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# **M.N. Roy's Critique of Marxist Tradition: Revisiting and Appropriation of the Notion of Freedom in Radical Humanism for Development Ethics**

*James Ponniah*

*Dean, Faculty of Philosophy,  
Jnana Deepa Vidyapeeth, Pune 411014*

**Abstract:** In this paper the author aims to explore the philosophy of one of the modern atheistic philosopher's of India, M.N. Roy to find out how he critiqued and re-interpreted the tradition that he came from, i. e., Marxism, and to develop his own system, namely, Radical Humanism. It further dwells on its key concepts of freedom, rationality and morality to finds their relevance for a secular development ethics. For this, according to the author, we need to look for philosophies and world-views that would put us on the right path of living for all. While so much has been written about the role of religion to orient ourselves for a holistic future, the author holds that M.N. Roy's radical humanism provides an alternative world-view from which all irrespective of religious creeds and ideological colours can draw inspiration and motivations for a holistic environmental ethics.

**Keywords:** M.N. Roy, Marxism, Indian communism, humanism, Radical humanism.

This paper aims to explore the philosophy of one of the modern atheistic philosopher's of India, M.N. Roy to find out how he critiqued and re-interpreted the tradition that he came from,

i. e., Marxism and to develop his own system, namely, Radical Humanism. It further dwells on its key concepts of freedom, rationality and morality to finds their relevance for a secular development ethics.

### **1. A Brief Biographical Sketch of M.N. Roy**

Manabendra Nath Roy (later popularly known as M.N. Roy) (1887-1954), one of the most original yet controversial thinkers of Modern India, was born in 1887 at a village called Arbelia near Calcutta and died in 1954 in Dehradun. His life is characterised by relentless pursuit of freedom which he sought at any cost all through his life. It was the search for freedom which made him a proponent of his own philosophy, not a slave of an ideology or a system. This explains why he decided to quit Marxist party for which he was one of the important ideologues. He went to Mexico and founded the communist party of Mexico. He served as a member of the Executive Committee of the Communist International and became the 'political Commissar' of the communist University of Toilers of the East which was seen those days as a nursery for the would-be leaders of communism in Asia. Independent-minded, Roy did not see eye to eye with Lenin and he also differed quite a great deal from the ultra-leftist policies of the communist party. Thus he severed his ties with Russian communists (Bhattacharya 1961: 2).

Upon returning to India, he was actively involved in congress party but for a short span of time as he grew critical of Gandhian leadership and left the party later. In 1940 M.N. Roy founded his own outfit, i.e., Radical Democratic Party. Later, he dissolved that too and launched not a party but rather a new movement known as the Radical Humanist Movement in 1948. He also founded the Indian Renaissance Institute at Dehradun in 1946 with a view to evolving a renaissance movement in India on the basis of scientific humanism in order to train and mould special group of intellectuals and leaders for a new future. Being a rationalist, he subjected everything to critical reasoning and did not

even spare Marxism in this regard. He grew increasingly critical of Marxist ideology, saw through its pitfalls and soon evolved his own philosophy called 'Radical Humanism.' He renamed his journal '*Independent India*' as '*The Radical Humanist*' and ventilated his views on Marxism through this magazine. He appealed to his communist friends to give up the mechanical understanding of Marxism. Instead, he wanted them to base their thoughts upon experiences, and thus to be able to re-interpret the insights of Marx to the present context. He held that one's existence and environment would necessarily determine one's thought. He wrote "our political consciousness and behaviour will be determined by [these] peculiar features of our social being. Necessarily, our thinking process, our ideology also must be very largely influenced thereby. And we shall be able to contribute to an amplification and enrichment of Marxism which is not a closed system of philosophy, not a bunch of dogmas. It is based on human experience, and therefore must adjust itself to new lessons acquired from experience" (Roy 1942: 148). It is his openness to contexts and experiences that drove him to widen the horizons of his philosophy, transcend Marxism and found a new philosophy of Radical or Scientific Humanism as we see in the following pages.

