

The Legacy of Maharani Sunity Devi: A Vanguard of Progress and Social Reformation in and outside of the Princely State of Cooch Behar

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Introduction

The nineteenth century was an era of change and reform, and in many ways, also the age of women. The struggle for women's rights in every sphere began to take shape during this period, whether it was for rights related to education or citizens' rights that aimed to improve women's role in the domestic sphere (Forbes 60). This period also saw the downfall of the Mughals and the ascendancy and consolidation of the power of the British in India. They brought with them the new ideas of the Renaissance and the reformation of Europe. These ideas appealed to some sections of our society and led to different reform movements in different parts of the country (Bandyopadhyay 139), especially in two provinces — Bengal and Maharashtra. In the history of Bengal, the nineteenth century is marked as a glorious chapter. The wave of renaissance touched almost every sphere of Bengali life. The influence of this new spirit is amply manifested in various fields of society, such as education, religion, literature, politics, and so on. The advancement of women's education and the pressing campaign for the abolition of Sati were two basic objectives of the women's movement in Bengal (Ramusack 154).

One of the major issues in the nineteenth century that drew keen consideration from the English-educated elites or 'bhadralok' of Calcutta was the "woman question." The degenerate condition of the subcontinent and the abominable status of women in society, among many other factors, provided the necessary ground to legitimise the 'civilising mission' of the colonial masters. The 'bhadralok' of Calcutta, as a response to the civilisational mission put forth by colonial writers, took up the task of reforming the status of women in the society and sought to modernise them to get their society validated by the British administration as modern and progressive. Keshab Chandra Sen, an eminent personality of nineteenth century Bengal, played an instrumental role in improving the condition of women. But the marriage of his minor daughter, Sunity Devi, to the Maharaja Nripendra Narayan of Cooch Behar in March 1878 spoiled his reputation as a reformer. It led to the second division in the Brahmo Samaj because Keshab Chandra Sen had already separated himself from Adi Brahmo Samaj of Debendranath Tagore and formed the Indian Brahmo Samaj. This marriage finally resulted in a conflict between Keshab Chandra Sen and his followers because Sunity Devi was only thirteen years old and had not attained the age of marriage according to the Brahmo Marriage Act of 1872. Further, Maharaja Nripendra Narayan was a Hindu and just fifteen years of age. However, by dint of this marriage, the spirit of the women's movement finally reached the Princely State of Cooch Behar. Sunity Devi, the Maharani of the State and the daughter of Keshab Chandra Sen, the celebrated Brahmo reformer of Bengal (Devi Sunity 3), ushered in a new phase in women's education in this remote part of Bengal. Almost around the same time, the Brahmo Samaj was further divided into Sadharan Brahmo Samaj (15th May 1878), and in 1880, Keshab Chandra announced his doctrine of "*Nababidhan*" or the "New Dispensation," which was to symbolise a higher stage of spirituality. These developments had a significant bearing on this northward journey of the Brahmo movement to Cooch Behar. Sunity Devi played a pivotal role in this expansion of the Brahmo movement in spite of the enormous odds she faced and overcame. But it is a matter of shame and disgrace that her countrymen did not duly recognise her talents during her lifetime. Even after a few decades of her death, her name is still unknown to the people of India.

This paper is an attempt to investigate how this new faith of Brahmoism gained its hold in the native State of Cooch Behar through Sunity Devi. This immediately connects to the second important strand, which is to analyse the vital role of Sunity Devi in propagating the reform programmes for women in this native State. Her contribution surpassed the limits of

the Cooch Behar State, and this article on the final count explores her activities that spread beyond Cooch Behar.

Sunity Devi and Her Milieu

Sunity Devi, born in 1864 in colonial Calcutta, was the second child of Keshab Chandra Sen (Devi Sunity 32). She spent her childhood in the Brahmo residence or 'ashram' (later called 'Lily Cottage'), which was established by her father in Coolootola and was educated at Bethune College. Owing to Sen's close association with the female education movement of the time, she had the opportunity to come in close contact with a notable activist for the same cause, Miss Pigot. She also got in touch with the missionary Sisters at Loreto Convent. Deeply influenced by the life of the nuns and missionaries, she vowed never to get married at the age of twelve and aimed "to be clever, to travel a great deal and to be a sort of nun" (Ibid 32).

