

Educational Progress during the Reign of Maharaja Nripendra Narayan Bhup Bahadur (1863-1911) in the Princely State of Cooch Behar

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Abstract: Maharaja Nripendra Narayan played an important role in modernizing the education system in the princely state of Cooch Behar. He took several important steps to bring the people of the state out of the darkness of illiteracy. Before 1850, the education system was confined only to the royal family. In 1864, the British commissioner Colonel Haughton played an important role in the expansion of the education system in Cooch Behar State. In addition to this some enlightened educated men came forward to promote female education. As a result, the common people get a chance to be enlightened in the light of education. In addition to government initiatives to expand the education system, many private initiatives can be noticed. There were so many private educational institutions where money was contributed by the people in the shape of subscriptions. So many inspecting officials like sub-inspector of schools, deputy inspector of schools were appointed. The establishment of Victoria College in 1888 marked the beginning of higher education in the state. For the accommodation of college students, a collegiate hostel and new boarding houses like Brahmo Boarding house were established. The role of Sunity Devi, Wife of Maharaja Nripendra Narayan, in expanding women education is undeniable. After taking her initiative, women's education progressed rapidly. Moreover negative aspects such as child marriage, caste discrimination affected women's education. Many common people donated their land to establish girl's schools. The administration emphasized the importance of opening Day-school as well as night school. A library called Raja's library was established for the use of English staff and the members of the royal family. For common people a big public library was established- a section of which later gave birth to the present 'Sahitya Sabha' Library.

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The enlightened ruler Maharaja Nripendra Narayan was the one who played the most significant role in liberating the people of Cooch Behar from the darkness of illiteracy. It was during his rule that education department was given special attention. In 1863 he ascended the throne of the state as a minor and responsibility for state administration passed directly into the hands of the British government. Nripendra Narayan himself went to Europe and finished his studies in England. Then after returning to Cooch Behar he went to Calcutta again completing the law. He believed that development of the state without education system is not possible. Nripendra Narayan studied in abroad and for this reason he felt the importance of education more. He constructed the railway system from *Mughalhat* to Cooch Behar at his own expense in 1894. So that the communication system can be improved and improved communication system can improve the education system. For all his modern thinking, Nripendra Narayan can be called the 'Father of Modern Koch Bihar'.

From 1865 onwards, initiatives have been seen in public education. When British Commissioners were appointed for good governance in the second half of the nineteenth century, the administration of Cooch Behar got a touch of modernity. The state's relationship with the British led to changes in the administrative structure of the state. As a result public education was effected. In 1864 the British Commissioner Colonel Haughton took initiative to expand education in Cooch Behar State. Under his direction the administrators of Cooch Behar were active in expanding education for public. In the year 1875-1876, Colonel Haughton visited various sites in the state and felt the importance of launching an education system for the public. Under the direction of Haughton 3 Bengali schools under the state government were established in the rural areas of the state in the year 1864-65.

During the period of minority of Nripendra Narayan, the number of schools and the number of students both are increased. Regarding the development of education, W.W. Hunter mentions: 'In 1864 the earliest year for which information is available, there was only one school in Kuch Behar state, attended by 36 pupils. In September 1871, this number had increased to 46 schools, attended by 1486 pupils, and by 31st March, 1875, there was a still further increase to 245 schools and 6497 pupils of whom 352 were girls'.¹

The schools in the state were divided into three categories in terms of school management. In the first category were government schools which were directly in the hands of the state administration. The government was fully responsible for their financial management. The second category was a government aided school. The government occasionally provided some financial assistance to these schools. In the third category were private educational institutions where money was contributed by the people in the shape of subscriptions. These schools were usually conducted with the financial help of the wealthy and common people of the society.

During the reign of Maharaja Narendra Narayan (1847-1863), Colonel Jenkins, the Governor General's agent was given some money from the state in recognition of his close work on the North Eastern frontier. But Colonel Jenkins refused to accept the money.

