

# Women Education in the Princely State of Cooch Behar, 1850-1947

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**Abstract:** *In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, most of the rulers in the state had to engage in the act of warfare and the solidarity of the empire. Therefore the work of expanding education was hampered. But in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, under the direct British rule of Cooch Behar, considerable changes were made in educational system, with the change in the administrative structure. In 1864, the British commissioner Colonel Haughton took initiative to expand education in Cooch Behar State. From then on the rulers of the state and some enlightened educated men came forward to promote female education. The name of Maharaja Nripendra Narayan and his wife Sunity Devi are notable in the history of the progress of women's education. Many common people gave their land to establish girl's schools. Apart from this many honourable people also paid for the promotion of women's education through personal initiative. Jagaddipendra Narayan, the last ruler of Cooch Behar was also patroniser of female education. Promoting women's education increased awareness among women. After 1950, many women participated in politics.*

**Keywords:** Education, Princely state, Library, administration, examination, scholarships

The History of education system of Cooch Behar is very ancient. No informational history of that ancient education system is available. It is not known what steps were taken by the rulers of the state before 1850's to improve the education system in public. But in the second half of the nineteenth century, under the direct British rule of Cooch Behar, considerable changes were made in educational system, with the change in the administrative structure. Before 1850, we can see various schools were started in Cooch Behar town for the purpose of imparting education to the kinsmen of Maharaja. No initiative has been taken to promote education among the public.

The lack of state initiatives could be attributed to the lack of education in the public before 1850s. There was also lack of awareness about education in the public. Besides if a social reformer or enlightened person had taken initiative to spread education, the Dark Age in education would have ended. Before 1850, no thoughts were aroused in the minds of ordinary people about women's education in Cooch Behar. Therefore there is no specific history of women's education at that time. Christian missionaries or private organizations have shown little interest in promoting women's education.

From 1865 onwards, initiatives have been seen in women's education. In 1864, the British Commissioner Colonel Haughton took initiative to expand education in Cooch Behar State. Under his direction the rulers of Cooch Behar took initiative to spread education. In the year of 1875-1876, Colonel Haughton visited various sites in the state and realized the importance of launching an education system for the public.

After taking the initiative of Colonel Haughton in promoting education, the issue of women's education has gained considerable importance. Since then some of the enlightened educated men in the state have realized the importance of female education. The name of Ramchandra Ghosh, Tribhanga Mukhopadhyay, and Harimohan Roy were notable in this regard. In his lecture named 'Vidyavisayak' Tribhanga Mukhopadhyay mentioned the need for women education. In his speech, Harimohan Roy also addressed the need for women's education. Besides they wanted to show that

early marriages, caste discrimination, superstition and polygamy etc social disorders impaired the women's education. As a member of Cooch Behar Hitaisini Sabha, Harimohan Roy repeatedly questioned the importance of establishing schools for girls.

The collected data shows that in 1857, the first modern school for boys was established and in 1865, the number of schools had increased to 58, five of them were girl's schools and there were a total of 130 pupils<sup>i</sup>. In the year of 1873-74, the total number of girl's schools had increased to 20<sup>ii</sup>. According to W.W Hunter's report, by 31<sup>st</sup> March 1875, there was a still further increase to 245 schools and 6497 pupils of whom 352 were girls<sup>iii</sup>. In 1872, the number of girl's schools in the state was 15 with a roll of 239 pupils. But in 1878, there were 49 girl's schools with a roll of 651 pupils<sup>iv</sup>. Although education of women has been widespread in Cooch Behar since 1875, it was very small compared to the boys of Cooch Behar and the girls of Bengal as a whole. In 1882, one in every 89 students in Bengal was a school girl between 5 and 14 years old girls. But there were only one girl who attends school out of every 130 girls in Cooch Behar<sup>v</sup>. In 1901, where one man is educated in every 10 people, there are 4 educated girls in every one thousand in Cooch Behar<sup>vi</sup>. That is the percentage of girls who could read and write in 1901 was 0.4%, in 1911 there was a slight increase of 0.6%<sup>vii</sup>. In the year of 1882-1883, the number of different government schools was 5. The number of private institutions under grant-in –aid system was as follows:

Middle Class English Schools	-	5
Middle Class Vernacular Schools	-	81
Lower Class Vernacular Schools	-	127
Night Schools	-	20
Girls Schools	-	24

Source: Annual Administration Report of the Cooch Behar State (1882-83), p.64

That is compared to other schools; the improvement in the number of girl's schools was not too bad.

