

MAINSTREAM, VOL LIII NO 6, JANUARY 31, 2015 – REPUBLIC DAY SPECIAL

Professor Rajni Kothari: Homage by a Socialist Worker

Saturday 31 January 2015

by Vijay Pratap

Prof Rajni Kothari, born on August 16, 1928, left this world on January 19, 2015. He was a rare academic person. In the last four decades I have witnessed many stalwarts leaving this world but not seen so many articles having been written in various languages in the mainstream media as well as in the movement space. The articles so far have primarily described him as a political scientist who, in addition to doing path-breaking work for his discipline, also contributed greatly in terms of creating enabling knowledge for the movements in India. Like the RSS which, through its collective functioning in a relatively selfless manner, helped rediscover meaning and dynamic roles for its political outfits like the Jana Sangh and BJP, Prof Rajni Kothari did perform a similar role through his various political hats such as *Lokayan* and PUCL. The difference is that the RSS does not only help its political outfits, it virtually directs and controls these through its organisational power, whereas Prof Kothari made his contribution through his moral, intellectual prowess and to some extent through his institutional support structures.

Since contemporary Indian polity claims to be fighting the negative features of *Brahminism*, probably for this reason our political class is embarrassed in acknowledging the role of intellectuals, ideas and ideologies in terms of shaping our politics and future. Kothari contributed to shaping his times in both of his incarnations. In the first phase until the mid-seventies he was the seeker of truth about Indian politics in general and democracy in particular. His second incarnation came into being thanks to the Emergency. Post-JP movement developments were a watershed in the trajectory of Prof Kothari. After the Emergency Kothari *sahab*, along with his larger peers, wanted to make an impact here and now, like an activist. Just capturing the truth in all its complexities and nuances was not enough any longer for him. The euphoria of defeating a 'dictator' through the ballot box was soon replaced by a series of disappointments. Retrospectively, one can see that the Janata Party under Morarji Desai was breaking some new ground but its constituents were pulling in different directions. The fuzzy understanding of the socialists regarding how to wield and sustain power for fundamental transformation contributed to the party's drift.

Meanwhile there was undue haste in the machinations of the RSS camp to sow seeds of bitter factional battles in the party to effect decisive control over it. At the same time came Indira Gandhi's successful intervention in the Janata Party with the help of the Soviet camp. These developments led to the breaking up of the party in July 1979. Prof Kothari, his CSDS colleagues and larger network of intellectuals did not sulk with the demise of the Janata Party. They all acted in their own ways not only to explain but were also trying to arrest the drift.

It was in this context of shattered hopes that Prof D.L. Sheth and Prof Ramashray Roy at CSDS conceived of the project which was christened by Prof Ramashray as *Lokayan* ('a place where people live' or 'movement towards the people'). They were kind enough to involve me in the pre-launch discussions in late 1979 and early 1980. Prof Giri Deshingkar and Prof Ashish Nandy also used to take active interest in these discussions. After about four-five months of preparation, the first meeting was held on May 16, 1980 in the CSDS library. I had conducted this meeting which, besides others, was attended by Prof Rajni Kothari, Ela Bhatt on behalf of SEWA, Kishore Saint on behalf of Seva Mandir, Father T.K. John, liberation theologian, and democratic socialist

Jesuit Father S. Kappen. At Dhiru Bhai's insistence Prof Kothari became an active part of *Lokayan*. It was under their joint leadership that a whole lot of activist-intellectuals became part of the *Lokayan* community. Among them were Jayant Bandopadhyay, Somashekhar Reddy and Vandana Shiva from Bangalore, Manohoran from Tamilnadu, G. Narendranath, Dr Uma Shankari of Andhra Pradesh, Hemant, Nutan and Raghupati from Bihar, Achyut Yagnik and Ashok Chaudhary from Gujarat, Norma Alvares and Claude Alvares from Goa. All of them became part of the *Lokayan* team. Prof Kothari was the natural leader and public face of *Lokayan*.

