

The Last Days of the First Rebel: Derozio

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Bicentennial Publication of the Presidency
College Alumni Association, 20th Jan 2017

When we recount, with a certain degree of vicarious pride, the contribution made by countless illustrious students and teachers of Hindu College and its successor, Presidency College, in the last two centuries, it may be equally fascinating to make a list of equally famous ones who were expelled from the institution or left it on their own. One can only hazard a guess at the number of such luminaries who qualify for this distinction, as it is highly unlikely that such a roll has ever been attempted. Many an expulsion or rebellion has, of course, been the stuff of myths and obvious exaggerations that were regaled in by young students, over never-ending cups of tea and shared snacks in the college canteen or in the portico.

It is, however, impossible to ever discuss the subject of rebellion in Presidency or Hindu College without mentioning the name of Henry Louis Vivian Derozio. He was, without doubt, the first radical who lit such a veritable fire on the campus that its glow continued to lead several generations of 'Young Bengal' and eventually succeed in triggering the grand Renaissance of Bengal. After all, just as "the battle of Waterloo was won in the playing fields of Eton" and not in its classrooms, the spirit of free inquiry was engendered more in the corridors of the college that often spilled over to the nearby coffee house, rather than through one-way lectures that rushed through time-bound structured syllabi. In our case, we can actually date the injection of this stimulating chromosome of energetic questioning to May 1826, when the institution was barely 9 years old. For it was the month when Derozio joined the college, to teach English Literature and History. Most Presidencians are aware that he was a young firebrand but many may know that he joined Hindu College when he was just 17 years old. And also that he himself was a school dropout, who was more fascinated by the mighty Ganga than in stuffy classrooms.

But let us also remember that by the time Derozio was 17, he was already well known as a poet and a radical thinker. As Susobhan Chandra Sarkar recounted in his *Derozio and Young Bengal* (in *Studies in the Bengal Renaissance* edited by Atulchandra Gupta, 1958),

"Derozio is said to have edited the *Hesperus* and the *Calcutta Literary Gazette*, acted as editor-assistant to the *India Gazette*, ultra radical in its politics, written for the *Calcutta Magazine*, the *Bengal Annual*, the *Kaleidoscope*. This is also evident from the backhanded compliment that the very-English and very high browed *Oriental Herald* expressed at "this really talented and interesting young poet". It declared that Henry had "real poetic power" and "very high poetic force and beauty", but bemoaned, of course, his major limitation: that had never actually beheld the exquisite beauty of England, before breaking out into such raptures about his native land.

At the same time, it may also be appropriate to clarify at this stage that the Hindu College or the Anglo Indian College as it was also called, was hardly a college in the sense in which one understands the term now. It started classes on the 20th of January 1817 with a handful of students in the form of a school or a *pathshala* as it was described in several official records. Lessons were given in a small rented building in Garanhatta, that later became known as number 304 Chitpur Road. In its journey from this place to Firingee Kamal Bose's house nearby and then to Bowbazar and finally to the present location of Sanskrit College, it added a *maha-pathshala* or a 'high school' or a junior college. The students who were addressed by Derozio were all fairly young, eager and very impressionable. In the 1820s, education in India was yet to be streamlined or standardised and it was still in the age of experimentation. Macaulay's defining *Minute on Education* that sealed the argument in favour of English education appeared almost two decades later and the first three modern universities that were designed on the British model came into existence in Calcutta, Bombay and Madras only after some 41 long years.

It is not our purpose here to analyse Derozio and his role in any great detail, except to mention rather briefly his personality and his influence, because they led eventually to the opening up of locked minds and to his consequent expulsion from the first major educational institution in the history of modern India. According to Sarkar, "Derozio's personality brought a new era in the annals of the College, the youthful teacher drawing the senior boys like a magnet around him". Let us visualise the first rebel through the fulsome praise that an Englishman, Thomas Edwards, showered on him as early as 1884. He mentioned repeatedly "his force of his individuality, his winning manner, his wide knowledge, his open generous chivalrous nature, his humour and playfulness, his fearless love of truth, his ardent love of India.....that

produced an intellectual and moral revolution in Hindu society since unparalleled". On the other hand, the conservative *Britannica*, that was hardly expected to love someone who favoured his country over Britain, was rather miserly in its entry on Derozio. Its classic understatement described him as "the son of an Indian father and an English mother" who "began publishing patriotic verses", and that "he was reportedly brilliant in Hindu College".

