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Once more we would ask—in view of such evident signs of the dawn of ecumenism in the mission field, is it wholly fantastic to imagine that a world missionary conference in 1810 might have heralded not only the advent of an international missionary council, but also the beginning of corporate search for agreement in the realm of faith and order, and the appearance of some form of world council of churches in the mid-nineteenth instead of the mid-twentieth century?

Dr Ruth Rouse is a well-known historian of the ecumenical movement. [p. 395](#)

Carey's Commitment to Social Justice

Evangeline Anderson-Rajkumar

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In a popular style the author surveys Carey's 40 years of unceasing protest and compassionate action for those who were condemned to cruel death in the name of religion—infants, widows, the sick and lepers.

Editor

William Carey and fellow missionary John Thomas were riding near Malda, India, in 1794 when they saw 'a basket hung in a tree, in which an infant had been exposed; the skull remained, the rest having been devoured by ants.' This 'holy' act of infanticide had been committed with religious fervour by a Hindu mother.

Infanticide was not uncommon in India in Carey's day. But the British government in India ignored such sacrifice of infants—it didn't want to interfere in religious matters of the people. The Indian masses were ready to sacrifice their lives (and their children's) for the sake of salvation and to escape the karma-samsara cycle. The people were intensely religious and were following (though sometimes misinterpreting) written religious laws.

William Carey strongly protested against these crimes against humanity. He was one of many who prodded the apparently passive government to halt or at least regulate a variety of harmful social practices.

KILLING INFANTS

In 1802 Carey's colleague William Ward studied infanticide on the river island of Saugor. Many women made vows to the Holy Ganges River 'that if blessed with two children, one would be presented to the River'. As many as a hundred children, he estimated (though probably more), were being sacrificed every year.

William Carey, Jr., reported one such sacrifice to his father: A boatman pulled a drowning child into his boat. He presented the infant to its mother. She took the child, broke its neck, and cast it into the river again! [p. 396](#)

After joining Fort William College as a professor, Carey protested against infanticide to Governor-General Wellesley. Wellesley called for a study of the frequency, nature, and cause of infanticide in Bengal. So Carey prepared an exhaustive report; other people were

at work as well. Since the attention of the government was now awakened, and Lord Wellesley was convinced, infanticide was abolished in 1802 before Carey even presented his report.

In a letter to John Ryland six years later, Carey explained his contribution: 'I have, since I have been here ... presented three petitions or representations to Government for the purpose of having the burning of women and other modes of murder abolished, and ... in the case of infanticide and voluntary drowning in the river ... laws were made to prevent these, which have been successful.'

This marked the first time the British government interfered so directly with religious practice in India. It set the stage for abolition of other practices.

BURNING WIDOWS

As scholar E. Daniel Potts explains, widow burning was 'based on the religious belief that only by burning could the widow win eternal happiness and bring blessings on her family.' (*Sati*, or *suttee*, refers to the *act* of burning alive a widow on the funeral pyre of her deceased husband; it also becomes the name of the *woman* who performs the act.) Voices had been raised against *sati* for centuries, but no one before Carey had the ability to drown out the voices that encourage it.

Carey first witnessed the rite, to his horror, in 1799. The next year, when he saw a group of people assembled for *sati*, he tried to stop them by (falsely) saying the governor-general had threatened to hang the first man who kindled the funeral pyre!

Carey and other missionaries soon launched a strong protest against *sati*, saying it was not voluntary but forced. Carey was then asked to submit full information on *sati* to the governor-general's council.

In 1803, Carey arranged for a debate on *sati* at Fort William College. Two years later the governor-general asked the Indian Supreme Court to study how much the practice was based on Hindu law. The report said that it had a religious sanction, and therefore, *any reform would be unwise*.

But in 1816, Carey's former pundit (native teacher), who was now chief pundit of the Supreme Court, determined that *sati* had no basis in the Hindu Shastras [Hindu sacred writings]. Still it continued to be [p. 397](#) debated. Carey's colleague William Ward and Indian leader Raja Ram Mohan Roy helped to influence Parliament to take up the matter in 1821.

Meanwhile, the Baptist missionaries continued their fight. They dismissed an Indian helper who participated in the *sati* of his sister-in-law. They continued to write against the practice in the periodicals *Samachar Darpan* and the *Friend of India*, criticizing the government for inaction.

In 1828, William Bentinck was appointed governor-general. Bentinck, an active Christian influenced by the steady *sati* debate, had the 'stern and unalterable determination ... that this atrocious rite should cease absolutely and immediately.' He consulted with *Indian leaders and abolished sati* in December 1829, which the Serampore missionaries praised as a 'bold and decisive step'.

William Carey was the government's translator in Bengali, and on Sunday morning, December 6, 1829, he received the official declaration that *sati* had been abolished. He decided that translating the declaration was more important than preparing his sermon. Giving the preaching task to another, Carey raced to translate the declaration by that evening, believing lives hung in the balance every minute he delayed.

