

Diplomatic Endeavors of Maharani Suniti Devi as India's Cultural Ambassador to The World

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ABSTRACT

Maharani Suniti Devi's life was marked by a unique intersection of royal lineage, social reform, and diplomatic acumen. This study examines how her international travels and interactions with the British aristocracy positioned her as a key cultural and social ambassador for India. Through a critical analysis of her experiences in England and her contributions to cross-cultural exchange, this research highlights Maharani Suniti Devi's pivotal role in promoting Indian cultural heritage and progressive ideals during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. By exploring her life and legacy, this study sheds light on the complex dynamics of cultural diplomacy, social reform, and women's empowerment in colonial India.

Keywords: *Maharani Suniti Devi, Cultural Ambassador, Indian Heritage, Social Reform, Diplomacy, Cross-Cultural Exchange, Royal Lineage*

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Maharani Suniti Devi of Cooch Behar emerged as a pioneering figure, effortlessly navigating the complexities of royalty, social reform, and cultural diplomacy. Her international travels, particularly to England, facilitated meaningful interactions with British aristocracy, enabling her to showcase Indian culture while absorbing modern ideas that could be implemented in her homeland. As a cultural ambassador, Maharani Suniti Devi's diplomatic endeavors demonstrated her exceptional ability to bridge cultural divides, fostering mutual respect and understanding between the East and the West.

Her participation in significant events, such as the Diamond Jubilee celebrations of Queen Victoria in 1898 and the Delhi Durbar of 1911, alongside her husband, the Maharaja of Cooch Behar, further solidified her position as a global representative of India (Devi, 1921). Through her remarkable life and legacy, Maharani Suniti Devi continues to inspire generations, embodying the values of cultural exchange, mutual respect, and empowerment. Maharani Suniti Devi's life and legacy are particularly noteworthy, given the societal norms and expectations placed on women during the colonial era. As a queen and social reformer, she played a significant role in promoting women's education and empowerment, challenging the patriarchal norms of her time. Her efforts to bridge cultural divides and

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foster mutual understanding between India and the West also underscore the importance of cultural diplomacy in promoting global understanding and cooperation.

This paper examines Maharani Suniti Devi's role as a cultural and social ambassador, focusing on her travels, interactions, and their broader implications for colonial India. By exploring her life and legacy, this study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the complex dynamics of cultural diplomacy, social reform, and women's empowerment in colonial India.

Objectives

1. To examine the life and legacy of Maharani Suniti Devi as a cultural and social ambassador for India.
2. To analyze her contributions to cross-cultural exchange and the promotion of Indian cultural heritage during the late 19th and early 20th centuries.
3. To explore the complex dynamics of cultural diplomacy, social reform, and women's empowerment in colonial India.

Research Questions

1. How did Maharani Suniti Devi's international travels and interactions with the British aristocracy shape her role as a cultural and social ambassador for India?
2. What were the key contributions of Maharani Suniti Devi to cross-cultural exchange and the promotion of Indian cultural heritage during the late 19th and early 20th centuries?
3. How did Maharani Suniti Devi navigate the complex dynamics of cultural diplomacy, social reform, and women's empowerment in colonial India?

METHODOLOGY

This research adopts a qualitative approach, with Primary sources, including Maharani Suniti Devi's autobiography, historical records, and archival materials, form the foundation of the study. Supplementing these sources are secondary materials, such as scholarly articles, books, and biographies, which provide contextual depth and nuance. A content analysis framework is applied to decipher the power dynamics, cultural narratives, and social contexts that influenced Maharani Suniti Devi's life and legacy.

Early Life and Background

Maharani Suniti Devi was born on September 30, 1864, to Keshab Chandra Sen and Jaganmohini Devi of Kalutala, Calcutta (Devi,1921). Her family was known for its progressive values, academic excellence, and cultural leadership, which played a significant role in shaping her personality and interests.

Maharani Suniti Devi's education was comprehensive and eclectic, reflecting her family's emphasis on learning and intellectual pursuits. Her early education, which combined traditional and Western learning under the guidance of a tutor at home, laid the foundation for her future academic pursuits. She later attended Bethune School, one of the first girls' schools in India, which was established by John Elliot Drinkwater Bethune in 1849. The school's emphasis on women's education and empowerment further solidified Maharani Suniti Devi's progressive ideals.

