SPEECH DELIVERED ON

"DR. RAM MANOHAR LOHIA’S CONTRIBUTIONS TO CIVIL LIBERTY"

BY

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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 this conference on Dr. Ram Manohar Lohia and Civil Liberties. It can only be with utmost humility that one could possibly make an approach to one of the makers of modern India, to use the phrase of a recent book – 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 by Maharaja of Bikaner, at the League of Nations in Geneva; 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 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 artifact 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?

As I began to think of what I should speak, about Dr. Lohia, I remembered an anecdote about him. 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”. In these times of cynical and debased polity, the realism of power grabbing and its retention at all costs, and of rabid promotion of extreme “I, Me and Mine” culture, one cannot but help asking, on recollecting that great man: “Jinhe naaz hai Hind, par who kahaan hai? Kahaan hai?”

Yet, I would not suggest that the life of Dr. Lohia is to be remembered for mere valorization and hagiographic speeches. It is precisely in these times of apparent noise, through an overload of information, the over-arching conception that we, i.e., India and Indians, have arrived, and turning a blind eye to the vast hordes who were not even afforded the chance to begin, let alone “arrive”, that one needs to draw sustenance from the lives and works of great men and women of history.

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 enchances, 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 any one 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? 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.

It is Dr. Lohia’s fear of Monotonic Logic and Mind, and its consequences for the society, and especially of the dis-empowered, coupled with his dictum that moral reasoning minus action would be like a sentence without a verb, that drove him to be one of the more ardent advocates of civil liberties 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 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.
The philosopher, John Gray, points to a fundamental cleavage in liberalism. 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, 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.... The 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 extenso:

"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 reaction...... 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 monotonic 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, as 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 monotonic 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.

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.” Even as some of us recoil from the electronic media orchestrated demonstrations of the elite at the Taj, in which T-Shirts with messages such as ‘No Taxation without Protection”, while the equal horror in Victoria terminus is ignored, and many people start to wonder why the masses appear to be disconnected with the woes of the elite, I think we would do well to recollect Dr. Lohia’s words:

“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.”

In this regard, I would be remiss not to contrast the wisdom of such thoughts and vision, against the reported observations of some persons holding high constitutional positions about protests by people against various repressive measures undertaken by the State. Some of these protesters have been likened to “private armies” and thugs in such observations. It has also been reported, by one eminent journalist, that one former judge of a High Court who visited a troubled spot, for verifying for himself about the actual conditions on the ground, was detained for five days, by the local police, and not produced before a judge within 24 hours as mandated by the law. Let us not be blind to the extent to which civil liberties can be systematically violated by the establishment, to pander to the desire for order amongst the elite, rather than conducting an enquiry into the violation of civil liberties as simultaneously an enquiry into the social and economic causes that have led the people to turn to protests. If even a former High Court judge is not afforded the protection of civil liberties, we can imagine the state of affairs for the common man, disempowered and disembodied by an establishment that dances to the tune of the elite segments.

Many years ago I visited the holocaust memorial in Boston, and what was engraved on that memorial has remained etched in my mind. Quoting Martin Niemöller it says:

They came first for the Communists,
and I didn’t speak up because I wasn’t a Communist.
Then they came for the Jews,
and I didn’t speak up because I wasn’t a Jew.
Then they came for the trade unionists,
and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a trade unionist. Then they came for the Catholics, and I didn't speak up because I was a Protestant. Then they came for me, and by that time no one was left to speak up.

We are an increasingly young country – most of our population comprises of those below thirty. And most of those youngsters, while becoming increasingly aware of the differences in life's opportunities for a vast majority and those for whom life seems to be a well paved road to glass mansions, are also becoming increasingly disenchanted with both the political culture of calculated connivance, and popular culture of indifference. The avenues for expression of dissent are increasingly becoming narrower or non-existent. Even the media, that so often claims unbridled freedom of expression for itself, has taken to the extraordinary step of self imposed censorship so that the people at large remain in the dark about the seriousness, and legitimacy, of the deprivation and disempowerment that drives social unrest in many parts of India. It would appear that the monotonic mind that Dr. Lohia has warned us against, may have become a tragic reality for those of us who still care about constitutional values and prospects.

In conclusion, let me say this: civil liberties are not some textual symbols on parchments to be discarded for maintenance of stability in the society so that we can escape into our Mandevellian modes of conspicuous consumption. They are the basic, and essential, foundations of social progress, and hence of social stability. The life, and the works, of Dr. Lohia should always serve as a reminder of that fact. Dr. Lohia is also very famous for having initiated the Theen Anna Pandra Annah debate, following a question in the Parliament about the cost per day of the office of the Prime Minister. That was not some trivialized or petty attempt at denigrating another maker of modern India.
That was an attempt to point out the fact that a culture which does not promote a spirit of humility, but only of propaganda initiated consensus, could spew out statistics that hides the prevalence of misery. Dr. Lohia was able to point out the fact that the Panning Commission hides the fact that over 70% of Indians daily per capita income was indeed Theen Annah, and that Prime Minister Nehru’s demurral that per capita income was Pandra Annah was a statistical fallacy – where the high income of the few had driven the average up. Such people are the need of the day, in all walks of our lives.

“Jinhe naaz hai Hind, par who kahaan hai, kahaan hai?”

Dr. Lohia answered that question. Trust the people. Build their capabilities to question and to participate in debate. Build bridges of empathy and genuine dialogue, demolish the walls of inequality, and of elite centric cultures and minds. And we will have a country full of such people. And we would be able to say,: 

“Jinhe naaz hai Hind, woh yahi hai, yahi hai.”

Thank you.