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ROY ON THE : ORIGIN¹ AND NATURE OF STATE

Roy's disagreement with the Marxian thesis about the division of society into irreconcilably antagonistic classes constitutes a significant point of departure from the Marxian theory of the state; for, it is the irreconcilability of class antagonism which explain the origin and nature of the state. It may be recalled that Marx regards the state as a form of secular alienation, itself rooted in the alienation inherent in private property, division of labour and cleavage between the individual interest and the social interest. In other words, the existence of the state is bound up with the class society. Roy disagrees with the Marxian view that society is divided into irreconcilable classes and that the history of civilization is the history of class struggles and characterised it as " Unrealistic and empirically unverifiable."¹ Consequently he denies that state is an organ of coercion in the hands of the dominant classes. A humanist, he visualizes like Marx a human social order, without classes, without subjugation and exploitation of man by man, a truly democratic social order, where every man has the fullest possible freedom. But he is critical

1. Roy M. N. Politics Power and Parties, p. 73.
Calcutta : Renaissance Publishers, 1960.

of the anarchic denial of the very necessity of the state and holds that " the ideal of stateless society is obviously an utopia." ²

The standpoint of Roy is humanistic individualism. The origin of the state can be explained on the same ground as the origin of society. Society was created by individual men in order to carry on their struggle for existence and promote freedom more successfully. So also the state. Though the state was created much later in social evolution, it is not something which is by its very nature radically different from society or above it. It is, infact, a form of organisation unique in its functions and powers - political organisation, its main functions being public administration and coordination. In so far as no complex society can do away with public administration and coordination, there is nothing approbrious about the state.

" Primitive communities organised themselves politically much later than their original formation primarily with the purpose of self defence and struggle for existence. In the intervening period, progressive economic development added to the original functions of society, which was departmentalized according to vocations and professions. Eventually, the state rose to coordinate and harmonise the diverse departments of social activities

2. Ibid., p. 73.

so that the individual could live in peace and order to promote the welfare of all living in the community. It was not superimposed on society nor given any totalistic significance."³ In this denial of the totalistic significance, Roy imports a pluralistic accent. " The state rose as one of the several other social institutions, all equally autonomous in their spheres - economic, educational, cultural, political."⁴

Roy speaks of public administration and coordination of the various functions of other autonomous social institutions as the " native " functions of the state. He does not, however, mean that the state in history has often been used as an instrument of " terrestrial oppression " by the privileged classes and groups and by dictators. He does not deny the fact of the existence of economic classes. But he finds the sanction for this terrestrial oppression in the ideas and philosophies mainly religious, which belittled man's true stature as a rational and moral being by postulating supernatural or transcendental beings and thus undermined man's faith in himself. This spiritual slavery is the root of man's terrestrial slavery in all its aspects including economic. Only spiritually free men can free themselves from terrestrial slavery. From Roy's

3. Ibid., p. 74.

4. Ibid., p. 74.

humanistic perspective of history, it is the process of secularisation, which began from the Renaissance, that created the necessary pre-conditions for man's striving for real freedom. That the modern democratic movements received a tremendous impetus from this movement of secularisation is no mere coincidence. Before men could revolt against the despotic regimes, they had to revolt against their spiritual foundations, the 'divine right theory' or other similar religious theories which swayed men's minds .

The liberal democratic state which has since come to be the widely followed pattern, has been democratic only in name. The central feature of the political experience of our time has been the enormous concentration of the power of the state. Roy says "it is not an exaggeration to say that the state has become an engine of coercion."⁵ This is not so much because of the irreconcilable antagonism of classes as because of concentration of power.

This perspective of the nature of the state in our time puts the sole emphasis on concentration of power as the chief obstacle in the way of freedom. "Thus ultimately the problem of democratic political practice is that of decentralization."⁶

5. Ibid., p. 75.

6. Ibid., p. 75.

The necessity of the state being no longer in dispute, we have to be clear about its purpose and its proper or " native " functions. Its purpose is to secure freedom and its proper functions are public administration and coordination. This might appear to be either common place or platitudinous; yet, it must be exphasized and emphasized repeatedly and adequately till it is securely rooted in the political consciou-ness of men. For have not men been indifferent to freedom too often " feared " it, " fled " from it, in search of imaginary security in, among other things, the state ?. Have not they contributed, directly or indirectly, to the state becoming a Leaviathan and an engine of coercion ? Have not they abjectly surrendered or submitted to this coercion ? Mere instituional charges, necessary as they are, cannot by themselves ensure freedom, the ultimate guarantee of freedom lies in the " spiritual " strength of men.

As to the problem that what instituional changes are necessary, Roy's approach is simple. It is a problem of finding ways and means of confining the state to its proper or " native " functions of public administration and coordination of the various functions of other autonomous social institutions. Public administration and coordination are very vague words indeed and in the context of our complex civilization we can easily

visualize to what extent the meaning of these words can be stretched to justify an enormous extension of the sphere of state activity and state interference. Roy does not discuss this aspect of the problem in any specific terms. But he is certainly for minimum government. He recognises the essential soundness of the old liberal dictum that, "that government is the best which governs the least." He proposes a radical and through going decentralization of economic and political organization and radical reorientation of political practice. To him this is a question of making democracy genuine and real, of putting, as he often says concerted content into democracy. Roy in this connection introduces an interesting and a novel idea - that in order to make democracy genuine and real, the state should be made co-terminuous with society. It is an important idea which throws fresh light on the old problem of political philosophy as to what should be the relation between the individual and the state ?

