On Remembering Lohia

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During his life, Rammanohar Lohia paid the price for three “sins” that the opinion-making class could never forgive him for – he attacked Nehru repeatedly at a time when Nehru was god-like, he led a vigorous and voluble campaign against English and he publicly questioned upper caste dominance and advocated caste-based affirmative action. No wonder Lohia was persona non grata to the upper-caste, English-speaking elite, from Congress supporters to communists. The Nehru-left dominance of Indian academia and media ensured that a caricature of Lohia became his dominant image.

On the occasion of his birth centenary this year, there has been fortunately a renewed political curiosity about Lohia and there is some reason to hope that serious, meticulous and critical scholarship on his politics and ideas may indeed take off. This special issue on the thought and politics of Rammanohar Lohia is offered in this hope.

What we remember and what we have forgotten about Rammanohar Lohia on the occasion of his birth centenary is as much a comment on the state of political and intellectual life in contemporary India as it is on the man who lived a short and intense life of thought and action. His strong personality and iconoclastic mind have split his memory into two strands that talk past one another. On the one hand, there is the small and dwindling band of Lohia admirers, still too dazzled to see anything beyond “doctor sahib”. On the other hand, there are the critics, too prejudiced and self-assured to even read Lohia. With the passage of time, the once passionate quarrel among his critics and admirers threatens to fade into a vast ocean of silence and forgetfulness in the public domain. It is not clear which of these is worse – the partial and skewed memory or the ridiculing forgetfulness. This special issue is aimed as a corrective to both the uncritical adulation and wilful amnesia about Lohia that exists today.

Admirers/Critics

Lohia admirers are usually a scattered bunch of ageing political activists, at the margins of political and intellectual establishments, in search of a party or a cause. More often than not selfless, over-attentive to the symbolic dimension of politics, masters of political rhetoric, and congenitally resistant to the requirements of organisation building, the Lohinities find themselves out of place in the world of politics and ideas today. A sense of political irrelevance serves to deepen their nostalgia, if not serious grudge against history. Their admiration takes many forms. Sometimes it is a ritual stuti (paean). Very often it is a recitation of some phrases and slogans coined by Lohia, or an attempt to read him through the lens of his own writings.

To be fair, this is not true of all Lohia’s admirers. A small band of socialist activists who derive inspiration from Lohia have tried to keep his legacy alive by updating his ideas in keeping with the times, exploring new themes in the spirit of these ideas and, if necessary, revising them. (The articles by Sachchidanand Sinha and Sunil in this collection represent the views of this category of political activists.) Kishen Pattnayak, a close associate of Lohia and perhaps the most creative thinker in this category, had this to say about the Lohia cult,

It seems Lohia was singularly unfortunate in his followers. His followers can be nearly divided into those who ineffectively repeat his aphorisms in a disconnected manner and those who parade their loyalty to Lohia only when it is politically opportune ... even the small sincere groups and individuals whose loyalty can’t be questioned are of no use so long as they remain mere worshippers of Lohia celebrating his birth and death days and parroting some of his witty sayings” (1980: 5).

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Of late there has been a quiet but significant revival of interest in Lohia among people’s movements and struggles, especially those involved in resisting displacement, environmental destruction and large-scale development projects. With such struggles coming up against the old left orthodoxies on development, planning and science, there is a growing interest in thinkers like Lohia who provide an alternative perspective. Lohia’s ideas now inform and inspire, directly or indirectly, some of the more innovative contemporary formulations of people’s movements and alternative politics.4

Lohia’s admirers are not confined to the world of political activists. Perhaps, the more creative interpretation of his ideas took place outside the world of politics. M F Husain spoke recently about how Lohia inspired him, “Dr Rammanohar Lohia had told me that ‘you must paint the Ramayana and Mahabharata, it is a universal thing, it belongs to no one faith’.”5 U R Ananthamurthy has also spoken about Lohia’s influence on his writings and those of his contemporaries. He said that Lohia made it possible for him to be “a critical insider”. (Chandan Gowda’s article in this collection traces Lohia’s deep impact on the Kannada literary tradition.) His influence on Hindi literature and writers in other Indian languages is also well known.6 It is not wrong to say that much of this influence was confined to writers who personally came in contact with Lohia and that it was rarely carried forward to the following generation.

