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# UNIT 29 M.N. ROY — MARXISM AND RADICAL HUMANISM

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## 29.0 OBJECTIVES

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Earlier in this block you have studied the role of Indian communists in the national movement. M.N. Roy was one of the first leaders who injected Marxism into the practical politics of India. This unit introduces you to the ideas of M.N. Roy who started as a marxist but gradually turned towards Radical Humanism. After studying this unit you should be able to understand the contribution of M.N. Roy towards the development of communism in India and to critically assess the Marxist analyses of Indian society.

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## 29.1 INTRODUCTION

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Most strands of Indian political thought in the early 20th century grew out of the historical conflict with colonialism. Narendranath Bhattacharya, later famous as M.N. Roy, was India's first communist theorist who attempted to apply Marxism to achieve liberation from foreign rule. He was born in the village of Arbelia in 1887. During the years that he was growing up, Bengal and the rest of the country was witnessing an anti-colonial struggle. In Bengal there was an agitation against the partition in 1911. These were the crucial years when the politics of representation and constitutional agitation were being questioned and militant nationalism was inspiring many young activists. Influenced by the climate of militant nationalism, Narendranath Roy was involved in bomb making and dacoity to secure funds for revolutionary activities. Narendranath and some other activists were convicted in the Howrah Sibpur conspiracy case in 1910. He spent about 9 months in solitary confinement in prison.

After this release, Narendranath Roy through his organizational ability rose to a position high enough to be sent as a representative to negotiate an arms deal with the Germans. The search for arms took him to the USA where in New York, he came into contact with a number of American radicals, socialists, anarchists and syndicalists. In Mexico after meeting M. Borodhin, a member of the Soviet Communist Party, he became committed to the idea of a social revolution which would ensure freedom to the people of India. He reassessed for the first time, his earlier life as "narrow visioned" and undertook a journey to Moscow to attend the second congress of the newly formed Comintern. In Moscow he offered critical comments on Lenin's Draft Thesis on the

National and Colonial Question. He also led a delegation of the Comintern to China. The mission was a failure. Meanwhile differences arose between the Comintern and M.N. Roy and he was expelled from the party.

Roy returned to India around 1930 and began his work as a critical marxist. After serving six years in jail, he joined the Indian national congress, in order to influence its programme. Unsuccessful in his attempts he founded the Radical Democratic Party on 21st December, 1943. When the party failed to make an impact he dissolved it and founded a new cultural-political movement called 'New Humanism'.

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## 29.2 COMINTERN AND THE COLONIAL QUESTION

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The national and colonial question was an enduring one for the Soviet Communist party and the Comintern. The latter were never able to deal with this question satisfactorily. The question was essentially of the strategy and tactics to be adopted by communists in their own country, while being directed by the Comintern. Now the strategy and tactic to be followed differed from country to country according to the prevailing objective conditions and the relations of forces. But the objective conditions were often perceived differently by the communist parties and the Comintern.

The problem was that the communist parties in various countries like India and China analysed their societies with the help of concepts already present in Marxist theory. The domain of facts in their own societies were however different and so were the questions raised. For instance in India the communists had to tackle questions outside the parameters of classical marxism owing to the existence of a backward capitalist economy. Classes corresponding to the capitalist mode of production were different in many ways and class conflict also assumed very different forms from those encountered in western capitalist societies. Colonialism and external capital domination had given rise to a distorted economy. But in the absence of a specific analysis of their own societies the communists depended on the Comintern for broad policy guidelines. The result was often unfortunate since the Comintern did not have adequate information. Gradually political movements in colonial societies questioned the Eurocentric philosophy of history upheld by the Comintern and attempted an independent course of action.

In Marxism there is a model of classic bourgeois revolutions in which the bourgeoisie leads a revolution to its successful conclusion. A second way model in which a bourgeoisie lacks hegemony over the revolutionary coalition is also present. The debate amongst the Indian communists revolved around the second way model — i.e. whether the bourgeoisie lacked hegemony or not.

In the second Congress at Moscow, Lenin developed a different theoretical framework for the colonial societies. He argued that first, the colonial bourgeoisie was historically capable of leading the revolution in India. A backward colonial capitalism, according to Lenin, did not imply that the bourgeoisie was as reactionary as in backward European states like Germany. So the Comintern must enter into a temporary alliance with bourgeoisie democracy in the colonial and backward countries, but should not merge with it. Secondly, he anticipated the crucial role of the peasantry in colonial societies in the anti-colonial struggle.

