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“Role and Functions of British Commissioners in the Princely State of Cooch Behar from 1789-1883AD”

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Abstract:

This study investigates the role and functions of British Commissioners in the princely state of Cooch Behar between 1789 and 1883, a period marked by increasing British political influence and administrative intervention. Following the treaty-based relationship established between the East India Company and the Cooch Behar monarchy in the late eighteenth century, British officials gradually assumed greater responsibility in supervising the state's governance, particularly during periods of political instability, minority rule, and administrative reorganisation. The research examines how Commissioners acted as intermediaries between the colonial government and the ruling Maharajas, ensuring political stability while safeguarding British strategic and economic interests.

The study analyses the Commissioners' involvement in revenue administration, judicial reform, financial supervision, law and order, public works, and institutional development. It also evaluates their influence on policy formulation, bureaucratic restructuring, and the introduction of modern administrative practices. While these interventions contributed to greater administrative efficiency and fiscal discipline, they simultaneously reduced the autonomy of the indigenous monarchy and expanded colonial authority within the princely state. Using archival documents, administrative reports, correspondence, government proceedings, and relevant historical literature, the research adopts a historical-analytical approach to assess both the achievements and limitations of the Commissioner's administration. The study argues that British Commissioners played a decisive role in reshaping the governance of Cooch Behar by combining indirect colonial control with institutional modernisation. This period represents a significant phase in the political and administrative transformation of the princely state and provides valuable insight into the nature of colonial intervention in regional governance.

Keywords: ‘Administration,’ ‘Administrative Reforms,’ ‘British Commissioners,’ ‘Cooch Behar,’ ‘Colonial Governance,’ ‘East India Company,’ ‘Judicial Administration,’ ‘Princely State,’ ‘Revenue Administration’

Introduction:

This entire period of late eighteenth and nineteenth-century British expansion, coupled with administrative centralisation in Eastern India, represented a critical era. After successful military campaigns led by the Battle of Plassey (1757) and the Battle of Buxar (1764), the British East India Company was no longer a commercial entity but became a political force extending its influence over Bengal and the nearby areas with the participation of the frontier princely state of Cooch Behar.¹ The geographical location of Cooch Behar, which lies between Bengal and Assam, was also very convenient since it acted as a military buffer against Bhutan, as well as being a channel of British influence in the northeastern frontier.^{2,3} British Commissioners used administrative reforms, mapping, and codifications of the law to absorb Cooch Behar into a larger colonial system of administration.^{4,5}

Up until 1789, Cooch Behar had a semi-independent status under its hereditary leaders, the Koch kings, the powers of which were repeatedly put to the test by the regional disturbances and foreign dangers. The state remained politically vulnerable to external security due to the inquiries by Bhutanese and sporadic helplessness under the Mughal in the eighteenth century. The ruler of Cooch Behar invited British intervention because of these weaknesses, which he signed in the form of the Treaty of Cooch Behar in 1773, which created the precedent of British administration, although the nominal indigenous sovereignty had been preserved (Suresh 477-78; Sarkar 33-36; Dutta 29-30).^{6,7,8} Towards the end of the eighteenth century, the British started ensuring that they extended their claims to territory and administrative system to such states of the frontier and exercised their control through cartography, treaties, and appointment of bureaucrats.⁹

Having British Commissioners stationed in Cooch Behar since the year 1789 was a significant step in the development of British paramountcy.¹⁰ These disinterested officials acted as go-betweens between imperial orders in Calcutta and the local administration of the Cooch Behar monarch. They served in the political surveillance, judicial reorganisation, and administration of revenue, all aimed at the colonial aim of harmonising administration in British India.¹¹ Slowly, the princely autonomy of the state was re-expanded in the moves of the Commissioners, being institutionalised in the legal and cartographic hierarchy of the British Empire.

Simply put, the British Commissioners in Cooch Behar were facilitators of change, which means their mandate was to ensure that they helped shift the localised monarchy to an administrative dependency under colonial suzerainty.¹² So in this chapter, we will look at the reconstruction of the political identity and institutional environment of Cooch Behar that took place between 1789 and 1883 as a result of their authority, during the expansive British Raj.

