

# DEVELOPMENT IN A DEMOCRACY: A LOHIA AGENDA FOR 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTAURY INDIA

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We live in very troubled times.

Each morning I open the newspapers with a sense of dread. What new aberrations will one find, what fresh neo-liberal pronouncements and anti people policies; palliatives to pander to the new growing middle classes? What further sops for the economic and political elite will be proclaimed that will further widen the gap between the haves and the have-nots?

Water Privatisation supported by the Planning Commission<sup>1</sup>; corruption the accepted norm; disproportionate spending on the development of urban centres to suit corporate 'wish lists'; and fixing the poverty line at a per capita daily income so low that it is often called the starvation line<sup>2</sup>!

India may be shining – but the majority of her people are not!

What is the way forward? My mind goes back to my childhood in search of answers. It is February 1956 the first Socialist Study Camp at Red Hills near Chennai. Though I was not yet 4 years old, the excitement and enthusiasm was palpable. Flush with new found Independence, the discussions for an Agenda for India led by Dr. Lohia were animated. There was hope and the anticipation of building *“a free India without poverty where her people would be engaged in building a society in which the Indian mind demolishes the walls of caste and class and thinks thoughts nurtured in free-wellbeing<sup>3</sup>”*, words that echoed the core principles on which our free Nation was built – equality, freedom and democracy – a commitment to tackling inequality and ensuring social justice.

However, this was not to be. We embarked on a trajectory that flouts all the norms that would have guaranteed this. Since Independence the Indian State has failed in the 'Quest for the Second Freedom' and now these fundamentals are being threatened like never before. We only need to look around us to know that not only have we failed to ensure economic, social and moral freedom for all through participatory democracy, but ironically, the battle for democratic decentralisation has now become one to save the State itself from a corporate takeover!

Democracy is not easy. It places serious demands on Governments to respond to people's aspirations and on citizens to exercise their vote with maturity, vigilance and discretion. If, therefore, the benefits of 'development' are designed so that they are cornered by a disproportionately small section of the population who are on the fast track to affluent opulence and citizens are coerced to sell their votes in a highly commoditised consumer world, both development and democracy are threatened.

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1 Govt may put water in private hands/ Aditya Raj Das and Ajith Athrady, New Delhi, April 22, DHNS/ Deccan Herald/ Saturday 23 April 2011

2 The Hindu/New Delhi/ April 20, 2011

3 Pamphlet of Khoj Parishad

Development can be of two kinds. One, inclusive, determined by the people through their participation, not just in an election, but through decentralised governance or Panchayati Raj. The other, exclusive development determined by the minority economic elite pushing for more liberalisation and privatisation and the removal of safety nets for the poor and marginalised. The latter is hindered by participatory democracy and its proponents systematically whittle away at democratic structures and participatory processes until only a hollow shell remains.

India has moved dramatically since Red Hills where the blue-print for enabling a liberated secular egalitarian nation were based on a set of premises that are no longer tenable. India was a different being then with a set of characteristics that have radically changed. We cannot turn the clock back, nor rely on solutions that are outmoded and inappropriate to the altered challenges of today. Nor is the euphoria of Red Hills enough; and so as a socialist and a political activist I turn to Lohia's writings for answers. Not for a prescription, but in search of the principles behind his pronouncements, the values that guided his vision.

### **Poverty**

The principal failure of the Indian State has been the inability to secure social, economic and political justice for all and so let us examine poverty one of the perennial conditions of the Indian state - an ancient affliction that we do seem to be able to rid ourselves off.

Today, poverty is widespread in India with the nation estimated to have a third of the world's poor. According to a 2005 World Bank<sup>4</sup> estimate, 41.6% of the total Indian population falls below the international poverty line of US\$ 1.25 a day<sup>5</sup>.

The Planning Commission Deputy Chairman Montek Singh Ahluwalia recently announced that the line for determining those who fall below poverty (BPL) will be a mere Rs 20 in urban areas and Rs 11 in rural areas. He said that the latest data of the Planning Commission indicates that poverty has declined to 32 per cent in 2009-10 from 37.2 per cent five years ago<sup>6</sup> and this has been very conveniently achieved by limiting the quantum of BPL to 36% and lowering the line to cover less poor<sup>7</sup>.

The Supreme Court in response to a PIL filed by the PUCL demanded an explanation of the Planning Commission as to *"how (they could) justify fixation of this meagre amount when even in the rural areas the amount is not enough"*. They also made scathing observations against the Planning Commission saying; *"You can't have two Indias. What is this stark contradiction in our whole approach in eradication of malnutrition? You say you are a powerful country but at the same time, starvation deaths are taking place in various parts of the country. It (malnutrition) must be totally eliminated and eradicated"* and also asked the Planning Commission to explain its rationale behind limiting the number of below poverty line (BPL) people in a state to 36 per cent of its population. The apex court also questioned the logic in the government claiming that there were adequate food grains in the country when thousands of people are dying on account of starvation<sup>8</sup>.

