

The Derozio Affair

An Annal of Early Calcutta

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Hindu College was set up in Calcutta in 1817 as a pioneering institution to impart Western learning to its students. In 1831, its most outstanding teacher, Henry Louis Vivian Derozio, then only 22 years old, was compelled to resign. A look at the circumstances that forced his resignation attempts to reconstruct Derozio's ideas and his teaching methods. The episode offers a glimpse of the intellectual ambience of early 19th-century Calcutta.

On 25 April 1831, Henry Louis Vivian Derozio was compelled to resign from Hindu College in Calcutta. He was, in his time, without doubt the most outstanding and inspiring teacher of the college, which in 1831 was only 14 years old. His resignation and the circumstances behind it are important not only to the history of the college, but also for an understanding of the intellectual ambience of Calcutta during the embryonic period of what has come to be known as the Bengal Renaissance. Bypassing the euphemism “resignation”—since in most ways it was never that—I argue here that Derozio's dismissal was rooted in the way Hindu College was founded and in the way it functioned. Both in his beliefs and in his pedagogy, Derozio was an anomaly in Hindu College. Sometime in 1816, social reformer, journalist and educationist Raja Ram Mohan Roy called a meeting of his friends for the purpose of creating a body of opinion that would undermine idolatry. David Hare, a friend of his, attended the meeting even though he was not invited. Hare had come to Calcutta from his native Scotland in 1800 at the age of 25 and had begun trade as a watchmaker. He made the acquaintance of leading members of Calcutta society and was a frequent visitor to their houses, often to attend nautches and tamashas. A philanthropist by inclination, he had at some point before 1816 handed over his business to an E Grey.¹ At the meeting in Roy's house, Hare argued that one of the ways in which idolatry could be eradicated was by establishing an English school. There was general agreement, but no one acted upon it (Mitra 1877: 1–5).

Hare decided to take his suggestion elsewhere and approached Edward Hyde East, the chief justice of the Supreme Court. Before deciding on the matter, Hyde East asked an influential Brahmin, Buddinath Mookerjea—of whom it was said “his poita [sacred thread] was his prestige”—to make enquiries about the feasibility of setting up such an institution and whether Hindus in Calcutta were in favour of a school where their children might be taught English literature and science. When Mookerjea affirmed that the leading members of Hindu society were indeed in favour of such a proposal, Hyde East called a meeting at his house where it was resolved that “an establishment be formed for the education of native youth” (Mitra 1877).

Hare must have been confident that his proposal would elicit a positive response. His own experience would have given him this confidence. Sibnath Sastri, who wrote a very well-informed account of the early years of the 19th century,

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recorded that it was a common practice for young boys to run after Hare's *palki* (palanquin) crying, "Me poor boy, have pity on me, me take in your school." As a young lad from Krishnanagore, Ramtanu Lahiri, on the advice of his patron, ran after Hare's *palki*; only after many such sprints did Lahiri gain admission into Hare's free school (Sastri 2016: 30). This practice of boys running after Hare is evidence of an eagerness to learn English. In early 19th-century Calcutta, the knowledge of English marked out a young man as someone special. Contemporary accounts mention that two lads, namely Nitai and Adwaita Sen, who went to a school in central Calcutta and had a smattering of English were held in awe in their locality (Sen 2012: 17–18).

The scheme to set up a school to teach English and the Western sciences ran into difficulties almost immediately following the decision. Mookerjea reported at one of the meetings that Roy would be connected with the institution. On hearing this, orthodox Hindus were unanimous in declaring that they would have nothing to do with such a college/school. Mookerjea and Hyde East were both put in a very awkward position by the opposition to Roy's association with the institution, and the entire plan was on the verge of being a failure. It was at this point that Hare entered the picture.

