

# Railway expansion in the Princely State of Cooch Behar: A Case Study of Maharaja Nripendra Narayan

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**Abstract:** *The primary objective of the research paper is to highlight the role of the Maharaja Nripendra Narayan in the expansion of the railway system in a princely State like Cooch Behar. In the second half of the nineteenth century, the British power extended to the undivided Bengal, Maharaja Nripendra Narayan sought to expand the railway to improve the communication system of the princely state of Cooch Behar. So, he appealed to the British government to expand the railway. The British government granted the request and gave the responsibility of extending the railway in the princely state of Cooch Behar to the Eastern Bengal State Railway. With the foresight of the Eastern Bengal State Railway, the Cooch Behar railway began to start. The first railway stations were established at Dewanhat, Chourahat, and Gitaldaha. However, railway stations were later set up two flag stations Vetaguri, Fakirtakia, and other stations were hosta, Baneshwar, Jayanti, etc. Finally, the Cooch Behar State Railway began to journey in 1893. But Torsa River became a barrier to connect the main Cooch Behar city with the railway. Therefore, the Torsa Bridge was established in 1896, with the effort of the Eastern Bengal State Railway. Thus, the direct railway connection to the main Cooch Behar was established. Later, the railway line spread to the important area of the princely state of Cooch Behar. The establishment of the railway at the princely state of Cooch Behar undoubtedly improved the quality of socio-economic life as well as improved the communication system.*

**Keywords:** Railway, princely state, Eastern Bengal, Communication,

In 1883, Maharaja Nripendra Narayan ascended the throne of the Princely state of Cooch Behar.<sup>1</sup> Through his initiative modernity entered all levels of the Princely State of Cooch Behar society. Therefore, in the study of the modern history of the Princely state of Cooch Behar, it is not possible to discuss the reign of Maharaja Nripendra Narayan in different ways. Because the reign of Maharaja Nripendra Narayan was a period of social, political, administrative

and economic modernity. During his reign, special emphasis was laid on the modernization of the communication system. The process of improving the railway communication system without roads and waterways was a significant event in the rule of Maharaja Nripendra Narayan.<sup>2</sup>

Until the last second half of the nineteenth century, the communication system of the princely state of Cooch Behar was highly underdeveloped. However, no official documents have been found about the communication system of the Princely state of Cooch Behar before 1850. But later on, the information about the communication system of the Princely state of Cooch Behar was known from the Annual administrative Report of the State. The state's internal communication system was depending on roads and rivers. There was no direct communication with the undivided Bengal and others parts of India. At that time the Tanga service (horse carriage) was operated by the government on the road from Cooch Behar to Gitaldaha.<sup>3</sup> The administrative report shows that a contractor named Ramdihin Sukul was employed in the postal service through the Tanga service from Cooch Behar to Gitaldaha. Open and cover both types of Tanga service were used to carry the passengers. There was a palanquin arrangement for women, especially for women of elite families. Apart from the Tanga service, the whole state of Cooch Behar used Bullock carts for transporting goods and heavy goods.<sup>4</sup> But in the rainy season most of the roads of the state were submerged, at that time, the boats were the only support of transportation. So cows and horses were an asset to the state roads transport system. At that time, a significant portion of the revenue was spent in this section.<sup>5</sup>

During the colonial rule, several public welfare programs were started in Indian territory at the initiative of the British. Among these, the establishment of the railway system is a significant step. Although, behind the expansion of the railway system was the policy of exploitation of the British Empire. Yet, it cannot be refused that the expansion of the railway system has brought about an unexpected improvement in the quality of life and the communication system in India.<sup>6</sup> Even Karl Marx declared with conviction that the railways would transform India into a modern industrialized country.<sup>7</sup> However, the first railway journey in our country was started in 1837. Although, the first passenger train in India was started on 16 April 1853 under colonial rule. Gradually the railways began to spread across the country. In the era of expansion of railways, various Native States began to make their debut in the expansion of railways. Such as Mayurbhang State Railway (1905), Dholpur State Railway (1908) and Cooch Behar State Railway (1893), etc. Before 126 years ago, the railway and the railway service of the contemporary Princely State of Cooch Behar were launched by the Cooch Behar State Railway. Undoubtedly this event is a memorable chapter in the history of Cooch Behar. However, Maharaja Nripendra Narayan, the father of modern Cooch Behar, played a leading role in launching the railway service.<sup>8</sup>

