

Revisiting Dr. Rammanohar Lohia - Examining certain distinct propositions in the text and the context

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At the end of November 1961, Lohia undertook 15 days tour abroad. He visited Turkey's ancient city Byzantium, the Greek Capital Athens, the Italian Capital Rome, and the Egyptian Capital 'Cairo'. Athens was hosting a peace conference of world politicians, to which Lohia was an invitee. While he was about to leave for the conference, someone asked him: "*So you are going to the country of Alexander?*" Lohia replied: "*No I am going to the country of Socrates.*" Lohia didn't see nations and their histories through its great warriors, but through their great men of ideas.

Questioning the political economy of Marx as an absolute category: In my understanding – "**Economics after Marx,**" "**Wheel of History**" and "**Caste System**" of Lohia forms part of the foundation for the distinct and original contribution of Lohia to the Indian version of '**socialism.**' In fact, in his first and extremely important intellectual exercise – **Marx, Gandhi and Socialism**, written while he was in the thick of his political activity during 1939-42 he laid the foundations for an alternative understanding of the political economy of Marx. He revisited Marx's value theory and its consequent accumulations of 'surpluses' at the end of the capitalist. In most of the theoretical construction of Marx, the 'surplus' accumulated at the Capitalist end was the result of the labour-time exploitation by capitalists within a closed system of an industry. Marx, in his enthusiasm to elevate his investigation into the natural sciences and to be as scientific as possible in the mode of the then current Newtonian 'laws of motion' or 'evolutionary theories' of Darwin, avoided the other frictional economic forces natural in the market economy. Lohia's exercise was to prove the incorrectness of such construction and thereby exposing the fallacy of its universal application or at least, its inapplicability for Indian and other colonial societies such as India. Lohia was not, per se, against the method political economy of Marx's type.

Lohia and the dialectical materialism: While understanding the distinct features of the Lohia's political economy, in my view, we need also to take into consideration that Lohia was a holder of PhD in Economics from Humboldt University, Germany during 1929-32. It was the times when the project of philosophy is closely knitted with economics. It was also the time when the Germany was leading the philosophies of the world. It was the leader of philosophy in many ways in the whole European context.

Immanuel Kant, Hegel and Marx, Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, to name few, the firmament of European philosophy during those heydays of Germany was studded with the bright stars Germany's philosophical department. With Hegel, dialectical approach obtained a *terra firma* in method of reading history, philosophy, economics and almost any other branch of social science. Anybody who comes to know that Lohia had studied in Germany during those tumultuous times, would invariably think that he might have had that Midas's touch of this dialectical approach. But surprisingly in the entire voluminous work of Lohia, on economics or history or caste, there is little reference to "dialectics." It's even said of Marx that he had not used the word dialectics, as such, in his theory.

However, there was a consensus among the Western philosophers post-Hegel and post-Marx that the dialectical approach was the only scientific way to history and none other. Within this broader spectrum of consensus lie another dialectical difference i.e., whether that movement was of the 'idea' or 'spirit' at one end of the spectrum and / or the 'material' on the other end of it. And this distinction made all the difference to identify one whether he is on the side of Hegel or Marx. But post-Marx, the materialistic-dialectical movement of history has assumed unquestionable heights. Thus the 'historicism' itself has a defining pre-Marx or post-Marx criterion.

The two well-known disagreements on this method of historicism even within the West were - Oswald Spengler and Arnold Toynbee, who came with certain alternative possible readings into history i.e., a kind of cyclic images. While Spengler (in "**The Decline of the West**") propounded his theory on the idea of biological life cycles in civilization, approximating to some thousand years during which it passes through the entire cycle of life – birth, youthful days, age of maturity and decay, Toynbee (in his **A Study of History**) constructs it as rise and fall of civilizations - the rise by their very corresponding success to the challenges of the history under the creative leadership, or the corresponding failure due to the lack of the same. Both took cyclical view of history, though, and this cyclical view and the dialectical view do not go together apparently.