Having hitherto kept himself in the background, Hare now spoke to Roy, who agreed not to have anything to do with the college. This, and perhaps other similar acts of persuasion, led one of Hare's 19th-century admirers to conclude that "Hare was not an important member of the republic of letters, but he possessed strong common sense. He understood well how to beat about the bush (*sic*), and put matters in train so as to secure the accomplishment of the object" (Mitra 1977: 1).²

The first hurdle thus crossed, the promoters of the college met twice in May 1816. In the second of these meetings, held on 21 May, the establishing of Hindu College was decided upon with the governor and members of the council as patrons, and Hyde East as president and JH Harrington as vice president. The college was to have a committee of eight Europeans and 20 "native gentlemen," with Lieutenant Irvine and Mookerjea as secretaries. Large sums of money were subscribed and further sums were promised. Among the Indians who took a leading part in the establishment of the college were Maharaja of Burdwan Tejchand Bahadur, Chandra Kumar Tagore, Gopee Mohon Deb, Joy Kissen Singh, Ganga Narain Dass, Radhakanta Deb, Radha Madhab Banerjee, Ramkamal Sen and Rasamoy Dutt. Hare was named Visitor, and he advised on the framing of the rules of the college, which were approved at a meeting held on 27 August 1816 (Mitra 1877: 7, 41).

The first clause of the "Rules of the Hindu College" stated that "The primary object of this institution is the tuition of the sons of respectable Hindoos in the English and the Indian language, and in the literature and science of Europe and Asia" (Mitra 1877: Appendix A, pp i–vii).

The purpose of this narrative concerning the setting up of the college is to underline that the project, as the name of the institution made evident, was emphatically a Hindu one. It was conceived by Hindus for Hindus and it was financed by

Hindus.³ Europeans like Hyde East, Hare and others played the role of facilitators. That Hare had a hand in drafting the rules is apposite since it was known in Calcutta then that, despite being European, he was strongly identified with the Hindus of Calcutta; "their rejoicing was his rejoicing—their sorrow was his sorrow" (Mitra 1877: 4).

It opened on Monday, 20 January 1817 at Gorachand Bysak's house in Goranhatta in North Calcutta. It moved soon thereafter to Roop Charan Roy's house in Chitpore and thence to Firinghi Kamal Bose's house. But, very soon, plans were made through the influence of H H Wilson (eminent linguist and Boden Professor of Sanskrit at Oxford) for Sanskrit College and Hindu College to have their own building. The construction of the building was made possible through the government providing ₹1,24,000 and Hare's donation of the land he owned on the north side of the college square. Both the colleges occupied the building in January 1825 (Mitra 1877: 8–14).

The 'East Indian' Teacher

Derozio joined this essentially Hindu institution as the fourth teacher in 1826 (Madge 1905: vi). In the absence of better documentation, how and why he got the job cannot be explained. He was only 17 at the time, just a little older than his students and had no teaching experience. He had been a precocious and a prodigiously gifted student of the school set up by David Drummond in Dharmatola (known as Drummond's Academy or Durrumtollah Academy). He studied in that institution till he was 14 and his first job at a very young age was with James Scott & Co, where his father was the chief accountant. Derozio left Scott & Co after two years and moved to Bhagalpore to work in an indigo factory. He returned to Calcutta and in 1826 became a sub-editor at the *India Gazette*; later that same year, in November, he joined Hindu College on a salary of ₹150 a month. Given his remarkable success as a teacher later, and his range of reading and interests, it is clear that Derozio was a self-taught person.

More curious and more noteworthy, however, is the fact that Derozio was by no means well-connected in Calcutta. He was born in a house located just east of the Lower Circular Road (originally the Maratha Ditch that marked the boundary of the city of Calcutta). His residence, located as it was in what E W Madge (an early Derozio biographer) called "the suburban side of Lower Circular Road," was clearly not a part of the White Town where the elite lived. Derozio was of Anglo-Portuguese descent, his grandfather being described in the St John's baptismal register as a "Native Protestant." The Derozio family were seen as East Indians, and therefore as somewhat inferior to the white population (Madge 1905). There is no evidence to suggest that Derozio was brought up in an ambience of any affluence; indeed, the fact that he had to seek employment as a mere adolescent suggests the contrary. Given his situation in the highly hierarchical world of early colonial Calcutta, it does not seem possible that he secured his employment in Hindu College through "connections." It is possible that Hare, with his generosity in helping the underprivileged youth of Calcutta, recommended Derozio to the

authorities of the college of which he was the Visitor. But, this is to move from facts to speculation.

