

Need of Understanding Dr. Lohia

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The life story of Dr. Rammanohar Lohia is an extraordinary example of selflessness, sacrifices, struggles, and successes. He was one of the most inspiring, courageous, consistent and creative socialist leaders of the Twentieth Century. His birth centenary year (2010) is a special opportunity for all of us to look at our times and its challenges and find the way out with the help of his vision, ideas, programme and message.

Dynamics of Social Change and the Saptakranti Way:

His analysis of dynamics of civilizations, nations, castes and classes in Wheel of History has become more relevant in the age of globalization. His doubts about the twin-ness of capitalism and imperialism as well as the limits of the path of capital intensive technology based Western way. He was never fascinated by the Marxist and the Gandhian alternatives except that he was an admirer of Marx for identifying the power in class conflicts and Gandhi for inventing the path of mass awakening through Satyagraha. Anyone can see the relevance of his approach now as he was one of the first to question the sustainability of the Stalinist Soviet Union and Maoist China. He had also predicted the limitations of 'official' and 'institutional' Gandhian versions in the context of poverty, injustices and inequalities in India in Marx, Gandhi and Socialism.

The programme of Seven Revolutions – Sapta-Kranti – was his comprehensive answer for realizing the socialist dream in the modern world system. Lohia pointed towards the need of multiple and simultaneous transformations of the human society in order to create a humane and happy society all over the world. He also indicated the emerging trends and tendencies in favour of his diagnosis. The idea of Seven Revolutions looks more inviting today as we are witnessing the increasing frequency of movements

in different parts of the world against class, caste, gender, race, nation, weapon, and state based injustices and exploitations and they make perfect sense through the Lohia call for Seven Revolutions.

Rejuvenating the Indian culture by ending the segregations of gender and caste:

Lohia was an admirer of Indian heritage and a critique of Indian society. He made sharp attacks on the Indian mind for the disconnect between the spiritual view of oneness of all forms of life and the daily practices of deep segregations on the lines of sex and caste. He also questioned the lack of 'will to power' and 'revolt against the internal tyrannies and tyrants' in the last 1000 years of the history of Indian people. He rejected all the 'progressive views' of Indian history presented by the imperial, Marxist, and nationalist historians around the respective doctrines of 'civilizational project of Europe', 'linear direction of change through ending isolation of the village India', and 'unity in diversity'. He challenged the theories of Indian renaissance associated with various invaders and rulers of the last several centuries in India, including the Mughals and the British.

He challenged the orthodox view of the Indian culture by questioning their positions about women, caste, property and individual freedoms. He was very radical regarding the Indian attitude towards female sexuality. He reminded the people of India about the enchanting tradition of saint poetesses like Akka Mahadevi, Lalla, and Meera who did not respect the patriarchal insistence on marriage and motherhood and still succeeded in commanding attention and earning respect for their spiritual quest and intellectual superiority.

Similarly, he wanted a national drive for the destruction of caste through a comprehensive

strategy with political, social, economic, and cultural components. He wanted the idealism of the upper caste youth and the drive for justice of the oppressed caste youths to combine for the full blooming of Indian talent and genius through the construction of a caste less class less social organization. He propagated the concept of preferential opportunities of up to 60% for a few years – 10 to 20 years - to the five major backward sections of the Indian society – women, the Scheduled Tribes, the Scheduled castes, the backward Castes, and the Backward communities among the Muslims and the other religious minorities. He wanted them to be given preferential opportunities in all walks of social and economic life including the government jobs, political representation, and military duties. He recognized an element of injustice in it with reference to the upper caste youth and called upon them to ‘endure the temporary injustice’ for the betterment of our society and culture as a whole. He agreed with his dissenters that the socialist caste policy of preferential opportunities may not give the desired results of social progress as a) the larger communities among the ‘depressed and backward castes’ may not be willing to share the opportunities with the numerically smaller sections among the backwards or b) may become the ‘new casteists’ through exchange of places with the upper castes or c) promote fear and jealousy instead of expected harmony and unity of purpose with the upper castes or d) make their women more subjugated by following the process of upper caste emulation (i.e. Sanskritization) or e) create more repression and aggression from the upper castes rather than the anticipated enthusiasm and awakening among the depressed sections of the society. Lohia admitted that these dangerous possibilities, or ‘poisons’, may surface. But what is the way out excepting taking the risk as we are already in a no-win situation in spite of centuries of reform movements and millenniums of integrative spirituality, Lohia asserted.

