

RECLAIMING THE
LEGACY OF ELLEN
GOTTSCHALK ROY:
COSMOPOLITAN
FEMINISM AND
RADICAL
HUMANISM IN
INDIA

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Reclaiming the Legacy of Ellen Gottschalk Roy: Cosmopolitan Feminism and Radical Humanism in India



In Europe in the early thirties

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Abstract

This work rethinks Ellen Gottschalk Roy's intellectual and political contributions as a cosmopolitan, transnational, feminist thinker and a key architect of Radical Humanism. She played a crucial role in institutionalizing the movement through organizational work, publishing, and practice. She was an anti-fascist activist, thinker, and philosopher positioned at the intersection of transnational histories of twentieth-century political thought. Conventionally, she has been represented as M. N. Roy's partner.

Ellen Gottschalk Roy's life was shaped by fascism, war, exile, and anti-colonial struggles. Her contributions challenge boundaries between East and West and nationalism and cosmopolitanism. This work explores her key concepts, such as Radical Democracy, creative rationalism, people's government, and transnational citizenship. It argues that her work expresses a distinct vision of a free, equal, and just world. Her cosmopolitan feminism linked women's emancipation to broader struggles for freedom.

This work reinterprets Ellen's experiences of migration, displacement, and activism as a form of transversal active citizenship while applying the lens of contemporary feminist citizenship theories described by Ruth Lister and Nira Yuval-Davis. It also maintains that dominant frameworks of decolonization and multicultural historiography challenge Eurocentric narratives. However, these frameworks highlight male-centric nationalist histories and marginalize transnational and cosmopolitan women thinkers, including Ellen Roy.

Although Ellen Gottschalk Roy was a co-creator of the movement, history has diminished her contributions. Reclaiming her intellectual legacy necessitates rethinking the frameworks that shape humanism, feminism, citizenship, and decolonization. In an increasingly polarized contemporary world, her contributions provide valuable insights, reinterpreting democracy and freedom beyond rigid ideological and national boundaries.

Keywords

Radical Humanism; Cosmopolitan Feminism; Ellen Gottschalk Roy; M. N. Roy; Radical Democracy; Creative Rationalism; Citizenship; Transnational Feminism; Decolonization; Political Thought in India

Preface

In the context of the Indian Renaissance, while reading about Radical Humanism, I came across the names of Ellen Gottschalk Roy and Evelyn Trent, M.N. Roy's partners. Although the historical narrative credits M. N. Roy for formulating Radical Humanism, such accounts marginalise the intellectual and organisational contributions of Ellen Gottschalk Roy.

Born and educated in the West, Ellen Gottschalk Roy (1904-1960) developed ideas regarding cosmopolitanism, global citizenship, and constructive freedom. Her early life was shaped by her experiences of war, displacement, and exile in Europe. She chose India as the site of her political and intellectual commitment, where she worked tirelessly along with M. N. Roy to nurture and expand Radical Humanism. After his death, she remained in India and played a key role in sustaining and institutionalising the movement. Her remarkable dedication to the cause continued until her tragic murder in December 1960.

Examining available records suggests that she was not merely a companion to Roy but a co-architect of Radical Humanism. She co-created the Radical Democratic Party and the Indian Renaissance Institute, and shaped publications associated with the movement, including *Independent India*, *The Radical Humanist*, *The Marxian Way*, and Renaissance Publications.

Significantly, M. N. Roy has not acknowledged the women in his life in his autobiographical writings or in his works. Similarly, many of his contemporaries in India and several of his biographers reduced Ellen Gottschalk Roy's identity to that of "Roy's wife or partner," thereby obscuring her intellectual individuality and diminishing her substantial contributions.

Ironically, even in the scholarly world, considerable attention has been devoted to Roy's personal relationships, intimacy, and sexual life to highlight his "*revolutionary heart*," and how knowledge is produced through collaboration. However, this framework ignored the intellectual, political, and organisational labour of the women who worked alongside him. This imbalance reflects the "*patriarchal paradox of progress*," a broader historiographical pattern in which women associated with influential male thinkers are remembered only through domesticity, sexuality, or emotional attachment rather than intellectual contributions, consequently erasing their contributions.

This *politics of erasure* is a historical tendency, as I have explained elsewhere. Just as the contributions of the Founding Mothers of the Indian Constitution have been neglected, the histories of foreign women who visited India and made it their intellectual and political home have also been rendered invisible.

Ellen Gottschalk Roy's role cannot be confined only to that of a spouse or supporter. While focusing on her life and contributions, this work recognises her as an independent thinker, organiser, and visionary whose ideas resonate in contemporary debates on democracy, freedom, cosmopolitanism, transnational citizenship, and dignity. She conceptualised and developed Radical Humanism, especially reflecting on anti-colonialism, democracy, freedom, and ethical politics. She was an institution-builder and cosmopolitan intellectual whose life and work crossed cultural, national, and political boundaries.

While theories of decolonization and multiculturalism rightly examine the oppression faced by women of colour under structures of white supremacy, they maintain silences regarding women's intellectual labour. The erasure of transnational figures such as Ellen Gottschalk Roy from mainstream and scholarly narratives reflects these unresolved tensions.

By focusing on Ellen Gottschalk Roy's writings, activism, and institutional work, this questions the selective remembrance, erasure, silences, and exclusions that shape intellectual history. It seeks to reclaim her legacy and her place within the history of Radical Humanism.

Although less archival material is available, a close reading of these writings and publications informs that she was a co-creator and co-architect of Radical Humanism. This work, therefore, contributes to an inclusive and nuanced history of her rigorous efforts for the Indian Renaissance, focusing on her intellectual ideas.

As a non-historian, exploring the history of ideas and movements during the freedom struggle and nation-building is a laborious yet interesting project that provides valuable insights never taught in classrooms.

This research has been undertaken without any financial support for archival work, the excavation of documents and literature, or the writing. It is a labour of love and an intellectual commitment to rethinking the history of the Indian Renaissance from a feminist perspective. The years spent tracing scattered archives, forgotten writings, and ignored histories have been sustained with the view that intellectual history must ethically account for women who have been neglected despite their profound contributions.

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Contents

Preface.....	5
Introduction: Reclaiming Ellen Gottschalk Roy as a Cosmopolitan Political Thinker	8
Cosmopolitan Origins and the Formation of Political Consciousness	11
Cosmopolitan Citizenship as Lived Political Practice	13
Ellen Gottschalk Roy as a Cosmopolitan Feminist.....	16
Feminism Beyond Nation, Culture, and Domestic Reform.....	17
Anti-Fascism and Revolutionary Politics	19
Peace as Social and Political Reconstruction.....	22
Radical Democracy as Critique of Parliamentary Form	24
People’s Government as a Strategy of Democratic Transformation	26
Partnership as Intellectual Collaboration, Not Dependency	28
Radical Humanism as an Institutional and Intellectual Project	30
Radical Humanism as an Open Philosophical System	32
India as Political and Intellectual Home	34
Creative Rationalism and the Ethics of Reason	37
Custodianship and Continuity of Radical Humanism.....	39
Ellen’s Death and Her Intellectual Legacy	41
Conclusion: Why Ellen Roy Matters Today	43
About the Author.....	45

Introduction: Reclaiming Ellen Gottschalk Roy as a Cosmopolitan Political Thinker

“The key to human progress is to be found in the quest for freedom and search for truth, which are the basic urges of human nature; and the satisfaction of these urges is the source and content of.... human creativeness and welfare. The aspiration of humanism is to help develop a cosmopolitan society of free men and women—a society in which personal life and conduct, and social relationships and institutions should be informed by the spirit of individual creativeness and enlightened co-operation. This is the main thesis of New Humanism...”¹

The intellectual history of India has largely been written to highlight male nationalist leaders, thereby diminishing the role of women activists and reformers.² Specifically, the contributions of transnational women actors hardly fit within dominant narratives.³ This selective historiography remembers Ellen Gottschalk Roy⁴ primarily as the wife and collaborator of M. N. Roy. Such a reductionist portrayal overlooks her independent intellectual and political trajectory.⁵

While challenging this reduction, this work argues that Ellen Roy was a cosmopolitan feminist thinker and a foundational architect of Radical Humanism. She was an anti-fascist activist, editor, organizer, internationalist, and theorist rather than a supporter of established ideas. Her political thoughts were shaped by her experiences of exile, transnational displacement, anti-fascist struggle, and migration across Europe and India. Her cosmopolitan consciousness challenged nationalist frameworks when she questioned the assumption that citizenship, democracy, and feminism must be grounded within the conventional boundaries of the nation-state.

This work makes four key arguments. First, Ellen Roy was a co-architect of Radical Humanism, which emphasizes reason, autonomy, and freedom as alternatives to fascism and authoritarianism. Second, she developed the idea of radical democracy, which extends beyond parliamentary representation to include education, mass participation, and decentralization of economic and political structures. Third, her cosmopolitan feminism linked women’s

¹ Roy Ellen Gottschalk (1948) *In Man’s Own Image*, Renaissance Publishers, Calcutta (Co-authored with Sibnarayan Ray) p. 7

² Nigam Shalu (2025) Resisting Gendered Citizenship: The Politics of Colonialism, Nationalism, and Maternalism in India, *Gender and Women Studies*, 6(1) 1-25 DOI: [10.31532/GendWomensStud.6.1.001](https://doi.org/10.31532/GendWomensStud.6.1.001)

³ Simonow Joanne (2024) Sexing the History of Indian anti-colonial Internationalism: White Women, Indian Men and Politics of Personal, *Gender and History*, 1-17 DOI: 10.1111/1468-0424.12801

⁴ In this paper, “Ellen Gottschalk Roy” is used at first reference, while “Ellen Roy” is used thereafter, reflecting the name under which she published and participated in Radical Humanist intellectual and political life in India.

⁵ Elsewhere, this author has used the phrase ‘*patriarchal paradox of progress*’ to describe how Roy and his biographers have erased and omitted the significant role of women, especially Evelyn Trent and Ellen Gottschalk Roy, in his life and work. Please see, Nigam Shalu (2026) *Women’s Emancipation and Feminist Praxis: Reclaiming the Radical Legacy of MN Roy*, Indian Renaissance Club, Delhi NCR

emancipation to broader struggles against imperialism, patriarchy, and domination. And fourth, she devoted the latter part of her life in India to institutionalizing Radical Humanism, envisioning India as a site for democratic and intellectual reconstruction.

Ellen consistently argued that democratic societies require nurturing morally and ethically conscious individuals who could dismantle oppressive structures, including dogmatism and authoritarianism. Her Radical Humanism is a transformative project grounded in reason, rationality, and freedom. For her, freedom must be distinguished from political independence. Independence implied absence of bondage; whereas freedom involves creating conditions in which individuals can think freely, act ethically, and realize their potential.

This paper situates her thoughts within broader twentieth-century debates on citizenship and belonging, where questions of democracy and freedom were radically redefined in response to fascism, colonialism, war, and violence. Contemporary scholars such as Ruth Lister⁶ and Nira Yuval-Davis⁷ have defined citizenship as a lived, participatory, and transnational practice rather than a fixed legal status. Ellen Roy's life extends these transnational and transversal perspectives by linking cosmopolitanism and citizenship to humanity rather than allegiance to the nation-state.

By reconstructing Ellen's intellectual trajectory from European anti-fascist activism to Radical Humanism, this work repositions her as a co-architect of a distinct philosophy rooted in reason, rather than a marginal figure within M.N. Roy's intellectual life. It resituates Ellen Roy as a significant figure in twentieth-century anti-oppression struggles, while connecting her ideas to contemporary debates on democracy, citizenship, and humanism.

