

Was Academic Association a Student Movement or Resurgence of the Social Awakening? A Critical Assessment

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Abstract

*After the introduction of modern education system a fresh consciousness gradually brought the educated youth and students in contact with the modern events in various parts of the country and the world at large. They started to pay attention to the problems facing the country and the people and to look upon them in different light. At the outset of the 19th century the problems related with the social reforms were the focal point of students' agitation. This consciousness of the students was one of the consequences of modern system of western education introduced by the colonial masters. This insisted the educated youth conscious about the social, economic and religious inequalities, discriminations and orthodoxies. These social evils led to the serious reaction among the educated middle class or the Bhadrалоке class and it reflected comprehensibly in the ideas of Raja Rammohan Roy, Derozio and Young Bengal and several other streams. The primary reaction of the educated youth and students was not only political, but also social, humanistic and cultural. They began reacting to the needs of better and wider education, social change, discussions on various questions of mutual interests, to spread and share the newly acquired knowledge and consciousness and to protest against various kinds of injustices. This new intellectual segment or, group was originally influenced by the ingredients of freedom, fraternity and equality of the French Revolution. They were also influenced by the writings and compositions of the great philosopher and scholars like Mill, Bentham, Thomas Paine, David Ricardo, Adam Smith etc. This new wave of students was initiated with the inspiration of Henry Louis Vivian Derozio, the young professor of Hindu College and with the movements of Young Bengal. In 1828, after a constructive discussion, the formation of **Academic Association** took shape in the House of Derozio. Derozio was its first president and Uma Charan Basu, student of Derozio, was its first secretary. The students of Derozio were the forerunner of this mission. It was the first student organisation in India functioning in an organised and regular manner.*

Key Words: Shaky, Talukdar, Bhadrалоке, Orthodox, Heyday

1:1 Introduction

At the beginning of the 19th century the students and its leadership have begun playing a determined and major role in social change. But, it is very difficult to trace a movement of

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the students alone. After the introduction of modern education a fresh consciousness gradually brought the educated youth in contact with the modern events in various parts of the country and the world at large. They started to pay attention to the problems facing the country and the people and to look upon them in different light. The ideas of the French Revolution, writings and compositions of the great philosopher and scholars like **Mill, Bentham, Thomas Paine, David Ricardo, Adam Smith** etc, the movements in the Italian Peninsula, and other events became tremendous source of inspiration for the students and youth to think and to do something new. The preliminary reaction of the students was not political nor did it take the form of *movement*, they began reacting to the needs of better and wider education, social change, to spread and share the newly acquired consciousness and social reforms. Gradually, political tendencies also begin to surface.² They are usually to be found with the various other sections of youth, middle strata and the rising intelligentsia. The growing student unrest in India constitutes the social context in recent past. This unrest of the students may not be entirely new to western countries, but considering the sacred status of the *guru* in ancient India, it is certainly new to us.³ The explanations of student unrest given by different academician, scholars and journalists are the psychological, psychoanalytical and sociological. Ross (1969) classifies students' protests into five categories: (1) political protests; (2) economic protests; (3) moral protests; (4) educational protests; and (5) protests for fun. These protests are often interconnected. There are certain factors which are found in all types of protests. According to many sociologists and social psychologists one common factor of all types of students' protests is the 'generation gap'. In a transitional and pluralistic society, it is difficult for students to conform to establish norms.⁴ So many scholarly works had been done by the scholars on Derozio and Young Bengal Movement. Prof. Susobhan Sarkar had done a great work 'On The Bengal Renaissance' in which the early activities of the members of Academic Association were thoroughly discussed up to 1839. Anil Rajimwale is another scholar who had expressed his deep concern on Academic Association in his work 'History of Student Movement in India'. He argued that social disparities of the 19th century India had deeply influenced the students who came from middle class families. Other scholars like Goutam Chattopadhyay, Barun De, Susnata Das, Chandi Prasad Sarkar and Manju Chattopadhyay wrote about students' participation in the Indian National Movement from various aspects, but they were reluctant to produce Academic Association as an organised form of student. The scholars were hardly highlighted the Academic Association as a students' organisation. My paper will focus the Academic Association as purely students' organisation and their movement from academic point of view with the help of current available historical sources of information. The article will focus the following facts and arguments:

- o To give a historical account of the growth, development and working of the Students' Organizations in Bengal.

- o To overview the socio-economic situation of Bengal favouring the emergence of Academic Association.
- o To highlight the difficulties faced by students.
- o Why did the students involve in the reform movement?
- o How did the students organize themselves before they became popular?
- o Was there any connection of the movement with the contemporary global students' movement?