If Lohia’s admirers have been voluble and unimaginative, his critics have largely deployed silence as an effective weapon of ridicule. The two most powerful orientations in the institutionalised world of ideas in post-independent India – Nehruvian and Marxist – came together to design a wall of silence around Lohia. The contempt underlying this silence came through occasionally. For instance, this is how Ajaz Ahmed introduces Lohia to his readers, “Rammanohar Lohia … who had a visceral hatred of Nehru, had built a sizeable base for himself, especially in UP, with a combination of a broadly populist programme and extreme linguistic cultural chauvinism in support of Hindi as the national language”7 (2002: 344-45). This contempt, generously reciprocated by Lohia, was transmitted to the next generation of left-wing or progressive thinkers in the form of ignorance. This gave rise to a left wing academic culture that made it easy to dismiss Lohia without reading him.7 The sheer weight of the negative, though silent, assessment of Lohia has affected our collective memory of him, not very dissimilar to Ambedkar’s memory before the renewal of interest in him in the wake of his birth centenary and the collapse of the Soviet Union. On balance, Lohia has been stuck with a rather unflattering image. He is seen to be something of a loose cannon – eccentric if brilliant, self-righteous in his honesty, acerbic and unrestrained in his speech, flamboyant and disjointed in his ideas.8 However, it must be said that there is now a small number, maybe even a critical mass, of Marxist and ex-Marxist scholars and activists who are willing to cast their intellectual net wide, which has led to a growing curiosity about Lohia.9

There is one respect in which Lohia’s admirers and critics collude with each other. His baiters do not feel that he deserves any critical attention and his admirers think that he is above any serious criticism. So, it is quite possible that the momentary attention that Lohia centenary has brought him may not spur a systematic critical scrutiny of his ideas and politics.

Politics/Ideas
In the world of politics, Lohia is remembered today as the originator of Other Backward Classes (OBC) reservations;10 the champion of backward castes in the politics of north India;11 the father of non-Congressism; the uncompromising critic of the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty; and the man responsible for the politics of anti-English.12 This has of course been a function of the image of his political legatees like Mulayam Singh Yadav, Lalu Prasad Yadav and George Fernandes. The disappearance of the socialist movement from the political map of contemporary India has meant that many dimensions of his egalitarianism have been largely erased from the world of politics. Lohia’s economic agenda – his campaigns against poverty, unemployment and price rise – is almost forgotten. So is his consistent and uncompromising advocacy of gender justice.13 With “nationalism” becoming a dirty word in progressive politics, we cannot even recognise Lohia’s brand of nationalism which combined a sharp response to Chinese aggression with a visionary Himalaya policy; which upheld the Indian case on Kashmir but not the unholy and undemocratic games in the Valley; which was at pains to distinguish the Pakistani rulers from ordinary Pakistanis; and which worked hard to separate the Pakistan question from that of Indian Muslims. A shallow understanding of politics has meant a collective inability to grasp Lohia’s cultural politics, which included efforts to organise a Ramayan Mela; an initiative to bring Indian languages closer to one another; a plea for cleaning rivers and protecting centres of pilgrimage; and an anxiety about culturally integrating the north-east with the rest of the country. The narrow, inward gaze of contemporary politics has also meant obliteration of the international dimension of his politics – his resolute pacifism; his opposition to nuclear weapons; his protests against racial inequality;14 his advocacy of an Indo-Pak federacy; and his dream of a world without visas and passports.

Compared to how he is remembered in the world of politics, his memory in the world of ideas is more intriguing, and also a sad commentary on India’s institutionalised academia. There is a deep irony here. Lohia has faded away precisely when some of the themes signalled by him have risen to respectability and prominence in western, and therefore Indian, academia. After the “linguistic turn”, social sciences are more sensitive to the significance of culture as an instrument of dominance and power. But that has not led to a scholarly attention of Lohia’s writings on this theme, which preceded post-colonial cultural critiques by well over two decades.15 The power of language and the role of English as a language of power have become commonplace in social sciences. Yet Lohia’s “Banish English” campaign is still viewed as the parochial voice of a Hindi supremacist. His critique

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of Euro-centricism has not invited even a gesture of acknowledge-
ment from post-Saidian scholars, who include many Indian
academics. Despite plenty of work on multiple and alternative
modernities, there has been no attempt to trace the roots of these
ideas in someone like Lohia. Although the post-modernist stance
has become trendy, Lohia’s resolute philosophical anti-objectivism,
rate for a political actor and that too for one from the left, has
drawn no attention.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, there is recognition
that the model of development that Soviet-style socialism shared
with capitalism needs a rethink, but that has not spawned any interest
in Lohia’s advocacy of the small machine and economic decen-
tralisation. Despite much interest in dependency theories of un-
derdevelopment, there has been no follow-up on Lohia’s thesis of
the twin origins of capitalism and colonialism. The experience of
20th century revolutions has led to a realisation that the battle
against inequality has to be fought separately on several fronts,
but Lohia’s “Seven Revolutions” are yet to register on the radar of
Indian intellectuals.

