

Dr. Ram Manohar Lohia in the US - Mississippi Experience

--Jawaharlal Jasthi

The experience of Lohia in the state of Mississippi is a demonstration of the method to fight for civil rights in a non-violent way. After visiting the western states of the US Lohia came to the state of Mississippi on 27 May 1964. He stepped on the soil of the city of Jackson. It was a few weeks before the commencement of 'Freedom Summer' organised by Edwin King. He was received at the airport by Mr. and Mrs. Bittel. They were also the hosts of Lohia during his stay in the state. Mr. Bittel was the president of the Tugaloo college. Mississippi happens to be the center of civil rights movement. The poet and author Ruth Stephen was with him along with Mr. Wofford.

That evening the hosts took him to the Morrisons Cafeteria located in the business center of the city. The manager of the cafeteria noticed the color of the guest and immediately decided to refuse service to the visitors. The couple were stupefied at the disrespect shown to their valued guest. But Lohia was cool and told the manager that he would come again next day and moved out. As it was a business center any confrontation would attract people and may lead to some untoward incidents. Lohia did not like it. Lohia wanted to face it in a peaceful way.

That night there were discussions in the house about America and missionary movements. They discussed the Morrisons hotel experience also. They told him that if he goes there again and insist on his rights, he is sure to be arrested. But Lohia insisted on going there and confront the manager. It would be a failure of his non-violence philosophy if he fails to go there and face the consequences. It amounts to misunderstanding that I failed to understand the conditions faced by the black people there and failed to sympathise with them.

Morrisons Cafeteria maintains a chain of hotels in the city. Lohia chose to go to a branch which is not in a busy center so that there would be no law and order problem created. The management alerted all their branches about the possibility of the visit of a colored foreigner. The police were also alerted, in case. Mr. and Mrs. Edwin King took Lohia to the hotel and dropped him at a distance. They stood there watching the situation. Some students of the Tugaloo college also were with them. Reporters from *Jackson Daily* got wind of it and were present to report. They made a truthful report of what happened there. It acquired more importance as the person involved was a political leader from India.

Lohia alone went to the hotel. He made himself ready for the encounter. He pulled his dhoti a bit above the ankles. Wearing chappals he tried to enter the hotel. The an at the gate prevented him from entering. Having noticed the stranger at the gate the manager also came

there and understood the situation. He told Lohia “This is my property and we don’t want your business. You may please go back.”

“No sir, I am not willing to go back without having my meal here” said Lohia.

The police officer Lieutenant C.R.Wilson who was watching the situation came there and told Lohia “You heard what the manager said. He wants you to go back. Please leave the place.” Lohia insisted that he will not leave the place.

“I am sorry sir; in such a case I will have to take you into custody” said the officer and guided him to the police van that was waiting. Reaching the van, Lohia said “I think now your duty is over.”

“No sir, it has just started” said Wilson and led him into the van. He entered the van; the doors were closed and locked. The van moved with Lohia inside.

But they did not go to the jail. They were undecided on what to do with the visitor from India who defied the law. The van went around the city for about an hour and returned to the place where the hosts Mr. and Mrs. Edwin were waiting with the other students. The van stopped at a distance from the hotel, dropped Lohia and went away. The hosts were afraid that Lohia may be subjected to the same treatment as the blacks in a similar situation. They were happy he was not mistreated and not imprisoned. Lohia wanted the people know that he defied the law and stood against color discrimination without resorting to violence. Police took him into custody. They did not say he is arrested. There was no violence and no disturbance to the public. It was followed by a press interview. He declared “It was not my intention to expose the injustice in America. Such things are happening everywhere, including in India. Usually I do not go to places where I am not welcome. But having noticed what was happening here before my eyes, if I keep quiet, I would be encouraging the perpetration of this injustice and oppression. If I defy the law to enter an open public place it is quite possible that some officer would come and arrest me. I cannot blame them. I made this effort as a human being, presuming myself as a citizen of the US. That is why I did not report this matter to the embassy. My intention is to provoke the Americans to take it as a challenge and confront the racial discrimination peacefully.”

