

Women Education in the Princely State of Cooch Behar with special reference to Maharani Sunity Devi

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Abstract

The education for the women was previously restricted to the Ladies of the Palace or confined the Royal families. But during the reign of Maharaja Nripendra Narayan education for the women received a special preference. In 1881 a land marking step had been taken for the favour of women education in the state. The girls' school named Sunity Academy was established in the capital town by the direct patronage of Maharani Sunity Devi. Gradually, the girls' school was also established in the subdivision of the state. The girls' school was increased and also spread the women education in the state. The education was extended to all classes of the society; Maharaja Nripendra Narayan had a secular vision in spreading education to the grass roots. The secular attitude of the Maharani Sunity Devi of Cooch Behar State in respect of women education in all classes of the society enumerated.

KEYWORDS: Education, Women, Sunity Academy, State, Secular

Introduction: The primary objective of this paper is to search the position of women education and its development in the princely state of Cooch Behar up to 1950 and second the role of Sunity Devi to develop women education. Before 1864, there was no any girls school in the state at that time women education was confined both Bengali and English medium of Koch royal family, rich people, the Englishmen. Queen Suniti Devi had played the prime role to develop women education with the help of Maharaja Nripendra Narayan. Here is no doubt to say, education system was greatly influenced by the British education system of Bengal proper (Calcutta).

Koch chief Bisa or Biswa Singha established the Kingdom in about 1515 AD, and his illustrious son, Naranarayan (1534-87) not only conquered whole of the Northeast India, but also cemented the Kingdom on permanent basis.¹ However, in the year 1581 AD, Koch Behar State suffered a division at the death of Chilarai (brother-cum-General of King Naranarayan (1534-87)). The western part of the Kingdom named as Koch Behar and Eastern part named as Koch Hajo (now lower Assam). From 1581 AD to 1773 AD Koch Behar State had been a sovereign state and there after it became a princely state loyal to English by an agreement between the English East Indian Company and Koch King Dharendranarayan (1773AD). In 1950 Koch Behar became a district of West Bengal by the merger Agreement Act, 28 August, 1949² between India and Cooch Behar.

But traditional educational institutions like *tolls*, *pathsalas* and *gurukula*'s were prevalent there for the education of the Royal Princes, sons of Brahman and Officials. Royal Princes of the Kingdom were sent to places like Banaras, Kashi, etc for their higher education. But women including royal princesses and daughters of Brahmins and other upper classes were not allowed in these traditional educational institutions like *tolls*,

pathsalas and *gurukula*'s.³ Thus at the early stage, women were kept outside the institutional education systems following the Hindu traditional pattern. However they got their educations in morality and religious-spiritualism from the elder members of the family through the *Kirtana*, *Namaghosh* and Scriptures based stories in their houses as well as in the village *Namaghar*. Besides, the exhibition of the Bhawnas or one act plays on religious themes also helped them to learn.⁴ It was a tradition in the nobility circle that women had to learn three R's i.e. reading of the *Ratnavali*, the *Kirtana* and *Namaghosha* form male members of the family.

We have also some self-educated and talented women, who marked their great achievements in the fields of languages, literatures, fine art, religious and socio-cultural activities. Thus, it was at the instance of queen Bhanumati, the consort of king Naranarayan (1540-87AD), Purusottam Viddhyavagis compiled his Sanskrita grammar '*Prayoga-ratna-mala*', which was read by all section of people including women and Sudras and became main grammar for learning. *Kanaklata alias Lakshmi Ai*, the first wife of *Chaturbhuj Thakur* and granddaughter in law of Sankaradeva was a noted Neo-vaishnavite preacher.⁵ She was an efficient woman of much ability and responsibility, for which she got appointment in the ecclesiastical order, as the head of a Satra and initiated a large number of disciples to the faith during her stay at *Bheladunga* Satra. Another woman, *Dayal Teli*, wife of *Krishna Teli* and a disciple of Madhavadeva, was appointed the by her master (Madhavadeva) as the Medhi or religious instructor, to give instructions to the queens of Laxminarayan (1587-1616AD) on religious matters. Bindeswari Devi, the Queen of Raja Shibendra Narayan (1783-1840), was a considerable well-self-educated woman. Without formal institutional education she wrote "*Beharodanta*", a women novel. The novel is considered as the first women novel in Koch Behar. She had knowledge about English language also. The novel republished in 1930 by Nirupama Devi.⁶

Besides, although there are no direct information about mass institutional education in this phase but there were considerable numbers of self-educated women in Koch Behar. According to *Rajoupakhan in about Saka 1538 (1616 AD)*, *Siddantobagis*, a *Sanskrit Scholar*, under the direction of Laxmi Narayan compile '*the Sivaratri Kaumudi*', '*the Mantradiksa Koumudi*', the *Samkrantri Kaumudi*, the *Ekadasi Kaumudi* and the *Grahan Kaumudi*.⁷ The above mentioned writings are all about women related subjects and rituals.

