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‘New Learning’ and Missionary Fashioning of Pedagogy at Serampore in the Early Nineteenth Century

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Abstract:

The Protestant missionaries in Serampore, namely William Carey, Joshua Marshman and William Ward, better known as the Serampore Trio, is said to have rendered great humanitarian service in the form of imparting education to the indigenous masses, and implementing reforms against social evils based on Christian values and ideals. They have served as a great inspiration for the later missionaries working in colonial Bengal and the Bengali intelligentsia of thenineteenth century. They also played an important role in changing the prejudices of the government and moulding public opinion against social abuses. Their ardent dedication to the complete spiritual and social welfare and progress of the locals, with whom they interacted on a daily basis, is laudable. In this paper, I intend to explore how the Serampore Trio were able to impart education in parts of Bengal, juxtaposed with proselytizing ventures undertaken by them to convert individuals over the period of 1793 to 1837.

Keywords: religious pedagogy, new learning, monitorial system, educational reforms, vernacular languages.

William Carey first arrived in North Bengal in 1793 and later in 1800 moved into the Danish settlement of Serampore where he joined the recently-arrived Joshua Marshman and William Ward, and their joint educational efforts flourished until Ward's death in 1823. It reached its zenith in 1816 with the establishment of over a hundred elementary schools along with the Serampore College for higher education. During the period the Serampore Mission broke with the Baptist Missionary Society (BMS) in 1827 due to certain disputes only to reunite in 1837 on grounds of financial difficulties. This year also saw the death of the last survivor Joshua Marshman, the one solely responsible for major educational reforms. It is quite ironic to think that the likes of Carey, Marshman and Ward, who brought about remarkable progress in the field of education in Bengal, hailed from much humbler backgrounds themselves. All three received some basic education at a village elementary school beyond which they largely educated themselves. The trio separately had some experience in teaching which proved beneficial on their arrival in Bengal, among whom Marshman was the most experienced and successful in this field. He worked as the master of the elementary charity school supported by the Broadmead Baptist Church at Bristol where he joined in 1794. This served as a useful experience for his management of the educational assignments at Serampore Mission.

During the eighteenth century, the Protestant Missions en bloc contributed to English education, in the colonies as well as back home. The Dissenting Academies played a major role during the decadence of English education in eighteenth century England and provided the next best available secondary and higher education compared with that of the grammar and public schools as well as the two universities, at Oxford and Cambridge, which were on the decline. These academies, founded by local or denominational societies or individuals who were often ministers who opted for teaching in order to boost their meagre salaries.

Others were theological seminaries run by Protestant missions which provided a broad liberal kind of education. These academies added modern subjects into the curriculum, such as science, history, geography and modern languages unlike the older traditional institutions which concentrated mostly on Latin and Greek classical studies. Antiquated classical languages were rejected in favour of vernacular as the medium of teaching and as a result text books, dictionaries and grammar books written in English were introduced (Laird, *Contribution* 92). In all of this, the Baptists made the smallest ever contribution, yet it cannot be considered as minuscule. In Bengal, Carey wrote books on natural history and botany in order to educate people regarding agricultural advancements. He produced dictionaries and grammars of Bengali and other languages derived from Sanskrit and over thirty Bible translations; he also contributed greatly to the development of Bengali prose, Marshman worked on Mandarin and Ward contributed to the establishment of a press at Serampore, along with the construction of the typefaces of different scripts along with the manufacture of paper. Though their work seemed to be more extensive than intensive as the bulk of their work was not proportional to the quality of the translations which was far from perfect, they were pioneering experiments and their work served as inspiration for later evangelists who were to continue with and finish what these missionaries had begun.

