



TOWARDS AN EQUAL SOCIETY: THE ANTI-CASTE POLITICS OF RAMMANOHAR LOHIA

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ABSTRACT

Rammanohar Lohia (1910-1967) was one of the principal figures of the socialist opposition in the Indian politics during the first two decades of independence. He was also a leading crusader against the caste system prevalent in the Indian society. Yet, he is almost a forgotten figure in today's anti-caste politics and various Dalit movements. The present study is a brief attempt to engage with Lohia's ideas about caste and his attempts to dismantle it.

INTRODUCTION

The crux of Lohia's socialism was the creation of an equal society— absolute equality and not simply a more equal, but by no means flat, society— which was the goal of many other socialist leaders. Lohia's notion of equality was not limited to the economic sphere nor was it meant for the Indian society alone. He extended the concept of equality to the social, cultural and gender sphere as well. According to him, equality is not only to be achieved within the borders of a nation but between the nations as well.

Before starting with Lohia's struggle for an equal society we must have a look at what he meant by an unequal social order. Lohia listed three characteristics which forged the identity of an elite or a member of the ruling class in India— i) high caste, ii) English education and, iii) wealth. Whoever possessed any two of these can be called a member of the ruling class. In this way, he presented a picture of an Indian society where marginality and deprivation must be understood through multiple aspects and the war on inequality must be waged on all of these fronts simultaneously. However, elites exist in every society, even in a post-

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revolutionary society like that of Soviet Russia. He asserted that it is the immobility of the situation which distinguished the Indian case from the rest of the world. According to him, education and wealth could have facilitated mobility in the Indian society but the exceptional rigidity of the caste system deprived most of the Indians from even a mere access to education and wealth. Lohia's inclusion of caste (and gender, and language as well— although, a discussion about them remain outside the purview of this essay) as an indicator of deprivation and marginality set him apart from the Communists who described marginality on the singular basis of class.

The Nature of the Caste System

Lohia wrote extensively about the caste system. He said that caste is not a unique Indian phenomenon and can be observed in many societies. The origin of the castes can be traced to classes— the specialised working groups. Whenever class mobility stops it is transformed into castes. Castes are immobile classes and classes are immobile castes. In India, there is hardly any transformation in thousands of years. What is the reason behind the continuous dominance of the higher castes in India over the centuries?

It is unlikely that Lohia have ever encountered the writings of Antonio Gramsci on hegemony. But the former echoing the latter's concept of hegemony wrote the following in 1958 as the causes of the upper caste domination:

They (the high-castes) cannot do it alone through the gun. They must instill a sense of inferiority into those whom they seek to govern and exploit. This they best can do by turning themselves into a select caste with speech, dress, manners and living of which the lower castes are incapable.¹

Why did the lower castes tolerate such a discriminating system— an illusion of inferiority about themselves? Lohia's answer was that the caste system gave the depressed castes a sort of social insurance. The caste system is the most overwhelming phenomenon of the Indian life. The most personal and intimate rituals of one's life like birth, marriage, death are all associated with their caste identity. One cannot go beyond these identities and still expect a safety net against calamity or routine ill-being from the society. In a way, it is the caste identity which sustains their very existence. There are also a number of myths and legends created in order to project their inferior status. In this way, the ideological subjection has made them, in most cases, active supporters of the status quo. It is, thus, very natural that in

¹ Rammanohar Lohia, 'Towards the Destruction of Castes and Classes,' 'The Caste System,' *Collected Works of Dr. Rammanohar Lohia*, Vol 2, 280; henceforward CWRL



India, castes are the determining force in politics too. Most of the political parties including the socialist parties were led by high caste men. Lohia who himself was a *Baniya* by caste was well aware of this situation and extended his criticism to his own party as well for their failure to elevate enough number of lower caste politicians to leadership positions. He did not spare even Gandhi from his criticism in this matter. He thought that Gandhi acted as a reformer and not a revolutionary against the system. He wrote in 1963 that Gandhi's idea about caste:

