

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-14321-9 - Bishop Heber in Northern India: Selections from Heber's Journal

Edited by M. A. Laird

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

I

Reginald Heber is remembered now mainly as a missionary bishop of Evangelical tendencies,¹ and although his talents and interests were much more varied than this description might suggest, it does contain a significant truth. His life indeed helps to illustrate a basic shift in British attitudes towards India which began to take place at the end of the eighteenth century. Until then there had been little sign of British concern for Indian missions apart from a financial contribution from the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge to a Lutheran mission in the south; on the other hand, between about 1760 and 1790 at any rate the most influential writers on Hinduism tended to interpret it in deistic terms and to argue that there was much that was admirable in Hindu philosophy and ethics, that Hindus worshipped the Supreme Being, polytheistic cults notwithstanding, and—by implication at least—that Christian missionary activity was unnecessary and useless.² But after about 1785 an increasingly effective challenge to this view was mounted by British Evangelicals, who had little sympathy for Hinduism or any other non-Christian religion—or indeed for non-Evangelical Christianity; they believed that salvation was only to be found through a personal belief in Christ and his Atonement, and that they had an urgent responsibility to labour for the conversion of a people which had fallen under British control.

Heber's lifetime thus coincided with the beginning of a new phase of missionary activity in India—one that was carried on more intensively and on a wider scale than ever before. The first Christian missionary to reach the country had been, reputedly, St Thomas the Apostle; at any rate there is no doubt that

¹ G. Smith, *Bishop Heber*. London, 1895, 55; G. D. Bearce, *British attitudes towards India 1784–1858*, Oxford, 1961, 85.

² P. J. Marshall, *The British discovery of Hinduism in the eighteenth century*, Cambridge, 1970.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-14321-9 - Bishop Heber in Northern India: Selections from Heber's Journal

Edited by M. A. Laird

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

a church was firmly established in Malabar during the early centuries of the Christian era. Then in the sixteenth century came Roman Catholic missionaries, operating mainly in the areas under Portuguese control around the coasts but also far beyond: there were, for example, three Jesuit missions to the courts of the Mughal Emperors Akbar and Jahangir. But by the eighteenth century the Roman Catholic missionary endeavour had lost its vigour, although the churches which it had brought into being remained—especially along the west coast, in south India, and in lower Bengal. By then however the Protestants were starting in the south: from 1706 onwards the Tamilnad was the scene of a remarkable international and ecumenical mission, manned largely by German Lutherans, based on the Danish settlement of Tranquebar, and financed by the English S.P.C.K. There was however virtually no Protestant missionary work in northern India until the last decade of the century, when it was started by the Baptist Missionary Society—the first of a ‘new wave’ of societies founded in Britain under the influence of the Evangelical Movement. William Carey, who had played a major part in its foundation, arrived in Bengal in 1793; Joshua Marshman and William Ward joined him subsequently, and in 1800 this famous ‘Trio’ established itself at Serampore—like Tranquebar, a Danish colony. Their evangelistic methods included vernacular preaching and the circulation of tracts and portions of the Bible, which they translated into over 30 Indian languages. They compiled dictionaries and grammars of Bengali and other languages, and their work helped to create the conditions for the subsequent development of Bengali prose literature. Carey also took an interest in plants and animals, and was one of the founders of the Agri-Horticultural Society of India (1820). They established schools, and they investigated and agitated against some of the ‘dreadful practices’ which existed in contemporary Hinduism, including infanticide and especially *sati*, the burning of widows, which was then common in Bengal.¹

Meanwhile India had become an important subject of concern to William Wilberforce and other leading Anglican Evangelists.

