

Nrisimha Temples in Cooch Behar: Religious Pluralism against aggressive imperialism?

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Cooch Behar became a feudatory state by virtue of the Treaty of 1773. Maharaja Dharendranarayan, on whose behalf the Treaty was concluded by the Nazir Deo¹ Khagendranarayan and the English East India Company, was the first king of the country to acknowledge his subjection to the will of the Company. After the untimely death of Dharendranarayan, his father Dhairyendranarayan became the King for the second time. In 1783, Dhairyendranarayan died and his younger son Harendranarayan ascended the throne at the age of three years and nine months. During the minority of the King, 'Queen Regent' Kameswari Devi would direct the state administration as the sole guardian of the state² as per the will of the late king. Attaining majority in 1801, the full ruling power was assumed by Harendranarayan. He was one of the ablest rulers (and also the last powerful king) of the Koch dynasty. He died in 1839, thus reigning for the longest period among the Koch Kings.

Harendranarayan was a typical Hindu with immense devotion to gods, goddesses and Brahmins. He used to give the daily burnt offering, listened to the recital of the *Puranas* and gave out rice and gold to the people. From sectarian point of view, he was a sincere and devout Sakta, who loved to sing self-composed songs to the goddess Kali at the conclusion of the daily worship. His peculiar religious faith enjoined seclusion, which necessitated him in the later days to adopt ascetic habits.³ Desiring to breathe his last in the holy city of Kashi, the king went there in 1836. It is the belief of the Hindus that death in Varanasi brings salvation, as it is closely associated with the Ganges as well as Siva or Mahadeva (Great God). He spent large amount of money in Benaras in charity and stayed there until his wish of death life was fulfilled in 1839.

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The reign of Harendranarayan was glorious for the religious literature. It also witnessed the construction of a large number of temples and installation of images of various gods and goddesses. Needless to say that temple is always considered as the symbolic representation of God. Moreover, a Hindu temple is also regarded as a *tirtha* made by art.⁴ Temple-building has, therefore, always been looked upon as a sacred act that is to enhance one's fame and renown in this world and one's eligibility for a place in Heaven. *Brihatsamhita*, an early text, lays down that "Let him who wishes to enter the worlds that are reached by meritorious deeds of piety and charity build a temple to the gods."⁵ *Bhavishya Purana* also goes on echoing the same thing.⁶ For a ruler like Harendranarayan, who wished death in the holy city of Varanasi obviously for salvation, it was quite but natural to devote himself to the construction of temples to augment his eligibility for a heavenly abode.

The temples which were constructed during the reign of Maharaja Harendranarayan⁷ may be mentioned here sect-wise. (A) Saiva temples: (i) Hiranyagarbha Siva temple (Cooch Behar Town), (ii) Yajneswar Siva temple (Abuyar Pathar), (iii) Krotswar⁸ Siva Temple (Abuyar Pathar) and (iv) Mahakal Siva image (Bhavani Temple, Abuyar Pathar); (B) Sakta or Devi Temples: (i) Anandamoyee Kali Temple (Madanmohan Temple complex, Cooch Behar town), (ii) Bamakali temple (Gosainganj), (iii) Temple housing images of Jayatara, Annapurna, Chandi and Patdevati (Gosainganj), (iv) Siddheswari/Bhagavati temple (Siddheswar village), (v) Brikshodvaba Thakurani/ Kamakhyarupini (Kamrangagachh, Siddheswari temple complex) and (vi) Ghurneswari temple (Chamta); (C) Vaisnava Temples/images: (i) Images of Krishna, Balaram & Lakshinarayan (in the inner apartment of old palace, Cooch Behar town), (ii) image of Govardhandhari (Nrisimha Bari Pally, Cooch Behar town), (iii) images of Radharaman & Radhavinod (Near inner apartment of old palace, Cooch Behar), (iv) Dindayal/Krishna image (Madanmohan temple of old palace, Cooch Behar Town), (v) Nrisimha Temple (Nrisimha Bari Pally, Cooch Behar Town). (vi) Nrisimha temple (Takagarchh Pally, Cooch Behar), and (vii) Jagannath temple (Patkura Pally, Gosainganj).

