

Women Trafficking in the Princely State of Cooch Behar

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Abstract: *The present paper focus on the scenario of women trafficking in the princely state of Cooch Behar as well as on the records of West Bengal State Archive containing a detail study of such an oppressive practice. Slavery was practiced in Cooch Behar and there was a regular slave trade. Poor people mortgaged or sold their daughters and wives as slaves. Every years girls from Cooch Behar and Assam were sent to various parts of Bengal for sale. . Some of the royal personalities of Cooch Behar strongly opposed this system. Ultimately the British Government had taken the initiative to ban women trafficking. They legally ceased those markets.*

Keywords : Socio - economic degradation, women trafficking and initiatives for ban the inhuman business in the princely state of Cooch Behar.

Law and religion never did offer equal status and rights to man and woman. Being a natural biological partner for amorous adventures and at the same time conventionally possessed of disadvantaged lower social status, the women's vulnerability to male's seductive attitude and activities is a stark reality of history. The obvious implication is that women are facing lots of problems in the society such as sexual harassment, molestation, gender discrimination, violence in domestic and public life, social abuse etc. over a long period of time. Trafficking of women is a natural phenomenon in a social structure cutting across the barriers of time and space. Women are trafficked for several purposes like sexual exploitation or prostitution, slavery etc. We have a reference to sale of good looking girls in inscription. The inscription is now preserved in the prince of Wales Museum, Bombay¹. Here, there is a reference in the *Abadhatta* poem to having of beautiful girls for royal people. This inscription is written in eight languages. It is like a beauty competition where the pimps or brokers were loudly describing the beauty of the girls who were waiting silently as market commodity. The social setting in ancient as well as medieval India was as such that dissimilar stands were adopted to judge the individual as well as social conduct of the male and the female.

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The introduction of western education and liberal ideas after the coming of the British, the Indian society witnessed a new change which even touched the life of women in India. Cooch Behar was the only princely state of pre-independence Bengal and enjoyed an important position in the north eastern boundary of Bengal province. East India company's contact with Cooch Behar in 1772 was the stepping stone of the British in the northern frontiers of Bengal. The geographical as well as strategic position and economic importance of Cooch Behar attracted the foreign investors including British East India Company.

During the second half of the 18th century the internal chaos and dissention of the ruling authorities specially in the reign of Maharaja Dhurjendra Narayan, mutual animosity, internal disorder, unlimited powers of the ministers, incapability and weakness of the royal personalities - all these led to dismal situation of the state. The aggression of the Bhutias on Cooch Behar kingdom had been going on increasingly and Cooch Behar had to conclude a treaty with the East India Company in 1773 whereby Cooch Behar became a subordinate ally of the English².

After the introduction of permanent settlement in 1793, the rate of agricultural production decreased and the peasants had fallen into indebtedness. The ryots were oppressed severally, but there was no justice in the law court. The officers and the company's sepoys engaged themselves in the money lending and lent money to the peasants and charged a monthly interest of two or three *anas* in the rupee. The tone of the society was that of medieval age. Usury was thriving occupation and any one who could spare some money for investment had the chance of a lucrative return. As a result, on account of that undesirable conditions many people left the country³. Famine and epidemic spread into the state which was referred by Maharani Brideswari Devi in 'Beharodanta'⁴.

The economic degradation of the Bengal Subha can be viewed not only by the oppressions of the company's servants and gomosthas but was a natural sequel to the general political disorders which had began many years before the plassey. In Cooch Behar, the weakness of royal authority, want of strong governance in the country, conflicts amongst the elites for power, the oppression of the Revenue Collectors all these together led to its economic degradation very quickly. The material condition of the people was poor. Beveridge, the Deputy Commissioner, in his report of 1865-67, pointed out that mal-administration and lack of good communication was mainly responsible for the degradation in Coochbehar.

Corruption was rampant amongst the police officers of the state. Their pay was poor and irregular. Under a corrupt system of native administration and owing to the want of proper arrangement for the suppression of crimes and maintenance of peace, the prosperity of the people of Cooch Behar was at a low – ebb, notwithstanding its excellent natural resources. Unrestrained sexual enjoyment by the powerful and rich people or the royal personalities was a very common feature of the age. Women were made victim in every possible way when institution demanded so for political benefits. The victors were given gifts of girls even from the royal family by the vanquished after a defeat in the battle. The kings maintained many queens and concubines. The kings had not even connection with their daughters and one information is furnished by JoynathMunshi in the '*Raj- Upakhyam*' that Birnarayan, the king of Cooch Behar, once he cast covetous eyes on a beautiful girl who actually was his own daughter by relation. He could not identify his own daughter. According to the writer, the daughter drowned herself into river water out of mental agony⁵. Whether the information is exaggeration or not, it indicates the vulnerability of women in any way.

