

# Rammanohar Lohia and the North-East India

A. C. Sinha \*

Rammanohar Lohia (1910-1967) was an unusual politician, who was highly educated, committed to the cause of the common people, and was proud of India with its past glory, religious traditions, ethnic diversity and geographical expanse. He had no hesitation in seating, conversing and sharing his social thoughts and political ideas with young and old, men and women, illiterate and highly accomplished scholars, simplest rural folk and sophisticated literati and, in fact, anybody and everybody. He believed in mass mobilization on the issues of common and public interests and he had no time to relax as long as he was alive. He was a restless soul, who was perennially travelling to distant and difficult parts of the country and sharing lives of the co-workers through the length and breadth of the country. He was a mobile dynamo, who was restless to reach each and every corner of the country with his brand of message for the resurgent India. He was a Gandhian, who did not feel obliged to be imprisoned in the creed of non-violence; he was a proud Hindu, whose life centered around Hindu-Muslim unity; and he was a Hindi zealot, who desired healthy growth of all the Indian languages. He began his political career as a Congressman, but soon gravitated to socialist ideology and remained a diehard socialist till the end. He was one of the founders of the Congress Socialist Party (CSP), Socialist Party (SP), Praja Socialist Party (PSP), and Sanjukta Socialist Party (SSP) of India. He was one of most vocal critics of the Indian National Congress, the ruling party of the newly independent India and its popular Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru.

---

\* Professor A.C. Sinha, formerly professor of sociology and Dean, School of Social Sciences, North Eastern Hill University, Shillong-793022 is an ICSSR National Fellow. He can be contacted on Email: [acoomarsinha42@yahoo.com](mailto:acoomarsinha42@yahoo.com)

In 1960's, Lohia expounded a political strategy of anti-Congressism, a joint and common front of all the Indian political parties opposed to the policies of the Indian National Congress, the political party in power in almost all parts of the country. The strategy proved crucial in 1967, when the Congress lost political power in most of the States in north India and 'united front governments' were cobbled by the various political parties strictly on the plea that they were opposed to the Congress Party. Alas, Lohia died soon in that very year in October leaving behind a void in public life.

Lohia was one of the few political leaders of the pre-independent era, who gave importance to distant, difficult, and otherwise ignored region of the North-East India. He inspired a chain of young and youthful political workers, who were proud to be Indians and willing to work under his leadership for the common cause fearlessly. Lohia himself undertook a series of journey to distant and then infra-structurally difficult North-East region; took up the regional/local issues as parts of the national agenda; organized the regional youth for the cause and tried to educate the national leadership on the problems of distant frontier region. For him, the Indian land must be inviolable and for that any sacrifice was considered worth it. In this context, Lohia's instrumental role in some of the instances affecting the region is worth recounting:

**Naga Freedom fighter, Rani Gaidinlieu:** In his visit to Nowgong in central Assam, Lohia learnt about Kacha Naga (Zelingrong) freedom fighter, Gaidinlieu, who was still languishing in jail in free India. This was the same young lady, who had championed the cause of a small Naga community against the British rule in 1920's along with her cousin, Jadonang. And for that, she was sent to jail. When Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru learnt of that, way back in 1937 on a visit to Assam, he had termed her as Naga Queen. Lohia immediately took up her case and berated the government for the lapse. And the result was that she was not only released by the earliest, but she also came to be honoured as a national freedom fighter and honoured as Rani Gaidinlieu, the Naga Queen.

**Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya and his Gyanpeeth awarded novel: *Mritunjya*:** Lohia was an inspiring leader, who used to enthuse young people to explore the different parts of the country and produce literature in the Indian languages. Young Birendra Kumar came in contact with the Lohia brand of infectious socialism early in life. The young Birendra got a job of a school teacher in district of Ukhrul among the Tankhul Nagas in Manipur. That was the time; the Nagas had taken to the arms against India, though Manipur was not affected very badly at

the time. Birendra did not hesitate to join the job of a government school teacher in the interior of the hill region of the State. Incidentally, teaching in the schools in the hill region of the State till then was a preserve of the Christian missionaries of American Baptist denomination. When young Birendra reported to the locale of his posting, to his amazement, he found a number of young people like Rishang Keishing working under the influence of socialist ideology of Rammanohar Lohia. Very soon, Keishing was elected to the State Assembly, Manipur in the first general election held in 1952 and since then he has been either a member of the State Legislature or the National Parliament. In this context, it is instructive to learn that the longest serving member of the Indian Parliament is Rishang Keishing, who has been elected as one of the law makers for as much as six decades.

Inspired by the socialist ideology, Birendra wrote his magnum opus novel, *Mritunjya* in his mother tongue, Assamiya, for which he was awarded the highest Indian literary award, Gyanpeeth Puraskar. The novel veers around two Tankhul Naga characters with different political messages for the people: Rishang and Khating. First is a social worker, who desires to serve his people through political education of the masses, and other joined the armed forces to serve the nation by defending it from foreign aggression and then he retired as a member of the Indian Frontier Administrative Service (IFAS). Subsequently, Khating was appointed Advisor to the Governor of Nagaland and the Indian Ambassador to Burma. While Kishing held various elective posts in the State such as cabinet minister and the Chief Minister many a times, it was Robert Khating (popularly known as Bob Khating among his friends), who was instrumental in extending regular administrative structure to the Tawang, Kameng division in Arunachal Pradesh for independent India.

