Lohia’s Thinking on Local Governments

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The papers in the special issue on Rammanohar Lohia (EPW, 2 October 2010) did not dwell on the socialist leader’s thinking on local governance and local development, ideas which continue to be relevant today for rural development.

The views expressed here are personal.

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Mission (NRLM), mainly based on institution-building of the poor through self-help groups and their federations.

**Local Development**

RML's programmes and actions were addressed to eradicate inequality and poverty. His plans dealt with the causes, not the symptoms of poverty disease.

While deliberating on the policy commission of the Praja Socialist Party during 27-30 November 1953 at Bombay, RML came out with a scheme for local development. The planks of the scheme were: (a) reclamation of wastelands, (b) equitable distribution of land, (c) abolition of land revenue, (d) establishment of a bhoomi sena or land army, and (e) emphasis on small and medium irrigation.

He was of the opinion that the food problem could only be solved if the monopoly of some people on land was broken and the land was to be given to the tiller. The example of West Bengal is a household name in this regard.

On the land army, he said that a large number of unemployed persons living in rural and urban areas could be absorbed for tilling the cultivable wastes. The brighter among them would be given training in agro-engineering. This army would be clothed, housed and financed by the state. It would move from one place to another and would disseminate the idea of socialism and also break down barriers of class and caste. This is a very important aspect of India's agricultural revolution. If this idea can be implemented, the problem of land degradation and augmentation of production could be solved. Besides, awareness about disintegrating forces will be spread in the country.

However, the ideas of RML have been implemented only in a piecemeal/fragmented way without adopting a holistic approach through the establishment of district and village governments. In order to enhance agricultural production and employment opportunities with small investment, the relevance of small and medium schemes cannot be doubted at the present level of agricultural development.

The idea of wasteland development has already been transplanted through the Drought Prone Area Development Programme and Desert Development Programme launched by the government, which is now designated as the Integrated Wasteland Development Programme. Common guidelines for watershed development have also been drawn up to give a focused approach to wasteland development. The earlier employment guarantee scheme of Maharashtra and the mgnregas marked a paradigm shift from the previous wage-employment programmes with its right-based approach that makes the government legally accountable for providing employment to those who demand it. The works to be undertaken under the mgnregas are aimed at water harvesting, soil conservation, flood protection, afforestation and plantations.

RML was both a dreamer and a propagator. He wanted to create a better India with greater equality and social justice. The approach to development Lohia advanced could not be put into practice in his time perhaps due to political reasons/prejudices. The socialist movement has withered away due to lack of political mobilisation of the people for bringing into fruition the ideas and thoughts of RML/the socialist movement.