

The Baptist Mission Press of Calcutta.

PRINTING was probably first introduced into India by Jesuit missionaries sometime in the sixteenth century. But of the establishment they set up and of those founded later in the time of the East India Company little is known and none exist today. One printing press, however, which was started as early as 1800 is still in active operation. This Press, established and still owned by the Baptist Missionary Society, may therefore rightly be said to have played a part in the introduction of printing in India. It may equally claim to have exerted an influence on the whole printing industry in India.

The Baptist Mission Press of Calcutta is now known throughout the length and breadth of India for the quality of its work, for dependable service, and for a sense of craftsmanship and pride in work well done: all the more so, because India is a country where, generally speaking, the labour is very ignorant—being more than ninety per cent illiterate—and having very little idea of craftsmanship or of pride in the production of first-class work. This Press has one other claim to fame in that it does work in more languages than any other firm in the east, if not in the world: it prints in over forty different languages, and can print in any of the 225 languages of India. The Mission Press at present employs a staff of 150 or more, all of whom are Indian, excepting only the European superintending missionary and his assistant. For this is still a Mission Press although it now does work for anybody on a strictly commercial basis alongside its commitments for missionary bodies to whom it offers special terms.

When William Carey arrived in India in 1793, his first task was to learn Bengali and translate the Scriptures. Such was his energy that his task was accomplished in seven years or less. Then he was faced with the question of printing his translation. The first Bengali types ever used in India were those employed in 1778 in printing Halhed's Bengali Grammar at a press in Hooghly of which no record now remains. The punches for this fount were cut by Mr. (afterwards Sir) Charles Wilkins who went out to India at the age of twenty as a writer for the East India Company. He rapidly mastered Persian and Bengali and actually cut the punches for this first Bengali fount with his own hands. Later he trained an Indian blacksmith named Panchanon,

through whose skill the art of punch-making became domesticated in Bengal. Sir Charles Wilkins has been spoken of as India's Caxton.

All this had been done under the aegis of the East India Company. Carey, however, had been compelled to take refuge in the Danish settlement of Serampore, sixteen miles north of Calcutta, because the Company most definitely disapproved of all efforts to evangelise or educate the Indian people. For this reason, if for no other Carey could not arrange for the printing of his translation of the Bible in any press in Calcutta even if there were any presses capable of undertaking the work. Accordingly the Missionary Society sent out its first trained printer, William Ward, and the first Baptist Mission Press was founded at Serampore, where the New Testament was completed in 1801.

This was printed on a wooden press purchased in Calcutta for £40. When it was first set up crowds of Indians flocked to see it, and hearing Carey's description of its wonderful power, decided it must be a European idol. Carey had originally planned to obtain punches for the type from Caslon "the eminent letter-founder of London" but as each punch would have cost one guinea he was relieved to find, just at that time, that a type foundry had been recently established in Calcutta. Of this foundry nothing is now known.

Despite the handicaps of such primitive equipment and methods and the fact that only one of those engaged in the work was a trained printer, the printing of the first edition of the New Testament in Bengali was completed in nine months. Some of the special difficulties of the task are mentioned in a letter written by Carey at this time:—"The labour is tenfold what it would be in England—printing, writing and spelling in Bengali being all such a new thing. We have in a manner to fix the orthography and my pandit changes his opinion so frequently."

But this first translation was only the beginning. During his lifetime, William Carey personally supervised the following translation work: The whole Bible into Bengali, Hindi, Oriya, Marathi, Sanskrit and Assamese; The New Testament and other portions into five other languages; the New Testament only into nineteen other languages; and one or more Gospels into five other languages, a total of thirty-five languages. All these translations were printed by the Press.

The following is a brief extract from a history of the Mission's earliest years published in two volumes in 1859:

"The progress which had been made in the preparation of founts of types in the Oriental languages was also very

satisfactory. In the middle of 1807, the missionaries had completed four founts, which, with the Persian fount received from England, enabled them to print the Scriptures in seven languages. On the ground of economy alone, the importance of the foundry they had established at Serampore will be apparent from a reference to the expense of Oriental founts in London; and at this distance of time it may not be without interest. The Persian fount, which Mr. Fuller had sent out, cost £500. The missionaries had also desired him to ascertain whether Telinga and Nagree founts might not be obtained more cheaply and expeditiously in London, where Fry and Figgins, the eminent founders, had been employed in preparing Oriental punches for the East India Company. Their reply satisfied the missionaries of the wisdom of having made the establishment of a foundry and the training of native artists one of the first objects of their attention at Serampore. Mr. Figgins offered to supply them with 407 matrices for the Telinga, he retaining the punches, for £641. Regarding the Nagree, a consultation was held with Dr. Charles Wilkins, the great Orientalist, who had cut the first Indian types with his own hands thirty years before, and it was found that the punches required for printing in that character might, by various contrivances, be reduced to 300; but the expense of preparing even this contracted fount was estimated at £700. At Serampore the missionaries had been able to obtain from their native workmen a complete fount of Nagree, consisting of 700 characters, for about £100. In the course of the first ten years of their labours the difference between the expense of their own foundry, and the sum which would have been required for the preparation of the founts in London, fell little short of £2,000."¹

