

M. N. ROY MEMORIAL LECTURE 2023

Lenin, Gandhi and M. N. Roy:

Their relevance to shape a new world order

---A Talk by Prof. P.R. Ramanujam

Karl Marx's 11th thesis on Feuerbach states: "The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world in various ways. The point, however, is to *change* it"(1). The three leaders I have chosen to reflect on for today's talk are all, in their own ways, philosophers and practitioners in *changing* the world on various grounds and through various methods.

Lenin was absolutely convinced about the need and inevitability of changing a world order which was based on class divisions, private property, profit motive, competition and therefore constantly at war with the working people of the world. Like his illustrious mentors Marx and Engels, he was guided by dialectical materialism, historical materialism and revolutionary action by the workers-peasants-soldiers who were exploited by the ruling upper classes for their selfish ends under Tsarist autocracy in Russia, and capitalism elsewhere. He was the leader of the successful 1917 revolution in Russia.

Gandhi, based on his 21 years of various experiments with methods of fighting aracial, colonial and unjust system in South Africa, returned to India in 1915 with the resolve to fight against and oppressive colonial system on moral or ethical grounds, using non-violence and *Satyagraha* as his weapons, and at the same time never forgetting and exploitative economic system that favoured the colonial rulers whose only weapon to put down any mass movement of the poor people of India was violence in the form of laws, courts, police and army.

Around the same time M.N. Roy left India as a 18 year old militant nationalist in search of procuring arms from different countries, particularly from Germany in the struggle against British colonialism. Roy , as a member of militant nationalist groups of Bengal, inspired by Jatin Mukherji and Aurobindo Ghose left the country in search of getting support from Asian and European countries to overthrow the British colonial rule in India . He wandered through the different parts of the world before he became a global Marxist intellectual revolutionary started the first Communist Party outside Russia based in Mexico and joined Lenin in Moscow as his admired colleague in 1920 to contribute significantly to world communist movements in China, Mexico, Europe and other countries, including the founding of the Communist Party of India, until he returned to India in 1931 when he was arrested and jailed for six years .

Despite their different backgrounds and experiences, there was one singular factor that united all the three: Their love for the people and resolve to put an end to the exploitation of the poor. Lenin always tested his understanding of Marxism with reference to the class position of any reality. Gandhi , who never wanted class conflicts or class war, nevertheless always tested his philosophy and political programme on the anvil of one single *mantra*--whether whatever the *Mahatma* did was 'helping the poorest of the poor'. M.N.Roy followed Marx and Lenin .Yet another uniting factor of all these three personalities was and has been their courage and conviction of *truth* as they understood this ever-elusive concept, irrespective of their differences in the methods adopted by them in upholding that truth and achieving the objective of liberating the exploited poor people from the unjust social, economic and political orders which promoted selfishness and profiteering of the few at the cost of the toiling millions. M.N.Roy ,while basically following Marx and Lenin, went beyond them in search of new alternatives to deal with new realities ,particularly after the second World War. Let me briefly reflect on where they differed, where they

concurred and how we can bring them together in the 21st Century for the survival of humanity, democracy, and justice.

LENIN

Karl Marx, Frederick Engels and Vladimir Ulyanov Ilyich Lenin are usually treated as the authorities on Marxism, particularly after the 1917 successful November Revolution in Russia. Lenin ,in every sense, was the Marx of the 20th century. Lenin knew, not only Marx, but also knew what Marx knew. Russian Revolution had every chance of being followed by the German revolution, and eventually revolutions in France and the other European countries, including Britain. They were expected to follow suit, only after the success of German revolution. But the failure of German revolution forced Lenin and his followers to settle for socialism in one country at least for that moment when no other developed European country could succeed in bringing out a socialist revolution. On the contrary, Lenin's premature death and the rise of Fascism and Nazism in Italy and Germany resulted in another World War-- the Second World War. Lenin's analysis of capitalism, the class character of the first World War and other issues related to socialism and communism still remain as the valid definitions for communists.

