## 8.Economic and Political Weekly

[This is an edited version of an interview of N.Krishnaji conducted by Indira Chowdhury in Hyderabad on the 23rd of November 2013. It is about the Economic and Political Weekly (EPW). The audiotape will be kept in the EPW archives. C Rammanohar Reddy, editor of the journal, was present at the interview.]

**IC:** In these interviews I like to begin with a bit of biographical detail. I want you to reflect on your intellectual background and the factors in that background that led to your present profession. We may begin with where and when you were born.

**NK:** I was born in 1935 in Berhampur, Orissa. Recently, there was a big cyclone there.

**IC:** I know Berhampur.

**NK:** I had my early education there. Later, I went on to Andhra University, where I studied mathematics.

**IC:** So you did your BA in mathematics?

**NK:** No, there was a three-year honours course in the South in those days after the 'Intermediate' course in college (I.A. in arts or I.Sc. in science that roughly correspond to the 'plus two' school stage these days). Instead of doing a BA in two years and later an MA in another two years, you did this three-year BA Honours course to qualify for an M.A. automatically. So I did that and saved a year. Then I was unemployed for a while.

**IC:** So which years were these in Andhra University?

**NK:** This was from 1951 to 1954. Later, I was unemployed for about two years.

**IC:** This was in Vishakhapatnam?

**NK:** My place is Berhampur, I told you. I got back home after studies in Visakhapatnam. In those days, there were very few jobs available in the teaching profession.

**IC:** But what made you choose mathematics?

**NK:** I was then interested in chemistry. Actually, in those days, admission was quite simple. You sent an application along with your mark list and either you got a place or you didn't get it – no tests or interviews. But I went to the university a little late and by that time seats in chemistry were all filled up. So the principal asked me, "You have got very good marks in mathematics. Why don't you do mathematics?" Having gone there, and not wanting to return empty-handed, I said, "Okay." (Laughs) So, really there was no planning of a career or anything like that.

**IC:** What was your father doing? What was your family doing?

**NK:** My father was a medical practitioner in Berhampur. All of us, brothers and sisters, got educated, with some of us getting college education.

**IC:** But there was no pressure on you to get into the medical profession or anything?

**NK:** No, not at all. That kind of pressure in families came much later. In those days, as far as I remember, in my generation in Berhampur, students chose various other subjects because engineering seats, available only in other cities, were in any case very few. And, from Berhampur you could not go into medicine because there was no biology at the Intermediate stage – a requirement for medical education - available at that time only in Cuttack. So people went into arts or science: economics, history etc; or mathematics, physics and chemistry, and so on.

**IC:** And when did your journey into economics begin?

**NK:** After my two years of unemployment, I worked as a lecturer in mathematics at Bhadrak College in Bhadrak, Orissa. I taught undergraduates. Then in 1959, I went to the ISI (Indian Statistical Institute) getting admitted into the highly reputed two-year statistics course.

**IC:** In Calcutta?

**NK:** In Calcutta, yes. And then I moved to Delhi. There is an ICAR (Indian Council of Agricultural Research) institution, called now the IASRI (Indian Agricultural Statistics Research Institute). I did a diploma in statistics there that gave me credentials in agricultural statistics.

**IC:** In Pusa or near Pusa.

**NK:** Yes, in the Pusa campus. Afterwards, I did not want to get into a government job. Let me explain: the IASRI trained statisticians for positions in different ICAR centres, and in departments of the government in various ministries. I wanted to get out of that system. I tried my luck at the Institute of Economic Growth. I just went there and after meeting some senior faculty members, I was offered a job as a research assistant. In fact, I was a research assistant to Khusro *Saab* (Professor A.M.Khusro).

**IC:** I see. Okay.

**NK:** The understanding was that I would help him with statistical analysis. I didn't have a clue that I would myself go into economics then. It started with some basic readings in economics, including agricultural economics – suggested by Khusro *Saab.*

**IC:** Agricultural economics. That itself is a very interesting trajectory. Tell me a bit about how IEG was in those days for a young researcher?

**NK:** IEG was a very good place. There were well-known senior scholars including Raj Krishna, Dharm Narain, A.M.Khusro, and V.K.R.V.Rao; and younger ones like Ashish Bose and C.H.Hanumantha Rao. Ashok Parikh and K. Krishnamurthy came a little later. They were all doing interesting work on Indian economic problems.

**IC:** And how many of them would do agricultural economics, which became your—

**NK:** Khusro *Saab* himself was doing it. Hanumantha Rao did agricultural economics, exclusively; Dharm Narain also. Raj Krishna was a little more diversified.