Near Serampore there is still a village called Johnnagar (John's Town) which was originally inhabited by the Christians employed in the cutting of steel punches for all the languages used in the Press. Many of the punches prepared there in the early days are still in the possession of the Calcutta Press.

During this period Joshua Marshman, another of Dr. Carey's Colleagues at Serampore, was engaged in learning Chinese. We are told that the art of printing had been known in China for ten or twelve centuries, but up to the time of which we write the practice had always been to print from hand-cut wooden blocks. It was in India, at the Baptist Mission Press, that the

¹ *Life and Times of Carey, Marshman & Ward*, Vol. 1., p. 420, by J. C. Marshman. Published in 1859 by Longman, Green, Longmans, & Roberts.

first moveable metal types were cast for the Chinese language. Here in 1822, after fourteen years of unremitting toil, Marshman completed the translation and printing of the first complete edition of the Bible in Chinese, which was also the first Chinese work ever to be printed from moveable metal types. It was not until some years later that workers in China realised what had been achieved for them at Serampore.

When the advantage of this mode of printing began to be appreciated by the missionaries in China, one of them wrote thus to Dr. Marshman in the year 1836: "We wish to obtain further particulars about the Chinese printing at Serampore. How are your metallic types made? Have you steel punches? Who are your printers?" About the same time the son of Robert Morrison sent the MS. of his translation of the New Testament to Serampore with the request that it might be printed there for distribution in China. Towards the end of the same year the Roman Catholic vicar apostolic of Cochin China came to Serampore in person to arrange for the printing of his *Anamitic and Latin Dictionary*.²

In the early days the Press was engaged solely in printing the missionaries' own translations of the Scriptures, and the grammars and dictionaries they also prepared. It was not then a profit-making concern but was financed by the subscriptions of Christian people in Great Britain. It was therefore a catastrophe of the first order when, in March 1812, the Press was burnt to the ground in a night.

The value of the property destroyed was estimated at £7,000, but the loss of so many copies of the Scriptures and of many years of translation work in the form of manuscripts was incalculable. Fortunately the printing presses were in a side room and therefore escaped. It was even greater good fortune that the punches and matrices for the different languages were found intact under the debris of the fire. Had these been destroyed the work would have been put back for many years.

However, these pioneer missionary printers were no ordinary men. They immediately found new premises, paid their staff up to date and gave them all one month's leave. Then, having salvaged from the ruins the mass of melted type, of which there was about four tons, they handed it over, with the matrices, to the type casters. The number of these was increased and arrangements were made for them to work in shifts day and night. They worked with such diligence that at the end of thirty days, complete founts of "the Tamul and the Hindoostanee" were ready, with which to begin work on two versions of the

² A copy of this Dictionary, in two volumes, is preserved in the library of the Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal, Calcutta.

New Testament. By the end of that same year, i.e. in less than nine months, the Press was fully restored and all the work which was in progress before the fire, had been restarted. At that time it was reported "Ten presses are working and nearly 200 men are employed about the printing office."

A few years after this, in 1820 to be exact, the first steam engine seen in India was erected in the Baptist Mission Press at Serampore to drive the paper mill. Paper has been made in India from time immemorial, but as it was always sized with rice paste it can readily be imagined how attractive it must have been to the innumerable and ever-hungry insects of India. It is said that, without continual care, the first sheets of work which took any length of time to print were devoured by insects before the last sheets were printed off.

These were the days of the Fourdrinier brothers, who did so much towards the invention and improvement of the paper-making machine, which was then only in its infancy. Therefore, paper made in Europe was only available in India in small quantities and at impossible prices, so for many years efforts were made in the Press at Serampore to produce a paper "impervious to the worm." At one period a treadmill, worked by relays of forty men, was erected to turn the pulping machine. This, however, had to be abandoned, not only because it was cumbersome and expensive, but finally because, after an accident in which one of the workers was killed, it became impossible to find men to operate it owing to the people's superstitious fears.