1:2 Outline of the Earlier Student Movement

The students' movement of colonial era had its genesis in a special backdrop. The movements were allowed to develop in the firmament of the movement of the Indian masses against the British imperialism. The socio-economic condition of India was passing through serious vicissitudes at a time when the British were in the struggle for the establishment of an empire in India. The British established its far-flung empire in India taking advantage of the decadent stage of the Mughal Empire. The heyday of the Mughal Empire had gone. Thereafter, the British administration as also the British exploitation was started. But the people of India could not evenly accept the British Rule. They fought tooth and nail against the British Rule since the very inception of their ascendancy. The students of India stepped into the shoes of the freedom fighters of the subcontinent.⁵

At the outset of the 19th century the problems related with the social reforms were the focal point of students' agitation. This consciousness of the students was one of the consequences of modern system of western education introduced by the colonial masters. This insisted the educated youth conscious about the social, economic and religious inequalities, discriminations and orthodoxies. These social evils led to the serious reaction among the educated middle class or the *Bhadraloke class* and students exemplified more comprehensibly in the ideas of Raja Rammohan Roy, Derozio and Young Bengal and several other streams. The primary reaction of the educated youth and students was not only political, but also social, humanistic and cultural. Their reaction did not take the shape of movement in modern form. They began reacting to the needs of better and wider education, social change, discussions on various questions of mutual interests, to spread and share the newly acquired knowledge and consciousness and to protest against various kinds of injustices.⁶ But, gradually their protests began to come into sight with certain political tendencies.

1:3 Birth of Academic Association

In Bengal within India, the first education system with European idealism was initiated and it was very interesting that the Indian student movement was also initiated in Bengal. The youth minds were easily attracted by the European knowledge and wisdom and by the

arguments with scientific analysis.⁷ Actually the British Rulers wanted that the new generation of English learning Indian would play as a weapon in favour of British administration and they should be kept alienated from the mass Indian citizens. But in history, the result was opposite. With the ideas of scientific and analytical European education, the upcoming new generation with modern learning tried to feel from the core of their hearts to hate the social superstitions and bondage of their country. This new intellectual segment or, group was originally influenced by the ingredients of freedom, fraternity and equality of the *French Revolution*. They were also influenced by the writings and compositions of the great philosopher and scholars. For example, it could be mentioned that when the books like *Rights of Man* by Thomas Paine, *Emancipate the Colonies* by Bentham reached at Calcutta from Europe, the students of the then Hindu College used to purchase those compositions then and there. In the 1st part of 19th century, the reflection against the superstitions and injustice was seen on the students' movement. In spite of that influence, the students' movement could not attain a proper shape but afterwards, the flow of such student agitation was spread everywhere. This new wave of students was initiated with the inspiration of Henry Louis Vivian Derozio (18 April, 1809—26 December, 1831), the young professor of Hindu College and with the movements of *Young Bengal*. In one side he was a teacher and on the other, he was their friend. He was a Calcutta Eurasian Portuguese Indian ancestry, the son of an officer in an English mercantile firm. His name is occasionally spelt as De Rozio. His personality brought a new era in the annals of the college, the youthful teacher drawing the senior boys like a magnet. According to his biographer "neither before, nor since his day has any teacher, within the walls of any native educational establishment in India, ever exercised such an influence over his pupils not only in classrooms, but also outside the hours as well." In 1828, after a constructive discussion, the formation of *Academic Association* took shape in the House of Derozio.⁸ Derozio was its first president and Uma Charan Basu, student of Derozio, was its first secretary. The students of Derozio were the forerunner of this mission. It was the first student organisation in India functioning in an organised and regular manner.⁹

The vibrant factor behind the rise of academic association was the growing modern consciousness termed as renaissance among a section of educated Bengali people. This section of the people was well acquainted to the social problems. They were frustrated with the social discrimination in terms of caste, classes, sex, religion, tradition etc. They also showed their dissatisfaction to the exploitative nature of the British rule.¹⁰ It may be said that this consciousness among the educated people was the by-product of western education and other movements of European countries and subsequently they reacted against the social injustice and discrimination. These new consciousness had left a deep impact on the radical students and they thought to be organised. Derozio organised these students and trained them to fight against the orthodox practices. He persistently encouraged students to free thinking, to question and not to believe anything blindly. His teachings inspired the development of the spirit of liberty, equality and freedom.

