Gandhi and Dr Lohia—Eternal Optimists
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(The following is a chapter from the author’s forthcoming book, Lohia Remembered.)

The twentieth century politics belonged to the endeavours of just one man: Mahatma Gandhi. Dr Lohia was one of the thousands of Indians who were inspired by Gandhi to dedicate their lives to public service beginning with the urgent task of India’s freedom from British rule. By his own admission, Dr Lohia was inspired by two men, fully by Gandhi and partly by Nehru.

Dr Lohia was introduced to Gandhi by Jamnalal Bajaj, his close associate, as an aspirant who wanted to join politics led by the Indian National Congress. Gandhi was also informed that Dr Lohia was well conversant with Gandhi’s politics and that he had written his doctorate thesis on “The Salt Tax and Satyagraha”. Gandhi was instrumental in the admission of Dr Lohia at a high level as a member of the Congress Working Committee. Nehru was the President of the Congress in 1935. He appointed Dr Lohia as the Secretary of the Foreign Relations Department of the Congress.

In a short time after joining the Congress, Dr Lohia realised that Gandhi was more powerful than the Congress party. However, this knowledge did not deter Dr Lohia from expressing his views to Gandhi boldly on several national and international issues, from time to time. During the five years, 1934 to 1939, there were several occasions for Gandhi to test Dr Lohia’s intellectual honesty, political vision and loyalty to his own leadership. Dr Lohia’s youth and integrity had impressed Gandhi much. Also Dr Lohia had smilingly endured the dressing-down from Gandhi on several occasions. After all, all great men are particularly fond of promising young people, in the hope that they will, one day fulfil their dreams. Gandhi was no exception to this rule. Dr Lohia was steadily rising in Gandhi’s esteem. During 1936–38, Dr Lohia edited a journal on behalf of the newly-founded Congress Socialist Party. Gandhi wrote regularly for Dr Lohia’s journal and also published Dr Lohia’s articles in his own journal, The Harijan.

On hearing about Dr Lohia’s first imprisonment for making anti-war speeches, Gandhi remarked: “I cannot sit quiet as long as Dr Lohia was in prison. I do not yet know a person braver and simpler than him. He never
propagated violence. Whatever he has done has increased his esteem and honour.” He showed his regard for Dr Lohia once again when Dr Lohia was captured from his underground hiding in Mumbai and kept in the Lahore prison for two years, 1944–46, where he was severely tortured. Under Gandhi’s pressure, the British Government released Dr Lohia from the Lahore prison.

The coming together of Gandhi and Dr Lohia is a saga of how a master and his favourite disciple enter into a lasting esoteric relationship. Here, the master, convinced of the intellectual honesty, vision and character of the disciple, corrects his ways, raps him for his intellectual indiscretions and forgives his little insanity, occasionally. In due course, they do not hesitate to borrow from each other and enrich themselves intellectually and emotionally in a mutuality of relationship. Gandhi had many favourite disciples, namely, Vinoba Bhave, Mahadev Desai, Jawaharlal Nehru, Chittaranjan Das, Vallabhbhai Patel, to name a few of those who rose to name and fame. There is evidence to conclude that Dr Lohia had indeed won the heart of Gandhi. We have, in support, Gandhi’s words when he told Dr Lohia that he esteemed Dr Lohia not so much for his intellectual prowess but very much for his sheela, meaning character and resoluteness. Gandhi also knew that, like himself, Dr Lohia was a rare visionary who owed allegiance to idealism and had to interest whatsoever in holding an office of power, the perks and the comfort they bring. While Nehru, his first choice, was already there to run the government of free India, Dr Lohia, a young man under forty at that time, was indeed cut out to modernise the Gandhian ideology and advance the economic and spiritual concerns of the Indian people along with the changing times. Furthermore, the astute politician in Gandhi might already have considered Dr Lohia as a fitting counterbalance as well as a fitting replacement of Nehru to lead the people of India in due time. Many would not feel surprised if Gandhi named Dr Lohia as his second political heir. We have, in support of this portrayal, the testimony of Rabi Ray, the former Speaker of the Lok Sabha, in his foreword to Lohia in Parliament published in 1991. He writes:

Where is the equality, human dignity and social justice if you address the rich and affluent as “Aap” and a rikshaw puller as “Tum” just because he happens to be poor and belonging to a poor and weaker segment of the society? This is what Rammanohar Lohia hammered into us in his characteristically sharp and acerbic style when I along with some students met him for the first time in 1948 in Orissa. At that time, after Gandhi’s death, the socialists in the Congress had parted company and Dr Lohia had come to Orissa to organise the Socialist Party. This remark, not so easy to swallow yet so true in life, left an indelible imprint on our young
minds, and our search for fathoming “Who after Gandhi” was complete. Here was a man who could confess as frankly and as informally as Bapu, the bitter truth of life and who could rank next only to him in practising what he said or preached.

