

Dr Rammanohar Lohia: A Tribute

Sunday 22 March 2015, by [Sumit Chakravartty](#)

I am certain that the life and activities of Dr Rammanohar Lohia, that remarkable socialist leader who left an indelible imprint on the Indian political scene in both the pre-independence period and the two decades following independence (that is, till his untimely demise on October 12, 1967), have been propagated throughout the country in the last two years (2009-11) in order to ensure the revival of a vibrant democratic socialist movement which is the imperative need of the hour in the present environment of market fundamentalism developed by the policies of liberalisation, privatisation and globalisation originating from the structural adjustment programme formulated by the Washington Consensus.

How do we remember Dr Lohia today? From his early youth he was a staunch fighter for the cause of India's freedom and devoted his entire life for the upliftment of the teeming millions. But then there were countless others of the same mould who had plunged headlong into the independence movement spurred by the clarion call of Mahatma Gandhi, the real revolutionary in this nation having moved the millions for the emancipation of the motherland through non-violent mass struggles aimed at overthrowing the foreign yoke. However, Dr Lohia was endowed with a brilliant mind, a rare foresight and an exceptional resolve to break the status quo by fighting the Establishment through militant mass actions which alone, he was convinced, would eventually lead to the goal of socialism. And on this issue of breaking the status quo he was literally uncompromising.

Much has been written about Dr Lohia's troubled relations with Jawaharlal Nehru. He was undoubtedly dauntless in lashing out at the first PM of independent India primarily because he found the hero of his youth had failed to live up to his expectations. (Lohiaji himself had disclosed this in as many words on one occasion.) And yet there was a time (that is, in 1936) when it was Nehru who appointed Dr Lohia, then just 26 years in age, the secretary of the foreign affairs wing of the Congress party. That was also the time when Panditji used to describe Rammanohar as the "rising star" in Indian politics. But the two drifted apart when Dr Lohia found Nehru not being true to what he had declared in his early years, and this became

increasingly evident in the post-independence era. On Dr Lohia's release from prison in June 1946 Nehru had offered him the Congress party's General Secretaryship but he refused to accept the post due to his serious differences on several questions relating to the functioning of Congress leaders in power as also the Congress organisation. Yet there was nothing personal in his sharp, and at times vehement, criticism of Nehru. As he himself explained in a piece in *Mainstream* within a couple of weeks of the weekly's launch in September 1962,

"Some people have tried to twist the purpose of this pinpointing on the Prime Minister's expenses as a move on my part to deny him, particularly in his old age, the comforts needed for him to carry out his duties as Prime Minister. Far be it for me to deny him any of the normal comforts in life. In fact, I have been raising this question of the Prime Minister's expenditure as part of our campaign to achieve good planning, right taxation, and just pricing. With such luxury expenditure, it would be impossible for India to achieve these."

Thereafter he added:

"On a rough estimate, I believe that Rs 2000 crores are being spent annually as super luxury expenditure by the upper classes of India, numbering around 50 lakhs. This sum of money could be easily transferred to planning or to reduction of indirect taxation on essential articles or the abolition of land revenue on uneconomic holdings, as also for the achievement of a price policy for essential articles that would fix sale price at no more than one-and-a-half times the cost price. When I try to take away Rs 2000 crores from India's upper classes, I might mention that Rs 3000 crores will still be left with them to spend as they like." (*Mainstream*, September 15, 1962)

Hence it was a matter of principle, not a personal issue for Dr Lohia. Here again he stood out among others.

The figures mentioned above are actually peanuts when set against the statistics available today. One wonders what Dr Lohia would have commented on witnessing the emergence of 54 largest billionaires of the world in India on the one side and the number of people below the poverty line growing by leaps and bounds with every passing day in this country on the other.

Dr Lohia's close association with Mahatma Gandhi in the years 1937-48 are too well known to bear repetition. Gandhiji had deep affection for him. Once, when he was imprisoned, the Father of the Nation spontaneously said: "I cannot sit still when I see Rammanohar Lohia and Jayaprakash Narayan in jail. I do not know braver and straighter men than them." This was evidence of the unalloyed love the Mahatma had for both. And it also provided a measure of his trust in them. Through their deeds both of them proved that they were indeed worthy of his trust.

