against her past history, culture and tradition. So they demanded the merger of Cooch Behar with Assam without any delay.²⁸ The tone of arguments of the Hitasadhani Sabha leaders of Cooch Behar were the same as those of the Assamese leaders. The Hitasadhani leaders pointed out that 'the people of Cooch Behar unlike the Bengalis have got peculiar characteristics of their own. The spoken language is quite different from Bengali having greater affinities with Assamese' and also 'the manners and customs are quite different from Bengalis and are similar to those of Assamese.' They also added that 'the entire people of Cooch Behar are against the merger of State with West Bengal.'²⁹ Maharaja Jagaddipendranarayan also tilted towards favouring the cause of Assam.

At this stage while the political situation was becoming very much volatile in Cooch Behar, the Prime

Minister Jawaharlal Nehru announced at a public meeting in Calcutta in July, 1949 that the question of merger of Cooch Behar should be settled by a plebiscite as there was division among the people of the State. This announcement naturally evoked mixed responses. While Assam political leaders and organisations gave thanks to Nehru for his announcement of a plebiscite, it was strongly resented by the pro-Bengal movement makers who pointed out that the question of plebiscite was superfluous and raised the demand for Cooch Behar's merger with West Bengal on the grounds of its geographical contiguity and cultural and linguistic affinity.³⁰

Thus Cooch Behar's merger issue not only became a heated controversy both in Bengal and Assam but it also made the political situation in Cooch Behar a more complicated one. Sardar Patel conveyed this to both Bengalee and Assamese leaders through his correspondence. While he told the Bengalee leaders like Bidhan Chandra Roy and Sarat Chandra Bose that Cooch Behar problem was not easy of solution, but at the same time assured them that there was no question under consideration of its merger with Assam. On the other hand, Sardar Patel informed Sri Prakasa, the Governor of Assam and also in charge of Cooch Behar State that his own tentative view was that 'if merger has to come about, it has to be with West Bengal.' But he wanted to leave the State alone for the time being.³¹

Some reports regarding Cooch Behar's topsy-turvy political development had alarmed the Ministry of States, the Government of India. The results of the controversial election to the Cooch Behar Legislative Council held in May, 1949 showed that the Hitasadhani Sabha captured 24 seats out of total 25 seats. The Adviser to the Governor of Assam told the Ministry of States that the State Congress had complained that elections to the State Assembly were being manoeuvred by the Chief Minister so that a majority of his Party (Hitasadhani Sabha) was returned. As it was expected, all the elected Hitasadhani members who met in Cooch Behar on the 15th June, 1949 passed a resolution announcing that 'Cooch Behar people were against the State's merger with West Bengal.' Besides, one I.B. report dated 24th June, 1949 had informed the Ministry of the States that the Revenue Minister and the Chief Secretary, who were Muslims, were practically running the State administration with other Muslim officials of the State and the Muslims taking advantage of their position in the State were instigating the local people against the enlightened Hindus who were domiciled Bengalees. It was further reported that the Muslim immigrants were entertained and Hindu refugees of Eastern Pakistan were not allowed to own any land in Cooch Behar State. Since the partition, the Muslims had been persistently trying to establish Muslim majority in the State.³² From these reports it would appear to the Ministry of States that the situation in Cooch Behar was becoming more difficult. The situation was further being complicated by the Chief Minister of the State tendering his resignation letter to Maharaja Jagaddipendranarayan on the 9th July, 1949.³³

In view of the grave situation, the Ministry of the States took up the case of Cooch Behar to settle its future. Accordingly Maharaja Jagaddipendranarayan along with his Chief Minister was summoned to Delhi for a discussion

on the 26th July, 1949. After a prolonged discussion, an agreement was finally signed on the 28th August, 1949, between C. Raja Gopalachari, the Governor-General of India and Maharaja Jagaddipendranarayan, which came to be known as the Cooch Behar Merger Agreement.³⁴ In pursuance of this agreement, the administration of Cooch Behar State was taken over by V.I. Nanjappa, the Chief Commissioner, on behalf of the Government of India, on the 12th September, 1949. While the Hitasadhani leaders had been dejected at the decision of the Government of India to take over and administer the state centrally because the liquidation of the ruler would affect the loyalty of the native people upon which the Hitasadhani Sabha was banking for so long, the Bengalees in the State were partially satisfied over the taking over of the State by the Central Government as they regarded it as a prelude to a merger with West Bengal.

