

LESSONS FROM LOHIA FOR DISTURBED TIMES

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At the very outset, let me state that it is with utmost humility that I have accepted this task of delivering this brief speech in memory of Dr. Ram Manohar Lohia. It can only be with utmost humility that one could possibly make an approach to one of the makers of modern India. After all, how does one seek to encapsulate the life, and works of a person like Dr. Lohia, who in the course of his life wrote prodigiously; as a young man, barely in his twenties, led a protest against the representation of India at the League of Nations in Geneva by Maharaja of Bikaner; formed the foreign affairs department in the All India Congress Committee; helped lay the foundation of the Congress Socialist Party; was imprisoned and tortured by the British; and in a free India founded the Socialist Party and indeed the humanistic socialist movement in India? Where does one begin to comprehend the vision, the mind and the integrity of a person who throughout his life worked, without respite and with only the remit of an unyielding conscience, to bridge the rich-poor divide, fought against the horrors of caste and gender inequality, warned us of the dangers of the big machine, not merely as a technological artefact but as a social machine, and above all the conditions of endemic inequality that perpetuates oppression of the many by the few, generation after generation, and lead to cycles of violence and repression?

Every time I think of Dr. Lohia, I am first reminded of an anecdote about him – something that is very pertinent in this day. In one of the elections that he contested, post-independence, he was approached by leaders of a particular community, asking him to deliver an election speech at a place of worship, assuring him that such an act would get him a lot of votes from that particular community. Dr. Lohia refused, and he lost the election very narrowly. His refusal was founded on the value that a space for worship, so intimately connected with the inner spiritual core of human existence, could not be used as a space for political propaganda. Fiercely independent, and never wavering from a concern for ethical implications of an action, and prioritizing the pursuit of the good of the broader society, within the framework of social justice, Dr. Lohia was indeed forever the "top-class scholar, civilized gentleman, liberal" and a person of "high moral character". It is widely discussed in many a quarters, either openly, or in hushed whispers as to whether India is turning or is likely to turn into a fascist polity, where the tenets of secularism are set aside, institutions of governance and justice compromised, of murders of journalists and open threats to do so many others who may speak on behalf of the Constitution, one cannot but help asking, on recollecting that great man: "Jinhe naaz hai Hind, par woh Kahaan hai? Kahaan hai?"

Yet, I would not suggest that the life of Dr. Lohia be remembered for mere valorization and hagiographic speeches. It is precisely in these unsettled times, when arguments are made that “nothing has happened” for the past six decades, and there are unthinking claims only now we have a deliverer, that one needs to draw sustenance from the lives and works of great men and women of history. However, the prospects of sustenance can be enhanced only if we can analytically grasp the core principle or principles and apply it to our own times, modifying it and/or expanding the concepts in light of new knowledge, institutional experiences and shocks faced by the democratic polity and the Constitutional structure.

I will humbly submit that one of the keys to the thought and life of Dr. Lohia is his lifelong struggle against the "Monotonic Mind". Of course everybody agrees that he used that expression in the context of "big machine" technology, and it then seems logically simple to conceive the political economy suggested by Dr. Lohia as one with E.F. Schumaker's "Small is Beautiful" and with the search for alternate technologies that enhances, rather than eviscerates, role of labour in production. That would be a correct conception, but essentially an incomplete conception. After all Dr. Lohia also argued and fought for the empowerment, and capabilities enhancement of the downtrodden. Can anyone claim that Dr. Lohia for instance would have disapproved of the use of internet by womenfolk in a village in India to direct their men folk to trading centers where they would be able to get higher price for their milk? Or our youngsters getting access to the entire corpus of human knowledge? In many instances, that comment of Dr. Lohia has been taken to imply a blind anti-science and anti-technology stance on his part, and often misused in the more notorious politics by lesser men of recent times. I believe that we need a more nuanced, and a more detailed appreciation of Dr. Lohia's work, to go beyond the trivial, and contextual, extensions.

