



## T R I B U T E

### Remembering CTK (1931–2024)

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Professor Kurien – “CTK,” as he was known to so many – who passed away in Kerala in July 2024, shortly after his 93rd birthday, was a very fine scholar. He was an economist who sought to think problems through for himself, in a totally non-doctrinaire manner, abjuring the shifts of scholarly fashion, and always addressing the fundamental questions of political economy: “Who owns what?” “Who does what?” “Who gets what?” – as V. K. Ramachandran remembers from his experience of being taught by Kurien at Madras Christian College (Ramachandran 2024). His work was driven always by the objective that Jawaharlal Nehru expressed in closing the debate on the “Resolution on Aims and Objects” in the Constituent Assembly, when he said that the purpose must be

to free India through a new constitution, to feed the starving people and clothe the naked masses, and to give every Indian fullest opportunity to develop himself according to his capacity.

In these few words, Nehru seems to have expressed the essential idea of thinking about economic development in terms of the capabilities of individuals and their capacities for leading lives that they have reason to value – and this was the approach and the objective that inspired CTK throughout his long and productive career. The last of his many books, published when he was 80, *Wealth and Illfare: An Expedition into Real-Life Economics*, calls into question an economic system determined by the pure pursuit of profit.

As well as being a fine scholar, CTK was one of the finest men it has been my privilege to know. He was a Christian who always sought to practice his faith, and a man who in his life and work sought to realise the civic values of the Constitution of India that are expressed in the Preamble. He was highly principled. Not, I think, judgemental, but always crystal clear about his sense of what was right. He was never afraid to

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express his views – as was the case during the dark days of the Emergency. Not demonstrative, but a man of warmth and quiet humour. A good friend to many and an inspirational teacher.

A very important part of CTK's legacy is in the institutions with which he was so closely associated throughout his professional career and which he helped, substantially, to build – Madras Christian College, and especially its Department of Economics where he was professor and head from 1962 to 1978; and the Madras Institute of Development Studies (MIDS), of which he became Director in 1978, serving in that capacity for ten years. I remember that presenting a seminar paper at the Department of Economics, Madras Christian College, could be a much more challenging and rewarding experience than in very many university departments. This reflected the quality of teaching in the department under CTK's leadership and the encouragement that he gave to his students to always question received wisdom and to think for themselves. He brought the same spirit of enquiry to MIDS. I treasure the memory of joining him in the first months of his Directorship, when the staff of the Institute, apart from himself, consisted only of his then research officer, K. Bharathan. We had some long discussions about the "mode of production debate," which was my own preoccupation of the time, and on which he took an interested but quietly sceptical view. A year later, when Barbara Harriss-White and I joined the Institute, together with others including S. Guhan and K. Nagaraj, and among the research students, V. K. Ramachandran, it was fast becoming, as it remained, a place of lively debate and a lot of hard work, much of it concerned with thorough analysis of "the data," especially those relating to the economy of Tamil Nadu.

For the readers of this journal, and probably a source of influence for a good many of them, CTK's work on *Dynamics of Rural Transformation: A Case Study of Tamil Nadu*, published first in the Annual Number of the *Economic and Political Weekly* in 1980, and then as a book, is perhaps of the greatest significance. In it, Kurien based his enquiry into trends of change in the rural economy of the State over the period from 1950 to 1975 on an exhaustive analysis of the secondary, "macro" data found in the Census of India, various rounds of the National Sample Survey, the Reserve Bank of India's All India Rural Debt and Investment Surveys, Agricultural Labour Enquiries, Farm Management Surveys, the Season and Crop Reports, and the annual *Economic Appraisal* of the Government of Tamil Nadu. His work served as a model that was taken up in comparable studies in a number of other States – though none, I believe, acquired quite the authority of Kurien's own study, which perhaps tested the limits of analysis based exclusively on official sources. What he showed was that growth had taken place in the agricultural economy of the State, but without structural transformation having occurred. Yet there was, he thought, a "hidden" kind of transformation reflected in "the tendency of small farmers to leave the land and farming to join the ranks of the rural proletariat" – though this argument was somewhat at odds with his finding that there had been a decline in the incidence of

landlessness and depended on the observation that the Census showed decline in the proportion of cultivators in the rural population. Putting this together with the finding the available data showed, that there had been a decline in the real wages of agricultural labour, the tendency of mass rural poverty to continue and even to increase was clearly understandable. The kind of proletarianisation that was taking place involved the marginalisation of many people.

Just as Kurien's study was published, and with his blessing as the Director of MIDS, S. Guhan took up the project of conducting fresh surveys of the "Slater villages" of the State, which had been studied in 1916–17 by students of the first Professor of Economics of the University of Madras, Gilbert Slater, and then by his successor P. J. Thomas, with K. C. Ramakrishnan, in the 1930s. CTK also took a friendly interest in the village studies in North Arcot with which Barbara Harriss-White and I were so much involved, and in the village research of S. S. Shivakumar in Chengalpattu. But for reasons that I never understood, CTK himself resisted suggestions that he might take account of the findings of such research in his own work. He and I always had an amicable disagreement about the trends of change in rural Tamil Nadu, mainly hinging around my view, based on the findings of village ethnography and the village surveys, that the data on which he relied tended systematically to underestimate the movement of labour into non-agricultural activity, so that he had not appreciated the extent of "proletarianisation without depeasantisation" that was taking place (Harriss 1989). He smiled at the memory of these exchanges when we spoke on the occasion of his 90th birthday.

Throughout his later years, when he remained sharp and engaged – as Ramachandran has recalled from his interest in the progress of the economy of Kerala – he was a good friend of the Foundation of Agrarian Studies and of the *Review*. We mourn his passing and honour his memory as a scholar and a man of the highest integrity.

#### REFERENCES

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