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“WHY, SIR, AM I NOT AN *INDIAN*?”: IDENTITY, LIBERATION AND  
NATIONALISM IN EARLY NINETEENTH-CENTURY INDIA<sup>1</sup>

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Exactly twenty years after the French Revolution had created an era of millennial regeneration among the poets and intellectuals of England and the continent, Henry Louis Vivian Derozio was born on the 18<sup>th</sup> of April, 1809, in a house in Calcutta on what was then known and is still commonly referred to as Lower Circular Road.<sup>2</sup> The first Indian poet to write English poetry, he became famous in his lifetime as India's first 'national' poet, as one newspaper review at the time described him. However, his fame as a poet has lagged behind his subsequent fame as a leader of men, due no doubt to an Indian political climate that has valued his contribution to the making of a putative Indian nation far more than any poetic legacy he may have inaugurated in his wake. A marble plaque in Bengali on the wall of his house does not mention his poetry at all, announcing rather that he was the “greatest of teachers, pathfinder of rationalism, and forceful warrior against the practice of widow-burning”. This ‘greatest of teachers’ had taught at the premier educational institute in all of Asia at the time, the Hindoo College (established in 1817) for a mere five years, managing, in that brief period of time, to fashion the course of Indian history through the influence he exerted upon his students, who ushered in an age of reform and rebellion in the 1820s in Calcutta the likes of which have been seen but rarely in modern Indian history.

A substantial mansion situated on one of the main arteries of the city, the location of the house is indicative of the unique confluence of cultures upon which Derozio's identity was constituted.<sup>3</sup> To stand on the main road at this location even today is to get a sense of how centrally situated he was in relation to his Hindu students and friends (who came to his house so freely and so often) only a short distance from the northern 'native' quarter of the city on the one hand, and from the southern European

areas of Chowringhee and Park Street that his English and mixed-race friends would have inhabited on the other – literally at the crossroads of two cultures. It was from here that as a boy he would have played cricket on the *maidan* and gone swimming in the “Bamon Bustee, the great tank now filled up, which once stood at the end of what is now Wood Street, with Camac Street on the west, Theatre Road on the north, and native villages stretching out to the south and east” (Edwards, 1884, p.9; Madge, 1905, p.8). Among his boyhood friends Edwards mentions the de Souza family; J.W. Ricketts; the artist Charles Pote, whose portrait of Lord Metcalfe hung in the Town Hall of Calcutta; W.Kirkpatrick, later editor of the *Orient Pearl*, and as Madge points out, “kinsman of Kitty, the Eurasian beauty whom Carlyle loved”, who, along with M. Crowe and R. Fenwick, went on to become among the “chief leader writers of the old *East Indian*” (Edwards, 1884, p.9). He would have seen the Baptist Chapel erected in 1821 that still stands on the opposite foot of the road on which he lived, and it would have taken only some ten minutes for his body to be taken to the South Park Street Cemetery, a few yards down the same road, when he died suddenly of cholera at the age of twenty two in 1831.

The original colonnaded house, with typical Calcutta Venetian shutters, was at one time surrounded by a large compound and included a tank, indicating the relative prosperity of the respectable Portuguese family from which Derozio descended. Portuguese merchants had preceded the British to India, and were well-established in the coastal cities of trade and commerce; Henry Derozio’s grandfather, Michael Derozio, was described in the St. John’s Baptismal Register of 1789 as a ‘Native Protestant’ and in the Bengal Directory of 1795 as a “Portuguese Merchant and Agent in Calcutta” (Madge, 1905, p.3).<sup>4</sup> Michael’s son Francis was Henry’s father, and his mother Francis’s first wife, a woman from Hampshire named Sophia Johnson, upon whose death in 1815 Francis remarried Anna Maria Rivers, an Englishwoman of “good family, education and common sense” (Madge, 1905, p.4). This mixed-race heritage was important to him and to his development as a community voice when he became editor, in the last year of his life, of the newspaper called *The East Indian*, in the pages of which he represented both community and country with the passion so characteristic of his life and writing.

In an introduction to the poetry of Henry Louis Vivian Derozio, a nineteenth-century critic had once observed: “The most prominent feature of his character [was] an ardent and exalted patriotism.” Clarifying further, Thomas Benson Laurence, editor, in 1869, of one of the earliest Indian anthologies of English poetry, said,

Unlike others of his class he gloried in the name of “East Indian” and was proud to be called a native of this country. He did not appear to see, as others did, that there was any merit in being descended from an English or foreign ancestry, and gladly assimilated himself with the legitimate[sic] sons of the soil on which he was born. The fervour of patriotism breathed through most of his writings in the *East Indian*, and endeared him much to his countrymen, who, with such a noble representation before them, began to feel less ashamed of being East Indians. This had always been considered an obnoxious term, but Derozio rejoiced in it, and had no desire to be known by the more pretending and ostentatious appellation of “Eurasian,” which his countrymen are so anxious to adopt, to trumpet forth, as it were, that they are half Europeans and half Asians. Derozio was content to be recognised only as a native of India. (Laurence, 1869, pp. 102-3)

Derozio’s claim as a native of India was all the more laudable, the subtext of this passage seems to suggest, because his father was ‘native’ Portuguese and his mother an English woman of good standing – he was certainly of the mixed-race community, but he is read as being unusual for having been proud of it, and for having asserted his identity in both his poems and his political speeches as an Indian above all else.

