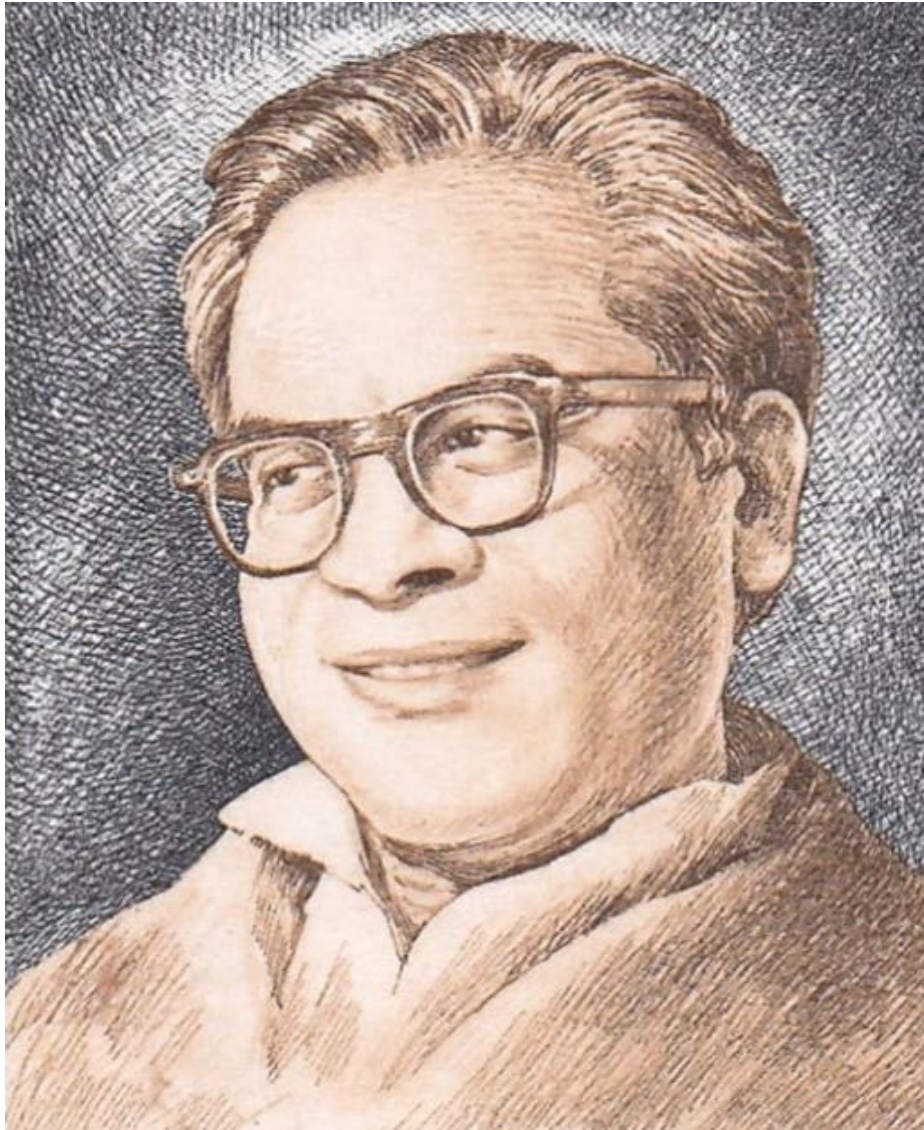


Ram Manohar Lohia: The Great Disruptor



Lohia spawned his own militant brand of socialist politics aimed at caste equity—an ideal and a movement so influential that his adherents came to be known as ‘Lohiaites’. Many continue to be powerful political figures. His strident politics to break the back of the Congress monopoly over politics is a landmark event that many place at par with pre-Independence disruptions that rattled the British. But Lohia’s legacy also includes an antipathy towards Nehru that ultimately helped to birth a virulent nationalism. His rigid pro-Hindi stance contributed to linguistic turmoil in Southern India.

