

# The Spirit of Renaissance: Reflections on Derozio's Mind and Work

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## Abstract

*Historically the Renaissance is the period of fresh growth and enlightenment in the field of art, culture, literature and ideas in Europe, especially Italy, during the 14th, 15th and 16th centuries. The word 'Renaissance' generally denotes the revival of learning, culture and the arts. In the beginning of the nineteenth century, there occurred in Bengal an enlightenment in education and culture which was similar to the European Renaissance. This phenomenon is widely known as 'Bengal Renaissance'. The period from 1825 to 1845 is marked by the historians as the first phase of Bengal Renaissance. Henry Derozio (1809-1831), the first Indian English poet, contributed significantly to the growth of Bengal Renaissance through his influential teaching and writings. The present paper aims to study Derozio's philosophy of life and his works as a driving force of Bengal Renaissance.*

*Key Words: Renaissance; Bengal Renaissance; Enlightenment; Reformation; Rationalism; Intellectual liberation; Indian English Literature; Poetry; Humanism;*

The word 'Renaissance' generally denotes the revival of learning, culture and the arts and it acts as an indicator of new growth of activity and interest in literature and culture, philosophy and ideas. Historically the Renaissance is the period of fresh growth and enlightenment in the field of art, culture, literature and ideas in Europe, especially Italy, during the 14th, 15th and 16th centuries. According to *The Oxford Companion to English Literature* (6th Edition), Renaissance is "the great flowering of art, architecture, politics, and the study of literature, usually seen as the end of the Middle Ages and the beginning of the modern world . . . . It began in Italy in the late 14th cent., culminated in the High Renaissance in the early 16th cent, (the

period of Michelangelo and Machiavelli), and spread to the rest of Europe in the 15th cent, and afterwards. Its emphasis was humanist: that is, on regarding the human figure and reason without a necessary relating of it to the superhuman.... The word Renaissance has been applied in the 20th cent, to earlier periods which manifested a new interest in and study of the classics...." (Drabble 846) The same idea has been found in Alfred Von Martin's *Sociology of the Renaissance*: "the typological importance of the Renaissance is that it marks the first cultural and social breach between the Middle Ages and modern times: it is a typical early stage of modern age" (Martin 3). It is often said that during the Renaissance, the literary, philosophical

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and artistic works of the ancient Greeks came to be rediscovered and studied and taught anew. This Renaissance has been described as the revival of ancient learning. This is the common view about European Renaissance. But Prof. Sibnarayan Ray has termed this view as a 'narrow' one. To him, "the main feature of the Renaissance was not revival, but creativeness. ... The spirit of Renaissance affected all aspects of human life and individual pursuits in science and philosophy, in religion and morals, in social and political thinking, in literature and the Arts, in education and institutional life". (Ray 14)

In the beginning of the nineteenth century, there occurred in Bengal an enlightenment in education and culture which was similar to the European Renaissance, although the context was much different. This phenomenon is known as 'Bengal Renaissance'. This enlightenment in the area of darkness was the result of the establishment of the Hindu College (now Presidency University) in 1817. This college developed Western education, logical learning and culture in the place of prevalent Brahminical social system, orthodox rituals and superstitious beliefs. Bengal Renaissance is the result of the encounter between the Bengali elite and Western civilization and culture. David Kopf called this enlightenment 'New Intelligentsia' (Kopf 253). Although Bengal Renaissance is still a controversial subject, eminent historians and scholars of nineteenth century Bengal like Sir Jadunath Sarkar, Binoy Ghose, Susobhan Sarkar, David Kopf, Nimai Sadhan Bose, Ramesh Chandra Mazumdar firmly believed that there was a Renaissance in Bengal having its birth in the early period of 19<sup>th</sup> century. Jadunath Sarkar wrote, "It