But prior to identification of that core principle, we must acknowledge the great perspicacity of Dr. Lohia's concerns with allowing unguided technological choices, and social choices uninformed with deep ethical concern for equality and human welfare, to destroy prospects of a democratic order, and the enslavement of the ordinary man. Recently, I was reading an interesting book “The Driver in the Driverless Car: How our Technological Choices will Create the Future” by Vivek Wadhwa and Alex Salkever. They posit, in much more stark terms what Amartya Sen has been saying for some time now – that our existing technology, and the ones that are impending are more than capable of eliminating many of the ills that have plagued human beings throughout their existence. The issue is of choices we make, and what

values we choose to undergird our choices. So far so good. But they present a dystopian alternative, that they say is equally possible. In a world of “Homo Deus” – Human as God, beating death –run by Artificial Intelligence, as posited by Yuval Noah Harari, Vivek Wadhwa and Alex Salkever say it is equally possible that:

“we are capable too now of ushering in a jobless economy, the end of all privacy, invasive medical record keeping, and an ever-worsening spiral of economic inequality: conditions that could create an unstable, Orwellian, or violent future that might undermine the very technology driven future that we so eagerly anticipate. And we know that it is possible to inadvertently unwind civilization’s progress.”¹

A dystopian vision such as that one ought to make us wake up in cold sweat. For most of our youngsters, we have not even managed to build educational systems to give them quality primary education. It took the ruling classes in our polity 14 years to even start thinking of enacting a bill to give the sanction of law to what Justice Jeevan Reddy had found to be an essential component of Right to Life guaranteed in our Constitution: the right to free and quality education for our children at least until the age of 14. Implementation has been shoddy at best, nearly a decade later, with great divides between regions, between rural and urban areas, between upper castes and the lowered castes. Increasingly the talk is about most of the entry level jobs disappearing, in the near future, even in technology fields that our policy makers hoped would lift most of our youngsters out of poverty. We cannot afford to let our demographic dividend to go abegging, lest it might turn into a demographic curse. The pace with which the slips our nation by only seems to have quickened.

With the intensification of inequality, something that Thomas Piketty has brought to the forefront of economic discussion brutally in the past 5 to 10 years, both within nations and across international regions, as a result of the globalised neo-liberal order that the social and economic elites across the world have pushed through relentlessly over the past forty years, the prospect of the gaps between the haves and the have-nots may become unbridgeable in any foreseeable future. Take the levels of inequality between nations that emerged as a result of the Second Industrial Revolution and colonial exploitation. In mid 20th century, scholars and policy makers could intellectually conceive and argue that gaps can be lowered in a few generations and maybe even 100 years or so. But not so now and inequalities could be

¹Wadhwa, Vivek and Salkever, Alex: “The Driver in the Driverless Car: How our Technology Choices Will Create The Future”, Harper Business (Location 88/2797 in Kindle version).

unbridgeable. Yuval Noah Harari posits that in an increasingly data driven world “humans agree to give up meaning in exchange for power.” That power could be the ability to create many of the marvels we may breathlessly wished for, including mastery over death. However, the massive price could be its inegalitarian spread, creating a new global elite. Tim Adams summarised this rather brilliantly in the Guardian:

“The new longevity and super-human qualities are likely to be the preserve of the techno super-rich, the masters of the data universe. Meanwhile, the redundancy of labour, supplanted by efficient machines, will create an enormous “useless class”, without economic or military purpose. Again, if nothing in our approach changes, Harari envisages that “Dataism”, a universal faith in the power of algorithms, will become sacrosanct. To utopians this will look a lot like the “singularity”: an all-knowing, omnipresent data-processing system, which is really indistinguishable from ideas of God, to which humans will be constantly connected. To dystopians it will look like that too.”²

But we have had intimations of the formation of super elites for some time, have we not? In a relentless pursuit of wealth, where greed has been dubbed to be good, we have created a layer of elite decision makers whose writ runs large in what happens in nations, and the globe, and what happens in the lives of billions of human beings, and who disproportionately bears the costs of externalities of this economic monstrosity. A scholar by the name of Manuel Castells called this a “Network Economy” way back in the year 2000. He also warned that as economic uncertainty grows, and inequality intensifies, the sociopsychological disconnect that citizens experience between their belief that their governments and policy makers, in response to electoral compulsions ought to work assiduously for their welfare versus their impotence in demanding and getting the ear of their democratically elected governments could unleash forces that undermine liberal democratic structures and also drive groups of people into more primal identity groups, such as fanatical religious groups or cults.

It would seem that the political developments over the past few years indicate a steady retreat from the values that we had hoped would inform our liberal constitutional democracies. Increasingly we hear the shrill voices of unreason from a fragmented world, fragmented nations and fragmented societies.

