

The Role of the Maharajas in the Administration of the Princely State of Cooch Behar

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Abstract:

This study examines the administrative role of the Maharajas of Cooch Behar and their contribution to the evolution of governance from the early modern period to the twentieth century. It explores how successive rulers established political stability, strengthened revenue administration, maintained law and order, and introduced judicial and institutional reforms suited to changing socio-economic, Cultural and political circumstances. Particular attention is given to the interaction between indigenous administrative traditions and the influence of British colonial policies, which gradually transformed the state's governing structure without entirely displacing its monarchical character. The research also analyses the Maharajas' initiatives in education, public health, communication, infrastructure, and local governance, highlighting their efforts to promote welfare and administrative efficiency. By employing historical and analytical methods based on archival records, official reports, and secondary scholarship, the study evaluates both the achievements and limitations of the Cooch Behar monarchy in shaping a responsive administrative system. It argues that the Maharajas played a significant role in balancing traditional authority with modern institutional development, thereby contributing to the political and administrative transformation of Cooch Behar. The findings provide a deeper understanding of princely state administration and its place within the broader history of governance in colonial India.

Keywords: 'Administration', 'Administrative Reforms', 'Cooch Behar', 'Colonial Governance' 'Judicial System', 'Maharajas', 'Princely State',

Introduction:

The state of Cooch Behar, located in the north-eastern end of India, in the foothills of the Himalayas, occupies a distinctive position in the history of India, as being among the few princely states of North Bengal. The region is geographically located at a strategic position, as it was and still is known historically as Pragjyotish, Kamrup or Kamta, making it have contact with major political centres in ancient times. Kamrup is mentioned in the classical literature like the Ramayana, Mahabharata, and Harshacharita, and this shows that it was also a culturally important place even before the times of the Mughals (Bal 13). Although Cooch Behar was far away, the Ganga plains, they had very significant political and trade ties with other neighbours. With the ruler, Biswa Singha, the Koch Kingdom was unified and an independent polity was formed that retained relative power but aligned with the external forces every now and then as a source of politicking (Bal 14–15).

Cooch Behar is a state that developed a politically flexible state during the Mughal era. The Koch rulers started uniting with the Mughals since the reign of Akbar, and this gave them the autonomy they desired

at the expense of recognising the Mughal sovereignty. These coalitions helped in the initiation of the administrative reforms that were based on the Mughal rule, particularly in land settlement and collection of revenues, which led to the earlier modernisation of the land (Bal 15). This Mughal affiliation, therefore, became a lasting fact in terms of the administrative trends of Cooch Behar.

At the end of the eighteenth century, Cooch Behar started experiencing a new period of politics that was under British paramountcy. This was transformed into a tributary state of the East India Company with the Treaty of 1773, which permitted the Maharajas to enjoy a little sovereignty under British control, who were in charge indirectly (Adhikary 73). This dualism resulted in a new form of government, a blend of ancient monarchy with British bureaucracy to tame the system. This synthesis was at its peak during Nripendra Narayan's reign (1863-1911). Although the Maharaja was seen as a moderniser, he brought about scientific land surveys, budgets, and administration that were both western and indigenous (Adhikary 74-75).

The integration of the princely state into India post-independence was a culmination of centuries of adaptive ruling. Since the days of monarchies, the vassalage of Mughals and dependency of British rule, the history of Cooch Behar is marked by the repetitive unity of the negotiation of tradition and modernity. The chapter, therefore, endeavours to explore the ability of the Maharajas of Cooch Behar to act as mediators between feudal tradition and bureaucratic modernisation, between local autonomy and outside control, which characterised their entire legacy in the administrative history of Bengal.

Historical Background of Cooch Behar State

The kingdom of Cooch Behar, historically known as Kamata or Pragjyotish, occupies a special place in the politics and culture of North Bengal and the eastern Himalayan Plains. It can be dated to the beginning of the sixteenth century, when local fragmentation and outside aggression by the Ahom as well as the Afghan forces encouraged local chieftains to centralise their control. It was out of this chaotic situation that the Koch Kingdom was created by Biswa Singha, and this became the inception of a religious political era in this region. Biswa Singha, a son of local Koch and Mech, brought together different tribes and expanded his control over Kamrup and Kamata and introduced the first stable type of systematic rule in the region (Bal 14). During his rule, the Koch Kingdom evolved to be not a loose confederation, but a centralised state, laying the basis of administration on which other rulers will rely in the future.

