

# Reconstructing Democratic Socialism of Rammanohar Lohia: Contemporary Relevance for Social Justice, Decentralization and Inclusive Development

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## HOW TO CITE:

Noor Fatima Ansari, Nishat Fatema, Anita Verma (2026).  
Reconstructing Democratic Socialism of Rammanohar Lohia: Contemporary Relevance for Social Justice, Decentralization and Inclusive Development  
International Journal of Special Education, 41(23s), 1736-1744

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## ABSTRACT:

Dr Rammanohar Lohia (1736-1744), modern architect of democratic socialism and one of the leading lights of the national movement. He opposed both unrestricted capitalism and centralized, doctrinaire communism and also did not want to reduce Indian inequality to class only. His ideas of socialism combined economic redistribution with struggles against caste, patriarchy, racial hierarchy, colonialism, political centralization, invasions of civil liberty and militarism. This article summarizes the political journey of Lohia with reference to the national movement and underground resistance during Quit India, the formation of socialist parties and their parliamentary opposition and non-Congressism strategy, etc. Further, it evaluates Lohia's political, social, and economic thought. According to this argument, Lohia's contribution ultimately lies not in any fixed policy but in a method that has already undergone an evolving and unfolding process. This means reading inequality through intersecting structures, democratizing power as well as property, connecting moral protest with institutional change, and judging development by the dignity and agency of the most subordinated. His vision on special opportunity, the four pillars of the state, small machine technology, linguistic democracy, civil disobedience, and seven revolutions remain significant to ongoing social justice, federalism, employment, gender equality, digital concentration and democratic accountability. Simultaneously, his reviews need critical updating due to constitutional developments, urbanization, globalization, ecological crisis, and new technologies.

**Keywords:** Rammanohar Lohia; Indian socialism; caste; gender; decentralization; democratic socialism; social justice; seven revolutions.

## Introduction

The development of Indian socialism was not a mere extension of European Marxism. It was born in an anti-colonial movement, a predominantly agrarian economy, a deeply stratified caste order and a multilingual civilization. Lohia's significance lies in his assertion that socialist politics in India must face these realities simultaneously. He learned more from Marx's critique of exploitation and Gandhi's non-violent, decentralist ethics than

both did, but was unorthodox in his criticism of both. He describes himself as a 'heretical Gandhian', which shows his attachment and dissent to this legacy. According to the relevant literature, Lohia is portrayed as a freedom fighter, a socialist organizer and parliamentarian, an advocate of women and oppressed castes, a defender of civil liberties and a decentralized development theoretician. It also contains the proposals for a four-pillar state, small machines, land reform, a land or food army, income ceilings

and the seven revolutions. The current article presents the materials made available in a coherent academic argument and tests them against Lohia's own writings and established historical scholarship. Instead of treating relevance as a timeless validity, it asks what principles remain illuminating, what institutional proposals anticipate later developments, and what needs to be revised.

### Objectives and Method

The paper has four objectives:

- To trace the major stages of Lohia's political journey and locate his ideas within the freedom struggle and post-independence opposition politics.
- To explain his distinctive contribution to Indian socialism, especially his synthesis of economic equality, caste annihilation, gender justice, decentralisation and non-violent action.
- To examine his principal political, social and economic ideas as an interconnected framework rather than as isolated slogans.
- To assess the contemporary relevance and limitations of those ideas in relation to democracy, employment, inequality, technology, federalism and social justice.

The study uses a qualitative, interpretive method based on textual analysis. Primary emphasis is placed on Lohia's Marx, Gandhi and Socialism, The Caste System, Wheel of History and Guilty Men of India's Partition. Secondary scholarship by Oesterheld (2010), Sinha (2010), Tolpadi (2010) and Yadav (2010) is used to contextualize and critically evaluate his thought. Contemporary official and institutional reports are used selectively to demonstrate present-day relevance. The method is analytical rather than hagiographic: Lohia's insights are considered alongside the ambiguities and gaps in his programme.

