

In memoriam

Rajni Kothari 1928-2015



UNLIKE politicians and bureaucrats, academics, particularly in India (notable exceptions apart) are not prone to setting out their life stories. The presumption is that their work speaks for itself. More likely, barring those who adorn public office, many feel that there is little exciting about their lives. A pity, for the ideas our scholars unleash, at least some of them, affect more than the world of thought, often leading to major interventions in public policy and civil society, even if, as is more common now, these serve as justifications for power wielders.

To remember Rajni Kothari only as an academic, albeit in his heyday an extremely influential one, would be doing him and us a disservice. Alongside his role as a teacher/researcher, a continuing preoccupation, Rajni was cast more in the mould of a public intellectual – an institution builder, vigorous defender of civil liberties and democratic values, one who sought to combine informed civil activism with reorienting the institutions of the state. Less recognized is Rajni's role as guru and mentor to generations of younger scholars and activists with a light and non-patronizing touch, often taking immense pride in the achievements of his one-time protégés – a rare quality, given that so many of our academics are intriguingly insecure about themselves.

The broad contours of his academic life are well known. He first burst upon the scene with a set of six path-breaking essays, 'Form and Substance in India Politics' while still a young lecturer at Baroda University. He moved to Delhi in the early 1960s via a brief detour at the National Institute of Community Development, Mussoorie, helped found the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies where with the help of his colleagues – Gopal Krishna, D.L. Sheth, Ramashray Roy, Ashis Nandy, Bashiruddin Ahmed, to name a few – wrote/edited *Politics in India, Caste in India Politics, Footsteps into the Future* and so on, all of which radically altered extant thinking on India politics and society. He helped nudge an otherwise arid discipline, till then overly mired in constitutionalism, public administration and somewhat archaic political thought, shift towards a deeper engagement with changing social and political reality – introducing new methods of mapping public opinion, engaging with concerned actors, and so on.

Much of this shift can be traced not just to Kothari's inclination and background – earlier involvement with the Quit India Movement or the Royal Indian Navy Mutiny – but also to the unique collaborations that he was able to forge. This ability to

work with a wide range of individuals and institutions, often of differing persuasions and skills, stood him in good stead. Today, as we scan the somewhat narrow and specialized world of the academia, this range and quality of collaborations appears somewhat unreal, both within India and elsewhere.

This was also the phase in which he became close to Indira Gandhi, including mediating on her behalf with the leaders of the Nav Nirman Movement in Gujarat which succeeded in dethroning Chimanbhai Patel as chief minister in 1973. Kothari's memoirs provide interesting insights into his deep disappointment with the student leaders, for pushing their agitation beyond its carrying capacity. Evidently, system stability was an important consideration in his understanding of democratic transition.

As Sanjay Gandhi started looming large, began a process of distancing from the then establishment. Proximity to JP and growing unease with authoritarian tendencies saw Rajni assume a more activist role. The Emergency, as also the experiences with the short-lived Janata Party, however, soured him from an over-reliance on political parties as agencies to deepen and enrich democracy. A deep engagement with the PUCL, the Citizens for Democracy, the framing of 'An Agenda for India' with Romesh Thapar and others, the setting up of Lokayan, and association with a wide range of social movements, eventually culminating into the National Alliance of People's Movements (NAPM) alongside active involvement with the Society for International Development, International Group for Grassroots Initiatives (IGGRI), the Peace and Global Transformations programme of the United Nations University, to list a few, helped nurture an enduring faith in the non-party political process. This was also the phase in which Rajni wrote prolifically – not merely in academic forums but the popular press – efforts at intervention to shape public opinion on matters of current concern while underscoring the values and ethical norms central to the making of a humane democratic society.

