



BEXHILL'S MAHARAJAH

HH Nripendra Narayan,
Maharajah of Cooch Behar

Compiled by Phyllis Burl
from contemporary sources



Association

Introduction

Cooch Behar, a former princely Indian state, was merged in 1950 as an administrative district within West Bengal. It is the name of both the district and its principal town. The area of the district is 1,307 square miles (3,386 square kilometres) and its population in 1981 was 1,771,643. The population of the town at that time was 62,127.

The district once formed part of the ancient kingdom of Kamarupa kingdom but in the 16th century the Kock kingdom was established. The Mugal emperor annexed the kingdom and in the 18th century it was ruled by the British.

It is an agricultural centre and has a fertile, well-irrigated soil and a high annual rainfall. Rice, maize, legumes, oilseeds and tobacco are the main crops. Although subject to floods its agriculture has enabled it to avoid most of the famines which periodically affect other areas of India.

The Cooch Behar Family

At the turn of the century Cooch Behar was one of the two native states under the government of Bengal. A small principality of 1,307 square miles with a population of a little over 600,000, predominantly Hindus with about a quarter Mohammedans.

In 1863 the Maharajah died, leaving as his successor a one year old son, the Maharajah Nripendra Narayan, who was first educated in India and subsequently in England. On the occasion of his installation as ruler of Cooch Behar the prince is reported to have said "It shall be my earnest endeavour to do justice to the great trust which I now undertake." He did indeed rule with justice and wisdom and was much beloved by his people.

In 1878, at the age of 16 he married Sunity Devec, the eldest daughter of the famous Indian reformer Keshub Chunder Sen, who was one of India's most remarkable men. He was a disciple of the Brahmo religion (or religion of the new dispensation), a religion of tolerance and charity, which aimed at removing the caste divisions of the Indian people.

The followers of this eclectic creed were not supposed to marry early, but the princess was never-the-less very young when she married the Maharajah and it caused a great stir in India. However her husband proclaiming himself both a theist and a monogamist, shared her ideas and together they formed a band of progress for India and a link between East and West which promoted understanding on both sides.

The Maharajah maintained a moderate military force and as a ruling chief was entitled to a salute of 13 guns. The yearly state revenue was estimated at £150,000. His family held sovereignty for nearly 400 years. While he was a minor his State rendered good service to the Imperial power in the Bhutan War and he was given a present of two guns.

The Maharajah was a man of splendid physique and commanding presence. He was an officer in an Indian regiment and he served with great distinction in the British army in the Tirah campaign of 1897-98, attached to the personal staff of General Yeatman Biggs. He was present at the actions of Dargai and Samana.

His Highness had the reputation of being a first-class shot and was an enthusiastic sportsman, fond of horses and a player of racquet and had few equals at lawn tennis. He was well-known as a big game hunter, was a fair cricketer, a brilliant polo player and among the best shots in India. Famous for great shooting parties in February and March every year when he entertained the Viceroy of the time, Lord Roberts and Prince Christian Victor. Indoors he passed many an hour over the billiard table.

He had the distinction, probably unique among Indian princes of holding high office in Freemasonry, Past Senior Great Warden of England.

On the occasion of Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee he and the Maharanee came to England to attend the function, she being the first wife of an Indian ruler to accompany her husband to this country and be received at the English Court. They received much kindness and attention from Queen Victoria, Edward, Prince of Wales and his son Prince George.

In the late 1890's the Maharajah and his wife visited Eastbourne and later stayed in this country several times, but the first detailed account of the family being in this area was in the Summer of 1901. It was then that the Maharanee, her brother and some of her children visited Bexhill and took up residence at Moor Hall, Ninfield. The Maharajah had other commitments at the time but was to join the party later on. Their sojourn at Ninfield caused much excitement and it was said at the time that—

'It was only a few weeks ago when the Maharanee and her family came to Moor Hall, yet at the present moment you may go for miles around and fail to find the humblest wayside cottager who has not seen the Maharanee and does not know the

personages of her suite...and it is needless to say that the advent of these wealthy and distinguished visitors has been what is commonly called a good thing for the villagers of Ninfield. The tradesmen of Bexhill likewise profited by their presence for the Princess maintained a large establishment and bestowed her favours with a lavish hand and everything which it was possible to purchase in the locality was brought in the town, to the very considerable advantage of local trade... Apart from that the neighbourhood had the honour of entertaining one of the most famous and esteemed of Indian princesses.'

'Much of her time was spent in London, the journey between Bexhill and the metropolis being always made in a reserved saloon carriage.'

'It was hoped that their stay in the neighbourhood would prove of so pleasant a character that subsequent years they would be induced to pay Bexhill another visit.'

The Maharajah and Maharanee had four sons and three daughters. All fine and good looking children, for whom the parents provided the best English education. The eldest son went to Christchurch and the others were placed at Eton.