There is another aspect to consider in the matter of Derozio's recruitment. By 1825–26, Hindu College was in dire financial straits. In 1823, the firm of Joseph Barretto & Sons, treasurers to the college, had failed and gone into liquidation. The college had only ₹65,000 remaining. On Hare's advice, the college authorities turned to the government for financial support (Sengupta 1955: 2). The government's initial condition was that the college managing committee should allow the General Committee of Public Instruction (G CPI) to exercise control over the running of the college. This led to an outcry from Radha Madhab Banerjee and Chandra Kumar Tagore "who apprehended undesirable changes which might be made, and wished that the Institution might be left to its own resources." After negotiations, the managing committee agreed to the setting up of a joint committee, consisting of an equal number of European and native members, to manage the college, and "any measure to which the natives express an unanimous objection shall not be carried into effect." The G CPI, however, responded that they would limit their supervision to the funds that they would be making available, and proposed that Wilson should work on their behalf. Wilson was elected an ex officio member of the managing committee and made its vice president. Hare was inducted as an honorary member of the same committee. Around this time, Mookerjea, Harinath Roy and Kali Sankar Ghoshal contributed ₹50,000, ₹20,000 and ₹20,000 each. Their contributions, though, were meant not for the running of the college, but to fund scholarships for students (Mitra 1877: 14–15).

Derozio joined Hindu College precisely at this juncture when the Hindu managers of the college were asserting their right to retain control over the running of the institution and the college was struggling to keep itself financially afloat. The two factors—his joining and the tight finances—were not unconnected. Government funding, being the principal source of financial viability, would sooner than later result in greater government influence and erode the autonomy of the college's predominantly Hindu managing committee, which would then lead to what some of its members feared would be "undesirable changes." At the same time, in these financially straitened circumstances, it was not unreasonable to appoint a very young and talented "East Indian" who would not have to be paid as much as a British teacher. Unequal salaries, determined by colour of skin, were an accepted principle from the time of the college's inception. When it was established, its two secretaries, Irvine and Mookerjea, were paid monthly salaries of ₹300 and ₹100, respectively (Mitra 1877: 8).⁴ It will not be entirely illogical to surmise that the same principle of difference operated on the teaching side as well, especially in a time of financial constraint.

Loosening of the Spell

Derozio's success as a teacher has become the stuff of legend. Ironically, it was this success and the consequent popularity among a section of the students that were connected to his exit

from Hindu College. It is difficult—as Sumit Sarkar noted many years ago in his essay on Young Bengal—to form a clear idea of the intellectual content of what Derozio taught and of his pedagogy (Sarkar 1985: 20). From whatever is available, a number of points emerge. First, Derozio emphasised that students should think for themselves: this was their "sacred duty." Second, there should be a free exchange of ideas and everyone should express clearly what they felt. Third, he encouraged students to read books that they would not have read as part of the curriculum. He often read aloud to them. Fourth, he impressed upon his students the importance of truth and virtue. Finally, he encouraged students to meet him outside the classroom and the college and to speak frankly to him (Mitra 1877: 15, 27). His age, no doubt, helped in such interactions. What Derozio was attempting to do was nothing more and nothing less than what good teachers and pedagogues invariably do, namely, encourage reading and critical thinking to open up the minds of their students. He presented his hopes and aims as a teacher in a sonnet he wrote in 1829 while he was still teaching in Hindu College. Its opening lines are a poetic statement of his pedagogic intent: "Expanding, like the petals of young flowers, / I watch the opening of your infant minds, / And the loosening of the spell that binds / Your intellectual energies and powers" (Derozio 2008a: 291). It would be fair to say that Derozio's popularity and the impact of his teaching provide a counterpoint to the other teachers of Hindu College in the 1820s. Had they, like him, been trying through their teaching to empower students to read and think for themselves, Derozio's pedagogy might not have created the stir that it did.

