

RAM MANOHAR LOHIA: AGRARIAN REVOLUTION THROUGH VILLAGE UPLIFTMENT IN INDIA

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ABSTRACT

An effective revolutionary action to change rural India, Ram Manohar Lohia's idea of village upliftment had its arteries flowing through the rural realities of India. Had not been the concept of village upliftment, by Indian radical thinkers of twentieth century which were astoundingly bold and original were evolved, which had in them the dynamic of the future, a new kind of political manner could not have been designed, in the midst of pandemonium of development – and thus, its future will be remembered after other more facile successes are forgotten.

KEYWORDS : Village upliftment, village panchayats, Panchayati raj, Economic Civil Services,

Ram Manohar Lohia's work entitled "Marx, Gandhi and Socialism" (Lohia:1963,p364) breaks new ground in many respect, though over the past couple of decades this view has been much quaffed, and it has been replaced by a more accurate and critical appreciation. Students of the history of ideas will be delighted, however, for a fresh exploration of his ideas of village upliftment as may be termed as agrarian revolution in India, which in our present perspective in 2000s, have assumed increased importance.

In his planning of rebuilding new India, Ram Manohar Lohia thought that the most exploited element in Indian society was the landless village laborers and farmers. This shows his originality of thought and approach to the problems of village dwellers. He asserted that the most exploited section in India was not the wage labourer as it was in Europe. In this context, Lohia doubted the validity of the contention of Plekhanov, Rosa Luxemburg. Lenin and Marx ;(Ibid, p398 Though influenced by Marxian and Gandhian ideology, Ram Manohar Lohia refused to be a Marxist or a Gandhian.(Lohia,1951,p172) In his attempt to synthesize the ideologies of Marx and Gandhiji, Lohia came to the conclusion that Man is today victim of ideologies of remote success, and so the "chain of acts of horror" in Indian village only lengthened, and the last link of good could not be forced.(Lohia,1963,p331) To Ram Manohar Lohia, the freedom struggle in India could

not be completed until the prosperity of a humble *kisan* became a reality.(Ibid, p 71-74)

In 1949, Ram Manohar Lohia was elected President of *Hind Kisan Panchayat*. In his presidential address, Lohia put forward a "Thirteen Point Programme" for village reconstruction. He reiterated his view that the reconstruction of India was primarily a question of the reconstruction of her five and half lacs of villages. He gave a new interpretation of socialism in the Indian context, and he had concrete programme for village upliftment in his social thought.(Panwar, 1987,p164)

Lohia felt the need of overhauling the whole state machinery in rural development programmes. Like Mahatma Gandhi, he wanted 'a village based democracy' in India. Lohia draw our attention to the fact that there was little coordination in the functioning of the various department of the Government of India which was supposed to look after the welfare of the village-dwellers in 1950s. Different ministries were shifting their responsibilities and this situation only bewildered the peasants. So Lohia was particularly concerned with the reorganization of agricultural administration.(Ibid, p 165)

For rural development in India, Lohia evolved the theory of "four-pillar State"(Ibid) for the reorganization of agricultural. In his view, there were to be three layers of administrative bodies:

(a) Union

- (b) State
- (c) Regional

Keeping in view regional variations of the problems of village upliftment in India, Lohia assigned the pivotal role to the *village Panchayats*. He insisted on decentralization of economy which could be realized in the Gandhian Panchayat Raj. Lohia was not merely an academic system builder; he rightly realized that the planned reconstruction of a large number of villages (five and half lacs of villages) was not feasible only through the efforts of the Union Government. Lohia asserted that the task of rural development must be fulfilled by the village folks themselves. (Lohia, 1951)

It appears that when Lohia thought and wrote about village problems, he was thinking more about the landless agriculturists and tillers of the soil in villages of the United Provinces. He was born at Akbarpur in Faizabad district and spent there his formative years from 1910 to 1925 (Sharad, 1972, p54-56). He tried to practice socialist thought from the grass-root level, and bring about total reconstruction of society through rural development. In Lohia's programmes for *village Panchayats* were to carry on the gigantic mass reconstruction. We get a clear picture of Lohia's ideas of rural development from his work "*We build for Socialism*" (Lohia, 1951)

Lohia suggested the following measures for village upliftment:

- (1) The members of the *village Panchayats* should be elected on the basis of universal suffrage.
- (2) The kisans were to be dealt with directly and individually by the *village Panchayat*.
- (3) The productive potential and the resources of the village were to be tabulated by the *village Panchayat*.
- (4) One of the primary duties of the *village Panchayats* should be the preparation of a crop plan.
- (5) There must be co-ordination in functioning of the *village Panchayat*, the Planning Commission, the Land Commission and the Regional Land Commission. (Ibid, p10-16)
- (6) The *village Panchayat* was to take the responsibility of the procurement of agricultural produce and the collection of state revenue.
- (7) The youths of village must take keen interest in the 'representative functions' of the *village Panchayat*.

