The Legacy of Samuel Bacon Fairbank

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The 1913 centennial report of the American Marathi Mission in India included a large photo with the caption “Samuel B. Fairbank, D.D., Missionary, 1846–1898. Evangelist, Writer, Translator, Editor, Scientist, Agriculturist.” The photo and attribution show the high regard in which Fairbank was held and the amazing breadth of his talents and activities during his long service in India. Though an unknown name now in missions history, Samuel Bacon Fairbank (1822–98) was in his own time a missionary of rare personal giftedness and revered status both on the home front and in the area of India where he spent his life and where he is still remembered. Moreover, he became the patriarch of a missionary dynasty in western India that lasted over a century.

Fairbank never served as an administrator of a mission board, never developed a unique theory of mission or published any books for an American audience, spent most of his life in a tiny village, and, perhaps also to be noted, never did anything blameworthy enough to attract the attention of modern critics of the missionary enterprise. Nevertheless, Fairbank’s career as a missionary spanned a period of many developments and changes in American mission policy and reveals the relationship—and often the tension—between mission theory from afar and actual experience on the field. His many letters that survive in manuscript, together with his contributions to the mission’s annual reports, magazines, and memorial volumes, provide a helpful window into larger issues of the nineteenth-century American missionary movement. Studying the life of a missionary like Samuel B. Fairbank can do much to dispel the prevailing image of nineteenth-century missionaries as narrow, paternalistic, ethnocentric agents of imperialism. It can, in fact, shed light on the complexities of life on the mission field for those pioneers who lacked our privilege of hindsight as they tried to navigate the wilderness of cross-cultural encounters.

The American Marathi Mission was one of the firstfruits of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM), which sent out its pioneering group of missionaries to India in 1810. Two of this group, Gordon Hall and Samuel Nott, began work in Bombay in 1813, spending much of their time translating the New Testament into the Marathi language. Eventually the mission spread east and south throughout the Marathi-speaking areas of western central India and established three other urban centers in Ahmednagar, Satura, and Sholapur. In 1854 the ABCFM sent a deputation to India led by Rufus Anderson, who urged the missionaries, then including Fairbank, to focus on evangelizing rather than “civilizing” the people and to aim toward building self-supporting, self-governing churches. The members of the Marathi Mission took Anderson’s advice to heart and over the following years attempted to put it into practice. They closed the mission press and many of its schools, began training and ordaining native pastors, and expanded beyond the urban centers into the surrounding villages, planting local churches. The changes inspired by the deputation in the following years resulted in unprecedented growth for the mission.

Fruitful Ministry in Wadalé

Samuel Bacon Fairbank was born on December 14, 1822, in Stamford, Connecticut. He was the eldest son of John Barnard Fairbank, who was principal of an academy in Stamford and later moved to Massachusetts, where he manufactured straw hats. Fairbank studied at Illinois College (A.B. 1842, A.M. 1845) and Andover Theological Seminary, where he became convinced that he was called to be a missionary. After his graduation from Andover and ordination in 1845, he married Abbie Allen. The couple immediately left for India to join the American Marathi Mission, arriving in Bombay in 1846.

Fairbank took charge of the mission press, based in Bombay. During that time he helped supervise the translation, revision, and printing of the Marathi Scriptures, as well as coediting a quarterly journal on temperance. In 1852 Abbie died following childbirth, having been in poor health for some time. After her death and the dismantling of the press because of the Anderson deputation, Fairbank went to the United States for a furlough. While he was there, he married Mary Ballantine, the daughter of fellow missionary Henry Ballantine.

Upon returning to India in 1857, Fairbank heeded Rufus Anderson’s admonition to begin a rural Christian movement by establishing one of the first mission outstations in Wadalé (later spelled Vadala). A village of fewer than three hundred people, Wadalé was located twenty-six miles northeast of Ahmednagar in the Godaveri valley and within ten miles of at least eighty-two other villages. From this central location, Fairbank single-handedly exercised oversight of what became known as the Wadalé district. Wadalé was the most fruitful outstation of the entire mission, growing rapidly over the following decades and eventually having more churches, native pastors, teachers, and schools than any other district—a distinction it could claim well into the twentieth century. Many Wadalé converts became involved in Christian ministry and government work throughout the Marathi-speaking region. By 1900 the churches of the Wadalé district had over 4,000 members, with Christians composing 35 percent of the total population of the region.