The impact of Derozio's teaching was not unexpected. As students began to think for themselves and experience what Derozio called "the loosening of the spell," they began to look critically at the world around them. These were boys, nearly all of them, from upper-caste Hindu families. Their daily lives in their homes were enveloped in religious rituals and forms of deference associated with ritual. A historian has outlined this succinctly: "The family priest, the family deity, the large mass of traditionalists led by old opulent families and guided sometimes by uneducated Brahmins, constituted a force whose impact on society was constantly felt, especially by the young students and graduates of the Hindu College" (P Sinha 1967: 401). Influenced by the new learning acquired from their precocious teacher, some of the students began to question religion, rituals and the pressure of the orthodoxies that clouded their lives. One manifestation of this was the breaking of Hindu dietary taboos. Predictably, this was seen as an adolescent insurrection, alarming many orthodox parents, and through them, members of the managing committee. The college may have shrugged off Ram Mohan Roy even before it was born, but now, to the conservative Hindu faction, it seemed it was saddled with an even worse reformer.

One of the first to officially voice this alarm was Radhakanta Deb, who had been associated with the college since its inception and who for all his philanthropic zeal was a diehard conservative.⁵ He wrote to Wilson:

It has been reported to me from time to time, and also published in the Bengalee papers, that the conduct of some of the adult students

of the College is in the highest degree disorderly and irregular, and in various modes inconsistent with the Laws and usages of our caste; that in direct contradiction to its dictates, they eat and drink prohibited articles ... with Mahomedans and Christians.

Deb did not stop at the breaking of dietary taboos; he also accused the students of being “guilty of fornication and sodomy.”⁶ He proposed that the offending students should be expelled from the college and the same fate befall the “Teachers by whom they had been misled and corrupted.” He added that while Europeans could eat and drink “promiscuously with individuals of a different sect,” for Hindus this constituted “a transgression [that] was in the highest degree revolting and sinful” and involved the loss of caste. Thus, if such acts continued in the college the Hindu managers would be compelled to resign and withdraw our “Boys as well as those of our Relatives and friends.”⁷

Deb used the occasion to remind Wilson of a meeting held in the house of E H Cash, at which Harrington had proposed that Mahomedans and Christians should also be admitted to the college. That proposal, he told Wilson, had been

unanimously rejected by the Hindoo members from a wish to preserve the Hindoo children separate and without admixture with the children of any other sect, in order to prevent the temptations either in acts of eating or drinking which might implicate a loss of caste to the Hindoo boys.⁸

There are a few points that need to be noted in Deb’s letter. First, of course, it contains no mention of Derozio by name as the “corrupter” of the students. In fact, as fig leaf, the plural—“teachers”—is used. Second, it hints strongly at Derozio as the chief culprit since it was common knowledge that his students ate beef and drank alcohol, a fact noted by many contemporary observers, most memorably by a writer in the *Oriental Magazine* who described the “progress” some students were “making by actually cutting their way through ham and beef and wading to liberalism through tumblers of beer” (Madge 1905: vii). But, Deb is among the first—he could even be the only one—to officially record that some students of Hindu College were engaged in sodomy and fornication. And third, he took pains to reiterate to Wilson that Hindu College was meant exclusively for Hindus. Students of other religious communities were not to be admitted.

Two days later, Deb wrote to Wilson again to thank him for putting up in the college an order along the lines that he, Deb, had proposed in his first letter. He then proposed that Ramkamal Sen be requested to see whether the arrangements regarding tiffin rooms for separate castes were being adhered to, and that Sen should occasionally superintend the sale of refreshments and also “stop the reciprocal snatching and eating of Cochury cakes in the College compound.” Deb further proposed that even during playtime boys should not be allowed to go outside the college boundaries. He added that the college could not disown responsibility for what the students were doing outside the college.⁹ He was, thus, in favour of putting strict restrictions on the freedom of students; from their movements to their diet, and particularly to their pranks. The letter highlights how

important caste constraints were to the functioning of Hindu College.