'Dialectical' has an inherent linear and progressive element in movement of history. But we can't rule out the possibility of the two dialectical opposites getting neutralized for various historical reasons. Even Marx & Engels in the Manifesto took note of this historical fact in the very early stages of their major joint venture, the Manifesto,¹ when they said: "*Freeman and slave, patrician and plebian, lord and serf, guild-master and journeyman, in a word, oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another, carried on an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight, a fight that each time ended, either in a revolutionary re-constitution of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes.*" However they also observed that – "Our epoch, the epoch of the bourgeoisie, possesses, however, this distinctive feature: it has simplified the class antagonisms. Society as a whole is more and more splitting up into two great hostile camps, into two great classes directly facing each other: Bourgeoisie and Proletariat."² Thus they indicated a greater possibility of success to anyone antagonistic force. They believed, in absolute accord with their times of high posit in reason, that "the working men have no country."³ With this high octane of faith in theory and praxis, the Manifesto concluded⁴: "The Communists disdain to conceal their views and aims. They openly declare that their ends can be attained only by the forcible overthrow of all existing social conditions. Let the ruling classes tremble at a Communist revolution. The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains. They have a world to win." It doesn't, however, mean that they didn't recognize the regional or national deviations. They also said⁵: "**These measures** will of course be different in different countries." [Emphasis added, 'these measures' mean the measures for attaining the final goal of the Communist revolution]

The underlying theories in the West's dialectical or cyclical views could again be traced to the ancient Greek philosophical texts and the views of time or history therein. Though apparently these two views stood against each other, both are deterministic and consider the laws of the history as '*inexorable.*' This '*inexorability*' of the laws of history and the '*cyclic view*' of it are not unknown to the Indians or the Asiatic. This view of *kala* (**time**) as *chakra* (**wheel**) is recurrent in the Hindu, Jain and Buddhist philosophies. Even in the context of these philosophies the law of *kala* has its own '*inexorability.*' It might be the idea of '*yuga*' or '*kalachakra*' leading from a status of absolute good in the

¹ Marx & Engels, Manifesto of the Communist Party, Progress Publishers, Moscow, Second Revised Edition, 1977, p.35-36

² *ibid.*, p.36

³ *ibid.*, p.56

⁴ *ibid.*, p.74

⁵ *ibid.*, p.58

timeline at a distant past or at the beginning to the absolute fall by stages and the final decay or *laya*. Again the cycle is repeated. Even this theory of the East is equally fatalistic and deterministic. There's nothing an individual soul could do than to follow the *yuga dharma* and wait in the *karma phala* or the inevitable result to the lead of the destiny. Many similarities can be drawn with the idea of a state of 'aboriginal communism' leading to a state of 'slavery' to 'serfdom' to 'feudalism' and the recent phenomenon of 'bourgeoisie' and ultimately heading towards 'communism.'

Though Marx, in the construction of epochal change by a violent revolution advances the stage of 'Statelessness' or a stage where all the contradictions are eliminated through heightened human action with **the Proletariat**, as its vanguard, and thereby provide for sufficient space for the human will and action in realizing the dream of creating a communist state, at the sublevels of its very formation, however, it is what is already determined to happen. The proletariat plays its historical role. Marx had not denied the *inexorability of the laws of history*. In fact this *inexorability* forms the basis of his historicism. When Albert Camus made out a case for a series of nihilistic tendencies in all social revolutionary movements, in his most famous **The Rebel**, he was lifting away Marx from this debris to a great extent because of the higher possibilities of human will. Even Karl Popper, with all his critique of this kind of historicism in his **The Open Society and its Enemies**, deals with Marx with great respect. But the theory of 'inevitability' still has its sway on Marxist historicism both in theory and practice, especially among the academic Marxists who wait for the inevitable cycles of economic depressions as possible interventions in convincing or for drawing masses to violent and revolutionary changes.

