CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The first half of the last century was an age of wars and revolutions. It saw the end of what K. M. Panikkar called 'the Vasco Da Gama Epoch of Asian History'. The First World War marked the beginning of the dissolution of the empires of Europe; the Second World War virtually completed the process. The military victory of the allied powers did not save Britain, France, or the Netherlands from losing their farflung colonies. In Asia and Africa, sovereign states arose proclaiming, one after another, their independence of foreign domination in the decades which followed the Second World War. One of the first to become independent was India which, in the process, set itself up as a model to other emerging independent nation-states.

Besides this phenomenal collapse of West European empires and the beginning of the emergence of new nations and states in what is currently called the Third World, these decades also witnessed revolutions in some of the most populous countries. In the nineteenth century, Karl Marx had anticipated revolutions in the most industrially developed societies of the West. However, history did not quite corroborate his anticipations. Instead, the first revolution of the century took place in backward Russia where the antiquated regime of the Tsars was quickly overthrown, and under Lenin's leadership, the highly

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centralized and determined Bolshevik Party captured power from the Provisional Government and took upon itself the task of radically altering Russian society in the shortest possible time. It established a totalitarian regime, a dictatorship, and used a part of the country’s resources in promoting revolutionary movements abroad which would draw inspiration and guidance from the Bolsheviks and remain under Russian control. China experienced the other major revolution. After decades of civil war and war against the Japanese invaders, this vast and populous country also came under a communist dictatorship which, as in Russia, was committed to revolution. A different model evolved in Mexico. There, after centuries of foreign rule, decades of dictatorship, a shorter period of the ‘Epic Revolution’ (1910-24), the country at least reached a measure of sustained political stability, and economic growth, rather rare in the violent and volatile atmosphere of Latin America.

Wars, upheavals and revolutions involve large masses of people who are moved by forces they rarely understand and almost never can control. Totalitarianism which emerged as a political phenomenon in the inter-war decades was a product as much of mass discontent and upheaval as of mass-manipulation which had been facilitated by newly invented and very powerful instruments and systems of communication and regimentation. If break-up of old empires and overthrow of ancient

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regimes were some of the welcome developments of the first half of the last century, then on the other side would be counted the growing pressures to constrict the scope of individual freedom and responsibility and the trends towards centralization of power and mechanization of human life. The second half of the century has not seen any weakening of these pressures and trends.

However, these great upheavals also produced persons who not only had active role in providing the movements with ideas, programmes, organization and leadership, but at least in some cases, also offered illuminating analyses and assessments of the developments in which they were themselves involved. These were intellectual activists in the tradition of the radicals of France in the eighteenth century, or of the ‘intelligentsia’ in Russia in the nineteenth. In the language of the existentialists, they were 'committed' or ‘engaged', and therefore, could not be expected to have that kind of distance or 'objectivity' in their approach which is the proclaimed pursuit of academic writers. However, at their best, some of them, brought, as if in compensation, a kind of insight or key to the 'meaning' of events, an insight which participants, not observers, are privileged to possess, and without which such complex human phenomena as revolutions might only be superficially chronicled, leaving their human springs of action altogether incomprehensible. In the writings, no less than in the careers of these intellectual revolutionaries, may be found important clues to the history of our times, and indicators of courses from our immediate past

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to the not-too-distant future of the human race. Two such persons are Mahatma Gandhi and M. N. Roy.

Among his Indian contemporaries, Manabendra Nath Roy was without a peer; there is perhaps no comparable figure in the East. He was unique in the universality of his experience. A dozen different countries, spread over three major continents, provide the background of his chequered career. He occupied leading positions in the great movements of Nationalism, Communism and Humanism, continuing to grow throughout, in his understanding, aided and enriched by his rare intellectual gifts and vast experience. While holding positions of authority and influence and rubbing shoulders with some of the greatest figures of contemporary history, he did not hesitate in choosing the path of wilderness whenever his convictions, in the context of the situations he faced, seemed to demand the choice. He combined firmness of commitment to the basic values of freedom and truth with a remarkable open mindedness, capable of absorbing new ideas and learning from fresh experience. Indeed, his life was a great quest, a steady and purposeful march; the movement had its moments of slowing down or setbacks, but it knew no failures or defeats. It had no room whatsoever for frustration or bitterness of any kind. That his life, no less than his ideas, is his bequest to future generations and is the real measure of his greatness.

