

# Maharaja Nripendra Narayan :“Maker of Modern Cooch Behar”

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## **Abstract**

Maharaja Nripendra Narayan was one of the greatest king of the Princely State of Cooch Behar. He was born on 4<sup>th</sup> October, 1862. He ruled the Koch kingdom till his death on 18<sup>th</sup> September, 1911. The reign of Maharaja Nripendra Narayan is a landmark in the history of Cooch Behar. He was a modern and benevolent king. During the reign of Nripendra Narayan Cooch Behar turned into a modern kingdom. There was extensive changes in the every sphere of life of the people of Cooch Behar. The reign of Maharaja Nripendra Narayan is regards as the ‘Age of Renaissance’ and the ‘Golden Age’ in the history of mass education. Maharaja Nripendra Narayan tried his best for the development of Cooch Behar in various ways. In the field of mass education, women education, higher education, literary activities, administrative efficiency in all respect Cooch Behar reached at the peak of progress. He was a patron of the art and architecture. Maharaja Nripendra Narayan founded the famous Madanmohan temple by the northern side of Bairagi Dighi at Cooch Behar town in 1889. He was an educated, lover of beauty and modern ruler. In 1988 he established the Victoria College which is now known as Acharya Brojendra Nath Seal College for the betterment of the higher studies in Cooch Behar. For the development of the women education Nripendra Narayan established ‘Sunity College’ in 1881 which is known as Sunity Academy. Apart from this he established three Higher English School at Dinhata, Mathabhanga and Mekhlignaj. The glorious achievement of Maharaja Nripendra Narayan was the establishment of Royal Palace of Cooch Behar. It was established in 1887 and was modeled after the Buckingham palace in Landon. Nripendra Narayan was the first king of Cooch Behar who banned the practice of Polygamy in the Royal family and abolished the slavery in Cooch Behar. He also took measures for the development of health service, railways, arrangement of drinking water and the repairment of the old temples. The modernization of Cooch Behar which took place during the reign of Nripendra Narayan marked the glorious era in the history of Cooch Behar. The role of Maharani Suniti Devi, queen of Maharaja Nripendra Narayan may be mentioned in this regard.

**Key Words:** Princely State, Renaissance, Architecture, Royal Palace, Modernization etc.

## **Introduction**

Cooch Behar which flourished as an independent princely state in medieval India is now a district of West Bengal. It lies on the border of Assam and Bangladesh. Before the rise of the Cooch rulers, Cooch Behar witnessed a political crisis and in the beginning of the sixteenth

century, a tribal leader Haria Mandal organized his own clan and sowed the seed of future Cooch Dynasty. Biswa Singha, the able son and successor of Haria Mandal ascended the throne and laid the foundation of Koch Kingdom. In 1733, Cooch Behar acknowledged the suzerainty of the British East India Company. Cooch Behar merged into Indian union on 12<sup>th</sup> September, 1949.<sup>1</sup> Thereafter it is regarded as a district of West Bengal since 1<sup>st</sup> January, 1950.<sup>2</sup> Now Cooch Behar district is under the supervision of Jalpaiguri Division on 4<sup>th</sup> March, 1963.

Maharaja Nripendra Narayan is regarded as the architect Modern Cooch Behar. He was born on 4<sup>th</sup> October, 1862. His father Mararaja Narendra Narayan was died on 6<sup>th</sup> August, 1863. Nripendra Narayan was then only ten months old. Under the dying wishes of Maharaja Narendra Narayan his legitimate son Nripendra Narayan was crowned as the king in the same year by Maharani Kameswari, Vrindeswari and Nishtarini Devi and with the support of the principal officer of the kingdom. Since he was still infant the administration was handed over to the Commissioner appointed by the British Governor General.<sup>3</sup> Nripendra Narayan studied at wards Institiut at Benaras, thereafter at Bankipur College, Patna and lastly law at Presidency College, Calcutta. In 1878 Nripendra Narayan married Sunity Devi, daughter of Keshab Chandra Sen. Sunity Devi was then only fourteen years old.<sup>4</sup>

Maharaja Nripendra Narayan ruled the Princely State of Cooch Behar till his death on 18 September, 1911. During his reign Maharaja Nripendra Narayan initiated various plans and projects for the all round development of Cooch Behar. Both the Maharaja and Maharani were the great patron of modern education. During the reign of Maharaja Nripendra Narayan Cooch Behar turned into a new paradigm. Maharani Sunity Devi was the main motivation behind the modernization of Cooch Behar. Maharaja Nripendra Narayan has done a great deal towards the improvement of Cooch Behar. He has taken a lot developmental Scheme during his reign. At present the beautiful management of the Cooch Behar town is the result of the earnest efforts of Maharaja Nripendra Narayan.

