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A table of contents for *The Baptist Quarterly* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_bq_01.php

The Serampore Missionaries as Educationists 1794-1824

THE Serampore missionaries' work for elementary education in Bengal falls into two main phases. The first begins with Carey's founding of a school at Madnabati in North Bengal in 1794, in which the "3Rs" and the Christian religion were taught. After 1800, when he joined Marshman and Ward at Serampore, more schools on the same pattern were founded at Serampore itself and at a few other places, such as Jessore and Katwa. After 1810 the system was reorganised on the monitorial system, which had recently become very popular in England; its main principle involved the senior boys teaching their juniors. This enabled the network of schools to be greatly extended, and in 1816 Marshman wrote *Hints Relative to Native Schools* to obtain public support, as a result of which over 100 schools were in existence by the following year. Simultaneously the open Christian religious teaching of the earlier phase, which included the Bible, tracts and hymns, gave way to Christian ethics. Textbooks were prepared, on ethics, history, geography, astronomy and science, consisting of short sentences which were dictated to the pupils by the monitors, after the completion of the preliminary course in reading, writing and arithmetic. The sentences were written down and learnt by heart. The schools were mostly discontinued due to lack of funds in 1824.

A thought-provoking article by Mr. G. E. Smith appeared in the BAPTIST QUARTERLY for July 1964, entitled "Patterns of Missionary Education: the Baptist India Mission, 1794-1824". In it he argued that the educational programme of the Serampore Trio was at first based on the Moravian pattern, and that the Lancasterian system which replaced this, including mere ethical as opposed to Christian religious teaching, was fundamentally a retrograde step. In fact it would seem that the Trio were influenced by eighteenth-century English, and especially Dissenting, educational practice much more than by the Moravians, and it could well be argued that the Christian religious teaching of the earlier phase was inappropriate in a plan to provide mass education to a predominantly non-Christian population.

Mr. Smith notes the emphasis in the early years of the Trio's educational work on religious teaching in their schools; he quotes (p. 296) Carey's letter from Madnabati (1798) in which he wrote "Our school now consists of 21 children who every day write and read to us some portion of the Scriptures, join us in the morning worship, sing hymns very pleasantly, and improve considerably in writing and

accompts",¹ and goes on to argue that this was essentially the Moravian pattern. It would seem unnecessary to look to so exotic a source, however, as it was also basically the pattern of elementary education in eighteenth-century England. Carey's father and grandfather were masters of an Anglican charity school in his home village of Paulerspury, which had been founded in 1720-6 by two local gentry, and in this school he himself received his elementary education.² The curriculum was the "3Rs" and the Church catechism, and the boys and master were expected to attend church regularly together.³ The Madnabati pattern was evidently a transplantation of this to Indian soil, with minor Dissenting modifications. Marshman was also accustomed to it, for it prevailed at the charity school run by Broadmead Baptist Church, Bristol, to which he was appointed master in 1794.⁴ Indeed religious teaching was an essential component of all English eighteenth-century elementary education; it was taught even when arithmetic and writing were sometimes omitted from the syllabus.⁵

There is positive evidence also that the Sunday School movement, which developed strongly in England after 1780, influenced the Serampore missionaries. Shortly before he sailed for India, early in 1799, Ward worked for a few weeks with Samuel Pearce, who had founded a Sunday school to give some elementary education to the poor of Birmingham.⁶ It was enlarged in 1806 to admit 600 children, who were given religious instruction and taught reading, writing and—on a weekday evening, to soothe Sabbatarian qualms—arithmetic.⁷ Ward must have seen this school on his visit, and in September 1809 he received a fresh report of it by letter,⁸ which inspired the Serampore missionaries to found the "Benevolent Institution" for the nominally Roman Catholic "Portuguese" children of Calcutta. The monitorial system was introduced in 1811, and it developed as one of the most successful of their educational enterprises.