Despite problems with funding, Marshman opened a private school in the pattern of English schools in May 1800, and subsequently, in the same year, a Bengali elementary school constituting 40 boys. With the expansion of missionary operations at Serampore, more schools sprang up at Malda, Katwa, Dinajpur, and Jessore. The curriculum was simple enough—"the three R's" and Christian religious instructions; reading and writing exercises comprised of rhymes, simple catechisms, sections of scriptures. In January 1795, Carey, dissatisfied with this limited educational programme, laid out a preliminary account of 'a plan for erecting two colleges (*chowparries* Bengalee) [...] in each of which we intend to educate twelve lads, six Musselmen, and six Hindoos: a Pundit is to have the charge of them, and they are to be taught the Shanscrit, Bengalee and Persian languages. The Bible is to be introduced there, and perhaps a little philosophy and geography. The time of their education is to be seven years [...]' (Laird, *Contribution* 95). Though the plan was not implemented with immediate effect, it certainly prefigured the foundation of the Serampore College in 1818. A similar idea is propounded in great detail in 'Plan for the Education of the Children of Converted Natives, or youths who have lost cast' in February, 1802 (Smith, *Patterns* 293) as the Trio realized the importance of effective proselytization of the natives with the help of Indian Christians who themselves would have had to be trained for the purpose. This special pattern of education would then include subjects like, vernacular languages, English, science, history and geography, along with divinity.

The monitorial system was first introduced in 1811 in the Trio's successfully run 'Benevolent Institution of the Instruction of Indigent Christian Children', primarily for the poor children of Eurasian origin in Calcutta, though the pupil count rose rapidly since its establishment in 1809-10. The system is said to be developed first by Andrew Bell, who was then a chaplain at Madras and superintendent of the Male Military Asylum since 1789, though opinions are divided on this matter (Keay, *History* 154). This system gained instant popularity despite the inadequacy of substantially qualified teachers in mass elementary education. The success of the monitorial system opened up fresh venues for the extension of elementary schools in various districts of Malda and Katwa in Bengal which were then under the supervision of Richard Mardon, a resident missionary at the Serampore Mission, and Carey's eldest son, William, respectively, and another eight schools were established in the year 1812. It is not surprising that the revived interest in schools on the part of the

missionaries coincided with an increasing thirst of the locals for knowledge and formal education, evident in Mardon's letters of 1810-12, which is flooded with native appeals for the opening of schools (Laird, *Contribution* 96). The former fear of losing caste if they attended mission schools gripped their minds no longer and they realized that they could choose education over Christianity, at any point of time, once they were educated formally. The fact that these mission schools hired non-Christian teachers and monitors, instead of Christian converts, put their hearts at ease and no one objected to the perusal of scriptures as a part of the curriculum.

Hoping for a 'general diffusion of pure scripture knowledge' which would arise as a consequence of the expansion of the curriculum, Marshman, in the 'Review of the Mission at the close of 1812' said, "Were it [the Bible] further accompanied at school with a concise but perspicuous compendium of Geography, and another of General History and Chronology, the minds of the children would be enlightened almost beyond conception'. In 1816, Marshman propagated his reformatory ideas in detail in *Hints relative to Native Schools* in order to gain wide public support for further extension of the number of schools. In 1813, the East India Company relaxed the ban on missionary activities with the sanctioning of the Charter Act. In this clause, the basic statement or condition of the British Government was:

It shall be lawful for the Governor-General-in-Council to direct that out of any surplus [...] a sum of not less than one lac of rupees each year shall be set apart for the revival and improvement of literature and encouragement of the learned natives of India, and for the introduction and promotion of a knowledge of the science among the inhabitants of the British territories in India.

