

## **Colonial Cultural Imperialism in the Princely State of Cooch Behar 1839 to 1911 – A Historical Overview**

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Central to the changes in the intellectual domain in colonial India were the cultural – ideological struggle occurring simultaneously at two planes against the ideological basis of the traditional order on the one hand, and against hegemonization on the other. The colonial conquest undermined the weakness of the traditional order and need for reform and regeneration of its institutions. An alternative, however, was not envisaged entirely in the western model presented by colonial rule, mainly because of apprehension aroused in the Indian mind by the cultural and intellectual engineering of the colonial state as a part of its strategy of political control. While the traditional culture appeared inadequate to meet the challenge posed by the west, colonial hegemonization tended to destroy the tradition itself<sup>1</sup>

The British colonial reforms in India, as the government understood, could engender loyalty to the crown. In order to check mate the growth of any movement for self-rule in colonies, the British, therefore, preferred introducing by turns some minimal reforms to upkeep the image of the government.<sup>2</sup>

With this end in view, the British Government steered their policies in Cooch Behar, the lone native state nestled in the north-east corner of India which came in contact with the British by the Anglo-Cooch Behar treaty of 1773.<sup>3</sup>

An attempt has been made in this paper to review the colonial cultural imperialism in the princely state of Cooch Behar through Reforms which had a great impact on the state. It was not an isolated policy of the imperial Government but the following of the same in other princely states also. The East India Company had introduced a number of reforming measures in the field of administration of its territories in Bengal. The company's authority at Calcutta also felt the necessity of introducing new measures in the field of administration in Cooch Behar. There were close geographical, ethnical and historical relations between the company's frontier territories of Bengal and the Cooch Behar State. To keep pace with the administration of rest of Bengal, the company-wanted to re-organise the system of administration of Cooch Behar which was feudal in nature and unpalatable to the present system.

The case of Cooch Behar State as well as its cultural transformation is selected for academic reasons at a first instance and for its social implications also. This was the place where the forces of cultural penetration through Reforms have been conducted both by the colonial administration<sup>4</sup> and also by those who wanted to build up a selective response to colonial cultural influences.<sup>5</sup> With the introduction of British Commissioner<sup>6</sup> in 1789 in the state, the process of westernization started, Harendra Narayan (1801-1839) was the last ruler of Cooch Behar to oppose the British. He vehemently opposed the British attempt to introduce British model in the administration of Cooch Behar. It was during his minority the British government re-organised the system of Revenue administration, which was their primary area of interest. In 1801 Harendra

Narayan attained maturity. After the assumption of power he wanted not only to restore absolute control over the states affairs, but to resist the introduction of the western system of administration. In the face of the strong opposition from Harendra Narayan, the British Government followed a conciliatory attitude and cautious step towards the process of reorganizing the administrative system of the state. After the death of Maharaja Harendra Narayan, the age old traditional pattern of administration in the state was about to change and a modern outlook was visible according to British model. His successor Shivendra Narayan, before his accession, had a pro-British attitude. He, in fear of future problem of succession, surrendered to the British Government.<sup>7</sup> Naturally, he was the choice of the British Government depriving Rajendra Narayan of his legitimate claim.<sup>8</sup> This reveals that the British hardly had a consistent policy in Cooch Behar. They decided according to the time and situation and to fulfill the British imperialistic interests.

Education was the most important area of intervention and innovation for the company's state in India. Through education the British Government started their modernization project in India. So, from the reign of Harendra Narayan (1847), the Colonial Government started to interfere in the educational policies of the Cooch Behar rulers. What will be the learning medium, who will be the private tutor of the rulers, where the rulers will be sent for further studies – all decisions were taken by the British Government. This policy of the British Government was not in conformity with the terms of the Treaty of 1773. Notwithstanding the opposition of the Maharanis and the officers of the Court, Narendra Narayan was sent to Krishnanagar and admitted in the College there on 4<sup>th</sup> July, 1853. He was then about 11 years of age.<sup>9</sup> This system continued to the successive rulers of Cooch Behar.

