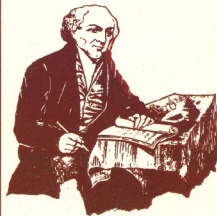


S O U V E N I R

WILLIAM CAREY BICENTENARY CELEBRATIONS

1793 — 1993

CELEBRATING
200th
YEAR OF
CAREY'S
ARRIVAL IN INDIA
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WILLIAM CAREY

MY REAL LIFE HERO

By Mrs. Margaret S. Joseph

The position that Indian women occupy today is very largely the result of more than a century of earnest endeavour on the part of social reformers and educationists. Those who have watched India's social and political trends in the decades prior to her independence regard the rapid advance of women and their easy adaptation to new days of life as a staggering achievement. Much of the credit for this is due to the liberal attitude adopted towards women by the social thinkers of those days. They believed that India's progress was closely linked with women's advancement, and that if India wished really to become free from its shackles, she should permit her women to share and share fully in the glorious task.

A review of India's recent social history points to many outstanding events as significant landmarks in the awakening and emancipation of her women. It will be remembered that as an outcome of internal wars and misinterpretation of customs, the condition of women in India was at its lowest ebb during the greater part of the 17th and 18th centuries. Missionaries like Dr. William Carey were among the first to carry on a strenuous campaign against the social disabilities then prevalent. Polygamy, child marriage, enforced widow hood and *Sati* - all effecting women - received the full force of their impact. They set up schools for girls and freeing of women from the trammels of out worn customs became the order of the day.

It was a time when Indians were in a pitifully backward condition. Learning had almost ceased; ordinary education scarcely existed. Mohammedanism was very orthodox and the collapse of their government had worked sad havoc in their religion. Needless to say, women being far behind men in

most areas of culture and learning, were the worst victims of mental and spiritual deprivation of society.

When Carey landed in India, the customs, traditions institution and laws were stagnant. The country was practically untouched by any regenerative influence whatsoever. He had to encounter all this in its worst form.

Carey's love for and dedication to the people of India is beyond dispute, yet he did not romanticise its darkness as so many of us do. To the core of his being, he was a missionary, so broad was his attack upon the problems of penetrating and becoming a part of India's life that he would not be deterred.

Sin enslaves, said Jesus Christ. Many of us forget that slavery is a social reality. While slavery works to the advantage of some, it hurts the weak. In struggling for the emancipation of women, Carey was resisting the consequences of the these sins that ruled India in his day.

About the rigid caste - system he said - " Perhaps this is one of the strongest chains with which the devil ever bound the children of men " beside being oppressive, caste cut off all motives to inquiry and exertion and made stupid contentment the habit of their lives. Their minds resembled their mud homesteads, devoid of pictures, ornaments and books. Harmless, indifferent vacant, they plodded on in the path of their forefathers; and even the truths in geography, astronomy or any other science, if out of their beaten track, made no more impression on them, than the sublimer truth of religion.

Women primarily are the home-makers. Therefore the absence of pictures, and books on their mud

homesteads was a reflection of the systematic and satanic emptying of the female mind. A mind which God created to be filled with all that is true, noble and good.

Yet Carey pitied more than blamed their superstition and servility, which he would often say, came of long subservience, making him the keener to preach to these dull, passive captives.

Female infanticide, child marriage, purdah, dowry and sati were everyday realities accepted as normal by the learned pundits and the illiterate masses. What was a common thread that linked all these practicals together? Obviously an ignorance of the Biblical truth that women shared with man the glory of being God's own image and the consequent diabolic trivialisation of her God-given dignity. To quote Shakuntala Narasimhan's description of the treatment of women "Smothered or poisoned at birth, given away in marriage at a tender age, bargained over like some commodity by dowry hungry in-laws, secluded in the name of chastity and religion and finally, burned for the exaltation of the family honour, or shunned as inauspicious widows, the burden of oppression took different forms at different stages of a woman's life, from birth to death in a chain of attitudes linked by contempt for the females".

