COOCH BEHAR MARRIAGE CONTROVERSY: A HISTORY OF
BRAHMO-HINDU MARRIAGE

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Abstract:

The Cooch Behar marriage is most debatable chapter in the history Brahmo Samaj. Maharani Suniy Devee was the daughter of Brahmo leader Keshab Chandra Sen. She was married to Maharaja (king) Nripendra Narayan Bhup Bahadur, Cooch Behar State in 1878. Due to this marriage Keshab Chandra Sen had to face so criticm in and out of his Samaj that he had to lose his image. In the marriage traditional Hindu rites and Brahmo faith both were followed. As a result of this marriage the Calcuttan culture entered in the royal family and its advent helped in
the spread of Brahmo faith in the State (Cooch Behar). On the other, due to this marriage the Brahmo Samaj was bifercuted into groups.

Key words: Cooch Behar, Marriage, Sunity Devee, Brahmos,

The most popular king of Cooch Behar State was Maharaja Nripendra Narayan Bhup Bahadur (1863-1911). During his reign the State saw socio-cultural changes. During his kingship the Cooch Behar Marriage was a most vital and debatable chapter in the history of Brahmo Samaj of India as well as in the renaissance movement in India. The royal family of Cooch Behar State belonged to Koch by caste and the members of the family believed in Brahmin culture before the Cooch behar Marriage in 1878 CE.

Cooch Behar State was tributary state to the East India Company (later to British government). The prince Nripendra Narayan was placed on the throne when he was infant. His mother reigned on behalf of him under surveillance of the British Commissioner till he attended the mature age. However, the British authority always wanted to westernize the king. The British authority pre-planned to change his ideological aspects as a part of colonial mind. Accordingly they started to educate him with western knowledge in India and tried to send him in England to provide education and make him follow western life style.

When the British authority initiated to send him in England, senior ladies of royal family opposed it. Because, they knew to cross sea water was to lose religion and caste. And if the minor king would go to England, he would marry an English girl. At this there would not be possible to adjust with that of the custom. In this situation Richard Temple, Lieutenant Governor
of Bengal, came to Cooch Behar Capital to handle the situation and accordingly talked to the senior ladies of the royal family. At last it was decided on condition that minor king Nripendra Narayan must be got married in March, 1878 CE before going to England.

The arrangement of marriage of Maharaja Nripendra Narayan and Sunity Devee created tension and schime in Brahmo Samaj of India. Many questions arose in the minds of protestor Brahmos. Above all this marriage was a inter-caste marriage. The cotemporary newspapers and magazines recorded different events rearding the marriage. Indian Mirror, 9 February, 1878, wrote “Babu Keshub Chunder Sen belongs to a Vaidya family in Calcutta, while the Maharaja of Kuch Behar represents in his person the descendant of one of the most ancient royal families of Bengal belonging to the Sankoche Khettry caste.”

\[1\] The match-maker of this marriage was Jadab Chandra Chakrabarti, a magistrate of Cooch Behar State. He was deputed to make confidential investigations in search of an appropriate girl for Nripendra Narayan. Conditionally the girl would be enlightened if possible. And as she would be the queen of Cooch Behar State. However, he (the match-maker) got nothing after searching for a girl for the said Maharaja (king). The British Indian government was the role maker of the marriage and interfered in the marriage for political purpose.

Besides, the British authority wanted to settle the marriage without further delay.\[2\] Many scholars thought that it was not a marriage or wedding, but bride Sunity Devee herself consided later the ceremony to have been a marriage in her autobiography.\[3\] Before marriage letters were passed and repassed between appropriate authorities of Cooch Behar and Calcutta, the Capital of Bengal, on the marriage issue. Before the marriage, very clever Mr. Dalton, Deputy Commissioner of Cooch Behar State (in a letter) made Keshab understand the marriage to be considered as only betrothal as per ordinary acceptance of term. The both bride and bridegroom
were underage in 1878 CE. Soon after the marriage, the Bridegroom would go to Europe for educational purpose by leaving the bride Sunity Devee in India.

