

Rev. Felix Carey: Medical Missionary and Linguist

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Rev. Felix Carey of Srerampore: Medical Missionary (1786-1822)

Felix Carey was the eldest son of Rev. William Carey who can be called a prodigy of his times. The Carey family arrived in Bengal first as Manager of Woodney's Indigo Concern in Malda, but from the very beginning, they could not adjust to the climate and food of the region. Felix and his mother became seriously ill. They were afflicted with dysentery and Field's life was in great danger. Though Felix survived; his younger brother Peter succumbed to the disease. They also suffered from the chronic poverty which affected their physical and mental condition. Finally they came to Serampore on 10th Jan. 1800, which was then under Danish flag. Carey rejoiced, "My whole family enjoyed much better health than we did on our first coming. My children can speak Bengali nearly as well as the natives."

Carey had already collected a printing press, Bengali types, papers etc. and was ready to start printing his Bengali translation of the New Testament. The Serampore mission was launched at the same time. At this time four missionaries Marshman, Ward, Bransdon and Grant had come to Serampore and joined him. Felix was put under Ward's care for proper Christian grooming. Ward was very fond of him and nicknamed him, 'a tiger'. Felix was by then 14 years of age and ready for religious conversion and instruction. Felix even enquired with tears the way of Salvation.¹

Felix as a Printer

Ward became his friend, philosopher and guide and on 20th Dec. 1800, Felix together with the first convert Krishna Pal was baptized in the Ganges and then became a full-fledged missionary preacher at the raw age of 14 years 3 months. Initially Father Carey was in charge of translation work, medicine and finance. Felix assisted Ward in printing in which he had immense talent and ability. As an expert printer, compositor, and proof reader, Felix continued learning Sanskrit, Hindustani and Bengali with the help of Munshis. He even took part in preaching in the neighbouring villages. People were attracted by his fluent Bengali. Apart from

village preaching, he was also in charge of a Sunday school, the first of its kind in India (1802). His health broke down due to heavy work, but he recovered and in 1804 got married to Margarette Kinsey at Calcutta. After this marriage, his health remained steady and he now turned his attention to learn medical science. One doctor Taylor at that time came to reside at Serampore. He became the medical tutor of Felix. Dr. Taylor collected an unclaimed deadbody from the locality and taught Felix dissection and anatomy with its help. But Dr. Taylor did not stay for long and went over to Bombay to take up missionary work over there. After Dr. Taylor's departure, Felix continued his studies at the Calcutta hospital. This training was of great help because the Serampore missionary was planning a medical mission for the surrounding villages. After the death of Dr. Thomas in 1801 and departure of Dr. Taylor, there was no medical man in the mission. Felix was the only qualified person indispensable for printing and translation and for medical work. But Felix wanted adventure abroad and soon took up the mission's work in Burma. His stay in Burma was a disaster, though he gained popularity in the court of Ava, and made forays into East Bengal but in private life he lost his first wife, his second wife got drowned and the third fled. He finally returned to Serampore in 1818 and resumed his work at the press. From 1818 till his death in 1822 he became a medical missionary and prolific writer of science in Bengali in 'Dig Darshan, a Bengali fortnightly in Serampore. It was at this time that he contemplated a Bengali Encyclopedia, Vidyaharavali in six volumes. All scientific entries were written by him. His most famous work of Anatomy was in the first volume, the details of which will be given later. This ambitious project of Felix originated from his father's desire to teach western science in Bengali to the Bengali students and to establish a medical faculty in the Serampore college with govt's approval. Felix was entrusted with the task of preparing a text on anatomy. The columns of Vidyaharavali bears testimony to his work. The second volume was on western sciences also written by Felix. He died when he planned the third volume on medical jurisprudence. It may be noted here that he wrote more than 20 articles on scientific subjects including one on psychology.²

Felix as a scientist

For a long time Felix was engaged in the medical service in Serampore, Calcutta and Burma and his rich experience was suitable for the project. Felix selected anatomy as the first volume of the series. This choice however laudable was fraught with insurmountable difficulties. For lack of suitable terminology in Bengali of Western scientific and technical terms, but this forbidding task was still attempted by Felix with the help of his father and two renowned Bengali scholars, pandit Sreekanta Vidyalkar and pandit Kabichandra Tarkashiromani. The first volume of the Vidyaharavali was completed on anatomy by Felix Carey translated from Encyclopedia Britannica from its fifth edition. In the words of Sushil De- "It is divided into 3 parts, each containing several chapters and each chapter divided into sections which are sub-divided into paragraphs or articles. The first six chapters deal with Ostiology, 2nd part in 12 chapters with comparative Anatomy, while the 3rd part traces the history of the science and gives the list of principal books on the subject of Anatomy, Medicine and Chemistry with the names of their authors and brief account of their contents. The whole is rounded off with a glossary of technical and difficult terms. This glossary in certain respects is the most interesting part of this entire treatise. This enormous volume was not received as very commendable as its style was stiff and uninteresting. The unintelligible technical terms and phrases makes it difficult to follow the books. But it certainly bears testimony to the compiler's learning and untiring industry."³

Vidyaharavali received a very poor response from the enlightened native society, especially the opulent class who were eager to have the children taught in the English medium to isolate themselves from the common people. Felix's book was too costly for the poor middle class people, among whom eagerness of learning was maximum. Only a few of them were able to collect copies of Vidyaharavali. Only the missionaries who were labouring through the Calcutta School Book Society supported such noble endeavour. From the records of CSBS, it is found that only 114 natives subscribed to this book. But Rev. James Long mentioned in his catalogue that there were 300 native subscribers of Vidyaharavali.⁴

Aid to the lepers

The plight of the lepers who were rejected by their

families and society is a pathetic scene witnessed by William Carey. With pained heart, Carey relates what he saw in Katwa in 1812.

