

Growing up with Doctor

- *Nandana Reddy*

My rendezvous with Doctor, as we affectionately called Lohia, began when I was 2 years old and lasted till I was 15 when he passed away in New Delhi on a still October day. For this reason, my impressions of him are that of a child's, uncomplicated and direct. They are based on his relationship with me and the way he responded to me as a person. At the time I did not fully comprehend his intellect or contribution to Indian politics. It was just that he treated me with respect, which very few adults did, and what he did and said appealed to my child's sense of justice. He was a huge part of my life and while I was growing up, an integral element of my formative years; and his influence in shaping the person I am continues even today.

My most vivid memories of him are at number 7 Valmiki Street in T. Nagar in Madras (Chennai), a two bedroom house that we lived in, set in a large garden. There were two Singapore Cherry trees in the front that gave my brother and me, endless pleasure; a Snehalata Creeper (*quisqualis indica*) peeping through the dining room windows, filling the heavy humid summer air with its fragrance; a large terrace and a huge backyard.

Preparing for Doctor's visits were filled with excitement - vacating my room, 'doing it up' for Doctor, planning his schedule and the menus and helping my mother shop for ingredients. My mother would place a few carefully chosen books that she thought he might like to read on the desk, a basket of fruit and chilled water beside his bed. Doctor's visits were events we looked forward to like the visits of our grandfather (mother's father) from Bangalore. Thatha as we called him would arrive with a basket filled with produce

that we in Madras never got to see in the markets. Fresh Strawberries, beautiful lush purple Brinjals, green fragrant cabbages, cauliflower and Brussels sprouts, one of my father's favourites. As he unpacked his 'magic basket' my brother and I would watch with eyes wide open as he explained their seasonal availability, recipes and health benefits. Doctor's visits were similar; he too was accompanied by a 'magic basket', though in his case it was food for the mind.

I eagerly awaited the hustle and bustle of his meetings with socialist leaders, the debates on strategy and ideology that ensued, but most of all, the moments alone, when I could ask him **my** questions. Looking back it is astounding to imagine that a man of his stature had time for a child, but that is precisely the quality that made him so special. His greatness lay in his simplicity and intense love and respect for all fellow human beings. He was an enigma, an unusual combination of piety, love, humility, humour, anger and suffering. This was probably why he was able to identify so absolutely with the marginalised of India and instinctively spoke their language. He was never condescending or patronising towards anyone and as I have learnt over the years, this is not a universal attribute - you either have it or you don't and it cannot be 'cultivated'.

My parents were born social activists, rebelling against patriarchy, the British rule in India and all forms of discrimination. They were inspired by Gandhiji, but in Doctor they found a resonance of thought, a kindred soul and an ideological basis for the revolutionary transformation that our country needed.

Ours was open house 24x7 and was filled with artists, writers, actors, film makers, political activists and politicians from India and abroad and we entertained endlessly, experimenting with Italian, Spanish, French and a multiplicity of other cuisines. Armando Lualdi the documentary film maker from Switzerland, Bernice Rubens the Booker Prize author from England, Peter Coe the director, Abu Abraham the Cartoonist and many others were constant visitors. Ours was a large extended family that transcended the traditional boundaries of blood, caste, class, colour and language.

Doctor was a part of our extended family in the Indian sense and we children awaited his trips with the eagerness of a close friend - our friend, not just our parents'. Our Indian extended family included C.G.K. Reddy, whom we called 'batter chocks, chatter box', whose experience of incarceration in the dungeons of Fort Saint George on the Marina we never tired of hearing and the dearly beloved M. S. Apparao, the absent minded wild life photographer, lawyer and surrogate father to us all. Aruna the beautiful shy bride from Tenali and her deeply committed handsome young husband Ravela Somayya who remain our close family. Madhu Limaye and Murahari; Veerendra Kumar and Sridharan; Vizi (Gajapathi Raju), the zamidar socialist, Gopal Gowda and Achut Patwardan. George Fernandes, the giant killer and the mild poet Kamlesh. Roma Mitra, the professor, the American Socialist Margo Skinner and Ponnamma the gentle lady in white from Shimoga.

There was a seamless integration between all this. Home was so exciting, a living school, that formal school was drudgery – a sterile environment within four walls where information was presented in the abstract with no connection to real life. We learnt so much at home, that school

seemed boring and a reparative regime that was intent on stemming thought and enquiry. The principle on which school functioned was 'sit still, keep quiet and repeat after me', while home was a store house of knowledge waiting to be opened, where debate and enquiry were the norm. Doctor encouraged this more than anyone else. He had the knack of always enabling one to see all side of an issue. My father, forever the devils advocate, could turn an argument on its head with just one seemingly innocent question - Doctor and he complimented each other and they enjoyed their verbal sparing.