The story of the life of Manabendra Nath Roy may perhaps never be fully told; the task at any rate seems to be well beyond the resources of any individual. It is indeed unfortunate that he could not continue writing his memoirs, for there are parts of his story he alone could tell.
The loss is permanent and irreparable. Roy had the great initial reluctance in starting this writing, a reluctance for which the powers of persuasion and argument of Ellen, his wife, and of his friends and followers had to be used to overcome. The identification of his life with his work was complete. So one was he with his ideas, ideals and pursuits that he seldom spoke of himself.

Born in a Bengal village, Urbalia (24 Parghanas), in a priest family, Narendra Bhattacharya joined the revolutionary movement in Bengal as a schoolboy of fourteen. He soon distinguished himself as one of its bold and brave members, and soon after the outbreak of the First World War, left the country, in disguise, to secure arms for overthrowing the alien rule. Narendra travelled through Burma, Indonesia, China, Japan and the Philippines and reached the USA in pursuit of his mission. Conditions in the USA changed with America's entry in the war and he was arrested. It was in the United States that Narendra Bhattacharya became Manabendra Nath Roy, a name that stuck till the end. Roy jumped bail and escaped to Mexico. The break with militant nationalism and conversion to Marxism began while he was in Mexico and culminated in his founding the Communist Party of Mexico, the first Communist Party outside the Soviet Union. Roy met Michael Borodin in Mexico and was soon invited to the Soviet Union by Lenin. He reached Moscow in time for the Second Congress of the Communist International and soon won the confidence and admiration of Lenin who described him as "the symbol of revolution in the East." He was elected to the Presidium of the Communist International and was

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for several years the Head of its Eastern Section. In 1926, he went to China as the sole emissary of the International to guide the revolution there. In 1928 came the break with the International and after a brief spell in Germany, Roy returned to India in 1930 nearly sixteen years after the departure from the country in search of arms.

He returned with arms but of a different kind. He had come back with a vision and ideas, with a devotion to freedom and justice which while mobilising the Indian people against British Imperialism, would also rouse them against their native exploiters. He had outgrown the naive inspiration of colonial nationalism. The new world of ideas and values opened to him by Marxism led him to insist that freedom must develop dimensions other than the nationalist if it were to be meaningful to millions of his countrymen.

However, in less than a year of his return, Roy was arrested and sentenced to six years' imprisonment. On release, he joined the Indian National Congress; but soon after the outbreak of the Second World War, came the break with the Congress on the question of India's attitude to the issues posed by the war. The war signified for him a global struggle between democracy and fascism and the victory of the former was a precondition for the liberation of the colonies. He left the Congress and founded the Radical Democratic Party in 1940. The break with the Congress marked the beginning of his break with communism and the evolution of his ideas beyond and away from Marxism. The man of action and the thinker were soon confused into a system-builder who, more than any one else, was conscious of the limitations and difficulties of any such endeavour and was never tired of emphasizing them. His
ideas developed rapidly and crystallized into a social philosophy, New Humanism\(^7\), which he continued to develop and propagate till the end. It was as a corollary of this development that the Radical Democratic Party was dissolved in 1948.

M. N. Roy was the first Indian thinker who appreciated clearly the significance of the major break-through of the citadel of Imperialism by the forces generated by the Second World War. He was the first to maintain that the issue of Capitalism vs. Socialism was bound to make room for that of Democracy vs. Totalitarianism, a fact supported by many and amply testified \(\circ\) by the history of the post-War period. Roy was again one of the very first few to recognise fully and clearly the implications of the enormous destructive power developed during the War and its bearings on the idea and the technique of revolution. Insurrections have been clearly rendered outdated; the ballot box, on the other hand, has been already found to be insufficient and wanting. If ever there was a challenge to human intelligence and ingenuity, here was one. It will redound to the credit of Roy, even after many of those who dominated the contemporary scene are long forgotten, that he took up the challenge and laid the basis of meeting it in an effective manner.

Starting as a nationalist revolutionary and spending nearly twenty years in the vanguard of the Marxian revolution of the last century, Roy ultimately crowned his career as a philosopher of the modern Renaissance. This indeed was an outstanding achievement for any man and especially so for one who never entered the portals of a university or a seminary. And yet what marks out Roy as unique among the dramatis

personae of the history of the revolution is a rare combination of the love of freedom, unimpeachable integrity, a sense of loyalty, the courage of conviction, a passionate interest in ideas and their human implications, an unqualified involvement in the struggle for freedom together with complete detachment from the game of power politics through which this struggle often expresses itself, and with all that a genuine interest in the hopes and anxieties of the most ordinary of men who ever came in contact with him. There was something of the universal man in him, whose company made even the most mediocre of his comrades feel that life, with all its ugly patches, was exciting and beautiful and that they, too, had an important place in its ever-renewing process. Few leaders have been able to release men's creativity as Roy could do without resorting to Shamanism of any kind.