¹ E. D. Potts, *British Baptist missionaries in India 1793–1837*, Cambridge, 1967.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-14321-9 - Bishop Heber in Northern India: Selections from Heber's Journal

Edited by M. A. Laird

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

cal—the ‘Clapham Sect’. The individual mainly responsible for directing their attention to India was Charles Grant, who served the East India Company in Bengal for twenty-two years before his final return to England in 1790, and subsequently in London as a Director and Chairman. While in Bengal he had experienced conversion, in the Evangelical sense, and in 1792 he wrote his pamphlet *Observations on the state of society among the Asiatic subjects of Great Britain*. He painted a gloomy picture of Indian social life, which he believed had been fundamentally corrupted by Hinduism and Islam and could only be reformed by the introduction of Christianity. Grant's thesis was readily accepted by his fellow-Evangelicals, and when the Company's Charter became due for renewal by Parliament in 1793, Wilberforce took the opportunity to introduce a clause which would have committed it to sending ‘schoolmasters and missionaries’ to India. It passed through a thinly-attended House of Commons, but was subsequently withdrawn as a result of violent criticism in the Court of Proprietors of East India Stock.¹ Most of the speakers argued that it was hopeless to try to convert the Indians, as they were too strongly attached to their existing religions; in any case the commitment would burden the Company with too great an expense. Randle Jackson thought that the American desire for independence had been stimulated by the spread of education there, and he warned the Company against making the same mistake in India; while Montgomery Campbell expressed a common late eighteenth-century opinion when he said that upper-class Indians at least ‘were people of the purest morality and the most strict virtue’. Several speakers thought that attempts to spread Christianity would arouse Indian resentments and therefore endanger British rule, and it was this question which was to become central in the arguments over missions during the twenty years leading up to the next renewal of the Charter, in 1813.

Meanwhile, however, successive Governors-General came to view the work of the Serampore Baptists with considerable sympathy and allowed them to extend it into British territory;

¹ W. Woodfall (ed.), *Debate at East-India House, on the renewal of the Company's Charter, 23 May 1793*, London, 1793.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-14321-9 - Bishop Heber in Northern India: Selections from Heber's Journal

Edited by M. A. Laird

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

and some of the Company's Anglican chaplains were also beginning to take an active interest in missionary work. The Company had provided chaplains for its settlements in India since the early seventeenth century: they were essentially for the benefit of its European servants, and though the Charter of 1698 encouraged them to give some attention also to the Indians in its employment they showed little interest in missionary work until long after that date. During the eighteenth century the chaplains in fact reflected the attitudes of the clergy in contemporary England: they tended to have an easy-going existence redeemed by philanthropic activities such as organising schools and orphanages for British and Eurasian children; but by the end of the century, in India no less than in England, the Evangelical Movement had begun to have its effect. The first of the Evangelical chaplains was David Brown, who arrived in Calcutta in 1787 and set about his duties with the vigour and earnestness characteristic of his party. At that time religious observances did not weigh heavily on the British community in Calcutta, but during the next generation a remarkable 'reformation of manners' was accomplished. This was due partly to the example and exhortations of Brown and his fellow-Evangelicals, but also to the general revival of religious orthodoxy which was one aspect of the reaction against the later stages of the French Revolution. It was confirmed at the highest level: Wellesley,¹ in contrast to his predecessors, was determined to show that Christianity was the religion of the Government; he issued orders for the better observance of Sunday, attended church regularly, and after his victory over Mysore he appointed 6 February 1800 as a day of general thanksgiving. There was a procession through the streets of Calcutta to the church, where a solemn *Te Deum* was sung; and 'the inauguration of the Christian religion, as the religion of the rulers of British India, was announced by the booming of cannon and the parade of two thousand troops'²—an appropriate beginning for the nineteenth century.

Wellesley appointed David Brown and Claudius Buchanan—

¹ Governor-General 1798–1805.

² J. C. Marshman, *The life and times of Carey, Marshman and Ward*, London, 1859, I, 127.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-14321-9 - Bishop Heber in Northern India: Selections from Heber's Journal

Edited by M. A. Laird

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

another Evangelical chaplain—respectively Provost and Vice-provost of Fort William College, which he founded in 1801 for training the young civil servants of the East India Company. He also appointed William Carey lecturer in Bengali, to which Sanskrit and Marathi were later added; and thus the new generation of Company officials came under religious and even missionary influences in their formative years. More generally, the Evangelical chaplains—and the Serampore missionaries—exercised an influence on the British community which ensured that there would be a substantial group of laymen ready to give their support to missionary work.