"A pit about ten cubit in depth was dug and a fire placed at the bottom of it. The poor man rolled himself and struggled hard for life. His mother and sister, however thrust him in again, and thus a young man, who to all appearance might have survived several years, was cruelly burned to death. I find that the practice is not uncommon in these parts. Taught that a violent end purifies the body and ensures transmigration into a healthy new existence, while natural death by disease results in four successive births and a fifth as a leper again, the leper like the even more wretched widow, always courted suicide."⁵

The lepers were also drowned so that they would be reborn with healthy bodies. Carey called this disease as the 'Great Sickness'. When he and Thomas tried to help the lepers, they also fed them with spiritual food along with medicines for their sores. Perhaps it was this which angered the critics that Carey waited for an opportunity to convert and what better time than when they were in need. William Carey probably looked upon these lepers as the ones Jesus had compassion upon, and his missionary zeal could not be hidden or denied when his services to them were considered. The missionaries once again used their vital tool, the Friend of India to publicize the pathetic state of the lepers, urging the people to render their kindness to them. Daniel Potts, in his book titled Baptist Missionaries in India 1793-1837, quotes from British records that even though George Smith and other biographers of Carey claim that Carey did not rest until an asylum for lepers was founded. There is no evidence for the same.⁶

In addition to the above concerns, we also need to mention Carey's tireless service to the cause of abolition of slavery. This caught their attention when they witnessed the sale of children as if they were items of sale as goats or poultry. Once again James Peggs who was their propagandist, resounded the protest of the Baptist missionaries to abolish slavery. It was effected by Acts in 1843 and 1860 to declare that slavery was illegal. The protests of the missionaries however found early result when slavery was abolished in the West Indies where the cry was raised at the same time.

One can debate for a long time on the person who abolished the evil practices such as infanticide, Sati, slave trade or the exposure of the sick and the dying

without coming to a consensus. Different writers have ascribed the honour to different people, like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Lord Bentinck, and some have also given William Carey, the credit. What is important to realize is that feeble voices protesting against the inhuman practices were raised from time to time but they did not draw the attention of the Government. William Carey did exactly what was needed. He succeeded in drawing the attention of the Government through their publications in 'Friend of India and Samachar Darpon'. He learnt the language of the people that brought him closer to understand their plight while this can be considered as his advantage, the fact that he was a missionary, a zealous Christian missionary was his disadvantage. The love that he showed to the people in fighting for them and their liberation from human clutches was suspected by the caste Hindus who were afraid of their religion being uprooted from them. Even though they respected and admired the work of these missionaries, their fear remained. In their opinion, Carey was convinced that the introduction of learning would lead to the gradual dissolution of many of the popular notions of Hinduism thus paving the way for removing the last minute hesitation on the part of Ram Mohan Roy in the abolition of Sati. In my opinion, it would amount to an example of utmost ingratitude to deny William Carey any credit in the introduction of social reforms of his time, as it was he who prodded the otherwise passive Govt. to take a stand on such issues.

Carey's contributions to the social reforms in India mark the synchronisation between preaching and practicing the gospel. The Nazareth manifesto comes alive in action during the period of the Serampore Trio's life and work in India. Compassion gains a new meaning. It is not merely sympathizing with the suffering but participating in suffering till the end. The stand that Carey takes i.e. to be with the oppressed, marginalized and against the oppressor, in fact reflects on the type of God he believes in. The relevance of this truth is realized in our theologising when God of the oppressed, God who suffers with us and a God who

liberates us from every yoke of bondage. When this truth and significance stand as a norm to evaluate our values, lifestyle, our theologies there is an opportunity for corrective theology.

It seems that history needs rewriting just as much as our theologies. History itself can be oppressive if it fails to be open for correction. Straightening of history is of great significance for its own sake, for our mission's sake and for our theology's sake. It is our hope that William Carey kindles in every heart, not only awe, admiration and wonder but also a challenge, commitment and service to those who are deprived of their basic human rights, oppressed, discriminated because of their sex, colour, caste, creed and race. To this goal is centered all reflections and historic accounts of William Carey, the FRIEND OF INDIA and Felix Carey to whom this article is dedicated.⁷

1. S. P. Carey, William Carey, London 1923 pp53-100
2. George Smith, Life of William Carey NY, 1935 PP 80-100
3. S. K. De, History of Bengali Literature Calcutta 1952 quoted in Sunil Chatterjee, Felix Carey of Srirampore 1991, p.85
4. IDIB 88-90
5. Daniel potts, Baptist Missionaries in India 1793-1837 pp51-80 London 1967
6. George Smith Infra
7. Carey's Obligation and India's Renaissance, Edited by J. T. K. Daniel, R. E. Hedlund, Article by, Eangeline Rajkumar, Council of Serampore College, pg. 329- 332

N.B. The entire book Vidyaharavali is available for consultation in Bishop's College Library and biography of Felix by Sunil Chatterjee available in Carey Library Serampore.



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