It admitted, however, that Derozio "influenced his students and won him their loyalty". Such upper lip comments notwithstanding, it is clear from contemporary reports that his teaching was indeed so revolutionary that the families from the so-called higher castes of Bengal became increasingly alarmed at Derozio's spirit and his charismatic hold over the Hindu students. His highly critical dissection of orthodox Hindu beliefs and practices as well as his tirade against idolatry and superstition were viewed with horror by the leading families of the upper castes in Calcutta. After all, they had taken such pains to plead for and to set up this pioneering institution. Their transparent goal was to ensure that their wards inculcated enough of the English language and of Western civilization as would ensure prosperous careers or livelihoods for them in the prevailing regime. But they had never bargained for such strident criticism against the very essence of Hinduism and were aghast at the downright rejection of their religion by their own children, who were so deeply influenced by this Derozio.

There were other reasons for the social leaders of the Hindus to worry about this terrible crusade against some obscurantist practices. It is our submission that Derozio's dismissal from the college was, in a way, some sort of a consolation prize that certain *samajpatis* of Calcutta extracted after losing the first major battle to Ram Mohun Roy and Lord William Bentinck, in this tumultuous period between 1828 and 1830. Raja Ram Mohun Roy and Devendranath Tagore had formally breached Hindu orthodoxy on the 20th of August 1828, after years of battering, by setting up the Brahmo Samaj. The avowed object of cleansing the ancient religion of its cancerous cells was viewed with dread and disgust and the attempt to stop the inhuman burning of Hindu widows was openly castigated as an infringement of some imagined inherent rights. But that did not deter either Ram Mohun or the Governor General of India who went ahead and signed the Sati Regulation of the Bengal Code in December 1829. This law declared unequivocally that "the practice of sati, or of burning or burying alive the widows of Hindus" was considered to be "illegal and punishable by the criminal courts".

The *Calcutta Gazette* of Monday, the 18th of January 1930 reported that the Indian gentry met the Governor General four days earlier, to demand an immediate rollback of this new law. It is the same elite that finally hounded Derozio out of Hindu College in just a year and four months. The *Gazette* mentioned that "several Native Gentlemen, among whom were Baboos Gopee Mohun Deb, Radhakanta Deb, Nilmoney Dey, Bowany Churn Mitter, presented a petition to the Right Honourable the Governor General, His Lordship, who received them in his Council Chamber." The petition mentioned that "under sanction of immemorial usage as well as precept, Hindoo women perform on their own accord and pleasure, and for the benefit of their Husband's Souls and their own, the sacrifice of self immolation called Suttee, which is not merely a sacred duty but a high privilege to her". The petitioners attacked the reformists quite directly and went to the extent of cautioning the Governor General. It also warned him not to rely on "a doctrine derived from a number of Hindoos who were apostate from the religion of their forefathers, who have defiled themselves by eating and drinking forbidden things in the society of Europeans".

The last bitter charge was not specifically restricted to those who favoured the immediate halting of the abominable ritual of burning widows alive: it was a general diatribe against all those who defiled the ancient religion. It obviously included several of Derozio's Hindu students who had not only partaken of prohibited foods but had openly flaunted their audacious acts as signs of liberation. Derozio was, therefore, a marked 'culprit' as it was he who had led these boys from conservative Hindu families 'astray'. We find clear evidence of this in several reports of that period and also in "a short manuscript history of the Hindu College by Baboo Hurro Mohun Chatterji". The latter was excerpted in the *Christian Observer* and it gives us interesting insights. It stated that in May 1829, several of the boys in the first and second classes had acquired, under Derozio's constant guidance, "a remarkable courage and spirit in expressing their opinions on all subjects and particularly on the subject of religion". Their off-class interactions with Derozio that "were held almost daily after or before school hours.....were without the knowledge or sanction of the authorities". In these sessions, "he taught the evil effects of idolatry and

superstition.....and formed their moral conceptions as to make them completely above the antiquated ideas and aspirations of the age. The principles and practices of the Hindu religion were openly ridiculed and condemned and angry disputes were held on moral subjects". It must be

remembered that Derozio had similar problems with Christian missionaries as well, for he was often a doubting atheist and his strict rationalist philosophy got him into problems with his own religion. But that did not stop newspapers like the *Sambad Prabhakar* and the *Samachar Chandrika* from raising a "hue and cry about religion in danger from the atheist beasts who aped the vagabond *Firingis*".