Fairbank’s historical essay on the evangelistic work of the mission for the 1882 Memorial Papers gives a detailed picture of how evangelistic work was conducted and how missionaries adapted their methods to specific situations and needs. The methods varied widely and included regular religious services, street preaching in the city, and itinerancy among the villages (periodic visitation, preaching tours lasting several months, or—his own favored mode—lengthy visits to individual villages). Believing evangelism to be his most important task, Fairbank often took long preaching tours—sometimes alone with his native assistant, sometimes with his wife or a fellow missionary. He traveled from village to village in an ox cart he had specially designed to serve as transportation, shelter from weather, bedroom, kitchen, study, bath, and storeroom. It even included bookshelves and a small writing desk. He fondly called it his “tent on wheels.” He made a special point of indicating in his report that the wives of the missionaries (including his own wife, Mary) were also sent and, when they were not otherwise occupied with schools and work among women, went on itiner-
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The missionaries soon found that they had to provide some sort of spectacle or arouse people’s curiosity in order to gather (and keep) a large audience. One method, employed often by Fairbank, was to use a Magic Lantern or its improved form, the Sciopticon, to provide visual illustrations to a Scripture story. Fairbank’s mission reports also praised the use of native music in evangelism: “among a people so fond of singing as the Hindus are, it would seem that such use might be made of this agency so that it would become a powerful means of conversions as well as of evangelization.” Fairbank himself contributed to this trend by preparing a tune book and music manual in Marathi, giving singing lessons, and writing and translating hymns. The most successful musical venture of the mission was its adaptation of the kirttan to Christian purposes. A kirttan, as performed by a company of trained Indian singers and instrumentalists, involved alternating periods of recitative teaching and musical response. From the time of its first use, wrote Fairbank, “the kirttan has been a favorite, as well as a most important and impressive mode of Evangelism. A good kirttan is sure to draw a crowded audience and to secure its pleased attention. The instruction given in it is remembered, and some of the hymns and tunes are learned by the hearers and are sung with joy and profit for many a day.” With a kirttan, portable organ, Sciopticon, or other attraction, a missionary could preach to attentive crowds of several hundred up to a thousand people at a time, including large numbers of higher-caste women, who were otherwise almost impossible to reach.

Beyond Evangelism

Fairbank’s duties soon extended far beyond itinerant evangelism. He did a great deal of literary work for the mission, publishing Sabbath school notes in Marathi and several vernacular schoolbooks, including a multivolume arithmetic, a Marathi grammar, and illustrations for a geography textbook. He also prepared references for an edition of the New Testament. In later years he was asked to take over the editing of the mission’s annual Marathi almanac. In Wadalé he supervised the native pastors and teachers, who regularly came to him for instruction and advice, established schools and taught English to a group of boys in his home, dispensed medicines and provided medical care, and settled both ecclesiastical and legal disputes among the villagers, who came to revere his counsel.

Although he sometimes regretted that such tasks—especially medical care—took him away from preaching, he reflected, “When the Master sent forth his disciples, the first direction he gave them was to preach, and the second was to heal the sick. He also set them an example and not only in the same order but also by first healing and then preaching. So, acknowledging that healing is a necessary part of the Missionary work, I have always done what I could for the sick.” Often he gave entire afternoons to this task of healing, which he regarded as intimately connected with evangelism. Missionary work, for Fairbank, involved not only preaching a plan of salvation to the “heathen” but also being a living presence among the people, who, in seeing the love of the missionary for them expressed in his daily words and actions, would be drawn thereby to the substance of his message.

Fairbank also made great contributions to agriculture in the valley. A farmer at heart, he was disturbed by the extreme poverty and primitive farming methods of the villagers and helped develop better farming tools and methods adapted to the Indian climate and soil, setting up an experimental farm of his own as a model for others. This initiative brought him into much personal contact with the local people, as he would walk from village to village and chat with them at work in their fields. His letters and mission reports show an intimate knowledge of climate and economic conditions and a deep sympathy for the daily practical challenges the farmers faced. Illustrations and metaphors drawn from nature and agriculture filled his sermons and writings.

During the many years of drought and famine that ravaged the region, Fairbank and his fellow missionaries were involved in relief work, assisting governmental efforts and offering food and shelter to famine victims, taking in orphans, and buying and dispensing seed to farmers. Fairbank himself lost money over the years by lending out of his own personal allowance to poor farmers and native workers who could not repay him, at least for a long time. He found, however, that in the long run it was better for the morale of the people that they learn to earn their own living rather than be dependent on aid from others. He was a strong advocate of industrial schools, in which the students spent half of each day doing manual labor and learning farming or other trade skills. He insisted that this practical work was excellent for their health, reduced the cost of their board, taught them the dignity of work, and helped them gain a livelihood. By the turn of the century, perhaps partly owing to Fairbank’s advocacy, industrial education became a major emphasis in the mission.

