

The Bible Society of India
(Calcutta Auxiliary)

**“Revd. Dr. William Carey:
An Enquiry into the Obligation of a Social Reformer”**

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I. INTRODUCTION & BACKGROUND:

Whenever the subjects of ‘Enlightenment’ or the birth of English education ever comes up in India, the first three names that cross our mind are those of Rev. William Carey, Raja Ram Mohun Roy and Rev. Alexander Duff. They are almost synonymous with that tumultuous age, when the existing structure of Muslim governance in the post-Moghul world had crumbled, but no substitute had appeared on the Indian scene. Three trading outposts of the British in India, namely, Calcutta, Bombay and Madras, were still only citadels of the rising power and were engulfed on all sides by a whole patchwork of kingdoms, Nawabs and interests: that were yet to come to terms with the imminent future.

I am sure everyone in this hall is familiar with the name of William Carey, as he features not only in the annals of the Church, the English, but also with the development of Bengali literature and publishing. Carey is extricably linked with the name of Ramram Basu, who was the first Bengali to create a work in ‘prose’ and was also the creator of the first historiography in Bangla. But, I think it may be proper to recapitulate the history connected with him, so as to be in a position to place his contribution in the

exact context. Most of us tend to think that all the three 'greats' were all contemporaries as were Macaulay and William Ward. The fact is that it is not so, and they all entered the scene, at different points of time.

In this sequence, it is William Carey who comes first, and therefore our story begins with this frail missionary, who arrived in India in 1793. We may need a quick flashback, to understand the history of the sub-Continent that prevailed in that period.

At the Battle of Plassey of 1757, Clive managed to defeat Nawab of Bengal, Siraj ud-Daulah, with treachery which was quite common, in those days. But this was not the decisive battle. It was actually the war of Buxar in 1764 that was really decisive. The combined forces of the much weakened Mogul (Shah Alam II), the Nawab of Awadh (Shuja ud-Daula) and the Nawab of Bengal (Mir Qasim) had come together, to take on the might of the impertinent East India Company and after 22 days of fighting, it was ultimately the British who won, and thereby sealed the fate of India for the next two centuries.

The Directors of the East India Company in London, however, did not look upon the conquests by the Company's servants in any good light at all and one of the maxims was that "Our business is to trade, not to rule". But then the trio, Robert Clive, followed by Hastings and then Cornwallis, was simply unstoppable. In 1786, the Board of Directors of East India Company permitted Cornwallis to settle the tax revenue (or rents from land) with a class of Zamindars, and in 1789, the rent roll of Bengal property

was fixed at 2 million 860 pounds a year, which in today's calculation would come to just Rs.20 crore rupees. Since the system seems to be working, British had no compunction in introducing a new genre of feudalism in India, through the Zamindari system, which was then confirmed and made permanent in 1793: the well-known Permanent Settlement of Bengal. This reinforced feudalism in India in 1793, when the world was slowly but surely moving towards republicanism and democracy.

It was in this year, 1793, that Carey landed in India, but not with a British Visa. The Company was clear that it did not want a missionary, especially a Baptist one, to mess around India and get into their way. So Carey's group, i.e., his reluctant wife, her sister and their five children together with Dr. and Mrs. Thomas, evaded the powerful East India Company and booked passage on a Dutch ship, to land five months later in India, on November 11, 1793.

II. EARLY LIFE:

William Carey born in 1761 i.e, just 4 years after the Battle of Plassey and his origins were rather humble. The son of a parish clerk and a village school master, he was fascinated by the natural sciences, especially Botany. He was the apprentice of a cobbler at the age of 14, and by the time he was 18, he moved to work for the local shoemaker, Thomas Old, and he was gifted with a wife, Dorothy. She was a simple woman who was not even literate enough to sign her name in the marriage register. Those in-

terested in the story may like to look up John Brown Myer's biography, 'William Carey the Shoemaker who Became the Father and Founder of Modern Mission'. But, Carey was not born to make shoes: during his spare time, he taught himself at the Baptist Missionary Society. On 5 October 1783, William Carey was baptized by Ryland and committed himself to the Baptist denomination.

