Dr. Ram Manohar Lohia: A Rebel Socialist and a Visionary Thinker (1910-1967)

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Dr Ram Manohar Lohia was a great freedom fighter, a veteran socialist, and a visionary thinker. He had warm bonds with Gandhi Ji, and on his thought process there are deep imprints of Gandhian concepts of non-violence, decentralization, civil disobedience and satyagraha. With the collapse of communist regimes and severe crisis faced by market economy, globalization and capitalism, Lohia’s theory of ‘equal-irrelevance’ of and ‘equal-distance’ from capitalism and communism is vindicated. The celebration of his birth centenary started on his 99th birthday on the last 23rd March and his followers have charted a two year plan (2009-2011) to celebrate it in India and abroad.

The author of this article, Prof. Satya Mitra Dubey, as a socialist youth activist, was closely associated with Dr. Lohia in his life time. Prof. Dubey spent more than two decades in Assam as Professor and Head of the Department of Sociology in Dibrugarh University and also acted as Vice Chancellor in the same University. There are several books to his credit. As a social-political analyst, he writes regularly in papers, magazines and journals.

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Dr Ram Manohar Lohia - a veteran freedom fighter, great visionary thinker, founder of the Indian socialist movement, a practitioner of Gandhian techniques of resistance and an active exponent of the idea of a World Government - was born on the 23rd March, 1910, at Akbarpur, District Faizabad, U.P. His death occurred on the 12th October, 1967 in New Delhi’s Wellington Hospital which was renamed as Dr Ram Manohar Lohia Hospital after his death. His political followers along with academics, intellectuals, creative writers, artists, journalists — influenced by his ideas and actions have charted out a two year plan (March 23, 2009 to March 23, 2011) to celebrate his ‘Birth Centenary’ in India and abroad. On the occasion of his 99th birthday, on the last 23rd March — the starting day of the centenary celebrations, befitting programmes remembering this stormy petrel of Indian politics were held in different parts of India. Besides a large gathering of socialist workers, leaders, intellectuals, social workers, New Delhi’s programme, held at Mavalankar Hall was attended by Prof. Paul Brass (USA), Prof. Detlef Briesen (Germany) and representatives from the South Asian countries.

In the coming two years, the birth centenary of Dr Lohia offers an opportunity to revisit his background, personality formation, political career, thought process, ideological orientation and will stimulate his followers to prepare a comprehensive plan to spread his vision of the restructuring of Indian society and the world system. The two-year span
of his birth centenary is an occasion to discuss the utility of his approaches in the present day’s context towards the place of caste and class in Indian society, preferential opportunities to the weaker sections, rightful place of Indian languages in official work and administration, and history writing and researches in Indian universities. As a visionary thinker, he raised several theoretical issues pertaining to society, polity, economy and the world system such as cyclical movement of history and society, oscillation between class and caste, small machine driven production, wastage, consumerism and capital formation, equal irrelevance of capitalism and communism, elimination of inequality at the international level through world parliament and an equal world order. These issues are more significant in the early decades of the 21st century where communism has collapsed and a world system based on the market economy and economic globalization is confronted with severe economic crisis.

As regards Dr Lohia’s background, he received primary education at Akbarpur, passed High School from Mumbai (1920-25) in first division, Intermediate from Varanasi (1925-27) and did graduation (BA in English Hons) in first division from Calcutta University (1927-29). Due to his deep interests in debates and extra-curricular activities, he missed first division in Intermediate examination. In Varanasi, he made wide reading of Hindi literary texts and tried to understand Indian philosophy. After graduation, he went to Germany in 1929 to complete his Master’s Course and to obtain the doctorate degree. He obtained his doctorate degree in 1932 in Economics on “Economics of Salt Satyagraha” from Humboldt (Berlin) University under the guidance of Late Prof. Werner Sombart – a noted economist. Since his early student days, he was deeply influenced by the freedom struggle, Congress politics, student and youth movements. During his stay in Mumbai and Kolkata, he developed command over Marathi and Bangla languages. In Germany, he wrote his Ph.D thesis in German. He had good understanding of French. The impact of Hiralal Lohia -- his father, his academic background, freedom struggle, participation in student movements, his polyglot character and close understanding of the socialist, communist and the Nazi movements in Germany played a crucial part in moulding the political orientations and influencing intellectual insights of Dr. Lohia.
After coming back to India in early 1933, he plunged into the freedom struggle. In May 1934, along with JP, Acharya Narendra Deva, Yusuf Meher Ali, Minoo Masani, Sampurnanand, Achyut Patwardhan, Kamala Devi Chattopadhyay, Ashok Mehta, SM Joshi, Sane Guru Ji, Sibnath Banerjee and Abdul Bari, he played a leading role in founding the Congress Socialist Party (CSP). From the very beginning, he was a member of its Organizing and Executive Committees. He was appointed Editor of the ‘Congress Socialist,’ an English weekly of the party. Despite scant resources, he turned this weekly into a powerful medium for raising national and international issues. In his stormy political career, he was closely associated with the founding and editing of journals. In the post-independence period, he founded and edited weekly ‘Chauukhambha,’ monthly ‘Jan’ both in Hindi and monthly ‘Mankind’ in English.

