

Lohia's Immanent Critique of Caste

Ravi Suman Kumar

Research Scholar

Department of Political Science

Sri Satya Sai University of Technology & Medical Sciences, M.P.

Abstract: This paper is divided into five sections. Section I explores Ram Manohar Lohia's method of immediacy and argues that for Lohia, internal tensions in history or mythologies are very important to develop a critical perspective. Section II tries to look at Lohia's contributions in the light of his predecessors like Gandhi and Ambedkar, two major influences on him in a variety of concerns. Section III examines Lohia's analysis of different aspects of caste and especially its moral order. In Section IV, it is proposed to discuss why Lohia focuses on non-historical resources (fables, myths) and their inner contradiction dealing with the caste system. In the last section, Lohia's analysis of three forms of opposition to caste is discussed. "The Prime Minister has a mind which essentially belongs to the West and Central Asia, a Magi mind, a mind of 'the sacred book', inimical not only to the evil, but also to the evil doer. The Indian mind is either inert or when active opposed the evil alone. The man who is an enemy of the evil doer has necessarily to befriend evil." - R M Lohia¹ (1957)

Lohia's Method: The principle of Immediacy: It may be argued that Lohia's immanent criticism is outlined by his principle of immediacy. Recent commentators misunderstand Lohia's principle of immediacy. Yogendra Yadav's lengthy essay on Lohia's intellectual journey underestimates Lohia's method. Where he should notice Lohia's methodological protocols in his principle of immediacy, he argues that Lohia's principle is morally relevant against 'vulgar presentism' (excessively concerned with the present and indifferent to the future) but does not have any analytical significance. Commenting on Lohia's principle of immediacy, Yadav (2010: 94) argues, "Lohia did not formulate the analytical part of this insight (the principle of immediacy – my addition) as clearly as the normative principle". Anand Kumar (2010) tries to argue for an intersectional understanding of caste but does not notice that Lohia offers an internal critique of caste and implies that Lohia transcends caste in order to offer his criticism of caste. His notion of intersectionality is transcendental based on external limits rather than immanent based on internal limits of the caste system. D L Seth comes very close to acknowledge internal tensions inside caste system and argues that 'counter-cultural traditions' (2002: 122) of the subaltern castes could be the basis of a new counter-hegemony. Seth argues that Lohia "does not develop sufficiently to give the symbolism a political content". (Ibid.) But Seth fails to notice that Lohia develops new analytical protocols for a new socialist politics to begin with. Lohia intends to develop a new path for a new political programme. Akin to Buddhism, for Lohia, a path (method) may be more important than the destination (politics). Obsession with a remote destination may destroy our search of a right path which may be waiting for our immediate attention. Let us discuss this issue at length.

The Immediacy Test; Lohia proposes, “We may, in fact, be heading for a golden age if we try to achieve that golden age in the immediate”. (Lohia, Vol 2: 186) The principle of immediacy connects the moment of flux (history) with the moment of eternity (fables), the moment of material force with a moment of subjective will, the moment of social with the moment of the individual. The principle of immediacy claims that for each single act, we need not look for transcendental criteria to justify its course of doing. It can be justified with immanent criteria or by a ‘here and now’ approach to production, governance, culture and class struggle. Lohia argues, “Compassion and revolution have to interweave and any preferential loyalty to one or the other would heap disaster on the spiritual as well as the material”. (Lohia, Vol 2: 186) Lohia clearly is unprepared to give up thereason for awill or vice versa. He discards the golden age of distant future and argues that such an ideal is harmful to left-wing movements. For they may do many ignoble acts to fulfil high ideals and think that their acts can be justified by the outcome of a remote future. If I may rephrase him, he implicitly suggests that a perspective of will focuses on compassion or spiritual realm whereas a perspective of reason concentrates on material changes in human life. A socialist ideal of progress must concentrate on a combined perspective of will and reason.

Lohia’s principle acquires an added analytical significance in socialist movement to establish classless and casteless society by a here-and-now approach rather than a remote approach. The orthodox notion of progress in socialist circles upholds a rosy future and forgets that subalterns want to gain ‘autonomy’ here and now rather than in distant future. Unless socialists identify with the subaltern search for autonomy/solidarity here and now and would want to identify their struggle with the subaltern search for autonomy, they will lose relevance here and now. Unless socialists identify with the principle of immediacy in production (the will to control production/profits in factory or agriculture field), in class struggle (democratic participation in pedagogy/action rather than dependence on leadership), in culture (intellectual formation among subalterns, approximation to other cultures of subalterns and so on), socialist movement cannot create the golden age it promises to the subaltern strata.

Caste as domination or legitimation: Gandhi, Ambedkar and Lohia: Since caste is a power structure, it needs to be related to a theory of power. A theory of power is usually caught with a tension between two notions of power: power as a hierarchy of domination on the one hand and power as a system of legitimation on the other hand. The former focuses on a hierarchy of elites and subalterns, structural inequalities arising between them and strategies to dominate subaltern strata and so on. The latter focuses on why subalterns give consent to the domination of elites and its moral and legal paraphernalia. These notions of power represent two different sides of power, sometimes pushing theorists to take sectarian positions. That is to say, theorists of power may merely echo the one or the other side of power, failing to notice that there are actually two sides of power in live tension or contradiction between each other. A comprehensive theory of power will have to engage with these two different tendencies of the power structure. Thus, a broad view of caste power may have to take into account the hierarchy of domination and structures of legitimation. It must break with a binary view that treats caste as domination or as legitimation process. This paper

primarily focuses on Lohia's accounts which deal with the moral order of caste. He focuses on the legitimising process of the caste system and enquires into why caste has survived as a social system. He throws some light on the resilient strength of caste system while pleading for the destruction of caste's exclusionary practices. But it would be a terrible mistake to examine Lohia's account of caste in isolation from that of Gandhi and Ambedkar. Moreover, in terms of genealogy, he should be evaluated as a succeeding thinker.

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