

Rajni Kothari Made History

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A personal tribute to one of the most influential theoreticians of the Indian political system.

On the death of Rajni Kothari on 19 January 2015 India lost one of the most influential and democratic intellectuals in its post-Independence history. As a theoretician of the Indian political system with a powerful formulation of the “Congress system”, Rajni Kothari shaped the discourse on Indian democracy and its modes of addressing social diversity and political interests. His critique of the authoritarian trends in India and the development model that alienated the poor and the marginalised groups laid down a major framework for search for alternatives in India and abroad.

Activist Intellectual

An activist intellectual, Kothari played a prominent role in the civil liberty movement and upheld the rights of the marginalised groups who were subjected to state repression and violence by powerful interest groups. His role as the President of the People’s Union for Civil Liberties (PUCL) will be remembered for the report on the anti-Sikh carnage in Delhi in 1984 which was jointly produced by the Peoples Union for Democratic Rights (PUDR) and PUCL. The report, *Who Are the Guilty?*, had daringly named several leaders of the ruling Congress Party who had led the attacking mobs. While defending civil liberties, Kothari led the PUCL to take up many issues of democratic rights which concerned the socio-economic and cultural rights of weaker sections of society. Rajni Kothari was one of the rare intellectuals to whom people’s movements throughout the country could look up for support and solidarity.

Rajni Kothari, the political scientist, meant a lot to two generations of teachers and researchers on politics in India who took his work as the reference point for their own academic pursuits. As the legendary institution-builder of the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS) where he gathered a brilliant team of social scientists, and as

a teacher and writer, he took the discipline of Political Science to a new height of serious theoretical engagement and political analysis. While much is known about his stewardship of the CSDS, I would like to recount some of my experiences to chronicle the unique political and intellectual dimensions of this democratic intellectual.

As a fresh lecturer in Political Science from Delhi College (now called Zakir Hussain College) I first met Rajni Kothari in the Institute of Political Theory and Behaviour – a six-week workshop – which he had organised under the auspices of the University Grants Commission in 1965 with support from the Asia Foundation. As a student and then a colleague of Randhir Singh I had already been drawn towards Marxist theory and method for my studies. So from day one I was a critic of the dominant behavioural method which was the subject of the lectures by Robert Dahl of Yale University, the main faculty member of this programme. That is where I started my interaction and the debates with Kothari. For the next half century Rajni and I remained close friends despite our ideological and political differences.

Alternative Thought

During 1967-68 Rajni was working on the book that became his trademark contribution, *Politics in India* at Stanford University while I was doing my PhD at the University of California, Berkeley. Then and later I took up *Politics in India* for sharp criticism for its structural-functional, political development perspective. I felt that this book rationalised the evolving capitalist, pluralist democracy that maintained multiple inequalities and domination in India rather than helped its democratic transformation. Later, he moved away considerably from that position and his equally influential writings after the Emergency (1975-77) presented a very different perspective. His books, *State against Democracy*, *Rethinking Development*, *On Humane Governance*, *Transformation and Survival*, and *Politics and People* contributed enormously to a critical and alternative thought process in India and the world.

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The failures of contemporary capitalism and communism to address the emerging human needs for freedom, equity and peace formed the template of his innovative thought that embodied a great deal of inspiration from Gandhi and MN Roy.

I had to wade through many awkward situations having to work with two sets of senior and powerful scholars battling against one another. China Studies don V P Dutt and the Jawaharlal Nehru University political scientist Rasheeduddin Khan thought that CSDS was a Central Intelligence Agency-funded pro-United States outfit. CSDS scholars were not only undaunted by such criticism, they returned the compliment in equally harsh terms calling their adversaries pro-Soviet. Randhir Singh who moved from JNU to Delhi University (DU) in 1972 was a little more tolerant.

At Delhi University

When Rajni Kothari joined the Delhi University's Department of Political Science in 1979 they became colleagues and, together with KP Karunakaran, we had a dream team of political scientists whose work has in many ways shaped the discipline in India. Rajni took everyone by surprise by resigning his professorship at Delhi University in 1983 after a short stint at teaching. In a memorable letter to me – I was the head of the political science department then – he mentioned that he was not able to do justice to his job (he had been chairperson of the Indian Council of Social Science Research and was later involved in policy-making for the Janata Dal) and that in a young country older people should make way for the young. (He was only 55 and I was 41. I had suddenly become head because Karunakaran had resigned and Rajni Kothari, the next in line, decline the headship!) Rajni left a deep mark on the Department of Political Science though he was only four years at the Delhi University. The research scholars he supervised were distinguished academics in India and abroad. What is more, he confided to me later that he had delayed his resignation till after the new revised Bachelor of Arts syllabus was passed by the Academic Council so

that he could stand by me in the whole process. The Political Science curriculum changes in DU started a countrywide process of revamping of the discipline by making it more grounded in the history and concrete problems of India and other non-western countries.

Unlike some of his colleagues Kothari was never offended by my critical views of his approach. After stressing the originality and far-reaching significance of his works in a review article in the *Contributions to Indian Sociology* (1990), and calling him a “democratic humanist” I described his ideas on “alternatives” as “capitalism’s permissible dissidence”. I also put the works of many other CSDS scholars under the same category. That never affected our personal relations. I did, however, make many of my Marxist friends angry because of my close interaction with Kothari and CSDS. In any case, my writings stressing intersectional analysis by relating class to caste, gender, ethnicity, nationality and religion were considered heresy by many Marxists while my Marxism was unacceptable to others. This may have made me somewhat distant from friends in CSDS, JNU, UGC and ICSSR from one regime to another, but a few like Rajni always allowed me the dignity which kept me going ahead with my academic initiatives.

When we launched the DCRC (Developing Countries Research Centre) in DU many friends in CSDS and elsewhere thought that it was the Marxist alternative to CSDS. But Kothari not only gave his full support for the endeavour to build creative theory from the historical experiences of the developing countries, but also actively took part in many of its programmes.

Support for China Studies

The China Studies community owed a special debt to Kothari who played a key role in bringing about the crucial transition of a seminar group to a research institute. In 1978 he invited the China Study Group to hold its discussions at the CSDS and locate its journal *China Report* in the centre giving full freedom to the members to shape the programme. This process led to the emergence of the Institute of Chinese Studies (ICS) as a

programme of CSDS. For Kothari, China Studies in India was a part of a necessary academic initiative to study non-western, developing societies to universalise the content and methods of social sciences.

Till the very end he was a staunch supporter of ICS's academic agenda of pursuing interdisciplinary research and policy studies on China as well as comparative India-China Studies. As a great well-wisher of the China group, Kothari was a happy witness to the christening of ICS in 2010 as a full-fledged, independent institute performing an increasingly significant role in the development of China Studies in India.

'Making History'

An essay I wrote titled “The Political Essence of Progress” (1973) wherein I critiqued Rajni Kothari and Samuel Huntington for reducing the notion of politics to the narrow limits of institutional functioning put our lines of thought on different tracks. I remember a post-dinner conversation at the Rajasthan University Guest House in Jaipur where he gulped a peg of whisky and threw the glass on the floor loudly protesting this charge. He was already moving into his alternative phase of grass-roots democracy and “non-party political formations” theorising and supporting people's movements on the ground.

“We have studied history, now the time has come to make history”, Rajni said in a conversation with some of us during the JP movement in 1974. Indeed, he has made history and history will keep remembering him as we continue to discover what democracy is all about.

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