

The Role of the Jotedar Class in the Development of Education in Cooch Behar: A Study

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Abstract:

The history of education in Cooch Behar cannot be understood exclusively through the initiatives of the ruling house or the colonial administration; it also needs to be examined in relation to the changing structure of landed society and the emergence of locally influential groups. Among these groups, the Jotedars occupied a significant position in the agrarian and socio-economic structure of the princely state. The Jotedars were revenue-paying landholders situated immediately below the ruler in the hierarchy of land tenure, and their hereditary and transferable rights over jotes provided them with a degree of economic security and local influence. This article examines the relationship between the Jotedar class and the development of education in Cooch Behar from a historical perspective, with particular emphasis on the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It argues that the educational transformation of Cooch Behar was primarily driven by royal patronage, colonial administrative intervention, and the activities of educated professionals; nevertheless, the growth of the Jotedar and landed middle groups created a socio-economic environment in which education became an increasingly important instrument of social mobility, prestige and local leadership. The article further explores the indirect and, in some cases, direct participation of locally affluent landed groups in educational and socio-cultural activities, while also highlighting the limitations imposed by agrarian inequality, sub-infeudation, caste and class distinctions.

Keywords: Cooch Behar, Jotedar, Education, Landed Society, Royal Patronage, Social Mobility, Local Leadership, Princely State, Colonial Modernity.

Introduction

The development of modern education in Cooch Behar represents one of the most significant aspects of the social transformation of the princely state during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The state, historically associated with the Koch dynasty, experienced substantial administrative, economic and cultural changes after the Treaty of 1773 and the subsequent expansion of British influence.¹ The transformation of the educational system became particularly visible during the second half of the nineteenth century, when traditional forms of learning gradually came into contact with English education, institutional schooling and the examination-oriented system associated with the colonial educational framework.

Historiography on the educational development of Cooch Behar has understandably emphasized the contribution of the royal family. Maharaja Narendra Narayan is associated with the introduction of modern education, while Maharaja Nripendra Narayan's reign witnessed a major expansion of institutional education. Jenkins School was established in 1861, and Victoria College was founded in 1888 under the patronage of Maharaja Nripendra Narayan.² The royal household also played an important role in promoting female education, particularly through the initiatives associated with Maharani Sunity Devi.³ However, an exclusive emphasis on royal patronage tends to obscure the role of the wider social groups that participated in, benefited from and gradually reshaped the new educational order. The Jotedars deserve particular attention in this context. They occupied a strategically important position in the agrarian hierarchy of Cooch Behar. As revenue-paying landholders directly under the ruler, they possessed economic resources, local influence and a relatively secure social position.⁴

The central argument of this article is not that the Jotedars were the principal architects of modern education in Cooch Behar. Rather, it seeks to demonstrate that the emergence and consolidation of the Jotedar class formed part of the socio-economic background within which education acquired new meanings. Education increasingly became associated with social prestige, administrative employment, access to modern professions, political influence and the reproduction—or transformation—of local status. In this sense, the Jotedar class may be understood as an important component of the social constituency that facilitated the transition from traditional landed authority to educated local leadership.

Historical Context of Educational Development in Cooch Behar

The educational tradition of Cooch Behar was older than the introduction of modern Western education. The Koch rulers historically patronised Sanskrit learning, literary activities and religious scholarship. Before the nineteenth-century transformation, education was largely connected with the royal household, traditional institutions and indigenous systems of learning. Persian also retained importance because of its administrative utility.⁵

The situation began to change significantly during the nineteenth century. British political influence after 1773 introduced new administrative and intellectual currents into the state. The appointment of British officials and the gradual reorganisation of state administration contributed to the introduction of institutional and Western-style education. Colonel Haughton is particularly associated with educational initiatives during the 1860s.⁶

The establishment of Jenkins School in 1861 marked an important stage in this process. The school provided English education and gradually developed into an important centre of secondary and higher schooling for Cooch Behar and the surrounding region.⁷ The development of modern schooling was not merely an educational phenomenon; it was also connected with the emergence of a new class of educated persons who could participate in administration, law, teaching and other professions.

