



## VI

TRANSFORMATION OF ROY FROM NATIONALIST TO COMMUNIST

In August 1915 Narendranath left India for Batavia in quest of arms. Fifteen years later, in Dec. 1930, he came back to India as Dr. Mahmud with new ideas in his head to make a revolution. In the course of these fifteen years. Narendranath came to be known as M. N. Roy, and was transformed into an ardent communist. Our task now is to find out the answer to the question - why did Narendranath give up nationalism and embrace communism. ?

The answer to this question must be traced to his experience of the five fateful years from August 1915, when he left India, in July 1920, when the second Congress of the Comintern began its session with M. N. Roy playing a leading role in it. For information regarding these crucial years in the career of M. N. Roy we have to depend mainly upon his Memoirs and the Notes which he prepared in order to relate the story of his adventures to old friends when he first met them in Calcutta in 1938 after his release from prison.<sup>1</sup> Our purpose here

-----

1. A typed copy of this note under the title ' When I left India...

Notes of the story told to old friends at their first reunion in Calcutta in 1938 is preserved in the M.N. Roy's Archives, Indian Renaissance Institute, Dehradun. Herein after it will be cited as Notes only.

is not to trace the history of his adventures, but to try to discover the working of his mind which ultimately led to his acceptance of Marxism.

The exciting journey of Narendranath through the far Eastern countries in quest of German arms was not only a failure but also a great disappointment. It undermined his faith in the sincerity of the Germans and in the seriousness of the Indian revolutionaries. All his attempts to despatch arms to India failed owing to the reluctance of the Germans to take this business seriously.

Though profoundly disappointed, Naren having nothing more to do in China and Japan, decided to try his luck first with the German ambassador to the U.S.A. and finally the Supreme General Staff in Berlin. With the assistance of the German ambassador he left China for America with a view ultimately to go to Berlin. Naren landed at San Francisco in the summer of 1916 and went to the town of Palo Alto, the seat of the Stanford University. There he met Dhanagopal Mukherjee, the younger brother of Jadu Gopal, the revolutionary comrade of Naren in Bengal. Dhanagopal advised him to forget the past and to start as a new man and it was he who gave him the name Manabendra Nath Roy.<sup>2</sup>

---

2. Roy's Memoirs, p. 54, Calcutta : Allied Publishers  
( Feb. 1, 1953).

Roy was at the Western coast for about two months and it was during this time that he came in contact with Evelyn, a young Stanford graduate, who accompanied him to New York, married him and was intimately connected with his political life until their separation in 1926. Unfortunately we know very little of this episode of Roy's life about which he writes nothing in his Memoirs.

In New York, Roy tried to contact Indian revolutionaries who might help to go to Berlin. He met Gupta who however could not help him in any way since he was replaced by Dr. Chakrabarty as the representative of the Berlin Committee in America. Roy there upon met Dr. Chakrabarty but received, as he says in his Memoirs, no assistance from him whatsoever. He appears to have been very much repelled by Dr. Chakrabarty. The Indian revolutionaries associated with the Berlin Committee with whom Roy had come in contact such as Gupta and Dr. Chakrabarty disillusioned him thoroughly and he concluded, as he records in his memoirs, that " a revolution supposed to be led by such men could not be taken seriously."<sup>3</sup> For the time being he gave up all hopes of getting any help from any body in his effort to go to Germany and thus the mission with which he left India practically came to an end.

---

3. Roy's Memoirs ( March 1, 1953) p. 103.

With the fading of the old vision a new horizon opened up before the mind of Roy. In America he came in touch with new people and new ideas socialists and anarchosyndicalists. In New York he became closely acquainted with the veteran Indian Nationalist leader, Lajpat Rai ; who went to America on a propaganda tour and succeeded in winning the sympathy of a section of the American people towards the cause of Indian independence<sup>4</sup>. But after U.S.A. joined the war, he found both the American press and platform closed to him. Under such circumstances a new platform - though a very limited one was given to Lajpat by the American Socialists who sympathised with the aspirations of the Colonial people. Roy along with Lajpat came in close contact with the socialists though both of them were opposed to their ideas. In his Memoirs Roy writes that Lajpat purchased the works of Marx and other socialist classics. Roy studied these books and became attracted towards the socialist ideas and began to frequent the New York Public Library to read Marx. Thus, as Roy recalls in his Memoirs, he soon accepted socialism, except its materialist philosophy which was his last ditch.<sup>4</sup>

-----

4. Ibid., (Feb. 1, 1953 ) p. 56.

The conversion of Roy to socialism can possibly be easily explained psychologically. He was convinced of the futility of the old quest for German arms. Most of his comrades in India were either arrested or went underground. Moreover he had lost all faith both in the Germans as well as in the Indian revolutionaries abroad. Under such conditions of disgust, disappointment and frustration the positive response of his mind, full of youthful ardour and enthusiasm, to the new ideas of socialism is not at all surprising.

