

Lohia's Socialism: An Underdog's Perspective

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Seeking an India-specific solution to the country's economic problems, Rammanohar Lohia was rightfully suspicious of both exploitative capitalism and Euro-centric Marxism. To him, socialism essentially meant equality and affluence for the people, and what concerned him was bringing these twin ideals together. He also presented his own version of the "Wheel of History", which he believed came close to the reality of the world, rejecting the linear view of history, which had dominated western society so far. And the moving force of his personality was his boundless love for India. In these times when the gulf between the ideal and the real has been widening, his memory needs reawakening.

Among leaders who have influenced the course of Indian history and way of thinking, Rammanohar Lohia was a unique figure. He ceaselessly tried to give meaning to his political actions in a theoretical framework, anchored in a world view. A worldview, of course, does not grow in a vacuum, and is inevitably shaped by the life situation and prime motivation of the person who propounds it. Lohia was born in Faizabad near Ayodhya, the mythical birth place of Rama, where daily chores were woven round the legends surrounding that epic figure. He had his early education in Bombay and Calcutta. But he graduated from Banaras University, and came across many more legends, some of them older than the *Ramayana*, and others occurring in historical time associated with saint poets like Raidas, Kabir and Tulsi, the author of *Ramcharita Manas*. So, early in life, he must have experienced the contrast between the ambience of an ancient land and the two centres of commercial and political domination in British India.

His father was a freedom fighter, and had been imprisoned during Mahatma Gandhi's satyagraha movement of 1930-32. It was during this period that he did his doctoral research in "national economics" at what was then the Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität in Berlin. The choice of Germany reflected an aversion to joining any university in Britain – at that time the choice of most Indians aspiring for a place in the colonial administration. Significantly, the subject of his doctoral thesis was the salt tax in India, an issue which led to Gandhi's historical march to Dandi. (Incidentally, salt has again become a national issue.) Germany may have encouraged Lohia's native propensity to seek a theoretical rationale to every action.

Rethinking Economics

However, Lohia was not influenced by the logical positivist school or the existentialists though they were the rage at that time in western philosophy. Karl Marx did have some appeal, but also aroused doubts. These doubts went so far that in certain contexts he considered them a part of the complex of ideas that epitomised the European domination of the rest of the world. At one time, he called Marxism "Europe's Weapon against Asia" (1963a: v; v-xii; 260). His predominant concern at that time was whether Marxism could lead to such rapid development as would help a non-white nation achieve the economic development to match the levels of west Europe or the us. He weighed the development of China against Europe or Japan and also Cuba against Taiwan. He was sceptical about Marxist ideology helping all lands of its adoption to compete with the capitalist world in the race for rapid development (see "Economics after Marx", "Marxism and Socialism" and "International Aspects of Communism" in 1963a).

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Perhaps, he was right though China has now emerged as the most rapidly rising economy in the world and has the third biggest economy after the us and Japan.

He was right in the sense that China has made these breath-taking strides not under a communist system inspired by Marx, but under a full-fledged market economy driven by a police state that does not allow any deviation from the goals set by its rulers. If Marxism can be said to have played a role in China, it was essentially to wipe away the remnants of the old feudal-mandarin legacy to create a highly aggressive capitalist class, moving in close tandem with the world capitalist system. It has such, abiding trust in the capitalist system and its present-day custodian, the us, that it keeps trillions of dollars in the latter's treasury.

Lohia's doubts about the ability of non-European economies, like those of China and India, arose from his assumption, basically correct, that the prosperity of the European nations was related to the impoverishment of the nations of Asia and Latin America. The capitalist system was not polarised between a small capitalist class and a vast majority of impoverished workers, the proletariat. Instead, it developed a prosperous economy, in which the workers also shared the prosperity in some measure, while impoverishment became the lot of the colonial economies with which it had a symbiotic relationship. In 1952, Lohia contrasted the availability of Rs 10,000 worth of capital to an average worker in the us and Rs 5,000 worth of capital in Europe with just Rs 150 available to a worker in India (1963a: 97: 323).