The missionaries eventually decided that, though admirable in theory, in practice Rufus Anderson’s ideals of “evangelism only” and “self-supporting churches” were not always mutually compatible. The American Marathi Mission was committed to the goal of helping the local congregations to become independent of foreign aid. According to Fairbank, the work of the missionary is not complete until the native church is self-supporting and stable. He added this qualification, however: “A Christian must have sources of independent income before he can become a pillar in a self-supporting church.” People in these village churches were poor landless laborers or tenant farmers who lived by subsistence sharecropping or by begging. Their financial struggles were compounded by droughts, locust plagues, and famines, and they were often dependent by necessity upon mission funds. The majority were Mahars—“untouchables” excluded from caste society and from regular employment. Living in servile dependence upon the farmers, they were unable to contribute very much to the support of their churches and were also reluctant to “contend for their faith” and challenge the beliefs and practices of those in society on whom their livelihood depended. Fairbank therefore took Mahar Christians under his wing, both personally and financially, to help them become farmers.

Though flying directly in the face of Anderson’s mission ideology, Fairbank’s agricultural work, industrial schools, and English classes (English being the ticket into government service
and other higher professions) were not consciously efforts to “civilize,” a word that never appears in his writings, but attempts to enable Indian Christians to stand on their own feet financially so that self-supporting churches would have a basis on which to grow and eventually become independent of the mission. The letters and reports of Samuel Fairbank show a lack of interest in politics except when governmental assistance was needed to assist or protect the mission and the native people to whom it ministered, such as in the case of a legal controversy over the rights of Christian converts to use communal wells and send their children to state schools. Though Fairbank spoke of “heathenism,” as did every other man of his century, his words are never denigrating of the people, unsympathetic, or championing of American culture over Indian. The relation between missions and colonialism, especially in the context of nineteenth-century India, is an issue far too complex to be settled by individual case studies, and this article makes no pretense of resolving this difficult issue. When studied on their own terms, however, apart from the often unforeseen consequences of their work, the evidence suggests that many of these early missionaries were not consciously intending to impose standards of Western culture but were simply ministering to the needs of people around them, using the only methods they knew, motivated by convictions that transcended cultural considerations and willing to give their lives to the cause.

Window on Mission Life

The career of Samuel Bacon Fairbank provides a fascinating window into other historical issues of the American missionary movement. For example, his letters and mission reports show the development of female education in India and the role of women in the mission, the serious difficulties missionaries faced because of the caste system, the development of indigenous leadership, and the snowball effects of American board financial decisions, funding cuts, and doctrinal disputes on the life of the missionaries on the field. His letters also reveal the complex relationships between denominations and local competition between various mission agencies.

Fairbank’s work as an amateur naturalist illustrates how missionaries often contributed to scientific knowledge. Fairbank had a lifelong love for natural science and pursued this interest in India by planting gardens wherever he went, collecting and sending shells and bird skins back to American museums (which helped finance his scientific and agricultural pursuits), and publishing articles for the Bombay government on local birds, plants, reptiles, and fish. As a result of his accomplishments, in 1868 he was nominated to be a fellow of the University of Bombay.

Samuel Fairbank died, possibly of heat apoplexy, during a train journey to Kodaikanal (in South India) on May 31, 1898. He was buried in Ahmednagar. According to the obituary in the Missionary Herald, “At the time of his death Rev. Samuel Bacon Fairbank, D.D., was, in length of service, the senior male Protestant missionary in India.” He had outlived two wives (Mary Fairbank having died in 1878 soon after the birth of her tenth child) and served a total of fifty-two years in India, with only three short furloughs in America. By all accounts, he conducted his life with good humor, honesty, equanimity, and great sensitivity to the people among whom he ministered.

Fairbank’s personal impact on the Wadalé district was incalculable. When he first arrived in Wadalé and requested permission from the village leaders to build a house there, they gave him a plot of land that had been an outcaste burial site, hoping the foreigner would be driven away by ghosts. Decades later, the villagers not only regretted their earlier distrust but organized a homecoming celebration for the aged missionary after he returned from his final furlough in America. They also built a well for him out of their own funds to commemorate the fifty-year anniversary of his arrival in India. The water appeared quickly in the well, and a worker on the project was fortuitously spared from injury, both of which occurrences the villagers attributed to Fairbank’s meritorious life.