Here’s a deep dive about Lohia the maverick, and Lohia the multi-faceted and unstoppable force of nature who helped shape modern India.

There are uncanny ways in which firebrand socialist leader Ram Manohar Lohia and his deeply controversial ideas have bounced back to political relevance. For instance, ‘anti-Congressism’ or ‘Non-Congressism’, unarguably the most popular project of his life. It was quite the departure for this former Congressman, who was a part of the influential socialist caucus within the Indian National Congress before independence, one that formally broke away after independence and eventually took on life as an independent party—the Socialist Party.

Lohia has been resurrected for this political utility. For instance, Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) have shown renewed interest in Non-Congressism. Indeed, Modi has on occasion attacked political dynasts and former chief ministers, Lalu Prasad Yadav of Bihar and Mulayam Singh Yadav of Uttar Pradesh (UP), for entering into electoral tie-ups with the Congress—and thereby betraying both the anti-Congress and the socialist principles of their acclaimed guru.

Bihar chief minister Nitish Kumar, the BJP’s ally in Bihar since 1996, too was taunted for betraying Lohia when he briefly joined the so-called Mahagathbandhan, or Grand Alliance, with Lalu’s Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) and the Congress in 2015.

For Lalu and Mulayam, who source their political roots to Lohia, anti-Congressism’s obituary was written with the end of the Congress hegemony and with the rise of the BJP in 1998. More so when the Congress vacated the dominant political space it occupied since independence in favour of the BJP.

For the BJP, Lohia’s anti-Congressism has mutated to Congress-mukt (obliteration of Congress) Bharat programme.

Even after several electoral victories for control of the Lok Sabha and various state Assemblies, the BJP’s thinking still assumes the Congress is still a monolithic party, and one which still demands unity of other parties against this former political giant. Ironically, the demise of the Congress was not on Lohia’s agenda. His mission was to break its monopoly in the political space.

According to Vijay Pratap, a prominent socialist and Lohiaite—as Lohia’s adherents are sometimes called—Non-Congressism was a reaffirmation of “Congress values, of values of the freedom movement” that the party had diluted along the way. He says Lohia put forward the idea that “all Opposition groups should come together to provide an alternative to the Congress.”

It was a tactical tool for uniting Opposition parties that differed in ideologies, programmes and policies, even diametrically and antagonistically opposed to each other—all to defeat the monolithic Congress.

In a nutshell, Lohia’s Non-Congressism was opportunistic, aimed solely at gaining power. And in that pursuit, Lohia also triggered a slow-acting poison that would ultimately harm his movement’s socialist core.



Ramdhari Singh, Madhu Limaye, Mani Ram Bagri, Ram Manohar Lohia, B P Maurya, S M Joshi |Wikimedia Commons

That's certainly a view Madhu Limaye, Lohia's associate, a political heavyweight in his own right, and a socialist ideologue, took. Madhu Limaye, who was Lohia's fellow-traveller at the Socialist Party, wrote: "This policy demonstrated that it could destroy the Congress monopoly for power, but it bred opportunism and lust for power and contaminated the springs of idealism and self-sacrifice on which the edifice of the Socialist movement had been raised."

Lohia erected the edifice of the Socialist Party, brick by brick, forming his own party in 1955 following a series of mergers and splits after leaving the Congress in 1948.

Lohia was born in Akbarpur, in present-day Uttar Pradesh, on 23 March 1910. His mother died when he was two-and-a-half years old. He was brought up by his grandmother, and father Hiralal, a wealthy goldsmith. After earning a college degree at Vidyasagar College in Kolkata, he attended Frederick-William University—now Humboldt University—in Berlin, in 1929. He earned a PhD in 1932 for a thesis on taxation on salt in India, a particular obsession of a political guru, Mohandas Gandhi.

Influenced in his younger days by Gandhi and future *bête noire* Jawaharlal Nehru, Lohia plunged into the freedom movement after his return to India in 1933. He worked for the Congress underground, as it were, during the Quit India movement in 1942, and was jailed several times. At this time, he was closely associated with Gandhi—even accompanying Gandhi for a part of his visit to Noakhali from November 1946.

