

A Philosopher – M.N. Roy

-Dr. Rekha Saraswat



M.N. Roy and Ellen having tea.

I write here about the revolutionary philosopher from India, Manavendra Nath Roy; founder of 'New Humanism', the Radical Humanist philosophy, and about his contemporary relevance after sixty years of his death on 25th January 1954.

A perceptive person, sensitive to his surroundings, when begins to express his disquiet with the inequities around him either becomes a poet, an artist, an author or a philosopher and leaves his deliberations for posterity to assess and acclaim or disgrace.

A philosopher is always the product of his circumstances; his past and his present and M.N. Roy was no exception to it.

We all know his long journey of pursuit for freedom first for his nation and finally for each individual human being. His various transformations from a nationalist revolutionary to a radical humanist with long intervals in the international communist movement and a small stint inside the Indian national congress, every time had an honesty of curiosity and a sincerity of faith in his endeavours to bring relief and betterment to the existing predicaments of the ailing humanity around him.

Coming from a Brahmin family of hereditary priests in West Bengal (being born on 21st March 1887) Roy underwent a complete metamorphosis in his personality by developing into a rationalist humanist during the final years of his life.

The continuity in the momentum of his thought process, from one conviction to the next, could be possible only because Roy was never in servitude to any person or idea, and, therefore, never surrendered his own independent thinking and analysis of either of them. Whenever he was introduced to any preset notion of amending the prevalent norms of society and state he applied his own mind and logic before agreeing to its basic concepts and then tried to put it to practice to test and prove its functionality.

He did the same with all sincerity to fulfil his vision of getting rid of the British yoke on Jatindranath Mukherjee's nationalist-revolutionary line of thought and action in 1915-16 and stopped not only when the mission could not progress due to lack of support from without (from the Germans and the Japanese) but when he began to realize that independence of a nation from foreign bondage was not a necessary and natural corollary of the freedom of its citizens from servitude and exploitation.

He then tried all the practical methods of Marxism through the international communist organisations that were setup in his presence in Europe under the general supervision of Lenin and extended to Asia and India with his own specific propositions. He continued to work upon them from 1917 till 1930 with all earnestness till his disenchantment with the undue repression of the vast majority of the downtrodden and deprived people (caused by the practical application of the technique of dictatorship of the proletariat) for whose betterment he had joined forces with the Marxists, in the first place.

He came to India in December 1930 (where he was imprisoned for six years in 1931 for "conspiring to deprive the King Emperor of his sovereignty in India.") still believing in the socialist objective of Marxism even after his disillusionment with the modes of obtaining it applied by the descendants and successors of Marx and Lenin in the name of Communism. And as it culminated and deteriorated further in the form of a dictatorial regime of one man Stalin, Roy began to further question the basic tenets of Communism, which undermined the very concept of individual freedom of thought and action vis-à-vis the collective entity of a state or nation.

He became equally apprehensive about the success of representative form of parliamentary democracy in which political parties and their leaders at the apex played a decisive role in getting candidates selected and elected from the constituencies to form governments in the Centre and states. He saw the practical outcome of the unfair use of populist methods by established political parties and prominent leaders during his own and his Radical Democratic Party's unsuccessful attempts in contesting elections and dissolved the RDP.

Many scholars accuse him for advocating a party-less form of democracy because of his own failure as a leader of his party in helping it win elections during the process of Indian independence. The blame may be lessened and our criticism mellowed out if we remember that he was witness to the sincere dreams and truthful efforts of Lenin and other leaders in trying to ameliorate the pitiable state of affairs of the working class and how miserably they failed to do so through the Communist Party and its followers.

He was again seeing history being repeated before his own eyes in the heightened expectations and blind faith of the common men in leaders of Indian political parties who were expected to improve their pathetic living conditions and bring betterment to their lives, as if with a magic wand, without themselves knowing how to go about it. The innocent people had no clues that they were being exploited first in the name of religion and communalism and later in the name of caste and region and these sectarian sympathies and partisan emotions were being used simply as tactics for seeking their votes to win elections and attain political power, creating huge hiatuses between people's expectations from an independent state and the political leaders' ambitions for governance, in the process. (Partition of the country later on and its criminal repercussions were a natural outcome of this egotistic craving for power of the few at the top.)

And when he and his party men tried to reach out to the masses to counsel them against this impending injustice their views were not accepted by the latter and his whole group failed to identify with the masses' psychology and were alienated from the ensuing historical process of change in the country.

He realised that it was too early for the Indian common men to understand the meaning and value of participatory democracy because they were seeped in the feudal tradition of monarchic hierarchy as well as in the customs of patriarchal society. They were also psychologically accustomed (and considered it their destiny) to being born in higher or lower classes because of their belief in the theory of past life's karmas.

Even Roy's persona, while enigmatic to some, was unapproachable, awesome and alien to most in his native land. He had gone far beyond the cultural and intellectual horizons of the traditional Indian thought process. His writings also, were beyond comprehension for all those who read them with a traditional bias.

The basic purpose of any philosophy or ideology is to find solutions to the contemporary social, political, economic and cultural problems of the society. Roy canvassed for a scientific, democratic egalitarian and above all rationally humanist solution for them. But for the few educated, emancipated minds the country was not open to a cosmopolitan approach towards life. Technology and its dramatic innovations were yet to influence the lives of Indian people.