Roy could do this because he was the least interested in himself. His sole concern was to realise freedom himself and to help others to do so. As his conception of freedom developed a richer and more complex meaning, his political philosophy and activity underwent a corresponding transformation. Similarly, his 'failure' in the pragmatic sense of the word can be seen only as the inevitable consequence of his intellectual and moral integrity. Where others compromised principle with expediency, Roy chose to forego ostensible success in order that the values he sought should not elude him. What he wrote in his last letter to Stalin is the basic clue to his career: "I cannot reconcile myself to the idea that decency, loyalty and honesty should have no place in the catalogue of Bolshevik virtues."8 Here spoke a man who was capable of throwing away the kingdom of the whole world for the sake of these

simple virtues, a man whose greatness essentially lay in his goodness. Who can deny that the world needs a basic transformation if it is to be a place congenial for men like him to live and to grow?

Reason was the sole guide that Roy accepted in his quest. Reason alone, operating in the light of experience, could solve the problems of men. He believed that once men saw the truth, they would accept it sooner or later. This was of course an unverifiable assumption, but not so utopian as it may at first sight appear. After all, the educability of man is grounded in his capacity to interpret and to learn from his experience. All that Roy did was to extend the principle from the field of formal intellectual instruction to that of co-operative social living together. For morality is nothing but a body of rules governing inter-personal relationships, and Roy assumed that in a rationally ordered society, the claims of morality would be compatible with those of freedom. Indeed, they had to be; for, according to Roy, being rational implied being moral and reason itself was but an instrument for carrying on the quest for freedom, which was an expression on the plane of consciousness, of man's instinct for survival. His approach thus involved both the Socratic scepticism as to the current beliefs and the Socratic faith that knowledge is virtue.

In spite of their sharp differences, Gandhi like Roy was also a humanist. But whereas the former was a puritan, the latter was a hedonist. Where one was a mystic, the other was a materialist, in the best philosophico-scientific sense of the term. Gandhi always emphasised the role of religion in all human behaviour including politics. Roy was a rationalist- nay, an atheist to boot. As such, he was
uncompromisingly opposed to bringing religion in politics - religion as it is generally understood with its rites, ceremonies, taboos and prayers. He considered it as an impediment to social progress on secular lines. At the Faizpur Conference of the Congress (1937), Roy did not hesitate to risk his popularity, which was certainly very high then, by refusing to attend the evening prayer meetings of Gandhi. He maintained unequivocally that these had no place in the secular political programme of the Congress. As a deeply religious man, Gandhi wanted Indian society to change within its traditional framework. He simply could not come out completely from his entrenched orthodoxy. He saw virtues in the outmoded concept of chaturvarnya and strove to establish a new "Ram Rajya" with his original thesis of Trusteeship. But he also had the saving grace of looking at other religions with reverence - an approach which did not break ice with vehement Sanatanists and hidebound nationalists.

On the other hand, Roy had delved deeply in several philosophies and sciences and had a cosmic view of world history and its civilisations. He had dedicated himself to bringing about the transformation of Indian society-nay, world society - based on a strictly secular and scientific programme of his own. But despite many irreconcilable differences between them, he never flinched to appreciate and support Gandhi's stance on moral values.

The practical genius of the Mahatma had prompted him to fight for the rightful place of the poor and downtrodden in society in the name of religion. He rightly maintained that all men are equal in the eyes of

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God; and in an effort to raise the social status of the so-called untouchables (achhuts of the orthodox Hindu religion), he renamed them as Harijans (people of God). That is why he advocated and fought for the entry of Harijans in Hindu temples, which had remained closed to them for centuries under the dominance of tradition-bound Hindus of all shades.

Roy, on the other hand, had raised the issue on an epistemological level. He objected to Gandhi's approach to the problem as taking one step forward and two steps backward in the total fight for the social emancipation of mankind. He maintained that such a well-meant but nonetheless irrational attitude would only help strengthening the shackles of superstition to which the Indian people were already chained. How would their status improve, he asked, and how will they ever be able to keep their heads high when they bowed down in obeisance before the concept of God as an omnipresent, omnipotent and omniscient entity? Certainly, it would deprive them of the opportunity to become makers of their destiny. That is why Roy considered Jawaharlal Nehru the agnostic as "the only Westernised man" he had come across in the Indian National Congress.\textsuperscript{10} From this point of view, it may be said that where the nation's Mahatma was a socio-religious reformist, Roy was a scientific humanist.