While recalling her childhood days in her autobiography, she notes how she imbibed religious values and virtues. Her father dedicated his life to the dissemination of the Brahmo Religion not just in Bengal but even beyond India. The spirit of "tolerance and charity," characteristic of the Brahmo religion, later transformed into the Religion of New Dispensation, was quite appealing to her. She found "the greatest consolation in religion," not in its "fierce fanaticism" though, but in the pure serene connection it establishes between God, the Creator, and his disciples (Ibid. 24). Endowed with all the attributes an 'ideal' Hindu woman of Calcutta was expected to embody in the nineteenth century, Sunity Devi's mother, Jagonmohini Debi, a "gentle, loving and self-denying" (Devi, Sunity 33) woman exerted immense, direct as well as indirect influence on Sunity's deep yet undogmatic religious outlook. Sunity Devi's life was greatly influenced by her parents. The keen sense of duty, devoutness, perseverance and forbearance, a modern and liberal cultural outlook, and similar other virtues of her father influenced her character and personality. She inherited from her mother a taste for literature, kindness, and sympathy for fellow beings and those in need.

Generally, girls were considered to be ready for marriage between the ages of six to twelve in nineteenth century Bengal (Walsh 36). Brahmos, being the 'enlightened' group of English-educated intellectuals in Calcutta, took a leading role in abolishing child marriage and reforming this practice. Young girls in the Brahmo household were educated and trained to be proficient in cultural endeavours like singing, reciting, knitting, and painting, among others. Keshab Chandra Sen played an instrumental role in this female education movement in Bengal. He established the Native Ladies' Normal School in Calcutta. Sen, however, did not believe in the importance of university degrees; he maintained that for a woman, being a good wife and a good mother is far more important than being able to write M.A. or B.A. after her name. Hence, in his opinion, women ought to be given lessons only in those subjects that would enable them to be 'good' mothers or wives. Such a point of view was undeniably influenced by the ideals of Victorian womanhood (Southard 62). The famous Civil Marriage Act of 1872 legalised Brahmo marriages in India and fixed the minimum age for marriage of boys and girls at eighteen and fourteen, respectively. Keshab Chandra Sen, again, was one of the chief proponents of this Act.

Sunity Devi's course of life ought to be understood within this particular framework. She strived to carry forward her parents' legacy through her social, cultural, and religious works. Her life turned upside down when her marriage was arranged with the Maharaja of Cooch Behar, Nripendra Narayan Bhup Bahadur, in 1878. Reminiscing about the event, she wrote, "My happy home continued undisturbed until I was thirteen" (Devi, Sunity 42). Before delving into the story of her marriage with the Maharaja of Cooch Behar, it is important to understand the context of this matrimonial alliance. The British officials played an essential role in this union.

Discussion on the Princely State of Cooch Behar demands a brief history of the state. It was situated in the northeastern part of the Bengal province, surrounded by Assam and Bengal. The political status of the state kept changing within a span of four hundred years or so. The State was founded by a local Koch chief named Biswa Singha in the first half of the sixteenth century (Chaudhury 203). After some time, it became a revenue-paying state to the Mughals and then to the Bhutanese. Later on, it became a feudatory state to the British after the Anglo-Koch Treaty was signed in 1773. It was subject to the Agency of the Governor of Bengal till 1938, when it was transferred to the control of the Eastern State Agency. In 1950, it was merged with the Republic of India and became a mere district of West Bengal (Majumdar 1).

The Cooch Behar State accepted British suzerainty way back in 1773 (Ray 451). The sustenance and success of British colonialism in the Indian subcontinent, in general, and among the princely states in particular, necessitated the creation of a class of Anglicised Oriental gentlemen who would be "Indians only in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in morals and in intellect," as envisioned by Lord Macaulay. The native princes were moulded through English education to conform to the British ideals of modernity, progress and prosperity, and this, in turn, ensured their loyal service to the Raj (Hutchins 173).

When Maharaja Narendra Narayan passed away in 1863, his ten-month-old child, Nripendra Narayan Bhup, was crowned as the next ruler of Cooch Behar. The coronation of the infant Prince, however, did not take place in a peaceful manner. Initially, after the death of the Maharaja, influential Queen Mothers like Kamteswari Devi, Brindeswari Devi, and Nistarini Devi took charge of the State administration. Maharani Nistarini Devi desired to place Kumar Jitendra Narayan on the throne instead of Nripendra Narayan, as the latter's succession right was being questioned on the ground that he was the son of a lady whom the late Maharaja had married through the 'gundharba' system of marriage. During such controversies regarding the question of succession to the throne, the other Maharanis sought the help of the British Indian authority to preserve the privileges and dignity of Nripendra Narayan as the Rajah (Chaudhury 287). The British Government, however, saw this as an opportunity to extend their influence and interference in the State affairs.