**Age of Marriage: Opinion of the contemporary doctors**

Marriage act was passed by the British government in 1872 to decide the minimum of marriage for the both parties – bride and bridegroom in the British territory in India. Before Marriage Act of 1872, Keshab Chandra decided what would be the minimum age of girls for marriageable age. Regarding this he took opinions of 12 doctors and made a unique collection of expression of the them on the subject. The views of these eminent professional men had been fully endorsed by Keshab at a meeting held at the Town Hall on the 30th September, 1871, when the subject was deliberated upon. However, though most of the doctors considered minimum age 16 to be decided, but the 14 was decided to be minimum marriageable age for girls. However, after around four years’ long agitation of the Brahmos led by Keshab the Native Marriage Act was passed on the 19th of March, 1872. The act denoted that minimum marriageable age would be 14 and 18 for bride and bridegroom respectively and it made bigamy a penal offence under the Act. It was a purely permissive law and it did not extend beyond British India. It, therefore, did not native states of India as well as the Native State of Cooch Behar.

**Protest against Cooch Behar Marriage**

The principal causes of the protest against Cooch Behar Marriage, which were sent by 23 anusthanic Brahmos of Calcutta in a letter form towards Keshab, when he had been at his residence in Calcutta. Some of them were Sib Chunder Deb, Durga Mohan Das, Ananda Mohan Bose, Kissori Lal Maitreya, Dwaraka Nath Ganguli, Bhuban Mohan Ghosh. The chief causes were against Cooch Behar Marriage as bellow--
firstly, Marriage should not be held until the girl would attain her proper development – both physical and moral and she was able to comprehend the solemn responsibilities of marriage. A few years ago Keshab took the opinions of many distinguished medical men on the marriageable age. Most of them distinctly declared eighteen or nineteen to be proper marriageable age for girls. However, fourteen was fixed as the minimum marriageable age in the Act. of 1872.

Secondly, the minimum marriageable age for men had been fixed at eighteen in the Act according to Keshab. The Brahmos astonished and expressed their grievance that he was marrying his daughter to the minor Prince of Cooch Behar before he had completed even his sixteenth year.

Thirdly, He took an enterprise to marry his daughter to minor Maharaja Nripendra Narayan though he believed in the high ideal of marriage set forth by him in his speeches and public writings and hated early marriage. He broke the provisions of Brahmo Marriage Act in the Cooch Behar Marriage. They argued “a marriage where the parties are not yet able to understand the responsibilities of married life cannot be regarded as a marriage at all, yet you are about to make Over to one child the charge of another child.”

Fourthly, the Cooch Behar Marriage would encourage violating the Brahmo Marriage Act., by the other Brahmos.

Fifthly, the previous Koch kings generally married more than one. The late Maharaja Narendra Narayan, who was father of Maharaja Nripendra Narayan, believed in polygamy. They thought that there would be no exception to young Nripendra Narayan. Or Nripendra Narayan would marry more brides than one. It would violate the Act. Besides he had been under the tuition of the English and God Grant which might be guilty of such a thing.
Sixthly, Nripendra Narayan and his family were neither known before nor any body of them as Brahmo; nor even did they take any interest in the Brahmo movement. There might be a doubt whether the marriage would be held according to Brahmo rites or not.

Seventhly, the Brahmos considered Keshab to be a religious father and he would attach greater importance to the religious and moral interest of a daughter than to considerations of wealth or rank. Besides, the bridegroom was minor and not a Brahmo of ascertained character. Above all he had not as yet passed the Entrance examination of the Calcutta University. It is clear that Keshab preferred wealth to other qualifications on the part of the bridegroom. It was lamentable thing for Church.

Finally, the Brahmos opposed to this intended early marriage as a hateful custom. It was contrary to Brahmo rite. They hated it as a sin for parents in such marriage.¹⁰

Ananda Mohan Bose was a Keshab’s long attached friend. He also felt mortified with this marriage and reacted to this marriage. He opposed to organise the marriage, because it was anti-Brahmo, but Keshab did not give him importance and did not discuss on the issue.¹¹

Many of the Brahmikas opposed to this marriage. Such as twenty Calcutta Brahmia ladies opposed to the Marriage. They sent their protest letter to Samalachak addressed towards Keshab and expressed their reasonable views regarding the harmful early marriage. The wedding arrangement seemed to them to have been a peculiar one by a renewed reformer like Keshab. Because, he was associated with the movement of female emancipation. Female education was placed in the forefront of the social reform movement. They considered the Cooch Behar Marriage to be the retret from progressive mind as the marriage did not follow the minimum standard age as prescribed in the Act. 1872. Therefore, they exclaimed in grief and criticised
such act of Keshab. They expressed boldly, “Under these circumstances, how a man so zealous as yourself in the cause of female education and female improvement could perform such an action, is what we are at a loss to comprehend.”

