

Text of 1985 Acceptance Speech by Rajni Kothari, for Right Livelihood Award to Lokayan

December 9th, 1985

May I on behalf of the Lokayan community of activists, scholars, and intellectuals and the scores of concerned individuals and organizations that have supported Lokayan over the nearly six years of its existence, extend our warm greetings and grateful thanks to the Right Livelihood Foundation, the Swedish Parliament and the Swedish society and people. Ours is a fairly modest and still developing endeavor towards broadening the base of the democratic process in India by drawing upon diverse practical initiatives and experiments in alternatives at the grassroots of our society as well as new thinking and reflection that have become necessary at the macro level as a consequence of this.

Lokayan has been conceived as an intellectual effort that is different from mainstream academic work. It is so both in content and even more in style. It is an effort at both listening to, and interpreting the grassroots dimension of the democratic process, articulating and nurturing the same. We seek to comprehend what is going on but we also intervene whenever necessary, in humility and in a spirit of shared experience. And we engage in frank exchanges and debates, mutual criticism and dialogue - for we believe that dialogue is the essence of the democratic process, provided it is "dialogue of the people" and not just among the privileged, and provided it is dialogue not for its own sake but for participating in collective transformation involving both micro and macro thresholds.

Lokayan believes in intervening in the social process through the method of dialogue and its concomitant processes - providing a broad platform of debate, documenting reality on diverse issues, undertaking research arising out of felt need of activists, and disseminating all this widely among both activists and the public at large. It believes in the primacy of dialogue because of its perception that we live in a deeply divided world with increasing loss of contact between the divisions and growing estrangement between them. It is an estrangement that not only promotes ignorance and loss of empathy, but through capsuled stereotypes and in-built prejudices creates a psychic condition of growing immunization, apathy and amnesia. We live in a habitat consisting of two worlds that are so wide apart that it is just not possible to think of them as being one. This is not along the post-war stereotypes of the capitalist and communist worlds or the North and the South or the earlier one of the West versus the East. The two worlds I speak of cut across all these along the simple indicators of human survival and access to resources and life opportunities as well as access to political power and decision-making institutions.

The "two worlds" are also found within each nation and at the lower reaches of territorial existence. Thus there are not just two worlds inhabiting this planet of ours but also two Indias; and within India, each political entity and each human settlement, whether urban or rural, is split into two. This split undermines both larger unities of the national or the sub regional kind and the sense of community at the local level. But, even worse than this, there is another process at work that undermines the rich social diversity and cultural plurality through which a sense of unity had been organically felt for so long. Modern technology and the modern State seek to deal with the problem of poverty or exploitation or inequity by imposing centralizing and homogenizing solutions that are meant to "integrate" various elements. But in fact, modern economy and the modern State destroy natural and cultural diversity and far from integrating, in fact, produce a basically dualist economy and centralising State. The modern project of integration, whether into the world economic market or into the world strategic order and the technological marketplace, has effectively split each society into two. And the more the integration of the one segment, the less the care and understanding and knowledge about the other.

The Lokayan dialogues and related processes are a way of raising issues that go to the heart of the great divide between the two Indias. We do this in a variety of ways: Through contact and communication between academics, professionals and opinion-makers residing in the metropolitan world and activists and political cadres working among groups and constituencies in the non-metropolitan, "vernacular" world.

Through dialogue among individuals sensitized to the grassroots reality in different ways or having different ideological interpretations of that reality. And above all through establishing contact and building relationships among the activists themselves and through them the diverse public they attempt to serve. We have found that the world of action too is a highly divided world. And so is the world of knowledge and social analysis and ideological interpretation.

Lokayan is an attempt to build bridges across both the world of action and the world of knowledge. It is also an attempt at normative interventions ? we seek to do all this simultaneously and not in separate compartments of reflection and action, theory and praxis, science and practical knowledge. In this lies Lokayan's distinctiveness, as a method of social intervention: relating and interrelating diverse segments of practical reality and enabling the practitioners of knowledge to

participate in the building of the same interrelationships.