In 1875, a girl's school was established at Bamanhat, Dinhata, with the personal initiative of Krishna Chandra Lahiri. He donated land to establish a school. This shows that there was no shortage of people who could understand the importance of education in remote areas like Dinhata at that time, although the number of such persons was very small. In 1882, another girl's school was established at Dinhata called Rajkumar girl's school. This school was established under the name of Maharaja Raj Rajendra Narayan. In the decade of 1880's a girl's school was established in the state of Cooch Behar under the efforts of Rati Babu.

The name of Maharaja Nripendra Narayan is particularly significant in the history of the progress of modern education in the state of Cooch Behar. Under his patronage, both the higher education and the women's education were greatly improved. Describing Maharaja Nripendra Narayan's contribution to education, "The Bengalee" paper was quoted as saying: '..... The outside public knew the Maharaja as a patron of education, especially high education and as an advocate of social reform particularly of female education'<sup>viii</sup>.

Sunity Devi, Wife of Maharaja Nripendra Narayan, played a significant role in educating girls. After the initiative of Sunity Devi the education of women began to progress rapidly. In 1883 Sunity

Devi acquired the Rati Babu' school and this school was connected to her name. In 1921, Indira Devi, wife of Maharaja Jitendra Narayan took over the school and named the school Sunity Academy from Sunity College. At that time a little salary was levied on the student. But when it became a high school in 1928, it became unpaid again<sup>ix</sup>. The Academy has been raised from an Anglo-vernacular school for girls to the status of high school and has obtained Calcutta university provisional recognition for two years from 1<sup>st</sup> January 1928 to 31<sup>st</sup> December 1929. In 1930, the privileges of the recognition of the Calcutta University were extended for a further period of two years. Originally this school was promoted to a high school in the interest of the Headmaster Bimal Chakraborty and Maharani Indira Devi. On the 31<sup>st</sup> March, 1928, there were 254 girls on the rolls of the academy, in which the number of local girls was 23. Following are the results of the matriculation examination of the Sunity Academy for a number of consecutive years beginning on 1929:

Year	Number of candidates	First division	Second division	Third division	Percentage rate
1929	1	1	X	X	100
1930	4	1	X	X	25
1931	X	X	X	X	X
1932	1	1	X	X	100
1933	4	1	3	X	100
1934	4	3	1	X	100
1935	9	5	4	X	100
1936	5	1	2	1	80
1937	3	1	2	X	100
1938	5	5	X	X	100
1939	6	4	2	X	100
1940	9	1	3	1	55.6

Source: Sunity Academy Satabarsa Smarak Sankhya, 1981, p.96

Therefore, it was found that from 1929 to 1940, a total of 51 pupils appeared in the matriculation examination at Sunity Academy, of which 24 pupils passed in the first division, 17 in the second division, and only 2 passed in the third division. In this institution, Bengali, History, Geography, Sanskrit, Mathematics, Drawing, needle work, music etc. were taught. Besides history of Cooch Behar, geography of Cooch Behar and poetry were also taught. From 1930, girls were encouraged as usual to take part in playing Badminton and some indoor games and also sporting. Drill was taught to the girls regularly. In 1932, this institution possesses a small library for which a sum of Rs.100 per annum is provided<sup>x</sup>.