The next major milestone was the establishment of Victoria College in 1888. Maharaja Nripendra Narayan's initiative transformed the educational landscape of the state. The college was affiliated with the University of Calcutta and began with sixteen students. A substantial amount was allocated for its establishment, including expenditure on buildings, furniture, books, apparatus, scholarships and recurring educational requirements.⁸

The creation of Victoria College also had a wider regional significance. It provided access to higher education within the princely state and reduced the necessity for students to travel to distant centres for

collegiate education. The college subsequently became an important institutional foundation for the emergence of an educated regional elite.

Thus, by the late nineteenth century, Cooch Behar had developed a layered educational structure consisting of traditional learning, vernacular schooling, English-medium secondary education and collegiate education. The expansion of this structure created new opportunities for social groups beyond the royal household.

Royal Patronage and the Transformation of Education

Royal patronage was unquestionably the principal institutional force behind the modernisation of education in Cooch Behar. Maharaja Narendra Narayan's interest in modern education resulted in the establishment of Jenkins School in 1861. During the reign of Maharaja Nripendra Narayan, educational development acquired a much broader institutional character.⁹

The founding of Victoria College in 1888 was particularly important. Contemporary and later accounts indicate that the Maharaja personally supported the establishment of a first-category college and that considerable state resources were committed to the institution. The college received financial provision for infrastructure, library facilities and scholarships.¹⁰

The royal policy also extended to female education. Maharaja Nripendra Narayan and Maharani Sunity Devi played important roles in encouraging women's education. The emergence of institutions such as Sunity Academy reflected a wider transformation in the social attitude toward female education among sections of the elite and educated society.¹¹

The significance of royal patronage therefore lies not simply in the creation of individual schools and colleges. The royal government established an institutional framework within which education could become a recognised instrument of social advancement. Once schools, examinations, scholarships and collegiate institutions became established, education acquired a new value in the eyes of local society. It was within this changing environment that landed groups such as the Jotedars encountered new possibilities and new pressures.

Jotedar Society and the Socio-Economic Structure of Cooch Behar

To understand the relationship between the Jotedars and education, it is necessary first to understand their position in the agrarian structure of Cooch Behar. The Jotedar was a revenue-paying holder of a jote directly under the ruler. The rights associated with a jote were generally hereditary, transferable and divisible under the customary law of the state.¹² Below the Jotedars existed several layers of subordinate tenures, including Chukanidars, Dar-Chukanidars and other categories of under-tenants.¹³

This hierarchical structure gave the Jotedars a distinctive socio-economic position. They were neither members of the royal family nor ordinary cultivating peasants. Their landholding rights provided them with economic resources, while their position within the revenue system gave them a degree of administrative and social importance. The development of the Jotedar class was closely connected with the evolution of land settlements in Cooch Behar. The nineteenth-century settlements sought to clarify revenue obligations and land rights. The first settlement and subsequent resettlement operations strengthened the formal recognition of the rights and obligations of different categories of landholders.¹⁴

The expansion of landed power, however, had a contradictory social effect. On the one hand, it generated a relatively prosperous rural group capable of participating in the emerging social and cultural institutions

of the state. On the other hand, the growth of sub-infeudation and the concentration of land could intensify the dependence of subordinate cultivators upon superior landholders.¹⁵

This contradiction is essential for understanding the educational role of the Jotedars. Their participation in the growth of education should not be interpreted as evidence of universal educational progress. Rather, education was initially concentrated among those sections of society possessing the economic and social resources necessary to take advantage of the new opportunities.

Education, Jotedar Society and Social Mobility

Education became increasingly significant for the Jotedar and landed classes because it provided a new form of social capital. Traditionally, the status of a landed family depended primarily upon land, revenue rights, kinship and proximity to political authority. During the nineteenth century, however, a new model of status emerged. English education, literacy, familiarity with law and administration, and access to professional employment became increasingly valuable. For the sons of prosperous landed families, education could therefore serve two complementary purposes. First, it could preserve the family's existing social position by providing the younger generation with administrative knowledge and cultural capital. Second, it could enable upward mobility beyond the traditional agrarian structure.