If Lohia had been alive today, he would have been surprised to find that the latest models of cars are being manufactured in China and India, often by the giant auto-makers of the us, Germany and Japan with high capital investment. How do we get a clue to this anomaly? It lies in that the high capital economies are enclaves within vast internal colonies, regional and sectoral, created within the country itself (Sinha 1973). Vast amounts of capital assets belonging to the tribal people and the peasantry are forcibly transferred at nominal prices to big corporations. Hundreds of special economic zones (SEZs), a feature of the Chinese economy, and lately of the Indian economy, have come up as havens where corporations can be granted immunity from laws which seek to protect the common people.

As economist Amit Bhaduri writes,

Land is being acquired in different guises: for mining, for the location of industries, for large estates and IT parks, and finally SEZs under the eminent domain clause of the Land Act (1894), which allows the state to override private property rights to land in the "public interest". Land being the largest primary source of livelihood in the agrarian economy, it becomes the most obvious case of the forcible transfer of resources from the ordinary people to private corporations, destroying livelihoods, and displacing huge populations (2009).

The result of this sectoral impoverishment can be easily seen in the large number of suicides of farmers in various parts of the country. Lohia could not have visualised internal colonialism of such dire consequences nor would he have approved it. He favoured following a humane path to industrialisation. Thus, he thought of "small machine technology," which could be had at a low capital cost and be simple enough to be easily comprehensible to the people who handled it. However, he began having doubts on the second score (Lohia 1963a; ii-v) because even a transistor

radio was a small machine, but with a technology far from simple. Then he had doubts about whether small machine technology could prove adequate in the fields of space or defence technology. Following the Chinese invasion in 1962, he became greatly concerned about India's defence, for which no viable non-violent method had so far been developed. Towards the end of his life, much of his effort was directed towards creating emotional integration of the nation, which he felt was being undermined by the rulers in Delhi. Thus the question of technology remained unresolved.

Though Lohia died without a clear idea as to what a "small machine" could be, the search for its form and efficacy must go on. Present-day industrial society is moving fast towards a dead end. The widespread belief that technology is value-neutral is totally wrong. Modern technology has grown with capitalism and is being shaped by its imperatives. The old saying that necessity is the mother of invention needs to be reversed in the context of the experience of the capitalist system. Today a large body of research and invention is directed towards creating new needs to ensure capitalist industries keep churning out new products. A spectacular example is the mobile phone. People had never felt its necessity. But now it has become everyone's need. Every day, new features such as photography, music players and synchronisation with computers are added to it. Every new feature wakes up a new desire among people to get it. This is just one instance, but countless such examples can be seen around us.

Capitalism is a system based on the profit motive. The capitalist's profits grow with the volume of goods sold in the market. The larger the volume of goods sold, the larger the profit. (We ignore here snags such as shrinking markets and the like, which keep a large body of economists and econometricians engaged.) But then a problem arises. To produce more goods, all capitalists need more raw materials and sources of energy (coal, oil, hydroelectric and nuclear power, and equipment to capture energy from rivers, tidal waves, wind, sunshine, and so on). These are only available in limited quantities since our earth is a finite body. So the faster economies grow, the closer we come to the day when there will be nothing left to go on. Not only this; modern industrial production and patterns of consumption spew forth an expanding volume of lethal pollutants, creating unmanageable environmental hazards. It follows that capitalism or any other system – whatever you call it – that aspires at multiplying consumption must lead to a dead end. Gandhi showed a way out of this impasse. Lohia wanted a compromise between the giant machine technology of the west and Gandhi's economy of khadi, which emphasises limiting man's needs. The solution, perhaps, lies in the direction of limiting our needs, with other imperatives like self-sufficient village economies. Lohia suggested a four-pillar state. But experience shows that the hierarchical form of the four-pillar state could ultimately end in the centralisation of power. Lohia may not have offered an ideal solution, but he had the merit of at least pointing out the problem.

Redefining Socialism

Lohia's contemporary and biographer, Indumati Kelkar, tells us that it was in Germany that he became a social democrat (2009: 39). After returning to India in 1933, he became one of the leaders of

the Congress Socialist Party (CSP), which was formed in 1934. Through a long apprenticeship in the freedom movement and the organisational struggles to build a socialist movement, of which he remained the sole political leader at the end, he developed his ideas of socialism. Jayaprakash Narayan, at one time the most influential Indian socialist leader, left politics to join the Bhoodan movement. Achyut Patwardhan and Ramnandan Mishra turned to spiritual quests. Ashoka Mehta joined the Congress a bit later and the great intellectual, Acharya Narendra Dev, died in 1955. It was a critical time for the socialist movement, and Lohia tried to fill the void. His efforts were made all the more difficult as Jawaharlal Nehru tried to monopolise the political arena. Nehru was the leader of the ruling party but made subtle efforts to keep the opposition under his tutelage as well. Lohia's efforts to fend off Nehru's influence made him look disproportionately harsh. That had to be so if the identity of the socialist movement was to be preserved. But this effort won for the socialist movement a wider significance than merely being an alternative in the game of power politics, the pathetic game being played at present by those who claim to be his legatee in politics.