Cooch Behar marriage: An arrangement

The marriage was held on 6 March, 1878. Harendra Narayan Chaudhuri, a contemporary high official of the State, gives us a fair description of the appearing of bride party and marriage arrangement in Cooch Behar that the bride accompanied by her parents arrived at Cooch Behar from Calcutta on the 27th February, 1878. They travelled by special train from Calcutta to Haldibari (Cooch Behar). Then carriages and palkis carried them to Cooch Behar. The bride remained in the house which had been prepared for her reception until the night of the 5th March and according to the custom of the Cooch Behar family, she was conducted to the residence of the royal family in procession. The ceremony of marriage commenced on 6th March, 1878. Some European guests of the Maharaja, including Duke Grazioli, Don Julio Malgiano and Marquis Pizzardi, were present at the ceremony.

The day before marriage of 6th March the Dewan and a few Raj pandits demanded consent of Keshab that some parts of the wedding would be according to the old Hindu rites, but Keshab refused to consent. It was very astonished matter that the bride party came already from Calcutta through a long distance for wedding purpose. The wedding date was fixed for 6th March and in this situation still there was an ongoing discussion on the question whether the wedding would be held before the Maharaja left for England or after his return. A deadlock had been seen between the both parties (bridal party and bridegroom party) whether the marriage would be held on the fixed day or not. Then the bridegroom, Nripendra Narayan expressed his determination to
marry Sunity and gave an ultimatum, “Now give good heed to my words. I am going to bed. If I am to marry this girl, wake me up. Otherwise have my horse in readiness, for I shall ride away from Cooch Behar for good and all to-morrow morning. If I cannot marry this girl, I will marry no one.”¹⁶ It was recorded by Sunity Devee later in 1921. It was shocking word and indicated another something. Nripendra Narayan saw her (girl Sunity) in Calcutta when he was in Calcutta. There is a word that first impression is the last impression. It was applicable to him. After seeing her he fell in love of Sunity Devee in Calcutta. Perhaps he did not pronounced such angry sentences if he would not have been in love with her.

In this situation Dalton suffered from anxiety and thought how to solve the problem. He proceeded to Keshab (who was at Cooch Behar City) and confirmed him that the marriage would be held according to the rites (Brahmo rites) as settled in Calcutta. In a word he made him understand that marriage would be performed according to rites of Brahma Samaj, not to non-Brahmo rites. The Lieutenant-Governor (Bengal) as a part of the Indian British Government interfered in the dead-lock and supported the Brahma marriage.¹⁷

Some enjoyment moments have occurred in the wedding. The grandmothers and mothers of the bride and bridegroom were engaged in tug-of-war on the issues of rites to be followed in the marriage. The grandmother of bridegroom wanted to follow up the old Hindu rites in the marriage, and on the other, the grandmother (Keshab’s mother) of bride wanted to follow up the Brahmo rites.¹⁸
Features of the Marriage

One of the interesting aspects of Cooch Behar Marriage is what was the nature of this marriage. Was the marriage celebrated in accordance with Brahmo rites or in Hindu rites? To search the answer of the question it is the discussion. It is known from a vivid description by an eyewitness. Some usual rites were performed on occasion of the marriage. The *adhibash* ceremony was performed in strict accordance with Hindu rites on 5th March, 1878. On the evening of 6th March Keshab saw a certain defeat, when the bridegroom party insisted on having marriage solemnised according to Hindu rites. He decided to go back with his daughter than yield to idolatrous rites. But it was too late for him to do anything of the kind. The bride was then in the Rajbari (residence of royal family), wherefrom he could not possibly get her back. Permission, however, was given to him to go back, but he was called upon to pay Rs. 1,60,000 down for the expenses already incurred on account of the marriage. This time he had not money to pay. So it is generally called that he was captive with word already given. There was no option to leave Cooch Behar without marriage. In this situation Keshab had to surrender to bridegroom party and gave his consent to this marriage. The marriage started commencing at 8 p.m. and ended at 2 a.m. next day 7th March, 1878.¹⁹