Soon after the integration of Cooch Behar State with the Indian Union, political leaders of West Bengal and Assam once again tried hard to merge Cooch Behar in their respective provinces. The claim of West Bengal over Cooch Behar received adequate support from various political, social and business organisations such as the Cooch Behar State Congress, the States People's Conference, the Communists and other left groups, the Cooch Behar People's Association, the Marwari Association, the Bengal Trade Association etc. On the other hand, Hitasadhani Sabha and the Maharaja of Cooch Behar as well as the Assam Pradesh Congress Party, Assam Parliamentary Party, Assam Jatiya Mahasabha etc. opposed Cooch Behar's merger with West Bengal and supported its merger with Assam.

It should be mentioned here that the leading leaders of the Hitasadhani Sabha participated in a Conference of All India Gorkha League held at Darjeeling Town in October, 1949 with the object of working for the formation of Uttar Khand Pradesh comprising Cooch Behar, Darjeeling, Sikkim and Jalpaiguri.³⁵ Having noticed such activities of the Hitasadhani leaders, Sardar Patel wrote to Jawaharlal Nehru that the Government of India 'should do nothing to encourage this kind of organisation in its mischievous tendencies.'

At this juncture, V.P. Menon suggested to the Ministry of the States on the 1st December, 1949 that the time was ripe to consider the question of Cooch Behar's merger with West Bengal. He also mentioned that V.I. Nanjappa, the Chief Commissioner of Cooch Behar, was of opinion that Cooch Behar should be merged in West Bengal. Sardar Patel held a discussion on the proposed merger on the 3rd December, 1949 where it was decided that Cooch Behar would be merged with West Bengal on the 1st January, 1950.³⁶ The Central Cabinet met on the 28th December, 1949 and approved the merger of Cooch Behar in West Bengal. Accordingly the Government of India issued a Press Note on the 28th December, 1949. On the 1st January, 1950 Dr. Bidhan Chandra Roy, the Premier of West Bengal, formally announced the merger of Cooch Behar with West Bengal at a public meeting held in Cooch Behar town.³⁷ The people of Cooch Behar as a whole acquiesced to Cooch Behar's merger with West Bengal which was perhaps a logical conclusion of history.

The constitutional and administrative set up of the Cooch Behar State as laid down by Maharaja Nripendranarayan was practically followed by the next two rulers, Raj Rajendranarayan (1911-1913 A.D.) and Jitendranarayan (1913-1922 A.D.). The king was generally assisted in dealing with the State affairs by two nominated bodies, i.e., the State Executive Council and the State Legislative Council. However, the reign of Jagaddipendranarayan (1922 - 1949), the last ruler of the State, witnessed some significant changes in the constitution and function of the Executive Council and the Legislative Council as a result of which a dyarchical form of Government was established in the State. A momentous step was taken in 1939 when a new full Member known as Fourth Member of the State Executive Council took office in March 1939 and assumed the charge of various departments like Education, Agriculture, Industries etc. He had been elected by the non-official members of the Legislative Council and was responsible to, and dependent on the confidence on those members in respect of those transferred subjects.³⁸ A scheme of direct election which provided adequate representation of all classes of interests amongst the people of the State was introduced in 1942. On the other hand, the constitution of the Executive Council underwent a change with the appointment of the Dewan Bahadur R. S. Naidu as Chief Minister of the State in August, 1940. With this appointment the designation of the three Members of the Council was changed into Ministers. It has been pointed out in an official gazette of the State that like H.M. the King Emperor, the Maharaja of Cooch Behar 'did not in practice exercise his sovereign power in administrative matters without first consulting the members of his Council. In other words, the Maharaja was a constitutional monarch.'³⁹ As regards the judicial system of the State, the constitution of the High Court, dissociated from any executive control, was materialised in June 1941 when Maharaja Jagaddipendranarayan established a High Court of judicature for the whole of Cooch Behar. The subordinate civil and criminal courts of the State were organised as a whole on the same lines as the corresponding courts in the neighbouring British districts and they administered practically the same code of law and procedure in the Cooch Behar State.

As regards the local self-government, the Cooch Behar Town Committee Act of 1885 was extended to the Sub-divisional Towns of Dinhata and Mathabhanga and to the Bundar at Haldibari (1897). This Act which governed the conduct of all municipalities of the State was amended on the lines of the Bengal Municipality Act of 1932 and was also extended to Mekligang (1932) and Tufangang (1939), thus making a total of 6 municipalities in the State. The percentage of urban population to total population in the state was only 4.18 in the year 1941 and compared with other parts of Bengal, Cooch Behar state was very rural in character.⁴⁰ As regards the rural administration of the State, a village choukidary system on the pattern prevailing in the neighbouring districts of Rangpur and Jalpaiguri was introduced in the State and the Cooch Behar Village Choukidary Act of 1893 was passed to place the villages under a regular contribution and also to provide for Choukidary Unions and for one Panchayet in each Union to be a collecting Panchayet. During the period of the Regency Council, steps were taken to introduce a system of payment to the Choukidars of their salaries at the Thanas once a quarter. The State also felt the necessity for reforming the Choukidary

system prevailing in the State and passed the Cooch Behar Village Choukidary Amended Act in 1941. As regards the duties of the Panchayets, they were now similar to what were in force in Bengal. However, it should be mentioned that the development of the representative institutions in the Princely States as a whole did not approximate to the growth of self-governing institutions in the British Indian Provinces during the period of our study⁴¹.

