

Ram Manohar Lohia and the Idea of Democracy

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Abstract

The article focuses on democracy as a concept, particularly how Ram Manohar Lohia, a great pioneer of democratic ethos, highly read and intellectual imbued with Socialist-humanist and Gandhian ideas construed of democracy as an antidote to dictatorship. Over centralization at societal, politico-administrative and economic pedestal mars democracy which was and is the only hope for the teeming millions of Indians. An attempt is made to comprehend Dr. Ram Manohar Lohia's reservation regarding the functioning of democracy in independent India. His suggestion for 'alternative model' which appears more significant in the 21st century where world ideologies, communism has already collapsed and the world system based on market economy and economic globalization is confronted with severe challenges.

Keywords: Lohia, Democracy, Socialism, Chaukhambha Model

Introduction

Within the galaxy of renowned Indian social scientist, Ram Manohar Lohia (1910 -1967) may shine out as one of the unusual, unorthodox and probably ingenious doctrinaire given his leaning towards 'New Socialism'. Called a 'doctrinal socialist'.¹ Essentially he was passionate enough to set free the postulate of socialism from the restraint of the dogma of European Marxism and International communism. Accordingly, Lohia was interested in localizing Socialism by adapting it to the ideal and pursuit of the newly emerged developing countries like India. In his endeavour, despite being averse to capitalism, he assimilated some of its postulates like freedom and dissent as cardinal principles which substantially ameliorated the conditions of working class and their transformation into the middle class in Europe.² In a nutshell, the honourable handout of Lohia to the body of socialist thought³ in India appears to be improvising the idea by incorporating in its myriad consanguineous scholarly precepts so that it could accommodate to the need and aspirations of the Indian masses. Whatsoever, Lohia's primary motto in conceptualization of socialism was to build a just and egalitarian, democratic, socio-economic political order capable of all round development of Indian masses.

It is universally acknowledged, that a thought process of a person is conditioned and shaped by the time, space and circumstances in which he or she lives. As Lohia was a prominent freedom fighter and a leader in both in pre and post independent India, his response to the numerous issues faced by India was in juxtaposition to the experiences drawn from the movements he led or participated in. To illustrate, under constant exposure to Gandhian ideals of truth, non-violence, swadeshi and passive resistance, he thought of liberating socialism both

¹A. Appadorai, *Political Thoughts in India (400 B.C.-1980)*, Khama Publishers, Delhi, 2002, p. 311.

² Ram Manohar Lohia, *Marx, Gandhi and Socialism*, Navhind, Hyderabad, 1963, p. 6.

³ For a succinct account of the body of socialist thought, see, Subrata Mukherjee and Sushila Ramawsamy, *A History of Socialist Thought*, Sage, New Delhi, 2000.

from capitalism and Marxism and adapting it to the Indian circumstances as well as his mantras of devolution of power to address the vast socio-economic and political-cultural cleavages plaguing India. In addition, his analytical acumen which was the result of his rigorous scholastic training enables him to comprehend the prevailing theoretical formulation around the globe and adjusting them to resolve the convulsions engulfing India. The article, hence, endeavours to provide an in-depth understanding of Ram Manohar Lohia's ideas of society and polity.

Ideating Democracy

To Lohia democracy was not merely a system of government. Instead of focusing on its functional aspects he wanted to realize the substantial meaning of democracy where people themselves are the masters of their destiny, being the repository of all powers. Only in a free, fair and equal atmosphere an individual can attain all round development. To him democracy was a great equalizing force, a guarantee for decentralized socio-economic and political order. He was anguished against the proclivity of consolidation in government and industry which brings over impoverishment and lopsided advancement. To quote him, "...the greatest single quality of democracy in the present age is decentralization and its meaning must be fixed both in terms of defined political power belonging to small units of direct democracy and economic arrangements and technology that would give the working man greater understanding of control over productive process."⁴

Though he was a die-hard supporter of democracy, which empowers masses by dialogue and discussion, he was averse to Western liberal democracy because of its 'elitist' character.⁵ The democracy in the West was/is based on the principle of individualism. It professes uninterrupted development of capitalism, mass production and profit. Thus consolidating power in the hands of the rich, leaving the majority unattended and deprived politically as well as economically. The neglected majority loses their political and economic freedom and becomes only a 'cog' in a machine before the formidable might of a corporate world.

Functional Dynamics of Indian Democracy

India after independence under the leadership of Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of India, went for the West ministerial model of democracy based on liberal capitalist ethos. To Lohia, the model best suited to the rich, affluent, well-educated and harmonious society of the West. In a society like India where there was wide spread poverty, lop sided development, illiteracy and was more over caste divided, democracy had little meaning to the masses. Perseverance of large scale inequality has been a stumbling block to the general folk in arranging their basic necessity of food, shelter, education, etc. Similarly prevalence of wide-reaching illiteracy forbid man to employ its rationale on substantial issues that command their lives.

