Henry Louis Vivian Derozio(18 April 1809 – 26 December 1831)

Henry Louis Vivian Derozio was a fiery Indian teacher and poet. As a lecturer at the Hidu College of Calcutta, he invigorated a large group of students to think independently; this Young Bengal group played a key role in the Bengal renaissance.

Derozio was generally considered an Anglo-Indian, being of mixed Portuguese descent, but he was fired by a patriotic spirit for his native Bengal, and considered himself Indian. In his poem To India My Native Land he wrote:

“My Country! In the days of Glory Past
A beauteous halo circled round thy brow
And worshiped as deity thou wast,
Where is that Glory, where is that reverence now?”

Early Life

The son of Francis Derozio, he was born at Entally-Padmapukur in Kolkata on 10 April 1809. He attended David Drummond's Dhurramtallah Academy school, where he was a star pupil, reading widely on topics like the French revolution and

Robert Burns. Drummond, "a dour Scotsman, an exile and a 'notorious free thinker'", instilled in him a passion for learning and superstition-free rational thinking, in addition to a solid grounding in history, philosophy and English literature.

He quit school at the age of 14 and initially joined his father’s concern at Kolkata

and later shifted to Bhagalpur. Inspired by the scenic beauty of the banks of the River Ganges, he started writing poetry. Some of these were published in Dr. Grant's India Gazette. His critical review of a book by Emmanuel Kant attracted the attention of the intelligentsia. In 1828, he went to Kolkata with the objective of publishing his long poem - Fakir of Jhungeera. On learning that a faculty position was vacant at the newly established Hindu College, he applied for it and was selected.

This was the time when Hindu society in Bengal was undergoing considerable turmoil. In 1828, Raja Ram Mohan Roy established the Brahmo Samaj, which kept Hindu ideals but denied idolatry. This resulted in a backlash within orthodox Hindu society. It is in the perspective of these changes that Derozio wasappointed at Hindu college, where he helped released the ideas for social change already in the air.

Hindu College and Social Backlash

In May 1826, at the age of 17, he was appointed teacher in English literature and history at the new Hindu College, which had been set up recently to meet the interest in English education among Indians. He was initially a teacher in the second and third classes, later also of the fourth, but he attracted students from all classes. He interacted freely with students, well beyond the class hours. His zeal for interacting with students was legendary.

His brilliant lectures presented closely reasoned arguments based on his wide

reading. He encouraged students to read Thomas Paine's Rights of Man and other

free-thinking texts. Although Derozio himself was an atheist and had renounced Christianity, he encouraged questioning the orthodox Hindu customs and conventions on the basis of Italian renaissance and its offshoot rationalism. He infused in his students the spirit of free expression, the yearning for knowledge and a passion to live up to their identity, while questioning irrational religious and

cultural practices.

Derozio's intense zeal for teaching and his interactions with students created a sensation at Hindu College. His students came to be known as Derozians. He organised debates where ideas and social norms were freely debated. In 1828, he motivated them to form a literary and debating club called the Academic Association. In 1830, this club brought out a magazine named Parthenon (only one issue came out).

Apart from articles criticizing Hindu practices, the students wrote on women emancipation and criticized many aspects of British rule. He also encouraged students into journalism, to spread these ideas into a society eager for change. In mid 1831, he helped Krishna Mohan Banerjee start an English weekly, The Enquirer, while Dakshinaranjan Mukherjee and Rasik Krishna Mallick began publishing a Bengali paper, the Jnananvesan

He took great pleasure in his interactions with students, writing about them:

"Expanding like the petals of young flowers

I watch the gentle opening of your minds…"

He was close in age to most of his students (some were older than he was). The

motto of the Derozians was:

"He who will not reason is a bigot, he who cannot reason is a fool, and he who does not reason is a slave."

