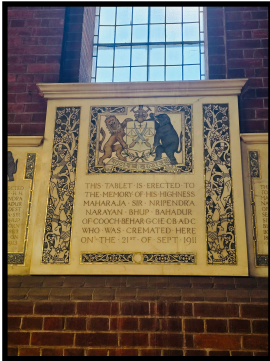


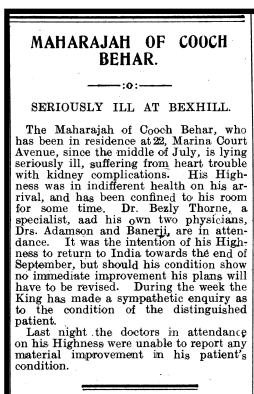
## The Britain-India Interface: Tracing Maharaja Nripendra Narayan's Footprints from Darjeeling to London

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Golders Green Crematorium, London

September 21, 1911, is a significant day in the history of the relation between India and Great Britain. The commemorative plaque for His Highness Maharaja Nripendra Narayan Bhup Bahadur of Cooch Behar (1863-1911) in the prestigious Golders Green Crematorium, London, instead of being in India, stands witness to the importance of his interfaces with Britain and, by extension, the British establishment's gesture of recognising his significant contribution towards this interface. The plaque reflects an acknowledgment that crosses geographical boundaries, raising him to the status of a figure of international respect.



The Bexhill Observer, 29.9.1911,  
England, U.K

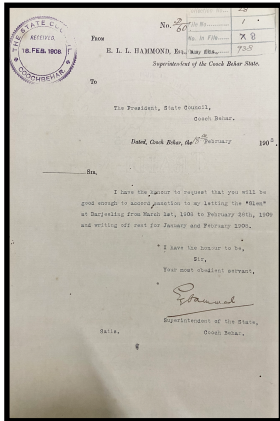
His Highness, Maharaja of Cooch Behar, Nripendra Narayan Bhup, spent an extensive part of his childhood and youth in Britain for his education. The newspaper excerpt (Bexhill Museum, England, U.K) detailing his severe illness and treatment in Bexhill, England, while primarily providing evidence of a medical imperative, can be interpreted as a tangential indicator of a deeper, long-standing soul connection between the Maharaja and the Britain. His return to England in his final years was intended to facilitate his regaining good health and his illness. However, his plans could not be realised and England became the place of his demise. The time spent by him in England and his death in Bexhill-on-Sea further reinforces his faith in British medical assistance. It could be implied that he found peace or a sense of home there. His death there, away from his ancestral land, can be symbolically seen as the culmination of his lifelong connection with Britain.

In order to retrace his steps towards the firm bond between him and Britain, a visit to the Cooch Behar Royal Palace Archive would be worthwhile. It is not merely a well-maintained repository: the meticulously penned decrees, the vibrant chronicles of court life, the intricate administrative records, and his intimate personal correspondences offer a documented narrative of his reign, passions, and his far-reaching influence. It is a space where history is not merely recounted but tangibly experienced - each carefully preserved folio is a direct link to the minds that shaped this princely state.

Amongst this wealth of information, a particularly evocative discovery sheds light on a less public, yet equally significant, facet of the royal lifestyle: 'The Glen', Maharaja's summer retreat in Darjeeling, which is another significant facet of his connection with the British. His decision to establish this retreat in the Darjeeling hills reflects his closeness with them. The meticulously cataloged documents reveal that 'The Elgin', A Heritage Property in Darjeeling, built in 1887, is a

name now synonymous with a colonial-era charm and the refreshing embrace of the Himalayas, serving as a cherished summer haven of Maharaja.

This summer retreat may have served as a ‘home away from home’, for His Highness, Maharaja Nripendra Narayan Bhup, in a climate more akin to Britain’s, the land of his upbringing. It was also a performative space which allowed him to project an image of an enlightened, modern ruler who embraced British values while still maintaining his princely authority. This performance was crucial for navigating the delicate balance of power with the British Raj, demonstrating loyalty and a shared cultural understanding that could potentially lead to their favourable treatment or his increased autonomy. The Elgin remains a strong symbol of this intricate historical tapestry, where British imperial power and the enduring spirit of princely India intersected for the emergence of a hybridised Indian royalty accommodating British elitist ways of life.



Cooch Behar Royal Archives  
MS 938, 18th Feb, 1908

The Elgin’s primary success lies in evoking a feeling of sophistication that stems from its architectural heritage hotel. The stylish manor house, with its sprawling sitting areas, antique ceilings, timber accents, and wooden grand staircase, undeniably speaks of a bygone era of opulence. The interior design is replete with antique furniture, chandeliers, and tapestries.

