



Manabendra Nath Roy

Ideational Journey of M. N. Roy

Phase I – Militant Nationalist

M. N. Roy's intellectual journey **began in the 1910s**. This was the phase of **radicalism**, of being a **revolutionary militant nationalist**.

At this point, Roy was not sitting in libraries reading Marx cover to cover. No — his inspiration came from the **burning spirit to change life itself**. That is why he once said:

"I still draw my inspiration rather from the spirit to change their life than from the three volumes of Capital or 300 volumes by Marxist."

Not Reliant on Mass Support

Unlike Gandhi, who would later mobilise the masses, Roy in this phase did not rely on **mass support**. His approach was **elite-led, radical, and revolutionary**. The idea was to **strike hard against colonial rule**, even if with small numbers, because the fire of change mattered more than the size of the crowd.

So in **Phase I**, we see Roy as a **young militant nationalist**, fired not by Marxist theory yet, but by the sheer **passion of revolution**. This was the foundation from which his later intellectual transformation would grow.

Phase II – Marxist Phase

By **1917**, the Russian Revolution was shaking the world. M. N. Roy too turned towards **Marxism**. Inspired by socialist ideals, he even went abroad and **co-founded the Mexican Communist Party** — the first Communist Party outside Russia. That's a milestone in itself!

But Roy's **real fame** came from one of the most celebrated intellectual exchanges of the 20th century — the **Lenin–Roy Debate**.

Lenin's Thesis

Lenin, in his classic work, described **imperialism as the highest stage of capitalism**. He argued that colonialism allowed capitalist powers to extract **super-profits**, which delayed their downfall.

So, Lenin proposed a **two-stage revolution**:

1. First, assist the **bourgeoisie-led democratic movements** in colonies to break feudalism and imperialism.
2. Then, later, help workers take power by building socialist movements.

Roy's Supplementary Thesis

Roy boldly disagreed. He said: *No, Lenin!* In colonies like India, the **bourgeoisie is not progressive**. They are **ideologically reactionary**, tied up with feudal forces, and will **compromise with imperialism**.

Therefore, he proposed a **single-stage revolution**.

1. Support only the **revolutionary elements**.
2. Build **independent communist parties**.
3. Prioritise **working-class and peasant struggle**, not bourgeois leadership.

This became famous as **Roy's Supplementary Thesis**, officially adopted in the **Comintern (Third International)**.

Later Realisation

But Roy was not a rigid dogmatist. Later, he saw that **both Lenin's and his own theories** had limits. Neither fully explained **neo-colonialism**, where **indirect control** — economic, political, cultural — replaced direct rule.

So in this **Marxist phase**, Roy emerges as a **global thinker**, not just an Indian revolutionary. He stood shoulder-to-shoulder with Lenin, dared to argue with him, and influenced the course of



international communism.

Roy on Gandhi – A Scathing Critique

Roy was never shy of strong words, and when it came to **Mahatma Gandhi**, he was openly **scathing**.

1. First, he argued that **non-violence is actually violence on the mass**. Why? Because it forces the poor, suffering people to endure exploitation passively, denying them the right to resist. In his eyes, it paralysed their spirit of rebellion.
2. Second, he saw the **chakra** — Gandhi's spinning wheel — not as a symbol of liberation, but of a **reactionary medieval economy**. To Roy, it was pushing India backward into a world of spiritualism and hand-spinning, rather than embracing modern industry and progress.
3. Third, he dismissed Gandhi himself as a **watery and weak man**, always looking for meetings and compromises, rather than taking bold, decisive revolutionary steps.

Scholarly Observations

Sudip Kaviraj later noted that Roy's critique revealed something deeper — a **guilt of heteronomy**. In other words, Roy sometimes borrowed too much from **Western categories of Marxism**, making his criticism less rooted in India's own context. Kaviraj called it a **remarkable failure** — Roy could not fully understand the unique role of Gandhi's mass appeal.

Roy's Misjudgment

Roy also **overplayed the strength of the working class** in colonial societies like India. He imagined they were strong enough to lead revolutions, when in reality they were small and fragmented.

At the same time, he **underestimated the power of nationalist ideas**, which, under Gandhi, had the ability to mobilise millions of Indians across class and caste lines.

So here we see Roy's weakness: while he was brilliant in theory, he sometimes **misread the Indian reality**. Gandhi's non-violence may have looked "weak" to Roy, but in practice, it became the **greatest weapon of Indian nationalism**.

Phase III – Towards Humanism

By the **1930s**, Roy's journey took a decisive turn.

1. He founded the **League of Radical Congressmen** — a group within the Congress that wanted to keep the spirit of radicalism alive while still working inside the broader national movement.
2. But soon after, in **1936**, he was **arrested**, which forced him into a period of reflection. This prison time became a turning point in his philosophy.
3. By now, Roy began to **shift towards supporting the Congress** itself. Why? Because he realised that in colonial India, the **first and foremost task** was not socialist revolution, but to **secure bourgeois democratic independence**.
4. In other words, before dreaming of communism, India needed **basic political freedom** — independence from the British, constitutional rights, and democratic institutions.

The Key Transition

This marks Roy's transition from a **strict Marxist revolutionary** to a **pragmatic democrat**.

He had once rejected the bourgeoisie as "reactionary." But now, he acknowledged that



even bourgeois democratic independence could be a **progressive step** — a necessary stage in the Indian revolution.

So in this **third phase**, Roy was planting the seeds of what would later blossom into his **Radical Humanism** — a philosophy that placed **human freedom, reason, and democracy** above both capitalism and communism.

