

Lohia: A Complete Crusader of Freedom

- Surendra Mohan

The sacrifices and tribulations of Dr. Lohia in India's struggle for independence, including the struggle he launched for Goa's freedom from the Portuguese rule, need no reiteration. Nor his resistance against the Principal of his school who was a Britisher having a colonial mindset or his whistling in protest against the pro-colonialism speech of Sir Ganga Singh, Bikaner's Prince, at League of Nations, Geneva. As independence came, he started to wage a consistent fight against all remnants of colonialism whether in the political field or economic, cultural or administrative. One of his acts of defiance was against the permit system introduced by the Colonial Power for Indian citizens from other areas visiting the northeastern region and continued by the Government of free India. He saw no logic in this attempt at separating some Indians from the others. It came to be subsequently known that the imperialists were conspiring to make the region a 'Government Colony' which could be owned by them even after freedom was granted to the rest of India. In this, they wanted to mobilise the services of the Church, and in this quest, they failed, partly because even those tribal leaders who had accepted Christianity joined the freedom struggle, before but particularly as the Indian National Army came close to India's border and entered it.

Politically, the effort of the British Government, strongly abetted by the last Viceroy Lord Mountbatten, to retain India in the British Commonwealth was strongly resisted by the Socialists and several other elements. However, in whatever amended form, India remained in the Commonwealth of Nations, headed by the

British Crown. Lohia was in the forefront of this resistance. The Socialist Party, in which he played a leading role, went further than that. It asked the forfeiture of all British assets in India as they had been amassed by exploiting India. It could have broken the back of economic domination of the British on several sectors of industry, including the petroleum industry. This, therefore, had a significant economic dimension.

However, that dimension manifested itself in India's relationship with Britain as that of periphery and metropolis. It had been built up during the last two centuries since after the East India Company got hold of India's raw materials and her markets. As the British influence was replaced by the American influence, the role of the metropolis was transferred to the latter. Yet, British assets have also expanded greatly. However, nationalization of the British assets in time could have stopped it. It is well known that all attempts by the then Government of India to develop the oil and gas sector in the late 1950's were strongly opposed by the British Government. A research work on K.D. Malaviya, then Minister of this ministry, has provided full details of how the rulers in London were getting all inner information about it, including discussions in the Cabinet. In particular, the nationalization of the Burma Shell was intolerable to the British Government.

The economic dimension of colonial relationship internally was fully expressed in several domains. The Government of free India retained the principle of Eminent Domain. Thereby, it became owner of all the land, forests

and rivers in the country, and the people lost all their traditional rights. These were exploited by the private corporate sector, in alliance with the Government, in the industrialization of the country. This industrialization is a copy of western model which is highly capital intensive with high consumption of energy. Capital formation of that high order was attempted on the same model of exploitation, with the crucial difference that the western industrialization was greatly dependent on the exploitation of the resources of the colonies as shown by Lohia in his epic work 'Economics After Marx', which could not be the case with Indian industrialization. Hence, the Indian people, particularly, the kisans, became the targets for it. The disequilibrium between industry and agriculture that was built then continues to this day. A study made by Prof Dalip Swami and Prof. Gulati in the mid- 1980's of major crops in the previous decade showed that the producers had lost forty thousand crore rupees annually on an average, owing to the pricing and taxation policies of the Government. For, these policies favoured industry so as to assist it in garnering capital. The instrument for them has been the Costs and Prices Commission of the government of India which determines the prices of agricultural commodities while the prices of industrial goods are left free. It is a well documented fact that public allocations for the agricultural sector have been quite low. The kisans generally have been compelled to seek loans from private money lenders. Consequently, we find suicides of kisans, high rate of migrations from large parts of the country to other parts and heavy loans borne by a majority of the kisans

The role of the environment in the destiny of the kisans is significant. If rivers and canals get silted, irrigation suffers. The destruction of forests in the Himalayas has created this situation as also

caused floods. Lohia campaigned, on the one hand, for an informed policy about the Himalayas, and on the other, insisted on desalting of the rivers. He had pleaded for small bunds, but it was unthinkable that he would have approved of the big dams which have uprooted hundreds of thousands of families of the kisans and the advisis. Socialists like Medha Patkar have died these efforts by launching agitations, showing thereby Lohia's commitment to small irrigation.

