Henry Derozio and the Making of Indian Modernity
Together with a Discussion of The Fakeer of Jungheera, 1828

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The paper concerns the contributions of Eurasian poet, democrat and social activist Henry Derozio and the emergence of a new awakening amongst the Bengali elites in the nineteenth century that modernized India. The paper also analyzes Derozio’s role in creating an enlightened group called Young Bengal who inculcated enlightened habits of mind, ranging from critical inquiry to free thinking atheism, and brought in western modernity to Bengal. Recent advances in literary scholarship have also restituated Derozio in the canon of nineteenth century Indian writing in English and brought to light his almost forgotten role as a pioneer of Indian aesthetics in English and the initiator of the concept of the motherland (matryabhumi). Derozio’s metrical poem The Fakeer of Jungheera and his prose writings reveal his concept of aesthetics and ideas of a syncretistic, democratic culture within early colonialism. As the initiator of the Bengal Renaissance he campaigned for the abolition of the practice of widow burning (sati) and introduction of widow remarriage. He spearheaded the Eurasian movement of 1829-30 demanding rights for Eurasians as British subjects. Not only did Derozio’s followers used his ideas of modernity, but also other Indian liberals, reformers and revivalists, such as Raja Rammohan Roy, Swami Vivekananda and Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay profited by them.

A charismatic educator, an incorrigible rationalist and a man of letters par excellence, the nineteenth century Indian writer Henry Louis Vivian Derozio (1809-1831) also enjoys the dubious reputation of being the initiator of the Bengal Renaissance (nabajagaran) and reformer of a conservative Hindu society. Writing in English before the advent of the British Raj, and before the establishment of formal English education in India, his virtues are extolled and his shortcoming forgiven. In recent years, the autodidactic nature of his erudite learning and the creative spin of his literary talent have drawn the attention of both the social historian and the literary critic who see in his short but intense life the spark of both a literary and social revolution that transformed India. Amongst many Bengali intellectuals he is regarded as a Columbus who sailed the dark seas of antiquated knowledge and brought the spirit of critical inquiry to the youth of Bengal. Derozio’s belief in reason and a syncretistic national tradition that could rise above religious conflict and sectarian divide propelled him to write a lyrical and tragic poem in two cantos The Fakeer of Jungheera in 1828. The poem, together with his persuasive essays on aesthetics and social change, sets the standards for Indian writing in English and social practices
in general.

His influence on the social and intellectual life of Bengal had its own vicissitudes. During his brief lifetime he was both praised as an exemplary teacher and then forced to resign on charges of immorality and "corrupting the minds of the youth". In a bigoted move the management of the Hindu College, where he was a teacher, charged him with propagating ideas that encouraged atheism, immorality and incest and dismissed him from the College without proof or hearing. It is also paradoxical that on the one hand Derozio created followers from amongst his students who were called Young Bengal, and on the other he was charged with undermining Hindu tradition (parampara), Christian belief and family values. Though many conservative Hindus were open to social and religious reform they resented the idea that suggestions for reform should come from the colonial masters or those associated with them. The Hindus by and large saw any modernizing process aimed at changing their social or religious practices as a direct attack on their community and an intervention in their personal affairs. They soon began to offer criticism of such reform and set out to purify their own practices. The revivalists as they were called resented Derozio’s open condemnation of Hindu beliefs and practices.

The conflict between the reformers represented by the proto-nationalist Young Bengal movement of the 1830s–50s and the revivalism of the old patriotic Dharma Sabha was quite strong right from the early decades of the nineteenth century. Adherents of both groups were located in the Hindu College where Derozio taught and practiced his “radical activism”. The complete westernization of Derozio and his followers and their public derision of the irrational beliefs of the Hindu society angered Dharma Sabha leaders who felt a colonial coercion in their reformist zeal. Foremost amongst the Dharma Sabha leaders was the patron of Hindu College, Radha Kant Deb who disliked the influence exerted by Derozio on young Hindu students. Interestingly though Deb himself was quite westernized, he disliked the interference of the British in Hindu customs and traditions. Deb brought together the rich and conservative Bengalis of Calcutta who opposed the reformist ideas not only of Derozio but also of Raja Rammohan Roy and Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar. Some residual strains of the Dharma Sabha animosity towards Derozio still survives today amongst scholars who fail to take note of his contributions in the making of Indian literature in English.

Derozio’s Eurasian background and his trenchant attack on the blind belief of Hindu community were not seen as politically correct in nineteenth century Bengal. Many revivalists were cut to the quick when told by non-Hindu reformers to modernize their society. Derozio died in 1831 after a brief illness. Within a few decades of his death his reputation as a poet and “subverser (sic) of all religious principles” suffered neglect. Even Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar who claimed to be a rationalist did not have the courage to include a fellow rationalist and free thinker like Derozio in his Jivan Charitra, a collection of biographies published by him in 1849. Though many biographies of early pioneers were written in the decades following Derozio’s death, there were no takers for him. In the early half of the nineteenth century some of the biographies that were published included those of Raja Rammohan Roy (1866), David Hare (1877), Alexander Duff (1879), William Carey (1885) and Sambhu Chandra Mukhopadhyaya (1895) but none of Derozio. “The intellectual hero of the late twenties of the [nineteenth] century did not appear to be so heroic in the late forties,” wrote R. K. Dasgupta. It was only in 1884 that Thomas Edwards brought out a biography of the “Eurasian” writer under the title Henry

Most historians and literary scholars of Indian writing in English do not reach back into pre-colonial times when writing about the beginnings of English writing in English, as they assume that there was no Indian literature in English before the advent of formal English education in India. Percival Spear, Sisir Kumar Das, Alphonso-Karkala and Vinay Dharwadker are some of the few who have paid attention to this lapse.

In 1835 Thomas Macaulay convinced the British government to “retain the Sanscrit college at Benares and the Mahometan college at Delhi” and divert all remaining funds for education to “the Hindoo college at Calcutta, and to establish in the principal cities throughout the Presidencies of Fort William and Agra schools in which the English language might be well and thoroughly taught.” It had a profound impact in accelerating the overall development of oral and written English culture in the public sphere. However it is now an acknowledged fact that many European communities had settled in Calcutta for one reason or the other and had opened English academies and schools to provide informal education to Europeans, Eurasians and Indians. Many of the graduates from such academies and schools later went on to write argumentative pieces in newspapers or published their own creative œuvres like Derozio.

In the second half of the nineteenth century literary activity by Indian writers in English began to be recognized. Perhaps this is one reason why most literary historians exclude writers like Din Muhammad, Henry Derozio and C. V. Boriah from Indian literary history of late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. It could also be a function of upper caste north Indian prejudice. It has always been a narrow nationalist enterprise to exclude Muslims, Christians and South Indians in the making of modular notions of the nation and national identity, literature being one of them.

In a highly perceptive but critical work on Indian writing in English published in 1969 David McCutchion did not include early writers like Din Muhammad or Derozio. He expressed surprise that Anglo-Indians created a “truly English-speaking milieu in India” but did not produce any literature worth the name. However he did not pursue the matter further. McCutchion dated Indian writing in English with Kasiprasad Ghose’s Shair and Other Poems (1830) and Michael Dutt’s The Captive Laddie (1849) and not with Shaykh Din Muhammad’s The Travels of Dean Mahomet (1794) or Derozio’s Jungheera (1828). This could be less to do with prejudice and more to do with neglect or sheer ignorance.