While existing scholarship on decolonization, multiculturalism, and cosmopolitan citizenship has significantly reoriented historical inquiry away from Eurocentric narratives, it privileges nationalist male leaders, ignoring the feminist and transnational dimensions. Moreover, it neglected women who operated across multiple contexts.⁸ It hardly engages with figures like Ellen Roy, who moved across national and ideological boundaries in search of a democratic world. By reclaiming her legacy as a cosmopolitan feminist and global thinker, this piece highlights the limitations of decolonization frameworks.

Ellen Roy's life and work compel a rethinking of feminism, anti-colonialism, and citizenship through a transnational lens, situating Radical Humanism within global intellectual currents. This work reclaims her contributions in shaping global thoughts, which were erased and overshadowed by historiography. In the contemporary debates on nationalism, identity, migration, and global solidarity, her life offers an alternative framework for understanding belonging beyond fixed national or ideological boundaries.

⁶ Lister Ruth (1997) *Citizenship: Feminist Practices*, New York University Press, New York

⁷ Yuval-Davis Nira (1997) *Gender and Nation*, Sage Publication, London

⁸ Kumari Jayawardena (1995) *The White Woman's Other Burden: Western Women and South Asia During British Colonial Rule*, Routledge, New York



Ellen Roy file photograph available with the Indian Renaissance Institute

“...man, as an instinctively rational being, is moral because he is rational.”⁹

⁹ Roy Ellen Gottschalk (1948) *In Man's Own Image*, p. 30

Cosmopolitan Origins and the Formation of Political Consciousness

“Freedom is the progressive disappearance of all restrictions on the unfolding of the potentialities of individuals.”¹⁰

Ellen Roy’s life and contributions cannot be understood without situating them within her global experience of displacement, transnational mobility, and the European crisis in the twentieth century. This section argues that her cosmopolitanism was a political consciousness grounded in historical collapse, war, and exile. It was not a philosophy developed in abstraction.

Her early life in Europe shaped her understanding of belonging and citizenship. Born in Paris in 1904 amid European political instability, Ellen grew up in a culturally rich, multilingual, and cross-border environment.¹¹ Her father, Oscar, was born in Germany in 1863. He later immigrated to the United States and became a citizen in 1886. In 1890, he was sent to Paris as a diplomatic representative serving at the consulate. He married German-born Adele Fritzler in 1903.¹² Ellen was their first child. She received training in music and singing and was exposed to diverse national and cultural influences.¹³

Her family’s transnational trajectory exposed her to the fragility of national belonging.¹⁴ During the First World War, her father was arrested by the Germans in 1917, while the family was permitted to remain in Paris under strict surveillance. Her mother was required to report daily to the local police station. These experiences of oppression left a lasting impression on Ellen, marking a decisive rupture in her understanding of nationalism. She understood the ugly mechanism of violence, militarism, and ideological division.¹⁵ Her cosmopolitanism was a response to the violence of European nationalism and fascism.

Like many young Europeans of her generation, she became disillusioned with aggressive patriotism and the destructive logic of war.¹⁶ Increasing fascism in Europe intensified her political consciousness and transformed exile into a harsh reality rather than a temporary disruption. However, she combined revolutionary politics with a cosmopolitan sensibility to resist narrow nationalist frameworks. As a teenager, she was fascinated by the internationalism,

¹⁰ Roy Ellen Gottschalk (1948) *In Man’s Own Image*, Renaissance Publishers, Calcutta (Co-authored with Sibnarayan Ray) p. 28

¹¹ Ellen Gottschalk Roy (1904- 1960) <https://humanists.uk/2022/01/27/jewish-and-humanist-secular-jews-who-helped-shape-the-humanist-movement-in-britain/>

¹² Ray Sibnarayan (1979) *The World Her Village: Selected Writings and Letters of Ellen Roy*, Ananda Publishers Pvt Lt. Calcutta

¹³ The Radical Humanist (2014) *Mrs Ellen Roy* 78(8) 21-31

¹⁴ Jasthi Jawaharlal (2013) *Mrs. Ellen Roy: A Life Dedicated to New Humanist Movement* https://indianrenaissanceinstitute.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Mrs.Ellen_Eng_.pdf

¹⁵ Roy Ellen (1955) *Fragments From the Draft of Talk by Ellen*, in the *World Her Village*, p 374

¹⁶ Ray Sibnarayan (1979) *The World Her Village* p. 24

equalitarianism, and irreligiosity of Communism.’¹⁷ She later reflected that the brutality of the period mobilized her “against the absurdity of hostile patriotism.”

Her political engagement during the 1920s reflected this orientation. Due to unprecedented circumstances at her home, she moved out in 1923.¹⁸ She joined the International League Against Compulsory Motherhood, the International Workers’ Aid, and other organizations.¹⁹ In 1925, she joined the Peasant International established by the Communist International (Comintern), where she worked as secretary to the European Peasants’ Council and edited its *Bulletin*. In 1927, she joined the German Communist Party, working as an organizer and editor.

These involvements connected her with socialist and anti-imperialist networks and exposed her to transnational solidarity. When political spaces in Europe remained overwhelmingly male-dominated, Ellen was intellectually involved with class struggle and resistance movements. Here, she developed a critical stance that emphasized rational inquiry and ethical responsibility, rejecting doctrinaire ideology. Her early life experiences laid a strong ground for her later thoughts on anti-nationalism, rationality, and universality.

She recognised that human identity extends beyond the boundaries of nation or race. She imagined a ‘passport-less world citizenship’ and ‘paperless existence’.²⁰ This consciousness later became foundational to her Radical Humanism, when she argued that freedom cannot be confined within national borders.

Importantly, this idea of belonging to ‘wherever they (one) feel at home’²¹ also shaped her approach to politics as an ethical space. Unlike nationalist frameworks that define belonging through the state’s allegiance, Ellen Roy emphasized reason, critique, and solidarity as the basis of political engagement.

Therefore, her early experiences in Europe shaped her later trajectory, when she propounded the humanist framework. These initial experiences provided a prism through which Ellen Gottschalk Roy later interpreted fascism and nationalism as interconnected structures of domination rather than isolated problems.

¹⁷ Ibid. p, 219

¹⁸ Ray Sibnarayan (1979) *The World Her Village* p. 23

¹⁹ Ray Sibnarayan (1979) *The World Her Village*

²⁰ Roy Ellen (1944) *The Absurdity*, p 217-226

²¹ Roy Ellen (1944) *The Absurdity*, p 217

Cosmopolitan Citizenship as Lived Political Practice

“The brain is a means of production, and produces the most revolutionary commodity-ideas.”²²

Ellen Roy’s ideas of citizenship can be reinterpreted through contemporary feminist theories that move beyond the legalistic understanding of the nation-state. Importantly, the work of Ruth Lister²³ and Nira Yuval-Davis²⁴ helps situate Ellen Roy within a broader theoretical framework that understands citizenship as a lived, layered, and transnational practice.

Ellen Roy’s life as an active democratic practice demonstrates Lister’s conception of citizenship as *participation, agency, and everyday political engagement*. Similarly, Ellen’s experiences across continents illustrate Yuval-Davis’s *transversal politics*, which emphasize multiple and intersecting affiliations across national and ethnic contexts. Her views were shaped by movement across nations, ideological traditions, and cultural environments, indicating how, through a layered citizenship, individuals negotiate their identity during displacement, migration, and political upheaval.

For Ellen, the harsh experiences of ‘legality, illegality, and semi-legality’ of citizenship determined the complexity of procuring documents such as visas and passports, she wrote, “Nationality is hereditary, diplomatic passports are not.”²⁵ Living through war, exile, and ideological struggle, she rejected the dominant notions to develop a belonging rooted in a commitment to freedom and solidarity. Reflecting on her life, Ellen once wrote:

“When you are born in one country, and your mother is from another country, and your father to a third, and, endowed with his citizenship, you are a foreigner in every country you have grown up, studied, and subsequently, lived and worked, and yet you feel at home in all of them, if then you marry an alien from a different continent altogether, and become at home there, too, it must teach you something. You see the good and bad in all countries and peoples, and you cannot bear the thought that the differences are worth being ironed out by war.”²⁶

This statement captures the essence of Ellen’s cosmopolitan outlook when she expanded narrow nationalism, developing a universalist vision of humanity. These experiences later shaped her engagement with anti-colonial politics. Her lived experience of exile and transnational engagement also reveals the emotional complexity of cosmopolitan belonging. While global citizenship expanded the horizon of solidarity, it also produced a sense of

²² Roy Ellen Gottschalk (1948) *In Man’s Own Image*, p. 34-35

²³ Lister Ruth (1997) *Citizenship: Feminist Practices*, New York University Press, New York

²⁴ Yuval-Davis Nira (1997) *Gender and Nation*, Sage Publication, London

²⁵ Roy Ellen (1944) *Absurdity*, supra

²⁶ Ray Sibnarayan (1979) Fragments from the Draft of Talk by Ellen, *The World Her Village* p. 374

displacement and instability. She acknowledged this contradiction of cosmopolitan life with striking honesty:

“The accident of birth and ‘fate’ deprived me of the security of my clan and the warmth of the cowshed. American through my father, German through my mother. French by birth and early childhood, educated in Germany, and married to India – I used to feel, when we are happy, that this was just right suited to my mental makeup.... Claiming several continents as home, it ceases to belong to any one country. The exhilarating citizenship of the world, in a mood of depression, can make one also a stranger everywhere.”²⁷

According to her, the freedom of moving beyond national boundaries is accompanied by the vulnerability of belonging everywhere yet settling nowhere. Global citizenship involves the duality of belonging, reflecting ambivalence that can be liberating and also cause personal estrangement.

Further, she questioned the arbitrariness of national identity in a world shaped by migration and political fragmentation. For her, identity was not a fixed category but a lived condition shaped by historical forces and personal experience. This position resonates with Yuval-Davis’s argument that individuals inhabit multiple overlapping “belongings” that cannot be reduced to a single national identity.

For Ellen, identity could not be reduced to documents such as passports or citizenship certificates because they failed to capture the complexity of human lives shaped by migration, conflict, and historical accidents. Reflecting on this fragmented sense of belonging, she wrote:

“And now my birthland France has been liberated, and my motherland Germany will also be liberated soon; because its only chance of liberation lies in defeat; and all this is being done by my fatherland America (with which I have now such a complicated relationship that even American Consul in Bombay cannot find himself out) and my father-in-law-land Britian, together with the fatherland of all the workers of the world of whom I am also the one. And I hope that someday I shall again visit all my homelands in this world and shall need no passport.”²⁸

Simultaneously, Ellen’s understanding of citizenship expands Lister’s emphasis on agency and participation. For Ellen, political belonging was defined by active and responsible engagement in transforming society, not by formal status. Her work in organizing political movements, editing journals, and building institutions demonstrates active citizenship, making it a daily practice rooted in the humanist ideology.

Hence, Ellen’s life and work extend these contemporary frameworks in a distinctive direction. While Lister and Yuval-Davis theorize citizenship primarily within post-colonial, modern, democratic, and feminist contexts, Ellen Roy articulates a radical vision in which citizenship

²⁷ Roy Ellen (1955) Travel Diary, *The Radical Humanist* 19(18) May 1 reprinted in *the World is her Village*, p. 303-304

²⁸ Roy Ellen (1944) *The Absurdity*, p. 226

becomes inseparable from a broader emancipatory project that entails transforming power structures, addressing inequality, and eliminating exclusion within existing systems.