In 1936 when Lohia was only 26 year old, the then Congress President Jawahar Lal Nehru appointed him as secretary of the foreign affairs wing of the Congress Party and called him a “rising star” in Indian politics. Lohia brought out a regular AICC bulletin on foreign affairs and published several booklets related to foreign policy, India and China, war in Spain and civil liberties. In one of the booklets of this period titled as “Salient Points of the Indian Foreign Policy,” he laid the foundation of the foreign relations of the Indian National Congress which proved to be a precursor of Independent India’s foreign policy. In September, 1939, the Second World War broke out in Europe. Lohia wholeheartedly opposed the war efforts launched by the colonial administration in India. He was arrested and awarded a rigorous jail term. At that stage Gandhi Ji said, “I cannot sit still when I see Ram Manohar Lohia and Jaya Prakash Narayan in jail. I do not know braver or straighter men than them.” Since then, Gandhi Ji was specially fond of Dr. Lohia.

At the early stage of 1942, socialists in Congress were mainly instrumental in motivating Gandhi Ji to launch ‘Quit India’ movement. Dr Lohia was a moving spirit behind the ‘Quit India’ movement and a leading light along with JP, Achyut Patwardhan, Aruna Asaf Ali, and Usha Mehta in organizing underground revolutionary movement in 1942-44. He formed ‘Azad Dasta,’ an underground group and established his centres at Mumbai, Kolkata and Nepal. He operated the underground ‘Congress Radio Station.’ Lohia was arrested in May 1944 in Mumbai and sent to the
most notorious Lahore Fort Jail. He had to undergo the worst type of torture in jail. Dr Lohia and JP were almost the last political prisoners who were released from jail in April 1946.

After release from jail, there was a new phase of struggles in Lohia’s life. In June, 1946 he was arrested in Goa by the Portuguese administration where he had gone to take some rest after the gruesome jail term. That proved to be the harbinger of Goa’s struggle for independence. Gandhi Ji supported Lohia’s action and openly admired his steps. Starting from his release from jail in 1946 till the assassination of Mahatma on the 30th January, 1948, it was a phase of very close bond between Gandhi Ji and Dr. Lohia. Lohia supported the movement launched by Nepali Congress against Rana regime in Nepal from its beginning in 1946 and he was arrested in May 1949 along with several socialist workers while protesting in front of the Nepal embassy in Delhi.

In March, 1948, JP, Lohia, Narendra Deva along with other Socialists colleagues at their Nasik conference decided to quit Congress and resolved to form a separate Socialist Party. The Socialists suffered defeat in the first general election in 1952 and they tried to do some soul searching exercise at the special convention of the party held at Panchmarhi in May, 1952. Since 1952, there were different strands in the party regarding ideology, policy, programme and approach towards Congress and communists. JP joined Bhoodan movement launched by Vinoba Bhave. Ashok Mehta propounded the thesis of the ‘compulsions of the backward economy’ which in practical terms pleaded for cooperation with the ruling Congress Party. Lohia laid emphasis on the ‘policy of equi-distance’ from Congress and communists. As a fallout, the KMPP led by Acharya Kripalani and the Socialist Party decided to merge together in September, 1952 and the new Party was named as the Praja Socialist Party (PSP). The differences among Lohia, JP and Ashok Mehta were growing on the issue of cooperation with the Congress-led government. To resolve the differences, a special convention of the Socialist Party was held at Betul in June 1953. In the first week of Jan, 1954, during the Allahabad Conference of the PSP, there was some patch up. Acharya JB Kripalani was elected Chairman of the party and Lohia was elected its General Secretary. During 1952-54 Lohia tried to revitalize the Indian
socialist movement by giving fresh theoretical, ideological, programmatic and agitational foundations to it.

