

## **Journalistic Contributions of Derozio and His Disciples: A Critical Exploration**

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**ABSTRACT:** *In this paper I have chosen to explore one of the most chromatic parts of the Bengal Renaissance, the Derozian period. Unlike their Brahma contemporaries Derozians were so much defiant in their activities, and for their invasion against the social orthodoxies they were often described by many historians as the 'Ultranationalists' or 'Ultra-radicals'. But, in today's context we have to admit that they had left a lasting impression on the social, educational, cultural and economic course of our Indian society. For their reform movement Derozio and many of his pupils used newspapers and periodicals as their spokes organs or to express their views on certain issues. So, in this paper I have tried to critically observe the ultranationalist contributions of Derozians, with special focus on their journalistic activities.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Henry Derozio; Bengal Renaissance; journalism; Young Bengal; Indian press.*

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### **I. INTRODUCTION:**

“One of the highest gifted and most accomplished of Eurasians, Henry Louis Vivian Derozio, poet, philosopher and free-thinker” the biographer of Derozio, Thomas Edwards writes (Edwards, 1884). Derozio died in cholera at the tender age of 23 only, but his impact continued to be manifested in multifaceted ways, even till today.

He was appointed in the-then Hindoo College as a teacher to the senior classes at his teens. Derozio's method of teaching was completely new and exceptional. His teaching knew no bounds; he encouraged his students in debates and discussions, and gave them his best ideas and received theirs. He taught them to pursue knowledge and think for themselves, urged them to question the authority fearlessly and think freely, in the truest sense of the term. His students and followers undertook several constructive and collective initiatives in the field of journalism and also by forming associations, which they used as platforms for spreading education and for social, political and religious reforms. They established and were associated with myriad newspapers and organizations; among them following deserves special mention, like- 'The Inquirer', 'Durpan' and The Academic Association, Epistolary Association, The Bengal British Indian Society and others. They contributed to the work of regeneration at a time when India needed it most and even later through. Peary Chand Mitra wrote, 'the seed that had been sown "had germinated and developed into a stately tree and was to bear goodly fruit."' (Mitra, 1877)

#### **1. A Brief History of Derozio and the Luminaries of Young Bengal**

**Henry Louis Vivian Derozio [1809-1831]:** Derozio was a Calcutta born Eurasian of Portuguese-Indian ancestry, his father was Francis Derozio, an officer of English mercantile firm. He was educated in the Dhuramtallah Academy School, run by the Scotsman, David Drummond. Susobhan Sarkar writes “It may safely conjecture that Derozio derived from Drummond his taste in literature and philosophy” (Sarkar, 1979). After finishing his schooling he was designated as a lecturer in History and English Literature at Hindu college. Within a very short time span, he drew around him a group of brilliant boys in the college. His teachings inspired them in various ways to evolve the spirit of liberty, freedom, and equality. They tried to uproot social atrocities, establish freedom of the press, trial by jury, and so forth. Thus, their activities gradually brought about the intellectual 'renaissance' in Bengal, which was later known as the Young Bengal Movement and his disciples, known as Derozians were the first ones to identify themselves as Indians in vein, were the fiery patriots aka the 'Ultranationalists'.

But in 1831, due to Derozio's unorthodox and notoriously free views on every aspect of society, culture and religion, the Hindu-dominated management committee of the college was alarmed and decided to expel him, accusing him “in the present state of public feeling amongst the Hindoo community” (The Calcutta Christian Observer, 1832). The chief mover in this matter was Radhakanta Deb and Ram Comul Sen. Soon he was forced to leave the college. But his answer to the allegations brought against him, is aptly eminent in the records of Bengal Renaissance and at any time it could have become their collective slogan, where he wrote “I

should be called a sceptic and an infidel is not surprising, as these names are always given to persons who think for themselves” (Quoted in Sengupta 2001: 282). But even after his dismissal from the college and his untimely death on the same year, his spell continued to inspire the Young Bengal students. They were the first outcomes of Derozio’s influence and teaching. Most of his pupils and followers became distinguished men in due course of time and throughout their lives they cherished the memory of their master with profound affection and remembered with humble gratitude. A brief note on some of them is as follows:

**Tarachand Chakravarti [1806-1857]:**Tarachand Chakravarti was the eldest among all Derozians. He was taken to the Hindu College as a free student, and after finishing his studies he worked as a teacher, then as a Deputy-Registrar and later as a Munsif. He was actually older than Derozio and not his direct student but this didn’t stop Tarachand from joining the voice of the Derozians. He gave up the Government job and devoted himself in the translation of ‘Manu Sanghita’ from ancient Sanskrit to English and the preparation of an Anglo-Vernacular Dictionary. He started a journal ‘The Quill’ which criticized the policies of the government directly.

