

**William Carey University**  
**Hattiesburg, Mississippi, USA**

**Lecture on the Topic**

**“Translation of the New Testament and the Bible  
into Bengali Language by William Carey”**

Delivered on Friday, 13 November 2015  
To GRK 202—INTRODUCTORY GREEK II  
By Dipankar Haldar<sup>1</sup>

**1. Introduction:** William Carey from his childhood had a great interest in learning foreign languages, particularly classical languages. It is remarked that at the age of twelve Carey found ‘a copy of “Dyche’s Latin Vocabulary,” and committed nearly the whole of it to memory, and carefully studied the brief sketch of a grammar prefixed to it.’”<sup>2</sup> Thereafter, when Carey was working as an apprentice in Clark Nichole’s shoemaking shop, he found a commentary on the New Testament interspersed with Greek words of which he was ignorant. He was attracted to it and copied some of the words and persuaded a journeyman named Tom Jones who knew Greek and got the translation of those words done from him and from there he was inspired to learn Greek. He taught himself Greek with the help of Mr. Jones. Carey did this because he loved to read the Holy Scripture in his mother tongue as well as in the original language. Timothy George wrote that Carey was a pre-cautious child in religious matters and loved to read the Scriptures from his childhood. To support this fact he quoted from Carey who wrote that “... read the Scriptures from my infancy.”<sup>3</sup> Carey also emphasized on the need of learning other languages of the world, particularly the language of the place where the missionaries would work. Carey in his book, “*Enquiry...*” wrote about the duties of the missionaries concerning such language study, “...their first business must be to gain some acquaintance with the language of the natives, and by all lawful means to endeavor to cultivate a friendship with them...”<sup>4</sup>

Carey kept this fact in mind and as soon as he and his family embarked on the ship (on 13<sup>th</sup> June, 1793) bound for Bengal he began to learn Bengali meticulously from John Thomas who was already acquainted with Bengali language. John Clark Marshman writes, “Mr. Carey employed his time in studying Bengalee under Mr. Thomas’s tuition, and in assisting him in the translation

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<sup>2</sup> John Clark Marshman, *The Life and Times of Carey, Marshman and Ward*, Vol. I (Serampore: Council of Serampore College, 2005), p. 2.

<sup>3</sup> Timothy George, *Faithful Witnesses: The Life and Mission of William Carey* (Birmingham: New Hope, 1991), p. 4.

<sup>4</sup> William Carey, *An Enquiry Into the Obligations of Christians to use Means for the Conversion of the Heathens* (Leicester: ANN IRELAND, MDCCXCII), pp. 51-52.

of the Book of Genesis, by his language of the original.”<sup>5</sup> When Carey landed in Calcutta (on 11<sup>th</sup> November, 1793), he took a rented house and found a good Bengalee friend, RamRam Basu, who was already acquainted with John Thomas. Carey appointed him as his Munshee (Teacher & Interpreter) to teach him Bengali language. Thereafter, for some time Carey was forced to hunt for job to save his family, at first in the Sunderbans and then for a little longer period in Mudnabatty of Malda. When Carey took the job of Indigo factory at Malda (on 15<sup>th</sup> June, 1794), he again continued to learn Bengali language and did the translation of the New Testament, and by August 1794, he thought of printing the Bengali translation of the New Testament.

**2. First Bengali Types:** While preparing to print the first ever Bengali translation of the New Testament Carey first thought of obtaining the fount of Bengali types from England, but when he learned that the types were available in Hooghly district itself, he changed his mind and began to find possibilities to have the types for his printing purposes. The first Bengali types ever used in India were those used in printing Halhed’s Bengalee grammar at a press in Hooghly in 1778. The punches for those founts were prepared by Sir Charles Wilkins, the eminent orientalist, who under the guidance of the Governor Warren Hastings began his work to introduce the oriental treasures to the Europeans. He learnt the art of punch cutting and then he first cut a set of Bengali punches with his own hands. Thereafter, he gave the training to a Bengali native blacksmith named Panchanan Karmakar who lived in Serampore near Bat Tala, G. T. Road. Panchanan was from a family of engraver cum type-cutter cum metal designer and founder. It is known that the ancestors of Panchanan worked under King Alibardi Khan for engraving names and designs on the metal substances. Wilkins used to draw the pictures of the Bengali types, and the type-cutting work used to be done by Panchanan. Carey at an opportune time engaged this expert young man Panchanan to join William Ward the specialist in printing technology for the printing job at Serampore.

**3. William Ward joined William Carey’s great Printing Enterprise:** One of the missionaries who were sent by the Mission Society to join William Carey in 1799 was William Ward who had special talent and training in printing technology. William Ward born at Derby on 20<sup>th</sup> October 1769 was the son of John Ward, a carpenter and builder. On leaving school Ward was placed as an apprentice with Mr. Drury who was at the head of a large printing establishment in the town. Mr. Ward soon rose to the grade of corrector of the press and gradually he acquired great fluency and command over language. The Serampore Mission was going to be greatly benefitted and blessed as Mr. Ward dedicated his life later on for mission work at Serampore. While William Carey was still working at Mudnabatty, he was gifted a second-hand printing machine by George Udny which was taken to Mudnabatty, but Carey could not begin the printing work there because he did not have an expert printer. When the Printing Machine reached Mudnabatty, Carey was so excited that the villagers thought and whispered among them saying “This must be the god and idol of the *sahibs* (white people).”<sup>6</sup> Later on, when Carey came to join the missionaries at Serampore (on 10<sup>th</sup> January 1800) he decided to begin the Mission work and the printing press in Serampore. Carey’s press and other accessories were transported from Mudnabatty to Serampore. The missionaries bought a house for Rs. 6000. The house could accommodate all missionary families and it also had a large hall which was devoted for public worship. A side of the building was fitted up as a printing office.

