

M. N. Roy on Radical Humanism and its Relevance in Modern Times

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M. N. Roy was one of the most fascinating, though highly controversial modern Indian thinker on politics and philosophy. In the evolution of his ideas, he shifted his position from a nationalist revolutionary to an ardent Marxist and from a Marxist to a radical humanist. Roy attempted to give a scientific exposition of philosophy and distinguished it from religion. He said that no philosophical advancement is possible in the presence of religious beliefs and theological dogmas.

He felt the need of a new and truly revolutionary social and political philosophy, which would infuse a fresh and re-invigorating ethical outlook, and realized the real nature of man. The philosophy of Radical Humanism, which Roy developed, was an effort in this direction. The present article endeavors to analyze his philosophy of Radical Humanism and its relevance in the present day.

Right from the beginning till present, humanism as a philosophical movement concentrates on man and his power. The principles of humanism are such as: that man, by nature is good and capable of indefinite advances towards perfection; that there cannot exist, any insuperable barrier to the future progress of human civilization, human efforts can eliminate all barrier of progress; that if full liberty, is granted to the individual, he will use it for the betterment of the society as a whole.¹

M. N. Roy preached a new approach to humanistic thought which is suitable particularly for man in any society. He realizes a number of problems and defects in prevailing humanism and establishes a new brand of humanism. His movement for a humanist revival, starting from the attempt to explain what is human nature. Manhood is the beginning of human existence, and man is an end in himself. To Roy, humanism cannot be based on, the belief that there is something higher than man. Roy claims that his new Humanism is integral Humanism, distinguished from older forms of Humanism, which were more poetic

and romantic, by being strictly based on scientific knowledge of man and human nature. He adopts scientific approach to understanding human nature.²

Roy observed that Radical Humanism should not be treated as a mere abstract political philosophy or a social philosophy or economic theory. It is a set of principles which have their relevance to all branches of man's life and social existence, and show a way towards their recognition. Roy tried to trace the root of human rationality to law governed universe. He held that the rationality of man is innate. According to Roy, reason is evolved through consciousness, a property of life which consists in an awareness of the total human environment.³

Reason is not something mysterious because its roots can be traced in lifeless physical nature. Human rationality is only an expression of reason in nature. He calls reason 'the rhythm of the cosmos'. He was one with Hobbes who also considered man as essentially a rational being. Roy believed that Hobbes was 'unjustly vilified' for his concept of human nature.⁴

The whole theory of Radical Humanism is based on rationalism. The pivot of his philosophy is that everything should be decided by reason before that is accepted but unfortunately he has failed to clearly and precisely define the term 'reason'. He has also failed to give any standard and acceptable definition of judging rationality and irrationality.⁵ By describing man as rational, Roy over simplified the problem of human nature. Roy's conception of human nature became the basis of society and state. He attributed their origin to the actions of man for promoting his freedom. Hence, man is an end itself, and state and society are means to achieve development of man.

He regarded freedom as the most fundamental human value as it is the essence of human existence. The urge for freedom being the basic incentive of life, the purpose of all rational human endeavour must be to strive for the removal of social conditions which restrict the unfolding of the potentialities of man. He regarded the quest for freedom as the continuation on a higher level of intelligence and emotion-of the biological struggle for existence.⁶

In his love for individual freedom, Roy could not properly understand the relation between the individual and society. He laid too much stress on the importance of individual liberty. Roy was of the opinion that man created society and had to accept the bondages of society

to become the member of the state. But he forget that 'man is a social animal' and society is essential for man for his proper development and also very existence.⁶

Roy has also condemned religion as a hindrance in the development of freedom. But his opinion about religion is wrong. In fact, religion being a part of human life plays a very significant role in our cultural and intellectual development. Another serious defect in his philosophy is that he has tried to establish that physical and social beings are governed by the same principles but such an analogy does not appear to be very correct as he himself subsequently establishes, that social beings are rational whereas physical beings are bound to obey certain pre-determined and decided laws without testing them on tests of rationality and reasonability.⁷

He had firm faith in democracy. He emphasized that freedom of man and unrestricted popular sovereignty, should be the main purpose of any government. The liberation of man, the dignity and position of the individual can be possible only in a free atmosphere of real democracy. The idea that a democracy should mean a government by the people, for the people and of the people, meant for him.⁸

According to Roy, the modern state, with the enormous increase in its political and economic functions and in its military might, has become a veritable Leviathan and the individual is being reduced to a non-entity. Parliamentary Democracy does not make it possible for the people to exercise an effective control on the affairs of the state. This led Roy to conclude that parliamentary democracy exists only in form but not in content. Therefore, the concept of organized democracy was developed by M.N. Roy, as an alternative to both Communism and Parliamentary, Democracy.⁹