M. N. Roy, "the man who looked ahead"\textsuperscript{11} was willy nilly advocating a big leap forward in the social evolution of the Indian people. It seemed as if he wanted a mutation to take place as early as

\textsuperscript{10} Wadia, J. B. H., M. N. Roy, An Incomplete Royana (Bombay: Popular Prakashan), 1983, p. 34.
\textsuperscript{11} Ibid.
possible. Where the philosopher of Dehra Dun was an idealist, the saint of Sabarmati was a pragmatist. But then Roy, who was as much in quest of truth as Gandhi, had a different postulate which he would not sacrifice at the altar of expediency. Roy had similar logical objections to Gandhi's panacea in the sphere of politics.

Roy admitted most of Gandhi's ideas on the moral plane. But what he objected to was the Mahatmic methodology employed in carrying out the secular political programme of the National Congress.

In one of the letters Roy refers to the fact that, in jail, he had started learning to ply "the divine spinning wheel with which Gandhi proposes to save the world" and goes on to quip a joke against himself: "It is an irony of fate that I should have to do this! The Mahatma has finally scored a point over me. If he only knew it".12

M. N. Roy himself records in one of his last books Men I Met, “About a Year ago, in a conversation with the head of an important Gandhi Ashram, I remarked that I appreciated Gandhi's greatness better than any of his ardent admirers. My interviewer was very much surprised to hear me say so. Had I not been a critic of Gandhi's philosophical views and often of his political actions? Do I not refuse to be a blind follower even now when, in the capacity of a loyal Congressman, I am a habitual wearer of Khaddar and accept the creed of the Congress? Do I not even to-day dare to differ from Gandhi when my conscience and intelligent judgment prompt me to do so? How then could I have made the above remark? There was no reason for me to be hypocritical. I am too notorious to seek rehabilitation: too marked to sail

12 Ibid., p. 35.
under false colours. The above remark was made with all sincerity, and I still stand by it. Yet, my interviewer was so very surprised by it as to ask me if the news could be passed on to others. My consent was freely and unreservedly given.”

What was the reason of the surprise, which most probably is shared by many others? The reason is the inability to understand that criticism does not exclude appreciation. Blind faith and servile obedience are not only debasing for those who possess those questionable virtues, but debase the object of worship itself. He further writes “in order to appreciate properly the historical significance of the personality of Gandhi and the role that he has played in our struggle for freedom, one must be free from emotion and try to see things in the revealing light of criticism. But there is a wrong notion about criticism itself. It is confounded with antagonism. Hence the inability to understand the value of critical appreciation. I am not a blind follower of anybody. I do not take any thing for granted. Before I accept any doctrine, I submit it to a critical analysis, which is, to test the consistency of its internal logic. If I find it self-contradictory, I have no hesitation in rejecting it however exalted may be the authority. But in the process of the analytical examination, the behaviour of certain persons, or a certain doctrine may reveal certain positive features which must be retained and admired even when the claims of the person and the doctrine as a whole, are to be rejected. That has been my approach to the personality, activity and the teachings of Gandhi. And I claim to

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have found greater values in them than are known to the blind followers or uncritical admirers.”14

In his opinion, Gandhi will go down in history neither as a prophet nor as a saviour of the masses, but as their political awakener. Gandhi's exalted place in the political history of contemporary India is created by the masses. “I do not share the view that our struggle for freedom, ever since 1920, is the creation of Mahatma Gandhi. On the contrary, Mahatma Gandhi is a creation of the Indian masses. It is a remarkable historical phenomenon. Every realistic student of history must appreciate the role of Mahatma Gandhi as such, unless he would allow emotionalism to mislead him into wilful misinterpretation of history. Why did the Indian masses hail Mahatma Gandhi as their liberator while many other men had been in the field before him trying for the honour? The reason is that he could speak in a language understood by the masses. But unfortunately, the understanding of the masses of our country is still on a very low level. One had to stoop to that level in order to raise it higher. To have the courage to do so, is a token of greatness. Generally, one feels to have paid the greatest homage to Gandhi, when he is given the credit of mobilizing the masses in the struggle for freedom. One does not know that the greater homage would be to regard and respect Gandhi as “the embodiment of the primitive, blind, spontaneous spirit of revolt of the Indian masses. His politics has been characterized by the immaturity, defects and deficiency of the source of the urge behind it. One can be only as great as himself. To ascribe to him any greater greatness, is to worship the God of your own creation - the kind of God who is sure to disappoint you any moment by

showing his clay feet. I am not such a stupid worshipper. Therefore, I claim to appreciate the real greatness of Gandhi."

