

M N Roy's journey to Radical Humanism

M N Roy (1887-1954) founded modern Indian humanism as an organized movement. The story of his life and his path from Nationalism, through Communism and ultimately to Humanism is difficult to believe. He participated in the leadership of the Indian freedom struggle, the Mexican revolution, and the Russian revolution. As a close associate of Lenin and leader of the Communist International, he was active in Central Asia and China in the 1920s. In the 1930s, disappointed with the way Communism was evolving under Stalin, he returned to India, where he devoted his life to developing what he called Radical Humanism, an ideology devoted to social change based on humanity, opposed to abstractions such as Nationalism and Communism while retaining his hostility to religion.



Born into a middle-class intellectual Bengali family, Roy devoted himself to revolution from the age of 14. The group he joined had a simple plan. Most Indians didn't like British rule, but they could not oppose it because they lacked guns. But guns could be purchased on the black market. All one needed was cash which could be gained by robbing banks! This was a dangerous strategy but Roy joined a group of Bengalis doing just that. Prospects were poor.

Things changed in 1914 when Germany went to war with Britain. As Roy wrote in his autobiography:

Roy: On the outbreak of the First World War in 1914, Indian revolutionaries in exile looked towards Germany as the land of hope, and rushed there full of great expectations. By the end of the year, the news reached us in India that the Indian Revolutionary Committee in Berlin had obtained from the German Government the promise of arms and money required to declare the war of independence. The news spread like wildfire, to affect the Indian soldiers of the British army also. Revolution was round the corner, although we had the vaguest possible idea about the things to come. In any case, independence was within reach. The imagined imminence of the attainment of the common goal induced several secret revolutionary organizations to compose their traditional feuds. Clandestine conferences led to the formation of the General Staff of the coming revolution, with Jatin Mukherji as the Commander-in-Chief.

The job of finding money for initial expenditure, entrusted to me, was soon done according to plan. Then we were confronted with the problem of getting the promised arms into the country. Our transporting them all the way from Germany was out of the question. A

messenger went to Berlin, with the proposal that the Germans should deliver the arms to us in a neutral country nearest to India. We chose the Dutch East Indies, and before the end of 1914 I left for Java—my first trip out of the country. I returned within two months, with some money, not much; but as regards arms, the coveted cargo of the Golden Fleece—it was a wild goose chase. They failed to arrive, because, as it was discovered later, the whole plan was a hoax, a veritable swindle.

But our youthful enthusiasm, thoughtless optimism and, above all, the faith in the liberating mission of Germany, were not to be so easily daunted. We resolved to try again; a new plan was made; and I left India for the second time early in 1915, in search of the Golden Fleece, determined not to return without the precious cargo which, we fondly believed, was floating somewhere on the Pacific Ocean. As it happened, I did not return until after sixteen years.

Frustrated by his failure to buy arms in Asia, Roy decided to travel to the United States, then neutral in World War I, where Indians around San Francisco were also working with the Germans. A brother of a Bengali comrade was studying at Stanford and arranged a letter of introduction to Stanford president David Starr Jordan.

Roy: Having reached a hotel in Tokyo, I kept mostly indoors, and thought out a plan of crossing the Pacific. While in China, the Germans had secured for me a French-Indian passport. It was issued to a native of Pondicherry going to Paris for studying theology—a harmless profession. But to travel as a regular passenger, I must have an American visa on the passport. I decided to take the bull by the horn, pinned a golden cross to the lapel of my coat, put on a very sombre face, and called at the American Consulate. A young lady received me to enquire about my business. Having heard my story, she took the passport and disappeared. After a while, she returned to ask if I was just travelling through the States. The would-be Christian priest told another lie; he was eager to reach Paris as soon as possible to join the next semester of the theological academy. In a few minutes' time, she brought the passport back with the magic seal which would open to me the gates of God's country, if not actually of the heaven. I must have been visibly happy. Because, to my surprise, the young lady who had just acted almost as the fairy godmother, shook my hand to congratulate me. It was a great thing to go to Paris; she wished she was travelling with me. A young Christian gentleman from India must be an interesting company. Well she hoped someday she might be posted at the Paris Consulate.

My heart overflowing with thankfulness, I dropped in a Christian book-shop on the way and reinforced my armour with a Morocco bound copy of the Holy Bible beautifully printed on rice-paper.