We had an old rather beat up Morris Minor that graduated into a Fiat and then an Ambassador in later years used to ferry politicians to and from meetings, holidays to Bangalore and for underground operations during the State of Emergency in India. It was also the vehicle used to visit places of interest like Mahaballipuram, Kanchipuram, Annamalai University and Tiruvanamallai that were invariably a part of Doctor's itenary. We would pack a picnic basket and head off on an adventure of discovery. My father and Doctor would get involved in complicated discussions of the origin of place names and words and contemplate the possible roots from which they sprung. My mother, an accomplished dancer would explain the mood and posture of the statues and sculptures we saw, while my brother and I explored the caves, slid down boulders and climbed trees. For Doctor and my parents there was no separation between the arts, history and politics and they believed that an understanding of each one of these disciplines enhanced an understanding of the others.

On hot heavy summer nights we used to sleep on the terrace of our home, Doctor on a cot (he was 10 years older than my father and therefore

given this privilege) and the four of us (my parents, brother and I) on two mattresses. Looking up at the brilliant star studded sky and listening to my father explain the constellations and the myths behind it, Doctor interjecting his comments, we would nod off between our parents, soothed by the comforting murmur of voices and secure in the knowledge that we were loved. This is probably what inspired me to compose one of my earliest poems; *“When it is sky-lighting time, there is a girl on earth that begins to sing”*.

But my first memory of Doctor was when I was just 3 years old, playing ball on the veranda of the Inspection Bungalow in Red Hills near Madras (Chennai), the venue of the first Socialist Study Camp in February 1956. My ball rolled out into the darkening dusk and I was afraid to retrieve it. Doctor Lohia, who was discussing the day’s events with my parents the organisers of the camp, noticed my plight. He came up to me and encouraged me to get the ball. When I was hesitant and explained that I was scared, he said; *“Only bad people are afraid of the dark, and you are not a bad person”*.

This, one of my earliest interactions with Dr. Lohia marked the beginning of my Socialist education that spanned more than a decade, and it remains one of the most important lessons I learnt.

As a child there was always the strong presence of Lohia at home, and not only when he stayed with us during his visits to Madras (Chennai). He was a constant factor and an integral part of my childhood and growing up. At home there were no separations between our politics, my parents’ careers in theatre and film and the way we lived our lives.

In my world there was no dichotomy between Doctor presenting my mother with a costly and

exotic gift of perfume and discussing strategies for liberating the majority from the shackles of poverty and powerlessness. My mother would stop in the middle of the street to protect hapless cyclists from abusive policeman and I saved stray dogs and wounded owls at school. We agonised over the plight of women and the state of electoral politics; discussed literature and the arts; and enjoyed rare family treats from the proceeds of the sale of old newspapers.

Inspired by Doctor’s spirit of unremitting opposition to injustice and his revolutionary perspective to political and economic theory, at the age of 3 years 10 months, I composed my first poem and later, several others that were published as a book when I was 5 years old that Doctor took the time to review in Mankind!

He wrote; *“Snehalata, her mother, is a statuesque beauty with accomplishments in the mobile arts of dance and drama, Pattabhi Rama Reddy, her father, is a man utterly at peace with himself and I have met no one more relaxed than him. That such parents should breed a lovely girl like Nandana is not at all surprising. What saddens me is the frittering of other possibilities, for how much lovelier could the girl have been in her own language. She is not to blame. I hope that Nandana and her little brother, Konarak Manohar, would soon be able to cast away the burden that their parents and an unthinking age have imposed on their complete delight and spontaneity.”* My brother has managed to do this, finding the universal language of music while I still struggle with the vernacular; but if I did not have a command of English, I would not have been able to delve into Doctor’s mind through his writing and understand his politics.

Sri Kamaraj Nadar lived down the road from us. We used to catch glimpses of him as he rode

by in his shiny black car, sitting upright in the back, his bald head shining. We knew of his famous saying ‘*parkalam*’ or ‘we will see’. We as children loved to use the term when our parents told us to do something, like tidy our room. We would say ‘*parkalam*’ with great flair and a hand waving flourish and then get an earful on responsibilities and duties.

On the other hand, Doctor never used avoidance or procrastination tactics to answer questions, however irrelevant they were, even from us children. He always addressed our concerns with the gravest seriousness, converting a flippant remark into a debate of enormous importance. Surprisingly, such debates were interesting and exciting for us children and we hung on his every word, adding our insights without fear of shame or censure. This was because Lohia never hesitated to speak the truth as he saw it and respected our right to do the same.