Let us first examine some of Carey's struggles against various methods of death and turn to his efforts at breaking the yokes of oppression.

The practice of exposing infants which sadly exists even today, was wide spread then. If an infant was sick it was supposed that he was under the influence of an evil spirit. In that case he was put in a basket and hung up for three days. Only if the child survived that in human ordeal were other means then used to save the child's life.

Carey had his first horrifying experience in 1794 near Malda. He found the remains of an infant devoured by white ants after being exposed as a sacrifice. He could never be content after that,

merely by telling the story of a saviour who died to save the little ones. Carey felt obligated to struggle to save the lives of innocent young ones. Every year at the Sangoer Mia (where the river Hoogly meets the sea). Children were pushed down the mud-banks into the sea either to drown or devoured by crocodiles, all in fulfillment of vows their mother had made. Others looked upon this as a most holy sacrifice, giving to Mother Ganges the fruits of their body for the sins of their soul.

As Carey's concern for these victims of superstitious beastliness became known, he was asked by the vice-president to inquire into the number, nature and reason for infanticide. He said he took this assignment with great readiness. His report resulted in the practice being illegalised.

The moment of satisfaction came when they went to the sangor Puja (Worship of the Ocean) in 1804, to proclaim the story of God's sacrifice, they found that not a single infant was sacrificed to the goddess. What a testimony that was to the Lord who conquered death to give us life. A powerful and sinful practice had been stopped.

It was strange irony that the very measures which had been designed by our people in the past to protect women and to safeguard them from exploitation led to practices that defeated their purpose. It is well known that the rigors *Sati* and the ill-treatment of widows often drove women to prostitution or to seek refuge in the precincts of temples where they became victims of their own ignorance.

The widows Remarriage Act came into effect only in 1856, for the first time, making it legal for widow to remarry. Until then the only option for a widow were to suffer life long indignity and hardships or to commit *sati*. *Sati* often seemed lesser of the two evils, and preferred a speedy death to unknown horrors of her future destiny. The poor widows were deluded to thinking that they would bless the family and their act of self sacrifice would take seven generations before and after them to heaven.

She her self would become a *Sati*- *Mata* and the family would acquire celebrity status.

Carey once witnessed the cruelty of *Sati* at Naoseri one evening in 1799. The funeral pyre set Carey's spirit a flame with anguish. His brain burnt with her body. His sensitivity and compassion naturally extended to the children who lost the father at least in their mother they would have a natural guardian, their tenderness and most faithful and watchful friend. But her cruel death left them doubly orphaned in one sad day. Those who glorified this culture had clearly put family possessions above the intrinsic value of life. Naturally Carey vowed to hit this accursed things hard, if God would spare him.

In 1802 Lord Wellesley asked Carey to institute an inquiry in to *Sati*. Carey sent out people who investigated carefully the cases of *Sati* in a thirty mile radius of Calcutta and they came up with the horrifying total of 438 widows the toll of a single year superstition, cruelty and waste. Armed with these figures, Carey implored the governments for biddance. But because the Governor General Lord Wellesley left India and the government was hesitant to interfere with the religious sentiments of the people, this work got stalled for twenty five years. Deeply entrenched social evils do not have quick solutions.

Carey knew that faith implies perseverance. He did not just care about taking the souls of women and men to heaven, but also about their bodies and their sufferings. That is why he fought a relentless battle against *Sati* for 25 years. In this struggle he was fighting for the individuality of a woman. The woman is not a property of her husband and her in-laws.

She is a person in her own right. She ultimately lives for God and not just for her parents first and then for her husband. Therefore her husband's death, even though it usually is her greatest tragedy, in no way means that her life is now without meaning and purpose.

Carey understood that a husband is not a woman's

God. Hence marriage does not exhaust the fullness of what a woman is. Therefore he fought against this evil. Fighting does not simply mean agitating. It also means that her life is now without meaning and purpose.