(8) The village welfare programmer was to be properly managed and implemented by the youths of village collectively.

(9) Each village must have elementary schools, village dispensaries, maternity centers and child welfare centers. These were to be supervised by the *village Panchayat*.

(10) The *village Panchayat* must encourage extra-curricular activities and sports in the village.

(11) The *village Panchayat* was to ensure non-pollution of drinking water and take proper measures for the revival of encroachments and keeping roads clean. (Ibid, p12-14)

Ram Manohar Lohia drew our attention to the fact that in India villages were neglected by the Government for the benefit of urban areas. Village dwellers were exploited economically and culturally. (Verma, 1991, p139) This drain of wealth must be stopped and the educated class and the elites must take the initiative in this direction. Lohia pointed out that many educated Indians had their homes in the village. So, it was their bounden duty to go back to the village and take active interest in the removal of illiteracy, revival of industries, establishment of cooperatives and arrangement of medical facilities.

Lohia regretted that rural reconstruction in India could not achieve its target due to non-availability of the capital. The Government must ensure proper allocation of funds proportionally. For development purposes, at least 25 per cent of state revenue should be made available for the self governing bodies in the districts and *Village Panchayat*.

Ram Manohar Lohia emphasized the importance of an integrated plan for rural development. The entire development programmer of rural reconstruction particularly for agricultural and industrial development must be integrated in an overall National Planning. The planned rural development of the village would be feasible only with the cooperation of the youth. So the government must give a serious to start a new *Economic Civil Service*.

Regional Land Commission had an important role to play in village upliftment in India. Lohia was of the opinion that it would render technical assistance to villages and to provide 'model forms' for the guidance for the villagers. The government should be careful about the composition of Regional Land Commission. There must be adequate representation of *Village Panchayat*, agricultural

experts, cooperative agencies and the state government. (Panwar,op.cit.p165-166)

Ram Manohar Lohia reiterated that he was keen to establish a new agrarian relationship for village upliftment. Each village should be a zone of peace where proprietary rights of land should be given to the impoverished and actual tillers of the soil and even landless labourers would be able to secure rehabilitation and social justice.(Ibid,p167)

Ram Manohar Lohia was deeply concerned about the dire distress of the exploited villagers and the poor people in Afro-Asian countries. In 1952 he said in a conference of the socialists in Rangoon, There is one world from Rome to Honolulu and another world from Tokyo to Cairo. The whole of Asia is a victim of acute poverty.(Sharad,op.cit.p219) He was a leader committed to the welfare of the downtrodden. In 1962, Lohia stated in *'Bargat ki Baat'* "I have nothing my own except the fact that the poor and common people of India believe that perhaps I belong to them"(Lohia,1962) It is indeed significant that a few hours before his death he said: Why are there so many doctors around me? Why should I have convenience not available to the poor people of the country? There are crores who are not able to see the face of even a single doctor".(Sharad,op.cit.p298)

As a revolutionary thinker, Ram Manohar Lohia never toyed with the ideal of 'aristocratic socialism'- he dreamt of socialism in the form of 'socialist civilization'. It will be an over-simplification of facts to state that Lohia's socialism was a mere reflection of Marxian socialism.(Chaudhary,p 7). e was deeply moved by the spectacle of chronic poverty in Afro-Asian countries, particularly India. Lohia thought that the diagnosis should be sought in India in the agrarian nature of Indian economy. (The Link, 28 Feb.1954) Thought Lohia rejected Marx's idea of class-less society, (Lohia,1963,p08) he believed that the Asian countries should have a revolution not only in the relations of production as envisaged in Marxism, but also in the methods of production. Lohia's scheme of 'agricultural reconstruction' makes it abundantly clear that he detested arm-chair academic approach to politics and socio-economic problems. His concept of Agrarian revolution is based on the basis of agricultural system, village upliftment, well-being of the tillers of the soil and the landless labourers and above all the basic reorientation of agrarian relation.(The Patriot,jul14,1947)

Ram Manohar Lohia was of the view that the core of the problem was the 'land hunger' of the tillers of the soil. (Mankind,Sep,1961,p61) As A.R. Desai observes, "Land hunger is the most powerful urge of the peasantry and till this is not satisfied, and the peasantry remained perennially discontented and launches struggle for land. "Spontaneous or organised".(Desai,1960,p94) According to Lohia, this problem could be solved only by giving the proprietary rights in practice to the tillers of the soil. In the words, "Land must belong to the tiller"(Mankind,op.cit.) this was Lohia's first priority, his scheme of agrarian revolution. He was keen to bring about 'a drastic change in agrarian land ownership' (Panwar,1976,p6)

