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A homegrown liberal

- Rajni Kothari (1928-2015)

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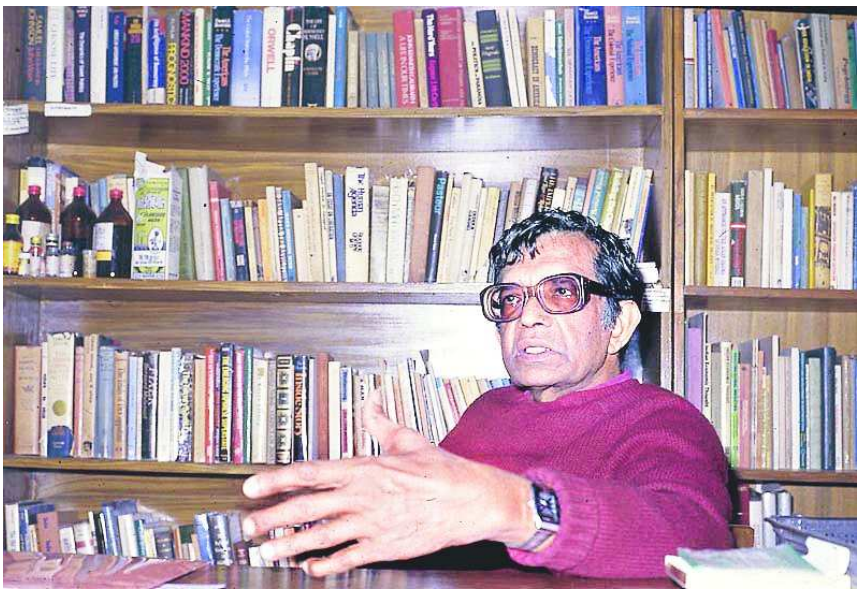

I first met Rajni Kothari in 1973 when, as a callow researcher with a recently secured doctorate, I went to Delhi looking for a job. He was in his office in what was then a single-storied bungalow on Rajpur Road that housed the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, known to academics as "Kothari's institute". I knew Kothari from his book, *Politics in India* (1970), which I had used to teach a course on Indian politics at the American university where I had done my PhD. The prevailing orthodoxy at the time among American political scientists writing on what was called political development - that is to say, the politics of developing countries - was that the modernization of State institutions and laying the foundations of capitalist enterprise must come first; democracy could wait. The preference for authoritarian modernization was barely concealed in the writings of influential political scientists such as David Apter and Samuel Huntington. Although Kothari's book appeared in an American series on Comparative Politics dominated by such views, his approach had struck me as significantly different.

He described the Indian political system as one of consensus-building, marked by a federal state structure as well as a federally organized ruling party. Even though the Congress party thoroughly dominated the system, it allowed for the articulation of a variety of contradictory interests within its own organization and had evolved democratic mechanisms for arriving at decisions that reflected a broad consensus.

Even though I had my reservations on what seemed to me Kothari's overly optimistic consensual model of the Congress system, I was pleasantly surprised by his generosity in listening to my undoubtedly poorly formulated and perhaps dogmatic criticism of the entire history of Congress rule since Independence. He asked me, in the kindest of tones, a few searching questions on my plans for further research on Indian politics. I said something about working on modern Indian intellectual history. I doubt very much that what I said made much sense to him - justifiably so, since I did not then have too many sensible research ideas myself. He didn't have a job to offer me but asked me to talk to Ashis Nandy who, he said, was a young man doing interesting new work. Nandy was not around. My first visit to CSDS came to a rather uneventful end.

Over the next few years, as I settled down to a life in Indian academia, I became acquainted with the wide range of Kothari's writings. More importantly, I developed an enormous respect for his ability to build institutions and lead large projects of collaborative research. He had already established himself as the pioneer of election studies in India, building a team at CSDS that included D.L. Sheth, Bashiruddin Ahmed and Ramashray Roy - all major analysts of electoral behaviour - and starting the first data bank in India on electoral surveys that would in time grow into the Lokniti data unit - the most important resource today for deciphering the mysterious doings of the Indian voter. As part of this project, Kothari led a team of scholars who set out to study the phenomenon of caste in the evolving democratic politics of different states and regions. The volume he edited, *Caste in Indian Politics* (1973), still remains the most influential book ever published on the subject. In his introduction, Kothari argued that India's electoral democracy had extracted caste from its traditional ritual and religious moorings and turned it into a modern and malleable form of mobilizing social and economic demands. This became a foundational formulation for all subsequent studies of caste as a political phenomenon.

