

## **Gandhi and the socialists: The truth about their relationship**

Prem Singh

*(This is the English version of my Hindi article which I read at the Sahitya Akademi's annual national seminar, Sahitya Utsav, held on March 18-20, 2010. The seminar was organized by the Sahitya Akademi to commemorate the birth centenary of Dr. Ram Manohar Lohia. U.R. Ananthamurthy inaugurated the seminar and the keynote address was delivered by Sachidanand Sinha. After being read at the seminar, the article was published in 'Samayik Varta'. There was no discussion on the article thereafter. However, Dr. Virbharat Talwar did personally praise and congratulate for writing such a 'serious' article on the subject.)*

At the time of independence and partition, when most senior Congress leaders abandoned Gandhi, young socialist leaders joined him. Scholars writing history of that period do not mention this relationship between Gandhi and the socialists. No scholar has yet explored its significance/implications, neither immediate nor long-term.

D. Rammanohar Lohia has written about the relationship between Gandhi and the socialists, including himself, in his several works, including 'Guilty Men of India's Partition' and 'Marx, Gandhi and Socialism'. Much of the information, facts, and interpretations in those writings can be useful to scholars, especially historians of modern India. Despite the introduction of certain new perspectives and methods in history writing, no historian has paid attention to this subject so far.

It wasn't a support system sought by Gandhi when he was left alone. Neither did socialists become close to Gandhi out of adoration or pity. Despite Lohia's assertion that 'Gandhi had tried to assess the strength of socialists to confront the British government and the Congress Committee on the issue of Partition, but we socialists failed to live up to his expectations', it cannot be said that this relation was the result of the pressures of political pragmatism on both the sides. The union of Gandhi and the socialists on the Indian political scene is a moment illuminated by the lustre of truth at a time when the values of the freedom struggle and the light of humanity were suddenly extinguished. When Jawaharlal Nehru declared, "The light has gone out of our lives" after Gandhi's assassination, neither he nor other leaders/scholars could see that the flame of that light had been revived among the younger socialist leaders.

Jayaprakash Narayan, Acharya Narendra Deva, and Ram Manohar Lohia, who studied socialism in the Marxist school, changed significantly after their association with Gandhi. Gandhi also underwent a transformation. In his mature years, Gandhi transformed himself in his relationship with socialists after Ambedkar. I am not discussing the changes in this presentation that occurred in Gandhi. I am attempting to briefly examine how the flame of Gandhi's light, which came to the socialists, especially Lohia, was ignited in their thinking and political action.

Socialists recognized in that hour of darkness that the nature and path of modern Indian civilization and politics could not be determined without assimilating Gandhi and all the

currents of the freedom struggle that preceded and paralleled Gandhi. In this process of assimilation, Lohia, in particular, explored every nook and corner of geography and history. No one identified with 'Bharat' Mata Dharati Mata' as Lohia did. He studied the myths, philosophical traditions, epics, languages and history of India and Asia in order to discover the essence of equality and freedom within them. In 'Hind Swaraj', Gandhi replied to a question, "To become a nation, it is necessary to cultivate the capacity for assimilation." Needless to say, the same criterion applies to becoming a world.

A few years ago, I wrote an article on the relationship between Gandhi and Lohia. (See, Bindu Puri, Ed., *Gandhi and Lohia: An Intimate and Fruitful Relationship*, 'Mahatma Gandhi and His Contemporaries', Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla, 2001; Hindi translation, *Gandhi Aur Lohia: Atmiya Aur Phalprad Sambandh Ka Kissa*, **Samayik Varta**, March 2003). At that time, I felt that Gandhi could see in socialist leaders the potential for leadership after the Nehru-Patel generation. This desire of Gandhi did not materialize. However, in 1967 and 1977, these leaders succeeded in breaking the rock of Congress power; the first event gave impetus to Indian democracy, and the second, while safeguarding democracy, liberating it from the clutches of dictatorship.

But that achievement is not important. What is truly significant is that they engaged in politics with a sound philosophical perspective, in which theory, program/policy, and modes of resistance are interdependent. A sound philosophical perspective has to be acquired, not simply lifted from the past or present, domestic or foreign; politics and its practitioners play a role beyond the mere assertion of power.

Gandhi championed this wisdom and ideal of politics more than anyone else in the modern world. If politics is at the core of modern life, there can be no alternative to maintaining it on a moral and humane footing. It must remain a source of inspiration for goodness, not a means to achieve it. The central driving force of life cannot resort to violence, lies, conspiracies, or wars. Not even in the immediate term. The justification for every step taken and every means used must be rooted in that very step/means, not in some distant goal. That is why he made nonviolence, truth, transparency, and civil disobedience the core of politics. Gandhi did this, and therefore, he was the most modern man of the modern age, even if it was not the prevalent and dominant modernity of the European-American style.