Ellen connected citizenship to a Radical Humanist vision of global transformation. While rethinking about the exclusionary idea of ‘citizen of nowhere’ to the inclusive notion of ‘citizen of everywhere,’ she articulated the idea of the “citizen of the world” as a political agency committed to reshaping society based on reason, equality, and freedom.

Importantly, Ellen’s idea of global belonging was grounded in concrete struggles and a sustained engagement with anti-fascism, anti-colonial politics, and democratic reconstruction. Her experience of migration and exile provides a lived articulation of citizenship that challenges territorial and legal definitions of belonging. Her cosmopolitanism is therefore practical, which emerged through action and organization.

Her framework is important to understanding contemporary debates surrounding refugees, migrants, and immigrants as she expanded conventional understandings of belonging. According to her vision, global citizenship is defined by shared responsibility for creating a better future. In the contemporary context, when issues such as migration and statelessness have been weaponized and the limits of nation-centric citizenship are increasingly visible, her work must be revisited to understand the complexities and nuances in real-life situations.



Ellen Roy with M.N. Roy file photo with Indian Renaissance Institute.

Ellen Gottschalk Roy as a Cosmopolitan Feminist

“Rising out of the background of the law-governed physical nature, the human being is essentially rational.”²⁹

The life and work of Ellen Roy was a rethinking of feminism beyond its conventional framing within nationalist struggles. Her cosmopolitan feminism was grounded in rationalism and internationalism. For her, individual agency, intellectual equality, and critical reason are important elements of a democratic life.

Ellen’s feminism was deeply international, informed by her experiences across Europe and India. These engagements across multiple cultural contexts enabled her to develop a comparative and critical understanding of oppression.³⁰ She deployed an analytical perspective to comprehend the world, recognizing its possibilities and contradictions.

Earlier, she engaged in the anti-fascist struggle in Europe, and for decades she worked in India with local communities, rejecting ‘mystic’ views and professing reason and rationality. Her feminism challenged the boundaries of nation, culture, and gender by situating women’s emancipation within a broader struggle.

Although Ellen did not identify herself as a feminist, her life and work embodied feminism as lived practice. As an editor, organizer, and activist, she occupied historically male-dominated public spaces. She consistently asserted women’s intellectual equality and political agency.

Ellen critiqued ideological nationalism, warning that elevating the nation above the individual reproduces hierarchical structures that marginalize women. Her cosmopolitan feminism aligned with Radical Humanism’s emancipatory vision, making women’s liberation integral.³¹ This rationalist approach distinguishes her feminism from identity-based frameworks that rely on fixed gendered categories.

In the context of contemporary debates on decolonization and multiculturalism, Ellen Roy’s feminism offers an alternative framework. Her rationalist perspective challenged the East-West binaries by imagining women’s emancipation through the lens of democracy and freedom.³² She rejected colonial stereotypes of “Eastern womanhood” and nationalist constructions of idealized femininity. Instead, she emphasized universal human abilities grounded in reason and ethics. Her feminism, therefore, complicates multicultural frameworks that treat cultures as fixed and homogeneous entities.

²⁹ Roy Ellen Gottschalk (1948) *In Man’s Own Image*, p. 24

³⁰ Ray Sibnarayan (1979) *The World Her Village*

³¹ Roy Ellen (1943) *Women’s Place in Society*, supra.

³² Roy Ellen (1943) *Women’s Place in Society*, supra.

Feminism Beyond Nation, Culture, and Domestic Reform

*“Knowledge is the awareness of the existence of things in nature and the understanding of their inter-relation, those things including man himself and his relation to all other things. What is thus known is truth. Truth is the content of knowledge. And the freedom which this knowledge confers on man is the freedom to live up to his creative role, to shape his world to his purpose, to develop all that is, consciously or unconsciously, in him.”*³³

In *The White Woman's Other Burden*, Kumari Jayawardena³⁴ explored the lives of foreign women in colonial South Asia, distinguishing them from the stereotypical “Women of the Raj.” Many foreign women crossed cultural and political boundaries, opposed imperialism, and joined nationalist, socialist, reformist, feminist movements, and anti-colonial struggles.

Some were praised as progressive allies, while others were vilified. For instance, Katherine Mayo faced strong backlash after publishing *Mother India*.³⁵ Also, certain “feminist imperialists”³⁶ depicted Indian women as oppressed and in need of rescue, while “maternal imperialists”³⁷ treated them as dependents requiring reform. Others directly resisted colonialism and conservatism, faced condemnation for crossing boundaries, and were branded as deviant by colonial authorities.

Within this larger historical context of transnational women intellectuals and activists, Ellen's life and work can be situated as part of a transnational project that connects gender justice to emancipation. She crossed geographical, cultural, and ideological boundaries in search of freedom, justice, and a humane society. Yet history has overshadowed her remarkable journey, remembering her largely as the companion and collaborator of M. N. Roy.³⁸

Ellen argued that the condition of women is inseparable from the overall structure of society. This perspective refused to treat women's liberation as an isolated domain. For her, gender equality cannot be achieved without transforming the underlying power structures, position that aligns with Radical Humanist belief that social, economic, and political systems collectively determine individual freedom.

Her cosmopolitan feminism insisted that women must equally participate in public and political life. She rejected their confinement to domestic roles. Ellen clearly articulated this

³³ Roy Ellen Gottschalk (1948) *In Man's Own Image*, p. 19

³⁴ Kumari Jayawardena (1995) *The White Woman's Other Burden: Western Women and South Asia During British Colonial Rule*, Routledge, New York

³⁵ Nigam Shalu (2025) *Gendered Citizenship*, supra

³⁶ Burton AM (1994) *Burdens of History: British Feminists, Indian Women and Imperial Culture 1865-1915*, The University of North Carolina Press, USA

³⁷ Ramusack Barbara N. (1990) Cultural Missionaries, Maternal Imperialist, and Feminist Allies: British Women Activists in India, *Women's Studies International Forum*, 13(4) 309-321

³⁸ Ray Sibnarayan (1979) *The World Her Village: Selected Writings and Letters of Ellen Roy*, Ananda Publishers Pvt Lt. Calcutta

interconnectedness when she wrote, “The place of women in society is closely bound up with the system of society as a whole.”³⁹ Her stand aligns with the colonial Indian women’s movement.⁴⁰ She further explained,

“The enlightened women who want to change their place in society must take their place in the general movement for changing the society as a whole in such a manner as will give women also effective equality in rights and opportunities and responsibilities and status. The ideals of the French Revolution are yet to be attained in the major part of the world. Women will achieve liberty and equality and a status on a level with any other human being only in a world where these ideals will be achieved by mankind as a whole.”⁴¹

Here, Ellen Roy links women’s emancipation to the unfinished project of liberty and equality. Her feminism was embedded in a larger vision of democratic and revolutionary transformation. She encouraged women to actively engage in public and political life:

“Behave as political beings; make up your mind that to work for the progress of society as a whole is the most urgent thing to do in the very interest of your children, for whom you want to prepare a better world than the one we live in; if you enter public life with this belief, don't do it as women, but as members of society. And then act, act purposefully and enthusiastically; don't be passive spectators at the periphery of history unfolding before our eyes today, and if you act, consistent with your thinking.... A historically necessary revolutionary movement is bound to succeed when the female half of society is adequately and worthily and actively represented in it.”⁴²

This statement reflects her broader conception of citizenship as inclusive and participatory. For Ellen, political engagement is a shared responsibility. In her view, women’s participation in public life was essential for the success of any revolutionary movement. In contemporary feminist debates that engage with intersectionality and global inequality, her approach remains relevant for understanding gender justice as inseparable from broader questions of democracy, political economy, and socio-cultural transformation.

³⁹ Roy Ellen (1943) *Women’s Place in Society*, p. 250

⁴⁰ Nigam (2025) *Gendered Citizenship*, *supra*.

⁴¹ *Ibid.* p. 251

⁴² *Ibid* p 252-253

Anti-Fascism and Revolutionary Politics

“The purpose of all human endeavour, individual as well as collective, is attainment of freedom in ever increasing measure.”⁴³

Ellen Roy’s intellectual and political trajectory was strongly influenced by European fascism in the twentieth century.⁴⁴ Her experiences of political persecution and forced displacement in Nazi Germany exposed her to the fragility of citizenship, compelling her to rethink the problems in nationalist frameworks. Those regressive conditions drew her toward communist politics and anti-fascist activism.⁴⁵ She critiqued nationalism, authoritarianism, and fascism. These thoughts were reflected later in her vision for Radical Humanism.

As Nazi influence grew, she was forced to flee to France. In Paris, she lived under precarious circumstances, supporting herself through secretarial work while engaging with anti-fascist activism.⁴⁶ Her forced displacement from Nazi-affected Europe made authoritarianism a lived reality for her. Experiences of exile strengthened her commitment to democracy and the struggle against authoritarianism.

Her active engagement with the networks resisting fascism in Europe also reinforced her anti-fascist stance. In 1935, she helped organize the International Conference for the Defence of Culture in Paris, which brought together writers, artists, and activists against fascism and war. This experience demonstrated that the destruction of fascism requires sustained intellectual practices besides arms. These involvements shaped her understanding of totalitarianism and its impact. She argued that under totalitarian systems, political power ceases to serve society and instead becomes an instrument of absolute control. She wrote:

“Under totalitarianism, power is the highest value, and the fight for its conquest or preservation the foremost concern, the end to which all means are good; in its pursuit, all other values simply vanish in meaninglessness and contempt.”

She developed anti-fascist vision, arguing that the legitimacy of any political order depends on its ability to ensure the well-being and dignity of its citizens.⁴⁷ She argued that the power without ethical responsibility can lead to destruction. According to her, fascism inverts the democratic principles by coercing loyalty to the nation. In Ellen’s view, Fascism was a system of domination rooted in inequality, fear, and authoritarianism. It combined corruption, violence, and propaganda, where power becomes an end in itself. Commenting on the situation in Germany, Ellen wrote,

⁴³ Roy Ellen Gottschalk (1948) *In Man’s Own Image*, p. 36

⁴⁴ Roy Ellen (1937) *The Danger of War*, *Independent India* 1(8) 23 May reprinted in the *World Her Village*

⁴⁵ Roy Ellen (1955) *Fragments From the Draft of Talk by Ellen*, in the *World Her Village*, p 374

⁴⁶ Ray Sibnarayan (1979) *The World Her Village*, *supra*.

