

## Suniti Devi and the Social Reform Movement of 19<sup>th</sup> Century Bengal

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**Abstract:** Keshab Chandra Sen, an eminent personality of 19<sup>th</sup> century Bengal, played an instrumental role in the social reform movement. But the marriage of his minor daughter, Suniti Devi to the Maharaja of Coochbehar in March, 1878 damaged his reputation as a reformer. In traditional historiography, this event has been interpreted as a shameful episode in the 'glorious' history of Bengal Renaissance. But the background and the context that led to this marriage, especially the way the matrimonial alliance served British imperial interests, have often been ignored. This paper seeks to understand the event in some detail and demonstrates how child marriage got justified when it proved to be beneficial to the imperialists and the Brahmo missionaries of Keshab Sen's clique. The article will illustrate that the social reform movement of 19<sup>th</sup> century Bengal, though incorporated debates on women's condition, mostly neglected the question of female agency.

**Keywords:** Imperialism, Modernity, Marriage, Social Reform Movement, Female Agency etc.

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### Introduction

By the first decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the British rule in the Indian subcontinent, particularly in Bengal, had transcended the political and economic insecurities present during its inception. After the consolidation of the Company Raj, the situation was ripe for promoting what is known as "cultural colonialism"<sup>1</sup>. Contact with the 'enlightened' Europeans and acquaintance with the western liberal thoughts and scientific knowledge ushered in a new epoch in the intellectual history of the Indian subcontinent and had complex far-reaching impacts upon the hitherto conservative, superstitious native society. In traditional historiography, the first half of

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the nineteenth century is identified as the period of ‘Renaissance’ that heralded the modern age not only in Bengal but in the entire subcontinent. The main protagonists of this ‘Renaissance’ were the English-educated elites of Calcutta who not only remained engrossed in intellectual musings but also sought to reform the degraded condition of the society.

One of the major issues that drew keen attention of the English-educated elites of Calcutta, often labelled as ‘*bhadralok*’, in 19<sup>th</sup> century was the “woman question” or the condition of women in Bengali society. In the pre-colonial times, the status and position of women in society had changed a number of times, but it was not before the advent of the British that the subordinated, degraded condition of women in Bengali society became a matter of concern in the intellectual circles. The influential Utilitarian thinker, James Mill, in his *History of British India*, argued that women’s position could be used as an indicator of society’s advancement. The cause-and-effect relationship between the social status of women and the advancement of the particular society/civilization was also postulated by some other contemporary British writers. The degenerated condition of the subcontinent – discernible from the decadent condition of the women of the society, among many other factors, provided the ground needed for the justification of the ‘civilizing mission’ of the colonial masters. The ‘*bhadralok*’ of Calcutta, as a response to the civilizational critique put forth by colonial writers, took up the task of reforming the status of women in the society and sought to modernize them to get their society validated by the British as modern and progressive.

Keshab Chandra Sen, an eminent personality of 19<sup>th</sup> century Bengal, played an instrumental role in improving the condition of women. But the marriage of his minor daughter, Suniti Devi to the Maharaja of Coochbehar in March, 1878 damaged his reputation as a reformer; so much so that he came to be neglected in Bengali historiography thereafter<sup>2</sup>. It led to the second split in the Brahma Samaj. In traditional historiography, this event has been interpreted as a shameful episode in the ‘glorious’ history of Bengal Renaissance. But the background and the context that led to this marriage, especially the way the matrimonial alliance served British imperial interests, have often been ignored. This paper seeks to understand the event in some detail, pointing to the intricacies involved and thereby, interprets it in the light of the contemporary social reform movement. Apart from that, it also attempts to sketch the life of an Indian woman, born and brought up during the dawning modern age of her country.