To balance these one sided reports, we need to also check what the more reasonable *Calcutta Gazette* had been reporting on the progress made by the 'native' boys in acquiring Western education in Hindu College. Two items that appeared on the 24th and the 31st of January 1828 gave detailed accounts of the achievements of young Indian boys in understanding and mastering complex issues of English Literature and heritage of the Greek and Roman classics. The latter news noted with satisfaction the "extraordinary progress made among Hindoo youth in English literature. The propriety which they have manifested in idiom and expression and their remarkable intimacy with Greek and Roman history and English writers afford a most satisfactory proof of the zeal and success with which their studies have been conducted." Though there is no specific name of the teachers, we may do well to remember that Derozio's subjects were English Literature and History. In discussing his radical views on religion and politics we often overlook the fact that, as a free thinker and a dedicated teacher, he was more than committed to his task than to other niceties. That year, 1828, Derozio and his students of the college took another bold step and set up India's first public debating club, the *Academic Association*. It discussed, rather logically and openly, many sensitive but critical issues like 'what constituted patriotism' and 'what exactly was meant by individual freedom'. It is a remarkable coincidence that these very issues are debated with as much heat and less light, even at present in our free country. The *Association* must have created quite a lot of controversy when it debated threadbare on 'priest craft' and on God's existence or otherwise. One of its hottest topics was 'idolatry' and the young men of Hindu College were bold enough, thanks to their mentor's constant guidance and encouragement, to take on many other sensitive topics head on. According to Susobhan Sarkar, "the debating talents of the youthful members attracted attention and drew many celebrities to the exciting sessions". This itself must have worried the ultra conservative groups at that time, though it would be unimaginable for anyone in the 1820s to visualise that almost two centuries later, as men evolved a lot, they would no longer resort to civilised debates on religion. They would rather indulge in mayhem and manslaughter, as is painfully going on in

the Middle East or was evident even in India during the riots that followed the Ayodhya episode.

Now that we have a fair idea of the scenario at that time, we may take a look at some more records of the troubled period, 1830-1831, to gauge how the last days of Derozio must have been. By 1830, the authorities of the college had just enough of his radicalism on the campus. The Managers of Hindu College decided to act sternly, for the fair name of the institution could not be held to ransom by one precocious young man and his intemperate followers. After all, the Hindu gentry that had a big say in the manner in which the college was run. To cap it all, Derozio's students had started antagonising the rulers of the land as well, by arguing against the British colonisation of India and talking publicly of liberty. This meant that the Hindu orthodox leaders could now seek official British intervention against the exasperating teacher. Then, on the 12th of February 1830, a damning 'anti-colonialist' article came out in the *India Gazette* and this was looked upon with great concern by the government. Derozio, however, continued his relentless campaign and encouraged his students to start a magazine, *Parthenon*, that espoused education for women, combating superstition and spoke justice for all. It was ordered to be shut down soon after just two issues, and in May 1830, the Managers of the College issued orders that added teeth to their disciplinary diktats of 1829. The new orders strictly forbade "the teachers from having any communication with their students on religious subjects and especially the religion of the Hindus". But, once the spark of rebellion was ignited, it could hardly be confined to religious debates. The *Calcutta Gazette* of 4th October 1830 reported that "the Managers of the College having heard that several of its students are in the habit of attending Societies at which political or religious discussions are held, think it necessary to announce their strong disapprobation of the practice and to prohibit its continuance and further that if any student being present at such a Society shall incur serious displeasure". Yet, on 10 December 1830, some 200 persons crowded the Town Hall to celebrate the spirit of liberty ushered in again by France's July Revolution and some had even the temerity to hoist the French tricolour on the monument, symbolising freedom.

It was clear that Derozio had to be silenced at any cost, either by the Hindu conservatives or by the British establishment. He could hardly expect any support from the Christian missionaries whom he had annoyed with his occasional espousal of atheism. He must have realised that he was in acute danger, but he continued his task,

regardless. As his students recalled later, he kept urging them "to live and die for truth". Things went to such a pass that when Derozio went to meet the Head Master, D'Anselme on the 5th of February 1831, he was so infuriated that he lifted his hand to strike Derozio. This was in the presence of the Management Committee members who had gathered there for a meeting. D'Anselme was prevented by David Hare from actually hitting Derozio and then he took his ire on Hare by calling him "a vile sycophant". One has hardly ever come across such high drama where the faculty of the college was concerned. Pearychand Mitra recorded later that there was some sort of a patch-up, but the mood of the meeting was definitely against Derozio. On that day, the Managers of the Hindu College took a resolution in their MC meeting "condemning practices that were inconsistent with the Hindu notions of propriety" and banned "Societies that discussed either politics or religion". The radical *India Gazette* immediately condemned these orders and declared them as "presumptuous, tyrannical and absurd intermeddling with the right of private judgement.....for they have no right to dictate to the students how they shall dispose of their time out of College". The Bengali newspapers, on the other hand, heaved some sigh of relief but were still bitter with the British suppression of what they considered was their fundamental right to burn alive young widows.

