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[Home](#) > [India](#) > A dissenter and social sciences superstar

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By *editor*

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Rajni Kothari, who passed away at the age of 86 on Monday at the end of a creative, productive, and eventful life, can be said to be the first superstar of the social sciences in India.

It is open to question if the remarkable political theorist's positing of the "Congress system" (as distinct from the Congress being a mere political party), which he believed would have a longish life (or shelf-life), has run out of steam rather sooner than he may have thought.

But the intellectual, whose powers of conceptualisation and description were noted among peers internationally, might not have been far off the mark in thinking that parties operating outside the Congress — not excluding the BJP, now in power — might continue to advance elements of the ideological, political, and even policy aims that have their origins in the Congress.

This remains presciently true when the Congress has become a pale shadow of its earlier self whose grand physical, structural and ideological presence had so struck Kothari.

This leading figure of our intellectual pantheon was a dissenter, a democrat and organisation-builder, all at once. He established not just the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS), a notable centre of study and reflection on contemporary intellectual mores, in Delhi more than forty years ago, he also set up Lokayan, an institution where grassroots workers and activists could interface with intellectual enterprise.

Kothari negotiated with the Congress government on behalf of Gujarat's Navnirman movement, the leftward push in Gujarat for the protection of the rights of students and poor people in the face of escalating prices that moved on to wider questions of

democracy leading to the imposition of the Emergency. He was subsequently enamoured of Jayaprakash Narayan and the Janata Party. But he retreated to his intellectual self, and one of democratic dissent, not long after.

In a 1997 article, commenting on fifty years of Indian independence, Kothari perhaps sought to modify his celebrated “Congress system” analysis. In it had been proposed, in essence, that apart from being a presence in every part of the country, the Congress was a broad church that had many streams of dissent and criticism residing right inside it.

Thus, in spite of the one-party dominance of the political space that the Congress represented, it could hardly be equated to one-party system models seen elsewhere in the world.

But the general election of 1996 led the renowned political scientist to think of other ideas. He seemed intellectually excited that the poll result had not given any party a majority, and that parties predominant in the states had come to influence the politics at the Centre, and of course the Parliament.

He wrote of the rise of dalit politics and their representatives- in general, the emergence of “counter-forces” (including parties of the minorities) to the earlier kind of rule seeking stability at the behest of the Congress, which professed democracy and plurality, but whose leaders (including Jawaharlal and other “founding fathers” of the nation) had not institutionalised the ideology of egalitarianism.

Quite remarkably, though, Kothari was not succinct on the question of what are known as the Naxalites, whose activities embrace some 40 per cent of the physical territory of India.

Nor might he have thought, in spite of him noting the communalisation of politics, notably in Gujarat, that the BJP would romp home to a singular victory in the Lok Sabha election of 2014. His passing, nevertheless, reminds us of a remarkable mind and a remarkable life.

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