Ram Manohar Lohia correctly assessed the baneful effect of landlordism on the villages in India. He said, "Those who actually till the land must be made secure masters of their harvests. Farmers of India, you are henceforth the masters of the harvest; 'you till' should be the proclamation which alone can scatter the gloom that has settled on the village(Lohia,1963)'. The agrarian reforms of the government after independence and in 1930s did not satisfy him. He was of the opinion that the land revenue measures had not broken the monopoly of land and distribution of land to the cultivators. In the context, Lohia had observed in July 1947:"Unless the abolition of landlordism is done, the man in the street would not feel that India is entering the temple of freedom".(The Patriot,Jul,14,1947) The abolition of *zamindari* had not solved all the agrarian problems; He asserted that the agrarian reforms of the government had not altered the basic agrarian relations of the rural society and also the class structure of villages. The old zamindars still remained in the rural society as a class of rich land-owners.(Thorner,1956,p78-79) Lohia maintained: "Payments of fabulous amount to big landlords and the creation of different categories of holdings on the basis of the peasants' ability to pay have tended to make existing inequalities even more acute".(Mankind,op.cit)

Dr Panwar holds that Lohia was in favour of the abolition of the *Bataidars* to bring about a real agrarian revolution in U.P. and Bihar initially.(Panwar,op.cit.p112) Dr Lakshmi Kant Verma maintains that Lohia never emphasized upon the abolition of *Bataidars*.(Verma,op.cit,1139) In his opinion the biggest exploiter in the rural society were the zamindars, particularly the absentee landlords who squeezed from the

cultivators 65% of the produce of the land. The worst sufferers were *Bataidars*, who not entitled to 1/4 of the produce of land inspite of hard labour. Dr, Verma asserts that Ram Manohar Lohia was keen to launch a movement to safeguard the interest of the *Bataidars*.(Ibid)

Lohia suggested that the class structure of the rural society should be altered in such a manner that a family of five engaged in agriculture should be left with a maximum of three times the unit of land. This would enable a family of kisans to cultivate, if necessary without mechanization or employing hired labour. The *village Panchayat* should be authorised to take over the disputed land, particularly in case of orphans and widows.

In the new agrarian system, there should be no privileged class in the village community. The re-division of land should be an essential feature of land reforms. Each villager must be given a plot of land, however small. By the *village Panchayat*, Lohia wanted a ceiling of three acres. Lohia also suggested in his agrarian reforms that a family in a village should not be allowed to own more than three times any land. Both the family and the acreage were to be measured in average. An *acre* meant an *acre* of average fertility, while a family meant a family of five. Lohia discouraged hired labour on land.(Panwar,op.cit.p113-114)

Cultivation of the waste land was one of the prominent features of Ram Manohar Lohia's concept of agrarian revolution. He pointed out that in India only 26% out of 41 acres of cultivable land was utilized. It would not be a difficult task to bring the waste land under cultivation at the rate of one crore *acre* per year. In 1950s, Lohia estimated that this program would involve the expenditure of 150 crores for the first three years and then the expenditure of Rs. 100 crore annually.(Lohia,1963,p403-404) The object of his program was to increase the production as well as minimize the perennial problem of unemployment.

Lohia's Pragmatic approach to an agrarian revolution becomes obvious from his emphasis on medium and small irrigation facilities for cultivators. In his opinion voluntary labour alone could undertake this task which would be highly beneficial for the village dwellers. Lohia suggested that unemployed youths of villages should be associated with this program. The scheme should continue throughout the year, even during the rainy season.

It has to be noted that Planning Commission in 1961 appreciated the suggestions of Lohia regarding small and medium schemes of irrigation.(Lohia,p81)

From Lohia's point of view, an abolition of land tax was a desirable item." He said, "I would vote for it even if the devil proposed." (Mankind,Mar-Apr,1968) Lohia wanted the land tax to be replaced by agriculture income tax on big holding and he also pleaded for the abolition of land revenue on profitless agriculture and uneconomic holdings. He showed convincingly that the total expenditure of the Government on agricultural development.(Lohia,op.cit.p521) In this context, Lohia observed, "The abolition of land revenue will have a most welcome repercussion on 30 crores of agriculturists, obsessed always with this tax under all contrariety of circumstances"(Mankind, Jul1966,p67) Lohia was a critic of Pandit Jawahar Lal Nehru; but on such issues he was prepared to cooperate with him.(Mankind,Nov,1960,p45) Nehru's attention was drawn towards the issue of the land tax and he admitted that all holding in India below 6.5 acres were 'uneconomic'(Ibid) It may be noted that from Lohia's view point all uneconomic holding upto 6.5 acres of land of average fertility.