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## Suniti Devi: Early Life

Suniti Devi<sup>3</sup>, born in 1864 in Calcutta, was the second child of Keshab Chandra Sen. She spent her childhood in the Brahmo residence or 'ashram' (later called 'Lily Cottage') established by her father in Coolootola and was educated in the 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 and also 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."<sup>4</sup>

While reminiscing her childhood days in her Autobiography, she had narrated down how religious values and virtues were imbibed into her. Her father dedicated his life to the dissemination of the Brahmo Religion not only 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<sup>5</sup>. Endowed with all the attributes an "ideal" Hindu woman of Calcutta was expected to embody in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Suniti Devi's mother – a "gentle, loving and self-denying" woman – exerted immense direct as well as indirect influence in determining Suniti's deep yet undogmatic religious outlook.

Following the traditional Hindu norms, girls in 19<sup>th</sup> century were married off between the age of eight to twelve, "with twelve generally seen as a dangerous outer limit"<sup>6</sup>. Brahmos, being the 'enlightened' group of English-educated intellectuals in Calcutta, took a leading role in abolishing and reforming this practice. Young girls in Brahmo household were educated and trained to be adept at cultural endeavours like singing, reciting, knitting, painting, etc. Keshab Chandra Sen played an instrumental role in this Female Education Movement in Bengal. He established the Native Ladies' Normal School in Calcutta which in 1871 became the Victoria College. Sen, however, did not believe in the importance of University degrees; He maintained that for a woman to be a good wife and a good mother is far better than to be able to write M.A. or B.A. after her name. Hence, in his opinion, women ought to be given lessons only on 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<sup>7</sup>. The famous Civil Marriage Act, 1872 legalised Brahmo marriages in India and fixed the minimum age for marriage of boys and

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girls at eighteen and fourteen, respectively. Keshab Chandra Sen again was one of the chief proponents of this Act.

Suniti Devi's course of life ought to be understood against this particular backdrop. She strived to carry forward her parents' legacy through her social, cultural as well as religious works. Her life turned upside down when her marriage was arranged with the Maharaja of Coochbehar, Nripendra Narayan Bhup Bahadur in 1878. Reminiscing the event, she wrote "My happy home continued undisturbed until I was thirteen."<sup>8</sup>

Before delving into the story of her marriage with the Maharaja of Coochbehar, it is important to understand the context of this matrimonial alliance. The role of the British officials was an essential part of it.

## **Coochbehar and the 'civilising mission' of the British**

Present-day North Bengal was under the rule of the Koch Dynasty since 16<sup>th</sup> century. It accepted British suzerainty way back in 1773.<sup>9</sup> The sustenance and success of British colonialism in the Indian subcontinent in general and in 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.<sup>10</sup>

When Maharaja Narendra Narayan passed away in 1863, his ten-month old child, Nripendra Narayan Bhup was crowned as the next ruler of Coochbehar. The coronation of the infant Prince, however, did not take place in a peaceful manner. Initially after the death of the Maharaja, his influential Queens like Kamteswari, Brindeswari and Nistarini Devi took charge of the state administration. Maharani Nistarini Devi desired to place Kumar Jateendra 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.<sup>11</sup> The British Government, however, saw in this an opportunity to extend their influence and interfere in the

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affairs of Coochbehar.<sup>12</sup> Since 1864, the charge of the governance of the state was handed over to the Commissioner of Coochbehar, Colonel Haughton and thus started what can be described as the “Anglo-Narayan colonial crusade”<sup>13</sup> against the degenerated condition of the native, Hindu state of Coochbehar.

One of the main avenues for “cultural colonialism”, or the imposition of alien values by ideological means rather than by legislation or by force, was education<sup>14</sup>. Hence, apart from introducing several ‘salutary reforms’ in the state of Coochbehar, 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 sent to the Wards’ Institute in Benaras initially 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 Coochbehar Palace into the 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 Bhup matured to be an Anglophile prince.

