

Writings of Christian Missionaries in Colonial Bengal from 1793 to 1878

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Missionary writings and their activities in colonial context have time and again been criticised for the ulterior motives of evangelization and conversion. It cannot be denied that evangelization and conversion have inextricably related to colonization. But, apart from considering the activities of Christian missionaries as one of the largest colonial ventures, there are several writings which can throw light on some unexplored aspects of missionary activities. Thus, the aim of this essay is to analyse the writings of selected Christian Missionaries in Bengal from 1793 to 1878 and how their writings represent the social and cultural aspects of colonial Bengal and bring out the missionary objectives and their achievements in the context of colonial Bengal.

Christianity contains a long history dating back hundreds of years. St. Thomas was the first Christian missionary to come to India in 1490 with the purpose of spreading Christian faith. Thereafter, various missionaries- the Syrian, Roman Catholic and particularly Jesuit visited India at different time. Bengal's contact with Christian mission started with the arrival of Jesuit missionaries- Father Antony Vaz and Peter Dias in 1576 and the group of Augustinian friars in 1580. A Dutch town, Bandel, became the centre of their activities. Initially, the Jesuit missionaries arrived in Bengal with the Portuguese captains and pirates. The Augustinians and the Jesuits worked together and established a church and monastery in 1599. The impact of European missionaries in Bengal had been felt at the close of sixteenth century when they forcibly converted many people. But, with the decline of Portuguese power, Jesuits left Bengal during seventeenth century. Thereafter, considerable number of Roman Catholics had left behind as their descendants in different parts of Bengal. After that, the Christian Missionaries started their notable journey with the arrival of Protestant missionaries in the eighteenth century. The first Protestant missionary to arrive in Bengal was Rev. John Zachariah Kiernandar from "Royal Danish Mission" which had been sent to South India. When Kiernandar's mission in South India was broken up by French armies, Robert Clive invited him to Bengal. He gladly accepted the invitation and came to Bengal in 1758. Here he started work among the Portuguese Roman Catholics and opened a school. His mission in Bengal was supported by The Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge. But, due to not being fluent in Bengali language, his labours were almost entirely confined to the Europeans. However, he built a church in Calcutta in 1770 with his own private funds, known as 'the old church' or 'Mission church'. This church was built when Calcutta had been without a Protestant church for a long time. It is needed to be mentioned that the first Protestant Church in Bengal called St. Anne's was built in Calcutta in 1709 by a subscription from the English sailors, but due to severe cyclone and earthquake, it was destroyed partially in 1737. During the attack on Calcutta by Siraj-ud-Daulah, the church was totally destroyed in 1756. In 1776, after six years of Kieranadar's

church, a movement was initiated by the chaplains with the object of building a parish church for Bengal at Calcutta. In 1787, with the help of governor general and other government officials, the church, St. John was established. In the same year Kiernandar went bankrupt and his missionary project was stopped here. In 1777, the 'Moravian Brethern' also arrived in Serampore. Here they learnt Bengali, compiled a dictionary and translated number of books into Bengali. But, somehow, their mission proved discouraging and they returned from Serampore in 1791. In the meantime, in 1783, John Thomas, the Baptist doctor with zeal for missionary work came to Bengal. He realised the lack of religious feeling among the Europeans in Bengal. So, he provided an advertisement in a Calcutta paper to find out whether there any existence of religious persons in the European community. Thereafter, he met four persons who were reputed as religious people and sympathetic towards missionary project. They were Charles Grant, William Chambers, David Brown and George Udny. Thus, Thomas along with Charles Grant and others started his missionary work in 1787. He went to Malda and started preaching among people and his medical skill served his missionary purpose so well. He learned Bengali and translated some portion of Old and New Testament. However, he remained unrecognised because he was not sponsored by any official missionary society. On the contrary, after repeated consultation between Grant and others who has great sympathy for missionary work made an appeal to the government for their support in establishing protestant mission for Bengal. But the proposal was declined by the Governor General Cornwallis as the company's government did not want any official involvement in missionary work.