Carey was not meant ever for the local parish: he began to read voraciously and at 21 years of age, he had mastered Latin, Greek, Hebrew and Italian and was turning to Dutch and French. He was restless and felt that it was his duty to spread the Gospel throughout the world. By 1789, Carey became the full-time pastor of Harvey Lane Baptist Church in Leicester. Three years later in 1792, he published his ground-breaking missionary manifesto, *An Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians*.

This group of country Baptists founded the world's first Protestant Missionary Society in October 1792, a decision that was taken by 14 men crammed into a back parlour, measuring 12 foot by 10. Their start up fund was collected in a snuff tin, and amounted to £13, 2s 6d, that too in promises, not hard cash. They named it 'The Particular Baptist Society for the Propagation of the Gospel' and it was later known as the Baptist Missionary Society. Andrew Fuller became the first home secretary of the Society and within a year Carey and his family, were on their way to India.

The first thing to note about Carey was his incredible focus. He had an ability to devote himself utterly to whatever task was in hand. Carey's genius lay in the combination of this focus with another quality: tenacity. Carey simply never gave up. His chief source of income came through his work as a shoemaker. He did not have a commanding personality or an arresting demeanor. He had an awkward, homely appearance, having lost almost all his hair in childhood.

One of the best descriptions of William Carey was: "Education: minimal; degrees: none; savings: depleted; political influence: nil, references: a band of country preachers half a world away". What then were his real resources? A weapon of love, and a desire to bring the light of God into the darkness.

III. INDIA, SERAMPORE, THE COLLEGE:

During the first year in Calcutta, the missionaries sought means to support themselves and a place to establish their mission. They also began to learn the Bengali language to communicate with others. A friend of Thomas owned two indigo factories and needed managers, so Carey moved with his family to Midnapore. During the six years that Carey managed the indigo plant, he completed the first revision of his Bengali New Testament and began formulating the principles upon which his missionary community would be formed, including communal living, financial self-reliance, and the training of indigenous ministers.

Meanwhile, the Missionary society had begun sending more missionaries to India. The first to arrive was John Fountain, who arrived in Midnapore and began teaching school. He was followed by William Ward, a printer; Joshua Marshman, a schoolteacher; David Brunsdon, one of Marshman's students; and William Grant, who died three weeks after his arrival. Because the East India Company was still hostile to missionaries, they settled in the Danish colony at Serampore and were joined there by Carey in January 1800. The whole group of Marshman, Ward, etc., and their families were all refused passports by East India Company. So, they could not land in Calcutta and Serampore was their best option.

Carey was convinced that missionaries and their families should live as a small community for the sake of economy, efficiency and essential fellowship. Carey's mission compound housed six families and enjoyed a family atmosphere. Everyone lived together and shared things in common. Work was shared among them according to their own particular gift and abilities. As the senior missionary, Carey, took leadership of the work but two others (Joshua Marshman and William Ward), helped him and these three came to be known as the "Serampore Trio."

In the beginning of Carey's ministry, he visited two hundred villages in the district and preached to the people. Carey's heart was with the 'natives' and he took great delight in his trips to the villages where he might preach to the people, who had never

heard of Christ. Success came slowly, as converts were gained, and other missionaries came to assist with the work.

William Carey understood the major need of trained pastors to spread the gospel to the teeming millions of India. So Carey and his colleagues planned to build a Catholic college of Eastern and Western knowledge and biblical learning. The foundation of Serampore College was laid in 1818, for the training of Indian and European youth and this may be regarded as the “crown” of their educational activities. The Serampore Trio invested all their resources in the creation of this College, even at the expense of their translation work. At this time, Carey wrote to his sisters: “I regret to say that we have been forced to relinquish some of the translations for want of funds. The erection of the Serampore College has lain heavy on us; We erect the buildings at our own expense.”

