

Lohia, Our Contemporary

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Voicing his concern over the high incidence of casualties during the recent agitation in Jammu and Kashmir, the Prime Minister, Dr Manmohan Singh, observed that there should be non-lethal ways of dealing with the agitators. When I came across this observation in the papers, I was reminded of socialist leader Dr Lohia's definite and strong views on police firing. Lohia believed that firing by the police which resulted in loss of lives of innocent and well-meaning citizens could have no place in a free and democratic India. He had once denounced the Travancore-Cochin Chief Minister who headed the PSP-Congress coalition for this very reason, demanded his resignation and thus became the centre of a political storm.

Later in that classic of a political speech 'sagun aur nirgun' (roughly translated as 'concrete and abstract' in English), which in my opinion should be a mandatory text for political activists as well as students of political science, he discussed the issue in great detail. So often one reads in the newspaper reports that the police was forced to open fire to control the agitators. In fact, there seems to be a broad, if tacit, agreement among the political parties that the police is justified in resorting to firing when there is a threat to peace, 'badamni' in Lohia's terminology. But what precisely is that is never spelt out. Anything from stone-throwing (incidentally it is the stone-throwers who were shot in Jammu and Kashmir) to the use of arms could be categorised as 'badamni'. Now this gives the executive and the police enormous discretionary power. If firing by the police is to be rarest of rare occurrences, as it should be in a democratic, nay, a civilised society, then the objective conditions that justify it, especially when it turns lethal, need to be precisely defined. In fact, Lohia's is a plea for transparency, for accountability. His speech could be legitimately described as an essay in sense and sensibility in politics. And this man was dismissed as a mad cap by the Brown Saheb and the English language press he patronises! Today the most urbane and cultured of our politicians is echoing his views. The wheel has indeed come full circle, and the Brown Saheb has egg on his face. At long last India is listening to Lohia.

During the course of his speech Lohia raised several other issues that are of great relevance to contemporary India. Lohia's central thesis is that there seems to be no correlation between abstract principle (nirgun) and concrete policy (sagun) in our public life. For instance, political leaders sing paeans to the Mahatma, swear by the charkha and at the same time lobby furiously for setting up textile mills in their constituency. Similarly, political leaders may wax eloquent about the virtues of decentralisation as a means of empowering the people but rush to the Delhi darbar at the drop of a hat. Also, as mentioned earlier, their profession of faith in non-violence may be totally at variance with their defence of firing by the police on a bunch of peaceful agitators.

All this may not necessarily be because of moral dishonesty in Lohia's opinion. There may be genuine intellectual confusion, a lack of clear understanding of political issues and their implications. But as the argument progresses, one gets the feeling that the core of the problem is the reluctance to commit oneself to a course of action. Reluctance to commit oneself to a concrete policy springs from lack of conviction and the price one has to pay for it. In Maoist jargon one cannot make omelette without breaking eggs. Genuine decentralisation would involve devolution of power to the States, districts and panchayats which in turn would erode the power of the rulers at the Centre. In other words, it would result in a confrontation with the Centre. Who has the guts to take it on?

BE that as it may, Lohia's 'essay' is an extremely significant piece of writing comparable in its political depth and cultural sweep to Mao's "On Practice". Also, nirgun and sagun have the kind of structural significance theory and practice have in Mao's "On Practice". To get back to Lohia, he is making a plea for constant interface between abstract principle and concrete policy, between the ideal and the real. Only then will we be able to steer clear of quixotic/textbookish idealism on the one hand and unprincipled opportunism on the other. The former may be seen to characterise the politics of the Left while the so-called mainstream parties are guilty of the latter. In any case, the complete divorce between the ideal and the real is bound to breed cynicism of the worst sort.

It may not be out of place to refer to Lohia's 'famous' three-annas-a day speech in the Lok Sabha here even though it does not figure in the 'sagun aur nirgun' address. Participating in the first ever no-confidence motion against the Nehru Government in the Lok Sabha, Lohia focussed the attention of the House on the shocking economic disparities that exist in our democratic republic in his inimitable style. Is the Prime Minister of a democratic country, especially when he talks of socialism day in and day out, justified in spending Rs 25,000 a day on himself when 60 per cent Indians live on just a little more than three annas a day? Must there be no correlation between what one professes and what one practises, between 'nirgun' and 'sagun' in Lohia's terminology? This is precisely the point Lohia was trying to put across through the dramatic use of statistics. And how did our wonderful Congressmen react? Like spoilt brats? Or feudal lords? Brazenly declaring they will spend even more on their beloved leader. The number of such feudal lords in our democratic polity has grown manifold today making Lohia's poser still more relevant.

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