Lokayan also represents a mode of action, of intervention, of politics, of struggle. While its members operate outside the Parliamentary and the party spaces, their work and activities, including the knowledge and intellectual debate they generate, are clearly political in nature. It is just that these are carried out at different thresholds of the political process, through quite different infrastructures of democratic participation from those in which political parties and electoral machines operate. And in articulating this process, Lokayan activists employ forms and procedures of intellectual intervention in ways that assist and enhance the political role of action groups and individuals engaged in political acts. There is an impression about Lokayan that it consists of a bunch of intellectuals who meet and talk and write, and publish that it is not concerned with actual action. This is not true. Lokayan's innovation is to closely relate its activities to the concerns and problems of those involved in political action, from the grassroots to the national - and in some ways international - thresholds. On the other hand, Lokayan operates from a basic premise arising out of its perception and understanding of the crisis of our times: that it is fundamentally an intellectual crisis, a crisis of ideas, a crisis of human knowledge, both generally but especially in the social arena. The stock of theories and models of social change and progress that have shaped the modern industrial civilization, its colonial expansion and its subsequent even larger expansion through the paradigm of modernization and 'development' has created the world we live in. It is a world in an undesirable state in numerous ways, among other things because of this intellectual tutelage of the whole world to the post-Enlightenment Western models and to the framework of modern science and technology through which these models have structured patterns of domination, manipulation and violence. This undesirable state of affairs cannot be substantially changed without raising basic questions about the structure of economic and political reality and the ideas and assumptions underlying it. Of course, we must also come forward with alternative answers to existing ways of managing the world. And this is a fundamentally intellectual task, an intellectual-political task. This is our conviction.

It is in the manner of conceiving and pursuing this intellectual-political task that Lokayan's specificity has methodology has developed. Lokayan has been a movement away from specialized knowledge to what we call social knowledge. Second, while it promotes carefully conducted studies in selected problem areas, it has moved away from the cool and amoral conception of scientific objectivity which does not permit one to take sides. We, in Lokayan, believe in taking sides, not in any dogmatic or sectarian manner or in any watertight ideological frame but on the basis of informed consideration of diverse or opposing points of view and a "dialogue" among these. And third, Lokayan conceives of the knowledge process as one of participation and involvement of diverse people, not just academics and intellectuals but activists, professionals and politicians as well. Indeed, Lokayan's basic input into India's intellectual, political and social life has been that based on the activist-intellectual interactions which are raising new issues, asking unconventional questions and, as we shall see, redefining the agenda of both political action and political theory.

Our activity of raising new questions and coming up with new issues does not take place in a vacuum. Nor is there some previously well-thought out grand design that only ideologues and model-builders are given to indulge in. Our thinking has gradually crystallized from a series of interactions between different strands, arising out of struggles against existing hegemonies in the social structure, resistance to exploitation and inequities generated by the development process, new forms of protest within the broad civil liberties and human rights movement, and new and alternative ideas and experiments in technology, social and economic organization and modes of decision-making and participation. Lokayan's is an effort to broaden the scope and the range of politics, to open up new spaces in both the sphere of the State and in the large and complex terrain of civil society outside the State, which in India presents a vast arena. It is this simultaneous process of "conscientization", engagement in actual struggles as well as a search for new alternatives on a variety of concrete tasks that Lokayan is concerned with.

It is process that has given rise to a new class of people drawn from the highly conscious and politicized stream of the middle classes. These individuals are engaged in a wide range of grassroots activism but also in broad touch with the larger context within which their work among the distressed and the restless masses has to be carried out. It is from this convergence of restless people getting increasingly conscious of their plight and a conscientious and equally restless class of volunteer politicians (to be distinguished from professional party politicians) on the one hand and concerned intellectuals on the other that new grassroots movements are emerging and pressing on the in stream political process in India. Such convergence of activists and intellectuals is gradually making it possible to articulate and present the large numbers and wide range of micro experiments and struggles in a macro perspective. This is precisely where Lokayan's overall aim and perspective lie - in bringing to bear at the threshold of macro politics the stirrings and struggles that have appeared in a variety of micro settings. It is a process still under way and has by no means been fulfilled. But it has begun.