Roy's Humanist Critique of Marxism

By this stage, Roy had moved **beyond Marxism**. He was not just tweaking it, but fundamentally **challenging its core assumptions**.

1. First, he **rejected Marx's polarisation** of society into just two rigid camps — the **exploiting capitalist class** and the **working class**. For Roy, this was an **oversimplification**. Society was far more complex.
2. Instead, he placed great importance on the **middle class**. Unlike Marx, who dismissed it as unstable, Roy argued that the **middle class could be the real driver of revolution**. Why? Because it possessed education, resources, and the ability to lead.
3. His analysis went even deeper — into the **biological urge of self-preservation**. He said: all human beings have this basic instinct — the desire to survive. Out of this comes the urge to **earn**. And from earning comes **surplus value**.
4. So, instead of seeing history only through **class conflict**, Roy began to see it through the lens of **human urges, rationality, and creativity**.

The Essence

Roy was basically saying: *"Marx, you gave us a powerful tool, but you reduced man to an economic animal. I want to bring back the full human being —*

with instincts, reason, and moral choice — into political theory."

This is why his thought is called **Radical Humanism** — radical because it went to the roots, humanist because it put **man, not class**, at the centre.

Radical Humanism – The Big Idea

Roy believed that all earlier systems — whether **religion, Marxism, or nationalism** — had one flaw in common: they **reduced man**.

1. Religion reduced him to a **sinner or a believer**.
2. Marxism reduced him to a **class member**.
3. Nationalism reduced him to a **citizen of a nation-state**.

Roy said: **No! Man must not be reduced to class, caste, creed, or nation**. He must be seen in his **wholeness** — as a rational, moral, creative being.

Victory over Struggle for Survival

For Roy, true progress meant **man's victory over the struggle for survival**.

1. Not just at the physical level (food, shelter, security)...
2. But even at the **cognitive level** — the way we think, rationalise, and relate to others.

This is where **rationality** becomes the **common basis** that links all human beings. Unlike religion or nationalism, which divide, **reason unites**.

Cosmopolitan Vision

Roy's **Radical Humanism** was cosmopolitan:

1. Man is not just a member of a **class**, or a **society**, or even a **nation**.
2. He is part of a **cosmopolitan world community**, bound together by **reason and shared humanity**.

This is why Roy's vision was both **universal** and



deeply **ethical**. It was a call to see politics not as the game of power, but as the **science of man's liberation**.

Freedom of Man

At the centre was one big, bold idea: **the freedom of man**.

1. Not just political freedom, not just economic freedom.
2. But even **freedom from fear of the supernatural** — no gods, no blind fate, no invisible chains.

For Roy, man must be **free in thought, free in action, and free in spirit**.

Ethics – Greatest Good for the Greatest Number

Roy's ethics were **practical**.

1. He said: during human **struggle**, whatever is found **essential for survival and progress** naturally becomes **norms**.
2. And the guiding principle? The **greatest good for the greatest number**.
So morality wasn't handed down from heaven — it was **created by man's struggle and reason**.

The Clash of Ideologies

Roy brilliantly contrasted **Radical Humanism** with other dominant ideologies of his time:

1. **Fascism** stood for the **Nation**.
2. **Marxism** stood for the **Class**.
3. **Liberalism** stood for the **Elites**.
4. But **Radical Humanism** stood simply, powerfully — for the **Human**.

That was his revolution: stripping away every layer that reduced man, and putting the **individual human being** back at the centre.

The Spirit of Radical Humanism

So if I were to put it in one line for you:

Radical Humanism is about **liberating man from every form of fear, oppression, and reduction** — to build a **cosmopolitan world** guided by **reason, ethics, and human dignity**.

Mental Revolution – not violent revolution

Roy now said: "*The real battle is inside the mind.*"

1. What we need is a **mental revolution**, a complete **change in the mode of thinking**.
2. And how do we achieve that? **Education**.

For Roy, education was the greatest weapon — not the gun.

So he called this a **revolution by consent, not by violence**. Change through conviction, not coercion.

Radical Democracy – from below, not above

Roy did not trust **political parties**, which he saw as power-hungry and corrupt.

Instead, he envisioned **radical democracy at the grassroots level**:

1. Village councils, local communities, people's participation.
2. Politics as a lived experience, not a distant institution.

It was democracy rooted in the soil.

Modernisation + Industrialisation

But Roy wasn't romantic about villages.

He insisted on **modernisation and industrialisation** — because India had to step into the future.

Yet, unlike capitalism, this growth must ensure:

1. **Equitable distribution** of wealth.
2. **Satisfaction of wants**, not just profit.



This human-centred economy echoed the spirit of **J. P. Sartre**, placing man's needs at the core of development.

The Essence

So, to sum up:

1. **Mental revolution through education.**
2. **Revolution by consent, not by violence.**
3. **Radical democracy at the grassroots, not party politics.**
4. **Modernisation + Industrialisation with equity.**

It was Roy's attempt to blend **rational humanism with practical democracy** — a vision where India could grow modern **without losing its soul**.

PYQs

1. Manabendra Nath Roy's political thought highlighted the humanistic aspects of Marxism. Discuss. 2024, 15
2. Comment on the Marxist and Radical Humanist phases of M.N. Roy's thought. 2012, 15
3. Analyse M. N Roys ideational journey from Marxism to Radical Humanism. 2012, 60
4. What are the major components of Modern Indian Political Thought? Examine then with reference to Gandhi and M N Roy. 2001, 60