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4 [http://en.Wikipedia.org/wiki/World\\_Bank](http://en.Wikipedia.org/wiki/World_Bank)

5 [http://en.Wikipedia.org/wiki/Poverty\\_in\\_India#cite\\_note-WB\\_Poverty/\(PPP \[Purchasing Power Parity\] in nominal terms ₹ 21.6 a day in urban areas and ₹ 14.3 in rural areas\)](http://en.Wikipedia.org/wiki/Poverty_in_India#cite_note-WB_Poverty/(PPP [Purchasing Power Parity] in nominal terms ₹ 21.6 a day in urban areas and ₹ 14.3 in rural areas))

6 The Hindu/New Delhi/ April 20, 2011

7 There Can't Be Two Indias: SC/New Delhi, Apr 20, (PTI)/Deccan Herald Thursday 21 April 2011

8 Ibid

At the same time, in March 2011, Forbes announced its list of billionaires. India now has 55 billionaires, 7 more than last year and has seven names in the top 100. The write ups in the press drool over the fact this year's list of the world's super-rich shows that there is the transfer of economic accumulation away from the traditional 'West' and economic power is haemorrhaging towards the emerging economies around the globe<sup>9</sup>. Lakshmi Mittal has a net worth of \$31.1 billion dollars and grabs sixth place in Forbes billionaires list for 2011, Mukesh Ambani with \$27 billion ranks ninth and Azim Premji ranks 36<sup>th</sup> with a net worth of \$16.8 billion.

Narayan Murthy receives from Infosys alone Rs: 56,25,000 per annum not counting his other earnings from HSBC, Unilever and others. This would mean a sum of Rs: 15,625 per day a difference of Rs: 15,005 per day between him and the millions who are subsisting on less than Rs: 20 per day - a disparity of 781 times!

The challenges that Lohia saw more than 60 years ago have exacerbated into a chronic disease. He felt then that no one could be quite sure about anything except that falsity and bribery were almost a part of every transaction. He sensed that in such a national situation people were losing faith in political changes and there was a need to focus on raising character as a prerequisite for everything else. He believed that the greatest danger to character comes from greed and big money, wasteful expenditure and the social prestige that is falsely associated with it. He said; *"Men want money, those at the top want more of it in order to maintain themselves in luxury and prestige, and those at the bottom want a little bit more so as to fill their belly. The attack on greed must, therefore, take place at the top. This is the only way to rid the population of its present obsession with money."*<sup>10</sup>

We rank eighth in the world in the number of our millionaires, but we stand 119<sup>th</sup> on the Human Development Index<sup>11</sup>. Most shocking is that only about 0.2 per cent of our people are growing at 9.92 per cent per annum while for a large number of our people the growth rate is down to 0.2 per cent and a further 400 million - even if we go by Montek Singh's figures - are barely surviving!

The latest World Bank estimates of the 'below-the-poverty-line' households are about 100 million or about 456 million individuals<sup>12</sup>. The World Bank also estimates that 80% or more that 800 million of India's population lives on less than \$2 a day which is a higher proportion as compared with sub-Saharan Africa<sup>13</sup>.

What a travesty! We are bedazzled by statistics that are formulated to befuddle us and the 'feel good' notion that we have arrived in the Global arena overtakes our good sense! We pat ourselves on the back that we can now boast that one of ours – Lakshmi Mittal – is the 44<sup>th</sup> richest man in the world and the 6<sup>th</sup> most powerful. Forbes also has a list of the world's most powerful people, the majority of whom are not elected people's representatives. A large number are dictators and the rest rich businessmen. This demonstrates who dictates policies

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9 The Tribune Friday, March 11, 2011, Chandigarh, India

10 Lohia/Programme To End Poverty/JANATA, March 20-27, 2011 Remembering Dr. Lohia

11 The Tribune Friday, March 11, 2011, Chandigarh, India

12 [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Poverty\\_in\\_India#cite\\_note-ncar-7](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Poverty_in_India#cite_note-ncar-7)

13 [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Poverty\\_in\\_India#cite\\_note-World\\_Bank\\_Report-9](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Poverty_in_India#cite_note-World_Bank_Report-9)

and determines development - that in a world of 6.8 billion people a mere 68 people rule the future of our planet<sup>14</sup>!

Lohia believed that Indian poverty was largely due to the dearth of capital and lack of tools. He said; *“The Indian has to produce wealth with tools and capital worth Rs. 150 while the West European commands over Rs. 3,000 worth of production equipment<sup>15</sup>”*. He believed that foreign capital could not bridge this gap and native capital was wholly incapable of this task. His 13-point programme to end poverty contained two main items of capital formation: (1) Food Army, and (2) Industrialization, particularly with the help of cottage industry machines. When Lohia wrote this the Indian record in inventing machines was zero and he felt that the State should step in<sup>16</sup>. This is still largely true. Our wealth formation is mainly in being subcontractors to the United States and the West in the form of IT-BPOs and this wealth is concentrated with a few – the IT Barons and the New Middle Class.

Lohia believed that capital was past earnings turned into tools and the State alone could step up both savings and tools<sup>17</sup>. The wealth formation now is solely in the hands of private enterprise and the state is heavily in debt. He also believed that India was living in a state of deferred death and he urgently recommended that a plan for capital formation must be put into immediate operation<sup>18</sup>.

Now India’s GDP stands at \$2.55 trillion and its national debt is 78% - 80% of its GDP<sup>19</sup>. This is very close to the danger mark. According to an international comparison of external debt of the twenty most indebted countries, India was the fifth most indebted country in 2007.

