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Serampore Then and Now

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In the bicentenary year of William Carey's arrival in India, when the trio of Serampore are remembered, while my object is not to catalogue the triumphs of their achievements, one thing which needs mentioning is that they were truly people of God, committed to a cause. Many things have been added or altered in accordance with the changing situation to carry out their vision but the path they laid down is the one which we still need to tread.

Their's was a faith which was against the stream and which was tested by fire. For example, it was six 'o' clock in the evening, 11th March 1812, William Ward was working late at his desk in the Mission Press. The staff had all left. Suddenly Ward became aware of smoke seeping into his office. The paper store was on fire. By two in the morning the fire had burnt itself out. Day light revealed a smouldering heap. Carey was in Calcutta. The difficulty was how to tell him that all precious manuscripts were destroyed, the draft of his great polyglot dictionary, Punjabi and Telugu Grammar, ten versions of the Bible and the translation of Ramayan. When Carey came back, tears filled his eyes and he said :

“In one short evening the labours of years are consmed. I had lately brought something to utmost perfection of which they seemed capable and contemplated the missionary establishment with perhaps too much self congratulation. The Lord has laid me low that I may look more simply to Him. How unsearchable are the ways of God ?”¹

Now in the bicentenary year, the need is to be reminded that the Trio never failed in their efforts seeking neither power nor glory for themselves. They were ahead of their time ! So amidst perplexities and challenges of our day, the need is to discern the will of God for His world to expect great things from Him and to attempt great things for Him, thus expressing that will in action.

‘History repeats itself. Has to. No one listens’ (S. Turner). This is probably one of the most interesting aspect of studying history. History repeats is more true of Serampore. Almost exactly a century after the arrival of Carey, a man arrived in 1895 with the same spirit and vision that marked him out as a genius. He

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was George Howell, remembered as the second founder of Serampore College. Howell's effort was to resuscitate the College on the lines laid down by the founders, William Carey, Joshua Marshman and William Ward. The outcome was that the Council of the College and the Baptist Missionary Society felt that time had come to recognize the College and place it on strong foundations so that it could command respect of all concerned and develop as a College granting degrees at University level.

With the revival of Serampore charter in 1915 and the system of collegiate affiliation associated with it, Serampore has exerted a far reaching influence upon the development of theological education in India. The Senate of Serampore record shows that more than 10,000 students have been conferred with various degrees in theology since 1915. The Serampore College Act of 1918 provided the setting of a Senate constituted by the Council and responsible to it. As soon as the 1918 act was on the statute book, at the first meeting of the Senate, the United Theological College, Bangalore was affiliated to Serampore to be quickly followed by Bishop's College, Calcutta and others. The story of Senate is one of remarkable adventure in cooperation among the people of varied Christian and national background. The fear that affiliation to Serampore should prove a strait jacket in which Serampore might impose on others a particular type of theological interpretation, has been proved wrong. Because closer acquaintance with the Senate of Serampore has generally dispelled that doubt when it has been realized how varied the colleges are which participate. In late 1980's with a view to provide an informed understanding of Christian faith to the laity, the Senate initiated a programme of Christian studies without any prejudice to caste, colour or creed. For the first time the non-Christians in India have an opportunity to know the Christian faith through an academic programme of external studies.

One striking feature of the history of Serampore has been the ever recurring crisis ; sometimes with very serious consequences threatening its very existence. In 1883 it was decided to close down the Arts department and the High School and to convert the College into a theological institution on the ground that the College had deviated far from the original object of training of Christian ministers. Later George Howell pointed out that it was sufficient to say that the College had neither deviated from the original object of the founders, nor had lost their vision. In 1911 Howell got reaffiliation of intermediate Arts classes with Calcutta university. The other such crisis was in 1912. It looked as though the College would have to be closed down just at the time when

it was progressing rapidly. There was a suggestion that the College be shifted away from Serampore to some other part of the country which fortunately never met with favour.

“In India the Theological Education Committee of the Bengal and Assam Christian Council suggested the amalgamation of Bishop’s College, Calcutta and Serampore College, at Serampore, a first step in the matter of much talked of cooperation in theological education. But the whole scheme fell through as the Bishops of the Anglican Church in India rejected the proposal for the amalgamation of two colleges, while expressing much sympathy with Serampore College and offering to assist it in any other way possible.”²

In 1970 the Commission on Serampore College recommended to shift the Department of Theology to Bishop’s College compound, Calcutta, with a possibility of the merger of the two institutions in future. Bishop Newbigin, the chairman of the said Commission has rightly said that “The report was a failure, and the College authorities were so diligent in destroying all known copies that I doubt if any survive.”³ Serampore stands out as an institution with the strength and joy from the denominational and regional varieties. The very existence of Serampore is the spirit of inter-church cooperation. That the Senate might exist without the College at times been suggested. In the words of Howell ‘If we are to use the Serampore charter for the actual conferring of theological degrees and if these degrees are to carry weight, it is essential that Serampore itself as a college should carry weight. It is not enough that the proposed Senate be strong’⁴

The object of Serampore has been that book learning is not sufficient for the strength of the ministry of the Church but scholarship is essential for academic discipline. Therefore one important task is to relate the academic study of theology more closely and creatively to the life and work of churches. Linked with this task is the practical question of preparation for ministry in the world. The majority of the Indian population are Hindus and to work as a ministry is to address daily the pastoral issues that emerge in a multi-faith society.