Mr. Smith also attributes Marshman's decision to open an English boarding-school for fee-paying pupils at Serampore (1800) to the Moravian example (p. 299). But here again, there are plenty of precedents in eighteenth-century England; this was a common practice of Dissenting ministers who wanted to augment their slender salaries, and several Dissenting Academies had started in this way.⁹ What is more, Marshman had himself done precisely this in Bristol, with the permission of the Broadmead Church. His "private seminary" there "rose rapidly in public estimation, and placed him at once in circumstances of independence."¹⁰ He was able to repeat this success in his school at Serampore, which became financially "the mainstay of the mission".¹¹

Mr. Smith also sees Moravian influence in the Serampore emphasis on the vernacular (pp. 298-9). But again, one may also look to English Dissenters; it was the Dissenting Academies which led the way during the eighteenth century to the substitution of the vernacular—i.e. English—for the traditional Latin as the teaching medium in institutions of secondary and higher education,¹² and from them

emanated a steady stream of English dictionaries, grammars and text-books;¹³ another interesting parallel to the work of the Serampore missionaries in Bengali. A Baptist teacher, Nathan Bailey, was responsible for the first English dictionary (1721),¹⁴ foreshadowing Carey's efforts for Bengali. Another characteristic of Serampore education, especially after 1816, was the wide curriculum, including modern subjects such as history, geography and science. In this also they followed English Dissenters, who had found the traditional emphasis on the Greek and Latin classics totally inadequate for their bourgeois clientèle and pioneered the introduction of modern subjects as an integral part of the curriculum.¹⁵ Serampore College represents to a large extent the revival on Indian soil of the Dissenting Academy, with its emphasis on the vernacular, its inclusion of arts, science and theology, and its refusal to impose any religious tests on the students.

All these practices and emphases were no doubt shared by the Moravians—indeed Comenius influenced the Puritan educationalists of the mid-seventeenth century¹⁶—and as Mr. Smith has shown, the Serampore missionaries were undoubtedly inspired by their example, but, it would seem, in a general way rather than particularly in their educational programme. He has not in fact been able to indicate with any precision how the Moravians influenced this side of their activities, although he disagrees with Dr. Oussoren's conclusion that no such evidence exists (p. 297). But in the absence of such evidence, it is surely more reasonable to believe that the strongest influence was that of the educational practices of their native land, and especially of the schools of which they had had some personal experience.

Mr. Smith remarks that "in the earlier phase under Moravian influence Christian teaching was predominant, and in the latter phase under Lancasterian method the emphasis was primarily on factual instruction" (p. 309), and he regrets that "the distinctively Christian witness was lost" in the later phase (p. 308). This raises the important question of whether, and to what extent, direct Christian religious teaching is appropriate in schools for non-Christian children, which is what the vast majority of the pupils in the Serampore schools were. Mr. Smith seems to underestimate the problems arising from that fundamental fact; how could "the concept of the school as part of a Christian community" be effectively fitted into the Bengali scene at the beginning of the nineteenth century—or indeed, in the middle of the twentieth? The early pattern must have involved children "learning" Christianity by rote, with little real understanding, simply because they were told to do so by the missionary, and putting up with it in order simultaneously to acquire literacy. A few at least did; others who ventured into the schools objected, and removed themselves,¹⁷ but the vast majority of course never went near the schools—at least until the great expansion took place under the different plan of 1816. It is difficult to see wherein lay the advantage of the early pattern, either from the

educational or the evangelistic point of view; there were virtually no conversions of children in the schools,¹⁸ and its basis was as authoritarian as that of the latter plan, which Mr. Smith criticizes on that account. There is in any case the question of whether missionaries are ethically justified in compelling the pupils in their schools to accept Christian religious instruction. On the other hand, it could well be argued that the later plan was not only likely to be more acceptable to the people, but was better designed for preparing the children to understand direct Christian teaching, as Marshman himself believed.¹⁹ Dr. K. P. Sen Gupta, in a recent study, has commented that the Bengalis rarely understood the Christian message as presented through the missionaries' tracts and preaching, "as they lived in a wholly different world of thoughts and ideas".²⁰