In such a predicament general masses are more likely to be swayed by popular, populist and momentary propaganda of political parties like "Garibi Hatao" and "Achhe Din Aane Wale Hain" at the time of election than think judiciously regarding their good. Policy making process has been under the influence of rich business houses at the cost of neglecting poor and marginalized sections of the society. Moreover, representative democracy has been monopolized by the corporate houses who fund the elections. As a result candidates after winning the election instead of speaking on behalf of wider groups become the spokesperson of their parties and big business houses in the legislative assemblies and deliberative bodies.

⁴ Ram Manohar Lohia, *Foreign Policy*, Dwadesh Shrew Private Limited, Aligarh, 1963, P-479

⁵ Ram Manohar Lohia, *The Doctrinal Foundations of Socialism*, Tulloch, Bombay, 1952

In a society loaded with so many cleavages of caste, creed, race and religion where a person's parentage sets a limit to their identity and future course of action, Lohia was firmly convinced that democracy has only meaning to the myopic lot of affluent upper caste. For majority of poor, there was neither equality nor fair play. Hence, Lohia had a reservation regarding Western form of democracy which according to him was a 'democracy of the rich'.⁶

Chaukhambha Model of Democracy

As democracy was loaded with a tendency of over-centralization, being a government of the rich and aristocrat, Lohia was skeptic regarding its functioning in post independent India. However it was the only system, capable enough to represent the diverse socio- economic and political rigidities prevailing in India. Indeed, Lohia had a tremendous appreciation for democracy as a system of government because of its "contemplative and accommodative" tributes. To put it differently, "West Ministerial Model" of democracy was not a kind of "shoe which fits all size", to make it comfortable to particular and complex socio-economics conditions rampant in Third World in general and in India in particular, Lohia advocated for repair and overhaul of the democracy. To him democracy has to be adaptive in such a manner as to be not only a warrantor of certain civil and political rights of the people but be a harbinger of such socio- economic surrounding where no one is deprived of his basic necessities of life. Indeed, Lohia aspired for such a framework of democracy which shed off its elitist character and work for the upliftment of deprived section of society.

In so far as the structure of government is concerned, Lohia's laudable attributes seems to be his model of four pillars of state. Lohia termed his model of decentralization as 'Chaukhamba Model' (Char Khamba- Four Pillar State) in which authority would be dispersed in villages, districts, provinces and center. Each pillar having equal respect and authority. Lohia wanted that the pillars must be in sync with each other and function in harmony, none out pacing the other. Only then the common men and women living in small groups in villages could taste the fruit of democracy. Only those functions should rest at the center which is of national significance, necessary to maintain the unity and integrity of the nation.

Thus, Lohia recommended for a decentralized democratic model for the country. A model in which common citizenry will always be at logger head with unjust and insensitive policies of the government. As a true Gandhian, he advocated for the 'permanent civil disobedience' which would act as an everlasting remedy against any sort of injustice. Thus, considering village, mandal (district) province and center as the four pillars of decentralized system of government, Lohia unconventionally sought to dovetail the lower levels like village and mandal with the police and welfare functions.⁷ However, later, reiterating his support for the idea of world government, he argued for the creation of the 'fifth pillar' also which would be in the form of the world government.⁸

Being a witness of partition and sudden eruption of violence on religious line, Lohia argued for addressing the issue of religion and politics prudently in free India. Any hasty and reckless amalgamation of the two inescapably trigger religious bigotry between different groups endangering the very foundation of a nation. Hence, Lohia

⁶ V.R Mehta, *Foundation of Indian Political Thought: An Interpretation*, Manohar Publications, Delhi, 1999, P-249

⁷ Ram Manohar Lohia, *Will to Power and Other Writings*, Navhind, Hyderabad, 1956, p. 132.

⁸ V. P. Varma, *Modern Indian Political Thought*, Lakshmi Narain Agarwal, Agra, 1964, p. 552.

advocated for right placing of the ideas of religion and politics in order to build substantive political structure. Thus, Lohia thought process was all-encompassing, covering a wide range of problems of the political processes and institutions in the country.

Lohia was a critique of the Westminster Model since it was elitist in nature. However, he was an ardent champion of its deliberative quality as it provides an opportunity for dialogue and discussion. A real democracy could be one which is participatory, provides fair and equal chance to each and every citizen. An active, aware and enlightened citizenship is a storehouse of a true democracy.

To make democracy viable to all and sundry, according to Lohia there was a need to adapt it to the phenomenal socio-economic status of India. There was an urgent need to combine political independence with economic independence to incorporate freedom with the need to provide nourishment to all. To Lohia freedom and equality are complimentary and can be realized within the fabric of social democracy.

It is here one can acknowledge Gandhian imprint upon Lohia. He sought to amalgamate his model of democracy on the principle of Gandhism and socialism, a system where political power will be diffused and the economy decentralized. Following Gandhi, Lohia believed that a true non-violent and free society can be realized when people are governed the least, where political power is decentralized. While centralization leads to subjugation, decentralization provides ample opportunity for the development of individual potential.