On 7th. September 1901, there was a cricket match between Moor Hall and the home eleven. The Ninfield team were the guests of the Maharanee of Cooch Behar, who had a large and fashionable house party and Prince Raj (her eldest son), Prince Victor and Mr. Tassell were said to have bowled well, the latter taking five wickets. Prince Victor and Jemmett then started the Moor Hall innings, but little could be done with the fine trundling of the Ninfield demon, C. Morris, and six wickets were down when a large and fashionable company drove down on Harry Prentice's well horsed coach 'The Old Times'. The village team were the victors by an innings and two runs...Mr. Morris then proposed a neat and feeling speech to the health of the Maharanee and her family, Prince Raj, Prince Victor and Prince Jit.

There was a return match later on at Moor Hall when the Maharanee of Cooch Behar entertained the rival teams to luncheon, tea and dinner. Prince Raj, Prince Victor, Prince Jit and Mr.K.Sen were present. The match was won by Ninfield.

In September 1901, the Maharanee gave a musical party at which Prince Ranjitsinhji was present, the orchestra being a local one.

The Maharajah's Illness

The next important news of the family was in July 1911, when the Maharajah became unwell and his physician suggested that the health giving qualities of the sea air of Bexhill might restore him again. A bungalow in Marina Court Avenue was therefore taken and he was brought down from London with his retinue.

After he had settled in he took a motor drive but appeared to be worse and was unable to leave his room.

It had been said that because he had lived his life with intensity and great devotion to manly sport, it had caused the breakdown of his constitution, but it was diagnosed that he was suffering from heart trouble with kidney complications and was in indifferent health on his arrival and little could be done for him. His own two physicians and a specialist, Dr.Bezly Thorne, were in constant attendance, but all to no avail and the world seemed rapidly fading away from him. But he was quite prepared to go and said 'Let us be happy together, my journey is almost at an end, why do you fear death?'

At this time of anxiety the King made sympathetic enquiries, while everything possible was done to save his life, but he passed away on 18th. September, 1911.

The Maharajah's Death

The *Bexhill Observer* of September 23rd. remarked on his death that—

‘Although the late Maharajah of Cooch Behar who passed away at 22 Marina Court Avenue on Monday evening was not personally known to the residents of Bexhill, as he had been confined to his room ever since he arrived here in the middle of July, they had followed the course of his illness with most sympathetic concern and it was with deepest regret that they heard the sad news of his death. Members of the family and suite have been familiar figures in the town during the Summer and the manner in which they have identified themselves with local life, taking part in various sports and recreations, has caused them to be regarded with feelings of greatest esteem. The Maharajah will be deeply mourned, not only by his subjects but by a wide circle of friends here and in India.’

The *Bexhill Chronicle* of the same date remarked that—

‘The late Prince paid his first visit to England over 30 years ago (circa 1881) and he also came to England in the Jubilee year of 1887 and was invested with the Insignia of the Order of the Indian Empire by Her Majesty the Queen Empress. He was made an honorary Aide-de-Camp to the Prince of Wales (later Edward VII).’

‘In 1897 he volunteered for service in the frontier war...and also in the South African War.’

The Funeral

‘Impressive scenes marked the obsequies of the late Maharajah. Overnight the coffin in which his remains reposed had been draped with the Union Jack by Major Ashby, 5th. Battalion (Cinque Ports) Royal Sussex Regiment...and this coffin was guarded through the night. Early on Thursday morning the military units selected to form guard for the conveyance of the

body to the Bexhill Station congregated outside the bungalow and meantime hundreds of residents and visitors to Bexhill assembled along Marina Court Avenue and Devonshire Road. The Maharajah Kumar Rajendra Narayan Bhup, son and successor of the late Prince headed the long file of mourners. The cortege passed up Devonshire Road direct to the Station. Drawn by six horses, the coffin with the Union Jack and the helmet was on the gun carriage.'

'King George V had directed that full military honours were to be accorded to him and while the display in London was more ornate, the preliminaries in Bexhill also partook of a military character. The procession of mourners moved away and the strains of Chopin's *Marche Funebre* floated down from the Coastguard Station where the band of the King's Royal Rifles were stationed under Band Master W.J.Dunn. Two dense banks of spectators lined the route to the station. The bereaved Indians saw the extent to which their sorrow was shared and saw the regard in which the late Maharajah was held here. All the shop windows in Devonshire Road had their blinds down and also the private residences on the route. Flags flew at half-mast at the Coastguard Station, the Town Hall, schools and other buildings while the presence of the Mayor and Town Clerk in the procession was a further assurance to the family of the Town's sympathy. Still playing Chopin's work the band of an English Army regiment only lately returned after 20 years in India led the cortege. On the gun carriage drawn by six horses and manned by drivers of the Second Home Counties Royal Field Artillery rested the casket enveloped in the National Flag and on the lid his sword and white helmet half covered by two beautiful wreaths while inside lay the body of the dead Maharajah clothed in his handsome dress and beautiful turban. Walking behind was his heir and successor wearing the uniform of an officer of the Indian Cavalry (cream faced with light blue and gold) and a light blue turban with a gold tassel, while his ivory sheathed sabre was suspended from a deep sash of gold. Immediately following and

walking together were the other three princes all in native uniforms. The majority of the mourners were in ordinary English mourning dress. The priests, the members of the Prince's suite and his principal servants being in native dress. One or two of the followers wore folds of crepe from the back of their heads. Another splash of colour was provided by the scarlet uniform of General Hawkins (the tenant of the bungalow in which the Prince died) with whom was the Mayor (Alderman J.A. Paton, J.P.) and the Town Clerk (Mr.T.E.Rodgers). The rear of the procession was brought up by three motor cars containing beautiful floral tributes.'