In the early 1970s, Rajni Kothari was known to be close to the ruling establishment in New Delhi. He was involved in the founding of the Indian Council of Social Science Research as the premier funding body for social science research. He was regularly consulted in matters

of planning and development. By 1974, however, it became clear to him that the Congress system he had described so meticulously was being systematically destroyed by the centralizing thrust of Indira Gandhi's regime. A new group of Indira loyalists spouting fiery leftist rhetoric now began to attack Kothari for his allegedly bourgeois-liberal theories and American academic connections. I remember some of these virulent and sometimes abusive criticisms of Kothari that were published in the social science journals of the time. Despite my own pronounced Marxism, I found these diatribes shallow, irritating and, considering the deeply authoritarian strain that ran through much of their anti-imperialist and socialist verbiage, utterly insincere. Kothari's disenchantment with the Indira regime led him and many of his CSDS colleagues to embrace Jayaprakash Narayan's Navanirman movement, doubtless confirming every suspicion that his leftist critics held against him. CSDS came under a cloud and, in one of those arbitrary acts of petty retribution that characterized Emergency rule, its funding from the ICSSR was drastically slashed.

With the dramatic elections of 1977, however, the tables were turned. Kothari had had a hand in drafting the manifesto of the Janata Party. He now became a member of the Planning Commission and chairman of the ICSSR. Needless to say, in the academic world no less than in politics, the knives were out for those who were believed to have been close to the Emergency regime. But Kothari supervised the new dispensation at ICSSR in the most impartial and gracious manner imaginable. He even refused to restore the unfair cut in the ICSSR grant to CSDS, arguing that with him at the head of both bodies, the move would amount to an unacceptable conflict of interest. For those used to the goings-on in Indian cricket today, Kothari's position might seem like something out of a fairy tale. CSDS had to wait for the end of Kothari's term, and the coming of Sukhamoy Chakrabarty as the new chairman of ICSSR, before the anomaly could be rectified.

The 1980s marked a distinct turn in Kothari's thinking. He set up Lokayan as a platform for the coming together of a whole range of new social movements and virtually became their mentor. He now argued passionately for the broadening of democratic participation by launching radical movements outside the rigid control of party organizations. He was at the forefront of the civil liberties movement, being a founding member of the People's Union for Civil Liberties, and was one of the authors of the historic report, *Who Are the Guilty?* that named the Congress politicians responsible for organizing the Delhi pogrom against Sikhs in 1984. It is during this phase of his life, from the late 1980s, that I met him a number of times and came to know something of the depth of his commitment to a life of the mind.

I discovered that Kothari had been born in 1928 in a wealthy Jain family of Gujarat. When, as a young man just out of college, he declared his intention to go to London for further studies, his uncle arranged for a visit to an astrologer who predicted that the young Rajni would never secure admission to a British university, and even if he did, would fail his exams. But Kothari defied the stars, secured a London degree, dissociated himself from the family business and, in 1953, took up the low-paid job of university lecturer in Baroda. Ten years later, he set up CSDS as a venue for creative and critical thinking. Perhaps as a protest against the domination of Indian social science by a pedestrian variety of economic technicians, he introduced the unwritten rule that CSDS would never employ an economist in its faculty.

Liberalism in India has a long history going back to the 19th century. But in its utilitarian, Gladstonian and Fabian phases, it always carried in both content and style the marks of its Western origin. It routinely repeated the doctrines of individual right and private property without seriously examining the conditions of their importation into a land with a completely different history of legal and political institutions, and quite slavishly imitated the formal practices of Westminster-style democracy or American capitalism, if necessary by keeping out of the hallways of power the unlettered and unwashed representatives of the native masses. Kothari had first-hand knowledge of both British and American liberalism. But he developed a liberal vocabulary and liberal practices that were of a sturdier vernacular make.

In his *Memoirs* (2002), he describes the intellectual circles of Baroda where he first encountered the rough and tumble of Indian political debate. It was characterized by a conversational style that could be combative, sometimes acerbic, but always patient, unhurried and generous. Every debate would be adjourned to the next day; no argument was ever finally clinched. Not for him the Powerpoint presentation with 15 slides in 15 minutes. His death, I feel, marks the end of an era in India's intellectual life.

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