The removal of this significant political obstacle and the new Governor General, Lord Moira, taking a serious interest in the field of vernacular elementary education, made the work of the missionaries much easier—new elementary schools following the monitorial system sprang up in places which were once under the East India Company jurisdiction and beyond the reach of the missionaries. Lord Moira, Marquess of Hastings, then newly appointed Governor General of India, unlike his predecessors gave more preference to vernacular elementary education instead of traditional higher education and personally encouraged missionary efforts in the same field. The *Hints* received great reviews and much appreciation from the Europeans and the Indians. The stages of learning in the curriculum were so devised as offer a modified course. In order to convey 'clear and distinct ideas to the mind', the textbooks accentuated reading, writing, spelling and grammar exercises for everyday practice. The course also included:

Aesop's Fables' and 'Historical Anecdotes', as reading lessons' illustrative of justice, fidelity, probity and humanity'; arithmetic, including 'Jumidaree Papers'—local methods of accountancy, land conveyancing, etc.; a summary of the names and writings of Sanskrit authors; 'Dig Dursuna'—'a miscellaneous collection of Truths and Facts' on history, science, and ethics; a View of the Solar System' with a glossary of technical terms; 'Epitome of geography', including a map; and 'History and Chronology' (Laird, *Contribution* 97).

As was the prevalent system in Lancastrian schools in England until 1839, the 'three R's'—reading, writing and arithmetic, along with religious instruction formed the majority of the curriculum. The Bible, being the only permitted textbook, biblical references permeated the other subjects as well—especially History, Geography and Mathematics where pupils were taught the Biblical knowledge of Creation and calculations based on Biblical data such as the quantity of water in the pots at the wedding at Cana (Laird, *Contribution* 98). Marshman

was not exempted from such Biblical knowledge, yet he devised a revolutionary plan for the elementary educational programme in England as well as for Bengal—his sole concern being the emancipation of the minds of the locals from the oppressive and superstitious clutches of Brahminical learning in order to improve the material condition by teaching them to think and decide on their own. He was sure of the impossibility of the compromise of Hinduism with modern knowledge but later Rammohan Roy's views made them rethink this matter.

This 'new learning' won popular support from both the pupils and their parents. A considerable fraction among whom were Brahmins, and disseminated beyond the boundary of schools, to Marshman's amazement, and the textbooks were perused by children of wealthy Bengali families of Calcutta for their education (Laird, *Contribution* 98). What comes as a surprise is that particularly Christian religious teaching disappears over time only to be replaced by religious-pedagogical texts. Marshman came to understand the need for at least a considerable amount of basic intellectual and moral education was necessary for the extensive dissemination of scriptural knowledge; he assessed 9000 schools which were operating in Bengal which followed the 'three R's' but he observed that 'to expand the minds of the young, or to give them the elements of useful knowledge, is no part of the plan of these schools (Ward, *Letter* 3). Religious education was only limited to teaching 'maxims' such as 'giving a brief idea of the creation of man, the introduction and nature of moral evil, the redemption of mankind, a future judgement, etc' (Brown, *History* vol. 2).

Joshua Marshman propagated this idea of extending the number of schools as he believed in "a wide diffusion of scriptural knowledge which would thereby become possible" and that 'a considerable degree of preliminary intellectual and moral education was desirable to enable them to understand them'. Therefore, in the new plan it was advocated the 'preparation' of the pupils 'for the advantageous study of the sacred scriptures, when they meet with them', which later Moira, Marquess of Hastings, termed as 'praeparatioevangelica' (Laird, *Contribution* 99). Thus, as stated in the Prospectus of the Serampore College, English was to be reserved only for the student who succeeded in learning Sanskrit and vernacular works, and who may then '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' (*Prospectus* 7). An integrated curriculum in theology and pedagogy, strange as it may sound, illuminates the concern shared by the missionaries who planned to educate before proselytizing. The missionaries offered their textbooks to the teachers of the indigenous schools and urged them to teach from them, and the students benefitted from this system with no additional cost to their fees. Yet the conflict remained in the minds of the trio as to whether the execution of a large-scale education plan for the spread of Christianity among the masses would prove a success if religious teaching were openly included. The question of the acceptance of such religious teachings remained despite the decline of popular opposition in some regions in Bengal. Dr. E. Daniel Potts is of opinion that the 'ethical maxims' taught by the missionaries were largely Christian in their essence, yet Marshman's plan seemed the only legitimate way out of the problem (Potts, *Missionaries* 121).

