

Indian Poetry in English: Henry Louis Vivian Derozio

MARY PEREIRA

Henry Louis Vivian Derozio, described by Kolkata writer and eminence grise P. Lal as a 'Calcutta Eurasian of Portuguese Indian ancestry', was born on 18 April 1807 into a respectable merchant family and educated at Drummond's Academy in Dharmatala. The Drummond program was well-known throughout India as being of high Scottish tradition with an emphasis on European classics. Drummond was equally well-known among the British in India for his 'free thinking', scholastic efforts and poetic endeavours, all of which Derozio came to accept as a part of his personal lifestyle.

By the age of twenty Derozio was well-schooled in the classics and tradition of western thought, following the moral philosophy of thinkers such as David Hume. Thomas Edwards, one of his early biographers, wrote that 'his chief delight, his sole pursuit outside of the cricketing, the amateur theatricals, and other sports natural to boys of his years, was the literature and thought of England, as he found these embodied in the poets, novelists, dramatists, and philosophers of that country. Till the last day of his short life, poetry and philosophy were the chief charm of his existence. There were two places in India where the most recent works issued from the presses of Britain could be found. These were the shelves of the most enterprising booksellers, and the library of Derozio, frequently the latter alone.'

When his father died, Derozio left school at 14 and joined his uncle in indigo planting at Bhagalpur. It was from here that he sent his first poems to the *Indian Gazette*, whose editor Dr. John Grant published them. When Derozio came to Kolkata in 1824 at age 17 he found himself well received as a poet and a writer. In short order he published his first volume of poems, and became the editor of several periodicals, including *The Calcutta Magazine*, *The Indian Magazine*, *The Bengal Annual* and *The Kaleidoscope*. The next year Derozio published his second book of poems, which included the long poem 'The Fakir of Jungheera: A Metrical Tale' and which drew upon his Bhagalpur experiences. It is with this poem that Derozio's name is most closely associated, written in fairly regular English iambic tetrameters but with a radically different subject:

'Jungheera's rocks are hoar and steep
And Ganges's waves are broad and deep.'

On the strength of his school performance (he had been Drummond's star pupil) and literary publications and activities, Derozio was appointed Master of English Literature at Hindu College (which later became Presidency College). A post from which he was compelled to resign in 1831. It is this particular period of Derozio's career and life which is the object of much curiosity among Indian academics rethinking English studies in postcolonial India. How should he be viewed, as an iconoclast driven out by

the orthodox Hindu founders of the college, or as one of the earliest writers of Indian literature in English? As a flash in the pan, or one of the earliest results of the Indian encounter with the English educational program in India?

Derozio became legendary for the brilliance of his teaching as well as his unorthodox teaching methods. He made his students read a wide variety of texts, from Homer's *Iliad* to Thomas Paine's *The Rights of Man*. Through an Academic Association which he set up, Derozio encouraged free discussion and debate on ideas. Such discussions, notably critical of established religions, continued long after college hours. Somewhere along the line, students picked up from their mentor the habit of eating what were for them forbidden foods such as pork and beef, and drinking beer. Hindu College students adopted two precepts, derived from Derozio. The first was: 'He who will not reason is a bigot, he who cannot reason is a fool, and he who does not reason is a slave.' The second: 'Cast off your prejudices, and be free in your thought and actions. Break down everything old and rear in its stead what is new.' Derozio was also loudly supportive of female emancipation. One has to remember that this was Calcutta of the 1830s, where religious and social conservatism was deeply entrenched, and soon rumours began that Hindu College was a den of atheists. Derozio was identified as 'the root of all evil' and asked to 'show cause,' even to answer questions such as 'Do you believe in God?' 'Do you think the intermarriage of brothers and sisters innocent and allowable?' Though Derozio countered these questions easily enough, he was not reinstated.

In the months remaining till his death, from cholera in December 1831 at age 22, Derozio continued to edit and write for various journals, surrounded by his devoted students. Just before his death, Derozio made a strong appeal to his fellow Eurasians to integrate themselves with native Indians rather than identifying with European colonists: 'They will find after all, that it is in their best interest to unite and be co-operative with the other native inhabitants of India. Any other course will subject them to greater opposition than they have at present. Can they afford to make any more enemies?' Prophetic words indeed!