From this process another convergence is taking shape: new definitions of the agenda of politics and the rise of new social movements. For example, the issue of environment. It is not something that can any longer be left to experts in ecology or

in economic development or to departments of environment. These departments may have been set up in response to popular pressures but they have now become part of the bureaucratic status quo. Nor can environmental problems be left to be sorted out in the future. The environment must be preserved and regenerated here and now and cannot be left to pious declarations of governments. It must become part of peoples' own active involvement, including agitations to restrain the State and corporate interests from destroying the resource base of the poor, of future generations as well as the resources of non-human species and plants with whom our lives are organically linked. Ordinary people understand this much more than experts.

The same is the case with health, with access and entitlement to food and nutrition, with shelter and housing. It is increasingly being realized that the new hazards to health, the new epidemics that are breaking out, and the problems associated with modern drugs are in good part a product precisely of experts in the medical profession. The horrors let loose by chemical industries and nuclear plants are increasingly coming to light; the tragedy in Bhopal dramatized it but this is happening in many other places too. The so-called self-reliance in food production (as in India) has little to do with actual access and entitlement to that food for the poor, and the same applies to shelter and housing and the availability of drinking water and access to fuel. The green and the white "revolutions", the revolution in materials technology and the umpteen schemes of "Housing for the poor" have not been able to remove the scourge of hunger and malnutrition, of millions being shelter less, of still more millions being driven from the rural areas into ghettos of dirt, squalor and disease in the cities from where, too, they are bulldozed and driven away and tossed around hither and thither. The poor have been reduced to being stateless people in their own State. All this is making matters that were hitherto considered issues for experts and specialized handling into urgent political tasks.

Implied in this is yet another change that has taken place in the thinking on development which has a bearing on practical politics and on intellectual work. The earlier logic of development based on accumulation-distribution - in which distribution was to be taken care of at a later stage - has been exposed and repudiated. Implied in that logic was another presumption, never fully spelt out. It looked upon people as objects, not as subjects in their own right; as beneficiaries of the process of development, not as direct participants in it. Thus, they had no control over how things should go. And things have gone awry. This is now being realized. And with this realization has also come the conviction that the process of distribution, access and empowerment, of narrowing gaps and countering monopolies are matters in which the people themselves will have to be involved, through their own organizations and through their own conceptions of what is relevant and what is not. These are issues of sheer survival; they are too serious to be left to either technocrats or professional politicians.

Nowhere is the enlargement and redefinition of the scope of politics brought out as vividly and dramatically as in what is called the women's movement. I prefer to think of it as a feminist input into our whole thinking on politics. It has not just enlarged the scope of politics by bringing into its ambit what was until recently considered a personal and a private world. From a position that the personal and the political are polar opposites to one that "personal is political" on the position that "political is personal" is a massive shift, not just in the position of women in politics but in our whole understanding of politics as such.

The entry of women in politics is leading to new approaches and methods to deal with basic problems like the environment, health, drunkenness, sanitation, reassertion of the community and the choice of technology. The feminist input serves not just women, but also men too. There is no limiting relationship between feminist values and being a woman. Above all, there is emerging an unprecedented convergence - between the ecological and feminist movements and between the two of them and the peace movement. This has already happened in Europe with the spectacular spread of the peace movement and with the affirmation that peace and disarmament are too important to be left to governments. In realising that, left to themselves, governments will, in all likelihood, blow up the world, women have played a major role. This is yet to happen in our part of the world. Our people are still under the spell of theories of threat from within and without. But the awakening will come there, too even if it takes time and calls for much greater effort to build pressures from the grassroots; we just cannot afford to be prisoners of this arms race, and women will have to play a major role in changing this.