The unreliability of the masters in the elementary schools was called into question as the teachers were not distinguished in terms of either knowledge or character. This was not peculiar to the Serampore schools, as J.C. Marshman, son of Joshua Marshman, in *Review of two pamphlets* (1830) admitted that the 'efficiency of the schools was not in an equal ratio with their extent; the plan was therefore ...contracted'. The missionaries felt that the natives had 'realized that the 'new learning' had undermined their religion' as some teachers refused

to teach their pupils from the books provided by the Mission. Marshman took the step of reforming the teachers' salary based on the number of students he had along with the fact that each of them could recite from their memory or write down portions from the prescribed textbooks which was to be supervised by the monthly visits paid by the Mission superintendents. It is herein that the 'real educational value' is raised, given the extension of the schools along with the curriculum was not proportionate to whatever was absorbed by the students from rote-learning which was based on the monitorial system in England. It was necessary to ascertain that the children of Bengali families living in the towns in the nineteenth century actually understood the revolutionary implication of the contents of the text-books, as according to the missionaries' aim, because the learning that they wanted to impart in Bengal was so much more different than that of the schools in England. Despite the success of this system till the end of 1824, a great number of schools were shut down mainly due to financial reasons. Further in the same year, there was a falling out between the Serampore missionaries and the BMS due to the disinterestedness of the latter regarding educational work and the unwillingness on their behalf to support the Serampore mission financially. With increased pedagogical endeavours, along with the Benevolent Institution and the Serampore College, the Mission decided to dismiss the 'Institution for Native Schools' project, another elementary education venture. With the establishment of the Calcutta School Book Society and Calcutta School Society both of which ventured to improve the impoverished state of indigenous schools by providing cheap textbooks in a pattern similar to that of the Serampore Institution since 1818. The trio laid the foundation for these organisations and turned their interest toward the College.

The Serampore College founded by the trio in 1818 was a venture for the higher education of Indian Christians. It was the second institution in India after Hindu College, which opened in 1817, to provide higher education in modern subjects. The Serampore College also include a separate course in theology for those who planned to be ordained. It would be a prejudice to consider this as a furthering of 'Plan for the Education of the Children of Converted Natives' (1802). One should keep in mind Carey's 1795 plan to provide an extended education to non-Christians without feeling the need 'to corrupt the moral principles implanted in his mind by nature' or 'to teach him to act against his conscience for the sake of advantage' (Laird, *Contribution* 104). What drives our curiosity is the curriculum which shows a shift towards an 'Anglicist' attitude from an 'Orientalist' one. Initially the curriculum comprised 'Eastern Literature and European Science', with a considerable emphasis on Sanskrit and other vernacular languages which included Bengali and Hindi, the former being the medium of teaching. Traditional Indian science was taught along with texts of Western science and literature, which of course were translated into Bengali first. English, on the other hand, was reserved for more progressive students, which would impart a thorough knowledge about the European culture.

The Serampore trio, being pioneers in the field of establishing vernacular languages as the medium for imparting education, constantly felt the necessity to 'naturalise' Western learning on Indian culture by trying to preserve the valuable aspects of Oriental learning to whatever degree possible. There is evidence of the demand for thorough basic education in the vernacular in *Hints—in* Marshman's words 'any hope of imparting efficient instruction...in a language not their own is completely fallacious' (Laird, *Contribution* 105). The trio's take on the English Language was thus limited only those students who performed well in Sanskrit and vernacular languages, who they felt, would '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