Hindu orthodox leaders, who were still frustrated and restless ever since they had lost out to Bentinck and Ram Mohun on the 'Sati' law, became desperate to procure some sort a victory. Dewan Ram Comul Sen, the grandfather of Keshab Chandra Sen, was the leader of the intolerant brigade and he started actively canvassing for Derozio's dismissal in public and seriously approached the Hindu -dominated management of the college. As a result, the Directors of the Hindu College had to call a 'Special Meeting' on the 23rd of April 1831 for "checking the growing evil and the public alarm arising from the very unwarranted misconduct of a certain teacher". Its ostensible proposal was to save "a great many children who have been entrusted[because Derozio] has materially injured their morals." The hand-written records of this fateful meeting contain a damaging memorandum that accused "Derozio as the root of all evils and the cause of public alarm". It proposed that "he should be discharged from the College" along with "all those students who are publicly hostile to Hinduism". It also demanded action against "any of the boys (who) go to see or attend public lectures". One may note how this strategy combined religion and politics, rather adroitly, for it helped establish thereby a definitely

retrograde tradition on the Indian subcontinent, that still flourishes in all the three nations that emerged later.

As expected, the Committee voted 6 to 3 to dismiss Henry Derozio to assuage "the present state of public feeling amongst the Hindoo Community". Radhakanta Deb, Ram Comul Sen, Radhamadhab Bandopadhyay and the "governor" Chandrakumar Tagore voted in favour of the resolution as "absolutely necessary", while Prasanna Kumar Tagore and Rasamoy Datta sided with it as they considered it "expedient". Srikrishna Sinha was the only one who stood boldly against the resolution. The College's Visitor, the famous Orientalist, Dr Horace Hayman Wilson and the noted pro-Indian educationist, David Hare, abstained on the ground that they could not represent Hindu views. The orthodox group failed, however, to pass the second part of the resolution that was to condemn Henry Derozio as "an improper person to be entrusted with the education of youth" because it could not convince the majority.

Wilson then informed Derozio of this decision and suggested that he resign as "an act of merit", but while Derozio sent his letter of resignation immediately on the 25th of April, he refused to relent. Instead, he wrote a sharp letter ripping apart the MC's decision to terminate his services as violating the elementary principles of natural justice. He said that it did not frame specific charges or inform him about them, or permit him to defend himself. He made the Managers acutely aware of the fact that he was "removed unexamined and unheard.....without even the mockery of a trial." The role of Wilson appears rather intriguing for while he appeared sympathetic to Derozio he sided firmly with the Hindu Management. He was already well known for several decades as the Secretary of the Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal, the translator of Kalidas's *Meghaduta* and famous as the author of the first 'Sanskrit to English' dictionary. Besides, he was a qualified doctor who wrote on the *Ayurveda* and on indigenous medical practices. He was also an eminent historian who had published several books before 1831. After this date, however, he would be better remembered as the first occupant of the Boden Chair of Sanskrit and respected till today for his splendid translation of the *Vishnu Purana*. He replied to Derozio on behalf of the Management Committee that "there was no trial intended, there was no condemnation" He then quizzed Derozio with questions like "Do you believe in a God? Do you think respect and obedience to parents no part of moral duty?"

Derozio's long impassioned reply to Wilson on the 26th of April is classic piece of logic. "I am neither afraid nor ashamed to confess having stated the doubts of philosophers.....because I have stated the solution of these doubts. Is it forbidden anywhere to argue upon such a question? Is it consistent with an enlightened notion of truth to wed ourselves to only one view of so important a subject, resolving to close our eyes and ears against all impressions that oppose themselves to it?" He continued his version that he was duty bound to inform his students about the different views on each subject and that he was tutoring them to arrive at considered decisions after weighing for themselves the strength of all conflicting arguments. He claimed that all he did was to ensure that they did not become "ignorant dogmatists" and to set "aside the narrowness of mind". According to him "one doubt suggests another and universal scepticism is the consequence." He ended this part of the argument with his typical flourish: "to produce convictions was not within my power and if I am condemned for the *Atheism* of some, let me receive credit for the *Theism* of others."