He connected the future of Indian freedom and possibility of progress of Indian civilization

with the degree of freedom and opportunity of progress granted to women and the backward sections of the caste order. He made a list of 23 questions for nationwide debates and discussions to interrogate the riddles of Indian mind and way of life through Association for the Study and Eradication of Caste, a dream which was never given priority by Lohia followers after his passing away. The programme presented in book titled The Caste System for destroying the twin prisons of gender and caste for emancipation of Indian people and their talents is more understandable after very disappointing progress in the last 60 years of post-colonial efforts on the fronts of women empowerment and justice for the depressed sections of the Indian social order, known as the Dalits.

Interrogating the dominant views about religion and society:

Lohia did not believe in God in spite of being a great admirer of Gandhi. He was fascinated by the stories of Ramayana and Mahabharata. He wanted the future Indian personality to be molded in such a way that they get the best of the attributes of Rama, Krishna and Shiva. He was enchanted by the gentleness of Parvati, love of Radha, grace of Sita and brilliance of Draupadi. He was most impressed by Buddha and Shankar for their power of ideas. But he did not see them as religious symbols. At the same time he tried to understand the power of religions and faiths in the making of mind and defining the behavior patterns of masses all over the world. He did not have faith any of the religious dogmas but he looked at religion as ‘inspiration for goodness’ and ‘celebration of virtues’. He called religions as ‘politics of long term’. He presented a new definition of politics as ‘religion in the short term’. This view of politics created an interesting interconnection between politics and religion around cultivating goodness and beyond the dominant trends of ‘communalization of politics’ and ‘politicization of faith communities’.

He rejected the ritualism of religions. But gave significance to the pilgrim centres and pleaded for their protection and beautification in order to promote cleanliness and aesthetics in our daily life. His call for cleaning our rivers by preventing the flow of the urban waste and filth and converting them into dirty drains made him one of the very few national leaders who cared for our rivers in the 1950s and '60s.

About the Hindus, the Muslims, and the Hindu-Muslim relations

The ideas related with the issue of Hindus and Muslims as two major faith communities of India and south Asia were also very interesting and innovative. He deconstructed the dominant ways of looking at the Hindus, Muslims, and the Hindu-Muslim question as well as the India – Pakistan issues. He invited the thinking minds to have a new look at the two religious communities by taking a 'temporal' and not just 'territorial view'. He underlines the sociological significance of the institutions of caste, gender, property and individuality in the making of different shades of Hinduism in the Indian civilisational journey.

Adoption of 'the long view' about the Hindus allows us to look at them as a community influenced by the continuous interaction between two major attitudes – orthodox and moderate. A moderate Hindu will be respecting women, rejecting caste, not being possessive about property and be liberal about individuality. The conservative Hindu will be dismissive about women, protective of caste, possessive about property and intolerant about individualism. Lohia takes side of the moderate Hindus as asserts that the periods of glory of Indian civilizations were marked by the prominence of the moderate approach among the Hindus. The rise of the orthodox views has coincided with the decline of the Indian culture and the people, including foreign invasions and internal decay. He wanted this distinction to be understood through the personalities and traits of the two great icons of Indian culture – Bashishtha and Balmiki

Similarly, Lohia refuses to accept that the Indian Muslims are a monolithic community. He finds a deep split in the Muslim identity around the axis of the invading foreigners and the natives. He was also aware of the significance of the institution of caste among the Muslims. It made him argue for preferential treatment for the backward castes among the Muslims. He was also emphatic about the need of a emancipation of all women, including the Muslim women from the clutches of orthodox practices and colonial laws regarding marriage, divorce, and inheritance. He wanted the Indians, including the Muslims, to have the courage to recognize the difference between the invaders and the natives for the purposes of a better future of inter-community relations between the Hindus and the Muslims. He thought that such a clarity of understanding about the complexity of the making of Muslim community in India will be important for India as well as a new approach beyond mistrust, fear and hate between India and Pakistan.