For an intellectual who for substantial periods engaged with the project of crafting a democratic state in a post-colonial, Third World society, Kothari proved inadequate when called upon to play a role in state institutions. His term as Chairman, Indian Council of Social Science Research 1977-79 revealed his impatience with working through the nitty-gritty of organizational requirements. Files, finances, rules, even personnel were seen as banal and boring – necessary evils which failed to hold his attention. Much the same was true of his subsequent stint as Member, Planning Commission (1989-90) during the V.P. Singh regime. One often wonders why he agreed to join these enterprises. Surely he realized that these were not roles that he excelled in or even felt comfortable playing.

Far more creative, and long lasting, was his role as a democratic theorist of the margins. As a participant in and mentor to numerous civil society, grassroots initiatives in India and abroad, Rajni provided space and gave confidence to a

bewildering range of actors and initiatives, constantly advocating a greater recognition of concerns and world views that modern states routinely prefer to ignore, and worse. In the struggles of ordinary people, seeking to move beyond survival to become active agents in the crafting of their futures, Rajni's role is unlikely to be easily forgotten. In this he joins a long line of illustrious colleagues, many of whom like him were shaped both by the struggle for independence and the early romance of the Nehruvian era. More unusually, possibly because of his wide international exposure, he was prescient in sensing the seductive dangers created by, or maybe inherent in, the working of the modern state, science, technology and knowledge establishment. Yet, at least in hindsight, it appears that he misread the charms of modernity for people at the margins, including for many of the dissenting movements. Little surprise that in his later years, as he saw so many of the efforts that he so vigorously promoted fall by the wayside, either co-opted or defeated, he gave into moments of despondency. His constant battles with ill-health and the unexpected loss of his wife, Hansa, and elder son, Smitu, only made matters worse.

But Rajni Kothari, as he recurrently reminds us in his memoirs, was not one to give up on his innate optimism. Even in his later days, while living a far more reclusive life, he kept in touch with compatriots and comrades, old and young, constantly encouraging them to continue. At a time and phase in our history as a democratic nation, when far too many of us favour a pragmatic reconciliation with the 'real world', thereby shrinking our personal and collective imaginations, Rajni Kothari and individuals like him will be missed. One cannot but help wonder how he would read the stunning victory of the Aam Aadmi Party in Delhi, whether it underlines his faith in alternative politics.

Finally, a personal note. I first met Rajni across an interview table at the ICSSR. Despite the occasion, I never felt intimidated as he engaged me in an intense discussion, unmindful of the difference in our age or status. Over the years we worked together at CSDS, Lokayan and the PUCL. And despite differences, often sharp, he was rarely less than generous and gracious. I very much doubt that the generation after ours will have similar sentiments about us. *Seminar*, the journal I have been associated with over the last two decades, owes immeasurably to Rajni. For close to twenty-five years, he wrote the lead essay for the Seminar Annual, setting the tone for a critical and constructive engagement with our turbulent history. A worthwhile tribute to him would be to continue with that legacy.

Harsh Sethi

Consulting Editor, 'Seminar'

Rajni Kothari joined M.S. University of Baroda in 1958 when we – Kalpana and I – were undergraduate students. He was associated with the Department of Political Science as well as

Economics. We do not have a distinct memory of him as a teacher taking our classes, as much as we remember Bhikhu Parekh. We also had no interaction with him when we were doing our fieldwork on village politics, as a part of our Master's dissertation in 1960 under A.H. Somjee. At the same time, we were impressed by the interesting questions he raised on contemporary Indian politics in informal conversation and at faculty seminars. We were active in Baroda's public life, had read his articles on 'Form and Substance of Indian Politics' and even invited him to lecture in a study circle of the Congress Sewa Dal. We became close when he started his empirical study (with Tarun Sheth, our sociology teacher) on voting behaviour in the 1962 elections, Baroda-East constituency. Kothari called us to his residence to talk about city politics. I also attended some discussions at the Renaissance Club in which he was very active.