**Urvasiam, Policy of Inner line and the National Policy to Nagaland and Arunchal Pradesh:** Lohia was an Indian, who took pride in Indian cultural traditions. For him, Indian independence should have ensured a cultural renaissance. He was strongly opposed to continuation of the terms used in the past by colonial masters such as NEFA, Mount Everest, Mount Austin Godwin, Dalhousie, and the like. For then the prevalent term, NEFA, referring to present Arunachal Pradesh, Lohia suggested an Indian nomenclature, Urvasiam. The term means north-eastern extension in Indian languages and at the same time linking the region to the Indian myth of dancing nymphs known as *apsaras* such as Urvashi and another myth spread in certain parts of the country that one of the consorts of Lord Krishna, Rukmini, was a Mishmi lass from Arunachal Pradesh.

Lohia's views on the Indian tribes were very much similar to that of the Gandhian reformists, who believed, possibly on their experience of the tribal communities from the Central India, that tribes should be assimilated in the fold of the dominant Indian ethos. And for that all types of racial, cultural, ethnic and social boundaries were to be obliterated. He noted with concern that the independent India followed a national policy of tribal integration with the national ethos, in which tribes retained/maintained their socio-cultural identities distinct from that of the national life. Lohia stoutly opposed the practice of seeking for entry permit under the provisions of the Bengal and Eastern Frontier Regulation, 1873 applicable to Arunachal, Nagaland and Mizoram. He considered the practice as retrograde, which continues to create a psychological barrier between the tribal communities of these States and rest of the Indians. This practice further encourages various shades of trouble shooters and foreigners to claim that these regions are the Indian territories in dispute/the communities residing there were not Indian ethnics. He wanted the region to be developed fast and join the rest of India on its course of social transformation. He wrote on March 23, 1963 at Guwahati: "While large scale planning for fruit growing over a Himalayan area, a thousand miles long and thirty to forty miles wide, is a matter of big policy, I suggest that small schemes of agricultural and industrial expansion be undertaken at once. Jhoom (slash-and-burn type of rotational) cultivation must be stopped as soon as possible, not necessarily by law, but by other really big inducements. A vigorous programme of social reform must be put through... There can be nothing so interventionist as the present policy of the government because, forcibly and by law, it keeps Urvashi into a dirty and stagnant pool, even dirtier than the rest of India" ( Lohia, R: 2002:98).

The British had put Nagaland and 'NEFA' under the administrative control of the Department of Foreign Affairs and directly ruled by the Governor of Assam and not under the ministry of home affairs, a practice, which continued during the period of Prime Minister, Pandit Nehru, who happened to be his own foreign minister. The very idea was repugnant to Lohia on the plea that if these were parts of the Indian Union, then why they should be placed at different levels compared to the other Indian States? In such a situation, the impression one gets that the issue of their being Indian is yet to be settled. Naturally, this provides a handle to some trouble shooters among the Indians and enemies of India to mount a counter argument about territorial claims. He had the same views on the continuation of the national tribal policy to keep the tribes of Nagaland,

Mizoram and Arunachal apart from bulk of the Indian population on the plea that they would be corrupted by the others, as if the Christian missionaries had not corrupted the indigenous tribal traditions. Lohia desired that the tribes' special privileges must be preserved for them, but they must not be segregated from the bulk of the Indian population. He was dead against the Tribal Panchsheel enunciated by Verrier Elwin and Pt. Nehru for the Arunachal, by which a policy of developing the region by 'rushing slowly' was followed. In fact, among others, Lohia made a proposal that various cities and villages from different parts of the country should adopt Arunachal and Naga villages as sister/brother villages and interact with them for social and cultural intercourse.

**Himalaya: Sikkim, Bhutan and Nepal:** Lohia was a visionary politician, who saw Himalaya not only as a geographical expression to be shared with others, but also as a cultural repository of the Indian traditions. His Himalaya consisted of Kashmir, Nepal, Bhutan, Sikkim, Tibet, Burma and Thailand. He proudly quotes the great Indian immortal bard, Kalidas' couplet on the Himalaya from Kumarsambhava, figuratively describing the great Himalayan expansion and challenges anybody, and especially the Chinese, to produce similar literary piece on the Himalayas to justify its claim on the Himalayan region. Lohia declares that these are parts and parcels of the great cultural entity of the Jambudweep, which our ancestors had been invoking on all auspicious occasions. Lohia was all for people to people contact and brotherhood instead of the formal political levels of States. Lohia arranging funds for procuring arms for Nepali Congress' Mukti Yoddh against the Ranas, his chiding B.P. Koirala for his alleged favour to his kinsmen, his entreaty to Jaiprakash Narayan to reach Pt. Nehru to save ailing B.P. Koirala in Rana jails are some of the examples that he did not see the Himalayan region distinct from that of India.

