M. N. Roy's Radical Humanism amid Identity Politics

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Abstract

This abstract explores M.N. Roy's philosophy of Radical Humanism in the context of contemporary identity politics. M.N. Roy, a revolutionary thinker and political philosopher, developed Radical Humanism as a response to the limitations of both capitalist individualism and Marxist collectivism. His vision emphasized rational thinking, ethical responsibility, individual liberty, and democratic participation rooted in universal human values. In today's world, where identity politics plays a central role in shaping political discourse and policy, often driven by race, caste, religion, gender, and ethnicity, Roy's ideas offer a critical alternative. Identity politics, while instrumental in highlighting historical injustices and seeking empowerment for marginalized groups, can also deepen social divisions and foster exclusionary attitudes. Roy's Radical Humanism challenges such fragmentations by promoting a rational, secular, and human-centered approach to social organization. His framework encourages individuals to transcend group loyalties and think in terms of common human interests, aiming for a just and equitable society beyond identity-based boundaries. This paper argues that revisiting Roy's Radical Humanism can provide meaningful insights into navigating the challenges of modern democratic societies. It calls for a renewed emphasis on reason, dialogue, and ethical individualism as tools for building inclusive communities in an era increasingly shaped by identity politics.

Keywords: M.N. Roy, Radical Humanism, Identity Politics, Individual Freedom, Rationalism, Human Rights, Ethical Individualism, Democratic Society, Secularism, Social Justice.

Introduction:

M. N. Roy (Manabendra Nath Roy) emerged as a pioneering figure in modern Indian political thought, notably through his development of Radical Humanism,a philosophical stance rooted in rationalism, ethical individualism, and democratic decentralization. Born in 1887 in Bengal, Roy participated in early revolutionary nationalism, later embracing Marxism abroad and co-founding communist parties in Mexico and India. Yet, following disillusionment with Stalinist authoritarianism, he distanced himself from both Soviet-style communism and Western capitalism to forge a new path honoring the dignity and freedom of the individual in a secular, rational society Radical Humanism, formally articulated in Roy's *Reason, Romanticism and Revolution* (1952) and the 1948 manifesto *New Humanism*, placed *reason and scientific temper* at the core of human progress, challenging religious dogma, political orthodoxy, and superstition Roy believed that the *individual*, not class, nation, or religion, should be the focal point of political life. He argued for a moral society forged through *voluntarist ethics*, democratic participation, and human-centered institutions Rejecting both capitalist exploitation and communist authoritarianism, Roy proposed a radical, *party-less*

democracy, governed through decentralized people's committees and guided by universal human values, moral autonomy, and individual agency. He believed that genuine democracy must ennoble the individual as a moral agent, not reduce them to ideological roles or collective identity. In the context of contemporary identity politics, marked by mobilization around caste, religion, region, and gender. Roy's Radical Humanism invites critical reflection: Can a framework rooted in *universalist ethics,* individual dignity, and rational discourse offer a compelling alternative to group-based political mobilization? By revisiting Roy's political philosophy, this work aims to explore whether such a humanist vision can help transcend fragmentation, bolster ethical politics, and foster a more inclusive, dialogic, and rational democratic culture.