M. N. Roy on The Individual And The State :

According to Roy modern democracy " started from the two unexceptionable principles of individual freedom and popular sovereignty."⁷ But so far as the discrepancy between the theory and practice of democracy has been wide, so much so

7. Ibid., p. 50.

that a vast number of people disillusioned with it have come to think of dictatorship as a better form of government. " The present condition of the world is the result of that contradiction!"⁸

Roy attributes this discrepancy to two main features of parliamentary democracy " The only form in which democracy has been practiced so far ", the principle of delegation of power and the party system. Tracing the historical background, Roy notes that direct democracy, the only form of democracy fully consistent with the principle of popular sovereignty; could not be practiced in modern states with millions of people. The difficulty was solved by devising a system " by which the people constitutionally delegated their authority to a small group of people which ruled the country as custodians of the sovereign people and its power."⁹ The indirect or representative democracy, evolved on this basis has been rent with a basic contradiction for, delegation of power, for all practical purposes, has resulted in surrender of power. Between two general elections the sovereign people have but little effective control over the government. The remark of Roy, the people exercise their sovereignty by surrendering it from time to time, brings out this paradox graphically. The party system, with all its

8. Ibid., p. 49.

9. Ibid., p. 51.

degrading and irrational electioneering practices and undemocratic features, has aggravated the ineffectiveness of the electorate. Roy therefore, concludes that the principle of delegation of power is a negation of the principle of popular sovereignty.

Roy refers, repeatedly to the classic definition of democracy given by Abraham Lincoln; Government of the people, by the people, for the people. " Of that generally accepted definition, however, two-third has been silently eliminated and in reality democracy has come to be nothing more than at best government for the people."¹⁰ On the other hand it is the neglected two-third government of the people by the people - which constitutes the true essence of democracy, " government for the people " involving as it does the principle of delegation of power is a negation of the principle of popular sovereignty. Democracy to be real must be government of the people, by the people.

Now the problem that could arise is how to practice this real democracy in countries with huge population. Roy's answer is " it will be possible and practicable in proportion as the state will become coterminous with society."¹¹ He adds

10. Ibid., p. 116.

11. Ibid., p. 19.

" so long as the state is not coterminous with society, it remains an instrument of power in the hands of some sections of society. And when power is concentrated in the hands of any minority or any section, it necessarily becomes an instrument of coercion and democracy becomes impossible."¹²

It is interesting to see how Roy proposes to make the state coterminous with society. He urges on the one hand that the state should be distinguished from society ; on the other, it should be made coterminous with society. " Of course the more consistent and profound political thinkers have always differentiated these two forms of man's collective existence (i.e. the state and society). But in current political thought, the distinction is not always born in mind. As a result, a good deal of confusion has been created and that confusion makes the problem of reconciling state and individual. But he also says " at the same time if the state is to be regarded as the political organization of society, as it should be, then there is no reason why the state should not be coterminous with society."¹³ The solution of this apparently puzzling problem is the widest possible decentralization of state power, the practice of direct democracy to the possible extent, by dispensing with

12. Ibid., p. 19.

13. Ibid., p. 19.

the system of delegation of power and with party system and a radical reorientation of political practice on rational and moral lines. On this basis he visualizes a detailed constitutional scheme, people's committees endowed with specific constitutional rights will become integral units of the state. Instead of atomised helpless individuals enjoying an illusory sovereignty, groups of individuals citizens will be discussing and planning the affairs of their localities in the framework of similar neighbouring localities, together constituting the country for whose administration they will feel themselves responsible. A growing network of such organised local democracies will be the instruments through which the electorate can assert its influence from day to day, and ultimately exercise a standing control over the state as a whole. The state will not then be able to become an all powerful Leviathan, because state power will be decentralized being largely vested in the local republics. In other words, the state will in this way become coterminous with society." ¹⁴

When thus the state becomes coterminous with society, the problem of the relation of the individual and state becomes no longer difficult of solution. To Roy there is no inherent contradiction between the individual and society. The relation

14. Ibid., p.p. 60,61.

between individual and society will become harmonious to the extent the individual becomes rational and moral. There remains no ground for contradiction, because the state no longer confronts the individual as the Leviathan. As participants in a genuine democracy, the individuals will have full and direct control over the state. This chapter is the outcome of the ideas that M.N. Roy has expressed in Politics Power and Parties, which throw ample light as to what Democracy meant to M. N. Roy. He had his own views on the nature of Democracy which was suitable for Indian conditions.

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: REFERENCES :

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- 2) Roy, M. N. : India's Message. Calcutta :
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- 3) Roy, M. N. : Politics, Power and Parties. Calcutta :
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