

## **Rajni Kothari, first to discover the pulse of Indian political system**

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**By Shail Mayaram**

When I was studying in Chicago I witnessed my friends in the Physics Department go into high anticipation and then into mourning as their icon Chandrasekhar's name was sidelined once again for the Nobel Prize. This, I was told, was the pattern every year —until he finally got it in 1983.

In the case of Rajni Kothari there was never any anticipation and, therefore, no disappointment when the Padma awards were announced year after year in India. We, at the Centre, knew that like a host of intellectuals he will never get it and neither will Ranajit Guha, Ashis Nandy or Partha Chatterjee, despite being among India's most celebrated names in the social sciences, theorists who work at the frontiers of knowledge and about whom we can proudly say, They Make/Create in India.

Rajni Kothari was a political scientist who first put his finger on the pulse of the Indian political system and characterised it as One Party Dominance (OPD), a label which is relevant even today as we seem to have exited the era of the "Congress system" and witness the BJP attempting to establish its own OPD.

His *Politics in India* was a classic and remains a foundational text in all courses on Indian Government and Politics taught in India and abroad. It is impossible to understand caste in postcolonial India without his and Dhirubhai Sheth's thesis of the politicisation of caste. The shifts in Rajni Kothari's location and political position were dramatic.

To begin with, he was a standard product of Western education, despite his Indian education. His concerns followed the intellectual fashions of American political science. There was the positivist framing, a behavioural predilection and theory of progress episteme that sees all societies on a single track of modernisation/development. *Politics in India* was actually part of a series on Political Development the world over.



When I first met him as a 19-year old student at our home in Jaipur and expressed to him my interest in Development, he cautioned me, “You are aware of its critique, aren’t you.” Both modernisation and development had come in for major attack by then as positing a single trajectory of growth the world over and for legitimising the dominance of the West, in effect that of America.

In his early years, Rajni Kothari like Romesh Thapar had been close to the Congress, particularly to Indira Gandhi. He came around full circle to being one of the strongest opponents of the Emergency. Indeed, he had been writing about democracy much before democracy became a political passion to be imposed, if required, with gun barrels and bombs.

This was not the democracy Kothari and the group of intellectuals who coalesced around him had anticipated for India or for the world. This small group had come to see the limits of the university system with its emphasis on the mono-disciplinarity of departments and founded the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies as a unique experiment over 50 years ago! Some of them were critical of the binaries of left and right that bedevilled Indian politics.

Many of the scholars belonged to Gujarat—the Gujarat mafia, as it was then called, included Bhiku Parekh, Dhirubhai Sheth, Ashis Nandy (via marriage), and more briefly, Ghanshyam Shah and Sudhir Chandra. This early group saw in Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi the possibilities of

ethical philosophy and politics and also had a different idea of Gujarat (pre-globalisation) and indeed, of the ecumene of Indian and of Chinese civilisation.

To date, many persons still refer to the Centre as the Kothari Centre! This small community had decentred the world and effectively recentred it. Today's Centre has diversified, representing new frontiers, but the Kothari period is still regarded by many as its "golden age." When I joined the Centre the tradition of long lunches and intense discussion was still vibrant during which one effectively transited through time, space and theory.

What changed Rajni Kothari's position vis-a-vis the Congress was India's transition from a State committed to minimal violence to a new militarisation and nuclearisation.

The Pokhran tests were a turning point and led to the Centre hosting an International Conference on Disarmament.

The concern with futures helped the founding of a leading international social science journal appropriately titled Alternatives. Increasingly, Rajni Kothari's disillusion with the political establishment led to a new focus on civil society.

Lokayan was another unique institutional experiment grounded in a collaboration between CSDS academics and activists, which incubated ecological and other social movements. Smitu Kothari and Vijay Pratap steered Lokayan, editing some wonderful issues of the Lokayan Bulletin, capturing textures of another arena of the political. Lokayan later received the Right Livelihood Award, better known as the People's Nobel Prize.

Rajni, you have left behind the energy of your person and the unforgettable warmth of your embrace.

Forgive those in the political establishment who cannot honour dissent and the quest for alternatives. Had there been a people's Padma award instituted by civil society you would have surely received it for your creativity and courage!

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