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Rajni Kothari, renowned political scientist, dies

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Few intellectuals in India have been as admired and revered as Kothari.

NEW DELHI: Rajni Kothari, a political scientist of commanding stature who relentlessly interrogated caste, and a tireless defender of civil liberties, passed away at his residence around 9.45 am on Monday. He was 86.

Kothari was suffering from urinary tract infection. A family member said he was unwell for the last two years and died of age-related ailments.

Few intellectuals in India have been as admired and revered as Kothari. Foremost academics home and away posted their tributes on social media. Psephologist and former colleague Yogendra Yadav described him as "the first theorist of Indian democracy, the most outstanding political scientist India has yet produced" and "a friend philosopher and guide of peoples' movements."

Prof Ashutosh Varshney, who teaches international studies and social sciences at Brown University, called him a "great political scientist", a "lifelong fighter for democratic rights" who "inspired a generation of academics and activists."

For Pratap Bhanu Mehta, Kothari was "a defender of democracy against state, empirical over abstract, politics against its critics, and distinctive Indian modernity." Back in 2012, "Mehta had written in a newspaper that "for decades, the empirical study of Indian politics was a series of footnotes to Rajni Kothari."

An institution builder, Kothari founded the Centre for Study of Developing Societies (1963), a research institute which did pioneering work in the field of caste, identity and politics. He was also one of the first presidents of People's Union for Civil Liberties and a former Planning Commission member.

In an article in The Hindu last October, Shiv Visvanathan wrote, "Rajni brought his sense of Gujarati entrepreneurship to ideas. He triggered election studies inviting political scientists like Myron Wiener, Robert Dahl and Karl Deutsch to India... He introduced a voluntary group called Lokayan which became a site for a range of grass-root imaginations...Rajni helped seed PUCL to create a tradition of on-the-spot investigations to investigate the violence of the state. PUCL-PUDR (People's Union for Democratic Rights) produced the classic report on the 1984 riots "Who are the guilty?"

Kothari's grand magisterial work was Politics in India. No serious student of political science, home or abroad, could afford to skip it.

"The crucial insight of this work was that there was neither an easy translation of West-centred categories in the Indian social and political setting nor was a useful link available between methodologies and the reality that they were meant to understand and explain," states the CSDS website.

Kothari's other books include 'Caste in Indian Politics', 'Rethinking Development: In Search of Humane Alternatives', 'State against Democracy: In Search of Humane Governance', and 'Rethinking Democracy'.

Praveen Rai, academic secretary, CSDS called Kothari's death a "passing of an era". "He lived with his sons, as his wife had died earlier. We are all saddened by this tragic loss," he said. "He was a pioneer in bringing to India the concept of scientific analysis to election data," Rai said.

He was also "one of the original three members" of the team that laid down the outlines for establishing the Jawaharlal Nehru University, he added.

The only son of a well-to-do Jain trader, Kothari came into prominence after he wrote a number of essays in the Economic and Political Weekly in the 1960s. He started his professional career as a lecturer at the Maharaja Sayajirao University in Baroda.

Union Minister Venkaiah Naidu condoled Kothari's death. "Feeling saddened on passing away of Rajni Kothari, an eminent political scientist, academician (sic) and writer. May the departed soul rest in peace," he said.

(With PTI inputs)

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