In 1818, the Mission’s The Serampore College was meant to train indigenous ministers, but it opened up new vistas, by providing education in the arts and sciences to anyone, regardless of caste or country. Let us not forget that Carey’s Serampore College in 1818 was a close second in the history of education in India. It followed the establishment of Presidency College in Calcutta, by just a year. It is, therefore, no co-incidence that Renaissance in India would first flower in Bengal, which had the good fortune of being gifted such institutions that brought the Enlightenment from other parts of the world to its doorsteps. In 1827 the King of Denmark granted a royal charter that made the college a

degree-granting institution, the first in Asia, which made it a de-facto University, the first in India.

Carey and his openness have often been construed as biased against Indian culture, religion and traditions. On the contrary, the fact is that an undereducated and underestimated, William Carey and his friends started over a hundred Christian schools, for over 8000 Indian children of all castes and launched the first college in Asia. He desired to develop the Indian mind and liberate it from darkness and superstition. Missionary pioneers like Mr. Robert May, Dr. J Marshman, Dr. W. Carey, and Captain J Stuart were instrumental in setting up several more elementary educations for the promotion of Vernacular education among Indians. The missionary plan of vernacular education received a valuable impetus with the publication of the Dr. J Marshman's Minute of 1813.

IV. THE CAUSE OF WOMEN:

Despite pressure, exerted by missionaries and liberals, the colonial government was unconcerned with female education and the Company's Government wanted to follow a policy of neutrality in the social matter of Indians. This is where, i.e. "the liberation of women in India", that William Carey is remembered the most. The main four missionary organizations, namely, the Church Missionary Society of Scotland, the Christian Knowledge Society of England, the London Missionary Society of England, and the Bap-

tist Missionary Society of Danish had devoted representatives, who carried out the female education mission.

IV.2 Even more than female education, Carey is a name that Indian history cannot forget, because of his success and victory in abolishing "Sati". This practice of burning widows alive on the funeral pyres of deceased husbands was indeed abominable, and Raja Rammohun Roy was campaigning vociferously against this cruel practice. Carey witnessed this rite in 1799 and protested publicly, as also carried out and published research on 'sati', which brought out through Brahmin Pandits that Hindu Shastras actually never enjoined such a practice. Carey's deep knowledge of religion was thus utilized by Governor himself, though it is the same East India Company that had refused to give him passports and visas. Along with Rammohun Roy, William Carey began a relentless struggle against what he described as "the awful state of female society in this country which appears in nothing so much as in dooming the female, the widow, to be burnt alive with the putrid carcass of her husband". The campaign by Rammohun Roy and Carey against 'sati', lasted for more than twenty years until the practice was finally abolished in 1829.

V. THE PRESS & TRANSLATIONS:

The source of one of Carey's greatest victories, came from the 'printing press' which constituted a land-mark in the history of publishing in India. He found native papers to be of poor quality,

so, with the help of others, he improved it, which was a great blessing to book publishing. In 1800 he set up this press in Serampore as part of the mission, which produced translations of the Bible in Bengali, Sanskrit, and other major languages and dialects. Many of these languages had never been printed before and William Ward had to create punches for the type by hand. Carey had begun translating literature and sacred writings from the original Sanskrit into English to make them accessible to his own countryman.

Carey used a large number of pundits in different languages for translation the work of God into all the principle languages of India. His original plan was to get the Bible printed in Bengali and Hindustani before he died. For the Mission family of Serampore, February 7, 1801 dawned as the most satisfying day because finally, the last sheet of the Bengali New Testament was printed. The Bible began to be translated in different Indian languages. Carey and his assistants translated the Bible, in whole or part into more than thirty five languages, which opened the printed word to India's millions.