Lohia realized the importance of the 'Food Army' in bringing about an agrarian revolution in India. He suggested that a 'Food Army' must be recruited to bring the uncultivated waste land under cultivation; The soldiers of the 'Food Army' were to be given practical agro-engineering training. About one million men were to be recruited in the 'Food Army' and they would be modest salaries. In Lohia's opinion, the 'Food Army' utility would be realized in increasing grain production.(Lohia,1963,p403) To quote Lohia, "The test of the 'Food Army' shall not be efficiency, but that of attainability; hence, whatever is attainable by way of agricultural tools crude or refined, in our present condition of manufacturers should be brought to the aid of the 'Food Army'.(Lohia,p60) He brought that the 'Food Army' would solve the immediate problem of food and unemployment. Above all, it would introduce dynamic element into the social structure and agricultural economy.(Ibid,p61) Lohia was sincere in his convictions and keen for the implementation of his scheme. After the Fourth General Election, he started a *Bhoo Sena* in Madhya Pradesh and Bihar.(Verma,1994,p130-131)

Dr Ram Manohar Lohia doubted the efficiency of the *Bhoodan* Movement of Vinoba Bhave as the panacea of all agrarian problems in India. One May 1, 1964, he observed in a University seminar in the U.S.A. "If *Bhoodan* had been conceived as one of the many answers to the land problem in India, I would have subscribed to it, but it has been put forward as the only solution and exclusive solution to the land problem. I have to reject it to that extent".(Panwar,op.cit.p115)

Lohia saw in the simmering discontent of the down-trodden and exploited cultivators of Naxalbari, agrarian upsurges of serious nature. *Bhoodan* was no answer to the perennial problem of land hunger in India. In 1967 Lohia wrote perceptive article entitled 'Naxalbari, Asansol and Calcutta' and he concluded with a thought provoking sentence "Still there is a problem to be solved in Naxalbari.(Ibid) Yet Lohia's concept of agrarian revolution was different from that of naxalite leaders. Lohia rejected both capitalism and communism as equally irrelevant to the whole of mankind, To Lohia the battle of delay should go together with the battle of mind.

Ram Manohar Lohia's concept of agrarian revolution was different from that of Pandit Jawahar Lal Nehru's views on agrarian reforms. He had not borne personal animosity against Nehru, and he appreciated the liberalism and broadmindedness of Nehru.(Lohia,1970,p82) Yet time and again Lohia made sweeping statements against Nehru, denigrating him 'rider less' leader bringing the country to the brink of ruin and author of India's partition.(Panwar,op.cit,p199) It appears that Lohia thought the Jawahar Lal Nehru 'extinguished the true revolution' Once Lohia said to "Tarakeshwari Sinha." You cannot understand what relations I have with Nehru. I have looked at him not only as a leader, but as a God. He extinguished the fire of revolution. I had pinned faith in him and accepted him as a socialist leader. He belied all our hopes. You cannot gauge my sadness. But this is a country of idol worshippers and it had started worshipping Nehru too. Unless this idol is broken, the country will continue worshipping him. Indians worship the stone around the *peepal* (ficus religiosa) tree. So if the unreal dreams of this country are to be broken and the country is to be shaken off then the idol must be broken.(Lohia,1963,p6)

Dr Ram Manohar Lohia drew the attention of Pandit Jawahar Lal Nehru that agriculture labourers, share coppers and old tillers of 'uneconomic holding's needed the immediate attention of the government. For revamping the agrarian system, Lohia suggested that an integrated price policy of uniform procurement and rationing, calculation of levy on village basis and creation of land army for the extension agriculture. Lohia also reiterated that all state aid to agriculture should not be on state to individual basis but on state to village basis. He wanted that his suggestions should be applied also to ryotwari areas because tenants had stepped in the system.

Dr Ram Manohar Lohia was not academic system builder; but he was a crusader for getting Socialism to be adopted as a national policy. Concept of agrarian revolution shows his sweep and originality of thinking. It was an aspect of a total transformation of the society through *Sapta Kranti*. For effective revolutionary action to change rural India, he was prepared to go even against the provision of law. To quote Lohia, "If the Constitution is a bar to this issue of such proclamation; the reproaches of the poverty in the constitution, it must go."

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