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RAJNI KOTHARI

Enduring legacy

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S. Arneja Rajni Kothari, founder of the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies.

Rajni Kothari (1928-2015) and his team were the first to recognise the salience of caste, now a crucial political and secularised category. By RAJEEV BHARGAVA

Rajni Kothari, who passed away on January 19, was unusual in more ways than one. He belonged to the Left without being a Marxist or a communist. He was liberal and democratic, but not bourgeois. He was the outstanding political scientist of his generation but not empiricist or untheoretical. He helped found an institutional culture but was not a power-seeker and balked at founder-dependent institutions.

When Rajni returned from the London School of Economics (LSE) and joined the University of Baroda, he quickly realised that economics dominated all other disciplines, including the study of politics, and was itself hostage to abstract generalisations or model-centric approaches that lacked the organic, value-laden vision of classical economic thinkers such as Adam Smith, David Ricardo and Karl Marx. Moreover, the data used by economists were largely generated by the state rather than by independent researchers. Indian academia, therefore, needed a study of politics that was free of economic reductionism, empirical rather than purely speculative, and dependent on critically minded data-gatherers and interpreters within an independent research institution rather than guided by the normative vision of the state.

The Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS), founded by Rajni in 1963, began its life then with an earthy motivation to grasp the nuts and bolts of Indian politics —not as it was imagined in secluded conclaves of the mind or how it appeared to starry-eyed romantics but as an arena of decision-making enmeshed in power-conflicts and factional struggles.

Rajni's *Politics in India* was born amidst the hurly-burly of Congress-dominated Indian politics and so was the CSDS that formed its nurturing backdrop. Even so, the India it so scrupulously studied was aspiring to become a modern, Westernised society with a subcontinental flavour with all its beauty and ugliness. More precisely, beauty or rather modernist perfection was its telos and the many home-grown warts, the irritating speed-breakers preventing a smooth transition. The very idea of a developing society—occasionally an embarrassment to those now associated with it—carries the grain of this stadal (upward movement from a lower to a higher stage) consciousness. This mildly Western and slightly pro-Congress orientation was enough to put off the established Left—both socialist and Marxist. Rajni's own understanding of the prevailing situation was different, however. While his left-of-centre politics was considered too soft and liberal by most communists, he believed their real problem lay with the fiercely empirical orientation of his work. His methodology demanded an open, honest search for the views, perceptions, self-understandings and political choices of ordinary people—an approach that challenged the view that the aim of social science is to discover entities already postulated by vanguard theoreticians.

The steadfastness with which Rajni approached Indian political reality had already yielded the idea that India did not fit existing compartments of one-party, two-party and multiparty systems generated by Western political science. Slowly more insights followed, the most prominent among them being the resistance offered by “traditional” castes to modern processes and institutions. Both intensive fieldwork and surveys—Rajni found these empirical approaches not incompatible but as complementary—showed that though castes did not wither away as predicted by modernisation theorists or were not, as some Marxists thought, mere classes in disguise, they were not intransigent either. Just as their appropriation by the democratic process made democracy Indian, just so democracy made the relationship between castes more egalitarian and created conditions for the making of new caste formations. Caste, hitherto a

sociological concept associated with ritual and religion, now became a crucial political and secularised category. Can one today imagine any study of Indian politics without caste? It was Rajni and the scholarly team around him that first recognised its salience.

A more general theoretical idea was also one of its offshoots—several Indian traditions were slowly adapting to modernity and generating new, different modernities. Modernisation and Westernisation are not the same things. Ideas of multiple and alternative modernities, developed much later in academic discourse, could not have been possible without the significant intervention of Rajni's Centre—something that leading Western theorists of modernity such as Shmuel Eisenstadt and Charles Taylor acknowledged.

