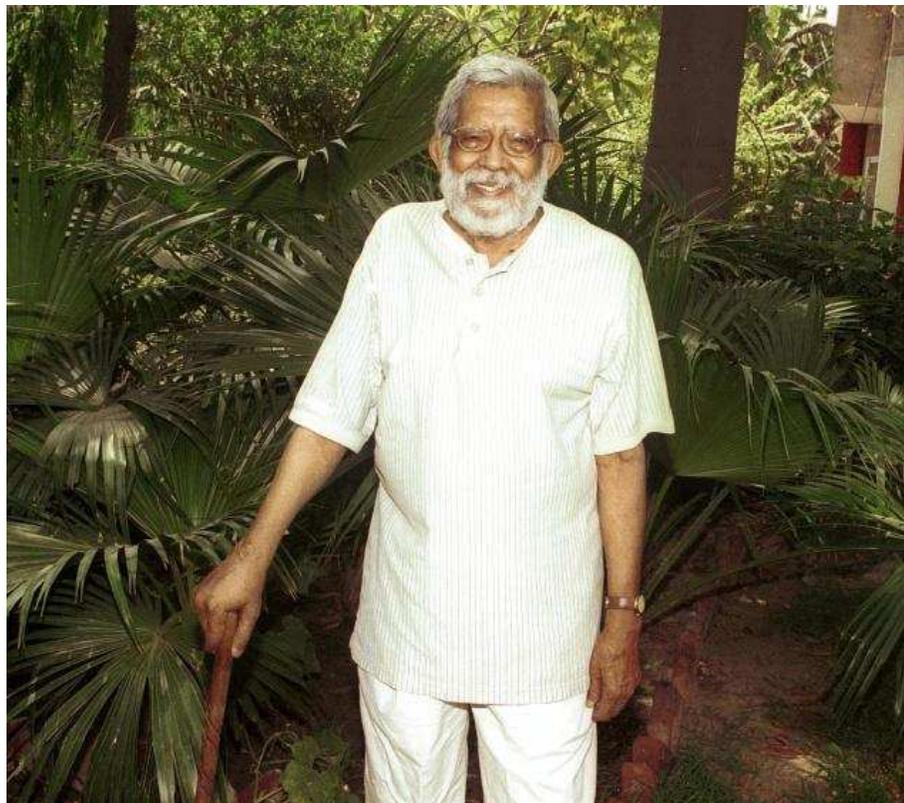


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A prophet abandoned by his own community

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FUTURIST: "Rajni Kothari had an acute sense of the inventive and followed it up creatively." File Photo: S. Arneja

A tribute to political scientist extraordinaire and teacher, Rajni Kothari (1928 – 2015)

How does one talk of a man who defined a subject, determined its directions, was its dominating presence without a shade of pomposity or status. Rajni Kothari was clear about some of the subjects of his studies, irreverently and pragmatically certain that the Indian elite was knowledge-proof, that the only changes it would accept were pressures from below or by mimicking its colonial masters. Here was a man far ahead of his times, a futurist in perspective.

Today the tributes will flow and embalm the man. Dissenting imaginations are best sanitised lest they destroy the hypocrisy and the current clichés of the establishment. The obituaries will recite how he started election studies, how he set up the institute of Chinese Studies, founded journals like the *Alternatives* and the *Lokayan Bulletin*. They will dub him the author of Indian Political Science's only durable classic — *Politics in India*. Oddly, Kothari was embarrassed by the longevity of the book and even tried to stall further publications but the book like many of Rajni's inventions had a wonderful life of its own.

To me it was not just the inventiveness of the man that is important. It was the vision he brought to his work. Rajni's enduring passion was his commitment to democracy, its sustainability, its creativity and its vulnerability. The sense of democracy was not an abstract one of formal definitions. He saw democracy as a way of life and wanted people to live it out and celebrate its everydayness.

As founder of CSDS

This is what impelled him to create that wonderful institution the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS). CSDS was a community, a perpetual adda built around the gossip of democracy. Without this passion for democracy his many projects would have made little sense. They were mere pretexts for sustaining the texts of democracy which in a holistic sense went beyond elections, data analysis, governance and grassroots studies.