Doctor never treated me as a child or for that matter, a girl. He never sat me on his knee or acted in a manner that was superior or belittling. He always listened to what I had to say and answered with utmost seriousness. When I wanted to pierce my ears, I remember Doctor explaining to me that these were symbols of slavery. I went ahead and did it anyway after a fierce inner battle between my need to be seen as Indian, the lure of adornment and Doctors advice. Doctor accepted my decision reassured that it was an informed one. Now at 50 I still wear my ear, nose and toe rings, not only for adornment – but as a reminder of the many who are still slaves.

Doctor was a gentleman, an honourable man and one can say this of very few – cultured and civilised in the true sense of the word. He was a

man of the world with a universal outlook. He could discuss Italian wines and French food, German Philosophy, American literature and recite poetry. One of his favourite songs was Bing Crosby’s version of Cole Porter’s *Oh, give me land, lots of land under the starry skies above, don’t fence me in. Let me ride through the wide open country that I love, don’t fence me in*. He would ask my mother to sing it and hum along, mumbling the words to himself. This song probably spoke to Doctor’s sense of freedom

Another song that he loved was an inspirational hymn written by John Henry Newman, an Anglican minister called ‘Lead, kindly light’. Set to a beautiful melody, the hymn asks for divine guidance to take one step at a time during a period of deep despair and hopelessness, but only until one can reclaim control over ones life. Doctor had been jailed repeatedly during the struggle for independence and was mentally tortured and interrogated by his jailers. In a notorious prison in Lahore, it is alleged that he underwent extreme torture. His health was destroyed but his courage and willpower strengthened through the ordeal. It was perhaps then that poems and hymns like ‘Lead, kindly light’ inspired and soothed his body and soul.

A rich and many-sided personality, Dr. Lohia was also a prolific writer. During the freedom movement, a close follower of Gandhi, he wrote extensively and these writings had an influence on the policies of free India. I was told how, as India’s tryst with freedom neared and Hindu-Muslim strife increased; Doctor strongly opposed the partitioning of India and denounced it in his speeches and writings. I was captivated by his courage when I heard how he appealed to communities in riot torn regions to stay united and be steadfast to Gandhiji’s ideals of non-

violence. But what impressed and astounded me the most was how on the 15th of August, 1947, as the rest of India's leadership gathered in Delhi to take over power from the British, Lohia stayed by Gandhiji's side as he mourned the effects of Partition.

Doctor was the Chairman of the Editorial Board of 'Mankind' of which my mother was a member and active participant and contributor. In 1961, my mother edited and published the first Indian edition of 'Lohia and America Meet' by Harris Wofford Jr. This was yet another link in the relationship between Doctor and our family.

I can still see my mother typing the first draft on our sturdy Olivetti typewriter. I remember her surrounded by reams of printed paper that in those days had to be typeset by assembling individual letters. She would go through every line making corrections using the prevailing editing codes. This exercise had to be repeated several times before a final version was achieved and each time 'new' mistakes would appear. In a time where there were no computers and digital printing was not even a distant dream, it was a painstaking and meticulous job.

When I was 11 years old Doctor Lohia began his short but unforgettable association with the Indian Parliament (1963) as he was elected to the Third Lok Sabha in a bye-election from Farrukhabad constituency in Uttar Pradesh. There was great excitement at home and I tried to picture the rather short and tender human being make the fiery speeches that were read aloud to us and electrify parliament. His speeches were well reasoned and researched and the language that Doctor used was so simple and direct, that I did not require much explanation. I began to understand the role of Parliament and the opposition, the need to demand the accountability

of governments, even ones own, the need to question faulty policies and most of all represent the concerns of the poor and marginalised. It was then that I learnt the difference between being an 'elected representative' and an iconic 'leader' sans accountability to their electorate or constituency.

Lohia shook Parliament when he arrived. The country had a one-party government that had survived three general elections. I remember the pamphlet Doctor, "25000 Rupees a Day", the amount spent on Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, claiming that it was an obscene sum in a country where the vast majority lived on 3 annas (less than one-quarter of a rupee) a day. Nehru responded by saying that India's Planning Commission statistics showed that the daily average income was more like 15 annas (a little under a rupee) per day but Doctor Lohia insisted that this was an important issue and demanded a special debate. This controversy is still remembered as the 'Teen Anna Pandrah Anna controversy. We followed the ensuing debate closely, a difficult thing to do at a time when there was no TV or internet and we were dependent on the All India Radio and the post.

