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Lohia & the aesthetic revolution

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*By Chandan Gowda*

An intense curiosity about cultural facts brought a different texture, a different angle, a different keenness to Ram Manohar Lohia's political vision. His attention to the deadly politics of skin complexion in India and elsewhere in the world is an illustration.

The list of debate topics Lohia recommended, in 1960, for an "Association for the Study and Destruction of Caste" or "any debating organization" in towns included the following item: "In the opinion of the house, Draupadi and not Savithri is the representative woman of India."

A couple of months earlier, Lohia's exciting essay, 'Beauty and Skin Colour', had noted:

"The greatest woman of Indian myth was dark. Draupadi also called Krishna has suffered neglect, probably because male vanity cannot reconcile itself to her five husbands and a platonic affair or two in addition. Savitri and Seeta, the chaste and also the fair of colour represent India's womanhood, not entirely without reason, but unreason ensures when other representatives are excluded."

Exploring social tensions through mythology, Lohia suggested that colour prejudice and a bias against assertive women seen in later times might have let piously virtuous women like Savitri and Seeta eclipse Draupadi, who had "ready wit and deep wisdom" and was "the friend, the companion, the heroine" of Krishna during "his years of duty," in the country's cultural memory.

Noting that ancient India had viewed both fair and dark skin as beautiful, Lohia deplored that, "Succeeding generations have squandered this great maturity of aesthetic judgement."

Beauty contests, he noted with sarcasm, had not elected dark skin so far. And, the dark female child in India grew up with a "diet of anxiety" about skin colour and suffered lack of opportunities for growth in comparison to the male child." He added that, "The male has not suffered the same amount of depreciation because of the colour of the skin." The cosmetic industry thrived, he noted further, amidst the cultural fetish for fair skin seen among "the coloured youth."

With an eye on complexity, Lohia observes again and again that the problem is perpetuated by the dark-skinned people: “All the world suffers this tyranny of skin’s colour, a tyranny made worse because the tyrants do not practice it as much as the slaves who inflict it upon themselves.”

Then, a brute fact and counter-factual observation from the realm of international politics: “The fair skinned peoples of Europe have dominated the world for over three centuries.... If Africans had ruled the world in the manner of the whites of Europe, standards of beauty would undoubtedly have been different.... Politics influences aesthetics; power also looks beautiful, particularly unequalled power.” Power also looks beautiful!

Ever alert to historical ironies, Lohia points to how the European aesthetic regime found an ally with the one prevalent in India: “The worldwide conjunction of fair skin with overwhelming power has received great reinforcement from a specific Indian situation. Those fair of skin or at least less dark have generally belonged to the higher caste.”

Like most tyrannies, Lohia asserts, this “largest and widest tyranny” of colour is also built on an error. How is this to end? Lohia is cryptic: “When would the beautiful women of dark skin assert their supremacy or at least their rights of equality, or perhaps the revolution in this as in other matters will be paved by the tyrants themselves?”

In any case, the value of an aesthetic revolution, for him, was not in doubt: “An aesthetic revolution in the evaluation of beauty and its relation to the colour of the skin will blow the air of freedom and inner peace over all the world almost as much as any political or economic revolutions.”

Colour prejudice as a political problem continued to preoccupy him. Written a few months later, in July 1960, Lohia’s longer essay on the subject, “The Issue of Skin Colour,” used the barbaric policy of apartheid in South Africa as a prelude to a discussion of colour prejudice across the continents of the world. In a compelling move, he brought Gandhian ideas to bear for the work of overcoming racial and colour prejudice: mimicry had to end, hatred overcome and friends sought from among the opponents.

Dismissing the idea of a combined military offensive by India, China and Africa against “the white world,” Lohia asks for “the formulation of universal principles acceptable to white and coloured alike, the absence of hate and the readiness to accept opponents of colour discrimination from among persons of European ancestry... the essential point is for the coloured person not to wish to be like the European, not to imitate him, but to be his equal, not to be arrogant and not even to flaunt his equality but also gently and firmly to reject all notions of white superiority to leadership, to take equal pleasure in the world around him, of the white as of the coloured skin, in other words to strive to be right where man through the ages has been wrong.”