The imprint of Gandhian framework was obvious on Lohia’s ideology when he emphasized on decentralization, constructive programmes, non-violent protests and satyagraha. He wanted that the Socialist Party should place equal emphasis on vote (Ballot), agitation (Jail) and constructive work (Spade). For the reorganization of Indian polity and economy, his emphasis was on the democratic decentralization through ‘Chaukhambha Raj’ where power and economy were to be equally divided among villages, districts, provinces and the Centre. In the place of reservation, he pleaded for the principle of ‘Vishesh Awasar’ under which 60 per cent of the political and economic space for a time specified period was to be secured for the backward classes – comprising Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, Backward Castes, backward among minorities and women. In the place of class struggle based on violence and the elimination of class enemies, he practiced the instruments of collective actions through civil disobedience and satyagraha against injustice, exploitation and tyranny. There was an unfortunate division in the socialist movement in India in 1955. In the place of PSP, Lohia revived the Socialist Party and as its Chairman, he worked very hard at the organizational, agitational, ideological fronts and launched a number of programmes to give the Socialist Party a distinct identity. His programmes of ‘Dam Bandho’ in this phase of inflation and economic crisis caused by consumerism, ‘Jati Todo’ in the rising wave of casteism, ‘Angreji Hatao’ in a downtrodden phase of Indian languages and ‘Himalaya Bachao’ with growing insecurity on the borders are more relevant than ever.

Throughout his life, Lohia was a man of action and a hero in leading powerful people’s movements against Portugal’s colonial rule in Goa (1946), against the Rana regime and for the restoration of democracy in Nepal (1946, 1949), struggle in Rewa state (1950), peasant’s struggle in Kagodu, Shimoga, Karnataka (1951), peasant’s movement against increase in canal tax rate in UP (1954), movement in Manipur for the establishment of state assembly (1955) and All India Satyagraha launched by the Socialist Party (1957). In these movements, he was imprisoned and was mostly released by Courts. He was arrested in Arunachal Pradesh protesting against the ban on entry without permit (1958, 1959). In the USA he was detained (1964) for protesting against racial discrimination, and when the State Department apologized to him, he replied that they
should apologize to the Statue of Liberty. There was a movement against hunger death in Bihar. He was arrested in that connection and was released by the Supreme Court (1965). His struggles against the Government’s callousness continued unabated and he was arrested in connection with ‘UP Bandh’ (1966), jailed during the students’ strike in Delhi and was again released by the Supreme Court (1966). During the process of his struggles, he developed techniques of peaceful collective action, non-violent civil disobedience against injustice and remodeled methods of mass protests through Satyagraha.

Dr. Lohia was elected to the Lok Sabha in 1963. On his initiative, the first vote of no confidence motion against Nehru government was moved in the Lok Sabha and his speech delivered at that time against the working of the Government is regarded as a landmark in Indian Parliamentary history. His strategic move to give concrete shape to the ‘non-congressism’ and the formation of the Sanyukt Socialist Party (SSP) were the two major developments in Indian politics during 1963-67. Lohia was the conceptual and practical architect of ‘non-congressism.’ The political outcome of this experiment was visible in the 1967 elections when the non-Congress governments were formed in nine States. At the time of the peak of his political glory, at the age of 57 only, his life-journey came to an end in October, 1967.

IV

In Lohia’s framework of social-economic transformation, politics is the real moving force. In his concept of politics, theory and practice, struggle and constructive work, democracy and civil disobedience (symbolically represented by spade, ballot and jail) are combined together. Like Marx, his emphasis was on struggle but he discarded the idea of violence. He tried to refine the Gandhian techniques of non-violence and Satyagraha (often based on fast and individual actions) by accepting non-violent methods of struggle but adding to it the mass based civil disobedience against injustice and exploitation. He disagreed with Marxist theses of forces of production, surplus value and imperialism as the last stage of capitalism. Lohia is of the view that the techniques of production (huge machines, heavy technology, mass production) remain the same in the capitalist and the communist systems. The only difference between them is on the forces of production and the ownership of the means of production. The private ownership of the means of production in the capitalist system is replaced by the state
ownership in the communist system but labour as a major force of production does not benefit from the surplus profit, the labourer remains alienated and does not become the master of his products. To correct the anomaly of both systems, Lohia’s emphasis is on small machine driven tools of production and ownership under the control of cooperatives and communities. In Marxist analysis, imperialism is the last stage of capitalism. Lohia does not agree with this proposition. By citing concrete examples from the economic history of India, England, Western Europe and Africa, he has marshalled evidence to prove that imperialism practiced by England and other Western European countries greatly contributed to the rise of capitalism in Europe. The rise of the first phase of Capitalism in England was the result of the loot and capital flow from Bengal to England, followed by the occupation and economic exploitation of the whole of India, leading to the capture of Africa and South-east Asia which led to the strengthening of the capitalist system in Europe. The same story was repeated in the case of Spain, France and Holland where the growth of capitalism largely depended on the imperialist expansion and the exploitation of resources of their colonies.