After the defeat of Germany a number of Indian revolutionaries abroad turned to Soviet Russia for help against British Imperialism, and the Soviet Union, for national and ideological considerations, was willing to give them assistance through the Communist International. This prospect of Soviet help to the Indian struggle for independence made their minds favourably disposed towards communism. This psychological factor alone can explain why a large number of Indian nationalists who were associated with the Berlin Revolutionary Committee and the Indo-German Conspiracy adopted communism or came very near to it. Roy also passed, as he says in his Memoirs, through " this psychological process"<sup>5</sup>. Secondly, the moral fervour of socialism the desire to abolish poverty and promote the welfare of the

-----

5. Ibid., ( March, 29, 1953 ) p. 150.

poor and the downtrodden was not aline to the ideal of a revolutionary nationalist. Trying to explain his own conversion to socialism Roy writes : " We all shared the same vague desire to uplift the poor and the down-trodden. Bankim Chatterjee's ' Anand Math ' was our common source of inspiration."<sup>6</sup> Therefore Roy continued in the same article, " The ideal of social justice could be easily incorporated in my inherited hierarchy of values or in whatever philosophy of life I might have had in those days." Thirdly, socialism also stands for anti-colonialism and advocates freedom of the subject peoples, and therefore, acceptance of socialism did not mean for Roy a betrayal of the mission he was entrusted with. It was rather the continuation of the same pursuit though with a broader perspective. Fourthly, the acceptance of socialism did not alter fundamentally and essentially the particular type of political practice to which Roy was accustomed - secret, conspiratorial - and violent." The idea of revolution," he writes, " associated with the heroic deeds of individuals armed with pistols or bombs, was fading in my mind. But the new idea of revolution taking its place also attached decisive importance to bloodshed and war."<sup>7</sup> Therefore, Roy found little difficulty in changing his political faith. The conversion was, in fact, psychologically pre-determined. As Roy

---

6. Ibid., ( March, 29, 1953 ) p. 150

7. Ibid., ( March, 8, 1953 ) p. 150.

puts it : " The road from revolutionary anti-imperialist nationalism to communism was short,"<sup>8</sup> though as he frankly admits, it was not easy for him to accept the materialist philosophy of Marxism. As an extreme nationalist Roy naturally had a religious outlook with a faith in the spiritual mission of India. Therefore, he took quite a long time to accept the materialist philosophy. But meanwhile several factors conspired to bring Roy's heart and soul into the vortex of socialist politics and opened up before him the vista of a new political life where he might play a significant role. Placed in such a situation Roy's mind naturally accepted the materialist philosophy of Marxism which alone would qualify him to take full advantage of the new opportunity.

The factors which brought Roy in the thick of socialist politics were, first, an unexpected scope for him to play a significant role in the socialist politics of Mexico, and secondly, an acquaintance with F. Gruzenberg, better known as Michael Borodin, as agent of the Communist International under the guise of a Russian commercial representative.

Roy along with many other Indian leaders was arrested in the U.S.A. in connection with the Indo-German conspiracy. Roy was let out on parole and he escaped to Mexico.<sup>9</sup> In Mexico we

---

8. Ibid., ( March 29, 1953 ) p. 150.

9. Notes, p. 11.



find Roy torn between two loyalties. The lure of the old mission came in conflict with the pull of the new ideas. There he met the Germans who gave him a huge amount of money, about 50,000 peson, all in godl coins,<sup>10</sup> and the old plan of purchasing arms in China was revived. Roy actually started for China, though he gave up the project on the way, realizing that his mind was not in this " wild-goose chase".<sup>11</sup> Along with this activity Roy plunged headlong into the socialist movement of Mexico.

The left-wing politics of Mexico were in an amorphous and unorganized state dominated by Anarchism and Syndicalism. There was also a Socialist Party with which Roy came in close contact. By that time a number of American Radicals such as Charlie Phillips, Maurice Baker, Irwin Gramwitch, Henry Glintenkamp escaped from the U.S.A. to Mexico in order to evade compulsory military service and Roy became acquainted with them.<sup>12</sup> Their political views, though not identical had much in common and all of them, including Roy, joined the Socialist Party of Mexico.<sup>13</sup> Roy was in possession of a huge fund given to him by the Germans and he used this money to finance the Socialist

---

10. Roy's Memoirs ( May 10, 1953 ) p. 122.

11. Ibid., ( May 17, 1953 ) p. 235.

12. Ibid., ( May 24, 1953 ) p. 247.

13. Ibid., ( May 31, 1953 ) p. 260.

Party organ ' La Lucha ' which was transformed into a regular weekly of eight pages.<sup>14</sup> The possession of this fund must have given Roy an advantageous position in the socialist circle. The Socialist Party of Mexico published half a dozen pamphlets, mostly written by Roy himself ; and he proposed to convene a conference for forming a mass party of the working class. He was appointed the editor of the party organ and director of party propaganda.