The main features of organized democracy were that the new state structure stands on a firm base of hierarchy of People's Committees at the base village to national level and to be elected by the local people for a period of one year. The organized democracy was decentralization of power. They would be empowered to give expression to the will of the people on various issues for the guidance of their representatives, of expressing opinion on proposed legislation as well as of Initiating legislation for the consideration of legislature, of recommending the recall of elected representatives, and of demanding a referendum on any legislative or executive measure of,

either the Central or the State Government. In this way, maximum power would be decentralized and only those functions would be assigned to district committees, State Government and the Central Government which cannot by their nature be discharged at the lower levels.¹⁰

Furthermore, the representatives elected at higher levels will remain under the control of the primary voters, that is, they shall be responsible, not to one or the other of political parties, but to the voters themselves, and shall be liable to be recalled by them.

Organized democracy will not be able to empower the people, if the people do not have either the will or the capacity to wield that power. To promote freedom as against fatalism, to promote rationalism and to promote secular morality as against religions orthodoxy, is therefore, the essence of a cultural movement, which is necessary if the experiment of an Organised Democracy is to succeed.¹¹

In Roy's philosophy Organised Democracy can only work successfully when highly intelligent people with high moral character and integrity come to power. But both these conditions appears to be more utopian than practicable. History is a witness, that in every society, intelligent people with high moral character and sterling integrity always do not come to power.¹²

Party-less Politics

Roy was the first political scientist in India who conceived and developed the idea that the party system is inimical to the maintenance of a genuine democracy, if by democracy, it is meant, a rule of the people and by the people and, not merely a rule for the people.¹³ M.N. Roy developed the theory of party-less politics as the emergence of political parties in the working of democracy has brought in its wake all the evils of party politics. The main drawback of the party system is that it is based on the delegation of power by the people to party candidates who after their election remain responsible only to their respective parties instead of their voters. Under the party system, the people lose their power completely and remain powerless till the next election takes place. According to Roy, if democracy consists of the widest diffusion of power, the party system functions in just the opposite direction by concentrating power in a few hands, if not in hands of a single leader.¹⁴

Roy pointed out that the people are nowhere in this scramble for power. There has been no case of a party capturing power and administering it, under the control of the people. Any majority party can establish a dictatorial regime. The only guarantee is its moral sense. But an impersonal machine can have no sense of morality and it is no guarantee against dictatorship. The party system is harmful to a genuine democracy because during the struggle for power between political parties, a divorce is brought about between morality and politics and they try to acquire it by fair or foul means. They tend to take advantage of the prejudices and religious sentiments of the people in order to win their allegiance and their votes. Consequently, party politics has become a dirty game in all the democracies, and this is particularly in countries where the people are under the domination of religious orthodoxy and blind faith, Instead of asking the people to have faith in themselves, political leaders urge the people to have faith in their respective parties.¹⁵ The party leaders in the name of the masses, steal the show. M.N. Roy was not prepared to leave the individual man in such a helpless political situation. He suggested that democracy to sustain itself, must be individual centred.¹⁶

Roy maintained that under the circumstances associated with the party system, politicians cannot appeal to the intelligence judgment of the people. On the contrary, false and imaginary issues are raised, passions incited, mass hysteria created. Whichever party possesses skill in election manoeuvres and has the largest party machine and best organs of propaganda, has the greatest chance of capturing power. It is the necessity of the party system to confuse, deceive and mislead the sovereign people. These practices being palpably immoral, party politics cannot be purified. In the words of Roy, party politics is not only unnecessary for a democracy but is actually antithetical to it, party politics has become a terrain in which decent men and women fear to lead.¹⁷

According to Roy “a constitution structure based on an even distribution of power alone can purify politics and such a system is said to be really democratic”. In the place of the political parties, M.N. Roy proposed to place the professional groups. These experts will help for forming opinion for good government in a democracy and the political parties can be easily eliminated.

Roy had advocated powerless and party-less democracy. The evils of party-politics are well known to everybody. It is also a fact that the democratic institutions cannot function

without the existence of the political parties. It is not possible to eliminate political parties. Even Roy's concept of Organised Democracy is not possible without political parties. In the elections, party system will emerge in one form or the other. It is very difficult to organise the electorate in such a big country like India without the party system. He has more or less failed to give any other practical and suitable alternative to the party system. His concept and idea of Peoples' Committee is not a practical substitute or solution to political party system.¹⁸

In spite of the above mentioned short-comings of Roy's philosophy of Radical Humanism, it has relevance in modern times.

