

M.N. Roy Memorial Lecture

WHY COMMUNISM FAILED IN THE SOVIET UNION?

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FOREWORD

The birthday of the late M.N. Roy, which falls on March 21 is celebrated each year by the Indian Renaissance Institute and the Indian Radical Humanist Association by arranging a lecture of an eminent authority on a topic of public importance. To celebrate the 105th birth anniversary, the Roy Memorial Lecture was delivered in New Delhi on 21st March 1992 by Justice V.M. Tarkunde, Chairman of the Indian Renaissance Institute. The full text of the address is published in this pamphlet.

The object of this lecture series is not to give a resume of the ideas of M.N. Roy, but to present a new thinking on a critical topic. This, I believe, is an appropriate mode of perpetuating the memory of a revolutionary philosopher who was always opposed to ideological orthodoxy, who became alienated from communism because of its spirit of blind confirmism, and who would have liked his own ideas to be critically appreciated but never sanctified.

The Indian Renaissance Institute and the Indian Radical Humanist Association are extremely grateful to Mr. V.M. Tarkunde for his highly interesting and stimulating address.

Vinod Jain

Every year, on 21st March, a public meeting is held by the Indian Renaissance Institute and the Indian Radical Humanist Association to observe the birth anniversary of M.N. Roy. On that day some eminent thinker, usually from outside the circle of Radical Humanists, is invited to deliver a memorial lecture on a topic of current social importance. It was decided that the lecture this year should be on "Why Communism Failed in the Soviet Union?". Because M.N. Roy had written extensively on communism and its failure, and since Radical Humanists have a great deal to say on the causes of the failure of communism in Soviet Russia, I was asked to speak on the topic on this memorial day.

Criteria of the Failure of Soviet Communism

Success or failure of a political movement of a political leader is judged in two different ways. The normal object of political activity is to attain power in order to achieve a worthy end. In practice, however, the attainment of political power, instead of being the means to a worthy end, often assumes the character of the end in itself. The practice is so common as to have become a part of the public lore. Thus when a political party or a political leader comes to power and succeeds in retaining it for a considerable period, the political party or leader is said in common parlance to be an outstanding success.

Apart from this pragmatic criterion, the more basic criterion of success or failure in politics depends on whether a political movement or a political leader has succeeded in achieving his social objective. Very often, a political movement or leader who has been successful in the pragmatic sense is an utter failure from the point of view of his ultimate aim. In post-independence India, for instance, almost all the political leaders who were successful in the pragmatic sense, were really failures because they could do little to bring about the material or cultural advancement of the Indian people.

From this basic point of view, the failure of communism in Soviet Russia has been apparent for a long time, particularly from about the end of second world war in 1946. The ultimate objective of communism was the attainment of freedom of the individual in a society of free individuals. In the Communist Manifesto, Marx and Engels had stated that under communism, "we shall have an association in which free development of each is the condition for the free development of all." Elsewhere Marx had declared that the object of communism was to "create a world of freedom." That is essentially the ideal of humanism. M.N. Roy had rightly described

Marx as one of the great humanists in world history. Marx was an anti-authoritarian. He regarded the State as essentially a coercive machinery designed to protect and promote the interests of the ruling class. That is why he anticipated that in a classless society, the State as a coercive machinery would wither away.

There can hardly be any dispute that Soviet communism completely failed to get anywhere near the objective of creating a free society of free individuals. On the contrary, it established a formidable dictatorship which suppressed dissent and abolished freedom of thought. It failed to create conditions of either political or economic equality. It did abolish the capitalist class but replaced it by a managerial class consisting of the upper strata of the party bureaucracy. Even the economic advancement of Soviet Russia came to a halt from about the middle of the 1960s.