⁴⁷ Roy Ellen (1954) *United Nations Day*, *The Radical Humanist* 18(44) 31 October, reprinted in the *World Her Village*, p. 291

“Hitler’s strength is his unscrupulous capacity of bluff, his wanton boldness as a blackmailer..... Whoever knows Germany and the Germans knows that Hitlerism was acceptable to them as the only alternative to more drastic readjustments of their social and economic disabilities; in despair, they took Hitler on his boasting words, promising to lead his chosen people to the solution of all their problems. He failed and stands today self-condemned. Unable to solve Germany's internal problems, he tries to turn the attention of the people away from the fundamental issues, towards the glamour of outward aggrandisement.”⁴⁸

For Ellen, defeating fascism required dismantling conditions that produced authoritarian consciousness in the first place, not military victory. According to her:

“Fascism can be considered completely defeated only when, besides being militarily crushed, it will not only be deprived of all positions of power, but also of its potential breeding ground; that is, if the re-establishment of conditions known to have bred Fascism will be successfully prevented.”⁴⁹

According to her, the struggle against fascism required transforming the socio-economic conditions that enabled authoritarianism to flourish. This insight shaped her later insistence that democracy must not only distribute power but also transform the social and moral conditions under which power is exercised. Ellen viewed culture, education, and political organization as interconnected steps essential to preserve democracy. She wrote,

“A moderate view of what might be considered conducive to political victory in this war would be a guarantee to all countries of total freedom from want and the freedom of the peoples. to exercise and administer democracy themselves, and not have it exercised for them by more or less benevolent self-appointed patrons.”⁵⁰

She drew a connection between the dangers of fascism and imperialism, asserting that both enslave and exploit humanity.⁵¹ She wrote, “Imperialism has given birth to fascism, a more advanced form of Imperialism...”⁵²

During the Second World War, her writings emphasized that the struggle against fascism should also include the questions of justice and material well-being. While working in the Indian context, she argued that political freedom is meaningless without ensuring economic security. Democracy must address the conditions of hunger, poverty, and inequality.⁵³ As she observed:

“If the fight against Fascism is one for freedom and progress, the latter must be given a concrete content. The peasant and Indian workers cannot think in abstractions. It has become an axiom that freedom means freedom from want, and progress stands for the

⁴⁸ Roy Ellen (1938) *No War and yet No Peace*, Independent India 2(28) October 9, Reprinted in the World Her Village, p. 236-237

⁴⁹ Roy Ellen (1943) *Where do We Stand? Dangers and Hopes of Victory*, Independent India, 7(36) 19 September reprinted in *the World Her Village*, p. 254

⁵⁰ Roy Ellen (1943) *Where Do we Stand: Dangers and Hopes of Victory*. P. 254 Supra.

⁵¹ Roy Ellen (1938) *Behind the Scene of Austrian Tragedy*, Independent India 2(1) April 3, Reprinted in the World her Village, p. 233

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Roy Ellen (1943) *Where Do we Stand: Dangers and Hopes of Victory*. Supra.

elevation of human beings out of the animal state, where all activity serves only sheer physical maintenance, to a state of dignity where every human being can think higher ideas and pursue nobler ideals. And that cannot be done on an empty stomach. The pursuit of freedom and progress in this sense must be declared a policy, and elaborated in a concrete programme in terms of politics and economics, which the people will understand and appreciate, and for the realization of which they will fight any obstacle on the way. They will fight Fascist aggression-as but only as-an obstacle on the way to something to be achieved.”⁵⁴

Thus, Ellen’s anti-fascist opposition critiqued authoritarianism rather than being limited to a critique of a specific regime. It shaped her understanding of democracy and freedom, and provided the groundwork for her Radical Humanism. Her anti-fascist approach was an intellectual bridge that connected European revolutionary politics to a universal theory of human emancipation.

Her ideas remain deeply relevant today in an increasingly authoritarian world where the spirit to foster democratic institutions, civil liberties, and pluralism is much required. Ellen Roy’s emphasis on rationality, freedom, and ethical responsibility offers an alternative framework for resisting authoritarianism.



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⁵⁴ Roy Ellen (1942) *Win the People to Win the War*, May 20, appeared in *India and War*, by MN Roy

Peace as Social and Political Reconstruction

“The dynamics of ideas runs parallel to the process of social evolution, the two influencing each other mutually.”⁵⁵

Beyond anti-fascist critique, Ellen postulated the theory of peace and post-war reconstruction. For her, peace was an active process of reconstructing society based on justice, cooperation, and dignity. In the context of global wars and geopolitical tensions of the twentieth century, she argued that peace is more than merely the absence of conflict. For her, peace could not be secured merely through military alliances, diplomatic settlements, or political independence. She prioritized constructive work to address growing international tensions, uncertainty, fear, and the possibility of future wars.

From this perspective, lasting peace could not be achieved through treaties or collecting armaments for defence.⁵⁶ She rejected the traditional understanding of peace as a temporary balance between competing powers. Her theory of peace is connected to her concept of a “mental revolution,” in which individuals perceive others as members of a shared humanity rather than as enemies.⁵⁷ Thus, sustaining lasting peace became a ground for her Radical Humanism.

She viewed war as a symptom of deeper structural conditions, including inequalities, national rivalry, and authoritarian systems. Ellen believed that lasting peace required defending democratic values, upholding justice, and fostering international cooperation. Reflecting on the global crises of her time, she wrote:

“World peace depends on the victory of the principles which are defended within those frontiers.... It will be the challenge of the decaying old to the rising new world.”⁵⁸

This statement reveals her conviction that the peace depended upon a struggle between authoritarian and democratic visions of society. To create a “new world” which symbolized freedom, dignity, and democratic reconstruction, the old world, represented by militarism, imperialism, aggressive nationalism, and economic exploitation, needs demolition.

Ellen articulated that peace depends on creating a global order grounded in shared human interests. International cooperation activities must engage ordinary people in building peace rather than relying on elite diplomacy. For her, people-to-people contact was important for sustaining peace, where mutual understanding and recognition of the universality of culture could provide a safeguard against war. Hence, the peace-building concept was a democratic process rooted in communication and mutual respect across societies.

⁵⁵ Roy Ellen Gottschalk (1948) *In Man's Own Image*, p. 41

⁵⁶ Roy Ellen (1937) *The Danger of War*, *Independent India* 1(8) 23 May reprinted in the World Her Village

⁵⁷ Roy Ellen (1954) *Thoughts on the Radical Humanist Reunion*, *The Radical Humanist* 18(25 and 27) 20th June and 4th July Reprinted in the World Her Village

⁵⁸ Roy Ellen (1938) *No War and Yet no Peace*, *Independent India* 2(28) 9 October

She explained that wars persist because of sustained propaganda, which divides people by fear, prejudice, and ignorance. She proposed that the United Nations could play an important role in eliminating misunderstandings between hostile nations by bringing people together.⁵⁹ These interactions can dismantle the psychological and ideological foundations of war. Enabling direct interaction could help them realize that despite differences in language, customs, and traditions, individuals everywhere shared similar aspirations, emotions, and hopes. Such engagements could transform their perception and consciousness. This idea reflected the essence of her cosmopolitan humanism.

Ellen also prioritised socio-economic reconstruction as crucial to peace-building efforts. In her writings during the Second World War, she argued that war sustains scarcity, inequality, and competition. Therefore, it can be addressed by transforming material conditions. Stable and lasting peace requires reducing poverty, expanding education, and creating cooperative structures. Prioritizing collective well-being over profit is important. She believed that progress implies actively resisting militarization and prioritising constructive development. She wrote:

“The greatest significance that we could give to Indian independence would be to go on building with all our resources for peace, as if no war were threatening. If others do likewise, the war may, after all, not come. And even if it comes, some foundation will have been laid, something good created that was in itself worthwhile and may survive catastrophe. Because in all great devastations, there is something that survives – ideas, and ideals, and the memory of great human endeavours”.⁶⁰

This humanist vision reflected her ideas about collective efforts amidst destruction. For Ellen, post-war reconstruction implies cultivating democratic values, rational thinking, and solidarity, conditions are necessary for resisting future authoritarian tendencies. Thus, her theory of peace and reconstruction integrates democratization, economic justice, and international cooperation, forming a comprehensive vision. She considered peace as an ongoing process of building institutions and relationships to sustain dignity.

Ellen’s project of democratic reconstruction offers an important source for rethinking contemporary global politics through feminist and human-centric perspectives. Her ideas on peace emphasize security, solidarity, and global cooperation over militarized and state-centric approaches. Contemporary feminist foreign policy frameworks strongly resonate with her Radical Humanist vision by linking peace with rationality, social responsibility, and transnational solidarity rather than domination or power politics.⁶¹

⁵⁹ Roy Ellen (1954) *United Nations Day*, *The Radical Humanist* 18(44) 31 October, reprinted in the *World Her Village*, supra.

⁶⁰ Roy Ellen (1949) What Indian Independence Means to Me. *The Radical Humanist*, 13(32) 14 August reprinted in the *World Her Village*, P. 263

⁶¹ Nigam Shalu (2022) Feminist Foreign Policy in India: A Trifecta of Hope, Imagination, and Possibilities, IMPRI Insights, October 25, <https://www.impriindia.com/insights/feminist-foreign-policy-trifecta/>

Radical Democracy as Critique of Parliamentary Form

“The purpose of all rational human endeavour, individual as well as collective, is attainment of freedom in ever increasing measure. Freedom is progressive disappearance of all restrictions on the unfolding of the potentialities of individuals, as human beings, and not as cogs in the wheels of a mechanised social organism. The position of the individual, therefore, is the measure of the progressive and liberating significance of any collective effort or social organisation. The success of any collective endeavour is to be measured by the actual benefit for its constituent units.”⁶²

Ellen Roy considered the parliamentary democracy inadequate for realizing genuine sovereignty because of its insistence on formalism. She defined Radical Democracy as a system of collective self-transformation grounded in reason, participation, and equality. While the parliamentary democracy claims to represent “the people,” it reduces political participation to periodic voting, fuelling elite and vested interests. In this system, power is delegated and controlled by representatives rather than being exercised by the people. She described parliamentary democracy as a *procedural illusion* or a ‘pretence’ rather than people’s rule because those in power remained indifferent to everyday realities.

In contrast, her concept of *Radical Democracy*⁶³ emphasized power rooted in active citizens’ participation in shaping their socio-economic conditions. Democracy, in her view, is not a method of selecting governments but a process of collective empowerment through which individuals develop the ability to govern themselves consciously and rationally. This shift from representation to participation in governance distinguished her ideas from those prescribed by the dominant discourse.

She maintained that educated, conscious, and rational individuals should actively participate in the process of governance. Without people’s participation, democratic institutions can be captured by demagogues. Therefore, democracy cannot be reduced to periodic voting. It has to create conditions in which every individual can live with dignity and pursue higher aspirations beyond the struggle for survival. She wrote:

“Democracy vests in the people the power to rule. Power in itself tempts none but the perversely ambitious – the prototype of the worst ancient tyrants. Power is coveted and necessary for achieving an end. The end for which power is needed and coveted by the people is to benefit the people and promote their spiritual and material well-being. For that, it is necessary, firstly, that the people should be sufficiently conscious and educated to formulate the terms of progress and wellbeing; and secondly, that instruments be created for them to exercise the power effectively.”⁶⁴

⁶² Roy Ellen Gottschalk (1948) *In Man’s Own Image*, p. 46

⁶³ Roy Ellen (1944) *Radical Democracy*, Radical Democratic Party, Delhi

⁶⁴ *Ibid.* P. 16

Ellen also redefined the meaning of power as the collective human capacity to create, organize, and improve the quality of life. In this framework, democracy becomes the institutional expression of human creativity rather than a competitive struggle for power and control. She maintained that the true people's rule requires raising society's intellectual, material, and moral level. Her Radical Democracy involved nurturing rational and ethically responsible citizens capable of collectively shaping progress.