...started with some kind of a romantic idealisation about it. He tried to shear it of its evils as though the thing was not evil in itself. It was only sometime around the last great struggle for freedom, the open rebellion of 1942, that he recognised the inherent evil of the caste system.”²

According to him, it was the indifference of the majority of the masses who belong to the lower castes to political changes that has caused a tragic succession of foreign conquests in India. The downtrodden, oppressed masses were mute spectators to these national tragedies because the political regime changes hardly affect their material condition.³The influence of the higher castes had been such that the lower castes consider it their duty to quietly obey the *Dwijias*. In this way, a lifeless mass and a chicane elite has been created. Thus, “*the needs of caste are at war with those of the nation.*”⁴ Lohia noted that political participation remain essentially caste-bound. One must not expect a group to act differently only when it comes to political behaviour when they are living, dying, wedding and feasting together in the same manner over the centuries.

It should be noted that Lohia always used the plural for the higher castes. According to him, an alliance of higher castes instead of a single caste should be considered as the ruling elite.

² Lohia, “Guilty Men of India’s Partition,” *CWRL*, Vol 2, 93

³ A distant echo of a similar line of argument can be found in the writings of Sudipta Kaviraj. He argued that the premodern state in India had a very limited role and it was a distant entity. The society was ruled according to rituals and religious laws. The majority of the population was subservient to the social elite instead of the political elite. They hardly took a notice of the political regime change and they hardly participate in the political activities. It was only with the advent of the modernity that the situation changed fundamentally. Now, even the downtrodden groups are actively participating in the political activities in order to elevate their status. Sudipta Kaviraj, “On the enchantment of the state: Indian thought on the role of the state in the narrative of modernity,” *European Journal of Sociology*, Vol 46, No. 2, (2005): 287; doi:10.1017/S0003975605000093

⁴ Lohia, ‘Towards the Destruction,’ “The Caste System,” *CWRL*, Vol 2, 278; emphasis mine



These higher castes sometimes inter-marry and inter-dine. But one should not be misled to believe such behaviours as anti-caste. A real anti-caste behaviour would be a marriage between a *dvija* and a *shudra* which is a rare incident. Similarly, the upward mobility of a single caste in a region should not be interpreted as the destruction of the system. On the contrary, such upward mobilisations mostly enforce the very system because the erstwhile lower caste imitates the norms and traditions of the higher castes and block the road of the other lower castes to the higher plains of the society. This is why Lohia was critical of the *Maratha* or *Reddy* dominance in Maharashtra and Andhra Pradesh respectively.

This was the crux of Lohia's thoughts regarding the struggle against caste. He was not in favour of simply mobilising anti-Brahmin sentiments like E V Ramaswamy Periyar. He highlighted the situation of Maharashtra where the Marathas replaced the Brahmins as the dominating caste and in effect, the caste system continued even without Brahmin domination. He was not presenting an exclusive plan for the Harijans alone like Ambedkar. He was talking about the regeneration of the whole nation which is possible only when the nation is free of the caste system as a whole. In a truly casteless system, there will be no sectional elevations; there will be no blind imitations of higher caste rituals by the upwardly mobile lower castes; and there will be no caste based antagonism.

The Attitude of the Government

Jawaharlal Nehru, the then Prime Minister of India and Lohia's political *bête noire*, on the other hand, considered caste as an anachronism— an ancient relic which would wither away with the economic developments accompanying the extension of modern democratic political franchise. He in fact denied their very existence and rechristened the backward castes as "Other Backward Classes" (OBCs). His government rejected the First Backward Classes Commission's report recommending reservation of government jobs in terms of caste identity. The Nehruvian modernism believed that with the establishment of a socialistic pattern of society the social discriminations would disappear automatically. Christophe Jaffrelot argued that the "preponderance of the notions of class and class struggle among an intelligentsia influenced by Marxism as well as Gandhi's utopia of a conflict-free society" was responsible in rejecting the recommendations of caste-based reservation. He added, "this twofold line of thinking preferred to deny the existence of caste but by doing so it maintained the social status quo."⁵Lohia vehemently criticised this governmental line as an attempt to continue the status quo and social injustice. He noted the reluctance of the Nehruvian government in implementing any caste-based policy:

