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A table of contents for *Indian Journal of Theology* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_ijt_01.php

The Missions of the Serampore Trio : An Ecumenical Perspective

K. L. RICHARDSON

And Christ-centred humanism has the best opening of making its impact in this dialogic social existence. This is the cultural mission of christian ecumenism in contemporary society, and more specially in India.¹

This article is a sincere attempt to critically reflect on certain mission of the Serampore Trio in the light of contemporary ecumenical concept of mission. The missionary vision and mission strategies of them were significantly ecumenical both in christian and secular lines even in the nineteenth century itself.

In the early years of nineteenth century, the trio had emerged as a dynamic force of christian mission which spoke of cosmic Christ. William Carey and his team strongly believed that mission was concerned not only to a person but also to his environment. Therefore, we found a wholistic concept of mission in the ministries of Serampore Trio i.e., mission to the total peron in the whole society. Our chief aim in this article is to identify how the missions of the Serampore Baptists reached the nineteenth century Bengal society in a broader and secular ecumenical sensibility. Secular ecumenical missions are understood here as the Christian missions ventured in the total context of people's culture and community.

A. Historical Context of the Serampore Trio :

Though the first christian activity in Bengal began from 1576 by the Jesuits, the total life of Bengalees was not influenced by it. But the mission of Serampore trio had a tremendous impetus on the life of the Bengal society from 1800. William Carey started his ministry in Bengal in 1793 and he had been joined by John Marshman, a school teacher and William Ward, a printer. This partnership was generally called — Serampore Trio who worked unitedly for many years for the upliftment of Bengal society in educational, social and religious environments.

Politically, the Danes settled at Serampore from 1755. Col.

*Rev. K.L. Richardson teaches *History of Christianity* at Bishop's College, Calcutta.

Ole Bie was the Chief Administrator of Serampore town from 1776-1805. In 1777, the Danish settlements of India came into the direct administration of the crown of Denmark and Col. Bie became the crown regent². From the beginning, the mutual trust and right relation had never achieved totally between English and Danes till the Serampore town fell into the hands of British in 1845. The history of Tranquebar Mission or Danish - Halle Mission launched in India in 1706 under the Royal Danish patronage (King Frederick IV of Denmark), vindicates the missionary consciousness and ecumenical consciousness of Danes. Hence the Danes at Serampore were also very visionary, action-oriented and encouraging towards Baptist missions. On the other hand, British authorities did not allow any missionary for propagation in their territory until the 1813 Charter came into force.

Socially, the life of the Bengal society was divided on the basis of castes and their traditional occupations. Intercaste marriages or dining were strictly forbidden. Practice of polygamy was a common factor among Kulins³.

Religio-Culturally, the Hindu beliefs and traditions were part of community life. Durga Puja was the national festival of Bengal and each village had its own deity. Many social evils continued in the society on the basis of religion and culture. The Hindu and Muslim relation was cordial and harmonious⁴.

B. Ecumenical Missions of the Serampore Trio :

The missionaries had encountered the society, religion and various situations to bring out their Christian missions with a new vision and spirit. The ecumenical missions of the Trio are examined in educational, social and religious fields.

1. Educational Missions

All missionaries in India used 'Education' as a key instrument in their missionary work to propagate the gospel. Perhaps, the chief aim of the Serampore Trio might be the same in the beginning of their missions. But later, the concept of education in the minds of Trio became completely different as per the demands of the then Bengal social religious and cultural situation. The reality of the society was largely studied by them. So a global thought of education emerged in their minds to liberate the local society. Innovative schemes of education were initiated and implemented sincerely though they had to struggle in their lives due to various

factors. Contextually, it was the intention of the East India Company to encourage Bengali, Marathi and other regional languages at Fort William College to benefit themselves in commercial enterprises with natives. Whereas the Baptist missionaries launched the educational institutions for the sake of the whole society. Here the society or the peoples must be looked upon as 'Oikoumene', of the whole inhabited world. No denomination, race, class, sex, caste or any other criterion of difference was evolved in the ecumenical ministries of the Baptists.