Carey understood that a husband is not a woman's God. Hence marriage does not exhaust the fullness of what a woman is. Therefore he fought against this evil. Fighting does not simply mean agitating. It also means educating. So he researched and wrote well-documented papers with detailed statistics. It was his article in his paper "Friends of India" which became the central document for debate on *Sati*, in and outside the parliament.

Carey's great day came when on December 4th 1829 Lord Cavendish Bontick, after one year of careful study declared *Sati* both illegal and criminal, by the regulation XVII of the Bengal code. The edict was sent to Carey on Sunday, December 6th Carey decided not to preach but to carry out a thanksgiving fast unto the Lord. At last widows were free to live, and no longer would children be unnecessarily orphaned.

He next turned his attention to the evils or polygamy and early marriage both of which greatly handicapped women's social advancement. In a society of low moral ethics, a girl's liberty was greatly curtailed. Sending her to school was dangerous. Her only safety and her family's honour was in getting her married off at the earliest. Thus a normal childhood was denied to a girl. She had to pass into mother hood before she had the time to grow up as a person.

Early marriage led to the danger of early widow hood. Child widows were in those by gone days, not an infrequent phenomenon and an outmoded social code condemned them to a life of unrelieved chastity.

Child marriage was only outlawed in 1929 when the Child Marriages Restraint Act was introduced. However, this is, as we all know, not outlawed in

practice, because it is more a social and moral problem than a legal issue. It would seem that it was for that reason that Carey did not agitate as such against child marriage. Instead he sought to undercut its social roots by female education.

One consequence of this practice of child marriage was that the women in India could not be educated. Deprived of inner intellectual and cultural strength they became dependent and vulnerable to oppression, exploitation and enslavement. In seeking to educate girls, Carey was undercutting this important foundation of their slavery.

The history of education reveals a variety of superstitions that have held back the education of women. The notion of providing the means of instruction for female children never entered into the minds of parents. Girls were deprived of that imperfect domestic instruction which is sometimes given to boys. A superstitious feeling is alleged to have existed in the majority of orthodox families, principally cherished by the women and not discouraged by the men, that a girl taught to read and write, will soon after marriage become a widow, an event which was regarded as nearly the worst misfortune that can befall the sex. The belief was also generally entertained in native society that intrigue is facilitated by a knowledge of letters on the part of females. Under the influence of these fears, there is not only nothing done in a native family to promote female instruction to acquire the most elementary knowledge.

Hannah Marshman was a big asset to Carey's community in Serampore. Together they started free schools for the low castes and for girls. Out castes were always a chief feature of their work. Carey not only gave them primary education but also Serampore College was started to give higher

education to Indians in the vernacular. In 1827 Dr. Marshman obtained for Serampore a charter to confer degrees in all faculties, making it the first college in India to do so. Till today all degrees in Divinity are granted by Serampore College.

It would be stating the obvious to say that Carey's primary burden was to see that the darkness of ignorance and sin was removed and the gospel shine. In his attempt to do great thing for God, he achieve great things for India.

It must be remembered that Carey's struggle was neither smooth nor easy. One fact that struck me as I read several books on Carey was that struggles marked his life from beginning to the end. From lack of food, lack of funds, loneliness, opposition and sufferings which would have discouraged and put off most others, this cobbler plodded on with a goal and purpose. The fact that God had called him was one secret of his inner dynamism. The other source of power was the knowledge that the gospel was indeed the only power that could liberate India from its shackles.

I was a member of the Carey Baptist Church in Calcutta in my childhood, when Carey was not much more than a name to me. I thank god for giving me this wonderful opportunity of presenting this paper. Now I have no hesitation in confessing that studying Carey's life has been extremely rewarding to me. He truly is a real life here to me.

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A FRIENDLY WARNING

" I have unbounding fears for the future. I tremble for the Ark of God when it shall fall into the hands of mere counting - house men. " -- Dr. Even Ryland a close associate and the last of the old guard in England.