

INDIAN FIELDS, by Lauris Ashton

Much has been written about the role of the East India Company and the British Raj in India, but little has been said about the role of the much discredited missionaries whose schools played a small but important part in the changes taking place in the development of the country.

The London Missionary Society was founded in 1795 and operated unofficially in India from 1805, although it was not officially permitted to work there before 1813. By that time, the mood in Britain for social reform had put pressure on the British parliament to persuade the East India Company to give official permission to let the missionaries into the country. The company's policy was one of non-interference with the customs or religion of the local inhabitants. Its only interest was in making profits. It regarded the missionaries as a nuisance, bent on introducing religious and educational reforms and generally upsetting the apple cart.

By 1818, the East India Company was the virtual ruler of India, and by 1835 it had become official policy to encourage the teaching of English and European science to the local population, so that those so educated would be of use to the company and, in this, the missionaries, despite their failings, had a role to play.

One of the first London Missionary Society stations was established at Visagapatam, on the east coast. For administrative purposes the missions were divided into areas, and institutes of learning were set up in cities such as Madras and Calcutta and, later, although mission policy was rigorously controlled from London, these also became regional headquarters, able to make some decisions about local matters. Each mission had to send a yearly report to headquarters in London.

Each denomination was responsible for recruiting and setting up their own missions but not all those who volunteered for missionary work were sent. It was a long time before women were selected in their own right, and it was preferred that the men should have wives to accompany them. This was two for the price of one, perhaps, as wives were expected to do their fair share of mission work - and there was also less chance of the men succumbing to local temptations. A few missionaries were recruited from the sons of officials connected with the East India Company and already living in India. Richard Johnston's father, for example, was the accountant for the Carnatic Bank at Madras, others were the sons of missionaries already working in the country.

On the long voyage to their assigned country the new recruits tried to study the language, or organised services and Bible classes. In the early days they travelled by sailing ship, later by steamship. The discomforts of a sea voyage behind them, they were introduced to their new country. If they had been assigned a station "up country", before the days of the railways, they set off by bullock cart for a long and sometimes dangerous journey, with little certainty apart from their faith. Most had never been outside Britain before and would be unsettled by the heat, smells, colour and strangeness of it all.

When they arrived at their destination, often suffering from fever or dysentery, they were frequently faced with poor living conditions. Sometimes the little group of two or three couples they joined would be the only Europeans for miles around and they were pitchfork into all the tensions, disagreements and petty jealousies between people cooped up together for long periods. They either joined a group living in the mission compound or, if in the city, probably lived in a house rejected by better off Europeans as unhealthy. They were not exactly ostracised by other Europeans, but were often considered to be socially inferior, whilst they, in turn, disapproved of the lifestyle of their fellow country-men. The missionaries had to overcome feelings of isolation and loneliness, whilst adjusting to a country which would indeed be heathen to them.

Their primary aim was, naturally, to convert the local inhabitants to Christianity. One way in which they hoped to influence people was by setting up schools and orphanages for the local children and so persuading people through education and example. Later they established hospitals.

Time proved that education did not lead as quickly to conversion as the missionaries had hoped. Whilst, when initial suspicions were overcome, some Indians were happy for the missions to educate their children and cure the sick, few were sufficiently influenced by the teaching to give up their own beliefs. Although converts were made, the rate of conversion was dismally low, so the missionaries often felt disheartened. Richard Johnston, at Nundial in 1858, felt that any interest shown by the villagers in the mission and its message was motivated purely by the hope that he would help them win disputes with their neighbours. He comforted himself with the thought that he would rather have a small, sincere congregation than a large insincere one, and this must have been a common reaction.

Setting up a school or a hospital was not a simple operation. Missions ran on a very tight budget and were entirely dependent on donations from churches at home. Often, missionaries on furlough would give talks and hold meetings in the hope of tapping into the social and religious consciences of their audience. When funds had been raised, suitable accommodation had to be found or built. This frequently required protracted negotiations with local landlords.

Textbooks were either translated from English or written in the local language. Missionaries were helped in the schools and hospitals by Indian converts or ex-pupils whom they had trained. Alas, the native assistant did not always come up to expectations so sometimes had to be dismissed for drunkenness, smoking ganja, or other unsatisfactory behaviour. Children

whose parents had died from illness and famine, or who had been abandoned, were “rescued” by the missionaries, so orphanages and orphan schools were also established -- separate ones for boys and girls. Boys were taught reading and writing, arithmetic, scripture and, sometimes, a little geography. The girls were taught reading and writing, knitting and sewing as well as the scriptures. It was hoped that this would enable them to find suitable (Indian Christian) husbands, or work in European households, although some eventually returned to their extended families. One way of financing the orphanages was to seek personal sponsorship for an orphan from individuals or congregations in Britain, much as some charities operate today.