On the day of marriage (6th March, 1878), the ceremonies of *Nandimukha* and *Sraddha* were performed by Kumar Surendra Narayan on behalf of the bridegroom. At noon the bride had to purify herself by *Prayachitta and she had to* distribute some gold to the Brahmins. At night the *bagdan* ceremony was first of all performed by Krishna Bihari Ben on behalf of his elder brother, Keshab Chandra Sen, as he (Keshab) had lost his caste in recent past on the ground of his visit to Europe. *Stri-Achar* ceremony was performed by the female relations of the bride. The
bridegroom and bride were then brought to the Bibah Mandap and Babu Krishna Bihari made over the bride to the bridegroom before a Ghat in the usual form, and the ceremony of Home (jajna) was last of all performed. Hom was formally performed in the presence of the bridegroom. There was a Mangal Ghat and two wooden idols, reality symbols of Har and Gouri in the Bibah Mandap, which were objected by two of the friends of Keshab with the Deputy-Commissioner for having allowed those idols to be placed there, but it, was to no avail. The ulu-dhani, dhaks, dhols were the traditional features. At presence of Mangal Ghat both the bridegroom and the bride were chanted by the Rajpurahit.

In the ceremony dual features of the Hindu and Brahmo principles were followed. It is neither purely called Hindu nor Brahmo marriage. The both parties tried to keep up their own ceremonial features. The Hindu rites were generally essential features of this marriage rather than Brahmo rites. So, Chaudhuri remarks regarding the features of the marriage, “The rites observed were Hindu in all essential features, though in difference to the religious principles of the bride’s father idolatrous mantras were omitted and the presence of an idol was dispensed with. Care was, however, taken to retain whatever the Brahmins considered essential to the validity of the marriage.” The Friend of India and Statesman informs us that the opponents of Keshab denied this marriage as a Brahmo Marriage and they further asserted that the marriage was polygamous. They added a peculiar argument to it that Koch dynasty had a custom of marrying five wives at a time. In this situation the British government was criticised as a guardian of the bridegroom for interfering in the marriage. Dalton, the Deputy Commissioner of the State issued an order that the Maharaja Nripnedra Narayan would start for England on 15 March, 1878. It was not supported by the mother and grandmother of the Maharaj and they suffered from agony.
After marriage the court ladies did not consider Sunity as a Hindu though Hindu rites were mostly followed in the wedding. Sunity Devee considered herself as a Brahmo member. So, she had to suffer mental harassment by the court ladies and pressurised to become a Hindu lady by faith, when she was at the Cooch Behar court before she returned to father, Calcutta. She wrote her painful experience like thus, “... the next few days were very trying. The palace ladies used to threaten and scold me by turns." You must become a Hindu," was their incessant, wearying refrain...”25

**Conclusion**

First of all, the immediate effect of the Marriage is bifurcation of Brahmo Samaj of India. One was handled by him namely Naba Bidhan Brahmo Samaj and Sadharan Brahmo Samaj led Shivenath Shastri. On ground of the Marriage his long attached friend Anand Mohan Bose felt mortified and left him. Other Brahmos and Bramikas fooled him once, they left. It is right that the Marriage brought about fragmentation in the Brahmo Samaj of India, but its positive sides were noticed in the Princely State of Cooch Behar. Due to this Marriage the activities got its speed in the State. Sunity Devee became the lady icon to socio-cultural activities. She had much contribution to establish girls’ school in the State for the first time. Her husband Maharaja Nripendra Narayan became icon in the propagation of Brahmo activities in the State. Due to the arrival of Brahmo member from outside of the State periodicals and magazines were published from Cooch Behar Press under benevolent enterprise of Maharaja Nripendra Narayan. Due to the extension of Brahmo activities, socio-cultural changes happened in the State. It is last word that the Marriage was blessings for Cooch Behar State.
Notes & References