To Lohia, simply defined, socialism meant equality and affluence for the people. But the problem that tormented him was how to bring these twin ideals together (see "The Meaning of Equality" in Lohia 1963a). In his experience, the extremes of affluence and poverty, which had to be levelled down, were not aspects of the same society. This division, in its most glaring form, had become an aspect of the international order in which the white people of Europe and the US had all the wealth and high levels of productivity while the rest of world remained mired in poverty, dogged by low productivity and low income. That transformed the issue of equality not only amid people of the same country inhabited by those having the same skin colour, but also among people with different skin colours – black, brown and white. It extended to include the differences of caste and gender. But the concept of caste division was raised to a higher level – that is, to the status of nations in a world body such as the United Nations (UN), where most nations were excluded from the Security Council. Even in the Security Council, there were superpowers that could veto and annul all majority decisions taken by it.

This approach had a thrust that would keep expanding to cover other areas, where other forms of inequality could arise. One form which is becoming more conspicuous now is represented by economic bodies such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), which are supposed to cater to the economic interests of all nations, but in reality are exclusive clubs dominated by the US and the affluent European nations. This line of thinking could open the way for restructuring all international relations and end the hierarchies which are deeply entrenched in the present international order. That could ultimately open up the world to a freer movement of people across it, perhaps bringing us nearer to one of Lohia's dreams, a world without passports and visas. At one stage Lohia also tried to form an Asian Socialist Forum because organisations such as the Socialist International and the Communist International (or the Comintern) were under the domination of white people, either under the Atlantic block or the Soviet block. These cogitations added up to form the

concept of *Sapta Kranti* or seven revolutions for (i) civil disobedience against violent revolutions; (ii) economic equality; (iii) abolition of castes; (iv) emancipation of women; (v) national independence; (vi) an end to colour discrimination; and (vii) the individual's freedom of thought, free of coercion from collectives of any kind (Lohia 1963a; xxxi-xxxx).

Reinterpreting History

The concept of the seven revolutions was tied to an overall policy framework that emerged from Lohia's idea of socialism as equality and affluence. But he also tried to fit his idea into a grand scheme of history, spelt out in *Wheel of History* (1955). In his own country, India, there was the cyclical view of history in the form of the *chaturyuga* (four ages) (Lohia 1955: 6-7). According to this view, life on earth was ordered in accordance with a recurring cycle of four yugas. The first, the Satya yuga or Krita yuga, was an age of abounding virtues, which was followed by the Treta, Dwapara and Kali yugas, in a diminishing order of virtues. The last, which is synonymous with our time, represents the decline of all virtues. But we find consolation in that this dark age will inevitably end and be replaced by the virtuous age of Satya. But Lohia did not find this arrangement satisfactory, possibly because it also sanctioned many of the evils he would have tried to abolish.

Then he moved on to Europe to examine its philosophy of history. He very briefly referred to some major figures in the west, including Oswald Spengler and Arnold Toynbee (1955: 8-14). But they too, perhaps, appeared too Euro-centred. Toynbee's idea that in the end people would be redeemed through Christianity appeared particularly so. These references were merely to point to their inadequacy. However, the cyclical view was not rejected altogether. Before he presented his own version of the *Wheel of History*, which he believed came close to the reality of the world, he came up with criticism of the linear view of history, which had dominated western society so far.