Lokayan was almost like an open space, where change-seekers/doers from diverse backgrounds would come and use each other as sounding boards. This resulted in greater clarity and coherence among these participants. Many a time, on the sidelines new alliances or fora were conceived and launched. This exercise of creating only an intellectual interface acquired such a momentum that instead of an intellectual space, it was perceived as an activist front. This created its own challenges within the CSDS and a five-year project, started in 1980, was wound up in December 1982. The decision to wind up was taken on the sidelines of the PUCL convention in Mumbai in early August 1982 and *Lokayan* started functioning as an independent activist group with Prof Kothari and Prof D.L. Sheth as co-chairs and Vijay Pratap and Smitu Kothari as co-convenors. I have explained the genesis of *Lokayan* at length because this at the CSDS was the space where Prof Kothari, the intellectual, was reincarnated as Rajni Kothari, the activist.

There was no struggle, no space where a basic question of transformative politics was being discussed and someone from *Lokayan* network was not there. A kind of phenomenal churning among Marxist, Marxist-Leninist/ Maoist/ Charu Majumdarvadi, Sarvodaya, Socialist and even newly born environmentalist groups was taking place all over the country.

Kothari *sahab's* conviviality, towering presence, and intense desire to change the world/India into a better place made him acceptable to all these streams. In my understanding, activism and stirrings have always existed in our polity in varying degrees. But it was through the writings of Kothari *sahab*, D.L. Sheth and later Harsh Sethi and several others in the *Lokayan* Bulletins and other publications that the non-party political process acquired a distinct identity and legitimacy.

There is no easy measure to quantify the strength, legitimacy and clarity Rajni Kothari and his team imparted to the frameworks of discourse and debates on democratisation. But continuities and legacies can be traced even today. Kothari was not an individual, he himself was an institution as well as a phenomenon. To rejuvenate *Lokayan* or launch another but similar instrument or space, careful study of the phenomenon of Prof Rajni Kothari will be quite instructive.

In my humble opinion all of us put together who worked as co-workers of Prof Rajni Kothari are not able to respond to the present ideological vacuum and dead-ends in our polity. The ideological crisis witnessed by Leftists of all shades is unprecedented. In my estimation had Prof Kothari been intellectually active in the last decade of his life, the nature and contour of debates in the Left and those committed to comprehensive and participatory democracy would have been different. Today, we seem to be giving a walk-over to the BJP/RSS family in allowing them to undo the achievements of struggles of the last one hundred years after Gandhiji's return from South Africa and taking charge of national politics. The talk by the Hindu Mahasabha about installing Nathuram Godse's bust has a potent political message announcing our defeat in this battle, if not in the war. If India has to respond to the present global crisis then we need to pick-up the threads and guiding signposts left by Prof Rajni Kothari.

Much has been written about Prof Kothari's contribution in the global discourse on democracy. In the post-colonial era a majority of Northern scholars were propounding that democracy was not sustainable in the Third World countries. Prof Kothari and his large team of researcher colleagues like Prof V.B. Singh, Prof Basheeruddin Ahmed, Prof Ramashray Roy, Prof D.L. Sheth and Shankar Bose etc. decisively established that India was a vigorously functioning democracy with its own cultural and social formations actively participating and contributing to the process of party-making, electoral battles and other legitimation process enhancing the degree of participation and the deepening of democracy. This segment of his contribution had been accomplished by the end of the 1960s and early 1970s. Since 1974, when the stirrings of the JP Movement had started, Prof Kothari, Prof D.L. Sheth, Prof Ashis Nandy and others had teamed-up with several intellectuals outside the CSDS to carry out the task of defending the Nehruvian/liberal values from the onslaught of Mrs Indira Gandhi's authoritarian tendencies.

