

St. John's Began with just seven students

By

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This year St. John's celebrates its 175th anniversary. The dynamic enterprise that is St. John's must be judged in light of the motivation and dedication of its founders, who were determined to serve selflessly what must surely have been a strange people in a strange land.

The early years of the 19th century saw the expansion of Christian missions in the British colonies. Colonial administrative officials, with their eye on profit, wanted good relations with the locals and had forbidden any

Christian evangelical work and refused to employ those locals who had taken up the Christian faith. In the first year of British rule alone, 300 new Hindu temples were built in Jaffna by the British. Indeed, the antagonism to Christianity in the 20 year lull between the British take-over and the arrival of the first missionaries saw the number of temples in Jaffna growing 4 fold. The growing evangelical movement in England's Parliament put a stop to this and since 1813 Christian missions started to spread throughout the colonies.

Arrival of Rev. Knight

This development brought to Sri Lanka the Rev. Joseph Knight (born in Stroud, England, on October 17, 1787) and three others who were given the requisite training and ordained priest just before their departure in the Autumn of 1817 as missionaries of the Church Missionary Society, the CMS. It was a dangerous journey to the East with many a missionary dying or losing a family member before the journey's end. But they were undeterred. Their journey from Gravesend via The Cape and Madras to Galle, took 200 days.

Knight arrived in Jaffna as the first missionary of the CMS's Tamil Mission in July 1918 and took up residence at Nallur in November, using the premises of the disused Dutch church (which earlier had been a Roman Catholic church and before that the site of the king's temple).

Knight's principal difficulties were in being accepted by the people (because of his out-caste status) and in learning the language. The American missionary Newell who preceded Knight by about 5 years losing his wife and baby on the way, perhaps had softened the landscape for Knight. For American records indicate that schools and churches were initially burnt by the high-caste sections of the public, teachers and students had their bones broken, and the missionary John Scudder and his wife were stoned. The objections were not to the new religion but because of the threat to the caste hierarchy. The missionaries carried on with patient endeavour and self-sacrificing commitment to the field of education and to cholera and small-pox patients. This witness ultimately made the missionaries accepted by 1843 when they would report that there was scarcely any opposition - a situation that changed again later only with the Hindu revival.

But Knight had to contend with the society's prejudices and opposition. People thought it necessary to bathe themselves and purify their houses after each visit by him. After higher-caste men of learning refused to teach him, he found a Brahmin who agreed to be his tutor for a hefty fee and purified himself at the nearby tank after each lesson. These early lessons in Tamil apparently bore much fruit as Knight's knowledge of Tamil grew. For Winslow's Comprehensive Tamil and English Dictionary (Madras, 1862) says in its preface that it "was commenced by the Rev. J. Knight, late of Jaffna."

Resistance overcome

It was not until 1823 that the resistance from the population was sufficiently overcome for Knight to start his "English Seminary for the higher education of Tamil youth" when 7 students, presumably from the not so fortunate sections of society, were found to live with him at home and undertake their studies. Knight's residence -- the present Mission House adjacent to today's St. James' Church, Nallur--was therefore the first site of St. John's College. The reputation of the school was made when the larger community saw the transforming process of modern education. The school grew and no longer had to beg for students.

Any biography on Knight must address two historical controversies. The first is the debate as to whether

he was St. John's College's first principal. It might be contended that St. John's was founded not in 1823, but in 1841 when the English Seminary in Nallur was closed to make way for the boarding school for girls, and relocated to the present site of St. John's as "The Chundikuli Seminary." The debate arises because when the Chundikuli Seminary was renamed St. John's College in 1891, it was at what was called "the school's Jubilee celebrations." This meant that at that time, St. John's was considered as having been founded in 1841. However, the continuity of management, staff and students at the time of the move, and the closure of the English Seminary as the Chundikuli Seminary was founded, are taken to prove institutional continuity. The Jubilee celebrations of 1891 are therefore now cast as the Jubilee of St. John's at the Chundikuli site.

The second is about Knight's printing press. Joseph Knight is credited by the CMS with having founded the first printing press in Jaffna, which issued 1,002,800 tracts over 4 years. The American Mission, whose records were much more punctiliously kept, however, is probably correct in saying that it was their press which was gifted to Knight when the British forbade their running a press because of tensions between the US and British governments. It would appear that Knight received the press and operated it for the Americans to circumvent the ban. Oral traditions at St. James' Church Nallur aver that the press was in Knight's loft in the church vestry to prevent British officials from seeing it. Thus was begun some of the earliest printing in the Tamil language. When the printing ban on the Americans was lifted in 1836, the press was returned to the Americans. It was this same press that, under the guidance of the American missionary Daniel Poor, began publishing the bilingual Morning Star (Uthaya Tharahai), the second oldest newspaper in Ceylon (after the Observer) and the first Tamil newspaper.

The press is not the only area where the Anglicans and the American Congregationalists co-operated. Knight's sister, who had joined her brother, was given in marriage to Daniel Poor. And then Knight himself married the widows of American missionaries in Jaffna twice, first Mrs. S.B. Richards, and after her death, Mrs. E.S. Nichols, who were both buried in the churchyard of the American Mission in Tellippalai.

After founding St. John's, Knight handed over the school to other missionaries and devoted himself to full-time evangelism. The loss of his two wives in turn and despite having given 22 years of the most vibrant part of his life to the Tamil Mission, Knight was still resolved to be part of it. Taking a furlough in England, he was ship-wrecked at The Cape travelling back, and died shortly after his return on October 11, 1840, presumably from the effects of that experience. His mortal remains lie buried at Cotta.

Heritage

In an anniversary year, it is customary to utter empty platitudes about the founders and the heritage they gave us. We then go away feeling nice about ourselves. An honest evaluation however, must ask what the founders sought to do and assess if they accomplished it. Knight and the other founders of the mission schools, sought to Christianise the nation and to build men and women of character and genteel upbringing who would uplift the wider society that they saw as steeped in superstition.

St. John's certainly has produced many well-rounded men of learning and stature who made no mean contribution to the making of our island nation. Equally remarkable is that by the close of the last century, St. John's had achieved collegiate status under Calcutta University. That an unlettered but creatively dedicated Knight could have pioneered that massive enterprise is amazing. That the missionary-run schools (including schools like Royal that were once staffed at the top by missionaries) brought out the best in the men and women they trained, is freely admitted and rarely questioned.

However, these very same schools in the late-colonial and post-independence era with emphasis mainly on examination results, have produced many undesirable citizens, both Sinhalese and Tamil. Though some of these products are highly qualified, education has not muted the bestial and fascist side in all of us. Indeed, they - that is, most of those who unleashed a reign of government terror in this nation; enjoyed watching torture sessions; commanded the rampages among civilians in the Northeast; bombed schools and Churches in Jaffna and burnt the public library; urged young children at Church, school and university functions in the North to join the Tamil militancy; and glorified and justified every act of Tamil terror from western capitals and Jaffna's pulpits - are all the proud products of these elite schools. They are often considered the most civilised men among us.

There is clearly something awfully wrong. It is time we asked ourselves "Why? Where did we go wrong?" To do so would be the fittest way to honour the high-minded founders of these august institutions.