He did not agree with a linear view that started with a golden age and then gradually declined to the contemporary age of misery. Instead, he turned his attention to those linear views which pointed to ceaseless progress, continuous or intermittent, towards a higher stage of material development (1955: 15-23). That progress in the west was related to the continuous development of the machine. Child labour and other attendant evils were considered temporary, and it was hoped that with progress, a satisfactory mode of life would arrive. This view began with Adam Smith and found its full articulation in Marx. But parallel with it or rather preceding it, there was another view which did not equate progress with material development, but with spiritual development; the view propounded by Johann Gottlieb Fichte and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, who found in history the unfolding of a World Spirit. This progress led from freedom of one to that of some and finally of all. And its terminal point was the Prussian state. Lohia found all these views to be Euro-centric, where the smile was always on the face of the west. In the Marxist worldview there was an assurance that with the immiseration of the poor at a point of high industrial development, there would be a revolution leading to socialism and the end of all suffering. But what troubled Lohia was that while this opened up the

prospects of industrial development, prosperity and socialism for Europe, poverty and deprivation were the fate of non-European, coloured people. As we have already noted, that was the source of his abiding doubts about Marxism bringing prosperity to non-European people.

Having rejected these linear views, he propounded his own cyclical view of the *Wheel of History* (1955: 28-47). According to this, civilisations showed two expansionary trends; one internal and the other external. The latter depended on a successful resolution of internal stress. The linear dynamics, he pointed out, was in the ceaseless change from class to caste and from caste to class. The former reflected the urge for equality, the latter the urge for justice. It was not clearly stated how the varna (the caste) manifested justice. Perhaps Lohia means it was a form of conflict resolution, some form of temporary repose. In another way, he related social decline to seeking "maximum efficiency" instead of "total efficiency" (1955: 78). Of the former, he cited the example of dinosaurs, which lost their struggle for life in spite of gigantic size and power. Did our civilisation show a similar growth of power without inner peace and poise? In another context, he asserted that the atom bomb and satyagraha were the greatest inventions of the 20th century (Lohia 1963a: xxxxi). Did he consider Gandhi's ideas a haven for mankind? Incidentally, he had an appointment with Gandhi the day an assassin's bullet put an end to the Mahatma's life (Kelkar 2009: 126).

Lohia's classification of caste and class in this context remains somewhat puzzling. His classification embraced such varied

forms that comparisons look somewhat arbitrary. Were the patricians and the plebians castes? Or were they classes? Were journeymen and guild masters ritually divided in the same way as the varnas? More puzzling was his contention that fascism and communism signalled attempts to change a class society into a caste society (1955: 34-37). Some limitation on corporate profits under fascism did not mean an end to basic class divisions. Lohia did not elaborate these points, but, on closer reading, it is obvious that he himself did not believe in the objective accuracy of his formulation. It was a speculation, an entertaining myth-making, but that is true of other philosophies of history too. There is nothing such as driving forces of history or ends of history. One is immediately reminded of the egregious assertion recently made about the "end of history".

Having said this, one could hold this charge against other widely held views of history, including Marxism, which have captivated people's minds for over a century. In *The Communist Manifesto*, Marx says that all history until now is a history of class struggles. He cites the fight of slaves against slave owners, the fight of plebeians against patricians, of serfs against feudal lords and that of the proletariat against the bourgeois as examples. The point is, were the slaves and slave owners classes in the same sense as the proletariat and the bourgeois? Or were they closer to serfs and feudal lords? Both the slave and serf categories were based on naked force and had no direct relation to the mode of production. Lohia was perhaps provoked into this brief excursion into the philosophy of history by the Euro-centric view held by

EPWRF website

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Europeans, and to show that there had been greater civilisations earlier, including two or three in India.

But ego is a poor substitute for the real status of a country, which must ultimately be judged by tangible conditions of material well-being, the level of food, clothing, housing and education available to its crores of people. That was Lohia's main concern, which made him to examine the idea of *Marx, Gandhi and Socialism*. It led ultimately to his idea of seven revolutions, which we have already discussed.

