
Maharani Suniti Devi of Cooch Behar and Her Literary Pursuits

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Abstract: *‘Education brings consciousness. Consciousness brings revolution .People’s dreams are connected with the revolution.’ Women’s education is inevitably linked with woman’s progress. The present work attempts a detailed study of Maharani Suniti Devi of Cooch Behar and her Literary Pursuits. In the last part of the 19th century and the beginning the 20th century, the name of Maharani Suniti Devi, the eldest daughter of Brahmananda Keshav Chandra Sen and the consort of Nripendra Narayan is fore most among all the Indian Women who have Left their marks in gold letters by becoming brilliant astrologers at home and abroad in the fields of social reform, education, numeracy, and social reform memorable. The reign of Maharaja Nripendra Narayana is regarded as the ‘Age of the Renaissance’ and the ‘Golden Age’ in the history of mass education. After the marriage of Maharani Suniti Devi, the tide of reform free modern thought came to the state of Cooch Behar. Maharani Suniti Devi was the first Indian Woman to cross the Kalapani to a foreign Country. In 1887, Suniti Devi was present at the royal court of England during the golden Jubilee Ceremony of the reign of Queen Victoria of England. Suniti Devi’s contribution to the world of Bengali and English Literature at the turn of 19th and 20th centuries is Undeniable. Suniti devi’s autobiography is the first book written by an Indian women writer.*

Key Words: *Cooch Behar, Marriage, Literature, Pioneer, Education, Social Worker, etc.*

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Introduction

Maharani Suniti Devi, consort of King Nripendra Narayan of Cooch Behar, was one of those who left her mark in golden letters in changing the course of society and education in the 19th century. At this time came the renaissance in Bengali Literary pursuits. The first words of social reform in the 19th century were Women’s emancipation, that why social reformers at

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that time focused on women's education, women's rights and progress. Women are not neglected, there-for education is the foremost need for their all round development.

Birth and Education

Maharani Suniti Devi herself was the eldest daughter of Brahmananda Keshav Chandra Sen, a prominent propagator of the Brahmo movement in the 19th century renaissance era. They were five brothers and five sisters. Keshav Chandra Sen was the second child of Parimohan Sen and Sarala Sundari Devi. Suniti Devi was born on September 30, 1864 in Calcutta. Suniti Devi's mother was Golap Sundari aka Jagmohini Devi, daughter of Ballyganj resident Chandra Majumdar. Suniti Devi was inspired by the ideals of her parents since childhood. Inherited from her father, Keshav Chandra Sen, Dutifulness, strong devotion to Dhamma, independent thinking attitude and tolerance, modern mindset, liberal outlook on culture and other virtues of heart helped shape Suniti Devi's personality and character traits. From her mother she got love for Literature, Kindness, affection towards poor began with her father, later at Bharatshram with mass Piggott's school in Calcutta, for a while at Bethune college and with European tutors. She was well versed in both Bengali and English Literature.

Child marriage Controversy

The Marriage Controversy of King Nripendra Narayan of Cooch Behar with Suniti Devi, daughter of Keshav Chandra Sen, is a memorable chapter. On March 6, 1878 A.D, she was married to Raja Nripendra Narayana of Cooch Behar. According to Act-III of 1872 or Civil Marriage Act, their marriageable age was lower. Suniti Devi was 13 years and 6 months old at the time of Marriage and Raja Nripendra Narayan of Cooch Behar was 15 years old. This was against government law. For which Keshav Chandra wisely said that they should be engaged until they reach adulthood. According to this condition, shortly after marrying Raja Nripendra Narayan, he went to abroad for higher education and Suniti Devi came to her father in Calcutta. When King Nripendra Narayan returned home in 1880, their marriage was solemnized at the 'Brahma Temple' in India.

The marriage controversy was significant not only in terms of its effect on religious and social reform organizations in Bengal, but also in terms of the ways in which it served to challenge British attitudes towards the proper regulation of Female sexuality in the empire. Even though the marriage was done, at that time Keshav Chandra Sen had to face various protests. Babu Vishwanath Dey, Anando Mohan Bose, Durga Mohan Das, Shiv Nath Shastri, Shashipada Banerjee, Vijay Krishna Goswami sent letters to Keshav Chandra Sen in Calcutta protesting the Child marriage of daughters. Keshav Chandra Sen was a Women educator and women philanthropist. Originally, under the pressure of Keshav Chandra Sen's Brahmo movement, the government passed the famous three- laws (Civil Marriage Act) in 1872. It prohibited child marriage, polygamy and made Widow Marriage and Unmarried Marriage legal. But he gave his daughter in marriage at a young age. Maybe for a little marital happiness, respect and prosperity. He violated what he himself had initiated.