'All traffic was suspended in Devonshire Road as the funeral passed. The road was thickly lined with people from end to end who were very moved by the sad procession. The coffin was laid on the platform through the gate in the Square, the special train, the funeral car, saloon carriage and guard's van were waiting. Before the departure the Mayor shook hands with the young Maharajah and as the train steamed out the bearers stood to attention. The military arrangements were in the charge of Major J.W.Ashby, 5th.Battalion Royal Sussex Regiment and Major H.C.Boys, 2nd.Home Counties Brigade Royal Field Artillery. All was carried out very smoothly. Assistance with the band was kindly rendered by Regimental Quarter Master Sergeant Tyler (Berkshire Yeomanry) who was in uniform. Sergeant Parker of the Yeomanry and Sergeant Major King of the Artillery were also on duty. Sergeant Isted being in charge of the drivers.'

'At Victoria Station a large crowd had assembled to witness the arrival of the funeral train. From Victoria the funeral cortege which consisted of about a dozen mourning carriages, several of which were filled with wreaths, proceeded to Golder's Green. Assembled in the courtyard of the crematorium was a large number of Indian mourners of both sexes, who showed much sorrowful emotion as the cortege entered the enclosure.'

'The service was according to the rite of the Brahma-Somat religion, a reformed Brahminism of which the deceased Prince

was a most distinguished member and supporter. It began with a hymn, intoned in a strange wailing chant in Hindustani. The Brahma-Somat religion resembles Unitarianism in many of its features and a large proportion of the phrases used in the burial service were drawn, but slightly altered, from the English Prayer Book.'

'At the close, Mr.Sen (the Maharajah's brother-in-law) delivered a brief eulogium of the deceased, in which he spoke of his qualities as a ruler and soldier. His chief characteristic however said Mr.Sen was love for his fellow-men and the Maharajah's favourite saying was "God is love". The life of the late ruler showed that this was no empty form of words, with him who uttered it. The widow of the Maharajah and those who had the honour of associating with him knew that not only in his love of God, but in love for his fellow-men the late ruler stood pre-eminent.'

'Concluding his address the speaker said the Maharajah's eldest son would recite the final prayer and he invited the congregation to join in. Then came a very touching and impressive scene. The young Maharajah leaving his place near the clergyman went to the head of the coffin. Standing there alone and with difficulty in mastering his emotion, he raised his hand and said "In the name of God, the Almighty Father, I commit these last remains of my beloved father to your keeping. That in him which is immortal will always live, the mortal dies and perishes in the flame. God keep and bless him in Your holy care".'

'After being cremated in London the ashes were placed in a bronze urn to be taken to India for interment.'

'The Maharanee of Cooch Behar sent a message on behalf of herself and family to thank the numerous residents and visitors in Bexhill who have so kindly sent messages of sympathy in her great bereavement.'

The New Maharajah

In the *Bexhill Observer* of 13th. January 1912, the following notice appeared—

'The Maharajah of Cooch Behar Installation Ceremony.'

'With the memory of the deeply impressive funeral of the late Maharajah of Cooch Behar fresh in their minds, the news of the installation of his son as ruler will have special interest for Bexhillians says the *Sphere* — "The new Maharajah of Cooch Behar (Raj Rapendra Narayan) the fertile Bengal State, was installed on his ancestral throne by the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal representing the British government just in time for the Durbar. He begins his reign with the sympathy and good wishes of the British public, who will remember the moving scene at his father's funeral, when he consigned the body to the flames with a last prayer and saluted the bier which was draped with a Union Jack."

"The Maharajah has been educated at Ajmere College with other Indian princes and also at Eton and Oxford, thus combining East and West in his training and in his ideals. He may become as great a favourite with the British public as was his father, yet he seems to be closely in touch with his subjects. After his installation he ordered an elephant procession and rode at the head of it through his capital so that the humblest of his subjects might see him face to face, a privilege unprecedented in the history of Cooch Behar. In a photograph his Highness is seen together with the Lieutenant-Governor on the dais. The Governor standing on the right, a guard of native soldiery with spears stands behind and along one side a group of British officials are shown".'



The Memorial Fountain

A few weeks later on, the following letter was sent to the Mayor of Bexhill from the Dewar of the State of Cooch Behar on behalf of the Maharajah

'Dear Sir,

I beg to acknowledge the receipt of an extract from the report of the Pleasure Grounds Committee of the Town Council at their meeting on 23rd. October 1911, on the subject of the fountain to be erected to the memory of His Highness the late Maharajah of Cooch Behar which has been sent to me under your direction.'

