

Lohia's Thoughts on the Dynamics of Society and Civilisations : Historiography and Praxis

Prof. Satya Mitra Dubey

Hitherto, history of all societies has been the history of class struggles. Karl Marx All human history hitherto has been an internal oscillation between class and caste and an external shift of prosperity and power from one region to another.

- Ram Manohar Lohia

Dr Ram Manohar Lohia (1910-1967) - a veteran freedom fighter, a founder of the socialist movement in India, a thinker with original flashes, a nationalist with a universalistic orientation , a revolutionary with a creative mind, an interpreter of Indian traditions with their contemporary relevance , a keen analyst of the rise and fall of civilizations with a clear historiography, a visionary- combining theory and practice, thought and action, Kathani and karani together- in a praxis framework. In the preface of his well known book “ Wheel of History” (Fifth edition: 2000), he writes “ if the academic faith of previous excursions I took into economic and political theory were any guide, I should have desisted from the publication of this effort into historical theory. But hope is undying”. While developing his theory of history and dynamics of society/ civilizations, Dr Lohia in his book has looked into purpose and history, examined the cyclical and materialistic views on history, revisited theories of Hegel, Marx , Spengler and Toynbee, evolved a clear historiography based on praxis in the context of Indian history.

Hegel and Marx have tried to develop a law of the movement of history. Hegel characterised this law in terms of ideas or spirit , whereas, Marx offered a materialistic interpretation of history. A law of history is supposed to be universally applicable. Lohia is of the view that these

interpretations are inadequate in explaining the movement of history. He asks “ why is it that a certain set of symptoms operated in a certain country at a certain period and did not operate in another”. The main distinguishing feature of man is his awareness of himself and of his relationship. The man tries to search the meaning and purpose of life and through the course of history, he has tried to discover them In such efforts, there is an element of design. There is another view which refutes the idea of law, meaning, purpose or design in history. According to the latter view, the historical events take place and the task of history is simply to discover and to collect facts and to record them. He prefers to leave this controversy to the academicians because it does not provide him an workable tool of thought He is conscious that neither the philosophical search of the purpose of history nor the collection of facts are easy tasks. But he develops his workable tools or historiography to combine stray facts to understand the rise and fall in an oscillating manner in Indian and world history and suggests that the search for a philosophy of history must, nevertheless, continue although with some humility.

In the light of Lohia's suggestions that the two issues, whether the movement in history is guided by some purpose or historical events take place without any design, should be left to the

academicians, a question may arise that is there any purpose in Lohia's perspectives on history? Distinct from other theorists of the cyclical approach and the linear concepts of historical dynamics, he presents his own philosophy of history. Through the help of historical events and facts he wants to understand and explain the unity of mankind, along with the common bonds as well as the dividing factors in Indian society.

II

Sociologists and social historians have tried to analyse social and civilisational dynamics in terms of cyclical (traditional Indian theory of Yugas, theories of Spengler, Sorokin, Toynbee), spiral (wave like change, ups and downs as visible in weather, season, economy, rise and fall of dynasties) and linear (theories pertaining to philosophy of history, evolution, development, progress and modernization) modes of change. Lohia calls them cyclical, pseudo-cyclical views of history. He examines the question of matter and spirit in history and reviews critically the materialist interpretation of history. In traditional Indian view, the wheel of time is divided into four ages. They are Satyug, Treta, Dwapar and Kaliyug. The Satyug is attributed with the best qualities of man followed by the descending order in three other ages. The time is like a wheel and it moves in circle. After the age of Kaliyug which is the period of dark age, evil, decline and downfall, the wheel of time will ascend again to Satyug- the golden age of truth and the perfect phase of highest human qualities. He considers that this deep and rich view of history is turned into an allegory. Its philosophical value is of great importance but has sometimes avenged itself by degrading the Indian mind into impotence. Such allegorical interpretations of a purely cyclical view of history are neither correct nor rewarding. In

the early 20th century, social philosopher Spengler (1920), sociologist Sorokin (1927), and historian Toynbee (from 1934- 1951) provide cyclical explanation for the understanding of social and civilisational dynamics. Though Dr Lohia also tries to develop cyclical approach-comparing it with a wheel of time (Kal Chakra) or history (Itihas Chakra) to explain dynamics of history, yet he disagrees with the theories of above stated authors.