**IC:** More in terms of your interaction with other institutions, for example with D School?

**NK:** With D School, not very much. I was just a research assistant in IEG. So, access to senior faculty at the school was difficult; still I could meet K.L.Krishna, a senior of mine at the ISI, then a lecturer at the Delhi School. I used to go to the DSE and meet KLK and through him A.L.Nagar, a reputed econometrician. I didn't at that time start anything on my own. I was simply providing research assistance and trying to feel my way into possible areas for future study. I did try to register for a Ph.D. in Delhi University but they did not allow me to do that in economics because my basic degree was in mathematics. (Laughs) They said I could do it only in mathematics.

**IC:** I see.

**NK:** Khusro *Saab* was interested in my getting a PhD in economics because he was sure that I could do it in two to three years' time. But they didn't accept it.

**IC:** You know, you were in IEG at a very interesting point when we have had the Five Year plans coming up and all those discussions going on, so I am just wondering how much of it you can remember. What discussions went on?

**NK:** In the Institute of Economic Growth, there was not much research on planning. It was more in Delhi School that some work on plan models was being done. Amartya Sen was at the DSE, Sukhamoy Chakravarty came later. K.N.Raj was leading the school then. They were all concerned about planning and plan models. The Institute of Economic Growth, as far as I remember, was involved more in sectoral studies such as in agriculture and industry. As I told you, many were working on the Indian agricultural economy, but there were some doing studies in other areas. For example, D U Sastry worked on Indian industry problems. There were some demographers as well, but the biggest concentration was in agriculture. In fact, that's true of all other institutions in India as well at that time. During the first two five year plans and, perhaps even in the third one, agriculture was the most important sector in India, and so it attracted wide attention. Economists were devoting a lot of attention to the structure of the agricultural sector and its relationship with industry and other sectors, and so on. On plan models, I don't remember anything of significance at IEG. Oh yes, Krishnamurthy worked on macro-econometric models, but that was much later. By that time, I was already leaving the Institute of Growth. That was an accident. I want to say something about that.

**IC:** How did it happen?

**NK:** Well, T.N. Krishnan (TNK) had just joined the IIMC (Indian Institute of Management, Calcutta) faculty. He had finished his PhD at MIT a year before, and K.T.Chandy, the director of the IIM, recruited him. There was at that time a proposal for the establishment of the Food Corporation of India (FCI), and Chandy was slated to become its first chairman. He asked Krishnan to do the spadework on some relevant issues: What should be the structure of the FCI? What should be the policies of the government with respect to procurement and prices and so on? Krishnan was looking for a person to help him with that work. He had come to Delhi and after being introduced to each other by Arjun Sengupta we got into a friendly talk. I had at that time a background in agricultural statistics. Also I did some work with Khusro *Saab* on the food

economy. So TNK asked me whether I would be interested in coming to IIM. I love Calcutta, so I grabbed the opportunity and joined the IIM.

**IC:** You had been to Calcutta before?

**NK:** I was a student there at the ISI.

**IC:** Oh, you were in ISI before, of course.

**NK:** They offered me the position of a research fellow, then an equivalent of a lecturer, which was a promotion of a sort because I was only a research assistant in the IEG. They gave me complete freedom to do whatever I wanted, apart from helping Krishnan with the food project. Soon I started teaching courses also.

**IC:** What kind of courses?

**NK:** I was teaching econometrics right from the beginning, from the first batch onwards.

**C Rammanohar Reddy:** This is mid-60s, is it?

**NK:** The first batch was during 1964-66. I joined IIMC in ’65, so they were in their second year, and I taught econometrics, a special course given in the second year of the programme. Then, I was also teaching a course called “Demand Analysis”, which was based on a mixture of microeconomics and statistics.

**IC:** I see. Were there others teaching agricultural economics in IIM Calcutta?

**NK:** At IIM, we had three compulsory economics courses, micro, macro and a course in Indian economy. On Indian economy, we discussed agriculture, industry, trade and so on, and we all in the economics group shared the teaching. In fact, I used to teach the agricultural part along with T.N. Krishnan (and later with Nirmal Chandra). And there was Jati Sengupta – an econometrician. I don’t know if you have heard of him—

**IC:** Yes, I’d written an email to him just—

**NK:** I worked with him on some of his problems and then I began my own work in econometrics and statistics.

**IC:** When you say you had complete freedom there, did it mean that the MIT professors did not have that much of a say in formulating the syllabus?

