

THINK
I N D I A

Q U A R T E R L Y

VOLUME 13 • NUMBER 1 • JANUARY - MARCH 2010

EDITORIAL

We dedicate this issue of Think India to the memory of Dr. Rammanohar Lohia on his Birth Centenary (1910-2010) as a tribute to his radical ideas, to the untiring crusader that he was, and to the invaluable contributions that he has made to the politics of contemporary India. We have begun our issue with Dr. Lohia's portrait with the caption 'the stormy petrel of Indian politics' - petrels are tube-nosed sea birds who hover over the sea surface; when you add 'stormy' attribute to the bird what you get is a relentless and vigorous occupation with inseparable attachment. Lohia's sea surface was the Indian society he was born to, and the passion that fuelled his engagement was the welfare of humanity at large - "to achieve a state from which war and poverty and fear will have been eliminated."¹ He sought to overhaul the system up side down to purge it of its caste-gender malaise and shake off inequality in order to restore its true civilisational dignity and purpose: "the languages of India are unique in that just one word, samatwam, designates both the external condition of equality and the internal quality of equanimity. One wishes that Krishna had sung more explicitly of these being the two sides of the same coin, of equality being the condition of the society and equanimity being the quality of the person, that sees the indivisible in the midst of the divided."²

He rubbished the age-old theory that the succession of foreign conquests, to which the Indian people had succumbed, was due to

1. Last sentence of Dr. Lohia's article 'Meaning of Modern Civilisation'.

2. From Dr. Lohia's article 'Ram and Krishna and Siva'.

internal quarrels and intrigues. The largest single cause, he exhorted both the intelligentsia and the masses alike, was the caste system which had rendered nine-tenths of the population into listless and disinterested spectators of grim national tragedies. How resilient and proud a community could be that kept fifty percent of its population out of the mainstream on gender grounds, and further discriminated the majority of the remaining fifty percent through caste hierarchy and right to property. The result that one got was a large chunk of population frozen in the warp of time, surrendered to misery and taking it as will of their fate. This required nothing short of a revolution to wrench the docile masses out of the quagmire of surrender and servitude.

Lohia had before him the models of Gandhi and Marx but he cautions against following them blindly in his long article 'Economics after Marx': "I sincerely believe that following Gandhi or Marx blindly is intellectual bankruptcy, and being anti-Gandhi or anti-Marx is intellectual stupidity in equal measure. Both Gandhi and Marx offer treasure of knowledge, but that knowledge becomes fruitful only when it transcends the confines of the ideas of a given person or the period it belongs to ... the ideas that I propose here are entirely insufficient nor have I revised them ... I only hope as much that they inspire more capable and diligent people to investigate further. However I definitely hope that these ideas would create the necessity of such an idea in Economics which would be entirely different from all the existing ideas and which would turn the whole world into a blissful unit of equal welfare."³

Lohia held the view that the industrial revolution in Europe and what followed it belonged to a unique historical situation, and that it was incapable of repetition in Asia and Africa. What distinguishes Asia from Europe and America is the abundance of labour in relation to land and capital. Too little land and too many men and too few tools are a mark of Asia. So the use of capital-intensive technology, which replaces labour with capital for large-scale production, is detrimental to the interest of the very people it seeks to serve. Therefore Lohia argued that the abstract

3. Translated from Hindi

talk about communist ability to solve the problem of bread as in Russia makes no sense: "Political and economic ideologies must be related to concrete historical situations and no greater tragedy can occur than to think of capitalism or communism and even socialism unrelated to history and geography."⁴

The dissimilarity between capitalism and communism lies in one major difference and that is the distribution of national output through change of ownership of the means of production, otherwise both the system are driven by the same desire and are similarly obsessed with science, a specific type of application of science to industry and agriculture that has led to mass production, ever growing large scale factories and increasing concentration of capital, where for every bit of labour employed the amount of capital used continually rises. Driven by such a science they both aim collectively at a rising national output and individually at an increasing standard of living: "No matter that the systems of property rights in the two societies are so dissimilar, the inside of an American and a Russian is moved by the desire for a comfortable home and an increasing living standard upon which rests the entire social edifice of rising national output. No previous civilization has known the equivalent of the modern man with his emotional complex and in this modern trait of civilization, the capitalist American and the Communists Russian are twins."⁵

Lohia therefore pleaded for a small unit technology and the corresponding decentralised economy which is not to be confused with the Gandhian economy based on village self-sufficiency. Dr. Lohia's insistence is on research and innovation to invent a new small unit machine run on electricity or diesel that could be taken to the remotest villages in India so as to fulfill the twin claims of providing jobs to the rural population as well as augmenting production. Dr. Lohia's argument was that such a small unit technology would be able to overcome the difficulties created by inadequacy of capital and the technique being labour intensive it would also eliminate, to a great extent, the concealed rural unemployment.