He suggested setting up an English school in the state. In this way, an English school was established here. The school was given a separate name Jenkins school when Colonel Jenkins retired from service in 1861. Since then not only the children of the royal family, but also the children of ordinary citizen started to receive education from this school. During the reign of Maharaja Nripendra Narayan, Jenkins School, the holder and conductor of public education, was the epicentre of the intellectual world of Cooch Behar. For example, a regular meeting of Cooch Behar *Hitaishini Sabha* was held in this school and it was from this meeting that the preliminary outline of the state's public education was created. On the 31st march 1892 the number of students in this school was 401.² On the 31st march 1911 the number of students in this school increased to 490.³ These statistics show that the popularity of this school increased tremendously despite various adversities. The first matriculation examination under the new Regulations was held in 1910. 13 boys were sent up and all of them passed.⁴

In 1865, when the inspector of the unpaid schools resigns, the responsibility of overseeing those schools is put on the local committee of public instruction. Local deputy inspector of school was appointed to assist in the supervision of these schools from time to time. He visited schools in remote areas and assisted in the spread of popular education. The adoption of this system leads to satisfactory improvement of education in the state within five years. The number of village schools came up to 58. At this time there were 5 girl's schools with strength of 130 pupils, one Persian madrasa and 3 Sanskrit *toles*.⁵ The total expenditure on education came up to Rs. 7022 in 1865 to Rs. 29515 in 1870. Of which Rs. 2884 was contributed by the people in the shape of subscriptions.⁶ This shows how much the common people were interested in spreading the light of education.

A Guru training school was established in 1873. Another sub-inspector of schools, Deputy Inspector of schools and four inspecting pundits were gradually appointed for proper supervision. A wards institution was opened at Krishnanagar in 1877 for the kinsmen of the Maharajas. In the session 1876-1877 the number of schools had increased from 282 to 323 and their pupils from 7238 to 7795.⁷ In the session 1878-1879 there is an increase of 21 schools, 9 aided and 12 private.⁸ This shows the rapid progress of the education system. At this time Sanskrit scholarship was arranged to encourage the Brahmins of Banerwar to set up new *toles*. During this time the school book society encouraged the students to buy books.

In 1884, Bhagabatcharan Bandopadhyay wrote in his book entitled '*Coochbehar-er Itihas*' that 'At present there are 318 schools of various types and there are 9260 students studying. There is also a first class normal school in the state. Of the other schools, the two model schools function only at a royal cost. There are also four minor school, 82 medium Bengal school, 122 high school, 21 night school, and 31 girl's schools. For these schools half the amount is paid from the treasury and the rest is paid by the villagers. In addition there

are many schools where government assistance is not provided. Those schools are run only with the help of local peoples. These include 3 medium Bengali schools, 30 high schools, 4 night schools and 2 girls' schools. There is a hostel for the relatives of the royal family; the royal treasury pays for the students there. Student attends school from that hostel. Apart from this there is a boarding school located in Bakipore, there are some royal family members and a supervisor to supervise their educational activities. The 'Rajas Library', an extensive library is located in the capital. Books worth Rs. 2000 are bought there every year. There are one principal supervisor, 3 deputy supervisors and 4 school supervisors to oversee the education department. On an average, the education department spends Rs. 60000 per year. Apart from all these schools, an industrial school is located in the capital. This school was established in 1869. Till the year 1864, it was entrusted to the principal supervisor of the education department.⁹ In 1890, so many entrance schools at sub-division level were established. From the above description we can get an overall idea of the progress of the education system.

With the appointment of Mr. E.E. Lowis of the Bengal civil Service as superintendent of the state of Cooch Behar, a new era began in the history of the education of Cooch Behar. According to his recommendation, higher education should be separated from the primary level of education in the budget. Lowis recommended a number of policies to improve the education system at a lower cost.

The influence of *Brahmoism* in Koch Bihar had a very notable bearing in the educational and cultural development of the state.¹⁰ The year 1888 is the land marking year in the history of higher education of the Cooch Behar state and also its neighbouring districts as well. Because the first college named Victoria College was established to commemorate the silver jubilee of Queen Victoria of England. This College was established to enhance student's capability in the kingdom. The college opened with only 16 students, the number rose quickly and at the end of 1890, there were 124 students on its roll, of whom 6 were natives of the state.¹¹ The English, mathematics, science, philosophy and Sanskrit was then taught. From the very beginning the education was made free to all. For the accommodation of college students, a boarding institution was opened in connection with this college. As well as various steps were taken to encourage native youths also to live in either the College, or in the Rajgan Boarding. New hostels like collegiate hostel and new boarding houses like *Brahmo* Boarding house were established for residential purposes of the students. In 1904 the college library was arranged by various books like literature, science and philosophy. Special grant was sanctioned for improving laboratory. At the request of the Maharaja Nripendra Narayan, the world famous philosopher Brojendra Nath Seal joined the college as a principal in 1896.