was truly a Renaissance, wider, deeper, and more revolutionary than that of Europe, after the fall of Constantine." (Sarkar 491) Nimai Sadhan Bose preferred the term 'awakening' instead of "Renaissance". According to him, "This historic and fascinating phase has variously been described as the Indian Renaissance, the Indian Reformation, the Indian Resurgence, etc. But none of these terms is altogether satisfactory.... But that modern India evolved out of the awakening of the nineteenth century is a historic truth, and it was Bengal which was the centre of this awakening." (Bose *Preface*) The most influential and oft-quoted writing in this field is Prof. Susobhan Sarkar's *Notes on the Bengal Renaissance*, first published in 1946 under his pseudo-name Amit Sen. Prof. Sarkar had given a very clear but brief description of the whole situation of Bengal Renaissance in his booklet. He wrote: "The impact of British Rule, bourgeois economy and modern Western culture was felt first in Bengal and produced an awakening known usually as the Bengal Renaissance. For about a century, Bengal's conscious awareness of the changing modern world was more developed than and ahead of that of the rest of India. The role played by Bengal in the modern awakening of India is thus comparable to the position occupied by Italy in the story of the European Renaissance." (Sarkar 11) In a most recent book in this field, Subrata DasGupta has drawn a very fine conclusion on this debate in an artistic way: "Was the Bengal Renaissance anything like the Italian one? Many eminent Indian (and some Western) thinkers have pondered and debated this question. But really, the answer does not matter. What matters is that there came into being in Bengal, beginning sometime in

the waning years of the eighteenth century and flowering to fullness through the nineteenth century, an awakening of the Indian mind of such a nature that we call it a revolution. The 'Bengal Renaissance' was the name given to this revolutionary awakening of the Indian mind." (DasGupta 2)

Susobhan Sarkar had divided the whole period of Bengal Renaissance into five sections (Sarkar 12):

- (I) 1815-1833: The earliest starting point is, of course, the date 1815, when Rammohun Roy settled down in Calcutta and took up seriously his life's work. His death in 1833 obviously ends the period of which he was, indisputably, the central figure.
- (II) 1833-1857: From the death of Rammohun to the outbreak of the Indian Mutiny.
- (III) 1857-1885: From the Mutiny to the foundation of the Indian National Congress.
- (IV) 1885- 1905: From the commencement of the Congress to the partition of Bengal.
- (V) 1905-1919: From the partition and the great swadesi agitation to the coming of non-cooperation and leadership of Mahatma Gandhi.

Pandit Sibnath Sastri had also marked the initial period of Bengal Renaissance from 1825-1845 (Bagal 63). Derozio belonged to this first phase of Bengal Renaissance and his contribution to it is immense and significant.

Dr. R. K. DasGupta called Derozio 'the morning star of the nineteenth century Bengal Renaissance' (DasGupta.2007. 222). Derozio's contribution to the Bengal Renaissance began with the launch of his remarkable career as a teacher of

Hindu College. He introduced the 'Advancement of Learning' in his new way of teaching. Thus, 'he at once drew to himself like a magnet a group of young pupils in the upper classes who began to adore him and drink deep in the stream of free thought'. (Sen 16) These followers of Derozio are known as 'Young Bengal', later 'Derozians'. Derozio encouraged them to debate freely and to doubt everything. He asked them not to accept anything without questioning that subject. Derozio was a competent scholar, gifted writer and radical thinker. Sibnath Sastri wrote, 'Derozio developed the zeal of free thought among his pupils.' This legacy of freedom of thought and expression is the soul of Renaissance. Derozio took this lesson of free thinking from his 'Guru' David Drummond. David Drummond was a renowned free-thinker and a scholar. Drummond was a follower of David Hume's philosophy of 'empiricism' and 'skepticism'. In the eighteenth century, books like *Essay on Miracles, An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals, Dialogues Concerning National Religion, An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding, and Treatise of Human Nature* laid a deep impression among the young generation of Europe. Drummond belonged to this generation and was influenced by these books and Derozio was his perfect disciple.