How is Derozio to be judged as a poet? Though historians of the Anglo-Indian community praise him highly, probably S. Kripalani's words sum him up the best: 'Derozio might be said to be on a cusp between the Romantics and the Victorians. He was born the same year as Tennyson and Darwin, and died only a few years after Byron. His poems have a light lyrical touch--in its sensuousness, its detailed natural observation, its patriotic fervour. He is everywhere a creative reader in his poems, in which Homer, Tasso, Hafiz, Byron, and Moore are all grist to his mill. Western and Indian mythology mingle easily in his poems but the setting is always determinedly Indian and painted in vivid colours. Derozio's strength lies in his shorter



poems...It is not easy to say what kind of poetry Derozio would have written had he not died so young. The extant verses are often derivative (thus his *The Harp of India* mourns the fact of a subjugated India in strains very similar to Moore's *The Harp of Erin*)...but we glimpse through his poems a lively and sensitive mind.'

The Harp of India

Why hang'st thou lonely on yon withered bough?
Unstrung for ever, 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 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 weakened once again,
Harp of my country, let me strike the strain!

That 'sensitive mind' is evidenced in the moving sonnet reproduced below:

To the Pupils of the Hindu College

Expanding like the petals of young flowers
I watch the gentle opening of your minds
And the sweet loosening of the spell that 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 circumstance, and freshening April showers
Of early knowledge, and unnumbered hours
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,
And then I feel I have not lived in vain.

Derozio could also write merry playful verse, which was modelled on his favourite Byron:

Don Juanics (xlviii)

E'en hearing scandal is a cruel way
Of killing time--some ladies think not so--
With them 'tis 'chit-chat, rumour, trifling play'--
O'er cups of tea they'll tell a tale of woe,
Defaming others, and then smiling say,
'O dear! Indeed 'tis what all people know,'--
So tea by folks aspersed is called, in wrath,
By a most fitting title--'Scandal broth!'

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TRAVEL WRITING

As we have said before, The Daily Star literature page welcomes travel pieces by its readers, especially inside Bangladesh. It is high time we started to explore our small towns and outlying areas, our grams and haats, chart the way our geography, culture and history intersect. In English.

In the article below we make a start in that direction, as a Dhakaite gets out of the city, and walks and talks through a Durga Puja quite like the ones they do here. And yet different.

Durga Puja in Kishoreganj

MANOSH CHOWDHURY

(written in collaboration with Khademul Islam)

Bright noontime, the sun out after two gloomy days. The inter-district bus terminal was on the outskirts of Mymensingh, a town with a long history. Rickshaw-wallahs surrounded me, all eager to take us to my destination. 'How much for going to Amlapara?' I asked one. 'Twelve taka,' he said. Proshenjit frowned at the rickshaw driver. He had eagerly wanted to take charge after we got down from the bus. He was thirteen years old and wanted to act like an adult. And besides, wasn't Mymensingh his town? 'It's ten takas at the most,' he said. But the rickshawpuller had a surprise for me. 'Shouldn't you give something extra because of puja?' he said. At this point I felt compelled to join the exchange. 'So is there a Hindu population here from whom to claim puja extras? 'What are you saying?' asked the rickshawpuller. 'That we don't have Hindus in Mymensingh? The place you are going, only Hindus live there. You must be one, too!' He had known on seeing me that I was not a native of Mymensingh. Which made me feel that that was reason enough to get on his rickshaw. Proshenjit tried to conceal his disappointment.

Riding in the rickshaw, I thought that I should stick to my plan of leaving for Kishoreganj before noon so that I could lunch at the place I was going. But I had doubts whether Projensit's mother would allow me to leave since it was my first-ever visit to their house, specially during Durga-puja. The rickshawpuller, Ali, attempted to give me (an outsider) an overview of the puja festivities in Mymensingh. At the end of every little lecture he would underline it for me: 'Bujhlen to? You understand?' Proshenjit was happy at this, that his town, and the event of Durga puja, was being narrated. I had been thinking about asking him whether he too was a singer like his father, Sunil Karmakar, a legendary 'baul' singer from this region. But he seemed to be enjoying the rickshawride, silent and smiling with his face down on his chest, that it seemed the wrong time. Instead I concentrated on Ali.

At the time the rickshaw was passing Charpara, and I could see the top of the tin-roofed house Ramzan had once taken us to. I

thought of stopping there, but then decided that I really should stick to my schedule. Maybe tomorrow I would have time to go see him! In the meantime I had missed Ali's comments on the previous years' incidents on Durga pujas.

