

Ambedkar and Lohia: a dialogue on caste

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THIS article is about a dialogue that never took place. Bhimrao Ambedkar and Rammanohar Lohia were contemporaries in that their period of political activity overlapped by at least twenty years, between the mid-1930s and mid-1950s. Ambedkar, senior to Lohia by 20 years, did not have any compelling reasons to get to know Lohia, who was not much of a mass leader before the early 1950s. Nor did Lohia write anything significant on caste by that time. However, Lohia could not have been unaware of Ambedkar, his writings and his politics. *Congress Socialist*, the official organ of the CSP (Congress Socialist Party), had taken note of Ambedkar in the 1930s. In any case, someone like Lohia, who had a keen eye for subaltern perspectives, could not have missed the significance of Ambedkar. Yet, there is no evidence of his making any attempt to get in touch with Ambedkar before 1955.

Indeed, this is a dialogue that could not have taken place in their lifetime. Despite an underlying affinity, Ambedkar and Lohia stood on opposite sides of the political divide, before and after independence. The differences were unbridgeable before independence. Lohia belonged to the CSP which stood for radical nationalism and whose program was to push the national movement away from any compromise with colonial power. If anything, Lohia was a shade more militant than his other colleagues on this point. Ambedkar, on the other hand, refused to recognize the national/colonial division as the principal fault line; he was willing to join hands with anyone, including the colonial power, for realizing his ultimate objective of social emancipation.

During the transfer of power, Lohia and his socialist colleagues stayed away from the Constituent Assembly and the provisional government; Ambedkar played a crucial role there. After independence, Lohia was opposed to all camps in world politics; Ambedkar would have liked India to be close to the Atlantic camp. Ambedkar drew upon the liberal tradition; Lohia on the socialist tradition. Add to this Lohia's ideological leaning towards and emotional bond with Gandhi and we have a good understanding of why a Lohia-Ambedkar dialogue did not take place.

Yet it almost did. Once Lohia split from the parent party, the then Praja Socialist Party, and decided to set up his own Socialist Party, he got in touch with Ambedkar. His letter of 10 December 1955 invites Ambedkar to write for *Mankind*, the journal Lohia had recently launched, to address a study camp and to attend the foundation conference of the Socialist Party. In that letter Lohia refers to the 'speeches I made about you in the parliamentary campaign in Madhya Pradesh.' The reference here is perhaps to the Lok Sabha by-election of 1954 when Ambedkar contested with support from the Socialist Party. We do not know the content of the speeches Lohia refers to, but the following sentence gives a sense of what Lohia must have said: 'Even now I very much wish that sympathy should be joined to anger and that you become a leader not alone of the scheduled castes, but also of the Indian people.' (*Caste System*: 29).

Subsequent correspondence indicates that some of Lohia's colleagues met Ambedkar in September 1956 and started informal discussions about an alliance between the two parties. Ambedkar's letter of 24 September 1956 confirmed this and paved the way for formal consultations between the Socialist Party and the All India Scheduled Castes Federation. Ambedkar and Lohia tried to fix a

meeting and missed each other due to scheduling problems. But the talks went on. Ambedkar passed away before the two of them could meet for a dialogue. Lohia recorded his regret in a letter (dated 1 July 1957) to his closest associate in the Socialist Party, Madhu Limaye:

‘You can well understand that my sorrow at Dr Ambedkar’s sudden death has been and is somewhat personal. It had always been my ambition to draw him into our fold, not only organizationally but also in full ideological sense, and that moment seemed to be approaching.

‘...Dr Ambedkar was to me, a great man in Indian politics, and apart from Gandhiji, as great as the greatest of caste Hindus. This fact had always given me solace and confidence that the caste system of Hinduism could one day be destroyed.

‘I have always been trying to communicate to the Harijans in India, an idea which is basic with me. Dr Ambedkar and Sri Jagjivan Ram are the two types of modern Harijans in India. Dr Ambedkar was learned, a man of integrity, courage and independence; he could be shown to the outside world as a symbol of upright India, but he was bitter and exclusive. He refused to become a leader of non-Harijans. I can well understand the agony of the last 5000 years and their continuing impact on the Harijans. But that is precisely the point. Such a great Indian as Dr Ambedkar, I had hoped, would some day be able to rise above the situation, but death came early.’ (*Caste System*: 36-7).

Intellectual curiosity is a good reason to try and set up this dialogue that never took place. My principal consideration, however, is more practical. I have argued elsewhere that policies and politics of social justice in today’s India have reached a dead end, that the social justice movement needs a ‘second wind’, and that it can do so by going back to the thinkers and texts that provide much of the energy for the first wind of social justice in 20th century India. My question, then, is: Can Lohia and Ambedkar help us negotiate the dilemma of politics and policies of social justice in contemporary India?

