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Sidelights on Serampore.

SOME time ago the writer had recourse to those two mines of historical information in Calcutta, the Imperial (now Indian) Library and the library of the Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal, since when he has been possessed of a desire to explore some of the interesting byways that everywhere led from his main subject. One of these byways is the one that leads to Serampore. It can be followed through many publications of a century or a century and half ago, but for our present purpose we confine it rigidly to the first fifteen volumes of the *Calcutta Review* beginning with the year 1845, by which time the Serampore trio had become highly respected characters of recent history. There is no doubt but that the *Calcutta Review* has been thoroughly combed by the authors of the various "Lives" of the early Bengal missionaries and no important fact is likely to have been overlooked by them, but a biographer must select his matter and must often omit material unnecessary for the purposes of his book and yet which sheds some sidelight on the character whose story he is telling. It is such material, extracted from the old volume of the *Review*, which follows.

The *Calcutta Review* as its name implies, published reviews of contemporary publications. Its articles were anonymous and confined to subjects relating to India and the affairs of the East India Company. The reviews are lengthy and are often of considerable interest. Generally they seem to be the reviewer's own essay on the subject discussed and include a large amount of independent information.

Article 1 of the first volume deals with the social life of the English in India and sheds a little light on the convenience of the Danish settlement of Serampore not only to proscribed missionaries, but also to others who for one reason or another had incurred the displeasure of the all-powerful Company, and wished to find asylum outside its jurisdiction. "A man becomes bankrupt," we read, "passes through the Insolvent Court, surrenders, or ought to surrender every farthing he has in the world, and what is the result? We do not see a pale-faced, dim-eyed wretch, with stooping gate and slouched hat, and coat out at elbows, stealing along the streets to his small furnished lodging in an obscure quarter of the town. No; on the very day that his name appears in the *Gazette*, whilst he is advertised to the whole world as "late of Calcutta and now residing in the Danish settlement of Serampore," he may, perchance be seen on the

course of Calcutta riding a fine English horse . . ." His domicile is of course Serampore and he is now a visitor to Calcutta, but by migrating to Serampore he has evidently rapidly found new means not only of subsistence but even to opulence. No doubt it is with creditors' money for the time being at least.

The incident in the year 1807 when the Government attempted to close the Serampore press is discussed at some length in an essay on "The Early or Exclusively Oriental Period of Government Education in Bengal." It will be recollected that exception was taken by Government to a pamphlet published by the Serampore Press which was alleged to be offensive to Moslems and likely to be productive of disorder. All that the offending pamphlet contained, says the writer, was "a brief statement of gospel truth, while it depicted in plain but strong terms the character of Muhammed and his sanguinary faith: but not in terms plainer or stronger than justice demanded, and historic truthfully warranted. The only effect it had on the Mussalmen themselves, was, that it led to the request, on the part of a Mogul merchant, that one of their learned men 'should prepare an answer to it'." The publications of the Press were proscribed and the Danish Governor of Serampore, who at all times remained a firm friend of the missionaries, pressed for an *official* answer from the British Governor-General to the question "Whether the circulation of the Bible in the Bengali language was to be included in his lordship's prohibition?" The reply he eventually received was as follows: "We are not aware of any objection to the promulgation of the scriptures in the Bengali language unaccompanied by any comment on the religions of the country." That is as the *Review* ironically comments, "the English Government were not aware that there was any objection to the publication of the Bible, yet they were not certain."

The struggle continued with the well-known result; with the aid of the Governor of Serampore the missionaries successfully resisted the demand that the Press should be removed to Calcutta (which would have meant its closure) but were compelled to submit any matter for publication to prior censorship by a Government officer, who would be either a Hindu or a Mohammedan.