Coal-mining had very recently been started in the Burdwan district of Bengal, so, coal being available, it was decided to import a 12 h.p. steam engine from Messrs. Thwaites & Rothwell, of Bolton, to take the place of the treadmill. This first steam engine must have caused as much excitement and interest as the first steamer or the first railway engine. Great crowds came to see it at work and the Indians called it "the machine of fire." It is many years now since the Press made its own paper, but those pioneer efforts are commemorated today in a kind of paper still known as Serampore paper and made now in the large mills of the Titaghur Paper Mills Co., which by a strange coincidence are situated on the bank of the river Hooghly almost opposite to Serampore.

In 1813 the Charter, under which the directors of the East India Company ruled India, was so revised as to permit Christian missionaries to settle and to work in the Company's territory. As a result the Baptist Missionaries were able to work freely in Calcutta which even then was the first city in India, whilst Serampore was, comparatively speaking, no more than a village. For this and other reasons a second Mission Press was started

in Calcutta in 1818 and for fifteen years these two Presses, in Serampore and Calcutta, developed side by side. The Calcutta Press was started, on the same site as that on which it now stands, by W. H. Pearce, who had been trained at the Clarendon Press, Oxford. The Serampore Press was eventually closed in 1837, since when the work has continued in the Calcutta Press, which has been in continuous operation since 1818.

The Serampore Press was also responsible for the first ventures in Indian journalism. Despite the government's rigid censorship of news at that time the first newspaper ever printed in any oriental language was printed and published by the Serampore Press in 1818. This was the Bengali weekly *Samachar Darpan* ("Mirror of the News"). About the same time a monthly magazine in English was commenced, entitled *The Friend of India*. This periodical was intended to keep people informed of the progress of the work of the Baptist Mission and other similar societies, engaged in charitable and educational work, in India and elsewhere. *The Friend of India* was printed and published by the Press, first from Serampore and later from Calcutta, until 1897, when it was incorporated in *The Statesman*, which is now the leading English daily for eastern and northern India.

That is the story of the early days of the Baptist Mission Press. Of the intervening period little is known. The most probable explanation is that during the past century there have been none of the startling developments which are counted as history. Historians find it difficult to write interesting chapters about long periods of steady, unexciting growth and gradual development.

With the end of the East India Company in 1858, the year after the Mutiny, printers in Indian attained to a freedom not known before and many printing businesses were started. Other missionary agencies took a hand in translation and made their own arrangements for the printing of the Scriptures. It was also at this period that there arose an increased demand for printing for commercial houses and business firms. So it was that, as its specifically Mission printing decreased in volume, and as improved machinery and methods made a larger output possible, the Baptist Mission Press began to accept work on a commercial basis. The Press nowadays does work for anyone and makes the substantial contribution to the finances of the Baptist Missionary Society of £4,000 or £5,000 each year.

From 1818 until 1941, a period of 123 years, there have been six European missionary superintendents: 1818-1837 Rev. W. H. Pearce; 1837-58 Rev. J. Thomas; 1858-80 Rev. C. B. Lewis; 1881-1901 Rev. J. W. Thomas; 1901-25 Rev. C. H.

Harvey; 1925-41 Rev. P. Knight—all of whom served the Press and the Mission faithfully and well.

The Press is now equipped with fully automatic two-revolution printing presses, and Linotype and Monotype composing machines. Everything is as up-to-date as in an English printing office—as up-to-date as possible, that is, after six years of war. It is no longer necessary to make paper on the premises, but many founts of type for Indian languages are still cast in the Press, some of them probably from punches and matrices which were made in Serampore. The latest development is the adaptation of the Monotype machines to cast Urdu, Arabic, Persian, Hindi, Sanskrit, Marathi, Nepali, Gujerati and Tamil.

The financial contribution made annually to the B.M.S. is by no means the only contribution which the Press makes to the work of the Mission. It is still a Mission Press as much in spirit and purpose as in name, but it does its evangelistic work indirectly now. It may be said to be served by many workers and agencies in the field, or on the other hand it may be regarded as the servant of these same workers and agencies who distribute the printed message prepared by the Press.

One of these co-workers of the Press has a history of almost as many years of service, though in India it has recently been "nationalised" and changed its name. The British and Foreign Bible Society was founded in 1804 and its first work in India was to provide funds to enable Carey, Marshman and Ward to proceed without financial embarrassment, and, therefore, more quickly, with the printing of their translations at the Serampore Press. In 1944 this body changed its name to The Bible Society of India and since then has been controlled in India by a committee, composed largely of Indian Christian leaders of all denominations. The work of the Society is carried on by several "Auxiliaries" or district headquarters in different parts of India, each of which is usually served for its printing by the printers of the immediate neighbourhood. The Calcutta auxiliary of the Society serves a very large area which includes Bengal, Assam, Orissa, Bihar and many language groups in the eastern hills bordering on Burma. In all, this auxiliary alone is responsible for producing and distributing the Scriptures in forty-eight languages. The Baptist Mission Press could print Bibles or Testaments in any of these languages and in 1944 actually had in hand, at one time, orders from the Bible Society for Testaments and Gospels in five different languages.