M.N. Roy's argument was different. He proposed that the Comintern and the communist parties should not support the national liberation struggles but should concentrate on building of communist parties and developing workers and peasants organizations. Contrary to Lenin's thesis he argued that a backward capitalism in India, produced a weak bourgeoisie, and a correspondingly stronger proletariat, which was more powerful. In this manner Roy exaggerated the role of the working class in the anti-colonial struggle. He eliminated the national bourgeoisie as a vital ally in the national movement and was skeptical of the revolutionary force of the peasantry. Eventually this implied that the working class in India was to achieve freedom from alien rule on its own. After an intense debate the supplementary thesis of M.N. Roy was adopted by the Congress.

Being an independent person by nature, Roy was unable to continue as an enthusiastic member of the Comintern, where the discipline had increased under the leadership of Stalin. As the prospects of a World revolution dimmed, the Comintern began to operate more as an organ of the CPSU. The rift between M.N. Roy and the Comintern widened during the Sixth Congress of the Comintern in 1928. The Comintern abandoned its united front policy between all classes and the policy of collaboration with the national bourgeoisie, that was being followed and instead proclaimed a policy of class confrontation under the leadership of the proletariat.

The attack against Roy at the Sixth Congress was based upon his decolonization theory. The theory states that the policy of imperialism was no longer an obstacle to the development of industries in India. It signalled the changing character of imperialism — in which there was a transfer of partial benefits to the Indian bourgeoisie.

After this expulsion from the party, Roy returned to India where in the Kanpur Conspiracy case he was imprisoned from July 21st, 1931 to November 20th, 1936.

### Check Your Progress I

**Note:** i) Use the space given below for your answer.

ii) Check your answer with that given at the end of the unit.

- 1) How did M.N. Roy differ from the Comintern in so far as the colonial question was concerned?

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## 29.3 ROY AND INDIAN POLITICS

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### 29.3.1 On 'India in Transition'

In 1922 M.N. Roy undertook a sociological study of Indian society in a book 'India in Transition'. He differed from other interpretations of the Indian Society: Of the Indian liberals and moderates who believed in the capacity of British statesmen and their reforms, and of the extremists and nationalists who confused religion and politics. Roy offered a marxist interpretation and became one of the first to initiate a marxist analysis of the nature of Indian politics — its class structure and the state.

The Indian people were subject not only to exploitation by foreign capital as the other interpretations said, but also Indian capital. The distorted and backward nature of Indian capitalism had given rise to a urban proletariat. In the post-world war era, co-operation was possible between the national bourgeoisie and the British imperialists because the latter had weakened. Therefore, in place of civil disobedience propagated by the Congress, Roy advised militant mass action.

In 1922, he sent a programme to the Indian National Congress on the eve of the Gaya Congress which included some of the following ideas:

- 1) Abolition of landlordism
- 2) Reduction of land rent
- 3) State aid for modernization of agriculture
- 4) Abolition of indirect taxes
- 5) Nationalization of public utilities
- 6) Development of modern industries
- 7) Eight hour day, fixation of minimum wages by legislation
- 8) Free and compulsory education
- 9) Separation of State and religion

### 29.3.2 On Organization

The communist party of India emerged as a national force only in 1935. Prior to this, most of its units existed as regional groups. In the 'Future of Indian Politics', Roy examined in detail the need for an organization which would be unspecified and general in character. The communist party of India formed in 1925 was not capable of mass mobilization. Moreover most of the socialists and communists were either languishing in prisons or were isolated from each other. The CPI was endowed with the power to influence the unspecified party. The open, legal mass party would facilitate collective action. The illegal communist nucleus would direct this legal and mass front. The idea was a dual organization — a people's party broad enough to attract oppressed classes and on the other hand, a communist party of the working class. Roy also asserted that the programme of the informal party would be the minimum programme of the CPI. This was the beginning of Workers and Peasants party i.e. WPP in various parts of the country. Every CPI member in his capacity or a member of the WPP, would be subject to the discipline of the latter. The WPPs as mass legal platform, allowed them access to cultural and political groups, like the trade unions and so on. The relationship between the CPI and WPP was retained during the entire united front period.

In its sixth congress the Comintern changed its line. In a letter to the All India Conference of Workers and Peasants Parties, Comintern urged the need for creating an independent class party of the proletariat.

### 29.3.3 Roy on the Second World War

After Roy was released on November 20th, 1936, he appealed to the people to rally in millions under the flag of the National Congress. Along with his followers, they participated actively in the struggle for freedom. In 1936 he addressed the Faizpur session of the Congress. But all attempts to radicalize the Congress proved futile.

In 1937 he launched a weekly journal 'Independent India' which was later renamed the 'Radical Humanist' in 1949. The first issue carried as the editorial a programmatic declaration defining the concept of national freedom, "Political Independence is not the end, it is the means to an end which is the radical transformation of the Indian society."