Being inspired by Derozio, his students went on reading the radical thoughtful books like Tom Paine's *Age of Reason, Right of Man* etc. Derozio taught his students to question all authority: the lesson of rationalism and empiricism. PearyChand Mitra, one of the Derozians, wrote the following, about Derozio's impact, in his *A Biographical Sketch of David Hare* published in 1878:

“Of all the teachers Mr. H L V Derozio gave the greatest impetus to free discussion on all subjects, social, moral and religious. He was himself a free thinker and possessed affable manners. He encouraged students to come and open their minds to him. The advanced students of the Hindu college frequently sought for his company during tiffin time, after school hours, and at his house. He encouraged everyone to speak out. This led to free exchange of thought and reading of books which otherwise would not have been read. These books were chiefly poetical, metaphysical and religious.” (Mittra 16)

Rev. Lal Behari Dey commented about these classes of Derozio at Hindu college: “... it was... more like the *Academy* of Plato, or the *Lyceum* of Aristotle.” (Dey 29) Derozio did not keep his teaching within the limits of the classroom, but he established Academic Association, a debating club in 1828 with his pupils. Not only the Derozians, but the notable personality of that time like David Hare, private secretary to Lord Bentinck, was regular visitor to the Association which used to discuss topics like free-will and fate, virtue and vice, patriotism, arguments for and against the existence of God, the shames of idolatry and priesthood. Thus, Derozio cast a magical influence on his pupils who not only joined the progressive discussions of their master, but also exercised new thoughts in their practical life. Derozio’s biographer Thomas Edwards aptly wrote: “No teacher ever taught with greater zeal, with more enthusiasm, with more loving intercourse between master and pupil than marked the short term of Derozio’s connection with the Hindoo College. Neither before, nor since his

day, has any teacher within the walls of any native educational establishment in India, ever exercised such an influence over his pupils.” (Edwards 23)

Derozio’s teaching did not go in vain. One of his pupils, Ramgopal Ghose held up the motto: “He who will not reason is a bigot; he who cannot is a fool; and he who does not is a slave,” Another, Radhanath Sikdar said of him: “He has been the cause and the sole cause of that spirit of inquiry after truth, and that contempt of vice— which cannot but, be beneficial to India.” (Sarkar 100) PearyChand Mittra wrote the same more clearly: “Derozio appears to have made strong impression on his pupils, as they regularly visited him at his house and spent hours in conversation with him. He continued to teach at home what he had taught at school. He used to impress upon his pupils the sacred duty of thinking for themselves— to live and die for truth— to cultivate and practise all the virtues, shunning vice in every shape.” (Sarkar 27)

One more contemporary record will be very apt to show how Derozio’s ‘New Learning’ brought a great moral revolution among the youth and how it stirred the stagnant orthodox Hindu society of nineteenth century Bengal. Baboo Huro Mohun Chatterji recorded the effect produced by Derozio on his pupils and on the higher Hindu Society of his day in a manuscript history of the Hindu College:

“The students of the first, second and third classes had the advantage of attending a *Conversazione* established in the schools by Mr. Derozio where readings in poetry, literature, and moral philosophy were carried on. The meetings were held almost daily after or before school hours. Though they were

without the knowledge or sanction of the authorities, yet Mr. Derozio's disinterested zeal and devotion in bringing up the students in these subjects was unbounded, and characterized by a love and philanthropy which, up to this day, has not been equalled by any teacher either in or out of the service. The students in their turn loved him most tenderly; and were ever ready to be guided by his counsels and imitate him in all their daily actions in life. In fact, Mr. Derozio acquired such an ascendancy over the minds of his pupils that they would not move even in their private concerns without his counsel and advice. On the other hand, he fostered their taste in literature, taught the evil effects of idolatry and superstition; and so far formed their moral conceptions and feelings as to make them completely above the antiquated ideas and aspirations of the age. Such was the force of his instructions that the conduct of the students out of the college was most exemplary, and gained them the applause of the outside world, not only in a literary and scientific point of view, but what was of still greater importance; they were all considered men of 'truth'! Indeed, the 'College boy' was a synonym for truth, and it was a general belief and saying among our countrymen, which those that remember the time must acknowledge, that 'such a boy is incapable of falsehood because he is a 'College boy'". (Edwards 51)