The Bengali Bible has never been printed elsewhere than at the Baptist Mission Press. The translation now used is no doubt very different from Carey's first translation, but ever since his day the most acceptable version has been the work of Baptists.

Because of this the Bible Society usually arranges to print an edition at the same time as the B.M.S., which results in a considerable economy for both societies. The Bengali Bible in the large type used for the last edition comprises 1,800 pages and 10,000 is the usual edition. The fact that it takes ten years to sell this number, in what is one of the largest provinces in India with a population of 60,000,000 reveals how difficult the work has been, in this province in particular, and how much scope there still is for the Christian evangelist.

The Scripture Gift Mission of London is another of the fellow-workers of the Press. This Mission specialises in the production and distribution of small booklets which consist wholly of Scripture passages without note or comment, except for the addition of headings and well-known hymns. The S.G.M. has depots all over India and circulates these books in forty-one different languages. During 1944-45 the Mission distributed 644,570 Scripture portions in India alone and during the following year printed 411,850 portions in India in eighteen different languages, for six or eight of which the B.M.P. was responsible. The Press also occasionally helps by translating booklets into Bengali, and aids the work of distribution by stocking some of these booklets in its book shop.

The agency through which the Press makes its largest and most direct contribution, however, is the Calcutta Christian Tract and Book Society. This Society, founded in 1823, is representative of all Protestant mission organisations working in Bengal, and is recognised as the Literature Committee of the Bengal Christian Council. The object for which the Society was established is "To supply in various languages tracts for distribution among the Heathen, Mohammedans and others and books of Christian instruction for Schools and for the spiritual good of professing Christians." In this way the Society makes an invaluable contribution to the cause of Christ in Bengal; producing tracts, biographies, commentaries, Sunday school lesson notes, theological books of all kinds, children's Scripture story books, hymn books for Church and School worship, books of prayers and other aids to devotion—all in Bengali and the peculiar form of that language used by Muslims, known as Musalmani Bengali. For this Society the Baptist Mission Press has for many years been the chief printer. Several Press Superintendents have acted as the honorary secretary of the Calcutta Tract Society in their spare time, and there has been some connection between the Press and the Society ever since the foundation of the latter.

Besides being the chief printer for the Tract Society—or the C.T.S., as it is familiarly known—the Press has also for the last twenty years or so been its sole wholesale distributing

agency. On the Press premises is a bookshop where the publications of the C.T.S. and kindred organisations, such as the S.G.M. are on view. To this bookshop may come as many as twenty or thirty Christian workers in a day to buy books for presents or prizes, books for their scholars, or tracts for free distribution. But the largest sales are by post and railway parcels to missionaries in the country districts all over Bengal. One missionary may order books to the value of Rs. 150 at a time—and that represents a large number of copies when the average price of a book is two or three annas only.

Since 1939 the consistent increase in annual production and sales which was evident before the war, for various obvious reasons, has not been regularly maintained, but a few figures may be given which are themselves convincing proof of the value of the direct contribution made to the work of evangelisation in Bengal by this joint effort of the Press and the C.T.S.

In the five years 1937-41 (before the shortage of paper was really felt in India) the Press printed for the C.T.S. a total of 715,000 tracts and 123,000 books and during the same period sold from the bookshop 546,525 tracts and 130,103 books to a total value of Rs. 12,214. These books go to schools and colleges all over Bengal. They are sold in the fields, on the railway stations, on the river steamers of East Bengal, in the great *melas* or religious festivals of Hindus and Muslims. Wherever men are willing to receive instruction there are books for them bearing the imprint of the Baptist Mission Press.

So the Press is still an influential force in the work for Christ and His Kingdom. Although it works indirectly it is nevertheless as potent an evangelistic agency as any other institution. The workers in the munition factories rarely win great honours, but without their efforts the war could not be won. The Press prepares the munitions for this Holy War and more and more munitions will be required. Everywhere adults are learning to read, and great plans are afoot for the education of the four hundred millions of India. How shall they read unless they have books, and how shall they learn from their reading unless they have books of the right type? Here, truly, "a great door and effectual is opened unto us," through which the Christian Gospel may be preached to India. Apart from that, the need of the Christian community for more books and good periodicals in their own language is greater than can be described.

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