Affirmative action is in the news and has gained more
academic respectability than before. While the roots of Mandal
are traced back to Lohia, there is little realisation of the concept
of equality that informed his thinking on social justice or about
his warnings and note of caution about policies of affirmative ac-
tion. (Anand Kumar’s article in this issue argues against the com-
mon caste-centric misreading of Lohia.) We do not remember, for
example, that for Lohia shudras included women of any caste.
While the feminist strand of thinking has strengthened in Indian
academia, Lohia’s feminist tracts have been forgotten by both
Lohiaites and Indian feminists. Also forgotten are Lohia’s
dialogues with B R Ambedkar and Periyar E V Ramasamy and
that his utterances on caste were animated by a concern for who
are now called dalits. Lohia’s protest against the museumisation
of adivasis, implicit in the Jawaharlal Nehru-Verrier Elwin
approach, has not been noticed by contemporary anthropology.

Insufficient attention to Lohia’s ideas is reflected even in a
deficient reading of his intellectual biography. While he was
careful about acknowledging the sources of his ideas, his
followers continue to see him as an iconoclastic thinker with no
precedence, one who learnt from no one, bar Karl Marx and
Mahatma Gandhi. This has led to insufficient attention to the
German roots of his thinking (Joachim Oesterheld’s article
reconstructs the intellectual and political context of Berlin when
Lohia was a doctoral student there), the evolution of his ideas in
the 1930s and the 1940s and the impact his dialogues with
Ambedkar and Periyar had on him. It is well known that Lohia’s
ideas developed as an internal critique of his own colleagues
such as Jayaprakash Narayan and Asoka Mehta. He was reluc-
tant to explicate it, but this has not been done by post-Lohia
scholarship either. Nor do we know enough about how Lohia
learnt from Acharya Narendra Deva, the one leader in the
Socialist Party he deferred to. In general, the task of placing
Lohia in his intellectual context, specifically that of socialist
thought in 20th century India, remains to be undertaken.
(Rajaram Tolpady’s essay in this issue makes a valuable
contribution in this direction.)

This is related to the very serious challenge of developing an
informed critique of Lohia’s ideas and his politics so as to assess
his real legacy. Lohia would have readily admitted that his writ-
ings presented a rough sketch, an outline rather than a finished
body of work. This requires filling the blanks in Lohia’s thinking,
enlarging domains such as environment and technology where
he offered no more than hints. This would also require reconciling
some aspects of his thinking that stood in tension with some
others. Examples of this would be his pacifism and his aggressive
reaction to the Chinese attack; his opposition to homogenisation
of cultures and his assimilationist streak when it came to smaller
languages and the north-east; and his universalism and his parti-
san nationalism when the subjects were Pakistan or the history of
Indian expansion in south-east Asia. A more demanding task
would be to reconstruct Lohia’s politics in a fast globalising, post-
Soviet world. (Sunil’s essay offers one such extension of Lohia’s
economic ideas in the present context.) We can get glimpses of this
effort in the writings of Madhu Limaye and Kishen Pattanayak.
But these are exceptions rather than the rule. (Yogendra Yadav’s
essay in this issue offers an argument to identify those aspects of
Lohia’s thought that are still “living”.)

