

ALEXANDER DUFF: VISIONARY & EDUCATIONIST

ALEXANDER DUFF MEMORIAL LECTURE 2014

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1. In his Preface to George Smith's 'The Life of Alexander Duff' that was published in 1879, William M Taylor had predicted that Alexander Duff would "go down to posterity", ²along with William Burns and David Livingstone, as together constituting the three mighties of the noble band of Scottish worthies, who have given lustre to the annals of our century. This was written nearly 150 years ago, when Britannia Ruled the Waves and it was a bounden duty of every Missionary to save more souls.

2. Little did young Alexander Duff realise what his destiny was, when he arrived in Kolkata on 27th May in 1830, after two unnerving ship-wrecks. A superstitious person would have taken these as 'omens' and returned home, but then, India would have lost a great educationist. He began his Mission by circumventing the only order that the Church had enjoined, i.e., not open a Mission in Kolkata. The East India Company's ambivalence, and open undisguised intolerance, towards Missionaries had driven William Carey and J C Marshman to the protec-

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² Smith, George (1879) *The Life of Alexander Duff*, vol. I, Classic Reprint Series, Forgotten Books (2013), London

tion of the little Danish enclave at Serampore, and even Bishop Middleton's venture was far outside Kolkata.

3. Kolkata in 19th Century, was considered as the Metropolis of British Empire in the southern half of Asia & it was also then the greatest city of the English in the East. This is where Duff decided to strike roots, much in the same manner in which Saint Peter had received the divine order: to build his Church in Rome. Nowhere else, but in Rome.³ (Quo Vadis)

4. Duff took the first major step when he decided to open a school for high caste Brahman youth in July, 1830, and this was the first one to teach in English. Prior to him, missionaries had concentrated on what is called the lower strata of society hoping that those who had lesser linkages with mainstream India would be attracted toward the message, salvation of the soul but Alexander Duff was different and within one year the school had become famous with some 300 pupils in attendance. It was satisfaction to him that four men of the highest cast took baptism and all of them became important figures in the Indian church in the years to come.

5. While browsing through the archival copies of the Calcutta Gazette of 1820s and 1830s (DasGupta, 1920) , I came across what contemporary newspapers had to report on the 4th of October, 1830, "The Managers of the Anglo-Indian College having heard that several of the Students are in the habit of attending Societies at which Political and Religious discussions are held,

³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Quo_vadis%3F

think it necessary to announce their strong disapprobation of the practice, and they prohibit its continuance Any Student being present at such a Society after the promulgation of this order, will incur their serious displeasure.”⁴

6. I have mentioned before, the ambivalent or often antagonistic attitude of the Company’s servants, who were more interested in profits than piety and felt that missionaries would stir up only problems, if they preach among orthodox Indians. The moot point is not about preaching, it is about introduction of Western advances in the Sciences and in the Arts, through the medium of a language, which though controversial, achieved the desired results. This was to link the students of India with the best knowledge systems of other parts of the world. It will now be clear as to why the new College was opposed with its students focussing on issues that could annoy the ruling establishment. The Calcutta Gazette reported in October 1830 that “the support and countenance of Government have, to a certain extent being given to this institution, and the Managers may have felt that the state things which arose, and to which their order referred was such as, in some degree, not merely to compromise their own responsibility, but the supposed preponderance of higher authority.”⁵

7. “In this venture, it was no one else but the great Indian reformer and pioneer of English education in Bengal, Raja Ram-mohun Roy, who came forward to help Duff set up his English

⁴Dasgupta. Anil Chandra (ed.) (1960) , *The Days of John Company: Selections from Calcutta Gazette, 1824-1832* xxxvii, Bengal Govt. Press Club, Calcutta
55- ibid

School. Before he left for England in 1830, he secured the first house for him and also the first batch of half a dozen students.” This was the small hall of the Brumho Sabha on the Chitpore Road, for which he had been paying for the five Brahman owners five pounds a month of rental. Pointing to a Punkha suspended from the roof, Rammohun said with a smile, ‘I leave you that as a legacy’....(Mitra,1997)