Though India’s credit rating outlook has been raised from ‘negative’ to ‘stable’ based on optimism and speculation that speedy growth in Asia’s third-largest economy will help to cut budget deficit and the Indian Finance Minister promised to cut the deficit from 6.9% of the GDP in 2009 to 5.5% of the GDP in 2010, it has actually escalated to 10.2%<sup>20</sup>. The Indian government has also promised to cut the debt from the current levels of 80% to 68% of the GDP by 2015<sup>21</sup>, but with our track record that is not a real possibility.

India has a long history of running high fiscal deficits. The political imperatives that arise from widespread poverty combined with massive leakage of resources due to corruption have resulted in a string of deficits over the years. The persistently high deficits are partly the result of the need for coalition governments to accede to the demands of a variety of constituencies. The second obvious reason is the extremely high level of corruption in India. Unofficial reports state that upwards of 50% of all government spending is lost to corruption and theft.<sup>22</sup>

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14 Forbes Gallery 2011: The World’s Most Powerful People/There are 6.8 billion people on the planet. Here are the 68 who matter.

15 Lohia/Programme To End Poverty/JANATA, March 20-27, 2011 Remembering Dr. Lohia

16 Lohia/Programme To End Poverty/JANATA, March 20-27, 2011 Remembering Dr. Lohia

17 Lohia/Programme To End Poverty/JANATA, March 20-27, 2011 Remembering Dr. Lohia

18 Lohia/Programme To End Poverty/JANATA, March 20-27, 2011 Remembering Dr. Lohia

19 <http://asiancorrespondent.com/449/debt-by-country-map-and-indias-national-debt/>

20 India Outlook 2011/ <http://seekingalpha.com/article/245734-india-outlook-2011-part-2-deficits-and-debt-balance-of-payments-inflation-interest-and-exchange-rates>

21 Economy Watch/ <http://www.economywatch.com/indianeconomy/debt-situation.html>

22 India Outlook 2011/ <http://seekingalpha.com/article/245734-india-outlook-2011-part-2-deficits-and-debt-balance-of-payments-inflation-interest-and-exchange-rates>

Lohia said; *“(India) is eating her past earnings and the rest of the sterling balances will be spent up in another two or three years. Famine will stare in the face and then it will be too late. The key industries of the country must be nationalized during the current year if catastrophe is to be avoided. A plan of capital formation must be put into immediate operation. In addition to the food army and small machine industrialisation, volunteer labour is a third item of capital formation. Even if one out of every ten in the adult population were to give an hour of free work to his village on some work of digging and building, the country would be able to finance capital works worth more than one billion rupees without spending anything at all. This will be possible only after the destruction of feudal and capitalist ownership and when the people are enthused into a feeling of mastery over their wealth. Meanwhile, volunteer bands of the more conscious elements in the population must set to work immediately. The destruction of feudalism and capitalism is not alone a dictate of justice or equality but a simple life and death issue for the Indian people. In another two or three years it will be too late and famine will stalk the land”*<sup>23</sup>  
This was in the late 40's.

In the 21 century countless farmers have committed suicide and we have witnessed innumerable starvation deaths. India has the largest number of mal-nourished children in the world<sup>24</sup>. Hunger has grown at an unprecedented rate since the crisis of the 60's. The per capita food available per Indian in 1991 was 510 gms, the highest ever for independent India, but in 2006 the figure (which is the last full year figure available) was 422gms, a fall of 80gms. At one end of the spectrum 20% are eating better than ever before, but the cake is shrinking so what are the other 40% or 60 % eating?<sup>25</sup>

According to the FAO<sup>26</sup> India is 94<sup>th</sup> in the Global hunger index of 131 nations just ahead of Zimbabwe at 93<sup>rd</sup>. As per the IFPRI's<sup>27</sup> – Global hunger progress indicator, we are just behind Ethiopia.<sup>28</sup>

Lohia's predictions may be close to the actual events unfolding before us, but are his solutions still feasible? He advocated for key industries of the country must be nationalised. We went down the path of partial nationalisation and before it could prove its worth we opened up to corporate globalisation. Now after paving the way for privatising health and education, we now wish to privatise even basic necessities such as water.

He wished for one out of every ten adults in Indian to volunteer an hour of free work to her/his village on some work of digging and building. But with poverty levels hitting an all time low, free labour would be difficult to come by unless the affluent were the ones to volunteer. NREGA is designed to enable this, but the way it is being mismanaged, it is not really serving this purpose.

The destruction of feudalism and capitalism, Lohia believed, were the key to ending poverty. 60 years later we have barely touched the surface of feudalism and capitalism has become our 'magic mantra'. Lohia's proposal to make punishable all spending above Rs. 1,000 per family would not be enforceable today. Even revised estimates would not work. The winds of the

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23 Lohia/Programme To End Poverty/JANATA, March 20-27, 2011 Remembering Dr. Lohia

24 NDTV

25 P. Sainath/<http://theatreforum.in/static/upload/docs/PSainath.pdf>

26 Food and Agriculture Organization

27 International Food And Policy Research Institute

28 P. Sainath/<http://theatreforum.in/static/upload/docs/PSainath.pdf>

economic and political climate are blowing in the opposite direction and there is no will to bring about a ceiling on income or expenditure. We have also created a 'middle class' who hanker for the millionaire status and the youth who are desperate to get there. Those who believe in equitable distribution of wealth and resources are few and silent.