In 1864, the charge of the governance of the State was handed over to the Commissioner of Cooch Behar, Colonel Haughton, and this marked the beginning of the 'civilising process'. Haughton gave special attention to the kind of education that was being imparted to the young Prince. He carefully carved out a plan to make Nripendra "a model ruler" who would rescue that state from the prevailing darkness and emancipate it following the British lines of 'Enlightened' ideas and good governance. The young Maharaja was initially sent to the Wards' Institute in Benaras and then to Bankipur College in Patna. In 1872, Mr. St. John Kneller became his tutor and guardian. Colonel Haughton took extra pains to ensure the least interference of the elderly women of Cooch Behar Palace in matters concerning the upbringing of the Maharaja and kept him away from the influence of the 'evil and retrograde' palace practices like child marriage, polygamy, slave-keeping, etc. In due course of time, Maharaja Nripendra Narayan matured to be an Anglophile prince (Ramusack 107).

To ensure the final success of the scheme, it was necessary to get the young ruler married to an equally educated, 'enlightened' girl who would support him in his, and incidentally, the Government's 'civilising mission' in Cooch Behar. However, there were several hindrances that the colonial officials had to encounter before the matrimonial alliance could be forged. Firstly, it was the principle of the colonial government since 1857 that it did not interfere with the socio-cultural traditions prevalent in the subcontinent. Particularly, the marriage question was to remain a matter where the Indians would enjoy utmost autonomy. It therefore became necessary for them to be very secretive about their plans to influence the marriage and, henceforth, the private life of the Maharaja of Cooch Behar. Mr. Jadab Chandra Chuckerbutty, the Magistrate of Cooch Behar, was deputed to make confidential investigations

and find a suitable match for the Prince. Secondly, women in Cooch Behar were not educated enough to match the expectations of Haughton, and hence, the Government officials had to come to Calcutta in search of a bride. Thirdly, the Ranis of Cooch Behar wanted the Maharaja to marry a seven or eight-year-old girl following the age-old custom of the palace. But, that would, in course of time, pull the Maharaja away from the modern practices he had grown accustomed to. Hence, the colonial officials could, by no means, concede to the wish of the Maharanis. Fourthly, the government decided to send the Maharaja to England to pursue higher studies. The Ranis again strongly opposed this as the venture of the Maharaja to a foreign land carried with it the risk of alienating him from his 'traditional surroundings', apart from the fear of losing caste for crossing the 'kalapani' (Devi, Sunity 43).

Sir Richard Temple, the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal, however, after prolonged discussions, managed to pacify the ladies of the palace on the condition that the Rajah would not go unmarried. Hence, the process of matrimonial negotiations had to be paced up. Meanwhile, in Calcutta, Mr. Jadab Chandra Chuckerbutty had mentioned to one of the missionaries of the Brahma Samaj, Prosonno Coomar Thakur, that Keshab Chandra Sen's daughter, Sunity, would be an ideal match for the Maharaja. Sen was taken aback by the proposition and readily refused it when approached by different Government officials through letters, telegrams, and face-to-face conversations. Both the bride and the groom were below the age prescribed in the Civil Marriage Act of 1872, and the orientation, social status, culture, religion, and outlook of the two families were poles apart. Moreover, at no point could the government win over Keshab Chandra by showing him the material gains of this proposed marriage. The government was aware that marriage was extremely crucial and that it would "either disseminate or ruin" their entire mission of creating an ideal collaborator for the Raj. Hence, they did not succumb to the objections set forth either by the Ranis of Cooch Behar or by Keshab Chandra Sen. The 'Cooch Behar-Sen alliance' was necessary for them (Devi, Sunity 46-56).

Mr. Godfrey Dalton, in a letter to Keshab Chandra Sen, assured that the marriage would be a "solemn betrothal" for the time being as the Rajah was to set out for England immediately after the ceremony (Devi, Sunity 52). He added that it would not be consummated before the couple reached their respective ages of 14 and 18. Having no other option left, Keshab Chandra finally had to "rush" to give consent. The marriage was finalised in January 1878, and it was to take place in March 1878.

