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THE MISSIONARY STRATEGY OF ALEXANDER DUFF (1830-1840)

by MICHAEL SAWARD

THIS paper was originally prepared for the Church History Study Group of the Tyndale Fellowship, to which it was read last year. It now appears in a revised and somewhat expanded form.

ALLEXANDER DUFF studied theology at St. Andrews under Thomas Chalmers before, in 1829, he left his native land for India and became the first ordained missionary of the Church of Scotland. On the journey out he was ship-wrecked twice before he finally landed at Calcutta in May 1830. His first task was to visit every missionary and mission station in and around the city and what he saw and heard caused him to formulate a completely new plan for evangelizing of India through Christian education.

The existing missions had schools of a crude kind and, in some places, large numbers were in attendance. Instruction was normally given in the vernacular. Despite opposition from the English community (with the exception of the ageing Carey), Duff opened a school for high-caste Brahmin youths in July 1830 and from the first he taught in English. Within a year the school had become famous and had already some 300 pupils in attendance, while within three years four young men had been baptized — all of them to become important figures in the Indian Church in later years.

Only one year later, in 1834, Duff's health gave way and he was forced to return to Scotland, where for six years he both wrote and spoke regularly in order to justify his new policy. Then in 1840 he returned to India.

Duff's missionary strategy may conveniently be considered under three headings — the Standard of Education, the Language of Education, and the Method of Education.

I. THE STANDARD OF EDUCATION

As has already been noted, all the Christian schools in existence before Duff's arrival (with the sole exception of Serampore) were

aiming at the primary education of Indian children — very largely boys — in the hope that the raising of their standards might help them to accept the gospel more readily. The great majority of these children came from the villages of the Bengal area. Some of these schools had been in existence for over a decade when Duff arrived, yet they had only a minute handful of converts to their credit. In fairness to them it must be added that they did teach the Christian faith — but only on the primary school level. Nothing was being done in Calcutta, the most needy place, to give any form of higher education except at the Hindoo College, and this institution was both non-Christian and anti-Christian in its outlook. Its teaching had already led to such an outbreak of immorality among the atheistic youths who attended that even their heathen parents were alarmed.

Duff's first radical suggestion was, in the words of his biographer, "to lay the foundation of a system of education which might ultimately embrace all the branches ordinarily taught in the higher schools and colleges of Christian Europe."¹

Writing in March 1833 in the *Calcutta Christian Observer*, a periodical which he edited, Duff himself advocated both a higher and a lower education. "God has frequently smiled on the diligent, prayerful training of the young; let therefore children receive the rudiments, and youth the higher principles of useful instruction in the way which experience may prove best adapted to secure the desire end."²

In the June issue of the same year he stressed the need for a more selective approach to higher education. "What, in the present state of things, is the course of instruction that ought to be pursued with the clearest prospect of speedy and triumphant success? Ought it to be limited in kind and in degree so as to admit of being spread . . . over a wider surface and rendered available to the general mass of the people? Or ought it to be multiplied in kind and increased in degree, and consequently, be restricted to a narrower sphere and a more select number, with the view of ultimately reaching the entire mass, through the instrumentality of the awakened and enlightened few?"³

Shortly after his return to England he was invited to speak at the Church Missionary Society Anniversary in 1836. Again

¹ G. Smith, *Alexander Duff* (1879), Vol I, p. 110.

² *Calcutta Christian Observer*, March 1833, pp. 103f.

³ *Ibid.*, June 1833, p.259; quoted almost verbatim six years later in Duff's *India and Indian Missions*, p.291.

he pleaded for advanced education — this time with particular reference to the needs of a future indigenous ministry. “What real Churchman can possibly object? If there are any who do object . . . let them go forth with the destroying scythe to prove the sincerity of their principles and mow down their Christian schools of every grade: let them toss their Cambridge and Oxford into the depths of the sea, and then smiling at the wreck and havoc which they have made, declare that we act inconsistently in desiring to erect Christian Schools and Institutions on the Ganges as well as on the banks of the Cam or the Thames.”⁴

In his book *India and Indian Missions*, published in 1839, he returned to the attack. Once again he compared widespread primary education for the many with advanced education for the few and decided that in the long term the latter would prove more valuable. As regards the former, he reminded his readers that “generally, nothing at all beyond the artificial or mechanical parts of the acquisition” were gained. Such methods he condemned as “very inadequate.”⁵

To summarize his position he pointed out that “in the present conditions of the people of India, one central seminary, of a higher grade, with its attendant retinue of preparatory gymnasia, would do more towards vitally impressing the intellect and heart of the people, and consequently towards furthering the great cause of national regeneration, than any number of elementary schools, however indefinitely multiplied.”⁶

So much then for his proposals concerning the standard of education necessary. But in order to effect these proposals it was vital that a decision be reached as to the language in which advanced education was to be conveyed.