A committee of the Church Missionary Society—an Anglican Evangelical body—was formed in Calcutta in 1807, and an auxiliary to the British and Foreign Bible Society four years later. Meanwhile, with Charles Grant using his influence in the Court of Directors to appoint more Evangelicals as chaplains, the movement was spreading up the Ganges valley. The zealous and emotional Henry Martyn, who has been aptly described as ‘a missionary in the guise of a chaplain’,¹ arrived in 1806 and during the next four years ministered first at Dinapur and then at Kanpur (Cawnpore), where he preached a series of addresses to large crowds. One of those who heard him and was subsequently baptised was Abdul Masih, who afterwards worked as an evangelist with considerable effect. Martyn was also a talented linguist who embarked on translations of the Bible into Hindustani, Arabic and Persian; it was in order to perfect the latter that he undertook the journey to Persia and Turkey that ended with his death at Tokat in 1812.

Of still more importance than Martyn as a founder of the Anglican Church in Hindustan was Daniel Corrie. He also arrived in 1806, and after working at Chunar and Kanpur was transferred to Agra, whither he went early in 1813 together with Abdul Masih as catechist and Scripture-reader. This was a most effective partnership, and during a stay of 16 months Corrie baptised 71 converts from Hinduism and Islam.² Then after

¹ T. G. P. Spear, *The Nabobs*, London, 1963, 108.

² *Memoirs of the Right Rev. Daniel Corrie, LL.D.*, by his brothers, London, 1847, 275.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-14321-9 - Bishop Heber in Northern India: Selections from Heber's Journal

Edited by M. A. Laird

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

a long furlough in England he returned to India and spent the year 1818 in Banaras, before being transferred to Calcutta, which was to be his base for the next fifteen years. Meanwhile David Brown had died, in 1812, but his place in Calcutta was filled by Thomas Thomason, perhaps the most amiable and generous-minded of all the early Evangelical clergy. Corrie and Thomason proved to be the mainstays of the work of the C.M.S. in northern India during the early nineteenth century.

The twenty years between 1793 and 1813 thus saw considerable missionary and quasi-missionary work in north India, but it was still with the connivance rather than the official permission of the East India Company. As 1813 approached, therefore, a vigorous interdenominational campaign was organised, under Evangelical leadership, to ensure that the position of the missionaries should be regularised. By then the fear that missionary work would antagonise Indians and endanger British rule in India had been sharpened by a mutiny of sepoys at Vellore in 1806, which, it was suggested, had been caused by apprehensions that the British authorities were planning to convert them to Christianity; and also by some of the publications of the Serampore missionaries' press, which had reflected most uncharitably on Muhammad and the Hindu gods—much to the distaste, as well as the anxiety, of Lord Minto.¹ In 1813, however, the religious pressure on the Company was much stronger and better-organised than it had been twenty years earlier; and Wilberforce did not this time require the Company to bestow its official patronage on missions. A clause was therefore successfully introduced into the Charter Bill² which in effect permitted missionaries to function under the auspices of their societies, the Government adopting a policy of religious neutrality. 'It is the duty of this country', its preamble declared, 'to promote the interests and happiness of the native inhabitants of the British Dominions in India; and such measures ought to be adopted as may tend to the introduction among them of useful knowledge, and of religious and moral improvements; and in furtherance of the above objects, sufficient facilities ought to be afforded by law to persons desirous of accomplishing those

¹ Governor-General 1807–13.² 53 Geo. III, c. 155, sec. xxxiii.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-14321-9 - Bishop Heber in Northern India: Selections from Heber's Journal

Edited by M. A. Laird

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

benevolent designs.' The tempo of missionary activity increased immediately: during the next decade the Baptist, London and Church Missionary Societies, the S.P.C.K., Americans and Scots all extended or began operations—in Bengal, Hindustan and Orissa in the north-east; Bombay, Gujarat and the Konkan in the west.

