

## MN ROY (1887-1954)

**“Crisis of life can only be solved by human rationality and not by any book of religion”**

- MN ROY

### INTRODUCTION

MN Roy, was a man who donned many ideological caps. In a political life that spanned the first half of the twentieth century, he moved across the world, organizing movements from India to Mexico, USSR as well as China. This was complemented by an equally diverse range of ideologies, **beginning with nationalism, moving onto socialism, and eventually to his own radical humanism.** Due to such inconsistencies in his ideology, Sudipto Kaviraj called him ‘a remarkable failure’.

### Broad outline of Roy’s life

- Initially as part of Yugantar, he met revolutionaries like **Jatin Mukherjee, or Bagha Jatin**, and committed a series of dacoities to raise money for the nationalist cause. An attempt to gather arms for an armed revolt with the help of the Germans led him to East Asia twice in 1915, but the plan failed. Hoping to persuade the Germans directly in Berlin, Roy arrived in America, eventually becoming Lala Lajpat Rai’s secretary. This brought him into contact with American radicals, and thence to socialism.
- However, Roy was forced to **flee to Mexico** when America joined the war against Germany in 1917. Here, he finally gave up the German arms project. Instead, he joined the Socialist Party of Mexico and began to rejuvenate it as a means of liberating the Latin American masses. **With the help of the Bolshevik Michael Borodin, he turned the Socialist Party into the Communist Party**, the first such party in America.
- As delegate of the new Communist Party to the **Second World Congress of the Communist International (Comintern) to be held in 1920**, Roy set off for USSR. Vladimir Lenin asked him to read through the draft of his theses on **National and Colonial Questions**. **Roy obliged and proposed an entirely new approach to the colonial problem.** However, he developed differences with Lenin (discussed separately later).
- He became **the founding member of the communist party of India (C.P.I.) in Tashkent in 1920**. With the formation of the C.P.I., Roy began to take more interest in India. His ‘**India in Transition**’ (1922) and ‘**Future of Indian Politics**’ (1926), along with his appeal to the **Ahmedabad Congress, outlined his ideas on India.**
- He saw the **bourgeoisie coming to a compromise and betraying the national movement. He held that Congress was a bourgeoisie party and Gandhi a bourgeoisie leader. He called Gandhi’s non-violence as violence against the masses. He held that Gandhi was a weak watery man looking for appointment with the viceroy. Hence, he proposed that the proletariat would have to overthrow this imperialist–bourgeoisie alliance and establish socialism.**
- He was sentenced to prison for the **Kanpur Conspiracy Case**. In prison, Roy wrote a number of works, including **My Defense**, in which he argued that imperialism was a usurpation of Indians’ sovereign rights; **Our Task in India**, which outlined communist goals and ideals; and **Whither Congress; A Manifesto**, in which he demanded a revolutionary leadership to lead the nationalist party instead. Roy also developed an interest in eclectic Indian and Western philosophy, paving the way for the philosophical foundations of his later radical humanism.
- On 20 November 1936, Roy’s prison sentence ended, and he was released. **He joined the Congress** but didn’t get along with Gandhi, Nehru, or Bose. Naturally, his support base within the Congress was limited from the start. Hence, his support never translated into influence within the Congress, and most of his proposals were either rejected or severely watered down. Realizing the entrenched position of the Congress right, led by Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, **Roy formed the ‘League of Radical Congressmen’ in 1938 at Tripuri.**

- Roy had been a vocal critic of British imperialism but having seen Nazism rise first hand in Germany, he chose to support the war effort from 1939 onwards. This finally led to his **expulsion from the Congress**. He formed the **Radical Democratic Party (R.D.P.) thereafter, but it failed to win a single seat in the 1946** election. Thereafter, Roy became convinced that **India required party-less radical democracy, and to this end, he dissolved the R.D.P. in 1948**. Instead, he launched and propagated his ideals of radical humanism and radical democracy.

### The Roy–Lenin controversy

As mentioned in the life sketch, the Roy–Lenin controversy arose over Lenin’s theses on the National and Colonial Questions, which Lenin intended to submit to the Second World Congress of the Communist International in 1920. Lenin was not, as Roy insinuated, a stranger to the colonial question, though the latter was right that Lenin had no first-hand knowledge of the colonial world. Lenin had written ‘**Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism**’. Lenin argued that, historically, revolution was likely to occur in two stages:

1. Support nationalist parties in colonies like INC in India, Kuomintang in China.
2. Once imperialists are ousted, communist international will support communist revolution by masses

As far as the backward and colonial countries were concerned, the conditions were not yet ripe for communist revolution. Here, the bourgeoisie enjoyed broad support, being able to mobilize the peasantry and other groups victimized by feudalism and colonialism in its struggle against feudal and imperial forces. **Given the numerical inferiority of communist movements in these countries, alliance with the bourgeoisie was the only option**. In this alliance, they would overthrow feudal–colonial relations and establish national democracy, paving the way for social revolution.

