

Madhu Limaye: the Past in the Present

Dr. A. Raghu kumar
avadhanamraghukumar@gmail.com

“The ideal subject of totalitarian rule is not the convinced Nazi or the convinced Communist, but the people for whom the distinction between fact and fiction (i.e., the reality of experience) and the distinction between true and false (i.e., the standards of thought) no longer exist.”

- Hannah Arendt, The Origins of Totalitarianism

Politics is a modern avocation imported to India through the Westminster model of legislatures of colonial experience, and an avoidable evil. It appears Indians are not so comfortable with this modern pursuit or they have experienced only its darker side. They made a caricature of it into something called as simple majority, another form of majoritarianism. Politics is everywhere now and ubiquitous. It had already affected the vital nerves of the Indian system and pervaded all branches of human life. We now think and act in politics. We had already crossed the Rubicon and now no one can escape its vicious circle or otherwise its liberated embrace. To live ‘**now**’ is to live in ‘**politics**,’ and the alternative is becoming a recluse. Politics is all about the possibilities, adjustments, and compromises.

But there were in the past, and are even today, around us in this vitiated environment, some rare personalities who balance the needs of the pragmatism of the day and the idealism for the eternal. One may fail or succeed in various degrees in this skillful art of balancing. But, to realize one’s ideal, one needs its experimentation in the live-world. Untested ideas are stillborn babies and of no use to the human experience. In fact, the politics of the early independent India, especially during its formative years as a political nation during 1950s through 1970s were a fertile ground for multiple experiments. Madhu Limaye stands, in the history of these formative years of Indian politics, as one such skilful artist who tried to balance the ideal and the concrete in the experimentally evolving democracy of India of those days.

While the Indian freedom struggle set an open and ideal stage for many for testing their various political ideals, the post-independent Indian politics posed another new set of challenges. It was electoral politics. At the centre stage, among these *dramatis personae*, were Nehru and Nehruvians who experimented with the politics of democracy, modernity, secularism, development and socialism. The communists on the other hand were more occupied with revolutionary transformation of the society, but were also in a continuous dilemma on the road to be taken. While the communists were split over their ideological choices of class-struggle and parliamentary democracy, the mainstream political space was, more and more, occupied by the political forces with central philosophies. Another stream

which attempted to make its presence felt and which influenced the Indian politics in the first phase of the post-independent political space (1950-1975) was Indian socialists – Acharya Narendra Dev, Jayaprakash Narayan, Dr. Rammanohar Lohia et al. They used representative democracy to advance their ideas. Yet another force compelling its presence in Indian politics was Ambedkar and Ambedkarites who were more convinced of the Constitution, Constitutionalism, pragmatism and politics of liberal democracy.

In the dominating and suffocating Nehruvian environment of politics, the socialists relentlessly struggled for their space. Among many, Lohia exercised immense influence on the young socialists. He was contemplating a broader confluence of anti-Congress, socialist and liberal forces. But his early death (he was just 57 years in 1967) put an end to some great possibilities in Indian politics. And that is how history closes certain speculative questions. On the contrary, Jayaprakash Narayan who relinquished active politics as early as in 1954-55, and joined the hands with Vinoba Bhave in his Bhoodan Movement, suddenly was called back to his national duty, and he rose to the demands of the occasion in the post-Emergency democratic renaissance, in the absence of his comrade Lohia. He anchored the anti-Congress forces, drove them to a successful political victory, and towards the restoration of democracy. Thus, a dream Lohia nurtured of demolishing the Congress during his tumultuous public life had its realization ultimately in the General Elections to the Parliament in 1977 in the Janata experiment.

In this process of history, there were several victories, pit falls, adjustments, compromises and regrouping of political thoughts. One important feature in the whole process of the Indian politics during 1950s through 1980s has been its “**anti-Congressism.**” This particular project or obsession among the Indian politicians had its own contradictions and counter-productive byproducts. The right-wing forces, struggling hard for political revival in the aftermath of Gandhi’s assassination found this atmosphere quite congenial for own resurrection. In fact, the China war of 1962 and the disillusionment it caused among the conscious citizens on the Nehru’s infallibility provided huge opportunities to the conventional forces. It increased political possibilities for the communists and the socialists also. But certain strategic mistakes committed by the communists in understanding the national aspirations, the power of nationalism vis-a-vis the international consolidation of the proletariat and their alleged acts against the interests of the Indian State or their avowed favourable dispensation towards the communist-China (?) diminished their prospects after 1963-64 and onwards. They lost the momentum and could never come back at the national stage in their full strength.