Among the students who were watching the entire episode were the members of Student Non-violence Coordination Committee (SNCC). Lohia invoked them to defy the unjust law in a peaceful manner and asked them many questions on their plans. They did not have ready answers for the questions, but they were made to think on different lines depending on what they have witnessed. In fact, the concept of non-violence was not new to them. But they were not so serious about it having fallen into the day-to-day affairs of life.

They were encouraged to share their experiences, values, fears, aspirations and affections. They told of their efforts to keep alive the flow of revolutionary thoughts in the past and their plans for the future. Lohia cautioned them they were going far from the past as well as the future. He suggested to notice the present conditions and mold their plans accordingly. They know Lohia was prepared even to go to prison in a foreign country by defying the law. It was not his country and he could as well ignore what is happening here. But he wanted to face it and show the way to solve the problem then and there. While talking about India his affection and love for India were evident. He explained the heroic deeds during the fight for freedom, defeats and victories. He explained the distinction between those who accepted non-violence as a way of life and those who accepted it as one of the tactics to fight for freedom. They realized how relevant those experiences are for their efforts to get civil rights. There would be many disappointments while entertaining high expectations. At times they were compelled to accept the meager concessions sanctioned by the British. They had to face intolerance and indecision. Even those who have respect were driven to think that non-violence may not be strong enough to drive away the British. Some took to weapons and some to guerilla tactics. But non-violence survived because of the respect for Gandhi and also because of its practical utility.

It was clear that Lohia was aware of the problems in fighting for civil rights in a non-violent way. The present problems are minor compared what they will have to face in the future. He made them think about their own problems in the movement. For India gaining independence was one step. There are problems even in independent India too. The problems of caste and race are more difficult to tackle than fight for freedom. Everybody has his own solution.

A black lady from the audience had a doubt. "Being defeated by Nehru in the elections how do you say so many positive things about him?" In reply Lohia asked whether any of them went to jail. Most of them had that experience. "But Gandhi and Nehru spent major parts of their lives in prisons. In the situation of those days it was inevitable, and they did not hesitate. It was an indication to the SNCC that they will have to be prepared for the troubles that come in the future. By that time, they may feel tired or disappointed and resort to violence or discard the movement itself. They were more enthusiastic than to heed to the caution.

Lohia appreciated the plans of *Freedom Summer*. They were prepared that some of them may lose their life in the struggle. But if you are not successful by that what would happen to your movement? What is your alternative plan? What is your ultimate aim? They did not have answers for such questions as they did not think of failure. They had to succeed. They did not like to say something insincerely before the man who came all the way from India and seeking truthful answers. They tried to explain their political plans and organizational efforts and build the Freedom Democratic Party. They said that the youth of all the colored people would prevail

on the elders to forge united front ignoring any differences. They were deeply convinced that they have to make the Freedom Summer plans a success. That is their priority. What to do after failure or success is a subsequent question.

The leader from India cautioned them “You are expecting victory now and immediately. How to predict what happens in the long-drawn fight? Seeing the troubles and travails how many of you stick on to the movement?” He implored them to have clear aims and detailed plans. He did not fight racial discrimination just to fortify their resolve to fight for civil rights. It is also necessary to have patience and plans for it. It would be better if they maintain continuous contact with those who are leading non-violent movements in India. He invited his hosts to visit India early for the purpose. He promised that he would come again to participate in their movement.

Before he left Mississippi there were messages of apologies from the government for the treatment meted out to him by the cafeteria managements. Lohia said it would not be necessary to treat him in a way different from what an American would have been treated. There was a message from Adlai Stevenson, the US ambassador to the UNO that he would meet him in New York and offer apologies. Lohia laughed and said, “Let him go to the statue of liberty and apologise.”