Radical democracy: why is it still relevant today?

Periods of crisis call attention to the necessity for a radical reorganisation of society. This was the case with 19th century liberal democracy, which had degenerated into exploitation under capitalism, forcing revolutionaries to seek out a better alternative. In time, a large number of these radicals came under the influence of new collectivist doctrines, which offered a transitional dictatorship and centralised economic planning as a remedy to solve the defects of liberal democracy and capitalist exploitation.

The initial enthusiasm of that revolutionary age came to a close when the “spectre of communism’’ that had once threatened capitalist hegemony had itself degenerated into a dictatorship. The concurrent rise of 20th century fascism led to the development of a political situation where there were outright dictatorships on one end and what some called, the mere panacea of democratic formalities on the other. With the concluding period of the Second World War, millions were dead and the world was in a state of chaos. Many who had been champions of solving humanity’s problems saw dictatorship as no solution at all. However, the question of reconciling the aspirations of freedom, and the desire for justice, continued to remain a quandary as before.

During this period of social crisis, the Indian freedom fighter and humanist philosopher Manabendra Nath Roy, and his Marxists colleagues, developed a theory which they felt offered a solution— they referred to it as radical democracy.

A new orientation

Before a contour of a radical democratic political economy can be laid out, a scientifically consistent philosophical outlook must be iterated. To this end, Roy and his colleagues developed the philosophy of new humanism. Humanism, the radicals argued, was as ancient as human beings, and could only be enriched by the new discoveries in scientific thought. A humanism enriched by these new developments in the understanding of the natural world would be best described as ‘scientific’ or ‘new’ Humanism.

Human behaviour includes the capacity for rational thought, the radicals argued. “Morality results from man’s intelligent response to his surroundings. Therefore, it can be deduced from his innate rationality. Since rationality is inherent in human nature, it is only necessary to remind him of his biological heritage, and he will regain faith in himself and undo the harm done to him,” Roy writes in his Reason, Romanticism and Revolution. The realisation of the possibility of a secular rational morality opens up a new perspective before the modern world. The concepts of human dignity, sovereignty, and creativeness, have meaning only when they arise, not as a token to divine writ, but from the rational faculty of the individual.

To that end, Roy proposes in his New Orientation, “Revolution is not inevitable.... Fundamental changes in the structure of society take place only when there is a group of individuals who feel the necessity, who see the possibility of fulfilling it, and who can develop an adequate amount of will to bring about the changes which are both necessary and possible.” That is, women and men, cognisant of their own capacity for reason, and driven to reshape the conditions around them, can do so by cooperating with each other to develop a just and free society.

A radical approach to elections

Democracy, if it is to mean a mere regularised counting of votes is not much more than deception, particularly if the voters have not had a chance to raise themselves up in dignity. In parliamentary democratic conventions, demagogues take power, by promising utopia to a hapless electorate; though once in power the demagogue is evidently unable to deliver, and must invariably resort to strongarm tactics to ensure retaining political power.

The decay of liberal democracies encouraged the rise of various collectivist doctrines which denied the possibility of individual freedom, ridiculing it as an empty abstraction. These doctrines, in turn, proclaimed that in order to be free the individual must merge himself in the mass. This also favoured political demagogues who preferred a mob that acts on appeals to passions. It was easier to sway voters by calls to their sentiments than to their reason. The more backward a populace is, the more easily they could be swayed by appeals to emotional prejudices. “The character of a party is to be judged not by its ability to catch votes, but by the merit of its proclaimed principles and published programme. The people should be asked to vote not for professions and promises, but by judging the record of a government… Under the formal parliamentary system, unscrupulous demagogues can always come to the top,” he writes.

A conscious will to freedom, a sense of responsibility and the ability to critically examine the promises and programmes put before the people by parties and politicians are the preconditions for any successful democracy. One must become a judge as to whether such conditions exist in a given society. “To ensure that elections reflect an intelligent public opinion, there has to be an intelligent public opinion first,” Roy writes.

The radical democratic approach to election begins with people in their localities meeting in local or regional conferences for discussions. Having come to understand political questions and economic problems for themselves, the people will see that they need not merely vote for this or that party to solve their problems. This would also cultivate the ability for independent judgement and as such the people could choose to elect candidates of their own choice, from amongst themselves.

These candidates would enjoy greater independence since they would not be dependent on any political outfit; they can rely on their own conscience and be directly responsible to the electorate. This would do away with the mechanical nature of party politics and the demagogy and corruption that comes in its wake. Such ‘people’s committees’ would not only have the ability to pick independent candidates from amongst themselves but also eventually become the locus of a pyramidical democracy. Empowered with the right of recall and the ability to hold referendums, these organised local democracies would wield a direct and effective control of the mechanics of the State. A progressive democratic movement can occur only with the intelligent and conscious participation of the individuals who constitute a society. As such, the more individuals choose to think about and participate in the democratic process the more organically democratic it becomes.

A humanist economics

“It is indeed a stupendous task to plan the economic life of a fifth of the human race,” Roy had written in his People’s Plan for Economic Development. Centralisation of politics is concurrent with the centralisation of economics. Under the so-called ‘free-market’ economies this is done by capitalist concentration of wealth, and under nationalised economies it reverts to State capitalism.

Capitalism produces goods not with the primary consideration of supplying the needs of the people, but of selling them at a profit. When goods cannot be sold with sufficient profit, capitalists will curtail production. This is compounded in the case of countries like India where a large and continually expanding population is seen as detrimental to the economic development of the country. Rapid industrialisation is offered as a solution to many of these problems. However, industries can succeed only on the basis of a home market. A healthy export trade begins only when the home market is satisfied.

“Modernisation of agriculture is the greatest need of the economic life of our country if production of wealth is to be increased. But this is more a matter of organisation of rural economy than of mechanisation,” Roy said in a 1949 lecture in Patna. Given the primacy for agriculture, the radical democrats cite three problems that need to be overcome in that regard. Firstly, a lack of irrigation which must be countered by the development of wells, reservoirs, canals, et al. Secondly, an improvement for the fertility of the land which could be incentivised by the State. Thirdly, the development of new roads, and the repair of old ones for the countryside. Finally, an organisation of rural consumers and local industries on a co-operative basis in order to provide employment and income for the rural populace.

A radical democratic programme includes provisos for unemployment insurance, old age pension, and other provisions for the upliftment of the citizens. But these must be made with the principle that economic produce is in line with use and with reference to human needs, with a specific focus on the development of health infrastructure, housing and education.

Why radical democracy?

The conditions of the contemporary world present a dismal picture for those who desire for freedom and do not see it as a contradiction to justice. Even as humanity is the most aware it has been about the cosmos and the laws that govern it, it is simultaneously the closest it has ever been to disintegration.

The way out must be one that harkens to the principles of scientific thought and humanist philosophy. Roy writes in New Humanism, “The brain is the means of production, and produces the most revolutionary commodity. Revolutions presuppose iconoclastic ideas. An increasingly large number of men and women, conscious of their creative power, motivated by an indomitable will to remake the world, moved by the adventure of ideas, and fired with the ideal of a free society, can create the conditions under which democracy will be possible”