The defeat of the German socialist revolution in 1923 was like a Greek Tragedy from where all the later global human tragedies have followed up till now in 2023---the Ukraine-Russian war that slaughters innocent people included .The differences, disagreements and wranglings among the Social Democrats, the Communists (the Spartacists) and the Independent Party together with workers councils missed a golden opportunity to overthrow the capitalist system in Germany. Their revolutionary action surely would have paved the way for a successful world socialist revolution, proving the prediction and fulfilling the

vision of Marx . For nearly six years (1917-1923) the progressive, socialist and communist leaders were fighting among themselves in assessing the stage of the German revolution and deciding the date for giving a call for resurrection and capture of power by the German working classes. The leaders were dragging their feet when the workers were thirsty for decisive action. Lenin's accurate analysis of the Russian revolution and the German revolutionary situation were sadly neglected by the German Left leaders of great stature(2).His analysis of the class character of World War I , the stage of Russian Revolution, the revolutionary situation in Germany and other developed European countries still serve as a living example of correct application of dialectical and historical materialism, masterly understanding of the need for a disciplined revolutionary party and the role of revolutionary leadership in a ripe revolutionary situation. But for Lenin's leadership ,Russian revolutions in February and October 1917 would have met the same fate of the German revolution. His leadership, clarity, timely decisions and utterly unbiased objective approach to every critical issue like the signing of the Brest-Litovsk treaty , introduction of the New Economic Policy and a host of other issues of practical urgency to save and consolidate the first, young Socialist State in the world could not have been possible under any other leader. In a way, it was Lenin's revolution.

The tragedy of German revolution was it did not have a leader like Lenin, in spite of the fact that German working class parties had a combined strength of 22 million members belonging to different Left parties out of 60 million population with a high level of class consciousness, culture, calibre and professional competence(In Russia out of 160 million population, only 8 million members in the progressive parties of all shades!) . There were also leaders of Rosa Luxembourgh and Karl Liebknecht stature in the *Spartacus League* (The German Communist Party), although the Social Democratic leaders were the real stumbling blocks in deciding of the stage and timing of the revolution. Success of the German revolution would have led to the success of world socialist

revolution ,and the Russian revolution would have been spared of complete isolation and the innumerable risks and grave errors imposed on it by the merciless onslaughts and conspiracies of world bourgeoisie that was mortally afraid of Lenin and socialism (2).

Maxim Gorky aptly said:”The hatred of the world bourgeoisie for Lenin is blatantly and disgustingly obvious and its blue plague -spots are glaringly conspicuous everywhere. This hatred, disgusting though it is, tells us how great and frightening in the eyes of the world bourgeoisie the figure of Lenin, the inspiration and leader of the proletarians of all countries” (3). After the death of Lenin, Gorky said:

“There are men whose significance no human word can do justice to. Such a man not only for Russia (alone) but for the whole world, for the whole of our planet, is Vladimir Ilyich (Lenin)” (4).

Lenin was hated by the bourgeoisie and petty bourgeois intellectuals as a dictator . But M.N.Roy ,after his first meeting with Lenin in 1920 had this to say:

“The crown of dictatorial power set on his head very lightly. There was nothing of a dictator in his physical bearing or manner of speaking. Nor was his remarkable modesty an affectation-- a repulsive demonstration of the consciousness of superiority. He was frank in speech and friendly in behaviour ...He was more than a leader, he was the preceptor... He was friend and philosopher for the old cadre of the party. They loved him.” (5) (Memoirs, p.344).

The flexibility, accommodative nature, and friendliness of Lenin has also been corroborated by various outstanding intellectuals of the western world. George Bernard Shaw said that Lenin was the only leader ‘whose head was not turned by giddiness of power’. Bertrand Russell and H.G.Wells also had talked about Lenin’s dreams and his unassailable faith in the class justice under socialism. It was history’s cruel mischief that it did not allow the German revolution to

succeed and fulfil the dream of Lenin as well as the vision of Marx. The other cruel game of history was the death of Lenin when he was hardly 54 years. If we analyse the events of 1917-23 dispassionately, we will share the historical optimism that the globalized capitalism may very well be replaced by global socialism in new form and with new names. What is a century in the long journey of human history? Just a small dot, a mere speck. Change can never be stopped. Ripeness is all!

GANDHI

It is interesting to note that the entire debate between Lenin and M.N.Roy centred around the role of Gandhi in a colonised country like India and its implications for building working class movements in backward colonies .Of course, the involvement of Gandhi in Indian politics brought in many changes in the freedom struggle of India. It is a strange coincidence that when Gandhi returned to India in 1915 with his new weapons of nonviolence and truth to fight for India's freedom, M.N. Roy left India in search of procuring arms from Germany and other countries to overthrow British colonial rule through violent means. Gandhi, on the other hand, used his weapons of nonviolence and *satyagraha* to conduct the liberation struggle by successfully mobilizing the masses through his peculiar genius of appealing to the backward masses of rural India as well as the urban workers through an idiom that they could understand. In a way Roy's exit and Gandhi's entry married some dramatic historical turning points in the history of anticolonial freedom struggle in India and the working class communist movements in the colonies. It is also a challenge to human intelligenceto see what is valid and what is illusory in the methods of struggle used by Gandhi and Roy .