'The present Maharajah and the others members of his family have learnt with great satisfaction that the Town Council have agreed to accept and forever maintain the memorial fountain and that they have decided to place the fountain as near as practicable to the residence in which the late Maharajah died.'

'I am now desired to convey an expression of warmest acknowledgements on behalf of the family for the great honour you and the Town Council have done to the memory of his late Highness by allowing his name to be intimately associated with the place where he breathed his last. It will be adding greatly to your kindness if you will be so good as to request the Pleasure Grounds Committee to undertake the duty of obtaining a suitable Memorial Fountain, at a cost of £100, as it will not be convenient for us from this distance to send for designs and estimates and to approve them.'

'In conclusion, I am desired by the present Maharajah to express a hope that the matter will now be taken in hand and the Memorial Fountain will soon be placed in its position. I shall forward to you the amount of £100 through our London Agents, Messrs. Henry King & Company, on hearing from you.'

'Yours faithfully,

Dewar of State of Cooch Behar.'

'The letter was received with applause by the members of the Council. The Mayor moved a resolution which again expressed the Council's high appreciation of the gift and undertaking to erect and maintain the Fountain.'

'The late Maharajah's Memorial Fountain is to be erected near the Colonnade. The Town Council accepts the design submitted by Messrs. Doulton & Co., Ltd. for a 14ft. fountain in dull glazed "Carrara Stoneware at the proposed sum of £110".'

'The representatives of the late Maharajah have sent the Town Clerk in connection with the Memorial a beautiful gold plate inscribed as follows—

"In Memoriam-His Highness Maharajah Sir Nripendra Narayan Bhup Bahadur of Cooch Behar".'

The Marriage of Prince Jitendra

However before the Memorial Fountain was dedicated more information concerning the family was received and appeared in the *Bexhill Chronicle* of May 10th 1913—

'News has been received from Bombay of the breaking off of the projected marriage between Princess Indira daughter of the Gaekwar of Baroda and Prince Jitendra, brother of the Maharajah of Cooch Behar, who is well known in Bexhill, having visited the town during the stay here of his father. The preliminaries in respect of the marriage had been arranged, but it appeared that when the Prince made a formal proposal for the hand of Princess Indira the Gaekwar and the Maharanee of Baroda did not assent to the request. Prince Jitendra, however still hoped to induce them to reconsider their decision and meantime preparations for the marriage were in full progress.'

'Officials declare that the Gaekwar will never consent to the match for various reasons...but which it is stated had to do with the question of caste.'

Never-the-less the seeming impossible happened and three months later the following appeared in the *Bexhill Chronicle* —

‘Bexhillians will heartily join in wishing the Maharajah Kumar Jitendra Narayan of Cooch Behar who was married to the Princess Indira, daughter of the Gackwar of Baroda, much happiness in their married life.’

‘Prince Jitendra, a son of the late Maharajah of Cooch Behar, who so long resided in Bexhill and brother of the present Maharajah is well known to many of our readers and spent much of his youth in our midst.’

‘The ceremony on Monday was of a very quiet character. Soon after 10 o’clock the bridegroom, wearing Indian robes of white silk and gold, arrived at Buckingham Palace Hotel where the wedding ceremonies were performed. The first of these was the reception of the Prince into the Brahma religion. Afterwards there was the civil ceremony at Paddington Registry Office.’

‘Following the civil ceremony the marriage took place at the hotel in accordance with the Brahma rites.’

The Death of H.H. Maharajah Rajendra

All friends of the family and well-wishers now hoped they had a long period of tranquillity before them after the tragic early death of the Maharajah which had occurred only two years before. It was with great sadness, therefore that only a week later Bexhillians read the following when they opened their local paper

‘News of the death of the Maharajah of Cooch Behar which occurred at Tudor House, Cliff Avenue, Cromer on Monday morning was received with regret in Bexhill owing to the close associations of the town with the Indian ruler’s family and the mournful coincidence that it was only two years ago that his father passed away at Bexhill. On that occasion the young prince

was a well-known figure in the town and of the many thousands who witnessed the funeral procession few will forget the slim figure in Indian turban and dress who followed immediately behind the coffin.'

'His Highness, who was only 29 years of age, had been staying at Cromer for the past fortnight and was to have been joined later by his brother, whose recent marriage in London to the Princess Indira of Baroda attracted so much public interest. On learning of the Maharajah's serious condition the bride and bridegroom hastened to Cromer from Maidenhead where they were spending the first portion of their honeymoon. The young Indian prince had passed away after a reign of but two years. Maharajah Raj Rajendra Narayan, though a keen sportsman was somewhat eclipsed by the personality of his father whose repeated visits to this country and the personal friendship with King Edward, made him the most familiar of Indian potentates in English society.'