McCutchion further questioned the literary merits of Indian writers of English, given their unproven and nominal ability of English. McCutchion’s 1960s scholarship failed to draw upon the great reservoir of bilingual culture of the late eighteenth centuries and early nineteenth centuries which created an elite class that could easily master the Persian and the English languages and provided aesthetics for Indian writing in various languages. Later in the next century this bilingual culture would create the great spurt of literary activity in the 1980s through the writings of Salman Rushdie and the Stephanian School. It is surprising that even while McCutchion was writing as an insider, firmly entrenched in the early literary fraternity of the Writers Workshop Calcutta and P. Lal’s patronage, he could have missed the secular and syncretistic Muslim and Christian beginnings of Indian writing in English from undivided Bengal. Srinivasa
Iyengar too dismisses the contributions of Derozio seeing him only as a disruptive force in traditional Bengali society. He opens his renaissance of India chapter with a derogatory reference to Derozio and his followers calling them “nihilists, intoxicated with a sense of false importance” and then elides any reference to his Fakeer poem by entering straight into an analysis of Raja Rammohan Roy and his works.iii

The Bengal Renaissance

An understanding of Derozio can offer us a glimpse of the intellectual history and social life of early nineteenth century Bengal. We now acknowledge that the first few decades of the nineteenth century, the period Derozio occupied, were the pioneering decades that laid the foundation of the Bengal Renaissance in Calcutta, a city dominated by caste and religion. Calcutta was also an important city in many other ways. It was a growing center of trade both for the Muslim rulers and the East India Company. The city was also emerging as the great intellectual center of global Diasporas. Some of the early Diasporas from Europe such as the Scottish, Portuguese, English and Greek were taking roots in Calcutta. Chris Bayly’s recent study of British expatriates and English-speaking Indian intellectuals during 1810-30 reveals the growth of these diasporas during Derozio’s life time and their impact on his life and works. Derozio would have known the celebrations of the second anniversary of proclamation of constitutional government of Portugal that took place in Calcutta on August 1822 as it was reported in Bengal Hurkaru and the Calcutta Journal. Derozio was also aware of the Greek and English diasporas that had grown in the city. Bayly writes,

Greece was also on the mind of Young Bengal. In the Hindoo College, Calcutta, the young Eurasian poet and democrat Henry Derozio wrote on the heroic struggles of the Greeks through the ages and the equal greatness of ancient India.iv

It was in this city that the early colonial trading interests of the Dutch, French and English converged. Many peoples from Europe dissatisfied with the Christian tradition and imbued with enlightenment ideas escaped the narrow confines of their society to seek their freedom and fortunes in far off colonial lands such as India, China and the Far East. Not much work has been conducted in the formation of the early European diasporas by postcolonial scholars or European maritime historians, but by the early nineteenth century these desperate and alienated European groups had set up English academies and societies that would play a significant role in disseminating rationalist ideas which in turn would destabilize conservative Hindu society and bring about reformed thinking.

As the officers of the East India Company were tightening their grip over the colonial lands in India, Scottish and English diasporic communities were spreading the new learning invalidating the justification of colonization and subjugation so carefully engineered as utilitarianism and free trade. This dichotomy had far-reaching consequences in both maintaining the status quo in the initial stages and later destabilizing the Empire with the logic of the new learning. The early interaction between Englishmen and Indian women led to an increased proportion of mixed blood children. Chris Bayly believes that by the 1788 there were 10,000 mestizos living in the British coastal regions, while Edwards informs us that in 1876 the Eurasian population of
Calcutta alone was 11,000. Early nineteenth century natives and Eurasians began to see the dichotomy between the notions of freedom, liberty and home rule as preached in Britain and as practiced in the colonies. The perception of this contradiction forced early proto-nationalists to critique not only the colonial masters but also the shortcomings of the nation in bondage. It helped them to create the rhetoric that would later dismantle the Empire.

In the early nineteenth century when the English language had not formally entered India, Derozio, of Lusso-British ancestry, created a literature in English that not only forged the identity of an emerging Indian nation but also critiqued an increasingly coercive British colonial system. Though we might question his flawed notions of imagined communities and nationhood, he instilled a sense of pride in the Hindu past and modernized the Indian thought and imagination weeding out superstition and blind belief. We might be troubled by Derozio’s communitarian presentation of nineteenth century Bengal and the aggressive temper of the Muslim invaders, as we might be with some of the constructions of communitarian politics in post-independent India, but we must understand that the general and accepted nineteenth century perception of communal identities, nationhood and colonialism was quite different from that of the twentieth century. Obviously in Derozio’s poetry we do encounter popular stereotyping of communal identities, especially of the Hindus, Muslims and Christians that was prevalent amongst the English-educated intelligentsia of the nineteenth century, but the ironic content of his writing carry a strong anti-European and nationalistic bias.

Though Derozio received training in English academies he was first and foremost an autodidact. Bernard S. Cohn notes that as early as 1660, most Indians who helped East India Company traders do business with the natives on the Indian subcontinent were proficient in two languages and they were therefore called dubashis or those who spoke two languages. The dubashis did not have any formal training in Portuguese, Dutch, French or English but picked up the languages from senior family members who were often employed with Europeans to do menial work, what Dharwadker calls “the zone of employment.” A highly cosmopolitan culture had already developed during the Mughal rule of Akbar, Jehangir and Shah Jehan much before the colonial encounter took place. This early pre-colonial growth of a multilingual culture in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries centering on trade in the cities of Bombay, Calcutta and Madras provided the necessary impetus for Indians to become proficient in European languages.

The Eurasian Movement

Derozio’s influence on the Bengali society and the Eurasian community of the early nineteenth century was profound. He eloquently campaigned for the rights of Eurasians as British subjects and spearheaded the Eurasian Movement of 1829–30. In 1822 the Supreme Court in Calcutta decreed that the East Indians could not be treated as British subjects but only as Indian natives. This combined with the earlier Gazette notification of June 1792 effectively debarred East Indians from higher positions in civil and military services of the Company or studying in England on government expense even when they were “well fitted” to do so. A few intellectuals of the time felt that the reasons for exclusion were to do with Eurasian “self-conceit” and British notion of “disgrace to the family escutcheon” through the mixing of subject races.

In 1829 the East Indian Committee devised an entire campaign to represent the cause and
grievances of the Eurasian community. For this express purpose they chose J. W. Ricketts as agent to petition the British Parliament on their behalf and collected rupees 12677-5-6 for the aforementioned purpose to defray the cost of his travel and stay in England. Though the British politics was in turmoil at this time grappling with political reform and the rise of liberalism, Ricketts not only convinced many English parliamentarians about the justness of the Eurasian cause but ably presented the arguments in their favor. Upon his return to Calcutta the Eurasian community organized a Town Hall meeting on 9th March 1831 where he was facilitated. It was at this meeting that we come to see Derozio’s profound oratory and command of the English language when he spoke the following words,

Why then am I here this day. I have intimated that I have been 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 I love justice, and therefore I ought to be here. Shall it be said of me that I was a man who, having committed an error, was afraid or ashamed to acknowledge it? They know me not who entertain this opinion of me:--I am satisfied that I have done him (J. W. Ricketts) wrong. Publicly was the error committed, as publicly is it recalled..... Our condition is worse than savage degradation. Of what savage tribes has it yet been recorded that the parents have consigned their offspring to infamy? No, sir, it has been left for civilized man to do what no barbarian has ever yet conceived, and that has been to work out for an unhappy class the conditions against which we complain. Taking this view of these conditions the petition, of which Mr. Ricketts was the bearer, was the remonstrance of East Indians against the unnatural cruelty of their fathers ......

This assembly has already accorded its thanks to him, but although the acknowledgements of grateful hearts are pleasing, the labour of men in a public cause should not be passed by in that way. Mr. Ricketts has told us that our gratulations and the plaudits he has received this day have rendered him indebted to us. Gentlemen, that sentiment has made us doubly his debtors. Conceive yourself transported back to the days of Greek and Roman glory, conceive yourselves a community existing in those ages, with brilliant examples before your eyes of honours and triumphs accorded to those who had served their country; conceive how such examples had operated upon your minds, and how you had then welcomed to his native shore the man who for you has done much and suffered much. Many whom I have now the honour to address are aware that it is not recently that he has exerted himself to ameliorate our condition. In youth, when he first felt life in every limb, that animation was inspired by an unabating zeal to do his country service. You can testify whether I overrate him, when I declare, that if any man is entitled to the gratitude of the East Indian community, that man is John William Ricketts. Had he been entitled to it on no other ground than because the Parental Academic Institution (the Doveton College,) an establishment which, if not well supported, is less creditable to those who should support it than to its founder, owes its origin to him, such gratitude had been well deserved. Should we not, therefore, present to him some token of our regard, which he may hand down to his posterity, that the conduct of so excellent a father and so worthy a man may not be lost upon his
sons; but that it may inspire his children to render such service to yours as he has done to you. If then, I am surrounded by East Indians, if there be in your bosoms one spark of manly feeling which may be kindled into a flame; if you consider patriotic exertion in your cause as worthy of imitation, if you are alive to just principles of duty, I charge you by all that is dear to your hearts to support the proposition which I shall now submit."