Child marriage is the cause of immense social, mental and physical harm and a great sin. Child marriage is the main obstacle to the education of Women and the development of the Women nation and it is known to all that Women have to suffer the most from the cruel consequences of Child marriage. Child marriage only weakens the body and purifies the

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character, not that it sharpens the intellect and makes it infinitely elegant. Child marriage should be avoided at all cost. Keshav Chandra also had to hear that not only your daughter will have to suffer the consequences of that act, but there is a danger of many kinds of harm to the Women's society in general Bengal. That no matter how powerful the truth proves to be the most powerful and sublime substance.

Life of the Suniti Devi in Cooch Behar

Suniti Devi's marriage to the Western educated Maharaja Nripendra Narayan was a blessing from God in the state of Cooch Behar. This intermarriage brought Cooch Behar closer to the Brahmin culture of Calcutta in social and cultural terms, establishing a synergy between the secular Hindu Culture of Cooch Behar on the one hand and the secular Brahmin culture imported from Calcutta On the other hand and the all-specious result was bringing a wave of renaissance in the State of Cooch Behar. Maharaja Nripendra Narayan and his wife Suniti Devi were the master shapers of modern Cooch Behar. During the reign of Nripendra Narayan, the State of Cooch Behar made great progress in the fields of education, art, literature, culture, architecture, urban development, revenue and governance. The then Native State of Cooch Behar was indebted to Suniti Devi in many ways, in terms of education and enlightenment, as well as in nation building. Maharani Suniti Devi's contribution in presenting Maharaja Nripendra Narayan as an ideal ruler of an Indian native state to the court of the world with all these virtues of hers is certainly admirable.

Women's Education and Social Reform

The female education at first started in the royal family of Cooch Behar. Maharani Suniti Devi was enthusiastic in the field of education and enlightenments as well as, she were seen to play a leading role in the field of Women's education. Both of the Maharaja Nripendra Narayan and Maharani Suniti Devi was the great patron of modern education. During the reign of Maharaja Nripendra Narayana, Cooch Behar turned into a new paradigm. Maharani Suniti Devi was the main motivation behind the modernization of Cooch Behar. The reign of the Maharaja Nripendra Narayan is a land mark in the history of Cooch Behar. He was a modern and benevolent King. In the field of Women's education, Suniti Devi established a Women's school in Cooch Behar. Earlier, where there was a girl, school called Ratibabu's school, Suniti College was built in 1881 on the wish of Suniti Devi and on the initiative of Maharaja Nripendra Narayan, which was later named Suniti Academy in 1916. In 1928, Suniti Academy was upgraded to High School. The main building of the Suniti Devi Academy was opened by Maharani Suniti Devi 1890. It was one of the famous learning institutions throughout the whole of North Eastern India. In 1886 a female School was founded which name was 'Rajkumari Girls School. Maharani Girls High School was established in Darjeeling in 1908 to promote education among Indian Girls. During 1888, Maharaja Nripendra Narayan was established the first College in Cooch Behar. The name of the College was Victoria College. Now it is known as Acharya Brajendra Nath Seal College. Maharaja Nripendra Narayan tried his best for the development of Cooch Behar in various ways. In the field of mass education, Women education, higher education, literary activities,

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administrative efficiency in all respect Cooch Behar reached at the peak of progress. He was a patron of the art and architecture.

Literary Pursuits

Maharani Suniti Devi of Cooch Behar stood out among the Women writers who produced Literature in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Ever since she was a child Suniti Devi was independent, thoughtful and devoted to her parent's ideals. When discussing the Literary practice of Cooch Behar Raja Durbar, the name of Maharani Suniti Devi comes up first. As She used to write poems from childhood, she could also make touching stories in the form of stories based on mythological stories. Spokesperson of Navabidhan Brahmo Samaj, Sukatha Patrika is published in Cooch Behar Rajnukulaya. Maharaja's adding Babu Yogendra Narayan Roy edited this news paper from 1887. Ramchandra singh, Kunj Bihari Majumder and Umanath Gupta were the from 1994-95 Suniti Devi's various works were published around this Sukatha Magazine. Her poems prove that Suniti devi is under the name of Bama Vandana in Sukatha magazine. Many poems with this name were published in the Sukatha Magazine, in which there are places such as childhood, Joy, spring Gathering, Death etc. few poets can find such frank, and simple fascination. Maharani Suniti Devi had a passion for Literature since childhood. In childhood poetry, childhood nostalgic memories, parental love etc. are expressed in Maharani Suniti Devi's poetry. Just as the Joy of the poet is revealed at the arrival of the beloved, the thirst for beauty as well as the spiritual mind is also found in the 'Vasant Samagam' poem. Suniti Devi's main foray into the world of poetry is from this phase of her life, though it culminated in her solitude after the death of Maharaja Nripendra Narayan. In 1887, at the age of 23, Suniti Devi's first book of poetry, 'Gatha' was published in Calcutta. In 1895, Suniti Devi's second book of poetry, 'Kavita o Gan', was published. In 1918, Amrita Bindu, part-I, the third book of poetry, was published with 164 poems and music. It is described in this book that the bitter memories of the poet's heart, the love of nature and the love of devotion have been expressed.