A new poignant situation was developing from mid-1946 onwards, which brought Gandhi and Dr Lohia even closer. It is well known that Nehru and Patel had consented to the partition of India as the condition for her freedom from the British rule. Gandhi and several other prominent leaders from the Congress and the entire leadership of the Socialist Party were totally against the proposal of partition. Yet, Nehru and Patel created a situation in which there was no real alternative for Gandhi but to agree to the partition. Was this an indication that Gandhi was not much needed anymore and he had done the principal work of his lifetime of consenting to the partition of India as the bargain for her freedom? Was this the perpetual dilemma in which expediency wins over ideology leaving the loser behind to nurse his wound? This kind of dilemma forms the sine qua non of the humaneness of our species. It is the unpleasant option of biting the bullet that obliges us to make the best out of our lot. Sixtyone years after the partition of India we have failed to overcome the Hindu–Muslim religious divide in Kashmir. What happened in Bosnia and Chechnya confirms that the chasm of religious divide is difficult to cross over and that even the modern political philosophies of socialism, communism, or welfarism have failed to offer any real help. As the date of India’s freedom and partition was announced, bloody riots between the Hindu and Muslim communities had broken out. The rioting was particularly severe in the provinces of East and West Bengal, Punjab and the major cities of of India.1 Nehru’s consent to the dismemberment of the country had bitterly alienated Dr Lohia from Nehru. We shall, however, return to this situation a little later.

Gandhi wholeheartedly supported Dr Lohia when he lighted the flame of liberation of Goa from Portuguese enslavement in June 1946, this time against the express wishes of Nehru and Patel. In view of the involvement of these front-runners of the Congress who later became the Prime Minister and the Deputy Minister of free India, we propose to probe the whole matter in some detail. We also propose to reminisce here the last phase in the Mahatma’s life. It was a difficult phase marked with anguish, despair and mourning brought about by the catastrophic decision to partition the country. Out of his several disciples, Gandhi had chosen Dr Lohia to remain by his side in those difficult times.
Dr Lohia was in Goa to meet his friend, Julias Menezes, and take some rest in the green scenery of Goa following his rigorous jail sentence in Lahore. The news of his arrival spread in no time and he had streams of visitors and delegations. They narrated the depressing accounts of Portuguese imperialism and medieval barbarism to which the people of Goa had been subjected with the help of the police force, specially recruited for this purpose, from Mozambique in South-East Africa. There was complete absence of civil liberties. Even wedding invitations could not be printed without prior approval of the police. They requested Dr Lohia to lead the movement for the liberation of Goa. Dr Lohia realised in no time that the Congress had committed a blunder by sidetracking the liberation of Goa which was an inalienable part of India. Goa was in fact enslaved in 1495, that is, at least 150 years before the British East India Company planted its feet in India. Goans had suffered immensely due to Portuguese atrocities including the desecration of Hindu shrines, forcible conversions, death by inquisition and total suppression of civil liberties. Without any doubt, therefore, Goans deserved to be liberated along with the rest of the Indian people and not a day later. The people from all over India must help the Goans in their struggle for freedom.

Dr Lohia obliged and addressed a meeting at Panaji, the capital of the Portuguese territory, on June 16, which was a huge success. This was a shock to the Portuguese Governor as no meeting or public gathering could be held without prior permission of the government. Spurred by the success of the meeting on June 16, the people of Goa rediscovered their self-respect and decided to throw away the fascist yoke. Another meeting was arranged at Madgaon on June 18. People began to trek to Madgaon in thousands from all over the territory. The police arrested Dr Lohia before he could address the meeting, and released him the next day at the Goa border. For the next three days there were massive demonstrations all over Goa. A number of persons were arrested. The police had to resort to lathicharge to quell the crowds. A complete hartal was observed in Panaji and other towns as a protest against the wanton lathicharge by the police.