It was this continuous stagnation of the Soviet economy for two and a half decades which led to the failure of communism in the pragmatic sense — its failure to retain political power, the abolition of the Soviet Communist Party and the dramatic disintegration of the Soviet Union itself. Khrushchev, Andropov and, lastly, Gorbachev tried to reform communism, but their efforts did not succeed. The most determined attempt to reform communism was made by Gorbachev by resort to the two weapons of Perestroika and Glasnost. Perestroika as conceived by Gorbachev was very limited in scope, because what was sought to be achieved was not to create in well conceived stages a free market economy, but to replace the existing command economy by giving more freedom to the managers of State enterprises and by encouraging the formation of non-competitive cooperatives. Gorbachev, moreover, tried to bring about these economic reforms through the instrumentality of the Communist Party which was not capable of giving up its authoritarian ways and adopting a democratic ethos. It is doubtful whether Gorbachev realised either the enormous difficulties involved in transforming a State controlled economy into a competitive economy or the suffering which the people would have to undergo during the transition from subsidised prices of essential commodities to prices determined by a free market. While perestroika increased the sufferings of the people, glasnost gave them full liberty to express their dissatisfaction against the Gorbachev regime. That resulted in Yeltsin becoming the President of Russia, and later in the dissolution of the Soviet Communist Party, the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the consequent abolition of the posts occupied by Gorbachev. The failure of communism in the Soviet Union led to the end of the Soviet Union itself.

However, the fact that communism in Soviet Russia failed both in achieving its objective of human freedom and in retaining political power and even its identity as a political party, does not imply that it served no useful purpose during the period of its existence. There were at least two achievements to its credit. In the first place, Soviet communism made a decisive contribution to the defeat of international fascism in the last world war. It was of course a fatal mistake on the part of Hitler to have attacked Soviet Russia instead of Great Britain in 1942, but the fact that Soviet communism was involved in the war on the side of democratic powers, as anticipated by M.N. Roy shows that Soviet communism, despite its totalitarianism, was less reactionary than fascism. The second achievement of communism was to produce leaders like Khrushchev, Andropov and Gorbachev, who wanted to liberalise and humanise communism in different degrees. That such persons could attain the leadership of an all powerful Communist Party shows that communism, unlike fascism, was capable of being humanised. It cannot be forgotten that Gorbachev, although he failed in his efforts to reform the Soviet economy, has the credit of taking the lead in nuclear disarmament and eliminating the danger of a nuclear world war. This was indeed a great achievement. A person like Gorbachev could never have become the leader of a fascist nation.

Many contemporary scholars have equated communism with fascism and have denounced both of them as equally destructive of human freedom. M.N. Roy did not agree with this equation. History has now shown that putting communism and fascism in the same slot was not justified. Faced with a situation of economic stagnation as in Soviet Russia, a fascist State would have become more oppressive and authoritarian and would not have undertaken a programme of self-reform. The main difference between Communism and fascism was that, while both of them were totalitarian, communism had the background of Marxian humanism while fascism has been always anti-humanist.

Causes of the Failure

The failure of communism to create a society of freedom resulted from the fact that the dictatorial State set up by the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, instead of withering away after the abolition of the capitalist class as anticipated by Marx, became increasingly more oppressive and totalitarian. It denied to the people the right of dissent and free thinking.

In the economic sphere, any further improvement in the people's standard of living became impossible after the middle of the 1960s

because of the inefficiency of State owned enterprises. Efficiency of these enterprises could not be increased in the absence of competition and competition was not possible when there was no free market where prices would be determined by the forces of supply and demand. While economic growth was taking place at a rapid rate in the capitalist world, Soviet economy remained in a stagnant condition. This was due to the nationalisation of all the means of production, which was regarded by Marxism as the definitive characteristic of "scientific" socialism.

The above explanation is, however, obviously superficial. It is necessary to find out why the dictatorial State set up in Russia did not get liberalised after the abolition of capitalism and why Marx and Engels regarded wholesale nationalisation of industry as the proper economy for a post-capitalist free society.

Following the ideas propounded by M.N. Roy, I am of the view that the debacle of communism in Soviet Russia can be explained on the basis of the inadequacies of Marxian ideology. The theory of economic determinism, coupled with that of dialectical development of history, was the basis of the confident prognosis of Marx that capitalism was bound to be overthrown by a proletarian revolution, that a short-lived proletarian dictatorship would expropriate the bourgeoisie, and that the dictatorial State will wither away after the creation of a classless society. History did not develop according to the anticipation of Marx because the theory of economic determinism on which Marx relied was only a half-truth. The further assumption about the dialectical development of history, which was inherited by Marx from Hegel, was also a half-truth, because history does not always develop according to the dialectical sequence of thesis, anti-thesis and synthesis.