To have constructed Saiva or Devi temples by a devout Sakta king Harendranarayan is not unexpected or unnatural. But His erection of Vaisnava temples, especially of the two shrines of Narasingha, one of the ten *avatars* of Visnu in half-man, half-lion form, cannot be without much significance. The present paper, admitting the factor of eclectic religious inspiration, attempts further to attribute the construction of these two temples to the political tug-of-war between the independence-loving and religious-minded king Harendranarayan on the one hand and a nakedly imperialist power like the English East India Company on the other.

We would now look at these two temples for a short while. The first Nrisingha temple⁹ is situated in Nrisinghapally at Pacharangi More near Magazine Road in Cooch Behar town. It is said that Maharaja Harendranarayana had established the temple¹⁰ and installed the images of Nrisimha and Govardhana in its sanctum along with making provision for the expenses of daily worship. It may be noted that an inscription claims its construction in the year 1868 A.D., which falls in no way in the period of Harendranarayan's reign. It is, therefore, reasonable to think that on the very ruins of the old temple a new temple was re-constructed, though no relics of the old shrine is traceable. The present temple made of brick and square in shape with flat roof and veranda faces the west. The image of Nrisimha is worshipped daily inside the temple. On the occasion of Dolpurnima, special *puja* is also offered. In course of time, god Nrisingha has become a family deity of the family members of the former priests, who take care of the maintenance of the temple.¹¹ The second Nrisingha temple¹² stands at Takagachh or Srirampura Dham about a mile west of the present royal palace. The presiding deity Narasimha was installed by Maharaja Harendranarayana¹³ along with construction of a temple for the deity. Arrangement was also made for the daily worship. Besides the idol of Nrisingha, those of Radha-Krishna, Gopal, Narayanashila, etc. are also installed in the sanctum. In addition to daily worship, special *puja* is also offered to the god Nrisingha during annual festivals of *Dolpurnima*, *Amavasya Samkranti*, etc. The temple is square in shape, having four sheds of corrugated iron. It is an aided temple, maintained by the heirs of the former priest.

We would now look to the background of Narsingha incarnation of Visnu to hint at an analogous situation in Kamta-Koch kingdom during the reign of Harendranarayan. Hiranyakasipu, a demon king mentioned in Book 7 of the *Bhagavata Purana*, hated Visnu like anything as his younger brother Hiranyaksha was slain by Varaha, the boar avatar of Vishnu. He, therefore, decided to kill Visnu by dint of mystical powers granted by Brahma because of his many years' austerity and penance. Hiranyakasipu's son Prahlada was, however, a great devotee of Vishnu, much to his father's disappointment.¹⁴ Hiranyakashipu eventually became so angry and upset at his son's devotion to Vishnu that he decided to kill him.¹⁵ But each time he attempted to kill the boy, Prahlada was protected by Vishnu's mystical power. When asked, Prahlada refused to acknowledge his father as the supreme lord of the universe and claimed that Vishnu is all-pervading and omnipresent. Hiranyakasipu, pointing to a nearby pillar, asked if 'his Vishnu' was in it. Prahlada then answered, *He is in pillars, and he is in the least twig*. Unable to control his anger, Hiranyakashipu smashed the pillar with his mace. From the broken pillar appeared Visnu in the form of Narasimha in defence of Prahlada and disembowelled the demon to death by using his nails as weapons.¹⁶ The tale of Hiranyakasipu depicts the futility of desiring power over others and the strength of God's protection over his fully surrendered devotees (in the case of his son Prahlada).