To spread the aims and objectives of newly formed Academic Association, the students of Derozio took an effort to publish one Magazine named *Parthenon* in 1829 and finally it was published in 1830. The worship to idols, superstitions were highly criticized and objected through this publication and it influenced the people in favour of spreading the scientific education. In support of the success of the *July Revolution of 1830*, some students of the then Hindu College wanted to greet that movement and they hoisted the Flag of French Revolution on the top of the Monument which carried the impressions of equality, friendship and freedom and replaced the Union Jack of the British Emperor. Prof. Susobhan Sarkar (1979) opined that 200 students attended the July Revolution celebration in the Town Hall, Kolkata on 10th December, 1830. For such an incident and protest by the reactionaries, Derozio was compelled to leave the Hindu College. But in spite of expulsion of Derozio, the new wave of conscious thinking could not be wiped out from the mind of the students.¹¹ It can be said that the neo-philosophy of life which influenced the youth intellectuals of that age afterwards shaped and ignited the flame of freedom movement among the students of that age.

1:4 Activities

The prominent members of the Academic Association were Krishna Mohan Banerjee, Rasik Krishna Mallick, Peary Chand Mitra, Dakshina Ranjan Mukherjee, Radhanath Sikdar, Hara Chandra Ghosh, Tarinicharan Banerjee, Ramtanu Lahiri, Tarachand Chakraborty, Ramkrishna Dey, Ramgopal Ghosh, Uma Charan Basu who believed classical economy and free trade. These radical students were very critical to the social, economic and political problems of the period. Their main task was to arrange discussion on the matter such as free will, the sacredness of truth, patriotism, free ordination, debate on burning issues etc. The discussion of the academic association attracted the attention of the educated elites of Bengal and even English administrators. For example, David Hare, Col. Benson, private secretary of Lord William Bentinck were regularly present to their discussion.¹² They also discussed to the need of female education and introduction of widow remarriage and published articles on the subject regularly.

The radical student movement of 1830s fought against all kinds of social problems. It played a noteworthy role in the spheres of social activities. The pioneer of this movement was *Derozians*. The students of academic association were vehemently criticised the Hindu orthodox practices. They indulged in prohibited food and drink. Some of the students used to repeat lines from *Iliad* instead of *mantras* at the time of prayer in Hindu College. Even, they used to take beef openly. These activities showed the extreme and revolting attitude to the tradition. A thorough revolution took place in their ideas.¹³ They raised their voice against the forced labour, introduction of English as court language, press act, political power of the company, and unprotected status of the peasantry.¹⁴ They also agitated by the issues like treatment of Indian labour in Mauritius, the extension of the right of trial by jury, the

introduction of English as court language, freedom of press and forced labour amongst the coolies employed by various government departments.¹⁵ Their main weapon of protest was small discussions, debates, meetings, hall gatherings, lectures and discourses, petition and protest letters, public meetings and even strikes. Their strongest weapon of publicity was various newspapers, periodicals and journals which discussed below in details.

1:4:1 Publications of the Association or Derozians

To spread their ideas, aims and objectives, the students or Derozians had been published following periodicals and journals from 1828 to 1844.

1. **The Parthenon:** In 1830 only one issue was published. After that it was discontinued.¹⁶

2. **Jnanannesan:** It means quest of knowledge. The journal was started in 1831 and continued up to 1844. With the active initiative of Rashik Krishna Mallick the journal had last long aimed to educate the people in scientific knowledge. The Christian Missionaries had also played an important part in support of the publication of *Jnanannesan*.¹⁷ The journal propagated the new philosophy of Young Bengal and specially made some suggestions for the improvement of colonial administration and eradication of some social evils. Rashik Krishna Mallick demanded the abolition of political power of the East India Company and the establishment of full parliamentary democracy. He also criticised the rampant corruption in the police force and demanded its remedies.¹⁸

3. **Enquirer:** It was started by Krishna Mohan Bandyopadhyay in 1831. The journal highly criticised the orthodox ideas of the then Hindu community as because they were always against the young radicals.¹⁹

4. **Hindu Pioneer:** The journal was started in 1838. It showed the social and political consciousness among the members of academic association or the Derozians. It published several articles on 'India and Foreigners' which complained of the people's exclusion from any share of the government and inexcusable burden of taxes.²⁰

5. **The Quill:** It was started by Tarachand Chakraborty in 1834 aimed to criticise the policy of the government. He pointed out the unprotected status of the peasantry under the Permanent Settlement introduced by Lord Cornwallis in 1793. He strongly advocated the abolition of the political power of the merchant company.²¹

6. **Hesperus:** It was also a journal of Derozians aimed to publish articles criticising the superstition of the then orthodox Hindu society.²²

7. **The Bengal Spectator:** Most probably, it was the last journal published by the Derozians. It was a monthly journal starting publication in 1842, but later on it became daily. Its main objective was to public the social, economic and political problems of the period. The Bengal Spectator began to agitate for competitive civil service examination.²³ The journal also published the articles favouring female education and widow remarriage question.