Removing Derozio

Though Derozio who was to be forced to resign in April 1831 was not mentioned in Deb’s letter to Wilson, it would be naive to believe that he did not have Derozio in mind when he penned his letters to Wilson. In spite of the various orders issued by the college authorities, Derozio’s teaching continued to make an impact, and some parents either stopped their sons from attending college or withdrew them. This so alarmed the Hindu managers that Sen called a meeting of the managing committee, at which he urged that “the College would not prosper till Derozio was removed.” Derozio was described as being “the root of all evil” (Mitra 1877: 17). The gloves were finally off.

Sen further proposed that those students known to be partaking of Western food and to be hostile to Hindusim should be expelled; those students attending private lectures and meetings should be removed, and teachers should be stopped from eating at the school table. At this meeting, both Wilson and Hare argued against the removal of Derozio, since both judged him to be a competent teacher. But, in the end, both declined to vote since this was a subject that affected only the feelings of “natives.” The majority voted in favour of Derozio’s dismissal (Mitra 1877: 18).¹⁰ Being informed of this decision, Derozio sent in his resignation on 25 April 1831.

It would appear from Derozio’s resignation letter that Joy Kissen Singh spoke, alongside Wilson and Hare, in favour of Derozio. The latter thanked all three in his letter. In a separate covering letter to Wilson, he wrote, “I cannot ... conceal from myself the fact, that my resignation is compulsory.” In his resignation letter, he recorded the following facts:

First, no charge was brought against me. Second, if any accusation was brought forward, I was not informed of it. Third, I was not called up to face my accusers, if any such appeared. Fourth, no witness was examined on either side. Fifth, my conduct and character underwent scrutiny, and no opportunity was afforded me of defending either. Sixth, while a majority did not, as I have learned, consider me an unfit person to be connected with the College, it was resolved, notwithstanding, that I should be removed from it, so that unbiased, unexamined, and unheard, you resolve to dismiss me without even the mockery of a trial.¹¹

Thus, Derozio left the portals of Hindu College. He died of cholera at the end of that same year. The college and its students, it could be said, were his life.

In a private letter to Derozio, written after he had received the resignation letter, Wilson admitted that Derozio was right and that “the native Managers [had yielded] to popular clamour.” He added, “An impression had gone abroad to your disadvantage, the effects of which were injurious to the College, and which would not have been dispelled by any proof you could have produced, that it was unfounded” (Chaudhuri 2008: 321–22). It is a pity that neither what Wilson said at the meeting nor what he wrote to Deb in reply to the accusations the latter had made are part of public knowledge. It is possible that Wilson was saying one thing to Derozio and another to the

“native Managers.” Neither he nor Hare wrote a word in favour of Derozio even after his dismissal.

But, the manner in which the Hindu managers treated Derozio “without even the mockery of a trial,” as he so tellingly observed, was not the only humiliation he had to face during his term as a teacher. It was the practice in the college for every teacher to submit a monthly progress report to the headmaster. Derozio was often a defaulter in this. On one occasion, when he took his report to Headmaster D’Anseleme, the latter, in the presence of Hare, lifted his hand in anger to strike Derozio who avoided it by backing away. Having failed to slap Derozio, the headmaster raged against Hare and called him “a vile sycophant.” Hare kept his cool and asked whose sycophant he was? (Mitra 1877: 18). Yet, though Hare was a Visitor to the college, he did not complain against the headmaster trying to slap a teacher. Given the status of East Indians in early colonial Calcutta, it is worth noting that the headmaster and the Hindu members of the managing committee could treat Derozio in the way they did because of his social standing, or rather the absence of it. It goes without saying that no European could have been dismissed without a hearing or have faced the threat of being slapped in a professional space. Derozio’s dismissal was a rare convergence of two different elite interests. There was nothing stopping Wilson and Hare from voting in Derozio’s favour. They chose not to do so despite their high opinion of Derozio as a teacher. They decided to go with the Hindu upper-caste opinion.¹²