A lot of controversies arose regarding the rituals observed at the marriage. As documented by Sunity Devi in her autobiography, it took place following Brahma rituals in the presence of Hindu priests. But this was not made public as it would be politically unwise for the Maharaja of a Hindu state to solemnise his marriage according to Brahma laws. Hence, the government formally announced that the betrothal took place according to traditional Hindu wedding rites, and the British newspapers followed suit (Devi, Sunity 69). This naturally invited a whole gush of criticism aimed at the hitherto upholder of Brahmaism and Brahma ideals, Keshab Chandra Sen. His associates regarded this as a fundamental betrayal of the Brahma values and as an instance of hypocrisy on the part of Keshab. The marriage thus led to the second major schism in Brahma Samaj. Sunity Devi stayed back in Lily Cottage till the Maharaja was eighteen years old when she reached the age of sixteen. The "real" marriage between the two was solemnised when both had reached the stipulated age in 1880 (Devi, Sunity 78). After that, they came together to Cooch Behar as the Maharaja and Maharani of the State.

The Brahma Mission Office, Brahma Samaj of India, in 1873 recorded that there was no Brahma Samaj in Cooch Behar till 1872 (Kopf 325-327). Hunter, in his *Statistical Account of Bengal* in 1876, mentioned that though there were a few followers of the Brahma Samaj in Cooch Behar, no regular Samaj, as such, was established in the region (Hunter 358). Rai Bahadur Kalikadas Datta, Dewan of Cooch Behar, was the main initiator of the Brahma Samaj

in his native State (Ghosh 37). At that time, Brahmosim had no relation with the Cooch Behar royal family. Some other prominent members were Nandalal Modak, Banamali Mitra, Siddheswar Ghosh, and Rajani Kanta Roy (Annual Report 166). But none of them was a permanent resident of Cooch Behar, so the region played host to irregular activities of the Samaj. But after the arrival of Sunity Devi as a Maharani, Nababidhan Brahma Samaj received support and had a better establishment.

The Advent of Brahma Movement in Cooch Behar State

On 31 October 1883, Nripendra Narayan completed his twenty-first year and was subsequently placed as the ruler of Cooch Behar on 18 November 1883 by the Lieutenant Governor, who entrusted him with the charge of the administration (Devi, Sunity 86). Following the initiative of Nripendra Narayan and Sunity Devi, the Brahma movement brought a tremendous change in the conventional atmosphere of the Cooch Behar royal family. Regular prayers and other ceremonies of Brahma rituals started in the royal palace of Cooch Behar. Every Sunday evening, divine service was held at the Jenkins school. After Keshab's death on 8 January 1884, the New Dispensation church was erected on 15 August with monetary support and patronisation from the royal household. There was an expenditure of Rs. 15969 for its construction, with a seating capacity of two hundred people in the hall (Annual Administrative Report 26). Thereafter, regular prayers and other religious festivals were held in the mandir. Maharaja himself became a Brahma and abolished the age-old 'evil' customs of the court, like slave-keeping (especially nautch girls), polygamy within the royal family, and capital punishment. In 1888, the King declared Nababidhan Brahmaism as the State religion (Kopf 329). All the rituals of the royal family had taken place according to the doctrine of New Dispensation. Rajendra Narayan, son of Maharaja Nripendra Narayan devoted himself to the principles of Brahmaism and all the festivals were celebrated in an aristocratic manner. *Maghotsaba* and *Bhadrotsaba* were the major occasions (Koph 330) in the Native State at that time.

Due to the initiative of Sunity Devi, many scholars and dignitaries belonging to the 'Brahma Society' such as Gouri Prasad Majumdar, Nabaddip Chandra Das, Brajagopal Neogi, Khitimohan Sen, etc. visited Cooch Behar to propagate Brahmaism and they enjoyed her hospitality. Troilokyanath Sanyal, a famous preacher of Brahmaism, stayed in Cooch Behar for a long time (Devee 78). Another renowned preacher of Nababidhan Brahmaism, Baikunthanath Ghosh stayed here for three years and engaged himself in preaching the religion. All the preachers moved to preach the ideals of Brahmaism inside and outside the native State and also to raise awareness among the masses regarding social evils. Every Sunday they went to jail and advised the prisoners to come back and follow the right path in life (Devee, Sabitri 77). The culture of Cooch Behar received a new dimension due to the spread of Brahmaism.

