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## Rajni Kothari, the political scientist of India



Rajni Kothari. (Source: Illustrated by C R Sasikumar)

Written by [Yogendra Yadav](#) | Posted: January 20, 2015 12:00 am | Updated: January 20, 2015 4:39 am

Where did he teach you? I mean in school or college, or where?" The question came from my son, curious about this old gentleman we would meet at the gate of our housing complex. I had told him that I touched his feet because he was my teacher. His question was a natural follow-up.

My mind wandered to my undergraduate days. I had found an untouched Hindi translation of Rajni Kothari's book, *Politics in India*, in the library of my college, Khalsa College, Sri Ganganagar. Despite its tough prose, made worse by a heavy Sanskritic translation, the book was a breath of fresh air. I didn't quite understand the complex argument. But somehow, the book taught me to think about politics in a radically new way. It also made me decide to study politics.

Kothari was not a favourite author for my Marxist teachers at the Jawaharlal Nehru University. But they encouraged us to study him so as to critique his "liberal bourgeois" reading of Indian politics. So I reread his book, this time the English original. I appreciated him better now and was convinced that his reading of Indian politics was far more illuminating than the crude Marxist reading that we learnt in classrooms. I never got to meet him or communicate with him at that stage of my life. But I read everything he wrote and fancied myself as an Eklavya who learnt from his guru in his absence.

As I look back at all that I have learnt from his books, what stands out for me is his intellectual and cultural self-confidence. He resisted two tendencies prevalent among students of Indian democracy prior to him. He refused to treat Indian politics as a re-enactment of the script written by Western democracies. At the same time, he debunked the idea that the democratic experiment in India was culturally unique. He made it possible to think of India as yet another “normal” democracy, distinctly modern and specifically Indian at the same time. I have learnt that it is easier to acknowledge this agenda than practise it. Theorising Indian democracy in these terms is still an unfinished intellectual agenda for our times.

Unlike most academics, Kothari evolved with the times and had the courage to change his formulation, and even position. Politics in India was an instant classic when it was published in 1970, when he was barely 40 years old. Kothari then expanded his horizons to think about the globe and joined a group of thinkers in reimagining the future of the world order. This led to the journal *Alternatives*. Then came the Emergency, which shook the democrat in Kothari.

He had the courage to revisit his formulations and chart out fresh directions for his intellectual pursuits. His writings thereafter, especially *State Against Democracy*, were a critique of the Indian state. His search for alternatives now took him towards the people’s movements that operated outside mainstream politics. He brought together many leading Indian intellectuals to formulate an agenda for India. He was more sympathetic now to the critique of the very idea of development. By the mid-1980s, Kothari had anticipated most of the key ideas that continue to dominate our democratic imagination today.

In this phase, Kothari was a public intellectual, not just an academic. He never made a sharp distinction between academic and popular writing. Many of his well-known articles appeared in *Seminar*. He wrote regularly for newspapers as well. His emphasis on a new brand of non-party politics led him to a unique research-cum-action project, *Lokayan*. Along with Dhirubhai Sheth and Vijay Pratap, he discovered and taught to my generation a new vocabulary to make sense of this new form of politics.

His intellectual engagement with movements often led him to direct activism. He had helped organise resistance to the Emergency outside India. It is well known that he was among the writers of the manifesto for the Janata Party in 1977. He was among the founders of the People’s Union for Civil Liberties (PUCL) and went on to become its president. In the aftermath of the anti-Sikh massacre in 1984, he was among the authors of the path-breaking report, “Who are the guilty?”, which dared to name some of the guilty Congressmen. Kothari was a friend, philosopher and guide to all people’s movements. I was involved with many of these — *Samata Sangathan*, *Samajwadi Jan Parishad* and *National Alliance for People’s Movements*. My colleagues there were not very fond of Kothari or *Lokayan*, but I found his frame to be very helpful in making sense of this new and exciting political practice. Above all, I learnt from him that the boundary between academic and popular writing, between intellectual and political work, is not watertight.

My limited direct learning from Kothari began after I joined the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS) in 1993. This institution was founded by Kothari in 1963 — when he was just 33 years old — and was known as “Kothari’s Centre”. After joining the CSDS, I

came to appreciate Kothari's approach to institution-building. He gathered a group of exceptionally talented social scientists and turned the place into a school of thought. Legend has it that he recruited a faculty member who demanded a higher salary than Kothari himself. Unlike most Indian institution builders, he stepped aside from the leadership of his own institution when he turned 50. That is one of the key reasons why the CSDS made a generational transition and is still a leading intellectual centre after completing its golden jubilee.

My mind went through all this as I turned to my son and said: "He was the teacher who never taught me." Somehow, he understood.

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