**NK:** No, no. The structure in terms of courses was given. The syllabus of courses was a different matter. There were all kinds of disputes there but ultimately the individual faculty members chose what to teach. In terms of responsibilities, all faculty members had to teach two courses in a year basically. It was a "term" system – three months each of three terms, something like that - and then you had the summer vacation. It comes roughly to about eighty or ninety hours of teaching two courses in two terms. Plus you did some extra bits at the short-term executive courses, so it came to about hundred a year, which is the norm even now. We did all this in six months and the rest of the six months we could do anything we liked. Nobody asked us what we were doing. In fact, it was such a good system that there was no annual reporting on individual faculty records and performance, on teaching or research. Research was an independent activity, considered only if there was a question of promotion. For example I was promoted very soon after I joined in 1965 to a readership, within two years. It was largely based on my teaching record, but also a few publications in the pipeline

Although I was working with the economics group, teaching some courses in economics, my research then was in theoretical statistics and econometrics. We had a very strong group in quantitative methods including Tapas Sarkar and a few others.

**IC:** Tapas Sarkar is in New Zealand. But since you are talking about IIM Calcutta, I was just wondering what kind of role the leftist intellectual forces played within that institution but more generally in India.

**NK:** Ashok Mitra was there at the IIM, apart from other leftists like Nirmal Chandra, Paresh Chattopadhyay and Ranjit Sau. They couldn't influence the basic structure of the programs. But we, in the economics group, taught Indian economics and other courses (for example, international trade) in a certain way that exposed management students to the realities of Indian economy, from a left perspective. The courses we taught were therefore not the standard ones such as those taught in the Calcutta University and other such places. Also, there was a course in history that Barun De and Sabyasachi Bhattacharya - both left-inclined - were teaching that could not have been even thought of in any other IIM curriculum.

The leftist couldn't of course influence the standard management courses: marketing, finance, advertising etc

**CRR:** Sorry to interrupt but the *Economic Weekly* association started when you were at IEG….

**NK:** Yes. Sachin Chaudhuri used to come to Delhi. I think it was an annual trip he was making to the Delhi School and the university campus to talk to his contributors. So he came. I think it was 1964. I can't remember the date exactly. He came into Khusro S*aab*'s room where I was sitting. Khusro S*aab* was not there at that time. So he got talking to me and we chatted (as we smoked) about all kinds of things, and then he said, "If you do something on your own, send it to me and I will publish it."

**IC:** I see.

**NK:** I forgot about this and later I moved to Calcutta. EW had in 1965 in their annual number ---

**CRR:** March-April; February-March maybe.

**NK:** -- an article by Raj Krishna in which I found a flaw. So I wrote about that and sent it to Sachin Chaudhuri; and he published it without any editing. He wrote a letter also, a nice letter, asking me to write more. That is how it started.

**IC:** Did you meet him after that?

**NK:** No I didn't. I met him only once in Khusro *Saab's* room, as I've already told you; that's all.

**IC:**I see, and you wrote in EW in 1965 and after that mostly in EPW.

**NK:** After 1965, my next piece came in 1971. Krishna Raj was the editor at that time.

**IC:** So, how did you meet Krishna Raj?

**NK:** I met Krishna Raj a couple of times during the 1970s. It was only later that I got to know him well.

Let me explain: Between 1965 and 1971, I was doing research in theoretical statistics, resulting in a few publications in journals abroad. During the late 1960s, some Kisan Sabha people asked me to look at the wages of agricultural labour after the Green Revolution. There was then a confusing picture about the wage rates. While production of wheat expanded along with labour

productivity, it was not clear whether wages were increasing as well. Then I did a piece, which was not very conclusive, and I sent it to Krishna Raj. He was already the editor then. He became the editor in—

**CRR:** 1969.

**NK:** He kept my paper for a while, a few months. Then I wrote to him saying that either he should publish it or let me know otherwise so that I could send it somewhere else. Then he published it immediately and wrote a long apologetic letter. That's how I got to know him. After that, a few times when I was passing through Bombay, going to Ahmedabad or Pune, I met Krishna Raj a few times in his office, along with friends in our travelling group: Ranjit Sau, Nirmal Chandra and others. Then it has continued.

After I moved to Trivandrum, I gave up theoretical statistics and started working exclusively on Indian economic problems..

**IC:** But before that I want you to talk a bit about when you were in Delhi: At that point was EW widely discussed and read?