Historical Background: British-Cooch Behar Relations:

Around the end of the eighteenth century, the state of Cooch Behar was a principal princely country and highly troubled at the time.¹³ Caught between the territorial ambition of Bhutan and the

North and the southern political aspirations of the Bengal Subah, the independence of Cooch Behar started to be lost in a series of decades before it was formally under the day supervision by Britain. The invasion of 1773-1774 by the Bhutanese changed the situation, and the military incapacity of the Koch leaders fell open. The Bhutanese troops had taken over sections of the Duars and were putting pressure on the local chiefs, posing a threat to trade as well as internal security.¹⁴ With looming suppression, the governing Maharaja of Cooch Behar requested the British East India Company to help them with military support. In reaction to the strategy of securing their frontier to the northeast and having some buffer to Bhutanese influence, the Company sent soldiers of Rangpur to the Bhutanese occupation and managed to drive the intruders away.¹⁵

The effect of such a military intervention was a formal document which was presented in the Treaty of Cooch Behar (1773), and it was a milestone agreement that reshaped the political relations of the state with the British.¹⁶ The treaty had the British offer protection to the Maharaja in exchange for an acknowledgement of British dominance and partiality in the administration of the revenue to the state. Although this document technically saved the ruler his powers, it was, in effect, turning Cooch Behar into a feudal state under the Company protection, an ally and not a sovereign.¹⁷ Such a structure resembled British treaties in other parts of the East Indian frontiers, where it was common to have treaties that comprised a mixture of language of protection with the machinery of indirect control.

This would eventually develop in 1789 as militarily dependent on formal British supervision. The East India Company also named a British Commissioner to handle the administration of Cooch Behar, and this was the beginning of another chapter in the history of government. At first, this role was to control political correspondence, arbitrate internal sections in the royal family and to oversee financial rectitude that would suit both the Company standards. These sales of power proved short-lived as the Commissioner's mandate soon extended to making exact administrative decisions, near totalizing internal government against the colonial bureaucracy.¹⁸

This move to set up the office of the Commissioner signified broad-based changes in the manner in which the East India Company managed its frontiers at this time. As Suresh makes it sound, the first colonial rulers used the representations of cartography and the law to change the relationship of politics into the relationship of territory, having redefined the idea of sovereignty with the help of maps, treaties and official administration.¹⁹ Through this procedure, Cooch Behar, which was an ally whose militarily secured status was preserved, transformed into a politically controlled state of the prince. The Commissioner, therefore, became the embodiment of the metamorphosis of protection to suzerainty of a bilateral cooperation and the stratified hierarchy of the British imperial order.^{20,21}

By that early in the nineteenth century, the government of Cooch Behar had been reformed in accordance with the administrative system of the East India Company in Bengal.²² The presence of the Commissioner also made sure that the interests of the Company, especially the ones related to revenue

collection and legal control, were always prioritised.²³ The Maharaja continued to have the title, but the autonomy to make political decisions was rather symbolic. It is the British policy of indirect rule, optimised by such build-ups, that formed the foundation of more penetration into northeastern India in the decades that followed.²⁴

The Role and Powers of British Commissioners (1830–1860):

The 1830-1860 was a crucial era in the political development of Cooch Behar, which was under indirect British rule. At this stage, the institution of the British Commissioner had already become much involved in the administration of the state, the officer being the political agent and, in effect, governor. The Governor-General had the Commissioner as its representative, and he was given the mandate to control all vital areas of the governance of this state, including revenue, judiciary, policing and education.²⁵ The British succeeded in rearranging the sovereignty of Cooch Behar using this system without destroying the monarchy directly.

Administrative Authority:

The Commissioners exercised a general administrative power and became the main realisers of the policy of the Company in the region. The dual-signature rule, the conditions of which all official texts had to bear the seals of the Maharaja and the Commissioner, and which was reinforced by symbolic signifying measures of shared sovereignty, in fact reassured British supremacy, already existed, having been promulgated by the first Resident-Commissioner, Henry Douglas, in 1789.²⁶ These precedents continued very far into the nineteenth century, and under them the office of Commissioner became the real centre of power in Cooch Behar.

The British provided a logical oversight of revenue collection in the state under different Commissioners. According to Sarkar, Douglas introduced 'Ijaradari' or the system of farming, whereby the collection of land revenue was left to contracted middlemen, yet there was very strict British control.²⁷ This system, which was later changed and enhanced by other administrators such as C. A. Bruce and W. T. Smith, was meant to stabilise the treasury and ensure predictable remittances to the Company.²⁸ Another step that the Commissioners took was the establishment of distinct criminal and revenue courts and the relocation of the Bengali judicial structure in the princely state.²⁹ These reforms enabled them to centralise the economic power and relegated the traditional officers, the Dewan as well as the Sazwals, to a ceremonial or advisory status.

