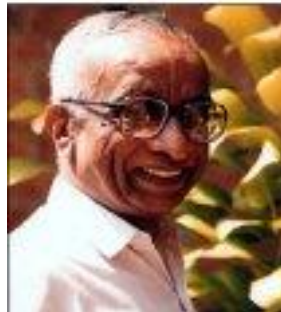


# **K.N. Raj: Outstanding economist, institution builder, beacon for young people**

**C. Rammanohar Reddy**



K.N. Raj  
(1924 - 2010)

The years after independence saw a number of outstanding young men and women throw their hearts and bodies into building a new India. K.N. Raj was a giant of that generation. Today when careerists and those who put their self-interest above everything else rule the day, it is important to stress how K.N. Raj and others of his kind, who could very easily have made their names anywhere in the world, were fired with passion for just one thing: contributing to a modern and equitable order in independent India.

Professor Raj was many things: an outstanding economist, an excellent teacher, a builder of institutions, a beacon for young people and, not least, someone who could think well ahead of his time.

The first half of his working life was spent outside Kerala. After obtaining his PhD from the London School of Economics, it was in the drafting of the First Plan that Raj first made his mark. While it is the Second Plan that gets noticed by all for the contribution of Mahalanobis, in many ways it was the First Plan that was the trailblazer - and Raj was one among a small group of professional economists who contributed to its making. That was when Raj became a Nehruvian, something he remained, I think, to the very end of his life.

Yet, it was in the new Delhi School of Economics, where Raj became a professor in his early thirties, that he really shone. For more than a decade, Raj was one of the stars who gave the DSE its brilliance - attracting fine minds like Amartya Sen to join the faculty, electrifying batch after batch of students and contributing immensely to the cross-national exchange of ideas among the economists of the newly independent countries of Africa and Asia.

That was also the time that Raj sowed the seeds of many new ways of understanding rural India, seeds that were subsequently developed by younger professionals in articles and books on inter-locked markets, under-employment, land reforms etc. Raj was also one of the first economists of independent India to acquire international status - and, rare for today, his interests were not confined to economics.

Raj was for a while very close to Indira Gandhi as well, but differed with her and her advisers both on the devaluation of 1966 and, more famously, a decade later when he was critical of the Emergency in public. In the late 1960s, he was briefly vice-chancellor of Delhi University. That was not the happiest of times, but at the height of his influence and perhaps power he then took a decision which in some respects resembles the actions of the lead character in

the Polish filmmaker Krzysztof Zanussi's *Structure of Crystals* - he walked out of the capital and the corridors of power; he had also been a star in the salons of the Delhi of the time.

Arguing that it was unhealthy for teaching and research in economics to be concentrated in Delhi, Raj moved to what was then the backwaters - Trivandrum. There, with the help of the then chief minister, Achutha Menon, and a small group of outstanding talents in economics from all over, Raj established the Centre for Development Studies (CDS). It was CDS that researched and made popular the notion of the "Kerala Model" of development. It could also be said that the early research in CDS contributed to the international/ United Nations' evolution of the idea of "human development". For a while the CDS was perhaps the most exciting centre for the study of economics in India and it was also CDS which brought to prominence the work of that other outstanding personality, the architect Laurie Baker, who Raj sought out to design and supervise the construction of the centre and popularise "low cost" architecture.

On a personal note I must write here that I was privileged to be a student at the CDS and also a PhD student of Raj's, but perhaps what must have been a great source of joy was my subsequent association with the Economic and Political Weekly. Raj was associated first with the Economic Weekly and was one of founder-editor Sachin Chaudhuri's preferred writers in the 1950s and 1960s. Then when Economic Weekly closed, it is said that Raj was one of those who convinced Sachin Chaudhuri to revive the journal and, I hear, gave it its current name as well. Raj was a founder-trustee of the Sameeksha Trust, which publishes the EPW, and remained on its board to the very end. Raj was a friend of Sachin Chaudhuri, and it was also a student of his from the DSE, Krishna Raj, who was editor of EPW for 35 years and built up the institution. When in the last years, Raj was unable to attend the meetings of the trust, I asked his son, Gopal, if he wished to continue on the board. Gopal said there were only two things that mattered to him now, CDS and EPW, and he would want the association to continue to the very end.

K.N. Raj was many things to many people; but he was, most of all, a teacher and a source of inspiration for generations of students. Five years ago, when the indefatigable A.A. Baby of Thrissur organised a conference in his honour, Professor Utsa Patnaik of JNU, the eminent and forceful economist, wrote that she could not attend but that she would always feel a very deep sense of gratitude to Raj. Patnaik said she had been a shy and quiet student at the DSE in the 1960s and it was Raj who sought her out, encouraged her to ask questions and pursue research in economics - and that, in some sense, it was Raj who pushed her into becoming an academic economist.

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