One wonders, had scientific advancements reduced the distances and narrowed the differences between nations of the world in the forties like they have done today would Roy have succeeded in making his points clear to the Indian masses in a better way through means of modern social media? The answer is definitely 'yes'.

One can provide evidence that Roy was a philosopher with contemporary relevance by citing the following two examples, one from the past and the other from the present.

It was in June 1974, twenty years after Roy's death when his idea of forming People's Committees at the grass-root level, giving them power to legislate, opine and vote on issues of personal and national importance as well as to recall the erring members of legislatures, thus, rendering political parties useless (all described, in detail, in his Draft Constitution of Free India) was picked up by Jai Prakash Narayan in his concept of Total Revolution and this time the youth rose to the occasion. It was that new generation of Indians which had not been directly reared in the pathos of foreign or inland monarchic slavery. It was that new age group which had gathered self-confidence by learning to exert its political rights in an independent sovereign state and had also begun to compare its own conditions with the political developments in other parts of this world. Rapid growth and advancement in the communication technology also helped them do so. Naturally, when Roy talked of this kind of confidence in the minds of people two decades earlier, people failed to recognize his reason. He was much ahead of his times and because he refused to compromise with the scientifically irrational or ethically unsound tenets of practical politics being practiced then he paid a heavy cost of being neglected by both the political leaders and the common masses. He failed to gain either's attention to become a populist leader of the masses. And honestly therefore, Indian history had to pay a heavy cost for this disregard of his farsightedness.

Taking the second example from the present, after sixty years of Roy's absence from the scene, a new movement and party AAP has once again, taken refuge in the goodwill and consensus of *mohalla samitees*, a term again being equated with Roy's concept of People's Committees. There are some, from the Radical Humanist group, who are desperate, once again, as they were during JP's movement to claim appreciation and advantage from this new development of the so-called masses' party, AAP.

But, I beg to differ with them. J.P.'s clarion call for a 'total revolution' and AAP's '*mohalla samitees*' consensus' both are missing the major basic tenet of Roy's radical humanist party-less democracy: the '*inculcation of values of renaissance and reformation in the citizens' minds*'. What to talk of the common man these values were missing even in the leaders of J.P.'s movement. And see to what level they have brought the Indian political scene!

I wrote in my editorial of the January 2014 issue of *The Radical Humanist* and I repeat it here that the ‘educators are still not properly educated’. Those who are approaching the people in the *mohallas* are still not clear about the humanist concepts of politics and philosophy. They themselves have, so far, not suggested ways out of sectarian, caste and class based regional and religious politics. They themselves do not seem to have, hitherto, risen above these divisions. They are yet not rational in their approach. But the irony is that they are expecting the voter in the *mohallas* to maintain a scientific attitude and an enlightened awareness and suggest ways of his amelioration himself. The situation is very grim. It is just like asking a child to take charge of a speeding train in his own hands. Chaos and anarchy will definitely let loose because the traditional feudal government bosses are impatiently waiting for this turn of events to disprove the concept of participatory democracy in India challenging the ability and maturity of the voters to do so.

Roy’s expectations of ushering in a scientific renaissance and rational reasoning in the minds of people, as a prerequisite of true democracy of and by the ethically emancipated people, is still nowhere to be seen.

Some may say that Roy would have made improvements and alterations in his own line of thought and action had he been present today because he did not categorically suggest solutions to the problems of corruption in politics and administration. Anyone who would have gone through his vast writings on the ill-effects of communism, parliamentary democracy and the menace of political parties would not blame him for omitting the hazards of corruption in power politics. He wrote ruthlessly and extensively since the beginning of Indian independence struggle on these issues, even at the time when India was basking in the glory of following a Westminster model of representative democracy. He had, in all his manuscripts, published or still waiting in the national archives in New Delhi to be published (the most famous of them – ‘*Philosophical Consequences of Modern Science*’) claimed that political morality is the only solution for the modern human crisis because we live in an age where production is sumptuous but distribution is still partial; where science has conquered irrationality but religion is still propagating myths and superstitions and where technology has brought humanity closer but nationalism is still instigating wars and terrorism. One may read with benefit M.N. Roy’s books like *New Humanism – A Manifesto, Beyond Communism, Politics Power and Parties, New Orientation, Materialism, From Savagery to Revolution, Revolution & Counter revolution in China, Reason, Romanticism and Revolution, Scientific Politics, Science and Superstition, Men I met, his Memoirs and The Historical Role of Islam*.

I may have gone beyond the expected length of my article but I must write its crux in the end that philosophers and thinkers, from the olden days till date, have contributed to the refinement of human knowledge; science and technology, in the modern ages, have given facilities of comfort and ease to human existence but frauds and deceptions have tried to spoil true human progress in all areas of the world’s living humanity. I repeat again, that Roy’s principle of ethical-politics and rational-social morality is the only everlasting solution for the salvation to human strife.

Introduction of the author of this article:

Dr. Rekha Saraswat

Editor, *The Radical Humanist*

Editor & Administrator of the RH Website: www.theradicalhumanist.com

H.O.D., Department of Political Science

R.G. (P.G.) College, Meerut, U.P.

Mob: 91-9719333011

Email: rheditor@gmail.com

allhopes@gmail.com