Fairbank’s son Henry, who took his father’s place in Wadalé, reported that the village had been so transformed by his father’s ministry that “Christian” had become a name of honor to them, and “this Wadalé is known in distinction from other Wadalés as the ‘Christian Wadalé.’” Fairbank’s second son, Edward, arriving several years later, remarked on the self-reliance of the native Christians in that area. Indeed, Samuel B. Fairbank became something of a local saint in the Wadalé district, and his name is still known and revered. The Wadalé church, built after a famine by Edward and dedicated in 1903, is called the Samuel Bacon Fairbank Memorial Church, and another nearby village has also recently renamed its church after him.

The Family Legacy

Samuel Fairbank’s significance lies not only in the particular accomplishments of his lifetime but also in his legacy carried on by succeeding generations of Fairbanks in India and beyond—what became known in the ABCFM as “the Fairbank Saga.” His first wife, Abbie, bore four children, only one of whom (Emily) survived to adulthood. Abbie died soon after the birth of their fourth child. His second wife, Mary, bore ten children, eight of whom survived to adulthood. All of the Fairbank children went to the United States when they were old enough for formal schooling and lived with various family members and friends, with Fairbank sending them as much money as he could. After the death of their mother Mary, Anna Fairbank Woods, Fairbank’s second eldest daughter, who had married a minister and was living in the United States, became a surrogate mother to her younger siblings. Fairbank’s fatherly hopes were fulfilled when six of his nine surviving children became missionaries: Emily in Ceylon, and the others returning to western India, where they grew up. (Another daughter wanted to come, but the ABCFM lacked the funds to send her.) Many grandchildren also returned. In 1930 there were twenty-five members of his family in India, including in-laws and great-grandchildren.

Samuel Fairbank’s work in Wadalé was carried on first by his son Henry, then by his son Edward, and finally by Edward’s son Robert, all of whom found that the reputation of Samuel Fairbank among both Christian and non-Christian villagers paved the way for their own acceptance and ministry there. According to one descendant’s account, the mission twice attempted to send
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Edward to another area, since he was no longer needed in Wadalé, but each time the Wadalé church protested, saying, “But there has always been a Fairbank Sahib in Vadala; always ever since our grandfather’s time a Fairbank Sahib has been our Vadala Sahib.” The second time this occurred, the Wadalé delegation submitted to the mission a petition with the names of over 3,000 villagers asking that the Fairbanks be allowed to stay in Wadalé. Joseph Moulton, writing for the Marathi Mission sesquicentennial in 1963, said, “The Fairbank name is still a household word in many a home in the area; their memory is cherished by Hindus and Moslems as well as by Christians.”

Although Fairbank never wavered in his belief that the preaching of the Gospel was the primary work of the missionary, his holistic understanding of Christian life and witness as encompassing the soul, mind, and body surely left its mark on his descendants, most of whom were involved in educational, agricultural, and medical work. For example, his daughter Rose received her M.D. from Johns Hopkins in 1900 and immediately returned to India to serve as head of a mission hospital. She then married another doctor, Lester Beals, and with him established a hospital in Wai, near Bombay, that is still in operation. Fairbank’s daughter Katie married Robert A. Hume, a well-known and gifted missionary teacher and statesman who became the first moderator of the United Church of North India, corresponded with Gandhi, and was awarded for his public service in India. Fairbank’s progeny attended leading academic institutions such as Mount Holyoke, Amherst College, Andover Seminary, and Yale. They inherited Fairbank’s deep respect for the cultures of Asia.

In conclusion, the surviving letters and papers of Samuel Bacon Fairbank and his family provide the historian with a valuable resource for probing more deeply into the lives of “ordinary” missionaries. The combined careers of the Fairbanks in India, spanning over a century, offer a firsthand glimpse at long-range developments in missionary methods, mission theory, and cross-cultural relations between Americans and Indians in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Fairbank himself, as a man of broad and deep—though perhaps not highly visible—accomplishments, is worthy of notice on his own merits. Residing among the villagers for so many years, Fairbank daily faced their physical and social needs, as well as their spiritual ones. He prefaced his essay on evangelism by placing evangelistic work within the context of the whole range of missionary tasks, using a natural analogy characteristic of him:

Missionary activity is like a great tree with various branches, which are like Joseph’s vine, and “run over the wall.” These branches are in some sense separate and bear diverse fruit; but they are all branches of one Mission tree whose fruit is for food to hungry souls, and “whose leaves are for the healing of the nations.” The Preacher, the Teacher, the Bookmaker, and the Doctor, have each most important work in hand and each in his way impresses and blesses others, and earns the “Well done” from the Master. Each uses his special opportunities for communicating Christian truth, and is a light into the darkness. Each has the privilege of doing what is for him the most important work.