This is what motivates me to set up a dialogue between Ambedkar and Lohia. I propose that we need to read Ambedkar and Lohia together (and, needless to say, much else as well) to gather resources to reinvent policies and politics of social justice. I hope to persuade that Ambedkar and Lohia shared much more than is known or acknowledged. It is important to recall this shared understanding today. I suggest that we gain as much by focusing on conclusions as by noticing the method of arriving at their conclusions. If we learn from their method, we can form our own judgment by analyzing our own context and examining the evidence now available to us. Finally, I would argue that the significant and substantial disagreements between Ambedkar and Lohia are also a source of learning for us, provided we overcome the temptation to frame the difference from the vantage point of one or the other.

I suggest that the best way to set up a dialogue between Ambedkar and Lohia is to disregard history and treat them as non-contemporaries. Lohia should be read as a successor to Ambedkar, as someone who shared some fundamental convictions with Ambedkar and elaborated, extended and amended his formulations. This was not a smooth succession. Any elaboration of Ambedkar’s views on affirmative action, for instance, required acknowledging the various pitfalls in such a scheme and providing a sophisticated rationale for it. Extension too required some modifications: some of

the suggestions implicit in Ambedkar's views on caste, for example, needed to be brought to the surface. Such an extension required some degree of straightening out of the tensions within the Ambedkarite view of caste. Amendments were the most visible way of bringing about modifications, entailing a dialogue between radically different world views.

Viewed in this light, a dialogue between Ambedkar and Lohia does not remain a conversation between two thinkers or leaders. It turns into a dialogue between two phases of the social justice movement. Ambedkar represented a moment of departure of the social justice movement: it required a painful rupture with Gandhi whose presence was both enabling and disabling for politics of social justice. This moment required a stylized picture of caste and sharp instruments of external critique, of legal/constitutional provisions and the language of western rationality. In many ways the politics of social justice in post-independence India has taken fifty years to catch up with Ambedkar's theory. Lohia's own political practice conformed to this script laid down by Ambedkar. At the same time, Lohia's reflections on caste sketch a blueprint of the next stage of politics of social justice. This next stage could take the existence of this politics for granted, but needed new modalities to achieve a higher order of synthesis.

What unite Lohia and Ambedkar are four convictions that run through the social justice tradition in India. First, they both recognized that caste is an autonomous and significant dimension of inequality, injustice and oppression in Indian society; this recognition sets both of them apart from the Marxists and other socialists who either did not acknowledge caste or privileged class over all other dimensions of inequality. To be sure, neither Ambedkar nor Lohia viewed caste in exclusive terms, as both of them recognized gender and class based inequalities. Yet, they insisted upon its autonomy and in different ways prioritized caste based inequalities as the first call for a politics of social justice.

Second, they held the caste system responsible for a number of ills in Indian society, from economic stagnation to cultural degeneration and vulnerability to external powers. Thus, the caste system was a national malaise and not just a problem for its victims. The causal significance they attached to caste did signal some form of primacy to caste. Third, unlike the Hindu reformers, both of them were convinced that this system of inequality could not be repaired or reformed, that an end to caste based inequalities is possible only if the caste system is brought to an end. Both of them engaged in an open-ended search for ways of bringing about an end to the caste system.

Their preferred solutions differed, at least in emphasis. Ambedkar's conviction about conversion as a way out was not shared by Lohia. But even in this difference they shared something fundamental. Both of them believed that the struggle against the caste system would remain inadequate if it was confined to the material domain. The struggle against the caste system had equally to take place at the plane of ideas and address the spiritual quest of the oppressed. This recognition of the spiritual dimension of struggle against caste injustice constituted the fourth and final shared conviction between Ambedkar and Lohia.

These foundational similarities can, however, distract from the several ways in which Lohia extended Ambedkar. First, Lohia moved away from an essentialist view of caste as a static and uniform social division unique to Hindu society. His philosophy of history sought to historicize caste

as one form of social stratification that may characterize any society in a phase of decline in its global position. This theoretical move enabled Lohia to combine a critique of the caste system as a sign of civilization decline with an understanding of the internal logic of caste as a system of social insurance. This, however, remained an abstract gesture, for Lohia did not provide many illustrations of caste outside India. Nor did he attempt a full account of the origins of caste in Indian history. Yet, this abstraction helped him recognize the intersection of caste, class, gender and language based inequalities. We get glimpses of how this frame could be used to study concrete situations, such as Lohia's analysis of the ruling class in India or his comparative political sociology of regimes in the Indian states.