## **Marriage**

So far, the experiment of training the future ally of British Indian Government had succeeded “beyond the expectations of the Government”. 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 second him in his, and incidentally the Government’s ‘civilising mission’ in Coochbehar.<sup>15</sup> But 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 to refrain from interfering 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 Coochbehar. Mr. Jadab Chandra Chuckerbutty, the Magistrate of Coochbehar, was deputed to make confidential investigations and find a suitable match for the Prince. Secondly, women in Coochbehar were not educated enough to match the expectation of Haughton and hence, the Government officials had to come to Calcutta in search of a bride. Thirdly, the Ranis of

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Coochbehar 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 had decided to send the Maharaja to England for pursuing higher studies. The Ranis again strongly opposed to 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'. As Angma Dey Jhala has demonstrated, royal marriages in the later 19<sup>th</sup> century brokered by the colonial government often resulted in officials becoming 'engaged in a political tug-o-war of compromise with the matriarchs of the zenana'.<sup>16</sup> Same became the situation in Coochbehar. Sir Richard Temple, the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal, however, after prolonged discussions, managed to pacify the ladies of the palace but 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 Brahma Samaj, Prosonno Coomar Thakur, that Keshab Chandra Sen's daughter, Suniti would be an ideal match for the Maharaja. Sen was taken aback by the proposition and readily refused to it when approached by different Government officials through letters, telegrams and during face-to-face conversations. Both the bride and the groom were below the age prescribed in the Civil Marriage Act, 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 boasting about the material gains the marriage would promise him.

The Government was aware of the fact that the marriage was extremely crucial and it would "either perpetuate or mar" their entire mission of creating an ideal collaborator of the Raj. Hence, they did not succumb to the objections set forth either by the Ranis of Coochbehar or by Keshab Chandra Sen. No matter how much 'modern' or 'progressive' the reasons behind Sen's reluctance to give consent to the marriage were in comparison to the 'irrational' and 'decadent' reasons posed by the former party, both were, in reality, hindrances obstructing the extension of the colonial hegemony over the strategically important state of Coochbehar. The 'Coochbehar-Sen alliance' was necessary to them.<sup>17</sup>

The British officials, with the objective to mould Sen, wrote –

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“Here is the Coochbehar state, the den of ignorance and superstition, with a corrupt court given to dissipation, polygamy, intrigue and oppression. The young Rajah has been saved by the British Government acting as a guardian. .... The administration of the affairs of the State has greatly improved in all departments, education, police, revenue, health etc. under the management of competent officers appointed by the British Government. .... Not a vestige will remain of the old regime and the ground will have been thoroughly cleared for political and social improvements when the young Rajah will be formally installed and begin to govern his immense territory. It is desirable, it is of the outmost importance, that he should have an accomplished wife.”<sup>18</sup>

Mr. Godfrey Dalton, in a letter to Keshab Chandra Sen, assured that the marriage would be a “solemn betrothal”<sup>19</sup> for the time being as the Rajah was to set out for England immediately after the ceremony. He added that it would not be consummated before the couple reach their respective ages of 14 and 18. Having no other option left, Keshab Chandra finally had to “rush” to give consent. The marriage was finalized in January, 1878 and it was to commence in March, 1878. In a letter to Frances Power Cobbe, Sen stated that he had received a “a divine command” that it was his duty as a public man, to give consent to the marriage. Perhaps, he understood the necessity of an enlightened wife for the Maharaja and believed in the providential motive of the colonial Government to modernize the state of Coochbehar. Borthwick has, however, rightly pointed out that “the pressure from the British authorities was the earthly correlate of this divine voice”.<sup>20</sup>

Sen later wrote to Max Muller that “it was a political marriage – A whole kingdom had to be reformed, and all my individual interests were absorbed in the vastness of God’s saving economy, or in what people would call public good. I trusted, I hoped with all my heart that the Lord would do what was best for me, daughter and my country. Duty was mine; future consequences lay in the hands of God.”<sup>21</sup> According to Cobbe, with whom Sen corresponded extensively about the marriage, “The Coochbehar marriage is one more notable instance in history of the ethical error that gives social duty preference before personal duty”.<sup>22</sup>

The blooming love between the young couple as illustrated by Suniti Devi in her *Autobiography* also strengthened Keshab Sen’s assertion that the match was made in heaven. “I looked up, and as I did so I met the Maharaja’s eyes fixed on me full of love.... From that moment my future husband and I loved each other.”<sup>23</sup>