Rosinka Chaudhuri in her editorial introduction to the volume of Derozio’s collected writings makes the valid point that Derozio’s prodigious talent allowed him to come into contact

with some of the well-known names of early 19th-century Calcutta. He knew John Grant, the editor of the *India Gazette*, D L Richardson, who became a teacher of English in Hindu College in the 1830s and 1840s, H M Parker, the secretary to the Board of Customs, and Wilson and Hare. Derozio was also a friend of Emma Roberts, who in the words of Chaudhuri was “the first woman poet of British India, highly placed and of the first rank socially” (Chaudhuri 2008: lxix; Stark and Madge 1892). While this is undeniable, it is necessary to keep in mind the absence of any kind of protest from any of these high-level acquaintances and friends of Derozio against the manner in which he was treated by his college. There is no record of any such protest. Moreover, Richardson as a teacher in Hindu College was the key figure in suppressing the activities of some of Derozio’s students.¹³ The reality of early colonial Calcutta, infused as it was by racial superiority and religious orthodoxies, manifested many conflicting interests.

The absence of material on his life and thought notwithstanding, it is worthwhile to attempt to reconstruct what Derozio’s ideas were from what he wrote. His poetry, which forms the bulk of what he wrote, has been expertly analysed by Chaudhuri (2008: xxi–lxxx). According to her, his poetry was imbued with “national aspiration and endeavour,” inspired as it was by the Romantics, especially Percy Bysshe Shelley. He addressed India, not just Bengal. His poems contained many of the familiar tropes of nationalist writing: “images of national greatness ... golden-age mythology; the praise of mythical heroism or more general valour [contributing] to a definition of the qualities desired in a citizen of the nation.” Chaudhuri describes him as “a self-consciously nationalist poet” some

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decades before nationalism emerged as a political idiom in India. His inspiration may have come from the West but his creativity and its articulation were “emphatically and unprecedentedly, Indian in its moorings” (Chaudhuri 2008: lxxx–lxxxi). Derozio’s students and disciples must have imbibed this love for “my native land” from their master’s creativity and his teaching. The members of the managing committee of Hindu College could not possibly have had any objections to these ideas. Derozio’s poetry is perhaps best described as patriotic and seen as a variant on Shelleyan idealism. His ideas did not contain any adumbration of anti-imperial subversion and, therefore, were somewhat different from the form that Indian nationalism acquired from the early 20th century.

Reply to Wilson

Derozio’s prose writings were few. Wilson, in his letter to Derozio referred to above, asked three very pointed questions: “Do you believe in 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?” He further asked Derozio: “Have you ever maintained these doctrines by argument in the hearing of our scholars?” (Chaudhuri 2008: 321–22). These questions provide a clue as to what kind of charges had been brought against Derozio by the Hindu members of the managing committee. Derozio sent a rather longish reply to Wilson, which forms the only direct evidence we have of some of his religious and social views. In his reply, he was emphatic that he had never denied the existence of “a God in the hearing of any human being.” What he had done as a teacher, he said, was to introduce the students to both sides of the argument. With this aim in mind, he had introduced them to David Hume’s dialogue between Cleanthes and Philo, where arguments against theism are offered. At the same time, he had also presented to the students Thomas Reid and Dugald Stewart’s replies to Hume. If because of this “the religious opinions of the students has become unhinged,” Derozio argued, the fault was scarcely his. He asserted that if he was being held responsible for the atheism of some of his students, he should also be held responsible for the theism of others (Chaudhuri 2008: 322–23).