On a very stormy night, we--a friend and I--had been on a bus to Mymensingh. We had very naively thought that we would reach there by 11 p.m. at night, and then somehow still make it to Muktagacha. When our bus reached Mymensingh, it was almost 1 a.m. It was raining heavily and our only option had been to stay in a hotel. Ramzan, the conductor on our bus, made us change our plans. He took us to a 24-hours-open restaurant in front of the medical college, fed us well, and then took us to his home. A midnight visit to his parents, in a tin-roofed house lighted with a kerosene lamp. We had entered to see the smiling faces of his mother and grandmother. We met his father the next morning. That had been Sahebpara in Charpara! Later, I could only talk to Ramzan over the telephone. He came to Dhaka after getting married. He had left home after facing a bit of a crisis with his family. He had called me probably expecting the same care from me that he had shown us that dark night. And I had avoided it. Yet, over the phone he remained his polite self and invited me to visit him to the hotel in Gulistan he had been staying with his wife. I had promised to do that, but somehow never made it. It was in 2001. And Ramzan never did call me again.

Where the road turned toward Amlapara we could hear puja prayers carried over loudspeakers. At first it was only a single priest, but then I heard two, then three. Four. Five. It was the third day of prayer. By the time we came to a stop before Proshenjit's house I was feeling bitterly guilty about my behaviour towards Ramzan. Which had made me inattentive to what Ali had been saying about Mymensingh. Proshenjit was also giving accompanying asides: about how many *protimas* he guessed were there, how many of them were in his familiar spots, etc. I was a little surprised when I learnt that there were some 40 spots for puja in Mymensingh. I asked him if Hindi film songs were played. He was a bit surprised by the question and then

said yes, that after prayers were completed those songs were played. I found their house full of visitors. His mother was very pleasant. I gave her a brief explanation why I couldn't stay for lunch, that I needed to reach Kishoreganj very soon since my friend was waiting for me there. When I left their house, Proshenjit's mother and others bade me

on the road that I felt uncomfortable about having presumed that puja celebrations here would have been puny. Here again, the rickshawpuller seemed to sense my thoughts. Without being asked he suggested that the Commonwealth parliamentary summit in Dhaka was the reason behind the successful puja. 'A big meeting in Dhaka, men have come from

new seats, but all to no avail. Then desperately he asked me if I wanted to sit just behind the driver. I did not. Which made him upset, so somewhere after Ishwarganj he bought two cigarettes, one for the driver and one for me. He was a restless man in his early twenties. Giving me the cigarette he asked me why I was going to Kishoreganj, and to whom. He became friendly after I

'Oh, I think Chakraborty is...' 'Do you think there is only one Chakraborty here?' one of them asked me, seeing me hesitate. Well... 'Susmita's father's name slipped from my memory. So I said, 'The Chakraborty whose daughter and son stay at Rajshahi university.' 'Oh,' he said, and gave directions to the rickshaw-puller, not to me.



Illustrated by Sabyasachi Hazra

goodbye, insisting that I should come over the next day on my way back.

Friday in a mofussil town! I expected silence. Markets and shops in Mymensingh were closed and it was not yet time for Jumma prayer. But as soon as my rickshaw got going I was flabbergasted to see a huge flow of people up and down the streets in the neighbourhood. Women with a typically common Hindu look, children with their new clothes, and the men strolling indifferently. Puja prayer time was over and Proshenjit proved to be quite right about Hindi songs. Kalibari Road was jammed with people, with at least five puja spots on it. This was Mymensingh: a colonial imprint along with a feudal desire to preserve heritage and culture. Identities were being contested: Congress Jubilee Road inevitably led to Ismail Road. And on a Friday, with Jumma prayers to be held, there were so many Hindus

outside. So this time puja is peaceful. Do you get my point?' he asked me. 'Uhh...Hum!' however, was all I said in reply. I had gotten the point. There were decorated gates on the street. I stopped thinking about serious matters and just concentrated on the gates--huge and colourful.

I could remember Shambhuganj Bridge. It had been at big event in the early '90s when it had been completed. Nearby districts were then easily connected with Mymensingh by road. Its modern look--the lights, wide footpaths, and lampposts--had been a cause for wonder. Well-off people used to take their evening strolls on it. Waiting for the bus to Kishoreganj, I lit a cigarette thinking how I would fit my knees in the small bus. Bus size had remained the same throughout these many years. Sure enough, when I got on, they wouldn't fit. The bus conductor was very kind and offered me several

answered his question. 'Yes, good. Kishoreganj is a genuine place for Durga puja. Lots of your people are there. I love Durga puja. You don't believe me? I grew up among Hindus. I know them better than you do. But,' he then asked, smoking the second half of the cigarette, 'what about puja in Dhaka? Aren't there more there than in Kishoreganj? And you came here to see puja here. How did your parents allow you to do it?'