### Political Journey: From Anti-Colonial Activist to Socialist Opposition Leader

Rammanohar Lohia, whose birth date was 23 March 1910, was born in Akbarpur. Zafar's father, Hiralal, took part in nationalist politics and

introduced him to the freedom movement. Lohia studied at Banaras, Calcutta and Berlin. The subject was salt, and his doctoral research conducted in Germany focused on salt taxation in colonial India. In the study by Oesterheld (2010), the author explains that Lohia's intellectual formation took place in the context of the crises of democracy in Europe, the rise of fascism and debates in socialism. There is a great deal of knowledge about the style of Temple and its architecture. Lohia became one of the founding members of the Congress Socialist Party in 1934 after his return to India in 1933, similar to Acharya Narendra Deva, Jayaprakash Narayan and others. The CSP tried to influence the national movement with a socialist direction while working within the Indian National Congress. In 1936, Lohia was appointed secretary of the Foreign Department of the All-India Congress Committee, Jawaharlal Nehru being the head. He linked India's resistance to imperialism with others in Asia, Africa and other colonial areas. During World War II, Lohia was against Indian support to the British for the war unless independent. He was arrested for anti-war activities several times. During the Quit India movement in 1942, he went underground after the arrest of senior Congress leaders and assisted in the circulation of clandestine literature and supported secret radio broadcasts that sustained the movement. He was arrested in 1944, imprisoned and tortured (at Lahore Fort), and released in 1946. As standard histories of the national movement hold, the underground socialist network was vital in keeping Quit India alive post the initial crackdown (Chandra et al., 1988). The movement for civil liberties in Portuguese Goa soon became more intense because of Lohia's intervention in civil disobedience.

Lohia's oppositional politics carried on after independence. Socialists quit the Congress in 1948 and formed a separate Socialist Party. The *Kisan Mazdoor Praja* Party and this movement created the *Praja* Socialist Party (PSP). Lohia's differences with the PSP leadership sharpened after the police firing under the PSP rule in Travancore-Cochin, as he said, a socialist

government could not repress popular protest but be politically accountable. Once he left the PSP, he lent his support to the re-establishment of the Socialist Party in 1955. Such organizational breaks weakened socialist unity but also showcased his refusal to subordinate ethical principle to party convenience. In 1962 Lohia fought against Prime Minister Nehru at Phulpur but lost. However, he won a 1963 by-election from Farrukhabad to enter the Lok Sabha. His parliamentary interventions included poverty, public expenditure, corruption and executive privilege in national debate. The celebrated 'three annas versus fifteen annas' controversy questioned the averages by revealing the actual poverty that figures conceal. His parliamentary style combined empirical challenge with moral indictment: democracy required an opposition able to reveal the gap between state claims and ordinary life. Lohia developed the non-Congress phenomenon from 1963; opposition parties should cooperate electorally to break one-party dominance. The strategy led to Congress defeats and coalition governments in various states in 1967. Its democratic achievement was to make alternation in power possible; its danger was that anti-Congress unity could come to be an end in itself, overriding ideological coherence. Yadav (2010) thus sees Lohia's political inheritance as both democratizing interventions as well as many unresolved tensions in later coalition politics. Lohia was elected from Kannauj in 1967 and died on 12 October that year.

### **Lohia's Contribution to Indian Socialism**

Lohia desired an independent socialism fitting for the Asian and Indian environment. He condemned capitalism for concentrating wealth and communist systems for concentrating political power. He threatened that only state ownership might destroy 'bread and freedom' if it were a replacement for private monopoly. Consequently, socialism necessitated widespread ownership of property, civil liberty, electoral democracy, non-violent resistance, and ongoing popular participation. This was not your run-of-the-mill mixed economy nor Soviet-style planning; it was one attempt to democratize

economic and political power together. His socialism also rejected historical determinism. In 'Wheel of History,' Lohia argued that the interaction of caste and class means that history cannot be explained in a single linear European sequence (Lohia, 1955). According to Tolpadi (2010), Lohia's engagement with Gandhi widened socialist reason beyond production relations to culture, hierarchy and non-violent transformation. His distinctiveness came from making European theory provincial while accepting modernity, science and universal equality. For Lohia, socialism was an equality and prosperity guarantee. Distributing poverty could be the outcome of equality without productive capacity, while domination will be reproduced through growth without equality. He differentiated between material equality within nations and equality among nations and linked both with moral fraternity and equanimity. As a practical matter, socialist policy had to reduce extreme disparities while expanding the productive resources available to ordinary people. He suggested that the highest income and the lowest income should roughly remain within a ratio of 10:1. This was not a technical formula for all time, but a moral test of tolerable inequality. (Lohia, 1963a) Lohia fundamentally altered socialist theory to prevent the reduction of oppression to class. He argued that caste was not merely a cultural remnant that would disappear with economic development. It outlines one's dignity, occupation, marriage, leadership and power access. Consequently, he favoured the 'special opportunity' for historically subordinated groups including the oppressed castes, Adivasis, minorities and women so that formal equality did not perpetuate inherited advantage (Lohia, 1964). The term 'underdog,' that is, a perspective of politics which begins from those at the bottom of multiple hierarchies is described by Sinha (2010). Lohia's focus on patriarchy, racial oppression, colonialism and militarism also marked by the same widening. His act of civil disobedience in 1964 against the segregation in Jackson, Mississippi, linked Indian nonviolent resistance to the global civil rights movement. His version of socialism was internationalist but not culturally

derivative. The fight against inequality crossed borders, but the form it assumed had to be understood in specific histories.