### **Development of Education**

Maharaja Nripendra Narayan was the first ruler of Cooch Behar to have English education. Social reformers of Bengal like Raja Rammon Roy, Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar, Keshab Chanrda Sen, Maharaja Nripendra Narayan was the patron of modern western education. He has taken various measures for the expansion and development of education in Cooch Behar as education is the backbone of a nation.

### **Progress in Mass Education:**

The development of mass education is one of the important chapter in the reign of Maharaja Nripendra Narayan. He was free from the religious constriction. He was liberal towards all religions. As a result of his liberal attitude along with the Hindus, the Muslims also were concerned with modern education. From 1891 a new episode has open in the field of Primary Education. In 1891 the M.E. Schools of Mathabhanga, Mekhliganj and Dinjata were upgraded to H.E. Schools. In this regard it may be mentioned that famous social reformer Thakur Panchan Barma had passed the M.E. Examination from Mathabhanga

school and secured the First Position in the Rajsahi Division. As a result of the measures taken by Maharaja Nripendra Narayan the mass education has been expanding in Cooch Behar very rapidly. In 1899 -1900 a Persian School at the town of Cooch Behar and a Maktab was founded for the benefit of the Muslims. The percentage of the expansion of mass education, in Rajsahi 18%, in Dinajpur 19.4%, in Rangpur, 20%, in Jalpaiguri 19.1%. while in Cooch Behar it was 26.09%. Cooch Behar was very well developed in the field mass education during the reign Maharaja Nripendra Narayan .

### **Progress of Female Education:**

The female education at first started in the royal family of Cooch Behar. During the reign of Maharaja Nripendra Narayan there was a considerable development in the field of female education. In 1875 there were 23 female schools in Cooch Behar which showed sign of the progress of female education. Maharani Sunity Devi took an active part in it. In 1881-82 among 19 girls student 17 were passed in Primary Scholarship Examination. In 1888-89 Saral Sashi Das and Hemangini Dasi were passed in the First Division in the Upper Primary Scholarship Examination. In 1893 a girl student passed in the Fourth Division from Sunity College ( Sunity Academy) it in the Middle Bengali Scholarship Examination. In 1886 a female school was founded which name was 'Rajkumar Girls School'.

### **Progress in Higher Education :**

Not only the expansion of education in Primary and Madhyamik education, there was a considerable progress in the field of Higher education in Cooch Behar during the reign of Maharaja Nripendra Narayan . Maharja Nripendra Narayan felt the necessity of introduction of higher education for the students of Cooch Behar. As a result of the earnest effort of Maharaja Nripendra Narayan in 1888 the first college in Cooch Behar was established. The name of the college was Victoria College. Now it is known as Acharya Brojendra Nath Seal College. The college is significant not only in North Bengal but also in the whole West Bengal.

### **Sunity College (SunityAcademy):**

Sunity Academy is a higher secondary girls school in Cooch Behar. It was founded by Maharaja Nripendra Narayan in 1881 as Sunity College. The Sunity College named after Maharani Sunity Devi who was the main brain behind its establishment. The main building of the Sunity Academy was opened by Maharani Sunity Devi 1890. It was one of the famous learning institutions throughout the whole of North-Eastern India.

### **Foundation of the main building of Jenkins School :**

The Jenkins School which is situated in the Cooch Behar town was established in 1861 during the reign of Maharaja Narendra Narayan, father of Maharaja Nripendra Narayan. But the main bulding of the existing Jenkins School was founded in 1879 during the reign of Maharaja Nripendra Narayan.<sup>5</sup> It was the first school in this region. After setting up of the

school students of not only of Cooch Behar but of entire North Bengal obtained the opportunity of higher education.

