

Henry Louis Vivian Derozio and An Act of Remembrance

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Introduction

The name may not be familiar to all members of modern Bengali generation, but this Portuguese-Anglo-Indian (1809-1831) was a household name two hundred years ago, about fifty years before Swami Vivekananda appeared on the scene. Although his appeal was mostly limited to the then young Bengal, whereas Swamiji's was global, both endeavoured to awaken the youths of Bengal and obliterate vested orthodoxy, complacency, intolerance, and colonial exploitation with rationality, critical thinking, liberality, patriotism, and social/cultural/educational amelioration.

This article discusses briefly the first ever Bengal Renaissance heralded by Derozio, and by Swami Vivekananda years later. The article also includes a fictional short story, paying tribute to Derozio as a 'Great Man', by the famous Bengali novelist Balaichand Mukhopadhyay (aka *Bonophool*).

Derozio as the pioneer of the Bengal Renaissance

At the time when Bengal was undergoing considerable social, religious, and cultural upheavals, particularly with Raja Ram Mohan Roy having established the Brahmo Samaj that triggered opposition from traditional Hindu society, Derozio appeared on the scene with fresh, progressive ideas, making the Young

Bengal think independently, question everything, and not accept things on blind faith without any serious scrutiny. He did all these mostly when he was appointed, at age 17, a teacher of English literature and history at the Hindu College that later became the Presidency College. He only lived five years after that.

Hailed as a scholar and progressive thinker at an early age, he zealously interacted with his students and inculcated in them the ideals of the French Revolution (1789 A.D.)—liberty, equality, and fraternity—and the liberal thinking of Britain. He inspired his students to work toward eliminating all types of social evils and injustice, improving conditions for women and peasants, and fight for the freedom of the press, thought, and expression. In other words, he led an intellectual revolution in Bengal with his forward and liberal thinking, which was aptly named as the 'Young Bengal Movement', and was instrumental in ushering in the 'Bengal Renaissance.'

Derozio was also a prolific poet, whose work reflected his intense patriotic love for India and its people, which was at that time quite extraordinary for someone with a mixed European-Indian descent. He was strongly influenced by the English poet Byron's romantic style, and he was often regarded as the first 'National Poet' of modern India. 'To India My Native Land' is one of Derozio's most famous poems, where he expresses his deep love for India and laments the loss of its former glory under colonial rule. The poem is

a powerful plea for the revival of India's lost greatness. In 'The Harp of India' Derozio uses the metaphor of a broken harp to symbolize the cultural decay in India due to foreign domination. He expresses hope for a resurgence of Indian culture and values. 'Fakir of Jungheera', a narrative poem, deals with social and religious themes, reflecting Derozio's engagement with issues of caste and religious orthodoxy in India. The poem critiques the practice of Sati (the burning of widows) and highlights the tension between tradition and modernity. 'Song of the Hindustanee Minstrel' exemplifies Derozio's blend of Indian and Western themes, showcasing his unique position as a poet who could traverse both worlds.

Derozio and Vivekananda

It is not the purpose here to draw a parallel, because Swami Vivekananda is nonpareil—unequaled for what he did for Bengal, India, and the world. But it is to point out that before Swamiji's advent, there was this person of mixed descent who shook up the young men of Bengal and made a large impact with his revolutionary ideas about education, literature, religion, and social reform.

It is truly amazing that Swami Vivekananda did so much for so many, all around the globe, in such a short time—nine years to be exact (1893-1902). Though Derozio's sphere of influence was much limited, and that too mostly within Bengal, he did what he did in five years (1826-1831). Swamiji was the first Indian in modern times to re-establish the spiritual pre-eminence of the Vedanta philosophy on a global scale and, with that end in view, found a socio-religious, philanthropic organization that would last forever. Derozio's effort was also the first of its kind, years before Swamiji's, and its impact

had continued to resonate with his followers, who were recognized as Young Bengal—many of them went on to make significant contributions in social reform, law, and journalism, to shape a better tomorrow—even after his death from cholera in 1831.

The story

The renowned Bengali novelist acknowledges the greatness of Derozio in a story that pokes fun at the Bengali society's gossip-loving, bureaucratic, know-it-all, members. The story relates the sequence of events in Derozio's short but consequential life, in a conversational tone:

Jatinbabu, a newcomer to our neighbourhood, can easily be called discourteous. The gentleman never obeys society's general rules and regulations; never accepts any invitations; never asks about any neighbour's wellbeing; doesn't appear to feel complimented if anybody visits his house—his gestures rather express disgust at that. Despite all that, we go to his house almost every afternoon for our regular cup of tea. There may be imperfections in Jatinbabu's character, but tea at his house is absolutely perfect. When we went there the other afternoon—we, meaning I, Madhabbabu, and Pundarikakshbabu—he was then seemingly chatting with another person, unknown to us, a stranger. We didn't remember having seen that person anywhere before. Jatinbabu, characteristically, only took a brief look at us, but never mouthed a word of welcome or asked us to sit down, but continued chatting. We sat down eventually.

'He was like that from his childhood,' Jatinbabu was saying to the person, 'bossing over everybody in school and perhaps learning to drink alcohol then.'

Pundarikakshababu could not control himself. ‘Are you talking about Hembabu’s son Phatke?’ he asked.

Jatinbabu didn’t answer, but continued after smiling a little at him, ‘Then his father withdrew him from school, although it is difficult to say why he did that; but he took him out, and sent him to a relative of his in a town in Bihar. Oh yes, one thing I forgot to say, the kid had started writing poetry in the meantime.’