But the more important point is one about the interrelationship of issues and movements, of a holistic approach to life, which goes against the grain of the modern scientific culture with its emphasis on specialization and fragmentation. As women come out of their presently narrow approach of catching up with men, and as feminist values become more generalised for humanity as a whole, a holistic approach will develop. It will be an approach that is also plural and based on complementarities. This is more likely to happen in the non-Western world than in the West because our cultures have always been embedded in a holistic way of life; they have just been recessive in recent times.

I have said earlier that it is in this effort at interrelating issues and transcending a specialized conception of both

knowledge and action and, through such a conception, also interrelating levels and thresholds - of micro and macro - that Lokayan has found its role both as an articulator of what is already under way and as an intervener in it by raising new questions and initiating dialogue and debates on them. It is this perception of our role through the method of dialogue that has made it possible for us to transcend the gaps that exist between the world of action and the world of intellect (a dichotomy that is based on a rather narrow view of knowledge) and between both these worlds and the organs of public opinion (imperceptibly the content of both reportage and commentary in the press and in the media has been changing). And in the same manner, we also hope to transcend the gap between the modern metropolitan world and the 'vernacular' world from which it has over time got so alienated. We are still struggling at this because so many of us live in the metropolitan world even if the political leaders of that world wished we were not there. We raise critical voices which they wish were not raised.

Our efforts by no means are successful; all we can claim is that the voices which we reflect and articulate cannot any longer be suppressed. We do realize the larger context in which we operate. It is a context in which the engines of growth are in decline, where the organised working class is not growing and the process of marginalisation is spreading, where technology is turning anti-people, where development has become an instrument of the privileged class, and the State has lost its role as an agent of transformation, or even as a protector and mediator in the affairs of the civil society. In fact one finds that the whole relationship between the State and civil society is increasingly being visited by a growing coercion of the State apparatus. There is a growing demand for unity and consensus - not in the form of an organic expression of civil society but in the form of compliance with whatever happens to be the ruling orthodoxy - dissent from which is considered illegitimate. And as this happens, the State becomes more and more repressive.

All this is taking place within a global context in which the centralising thrust does not stop at the national centre; it makes the nation-state itself an abject onlooker and a client of a global "world order". It is a context of growing international pressures and subtle brainwashing that herald an end of self-reliance of the developing countries. There is at work a process of integration of the organized national economy into the world market while removing millions of people from the economy by throwing them into the dustbin of history - impoverished, destitute, drained of their own resources and deprived of minimum requirements of health and nutrition, denied 'entitlement' to food, fuel, water and shelter and even access to their traditional cultures. In short they have been made an unwanted and dispensable lot whose fate seems to be 'doomed'.

It is with the plight of these rejects of society and of organized politics that the grassroots movements and non-party formations in India are concerned. They are a part of the democratic struggle at various levels, in a radically different social context from what was posited both by the incrementalists - and the revolutionaries. They have sprung up at a point of history when existing institutions and the theoretical models on which they were based have run their course. There is a search for new instruments of political action in the large vacuums in political space that are emerging, thanks to the decline in the role of the State as an agent of transformation and the virtual collapse of 'government' in large parts of rural India. The grassroots movements and non-party formations are based on deep stirrings of consciousness, on an awareness of crisis that can conceivably be turned into a catalyst of new opportunities. They need to be seen as a response to the incapacity of the State to hold its various constituents in a framework of positive action, its growing refusal (not just inability) to 'deliver the goods' when it comes to the poor and its increasingly repressive character. The repression is directed against vulnerable sections of the population, activists working among them, intellectual dissidents and groups and organisations associated with these. What these groups and organisations are in fact doing is to open alternative political spaces outside the usual arena of party and government though not outside the State. When the State and other vested interests mount a backlash, these organisations are called upon to play a further role of nurturing and providing protection to the victims of this backlash. Lokayan both joins in this effort and sensitizes the wider public to the realities on the ground.

