

# William Carey and the Education of India

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## I

William Carey and his colleagues Joshua Marshman and William Ward were deeply concerned with education of all kinds and at all levels. From the beginning of their work in Bengal they organized local vernacular schools; then in 1818 came Serampore College, and subsequently some girls' schools; meanwhile Carey himself was lecturing at Fort William College to the recruits for the East India Company's administrative service. They thus played an important part in disseminating that Western learning which was to have a revolutionary effect on the whole of Indian life, and it seems appropriate in this bicentenary year of Carey's birth to remember this work of the missionary community over which he presided.

Perhaps the most striking thing about these men is the variety of their interests and activities; besides education, they engaged in direct evangelization, printing, translation work, philology, and botany, in all of which they were among the pioneers in India. These things they loved for their own sakes; nevertheless they were undertaken only as a means towards the one great end which alone had brought them to Serampore—of converting India to Christ. Their diverse activities were all integrated into this work, which they pursued as instruments of The Lord in the fulfilment of His purposes. Education would obviously be a most useful means, as it has been at every stage of missionary activity. Through it they could influence future generations at the formative period of their lives; hence the almost immediate establishment of elementary schools. Serampore College was also intended partly for this purpose, but more especially for able children of Christian families, who could thus continue their education to the highest level in a Christian institution, and above all for the training of Indian ministers on whom the main task of the conversion of their compatriots would fall. Christian education, then, at all levels and for all sorts of men—a means of conversion to and confirmation in the Faith.

By 1816, therefore, the missionaries felt that their existing elementary education work should be much expanded, and Marshman wrote the pamphlet 'Hints Relative to Native Schools'

to secure the public's support. In this their views are expressed at length; Hinduism was in part responsible for the prevailing ignorance, and its inherent defects were aggravated by it. The Bengalis were ignorant of almost everything conducive to morality or intellectual and spiritual fulfilment: of the nature of God, ethics, history, geography, and science. The juxtaposition in a single list of both 'sacred' and 'secular' subjects tells us much in itself about the missionaries' ideas for them in 1816, before Lyall and Darwin had done their work, there was no conflict between religion and science. On the contrary, the study of Nature gave an insight into the ways of its Creator, while the Book of Genesis was an accurate textbook of the early history of the world. As God manifested himself openly in all branches of learning, the study of them would be an effective preparation for the Gospel; and just as theology was vindicated by science, so were ethics by experience. All this then was to be taught to Hindu children; a smattering of modern scientific knowledge, Christian theology and ethics—though not yet the Bible itself; too much of a good thing for these spiritual beginners. Christianity would be seen to be essentially reasonable, and in agreement with scientific truth as objectively verified; conversely, the inconsistencies of Hinduism would be clearly revealed. How could people continue to worship rivers and trees after they had been taught to regard them with the eye of a scientist?

If the conviction of the harmony between the sacred and the secular was the basis of the Serampore missionaries' philosophy of education, nothing can have discredited their ideal more than the conflict between the two which began in earnest in the following generation; the acid of science with which they proposed to corrode Hinduism was used with devastating effect upon their own faith. There is no passage in Marshman's 'Hints' pregnant with a more painful irony for the modern Christian than that in which he confidently asserts that the Hindus' faith in Rama would be undermined by their studies in history: how would they reconcile their belief that he lived for 11,000 years with their new 'knowledge' that the world itself had only existed since 4004 B.C. ? The collapse of the old harmonies must have affected Serampore College's reputation in particular. Carey envisaged that the Christian learning of which it should become the centre (as the 'Christian Benares') would capture the best minds of India, and as long as theology remained in alliance with the dazzling developments of contemporary science and technology there is no reason why his hopes should not have been fulfilled; these things emanated from a Christian civilization, and presumably were in some way the consequences of its theology. Well might Carey emphatically disclaim (in the 1823 College Report especially) any design to make converts by coercion or by 'slanting' the syllabus: these methods were not only clean contrary to the Gospel, but quite unnecessary in any case; the Truth manifested in Christianity would be irresistible—all the College authorities need do was reveal it. Half a century later it was difficult for well-informed

people to share his confidence, and herein lies the fundamental problem for the Christian colleges in the present age.

