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BEYOND THE BALLOT: M. N. ROY'S THEORY OF ORGANISED DEMOCRACY AND THE PROBLEM OF POPULAR SOVEREIGNTY IN INDIA

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KEYWORDS

M. N. Roy, Organised Democracy, Popular Sovereignty, Political Representation, Radical Humanism, Decentralisation, Participatory Democracy

ABSTRACT

This paper looks at M. N. Roy's theory of democracy especially how it challenges the idea that holding elections every so often is enough to ensure popular sovereignty. Popular sovereignty means that the ultimate power belongs to the people. Organised democracy according to Roy means setting up a system where citizens keep participating through People's Committees. The paper claims that Roy's main point is to see democracy not as a way to pick leaders but as an ongoing system where the people keep control over political power. By studying Roy's draft constitution the Constitution of Free India and his radical-humanist writings the paper looks at how representation, decentralisation, political parties and personal freedoms are connected. It also compares Roy's ideas to Carole Pateman's theory of democracy and checks how useful they are for decentralising India's constitution. The main conclusion is that Roy gives a critique of the idea that elections alone can solve everything although his model still has open questions about how to run the administration, how to deal with social inequality, how to allow many political voices and how to protect minority groups. Therefore Roy's theory should be seen as an add-on to representative democracy, not a simple replacement for it.

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Introduction

Democracy is usually seen as a way of running a country where people pick their leaders. These leaders have to answer to the people. There are rules to make sure power is used properly. This idea brings up an important question: does getting to pick leaders once in a while really mean that people have real power in between elections? This difference is important because voting once and being in charge of the government all the time are not the same. A person might have the right to vote and still not be involved in decisions about the money the government spends, the laws that are made, how the government runs things and how resources are shared among people.

This paper looks into this issue by studying the ideas of Manabendra Nath Roy, who is often called M. N. Roy. Roy was a leader and thinker. His ideas changed over time starting with fighting for India's freedom, then learning about Marxism and finally moving to a way of thinking called humanism. His final ideas questioned ways of leading and also the problems he saw in regular democracy. Instead of seeing democracy as just a system where people choose leaders to make decisions, Roy wanted to create ways for people to keep control over the government all the time.[1]

The paper focuses on one idea: Roy's theory of organised democracy tries to solve the problem between the formal power of citizens and their real political helplessness. This idea allows us to see Roy's work as a contribution to democratic theory, not just as part of the history of Indian political ideas.

The argument has three parts. First, it explains Roy's criticism of government and his own plan for a different system. Second, it looks at how his ideas compare with democracy and checks the link between political decentralisation and personal freedom. Third, it looks at the chances and limits of Roy's plan in the situation of India's decentralisation. The paper does not say that

today's institutions come directly from Roy's ideas. It looks at different ideas without saying there is a proven history of influence.

Literature Review

Studies on Roy's thinking have looked at his move from Marxism to radical humanism, his idea of freedom, his criticism of communism and his new view of democracy. These views show that his later political thought cannot be seen as a mere rejection of Marxism. They also show an effort to rethink the connection between freedom, social change, reason and political power.

Vandana Arora's view of Roy's humanism puts his democratic ideas in a larger philosophical view that includes reason, materialism, ethics and personal freedom. In this view Roy's criticism of democracy comes from his worry that giving power to others can leave citizens without a way to control the state. His plan is to have institutions and People's Committees so that people can take part in politics all the time, not just during elections.[2] This interpretation helps set the foundations of organised democracy. However, the institutional feasibility of Roy's proposal needs critical examination.

A newer intervention is Tejas Parasher's article, "M. N. Roy and the Problem of Parliamentary Democracy", which appeared in the Journal of the History of Ideas in 2024. Parasher reconstructs Roy's writings on non-parliamentary forms of popular sovereignty from the 1940s and places them in the context of debates about political representation in the Indian national movement.[3] This scholarship is particularly important because it challenges interpretations that equate democracy only with the adoption of parliamentary institutions. Parasher's study *Radical Democracy in Modern Indian Political Thought* similarly places Roy within a broader tradition of Indian thinkers who questioned the concentration of political power in representative institutions and explored more participatory options.[4] These studies show that Roy's political thought has attracted scholarly attention. Because Roy's thought has attracted serious scholarly attention, it would be wrong to say that organised democracy is completely ignored.