The son of Maharaja Naranarayan (r. 1533-1587) of Biswa Singha is considered to be the golden age of the Koch Kingdom. His military expeditions made the territorial limits of Cooch Behar extend from the foothills of Bhutan in the northern end to the Bay of Bengal in the southern end, and it spread to most of the present-day Assam, Tripura, Manipur, and some areas of Bangladesh. Naranarayan conquered the neighbouring kingdoms, including the Ahoms, the Kachhar and the Jayantiya and Manipur, with his brother and commander Shukladhwaja (also called Chila Roy) and brought about a kind of prosperity and stability never before seen in the area (Sutradhar 9-12). His conquests were not necessarily military conquests, but instead, they put into place a system of tributary states that accepted Koch suzerainty but retained local autonomy, just as the previous Indian empires, such as Samudragupta, did (Sutradhar 14). Naranarayan was culturally a period of liberal religious attitude and the patronage of the arts. He funded the reconstruction of the Kamakhya Temple, which had been earlier set ablaze by previous invasions and funded the Vaishnava heretic, Sri Sankardeva, who encouraged a syncretic religious setting (Sutradhar 13). His government also encouraged land reform, literary support and business connections that enhanced the agrarian as well as the business economy of Cooch Behar. The large kingdom, however, started to

disintegrate during the period after his death, resulting in the subdivision of Koch Behar and Koch Hajo by 1581 (Bal 14–15). This division within the empire also damaged the political structure of the state, and it was prone to outside influences, the Mughals being the most influential.

The interventions of the Mughals changed the Cooch Behar political structure immensely by the end of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. First, monarchs, such as Lakshminarayan, incorporated the Mughal overlordship in an effort to have military assistance against their internal competitors, and this witnessed the establishment of Mughal-style administrative and revenue structure, such as the pargana and sarkar (Bal 15). The Mughal system of rule brought about a new system of a new rule of bureaucracy where officers like chauhadhuries, talukdars and quanungos were in charge of the administration of taxation and land survey, and this was to be felt even during the colonial rule. It is also within this time that urban settlements were expanded, there being an exchange of Islamic architecture and culture, and the traditional Koch institutions (Bal 16).

The nineteenth century only improved the fate of Cooch Behar as the influence of the Mughal power and the British Empire was starting to decline in Bengal. In 1773 Treaty of Cooch Behar was signed, establishing a formal status as a British protectorate, a status that the kingdom was seeking due to the Bhutanese invasion. The British under this treaty undertook to guard the dominion of the Maharaja in return for recognition of British superiority, which actually suppressed the sovereignty of Cooch Behar (Chaudhuri 232). Afterwards, a British Political Agent was posted in Cooch Behar, which dealt with the administration and finances, but left the nominal control to the Maharaja. This was further strengthened by the introduction of British legal codes, land revenue reforms and Western education, which further assimilated Cooch Behar into the colonial administrative set-up (Chaudhuri 233).

Cooch Behar had by the nineteenth century been changed by taking out the martial frontier kingdom into a semi-autonomous princely state guided by the colonial hand. The main groups (Rajbanshi and Koch, and Bengali) maintained their own spoken language and cultural cultures, even adjusting to the administrative modernity implemented by the British officers. Their subsequent attempts at neutralising the traditional sovereignty and dependency triggered by the colonial policies made the Maharajas maintain the political identity of Cooch Behar up to the year 1949, when it was finally incorporated into the Indian Union. Therefore, the history of Cooch Behar can be seen as a form of progressive development, namely, from a tribal confederacy to the status of an imperial vassal, and finally, a modern princely state, which was the result of adaptive governance and cultural continuity.

Administrative Structure Under the Maharajas

The Maharajas of Cooch Behar had a rich administrative system that developed in the course of several centuries and was changed with respect to the political situation and the influences of colonisers. The Maharajas, as hereditary monarchs, acted as the highest authority of the state as they were the legislators, judges and executives. They had a very centralised form of government where the word of the king acted as the ultimate final authority; however, it changed with time to be more bureaucratic or institutional. The administration of the early Koch rulers (like Biswa Singha and Naranarayan) was influenced by the indigenous traditional elements of the administration and the stresses of outside suzerainty (Bal 14-15).

Under the monarchical system, the Maharaja was on the pinnacle of political rule, having both temporal as well as spiritual validity. The rulers, early like Naranarayan, were known as malla Narayan, which was a symbol of defeat and security (Chaudhuri 2). The Maharaja attended both state ceremonies, religious activities, and court meetings, which strengthened his divine position among the subjects. But towards the

end of the eighteenth century, with the emergence of the Treaty of 1773, the status of Cooch Behar as a territory under British protection took place, minimising royal rule, yet preserving the ceremonial power (Chaudhuri 3). The Maharaja was held as the titular leader of government, with the various administrative and financial authority becoming increasingly British-supervised.