The palace, now The Elgin, stands as the outcome of a deliberate choice to offer to the guests the flavour of royal elitism exuded by the Maharaja of Cooch Behar. The hotel’s corridors and common areas are adorned with framed historical photographs, etchings, and reproductions of documents. The stone walls, gabled roofs, fireplaces, and overall architectural design evoke the feel of a British manor house rather than a traditional Bengali palace. The purpose behind its emergence is clear: the creation of a transcultural space where British and Indian elites came together, sharing tastes, pastimes, and social customs. The house itself became a microcosm of this cultural mingling, where a royal Indian family lived a life similar, in many ways, to that of the British in Darjeeling. This deliberate architectural manifestation was a form of subtle power projection – a comfortable space for British guests, signalling the Maharaja’s elite status and shared aesthetic sensibilities.

Maharaja Nripendra Narayan eventually undertook the unavoidable transfer of The Elgin property to British hands for its upkeep. The final transferee of The Elgin, Mrs. Nancy Oakley gains significant space in connection with the history of this heritage site when read in conjunction with Maharani Sunity Devee’s explicit mention of Oakley being in charge of the Maharaja’s stables. Her Highness, Queen of Cooch Behar, Maharani Sunity Devee, mentions Mrs. Oakley very clearly in her autobiography.

“...They were taught riding by an Australian, named Oakley, who was in charge of my husband’s stables”.

This reveals a fascinating interplay of trust and strategic social relations within the Cooch Behar royal household during a period of significant change in British India, the most striking aspect of

which is the identity of the final transferee, Mrs. Nancy Oakley. From Maharani Sunity Devee's entry in her autobiography it's highly probable that 'Mrs. Oakley', who leased 'The Elgin' is the same individual responsible for the royal stables. In that case, this isn't just a landlord-tenant relationship; it's a deep professional and social connection.

Leasing a major property like the summer residence, The Elgin, to an employee, especially a foreigner, shows the Maharaja's trust and the Oakleys' high standing within the royal household. It suggests they were more than just staff; they were important individuals, perhaps even close confidants of the royal family. The presence of European residents and employees like the Oakleys created a more diverse environment in Cooch Behar. This encouraged cultural exchange and exposure to different lifestyles, helping the state's broader intellectual and social growth.

Thereafter the transference of The Elgin from Mrs. Oakley to the Oberoi family serves as a significant pivot in its history. While Mrs. Oakley, as a lessee, likely maintained the property as a charming guesthouse, the Oberoi acquisition in 1965 by Mr. Kuldip Chand Oberoi, and subsequently the extensive development under Mr. Brij Raj Oberoi (fondly called 'Diamond'), transformed it into a prominent luxury heritage property. The Director of the group of Elgin Hotels, Mr. Viraj Oberoi, views The Elgin not just as another property, but as an Empire, built from dust- a metaphor for its growth as something magnificent. It suggests that Mr. Oberoi does not consider the magnificent palace as a business venture: he is living the spirit of the Maharaja's Summer retreat. This dedication goes beyond routine maintenance; it encompasses a zeal for preserving its facts, its architecture, and, most importantly, its archives. His passion indicates a proactive approach towards conservation, ensuring that the legacy of the Maharaja's Summer retreat doesn't crumble into dust but continues to flourish as a marker of the splendour of the Maharaja's taste and gesture.

The entrance of The Elgin with its meandering stone pathways and the evocative crest — which epitomises the pristine and structural accents — does not merely lead one into a 'hotel': it ushers one into a living legacy. It is here, amidst this meticulously maintained charm, that the profound lines by the poet Rabindranath Tagore seem to come alive, too: 'O King of Kings, in your hands, time is endless!'

#### Acknowledgement:

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#### Photo Courtesy :

(a) His Highness Maharaja Nripendra Narayan Bhup Plaque in Golders Green Crematorium, London: Mrs. Meerali Patel, Member, Golders Green, London, U.K.

(b) 'The Bexhill Observer', 02.09.1911, England, U.K: Mr. Julian Porter, Curator, Bexhill Museum, England, U.K.

(c) Hammond, E.L.L. *Letter of E.L.L. Hammond*. Received by H.H Maharaja Nripendra Narayan, Cooch Behar District Record Room, MS 938, 30 March 1905, Cooch Behar, West Bengal, India.