The socio-political atmosphere of the post-China war of India alternatively gave a great fillip to the socialists who were critical of the foreign policy of Nehru since late 1940s. They took a definite theoretical stand against the Congress in general and Nehru, in particular. Lohia correctly realized this political opportunity. But certain ideological issues were troubling the socialists also. By that time Ashok Mehta came with the concept of ‘compulsions of a backward economy and areas of cooperation,’ or alternatively “political compulsions of a backward economy” in 1953. He was accused of softening his stand on the Congress, the main political stand of the Indian socialists. Mehta later even joined the Congress Party in 1964 and became a Union Minister of Planning. Jayapraksh Narayan voluntarily and effectively relinquished political life and joined Bhudan Movement from somewhere around 1955. It was Lohia who had been the sheet-anchor of oppositional politics, especially of the socialists.

Lohia, in his efforts to get into the Parliament, in the by-elections of 1963, allowed consciously the helping hand of the then Jana Sangh, and in turn promised to campaign for Deen Dayal Upadhaya. “Some Socialists did not like Lohia going for campaign in support of Deen Dayal and Kripalani.” (Indumati Kelkar, Ram Manohar Lohia, Translated by Desh Raj Gopal, National Book Trust India, Abridged and edited by Shripad Krishna Kelkar, p.166). In the post-Emergency scenario Jayaprakash Narayan helped in consolidating and shaping the Janata Party, a conglomeration of many contradictory forces including the Jana Sangh. Now the Jana Sangh was no more a fringe element in Indian politics struggling with moral questions of the assassination of the Father of India, and a distant aid for anti-Congress forces. It was by 1977, in fact, a part of the Party in power, merging itself into it, and probably with a clear, though distant vision of emerging as a formidable alternative to the Congress in the future. After the brief and inconvenient bonhomie with the secular and democratic forces within the Janata party, the Jana Sangh resurrected itself into a new avatar, the Bharatiya Janata Party. The sense of possibilities was already set by mid-1980s for the BJP to claim for power at the Center at any point of time. It has slowly displaced all the anti-Congress forces by the late 1990s except the Communists.

The present efforts of the author is to locate Madhu Limaye in this political milieu and in the midst of these inconvenient and yet new political realities. It is an examination of the practical politics in India between 1950-1990s, and to understand the agony of Madhu Limaye. It is only in retrospect we understand history. Limaye appears to have exhibited more clarity of thought, and his vision and his fears deserve serious re-appreciation in the present stage of the Indian polity. He, in tune with his times, joined politics quite young. At a very tender age of 15 years, he joined the May Day procession in Poona in 1937. Incidentally he was born on the 1st May, 1922. This procession was attacked violently by the RSS volunteers. Several leaders of the movement like Senapati Bapat and SM Joshi were stated to have been

grievously injured. This was the first experience of a young boy in his teens with the trade union politics and the right-wing response. Probably, this trauma haunted his political actions all through his life!

Limaye was drawn towards the idea of labour rights, the Indian socialist movement and the leading personalities of his times in this movement like Joshi, NG Goray, Panduranga S. San and many more. He was one among the founder members of the Congress Socialist Party, a group within the Congress with heavy socialist leanings. The Indian National Congress was never a party of any particular political ideology; rather it was a platform for many ideologies and sometimes even contradictory from extreme left to extreme right. It was a center for the struggles for freedom of India from the colonial rule. Limaye was the district General Secretary of the Provincial Congress Socialist Party by 1939. In the same year he came into contact with Jayaprakash Narayan and Rammanohar Lohia.

He was an active participant in the Quit India Movement. He was also an active participant in Goa liberation movement. But his political ideas and philosophical journey appears to be mostly molded by Lohia. He was Lok Sabha Member of the Indian Parliament from 1964 to 1979. He was said to be an encyclopedia of the Indian Constitution. According to him "Parliament was not a substitute for mass and popular movements but an additional instrument of public service and a platform for airing public grievances. It should be used as an instrument for reflecting the hopes and aspirations of the common man." He was also an articulate campaigner of civil liberties, and an expert in foreign policy. His entire ideological edifice was built on the secularism and nationalism constructed around "the spirit of tolerance" which forms "the essence of India's composite and plural culture".

The Emergency imposed by the Indira government on midnight of the 25th June 1975 was the first major challenge to the premature Indian "Democracy" and was also equally a challenge to the Constitutional scheme of the State. The election dispute of Indira was said to be the immediate cause, but it was also symptomatic of an emerging crisis between the feudal forces and the new bourgeois for space and supremacy in the Indian economy. Whatever be the factors and its varied analysis, the concerned citizens of India recalled the services of the saint Jayaprakash Narayan into political duty after almost two decades. And the rest is the history.

