

Exploring Maharaja Girijanath Roy And The Development Of Modern Education In Colonial Dinajpur: A Micro History

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Abstract:

The 'Roy Bari' or Royal Palace of Dinajpur during the regime of Maharaja Girijanath Roy was marked as the symbols of education and cultural practice in undivided Bengal located in the town of Dinajpur at present Bangladesh. But its reflection is hardly found in the study of history and literatures in connection with the spread of modern education in Dinajpur. Most of the researchers both from India and Bangladesh who worked on Dinajpur have presented the contribution of Maharaja Girijanath Roy sporadically and presented him as a trusted British feudal lord - this article has reviewed how true this allegation is. The present article is an attempt to explore the contribution of Maharaja Girijanath Roy to the spread of modern education in Dinajpur. In addition, an attempt has been made to present the extent to which Girijanath, as a feudal king, emphasized English education and how interested he was in the spread of English education. The article also reviews the extent to which Maharaja Girijanath Roy demonstrated his expertise in promoting Bengali literature and culture, in addition to improving the educational system.

Key Words: British, Charitable, Landlord, Literature, Music, Palace, School

Date of Submission: 18-04-2026

Date of Acceptance: 28-04-2026

I. Introduction:

Whenever the issue of spreading modern education in colonial Bengal is raised, the names of those who are mentioned first are the British East India Company and the Christian Missionaries. In pre colonial Bengal, the traditional education system was centered round with *Tols* and *Chatushpathis*. In those educational institutions, *Sanskrit, Adya, Madhya, Anta, Vakarana, Smritishastra, Tarkshastra, Kalapa, Chhanda, Alankar*, etc. were taught. And a part of higher education was Hindu religious scriptures like *Vedas, Upanishads* etc. Along with these traditional subjects, Buddhism, Science, Medicine, Physical Education, etc. were also included in educational institutions during Buddhist era. In the Medieval Age, no significant changes took place in those traditional educations. But in the second half of the eighteenth century, with the seizure of power by the British East India Company in Bengal, changes began in the field of education. The initiatives of Christian missionaries were added to this. Although their main objective was conversion into Christianity, it would be a mistake to deny the role of missionaries in the spread of English education. In other words, there is no doubt that modern education was introduced in India by the initiatives of Company and Missionaries. In this case, the pioneer role was taken by middle class intelligentsia enlightened by the light of the Bengal Renaissance of the nineteenth century. But the light of the Renaissance could not touch the rural areas of Bengal. Like the rest of India, students of Dinajpur district used to go to urban areas to get education and then return to their own areas to provide education, albeit to a very limited extent. This was no different in the case of the royal family of Dinajpur. The tenth Maharaja of the Dinajpur royal family, Girijanath Roy, first completed his higher education in Calcutta and later in Banaras in Uttar Pradesh and took the initiative to spread modern education in Dinajpur. The spread of modern education, literature and culture in Bengal, especially in Dinajpur, was not possible without the help and cooperation of some landlords and the royal family. In this context one of the unforgettable contributions of the royal family member was Girijanath Roy (1862-1919). The 'Roy Bari' located in the present day town of Dinajpur, Bangladesh, was one of the symbols of the district's education and cultural practices. But its reflection is hardly found in the history of the spread of modern education in Dinajpur. The present article is only an attempt to explore the outstanding contribution of Maharaja Girijanath Roy to the spread of modern education in Dinajpur and to place it in the pages of history. In this regard, the then *Dinajpur Patrika* has provided endless resources to the author.

Background and Historiography of Dinajpur Raj:

It is very difficult to know the history of the spread of modern education in Dinajpur without discussing the contribution of the 'Roy Bari' of Dinajpur and the context of the rise of Girijanath Roy. Prof. Mesbah Kamal, Mehrab Ali, Dr. Moniruzzaman, Himanshu Sarkar, Dhananjay Roy, Satyaranjan Das, Kamlesh Goswami, Brindaban Ghosh and many other researchers have studied the history of the Dinajpur dynasty. These researchers have presented the contribution of the Dinajpur royal family and Maharaja Girijanath Roy in the spread of modern education sporadically and have avoided it in many cases. Most of the researchers have presented Girijanath as a trusted British feudal lord. Because Maharaja Girijanath Roy supported the British Government's role in the Anti-Partition Movement in 1905 and was awarded the title of 'Maharaja Bahadur' in 1907 and the title of 'Knight Commander of the Indian Empire or K. C. I. E.' in 1914. In addition, as a loyal British soldier, he donated money too much government works, including Rs. 25000/- for the construction of the famous Victoria Memorial Hall in Calcutta and Rs. 10000/- for the preservation of the memory of Edward VII.¹ Girijanath's role as a member of the Delhi Council of the Governor General also fueled British loyalty.

