

'The Question is *Democracy*'

A Seminar in Honor of Rajni Kothari

Reflecting on the idea of democracy, Rajni Kothari, one of the most influential political analysts of postcolonial India, in his last interview said:

"...the task of intellectuals is not limited to the study of the critical role played by politics at various levels; they also have to develop various critiques of existing politics....If we close the possibility of criticism, the gap between ideas and processes will increase. It will restrict our role as intellectuals in society."

Kothari's provocative statement reflects a profound adherence to the idea of democracy—an idea that remains central to his intellectual concerns and to his political engagements as an intellectual-activist. Kothari, however, does not offer any fixed meaning of democracy. One encounters, in his work, attempts to capture those context-specific ideas and practices, which are often described as *democracy*. This analytical openness makes Kothari very relevant—not merely to understand multiple trajectories of democracy in India but also to reflect on the very historical moment we recognize as *contemporary*. Kothari's exploration, thus, provokes us to unpack our meanings and understandings of democracy because eventually for him as well for us: ***the question is democracy.***

In his *The State against Democracy* expressed several of his ideas and concerns on democracy. Things have changed drastically since the publication of the book. Increasingly, 'democracy' gets defined almost on daily basis by various actors and at multiple levels. The advent of new technologies, phenomenal expansion of mass media and civil society organizations, unprecedented proliferation of non party political formations, increasing influence of transnational forces on the working of national/local governments, restructuration of economic, educational and other public spaces, rapid politicization of society, uses of innovative modes of political and cultural campaigns and mobilization of citizenry have not only transformed the political landscape but also have changed the coordinates and ecology of democracy. While we live in a monumental era for the advancement of democracy, we are also witness to the fact that the authoritarian or anti-democratic tendencies are far from being feeble. The challenges facing democracy are far graver than ever before. Put differently, the more democracy gets rooted, the more it becomes vulnerable. Hence, ***the question is democracy.***

This seminar intends to focus on, though it is not strictly about, the contemporary ecology of democracy in India. It poses a very straightforward question: **What are the modes by which democracy as an idea, and a practice, is understood and played out in contemporary India?** The seminar hopes to generate an empirically informed, and conceptually/theoretically nuanced, discussion around the new technologies of governance that constitute the entity called the 'state'

and the new spaces where equity-based participation is demanded. The aim is to focus on actual empirical instances—the case studies—not only to explore the actualities of democracy at the bottom level of society but also to critically assess the limits of the conceptual tools we employ in the study of these experiences.

We do not intend to discuss or debunk the claim of any discipline on the study democracy. We wish, instead, to discuss multiple notions and practices of democracy in various domains and spaces. We often hear of the terms like social democracy, economic democracy, political democracy etc. Their meanings we hope will infuse the presentations. The seminar identifies seven broad thematic concerns which have intentionally been kept open-ended. These are:

1. **Constitutions, Institutions, Organizations**

- How do we look at the changing nature of state- institutions, and how is it affecting 'democracy' at the levels of ideas, processes and practices?
- Is there any relationship between the normative ideas given in the constitutions and actual practices of those organizations which describe themselves as 'Civil Society'?

2. **Censorship, Bans, Vetoes**

- What are the tensions between the ideas and values of democracy (viz., freedom of speech and expression, of religious and cultural practices etc.) and censorships, bans and vetoes?
- Are censorships, bans and vetoes not just inimical but antithetical to the ideas and values of democracy, or conversely censorship, ban and veto actually serve as preventive checks on democracy turning into anarchy?

3. **Democracy, Market, Technology**

- How do the ideas of democracy square with the logics of a liberalized market economy?
- What is the idea of 'cyber democracy'? Does cyber space broaden democracy by enriching public opinion through social media, deepening discussions and debates and democratizing political activity on the internet? What are the implications, positive or otherwise, of new technologies of governance and of protest on what we think democracy means?

4. **Dissent, Disputes, Violence**

- What is the role of dissent in enriching and strengthening democracy?

- How does democracy structure, foment, and resolve disputes and violence? Whether, and in what ways, does the incidence and occurrence of disputes and violence enhance, limit or alter democratization processes?

5. Campaigns, Movements, Non-party political formations

- How do campaigns, movements and non-political formations of various sorts structure/restructure or shape/reshape much of what we think democracy is?
- Are campaigns, movements and non-political party formations necessary elements of stronger democracy as they go beyond daily business of democracy (election, institutions, legislations, lobbying) and enable ordinary citizens to construct their lives without worrying too much about politics, or do they present extra institutional challenges to the boundaries of democracy by forming little regimes under which members are driven to a particular direction against their choice?

6. Rights, Dignity, Livelihood

- Is the expansion of democracy essentially driven by rights claims?
- How should the rights based development strategy of the UPA in a global context of neo-liberal economies be seen especially in a context where identity claims are being forcefully made and where dignity is an issue of significant contestation?

7. Corporations, Growth, Distribution

- What is the relationship between deregulation of corporate activities, economic growth and equitable distribution of income and resources?
- What are the pathways through which corporate elites capture the system and deprive citizens of their access to critical resources (e.g., land, water, forest etc.) and of democratic participations in crafting or making of policies that affect their lives?

The above seven rubrics will be the basis of the seven sessions around which the seminar will be organized. The questions listed under each rubric are merely illustrative of the issues we think could be discussed. A prospective could expand our imagination of democracy by interpreting the rubrics in innovative new ways. We expect to select 2-3 papers under each rubric. Each paper will be around 5000-7000 words and will preferably be an analysis of a particular case which would illustrate the conceptual points being made about the working of democracy in India. We would welcome studies that engage with the received vocabulary of democracy to either craft new conceptual tools of understanding or new concepts that will give us a better way to understand the dynamics of

democracy in India. Cases are what we would prefer not interpretation of scholarly texts. The articles chosen will, if found suitable, result in an edited volume.

An abstract of about 500 words, indicating the rubric under which it should be considered should be sent by end November 2015 for a committee to review and select from the proposals the final list of presenters to be invited. Invitations will be sent by 15 December 2015. The seminar is planned for Mid-March 2016.

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