**Rasikkrishna Mallik [1810-1858]:**Rasikkrishna Mallik was a true disciple of Derozio. He had once openly refused to swear in a law court about the sacredness of holy Ganges, which shocked the bigoted Hindu society. Rasikkrishna gained recognition as a bold debater of the Academic Association. After leaving the college on 1830, Rasikkrishna set up a free school in Simulia and became a teacher of a school at Pataldanga conducted by Calcutta School Society where David Hare was the supervisor. He had a great support for the weekly magazine ‘Parthenon’ started by the Hindu College students and was one of the editors of ‘Jnananveshan’ a bilingual journal, the third mouth organ of Young Bengal, which lasted till 1844. In 1832, he also started a monthly Bengali newspaper, ‘Jana Sindhu Taranga’. Through his activities we can clearly find that he was a man of heroic integrity and a proud Derozian.

**Krishna Mohan Banerjee [1813-1885]:**Krishna Mohan Banerjee belonged to a Kulin Brahman family, who in course of time converted to Christianity and became Reverend. He belonged to the very first class of Derozio after his appointment as a teacher there, and their intimacy soon grew up. He actively participated in the debates and discussions of Academic Association. Under the influence of his master, Krishna Mohan became a proud upholder of freedom of thought and showed his eagerness in freeing his countrymen from the shackles of prejudice by helping them in seeing the unreason behind many of the orthodox social and religious practices. He also contributed to the short-lived ‘Parthenon’. Apart from this, his intellect also came to be diffused by his own journals, ‘SambadSudhansu’ and the ‘The Satyamava’, as well as by his articles in the ‘SambadPrabhakar’, ‘Calcutta review’, ‘The Bengal Magazine’ and many others. In 1831, he started publishing ‘The Inquirer’ to fight against the social evils. He also actively participated in the affairs of Indian Association, established on 26 July 1876 by Surendranath Banerjee. In 1878 he was elected president of the Association and in April the same year he protested against Lord Lytton’s Vernacular Press Act. His sense of nationalism was not affected in any way by his conversion to Christianity. He was, as Surendranath Banerjee admits, the guiding spirit of the younger generation of politicians.

**Radhanath Sikdar [1813-1870]:**Radhanath Sikdar was one of the brightest scholars of Derozio. He had a great taste for mathematics since earlier days and acquired amazing proficiency in higher Mathematics later on. He joined the Great Trigonometrical Survey of India as a computer in the year of 1832. In 1852, in the Himalayas he discovered the highest peak of the world Mt. Everest. In addition to holding the post of Chief Computer he subsequently became the superintendent of the Government Observatory in Calcutta. His ‘Auxiliary Tables’ were of immense help to survey work. Like other Derozians he also engaged himself in the development ventures of his countrymen. For enlightenment of the Hindu women, he started publishing the ‘MasicPatrika’ from 1854 onwards. Its widely varied and rich articles were written in simple vernacular language so that everyone can comprehend them. He also participated in discussions on female education held at the SuhridSamiti and Bethune Society. He along with Kishory Chand Mitra and Peary Chand Mitra carried on a vigorous campaign against child marriage, widow marriage and Polygamy throughout Bengal.

**Ramgopal Ghosh [1815-1868]:**Ramgopal Ghosh became the most famous among all Derozians. He thoroughly cooperated with David Hare in setting up schools. He himself set up a school and a library in his locality. He was very closely connected with the journals like ‘Gyananneshan’ and the ‘Bengal Spectator’, both very effective mouthpieces of Young Bengal. He was also one of the most important members of the ‘Epistolary Association’. The most brilliant gift that he possessed was genuine oratory and rightly he has been named as ‘The Indian Demosthenes’.

**Peary Chand Mitra [1814-1883]:**Mitra was a dynamic member of the Academic Association and a great admirer of Derozio. The rights of Indians found expression in many of his writings in the ‘Gyananneshan’ (1831-1840), the bilingual ‘Bengal Spectator’ (1842-1843), the ‘Calcutta Review’ and ‘Vidyakalpadrum’, a highly educative journal edited and published by the Rev. Krishna Mohan Banerjee. In cooperation with Radhanath Sikdar he brought out the ‘MasikPatrika’ (1854-1858), in which educative articles were written with an intention to promote the cause of female education, domestic happiness and morality. He also ushered in a new age in the history of the Bengali language and literature by developing the usage of simple Bengali

diction in his stories and novels in opposition to difficult words. He thus brought literature to the door of the common people. Along with journalism he also possessed immense proficiency in the literary fields and for his utmost excellence Rev. James Long called him the 'Dickens of Bengal'.