40 years ago we lived in simpler times where there was honour, dedication and a commitment to India and a nationalist zeal. A time when the collective consciousness of a nation was national honour and pride and in depth nuanced political debate. Where adversaries conversed in pursuit of the truth and service was the primary intent. Now the quest for power overrides all else and national zeal has been replaced with individual vested interests. There is a systematic dismantling of safety nets and the provisions that nurture people's movements. The space for political dissent and civil disobedience is being steadily eroded; consumerism is being rammed down our throats and the thirst for money has turned us against each other, divided we stand for our own survival – survival of the fittest – the mentality of the caged. We have strayed from a colourful world where all the shades in between were painstakingly explored - to a black and white world of absolutes.

So even if the remedies suggested by Lohia are not appropriate for today, we need to keep socialistic principles in sight and *"rebuild national character and austerity conditions<sup>29</sup>"* until poverty is eradicated whether it is by *"putting a ceiling on people's incomes and expenditures<sup>30</sup>"* or through other measures. We need to find strategies to *"refocus people's attention to general uplift from individual uplift<sup>31</sup>"*. Most importantly we must find ways to dismantle *"feudal and capitalist ownership"* and enable people to have a *"mastery over their wealth<sup>32</sup>"*.

The means that Lohia suggested may no longer be relevant or even workable but the goals remain the same; (i) reclamation of waste lands, (ii) equitable distribution of land, (iii) abolition of land revenue, (iv) establishment of a Bhoomi Sena or Land Army, and (v) emphasis on small and medium irrigation. And finally that the food problem could be solved by breaking the monopoly on lands by a few and the land is given to the tiller. One of the demands made by the HMKP is that landowners get, besides compensation, a share in the enterprise for which their land is acquired. This would make a lot of sense in today's world.

Lohia also warned all of us who thought that with the removal of poverty through a modern economy that the segregations of cast and gender will automatically disappear, were making a big mistake. He was convinced that poverty and these two segregations thrive on each others worms.<sup>33</sup> It is therefore not just to fight for egalitarian development based only on economics, but we also need to simultaneously ensure the liberation of the individual from discriminatory bonds that tie us down and segregate us.

We can achieve these goals only through serious scholarship and discourse. The Indian socialists need to consider seriously Lohia's proposition to; *"unfold a warm and live debate around the programme to end poverty in their communities<sup>34</sup>"*. He believed that these centres of debate and agitation would in time become the centres of revolutionary power for the destruction of

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29 Lohia/Programme To End Poverty/JANATA, March 20-27, 2011 Remembering Dr. Lohia

30 Lohia/Programme To End Poverty/JANATA, March 20-27, 2011 Remembering Dr. Lohia

31 Lohia/Programme To End Poverty/JANATA, March 20-27, 2011 Remembering Dr. Lohia

32 Lohia/Programme To End Poverty/JANATA, March 20-27, 2011 Remembering Dr. Lohia

33 Lohia/The Caste System

34 Lohia/Programme To End Poverty/JANATA, March 20-27, 2011 Remembering Dr. Lohia

feudalism and capitalism, for the setting up of the Four Pillar State and for the removal of poverty<sup>35</sup>”.

But in order to do this we must examine the new challenges we face.

**The first is the climate of Fear.** An air conditioner that will protect you from H1/N1 Virus; a paint that prevents bacteria from entering your home; a toothpaste that vanquishes all the germs that are crawling around in your mouth cavity; a face wash that cleans dirt, oil and grime from the pores of your skin; a disinfectant sanitising hand lotion; rice that can be eaten without fear of calories; oil that will not give you a heart attack; insurance that ensures that your husband will not die of a heart attack on hearing what he has to shell out for his son’s college fees; water purifiers that clean the water of germs and is tasty too; a disinfectant bath soap that kills bacteria..... the list can go on.

All this is part of the new climate of fear that helps to sell products and pacify the disturbed mind. Corporates are learning fast from history and our dictators and using it to sell product we do not need. First instil fear by announcing eminent danger and then offer the palliative that you have already prepared – gullible people will accept it in a flash and succumb to this ruse.

Governments do this too. First you mismanage water distribution and housing and the PDS (Public Distribution System) and NEGRA and everything else and add a large dose of corruption until all are convinced that Government does not and cannot work and then offer privatisation as the only alternative. The middle class will buy this argument and vociferously support it backed by their mouth piece the media, their guide to status symbols and etiquette.

But what about those who cannot afford the air-conditioner and the paint? What of those who live in mud huts with thatched roofs? They are either forced to aspire for this life style or perish.

All this has given rise to a ‘new middle class’ in India that is a strange breed. They are either children of the old ‘middle class’ who were the hard working public sector employee or the educated intelligencia who had experienced the struggle for freedom in some way. But this generation do not carry forward the legacy of their parents, instead they shed their identities and have become either corporate or IT executives, or are aspiring to get there.

With this new found corporate status they shed their roots and identity, they are even ashamed of it and ‘buy’ a new one through products and lifestyle. Many corporates have mini ‘shopping malls’ adjoining the workplace so that a newly hired executive can get a new car, phone, house, TV and all the other trappings of this new ‘class’ identity with a small down payment. Buy now and pay later! Pubbing, fast food, Coca-Cola and five star restaurants are all part of this deal.