On 11 March 1812, a fire in the print shop caused £10,000 in damages and a lot of valuable work lost. Oriental languages, Greek, Hebrew and English types blazed to ashes, together with proofs, printed sheets and a thousand copies of the first sheets of Henry Martin's 'Hindustani New Testament' which had just been printed. Amongst the losses were many irreplaceable manuscripts, including much of Carey's translation of Sanskrit lit-

erature and a polyglot dictionary of Sanskrit and related languages, which would have been a seminal philological work had it been completed. However, the press itself and the punches were saved, and the mission was able to continue printing in six months. In Carey's lifetime, the mission printed and distributed the Bible in whole or part in 44 languages and dialects.

Carey's strength lies in envisioning the need and to go after fulfilling that need. He recognized the fact that India is populated by different linguistic groups and that each of these groups needs to be given the translation of the Bible in their own tongue. He also realized that the Indian vernaculars were yet to be fully developed as vehicles of learning. The Protestant missionary's assumptions demanded that the Bible be made available in the vernacular and by preaching his bible in so many vernacular languages, Carey has actually introduced the wonders of printing and publishing in many of these, for the first time in their history.

He also wrote a Bengal Grammar Book and book entitled 'Colloquies' which gives a living picture of the manners and notions of the people of Bengal. He translated Indian classics into English, and publishing grammars and dictionaries, unlocking the rich treasures of the various languages and dialects. And, he published magazines in Bengali and English as well.

William Carey is credited with establishing the first newspaper that was ever printed in any Oriental language, because he believed that "above all forms of truth and faith, Christianity

seeks free discussion.” His English-language journal, Friend of India, was the force that gave birth to the social-reform movement in India in the first half of the nineteenth century.

VI. HIS TROUBLES:

William Carey’s son Peter, died of dysentery soon after his arrival in India, which, along with other causes of stress, resulted in Dorothy suffering a nervous breakdown from which she never recovered.

Carey had a difficult life and as John Clark Marshman observed, “The arduous biblical and literary labours in which Carey had been engaged in, since his arrival at Serampore for nearly 8 years previous were prosecuted, with an insane wife, frequently in the most distressing excitement, in his next room” Due to her debilitating mental breakdown, she had long since ceased to be an able member of the mission, and her condition was an additional burden.

Several friends and colleagues had urged William to commit Dorothy to an asylum. But he recoiled at the thought of the treatment she might receive in such a place and took the responsibility to keep her within the family home, even though the children were exposed to her rages, till she died in 1807. In 1808 Carey re-married and his new wife Charlotte Rhumohr, a Danish member of his Church was Carey's intellectual equal. They were married for 13 years until her death.

Internal dissent and resentment was also growing within the Missionary Society as its numbers grew, the older missionaries died, and they were replaced by less experienced men. Besides, new missionaries who arrived were not willing to live in the “communal fashion” and went so far as to demand "a separate house, stable and servants" as they were unused to the rigorous work ethic of Carey, Ward, and Marshman.

This is only a short recall of some of the numerous troubles through which William Carey had to pass through. Without his proverbial stubbornness and ‘never say die’ spirit his Mission and work would have floundered.

Carey had to undergo many such tribulations, both physical and mental, but till the end of his life, he was faithful in his calling in serving the people of India.

VII. REFORMS:

In the early 1990s the Council of Serampore College published a collection of papers in honour of the bicentenary of Carey’s arrival in India. It is titled Carey’s Obligation and India’s Renaissance. It speaks of Carey’s impact in terms of social reform, education and broad cultural modernization. Let us go over a few of his reforms .

Carey was horrified to learn and see that infants were sometimes sacrificed, to fulfill vows taken by their mothers. They could be drowned in the holy river or exposed to the elements. He protested against this to the Governor General,

Lord Wellesley, who asked him to produce a report and infanticide was abolished in 1802.

