

## Remembering Lohia: A Legacy for the Left

Sunday 22 March 2015, by [C.N. Chitta Ranjan](#)

*Dr Rammanohar Lohia's 105th birth anniversary falls on March 23 this year. Since his birthday coincided with the day of martyrdom of Bhagat Singh, Sukhdev and Rajguru, he never wanted his followers to observe or celebrate his birthday. However, we remember him and offer tributes to the abiding memory of that stormy petrel of the Indian socialist movement on this occasion by reproducing two articles. The first article, written by a veteran journalist (the first editor of Mainstream who later became the editor of National Herald and is no more with us), appeared in Mainstream (October 21, 1967) after Dr Lohia's untimely death on October 12, 1967. The second article by the Mainstream editor appeared in Janata, April 17, 2011)—some excerpts of that article are being [reproduced here](#)*

There is a great deal of evidence that in the last few months of his life, especially after watching the performance of the non-Congress governments in several States and the functioning of the Opposition parties in Congress States as well as at the Centre, Rammanohar Lohia was engaged in a serious reassessment of the role and mutual relationship of the parties of the Left in this country.

In interviews as well as in discussions with party colleagues and other friends he had been increasingly talking in terms of new efforts to forge unity among the progressive parties, and the SSP leadership has after his death appropriately decided that it will now pursue this objective more purposefully in the coming period. Simultaneously, awareness of the need to shed sectarian attitudes in dealing with parties and groups whose socio-economic aims are broadly the same is also becoming increasingly evident in the case of the other Leftist parties, notably the CPI, CPM, PSP and Forward Bloc.

While he lived Lohia had the reputation of being “colourful” and unpredictable. His life had positive as well as negative aspects. The latter were hardly of any long-term significance, although they did affect to some extent the development of the socialist movement in the country.

### **Negative Phase**

For instance, for a long time he could not countenance cooperation with the Communists because he felt that their approach to national and international issues did not spring from the needs and aspirations of the people of India but were related to the ideological or other formulations hammered out elsewhere. Nor was he alone in coming to this conclusion. The number of Leftists in the country who grew hostile to the Communists because of the latter's inability to fit the Marxist-Leninist ideology to the national context and make such changes as were necessary was quite large. The antagonism which developed was not always unjustified, for the consequences of the limitations which the Communists imposed on themselves became strikingly evident in their wrong assessment of Gandhiji's role, in their unjustified opposition to the 'Quit India' movement and finally in their perverse reading of the totally new situation immediately after the achievement of national independence.

The growth of an anti-communist angle in a vital section of the socialist movement was thus in a sense inevitable. It would not have been disastrous but for the advantage vested interests were

able to take of it for two purposes: one, to fight the Communists who were strong in the working class movement, and two, to prevent the consolidation of the Left by utilising their newspapers and influencing certain figures in the socialist movement itself to accentuate and sharpen the differences. Unfortunately for the common people, neither the Socialists nor the Communists showed awareness of the harm they were doing to the common cause by not attempting to find common ground. But then this was a tragedy of historical circumstances for which no individual can be blamed, however important he might have been in either section of the progressive movement.

Another of the negative aspects was that Lohia, gifted with a brilliant mind which had few parallels, was developing his own theory of socialism in the context of Gandhian India and would not concede that the situation admitted of other possibilities. It is this attitude of his which explains in part not only the sharp personal conflicts that developed in the Congress Socialist Party but also the many difficulties that arose after the Socialists went out of the Congress and began organising themselves for the role of Opposition. But there was another, and more important, aspect to it. He believed in organising the people for militant struggle for the achievement of socialism, and for this reason had to part company with close associates like Sri Jaya Prakash Narayan. He was earnestly against pro-Establishment thinking, and this led to his anger over the police firing in Kerala during PSP rule and to his separation from Sri Asoka Mehta and others of that type.

### **Running Thread**

Lohia would surely have been a much bigger force in national life than he was if he had from early on devoted himself single-mindedly to building up a nationwide Left front at least on the basis of internal national issues on which differences were not substantial. Many admirers of Lohia have in the past regretted that so dynamic a leader should so often have got lost in trivialities, resulting in his inability to concentrate all the time on the basic problem of unity in socialist ranks.

Nevertheless, the thread running through all phases of development of Lohia's personality and political life was indeed his insistence on the people being their own masters. His seeming obsession with Hindi arose precisely out of the feeling that national life, including education and administration, should be based on the language of the people. He was dealing mainly with the Hindi region, and therefore Hindi found frequent mention in his utterances. As clarified by him subsequently, his anxiety was that the people must deal with their own affairs in their own languages and not in a foreign language which helped only to perpetuate a parasitic elite to the detriment of the people's progress: this was true for all the regions in India, whatever the local language.

### **Indifference**

For many years Lohia's basic cause—namely, the creation of a genuine socialist party which would struggle constantly and unremittingly against the existing order without seeking temporary gains either in terms of office or in terms of half-hearted economic measures—suffered because of his and his colleagues' obsession with anti-Congressism on the one side and anti-communism on the other. While conceding that this was natural in the circumstances as they developed, it has to be admitted that the attitude made the socialist movement infinitely less effective than it could have been for on the one hand it hurt the susceptibilities of sections which

had a sentimental attachment to the Congress and were hopeful that under Nehru's guidance advance could be made towards the goal of socialism, and on the other made the Communists feel that there was little in common between them and the Socialists led by Lohia and others.