There is no doubt that, although open Christian teaching disappears under the new plan, the ethics which replaced it were still thoroughly Christian; sentences in the copy-books which the children had to learn included "The eye of God is in every place beholding both the evil and the good"; "God has appointed all men once to die and after that to receive judgement", and many others of a similar tendency.²¹ Indeed the basis was still so evidently Christian, as Dr. Potts has remarked,²² as to be a likely cause of the difficulties which the scheme encountered; particularly the unwillingness of some of the teachers to co-operate. Mr. Smith is unsympathetic to Marshman's attempt to make the scheme "teacher-proof", by paying them—in the presence of their pupils—only if they ensured that their pupils had actually written down and could recite from memory the prescribed amount from the textbooks each month. He rightly recognizes that this method was degrading for the teachers, but the choice before Marshman was either to use some form of compulsion, or to dilute further the Christian content of the curriculum in an attempt to make it more acceptable to them. Again the basic question remains, of how to make Christian teaching palatable to a non-Christian population; whatever may be the right answer, the early pattern of Serampore education clearly would not do; the later pattern was, comparatively, a step in the right direction.

Mr. Smith in any case seems to have misunderstood the purpose of the "*Plan for the Education of the Children of Converted Natives, or Youths who have lost cast.*" As the title suggests, this was not a plan for general elementary education; the key word is "converted". With its *Christian* pupils, the school could indeed be regarded as part of the life of the Christian community. The plan was an early expression of the wish to give a liberal education of a high standard to Christian youth, on whom, as the missionaries realized, the main responsibility for the conversion of India would fall. Their desire was fulfilled with the founding of Serampore College in 1818, but here again the Trio made a clear distinction between the Christian students, who were to study divinity and attend College worship, and the non-Christians, who should not "*be constrained to do a single*

act as the condition of their enjoying the benefits of this institution, to the doing of which [they] attach any idea of moral evil";²³ they lived in the town and were clearly not regarded as part of the Christian community.

In 1818 an attempt was made to graft the Serampore system on to the indigenous schools, in which the "3Rs" were taught, by inducing their masters to use the Serampore textbooks,²⁴ thus greatly diversifying their curriculum and giving an incentive to their pupils to stay longer at school. Mr. Smith briefly dismisses this as an "unsatisfactory attempt" (p. 306), and indeed the whole scheme was wound up six years later largely, as he has noted, because the missionaries were unable to finance it any longer.²⁵ The missionaries should however be given credit for realizing that any plan to bring literacy and modern knowledge, whether or not on a Christian pattern, on a mass scale to the people of Bengal could well use the existing network of village schools as its basis. Robert May, an L.M.S. missionary who started some successful vernacular elementary schools around Chinsura (a few miles north of Serampore) in 1814 did just this, and William Adam, in a famous series of Reports commissioned by the Government, recommended in 1838 the improvement of the indigenous schools rather than the foundation of new schools as the best method of mass elementary education. This brings us to the question which Mr. Smith discusses at the end of his article (pp. 308-10), as to how far missionaries should concern themselves with activities not directly connected with the building-up of a church, and whether "the strategy of missionary education took a wrong turning about 1810, starting along a road which more than a century's journey is showing to be a humanitarian cul-de-sac?" It is certainly true, as he notes, that the Serampore missionaries' belief that modern Western learning would in itself undermine Hinduism proved greatly exaggerated; the phenomenon of Ram Mohun Roy, who mastered Western learning but still remained basically a Hindu, was soon to cause them to have second thoughts on the subject themselves,²⁶ and as early as the 1840's "Young Bengal"—the first generation of Bengalis who had had a thorough Western education—were turning Western philosophy and science against Christianity.²⁷ But if education did not necessarily prove to be a "praeparatio evangelica" in the fullest sense, it did at least produce responsible and thoughtful individuals who questioned traditional customs and rejected those that appeared inhuman and degrading. Its fruits were in innumerable cases a fresh love for truth, justice and compassion, which has effectively changed Indian society for the better; less than the full and conscious acceptance of Jesus Christ, but it can surely not simply be dismissed as a "cul-de-sac". Nor would Marshman and his colleagues have done so; they would certainly have been disappointed had they realised that 150 years after their time India would still be overwhelmingly non-Christian, but as Christians they were also humanitarians, and they would have rejoiced to see these fruits of

