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The Significance of Serampore Mission for Christian Higher Education Today

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Introduction

The Christian Colleges in our country are also called missionary institutions not only since they were founded by pioneering Christian educationists such as Serampore Trio – William Carey, Joshua Marshman and William Ward – Alexander Duff, John Wilson, John Anderson and others but they were also meant to be channels for promoting Christian Mission. Missions are of many types. Bishop Lesslie Newbigin defines missions as “particular enterprises within the total mission which have the primary intention of bringing into existence a *Christian Presence* in a milieu where previously there was no such presence or where such presence was ineffective”.¹ The Church, as a people of God, responding to God’s call given to them through Jesus of Nazareth continues to be involved in the mission. In other words, Christian Education is one of the missions or one of the missionary dimensions of the Church. Part of our responsibility as Christians in any society is to bear witness as ‘salt and light’ by making Christian message challengingly relevant by our words and deeds through our institutions, following the pattern adopted by the Teacher *par excellence* Lord Jesus Christ. For the present study let us look afresh at the emphases of Serampore Mission.

The Emphases of Serampore Mission

The Serampore Trio, the pioneers of Christian Higher Education in India, had the vision for raising indigenous leadership potential for the society and the Church in the beginning of last century. The Serampore Mission was inaugurated on the 10th January 1800 in the then Danish colony by the British Baptist Missionaries led by the Trio. They had full support of the Governor Colonel Bie who was called as his tomb tablet reads “a disciple of Schwartz of Tranquebar”. The Serampore Trio believed in the inextricable linkage between education and evangelism even as the enlightenment of the mind played an important role in the

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development of Christian mission from its inception. Following Carey's experiment of establishing vernacular school at Madanabati in 1795, several types of schools were started in and around Serampore at the very beginning of the Serampore Mission.

Hints relative to native schools, together with an outline of the Institution for their Extension and Management, published in 1816, is an important document prepared by Joshua Marshman on popular education in India, consisting of many valuable suggestions to our context of educational enterprise and contemporary literacy drive. In the year of establishment of Serampore College (1818), the Mission had 126 vernacular schools with many thousands of pupils receiving elementary education. The College was founded with careful planning at enormous cost and sacrifice by the Trio, to make Serampore a "Christian Benares" and "an Indian Halle" - as potent centre of Christian learning as was Benares of Sanskrit, and as serviceful to India and God as Professor Francke, the inspirer of Ziegenbalg, Plutschan, Schwartz and others had made the university of Halle.² With their first and foremost emphasis of *quality education* in the sphere of higher education, the Trio stood for the highest university ideals and were ahead of state universities in our country by forty years in their plans. The Charter secured from the Danish King Frederick VI for the College on 23 February 1827 provides not only the power to grant degrees which is used since 1915 for Theological education for the whole country and Sri Lanka but also the protection which the institution needed amidst many changing and challenging scenes of Indian history. Hard work and self-discipline were the hallmarks of the quality education the trio propounded. In fact the College report of the first year of its existence reads "the object is not to give (the students) a light smattering of things, which may tend to gender conceit... but to lay the foundation deep, to strengthen the mind by inuring to real labour"³

Secondly, the emphasis of Serampore Mission is the catholicity of interests and the broad-based Vision of national development through higher education. The College was founded for "the instruction of Asiatic, Christian and Other Youth in Eastern Literature and European Science" even as the first prospectus published on the 15th July 1818 announced. The Trio took the middle position between the Orientalists and the Anglicists by making the vernacular the medium of instruction, though English forged its way to the front gradually. Their curriculum included many branches of Science, Linguistics, Religion and Ethics. Carey

contributed personally to national development through social reform, economic and ecological innovation, scientific research and linguistic prodigy. In the prospectus for the Agricultural and Horticultural Society in 1820 Carey indicates his deep concern for: "...the cleaning of jungles, the tillage of wastes, the draining of marshes, the banking of river-courses, the irrigation of large areas, the mixing of composts and of manures, the rotation of crops, the betterment of tools and transport, the breeding of stocks, the cultivation of new vegetables and herbs, the planting of orchards, the budding, grafting and pruning of fruit-trees, the forestation of timbers..."⁴