And so on... Susmita had given me directions to their home. She even had suggested that her husband Newton, my old friend, should pick me up at the bus-stop. I had said no. But getting down from the bus, I saw that I had only a very rough idea how to proceed. I saw some young men in *sofed* pajamas and dhuti beside a pond and asked them 'Where is the Chakraborty house? 'Which Chakraborty?'

Newton was out. He had gone to Mymensingh on some business. I was given *luchi* and *mishti*, which made me think that lunch would probably be orthodox vegetarian. I talked to *mashima*, Susmita's mother. 'In Barisal, the well-to-do families celebrate this oshtomi with lots of fishes and and other items. Meherpur, where I stayed later, had nothing in particular. But here in Kishoreganj, we celebrate it with vegetarian food. Though,' she said meaning me, 'you will get fish at dinner.'

There was an old *jomidar bari* near their house. On the way there, Susmita and I passed a cinema hall crowded with Friday moviegoers. The *bari* was being maintained by somebody who had inherited it. It had a large compound, a building and a *mandir*. 'Don't they have legal complications with this property?' I asked Susmita. 'No. I think one of the owners is already a lawyer,' Susmita said firmly. The

mandir had a small Durga idol inside, but not centrally placed. So I asked once again what *mandir* was it. 'I suppose Radha-Krishna,' Susmita replied. We then found the *muris* of Radha and Krishna, but then also saw another idol, fair-looking, unlike Krishna, but in the typical *tribhongo* style of Krishna. It was quite confusing. The sculptures themselves were not particularly good. But the style of the third idol still puzzled me. I became sure it was Balaram, Krishna's brother by chance and boyhood mate. But then why should Balaram be in *tribhongo* style? However, I chided myself, who am I to question an artist's imagination. Later than on night, *mashima* told me that it was indeed a *mandir* of Balaram.

When we visited the puja spots in the evening, like in Mymensingh, it was crowded. A few drops of rain began to fall. Little Lalon, Susmita and Newton's child, was excited. The loudspeakers were on; the pandals were colourful, decorated with lights; bits of *dhak* and *kashor*: *Dhyaang tateng!* *Dhyaang tateng!* went the sounds; people were walking about and happily chatting with each other. The children's excitement was mixed with fear of possible rain. After visiting three or four spots, Mashima decided to leave for home with Lalon. We remaining four, Susmita, two of her younger friends and I, continued to walk around. At all puja spots the same scene would repeat itself, though I could smell the different fragrances coming out of the *dhunduchi*, incense burners, at different places. Soon I tired of the *dhak* and *kashor* and wanted to get away. So when somebody said how about a rickshaw ride on the

highway, I was happy.

The road was very straight and in deep darkness. After five minutes there were no more electric lights. I assumed from roadside shapes that there were a great variety of trees around us, those that survived the developmental planning. It was a night in late autumn, *Kartik* month, with dewdrops. Hallucinatory. We went on for a long time, then sat down for some tea in a kerosene-lamped tea stall, the two rickshaw-pullers and we four. The shop-keeper was angry at some official of the *Palli Bidyut* (village electricity) board. He was paying for an electric line to the shop, and all he got were power failures. Then we got on board the rickshaws again, and the dewdrops made me think of the fertilized lands around us waiting for water, for the dewdrops, for moisture, for Hemanta, for the winter. I heard distantly, in an imagined forest: *Dhyaang tateng!* *Dhyaang tateng!* *Dhyaang tateng!* I was lost in the past, running, my loosely elasticized pant slipping from my waist. Running, running. Towards the direction of the sounds, towards Barguna, the place where I was born. Where the legs of the drummers were dancing with a delicate rhythm. Running on legs that were not used to such effort. Running towards the small town of Barguna, from a rickshaw on a tiny highway in Kishoreganj, after so many years.

Beside me, Susmita asked, 'What are you thinking of?'

'Nothing. Just that this road is quite nice.'

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The Daily Star LITERATURE PAGE SHORT STORY CONTEST: A DATE EXTENSION

The Daily Star literature page invites short stories from its readers, domestic as well as overseas. The winning entry will be published and awarded a prize of Taka 3000. The story must not exceed 2000 words and should be printed/typed. Multiple entries by the same person is not permitted. The sole judge of the contest will be the literary editor of The Daily Star. While the story can be written in any genre they must be set in Bangladesh and have Bangladeshi characters. Ideally, the submission should also be interesting at the level of language. If there is no clear winner the contest will be held again at a later date. The last date for entries is now DECEMBER 30, 2003. Therefore, if desired, entries already submitted can be revised and sent again. All entries must be sent to The Literary Editor, The Daily Star, 19 Karwan Bazar, Dhaka-1215. Email entries should be sent to dseitor@gononet.com, atten: literary editor.