The flowing rhythm of his sentences, the rhetorical power of his statements and the force of his conviction all slowly build up towards a powerful indictment of the British discriminatory policy towards the Eurasians. Derozio’s love for his country and his desire to seek justice from a hitherto enlightened government makes him lift his voice in indignation against all the wrongs perpetrated by it. He calls the government worse than a “savage tribe” for treating her children in such a slovenly manner and consigns it to “infamy”. Derozio’s construction of British and Eurasian association as a parent and child relationship and the subsequent rejection of the child by the parent had strong legal and emotional connotations for the Eurasian community. Rejected by the British and shunned by the Indians, the Eurasians found themselves orphaned in India. Derozio’s being a powerful rhetoric the motion to felicitate Ricketts was passed unanimously but the predicament of the Eurasians remained unresolved. Derozio resolved this issue by throwing his lot with the land of his birth and then constructing the identity of a motherland. Had he lived longer he would have undoubtedly played a pivotal role in the freedom struggle of India.

Obviously Derozio was supported by other Eurasians who were equally enthusiastic about the welfare of their community. On the same day when Charles Pote submitted a second petition to be presented to the Parliament for equal rights Derozio argued that the interests of the Eurasian community should best be served by the Eurasians themselves and not by others on their behalf. He said,

Our friend Mr. Ricketts has told us, that Lord Ashley sympathises with us, and that Sir Alexander Johnston is deeply interested for us. But their sympathy and their interest, however likely to call forth our gratitude, should never claim our confidence. Do you suppose, that any Member of the Legislature, touched by so much tenderness, will address either House of the Legislature in some such way as this? Gentlemen, here am I overflowing with the milk of human kindness, anxious to restore to that long-neglected and unjustly treated race, the East Indians, those rights—*which they do not demand*. No, sir, such will never be the language of legislators: the benevolence of statesmen seldom incommodes them to such an alarming degree. But the very facts which Mr. Ricketts’ report communicates to us should lead us to distrust noble Lords and honourable gentlemen. What are those facts? Lord Ashley felt for us. We thank his lordship. He promised to present our petition. This was generous. But when the time came for his Lordship’s hand to follow up the benevolent suggestions of his heart, that hand became suddenly paralyzed. Weighty matters of State pressed upon his heart, and the petition was left to make its own way into the House of Commons. I am apprehensive, (though I only suggest the possibility of the thing) that matters of State may be as burdensome to our other sympathising friends in parliament, and that such paralytic attacks as, we see, do sometimes afflict Lord Ashley, may be common to
others who are deeply interested in our welfare. To protect ourselves against such mischances, it would perhaps be the most unwise course to petition the Legislature. 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.

Early in the struggle against colonial injustices Derozio had come to realize that the best interests of the Eurasians could not be served by anyone other than themselves. He felt that neither the British nor the Indians were capable of including them in their own communities. The hybrid nature of their identity and the notions of racial impurity in nineteenth century Europe and Asia prevented the assimilation of Eurasians in either the British or Indian societies.

Edwards argued that if the Eurasians had campaigned as energetically and untiringly as Derozio did during those days they would not be in the unfortunate situation they are in then:

But we venture to think that, had Eurasians been more energetic in their assertion of equal rights, and an equal share, not only of posts in the government of India for which they were suited, but of an adequate State-aided system of education for their children, their position today would not have been that of a race burdened in the battle of life with conditions which, in some respects, they themselves have induced.

Derozio’s social activism was not only directed against religious dogmas but also against the general lethargy of the Indian communities who were reluctant to fight for their rights.

The Modernizing of Indian Vernaculars

The middle of the nineteenth century was not only momentous for vernacular literatures of India but also for Indian literature written in English. There were many reasons for this. The British were gradually expanding their colonial claims over the Indian peninsula especially in Bengal through muscular trade, territorial expansion and destabilizing the somewhat unpopular government of the Nawab of Bengal, Sirajud Daulah. The British were in a much more advantageous position in the early nineteenth century than the Portuguese or the Dutch were in the fifteenth or sixteenth centuries in the Deccan. The Mughal Empire was in a general state of decline unable to deal effectively with internal rebellion or external invasions. Historians like Irfan Habib have argued that the Mughal rule was already in decline due to the class struggle that ensued as a consequence of the oppressive taxation of the peasantry who fomented rebellion with other classes or states. Athar Ali felt that the decline was more due to the jagirdari system, which created a shortage of crown lands to be disbursed among the increasing influx of Deccan nobles in the Mughal aristocracy.

The general weakness of the Mughals left a political and military vacuum in India, which was easily filled by a coercive trade, by the East India Company. The British wasted no time in building garrison forts and introducing unfair trade practices under the Nawab’s general dispensation to conduct business in Bengal. This angered Sirajud Daulah who engaged soldiers of the
East India Company at Plassey, but his military commander Mir Jaffar was won over by the British. The defeat of Sirajud Daulah in 1757 made Bengal into a British protectorate directly under the control of the East India Company. Soon the British expanded their control to the rest of India. However Sirajud Daulah’s fight against the British has been celebrated in Bengal well into the twentieth century as the Sirajuddowla Day. He is looked upon by early nationalist revolutionaries like Subhas Chandra Bose as “the last independent king of Bengal.”

The British up to now were using intermediaries to interpret the linguistically alien culture of the Indian subcontinent, but now that they were in direct control of a large part of the Indian terrain they needed an intimate knowledge of its vernaculars and literatures. Some British administrators also felt the need to transform the cultural and linguistic ethos through the introduction of the English language as the medium of instruction. To further the first objective the English set up colleges and to realize the second they decreased the shifted financial assistance from Sanskrit and Persian to English.

With the first aim in mind the Governor General of India, Lord Wellesley founded Fort William College on July 10, 1800 in Calcutta for the advancement of oriental studies. It enlisted the services of the Bengali pundits or scholars not only to translate Bengali texts into English but also to teach the Bengali vernacular to the British government probationers. Most of the upper-caste Indians were not only bilinguals but also polyglots and autodidacts. They were quickly able to master the English language just as they had mastered Persian earlier and became the arbiters between indigenous and alien peoples. Over a period of time the College not only translated thousands of books from Sanskrit, Arabic, Persian, Bengali, Hindi and Urdu into English but also became a force in using the English language to develop and modernize local vernaculars like Bengali and Hindi. Raja Rammohan Roy who came to Calcutta in 1814 established a Club of Kins (Atyio Soya) in 1815 and began translating important texts from Sanskrit into Bengali, publishing journals and writing religious and philosophical essays. Together with the establishment of The Calcutta Madarsa (1781), The Asiatic Society (1784), Fort William College (1800), The Hindu College (1817) and The Sanskrit College (1824) by the British, Ram Mohan Roy laid the foundation of the Bengal Renaissance that transformed not only Bengal but also the rest of British India.

Between 1805 and 1825 a controversy raged between the need to encourage indigenous languages like Sanskrit and Persian or to teach English and its literatures. The orientalists felt that unless the natives were allowed to practice their own languages and philosophies they would not be able to see the ‘correctness’ of the English tradition and the English language. The Anglicists felt that the orientalists were eulogizing native traditions and undermining the Christian tradition, an imputation so complex that it had to be understood in terms of larger paradigms of western thought and global theoretical frameworks.

Within three and a half decades of the establishment of Fort William College, Lord Macaulay changed the Indian linguistic landscape by introducing English in higher education to train Indians in British thought and culture. His “Minute on Indian Education 1835” may not seem to be well argued by post-colonial standards but it had far-reaching effects on Indian thought and sensibility. Under the pretense of providing liberal English education to the natives literary texts with a Eurocentric and Christian bias were roped into the curriculum. Literary texts with an overtly Christian moral system began to be used in Indian curriculum.
Viswanathan concludes “the Eurocentric literary curriculum of the nineteenth century was less a statement of the superiority of the Western tradition than a vital, active instrument of Western hegemony in concert with commercial expansionism and military action.” The hegemony of the empire will continue to guide the curriculum of English studies whether we appeal to universalist or secularist standards. Unless we use the texts as vehicles of exercising power we will not be able to develop an effective curriculum of education.