We heard how Lohia captivated and aroused Parliament as member after member gave up their time to Doctor to build his case. He demolished the Planning Commission statistics as unreal and established that his figure was true for over 70% of the population. A dedicated and brilliant parliamentarian, Doctor enthralled the House with stimulating, and often humorous speeches on critical issues of the times and I avidly followed his progress, soaking up all that I could get my hands on.

In 1966 Indira Gandhi became our first woman Prime Minister, though deeply opposed

to dynastic rule, Doctor quipped that at least it would be good to see an “*attractive female face in the newspapers*”.

Amid much jubilation, Doctor was again elected in March 1967 to the Fourth Lok Sabha from Kannauj constituency in Uttar Pradesh. One of Doctor’s main contributions to Indian politics was the incorporation of Gandhian principles in socialist philosophy. A firm believer in decentralised economy, Doctor stressed the need for local self-governments, the setting up of cottage industries with small machines, minimum capital investment and where maximum manpower could be used. His passion for decentralisation of power and resources to the village as self governed units and the ‘small is beautiful’ concept formed the basis of his political theory and blue print for a new India. It was not until some years later (1973) that I read the British economist E. F. Schumacher’s collection of essays Small Is Beautiful: Economics As If People Mattered when it was first published that voiced similar views.

From 1963, since he was first elected to Parliament, Doctor’s visits to the south sadly, became less frequent. These were my adolescent years and I hankered after a theoretical understanding of socialism but had to make do with his writings. I yearned for the old times of ‘one to one’ dialogue, but got little of this.

The last time I saw him was in Delhi when we were on our way to Kashmir for the summer holidays. I got a sun stroke on reaching Delhi and we had to change our plans. Doctor visited us almost daily at the home of Gopal Reddy, my father’s uncle, where we were staying. The final farewell was as we boarded the bus for Dalhousie, Doctor had come to see us off, I waved to him until we rounded the corner and he faded from sight.

Doctor passed away on 12th October 1967 at the age of 57, much too soon to bring his ideas to fruition. Our home was plunged in gloom – we had lost a close member of our family. My mother was weeping and raging against a hospital that could allow such a thing to happen while my father quietly tried to console her. I was 15 and distraught – I had lost my friend and did the only thing I knew how – I wrote a poem.

*A torch has burned out,
A new star in the sky,
Our grief is only tears.
The light was true and unafraid,
But too soon it has perished,
Leaving a heap of warm ashes.*

*Torches burn out, but why so soon, and
why unfinished?*

I ask God, if there is one.

Life after Doctor has been a joyous striving to be true to his principles. My parents paid tribute to him by the way they lived their lives, but the most enduring gift was the making of the film Samskara that was inspired by Doctor’s stand on the caste system. The book authored by U.R. Ananthamurthy was narrated to my parents by Shantaveri Gopal Gowda in 1968. It was around the dining table, where every one always congregated (and we nick named the ‘round table’) that the dilemma of Pranesacharya, the Brahmin priest, toying between acting on what was ‘just and morally right’ and the dictates of traditional dogma were related - the battle between his conscience and the commandments of organized religion and social norms.

Doctor deeply believed in social equality and denounced the caste system and the hierarchical order based on birth. He wrote a scathing attack on Dr. Rajendra Prasad when the President of our Republic washed the feet of a 200 Brahmins

in Banaras calling it vulgar and demanding that it should be a punishable offence. Lohia recognized that caste, more than class, was the huge stumbling block to India's progress and launched a 'destroy caste' movement. *Caste*, Doctor said, *was congealed class, while class was mobile caste*. He not only advocated the need for a fundamental re-ordering of our society but also provided an ideological and theoretical basis for this radical revolution. In his words, "*Caste restricts opportunity. Restricted opportunity constricts ability. Constricted ability further restricts opportunity. Where caste prevails, opportunity and ability are restricted to ever-narrowing circles of the people*".

Samskara captured all of this and set in motion a revolution of its own. Produced and Directed by my father, with my mother in the female lead, we sold the few possessions we had and moved to my grandparent's home in Bangalore to make this film. It was banned by the censors, denounced by fundamental Hindus and stirred up a storm in Karnataka and the entire country. It was hotly debated and studied all over the world and remains so even today. This is one example of the depth of commitment my parents had to socialist principles.

It was not until 1975 that my beliefs were really put to the test. I was 23 years old. Prime Minister Indira Gandhi declared a State of Emergency to perpetuate herself in power and heralded the darkest chapter in the democratic history of India, suspending elections and civil liberties in India. The press was censored, people were forced to undergo vasectomies, and the power of the Government was rampantly abused by the members of the Congress Party.