In the 19th century, European intelligentsia was hectically engaged in debating the roles played by spirit and matter in determining the movement of history. Hegel in his philosophy of history propounds that the course of history is determined by spirit or ideas. Marx, an early Hegelian, borrowing a lot from the great master, finally in his theory of historical materialism turns to assign this role to matter or the economic forces operating in society. Marx borrows the dialectical approach from Hegel. In Hegelian dialectics, conflicting ideas, passing through the phases of thesis, anti-thesis and synthesis, play crucial roles in the movement of history. According to Marx, Classes in society are formed on the basis of economic interests and the class conflict is the foundation of Marxian dialectics. These two approaches are also refuted by Lohia.

Lohia's approach to societal and civilisational dynamics centres around the concepts of oscillation-alteration between class and caste, continental shift, approximation of mankind and internal approximation. These concepts need careful understanding. Through his intellectual exercise and political struggles (praxis) Dr Lohia carefully used the tools of mythology, archeology, history, linguistics and his personal observations during the course of travels in India and abroad. His major historical concerns are rise and fall of India and the other world civilizations, Indian

caste system, relationship between imperialism, capitalism and fascism, Cripps's Mission, partition of India, history of Indian socialist movement Apart from the Wheel of History, as mentioned earlier, the other major works-documents which throw light on his sense of history are old files of the Congress Socialist (Calcutta:1936-38), The Mystery of Sir Stafford Cripps (Bombay: 1942), Economics after Marx (underground days : 1943), Fragments of a World Mind (Calcutta:1951), Will to Power and Other Writings (Hyderabad: 1956), Marx, Gandhi and Socialism (Hyderabad:1963), The Caste System (1964), Old files of Mankind (1956-67), Guilty Men of India's Partition(Hyderabad:1970), Lohia –Karm and Siddhant (Indumati Kalkar : 1983) and Ram Manohar Lohia (Original in English and Hindi by Indumati Kelkar, abridged edited edition Shripad Krishna Kelkar : NBT-1996).

For Lohia, being a man of action, history is not merely an academic exercise. Along with his constant search of conceptual and historical roots of the unity of mankind, he exposes Stalin's policies in the Pre-Second World War phase in Soviet Russia, takes resolute stand against Franco's dictatorship at the time of Spain's civil war, resists Portuguese regime in Goa, agitates for the restoration of democracy and civil liberties in Nepal, helps in forming platform for World Government and pleads for Asian-African unity .In his writings Himalayas and Tibet are geographical, historical-cultural entities but he launches movement for their protection and Indian security. He discusses the theoretical and practical aspects of the caste system, but at the same time, he starts movement for " Jati Todo." These and many such other programmes are the praxis aspects of Lohia's thought process and personality.

III

Let us discuss his theory of oscillation between class and caste and how it has influenced the dynamics of history, society and civilization. In Lohia's analysis, class is mobile caste and caste is immobile class. Caste can not be defined by birth and religion. It is not a distinguishing feature of India. "What distinguishes caste is immobility that has crept into class relationship (Wheel of History: Fifth Edition P-25)." In the long course of history, this movement from class to caste and vice versa has been experienced by all societies. Marx and Lohia both cite the example of class struggle undergoing between patricians and plebians in ancient Rome. But Lohia contributes another caste dimension to this struggle. He is of the view that so long Rome was politically and economically strong, free play of classes was permitted there. Whenever due to the unbearable struggles and external pressures, there was danger to stability and order, a more rigid system was evolved by Romans to prevent disruption. A more rigid system like caste demands justice whereas a relatively mobile and open system like class demands equality. Depending on the movement of history and social-political requirements, in Roman system, there was emphasis on equality, justice and the attainment of maximum efficiency. Taking clue from the historical process, he marshals evidence to show that the downfall of civilization starts with the attainment of the latter.