Being a Brahma, Sunity Devi was fortunate enough to be familiar with Maharshi Debendra Nath Tagore, Rabindranath Tagore, Swarnakumari Devi, Sibnath Sastri, Bipin Chandra Pal, Sarala Devi Chowdhurani and the other distinguished Bengalis and Indians of her time. The familiarity with this intelligentsia helped her to become a progressive figure. The Tagore family had a great contribution to this culture and tradition. Both Rabindranath Tagore and Sunity Devi were contemporary and they had a cordial relationship. It may be noted that she had the privilege of entertaining the poet Rabindranath as her guest at her Darjeeling residence (Devi 7). Many letters were exchanged between them. Sunity Devi was an eminent writer who composed various poems, Brahma sangeet, short stories, and essays. She was an expert in *kathakata* or the vocal rendition of mythical and epic tales. Following his father's social and religious activities she started the *Kalpataru* festival in Cooch Behar on the birthday of Keshab Chandra Sen where various cultural programmes were conducted such as *kathakata*, *jatra*, *kirtan*, and a fair named *anandabazar* (Bandyopadhyaya, B. 138). Thus, she brought a tremendous change in the cultural sphere of this native State. In the matter of

introduction of a suitable and elegant set of dress for the womenfolk of India she played a pioneering role like members of Tagore family.

Sabitri Devee, sister of Sunity Devi, was married to Gajendra Narayan, one of the cousin brothers of Maharaja Nripendra Narayan in 1881. Being influenced by Keshab Chandra, Gajendra Narayan dedicated himself to the cause of Brahmoism in the native state. He was also the first secretary of the *Nababidhan* Brahmo Samaj and Brahmo mandir at Cooch Behar. By his initiative, the beautiful Keshabashram was built to keep Keshab Chandra Sen's memory at Patakura at Cooch Behar. He established a lodge at Patakura in the name of his wife, Sabitri Lodge. It was a shrine of the Brahmos. They felt peace and happiness at this holy place. At the time of Gajendra Narayan, Brahmo Palli was established at Patakura, where many Brahmo families used to live. Beside these, Brahmo boarding was also established where students from East Bengal were given residential facilities (Devee 27). He played a major role in the anti-liquor campaign in Cooch Behar. From people of the royal family to the masses – all were affected by the intoxicant. Gajendra Narayan established 'Surapan Nibarani Sabha' on 20th June, 1887 (Devee 156) to preach the ill effects of drunkenness. Thus, he had spread the message of Brahmoism throughout Cooch Behar. All the festivals of the Nababidham Brahmo Samaj were performed with great splendour. After the death of Nripendra Narayan in 1911, his ashes were kept in Keshabashram, as his last wish was that his casket should be encased in a stone monument replicating the one placed for Keshab Chandra Sen (Koph 329).

Women's Education and the Brahmo Movement in Cooch Behar State

Sabitri Devee, under the guidance of Sunity Devi, was also greatly involved in propagating the Brahmo faith and improving the condition of women in Cooch Behar. Under the patronization of Nripendra Narayan, a technical school was built in 1908 for women (Devee 92). Technical work, cookery, and tailoring were taught in that school. Gradually, the number of women increased in the school and all of them worked under the supervision of Sabitri Devi who performed her duty till 7-8 pm. Along with Sunity Devi's and Sabitri Devee's endeavour, the name of Nirupama Devi, daughter-in-law of Sunity Devi, must be mentioned. She was the editor of a women's magazine (Devi 229) and dedicated herself to bringing cultural upliftment to women in this native State through her performance (Das 112). She was connected with technical work and various social, cultural, and religious activities. In those days, the Brahmos in this native State had done many virtuous acts. Young Men's Theistic Association was one of them, which was established in 1906, (Devee 88) bearing the motive of improving socio-religious facts. This Association also built night schools.

During the time of Nripendra Narayan, all the posts in higher education and respectable posts in the State administration were in the hands of the Brahmos. Kalika Das Dutta (Dewan), Amritlal Sen (Accountant General), Priya Nath Ghosh (Dewan), Narendra Nath Sen (Dewan) – all were Brahmos and took a pivotal part in rebuilding the State (Das 113). The Brahmos of the State played a vital role in the development of media. A journal named 'Sukatha' was published for preaching and popularizing Brahmo religious thoughts and, more importantly, during the time of Nripendra Narayan, Ram Chandra Singha was its editor (Das 114).