Having whetted the appetite among the youth for learning in schools with their text books, the Serampore Mission introduced journals such as *Dig Darshan*, *Samachar Darpan* and *Friend of India* (which was incorporated with *Statesman* since 1875) to nourish the desire of the youth for more information. M. A. Laird rightly observes "the histories of journalism and of education intermingle" in the story of Serampore Mission in Bengal.⁵ Even though the Serampore Mission wanted pre-eminently the divinity school for the sake of developing leadership, the Trio were "against narrow-minded theologues" who had little interest in secular disciplines. They wanted the future leaders to be people of "sound learning, genuine piety and sterling character".⁶ In other words, Serampore Mission upheld "the broadest culture and the strongest character" and was against every form of communalism or sectarianism.⁷ In short, the Serampore Mission emphasised *holistic* education.

Indian society has many diverse traditions and the people are divided by many religions and languages. The Christian higher education introduced by the Serampore Mission is praxiological by its emphasis on unity and national integration. From the first day of its establishment Serampore College introduced both theological and secular education with almost equal number of students in both these sections. The Serampore missionaries who were predominantly Baptists knew that biblical vision based on Jesus' high priestly prayer was that mission and unity were interrelated. Carey's ecumenical vision led him to propose to Andrew Fuller for an international gathering of missionaries from all Christian denominations as early as 1810 in Cape of Good Hope so that they could "understand one another better and more entirely enter into another's views by two hours conversation than two or three years epistolary correspondence"⁸

The Serampore Mission knew the importance of Christian unity far ahead of Richard Niebuhr who claims "Denominationalism

represents moral failure of Christianity”⁹ The College addressed to the problem of disunity among the diverse traditions of the Church by incorporating in its statutes and regulations dated 12th June 1833, more than a century before any organisational unity emerged in its clause 13 (a) stating:

“Students are admissible at the discretion of the Council from any body of Christians whether Protestant, Roman Catholic, the Greek or the Armenian Church...”¹⁰

Based on this regulation of the College, the common accrediting body, the Senate of Serampore College established in 1918- one hundred years after the establishment of the College -brings together about 35 theological colleges belonging to the orthodox and protestant churches to have uniform theological training for ministry and leadership. More than 10,000 young people have earned one degree or the other at the Convocations of Serampore College. Theological Education with this basis of ecumenism is the praxiological adventure of Serampore Mission.

The Serampore missionaries knew that higher education can promote national integration and human solidarity in this country which is otherwise divided on the basis of religions and castes. They wanted the theological and secular disciplines to be developed on the same campus. They knew rubbing of shoulders among the teachers and the taught of pluralistic faiths would not only break down barriers of prejudice but would promote understanding and respect for one another. Carey translated the Bible into many languages and also *Ramayana* into English in order to understand the Hindu spirit at its very roots.¹¹

The pioneers of Serampore College have responded in their educational enterprises positively to uphold national integration. With a view to respond squarely to the issue of religious fundamentalism, they incorporated in the statutes and regulations of the College in clause 13(b) which reads: “...no caste, colour, country shall bar any man (or woman) from admission into Serampore College”¹² Undoubtedly the emphases of Serampore Mission for Higher Education with all its critical scholarship without disturbing the foundation of the ecumenism and national integration provide clues to respond to the many contemporary problems of disunity and fundamentalism both for the church and the nation. In order to cultivate Serampore ethos in higher education, new frontiers of value-oriented educational apparatus will have to be explored.

