

Higher Education in Cooch Behar in the Nineteenth Century: The Victoria College

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I

Coochbehar in the north-eastern frontier of India, is at present a district of West Bengal. Prior to August 20, 1949 Coochbehar was an Indian state ruled by the Maharaja of Coochbehar, a feudatory prince under the British Raj. On that date Maharaja Jagaddipendranarayan ceded his territory to the Dominion Government of India and on January 1, 1950 it was merged with the state of West Bengal¹.

The early history of the state is to be sought in the early history of the kingdom of Kamrup of which it formed a part till the middle of the sixteenth century, when it began to have a separate existence of its own. It had many ups and downs during its long chequered history till in the seventies of the eighteenth century, when the country was under the threat of Bhutanese occupation, there took place a dramatic turn in its history. The hereditary Commander-in-chief, at this critical moment, applied for aid to the East India Company. The latter, which had been watching with concern the growing power of Bhutias, close to its border agreed to give aid² but under certain conditions. This was the beginning of the process which ultimately led to the treaty of April 1773 between the East India Company and Coochbehar by which the latter became a feudatory state under the control of the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal leaving the administration of the state to the Raja. The following years were marked by great disturbances created by factional rivalry in the royal household. Further, Maharaja Narendranarayan's death and the succession of Nripendranarayan to the throne as a minor in 1863 provided opportunities for the East India Company to interfere in the affairs of the state. Setting aside the wishes of the late Maharaja the Company appointed Colonel Haughton as Commissioner of the state

in 1864; he was vested by the Government with full authority of the ruler of the state except in regard to certain specified points³.

An enquiry into the condition of education of any state or country becomes meaningful only in the context of a broad socio-economic, cultural and political framework, as well as the composition of the people. The Census Report of 1872, the first of its kind in the country and not very accurate too for several reasons spoke of the existence of 199 villages in Coochbehar⁴. The character of the population was mixed, though the Rajbansis or Coch predominated over the other tribes.

The semi-Hinduised aborigines together with their Mahammedan counterpart made up 93.64% of the total population Migration there was none but immigration from Bengal, Assam and Terai regions had its contribution in rendering the mixed character to the population. Apart from the Hindus and Muslims, who formed 27% of the population, there were a few belonging to other religious communities.

A look into the social pattern in Coochbehar reveals that the bulk of the population was the cultivating class. The Brahmans were few in number, while there were no Kayashas or Vaidyas. To the people in general, thus, education was of little value; they were too poor to get up schools for themselves, or too ignorant to care much about education. Educated men in Coochbehar were few and far between. There was no enlightened middle class that could juxtapose itself between the royal family on the one hand and the agriculturists on the other.

In place of the rajas, zamindars and rich landed aristocrats of Bengal who provided the sources of the private education system there were in Coochbehar the petty jotedars and chuknidars whose income was precariously dependent on the rainfall of the year⁵. Thus Coochbehar presented a stark contrast to Bengal; the new ideas and concepts that the British had introduced in the country had little impact here the nineteenth century characteristics of Bengal had not the faintest trace here.

However, Coochbehar being a native kingdom did have a cultural tradition. But education, prior to the 19th century, was a privilege of the higher classes only, confined to the court

of the Maharaja and to the members of the royal family. Sanskrit learning was patronised by the royal house⁶. But little was done to educate the common people.

II

In 1864 the year of the appointment of the British Commissioner Lieutenant Colonel Haugton, Coochbehar was launched on a vigorous education programme. The process, which continued unabated throughout the 19th century, brought about fundamental transformation in the state comparable to the neighbouring province Bengal. Education no longer remained the privilege of the few but became accessible to the people at large. Separate assignment from surplus revenue was to be made available for the maintenance of an education establishment suited to the needs of the country⁷.