The Brahmo Religion

'The late Maharajah had scant time in which to leave any mark on the records of his State and an almost incessant condition of illness rendered his official works doubly arduous. The hopes of the Brahmo Samaj, a certain form of spiritualised Hinduism were largely concentrated on him, the child of his father, the late Maharajah of Cooch Behar and of the Maharanee, the daughter of the Keshub Chundra Sen, the founder of the Brahmo Samaj. It is unnecessary to recall all the incidents of this strange and partially successful idealisation of Hindu tradition. It is, however of importance to note that although Sen denounced infant marriage, he was willing to ally his infant daughter with the dynasty of Cooch Behar. As can be imagined, there was trouble in the ranks of the Brahmo Samaj and a serious heresy developed.'

herself to English society and the recent marriage of "Princess Pretty" to an Anglo-Indian planter has been welcomed in the inmost circles and Simla and Delhi society. The marriage of the late Maharajah's brother to the Princess Indira of Baroda took place only one week ago. The relatives of the Prince present at his death were his mother, the Maharanee of Cooch Behar, his brother the Maharajah Kuma Jitendra Nayaran and his wife and three sisters, the Princesses Jukrite, Previta and Judhra and his uncle, Mr.Sen.'

The Funeral of H.H. Maharajah Rajendra

'Cremation in London.'

'The remains of the Maharajah were cremated on Wednesday afternoon at Golder's Green Cemetery, the ashes being conveyed afterwards to Palace Court, where they will lie in a silver casket until they are removed to India. Although Brahma ceremonials were conducted with some pomp in the privacy of the Palace Court, the service in the crematorium was of the simplest nature. Only about a score of the late Maharajah's relatives, officers and servants travelled by the special train of five coaches, which brought the remains from Cromer to Cricklewood, where a few more joined the procession to Golder's Green.'

'Among the principal mourners were the Maharajah Kumar Jitendra Nayaran and his wife, Princess Sudhira (sister), Dr.Sen and Mr.and Mrs.Peter Sen, Judge N.N.Sen and four aides-de-camp, Mr.Raikut, Mr.Kumal-Na-Rayon, Mr.N.Gupta and Mr.and Mrs.S.N.Roy.'

'Cloth of purple and white was used to drape part of the crematorium, which was further brightened by a profusion of palms and beautiful flowers. Seated near the relatives were the deceased's officers in gorgeous scarlet and gold state uniforms

and Indian servants in blue liveries with turbans of gold, blue and white cloth. Lieutenant-Colonel Sir James Dunlop-Smith represented the Secretary-of-State for India and others present included Dr. Hamilton Allen, who attended the late Maharajah in his final illness, Dr. Johnston, Mr. Pezen (secretary), Mr. Ezra, Mrs. Williams, Mrs. Davidson and Mrs. Beverly.'

'New Ruler's Prayer.'

'Brahmo prayers having been recited in English by Judge Sen, the Maharajah of Cooch Behar, who was attired in a dark grey lounge suit with soft silk collar, advanced and placing his right hand on the coffin, offered up the following prayer— "In the name of the Father and in the name of the Son, I commit these last remains of my most beloved brother to the fire. That which is mortal will burn away and perish, but the immortal liveth. The Lord keep and bless the departed soul in everlasting peace". The Prince having raised his hand above his head, the coffin was withdrawn from view and the simple ceremony was concluded.'

'Many beautiful wreaths were borne on the hearse and in another vehicle, among them being a crown of purple blooms on a square white base from the Maharajah and his wife and another large tribute from the Princess Ghosal who was unable to be present. The members of the Cooch Behar State Council also sent a floral offering "With love and devotion" and among others who contributed similar tokens of remembrance were Major-General Sir John Cowans, Mr. A. Ezra, Miss Flora L. Wood and Mrs. Oscar Lewisohn.'

'The coffin bore an inscription giving the full name of the deceased and date of his birth, April 11th. 1880 and of his death Sept. 1st. 1913.'

The Dedication of the Memorial

In spite of the death of the Maharajah, the arrangements for the dedication ceremony of the Memorial Fountain went forward, as shown in the *Bexhill Chronicle* for 13th. September 1913—

‘A communication has been received by the Mayor from the Maharajah of Cooch Behar, intimating his intention of visiting Bexhill on Thursday the second anniversary of his father’s death and dedicating the fountain erected to his father’s memory.’

‘It is the wish of the Maharajah and his family that the death of the late Maharajah which occurred recently should not interfere with the arrangements previously made.’

On the 18th. September, the opening of the Cooch Behar Memorial took place—

‘The erection in England of a Memorial to a ruler of an Indian State must be an incident of a unique character and those who were privileged to witness the ceremonial opening of the Maharajah of Cooch Behar Fountain at Bexhill on Thursday afternoon were spectators of an event of rare occurrence and world-wide interest.’

‘The proceedings were admirably arranged and ‘though brief in duration, they could hardly have been of a more suitable character. The Mayor, who is always seen at his best on such occasions had the able support of the Mayoress, while the Town Clerk had spared no effort to make the ceremony agreeable to the distinguished visitors who were honouring the town with their presence.’