During the last two decades of structural adjustment programs, the growth of agriculture has suffered greatly as compared to industry and the service sector. The average rate of agricultural growth has slumped to less than 2 %, while, earlier, it was above 3.5 % and above. The share of agriculture in the GDP has gone down from 53 % in early 1950's to 17 %. This is a reflection of the metropolitan- peripheral relationships in the economy of the country, in continuation of the colonial pattern.. Another aspect of capital formation since the first Five Year Plan has been the status quo in the consumption levels of the common people. If anything, they have eroded, as the data of the per capita availability of grains and pulses make obvious. Moreover, the determination of the poverty line at Rs. 11. 90 since the mid-'90s which the Suresh Tendulkar Committee appointed by the Government of India has recommended for revision to 14. 50 at a time of 17 % inflation in food prices is a confirmation of the continuation of the same policy. The wealthy, during these decades have become tremendously wealthier, but, the scandal of the present decade was the removal of customs and excise duties and reduction of direct taxes in favour of the industrialists which gave them 5.2 lakh crores in two years in 2007- 9..

As against these developments, Dr. Lohia pleaded for power driven small unit technology

by modifying Gandhi's spinning wheel centred village industries. They are capital scarce, labour intensive, eco- friendly and decentralized. He wanted intensification of agriculture by providing irrigation through small projects to every plot, recruitment of Land Army for making waste lands cultivable, liberal credit to farmers at low rate of interest, removal of revenue on uneconomic land holdings and a cow for every agricultural family, but above all, an institutional transformation in favour of land to the tiller. He advocated equitable redistribution of land. He was keen that the price loot should also end and therefore he wanted equitable equilibrium in the prices of agricultural and industrial commodities. The middle man's loot was to be plugged by an arrangement in which the prices charged from the consumer should not be one and a half times more than the price which has been paid to the producer. He advocated ceiling on incomes and expenditure, and during the 1950's, he wanted that the ceiling on income should be Rs. 1,000 per month. His view was that wherever large scale industry was necessary, it should be in the public sector. He pleaded for regulation of wholesale trade.

Lohia was strongly critical of the dual educational system discriminating between the affluent and the poor which was a colonial legacy. Dharam Pal's book 'The Uprooted tree' brings out in great detail the system prevalent before the colonials destroyed it. Common school system with cheap school fees was his model. At the same time, he emphasized the need for quality and excellence. He was insistent that all education should be in the regional language, and English must not remain as medium of instruction, though it could be taught as a subject like any other foreign language. He expressed unhappiness at the state of research in our Universities, and

warned against copying western research or use their translated texts for teaching. Indian, and specifically regional, conditions, values and mores should guide the preparation of text books, he argued. He also favoured adopting the Gandhian model of basic education.

The administration of Huzoor Mai- baap was, according to Dr. Lohia, a colonial instrument of suppressing the people and destroying their self respect. It had evolved to suit the requirements of the imperialist rulers and in denial of the people's rights. Unfortunately, the constitution makers included in it Article 311, so as to give them certain unnecessary guarantees. No officer was specifically designated to serve the needs of development, while collection of taxes, magisterial powers and administrative functions were in the charge of the Deputy Commissioner, also known as District Magistrate and Collector. While the requirements of development made for certain alterations in the system, the colonial pattern sustains by and large. Lohia was for decentralizing political and administrative powers. His doctrine of Four Pillar State is well known.

Twenty five years after his premature demise, the Constitution was amended and a third tier of panchayati raj institutions was introduced. However, these institutions have not been given powers of regulation and administration. Thus, they are far away from Lohia's dream of a people's own administration, or Gandhi's swaraj. The police force is controlled by the State, and there are a large number of para military forces directly controlled by the Centre. These, and the control of the IAS officers by the Centre have made our quasi federal system even more skewed against federalism. Retention of the Article 356 and its excessive use have led to the strengthening of centralistic tendencies. It is forgotten that the obverse side of this

phenomenon is the rise of fissiparous tendencies which India has experienced since after 1969 when the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi sought to consolidate her hold on the organisation, appointed only favourites in government positions in the Centre and the States, dismissed state governments at will, and refashioned the fiscal regime to squeeze the states in favour of the central government. The ever-rising regional economic imbalance in certain areas like the northeast region, along with the anti-civil rights legislations as the Armed Forces Special Powers Act and the employment of paramilitary forces have combined to create an explosive situation in the region.