Political Oversight:

The Commissioner had control over the Maharaja and his council to the point where he was closely monitoring these individuals. Although formally the Raja remained sovereign, Bruce officers corresponded to the Governor-General about domestic affairs, and they had the prerogative to interfere in the circumstances of maladministration or a succession crisis. According to Sarkar, the correspondence between the Commissioner and Calcutta involved the day-to-day decisions concerning

the number of problems of the State, meaning that royal independence was being eroded.³⁰ The British also defended their interventions in the royal household in situations of feudalism with each other in the face of royal disputes like those between Raja Harendra Narayan and his Dewan by claiming that they were victims of anarchy, oppression and bloodshed.³¹ This made the Commissioner act as an administrator as well as a political overseer so that there was no decision that could be made without British approval.

The Commissioner and the Cooch Behar Raj (1860–1883):

The years between the period of 1860 and 1883 were an era of transition, as well as institutionalisation in the Cooch Behar princely state. The British power, which is manifested through the office of the Commissioner, was during these years increased beyond supervision to an administrative control. This changed when Maharaja Narendra Narayan died in 1863, after which the British created a regency in the leadership of the minor ruler Nripendra Narayan. The British, as it has been cited by Adhikary, had taken all the supreme authority of the officials in the State by the 1860s, and the Maharaja relied on their consultation.³² The Commissioner became, therefore, the protector of the continuity of the royal and the chief implementer of British policy in the state.

Transition Period and Consolidation of British Control:

Transference of the administrative machinery in Cooch Behar into the Welch system of the Bengal Presidency had been maximised by mid the nineteenth century. British officers had been introduced into office in important posts such as that of the Superintendent and the Deputy Commissioner, and that ensured that revenue, law and land management decisions were made on the lines of Bengal and Assam.³³ This administrative assimilation became the peak of the gradual transformation of nominal sovereignty to British suzerainty. British domination was concentrated mainly on agrarian growth and the collection of revenue. In 1871, it was reported that the colonial rulers had cleared nearly three-fourths of the jungle, and that it was holding an area that could be opened to ploughing; an indication that the colonial rulers were deforesting the area and intensifying agriculture to generate income.³⁴

The Regency Council (1863–1883):

This British influence was further consolidated by the regency of Maharaj, wherein Narendra Narayan died in 1863. A Regency Council was also established under the watch of the British Commissioner, who was the same guardian and political adviser to the young Nripendra Narayan.^{35,36} According to Adhikary, the regency council was practically at the mercy of the British Commissioner, who served as the supreme authority within the state.³⁷ The commissioner and his deputies came up with vast administrative changes, especially in the fields of land revenue and infrastructure.

The scientific land survey led by Colonel J. C. Haughton, who was the British political agent at that time, restructured the land revenue assessment on a contemporary bureaucratic basis.³⁸ In 1872,

he abolished the 'Ijaradari system' of revenue farming and substituted it with the khas tehsil system by putting collection under the government control itself.³⁹ Those reforms cost intermediary landlords and increased government income, and the fiscal system of Cooch Behar matched the Permanent Settlement of Bengal.

Reforms under the Commissioner's Supervision:

The regency had a regular budget system (1866-67), which was first introduced in the history of the state under the leadership of the Commissioner to align income and expenditure.⁴⁰ This was succeeded by the full First Land Settlement of 1872 that partitioned the land into six parganas of Cooch Behar Sadar, Tufanganj, Dinhata, Lalbazar, Mekhliganj, and Mathabhanga, which were divided into taluks in units of bigha-katha-dhur. The statistics were remarkable; the revenue increased to ₹9,38,610, almost thrice as high as before at ₹ 3,64,139, which showed the effectiveness of British fiscal management.⁴¹

Even social policy and education became influenced by the British. Through the regency, the Commissioner stimulated the English education, eventually leading to the establishment of Victoria College, which became a symbol of the modernisation culture along colonial guidance. According to Adhikary, his era was characterised by the peak of modernity in British ideology, and the reign of Nripendra Narayan became associated with reformist paternalism with references to the British ideals. Courts were also reformed by following colonial precedents, founding regular courts and formulating legal procedures, bypassing the previous customary practice.⁴²

