

M. N. ROY: A NATIONALIST REVOLUTIONARY, A COMMUNIST AND A RADICAL HUMANIST

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Abstract :

Manabendra Nath Roy (1887-1954) is one of the most outstanding political thinkers in modern India. He is considered as one of the first communists in India. But the fact is that as a political thinker, Roy passed through three different phases in his life. In the first phase, which lasted up to 1919, Roy was a national revolutionary involved in the terrorist or violent movements in Bengal. In the second phase, Roy was a Marxist engaged in active communist movement, first in Mexico and then in Russia, China and India. In the last and final phase, Roy emerged as a Radical Humanist in favour of some kind of liberal humanism. As a political leader, Roy is considered as most remarkable failure in the history of the Indian national movement. As an individual, Roy had great qualities of intellect and character. He had a remarkable sense of purpose and determination. He had a tremendous ability to organize and inspire personal loyalty. But despite these personal qualities, Roy never became much more than a leader of a small political sect. However, his failure was not the inevitable but regrettable inability of a saint to handle the world of politics.

Key Words :

Communist Revolution, Marxism, Class-struggle, Radical Humanism, COMINTERN, Bourgeoisie, Medievalism, Conservatism, Capitalism, Workers and Peasants, Proletariat, Industrialization, Imperialism, Colonialism, Nationalism, Decolonization, Democracy, Fascism, New Humanism, Doctrine of Dialectics, Theory of Surplus Value, Individualism, Liberalism.

Roy as a Nationalist Revolutionary :

M. N. Roy's original name was Narendranath Bhattacharya. He came from a Bengali Brahmin family, and had quite an unremarkable childhood. His brief experience with the terrorists was crucial to his political career. As a student, Roy was attracted to the nationalist revolutionary Yugantar Group. In 1910 he was sentenced to imprisonment in connection with the Howrah Conspiracy Case. He was again arrested in 1915 for involving himself in revolutionary activities. In 1915 he escaped from prison and went to the Dutch Indies. In Java, he made contacts with German agents for bringing arms for the Indian revolutionaries. But he did not get the arms on time. Subsequently, he went to the U.S.A. as disguised. There, in Stanford University, he met a lady called Evelyn Trent with whom he got married. From U.S.A., he went to

Mexico in 1919 where he settled under the name of Manabendra Nath Roy, his previous name being Narendranath Bhattacharya.

Roy as a Communist :

In Mexico, Roy came in close contact with Michael Borodin, the Russian communist, and was converted to Marxism. He participated in the formation of the Mexican Communist Party - the first communist party outside Russia. After some time, Roy became the General Secretary of the Mexican Communist Party. Later, Roy was invited to Russia as a representative of the Mexican Communist Party to attend the Second Congress of the COMINTERN in 1920. In Moscow, Roy offered his critical comments on Lenin's Draft Thesis on the National and Colonial Question. Roy differed to Lenin about communist tactics in the colonial countries.

Roy believed that the communists in colonial countries (including India) should more rely on the workers and the masses rather than on bourgeoisies. He advocated a militant uncompromising policy in the colonial countries. Whereas Lenin considered that in the early stages of the national liberation movement in colonial countries, the communists should work in co-operation, and not in conflict, with the national bourgeoisie who sought freedom. Moreover, Lenin considered that Gandhi was playing a progressive role in the conditions prevailing in India. But Roy regarded Gandhi as a purely mediaevalist reactionary.

In 1922, Roy wrote a book namely 'India in Transition' in which he criticized the Indian moderates who believed in the British sense of justice. He characterized them as the instruments of the Indian bourgeoisie. Roy claimed that the only solution for India is to adopt Marxist philosophy. He was greatly distrustful of the role of the national bourgeoisie led by Gandhi. In his book "India's Problem and its Solution," he criticized Congress policies as a betrayal by the bourgeoisie leadership of the revolutionary forces and attacked Gandhi's medievalism and conservatism. He believed that the religious ideology preached by Gandhi appealed to the mediaeval mentality of the masses and, thereby, effectively discouraged any revolutionary mass action.