And he was certainly a protégé of Nehru in his early days. His association with Nehru went back to the early 1930s, after his return from Germany. Soon after, he joined the Congress Socialist Party (CSP) caucus, which was formed in 1934 as a check on more right-wing and free-market or capitalist influences within the Congress.

In fact, Nehru appointed him head of the foreign cell of the Congress after Nehru assumed the party's presidency in 1936. But they fell out over policy issues. Nehru offered him the Congress' general secretaryship in 1946, which Lohia refused. As his links with the Congress snapped, Lohia sharpened his attacks on Nehru. He felt Nehru had strayed from the Congress's early goals of building a just and equitable society.

Several decades later, he would also foresee the rise of dynastic politics in the Congress. When Indira Gandhi was appointed Congress president in 1957, during Nehru's premiership, Lohia remarked with a prescient warning: The question of who after Nehru has been solved. Of course, Lohia also famously—or infamously—described Indira Gandhi as “goongi gudra” (dumb doll), deriving much mirth among Congress critics and outrage in the Congress party. The jibe against Indira would ultimately backfire, but such cutting insults had by then become a trademark of Lohia's, alongside his stated missions.

After launching the Socialist Party in 1955, Lohia set about to work on three issues dear to him. One, the upliftment of backward castes through affirmative action of providing 60 per cent reservations in every sphere of public life. Two, breaking the hegemony of the Congress led by Jawaharlal Nehru. And, lastly, a campaign to banish English from its exalted position in favour of Hindi and other Indian languages.

A popular slogan given by Lohia and his colleagues sums up his political agenda:

Samajwad ne baandhi gaanth, pichhda paave sau mein saath/ Raj-paat hai kiske haath, angrezi aur oonchi jaat/ Oonchi jaat ki kya pehchan, git-pit bole, kare na kaam/ Chhoti jaat ki kya pehchan, kare kaam aur sahe apmaan...

(Socialism vows to provide 60 per cent reservations for the backwards/Who holds the power? English language and upper castes/ What's the identity of upper castes? They talk in English and do no real work/ What's the identity of backward castes? They toil and suffer humiliation...)

Lohia died in 1967 and he didn't live to see the fruits of his labour - reservations for the backward castes and dethronement of the Congress as the most dominant, monolithic party of India. Backward castes, identified as OBCs (Other Backward Classes), were provided 27 per cent reservations in government jobs through the implementation of the Mandal Commission recommendations in 1990, though Lohia's vision to bring about equality between strata of castes by breaking the caste barrier remains unfulfilled.

His struggle to break the monopoly of the Congress bore fruit in 1967, a few months before his death on 12th October the same year. In the general elections held that year along with simultaneous Assembly elections, the Congress was unseated from power in a large swathe of India, in as many as nine states, from Kerala and Madras (now Tamil Nadu) in Southern India, to West Bengal and Orissa in Eastern India.

The so-called Hindi heartland states, especially Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, emerged as a stronghold of Socialists.

**The ever-loquacious Atal Behari Vajpayee summed up the Congress’s electoral setback:
“Due to Dr Lohia’s efforts, one could travel on board the Howrah-Amritsar Mail without
having to pass a single Congress state!”**

Lohia’s project of defeating the seemingly invincible Congress was realised through his tactical brilliance, intellectual boldness—even adventurism. He had managed to bring together all non-Congress parties on one platform, including the right-wing Bharatiya Jana Sangh (which evolved into the BJP) and the Communist Party of India (CPI) to form Samyukta Vidhayak Dal (SVD) governments across India. In the 1960s, the idea of unseating the Congress from power looked as fantastic a project as the sharing of a political bed by the Hindu nationalist right-wing and the communists. Lohia made it happen.