The East India Company never wanted to disturb the traditional religious belief of the people. They regarded themselves as the successors of the old rulers and heirs to their policy and methods except in so far as it was necessary to adjust things for the sake of their own commercial interests. In fact, they believed that for the sake of the stability of their own position, they should not only recognise the religion of the people, but also support and patronise them as fully. Even they took control under their management and patronage the temples and mosques, paid money for rebuilding and repairs of important shrines and sometimes granted large sum of money for sacrifices and festivals. With such circumstances where Europeans in general had abandoned the principals of Christianity and European government showed definite hostility, it was difficult for missionaries to foothold in Bengal at all. Though, their arrival was possible because of the private efforts of a few high ranking officials who had sympathy for the Christian missionaries.

Thus, missionaries started coming to Bengal from 18th century. Their constant endeavour to bring the missionary zeal to the people and after several failed attempt, the first organised missionary work in Bengal started after the arrival of William Carey in Bengal in 1793. He started the Baptist mission in Serampore under the British control. His two associates were Joshua Marshman and William Ward, and together they formed the famous Serampore trio. They followed the humanitarian ideas of the early evangelicals in England and emphasized on the social aspects of their missionary programme. They believe that only education based on the Christian truth can remove social evils. Thus, in order to spread education

to common people, Carey builds up scheme of mass education and adopts some indigenous system. Carey always wanted to build up a system of education that influence people from below. With this aim, his associate Joshua Marshman worked out a complete scheme known as ‘Hindu relative to Native school’ for the establishment of village vernacular school in 1816. It focused on the medium of instruction should be the mother tongue of the people. The Trio also encouraged the oriental classics since they believed that the Bible should be translated in Sanskrit and Persian to pave the way for a cultural bridge between India and the West. The Serampore mission is also considered as the pioneer in the field of printing and publication too. Under Carey’s guidance, Serampore mission press printed the Bangla, Assamese, Hindi, Marathi and Sanskrit version of complete Bible. Apart from Biblical translation, they also translated the Ramayana and parts of other Indian classics. They translated, printed and distributed numerous tracts or pamphlets on Christianity.

Missionaries who took charge of literary works were also engaged mainly in writing texts books. J.C. Marshman wrote both in English and in Bengali. But most of his writings were published after 1833. Only his *History of India*¹ in two volumes was published in 1831. It is also mentionable that his writings both based in history were written both in English and Bengali. Another writer is Felix Carey, who is a scholar in Sanskrit, Bengali, Burmese and Pali. Felix Carey translated Goldsmith’s History of England into Bengali in 1820. This book ¹is also published by the Calcutta School Book Society. Moreover, Felix Carey also translated and published John Bunyan’s The Pilgrim’s Progress in 1821². It is also documented that with Ram Kamal Sen³, he planned to bring out a Bengali encyclopedia, but his untimely death in 1823 prevented the full execution of that plan⁴. Rev. John Mack⁵ came to Serampore as a professor of Mathematics and Natural Science. He provided a lecture both in English and Bengali on the subject of Chemistry at the Asiatic Society⁶. He also wrote a treatise on Chemistry probably the first in Bengali, which was published in 1834⁷.

Christian missionaries also showed interest in the field of journalism. Marshman’s “Digdarshan” (1818), “Magazine for Youth India” (in English and Bangla), “Samachar Darpan” (1818), “The Friend of India” (1818), “Satyarnab” (1850) played significant role in portraying several contemporary social problems. More to say, “The Calcutta Christian Intelligencer” (1840-1865), “The Calcutta Spectator”, “The Calcutta Christian Observer” (1832-1840) are most of these journals reflected the contemporary social problems of colonial Bengal. As for example, “The Samachar Darpan”, a Bengali weekly newspaper published by the Baptist Missionary Society, on 23rd May, 1818, from the Baptist Mission Press at Serampore in the first half of the 19th century, commenting on the annual examination of the Hindo College

¹ Marshman, J. C. History of India 2 vols. 1831.

² *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, 1821, Ben, text.