As elsewhere the British were to use English education as a cultural project of control. It was to serve the purpose of manning the administration, creating an overall climate of change and development and thereby generate a culture of loyalty to the British. The policy of cultural imperialism hand in hand with cultural subversiveness was undertaken in a very subtle manner. The imperial motif was carefully woven into the structure of the cultural identity of the royal family of the state through the introduction of English education and through it, western culture. The result was amazingly pro British orientation of the royal family of Coochbehar.

The period following the memorable Despatch of Sir Charles Wood, President of the Board of Control in 1854 saw the evolution of a comprehensive and co-ordinated system of education by the East India Company. The same pattern was introduced in Coochbehar with the establishment of teaching institutions such as primary schools, high schools and colleges. A regular system of scholarship was instituted to encourage meritorious students to prosecute study. Educational institutions founded by private efforts were to be helped from Governments funds. The Victoria college was an outcome of this policy.

The establishment of the this college on June 15, 1888, in commemoration of the

Diamond Jubilee of the Queen Empress Victoria, by Maharaja Sri Nripendranarayana Bhup Bahadur was a milestone in the history of education of the Coochbehar state. It not only ushered in a period of higher education in the state but brought about fundamental and significant changes in the educational system. Considerable funds had to be found for the college; a sum of Rs. 85,000 was granted as intital expenditure to set up the college. Under the principle that the normal grant for educaion should not be increased a complete reshulfling of the education department was undertaken. The allotments for primary and secondary education had to be heavily curtailed, the post of Superintendent of education was aboslished and the Wards Institution was amalgamated with the Sudder Boarding Establishment. The Principal of the college was also to be in charge of the Jenkin's School and the Boarding Institution. The Inspector of schools, an office created at this time, was to be in charge of primary and secondary education. The superintendent of state was to be incharge of the Department of Public Instruction in the state⁸. Thus, higher education was introduced in Coochbehar but at no little cost of primary and secondary education.

For the first nineteen years the college was entirely maintained at the expense of the Coochbhear state. No fees were charged from the students, irrespective of caste or creed. Ever since its foundation the college enjoyed affiliations upto M. A standard in all subjects prescribed by the Culcutta University at that time. Affiliation for the Bachelor of Law course was also given⁹.

The college opened with 16 students distributed in five classes. By March 1889 the number rose to 68 with daily attendance of 45. By 1890-91 the number rose to 124. A boarding institution was opened for the college students. Steps were taken to encourage native youths to avail themselves of the boarding facilities¹⁰. Two scholarships of Rs 20, tenable for two years were offered to those students who were successful at the F.A. examination and two of Rs. 30 tenable for one year to graduates who intended to appear for the M. A. examiantion¹¹.

Interesting details about the faculty members of the college their academic qualifications and the salary they drew are to be found in the available records.

Table - I

Sl. No.	Name	Qualification	Scale of Pay
1.	J. C. Godley	B.A. Principal	500-50-700
2.	Joy Kisen Sen	M. A. professor of English	150-30-300
3.	Rajmohan Sen	M.A. Professor of Mathematics	150-20-250
4.	Gobinda Chandra Das	M.A. Professor of Science	150-20-200
5.	Jogendra K. Das Sinha	M.A. Professor of Philosophy	100-20-200
6.	Sarat Chandra Gupta	M.A. Professor of Sanskrit	100-10-150
7.	Law Lecture	-----	50-----
8.	Clerk & Librarian	-----	25-----
9.	Duftry	-----	10-----

Source : Annual Administrative Report Coochbehar 1888-89-P43

An analysis of the table above show the importance to English and Science when compared to other subjects like Philosophy and Sanskrit. English obviously enjoyed a very special position. Again the discrepancy in the salary of the European Principal and the “native” professors despite the higher academic attainments of the latter was an example of the discretionary policy pursued by the government.