The following table shows the number of students admitted in to the General Department of the college:

Table-1

Year	Number of students
1899-1900	151
1900-1901	208
1901-1902	233
1902-1903	219
1903-1904	228
1905-1906	239
1907-1908	135
1908-1909	71
1910-1911	139

Source: Annual Administration Report of the Cooch Behar State, Relevant years.

From the above table we can see that, the number of students enrolled every year increased. But the epidemic of cholera and small pox that took place in 1908-09, had a profound impact on the education system of the people of Cooch Behar. On the other hand, the abnormal floods caused great damage to the education system. As a result, the educational institutions were severely damaged. Communication system had crashed. The immediate impact of this was on the education system. But the administration was able to deal with it very quickly and since 1910 the normalcy in the education system has begun to return.

The administration placed considerable emphasis on opening day schools as well as night schools. The night schools were opened mainly for those who were unable to go to schools during the day. The first night school was established in 1865, the idea was to provide education to the adults who were too old to attend day schools. Actually Maharaja Nripendra Narayan realized that if parents could be educated, they would easily encourage their children to go to school. But looking at the statistics, it is clear that the night school failed to gain its popularity. In the session 1873-1874, there were 7 night schools in the state.¹² In the session 1885-1886, the number of night schools was increased to 46.¹³ But In the session 1895-1896, the number of night schools was reduced to 40.¹⁴ In the session 1910-1911 the number of night schools was further reduced to 31.¹⁵ There were several reasons for this decline in the popularity of night schools. Adult usually taught in night schools and they were involved in different professions. They do not have time to get education as they were involved in various livelihoods. The financial problems of the family reduced the motivation of the students to go to night schools. Later the government reduced various grants after the popularity of the night schools declined. Dropout students could attend the night school as well.

Maharaja Nripendra Narayan made equal efforts to spread education in Hindu society as well as in Muslim community also. In the session 1878-1879 out of 651 female students in 49 girl's schools, 392 were Hindus and 259 were Muslims.¹⁶ It is easy to infer from these statistics that Muslim girls also wanted to come out of the bondage of illiteracy. In the session 1885-1886 the number of Hindu students studying in different classes of schools in the state was 6313 and the number of Muslim students was 3133.¹⁷ From these statistics it is easy to infer that the spread of education within the Muslim community took place rapidly. Madrasahs, Maktabas and Persian schools were established to spread the light of education among the Muslims. A number of private Maktabas were set up in different parts of the state at the expense of some prominent members of the Muslim community. The *jotedars* of the western portion of the state mostly Mahomedans came forward greatly to their credit with a liberal monthly subscription to raise the Mekligunj middle into a higher class school. Maharaja Nripendra Narayan believed in secular mindset. Therefore he provides equal education for all irrespective of caste, creed and religion. The Maharaja introduced scholarships to encourage economically backward Muslim students.

The year 1903-04 witnessed the introduction of the new system of primary education, as outlined in the Resolution of the Government of Bengal, dated 1st January 1901.¹⁸ Gradually physical exercises and athletic sports were growing popular among the boys. The most important thing about the scholarship is that, for the selection of candidates for the scholarship examinations which is made by the inspecting officers in Bengal and for awards of certificates system of local competitive examination was introduced in 1904. In addition to this, during Maharaja Nripendra Narayan's reign, arrangements were made for the grant of a new scholarship was called Temple Scholarship. Only the best students who passed from the Sanskrit *toles* were given this scholarship. In 1908 the system of annual prize distributions was inaugurated to motivate the students and a regular grant for this purpose was allotted in the Budget. Managing committee was appointed for the discussion of all matters connected with the management of schools. This shows how much interest in education among the general public had increased. So many steps were taken to establish similar boarding institutions in connection with the sub divisional higher English schools.