While saying this, it must also be pointed out that till after the open cleavage in the international communist movement the Communists in India tended to treat the Socialists largely with indifference, not realising that these represented an honest force for progress which could not be brushed aside without serious harm to the movement as a whole. It is true that for a brief period during the freedom movement the Congress Socialists and Communists found it possible to work together, but it is doubtful if both sides conducted themselves with a complete understanding of the potentialities of such identification for the future of the country. The rift that developed subsequently was undoubtedly due both to contradictions in the comprehension of the national situation and to personal incompatibilities of the leaders involved. Perhaps because of unthinking acceptance of international formulations, Communists in India tended to ignore vital aspects of the national genius; similarly, obsession with ill-digested Gandhism led most Socialist leaders to think it necessary to demarcate themselves from the Communists at every conceivable opportunity.

### **Unity Efforts**

It is against this background that Lohia's intermittent efforts towards Leftist unity have to be judged. Earlier these efforts were largely confined to attempts to work out an understanding between the SSP and PSP which after all consisted of men who had stood together in the Congress Socialist Party and had much in common. Even so the relationship between these two parties continued to be a love-hate affair mainly because of Lohia's dominating personality and his insistence on his own terms for merger or cooperation.

But it is hardly fair to lay undue emphasis at this stage on aspects of his political life which were not of permanent value but arose out of a context which has since undergone drastic change. Once he realised that the Congress influence on the masses was on the wane, he did not hesitate to recognise the new possibilities and call for Opposition unity to throw the Congress out of office. He took the position that the first need was to end the monopoly of power enjoyed by the Congress for two decades and that any alliance for this purpose was justified. He was not by any means alone in coming to this conclusion. Even the Marxist Communists, who took extreme positions in terms of ideology, favoured such all-inclusive Opposition alliances.

This approach has proved at least one point, which Lohia no doubt wanted firmly established: that the Congress was not irreplaceable, that an alternative could be provided if only the Opposition parties desired it. To the extent that the myth of the Congress alone being capable of providing stable government has been exploded, this line has paid dividends.

### **Close Watch**

But Lohia demonstrated by his public utterances in the last six months that he did not overestimate the possibilities of "non-Congress" coalitions. He was closely watchful of the functioning of these governments and did not hesitate to castigate them for not implementing the accepted minimum programmes. He did not spare even the Leftist coalitions in this respect. The SSP's decision to quit the UP Ministry if the State Government did not carry out the promise on land revenue remission in the case of small holdings was the last of Lohia's political decisions. In the circumstances leading to this decision lies the key to an understanding of the positive

aspects of Lohia's life and work, which will be of considerable significance in the coming months and years.

Lohia had all his life been concerned deeply over the poverty and suffering of the masses of people in India: with him it was not an arm-chair attitude born merely of humanitarian instincts. It was not for nothing that he had always rejected those parts of the Gandhian approach which did not approve of powerful militant agitations to force economic changes or which did not want to create radical disturbance in the concept of property. While he did not believe in violent revolution, he did not equally believe in supine acceptance of the theory of gradual change. He was convinced that power should be secured and used to bring about speedy and drastic economic changes. It was in this light that he critically observed the working of the non-Congress Ministries and made his views known to the public from time to time.

It is therefore proper to conclude that, disappointed with the performance of non-Congress Ministries in which the Left did not have a decisive voice, he began thinking towards the end more and more in terms of broadbased Left unity including the whole range of parties from the PSP to Marxist Communists. He found the atmosphere in the country changing in favour of Leftist consolidation and if he had been spared would undoubtedly have bent his energies to this task.

The circumstances have indeed been growing increasingly propitious for such a development, for Lohia's anxiety for Left consolidation has been shared by the other progressive parties. He must be taken to have come to the conclusion that a mere anti-Congress platform would no longer do the meet present needs and that the tenuous alliances with all kinds of parties should gradually yield place to a united Left front on the national plane as well as in each State.

### **Hopeful Signs**

The decision of the SSP, CPI and PSP to act in concert on the question of land revenue remission in UP would appear to be a heartening indication of the shape of things to come. In view of the continuing attempts by discredited Congressmen in States like UP to come back to power, the Left parties may for the present refrain from adopting attitudes which may topple the concerned governments, but it is not difficult to see that in States where vested interests dominate the governments the progressive parties will have to get ready for a confrontation sooner or later. In UP, for instance, if the Charan Singh Ministry continues to flout the minimum programme, how long can the Left acquiesce merely for the sake of keeping the Congress out of office? It may be that all the Leftist parties may have to withdraw support from such coalitions and demand a fresh verdict from the people.

Whatever the course of developments in each State, it is clear that the parties of the Left have the task of taking forward the moves for Left consolidation initiated in recent times. We can afford to forget the passing aspects of Lohia's life, but we cannot do without his discontent with the inadequacies of the Left, his anger at the continuing poverty and suffering of the millions twenty years after the attainment of independence, his uncompromising struggle against the Establishment which symbolises the pernicious philosophy of status quo.

To carry out this legacy is not easy: it calls for a great mass movement led collectively by all the parties of the Left. And in this movement, let it not be forgotten, there is a role for Congressmen who are disillusioned with their leadership and who ardently desire that radical socio-economic changes must be brought about. The future battle is not between the Congress and the non-Congress forces; it is one between the entrenched and affluent minority and the common people. The people must win, and it is to this end that all progressive forces must seek to unite at all levels, forgetting the petty differences of the past and casting aside personal equations which have greatly harmed the people's cause which is supreme.

*(Mainstream, October 21, 1967)*