Foundations of Radical Humanism: Core Principles

M.N. Roy's Radical Humanism was developed as a philosophical and political response to the perceived failures of both capitalism and Soviet communism. At its foundation lies a commitment to *rationalism, scientific temper*, and *ethical politics*, which Roy saw as essential tools for liberating the individual and building a just society. He emphasized that reason, rather than faith or tradition, must guide human progress. In his own words: *"Man must learn to think for himself, to act for himself, and to live for himself"* (Roy, *Reason, Romanticism and Revolution*, 1952). For Roy, this was not just intellectual independence but a moral imperative that empowered the individual to resist dogma and authoritarianism. Central to Radical Humanism is the *individual's freedom and dignity*. Roy moved away from Marxist class determinism, arguing that human beings cannot be reduced to mere products of their economic circumstances. Instead, he upheld *moral voluntarism*, which suggests that social progress is achieved through conscious ethical action rather than material determinism (Polity Prober, 2025). Roy believed that each individual had the capacity and the duty to think critically and act morally. Roy also firmly supported secularism and rejected religious orthodoxy. He argued that religion had historically been used to justify social inequalities and suppress reason. In *New Humanism*, he wrote that *"the emancipation of man from superstition and tyranny is impossible without the emancipation of the mind"* (Roy, *New Humanism*, 1948). This belief laid the foundation for his advocacy of secular democratic governance. Finally, Roy's shift from Marxism to Radical Humanism involved *replacing economic materialism with ethical voluntarism*. He envisioned a democratic society where progress is driven by the ethical self-determination of individuals, not class struggle or revolution (IGNOU Corner, 2024; Ebooks.inflibnet.ac.in).

Identity Politics in Contemporary India

Contemporary Indian politics has increasingly been shaped by the dynamics of identity politics, where political mobilization is organized around caste, religion, region, language, and gender. These identities have become powerful tools for political representation and resistance but also for populist manipulation. The post-Mandal era saw an upsurge in caste-based parties and coalitions, where demands for social justice were channeled through electoral competition (Jaffrelot, 2003). While such movements empowered historically

marginalized communities, they also led to vote-bank politics, where identity was often commodified for electoral gain.

Religious identity, particularly Hindu-Muslim polarization, has become a central theme in Indian politics, intensified by the rise of majoritarian ideologies and communal rhetoric. Events like the Babri Masjid demolition (1992) and the CAA-NRC protests (2019–20) reveal how religious identity is used to shape citizenship, inclusion, and exclusion (Hasan, 2020). Moreover, regional and linguistic identities have led to the emergence of strong sub-national movements, especially in states like Tamil Nadu, Punjab, and Assam. In many cases, the rhetoric of social justice has been reduced to political tokenism, where symbolic gestures replace structural change. Political parties often promote identity icons rather than engage with issues like education, employment, or land reform (Yadav, 2000). Furthermore, digital and social media have amplified identity consolidation. Platforms like WhatsApp, Twitter, and Facebook have enabled rapid dissemination of identity-based narratives, often fueling polarization and misinformation (Udupa, 2018). These technologies are now central to identity-based political campaigns, reinforcing echo chambers and narrowing public debate. Thus, while identity politics in India has played a crucial role in democratizing access and visibility, it also risks entrenching sectarian divides and weakening the rational, ethical public discourse envisioned by thinkers like M.N. Roy.

Tensions Between Radical Humanism and Identity Politics

M. N. Roy's Radical Humanism presents a distinctive tension with contemporary identity politics. Whereas Roy champions universalist ethics and rational discourse, identity movements rely on group-based mobilization and emotional solidarity. This section explores key fault lines between the two perspectives.

Dimension	Radical Humanism (Roy)	Identity Politics
Ethical Framework	Universalist: Morality based on human reason, transcending sectarian identity	Particularist: Rights and recognition tied to specific group membership
Individual vs. Group	Emphasis on individual agency, autonomy, and moral responsibility	Focus on collective identity, group rights, and shared solidarity
Political Discourse	Advocates rational, critical debate free of affective bias	Relies on emotional appeals and identity loyalty, potentially fragmenting discourse
Partisanship & Institutions	Supports decentralized, party-less democracy to empower individuals	Uses parties and organizations built around identity (caste, religion, region)
Approach to Diversity	Aims to transcend differences through universalism	Reinforces identity boundaries; often leads to exclusive coalitions

1. Roy's universalist ethics vs. identity-based mobilization: Roy believed that morality arises from shared rationality, not inherited loyalties, and should form the basis of political life. Identity politics, by contrast, roots political claims in particular group identity and collective experience.

2. Individual agency vs. group-based rights: Radical Humanism uplifts the moral autonomy of each person, while identity politics foregrounds collective representation, sometimes at the cost of individual critical judgment.