We should now turn our attention to the Visnu-Hiranyakasipu-like relation between Harendranarayan and the Government under the English East India Company. From 1789 to 1801, the whole administration of the Cooch Behar State was under the English Commissioner, who conducted all the affairs in the name of the minor king. During this period, land reform and revenue, zamindari system, amount of tribute, excise, public offices and courts of law, police and military, postal mail and other miscellaneous matters including works of public utility were reorganized by the commissioner.¹⁷ In the year 1801, Maharaja Harendra Narayan came of age and the state administration was left in the hands of the Maharaja by removing the Commissioner. It may be mentioned here that carefully educated by private tutors under the supervision of the British Commissioner Henry Douglas, Harendranarayan was the first of his line to receive a modern education. Anyway, after receiving administrative power the king sought to affirm the right of minting as the issue of Narayani coins was almost stopped by

the Company during the minority of the King although the right of coinage was kept open by the Treaty of 1773. The right was rightly admitted by a Resolution of Govt. Dated the 26th August, 1802.¹⁸

Surprisingly in the next year, i.e. 1803, again a commissioner was appointed at Cooch Behar by the British Govt. with a view to establishing law and judiciary departments. However, the next year he was removed on strong repugnance of the King, who insisted on his right as an independent ruler of his own territories.¹⁹ Again in 1805, the British Government appointed a commissioner in order to introduce the Regulations, and establish tribunals on the Government models, though under the King's own officers. Interestingly, in the same year the separate office of the Resident Commissioner was done away with and the duty of communicating with the Maharaja was vested in the collector of Rangpur. In a letter in 1805 addressed to the Company, Harendranarayan again sought the right of issuing coins, because the privilege was a cherished one, both of the ruler and of the people. However, the Company declined to affirm the right of minting in apprehension of serious inconvenience.²⁰ During the period from 1805 to 1813, the Collectors of Rangpur and ex-officio Residents for Cooch Behar, carried away by exparte statements of the Nazir Deo and Dewan Deo, interfered in small matters of internal administration, unduly aggrandised the position of the Dewan Deo and went on dictating humiliating terms to the King as usually applicable to a zaminder of lower Bengal. To add to worse, the Government of Lord Cornwallis, determined upon exercising a thorough interference in the internal affairs of Cooch Behar on the pretext of eradicating the evils of the Cooch Behar administration, revived the post of Resident Commissioner of Cooch Behar in 1813. The newly appointed Commissioner Norman Macleod repeatedly interfered in the internal administration, encouraging all sorts of anti-King but improbable reports. In 1815, he even went to the extent of levelling serious but totally baseless charges against the King of having secret intrigues with the Subhas of Buxa and Chamurchi Dooars in Bhutan and with the Government of Nepal and was, therefore, taken to task by the Government.²¹ Upon the Dewan Deo's complaint in October 1816, of dispossession of certain lands belonging to his Estate by the Maharaja, Mr. MacLeod pressed the Government for an investigation on the subject. These and other circumstances convinced the Government to adopt the policy of abstaining from all

interferences except in the form of advice and representation in the unlimited management of the affairs of Cooch Behar.

In A.D. 1821 the Maharaja again raised the issue of minting coins. The Government, however, took much more unfavourable attitude on the question and informed that ‘to allow this coinage to be renewed, after it has been for 21 years prohibited, will be opening the door to abuses not easily controlled, besides being on their accounts objectionable. Since therefore, the Raja cannot claim it as a matter of right and is not entitled by his late conduct to any favour or indulgence.’²² The king’s jurisdiction of power was once more encroached upon when in 1827 prohibition was imposed on behalf of the Company to the King’s realizing tools from plying boats on the Tista and the Sankosh rivers.²³

As regards the coins, the King was in no way even prepared to think of giving up the right of striking coins. The Government were again addressed in 1828 in the matter but the British refused modify their stand under any circumstances.²⁴ Moreover, they urged Harendranarayan to stop the use of Narayani coins. On 4th July 1829, law was passed by Lord William Bentinck banning the rite of *Suttee* even in the Cooch Behar State, though Cooch Behar had its own law of her land and judiciary. In 1830, a dispute arose between the Maharaja and the Nazir regarding the limits of the Jaigir of Balarampur, but it took long four years for the British to appoint their representative to settle it and another three years to resolve the issue.²⁵ In 1834, when the Government planned to introduce the Furakkabad coins in Cooch Behar, Harendranarayan strongly objected to this through a representation. The next year (1835), it was even threatened to make Furakkabad and Company's rupees legal tender in Cooch Bihar. However, the strong dislike and tough opposition of the king to the measure could thwart the British plan till his life time. In the same year, the tribute that was paid in Narayani rupees, was ordered by the Government to be paid in standard coins of the British India. But again in face of the King’s representations and utter repugnance to the measure, which was obviously derogatory to his rank and position, the order could not be implemented so long as Harendranarayan lived.