India's freedom struggle took an all India character only with the arrival of Gandhi on the political scene. His Champaran movement in organising the poor peasants in Bihar, his reaction to the Jallianwala Baug massacre, his non-

cooperation movement in 1920, his Dandi March to break the salt laws in 1931, his participation in the three Round Table Conferences in London in 1930-31, his relentless tours in all parts of India, his movement against untouchability(notwithstanding the bitterest criticism from B.R.Ambedkar), and his support for temple entry by all castes etc, set Gandhi apart from other orthodox Hindu belief systems. His new interpretations and justifications for using religion for political ends, his steadfast commitment to promote and preserve the communal unity and brotherhood among the Hindus and Muslims even at the cost of incurring the wrath of the fundamentalists and fanatics from both the religions. Gandhi always used nonviolent methods of struggle, even if it meant sacrificing hundreds of innocent lives. His unassailable faith in appealing to the goodness of human beings-- Indian or British, Hindu or Muslim or people of any nation made him a unique personality in the modern world. He never wanted partition of India. He wanted Jinnah to be the first Prime Minister of united, independent India. When truncated India became politically independent on 15th August 1947 Gandhi was not part of that celebrations. He was busy in controlling successfully the communal violence in Calcutta and other parts of India with his frail physical presence, moral force and courage.

When India and Pakistan became finally two nations, Gandhi got the promise from the Indian government that it would give 50,00,00,000 (Fifty Crore) Indian rupees to Pakistan to build its own systems. This was something unheard of in the world history and it also became the flashpoint for the assassination of Gandhi on 30th January 1948 ---less than 6 months after India's independence. Gandhi and Gandhian methods have now become well accepted civil, nonviolent means of democratic struggle throughout the world. Gandhi once said: “ First, they ignore you; then they laugh at you; then they fight with you; then you win”. As Albert Einstein famously said that the future generations would find it difficult to believe that a man like Gandhi walked on this planet

Earth .The fact is , that even the present generation hardly remembers Gandhi even in his own country of birth and struggle.

Many social, economic and political evils of violent nature are dancing around in India today.Caste and communal conflicts, atrocities against the poor and the weaker sections are steadily rising even after 75 years of independence. The global scenario is no different either. If Gandhi were alive today (He wanted to live up to 120 years) would he allow any of the social evils, including corruption and power hungry politics practiced by all political parties ,who at the same time, swear by his name? Will Gandhi remain passive and inactive when the March of Anarchy tramples over everything best and valuable preserved by Gandhi and humanity?

Whatever be the criticism against Gandhi from any quarters one thing about the Mahatma cannot be denied. His love for the poorest of the poor, his total rejection of the communal mindset,untouchability and greed of all varieties. His faith in the ordinary people, his hope in the villages, his conviction of nonviolence in place of violence-- whether individual or state protected-- and his innate humanism would not have allowed him to remain silent or inactive.Gandhi's nonviolence and satyagraha are not the same as western pacifism, but active, effective means of resistance.

From practical experience and people's movements one can deduce that Gandhi understood the backwardness and the cultural orientation and standards of the Indian masses better than anybody else. Perhaps, instinctively he felt that the form of struggle was not as important as the core and substance of it when he undertook India's liberation struggle and eventually became its leader. Within the Congress, his only challenger was Subhash Chandra Bose but even Bose had utmost respect for Gandhi as he called him the father of the nation. When Bose created Indian national army outside India he named one of the brigades as Gandhi brigade and the other as Nehru brigade. If only Bose had

shown a little patience perhaps he would have become the natural choice to be the leader of quit India movement of 1942. Other than that Gandhi never had no other serious opposition from the Congress party, although he was fully aware of the various limitations of the party before and after India's independence.

Certainly, Gandhi would not have accepted the power politics played by various political parties, the massive corruption and all kinds of unethical practices in the name of democracy and development that at the moment have become self-defeating and self-devouring forces within India. No political party today is in a position to control or eliminate the dark forces . Gandhi's concerns for morality and ethics , the means and ends, truthfulness and genuine, love , simplicity and care for every human being and many other noble ideas and principles that Gandhi tried to promote during his lifetime, particularly the communal amity are the basis of cast and religion based conflicts that have now become the most urgent and scary issues in India and elsewhere in the 21st century world.

This situation straight away takes us to rediscover and re-evaluate the outstanding analysis of MN Roy.