Maharaja Narendra Narayan died in 1863. He was succeeded by his minor son Nripendra Narayan, who was the next ruler of Cooch Behar.<sup>10</sup> As he was a minor, the three Maharanis were appointed as joint Regent of the state. But this was set aside by the British Government and it took the charge of the administration of Coch Behar and placed it under the management of the British Commissioners. Colonel J.C. Houghton, Governor General's Agent, North East Frontier was deputed to Cooch Behar as Commissioner-in-Charge of the administration.<sup>11</sup> Thus the direct supervision in the administration by the British Commissioner was established. As the British Commissioners became the pilot of the administration in Cooch Behar it was the demand of the situation that every member of the royal family should be taught in the line of western education. Accordingly a plan for giving the prince Nripendra Narayan a suitable education was settled by the Government in consultation with Colonel Houghton. By educating the Raja in the British line of thought and making him imbued with modern ideas, the British Government hoped to project the Raja as the symbol of loyalty and allegiance. Secondly, they thought that a matured, politicized Raja, oriented to modern European culture could best serve for reforming his tradition-ridden and age-old society.<sup>12</sup> This was also the policy of the colonial masters towards the other native states defined as "one charge theory" which connotes the British supremacy over the princes in a single line of control and command.<sup>13</sup>

Nripendra Narayan was placed in the Ward's Institution at Beneras under the care of the Commissioner of that Division. Later in 1872, Maharaja was sent to Patna Collegiate School and he studied there for five years. It is presumable that the experiment of training the ideal ruler for the ideal state had succeeded beyond the highest expectation of the Government. The Maharaja had become a clever young man and a keen sports man.

The Colonial cultural imperialism in the princely state of Cooch Behar took a new dimension in the form of the question of marriage of Maharaja Nripendra Narayan. To fulfill their designs the imperial government thought it necessary to arrange for the marriage of the young Maharaja with an equally advanced girl who would help him in his efforts for good administration in Cooch Behar.<sup>14</sup> The British Government wanted to arrange this marriage with Sunity Devi, the daughter of Brahma Leader Keshab Chandra Sen. But this was considered “unequal” as Keshab Chandra belonged to a family of the so-called middle class Bengali and a follower of Brahmaism whereas the Cooch Behar Royal family was conservative staunch Hindu.

There was deep motivation and purpose of the British Government behind the marriage and in order to fulfill their plan, they used the royal family and Keshab Chandra as instruments. The royal family did not like it and Keshab Chandra too, but in view of some anticipated cultural and political gains the imperial government was stubborn to resist all hazards before the marriage. Keshab hesitated in giving his consent because it was in violation of the Brahma Act of 1872, which prescribed the minimum age of the bride and bridegroom respectively 14 and 18 years. Neither Sunity nor Nripendra Narayan attained the age. Keshab Chandra ultimately yielded to the increased British pressure only with the compliance that his daughter could become a queen of a princely state and in pursuance of this he could propagate Brahma ideals in Cooch Behar.<sup>15</sup> He was also assured that though the cultural ambiance of Cooch Behar State was not so modern, but the young Raja was educated by the British on modern lines. The administration of the State in all departments – education, Revenue, police, health etc. has greatly improved and further development would continue. So Sunity Debi would be the only ideal bride of the Maharaja.

Under the direction of the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal, Mr. Dalton, the Deputy Commissioner of Cooch Behar stated that in the modernization of the State, Brahma enlightenment would have much to play by spreading its roots to Cooch Behar.<sup>16</sup>

The marriage between Sunity Debi and Nripendra Narayan was a tool in the fulfillment of British designs in Cooch Behar. Through this marriage they wanted to establish a direct cultural link with the tradition oriented people of Cooch Behar. It was difficult for the British to have access with the common people at the cultural level, which could make the imperial hold deeper and stronger. The British Government chose Keshab Chandra and his daughter to be champion of reforms and modernization of Cooch Behar.