8 On the date of the opening of the School (13th July, 1830), Rammohun Roy was present to explain difficulties to remove the prejudice against reading the Bible. He told his young countrymen that they were mistaken. “Christians, like Dr. Horace Hayman Wilson, have studied the Hindu Shastras, and you know that he has not become a Hindu. I myself have read all the Koran again and again, and has that made me a Musalman? Nay, I have studied the whole Bible, and you know I am not a Christian. Why, then, do you fear to read it? Read it and judge for yourselves”. (Mitra)

“For the next month, the Hindu reformer visited the school at ten for the Bible lessons, till he left for England. His eldest son Radhaprasad Roy continued to encourage the boys by his presence, and their teacher by his kindly counsel.

9. But how did the upper echelons of Indian society react to Alexander Duff’s school attracting so many students from communities that had held the white men as the mlechha, the impure foreigner? Here is another interesting report from the newspapers (Dasgupta). “The Natives who have placed their

children in this Seminary, have, we believe, done so on the bona fide stipulation that the courses of instruction were not to include anything that would in the slightest degree, interfere with their own religious system. We have then one clear, consistent, imperative task before us, to teach the Hindu youth the elements of European knowledge and Science and nothing more. Now, no one will deny that this was gaining an immense advantage. All at once, however, according to the other side, an alarm was spread. We all know how very prominent a feature of the native character suspicion is and how very apt natives are to connect by some refinement of prejudicial concatenation, matters in them perfectly distinct.” (Dasgupta)

10. Another report in the Calcutta Gazette mentions about the transparency of the first English Missionary venture of consequences in India (DasGupta). “The advocates of the Christian predilections distinctly avow that we had no intention of attacking or reviling Hindooism, therefore the Native parents and guardians are quite mistaken on that head. We intended, for we considered it as our sacred and imperative duty so to do, to explain the evidences of our religion, and to let these work their own effect and the Managers, though they were willing to hear us have, by an exertion of undue authority prevented the students from attending our predilections.” (Dasgupta)

11. There were some difficulties, however, in introducing modern medical practices on orthodox Indians, who preferred to be examined either by ‘Hakeems’ if they were Muslims or the

'Baidyas' caste if they were upper caste Hindus. This interesting report of August 1931 gives us a picture of the times. (Dasgupta) "We observe by the Native Papers, that a Native Medical Society has been instituted. The object of it appears to be a laudable one, viz., the protection of the community, as far as it may be within the power of the Association, from quacks and ignorant pretenders, who, it is well known, do incalculable mischief in Calcutta. The Society, it would seem, is composed of Native Doctors properly so called, men of education and experience in Native MateriaMedica and practice of Physic, who consider it expedient to decline undertaking any case, where medicine had been administered to the patient 'by any practitioner of another caste'- that is to say, not belonging to the Baidya caste, who would appear to be the only legitimate Native Doctors. How far such an Institution may be competent to correct the evil it seems intended to remedy, we are not prepared to say, since it is possible, that out of the Baidya caste, there may be men of talent and skill in the healing art, who may view the matter as one taken up more in a spirit of Corporation than of genuine reform." (Dasgupta)

12. To understand Alexander Duff's strategy, Michael Seward (Seward,1839)⁶ has given three-pronged approach on education, namely,

- a) insisting on a high standard;
- b) emphasising on the international language and
- c) a focussed methodology.

⁶ Seward, Micheal (1839) The Missionary Strategy of Alexander Duff (1830-40), Church History Study Group, Tyndale Fellowship

13. Where the first was concerned, i.e, setting a high standard, Duff's first radical suggestion was "To lay the foundation of a system of education which might ultimately embrace all the branches ordinarily taught in the higher schools and colleges of Christian Europe". (Saward) Writing in March 1833 in the Calcutta Christian Observer, a periodical which he edited, Duff himself advocated both a higher and a lower education. "God has frequently smiled on the diligent, prayerful training of the young: let therefore children receive the rudiments, and youth the higher principles of useful instruction in the way which experience may prove best adapted to secure the desired end".⁷

14. In his book *India and Indian Missions*,⁸ published in 1839, he compared 'widespread primary education for the many' with 'advanced education for the few' and decided that, in the long term, the latter would prove more valuable. Where the former was concerned, he reminded his readers that "generally, nothing at all beyond the artificial or mechanical parts of the acquisition was gained" (Duff, 1839). Such methods he condemned as very inadequate.