Cooch Behar being purely an agricultural State, the largest number of its people were agriculturists and lived in villages. All other occupations or professions were pursued in addition and were supplementary to agriculture. According to the Census Report of 1921, of the total population of the State 88.7 per cent were supported by agriculture, 2.6 per cent by industries, 4.4 per cent by commerce, 0.1 per cent by professions and 3.3 per cent by other occupations. The methods as well as implements of cultivation were old and primitive. The abundant and generally seasonal rainfall enabled the cultivators to cultivate their lands without irrigation. Paddy, jute, tobacco and mustard were the principal crops of the State while jute and tobacco were paying crops. But there had been considerable fall in the prices of all agricultural crops owing to the economic depression and the economic condition of the people was not good. Consequently, many jotes became khas due to non-payment of the revenue and many cultivators turned into landless cultivators due to non-payment of rent. In order to improve the agriculture and to cope with the economic depression, the State Government opened an Agricultural Department and initiated various welfare measures. Nevertheless, the yield rates of the major crops of the State such as paddy, jute and tobacco were not noticeably high for the period 1871-72 to 1949-50. Rather, the yield rates of paddy and jute declined in the stated period. A large number of landless cultivators or agricultural labourers emerged in Cooch Behar State as a result of large eviction of cultivators or adhiars during 1930s and 1940s.⁴² This was an important factor that paved the way of the peasant as well as adhiar movement in some pockets of the State and this was the manifestation of the prevailing social tensions arising out of the oppressive jotedary system.

Cooch Behar State did not occupy a prominent position in the sphere of industry, trade and commerce. Before long the people of Cooch Behar was self-contained as regards their cloth and other simple necessities of life. The people used to wear home made cloth in Cooch Behar as in other parts of India. For instance, cotton cloth called phota and very fine mekhli woven from the thread of jute were manufactured by handloom in almost every village home, besides fine endi woven out of thread of wild silk for family use and sale. The import of mill-made cloth had however served to practically extinguish this important native industry. Similarly, there were cottage ghanis in almost every important villages of the State. By unequal competition of the mill oil, this cottage ghanis had been compelled to cease their works.⁴³ Want of necessary finance and organisation, import of mill-made products such as cloth, oil etc. and want of market were some of the many causes of the decay of the cottage industries in the State. Despite the State Government's efforts such as the establishment of the Department of Industries, the industrial advancement or revival of cottage industries had not been materialised and the State remained backward in industry as well.

On the other hand, nearly all the trade and commerce of the State was in the hands of foreigners and most of them were Marwari traders or the up-country shop-keepers. The local people had got no interest or enterprise in any commercial activity and they had lost practically all hold on the trade and industry of the State. The opening of railways into the State did much to develop the resources of the State and greatly facilitated the disposal of the produce of all kinds.⁴⁴ The trade of Cooch Behar consisted mainly of the export of agricultural products and the import of manufactured goods and other necessities of life. Consecutive three historical events badly affected the economy of the State. First, the outbreak of the First World War (1914-18) had caused dislocation and disrupted economic life of the State. Secondly, the trade and commerce was also seriously were affected by the world-wide economic depression of 1930s. Thirdly, the State passed through a distinct economic crisis as a result of the Second World War (1939-45). After the declaration of war by Japan, there had been a deadlock in trade and commerce especially in Bengal and Cooch Behar. As regards the economic scenario of the State, the Cooch Behar Chamber of Commerce observed in 1942 that 'as the purchasing power of the people was very limited and as there was nothing like Tea plantations and other concerns providing employment to a large number of men and requiring supplies of various materials, the trade and commerce in the State was not expanding and was not in a flourishing condition.'⁴⁵ In this context, the role of the colonial policy should also be brought into focus. Because the British policy bound India's economy to the heels of the British economy and the process of de-industrialisation commenced and gradually India was converted into a centre for the supply of raw materials for the British industries and a market for the import of British manufactured products. As a consequence, India ceased to be a manufacturing country and agriculture became the only source of nation's subsistence.⁴⁶ As a part of India, Cooch Behar could not escape this disastrous impact of the colonial economy.

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