The "secret department" of Government then having nothing better to do, desired Mr. Blaquiere, one of the magistrates of the Town of Calcutta to make further enquiries regarding the missionaries and, to quote the *Review* again, these enquiries "led to the fearful discovery that there were other tracts of a similar nature in the Hindustani and Bengali languages—and to the still more astounding discovery, that the Gospel of salvation was actually preached to the inhabitants of Calcutta!" This

information was included in a despatch to the Court of Directors in which it was stated that Mr. Blaquiere had directed a Brahmin in his service to wait on the Reverend Mr. Ward and, under a pretended desire to become a convert, to obtain from Mr. Ward such copies of publications issued by the missionaries as he could. The result of this subterfuge was that Mr. Blaquiere was very cleverly able to produce to the Secretary to the Government no less than eleven publications, some in Bengali and some in Hindustani. Mr. Blaquiere also deputed "a person in his employ" to attend one of the meetings conducted by Mr. Ward and a copy of the report of this meeting was appended for the perusal of the Honorable Court. The "Memorandum" reports that the ceremony was conducted by an elderly Bengali who, during the course of his sermon observed that even Brahmans and other people of respectability live a sinful life in the town; to this they were prompted by their evil inclination. He questioned the difference between Brahmans and other men seeing they are both liable to sin equally, that if other castes were required to expiate their sins, why not the Brahmans—that Brahmans cannot forgive sins. A European then ascended the pulpit and preached a sermon in English. Among the hearers, the observer reported, he did not see a single person of respectability, but such as he recognised lived an irregular life. (Was it a lack of familiarity with the gospels that led Mr. Blaquiere to overlook the most obvious retort which could be made to the criticism of a church which carried its message to the Indian equivalent of publicans and sinners?)

On receipt of these communications, the Supreme Council took even more extreme suppressive measures in spite of all the explanations of "the venerable Mr. Carey" and all the protests of the Governor of Serampore. There was, however, one servant of the Company possessed of the energy and the will to make a vigorous protest, and to dare the frown of the Government he served; this was none other than the Rev. Dr. Claudius Buchanan, later Vice-Provost of the College of Fort William and one of the group of evangelical chaplains of the East India Company appointed through the influence of Charles Grant and on the recommendation of the doughty Charles Simeon of Holy Trinity, Cambridge. Buchanan "addressed a memorial or remonstrance of a character so bold, energetic, and uncompromising, as to draw upon himself the heaviest denunciation of the Supreme Government. The stroke had evidently fallen on some real sores. For so keenly did the members of Government smart under the cutting animadversions of the memorialist, that they felt themselves compelled to address a conjoint letter of complaint and self-vindication to the Court of Directors. Most

certainly the Rev. Doctor did not mince the matter. His trumpet gave no uncertain sound." All honour to the Reverend Doctor; his was hardly a gentle character, but he dared in no uncertain way "to be the champion of our church."

A bypath leads from Serampore to Burma; it was trod by Felix Carey and Chater and by Adoniram Judson, and they found it a thorny path. In due course the work grew in Burma, and as at Serampore, a Mission Press was established. The *Calcutta Review* frequently notices publications of the American Baptist Mission Press at Moulmein and an early volume informs us that from Moulmein appeared a little book of verse compiled by a Mrs. C. J. Simons entitled *The Child's Wreath of Hymns and Songs*. The review devotes several pages to it, in which the dearth of educational books suitable for children is deplored and more especially the absence of a demand for them. A footnote, however, pays tribute to "the Serampore and other Missionary Presses" which had published important educational works, though, sad to say, they were designed to create rather than to meet a demand. A criticism which has rather a modern sound is "the pernicious habit of slipping off the tongue expressions of self-condemnation and devotion equally beyond the possible calibre of a child's mind . . . how can a child repeat such words as the following with any degree of understanding?"

Madly I ran my sinful race,
Vindictive Justice stood in view;
To Sinai's fiery mount I flew."

and, "on infantine lips what meaning can be attached to these expressions?"

You were wretched, weak and vile,
You deserved His holy frown,
But he saw you with a smile,
And to save you hastened down."

Mrs. Simons however was a mother and was evidently not quite so devoid of an understanding of a child's outlook as some of her selections might indicate, as the following "entire specimen of Mrs. Simons's versification" will show:

MARY'S LAMB

Mary had a little lamb,
Its fleece was white as snow,
And everywhere that Mary went
The lamb was sure to go.