Maharani Sunity Devi paid close attention to teaching at Sunity College. She used to sign certificates for the pupils and distributed prizes at the annual awards ceremony to encourage students of this institution to study. The Annual Administration Report of 1890-91 shows her enthusiasm- 'Her Highness the Maharanee was pleased to invite the girls of the Sunity College to the palace in May last and after delivering to them an interesting address on their duties as girls, wives and mothers gave them prizes of useful books, nice clothes, plates, boxes and other fancy things. The Maharajah also was kind enough to be present on the occasion and to award a silver medal to the first girl and some appropriate prizes to others<sup>xi</sup>. Generally the prizes were presented to the meritorious students on their success in the annual examination. The prize giving of the school for the session 1930 took place on

the 14<sup>th</sup> April last, with great éclat, under the presidency of princess Ila devi of Cooch Behar. The prizes comprised a gold ring, books and some other articles. The function cost of the state as a sum of Rs.206-0-9<sup>xii</sup>.

In the year of 1879-80, where the number of girl's school was 50 in the state, the number of girl's schools declined to 34 in the year of 1881-82 and the total number of pupils was 407<sup>xiii</sup>. One of the reasons for such a decline was the state government's policy. School grants were reduced by the administration; as a result the numbers of girl's schools were reduced. Moreover the parents of the students could not become reformed. Negative aspects such as child marriage, caste discrimination affected women's education. But if there were enough male teachers as well as female teachers in schools and scholarships were provided by government initiatives for girls, then parents might also be interested in women's education. However the stagnation that arose in the field of women's education in 1881 was lasting much longer. In the year of 1891-92, the number of upper and lower primary schools for girls was 10 and the number of pupils was 214<sup>xiv</sup>. In the year of 1893-94, there were 11 schools and 396 students<sup>xv</sup>. The number of educated girls was small but there was no shortage of talented girls. In the year of 1881-82, at the primary scholarship examinations, 307 Cooch Beharis passed amongst these 10 were girls (8 Hindus and 2 were Mahomedans)<sup>xvi</sup>. In the year of 1888-89, Hemangini Das and Saral Sashi Das passed the first division in higher elementary scholarship examination at Rati Babu's school. In 1893, a pupil from Sunity College holds the fourth place in the general list for the Middle Bengali Scholarship examination. In 1893 Purna Prabha Mukhopadhyay took first place in the first division in the primary scholarship examination from Dinhata girl's school.

From the beginning of the twentieth century, education spread rapidly in the state of Cooch Behar. The reason for this was to create awareness among parents. And the administration played an important role in creating this awareness. Women continue to participate in education ignoring all social restrictions. In the remote areas of the state, there is no way to build a large number of separate girl's schools for women. Yet at this time the education rate of women was hopeful since 1900 the increase in the rate of educated women has been observed. In 1901, the total population of the state was 565116. Of this 10.7% of men and 0.8% of women come in the level of literacy. In 1911, the female literacy rate was 0.6%; in 1921 it was 0.9%. That is the female literacy rate was increasing day by day, which is an indicator of the progress of the society. In 1941, the female literacy rate was increased by 1.76%. It is to be noted that at this time the total population of this state was 298858 out of 638703 were women.

**Table-1**

**Percentage of literates in Cooch Behar district since 1901:**

Year	Total population of Cooch Behar	Total Male	Total Female	Percentage of literate male	Percentage of literate female
1901	565116	300413	264703	10.7%	0.4%
1911	591012	315536	275476	13.4%	0.6%
1921	590599	314631	275968	13.9%	0.9%
1931	589053	312265	276788	11.3%	1.2%
1941	638703	339845	298858	-----	1.76%
1951	668949	360670	308279	23.2%	5.3%

Source: West Bengal District Gazetteers, Koch Bihar, by Durgadas Majumdar, February 1977

The number of girls from 12 girl's schools in Cooch Behar was seen to increase rapidly after the first student passed in matriculation examination from Sunity Academy in 1929. These twelve girl's schools were as under-

- i. Rajkumar Girl's school M.E, Dinhata
- ii. Mekligunj Girl's M.E
- iii. Chhabirannesa Girls M.V Mathabhanga
- iv. Ila Devi Girls M.V, Tufangunj
- v. Haldibari Girls, M.E
- vi. Bamanhat Girls, L.P
- vii. Goshanimari Girls, L.P
- viii. Khagrabari Girls, L.P
- ix. Chilakhana Girls, L.P
- x. Baladanga Girls, L.P
- xi. Golenuhati Girls, L.P
- xii. Khapaidanga Girls, L.P