In the process they sever all ties with their village, city or town and become super consumers in a global market. Now all they want is good service, be it water supply, electricity or roads and are willing to pay for it.<sup>36</sup> Their belief is that the government does not work and is corrupt and

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35 Lohia/Programme To End Poverty/JANATA, March 20-27, 2011 Remembering Dr. Lohia

36 The 'middle class' is an expression difficult to pin down, since it is defined not just in terms of income, but also as values, cultural affinities, lifestyles, educational attainments and service sector employment. Using income, one way of defining middle class is in terms of how much of income is left over for discretionary expenditure, after paying for food and shelter. If more than one-third is left, that qualifies one for inclusion in the 'middle class'. But there is yet another feature of being middle class that we need to flag -- one which has been apparent in every country that has developed. The middle

therefore democracy does not work – but the corporate sector does and so they would push for privatization as against strengthening participatory democracy.

Social modification is a tool used by authoritarian regimes through the ages. It begins with modifying or blurring definitions. For example Civil Society now means NGOs who really have no mandate from people to represent them. A clever shift from democratic political participation to passive acquiescence

The cooption of civil society organisations to do Government work or act as extensions is an integral part of the liberalisation process. The fate of the few independent civil society organisations that are still by the people, for the people and off the people who have managed to retain a sense of political activism despite the growing influence of neo-liberal policies is well summed up by Dom Helder Camara - one of the South American apostles of Liberation Theology: “When I give food to the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why the poor have no food, they call me a communist.”

Indoctrinating for the needs of Globalisation is achieved through various means. For example the corporatisation of education – learning not for the sake of knowledge, but for profit and the cooption of civil society organisations and converting international UN organisation that were meant to protect human rights and poor countries such as the ILO, into instruments of globalisation by bringing them under the control of the WTO, WB and MNCs.

Authoritarian regimes have used this ploy for centuries and our governments have used it too to keep the poor, poor and divided. When resources are limited and schemes meant for the poor are sprinkled thinly over villages based on the vested interests of MLAs, MPs and others it breeds the mentality of the caged or the survival of the fittest.

Capitalist ethics promotes competition that results in the loss of a sense of community. Their tactics are to erase one's memory of history, roots and past incidents. As a result one's roots are eroded and communities divided into individuals scrambling to survive. This breeds communalism and violence and the poor become disposal commodities to protect the middle class and the economic elite.

**The second is the shrinking space for Civil Disobedience – Our Fundamental Right to Dissent.**

For a democracy to survive and remain healthy there has to be a vigilant civil society that demands accountability of the state and its elected representatives and ensures that the state delivers on its promises to the electorate. If the state or any part of its apparatus falters, over steps its limits or infringes the rights of its citizens, corrective measures must be enforced through civil disobedience. The right to dissent is not only a fundamental right; it is also a fundamental duty of all citizens to ensure that the principles and values of a participatory democracy are protected. It is the needle that keeps the democratic balance equal on both sides.

A nation that does not respect and enshrine this right is not a democracy and cannot call itself one. Even people in countries that are not democratic have exercised this fundamental human right to expel authoritarian regimes – the largely youth demonstrations in Tiananmen Square

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class no longer wants subsidies and hand-holding from the state, and is content to pay taxes. The middle class gives up demanding from the government. [Bibek Debroy/Indian Middle Class/ Indian Express.Com/ Tue Mar 24 2009/New Delhi]

China in 1989. December 2010 saw the beginning of a milestone in the Arab World with the protests in Tunisia against the lack of freedom, inflation, unemployment, and a decline in wages. This people's uprising is a response to the vicious police state run by the dictator Zine Al-Abidine Bin Ali and the repulsive neo-liberal model of economic development that was imposed by him of which the U.S. and the E.U. were the primary benefactors. This has sent shock waves throughout the region and all the self imposed leaders of the Arab World.

More recently the uprising in Tahrir Square in Egypt to unseat Hosni Mubarak, who for the past 30 imposed a brutal dictatorship over the 80 million people of Egypt of whom 30% live in extreme poverty; and the Yemeni uprising that followed the initial stages of the Tunisian Revolution and occurred simultaneously with the Egyptian Revolution and other mass protests in the Middle East in early 2011. The protests were initially against unemployment, economic conditions and corruption, as well as against the government's proposals to modify the constitution of Yemen. The protestors' demands then escalated to calls for President Ali Abdullah Saleh to resign.

However, in India, the largest and one of the oldest democracies in the world, the space for political dissent is shrinking rapidly. The stealthy imposition of draconian laws, the lengthy procedures required to hold public meetings, rallies, strikes and stayagrahas are designed to control and restrict the public from voicing their protest. As if this were not enough, now parliament, legislatures, the official residences of elected representatives and government offices have become fortresses with blade wire fences and heavy security isolating them from the very people who have given them their mandate, all in the name of the new all pervasive excuse – terrorism.

The surprising thing is that we, the people, seem quite unperturbed by all this. There is no public outrage, no real protest, no indignation and the few that do, are too insignificant to make an impact as their voices are not heard.

**The fourth is Corruption.** Recently we all witnessed an unusual phenomenon – something that has not happened in free India. A campaign against corruption backed by the middle class and supported by the media (though the print media was more balanced). In many ways it was a media created phenomenon and the only other campaign that came close to this was the Lok Satta campaign for clean elections some years ago.

