

Digvijay Singh

## Rammanohar Lohia in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

It is an honour as well as privilege for me to associate myself with the centenary birth celebration of an outstanding democratic and socialist leader of the 20th century, Dr. Rammanohar Lohia. I am a great admirer of Dr. Lohia and have been attracted to his versatile genius right from my student days. His amazing talent was reflected in his various vocations as a political worker, as a journalist, as a parliamentarian and especially as a spokesperson of the masses championing their causes at every fora. The issues raised by Dr Lohia in the post-Independence India are relevant even today and his perspectives are discussed by academicians, scholars, political leaders and shared by millions of people.

Rammanohar Lohia was a fearless and dynamic freedom fighter, an outstanding socialist, an eminent parliamentarian, an exponent of new theories of Marxism and above all a leader of the masses who made immense contributions in the development of progressive thought and the spirit of nationalism during the freedom struggle. Lohia was associated with the Indian Freedom Movement from his school days. He was arrested as many as 25 times for participation in freedom movements of India, Goa and Nepal and Civil Disobedience Movement in free India and in America.<sup>1</sup>

Lohia was a brilliant student as he secured first division in Matriculation and obtained Doctorate on 'Salt Satyagraha in India' from Berlin University. Salt may be a common commodity today and easily available in plenty in all parts of India. But we all know the importance of the salt in our freedom struggle. When Mahatma Gandhi chose to violate the Salt Act during the famous Dandi march in 1930, it was the beginning of the end of the British Rule in India. The selection of the

topic of Dr. Lohia's Doctoral thesis shows his passion for Gandhian philosophy and thought, especially the non-violence and the Satyagraha as a mode of protest against the imperial rule. Lohia once sent a long letter to Mahatma Gandhi on the Congress resolution and elaborated the concept of non-violence in these words, 'non-violent collective action is among the rarest and most precious gifts received by mankind in all history. We may not however know how to treasure it and continue.'<sup>12</sup>

Rammanohar Lohia was a great visionary. In his young days, like many young members of the Congress Party, he felt that elders were not moving fast enough for ameliorating poverty of working class and the peasantry. He was one of the founding members of the Congress Socialist Party. Besides, Acharya Narendra Dev, Jaya Prakash Narayan, Ashok Mehta were other leaders associated with this Party. The Party decided to bring a journal *Congress Socialist* and Lohia was given the task of editing the periodical. He wrote several thought-provoking articles, editorial on the viability of democratic socialism, most suited to India. Recognizing his talents and his wide knowledge of international affairs, Lohia was given a greater responsibility to look after the Foreign Affairs Department of the Congress Party. He discharged the responsibilities entrusted to him with utmost devotion and dexterity and played a pivotal role in laying down the basic foundations of the Indian Foreign Policy. In this process, he emerged in his own way as an expert on foreign affairs. His knowledge of international affairs and perspectives played a key role in establishing the contact with all progressive thinkers of different countries.

During the Second World War, Lohia wrote several articles highlighting the view that India should not extend any support to the British and he campaigned vigorously for complete non-cooperation with the British administration. When the Congress Working Committee (CWC) passed the Resolution in support of Britain, Rammanohar Lohia opposed it vehemently and wrote a pamphlet 'Down with Armaments'. He was imprisoned for making anti-War speeches and was sentenced to two years of imprisonment. During the

trial, the Magistrate observed, "He (Lohia) is a top-class scholar, civilized gentleman who has a liberal ideology and a high moral character." Mahatma Gandhi was very unhappy over Lohia's imprisonment. He expressed his anguish in these words, "I cannot sit still when I see Rammanohar Lohia and Jaya Prakash Narayan in jail. I do not know braver and straighter men than them. They have not preached violence, but simply carried out the behests of the Ramgarh Resolution."<sup>3</sup>

Lohia participated actively in the Quit India movement while keeping himself underground. When all the prominent Congress leaders were in prison, Lohia took the command. Those days he also used to write pamphlets and bulletins to mobilize people against the British. Some of the important booklets include (i) I am Free; (ii) Prepare for the Revolution; (iii) Brave Fighters March Forward, and (iv) Economics after Marx. All these booklets were brilliantly written and are thought provoking. Later on, he was arrested and was released in April 1946.

Though in the early part of his career, Dr. Lohia was a true disciple of Mahatma Gandhi and Nehru, however, in the subsequent years, he chose his own path - a path to associate himself totally with the people and raise their concerns. He never aspired for a post.

In, 1947, when India achieved freedom, he disassociated himself from the Congress Party which was the ruling party and instead played a key role in the formation of Praja Socialist Party (PSP). Although, a popular leader of masses, Dr. Lohia decided not to contest the election for the first Lok Sabha and remained a dedicated and committed socialist working for the amelioration of the deprived and marginalized sections of society.

Lohia was a man of action. He not only preached but also practiced the same. For instance, he advocated and encouraged public involvement in post-freedom reconstruction as he thought that public participation was essential in any developmental activities. He urged the people to participate activity in constructing canals, wells and roads voluntarily in their neighborhood. He himself volunteered to build a dam on a river Paniyari which is standing till this day and is called Lohia

Sagar Dam.