These developments, juxtaposed against Lohia's plea for political and economic decentralisation would show what tremendous costs in blood and destruction have been borne by ignoring his advice. Lohia's advocacy of special opportunities for the backward communities, including the dalits, the adivasis, the other backwards in all religious communities and women was born out of his deep anguish that he felt at the hierarchical and patriarchal systems traditionally prevalent in India, which was further emphasised by the colonial rulers. It is not generally recalled that the East India Company's Government had decided that in the Presidency Colleges it established in Bombay, Calcutta and Madras, only Brahmins would be admitted and given scholarship. When some upcoming communities protested, the sole reservation of Brahmins in admission was removed, but the scholarships remained their sole preserves. In appointing revenue collectors as per the policy of Permanent Settlement in Eastern India, it resorted to power the forward castes who generally did not engage in actual cultivation of land. These collectors became the feudatories in course of

time. The status of the Shudras and the Panchamas or Antyajias became much lower than before. Introduction of the money economy destroyed the lagdari system in the rural economy which had sustained low caste craftsmen and other service providers for generations.

Dr. Lohia, the sociologist, had looked at these developments with a professional's eye, analysed it and found solution to end the unfortunate legacy of high and low, clean and unclean, dwija and adwija. His policies were gradually adopted by State Governments, as they had their foundation in the Constitution. The special opportunities were made available to the SCs and the STs after it was promulgated. However, the recognition of the OBCs' need for them came much later. While several States provided them in the '60's and the '70's, the Central Government did so only in 1990 when V.P. Singh was the Prime Minister. His Cabinet of Ministers included a sizeable number of socialists who pushed forth Dr. Lohia's policies. In consequence, the OBCs and the SCs ascended to power in north India. Lohia thereby helped transform the power equation among castes so that the more populous castes, including those called Shudras and the Unclean etc.

If this development has failed to transform society, the reasons are to be found in the failure of the leaders of these castes to apply Lohia's teachings in respect of the economy, the administration and the system of education. Their rule in U.P., Bihar or Haryana did not redistribute land, did not remove dual system of education and failed even to remove land revenue on uneconomic holdings. A study of their argument in defence that they were constricted by the Central Government would provide instances where they could make meaningful starts. If West Bengal could launch Barga operations and do

away with the mischief of Permanent Settlement, the Government of Bihar could also do it. On the other hand, the two decades rule of the OBC socialists in the State failed to get a law on justice to the share croppers and agricultural workers adopted by the State Legislature. Nor is there one instance of their promotion of the small unit technology.

Lohia's plea for gender equality, on the other hand, has faced strong resistance from his followers, particularly the OBCs and the Dalits, as heir conduct in Parliament on the Women's Representation Bill has demonstrated. It might be recalled that during the days of the Provisional Parliament, Dr. Ambedkar, the Law Minister, had introduced the Hindu Code Bill in 1951, and when the Congress Parliamentary Party threw it out, he resigned his seat in Government. Later, it was adopted in separate pieces of legislation. This initiative was not followed. Lohia's OBC

followers, while opposing te Women's Representation Bill, could have sought to reform discriminatory customs relating to women, given more tickets to them in elections, brought more of them in their respective parties, but they did nothing at all. The dream of gender equality is not on their agenda, just as land reforms too have been neglected by them. Nevertheless, in this respect, some good decisions taken by the Bihar Chief Minister, Niteesh Kumar, in improving women's conditions require appreciation.

It is obvious that the social justice movement initiated by Phule, followed by Gandhi, Ambedkar and Lohia did not develop into a broad cultural renaissance. It is therefore necessary to ponder on this issue, because without the removal of mental blocks on the issues of gender and property, the remnants of colonialism will not go.