Another horrendous practice, known as 'ghat murders' took place, whereby the sick and dying were carried to the banks of holy rivers and left to die, without any support. In fact, prayers were sent to God to take them to heaven as early as possible and sometimes, even murders were committed as a kind of 'mercy killing' to speed the process. Carey protested against this in 1803 and raised its profile in his journal 'Friend of India'. The Serampore team rescued 'ghat victims', who they saw and nursed back to health, and drew the attention of the government to the practice.

Another shocking ritual related to lepers, who were abhorred in almost all societies (remember the Bible!), but in India of the early 19th century, it could take virulent forms. He was the first to campaign for humane treatment of India's leprosy victims because he believed that God's love extends to even leprosy patients: so they should be cared for. Before then, lepers were often buried or burned alive, because of the belief that a violent death purified the body on its way to reincarnation, into a new healthy existence.

He also focused his attention on the natural world, with a particular fondness for horticulture. Again, Carey's ability to get into details, to observe and record absolutely everything, ensured that his passion for gardening exceeded the boundaries of any normal 'hobby'. Wherever he went, Carey

turned a bit of land into an earthly paradise. In Serampore, he was to create a 'Botanical Park' that was unique in southern Asia for more than half a century.

Carey was aghast that India, one of the most fertile countries in the world, had been allowed to become an uncultivated jungle abandoned to wild beasts and serpents. Therefore, he carried out a systematic survey of agriculture and campaigned for agriculture reform. He introduced the Linnean system of plant organizations and published the first science texts in India. He did this because he believed that nature is declared "good" by its Creator.

Carey introduced the idea of the 'savings banks' to India, to fight the all-pervasive social evil of usury: the lending of money at excessive interest. He believed that God, being righteous, hated this practice which made investment, industry, commerce, and economic development impossible. In a rudimentary way, William Carey started the practice of collecting small amounts from peasants, so that they could be lent back some money when they had any dire need. One could go on endlessly citing more reforms that this missionary took up, but we have to conclude somewhere.

VIII. THE END

Andrew Fuller, who had been Secretary of the Society in England, died in 1815, and his successor, John Dyer, was a bureau-

crat, who attempted to reorganise the Society along business lines and manage every detail of the Serampore Mission from England. Their differences proved to be irreconcilable, and Carey formally severed ties with the Missionary Society he had founded, leaving the Mission property and moving onto the college grounds, to live a quiet life, until his death in 1834: revising his Bengali Bible, preaching, and teaching students. The couch on which he died, on 9 June 1834, is now housed at Regent's Park College, the Baptist hall of the University of Oxford.

Alexander Duff went to meet him as he lay on his death bed and he spent some time talking chiefly about Carey's missionary life, till at length the dying man whispered, "Pray". Duff knelt down and prayed, and then said "Goodbye". As he passed from the room, he thought he heard a feeble voice pronouncing his name, and, turning, he found that he was recalled. He stepped back accordingly; he heard Carey speaking with a gracious solemnity: "Dr Duff, you have been speaking about Dr. Carey. When I am gone, say nothing about Dr. Carey: speak only about his Saviour. Duff went away rebuked and awed, with a lesson in his heart that he never forgot.

But finally, thinking of Carey's disposition, I think he would end with these words: "Keep going" Here is what the Mission wrote to their British supporters. "Farewell....you have all need of Patience. The expense of the Mission is great, and success has

been long delayed, but in due season you shall reap, if you faint not. We are full of expectation, we are full of hope.”

It would be unfair to conclude without a mention of a remarkable proposal made by William Ward to establish a Society in Calcutta (or London) to preserve the best of the Hindu culture, including statues of the gods. This shows that the missionaries were not “crude iconoclasts”. They were able to engage with other cultures, disagree with them, and yet at the same time find good in such cultures: to seek to respect and preserve their best of them.

Let me close with one of his most famous quotations: “Expect great things from God: attempt great things for God”.

Amen.

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