Surprisingly, the motto of the Centre then could not have been very different from the motto of the Enlightenment: have the courage to use your own understanding. An inability to rely on one's own understanding is a sign of self-incurred immaturity, self-incurred because it is lack of courage and resolution, not absence of ability, that keeps us in the throes of immaturity. In the early 1970s, Rajni's Centre began to shed this immaturity. Immanuel Kant is hardly a philosopher one associates with the Centre, but a very Kantian move this certainly was.

Perhaps this influence was mediated by a collective reading of the philosopher K.C. Bhattacharya's classic essay "Swaraj in Ideas". Bhattacharya spoke passionately about the woeful condition of cultural enslavement in which Indian elites were trapped the moment they allowed their own traditional cast of ideas and sentiments to be superseded without comparison or competition to a new cast representing a somewhat alien culture. To be sure, there is nothing wrong in embracing elements of another culture, no matter how different it is from one's own. The point is that neither Western modernity nor indigenous tradition must be blindly accepted or rejected. Instead, a decision must be taken after a full and open-eyed struggle has been allowed to develop between both. The mark of cultural subjection is to bypass this struggle and to succumb in abject surrender without a fight to one of these contending forces.

In the 1970s, the Centre, under the guidance of Rajni and his team, which included Ashis Nandy and Dhirubhai Sheth, developed the courage to say "no" to received wisdom and to revel in the struggle between different traditions of thought and practice. Western categories had possessed Indian intellect like a ghost. The Centre had now begun to exorcise this ghost and had considerably broadened and enriched the idea of intellectual autonomy.

The pursuit of intellectual inquiry alone could not have taken Rajni's Centre thus far. Undoubtedly, a significant impetus to this change came from the powerful mood of dissent sparked by the Emergency that forced many into a more open-eyed self-confrontation. As a result, the central aims of Rajni's Centre began to alter fundamentally, as did its relationship with socialists and independent Marxists.

Rajni himself felt that as the Centre became the hub of dissenting activities, many persons on the Left began to re-evaluate its role and significance. But mere dissent could not have been enough. Rajni's personal opposition to the Congress's authoritarian rule brought into sharp relief that he was not loyal to the Congress system or the party but to civil liberties and democratic values. The Emergency helped wiser people within the Left to see that these were as much their values as they were of the liberal-democratic centre or even the Right. It was this change of attitude that brought a reassessment of the CSDS.

Rajni, however, kept moving further to the Left, to more radical shades of politics. He realised that some insights in politics can be picked not just by being among political workers but becoming a political activist oneself. At least part of the fieldwork in politics is done by fully participating in politics. From the early 1980s, along with D.L. Sheth, Rajni's own involvement with grass-roots movements became steady, persistent and intense. Gradually, he began to distance himself from the Centre he had created, by first giving up its directorship, then altogether moving out to the Department of Political Science at the University in Delhi, and eventually thriving as an independent public intellectual, lending his experience and voice to several issues relating to the lives and livelihoods of ordinary people. The most significant among these was the massacre of Sikhs in Delhi on which, along with others, he wrote a report that named Congress politicians responsible for abetment and organisation.

During this period, his writings became less "academic and scholarly" but never lacked insights and political punch. He wrote with perspicacity on the deep crisis of the moderate state, that is, a state that protects freedom and delivers social justice, on the decline of democracy, and on how the Indian state itself turned against democracy. He wrote regularly in newspapers, making critical but constructive suggestions on how to improve the system to make it more people-oriented and warning against "the cult of personality and the politics of survival". Even in this more radical phase, his faith in the possibilities of Indian democracy, the value of civil liberties and the potential of transformative social movements never wavered.

Institutions in India often fail to retain the fundamental vision that first animated them. They begin to flounder with the departure of their founders. They neither die nor survive, but exist endlessly in limbo. Rajni's remarkable achievement was to make intellectual flourishing a part of institutional design.

He could do so because he knew that founders must make themselves dispensable not in the phase of institutional decline but when the institutions they set up are at their peak. For this and many other reasons, Rajni's political and institutional legacy will endure.

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