The combination of traditional and Western learning in her education exposed Maharani Suniti Devi to a wide range of subjects, including languages, literature, history, and

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philosophy. This broad-based education helped her develop a nuanced understanding of different cultures and perspectives, which would later serve her well in her roles as a queen, social reformer, and cultural ambassador.

As the daughter of Keshab Chandra Sen, a leading figure in the Brahmo Samaj, Maharani Suniti Devi was instilled with values of social equality, education, and women's rights. The Brahmo Samaj's emphasis on social reform and women's empowerment deeply impacted her perspective, which she later integrated into her royal responsibilities.

Maharani Suniti Devi's marriage to the Maharaja of Cooch Behar marked the beginning of her life as a queen, but it was her upbringing and family values that laid the foundation for her future roles as a social reformer and cultural ambassador.

Role as a Queen and Social Reformer:

Marriage and Royal Life

Maharani Suniti Devi's marriage to Maharaja Nripendra Narayan of Cooch Behar in 1878 was a significant event that shaped her life as a queen and social reformer. The marriage, which took place when she was just about 14 years old, was criticized for not adhering to the then Indian Marriage Act III, which specified the minimum age for marriage. Despite the controversy, the union proved to be beneficial for both parties, as it improved their royal status and bridged two distinct traditions.

As queen, Maharani Suniti Devi quickly adapted to her new role, blending her progressive upbringing with her responsibilities as queen. She worked closely with her husband to modernize Cooch Behar, focusing on education, healthcare, and infrastructure development. Her experiences as a queen not only deepened her understanding of the challenges faced by women in Indian society but also empowered her to become a vocal advocate for social change.

Social Reform Efforts

Maharani Suniti Devi's involvement in social reform movements was instrumental in promoting women's education and empowerment in India. She was a strong advocate for women's education and worked tirelessly to establish schools and colleges for women. In 1881, she converted the 'Rati Devbaksi School' into 'Sunity College' (now 'Sunity Academy') for women's education. She also established vernacular schools, normal schools, night schools, and other educational institutions including 'Maharani Girls School' in Darjeeling (along with her sister Maharani Sucharu Devi of Mayurbhanj in 1908) to promote education among women.

Maharani Suniti Devi's efforts to challenge patriarchal norms and promote women's empowerment were remarkable. She was the President of the State Council and the first President of the All Bengal Women's Union, which worked to end child marriage and promote women's education. Her commitment to social reform and women's empowerment inspired many others to join the movement, leading to significant changes in Indian society. Overall, Maharani Suniti Devi's life and work serve as a testament to her courage, conviction, and commitment to social change. Her legacy continues to inspire women and social reformers in India and around the world.

Cultural Patronage and Literary Pursuits

Maharani Suniti Devi's passion for literature and culture was evident in her numerous initiatives. As a literary enthusiast, she organized various festivals, kirtans, kathakas, and lectures in Cooch Behar, providing a platform for cultural expression and exchange. One of her notable initiatives was the Ananda Mela program, held at Lansdowne Hall, where girls could participate in various cultural events. Her Kolkata residence, Kamal Kutir, was also a hub of cultural activity, hosting a fair during Magh utshab, where women from upper-class families managed improvised shops.

Her commitment to promoting women's education and empowerment was reflected in her literary works. Suniti Devi was a prolific writer, penning books in Bengali, Sanskrit, and English. Her autobiographical work, "The Autobiography of an Indian Princess," published in 1921, offers a unique glimpse into her life as a royal and her observations on social and political issues of her time. Her other notable works include "Indian Fairy Tales" (Dey, 2024), "The Bengal Dacoits and Tigers," and "The Ideal Indian Women" in English, as well as Bengali poetry collections like "Amrita Bindu" and "Kathakatar gaan".

Cultural Diplomacy and International Relations

Maharani Suniti Devi's remarkable life and legacy serve as a testament to her adaptability and dedication to cultural diplomacy. Coming from a non-royal family, she adeptly adopted the role of an ideal queen, navigating the complexities of royal diplomatic realms with ease. Her remarkable ability to navigate and harmonize diverse intercultural and intracultural paradigms, both prior to and following her marriage, stood as a testament to her exceptional diplomatic acumen and adaptability. Maharani Suniti Devi's travels abroad, particularly to England, played a significant role in promoting cultural exchange and understanding between India and the West. Her first visit to England in 1887, accompanied by the Maharaja and her sons, was a landmark moment in her diplomatic career. The visit was marked by several notable events, including her meeting with Queen Victoria, who became the godmother of her son Prince Victor Nityendra Narayan.

