



HEALTH AND WESTERN MEDICINE IN COLONIAL INDIA (A CASE STUDY IN PRINCELY STATE OF COOCH BEHAR)

Dr. Anil Kumar Sarkar
Asst. Professor of History (PG)
Dept. of History, ABN Seal College, Cooch Behar,
West Bengal, India

Abstract:

The Cooch Behar was the only princely state of undivided Bengal. It is important to note that Viswa Singha, the founder king of the Kamata Koch kingdom who for the first time assumed the title of Kamateswara. It was a very important landmark that after the treaty Koch kingdom became the Cooch Behar State in the year 1773. Before the year 1819, the European system of medicine was unknown in Cooch Behar State. There were a large number of people who by and large had faith in ojhas and village quacks. In 1819, the British East India Company sent a qualified doctor in Cooch Behar State on the basis of Macleod (British Commissioner in Cooch Behar State) prayer. Maharajas of Cooch Behar also applied to the British Government for a qualified medical man. Earlier time, it was confined to the Royal family and to the upper classes people. Colonel Haughton (British Commissioner in Cooch Behar State) who was the first time opened western treatment in the state of Cooch Behar in common people. Large number of patients was treated at the Hospitals and Dispensaries. There is no doubt that the European modern medicine system gradually improved the health system of Cooch Behar State.

Keywords: Health, Cooch Behar, Surgeon, Vaccination, Ojhas, Malaria

The history of western medicine in India dates back to 1600 A.D., when the first medical officers arrived in India along with the British East India Company's first fleet as ship's surgeons. [Pati and Harrison, 2009: 9]. After the battle of Plessey, this led to the development of civil and military services. A medical department was established in Bengal as far back as 1764, for rendering medical service to the troops and servants of the company. In 1775, hospital boards were formed to administer European hospitals comprising of the surgeon general and physician general that were in the staff of the commander in chief of the Royal Indian Army. In 1785, medical departments were set up in Bengal, Madras and Bombay presidencies with 234 surgeons. In 1796, hospitals boards were renamed as medical boards to look after the affairs of the civil part of the medical departments [Pati and Harrison, 2009: 10]. Gradually the western type of treatment entered into India and side by side the traditional Kaviraji and Ayurvedic treatment was going on. Early phase of colonial rule it was confined the military service, company servants and royal families but after that this type of treatment spread with in the common people. Here my intends to search the European health system introduced in princely state of Cooch Behar.

It is important to note that Viswa Singha, the founder king of the Kamata Koch Kingdom who for the first time assumed the title of Kamateswara and Koch State was also known as Kamata-Bihar, especially to the Assamese historical chroniclers. The foundation of the Cooch Behar State under Viswa Singha, in the opinion of Khan Amanatulla Ahmed, took place in 1496 [Ahmed, 1936:402] . But according to Jaynath Munshi, Viswa Singha is said to have succeeded in 1522 [Munshi, 1985: 15]. The Koch Behar was the only Native State of undivided Bengal. Geographically, it was a part of greater Bengal and occupied a place in the North East corner of the province. The present district of Cooch Behar was bounded on the north by the district of Jalpaiguri; on the east by Goalpara; on the south by Rangpur; and on the west by Rangpur and Jalpaiguri. The State lies between $25^{\circ} 57'40''$ and $26^{\circ} 32'20''$ north latitude and between $88^{\circ} 47'40''$ and $89^{\circ} 54' 35'$ east longitude [Imperial Gazetteer of India, Vol.-X: 379]. Before 1773, the Cooch Behar State had maintained their native character properly and consequently it could develop as an independent character of administration and socio-economic and political system. By extending military help to Cooch Behar against Bhutan, Warren Hastings concluded a treaty with Cooch Behar on 5th April, 1773 [Majumdar, 1977: 43]. It was a very important landmark that after the treaty Koch kingdom became the Cooch Behar State in the year 1773. Before the year 1819, the

European system of medicine was unknown in Cooch Behar State [Chaudhury, 1903:337]. The Rajas of Cooch Behar had found from early times *Kavirajas or Ayurvedic Physicians*. But this form of treatment was confined to the Royal family and to the upper classes. There were a large number of people who by and large had faith in *ojhas or village quacks*. In June, 1814, the Commissioner, Macleod applied to the British Government to send a qualified medical man to the State but due to paucity of such man the Government was unable to send a single candidate as per the demand [*Cooch Behar Select Records, Vol-II, 1888:132*]. In 1819 an Indian doctor was sent to Cooch Behar on a salary of Rs. 40 per month but there was no record as to what his qualification or training was. In 1841 Maharaja Sibendra Narayan applied to the British Government for a qualified medical man and in February, 1842 Dr. Syama Charan Sarkar, a graduate of the Medical college of Calcutta was appointed Medical officer of the Maharaja's Court [*Cooch Behar Select Records, Vol-II, 1888:140*]. In 1846, the Maharaja asked for a European Medical officer and Dr. Ralph Moore was appointed Medical officer of the Maharaja [Ghosal, 1936, 342].