### Major Political Ideas

According to Lohia, the four pillars of the state must be village, district, province and centre. Delegation of technical responsibilities was not decentralization from above; each pillar was to be constitutionally enabled with the requisite power and resources. Government should be decentralized and close enough for citizens to observe, influence and challenge. A democratic district government was very important because the district could coordinate services and planning while remaining accessible to the local communities (Lohia, 1963a; Yadav, 2010). The conception envisaged the democratic impulse behind the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments, which conferred Constitutional status to the rural and urban local bodies. However, unlike most actual decentralization, Lohia's proposal is much more radical. This is because local bodies are dependent on higher governments for funds, functionaries and authority. His framework, therefore, directs your attention not to the existence of elections but to their real distribution of fiscal and administrative capacity. Lohia viewed civil disobedience as a means of democracy, not simply a tool against foreign rule. Elections give power to the government but not unquestionable government action. People must retain the ability to organise collectively to peacefully disobey unjust laws and arbitrary detention and repression. The principle was embodied in his own arrests in colonial India and after independence. The key takeaway is that constitutional democracy needs both formal institutions like courts and legislatures, as well as active citizenship. These components support one another to check power, as political parties, social movements and public criticism all play a role.

The motive behind non-Congressism was to curb the apathy generated by one-party rule. It continues to be relevant because of the principle of alternation: no party should consider itself a natural or permanent ruler. In some situations,

coalition by negation can weaken programmatic politics. Lohia's strategy is most defensible when opposition unity serves constitutional accountability and a substantive social programme; it becomes hollow when defeating the incumbent replaces commitment to equality, secularism, and democratic conduct. Lohia was against the domination of English in administration, higher education and elite jobs. The Indian bourgeoisie's objection was not to learning English but to a social order in which command of one colonial language became a gatekeeping device. Indian languages can have the same function of being science, law, administration and knowledge; only then can democracy develop socially. Today's challenge is to aim for multilingual access without making language policy coercive majoritarianism. The democratic essence of his argument is furthered by the high - quality education regional languages lend their weight to and multilingual digital services. Lohia condemned passive non-alignment and envisioned a 'third camp' of peoples and countries that would be independent of both blocs of the Cold War. He was against the dominance of colonialism, racial hierarchy and great power. Also, he was in favour of movement towards world parliament and world government. Although the creation of a world state is far off, the questions of unequal sovereignty, global poverty, war and nuclear danger and weak democratic control. His call for internationalism encourages mutual collaboration between the less powerful human societies.

### Major Social Ideas

According to Lohia, Caste was the essential cause behind the immobility of Indian society. The inherited caste system creates social divisions and limits the distribution of leadership. His initiative was more than just a denunciation: he was in favour of representation and preferential opportunity for subordinated groups, encouraged inter-caste dining and marriage, and demanded changes in the social composition of political leadership (Lohia, 1964). In later discussions, substantive equality was anticipated, which means treating dissimilar groups identically can

preserve historical injustice. This argument still holds considerable relevance because caste continues to shape education, occupation, marriage, political representation and exposure to violence. However, a modern Lohiaite approach should not depict the broad categories as internally homogeneous. The intersection of caste with class, gender, region, disability and religious identity must be examined; it must be based on reliable data and combine representation with universal improvements in public education, health and employment.

Equality between women and men is placed by Lohia at the beginning of his seven revolutions. He condemned the restriction of women to housework and demanded their independent entry into jobs and public life. That was not an ancillary 'women's issue' but a fundamental structure of an unequal civilization. Data collected in recent times show that this project is still far from completion. India's female labour-force participation rose from 21.1 per cent in 2017–18 to 35.6 percent in 2023–24; it remains far below the male rate of 77.5 percent (MoSPI, 2024). Merely participating does not assess the quality of the job, the wage, the unpaid care burden or the safety at work.

Lohia's *Sapta Kranti* condensed his political morality into seven connected struggles. Formulations vary slightly across editions, but their substance is consistent:

- equality between women and men;
- an end to discrimination based on skin colour and race;
- annihilation of caste and special opportunity for historically oppressed groups;
- freedom from foreign domination and movement toward a democratic world order;
- economic equality through limits on concentration and planned expansion of production;
- protection of individual life and liberty against unjust collective or state interference; and
- resistance to conventional and nuclear weapons through non-violent civil disobedience.