The Brahmos also led to the beginning of many social reforms such as widow remarriage, prohibition of child marriage, etc. After Gajendra Narayan, Victor Nityendra Narayan, the third son of the late Maharaja Nripendra Narayan became the secretary of Nababidhan Brahmo Samaj. Up to the fifties of the twentieth century, Brahmo mandir was looked after and maintained by the existing Brahmo families, but after its inclusion in the State of West Bengal the Brahmo Samaj building was brought under Trustee Board. Subsequently, the Brahmo mandir lost its glamour and turned into a dilapidated structure. Gradually, Brahmoism became a religion of the minorities in Cooch Behar.

The entry of Sunity Devi in Cooch Behar is marked as the beginning of a modern era. Sunity Devi contributed a lot towards making Nripendra Narayan an ideal ruler. The State of Cooch Behar is indebted to her for a good number of public welfare works such as spreading education, adopting various measures for social reform, etc. The Maharaja improved and modernised the overall administrative system of Cooch Behar — reformed the police, revenue and judicial departments; established the first railway link to Bengal; improved communication systems within the state by constructing new roads and bridges; urbanised the town of Cooch Behar; ameliorated the drainage system; instituted a fully-equipped hospital; postal and telegraph systems were introduced alongside English education in the state (Chaudhury 287-299). Needless to say, the one person at the root of all the developmental works in this state during Maharaja Nripendra Narayan's tenure was this noble lady (Devi, Sunity 92-97).

Sunity Devi played a vital role in modernising the state. She took the lead in spreading modern education in Cooch Behar. It was due to the sincere and untiring efforts of Sunity Devi that the female education movement of nineteenth century Bengal gathered momentum and spread even to the remote Princely State of Cooch Behar (Devi, Gayatri 40). Nripendra Narayan had set up a girls' school in her name, Sunity College, in 1881. This was later renamed to Sunity Academy. Keeping herself bound within her palace, she gave ample inspiration to the cause of female education. We get an idea of her role in this sphere from different sources:

Her Highness the Maharani was to invite the girls of the Sunity Academy to the palace 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 Maharaja was also kind enough to be present in the occasion and to award a silver medal to the first girl.' (Annual Administrative Report 42)

She was an educationalist and women's rights activist at heart. She gave annual grants for the institution, exempted the girl students from paying tuition fees, and also rewarded the successful students. She had arranged for palace cars to ferry the girl student from home to school and back. In order to avoid any controversy, she ordered that the windows of the cars carrying the girls to school must be covered by curtains in order to preserve their privacy.

Along with her sister Sucharu Devi, the Maharani of Mayurbhanj, she also financed the foundation of the Maharani Girls High School at Darjeeling in 1908. It was the first privately run school, managed by Indian people for Indian girls in the district, imparting modern education through the Bengali medium (Ramusack 176). In her autobiography, she expressed her satisfaction with the schools thus: "Some of the governors of Bengal have been most kind to my school at Darjeeling, where sixty or seventy children of all castes are taught kindergarten, and I am glad to say it does very well indeed. My technical school for poor ladies in Calcutta too is a success" (Devi, Sunity 97). This initiative marked a significant step towards enhancing educational opportunities for girls beyond the traditional boundaries.

As far as higher education was concerned, the year 1888 became a historical milestone not only in the Cooch Behar native State but also in the neighbouring districts of Bengal and Assam. To commemorate the Silver Jubilee of Queen Victoria in that year, Maharaja established a college in her name (Das 202). Right from the beginning, education in this College was made free to all. Victoria College was considered a first-grade college with arts up to B.A. standard and was affiliated to Calcutta University. Gradually, the M.A. and the Law course were opened and this College became one of the leading institutions in North Eastern India, particularly in North Bengal.

Maharaja was always careful to appoint efficient and scholarly persons in the post of lecturer of the College. Nripendra Narayan's attachment to the Brahmos and his endeavour to

develop the State's educational standard was evident in the fact that he initiated Brojendranath Seal, a great scholar and an eminent Brahmo theoretician of India at that time. Brojendranath was appointed as the principal of the Victoria College in 1896 (Koph 32). In fact, Sunity Devi persuaded Nripendra Narayan to offer Brojendranath Seal this post to join the college. Due to the sincerity and untiring hard work of Brojendranath Seal, higher learning and academic excellence gained ground in Cooch Behar through Victoria College. Later Victoria College was renamed Acharya Brojendra Nath Seal College.