Adolescence and youth is the time for rebellion and the need to fight for 'something'; but the

struggle against the Emergency, was unlike the usual, more self-centered individual battle for the freedom to wear the hairstyle or clothes we wanted or for well paying jobs. This was not a challenge based on our selfish 'wants'; but a struggle for democracy and the freedom of a nation. I was challenged and met it head on. M.S. Appa Rao's daughter Amukta, many other young people and I plunged ourselves into the underground movement - cyclostyling pamphlets, distributing literature, hiding George and other politicians, inventing disguises for them, and using methods of harmless selective disruption to state our opposition to Mrs. Gandhi. We met several leader of the opposition to garner support, traveled widely all over the country and persuaded leading business men to donate funds.

When the underground movement reached its peak and was obviously making an impact, Mrs. Gandhi in an attempt to stem our protests began a massive clamp down. George Fernandes was arrested and other arrests followed – C.G.K. Reddy, Adwani, Jayaprakash Narayan, Raj Narain, Morarji Desai, Charan Singh, Jivatram Kripalani, Atal Bihari Vajpayee. My family was arrested and my mother was detained in Bangalore Central Jail along with M.S. Appa Rao and several others. We had no judicial recourse and no legal avenues that could be pursued. My mother's health was failing and we could feel her slipping away. She died on January 20th 1977 a few months before the 18 months long Emergency was lifted.

I was angry and hurt and I wanted answers. But Lohia taught me not to hate, even those that cause us great pain. So when Mrs. Gandhi stood for Parliament from Chikmagalore in 1978 I carried out an individual and very personal non-violent campaign supported by five young members of my very first union, the Airport

Porters and General Services Union. It was my way of coming to terms with my grief and anger. Mrs. Gandhi who expected a landslide victory, won by a slight margin.

It is rather unusual that a man I knew sporadically over a period of just 13 years should have left such an indelible mark on me – instilling in me a sense of justice, the strength to never make compromises for power or political considerations and most of the need to champion the cause of the less fortunate. These values are ingrained in me, reinforced by my parents and are the principles that I live by.

I am a Lohia Socialist and proud of it. I grew up in a socialist household, with a socialist life style and was surrounded by socialists all my life. Then socialism was not confused with communism and had not been sullied by the ‘rightists’. For us Lohia Socialists, socialism embodies the **right to self-determination, the right to organise, non-violent dissent, civil participation and equal opportunities for all**. I believe in its principles and will unequivocally defend them.

But there are many like me – Lohia’s Children; the many sons who were named after him; (my brother Konarak Manohar; CGK’s sons Ram, Manohar and Ram Manohar; Aruna and Ravela’s son Lohia; Shantaveri Gopal Gowda’s son Shantaveri Ram Manohar) and us daughters, who carry the essence of Lohia Socialism in our hearts and souls.

Today, yet again, we, the children of Lohia are being tested; with institutions of government opposed to social organization and civil society participation; with poverty that every Indian feels to be beyond solution; and the erosion of democratic structures and processes; our country is at the crossroads of history and two paths lie before us. Do we go the way of the capitalist

nations of the world and adopt a lifestyle of consumption and waste depriving the less fortunate of their rights by restricting their participation in governance; or will we strive for democratic socialism and a more rights based equitable society?

We, the Lohia Children, have been left a great fortune - the strategies and tools to save our rich, diverse and very beautiful nation and her people from the influence of corporate globalisation. We are ‘good’ and therefore not afraid of the darkness – so we shall prevail.

On the 23rd of March 2010, one hundred years after he was born, Doctor still lives on in the hearts of the ‘Lohia Children’. Unlike the Yadavs of the world who profess to be Lohia Socialists and make a mockery of Parliament and all that Doctor stood for (as demonstrated during the passing of the Women’s Reservation Bill in Parliament this month - March 2010), there may still be hope if Lohia’s Children come together and relight the lamp of Socialism in India. Then his legacy can live on – not just in theory, but in practice!

Thank you Doctor!

Lead, Kindly Light

*Lead, kindly Light, amid the encircling gloom,
Lead Thou me on;*

*The night is dark, and I am far from home;
Lead Thou me on.*

*Keep Thou my feet; I do not ask to see
The distant scene one step enough for me.*

John Henry Newman (1801–1890)

Nandana Reddy is a political and social activist working on issues of democratic decentralisation, human rights, civil liberties and children’s right to self determination. She was born into a socialist family and was closely associated with Dr. Lohia who was a frequent guest in their house. She is the Daughter of Snehalata and Pattabhi Rama Reddy.