

Lohia's Thinking on Local Governments

MAHI PAL

The papers in the special issue on Rammanohar Lohia (EPW, 2 October 2010) did not dwell on the socialist leader's thinking on local governance and local development, ideas which continue to be relevant today for rural development.

EPW (2 October 2010) published a collection of articles written by academicians and political activists on the "Politics and Ideas of Rammanohar Lohia".

Here, I want to emphasise Rammanohar Lohia's (hereafter referred as RML). Ideas on local governance and local development, their relevance today, the action taken so far and what is needed to put his precepts fully into practice. Although passing references to local governance have been made in the articles of some of the authors, there is a need for more discussion.

Local Governance

The "four-pillar state" (FPS), i.e., the centre, state, district and village, as a framework for decentralised policy and development that was evolved by RML has paramount importance and relevance for India. In this regard, Sachchidanand Sinha in his paper in EPW writes, "Lohia suggested a four-pillar state. But experience shows that the hierarchical form of the four-pillar state could ultimately end in the centralisation of power." He is right to an extent. But his statement that "Lohia may not have offered an ideal solution..." (p. 52) needs discussion. In fact, RML offered the solution which has not been put into practice. RML pleaded for making the panchayat the unit of self-government by vesting in it the power to oversee law and order. He advocated the idea that the government should be near the people so that they have easy access to it and can see the functioning of their government. Decentralised planning under the umbrella of democratic institutions is the only way to plan various schemes taking into account local resources for and the constraints on development. RML rightly pointed out that institution-building was the weak point in the history of economic development in India. He tried to remove this weakness by propagating the idea of

decentralisation (devolution of political and economic power) to the grass roots.

The 73rd (Constitution) Amendment Act (hereafter CA) and its extension to scheduled areas is testimony to the relevance of RML's thought expressed in the early 1950s. Although what RML said is not fully covered by these acts, it was a step in that direction. The CA prescribed a three-tier structure (i.e., the village panchayat as the lowest tier, the panchayat samiti as the intermediate tier and the zilla parishad as the apex tier) of the panchayati raj system (PRS) in the country.

In the idea of FPS of RML, there was no intermediate tier (i.e., panchayat samiti/block panchayat/panchayat union, etc) as he did not consider it relevant in the Indian context. The experience with the functioning of panchayati raj for the past 15 years after the implementation of CA has revealed that there has not been much of a role for this body in local governance and naturally the villagers and their representatives have not shown much interest. Elected representatives of this tier have been found to say that as there is not much to be done in their posts, it may be removed. Lohia's views have been proven, for example, in the recent panchayat elections in Haryana. The average number of contestants per position increased from 2.88 in 2000 to 3.35 in 2010. However, the maximum number of candidates per seat was for the zilla parishad, followed by for the post of the sarpanch and the least for the panchayat samiti. The panchayat election results of this tier of the PRS in other states may also be examined for the relevance of Lohia's views.

Further, in the context of institution-building, it may be stated that almost all programmes of the governments have been/are being restructured based on institution-building triggered towards a demand-driven mode. The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) programme is an example of this because it is based on social mobilisation and institution-building at different levels. The Swarnajayanti Gram Swarajgar Yojana (SGSY), a self-employment generation scheme for the poor, is being restructured as the National Rural Livelihood

The views expressed here are personal.

Mahi Pal (mpal1661@gmail.com) belongs to the Indian Economic Service and is currently with the Ministry of Rural Development.

Mission (NRLM), mainly based on institution-building of the poor through self-help groups and their federations.

Local Development

RML's programmes and actions were addressed to eradicate inequality and poverty. His plans dealt with the causes, not the symptoms of poverty disease.

While deliberating on the policy commission of the Praja Socialist Party during 27-30 November 1953 at Bombay, RML came out with a scheme for local development. The planks of the scheme were: (a) reclamation of wastelands, (b) equitable distribution of land, (c) abolition of land revenue, (d) establishment of a bhoomi sena or land army, and (e) emphasis on small and medium irrigation.

He was of the opinion that the food problem could only be solved if the monopoly of some people on land was broken and the land was to be given to the tiller. The example of West Bengal is a household name in this regard.

On the land army, he said that a large number of unemployed persons living in rural and urban areas could be absorbed

for tilling the cultivable wastes. The brighter among them would be given training in agro-engineering. This army would be clothed, housed and financed by the state. It would move from one place to another and would disseminate the idea of socialism and also break down barriers of class and caste. This is a very important aspect of India's agricultural revolution. If this idea can be implemented, the problem of land degradation and augmentation of production could be solved. Besides, awareness about disintegrating forces will be spread in the country.

However, the ideas of RML have been implemented only in a piecemeal/fragmented way without adopting a holistic approach through the establishment of district and village governments. In order to enhance agricultural production and employment opportunities with small investment, the relevance of small and medium schemes cannot be doubted at the present level of agricultural development.

The idea of wasteland development has already been transplanted through the Drought Prone Area Development Programme and Desert Development Programme

launched by the government, which is now designated as the Integrated Wasteland Development Programme. Common guidelines for watershed development have also been drawn up to give a focused approach to wasteland development. The earlier employment guarantee scheme of Maharashtra and the MGNEGS marked a paradigm shift from the previous wage-employment programmes with its right-based approach that makes the government legally accountable for providing employment to those who demand it. The works to be undertaken under the MGNREGS are aimed at water harvesting, soil conservation, flood protection, afforestation and plantations.

RML was both a dreamer and a propagator. He wanted to create a better India with greater equality and social justice. The approach to development Lohia advanced could not be put into practice in his time perhaps due to political reasons/prejudices. The socialist movement has withered away due to lack of political mobilisation of the people for bringing into fruition the ideas and thoughts of RML/the socialist movement.

Economic & Political WEEKLY

REVIEW OF WOMEN'S STUDIES

October 30, 2010

Rethinking Feminist Methodologies

– Anandhi S, Meera Velayudhan

Methodological Concerns

– Maithreyi Krishnaraj

Feminist Contributions from the Margins: Shifting Conceptions of Work and Performance of the Bar Dancers of Mumbai

– Forum against the Oppression of Women

Experiments in Methodology on Reproductive Technology: Feminisms, Ethnographic Trajectories and Unchartered Discourse

– Victoria Loblay

In Pursuit of the Virgin Whore: Writing Caste/Outcaste Histories

– Priyadarshini Vijaisri

Estimating Unpaid Care Work: Methodological Issues in Time Use Surveys

– Neetha N

Law Commission Reports on Rape

– Rukmini Sen

For copies write to:

Circulation Manager,

Economic and Political Weekly,

320-321, A to Z Industrial Estate, Ganpatrao Kadam Marg, Lower Parel,

Mumbai 400 013.

email: circulation@epw.in