Second, Lohia elaborates the suggestion of class and gender interacting with caste. Ambedkar's idea of caste being an 'enclosed class' and Lohia's suggestion of caste being an immobile class do not on the face of it appear very different. Ambedkar's suggestion about the caste system having come into existence to control women, too, has an echo in Lohia's formulation of gender based discrimination being the first and primary form of inequality. Lohia, however, extends the idea of intersection of caste with class and gender beyond the point of origin of the caste system. For him this intersectionality of caste, class and gender is a regular feature of social inequality. This intersectionality shapes Lohia's politics, for it characterizes his definition of the ruling class and the historic bloc of the oppressed that could be mobilized for social transformation.

For Lohia, the ruling class in India comprises the upper caste, well to do and English speaking persons, presumably men. The coalition of the oppressed that Lohia wanted to constitute included dalits, adivasis, backward castes, Muslims, women and, in some versions, the poor. Thus, the challenge of annihilation of caste in Ambedkar becomes the challenge of destruction of castes *and* classes or the challenge to end the segregation of caste *and* sex in Lohia.

Third, Lohia carries forward Ambedkar's open-ended quest for ways to end the caste system. Like Ambedkar, Lohia did not put much store by inter-dining as a solution; both of them thought inter-caste marriage was a surer way in the long run. Lohia shared and in some ways extended Ambedkar's emphasis on the use of the modern state and democratic politics as an instrument to end the caste system. His reflections on affirmative action in jobs and assured political representation for the hitherto disadvantaged groups extended Ambedkar's arguments. Lohia was not as attentive as Ambedkar on the institutional mechanisms and their consequences. But he was acutely conscious of the possible side-effects and initial misuse of the policy of preferential treatment and offered a defence that anticipated and neutralized the critique of reservations in contemporary India.

An understanding of the foundational convictions that Ambedkar and Lohia shared and how Lohia extended some of Ambedkar's suggestions is not enough to set up a creative dialogue between the two. Ambedkar and Lohia diverged in two fundamental respects. These differences have substantial implications for the politics of social justice in contemporary India. Therefore, an attempt to learn from both of them requires that we confront these radical differences.

The first difference pertains to their political strategy. Ambedkar followed a strategy of political segregation of dalits from the rest of Hindu society. Forging a distinct identity, recognition of

differential interests and securing separate political representation were central to Ambedkar's political strategy for the destruction of the caste system. Specific actions like support for a separate electorate, system of reservations or conversion to Buddhism followed from this understanding. To be sure, there was an aggregative element to this segregate strategy. It meant bringing together thousands of castes and sub-castes which were then called 'untouchables'. The formation of the Labour Party and then the Republican Party of India also indicated a desire for joining other victims of injustice. But Ambedkar's principal strategy remained a politics of, for, and by the 'untouchables'.

This strategy has, of course, the merit of generating a sense of solidarity and political energy and has therefore been the unspoken ideology of dalit and backward caste politics in post-independence India. As a result, the segregative impulse of the politics of social justice has gained at the cost of an aggregative impulse. In many ways this was an extension of the division of political labour in colonial times: nationalist politics stood for aggregation while social justice movements were charged with segregation.

But with the politics of social justice gaining ground, the lines have got blurred. Dalit politics today is as much about a search for aggregation as it is about setting dalits apart from the rest of the caste Hindus. Mayawati's dilemma illustrates this well: in order to stay in power, she needs to retain her 'dalit' base by maintaining the political aggregation of Jatavs with non-Jatav dalits. At the same time she knows only too well that all the dalit votes are insufficient for her to retain power. Hence the shift from *bahujan samaj* to *sarvajan samaj*. Dalit leadership today is also at the receiving end of the politics of segregation, as in the Mala-Madiga dispute in Andhra Pradesh and Jatav-Balmiki differences in much of North India. Faced with these demands, the dalit leadership often ends up behaving just as the nationalist leadership did vis-a-vis the forces of social justice.

This context requires us to think about aggregative politics of social justice. At an abstract plane, Lohia appears to offer a way out. His politics of social justice was aggregative in its impulse. This aggregation was multi-dimensional: he was for fusing various caste-groups under an umbrella category like *shudra*; he wanted to bring together various caste groups such as the shudra with dalits and adivasis; and he proposed an alliance of victims of the caste system with Muslims, women and the poor. To be sure, there was necessarily a segregative element in this aggregative politics. Lohia's sharp attack on upper caste Hindu domination of public and political life made him appear no different from advocates of segregative politics. But an overall understanding of Lohia's politics makes it clear that he was engaged in aggregating a historic bloc of the victims of multi-dimensional oppression and injustice in Indian society.

The difficulty is that this aggregative politics remained an abstract principle. Lohia's own politics and that of his followers did not manage to achieve even a semblance of this aggregation. In effect, this tradition of politics of social justice remained a segregative politics of the backward castes or attempts at aggregation under the leadership of the better off backward castes. This politics was driven by compulsions not different from those of dalit politics: aggregative politics often fails to generate felt solidarity and does not translate into political energy. Confronting this radical difference between Ambedkar and Lohia thus invites us to face a historic challenge of constructing a politics of aggregation at the concrete level without losing a minimal coherence and loyalty of the

groups whose cause it espouses. Both of them help us to frame this question but do not necessarily offer us answers.

