



## T R I B U T E

### **Professor C. T. Kurien: A Personal Tribute**

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I first met Professor C. T. Kurien (CTK, hereafter in this Note) in early 1978 when he had been kind enough to invite me to present, to participants in a Seminar on the Long-Term Development of the Indian Economy, a paper on the Indian fertilizer industry whose first draft I wrote during a one-year stint as a Visiting Fellow at the Centre for Development Studies in 1976. Not having done my graduate studies in Economics in the Indian university system, and not having worked on the Indian economy in my doctoral programme, I was quite nervous about how I should present my material. CTK put me at ease in that seminar and was very helpful in ensuring that the presentation went off well. The seminar itself, which ran through the academic year, was a reflection of CTK's consistent concern with the growth of the Indian economy and its implications for the well-being of the people of India, especially in terms of employment and improving the lives of the poor.

My encounter with CTK led me to visit the Madras Institute of Development Studies whenever I was in Chennai, to meet with the faculty and doctoral scholars, some of whom were already making a mark with their research and publications. It would be fair to say that MIDS was the most active centre of research in economic and social development in Tamil Nadu in the late 1970s and through the 1980s. CTK's enabling attitude and his own work ethic contributed significantly to this outcome. During the 12 years that he was Director of MIDS, CTK put together an impressive group of scholars, some of them with considerable practical and administrative experience in government and in international development agencies, and others who were junior researchers with talent and motivation. While scholars were free to pursue their research interests, CTK and other senior faculty encouraged the younger researchers including PhD scholars, to focus on empirical research with a bearing on the basic goal of bettering the lives of the poor in general and the rural

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poor in particular. CTK was no pure empiricist, and did lay stress on theoretical research as well. While the broad focus of research under the leadership of CTK and his senior colleagues was on what one may broadly describe as the political economy of development, scholars were encouraged to acquire scholarly exposure to the fields of economics, history, sociology, anthropology, and, as befits the name of the institution of which CTK was Director, development studies, which also included studies on science, technology, and self-reliance. This is significant in a context in which neoclassical economics, with its preoccupation with “optimality” and “equilibrium” in distinctly peculiar ways, and its ideological mission of demonstrating the “efficiency” of equilibria under “competitive” market structures, held sway over a large proportion of undergraduate and postgraduate teaching programmes, with little academic space for alternative viewpoints being taught as part of the curriculum, notwithstanding honourable exceptions like the Jawaharlal Nehru University’s Centre for Economic Studies and Planning.

CTK was not committed to any of the dominant theoretical frameworks in Economics, and tried to carve out his own path to understanding development issues through a somewhat eclectic blend of empirical work (mostly with secondary data) and what CTK himself has described as “theoretical groping.” I recall a conversation with him on this matter not more than five years ago. In 1983, I had reviewed in the journal *Social Scientist* (Athreya 1983) the book *Dynamics of Rural Transformation* (Kurien 1989) a very important contribution of CTK. In this book, CTK argues that the class-based approach “. . . can lead to a much better understanding of the dynamics of socio-economic transformation than the one that views the economy essentially as a commodity flow” (p. 120). However, he refrains from using this approach, arguing that “. . . classes are conceptual categories and the socio-economic transformation they can interpret is essentially long-term in character,” and that it is difficult to translate these categories into operational empirical categories (p. 120).

In my (then) youthful enthusiasm (ignorance?), after highlighting positively the important contributions of the book, I took issue with his declared reason for not using the analytical framework of class:

The self-conscious avoidance of class analysis leads Kurien to pose the issue in terms of “. . . whether the material benefits have gone to the rich minority or poor majority . . .,” and to divide the population of rural Tamil Nadu into large farmers, small farmers and non-farmers. Thus, the distinction between landlords and peasants is totally absent; the question of remunerative prices for farm produce is not addressed except in passing; exploitation through trade and usury is not dealt with, while [exploitation] through rent is left to be inferred from the data on leasing-in. The reluctance to see state policy in class terms also leads to ignoring the question of input price trends and the positions of the different strata of cultivators in the product market.

CTK, as was his wont, responded gently to my observations at that point in time. Years later, when I expressed my admiration for his two important works, *Wealth and Illfare*

(2012) and *Economics of Real Life* (2018), CTK ribbed me gently, reminding me that I had taken a critical view of his declared eschewal in *Dynamics of Rural Transformation* of the use of class analysis and class categories! It was indeed a privilege for me to read, at his request, the Tamil translation of *Wealth and Illfare* published by Bharathi Puthakalayam in Chennai, before its publication.

CTK contributed to academic and wider thinking on issues of economic development from the standpoint of justice for the weaker sections of society and from the normative value of reduced inequality. He paid attention to the needs of doctoral research scholars by organising inter-disciplinary workshops for them. He led several inter-disciplinary workshops of social scientists from southern states for the southern regional centres of the Indian Council of Social Science Research. He reached out to the social science faculties of colleges in Tamil Nadu, providing them access to the resources of MIDS and encouraging them to work on problems of Tamil Nadu.

More importantly, CTK evolved along a distinct path, one that led him to question the class nature of the state, even if he himself did not use these words, from the standpoint of the poor and the exploited. That path also led him to a staunch secular stand, as his work with many civil society organisations showed. He had his own tactful ways of ensuring that progressive scholars and their viewpoints figured effectively in conferences and seminars, inside the academy and outside, on issues such as secularism, democracy, and fiscal federalism. CTK was also a strong supporter of panchayati raj and democratic decentralisation.

In the death of CTK, I feel I have lost a progressive, non-judgmental senior and friend. In some ways, CTK's trajectory reminds me of the great Joan Robinson, who grew progressively more radical as she grew older, bucking the conventional assumptions in this regard.

#### REFERENCES

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