Most critics do not see continuities between nineteenth century literary practices and contemporary education practices of the twentieth century. If continuities exist they must be understood in terms of larger global theoretical structures.

Many of the literary critics and regional writers do see continuity in Indian writing in English placing it within the tradition of nineteenth century English writing and using the English canon as touchstones to measure the worth of contemporary Indian writing in English. David McCutchion has complained about the substandard work produced in English by Indian writers who have been eulogized by Indian literary critics as representative of a uniquely Indian sensibility and the Indian ethos. Regional Indian literary critics also find this eulogy somewhat misplaced arguing that the non-English speaking ethos of colonial and early post-colonial India had a small elite population speaking English and therefore does not authenticate writing in English. However elite Indians have always been good at translating cultures in different languages and incorporating new ideas into their own linguistic structures and identities. The modernizing of the vernacular languages like Bengali happened because the upper caste Bengalis (bhadralok) internalized the English language and then used it to modernize their own vernacular. Sumit Sarkar takes a more conservative view of the modernizing process of India. He believes that it was not with the downfall of the Mughals or the Battle of Plassey but “during the latter half of the nineteenth century” when British rule becomes stable that modernity arrives. It has been argued that the Bengali elites were the first to patronize and imbibe the English language and literature while the Hindi elites were either unable or unwilling to so. Therefore modernization of Bengali was much earlier than Hindi. Even today Hindi languishes as a political language with lesser linguistic credibility than Bengali.

**Changing Paradigms of Colonialism**

The reassessment and inclusion of Derozio in the canon of Indian writing in English has to do with many factors especially the rise of colonial discontinuities, deracinated prose in the 1980s, notions of fragmentation of the nation, communitarian politics, redundancy of ‘imitating western realism’, new constructions of colonialism and Bengali regionalism as secular national identity. Over the years different theories of colonialism and its effects on Indian thought and culture have grown. Investigations of the nineteenth century have shifted from genealogy of colonialism to archaeology of colonialism. In simple terms this implies that there is a growing interest in the way we understand colonialism than its impact on social and economic structures, per se.

There are those like Franz Fanon, Albert Memmi and Edward Said who see the colonial enterprise as total conquest by an alien civilization, the complete subjugation of an indigenous culture. Since this representation of colonialism can easily employ Marxian, Focauldian or Freudian categories it has influenced modern disciplines more than any other for nearly half a
century. The Marxist discourse on colonialism only argues in terms of total conquest where the colonizing master tightens his control on the colonized slave by every possible representation and construction. Through this paradigm it is assumed that even the literary and textual practices are unequivocally and tragically taken over by the colonizing agent in the service of empire building. In colonized societies, the monolithic representation of the colonizer and colonized leaves no room for individual agency to operate. There are no hidden spaces for the individuals to counterbalance the overpowering and all pervasive influence of the Empire. The public space totally subsumes the private. But such constructions either deliberately avoid or are ignorant of pre-colonial forms of knowledge. The Fanonians only attempt to expose the forces of colonial hegemony and not reveal avenues or strategies of escape by the colonial subject. Ashish Nandy has rejected this conception of colonial structure and has revealed strategies of survival and resistance by the colonial subject and their transforming effect on the Empire. However he ignores pre-colonial forms of knowledge impacting on the colonial structures of power.

Secondly, there are those who see the colonial project as touching just the surface of India. The cultural soul of India, that represents its abiding quality stands invincible, irrevocably inaccessible to change or colonial impact. Proponents of this kind of essentialist understanding are Ananda Coomaraswamy and Seyyed Hossein Nasr. Coomaraswamy sees in colonialism a brief cultural humiliation or interlude in the eternally vibrant and triumphal march of cultures. He finds a superiority of the Asiatic and traditional European civilizations over the contemporary Western civilization that has remained unchanged over the centuries. Unlike Gandhi, Coomaraswamy makes no distinction between society and civilization. Gandhi’s notion of eradicating untouchability separated society and civilization. Coomaraswamy does not see any conflict in pre-modern India; he only sees a geo-cultural domain where people see nation states.

Recently a third way of understanding colonization has been put forward and propagated by scholars like Ashish Nandy, Shiv Visvanathan and Gustavo Esteva who see colonization not as a monolithic evil but an intimate enemy. Nandy believes that colonization did not only transform but also became transformed in the encounter. The notion of mutual transformation is more in line with Gandhian mode of understanding colonization as a process of multiple interactions but not as unilateral change. A lot of scholarly work has been done in this direction from Dipesh Chakrabarty and Muzaffar Alam to Chris Bayly and Partha Chatterjee.

It is hard to understand how we can forget the conflict and injustices of pre-modern India as they enter colonial India and express themselves as social violence of the caste system or institutional violence of sati. Many upper caste Hindu and British prejudices, biased literary genealogies and narrow intellectual constructions all go into the making of colonial and modern narratives which find expression in literature. We ought to be thinking of Derozio more as his way of constructing colonialism and its impact on indigenous traditions was more in terms of multiple interactions drawing upon monolithic and intrinsic categories whenever necessary. He freely borrowed form Western Enlightenment ideas and collapsed them within Indian syncretistic or mainstream Indian traditions. He saw colonialism as a debilitating monolithic and hegemonic category that had to be opposed not only from within the symbolic poetic form but also from the realistic prose tradition.
The English Reading Public in India

The English reading public of the early nineteenth century was not large and this limited the publication and sale of Indian writing in English. Derozio was a victim of a small reading public. Derozio’s students may have been equally to blame. The limited English reading public and the general reluctance of publishers may also have prevented Derozians from this worthy task. Even Edwards laments this fact early in his preface.

The English reading public of India who buy books is a very small public, and it is very doubtful if any book published in India by a private person ever did more than pay the printing charges; of course, I expect what are called “textbooks,” which are prepared for University examinations and cramming purposes, and books used in Government offices. I have little hope that my Memoir will sell in numbers sufficient to pay even for the cost of advertisements which I inserted in several newspapers, asking for information and papers, &c., and offering a fair price for a copy of Derozio’s critique on Kant, let alone the four years’ labour I have had in collecting materials. I shall be delighted to realise that I am mistaken.

Edwards was not alone in expressing this sentiment.

The narrow reference area of books in English and their elitist enterprise forced many scholars and writers to depend on private patronage or government largesse. Derozio himself had to depend on financial assistance on sundry benefactors to publish his poems. Though he was not represented enough in English he was quite popular in Bengali where he had a large readership. He was an important figure in Bengali memoirs and social history of the 1870s in works such as Rajnarain Basu’s Sekal Ar Ekal (1874), Hindu Kalejar Itibritte Ekal (1875) and Sivnath Sastri Ramtanu’s Lahiri O Tatkalin Banga Samaj (1903). In the twentieth century too works in Bengali such as Pallab Sengupta’s Jharer Pakhi: Kabi Derozio (1979) and Benoy Ghose’s Bidrohi Derozio (1961) and Suresh Chandra Moitra’s Ashanto Kal: Jignasu Yubak (1988) speak of the impact of Derozio’s writings on literature and society. Writing in Bengali many historians and critics were able to de-link Derozio’s European and Anglicized background and cast him as a Bengali writer who initiated the Bengal Renaissance and created a new aesthetics for Indian writing in English.

Background to The Fakeer of Jungheera, 1828

During his meteoric but short-lived career, Derozio wrote on all kinds of themes—from aesthetics, education and social emancipation to love, patriotism and rationalism. Today, though some of his writings are irretrievably lost or inaccessible, Calcutta publishers have endeavored to bring out collections of his works that shed light on his literary and academic career. Most of us remember Derozio for his long metrical poem in two cantos called The Fakeer of Jungheera published by Samuel Smith and Company, Hurkaru Library Calcutta in 1828.

It is rather difficult to say which influences went into the making of the personality of the fakeer. Edwards suggests that Derozio’s early association with Bhagalpur, where his uncle lived, shaped his image of the fakeer. On one of his visits to the city as a small boy, Derozio saw a fakeer “on a rock in the middle of the river” and this became “the first suggestion to his
fertile imagination of the longest and most sustained flight of his muse." In the character of the fakeer and his beloved, Derozio gives us a glimpse of the different stages of life and its emotions.