Social and Legal Reforms Introduced:

During the period of 1830-1860, usually Commissioners effected the reforms and aimed at modernization the legal and social modernization of the state according to British norms. Following the attempts to codify judicial procedures, in 1840, the Rajsabha, or State Court, was established, which, according to British officers, was a sign of progress and good governance.⁴³ The Government, also, under Maharaja Sibendra Narayan, with the British still urging it on, worked at the elimination of 'Sati' as well as the extension of Western education, of which Jenkins, the British Agent on the North-East Frontier, gave approval, saying that it was pleasing to the Government.⁴⁴ These social reforms pointed to the greater colonial ambition of moral justification and administrative regulation in the banner of modernization.

Comparative Perspective:

The encounters of Cooch Behar were similar to those of other princely states like Sikkim and Tripura, where the British Commissioners and Political Agents were used to mediate between indigenous rulers and the colonial rule. Each of these times, the Commissioners centralised the fiscal, the judicial and the political forces and maintained the veneer of royal independence. According to Sarkar, the net result of these policies by 1860 was that commissioners were now the true

administrators of the State.⁴⁵ The power of the Raja was limited to ritual obligations, but the Commissioner had decisive power in all things of government.

Political Symbolism and Paramountcy:

This double role of the Commissioner as both protector of the monarch and spokesperson of the Crown provided the Commissioner with formal and political superiority. His office contained the concept of British paramountcy, where the royal institutions, even though it was a subordinate branch of imperial rule. According to Adhikary, the British administration attempted to demonstrate good intentions by introducing reforms in the country, yet the overall goal was to control the situation. This masculine discourse of modernisation had more secret economic as well as environmental implications. Deforestation of the trees to accommodate agricultural growth, which is supported by the administration of the Commissioner, brought about environmental degradation and a reduction in the rainfall in the subsequent decades.⁴⁶

This led to the transformation of the character of Cooch Behar before Maharaja Nripendra Narayan formally took over power in 1883. The bureaucracy, the land system and even the educational institutions had the strong British stamp on them. The Commissioner was not only the creator of the modernization of the administration but also the existing embodiment of the British supremacy in the state, which, in fact, was independent only by name.

Impact of the Commissioners on Cooch Behar Society and Governance:

The ultimate phase of the integration of the kingdom within the colonial administrative and economic system is the appointment of the British Commissioners in Cooch Behar, which started in the late eighteenth century and continued to the late nineteenth century. The economy of the state was transformed under the Commissioners, such as Henry Douglas and Charles Bruce, because of the reorganisation of land and revenue collection. According to Sarkar, Douglas added the system of collection of revenue, which was uniform and the Ijaradari system of land revenue settlement to ensure that the state income would be stable and the power over local cultivators would be enhanced.⁴⁷ These restructurings incorporated the agrarian system of Cooch Behar in the colonial market, where agrarian activities were fostered by new cash crops and cash-based exchanges. They, however, were also characterised by causing misery to the Ryots who were victims of extortion and huge debts as a result of the predatory nature of the settlement.⁴⁸

Economic reliance on the colonial structures also became a factor of economic growth, with the Commissioners focusing more on productivity rather than subsistence. Syntokism and indentured servitude grew quickly, and Sarkar commented that the peasants converted into fugitives and the state continued to lose more revenue, which was characteristic of the extraction of surpluses under colonialists.⁴⁹

Socio-cultural sphere also represented the domain that was modified due to the influences of

the British administration. The Maharajas who studied in England were focused on proving the historical greatness of Cooch Behar by using modern education and community service as passive forms of imitating the Western patterns.⁵⁰ Both the schools and the administrative institutions created by the Commissioners were Western in style, giving rise to a group of elites who were well informed about colonial bureaucracy; the monarch was no longer in touch with its traditional constituents. This alienation was heightened by the growing number of British officials in the regency since they turned out to be the actual administrators of the State.⁵¹

The British developed a hybrid system that combined localised monarchy and colonial bureaucracy in politics. In 1883, as an imperial symbol, the dualism of tradition and empire was represented in the Council of State, made up of the Maharaja, who served as President and the Superintendent, who served as Vice President.⁵² Such an arrangement maintained prestige amongst the princes as well as the British paramountcy. However, the system developed local unrest. Hoque documents that the cultural development of the State was observable under Britain patronage, though it was coupled with the feeling of anger of the local citizens towards foreign interference in the governance.⁵³

Simply put, the Commissioners had a two-fold effect on Cooch Behar: they helped to modernise its institutions and infrastructure, as well as entwined its economy, politics, and culture with the colonial state. What came out was an entangled history of development tinged with abuse and dissatisfaction.