A Case for Value Education

Many educationists and statesmen in India have expressed in the national education commission reports the crying need “to balance the knowledge and skills which science and technology bring with the values and insights associated with ethics and religions at its best. In the situation that is developing, it is ... important for us to give a proper value-orientation to our educational system”¹³ T. K. N. Unnithan, former Vice-Chancellor of the University of Rajasthan, says:

“There is an urgent need to inculcate values at all levels of our society, without which we will not be in a position to arrest our accelerating social degradation... Education in human values becomes of paramount importance in the Indian context. A centre for in-depth study, research and undertaking, action-oriented programme should be set up at each university for promotion of value-oriented education.”¹⁴

In spite of the many achievements in quantity and quality since Independence, education stands at crossroads and our political and social life is threatened with erosion of the long cherished values. Our goals of secularism, democracy and professional ethics have come under enormous strain. The youth of today and tomorrow has to be imbued with “a strong commitment to human values and to social justice”.¹⁵ Higher Education should provide ample scope to study critically the social, economic, environmental, cultural, moral and spiritual issues facing the people today. The general apathy, cynicism in society, and erosion of essential values have persuaded the educational policy makers to suggest curriculum changes with the view to making education a forceful tool for the cultivation of social, ethical and moral values. Higher Education ought to lay emphasis on eliminating “obscurantism, religious fanaticism, violence, superstition and fatalism”.¹⁶ It is made clear by the national education policy makers that the systole of scientific preoccupation must be followed by the diastole of religious teaching if the system of human culture is not to miss a few normal beats. The serenity of the sages of the past cannot be altogether divorced from the sagacity of the scholars of the present. Science and *ahimsa* should join together in creative synthesis of belief and action so that mankind would attain a new level of purposefulness, prosperity and spiritual insight. The Indian educationists want this creative synthesis of belief and action to be a new dimension to the scientific achievement of the West and make higher education challengingly

relevant. The Kothari Education Report quotes Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of Independent India, stating:

“We cannot be untrue to science because that represents the basic fact of life today. Still less, can we be untrue to those essential principles for which India has stood in the past throughout the ages. Let us then pursue our path to industrial progress with all our strength and vigour and at the same time, remember that material riches without toleration and compassion and wisdom may well turn to dust and ashes.”¹⁷

The New Educational policy embodies the aspirations of national consensus to infuse values into the contents of our educational inputs. It has not only indicated value education explicitly in one section, but emphasised it implicitly throughout the policy statement. It is quite right to say that the entire new education policy is the declaration of the intention of educationists and statesmen to make our educational system value-based. In the life of the majority of Indians, religion is undoubtedly a great motivating force and is intimately bound up with the formation of character and the inculcation of ethical values. Religion spreads a supernatural canopy over history, language, literature, arts, architecture, politics, law and so on. It is therefore imperative to pay heed to the recommendation of the national educational commissions to incorporate the essential core, especially the ethical and philosophical common factor, in the curricula at all levels. For the multi-religious society the study of religious values at the very citadel of reason in the modern world viz., the University would certainly strengthen inter-cultural and inter-religious understanding of the people. In fact, the Universities and Colleges should help in the broadening of outlook and enable young people to know about other religions which would eventually enrich their own faith and strengthen the skills of objectivity and impartiality. The problem of religious fundamentalism is rampant in India today because many young people educated in the centres of higher learning have little opportunity to study their religious dogmas with a critical and objective mind. The Serampore missionaries made a critical study of Hindu shastras with regard to the problem of *sati* and soon discovered that *sati* was practised not because of any religious reason but some people had vested interest on widows' properties. In the Serampore system theological education promotes critical study of the scriptural texts lest the young people trained in our colleges become fundamentalistic and their scholarship anachronistic.

Religion Reinforces Moral and Spiritual Values

Whenever we address the youth, we address the future indeed. The leadership in the country at different levels can be raised if guidance on moral values is given to the youth at the University in addition to what they acquire from their homes and communities. Morality is both universal and indispensable for good citizenship. But, as T.M.P. Mahadevan rightly observes, "morality without religion is like a road without an end, like a pathway without a goal."¹⁸ With all our interest to develop value-based education, we can neither ignore nor minimise the importance of permanent values of truth, beauty and goodness revealed from the Transcendent Reality (God), the source of all values. Sometimes people derive their values from the guaranteed beliefs and the values in turn dictate their moral choices, their social actions and their aesthetic tastes. Value education with no reference to religion can remain superficial only. In the context of the Indian mind, the reservoir of inner-strength provided by religious faith to the educated youth has not been harnessed through our University curricula in a proper way. Religions have shaped human civilizations and they continue to promote personal as well as social values. We may be reminded of C.S. Lewis' dictum, "Education without religion will make clever devils."