Fairbank’s reminder that Jesus combined healing with preaching, as well as his belief that being a living presence among the people was as important as words in the goal of spreading the Gospel, anticipated the shift in missions toward social and philanthropic work by the twentieth century. In his case, however, these beliefs did not reflect a changing theology but flowed from a life of experience on the mission field.

Notes

2. See Rufus Anderson, History of the Missions of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions in India (Boston: Congregational Publishing Society, 1874).
7. Report 1890, pp. 54–55; Samuel Bacon Fairbank to James Fairbank, June 28–July 1, 1874, Fairbank Family Papers (the location of all personal letters cited below).
8. Samuel B. Fairbank, 6th paper, in Memorial Papers, p. 44.
12. See, for example, Report 1889, pp. 70–71.
13. Samuel wrote to his brother James that most of his work was “the superintendence of workers, who live several miles (from 5 to 25 miles) away” (Samuel Bacon Fairbank to James Fairbank, October 21, 1881).
15. See, for example, Report 1882, p. 40; Samuel Bacon Fairbank to James Fairbank, March 10, 1883, and August 8, 1880; Clark, “The Fairbanks of India”; and Hume, “Semi-Centennial,” p. 528. According to Robert A. Hume, “In his district he was the chief authority for many Hindus, as well as for Christians” (“Samuel Bacon Fairbank, D.D.,” p. 301).
Selected Bibliography

The main source of material related to Samuel Bacon Fairbank and his descendents is the massive collection of Fairbank Family Papers in the Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library of Duke University, Durham, North Carolina. The annual reports of the American Marathi Mission also provide a wealth of information. Other general sources include the following:


Historical Sketch of the Mission to the Marathas of Western India. New York: American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, 1862.


20. See Marian Fairbank, “The Fairbank Family in India” (1930), Fairbank Family Papers; Goodsell, They Lived Their Faith, p. 31; Hume, “Semi-Centennial,” p. 527; Samuel Bacon Fairbank to James Fairbank, April 9, 1882; and Samuel Bacon Fairbank to his mother, brothers, and sisters, March 30, 1880.
21. See Hazen, A Century in India, pp. 70–71; and Samuel Bacon Fairbank to James Fairbank, August 10, 1878.
22. See Report 1882, pp. 31–37; Report 1884, p. 34; and Report 1892, p. 11.
24. R. A. Hume, 1st paper, Memorial Papers, p. 3.
26. See Modak, 4th paper, Memorial Papers, p. 26; and Report 1885, pp. 18–19.
28. For example, the family papers include a receipt from Amherst College that reads: “The Trustees of Amherst College have received from Rev. S. B. Fairbank numerous specimens of shells, collected by the donor in Bombay, as a gift to the Zoological Museum, for which they return a grateful acknowledgment” (Amherst College, letter acknowledging donation, March 30, 1852).
29. Henry J. Bruce, 8th paper, Memorial Papers, p. 106.
30. C. Gonne, Secretary to Government, Bombay, to Samuel Bacon Fairbank, December 29, 1868.
34. See Report 1896, pp. 11–12.
35. Report 1887, p. 22.
37. There is some discrepancy as to the number of children Abbie bore. A letter from Samuel to a friend shortly after her death seems to indicate only three pregnancies (Samuel Bacon Fairbank to Mrs. Kimball, August 25, 1852). In any event, only one of the babies survived.
38. Marian Fairbank, “The Fairbank Family in India.”
39. Ibid.
40. Moulton, Faith for the Future, p. 175.
41. His son Henry, reporting on the work of the Wadalé mission in 1896, echoed his father’s belief that healing was a necessary corollary to evangelism: “It is easy to forget the spiritual side of the medical work in caring for the bodies of the patients. However, I feel that the Gospel is commended in many villages, because bodily suffering has been relieved, and indirectly the Evangelistic work in the district is advanced” (Report 1896, p. 69).
42. Goodsell, They Lived Their Faith, pp. 402–3.
43. Fairbank, 6th paper, Memorial Papers, p. 43.