Transition to Indirect Rule and the End of the Commissioner's Dominance:

A major change in the running of the Cooch Behar government happened in the year 1883 when Maharaja Nripendra Narayan entered his majority. This incident practically terminated the regency council and increased the immediate jurisdiction of the Commissioner in the administration of the state. According to Adhikary, when the Maharaja took over power, the executive authority of the British Commissioner was limited and reduced to an advisory control.⁵⁴ The change of British regency into princely rule marked a new shift of indirect rule, with the Maharaja being the administrator in structures and organisations that had been set to be governed following British expectations and influence.

Although this power transfer was done on a nominal basis, the administrative system that was established by the British remained virtually the same. The Dewan, Superintendent and Deputy Commissioner offices were kept under the measure of civil officials who were instructed on colonial practices.⁵⁵ Such bureaucracies guaranteed that British rules of administration prevailed even when the Commissioner stopped administering the day-to-day government. The government that was led by the Maharaja, as Ratna Paul points out, was based on the British system of rule, but at the same time, it enacted reforms that were applicable locally.⁵⁶ In this way, the supremacy of the Commissioner was

diminished, but the British stamp remained on the Cooch Behar institutions.

This period after 1883 was also characterised by the modernisation that was being adopted by the Maharaja as a result of the influences of his western education and association with his reformist influences, such as the Brahmo Samaj. Nripendra Narayan was a reformer assisted by his wife, Sunity Devi, who introduced large-scale education, legal, and road reforms. After its foundation, Victoria College in 1888 artificially became an icon of the enlightenment ruling system, and it provides Master-level education, which is free and grants access to Calcutta University.⁵⁷ These reforms indicated the Maharaja's attempt to make a point out of showing that a native state could experience development under the leadership of natives with credence to the modern principles.⁵⁸

Meanwhile, the fiscal and legal issues were still observed by the British political officers, who ensured the predominance of the colonial government. According to the Annual Administrative Reports, British agents retained their right of supervision and advice in land settlement and finance despite 1883.⁵⁹ Therefore, as the Maharaja had both ceremonial and legislative independence, sovereignty was subject to colonial control.

The institutional heritage of this time survived till the twentieth century. The administrative lines, the budgetary system and the judicial processes that were initiated under the Commissioners became established, giving the foundation to the modern Cooch Behar State. At the end, Paul expresses that the indirect rule was a mixture of monarchical tradition with bureaucratic modernity that modelled a new polity that contributed towards closer integration of Cooch Behar into the British India order.⁶⁰

Conclusion:

The history of the development of the British rule in Cooch Behar during the period 1789 to 1883 indicates how the Commissioners were the main icons of the transformation of the state, once an independent kingdom, to a modernised and submissive princely state. Reform in land revenue, law and education was established by the Commissioners, bringing in bureaucratic efficiency and centralised control, which transformed the way the government was run. The British, as Sarkar notes, turned the local system of governance into a scaled-down version of the colonial state, with the former being both economically stable and subservient to the latter.⁶¹

The British form of legacy was present in the post-Commissioner direct rule. According to Adhikary, by 1883, just after Maharaja Nripendra Narayan took full power, the institutions formed under the Commissioners had turned out to be the backbone of the State with regard to its administrative set-up.⁶² The coordination into the colonial economy and culture was done in Cooch Behar with the introduction of Western education, modern infrastructure and codification of laws. Meanwhile, these reforms undermined the positions of indigenous autonomy and established a monarchy to continue working in the shadow of British paramountcy.

In this integration of monarchy and bureaucracy, a hybrid polity rose with forms and

perspectives of native ambition and colonial domination.⁶³ Cooch Behar, therefore, is a small empire of indirect British rule in Eastern India--where modernisation and dependency went hand-in-hand, and left a two-sided legacy in both constructive and deconstructive developments.

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