² Adams, Tim: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/sep/11/homo-deus-brief-history-tomorrow-yuval-noah-harari-review>

How did we come to such a pass? And that too so quickly? What words of wisdom, and intellectual insights of people like Dr. Ram Manohar Lohia did we ignore?

I would suggest that we ignored Dr. Lohia's fears of and warnings regarding Monotonic Logic and Mind, and its consequences for the society, and especially of the dis-empowered. It is that, coupled with his dictum that action without moral reasoning would be like a sentence without a verb, that drove him to be one of the more ardent advocates of civil liberties, articulators of liberal constitutional democracies that seek egalitarian goals and also be an agent provocateur throughout his life.

In his thought, and in his actions, he was forever guided by the epistemic principles of Non-Monotonic logic, or rather a group of philosophical frameworks that encapsulate defeasible inferences — i.e., where reasoning is expected to lead to tentative conclusions from everyday life, reserving the right to change those inferences in light of new information. The times that he grew up and lived in, and in which he led a life of civil disobedience, were marked by extreme and visceral horrors that were visited upon mankind by Imperialism, Colonialism, Fascism, Capitalism, and yes, even Marxist-Leninism. In a certain sense, they were all the products of Monotonic Logic, a pure deductive schema of conception, in which observable phenomenon could be explained from a-priori definitions of nature that were posited to hold universally and without exception. The danger of such conceptions, is that every consequence, howsoever horrific, could be rationalized away as being inevitable. Such a mind and logic, at the individual and at the level of collectives, blinds us to the adverse consequences, even impending massive human tragedies, because we have denied the possibility of fallibility of our assumptions, and denied the possibility of alternate conceptions.

John Gray, a philosopher, points to a fundamental cleavage in liberalism.³ On the one hand liberalism posits that there is one objective truth, which through exercise of rational thought, that is both comprehensible and also upon which consensus ought to be arrived at. On the other hand, liberalism also posits the view that toleration of different beliefs, experiences, views, and needs, and empathy for those who are deprived or left behind, is sine qua non for social stability, an indicia that justice prevails, and the path to progress. The danger of the former view is that it is easy for us to come to the erroneous belief that the "truth" we have arrived at is the absolute truth. Consequently, it is easy to conclude that those who do not agree with us are the "others", the evil, the "disorderly" elements, the anti-progress luddites,

³Gray, Jon: "Two Faces of Liberalism", New Press 2002.

and the anti-development anti-nationalists. Having conceived the "other" as irrational, it would but be a logical step to tyranny: elimination of voices of dissent. On the other hand, with the other view also we have problems: of argument for the sake of arguments, of every argument being posited as the right argument, and hence denial of possibility of any action. The consequence is immediate: in the din of a million mutinies, the voices of cynical pragmatism, often called realism, advocate the loot and plunder of disembodied, de-socialised and de-humanised individuals, for whom the society has become but a market; a market of values, of ideas, liberties and rights. Again, the big machine takes over — the social machine of the elite comprising of, in Dr. Lohia's terms, those who possess at least two of the three attributes, viz., knowledge, wealth and felicity of speech in the language of power. This in turn seeks to create a collective monotonic mind, numb in its ethical value structures, dead to innate human empathy, uncaring of the suffering of fellow human beings, infantile in its demands on the social matrix, and blind to the impending doom of social conflagration.

History is littered with examples of social orderings and ideologies, that had promoted, and in turn been sustained, by such minds. The rise of fascism and the emergence of Nazi Germany are but particular instances, and arguably among the more gory ones. The singular aspect of German Nazi regime, we must remember, was that ordinary folks, like you and I, had turned a blind eye, to the rising tide of intolerance and inhumanity. People who otherwise were capable of ordinary courtesies, and indeed even great empathy for one another, had given into xenophobia, based on the singular belief that nothing overrides the redemption of their national pride, and development of the economy that projects their might abroad were to be the over-riding goals. Further, they also believed that the path to such a goal was one, and anyone who advocated an alternate vision or path was to be treated as immediately suspect — and indeed even to be eliminated - all debate, and conceptions of the alternate modes of social organization, were eliminated. A cultural blindness was created that failed even to perceive the holocaust — because the people being exterminated were made to be the others, and hence a stumbling block for the uni-dimensional national goal propagandized by the Nazi party. Indeed we must remember that democratic elections brought the Nazis to power, and it was popular support that kept Nazis in power. Democracy, by itself, cannot be the arbiter of truth, and always necessarily conducive to promotion of human welfare. Preservation of alternate voices, the ones that question both the goal and the means, are vital for survival of understanding what is humane and inhumane.