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<sup>5</sup> Clark Marshman, *The Life and Times of Carey, Marshman and Ward*, Vol. I, ... p. 60.

<sup>6</sup> Sunil Kumar Chatterji, *Baro Sadh Baro Seba*, in Bengali meaning ‘Great Desire, Great Service’ (Sheoraphuli: S. K. Chatterji, 1989), p. 54.

**4. The First Printing of the New Testament and the Bible:** With the expertise of William Ward, the press was set up and the types were arranged and the printing of the portions of the Bengali Bible was immediately started in March 1800. Apart from two books of the Old Testament, the translation of the whole Bible into Bengali had been completed by this time. The missionaries were determined to begin the printing of the New Testament. Mr. Ward set the first types by his own hands and presented the first sheet of the New Testament to Carey on 18<sup>th</sup> March, 1800.<sup>7</sup> In 1809, a treadmill run by a steam engine was set up in Serampore to produce paper. In August, the gospel of Matthew was completed as *Mangal Samachar* (Good News). The last sheets of the work were published on the 7<sup>th</sup> of February 1801. The printing of the volume was completed within nine months. By the year 1804, the printing of various portions of the Bible had been completed in Bengalee, Oriya, Hindi and Sanskrit languages. Initially the missionaries faced problems to raise money for printing. In 1795, Carey wrote to the Mission Society in England that the printing of 10,000 copies of the translated New Testament would cost Rs 43,750, a sum that was beyond their capacity to raise. Thus, due to lack of funds, the printing work of the Bengali New Testament had to be restricted. The missionaries sought to raise money by selling copies of the Bengali Bible for 2 gold mohurs (Indian gold coin) each to the Englishmen in Calcutta. They raised Rs 1500 from this enterprise. Then from 1804, the Society in England raised Rs 10,000 every year to fund the printing of the Bible in seven Indian vernaculars. Once the books became popular, the press started earning enough money to cover costs and leave some profit. This money was entirely devoted for furthering the work of the Mission.

**5. Publication of different editions of the books of the New Testament and the Bible in Bengali:** The Serampore Mission press published a large number of Bengali books apart from the books of the Bengali Bible. Here an account of only the books of the Bible is being given. The Gospel of Matthew was printed in 1800, the New Testament in 1801, Pentateuch and Proverbs in 1802, Psalms and Songs of Solomon in 1803, Parts of the Old Testament in 1804, the New Testament and Ecclesiastes in 1806, Luke, Acts and Romans & Prophetic books in 1807, Proverbs in 1808, the Historical Books and Complete Bible in 5 volumes in 1809, the New Testament in 1811, Pentateuch in 1813, Kings and Proverbs in 1814, New Testament in 1816, Matthew & Mark in 1819, Pentateuch & Proverbs in 1821, (Then in 1823, William Carey was greatly shocked and discouraged at the sudden death of William Ward, but the printing works continued slowly.) the Matthew & Mark were printed in 1824, Pentateuch in 1825, Matthew in 1828, the Old Testament & Mark in 1829, the Old Testament, Psalms & the New Testament in 1831-34.<sup>8</sup>

**6. Fate of translation and printing after William Carey's death:** At the death of William Carey on 9<sup>th</sup> January, 1834, the huge printing works and mission enterprise at Serampore came to a standstill. Though the Serampore Mission Press was formally closed down in 1837, publications from the press continued to flow till later on. At the close of 1845, the King of Denmark surrendered Serampore to the British Government. The spearheads associated with the conception and execution of the Mission Press had all expired by 1854. Due to lack of men to take initiative, gradually the press was bereft of financial as well as expert guidance. Hence, all printing activities came to a standstill by 1855.

<sup>7</sup> John Clark Marshman, *The Life and Times of Carey, Marshman and Ward*, Vol. I..., p. 129.

<sup>8</sup> Sunil Kumar Chatterji, *Baro Sadh Baro Seba*, in Bengali meaning 'Great Desire, Great Service'..., pp. 136-139.

**7. Conclusion:** William Carey's Bengali translation of the complete Bible or OV (Old Version) has been fondly used by the Christians of all generations till today. For last few decades, the language of OV was found little difficult to understand by present generation of Christians. So the Bible Society of India took initiative to translate TEV/GNB in common Bengali language. The translation work of Bengali CL (Common Language) Bible was completed and released in 1999 at Kolkata by the Governor of West Bengal in a gala event, when the author of this article was at the helm of Kolkata Bible Society. Later on it was found that many traditional as well as recent Bengali Christians having gone through the translation of the Bengali CL (Common Language) preferred to read Bengali OV to Bengali CL. It must be noted that the Bengali OV had been revised occasionally throughout the ages to fit into the ongoing changes of the spoken and written Bengali language, yet people in general accepted the OV as the one of Carey with reverence, although a comparative study of the first translation of Carey in juxtaposition with the present OV will reveal that there are remarkable differences between them. Probably a deep reverential sentiment of the Bengalis for William Carey and his translation work has led and guided them to establish the present OV as the most acceptable translation.

### Bibliography

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