It is a pleasure to think of Mrs. Simons sitting among her children (a veritable quiverful, without doubt, though one of her poems suggests that there were gaps in the quiver), in the steamy

heat of faraway Burma while her thoughts strayed to the cool green pastures of some village in her native land, to the spring-time and to the lively fleecy lambs her own children would never see so long as they remained in exile, and formulating a verse which a full century later would be on the lips of every English child. It is interesting to think too, that it was a Baptist Mission Press which first published "Mary had a little lamb."

In Volume III of the *Review* we read of a book by the mighty Alexander Duff on the subject of *Indian Missions and Hinduism* which leads the writer to contemplate the "Literary Fruits of Missionary Labours" and we are not at all surprised to find that he writes with admiration of the extraordinary liberality of mind of "the first Englishmen that ever came to the shores of Bengal with the single purpose of communicating to the *natives* of India the pure gospel of salvation; with no advantages of academic training . . . they were led into various courses of research that issued in their being the agents of diffusing a greater amount of accurate knowledge regarding India and it's people . . . than had been accessible to European students before. A few years before they came to India, Carey and Marshman (and we suppose Ward also, though we do not remember to have heard aught of his early history) were men of whom it might be said that "They knew, and knew no more, their bible true," and a few years after their arrival, we find them grappling successfully with some of the most difficult subjects of philological and ethnographical research; and until this hour their works are among the most important sources from which the student must gain his knowledge of India and Indian things. He who would enquire into the natural products of the country will find that he must proceed a long way before he reach the point to which Carey led the way. He who would study the philosophy of Indian life, and the laws and usages of the people will find much information in the periodical writings of Dr. Marshman; while the student of man and matters might live long in the land . . . without getting any information he might not have got from the classical work of Mr. Ward."

The Rev. William Robinson joined the Serampore Community in 1806; he attempted to form a mission to Bhutan and later proceeded to Java and Sumatra, thence returning to minister at the Lall Bazar Church, Calcutta. During his years in Bengal he pieced together a poem in blank verse of no less than eight books, with an appendix thrown in, bearing the formidable title *The Invisible World: or The State of Departed Spirits between Death and the Resurrection* which was offered to a long-suffering public in the year 1844. The reviewer of this monumental work confesses that the mere fact that a poem in

that period Carey and his associate, John Thomas, were Indigo planters at Mudnabati and Mahipaldighi respectively for some years. Indigo production was for over a century a staple industry in Bengal and Bihar, and even to this day there are those who can remember how the indigo industry was dealt a death blow when the brilliant dyes of modern aniline chemistry effectively ousted the duller vegetable dye from the market.

The indigo planter of early days was not a servant of the Company; doubtless he entered the country with the cognizance of the Company, though he may not have had official permission. The prevalent picture in England of an indigo planter, to quote from the *Review*, was of a man "with a wide-brimmed straw hat, a fierce and oppressive overseer, and a whole string of unfortunate dark coloured beings, working away incessantly under a broiling and vertical sun . . . and is supposed to go home at the end of a couple of lustra, with a fortune raised on the basis of oppression and illegality." "We will try and give the planter fair play," says the anonymous essayist, "nothing extenuating, nor setting down aught in malice."

The planter who settled in Bengal about the time of William Carey was as often as not an adventurer seeking a spot on which to establish himself. His method was to purchase "a potta of about fifty, or one hundred bighas, and there erect a factory with vats, godowns and machinery complete." Under the laws of the Company he was not allowed to own land himself, the land was therefore held "*benami* or covertly, by the master, and openly by his native agent, or some other man of straw." He was not even covertly a landowner on any scale, and to obtain a crop he would have to persuade the neighbouring peasants to sow indigo, giving them an advance of two rupees per bigha and promising them a dividend at harvest time. The zemindar, or landowner of the district, who incidentally seldom had any interest in the land apart from extracting his rents, was not usually disposed to look very favourably on this interference with his lordship over the ryots, and inevitably there were quarrels. In a country where landmarks are easily obliterated, where, for example, during the rains a small muddy stream might become a raging torrent flooding large areas of land and then subside into a course quite different from that it had previously followed, there was ample opportunity for disagreements over boundaries. Indigo estates were far from the centres of government and the arm of the law never very long in India, seldom extended as far as the indigo estate. The result was that disputes were as often as not settled under the "lattial system" by the retainers of the respective sides. The word lattial is derived from the vernacular word "latti," now more commonly spelt "lathi," is a weighted bamboo

pole capable of forming quite a formidable weapon; it is used in these days by the Indian police as the equivalent of the truncheon. The writer was recently amused to find that the cashier at his office in Calcutta keeps one by his desk. Settlement by the "lattial system" merely indicated a free fight between the respective factions.