The year 1908-09 brought a disaster to the education system. Sickness and scarcity were sworn enemies to education. Many of the schools in the state were injuriously affected in 1908-09 by epidemics of cholera and small pox. In 1909-1910, the abnormal flood caused great damage to the school buildings and at the end of the flood the students were afflicted with various diseases. As a result the student's education was disrupted. Therefore improving the education system was a challenge to the administration during this time. Despite all this the progress of the education system has not stopped. The number of Mahomedan schools rose from 8 to 12 during the session 1910-1911 while the number of pupils was nearly double.¹⁹ This indicates that Mahomedan education was much improved

than before.

Before 1850 there was no awareness in the minds of ordinary people about women education in Cooch Behar. From 1865 onwards, initiatives have been seen in women education. After taking the initiative of Colonel Haughton in promoting education, the issue of women education has gained considerable importance. In addition to this some of the enlightened educated men in the state have realized the importance of female education. The name of Ramchandra Ghosh, Tribhanga Mukhopadhyay, and Harimohan Roy were notable in this context. They were all members of the Cooch Behar *Hitaisini Sabha*. They all tried to raise the need for women education and the importance of establishing schools for girls through their various lectures to the society. Besides they wanted to show that early marriages, caste discrimination, superstition and polygamy etc social disorders impaired the women education.

The collected data shows that in 1857, the first modern school for boys was established and in 1865, the number of schools had increased to 58, five of them were girl's schools and there were a total of 130 pupils.²⁰ According to W.W Hunter's report, by 31st March 1875, there was a still further increase to 245 schools and 6497 pupils of whom 352 were girls.²¹ Although education of women has been widespread in Cooch Behar since 1875, it was very small compared to the boys of Cooch Behar and the girls of Bengal as a whole. In 1882, one in every 89 students in Bengal was a school girl between 5 and 14 years old girls. But there were only one girl who attends school out of every 130 girls in Cooch Behar.²²

Table-2

Years	Nos. Of Girls schools	Nos. Of Girls students
1878-1879	49	651
1881-1882	34	383
1891-1892	10	214
1895-1896	8	261
1906-1907	8	260
1910-1911	10	522

Source: Annual Administration Report of the Cooch Behar State, Relevant years.

The above table shows that in the session 1878-1879 numbers of girl's schools and the number of students reached highest; the marriage of Maharaja Nripendra Narayan and Sunity Devi was probably responsible for this progress. In addition to this huge amount of money was spent on women education sector through government and private initiatives. But from the session 1891-1892 the drought in the field of women education began. There

are several reasons behind this. The amount of expenditure allocated for women education was reduced. In the session 1878-1879 the expenditure on the Girls' education amounted to Rs. 3125-14-0.²³ But in the session 1891-1892 the expenditure on Girl's education amounted to Rs. 904-10-6.²⁴ In addition, the emergence of Influenza had disrupted women education. Apart from that the parents of the students could not become reformed. Some social evils such as child marriage, caste discrimination affected women's education. But if there were enough female teachers in girls' schools and scholarships were provided by government initiatives for girls, then parents might also be interested in women's education. However the insensateness that arose in the field of women's education in 1881 was lasting much longer.

In the session 1878-1879 twelve girls competed successfully for vernacular scholarship examination, 6 of them passed.²⁵ In the session 1910-1911 twenty two girls were sent up to different scholarship examination and 19 came out successful.²⁶ This means that the success rate of girls has increased compared to the past. Although the number of educated girls was small, there was no shortage of talented girls. In this context, the names of *Hemangini Das* and *Saral Sashi Das* can be mentioned who passed the first division in higher elementary scholarship examination at Rati Babu's school in the session 1888-89. In 1893 *Purna Prabha Mukhopadhyay* from Dinhata girl's school stood first position in the primary scholarship examination. In the session 1891-1892 *Subala Sundari Sen* from the Sunity College stood second position in the upper primary scholarship examination of the Rajshye Division.