Roy made his way to San Francisco and Stanford where he met the Utah-born American Evelyn Trent, who had just graduated. Roy and Trent fell in love, married and combined their personal and political lives for the next 10 years. Initially that meant helping Germany win the First World War. Roy and Trent planned to travel on to Germany. (Her parents

vigorously opposed their plan to cross the Atlantic by U-boat.). They made it as far as New York. They were disappointed to find little pro-German sentiment, but they did find people they liked.

Roy: Naturally, looking out for congenial company, we made new friends—amongst the “Radicals,” the common American designation for Socialists, Anarchists, Syndicalists (Communists were not yet born). They were neither anti-British nor anti-German; they were pacifists, against war. Some were anti-imperialists, although I was amused to hear one of them, a Unitarian professor, maintain that colonies were not economic assets. As nationalists, we disagreed with their doctrine of social revolution; as Indians, we vehemently opposed Marxist Materialism with our spiritual genius.



Evelyn Trent

That bit about “spiritual genius” sounds ironic. Roy was beginning to move away from Indian nationalism to a broader, non-ethnic, concern for social revolution. He was becoming a socialist.

Roy’s status in the US was delicate. The agents of the British government were out to get him. After all, he was trying to buy arms to wage war against Britain. He was travelling on a fake French passport which had been forged by German agents in China, and he had gotten his US visa by lying. When British agents pointed this out to the police in New York, the police questioned him, but let him go. Roy speculated that some of the Irish Americans in the New York police department shared his view of British imperialism. Nevertheless, Roy and Evelyn and he should leave immediately. Evelyn, who had a perfectly legal US passport, followed a little later.

Roy: I learned from my Socialist acquaintances in New York that Mexico was in the throes of a social revolution. Indeed, it was reported that one General Alvarado had actually established socialist economy in the State of Yucatan, the home of the Maya civilisation. My socialist conversion was not yet deep enough to counter the patriotic belief that in the prehistoric days Indians had somehow managed to cross the ocean and colonize Mexico. That made my longing to go there irresistible.

I had armed myself with a letter of introduction to General Alvarado from the President of Stanford University, David Starr Jordan who was the foremost pacifist in America at that time. Now it was high time to clear out. But how to dodge the police in a country where the coloured man could be so easily spotted? The methods successfully practised at home would be of no avail. One must simply take the chance. Reckless daring was the only possible method.

So, one evening I left the new lodging and went to a restaurant. After dinner, I went out by another door, hailed a passing taxi and made for the railway station. Previously, I had informed myself that late in the evening a train left for the border-town of San Antonio. The train passed through several southern States, but I encountered no difficulty on account of my brown skin. On the third day noon, the train reached the frontier station. It was blazing hot; when I left New York was blanketed with snow. A few last-minute difficulties were overcome with sheer brass, and I was over the Rio Grande, laughing heartily for having called the American bluff.

Roy and Evelyn arrived in a Mexico divided by civil war, the new government of Venustiano Carranza was arguing with the US over ownership of Mexican oil resources while also fighting with Emiliano Zapata and other rural leaders who felt that the revolutionary government wasn't revolutionary enough when it came to giving land to the people who worked it. Roy thought most of the rural rebels, especially Pancho Villa, were just opportunists. But...



Roy and dog in Mexico

Roy: Zapata was a more formidable enemy. He was not a mere bandit, he had a social base, so to say. His role was analogous to that of the Anabaptists at the time of the Peasants' War in Germany. His pure Indian blood was his greatest asset. Because he was a son of the people and did not have the chance of going away far from them towards the corrupting atmosphere of governmental power, Zapata never lost the halo of mediaeval heroism. So much so that even beyond the frontiers of Mexico he was hailed as the revolutionary champion of the freedom of the Mexican people living in feudal bondage. He did actually try to establish a sort of agrarian Communism in the territories occupied by his armed followers.

Roy came to believe that events in Mexico showed the futility of pure anti-colonial Nationalism. Mexico had driven the Spanish out a hundred years earlier, yet rich Mexicans were oppressing poor Mexican the same way the colonialists had. Roy believed that opposition to colonialism should be coupled with opposition to rule by local elites, even if they were ethnically similar to the oppressed. Then in 1917.

Roy: The Bolsheviks had just captured power in Russia, and a faint echo of the revolution reached across the Atlantic. All left-wing socialists were in an exuberant mood, and lived in an atmosphere surcharged with great expectations. They were all would-be Communists. I was sucked up in that electrified atmosphere. In my case, it was not a few degrees rise of the revolutionary temperature. It was a mutation in my political evolution: a sudden jump from die-hard nationalism to Communism. With the fanaticism of a new convert, reformism was an anathema.