He wants to improve the underdeveloped communication system and to realize the importance of railways. Maharaja Nripendra Narayan declared for the people during his coronation "being anxious to connect our capital with the railway system of Bengal, we contemplated measures for construction of a railway to Gitaldaha....".<sup>9</sup> However, the first railway in the Princely state of Cooch Behar was established in 1876. The railway authorities established the first railway station at Haldibari.<sup>10</sup> Before 1876, the State Of Cooch Behar had no railways. Although the State of Cooch Behar was annexed by the British in 1773, the transport system of the state of Cooch Behar did not improve much till 1863, that is, in one hundred years. During the reign of the Maharaja Nripendra Narayan, English Commissioner Colonel Houghton paid special attention to the transport system of the Princely State of Cooch Behar. The Testa and the Brahmaputra are two major rivers flowing through the state of Cooch Behar. Extensive transport work was carried out through these two rivers only during the monsoon season.<sup>11</sup>

The reason for the Maharaja proclamation was that in the early part of 1883, Major Inglewood, the chief architect of the North Bengal State Railway planned to build a two-and-a-half feet gauge railway to connect Cooch Behar with the Mughalhat-Kauniya-Dhubri railway. Taking into account the possibility that the plan would be approved along embankment was constructed from Jail road to Sunity bridge over the Torsa river in Kalighat. After the coronation of the Maharaja, he proceeded to complete the work of the proposed path by raising the embankment. Mr. Furnivall an agent of the Bengal Central Railway Department came to supervise the railway and gave an important report. The main point of this report in 1884 was "The railway should be nine meters in Narrow gauge, all dam shall be higher and widened and the cost of construction of the railway will be Rs.10,38,484". It will take roughly four years to build this railway. The Maharaja Nripendra Narayan submitted to the Cooch Behar Royal Court a report on the railway, including a report from Furnivall on 11 February 1884, to approve the four-year plan. In a written report, the senior member of the Royal Court and State Dawan Roy Bahadur Kalika Das Dutta analyzed the financial accounts and statistics of the state's revenue and expenditure and said in clear language "I regret, I am obliged to propose the postponement of the construction of the railway".

The financial viability of the state is not able to bear the huge cost burden on the construction of railways in the state. Because when the construction of huge expenditure like construction of palace has reached in the middle stage. Therefore, the plan to build the railway was put on hold in the royal court on 29 March. Meanwhile, a rumor has spread that the Kauniya-Mughalhat railway line will be closed. There was also news that the Kauniya-Mughalhat railway line would be extended to Dhubri in Assam. Due to opposition from the Royal Court and uncertainty over the decision of the Bengal Government regarding the railways, all activities related to the

establishment of railways in the Princely state of Cooch Behar were also suspended. But what is the decision of the undivided Bengal Government regarding Kauniya- Mughalhat railway, the joint public works of the royal court and Bengal government? The joint secretary in reply to the inquiry made it clear that the Kauniya- Mughalhat railway would not be extended; in addition, the railway would be improved in meter gauge. However, plans to expand the railway line to Dhubri have been scrapped. As per the decision of the government, constructive work has started. In reply to the joint secretary, the Royal Court succeeded in setting the railway and the Royal Court proposed that -

- A) The Cooch Behar State would borrow Rs. 7, 00,000 from the government of Bengal.
- B) With the help of the loan money received, a 2 feet 6-inch gauge railway will be laid in the state from Rathibabu *Ghat* (**Landing a place in a river**) on the south bank of the Torsa river to Dewanhat and directly Dewanhat to Gitaldaha.
- C) The government will allow the construction of a railway in the state of Cooch Behar if a plan and survey for the establishment of this proposed railway are carried out by an expert. Mr. Warrar Ford submitted a design and estimated cost allocation to the audit meeting and demanded a fee of Rs. 10,000 for the survey. Design and expenditure were approved in 1891-92. The work progressed rapidly. Under the supervision of Mr. Warran Ford, railroads began to be built from the south bank of the Torsa River. On 15 September 1893, the Cooch Behar state railway was opened for freight traffic only.<sup>12</sup> At this primary stage five railway stations were set up. Such as a) Torsha b) Dewanhat c) Chourahat d) Gitaldaha and e) Gitaldaha *Ghat*.<sup>13</sup> (Landing a place in a river)

Needless to say, overcoming these adversities, the management of Cooch Behar state started its journey from the second half of the nineteenth century onwards. Earlier, the Cooch Behar State Regency Council under the supervision of the Maharaja Nripendra Narayan forwarded the proposal to the government of India after some change and modification. Added to this proposal is the new railway construction supervision program. The responsibility of constructing the railway was entrusted to the manager of the Eastern Bengal State Railway. The program payable to the Eastern Bengal State Railway officer was " Under the present system of management of the line a change for the supervision and keeping of the accounts, proportionate to the receipts and expenditure of the line, is made in the same ratio as the cost of the examination of Account's Office bear to the receipts and expenditure of the Eastern Bengal State Railway"<sup>14</sup>

