

## Challenges of Rajni Kothari's legacy

The best tribute to Kothari would be finding a model of growth that asks no one to pay the price for progress



Photo: Hindustan Times

**Rajni Kothari**, the renowned political scientist who passed away on 19 January, is being hailed as a public intellectual who made a mark on the world stage. Yet his defining achievement was that he was equally if not better known at the grassroots of Indian political life, among those struggling to deepen and widen democracy.

Kothari's life and work demonstrated the creative potential for intellectuals, activists and people from diverse domains to collaborate in building democracy from the ground up. This is poignantly ironic at a time when the mainstream of business and politics sees much of India's activist community as being at odds with the goal of exponential economic growth.

From the late 1970s Kothari *saheb*, as he was fondly known, kept in close touch with a wide array of village level social and political activists across India. In 1980, along with D.L. Sheth and other colleagues at the Centre for Study of Developing Societies (CSDS), Kothari launched an initiative called Lokayan, Dialogue of the People.

Over the next 10 years Lokayan became a platform through which grassroots activists and scholars learnt from each other. Enabling and leading this two-way learning is the enduring legacy of Kothari and his colleagues—Sheth, Ashis Nandy and the late Giri Deshingkar. Kothari's greatest achievement as founder of CSDS was in nurturing this dynamic team of peers who together built up a think-and-do tank that engaged with political practitioners with as much gusto as it gave to pure intellectual enquiry.

Through the 1980s Lokayan served as a platform for multi-dimensional dialogues and writings on what came to be known as the non-party political process. It thus brought together a wide range of people, from welfare-delivering non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to radical people's movements protesting the destructive impacts of development and demanding instead an alternative development.

In 1985, Lokayan was awarded the Right Livelihood Award, often known as the alternative Nobel Prize. The citation stated that Lokayan was being honoured for its role in the "consolidation of democracy, for exploring the possibilities and principles of coherence within the explosion of democratic assertions, for equity and people's control over natural resources, women's empowerment, cultural plurality, health and well-being for all".

The articulation of this critique in India became part of a growing global discontent with the limits and dangers of development as it had been defined by the Western world. Voices of the kind that the Lokayan platform highlighted lent weight to this global discourse and indirectly informed the path breaking World Commission on Environment and Development, better known as the Brundtland Commission. This in turn led to sustainable development being declared a universal goal at the UN Earth Summit in Rio in 1992.

Global academia will remember Kothari for his theoretical insights about the early stages of Indian democracy and the role of caste. His book *Politics in India*, first published in 1970, remains a classic.

But in many small towns and villages of India, Kothari will be remembered as a scholar who helped them to do more than just question why they were being left out of development. He went further and amplified perspectives about attaining well-being that did not conform to the model of development that had dominated since Independence—centralized planning deploying big dams and other mega-projects that concentrated economic power while also displacing millions of people without adequate relief or rehabilitation.

Both intellectually and as an activist with an ear on the ground Kothari's work is a mission that will need nurturing for a long time to come.

As the CSDS website says, Kothari's crucial insight was that there is no easy translation of West-centred categories in the Indian social and political setting nor can those categories be applied to fully understand and explain our complex reality. The work of crafting categories that are not entirely euro-centric has gathered momentum. Three years ago, CSDS co-hosted the 40th World Congress of the International Institute of Sociology on the theme *After Western Hegemony: Social Science and its Publics*.

Work in the activist domain grows increasingly more acute. The People's Union for Civil Liberties (PUCL) in Rajasthan is currently challenging a new law that prevents anyone who has not passed 8th class in school from contesting panchayat elections. The National Alliance of People's Movements, a network that Kothari once supported, is struggling to defend the rights of people who are being displaced without full compensation.

At such a time it is worth recalling that when Kothari was president of PUCL he set up a National Council into which he drew people of diverse backgrounds—rural and urban, old and young, men and women. But the mission of creating a truly broad-based civil liberties movement remains unfulfilled.

Both electoral democracy and economic democracy depend upon a civil liberties movement whose members come not only from diverse social and class backgrounds but also political perspectives. Only then can we dissolve the false divide between social activism and economic growth. The best tribute to Kothari would be a vigorous and expanded dialogue of the people which includes not just activists and scholars but business people, together seeking to find a model of economic growth that asks no one to pay the price for progress.

*Rajni Bakshi was co-convenor of Lokayan from 1989-1991. She is currently Gandhi Peace Fellow at Gateway House: Indian Council on Global Relations.*

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