Religion derived from the Latin words, *religio* or *religare*; means not only a 'binding' between man and the Transcendent Reality but also between man and his neighbour. R.S. Downie propounds 'a metaphysical thesis' on the basis of the Good Samaritan story that the ideal brotherhood of man is motivated because of the understanding of the Fatherhood of God and that ethics points beyond itself and exists for the sake of some greater end.¹⁹ Ethical values as such under close scrutiny reveal that they appeal in one way or other to the authority or insight in religion. According to Paul Tillich, the inter-relationship between religion and morality, viewed from the perspective of the latter, is "not an external one, but that the religious dimension, source and motivation are implicit in morality acknowledged or not".²⁰

It is important to recognize the altruistic values such as self-giving sacrifice and service and services to one's fellow men upheld and cherished by the religions through the centuries. All would praise the noble service rendered by various religious agencies, alleviating the misery of the poor and the needy. In the days to come any religion, which fails to liberate the people from dehumanising factors, which does not relate its knowledge and experience to the realities of the national and cultural heritage

which cannot make the people sensitive to the demands of social justice is likely to be ignored. The remarkable reversal of values from the worldly standards enables the religious to prize what the world calls pitiable and to overcome the many barriers already erected between different communities based on culture, race, region, language, sex and so on. Reinhold Niebuhr affirms: "The transcendent perspective of religion makes all men our brothers and nullifies the divisions, by which nature, climate, geography and the accidents of history divide human life."²¹

Conclusion

India, the land of many religions, has to meet the challenges of communalism and fanaticism quite often these days. Suspicion and strained relationship between the people of different religions have been the cause of frequent eruption of communal tensions, acts of violence and ruthless killings. Religious sentiments and fervour manipulated by some politicians and religious leaders lead to provocations and many cancerous forms of disintegration. Can there be harmony and amity among the diverse religious communities? Can the prejudices of the past prevalent among religious communities be dispelled? Will the young people have broader outlook to avoid all forms of parochialism? These questions may be answered in the affirmative if proper inter-religious understanding can be obtained through study of religions and dialogue among people of various faiths.

Dr. S. Radhakrishnan, a former President of our country, rightly claims that the Indian secularism attempts to provide a 'dynamic fellowship' among all believers on the basis of "the principle of diversity in unity which alone has the quality of creativeness"²². The founding fathers of the nation were sensitive to deeper values of life and they wanted an attitude of tolerance and positive respect of all religions to be consistently developed in the multi-religious society. Mahatma Gandhi, the father of the nation, explains the profound meaning of tolerance as follows:

"Tolerance does not mean indifference toward one's faith, but a more intelligent and pure love for it. Tolerance gives us spiritual insight, which is far from fanaticism as the north pole is from the south. True knowledge of religion breaks down the barrier between faith and faith. Cultivation of tolerance for other faiths will impart to us a truer understanding of our own"²³

Indian democratic secularism is not against promoting religious knowledge. A deeply religious strain has run throughout the

national history like a golden thread, Long ago, emperor Ashoka said, "The faith of others all deserve to be honoured. By honouring them, one exalts one's own faith and at the same time performs a service to the faiths of others." The country has been the meeting place of great religions of the world and has upheld a wide ecumenical spirit. The aim of higher education has always been to bring in a harmonious development of 3Hs (heart, head, hand) in a student which affect the three Ws (wisdom, will and work) even as the three margas (Ways) viz., jnana, bhakti and karma are interrelated. Emphasis on one without the other cannot be holistic. In fact education (root word being *educare*) implies develop to a person to maturity or to bring out the full potential of him/ her.

The value-oriented higher education based on Serampore ethos will help the future generation to face the challenges of religious fundamentalism even as they are enriched by superme values of faith, hope and love. Let us be inspired by the spirit of service to humanity and the spirit of adventurism of the indomitable Serampore Trio and the deathless sermon of Carey :

Expect great things from God

Attempt great things for God ,

even as we commemorate the epoch-making event of Carey's landing on the shores of Hooghly river and of establishing Serampore College for serving many generations of young people for many more years to come.

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