In 1894, a plan was adopted to expand the railway. With the

implementation of the adopted resolution, the officers of Eastern Bengal State Railway Board visited the proposed area and fully realizes the issue of flooding of Torsa River. As a result, two officials, known as Odling and Anderson, disagreed with the proposal.<sup>15</sup> In the same year, it was proposed to set up two flag stations at Fakirtakia and Vetaguri for the Cooch Behar State Railway. A revolutionary arrangement was made in the state budget due to the implementation of railway improvement in the Princely State of Cooch Behar. The communication improvement fund was created. At a time of Rs.50,000 from the revenue, the sector was deposited in the fund.<sup>16</sup>

Maharaja Nripendra Narayan undertook various innovative programs to major improve the railway service system. Before 1896, the Cooch Behar State Railway did not take any measure to protect the passengers of the railway system. Maharaja was the first to undertake a program of recruiting railway security to ensure passengers' safety on the railway. As per the schedule security guards were posted at Dewanhat, Gitaldaha and Chourahat stations one by one. The Cooch Behar State Railway had decided to pay the employees recruited under this program "These constables must work under the management of the Assistant Inspector- General Police, North Bengal State Railway System and their salaries amounting to Rs.535-5 yearly, were to be borne by the State of Cooch Behar ". Also, the Maharaja assumed that it will be not possible to increase the revenue of the railways without proper development of the road system of the state. The main objective of this system was to develop the road transport system and connect every road with the railway port. The improving road system will naturally increase the number of goods and passengers transported on the railway.<sup>17</sup> Evidence of this is available from the following statistics –

Table-1

	For the year 1894	For the year 1895
Mean mileage worked	22,12	22,12
Train Mileage	16,288	16,662
Gross Earnings	40,280	53,174
Working Expenses	31,704	33,974
Number of passengers carried	47,583	22,486
Earnings from above	18,271	22,486
Tonnage of goods carried	3,448	7,181
Collection of goods rent	10,481	19,671

*Source: Annual Administrative Report of Cooch Behar 1894-95, page-13*

In 1896, the need to build a bridge over the Torsa river and extend the railway to the interior of the city of Cooch Behar. The number of goods and

passengers transported on the railways was increasing rapidly. But the passengers and goods had to cross the Torsa River through the boat system. This crossing system was costly and dangerous, especially in the rainy season. Naturally, there was a need to build a railway bridge over the Torsa River. So, to solve this problem, in 1896, Kedarnath Majumdar, the chief engineer of the public works department in the Princely state of Cooch Behar and Mr. Anderson, the chief engineer of the Eastern Bengal State Railway Department, selected the area for the construction of a possible bridge by following and observing the course of the Torsa River.<sup>18</sup> In this year, the State Council made a recommendation to the Eastern Bengal State Railway officials to extend the Cooch Behar state railway route to Santalabari. In this context, it is noteworthy that at this time, Maharaja Nripendra Narayan presented a proposal to the State Regency Council to extend the railway line up to Kholta and allocated Rs.2.75 lakhs from the state treasury. However, according to Anderson's design, the construction of the Torsa Bridge and the extension of the railway line began to rapidly. In order to expedite the construction of this railway, the need was coal and coals products. In this case, the neighboring state Bhutan was very important and rich in minerals resources. Maharaja Nripendra Narayan proposed to the king of Bhutan to send the necessary minerals. The king of Bhutan politely accepted the Maharaja offer and provided the necessary products.<sup>19</sup>

A catastrophic earthquake on 12 June 1897, caused the possibility of damage to the railway line some distance from Torsa River station, so the station moved to the east and moved to its present location.<sup>20</sup> Meanwhile, in 1896-97, the work of the Cooch Behar City Station started. On 15th December, the booking of coaches and goods was started from the Cooch Behar Station. However, the first train was started running over the Torsa Bridge on 15 June 1900. Although the construction of the bridge was completed in early May. After the establishment of a direct railway line to the city of Cooch Behar, the work of expanding the Cooch Behar State Railway to Alipur proceeded rapidly. This new connecting railway was established till Kholta became Jayanti. The railway was opened to passengers on 1 February 1901. The long expansion of this railway was possible only after the construction of a bridge over the Kaljani river in 1897-98, with the financial support of the Maharaja Nripendra Narayan. However, the Baneshwar railway station was the last boundary of the Cooch Behar State Railway. On the other hand, there was another boundary up to Gitaldaha. The length of this railway from Baneshwar to Gitaldaha was 35 miles. As of 31st March 1900, the amount of capital invested for Cooch Behar Railway was Rs. 13, 31,638.