3. Critique of partisan and identity-party politics: Roy's vision of "party-less democracy" challenged conventional power structures, advocating for grass-roots committees guided by rational discourse. Identity politics, however, has institutionalized party formations based on caste, religion, or region.

4. Reasoned discourse vs. emotional/affective politics: Roy warned against sentimentalism and dogmatic group attachment, emphasizing the need for critical, evidence-based dialogue. Identity politics often leverages emotional mobilization and binary "us vs. them" dynamics, as seen in contemporary communal and caste-based mobilizations.

These tensions underscore a fundamental challenge: while identity politics addresses historical injustice and cultural recognition, Roy's Radical Humanism calls for transcending group particularism through rational ethics and universal individual dignity. The next section will examine how this tension plays out through a political-theory lens.

Political Theory Lens: Revisiting Roy

This section explores how Roy's Radical Humanism compares with the political theories of Ambedkar, Gandhi, and Nehru, and examines the feasibility of his *"party-less democracy"* in a pluralistic society.

A. **Radical Humanism as liberal-republicanism?**: Roy's emphasis on individual sovereignty, rational governance, and participatory decentralization aligns with liberal-republican ideals. He saw political legitimacy emerging from *grassroots democratic control* rather than centralized institutions, matching his call for "organized democracy" structured around local people's committees

Comparison with Ambedkar, Gandhi, and Nehru

Thinker	Roy	Ambedkar	Gandhi	Nehru
Identity & group politics	Universal individualism; rejects class/caste-	Advocated group rights (Dalit reservations), yet framed within	Prioritized moral uplift (Sarvodaya) and voluntary	Favored class-based economic planning and

	based mobilization	universal human dignity	community action, but recognized caste inequalities	state-led progress, less focused on identity frameworks
Democratic model	Party-less, decentralized, continuous popular sovereignty	Constitutional democracy with institutional safeguards (e.g., reservations)	Village-level participatory democracy, but kept party politics for national governance	Representative parliamentary democracy with centralized institutions
Secularism and rationalism	Strongly secular, oriented toward scientific temper	Firm secular constitutionalist; backed affirmative action	Spiritual-national synthesis; wary of state ideology, supported pluralism	Asserted modern, secular/state-centered modernization through socialism and planning

B. Is party-less democracy feasible in pluralist India?

Roy argued that traditional political parties breed division, corruption, and alienation His alternative, Grassroots governance through local councils and committees, promoted continuous civic participation. However, critics note that implementing such a system in India faces *significant structural barriers:* entrenched party interests, vast socio-economic inequality, and diverse cultural identities that often demand group representation. Scholars argue that while Roy's ideal stimulates valuable debate on decentralization, its practical realization would require a radical institutional overhaul and a cultural shift toward individual rationality over identity affiliations. In sum, Roy's Radical Humanism offers a bold normative alternative to mainstream Indian political theory, one that foregrounds individual reason, secularism, and decentralized democracy while contrasting sharply with Ambedkar's constitutional group-focused liberties, Gandhi's moral community ethos, and Nehru's centralized state-building.

Contemporary Applications and Limitations of Radical Humanism

M.N. Roy's Radical Humanism, though developed in the mid-20th century, offers several potential insights for navigating the complex realities of 21st-century India. This section examines where Roy's framework aligns and where it may fall short in engaging with contemporary political and social movements.

Radical Humanism's insistence on rational discourse, secularism, and ethical politics aligns with the spirit of many recent mass movements. For instance, the anti-CAA/NRC protests invoked constitutional values, secularism, and human dignity principles central to Roy's vision (The Hindu, 2020). Similarly, Dalit assertion movements and feminist mobilizations emphasize individual autonomy, dignity, and equality resonating with Radical Humanism's human-centered ethics, though often framed through group-based identity politics.