15. To summarize his position, he pointed out that "In the present conditions of the people of India, one central seminary, of a higher grade, with its attendant retinue of preparatory

⁷ G.Smith, *Alexander Duff (1879)*, Vol I, P.110 & (Mentioned in the main text) *Calcutta Christian Observer*, March 1833, pp 103f

⁸The *Missionary Register*, September 1836, p 400 & A. Duff, *India and Indian Missions* (1839), pp 294

gymnasia, would do more towards vitally impressing the intellect and heart of the people, and consequently towards furthering the great cause of national regeneration, than any number of elementary schools, however indefinitely multiplied". (Saward)

16. On the second strategy, i.e, language, we may recall that Indians at higher levels were being taught in Persian and official support was given to study this language. In addition, the study of Arabic and Sanskrit was encouraged and a large number of books in the latter were officially published. In point of fact, the government was slow to realize that the Indian intelligentsia wanted to learn English – this is illustrated by the speed with which English books were sold in Calcutta. But, as we have seen, the official policy was that one of the Oriental languages should be used in education.

17. Duff at once recognised the folly of this and so from the start, he taught in English. He, however, insisted that all his pupils should be able to read and write in their own vernacular – Bengali. But for the official language of education, he felt English to be essential. In this, he was supported by Charles Trevelyan, by Lord Macaulay, and eventually by the Governor General himself, Lord Bentinck. Men such as these felt that for budding Indian renaissance to blossom, it must be grounded in a language which could boast a great literature. As a missionary, Alexander Duff hoped that English would open the door to the whole of western culture with its underlying Christian sym-

pathies. For five years the battle raged in India between the Orientalists and the Anglicists. Then, in 1835, Lord Bentinck announced that the official policy was to be changed – the Anglicists had won the battle.

18. Where the third strategy was concerned, i.e, 'method of education', Duff's plan was simple enough. He planned to give a good education in secular subjects, but to use his biographer's words, "Inseparable combination with the Christian faith and religion was to be not merely the foundation upon which the superstructure was to be reared, but the animating spirit which was to pervade and hallow all". (Saward) His plan was received with disapproval by both British residents and missionaries in Calcutta. His first students were suspicious that the reading of the Christian Scriptures might automatically make them Christians. Before long, these difficulties were overcome and in a short time, this method of instruction was accepted by the Hindu pupils. But Duff still had to convince the Christian public of both India and Britain that this was a wise policy to adopt. He refers to the admission by the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge that "The first place in every system of national education is due to that which teaches a man his duty to God and to his neighbour". (Calcutta Christian Observer)

19. To understand a man with a mission is often a complex exercise and history bestows virtues only on the prevailing mind-set and on contemporary systems, thereby judging the past rather harshly with the values of the present. This viewpoint of-

ten belittles many past contributions and condemns the mind-sets of earlier periods as archaic, imperial, over-zealous or retrograde, with retrospective effect. Academic analysis enjoins, however, a dispassionate approach for the full flowering of the human mind; so that much more can be accomplished in future.

20. To dismiss Duff as just a Christian missionary will thus be quite unfair. After all, if he had taken one positive steps for the effective spread of English education and modern knowledge in India; long before the ruling powers took up this task, we would miss a vital link in the history of India's enlightenment. Let me conclude by stating what Alexander Duff believed was the purpose of his toil: "The grand object of education is that it ought constantly to avow the moral and intellectual regeneration of the universal mind, in the speediest and most effectual manner, to reach and vitally impress the entire body of the people of Hindoostan" (Saward)

Suggested Readings:

- I. Smith, George (1879) ,The Life of Alexander Duff , Vol.II, Internet Archival Copy
- II. Mitra, SarojaMohana (1997) , The Golden Book of Raja RamMohun Roy, Supplementary Notes:, University of Michigan
- III. Sastri, Sivanath, ed (1933) The story of rammohun Roy's life. Pp 26, Calcutta