Roy developed an intimate relation with the President of Mexico, General Carranza, and this created an atmosphere favourable for the pursuit of his political activities. In the U.S.A. Roy wrote a pamphlet called " The High Way to Durable Peace " where he maintained that world peace was conditional not so much upon the overthrow of capitalism as upon the liberation of the colonies. In Mexico, he translated it into Spanish and published it adding to it a chapter on the Monroe Doctrine. The President of Mexico was much impressed by the book and he met the author, and from the first meeting, Roy says, they became very friendly and thereafter they used to meet often.<sup>15</sup> The relation between Mexico and the U.S.A. at that time was far from friendly and General Carranza supported Roy's idea of the

-----

14. Ibid., ( June 14, 1953 ) p. 282.

15. Notes, p.p. 11-13.

formation of a Latin American League as against possible U. S. encroachment. Roy thus was safe in his pursuit of socialist politics and the Mexican president, Roy was told, had resisted Anglo - American pressure for his extradition.<sup>16</sup>

When Roy thus became a prominent figure in the Mexican Socialist Party, Michael Borodin appeared in Mexico and came in contact with the socialists there. He became a very close friend of Roy. It was he who fully converted Roy to the Marxist philosophy. Referring to Borodin's influence upon himself Roy writes : " He initiated me in the intricacies of Hegelian dialectics as the key to Marxism. My lingering faith in the special genius of India faded as I learned from him the history of European culture." <sup>17</sup>

After coming in contact with Borodin, Roy became very eager to change the name of the Socialist Party of Mexico into the Communist Party. He moved slowly and cautiously. He introduced Borodin to President Carranza, and Borodin assured the President that the new regime of Russia fully sympathised with the struggle of the Latin American peoples against imperialism and was eager to help it, and for this purpose he proposed the foundation of a Latin American Bureau of the Communist International, President

-----

16. Roy's Memoirs ( June 21, 1953 ) p. 379.

17. Ibid., ( Aug. 9, 1953 ) p. 379.

Carranza welcomed the idea and thus his sympathy for the foundation of the Communist Party of Mexico was indirectly secured. An extraordinary conference of the socialist party was held with Roy himself in the Chair. The resolution to change the name was passed and the Communist Party of Mexico thus born affiliated itself with the Communist International. The conference resolved to send a delegation to the Second World Congress of the Communist International at Moscow and Roy was selected to head the delegation.<sup>18</sup> Thus Roy stood upon the threshold of a new chapter in his political career.

It is not at all difficult to guess why Roy was so eager to change the name of the Socialist Party of Mexico into the Communist Party. A Communist Party in Mexico would obviously be a feather in the cap of Borodin and he in return would help Roy to go to Moscow as the delegate of the party. Corleton Beals states : " Borodin, I later discovered, had told Roy that if he would found a Communist Party in Mexico, then get himself named delegate to the Third International Congress in Moscow, he, Borodin, would assist him to promote Hindu Independence, a bigger opportunity for Roy than remaining marooned in Mexico, far from the theatre of activities."<sup>19</sup> " With a tacit agreement about our future movements, " Roy himself writes in his Memoirs

-----

18. Ibid., ( Aug. 23, 1953 ) p.p. 402 - 404.

19. Overstreet and Windmiller, Communism in India, pp. 25,26. University of California Press, 1959.

" we turned to the plan of founding the first ' Communist Party ' outside Russia." <sup>20</sup>

In the month of November 1919 Roy left for Moscow with a Mexican diplomatic passport.<sup>21</sup> At the end of the year he came to Berlin no longer in quest of arms. There he came in close contact with many outstanding socialist and communist leaders like Bernstein, Kautsky, Hilfferding, Radek Earnest Meyer, Wilhelm Pieck, August Thalheimer, Reinrich Brandler and others. In this connection North and Eudin point out that " it is no exaggeration to state that Roy ranks with Lenin and Mao. Tse-tung in the development of fundamental communist policy for the underdeveloped, as contrasted with the industrialised, areas of the globe."<sup>22</sup> At last he reached Moscow and entered into a new phase of his political career.

---

20. Roy's Memoirs., ( Aug. 23, 1953 ) p. 403.

21. Ibid., ( Sept. 6, 1953 ) p. 426.

22. Robert, C. North and Xenia, J. Eudin., M. N. Roys Mission to China, p. 1. University of California Press, Berekeley and Los Angeles, 1963.

: REFERENCES :

1. Notes : ( A typed copy of this note under the title ' When I Left India' ... Notes of the story told to old friends at their first revnion in Calcutta in 1938 is preserved in the M. N. Roy's Archives, Indian Renaissance Institute, Dehradun).
2. Overstreet and Windmiller : Communism in India, University of California Press, 1959.
3. Roy M. N. : ( In collaboration with Abani Mukharjee) India in Transition, Geneva : J. B. Target, 1922.
4. Roy M. N. : The Future of Indian Politics, London : R. Bishop, 1926.
5. Roy M. N. : The Aftermath of Non-Co-operation, London : The Communist Party of Great Britain, 1926.
6. Roy's Memoirs : ( Roy's Memoirs were serially published in the Amrita Bazar Patrika, Calcutta and also in his own Journal Radical Humanist from Feb. 1, 1953 to Sept. 5, 1954. All references to his Memoirs in this chapter are from the Radical Humanist.)
7. Robert C. North : M. N. Roy's Mission to China, and Xenia J. Eudin University of California Press, Berekeley and Los Angeles 1963.

.....