As well as setting up schools or hospitals, the missionaries made regular tours of surrounding towns and villages, preaching in the bazaars and handing out religious tracts which they had printed in the local language on their own printing presses. These tours were often protracted journeys taking weeks. Occasionally, a missionary would take a real interest in the customs and way of life of the villages he passed through and would make a record of them. When conditions permitted, they tried to set up small outstations in outlying villages, with perhaps just a local catechist in charge, which they would then visit to hold services or prayer meetings. Sometimes they would even be able to set up a small school.

The British in India died like flies and the missionaries were no exception. Many passed away within a relatively short time of arriving, succumbing to malaria, cholera, typhoid, dysentery, unspecified fevers and an inability to cope with the heat. Their wives died in childbirth. The case of Lucy Hay is an example. When John Hay, stationed at Ganja, returned from England with his new wife in 1844, she was ill with dysentery and expecting their first child. A severe attack brought on the premature birth of her baby and both she and the baby died. She had been married for just one year and 11 days. Her husband, with the assistance of a fellow missionary, had to bury first his child and then his young wife.

Over the years, those who survived were plagued by ill health and the enervating heat which, year after year, wore them down. In 1869, Susan Johnston, wife of missionary Richard Johnston, wrote to her daughter Susan Ashton, whose husband, also a missionary, was based in Calcutta:

Mr and Mrs Corboid are wanting to go home. Mr Hall wants to give up... but the Directors have not accepted his resignation. It is sad to think of the state our Society is now in. Dying and ill and going home is what we are constantly bearing.

Their only respite was an occasional trip to the hills or, after many years service, a furlough home to England.

Finance was another worrying problem for all the missionaries but particularly for the few who had been recruited in India. They were regarded as East Indian, so were paid at a lower rate than those recruited in Britain and were expected to contribute towards their children's education. It was not unusual for them to owe money to the society.

It was not considered appropriate that the children should be educated at schools established by their parents. It was feared that they would make friends with the local children and grow up under a “heathen” influence. So, frequently, at the age of five or six, their parents parted from them with the heartbreaking knowledge that they might not see them again until they were young adults. Sometimes a parent travelled with them, but often the children were put in the care of another missionary travelling back to England.

Two interdenominational schools had been established in England for the children of missionaries, wherever stationed. A girls' school was founded at Walthamstow Hall in 1838, and their brothers were sent to a similar school at Blackheath. Allowances were given to the parents so that they could pay their children's school fees.

Discipline was strict, but it was recognised that many of the children would not see their parents again for many years, so an attempt was made to provide them with not just a school but also a home. Some stayed with relatives or friends during the holidays but, for many, the school was their only home. They were allowed occasional contact with their brothers.

It was not unknown for some of the missionaries to dabble in trade, buying up cargo, particularly indigo, to be shipped and sold on the English market. Their sons had to be provided with a career, sometimes in the Indian Civil Service, but it required money for them to study and sit the necessary examinations.

Although the missionaries liked to think of themselves as morally above others, it was not unknown for there to be disputes and arguments, and even the odd scandal. There was minor but unpleasant cattiness when senior missionary wives regarded the younger more inexperienced wives as “ill-fitted” to help with the schools. Major upsets were caused by disputes regarding the interpretation of doctrine, and occasionally there was a more serious scandal when a missionary was accused of fathering a child by a native woman, or was thought to have been involved in financial mismanagement. There was also rivalry between all the different denominations, not just between Catholics and Protestants.

Sometimes there were disputes with the townspeople which created considerable ill will, as when a Brahmin student wanted to convert to Christianity. This was a feather in the cap of the mission but a tragedy for his family, who attacked the mission and dragged him away. The missionaries were dismayed to lose their high caste convert, and even more so when the European judge wisely ruled in favour of the family.

In the late 1860s the missions were plagued by severe financial problems and it almost seemed that they were more interested in saving money than saving souls. Smaller stations were closed down or reopened according to the financial situation.

It was not until around 1875 that any thought was given to the recruitment of women as missionaries in their own right. Until that time, although they were expected to play their part in organising and running the schools, and frequently carried the burden of the mission when their husband was ill or away, that was regarded as no more than their duty.

When eventually worn out by ill health and the hardships of their lives, disillusioned and sometimes close to losing their faith, it became time for the missionaries to retire, most returned to England but some stayed on in India, usually departing to the relatively kinder climate of the hills to live out the rest of their days.

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