The first principal left in December 1889 and was succeeded by W. H. Wood, B.A., F. C.S. The gentleman by his high scholastic attainments and exceptional personal qualities of sympathy and kindness became very popular. The Maharaja took keen interest in the institution and in 1889-90 a grant of Rs. 6000 was followed by another grant of Rs. 2000 for equipping the college with apparatus, books and furnitures. Annual grant, as pointed out by the Principal, was essential for upkeep of the laboratory and library¹². Towards this end a regular state partonage of a handsome amount of Rs. 1000 for books and scientific apparatus was made from the state exchequer. The library was not so well represented in history, philosophy, law and science as it was in English literature, but it possessed the most standard

works of reference. One could get an idea of the library and the laboratory from the figures given below for the year 1898-99.

Table - II

New books	-	Rs. 642-13-0
Scientific apparatus	-	Rs. 216-12-0
Librarians Pay	-	Rs. 60-0-0
Book Binding	-	Rs. 62-0-0

Source : Annual Administrative Report, Coochbehar 1898-99 P-60

Considering the price index more than hundred years ago the interest taken by the Mahraja was indeed commendable. This was further revealed in the expenditure incurred by the state on this institution and the cost it had to bear for educating each student.

Table - III

Year	Total Expenditure	Income from fees and f	Cost of educating each pupil per annum
1888-89	15,592-5-0	-	-
1892-3	-	-	206-9-0
1893-94	17,477-8-6	119-5-0	156-6-1
1893-94	17,503-3-7	24-0-0	138-11-6
1898-99	20,806-0-0	141-0-0	131-3-4
1901-02	23,041-9-8	-	101-0-0

Source : Annual Administrative Reports (Coochbehar) of the respective years mentioned above.

As the above table show the need of the college annually increased but the aggregate

allotment for the purpose of education remained stationary. To meet the increasing requirement of the college the grant for primary and secondary education had to be annually reduced. The Superintendent of State realized that if this diversion to higher education be carried too far the result would be the sacrifice of the former to the latter. Major Evan Gordon, the Superintendent of Education therefore wanted that all fees be placed at the disposal of the Education Department instead of being credited to the state.

The question of imposition of fees assumed importance. At times it ceased to be free and at other times it was imposed. In 1894-95, for instance the Principal Della Fosse, spoke of reimposition of fees. A large portion of the students who came from districts where opportunity for higher education prevailed, joined this college for two reasons. Having failed to qualify from colleges in their own districts they tried their luck here once more; more so because it was non remunerative. This practice had been increasing over the years¹⁴. Both on account of limited accomodation and in the interest of efficient teaching it was desirable that the number on the roll be limited. Besides, the future of the institution as an affiliated one was dependent entirely on the Government Resolution with regard to the recommendation of the University Commission. This was pointed out in 1903-04. It was essential that the college should comply with all the standards on which affiliation with the Calcutta University was possible. Overcrowding of students was a vital issue in this respect¹⁵. Considering all these points imposition of fees was in every way justified and the Maharaja was requested to give a serious thought to it.

As already mentioned above the entire expenditure of the college was borne by the State exchequer. Again, the cost of educating each student per annum was considerably lower than the average cost in the Government Colleges in Bengal; in 1901-02 it was Rs. 101, whereas it was Rs. 177-5-10 in 1899-1900 in the Government colleges in Bengal. Ever since its establishment in 1888 the enrolment of students gradually increased from 16 in 1888 to 212 in 1910-11¹⁶. Natural calamity did affect the rolls, for instance in 1896-97 and 1897-98 due to famine followed by earthquake which affected communication between Coochbehar and Bengal, and cholera epidemic in Dinhatra and Mekhliganj in 1892-93. Increased cost of living in Coochbehar in 1892-93 made a section of students leave the state. When situations devel-

oped the other way round, e.g. plague in Calcutta in 1899, students were driven to join the mofussil college.

It is interesting to note the performance of the college on the basis of various public examiantions. The college sent its first batch of candidates for F.A. and B.A. examiantion in 1889 the following fitures give the year and the percentage of pass in F.A., B.A. and M.A. examination from the available records .