Lohia had also chosen the idea or the image of '*wheel*' to explain the idea of history. This construction of laws of history or movement of history as wheel though derives its strength from traditional Hindu, Jain or Buddhist views of *kala* (time) in Lohia's **Wheel of History**, it steered through from both the linear and as well cyclic views of history. We may find the criticism of both the linear and cyclic views in Lohia's writings. Lohia understood both the linear and cyclic views as equally dialectical - nihilist, fatalistic and deterministic. In the "**Wheel of History**", Lohia⁶ ends his theory with a note of confidence i.e., the breaking of the wheel, which in my view constitutes a definite, conscious and deliberate human intervention to stop the *inexorable laws* of history.

⁶ Collected Works of Dr. Rammanohar Lohia", Mastram Kapoor (Ed), © RML Samata Nyas, Hyderabad, Anamika Publishers, New Delhi, Vol.II, p.195-96

“The wheel of history does not foretell whether its revolving would cease, but once again there is an auspicious constellation of conditions. Man stands before the choice of hitting out into yet another direction of maximum efficiency or walking into a stage of total efficiency. Should he choose to break the wheel **for** history, the outlines of his new civilization have already shown themselves. This new civilization would attempt to achieve approximation of the human race and the overcoming of class and caste and regional shifts through comparatively equal production in all the world. ...” As we could see in the end, the wheel **of** history turning out to be the wheel **for history**— a tool in the human will. The idea of Marxist dialectics conveyed in the opening sentences of Manifesto of the Communist Party – “The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles” stood corrected in Lohian thought as – “All human history hitherto has been an internal oscillation between class and caste and external shift of prosperity and power from one region to another.”⁷

The problem with the Marxists, [it may not be with Marx per se, as Marx was continuously examining his ideas and was evolving them into further sharper statements till the end of his life) and more specifically with the Indian Marxists, is in their treatment of Marx’s theories as final statements on everything and considering any revisiting as ‘blasphemous’ (in the strict sense of its term in the religion) leading even to the ridicule of the persons for attempting any such journey as ‘revisionist.’ Sometimes certain ideas need to be revisited and tested at every epochal conjecture of ideas in history. Each society attempts to understand even the universal ideas such as ‘equality’, ‘freedom’ and ‘liberty’ within their cultural or historical moorings i.e., *kala, chitta, and manasa*, in the Dharmapal’s language.

Lohia was almost a pioneer in understanding the causes of industrial revolutions, and their impossible replication in Indian / Asian-African, or Latin American context, i.e., in the context of many erstwhile colonies. In that process, in my understanding, he even doubted the very foundational concept of Western philosophical project – “dialectics.” In the last and the eleventh thesis in “**Theses on Feuerbach**” (written in 1845) Marx states: “*The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it.*” This statement appears to have the potential in convincing the later disciples of this tradition about the preeminence of the ‘activity,’ making any further theoretical endeavors as the luxuries of the lethargic intellectuals. Sometimes even Gandhi, Lohia et al, i.e., and in fact almost all the influential personalities of the twentieth century - political, social and religious, started considering theoretical exercises as exercises in futility with a diatribe of ‘**arm-chaired**’

⁷ CWRL, Vol.II, op cit., Anamika Publishers, New Delhi, p.152

philosophers. It is true that every abstract idea has to be tested in the concrete ground of practice. But even such thought may not be taken as a final statement in the history which continues to be always in flux.

Can we afford to accept the idea of Marx (1845) that the interpretation of the world is over? The vast swathes of Asia, Africa and Latin-America remain even today unexplored – their cultures, their ethos, their historical moorings, their struggles, their understandings etc. The universal theories have imposed terrible burden on their path for change. Even today these areas compel the intellectuals from the ‘Third World’ and the erstwhile colonies, to re-engage themselves with fresh inquiries, through the process of *decolonizing* their minds. In the theoretical labors of Lohia we find the first ever such readings into India far away from the blunt, unsophisticated and racial readings of the West which led Marx⁸ to say: “*England has to fulfill a double mission in India: one destructive, the other regenerating – the annihilation of old Asiatic society; and laying of the material foundations of Western society in Asia.*” Why don’t Indian Marxists think that this idea of Marx exhibited the idea of a ‘white-man burden’, in a sense, and an expression of a kind of a racial supremacy, and of the historical duty arising out of insufficient study and understanding of India or any other Asiatic society, and based on partisan East India Company records? And here, we find the contribution of Lohia as an original thinker challenging the supremacy of the West’s intellectual pride and their appropriation of the idea of ‘socialism’ as a single and monolithic construction.