Gandhi alone fully endorsed Dr Lohia’s action. Writing in the Harijan on June 26, Gandhi said:

Dr Lohia has rendered service to the cause of civil liberties of the Goans. The little Portuguese settlement, which merely exists on the sufferance of the British Government, can ill afford to ape its bad manners. I would advise the Portuguese Government to recognise the signs of the times and come to honourable terms with its inhabitants rather than relying on any treaty that might exist between them and the British Government. The inhabitants of Goa should shed their fear of the Portuguese Government as the people of the other parts of India have shed the fear of the mighty British Government.
On return to India, Dr Lohia launched a vigorous campaign in support of Goa’s struggle for freedom. The AICC met in Mumbai on July 6, 1946. Nehru briefed the press on July 10. He said:

The Congress had concentrated all its attention on the struggle for India’s freedom and it had no time to bestow on minor issues. India would be able to crush the “small pimple” on its face in no time with the help of a single finger, after the country became free. There was no need to organise any movement in Goa and the Portuguese domination over Goa would disappear after the British withdraw from India.

Not satisfied with Nehru’s stance, Dr Lohia brought up the urgency of supporting the Goan people. He referred to Gandhi’s support to the struggle for Goa’s independence. He resented Vallbhbhai Patel’s remark that he did not have anything to do with the Goa movement. Dr Lohia reminded Nehru and Patel to respect the desire of the Goan people and run to their rescue which was long overdue.

The Portuguese Governor-General wrote in reply to Gandhi’s article dated June 26. He said: “Gandhi had unnecessarily interfered in Goa's internal affairs.” He declared that civil liberty was not at all in jeopardy in the Portuguese settlements and that some disgruntled people were conducting the agitation in Goa. He told Gandhi that the Portuguese had come to Goa with the sole object of spreading the gospel of equality and brotherhood.

Replying to the Governor-General in the Harijan dated August 2, 1946, Gandhi said:

…..Indeed, I was astonished to see the distinction that the Portuguese Government made between Indians and Portuguese in Mozambique, Delagoa and Inhambane when I visited these settlements. The history of Portuguese settlement in India does not prove the claim set forth by you. Indeed, what I see and know of the condition of the things in Goa is hardly edifying. You will forgive me for not subscribing to your statement that there is full liberty in Goa and the agitation is confined to a few malcontents. Every account received by me personally, and received in the papers in this part of India confirms the contrary view. I suppose the report of the sentence by the Court Martial of eight years in Dr Braganza’s case, and his contemplated exile in a far-off settlement, is, by itself, a striking corroboration of the fact that civil liberty is a rare article in Goa. Why should a law-abiding citizen like Dr Braganza be considered so dangerous as to be singled out for exile? Though the politics of Dr Lohia differs from mine, he has commanded my admiration for his having gone to Goa and put his finger on its black spot…. No person or group can remain without civil liberty, and without losing self-
Dr Lohia met Gandhi on September 28 and acquainted him with the progress of the freedom movement of Goa, and later announced his decision to return to Goa to fulfil his earlier promise. On arrival at Colem railway station the Portuguese Police arrested him and took him secretly to Auguada Fort. He was kept there from September 29 to October 8, 1946. He was subjected to torture and denied the facilities offered to political prisoners in civilised countries. He was kept in solitary confinement, in a dark cell with barely sufficient ventilation to keep a man alive. He was later taken to the border and released. His release in the circumstances was a miracle. The interim government headed by Nehru was in power at Delhi. Gandhi asked Nehru to secure the release of Dr Lohia, but Nehru expressed his inability to intervene, due perhaps to the absence of protocol agreement with the Portuguese Government. Gandhi declared: “Dr Lohia is not an ordinary individual. Not just Dr Lohia but the soul of India is in prison.” Gandhi then wrote to the Viceroy of India, Lord Wavel, to exert pressure on the Portuguese Government to release Dr Lohia. Gandhi repeated his plea with the Viceroy and the Church of Goa. His efforts bore fruit and Dr Lohia was released on October 9, 1946. Immediately after his release Dr Lohia wrote to the Chief Judge of Goa High Court:

I had not violated any Goan law. The police just arrested me without giving any reason. I was illegally detained in an ill-ventilated solitary cell. Therefore, they owe me an apology and damages for illegal imprisonment.