Before moving on to Derozio’s replies to the other questions that Wilson had posed to him, let us pause with this first answer since it reveals some aspects of his views. It should be clear that Derozio does not answer Wilson’s question: “Do you believe in a God?” His answer is a trifle disingenuous: he had never denied the existence of a god within anyone’s hearing. So did he believe in a god? Unlike E M Forster’s (1951: 67), “Lord, I disbelieve. Help thou my unbelief” a century later, Derozio’s indirection is not proclamatory. He leaves open the possibility of being a non-believer without going public, or even declaring his unbelief in private. Derozio was, perhaps, being too clever by half in offering indirection to a very direct question. His choice of Hume’s dialogue between Cleanthes and Philo is telling in several ways. First, he clearly attaches importance to discussion. Hume has one of the participants say in the text that “Any question of philosophy ... which is *obscure* and *uncertain*, that human reason can reach no fixed determination with respect to it ... seems to lead us

naturally into the style of dialogue and conversation.” What Hume was trying to do in the text, as Derozio did pedagogically, was enable readers to resist the pressure to believe in the existence of god regardless of evidence, and see what basis the content of the belief had in reason (Harris 2015: 444–56). Derozio’s target was blind belief in the failure to be sceptical of the existence of god by remaining oblivious of the evidence against divinity. He wanted his students to see for themselves what basis belief had in reason. To convey this to a group of teenagers swamped by ritual and belief in their daily lives was an ambitious task even for so talented a teacher. He could not have been unaware of the possible fallout, and he must have known that even Hume had not published this dialogue in his own lifetime (Harris 2015: 456). Derozio cleverly skirted the issue of his own belief in a god, while suggesting through Hume’s dialogue that religion needed to be rational to be free of superstition.

Derozio’s answers to Wilson’s other two questions were straightforward. To the question about respecting parents as a moral duty, he said that he had always insisted upon respect and obedience to parents. And, he gave examples of how he had intervened in the case of two of his students—Dakshinananjan Mukherjee and Mohesh Chunder Singh—to ensure that they did not defy their parents. On the question of incest, Derozio denied having ever taught “such an absurdity.”

It would appear from whatever Derozio had to say about his own beliefs, and from whatever little else is available about him, that he had fashioned himself as a creature of the Enlightenment. He taught the importance of questioning and doubt. And, in his letter to Wilson, he vindicated this procedure by quoting Francis Bacon’s words: “If a man will begin with certainties and he shall end in doubt” (Chaudhuri 2008: 323). He taught Hume, translated from Pierre Louis Maupertuis, wrote on Immanuel Kant, and was interested in the Marquis de Condorcet.¹⁴ When, in a short piece, he had to remember great names and their influence, he recalled Bacon, John Milton, John Locke, Stewart, Shelley and Isaac Newton (Derozio 2008b). Here is clear evidence of his Enlightenment intellectual lineage. His poetic inspiration also harked back to poets of the same period. This strong influence of the Enlightenment notwithstanding, or maybe because of it, Derozio was not an unequivocal supporter of the abolition of sati. Before its abolition, he wrote,

It will be impossible therefore to make an attempt at overthrowing this system [sati], before education is generalized, without wounding the tenderest feelings of human nature ... How ... can we stand acquitted from the charge of intolerance, if we exercise our power in violently suppressing so popularly respected a ceremony among the Hindoos? Neither is society injured by the practice, nor will the poor native females be the better for its abolition. (Derozio 2008c)

The influence of the Enlightenment informed what he thought was his duty as a teacher. To quote again from his letter to Wilson:

Entrusted as I was for some time with the education of youth peculiarly circumstanced, was it for me to have made them pert and ignorant dogmatists ... Setting aside the narrowness of mind which such a course might have evinced, it would have been injurious to the mental energies and acquirements of the young men themselves.

Derozio could not have been ignorant of the kind of families from which his students came—the students were “peculiarly circumstanced,” in his remarkable phrase—and he wanted to bring them out of the narrowness of mind and the dogmatism that circumscribed their lives. In this aim, he was at odds with the fathers of his students and with the Hindu members of the college managing committee who wanted Western learning for their sons and wards but not the critical thinking abilities that came with that tradition of learning. For the fathers and the Hindu members of the managing committee, Western education was functional and instrumental—a means to an end—the end being government jobs in the lower rungs of the growing colonial administration. Derozio’s interest was not in reducing education to a glorified variety of language teaching. His vision was more profound and was drawn from the Latin root of the word educate (*educere*, meaning to lead forth). Addressing his students in 1829, he said,

My advice to you is, 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. (Derozio 2008d)

In different ways, neither those who promoted Western learning in Hindu College, nor Derozio with his aim to teach students to think for themselves could quite comprehend the intellectual forces they were unshackling.