I received hundreds of email messages, appeals from organisations, friends and acquaintances to support Anna Hazare, join his fast and petition government to set up a committee to draft the Lokpal Bill. I saw cars with stickers in support of Anna and urbane students giving sound bites on national television all condemning corruption. Yet rural Karnataka was indifferent and even suspicious of this campaign. Many were disparaging, especially the rural poor, as to the possibility of a law that would eradicate this malady, especially those that faced the effects of corruption on a daily basis.

We all abhor corruption and there can be no right thinking law abiding citizen who is for corruption and yet there were many like myself who did not support Hazare.

One of the main questions for me was why, when we have a concrete embodiment of corruption in our backyard in the form of our Chief Minister, Mr. Yeddyurappa, have we not

lifted a finger, not even a whimper to force his resignation and prosecution. In Karnataka, we are surrounded by all forms of corruption and sleaze at all levels – despite having the strongest Lokayukta we are the most corrupt state in India – and yet we do not want to clear the filth at our feet, but happily join a campaign against ‘corruption’ in the abstract.

This was very telling. We have all given in to corruption at least once in our lives – to get a ration card, a gas connection, a ticket on a train, to escape a parking ticket or get a file moved upwards. This was not what we were willing to fight – yet we were willing to wish for a magic wand that would exterminate corruption. A battle against the former would mean that we would have to stand up and be counted. We would have to forego the benefits that were obtained through greasing palms, we would incur the wrath of the administration and possible repercussions – yet joining Anna’s supporters in Freedom Park would not only get me my minute of fame, but show me as a ‘good citizen’.

The second question was the fact that so many individuals known for their corrupt practices supported Hazare and could do so easily – no questions asked. Modi, Yeddyurappa, a murder convict and many other tainted individuals supported Hazare. Many others did not – not because they were for corruption, but because they had questions regarding the implications of instating a Lokpal Bill and had serious reservation regarding the Janna Lokpal Bill.

The draft Jan Lokpal Bill<sup>37</sup> envisages the Lokpal as one of the most powerful state institutions in India. It will be given the powers of making law – now the duty of parliament, implementing the law – now the duty of the home department, and punishing those who break the law – now the duty of the judiciary. The net result of a ‘Lokpal’ will be to weaken the authority of all other democratic institutions even the well-functioning ones. The Lokpal, as it is envisioned in the draft Jan Lokpal Bill, will be a super centralised body that bypasses even the parliament and is against all the tenants of democracy and lead to its further erosion.

Aruna Roy questioned the implications of the proposed bill and was maligned as one who wished to perpetuate corruption. It must be remembered that she was one among others who championed the Right to Information Act that is increasingly becoming a useful weapon in the battle against corruption and lapses by the state.

One had to be for Anna and therefore against corruption and if one questioned the means and the end of this campaign – one was labelled corrupt. But then we now live in a black and white world – you are either against terrorism and therefore for the USA. But if you are critical of the USA you must be a terrorist. The grey areas are not discussed, the implications not explored, the politics of our actions not debated. We are a knee jerk society led by the media and campaigns like Hazare’s will remain bubbles on the surface that will go pop with the slightest breeze.

There is a difference between building a movement and leading a campaign. Movements like the Narmada Bachao Andolan and others, that the middle class and the media give scant attention too, take time and have strong foundations and concrete raison d’être for their means and their ends. They are not easy to build. People need to understand the complex reasoning

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37 As it appears on the website: [www.Indiaagainstcorruption.org](http://www.Indiaagainstcorruption.org)

behind these movements as they are not simple 'for or against' campaigns. They require high levels of commitment and great sacrifice – qualities that educated urban India is lacking.

However, if we are serious about battling corruption we would begin with ourselves. As a society, we would combat the political nexus that sustains corruption by using the provisions of the Right to Information Act and extending it to areas where it does not currently apply – national security and defence. We would campaign for electoral reform, controlled spending and more vigilance to prevent candidates from buying votes. We would empower citizens to be honourable and not sell their votes. We would demand that local bodies are strengthened and all resources and schemes meant for villages are handed over to Panchayats and the respective budgets are controlled by Gram Panchayats and local bodies. We would petition all states to implement decentralisation and honour the provisions of the 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment. We would demand the 'right to recall' elected representatives.

The powers of the Lokpal should actually be decentralised right down to Gram Sabhas. People and their democratically elected representatives should be the final arbiters and not a few chosen supreme individuals who are not accountable to us. These are serious questions that require consideration. The tragedy is that today legitimate public outrage against corruption is being channelled in a profoundly authoritarian direction that actually succeeds in creating a massive distraction<sup>38</sup>.

**The third is commoditising of our Vote.** India goes through a sea saw every five years. People vote against the ruling party for not delivering on their aspirations and the party then voted into power follows the dictates of the Indian Corporate Sector and economic elite forgetting their pledge to the people of India and are predictably routed in the next election.

Though India has been applauded for its vibrant democracy and her people for demonstrating their 'good sense' during elections by repeatedly throwing out governments that have not performed – a phenomenon known as the anti-incumbency vote – now, especially in the southern states, even this possibility has been neutralised through the large scale purchasing of votes, neutralising the one prospect of ensuring the accountability of elected representatives to their electorate. Selling ones' vote is selling out democracy.