Apart from the faulty theory of economic determinism and dialectical development, there was another defect in Marxian thinking which led to the belief that nationalisation of all industries would be the proper economy of a post-capitalist society. The mistake consisted of the unjustified assumption that social ownership of the means of production can be adequately brought about by their nationalisation.

We will now examine how these inadequacies of Marxian ideology explain the failure of communism in Soviet Russia.

Theory of Economic Determinism

It is perhaps necessary to emphasise that economic determinism is not a theory relating to social engineering. The theory does not mean that in a poverty stricken society, those who are concerned with social progress must give priority to economic development and poverty alleviation. Economic determinism is a theory of history. It says that the primary factor which determines historical developments is the

class relationship arising from the ownership of the main means of production. The class structure of society is the basic reality, which gives rise to the ideas and ideologies, including moral values, and this ideological superstructure performs functions of sustaining the interests of the ruling class. According to economic determinism, the development of the forces of production arising from the basic economic structure of society determines the course of history. Historical developments are not influenced to any material extent by the prevailing ideas and ideologies whose function is to sustain the status quo rather than to change it. It follows from this theory that man has no creative role in history; he is only the instrument of history, not its maker.

I know that the theory of economic determinism, stated in this way, is often criticised as a vulgarisation of Marxism. There are several passages in the writings of Marx which show that he did not always attribute such an insignificant role to ideas and ideologies in historical development. For instance, in his Theses on Feuerbach, Marx said that "philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it." This is clearly an assertion of the humanist principle that man can change the course of history and he can only do so on the strength of his ideas. However, when we examine the main conclusions reached by Marx, such as the inevitability of a proletarian revolution, characterisation of the State as a committee which looks after the common interests of the ruling class, establishment of a proletarian dictatorship after the overthrow of the bourgeoisie and the ultimate withering away of the State after a classless society is established, we find that all these conclusions are based on the theory of economic determinism in which the major role in shaping history is played, not by man's creative ideas, but by the development of the forces of production. Underestimation of the liberating role of ideas was the main reason why Marx's prognosis about the collapse of capitalism went wrong and why communism created an oppressive totalitarian State which negated Marx's ideal of a free society of free individuals.

Let us see how Marx came to the conclusion that a proletarian revolution was "inevitable". Marx rightly emphasised that under the capitalist mode of production, labour becomes a mere commodity. Its value is determined by the cost of its supply. The cost of the supply of labour is what is necessary for the subsistence of the labourer and his reproduction, i.e. the subsistence of his family. In consonance with the theory of economic determinism, Marx concluded that the wages of labour will always remain more or less at the subsistence level. The productivity of labour would, however, go on increasing, both as a

result of the division of labour and the improvement and growth of machinery. The ever increasing productivity of labour, coupled with stagnant wages, creates what Marx called an "epidemic of over-production." The consequence is a series, of industrial crisis, each crisis being more severe than the previous one. During the period of a crisis, a part of the excess productivity is eliminated by the destruction of some of the means of production. The problem of over production is also sought to be got over by the conquest of new markets and by the more thorough exploitation of old ones. However, the markets also must get exhausted in the course of time, so that capitalism would ultimately be involved in a perennial crisis. In the mean time, with the development of industry, the proletariat not only increases in number; it becomes concentrated in greater masses, it is socialised, its strength grows and it feels that strength. Thus, according to Marx, the bourgeoisie produces its own "grave diggers." Capitalism creates both the objective and subjective conditions for its overthrow. "Its fall and the victory of the proletariat are equally inevitable."

The Marxist conviction about the inevitability of the proletarian revolution was based not only on the theory of economic determinism, but also on its faith in the dialectical course of history. In Volume I of *Das Kapital*, Marx observed that the capitalists expropriated the great mass of the people from the soil so that they became available as workers in capitalist industries. Marx calls this the "first negation". Marx then goes on to say that capitalist production begets, "with the inexorability of the law of nature", its own negation. The monopoly of capital becomes a fetter on the capitalist mode of production and socialisation of labour become incompatible with its capitalist integument. "The expropriators are expropriated."