### **Victoria College:**

Maharaja Nripendra Narayan felt the necessity of introduction of higher education for the student of Cooch Behar to fulfil such great mission. In 1888 Maharaja Nripendra Narayan established the Victoria college which is now known as Acharaya Brojendra Nath Seal college. The first Principal of this college was John Conrnwallis Godley. It was the first college of North Bengal and Assam. The 1986 Acharya Brojendra Nath Seal was appointed as the Principal of the Victoria college.<sup>6</sup> Thakur Panchanan Barma ,the father of the Rajbanshis and Abbasuddin Ahmed, the world famous Bhawaiya Singer obtained degree from this institution. The Victoria College changes the education structure of Cooch Behar.

### **Artizan School:**

In 1869 the Artizan School was established in Cooch Behar. It was the first technical and vocational institution in Cooch Behar.<sup>7</sup> The main purpose of this institution was to fulfil the shortage of technicians after giving proper vocational training to the local apprentice. In the initial stage there were three department in the school viz ; tailoring, carpentry and blacksmith. Later on many new courses were opened such as weaver, breezier etc in this institution.

### **Administrative Buildings:**

As a benevolent administrator Maharaja Nripendra Narayan built many attractive buildings for the purpose to serve good administration. At the time of the foundation of the Royal palace in 1887, a magnificent building was established at Nilkuti as the residence of the British Commissioner. But the Building was damaged in 1879 by severe earthquake. One of the most important administrative buildings was Lansdowne Hall which was erected in 1894. It is situated on the bank of Sagar Dighi in the town of Cooch Behar. The library which was started at Nilkuthi was transferred to Lansdowne Hall in 1895. Now the building turned into the office of the District Magistrate. The Cooch Club was founded in 1897.<sup>8</sup> There were so many other buildings were erected during the reign of Maharaja Nripendra Narayan namely Motimaharal, Parijat Villa etc.

### **Royal Palace of Cooch Behar:**

The existing Royal Palace of Behar is one of the notable among all other palaces in India. The palace was built by Maharaja Nripendra Narayan in 1887.<sup>9</sup> It was modeled after the Buckingham Palace in Landon. The famous architect Mr. F. Barckley was the chief engineer of the palace. It is a brick built doubled-story structure covering is 395 feet long and 296 feet wide. The palace is 124 feet high from the ground.

Two large courtyards are attached with the Palace. These were used for the ladies and guests. An enclosure made of iron is now visible. The main gateway of the palace lies to the

eastern side of the Palace. The entrance is made of iron. There are two small apartment made of brick by the two sides of the gate. Each of the two apartments has a dome on the top of it. On the top of the southern pillar of the gate there is the figure of a loin and the northern pillar has a figure of an elephant. Italian architectural style with a large dome on the top of the Palace is the source of attraction of visitors.

### **The Madanmohan Temple:**

During the reign of Maharaja Nripendra Narayan many temples were built in the town of Cooch Behar. Madanmohan temple is one of the notable temple of Cooch Behar which was built in 1889 by Maharaja Nripendra Narayan.<sup>10</sup> It is situated on the northern side of Bairagi Dighi. The temple has four-cornered and a dome on the top of it. The white color dome has a Padma, Kalasa and Amalaka. Every rooms of the temple have some deities. Among them the largest room has three deities. It is a matter of regret that the image of Madanmohan, the main deity of the Madanmohan temple had been stolen in 1994. Thereafter a 'Narayanshila' is being worshipped in place of Madanmohan.

There was a wall around the temple compound and it has a main entrance on the southern side. The Nahabat Khana is on the entrance of the temple. Two other temples in the temple compound add the beauty of the main temple. Cooch Behar Debottar Trust provides the expenses of daily worship of images and occasional festival of which Ratha Yatra, Durgapuja and Raspuja attract the people of Cooch Behar as well as the people of neighboring areas.

### **Rajmata Thakurbari :**

The temple of Radharaman or Radha-Gobinda which is now popularly known as Rajmata Thakurbari is situated at Gunjabari in the Cooch Behar town. Maharaja Nripendra Narayan's mother Dargarayee Kameshwari Devi erected this temple in 1884. This brick built temple has a dome on its garbhagriha. The entrance with multi color khilan attached to the southern wall of the temple. The image of Radharamana or Radha-Gobinda stands on a throne inside the garbhagriha. The Cooch Behar Debottor Trust arranges the daily worship of the deity. There is a large dighi on the eastern side of the temple which was dug at the order of Maharaja Nripendra Narayan.