The State Council, also known as ‘Durbar’ was the advisory-executive body that assisted the Maharaja in governance. This council consisted of the ‘Dewan’ (chief minister) and ‘Naib Ahilkar’ (assistant minister), and officials dealing with finance, police and revenue. The ‘Dewan’ was very important as the link between the Maharaja and British administrators, especially with the establishment of a British Political Agent in Cooch Behar in 1773 (Chaudhuri 34). In the years of Maharaja Bhup Bahadur, the meetings of the councils were more formalised, where there were British officers like the Commissioner of the Rajshahi Division. Towards the nineteenth century, western-style administration and English education also entered the bureaucracy through educated elites of the Bengali population (Chaudhuri 7).

Its administration was dependent on its judicial and revenue system, Cooch Behar. The Koch rulers, as Tania Bal notes, originally imitated the design of Mughal structures but instead assumed divisions such as ‘Pargana’ and ‘Sarkar’, in which officials such as ‘Chowdhuries’ and ‘Talukdars’ would be in charge of local taxation and justice (Bal 15). These were perfected through the colonial control over time. The British systematised a land revenue survey between 1868 and 1870 under the tenure of Colonel J. C. Haughton and Deputy Superintendent J. H. O’Donnell and split the state into six parganas, namely Cooch Behar, Dinhata, Mathabhanga, Lalbazar, Mekhligunj, and Tufangunj, under Maharaja Nripendra Narayan (r. 1863-1911) (Adhikary 74). The ‘Ijaradari’ system of tax farming was abolished in 1872 and the ‘Khas Tehsil’ system was introduced to enable the direct collection of state revenue by the government. These administrative reforms marked an important step towards the bureaucratisation of revenue administration and led to the introduction of standard land measurement units of land like ‘Bigha’, ‘katha’ and ‘Dhur’. (Adhikary 75).

The jurisprudence of Cooch Behar under the Maharajas was based on the civil and criminal courts, and finally appealed to the Maharaja or his Dewan. The courts were allowed to apply traditional laws and codified laws, which gradually became consistent with British laws towards the end of the nineteenth century. According to Cooch Behar State Council Proceedings (1882-93), most of the cases were related to land, tenancy and inheritance, and thus the agrarian nature of the economy in the state was evident in the council proceedings (Adhikary 74). Such a judicial system reflected the colonial duality of power-Maharaja still had all the symbolic supremacy, though the procedure and legal norms were British.

Internal security, military organisation and policing were also left under the responsibility of the Maharaja. Traditionally, the Koch rulers had their own military force as this was necessary to protect against the Ahoms, Mughals, and Bhutan (Bal 13–14). By the nineteenth century, though, the royal army had been superseded by a colonial type constabulary, under the oversight of a Superintendent of Police, who was usually a British officer. The British forces were helped by Cooch Behar soldiers led by Captain Hedait Ali during the Second Bhutan War (1864-65), and this marked the further martial military role of the princely state (Chaudhuri 4). Once Bhutan Duars had been annexed, a smaller militia and police system was formed to implement local order (Chaudhuri 5).

Around the beginning of the twentieth century, the Cooch Behar rule had developed into a mixed system that was an amalgamation of local monarchy, British bureaucracy and local involvement in the Cooch Behar administration under Maharaja Nripendra Narayan. The Maharaja was the chairperson of the State Council, signer of yearly budgets and was still seen as representing regional togetherness and continuity

of culture. The focus of his administration on modernisation, in the form of scientific land surveys, codifying laws, and education, is how Cooch Behar created a quasi-modern polity without necessarily abandoning its royal image. The position of Maharaja as the head of state, therefore, shifted over to constitutional leadership in a colonial system of autocratic leadership with a sense of balance between tradition and reform in order to maintain the political identity of Cooch Behar.

Maharajas and Their Administrative Reforms

The contemporary history of Cooch Behar can mostly be discussed outside of the context of the vision and reforms of the Maharajas, the history of the Maharajas in Cooch Behar, and, in particular, the Maharajas who reigned during this period between the late nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries. It was during the reign of Maharaja Nripendra Narayan (1863-1911) and his successors that the shift towards a traditional monarchical state was more than partially replaced by a semi-modern princely administration took place. The administrations of both of them demonstrate the demonstrative gradual development of Cooch Behar from the feudal state to the bureaucratically ordered princely state, following the examples of British administration.