II. THE LANGUAGE OF EDUCATION

The Government language was Persian and official support was given to those who studied it. In addition, the study of Arabic and Sanskrit was encouraged and a large number of books in the latter were officially published (though it appears that most of them never left the warehouse shelves as so few people could or would read the Sanskrit language). In point of fact, the Government was slow to realize that the Indian intelligentsia wanted to learn English — this is illustrated by the speed with

⁴ *The Missionary Register*, September 1836, p. 400.

⁵ A. Duff, *India and Indian Missions* (1839), p. 294.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 304.

which English books were sold in Calcutta. But, as we have seen, the official policy was that one of the Oriental languages should be used in education.

Duff at once recognized the folly of this and so from the start he taught in English. He did, however, insist that all his pupils should be able to read and write in their own vernacular -- Bengali. But for the official language of education he felt English to be essential. In this he was supported by Charles Trevelyan, by Lord Macaulay, and eventually by the Governor-General himself, Lord Bentinck. Men such as these felt that for budding Indian renaissance to blossom, it must be grounded in a language which could boast a great literature. While it was true that the classical works of Hinduism were written in Sanskrit, they felt that the heathen nature of all the great Sanskrit writings could hardly be the means of Christianizing the culture of the Indian people.

The only alternative therefore was English, which, it was hoped, would open the door to the whole of western culture with its underlying Christian sympathies. For five years the battle raged in India between the Orientalists and the Anglicists. Then, in 1835, Lord Bentinck announced that the official policy was to be changed — the Anglicists had won the battle.

Looking back on these years, Duff later wrote, "It now appeared that the choice could only lie between . . . Sanscrit . . . and English. The determination of this choice involved the decision of one of the momentous practical questions connected with the ultimate evangelization of India. . . . The question was 'Which shall hereafter be established as the language of *learning* in India? Which will prove the most effective instrument of a large, liberal and enlightened education?' The wrong determination of so vital a question, at the outset, would have greatly retarded . . . every subsequent movement. It was not, therefore, without earnest prayer to God for counsel and direction, that a decision was attempted."

He went on to show how, in the face of apparently overwhelming opposition, he had been able to carry through his plans. "It would seem at first view", he continued, "that there could be no room for hesitation. All arguments and authority . . . seemed exclusively in favour of Sanscrit. The Supreme Government, . . . all learned Orientalists, . . . some of the oldest and most experienced Missionaries . . . were decidedly in its favour

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 517f.

... Yet it was in the face of the highest authorities ... that the resolution was taken ... wholly to repudiate the Sanscrit ... and openly and fearlessly to proclaim the English the most effective medium of Indian illumination."⁸

Finally he pointed out that Sanskrit was :

- (a) Unable to express Western thought.
- (b) Harder to master than English.
- (c) Forbidden to three-quarters of the Indian people.
- (d) Linked inseparably with heathen religion.⁹

It was the initial stand taken by Duff that proved the Orientalists wrong and it was the demonstration which his school offered that convinced first Trevelyan and Macaulay, and later Bentinck, that the future of India was dependent upon the future of the English language in India.

III. THE METHOD OF EDUCATION

For many years, popular opinion amongst the English community in India was that any attempt at Christianizing the Indians by direct means was bound to lead to trouble and rioting among the Indians themselves. Back in 1814 these fears had proved groundless when Middleton, the first Anglican Bishop, had arrived in Calcutta from England. Not one Indian had taken the slightest notice of His Lordship's presence. Nevertheless the fear had remained and until Duff's time even the Mission schools had contented themselves with teaching Christianity as a subject on the curriculum. Indeed the C.M.S. Report for 1817 refers to its first Indian school in these strange terms : "It is under the care of the missionaries but it is not likely to alarm prejudice as the schoolmaster is not a Christian."¹⁰

Between 1817 and 1830 this situation clearly improved and the Gospels were read and taught in the schools, but still the doubts about direct Christian evangelism through the media of schools continued.