The second radical difference pertains to their cultural politics. As noted above, both Ambedkar and Lohia recognized the spiritual need of the oppressed and underscored the necessity of combating caste ideology at the level of principles. But they proposed radically different ways of doing so. Ambedkar believed in destroying the fountainhead of the ideology of the caste system. He was convinced that the caste system drew its foundational principles from and was sanctified by the Hindu scriptures. Therefore, the high textual tradition of Hindu *shastras* was the principal site of his critique. His method was that of a hermeneutics of suspicion. For him the tradition was nothing but hierarchy and oppression and any voice of protest within this tradition was necessarily compromised. Hence the need for a critique from outside. Ambedkar drew upon traditions of western rationalism to attack the Hindu ideology of hierarchy. Much of the dalit movement after Ambedkar has followed him in this strategy. The trouble with this strategy is that more often than not it fails to establish a meaningful connect with the world view of those whose cause it espouses; by depriving its subjects of identity, memory and history, this politics often disempowers itself.

Lohia offers a radically different path of internal critique. He was simply not interested in the high textual tradition of the *Vedas* or *dharmashastras*. His favourite site was Hindu mythology and epics like *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. His critique did not operate from outside; he picked up his counter-symbols and counter-narratives from within these mythologies. Ram's *maryada* was juxtaposed to Krishna's *amaryadit* personality, Draupadi was invoked as a model of womanhood to counter Savitri, and alternative to the Brahminic Vashishtha tradition of Hinduism was the Valmiki tradition. Instead of debunking mythologies, Lohia preferred a retelling of these stories. Lohia engaged with deities and other mythological characters with unabashed admiration and yet from an avowedly atheist position that reserved the right to be irreverent and critical.

Lohia enunciated this new and innovative form of cultural politics through his lectures and public positions, but could not translate this into politics on the ground. Unlike Ambedkar's critique, Lohia's brand of cultural criticism did not leave behind a political legacy outside a small circle of intellectuals. This absence was not accidental and points to the difficulties in turning Lohia's critique into vibrant politics. Unlike Ambedkar, Lohia's cultural politics remained in the form of hints and was never spelt out. No wonder, his followers picked up the symbols and phrases but not the point. Lohia himself deftly combined admiration for mythological figures with their thoroughgoing critique, but did not specify the grounds of such a critique. This left open the possibility of a less critical engagement with traditions that Ambedkar alerted us to. In this respect too, an appreciation of the radical differences between Ambedkar and Lohia reminds us of the need for a new cultural politics of social justice, a politics that combines understanding with critique that marshals powerful cultural resources to mount an effective attack on a system of injustice and oppression.

The dialogue between Ambedkar and Lohia did not take place, much to the eternal regret of advocates of social justice who would have liked them to come together. However, it is not clear that such a dialogue would have been successful had it taken place in their own lifetime. Ambedkar and Lohia were both strong-headed leaders, with a grudge against history. They thought in and

spoke very different political vocabularies. Besides, Lohia's social location – he was after all a caste Hindu Bania – did not help. Therefore, it is hard to be sanguine about the outcome of a dialogue.

The attitude of their followers confirms this suspicion. The Ambedkarites are still unwilling to trust Lohia, or any socialist for that matter, as ideological ancestors. Mulayam Singh Yadav's invocation of Lohia may have confirmed his image as an OBC champion. Lohia's attempt to think of caste along with class and gender is likely to appear as a dilution to the Ambedkarites. To the Lohiaites, anyone other than their own 'doctor sahib' is unacceptable. They think that Lohia had transcended the one-dimensional thinking represented by Ambedkar. Reading Ambedkar after Lohia would look to them like reading Feuerbach after having understood Marx. In this sense, it was perhaps not all that tragic that Ambedkar and Lohia did not meet. Perhaps they wished to save their dialogue for another century.

* This article is an abridged version of a longer research paper under preparation. I have omitted here the long exegeses on Ambedkar and Lohia and have removed notes and references, so as to present the main argument within the given word limit. The first draft of the paper was presented at the Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla and a revised version at the Faculty Retreat of the CSDS. I would like to thank all the participants for their generous comments and criticism. For a fuller version of the reading of the dilemmas of the politics of social justice in contemporary India, see my 'Rethinking Social Justice', *Seminar*, September 2009. For a detailed exposition of Lohia's ideas, including his views on caste, see my 'What is living and what is dead in Rammanohar Lohia?' *Economic and Political Weekly*, 2 October 2010.

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