Not the least of their contributions was in the field of education. They concentrated at first on teaching the elements of Western learning and Christianity through the medium of the local vernaculars, though English was also taught in a few of their schools; they also started some schools for girls. The Government, on the other hand, had only just begun to modify its policy of trying, in a very half-hearted way, to revive traditional Muslim and Hindu learning. Warren Hastings,¹ who had a genuine interest in Indian culture, had founded a *madrassa*—a college for Muslims—at Calcutta in 1781, and in 1791 a Sanskrit College was established for Hindus at the holy city of Banaras by Jonathan Duncan, the British Resident. The patronage of traditional learning had been one of the functions of Indian rulers, but such attempts to continue it encountered increasing criticism in Britain, especially from Evangelicals and—a little later—from Utilitarians also: both wanted an education designed not to revive past glories, of which they were highly sceptical, but radically to transform India. Some concessions were made to the reformers in the 1813 Charter Act, which empowered the Government to spend a lakh of rupees per year out of its surplus revenues on education, on the modern Western as well as the traditional Oriental pattern. In fact however the wars which preoccupied Lord Hastings' administration (1813–23) left nothing by way of surplus revenue until its last years, so little was done by the Government until 1823, when the General Committee of Public Instruction was established to deal with educational matters in the Bengal Presidency. It hoped that Western studies might be grafted on to traditional Oriental learning, but its patronage was mainly directed towards the latter in practice.

Under Lord Hastings it was the non-governmental educational agencies which registered the most notable advances.

¹ Governor-General 1772–85.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-14321-9 - Bishop Heber in Northern India: Selections from Heber's Journal

Edited by M. A. Laird

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

Apart from the mission schools there were institutions such as the Calcutta School and School Book Societies, which were founded in 1817–18 to improve the indigenous schools of Calcutta and to publish textbooks; to them missionaries, British laymen and Indians all contributed. Then there was the opening of the Hindu College, Calcutta, in 1817—the first Indian initiative for education after a Western pattern. Its founders were a group of Bengalis who were beginning to realise the potentialities of modern European learning for India. Some of them also wished to purge Hinduism of what they believed to be the degenerate social practices which had marred its original purity. The greatest leader of the reformers was Ram Mohan Roy (1772–1833), who was influenced by Muslim and Christian ideas: he had a deep admiration for the teachings of Christ, opposed idolatry and sacrifices, and evolved a monotheistic position which might be roughly summarised as Hindu–Unitarian. Further than that he would not go, much to the disappointment—indeed the annoyance—of the missionaries. As a social reformer he was mainly concerned to vindicate the rights of women: he was able to find supporting texts for his campaigns in the Hindu Scriptures, and thus played an important part especially in the agitation against *sati*, which was finally prohibited by Lord William Bentinck in 1829. But while the Hindu reformers had an importance out of proportion to their numbers, their attitudes were not shared by the majority of the ‘learned natives’ of northern India—a fact which was reflected in the fundamentally cautious education policy of the Government.

The Charter Act of 1813 not only smoothed the way for missionaries and committed the Government to support for education, but it provided also for the establishment of a bishop in Calcutta and three archdeacons for the Presidency cities of Calcutta, Madras and Bombay; to be maintained out of the Indian revenues.¹ The most influential advocate of an episcopate was Claudius Buchanan, a man after Wellesley's own heart, who shared that extreme reverence for the institutions of the Anglican Church which seems to have characterised most of its Scottish members. ‘An Archbishop is wanted for India’, he pronounced in

¹ 53 Geo. III, c. 155, sec. xlix.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-14321-9 - Bishop Heber in Northern India: Selections from Heber's Journal

