

Rajni Kothari, doyen of Indian political science, dies

Prashant Jha, [Hindustan Times](#), New Delhi

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Political scientist and former Planning Commission member Rajni Kothari died the age of 85. (Jeetendra Sharma/HT File Photo)

Rajni Kothari – considered the doyen of Indian political science, founder of the reputed research institute Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, author of multiple books, and a leading civil liberties activist – passed away on Monday. He was 85.

Kothari, who started out at the Baroda University, published seminal essays in the Economic and Political Weekly on the form and substance of Indian politics in the early 60s. He was to later use an Asia Foundation grant to set up the CSDS where he brought together some of the finest scholars in India to produce pioneering social science research.

Kothari's own initial contribution lay in seminal books like Politics in India, where he formulated the notion of a 'Congress system' – with the party as a grand umbrella coalition of interests – and politicization of caste.

Aditya Nigam, CSDS professor, told HT that he saw Kothari's contribution at two levels. "One was of course as an intellectual and political scientist. When he started out, he was interested in themes like nation building and Congress party. Then he worked on the changing nature of caste and how it became a part of democratic politics." Nigam feels Kothari was one of the first scholars to sense this role of caste. "There was then a break with Congress during the emergency, when he and CSDS took a strong oppositional stance. He got involved with civil liberties and people's movements and in the 80s, this engagement with non party political processes deepened." In this phase, Kothari's academic writings became more political.

At the second level, Kothari was an institution builder. "Very few institutions have lasted well beyond the first generation – and CSDS has not only lasted but flourished and there has been a remarkably smooth transition from the old to new," says Nigam. Kothari was open to the centre's expansion into newer research areas. It works both on theory as well as strong empirical programmes like Lokniti, which has done the most comprehensive work on Indian elections.

Yogendra Yadav, a CSDS scholar who is currently a leader of the Aam Aadmi Party, tweeted that Kothari was the 'first theorist of Indian democracy' and the 'most outstanding political scientist' India has yet produced. "They rightly say everything on our country's politics is no more than footnotes to Kothari's magnum opus Politics in India."