8. **The East Indian:** The journal was started by Derozio himself with the assistance of his students and continued till his death.²⁴

9. **Athenium:** It was a monthly journal started by Madhav Chandra Mallick, member of Academic Association aimed to propagate their views in public.²⁵

1:5 Impact

It can be kept in mind that from the beginning of the twentieth century and before the starting of organized student movement, the students moved unorganized way by writing against the irregularities, bondage and conservative attitude of British ruling. It was also observed that such student agitation against the British administration was initiated at Bengal first. The cause of such movement was to some extent for Bengal Renaissance. After Derozio the Academic Association did not stop their activities. They were alive till about 1839. David hare accepted the presidentship after Derozio. It was supplemented by an Epistolary Association in which the Derozians exchanged opinions in the true renaissance humanist style. It left a deep impact on the contemporary social and cultural organisation. For instances, in 1838, on 12th March, with a view to form a permanent organization to discuss about different problems and crisis of the country, Tarinicharan Banerjee, RamtanuLahiri, TarachandChakraborty, RamkrishnaDey, RamgopalGhosh and many others convened a meeting at Sanskrit College in Calcutta. Out of 200 participants who remained present in the meeting, most of them were the students, particularly the students from Hindu College. The outcome of the meeting was the formation of **Society for the Acquisition of General Knowledge (1938)**. Its president was TarachandChakraborty, Vice president RamgopalGhose and Peary Chand Mitra was the first secretary. The society published three volumes of selection of papers presented at its meetings between 1840 and 1843. It was an intellectual organisation which began to take shape as an anti-British sentiment. Their main agenda of discussion was civil and social reforms among Indians.²⁶In 1841, the students and youths progressed one step more and they formed a half-shaped or, partial political platform or, organization in the name of "**DeshhitaishiSabha**". The chief exponent of this Sabha was Sarada Prasad, an ex-student of Hindu College. It was declared that the Sabha or, organization was made for all the Indians irrespective of caste, creed or religion. "*The objective of this newly made platform was stating the reasons that as the British rulers never allowed any political freedom to the Indians and they deprived of their right, which was the main cause behind the crisis and miseries of Indian people. So to get rid of this situation, Indians have to be united first to arrange to get relief from such torture and improper administration, the formation behind such unity would be the patriotism or, love for the country and the said platform or, organization would be run on the basis of welfare to the nation and its people in general.*"²⁷The Derozian societies were youth cultural associations but they were being drawn towards politics.

1:6 Conclusion

The Academic Association did not last long because it failed to gather mass support from the Bengali society as well as intelligentsia. Even, Raja Rammohan Roy, the architect of renaissance Bengal did not support them. The contemporary society was dazed beyond measure by the activities of the *Derozians*, and yet they formed more of a group with a certain viewpoint than a real sustained movement with a solid basis and growing support. Being a group of brightest student of the country they created sensation and stir, but they failed to develop a definite progressing ideology. Their ideology was shaky. Therefore, they did not succeed to develop any movement outside their charmed circle. Practically, western type radical politics were hardly possible in Bengal at that time. Contemporary Bengali society was not prepared to expedite the radical movements.

Paradoxically, the members of the Academic Association were not able to evaluate themselves properly. Even, they were not committed to sustain their radical ideology after Derozio. If we meticulously study the profile of the radical student leaders of Academic Association we find that most of them were compromised with the traditional system. Some of them adopted Christian religion and few came back to Hinduism and others were involved with the *Talukdari* system. We can cite few examples here; Dakshina Ranjan Mukhopadhyay had started his new life as a *Talukdar* in Ayodha; Rasik Krishna Mallick, Kishori Chand Mitra and many others had joined the Government services. Actually what they thought, it could not be materialised properly. They had done little for their country, they professes to do, but hardly ever does anything. They did discussions and no action. Sometimes, they supported the policies of the British for the establishment of their own.

Apart from all these, the Derozians or the radical students attracted much attention for several years. We did not raise question of their patriotism, but due to their lack of experience and way of action they did not get mass support from the society.

To sum up it can be said that few student organisations were emerged in that period in a scattering way, but academic association was the well organised apolitical student wing under the leadership of Derozio, a strangest figure in the history of Bengal Renaissance. The members and followers of the association were conscious both socially and politically. Even, the British rulers get alarmed and think how to tackle this rising dangerous trend! But they confine their attention in the elite society and later on deviated from their original motto. They were very much orthodox and it was one of their main reservations. It was irrelevant to the enlightened students' movement of the time. As a blind follower of westernise concept they failed to recognise the positive aspects of Hinduism.

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