Dr. Lohia was a student of human history — or more specifically, of the struggle of humanity against the monotonic minds of the elite that normalises the indifference of rulers to the plight of the disempowered, and debasement of civil liberties. It is best to recall Dr. Lohia's own words in this regard:

"The concept of civil liberties is an outcome of the struggle that the citizen has eternally waged against his State. Throughout history, the State and its laws have given rise to manifold types of abuses..... wrath of the State fell down on the citizen who tried to be critical. He suffered long and solitary confinements, quite often death, and his most precious possessions were snatched away from him. He, therefore stood in need of basis of safety from where he could launch attacks on the abuses and evils of his times.... If a resistance of civil liberties prevails, resistance to oppression is not attended with frightful consequences.

It is such a historical conception that animated the thoughts and actions of Dr. Lohia. His was a nationalism that was based on an appreciation of the specificity of India's conditions, the particular needs, and the particular problems. Nevertheless, his was an open mind that could arrive at deducible inferences from the broad swath of human experiences, as a mode of guidance for immediate action, with a deliberately constructed appreciation of epistemic uncertainties, and fostering of monotonic mind sets by the big State to be experiential facts, that forever made him alive to the possibility of oppression. Hence, for him civil liberties were never about mere textual promises, but about an actual existential necessity, for the individuals, the groups and the nation itself. For him, civil liberties were the essential foundations on which social stability, and a constructive and progressive democracy could be constructed. I would dare say that Dr. Lohia's thought and life are early precursors to the kind of deliberative, and capability enhancing, democracy that Dr. Amartya Sen has been espousing for the past three decades. It pays to quote Dr. Lohia himself, in extensor:

"Civil liberties comparatively smoothen society's march towards progress. Society is being eternally pulled between reaction and progress.... In this pull, the State has more often been controlled by forces of stagnation and

.....Lest the State should turn into a terrible obstruction to progress and continually block it by its repression, its supreme authority over the citizens stands in need of description and curtailment.... In this manner orderly social progress becomes possible and society is not continually faced with the choice between tyranny and

revolution. The concept of civil liberties is thus essentially a liberal concept which acts as a shock absorber of the cruel impact between State tyranny and mass revolts. "

Given Dr. Lohia's justifiable fear of the monotonous mind, and its social ordering, whether of the Marxist kind, or of the Capitalist kind, his greatest worry was about sustaining the feasibility of arguing for change, without resort to violence. In this regard, Dr. Lohia's thought and life, and more particularly his conception of the virtuous life, epitomizes what Paulo Freire, the eminent educationist from Brazil, had articulated as the search for a humanized condition. In every struggle for freedom from oppression, the quest for equality could and often does degenerate into an equal opportunity for the oppressed to oppress the oppressor in his or her turn. The dehumanized condition of oppression, thereby gets perpetuated. While violent agitations may be indicia of a social dialogue that has gone horribly wrong, one needs to appreciate two facts. One, people normally do not take to violence if the society, and the State, had allowed the expression of dissent, within the framework of diligently guarded civil liberties, which act as the safety valves. Second, the expression of violence cannot be met with unlawful and unconstrained violence of the State — for that will surely breed more resistance and violence. Dr. Lohia was acutely alive to this, and in his book "The Struggle for Civil Liberties" he cites Senator Borah: "Repression is not only the enemy of free government, but it is the breeder of revolution. It is the enemy of progress and human happiness. And above all, it is neither a test of error nor of truth."

Over the past few decades we have seen a systematic demolition of the legitimacy, and validity, of civil liberties in many countries. We, I would submit, in this country are no exceptions to this rule. Even as neo-liberal economic thought took its evil roots again, as Washington consensus, and as necessary structural reforms in India, it systemically built a monotonous mind, ideology and culture. A knee jerk nationalism that condemns any expression of dissent as anti-national and anti-development has been systematically been built into our popular discourse. Every expression of dissent has at some point or the other, and more often than not, been portrayed in our popular culture and elite discourses as a potential threat to a development that is conceived as billion dollar homes for the one or two, and shining towers of glass for the few, even as hundreds of millions are dispossessed of their land and livelihoods, of their water and clean air, of their social roots and the informal sector swells with hundreds of millions of displaced, dispossessed, and dehumanized humanity. And when that humanity expresses its dissent, because the political process no longer properly encompasses its

demands, the elite culture, in reaction, immediately asks for restoration of order, by use of extreme state repression, so that they can go back to their ever thinner TV's, a culture of glitz, and fads that define lifestyles. To all of this we have added the vilest discourse possible that demonizes, in the name of religion, in the name of God and in the name of construction of a monotonic spiritual order. All to be relentlessly pushed forward by subversion of constitutional structures and small armies of hate filled youngsters.