## **2. Re-interpreting Marxism**

Though M.N. Roy's thought was much influenced and shaped by Marxism, he was always able to transcend the paradigmatic limits of Marxism. He went on to relate to certain notions and views that he found lacking in Marxian worldview. While Roy reinterpreted Marxism in his construction of Radical Humanism, he also differed from Marxist views in many ways.

Roy notes that Marxist theory of historical materialism is another form of belief in the theory of predestination. Taken to its logical conclusion, Marxism would imply that whatever happens in human history happens not because of the will of man but because of the historical inevitability of class-struggle.

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In Marxism, history is a succession of events caused by the automatic developments produced by the contractions inherent in the means of production. The idea of class struggle brought about by automatic contradictions in economics is nothing but economic determinism. Economic determinism, Roy said “is a throwback to the doctrine of predestination....The march of events being determined either by a Divine Providence or by inexorable economic laws, man can have no control on them... Human life will then be the greatest tragedy on earth” (Bhattacharyya 1961: 2). But for Roy man is an architect of his own history. To quote Roy “The function of a revolutionary and liberating social philosophy is to lay emphasis on the basic fact of history that man is the maker of his own world” (Quoted in Bhattacharyya 1961: 62).

He rejects Marxism’s political theory as well. In Marxism individual is subordinated to society. This position is unacceptable to Roy, because society is nothing but the coming together of individuals whose existence is prior to that of the society. Hence individuals come first and society next. As an entity created by and consisting of individuals, society is the means to attain the end, which is freedom and progress of the individual.

Marxism which privileges society over individuals is a totalitarian cult and totalitarianism is the negation of the very concept of freedom. Marxism negates the significance of the individual who has no existence apart from the class. For Marx, individual freedom may have a meaningful place in classless society. “Real freedom [and democracy] can come only when we have reached the classless society but classless society is an utopia” Therefore in the final analysis what will come to stay would be the totalitarian state. Nor does M.N. Roy view positively the notion of classless society, which is too much of a utopia to be materialized in a historical time and place.

### 3. His Idea of Radical Humanism

Roy's idea of radical humanism is based on the idea of materialism in the sense that at the end of a long process of evolution of the material universe man—the highest product of evolution – emerged as an autonomous, free, rational and a moral being. “Before the appearance of the man or any life the universe existed as a vast mass of mater and energy and its evolution was purely mechanical in character. Life, which is a chemical process, emerged out of non-living matter spontaneously in consequence of the operation of physic-chemical laws and man is the outcome of the long process of biological evolution” (Bhattacharjee 1971: 14).

In fact he preferred the term ‘physical realism’ to materialism but he did not develop the idea subsequently . Though the concept of matter is constantly changing with the advancement of science and its discoveries, what cannot but be presupposed in all of this is the ‘physical reality’ of the cosmos. As Roy puts it, “physics has discarded the old conception of matter, but it has not dissolved the physical universe into nothingness or the fantasy of disembodied minds” (Roy 1955: 302). Thus something of the physical will always remain to be true.

No doubt evolution necessarily implies a complex process of diversification, and underlying this diversification there is a fundamental unity—a common foundation—which cannot but be matter for Roy. “The search for a unity underlying diversity is the oldest urge in man. It is the foundation of philosophy....” (Bhattacharjee 1971: 302) and in search for ‘what is reality at its core?,’ science has come to conclude that it is fundamentally material in nature and it is one.

Just as the universe is a physical system, the human being, who is grown out of it, is also a physical whole. But there is a great difference between the two. “The physical universe is law-governed, the laws being inherent in itself, whereas man possesses will and can choose. Between the world of man and the

world of inanimate matter, there lies the vast world of biological evolution” (Bhattacharjee 1971: 302).

He considered physical realism (materialism) as the most plausible hypothesis about reality because “it provides the soundest philosophical foundation of the humanist view of life because, by abolishing the supernatural, it sets man spiritually free, capable of creating a world of goodness and harmony” (Bhattacharjee 1971: 302).