Table - IV

Year	FA Examination	BA Examination	MA Examination
	Percentage of Pass	Percentage of Pass	Percentage of Pass
1888-89	60%	70.6%	--
1889-90	60%	70.6%	--
1891-92	52.2%	11.1%	100%
1893-94	56.5%	20%	100%
1894-95	66.6%	42.2%	100%
1897-98	72%	--	Incomplete information
1898-99	52.6%	34%	Incomplete information
1899-100	55%	--	Incomplete information
1900-1901	84%	--	--
1901-1902	44%	27%	40%
1902-1903	55%	--	--
1903-1904	44%	21%	Incomplete information
1910-1911	--	75%	--

Source : Annual Adm. Reports (Coochbehar) of the respective years mentioned above.

The number of candidates appearing for the FA examination from 1888-89 to 1903-04

ranged between 23 and 44. The number of candidates taking the BA examination increased from 17 in 1888-89 to 71 in 1903-04. Fluctuations in the number were there e.g. in 1910-11 only 16 candidates appeared. So far as any examinations were concerned students appearing for it ranged between 1 and 5.

Intermediate Arts and Intermediate Science examinations were introduced by 1910-11. 54 appeared in the I.A. and 17 in the ISc examination. 31 passed in the former with 15 in first division and 11 in the latter with 3 in first division¹⁷.

A careful scrutiny of the figures above will reveal that no candidates appeared in any of the examinations, F.A., B.A. or M.A in 1895-96 and 1896 - 97 for those were the years of disaster for Coochbehar. The state suffered from famine first and then experienced earthquake as already stated.

The Law Department of the college began in 1888-89 with 26 pupils. Education here, as in the general department, was free. The Principal, J. C. Godley felt that the existence of free law classes was undoubtedly an incentive to attract students but as the instruction was technical and unconnected with the college course, the imposition of fees in future years was inevitable. The very next year i.e. in 1889-90 a fee of Rs. 2/- was charged from the students to be increased to Rs. 3/- in 1897-98¹⁸. One of the leading pleaders of Coochbehar, Jadunath Banerjee was appointed law lecturer with a monthly salary of Rs. 50¹⁹. The expenditure of the college was borne partly by the state and partly from fees and fines. Between 1891 and 1894 the total amount was Rs. 600, the state grant being the major share. This amount shot up to more than Rs. 900 in the years between 1894 and 1899. Later the state grant was decreased from 1894 onward till in 1898-99 the department became self-supporting²⁰. It sent up candidate for the Bachelor of Law examination; 3 in 1893-94, 1 in 1894-95, 8 and 8 in 1897-98, 1898-99 respectively. Except for 1894-95 when the one and only solitary candidate failed to qualify for the examination, the result was 2 out of 3 in 1893-94, 3 out of 8 in 1897-98 and 5 out of 8 in 1898-99²¹.

IV

The Victoria College was well served by a band of good professors and European Principals who were distinguished educationists. Maharaja Nripendra Narayan was careful to appoint efficient and scholarly persons in the post of lecturers. Among the teachers were eminent professors like Joygopal Banerjee, Shyama charan Chakraborty, Tarapada Mukherjee, Monorathdhan Dey, Upendra Narayan Sinha and others. Commenting on the conduct of the professors, the Principal D. Fosse wrote in 1893-94 that they had discharged their duties with zeal and ability. The success obtained by the pupils in the examination of the Master's degree in science was indeed praiseworthy considering the difficulty of working in a defective laboratory. Due credit had to be given to the professor of science²². Shyama Charan Chakraborty, the professor of Philosophy, appointed in September 1894 proved himself to be a very sincere and devoted teacher. The Principal of the college seemed always to have a word of praise of his staff as the Reports of 1897-98 prove. But the college suffered owing to the small initial pay given to the teachers. This was pointed out by W. H. Wood the Principal in 1891-92 who felt that the minimum initial pay should be Rs. 150.00; as already mentioned the professors of history, philosophy and Sanskrit were all drawing salaries below this amount. Really competent men, he felt, were unlikely to continue if the conditions of services were not improved. In fact in 1891-92 the college lost the services of three valuable teachers as mentioned in the Annual Report of that year. Under most trying circumstances caused by earthquake in 1897-98 they did everything possible to maintain the reputation of the college. The Principal W. H. Wood, himself took the greatest interest in the welfare of the college and the wellbeing of the students. The institution was fortunate in having the great scholar Brojendra Nath Seal as its Principal in 1896. The Maharaja was so impressed by his scholarship and erudition that at the earliest opportunity he secured his services by giving him direct appointment without even consulting the State Council members.

