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FROM MARXISM TO RADICAL HUMANISM: M.N. ROY'S PHILOSOPHICAL EVOLUTION IN THE INDIAN CONTEXT

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Introduction

M.N. Roy (1887–1954), a key figure in modern Indian philosophy and political thought, embarked on a remarkable intellectual journey from Marxism to his unique doctrine of Radical Humanism. Rooted in the socio-political realities of India and shaped by global philosophical currents, Roy's trajectory reflects a critical engagement with Marxian thought while striving to develop a philosophy that would address the specific needs of Indian society. This paper explores the evolution of Roy's thought, emphasizing how Marxian philosophy served as a foundation upon which he built his radical humanist framework.

The Early Phase: Roy as a Marxist Revolutionary

M.N. Roy's early political career was deeply influenced by Marxism. Disillusioned by the limitations of Indian nationalist movements, Roy turned to revolutionary socialism as a means to achieve true political and economic liberation. His engagement with Marxism intensified during his exile, where he became a founding member of the Mexican Communist Party and later contributed significantly to the Communist International (Comintern).

Roy's Marxist phase was characterized by his adherence to key tenets of historical materialism and the revolutionary potential of the proletariat. He believed that the socio-economic structures of colonial India were ripe for transformation through class struggle. However, his early writings, such as *India in Transition* (1922), also reveal a critical awareness of the unique socio-cultural conditions in India, including the pervasive influence of caste and religion.

Critique of Orthodox Marxism

Despite his initial commitment, Roy's relationship with Marxism began to change as he encountered the practical and theoretical limitations of orthodox Marxist doctrine. His experiences within the Comintern, particularly his disagreements with Lenin over the role of colonial movements, exposed him to the rigidities of Soviet-style communism. Roy criticized the Comintern's insistence on subordinating anti-colonial struggles to the broader objectives of the Soviet Union, arguing that this approach failed to account for the unique dynamics of colonial societies.

Roy's disillusionment with orthodox Marxism deepened as he observed the rise of authoritarianism in the Soviet Union under Stalin. He came to view centralized control and dogmatic adherence to Marxist orthodoxy as antithetical to the principles of freedom and human dignity. In response, Roy sought to develop a philosophical framework that retained the emancipatory aspirations of Marxism while addressing its shortcomings.

The Turn to Radical Humanism

By the 1940s, M.N. Roy had fully distanced himself from Marxism and began articulating his philosophy of Radical Humanism. This new doctrine marked a significant departure from the Marxian emphasis on economic determinism and class struggle. Instead, Roy placed the individual at the center of his philosophical system, advocating for a rational and ethical reconstruction of society.



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Key Principles of Radical Humanism

1. Primacy of the Individual

In contrast to Marxism's focus on collective class identity, Radical Humanism emphasizes the autonomy and dignity of the individual. Roy argued that genuine liberation could only be achieved through the development of rational, self-aware individuals capable of making ethical choices.

2. Role of Reason

Roy's humanism was deeply rooted in the Enlightenment ideal of reason. He believed that human progress depended on the application of scientific rationality to social and political problems. This emphasis on reason also led Roy to reject religious and metaphysical explanations of human existence, which he viewed as impediments to intellectual and moral development.

3. Ethical Naturalism

Roy advocated for an ethical system grounded in naturalism, rejecting the notion of divine or supernatural authority. He proposed that moral values could be derived from human nature and the requirements of social cooperation, thereby aligning ethics with the scientific understanding of the world.

4. Decentralized Democracy

Politically, Radical Humanism envisions a decentralized democratic system that empowers individuals and local communities. Roy was critical of both capitalist and socialist states, which he saw as inherently prone to authoritarianism. His vision of democracy emphasized participatory governance and the protection of individual freedoms.

Radical Humanism in the Indian Context

Roy's Radical Humanism was not developed in isolation; it was shaped by the historical and cultural context of India. He sought to address the unique challenges faced by Indian society, including the persistence of caste, the influence of religion, and the legacy of colonialism.

1. Critique of Nationalism

Roy was a vocal critic of Indian nationalism, which he saw as a narrow and exclusionary ideology. He argued that nationalism often prioritized the interests of the elite while ignoring the plight of marginalized groups. In contrast, Radical Humanism advocated for a universalist perspective that transcended national and cultural boundaries.

2. Rejection of Caste and Religion

Roy was deeply opposed to the caste system and the pervasive influence of religion in Indian society. He believed that these institutions perpetuated social inequality and hindered intellectual progress. Radical Humanism called for a cultural renaissance that would replace traditional beliefs with a rational and scientific worldview.

3. Emphasis on Education

Recognizing the importance of education in fostering individual autonomy, Roy advocated for a system of secular and scientific education. He believed that an enlightened and educated populace was essential for the success of democratic governance and the realization of human potential.



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Roy's Legacy and Contemporary Relevance

M.N. Roy's Radical Humanism remains a significant but often underappreciated contribution to modern Indian philosophy. His emphasis on individual freedom, rationality, and ethical naturalism offers a compelling alternative to both religious traditionalism and authoritarian political ideologies. In the contemporary context, Roy's ideas resonate with debates on human rights, secularism, and the role of reason in public life.

Moreover, his critique of centralized power and advocacy for decentralized democracy hold particular relevance in an era marked by increasing political polarization and the erosion of democratic institutions. Roy's vision of a participatory, grassroots democracy offers a model for addressing the challenges of governance in diverse and complex societies like India.

Conclusion

M.N. Roy's philosophical journey from Marxism to Radical Humanism reflects a lifelong quest for a framework that could reconcile the ideals of freedom, equality, and human dignity. While Marxism provided the initial impetus for his engagement with political philosophy, it was through Radical Humanism that Roy articulated a vision of human emancipation that was both universal in its aspirations and rooted in the specific realities of Indian society. His legacy serves as a reminder of the enduring importance of critical inquiry and the pursuit of ethical and rational solutions to the challenges of human existence.

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