In this article, the present writer is willing to delineate the whole transaction of women for trafficking. How local women were made victim and what were the main factors behind such immoral activities carried out by the local brokers will have to be examined. An attempt will be made in paper to draw a picture of trafficking in women in Cooch Behar during the rule of the kings of Cooch Behar. Before entering into the main context, it seems necessary to mention that women whether in eastern or western countries, have been denied any honour and dignity. 'The male bias manifested itself from time to time in the views and acts of misogynist intellectuals and thinkers, preachers and priests, soldiers and rulers, fathers and husbands'⁶.

Such a deplorable economic and social situation can not be detached from the women's compulsion and degradation in the society. The hard economic realities often cause human action for survival in some way or other.

Slavery was practiced in the society and there was a regular slave trade. Bhowaneeganj was the mart which conducted such type of human trade. Poor people used to mortgage or sell themselves as slaves. Every year, boys and girls from Cooch Behar and Assam were sent to various parts of Bengal. The price of a girl varied from Rs. 12 to Rs. 15. A Koch boy cost Rs. 25. Children of the lower castes were sold to Garos. Some were exported to Burma through Assam.

People of the neighbouring Bhot or Garo tribe often abducted men and women from Mughal or Coochbehar territory and made them slaves⁷. On Bhadra 22, 1257 (according to the bengalicalender), Jhalu Das (40 yrs old) and Jentu Das (30 yrs old) sold themselves to Iswarchandra Mustafi, the royal employee of DashramGoborchhora in Rs. 50 narayai and 25 narayani respectively. Vendri of Kulidanga, Sudharam Das of Balarampur, FikaNoshya of Singimari, YatriBewa of Khagrabari sold their wives and daughters. Agni, a girl of seven years old, Futke, of five years old were sold by their fathers as the families suffering from starvation⁸.

As conventional practice, the royal people of Koch dynasty used to keep more than one wife. Maharaja Biswasingha brought a lots of women from Nepal, Gaur, Kamrup, Kashmir, Kaashi, Shonitpur, Mithila and he married those women⁹.

Captain R. B Pemberton visited Bhutan in 1836. He recorded: 'In addition to these several tribes, all of whom are of pure or mixed Mongolian races, there are some thousands of Bengalees and Assamese, the Helots of the country, who have been carried off at various times from the plains by the Booteahs in their several incursions, and who led a life devoted to the most menial and degrading offices. Whenever men are seized and carried up into the Hills, they are forced into a connubial union with some Booteah women of the inferior grades of society, who are made responsible for their continuance in the country..... Captive women are in a similar manner united to low Booteah men, and with a similar result; whenever it may not be convenient to provide prisoners either with Booteah wives or husbands, orders are transmitted to the Dooars to capture a man or woman, as the case may be, to be sent into the hills, and ultimately so disposed of'¹⁰. Keeping huge number of slave boys or girls was a symbol of aristocracy. The prisoners of war, criminals, mortgaged men women were sold in the market of Bhutiyas. The Bhutiyas called the slaves as '*jou-mi-l*'. Those slaves were used in invading and plundering the Cooch Behar kingdom.

Selling of girls was a reality in the society. A few lines from a local poem reflect the vile practice that prevailed in the society. That day was a festive day, on that gay day, the ferocious wolf gang lacerated Sonamoni – my sister, marriage did not come to her life but was sold off cheap to a senile zamindar and then lost forever into oblivion (free translation). The lines reveal that the moneyed people could purchase a girl for enjoyment and these girls lost all their past.

Turner had written : 'In the district of Cooch Behar an usage of a very singular kind has prevailed from remote antiquity, and I was assured by many of

the inhabitants of its actual existence at this day. If a Rayot, or peasant, owes a sum of money, and has not the ability to satisfy his creditor, he is compelled to give up his wife as a pledge, and possession of her is kept until the debt is discharged. It sometimes happens, as they affirm, that the wife of a debtor is not redeemed for the space of one, two or three years; and then if during her residence and connection with the creditor, a family should have been the consequence, half of it is considered as the property of the person with whom she lived, and half of her husband.