Though the poem abounds in romantic fantasizing of discrete religious categories, there seems to be an unbounded enthusiasm in creating a syncretistic tradition that includes the marginalized and outcast groups of Indian society. Since it was somewhat difficult for young Derozio to understand the complexities and underpinnings of the Hindu and Islamic traditions, he approached them from a predominantly Christian and European enlightenment perspectives. In trying to find a unifying identity within the disparate religious categories of the Indian subcontinent, he discovered the earthy fecundity of India. The rich fruitfulness of the land represented in his writings, later took the shape of matryabhumi or motherland, a category, which stood in opposition to the exclusionary politics of the British Empire.

By creating a concrete image of mother India and imbuing her with Christian and enlightenment ideas of love and freedom, Derozio gave an original identity to the Indian freedom movement and created an iconography that was successfully exploited by Bollywood in the movie Mother India (1957). Later writers like Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay (1838-1894) and other Bengali writers exploited and developed the concept of mother India as a unifying symbol and rallying point to give immediacy and power to the nationalist movement. The debt nineteenth century Indian writers owe to Henry Derozio has been elided in the last century primarily due to the upper caste Hindu politics of literary historians and the narrow categorization of Derozio as a writer with a Portuguese-British background.

In The Fakeer of Jungheera Derozio dexterously mixes the tantric, Hindu mythological, Islamic and Christian traditions to create a composite whole that corresponds to the elegiac European tradition of the nineteenth century and the syncretistic Sufi tradition of the fifteenth century. Derozio’s marginalized Anglo-Indian background was ideally suited to the hybrid and impure tradition of the tantric tale. The world of magic, resurrection and immortality that the tantric tradition provides was more suited to the Fakeer-Nuleeni’s tragic tale than the purist and idealized versions of Hindu, Christian or Islamic thought. Derozio confessed that he found the tale quite fascinating when he first heard it from a student of Hindu College and realized that it would fit perfectly with the Jungheera story of inter-religious blighted love tale that he was narrating. Probably because of the impurity and hybridity of the poem many literary historians have rejected it from inclusion in the Indian literary canon.

The Tantric Cosmology

The Tantric cosmology embodied in the tale of King Vikramaditya and the Beital, the vampire story in Baital Pachisi, offers hope and respite to people even after death by invoking the power of love, provided they possess the virtues of courage and perseverance when encountering fear and temptation. In the “Notes” to The Fakeer of Jungheera Derozio explains how he got the idea of introducing this tale in the main narrative of the poem; he writes:

A student of that excellent institution, the Hindu College, once brought me a translation of the Betal Puncheesa, and the following fragment of a tale having struck me for its wildness, I thought of writing a ballad, the subject of which should be strictly Indian. The Shushan is
a place where the dead are conveyed, to be burnt. In conformity with the practice of eastern story tellers, who frequently repeat the burden or moral of the song, have I introduced the 'O Love is strong'. &c. wherever an opportunity offered:—xxvi

In the subsequent two pages Derozio sets out to narrate the tale while emphasizing the fact that "he who greatly ventures, will greatly win" to show how the two star-crossed lovers, though unable to find happiness in the narrow confines of traditional Bengali society, live eternally together beyond death.

As the story goes, if King Vikram remains steadfast in his love for his queen he can resurrect her and once more both can find happiness together. The dauntless fortitude and courage that the King exemplifies by passing through the horrible ordeals in the graveyard leading to his victory, provides a fitting conclusion to the tragic death of the fakeer in the arms of his beloved Nuleeni. If the tale of the baital is true, then "the burnt out eloquence" of Nuleeni can again be resurrected in the arms of the fakeer if she can pass through the horrors and temptations of life. However these are unstated assumptions, a part of the general ambience of the story that forces the reader to reflect upon the last scene where the fakeer lies dead in the arms of Nuleeni on the bloodied battlefield or the graveyard of death. The omniscient narrator broods over the tragic scene divesting us of all emotions, merely reflecting on an impasse, which may soon be resolved through a deus ex machina. The open-ended montage makes the reader reflect on the calm engendered by a catharsis.

The Emotional and Social Landscape of the Poem

Derozio works around the story, not from within. The entire story races through imagined anxieties of the love relationship and the dreams of a happy future in iambic four-foot couplets. There is no sensuous fulfillment of love, no expressions of a strong emotional bonding, as if the writer fears that their expression might result in their loss. However, the anxiety in the poem is palpable from the beginning to the end, reflecting the social ethos of mistrust and animosity of nineteenth century Bengal. Derozio's delicate position as an outsider and outcast and the resentment caused by the criticism heaped by the elders of Hindu College of his avant garde ways, cast their shadows over the poem. This quivering hesitation not to reveal enough, this pulling back, creates not only an indubitable mystery, but also an understatement necessary for high art. Early in the nineteenth century Edwards wrote,

Derozio has felt and expressed, not only the close affinity of the varying moods and the life of man with the changeful phases of nature, but also the sympathy that links together all created things, and that throws the beams of a warm human love around on all Nature.xxvii

From another perspective the unmitigated anxiety and pain broods like a dark cloud over the poem invading the characters true feelings, and making the imagery and setting opaque. The poem is more a part of the spoken tradition and had the poet thought of it as a written artifact he would have deleted some of the belabored sections and reduced the poem to half of its present length.

The poem can be read as story of emancipation of suppressed Bengali women and an
indictment of the conservative Hindu society in the nineteenth century. The pure and beautiful Nuleeni refuses to die on the funeral pyre of her husband and escapes with the bandit fakeer to his cave in Junheera to a life of forbidden love though frightened by violent social repercussions. She believes that her lover’s courage and her unfailing love will finally make them victorious. Her fair and beautiful face brightens the dark social setting of the poem and mitigates the bold audacity of the fakeer who snatches her from the midst of a group of mourning upper caste Hindus at the funeral. Even though the story ends in a tragedy, the brave rebellion of the weaker sect draws the attention to the inequality of the sexes and the social malaise rampant in Bengali society of the time. The poem marks an important stage in the use of social themes in literary texts endorsing a syncretistic tradition quite popular in nineteenth century Bengal.

Undoubtedly Derozio had a social purpose in mind when he wrote the poem in 1828 and endorsed the moral aesthetics he would enunciate two years later in an essay in India Gazette on January 22, 1830 called “On the Influence of Poetry.” Derozio strongly felt that poetry was always meant to refine and purify “the springs of life,” and to elevate and improve “man’s moral and intellectual nature.” The Fakeer was dedicated to his mentor and friend Horace Hayman Wilson, officer of the East India Company’s Bengal Medical Establishment and carried in the beginning a patriotic poem called “My Country.” Derozio builds a splendid iconography of the motherland in this poem. In the poem Derozio reflects upon the past glory of a country that was like a beautiful goddess with a resplendent face and soared like an eagle in the sky. Once enchained and enslaved by foreign people, she begs the poet to free her—her “one kind wish from thee.” The poet wants to do something for his “fallen country” but feels helpless. The only thing he can do is to escape into the past and bring back the lost glory, the “wrecks sublime.”

Attitudes Towards Colonialism and the Nation

Derozio was deeply exorcised by British colonization and felt that it was responsible for many ills India was facing including the throttling of the creative spirit. Two years before the publication of the poem, “My Country,” he wrote an essay in The India Gazette called “Beginnings—Literature in India—Promises” where he inquired about the reason why literature does not “flourish” in India. He gave many reasons responsible for this problem such as “un congenial” soil and climate, paucity of talent, lack of literary publications and colonization itself. At this time he still felt that colonial rule was meant to “benefit India beyond all cultivation” but was worried about its “practicability.” By 1929 Derozio began to be convinced that the British Empire was not an “empire of opinion” but an “empire of military force.” He felt that the moment military force was withdrawn the hitherto supportive natives would subvert the empire and dismantle its edifice. Like most Bengalis later in the century, Derozio used European enlightenment arguments to critique the British colonial system. In an essay, “On the Colonization of India by Europeans” he stated,

Upon the whole, then, we must draw the inference, that colonization would not be beneficial, unless the British Legislature interferes, and materially alters the present system of Indian policy, by admitting natives and Indo-Britons to a participation of privileges, on a similar footing, as far as practicable and expedient with the Europeans. It is only by such a
measure that discontent can be prevented from brooding into rebellion, and the arts and sciences, when established, can produce benefits both to the governors and governed, to Britain, and to this, at present, our oppressed and neglected native country. The basis of good government is, as Jeremy Bentham observes, ‘the greatest good of the greatest number’, and I heartily hope this principle the wisdom of the legislature will see fit, ere any years elapse, to adopt in every measure connected with India.\

By the time he was writing the Fakeer poem, Derozio had come to believe in India as his country and the detrimental effect of the British colonial rule on Indian society and economy.