At that time there were some prominent people in the society who took the initiative to establish a girl's school through personal efforts. In 1875, a girl's school was established at Bamanhat, Dinhata, on the initiative of Krishna Chandra Lahiri. He donated private land to establish a girl's school. By the year 1882, another girl's school was established at Dinhata called Rajkumar girl's school. This school was established under the name of Maharaja Raj Rajendra Narayan. In the decade of 1880's another girl's school was established in Cooch Behar on the initiative of Rati Babu. In the session 1895-1896 the expenditure on the lower primary girl's schools amounted to Rs.298-5-3 of which the state paid Rs. 126-3 and the people paid Rs. 172-5-3.²⁷ From these statistics it can be easily inferred that in addition to government initiatives to improve women education, the role of the common people was no less.

Sunity Devi, Wife of Maharaja Nripendra Narayan, played an important role in educating girls. After taking her initiative, the pace of women education increased rapidly. In 1883 Sunity Devi acquired the Rati Babu's school and later this school was connected to her name. Maharani Sunity Devi paid special attention to teaching at Sunity College. She used to give moral advice to the students. She encouraged the students to advance women education in various ways. Generally the prizes were given to the meritorious students on their success in the annual examination. In this school, the subjects taught were Bengali,

English, History, Geography, Sanskrit, Arithmetic, Drawing, Needle work and Music.

The awareness that was developed through the initiative of Sunity Devi is reflected in the field of women education. The total population of the state in 1901 was 565116. Of this 10.7% of men and 0.4% of women come in the level of literacy.²⁸ In 1911 the female literacy rate was 0.6%.²⁹ That is the female literacy rate was increasing day by day, which is an indicator of the progress in the field of women education. Female education in the state was making but slow progress, parents took such little interest in the education of their girls that they do not even send them to school regularly, they also removed their girls from school at a very early age. Despite all this, early marriages, caste discrimination, superstition and polygamy, etc social disorders hindered the progress of women education. As a result, women education remained in its infancy.

In 1870, an English bureaucrat Colonel Haughton first felt the need to create an educational environment and established a library called Raja's library. Some information suggests that this Raja's library was originally in the Nilkuthi area, later it was shifted to the south side of *Sagar Dighi*. The Raja's library was used for the English staff and the members of the royal family. After 1891, all the employees got a chance to read the books at home by depositing 5 rupees.³⁰ Maharaja Nripendra Narayan built a paved house on the west side of *Sagar Dighi* in 1895. The library was moved to the porch surrounded by the hall at the bottom of this paved house. It was then renamed Cooch Behar State Library. During that time a large number of books were collected in the library. There were so many manuscripts in Bengali and Sanskrit language. For the study of the common people a big public library was established- a section of which later gave birth to the present '*Sahitya Sabha*' Library.

The role of Maharaja Nripendra Narayan is specifically significant in the history of the progress of modern education in the state of Cooch Behar. He did not establish separate educational institutions for any particular caste, creed or religion. He established institutions where people of all classes of the society could receive education. In addition to traditional education, he founded the vocational institutions and the artisan schools also. The artisan school was established for the purpose of educating the people of the state in technical education but later this school was converted into public workshop. People here were encouraged to join this school through monthly stipends. During this period mainly two special issues played a crucial role in the spread of education in Cooch Behar- the first was the enthusiasm of Maharaja Nripendra Narayan and his wife Maharani Sunity Devi for the spread of education among the public and the other is the cooperation of the British government in the expansion of education. Under his guardianship, both the higher education and the women's education were greatly improved. Despite these improvements the education system had some drawbacks. The primary schools of the state were in a backward condition. Better school houses should build and the scanty pay of the teachers increased. Many upper primary schools were in need of a teacher for the lower classes.

Describing Maharaja Nripendra Narayan's contribution to education, "The Bengalee" paper was quoted as saying: '..... The outside public knew the Maharaja as a patron of education, especially high education and as an advocate of social reform particularly of female education'.³¹ By introducing grant-in-aid system for education, giving special importance to primary education separately, emphasizing on the expansion of women's education and higher education, establishment of the first college in the state, increasing allocation in the education sector, by appointing ideal educators for the improvement and by taking measures such as changing the administrative structure Maharaja Nripendra Narayan has shown his progressiveness.

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