Young Chandra Das Rai (C. D. Rai, a retired I A S officer and father of the present member of Lok Sabha, Prem Das Rai (P.D. Rai) ran into Lohia in Varanasi, where he was a student. Lohia reached for him and asked who he was. When CD told him that he was from Sikkim, Lohia asked him to organize people's movement against the local zamindars, the Kazis and autocratic king. When CD told him that he was alone from his State, prompt came the answer that he should not shirk his responsibilities to his illiterate and poor villagers as he was equal to a thousand persons. That small incident enthused CD so much that he went back to Sikkim with a view to do something for his people. And that was the time, some of the political activists from Sikkim were thinking of

making a political move. It was December 7, 1947 and the locale was Polo Ground, Gangtok, where three Sikkimese socio-political fora got together to form a political party: "On 7<sup>th</sup> December, 1947, all roads led to the polo ground, where the peasants of Sikkim were holding their first public meeting under the auspices of political parties. And on that day the people of Sikkim heard their first political speeches. And speeches were no baby talk...And people released their pent-up feelings by lustily cheering speakers after speakers....Appearing with these stalwarts was a young man, Chandra Das Rai, 24, from Namchi. He was asked to read the Nepali version of the paper, 'A Few Facts about Sikkim' (a description of the excesses committed by the ruler and his autocrat aristocrats), which he did with gusto, lacing his reading with witty remarks. The crescendo of applause that followed his speech marked him as a budding hero in the inchoate politics of Sikkim" (Basnet, L B: 1974: 76-77). In May 1949, the first five member popular government of Sikkim was formed, in which young C.D. Rai was one of the ministers on behalf of the Sikkim State Congress. This popular government was dismissed by the Indian Political Officer, Harishwar Dayal after 28 days on the name of the Government of India. But a grateful CD, then known as Sikkim-na Nehru, now 89, continues to fondly remember Lohia and his magnetic personality.

Nepal, Nepali Congress and its leaders such as B.P. Koirala, K.P. Bhattarai, Ganeshman Singh and others were very dear to Lohia and, in fact, he had directly contributed to their cause (Koirala, B P: 2001). The armed anti-Rana struggle in Nepal was fought with men and material support from the Socialist Party of India against the approval of the government of India. Role of Jaiprakash Narayan and Rammanohar Lohia in that struggle was memorable. In spite of all that, when the occasion came, Lohia did not mince words to sound caution to inexperienced Nepalese leadership: "Politicians of Nepal should not try to be clever...Prime Minister Koirala and other Nepalese leaders say that Nepal has been under the influence of China and India equally. It is not true. Many Nepalese (including B.P. Koirala, the then PM of Nepal) went to jail in India's struggle for freedom and many Indians suffered for Nepal in the same manner. Why it did not happen in regard to China? It is obvious that in matters of language, script, culture, religion, physical feature etc., Nepal is akin to India...For the last many years I had not spoken about Nepal because Nepalese leaders of both the opposition and the government had worked with me at the time of the Nepalese rebellion against the Ranas, while other Indian leaders had either kept aloof or

opposed the movement. Yet the ideals for which we had fought have been forgotten, ideals of people's government and equality. India also is following an important and seemingly clever policy. In both the cases the reasons are the same. In Nepal, as in India, a few English educated upper caste people are ruling the country. Instead of the rule of the 90 per cent common people – Rai, Gurung, Dewan, Chhetri, Limbu etc., it is the government of the 10 per cent upper caste Nepalese. Until and unless the poor people of Nepal takeover the country, defence of Nepal will be difficult: (Lohia, R: 2002: 109-110). None of the Nepalese leaders learnt the above blunt advice, which only a person like Lohia could unhesitantly volunteered.

It is difficult to bind a personality such as Lohia in the boundary of nationality, discipline of the party, or the written laws of the land against the experience earned through the struggles. Unlike most of the mono-profile self-seeking leaders, Lohia was unconventional in his approach, thinking and style of work. His biggest asset was his instant rapport with the masses through the length and breadth of the country. He was a visionary leader, who did not live for self-aggrandizement; rather he was an iconoclast in politics. He had an unshakable commitment to the country and its people and for that he was ready to make any sacrifice possible. Unlike men (or politicians) of the establishment, who clung to the chair and its privileges, Lohia was always on the move to reach the masses, learn from their experience, understand the common man's problems at first hand and reach the power to be for solving them. Along with all these, he was a thinking leader, who read, thought, and wrote on a variety of issues. He was one of the few national leaders, who had a vision for India, in which North Eastern Frontier region and the Himalayas had a unique place. In this year of his centenary celebration, one way to pay homage to him is to remember some of his contributions to the cause of the national solidarity.

### References:

1. Basnet, L.B.: 1974: *Sikkim: A Political History of Sikkim*, S Chand & Co, New Delhi.
2. Lohia, R: 2002: *India, China and Northern Frontiers*, B R Publishing Corporation, New Delhi, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition.
3. Koirala, B.P.: 2001, *Atmabrittant: Life's Reflections*, Himal Books, and Kathmandu.