When leaving Baroda to join the National Institute of Community Development, Mussoorie, he presented me two books (perhaps by Russell) from his collection and asked me whether I was available to do field work in the summer after my final examination. I enthusiastically agreed to leave for Himmatnagar (Sabarkantha district) to study elections in Gulzarilal Nanda's constituency. With two friends to help me, I became deeply immersed in the study. After a couple of months, Kothari called me to NICD Mussoorie for discussions on the field work. I stayed with him for five days. We discussed the data that I had collected and got his guidance for writing the final report. This was a memorable stay, both intellectually and emotionally. Besides the warm hospitality of Hansaben, I was stimulated by Kothari; he not only satisfied my curiosity but generously engaged in discussing all manner of questions and counter questions.

I then joined Baroda University as a research assistant to A.H. Somjee. But the nostalgia about the brief period I had spent working with Kothari created a sense of discomfort with the new assignment. I began to feel suffocated, sensing that I was not learning anything new. I became restless and decided to leave Baroda. I wrote to Kothari. He understood my urges and asked me to join him on his project on Panchayati Raj for six months. I jumped at the offer, convinced my parents but faced difficulties in getting my department to accept my resignation. Fortunately, I.P. Desai came to my rescue and I was relieved from the university. Anil Bhatt and I joined him. The three of us travelled to different parts of the country and interviewed several political leaders and bureaucrats at all levels. This not only provided me an exposure to Indian politics, but also in how to understand reality. During field work we would discuss the answers from respondents and try to understand them in the context of intra-party factions. In the process, I learnt about larger theoretical/philosophical issues – about politics, par ties, morality, caste, and so on.

At a more personal level, Kothari played an important role in my marriage, crucial at a time when my parents were opposed to my marrying Kalpana, primarily on grounds of caste. He

persuaded my father to go along. Our family bonds strengthened after I joined CSDS in 1963. We played cards, shared drinks and Gujarati food, particularly *undhia*, alongside ideas. In the process, I received a firm grounding in theoretical/philosophical issues, qualitative and quantitative research and, above all, the role and meaning of research institutions in the Indian environment. My understanding of institution building – potentialities and constraints – owes a lot to him.

He supported my decision to move to Surat and work at the regional level. I joined I.P. Desai in 1972. With my experiences of field work in the city as well as in tribal areas and intense interaction with IP, my theoretical approach began to drift away from CSDS' liberal underpinnings centred around 'consensual' framework to analyze sociopolitical reality. I began interrogating my received framework, reread *Open Society and its Enemies* (Karl Popper) which had strongly influenced me earlier. My understanding about Gujarat and the JP movement for 'total revolution' was radically different from Kothari's views. He disagreed with my approach but never tried to influence me with his views. We learnt to accept our differences. Our intellectual and activist interests converged during the Lokayan phase, particularly with respect to the dalit and adivasi questions, reservation and also on various issues related to violation of human rights such as the Sikh killings in 1984, the rise of Hindutva, displacement of adivasis and other deprived groups by 'so-called' 'development' projects, environment degeneration and so on. All through our long association, notwithstanding our differences, he remained a close friend, guide and philosopher.

Ghanshyam Shah

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SITTING here in Vadodara and thinking of Rajni Kothari a couple of weeks after his passing away, thick memories of our Baroda days – intellectually eventful and life-celebrating – prevail over the grief I felt when I was given the news of his death. I would, however, like to postpone talking about Rajni's life in Vadodara to some other day and instead celebrate his work from the distance it allows me from Delhi and the CSDS.

First, it will be a serious mistake to view Rajni as an empiricist. Although he was firmly anchored in the empirical world of politics, his distinctive and lasting contribution has been to the political theory of democracy, not just of Indian democracy. All that he did as a public intellectual, a political dissenter, a unique institution builder, as a friend, philosopher and guide to civil society movements, a human rights activist – crystallized into robust, distinctive political-theoretical formulations. His was a demo-centred theory where the demos, while relating to and participating in politics, structure their aspirations and activities and in the process transform the nature of state-driven politics and challenge the pure normative and elitist thinking on

democracy. Rajni's deep insights into these processes led him to formulate a new, dynamic political theory of democracy. In this sense his contribution to democratic theory is both distinctive and likely to be long-lasting. More appropriately, he was a theorist of democratization. Political processes interested him more than personalities and events.