This must have been emotionally demanding for Prof Kothari himself and his team because they were the ones who had established to the world at large that the way the Congress functioned and related to other parties on the margins and movements in opposition, India's party system could be called the "the Congress system" or "one-party dominance system". The radical shades of democrats, except the CPI, were very upset with this analysis. This analysis almost de-legitimised any real oppositional, independent space for the Left and radical Gandhians and Socialists. But it was such a nuanced and matter-of-fact description of 'the Congress system' that it was not easy to put forward an alternative liberal narrative without almost justifying totalitarian radicalism. In his analysis, the system was a reflection of the existing social dynamics, power equilibrium at the grassroots and societal goals and aspirations with an accompanying level of moral energies. Any attempt for a forced radical departure would require a totalitarian social engineering. Socialists and several shades of Communists called him names, painting Kothari *sahab* and his colleagues as the system's drum-beaters. Through their role in the JP Movement, during the Emergency and later the re-launching of the People's Union for Civil Liberties (PUCL), building an interface called *Lokayan* of activists across transformative ideologies, policy-planners, media activists and intellectuals on issues of 'Democracy, Development and Decentralisation' Prof Kothari and his team re-established themselves as authentic democrats independent in character. A time came when there was no shade of transformative political activists/intellectuals that did not relate to Prof Rajni Kothari and his team. The only exceptions for some initial years were the CPI-M and some marginal radical Socialist groups and individuals.

Since the JP Movement, Kothari *sahab* became almost obsessed with the idea of intervening here and now like any activist. He always had the desire—or we may even call ambition—to intervene through his intellectual pursuits while discerning the truths of our times, but after the JP Movement to 'intervene' became the primary goal. Kothari *sahab*, through his writings, identified with the JP Movement and he did not stop taking stands even after the Emergency was imposed. To continue with his campaign and avoid arrest in India, he went to the USA and campaigned vigorously against the Emergency in universities and other public fora. After the defeat of Mrs Indira Gandhi in the election of March 1977, Prof Kothari returned home and became an active member of an informal think-tank of radical liberals within the Janata Party. He played a crucial role in the Global Disarmament Conference held in India.

During the initial period of Janata rule the biggest challenge was how to engage with Left-wing extremists known as Naxalites. Prof Kothari, V.M. Tarkunde along with Socialists in the Janata Party like Surendra Mohan and George Fernandes defended the 'right to fair trial' for everyone including Naxalites. The ruling establishment of the Congress had used the tactics of slapping cases with serious charges of loot, arson,

violence and murder against those working among the poorest sections of our people. Many a time false encounters were also staged to eliminate such activists. Prof Kothari was in the forefront in defending the human rights of such activists. Under the leadership of the above persons, the People's Union for Civil Liberties (PUCL) was re-launched in 1980. Prof Kothari did not patronise only the PUCL of which he was a leading figure, he was also informal advisor of a whole lot of other civil liberties and democratic rights organisations such as the People's Union for Democratic Rights, the West Bengal and Andhra Pradesh based civil-liberties organisations. The main contribution of the civil liberties movement was that issues of identity aspirations of tribals, Dalits no longer remained marginal as was the case even in the Left circles in earlier times. They became important concerns of even Left politics.

Prof Kothari combined the virtues of disciplined hard work with passion, creativity, bold and constructive thinking. At the present juncture if we engage with the issues of our times by emulating these traits, then the results will be more dramatic than what was possible during his time and that of his peers, the likes of Ramesh Thapar, B.G. Verghese, Kuldip Nayar, Raj Krishna, L.C. Jain, J.D. Sethi, Rajindar Sachar, K.G. Kannabiran, V.M. Tarkunde, Surendra Mohan, Prabhash Joshi and Nikhil Chakravartty.

To make institutions what they were during in his time required not only the above-mentioned qualities but also a pluralist notion of truth-seeking and intervention. Prof Kothari's imprint on the CSDS and *Lokayan* was very clear. In our progressive circles, it is seldom realised that it is not 'the correct line' which causes lasting epochal changes. It is the intense, honest and authentic war of ideas and approaches in an overall transparent framework, without competition and without malice, that produces great epochal breakthroughs. The CSDS and *Lokayan* were sought to be modelled in the light of these ideals. And because of Prof Rajni Kothari's leadership these institutions could create the impact that they did.

The author, a socialist activist, was a member of the team that founded Lokayan.