⁵ Christophe Jaffrelot, "The Impact of Affirmative Action in India: More Political than

Socioeconomic," *India Review*, Vol 5, No. 2, (2006): 179, DOI: 10.1080/14736480600824516



India's political parties, Congress or Communist, are under Mr. Nehru's leadership, thoroughly hostile to the award of preferential treatment on any large scale. They denounce it as a caste-motivated measure while they are themselves viciously caste-ridden, perhaps unknowingly. They denounce caste by birth, but in enthroning the principle of merit, they keep secured their privileged positions.⁶

He further wrote that "a vested interest socialism talks of political and economic revolution alone, meaning thereby the award of increased wages or bonus on the lowest level and the destruction of private property in factories and the like on the highest level." But these did not solve the problem of social inequality and injustice.

Lohia's Programme against the Caste System

Lohia prescribed seven revolutions in order to establish an equal society. This is the only way through which a man can reclaim his human dignity and human existence. These seven revolutions or *sapta kranti* are: 1. Revolution for the equality between man and woman; 2. Revolution against political, economic and spiritual inequality based on skin colour; 3. Revolution against inequality of backward and high groups or castes based on long tradition, and for giving special opportunities to the backward; 4. Revolution against foreign enslavement and for freedom and for democratic rule; 5. Revolution for economic equality and planned production and against the existence of and attachment for private capital; 6. Revolution against unjust encroachments on private life and democratic methods; 7. Revolution against weapons and for satyagraha. According to Lohia, all of these revolutions are of equal importance and one must participate in them simultaneously. However, for our present study we are solely focusing on his struggles against the caste system.

Lohia considered women, *Sudras*, *Adivasis*, and backward castes of religious minorities as depressed groups. According to his political programme, the socialist government would reserve 60 percent of seats in all high positions for the depressed groups. This would be implemented immediately irrespective of the merit of the individuals from these groups as it is only natural that they would not be equal in merit to the upper castes who have enjoyed the privilege of their position for centuries. According to him, "A true doctrine of equal opportunity would have to undo the work of five thousand years by giving preferential treatment to the lower-castes over a period of at least a few decades."⁷The upper castes must

⁶ Lohia, "Caste," Notes and Comments, *CWRL*, Vol 6, 160; Lohia considered merit not as an objective phenomenon but a result of the expression of accumulated social capital over the centuries.

⁷ Lohia, 'Towards the Destruction,' "The Caste System," *CWRL*, Vol 2, 293



endure a temporary injustice so that a “...new era of justice and equality may begin.”⁸ A similar formula of reserving sixty percent posts for the depressed groups were followed within the Socialist Party. He also prescribed inter-caste marriage between upper and lower castes a necessary requirement for government employment. Similarly, “collective inter-dining among government employees in a particular area twice a year” would be made compulsory.⁹ He was aware that this may lead the liberals to attack him accusing of encroaching on personal choices. But he defended his position by asserting that the caste system is more evil to the notion of individual freedom. The socialist government would also arrange for special scholarships, hostels, etc. for the lower caste students.