Roy upheld the physical foundations of man’s life and not the divine essence of man. “All the manifestations of life—consciousness, intelligence, will—can be traced down to a common origin, which is a physical substance. There is a red thread of continuity running through the entire process of cosmic evolution including biological evolution” (Bhattacharjee 1971: 305).

The philosophical quest in woman drives her on to explore her true nature. It asks such questions about oneself as “Who am I basically? What is my true me? Such questions in philosophy led many thinkers to speak about the notion of ‘soul’ as the most basic dimension of a human being.

Thus in his philosophical inquiries, Roy also gives his understating of soul “The soul is a sum total of the intellectual and emotional attributes of the human being. Scientific knowledge of the biological phenomenon man, thus rounds up the monistic philosophy of physical realism” (Bhattacharjee 1971: 305). Man did not come to the earth from nowhere; with all that is specific to him—mind, intelligence and will—he is an integral part of the physical universe.

Though man is intrinsically related to the physical universe, yet he stands out by virtue of reason. But reason plays the specific role of adaptability and survival. Just as sub-human species adapt themselves to the surrounding environment through their instincts, human beings adapt themselves to the world outside through the use of reason. It is by virtue of reason that man can

learn how to survive and to be part of nature. Without reason, he would have become helpless and powerless. Hence that which is meant not to make him powerless should not make him dominate over the nature.

M. N. Roy explicitly appeals to the humans not to forget their origins and to use reason not to destroy nature but in favour of total well-being of the universe: “In as much as the entire process of biological evolution takes place in the context of the world of dead matter, human will cannot be an antithesis to the law-governedness of the physical Universe. Reason harmonises the two; and reason results from the consciousness of man’s (the whole man’s) being an integral part of the law-governed physical Universe” (Bhattacharjee 1971: 306)

Though man has become a rational being and the end product of evolution of the physical universe, his rationality does not make him in any way superior to the physical nature. In fact the rationality of man is derived from the rationality of the physical universe. So he could very well hold: “The reason in man is an echo of the harmony of the Universe” (Roy 1947 : 48).

The harmony of nature is neither accidental nor arbitrary. It is brought about by natural laws. For Roy, everything in the physical universe has a cause and is governed by natural laws. “This law-governedness and orderliness of the physical universe may be called reason in nature. Man, as a result of his highly developed brain, is conscious of this reason in nature. Man is rational and thinks in terms of cause and effect, because he finds the world as rational where everything happens as a consequence of something else. Subjective rationality thus is intimately related with objective rationality” (Bhattacharjee 1971: 16).

The cause-effect relationship in the law-governed world finds its reflection in reasoning processes of man, the final product of nature in evolution. Therefore, the law-governed world and the harmony of physical universe should govern and guide his be-

haviours, inform him of what is good and what is bad, what is morally permissible and ethically imperative. Thus the objective rationality that is inherent but implicit in nature finds its manifestation in the a-priori ethical sense innate in (wo)man.

M. N. Roy, for instance, observes, “Morality must be referred back to man’s innate rationality. Only then can man be moral, spontaneously and voluntarily. Reason is the only sanction of morality, which is an appeal to conscience; and conscience, in the last analysis, is nothing mystic or mysterious. It is a biological function, on the level of consciousness” (Bhattacharjee 1971: 306). This rationalistic ethics is also closely associated with aesthetics. That is why Roy writes “Morality will be a soul-killing virtue, if it cannot co-habit with the pleasant, the enjoyable and the beautiful” (as cited in Bhattacharjee 1971: 124).

Roy (1955:255) writes “A secular rationalist system of ethics can be logically deduced from the mechanistic cosmology of the materialistic philosophy” and further goes on to state in another place: “As the repository of residues antedating *Homo sapiens*, the psyche is not a link between the mortal man and the immortal spirit (God); it is the umbilical cord which binds man, with all his spiritual attributes, to Mother Nature—the physical world. Spiritual values are physically determined, the psyche is a daughter of the Mother Earth” (as cited in Bhattacharjee 1971: 129). Since spiritual and ethical values are derived from the biological heritage of man, they require no sanction from outside.