In the year of 1932-33, the total number of girls attending the several classes of these institutions under the department was 1090<sup>xvii</sup>. In the previous year, the number was 816. This indicates that the people of Cooch Behar became aware of women's education. The Cooch Beharies were able to slowly understand the eternal truth that if women are educated in society then human civilization will develop. As a result the number of girl's schools increase to 14 in 1934<sup>xviii</sup>.

After opening the door to higher education through Sunity College, the girls feel the need to be educated in higher education. Therefore, the administration has given Victoria college students the opportunity to study at the graduate level. It is amazing then that in a remote state like Cooch Behar, boys and girls studied in the same college at the same time. In 1928, total number of girls in Sunity Academy was 254. Of the total number, 237 were Hindus and 17 were Mahomedans<sup>xix</sup>. This shows that, the awareness of women's education was increased in Muslim community also. In 1928, all male teachers of this institute were removed and female teachers were recruited. Prakriti Gupta was the Head teacher of this school at that time. The appointment of female teachers made parents more motivated to send their daughters to schools. In the year of 1932-33, there were 306 pupils at Sunity academy and the total number of pupils in different institutions in this year was 1090<sup>xx</sup>. School inspectors were regularly inspected at each school for the advancement of education throughout the state. Not only that, they used to ask students various questions and write down the details of the educational institution. In the year of 1939-40, the number of schools increased significantly to 24. In this year, the number of students in all types of educational institutions was 2028<sup>xxi</sup>. Of the 2028 pupils, 1292 were elementary school students and 736 were secondary school students<sup>xxii</sup>. From this time, the number of pupils in the girl's schools increased greatly. This increase in the number of schools and girls shows that the people were taking greater interest in the education of their daughters.

**Table-2**

**The Girls performed in various tests**

Year	Matriculation	Middle Bengali	Middle English	Upper Primary	Lower Primary	Total Number	Success Rate
1912-13	-----	1	-----	6	15	22	81.8%
1920-21	-----	1	-----	3	17	21	100%
1922-23	-----	1	-----	6	14	21	100%
1932-33	1	10	8	24	56	98	93.8%
1933-34	4	3	8	15	64	90	93.3%

Source: Madhuparni, Volume of Cooch Behar, (ed.) by Ananda Gopal Ghosh, August 1990, pp.208, 209

Of the total 25 candidates in the year of 1914-15, 22 passed in the first division, one in the second division and one in the third division<sup>xxiii</sup>. Of the total 20 candidates, in the year of 1918-19, only nine passed in the first division, six in the second division and one in the third division<sup>xxiv</sup>. That is to say, the success and failure of the students in the exams was going on simultaneously. In the matriculation examination of 1933-34, four candidates passed in the first division. One of them holds the fourth position among all the male and female candidates in the centre, which is quite a feat.

The contribution of the common people to the promotion of women's education was in no small part. The common people of the state promoted women's education through various financial supports. Seeing that influential people in society were taking initiatives to promote women's education, the common people came forward to promote women's education. In annual administration report of 1902-03, we can see that the number of girl's schools was four, number of students on 31<sup>st</sup> march 1903 was 63, average daily attendance was 41, state grant was 112 Rs and local grant was Rs 12<sup>xxv</sup>. Gradually the amount of this local grant increased. For example, in the year of 1907-08, the total expenditure on primary and secondary education in the state amounted to Rs.45688-4-3 of which Rs.20821-14-1 was paid by the state and Rs.24866-6-2 raised from local sources<sup>xxvi</sup>. It is noteworthy that in the boy's school, girls also studied, but there were not enough schools for girls alone. As a result girls were far behind in terms of education compared to boys.