Many socialist leaders and observers today feel that bringing the Bharatiya Jana Sangh—quite transparently the political arm of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh—and the CPI, mutually antagonistic parties, to share power in SVD governments was unprincipled and opportunistic, and had long-term consequences for the country. They trace the rise of the BJP and its unchallenged dominant position today to Lohia’s 1967 “blunder” and his unabashed, blind anti-Congressism.

Lohia’s bid to unite Opposition parties had started showing promise in 1963. Four politically significant bye-elections to the Lok Sabha put to test Lohia’s theory of uniting the Opposition parties. During the bye-election to the Jaunpur seat in UP, Lohia provided ample hints of his future strategy to rope the Jana Sangh into the fold of Opposition parties. He campaigned for Deen Dayal Upadhaya, then Jana Sangh president and a party ideologue. Upadhaya lost but Lohia and his anti-Congressism’s utility was not lost on that party.



Deen Dayal Upadhaya|Wikimedia Commons

Indeed, in 1963, Upadhaya reciprocated and campaigned for Lohia in the Farrukhabad bye-election in Uttar Pradesh, which Lohia won. This was a significant comeback as Lohia had contested the 1962 general elections to the Lok Sabha from Phulpur in UP against Nehru, and lost.

Along with Farrukhabad, two other simultaneous bye-elections in 1963 made national headlines that gave the much-needed impetus to Lohia's plan to forge an anti-Congress front. J B Kripalani, another leader who had broken away from the Congress, contested the Amroha bye-election in UP as an Independent candidate supported by the Opposition parties. He won. Minoo Masani, another former member of the socialist caucus in the Congress, and who transitioned from socialism to free-market economics after his disillusionment with Stalin's policies, was elected from Rajkot on a Swatantra Party ticket.

By then, Nehru's allure had in any case begun to fade a little. India's third general elections to the Lok Sabha in February 1962 and subsequent bye-elections were held against the backdrop of rising tensions with China, and the disastrous war towards the end of that year. India's defeat had led to Nehru's humiliation. He was weakened politically and it wrecked his health. Lohia was determined to cash in on Nehru's diminished position and make best capital out of it by uniting the fragmented, fractious and disparate Opposition parties.

Other Opposition leaders too saw merit in Lohia's propagation of anti-Congressism. This gathering momentum helped Lohia's journey from there to the Lok Sabha elections of 1967 which, even though the Congress won in enough numbers for Indira Gandhi to form the government, its dominance in Parliament was noticeably dented. Moreover, as we have seen earlier, it led to the rout of the Congress in nine states, where simultaneous Assembly elections had also been held at the time.

Besides caste-based agitations and anti-Congressism, the other major issue with which Lohia burst onto the national scene was his campaign for removal of English. This backfired. Non-Hindi speaking states in Southern India, in particular, reacted to the Socialist Party's militant campaign with equal force and vehemence. Lohia's argument that his campaign didn't imply imposition of Hindi or marginalisation of regional languages didn't cut ice.

And, even with his relative popularity and visible influence, a powerful section of the population in the North, the elites from the upper-castes and ruling classes, were equally resentful of Lohia's stand against English, his militant caste movement for reservations, as well as his distasteful and personal attacks on Nehru.

For all these reasons, the power elite in politics, business, the bureaucracy and even the media developed nothing short of a visceral hatred for Lohia, who became to them a persona non-grata. On his election to the Lok Sabha, one newspaper likened him to a "bull in a China shop". Another went a step further to say that a "street thug" had entered the Parliament.

Their annoyance was understandable.

Lohia had broken all established norms that defined the post-Independence ruling class. He changed the grammar of politics. In that respect, he was perhaps the most original disrupter India had produced after Mohandas Gandhi.

Lohia gave new meanings to civil disobedience as he felt the Gandhian tactics in their original form could no longer produce results. Spade, jail, vote—constructive work, jail for protests and vote for political change—became his mantra. His supporters used bandh and gherao—words for closure and, literally, encirclement that would soon become part of the Indian political lexicon as well as English lexicon—to press their political demands. Such protests often took a violent turn. As a result, Lohia was jailed on more occasions in the post-Independence period than during the freedom struggle. He wore it as a badge of honour.