During the period of collaboration, the communists had to be careful of bourgeoisie deception. Instead, only those movements which did not demand limiting the proletarian potential would be supported. Special attention had to be given to peasant movements and communist education so that a proletarian movement would be ready to attack the bourgeoisie at the right moment. This would establish the social revolution and the dictatorship of the proletariat.

However, Roy’s **Supplementary Theses** argued against Lenin’s idea and held that colonial nations such as **India had been undergoing industrialization since the late nineteenth century**. Hence, it would be wrong to consider the economic relations in these colonies as pre-capitalist. Hence, **an alliance with the class enemies would be artificial and stifle the growth of class consciousness**.

He also warned against trusting INC in India as he feared they would join hands with imperialist powers sooner or later (Sudipto Kaviraj in this regard has charged Roy with guilt of heteronomy). He suggested that instead, the **Communist Party of India must lead the proletariat to unleash an organized movement without allying with nationalist parties**.

Roy argued that such a movement (supported by communist international), was bound to lead to the collapse of the colonial empire, since in his view, European capitalism increasingly came to depend upon the colonies for survival. As such, the break-up of the colonial empire would lead to the breakdown of European capitalist States and usher socialism in Europe. **Hence, as per Roy for socialism to win in the West, it had to first win in the East**.

### Transition from Marxism to radical humanism

Roy had become a staunch Marxist during his days in Mexico but after his debate with Lenin, he

began to argue that **Marxism wasn't simply what Marx had said a hundred years earlier. Instead, Marxism was more method than dogma and was open-ended.**

He believed Marx had not incorporated any contributions from the Orient, and thus his views **needed to be reformulated** considering the arguments and experiences of the people of Asia. Holding that happiness was the greatest goal of mankind, he began to champion a vision of freedom which entailed individuals engaging in the free experience of the pleasure of the senses without the limitation of social codes or taboos.

Further, as early as 1937, we find him arguing that **economic critique is not enough**. Each civilization had its own philosophy, and any subversion must be preceded by a critique of philosophy. This would be followed by not just the overthrow of an economic system but a "historical and cultural background." **Economic determinism is to be replaced by growing emphasis on the role of civilization.** Roy argues here that it is not the collective that determines the progress of civilization but **the individual who imagines his own dream of civilization.**

This **emphasis on the individual and the philosophical underpinnings of the quest for freedom, which would become the cornerstones of his radical humanism, also led him to a thorough critique of Marxism.** In his works **New Humanism: A Manifesto (1947)** and **Reason, Romanticism and Revolution (1952– 1955)**, he took up the critical tenets of Marxism and demolished them one by one.

#### **Criticism of Marxism by Roy:**

- **Subdues individualism-** Roy begins his Manifesto by pointing out that the Marxist utopia of proletarian dictatorship remained confined to one country (Russia) and created the "**collective ego of the proletariat**", to claim subordination and the sacrifice of individuals composing the classes. Instead of proletarian world revolution, what followed was the **era of triumphant reaction and counter-revolution**. Since the conclusion of the Second World War, this supposed engine of proletarian revolution has been pushing the world to the "very brink of the precipice". Hence, he argues, the **Marxist view of history is fundamentally erroneous.**
- **Surplus value-** Roy argued that Marx had been wrong in arguing that surplus value was a special characteristic of capitalism. Ever since the dawn of society, it had been a foregone conclusion that for society to progress, all that man produced must not be consumed. What remained after the needs had been met, would be used for further progress. This was surplus value, which he called social surplus. Hence, **surplus value is bad only when it is not distributed equitably.**
- **Nature of revolt-** Roy argued that the sanction for ending exploitation was not economic but moral. Marx asked for social revolution, which presupposed the moral decision to end exploitation. Hence, he believed that the exploitation of social surplus would **end not by economic but moral means.**
- **Theory of class struggle-** Roy argued that Marx's fixation with the theory of surplus value and economic determinism led him to argue that throughout the ages, society had been turned into classes and class struggle. Roy conceded that classes existed, but he also found a cohesive tendency.
- **Criticized historical materialism as economic determinism-** Roy argued that man was not simply an economic machine driven by hunger but a creature seeking to emancipate himself to a higher plane. This plane involved moral, intellectual, and social life, which would not be serviced by the bare economic necessities of life. Man's search for such a plane led him to use his brain to produce ideas, which culminated in the formation of the state and virtually everything that followed.
- **Dialectical materialism-** Roy argued that it is not materialism but idealism in true sense.