The deteriorating state of race relations in India may usefully be traced from the attitudes shown in relation to the naming of the mixed-race community, which changed radically as the century progressed. At the time Laurence was writing in 1869, the term East Indian, in his perception, is already one that a majority of the community are ashamed of and wish to disown; his imputation to Derozio of a valiant stance, a resistance, against this stigma of naming might not, therefore, have had quite the correct implication, as the situation in Derozio’s own time was certainly substantially different from his own. In this context, it might be worth citing some among a series of letters on the subject of naming that appeared in the *Calcutta Journal* of November and December 1821, when Derozio, born in 1809, was about twelve years old. From these letters, it is possible to ascertain that the naming of the community was a subject of great current interest, and the various suggestions

made by a variety of people point towards the bewildering heterogeneity of social situations in India at this time. On November 1<sup>st</sup>, 1821, A.H. wrote in to say:

I think the term Eurasians, suggested by Mr. Ricketts, in his excellent little Address, written some months ago, is the most comprehensive that can be established, as it is a compound formed from Europe and Asia, and will apply more or less, to the children of Europeans of all nations born in India. My father having been a German, I do not see, how I can, without tacitly disavowing my origin, call myself an Indo-Briton, an Asiatic-Briton, or even an Anglo-Asiatic.<sup>5</sup>

This proposal, however, was rejected as unsuitable by the next letter-writer in these columns. Among various other letters that came in on the subject, such as one from “Phileriphus” on “Indo-Britons”, and two more on “East Indians” by A.H. and Asiaticus, this gentleman wrote, “As my father was born in Philadelphia and my mother in Rohilcund, the word which A.H. proposes to substitute (*Eurasian*) would not suit *me*. The word Eurasian is quite as vague in its import as *Indo-Briton*”. After deliberating on the unsuitability of several other appellations, the writer then concludes with a suggestion that points towards a breadth of liberalism that must have been unusual even in those comparatively liberal times. “What then do I wish to be called?” the writer asks, continuing,

Why, Sir, am I not an *Indian*? With that name I am content. All the rest is a matter of pedigree... I am an *Indian* and the friend of India. I am also the cordial friend and admirer of England, grateful for many benefits that she has bestowed on my country, and expectant of many more, and of much higher value, that are to come.<sup>6</sup>

Two strands of thought in this brief portion of an anonymous letter, signed ‘An Indian’ of November 7<sup>th</sup>, 1821, would go on to become fully developed issues in the affairs of the mixed race community, and in extension, the Indian community, as the century progressed. The first of these was the predominantly liberal spirit that animates the sentiments of the letter – the perception of racial equality embedded in the desire to be identified with India and Indians. This was a spirit that would ebb and flow in members of the mixed community – strongly in favour of assimilation and regeneration at this particular node of time, the sentiment would turn by mid-century, so that by the 1870s, it had reached its nadir of negative perception, although Laurence in 1869 was still trying to uphold it in his statements condemning the pretension of the term ‘Eurasian’. By the turn of the century, when Herbert Stark and E.W. Madge published their study, *East Indian Worthies* (1892), the achievements of

the community were felt to be in need of rescue and resuscitation, an attempt made by both these authors, who showcased the glory days of the community in the heroic achievements of its best known representatives.

From the days of the white Mughals of the eighteenth century, to the middle-class liberalism of the early nineteenth, to the conservative Victorianism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the tide in the affairs of these men had turned fully by the time of Indian independence, which mostly led to a spirit exactly the opposite of the letter writer who wanted to be identified as an Indian, leading to an exodus of sorts from among the community that was by then known as Anglo-Indian. The spirit of the early part of the nineteenth century in certain sections in India, which was intellectually liberal and spiritually ethical and rational rather than narrowly religious, was a crucial intervention in the construction of a version of Indian modernity which would endure, despite setbacks and limitations, and take form ultimately in the broad and inclusive nature of the Indian constitution. The moment in the early nineteenth century when racial distinctions seemed not to be as important as intellectual affinities was one that produced also the sentiments of the following sort from the pen of a contemporary Indian:

It is now generally admitted that not religion only but unbiased common sense as well as the accurate deductions of scientific research lead to the conclusion that all mankind are one great family of which numerous nations and tribes existing are only various branches. Hence enlightened men in all countries must feel a wish to encourage and facilitate human intercourse in every manner by removing as far as possible all impediments to it in order to promote the reciprocal advantage and enjoyment of the whole human race. (Robertson, 1999, p. 281)

This was Rammohun Roy, in a letter to Prince Talleyrand, French Foreign Minister in London, in 1831, urging the French minister to abolish the requirement for permission from the minister before visitors from England could set foot in France – a measure he felt unworthy of “a country standing in the foremost rank of free and civilized nations” that was not only “so favoured by nature and so richly adorned by the cultivation of arts and sciences”, but “above all blessed by the possession of a free constitution” (Robertson, 1999, p. 281).