(Prospectus 7). Special emphasis is laid on the word ‘thorough’ as the trio disapproved of those pupils who only learnt ‘a light smattering’ of English to procure nothing above clerical jobs in Calcutta instead of its application in greater purposes appropriate to college standards as intended by the missionaries. It was clear to the Serampore trio and the Government that higher education was to be imparted on a traditional basis, and that western learning was to be cleverly grafted through translations, so that the ideas they possessed and the terms in which they expressed them would facilitate the communication of superior ideas. Further, any hope of finding acceptance among natives was possible only through the Christian peoples’ complete immersion in Indian literature and philosophy as any other native. The trio was always aware that the natives regarded Christianity as an ‘alien faith, which would never be accepted unless Indian Christians were as evidently Indian as any of the other communities in the country’. Cultural acceptance, through the ‘policy of engraftment’, was the foremost agenda of the Serampore trio. Indeed their primary missionary purpose was not only the salvation of individual souls, but also the regeneration of society as a whole—intellectually, materially, as well as spiritually. It does not come as a surprise that this curriculum underwent a modification within a decade after its implementation as the number of non-Christian students fell drastically to zero. It is unlikely that the native students would choose missionary colleges for traditional Sanskrit education over the training in orthodox Sanskrit *tols* where they felt they could receive unadulterated classical training or ignore the opportunity of the stipend-paying new Government Sanskrit College in Calcutta established in 1824.

It is only after the appointment of an English teacher in 1829 that the missionaries were able to meet the rapidly increasing demand for English education in the territory and the non-Christian student count increased rapidly by 1832 once English education was given precedence over Sanskrit. When in 1827 Marshman remarked ‘The Hindoo system having now been thoroughly investigated, the whole fabric is found to rest on the most absurd mistakes’, Sanskrit education was pushed to the background only to ‘enable them to read it with ease and make them masters of the grammatical niceties of their own language, which is so clearly linked with the Sungskrita’. This culminated in Governor-General Lord Bentinck’s resolution of March 1835 in which the Court decided to turn its attention—from the Oriental to the Western form of learning while retaining the medium of English—‘In explanation of the little prominence given Sungskrita studies...the Council begged to remark, that it has arisen from their the students having been so closely engaged in the study of English and European science, as to leave them less leisure for their Oriental studies’ (Laird, *Contribution* 106).

After the death of Marshman, the last surviving member of the trio in 1837, the responsibilities moved into the hands of his son John Clarke Marshman, John Mack who joined the College to teach science in 1821 and John Leechman who joined in 1832. *The Friend of India* was restarted as a weekly as an effort of their joint collaboration in 1835 whose pages became the bearers of the news of Serampore’s view on changing government policies. In an article on 21 May, 1835, it articulated the government’s approval to encourage European learning instead of the Oriental and vouched that it would not—‘stopped with the diffusion of English knowledge and literature among the upper ranks; but combine it with a widely extended and judicious plan of Education for the People in the language of the People’. The paper also condemned the ‘silly Anglomania’ along with the ‘downward filtration policy’ which the missionaries now thought would be the least successful way to spread the knowledge of English; the youth already educated in English would serve as highly unqualified trainers of Western learning due to their weak grip on their mother tongue.

Judging from the standpoint of the historian, on the one hand the paper implored the government not to overlook the classical languages and devote time wholly to the propagation of the English education; whereas on the other hand, it supported the discontinuity of the texts of Western learning into classical languages like Persian, Arabic and especially Sanskrit under the aegis of the General Committee of Public Instruction (28 May 1835). The missionaries were aware of the fact that the *pundits* and *maulvis*, for whom the publication of translated texts were intended would never approve of imparting Western education to the Hindus and Muslims, respectively, as it was opposed to the 'traditional learning in which they had a vested interest (Laird, *Contribution* 107).' An extreme form of power play regarding language policy, between the Brahmin caste and the missionaries resurfaces time and again as the latter's efforts to dilute the oppressive hold of the Brahmin caste over all others in India by making Sanskrit available to all and sundry; this could well be achieved through the development of an alternative medium of education, that is, Bengali. The Protestant missionaries had noticed a manifestation of Roman Catholic culture in the snobbery of the Brahmin caste and thus their revolt is reflected in their concern for providing the non- Brahmins with the vehicle of expression— the Bengali language. The Serampore Baptists assumed that the intrinsic connection between the Sanskrit language and the Hindu religion would gradually fade away; that language and literature would live while the religion died as it happened in Ancient Greece. This view is to be held against Alexander Duff's words, an extreme Anglicist, published in *Friend of India* (3 December 1835), who believed that through Anglicization was necessary before Christianity would find acceptance on the Indian soil, the process by which Indians would become 'unnaturalised' in their own country.