The framework gives us an early account of injustice's interconnection. Ensuring this stops economic redistribution from becoming caste- and gender-blind and identity-based emancipation from becoming property- and livelihood-blind. It lacks institutional priorities, sequencing and measurable goals. Its moral programme could therefore become rhetorical, rather than being comprehensive. The Diagnostic Matrix Power Shift assesses whether policy shifts power along several dimensions at once, that is across categories.

### Major Economic Ideas

Lohia did not accept that we should choose between hand tools or huge industrial units. His "little machine" was modern, powered, productive, locally controllable, and capable of broad dissemination. While large industry will continue to be essential, especially in steel and major infrastructural projects, it should not monopolize our development imagination. The goal was to increase productivity without mass displacement or concentration of ownership in a few metropolitan centres (Lohia 1963a). In contemporary times, the micro, small and medium enterprises distributed renewable energy, local manufacturing, digital fabrication and platform-enabled producer cooperatives have gained relevance. To date, multi-stakeholder governance has become a ubiquitous requirement. However, the solution to internet challenges might not lie in more consultations. Perhaps less consultation and clearer government policies would be more effective. Nevertheless, the thought needs to be refreshed as some contemporary networks – semiconductors, railways, cloud infrastructure and public health systems – need scale. An economy of Lohia's type would combine strategic scale with dispersed access and democratic regulation. According to Lohia, ensuring food security was about equitable access to land, minor irrigation, and soil improvement. His 1953 local-development proposals included reclamation of wasteland and redistribution, reduced or abolished land revenue for ordinary cultivators, small and medium irrigation, and a publicly supported land or food

army that employed people to rehabilitate land and extend cultivation. Along with livelihood security, the proposal provided for creation of productive assets.

The logic is re-invoked in public works based on rights, watershed development and ecological restoration. The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, or MGNREGA, under which rural employment demand has been legally granted, also allows works relating to water conservation, drought proofing, land development, and rural infrastructure. The pertinence of Lohia in this regard is not that current policy merely implements his scheme, but that he saw the developmental value of labor-intensive public works. This can be widened to climate change adaptation, wetland restoration, heat mitigation and care infrastructure. Lohia condemned the obvious consumption by the economic and political elite and offered ceilings on income and expenditure. He preferred social

ownership of large-scale industry and not exclusive central-state ownership; cooperatives, villages and other decentralized bodies could also own productive resources. Although the 10 to 1 income ratio and numerical limits refer to a historical price structure, the normative principle is clear: extreme inequalities harm equal citizenship and divert scarce resources from social investment.

A modern application would rely to a lesser degree on administratively fixed salaries than on progressive taxation, inheritance taxation, competition policy, universal basic services, worker voice, transparent political finance and monopoly rents regulation. The challenge is to constrain their domination while preserving innovation and feasible administration. It is essential that Lohia's notion of the 'investing state' be stressed: redistribution must be linked to ongoing investments in health, education, skills, infrastructure and productive capabilities.

**Table 1: Relevance in Contemporary India**

| Lohia's principle    | Present challenge                                | Contemporary application                                                                                        |
|----------------------|--------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Special opportunity  | Inherited caste and gender advantage             | Evidence-based affirmative action, representative leadership and strong universal public services               |
| Four-pillar state    | Fiscal and administrative centralization         | Predictable local finance, empowered <i>gram sabhas</i> and municipalities, district planning and social audits |
| Small machines       | Job-poor growth and technological concentration  | MSME ecosystems, cooperatives, distributed energy, open technology and worker-centred automation                |
| Civil disobedience   | Executive overreach and shrinking accountability | Non-violent protest, judicial review, free media, transparency and protection of association                    |
| Linguistic democracy | Knowledge and digital exclusion                  | High-quality education, courts and e-governance in multiple Indian languages, supported by translation          |
| Seven revolutions    | Fragmented approaches to injustice               | Integrated policy tests covering class, caste, gender, race, liberty, ecology and peace                         |

Lohia's most important contemporary contribution is his insistence that formal equality cannot remediate a society organized by inherited hierarchy. Who has voice, assets, education,

networks and cultural authority is key for public policy. This realization not only lends support to affirmative action but also propels a demand that cuts through quotas to redistribute high-quality

schooling, health care, land, credit, digital access and political leadership. It also requires disaggregated evidence so that benefits reach the most disadvantaged in broad social categories. In India, local government is constitutionally mandated; however, it has been unevenly decentralized. The Ministry of Panchayati Raj is still working on the Panchayat Development Indices and capacity building. The practical difficulties being faced by elected women representatives indicate that representation must be backed by authority and institutional strength (Ministry of Panchayati Raj, 2025). Lohia's four pillars convey a simple message: allocate functions to the level closest to citizens that can competently carry them out; and align these functions with funds, staff and public accountability. The unemployment rate is not the only thing that measures the employment challenge of India. There is informal work, low earnings, underemployment and a difficult school-to-work transition included in the employment challenge of India. The centrality of youth employment, education and skills is highlighted in the India Employment Report 2024 (International Labour Organization & Institute for Human Development, 2024). Lohia's argument for small machines generates a labour-absorbing innovation strategy: support for enterprises and technologies that spread productive capacity, enhance employment quality, and allow workers and communities to share in ownership. In the AI era, who controls data, computing infrastructure and the benefits from AI productivity gains?