It is not that there was less criticism of Marx and his theories even within Europe and industrially developed nations, but most of the critics of Marx in the West arose out of the individual disappointments or failures of some individual activists. Most of them were *prima facie* lovers of the modern democracy in the western mold. Most of them were threatened by the shape the Marxist theories took in the October Revolution in USSR and in the later Stalinist State. The exception has been the Capitalist intellectuals who believed in the supremacy of the *laissez faire* economy and in organizing the society with the sole motive of profit. But what Lohia offered as critique of Marx in **Marx, Gandhi and Socialism**, for the first time, was a criticism of Marxism, not in terms of an emotional spiritualist, or a threatened Capitalist, or a disappointed Marxist, but in terms of political economy, the very *terra firma* of the Marxism.

⁸ Karl Marx and Engels – On Colonialism, Foreign Languages Publishing House, Moscow, p.77

Caste System is another and the most enigmatic challenge before all the Indian theoreticians and as well the social reformers. Most of the approaches in understanding and reforming or annihilating this blot revolve around the reading and rereading of the Hindu religious texts and their interpretation. Probably the only Indian philosopher who provided possibilities of understanding the caste system, again in terms of political economy, was Lohia. He understood it in terms of the oscillations between class and caste as the society moves towards 'maximum' efficiency in one direction and the inability to contemplate towards 'total' efficiency. He also explained it in terms of internal and external approximations. He said: "When maximum efficiency has already reached and a dead look ensues, the internal class struggle becomes unbeatable and an attempt is made to resolve it into an apparently just system of caste..." He further explained: "Class is mobile caste. Caste is immobile class." Though he consciously avoided inexorability of historical laws, at one point, however, he relapses back to the idea that – "The wheel of caste revolves remorselessly,"⁹ though not inexorably!

The only scientific explanation of class-caste phenomenon lies in the realm of political economy. Even Ambedkarites didn't attempt with the strength of inquiry as Lohia subjected it to historical / political-economical / scientific analysis and mostly blamed the individuals and certain dominating castes. While Marxists ignored caste contradictions almost up to 1980s in the intoxication of their class theories of Marx, and Ambedkarites restricted its examination to the discourse within religious texts / cultural and historical setting, Lohia undertook it in terms of political economy, which in its real sense belonged to the realm of Marxists. Unfortunately, the great Lohian endeavors and understanding is almost lost and have given way to the more politically relevant arguments even among the Lohians. Even the Marxists have fallen in line with the arguments based on religious texts forgetting their own ground. Lohia did what Marxists should have done!

How to abolish caste? Can annihilation of caste be achieved by anger and violence of words and deeds against its so-called creators or perpetrators? Lohia considered the problem of caste, not as the will of any individual or imposition, but as a process in the history in resolving the contradictions between the total or maximum efficiencies. "*All human history hitherto has been an internal movement between castes and classes, between classes solidifying into castes and castes loosening into classes.*"¹⁰ Those who wish to abolish all classes and castes must get hold of this motive in history, and after

⁹ CWRL, Vol. II, op cit., Anamika Publishers, New Delhi, p.294

¹⁰ CWRL, Vol. II, op cit., Anamika Publishers, New Delhi, p.150

grasping it, devise such endeavors as may put an end to both. Thus the solution to the annihilation of caste lies elsewhere, according to Lohia. History by itself will not do so, Lohia further said. There is no automatic motion; there are no inexorable laws. Simultaneously no individual or a dominant group can will it or force it upon the history, however mighty he or the group is, and however strongly it is aided by the system of a religion, or religious diktats etc. Even within the Marxist tradition these things, such as religion, morals, ethics, mode of ordering the society etc., fall within in the '**super structure,**' and once the economic basis is re-ordained on a different mode, these areas will lose their supremacy to a greater extent. Thus Lohia laid his stress on "**human intervention,**" not on "inexorable laws" in the sense of Hegelian or Marxist theories.