Dr Lohia's legendary exploits during the 'Quit India' movement elevated him to the stature of a national figure of eminence. He was arrested in May 1944 after 21 months of clandestine activities and lodged in Lahore Jail where he was subjected to inhuman torture. But incarceration in prison could not shatter him or dampen his spirits. While he was in prison he lost his father but even then he refused to come out on parole. Here one notices the best streak of a principled freedom fighter. This was again witnessed in August 1954 when the PSP Government of Travancore-Cochin headed by Pattom Thanu Pillai fired on unarmed people resulting in some deaths; Dr Lohia, who was then the General Secretary of the party and was behind bars in UP for having participated in a mass movement there, strongly urged the State Government to resign on moral grounds, but when the request to that effect was rejected by Thanu Pillai he instantly resigned from the party post upholding principle over politics.

A man of action, he led powerful mass movements all through his life. He fought against Portugal's colonial rule in Goa (1964), for restoration of democracy in Nepal (1946, 1949), for establishment of a State Assembly in Manipur (1955) besides leading numerous mass struggles on the various demands of the peasantry and toiling people. He was arrested in Arunachal Pradesh for protesting against the ban on entry without permit there (1958, 1959). In the USA, he was detained in 1964 when he protested against racial discrimination; ultimately the State Department was compelled to apologise to him, but in reply he asked them to apologise to the Statue of Liberty instead. Such was Dr Rammanohar Lohia.

A firm believer in grassroots democracy, he waged a concerted struggle against an unequal world order and propounded the theory of *Sapta Kranti* (seven revolutions) envisaging male-female equality, elimination of discrimination based on colour, and end to caste-based

inequality, liquidation of colonialism and establishment of a world parliament, fight against inequality generated by private capital and for growth of capital through planning, struggle against armaments, mass civil disobedience.

Dr Lohia fought the second, third and fourth general elections from UP, the third one in 1962 against Nehru from Phulpur. He lost in 1957 and 1962 but came to the Lok Sabha by winning a by-election from Farrukhabad. In 1967 he was re-elected to Parliament from Kannauj.

Even today, after more than 44 years, one distinctly remembers his absorbing speeches in the Lok Sabha in 1966—even now one can hear his inimitable voice in Parliament hurling sharp and acerbic attacks on PM Indira Gandhi especially during the acrimonious debate on the devaluation of the rupee. Every word was measured and his unequivocal pronouncements, full of wit and substance, were listened to with rapt attention by all sides of the House—he commanded a kind of respect from friends and foes alike few have been able to claim since his demise.

Dr Lohia led several mass movements and was jailed on numerous occasions in both pre- and post-independence India. He was an uncompromising and indomitable fighter who could not be suppressed by either force or coercion.

His espousal of several causes, like the one on giving Hindi the status of national language while strengthening the regional languages for the benefit of the poor and the marginalized, evoked mixed reactions. But his arguments were always logical and factual.

He wanted to keep equidistance from both capitalism and communism but towards the end of his life he expressed a strong desire for Left unity in the country.

Lenin had once described Bukharin as the “darling of the Soviet revolution”. Dr Lohia can justifiably be characterised as the “darling of the Indian revolution”. He was essentially human in every sense of the word and far from being the run-of-the-mill politician. In the brief span of 57 years before his life was suddenly cut short, Dr Lohia played such a vitally important role in our political and social life!

Let me conclude this tribute with what Dr Lohia told two journalists, Ravindranath and Ayub Syed, while giving a recorded interview to them just before the fourth general elections in

1967, that is, precisely 44 years ago. Asked to describe the most thrilling moment in his political life, he briefly paused and then, with a far-away look in his eyes, said:

“There have been innumerable thrills. I don’t know; in a certain sense I am a somewhat immature person, more of an adolescent than an old person because every situation appears to me to be a fantastically novel situation. I am slightly nervous, still so, before making a speech, an ordinary speech—and I must have spoken thousands of times—but then each speech has an occasion and I like each speech to conform to that new occasion. Therefore, there is a novelty in it. But then if you ask me straight off, well, there were Goas, there were Nepals, there were those various peasant marches. Also actions during the Independence movement, of course.... During the 1942 rebellion days, there were occasions when I turned to stone—whether out of a firmness of resolve or paralysis of my faculties, it is not for me to decide. Oh yes, there have been thrills and too many of them.” (*Mainstream*, October 21, 1967)

That is the intensely human Dr Rammanohar Lohia for you, a man who could endear himself to one and all by his extraordinary qualities and who left such a profound impress upon our nation as a whole.

(*Janata*, April 17, 2011)