For Roy, “To be moral one only needs to be human” (Roy 1955: 307). But to be a human is to be free. And it is that which distinguishes humans from other beings. On the hand, he is different from others because he is free “There is a great difference: The physical universe is law-governed, the laws being inherent in itself, whereas Man possesses will and can choose” (Roy 1955: 307). But on the other hand, his difference cannot be absolutized as it is conditioned, controlled and enabled by the world to which he is an integral part. “Man can be free because he is a part of



a world which is self-contained and self-operating” (Roy 1955: 306)

Accordingly, in his philosophy of new humanism, M.N. Roy lays special emphasis on human freedom. The radical humanism of M.N. Roy derives all its values from the supreme value of freedom. “Freedom is the supreme value of life, because the urge for freedom is the essence of human existence. Indeed it can be traced all the way down the entire process of biological evolution. Since all ethical values are derived from the biological heritage of man, they require no sanction which transcends human existence. To be moral, one needs only be human. It is not necessary to go in search of divine or mystic metaphysical sanction” (Roy 1955: 307).

#### **4. Implications of Radical Humanism for Development Ethics**

According to M.N. Roy, freedom becomes both prerogative and prescriptive for the humans. Freedom can be celebrated as the prerogative of the humans, for it is reserved exclusively for the humans. Humans alone possess freedom and no other beings seem to have volition and exercise freedom. Nevertheless, freedom is also equally prescriptive in the sense it makes it imperative for the humans to act responsibly not only towards one another but also towards the physical universe, the metaphysical foundation of their existence. Humans have to care for the physical world which might seem to be external to and outside of them. But without the physical universe the human beings could not have come to be what they are now. While actualizing their potentiality for freedom which they alone possess, human beings cannot digress from their innate nature of being part of the physical universe. Thus the rightful use of freedom entails rightful ethical behaviour towards the nature.

By rendering the human rationality as a reflection of ‘rationality of the physical universe,’ M.N. Roy has made the human

reason as a derivative of the physical universe and thus has re-invented the symbiotic relationship between the humans and the cosmos. It is to be recalled that while the indigenous peoples for time immemorial have always believed in the inalienable relationship between the humans and the nature and manifested it through their religious and symbolic schemes, the modern human beings, with the advancement of science and technology, have come to 'use' nature for their selfish ends. They have forgotten that the future of humanity and the future of the environment are intrinsically, inseparably and indefinitely related to each other. But M.N. Roy's understanding of human rationality as a reflection of cosmic rationality is a timely caveat for our modern period. He gently reminds us that the human rationality cannot go against and disrupt the harmony and order found in the universe. To do so would prove to be suicidal as it would mean going against the law of evolution and destroying ones' own roots. Radical humanism, taken seriously, would then imply that human reason in no way can go against the overall well-balanced equilibrium of harmonious laws found in the universe. As indicated already Roy puts it this way: "The reason in man is an echo of the harmony of the Universe" (Roy 1952: 16). Maybe we can term it as cosmic-rationality. Human rationality and its various artefacts, science, technology, etc., have to take utmost care to be at the service of 'law-governed' universe and take cognizance of the sacredness of cosmic rationality or the cosmic order, *rita* of Hindu world-view. In tune with this awareness, we can easily formulate a secular ethical principle that would protect nature. Whatever perceives, respects, supports and sustains the unity and the harmony of the cosmos is morally right. Whatever disrupts the cosmic unity is morally wrong.