**Dakshinaranjan Mukherjee [1814-1878]:** Dakshinaranjan won distinction for his English compositions. He actively participated in the debates and discussions of the Academic Association. With the spirit of enquiry which he had developed, he challenged the irrational orthodoxy and superstitious customs of the Indian Society. He was a noted promoter of Women education. He founded a girl's school at Baithakkhana in Calcutta and helped Bethune in establishing the Hindu Female School in May 1849. Through his bilingual weekly 'Gyananneshan' (1832) he tried to serve the cause of progress and reform in the society. Thus, he was always forward in defying every irrational convention and was prominent in all Young Bengal activities as a forward Derozian.

It is merely impossible to enlist all the Derozians in this small space, and there must have been many more names that had come under the magical spell of the great teacher, which are not listed above.

## **2. Contribution of Derozio in Indian Journalism and Engaging His Pupils in Writing**

Derozio's name is closely associated with the development of Indian Press in the first quarter of the nineteenth century. After coming back from Bhagalpore at the call of John Grant, the Editor of the 'Indian Gazette', he joined there as a sub editor. In 1826, it is said that Derozio founded a journal named 'Indian Magazine'. In spite of only five issues of this journal saw the daylight, it received wide appreciation. He also had connection with 'Kaleidoscope', a monthly journal which started functioning from August, 1829. He was the chief influencer and supporter behind the 'Parthenon'. But after its first issue, they had to discontinue it because of the opposition from the conservative Hindus. He began to write in 'Hesperus' but soon withdrew himself from the journal as its editors would make alterations to his writings. Later he contributed to 'Enquirer', edited by one of his acclaimed followers, Krishna Mohan. Derozio himself published 'The East Indian' journal, which essentially focused on the problems faced by the Anglo Indian Community in India.

He was not only an efficient teacher or speaker but also a powerful writer. In the then traditional education system the first and foremost duty of the student was to listen silently to the teachers. But Derozio was the initial one to give his students full chance to express their thoughts freely, to question authority and to solve problems rationally. He brought his students beyond the four walls of traditional classroom structure and insisted them to participate in the debating society. Not only had he taught his students to speak for what is right but also encouraged to write. His aim was to spread new views and ideas for the drastic reformation of the society far and wide. After Derozio his followers successfully carried forward his baton and threw ample light on solving problems of common man's life and paved the way for public good. For this they needed the help of mass media, at that time which was only newspapers and journals. The light of new learning that Derozio had ignited in the minds of his students later found its way in Indian society through various mediums.

## **3. Journalistic Activities of the Derozians**

Derozio's passion for journalism was carried forward by his students who brought out many journals and newspapers. Among these were the 'Parthenon', 'Hesperus', 'Jnananveshan', 'Enquirer', 'Hindu Pioneer', 'Quill', the 'Bengal Spectator' and others. These periodicals were all written in English although the Young Bengal is also attributed to have written two bilingual and a few Bengali periodicals. 'Gyananneshan' and the 'Bengal Spectator' were the bilingual journals.

The following is a brief account of the journalistic activities with the publication of which members of Young Bengal were associated between 1825 and 1857:

The Parthenon was started by Hindu College students on February 15, 1830. It published radical views of the day on subjects like female education, necessity of chief justice, superstitions of Hindus and against the evils of Colonisation.

The Enquirer was started in May, 1831. In its first issue editor Krishna Mohan Banerjee explained the objectives of the paper and as a concluding remark added, "Thus launched our bark under the denomination of Enquirer, we set sail in quest of truth and happiness" (Quoted in Duff 1839: 624).

The Quill was an English newspaper which have been said to be published around 1842-43 by some students of Hindu College. We can find from Shibnath Shastri's mention that Tarachand Chakravarti was its editor.

The Hindu Intelligencer founded and edited by Kashiprasad Ghosh was a weekly paper. Having its establishment in 1846, it ran up to 1857. It condemned fiercely against Lord Canning's 'Gagging Act' demanding immediate withdrawal of it. But failing to gain support soon its publication was put a stop to.