Christian endeavour; indeed they welcomed the first signs of the new spirit, which were appearing before the end of their lives. In any case their Christian compassion could hardly have allowed them to do nothing for education when the indigenous schools were so inadequate and the Government had hardly begun to realize its responsibility—especially as Marshman in particular found a real vocation in teaching. "The mere view of an instance of diligence and improvement in a child", he wrote, "will raise such sensations of pleasure in my mind, as quite repay the toil."²⁸ The pioneering work of the missionaries in education was also valuable in arousing public opinion on the subject, and in indicating possible lines of advance to the Government. Inasmuch as missionary educational activities are regarded as a means of conversion, they may indeed be adjudged to have failed in India, but this is not their only possible justification, as the missionaries themselves realized.

NOTES

- ¹ *Periodical Accounts of the Baptist Missionary Society*, 1798, p. 436.
- ² S. P. Carey, *William Carey*, 8th Edn., London 1934, pp. 16-21.
- ³ *Report of Commissioners for Inquiring into Charities*, Vol. XII, 1826, pp. 220-1.
- ⁴ *Broadmead Baptist Church Minutes*, 20 May 1794; J. C. Marshman, *The Life and Times of Carey, Marshman and Ward*, Vol I, p. 106; *State of the Dissenting Charity School*, Bristol, 1788.
- ⁵ H. C. Barnard, *A History of English Education from 1760*, 2nd Edn., London 1961, pp. 5-6.
- ⁶ S. Stennett, *Memoir of William Ward*, London 1825, pp. 58-9.
- ⁷ J. Ivimey, *A History of the English Baptists*, Vol. IV, London 1830, p. 543; "Cannon Street Sunday Schools—An Historical Sketch, 1795-1895", in *Mount Zion Messenger*, Birmingham, July 1895.
- ⁸ BMS MS—Ward's *Journal*, 24 Sept. 1809.
- ⁹ H. MacLachlan, *English Education under the Test Acts*, Manchester 1931, p. 17; I. Parker, *Dissenting Academies in England*, Cambridge 1914, pp. 57 ff.
- ¹⁰ *Friend of India*, 14 Dec. 1837.
- ¹¹ J. C. Marshman, *op. cit.*, I, p. 131.
- ¹² Parker, *op. cit.*, p. 76; W. T. Whitley, "The Contribution of Non-conformity to Education until the Victorian Era" in *Educational Record*, June 1915.
- ¹³ *Ibid*; MacLachlan. *op. cit.*, pp. 20-2.
- ¹⁴ *DNB*.
- ¹⁵ MacLachlan, *op. cit.*, pp. 27 ff; Parker *op. cit.*, p. 102.
- ¹⁶ T. L. Jarman, *Landmarks in the History of Education*, London 1951, p. 191.
- ¹⁷ *Periodical Accounts* 1800, p. 114; 1813, p. 170.
- ¹⁸ BMS MS—Leonard to BMS, 23 May 1838.
- ¹⁹ *Third Report of the Institution for the Support and Encouragement of Native Schools*, Serampore 1820, p. 35.
- ²⁰ K. P. Sen Gupta, *The Christian Missionaries in Bengal, 1793-1833*, an unpublished Ph.D. Thesis (London 1966), p. 130.
- ²¹ *Third Report of Native Schools*, pp. 24-7.

(Concluded on p. 312)