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## Political scientist of India

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

Written by **Suhas Palshikar** | Posted: January 20, 2015 12:00 am | Updated: January 20, 2015 12:05 am

It is not often that an academician has potentially something to offer for well over half a century. In the realm of political analysis, longevity is even rarer. It will therefore be a fitting tribute to Rajni Kothari if we note how his rather forgotten but oft-quoted political analysis resonates with our contemporary political moment — and how, by taking it forward, the enterprise called Indian politics could be better grasped.

Since last May, not a week goes by without reports about the resolve or lethargy of the Congress party to rise from the debris of its defeat. Analyses of the 2014 election were also marked by jubilation over the demise of caste — making way for “development-oriented” politics. Ever since the BJP rose to prominence in that election, the discipline of political science has been struggling to make sense of the development. Is Kothari’s

political science helpful in resolving these puzzles?

Not that he explicitly answers all these puzzles. Some emerged only after Kothari ceased to be intellectually active due to age and illness; some failed to attract him since he chose to move away from analysing politics to critiquing it. And yet, if there was one Indian political scientist with some insight to offer on the contemporary political predicament, it was Kothari.



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In a discipline short on theorisation and bold conceptualisation, this must be regarded as a Herculean contribution. And if India's political science is still famished for analytical frameworks, it only shows the weakness of receptivity and creativity in the discipline.

Kothari is associated with the coinage of the term "Congress system". Sure, he was talking of the Congress of the 1960s, but that analysis still throws light on the "un-Congress"-like politics that the Congress party steadfastly conducted for more than four decades thereafter. In one sense, that analysis implicitly posited that there is a model and a deviation, or an idea and the practice. (Kothari was critical enough of the practice to invite the wrath of the government, but he remained convinced about much of what constituted the idea called "Congress".)

In the more than half-century since the formulation of the "Congress system" came into being, it is waiting to be decoded at the disaggregated level. We do not have accounts of how the Congress system evolved and dissolved in different states. For instance, what was the Congress system like in, say, West Bengal, and how that was different from Uttar Pradesh. If we had such accounts, we would have been in a better position to understand the demise of the party. Soon after Kothari's *Politics in India* (1970) appeared, he moved on to become a critic of the new Congress that had emerged, and also a critic of the prevailing democratic theory. As important as this role was, the analysis of Indian politics lost a political scientist who had the capacity and inclination to engage with real-world political processes. With Kothari departing for a different zone of intellectual pursuit, political science in India conveniently forgot his analysis by iconising rather than expanding it.

The same thing happened in the case of Kothari's analysis of the interaction between caste and politics. Here, Kothari refused to be cowed by the then dominant modernist tendency of looking upon caste, religion and the like as "pre-modern" factors, hindering modern, secular, democratic politics. Instead, he draws attention to the dynamic interaction between caste and politics, whereby caste becomes a political resource and, in the process, loses its traditional nature. The caste that we encounter in politics is thus different from caste as a hierarchy-based social formation that divides. It becomes a formation capable of uniting as much as dividing; and as post-Mandal developments have shown, of redefining itself.

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Thus understood, caste does not become a hurdle in the process of democratisation. Instead, it becomes a factor — like many others — shaping the nature of democracy and political competition. In the process, caste also does not remain a permanent and assured explanatory factor of politics. Those who were surprised by the rise of caste-based politics in the 1990s and, again, those surprised by the decline in the salience of caste since 2009, have a lot to learn from the way castes entrench themselves through electoral competition and the political economy of the region in which they operate.

In his formulation of the Congress system, Kothari does not go to the state level; he confines himself to the grand narrative of the “all-India”. But in dealing with caste, he and his collaborators focus on the states. That focus helps explain region-specific expressions of entrenchment and possible frictions, as they existed in the late-1960s. The 1970 study of “Caste in Indian politics” thus frames the agenda for further study and it has been waiting to be revisited for over four decades now.

Since the BJP rode to power in 2014, we have been preoccupied with the question of whether this was a one-time stroke of luck coinciding with the rise of a new plebiscitary leader. In his famous formulation of the Congress system, Kothari presciently says: “..the question remains whether the new party... provides us with another consensus or is an expression of accumulated protest... which is likely to wither away after a short time in office.” This summary observation encompasses the possibility of analysis of the post-Congress polity since 1989. As Kothari suggests, that phase went through short-term eruptions of public disappointments. Have we finally reached a “new consensus”? That would be the single-most important intellectual agenda for political scientists for the coming decade in understanding the final collapse of the Congress.

But above all, Kothari’s analysis of Indian politics will be remembered for its deep engagement with democracy. This is evident in both his pre-1975 scholarship and his post-1980 introspections. What is common to both is a firm belief not only in something fuzzy called democracy, but also in our capacity as a society to chart a democratic path, as well as his confidence that India (or any other “new democracy”) does not have to adopt the received models of democracy because, just as American — or any other Western — democracy, with all its idiosyncrasies, is an instance of democracy, India’s democracy can also have its own trajectory, with all its deficits and faults.

It was with this confidence that Kothari dealt with the Congress system, not as an aberration but just another way of doing politics — and hence, “an interesting addition to the present typology of party systems”. This confidence was not about his formulation, but about India’s democratic politics being another normal way of conducting politics, rather than a queer animal in the zoo. Apart from the creativity of his conceptual formulations, this understated assertion about different expressions of democratic politics sets Kothari apart as India’s political scientist par excellence.

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