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<th>Name of Doctors</th>
<th>Minimum Marriageable Age</th>
<th>Proper Age</th>
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<td>Dr. C. O. Dey</td>
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<td>Babu N. K. Bose</td>
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<td>Tamiz Khan Bahadur</td>
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Dr. Ohevers 16 ,, ,, 18
Dr. D. B. Smith 16 ,, ,, 18 or 19
Dr. Ewart 16 ,, ,, 18 or 19
Dr. Fayrer 16 ,, ,, 18 or 20
Dr. Chuclrerbutty 16 21
Atmaram Paddurung, Esq. 20


[8]. *Anusthanic* Brahmos, i.e., those who perform all the *anusthans* or religious observances of life according to strict Brahmic principles. (Ref: Sophia Dobson Collet, (ed.), *The Brahmo Year-Book for 1878*, no. III, London, Williams and Norgate 1878, p. 10.)


[10]. Collet, Sophia Dobson, (ed.), *The Brahmo Year-Book for 1878*, No. III, London: Williams and Norgate, 1878, pp. 11-13; some names of the protest Brahmo leaders were mentioned in the article and others of the twenty three were (from page at 13 of the same) Nagendra Nath Chaterjee, Siva Natha Bhattayacharya, Kali Nath Datta, Ducowri Ghosh, Khetter Mohan Dutt, Guru Charan Mahalanabish, Jadu Nath Chakravarti, Radha Kanta Banerjee, Hara kumar Chowdry, Kedar Nath Mookerjee, Radhica Prasad Mitra, Rajani Kanta Niyogi, Ganesh Chandra.
Ghosh, Satya Pria Deb, Bhagavan Chandra Mukerjee, Prasanna Kumar Chowdry, Rupchand Mallik. Later it is known from Sunday Mirror, 24 February, 1878, (letter to the editor of Indian Mirror) that Khetter Mohan Dutt withdrew his name from the list of protesters. He wanted to oppose no longer against Keshab. (Ref: Same book, pp. 13-14.)


[14]. Harendra Narayan Chaudhuri, The Cooch Behar State and Its Land Revenue Settlements, Cooch Behar, The Cooch Behar State Press, 1903, p. 422. Chaudhuri wrote that the marriage commenced at 10 a.m., but Brahmo Public Opinion, 21 March, 1878, wrote the time of marriage to have been 8 a.m.


[17]. Sunity Devee, The Autobiography of an Indian Princess, London, John Murray, 1921, p. 66; “Mr. Dalton, pale and breathless, stood before my father "Mr. Sen, “he cried, "the wedding must
and shall take place to-night. The service shall be exactly as you wish. I'll be there to see that it is not interfered with. Come quickly. We've not a moment to lose. There is another auspicious hour at 3 a.m. Let it be then. As he spoke he handed my father a written agreement confirming his words, and told him that the Lieutenant-Governor had telegraphed:"Let the marriage be performed according to the rites as settled in Calcutta.”


[20]. Indian Daily News, 15 March, 1878; Indian Mirror, 17 March, 1878 expressed non-Brahmo activities in the day of marriage.

[21]. Brahmo Public Opinion, 21 March, 1878, Sophia Dobson Collet, (ed.), The Brahmo Year-Book for 1878, No. III, London, Williams and Norgate, 1878, pp. 32, 33. But Indian Mirror, 17 March, 1878 wrote, “They evaded the difficulty, and did not order the removal of the objectionable symbols, comprising ghats, earthen Vessels filled with water, and a pair of wooden koutas, symbolical of Har Gouri. These objects, however, were not worshipped during any part of the ceremony.”


[23]. The Friend of India and Statesman, 15 March, 1878.

[24]. The Friend of India and Statesman, 15 March, 1878; “The Micro, contains the following telegram from Couch Behar, dated 13th March:-A painful seers has taken place at the Rajbari
today. The Deputy Commissioner has issued order that the Maharajah should start for England the Maharajah's mother and grandmother are said to be beating their beads in desperate fits of agony and profusely bleeding. Doctors bare been sent for. The entire Hindu community is in a state of agitation.”