## II. ENGLISH OR VERNACULAR ?

The major controversy in which Carey became involved, however, was not so much on the ultimate value of Christian education as over the best medium of instruction. By 1816 it was at last generally agreed that the East India Company had some responsibility towards the education of its subjects ; the question was—how should this be discharged ? Broadly speaking there were three schools of thought : the ‘ Orientalists ’, who wanted continued study of the Sanskrit classics for their own sake, through a Sanskrit medium ; the ‘ Anglicists ’, who wanted Western education in English ; and the ‘ Vernacularists ’, who wanted the same in the appropriate vernacular. The Serampore missionaries were among the leaders of the latter party. Marshman sets forth their reasons in the ‘ Hints ’—the vernacular medium would make it easier for the whole people to acquire education, and be conducive to social stability. ‘ The hope of imparting efficient instruction to [the people] . . . in a language not their own is completely fallacious.’ The Anglicists were mainly concerned to give an advanced education to a minority intelligentsia ; Carey and his colleagues, on the other hand, wished also to give elementary Western education as soon as possible to all the people, and they poured scorn on the notion of Bengali peasants learning the English language well enough, with the very limited opportunities at their disposal, for use as an instrument for acquiring even the smattering of general knowledge which they felt to be essential for altering their world-view. Marshman recalled the experience of Europe—how the Renaissance had leavened whole nations because it had come through the vernaculars rather than some language known only to the learned, and he believed that the same process could take place in India : the products of the vernacular schools would spread abroad this ‘ new learning ’ in their normal social intercourse. In addition, the very fact that it was given in the ordinary language of the people would indicate its relevance for them even as they continued to go about their everyday affairs ; thus the poorest peasant would realize that the marvels of modern science were at his own disposal for the improvement of his surroundings—not merely to be cultivated by pandits in an ivory tower peopled exclusively by fellow intellectuals. ‘ Instruction . . . should be such as to render the inhabitants of a country happy in their own sphere, but never to take them out of it ’ ; having learnt English, however, people ‘ would scarcely remain to till the ground, or to labour at any manual occupation ; they would therefore by their education be unfitted for the ordinary callings of life ’. Thus wrote Joshua Marshman, in 1816. Even at this early date Bengalis who had learnt a little English tended to gravitate to Calcutta in search of clerkships, and the Serampore missionaries never ceased to condemn the ‘ love of gain ’ which motivated

them, and which had already produced the problem of the educated unemployed. They therefore actively discouraged the learning of English in their schools, and even as far as the College was concerned they at first intended that only a 'select number' of students should embark on English—after they had mastered all available Sanskrit and vernacular works. Having thus proved himself a sincere and reliable student, he 'may by a thorough knowledge of English . . . open to himself the literature of the Western world, penetrate into the deepest recesses of Western science, and enrich his vernacular language with its choicest treasures'.<sup>1</sup> English, in other words, was to be the summit of educational achievement, attained only by a few, and merely in order to deepen and complete the education already acquired. A little English was a dangerous thing; it must be studied thoroughly, for its own sake, or not at all. And even so its importance would steadily decrease, for the missionaries translated many English books into Bengali, and looked forward to the day when all those 'choicest treasures' of English literature and science would be available in the vernaculars.

And yet in spite of these brave words we find in 1832 no less than 67 students, or over half the total number in the College, primarily engaged in studying English language and literature! The demand for an English education had grown so greatly that by now the triumph of the Anglicists, as far as higher education was concerned, was practically assured—1835, within Marshman's lifetime, saw the publication of Macaulay's famous Minute. Did this then represent merely the triumph of cupidity over the wide diffusion of the rudiments of sound learning for which the former had striven so hard? Partly no doubt; but J. C. Marshman, in *The Life and Times of Carey, Marshman and Ward* (1859), points out that the missionaries had underestimated the real desire among many Indians to master English for its own sake, and he thought that Carey's grand design of subverting Hinduism was being accomplished in spite of the rejection of his methods—by an educated minority taking the new ideas from their source, rather than by a widespread diffusion of these ideas in the vernaculars. In 1859 it was possible to believe that the 'new learning' would in time filter down to everyone, but fifty years later it was apparent that these hopes had not been fulfilled. Instead all that had happened was the appearance of a new learned élite; English had taken the place of Persian or Sanskrit, and the gulf between the literate and the illiterate which Carey had tried to close was as wide as ever.