Edited by M. A. Laird

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

1805, 'a sacred and exalted character, surrounded by his Bishops, of ample revenue and exalted sway... We want something royal, in a spiritual or temporal sense, for the abject subjects of this great Eastern empire to look up to.'¹ Buchanan's idea, though in a more modest form, was taken up and successfully pursued by Anglican Evangelicals and also by a group of High Churchmen who from about 1810 onwards were putting new life into the two old-established Anglican missionary societies, the S.P.C.K. and the S.P.G.²

Thomas Fanshaw Middleton, Vicar of St Pancras, was appointed as the first Bishop of Calcutta, where he arrived in November 1814. His episcopate was not however a happy one: from the first he found himself beset with problems of a kind which his rather unimaginative mind had never conceived. To begin with, the establishment of chaplains—never generous—was now quite inadequate for the vastly extended British dominions in India, and even that was never at full strength. Church buildings also were few. Still more serious, there was a host of vexatious juridical problems involving the Government, C.M.S. missionaries, and the ordination of converts. His Letters Patent gave him the authority to license the chaplains, but they also contained the provision that nothing in them should restrict the powers of the Company, which was interpreted to mean that it should continue to be responsible for their appointment, stationing, and transfer. Lord Hastings sympathised with the Bishop's desire to assume the last two of these functions, but the Court of Directors insisted on maintaining the Company's powers intact.³ Middleton also had lengthy and vexatious disputes with the secular authorities concerning the granting of marriage-licences, the establishment of his consistory courts, and even the consecration of churches. Then there was the problem of the ordained Anglican missionaries—in effect of the C.M.S. only, as the two other societies were not yet sending such men to India. As Anglican clergymen they might have been expected to

¹ H. Pearson, *Memoirs of the life and writings of the Rev. Claudius Buchanan, D.D.*, London, 1817, I, 377.

² Founded in 1699 and 1701 respectively.

³ C. W. Le Bas, *The life of the Right Reverend Thomas Fanshaw Middleton, D.D.*, London, 1831, I, 141–4.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-14321-9 - Bishop Heber in Northern India: Selections from Heber's Journal

Edited by M. A. Laird

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

fall within the episcopal jurisdiction, and indeed the C.M.S. wanted Middleton to license them; but in fact he felt unable to do so. Nothing had been said about missionaries in the Letters Patent; indeed the bishopric, as established in 1813–14, was officially for the benefit only of the Christian population of India, and every precaution was taken not to ‘alarm the natives’ into thinking that it was an agency intended to pressure them into conversion. Middleton had shown considerable interest in missionary work before he had left for India; he was a member of the S.P.C.K. and had in 1813 preached the valedictory sermon for one of their German missionaries whom they were sending to south India;¹ but at least for the first two years of his episcopate he concentrated entirely on his work among Christians. A further reason for his hesitations about the C.M.S. missionaries was that they were in the habit of ministering also to the Europeans in the vicinity of their stations if there were no Company chaplains within reach, and Middleton feared that if he licensed them the Company would have an excuse to send out even fewer chaplains in the expectation that the missionary clergy would supply their place.² Finally, Middleton was distinctly identified with the High Church party, with the S.P.C.K. and the S.P.G.—of which the latter at least could well have been offended by any signs of undue cordiality towards the C.M.S.³ In fact they had little need for anxiety: Middleton’s relations with this society—including Thomason and Corrie, the chaplains most sympathetic to it—were marked by mutual suspicion and irritation. His refusal to ordain their converts did not help; this was another question which bristled with legal difficulties. He was supposed to administer the ecclesiastical law of England; but were Indians to be regarded as ‘His Majesty’s loving subjects’, and what oaths were they to take on ordination? Furthermore, there were no officially-authorized translations of the Book of Common Prayer for them to use.⁴

Although Middleton always insisted that his primary duty was towards the existing Christian population,⁵ he evinced

¹ S.P.C.K. *Report*, 1813, 58 ff.² Le Bas, *Middleton*, 1, 400–2.³ H. Cnatingius, *Bishops and societies*, London, 1952, 1, 91–2.⁴ Le Bas, *Middleton*, II, 269–75.⁵ *Ibid.* 337–8.