Besides ancient Rome and India, he extends his logic of oscillation to Europe, particularly to Nazi Germany, America and Soviet Russia."The older social groups of Europe have never quite been able to leave the taint of caste. Even in great mobility of classes moving up, democratic behaviour and inter marriage have not been easy

or natural in Europe (ibid:P-28)". England , the mother of parliamentary democracy, is the classical example of age old caste like segregation between Lord class and the commoners. Around 700 years back, European society started moving away from Caste like structure of lord and the serf and emerged new structures of industrialists, factory workers, professionals and middle classes. But the latent remains of caste structures are still there. The maximum glory of power and at one stage attainment of maximum efficiency through scientific - technological progress led to wars, destruction and stagnation. After the First World War when the class struggle became unbearable, to resist disruption, Europe gave birth to fascism in Italy and Nazism in Germany. Both tried to coordinate classes, curtailed their struggles by reducing the shares of profits of industrialists and bargaining power of trade unions in a regimented caste like structures through corporations. Now, the men in Europe, in the place of struggles and disruptions are in search of stability, unity and better standard of life.

Despite wide difference between whites and blacks in America, he feels that there is the existence of a mobile class system and attendant class struggles for better wages, employment and social equality. The present day's expansive capacity of American economy and some day the attainment of maximum technical efficiency will lead to deadlock in American System. (*In between 2007 to 2010, that has already happened in the case of America*). *Trade unions in America based on exclusive crafts are taking the shape of caste like organizations*). Communist movement in Russia is also a European product. It is generally thought that the Soviet efforts are in the direction of the destruction of classes. Soviet Russia has also tried to evolve an immobile caste like system

by controlling change, perpetuating power, position and privileges of the top party leaders, officials of military and bureaucracy through one party rule, dictatorship, elimination of class enemies and concentration camps. This was considered as the emergence of a new (immobile) class (Djilas:) in Soviet Russia. There is a basic difference between the immobility and stability of Nazi Germany and the Soviet Russia. "The German efforts to achieve caste arose out of the need to protect a highly developed economy against an unbearable class struggle. The Russian system of castes has probably arisen out of the need to create a highly industrial economy from an agricultural one , which may not have been possible in the climate of sharp class struggle(Lohia: ibid,P-33)". The 5 to 10% of Russians lodged in the concentration camps are like untouchables. They have been used as a cheap labour force and treated in the worst cruel manner. Their position is much degraded as compared to the traditional Indian untouchables.

The caste system, as found in India, is widely known. Lohia makes a separate detailed study of the Indian caste system(The Caste System: 1964).In the "Wheel of History" he regards the rise of Buddhism as a movement opposed to the caste system and a shift from caste to class.. Under its impact, there was some loosening in castes which was accompanied by political strength, economic prosperity, improvement in agriculture, upward mobility in the case of artisans and traders and growth in national income. It led to a growth of partial efficiency in the society as a whole (ibid:P26). During the last 1200 years rigidity of castes increased to the maximum. He thinks "foreign invasions and increasing poverty beset Indian society of this period and a total anaemia seizes hold of it(ibid:P27)." For this

state of downfall, no purpose will be served simply by blaming caste system and spirituality.

His other major contribution is in developing the theoretical frame of continental shifts. The rise and fall are the features of all civilisations. At one stage in human history India, Greece, Rome, China and Mexico were at the top. During the last 300 years, that position was occupied by Europe. A visible continental shift from Europe to America has again taken place in the last century. The shift from class to caste and vice-versa is the part of internal oscillation within a society. The rise and fall of societies, nations and civilizations belong to the realm of external oscillation. Much before the publication of "Wheel of History", He tried to develop his idea of 'continental shift' in a speech delivered at the Stanford University (August 17, 1951) where he propounded " All human history has been hitherto a shift in power and prosperity. The dawn of one continent has been the sunset of another. And if the Indian revolution, or the Asian one, succeeded in raising Asia once again to a position of supremacy, so that Europe or the United States of America got depressed, however much as an Asian I might- but , I do not- I was going to say I might feel happy about it, but I do not wish to repeat these experiences! We have had enough of it. In our history we have perhaps been on top , and we do not wish to be on top again. Could we perhaps achieve a world whose parts were comparatively equal in strength, we might usher mankind in to a totally new era of peace and cooperative endeavour."