Second, he helped found a new kind of political sociology. His work, for example, focused on what caste, the Indian family system and, generally, Indian culture did to politics and Indian democracy. As a political sociologist, he did not view politics as a subsystem of society, but as an engine, a primary force of social and cultural change in India. Third, Rajni had a knack and ability not only to come up with bright new ideas in response to challenging academic and organizational situations but, more importantly, to creatively embody the idea that would lead to a new desired reality.

Fourth, he deeply respected the self-worth of every individual and had the ability to trust colleagues unconditionally, thereby bringing out the best in them. He was anti-hierarchical and anti-organizational, but far from being an anarchist.

Lastly, I regret I did not adequately play my role in CSDS in finding and mentoring one or two younger colleagues who would carry further Rajni Kothari's work on democratic theory and political sociology. I am particularly sad that I was not much of a companion to him in his final days.

D.L. Sheth

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Rajni Kothari will be remembered as a political scientist who gave us some of the most important insights into Indian politics in general, and Indian democracy in particular. Kothari was the celebrated author of the idea of the 'Congress system' and of that landmark book, *Politics in India*, written in the early years of the Indian Republic when there had been few serious attempts at understanding what exactly the thing called 'Indian democracy' was all about. In order to understand it, said Kothari, a far closer focus was required on institutional analysis and the role of elites than had been attempted till then. He saw the action of elites and the institutional forms built by them as crucial to an understanding of Indian democracy. In articulating this agenda, he observed: 'Politics is the great creative force in such a situation, not just a representative mechanism which responds to outside pressures and aggregates outside interests.'¹

This understanding of politics as a creative force, as something that looks beyond immediate questions of representation and interest aggregation, is central to Kothari's understanding and passion for politics. For politics here is fundamentally about transformation. It is the element that transforms society, especially a relatively 'traditional' society like India's, into a modern one. However, it does so on its own terms – not merely replicating what has already been done elsewhere. That is why

Kothari never lost sight of the specificity of every context.

Rajni Kothari's study of India's democracy and politics, therefore, begins with the recognition that this is a society where the 'arena of power is not limited to a ruling oligarchy or an aristocracy of birth' but where 'it is increasingly being spread to society as a whole by drawing new sections into its ambit.'² It is also a context that was, unlike many revolutionary experiments of the twentieth century, one that virtually disallowed politics from interfering with the process of development. 'In India, politics is neither suppressed nor confined to a small aristocracy', he claimed, for it 'provided the larger setting within which decision-making in regard to economic development and social change takes place.'³

These were the starting points for Kothari's study of Indian politics and Indian democracy in its specificity. Needless to say, there was behind these assumptions, a commitment to the larger project of nation-building of the Nehruvian political elite in particular. The need to specify what was distinctive about Indian democracy and why it represented such a major and creative attempt arose from a political commitment to that project. It could not have arisen, for instance, if Kothari had, like the communists, believed that India had not won true freedom (*yeh azadi jhoothi hai*, the communist slogan went). Nor could it have arisen if all Kothari expected was a re-enactment of the European story on Indian soil. For we know what such social science has led us to believe: Indian society in that reading was underdeveloped, its modernity incomplete and its democracy largely distorted. To see the participation of caste and community groups in this political process as a positive aspect of the creative side of politics, rather than as a 'lack' (of individuation, for instance), was one of the great merits of this undertaking. One should acknowledge, of course, that there were some western scholars too, who were pushing their investigations in a similar direction, though their impulse was perhaps quite different.

Interestingly, this was an aspect of Kothari's work that became the most celebrated and in a manner of speaking, political science fixed him permanently as the author of the 'Congress system' and *Politics in India*. Kothari's name became synonymous with a celebration of Indian politics and democracy. Within five years after the publication of *Politics in India*, however, came the Emergency, imposed by Indira Gandhi's Congress, as she faced serious charges of corrupt electoral practices and a mass movement in the form of the JP movement. No longer could a rosy picture of Indian democracy and politics be sustained. Rajni Kothari's institution, the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, became a hub of dissent during the Emergency. A serious re-evaluation of what was happening to Indian democracy was now in order.