According to Roy, the non-co-operation movement of 1920-22 was inspired by the ideology of the lower middle class and did not contain any revolutionary programme. Hence he called for militant action by the masses in place of the Gandhian policy of non-co-operation. He complained that the Congress had failed to organize the workers and peasants because big capitalists financially supported the Congress. In 1922, Gandhi called off the non-co-operation movement on account of the violent incident at Chauri Chaura. Roy regarded this as an open betrayal of the revolutionary movement.

Roy expected that C. R. Das, who presided over the 1922 Congress session at Gaya, would give a radical orientation to Congress policies. But C. R. Das rejected the path of violent revolution. In his presidential address, he even declared that he believed in non-violence in principle. Being disappointed with the Gaya Congress in

1922, Roy felt that, in the circumstances, the organization of a party of the workers and peasants of India was indispensable. Therefore, the Workers' and Peasants' Party was established in 1923.

Though Roy continued to be critical of Gandhi, after seeing the tremendous hold that Gandhi had on the Indian masses and the way he had mobilized them, Roy somewhat modified his approach to Gandhi. He acknowledged Gandhi's role in rousing the masses and compared him with St. Thomas Aquinas. Yet Roy continued to criticize Gandhi saying that he was mixing religion with politics. He described Gandhi's economics of 'charkha' as being reactionary. Roy also disagreed with Gandhi's political methods and condemned his negotiations with the British Viceroy saying that he was not a believer in revolution but in "weak and watery reformism."

The Fifth Congress of the COMINTERN in 1924 decided to establish direct contact with the Indian National Congress. Roy opposed this idea saying that it would run counter to the thesis adopted by the COMINTERN in the Second Congress. He wanted the COMINTERN itself to encourage the communist movement in India, and not through the Indian National Congress.

In 1924 an attempt was made to form a legal Communist party in India. It was declared that the new party would be an Indian organization unconnected with the Communist International. This declaration was totally unacceptable to Roy. He described the idea as non-communistic and declared that those who maintained this point of view were the real enemies of the Indian working class.

While analyzing the reasons for the failure of the non-co-operation movement, Roy said that the Indian bourgeoisie was "too afraid, too hesitating to follow a revolutionary channel." He maintained that the Indian bourgeoisie had been won over by the British imperialists and had become their allies. Under the circumstances the proletariat alone could fight against imperialism.

Roy advocated the organization of a broad - based people's party which would organize all exploited sections of the Indian society. Though he was strongly against the co-operation with the big bourgeoisie, he did recognize the role of the petty bourgeoisie in the organization and leadership of the small traders, artisans, employees, students and petty intellectuals for the people's party. Roy observed that the big bourgeoisie had been practically eliminated from the struggle for national liberation. Therefore, reliance had to be placed on the petty bourgeoisie, namely, the small traders, artisans, employees, students and petty intellectuals.

Roy wanted the class struggle to be intensified along with the national liberation movement so that the fight for national freedom "becomes a class - struggle approximating to the final stage". This class - struggle was to be intensified not only by the Communist Party, but also by the People's Party. He believed that the people's fight for freedom must be led by the party of the people, in which "the proletariat will stand side by side with the petty bourgeoisie and peasant masses." In this context, Roy

condemned the Swaraj Party, led by C. R. Das and Motilal Nehru, as a defender of capitalism and landlordism.

In 1927, the Congress of Oppressed Nationalities, which was dominated by Roy's rivals, undermined his position in Europe. Roy's position in Russia was further undermined when Soumyendranath Tagore, a leader of the Bengal Workers' and Peasants' Party, visited Moscow in June 1927. Tagore told the General Secretary of the Central Committee of the COMINTERN that there are only about a dozen communists in India. He also complained that hardly any money that the COMINTERN had given to Roy was received in India and the communist movement was greatly handicapped due to the lack of money and literature.