Another useful conceptual framework comes from Carole Pateman's book *Participation and Democratic Theory* (1970). Pateman says that participation is not an add-on to existing democratic institutions. Participation can also grow citizens' skills in judgement and effectiveness. Her analysis gives a comparative lens for looking at Roy's claim that democratic institutions must nurture active citizens instead of merely gathering electoral preferences.[5]

The literature therefore gives three views: Roy's radical humanist philosophy, historical study on his criticism of parliamentary representation and wider democratic theory about participation. The current paper combines these views to look at a specific question: can Roy's institutional plan truly change popular sovereignty into ongoing, responsible and inclusive political control?

Research Gap

A solid research gap does not mean pretending that a known thinker has not been studied. The gap here is about analysis, not about the person. Existing studies have shown Roy's ideas and placed them within the history of democratic thought. This paper adds to that by looking at the institutional problem in organized democracy: how can ongoing public involvement be turned into real political control without creating domination at the local level?

The study therefore focuses on three related issues. First, it looks at the link between People's Committees and representative legislatures. Second, it checks if decentralization always helps increase citizens' freedom or if it can instead keep existing inequalities. Third, it thinks about whether Roy's criticism of parties gives a strong alternative to party-based representation.

The analytical contribution is in seeing these questions as one connected problem of building institutions. Organized democracy needs more than making participatory groups; it must explain how these groups get power, how they stay responsible and how they protect people who disagree with local majorities. The paper therefore offers an analytical look rather than claiming to find a new political philosophy.

Research Questions, Objectives and Hypothesis

The main research question is: How much does M. N. Roy's theory of organized democracy offer a choice compared to just an electoral view of popular sovereignty?

Three smaller questions guide the analysis. How does Roy see the link between representation and citizens' continuing control over government? Can decentralized participation protect freedom while stopping the concentration of power? What are the good parts and limits of Roy's plan when compared with democratic theory and current local self-government in India?

The main goal is to rebuild Roy's idea of organized democracy by reading his political and constitutional writings. The second goal is to check the link between participation, representation and individual freedom in his theory. The third is to compare Roy's plan with some ideas in democracy and India's system for local government. The final goal is to find the conditions where organized

democracy can make things more responsible without hurting diversity.

The paper suggests this idea: Roy's theory sees a problem in electoral democracy—the gap between citizens' official power and their ongoing control over power—but how well it works depends on institutions that stop local involvement from being unfair or not working well.

This idea is carefully worded. It does not say that representative democracy is always bad or that decentralization always brings freedom. Instead it says that organized democracy should be judged by how good the participation is, how power is spread out and how responsible the institutions are.

Research Methodology

The study uses a qualitative way of working that combines close reading of texts, conceptual reconstruction and some comparison. The main source is M. N. Roy's Constitution of Free India: A Draft, from the middle of the 1940s. This text is very useful because it turns Roy's ideas into real constitutional plans instead of just leaving them as ideas.[6] His later writings about humanism give the bigger picture to understand why personal freedom and organized people working together are important in his political ideas.

The extra books and articles include Parasher's look at Roy's thoughts about democracy, Arora's explanation of humanism and Pateman's ideas about how people take part in democracy. These works help in three ways: showing history, explaining ideas and comparing concepts. The study shows what Roy suggested about how to set up government and what others have said about his ideas.

The part where things are compared is about thinking through ideas not saying one idea came directly from another. Pateman's ideas are used to look at how being involved in decision making relates to how a democracy works. Also the rules in India about government are looked at as a modern example to compare with. The paper does not say that these rules in India came from Roy's ideas.

The way the study is done has limits. Looking at words can show what an idea says and what it means. It cannot show how a system actually works in real life. Because of that the paper sees claims about how an institution works as guesses based on thinking not facts found by testing. A better check would need case studies, records from people who ran the systems, interviews with people who used them and information about who had power in local groups.

Roy's Critique of Representative Democracy

Roy's criticism of democracy starts by drawing a line between having political rights and having political power. Elections give citizens a way to choose representatives, yet the act of giving electoral approval does not secure constant accountability. After an election, representatives can gain a considerable amount of independence from their constituents while citizens often find that they have little real power to shape decisions until the next election.

Roy's objection cannot be simply called a rejection of democracy. It is a critique of democracy that occurs when the structure of institutions allows the handing over of power to turn into a loss of popular control. According to Roy, citizens must be able to take part in the processes that exercise public authority instead of just giving approval for others to act on their behalf.

