



THE ANGLO-INDIAN COMMUNITY'S FIGHT FOR CULTURAL IDENTITY

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In this article Professor Wright makes the point that if Anglo-Indian culture is to survive Anglo-Indians have to go beyond documenting their history and start to make a contribution in the arts. They have to contribute to the upkeep of a unique Anglo-Indian culture through books, music, poetry and plays.

Over the thirty-five years that I have been looking at the Anglo-Indian Community from the outside I have been impressed with its ability to persevere despite mounting difficulties. In other parts of the world those communities that have paralleled this group lasted from only a few years to several centuries but never obtained a similar level of social and cultural identity. I have looked back over the history of the Community and note several "bumps" of cultural surge, times when the group took its destiny into its own hands and demanded it become something else. That something else was ultimately a movement to become more permanent, more lasting, to preserve its heritage for future generations. With this persistence there has always been an overriding sense that the history of the community was both worthy of preserving and worthy of an identity that would carry pride and satisfaction. That satisfaction and worthiness transcends common power and status and takes on qualities that will last forever, a cultural heritage that uniquely identifies that group as having a life that will last far beyond the life of any member ... a heritage found in the arts. For the Anglo-Indian Community that location involves one community and a particular unique individual.

One of the most significant times occurred almost two-hundred years ago, a time when the Community could have easily disappeared. Yet, the Anglo-Indian Community of India enjoyed a surge of greatness during the early part of the 19th Century. It was during those years that many events happened world-wide that brought major changes throughout the modern world. This was the era that witnessed those advances fostered by the industrial revolution, major innovations in commerce and industry, significant shifts in demographics from the rural to the urban, and ultimately what some would argue a major shift in intellectual thought. Communities throughout the world took advantage of these major shifts or were left behind, and certain members of the Anglo-Indian Community saw fit to expand the position of their group by a series of activities. Prominent leaders petitioned England for the chance to become greater.

In 1829 John Ricketts had taken a petition to England that requested the British to provide better benefits for members of the community. This petition was the result of numerous Anglo-Indians coming together and forming a collectivity that sensed the repression that Anglo-Indians had felt as quasi-citizens. Such political activity accompanies a sense of collective identity, a common sense of belonging that brought the group together in ways that they had never been brought together before. Anglo-Indians had been repressed by the British, mainly due to a fear that they could be instrumental in leading uprisings of locals against the colonial rulers as had been the case in other parts of the world. There was never any evidence that Anglo-Indians would in any way engage in revolutionary action, but the more ethnocentric British controlled and set the rules. As a result Anglo-Indians found themselves and their lives to be severely restricted by the British from 1785 to 1857. If any lesson is to be learned from this repression, it is that attack from the outside acts to solidify groups, and this was to be the case with the Anglo-Indian Community. It was during this time that the group came together and for the first time enjoyed community identity.

Calcutta was to become the center of Anglo-Indian culture. John Ricketts was only one of many members of the community to gain political and economic prominence during the early 1800s. For the first time community centers were formed, places

where members could come together and share their common status both socially and culturally. Religious culture, always Christian, solidified as Anglo-Indians found the Catholic Church to be especially welcoming. In common meeting rooms Anglo-Indians came together to discuss, debate, plan, and shape their future. The Calcutta press of that date contains an increasing number of references to both key personalities within the community and activities attributed to the full collectivity.

As communities solidify they often identify persons who enjoy activities beyond the economic and political and delve into the cultural. So it was with the Anglo-Indian Community during these years. Henry Louis Vivian Derozio is a figure that today's literary world enjoys and is one of the major historical figures that will serve to identify the key intellectual role played by Anglo-Indians during the early years of the 19th Century. The life of the scholar is well known to those who have read a history of the Community. However, his poetry is perhaps less well known. During the last part of the 1800s there were several articles in the Calcutta Review that discussed the poetry of Derozio. It is in this journal that we find his more obscure writings. Thomas Edwards, in a series of articles in the early 1880s, produced for us some of Derozio's poetry. (See: "The Poetry of Derozio." *The Calcutta Review*, Vol LXXII, No. CXLVI, 1882. pp. 301-320) Derozio was that artist, poet, who gave the Anglo-Indian Community a place in history. His words will continue to interest scholars long into the future, long after the community has ceased to be a vital part of the international scene. Among the most important works by Derozio was *The Legend of the Shushan*, a part of a much more elaborate poem, this allows for the reader to construct an image of that place where, in Hindu legend, the dead are taken to be buried. Edwards wrote: ""The Fakier of Jungheerah is a poem of two cantons, without a plot and with few incidents. It may be analyzed in a sentence or two. A young Hindu woman is about to perform the right [sic] of Sati, when she is rescued by a former lover, the leader of a band of lawless men, whose stronghold is the rock of Jungheerah. In a raid, the last on which he was to lead the band before quitting the lawless life for ever, the robber chief is killed and his band scattered, the Nuleeri is found dead in the arms of her dead lover." (Edwards, Thomas. "The Poetry of Derozio." *The Calcutta Review*, Vol LXXII, No. CXLVI, 1882. p. 302.) Edwards recorded the following for future generations:

THE LEGEND OF THE SHUSHAN

O! Love is strong, and its hops 'twill build
Where nothing beside would dare;
O! Love is bright, and its beams will gild
The desert dark, and bare,
And youth is the time, the joyful time
When visions of bliss are before us;
But alas! when gone, in our sober prime
We sigh for the days flown o'er us.
And youth and love their hopes will build
Where nothing besides would dare;
And they both are bright, and their beams will gild.
The desert, dark and bare.
The rain fell fast, and the midnight blast
Its horrible chaunt did sing,
And it howled and raved as it madly passed
Like a demon on wildest wing.
The precipitous lightning beamed all bright,
As it flashed from the dark, dark sky,
Like the beautiful glance (which kills with its light)
of a woman's large black eye.
It hissed through the air, and it dipped in the wave
And it madly plunged into earth,
Then pursued the wind to its desolate cave,
And hurried to its home in the north.
Some spirit had charmed each gathered cloud,
Till the mystic spell it broke;
And then uprising, oft and loud,
The heavens in thunder spoke.
And sooth it seemed a if, save that gleam,
All nature had lost her light
The moon had concealed her beautiful beam;
'Twas a fearful, fearful night.

On the wings of the storm each star had passed
To its home of rest far away,
As if in the blast there could not last
Of radiance even a ray;
As if like hope and joy they ne'er
Too long should brightly shine,
Least, if on earth they for ever were,
Existence might be devine!
'Twas a dismal night; and the tempest sang
As if rushed o'er flood and fell'
And loud the laugh of spirits rang
With the demon's midnight yell.
And the shriek and cry rose wild and high
From many an earthless form;
And roar and shout cut through the sky,
And mixed with the voice of the storm.
But love is strong, and its hopes will build
Where nothing beside would dare;
And love is bright, and its beams will gild
The desert dark and bare.
And youth is the time, the joyful time
When visions of bliss are before us;
But alas! when gone, in our sober prime
We sigh for the days flown o'er us.
For love and youth their hopes will build
Where nothing beside would dare;
And they both are bright, and their beams will gild
The desert, dark and bare.
O! Why at this hour, in the dark Shushan,
Is the Prince Jogindra sighing?
Sure, that cannot be a dwelling for man,
Where the loathsome dead are lying.
Unearthly dogs dogs are barking there,
As to break the dead sleeper's dream;

And the grey wolf howls - 'tis his dismal lair; -
And the owl glints by with a scream.
The right wind moans, like a sick man's groans,
When he, fevered, gasps on his bed -
Then why is the prince here all alone? -
Ah! Radhika fair is dead.
The wind may moan like a sick man's groan
When he fevered gasps on his bed -
But why is the prince here all alone,
Though Radhika fair be dead?
Her spirit is gone to some region blest,
Unhurt by the storm and the strife -
She will not wake from her dreamless rest;
And who shall charm her to life?
But there was a man, and a holy man,
A gifted Sunyasee.
Who bade him dwell in the dark Shushan,
For days and black nights three
"There demons shall come and bid the do
"Full many a fearful deed;
"But if thou quail or shrink, thou'lt rue,
"And death shall be thy meed,
"Each night three trials must be passed,
"Of earthly pain severest;
"And thou, if true, shall win at last
"Thy Radhika fairest, dearest.
"But there's one deed thou shall not do,
"Thou a spirit bright bids thee -
"Yet if thou dare, that deed thou'lt rue;"
Said the sainted Sunyasee.
"Now name that deed; thou holy man!"
Cried the Prince all eagerly;
"And I shall dwell in the dark Shushan
"For days and black nights three."