With the collapse of communism in Soviet Russia, East Europe, rejection of it by China and the recent global economic crisis generated by capitalism based on market economy, the relevance of his theory of ‘equi-distance’ has to be properly understood. He propounded that the Indian and Asian socialism should be different from the European Marxist thought process of socialism, since historical, material and social conditions are different in the two continents. At the ideological level, the path of socialism must be distinct and at the equal distance from the paths of capitalism and communism. The latter two systems are equally irrelevant in assuring freedom, equality and prosperity to mankind at large. In the era of military blocks of cold war days, his thrust was that the countries of Asia, Africa, Latin America in general and India in particular should be at equal-distance from the Atlantic and Warsaw pacts. In the place of the toothless idea of non-alignment, his stress was on the creation of a vibrant positive third block. Similarly, in the domestic Indian politics, socialists should be at an equal-distance from the Congress and the Communist parties.

In this unequal world order, his theory of seven revolutions or ‘Sapta Kranti’ for building a society based on male-female equality, elimination of colour discrimination, revolution against birth and caste based inequality, revolution against colonialism and for the establishment of
world parliament, revolution against inequality generated by private capital and for the growth of capital through planning, revolution against armament, and in favour of mass civil disobedience offer an alternative to create a just social system.

Apart from politics, his books – ‘Marx, Gandhi and Socialism,’ ‘Wheel of History,’ ‘Fragments of a World Mind,’ ‘Will to Power’ and dozens of other booklets are clear testimony to his intellectual prowess. He had close contacts with leaders of the socialist movement all over the world and had personal equations with some of the great minds of the world. This is evident from Harris Wofford’s book ‘Lohia and America Meet,’ and Rama Mitra’s ‘Lohia Thru Letters.’ On the mind of some of the great names in Indian literature, art, films, journalism, judiciary and social sciences, there are unending imprints of his personality and thoughts. In several Indian universities, Lohia’s thoughts are incorporated in the course and around a dozen Ph.D. theses have been prepared on different aspects of his thoughts.

V

The later decades of the 20th century saw the collapse of communism in Russia, Eastern Europe and Central Asia. At the same time at the global level, there was the rise of market economy and economic globalization as an extension of capitalism. Since the beginning of the 20th century, Capitalist system has been passing through the phases of severe crises. In the form of a great human crisis, the First World War was the fallout of the contradictions among the capitalist-imperialist countries. As an alternative, there was communist revolution in Russia (1917) and the Fascist take-over in Italy (1922). Both had faith in totalitarian systems and the dictatorial regimes. The laissez-faire anchored capitalist system faced another great challenge in the form of the ‘Great Depression’ (1929-32) and its one major outcome was the take over of Germany by the Nazi Party led by Adolph Hitler. Mankind faced another crisis in the form of the Second World War generated by the cut throat rivalry among imperialist powers represented by Britain and France on the one hand and Germany and Italy on the other. In the course of the war, the East European countries, Mongolia and North Korea were captured by the Red Army of Soviet Russia. The communists succeeded in capturing power in China and Vietnam. Mankind had to face another crisis known as the cold
war between the capitalist countries led by America and the communist countries led by Soviet Russia.

The communist system collapsed in Russia, Central Asia and East Europe in the early 1990s, followed by the sudden upsurge of the market economy and the capitalist system at the global level. Communist China also adopted the policy of private ownership and market economy. Now, the perpetual story of capitalist crisis has surfaced again in 2008-09 in a more unmanageable form. There are inherent contradictions in the capitalist and the communist systems. In these circumstances, Lohia’s thesis of ‘equal irrelevance’ of and ‘equi-distance’ from capitalism and communism has been vindicated.

On the occasion of his birth centenary, let us resolve to reanalyze Lohia’s intellectual contributions. In the coming two years, let us try to spread his reexamined messages of broad nationalism, democracy, socialism and the international order. As a nationalist, Lohia was a valiant fighter for Indian independence and his primary concern was to rebuild India through principled politics, approximate equality, decent standard of life, capital formation through control over wasteful expenditure and conspicuous consumerism, rightful place of Indian languages, elimination of castes and time bound preferential opportunity for the backward sections of society. His nationalism was not narrow. He was a champion of a new civilization based on democracy, socialism, non-violence and disarmament. He was a great votary of an egalitarian international order and a world government. He considered himself a world citizen. Lohia’s theories of twin origin of capitalism and imperialism, equal irrelevance of capitalism and communism, small unit machines, oscillation between class and caste and permanent civil disobedience are today more useful and valid than ever before. During the course of his birth centenary, his ideas pertaining to society, polity, economy, culture, world system must be thoroughly discussed, examined and wherever found appropriate as per demand of time and place, they must be operationalized.

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