History, however, did not develop according to the theories of economic determinism and dealectics. Wages of labour did not remain at the subsistence level. They began to increase, though initially at a lesser rate than the increase in the productivity of labour. The growth of liberalism in England aided this process. Capitalists themselves endorsed the view that increase of wages leads to increase in labour productivity. There is at present a tendency in western democracies, including in Great Britain, for wages to rise at a rate higher than that of the rise in the productivity of labour. The British Government has to appeal every year to both employers and employees not to raise the wage level beyond a certain percentage, and this advice is often ignored and wages are fixed at a higher level than what is justified by the increase in labour productivity. The proletariat in advanced capitalist countries has, therefore, not become a revolutionary class as anticipated by Marx.

What happened, however, was that communist revolutions succeeded in some underdeveloped countries like Russia in 1917 and China in 1949. Neither of these revolutions was brought about by the proletariat of those countries. Communist parties in both Russia and China were composed of persons from the middle class who had active sympathy and devotion to the cause of workers and peasants. Since both Russia and China were under developed countries, economically as well as culturally, the dictatorships established in these countries consolidated themselves and refused to wither away. Obviously, if a dictatorship is imposed on a country where the people do not cherish to an adequate extent the democratic values of liberty, equality and fraternity, it has an inherent tendency to perpetuate itself.

Revolution From Above

I would go a step further and say that any revolution guided by the theory of economic determinism is bound to result in the setting up of a dictatorship which, by its very nature, would be a formidable impediment to social progress. This is because the theory of economic determinism assumes that ideas and ideologies arise from, and constitute a superstructure of, the basic economic reality which consists of the ownership of means of production and the social relations arising therefrom. Economic determinism postulates that, except in the case of a few de-classed intellectuals, liberating ideas would emerge in a society only after a liberal economic structure is created as a result of a revolution. Such a revolution is necessarily brought about from above, by a determined minority. It is not created from below, by an enlightened people who aspire for freedom and democracy. The stages of a revolution as visualised by the theory of economic determinism are that first a revolutionary party consisting of de-classed individuals will capture political power, then the revolutionary party will expropriate the capitalist class of all the means of production and that thereafter an ideology suitable for a socialist society will develop among the people. Thus the sequence of communist revolutionary theory is—first a political revolution, then an economic revolution and thereafter a cultural revolution. Now a revolution brought about in this way cannot possibly result in the establishment of a democracy. The successful working of a democracy requires as a precondition that the people should cherish to an adequate degree the values of liberty, equality and fraternity. In the absence of these values, any political or economic institution, even if it is created with a democratic intent, will be perverted so as to subserve the interest of the ruling dictatorship.

Take the instance of the "soviets" in Communist Russia. A soviet

was conceived as a basic organ of democracy, as an instrument of people's power. In the absence of the democratic values of liberty, equality and fraternity amongst the people, and with the imposition of the so-called "proletarian" dictatorship, the same soviet, instead of being an organ of people's power, became in Communist Russia an organ for the exercise of the State's power over the people. It became, in other words, an instrument of dictatorship.

Out of the three values of democracy—liberty, equality and fraternity—the values of equality and fraternity are moral values. Freedom (liberty) and morality are thus the basic components of the democratic ethos. When these values were pushed up into the "superstructure" and excluded from the basic reality, Communist practice became entirely unprincipled. Although Marx was himself a passionate moralist, Communist practice was guided by the dictum that the end justified the means. Morality was completely divorced from the political practice of communism. Stalin secured the execution through fake trials of almost all the leading members of the Bolshevik Party who were Lenin's colleagues, and this inhuman conduct was justified on the ground that Stalin's aim was to achieve socialism in Russia. Stalin's pact with Hitler in 1939 for the division of Poland was justified on the same ground. Such a thoroughly amoral movement could not possibly create a free and moral society.