‘The Maharajah and His Worship the Mayor descended from the platform for His Highness to turn on the water which supplies the Fountain. The Mayor then made his speech and His Highness made his reply as follows—“In the first instance, I must tender my gratitude to you and also to the residents of Bexhill, for the honour they have conferred on our family by erecting this Fountain to the memory of my beloved and illustrious father. It

is both a pleasant and a sad duty that I am asked to perform today. Pleasant because all our family appreciate what the citizens of Bexhill did for my father during his illness, also the honour they paid him on the day of his funeral. Sad because it reminds us of the end of one who was so dear to us and who endeared himself to all who came into contact with him by his charming personality. When we brought my dear father to this healthy seaside resort in 1911 on the recommendation of his physicians we all hoped that he would get well and long be spared to us. But God willed it otherwise and took unto Him the tired soul who did so much to bring the East and West together and who brought the little known State of Cooch Behar into such prominence. And sad again because of the great loss we have so lately suffered in the death of my beloved elder brother to whom the town of Bexhill was so dear and who even in his illness was so anxious to perform the dedication. Your Worship, Mayoress, Ladies and Gentlemen, I shall not take up more of your time, I, on behalf of my wife, myself and my family, express to you again our sincere gratitude for erecting this Memorial to the memory of my dear father."

"The young Maharajah who has been suddenly called to the rulership of the State of Cooch Behar on the lamented death of his brother made an excellent impression. Wearing a turban and a handsome native dress, he presented a striking figure. His speech was admirably delivered, speaking clearly but rather rapidly, his voice was plainly heard by the several thousands of people gathered round and the reference to his late father and the town of Bexhill could not have been more felicitously expressed."

"On the part of the public, the greatest interest was evinced in the young Maharanee whose marriage a few weeks ago and under somewhat romantic circumstances excited so much attention. Her Highness was in European dress, her costume being black and the members of the numerous suite were also in mourning for the late Maharajah. Smaller in stature than her husband the Maharanee bore herself with charming modesty and was

obviously pleased with the very beautiful bouquet presented to her by the Mayoress.'

'As a daughter of the powerful and wealthy Indian Prince, the Gaekwar of Baroda, Her Highness was educated in England and is therefore thoroughly conversant with Western manners and customs.'

'After the opening ceremony and at the invitation of the Mayor, His Highness and his suite afterwards took tea in the Colonnade. Reserved places for His Worship, the Mayoress, the Maharajah and the Maharanee and their immediate relations were laid on in the inside bandstand.'

'This part of the afternoon's proceedings was marked by a presentation by the Maharajah of a gold cigarette case and gold match box to the Mayor and a silver cigarette case and silver match box to the Town Clerk (Mr.T.E.Rodgers). The gifts were handed over quite informally with the request that they would be accepted as a memento of the occasion; both the cigarette cases and the match boxes were engraved with the initials "C.B.".'

'Large crowds awaited the departure from the Colonnade of the distinguished visitors.'

Later News of the Family

For a while nothing more was heard of the family until in the *Bexhill Observer* of January 8th.1916, there was the following announcement—

'A son and heir has been born to the Maharajah and Maharanee of Cooch Behar.'

and later on May 31st.1919—

'A daughter was born to the Maharajah and Maharanee of Cooch Behar at 23, Portland Square, London.'

On 28th.October there was a disturbing notice in the *Bexhill Chronicle* —

'Incorrect reports have recently appeared in the London papers to the effect that the Maharajah of Cooch Behar, one of the independent ruling princes of India, is lying dangerously ill in a nursing home at Folkestone. Many of the paragraph writers have recalled the picturesque romance of the royal courtship. It will be remembered that the Maharajah was married in 1913 to Princess Indira, the beautiful daughter of the fabulously rich Gaekwar of Baroda. Her family desired her to marry the Maharajah of Scinda of Gwalior, but the Princess was in love with the dashing Prince Jitendra Nayaran of Cooch Behar (as he then was). Nothing would induce her to give him up. She was to have been married to Prince 'Jit' in Calcutta, but two days before the ceremony an irate father rushed her off to Paris.'

'Prince Jitendra dashed across to Bombay from Calcutta, caught the next mail steamer and went to Paris to interview the Gaekwar, the ruler of Baroda. However, he hearing of the Prince's arrival hastened to St.Moritz taking his daughter with him.'

'Tears from his daughter and pleading by her ardent lover had their effect and the Gaekwar reluctantly consented to the union which took place in Paddington Registry Office on 25th August 1912. The Maharajah's father will be well remembered by Bexhillians, for he resided in here for some time and died in the town.'

Alas the rumoured report mentioned above turned out to be only too true, as was proved by an article in the *Bexhill Chronicle* of 23rd December 1922

'The death occurred in a London nursing home on Wednesday of the Maharajah of Cooch Behar. The Maharajah was aged 36 years and died on his birthday. It will be remembered that his father died at a bungalow on the Parade at Bexhill...the successor to the title is a boy seven years old. The family have been associated with Bexhill for nearly a quarter of a century.'