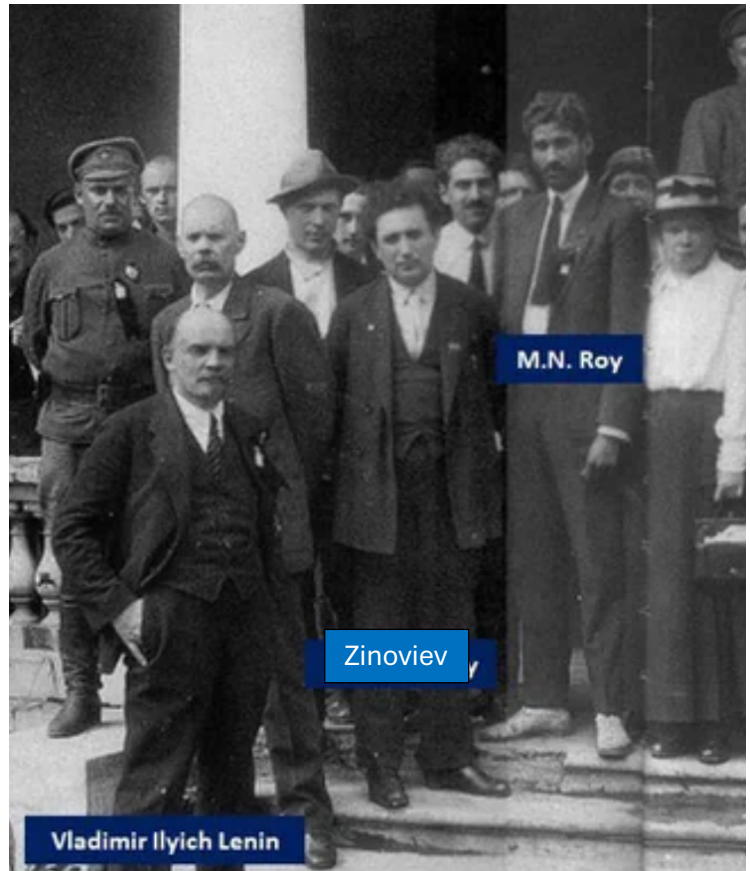
The road from revolutionary anti-imperialist nationalism to Communism was short. Not only I experienced this psychological process, but many others subsequently underwent the miraculous transformation, and consequently corrupted Communism. I also went a long way in that direction, but fortunately could discern the fatal pitfalls ahead before it was too late. I stopped to think and discovered the fallacies of the new faith. But that was the end of a journey which had lasted for nearly a quarter of a century. It began in Mexico.

Roy and a few similarly minded Mexicans organized the Mexican Communist Party, the first explicitly Communist Party outside of Russia. The Mexican party chose Roy as its representative to the 1920 conference of the Communist International, the Comintern.

An important question for the newly organized Comintern was how to organize in oppressed colonies. Should the Communists support “Bourgeois Nationalists”. Roy believed that Lenin, not having spent time in colonized countries, was confused.

Roy: In the capitalist countries, there were Communist Parties which could be helped with the confidence that they were dedicated to the cause of social revolution. But in the colonial countries similar instruments for revolution were absent. How could then the Communist International develop the national liberation movement there as part of the World Proletarian Revolution?

Lenin’s answer to my question appeared to me to be based on ignorance of the relation of social forces in the colonial countries. In our first discussion, he frankly admitted his ignorance of facts, but took his stand on theoretical grounds. He argued that Imperialism had held the colonial countries back in feudal social conditions, which hindered the development of capitalism and thwarted the ambition of the native bourgeoisie. Historically, the national liberation movement had the significance of the bourgeois democratic revolution. Every stage of social evolution being historically determined, the colonial countries must have their bourgeois democratic revolution before they could enter the stage of the proletarian revolution. The Communists, therefore, must help the colonial liberation movement under the leadership of the nationalist bourgeoisie, regarding the latter as an objectively revolutionary force.