## PETITIONS, POLITICS, PROTESTS

1831 was also the year that the East Indians of Calcutta petitioned both houses of the British Parliament for redress of their grievances. The committee of concerned East Indians sent an agent, John William Ricketts, to England to argue their case, and, in 1831, after a generous reception in Madras on his way back, Ricketts returned to a resounding ovation at the Town Hall in Calcutta. His mission had been conceptualised, argued and drafted in public meetings of East Indians, the final meeting and its adopted resolutions then being reported in full in the newspapers of the day. The letter writer in whose veins ran the blood of Rohilkhand and Philadelphia but who nevertheless identified himself as an ‘Indian’ had said, before signing off, “I am also the cordial friend and admirer of England, grateful for many benefits that she has bestowed on my country, and expectant of many more, and of much higher value, that are to come.”<sup>7</sup> This concluding hope was the animating principle, it may be argued, in the early language of politics and protest in colonial India – a language that spoke in tones of gratitude and anticipated benevolence, rights and concepts of justice and legal procedure. Significantly, this language was first put in use in colonial India in the service of the demands of the mixed race community, who were among the earliest to publicly petition the British government in England for a restitution of their rights in India.

On 28<sup>th</sup> March, 1831, it was reported in *The Calcutta Magazine and Monthly Register* that “A numerous and respectable Meeting of the East Indian Community, was held on the 28<sup>th</sup> March, by public advertisement at the Town Hall, for the purpose of receiving the report of the Agent to the East Indians, who has lately returned from his deputation to England.” The proceedings of the meeting were recorded in minute detail. Mr W.M. Woollaston was “called to the chair and opened the business of the Meeting with some prefatory observations”, following which he called upon the Secretary to the Committee to read Mr Rickett’s report. This was followed by Mr A. Heberlet first addressing the meeting, and Mr W. Kirkpatrick seconding his resolution. Mr Pote rose to propose the second resolution, which was then seconded by Mr Welsh. When Mr Ricketts rose to address the meeting, the report said that “the applause was so great, that for several minutes he could not be heard.” After he spoke, Mr. Derozio rose and made a speech (we must remember, from Edwards’ biography quoted above, the description of J.W. Ricketts as one of Henry Derozio’s boyhood friends). The speech Derozio delivered that day is one of

the great speeches of national awakening ever to have been made in modern Indian history, and deserves a place at the very head of all nationalist speeches made in India; unfortunately, barely a handful know even of its existence. *The Great Speeches of Modern India* edited by Rudrangshu Mukherjee (2007) does not, for instance, either include or mention this speech, which should, chronologically, have been at the very head of the list.

Derozio had begun by saying his appearance at the meeting might have surprised many people, “labouring as I am under painful indisposition”, but “circumstances and the occasion” impose upon him a sense of duty. He then asks, in some of the most stirring words addressed to country and community:

Why then am I here this day: why have I offered myself to your notice? I have already answered that question. I have intimated that I am called here by duty; and that is a voice which I dare not disobey. I am an East Indian, and therefore I ought to be here; I am interested in the welfare of my countrymen, and therefore I ought to be here; I am anxious to know what measures have been adopted to promote that welfare, and therefore I ought to be here; I love my country, and therefore I ought to be here; I love justice, and therefore I ought to be here? (East Indian Meeting, 28 March, 1831)<sup>8</sup>

After expressing his love for his country and community in such stirring language, he then declared the community’s great indebtedness to the services of Mr Ricketts, and ended by declaiming:

If then I am surrounded by East Indians; if there be in your bosoms one spark of manly feeling which may be kindled into flame; if you consider patriotic exertions in your cause as worthy of imitation; if you are alive to the principles of duty; I charge you, by all that is dear to your hearts, to support the proposition which I shall now submit.