The Social Malaise of Sati

Instead of belaboring upon the misery of slavery, Derozio embarked upon a mission of resolving some of the inherent evils of Hindu society especially the practice of widow burning. In his Notes on Canto 1 Derozio criticizes the mistaken belief that the practice of Hindu widow burning exemplifies “an act of unparalleled magnanimity and devotion” and explains at length the problem of sati and his position on it. He writes,

The fact is, that so far from any display of enthusiastic affection, a Suttee is a spectacle of misery, exciting in the spectator a melancholy reflection upon the tyranny of superstition and priest-craft. The poor creatures who suffer from this inhuman rite, have but little notion of the heaven and the million years of uninterrupted happiness to which their spiritual guides tell them to look forward. The choice of immediate death, or a protracted existence, where to be only must contend their desire, is all that is offered to them; and who under such circumstances would hesitate about the preference? The most degrading and humiliating household offices must be performed by a Hindu Widow; she is not allowed more food than will suffice to keep her alive; she must sleep upon the bare earth; and suffer indignities from the youngest members of her family; these are only a few of her sufferings. The philanthropic views of some individuals are directed to the abolition of widow-burning; but they should first ensure the comfort of these unhappy women in their widowhood—otherwise, instead of conferring a boon upon them, existence will be to many a drudge, and a load.\

Derozio approvingly quotes a writer from the Indian Magazine and endorses the latter’s opinion that sati constitutes the most barbaric and degrading aspect of Indian society which can be overcome through education and intellectual development. Nonetheless with all his self-assurance and animosity for con-cremation, Derozio seems somewhat bewildered by cases of willful self-immolation. During the nineteenth century many upper caste Hindu women willfully committed sati mistakenly believing in the veracity of the Hindu ritual, as if mesmerized into an abominable act through a long process of socialization.

In 1829 when William Bentinck abolished sati Derozio wrote a poem entitled “On the Abolition of Satee” in praise of Regulation XVII extolling the merits of the decree:

Bentinck, be thine the everlasting mead!
The heart’s full homage still is virtue’s claim,
And 'tis good man’s ever honoured deed
Which gives an immortality to fame:
Transient and fierce, though dazzling in the flame
That glory lights upon the wastes of war:
Nations unborn shall venerate thy name,
A triumph than the conqueror's mightier far,
Thy memory shall be blessed as is the morning star.

Thrilled by the regulation Derozio felt that the “widow’s wail” was over at last and the “flames from impious pyres” have been forever extinguished though its “dismal” history would continue to haunt us. He believed that now sati declared illegal women would enjoy freedom and “social bliss” in a new India. The poem was dramatically signed in capital letters—INDIA—could be construed as a sign of the emerging identity of a new India that Derozio envisaged.

The issue of sati was not just a social phenomenon. Natural causes and hygienic practice also aggravated the malise. It must however be remembered that the increase in the number of sati was also related to a large extent to the spread of cholera epidemics in the nineteenth century that originated along the banks of the Ganges River and spread to other parts of the world reaching through the Middle East and Europe up to the United States. The unhygienic conditions in Calcutta were quite conducive to the spread of the disease. The Indian habit of defecating by the banks of the Ganga River and the warm waters of the river multiplied the cholera virus that entered human body through drinking water drawn for it. Derozio himself met an untimely death through contracting cholera. Though there were many reasons for the increase of incidents of sati in Bengal the death rate of married Bengali males was a significant factor.

Analysis of The Fakeer Poem
The protagonist of The Fakeer poem is a robber fakeer or a mendicant, who belongs to some unidentified Muslim sect, while the heroine, the widow Nuleeni, comes from an upper caste Bengali Hindu family. Derozio’s uses Christian imagery, such as heaven and angels flitting about, and juxtaposes it against the Hindu tradition of sati, Muslim prayers and Tantric tale of Raja Vikramajit and Baital to create a quaint, romantic atmosphere. Though the tantric tale seems to be a lengthy digression within a tragic tale of a blighted Hindu-Muslim love affair, it nonetheless places the tragedy in an impure tradition after having rejected all the other dominant religious forms.

The Fakeer poem is in two cantos of twenty-eight and twenty-four stanzas respectively written in the iambic, anapestic, trochaic and dactylic meters to suit the different rhythms ranging from the normal spoken voice and slow description to the racy battles and the chant of priests and women. By introducing commercial transactions of the East India Company in India, Derozio develops the metaphor of commerce comparing it to the relationship of people in love; he concludes that “Affections are not made for merchandize.” The poem highlights the fact that utilitarian ideas of the East India Company had a far stronger impact on Bengal than the proselytizing work of Christian missionaries.

Imitating the English Romantics, Derozio opens the First Canto with the wind wandering
gently like “young spirits” but the wind also sighs occasionally reminding us of the transience of love and fixing the tragic tone of the poem. The beginning however heralds the bountiful embrace of mother earth:

The sun-lit stream in dimples breaks,
As when a child from slumber wakes,
Sweet smiling on its mother—there,
Like heavenly hope o’er mortal care!

The sun continues to shower its blessings on mother earth. Sitting under a banyan tree and watching the “faithless” honeybee sipping the nectar from flower to flower can inspire anyone, but the bucolic world of blissful fecundity is tinged with the sadness of impermanence.

In the second stanza Derozio establishes the tragic theme of sati in the poem. Morning arrives lighting up a “mournful scene” followed by a “maddening wail of misery,” a scene where a “devoted woman” need “must die.” By the “sacred” river Ganga the granite rocks of Jungheera stand steep and formidable where daring fishermen guide their swift shallops at high tide to catch fish. In this inaccessible and barren crag, on huge granite boulder stands a natural hut, the abode of “a holy man” with a heart full of “purity.” The man,

His life unruffled, like a stream
Flows brightly in a devotion’s beam.

There are however conflicting opinions about his character. There are some who say that he is saintly wise and holy while others talk of his mindless cruelty, treachery and devilry. In stanza four the poet comments that there are cases when evil men may take to religion to hide their criminal intent:

Alas! In fairest seeming souls
The tide of guilt all blackly rolls;
And then they steal religion’s ray
Upon its surface but to play:
As o’er the darkest sea a gleam
Of brightest sunshine oft may beam,
Gilding the wave, while dark beneath
Are lurking danger, woe, and death.

The wonderful play of light and shade bring out a deceptive human nature and the evil that lies buried in the human soul.

In stanza five a group of people protected with soldiers slowly move over the plains beating “drums and gong” carrying “spears of gold.” In the group are upper caste Hindu men, “priests with triple thread.” Eager women who follow the procession silently watch these saintly men. Amidst them a woman in white, like a “child of light” stands out, this woman has come for the final rites. The notions of saintliness and purity are clearly identified with both the hero and the
heroine and the tragedy when it comes has a deeper moral ring.

The Chorus of Women in Stanza six celebrates the deification of the Hindu widow about to become a sati. Women scatter flowers on the sacrificial alter as the helpless victim is convinced that she will inherit the “gay” gardens blooming with amaranth, filled with soft music and eternally burning lamps. The chorus sings that the sati will get all this and much more. She will become thrice happy in heaven, where she will once again be united with her departed husband; and what better encouragement for her to climb the sacrificial alter:

On to the alter, and scatter the flower,
Sweeten the path as ye wander along;
On to the alter! another blest hour
Brings to her spirit the Kinnura’s song.

The kinnura’s song could refer to the Hebrew kinoor, an ancient stringed instrument or more especially to the sitar, which can be made to produce mournful sounds. As the precession moves to the grassy bank their song acquire a mysterious, foreboding quality:

And loud and deep its numbers roll,
Like song mysterious o’er the soul.