Lohia’s continued agitation for the sixty percent reservation was epitomized by the famous slogan— *sansopa ne bnadhi gnaath, peechde paaye sau me saath* (the SSP or Samyukta Socialist Party is determined to fight for the sixty percent reservation for the backwards). The reservation politics gave the much needed political oxygen to Lohia’s party in the 1960s. Although it failed to reap the benefits immediately against the Congress in the elections, it prepared the ideological ground for the lower caste and middle-peasant group mobilisations in the subsequent years. Lohia’s obsession with quotas emanated from his belief that the appointment of a person from the lower castes to a government job or a position of power worked in the psychological empowering of the whole caste. Although the material benefit of a government job is negligible the psychological impact would be immense. It would remove a mental barrier which had hitherto restrained that particular caste from asserting itself in the life of the nation.

However, in such cases, the risk of sectional elevation within a caste is imminent. Lohia who was otherwise very vocal against such sectional elevation remained silent on this aspect of the possible creation of ‘creamy layers’ within a caste. He was possessed by the idea of reserving seats alone. And this single trait has become the dominant identity of his politics to later generation of scholars and politicians. Thus, when Akshaya Mukul wrote a fitting tribute to Lohia in his birth centenary year, he chose to title his piece “Rammanohar Lohia: The Quota Marshall.”¹⁰ However, it must be kept in mind that Lohia never advocated reservation

⁸ Lohia, ‘Endure Temporary Injustice,’ ‘The Caste System,’ *CWRL*, Vol 2, 223

⁹ Lohia, “Marx, Gandhi and Socialism,” *CWRL*, Vol 1, 696

¹⁰ Akshaya Mukul, “Rammanohar Lohia: The Quota Marshall,” *The Times of India*, April 3, 2010, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Ram-Manohar-Lohia-The-Quota-Marshall/articleshow/5756713.cms> Accessed on September 5, 2020



as the sole weapon to fight against multiple marginalities. Nor did he propose blanket reservation of seats for depressed groups in all spheres of life. For example, he was strictly against reserving seats in the educational sector proposed by the Backward Castes Commission. He urged the backward castes to ask the government to open more schools and colleges or conduct more than one shifts in the same school in order to accommodate more students from their castes, but they may “never ask for the exclusion of any child of India from the portals of an educational institution.”¹¹

CONCLUSION

Although Lohia considered all of the seven revolutions of same importance and to be undertaken simultaneously it is his proposed revolution against the discriminating caste system which established his most well known political legacy. This was manifested in the establishment of a number of political parties voicing the demands of the OBCs between the 1970s and 1990s and the implementation of the recommendations of the Mandal Commission regarding the preferential treatment of the members of the OBCs in the government educational and public sector enterprises.

However, this legacy of Lohia also, in some ways, limited the appeal of his socialist politics. While Lohia thought the anti-caste politics to be only one of the components of his way to a socialist world order, most of his followers eschewed the other components of his socialist politics like the struggle against gender-based discrimination or the predominance of English language. This was largely influenced by the realities of electoral politics where the issues related to caste(s) garnered the maximum number of votes and ironically proving Lohia’s own convictions about caste being the most important factor in Indian politics as true. This is, perhaps, the greatest tragedy of one of the finest political minds of twentieth century India that despite repeatedly identifying himself as a universalist and a true internationalist, despite thinking on a global scale and proposing a socialism for the future of the entire human race, despite being pained and agitated by the unjust treatment of humanity in any part of the world, Lohia ended up in history and memory merely as a leader of the Other Backward Classes of north Indian Hindi belt.

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3. A distant echo of a similar line of argument can be found in the writings of Sudipta Kaviraj. He argued that the premodern state in India had a very limited role and it was a distant entity. The society was ruled according to rituals and religious laws. The majority of the population was subservient to the social elite instead of the political elite. They hardly took a notice of the political regime change and they hardly participate in the political activities. It was only with the advent of the modernity that the situation changed fundamentally. Now, even the downtrodden groups are actively participating in the political activities in order to elevate their status. Sudipta Kaviraj, "On the enchantment of the state: Indian thought on the role of the state in the narrative of modernity," European Journal of Sociology, Vol 46, No. 2, (2005): 287; doi:10.1017/S0003975605000093
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