'The Maharanee Indira of Cooch Behar left London on Thursday to embark on the mail steamer Kaiser-I-Hind at Marseilles with

her seven year old son, the present Maharajah Javaraj Jagaddependra and her eldest and second daughter.'

'The Maharanee is taking back to India an urn containing the ashes of her husband whose death in London on his 38th birthday was recorded in the Chronicle recently. They follow to Cooch Behar the ashes of his father Maharajah Sir Nripendra Narayan who died in Bexhill in 1911 and those of his brother Maharajah Rajendra Narayan who died at Cromer in September 1913, both of whom were also cremated at Golder's Green. The ashes will be deposited with due religious rites beside those of the late Maharajah's father and elder brother in a beautiful marble mausoleum in the rose garden at the Cooch Behar palace.'

In November 1932 news was received of—

'the Dowager Maharanee of Cooch Behar, whose death has taken place in India at the age of 68. She will be remembered in Bexhill as the wife of the Maharajah who died here in September 1911 and a memorial to whom in the form of a fountain stands on the cliff behind the Colonnade.'

'The Maharanee, a charming little lady, who came to Bexhill on several occasions in after years, was one of the pioneers of social advancement and intellectual development among the women of India. In the latter part of her life the Maharanee suffered many sorrows, losing her husband and two sons at an early age. she spent a good deal of time in this country enjoying the many friendships which she and her late husband had formed with leading English families.'

'The late Princess wrote an autobiography in which interesting references were made to her connections with Bexhill. She mentions that— "When the sad news of the death of her husband in 1911 reached Cooch Behar, a procession was ordered in which officials and relatives walked barefoot to honour the memory of the Ruler. The State elephant of which he had been so fond, accompanied the mourners and all the while tears rolled down the animal's cheeks, just as if he knew the beloved voice was

hushed for ever. The dumb beast's sorrow touched all those who witnessed it and I always like to think the elephant by some wonderful instinct shared our grief." She also referred to the old garden at Cooch Behar Palace in which her loved ones ashes were placed at a peaceful spot round which so many legends cluster. At the Mausoleum "...prayers are offered every evening and sometimes the boys go there alone in the moonlight. The scented stillness of the Rose Garden is unbroken save for the music of the birds and the mournful whisperings of the trees when the wind speaks to them and the sleepers".'

'The Prince Victor Nityendra son of the Maharajah Nripendra was killed last Saturday while crossing the Great West Road. His mother was the Maharanee Sunity Devec.'

Final Remarks

Two further items of local interest connected with the Cooch Behar family are appended

(1) In the early 1920's the researcher of this information was a small child and remembers being taken to Marina Court Avenue for tea. The lady of the house asked her if she would like to see a real Indian princess. The child expressed delight at the idea, but her surprise was great when a little Indian baby was placed on her lap, who she was told was the daughter of the Maharajah of Cooch Behar.

(2) During the last war, a friend of mine knew a young Air Force man who was subsequently drafted overseas to India, being ultimately stationed in Cooch Behar. He told my friend that the Maharajah was very friendly and good to them all, inviting them to form a cricket team to play against his own eleven. At that time he did not know of any connection with the Cooch Behar family and Bexhill.

Presumably the baby and the Maharajah mentioned above were the children of the late Maharajah Sir Jitendra Narayan, second son of the Maharajah Sir Nripendra Narayan, who died in Bexhill in 1911.

Finally there was a reference to the fate of the Memorial Fountain in the *Bexhill Observer* of July 21st.1934. It will be remembered at that time the Coastguard Cottages were being demolished and the surrounding ground cleared to make way for the proposed De La Warr Pavilion.

'Regrettable as it is in some respects that the removal of the Cooch Behar Memorial from its site behind the Colonnade became inevitable with the use of the land for town improvement purposes.'

'The drinking fountain commemorates a Maharajah who was a great sportsman and a wise ruler of an Indian State and who spent the last weeks of his life in a house on the Parade by the Colonnade. It was unveiled during the Mayoralty of the late Mr.Daniel Mayer. In a sheltered nook in the Park, the Memorial will probably be seen to better advantage than it ever was.'

Further remarks about the family

This book has been concerned with some of the Maharajas of Cooch Behar and has only made passing reference to their mothers, wives and daughters. These ladies have had a great influence both in Cooch Behar and India and have even affected British actions and opinion.

When HH Nripendra Nayaran succeeded to the throne aged ten months a British commissioner administered the state until he attained his majority. We read in Gayatri Devi's *A Princess Remembers* that his mother and grandmother both opposed so forcefully British plans for his education to be completed in England that officials had to agree to their condition for approval that he would be married to an Indian girl before leaving India and being exposed to Western decadence. The girl chosen was Sunity Devi, an educated Bengali girl, daughter of Keshub Chhunder Sen (1838-1884), one of India's most remarkable men whose ideas influenced Rabindranath Tagore and Mahatma Gandhi. The marriage was in effect a betrothal as he was 15 and she was 13. The marriage proper took place on his return from England when he was 18 and she was 16.