The Serampore mission developed a trend for a system of education modified according to indigenous conditions instead of simply importing elements from their culture which would feel foreign and thus, unnatural to the natives. One of the reasons why the missionaries stuck to the monitorial system is because it was based on time-honoured conventional methods of teaching which had always already existed in the Indian culture--- learning by rote simple maxims which were more often than not in the form of simplistic rhymes devised for effortless memorization, under the supervision of 'the gurus' or monitors. The textbooks printed at the Serampore Press suited to the purpose employed local references in which, for example, the shape of the earth was likened to that of the *kudumba* fruit to aid the students in familiarization with this new pattern of study. While teaching geography, the missionaries commenced with the map of India, in which both English and Bengali place-names were used, before moving on to European geography. Mathematics was taught from the 'Jumidaree Papers' along with standard conversion of monetary units such as *cowry* to the 'rupee.' Such a curriculum is notable in the light of the British Government's interest post 1835, in devising a curriculum in the same pattern of the English academies in the United Kingdom which would lead to a mass production of trained natives ready to be appointed in the service of the Empire ((Laird, *Contribution* 108).

When in 1827 Joshua Marshman visited Copenhagen and secured from the King of Denmark, Fredrick VI a Royal Charter with university rights, empowering the College to confer degrees in all subjects. Serampore College was considered the third University of Denmark, the other two being at Copenhagen and Kiel and embodied the restoration of one of the larger Dissenting Academies of the mid-eighteenth century which emphasized on teaching vernacular along with a variety of other subjects in Arts, Science and Theology groups without feeling the need to pressurize students to take up religious courses. John Mack, whose outstanding work in chemistry in both English and Bengali language received much acclaim, succeeded Joshua Marshman as the Principal of Serampore college in 1837.

Yet the institution was largely beset by financial difficulties which proved a grave obstacle in the course of the Serampore missionaries' zeal to admit more students in the college. Also, the fallout between the BMS and the Serampore College on financial and personal grounds in 1815 resulted in further pecuniary problems and by the end of 1818, dimmed the chances for procuring monetary help to undertake future educational initiatives. To add to their woes, Bentinck's economic campaigns put many professors and Bengali translators out of their jobs and also moderated Carey's salary to nearly half of what he was earning within less than a year.

The hostility of the BMS towards the Serampore Mission does not come as a shock because the primary motive of the former lay in limiting missionary activities only to proselytization through effective preaching. It can be rightly said that the BMS seemed less enthusiastic about investing in some of the costliest undertakings in the field of education on Indian soil. They were prejudiced against the overly ambitious Serampore missionaries and even though the scope of the College was far more expansive than anyone had predicted for any English Baptist institution, the BMS perceived this as a waste of missionary resources on the Indian Christians and shockingly, the non-Christians, could be put to ecumenical use. William Carey's nephew, Eustace Carey, proved one of the biggest adversaries of Serampore College who was against the mingling of Christian and non-Christian students as he was of opinion that the latter would corrupt the religious bent of the mind of the former. He also criticized the teaching of Sanskrit at the expense of English and showed favour for the Calcutta Baptists who, according to him, were more 'Anglicist' in their approach than the Serampore missionaries; these views were in direct opposition to the values of the Serampore missionaries. By the year 1827, the BMS denied any financial assistance to the Serampore Mission on the grounds that they had virtually betrayed their original missionary purpose. This great divide in opinions between the BMS and the Serampore missionaries had quite a negative impact on the latter's educational efforts; nevertheless, the latter continued with their basic missionary work in India with renewed zeal. Though the complete vision of the Serampore missionaries for the College remained unachieved yet the historical building stands witness to the pioneering efforts of these missionaries for the progress of education in Bengal.

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