### III. SANSKRIT AND MORALITY

However, if Carey differed with the Anglicists over the medium of instruction, they were at least agreed that it was

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<sup>1</sup> Serampore College Prospectus, 1818.

Western education which India needed ; she should be revitalized by the 'new learning' of Christendom. But with the Orientalists his dispute was quite fundamental ; Christ could not be discovered in the Sanskrit classics, and neither could true scientific principles. Yet paradoxically Carey spent a great deal of time collecting, translating and printing these same classics for whose spiritual content he had so little respect, and Sanskrit studies had to begin with the most prominent place in the syllabus of Serampore College. His motives shed much light on his purpose for the College ; it should be primarily for the training of Christians, ministers and laymen, to the highest standard, to enable them to give convincing accounts of their faith in their contacts with non-Christians. For this purpose they should know four things : their mother-tongue, Christian theology, the science and literature of Christendom, and Indian religions and culture ; thus they would be able to demonstrate Christian truth by well-informed comparisons between it and the faiths of their potential converts. Of these Carey was mainly preoccupied with Hinduism, to which Sanskrit was the key. Moreover, it would be a valuable aid to the mastery of Indian vernaculars, and it would have certain excellent intellectual and even moral by-products : its literature might be corrupting, but the study of the structure of the language itself was an invaluable mental discipline. The 1818 Report states 'The object is not to give [the students] a light smattering of things, which may tend to gender conceit . . . but to lay the foundation deep, to strengthen the mind by inuring it to real labour . . .' and Sanskrit—inherently 'dry, severe and uninteresting'—was admirably suited for this purpose. So much so, in fact, that most of the early students failed to stay the course! The pearls of wisdom offered by Serampore College were to be won only by hard work and self-discipline ; a successful student would need not only intellectual ability but moral integrity, too, both of which would be developed by the syllabus itself ; and so we return to that integral connexion between education and ethics which was at the heart of Carey's philosophy. Other subjects would also toughen moral fibres : science, besides encouraging Hindus to subdue rather than worship Nature, would teach that ideas and opinions should be based on facts, capable of objective verification, rather than prejudices, while mathematics would inculcate an unwonted precision of thinking and reasoning, and with it a new love of truth. Even the basic skills of reading and writing in the vernacular would be a salutary discipline. These were much emphasized as the foundations of all education ; just as Carey tried to insist on a mastery of Sanskrit before taking up English, so Bengali should be the prerequisite for all further study. He had the instincts of a good craftsman who made things genuine and sound and durable ; rather a select number of truly educated graduates than the large numbers with mere 'smatterings of things'. To these missionaries education was not just the learning of facts, valuable though these were ; it was a process of mental and spiritual discipline, which would so temper a man's

character and personality as to enable him to face anything. And for this purpose solid foundations were essential.

#### IV. ELEMENTARY EDUCATION

As far as elementary education was concerned, however, it was particularly important to make it attractive and obviously relevant to the pupils' environment. In the scheme worked out by Marshman in 1816 the fundamentals of modern knowledge and Christian ethics were boiled down into maxims—in 'compressed yet perspicuous' form—and illustrated by local references: thus 'The Earth is globular in size, somewhat like the *kudumba* fruit'. They were attractively printed in separate textbooks for the different subjects and despatched to the masters of the new schools, which became immediately popular—within two years they contained 8,500 pupils. The missionaries were particularly encouraged by the growing evidence of local people organizing such schools for themselves; they were always highly conscious that their work could only survive inasmuch as it was carried on by the Indian people. In their education work as in their direct evangelization the missionaries saw themselves merely as initiators; they brought the good seed to India, but only her own people could make it grow.