When Gandhi suggests in 'Hind Swaraj', I believe that if India rejects modern civilization, it will be for her own good, he rejects the very version of capitalist-imperialist modernity. At the end of 'Hind Swaraj' a list of reference books is given. Except for two books - Dada Bhai Naoroji's 'Poverty and Un-British Rule in India' and R.C. Dutt's 'Economic History of India', all are authored by European and American thinkers. Among them are some thinkers who proposed a modernity as opposed to the prevailing version. However, they were not successful in changing the grip of prevailing modernity. It can be said that "modernity," spurned by Europe and America, finds its refuge in 'Hind Swaraj'.

Had the socialists not joined Gandhi, the alternative blueprint for modern civilization, sketched in 'Hind Swaraj' which was to be coloured after the independence, would have been as meaningless as Gandhi's letter to Nehru. Lohia

acknowledged that he had captured the essence of Gandhi's ideas and work in the philosophical integration and ideological schemes of socialism.

The relevance of the thoughts and political actions of socialists inspired by Gandhi may be a subject of criticism, disagreement, or opposition. In fact, it faced constant opposition from the establishment. Lohia had applied the Gandhian filter to the ideology of socialism, which is why the political class continued to oppose it. The opposition and boycott by the intellectual class is well known. The question of relevance and success is a different matter. More importantly, socialists maintained the freedom of independent initiative by striving to build a socialist civilization in opposition to capitalism and communism. However, it did have some relevance and success too.

As a result of the socialists' thinking and political actions, an atmosphere of self-confidence and hope was created in the country. In that atmosphere, the possibilities of Shudra and Dalit politics emerged. Regional parties emerged. The atmosphere created by the socialists was a significant factor in the ideological shifts in communist politics and the spread of the progressive movement in the country. It also impacted the politics of the Jan Sangh and the BJP. Even the ruling Congress party was not immune to the socialists' influence. The power of influence is not so much a matter of strength, but rather the extent of influence. As long as there was mutual interaction among Indian political groups while influencing each other, the goal of transformation remained acceptable. Consequently, Indian politics could retain some strength to avoid falling prey to neoliberalism. Gandhi's vision of the last man could not be ousted from power politics.

After Gandhi, Lohia connected himself most with the last man. He would find joy in his political struggle simply because the poor people of the country considered him their own man. Lohia says, "Gandhiji spent just about a year of his life changing the hearts of Smuts, Irvin and Birla, while he devoted over forty years to putting courage into and thereby changing the hearts of tens of millions of people all over the world. It would be wrong to deny or forget the relative worth of either activity." ('Marx, Gandhi and Socialism')

Lohia carried forward the mission of instilling courage in the hearts of the people of the country in independent India. Along with Satyagraha and civil disobedience, he made imprisonment an essential duty for political activists. Lohia himself went to jail more times in independent India than in colonial India.

Lohia created a unique political sociology to bring Gandhi's vision of the last man to the center of independent India's politics. This work of his was beyond Gandhi's in democratic politics. Lohia proposed the idea that the Brahminical-capitalist nexus could be broken by bringing the oppressed and marginalized groups of society - Dalits, Adivasis, backward classes, women, and poor minorities - to the forefront in every sphere of life, including politics. So far, this important proposition by Lohia has only been exploited electorally by a few backward and Dalit leaders.

Lohia spoke of embracing the essence of Gandhism. But, he embraced the nonviolent mode of resistance of Gandhi in totality considering it "the greatest quality of Mahatma Gandhi's action and life." He further elaborated the point: "The greatest revolution of our time is,

therefore, a procedural revolution, removal of injustice through a mode of action characterised by justice. The question here is not so much the contents of justice as the mode to achieve it. Constitutional and orderly processes are often not enough. They are then transgressed by the use of weapons. In order that this should not happen and that man should not ever get thrown around between ballet and bullet, this procedural revolution of civil disobedience has emerged. At the head of all revolutions of our time stands this revolution of *satyagraha* against weapons although it has in actual effect made only a faltering appearance to date." (Marx, Gandhi and Socialism)

The unambiguous and complete acceptance of the nonviolent mode of resistance has many dimensions. One important dimension would be the dignity and strength of the last man.

His insistence on making the language of the common people the language of governance, his economic philosophy, historical philosophy, social philosophy, religious philosophy, cultural philosophy, including the concepts of small machine and four-pillar state, are for the last man with equality and freedom.

It is heard that Gandhi's role was over. Therefore, his assassination did no harm much. Lohia has written that ordinary people across the world were mourning when Gandhi died. The status that the big people got in independent India had a major contribution of Gandhi. Though, none of them cried. They had secured their position within Nehru's aura. It is not without reason that the flame of light that ignited in Lohia pierced Nehru's aura the most.

Lohia, in his famous essay, 'Hindu vs. Hindu', discussed those actions of Gandhi that angered the fundamentalist forces resulting in his assassination. But, Gandhi did not anger the fundamentalist forces only. The enlightened groups were equally angry with him. The anger of both the groups combines towards Lohia. Reason being the flame of Gandhi's light illuminates most the thoughts and political path of Lohia.

*( The author, associated with the socialist movement, is a former teacher at Delhi University and a former fellow of the Institute of Indian Studies .)*