So all ideas were open to challenge. Many of his inner circle of students eventually rebelled against Hindu orthodoxy, and joined the Brahmo Samaj, while some like Krishna Mohan Banerjee converted to Christianity, and others like Ramtanu Lahiri gave up their sacred thread. Others went on to write in Bengali, including Peary Chand Mitra, who authored the first novel in Bengali. The radicalism of his teaching and his student group caused an intense backlash against him.

** Expulsion **

Due to his unorthodox (legendarily free) views on society, culture and religion, the Hindu-dominated management committee of the college, under the chairmanship of Radhakanta Deb, expelled him as a faculty member by a 6:1 vote, for having materially injured [the student's] Morals and introduced some strange system the tendency of which is destruction to their moral character and

to the peace in Society. In consequence of his misunderstanding no less than 25 Pupils of respectable families have been withdrawn from the College.

Though facing penury, he continued his interaction with his students, indeed, he was able to do more, helping them bring out several newspapers, etc.

** Death **

However, at the end of the year, he contracted cholera, which was fatal at the time, and died on 26 December 1831 at the age of 22. Being a Christian apostate, he was denied burial inside South Park Street Cemetery; instead he

was buried just outside it on the bust was unveiled at the Esplanade.

** Poetry **

Derozio idolized Byron, modeling many of his poems in the romantic vein. Much of his poetry reflects native Indian stories, told in the Victorian style. The Fakeer of Jungheera(1828) is a long lyrical poem, abundant in descriptions of the region around Bhagalpur. The melancholy narrative involves a religious mendicant, who saves his erstwhile lover from satihood, but comes to a romantic end fighting her pursuers.

Among his short poems, there are several ballads, such as The Song of the Hindustanee Minstrel:

"Dildar! There's many a valued pearl
In richest Oman's sea;
But none, my fair Cashmerian girl!
O! none can rival thee."

Fired by a patriotic zeal he also wrote a good bit of nationalistic poetry, some quite openly rebellious, as in The Golden Vase:

"Oh! when our country writhes in galling chains
When her proud masters scourge her like a dog;
If her wild cry be borne upon the gale,
Our bosoms to the melancholy sound
Should swell, and we should rush to her relief,
Like some, at an unhappy parent's wail!
And when we know the flash of patriot swords

Is unto spirits longing to be free,

Like Hope'e returning light; we should not pause

Till every tyrant dread our feet, or till we find

Graves... "

This anti-imperialist fervour also separated him from the Anglo-Indian (then Eurasian) community, who were overwhelmingly pro-British. At one point, he urged his fellow Anglo-Indians that it would be

"in their interest to unite and be cooperative with the other native inhabitants of

India. Any other course will subject them to greater opposition than they have at

present."

Despite his poetic bent, and his flamboyant dresses, he never showed much interest in women, though he was a strong advocate for female emancipation. The women in his poetry also appear "a little wooden and lacking in individuality". A 1905 biography subtly hints that his expulsion may have had some underpinnings of homophobia; all his student meetings were exclusively attended by young male students.

** Influence **

His ideas had a profound influence on the social movement that came to be known as the Bengal Renaissance in early 19th century Bengal. And despite being viewed as something of an iconoclast by others like Alexander Duff and other (largely evangelical) Christian Missionaries; later in Duff's Assembly's Institution, Derozio's ideas on the acceptance of the rational spirit were accepted

partly as long as they were not in conflict with basic tenets of Christianity, and as

long as they critiqued orthodox Hinduism.

Derozio was an atheist but his ideas are generally believed to be partly

responsible for the conversion of upper caste Hindus like Krishna Mohan Banerjee

and Lal Behari Dey to Christianity. Sameran Roy, however, states that only three Hindu pupils among his first group of students became Christians, and asserts that Derozio had no role to play in their change of faith. He points out that Derozio dismissal was sought by both Hindus such as Ramkamal Sen, as well as Christians such as H. H. Wilson. Many other students like Tarachand Chakraborti became leaders in the Brahmo Samaj.