This is exactly what the proponents of globalisation and a market economy need to push their agenda. Lack of accountability leads to increased corruption and disillusionment in governments' ability to administer the state; this in turn leads to a conviction that 'democracy' does not work and thereby a growing confidence in the ability of private enterprise to deliver services and managed infrastructure.

*"Objective Western commentators have often pointed out how in developing countries there is a real trade-off between redistribution and survival of formal democracy. It is now universally agreed that the-neo liberal structural reforms imposed by the IMF and the World Bank have generally had a regressive impact on income distribution. They are seen as having strengthened large capitalists, weakening in the process both middle- and working-classes and their organisations, contributing to the survival of formal democracy by reducing the threat to the*

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38 Shuddhabrata Sengupta/At the Risk of Heresy: Why I am not Celebrating with Anna Hazare/KAFILA

*essential interests of property groups while at the same time severely undermining the development of participatory and social democracy.”<sup>39</sup>*

Democracy is based on a system of checks and balances where the elected representative is accountable to his/her electorate and the citizen is duty bound to be vigilant and demand and ensure this accountability at all times. But when we are faced with a situation where our votes have been commoditised, the very basis of democratic governance is uprooted.

**The answer lies in Decentralisation and Panchayati Raj.** The cure for a non functioning democracy is a larger dose of democracy! The strategy to push for Corporate Globalisation is designed to negate and undermine participatory democratic processes as it does not enable an environment that is congenial to pushing this agenda. Active and conscious citizens that wish to exercise their right to determine their future and the future of their villages, towns and cities will block an agenda that benefits only a few and marginalises the majority. The answer is to push for more decentralization of powers and resources through Panchayati Raj as it is the last vestige of democracy left in India.

Lohia believed that the four-pillar State would remove corruption that inevitably comes with a system that rules from above by making the village or the city community largely responsible to itself and by handing over a large part of the administration to it.<sup>40</sup>

Rural Indian still has possibilities to set a new development agenda as the penetration of corporate ethics through marketing and advertising products, television and lifestyle changes or eating habits have not yet completely eroded cultural and social habits. For example Kellogg's who entered India with the objective of changing our breakfast habits have not even been able to penetrate the urban market to the extent they had hoped and now have to rely on convincing us that Special Kellogg's K with help overweight women lose weight in one month! We still enjoy our wonderful array of breakfast dishes and the instant food industry has made this easy even for the working woman and man and bachelors.

But Panchayati Raj has been implemented only in a few states of India and is in jeopardy even in those states that were hailed as forerunners of this policy such as Karnataka. Understandably, every attempt to increase the degree of devolution of power and resources to the Gram Panchayats will be resisted by those who have a vested interest in retaining power and in that the MLAs are in the forefront. Devolution of power is acceptable only up to 'my' level and not below! The irony is that it is these very people who have the power to decide the fate of Panchayat Raj as policy decisions and the Act in this regard are made by them. One can only hope that State Legislatures will do their duty to fulfil the Constitution and abide by the directives to honour the 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment and devolve powers to the Panchayats.

This is where we need to exert pressure and this pressure has to come from below – from the people whom it affects the most. The pressure has to be four fold: (i) to push State Governments to implement the provisions of the 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment; (ii) to pressurise State Governments where Panchayati Raj has been enacted to honour the 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment and devolve powers and resources to the Panchayats; (iii) to build an Andolan of Gram Sabha and

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39 T. C. A. Ramanujam/ Democracy and Development: Contradiction in Terms?/Business Line/ Financial Daily from THE HINDU group of publications/Saturday, Dec 20, 2003

40 Lohia/Programme To End Poverty/JANATA, March 20-27, 2011 Remembering Dr. Lohia

Gram Panchayat representatives to be ever vigilant against moves by MLAs and others to erode the rights and powers of Gram Sabhas and Panchayats; and (iv) to strengthen Gram Sabhas through the active and vigilant participation of people.

Another important issue is the difference between the tenor of the 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> Amendments. The 74<sup>th</sup> Amendment is designed to centralise the resources and give State Governments or their nominees control over it. Villages or Gramas that prove viable monetarily or have resources that multinationals need to exploit in order to further their business plans, can be brought under the 74<sup>th</sup> Amendment by State Governments and are not required to have the equivalent of Gram Sabhas or the direct participation of citizens. There are also strong pressure groups backed by corporate entities to have directly elected Mayors on the lines of New York. This will render the other elected members of a Municipality relatively powerless and voiceless and thereby unable to represent their electorate. An all powerful Mayor is exactly what is needed for a corporate take over of rich and emerging Municipalities as this one person can be easily bought and controlled –s/he can even be a corporate representative and most likely will be as whom else will be able to manage an election of that magnitude?

A serious examination of the 74<sup>th</sup> Amendment, listing changes to it to ensure direct participation of citizens and resistance by Gram Panchayat to be brought under the 74<sup>th</sup> Amendment until it is suitably amended or at least implemented at the State level in the true spirit of democratic decentralisation.