Carey's efforts in establishing Agri-Horticultural Society in 1820⁵, reflects his vision of cosmos, which is again becoming concerned with the whole of the earth. He was a unique missionary of global mission. Over all, the trio recognized and respected each other's thoughts and deeds. What a model ecumenical trio! Vernacular schools, female schools, Marshman's Educational Plan, William Carey's Professorship at Fort William College and his interaction with other faiths there and the association of Serampore trio with so many educational programmes in Bengal speak for the ecumenical consciousness of the three baptist missionaries.

The linguistic works of the Trio were so remarkable. The grammars, dictionaries, translations, journalism, publications and various literary contributions thus enlightened the whole Bengal⁶. Were all these works necessary for the cause of evangelization? Yes, the modern mission thought of Carey and his men was totally framed on the basis of cultural mission. Unless the culture, the people and the whole society was transformed into a new mind, the whole process of modern mission would be in vain. So the educational missionary efforts of trio made a tremendous impact on the life of the Bengali society in the nineteenth century.

2. *Social Missions*

Carey was a social thinker and social ecumenist. He had undertaken an extensive study of Bengali society and found the social evils prevailed were against the welfare and progress of the society. When the sick and dying people were brought by their relatives to the ghats of the holy rivers to die, the missionaries helped them with medicines. They not only supplied medicines but also published in their periodicals from time to time to let the readers know how to make use of the medicines available. Daniel Potts comments :

¹It was expected that the medical students educated at

Serampore would be predominantly, if not exclusively, Christian. This was not discrimination against Hindus or Muslims but due largely to the former's objections to the practice of human dissection. Nevertheless the trio thought non-Christians would make use of the services of Indian Christian doctors because physicians rise above cast, even the Hindu shastras declaring that whatever forbidden for food or liquid be received as medicine, interferes not with cast in the least degree."⁷

Therefore, it was vindicated that the services of the Baptists influenced William Bentinck, British Governor-General, to launch a medical college at Calcutta in 1835. The primary aim of the college was to give medical knowledge to the natives.

Another social evil was infanticide i.e. throwing the child into the river as an offering. This was strongly criticized by Carey when he heard the report of William Ward on it and he submitted a report to the government saying :

"Memorial on murders committed under the pretence of religion in the hope that they would all be decided criminal acts."⁸

Furthermore, the Serampore Trio fought severely against 'Sati' which was an inhuman act in the name of Hindu religion. With the help of his Pundit Vidyalkar, Carey found no emphasis in the shastras about Sati (9). So the missionaries published articles on Sati for public awareness, and through their letters they appealed their philanthropic European friends to put pressure on British government. Raja Ram Mohan Roy, an eminent Indian leader also joined the movement and voiced against the evil practice of Sati. After long protest by the Serampore Trio and their supporters, the government abolished Sati in 1829. The significant features of the social missions of the trio was giving a new meaning and praxis for modern Christian missions. So Middlebrook describes :

that Carey was a person who sought to change the world in which he lived for the better.¹⁰

3. *Religious Missions*

A greater amount of commitment and unity among the Serampore missionaries made possible their efforts of evangelism in and out of Bengal a success.

The socio-economic and socio-religious situation of India during the end of eighteenth century gives the impression that the country was in dismal condition. Historically, it has been accepted

that Raja Ram Mohan Roy had transformed this century through his dynamic social, intellectual and religious acts. But a careful study of this period reveals that even before him the Serampore Trio started their crusade against illiteracy, ignorance and superstition. Trio established printing presses, started writing and printing in Indian languages, opened schools and launched movements against the prevailing social evils. But they differed from other 'evangelicals' in their approach towards Indian religion and culture. Though they appreciated Indian culture, they criticized the evils of Hindu society and religion¹¹. William Ward wrote a four volume book on Hindus entitled "An Account of the writings, Religion and Manners of the Hindus, including translations from their Principal Works" (1811) in which Hindus, their religion, festivals and their gods were degraded. Situationally, Serampore Trio shifted to exclusivist attitude towards Hinduism. They recognised the fact of interdependency of religion and society among Bengal Hindus. The words of Bishop V.S. Azariah, an eminent Indian ecumenist states clearly the traditional situation of Indian religion and society thus :