However, even with elitist angst, Lohia's legacy today would, perhaps, have been far richer, perhaps second only to Gandhi's, if the results of his casteist movement, anti-Congressism and banish-English campaign did not have several negative consequences.

It can be said that Lohia's political vision produced more disruptive politics than the creative destruction he imagined it would bring about to launch a true national reconstruction.

Indeed, there is a deep irony in the current playbook of Lohia's politics. Those claiming to inherit his calling - and calling themselves 'Lohiaites' - and now political satraps in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, for example, have ended up spawning crude forms of dynastic and casteist politics that would have been revolting to their political guru. And others who ride piggyback on Lohia's shoulders to get wider acceptance are invoking his legacy to further their political dominance just as the Congress had done for three decades until 1977.

So, what would the architect of non-Congressism have done had he been alive today? Would he have begun working on forging a common front against the ruling BJP, just as he had united Opposition parties against the Nehru's and Indira Gandhi's Congress? The question, and possible answers, are speculative.

But there are some indicators. As far as Lohia's approach to the Jana Sangh was concerned, one can trace commonalities of views on culture and aspects of religion. Lohia was deeply nationalistic. He was against the Partition of India. In his book, *Guilty Men of Partition*, Lohia blamed Nehru, Vallabhbhai Patel and Abul Kalam Azad for the Partition. He felt Gandhi had been betrayed by Nehru and several top Congress leaders, who agreed to the Partition of India only to fulfil their lust for power.

Lohia's views on culture and religion and their role in nation-building tallied with the Jana Sangh and the RSS in many respects. For instance, Lohia sought to use popular symbols from Hindu epics the Ramayana and the Mahabharata to foster cultural confidence in the people. One of his often talked-about cultural projects was to organise a Ramayana Mela (festival) at Chitrakoot in UP, which finds mention in poet Tulsidas's *Ramcharitmanas*. If that could be interpreted as a narrow, exclusivist religious undertaking, Lohia suggested to M F Husain that he paint motifs from the Ramayana and Mahabharata. Hindu gods Ram, Krishna and Shiva often figured in his cultural discourses to forge national unity. At a time when secularism was a popular political currency, Lohia's penchant for using religious symbols from Hindu scriptures for political ends was narrow and bold at the same time—and to the liking of the Jana Sangh.

Towards the end of his life, it was Lohia's turn to suffer unkind cuts. A man who strategized to defeat the Congress and shook the Indira government died because he couldn't afford decent medical care. An iconic leader who could paralyse governments and bring the country to a halt at short notice, perished in New Delhi's Willingdon Hospital on 12th October 1967. (The hospital was renamed after him during the Janata Party rule in 1977-80).



Ram Manohar Lohia

At the time of his death, Lohia headed the Samyukta Socialist Party (SSP), one of many avatars of the socialist movement, and was a sitting MP from Kannauj in UP, having won the seat in the 1967 elections. His Socialist Party leaders and followers held ministerial positions in several states (in Bihar, Karpoori Thakur was deputy chief minister, and later became chief minister). In the Lok Sabha, the party had 23 members, including Lohia. But none of that helped.

Lohia had no personal resources to travel abroad to have urgent surgery of the prostate. He had given strict instructions that he wouldn't accept monetary help—some say he needed Rs 12,000—from anyone in the states where his party had either formed the government or was a part of coalition governments.

The story of his untimely death needs retelling because it sums up a significant facet to Lohia's character: Austere, uncompromising to the extent of being rigid, fiercely combative, ideologically committed, candid and honest to a fault.

He was a Gandhian, leftist, revolutionary, nationalist, anarchist and all rolled into one. An ideologue, intellectually incisive, indefatigable, a polemist, a maverick, he influenced generations of youngsters and politicians, creating among them a sense of idealism and sacrifice for the greater political good.

Lohia leaves behind a controversial, debatable legacy born of his multi-faceted persona. Like everything he did, his legacy can't be painted with a broad brush.