The second world war saw important changes in the ideological development of the CPI and their perception of the role of the working class. After the fascist attack on the Soviet Union, the anti-imperialist war was transformed into a people's war. Communist slogans changed. Throughout 1942, while congress launched the Quit India movement, the communist party exhorted its members to not only unite but also to keep the wheels of production running. Roy along with other communists, was in favour of supporting the Allies which included the British. According to him, the war was not between two states, but between two ideologies. The war he stressed was an anti-fascist war and it should not be confused with the anti-imperialist struggle. Throughout the war Roy condemned the Congress for its animosity against the British.

Meanwhile the British released the imprisoned communists to implement their 'people's policy'. As a legal party, membership of CPI increased considerably. However all these actions alienated the party and its workers from the Indian public.

### 29.3.4 Problems in Methodology

During the anti-colonial struggle M.N. Roy and other communist leaders tried to sincerely spell out the properties of a new model of revolution. In this attempt Roy was keen to preserve the central tenets of Marxist theory. He analysed Indian society with categories already present in Marxist theory. But Indian society was experiencing a different historical situation which had to be expressed in definite terms. He failed to comprehend fully the process of the structural transformation of the Indian working class in a colonial context. His analysis used concepts which had earlier been applied to the class structure of advanced capitalist societies. He neglected several characteristics of the Indian working class while formulating a model of revolution.

Two distinguishing features of the proletariat in classical Marxism are, disengagement

and development of class consciousness. But in India the working class was not a homogeneous class. It retained primordial loyalties of community, class and religion while being drawn into the factory system. Also given the nature of the colonial labour market, there was a large proportion of migrant and seasonal labour employed in the plantations and mines. These workers have been called semi-proletarians and semi-peasants because they retained their links with their land in the village. More significant is the fact that the industrial proletariat was numerically insignificant in the early 20th century. It was concentrated in the cities of Bombay, Calcutta, Madras, Kanpur and Jamshedpur, but clearly lacked features of the proletariat in classical Marxism. This misinterpretation was the cause of Roy's failure in developing an astute model or revolution which could successfully integrate the demands for nationalism and socialism, a task fulfilled by Mao Tse-Tung in China.

### Check Your Progress 2

**Note:** i) Use the space given below for your answer.  
ii) Check your answer with that given at the end of the unit.

1) How was Roy's analysis of Indian society different?

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2) Briefly discuss Roy's views in 'Future of Indian' Politics .

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## 29.4 RADICAL HUMANISM

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### 29.4.1 Critique of Marxism

After dissolving the Radical Democratic Party Roy re-examined his ideas and attempted a clarification of some concepts he had used. This examination led him to launch an attack on Marxism on several grounds.

Developments during and after the war convinced Roy that communism had degenerated into nationalism in the Soviet Union. Under Stalin the communist party had become authoritarian. It suppressed all forms of dissent. The actions of Soviet leaders in foreign affairs such as setting up of communist dictatorships in East Europe, opposition to the Marshall Plan and so on, led him to believe that they were aspiring to be a super power.

M N. Roy also criticised the economic interpretation of history given by Marx. He argued that by viewing the individual as only a part of the collectivity, Marxism rejected the autonomy of the individual. According to Roy, the existence of social organization presupposes the prior existence of the individual.

He further contended that neither socialism nor communism but freedom should be the ideal of a civilized society. Describing Radical Humanism in this context he said, "We place man in the centre of scheme of things: others would sacrifice him on the altar of the collective ego."

He now viewed the Marxist model of revolution as an outdated one. Revolution through insurrection was impossible owing to the military power of modern states. He put forward the idea of a revolution by consent, guided by a philosophy with universal appeal.

In the last years of his life 1947-54, Roy became an exponent of Radical Humanism. Like Western philosophers, Turgot and Condorcet, he felt that the progress of science had liberated man's creative energies. He explained the need to coin a new word because the existing philosophies were inadequate to deal with the problems of Indian society. He argued that his political philosophy makes room for the individual and moral values; and he judged the merit of any social order by the freedom it gives to its individual members.

Also politics around him had become opportunistic and the way could be cleared only by introducing the human element in public affairs. He believed that the right to participate in politics had been reduced to mere voting in elections. This must be re-examined in order to establish complete democracy.

#### **29.4.2 Humanist Model of Politics**

Roy's theory of a new model of politics aims at the rejection of spiritualism, nationalism, communism and stands for the acceptance of materialism. According to M.N. Roy the latter is the only possible philosophy since it represents the knowledge of nature as it really exists.

The basic elements of New Humanism are three: rationality, morality and freedom. Roy argued that human beings are subject to their environment but the rational nature of man compels him to offer better explanations of the events of nature. As a rational creature man is involved in a struggle for material existence. This struggle takes two forms — at the savage plane it signifies the satisfaction of his mundane wants and at the higher plane, it signifies his struggle for freedom. Freedom is a process and not a complete idea. In the quest for freedom, argues Roy, man as a rational being is driven to bring nature under his control. And freedom "signifies the progressive disappearance of all restrictions on the unfolding of the potentialities of individuals as human beings. Freedom of the individual is one of the central themes of Roy's scientific politics. He challenges all ideologies which deny the sovereignty of man. As an alternative to the existing ideologies, Roy desired to set up a new social order based on the sovereignty of the individual.