The emergence of schools such as Jenkins School and later Victoria College created institutional pathways through which young men from locally influential families could acquire English education.¹⁶ The significance of this process becomes clearer when one considers that Victoria College attracted students from outside Cooch Behar as well as from the state itself. Contemporary administrative records indicate that the number of students increased rapidly during its early years, although the proportion of native Cooch Behar students remained comparatively small in the beginning.¹⁷

This suggests that access to modern higher education was initially uneven. Distance, cost, social conventions and the availability of educated families capable of encouraging prolonged schooling all influenced educational participation. For the Jotedar families, therefore, education could become a means of converting economic capital into cultural and administrative capital. A landholding family could produce a lawyer, teacher, government employee, doctor or other professional without necessarily abandoning its landed identity. Such diversification was an important feature of the transition from traditional landed society to the emerging regional middle class.

In this sense, the Jotedar class occupied an intermediary position in the process of social mobility. Their economic resources allowed sections of the class to participate in modern education, while their local social influence allowed educated members of the family to assume new forms of leadership.

Contribution of Jotedars to the Development of Education in Cooch Behar

The contribution of the jotedar class to the development of education in Cooch Behar was significant and extended beyond the accumulation and management of landed wealth. A number of affluent jotedars and members of their families played an important role in establishing educational institutions, donating land, providing financial assistance, and supporting the long-term maintenance of schools. Their philanthropic activities contributed substantially to the expansion of modern education, particularly at the local and rural levels.

Among the prominent jotedars who made notable contributions to the educational development of the region was Manindra Nath Roy. He donated Rs. 10,000 towards the establishment of Manindra Nath High School and subsequently provided financial assistance for its maintenance and development. His

contribution to education was not limited to a single institution. He also donated land and provided financial support for the establishment of Santara Devi High School, which was named after his mother, Santara Devi. In addition, he extended his support to the establishment and development of several primary schools. His philanthropic activities demonstrate how individual members of the landed elite could contribute to the expansion of educational opportunities within their local communities.¹⁸

Another notable example was Hichalu Barman, who, along with his wife, made substantial contributions to the establishment of Baudiar Danga Hichalu Barman High School at Baudiar Danga. Initially, they donated Rs. 25,000, followed by a further contribution of Rs. 10,000 for the development of the institution. Their assistance continued beyond the initial establishment of the school. They subsequently provided financial support for teachers' salaries and the development of the school library. Such sustained patronage was particularly important because the survival and expansion of educational institutions in rural areas often depended upon the financial support of local patrons.¹⁹

Dineswari Devi also made an important contribution to the spread of education. She provided both financial assistance and land for the establishment of Dineswari High School. Her support extended to students as well, as she provided financial assistance to help them continue their education. Her contribution illustrates that the philanthropic role of the landed elite was not confined to the construction of school buildings but also extended to facilitating access to education for individual students.²⁰

Similarly, Rambhola Sarkar played a significant role in the establishment and development of Cooch Behar Rambhola High School. His contribution represents another example of the involvement of the jotedar class in the creation of educational infrastructure in Cooch Behar.²¹

These examples indicate that the contribution of the *Jotedar* class to education in Cooch Behar was multifaceted. Their support took the form of donations of money and land, assistance with school construction and maintenance, provision of teachers' salaries and library facilities, and financial aid to students. Although the development of education in Cooch Behar was closely associated with the initiatives of the princely state and the educational policies of the ruling Maharajas, local patrons and jotedars also played an important role in extending educational institutions beyond the major urban centres. Their philanthropic activities helped create educational opportunities at the local level and contributed to the gradual spread of modern education among different sections of society. In this respect, the jotedar class constituted an important component of the social and economic network that supported the expansion of education in Cooch Behar.

Limitations of Jotedar Participation

The role of the Jotedar class in educational development should not be romanticised. Several structural limitations need to be acknowledged.