The capital expenditure for the Cooch Behar- Gitaldaha railway, including the construction of the Torsa Bridge was Rs. 10, 82,648. The remaining capital of Rs. 23, 90,000 was spent on the Cooch Behar- Alipur railway line. The state of Cooch Behar took a loan of 8 lakhs from the Maharaja of Cooch Behar to the Government of India. In 1892-93, the

Government of India paid the first installment of this loan of Rs.5 lakhs and the second installment of 3 lakhs in 1897- 98. Although there was a plan to extend the railway line to Santalabari under the supervision of the Bengal Government, for various reasons, the railway line was expanded till Jayanti.<sup>21</sup>

**Table-2**

Years	Net earnings
1897-98	15,175
1898-99	23,451
1899-1900	47,446

From the beginning of the Cooch Behar State Railway was depended on the Eastern Bengal State Railway, for its maintenance. This arrangement was based on an agreement between British Government and Raj Government. But in 1900-1901, the management liability agreement with Eastern Bengal State Railway Authority was expired.<sup>22</sup> The Cooch Behar Royal Court requested the Eastern Bengal State Railway for operating expenses of less than 45 percent of the income of the Railway. As a result of giving 45 percent of the income, the railway was not becoming a particularly profitable venture for the state of Cooch Behar.<sup>23</sup> This financial picture of the railways at this time was as follows;

**Table-3**

	1899	1900
Average mileage	30	33.71
Running mileage of the train	55,289	64,397
Total Earnings	82,773	94,792
Current Earnings	39,700	51,602
Net Earnings	43,073	51,602

These figures prove that a part of the income was transferred to the treasury of the Eastern Bengal State Railway Authority. However, they said that the rate was much lower than the actual requirement. Meanwhile, the loan installments had to pay with interest from the income of the railways. Although the goods and passengers traffic on the Cooch Behar Railway increased significantly, the railway was deprived of this profit. The State had its own Bullocks Carts for transporting heavy goods. In 1900, the income of the railway was Rs. 20, 00,597. But the interest payable that year was Rs. 2, 91,102. Thus a huge deficit was created between property and liability. However, the maintenance of this new railway sometimes had to spend huge amounts. On 22, July 1900, the Torsa River was flooded. The water level of the river rose 14 feet below the bridge. The flood protection wall of the bridge was

damaged in the flood. In this situation, the Maharaja Nripendra Narayan sanctioned Rs. 30,000 from the state budget to repair and make the entire bridge safe. At this time, the Government of India made it clear in a letter. "The Government of India agreed that the portion of Cooch Behar State Railway which lies with your Highness territories should continue to be regarded as an isolated local line".

In previous years, no doctor was appointed to protect railway passengers. But in 1900 Maharaja Nripendra Narayan appointed a doctor to protect the passengers. Dr. James was appointed to this post with a monthly salary of Rs. 50. He used to travel by train every day in the Guard's room. Every train carrying passengers on this railway had to stop at Cooch Behar City Station for some time. At that time, various elite passengers or high Ranking officials (Indian and English) had to wait in the restroom of the station. A five-room rest house was constructed near the railway station at a cost of Rs, 6,974 to accommodate this class of passengers. The Eastern Bengal State Railway Authority provided Rs, 2000. In this year, the Royal court of Cooch Behar petitioned the Government to change the Narrow gauge from Meter gauge to the Cooch Behar State Railway, and Government finally allowed the convention of the Cooch Behar Railway to Meter gauge.<sup>24</sup>

The Cooch Behar State Railway is a major contributor to the economic development of the region as it connects the major contemporary *huts* (Markets) with the railway. Moreover, after the establishment of the Cooch Behar State Railway link with the other part of the undivided Bengal, considerable prosperity can be seen in the business sector as well. So, after the expansion of the Cooch Behar State Railway, a lot of business classes people came to Cooch Behar from various parts of undivided Bengal for business purposes. At that time, the Princely State of Cooch Behar was famous for the jute, tobacco and other cultivation. As a result, day by day increased the export and input business in the Princely State of Cooch Behar. On the other hand, with the arrival of the railway at the Bhutan border, there was a bright prospect of trade with the state of Bhutan centered on coal and minerals from Cooch Behar. The percipient Maharaja Nripendra Narayan himself had long ago sought the permission of the Bhutanese Government to do so. Thus trade and commerce gradually expanded around the railway.<sup>25</sup>

From the above discussion, it can be said that the railway system of Cooch Behar was a direct reflection of the Koch Dynasty of the Nineteenth century. The improvement of the railway system on the one hand improved the communication system and on the other hand, the expansion of domestic and foreign trade led to the considerable socio-economic development of Cooch Behar. There is no doubt that the railway service has made Cooch Behar a special place in the history of communication and at the same time, it is universally accepted that the reign of Maharaja Nripendra Narayan of Cooch Behar was an era of Modern planning. For this reason, reviewing the



history of modernization of Cooch Behar without discussing the reign of Maharaja Nripendra Narayan seems incomplete. During the Partition and post-independence, many railway stations of the Royal period were lost due to various reasons. However, the station of Baneshwar, Cooch Behar, Dewanhat, Vetaguri, Dinahata, Gitaldaha was still standing today bearing witness to the glorious past of the Royal period.

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