A lot of controversies arose regarding the rituals observed at the marriage.<sup>24</sup> As documented by Suniti Devi in her *Autobiography*, it took place following Brahma rituals in

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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 Brahmo laws. Hence the Government formally announced that the betrothal took place according to traditional Hindu wedding rites; the British newspapers followed suit.<sup>25</sup> This naturally invited a whole gush of criticism aimed at the hitherto upholder of Brahmoism and Brahmo ideals, Keshab Chandra. His associates regarded this as a fundamental betrayal of Brahmo values and as an instance of hypocrisy on the part of Keshab. Shivnath Sastri wrote extensively on this matter in his book, *The History of the Brahmo Samaj*, and the narrative of ‘betrayal and hypocrisy’ he set forth still dominates the popular perception about Keshab Chandra Sen.

## Significance of the marriage

The marriage was one of the most controversial event in the history of Brahmo Samaj. It induced tensions among every section of the society and as one of Sen’s close disciples, P.C. Majumdar, had put it, it signalled “the great turning point” of Sen’s career. Some of the liberals in the Brahmo Samaj were already frustrated with Keshab Chandra’s authoritarian policies. The marriage of the minor daughter to the Maharaja of Coochbehar in 1878 served as the straw that broke the camel’s back and led to the second major schism in Brahmo history.

The first public mention of the marriage was in the ‘Indian Mirror’ issued on 9<sup>th</sup> February, 1878. It hailed the marriage as ‘progressive’ because it was an inter-caste marriage. However, the columnist remarked that “we only wish that the bridegroom and bride had been a little older than they now are”. This newspaper, thereafter, published articles or letters in support of the marriage while the other Brahmo newspapers like the ‘Samalochak’ and the ‘Brahmo Public Opinion’ promoted the converse view. On 14<sup>th</sup> February, 1878, twenty-three Brahmo protestors like Durga Mohan Das, Ananda Mohan Bose, Dwarakanath Ganguli and Shib Chunder Deb published the first public protest against the marriage. They accused Keshab Chandra to have “sold his principles” and his enlightened, reformist outlook to the “rank, wealth and position of the groom”.<sup>26</sup> These allegations took hold of public imagination and went a long way in the defamation of the much renowned Brahmo leader.

But it is important to understand the context of the much-debated Coochbehar marriage, not only from the historiographical perspective of ‘betrayal and hypocrisy’. It has generally been believed that Keshab Chandra Sen succumbed to the traditional Hindu state of Coochbehar, thereby betraying every reformist principle he stood for since 1861. It is true,

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argues Kopf, that Keshab had at that time been inclined towards the philosophy of Ramkrishna Paramhansa and been pre-occupied with comparative analysis of Hindu and Brahma religions. But he forged the matrimonial alliance as it ensued the prospect of dissemination of Brahma Religion to the native decadent Hindu state of Coochbehar.<sup>27</sup> The argument that Keshab Chandra 'sold out' his reformist self to the Coochbehar Raj loses relevance if we look into the social, cultural as well as religious reforms that took place after 1878 in Coochbehar.

## **Spread of Brahmoism and progress of Coochbehar**

Suniti Devi stayed back in Lily Cottage till the Maharaja was eighteen years old and she herself became sixteen. The "real" marriage between the two was solemnized when both had reached the stipulated age in 1880.<sup>28</sup> The Maharaja improved, in essence, modernised the overall administrative system of Coochbehar - reformed the police, revenue and judicial departments, established the first railway link to Bengal, improved communication system of the state by constructing new roads and bridges, urbanised the town of Coochbehar, ameliorated the drainage system, instituted a full-equipped hospital and introduced English education in the state. He 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, he declared Brahmoism or New Dispensation as the state religion.<sup>29</sup> However, the Rajah never tried to impose the religion upon his Hindu subjects or relatives. One of his cousin, Kumar Gajendra Narayan embraced Brahmoism and married Sabitri Devi, another daughter of Keshab Chandra Sen. The two sisters worked together and initiated several social reforms surpassing the traditional Hindu customs of the royal family.