The difference appears clearly in Roy's constitutional proposal. Article 2 of the Constitution of Free India: A Draft states that authority comes from the people. Article 3 says that organised democracy is the base of the state and Article 4 places the expression of democratic power in local People's Committees.[7] These provisions set up a line of reason: popular sovereignty is the rule, organised democracy is the way the system is built and local committees are the body that does the work of organised democracy.

The committees were not made merely to listen. Roy's draft gave the committees roles that include choosing candidates, passing the voices of the people to representatives, discussing laws and starting steps to remove representatives if certain rules are met.[8] The importance of these rules is because they try to make ways for people to talk to groups that make decisions for them.

Roy's idea therefore questions the idea that democracy is only about voting. Voting legitimacy comes from choosing leaders in elections. But for democracy to keep working leaders need to keep explaining themselves to the people between elections. Roy's plan tries to link these two parts.

The idea shouldn't be taken too far. Elections are still important in Roy's plan and the committees he suggested would also be chosen by people. His model is better seen as a way to change how leaders are chosen by keeping people involved all the time not as replacing all the ways with direct voting.

Organised Democracy and Radical Humanism

Organised democracy makes sense when you look at it through Roy's radical humanism. Radical humanism is Roy's belief in freedom, rational thinking and responsibility. He developed this idea after moving from

traditional Marxist ideas. It puts the ability of each person to be free at the centre of rebuilding society and politics.[9] This philosophical commitment matters because Roy's institutional proposals are not concerned only with administrative efficiency. They express a claim about the relationship between political institutions and human autonomy. A political system cannot be judged democratic merely because it produces decisions through authorised procedures. It must also allow individuals to exercise agency and participate meaningfully in the decisions that shape their lives.

Roy's approach thus connects the distribution of power with the development of citizens' capacities. A centralised state may provide administration, but centralisation can also distance citizens from decisions and make accountability dependent on intermediaries. Local participation, by contrast, can bring decision-making to those affected by it.

However, proximity is not equivalent to justice. A decision made locally may remain coercive, discriminatory or unresponsive to powerful groups. The democratic value of decentralisation therefore depends on more than closeness. It requires opportunities to participate, access to information, procedures for contesting decisions and protection against the domination of local majorities.

This qualification exposes a tension within Roy's theory. Roy's faith in autonomous individuals provides a normative foundation for democratic participation, but the existence of participatory institutions does not guarantee that citizens possess equal resources or equal influence. Education, economic dependence, social hierarchy and control over networks can affect whose preferences become politically effective.

Roy's radical humanism nevertheless provides a standard for evaluating institutions: the objective is not merely to transfer authority from one administrative level to another, but to expand the effective freedom of individuals. Organised democracy should therefore be assessed by whether it reduces citizens' dependence on power and increases their ability to influence collective decisions.

People's Committees: Institutional Design and Accountability

The distinctive feature of Roy's model is its effort to construct a continuous relationship between local participation and representative government. Roy's draft proposed that People's Committees would operate in villages, towns and cities with committee structures at higher administrative levels. The committees were expected to support citizens in exercising their rights and to make democratic power effective.[10] Three institutional mechanisms are especially important. First, the committees were meant to create a forum for political participation. Their proposed yearly elections would give a chance to choose local representatives, while their wider duties would go beyond election day. This arrangement aims to make participation a regular practice instead of a one-time event. Second, the committees were meant to influence the legislative process. Their powers over candidate nomination and talking with elected representatives would create a channel where citizens could share preferences and examine decisions. The proposal therefore tries to shorten the gap between voting and government action. Third, Roy's draft thought of ways to challenge representatives who did not act as their constituents asked. The recall procedures are important because they solve the problem of keeping representatives accountable between elections.[11] The basic idea is clear: representatives should not become politically isolated just because they have won an election.

These mechanisms raise more questions. Who decides if a representative has broken a mandate? How are disagreements among constituents resolved? What stops a local faction from using recall procedures to scare representatives who defend unpopular minorities? What occurs when local preferences clash with rights or broader public duties?

These are not just technical problems. They deal with the conditions that let popular control stay in line with liberty. Accountability mechanisms can curb power, yet poorly designed mechanisms can also bring instability or expose representatives to coercive pressure.

A close reading must separate the purpose of Roy's proposal from how well its design works. The draft shows that Roy recognised the problem of representation. It does not by itself prove that every institutional mechanism Roy proposed would solve that problem effectively.

