

Derozio and the Bengal Renaissance

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At the beginning of the British rule in India there was no dearth of elementary schools. The nature of the Indian education at that time had always been, since the Vedic age, of a classical and spiritual rather than of a practical. It was communicated through the sacred classical language of the Hindus and the Muslims, namely –Sanskrit, Arabic and Persian.¹ There were the highest seminaries of learning meant for specialists. For primary education, there were in the villages Pathsalas and Maktabas where the Gurus and the Maulavis imparted a knowledge of the three “R”s i.e, reading, writing and arithmetic to the boys of the locality.² It is learnt from William Ward’s account that in 1803 almost every village in Bengal had a Pathsala. According to the report of William Adam the system of education prevailing in the province was more or less uniform. Tols and Madrasas were higher centre of learning. According to William Ward there were as many as 1800 Tols in Bengal province, but education was in a low state. People had little idea of modern education. History, Geography, Mathematics and Natural Science were almost unknown to them. Village schools served a very useful purpose – they fulfilled the needs and requirements of the villagers, the petty Zamindar, the bania and the well-to-do farmer. William ward, a Baptist Missionary based at Serampore, observed in his ‘ A View of the History of the Religion and Mythology of the Hindus’ that “almost all villages possessed schools for teaching , reading, writing and elementary arithmetic .³ According to Shivnath Shastri even the Pundits of those days knew nothing of the Vedas, the Vedanta, the Geeta, the Puranas and History.

At the beginning of the British rule, the company was opposed to the introduction of western education in India under the impression that English education might create a strong yearning for freedom among Indians and India might pass out of their hands as a consequence. From this consideration they gave encouragement to the study of Sanskrit, Arabic and Persian. Calcutta Madrasa (1781), Calcutta Asiatic Society (1784) and Sanskrit College of Varanasi (1792) were set up under the patronage of Warren Hestings, Sir William Jones and Jonathon Duncan.

But the demand for the introduction of English education was first raised by Charles Grant, a retire official of the company, could not be ignored for long. It was Charles Grant who was the first Englishman, at least four decades before Macaulay, to agree for the introduction of English education in India.⁴ With the contact and consultation with Wilberforce, M P For York Charles Grant wrote: Observations on the State of Society among the Asiatic subjects of Great Britain, Particularly in the Respect of Morals And on the Means of Improving It. He urged the establishment of English schools under teachers “of good moral character” , hoping that very soon the pupils taught in these schools would themselves become the teachers of English to their countrymen. He asserted “ the true cure of darkness is light”⁵. William Cabell, secretary of Henry Dundas , president of the Board of Control write a note about developing an education policy based on Grant’s Observations. He mentioned that a common language would draw the ruler and the ruled into closer contact and the introduction of European education would lead to the removal of

many abuses from which the people were suffering due to their “false system of beliefs and a total want of right instruction among them”.⁶ Moreover, with the consideration of the British rule in India the Judicial system of the English was introduced. Knowledge of English was essential for those who worked under the British traders at different places. The middle class Bengalee were attracted to English education for the sake of employment in government offices or commercial houses. To meet this demand some Europeans like Sherbourne, Martin Bowels, Drummond, Araton peters, Serampors trio i.e Carey, Marshman and Ward etc. open a number of English school in Calcutta as well as different parts of the country.

The introduction of western education no-doubtly gave birth to a spirit of enquiry into the educated class. This brought about a change in their outlook. Medieval thought and ideas, blind faith and superstitions gave way to rationalism and scientific outlook. After the foundation of the ‘Asiatic Society’ the researches of Sir William Jones, Canningham, Princep, Maxmuller and Rajendralal Mitra brought to light a glorious chapter of ancient Indian history. This made the Indian proud of their heritage. Thus under the impact of western culture India experienced a re-awaking or “ Renaissance”. The chief features of this renaissance were- patriotism, humanism, individualism and rationalism. The influence of this renaissance on Indian life was far-reaching. It affected all aspects of our life i.e, religion, education, literature, art, society and polity.

Keeping in mind the all affected aspects of our life – religion, education, superstitions, society, polity etc. Henry Louis Vivian Derozio (1809-1831) a young Eurasian teacher of Hindu College, played a remarkable role in the social and cultural history of Bengal, was a symbol of the nineteenth century renaissance of Bengal. Derozio was born in 1809 in a Portuguese – Indian family of Calcutta. He had his schooling in the ‘Dharmatala Academy’ of Henry Drummond, a poet and a free thinker. Under the influence of Mr. Drummond, Derozio also became a free thinker. He was appointed as the fourth teacher (English and History) of the Hindu College in 1828. Soon, by dint of his charismatic personality and sharp intellect Derozio succeeded in rallying a band of talented and challenging young students around himself. He taught his student to reason and search for truth. With great penetration he led his pupils through the pages of Locke, Bentham, Mill, Hume and other philosophers. These students formed the core of the “Academic Association” a debating society, which was launched by Derozio in 1828. His pupils took part in debates and expressed their opinions freely on all sorts of evil practices. Casteism, untouchability, image worship, priest- craft and sati or self-immolation of Hindu widows were the main targets of their attacks.