Lohia was no more. In the absence of him, the next in line of command among the socialists, along with the political forces, both on the right and the left, challenged Indira's dictatorial tendencies. Limaye also as a socialist and a concerned citizen played a significant role in these developments. He was the prime mover of the anti-Emergency forces, and along with Jayaprakash Narayan, laid foundations to a structural alternative to the Congress regime. In the re-alignment of political forces in the post-Emergency politics, the Jana Sangh agreed even to merge itself

into larger coalition. At the same time it had also created serious ripples in the ideological stance of the socialist and the left-wing thinkers.

In this milieu of new realities, Limaye was also the one, or probably the only one, who sensed the political incorrectness of joining the Right-forces for a temporary political need. Though he temporarily followed the line of action indicated by Jayaprakash Narayan in consolidating and organizing the anti-Congress forces, within two years of the formation of the Janata government, in 1979, he caused an immense stir within the Janata Parivar through his insistence on the members of the Janata Party that they shall not be members of any other alternative social or political organization, and thereby directly questioning the erstwhile Jana Sangh leadership in continuing their membership with the RSS. RSS was claiming quite often that it was a cultural organization and had no political ambitions, which was not true. It had created a piquant situation to the then Jana Sangh members in the Janata. It ultimately led to the fall of the Janata government, probably the first serious experiment at national level for an alternative to the Congress. Limaye was accused of being a “splitter,” a derogate description for his political correctness.

In fact, anti-Congressism itself was, and continues to be, a problematic political theory. A political theory is a positive description. “Anti-Congressism” as such is no alternative theory and had seen its zenith in this experiment of the Janata. It was also the beginning of the end of ostracisation of the RSS-Hindu Mahasabha-Jan Sangh right-wing politics in the post-independent India. The process started in the 1963 by-elections where Lohia took the help of Jana Sangh and in turn promised to return to them in some kind of a helping hand, reached its culmination in the Janata experiment.

Limaye was one among those who sensed the cost of this political mistake, of facilitating the Jan Sangh, in the blind pursuit of anti-Congressism. Immediately after the fall of the Janata experiment, he wrote an explanatory article (re-published in The Milli Gazette Online, 30 April 2019) explaining his stance against RSS. The article titled “**What is RSS?**” was reminiscent of the trauma of his early encounters with RSS on May 1st 1938, and their haunting memories. It appears that the pain of this socio-psychological injury left indelible impressions in his sub-consciousness. He rightly carried this trauma till his last breath while his comrades might have had reconciled to the realities of the currents of the times. While many of his colleagues and comrades in the socialist, movement softened their stance at times in the pursuit of their political contingencies, the main narrative being anti-Congressism, Limaye appears to have not allowed any dilution of his principled stand on the right-wing parties.

Lohia mentored many young men of his times, but two personalities stand out in the political arena of those times: one was Limaye and the other was George Fernandes. While Limaye understood the political folly of flirting with Jana Sangh from the beginning and was coexisting in their company during the Janata experiment. Fernandes had even extended bonhomie with the right-wing politics. In fact, the assassination of Gandhi and the atmosphere during the trial of Godse and his associates cleared the air of any doubt, and a miasma of the impending danger of the nation slipping into an era of darkness were very much suspected by many. What was required was a conscious effort on the part of the liberals and anti-fascist forces to be continuously and consciously on guard and avoid any political blinking even for a split-second. With all the failures and adverse credits, the Congress of both the Nehruvian and Indira-ian challenged the right-wing and firmly stayed on the ground of a secular edifice. But the others were more convinced against the Congress, the Nehrus and the ilk and lost the longer vision.

But it was not just a blinking that surprised many as the later events prove to us today in the hind-sight. It was a conscious accommodation of the right-wing politics by the socialists that gave some kind of political legacy to the Jana Sangh & Co. It was here, the anti-Congressism had become more an obsession among the socialists to the extent of blinding them to the long run consequences. Any student of political theory vouchsafes the idea that a political idea which tries to displace the dispensation in power at that time would dislodge the opponent with a view to occupy the space so-created by themselves. One would demolish the other when one thinks more probable to occupy the space so created. But the series of political activities that occurred during 1950-1990 would lead one to an inescapable conclusion that there was something seriously wrong in the oppositional politics of those times. If demolition of Congress was accompanied by the emergence of liberals or communists or socialists as the force next in queue for power, probably it would have been a strategically correct move even if it had lacked the political morality. But the reality now is that the right-wing is given the power on platter and the phenomenon appears to be not-so-easy to dislodge it in the near future.