Women's freedom will become ironically topical if the time comes. More participation in panchayats and rising labour-force participation is important, but substantive equality also requires safe mobility, childcare, equal wages, bodily autonomy, freedom from violence and recognition of unpaid care. Through this framework, the synergy between family power, labour markets and political representation is established, instead of treating it separately. As an outcome of ecological degradation, Lohia's criticism of extravagance and advocacy for decentralized production, conservation of water

and land restoration explain this. The information on the economic concepts of Karl Marx is not a fully elaborated environmental theory. But he offers useful principles: adequacy rather than elite excess. Productive work for all. Locally adapted technology and public investment in common resources. Climate action can lead to resilient agriculture, clean energy that is decentralized, circular production and employment-intensive restoration. But ecological limits cannot be weaponized to freeze the poor; low-consumption restraint must begin with emissions from luxuries and concentrated resource use. Lohia's life linked colonialism with anti-colonialism and injustice by postcolonial government. This is particularly relevant when obedience is equated with patriotism or a vote is perceived as an unlimited mandate. A democracy deserving of her vision protects dissenters, minorities, journalists and peaceful movements while holding everyone accountable. His example also raises questions for opposition politics: resistance must be principled, non-violent and linked to a constructive programme, not just to getting into office.

Conflicts of competence, local elite capture or unequal administrative capacities do not automatically get solved through a four-pillar state. There should be a combination of decentralization with constitutional rights, independent oversight, equalization transfers and measures to safeguard local communities' marginalized residents. In the second place, ceiling limits on income, land or expenditure are historically determined and may be difficult to administer. The ethical purpose that extreme concentration should be pursued through modern fiscal, regulatory and ownership institutions. Thirdly, a small machine thesis cannot take over a sector-specific analysis on scale, productivity, global supply chains and environment. Within a mixed technological ecology, this works best as a distributive criterion. Lohia's anti-English politics may mislead some to assume he is opposed to multilingualism or global knowledge. The essence of a democratic language policy should be recast as linguistic capability: no citizen should be prevented from participating in

the political process simply because public power or advanced knowledge is available exclusively in some elite language. Rather, citizens should be free to learn and use many languages while knowing that they can participate fully in society irrespective of their level of linguistic ability. To some degree, Lohia's legacy has been reduced to caste arithmetic or anti-incumbent coalition. These uses separate his representation from his motives to promote economic equality, gender justice, civil liberty, non-violence and world peace. According to Yadav (2010), bringing back alive Lohia's vision entails reconstruction, not repetition.

### Conclusion

The significance of Dr. Rammanohar Lohia lies in the remarkable breadth and unity of his democratic socialism. His political journey: anti-colonial resistance, underground organizing, civil disobedience, socialist party-building, parliamentary scrutiny, and democratization of electoral competition. His theoretical contribution was to make Indian socialism answerable to caste, patriarchy, language, empire and centralized power as well as class. He modified equality beyond a mere economic goal but rather a broader agenda of material redistribution, social dignity, political voice and international justice. Many of his proposals

anticipated the creation of institutions: local self-government (which would be constitutionally recognized), affirmative action for the historically oppressed groups, women's political representation and public works for employment generation. However, their partial fulfilment shows his main warning: institutional form without real power transfer can keep hierarchy intact. Panchayats that lack adequate financial resources and representation that does not possess effective agency and employment without dignity and growth without dispersed ownership fall short of meaning what is referred to as democratic socialism.

One should not look upon Lohia as a ready-made supplier or a symbolic ancestor of specific parties. His greatest legacy is a sense of political judgment. It inquires whether an institution will allow power to flow nearer to the citizen; whether technology expands capability or concentrates it; whether development narrows the gap between the privileged and the poor; whether opposition can ever remain ethical; and whether freedom reaches the subordinated by caste, gender, race, class or state power. In India, where social structures are hierarchical, development is uneven, technology is centralised, ecological stress is obvious, and democracy is contested, these questions remain painfully contemporary.

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