When Maharaja Nripendra Narayana died at the age of 48 in 1911, the life of Maharani Suniti Devi gradually became dark. The eldest Son Raj Rajendra Narayan died in 1913. Since then, Suniti Devi's literary achievements began to be published in books during the days of her solitude. She accepted the responsibility of Navo Bidhan.

Suniti Devi's third book, 'Sangha Sankha', published in 1914 A.D. This music book was published under the pseudonym 'Sangh Bhagini'. This book is a collection of music by Suniti Devi. In this music collection, Maharani of Cooch Behar, in spite of her abundance of wealth, bathed herself in the Sea of devotion.

Paricharika magazine was first published by Navabidhan Brahmo samaj. This magazine was later published as the mouthpiece of Cooch Behar Sahitya Sabha. From 1932, this newspaper started to be published in a new form. Cooch Behar Sahitya Sabha was formed on the 13th Paush (Bengali month) of 1915. The writers established in this magazine are Rabindranath Tagore, Kabi Shekhar Kalidas Roy, Kazi Nazrul Islam, Akshay Kumar Maitra, Deshbandhu Chittaranjan Das, Banful, Annada Shankar Roy, Pramath Choudhury, Khan Chowdhary Amanat Ullah Ahmed and many others.

Suniti Devi's short story Collection 'Sahana' was first published in 1915. This book is rich in prose and poetry. The Bengal Dacoits and Tigers, publish in 1916, contains 9 fascinating stories about the dacoits of Bengal and 11 stories about them. Another English

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story book Published in 1917 is The Rajput Princes. The subject of the book was 4 stories. The Beautiful Mughal Princess was published in 1918 A.D; this was a English prose book. The book features the stories of Rajput Begum of Akbar, Mumtaz Mahal, Princess Bra, Zebunnesa, Nurjahan- The light of the world. Puryasmriti book published in 1919. On the brief literary of her husband Nripendra Narayan. Another book nine ideal Indian Women was published in 1919. Here are the life stories of 9 memorable Indian Women (Such as Sati, Suniti, Shakuntala, Savitri, Shaiba, Sita, Pramila, Damayanti and Uttara). Suniti Devi's book KathaktarGan published in 1921 from Calcutta. Described here are the stories of King Harishchandra, Dhruva, Aindrila, Bhishma Vijaya, Buddhadeva charita, Satijana and Sita. Yogendra Nath Gupta said about Maharani Suniti Devi in his 'Mahila Kavi book of Bengal'— she was a social reformer, moral education of boys and girls, dedicated to the education of the people through Dharma upodesh and Kathakta, she could do very beautiful Kathakta herself. Some say that Maharani Suniti devi is the author of one of the stories in the book 'Jharer Dola ', a collection of four stories published in 1921. Maharani Suniti Devi wrote two biographies for girls, 'Shivanath (1921), and Shishu Keshav' (1922). In Shishu Keshav, Suniti Devi has beautifully presented the Childhood history of her father Keshav Chandra Sen. The characteristic features of Keshav Chandra can be found here. The Biography of Shivnath Shastri is described in 'Shivnath Ganth,' He paid tribute to him in the said book in beautiful and fluent language. The ballad 'Sati' was written in 1922 by Suniti Devi. Suniti Devi's other book Indian fairy tales was published in 1922. Six stories of Indian fairy tales are undoubtedly unforgettable. Maharani Suniti Devi's 'The life of princess Yashoda' is a remarkable book written in 1922. Although she was a believer in Brahmanism, she had deep respect for other religion as well. There are 11 oil paintings and a copy of the map. Here she has created a wonderful combination of real-lifelove and sacrifice with logic based on historical stories. It is a beautiful explanation of the social customs and religious evolution of India at that time. English book Prayer's was written in 1924. The book is related to 'Bhakti-Rasa'. He also composed a few ballads. In 1925 Maharani Suniti Devi's last book of poetry 'Amrita Bindu', part-II, was published. Here she recorded 33 songs and poems. Here tributes are paid on the occasion of the birth of Suniti Devi's father Keshav Chandra Sen. Although most of the topics of this poetry book are religion, there are also topics such as Prakriti, Birha, Katar etc. This is the mature work of his last age and naturally the spiritual consciousness is revealed in the book. Even as a queen, the appeal she creates in the poetry full of Sorrow and pain shows her pure heart and advanced mentality.