Being a British loyalist, Girijanath Roy got membership in several organizations, such as the British Indian Association, the British Historical Association, the Bengal Landholders Association, the Dinajpur Association in Calcutta, the *Bangiya Sangeet Samaj*, the *Bangiya Sahitya Parishat*, the *Rangpur Sahitya Parishat*, etc.² He regularly participated in the activities of these organizations. Although, Meherab Ali did not accept the accusation of Girijanath, being a British loyalist. He recorded his clear opinion on this matter in the book 'Dinajpur Rajbangsher Itihas'. He says, "He had an innate interest in being associated with all developmental works including the sports movement, theatre movement, library movement, public education movement of Dinajpur and so on."³ Girijanath was also a member of the District Board three times, an Honorary Magistrate twice, a nominated Commissioner of Dinajpur Municipality (1884) and an elected Chairman of Dinajpur Municipality three times.

Rise of Girijanath Roy and His Education:

Maharaja Girijanath Roy was the tenth heir to the Dinajpur dynasty of the undivided Dinajpur district. Although he was not a member of royal family by birth, Girijanath was born in 1862 in a small landlord family in Damur village of Chirir Bandar Police Station in Dinajpur district of present-day Bangladesh. But in his childhood, he was adopted as the son of *Maharani* Shyamamohini, wife of Raja Taraknath. In 1882, at the age of twenty, he adorned the throne of Dinajpur and remained in that position until his death on December 21, 1919. It is difficult to say whether there was another philanthropic king in Bengal who was so virtuous in his personal life. Even though he was a feudal king or a hereditary landlord of a foreign government, the way he was able to win the hearts of the people of Dinajpur through his own qualities is rare in feudal society.

Maharaja Girijanath's early education began at the *Pathshala* established at the Dinajpur *Rajbari*, which is now known as Jubilee High School. But *Raja* Taraknath and *Maharani* Shyamamohini realized that if they were only taught at home, interest in learning would not be developed and that education would remain incomplete. Then they sent the Prince Girijanath to Kolkata to receive Bengali and English education. Again, along with the current general education, religious education is absolutely necessary for moral and spiritual development because it increases human restraint - thinking about this, the *Rajmata* sent Girijanath to *Kashidham*, the holy place of Hindus and the main center of religious practice. *Rajmata* admitted her son to the Queen's College in *Kashidham* in 1871.⁴ From 1871 to 1877, the *Maharaja* acquired skills in general education in Banaras, including gymnastics, wrestling, horsemanship, weaponry, hunting, etc. It is particularly noteworthy that a famous horse rider was employed to teach the *Maharaja* horsemanship. Later, in the company of some scholars at his home, he gained proficiency in Bengali, English, Sanskrit, Mathematics, History, Geography, Political Science and Music. He also established himself as a natural artist by creating melodies on various musical instruments including the *Sitar* and *Violin*.⁵ During his stay in *Kashidham* from 1871 to 1877, he came into the presence of many western princes as because at that time, many western princes used to come to study at Queens College. During his seven years in Banaras, the seeds of modern education sprouted in Girijanath, which was later reflected in his works. Before completing his education in Banaras, in February 1877, *Maharaj* married the daughter of Motilal Singh, a resident of Kulai village under the Katwa Sub-Division of Burdwan. Then *Maharaj* returned to Dinajpur and settled permanently in the 'Roy Bari'. Even after marriage, Girijanath did not deviate from his education. He continued to receive education from renowned people like Dr. Yogendra Chandra Bhattacharya, Babu Yashodanandan Pramanik, Shriyukta Brindavan Chandra Vidyaratna and others at the Royal Palace. *Maharaj's* concentration and hard work towards education helped him to develop his understanding of the society and economy of that time.

Development of Education in Dinajpur:

When reviewing the history of modern education in Dinajpur, it would be a mistake if we do not mention the contributions of the Roy Dynasty and the role of Girijanath Roy. Because in the remote North

Bengal, isolated from South Bengal, immersed in a feudal culture, and extremely backward, they kept a small light of modernity burning until the middle of the nineteenth century. Again, they were the highest representatives of the feudal system of Dinajpur, the exploiters and rulers. Despite this, it can be said that the Roy family kept Dinajpur ahead for about 300 years in the conflict between the ruler-exploiter versus progress. This role of the Dinajpur monarchy served as the central lever for the development of Dinajpur.⁶ In this regard, the role of Girijanath Roy of the Roy family in the development of Dinajpur's society as well as the expansion of education is particularly noteworthy. A staunch supporter and enthusiast of modern English education, *Raja* Girijanath realized the lack of expansion of English education in the field of education.⁷ For this reason, he emphasized the establishment of high-quality schools, where the practice of oriental studies would also be given importance along with the practice of western knowledge and science.