- **Theory of human nature-** For Roy, rationality was inherent because, like the physical universe and all beings on earth, he too was a product of natural laws. But a rational man was not an amoral mechanical machine. Instead, his rational animal instinct led him to seek out what was good for him. Seeking out such goodness for himself led him to generalize that goodness as good for all. This rational desire for the good of all creates an instinctive ability called **conscience**. Such conscience leads to morality, which manifests itself as man's desire to seek harmonious and beneficial relations with all.
- **Concept of freedom-** We have seen how Roy, in his transition from orthodox Marxism to radical humanism, laid great stress on the **concept of freedom of the individual leading to the greatest measure of happiness**. Furthermore, in his critique of Marxism, Roy took the Marxists to task for **creating the collective ego, which hindered the free expression** of the potentialities of the individual. In his opinion, this had created the monstrosity of the Soviet Union, where bureaucratic control destroyed the ideal of social liberty.

Given the unhappy experience of the Soviet Union, Roy's radical humanism defined freedom as the **"progressive disappearance of all restrictions on the unfolding of the potentialities of individuals as human beings, and not as cogs in the wheels of a mechanized social organism"**. Thus defined, freedom could be traced back to the **rational man's search for a means of survival through the conquest of nature. This was a biological quest that arose out of the fact that man had infinite potentiality for development**. Such freedom would have to be constantly sought after, breaking down more and more barriers that fettered the unlimited potentialities of man.

Roy did not move into the polarity of freedom without responsibility. For Roy, **freedom being rational and thus moral**, it would make man a responsible citizen. Roy was emphatic in asserting that nation-States, with their formalistic definition of freedom of citizens, failed miserably in providing actual freedom. Rather, Roy envisaged a broader global definition of citizenship in which mankind is in a state of cosmopolitan union of liberated individuals.

### **The concept of political order and the theory of State**

Hence, for Roy, state should ensure law and order, defend the citizens against external aggression, and maintain socio-economic institutions, **but it would not impinge on the freedom of the individual**.

#### **How was this to be achieved?**

Roy's solution was to **decentralize the state to the greatest possible extent** without utterly dissolving it. To ensure that the people had the greatest amount of control over the state, he argued that there should be **people's committees of a voluntary nature** which would perform most of the functions carried out by the bureaucracy and the political apparatus in the modern state. Such functions, with the participation of almost all citizens in cooperation with each other, would ensure the greatest amount of freedom for all. Naturally, the central government would be weak and perform only the most basic of tasks required to hold itself and society together.

Roy's primary concern in formulating this political and social structure was to **avoid the dictatorial Leviathan**. Roy felt that since man created society and state using his own rational senses in his quest for freedom and the realization of his potentialities, state and society must serve him. Such service precludes any demand for surrender of freedom since they exist primarily to defend and further it. Therefore, man must always guard against any form of regimentation of the political order which infringes upon his freedom. Only then can society and state carry out their true duties .

### **Critique of liberal democracy and the concept of radical democracy**

Having gone through the concepts of rational and moral man, freedom of the individual, and the concept of political order, it is now time to see how Roy brought them together in a scheme for

“real” democracy, which he called **radical democracy**. In his Manifesto, Roy makes it clear that neither western democracy nor Marxism provide true freedom to man. The reasons for the failure of Marxism were given earlier. For democracy on the other hand, **Roy argues that liberal democracy reduces the exercise of sovereignty to a mere formality – a legal fiction**. People vote in elections to delegate power to representatives, who then make all decisions for the people. Until the next election, the people have virtually no say in the running of the state or society. Liberal democracy turned **elections into a race for capturing power**. Such a race employed all methods, fair and foul, to win. Naturally, the ideals of honesty and sincerity had no chance of survival under this system. The party system thus bred social and political immorality.

In this backdrop, Roy’s alternative was **radical democracy, or ‘organized democracy’**. In fact, Roy’s vision was for a **party-less democracy**, where sovereignty would be held by the person and not a party. The result would be a structure of extreme decentralization, wherein the **people’s committees would act as miniature republics** in their own right. The central government would, in many cases, do nothing more than gather and pass on information. However, Roy did not oppose economic planning, as long as it didn’t hamper freedom.