## **Anandamayee Dharmashala :**

Maharaja Nripendra Narayan established the Anandamayee Dharmasala in 1889 in memory of his elder sister Anandamayee.<sup>11</sup> It is situated to the eastern side of the Madanmohan temple. It was built as a temporary residential place of the monks, pilgrimages and tourists. For a long period it carried the works of Maharaja Jagaddipendra Narayan Sanskrit Mahavidyalaya.

## **Brahmamandir:**

In 1878 Maharaja Nripendra Narayan married Sunity Devi, daughter of Keshab Chandra Sen, leader of Brahma Samaj Movement. Gradually the wave of Brahma movement spread in Cooch Behar. The Brahmamandir was established during the year 1887-88 in favour of Maharaja Nripendra Narayan.<sup>12</sup> After the establishment of this Barhmamandir Prince Gajendra Narayan became its secretary and later on Prince Victor Nityendra Narayan performed the duties as the secretary.

## **Church:**

There is a Lutheran Church of the Christians in the Cooch Behar town. At first it was built in 1898 at Mrinal Kutir by the opposite side of Bhawani cinema hall.<sup>13</sup> In 1911 the Indigo Planters sold their land to the Swidish Mission. The existing church was established by the Royal Government in favour of Maharani Sunity Devi. Now here the Lutheran Church and a Blind School conducted by the Church.

## **Municipal Administration**

Maharaja Nripendra Narayan was the founder of municipal administration of Cooch Behar. The predecessor of the existing Municipality of Cooch Behar was Cooch Behar Town Council or Town Committee. After the approval of Royal Government the Town Council was formed in 1883 and its first convention held on 15<sup>th</sup> February, 1884. The Town Committee had performed several duties which were as follows: lightening the town, arrangement of watchmen in the town, collection of taxes from the carts in the town, introduction of the record of birth and death of the people, maintaining the drainage system in the town etc. In 1893, the Cooch Behar Municipality was established infavour of Maharaja Nripendra Narayan along with the enterprise of the Town Committee.

## **Printing Press:**

The development of the Printing press is an important chapter in the reign of Maharaja Nripendra Narayan. In 1875 the Printing Press of Jalpaiguri was transferred to Cooch Behar. During the year 1899-1900 there were eight printing presses in Cooch Behar. In 1903 Harendra Narayan Choudhury's . 'The Cooch Behar State and its land Revenue Settlement' was published from the Royal Printing Press of Cooch Behar.<sup>14</sup>

## **Cooch Behar State library:**

While Colonel Houghton was an acting Commissioner of Cooch Behar, a library was established by Maharaja Nripendra Narayan at Nilkuthi. Then it was shifted to Lansdowne Hall. It was known as Raja's Library'. From 1903-04 the Raja's library was known as Cooch Behar State Library. Now the existing library which is situated by the southern side of Cooch Behar District Inspector Office is known as North Bengal State Library. Now it becomes an archive for the North-Eastern Region. There are so many valuable manuscripts , great number of books, century old journals, Indian and foreign rare documents, Gazetteers, Reports etc.

## **Development of Railways:**

There was a considerable progress in the transportation system during the reign of Maharaja Nripendra Narayan. The introduction of railways in Cooch Behar is a landmark in the field of transport and communication. In 1876 Northern Rail Company established a rail station at Haldibari in Cooch Behar.<sup>15</sup> In 1890 Maharaja requested the government of Bengal to take necessary step for the construction of the proposed railways. In 1890 one project started the work to extend the railway line from Mughalhat to the southern bank of the river Torsa. In 1893 the freight train had started. In 1899 the railway also opened for both passengers and goods up to Alipurduar. In 1900 after the completion of Torsa bridge, Cooch Behar town was connected with a railway line. In 1910 the rail line was opened from Mugholhat to Baneswar. In this way under the patronage of Maharaja Nripendra Narayan the Cooch Behar State railway ushered a new avenue of communication with the outside of Cooch Behar but also symbolized the modern means of import and export facilities of trade.

