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Flower power resurrects Carey legacy

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KOLKATA: Winter, the season of yellow leaves and naked trees, has for long added colour to the Bengali's palette and palate. But for a culture that thrives on good food and printed words, the link between the two is obvious to few - **William Carey** (1761-1834). As part of Carey's 250th birth anniversary celebrations, the Agri-Horticultural Society of India has dedicated its annual flower show on February 9-12 to the baptist from Northamptonshire, who became a pioneer of poriborton in Bengal.

Incidentally, the Society was founded by Carey in 1820, and the annual flower show, still the largest in India, was started by him in 1828.

"The Society served as the de facto ministry of agriculture up to 1900. India owes a great deal to Carey as he pioneered the import of winter vegetables like cauliflower, cabbage, tomato and beet that were otherwise impossible to grow in Indian climate. From acclimatizing these crops to standardizing the cultivation techniques, Carey's role is unforgettable despite the current progress in biotechnology," says Sujit Chakravorti, former AHSI president and now in charge of its events. "Apart from vegetables, he also improved the quality of cotton and sugarcane, among other crops. The idea was not to boost production for commercial gain, but to improve the quality of life of the poor," says **Nirupam Sen**, AHSI secretary.

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Carey's contribution went beyond the tilling fields. The leading force of the legendary Serampore Trio gave the biggest boost to Bengal's printing industry, introduced the idea of savings banks and lending libraries, campaigned successfully against the evil of 'sati' and was a major force behind the rise of the Bengali prose. Digidarshan and Samachar Darpan, the earliest vernacular periodicals and newspapers in India, were printed from Carey's press in Serampore, as was the English daily, Friend of India. He also translated the Bible in Bengali, Sanskrit, Oriya, Marathi, Hindi, Assamese and several other regional languages.

"The Portuguese first brought the printing press to India - in Goa in the 16th century. But it didn't flourish. Soon after, there was a lot of missionary activity in Travancore.

William Carey's activities started after two major events took place in 1800, when he joined the Fort William college and installed the Serampore Mission Press in the then Danish colony. In Serampore, he teamed up with Panchanan Karmakar to make Bengali wooden types. But Carey is best known for printing fonts and his compilation of Bengali and Sanskrit dictionaries. That was a fantastic achievement," says Swapan Chakravorty, director general, National Library.

In 30 years, the Serampore Mission Press printed over 200,000 copies of books in about 40 languages. "Carey's printing of Matthew's Gospel was the first prose literature in Bengali," according to the US-based William Carey Heritage Foundation.

But is Carey, whom Rabindranath Tagore called 'The Father of Modern Bengal', still relevant in the age of round-the-year cold storage and deskjet printers? "It's easy to improvise once the foundation is laid," says the organization. Maybe that's why, agriculture-driven Bengal will always carry Carey in its heart.

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