The period immediately after the Emergency was certainly a period of hope when Kothari got involved with the forces that became the vehicle of Congress defeat. He adopted a more activist role. In his contribution in drafting *An Agenda for India*

and his involvement in the civil liberties and democratic rights movement, we can see Rajni become more and more critical of the anti-democratic tendencies within India's democracy. This is the period of his intellectual involvement also with social movements.

Kothari's politics was now taking an important turn where dissent rather than power, the popular rather than elite, movements rather than institutions, became increasingly important to him. A new methodological approach was also, therefore, called for – it was no longer enough to rely on surveys and collect data on electoral and political behaviour. It was necessary to actively engage and be in dialogue with activists and ordinary people as an important part of the business of knowledge production. The Lokayan experiment, initiated with his colleagues Dhirubhai L. Sheth and Ramashray Roy, focused therefore on dialogue as an important method in the business of understanding Indian politics.

Years later, Rajni was to look back at his own work with a critical eye and acknowledge in his *Memoirs* that his own view of Indian democracy and politics was no longer celebratory. He was to underline that the preoccupation with institutions and elites had led him to see Indian democracy and politics from a vantage point that was not touched sufficiently by the popular.

With this brief take on Rajni Kothari's intellectual trajectory, let me turn to my own personal engagement, intellectually speaking, with him.

I have always known Rajni Kothari from a distance – as the legendary founder and father-figure of the institution I work in, namely CSDS. I have heard him spoken of with awe and reverence by his peers and younger colleagues. My personal interactions with him have been brief. Yet, in a strange way, I found myself relating to Kothari as a kindred soul as far as understanding politics is concerned. And even now, I find it productive to think politics with him.

This is strange because, unlike many others who have had a long association with Rajni Kothari as a mentor, my first introduction to him was as an intellectual adversary of sorts. Not a personal intellectual adversary to be sure, for we were all too young then. I was a young and passionate left-wing activist back then in the early 1980s. We had lived through the exciting times that saw the end of the Emergency and the massive prestige acquired by the Left in those days. There was a distinct feel of radicalism in the air. Major advances of the Left in different parts of the country certainly lent credence to that belief.

And yet, it was also the time when a whole range of political movements that rejected the idea of Indian nationhood in its existing form, emerged on the scene. One can think of the Assam and Punjab/Khalistan movements as symptomatic of such movements. The Left in general had identified these movements as fissiparous and indeed, part of some larger

imperialist conspiracy. Alongside these was the emergence of a whole new series of grassroots movements, which too, despite their very left-leaning discourse, were viewed with great suspicion – all of them being lumped together as belonging to the universe of foreign-funded voluntary agencies. The dominant, mainstream Left, especially the two communist parties, increasingly saw themselves siding with the establishment and order, against a whole range of ‘divisive’ and ‘fissiparous’ forces. Analytically speaking, the Left had made no attempt at understanding the social movements that had already made a significant mark in terms of elaborating a critique of development. It rhetorically lumped all these together as part of some imperialist conspiracy: after all who but the imperialists would want India’s development to be held back?

It was at this time that Rajni Kothari and his colleagues at CSDS, started theorizing on what they referred to as the non-party political process. Kothari’s assertion that the non-party political process represented the exhaustion, not only of the political system but indeed, also of theory, was perhaps read by the ideologues on the Left as of a piece with the political developments mentioned above. My first introduction to Kothari was through second or third hand relays of this theory of the non-party political process, which we were told, was an intellectual justification of the new fissiparous tendencies evident in Indian politics.