“Rajni’s enduring passion was his commitment to democracy, its sustainability, its creativity and its vulnerability”

Two things must be stated clearly, CSDS was a collage of friendships and Rajni invented many of his ideas along with his friends. He had an acute sense of the inventive and followed it up creatively. In that sense the idea often originally belonged to the others. Rajni's idea of the Congress as a coalition of competing confusions was Gopal Krishna's. The idea of Lokayan as a grass roots experiment belonged more to Ramashray Roy and D.L. Sheth. Rajni took it and transformed it.

As a commons of ideas, CSDS was extraordinary. For me, CSDS is that wonderful pack of quirky incorrigible scholars like Ashis Nandy, Basheer Ahmed, Sudhir Kakkar, Giri Deshingkar quarrelling over ideas at every lunch as if democracy was a hypothesis that had to be digested every day. No group had a greater passion for politics, its myths, its facts and its folklore.

The style, the theory, was as important as the substance. Neither CSDS nor Rajni will rest in peace if I do not resort to a few anecdotes.

I remember how he recruited me. Rajni was chairman of ICSSR and he had heard rumours about me as a rebellious and even problematic PhD student at the Delhi School of Economics. He dropped in one day for a casual chat and asked me to join CSDS. Some of my teachers warned him against it. And one of them even complained that I was a

goonda, a gangster. Rajni smiled and said, “I need a few intellectual gangsters for my new project.” He had an easy charm that soothed opponents and part of it came from his acute ability to listen. If you insulted him, he listened intently almost as if you were wooing him.

Role during the Emergency

CSDS and Rajni became institutional legends during the Emergency. It was during that monstrous period that Centre became home for every dissenting imagination: George Fernandes, Romesh Thapar, Arun Shourie and Kuldeep Nayar were frequent visitors. This hospitality to dissent seeded the creative style of the future where the Centre became home to critical studies, social movements and the search for alternative imaginations. The Centre, which glorified the Nehruvian era and the initial creativity of the Congress, now became Indira Gandhi’s fiercest and most obsessive critic. It became the hub of human rights movements, environmental struggles, and development battles that insisted that democracy had to reinvent itself beyond its electoral form. Civil society became the creative subject of study: a counter to the elitist preoccupation with the state and its development project.

The Left was the dominant intellectual imagination of the period. Rajni had no quarrel with the left, only with leftists who romanced with the state, infiltrating government committees as if they were party cells. Oddly, both the Left and the Right were obsessed with being legitimised by the state. During the infamous controversy involving History text books when ideologists went hysterical, Rajni observed quietly: “That both sides wanted the state to approve of their version of history”. This intellectual dependency on state approval of scholarship worried Rajni. Did truth need to be approved by power?

Rajni had a playful response to criticism. I remember when a Serbic Marxist wrote a critique of his work claiming that Kothari had forgotten to mention the word class. With easy equanimity Rajni replied that he had not mentioned cucumbers either. This ease was important because the period of the 1960s and the 1970s was dominated by a pompous left which treated Marxism with a form of idolatry. Rajni felt that Marxist critiques dealt more with the formal economy and had little place for marginal groups and the informal economy. Little protests did not acquire the officialdom of trade union struggles. The movements alone in the era, Chipko, Narmada, Balliapal and fishermen struggle in Kerala had to struggle with the official radicalism which refused to go beyond conventional categories. CSDS became an archive and a sounding board for many of these struggles which linked ecology, livelihood and empowerment to the still life of electoral democracy. Rajni had an easy way of pushing younger colleagues to stretch beyond themselves. I remember when the Bhopal gas disaster occurred. He looked at me and said, “Let’s see if your work on science helps. Pack up. You are leaving for Bhopal tomorrow.” When I began my work on science and violence, he sent me to Hiroshima requesting the Mayor to take me around the city. He believed that projects should begin as pilgrimages; he was always nudging us to see linkages and connectivities. He never lectured, and wanted us to discover and internalise and share our insights. For him mistakes were something precious one owned up to. He was a great teacher but always taught by anecdote and example.

I must confess that in the final decade, many of us moved away from the Centre and Rajni. Quarrels are important because they mark the contours of a relationship. One felt that the Centre was now imitating itself rather than inventing ideas. In spite of having moved on and all the distance I realised how much the Centre had taught me.

In his final years, Rajni Kothari was a lonely man — ill and broken by the death of his wife Hansa and son Smithu. In the meanwhile, political science had lost its flavour of dissent. It had become a game of think tanks and Rajni must have watched it with wry sadness, a prophet abandoned by his own community. But the future will no doubt celebrate the man.

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