Dr. Lohia recognized the need for assiduous protection of civil liberties because they, in his words:

"lay bare political and social abuses which are the fountainhead of all suppression. An enquiry into a case of violation of civil liberties is simultaneously an enquiry into the particular abuse against which the individual had fought and for which the wrath of the State and other interests had descended upon him.....The special front of civil liberties maintains the backbone of the people. The spirit ,of opposition against injustice is kept intact. The individual gets strength from the knowledge that his resistance to police or executive oppression will awaken common interest. Again, such a common interest serves to convulse the conscience of the people against encroachment of their liberties. The people are taught to be vigilant, so that they clear the road to progress."

Why Dr.Lohia was talking about the individual resistance against oppression. Dr. Lohia believed that in the modern world, organization has become so embracing and powerful that the individual is completely subservient to it. "No matter where the origins of modern civilization lay, it is today the civilization of the collective, where the individual is only a number in the mass and his effectiveness exists in so far as he is a part of the mass. Individual is often an isolated item surrounded by a hostile world and, when a suitable organization is lacking, he is reduced to the status of the rats. Individuals unsupported by organization and weapons are negligible in the context of modern civilization. He observed when Hitler came to power in Germany, "it was easy enough to notice how those brave and valiant and thinking Europeans belonging to the Socialist and Communist parties had lost all their manhood and, although I regret to have to say this word, they behaved more or less like rats, scurrying to and fro for shelter from Hitler". Lohia believed in civil disobedience and course of action suggested by Mahatma Gandhi comes to be singularly effective. The weapon of "Satyagraha/civil disobedience is always available to individuals in their hands when injustice and oppression go

beyond bearable bounds. He believed that Satyagraha as a weapon will prevail as long as injustice and oppression prevail, and it should prevail, because if it does not, the gun or the bullet will". Lohia rejected the theory propounded by some eminent and great thinkers of this country, that Satyagraha as a weapon is not permissible in a State of freedom and it was permissible only when the British rule prevailed. In his inimitable style he characterized the theory as "childish prattle". It is worth to recall what he said "should our century, before it dies out, learn this lesson all the world over, that the individual as well as the mass have had placed in their hands this unique weapon of civil disobedience to defeat their tyrants, we may be ushering a new civilization".

Ultimately what we allow to come true depends on how we make collective choices, and what values and aspirations inform them. The first of that value would have to be a commitment to an essential belief in innate human dignity of every human being. Constitutions, much less socio-political orders, do not survive in an environment of apathy. Ultimately, the greatest lesson from Dr. Lohia's life maybe this – that he spent more years in prison in an independent India, notwithstanding his many longer decades of struggles against the colonial yoke. It tells us this – freedom, assertion of human dignity and creation of conditions for protection of some minimal content as a part of that human dignity are not one shot games. But matters of continuous struggles. Struggles at the political level, at the social level and above all at the level of values. I conclude this lecture with what Shahid Bhagath Singh said:

"You go and oppose the prevailing faith, you go and criticise a hero, a great man, who is generally believed to be above criticism because he is thought to be infallible, the strength of your argument shall force the multitude to decry you as vainglorious. This is due to the mental stagnation. Criticism and independent thinking are the two indispensable qualities of a revolutionary. Because Mahatmaji is great, therefore none should criticise him. Because he has risen above, therefore everything he says—may be in the field of Politics or Religion, Economics or Ethics—is right. Whether you are convinced or not you must say, "Yes, that's true'. This mentality does not lead towards progress. It is rather too obviously, reactionary".

In the hope that we learn the right lessons, again and again, from the lives and thoughts of great men and women like Dr. Ram Manohar Lohia. Thank you ladies and gentlemen for your forbearance.

Jai Hind.