Economic Determinism Inconsistent With Materialism

Soon after his release from jail, M.N. Roy declared in a meeting held in Poona in December 1936 that "every worthwhile social revolution must be preceded by a philosophical revolution". He explained that a cultural transformation of society, a revaluation of the established values, was necessary before its political and economic liberation can be achieved. He had derived this conclusion from his study in jail for a period of about six years. He was of the view that modern democracy was born in Europe as a result of the Renaissance movement which generated among the people the values of freedom, rationalism and self-sustained morality. Although when I heard that speech I was already a full-fledged Marxist, I did not then realise that this statement of Roy was quite contrary to the theory of economic determinism. Roy was able to depart from the traditional Marxist view in this way because, as he often explained, he regarded Marxism as a way of thought and not a set of dogmas. The precedence which Roy gave to cultural transformation over the transformation of political and economic institutions led him to the conclusion that, in India and elsewhere, a successful revolutionary transformation must start with the

spread of the humanist values of freedom, rationalism and self-sustained morality, a movement which he called the 20th Century Renaissance. Such a movement, Roy felt, would lead to a "revolution from below" which would establish a genuine political, economic and social democracy.

Roy also explained in his writings that the theory of economic determinism does not necessarily follow from the philosophy of materialism. Roy fully appreciated the statement of Marx that "consciousness is determined by being". Marx used the word "being" to mean physical existence. Marx meant that consciousness is a property of life and that life emerged from inanimate matter. But this chronological sequence between matter and ideas did not justify the conclusion that the ideas and ideologies are a super-structure on the so-called materialistic foundation of society. The fact is that ideas are as materialistic as economic relations. Ideas are the product of the human brain and human beings are a part of nature. There is no reason why one part of material existence, such as the economic structure of society, should have greater influence in the making of history than another part, such as ideas and ideologies. The chronological sequence between matter and ideas cannot justify the conclusion that the ideas have a minor role in historical development than "material" existence. In fact, with the march of civilisation and with the shortening of the cultural distance between different societies, ideas are having an increasing influence in the shaping of historical events.

According to the theory of economic determinism, social evolution is determined not by man's creative ideas, but by the development of the means of production. Referring to that view, Roy raised the question: "Who created the first means of production and how?" He answered the question by pointing out that the first means of production must have been created by the human or sub-human brain. He observed that one can imagine an exceptionally clever anthropoid ape hitting upon the idea of breaking a branch and using it for beating down fruits, instead of taking the trouble of climbing to the top of the tree. Roy said that the first non-biological extra organic tool was thus created. He concluded that the main means of production is the human brain. It is thus clearly wrong to give precedence to the development of the means of production over the development of ideas in the theory of social transformation. In fact, ideas must have precedence in a worthwhile transformation of society because no political or economic institution can be run democratically unless the people who run that institution, and the people among whom the institution is run, cherish the values of democracy.

Nationalisation of Industry

I have so far dealt with the first cause of the failure of communism which was the theory of economic determinism and dialectical development (often described conjunctively as "dialectical materialism") which led to the view that historical changes were determined primarily by the development of the forces of production and not by the cultural and moral values of democracy and humanism. I will now deal with the second cause of the failure of communism which consisted of the faulty assumption that social ownership of the means of production should be brought about by their nationalisation.

According to Marx and Engels, one of the contradictions of capitalism consisted of the socialisation of production while retaining individual appropriation of the goods produced. Before the emergence of capitalism, individual artisans worked with small implements belonging to them and they were also the owners of the goods produced. Under capitalism, increasing numbers of workmen worked with the aid of increasingly costly and complicated machinery belonging to the capitalist who was the owner of the goods produced. There was social production but individual appropriation. This contradiction, Marx and Engels observed, could be resolved by social appropriation of the goods and services produced by the economy and the requisite social appropriation could be secured if the ownership of the means of production was also socialised. This led Marx and Engels to the further conclusion, which had no justification, that the social ownership of the means of production should be brought about by the nationalisation of all industries. The contradiction between social production and individual appropriation could really be removed by ensuring that appropriation is socialised to the same extent to which production is socialised. This implied that the workmen who are engaged in the process of production should become the owners of the means of production which they utilise for producing goods and services. As I will presently submit, this aim can be achieved by building up a cooperative economy. Marx and Engels were, however, committed to the view that a proletarian dictatorship was necessary for expropriating the capitalist class and that was probably the reason why they equated social ownership with the national ownership of the means of production. This eventually led to the undoing of communism, both economically and politically.

