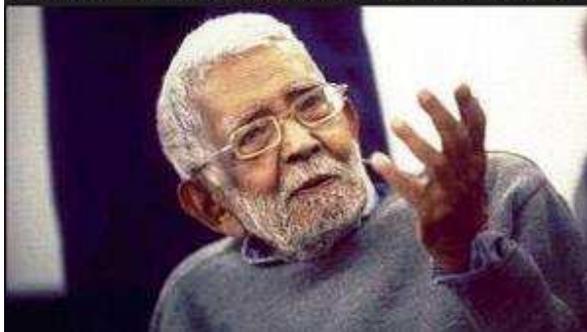


A man both paradigm and exemplar for two generations

By Shiv Visvanathan, Mumbai Mirror | Jan 21, 2015, 12.00 AM IST

RAJNI KOTHARI: 1928-2015



If democracy needed an intellectual ombudsman and an individual obsessed with it and vigilant about it, it was the political scientist Rajni Kothari. When he died on Monday, one realised the world he had built had died before him. Kothari created a world where political science was inventive about human rights, grassroots movements, marginal groups; a domain where people had voice and the political scholar was the storyteller. Today political science is a world controlled by think tanks and policy experts who act as servants of power. Kothari created a space which was ever critical of power. He needs an assessment which goes beyond hagiography and hostility and provides a deepened ethnography of the ways in which he invented political science to help solve the imagination of democracy.

In the 60s Kothari was the defender of the Nehruvian imagination and its possibilities. He saw in the Congress Party a microcosm of the diversities of India and a recreation of its quarrelsome unity. The Congress Party he claimed was the one party dominance that captured the diversity of India. His book *Politics of India* articulated this thesis. The irony was that it remains a classic even as Kothari spent two decades questioning its assumptions.

The Emergency transformed the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS) and Kothari (who founded it) - from an institute that looked at mechanics of politics, the Centre began studying people, dynamics of democracy and its future. If politics in India captured the romance of the Nehruvian state and Congress party, Kothari's later work was a brilliant foray into the creative possibilities of civil society, social movements and constant need to reinvent democracy and revitalise citizenship. The genius of the man lay in his ability to question his own work. In fact, he produced two classic texts on Indian politics: one a study of Congress in the

Nehruvian era and the other, a critique of the Emergency and the rise of civil society in the post-Nehruvian period. In that sense, he was both exemplar and paradigm for two generations.

One could get a sense of Kothari's work in the theories that office staff churned out over tea next morning. For them, typing his ideas was not a chore but a privilege. Few know that when CSDS decided to resist the Emergency, the decision was taken by the entire staff.

Kothari and his close colleagues had to the confidence and the humility to realise that people's movements were theorising far beyond the academic boundaries of political science. In fact the text book idea of political science was ripped open during the Emergency and Kothari and company became chroniclers of this new spirit of innovation. The brilliance, the innovation of Kothari was to tie together the various forms of dissent. He connected human rights to nature by showing development destroyed environment. He showed that new patterns of state violence were creating perpetual emergencies in India by linking dissent in feminism, ecology, and development he created an alternative way of looking at democracy.

What made this even more powerful and attractive was the way Kothari linked Indian democracy to South Asian politics and wider global battles for peace. He felt that the story of democracy had to be retold five times - locally, nationally, regionally, internationally and in terms of a planetary imagination. Kothari was open to the churning in Nepal, Sri Lanka and Pakistan, arguing that India must be concerned with them. He participated in future studies knowing full well that it was a pretext for dissenting imaginations of Eastern Europe to visit the West. No political scientist here or abroad managed to connect such a variety of issues, battles and controversies. Underlying it all was his great passion for democracy. The CSDS in that sense was an invention built around remarkable friendships here and abroad. When the list becomes a who's who of democratic imaginations one thinks of Mary Kaldor, Ali Mazrui, Neelan Tiruchelvam, Vaclav Havel and Susanta Goonatilake, all of whom tried to create a cosmopolitanism of dissent from dialects of local struggles.

Today, political science is more spoiled, text bookish about dissent, nostalgic about movements, and politically correct. It thinks post-modernism is an answer to the demands of critique. Kothari would have watched this wryly, realising how the subject has lost its way. His silence conveyed his distance from emerging trends. Yet as the Arab Spring and AAP emerged he must have been content realising that he helped create this world.

One realises one could build a monument to this man, yet the only tribute he deserves is a constant inventiveness about democracy he so treasured. He was in that sense a perpetual futurist and it's the future that will recognise the wonderful genius of this man.

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