International Perspective: Roy and Participatory Democratic Theory

Roy's theory can be clarified by comparing it with Carole Pateman's participatory theory. Pateman challenges views that shrink democracy to a contest among elites and keep citizens passive between elections. Pateman says that participation builds competence and a sense of efficacy, which in turn strengthens the skills needed for democratic citizenship.[12]

The idea of participation in Roy's thinking lines up with Pateman's. Both see participation not only as a way for people to voice what they want. Instead, they see it as something about how political systems connect with what citizens can actually do. In a democracy, people should be

able to think for themselves gain experience in politics and have a real say in the choices that affect their lives.

There's a key difference in focus. Roy wants to change how the state is set up, by creating People's Committees and ways for people to directly control how things run. Pateman, on the other hand, cares more about how democratic activity helps people learn and grow. She looks at participation that happens outside political structures too, as in communities or workplaces.

Looking at these two ideas side by side shows two parts of participatory democracy. One is institutional participation, meaning the formal ways citizens can take part in decisions. The other is capacity, meaning whether people are actually able to use those formal chances. Neither part works alone. If there are institutions but no real participation, they are empty forms. If people are informed and engaged but have no ways to make decisions, their efforts won't change anything.

This also points out a shortcoming in Roy's plan. Just setting up committees doesn't mean everyone can take part equally or that people will know how to hold powerful figures accountable. True participation needs more than new structures. It needs design that supports people and social conditions that let them act.

So Roy's theory matters for democratic thinking because it puts popular control at the heart of how institutions should be built. It doesn't offer a blueprint for how democracy should work. It pushes democratic theorists to face a big problem: the gap between how equal people are supposed to be in politics and how power is actually shared in real life.

Comparative Analysis: Roy and Constitutional Decentralisation in India

The Indian constitutional framework gives an example to compare with Roy's focus on local participation. The Constitution includes rules about Panchayati Raj, which creates a system for local self-government. Article 243G lets state legislatures give Panchayats powers and duties related to development and social justice. This happens within the limits of the Constitution and any state laws that apply.[13]

The similarity between Roy's proposal and constitutional decentralisation is that both recognize that political authority does not have to be exercised through central or state institutions. Local bodies can offer places where community needs are met and where citizens can take part in decisions about development and public administration.

The differences are just as important. Article 243G gives a framework for possibly handing powers down to Panchayats; it does not set up Roy's full model of organised democracy. Roy's draft imagined People's Committees as parts of popular sovereignty with duties that touch candidate selection, legislative discussion and ways to recall representatives. Today's Panchayati Raj institutions work within a constitutional and legal structure.

Thus, it would be wrong to treat the two systems as the same. The comparison instead points to a question: does decentralising administration automatically decentralise real political power?

The answer is no. A local institution can exist on paper while still relying on levels of government for money, administrative power or to carry out decisions. Likewise, participation can be uneven if only some groups have access to information, social networks or local decision makers. These are ideas that need study in specific contexts; they should not be taken as facts that apply to every Panchayat.

Roy's theory gives a standard for judging decentralisation. Just having local institutions is not enough. Their democratic value depends on whether citizens can shape decisions, whether representatives stay accountable and whether local authority is used in a way that respects freedom and equal citizenship.

This standard is especially helpful because it distinguishes administrative decentralisation from democratic decentralisation. Administrative decentralisation means moving or sharing government functions. Democratic decentralisation adds the need for citizen influence over how those functions are carried out. Roy's main focus is the latter.

Results and Findings of the Study

Because this study is qualitative and text-based, its results are findings instead of numbers or experimental results.

The first finding is that Roy's organised democracy is built on a difference between having rights on paper and actually using them. Roy's draft tries to close that gap by creating institutions where citizens can stay involved in decisions beyond just voting.

The second finding is that Roy's criticism of representation is more subtle than a rejection of representative bodies. His plan keeps elections and representative groups but wants them to be under ongoing popular oversight. Thus organised democracy can be seen as a way to rebuild the link between representation and participation.

The third finding is that radical humanism gives the foundation for Roy's institutional argument. Political

arrangements matter only if they guard and grow freedom. Decentralisation is not an end; its worth depends on whether it makes political power more accountable and citizens better able to act for themselves.