Gandhi published Dr Lohia’s letter under the caption “Dr Lohia Again”, in the Harijan and commented:

Let me for one laugh at Dr Lohia’s presumption in asking for damages. If he had power behind him the Goan authorities would quickly apologise and offer to pay damages. It is not an unusual thing to ask for damages
and obtain them for injury or insult done even to insignificant subjects. Dr Lohia is not a little man. Well, India
has a national government. I am sure they are as sensitive as any can be. I should not be surprised if they
have lodged their protest and asked the Portuguese Government to mend their manners. Anyway, let the
force of the public opinion be behind the national government and the injured Dr Lohia.

By end October 1946, Dr Lohia arrived in Belgaum to begin his preparations to offer satyagraha for the
liberation of Goa. He undertook a tour of the border areas. Scores of volunteers came forward to join the
proposed satyagraha. However, early in November 1946, Dr Lohia received a telegram from Gandhi to meet
him urgently. Gandhi had, in the meantime, reached Noakhali towards the end of November 1946.

Dr Lohia arrived in Noakhali towards the end of 1946. There, Gandhi dissuaded him to enter Goa once again
and instead let Nehru progress with his diplomatic efforts. In any case Gandhi did not want Dr Lohia to
languish in a Portuguese prison indefinitely which was bound to happen if he entered Goa once again. Dr
Lohia acquiesced in the circumstances and, at Gandhi’s bidding, he remained with the Mahatma, assisting in
the latter’s peace work at Calcutta and later in Delhi over the next several months until the most dastardly
assassination of Gandhi on January 30, 1948. There were more developments on the Goa front. But we
propose to wind up the matter by saying that both Nehru and Patel resorted to the politics of expediency.
Patel took the stand that Goa’s liberation was as urgent as India’s, but the movement must be led by the
Congress and not by Dr Lohia. Nehru took the stand that the Government of India will be able to mount
adequate international pressure on Portugal to depart from Goa and somehow felt that the Pope and France
will tilt the situation in India’s favour. He even wrote to V.K. Krishna Menon, India’s Foreign Minister, on this
subject, but in real life he did nothing, nothing at all till December 1961, on the eve of the general elections.
He finally resorted to military action to liberate Goa. The Indian armed forces secured the surrender of the
Portuguese regime in Goa on December 19, 1961. The duplicity of Nehru was bared, much to his chagrin, just
a little before the disastrous shock of the Chinese aggression in the following year. Nehru could never really
recover from this latter shock before his death in 1964.

Why did Gandhi bring about assiduously the miraculous release of Dr Lohia from the Portuguese prison, and
why did he dissuade him from entering Goa once again in October 1946? The answer is clear and simple. To
him, Dr Lohia was the soul of India, absolutely indispensable for the future of Indian democracy and,
understandably, for his own plans to revive the spirit of the Indian people to honour and safeguard their democratic rights. He certainly thought of Dr Lohia as the future leader of India who could brighten the outlook of the Indian people who had lost much of their courage, hope and self-confidence under British rule. Probably, Gandhi had by now identified Dr Lohia as the conscience-keeper and sentinel of democracy to take his place when he was no more.

As stated before, Gandhi and Dr Lohia were together from November 1946 onwards. At Calcutta, Gandhi asked Dr Lohia to enter the Muslim localities and pacify the people surcharged with hatred simmering in the beleaguered communities. Here, Dr Lohia learned how to assuage the feelings of revenge and wanton ravage under the day-to-day supervision of Gandhi who knew well that Dr Lohia had the necessary courage and judgment of what to do next under the prevailing difficult conditions. Gandhi insisted on Dr Lohia to stay by his side and assist him in his peace work at Delhi, where severe riots had broken out. The situation had become graver following the arrival of thousands of refugees from Punjab. Dr Lohia admits, in his eloquently worded Anecdotes of Mahatma Gandhi, that Gandhi taught him, at Delhi, the lesson on the total meaning of duty in despair, namely the civil resistance of hooligans, rioters and arsonists as well as providing the much needed succour and hope to the riot-torn communities. Dr Lohia's peace efforts at Delhi were not in vain. On August 15, 1947, India's Independence Day, there was in Delhi tumultuous rejoicing when both Hindus and Muslims were embracing each other. For a moment, all the accumulated bitterness and fanaticism of a year was gone. Dr Lohia organised an all-night procession which was a huge success; it broke down all barriers which had impeded Hindu-Muslim unity. However, the peace was short-lived. Delhi was plunged in riots once again and Dr Lohia had to remain there to help Gandhi in his peace missions.

