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The Heritage of Serampore College and the Future of Mission

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The following are some notes of what was said at the conference relating specifically to Serampore College.

Brian Stanley: 200 years of Serampore College history

Brian Stanley, Professor of World Christianity at Edinburgh University, began with the student unrest at Serampore College in 1970 between the Arts/Sciences and the Theology students. There were three ‘governing bodies’ — the original Serampore College Council, the Senate which had been set up by the 1918 Serampore College Act and the Faculty. Lesslie Newbigin, the Bishop of Madras, chaired a committee to report on the future of the College. The report argued that Carey had seen truth as a single whole in which there was no separate subject of theology but this view was on its way to dissolution; the secularists had destroyed this synthesis and there was no unified view in Europe or in India. Serampore College remained the only theological college in which both strands continued. The report recommended that the Arts/Sciences faculties should be retained but the theology department join Bishops College in Kolkata. This would be more efficient and useful in preparing for the Church of North India. The Serampore College Council rejected the recommendations.

The 1827 Charter had permitted degrees in science but the 1918 Serampore College Act stipulated that they could only be given if the college had the resources to meet the necessary standards. The first degrees were formally awarded in 1915. It provided a unified Christian higher education.

Carey, Marshman and John Clark Marshman had been the driving forces after William Ward died in 1823 in their vision of India’s future lying in Indian hands as set out the 1805 *Form of agreement* (1947) with native preachers, translations and elementary schools. John Clark Marshman argued in 1827 that literacy alone was not enough; they had to be equipped to be equals to the Hindus. They saw ‘vital Christianity’ as based on sound learning.

Sanskrit took pride of place with teaching in the Bengali vernacular as opposed to English at the Hindu College (now Presidency University) and Alexander Duff's Scottish Church College but they wanted scientific knowledge to dispel ignorance and so they combined European science with Eastern literature. The prospectus was formed for Christians but they admitted Hindu and Muslim students because they believed that Christian students would benefit from the contact. However, for the BMS the admission of non-Christians amounted to dilution. There was equality in the admission criteria but all Professors and members of the Council had to be Christians.

There followed a complex outworking of continuity and insecurities:

1. there was no attraction to vernacular education — global languages are better for work — by 1834 the College is reporting that few people are studying Sanskrit (nb. most students did not come from a Hindu background);
2. funding was a problem from the start; the BMS would support anything aimed at producing Baptist ministers; Carey's funding was lost after the East India Company ended his contract during the financial crash; John Clark Marshman supported the College from his own pocket as a newspaper publisher; the College was handed back to the BMS in 1855 having been excluded from the earlier settlement with the Serampore missionaries; at one point the BMS proposed closing the college but Underhill led a campaign against the idea and, though he lost the vote, he won the argument but the BMS refused to include the College in its centenary funding campaign.
3. The question was raised: could other churches be involved? George Howells, who became Principal in 1906, had been with the GBMS in Cuttack and he piloted the College through the 1918 Serampore College Act which created the Senate which allowed a broader base though most members were Baptists. However, most missionary societies were not willing to contribute. In 1925 the BMS accepted full responsibility for the College — something it might not have done if it had realised what would happen in the 1930s. There has been perpetual underfunding; with Indian Independence in 1949 the Council was relocated to Serampore; from 1949–1959 C. E. Abraham was the first Indian Principal. Since then various Indian churches have given grants but there has been no regular support and only occasional support from voluntary organisations.
4. the combination of secular and theological education highlighted in the 1970 Newbiggin Report can be criticised but it is worth noting that this was also true of the dissenting academies in England; now science has become separate from Christian interest in the world, cf. the attempt by the BJP to promote Vedic science.

He concluded by reading a letter written by Lal Khan Cheema to Dr Angus on 13 May 1941 outlining how much he had benefited from his studies at Serampore.

John Hudson: From the Enlightenment to modern missions: how the vision of the Serampore Quartet has come full circle

John Hudson introduced himself as a former tour guide at Serampore College, a job he had done during the school holidays when his father taught at the college whenever American tourists arrived at the College unexpectedly. See the separate paper for his talk.

Dr Vansanglura & Revd Dr Dipankar Haldar: Serampore into the future

Dr Vansanglura (Principal) began by saying that they are planning to admit Christian students to the Arts/Sciences courses. They also have a programme to renovate the site and the buildings and on a visit to Denmark found that there was interest in building up a new relationship. They have also visited other Nordic countries and have received grants from the Danish government. There may be a visit from the Crown Prince when he comes to open the new Danish embassy.

He stressed the importance of understanding the ecological system and the importance of emphasising their role as stewards of biodiversity. They plan to make it a plastic free zone. They are involved in a campaign to clean Serampore and will seek to deal with their own garbage themselves.

He regretted the continuing impact of caste and class distinctions and stressed the need to address communalism.

Currently they only offer theology degrees but they plan to make the transition to being a fully fledged university.¹

There is a planning committee and an extension of the campus committee and they have earmarked about 10 acres for a new site — the current site is about 6½ acres. There is a proposal to restore a cultural programme in the original college.

They have no good auditorium and have proposed building a bicentenary auditorium for which they have the support of the Bengal government. For the repair and maintenance of the main buildings, they have support from the National Museum of Denmark. They have also put in a proposal to the West Bengal Heritage Committee.

They have a Carey library and research library agreement with Princeton University and want to use the Carey links to create a user-friendly research centre — currently they receive about 800 visitors a year for research purposes.

They wish to provide quality education and be a centre for excellence. They would like to become self-supporting; there is no permanent domain for theology; Serampore College belongs to everyone but no one owns it.

There are a lot of maintenance demands; they have done the electrical wiring and are moving to solar energy.

They are involved in a search for partners.

Revd Dr Dipankar Haldar (Deputy Principal) explained that the college is taking up the work of translation through programmes for translators requested by the Bible societies. They began with a Diploma in Bible Translation which was initially filled by bible society staff. They now have a Bachelor in Bible Translation Studies for which they have had lots of applications and they are designing a Masters in Bible Translation Studies.

However, there is no space in the college and so the students have to come during the college holidays in May when it is very hot! They plan to have a bible translation centre which they will call the Centre for Integrated Studies.

¹Dhirendra K. Sahu pointed out that there might be implications in that, if they granted their own degrees, they would be restricted to a geographical area and would no longer be able to have affiliated colleges for theology.

They are also committed to women's empowerment but need more accommodation for women. They only have three out of fifteen women teachers and so need accommodation for both teachers and students.

References

Carey, W., Marsmran, J., Ward, W., Chamberlain, J., Mardon, R., Biss, J., Moore, W., Rowe, J. and Carey, F. (1947). The Serampore Form of Agreement. *Baptist Quarterly* 12(5):125–138. Text of the agreement reprinted from *Periodical Accounts* Vol. III pp. 198f.