In 1836, the British Government issued orders prohibiting the minting of coins in Cooch Behar.²⁶ And this was the final nail put in the coffin of the long-cherished hope of Harendranarayan to rule as a truly independent king with the right of minting coins. Consequently the King was no longer left with any more interest not only in administration but also being alive. To die in the holy city of Kashi as noted earlier, the king went there in 1936 leaving the management of the state in the hands of joint princely *Sarvakaras* and finally breathed his last there in 1939. This reminds us of a few lines of a patriotic Bengali poem written by Rangalal Bandopadhyay (1855-1918) in the backdrop of an anti-British movement: *Swādhīnatā-hīnatāy kē bānchitē chāy hē kē bānchitē chāy?*²⁷

It is thus evident that since the assumption of power by Harendranarayan in 1801 to his final retirement to Benaras in 1836 there had been a constant tussle between him and the British Government on the one and only basic issue: who was the supreme authority to conduct all the affairs of the state. Through the Resident or ex-officio Commissioner, the British Government wanted to manage almost every sphere of the internal administration with a pretention of supreme authority in complete disregard of the *de jure* supremacy of the King as guaranteed by the Treaty of 1773 while the same sense of supremacy impelled the king to oppose the British at their every encroaching step, securing frequent success too. It was as if Hiranyakasipu in the form of the British attempted to kill Prahlada in independence form, which was somehow protected each time by Visnu in the form of Harendranarayan. To maintain his independent and thus supreme position, Harendranarayan continually sought to affirm the right of striking Narayani coins till 1836 while the British posing as an overlord in sheer violation of the 1773 Treaty simply played a dirty game over the issue. In view of contested relation with an aggressive power like the British, the King most probably thought to strengthen his popular base in the state by rallying people of different religious denomination behind him in his tooth and nail fight against the unjust British authoritarianism. This is clearly reflected in the construction of temples and installation of images of deities of different Hindu sects along with *pucca* building of the *mazar* (grave) of the celebrated Muslim Faqir or Pir named Torsa-Baba or Torsa Pir, covered by the char-chala tinned roof.²⁸

In view of above, we may now dig out the other impulsion or inspiration than the religious one behind the construction of Nrisimha temples. Harendranarayan, besides being a wrestler, strongman, accomplished horseman and rider of elephants as well as a skilful archer and good shot, was a scholar of his days well versed in Persian, Bengali and Sanskrit. He wrote several books in verse, both original and translation of *Sundarkanda* of *Ramayana*, *Santiparva*, *Aishikaparva*, *Salyaparva*, *Sabhaparva* and *Khandavadahan* of *Mahabharata*, *Madhyakhanda* and *Uttarkhanda* of *Brihaddharma Purana*, *Brahmottara Khanda* and *Kashi Khanda* of *Skandapurana* and *kriyayogasara* from original Sanskrit.²⁹ His court was always adorned by a galaxy of twenty-five twice-born poets, who rendered translation of all the books (*kandas/parvas*) of two epics as well as of different *Puranas*. Among the *Puranas* translated is included the *Nrisingha Purana* both by Dwija Braja Sundar and Dwija Ramanandan.³⁰ Harendranarayan's scholarly knowledge of Epics and *Puranas*, presence of a large number of twice-born poets in the royal court, translation of *Nrisingha Purana* by two poets and construction of two *Nrisingha* temples by the King are no scattered phenomena. Rather, they combined to impress upon the King that by worshipping the god *Nrisingha* in image form in the shrine, he could gain the blessings of the god as well as the mystical powers to control the demonic British to his wish and rule the country with full independence.