Maharaja Nripendra Narayan (1863-1911)

Maharaja Nripendra Narayan came to power as a minor, and in the process, the British administration had significant influence on the government of Cooch Behar. When Nripendra Narayan came into full power in 1883, he began a tremendous administrative and social upheaval and gained a reputation as a moderniser of Cooch Behar State (Adhikary 73). Between 1868 and 1870, with British assistance, he placed the first scientific land revenue management system, which proceeded to carry out detailed surveys and mapping, dividing the state into six parganas: Cooch Behar, Dinhata, Mathabhanga, Lalbazar, Mekhligunj and Tufanganj. The reforms made uniform land measurements, and the Ijaradari tax farming system was abolished in favour of the 'Khas', 'Tehsil' system that ensured more equitable and efficient revenue collections (Adhikary 74-75). Such reforms played a very pivotal role in ensuring that fiscal cornerstones of the state were put into a certain position, and at the same time, the state institutions were synchronised with the British administrative standards.

The process of social and cultural modernisation that occurred under Nripendra Narayan was highly played out in the fact that he was involved in the Brahmo Samaj movement because of his marriage with Sunity Devi, who was a daughter of the reformer Keshab Chandra Sen. This marriage in 1878 not only caused a religious controversy, but it also was a catalyst towards reform. Nripendra Narayan assumed the title of a Brahmo and embraced monotheistic and progressive principles of governing. In 1884, he introduced Brahmoism as the state religion, though it was only temporary since he founded the Nababidhan Brahmo Mandir the same year (Paul 4). The intellectual and spiritual life of Cooch Behar was made to revolved around the temple with a royal treasury financing its activities as a symbol of modernity and belief.

The foundation of modernisation that was created by Nripendra Narayan was education. In 1881, Sunity Devi formed a school to educate girls, which became the popular school Sunity Academy (Paul 5). The Maharaja established the Victoria College in 1888 in memory of the Silver Jubilee of Queen Victoria, offering free education until the B.A. level and granting the college affiliation with the University of Calcutta. In 1896, the intellectual development of higher education in North Bengal started with the appointment of a philosopher named Brojendranath Seal as the principal (Paul 6). The judicial practices

were also reformed by Nripendra Narayan. The capital penalty was abolished, and educated Brahmo officials were encouraged to take on key administrative positions, which resulted in a more rational and meritocratic bureaucracy. His rule was a blended idealism in morality and a modernisation that was applied in a practical manner, transforming the fabric of institutions in Cooch Behar (Adhikary 75).

Maharaja Raj Rajendra Narayan and Jitendra Narayan

With the death of Nripendra Narayan in 1911, his son Raj Rajendra Narayan became the King and proceeded with the reformist legacy of his father. Being taught in accordance with the rules of Brahmos, Raj Rajendra Narayan kept the Brahmo faith of Nababidhan as the state's ethical code, followed and preserved the cultural programmes, which had first been initiated by his parents. He was also the leader of open events such as Maghotsava and Bhadrotsava in the Brahmo Mandir, and this shows that he believed in practising good governance (Paul 7). But this did not last long, and when he died prematurely, in 1913, the throne was given to his brother, Maharaja Jitendra Narayan.

The reign of Jitendra Narayan was a transition period. He took inspiration from his marriage to Princess Indira Devi of Baroda to revive the Hindu rituals in the royal court, overturning the rule of Brahmos (Paul 78). The same was done by Indira Devi, who was a hardcore Hindu follower who influenced the worship of the temples and traditional rites were reintroduced, which reclaimed the culture of Hinduism as the main characteristic of the royal life in Cooch Behar. This change, though it signified the waning of Brahmo impact on state religion, saw the Maharaja carry on the modernisation of the administration of his father, enhancing public works, health services and domestic education. During his time, roads, drainage systems and irrigation systems were also extended, and their development was influenced by the increasing power of British civil engineering standards (Chaudhuri 6-7). The nature of the spiritual conservatism and bureaucratic reform in the rule of Jitendra Narayan was one of equilibrium between continuity and adaptation.

Maharaja Jagaddipendra Narayan (20th Century)

The last stage of the Cooch Behar princely rule transpired under Maharaja Jagaddipendra Narayan's reign, which took place in the middle of the twentieth century. Having been educated in Britain and having been exposed to the ideals of democracy, he was progressively thrust under political pressure during the demand for Indian independence. By now, the state had acquired a semi-democratic administration machinery whereby there were appointed councils and civil service departments that operated on a nominal basis of the Maharaja. Almost all the personal rule was almost ending, and the governance became bureaucratic. Jagaddipendra Narayan was the person who invited the conditions of joining the Dominion of India; his signature on the Instrument of Accession dated August 28, 1949, finally united Cooch Behar with the Indian Union (Paul 2). His choice was an indication of the practicality of a new political order that is based on constitutional democracy and not hereditary privilege.