“The impression that Hinduism is a mystical religion rests partly on the identification of Hinduism with Vedantic spirituality fostered by the movement which began with Ramakrishna. It describes a genuine element of Hinduism, but one which is always related more to tiny literate and Brahmin minority than to the masses. Long ago the Abbe Dubbois recognised that Hinduism is not so much an ascetic religion as a sacramental religion of village square and street,

of hearth and home, of pilgrimage; of folk song and story and of caste.”⁵

Hinduism is also a peasant religion rooted in harsh realities of agricultural life. Therefore theological education in India demands the essential task being in engendering the ability to see ourselves in a wider context. The capacity to understand the other is an essential part of theological education. Linked with the question of contextualization of theological education is the question of poverty and disparity.

“It follows that to do theology in India is not to do theology at 120° F, as it has been romantically described, but to take part in a struggle between death and life (Dt.30 : 19).”⁶

The need is to train people for ministry for both city and village. It is a reality of India that 50% out of 870 million live below the poverty line and for whom to get one meal a day is a luxury. There are two Indias. One which watches Wimbledon on the colour TV and talks about transcendental meditation, and the other is the place which is portrayed and made known through the work of Mother Teresa. Linked, though, with the vision of the founding members of Serampore College for India is the immediate question of disparity that exists in society and also clearly evident in the church. One example is the question of disparity among ministers in the Church. The artificial distinction between ministers on the basis of educational qualification, and hierarchy within the ministry persists in the Church and creates unhealthy disparity among ministers, as well as blurring the sense of vocation.

Serampore College has been in the vanguard of theological education in India by pioneering the training of people for leadership in the community. The missionaries were pioneers in the field of evangelism, education and social reform. In view of the contribution of the early missionaries, admiration for this side of Christian witness is absolutely necessary. In due course the leadership has changed from overseas missionary to national. For example the ratio of Indian leadership to missionary in the faculty of theology in Serampore College started in early 1970's with 1:6, then in early 1980's it became 7:2 and now it is 10:0. But the reality is not the replacement of the white faces with black or brown but to continue to carry out the vision of the founders of the Serampore College for witness and service in the changed situation. Therefore the chair for Mission Studies is established in the bicentenary year to continue the long heritage of Serampore being the fountain head of theological studies in India as well as to rediscover the meaning of mission amidst the present pluralistic

context of India.

It is not an easy task to maintain an inherited structure. There is also the need to provide facilities for training people to face the realities of the Indian situation. While the distinction is not as simple as mystic east and materialistic west, it is true that the family and the community play a great part in Indian life. One common task of community consists in recognition of the importance of the family, the dignity of all human beings, the acceptance of the disabled, weak, outcasts, rich as well as the poor. This recognition implies a risk taking love for others. Some people laughed at Carey's love for the people of India. Even today risk taking love for others can be costly. But in the free giving and surrender of oneself to others a community is born in which 'Love finds communion without seeking it, or rather precisely because it does not seek it.'⁷ The triumph of the Serampore missionaries was of course through the grace of God, but it was also a sincere act of devotion and commitment, of risk taking love.

Perhaps history would have taken a different turn if Carey, Marshman and Ward would have been granted permission for entry by the East India Company. However it was providential that Serampore, then a Danish Colony, was to be the cradle of modern Protestant Mission. The arrival of Carey in India on 11 November 1793 is usually marked as the beginning of modern missions. Although Carey stood in a succession of many other pioneers, he is generally known as the 'father of modern missions.' His work represents a turning point marking the entry of the English speaking world on a large scale into missionary enterprise. Carey was persuaded by Marshman and Ward, on their arrival in India in 1799, to join them at Serampore as they realized that this was the best way to ensure their safety. They founded the Serampore College in 1818 with 37 students of whom 19 were Christian. Now in 1993 there are about 2750 students in the Arts, Science and Commerce faculty and 111 students in the Department of Theology. The need to carry out the vision of the founders is as great as ever.

1 Carey, S.P., William Carey, Hodder & Stoughton, 1923, p. 284

2 Christadoss, D.A., The Story of Serampore College 1818-1929 In: The Story of Serampore and its College, Council of Serampore College, 1961, p. 39.

3 Newbigin, L., Unfinished Agenda, SPCK, 1985, p. 229.

4 Stewart, W., The Council and the College, In: The Story of Serampore College, p. 81.

5 Gorringe, T., Redeeming Time, DLT London, 1986, p. xii.

6 Gorringe, T., Ibid, p. xiii.

7 Bonhoeffer, D., Sanctorum Communio, Collins, London, 1963, p.125.