Without much ado, in stanza eight, the “Chorus of Brahmuns” begins their ritual. As a prelude to the sacrifice they shower petals and sprinkle orient spice and clang the cymbals to complete the rite before sunset. Then the “Chief of Brahmun” prays for the woman’s immortality and exhorts the sun to be her guardian. The group moves slowly like a passing cloud. The poet laments at the heartlessness of the scene and wonders how the sophists could have believed that human beings possessed sympathy.

O! this is but the world’s unfeeling way
To goad the victim that it soon will slay,
And like a demon ’tis its custom still
To laugh at sorrow, and then coldly kill.
Yet dreaming sophists in this world there be
Who tell us man for man has sympathy,
Who say that tears arising out of pain
Soon see themselves reflected;—but ’tis vain—
Sure social love dwells not beneath the skies,
Or it is like the bird of paradise,
Which lights we know not where, and never can,
Be found alive among the haunts of man.

Derozio pulls out humanistic notions of social love and civil society from his vast reading of the Greeks but fails to understand the bizarre ritual of sati. The impending tragedy brings out elegiac lines such as the following:
Ye who in fancy’s vision view the fires
Where the calm widow gloriously expires,
And, charmed, behold her ere she mounts the pile,
Her lips illumined by a radiant smile.

The widow bought to the sacrificial fire is young and pure in her “spotless loveliness” but she is a “purchased flower” and a victim of human caprice and guile. Contrary to the Sophists human nature seems degenerate:

A heaven beyond the limits of her thought,
A bliss her spirit never yet had sought—
Ah! Haply then might pity mourn above
Degraded nature, not exalted love!

Pale-faced and speechless, she now watches the dead body of her husband covered with sandalwood. The use of sandalwood would obviously signify the upper class status of the family. The poet paints the heroine as a “perfect” Bengali beauty—with large black eyes, black unbraided tresses, a pale lily complexion and a majestic walk. As she arrives at this strange “death’s festival” she seems to be in full control of her emotions, though her eyes speak more than her tongue could.

In stanza XIII the poet comments on the meanness and cruelty of the world that tries to buy love and imprison the heart; but nay the heart was ‘created’ free and therefore cannot be imprisoned:

Ye mean, ye cruel! in whose bosoms cold
The thought springs idly that love may be sold—
What! dare you id our feelings all depart
And give for golden dross th’ impassioned heart?
Go! tell the ocean when its billows roar
To rest in peace nor lash the sounding shore;
Bid them be hushed, and flee unto their cave;
Go! when the spirits of the storm on high
Drive their mad coursers through the blackening sky,
Bid them return, and measure back their way,
And they may hear your voices, and obey!—
But oh! the heart enthralled can never be,
Lord of itself, created to be free!

It is only in Stanza XIV that we come to know the name of this beautiful widow; she is called Nuleeni. Though her situation is rather hopeless, she does not reflect upon death but upon love, especially the “blissful hours” she spent in those scented “bright bowers” with her lover. She never loved her dead husband as her true feelings were for someone else. Now she suffers from pain not at the loss of her husband but the pain of separation from her beloved. She rises like a
phoenix burning in the fire of her “hopes, affections, happiness.”

In Stanza XV Derozio introduces Persian imagery of shama-parvane or the lamp and moth representing the heat of love and the tragic death of the lovers.

On giddy wing it wildly wheels,
Th’ enlivening glow is spirit feels;
And then it fondly fancies this
Until into the fire it flies
And then, too late lamenting, dies!

Latent in the imagery of shama-pravna is the tragic consequence of unapproved, unconventional love. In the next stanza, stanza XVI, Derozio shifts to the image of the sun brightening the Ganga River, which will soon set leaving the landscape in darkness. Derozio’s dexterous use of the Hindu and Islamic imagery of transience juxtaposed against the Christian image of an eternal soul highlight the syncretistic aspect of the poet’s imagination, to which the nineteenth century social reality might not have conformed. In the rather long Stanza XVII the poet foresees the tragic future of the two lovers and once again weaves images of angels, immortal boundless love and flowers from Indra’s bowers into an epigram of Christian immortality:

And this good angels weave for me,
The wreath of immortality!

In Stanza XVIII Nuleeni stands still like a statue, as a divine being only to be worshipped:

With upward gaze, and white clasped hands,
She, like a heaven-wrought statue, stands—
‘Tis thus that woman fair should be
Worshipped as a divinity;
Just when her beauty beams so bright,
As too intense for human sight;
Just in that hour when all her worth
Is fitter far for heaven than earth!

She is now taken to the funeral pyre for immolation by a Brahmin. Her secret plan to elope with her lover gains acceptance in the light of the stereotypical crafty Brahmin priest referred to in the colonial discourses, especially in the Parliamentary Papers on Widow Immolation, 1821–30, as “hungry brahmins” and “necessitous brahmins.” As she mounts the funeral pyre and takes “seven circuits” of the “pile” The Hymn to the Sun promises her a paradise in the hereinafter. But Nuleeni’s mind is on rescue and escape by her crafty lover, a Muslim fakeer, who does not disappoint her. He comes like a “tempest,” in the evening, kills and wounds a few and takes her away to Jungheera’s inaccessible crags “bleak and bare”—redeeming her as an “unoffered sacrifice.”
In Stanza XXV the Muslim fakir is described as a lover and a warrior:

His dusky brow, his raven hari,
His limbs of strength, his martial air,
His eyes though softened into love
Far from the mildness of the dove, His baldric round his manly waist,
Bespeak him sure some bloody man—
The chieftain of a robber clan.
But whence came he?—‘tis certain here
A sainted soul, a meek Fakeer
On whom religion’s sacred ray
Shines bright, hath dwelt for many a day.—
This is the saint—nay can it be
The holy man?—‘tis he! ‘tis he!

Nuleeni has always dreamt of him and is now satisfied in his embrace:

I dreamt, and now before my view,
My dream, my golden dream is true!—

She now worships him as a “deity” and for a brief moment tastes the joys of heaven. To him she is his “beloved”, his “most adored,” his goddess and his religion:

No more to Mecca’s hallowed shrine
Shall wafted be a prayer of mine;
No more shall dusky twilight’s ear
From me a cry complaining hear;
Henceforth I turn my willing knee
From Alla, Prophet, heaven to thee!

Derozio sees love between a Hindu and a Muslim as transcending religion, though this could be Derozio’s own atheistic vision of religious categories based on his rationalistic temper. There was a hardening of identity of Bengali Muslims in the subcontinent as Islam provided “a sense of belonging” to the Muslim community. “In the absence of a powerful modern Muslim leadership in nineteenth-century Bengal, the ulema emerged as the leaders of the Muslim community.” The British during the latter half of the nineteenth century created a legal and political discourse concerning sati but kept the categories of Hindus and Muslims quite separate. Though they legislated against sati they allowed it to happen with permission till it was completely abolished in 1829. The hardening of religious categories in colonial Bengal lays the ground for the inevitable conflict that ensues in Canto Second.

The Second Canto begins with the soft gurgling of fountains like the flute of Krishna as lamps are lit in mosques—“Mussulman’s towers.” In Stanza II the poet introduces the popular
belief that love for a woman can lead any god-fearing young man away from the worship of Allah. The song that follows is just to provide a maudlin sentiment mixed with Muslim imagery of houris, the sound of lute and love’s passion. Stanza IV gives us a glimpse of the tragic end by comparing his heart as a “taper in a tomb” that will soon be extinguished. Stanzas V and VI introduce the Legend of the Shushan in which the tragedy is contained. Stanza VII reveals the affronted father of Nuleeni who wants to avenge the insult:

He stood the statue, warmed with life;  
Demanding vengeance, not relief,  
Honour alive, or death in strife.

The father probably appeals to the armies of Shah Shuja to help him fight the robber fakeer.

A thousand of his bravest band,  
The stars of Moslem chivalry,  
At princely Shoojah’s high command,  
As though it were some god’s decree,  
Attend Nuleeni’s injured sire  
With all the vault of martial fire.

The poet comments upon the uncertainty of life and its twists and turns:

How beautiful is moonlight on the stream!  
How bright on life is Hope’s enchanting beam;  
Life moves inconstant, like the rippling rill,  
Hope’s and the moon’s rays quiver o’er them still!

Then the impending tragedy:

Thus shone the moon upon Jungheera’s flower,  
Nuleeni, rosebud of the rocky bower;  
And thus soft beams upon the shallop lay  
Which soon must bear her Robber-love away.