Having erected his factory, the planter would then seek out high sandy places on which to sow his indigo and efforts would be made to persuade the ryot occupying the ground to accept the two rupees advance and undertake the work. For one reason or another the ryot was generally reluctant to do so, but in the fall of the year he was short of money, and at that season could be persuaded to enter into an agreement for the sake of the advance. When sowing time approached the ryot would begin to display his reluctance to commence sowing; the two rupees per bigha had long since been spent and forgotten and the planter would then have recourse to law for breach of contract. A slip of paper awarding him damages might then be received from the court; of these damages he would be able to obtain only a fraction if any, while the ryot "who was previously known in the village as a man of flocks and herds, with a plough or two and a train of lusty oxen, has suddenly dwindled down into a penniless outcaste . . . Bullocks and utensils, kids and goats are safe under the protection of his patron . . . his very house and adjoining plots of ground turn out to be the property of some distant relation. This situation resulted in the unprincipled sowing of the lands by force, with the aid of a strong body of lattials."

The seeds being sown by one means or another, and the plant having commenced growing, the grass and low jungle which sprang up with great rapidity in the hot damp climate of Bengal, must be constantly weeded out. Agreement or no agreement, this was not to the taste of the ryot and so coolies must be hired by the factory for weeding, and two annas per man entered against the name of the defaulter.

At last the crop, if it survived the hazards of climate and jungle was gathered, and the ryot received his payment. From this must be deducted the advance and other amounts standing against his name. From the balance, rent must be paid, debts repaid, together with interest in the neighbourhood of fifty per cent (low enough! when the watchman at the writer's office died in 1947 he left about a thousand rupees out in loans among his fellow-workers carrying interest at the rate of eighty per cent.) Then there would be demands for "gifts" from the planter's agents, the zemindar's agents and many others who felt they should share in the year's prosperity, with the result, the *Review* informs us, that the ryot would be left with about eight annas to

pay off demands of one rupee twelve annas. On the whole indigo growing was not very profitable to the ryot, and it is hardly to be wondered that he did not find it a very attractive occupation.

In these circumstances as well as in the misfortunes William Carey suffered due to floods, probably lie the reasons why he, an eminently practical man, was not able to make indigo production pay. Hampered on the one hand by the indolence of the ryot and his reluctance to cultivate indigo energetically, and on the other hand by his own conscience, which we can hardly imagine permitting him to resort to the "lattice system," or any other method of enforcement, William Carey was in a business in which the odds were weighted against him. Doubtless too, his Christian employer, Mr. Udney, although prepared to continue the factory for so long at a loss in the hope that a few successful seasons would make all the difference to a project existing so near the border line between failure and success, was not prepared to resort to enforcement either. Indigo planting tided Carey over a very difficult period and was part of his preparation for Serampore, but both he and Mr. Udney were wise to drop it when they did.

William Carey died in 1834, and by the year 1850 the references to him in the *Calcutta Review* are becoming few and infrequent, though literary work by later Baptists is reviewed quite frequently. The occasional references to Carey by the English residents in India of that time indicate that he had become almost a legendary figure, looked back to with veneration. The following paragraph, occasioned by the publication of a work entitled *An Anglo-Indian Domestic Sketch—A letter from an Artist in India to his Mother in England in 1849* relates a minor incident and, quite incidentally, gives an indication of the impression Carey's life had made on the average European. In discussing the ravages of white ants, one of the minor plagues of life in the tropics, the writer says, "We have heard that the venerable Dr. Carey was never known to be thoroughly enraged by any creature, except by these same white ants, and well he might—for they utterly destroyed in a single night, either Walton's Polyglot or Poole's Synopsis. We believe it is on record that the good old man set about a search after the queen mother, with a view to cutting off the succession; but whether he did or not, we do not remember to have heard."

F. M. W. HARRISON.