On May 31, 1831, Dakshinaranjan Mukherjee was given licence to publish Gyananneshan aka Jnananveshan as a bilingual weekly. This paper started functioning from June 18, 1831. In its first issue it clearly stated its objectives in colloquial Bengali, where among other points we find a special mention that the

society ought to be protected from all the evils that are being caused to them by the orthodox interpretations of the caste, creed and religion. They advocated for the abolition of stamp duty on judicial proceedings so the poorer might avail judicial helps. In their paper they also raised demand for the abolition of East India Company's monopoly over salt and opium.

There were another bilingual periodical, the Bengal Spectator, started in April, 1842 by Ramgopal Ghosh with assistance of Pearychand Mitra and some other Young Bengal members. It started publishing as a monthly paper but was later converted to a fortnightly from September, 1842. From March, 1843 it became a weekly. After its 39th issue of the second volume on November 20, 1843 it was discontinued. In the first issue of this periodical it announced its aim to urge the "Government to remove the hardships people of this country were facing" (Moitra, 1979).

In the History of Journals prepared by Ishwar Chandra Gupta, we can find the mention of Jnana Sindhu Taranga, started as a monthly Bengali paper by Rasikkrishna Mallik in 1832. But it was a very short lived paper.

From the above discussion we can clearly see that the Young Bengal members were fully devoted to the cause of betterment and well-being of the people of their motherland through all of their actions and in newspapers, periodicals and journals also.

## **II. DISCUSSION AND CRITICAL ASSESSMENT**

The Young Bengal group wanted to reform the Hindu Society by applying their knowledge of western science and literature. They were highly infatuated by the radical and liberal ideas of the west, the spirit of humanism and patriotism, and the conviction to practice what was believed to be right. But the then orthodox Hindu society was not ready to accept them, as they were changing the age old societal and religious frameworks.

Allegations were raised against the Young Bengal members as they opposed the conventional norms of the Hindu society. As a mark of protest they overtly ate forbidden food and drink. The conservative organs like 'Samachar Chandrika' and 'Sambad Prabhakar' raised a hue and cry about their activities which can drive away society and religion into danger. The main averments against them were that they were anti-Hindu, anglicised, anti-communal and undisciplined-reckless bravados.

But the characterization of Young Bengal as Anglicised has been exaggerated. In spite of their advancement in English education, they were keenly interested in spreading vernacular education and published books and journals in comprehensive Bengali. Tarachand translated ancient Hindu texts; Krishna Mohan, even after being Christian missionary since 1837 was a great Sanskrit scholar and studied Sanskrit literature along with Hindu philosophy; Ramgopal greeted the Bengali writings of the 'Tatvabodhini Patrika'; for easy understanding of ordinary housewives, Pearychand and Radhanath started publishing the 'Masik Patrika', a simple colloquial Bengali magazine. In fact, in general the Young Bengal had acute love for their mother tongue and took interest in its development and most interestingly the Derozians didn't leave their country or people for their personal betterment unlike so many later 'Anglicised' Indians.

To accuse Young Bengal as anti-Hindu is also not correct, because it is true that their initial protests were mainly against the irrational and blind religious practices of the Hindus, but only a handful of them took Christianity. Scottish missionary Alexander Duff was much interested in the conversion of Young Bengal students into Christianity but was disappointed to find the tendency of scepticism towards every religion among them. So we can safely conjecture that their behaviour was not at all unusual at that critical point of development.

The young Bengal members were detracted in their early life when their passion ran high, but in the following years their individual merits were admitted. Kishori Chand Mitra rightly defined them, saying "The youthful band of reformers who had been educated at the Hindoo College, like the tops of Kanchanjunga were the first to catch and reflect the dawn" (Halder, 1977).

## **III. CONCLUSION**

H.L.V. Derozio and his followers sincerely tried to set free the Indians from the darkness of ignorance, illiteracy, unemployment and from conditions of misrule in political and administrative arrangements. In doing so they found themselves deprived of the sympathy and support of most of their social elders. They had to suffer oppressions at the hands of the orthodox community. But they directed themselves against all the obstacles in their way as well as India's march towards progress. They efficiently contributed to every possible field of work, including journalism and literature and helped in the work of resuscitation at a time when India needed it profusely. Their most memorable positive aspect was a spirit of fearless radicalism which we can later find again in a bigger way through the Revolt of 1857 – and also later through the Indian freedom Movement. There is no doubt that the change was a gain for our national health and has an enduring effect on us.

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