All other functions must be defused among other three pillars- the provinces, districts and villages following the spirit of equality and mutual respect. Lohia's four pillar state was not merely executive and legislative arrangements where central organs formulate policy and legislate whereas the district and the village organs are left only with execution. It was rather a way of life, structured in such a way which provides opportunity to the community as a whole to be a partner in every sphere of human activity, for instance, production, ownership, legislation, administration, planning, education and the like. The sovereign power was so diffused and decentralized in Lohia's design of state, common people became the master of their destiny, the ruler instead of being the ruled.

In order to dispel the fear of skeptics and to realize his model of four pillar state, he enunciated a blue print for its realization. Under the Jurisdiction of central government, according to Lohia only those subjects may be placed which are of national significance and require decision making at national level such as defense, foreign affairs, railways, heavy industries, civil aviation and so on. All other subjects which are of provincial nature and have local consequences particularly administration of law and order must be under the jurisdiction of the districts and villages. Under Lohia structure of state, an utmost importance was assigned to the districts and villages. By owning and managing the small unit textile industry of tomorrow and by determining the management and arrangement of agriculture both in terms of proportion of capital and labour utilized, the districts and villages become a vital unit of governance. Lohia opines that rising issues of factionalism and regionalism may be answered only by involving social collectivity in the decision making.

The notion of such a state, however, did not encapsulate the carbon copy of a self-sustained village but of the 'intelligent and vital village'. Under such a framework of the state, every section of the society would live judiciously and make an effort for the harmonious living.

Lohia was in consonance with positive liberals that democracy gains substance only along with economic freedom. Political decentralization must be adapted to the peculiar socio-economic condition of India. In a country where majority was poor and deprived, political democracy could be worthy of masses once they are liberated from their subsistence. So, he laid emphasis on abundant production and effective distribution.

Like a true Gnadhian, Lohia pleaded for localized production, use of small machine technology and providing useful work to maximum hands. There was a need to liberate masses from the bondage of capital, make them self-sufficient and master of their basic needs. It was possible with impressive production and distribution using small unit machines. Being cheap and affordable, such machines will be available at all levels, be it villages, cities or towns. Never the less, Lohia was not against the use of heavy machines but such machines should be used only in steel works or in river-training projects. In a sense, he aspired for economic planning in a reverse order that is from bottom to top. Lohia was averse to any kind of centralized or monolithic state, be it capitalist or communist. He firmly upholds that freedom can exist only in a non-violent society which is free from all kinds of domination and hegemony.

Any kind of cleavage, be of economic or social in nature, give birth to privileges, blocks the path of the overall development of general masses. To percolate down democracy at grass root level enables the majority to be an equal partner in nation-building. Indian society has to set off the prerogatives of birth, colour, sex and income. To achieve the goal, Lohia gives a call for 'Sapt-Kranti', seven revolutions. Equally important was to oppose the influence of foreign capital, imperialism and protect the individual rights against majoritarianism. Liberty of individual was so dear to him that like J.S Mill, he wanted to protect it from social collectivity, society at large. As Lohia was against any kind of coercion or force, his revolution was not akin to socialist who professed violent overthrow of one kind of oppression and exploitation with another but adhere to Gandhian tactics of satyagrah, passive resistance.

Civil disobedience was the only viable alternative to resist any and all kinds of domination. A just order can be achieved only through peaceful resistance, by change of heart not by wicked means of deceit or violence. To Lohia, purity of means was must to achieve the highest ideal of just and oppression free society.

He favoured Gandhian method of constructive program, educating both the rulers and ruled alike in order to withstand the onslaught of bureaucracy. To make democracy meaningful, undoubtedly along with enlightened and vigilant citizenry, mature leadership was also needed. Uprightness of behavior was expected from those who occupy the highest pedestal of power. They should not succumb to moral debauchery. Like Gandhi, Lohia advocated for ethics in politics.

As an ardent Gandhian, Lohia attempted his model of decentralized socialist democracy with Gandhian principles. By providing synthesis between Western capitalism (political democracy) and socialism (social ownership) with Gandhian philosophy, he tried to provide a model which best suited to the Asiatic condition, particularly India.

Conclusion

Under the neo-liberal capitalist paradigm of globalization, India may be signing but majority are still in an illusion. We are still far off from the quest of 'Second Freedom', liberating our majority from the shackles of economic servitude, social stratification and ensuring socio-economic and moral freedom for all through participatory democracy.

Ironically, there is an impending threat of corporates taking over the state. In a highly commoditized consumer world, marked by overriding greed for power and money, systematic dismantling of safety nets for poor, shrinking space for dissent and peaceful resistance, there is mounting disillusionment and despair among disproportionate populace regarding the efficacy of parliamentary democracy.

In such a predicament, Lohia's model of democratic decentralization, devolution of authority to the local bodies, making the majority of disadvantaged groups as equal partner in governance appears to be the sustainable and viable alternative. Sagacity demands for urgent strengthening of local bodies, all resources and schemes meant

for villages must be handed over to the panchayats. The 73rd and 74th constitutional amendment meant for democratic decentralization must be implemented by all states in letter and spirit. Lohia truly opined in order to rescue democracy from the monopoly of rich and advantageous section of society, authority must be dis-integrated into as many fragments as there are villages and relinquished in the village community. It was the only available way out for Lohia to introduce change in Indian life.