The college developed a good tradition of athletics and sports. This was not so at the beginning. Only a few patronised the cricket, football and gymnastics. A taste for these were yet to develop. Coochbehar in fact was somewhat behind in the matter of physical education when compared with Bengal. Most of the colleges in Bengal (e.g. Presidency Division, Hooghly,

Krishnanagar, Rajsahi and Dacca) were properly equipped with gymnasium where the students were trained under proper supervision. However in Coochbehar neither the college nor the Jenkin's school possess a gymnasium, nor was there any person attached to the education staff competent to act as a gymnastic instructor. Unlike several colleges of Bengal drill too was not compulsory. Gradually things began to improve; more and more students began to take interest in games and sports. A cricket club was established along with a gymnastic club under the able supervision of the Superintendent of the Boarding Institution. The taste for these outdoor sports like cricket and football increased among students. The gymnastic club became popular among students; by 1876-97 it had 95 members including students from Jenkin's²³. Annual donations were given by the Maharaja for encouraging gymnastics and games like football and cricket, specially the latter. A clear indication of the British influence on the Maharaja is discernible here.

The moral training of the college pupils received sufficient consideration at the hands of the Principal. The conduct of the students on the whole was satisfactory. There were however occasions when boys were expelled from the institution for "gross in subordination" as in 1897-98 and for irregularities during annual examination in 1910-11²⁴.

In conclusion it may be said that the Victoria College gradually rose in strength and efficiency. In 1900 there were 168 pupils. In the next ten years the number rose to 204. Between 1891 and 1900 it turned out 199 under graduates, 73 graduates, 4 M.A's and 19 B.L's. Under the guidance of Dr. B. N. Seal who served the college for long sixteen years the institution continued to prosper. The Acharya's distinguished academic attainments, intimate acquaintance with the working of the Calcutta University and extensive experience of the needs and conditions of Indian education the college succeeded in attaining the position of one of the most ably conducted and highly efficient first grade colleges of the Calcutta University. The college had to go through trying circumstances like the earthquake of 1897 which crippled its resources. It also had to face the severe strain of the new University Regulation requirements. However all obstacles were overcome by the unsparing devotion and sincerity of Brojendranath Seal.

Having delieniated the details about the college a big question remains, and that is how far was the interests of the inhabitants of Coochbehar served ? The year of the establishment of the college was June 15, 1887. By March 1889 the student strength was 68. Out of this only 3 were from Coochbehar. By 1890-91 number rose to 124 of whom 6 were Coochbehars.

The religious and caste composition of the college students would reveal that very few of them really belonged to the state. The percentage of Muslim students going in for higher education too was was extremely poor. The table below is an indicator of the statement made above.

Table - V

	1888-89	91-92	93-94	94-95	97-98	1899
Brahmans	26	48	55	52	49	69
Baidyas	7	10	11	16	09	13
Kayastha	26	49	35	49	47	59
Brahmo	-	01	-	-	01	02
Rajharsi	02	03	02	01	02	08
*Rajgan	-	-	03	04	01	01
Muslim	05	04	03	03	02	02
Christians	01	-	-	-	-	-
Other Caste	01	03	02	01	-	-
Kaibarta	-	-	-	-	-	02
Barui	-	-	-	-	-	02
Banik	-	-	-	-	-	01

Source : Annual Aministrative Reports Coochbehar 1888-89, 91-92, 93-94, 94-95, 97-98, 98-99.