She strongly advocated for cooperation as the principle necessary for democratic reconstruction. For Ellen, cooperation was a democratic ethic that could overcome divisions of caste, religion, region, and class. She encouraged cooperative association based on equal participation, shared ownership, collective responsibility, and mutual aid. Cooperative structures, therefore, are educational spaces where democratic values are practiced and reinforced. She wrote,

“Only when co-operation becomes a way of life can it become more than an economic technique and have its effect on the whole atmosphere in the country, transcending parochialism and communalism and exercising a truly democratic influence on the political life of the country also. Co-operation is the most democratic form of organisation. For this reason, Radical Humanists have adopted the co-operative principle as the basis for the country's economic and political reconstruction.”⁶⁵

Importantly, Ellen linked Radical Democracy to economic transformation. In her view, material deprivation undermines freedom by limiting individuals' capacity to participate meaningfully in public life. Therefore, democracy must include economic restructuring to reduce inequality and ensure social security.

Her Radical Democracy emphasises decentralization and democratization of local structures such as cooperatives, workers' organizations, and community institutions. These bodies enable citizens to participate directly in decision-making processes that affect their daily lives. They bridge the gap between political authority and social reality.

In short, Ellen's Radical Democracy represents a shift from formal politics to substantive democracy, where freedom is measured by an individual's ability to participate in governance. This conception lays the foundation for her Radical Humanism, in which democracy is inseparable from rationality, ethics, and freedom. In this vision, Radical Democracy is a collective living practice grounded in participation, education, and cooperation.

In the contemporary era marked by democratic backsliding, political polarization, and growing public distrust in institutions,⁶⁶ her vision remains relevant for reimagining democracy as an active and participatory ethical practice beyond merely an electoral system.

⁶⁵ Roy Ellen (1960) Cooperation as a Way of Life, *The Radical Humanist*, 24(50) December 11, reprinted in the *World her Village*, p. 352

⁶⁶ Nigam Shalu (2018) Infantilization and Degeneration of the Politics in Recent Times, *countercurrents.org*, February 16, <https://countercurrents.org/2018/02/infantilization-degeneration-politics-recent-times/>

People's Government as a Strategy of Democratic Transformation

*"Morality is an appeal to conscience, and conscience is the instinctive awareness of, and reaction to, environment."*⁶⁷

Ellen Roy also envisioned a concrete program of political reconstruction. Her idea of "People's Government" represents a strategy for transforming democracy from elite-controlled representation into mass organization rooted in education, cooperation, and everyday participation. She rejected the dominant conception of a "national government" in which political authority is transferred from colonial rulers to indigenous elites without altering the power structure. She viewed such transitions as insufficient because they reproduce hierarchies. She warned that reactionary forces use the language of nationalism to silence criticism and prevent structural transformation. According to her:

A people's Government would also be national in the sense that Indians will have to form it.... This is the life and death problem before India, and the reactionaries are cleverly confusing the issue by harping on National Government and branding anybody who wants to introduce a differentiation and clarification as anti-national and unpatriotic..."⁶⁸

She emphasized that genuine political transformation requires the active organization of ordinary people as the primary agents of governance. According to her, political authority should be accountable to the people. Her idea of People's Government is grounded in the belief that democracy must be constructed from below rather than imposed from above. Hence, the People's Government is a movement of organized citizenship, linking governance with responsibility and ethical citizenship.

At the heart of Ellen's idea of a People's Government was her insistence on individuals cooperation for collective welfare. She believed that democracy should not be confined to electoral representation but should become a lived practice embedded in everyday practices. For her, true democracy implied empowering workers, peasants, and marginalized communities. Outlining this vision, she wrote:

"We have recognised the necessity of new ways of revolution. We have now to specify and concretise them... Our plan of action: Educate the electorate through People's Conventions, and day-to-day, sustained, intensive and extensive propaganda. Organise the electorate in the People's Party, in trade unions, in co-operatives both of producers

⁶⁷ Roy Ellen Gottschalk (1948) *In Man's Own Image*, p. 54

⁶⁸ Roy Ellen (1943) *Where Do we Stand: Dangers and Hopes of Victory*. Supra. p 258

and consumers, People's Defence and Vigilance Committees, and Committees of the village poor. Entrench the People's Party in the hearts and minds of the people.”⁶⁹

Her emphasis on trade unions, cooperatives, village committees, and local organizations reveals her commitment to decentralization and participatory democracy. Rather than concentrating power in the state or political parties, she envisioned a network of democratic associations through which ordinary people could participate in governance.

A central feature of this approach is political education. Ellen argued that democratic transformation depends on the conscious development of the electorate. Without awareness, mass participation can be easily manipulated by populist rhetoric. Therefore, she emphasized sustained efforts to educate citizens through public discussions, study circles, and organized engagement.

Alongside education, she stressed the importance of organization as a direct expression of sovereignty. She proposed the formation of structured platforms such as people's committees, trade unions, and cooperative associations as instruments of collective action. Through such organizations, individuals can learn to exercise power responsibly. In this scheme, cooperative structures embodied principles of shared responsibility and democratic participation in economic life.

In this conception, economic organization plays a crucial role. She believed that democratic governance is crucially linked to control over production and distribution. The People's Government extends democracy beyond the political sphere into the material conditions of society. Ellen emphasized that the People's Government must be a dynamic and evolving process shaped by continuous participation and experimentation. It derives legitimacy from its ability to remain responsive to people's needs and aspirations. Against the bureaucratic national government, the People's Government reflects her belief that institutions must evolve in accordance with reason.

Thus, the People's Government translates Ellen's philosophical commitments into an organized political action aimed at restructuring society through participation, cooperation, and education. Critiquing the dominant nationalist system, it provides a blueprint for building a new order rooted in agency and dignity. Radical Democracy outlines the philosophical foundations of political participation, and the idea of a People's Government translates this vision into a concrete programme.

In the contemporary context of widening social inequalities, political alienation, and declining public trust in representative institutions, her emphasis on participatory governance and collective responsibility offers an alternative framework prioritising agency and empowerment.

⁶⁹ Roy Ellen (1943) *Where Do we Stand: Dangers and Hopes of Victory*. Supra. p 258

Partnership as Intellectual Collaboration, Not Dependency

“...for creating a new world of freedom, revolution must go beyond an economic reorganisation of society. Freedom does not necessarily follow from the capture of political power in the name of the oppressed and exploited classes and abolition of private ownership in the means of production.”⁷⁰

The relationship between Ellen Roy and M. N. Roy is often seen as a personal alliance in the official discourse. Most documents depict Ellen in a supportive role in Roy's intellectual career.⁷¹ However, these narratives ignored their association as a reciprocal intellectual partnership in which political ideas, organizational work, and philosophical development were jointly produced.

Ellen met M. N. Roy in the late 1920s within radical political circles in Europe. That time, both were engaged in rethinking the limitations of orthodox communism and exploring alternative frameworks. Their mutual commitment to reimagine revolution shaped their intellectual convergence. From the beginning, their relationship was a collaborative project embedded in commitment to anti-imperialism, democracy, and freedom.

A crucial dimension of their partnership emerged during M. N. Roy's imprisonment by colonial authorities (1931 to 1936). Ellen remained in constant correspondence with him. These exchanges later appeared in *Letters from Jail* (1943)⁷², a collection described as “documents of revolutionary intimacy” because they reveal the close intertwining of philosophical debate and companionship.⁷³

During this period, Ellen played a significant role in sustaining his intellectual work by ensuring access to books, journals, and writing materials, enabling the production of extensive philosophical manuscripts. With her support, Roy produced the extensive *Prison Manuscripts*, consisting of nearly 3,000 pages published across nine volumes, which later became foundational to the evolution of Radical Humanism. Under conditions of political repression, this support became essential to continue the idea.

Simultaneously, Ellen participated in building international campaigns for his release, engaging with political leaders, intellectuals, and organizations across multiple countries. Among those she contacted was Jawaharlal Nehru, who was associated with Roy's Defence Committee.

⁷⁰ Roy Ellen Gottschalk (1948) *In Man's Own Image*, p. 60-61

⁷¹ Malik, K. (1981) Review of *The World Her Village (A Book of Ellen Roy)*, by S. Ray. *Indian Literature*, 24(1), 147–151.

⁷² Roy MN (1943) *Fragments of a Prisoner's Diary: Letters from Jail, Volume 3*, Indian Renaissance Institute, Calcutta

⁷³ Manjapra Kris (2013) The Impossible Intimacies of MN Roy, *Postcolonial Studies*, 16(2) 169-184

Their later correspondence reflects Ellen's continued concern about Roy's health and imprisonment, as well as the wider political implications of the case.⁷⁴

Ellen travelled to Britain to meet leaders of the Labour Party and discuss the matter directly. Through these persistent efforts and her extensive networking, Roy's prison sentence was eventually reduced from twelve years to six.⁷⁵ Her efforts reflect a sophisticated understanding of transnational networking. Through correspondence, advocacy, and organizational work, she helped situate Roy's imprisonment within a global discourse on colonialism and freedom.

Importantly, this phase of their relationship demonstrates Ellen's agency. While supporting Roy's intellectual efforts, she simultaneously took up tasks of writing, organizing, and engaging with international leaders. Moreover, the correspondence between M. N. Roy and Ellen during his imprisonment suggests that they deliberated upon the possibility of establishing an Indian counterpart to the Frankfurt School.⁷⁶ Although the idea did not materialize, it arguably found later institutional expression in the establishment of the Indian Renaissance Institute. Sibnarayan Ray⁷⁷ also noted,

“Through her letters, she tried to bring comfort to Roy... She wrote to him about her own literary efforts, and explored on his behalf possibilities of finding support for setting up a Research Institute-cum-Publishing House after he was released from prison.”

These writings indicate that the idea of the Institute was envisioned jointly. Ellen contributed substantially to its conceptualization as a co-architect and shaped its institutional and intellectual directions. Their collaboration continued after Roy's release, where both involved in redefining the meaning of postcolonial transformation. The evolution of their partnership into marriage and shared residence in Dehradun was a continuation of their joint work within a shared intellectual environment. India became the space in which their ideas were institutionalized through journals and initiatives, reflecting their combined efforts.

Thus, the intellectual partnership between Ellen and M. N. Roy represents a complex interplay of collaboration, mutual influence, and shared commitment. It also depended significantly on Ellen's organizational capacity and intellectual labour. Reframing this relationship as a partnership fosters an accurate understanding of how Radical Humanism emerged as a collaborative intellectual project shaped by shared experiences of exile and political struggle. This partnership was structurally significant as it transformed Radical Humanism from a philosophical position into an organized intellectual movement.

⁷⁴ Reply by Jawahar Lal Nehru to Ellen Gottschalk August 29, 1936, Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru, First Series, Vol. 7, p. 656-7 <https://nehruarchive.in/documents/to-ellen-gottschalk-29-august-1936-250xe>

⁷⁵ Nigam Shalu (2026) *Women's Emancipation and Feminist Praxis*, supra

⁷⁶ For details, please refer letter dated 13 September 1932, written by MN Roy to Ellen Gottschalk from Central Prison, Bareilly, letter dated 20 September 1934 written by MN Roy to Ellen Gottschalk from District Jail Almorah, Letter dated 22 March 1936 by MN Roy to Ellen Gottschalk from District Jail, Dehradun, and Letter dated 24 May, 1936 from District Jail Dehradun by MN Roy to Ellen Gottschalk. The record of the reply of these letters by Ellen is not available, yet, in these letters, among other things, they discussed about the idea of the Indian counterpart of the Frankfurt Institute. Roy MN (1943) *Fragments of Prison Diary Volume III, Letters from Jail*, Renaissance Publication, Dehradun.