The direct and indirect results of Western education and the marriage, after all, were partially good enough in heralding modernization in the State but for the future, it created problems to the original inhabitants of Cooch Behar. A symptom of alienation of the local people from the royal family was perceived. To train them in western culture and education, some of the rulers of Cooch Behar were also sent to Europe for higher education. For the close association with the Europeans and for their long stay in Europe a mimic culture had developed in the Cooch Behar royal family. Not only their minds but also their bodies were colonized. They became Englishmen in taste, in culture, in habits and in customs.<sup>17</sup> The introduction of western education, the British argued, would create “a class of persons between us and the millions whom we govern – a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals and intellect”.<sup>18</sup> Thus the cultural identity of the members of the Royal family of Cooch Behar has differentiated them from their ancestral Rajbanshi clan. The womenfolk of the Royal family had also western education and some of them were also sent to Europe for vocational trainings.<sup>19</sup> The Maharanees of Cooch Behar such as Sunity Debi, Indira Debi were well versed in English language. Sunity

Debi was the first Indian Maharanee who wrote her autobiography in English. As a result of this western education, the psychological framework of the Cooch Behar royal family had completely changed. A cultural gap was widened between the rulers and the ruled. Socially, politically, economically the Rajbanshi clan seemed to have been ignored by the ruling elites. A number of factors help us to reconstruct this argument.

Due to the ignorance and backwardness of the Rajbanshi mass, the Maharajas of Cooch Behar always appointed the non Rajbanshi people in the high offices of administration.<sup>20</sup>

Under the impact of western education, the rulers of Cooch Behar also shown their keen interest in establishing English medium schools in Cooch Behar. Thus in 1861 Jenkins school for boys and in 1881 Sunity School for Girls was established. The inclination of the Maharajas was to promote the cause of modern education but its benefit was not extended to the Rajbanshi mass in general.

After the marriage of Nripendra Narayan with Sunity Debi, the religion of the royal family also completely changed.<sup>21</sup> The Maharaja embraced Brahmoism. All the festivals and religious rites of the royal family were observed according to Brahmo rites. It had a great impact upon the subject people who followed their traditional religious rites of Hinduism which had suffered a set back.

The advent and phenomenal growth of non-Rajbanshi community in Cooch Behar State had adverse effect on the economic condition of the local people. In course of time they occupied the possession of the land of the state and the Rajbanshi mass were disempowered. A report submitted by the Dewan in 1880 supported this view. Originally all lands were no doubt cultivated by jotedars and Chukanidars, when the foreigners (Non-Rajbanshi) acquired Jotes, the resident jotedars living on the jotes were reduced to the position of Chukanidars and their under-tenants, who were Chukanidars, became Dar-Chukanidars.<sup>22</sup>

Thus in every sphere of life the Rajbanshi Royalty out distanced themselves from the Rajbanshi mass consciously or unconsciously. It is, therefore, presumable that social tension of sorts would originate from movements towards cultural homogeneity and structural adjustments.<sup>23</sup>

But it is surprising to note that inspite of this difference there is no evidence of resentment of the people of Cooch Behar against the royalty. One possible hypothesis is that Maharaja Nripendra Narayan, inspite of his western life-style, was one of the benevolent rulers of Cooch Behar. His modernization Process in the State<sup>24</sup> was beyond question. He devoted personal attention in every branches of administration. His reforming zeal surpasses his mental gap with his subjects. Moreover, the people of Cooch Behar as a whole were in a state of ignorance and little aware what was good to them. The allegiance of the people to the king was total<sup>25</sup> and they could never think of protesting against the Royal family. Nevertheless, the present day identity crisis of the Rajbanshis of eastern and north-eastern India seems to have been originated from this comparative silence and alienation of Cooch Behar royal family and aggravated after the end-game of the Raj.

## Notes and References

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