Lohia knew it very well that caste restricts opportunity and restricted opportunity constricts ability which in turn further restricts opportunity. Where caste prevails, opportunity and ability are restricted to ever-narrowing circles of the people. That is why, in his own party, the Samyukta (United) Socialist Party, Lohia promoted lower caste candidates both by giving electoral tickets and assigning high party positions.

Dr. Lohia was elected to the Lok Sabha for the first time in 1963 by winning a by-election and he had only a short stint in the house as he passed away in October 1967. During this tenure he was extremely active and spoke on almost all issues which came for the consideration for the House. Some of the speeches such as distribution of National Income, Motion regarding appointment of committee for restriction of monthly expenditure of an individual, corruption, student unrest, criticism of Indian history and preventive detention (continuance) Bill are milestones even today. He firmly believed that the Lok Sabha not only should reflect the hopes and aspirations of the people but also be a vehicle of socio-economic justice. Participating in the debates he said, “the dignity of the House could be maintained only if the dignity of the country is protected. So long as the practice of keeping the dignity of the country separate from that of the House continues, the dignity of the House will go on diminishing. We, therefore, have to maintain the dignity of both.”<sup>4</sup>

Dr. Lohia was a far-sighted visionary. Nearly half a century ago, he stressed on the importance of education in the nation's development. Participating in the discussion on the issue of education, Rammanohar Lohia said, “All children in the age group of 5 to 11 years, should get similar schooling facilities and there should be no difference between the child of the President and that of the scavenger on this count. Only by taking such steps, we will be able to build our country.”<sup>5</sup> Recently, our Parliament has fulfilled his long cherished dream when we enacted the Right of Children for Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009.

Apart from being a staunch socialist, Dr. Lohia also laid emphasis on effective governance devoid of favouritism and arbitrariness. On one occasion he observed that there was no rule of law in India, as the administration was functioning arbitrarily. The result is that one finds favouritism in every action of the Government, it is secondary whether one gains monetarily or not as a result of this favouritism. Favouritism, arbitrariness, bribery and contravention of rules should be considered as corruption, he said.

Dr. Lohia was truly an ardent supporter of equality. He believed that casteism and class-conflict were mainly responsible for the decline of India. Keeping this in mind he had started a movement for the abolition of caste system. In this context, he held the view that in a society encumbered with tradition based distinctions, equality could not be brought about merely by providing equal opportunities to all. He said, "if we do not change the caste-based system the inequality would go on increasing with the progress of the country. Development in India, if caste-system continues, means increase in inequality."<sup>6</sup>

Rammanohar Lohia was a great nationalist and was dead against the partition of India. In fact, he wrote a book "Guilty Men of India's Partition" recounting those painful days when the decision to divide India and the two communities - Hindus and Muslims - was taken. In this book Lohia identifies the leaders and the circumstances responsible for partition.<sup>7</sup> Lohia also advocated strongly for a league of confederation of India and Pakistan. He also believed in practice of genuine Non-alignment which did not take any block. Participating in the discussion on foreign policy in the Lok Sabha he said, "I also support non-aligned policy but keeping in view the way in which it has been distorted by the Foreign Ministry, I will have to say that it is not a policy of non-alignment, rather it is a policy of disloyalty and opportunism to sit some time in the lap of one block and some time in the lap of other. We will have to give up such a policy and will have to adopt an idealistic policy."<sup>8</sup>

When Lohia passed away in 1967, a rich tribute was paid to him by the entire nation. The Hindu, a daily newspaper paid the tribute in these

words: “he had the courage of his convictions and... become the brilliant opponent of Nehru.”<sup>9</sup> In the Lok Sabha all party leaders paid tribute to Lohia. Smt. Indira Gandhi, the then Prime Minister said that his untimely death had removed a vigorous mind and a dynamic character from the country. Further, she described that “the House will not be the same without him.”<sup>10</sup> Atal Behari Vajpayee paid the obituary reference in the following words: “He always remained controversial and took pleasure in raising new controversies. He was a born rebel rather rebellion was an innate quality of the nature. He tried to give a new direction to the nation. He wanted to bring about a new regime and new administration. A person may have difference of opinion with him, but his heart bled for the welfare of downtrodden and influenced those who came close to him.”<sup>11</sup>

Rammanohar Lohia is said to belong to the greatest critic of the Congress and the greatest exponent of the Indian socialist and democratic paradigm. His brilliant intellect, selfless character and penetrating power of analysis had been a tremendous asset to the cause of socialism. Eloquence in language and persuasive power, which he had abundantly in possession, makes him the man of the masses. The path which he opted was full of sacrifice and struggle but it was peoples' path. His ideas and views on diverse issues are quiet relevant even today and will continue to remain in the coming centuries.

#### Reference

- 1 Lohia and Parliament: Dr. Rammanohar Lohia - A profile, Lok Sabha Secretariat, p.6, New Delhi, 1991
- 2 The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, volume 70, p.9
- 3 The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, volume 73, p.20
- 4 Lok Sabha Debates, 26 July 1966
- 5 Lok Sabha Debates, 10 march 1964
- 6 Lok Sabha Debates, 3 September, 1963
- 7 Rammanohar Lohia : Guilty Man of India's Partition
- 8 Lok Sabha Debates, 11 April, 1964
- 9 The Hindu, Madras, 12 October, 1967
- 10 Lok Sabha Debates, 13 November 1967
- 11 *ibid*