The administrative tradition of Nripendra Narayan till Jagaddipendra Narayan shows following a channel, i.e., the feudal to bureaucracy and then constitutional government. In the reign of Nripendra Narayan, there was rational administration and Western education; in the reign of Raj Rajendra and Jitendra Narayan, social reform and infrastructural building had been maintained; and in the reign of Jagaddipendra Narayan, the princely institution transformed into democratic integration. Together, these Maharajas could be viewed as adaptive leadership in that they exercised their powers such that they could both move between modern and traditional. Their policies made Cooch Behar changed state since it was a marginal

principality which had been converted to one of the most progressive princely states in the Eastern part of India.

Relationship with the British Colonial Administration

The British colonial government adapted the relations with the Maharajas of Cooch Behar by applying a number of treaties, interventions, and administrative changes, modifying and re-establishing the political independence of the state. The turning point was reached in the Treaty of 1773, which was concluded between the East India Company and Maharaja Dharendra Narayan, after the Bhutanese intrusion into the area destabilised the place (A. K. Sarkar 34). With the Nazir Deo Khagendra Narayan, this treaty made the Maharaja put half of the annual income of Cooch Behar under the stewardship of the Company in exchange for military protection, which in effect transformed the kingdom to become a tribute kingdom of the British (A. K. Sarkar 5). With the agreement, British paramountcy in Cooch Behar was initiated and established a system of indirect rule, not person-control but British oversight.

The British rule established a Political Agent who administered the internal government of Cooch Behar, and this marks the start of what Sarkar terms the system of indirect rule that came to the core of managing British imperialism in India (A. K. Sarkar 12). The Maharajas could still exercise civil and judicial power, but they could only defend their kingdom internally and conduct external relations with the British, a system which scholars call paramountcy without sovereignty. This bilateral ruling made certain British superiority without a loss of pretentiousness of the native government.

Also brought through the colonial encounter, there were major reforms that were brought through the influence of the British. Indigenous systems were supplanted by Western administrative and legal systems, and laws were first codified under Company control. During the nineteenth century, education reforms were aimed at training a new bureaucratic government conversant with British rule (A. K. Sarkar 78). Nevertheless, in this relationship, there was no tension in isolation. Referred to as the Nazir Deo and the Bhutanese groups, constant wars between them compelled the intervention of British military and political powers, which disclosed a combination of cooperation and contradiction in this compulsory order (T. Sarkar 45-46). The Maharajas, even with such tensions, were able to maintain a symbolic autonomy to the time Cooch Behar was incorporated into modern India (Government of West Bengal).

Socio-Economic and Cultural Policies under the Maharajas

The Maharajas of Cooch Behar enforced a broad array of policies that were social, economic, and cultural and encompassed a wide spectrum of both indigenous and modern colonial. Cooch Behar became the exemplar of British indirect rule administration that paid special attention to education, health, and public welfare (A. K. Sarkar 45). Maharaja Nripendra Narayan had started schools and hospitals, and his consort Suniti Devi, who was the daughter of a reformer, Keshab Chandra Sen, had opened the Sunity Academy of girls, which advanced the education and social reform of women. Further on, the Maharani Indira Devi still kept funding female literacy and cultural enrichment under royal patronage (Government of West Bengal).

The Maharajas also promoted a combination of Brahmo reformism and regionalism through a cultural source. They were also patrons of temples, festivals and architectural constructions such as the Cooch Behar Palace, a mixture of classical Indian and European styles. Cooch Behar was a theme of intellectual activity with Royal patronage of the Sanskrit and Bengali literature. On the economic front, the agricultural reforms and revenue reorganisation during Nripendra Narayan and his successors changed the systems of

trade and irrigation, which were similar to those in Britain and did not discard the local agrarian system (T. Sarkar 45-46).

Therefore, the Maharajas with their reforms created a balance between tradition and development that saw Cooch Behar develop into a culturally enlightened and economically sound princely state.

Conclusion

The history of Cooch Behar depicts an amazing experience of transformation of a regional monarchy to a modernised princely state. Using adaptive leadership, the Maharajas determined a predicate of conventional rule and administrative reform, adopting education, law and cultural development in the light of colonialism. Their policies made social strides, economic development, and a regional self-identity that cut across indigenous values and Western modernity. After all, the legacy of the Maharajas and their governance was so great that it turned Cooch Behar into a prototype of enlightened ruling and provided a safe way of its entry to the system of democratic relations in independent India.

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