A key critique of Roy's framework is its limited engagement with social location and structural oppression. Contemporary feminist and anti-caste theorists argue that individual ethics alone cannot dismantle deeply embedded social inequalities. Intersectional frameworks, which recognize how caste, gender, and class interact, challenge the universalism of Radical Humanism as too abstract or decontextualized (Crenshaw, 1991).

Roy's blueprint for decentralized democratic governance through local committees could inform today's debates on grassroots democracy, civic education, and panchayati raj institutions. His emphasis on scientific temper and ethical public reasoning also supports the need for educational reforms focused on critical thinking, civic duty, and pluralism ([Roy, *New Humanism*, 1948]; IGNOU Corner, 2024).

In an era of populist strongmen, emotional politics, and digital misinformation, Roy's call for an ethical and rational political culture is especially urgent. He warned of "mass psychology" that could erode individual moral judgment foreshadowing today's social media echo chambers and populist rhetoric (ebooks.inflibnet.ac.in).

Lessons and Way Forward

As India navigates the challenges of rising polarization, populism, and identity-based mobilization, M.N. Roy's Radical Humanism offers enduring lessons and a potential framework for reimagining democratic life. While not without limitations, Roy's philosophy urges a return to reason, ethics, and individual moral agency as the foundation of political culture.

Is there space for a universalist political ethic in 21st-century India?

Roy's insistence on universal human values and rational discourse contrasts sharply with the current dominance of identity-based mobilizations. However, amid increasing communal tensions and fragmented social discourse, this universalism remains not only relevant but essential. As Mehta (2003) argues, democratic renewal requires cultivating "ethical citizenship" rooted in shared human dignity, not merely identity-based rights ([Mehta, *The Burden of Democracy*, 2003]).

Potential for a neo-Royan framework adapted for democratic pluralism

Radical Humanism can be reimagined not as a rejection of identity politics, but as a corrective to its excesses. A "neo-Royan" framework would retain Roy's emphasis on scientific temper, individual autonomy, and ethical action, while also engaging seriously with structural inequalities and the lived realities of caste, gender, and class. This hybrid approach

aligns with contemporary calls for ethical intersectionality where group experiences are acknowledged without sacrificing individual agency (Crenshaw, 1991).

Challenges of reviving Radical Humanism in party-dominated systems

Roy's vision of party-less democracy, though idealistic, faces serious structural obstacles in India's entrenched party-based system. Political parties are deeply embedded in governance, patronage, and social mobilization. Nonetheless, civic movements, local governance initiatives, and decentralization reforms (like Panchayati Raj) reflect partial realizations of his ideal (IGNOU Corner, 2024).

Reimagining political participation: Civic duty, reason, and democratic decentralization Ultimately, Roy encourages a shift from politics as identity-based competition to ethical cooperation. He envisioned political participation not merely as voting, but as an ongoing civic duty driven by critical inquiry and moral independence. This outlook could foster more dialogic, inclusive, and decentralised democratic practices needed now more than ever in an age of misinformation and hyper-partisanship.

Future Relevance of Radical Humanism in India's Democratic Evolution

M.N. Roy's Radical Humanism holds enduring potential for reshaping the future of political discourse in India, particularly as the country grapples with deepening identity divisions, digital populism, and democratic backsliding. Looking ahead, the following points highlight how Roy's ideas could inform and influence political, educational, and institutional transformation:

Reviving Ethical and Rational Politics: Roy's vision emphasizes that politics must be grounded in reason, ethics, and dialogue, not in emotional mobilization or sectarian loyalty. In a time when political narratives are dominated by religious nationalism, caste-based polarization, and fake news, Radical Humanism can serve as a normative anchor to restore a culture of rational deliberation.

Countering Populism and Majoritarianism: The rise of majoritarian populism has threatened the secular and pluralist ethos of the Indian Constitution. Roy's insistence on universal human rights and individual dignity provides a philosophical counter to populist ideologies that appeal to religious or caste majorities at the cost of minorities' freedoms (Mehta, 2003).