But to achieve this we have to put ‘activity into our lazy bones’ as Lohia so rightly put it. To do that we have to maintain the distinctions and limitations between the four elements of which politics is composed; the State, Government, Party and the Individual and some of us must be willing to abdicate power even though we are able to have it we must refuse to possess it. But even Lohia felt that this was perhaps an unattainable ideal, he believed that partial abdication of power was possible for everybody and should be so in a democracy. He held that recognition of our limitations was in itself partial abdication of power and that all Indians must restrain themselves in the accumulation and use of power from the national to the village politician. Lohia felt that the four-pillar State would be an inevitable consequence of such recognition. The power of the State he deemed must be broken up into as many fragments as there are villages and reposed in the village community. Though naturally the central limb of the State must have power enough to maintain the integrity and unity of the State, Lohia strongly advocated that the rest of it must be fragmented. He said; *“I do not know of any other way of introducing change and activity into Indian life”*.<sup>41</sup>

On this we should all agree as it is still the most appropriate and relevant tool we have to leaver democracy in India - it our last chance and the only possible way. The question is who will do this? How and through what means? Will we socialist be able to come together and agree on an Agenda for India? Will we form a movement or fall back on the stereotypical yearning for political power and try to form a political party without the militancy and political content required to achieve a sea change for India and her people?

**The need for a Socialist Movement or a Socialist Party?** There are some Socialists who are considering the formation of a Socialist Party. This is a very serious and momentous decision

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41 Lohia/Programme To End Poverty/JANATA, March 20-27, 2011 Remembering Dr. Lohia

fraught with responsibility. It is also probably too early as there has not been enough meaningful dialogue and serious in-depth discourse and we do not yet have a Socialist Movement or even a variety of individual Socialist Movements. This should be the basic requirement for the formation of a party. Most parties are issue based, revolving around an individual devoid of ideology and principles and with little or no understanding of peoples needs or aspirations. A Socialist party cannot follow this pattern, and must have a connection with people as their mandate is critical for a strong foundation of any party and is what most parties, even the cadre based ones, lack today.

Lohia believed that; “no man’s thought should be made the centre of a political action; it should help but not control. Acceptance and rejection are varying forms of blind worship. I believe that it is silly to be a Gandhian or Marxist. There are priceless treasures to learn from Gandhi and from Marx, but the learning can only be done when the frame of reference does not derive from an age or person<sup>42</sup>”. Today we have parties that are not based on ‘ideology’ but on ‘idol’ worship and are even named after the so called ‘leader’!

The Socialists are so divided, we have all brands from far left to far right and there is no cohesive thinking on an ‘Agenda for India’. This would be one of the pre-requisites for the formation of a party – a serious debate and understanding of what India requires today – a proactive manifesto that is a result of deep scholarship and practical experience and not a knee jerk reaction to the present situation, nor a superficial reactionary response to present trends.

I would like to quote Lohia: *“A healthy will does not make use of lies, deceit and violence. Only a frustrated will indulges in perverse conduct and is consumed by its own despair. At the same time, a will, whose vitality is at a low ebb, loses the power to move and stands still in the stream of events or is tossed about if it is not drowned. The will to power of the new party will be faced with the danger alike of perversity as of weakness. To strive cleanly to capture power on the morrow is a high trust but an equally sacred obligation is not to give up to weakness or give in to perversity, should power not come for a decade or more. The will to power of a person or a party is best measured by the will to react to situations, old and new. The world abounds in men with delayed reactions or none at all. Challenges come to them, often even unnoticed. India is full of such challenges, old and new, but where are the men and women to react to them and respond to them?”<sup>43</sup>*

A true Socialist Party needs to be born of struggle and a strong Socialist Movement. There are many working painstakingly to spread the Socialist word, but unfortunately there are very few who can respond the needs of people and meet the challenges of the effects of today’s market economy.

Lohia believed that politics consist of four elements—State, Government, Party and Individual. Post Independence he believed that the Indian State had become the Congress Government and pure dictatorship prevailed in the ruling party and even though some opposition elements wanted to fight the Congress dictatorship they were building a more efficient and ruthless dictatorship of their own. He warned that a Socialist dictatorship would as inefficient, corrupt and policy-less as a Congress dictatorship and warned against it.<sup>44</sup>

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42 Rammanohar Lohia/Marx Gandhi and Socialism/Economics after Marx

43 Lohia/The Will to Power - September 1952/JANATA, March 20-27, 2011 Remembering Dr. Lohia

44 Lohia/Programme To End Poverty/JANATA, March 20-27, 2011 Remembering Dr. Lohia

Forming a party would also entail election politics and today with the levels of corruption and the role that money plays, one would have to be corrupt to enter the fray. This would be against all the tenants of Socialism. So unless this situation is changed through rooting out the evil at the base – that is empowering the citizen to honour and respect his/her franchise and use it with the utmost discretion - democracy will not survive. This would be a primary task and does not require a party to achieve this – but a movement.

A Socialist Party today really has no blue prints to turn to, no predetermined plan to guide it, no words of wisdom to formulate a plan. We have Dr. Lohia's thoughts of more than 50 years ago responding to a situation very different from today. Though there may be similarities, it would be a great error to take his or anyone else's words literally and forge ahead. Lohia lived by a set of principles and values – all of which, by his own admission, he did not always conform to. His was a search for the truth – a pursuit for the answers for India and her people. He never ceased to question and compare and critique in his quest for a strategy that would work. His agenda was not dogmatic – but based on principles that he applied to evolving situations.

What is required is to undertake a serious deliberation on the possibility of a Socialist Movement in preparation for a possible political party. We should *“unfold a warm and live debate”*, as Lohia said and make these centres of debate centres of agitation and in time they would become centres of revolutionary power to build a Four-Pillar State.