### **Radical Humanism- M.N. ROY**

The genesis of the concept of New Humanism lies in the frustration of Roy with the suitable characteristics of the Marxist philosophy like its overemphasis on the economic interpretation of history as well as the total disregard to the individual intellect for communitarian identity. Thus, Roy propounded a theory rooted in **integral scientific humanism which he called as the ‘New Humanism’**; new because it is humanism enriched, reinforced and elaborated by **scientific knowledge and social experience gained during the centuries of modern civilization**.

Its main ideas included:

- No collective ego
- Individual at center
- Denies existence of any supernatural
- Primacy to rationality (to serve as common link between radical individuals)
- Freedom as biggest concern
- Vision of Cosmopolitan union of liberated individuals

The core of the Radical Humanism of Roy lies in laying the greatest emphasis on the **personality of the individual as a human being**. He was very critical of all theories and perspectives which did not take individuals as the focal point of analysis. For instance, **his opposition to Marxism stemmed from, among other things, its undue stress on the phenomenon of class struggle under which the human being lost his individuality in order to become a part of one class or the other. At the same time, he denounced the framework of nationalism also apparently due to the fact that it also subsumes the personality of the human being within meta constructions of the nation and nationhood**. He was categorical in propounding that radicalism thinks in terms neither of nation nor class; its concern is man; it conceives freedom as freedom of the individual.

The human being, as the central agent of the New Humanism of M.N. Roy is supposed to be **characterized by three fundamental elements of reason, morality (subjective and not absolute) and freedom (from struggle for survival and fear of the supernatural)**:

1. **Reason**: Given the diversity in the nature and characteristics of the vast majority of people, Roy **takes rationality as the unifying element in every human being echoing the notion of harmony in the universe**. Taking every man as essentially rational, Roy convincingly argues that the behaviour of every person in the world is rational, though it may appear to be irrational at times owing to the difference in the underlying pattern of life in various parts of the world. He rejected

doctrine of karma, blind faith, ignorance and asked for **cultural renaissance**. He held that **critical and constructive thinking** are the two most important features for a radical society.

2. **Morality:** M.N. Roy is quick enough to **discard the notion that morality is based on intuition and transcendental pillars**. Applying the canons of Marxian training, Roy argues that **morality stems out of the scientific application of human rationality to the dynamics of social relations and mutual adjustments of people with one another**. Given the innate unifying and creative value of morality in society, Roy asserts that it aims at translating into reality the collective and common good of the whole society. Hence, **Roy calls for society based on secular rational principles, in harmony with the nature and not some vague idea of social morality**
3. **Freedom:** To Roy, it epitomizes the crux of the biological struggle for self-protection and multiplication of human beings in a somewhat hostile nature. In other words, the human being's quest for finding out laws of nature and the dynamics of the functioning of the cosmos has the ultimate objective of providing certain clues to him to enable him to get rid of the restrictions imposed by nature. **The product of this enterprise is freedom for man**. Therefore, the notion of freedom, argues Roy, consists of the inalienable elements of humanism, individualism and rationalism. The application of rationality by the individual in his search for knowledge culminates, in the final analysis, in the idea of humanism.

The cumulative impact of the elements of reason, morality and freedom on human beings has been to provide a **cosmopolitan perspective** to the theory of New Humanism. **A cosmopolitan commonwealth of spiritually free men will not be limited by the boundaries of nation states—capitalist, fascist, socialist, communist, or of any other kind – which will gradually disappear under the impact of the twentieth century renaissance of Man.'**

The cosmopolitanism of New Humanism goes beyond the notion of internationalism, as the latter is based on the assumption of the continued existence of various nation-states in the world. However, New Humanism presupposes the antagonism between the vibrancy of nation-states and the concept of cosmopolitanism. The realization of the dream of cosmopolitanism, **therefore becomes conditional to the fact that nation-states are neutralized, if not decimated, as the formidable actors in the world**.

Elaborating on the **economic dimensions of New Humanism**, Roy pleads for economic reorganization of the society free from exploitation of one man by another, leading to the establishment of a **cooperative economy**. For this, he pinned his hopes on planned economic development with the virtues of cooperation and decentralization underpinning the system.

Roy was prudent enough to factor the role of state in the economic activities of men and considered it as some sort of **necessary evil**. Roy seeks to reorganize the structure and functions of the state based on the doctrine of democracy, decentralization and pluralism. The notion of **'organized democracy'** is to be the hallmark of the **political dimension of the New Humanism**. To him, democratic political setup must be the facilitator of a participative citizenry in the country, which the liberal parliamentary democracy seemed to have failed miserably.