In 1927, Roy was sent to China as a leader of the COMINTERN Delegation. On the instructions of the COMINTERN, the Chinese communists had sought to work in co-operation with the Kuomintang. But eventually the Kuomintang and Chiang-Kai-Shek turned against the Chinese communists. The fact is that Roy had never trusted the national bourgeoisie and had advised not to create any alliance with the Kuomintang. But as the representative of the COMINTERN in China, Roy had to implement the COMINTERN policy of co-operation with Kuomintang, even though he himself was against this idea. And yet, when the Kuomintang turned against the Chinese communists, Roy had to bear responsibility for the failure of the COMINTERN policy in China.

By 1928 Roy had developed his theory of decolonization and had moved to the right. According to Roy, decolonization arises out of the crisis in imperialism and the decay of capitalism. With the accumulation of capital in imperial countries, which cannot be profitably invested at home, the imperialists seek fields of investment in the colonies. To facilitate this, they permit the colonies to industrialize themselves. In the long run, such industrialization results in decolonization, which eventually leads to the transfer of power from the imperialist bourgeoisie to the nationalist bourgeoisie in the colonies.

The Sixth Congress of the COMINTERN met at Moscow in 1928 in which the COMINTERN moved to the left. It advocated a policy of uncompromising hostility towards the national bourgeoisie. It was the policy which Roy had been preaching since the Second Congress of 1920, but which he had then just given up. The Sixth Congress rejected Roy's Decolonization Theory on the ground that the national bourgeoisie is a counter – revolutionary force. Because of the bitter experience of betrayal by the Chinese bourgeoisie, the COMINTERN followed the policy of uncompromising hostility towards the bourgeoisie. The Sixth Congress also declared that the workers' and peasants' parties could easily be converted into ordinary petty-bourgeoisie parties. Therefore, the real task of the communists should be to organize all communist groups and individuals into a single, unified communist party. Thus, the COMINTERN accepted the ideas that Roy had suggested much earlier. But it was too late for Roy as his position in the COMINTERN was much undermined.

After the Sixth Congress, Roy worked for one more year as a member of the COMINTERN. But since the Sixth Congress Roy was standing before the 'Sacred Guillotine.' Eventually in July 1929 he was expelled from the COMINTERN. It was declared that Roy was no longer a 'comrade of the communists' but was rather the 'comrade of Gandhi.' Roy attributed his expulsion to a conspiracy. According to him, the desire of the Communist Party of Great Britain to establish its supremacy over the Indian communist movement, the criticism by people like Soumyendranath Tagore and the internal struggle of the Russian Communist Party all contributed to his victimization.

After his expulsion from the COMINTERN, Roy returned to India in December 1930 and, at the invitation of Nehru, attended the 1931 Karachi Congress. After that he was jailed for six years for his involvement in two earlier cases of communist conspiracy. From 1930 to 1940 he was associated with the Indian National Congress, which he tried to radicalize. Roy found that the leadership of the Congress, especially Gandhi, was still very conservative. Therefore, he continued his attack on Gandhi and his methods. Roy was especially critical of Gandhi's faith in the 'charkha' (the spinning wheel), and said that Gandhi was seeking to convert a political party like the Congress into a Spinners' Association. Roy was equally unhappy about Gandhi's religious mode of thought.

When the Second World War broke out in 1939, Roy described it as an international civil war between Democracy and Fascism. He advocated unconditional support for the Allies, and was opposed to any anti-British movement during war-time. He was rather convinced that because of the process of decolonization the end of the war would bring India freedom. So it was not even necessary to continue the liberation movement during the war. In this regard, he condemned the 1942 Quit India Movement saying that it ignored the danger of weakening the British war effort in a fight against Fascism.