These proposals were suggestions for honouring Mr Ricketts with gifts, a portrait, and a public dinner: resolutions which were seconded by Mr Hoff, “and carried with acclamation amidst loud and continued applause.” As the meeting continued, however, Derozio rose a second time to speak, this time in support of a proposition made by Mr Pote that a second petition be prepared by the Committee to be despatched to England a second time. Although Ricketts had obtained assurances that their cause would be looked into, the petition had not yet been acted upon in the English Houses of Parliament, and since, as Derozio put it, “the fact that one House

of Commons rarely takes cognizance of petitions addressed to its predecessor, [that] should be alone sufficient to convince us of the imperative necessity of appealing to the legislature of Great Britain once again.” As the rights they demanded had not been restored to them, it was incumbent upon the East Indian community, he felt, to reiterate them before the legislature of Britain. Articulating some disbelief in the noble intentions of the English peer Lord Ashley, who had said he felt sympathetic to their cause but had failed to present their case because of other more pressing matters, Derozio advocated petitioning the legislature once again, ending his second speech with the words:

Gentlemen, you have nothing to fear from firm and respectful remonstrance. Your calls for justice must be as incessant as your grievances are heavy: complain again and again: complain till you are heard – aye, and until you are answered. The ocean leaves traces of every inroad it makes upon the shore; but it must repeat those inroads with unabated strength, and follow them up with rapidity, before it washes away the strand.

The language in this speech and the occasion of its enactment is significant on two levels. First, there is the rhetorical level of metaphor and image (“The ocean leaves traces...”) in the speech itself, which brings English literary language into play in the domain of political demand. We forget how important and influential the performative aspect of oration and speech-making was to the early nineteenth-century public sphere in Calcutta; the reputation of Ram Gopal Ghosh, for instance, was premised to a great extent on his famous English speeches at public meetings. At another level, the report quoted above of the proceedings at the Town Hall points toward the underlying sub-structure of the formal semi-legal language of meetings and societies, enacted here in the sequence of events. Apart from the speech itself, the resonance of the framework in which it is enclosed: of the entire procedure of a public meeting, with speakers rising to speak, chairmen opening the proceedings, the formal language of speeches and responses, the resolutions adopted and motions seconded, all contribute towards the formulation of a language of method and procedure that then proceeded to become institutionalised in the nineteenth-century Indian political domain. The formalities observed above point also to an incorporation of the subliminal ethos that accompanies language, the ‘aura’ emanated by systems and procedures belonging to the ruling culture that is encoded in language which needs to be acquired by the citizens in order to furbish their



claims with the necessary equipment to handle the institutional networks of colonialism. (It is worth reflecting upon the court room scenes in Hindi cinema up to the '70s that demonstrate by their ubiquity how the language of procedure in law lingers, for instance, in newly postcolonial states, and their subsequent absence from globalised Bollywood.)

What is significant is that this early proto-nationalist moment of protest and petition – both the speech itself and the protocols within which the speech functions – which incorporates within it the chief tools of nineteenth-century politics, was to be consigned to the margins of agitational strategy in India with the advent of mass politics and Gandhian tactics on the one hand and of revolutionary action and armed struggle on the other as the nation progressed inexorably towards independence in the twentieth century. Nevertheless, unless we note the contribution made by the East Indian / Eurasian community to the inception of Indian political thinking – encapsulated brilliantly in the instance of this speech and its surroundings – we will be blind to the impact the community made upon the evolution of the political life of the nation. In a sense, the two seminal moments of 1821 and 1831 – one recording the debates over the naming of what is today referred to as the Anglo-Indian community, and the other showcasing the most important political petition sent by this community to Britain – that have been portrayed here each encapsulate a moment in history that was to be both formative and significant for the future shape of modern Indian identity and politics.

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#### NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> This article is drawn primarily from a chapter in *Freedom and Beef Steaks: Colonial Calcutta Culture* (Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2013) and “The Politics of Naming: Derozio in Two Formative Moments of Literary and Political Discourse, Calcutta, 1825–31”. *Modern Asian Studies*, 44, pp. 857-885 (2010).

<sup>2</sup> The correct postal address, however, is currently 155 Acharya Jagadish Chandra Bose Road, Kolkata.

<sup>3</sup> The house that stands today was rebuilt at a later date and is not the original.

<sup>4</sup> Michael Derozio’s Protestantism was unusual, as the Portuguese community in India was almost entirely Roman Catholic; however, the church records of the Derozio family indicate a closeness between the family of Michael Derozio and the Serampore Baptist missionaries, William Carey, Joshua Marshman and William Ward; possibly, Michael Derozio converted to Protestantism under their direct influence.

<sup>5</sup> Letter signed A.H., in *The Calcutta Journal*, November 6, 1821.

<sup>6</sup> Letter signed ‘An Indian’, in *The Calcutta Journal*, November 7, 1821.

<sup>7</sup> Letter signed ‘An Indian’, as above.

<sup>8</sup> The anomalies in the punctuation in this passage are reproduced as they were printed; evidently, the question mark and the semicolon after “...I love justice, and therefore I ought to be here...” has exchanged places; the semicolon should follow “here”, while the question mark should follow “acknowledge it”.