Suniti Devi went to England in 1887 along with her husband to take part in the auspicious Jubilee Celebrations of Her Majesty's reign. She had the opportunity to meet the Queen privately in Windsor Castle and this was quite an honourable moment for the Maharani of a princely state in British Indian Empire. She had documented intricate details of the meeting in her Autobiography in a reverential tone - "To us Indians she was a more or less legendary figure endowed with wonderful attributes, an ideal ruler, and an ideal woman, linked to our hearts across the black water by silken chains of love and loyalty".<sup>30</sup> The appearance, attire, courteous gestures and dignified personality of the Empress impressed the Maharani a lot and left deep imprint upon her. It was during the Jubilee Celebrations that the advancement of Coochbehar during Nripendra Narayan Bhup's reign received remarks of approbation and

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appreciation and the Maharaja was honoured with the GCIE Award. Suniti Devi became the first Indian woman to receive the CIE Award.

Thus the ‘modernisation project’ initiated in the state of Coochbehar since 1864, got the formal recognition of the Crown in 1887. Thereafter the princely state officially became a collaborator of the Raj. The metaphorical representation of Coochbehar’s ‘Coat of Arms’ displaying a badge supported by a crowned lion on the right and an elephant on the left made a political statement in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. By the mutually supportive gestures of the two animals, the statement was evinced that the Raj relied more on collaboration than confrontation with the native, yet Anglicised Maharaja of Coochbehar.<sup>31</sup> The success of the ‘modernization project’ justified the ‘civilising mission’ of the British.

## Conclusion

It is quite apparent that the Coochbehar marriage was utterly successful in materialising the motives of its solicitors, i.e., the British Indian Government and Brahma missionary, Keshab Chandra Sen. The British influence flourished during the following years, even under Nripendra Narayan’s successors. Moreover, as David Kopf has observed, though the ‘Sen-Narayan’ alliance damaged Keshab’s reputation and led to remarkable reduction in the membership of Brahma Samaj of India, it served to strengthen his position in a region otherwise out of his sphere of influence; this line is also taken up by Theodore Koditschek, who contends that the marriage was “a strategic concession designed to enhance ... [Keshab’s] influence in India’s more backward, less westernized, native state”.<sup>32</sup>

But all these successes ensued at the cost of the regulation of female sexuality in a way that was by no means ‘modern’ or ‘progressive’, even according to the British definition of the same. The status of women in a society had long functioned as a yardstick to judge the civilizational status of Asian and Middle eastern societies. The oppressed situation of women manifested through some inhuman, savage traditions like foot-binding in China, veiling and clitoridectomy in the Arab world and North Africa and ‘sati’, child marriage, polygamy, etc. in British India became emblematic of the general ‘barbarity’ of people of the colonised countries. The Coochbehar marriage, arranged and subsequently pressed upon Keshab Sen by the British officials, witnessed the celebration of child marriage; even if it defied the marriage law (Civil Marriage Act, 1872) of British India, it was justified on the ground that it would ensure the modernisation of the native state of Coochbehar, in reality, perpetuate British influence in the

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princely state. The British press, too hailed the marriage, accepting the line taken by the Government. Responses to the marriage in Britain indicate that the issues of civilization, duty and imperial governance overshadowed the issue of female 'emancipation', to the extent of championing child marriage instead of condemning it.

The British vision of a modernised society and the Victorian ideals of womanhood provided the benchmark against which the reform programmes for women were carried on in Bengal in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. As evident from the fore-mentioned narrative, the British understanding of modernity and progress often altered its form and narrowed down its scope when imperial interests demanded so. Meanwhile, the loyal English-educated '*bhadraloks*' failed to go beyond the definition of modernity set forth by the British. As a result, their reformation movements, especially those aimed at improving women's condition in society, possessed some intrinsic limitations, even before the nationalist discourse, which is often held responsible for resolving "woman question", appeared in the scenario.

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