We can easily detect the spirit of eighteenth century Enlightenment of West in the mind and works of Derozio. The Enlightenment is the

movement of intellectual liberation. Enlightenment is defined by Kant as man's emancipation from his self-incurred immaturity. 'Enlightenment thinking encouraged rational scientific inquiry, humanitarian tolerance, and the idea of universal human rights.' Dr. R. K. DasGupta also remarked, "What made Derozio a unique figure in the new educational system was that he brought into it the finest ideals of the European Enlightenment, the most important of which was the spirit of enquiry, a rationalist and skeptical approach to the vital concerns of social and individual life." (Edwards *Foreword*) The Derozians, the close followers of Derozio, who came to be known as 'Young Bengal' or 'Young Calcutta' (Mitra 28), were 'afire with love for the twin gods of liberty and rationalism'. (Bose 47) Derozio promoted the three essential traits of Renaissance: 'Freedom of Thought', 'Freedom of Expression', 'Freedom of Association'. The young pupils of Derozio were 'the makers of Modern Bengal and of our Nineteenth Century Renaissance.' Dr. R. K. DasGupta had firmly placed Derozio in the first position in the History of Bengal Renaissance: 'Derozio was the first to contemplate an intellectual Renaissance for an ancient civilization through 'new perceptions', the first to exalt reason as an instrument of progress." (Bradley-Birt *Foreword*)

The result of Bengal Renaissance and spread of English education system also gave birth to a new discipline of Indian literature which is now called Indian English Literature where again credit goes to Derozio as the first Indian poet to write in original English. Derozio's Renaissance mind has found its reflections in his teaching as well as in his poetical works. Derozio had sown the seed of

intellectual revolution in young Bengal. That he wanted to see the seed to germinate and develop later into a majestic tree with goodly fruit was brilliantly articulated in one of his famous sonnets—*'To the Pupils of Hindu College'*:

Expanding like the petals of young flowers  
I watch the gentle opening of your minds.  
And the sweet loosening of the spell the binds,  
Your intellectual energies and powers,  
That stretch (Like young birds in soft summer  
hours)  
Their wings, to try their strength, O, how the  
winds  
Of circumstances and freshening April  
showers  
Of early knowledge and unnumbered kinds  
Of new perceptions shed their influence;  
And how you worship truth's omnipotence.  
What joyance rains upon me, when I see  
Fame in the mirror of futurity,  
Weaving the chaplets you have yet to gain  
Ah then, I feel I have not lived in vain.  
(Chaudhuri 291)

Dr. R K. DasGupta remarked, 'the history of our Renaissance is the history of 'the gentle opening of minds' (Dasgupta 2007, 233). Interestingly the same spirit of Derozio was also reflected in one of his prose piece titled "Conclusion of My Address to My Students Before the Grand Vacation in 1829", published posthumously:

"As your knowledge increases, your moral principles will be fortified; and rectitude of conduct will ensure happiness. My advice to you is, that you go forth into the world strong in wisdom and in worth; scatter the seeds of love among mankind; seek the peace of your fellow-creatures, for in their

peace you will have peace yourselves." (Chaudhuri 386) A very important fact was noticed by Stephen Hay that "His (Derozio's) poems to India are virtually the first expressions of Indian nationalist thought". (Hay 566) In *The Harp of India*, Derozio is very sympathetic towards the 'neglected, mute, and desolate' condition of mother India, perhaps in the hand of the British rulers, and very energetic to arouse its lost spirit by striking its strain:

Why hang'st thou lonely on yon withered  
bough?

Unstrung forever, must thou there remain;  
Thy music once was sweet — who hears it  
now?