In retrospect, it seems to me, the beginning of the 1980s already represented the beginning of the end of a certain kind of Left imagination. And Rajni Kothari had sensed this quite astutely. At the level of the political system, Kothari saw the inability of institutions like the Parliament, the party system, the Planning Commission and the executive to respond to popular aspirations as a sign of this exhaustion.

But his diagnosis did not end here. He went on to identify the *theoretical* exhaustion of existing frameworks as well. His essay on the ‘Non-Party Political Process’ in the *Economic and Political Weekly*, in early 1984, argued that the theoretical crisis was pervasive across the liberal, the social democratic and Marxist currents. None of them seem to have the wherewithal to guide us through this crisis any more.

More important from my point of view, in that early article on this new phenomenon, Rajni Kothari pointed out that against the backdrop of the crisis of the party system, a ‘new order’ was coming into being. He identified this ‘new order’ as one ‘manned by a class of professional managers and experts in the art of injecting corruption in the organized sectors of the economy and polity.’ It was a context, he further noted, where ‘revolutionary parties too have been contained and in part co-opted (as have most of the unions)...’ This observation strikes me as particularly significant in so far as it puts its finger on what I see as a strong tendency within the realm of formal politics – the tendency to excise politics from the formal domain of what is often called ‘the political’. In recent years

scholars like Timothy Mitchell have talked of the 'Rule of Experts' and philosophers like Jacques Ranciere have noted similar tendencies towards stratification and order within this domain. It is in the context of such a tendency that Rajni elaborated on the importance of the non-party political process, which he saw as redefining the idea of politics itself by widening its scope and bring into its ambit, matters not hitherto considered political.

I cannot resist citing here a particularly important passage from this essay. In this part he anticipates, to my mind, a critique that has now become quite significant in the wake of the anti-corruption movement and the recent victory of Aam Aadmi Party in Delhi. He identifies, very early on, a tendency of the formal electoral and parliamentary process to marginalize the popular. In that context, he understands the grassroots movements in the following terms:

'They are really to be seen as part of an attempt at *redefining politics at a time of massive attempts at narrowing its range*, different from electoral and legislative politics *which has relegated large sections of the people outside the process of power*, different also in respect of the basic conception of political activity as being not confined to capture of State power but seen as a comprehensive process of intervening in the historical process.'⁴

It is true that within a few years of writing this essay, electoral politics in India took a very different turn. With the rise of Dalit and OBC politics, following the Mandalite democratic revolution, the nature of the electoral and legislative process changed yet again. The popular and the subaltern invaded the heavily guarded *sanctum sanctorum* of the parliamentary system, so to speak. The nature of legislatures changed. Political scientists hailed this, to put it in Yogendra Yadav's words, as the 'second democratic upsurge' (the first being the expansion of the electoral base in the late 1960s). However, it soon became clear that despite this massive influx of the subaltern into the political process, nothing changed. It was business as usual. Political scientists have yet to address this aspect. However, this is where, it seems, Rajni Kothari's acute observation about the institution of the new order of experts or the technocracy becomes significant. For, coeval with the democratic upsurge was the advent of neoliberalism, which lent a heightened significance to this new order of experts. Virtually all important matters of policy and contestation were taken away from the purview of legislative decision making and placed in the hands of a new breed of experts and technocrats. The new revolutionaries too were co-opted into the system. Politics of the street was replaced, within a short time, by the shadow fights on television. The popular and the subaltern were virtually written out of politics even as the second democratic upsurge was being celebrated.

In a very interesting turn of events, politics has returned, challenging the new order of experts, in the period of the anti-corruption movement and the AAP. Politics has returned

through the intervention of a movement/ party that claimed to be anti-political. The task of understanding this moment remains. Rajni Kothari's work can help us take on this challenge intellectually.

Aditya Nigam

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1. Rajni Kothari, *Politics in India*. Orient Longman, 1970, p. 6.
2. Ibid., p. 9.
3. Ibid., p. 9.
4. Rajni Kothari, 'Non-Party Political Process', *Economic and Political Weekly* 19(5), February 1984, p. 219. Emphasis added.