Reconnecting with the Motherland

Lohia made important contributions to various aspects of Indian politics. But the moving force of his personality was his boundless love for India. For that he was prepared to undergo any suffering and humiliation. He had been arrested when trying to lead the underground resistance during the Quit India movement and was tortured for weeks in the notorious Lahore fort (see "An Episode in Yoga" in Lohia 1965: 72-87). India to him was not merely a political entity limited by its physical boundaries. It was a cultural and spiritual awareness, which suffused him with the aura of the epics. As he looked at India's past, it flowed through him in the wake of the ceaseless movements of people from the north, south, east and west with their varied colours, dresses and dances ("The Unity of the People of India", Lohia 1965: 123-26). He could discover the nuances of a resulting composite culture, in south-east Asia and other places he went to. He would bear no intrusion within India's borders. He defied the Portuguese in Goa and was arrested. He defied curbs on the movement of Indians to the North-East Frontier Agency (NEFA), which he christened Uvasium, and was arrested (Lohia 1963b: 69-98). He grieved deeply when the Nehru government conceded the Chinese claim on Tibet, which included Mansarovar and Kailash, the legendary abode of Shiva (Lohia 1963b: 111-23). He felt humiliated when Nehru described areas of Ladakh, which had been occupied by China, as a barren piece of land where even a blade of grass did not grow. To Lohia, it was a defilement of the motherland. He was tormented when he found the great rivers of the country, Ganga, Godavari and Narmada, polluted with effluents from factories and city drains ("Rivers of India", Lohia 1965: 88-90). He was aghast when he heard Prime Minister Nehru weeping on All-India Radio after the Chinese occupied large parts of India in 1962. It reminded him of the contrast with Winston Churchill's speech after Germany occupied Dunkirk at the beginning of the second world war, a speech which steeled the determination of the British to fight Germany to the end. That humiliation inspired him to initiate the Save Himalaya campaign, which included in its aims the autonomy of Tibet ("A Himalayan Policy", Lohia 1963b: 6-12). He believed Sikkim was a part of India, which later did come true.

In an article "Rama and Krishna and Shiva" (Lohia 1965: 29-49), which was a beautiful literary work in its own right, he discussed the motifs that united India. The *Ramayana* symbolised the unity of the north and south, while Krishna represented the unity of the east and west. He discovered the virtues of Rama and Krishna in his great contemporary, Gandhi. As he put it,

Gandhi was the great descendant of Ram. He dies with Ram on his lips. He modelled his life after that great ideal and he invited his

countrymen to act similarly. But there seems to have been a dash of Krishna in him and a very powerful dash at that. His letters and speeches and other writings, as they appeared from day to day or week to week, seemed to be strung together in consistent harmony, but as one reads them together after their author is dead, one is struck by the craft and skill that underlie the change of strategies and meanings in various situations. Dwarka was paying a return visit to Mathura (1965: 44).

And, at the end, we have a prayer that steepens us in the great tradition of our epic heroes. Lohia wrote,

O India, mother, give us the mind of Shiva, the heart of Krishna, and the word and deed of Ram, create us with a non-dimensional mind and an exuberant heart, but a life of limits (1965: 49).

He pressed on with his search for the unity of India and a unifying rhythm in its works of art and architecture, and found that except in the north-west (in Gandhara art, where certain Greek elements could be found), all the arts displayed a basic unity of form ("Meaning in Stone", Lohia 1965: 172-88). He was also keen to find a common alphabet for the various languages of India, and discerned a good deal of formal unity in them – from Malayalam and Telugu to Oriya and Devanagari (Lohia 1965: 112-22). In the field of art, perhaps, his influence was thematic rather than formal. He suggested at an early stage to M F Hussain that he paint motifs from Indian epics. Hussain did follow his advice and has suffered grievously at the hands of cultural lunatics, ignorant of both art and Indian tradition, who have vandalised his work and driven him out of the country. Lohia had many admirers and followers among writers and poets in Hindi and other Indian languages. Some of those who were close to him such as U R Ananthamurthy, Ramesh Chandra Shah and Kamalesh are still around. They could perhaps let us know how Lohia influenced them, revealing one of his less well known sides.

Lohia was a socialist and a votary of equality. But as a patriot his concept of equality had a heady Indian flavour. Equality, or *samatva-sambhav*, in the Indian tradition goes much beyond the formal meaning it has in the west, which is basically a levelling up or levelling down of economic conditions in terms of consumption. *Samatva* has a deeper sense of equity and reciprocity, as much at the spiritual as at the material level (Lohia 1963a: 222-41). But Lohia was also aware of the danger, which lay camouflaged in different forms in Indian society, mainly exemplified in caste and gender discrimination. To obviate these, he always emphasised eliminating the hiatus between *saguna* and *nirguna*, between the concrete and the abstract (Lohia 1963a: 207-21). But that gulf has been widening since his departure. His memory needs reawakening to revive that concern.

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