The continued relevance of Radical Humanism is based on the correctness of two basic propositions. First is about the centrality of the man in all social collectivities, because the man is possessed of consciousness and can experience progress or regress, and the progress or regress of such collectivity must depend upon what is experienced by men composing it. Therefore, man is measure of all things. There can be little doubt about the correctness of this proposition. It is obvious that development and happiness of any social agglomeration can be measured only by the progress and happiness experienced by the men who compose it. But, unfortunately, there has been a tendency to put one collectivity or another above men and, the man has been asked to venerate that collectivity and even sacrifice for it.

However, due to love of mystery and the awe which it inspires, there has always been tendency, even in learned persons including eminent scientists, to place artificial limits on the scope of scientific knowledge. In this regard mention may be made of the Theory of Probability. According to the theory, there is inherent 'indeterminacy' in nature, which implies not only that scientific knowledge is unreliable, but that, it can never be reliable. While the Probability theory seems to have receded into the background in the recent years, similar limits to human knowledge are being perceived and expressed from time to time. While many things about man and the world are yet to be known, there are no set limits to the potentialities of the human mind, to know them. Thus, the correctness of this proposition can hardly be doubted keeping in view, the development of modern science, that man is part of nature and that, therefore, the scientific approach should be adopted for the understanding of man, society and his place in the world. The history of science has shown that there is no justification for assuming that any supra-natural force interferes in

the shaping of natural events. There is, therefore, every reason to believe that Radical Humanism is not only the philosophy of the present but also of the future.¹⁹

The idea of decentralization of power is gaining strength in India, is evident from fact that local self government system has been incorporated in our Constitution by the 73rd and 74th Amendment in 1992. The local governments will have the power of self-government and such additional powers as the state legislature may grant them.

His criticism of party system, has also been fully justified in context of contemporary Indian politics. He described political parties as antithetical to the preservation and development of a genuine democracy. Soon after independence, when the Indian National Congress came into power, the limited amount of internal democracy which existed in the party disappeared. Jawaharlal Nehru, the leader of the ruling Congress party, became virtually the absolute ruler of the country. Some internal elections in the Indian National Congress used to take place at the beginning, but in the course of time, they disappeared. Centralisation of power reached to its climax during the regime of Indira Gandhi. No internal elections took place in the Congress for many years, including the years after the supreme power passed from the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty into other hands. It has also proved to be true regarding other political parties. Thus, the first objection of Roy that the party system would result in concentration of power and virtual negation of democracy, is borne out by practical experience.

Roy's warning that party politics would bring about a divorce between morality and political practice has been borne out even more vividly and in a frightening form. For meeting the mounting expenses of periodic elections, the whole political administration of the country has reached a level of corruption which is truly alarming. An unholy alliance has also developed between politicians, the local administration and the anti-social elements and downright criminals. This criminalization of politics is not confined to a few parties, but has infected even those parties which were known to have been firmly based on political principles. Further, due to political parties, India has reached a stage when a genuine apprehension has arisen that communal animosities, particularly between Hindus and Muslims, would be fomented for political gains to such an extent that Indian democracy itself, may be replaced by an indigenous variety of Fascism.²⁰

It would be wrong to assess the relevance of Roy's ideas to the contemporary world, by not attaching importance to institutional devices which Roy had visualized for ensuring the freedom and progress of individuals in political and economic spheres. In the political field, Roy propagated the view that Parliamentary democracy should be replaced by an organized democracy.²¹

If democracy is to be real, power must be radically decentralized and brought nearer to the people. The people also should be organized so as to be able to exercise that power. The constitution of a genuine democracy should, therefore, provide for a network of Peoples' Committees in villages and towns. Political power must be radically decentralized and effectively vested in these primary Peoples' Committees. The Peoples' Committees should have wide powers, not only of local-self government, but also of economic planning and development, education, health and hygiene, maintenance of law and order etc. The Peoples' Committees, in short, should be the real repositories of people's power. The Parliament should be at the apex based on a network of such local democracies.²² Such power, as may have to be delegated to centres higher than the Peoples' Committees, should be in the hands of candidates proposed by the Peoples' Committees and liable to be recalled by them, and that the functioning of higher centres including the Central Government should be under a standing control of the primary Peoples' Committees.²³