⁷⁷ Ray Sibnarayan (1979) *The World Her Village* p. 35

Radical Humanism as an Institutional and Intellectual Project

“Our philosophy is a philosophy of life, of the life of man. We are concerned with man, and with everything else to the extent that it concerns man's life. That sets no limit to our concern, because there is nothing that did not concern man, in the sense that to know everything is man's instinctive and primary endeavour; for, increasing knowledge brings him greater freedom, and freedom is not only his birth-right, but the original and ultimate end of all his pursuits.”⁷⁸

The emergence of Radical Humanism is attributed primarily to M. N. Roy; however, such a reductive reading overlooks the constitutive role of Ellen into an organized intellectual movement. She institutionalized Radical Humanism as a living practice through journals, organizations, educational initiatives, and transnational networks.

After settling in India in 1937, Ellen and M. N. Roy developed a new intellectual platform that evolved into the journal *Independent India*, which became *The Radical Humanist* in 1949. Alongside Roy, Ellen created the *Radical Democratic Party*. She believed that political transformation requires ideological clarity and institutional grounding.

Ellen travelled across the country, addressing meetings, organizing study groups, and engaging with intellectuals, workers, and activists.⁷⁹ Through these discussion networks, she extended Radical Humanism into a movement about ethical politics, democracy, and reconstruction. She believed that the movement carried the potential to create “new landmarks of human history”.

She consistently argued that Radical Humanism is a *dynamic movement of ideas* capable of reshaping society. In her view, the success of Radical Humanism depended on creating conditions that nurture reason in everyday life. As she wrote:

“Our success will lie *in* having created conditions in which the further evolution and improvement of all institutions towards greater human freedom and happiness will be rooted in the nature of those institutions themselves, being created and operated by, and conducive to the further growth and development of, free and rational human beings who are moral because they are rational, considerations of power and vested interest having come to be held in universal contempt and derision.”⁸⁰

⁷⁸ Roy Ellen Gottschalk (1948) *In Man's Own Image*, p. 19

⁷⁹ Roy Ellen (1958) A Letter addressed to the couple Suyesh Malik (an advocate) and Gauri Bazaz Malik (a doctor) on 1st of January detailing how the institute was working and how she would like to that forward. Available on file with the Indian Renaissance Institute. Available at https://www.academia.edu/167984895/A_Letter_from_Ellen_Roy_to_a_couple_Suyesh_Malik_and_Gauri_Bazaz_Malik_members_of_the_Indian_Renaissance_Institute_Suyesh_Malik_an_advocate_and_Gauri_Bazaz_Malik_a_doctor_were_renowned_in_their_own_fields

⁸⁰ Roy Ellen (1954) Thoughts on the Radical Humanist Reunion, p 285-290

Ellen believed that considerations of power, domination, and vested interests should eventually give way to values rooted in cooperation, ethical responsibility, and dignity. Her strategy for institutionalizing Radical Humanism, therefore began, with transforming the individual.

She also played a crucial role in establishing *The Marxian Way* and the *Renaissance Publishers*.⁸¹ These publications served as organizing tools for a movement of rationalist ideas. Through dissemination and educational initiatives, she translated Radical Humanism from a theoretical critique into a living idea of democratic reconstruction.

In 1946, she helped establish the *Indian Renaissance Institute*, which aimed at promoting Enlightenment values, humanism, and rational thought. This institution reflects her belief that political change must be supported by a cultural and educational infrastructure capable of sustaining critical thinking.

For Ellen, one can create a humane society through sustained ethical behaviour, dialogue, and action. If people embraced rational solutions to personal and social problems, a philosophical revolution would emerge, leading to a wider change. Therefore, the success of Radical Humanism depended on the gradual expansion of individuals who embody rationality and ethics in their everyday lives. She described transformation as a cumulative process of cultural and intellectual change. In her view, institutions evolve organically when individuals internalize and practice new modes of thinking.⁸²

Thus, Radical Humanism was a collaborative and transnational project shaped significantly by Ellen's organizational vision and commitment to rational-democratic culture. Her efforts to institutionalized this project linked philosophical inquiry with public engagement.

⁸¹ Ray Sibnaryan (1979) *The World Her Village* p. 36

⁸² Roy Ellen (1950) *The God that Failed*, *The Radical Humanist*, 14(39) October 1, Reprinted in the *World Her Village*, supra p 273

Radical Humanism as an Open Philosophical System

“Society, which is a creation of man, and is nothing except for man who makes and composes it, is also part of the physical Universe and subject to its laws of rationality, of logic and causality.”⁸³

At the core of Ellen Roy’s concern was human dignity because, for her, Radical Humanism was a movement of ideas.⁸⁴ Unlike rigid ideological systems that prioritise state power, her humanism highlighted ethical responsibility, welfare, and nurturing a democratic culture rooted in reason and compassion. She believed that the meaningful transformation requires the growth of free individuals, guided by reason.

For Ellen, philosophy of Radical Humanism was a philosophy of life. In this framework, freedom implies “progressive disappearance of all restrictions on the unfolding of the potentialities of all individuals... The success of any endeavour is to be measured by the actual benefits to its constituent units.”⁸⁵ It is an ‘essence and expression of Indian Renaissance.’⁸⁶ It integrates political theory, ethics, and epistemology into a single framework, prioritising an individual as a rational and creative agent.

Therefore, Radical Humanism is a process of intellectual and ethical reorientation. This focus on individual transformation distinguishes her approach from purely structural theories of change. She emphasized the importance of transforming society through a gradual change in ideas, attitudes, and moral consciousness rather than through coercive methods. She believed that institutions had to evolve alongside a shift in individuals’ ethical outlook. As she wrote:

“The Radical Humanist Movement will leave institutions to grow within and out of the existing society, as and when and where the mental outlook of people changes.... A mental atmosphere is nothing abstract; it does not hang in the air. It is created by human beings, their ideas, their behaviour, and their actions. If we can make our ideas appealing and acceptable to the reason of our fellow citizens, and if our action indicates rational solutions of personal and social problems to be affected by the people around us themselves – then the mental atmosphere will have changed. A philosophical revolution will have started in the minds of people and will be the harbinger of social changes inspired by the ideas of Radical Humanism”⁸⁷

Ellen insisted that social transformation begins in the realm of everyday thought and conduct and emerges through a gradual transformation of mental and cultural conditions. She introduces

⁸³ Roy Ellen Gottschalk (1948) *In Man’s Own Image*, p. 27

⁸⁴ Roy Ellen (1954) *Thoughts on the Radical Humanist Reunion*, supra. p. 289

⁸⁵ Roy Ellen and S Ray (1948) *In Man’s Own Image*, p. 46

⁸⁶ Ellen Roy (1954) *Thoughts on the Radical Humanist Reunion*, supra.

⁸⁷ Roy Ellen (1954) *Thoughts on the Radical Humanist Reunion*, supra

the concept of a “mental atmosphere,” arguing that societies change when ideas, behaviours, and interactions reflect new values.

Therefore, she envisioned Radical Humanism as a “philosophical revolution,” a slow but profound transformation in consciousness that would lead to broader change. If ideas of reason, freedom, and ethical responsibility become widely accepted and practiced, they reshape institutions. According to her, the success of the Radical Humanism lies in creating the conditions toward greater freedom.

Her intellectual legacy thus drew a connection between philosophy, lived experience, and ideas with practice. This dynamic framework challenged authoritarianism, dogmatism, and exclusion. It rethinks democracy as an ongoing process of emancipation grounded in shared rational and ethical abilities. This universalism builds solidarity through reason, dialogue, and cooperation.

To sum up, Radical Humanism is a living philosophy of critical inquiry and democratic practice, where ideas remain open to revision and renewal in response to historical change. In a contemporary world marked by ideological polarization, democratic crises, and rapidly changing realities, her emphasis on critical reasoning, ethical responsibility, and intellectual openness remains highly relevant for rethinking democratic and humanist politics.



Ellen as a young girl

Photo courtesy: From the World Her Village, Edited by Sibnarayan Ray

India as Political and Intellectual Home

“...human will is the most powerful determining factor. Otherwise, there would be no room for revolutions in a rationally determined process of history.”⁸⁸

Ellen Gottschalk Roy's decision to remain in India was not simply a personal consequence of marriage or migration; it reflected a deliberate political and philosophical commitment. India became the principal historical terrain where she believed her intellectual and political vision could be meaningfully realized.

For Ellen, India's independence was not about the transfer of power from colonial rulers to indigenous elites. She recognised it as a rare historical opportunity to reconstruct society on rational, democratic, and cooperative principles. Independence, in her view, offered the possibility of “starting afresh” by creating a new political and social order free from inherited systems of inequality and violence.⁸⁹ Thus, she conceived freedom as an active and creative process of reconstruction.

She made a clear distinction between *independence* and *freedom*. For her, independence signified the absence of external domination, whereas freedom referred to the ability of individuals and societies to develop human potential. Political subjugation, including coercion, exploitation, or structural inequality, reduced individuals to instruments of power and denied them humanity. A genuinely free society, therefore, had to restore dignity to ordinary people.

She strongly opposed reducing people into anonymous collectives that could be mobilized for war or authoritarian rule. Instead, she insisted that societies must be rebuilt on autonomy, creativity, and cooperation among free individuals. As she wrote:

“They (society) have to be broken up into human individuals again before this world can become a better place to live in, and power be restored to its original meaning of the ability to do things, to create. which are human prerogatives, to be exercised by individual human beings, in cooperation with each other, in respect of each other's dignity and liberty.”⁹⁰

In this formulation, Ellen redefined “power” not as domination over others, but as the creative human capacity to act, cooperate, and build collectively. For her, a genuine political transformation required decentralizing authority and restoring agency. Consequently, substantive freedom for individuals and communities becomes important than the formal state sovereignty. She articulated this vision clearly when she observed:

“I do believe that the meaning of independence is to spread enlightenment and the consciousness of human dignity and self-confidence among the forty odd crores of

⁸⁸ Roy Ellen Gottschalk (1948) *In Man's Own Image*, p. 28

⁸⁹ Roy Ellen (1955) *Fragments From Draft of Talk by Ellen*, in the World Her Village, p. 374-376

⁹⁰ P. 262

Indians; to plan with such awakened individuals the economic life of the country on the basis of technically advanced and scientifically organised co-operatives, as decentralised as possible, and thorough-going electrification; and to elaborate the Panchayat system into a libertarian sovereign political democracy.”⁹¹

Therefore, for her, India became a space of possibility where Radical Humanism could become an institutional practice. She realized that the task before postcolonial society was to reorganize economic life, education, and civic consciousness based on reason and dignity.

Her conception of independence was tied to economic justice and well-being. She argued that freedom would remain incomplete unless accompanied by freedom from poverty, insecurity, and deprivation. Instead of prioritizing militarization or state coercion, she advocated redirecting resources toward development, education, and welfare. In her view, independence should be measured by its impact on human dignity. She wrote,

“...if her (India’s) favourable financial position will be utilised in production for use, for raising the standard of living of her teeming millions, for creating a modern system of economy and guaranteeing India the one freedom that counts (because this freedom guarantees all the others) —the freedom from want.”⁹²

She envisioned a decentralized, cooperative economy rooted in scientific planning and collective participation. For Ellen Roy, such arrangements were essential to ensuring that independence translated into substantive freedom rather than formal sovereignty.