The conflict of views regarding the appreciation of the role of Gandhi, can be traced back to the contradictory philosophies of history. Many in the country still believe that history is the biography of great men. But since the days of Carlyle, history has become a science. Today, it knows neither prophets, nor miracles, nor socio-political alchemy. Great men are no longer regarded either as avatars, demigods or super-men. Great men are great in so far as they represent the spirit of their respective age. Gandhi will remain great as long as he represents the spirit of revolt of the Indian people. Therefore, his greatness cannot be unlimited. The spirit of revolt of the Indian people will grow until their conditions of life are so radically changed as would permit the development of any single human being into a "superman." Gandhi's philosophy would not permit such tumultuous development of the spirit of revolt. However serviceable it may have been in the past, his personality and his activities may become injurious for the liberation of the Indian people in the future. That perspective should have been clear from the very beginning of his career to anybody who did not permit his intellect to be fogged by emotion. "I claim to have been one of them. But having no illusion regarding the scene to be enacted at the end of the drama, I could admire wholeheartedly the action of the great actor when he strode across the stage in the previous scenes. He may still develop useful possibilities. Or he may not. No definite judgment need be pronounced as yet. Meanwhile, let us admire, respect and properly

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15 Ibid., pp. 27-28.
appreciate him for the great services that he has rendered for freedom of the Indian people.”

When Gandhi was assassinated in 1948, M. N. Roy paid tribute in an article “The Message of the Martyr”. Roy wrote, “Leaders of aggrieved India have professed loyalty to the sacred memory of the martyred Mahatma and pledged themselves solemnly to be guided by his message. If the pledge is implemented, then death at the assassin's hand may still accomplish what a dedicated life could not. There is no doubt about the sincerity of sentiments felt in an atmosphere of poignant anguish and expressed spontaneously from the bottom of hearts moved by a dreadful experience. At the same time, it cannot be denied that, had nationalist India grasped the Mahatma's message and been guided by it without reservation, today she would not be mourning his death at the hands of an assassin. Therefore, having recovered from the initial impact of the stunning blow, the country should even now try to understand the meaning of the Mahatma's message, if his martyrdom is not to be in vain.”

He further wrote, “Even during his lifetime, the Mahatma was hailed as the Father of the Nation. Nationalist India's homage to his sacred memory will be to canonise him as such. He was the patron saint of nationalism, which triumphed during his lifetime. Yet he fell a victim to the very cult he preached. That is the implication of the terrible tragedy which stupefied the entire civilized world. But few seem to have learned the lesson. The patron saint of nationalism has been sacrificed at the altar of the geographical goddess of Akhand Hindustan, and all

16 Ibid., p. 28.
17 Independent India, February 8, 1948.
Indian nationalists, who today reaffirm undying loyalty to the Mahatma, also worship at the shrine of that goddess. Since that fanatical cult logically goes to the incredible extent of demanding the blood of its own patron saint, the Mahatma's message must have been greater than a mere call for suffering and sacrifice for the country. Essentially, it is a moral, humanist, cosmopolitan appeal, although the Mahatma himself allowed it to be heavily coloured by the narrow cult of nationalism. The lesson of the martyrdom of the Mahatma is that the noblest core of his message could not be reconciled with the intolerant cult of nationalism, which he also preached. Unfortunately, this contradiction in his ideas and ideals was not realised by the Mahatma himself until the last days of his life. During that period, he was a disillusioned soul, full of sorrow, struggling bravely against the growing feeling of frustration with an apparently stout optimism based on the sand of an archaic faith.  

The doctrine of non-violence represented an effort to introduce morality in political practice. But in the Mahatma, the politician often got the better of the moralist. Personally, he may never have deviated from his principles, or faith, as he preferred to call it. Yet, he allowed, or condoned, compromise in the political practice and personal conduct of his followers. Even that he did not do willingly. As a moralist, he followed the footprints of the religious preachers of the past.

The implication of the doctrine of non-violence is the moral dictum that the end does not justify the means. That is the core of the Mahatma's message - which is not compatible with power-politics. The

18 Ibid.
Mahatma wanted to purify politics; that can be done only by raising political practice above the vulgar level of a scramble for power.

In the opinion of M. N. Roy, “Nationalism, heavily tainted by Hindu orthodoxy, bred Muslim communalism. Therefore, the ideal of Hindu-Muslim unity, placed before the country by the Mahatma, could not be attained.” The failure in this respect must have been the greatest blow for the Mahatma. During his last days, he staked his life for restoring communal harmony. He failed. Where he failed, smaller men with less lofty motive will not succeed. Nationalism is heading towards its nemesis. The cosmopolitan (non-communal) and humanist message of the Mahatma is urgently needed by India. Will his martyrdom open the eyes of his followers? Will they know how to honour his sacred memory? That can be done by acting according to his message.

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19 Ibid.