"Hinduism has never set forth a body of doctrines which every follower of that religion should more or less accept; it presents a scheme of life. A Hindu will still be a Hindu if only he does not transgress the social restricts of that particular caste in which he was born, to which he belongs through life, and in which he must die. In this limited sense, caste is Hinduism and Hinduism is caste."¹²

In that situation they tried for casteless society by encouraging inter-caste marriages among the converts and arranged united communion services. At Serampore College, Pundits refused to teach the Hindu sacred scriptures to the Sudras. But the Baptists forced them to teach the sacred laws to Sudras. Furthermore, they considered the 'Brahminical thread' as a token of social distinction and so the Brahmins were baptized with their sacred threads. It is noteworthy here that Carey and his associates learned Indian languages and published Ramayana and other Indian ancient works in view of finding facts and social awakening among Hindus. Middlebrook adds :

"Carey translated books in which his intention was to show the weakness of the shastras. So he declared that he had never yet met with a Hindu who was proof against the absurdities of his own shastras."¹³

But strong defender of Hinduism from the attack of Christian missionaries was Ram Mohan Roy. When Serampore trio were using their journals 'Samachar Darpan' and 'Friend of India', to

bring out their comments on Hindu society and religion; Ram Mohan also published (1821) a bi-lingual magazine in Bengali and English entitled 'The Brahminical Magazine' to defend Hinduism. Roy played a significant role in the process of interaction between Serampore trio and the Hindus through his free thinking and valuable writings. He decided to draw the attention of his fellow Hindus to the teachings of Jesus and in 1820, he published the 'Precepts of Jesus'.

Overall, the trio had done their ultimate efforts on the translation of the Holy Bible into numerous Indian languages which was the matchless and permanent gift to the Indian Christians. Daniel Potts remarks :

"The real revolution in nineteenth century Indian society was the result of both the work of missionaries and Indian Hindu reformers.¹⁴"

Evaluation

The three type missions of Trio in the Bengal society during nineteenth century reflects their wider perspective of missions. Their secular enumenical missionary approach had created a marvellous influence on the life of Bengal Hindus. The society, religion and culture were examined and encountered by their educational, social and religious missions. The outcome of these missions was an emergence of a new ecumenical awakening in the Bengal society i.e., Renaissance which produced a lot of openness and secular ecumenism.

1. M.M. Thomas, "Christian Ecumenism for the renewal of Secularism in India", *Ecumenism: hope in action*, edited by Aruna Gnanadasan, Nagpur: N.C.C.I., 1990, p.105.
2. Sunil Kunmar Chatterjee, *William Carey and Serampore, Calcutta: Ghosh Publishing Concern, 1984, p.4.*
3. Kanti Prasanna Sen Gupta, *The Christian Missionaries in Bengal, 1793-1833*, Calcutta: K.L. Mukhopadhyay, 1971, p.23.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 26.
5. Sunil Kumar Chatterjee, *op. cit.*, p. xiv.
6. E. Daniel Pott, *British Baptist Missionaries in India, 1793-1837*, Cambridge: The University Press, 1967, p. 98.
7. *ibid.*, p. 67.
8. *ibid.*, p. 140.
9. *ibid.*, p. 148.
10. J. B. Middlebrook, *William Carey*, London : The Carey Kingsgate Press Limited, 1961 p. 109.
11. Kanti Prasanna Sen Gupta, *Op. cit.*, p. 65.
12. V.S. Azariah, 'India and Christ *In:International Review of Missions*, Vol. XVII, 1928, p. 155.
13. J.B. Middlebrook, *Op. cit.*, p. 53.
14. Daniel Potts, *op. cit.*, p.244.