4&5. Meaning of Modern Civilisation

Lohia then places this mode of production in a polity that he calls Chaukhamba Raj, a decentralized socialist state, an idea that he achieved by combining Gandhian village democracy with modern state apparatus, with the four pillars being village, district, state and centre, where each succeeding tier gets lesser powers than the preceding one, and where people themselves would produce bulk of the essential commodities which they need. He thus brings in Gandhian economics but modified it to call for the widest possible use of the small-unit machine.

Lohia, however, contended that even this decentralized socialist state would not provide solutions to the problems of tradition bound Indian society unless it is reinforced through social revolution, and therefore came up with his idea of 'seven revolutions' which takes on all social maladies in a single sweep - confrontation with discrimination and deprivations based upon caste, class, race, gender and nationality - and gave a new direction to the movement for socialism by giving equal emphasis to the struggles against sexism, class and caste-based exploitations.

It is a departure from the Marxist line of a class-centric programme for a socialist revolution. It also goes beyond the Gandhian emphasis on constructive programme of ending untouchability and casteism. These seven revolutions are supposed to be taking place simultaneously and are: (1) for equality between man and woman; (2) against political, economic and other inequalities based upon skin colour; (3) against the inequalities between higher and backward castes and for preferential opportunities for the backward sections; (4) against foreign rules and for freedom and democratic world government; (5) for economic equality and planned production and against the lust for and system of private property; (6) against unjust interference in private life and for democratic methods; and (7) against arms and weapons and for Satyagraha.

Holding caste stratification as the most obnoxious and dehumanized aspect of Indian society that has rendered nine-tenths of

the population into listless and disinterested lot, he questioned the concept of 'equality of opportunity' that constitution of India accords to its citizens. How can those, Lohia argued, languishing in poverty and illiteracy compete with those who are well off and literate. He radicalized the idea by inverting the concept of 'equality of opportunity' into 'opportunity for equality' by asking for preferential opportunity for the backward caste and communities in India. The country still echoes with the famous slogan that he raised for the backward community : "*sansopa ne baandhi gaanth, pichhda pave sau mein saath.*"⁶

Lohia interacted with some of the most important anti-caste leaders, movements and organisations of India in his quest for the abolition of caste system. He engaged with Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and Periyar Ramasami Naicker. He did not agree with the anti-Brahminism of both the social revolutionaries as he found them being used for dominance of the middle caste in Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu. He argued that their movement generated a split among the poor of India.

Lohia also stressed for the necessity to connect the movements for unity among the non-dwija castes with the socialist movement to strengthen the struggle for equality and prosperity in India. The caste system, Lohia argued, has not created a bi-polar system of forward and backward castes. In fact there are three layers in the society because of the logic of the caste system - the real upper castes who are affluent, the fake upper castes who are the poor, and the backward shudras. He also underlined the pathetic condition of all women across caste lines. So he wanted to achieve unity of all the women, shudras and the fake upper caste people who are together trapped for centuries in the prison of poverty and powerlessness. His idea was to take the anti-caste forces beyond the twin tragedies of jealousy and sycophancy so that a new age of unity, sacrifice and reconstruction may be unleashed to abolish the caste system once and for all: "The young high caste must now rise to his full measure, instead of seeing in this policy an attack on his interest ... the young high caste must decide to turn himself into manure for the lower castes, so that the people may for once flower into their full glory ...

6. It is the unbroken resolve of 'SANSOPA' (Samyukt Socialist Party) that the backwards must get 60 percent reservation.

simultaneously a great burden rests on the youths of the lower castes. Not the aping of the high caste in all its traditions and manners, not dislike of manual labour, not bitter jealousy, but the staffing of the nation's leadership as though it were some sacred work that should now be the supreme concerns of women, sudras, harijans, muslims and adivasis."⁷

And to achieve the manifold objectives he pleaded for "constructive militancy" and "militant construction" and described "spade, prison and vote" as the symbols of this new perspective of action and construction. It was Dr. Lohia's imagination that, when the mammoth Janwani march of the people proceeds to the Rashtrapati Bhawan to present to the President of India the charter of demands it should do so after passing through hundreds and thousands of villages on its way undertaking mass construction activities like digging wells, building bunds and cleansing them with a direct involvement of the villagers in this mass constructive work. This is Dr. Lohia's novelty which he derived from his 'principle of immediacy'.