Derozio’s passionate love for liberty (social, religious and political) combined with his rationality made him on the one hand a firm patriot and on the other hand an uncompromising critic of the orthodoxy. He challenged the whole fabric of Hindu prejudices and attempted to implant in his pupil friends a love for truth and a willingness to struggle for its attainment. He taught them, “ whatever comes before you in the semblance of truth, that enquire into with all diligence, out of the high respect due to truth”.⁷

The students of Derozio included among others – Krishnamohan Bandopadhyay, Ramgopal Ghosh, Parichand Mitra, Ramtanu Lahiri, Dakshinaranjan Mukhopadhyay, Rashikkrishna Mullick and Radhanath Shikdar were collectively known as ‘Young Bengal ‘ or Derozions. They made

remarkable contribution in the Indian renaissance. In order to express their opinions on social, economic and political questions Derozio and his pupils brought out a number of Journals which included Athenaeum, Parthenon, Enquirer, Jananneswan, Bengal Spectator, Hindu Pioneer, Bengal Recorder and Kaleidoscope. The last named one was edited by Derozio himself. Derozio was extremely critical of the moderate line of reforms adopted by the contemporary Brahmo Samaj movement. He and his team i.e, Derozians considered them to be only “ half liberals”.⁸

Compared to the Brahmo Samaj, Derozio and the Derozians were far more forthright in their attack on Hindu orthodoxy and Brahminical values.⁹ At one time criticizing Rammohan, Derozio said: What his (Raja Rammohan Roy) opinions are, neither his friends nor foes can determine. It is easier to say what they are not than what they are...Rammohan, it is well known, appeals to the Vedas, the Koran and the Bible, holding them all probably in equal estimation, extracting the good from each and rejecting from all what he considers apocryphal. He has always lived like a Hindoo. His followers, at least some of them , are not very consistent, sheltering themselves under the shadow of his name, they indulge in licentiousness in everything forbidden in the Shastras, as meat and drink, while at the same time they feed the Brahmins, profess to disbelieve Hinduism, and never neglect to have poojas at home.¹⁰ Despite having what was a remarkable teaching ability , Derozio lost his teaching assignment apparently on the charge of teaching that respect and obedience to parents form no part of moral duty and that marriages between brothers and sisters are innocent and allowable. But, as the Oriental Magazine (1843) had noted, the fact of the matter was that “ the native managers of the college were alarmed at the progress which some of the pupils were making by actually cutting their way through ham and beef and wading to liberalism through tumblers of beer”.¹¹

In 1831 Derozio died an untimely death only at the age of 23. But, his efforts were carried ahead thereafter by his radical disciples i.e, Derozians. The Young Bengal as well as Derozians were staunch advocates of female education and female rights. The Young Bengal Journals particularly the ‘ Parthenon’ championed the cause of female education. The Young Bengal were vociferous in their criticism of inequality of rights between males and females, slavery, persecution of the women folk, corvee service, monopoly trade, permanent settlement and other social ills and inequities. They also strongly demanded introduction of Juri system, free trade and freedom of the press. “The society for the3 acquisition of General knowledge”(‘Jnanoparjika Sabha’) which was organized by the Derozians in 1838, emerged as a powerful platform of political movement. Thus, while the death of derozio was no doubt a major set-back for the Young Bengal movement, yet it did not immediately die out.

The Derozians were throughout greatly inspired by the Philosophers of the French Revolution and English radicalism. They avidly read the works of Bacon, Hume and Tom Paine. The matters which were discussed in the Academic Association were, as reported by Derozio’s biographer Thomas Edwards:

Free will, free ordination, fate, faith, the sacredness of truth, the high duty of cultivating virtue, and the meanness of vice, the nobility of patriotism, the attributes of God, and the arguments for and against the existence of the deity... . The hollowness of idolatry and the shams

of priesthood...¹² The Derozians through their debates, discussions and writings challenged almost every facet of Hindu orthodox thought. They rejected the religion of the Shastras and the principles of Hindu morality and ethic and openly flouted caste norms. Their efforts reflected a combination of rebellious spirit and radical intellectualism.

In spite of the short span of its existence, the movement of the Young Bengal youth did create a stir. The complacency of the Hindu Orthodoxy of Bengal was at that time badly shaken. Throughout its history, however, the young Bengal movement was a very restricted movement. Territorially it could not cross the confine of Bengal. Nor could the young rebels break out of their elitism, sometimes they committed excesses. They indulged in socially forbidden food and drink and thereby alienated themselves from the society. They failed to leave a lasting impression on the general mass of people. Their influence was limited on the educated section of the people of Calcutta. The greatest shortcoming of the movement, however, was its lack of a theoretical basis and an action programme.¹³ While in its early days extreme radicalism was its hall-mark, the movement could not sustain itself for long in the face of the orthodox onslaught and an overall lack of public sympathy. The general opinion about the Young Bengal is that they were a sudden glare of light in the decade of 1830's a generation without father and children.

Notes and References

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