Jagaddipendra Narayan, the last ruler of Cooch Behar was also the patroniser of education. He also focused on promoting women's education. In 1947 state government girl's schools were unpaid till class X on the occasion of the silver jubilee festival of the Maharaja's reign.

The above discussion shows that the progress of women's education in Cooch Behar has not been so smooth. In the Eighteenth Century, most of the rulers in the state had to engage in the act of warfare and the solidarity of the empire. Therefore, the work of expanding education was hampered. But with the intervention of the British government, work on promoting women's education began after peace and order was established in the state. Women were neglected and ignored in the first half of the Nineteenth Century. Girls were not sent to school, girls were tied to a barrage of social constraints, such as child marriage and polygamy. No major administrative steps were taken to improve their status. But in the second half of the Nineteenth Century, progress in their education began. And it starts with the effect of British rule. The women's reform movement that started

throughout Bengal in the Nineteenth Century had a lot of influence in the marginalised Cooch Behar state. Although the education of women was started in the state mainly due to British rule, the contribution of local rulers of this state cannot be denied. On the one hand just as some responsible people from remote part of the state donated land and established schools in private enterprises, Christian missionaries also showed their interest in promoting women education. It was through these concerted efforts that women's education became a reality. Above all the rulers of the state were able to realize that it was not possible to improve society at all levels without promoting women education. Therefore after 1930, we can see that the rate of female education was increasing. Promoting women's education increased awareness among women in Cooch Behar State. When the wave of the freedom struggle movement reached the remote state of Cooch Behar, several women took active part in the movement. Even after 1950, many women participated in politics

## Notes & references

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<sup>ii</sup> W.W.Hunter, A Statistical account of Bengal, vol.X, First printed in India 1974, Delhi, D.K. Publishing House, 1876, p.437

<sup>iii</sup> Ibid, p.437

<sup>iv</sup> Annual Administration Report of Cooch Behar State, 1878-79, p.65

<sup>v</sup> Satabarsa Smarak Sankhya, Sunity Academy, Cooch Behar, Edited by Mamata Chakraborty, Cooch Behar, Sunity Academy, 1981, p.95

<sup>vi</sup> Durgadas Majumdar, West Bengal District Gazetteers, Koch Bihar, Calcutta, Government of west Bengal, February,1977, p.177

<sup>vii</sup> Ibid. p.177

<sup>viii</sup> Satabarsa Smarak Sankhya, op.cit, p.67

<sup>ix</sup> Ibid. p.17

<sup>x</sup> Annual Administration Report of Cooch Behar State, 1932-33, p.77

<sup>xi</sup> Annual Administration Report of Cooch Behar State, 1890-91, p.41

<sup>xii</sup> Annual Administration Report of Cooch Behar State, 1930-31, p.63

<sup>xiii</sup> Annual Administration Report of Cooch Behar State, 1882-83, p.64

<sup>xiv</sup> Annual Administration Report of Cooch Behar State, 1891-92, p.42

<sup>xv</sup> Annual Administration Report of Cooch Behar State, 1893-94, pp.48,49

<sup>xvi</sup> Annual Administration Report of Cooch Behar State, 1881-82, p.54

<sup>xvii</sup> Annual Administration Report of Cooch Behar State, 1932-33, p.87

<sup>xviii</sup> Annual Administration Report of Cooch Behar State, 1934-35, p.85

<sup>xix</sup> Annual Administration Report of Cooch Behar State, 1927-28, p.59

<sup>xx</sup> Annual Administration Report of Cooch Behar State, 1932-33, p. 76,87

<sup>xxi</sup> Annual Administration Report of Cooch Behar State, 1939-40, p.60

<sup>xxii</sup> Ibid. p.40,63

<sup>xxiii</sup> Annual Administration Report of Cooch Behar State, 1915-16, p.31

<sup>xxiv</sup> Annual Administration Report of Cooch Behar State, 1918-19, p.39

<sup>xxv</sup> Annual Administration Report of Cooch Behar State, 1902-03, p.22

<sup>xxvi</sup> Annual Administration Report of Cooch Behar State, 1907-08, p.21