Why doth the breeze sigh over thee in vain?  
Silence hath bound thee with her fatal chain;

Neglected, mute, and desolate art thou,  
Like ruined monument on desert plain:

O! many a hand more worthy far than mine  
Once thy harmonious chords to sweetness  
gave,

And many a wreath for them did Fame entwine  
Of flowers still blooming on the minstrel's  
grave:

Those hands are cold — but if thy notes divine  
May be by mortal wakened once again,  
Harp of my country, let me strike the strain!  
(Chaudhuri 97)

In *To My Native Land*, Derozio shows his love for his native land recalling the glorious past of her:

My country! In thy days of glory past  
A beauteous halo circled round thy brow  
and worshipped as a deity thou wast—

Where is thy glory, where the reverence now?  
Thy eagle pinion is chained down at last,

And grovelling in the lowly dust art thou,  
 Thy minstrel hath no wreath to weave for thee  
 Save the sad story of thy misery!  
 Well—let me dive into the depths of time  
 And bring from out the ages, that have rolled  
 A few small fragments of these wrecks  
 sublime  
 Which human eye may never more behold  
 And let the guerdon of my labour be,  
 My fallen country! One kind wish for thee!  
 (Bradley-Birt 2)

Derozio's long poetical work *The Fakir of Jungheera* (published in 1828) is a fine expression of Renaissance Humanism. It is a metrical tale on Sati Burning system. The tale revolves round Nulinee, a Brahmin widow who was rescued by her former lover, a Muslim youth, at the time of ascending upon the pyres. After being rescued she eloped with her lover to live a happy life upon the rocks of Jungheera. Accordingly the royal forces began to search the culprit. The narrative ends with the death of two lovers in the battlefield. The poet's focus on the value of love and humanity against the cruel social custom, prejudice and orthodoxy is noteworthy. The union between Hindu Brahmin and Muslim, as shown in the poem, is a brave voice of Humanistic secularism, progressive harmony and passion for liberty.

Derozio's new radicalism was not understood in his own time; that is why he was removed from the job of Hindu College without giving him 'even a mockery of trial'. But Derozio's ever enquiring spirit, his Renaissance intellect, found its best expression in the reply which he wrote to H. H. Wilson, 'his firm friend throughout his career', in defense of the charges brought against him by the

authorities of the Hindu College. It was from H. H. Wilson's letter, dated 25th April 1831, Derozio came to know the ridiculous, superstitious charges which the authorities of Hindu College had brought against him: 'Do you believe in a God? Do you think respect and obedience to parents no part of moral duty? Do you think the intermarriage of brothers and sisters innocent and allowable?' (Chaudhuri 319) Derozio had not stopped sending only the letter of resignation. On the next day, he replied all questions from his indomitable position. For the first question, Derozio wrote, 'I have never denied the existence of a God in the hearing of any human being. If it be wrong to speak at all upon such a subject, I am guilty; but I am neither afraid, nor ashamed to confess having stated the doubts of philosophers upon this head, because I have also stated the solution of these doubts. Is it forbidden anywhere to argue upon such a question? If so, it must be equally wrong to adduce an argument upon either side.' (Chaudhuri 322) Prof. Susobhan Sarkar commented 'his answer to the question whether he had undermined his pupils' faith in god is deservedly famous in the annals of the Bengal Renaissance'. (Sarkar 103) Derozio dismissed the other charges scornfully. His brave spirit came out at the end of the letter to describe the Native Managers who were the main causes for such an injustice to him: 'Excuse my saying it, but I believe there was a determination on their part to get rid of me, not to satisfy popular clamour, but their own bigotry. Had my religion and morals been investigated by them, they could have had no grounds to proceed against me. They therefore thought it most expedient to make no enquiry, but with anger and precipitation to remove me from

the institution. The slovenly manner in which they have done so, is a sufficient indication of the spirit by which they were moved; for in their rage they have forgotten what was due even to common decency.' (Chaudhuri 325)

The last line of Subir Roy Chaudhury's book on Derozio runs like this: 'Without him (Derozio) the history of Indian Renaissance is incomplete'. (Roy Chaudhury 103) The freedom of expression of opinion, even against the state, which is the essence of modern civil society and Human Rights movement finds its seed in the radical thought of Derozio. If we ignore it, it will be a gross injustice to Derozio and a serious mistake in modern Indian history.

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