Duff's plan was simple enough. He planned to give a good education in secular subjects, but, to use his biographer's words, "in inseparable combination with the Christian faith and its doctrines, precepts and evidences, with a view to the practical regulation of life and conduct. Religion was to be not merely the foundation upon which the superstructure was to be reared,

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 518.

⁹ *Ibid.* This summary is the gist of a lengthy paragraph on p. 519.

¹⁰ *Proceedings of the Church Missionary Society*, V. (1817), p. 440.

but the animating spirit which was to pervade and hallow all."¹¹ Daily Bible reading and exposition were to be a vital part of the curriculum and the teacher was to pray "that the truth might be brought home, by the grace of the Spirit, for the real conversion to God of at least some of the students."¹²

His plan was received with disapproval by both British residents and missionaries in Calcutta. His first students were suspicious that the reading of the Christian Scriptures might automatically make them Christians. Before long these difficulties were overcome and in a short time this method of instruction was accepted by the Hindu pupils. But Duff still had to convince the Christian public of both India and Britain that this was a wise policy to adopt. In the *Calcutta Christian Observer* he quoted with approval the following remark of an unnamed French statesman. "Let therefore every school throughout the land", the Frenchman had written, "assume the precepts of religion as the basis of instruction."¹³ A year later he also refers, in the same journal, to the admission by the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge that "the first place in every system of national education is due to that which teaches a man his duty to God and to his neighbour."¹⁴

Two months later, he stated what he believed to be the object of education in India. "The grand object of education, which all ought constantly to avow, is the moral and intellectual regeneration of the universal mind — or, in the speediest and most effectual manner, to reach and vitally impress the entire body of the people of Hindoostan."¹⁵

After his return to Scotland, Duff continued to write on this same theme. The *Calcutta Christian Observer* for December 1835 contained his "Statement of the Plan and Objects of the General Assembly's Mission in India." In the course of his article he explained the objects of the Institution for Hindu Youth in Calcutta (i.e. his school) in these terms:

- 2 departments — 1st preparatory.
 — 2nd "of a higher order".
 1st — grammar, history, geography, arithmetic and Christianity.

¹¹ G. Smith, *Alexander Duff* (1879), Vol I, p. 110.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 109.

¹³ *Calcutta Christian Observer*, June 1832, p. 20. (This statement did not, of course, originally refer to India.)

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, March 1833, p. 127; quoted from the *Penny Magazine on Education*.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, June 1833, p. 258.

2nd — to perfect an acquaintance with Chronology, Geography and History — natural, civil and sacred.¹⁶

In this connection he lays great stress on the “regular and systematic study of the Christian Scriptures.”

Later, writing in 1839, he defends his methods yet again. “How often has education been unhappily represented as somehow opposed to the preaching of the Gospel? If indeed by education were meant what is merely secular there would be a difference, there might be opposition. But if Christian education be meant, there can be no real antagonism.”¹⁷

Alexander Duff’s strategy was not only bold for his time—it was successful. Two and a quarter years after his arrival in the city, the *Calcutta Christian Observer* records the results of a public examination of the youths at his school in these glowing terms. “Never was a more satisfactory reply given to the charge that religious instruction hinders and interferes with the progress of the pupils in the other branches of learning; for we are persuaded that the young men of the 1st class, in intelligence and sound general knowledge, are before any other of their own standing in Calcutta, while in a knowledge of the evidence and leading doctrines of Christianity they will stand no unequal comparison with the educated youth of England.”¹⁸

For a final comment we turn to a German source. In his *History of Missions in India*, Richter confirms the success of Duff’s remarkable insight into the needs of the Indian people with these words: “Only five years after his school had been opened, Duff had the triumph of seeing the existing educational policy of the administration thrown to the winds, and a new policy of reform, based on his own ideas, adopted.”¹⁹

Edware, Middlesex.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, December 1835, p. 625.

¹⁷ A. Duff, *India and Indian Missions* (1839), pp. 285f.

¹⁸ *Calcutta Christian Observer*, October 1832, p. 257.

¹⁹ J. Richter, *A History of Missions in India*, translated by S. H. Moore (1908), p. 179.