³ Sen, Ram Kamal (1783-1844), a Bengali scholar, and wealthy man, leader of the orthodox Hindus.

⁴ Sen Gupta, Kanti Prasanna, The Christian Missionaries in Bengal.

⁵ Mack, J. (1797-1845) professor of Serampore college. He also shared the editorial management of the Friend in India.

⁶ *Somachar Dorpan* Nov. 30, 1822.

⁷ Sen Gupta, Kanti Prasanna, The Christian Missionaries in Bengal.

writes that, “Formerly the English believed that the Indian pick up a smattering of English here and there just enough for serving as a clerk. But now it transpires that they are learning English like their own language”. Again in 1829, The Samachar Darpan writes, “we now find with supervise that Indian boys venture to study the most advanced texts and the most abstruse subjects in English and have mastered even the most difficult branches of English learning”.

In fact, the contribution of British women missionaries is also notable. Dorothy Carey, Hannah Marshman, Hannah Catherine Mullens, Elizabeth Sale, Miss Bird, Mrs Yates, Miss Mary Ann Cooke were exemplary women who were active in their mission to educate and reform the ‘native’ women. They provided shelter and security to the widows and orphans in the mission. Thus, their work can be considered as pioneering to help building a defining space for women’s activities within a patriarchal colonial society. Their role and responsibilities have greatly shaped our understanding of women question and future mission activities by women and for women in our society.

Christian missionary’s reflections and involvement in the social life of Bengal is notable here. Their activities made an impact both direct and indirect on the Bengali society. Their vigorous attack on the age old social customs, common superstitions, several religious ceremonies of the Bengali people are consequential. According to Rev. James Long, large scale of illiteracy and lack of mass education among the Bengalis became the reason of indulgence of several superstitions and retarded their social improvements. The very criticism was mainly directed against Hindu idol-worship and the rite of Sati. In 1803, the Serampore missionaries deputed some people to collect information about Sati. According to the information gathered the number of Satis exceeded four hundreds in one year. In 1804, according the information, the number of Satis had increased. During this time, Carey collected various texts of the Hindu shastras on which Sati practice was based. All the materials were placed at the disposal of G. Udny who was then a member of the Governor- General’s council. The statistics collected by the Serampore missionaries were used frequently in subsequent missionary writings against Sati both in India and England. In attacking the Satis, the missionaries were the first to show that the cruel rite was not sanctioned by the Hindu shastras. Ward put forward this line of argument in his book “A View of the History, Literature and Religion of the Hindoos”. Mrityunjay Vidyalkar in 1817, Ram Mohun Roy in 1818 had also argued that nowhere in the Shastras was the custom enjoined as a compulsory religious duty. Having shown that Sati was not sanctioned by Hindu shastras and having secured the full co-operation on the issue of some of the leading Indians of the time, the missionaries continued to demand its total abolition through their periodicals. The Serampore paper Samachar Darpan (1818) week after week published articles discussed on defending the abolition.

Christian missionaries eyed the Hindu caste system and its operation with utmost precision and circumspection. According the William Carey that the caste system was originally political but it was so much interwoven with every circumstance of the lives of everyone. This evil practice is based on social,

occupational and economic considerations. The Christian missions in Bengal had encountered this from the very beginning. Though the colonial rule and missionaries had different approaches to this practice, but both of them tried their best to eradicate it from the society. Though the Christian missionaries were well aware about the Rigvedic definition of the origin of caste from the four parts of Brahma's body, but they bring another interpretation on the origin of caste. The most common view was that the whole system of caste practice is actually intent to maintain the Brahmin supremacy over all the lower orders. Missionaries cited numerous ways by which the lower orders – the Shudras, did obeisance to the Brahmins. One common form of reverence was drinking water into which the toe of a Brahmin had been dipped. This way most of the Shudras purified themselves daily. Collecting dust from Brahmin's feet by the lower caste people is another example here. Ward said that this act was credited with the boon of curing diseases. This way, Christian missionaries presented a graphic pen-picture of the baneful feature of this evil practice in Bengal.

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