

RETHINKING DEMOCRACY. By **Rajni Kothari.** *London and New York: Zed Books, 2007. vii, 176 pp. US\$27.95, paper. ISBN 978-1-84277-946-0.*

The twentieth century witnessed a remarkable shift in many countries from authoritarian to democratic rule and a no-less-astounding move within many older democracies towards more plural forms of political competition. Yet this upsurge of formal democracy has often occurred in the absence of a significant change in the distribution of political opportunities on the ground. Rajni Kothari, one of India's foremost political scientists, speaks directly to this paradox in his new book, drawing together a lifetime of observations on India's changing political scene. *Rethinking Democracy* does not always fulfill its promise, but it deserves to be read by all those interested in political transformation, democracy, grassroots mobilization and social justice in South Asia.

Central to the book is a story of India's failed democratic state, situated within a critique of European modernity. The outlines of this account will be familiar to readers of Kothari's prior work. He charts a decline in Indian democracy from a period in which the state was putatively uninfluenced by powerful sections of society, in the 1950s and 1960s, to an era in which the state has been thoroughly captured by national elites and their associates among the middle classes and powerful institutions abroad. Kothari characterizes the contemporary era as one in which the state is manifestly incapable of meeting the needs of the poor, economically, socially or politically, and in which the worst excesses of consumer capitalism have been allowed free rein. Kothari imagines an upsurge of reactionary forms of religious communal violence as a consequence of this political and moral crisis. At the same time, he emphasizes the emergence of powerful environmental, social justice and women's movements since the 1970s in India.

Kothari's suggested remedy for contemporary ills is the decentralization of governance to allow grassroots organizations greater power in the framing of policy and planning. What Kothari has in mind is a radical revision of the role of government in society that would include diminished party political action, and widespread popular participation in the running of public affairs. He also appeals for a reorientation of the educational process to provide a more holistic understanding of the world and greater efforts to nurture and connect grassroots social movements. Kothari repeatedly stresses the importance of Indian traditions to this political drive. India requires "new indigenous roots of sustenance and strength...based on genuine possibilities of alternatives that can work" (48).

Kothari's description of political crisis and plans for recuperating Indian democracy are only partially convincing. His description of India's political trajectory arguably downplays the extent to which elites were able to shape state policy in the 1950s and 1960s. Moreover, Kothari exaggerates the failure of the state to counter problems of poverty in contemporary India. Social

science research on the state in India published in the 1990s and 2000s has shown that, even in the areas of India most profoundly affected by “elite capture” and bureaucratic inefficiency, some benefits do arrive for the poor, who are increasingly demanding the forms of “modernity” disparaged by Kothari.

The author’s search for a new decentralized and participatory form of democracy is more suggestive. Kothari’s emphasis on learning from multiple grassroots organizations and strengthening non-party political forums resonates with recent feminist and subaltern research in India. Moreover, Kothari’s discussion of the capacity of middle classes to play brokerage roles in networks of political assertion is timely, reversing a tendency in some quarters to paint elites as inevitably self-serving. Towards the end of the book, Kothari also develops an intriguing argument about the ability of subalterns to expand our understanding of what constitutes the political. And yet, when moved to outline specific measures that might democratize India, Kothari is rather vague, falling back on general calls for greater civic social involvement in governance and a decline in the role of the state.

Reviewing five volumes of Kothari’s work in this journal nearly twenty years ago, Pratap Bhanu Mehta questioned whether Kothari’s Gandhian emphasis on decentralized forms of governance was viable in the absence of a better account of the type of institutions that could replace those associated with Europe’s modernity (India’s Disordered Democracy, *Pacific Affairs*, vol. 64, no. 4, Winter 1991-1992, p. 548). Nearly twenty years on, I am left with the same uncertainty. *Rethinking Democracy* falls short of providing a roadmap for a more genuinely democratic Indian polity. But it remains a compelling summary of the work of one of South Asia’s leading intellectuals and a passionate appeal for a fairer, more inclusive India.

University of Oxford, Oxford, United Kingdom

CRAIG JEFFREY