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MISSIONARY BURMESE.

BY MAUNG TIN, B. A.

It is well that the American Missionaries who have Burma for their mission field should cherish with grateful pride the memory of Rev. Adoniram Judson as the man who paved the way for Missionary work in this country. The history of his Missionary labours here is too well-known to detain us long. A mere allusion to it is sufficient. Nor is it the purpose of the present article to treat it from a biographical point of view. Its purpose is only to review briefly what American Missionaries have done for the Burmese language, with which subject the name of Dr. Judson is intimately bound.

Special importance must be attached to the publication, about the middle of the last century, of Judson's translation of the Bible and his Dictionaries; for they form the first and the only great land-mark in the field of Burmese literature as explored by American Missionaries. It reflects great credit on the author's abilities that he could have brought out books of such utility and wide scope at a time when the Burmese language was but little known to foreigners. These books must, therefore, be considered as the works of a pioneer. Whatever short-comings they may have, are readily excused as the inevitable mistakes of one working upon insufficient materials. The labours of pioneers in every branch of activity, both physical and intellectual, are of the utmost service to later workers. In spite of any imperfections they may have, their works must ever remain as monumental records for the guidance of new-comers. Their utility far outweighs their insufficiency. Critics may, therefore, legitimately relax their rigidity to some extent, when dealing with the literary works of pioneers.

But American writers in Burmese of to-day cannot expect to enjoy the privileges of pioneers. It is only proper that they should be prepared to meet with a criticism at once just and unbiassed. The facilities for studying the Burmese

language at present cannot be said to be meagre at all. In fact, American missionaries, by virtue of the nature of their work, have the splendid opportunity of learning the language not only by studying the standard works of classical writers, but also by the more correct way of hearing it direct from the lips of the people. Being in touch with the people on such terms as must be highly beneficial to both parties, they are in a position to observe, with less difficulty, the various idioms, the different turns of expression, the varying shades of meaning and the many colloquialisms, that give so much lustre to the spoken language. Nevertheless, it seems indubitable, that they have fallen short of the expectations that have been made regarding their Burmese. If the works of Dr. Judson ever raised any hopes of American missionaries playing an important part in the later development of the Burmese language, these hopes must now be given up. For, their literary contributions, so far as we know, are by no means of a nature to leave any permanent impression on the minds of Non-American readers. It is regrettable that such a good example set by Dr. Judson and his colleague, Dr. Stevens, should not have stimulated their successors to a more intelligent study of the Burmese language. If one is to judge by the later publications, one has little or no doubt that the study of the language by the Americans has been in a languishing state, or else has taken a wrong direction. These publications, it must be admitted, by no means show an intimate acquaintance, on the part of the authors, with the language in which they are written. Apart from occasional reprints of the New Testament, Missionary Burmese, as it is fittingly called, is to be read in scraps of translations on moral subjects, biographical notes, monthly papers and accounts of travel and similar bagatelle. The epithet, 'Missionary Burmese,' alone gives an idea of the sort of language one reads in these publications. For, it is to be remembered, that such an epithet is not due to the caprice of any single individual; but it is the creation of the whole community. And the judgment of the community happens, in this case, to be influenced by a full appreciation of the ludicrous.

A distinguishing line, however, should be drawn between the matter and the style of the books written in Missionary Burmese. With regard to the matter, even the most fastidious moralist would hardly find anything to take exception to. And this is precisely as it should be. For, it is not likely to come across anything besides the inculcation of the best morals in books written by people who profess (and it is the most self-sacrificing of professions) to convert others to their own faith. Hence it is that the tone in point of morality is always pure, healthy and sweet and often even powerful.