Is not this interpretation reading too much into Roy's radical humanism? While trying to find answer to this question by reading various works of Roy, I found one expression "conquering nature /environment " that seems to go against the basic concern against the environmental ethics. But when Roy uses such an

expression, he uses it from an evolutionary perspective in which he takes into account the early man's struggle for survival against the forces of nature. "As soon as it appeared on the earth, the human species had to undertake the struggle with environment for survival. That was the beginning of endless struggle for freedom" (Roy 1955: 307). The struggle that started then is still on. Human beings still continue to conquer it by acquiring knowledge of the nature/environment. Though Roy states that 'man will never conquer the universe', because it is unbound, he does not seem to be uncomfortable with using such triumphalistic expression to describe man's interaction with the nature. In fact, he did not live at a time in which the kind of ecological awareness that we have now was talked about. Environmental concerns did not enter into human consciousness of the people especially the intellectual group, the academic philosophers and social thinkers of his time. Nevertheless, with his scheme of humanism which "bases its ethics on rationalism, and traces the roots of reason in the orderliness of nature and harmony of the physical universe" (Roy 1955: 309) the human beings' self-claimed license to destroy nature for 'profit motives' is out of place in his scheme of things as it would prove to be suicidal.

While Roy time and again emphasises man's part-whole relationship with the universe, he also speaks of the need to make use of reason and morality to establish harmonious and intimate union with the universe and the beings in it. "Man's rationality and moral sense, which are casually connected, are the expression of cosmic harmony. Therefore, it is in the nature of man, as biological organism, to be rational and moral, and as such he is capable of living with others in peace and harmony" (Roy 1955: 301).

He reminds that human beings as end-products have to be responsible agents in human history. He writes, "History being the record of human endeavour, and man being an integral part of the law-governed universe, history is not a chaotic conglomerate-

tion of fortuitous events” (Roy 1955: 309). This being the role of humans in the development of history wherein humans promote not chaos but order and harmony. Roy, if he were to write today, would have corrected himself and avoided such expression as ‘conquering nature.’

He also described his humanism as cosmopolitan. His humanism called for restructuring the world through the fraternity and the cooperative endeavour of spiritually emancipated moral men. “A cosmopolitan commonwealth of spiritually freemen 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” (Roy 1955: 310). It was M.N. Roy’s hope that such a cosmopolitan commonwealth, free of nationalistic, ideological, ethnic and economic interests, is the right basic human structure ideal for the cultivation of harmonious relationship with nature and one another.

To sum up, Roy’s radical humanism “bases ethics on rationalism, and traces the roots of reason in the orderliness of nature and harmony of the physical Universe” (Roy 1955: 311). Thus M.N. Roy’s philosophy lays strong foundation for a secular development ethics. M.N. Roy’s view of human person as rational, free and ethical in his philosophy of radical humanism carries sufficient philosophical import for secular development ethics in the sense it places the human being as an integral part of the physical whole. By characterising the nature of this part as a conscious, rational and ethical entity, he calls for the responsible use of freedom that would guide human being’s interaction with the whole and inform his/her developmental practices.

## 5. Conclusion

We live in techno-modern world where only two things matter most: ‘know more’ and ‘have more’. As a result, we forget about ‘being more’. With the process of all encompassing globalisa-

tion, we find ourselves caught up in a consumeristic mode of life-style which drives us to 'grab' from all around us for our happiness. But we hardly get time to 'give' to others and the world from which we have taken to be happy. The net result of this life style is destruction of forests, interruption of rainfall patterns, global warming and significant loss of species. According to the United Nations Environment Programme, between one hundred and 300 species are being lost each day. Hence our present mode of living and enjoying cannot go on for too long. "The ecological crisis is the greatest challenge facing the human community and indeed threatens the very survival of life on earth.....The rescue of the Earth must be the key organising principle of civilization from here on" (Chapple 1994: xx).

Hence we need to look for philosophies and world-views that would put us on the right path of living for all. While so much has been written about the role of religion to orient ourselves for a holistic future, M.N. Roy's radical humanism provides an alternative worldview from which all, irrespective of religious creeds and ideological colours, can draw inspiration and motivations for a holistic environmental and developmental ethics.

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