Her engagement with India reflects a distinctive form of cosmopolitan transformation from international revolutionary activism to a sustained commitment to democratic reconstruction. It transcended national boundaries, radically redefining freedom. For Ellen, India was not romanticized as a cultural ideal, nor treated as an exotic “East,” but a real context in which rational, cooperative, and humanist institutions could be built. Her rejection of narrow notions of identity reflected this broader philosophical orientation. She once remarked:

“Well, I cannot help the colour of my skin; otherwise, this ‘foreigner’ business is rather an atavism.”⁹³

This statement reveals her discomfort with the nationality and race. She was convinced that human identity must transcend boundaries of belonging. Her association with India was therefore shaped less by cultural assimilation than by a shared ethical and intellectual commitment to progress. Ellen’s relationship with India should be understood as the strategic anchoring of Radical Humanism, not as cultural belonging in an emotional or nationalist sense. Moreover, her Indian experience expanded her political imagination when she integrated her early experiences with new dimensions. Hence, India became the site where her ideas about democracy, reason, decentralization, and cooperation were elaborated and institutionalized.

⁹¹ Roy Ellen (1949) What Indian Independence Means to Me. *The Radical Humanist*, 13(32) 14 August. reprinted in the *World Her Village* P 262

⁹² Roy Ellen (1943) *Where Do We Stand? Dangers and Hopes of the Victory*, Independent India, 7(36) September 19, Reprinted in *The World Her Village* p. 256

⁹³ Roy Ellen (1949) What Indian Independence Means to Me. *supra*, P. 259

Through her writings and activism, she connected India's independence with a larger emancipatory vision. She emphasized that freedom acquires meaning when translated into justice, dignity, and individual empowerment. In the contemporary context of widening inequality and persistent challenges in governance, her vision offers important insights into reimagining democracy as participatory, inclusive, and grounded in reality.



Ellen in the USA in 1955

Photo courtesy: From the World Her Village, Edited by Sibnarayan Ray

Creative Rationalism and the Ethics of Reason

“...the quest for freedom is the continuation, on a higher level of the biological struggle for existence. The search for truth is the corollary thereof.”⁹⁴

Ellen Roy’s philosophy develops a distinctive form of rationalist thought that she describes as “creative rationalism.” Rather than critiquing superstition, Ellen elaborated on a comprehensive theory of how individuals construct meaning of morality and order through reasoned engagement with the world. It insists that scientific inquiry and ethical awareness provide the foundation for progress.

Aligned with the Radical Humanist critique of authoritarianism, Ellen Roy argued that individuals must act reasonably rather than relying on superstition, fear, or dogma. She argued that the crisis of the modern world required a new basis for morality that emerged voluntarily from reason rather than external coercion or religious commandments. As she observed:

“The solution of the crisis of our time depends on a valid sanction for a voluntary, spontaneous morality. All other sanctions having failed to achieve this, let reason, scientifically and soberly defined, have its chance”⁹⁵

According to Ellen, both God and religion were historically created by human beings in their attempt to explain the mysteries and forces of nature. The purpose was to address uncertainty and fear. People wanted to make sense of forces beyond control.⁹⁶ Religion, therefore, gave individuals a sense of emotional security and symbolic control over an unpredictable world.

Ellen does not dismiss religion as ignorance. Instead, she interprets it as a human attempt to assert agency in the face of nature’s unpredictability. According to her, prayers, rituals, and appeals to divine powers may not influence natural events, but they provide people with an illusion of agency and protection. These supernatural frameworks helped individuals cope with suffering, fear, and insecurity while sustaining confidence in difficult conditions.

However, she argues that scientific developments and human mastery over nature have altered the conditions under which religious explanations were necessary. With the expansion of scientific knowledge, humanity gains the ability to understand natural processes. This shift from faith to reason creates the possibility of a new ethical foundation rooted in reason.

She believed that rationalism could free individuals from fear, blind faith, and irrational authority. According to her, the task of the rationalist movement was therefore not to criticize religion but to spread knowledge, encourage critical inquiry, and cultivate a scientific temper

⁹⁴ Roy Ellen Gottschalk (1948) *In Man’s Own Image*, p. 30-31

⁹⁵ Roy Ellen (1955) Towards Creative Rationalism, *The Radical Humanist*, 19(10) 6 March, reprinted in the World Her Village, p. 299

⁹⁶ Roy Ellen Gottschalk (1948) *In Man’s Own Image*, supra.

to explain the “why” behind natural phenomena. Creative rationalism, therefore, reconstructs human meaning based on scientific understanding, ethical responsibility, and agency.

According to Ellen, rationalism could encourage individuals to cultivate a scientific temperament. For her, the rationalist movement was not merely an intellectual exercise but ideas that offered reasoned approaches to personal and social problems. She wrote.

“If democracy is considered to be the best form of government, it must be shown to be the most reasonable proposition, and this can be shown to be so if the people who are to govern themselves learn to be conscious of their reason as their supreme and innate human distinction, and to apply it in the shaping of their own destiny.”⁹⁷

Ellen argued that democracy survives when individuals recognize reason as their highest human faculty. Without rational consciousness, democracy could degenerate into manipulation, demagoguery, or authoritarian control.⁹⁸ Importantly, Ellen’s human-centric rationalism affirms that knowledge enhances freedom, dignity, and creativity. Within this framework, rationalism becomes the basis for a voluntary and conscious morality. Instead of obedience to external authority, individuals understand social responsibility. Therefore, rationalism generates self-conscious ethical development.

Her creative rationalism forms a crucial pillar of Radical Humanism, linking individual reason to collective liberation. It was a philosophy of empowerment, reinforcing human ability to think freely and collectively shape society. By linking reason with freedom, morality, and democratic participation, she envisioned a world in which individuals overcome fear, dogma, and oppression through critical thought and ethical actions.

In the contemporary context of rising misinformation, identity-based polarization, assertions of authoritarianism, and anti-rational politics, her rationalism remains relevant as a framework for defending democratic deliberation, critical inquiry, and ethical reasoning.

⁹⁷ Roy Ellen (1955) *Towards Creative Rationalism*, p. 299

⁹⁸ Decades later, these observations seem to be true where the authoritarianism is increasingly causing much concerns around the world.

Custodianship and Continuity of Radical Humanism

“The problem before modern man is to shape his society so as to make freedom possible. His future depends on the solution of this problem. Our philosophy may solve the problem, because it starts from man, it aims at his freedom, and it visualises action in harmony with this aim, based on the contention that man is rational and therefore moral; and only such action can lead to freedom.”⁹⁹

Before M.N. Roy died in 1954, Ellen Gottschalk Roy remained closely involved in his personal care and intellectual work. She communicated with political leaders, including Jawaharlal Nehru, updating them on Roy’s health and engaged with wider political and intellectual networks concerned about his condition.¹⁰⁰

The death of M. N. Roy marked a decisive moment for Radical Humanism, raising the question of its survival. Ellen Roy took charge as a principal custodian, transforming it into a sustained institutional practice. She worked simultaneously at several levels, including handling the organizational matters, publications, and documentation.

She edited *The Radical Humanist* to disseminate ideas, encourage debate, and sustain intellectual engagement among rationalists, humanists, and thinkers.¹⁰¹ Through rigorous efforts, she established and maintained the institutional infrastructure to preserve and expand the movement. She continued organizing study camps, discussion forums, and public lectures to maintain spaces became active sites of intellectual production and reflection.

Ellen Roy also took steps to preserve archival resources, including the *M. N. Roy Archives*.¹⁰² She compiled the text of *Reason, Romanticism, and Revolution*, written by MN Roy, and edited his other writings. Without Ellen’s rigorous synthesis of these notes, the comprehensive literature outlining Radical Humanism would not exist. She documented material texts, correspondence, and historical records.¹⁰³ By updating and safeguarding these materials, she ensured continuity and scholarly engagement with Radical Humanism.

⁹⁹ Roy Ellen Gottschalk (1948) *In Man’s Own Image*, p. 39

¹⁰⁰ Jawahar Lal Nehru’s Letter to Ellen about Roy’s health on 29th December 1953, Selected Work of Jawaharlal Nehru, Second Series, Vol. 24 p. 706 <https://nehruarchive.in/documents/to-ellen-roy-29-december-1953-jjeen>

¹⁰¹ Ray Sibnarayan (1979) *The World Her Village*, p 1-46

¹⁰² A Letter by Ellen Roy to Jawaharlal Nehru dated 10 March 1960, for sanctioning funds and informing him about the plans to get the 1500 pages of the Archives published. *Selected Work of Jawaharlal Nehru*, Second Series, Vol. 58 p. 429-30 <https://nehruarchive.in/documents/ellen-roy-to-nehru-10-march-1960-7gzl4>; Also, reply by Jawaharlal Nehru to Ellen Roy dated 20 March, 1960 *Selected Work of Jawaharlal Nehru*, Second Series, Vol 58, p. 381-382 <https://nehruarchive.in/documents/to-ellen-roy-m-n-roy-manuscripts-20-march-1960-n1zn7>

¹⁰³ Roy Ellen (1958) A Letter addressed to the couple Suyesh Malik (an advocate) and Gauri Bazaz Malik (a doctor) on 1st of January detailing how the institute was working and how she would like to that forward. Available on file with the Indian Renaissance Institute. Available at https://www.academia.edu/167984895/A_Letter_from_Ellen_Roy_to_a_couple_Suyesh_Malik_and_Gauri_Bazaz_Malik_members_of_the_Indian_Renaissance_Institute_Suyesh_Malik_an_advocate_and_Gauri_Bazaz_Malik_a_doctor_were_renowned_in_their_own_fields

With her futuristic vision, she took steps to increase membership, mobilize funds, and spread Radical Humanism.¹⁰⁴ She wrote to leaders, academicians, and institutions, including Pandit Nehru, the then Prime Minister, to contribute to the Radical Humanist while celebrating its anniversary in April 1957. However, Nehru declined, citing that Radical Humanists criticized his Kashmir policy.¹⁰⁵ Yet, all these actions show her commitment to Radical Humanism.

Between 1957 and 1958, Ellen Roy served as president of the Indian Rationalist Association. Her participation in national and global conferences and organizational initiatives reflects her zeal as a leader to expand the movement. She demonstrated her leadership and dedication through sustained engagement with international humanist organizations, including the International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU).¹⁰⁶ Her international travels during the mid-1950s further strengthened these networks. During visits to Europe and the United States, Ellen engaged with humanist and rationalist groups, exchanging ideas and building intellectual alliances.¹⁰⁷ These interactions helped situate Radical Humanism within a global discourse. During these visits, she met Evelyn Trent, expressing feminist solidarity.¹⁰⁸

In short, after MN Roy died in 1954, Ellen chose to remain in India and continued the intellectual and political work they had begun together. Through her efforts, Radical Humanism evolved into a collective movement sustained through institutions, networks, and shared philosophical commitments. Her stewardship, institutionalization, and consolidation ensured the movement's survival and continuity. This commitment is significant given that some scholars have subsequently portrayed M. N. Roy as a political failure.¹⁰⁹ Ellen, however, remained deeply convinced of the enduring value of the intellectual project they co-created. Reflecting on Roy's resilience in the face of physical decline after his imprisonment, she wrote:

“Every one of our seventeen years together in this country was like a theft from fate or, if you will, a conquest of mind over matter. But, of course, if his "matter" had not been earlier so well organised in what he liked to call his "iron constitution", it might not have produced a mind so powerful that it could make the body do its bidding even when it was so undermined as his was after those six years in jail.”¹¹⁰

More than an expression of personal admiration, these words reveal her belief in the lasting relevance of Radical Humanism. Yet, despite these contributions, Ellen remained absent from mainstream historical narratives, ignoring her role as a co-architect of Radical Humanism.