There was no attempt to open any Hospital or dispensary in Cooch Behar State before 1842, when Colonel Houghton took over charge of the administration during the minority of Maharaja Nripendra Narayan. The first dispensary was opened in Cooch Behar in the charge of a Sub-Assistant Surgeon in 1865. In 1869-70, the Medical establishment consisted of a Sub-Assistant Surgeon, two unqualified Doctors and four compounders [Majumdar, 1977:182-183]. At that time, there were other three Hospitals at the Sudder, the police, Military and jail. The Sub-Assistant Surgeon was in charge of the Medical Department up to May, 1873, when the post of the Civil Surgeon was created and Dr. Thomas Briscoe was appointed to it. Henceforth the Assistant Surgeon came to be in charge of Dispensary only.

The first dispensary to be opened in the Mofussil (Village) was on 13th June, 1873 at Dinhat. The Mekhliganj dispensary was opened on 9th August, 1874 and the Mathabhanga dispensary on 28th September, 1874. Arrangement for in patients was made in both these dispensaries in 1875-76 [*Annual Administrative Report of Cooch Behar State, 1875-1876:34*]. There was at this time no qualified Medical Graduate or licentiate in charge of the Sub divisional dispensaries or Hospitals. In 1885, Haldibari dispensary was opened for the treatment of outpatients. A dispensary was started at Fulbari in 1888-89 [*Annual Administrative Report of Cooch Behar State, 1888-89:36*].

In 1866-67, the number of patients was treated at the Hospitals and Dispensaries. It gradually rose and stood at 4988 of which 334 were in-patients in 1873-1874, when a dispensary was opened at Dinahata [Chaudhury, 1903:349]. In 1875-1876, after the opening of the three hospitals at Dinahata, Mathabhanga, and Mekhliganj, the number of patients gradually went up. The number gradually increased as shown below:-

Year	In patients	Out patients	Total
1880-81	1289	13236	14525
1890-91	1487	16998	18485
1900-01	1332	19890	21222
1910-11	1149	39460	40609
1920-21	1689	48346	50035
1930-31	1527	58515	60042
1940-41	2708	169261	171969
1950-51	304	20522	20826

Table 1 : The number of Inpatients and Outpatients in Cooch Behar State (1880-1951)

Source: H.N. Chaudhury, Cooch Behar State and its Land Revenue Settlement, Cooch Behar, 1903, p.338

These dispensaries and hospitals were established near the state head quarters and at the sub divisional head quarters and were visited mainly by the people of the towns and those living close by. The rural people remained apathetic to the scientific treatment and still had faith in *ojhas and village quaks* [Majumdar, 1977:183]. The principal diseases of the people attending the dispensaries and hospitals were fever, spleen, rheumatic affections, skin diseases and goiter as the table has given below-

Diseases	1875-1876	1880-1881	1890-1891	1899-1900
Fever	3345	4475	4048	4726
Spleen	461	480	496	792
Rheumatic affections	757	787	947	605
Skin diseases	1098	1553	1893	1805
Goiter	1391	1087	813	608

Table 2: Major Diseases In Cooch Behar State

Source: Durgadas Majumdar, West Bengal District Gazetteers, Koch Bihar, 1977, p.183

In 1865-66, the vaccination was the only preventive against small pox. Colonel Haughton the Commissioner secured the services of some vaccinators from the Government of Bengal during 1869-71, but there was serious opposition from the people and much headway could not be made [Majumdar, 1977:184]. Later some local people were trained as vaccinators and the state set up an organization of its own and inoculation was prohibited. In the beginning the vaccinations were done by salaried staff of the state and a Deputy Superintendent of vaccination was appointed in 1869-1870. In 1883-1884, when the period of the administration of the commissioner came to an end with the Maharaja Nripendra Narayan attaining majority, the paid vaccinators' organization was disbanded and only an inspector was retained [Chaudhury, 1903:350]. The ex-vaccinators were licensed to practice and they were supplied with report forms, lancets and lymph from the state. These private vaccinators were allowed to charge a fee of two annas(Paisa) per case. The following figures give a picture of the progress of vaccination in the State between 1873 to 1941.

The population of Cooch Behar remained almost static for some years up to 1941. The birth rates and the death rates were very close and there was no appreciable immigration during this time [Chaudhury, 1903:351]. The statement below shows the birth and death statistics with their respective rates per thousand of population during the year of 1900 to 1940.