In the first half of the 19th century, many steps have been taken by the kings of the dynasty with the help of East India Company and British Government to establish modern English/ Bengali schools for boys. But nothing is said on the education of women and it is fact that King's of this phase did not show any interest about women education.

It is fact that the introductions of modern /formal educational institutions for women in Koch Behar State were comparatively late in respect of Bengal proper (Calcutta). But with the beginning of the 2nd half of the 19th century, various initiatives have been taken for the women education by the Government and the momentous of it was tremendous at the early stage due to royal patronage. The Royal treasury started to expend huge money

for the development of the education, including women. However, social structure and superstitions was main barrier in favour of women education in this phase.

It was a land mark in the history of Koch Behar, when Colonel T. Houghton came to Koch Behar as a British Commissioner (1864-73). He not only took the responsibility of Koch Behar administration, but also the responsibility for modern Education. As a result great changes had come in administration and education. He established the 'Koch Behar State Library' in 1870 AD.⁸ A lecture of the *Hitaisani Sabha*, inform us that some modern education-minded people of Koch Behar started thinking about education, especially for women education. The Headmaster of Jenkin's School (1859), Tribhanga Mukhopadhyay in his lecture before Commissioner Colonel T. Houghton on education pleaded for English-Bengali Schools in Koch Behar. Harimohan Babu, a teacher of the same school also had given a lecture in favour of women education. He said in his, a well-educated woman produces well-educated children. He also said: We should not only build schools for boys, for a proper development of the country we should also focus on education for girls. As God has gifted both men and women intellect and ethics, we should not neglect education for girls.⁹

This lecture was a landmark in the history of women education in Koch Behar. This is for the first instance we find that educationists directly advocating for women education. As a result of that, Rajput Zoadar Chandradhar Singh of Mekhliganj and Krishna Kumar Lahiri of Bamanhat established two girl's schools at Mekhliganj and Bamanhat respectively. Ratikanta babu of Koch Behar established a Gurukula type girls' school at Koch Behar. There after number of girls schools increased tremendously. In the year 1864 there was only girl's school in Koch Behar state but in the year 1879-80 AD number of schools increase to 50. W. W. Hunter in his "Statistical Accounts of Bengal" (Popularly known as Hunter Reports)¹⁰ gave us the following table of the number of girls' schools and number of girls' students

Table-1

Years	Nos. of Girls Schools	Nos. of Girls Students
1868-69	06	130
1875-76	23	352
1878-79	48	560
1879-80	50	641
1881-82	34	383
1891-92	10	214
1893-94	11	396
1897-98	12	178

The table-1 shows that in the session 1879-80 number of girl's schools reached highest, most probably due the influence of the marriage of Maharaja Nripendra Narayan with Sunitidevi, the third daughter of Brahmananda Keshab Chandra on 1878 AD. This marriage imparted great impact and considered as an instrument of modernity in Koch Behar State in respect of culture and education including women education. After that there was a great decrease in the number of girl's schools. The causes of this decrease became clear from the opinion of Governor General "Educational expenditure of Koch Behar state has touched the revenue line and it would not be possible to continue."¹¹ In this situation Govt. had "cut-off" educational grant and tried to influence the rich people for financial help but in vein. Following table will show the situation

Table-2

Agencies	Year	Education Cost	Amount of Decrease
Govt.	1879-80	Rs.93894	--
	1881-82	Rs.80894	Rs.12995
Public Donation	1879-80	Rs.33213	--
	1881-82	Rs.22274	Rs.10939

As a result Table-2 of that, there was an unwanted situation about the women education. 'Cut-off, of Govt. grant actually was a 'Cut-off' of Govt. expenses towards girl's schools. Annual Administrative Report of Koch Behar State informed us that Education Secretary of Koch Behar, Umacharan Das was not satisfied about this 'Cut-Off', of Govt. grant. He also mentioned "Girls schools are their teen-age and Govt. should save them."

In this phase all girls schools were urban centric and all schools were lower Primary, Primary and Middle Primary.

The marriage of Suniti Devi with minor Maharaja Nipendra Narayan (1863-1911) of Koch Behar on 6th March, 1878 AD herald a new era in the field education including women education as well as other aspects of the state administrations. She was well-educated and well-versed in languages like English, Bengali and Sanskrit.