It was his call that all Indians must treat Shershah, Razia, Raskhan and Jayasi as our revered ancestors. But we must recognize that Ghoris, Gazanis, Chengezs and Baburs were the invaders. Lumping all of them together will be possible only on the basis of distortion of truths and ignoring of the basic facts about Islam, the Muslims and the Indian history and culture. This civilizational view provided Lohia the faith about his programme of India-Pakistan confederation as he refused to believe the colonial and European and American views about relationship between religion and nationality in the Indian context. He was more inclined to give primacy to language for the basis of 'we' feeling than religion. He was found to be correct about the artificiality of the manufactured togetherness of the East and West wings of Pakistan. He is seen to be accurate about the impossibility of destroying the Pakhtoon identity under the pressure of 'religious commonality'.

Attacking 'colonial mind' through the language Swaraj:

Lohia was one of the most non-compromising opponents of colonialism and Westernization. It was very unpopular in the Nehruvian era to campaign for the continuity of decolonization of our knowledge system, governance apparatus, and cultural practices after freedom. Nehru was in sharp disagreement even with Gandhi about it. But Dr. Lohia did not fear unpopularity and rejection by the Westernized elite. He stressed on the need to empower people by use of Indian languages in the public spheres and the affairs of state in place of English. He wanted the use of English language to be confined to the academic pursuits and not as the dominant language in the discourse of democracy and compulsory language as the medium of instruction in schools and colleges. This was the promise of our national movement and the dream of Gandhi led Indian National Congress.

But the effort of Lohia to decolonize our culture and politics and promoting mental Swaraj was presented by the Indian elite as 'Hindi chauvanism' as well as anti-south India conspiracy. In fact Lohia and his Socialist Party did suffer lost of mass appeal among the newly educated youth of the southern states due to the eruption of Anti-Hindi agitation and his mass base got confined to the Hindi speaking areas in the late 'Sixties. Lohia tried to clarify his ideas again and again. His book called Language was an impressive effort. But it was ignored by the critiques. He went for mass education by addressing intellectual gatherings, youth camps, and mass meetings in Karnataka, Andhra, Kerala and Tamilnadu, Bengal and Orissa. He went to Chennai to meet the most militant anti-North Indian leaders like Periyar Ramasamy Naiker and Raja ji to persuade them to join him in the endeavour against continuity of colonial mind set under the patronage of Prime Minister Nehru. His meetings were attacked and he was presented as propounder of parochialism and backwardness.

But Lohia refused to surrender to the pressures of vote bank politics and remained committed to the promotion of decolonization of our mind through creating spaces for the use of Indian languages. He encouraged his colleagues to use Indian languages in the Lok Sabha also. His insistence resulted use of Hindi, Kannada, Oriya, Bangla and Tamil in the national parliament. His campaign was supported by the creative writers of all major Indian languages. It became the basis of attraction for the youth of villages and small towns also as they were the victims of English language hegemony in the education system. He refused to allow the Westernised Indian elite to go unchallenged in their efforts to maintain their grip over systems of power through the perpetuity of English language in a feudal manner. His call for the use of mass languages in the public sphere was and continues to be a major cause for strong feelings among the Westernised intellectuals against him and his ideas.

But is it easy to have a full view of Lohia? He was a rare national leader who was always facing falsehood and lies due to his non-compromising attitude about the need to make people aware of the great task of total non-violent revolt against the various forms of internal and international injustices. He had a great dream where there was no scope for short cuts or selfish pursuit of power for oneself. Therefore it was not easy to be a Lohia follower. It is amazing that Lohia still commanded a significant following among youth, intellectuals and selfless social activists as well as political workers in different parts of India. He came very close to writing a new chapter of Indian politics in the national elections of 1967 through his astonishing strategy of Non-Congressism. But untimely death cut short the life of such a special man with brilliant mind, passionate heart and the mission to make the world better for the poor and needy men and women around the world through socialist changes in economy, polity, society and culture.

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