Though she was the queen of a Princely State, she was yet free from any sort of vanity or false pride. Although she had more than a hundred attendants, she always busied herself in multifarious household chores. She was a good cook too. She always preferred to make food for her husband by herself. Besides, she was a pious and benevolent lady, always willing to serve the poor and the needy (Devi 41). She was connected with various public institutions, catering to the needs of her subjects. She was a good storyteller. The stories were, however, related to ancient folklore or parables. Through these acts of story-tellings, she tried to inculcate in her subjects, especially womenfolk, a keen desire for a better life. In her Calcutta residence named 'Kamal Kutir' she arranged a fair during the *Magha Utsab* where there were provisions for improvised shops managed by ladies, chiefly belonging to the upper stratum of the society (Devi 5). The ladies sold their products and got money. It can be seen as one fledgling and exemplary instance of economic empowerment of women at that time.

A vocal advocate of women's rights, Maharani Sunity Devi became the President of State Council and also the first President of All Bengal Women's Union in 1932 and worked along with other women's rights activists from Bengal like Charulata Mukherjee and Saroj Nalini Dutta. Her presidency not only highlighted her leadership but also her enduring commitment to advancing the status of women in society.

But, in spite of her long stay at the palace of Cooch Behar, the age-old Purdah System and other traditional restrictions forbade her to come in close contact with the common people of Cooch Behar. She failed to put an end to the Purdah System in the State of Cooch Behar (Devi 40). But the enlightened maharani always tried her best to materialise her plans for the upliftment of native people with the assistance of high officials. She had written in her autobiography in this way, "I endeavoured from the first to gain the confidence and affection of my husband's subjects, and I never knowingly ran counter to their prejudices. In Darjeeling and Calcutta I may be considered the maharani with advanced western ideas, but in CoochBehar I was and am a *zenana* lady who enters into the lives of the people" (Devi 97). Here we would better quote Gayatri Devi, Maharani of Jaipur, the grand-daughter of Sunity Devi saying in her book, *A Princess Remembers*, "I never knew my Cooch Behar Grandfather (Nripendra Narayan), for he had died long before I was born, but my Grandmother Sunity Devi was a gentle and affectionate presence all through my childhood. Outside the State she worked diligently to encourage emancipation of women in Bengal but for some reason she did not attempt to put an end to purdah in Cooch Behar. Although she moved freely in her visit to Calcutta and other places in India..." (Devi, Gayatri 41).

By birth, she was not a princess, but after marriage she became the Maharani of a princely State and got the opportunity to meet with the contemporary intelligentsia and a good number of royal families of India and the highly cultured and aristocratic society of England. She in her autobiography had described her first visit to England and other places in Europe. She was the first among the Indian Princesses who visited England. In the aristocratic society of England, Sunity Devi was the most beloved and respected among all Indian Ladies. She was very proud of her good relationship with Queen Victoria. She tells her readers how she and her husband got so many awards and titles from the Queen of Victoria and how she was well treated by the queen in England. Sunity Devi went to England in 1887 along with her husband to take part in the auspicious Jubilee Celebrations of Her Majesty's reign. The appearance, attire, courteous gestures and dignified personality of the Empress impressed

the Maharani a lot and left a deep imprint upon her. From her travels abroad after marriage, she gathered various experiences and enriched her mind and personality. It was during the Jubilee Celebrations that the advancement of Cooch Behar during Nripendra Narayan Bhup's reign received remarks of approbation and appreciation and the Maharaja was honoured with the GCIE Award. Sunity Devi became the first Indian woman to receive the CIE Award. Thus, the 'modernisation project' initiated in the state of Cooch Behar in 1864, got the formal recognition of the Crown in 1887. Thereafter, the princely state officially became a collaborator of the Raj.

Sunity Devi grew up to marry Maharaja Nripendra Narayan of Cooch Behar and gained fame and eminence as the Maharani of Cooch Behar. It is remarkable that she was the only Indian lady who was able to make room for herself among the contemporary English elite and was first to be crowned with the high appreciation of learned societies, at home and abroad, for composing her autobiography in English. She was also the first Indian lady whose autobiography was published from England (John Murry, Albemarle Street London, 1921) and highly appreciated by the readers in India and abroad. She has written a number of books both in Bengali and English (Devi 5). These works created a sensation among her distinguished readers not only in India but also in England for her intellectual powers and literary acumen.

