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BangaloreMirror

Ideas of the self in Lohia

By Prof Chandan Gowda, Bangalore Mirror Bureau | Jan 21, 2020, 06.00 AM IST



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Ram Manohar Lohia, the socialist thinker, is usually remembered for his advocacy of land reform, of affirmative action for backward castes, religious minorities and women, of devolution of power to village panchayats, of Indian languages as sources of political and intellectual creativity in India, of international equality between countries and races, of global disarmament. His views on human nature and on the cultivation of the moral self among socially engaged individuals, which are found scattered across his voluminous writings are not remembered as much.

In several of his writings, Lohia **deplored** what he termed “environmentalism,” a political view which views changes in law and government as sufficient to reform the individual. He saw political discussions focused only on large structures such as the economy and the polity as morally inadequate since they offer scant attention to the moral selves of individuals.

In a famous essay, *Fundamentals of a World Mind* (1958), Lohia **argued** that “the eye must necessarily redden at an act of injustice and at the fact of poverty and inequality, but it must also shed a tear.” The capacity for feeling angry at instances of injustice and suffering is essential to see in *everyone*. It makes up, in Lohia’s phrase, “social conscience.”

Aided by global reflections such as these, Lohia **scaled** down the focus on the Indian predicament **on several occasions**. He often bemoaned the hypocrisy in India, where the pursuit of material prosperity went hand in hand with a life-denying stance. This disjunction between ideal and practice ought to make way for an affirmative attitude to life. In Lohia’s words: “Life must be lived to the fullest – otherwise it is a sin. A decent standard of living, not prosperity is what is to be sought.”

Another instance of disjunction between the ideal and practice in India, for Lohia, was found in how metaphysical affirmations of the oneness of reality like the one found in Shankaracharya's *advaita* philosophy existed alongside active caste divisions. The young socialist activist, he observed, had to put an end to this "sorry mental condition."

Lohia felt that other parts of Indian philosophical tradition offered valuable lessons for cultivation of the moral self. His idea of "Nirvikalpa Samadhi," or a state where time stands still, plays a key role in his idea of how a morally engaged person orients herself to the world. Evolved from his experience of torture inside the Lahore prison, it asks for a focus on the present without anxiety or fear or desire towards the future.

An integral part of his plea for evolving an independent relationship with the present without letting the past or the future haunt it, Lohia's concept of immediacy asks that moral justifications be found for the immediate steps taken in one's moral efforts instead of seeking them in either past actions or future outcomes. He invoked Gandhi's phrase, "one step at a time" for illustrating his prescription of the means-ends relation.

Lohia's recuperation of the philosophical ideal of *samata*, which values inward equanimity and outward equality at the same time, foregrounds the value of the staying attentive to the cultivation of the moral self alongside the efforts in public action and extends the modern discussion of equality in novel ways. In his essay, *The Meaning of Equality* (1956), he wrote:

"The modern mind has forgotten yet another meaning of equality, its most inward meaning. Man must strive to feel an inward quality between contrary conditions of pleasure and pain, heat and cold, victory and defeat. The ancients in India seemed to have sensed that inward equanimity and outward equality were two sides of the same coin, for alone in India's languages, does a single word stand for both meanings, *Samata* or *Samatvan*." Dismissing any skepticism that tranquility would be difficult to attain under politically desperate circumstances, he argues that that had "been possible in the past to those who have prepared themselves for it" and it should then be possible to see happen in the present as well.