Thus, the trilogy – **Marx, Gandhi and Socialism, Wheel of History and Caste System** together constitute an alternative to the Western philosophical project of **socialism**. Lohia tried to come out of the dialectical approach - the so called understanding of history as materialistic and dialectical movement of opposites alone. Lohia, simultaneously, attempted to resolve the contradictions - "**the linear versus cyclical**". He, prima facie, denied the supremacy of the inexorable laws and placed human will at the forefront!

Is there anything called as Indian Socialism? While Marx stands as the highest point in the journey of western philosophy – **dialectical and historical materialism**, Gandhi, *pari passu*, represents the highest philosophical tradition of the East – **the spirit**. Lohia was attempting a synthesis in the West and East dichotomy of the matter and the spirit. While Marx's jargon invokes the terms such as materialism, modernity, progress, industrialization, proletariat and socialism or communism, Gandhi responds with the spiritualistic terminology, challenging modernity of the West with the alternatives of nonviolent diction i.e., Satyagraha, Antyodaya / Sarvodaya – as alternative modes of communism as its end. Lohia was dealing with the idea of transcending the East-West dialectics. This idea of transcending the dialectics has its own roots in the traditional Indian philosophies also. Vivekananda said once that the Advaita attempts to transcend the dialectical opposition, and denies its resolution within the oppositions and their synthesis.

Gandhi and Lohia together constitute an anti-thesis of Western Civilization. Gandhi is more moral in his approach towards this problem and it could easily be inferred in his *Hind Swaraj* (1909). Gandhi drew from Western sources also heavily (i.e., Tolstoy, Thoreau, Ruskin, Carpenter et al.,) but they were also the substratum streams within those western societies flowing against the then dominant Western cultural or Civilization trends – more particularly against the emerging industrial civilization and its narratives. He also almost drew from the Indian sources like Sanatana dharma, Vaishnavism and Jainism at par. Thus, on an overall assessment Gandhi was challenging the project of modernity of the West as expressed through the industrial revolution and its aftermath. Lohia was not against the industrial civilization as such, but he was making out a case more for Asiatic mode of industrial revolution, and the possibilities of socialism through such industrial relations. Gandhi opposed even the byproducts of West's modernity project such as the education in the Western mode, medical and legal institutions etc. In Lohia there is no serious opposition to modernity, modern rationality, and these byproducts.

Lohia¹¹ almost concludes his philosophical statement in saying - "*I am neither anti-Marx nor pro-Marx, and that equally applies to my attitude towards Mahatma Gandhi.*" But what exactly he meant by it? Was he denying the heights of the journey of both the materialistic and the spiritual, his another mode of expression of the 'maximum' and 'total' efficiencies and was declaring his intention of looking towards holding of the wheel, and breaking it to see the outlines of new civilization transcending this apparent dichotomy? Lohia offers a distinct social philosophy, but political exigencies appear to have consumed the best part of its content allowing only the forms and externalities!

Both Gandhi and Lohia have one common feature. Both deny the idea that they were establishing a system. While Gandhi denies any original claim to 'truth,' 'nonviolence,' 'civil disobedience' and 'satyagraha' etc., as they were as old as the Himalayas, Lohia denies the very attribute of his theory as all-explaining – omnipotent and omniscient. In his opening remarks to his analysis of Capitalism, he declares¹²: "No man's thought should be made the centre of a political action." One of the several commonalities both in Gandhi and Lohia was their invoking images from the local myth which enables the ordinary Indian to grasp the idea and their accepting the possibilities for multiple understandings and suggesting plural ways to the Universal truth.

¹¹ Speech: Pachmarhi, May 1952

¹² B.K. Bhattacharya, *Salient Ideas By Rammanohar Lohia*, © Author via Samajvadi Sahiya Sansthan, Anamika, p.32