Thinker/Leader

At least in part, the distorted memory of Lohia is due to the radia-
cal difference there was between Lohia the thinker and Lohia the
political leader. This was not the usual dichotomy of high theory
and low practice that accounts for much of the hypocrisy in the
world of politics. If there was one thing that made Lohia attrac-
tive to his contemporaries, and caused deep discomfort to his adver-
saries, it was an absence of hypocrisy. He spoke and wrote as he
thought, he did so in public and was willing to pay the price for
his beliefs, he practised in his own life what he preached to others,
his political programme flowed from his doctrines, and he was
scandalously open in criticising his own party when it deviated
from principles.15 The disjunction between Lohia the thinker and
Lohia the leader was more a matter of difference in temper and
style. Lohia the thinker was a self-conscious “philosophical liberal”;
Lohia the leader was a “programmatic extremist” and deliberately
so (Marx, Gandhi and Socialism: xxi). The thinker could be ex-
ceedingly tolerant of intellectual disagreements,18 always looking
to synthesise opposite viewpoints; the leader was often seen
to be intolerant, partisan and a divisive influence. The thinker
was meticulous in gathering evidence, responsible about weigh-
ing it and careful to qualify what he said. Quick conclusions,
strong judgments and a bad temper characterised the leader.19

If Lohia’s collective memory today is shaped largely by a selec-
tive recall of his life as a political leader, this is partly because his
political actions and programmes were more visible and are
easier to recall than his ideas. This is indeed how Lohia wanted
it, perhaps because he was conscious of the limited immediate
appeal of some of his far-sighted ideas. The political symbolism
of his action was designed for its attention and recall value, for
gathering followers who may not have appreciated his ideas.
Lohia’s own followers contributed to this distortion by accentuat-
ing each of his weaknesses in political action and reducing his
ideas to a few easy-to-digest phrases.
However, if one has to look for one reason why Lohia is remembered as he is today, it must have been his disconnect with the upper-caste, English-speaking elite, from Congress supporters to communists. The Nehru-left dominance of Indian academia and media ensured that a caricature of Lohia became his dominant image.

Will the flurry of activities associated with Lohia’s birth centenary celebrations change this? The various events and associated with the birth centenary have no doubt led to a greater attention to Lohia's life and works than has been the case in recent times (Somaya 2010; Oza 2009). But it is not clear if this attention has spilled over beyond the small circles of political activists and opinion-makers to the younger generation of citizens, activists and scholars. The birth centenary activities have had to draw much of its energies from those legatees who have been largely responsible for Lohia’s negative image. Besides, much of this new attention has been focused on his personality and political action, rather than his ideas. To be sure, the publication of his Ratchanavalii, a nine-volume collection of his writings in Hindi or translated into it, and the much-awaited publication of his Collected Works in English is a significant milestone. At this stage one must hope that the birth centenary will lead to a surge of interest in Lohia, as happened to Ambedkar after his birth centenary, and this new resource will be used outside the small circle of Lohia admirers. One can also draw some hope from what appears to be the beginning of a renaissance of studies in modern Indian political thought. Add these to the growing political curiosity about Lohia in radical political circles and there is some hope that serious, meticulous and critical scholarship on his politics and ideas may take off. This special issue is offered in this hope.

NOTES

1 For example, take this introduction to Lohia's publica-

2 This would be a fair way to summarise a surpris-

3 For a representative selection of his writings, see

4 For instance, a careful scrutiny of the ideological
documents of the National Alliance of Peoples

5 Interview with Husain in The Times of India,

9 The website Sanhati, a left wing critic of the Left

14 For an admirer's account of Lohia's visit to the US


com/articleshow/4894540.cms?, retrieved on

8 March 2010. For nearly a decade, Lohia's headqua-

12 Only a few academic studies have analysed

13 See Sharan and Sharma (2002) for one of the few

18 As a member of the Editorial Board of the journal

19 The web site Sanhati, a left wing critic of the Left

Vidhayak Dal (SVD) governments in which his

10 "Quota Marshall" is how an otherwise sympathet-

9 The web site Sanhati, a left wing critic of the Left

16 For an exception see Jaffrelot (2005), p 86.

17 Vijayadev Narayan Sahi mentions an incident in

Congress Socialist is among the few journals in the world whose editor has published articles, over and over again, with which he was in sharp disagreement” (Congress Socialist, 10 September 1938). He continued this practice in journals such as Mankind and Jan, which he founded, though by then there were few adversaries willing to publish in his journals.


Both these collections, edited by Mastram Kapoor, fill a big void in scholarship on Lohia. The collection is still not complete and the volumes could do with clarity of organisation and careful annotations. Yet these volumes would ensure that every scholar does not hunt for the right edition of Lohia’s various writings and speeches scattered across a number of publishers. It should be recorded here that these volumes were made possible by extensive research carried out by the late Hari Dev Sharma.

References