**NK:** No. At the Delhi School and the Institute of Economic Growth there were a lot of people who thought EW was an inferior journal. In fact, some research scholars used to call the EW writings as "percentage economics". That is, you don't do any modelling; you calculate growth rates and percentages to derive conclusions: that's percentage economics for you according to those young scholars in the school. Never mind, economists like K.N.Raj were associated with that kind of work. Others like Amartya Sen or Sukhamoy Chakravarty were supposed to be among the good and really competent economists, mainly because their work was on "theory" adorned by mathematics. That sort of opinions prevailed, but, on the other hand, in the Institute of Economic Growth, practically all, including the great V.K.R.V.Rao himself, used to publish in the EW along with Khusro, Raj Krishna, Hanumantha Rao and others. Outside Delhi, there were reputed economists like M.L.Dantwala and V.M.Dandekar who published their most important writings in the EW and later in the EPW. So, there was this ambivalent attitude among the students and some teachers as well at the DSE, and this continues even to this day in many academic institutions.

I have a lot to say on this. The EPW is not a 'refereed' journal, so the general impression is that you could publish anything you liked. And any publication in the EW/EPW was not given (by the sceptics) as much weight as a paper published outside, in the so-called international journals. But the EW was an accepted vehicle for many seniors at the IEG.

**IC:** That might be for its academic recognition, the peer review, but without that, I mean, generally there is nothing else in India in which the economy is being discussed.

**NK:** Exactly. That's right. Publishing a paper on the Indian economy in a refereed journal like the *Indian Economic Review* would take a lot of time, and it could be outdated in some respects by the time it's available in print. If I am writing something on the inflationary process, and it's published in the EPW, it gets noted now. Published after six months or a year it may lose some of its relevance.

**IC:** I think we already spoke about your contribution in 1971 but going back to the formation of *EPW* and the Sameeksha Trust, were you aware of that particular crisis when EW folded up and people were contributing to the start of the Trust?

**NK:** Yes, I knew because Ashok Mitra was collecting money for the Trust. I remember that 500 rupees got you a lifetime subscription to the proposed journal. My friend Ranjit Sau took it, and he probably gets still a free copy of the EPW. (Laughs)

**IC:** Yes, a lot of them talk about that actually. I think Amiya Bagchi also talks about it.

**NK:** I know it was a good bargain but I couldn't afford even that.

**IC:** (Laughs.) Since you were talking about Krishna Raj, I wanted to know more about that relationship. Whenever you went to Bombay you met him; I want you to tell me a little more.

**NK:** I wrote a piece on wheat prices in 1973 that attracted some attention and Krishna Raj liked it and he would refer to it later in some of his editorials. After that he started writing to me. He had those two bulky issues of the EPW, one special number and one annual number. He would ask me to write for those EPW numbers and sometimes suggest a subject, but otherwise he would say "write something and send it to me." Also, he used to send me books for review. That is how I got to know him, but it is only in the mid-1980s that we really got to know each other, after he had come to Calcutta twice, if I remember right. Ashok Mitra was the finance minister of West Bengal at that time, and he had organised some meetings. The first one was on the IMF loan and its conditionality. Ashok Mitra invited Krishna Raj along with a number of

economists from all over India, including some of us in Calcutta. The second time was a little later, again to discuss some aspects of Indian economic policy.

By that time some problems concerning EPW were accumulating. The general impression was that Krishna Raj was publishing papers coming mainly from Delhi, Calcutta and Bombay, and apparently neglecting other sources. This was one complaint. Second, that he would go by the names mentioned in the list of acknowledgments that say thanks to so and so, and if a name mentioned there was well known, he would publish it. These were serious complaints against Krishna Raj.