The story at this point becomes somewhat sketchy but the robber fakeer decides to make a last stand and fight. The poet-writer thus,

A daring conquest must my band achieve;  
And ’tis my promise, ere another chieft  
Shall be selected for thy love’s relief,  
Once more to lead them to their prey alone,  
Then quit for ever, and be all thine own.—  
Quench not the light of that life-giving eye
Swift on the wings of Love to thee I'll fly—
But one short hour—and I demand no more—
For ever thine, when that short hour is o'er.

However Nuleeni fears that that the “dubious hour” might bring doom:

Let me once warn thee that our doom so bright
May darkly end—as darkly speeds the night—

The Fakeer is confident of victory:

“Ere long I’ll warm thee in my breast again—

With the “battle cry” of “the Moslem ringing afar” to fight the “royal cavalry.” Section XXI describes the battle scene where he is mortally wounded with a lance:

An unseen hand with a glittering lance
Checked the Chieftain’s fierce advance,
And forth the blood from his bosom streamed,
And quenched hope’s latest ray as it heamed!—

Nuleeni cradles him in her arms and dies together with him—her “eloquence had all burned out.”

Nuleeni becomes a free agent to choose her destiny; she prefers to die together with someone she loves than with her husband whom she does not. The Sanskrit word sati implied a “good and virtuous woman” who was truly devoted to her husband. And according to the Hindu tradition these virtues found expression in the ultimate act of self-immolation. Women who sacrificed themselves continued to be called sati long after they were dead and gone. The British however restricted the usage of the term “to the sacrifice alone, the act as well as the agent.”

Conclusion
The hardening of religious identities in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and the deepening schism between various religious categories, especially Hindus and Muslims, rejected the entire syncretistic tradition that once flowed unhampered not only in Bengal but the entire British India exemplified in the cult of Satya Pir. With the rejection of the syncretistic tradition, all literature associated with it was also rejected. The secular and universal ideas that Derozio espouses in his poetry do not go well with the separatist and divisionary politics of modern India. These are some of the revisionist consequences of modernity. However, the “modes of social life” that emerged in the early nineteenth century in response to modernity in India now take us “beyond modernity” into the information age. If India must shine it must do so within its own traditions and Derozio occupies a central place in it.
NOTES

i Abirlal Mukhopadhyay, Amar Dutta, Adhir Kumar et. al., (eds), Song of the Stormy Petrel: Complete Works of Henry Louis Vivian Derozio, (Calcutta: Progressive Publishers, 2001). Sakti Sadhan Mukhopadhyay in “About the Collection” writes, “Derozio was like Columbus who sailed through the orthodox dark ocean to discover a new horizon of humanism... Rammohun was the inaugurator of spiritual humanism and Derozio, Vidyasagar were of secular humanism” (p. xiii)


xi McCutchion, ibid., p. 12.


xvii See Dharwadker, pp. 208–9.

xviii Edwards, Henry Derozio, ibid., p. 79.


xxi Edwards, Henry Derozio, ibid., p. 91.


xxvi Viswanathan, Masks of Conquest, ibid, pp. 166–67.

xxvii Viswanathan, Masks of Conquest, ibid, p. 167.

xxviii Viswanathan, Masks of Conquest, ibid, p. 168.


xxxii Edwards, Henry Derozio, ibid., p. 3.


xxxiv Bankim’s idea of the mother in his novel Anandmath, especially in the song Bande Mataram or Hail to Thee Mother originates from Derozio’s typically western idea of the land as mother. See G. A. Grierson, The Times September 12, 1906 who argues that the invocation to the motherland is alien to Hindu culture and could imply an invocation to Kali. Sir Henry Cotton believes that the invocation to the mother could represent the motherland of Bengal (Henry Cotton, The Times, September 13, 1906). J. D. Anderson writing in The Times, September 24, 1906 argues that in the eleventh chapter of the first book the sanyasis have erected two images of Kali—‘the mother who has been’ and ‘the mother that shall be.’ The first image represents Kali and the second the land of Bengal.

xxxv The argument about the foreign ancestry of writers or scholars was not used in the case of Charles Freer Andrews (1871–1940), an English missionary, who championed Gandhi’s call for freedom. Though the British detested Andrews’ stand the Indians called him “Deenabandhu Andrews” or the friend of the poor.

xxxvi Complete Works, ibid., p. 168.


xxxviii Complete Works, ibid., p. 320.

xxxix Most commentators have ignored Derozio’s corrections in his own handwriting where he changed the last line. Instead of the earlier line, “My fallen country! One kind wish for thee!” he wrote “My fallen country! One kind wish from thee!” Changing the word “for” to “from” alters the meaning of the sentence completely. What Derozio listens to is the voice of the country beseeching him to take away the yoke of slavery and free her.

x Complete Works, ibid., p. 99.
xli Complete Works, ibid., p. 299.


xlv The British themselves were quite exercised by the spread of tropical diseases amongst its troops stationed in the tropics. Philip D. Curtin, Death by Migration: Europe’s Encounter with the Tropical World in the Nineteenth Century, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003). In a section “Death by Migration,” Curtain explains the impact and cost of tropical diseases on British troops in India: “When the Royal Commission on India reported in 1863, it found that the recent death rates of British military in India represented the trailing edge of a prolonged plateau of relatively high mortality stretching back still further into the past. Most authorities date the beginnings of the mortality revolution as far back as the late seventeenth or early eighteenth century, and this was no doubt true for civilian populations. The Indian commissioners, however, assessed the plateau rates for enlisted men in India over the whole period from 10800 to 1856 at about 69 per thousand; those for officers were 38 per thousand, and those for European civil servants about 20 per thousand. The low rate for civilians highlights one of the fundamental facts of military medical experience; troops in barracks are much healthier than troops on campaign, even disregarding losses from combat, and military campaigns had been an ever-present reality in India before the 1860. “That same Royal Commission worked out the cost of Indian operations in pounds, shillings, and pence. It cost £100 to recruit a soldier and maintain him in India. With an army of 70,000 Europeans, 4,830 would die each year, and 5,880 hospital beds would be full at any given moment. Britain was therefore losing £588,000 annually from sickness alone. A similar force might have cost £200,000 in European conditions; the extra £388,000 was a surcharge for tropical service.” p. 107.

xlvi In his “Notes” on the first Canto in Complete Works, ibid., p. 161 Derozio explains the origin of the topography of the poem in the following paragraphs:

“Although I once lived nearly three years in the vicinity of Jungheera, I had but one opportunity of seeing that beautiful, and truly romantic spot. I had a view of the rocks from the opposite bank of the river, which was broad, and full, at the time I saw it, during the rainy season. It struck me then as a place where achievements in love and arms might take place; and the double character I had heard of the Fakeer, together with some acquaintance with the scenery, induced me to found a tale upon both these circumstances. From Forest’s Tour along the Ganges and Jumna, I submit to the reader the following description of Jungheera. The foliage he speaks of did not strike me, probably in consequence of the great distance at which I saw the island, which in a subsequent part of the poem I have called bleak and bare.

At some distance before reaching Moughyr, We saw in the river Ganges on our right, a singular mass of rock standing in the water, and somewhat resembling those of Colgong. It is distant about two hundred yards from the right bank, immediately opposite to the village of Sultangange. It rises about seventy feet above the level of the water, towering abruptly from its bosom: there is one place only at which a boat can be put in, and where there is a landing-place, and a very steep and winding path leads to its summit. Here is found a small building, a
Madrussa or College of Fakeers, or wandering Monks, who reside in it.

xlvi Complete Works, ibid., p. 107.

xlvii Complete Works, ibid., p. 109.

l Torkel Brekke, *Makers of Modern Indian Religion in the Late Nineteenth Century* (Oxford Oriental Monographs), (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003). Brekke in the Introduction writes, “During the nineteenth century there took place a complete transformation of Indian religions. It was a transformation characterized by two distinct levels of change. On the one hand, there was a fundamental conceptual shift among Indians who were exposed to English language and culture, which crystallized religious communities with sharp boundaries and distinct histories. On the other hand, the emerging feeling of religious-communal motivated religious and lay leaders to work in the interests of their communities” p. 1.


lii Dalmia, Notes, ibid., p. 75.