## **Fire Extinguishing Measures:**

The opening of the fire distinguishing measures in the Cooch Behar town was one of the mentionable achievement of Maharaja Nripendra Narayan. As a result of this effort the Victoria Jubily Tower was built in 1887 at Bhowaniganj at the heart of Cooch Behar town.<sup>16</sup> This tower had a bell which rung at the time firing in any place in the town to alert the people.

## **Management of Drinking Water:**

The problem of drinking water was one of the fatal problem of the Princely State of Cooch Behar. Maharaja Nripendra Narayan took versatile measures to solve the problem. In 1865-66, the Sagar Dighi was proclaimed for reservation only for drinking water. The works of excavation and extension of the bank of the Sagar Dighi continued during the year 1867-1874. The Bairagi Dighi and the Lal Dighi were dug in 1875 and 1874 respectively. During the year 1880-1886 in the Cooch Behar town there were many ponds such as Chandan Dighi, Rajmata Dighi, Kalika Bazar Dighi etc.

## **Botanical Garden: Narendra Narayan Park :**

The versatile genius Maharaja Nripendra Narayan did many works which made his reign as the glorious period in the history of Cooch Behar. In 1892 he founded the Botanical Garden named Narendra Narayan Park in the Cooch Behar town. He also took the scheme of plantation work in Cooch Behar. In 1878-79 one thousand Sal trees have been brought from Bhutan forest and planted in Nilkuthi area.<sup>17</sup> In 1880-81 some rubber trees were planted in different areas of Cooch Behar town which were brought from Assam. Thus the work of plantation received an impetus in Cooch Behar and it is also indicated that Maharaja Nripendra Narayan was well aware of the environmental beautification of his kingdom.

## **Medical System :**

Maharaja Nipendra Narayan was concerned about the health of the subjects in his kingdom. At that time the mode of treatment was Ayurvedic . In the village area people believed in ojhas or village charlatan. Maharaja Nipendra Narayan took some measures for the introduction of European system of medicine. In 1878 a new building for the Sudder Dispensary was built at the town of Cooch Behar . In 1880 -81 initiative was taken for sanitation and vaccination . In 1885 under the patronage of Maharaja Nipendra Narayan one dispensary was opened at Haldibari . There after so many dispensary were opened throughout the kingdom . The mentionable dispensaries were Sudder Charitable Dispensary, The Dinhata Charitable Dispensary , The Dewanhat Dispensary etc . Maharaja Nripendra Narayan had started the construction of a hospital which was later known as the Jitendra Narayan Hospital.<sup>18</sup> . Thus in various ways Maharaja Nipendra Narayan tried his best for the upliftment of the medical treatment in Cooch Behar .

## **Development of Literature :**

Maharaja Nipendra Narayan was a litterateur like his forefathers. During his reign a new feeling or thinking emerged in the field of literary activities in Cooch Behar . He had written an English book about his experience on hunting which was published in 1908 A.D. The name of the books is ‘Thirty seven years of Big game shooting in Cooch Behar, Duars and Assam’ – ‘A Rough Diary’.<sup>19</sup> Maharani Sunity Devi, the queen of Maharaja Nipendra Narayan was a famous litterateur in the royal family of Cooch Behar in modern period.<sup>20</sup> She

wrote many books. The Bengali books are : ‘Amrita Bindhu’ (Part –I , 1325 Bengali Era ); ‘Shishukesheb’ (1922 A.D.) etc . She has written some books in English like ‘The Rajput Prineess’ (1917 A.D.) , ‘ Sangha Sankhya(1924 A.D.) etc .

### **Development of Roads And Bridges :**

For the development of communication system in Cooch Behar, Maharaja Nripendra Narayan took some steps for the construction of roads and bridges . Lowkati Road was completed in 1878. The Cross Road from Dinjata and Mekhliganj was constructed in 1880. The iron bridge over Torsa river (kalighat) was constructed in 1880. Many roads and bridges were constructed during the reign of Maharaja Nipendra Narayan . It should be mentioned here that the communication through road was formed in planned way in Cooch Behar .