In sum, the phenomenon of 'grassroots' activism is a part of an attempt to kindle faith and energy in anti-establishment forces in a variety of settings at a time of general drift and loss of elan. It is also a time when the suffering masses are scared of confrontation with the status and thus, a time which calls forth people who have the will, creativity and a readiness to wage sustained struggles, not just against a particular local tyrant but against the larger system, both national and international.

Not everyone involved in popular movements sees it in this manner. Many of them are too preoccupied with immediate struggles to be able to think in wider terms; others are suspicious of both abstractions and aggregates. And, in any case, the conditions for concerted and consolidated action informed by an adequate theory are just not there. And yet there is enough evidence to suggest that underlying the micro movements is a search and restlessness for a more adequate understanding of the forces at work as well as a more adequate response to them. The movements show a certain conviction that available ideologies are inadequate. They have enough experience which tells them that the existing

instruments of formal politics - Parties, elections, even the Press and judiciary - cannot be expected to cope with the crisis in which they and those they work among find themselves. In one area after another, where we in Lokayan have had dialogues with activists working among the "untouchables", the landless, the tribals and various other segments of the rural poor, we found that none of the existing Parties, including those that mouth radical slogans, really cared for these incoherent, unorganised and on the whole mute suffering masses. Hence the need for a new genre of organization and a new conception of political roles.

It is a conception of politics that differs from party politics in that, for it, State power is not seen as the only - or even the predominant - object of politics. It sees an equal, perhaps even greater necessity to keep struggling against - injustices which are bound to occur no matter which Party of coalition of Parties is in power. It believes in experimenting with new modes of organizing social, economic and technological spaces, insisting on norms in politics and in keeping the intellectual ferment alive. The new conception of politics holds that it is not enough to provide participation in the system; the aim is also to create a just society. Participation is necessary but not sufficient for this to happen. A just society needs self-government and a decentralized order through which the masses are empowered. But it is not decentralization in the sense of a scheme of territorial devolution of functions and resources to lower levels but decentralization in which the people are the centre.

For us in India there is no alternative but to move towards a pluralist, decentralized polity with a humane technology and a relatively self-reliant economy. Our concept is that the self-reliance for the people, not just for the State as has been the thinking on self-reliance in the context of the New International Economic Order. In our highly plural context a just society cannot be built except by the people coming into their own and assuming responsibilities for shaping their lives. We just cannot afford to hand things over to experts. This may be possible in centralized and homogeneous societies like the Western ones. To follow that model in India is of necessity to create a dual society with large masses left out of citizenship, out of civilization really.

Fundamentally, the vision that informs the grassroots model of mass politics (as against the parliamentary or presidential or party model of mass politics) is one in which the people are more important than the State. This is crucial and it is not as simple as it sounds. In fact, in times we are living in, it is a revolutionary idea. The dominant tendency and mode of thought today is to place the State above the people, the security of the nation-State above people's security; the removal of real or imaginary threats to the State has become more pertinent than preventing threats to the people and their interests.

To restore to the people their sovereignty is not to undermine the role of the State but to transform it. This transformation can be achieved only through the transformation of the civil society, not the other way around. For this, the role of the centralized State must decline. The State will be very much there - some functions will have to be carried out by a centralized apparatus - but the State must basically operate in concert with other centres as well as other institutional spaces in civil society. And, for this to happen, we need to move beyond the nation-State syndrome of Statehood. We must, in particular, move beyond the 'national security State' syndrome which has been the source of both authoritarianism and hegemonism in our time. In any case, so long as the 'national security State' rules the roost, the masses cannot and will not come into their own.

For us regaining power for the people, for communities, for autonomous societal forces is crucial. To that end Lokayan aims to be a "dialogue of the people". It still is not one, not adequately at any rate. But that is its conception. We need all the empathy and involvement and support that we can mobilize for this purpose - and a dialogue, a continuing dialogue with others similarly inclined in other parts of the world. It is in this spirit of fellowship that we accept the Right Livelihood Award.