Unequal Access to Education: The agrarian structure of Cooch Behar was highly stratified. Jotedars stood above several layers of subordinate tenants, while a large cultivating population remained economically vulnerable. Consequently, the benefits of educational expansion were initially concentrated among economically better-off sections.

Agrarian Inequality: The same landholding structure that enabled some Jotedars to accumulate resources also created dependency among subordinate cultivators. Research on the land tenure structure of Cooch Behar shows the persistence of multiple layers of sub-infeudation and a large population of cultivating tenants and sharecroppers.

Limited Evidence of Collective Educational Patronage: Unlike the royal family, whose educational initiatives are clearly documented, there is insufficient evidence to treat the Jotedar class as a unified educational pressure group or institutional patron. The Jotedars were not a homogeneous organisation. Their interests, wealth and social backgrounds varied considerably.

Tension between Traditional Status and Modern Education: Education could both strengthen and undermine traditional landed authority. While educated sons could enhance the prestige of a Jotedar family, education also opened pathways into professions and urban occupations that could weaken the exclusive economic dependence upon land.

Rural-Urban Divide: The most significant educational institutions were concentrated in or around the urban centre of Cooch Behar. Consequently, the influence of modern education reached rural society unevenly. The development of village schools was important, but access to higher education remained much more restricted.

These limitations demonstrate why the Jotedar contribution should be understood as part of a complex process rather than as a single organised educational movement.

Historical Significance

The historical significance of the Jotedar class in the development of education in Cooch Behar lies less in the number of schools directly established by individual Jotedars and more in their position within the social transformation of the state.

First, the Jotedars represented a relatively prosperous landed segment capable of responding to the opportunities created by modern education. Second, education provided a mechanism through which landed families could diversify their social and economic resources. Third, educated members of landed families contributed to the formation of local associations, public institutions and new forms of leadership. Fourth, the interaction between landed wealth and education contributed to the emergence of a regional middle class whose identity combined agrarian roots with modern professional and cultural aspirations. Finally, the history of education demonstrates that social change in Cooch Behar was not imposed exclusively from above. Royal patronage created institutional possibilities, colonial administration introduced new educational structures, missionaries and educated professionals expanded the social reach of education, and local landed and middle-class groups gradually appropriated these institutions for their own social advancement.

The educational history of Cooch Behar should therefore be viewed as an interaction between royal authority, colonial modernity and local society.

Conclusion

The development of education in Cooch Behar during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was a multidimensional process. Royal patronage, British administrative intervention, missionary initiatives, educated professionals and local social groups all contributed to the transformation of the educational landscape.

The Jotedar class occupied a distinctive position within this process. As revenue-paying landholders situated immediately below the ruler in the agrarian hierarchy, they possessed economic resources and local influence that enabled sections of the class to participate in the emerging educational culture. Their importance, however, should not be exaggerated into a claim of systematic collective patronage without adequate archival evidence. The most convincing historical interpretation is that education became a

means through which sections of the Jotedar class converted economic power into cultural capital and, subsequently, into professional and public influence. The educated descendants of landed families could enter government service, teaching, law and other professions, while simultaneously retaining the social prestige derived from their family background.

In this respect, the Jotedar class formed an important bridge between the traditional agrarian order and the emerging educated society of modern Cooch Behar. Education did not simply produce literate individuals; it altered the basis of social status, encouraged new forms of mobility and helped create a local leadership whose authority rested upon a combination of land, education, occupation and public participation.

The history of education in Cooch Behar is consequently best understood not as a simple narrative of royal benevolence, but as a history of interaction between state power, colonial institutions and local society. Within this broader framework, the Jotedar class represents an important, though understudied, dimension of the social history of education in the region.

Future research should therefore move beyond institutional histories of schools and colleges and investigate family archives, estate records, land-settlement reports, private correspondence, local associations, school registers and contemporary newspapers. Such sources may reveal the names of individual Jotedars who financed schools, donated land, supported scholarships or participated in educational associations. A micro-historical study of selected Jotedar families could consequently provide a more precise understanding of the relationship between landed power, education and social mobility in Cooch Behar.

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