Dr. Lohia added a new dimension to the dynamics of action by propounding the theory of "immediacy in struggle and organisation". Those who mechanically applied their mind to the problems of organisation and indefinitely waited for the struggle to ripen at the highest stage of organisational work completely missed the opportunity to join the mainstream of the nation's struggle. The best instance is that of the RSS which for years harped on perfecting a disciplined organisation in search of the "opportune moment" for launching a struggle for independence. In this process the RSS remained completely isolated from the current of nation's freedom struggle. The other extreme is that of the adventurist actionists who considered organisation as the subsidiary part of the militant struggles and hoped that sharpening of people's struggles would itself throw up the necessary organisation with the militant outlook. Dr. Lohia exposed the futility of both these extreme viewpoints and pleaded in his theory of "immediacy" that organisation and action must continue as parallel currents.

Lohia was equally concerned for people's languages. He argued

7. Last paragraph of Dr. Lohia's article 'Caste'.

that if language is the medium of expression then the true expression of the community would come forth only when its people expressed their thoughts in indigenous language. He therefore pitched himself strongly against the continuation of English as the medium of administration, the judiciary and higher education. He was not per se opposed to the English language, but warned the powers that be that it was impossible to make English the lingua franca of the common men and women. In the beginning, he was thought to be a Hindi zealot, but when he explained that he wanted English to be replaced by regional languages, that prejudice withered away. He understood that as the link language, English could be replaced by Hindi only, and he offered reservations in Central jobs for non-Hindi speaking people. There can be no argument about the truth that if a large proportion of our people are still illiterate or semi-literate and the quality of education low, the reason for it is the opposition to Lohia's language policy.

Lohia waged battle against injustice and discrimination on all fronts all his life and never let any bias personal or ideological affect his pursuit. The visionary genius was a dynamite of a politician and activist and a true altruist. When it was time to reap the benefits of the freedom struggle he opted out of the company of Nehru and chose to commit himself to laying ground for a socialistic revolution in the country. His mission was now to expose the pseudo-socialism that had come to be the reference and guide map for the reconstruction of the country. He called it the dogma of a man obsessed with the superiority of western civilisation. He travelled tirelessly, speaking in public meetings across the country, wrote extensively and strove to unite people to find an alternative to the high priests of modernity and development who imported ideas to the exclusion of native wisdom, who lived in ivory towers made up of public money and theorised about trickle down effect to happen in some remote future, who shed tears for the unprivileged alright but did so with contempt for their savagery and meanness, who cowered before the more powerful but cloaked it with lofty language and fantastic ideals. A case in point is what Lohia said on the policy of non-

alignment that India pursued: "It would be foolish to deny the difference between a slave and a servant; a servant can change its master. India has never been a slave to either camp as some other coloured governments have been, she has been a servant in the alternate service of the Atlantic and Soviet Camp." How prophetic about the future that lay in store, and how truthful and scathing to the times he himself lived in! He often rocked the parliament with his incisive analysis of the profligacy of the government and stunning comparison between the rich and the poor.

I would not hesitate to say that the present day coalition politics has its origin in Dr. Lohia's quest for an alternative to the Congress, which is a decentralisation of sorts of Indian politics. In fact history bears testimony to my claim. The three successive victory of the Congress between 1952 to 1962 made Lohia realise that defeat of the Congress lay in the unity of the opposition. He persuaded the entire spectrum of opposition parties to have mutual adjustments to overthrow Congress rule. This new tactical line of non-Congressism paid rich dividends in the 1967 general elections and in nine states the Congress party was defeated and governments were formed by the opposition parties of that time. And only a decade later in the 1977 General Elections the Congress was routed by the movement led by his comrade-in-arms and dear friend Jayaprakash Narayan whom Dr. Lohia always prodded that "you can shake this country." Though later the joint opposition broke down but the strong opposition to the hegemony of Congress survives in the form of strong regional parties, the Third Front, the National Democratic Alliance and in the other constituents of United Progressive Alliance itself. This is the legacy of Dr. Lohia. I take this opportunity to salute the rebel ideologue and the untiring crusader who was also a connoisseur of art, language and literature, a lover of women's beauty and an ardent advocate of their crucial importance in social development.