### **Patronaze of Games and Sports**

Maharaja Nipendra Narayan was a patron of games and sports. There was a considerable development in field of games and sports under the patronage of Maharaja Nripendra Narayan. The year 1883 is important in history of foot ball not only in Bengals but also in whole India. In the same year the match of Cooch Behar Cup had started in Kolkata. It is said that the I. F.A. Shield had initiated under the patronage of Maharaja Nipendra Narayan . In 1911 the I.F.A. Shield win by Mohon Bagan was one of a golden chapter in the history of India . Among them five players were belonged to Cooch Behar Foot Ball Team. They were Rajen Sen , Bijay Bhaduri , Sibdas Bhaduri , Kanu Roy and Shukul . Apart from this Maharaja Nripendra Narayan introduced many forms exercise such as tennis, polo etc. He also initiated a prize for cricket match in Cooch Behar namely ‘Cooch Behar Trophy’.<sup>21</sup> Maharaja Nripendra Narayan was fond of some game like billiard and for regular practice he constructed a billiard room in the Royal Palace of Cooch Behar .

### **Develoment of the Cultivation of Music :**

The Maharajas as of Cooch Behar were the great patron of music . Maharaja Nipendra Narayan was educated by western education. During his reign the western music entered into the Royal Palace along with the‘Marg Music. Violin, one of the most important musical instrument entered in to the house of the royal family . In favor of Maharaja Nipendra Narayan ‘ Geet Sutra Sar’ , the musical book of famous musicologist Krishna Bandyopadhyay was published in the Royal Press of Cooch Behar .

### **Fairs and Festivals :**

Maharaja Nipendra Narayan was a patron of cultural affairs. The famous Rash Festival is the main annual attraction of the people of Cooch Behar and its adjacent areas. It is said that Maharaja Harendra Narayan had started the Rash festivals at Bhetaguri in 1812 A.D. Later on in 1889 the temple of Madanmohan was built and the main deity of the royal family was shifted from the royal palace and placed it in the temple. In that year aided by the treasury of the Cooch Behar Municipality the Rash festival was organized in a small form. Since then the Rash festival has been organized permanently in every year.<sup>22</sup> The Rash Chakra is an important part of the Rash festival which is till now made by a Muslim family of Cooch Behar . In 1904-05 at Dinhata and at Haldibari fairs were organized by Municipality of these areas. In 1909 the Gadadhar Mela and Phulbari Mela at Tufanganj and Syam Sunder Mela at Mekhliganj were organized by the state authority.

### **Improvement of Agriculture :**

Maharaja Nipendra Narayan took some measures for the improvement of agriculture, especially in the cultivation of tobacco which is one of the most important agricultural product of Cooch Behar. Indigenous tobacco has been grown here for long time . In 1905 the Cooch Behar State Authority under took an experiment on growing American tobacco. Maharaja Nripendra Narayan sent his third son Victor Nityendra Narayan to America for getting education in agriculture, especially about tobacco.

### **The System of Justice :**

A Council consisting of three members helped Maharaja Nipendra Narayan in the administrative court. They were the Superintendent of State, the Dewan and the Chief Justice. The distribution of power in three section was the chief feature of his administrative system. The Faujdar Ahikar exercises the full powers of a magistrate.<sup>23</sup>

### **Emancipation of Slavery :**

The system of people purchase and sales was prevalent in Cooch Behar for a long period . At first Maharaja Narendra Narayan took some measures for the prohibition of the age old system of slavery. After his death while Nripendra Narayan was a legitimate king , Colonel Houghton , the British Commissioner of the State announced an important regulation in 1864 to abandon this traditional practice.<sup>24</sup> As a result of such great effort the practice of slave system was banned in Cooch Behar.

### **Conclusion**

The history of Cooch Behar turned into a new paradigm under the guidance of Maharaja Nripendra Narayan. He was the architect of modern Cooch Behar.<sup>25</sup> During his reign there was a considerable progress in every sphere of life of the people. Maharaja Nripendra

Narayan was a great patron of art, architecture and literature. The Royal Court became a great centre of learning. His reign marked an important epoch in the progress of education. He had initiated various plans and projects for the all round development of the kingdom. Actually Maharaja Nipendra Narayan was the 'Maker of Modern Cooch Behar.' Sunity Devi, queen of Maharaja Nipendra Narayan was the main motivation behind the modernization of Cooch Behar. The modernization-cum development of the Princely State of Cooch Behar can be compared with the same developed Princely State of Western, Southern and Northern India.

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