

The Power of Missions in India

An Address by Principal Fairbairn at the London Missionary Society Anniversary

IN the history and action of modern missions, two things profoundly impress me: Their ubiquity and their audacity. They are everywhere. There is no land on which the sun rises where the foot of the missionary has not trod. There is no tribe, however fierce, or however depraved, his hand has not handled. There is no tongue, however barbaric, he has not tried to speak. There are great primary human passions that are strong and invincible. There is the passion of greed. Tempted by it, a man will stay at home and assume a thousand disguises. He will clothe the meanest selfishness in the most magnificent patriotism. He will dress the hardest and least human spirit in generous philanthropy. He will try and speak large things about empire and about civilization, when he means only his own love of gold and contempt of men. Or he will go abroad—and there is no point where greed has not made men go. Amid the Arctic snows and tropic heats it has made him live. On poisonous coasts and up fever-haunted rivers, and in dismal jungles, he has dwelt, that he may indulge his love of gain, and come back with his gold multiplied a thousand-fold. But greater than passion or greed stands the enthusiasm for humanity. The missionary has gone before the trader and beyond the trader, and wherever he has gone he has been inspired with a new hopefulness for men. He has kept the sense of duty living at home, he has carried light into dark places, and he has made us feel that precious in the sight of God, and precious in the sight of men, is that great immortal soul Christ died to redeem.

But more remarkable even than the ubiquity is the audacity. We hear without ceasing that our race loves courage. I have no great affection for a bravery that knows itself too well, and admires itself the more that it seems to know, but one can not help feeling how great is the power of English courage. But great as has been the power of the courage that made India England's, there is a far sublimer and grander audacity. Many a time the men of arms or the men of law, or still more, the men of wealth, may turn haughtily upon the missionary, and ask why he is there? He is there in obedience to a grander courage, in fulfilment of a higher function than their own. Think what he faces. There is a people far older than we, civilized when we were savage; there is a people with a classic literature older than our own, full of tales and full of heroism dear to the heart of the Hindu. There is a religion embedded in custom, revered and worshipped, embalmed in memory, consecrated by victory and defeat, dear to all hearts, holding many minds. There is a great social system wherein the individual counts for nothing, and the caste and the family and the

guild are all in all. To change that is almost like trying to lift by persuasion the earth from its very axis. Yet this is what the missionary faces in India, a land and people less open to conquest, more deeply embedded in the past, more profoundly guarded by sacred associations than those the soldier or the civilian can face; and the missionary faces them without arms in his hand, without an imperial power behind him, faces them in the power of a great faith, in whose strength he hopes to overcome and prevail. There he lives, there he works, and the wonder is that he does not in dismay die, that he does not in shame retreat, that he still lives, still works, and still carries on his great attempt, the grandest example of heroism and of audacity in the whole history of our English race. But you can not think what it means unless you go and face it. I many a time am sorry for the missionaries, hard-worked, sent round on deputations, equally hard-worked at home. Why, the way to create interest in missions is to send men of influence out to India and elsewhere. Convert the churches through the churchman at home. Get him to face the field, the men who work it, and to see what they have done.

When I landed in Bombay what did I find? A picturesque, beautiful, Oriental city, very strange and very radiant to Western eyes. There was life everywhere. Teeming myriads of men and women struggling to live, struggling to think, doing their best to accumulate the little needed to keep soul and body together; and, facing them, stood a small handful of missionaries. Why, as I looked at that great teeming multitude, what did I feel? This first and foremost: The church has begun the conquest of India? No. Rather it does not yet conceive what the conquest means. We have put our hand to the plow. We know nothing about the field through which we would drive the furrow. We neither see its extent nor know its limit, nor understand the force needed to drive the great iron wedge through the soil. Yet what are the men doing? I visited the colleges, mission and civilian, visited schools, visited the churches, visited the various agencies meant to help the orphan, to educate the girl, to bring the widow, left desolate, into larger life. Yet with it all, what was that to the great teeming thousands?

I crossed to Calcutta. There, too, visited colleges, schools, churches, missions of all kinds, what again to feel? To see again multitudes streaming through the land, to see a few cultivated, educated, pious, devoted men and women straight from home, living under conditions of self-denial that they might reach the multitude, and save the many.

I passed from Calcutta up to Darjeeling, and what there? Ay, it was beautiful to see the sun