Another matter: In Calcutta, some of us decided that we should strengthen the EPW. Specifically, our concern was with the work on Indian economy. It is true that there were professional journals like *The Indian Journal of Agricultural Economics*, and *Indian Economic Review,* but there was a publication lag and, as I explained earlier, if you remain focused on the current problems, you had to publish in the EPW because of its wide readership among followers of Indian economics and politics. But at the same time the weekly had to ensure some quality in its articles. These were the sets of problems that we discussed with Krishna Raj. We met him in Calcutta to discuss these issues, as well as the possibility of refereeing at least some papers  Krishna Raj explained that refereeing was not possible in the case of EPW, a weekly journal. It's quite true because of the enormous workload involved. Editors of many professional journals, send the submitted papers to two referees to get their reports and then ask for revisions, and so on. All this means a lot of correspondence and inevitable publication delays – apart from the expenses involved. A weekly with limited financial resources simply cannot do all that. So how does he control the quality? He said, "We make a judgement based on a reading by our own staff" Also, that most of the good papers come from these places, Delhi or Calcutta, but he agreed that we could help others if they write interesting stuff.  About refereeing, he was not very sure of what we could do. Then we, A.Vaidyanathan, Amiya Bagchi, Nirmal Chandra, and a few others, asked him when he came for the second meeting at Calcutta: why don't you have a section of the EPW, which is completely refereed like a professional journal? Many people liked this idea earlier, and Krishna Raj immediately agreed. We called it the *Review of Political Economy* (RPE) covering contributions to political economy in a broad sense. EPW already had politics and economics in its name. We put it in a slightly different way. The review would appear once in six months, but it will have only papers fully refereed as in any professional journal. Krishna Raj agreed to all this, although later I was told that there was opposition within the Trust. I will tell you a little bit about that a little later. So we agreed and then my friends asked me to take charge of that Review. We began publishing the RPE from— I don't remember the dates.

**CRR:** 1985.

**NK: Yes,** 1985. So, before I moved here to Hyderabad in 1989, some seven or eight issues of that Review were published, with all papers fully refereed. However, it didn't work quite the way we wanted it to for two reasons. For one, the EPW itself carried articles from different disciplines week after week; from different perspectives, Marxist and other. The diversity was not immediately obvious because Krishna Raj himself would make selections and put them out in a way that showed no clear bias.

But the Review of Political Economy became a mixed bag lacking focus or intention. An example: The first issue itself had an article on Charles Dickens and another on Cobb-Douglas production functions. That kind of mixture does not look quite okay. That was one reason. Second is that quite surprisingly many writers, including some senior colleagues, didn't like this referring system in the EPW. If you wrote a paper for the Cambridge Journal of Economics, and got a rejection or were asked for revisions, you accepted that. But imagine that happening with EPW: a journal that perhaps routinely accepted all your stuff, so you just can't take it.

I can give you a few examples without mentioning names. One senior author actually withdrew the submitted paper after looking at the comments by a competent referee. (I was consulting with many scholars in Calcutta in history, political science and economics and the papers all went to competent referees.). This non-acceptance of the referee system in the EPW embraced junior people also. On a paper by a junior scholar on some peasant issues in South India, I had two very good referees. I sent the reports to the author, A few days later he walks into my room and says. "What is all this nonsense?" and started arguing with me. Then I had to tell him that you couldn't do this with the editor of a journal. You can't walk into his room and talk in an abusive way. So he walked away in a huff. That paper was published later in an international journal without any changes. What does that say about refereeing and the 'international' status of journals?

**CRR:** Is it?

**NK:** You may guess the name of the journal but I won't tell you.

**IC:** (Laughs)

**NK:** Another example: I had to send a paper to three referees and then I read it myself and told the author to make some changes. But no, he wouldn't make the

changes; he'd later make the charge that our refereeing system wasn't free of bias.

Then, finally after I moved from Calcutta to Hyderabad in 1989, I knew that I wouldn't be able to handle it all here. To run a journal with a refereeing system, it will take a lot of money and time, with support from scholars willing to help gratis. Fortunately, at the place I was working earlier (the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta, known as the Barun De Centre among academics), they supported this new EPW venture. Quite apart from that, we had referees mostly from Calcutta. I could make telephone calls to referees costing little; I couldn't do that from Hyderabad, so I gave it up. Then Krishna Raj himself edited the Review for another two-three issues after I moved to Hyderabad 1989 and then gently he dropped it.

**IC:** So it wasn't refereed anymore.

**NK:** No, the *Review of Political Economy* was dropped. But in the meantime, I think the *Review of Women's Studies* was started. That was on the basis of suggestions made to Krishna Raj at that time by Alice Thorner and others.

**IC:** That continues.

**CRR:** That was not refereed. But I got to know later that there were problems about the Review of Political Economy in the Board as well.

**NK:** Yes, I will tell you about that as far as I know. Ashok Rudra (a member of the Sameeksha Trust Board) was opposed to it. That I know. I don't know what happened in the Board. Around that time after we published one or two issues, I went to Santiniketan and met Ashok Rudra. He made one valid point, which is: you already have this diversity for studies in the EPW, why do you need this broad sense political economy as a separate review? So I explained to him that this is a refereed review that ensures quality. He wouldn't agree and wouldn't allow me to speak. He went on and on with his objections. Then he made the charge that Ashok Mitra and K.N. Raj who, according to him, had absolute control over the EPW, were using me. It was sheer nonsense, of course. In fact, when we started the Review, I never spoke to Ashok Mitra about it, or to Raj. It is only among friends including Amiya Bagchi, Nirmal Chandra, Ranjit Sau, Partha Chatterjee and Sabyasachi Bhattacharya that we have had the initial discussions. Ashok Mitra had nothing to do with the plans for the Review. And it was also not true that Ashok Mitra and K.N.Raj controlled the EPW. I don't think so.