Nationalisation of industry had initially the advantage of securing rapid industrial growth. In a few decades, however, the growth of industry in the Soviet Union came to a halt. This was for various reasons. Wholesale nationalisation of industry necessarily meant the

absence of a free market. In the absence of a free market, there was no way to find out what the people wanted and what their relative preferences were. Prices of goods and services were therefore determined arbitrarily, without reference to the demands of the consumers. In the absence of competition, there was neither an incentive to increase the efficiency of State industries nor a dependable method of assessing their efficiency. Moreover, party bureaucrats who became the managers of State enterprises were not the best persons suited to the job.

Further, the alienation of the workers from their work and from the products of their work continued under State ownership as much as it was under capitalist ownership. In both cases, the workers never became the owners of the goods and services produced by them. State ownership consisted of transferring the workers from the employment of capitalists to the employment of the State.

Politically also, wholesale nationalisation of industry contributed to the consolidation of the dictatorship of the Communist Party. Nationalisation led to the concentration of all economic power in the same hands, in which all power was already centralised in accordance with the theory of proletarian dictatorship. This process was further aided by the State ownership of all the mass media and the business of publication of books, as well as the subjugation to the State of the judiciary, the legal profession and the profession of teachers in schools and colleges.

The contradiction between social production and individual appropriation could have been removed by developing an industrial structure in which the workers engaged in particular enterprises would be the owners of the capital invested in those enterprises. Such an industrial structure can be described as a cooperative economy. A free market is not inconsistent with a cooperative economy. A large number of cooperative enterprises producing the same or similar goods can compete for the consumers' preference in a free market. The alienation of the workers from their work and from the goods they produce would also come to an end when the workers become the owners of the means of production and of what is produced by their work. In large corporations, the principle of cooperation can be implemented by ensuring that the shares in such corporations are progressively owned by the workers themselves. In enterprises where monopoly conditions are inevitable, the ownership can be placed, by appropriate statutes in the hands of representatives of both workers and consumers. In such an industrial structure, all the workers are self-employed and the conflict of interests between employers and employees is eliminated. A cooperative economy is clearly far more

democratic and egalitarian than capitalism as well as State ownership.

Alternative to Communism

It would follow that capitalism is not the only alternative to communism which has failed. A more democratic and egalitarian alternative to communism is a welfare State with a cooperative economy. A welfare State is characterised by social insurance against the various uncertainties and shortcomings of life, such as unemployment, accident, physical handicaps, sickness and old age. In a welfare State, equality of opportunity can be secured by making education equally available to all. Preventive and curative medical assistance can also be provided to all, irrespective of their economic means. A healthy cooperative economy can ensure that the State would eventually have the means to extend these facilities equally to all the members of the society. It is true that a cooperative economy cannot succeed unless a culture based on individual freedom and purposeful social cooperation is developed in a society to an adequate extent. But that only means that a cooperative economy can only be developed gradually on the basis of the development of a cooperative culture.

Conclusions

We may conclude that a cultural revolution is a necessary pre-condition of a worthwhile political and economic transformation. So far we, the persons belonging to the middle class, have failed the Indian masses because we have either isolated ourselves from them, or else we have approached them for votes in favour of one party or another with the promise that the party of our choice will uplift them from their poverty and degradation. We have thus created an illusion amongst the people that somebody other than themselves would be their saviours. We should now go to the people with the message that they alone can help themselves and they alone are the makers of their future. We must awaken their urge for freedom and propagate among them the values of self-reliance, rationalism and self-sustained morality. On the basis of these humanist values, we can promote appropriate organisations of the people at the grass-root level so as to enable them to develop themselves and to fight for their rights.

Secondly, we should, I think, insist that capitalism is not the only alternative to communism. Another alternative is of a welfare State with a cooperative economy.

A third lesson of the failure of communism in Soviet Russia is the

futility of centralisation of power in a nation which consists of a number of sub-nationalities. Even after 70 years of centralisation of power in Soviet Russia, the various sub-nationalities became separate States as soon as the dictatorship of the Communist Party came to an end. They would not be held together even in a loose federation as proposed by Gorbachev. India also is a nation of a number of sub-nationalities. We should not commit the mistake of continuing with the excessive centralisation of power which we have in the country today. We should have a genuine federation with the minimum power at the centre and the maximum power decentralised from the centre to the States and from the States to various zilla parishads, taluka samities, gram panchayats and lok sabhas.