Dinajpur Jubilee High School:

Maharaja Girijanath Roy's patronage of education began with his own school in Rajbari. In 1887, on the occasion of the 50th Anniversary of the reign of Queen Victoria of England, *Maharaja* Girijanath Roy of Dinajpur upgraded the Rajbari Primary School to a Middle Vernacular School and named it as Jubilee High School. Initially, the school was reserved for members of the royal family, but after Girijanath came to power, he opened the school to everyone.⁸ In 1894, he upgraded the school to a Middle English School. Until the partition of the country, all the expenses of the school were borne from the Dinajpur Royal Treasury. Since the school was founded, it can be said that it was a very old educational institution in Dinajpur district. Since the school was built to satisfy the Empress on the occasion of the 50th Anniversary of the reign of Queen Victoria, many have referred to Girijanath as a loyal British feudal lord. But if we meticulously review the information, it is easy to understand that after Girijanath came to power, he not only improved the school, but also opened the doors of the school to students of all classes, so that they could get free education. However, various sources indicate that since the school was located two kilometers away from Dinajpur town and due to the lack of proper transportation, not many students were admitted there.

Raiganj Coronation High School:

Whenever the topic of colonial education in Dinajpur is raised, the first name that comes to mind is Coronation High School in Raiganj and *Maharaja* Girijanath Roy. Although the establishment of Coronation School is recorded as 17th January 1911 in the Education Department of the Government of West Bengal, the establishment of the school was in the backdrop of the revolutionary movement against the partition of Bengal in 1905. In the midst of the nationalist ideology and the tide of the independence movement throughout India, the educational institution named Raiganj Middle English School was established in 1905 to propagate and spread the ideals of national education in Raiganj and the surrounding areas, and in 1911 it was renamed Raiganj Coronation High English School. In 1905, the entire Bengali nation, led by *Rashtraguru* Surendranath, jumped in to cancel the decision of the British government to partition Bengal. The sensitive people of Dinajpur were not left behind in this regard. Yogindranath Chakraborty of Dinajpur and Kuldakanta Ghosh, renowned lawyer of Raiganj jumped into this movement with patriots. At that time, a renaissance of nationalist and indigenous ideology was emerging throughout the country. In that fiery situation, in 1911, in the I.F.A. Football Shield, the Bengali Mohun Bagan team defeated the British Yorkshire football team in bare foot. Mohun Bagan's victory had an impact on the whole of India. In that nationalist heated atmosphere of the country, some lawyers including Kuldakanta Ghosh and a handful of educated people decided to upgrade Raiganj Middle English School to a high school. Because at that time, there was no higher educational institution other than the only Zilla School in the greater Dinajpur district. In this context they approached the *Maharaja* Girijanath of Dinajpur for financial assistance. *Maharaja* Girijanath also immediately donated about 10 *bighas* of land and Rs. 10,000/- for the school.⁹ However, some land for that school was donated by Jatindra Mohan Goswami and his son Kalyan Kumar Goswami. A report in the then *Dinajpur Patrika* about the charity work of *Maharaja* Girijanath is quite telling. In that report, it was said, "*Maharaja* Girijanath Roy was an intellectual, literary enthusiast, humble, unassuming, altruistic, charitable and devout Hindu. He donated about 10 *bighas* of land for the district headquarters Raiganj High School and Rs. 10000/- for the construction of school building. *Maharaja* did not donate for the sake of public fame. This is the specialty of his donation." That is, Raiganj Coronation High School, a famous educational institution in Raiganj, present-day West Bengal, for which the people of Raiganj feel special pride, was established in 1911 CE by the generosity of *Maharaja* Girijanath Roy.¹⁰ On the Coronation of the British Emperor George V the school is known as Coronation School. Since then the school still carries colonial heritage in terms of its name.

Maharaja Girijanath High School:

In the pre-independence period, the most popular educational institution in Dinajpur town was *Maharaja* Girijanath High School. Although Dinajpur Zilla School was established under government

supervision in 1854, a single school was not enough to cope up with the pressure of students. Accordingly, Girijanath Roy came forward to establish another high school. In 1913, Maharaja Girijanath Roy donated 26 *bighas* of land and Rs. 20000/- for the construction of the school in Balubari Mouza of Dinajpur town. But unfortunately, the construction of the school building was not completed during the regime of Maharaja. After the Maharaja's death in 1919, the school was started in the name of the donor and was named as 'Maharaja Girijanath High English School'.¹¹ Girijanath's objective behind establishing the said school was to encourage modern English education and spread it among the middle class society. It was the second English medium educational institution after Dinajpur Zilla School.