In 1887 they came to England for Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee, the first time that an Indian ruler had taken his Maharani to England. It was written at that time that 'among the many illustrious visitors who came to England during the summer of 1887 to pay their respects to our gracious Queen on the occasion of her Jubilee, there were few who were received with more marked attention by her Majesty, or who attracted more general interest and sympathy, than the Maharajah and Maharani of Cooch Behar.'

'Sunity Devi was an outstanding and popular figure in London society and moved freely with the Royal family besides being a favourite with Queen Victoria.' (Padmini Suthiandham)

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It was this journey to England which was a milestone in the liberation of Indian women. Such a venture broke with orthodox opinion and there was much public criticism. By her actions she showed that the enclosed world of the zenana need not cut off a woman from the outside world and by her travels abroad set an example for other maharani to follow.

She wrote several books including an autobiography and those mentioned in the bibliography together with childrens stories and Bengali songs. Two schools were founded by her, the Maharani Girl's School in Darjeeling, where children of all castes and creeds were taught and a technical school for poor women in Calcutta. Her charitable works were numerous and she worked diligently to encourage the emancipation of the women of Bengal although when in Cooch Behar she lived in the zenana quarters. Purdah finally met its end when her daughter-in-law Indira, wife of Prince Jitendra arrived in Cooch Behar in an open car.

The romantic story of the courtship of Princess Indira and Prince Jitendra has been told above. This again was a flouting of Indian traditions and concept of all that is correct and having overcome this the next great challenge in her life came in 1922 following the death of her husband. She was left to bring-up her family of five children and at the same time, because Prince Jagaddipendra was a minor, at the request of Lord Reading the Viceroy, she acted as regent. Thus she was the ruler of Cooch Behar until her son attained his majority.

The second daughter of Prince Jitendra and Princess Indira is HH Gayatri Devi, Rajmata of Jaipur, and she has followed in her Cooch Behar grandmother's and mother's footsteps. As the third wife of the Maharajah of Jaipur she gradually introduced an unfettered lifestyle for the Maharani, travelling abroad with her husband and enjoying a full social life. Following Indian Independence the Maharajah became Head of State of Greater Rajasthan in 1949 and she supported him in his political role. She was, thus, drawn into Indian politics, ultimately standing for

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parliament in 1962, winning her seat by the largest majority of any candidate in a democratic election. In 1975 she was imprisoned by the Congress Party led by Indira Gandhi and spent several months in appalling conditions.

She has founded a school and written her autobiography, as did her grandmother and since the death of her husband and her withdrawal from politics, has devoted much of her life to helping the people of Jaipur to improve their standard of living by setting up workshops for the production of textiles and ceramics for export.

COOCH BEHAR



The Coat of Arms of Cooch Behar

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COOCH BEHAR



The Coat of Arms of Cooch Behar

Postscript

On 21st. September 1998, the eighty seventh anniversary of the funeral of HH Maharajah Nripendra Nayaran, Bexhill Museum was delighted and proud to welcome HH Gayatri Devi, Rajmata of Jaipur, granddaughter of Maharajah Nripendra Nayaran and daughter of Maharajah Jitendra Nayaran, to open its exhibition 'Bexhill's Maharajah'. Accompanying her were two further welcome guests, Mrs. G. Garnham, also a granddaughter of Maharajah Nripendra Nayaran and daughter of together with her daughter Diane Garnham, a great granddaughter of Maharajah Nripendra Nayaran.

The Rajmata and Mrs. Garnham both donated family photographs and object to the Museum collections the most impressive of which is a gold cigarette case given by the Maharajah to to Edward, Prince of Wales on his appointment as an honorary ADC in 1887. This was returned by Queen Alexandra to the Maharajah as a memento, suitably inscribed, in memory of her husband following the death of King Edward VII.

The evening was the highlight of the Bexhill Museum Association's year and will be remembered for a long time by those members and guests who attended.

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This book is published to accompany the exhibition entitled 'Bexhill's Maharajah' which opened on 21st September 1998 at Bexhill Museum. It tells the story of the connection with Bexhill of Sir Nripendra Narayan, Maharajah of Cooch Behar, who ruled from 1863 until his death in 22, Channel View, Bexhill on 18th September 1911, and of his immediate family, by means of extracts from local newspapers of the time. The original spellings in the newspapers have been retained. The compiler has added some personal recollections of her own.

Phyllis Burl, who compiled this book, was born and lived her life in Bexhill. She never married. Her early years were spent in her parents house, one of the Coastguard Cottages on the Horn. In the thirties these were demolished to make way for the De La Warr Pavilion and Phyllis and family moved to St Patricks Crescent where, sadly, she died in August 1997 having lived there for some 64 years.

Her working method was to copy out all extracts she made in capital letters. Later she would make a copy of these, also in capitals, in the form of a book into which she included copies of illustrations and photographs which she considered appropriate. Her consuming passion was the local history of the town and she kept up her research almost to the end of her life. It was a privilege to know and work with her.



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