Years	Number of persons vaccinated
1873-1874	4449
1880-1881	17447
1890-1891	13755
1900-1901	16895
1910-1911	45017
1920-1921	31193
1930-1931	12529
1940-1941	65764

Table 3: Total Number of vaccinated Persons (1873 – 1941)

Source: Durgadas Majumdar, West Bengal District Gazetteers, Koch Behar, 1977, pp.182-183

Years	Birth rates	Death rates
1900-01	18.45	25.43
1910-11	16.32	15.40
1920-21	18.23	15.30
1930-31	13.28	11.62
1940-41	26.81	22.64

Table 4: Percentage of birth and death statistics with respective rates in Cooch Behar

Source: Annual Administrative Report of Cooch Behar State, Relevant Years

In the year 1937-1938 the medical department in Cooch Behar had greatly improved. There was a foreign trained qualified civil surgeon in charge of the department. The Cooch Behar Sadar hospital had an assistant surgeon as Medical officer in charge. The clinical laboratory and anti-rabies department was in charge of a sub-assistant surgeon [Annual Administrative Report of Cooch Behar State, 1937-1938:132]. The civil surgeon visited the hospital wards daily and treated difficult cases. The sub-divisional hospitals remained in charge of a sub-assistant surgeon. Four dispensaries had been opened at Bamanhat, Sitalkuchi, Sitai and Nishiganj, each under the charge of a sub-assistant surgeon. During the year the scheme of having X-ray equipment at the Sadar hospital was taken up for execution. Major and minor surgical operations were being performed in the Sadar hospital and minor surgical operations were being performed in the Sub

divisional hospitals [Annual Administrative Report of Cooch Behar State, 1940: 32]. The people appear to have got rid of their apathy for the allopathic treatment and the hospital statistics show following attendance-

Years	Number of out-patients	Number of in-patients	Percentage of death patients
1936-1937	92434	2450	5.30
1937-1938	89142	2627	5.59
1938-1939	117492	2827	2.86

Table 5: Year wise number of in & out patients in Cooch Behar State

Source: Durgadas Majumdar, West Bengal District Gazetteers, Koch Behar, 1977, pp.182-183

As malarial fever continued to be the principal ailment, a spleen index survey was regularly conducted. As a preventive against malarial fever free quinine tablets were distributed from the hospitals and dispensaries and free travelling dispensaries were started with centers at Rajarhat, Dodearhat, Dewanhat, Tapurhat, Sutkabarihat, Pundibarihat and Baneswar[Majumdar,1977:185]. An anti-malarial department was started from 1937 in charge of a sub-assistant surgeon. Stagnant pools of water were sprayed with paricides and jungles and woods cut. The work was, however confined to Cooch Behar town [Annual Administrative Report of Cooch Behar State, 1937-1938:132]. A vaccination department was maintained persions at state cost in charge of a sub-assistant surgeon. The number of persons vaccinated in 1937-1938was 47176 [Annual Administrative Report of Cooch Behar State, 1937-1938:133] and in 1938-1939 the number was 51881 [Annual Administrative Report of Cooch Behar State, 1938-1939:132]. Thomas Briscoe was the first civil Surgeon of Cooch Behar State and assumed the charge of Medical Officer of the State in 1873. Surgeon Major H. Coop son officiated in the post till 1877. Dr. Henry holds the post till 1892 [Chaudhury, 1903:352]. Gradually the post was held by one and another European doctor. The European modern medicine system gradually improved the health system of Cooch Behar. The people of Cooch Behar, mainly Maharaja of State wanted and requested to the British Government for European style of treatment.

If the people of Cooch Behar were great conservative in other matters, they were doubly so in the matter of treatment of their invalid [Chaudhury, 1903:349]. They had no faith in European medicines and prefer their ojhas or village quacks to the most experienced physicians. The people in the interior very seldom, if ever resort to these dispensaries and hospitals; it was only the inhabitants of the towns and bundars(port town) and their neighborhood that had gradually come to appreciate the European system of medicines.

Reference

1. Ahmed, K. C. Amanatulla, 1936, A History of Cooch Behar (Bengali version), Cooch Behar State press, p.402.
2. Annual Administrative Report of Cooch Behar State, 1875-1876, 1888-89, 1937-1938, 1938- 1939, 1940-1941.
3. Cooch Behar Select Records, 1888, Vol-II, Cooch Behar State Press, p.132.
4. Gait, E. A. 1875, 'Koch Kings of Kamarupa" fixes 1534 A.D. as the year of Nara Narayan's accession to the throne. He does not accept 1555 AD as the true date, although this is supported by the Cooch Behar chronicles is urged by him that the last mentioned date (1555 AD) may be at the rejected on the testimony of a silver coin was found some years ago at the Garo Hills and published in the JASB for , p.306.
5. Chaudhury, H. N. 1903, The Cooch Behar State and its Land Revenue Settlement, Cooch Behar State press, p.230.
6. Ghosal, S. C. 1936, The history of Cooch Behar, Cooch Behar State press, p.342.
7. Imperial Gazetteer of India, Vol.-X, p.379.
8. Majumdar, D. 1977, West Bengal District Gazetteers, Koch Bihar, 1977, State editor, West Bengal District Gazetteers, p.43.
9. Munshi, Jaynath, Das, Biswa Nath (ed) 1985, Rajupakhyan (in Bengali), Calcutta, Pustak Bipanani, .p.15
10. Pati, B. Harrison, M., 2009, The social history of health and medicine in colonial India, Primus Books, p.8