The seeds of Western learning were planted in early colonial Calcutta in a soil that was not fertile for them. The soil had previously been furrowed and contaminated by the weeds of dogma, by an intelligentsia that was blindly Hindu. Derozio was right to tell Wilson that he was a victim of bigotry (Chaudhuri 2008: 325). It is not that men like Deb and Sen, who spearheaded the attack on Derozio, were opposed to Western ideas and learning per se. But, they preferred to keep those ideas and that learning as far as possible within a conservative Hindu framework to make them acceptable to their fellowmen in search of a narrowly instrumental education for their heirs. For Hindu College to become a nursery for rational and argumentative minds, it would have to be taken over by the government and converted to Presidency College. There is perhaps some irony in that.

NOTES

- 1 When Hare made over his business to Grey, a local newspaper made the wisecrack, “Old Hair Turned Grey” (Mitra 1877: 1).
- 2 It should be noted here that in an exchange of letters in August 1847 between Mitra and Radhakanta Deb, the latter denied that Hare had had any role to play in the establishment of Hindu College (Mitra 1877: 39).
- 3 The total funds raised were ₹1,13,179. The two principal donors were Maharaja of Burdwan Tejchand Bahadur and Gopi Mohon Deb with donations of ₹10,000 each (Sengupta 1955: 1).
- 4 In 1819, the managing committee found it difficult to pay these salaries, and Irvine resigned and Buddinath continued on an honorary capacity (Mitra 1877: 8).
- 5 His historical fame rests considerably on his opposition to Ram Mohan Roy’s efforts against the practice of sati (Sarkar 2009: 54ff).
- 6 H H Wilson Papers: Mss Eur E 310/1: Radhakanta Deb to Wilson, 23 July 1830, British Library, India Office Records.
- 7 See note 6.
- 8 See note 6.
- 9 Deb to Wilson, 25 July 1830.
- 10 See note 9, p 18.
- 11 Derozio’s resignation letter and his covering letter to Wilson are both reprinted in Chaudhuri (2008: 319–21). These were first printed in the *Calcutta Quarterly Magazine and Review* in 1833.
- 12 It is worth noting, as Sumit Sarkar (1985: 19) does, that not only did Hare maintain friendly relations with Radhakanta Deb, he also did not prevent the dismissal of Krishnamohan Banerjee and Raskrishna Mullick (both followers of Derozio) from his own Pataldanga School. Sarkar cites Bagal (1963: 87) as his source.
- 13 In 1843, a meeting of the Society for the Acquisition of General Knowledge (SAGK; an association formed by former students of Derozio) was being held in Hindu College. A paper was being read on “The Present State of the East India Company’s Criminal Judicature and Police.” Richardson angrily interrupted the reading and declared, “He could not permit [Hindu College] ... to be converted into a den of

treason, and must close the doors against all such meetings.” He earned a stern reprimand from Tarachand Chakrabarti who was chairing the meeting. Chakrabarti pointed out to Richardson that he “was only a visitor on this occasion, and possess[ed] no right to interrupt a member of this society in the utterance of his opinions.” He described Richardson’s interruption to be an insult. Richardson, of course, won the day and the SAGK never held a meeting in Hindu College again. This incident was reported in the *Bengal Hurkaru*, 13 February 1843 (Chattopadhyay 1965: 389–99).

14 The translation of Maupertuis is referred to by Sarkar (1985: 21); the essay on Kant is lost; Derozio made a translation of the Preface to Condorcet’s *Tableau Historique des Progrès de l’Esprit Humain* (Chaudhuri 2008: 381).

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