Autobiography of Suniti Devi

“Autobiography of an Indian Princess: Memories of Maharani Suniti Devi of Cooch Behar” was published in English Language in 1921. Publisher of the book “John Murray, Albemarle Street, W. Landan.1921”.It is the first English autobiography written by an Indian woman writer. In this autobiographical book, the picture of contemporary England and India and Cooch Behar and above all the picture of the personal life of the Maharani, the dynamic nature of the relationship of the English ruling apparatus with the native state and the face of discipline are described in a clear and thorough manner. This book describes her personal story, royal family and paternal family, Bhabhi swami has written a novel diary in different chapters about her emotional state. The book is composed in 15 chapters the chapters are organized as follows- My childhood, My Family, Festivals and Festival Days, my Romance,

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My Marriage, Early Married Days, life at Cooch Behar, My First Visits to England, English society, Happy Days in India, Education of the Boys, Sad Days, Another Blow, Viceroys I have known, Later years. The total number of pages of the book is 251, of which 243 pages are devoted to various incidents of his life and 243 to 251 pages of index. Suniti Devi has succeeded in expressing her own experiences in this book. Maharani Suniti Devi, the Queen of Maharaja Nripendra Narayan was a famous litterateur in the royal family of Cooch Behar in modern period. Her autobiography not only reflects her personal journey but also her commitment to advocating for social change and the right of Women in colonial India.

Rabindranath and the Royal family of Cooch Behar

Keshav Chandra Sen's relationship with the Tagore family was sweet. Rabindra Nath's elder brother Satyendra Nath was a classmate of Keshav Chandra. Rabindra Nath's relationship with Cooch Behar was formed on the basis of these two families. It is not known whether the relationship between Rabindra Nath and King Nripendra Narayan of Cooch Behar was close. Again, there is no historical information that Rabindranath ever came to Cooch Behar. But he used to come from Calcutta to Darjeeling many times. Rabindra Nath's relationship with Maharani Suniti Devi of Cooch Behar was very affectionate. They were both about the same age. In 1901, King Nripendra Narayan of Cooch Behar met Rabindra Nath in Darjeeling. Suniti Devi and her sister Mayur Bhanj's Queen Sucharu Devi gave Rabindra Nath many siblings. The marriage of Jyotsna Nath Ghoshal, Son of Rabindra Nath's elder sister the poet Swarnakumari Devi, with Suniti Devi's daughter Sukriti Devi further strengthened the family bond.

Suniti Devi met Rabindra Nath in Darjeeling. Rabindra Nath created a number of famous stories gossiping with the Maharani at Colinton on Auckland Road in Darjeeling and at woodland prasad in Alipur, Calcutta. For example-Durasha, 'Manihara' and 'mastermashay.' Rabindra Nath himself said all these things later. He said that Suniti Devi often insisted on telling ghost stories, hence the above stories. Rabindra Nath was very fond of Suniti Devi's eloquence. He requested Suniti Devi to come to Santiniketan and listen to the stories of the children. When Suniti Devi's stories were presented to Rabindra Nath, the Poet would receive letters criticizing them. Such was the close cordial relationship between them. In 1933, Rabindra Nath presided over the Suniti memorial meeting in Calcutta.

Conclusion

Finally, the early beginnings of modern Cooch Behar during the reign of Maharaja Nripendra Narayan are also notable for the contribution of his beloved wife Suniti Devi. Nripendra Narayan's Marriage to Suniti Devi resulted in a joint effort of North and South to place special emphasis on education, one of the keys to the development of Cooch Behar. The new Journey of improvement in the educational affairs of Cooch Behar started by their hands, is still working tirelessly for the betterment of the people of Cooch Behar. Prajavatsal Maharaja Nripendra Narayan and his wife Maharani Suniti Devi worked tirelessly for the modernization of Cooch Behar in the overall improvement of social, economic and educational issues and took an important role in the transition of Cooch Behar to modernity. For this, the people of Cooch Behar are still remembering them every step of the way.

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Actually, Maharaja Nripendra Narayan was the Maker of Modern Cooch Behar. Suniti Devi, a Woman of extraordinary talent, died on 10th November 1932 in Ranchi.

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