#### **29.4.3 Partyless Democracy**

Given his experience of party politics, Roy attacked the goal of power as the only incentive for political action. He argued that "politics is as old as organized social life... It should therefore be realised that politics and parties are not invariably related to each other, nor have they always been together." Hence there was a possibility of political activity without the existence of political parties.

The party system is an inadequate medium to represent the people in the eyes of Roy. It denies the individuals any significant opportunity for effective political action. The right to vote does not ensure political participation. Moreover party rule signifies the rule of a minority of citizens who claim to represent the aspirations of the people. Representative government largely represents only the party which controls it and membership of even the largest size is but a small fraction of the people. Finally Roy claims that party system leads to dishonesty and corruption in public life since such a system works for the leaders and not for the people.

Roy formulated the notion of organized democracy and participant citizenship to overcome the grave defects of parliamentary democracy. Concomitant to this political framework is the need to introduce a new economic order. According to Roy, a decentralized order in which functions of the state are performed by free and voluntary associations of enlightened people will provide a partial solution to the problem. The state will become an advisory and administrative machinery to co-ordinate and supervise policies framed by the people. The people will participate in local committees which will make them conscious of their sovereign rights.

The economic activity of the new social order has three characteristics:

- a) Co-operative economy
- b) Centralized planning
- c) Science and Technology

Since Roy was critical of capitalism and its doctrine of laissez faire and of state socialism, he advanced the view of an economy based on widespread decentralization and a practice of co-operation. Economic activity should be conducted at the district, regional and national level by multipurpose co-operative societies. Similarly, planning should be initiated at the grassroots level. Science and technology should be used to reconcile the problem of economic development with the human urge for freedom.

From the above discussion we find that M.N. Roy started his career with a commitment to Marxism but became disillusioned with it over the years. What remained with him however was the conviction that revolutions are 'heralded by iconoclastic ideas conceived by gifted individuals, Primacy lies with the existence of revolutionary ideas'. A revolution must be preceded according to him by a philosophical revolution. Thesis 20 in the Principles of Radical Democracy states that a reorganization of society must be conducive to common progress and prosperity without encroaching upon the freedom of the individual. Thus, revolutions have no relations with violence or the struggle for power amongst individuals but are meant to change the outlook of the people by bringing about a philosophical regeneration.

### Check Your Progress 3

**Note:** i) Use the space given below for your answer.

ii) Check your answer with that given at the end of the unit.

- 1) Discuss M.N. Roy's concept of Radical Humanism.

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## 29.5 CRITICISM

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Even when it does not immediately result in political action the thinking of political philosophers is often found to lie behind great social and political changes. M.N. Roy will be remembered as one of the first leaders to nullify intellectual tradition in order to comprehend the dynamics of colonial rule. He attempted a marxist analysis of Indian society and set his life according to such principles. Yet he has been described as the tragic figure of Indian history. His political career was marked by several failures and in the history of the national movement his practical achievements were rather short-lived. Even if we estimate Roy's position in political thought by his writings rather than by the effects of his political work, we find much is lacking.

As pointed out above there were methodological defects in M.N. Roy's work during his association with Marxism. In his humanist phase he rejected almost all these beliefs. But at the same time he criticised liberal political institutions like the parliament, party system, elections etc. This new approach and philosophy maintained that a scientific outlook, education and co-operative living would bring about harmony amongst individuals.



Roy clearly studied the social and political problems facing our society but he had no solution in the form of a complete philosophy. The picture of society he drew was neither wholly coherent or consistent though there was a superficial sincerity in its claims. Therefore by no means can he be ranked in the category of great political thinkers like Gandhi or Nehru.

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## 29.6 LET US SUM UP

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In this unit you read about M.N. Roy, the person credited with introducing Marxian (class) analysis of Indian society and politics. You also studied about Roy's eventual disillusionment with Marxism and his presenting of an alternative system of thought — Radical Humanism. In the end you were told about his achievements and shortcoming. It is hoped that the unit would have provided you with sufficient insight into a highly original if romantic mind.

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## 29.7 SOME USEFUL BOOKS

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Samaren Roy, M.N. Roy — *The Twice Born Heretic*

V.B. Karnik, *Biography of M.N. Roy*

J.C. Johari, *The Great Radical Humanist*

J.B.H. Wadia, M.N. Roy

Pantham ed., *Indian Political Thought*

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## 29.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

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### Check Your Progress 1

See section 23.2

### Check Your Progress 2

See sub-section 29.3.1 and 29.3.2

### Check Your Progress 3

See section 29.4