Autobiography of Queen Suniti Devi called "*The Autobiography of an Indian Princess*" inform us about her thinking especially about women education. She emphasized modern education among the girls of Koch Behar.¹² As a result many girls' schools were established all over the Koch Behar State. For example, Maharaja Nripendra Narayan had in her name set up a girl's school named as *Suniti College* in 1883. Suniti Devi was the brain behind establishment of the school. Later this *Suniti College* named as *Suniti Academy* in 1921 by Maharani Indira Devi to honour her. From beginning *Suniti College/ Suniti Academy* has become the guiding force of women education in Koch Behar. She had established a technical girl's school in 1909 to make girls self-sufficient. She with her sister, the Maharani Sucharu Devi of Mayurbhanj, funded for the establishment of a girl's school in Darjeeling in 1908 and therefore the school was named as Maharani Girls' School.¹³ It was upgraded to High School status in

1911. She was also President of State Council and also the first President of All Bengal Women's Union in 1932 and worked along with other women's right activist from Bengal like Charulata Mukherjee, T. R Nelly and her sister Sucharu Devi, the Maharani of Mayurbhanj.

She herself was a great scholar and wrote many books like '*the Rajput Princess*' (1917); '*Nine ideal Indian Women*' (1919), '*Life of Princess Josodhara*' (1920), and so on. She was the first Indian Maharani, who visited England and in England she established a women organization named "Sisterhood of the East"¹⁴. She attended the Diamond Jubilee celebrations of Queen Victoria in 1898 and Delhi Durbar of 1911 with her husband, the Maharaja of Cooch Behar. The objectives of the organization were to develop the position of women and to minimize distances between men and women.

She was an educationist and women activist at heart and gave annual grants for the institution, exempted the girl students from paying tuition fees and also rewarded the successful students. In those days when even Hindu women used to stay behind purdah, to encourage parents to send their girls for schooling, she had arranged for the palace cars to ferry the students from home to school and back. In a further effort to avoid any controversy, she ordered, even windows of the cars carrying the girls to school to be covered by curtains.

Academic Achievements of some women in the field of Education:

Annual Administrative Reports (Koch Behar State) inform us that in the year 1884-5 AD Rajshahi Division had sent 6 girls for Primary Scholarship examination and they passed the exams with good results, 1st division – 5, 3rd division – 1. In the academic session 1888-89 Hemangashasi Dasi and Saralashasi Dasi, from Suniti Academy had passed upper Primary examination with 1st division. In the same year a girl from Dinhat Girls School stood first division 8th in upper Primary scholarship examination. In the session 1922-23 Sukriti Bala from Mekhliganj girl's school stood 1st division 2nd in upper middle scholarship examination of Rajshahi division and had received a scholarship of Rs.20.¹⁵ In 1928 Suniti Academy got its recognition from Calcutta University as an upper girl's school and a girl's student from Suniti Academy had passed Metriculation examination in first division in the session 1932-33.¹⁶ The following will highlight the overall results of various examinations.

Table-3

Year	Matric	Middle (Beng)	Middle (Eng.)	Upper Primary	Lower Primary	Total Student	Passing (%)
1912-13	-	1	-	6	15	22	81.8%
1920-21	-	1	-	3	17	21	100%
1922-23	-	1	-	6	15	21	100%
1932-33	1	9	8	24	56	98	93.8%
1934-35	1	3	15	93	93	93	93.3%

With the beginning 20th Century, Women Education became unseparatable part of whole educational system. Co-educational institutions were started to establish. In spite

of that women education of Koch Behar state was in a precarious condition, following will show the situation in the year 1950.¹⁷

Table-4

Categories of Schools	Number of girls and co-educational schools
1. Ucha Madhyamick	1 out of 15
2. Madhyamick	6 out of 78
3. Primary	32 out of 426
4. Sanskrit Tolls	5 co-educational
5. Sanskrit College	1 co-educational
6. College	1 co-educational
7. Technical School	1 co-educational

The table has shown the girls and co- educated schools gradually increased in all subdivision of the state. A detail of the girls' school, Sankrit Tolls, Sanskrit College, technical school is given the table.

Conclusion: From the above discussion, it can be say in safe that women education in small native state was far behind of Bengal proper. Most of the educational institutions were for Primary and upper primary education. Whole education system was not sufficient for the population of the state. Education system showed some ups and downs throughout the centuries due to Government policies and socio-economic superstition. It had been modernized and multi-dimensionalised by Sunity Devi. As a result we find co-educational and technical institutions in Cooch Behar.

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