There is evidence to conclude that Gandhi did try to change Dr Lohia's maverick way of life—including his smoking cigarettes, and drinking tea and coffee. Gandhi tried to inject some warmth and compassion in Dr Lohia's disposition towards his colleagues and all those who cared for him. Nehru too would seem to have tried to change “the-difficult-to-get-on-wth” person in Dr Lohia into an agreeable and friendly person. One day, Gandhi offered to become a father to Dr Lohia, a father who is firm, demanding and watchful, but keen at the same time to nourish the son with the milk of kindness and compassion. On yet another occasion, Gandhi gruelled Dr Lohia for fortyfive minutes to persuade him to give up his unbending disposition and correspond with Nehru and Patel. Were some of the exhortations of Gandhi a shrouded attempt to encourage Dr Lohia to join the government and lead from the front, solve India's problems and steer the nation’s interests in difficult times? In any case Dr Lohia’s insistence not to hold an office of power from within the government, a
reflex of the communist model, was questionable on the aforesaid grounds. It is also possible that Gandhi was asking Dr Lohia to make a distinction between the methods of fighting against the British as opposed to our own elected government as a matter of political discipline.

Gandhi’s exhortations were well taken by Dr Lohia since he regarded Gandhi as the sentinel of India watching over the character of her citizens. In fact Dr Lohia wished that every country ought to have a sentinel like Gandhi. After all, Gandhi wanted Dr Lohia to remove the blemishes which act as obstacles to the wresting from life of its secrets, which is the main purpose of our lives. The knowledge of this ethic and character goes together, testifies Dr Lohia, in his Anecdotes of the Mahatma.

We do not know exactly what future role Gandhi had cut out for Dr Lohia. What we know is that Gandhi had been grooming Dr Lohia to play a challenging role in country’s service. But destiny had arranged that Gandhi was to be assassinated before announcing his final wishes, especially the role he had cut out for Dr Lohia. This is an important matter in the historical sense because Gandhi’s wishes had to be honoured by everyone in the Congress, the ruling party at the time.

In the death of Gandhi Dr Lohia lost a fatherly figure. He became an orphan. There was no one for him to care for. Thereafter, he lived a life of a maverick itinerant. He became a man of many moods—of an unrelenting pedant, a stormy socialist, a puritan and an iconoclast, a connoisseur of art, language and literature, an admirer of women’s beauty and their importance in social development. He became unpredictable. He was not answerable or accountable to anyone. Yet he remained throughout the next thirty years of his life essentially a well-meaning idealist and, like Gandhi, an eternal optimist. Eternal optimism was the most intimate bond which furthered their esoteric relationship. Indian politics suffered due the orphaning of Dr Lohia, the way it happened, unexpectedly as a bolt from the blue. Dr Lohia was probably waiting, hopefully, for the announcement of the assignment Gandhi had cut out for him and only Gandhi could have installed a more softened Dr Lohia in the place of Nehru, if he so wished.

As for Dr Lohia, he realised how sad and helpless he was without an elder-brotherly counsel a few weeks before his death in 1967. He pleaded with Professor Samar Guha:

Samarbabu, you go and bring Jayaprakash Narayan back. I can break but cannot pull down. If anybody can pull
down the present regime, only JP can do it. Please go and bring back JP.

The coming together of Gandhi and Dr Lohia has been summed up eloquently by Professor Samar Guha, a close friend and a former Member of the Lok Sabha:

The spell of the Mahatmic aura and the absorbing love Gandhi had for the young Lohia, had an emotional pull, so much so, that Dr Lohia could never get away from the old man at any time. Dr Lohia was often an erratic bohemian, but the hypnotism of Gandhi had an imperceptible restraint on him. Gandhi was the last resort for this restive man. Gandhi was the solace for his inner self.

Did Dr Lohia want to become a modern Gandhi?

Reference

1. In his remarkable book on partition, The Guilty Men of India’s Partition, Dr Lohia has dubbed Nehru, whom he adored so ardently before mid-1946, as its principal culprit. Thereafter, Dr Lohia completely broke away from Nehru and adopted an uncompromising attitude of strident hostility towards him.

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