In the understanding of history, lohia's theories of the approximation of mankind and internal approximation are equally important. He feels the

most significant contribution in the physical and cultural approximation of man has been made by the Indian people. With a sense of pride he states that our great ancestors traveled far and wide, mixes with the people, lived there, loved them, left no distinct identity and disappeared but left their permanent historical and cultural footprints in those societies where they went. For the further elaboration of his point he takes the help of the Indian concept of "Rakt-Beej" -blood-seed. This process has been repeated all over the world and different groups and communities have contributed their shares in the process of this approximation. He is of the view that Sanskrit with its sisters and daughters –Prakrit and Pali which unites all South Asia, to a lesser extent, other parts of Asia as well. The Indian culture, in this process, reached up to Japan. The same role was played by Arabic in the Western Asia and in large part of Africa, Greek and Latin in Europe. The spread of three great proselytizing religions- Buddhism, Christianity and Islam have also accelerated the approximation of mankind.. As external approximation takes place between the people of two nations or regions, similarly internal approximation takes place within the country and society. Inequality is the part of human history but at the same time people have been striving for equality. Dr Lohia accepts that in the western society in general and Europe in particular has achieved greater degree of equality during the last two hundred years due to democracy and the programmes of the welfare state. He particularly cites the case of Swedish socialism which has been able to bring most incomes with in a minimum-maximum ratio of one to twenty. He pleads for internal approximation between different groups, classes and castes in a society.

IV

In Dr Lohia's historiography, cyclical and spiral modes of analyzing social change, dynamics of history and civilizations are combined together. His ideas of oscillation between class and caste, continental shifts, approximation of mankind and internal approximation are of great value for the understanding and analysis of history, society and civilizations. In this intellectual exercise, thought and action, preaching and practice are combined together. Lohia is not confined only to the analysis of history but he makes history by leading the underground freedom movement during 1942-44, struggles against Portugal's imperialism in Goa(1946), leads movements for the establishment of a democratic system in Nepal(1946-50), participates in the historic meeting of the Congress Working Committee (June, 1947) which endorsed the partition of India, moves a proposal in that meeting to incorporate one clause-rejecting the two nation theory, as a part of the main resolution of the Working Committee which was approved, actively participates in the movement committed to a World Government (1949-51) and is detained in the USA, protesting against the racial discrimination. This is the praxis part of his intellectual life and political career.

This praxis part of his intellectual orientation takes a sharper form in the analysis of Indian history. In this connection his four articles on the North-South, Unity of Indian People, One Culture,, Research in Indian Universities and Indian History Writing (see Bharat Mata-Dharati Mata : 1982) are of special significance. He makes a powerful critic of the colonial history writing- represented by Wincent A. Smith and others, disagrees with the approaches of Tarachand, Majumdar and Maexist historians

and ridicules Aligarh brand of history writing.. He is of the view that the misfortune of India has been extraordinary in history writing. He is not satisfied only by academic criticism. He raised the issue of history writing in Loksabha(Loksabha Debates : March26, 1966). His constant search for the understanding of the Indian people, Asian society and world mind is reflected time and again in his personal letters written to Rama Mitra((Lohia Thru Letters: 1983). These letters also indicate his thinking regarding history. His "Guilty Men of India's Partition(1970)" is an authentic historical document of the inside story of the meeting of the Congress Working Committee. With a deep insight, he makes a wonderful analysis of the historical, political, social and cultural factors responsible for the partition of India.

Lohia's intellectual contributions can be properly grasped in the context of praxis. He was basically a political man and a towering leader of the Indian socialist movement.. A man of unusual intellectual caliber, in his stormy political career, full of struggles, he had little time for pure academic exercise. Apart from his unparalleled analysis of politics and economy, his writings on history, society, culture language, literature, alphabets open new vistas of investigations and research. Now, it depends on the level of understanding of the latter generations to make full use of his thoughts and actions and to utilise his theoretical framework combined with praxis.

- Draft paper written for the National Seminar, organised by Sahitya Academy on " Dr Ram Manohar Lohia"(Feb.18-20, 2010) at New Delhi.
- The author, closely associated with Dr Lohia in his life time as a youth activist, is a sociologist and an analyst of Lohia's thoughts and actions.