Maharani Suniti Devi's interactions with British aristocracy and other international leaders helped to promote a nuanced understanding of Indian culture and traditions. Her elegant demeanor and intellectual depth left a lasting impression on British elites, challenging stereotypes about Indian women and showcasing the richness of Indian culture. Through these exchanges, she advocated for a deeper understanding of Indian traditions and highlighted the progressive strides being made in her own state of Cooch Behar.

Her exposure to Western education systems, governance models, and women's rights movements influenced her reformist agenda back home. Maharani Suniti Devi incorporated these ideas into her efforts to modernize education, healthcare, and social systems in Cooch Behar. One of her most significant contributions was her advocacy for women's education, which she believed was the key to empowering women and breaking societal barriers.

Under her guidance, initiatives were launched in Cooch Behar to promote girls' education, including the establishment of schools and scholarships for women. Maharani Suniti Devi also worked tirelessly to uplift the underprivileged and marginalized sections of society, supporting campaigns against child marriage and purdah (veiling), and encouraging women to participate in public life.

Legacy and Impact

Maharani Suniti Devi's life and work had a profound impact on Indian society, culture, and politics. Her commitment to cultural synthesis, which involved blending Indian traditions with Western education and reforms, influenced societal change without undermining cultural roots. This approach is characterized by the integration of ideas, mutual adaptation, and innovation, leading to new forms of art, thought, and social practices.

Maharani Suniti Devi's cultural synthesis was evident in her advocacy for women's education, which combined modern pedagogy with respect for Indian customs. She promoted the use of English while advocating for the preservation of regional languages. Her support for progressive changes, such as abolishing purdah (veiling) and promoting women's independence, was framed within the cultural context, emphasizing values like dignity and equality that resonated with traditional Indian ideals.

As a patron of art, literature, and architecture, Maharani Suniti Devi combined Indian craftsmanship with European aesthetics, visible in the designs of palaces and public spaces she influenced. Her personal style, which blended Indian saris with Western fashion influences, symbolized a harmony between the two worlds.

Maharani Suniti Devi's legacy continues to inspire contemporary India and the world. Her commitment to cultural synthesis offers valuable lessons for promoting unity, encouraging creativity, and supporting progress in diverse cultural contexts. As a trailblazer who seamlessly blended modernity with tradition, Maharani Suniti Devi's life and work remain a powerful testament to the transformative power of cultural synthesis.

Embracing Progress and Tradition

Maharani Suniti Devi's life and work embody the spirit of Bhagirath, who, according to Indian mythology, brought the sacred Ganga River to Earth through his unwavering dedication and perseverance. Similarly, Suniti Devi navigated the complexities of royal life, blending her progressive ideals with her royal status to create a harmonious integration of Eastern and Western values. Her ability to traverse both worlds helped reshape the perception of Indian women, replacing the image of passivity and subjugation with one of dignity, intellect, and leadership.

By embracing both progress and tradition, Maharani Suniti Devi demonstrated the power of selfless efforts for the welfare of others. Her life serves as a testament to the idea that education, social consciousness, and determination can create lasting change, even within the confines of tradition. Her legacy endures as a symbol of women's empowerment and the transformative power of education and reform, continuing to inspire generations to champion equality, justice, and social progress.

CONCLUSION

Maharani Suniti Devi's life serves as a testament to the power of balancing tradition and modernity. As a queen and a reformer, she navigated the complexities of cultural norms and societal expectations to bring about meaningful change. Her pioneering work in education and women's rights continues to inspire contemporary discussions on gender equality and social reform. Her approach to reform, which harmonized progressive ideals with traditional values, offers valuable lessons for achieving social change within existing cultural frameworks. Her life as a global ambassador demonstrates the importance of cultural diplomacy and representation in fostering mutual respect and understanding.

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In today's interconnected world, Maharani Suniti Devi's legacy remains an inspiration for balancing tradition with modernity on the global stage. Her life serves as a reminder that even within restrictive societal structures, determined individuals can bring about meaningful change. As a trailblazer who embodied the spirit of cultural synthesis, Maharani Suniti Devi's legacy continues to inspire future generations to champion social progress, equality, and justice.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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