In 1939, in order to propagate his ideals and to influence the policies of the Congress, Roy formed the League of Radical Congressmen within the Congress. But being unable to influence the Congress leadership (especially Gandhi), Roy left the Congress in 1940. By this time, Roy was rather convinced that the working class was no longer the only revolutionary force. Now he admitted that the middle class could also play a revolutionary role. Subsequently, he founded the Radical Democratic Party comprising the workers, peasants and the petty bourgeoisie. Thus, Roy is coming back to Lenin's position in a sense that Lenin was in favour of the policy of co-operation with the bourgeoisie in the early stage of the struggle for national liberation. However, Roy's Party failed to play any important role in Indian politics. So, Roy dissolved the party in 1948 and started a new movement for a Radical or New Humanism.

Roy as a Radical Humanist :

Thus, between 1940 to 1948, Roy made a journey away from an orthodox Marxism towards Radical Marxism. As a Radical Marxist, Roy criticized the Marxist

method of social revolution. Roy recognized Marx as a humanist and a lover of freedom, but he considered the ethical foundations of Marxism as weak. Roy, who was a great supporter of class-struggle and who had often criticized Gandhi for not believing in class-conflict, now began to emphasize “the cohesive factor in social organization.”

In 1947, Roy moved from Radicalism to what he called New Humanism. As a New Humanist, he found the basis of a new social order in the secular humanism of the European renaissance. Though Roy adopted Gandhi’s doctrine of the ‘purity of means’, the social order he desired was very different from Gandhi’s ‘Ram Rajya.’ To achieve new social order, he did not go back to indigenous Indian institutions in which Gandhi believed, but to the European tradition of liberalism and humanism.

As a Radical Humanist, Roy sought to place the individual at the centre of the universe. He did not want the individual to be subordinate either to a nation or to a class. So, he rejected both the nationalism of Congressmen and the theory of class-struggle of the Communists. Theory of class-struggle had subordinated individual-consciousness to class-consciousness. Moreover, it never gave any significance to the middle class as a class. But, according to Roy, it is the middle class which produced revolutionaries. However, though Roy emphasized the individual and not the class, when he spoke in terms of classes, he gave importance to the middle class and not to the proletariat. Moreover, he did not believe in absolute individualism and therefore he brought in human values.

Roy believed that society could not survive without some kind of social cohesive force, and that force is the humanist element. In India, the decomposed feudal relations still exist along with the rising capitalism. In other words, there is no classical or standard class-division in India. Hence, the theory of class-struggle is not relevant in India.

As a Radical Humanist, Roy no longer believed in the economic interpretation of history. According to classical Marxism, our consciousness is determined by the objective or material conditions of life. Roy rejected this idea by saying that our cultural values and consciousness have an autonomy, even though initially they are determined by material conditions. Roy also criticized the Marxian ‘doctrine of dialectics’ by saying that though man may think dialectically, the process of nature or the process of history were not always or necessarily dialectical.

Roy also criticized the Theory of Surplus value. He did not regard surplus value as a peculiar characteristic of capitalism. He believed that there could be no accumulation of capital without the creation of surplus value, and there could be no economic progress without the accumulation of capital. However, Roy was opposed to state as well as private ownership of the means of production and recommended co-operative ownership. He did not reject Economic Planning altogether but believed in planning based on voluntary co-operation. However, Roy was a true follower of Marx in his criticisms of theology and religion. He was a believer in reason and an enemy of tradition and theology.

Some Concluding Remarks :

In his final phase, Roy came to believe more and more in Individualism and Liberalism. He derived morality from man's rationality. His New Humanism proclaimed the sovereignty of man. It maintained that the creation of rational and moral society is possible because man by nature is rational and moral. Roy declared that both Fascism and Communism are against individual freedoms, while New Humanism stands for the freedom of individual, especially spiritual and moral freedoms along with political and social freedoms. He advocated 'Individual' or 'Moral' approach rather than 'Structural' or 'Institutional' approach to bring about the New Social Order. Thus, in his final phase, Roy's thinking was rather nearer to that of Gandhi, whom he had criticized for the greater part of his life.

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