On the second question, i.e, whether he had been teaching his students to disrespect their parents or to incite rebellion against elders, he appeared genuinely hurt. "The authors of such infamous fabrications are too degraded for my contempt. If my father had been alive, he would have repelled the slander by telling my calumniators that a son who has endeavoured to discharge every filial duty as I have done, could never have entertained such a sentiment; but my mother can testify how utterly inconsistent it (defiance) is with my conduct. " He went over the other issues raised by the upper caste Hindu leaders and he was intuitive enough "to trace the reports (against him) to a person called Brindabone Ghosal, a poor Brahmin, who lives by going from house to house to entertain the inmates with the news of the day, which he invariably invents". Having replied satisfactorily to all the allegations against him, he was bold enough at his young age to pose a counter question to a reputed scholar like Dr Wilson."Allow me to ask you, my dear Sir", he wrote, "whether the expediency of yielding to popular clamour can be offered as a justification of the measures adopted by the Native Managers of the College towards me?.....Excuse my saying it, but I believe that there was a determination on their part to get rid of me, not to satisfy popular clamour, but their own bigotry."

There is no further point in carrying on with this debate as we have no record of what the Managers responded on these counter charges as it is clear that neither side was prepared to even discuss the matter. The

simple fact is that Derozio's dismissal from the college could hardly constrict the historical process that he had triggered in the first real public educational institution of India. His students and those who swore by him for several decades to come, would never give up their habit or right to question every major issue and to relentlessly seek to know the truth, through enquiry and open debate. We can not, of course, recreate within the space of this article either the excitement of the revolutionary Young Bengal movement that he inspired directly or the efflorescence of the Bengal Renaissance, that owed a lot to the Derozian doctrine of doubt and debate.

But, what did he do after the Hindu College episode? Not many know that he carried on regardless and that he continued to be the beacon for his students and admirers for the remaining part of his life, which was tragically just nine more months. He continued with renewed zest to influence young minds, speak at public fora and also assumed responsibilities as the editor of a new, influential daily called the *East Indian*. Here again, his statements were full of logic that were couched in pleasing prose, often a bit too verbose, as was the prevailing style of writing. Many compliments were paid to him even by his rivals and critics and one such statement declared that, as a journalist, "he possessed the finest sentiments of liberty". While he encouraged the large numbers of his former students to branch out on their own, which many did so eminently, his own special mission was to act as an interpreter and an interlocutor between his own community of half European and half Indians and the rest of society. This community was called by various names like Eurasians or East Indians, because at that time, the word 'Anglo Indians' referred to English-educated Indians. It would, however, become the common accepted name for Eurasians many decades later. The fact that Derozio was as active as ever before is clear from several items that appeared in different newspapers in 1831, An item in the *India Gazette* of 19th December 1831 mentioned "an examination of the pupils in the Parental Academic Institution" that was held a few days before where "Mr Derozio came forward and intimated his intention of delivering a series of lectures on Law and Political Economy, with a view of qualifying the pupils to avail themselves of the judicial situations that are now open to East Indians". He was thus his usual self even a few days before a fatal fever struck him on the 17th of December. He was immediately attended to by his students and admirers in such large numbers that the *Indian Register*, a rival journal, was moved by "the serious apprehensions entertained for him during his illness,.....the whole community appeared to be deeply

interested in his safety, and the most anxious enquiries were made by every person respecting the progress of the disorder by which he was attacked".

Nothing however worked and no prayers helped, for Henry Louis Vivian Derozio died on the 26th of December 1831, at the age of 22. The Calcutta Gazette displayed maturity in its obituary where it mentioned: "Destined to terminate his short but bright career, when others are commencing theirs, he, nevertheless lived long enough to acquire a reputation that is not likely to perish, and that is honourably associated with the moral, social and political improvement of his countrymen." While tributes poured in, along with some strong comments about some of his excesses beyond the classroom, the pity lies is that very few realised at that early stage of formal Western education in India that this college would be unique throughout history not for its orthodoxy but for leading the freshest of ideas. And, there is no doubt that it was Derozio who first lit the flame when the institution was still in its infancy. For the next 186 years, the prime contribution of the college lay in igniting so many young minds through several generations to think ahead of their times. Derozio's torch still shines along this difficult path that guided the bold to lead the struggling nation scale new heights in several domains, even if the process involved bitterness and conflict. Thus, for decade after decade, Hindu and Presidency College has provided numerous leaders in every sphere of life, who spearheaded the eternal quest to know more, to change, to challenge and also to suffer for what they considered to be beyond negotiation or compromise.