The fourth finding is that radical humanism again gives the foundation for Roy's institutional argument. Local institutions can make government easier to reach. They can also repeat social hierarchies or give power to dominant local groups. Therefore participatory systems need protections for dissent, minority rights and fair procedures.

The fifth finding is that comparing with Pateman shows the difference between making chances for participation and building citizens' ability to use those chances. Roy's design tackles the first directly while participatory democratic theory gives a good way to look at the second.

Finally, looking at decentralisation in India shows that local self-government and organised democracy both care about spreading political power but are not the same in structure. Roy's model stays useful as a lens to check whether decentralised institutions give real popular control.

Taken together, these findings support the hypothesis, with conditions. Roy points out a flaw in electoral democracy, but whether his alternative works depends on institutional and social conditions that his plan does not fully solve.

Scope, Significance and Relevance

The scope of this paper is deliberately limited to Roy's theory of democracy with particular emphasis on the relationship between political representation, People's Committees and individual freedom. It does not try to give a biography of Roy, a complete history of Indian socialism or a detailed account of the constitutional development of local government.

The study is important for three reasons. First, it adds to the study of political thought by looking at a clear institutional problem instead of treating Roy's radical humanism as a broad philosophical idea. Second, it links the history of ideas with modern questions about electoral accountability, citizen participation and decentralisation. Third, it shows how older political theory can be used carefully without assuming that an old institutional idea can simply be transferred to present-day conditions.

Its present relevance lies in the difference between elections, which are a necessary democratic step, and participation, which is an ongoing political relationship. Electoral competition can give power to governments. Democratic accountability also needs institutions where citizens can review decisions, challenge abuses and shape public priorities.

Roy's thought is especially helpful when democratic legitimacy is talked about in terms of election results. It directs focus to how political power is shared between elections and to the institutional conditions that let citizens exercise real control.

Limitations and Suggestions

The main limitation of Roy's theory is the gap between its ambition and the practical challenges of putting continuous popular participation into practice. Frequent meetings, discussion and ongoing citizen oversight need time, information, administrative help and institutional support. Without these conditions, participation may stay on paper or be dominated by a small group of active citizens.

A second limitation is inequality. Local institutions exist inside the social relations of the communities they serve. Differences in wealth, education, caste, gender and access to networks can change whose voices are heard. A participatory institution cannot be assumed inclusive just because it is local.

A third limitation is pluralism. Roy's criticism of party-centred politics raises a question about power concentrated in organised political groups. Parties can also bring together interests, outline competing programmes and give clear ways of accountability. Removing or weakening party mediation does not automatically remove organisation; it may just make informal networks of influence less visible.

Three suggestions come from this assessment. First, participatory institutions should have clear powers, open procedures and records of decisions that anyone can see. Second, mechanisms of oversight should work together with constitutional protection for dissent and minority rights. Third, any modern evaluation of democracy should look at participation in real life, including who goes to meetings, who influences decisions and whether participation changes policy outcomes.

Future research could study the link between Roy's criteria and how Gram Sabhas or other local deliberative institutions actually work. Such research would need to pick a case, look at administrative records and check participation among important social groups. It could test whether chances for local participation lead to real improvements in accountability, inclusion or how citizens see their political power.

Conclusion

M. N. Roy's theory of organised democracy tackles a long-standing problem in democratic theory: the gap between citizens' formal status as sovereign people and

their real ability to influence political power. By suggesting People's Committees, ways to talk with representatives and ways to challenge representatives, Roy wanted to make popular sovereignty a real institutional practice, not just a statement at elections.

The paper has argued that the importance of Roy's thought is not a simple rejection of parliamentarism nor the idea that local participation is automatically democratic. Its contribution is a view of accountability where representative institutions must stay linked to citizens' ongoing political agency. The comparison with Pateman shows how important participation is for power, while the comparison with constitutional decentralisation in India shows the need to separate formal local government from true popular control.

The critical assessment also points out a limitation. Participation can shift authority without sharing it equally. Local institutions might repeat hierarchies, push out dissent or fail administratively unless they have open procedures, constitutional protection and real inclusion.

Roy's organised democracy should therefore be seen as an addition to representative democracy, not a full or self-validating replacement. Its lasting value lies in the question it asks of every system: if citizens are sovereign, what institutions let them use that sovereignty when they are not voting? This question stays politically important because the legitimacy of democracy depends not only on how governments are chosen but also on how power is used, checked and limited.

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