Humanist Civic Education for Democratic Culture: Roy argued for cultivating a scientific temper and critical thinking among citizens. In the future, integrating Radical Humanist values into school and university curricula can promote civic responsibility, secularism, and reason-based debate. Education, as Roy emphasized, must liberate minds, not indoctrinate them ([Roy, *Reason, Romanticism and Revolution*, 1952]).

Digital Literacy and Resistance to Identity-based Misinformation: Roy's belief in individual intellectual freedom is particularly relevant in the age of digital media manipulation. Promoting digital literacy and ethical reasoning through a Radical Humanist lens can help

counteract identity-based misinformation and propaganda, which are rampant on platforms like WhatsApp, Facebook, and Twitter ([Udupa, 2018]).

Strengthening Grassroots Democracy and Decentralization: Roy's idea of party-less democracy remains utopian, but elements such as local self-governance, participatory democracy, and decentralized institutions (like Panchayati Raj) can be revitalized. In the future, policy reform may look to non-partisan civic assemblies or deliberative forums to address local needs with greater public involvement.

Adapting Radical Humanism for Intersectional Justice: A key task for the future is to reframe Roy's universalism to be more sensitive to social hierarchies, such as caste, gender, and religion. Scholars can work toward a neo-Royan framework that combines ethical individualism with intersectional awareness, enabling humanism to engage with real social inequalities without abandoning its commitment to shared dignity ([Crenshaw, 1991]; [Jaffrelot, 2003]).

*Promoting a Neo-Humanist Political Platform***:** Future political and civil society actors might build new movements or platforms inspired by Radical Humanism, focusing not on identity-based demands but on universal rights, scientific governance, civic duties, and economic and social ethics. Such platforms could offer an alternative to polarized party politics.

Global Relevance in Post-Identity Democracies: Finally, Roy's ideas extend beyond India. As identity politics and authoritarian populism gain ground globally, Radical Humanism offers a universal framework for defending democratic values, human rights, and rational citizenship. In this sense, Roy's thought anticipates the need for a post-identity politics grounded in ethical universality.

Conclusion:

M.N. Roy's Radical Humanism presents a bold philosophical response to both ideological authoritarianism and the fragmentation of democratic discourse through identity politics. His firm belief in reason, ethical individualism, and secular democracy offers a universalist framework that transcends the limitations of caste, religion, and community-based mobilization. As Roy wrote in *New Humanism*, "A man must think for himself, act for himself, and live for himself" a direct call to build political life on the foundation of individual autonomy and rationality (Roy, 1948). In the present context, where identity politics often defines political alliances and state policies, Roy's emphasis on universal human values serves as a necessary critique. While acknowledging the importance of group-based mobilizations for justice, Radical Humanism critiques their potential to re-entrench social divisions, replacing substantive ethics with emotional partisanship (Mehta, *The Burden of Democracy*, 2003; Jaffrelot, *India's Silent Revolution*, 2003). Nonetheless, for Roy's framework to remain relevant in the 21st century, it must be reinterpreted in light of intersectionality and structural inequalities. Thinkers like Crenshaw (1991) have shown that individual freedom must be understood through the lens of overlapping oppressions a concept that can deepen Radical Humanism's engagement with contemporary justice movements. Future applications may include civic education rooted in humanist values, non-partisan

democratic deliberation, and grassroots political participation guided by reason and ethics rather than identity and emotion (Udupa, 2018; Roy, *Reason, Romanticism and Revolution*, 1952). Roy's ideal of a party-less, decentralized democracy, while difficult to implement fully, can still inspire institutional innovation in democratic governance (IGNOU Corner, 2024; INFLIBNET, n.d.). In conclusion, Radical Humanism offers a timeless philosophical lens to reclaim democracy from the clutches of sectarianism and populism. By embracing Roy's vision updated for present realities India can pursue a politics of dignity, reason, and inclusive ethics, rooted not in who we are by birth, but in who we become through thought and action.

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