The country has a most wretched appearance, and its inhabitants are a miserable and puny race. The lower ranks without scruple dispose of their children for slaves, to any purchaser, and that too for a very trifling consideration; nor yet though in a traffic so unnatural, is the agency of a third person ever employed. Nothing is more common than to see a mother dress up her child, and bring it to market, with no other hope, no other view, than to enhance the price she may procure for it. Indeed the extreme poverty and wretchedness of these people will forcibly appear, when recollect how little is necessary for the subsistence of the peasant in these regions. The value of this can seldom amount to more than one penny per day, even allowing him to make his meal of two pounds of boiled rice, with a due proportion of salt, oil, vegetables, fish and chill.¹¹

Ahomraj gave sixty beautiful women to MaharajNaranarayan as gift. The Mogh and Portuguse invaded upon Koch and took away the women forcefully. Morongraj send Morongiya Dasi to Maharaja Naranarayan at the time of his marriage ceremony¹².

The lists show whole of the women (except some few ones) belong to Noshya¹⁴ community which indicates the illiteracy and unawareness of that particular community. Therefore, it may be said that under the rule of Cooch Behar Narayan king the condition of society and economy was not very hopeful.

We get a clear proof of transaction between the seller and purchaser often through the mediation of the brokers. For our clear understanding one such evidence of agreement is reproduced here. One such bill remarks that "Ganghonee Bewah¹⁵, village Lotamookh, at present residing at Chomar Poltea Pergunnah Hajo, do write this bound of assignment of my daughter in 1771 B.S to the effect that on receiving Rupees 20 from Mussamut Sona Nultee of Nuttallah of the same Pergunnah, I give up my daughter Roho to her who will remain with her according to her wishes and custom of the country. To this I have no objection if

I make any it will be entirely false. Sona Nauttee says that I voluntarily adopt this girl as daughter. I will give her no inconvenience or trouble. She will remain with me and behave according to our profession and to this I have no objection”.

(Source : JUDICIAL (JUDICIAL), OCT. 1872, B. NO. 252 – 335)

The Maharajas of Cooch Behar maintained a sincere and honest political relation with the English East India Company. Following the friendly terms and conditions, Cooch Behar the single most princely state of Cooch Behar in Bengal province was happy enough to introduce western education and modern thinking in the state. But a critical analysis of women trafficking in the state and the degrading situation of women under the rule of the western educated kings of course points to some failures of the kings who were willing to project them as benevolent rulers and royal ally of the liberal British Government.

Not only the royal people, the entire situation of the people was far behind the level of Liberal ideas that had started to inspire the middle class elites of the land to take some emancipatory measures for women.

However; at last in 1843, British government legally ceased all those markets where human selling and buying was going on. Maharaja Shibendra Narayan, Maharaja Narendra Narayan tried to stop human selling. But they failed due to the self seeking efforts of a group. Finally Maharaja Nripendra Narayan banned this inhuman practice with the help of Commissioner Haughton in 1864. Talboyez Wheeler narrated in Summary of Affairs of the Government of India in the Foreign Department (1864 – 1869) (PP 402 -404): ‘.... The existence of actual slavery in Kuch Behar forced itself upon the attention of the Commissioner, and the matter was laid before the Governor General. On 7th September, 1864, the abolition of slavery was formally proclaimed at a public Darbar; and a Regulation in Bengali language, embodying the provisions of the penal code respecting kidnapping and abductions, was declared to be in force as regards all future seizures, sales or detention of persons, male or female.’¹⁶

In conclusion it may be said that women’s vulnerability to seduction has been a stark reality in history for various reasons. Now a days, when different discourses on women history are emerging out in the academic area, the issue of trafficking of women may be taken as a viable and may be examined subject of study as such resorting to valid evidences as much as available. For doing so the whole of the social and political scenario related to the issue may be depicted in

such a way that the basic object of the study never loses its connectedness with history,

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11. Turner S. (1800) An account of an Embassy to the Court of Teshoo Lama in Tibet, London, Page 10 -11
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13. *Narainee* Rupee or Coin : Maharaja Naranarayan who was a great king of Cooch Behar introduced *Narainee* coin. History written in Farci language refers *Narainee* mudra. *Narainee* coins of Cooch Behar bear four different kinds of symbols. A symbolic dot (.) was inscribed at the bottom of the letter 'N', of the name of royal king.
14. *Noshya*: The Rajbanshi people who accepted Islam as their religion and fallen from their earlier (Hindu) religious status are commonly known as *Noshyas*.

15. *Bewa* : The widow women are called *Bewa*.

16. Hunter W. W (1876)A Statistical Account of Bengal, Volume X, Page 425