The maxims were copied down by the pupils and learnt by heart, and here the question is raised as to whether the missionaries were not merely perpetuating the system of meaningless rote-learning to which Indian indigenous education had degenerated by then, and which has bedevilled it ever since. Their major problem, which was never solved, was that most of the masters were quite unfitted to teach. They hoped to train them at Serampore, but there were never enough, and it was chiefly for this reason that several of the schools had to be closed after a few years. So the best they could do was to make their maxims self-explanatory as far as possible, and to trust that they would 'furnish [the pupil's] mind with a treasure of ideas, which, duly improved by reflection, might enable him hereafter to illuminate all around him'.<sup>2</sup> All the masters had to do was to dictate the maxims to the class. Thus Carey and his colleagues attempted to organize over a hundred schools scattered throughout Bengal from their desks at Serampore, by means simply of some printed textbooks and a few itinerant missionary superintendents. Education without teachers has normally only been successful when broadcast over the radio, and the means at Carey's disposal were no substitute for this.

Nevertheless enough Bengalis became literate to raise the problem of how to prevent their new-found skills from rusting away through disuse, and for this purpose Carey founded the vernacular magazines, *Dig Durshan* and *Somachar Durpun* (1818).

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<sup>2</sup> First Report of the Institution for the Encouragement of Native Schools for India, 1817.

Vernacular literature hardly existed at all at this time, and in any case the new literates required reading-matter simple in form and expression and on subjects which could be readily understood. Material for the articles was therefore specially selected and rewritten, with the intention that it should be at once entertaining, useful, and—needless to say—morally uplifting; the new literacy was not to be misused. They thus gave practice in reading, spread modern knowledge, and continued the process of education on foundations already laid, and as they were cheap and attractively printed they soon built up a wide circulation. They were a landmark in the history of both education and journalism in Bengal; and the contrast between the purpose of these papers and that of subsequent enterprises in popular journalism needs no emphasis here.

## V. CONCLUSION

For Carey and his colleagues, then, elementary education meant literacy and the fundamentals of Western knowledge and Christian morality: rudimentary education for the masses, attractive, useful, cheap—and ultimately revolutionary. To the College, quite other considerations applied: it provided an exacting study of the highest realms of Christian learning. And if all could profit by the former, the high standards of the latter could be obtained only by the few. Even within the field of education, then, the width of Carey's concern is remarkable, and in addition to all this there was the pioneering work of the Serampore community for the education of girls. This was undertaken both for their own sake—to free them from ignorance and degradation—and also because they realized that Christianity would never triumph in India unless the women came into direct contact with it. Then, in his concern for the mind and spirit of Bengal, Carey did not forget the body, which needed similar expert nurture and treatment; hence his plan—which never materialized—for a medical department at Serampore. Finally, who can tell the extent of his influence on the future administrators of India during the generation in which he lectured at Fort William College? During his residence at Serampore there was a revolution in the attitude of the Government, which came to accept the responsibility, in theory and to some extent in practice, of improving the lot of its Indian subjects, mainly through education. So far from quenching the missionary spirit it had itself been infected by it, and Carey, by his friendships with officials and successive Governor-Generals, probably played a considerable part in this process. In part it was a reflection of the Utilitarian movement in Britain; Carey, too, believed in the possibility of Improvement, which he achieved first by a thorough investigation of the situation; then by appealing to public opinion for support by speeches and pamphlets; and finally by operating upon it through efficient planning and practical organizing ability, resting on sheer hard work and a refusal to become discouraged. But there is more to Carey than this.

In the College curriculum the traditional—and lengthy—method was at first adopted for Sanskrit studies, but after a few years it was altered, with the explanation that the original method was all very well for Hindu students at Nadia and Banaras who had nothing else to do ; but the young men at Serampore had no time to waste—for them the language was but a means to the great end of the conversion of India. This was typical of Carey ; all his faculties and his enterprises were integrated into his one purpose of doing God's will for India. Many of the Benthamite reformers were unattractive personalities ; their efficiency was beneficent, no doubt, but it seemed cold and heartless to some. But Carey was no machine ; he loved the people of Bengal, and he could bring them nothing better than his Lord.