Notes and References

1. Head of the military affairs.
2. Major Francis Jenkins, *Selections from the Record of the Government of Bengal*, Paper on Cooch Behar, Calcutta, 1851, p. 33.
3. H. N. Choudhury, *The Cooch Behar State and its Land Revenue Settlements*, first published in 1903, Reprint ed. by N.N. Pal, Siliguri, 2009, p. 280.
4. D. N. Shukla, *Hindu Science of Architecture*, Vol. 1, 1958, pp. 455-456.
5. H. Kern, 'The Brihat-Samhita of Varahamihira,' *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, New Series VI, London, 1873; George Michell, *The Hindu Temple: An Introduction to its Meaning and Forms*, London, 1977, p. 50.
6. "One wishing to enter the world attained by performing sacrifices and sinking wells and the like, should build a temple, whereby one should get the fruit of both." *Bhavishya Purana*, 1.130.9.
7. Shyamchand Mukhopadhyay, *Koch Behar Jelar Purakirti* (in Bengali), Calcutta, 1974, p. 17.
8. *Krodheswar* (?)
9. Pabitra Kumar Debnath, *Religion and Religious Establishments of Kamata-Koch Kingdom*, Ph. D. thesis (unpublished), University of North Bengal, Darjeeling, 1993, p. 287.

10. H. N. Chaudhury, *op. cit.*, p. 703.
11. Interview: Tapan Misra, family member of the former priest, Nrisimha Temple (Nrisimhapally), Cooch Behar, 26/06/1993). Quoted in Pabitra Kumar Debnath, *op. cit.*, p. 326.
12. Pabitra Kumar Debnath, *op. cit.*, p. 288.
13. H. N. Chaudhury, *op. cit.*, p. 699.
14. *Bhagavata Purana*, 7.8.6.
15. *Ibid*, 7.8.3–4.
16. *Ibid*, 7.8.29.
17. H. N. Choudhury, *op. cit.*, p. 259ff.
18. “That the Rajas of Cooch Behar have not only been permitted, subsequently to the date of the Treaty, to coin money, to administer justice, and exercise other powers of sovereignty, but that their right to the exercise of such powers has been fully and unreservedly acknowledged by the British Government in India.’ *Cooch Behar Select Records*, Vol. I, p. 133.
19. *Select Records*, Volume 1, pp. 144-45.
20. *Cooch Behar Select Records*, Vol. I, p. 161; Sarat Chandra Ghosal, *A History of Cooch Behar* (being a translation of Khan Choudhury Amanatulla Ahmed’s *Kochbiharer Itihas*, Koch Bihar, 1942), 1st reprint, ed. Hiten Nag, N.L. Publishers, Siliguri, 2005, p. 309.
21. Chief Secretary Mr. Monckton’s letter of the 16th May 1815, *Select Records*, Vol. I, pp. 94-97.
22. *Cooch Behar Select Records*, Vol. II, p.41.
23. Sarat Chandra Ghosal, *op. cit.*, p. 455.
24. *Cooch Behar Select Records*, Vol. II, p.41.
25. H. N. Choudhury, *op. cit.*, p. 267.
26. Letter dated the 13th February 1837 A.D. to the Agent from the Government. *Cooch Behar Select Records*, Vol. II, p. 73.
27. *Dāsatwa-śṛṅkhal balo kē paribē pāy̐ hē kē paribē pāy̐? Kōṭikalpa dās thākā narakēr prāy̐ hē narakēr prāy̐; dinēkēr swādhīnatā swargasukh tāy̐ hē swargasukh tāy̐. Kṛtānta kōmal kōlē āmādēr sthān hē āmādēr sthān; ēsō tāy̐ sukhē ēbē ha'iba śayānhē ha'iba śayān.*
<https://bn.wikisource.org/.../স্বাধীনতা-হীনতা..>
28. Shyamchand Mukhopadhyay, *op. cit.*, p. 17.
29. Swapan Kumar Roy, *Prachin Koch Biharer Sampurna Itibritta*, Kolkata, 2006, p. 154.
30. *Ibid*. 10