"It may not be," said the Sunyasee;
"Thy faith must yet be tried;
"And if great thy love and thy wisdom be,
"Thou Prince! shalt win thy bride.
"But all unarmed, that home of the dead,
"And heedless of friend or foe,
"With feet unshod must Jagindra tread."
Said the Prince: "With joy I go."
For love is strong, and its hope 'twill build
Where nothing beside would dare;
And Love is bright, and its beams will gild
The desert, dark and bare.
And youth is the time, the joyful time
When visions of bliss are before us;
But alas! when gone, in our sober prime
We sign for the days flown o'er us.
For love and youth their hopes will build
Where nothing beside would dare;
And they both are bright, and their beams will gild
The desert, dark and bare.
Three days are done, and two nights gone
In painful trials past;
This night remains, and the bride is won,
If strong he be to the last.
He sat on a stone. all mute and lone,
By the corpse of his Radhika fair,
When the lightning flashed, and the wind made moan,
And a beautiful spirit stood there!
Her eyes seemed made of the pure star-light,
And her face was mild and seet;
Her neck was white as the flower at night,
And her tresses kissed her feet.
Her form was like the cypress tree,
And her cheek, it was young love's bed;

Her fairy step, was light and free,
Her lips like a lotus red.
Her voice was sweet as when ripples meet,
And sigh o'er a pebbled strand;
So soft was her song, it seemed to belong
To a happy, heavenly land.

The Spirit's Song.

O! now do not leave me,
Since false friends have flown;
Dear love! do not grieve me,
I've thought thee mine own.
'Mid tempest and storm, love!
'mid good and 'mid ill,
Thy form, thy bright form, love!
My star hath been still.
Though prospects before me
Were darksome and dear,
Though clouds gathered o'er me,
Still, still thou wast near!
My visions have faded,
The tear fills mine eye,
My hopes are degraded,
They're hurled from on high.
Like thoughts that are straying
Where darkness should be,
Bright moon-beams are playing
Above the green sea.
Now clouds are concealing
The face of the moon -
As onward she's wheeling,
She's darkened to soon!
O! thus on my sorrow
There shone silver beams;
Alas! ere the morrow,

They vanished like dreams!
My bird was the sweetest
That ever did sing,
But ah! 'twas the fleetest,
And wild was its wing.
But sweeter, far sweeter
Did hope weave her lay,
And, oh me! much fleeter
She flew far away.
I've found thee, I've found thee -
My griefs would be done,
If love's chain had bound thee,
And made us out one.
Then oh! do not leave me,
or wretched I'll be -
For now what would grieve me
But parting from thee?
Her dawning smile breaks pensively'
Sith supplicating hands,
And sad yet soft beseeching eye,
That fairy vision stands.
Jagindra's glance upon her dwelt,
As there were magic in her form;
He gazed, he sighed, he almost felt
His heart within him warm.
"But no! he cried, for constancy
"Is every charm above;
"And I shall still be true to thee,
My Radhika! my Love?"
The storm is hushed, and the moon her light
Has softly flung o'er all,
And the dark Shushan is a place bright,
With lamps on each crystal wall.
'Mid a glittering throng the sound of song

Now floats on the scented air,
As mainstrel seraphs, glad and young,
Were waking their music there!
From heavenliest bowers they've gathered flowers,
Red roses, and jasmines white;
On the wings of joy swift fly the hours,
For the night is a bridal night!
And high, on a throne of azure and gold,
Jagindra in princely pride
All smiling sits, - on his arm behold,
Leans Radhika fair his bride!
O! Love is strong, and its hope 'twill build
Where nothing beside would dare;
O! Love is bright its beams will gild
The desert, dark and bare.
And youth is the time, the joyful time,
When visions of bliss are before us;
But alas! when gone, in our sober prime,
We sigh for the days flown o'er us.
For love is youth their hopes will build
Where nothing beside would dare;
And they both are bright, and their beams will gild
The desert, dark and bare.

When one looks toward the past of any cultural group that was only a small percentage of the nation of India, found themselves repressed for almost a century by a colonial power that feared them for what they could become not what they had been, it is interesting that their cultural identity contained so many elements that could provide the members with a unique cultural and subsequently personal identity. Once a literature is established the identity of a culture continues. Derozio set the model for numerous Anglo-Indian writers, entertainers, poets, and others who have constructed for the Community a wide ranging cultural identity. The arts offer only one of those elements of identity that will outlive the last Anglo-Indian.