Madhabbabu looked at Pundarikakshababu and said in a little hushed voice, ‘He is talking about our Jaga, don’t you get it?’ Our Taponath’s son Jagadish, after failing his I.A. examination twice, started drinking alcohol at other’s expense and began writing romantic poems for movie magazines; recently he went to his maternal uncle’s house in Chhapra, Bihar. Madhabbabu’s guess, therefore, was not very unreasonable. Jatinbabu, however, neither supported the statement, nor opposed it.

Jatinbabu continued talking, ‘Once in Bihar, his addiction to literature increased dramatically. He had been sent by his father to his relative in Bihar to become conversant with the relative’s business. The kid was not at all interested in the business, but wrote long poems and sent them to monthly and weekly magazines and spent the remaining time sitting in a corner reading worthless books.’

The stranger asked, ‘What do you mean by worthless books, which books?’

‘Philosophy, poetical work, literature, etc., not any book about indigo,’ Jatinbabu replied.

‘Why should he read a book about indigo?’

‘Because that book would help the business; the relative had an indigo business.’

‘Then what happened?’

‘What else? The relative gradually lost patience.’

Tea came. Pundarikakshababu took out his opium container. Whenever we heard ‘indigo’, we knew it would be Jaga—nobody else. Madhab was thinking—who could it be?

Jatinbabu said, ‘Then something happened. An editor from Calcutta summoned the kid and said, “We are impressed with your talent. You come and become the assistant editor of my newspaper and get your poems published.” The boy ran to Calcutta and joined the literary world.’ Swallowing the opium tablet Pundarikaksha said, ‘It must definitely be our Khirodchandra!’ There was, no doubt, some similarity between the boy and Khirod, and Khirod also became an assistant editor of a newspaper for a few days.

Jatinbabu kept on saying, ‘The kid made his mark in Calcutta.’

Although Jatinbabu never even glanced at Pundarikaksha, the latter asked, ‘Is that so?’

Jatinbabu paid no heed and kept going, ‘He firmly established himself. He became famous not only in the literary circles, non-literary people were also talking about him, which landed him a job.’

The stranger asked, ‘What kind of job?’

‘Teaching in school.’

‘Then what?’

‘He became quite renowned for a few days. People clamoured, “A good teacher, good teacher!” But his downfall came because of his excessive bravado.’

‘How come?’

‘He started to become too pally with the students; the students became his dear friends.’

Madhabbabu was wiping his hanging moustache with a dirty handkerchief and made a remark, ‘Boys are like that nowadays. Seems like you are talking about the teacher Ashu; do you know his history?’

Jatinbabu only smiled a little—didn't answer. The new teacher of our school incurred some bad publicity because he mingled too much with the students.

The stranger asked, 'Then what.'

'What else? Lost his job. All kinds of bad rumours kept circulating; the guardians got scared that the boys would go astray. The committee fired him—they had to,' said Jatinbabu.

'Why would the boys go astray,' asked the unknown guest.

'He used to drink alcohol with the boys. Used to say that religion and rituals were activities of primitive people, not suitable in this era. Asked everybody to drive away bad superstitions. Told stories about the French Revolution, and discussed Bentham, Mill, and the likes.'

'Then what happened?' asked the stranger.

'How many "then what" could this country sustain? For a few days he did nothing and roamed around; listened to the advice and rebukes of the elderly; then one day suddenly died,' replied Jatinbabu.

'Died! Why, what happened?'

'Cholera.'

Madhabbabu said, 'I understand you are talking about Nipu's nephew. He was also teaching in Calcutta, and was kind of spoilt due to bad association. Died about a year ago. Aren't you talking about Nipu's sister's son?'

Pundarikaksha protested, 'Nipu's nephew never drank alcohol. The one who drank was our Chhirey, who was also a teacher. But he died of typhoid; you got the wrong information, Jatinbabu.'

Jatinbabu again smiled a little, but made no response. Such an ungentlemanly person was hard to come by anywhere.

Jatinbabu looked at the person with whom he was chatting all along and asked, 'Do you have any respect for the person?'

The man asked, 'Was that your story of a great man?'

'He does not appear great because I suppressed the name. You would have seen greatness in every step if I had initially mentioned the name. I hate you—I hate you all,' Jatinbabu retorted.

'Why don't you let us hear the name?'

'Henry Louis Vivian Derozio.'

Concluding remarks

No one will probably shed tears at Henry Louis Vivian Derozio's grave, but it still stands on the South Park Street cemetery of Kolkata.

His 200th birth anniversary was celebrated in Kolkata in 2009. The grave still whispers stories about a mixed European-Indian man, who was a forerunner of Swami Vivekananda, albeit his impact was in a much smaller scale than that of Swamiji, and whose activities brought about the intellectual revolution in Bengal. ■

REFERENCES

- 1 <https://englishliterature.in/henry-louis-vivian-derozio-1809-1831-a-beacon-of-indian-renaissance/>
- 2 Balaichand Mukhopadhyay, 'Naam', *Bonophooler Shreshtha Golpo* (Sandhya Prakashani, Calcutta, 1979), pp. 176-180.

* Sri Asim Chaudhuri, an eminent writer and Vivekananda scholar, who has contributed many articles to the *Bulletin* over the years, passed away recently. We shall publish in the coming issues a few articles by him that have remained with us unpublished. His death is deeply mourned by the Publication Department of RMIC, Gol Park, Kolkata.