*Rajgans were the poor members of the royal family who were too poor to afford lodging in Coochbehar proper to pursue studies. The promiscuous habits of the rajas were the reasons behind their increasing number. Maharaja Nripendra Narayan wanted to establish a boarding school to facilitate the education of these Rajgans. But before he could implement this plan he died. Later in 1864, Colonel Haughton, founded this boarding school to feed, clothe and educate a certain number of selected Rajgans. At least a few if not all could thus become respectful members of the society.

Turning to the performance of the natives in the different public examinations it appears that 1889-90 was a year to be remembered for, in that year, two natives of Coochbehar became the states first graduates. Earlier in 1888-89 two native candidates have appeared for the B.A. examination but failed to qualify.

In 1891-92 three natives were sent for the M.A. Examination. Of them two were Rajgan boarders; none were successful. Of the two candidates sent up for M. A. examination in 1894-95 both were Rajgans. one passed in the II class standing 5th in the list of successful candidates and the other in the III class standing 4th in the list.

In 1898-99, 20, out of the 38 candidates sent up for F.A examination, passed; two out this 20 had passed in second division, one belonged to Coochbehar. The results of I.A and ISc. examinations the 1910-11 show that 6 natives (5 in I.A and 1 in ISc.) had passed of the total number of 31 in I.A and 11 in ISc. The above figure prove that in higher education a very few percentage of students belonging to Coochbehar could be found.

To what extent then were the natives of the state benefitted by higher education ? Of the 168 boys in 1900; nine only were the natives of Coochbehar. This very question was raised in the Annual administrative Report of 1898-99. Out of the average number of 144 boys on the roll annually between 1895 and 1898 only 7 to 8 each year belonged to Coochbehar state. The average annual cost of the maintenance of the college between 1896 and 1899 had been Rs. 19,830-6-3 and Rs. 139-13-2 annually for each boy. The actual total expenditure during 1895 to 1898 for education on behalf of the natives of Coochbehar had been Rs. 3125-14-10 whi Rs. 49,843-3-3 was spent at the same time in educating boys from Dacca, Pabna, Jessore, 24 Parganas and other districts of bengal. Students from these places had no claim whatsoever to free education at Coochbehar. They all flocked here because here education could be obtained at a cheaper rate than the college afforded by the Government at their own home towns. There was no point in incurring such heavy expenditure for people who should have had no claim on the liberality of the Maharaja. Many urgent requirements in the state under several heads were being unduly starved for want of funds. It is to be remembered that a large percentage of fund from primary and secondary education had been diverted to higher

education from which the natives of Coochbehar hardly reaped any benefit. In fact it was felt that the cause of education was very adequately served in the state without the final course of collegiate education. The Maharaja was therefore requested to consider whether instead of maintaining the college a few scholarships in medicine, law and engineering be granted to the Coochebhari students to enable them to pursue their studies in the different colleges of Bengal. In this way the object for which the college had been established would be better served and the requirements of the states Collegiate education would be fully met. The argument seemed convincing indeed but the college was not done away with. It had to remain , no other alternative was there for it was a part of the policy of hegemonization that the British government had introduced in the state. This was destined to under mine the traditional pattern . As things turned out the successive rulers of Coochbehar from 1847 onward, trained, educated and oriented in European culture became very loyal to the British. The superlative values of white civilization was fully accepted without a murmur even in the dynamics of every day life in the royal household. The question of ‘mimicry’ and ‘authenticity’ the dominant theme with reference to which the assertive authenticity of the colonized challenged British policy of subversion elsewhere in India did not have any echo in the state of Coochbehar. British cultural did succeed in establishing its hold over the native state !

The college still stands today bearing the name of its erstwhile erudite and scholar Principal.

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