In Roy's philosophy of Radical Humanism, a very high place to ethics has been given, because he believed that the modern crisis is essentially a moral crisis. His approach to ethical problem is based on an integrated view of life and nature. He did not agree with those who believe that science by undermining the influence of religion has made us morally irresponsible. He believed that political theory and practice could not be harmonized with moral values so long as there appeared to be no relation between science and philosophy. He rejected the prevailing opinion that science cannot be integrated with social philosophy and political theory, which led to a growing alienation of morality from political practice. Therefore, he deduces his system of secular morality from his integral philosophy, which is neither institutional nor utilitarian. It is based on rationalism. Thus, Roy rescues rationalism and ethics from the devastating consequences of skepticism. Roy's concept of a secular rational morality opens up a new perspective before the modern world. It makes the time honored concepts of man's dignity, personality, sovereignty, creativeness full of meaning. This self-realisation about himself will restore man's

confidence in himself, and thus, create the condition for the resolution of the moral crisis of our time. This is an important contribution of Roy to political thought.²⁴

Roy tried to combine scientific objectivity with ethical idealism in political practice. The importance of secular ethics in an age of secular public life is undeniable, and therefore, Roy's attempt to reconcile moral values with the secular outlook should be appreciated by all who stand for modernism, without sacrificing the positive values of the past. The problem of corruption is the most vital problem of Indian public life of today and Roy tried to trace it to the politics of power.²⁵

Roy opined that unless the mankind is united, the problems of mankind would not end. The present world is suffering mostly because of burning nationalism. The whole world is divided into small national boundaries and that leaves little scope to think it as a single unit. To avoid the future wars, higher thinking is a pre-condition and for that national ambitions have to be abandoned. World peace would remain impossibility, so long as the nations talk of their own interests and forget the interests of others. Moreover, national considerations when extended into economic domain, lead to imperialism.

He believed that the international fraternity should be accepted as an organic whole and it is a fact of necessity. Extending his political ideas to the economic field, Roy suggested to surrender the national economic problems to international conditions. It was in this context, he opined, that further exploitation of the backward and under-developed countries by the richer one's would be undesirable and dangerous. He viewed that international trade should be transformed from struggle by the nations to get one another into non-payable debt to a mutually advantageous exchange of real wealth. Mere competition for capturing international market would lead to depression on one hand and dumping on the other. The world can no longer thrive on the road to progress, if the individual nations forget their responsibility for the whole of mankind. Therefore, Roy laid much emphasis on the unity of the world. Radical Humanism is essentially a path to attain internationalism.

In the economic sphere, he projected cooperative economy as an alternative to capitalist Free Enterprise and to Communist Nationalisation of all vital public utilities. After the collapse of Communism, there has been a worldwide upsurge in favour of capitalist free enterprise. However, this upsurge is gradually subsiding. It is being increasingly realized that contemporary capitalism dominated by multi-national and trans-national corporations

cannot be given a free hand to exploit the consumers in the developing countries. State intervention in the economic affairs is thus inevitable, to avoid inflation and industrial stagnation, to grant relief against the increasing scale of unemployment and also to provide security to the people against various contingencies.²⁶

His idea to that primacy should be given to the development of agricultural and small scale industries, and that the large scale industry will develop on the basis of the increased demand generated by the increased income of those engaged in agriculture and small undertakings, is borne out in both theory and practice. A number of economists in India accept the type of development which Roy had visualized, as the only way in which employment can be increased and mass poverty be reduced. The phenomenal economic growth which is taking place in China at present is based on the type of development which Roy had visualized.²⁷

In Roy's opinion, cultural transformation must precede a social revolution otherwise any revolution brought about by a political party in a culturally backward society would result in the establishment of an authoritarian state. In the post-independence period, this has been proved true in India. During the period, all party leaders who have been Prime Minister of India, including Jawaharlal Nehru who had an uninterrupted regime of 17 years, and Indira Gandhi were socialists by profession. There are several reasons why these leaders could not achieve required progress in the direction of democratic socialism.²⁸ Firstly, they themselves constituted the main vested interest in the country, the liquidation of which was necessary if democracy was to be realised by a radical decentralization of power. Second, they were actively engaged in the inter-party struggle for power, with the result that their political practice was at variance with their professed principles. Lastly, exploitative economic structure required for their removal a strong popular initiative, which neither the ruling party nor any of the opposition parties could possibly generate.

Therefore, socio-political transformation in society can be brought about from below by the initiative of the people at the local level, striving for freedom and not revolution imposed from above, by a political party which succeeds in capturing state power. The state legislature cannot solve all the problems. As proved in India, that in spite of large scale legislation to curb corruption, crime, dowry system, crime against women, infanticide, foeticide have increased because of lack of cultural awareness in the masses.

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