M.N.ROY

Interestingly, the anti-colonial freedom movements in India, China and many other Asian and African colonies became strong and vigorous between the two world wars. M.N.Roy and M.K.Gandhi from India became the leaders of anticolonial freedom movements after 1919 following two different world views and methods of struggle. Although the Congress under Gandhi's leadership represented many streams with different personalities and different trends and approaches to the freedom movement, it was Gandhi ,who for the first time,fused the sporadic struggles against British colonialism as an all India National Liberation struggle. With all the heroic efforts of persons like Bhagat Singh, Subhash Chandra Bose and the Communists, it was Gandhi who became the *Father of the Nation*, asSubhash Chandra Bose called him. Gandhi's

relentless struggles based on nonviolence--*Ahimsa* and *Satyagraha*--united the majority of the people of India. The unique strategy adopted by Gandhi mobilised the masses for the first time in India during the British rule on an unprecedented scale. M.N.Roy, on the other hand, operated on a world stage of anti-capitalist as well as anti-colonial struggle with a rational, scientific revolutionary world view.

The flip side of Gandhian methods and values had been thoroughly subjected to a critical scrutiny only by M.N.Roy. When the unity of India was truncated by the Partition and the communal violence devoured more than 2 million lives, Gandhi's mission of non-violence practically ended. When he could not be protected from the bullet of an assassin, another tragedy of Mahabharat proportions started in India. Political morality, ethics and democracy in India received a severe blow with the disappearance Gandhi from the political scene of India. Jawaharlal Nehru tried his best to uphold the principles of democracy and secularism till the end of his life . After Nehru's death in 1964, Gandhi became a mere idol of worship and respect for his principles of nonviolence became a ritual. The military might of the Indian state ,the functioning of the democratic institutions, the standards and quality demonstrated by the political players of all ideologies have turned into the most unintended ironies of Gandhi's "India of My Dream".

Still the living core of Gandhian practices is in the potential of mass mobilization of suffering people throughout the world who organize themselves without involving any political parties---USA, South Africa, Arab countries, Indian farmers, and the rest of the global protests today essentially remain nonviolent, civil and democratic.

Not that people are averse to political parties, but political parties of all shades have thoroughly lost their moral and ethical values in every country. Power, pelf and profiting through unethical electoral politics of all the parties today have

suddenly brought to light some of the astounding predictions made by M.N.Roy some 85 years ago. The sum and substance of Roy's Radical Humanism, his concerns for individual freedom, morality and ethics in the practice of even the noblest political theories, the inseparable nature of means and ends etc, have so much in common with Gandhi's practices and classical Marxism. However, while the Mahatma's worldview was shaped by religious, medieval ethics with an invisible humanist rationality, M.N.Roy's world view was shaped by three clear successive stages of his intellectual and philosophical transformations: Nationalism, International socialism, and New Humanism. Reason, Romanticism and Revolution perfectly blended with his personality of dynamism, freedom and fearlessness.

M.N. Roy, a nationalist revolutionary, soon became a global Marxist revolutionary by the time he met Lenin in 1920 in Moscow. Roy's political, philosophical and ideological journey was an unimaginable real-life thriller, and his first meeting with Lenin was a real turning point in a historical sense. Lenin had his own views of building anti-colonial and working-class movements in the colonies, including India. Lenin suggested that the Indian communists should work with Gandhi. He thought Gandhi was a revolutionary in as much as he was able to organize the anti-colonial struggles on a mass scale. He thought the communists could work along with Gandhi and establish their ideological hegemony over Gandhian methods and then eventually prepare for socialist revolution in India. MN Roy differed from Lenin's thinking because he thought Gandhi was essentially a reactionary and his vision of India was medieval and therefore would not help India to become a modern democratic or progressive country in the long run. He presented his own thesis on building anti colonial movements and Lenin respected his views and placed Roy's thesis along with his own and got both approved by the Second Congress of the Communist International. In retrospect, I tend to think that Lenin was right, and Roy, in

spite of his consistent, rational and logical analysis of Gandhian ideas missed the humanist kernel of Gandhi. When Gandhi proved his humanism on 30th January 1948, Roy fully endorsed it . However, Roy's predictions about the blind faith in the symbols of religion and its consequences for modern India are fully borne out to be true.

WHAT WE LEARN FROM THE THREE:

After more than a century since all the three great personalities started their political struggles to change their contemporary world, it is time to look at their visions, methods and views dispassionately in order to understand, assess and change the contemporary world which has changed beyond the imagination of any of the three great personalities mentioned here. Had Lenin lived for another 20 years, perhaps the entire world history would have taken a different course. Perhaps, the Second World War could have been averted. He and Gandhi would have formed an alliance. But these are all speculations and have no relevance to historical events that had happened during the last 100 years or more. An unbiased assessment of the entirely different two personalities can guide us today in many ways in finding answers to some fundamental questions raised by M.N.Roy 70 years ago as a Radical Humanist.