She was the founding President of a women's organization named 'Sisterhood of the East'. The principal object of this organization was to solve various problems of the women of the east and also to remove inequalities between men and women in a society dominated by men (Devi 5). Those were the days when the call of equality for women reverberated all around. It was considered as an essential prerequisite for social progress. Education for women was the only springboard for realising these lofty ideals. Without education, the women could not even have attempted to break away from the stranglehold of the corrupt social system replete with ignorance, superstition and hyper orthodoxy. Sunity Devi realised it very much and always tried her best to materialise her plans for the upliftment of the native people, particularly the women.

She had done so many things for the betterment of womenfolk. But her last days were not good. After the marriage of her son, Jitendra Narayan with Indira Devi, the staunch Maratha Lady, she began to be ignored in the royal family and started to spend much of her time in Calcutta. But before her death, she started to stay with her younger son in England. She passed away suddenly in 1932 in Ranchi, leaving behind a legacy of educational reform, women empowerment and cultural enlightenment.

Her autobiography is a perfect documentation of a Princely State under indirect rule of British power as well as her role as a thinker. Born and brought up in the midst of a Brahmo family and society her early age was marked by privilege and progressive thinking. She was a good storyteller. She was so matured at the age of thirteen that she refused to obey the Hindu rituals at the time of her marriage. She added some spices and flavour to her writings by adding some legend and tales of India and customs of natives. Overall, she was very liberal, but sometimes she became conservative. She was also very brave. She did not hesitate to tell her sufferings given by her in-laws. She was a propagator of Brahmo religion and was successful in converting a Hindu State to a Brahmo State for a brief period of time. The kind of farsightedness and the liberality in outlook she displayed even in those days were something unparalleled. And for all these, her subjects held her in high esteem.

Conclusion

It is difficult to determine how autonomous Maharani was as a patron and what exactly the sources of her funds were. Her male relatives might have promoted such philanthropic

activities to acquire prestige within the colonial hierarchy through honours and titles for themselves and for their female relatives. From 1858 till the 1920s, the British developed a theory of indirect rule that helped them maintain hegemony in India without any further annexation. However, they continued to intervene in the internal politics of the princely states for political and economic advantages. The education of princely heirs, according to the British model, was one such subtle manner of influencing the future. For the imperial power, the princes provided a key link at the local level of the society. So, the princes were made to act as valued imperial clients until 1947. Unless a section of the Indian society was prepared to support reform, it was not possible for the Company's government to initiate reform programmes. A group of liberal people who would support wide-ranging social reforms in India gradually emerged after the introduction of English education. Sunity Devi was one of the members of such a group who patronised English education. So, it is possible that she played the role of a client for the Company's government in the Cooch Behar State. On the other hand, it is very interesting to note that women's status became the main focus of the reform activities of the colonial state as well as that of the educated Indians. The Indian intelligentsia also responded to the critique that their civilisation was not modern enough as it assigned a low status to women, thereby advocating and supporting reforms to improve the status of Indian society (Chakrabarty 94). Sunity Devi might have been motivated by this nationalist zeal to improve the condition of women and reverse this condescending colonial outlook. Therefore, her legacy has been fiercely debated. Whether she was an imperial client or a responsible nationalist is something that continues to befuddle the critics.

However, if we keep those contentious issues aside and focus primarily on the kind of works she ushered in, her contribution towards Indian society, particularly in Bengal, is undoubtedly quite radical. From the perspective of contemporary history her importance is to be considered not only as the daughter of a Brahmo leader like Keshab Chandra Sen, nor as a propagator of the Brahmo religion or as one of the Maharanis of Cooch Behar State, but more as a beacon of progress and social reforms for women in Bengal and in India. She made tremendous contributions to the best-known girls' school in Cooch Behar, 'Sunity Academy', which has been rendering excellent service to spread female education in this distant corner of India for more than hundred years. She also showed her commitment to modernity amidst tradition. Besides all these, she penned some notable works in English and Bengali, which are really valuable and interesting and cannot be ignored. She is the first among Indian ladies to compose her autobiography in English. Maharani Sunity Devi's contributions continue to inspire generations, reminding us of the power of education in shaping a more equitable and enlightened society. Her pioneering efforts continue to resonate, serving as a beacon of hope and progress for future generations of India and beyond.

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