Other Contributions:

Maharaja Girijanath Roy was not only a champion of education, but also had a reputation as a lover of literature and a philanthropist, as evidenced by the 1919 Maharaja Girijanath Roy Commemorative Issue of the *Dinajpur Patrika* and various articles published in Bengali newspapers. In a report in the Baishakh Issue of the *Dinajpur Patrika* of 1327 BS, it was written about Girijanath, "He has donated about two and a half *bighas* of land for the Birganj Charity Hospital under this district. The Raiganj Charity Hospital is being run at the full expense of the Maharaja and he also has monthly assistance to the Birganj Charity Hospital. The Maharaja has donated a little over one hundred *bighas* of land for the *Dinajpur Goshala*. The said great man used to join the *Sabha-Samities* in Calcutta, Dinajpur and various other places and was always engaged in the welfare of the common people. The amount of donations he made silently cannot be estimated. He was a lover of art and science and loved music. Even Maharaja has helped and patronized the Barendra Research Society. His glory is engraved in glowing letters in the history of Dinajpur and will remain so forever."¹²

Maharaja Girijanath Roy was a cultured man. He was a devoted member and patron of the Bengali Literary Council and Bengali Music Society of Kolkata. When the Sixth Session of the North Bengal Literary Conference was held in Dinajpur town in 1913, Girijanath became the President of the Reception Committee. The session was attended by great writers of Bengal and Assam.¹³ The conference became a success due to Girijanath's efforts and special favors.

The untimely death of Maharaja Girijanath on December 21, 1919, left the entire Bengali nation in mourning. The educational and literary world of that time, especially of Dinajpur, suffered an irreparable loss especially the institutions that were run with the financial support and personal patronage of the Maharaja began to fail. The extent of Maharaja Girijanath's influence on the education and culture of Bengal can be seen in a report in the 'Indian Daily News' and 'Bengalee' newspapers on December 23, 1919. According to the report of Indian Daily News "We regret to announce the death of Maharaja Bahadur Sir Girija Nath Roy of Dinajpur which melancholy event took place in yesterday morning. Dinajpur is one of the ancient houses in Bengal and the Maharaja who represented it with credit, was the type of fine old Bengali, religious, charitable and urban, always anxious to do his fellow beings a good turn. He was associated with many public organizations and a patron and a friend of *Sangeet Samaj* which remained closed yesterday as a mark of respect. The Maharaja was an excellent gentleman."¹⁴ According to the report published in the Bengalee newspaper of the same day, "Maharaja-Bahadur Sir Girijanath Roy, K. C. I. E., left this world at 4:30 A.M. last Sunday night (Monday in English) and departed for his eternal home. Maharaja Bahadur had been suffering from malarial fever for almost a year. He was brought to Calcutta for a change of air and for proper treatment. Almost all the great doctors of the city treated him; but no human effort can overcome destiny, and both efforts fail...."

Maharaja Girijanath kept the prestige of the Dinajpur dynasty intact and continuous due to the influence of his character and intelligence. What Bengali Hindus lost with his death will never be recovered."¹⁵ The Dinajpur newspaper of that time also published a separate 'Maharaja Girijanath Sankha' praising the Maharaja enthusiastically. In other words, the influence and status of Maharaja Girijanath became quite evident after his death.

II. Findings And Conclusions:

In light of the above phased discussion and after reviewing the available data and literature, the following findings and conclusions can be reached.

Modern education in Bengal was introduced by companies and missionaries, and the pioneers were Bengali intellectuals, enlightened by the renaissance of the 19th century. But in Dinajpur, a district located about five hundred kilometers from Kolkata, the traditional education system was supported by the 'Roy Bari' of Dinajpur and especially Maharaja Girijanath Roy.

Most of the researchers in present-day Bangladesh and West Bengal who have worked on Dinajpur have presented Maharaja Girijanath's contribution sporadically and presented him as a trusted British feudal lord. But if we stand in the time frame of the next century and review the available information and literature, it is easy to understand that the Maharaja had an inherent interest in being involved in the literary and educational development of Dinajpur, i.e. Bengal. This is also supported by contemporary newspapers.

Girijanath was able to convey that moral, spiritual, and military education, along with the current general education, are also important for social development.

The few educational institutions that were established in Dinajpur district in the early 20th century would not have been possible without the financial support and personal patronage of Girijanath. For example, Dinajpur Jubilee High School, Raiganj Coronation High School, Maharaja Girijanath High School, etc. are still among the best educational institutions in both Bengals.

In addition to improving the educational system, Maharaja Girijanath Roy also demonstrated his expertise in the pursuit of Bengali literature and culture. The Maharaja's regular participation in the *Bangiya Sahitya Parishat*, *Bangiya Sangeet Samaj*, and various associations in Bengal brought a different dimension to the pursuit of literature and culture.

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