Gandhi's methods which many thought as ineffective and useless in fighting oppressive forces with the power of weapons, surprisingly have been resurrecting themselves as effective forces of resistance in the 20th and 21st centuries where no other method has worked so successfully in mobilising mass movements against state oppressions, social evils, political arrogance and economic injustice. Martin Luther King Jr and Nelson Mandela are the most shining testimonies for having used Gandhian methods in their own ways in fighting political oppression, social inequalities protected by mighty state machines. Civil liberties fostered by democratic values often resort to Gandhian methods when they are threatened.

M.N. Roy's long-standing relationship with world communist movements and his participation in the Indian freedom struggle changed his views philosophically and politically to a large extent after the Second World War. His views on new or radical humanism cannot be dismissed as mere idealistic musings of a failed communist revolutionary. When we read his views on democracy, freedom of the individual, economic and social justice etc, today, we feel that he is talking to us in 2023 although he formulated his views in 1946-47. Roy's views on philosophy, party politics, elections, individual freedom under any political system and the rest of his radical humanist ideas need to be studied and understood in today's context of a grand *global disorder*, ridden with not just economic crisis but with many other moral, ethical, and philosophical crises.

Given the impending threat of nuclear armaments, the military might of the mighty nations devoid of human values, and the growing inequalities based on hunger for power and profit at the local and global contexts should easily convince us that all the earlier political programmes and strategies based on even the progressive ideologies are now proving to be ineffective, at least in the light of their practices so far. I personally feel that Roy's questions cannot be ignored as the views of a completely frustrated, sensitive, and impatient revolutionary with an intellectual brilliance of the highest order who didn't have an organization for himself to propagate and put to practice his own views. There were many instances where I could see the suddenness of change in Roy's thinking but there were solid reasons for that suddenness as well. In my view, he never moved away from Marx, Engels and Lenin fundamentally but only updated them in many respects after the horrible experiences of the two decades between the World Wars.

The problems faced by the Soviet Union during and after Lenin's death, Stalin's leadership, the rise of fascism and the developments in the post Second World

War period---all gave solid basis for Roy's formulation of his moral reasoning and ethical concerns. More importantly, whether one argues for bourgeois democracy or socialist democracy, Roy's concerns for morality and ethics in politics bring him more close to Gandhi than any other political leader or any interpretation of the communist ideology--Marxism. Of course, one can argue with a critical analysis of Roy's somewhat hasty conclusions about Marxism, but one can't ignore the relevance of the questions raised by him in dealing with the problems of the contemporary world.

The possibility of synthesising the theories/concepts, analysis, methods and moral visions of the three great personalities that I have chosen to talk about is real. Therefore an attempt has to be made to see how the 21st century's major challenges can be faced by learning from all the three. The antagonistic stand and contempt by the global exploiters against Marxism and Leninism can be explained, if we look at the disastrous consequences of the market economies resulting in recession, huge unemployment, violence, extreme inequalities and the rest of the social tensions. Gandhi's belief in ahimsa --the method of nonviolence-- and the potential of his method in mobilising the masses against any type of injustice can be adapted in the anti- capitalist struggles without hair splitting arguments on Gandhi's other ideas.

MN Roy's views on radical humanism and his profound scepticism of party politics that promote selfishness, power struggle, and the continuing success of demagoguery, electoral frauds and immorality are absolutely true not only in India but in all other so- called democracies. The global crisis is not merely economic but a total crisis of humanity's inability to find its own place in the planet and in the universe. Roy effectively and passionately raises some fundamental questions which cannot be answered without addressing the crisis in confidence, morality, and ethics. It is not an academic or intellectual question but about the basic survival and further progress of humanity when it is unable to take

advantage of science and technologies today. No doubt, when unlimited greed relentlessly is destroying the ecological balance causing climate change and environmental disasters, no political system can take it as their right to continue this self-destructive game. Similarly, the basic insecurity generated by violence, nuclear menace, and uncontrolled economic and social inequalities can be dealt with, only by addressing the questions raised by Roy.

In the global context the class struggle continues in different forms and varying intensities. Private property is the root cause of the hiatus of all the artificial scarcities, conflicts, violence and wars cleverly covered up by terminologies of 'free' markets. Lenin, Gandhi, and Roy have much in common to complement each other in shaping a new world order based on superior consciousness, morality, and ethics. It is our responsibility to find out how.

Thank you.

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