**Party-less democracy:** New Humanism believes in the **value of humanist politics** also, which means, in simple term, **politics not for power but for the purification and rationalization of the political life of the people**. He maintained that party-based political activities in the country are aimed at serving the interests of a privileged few at the cost of the masses. Thus, politics has become a corrupting instrument whereby people enter the arena of politics to make quick riches for themselves. To get rid of this malaise in the Indian political system, he **advocated the abolition of political parties and conduct of the political activities in the country not on the basis of parties but individual perspectives on the issues of the common man which would lead to the spread of humanist politics in the society**.

**The social fabrics of New Humanism** is designed by M.N. Roy out of his subtle conclusion that class struggle could not be the only reality in the society. Rather, **Roy noted that no society could sustain itself without some sort of cohesiveness existing amongst the people**. At the same time, Roy also discarded the classical Marxist formulation of the existence of only two classes- 'haves' and 'have-nots' in the society. In order to provide for an educated, rational and mobile class which could have acted as the buffer between the two seemingly antagonistic classes, Roy accorded a **prized status to the middle class** in his social perspective of New Humanism. However, despite envisaging the role of the middle class as the moderator of the social cohesion in society, Roy was emphatic to give the primacy to the individual rather than the class in the social formation of New Humanism.

Even on the **religious front**, Roy gave primacy to reason over belief and called for **separation between religion and state** (opposed to Gandhian view). He stood for scientific understanding of man and promoted **rule of law** over rule of religion.

Finally, **the medium of fructifying the ideal of New Humanism, to Roy, would not be anything else than education**. Implying the broadest possible connotation of the term education, Roy was of the opinion that it was futile to talk about revolution being brought about through the means of class struggle or violent means. To him, **education could be the slow but sure emancipator of the people** from the shackles of the anachronistic and irrational system of life.

Hence, Roy pleads for the **denunciation of the idea of violent and quick revolution** to defend the virtues of rationality, morality and freedom amongst the people, creating the background for the ushering in of a new era of evolved revolutionary life. The enlightenment going deep into the minds and hearts of the masses through education would be far more everlasting than ideological intoxication in a short span of time.

Education would be able to bare the truth in the face of people and give them a perspective on how to respond to a particular scheme. Hence, New Humanism would be operationalized only when the masses are adequately educated in rational thinking, so that they are able to look for plausible revolutionary solutions to the problems plaguing the society.

#### **Criticism:**

- New humanism has been criticized on grounds of not offering anything new and practicable (Bidyut Chakraborty).
- Rejection of existence of God has been criticized as teleological in nature.
- Over emphasis on individual in radical humanism can create problems of other in society and has been criticized by functionalist school of thought

**Evaluation:** A critical evaluation of the philosophy of New Humanism of M.N. Roy reveals certain discrepancies in the entire scheme of things. To begin with, the idea of New Humanism was advanced by Roy in the face of his utter dissatisfaction with the theoretical constructs of the ideology of Marxism over the years.

In fact, most of the characteristics of New Humanism are in the nature of discarding the prevalent conception of the Marxian analysis and evolving a counter argument rooted in reason, morality and freedom of the individual. What, however, is incongruent in this regard, is that Roy could not resist the temptation and trappings of his longstanding training and association with the ideology of Marxism, as a result of which he could not completely free himself from the allurements of Marxism (Bidyut Chakraborty).

However, despite the criticism, Roy has to lauded for bringing a totally fresh perspective to Indian political thought.

**PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTIONS**

1. What are the major components of Modern Indian Political Thought? Examine them with reference to Gandhi and M N Roy.
2. Analyze M.N. Roy’s ideational journey from Marxism to Radical Humanism.
3. Radical Humanism. Short note.
4. Comment on the Marxist and Radical Humanist phases of M.N. Roy’s thought.
5. MN Roy’s criticism of Marxism

**Sources**

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- INDIAN POLITICAL THOUGHT: VR MEHTA
- INDIAN POLITICAL THOUGHT: O.P. GAUBA

**EXAM VITAMINS**



**TO BE FILLED BY THE STUDENTS**

<p>“Crisis of life can only be solved by human rationality and not by any book of religion”</p>	<p>THEORY OF ROY</p>
<p>Viewpoints of Sudipto Kaviraj</p>	
<p>Progressive disappearance of all restrictions on the unfolding of the potentialities of individuals as human beings, and not as cogs in the wheels of a mechanized social organism”.</p>	<p>THEORY OF ROY</p>