EXPOSING THE SICK

The sick and dying were often taken to the banks of the holy rivers and allowed to die. William Ward described such 'ghat murders': 'When a person is on the point of death, his relations carry him on his bed, or on a litter, to the Ganges ... A person, in his last agonies, is dragged from his bed and friends, and carried in the coldest or the hottest weather, from whatever distance, to the river side, where he lies, if a poor man, in the open air, day and night, till he expires.' In some cases, the practice veiled simple murder.

William Carey protested against the act in 1802, and later the Serampore journal *Friend of India* declared that controlling the practice would require 'delicate handling, for the strongest religious feelings of the Hindoos' were involved. Yet it was time to halt 'barbarous cruelty even in the well-meaning'. Till a formal abolition took place, the missionaries occasionally carried home people who were exposed to die and nursed them back to health.

In *India's Cries to British Humanity*, Baptist James Peggs brought to the fore the passivity of the government to this 'murder'. The Baptist p. 398 missionaries also continuously protested against the social evil. Finally an otherwise insensitive government was forced to halt such exposures of the sick and dying.

DROWNING LEPERS

Lepers were rejected by their families and society and sometimes either helped to commit suicide or actually murdered. Carey saw a leper die in Katwa in 1812: 'A pit about ten cubits in depth was dug, and a fire placed at the bottom of it. The poor man rolled himself and struggled for that purpose [of getting out of the pit]. His mother and sister, however thrust him in again; and thus a young man, who to all appearances might have survived several years, was cruelly burned to death.

'I find that the practice is not uncommon in these parts. Taught that a violent end purifies the body and ensures transmigration into a healthy new existence, while natural death by disease results in four successive births and a fifth as a leper again, the leper like the even more wretched widow, has always courted suicide'. Others who suffered from what Carey called the 'great sickness' were drowned.

The missionaries once again used their vital tool, *Friend of India*, to make known the lepers' pathetic state and call for better care. In addition, Carey and Thomas preached to and provided medicine for many lepers. Missionary wife Ann Grant wrote in 1803, 'This morning 34 poor people met before our door ... Many with the Leprosy; some with the ends of their fingers, some with their toes eaten off, by the Leprosy, many of them receive two-pence a week. Bro. Carey gives them medicine for their bodies, & the best medicine for their poor Souls.'

PROTESTING BOLDLY

Carey and his colleagues also objected to slavery ('In some parts of India,' William Ward wrote, 'children are as much an article of sale as goats or poultry'). They also spoke out against religious practices involving self-torture and published tracts against the caste system.

One can debate who deserves credit for abolishing the evil practices of infanticide, *sati*, the slave trade, or the exposure of the sick and the dying. Writers have ascribed the honour to Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Lord Bentinck and others, as well as Carey. p. 399

But Carey definitely raised his voice in protest, and he succeeded in drawing, and keeping, the attention of the government through the publications *Friend of India* and

Samachar Darpan. He and his fellow missionaries stood with the oppressed, reflecting the type of God he believed in—the Friend of India.

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***Sati* or Widow Burning**

S. Pearce Carey

Excerpt from William Carey by S. Pearce Carey (London, Carey Press 1934) p. 182f

William Carey wrote: ‘We saw a number of people assembled on the river-side. I asked for what they were met, and they told me to burn the body of a dead man. I enquired if his wife would die with him; they answered yes, and pointed to her. She was standing by the pile of large billets of wood, on the top of which lay her husband’s dead body. Her nearest relative stood by her; and near her was a basket of sweetmeats. I asked if this was her choice, or if she were brought to it by any improper influence. They answered that it was perfectly voluntary. I talked till reasoning was of no use, and then began to exclaim with all my might against what they were doing, telling them it was shocking murder. They told me it was a great act of holiness, and added in a very surly manner, that, if I did not like to see it, I might go further off, and desired me to do so. I said I would not go, that I was determined to stay and see the murder, against which I should certainly bear witness at the tribunal of God. I exhorted the widow not to throw away her life; to fear nothing, for no evil would follow her refusal to be burned. But in the most calm manner she mounted the pile, and danced on it with her hands extended, as if in the utmost tranquillity of spirit. Previous to this, the relative, whose office it was to set fire to the pile, led her six times round it—thrice at a time. As she went round, she scattered the sweetmeats amongst the people, who ate them as a very holy thing. This being ended, she lay down beside the corpse, and put one arm under its neck, and the other over, when a quantity of dry cocoa-leaves and other substances were heaped over them to a considerable height, and then *ghî* was poured on the top. Two bamboos were then put over them, and held fast down, and fire put to the pile, which immediately blazed very fiercely, owing to the dry and combustible materials of which it was composed. No sooner was the fire kindled than all the people set up a great shout of joy, invoking Siva. It was impossible to have heard the woman, had she groaned, or even cried aloud, on account of the shoutings of the people, and again it was impossible for her to stir or struggle, by reason of the bamboos held down on her, like the levers of a press. We made much objection to their use of these, insisting that it was undue force, to prevent her getting up when the fire burned. But they declared it was only to keep the fire from falling down. We could not bear to see more, and left them, exclaiming loudly against the murder, and filled with horror at what we had seen.’