¹⁰⁴ Letter from Jawaharlal Nehru to Ellen Roy about the publication of manuscripts dated October 17, 1960, Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru, Second Series, Vol 63 p. 607. <https://nehruchronicle.in/documents/to-ellen-roy-publication-subsidy-17-october-1960-vz43q>

¹⁰⁵ Nehru's note to OM Mathai, his private secretary on 27 February 1957, Disinclination to Send Message, Selected Works of Jawahar Lal Nehru, Second Series Volume 37, p. 578 <https://nehruchronicle.in/documents/disinclination-to-send-messages-27-february-1957-5ewwlq>

¹⁰⁶ Ray Sibnarayan (1979) *The World Her Village*, p. 18

¹⁰⁷ Ray Sibnarayan (2007) *Ellen's Friendship: The Leitmotiv of my Cherished Friendship*, Radical Humanist, January Issue

¹⁰⁸ Ray Sibnarayan (1979) *The World Her Village*, supra.

¹⁰⁹ Rao Kavitha (2025) *Spies, Lies, and Allies: The Extraordinary Life of Chatto and Roy*, Westland Books, Chennai

¹¹⁰ Ellen Roy (1954) *Thoughts on An Anniversary*, The Radical Humanist 18(14) April 4, Reprinted in the World Her Village p. 278

Ellen's Death and Her Intellectual Legacy

“Democracy aims at a state of society in which all the people participate in the affairs of the community, contributing their share, in thought and action, to shape society so that all can have the opportunity of developing their potentialities.”¹¹¹

Ellen Gottschalk Roy's life came to a tragic end when she was found murdered under mysterious circumstances in Dehradun on 14 December 1960.¹¹² Although the circumstances surrounding her death remain unclear,¹¹³ her legacy continues through her writings, activism, the institutions she helped build, the journals she edited, and her contribution to shaping and sustaining the Radical Humanist movement. Her memorial, alongside that of M. N. Roy, stands at Mohini Road in Dehradun, symbolizing their shared intellectual journey.

Her life challenged the conventional boundaries of nation, gender, and citizenship. Born in Europe, Ellen devoted her life to India's intellectual and political landscape. She embodied a cosmopolitan humanism that brought together anti-fascism, rationalism, feminism, and democratic thought. To reduce her life and work merely to that of a companion of M.N. Roy is to diminish her contributions.

She was a thinker who played a crucial role in co-creating and establishing Radical Humanism as an evolving, open-ended philosophical system. She propounded a democratic philosophy in which reason, freedom, and ethical responsibility reinforce socio-political transformation. Ellen's writings, spanning essays, speeches, and editorial work, consistently focus on ethical and democratic citizenship. She envisioned a flexible intellectual framework designed to respond to changing historical and social conditions.

Her key works, including *Radical Democracy*, *The World Her Village: Selected Writings and Letters of Ellen Roy* (Edited and compiled by Sibnarayan Ray), *From Absurdity to Creative Rationalism*, and *In Man's Own Image* (co-authored with Sibnarayan Ray), reflect a consistent attempt to rethink philosophy in human-centric terms. Across these texts, she explores how democratic life depends on nurturing rational and ethical individuals. Her writings represented a continuation and refinement of Radical Humanism's core concerns.

She prioritized freedom as the goal of human life, emphasizing that individuals are driven by an inherent desire to understand the world, and that this pursuit of knowledge is not merely instrumental but emancipatory, forming the basis of human self-realization. As a cosmopolitan feminist, she challenged irrationality, superstition, religious orthodoxy, patriarchy, imperial domination, and all forms of structural and ideological control, forces that obstructed the human quest for freedom. She also confronted imperialism and fascism through her

¹¹¹ Roy Ellen Gottschalk (1948) *In Man's Own Image*, p. 48

¹¹² The Times (1960) *Murder of Mrs. Roy investigated*, December 19, https://go.gale.com/ps/i.do?p=TTDA&u=nl_earl&id=GALE%7CCS118316947&v=2.1

¹¹³ Ghosh Tapan (1979) *Ellen Roy's Murder Case*, In the *World Her Village*, supra. p. 159-173

involvement with radical and internationalist movements. Her engagement with India was not that of an outsider, but of a committed participant in democratic struggles for reconstruction.

Yet, despite the magnitude of her contributions, Ellen remained marginalized within mainstream historical memory. While M. N. Roy gained recognition, her role was reduced to that of a devoted companion rather than as an intellectual and political scholar. This imbalance reflects a broader historical pattern in which women's intellectual and political labour is overshadowed and the visibility is accorded to their male counterparts.¹¹⁴

Ania Loomba¹¹⁵ in her work on Indian revolutionary and communist women argued that recovering such lives is essential because these women expanded “the boundaries of the home and the world” and challenged the rigid separation between the personal and the political. Ellen Roy's marginalization reflects the additional burdens faced by foreign women operating within colonial contexts.

Scholars such as Kumari Jayawardena¹¹⁶ have shown that women who crossed national and cultural boundaries were subjected to suspicion, erased from dominant narratives, or confined to supporting roles. Historical recognition was reserved for familiar figures who fit nationalist categories, leaving cosmopolitan and intellectually independent women like Ellen Roy at the edges of public memory.

Reclaiming Ellen Gottschalk Roy's legacy is therefore an act of historical correction and a necessary intervention to rethink feminist, cosmopolitan, and transnational histories. Her life and work challenged the boundaries of political thought, intellectual labour, and feminist practice. Remembering her today is about recognizing the enduring relevance of her vision of a rational, ethical, and emancipated humanity.

¹¹⁴ Nigam Shalu (2025) History has Tried to Silence Women – But They Have Always Fought Back, *countercurrents.org*, August 30, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/395058216_History_Has_Tried_to_Silence_Women_-_But_They've_Always_Fought_Back

¹¹⁵ Loomba Ania (2019) *Revolutionary Desires: Women, Communism, and Feminism in India*, Routledge, UK p. 304

¹¹⁶ Kumari Jayawardena (1995) *The White Woman's Other Burden: Western Women and South Asia During British Colonial Rule*, Routledge, New York

Conclusion: Why Ellen Roy Matters Today

“It (Radical Democracy) means that the interest of the majority of the people.... demands that democracy be extended from formal political to essential economic democracy, the privileges and material gains of power will be shared by all the constituents of the ruling power, which is, the people. They will no longer be the prerogatives of individual rulers, or ruling classes.”¹¹⁷

The intellectual and political life of Ellen Gottschalk Roy exposes how mainstream histories erase women’s major intellectual contributions in favour of prominent male thinkers. Highlighting her cases, this work contends that historical narratives must be re-examined to account for the key role women have played in shaping the intellectual movements.

Ellen Roy was a co-architect of Radical Humanism. She played a key role in movement’s formation, institutionalization, documentation, and preservation. Across her writings, organizational work, and interventions, she advanced a vision grounded in reason, democracy, and freedom. Her intellectual work and politics were oriented toward imagining a society governed by rationality and cooperation. Ellen directly confronted authoritarianism, nationalism, superstition, and inequality, emphasizing individuals’ power to influence society.

Radical Humanism should be understood as a collaborative project dependent on sustained, transnational intellectual engagement. As a European-born intellectual working in India, she embodied cosmopolitan humanism that resisted the East-West binary. She confronted nationalism and internationalism, expanding ideas beyond territorial and cultural limits. Her life and work were shaped by twentieth-century crises of fascism, war, and colonialism.

Ellen’s cosmopolitan feminism redefined women’s agency as interwoven with the broader struggles for freedom, insisting that women must participate as equal political agents. She located feminism within a larger emancipatory vision rather than confining it to questions of identity. Her radical praxis connected gender justice to the democratic reconstruction of society.

Her contributions to Radical Humanism involved sustained efforts to institutionalize ideas through journals, study circles, organizations, and international networks. This institutional dimension demonstrates that her legacy was grounded in practices of education, communication, and collective organization, ensuring that Radical Humanism continued as an intellectual practice.

Despite these major contributions, Ellen remains underrepresented in mainstream intellectual history. Her work has been overshadowed by her association with M. N. Roy, reducing her to a secondary figure in official discourse. This marginalization reflects broader patterns in historiography where women’s intellectual labour is rendered invisible.

¹¹⁷ Roy Ellen (1945) *Radical Democracy*, Radical Democratic Party, Delhi

Contemporary debates on decolonization and multiculturalism challenge Eurocentric frameworks; however, their construction of intellectual histories remains limited. Critical scholarship prioritises anti-colonial nationalist male figures, ignoring cosmopolitan women intellectuals such as Ellen Roy, who engaged with anti-fascism, anti-colonialism, feminism, and rationalist critique. Despite her valuable contributions, she was marginalised within dominant frameworks.

She transcended geographical and ideological boundaries to imagine alternative futures rooted in democracy, reason, and dignity. Her trajectory exposes limitations in nationalist historiography and the decolonization framework that failed to account for actors whose lives and ideas exceed fixed categories of nation and cultural belonging.

To recognize Ellen Roy is to acknowledge an alternative model of transformation in which democratic transformation depends on transforming ideas, relationships, and mental frameworks across territorial or cultural boundaries. Her work suggests an integrative way of thinking about democracy, freedom, and justice. She envisioned freedom as a constructive and continuous process. Her framework is relevant in today's increasingly authoritarian world because it connects individual liberty with collective responsibility, insisting that democracy must be lived through everyday participation, education, and reasoning.

Reclaiming Ellen's intellectual and political legacy, therefore, requires a conceptual shift in how Radical Humanism is understood. Such movements must be recognized as collective intellectual formations shaped by collaboration, dialogue, and shared commitments across borders rather than as the creation of a singular genius.

In a global context marked by deepening inequalities and polarization, her emphasis on rational inquiry, decentralized governance, and human-centric politics provides a valuable lens for reimagining democratic life. Simultaneously, her persistence on gender justice, economic transformation, and political freedom anticipates contemporary intersectional approaches, making her thought relevant for current discussions on feminism and governance.

About the Author

Shalu Nigam is a feminist advocate and researcher working on gender, law, governance, and human rights in India. With a PhD in Social Work and a law degree, she practices in the courts of Delhi and actively engages with various human rights and women's rights movements and research organizations, such as the People's Union for Civil Liberties, the Indian Social Institute, the Impact and Policy Research Institute, Delhi, the Indian Renaissance Institute, and the Centre for Women's Development Studies. She has been a founder of We the People Network and the Indian Renaissance Club. She was awarded a senior fellowship by the Indian Council of Social Science Research. Her publications include

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Women and Domestic Violence Law in India: A Quest for Justice;

Domestic Violence Law in India: Myth and Misogyny;

Dowry is Serious Economic Violence: Rethinking Dowry Law in India;

Single Mothers, Patriarchy, and Citizenship: Rethinking Lone Motherhood from a Socio-Legal Perspective;

Human Rights in Everyday Life in India: A Praxis from Below;

The Role of South Asian Women in the Making of the UDHR;

Towards an Inclusive Gender Just Code in India: Women's Rights are Non-Negotiable;

Conceptualizing Freedom: MN Roy's Revolutionary Blueprint for India's Constituent Assembly;

The Trifecta of Human Dignity: The 3P Progressive Philosophical Praxis Paradigm: Integrating Radical Humanism, Human Rights, and Praxis;

Women's Emancipation and Feminist Praxis: Reclaiming the Radical Legacy of MN Roy

Beyond Domesticity: Reimagining Home Science Education for Safe and Equitable Homes

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