Comintern Leaders, 1920

I pointed out that the bourgeoisie even in the most advanced colonial countries, like India, as a class, was not economically and culturally differentiated from the feudal social order: therefore, the nationalist movement was ideologically reactionary in the sense that the triumph would not necessarily mean a bourgeois democratic revolution. The role of Gandhi was the crucial point of difference. Lenin believed that, as the inspirer and leader of a mass movement, he was a revolutionary. I maintained that, a religious and cultural revivalist, he was bound to be a reactionary socially, however revolutionary he might appear politically. Remembering my own past, I saw that Plekhanov's famous judgment of the Russian Populist and Socialist Revolutionary Movements was applicable to Indian nationalism, particularly of the extremist and Gandhist schools. The Russian Populists and Socialist Revolutionaries believed in terrorism and in the special genius of the Slav race. They also denounced capitalism as a western vice, which had no place in Russia. They appealed to the younger generation to return to the village with the object of reviving the "Mirs" of the olden days. Plekhanov characterised them as politically revolutionary, but socially reactionary.

Lenin had learned Marxism from Plekhanov ...by quoting Plekhanov's authority, I shook his theoretical position. After several discussions, he suggested that I should draft an alternative thesis. I was reluctant to oppose Lenin publicly. Our discussions were carried on in private. The delegates whispered mostly in awe, that the Indian upstart had dared question the wisdom of Lenin and cross verbal swords with the master of polemics. But Lenin's attitude was very kind and tolerant. In the beginning, he appeared to be amused by the naiveté of a novice. But before long, he was impressed by my arguments, and could not dispute the authenticity of the facts I cited. It was perhaps the most valuable experience of my life until then. I had the rare privilege of being treated as an equal by a great man who proved his greatness by doing so. He could refuse to waste his precious time in discussing with a young man of no importance. I would have no chance to make myself heard in the International Congress. Lenin finally amazed me by proposing that, after a general discussion in the Commission set up to examine the question, he would move that his Theses as well as mine should be recommended for adoption by the Congress.

Indeed, the document produced by the Comintern is explicitly opposed to nationalism based on traditional culture stating for example.

Official Comintern platform: A struggle is necessary against Panislamism, the Panasiatic movement and similar currents which try to tie the liberation struggle against European and American imperialism to the strengthening of the power of Turkish and Japanese imperialism, the nobility, the big landlords, the clergy, etc. ...and... The Zionists' Palestine affair can be characterised as a gross example of the deception of the working classes of that oppressed nation by Entente imperialism.

Having convinced Lenin not to trust religious/nationalist movements in colonized countries, Roy was sent by Lenin to explain things to Central Asians. He and Evelyn worked

in Tashkent and Moscow to train anti-religious revolutionaries. While in Tashkent he organized the first Indian Communist Party among exiles there. Later, the Comintern assigned him to managing relations with the Chinese Communist Party. In China there was disagreement among Communists about how much to trust Chiang Kai-Shek's Nationalists. The story is complex and often discussed. A short version is that Roy opposed trusting Chiang but the new Communist leader Stalin insisted that the Communists work closely with the Nationalists. In 1927 Chiang spectacularly betrayed the Communists, murdering large numbers of them, especially in Shanghai. Roy had been proven right. Roy was no fool and, realizing that showing Stalin to have been wrong was a death sentence in Stalin's Russia, he left China, Russia and Communism. He returned to India in 1930 fully aware that he would be immediately imprisoned, which he was from 1931 to 1936. He preferred an English prison to life under Stalin.

While in prison, Roy wrote a great deal, describing his mature philosophy as "Radical Humanism"; "Radical" in wanting to change the world, "Humanism" is rejecting abstract ideology. He had always denounced religion. Now he saw Nationalism and Communism as similar. In the 1930s he supported Nehru and Gandhi's Congress party. Nehru expressed a high view of Roy and his philosophy. Gandhi didn't like him because of his open hostility to religion. But while Roy did lead a political party for a time, he didn't challenge Congress.

Also during this period Roy's marriage fell apart. Evelyn returned to the US to write for the San Francisco Chronicle and live a long a peaceful life. Roy married Ellen Gottschalk a German/Jewish Communist. They worked together on Radical Humanism for the rest of their lives.



Ellen Gottschalk and Roy

Roy did break with Gandhi and Nehru over the Second World War. Nehru and Gandhi refused to support the British war effort. Roy thought that Naziism was a huge threat to all humanity and that loyalty to humanity should supersede loyalty to India in the emergency which was the Second World War.

Roy died in 1954. Although ill, in 1952 he was a of Humanists International. He is today honored in India for his thoughtfulness, integrity and commitment to human betterment. Naturally he is particuilar popular with outspoken atheists. But even though he is not nearly as well known as his opponent, Gandhi, he does get a postage stamp.



Today in Mexico City, where he founded the Communist Party, his old house is now an expensive nightclub named M N Roy. I think that's a subtle joke. I suspect he would like it.