George Fernandes, another protégé of Lohia, on the contrary, even became a partner to this project of resurrection of the right-wing in Indian politics by flirting with the Swadeshi Jagaran Manch first, and later by joining directly the Vajpeyi government. Fernandes might have his own reasoning for his decisions. It was a time when the Swadeshi Jagaran Manch, an outfit of the BJP, was posing itself as the sole organization opposing globalization. As staunch opponent of the MNCs all through his life, Fernandes might have found some hope in the Manch. But the question of how sincere was Swadeshi Jagaran Manch on this issue had been a nagging doubt even for a common man with ordinary political knowledge since the beginning. With his faculties for incisive examination of the ground realities, we cannot assume that Fernandes had been a political novice or he got into its trap. His decision to join the NDA of 1998-99 was a well-calculated mistake.

Limaye, on the other hand, was more consistent and clear about the right-wing politics. Even after retiring from active politics in 1982, he wrote extensively on the dangers ahead for the Indian polity. He wrote more than 100 books in English, Hindi and Marathi, explaining the political experience of the socialists, secularists, liberals and democrats of those times. He wrote on the Constitutional and Parliamentary practices, and on national and international issues. But he wrote quite extensively on the politics of those years as a short list of his publications do indicate: 1) Indian Polity in Transition, 2) India and the World, 3) Birth of Non-Congressism, 4) Communist Party: Facts and fiction, 5) Evolution of Social Party, 6) Politics after Freedom, 7) A socialist leader's survey of the post-1947 Indian political scene, 8) Contemporary Indian Politics, 9) Birth of non-Congressism: Opposition Politics 1947-1975, 9) Musings on current problems and past events, 10) Decline of a political system: Indian politics at the crossroads, 11) Religious bigotry: a threat to ordered state, and 12) Janata Party Experiment : An Insider's Account of Opposition Politics 1975-77 Vol.1 & 2.

When in-retrospect, we examine the present political environment where the right-wing gained full legitimacy through the two powerful mandates of "*we the people of India*", through the General Elections to the Lok Sabha in 2014 and 2019, it is time we looked back to Madhu Limaye, and what he did or said about this area of the Indian polity. Anti-Congressism has become a faith and philosophy among many political leaders and intellectuals in the opposition. What is the nature of this anti-Congressism in terms of a political theory? And in the final assessment, what it achieved in the long run for the Indian polity? It seems now, with hind sight, and with deep anguish, we need to admit that this anti-Congressism blinded the political consequences. Temporarity and contingency blinded long-term political objectives.

Limaye was, however, consistent on his opposition to the right-wing politics. In his 1979 article referred to earlier, he reassessed that "our first difference with RSS was over the issue of nationalism. We believed that every citizen had equal rights in the Indian nation. But the RSS and the Savarkarites came up their notion of Hindu Rashtra. Mohammad Ali Jinnah too was a victim of a similar world view. He believed that India was made up of two nations , the Muslims nation and the Hindu nation. Savarkar too said the same thing." Thus he reflected upon the democratic republic and how the RSS was opposed to it. He found certain similarities in their stance on Hitler etc. and the Indian nationhood. He distinguished the approaches towards the caste system between the socialists and the RSS, towards the language problem, federalism, and the question of respecting the tricolor flag. It was his consistent argument that the socialists and the right-wing parties cannot go together.

In the commemorative volume released by the Parliament Secretariat on Limaye, "**Madhu Limaye in Parliament – A Commemorative Volume**" (2008), U.R. Ananthamurthy is stated to have remarked that Limaye was probably "more uncompromising in his beliefs and practices than Dr. Ram Manohar Lohia, the doyen of socialists." (ibid, p.22) Kuldip Nayar, the eminent journalist, mentioned about the political environment of the post-emergency Janata period: "Irking Madhu was also the breach of promise by members of the erstwhile Jana Sangh to sever their connections with RSS. When they joined the Janata Party they had given an undertaking that they would end the dual membership and come out of Sangh Parivar. They refused to do so." (ibid, p.52). "Limaye fought against communalists all his life and he could not relent even when the ousting of Jana Sangh members meant the fall of Janata government." "He was sorry that the Janata government was breaking up but he felt it was inevitable since its stay meant a compromise with corruption on the one hand and communalism on the other." (p.52-53)

It is time we examined the political contradictions of anti-Congressism on one side and compromises in the anti-RSS constructions on the other side. The anticipated or unanticipated political outcome is startling. The Congress is demolished, and rightly beyond recovery. But simultaneously, the BJP is well inducted into Indian polity, and beyond any possibility of challenge in the near future. The RSS passed the test of history, thanks to short-sighted and ill-conceived anti-Congressism! Is Madhu Limaye twisting and twirling in his grave? In agony and with anger? Lohia, Madhu Limaye and George Fernandes – a legacy of three trajectories! Questions galore – can temporality blind even the so-called visionaries? What is the practical outcome of anti-Congressism so strong in the minds of the intellectuals of 1950s – 1990s to the common man of today's India? Did it felicitate the political sanctification of the RSS-Hind Maha Sabha-Jana Sangh-BJP combination in the long-run?