But in speaking highly of the contents of the books, one must not be blind to the style in which they are written. The most careless reader, provided he is not an American Missionary, will at once be struck by the peculiar construction of the sentences. Almost on every page, strange forms and expressions betray the foreign hand. There is no end of colloquialisms, some of them being ludicrously out of place. And these are contrasted with stilted idioms and striking passages, mostly having only a semblance of poetic images. Indeed, it may be said of most of these writings, that they resemble nothing so much as a curious piece of mosaic constructed out of materials of forced labour. It is difficult, when dealing with the special features of a number of books, to do justice to every one of them, unless one goes into details. Perhaps, there may be some writers who are more happy in their expression and are not so guilty of murdering the Burmese language. Nevertheless, their mannerism is too well-marked to escape notice, and generally, the style of one writer is so much like that of the others that it needs no critical acumen to discover their relationship. To account for this is quite an easy thing. It is our belief that most of these Reverend gentlemen begin to write Burmese before they have made a thorough study of it. A mere colloquial acquaintance with a language does not make a good writer. We fully sympathize with, and heartily encourage, these ladies and gentlemen (a fair proportion of writers in Missionary Burmese consists of ladies) in their attempts at Burmese authorship, because we know for certain that their motive is good and that their writings

continue to exercise a beneficial influence over the minds and habits of a community, that is daily increasing in number—the community of Burman Christians. But in the interest of literature, we cannot persuade ourselves to commend the style of writing. Perhaps, one feels justified in being eager for the purity of one's language after filtration through foreign minds. We would, therefore, with due deference to these American writers, suggest a method of procedure, which they seem to have neglected.

It is clear that a sound critical knowledge of any language cannot be attained without a systematic study of the classical works written in that language. The Burmese language also can boast of its own classics, without an intimate knowledge of which a man can hardly be called a scholar. We would therefore strongly recommend a systematic study of Burmese literature to American Missionaries. Such a study would not only enable them to clothe their thoughts in pure, simple and forceful language, but the purity of the language alone would appeal to the people at large. Non-Christian Burmans, notwithstanding religious scruples, would take delight in reading their writings for the sake of the language, if not for anything else. Thus a systematic study of Burmese literature would serve the double purpose of improving Missionary Burmese and of inviting the attention of non-Christian Burmans. Moreover, it would go far to lessen the glaring inconsistencies in the mode of spelling adopted by American writers. Their mistakes in spelling such ordinary words as are heard in every-day speech make their writings extremely ridiculous when the reader is conscious of the change in meaning due to a difference of spelling. But one is glad to see the beginnings of a steady improvement in this respect.

Foreigners may find it easy to write Burmese as compared with other modern tongues. The Burmese language, indeed, in common with all agglutinative languages, does not present so many complexities of construction as do most inflectional ones. But its want of inflection is more than compensated for by its wealth of imagery, its happy turns of expression, and its high degree of responding to the needs of the writer.

It is, like the older language, Pali, to much it owes much, a language pre-eminently fitted for the vehicle of religious thought. This hardly needs any demonstration, if one only thinks of the contents of Burmese books. Almost every one of them treats of religion; and the religion being Buddhism does not attract, naturally, many Christian readers. Nevertheless, American writers in Burmese would be well repaid for their pains in studying the literature. For there one meets with forms and expressions of ecclesiastical significance, that would be peculiarly suitable for missionary purposes. That is to say, missionaries writing in Burmese would be spared the trouble of coining new words and expressions, as these are abundantly supplied in Burmese books.

It seems necessary, therefore, to remind American writers in Burmese of the greater portion that still remains unexplored in the mine of Burmese literature. As a matter of fact, they delve and tend but a plot in that mine, whilst much that would be valuable awaits their diligent search. In other words, they seem to be gathering shells on the shore, whereas they ought to be crossing, as a well-known Indian saying has it, to the other shore of the ocean of Burmese literature. Perhaps they have not weighed well the truth of Pope's familiar couplet,

A little learning is a dang'rous thing;

Drink deep, or taste not the Pierian spring.

And it is only fair that they should know, that although they write in Burmese, there is much in their mannerism that falls chill and stark on Burmese ears and much that brings a smile to Burmese lips.