**IC:** That was a perception.

**NK:** That was a perception. Then Rudra associated not only me but also my whole group. He said, "You fellows don't even know you are being led by Ashok Mitra and K.N.Raj." I am told that there were other people in the Board, in the Trust, who opposed the Review, but Krishna Raj ignored them obviously and started the journal and we ran it.

**CRR:** I can add to this something I got to know from a published source. In the book on the collected works of A.K.Dasgupta, there is a long introduction by Alakananda, his daughter, where she refers to this and apparently, as recorded, in the Board meeting A.K.Dasgupta opposed it, saying that, "Look, the whole journal is on political economy. Why are you having a separate one?" And made the criticism that this was really a "ruse" – ruse is my word – to consolidate the Marxian bent of EPW in this. It became a big thing in the Board, and so Alaknanda Patel claims he stepped down from the Board for that reason and this is one side of it. We don't know what exactly happened, but this account is based on published material and maybe one should put it on record.

**NK:** Incidentally, I talked to Krishna Raj a few times about the Marxian tilt of the journal. He said: you look at the EPW from the beginning, it has a stridently left position only in the editorials; if you look at the special articles section, in fact seventy-five per cent of it is non-left. It's true that he gave space to the Marxists. Taking a leftist stand was of course an editorial prerogative. In fact, he changed his stance in his later years.

**IC:** I was going to come to that, but before that I wanted to know a little more about the Emergency period and how the EPW coped?

**NK:** You can get an idea from what was getting published. I had no contact with Krishna Raj then. They repeated old editorials as a way of coping.

**CRR:** But others must have told you. From what I remember as somebody in his twenties who was reading EPW, Krishna Raj would take clippings from the newspapers of that time and choose certain clippings so that he told us a story.

**IC:** M S Prabhakara talks about it; he was there at that time. But before I come to the other Reviews of the journal and how EPW opens up to diverse disciplines, I wanted you to talk a little more about your work, where the articles you published in the '70s and '80s really look at not just at agricultural statistics and economics but looks at other issues of politics, family size, fertility. How did those interests come together?

**NK:** This was an accident. I was working on the Indian economy, basically on the food sector and prices, wages and that kind of things. But I suddenly got interested in issues of poverty and fertility. What happened was that in the MPhil course we were teaching at the CDS I used to share some lectures with Vaidyanathan...

**IC:** A. Vaidyanathan.

**NK:** Vaidyanathan was showing NSS data to the students to demonstrate that low per capita expenditure households had high family size. On the other hand, I discovered that if you look at the households classified by land holdings, you see something different. The agricultural labour households and small peasants have small families. As you go up the landholding scale you'd get an increasing family size. Even now it is true. So I tried to resolve this problem and got interested in questions of demographic variations and I continued to work on that.

**IC:** Because one sees these different things coming together in those articles. Earlier you would see them as in two separate sectors but it seems there is an attempt later to bring them together and correlate the data. That was in your work on Kerala also, wasn't it?

**NK:** Yes, I was there from 1973 to 1979. There was a general interest in Kerala's demographic transition at that time. Lots of students also started work on demographic issues in a more general sense.

**IC:** But you were also relating it to left movement in Kerala politics?

**NK:** No, that was an independent effort. I was interested in left politics. There was then a general leftist atmosphere or whatever you call it in the CDS. A lot of discussions on Kerala's political economy were taking place and one of my own students, Isaac, was very active in the movement. It was in that context I wrote one piece on the Kerala's left basically to focus on the fact that land reform had taken a back seat. Land reform is supposed to be a great success in Kerala but I showed - and other people have also shown - that it is not really true. What is true is the transfer of ownership from the big chaps to medium-sized tenants; and at the bottom the labourers got those ten cents of hutment land, but otherwise no major transfer of land had taken place. At that time, my calculation was that less than two lakh acres out of four million acres was deemed as excess of land over the ceilings, surplus by law. It is very little. So land reform in the sense of redistribution of land was not a great success except for the fact that all these people at the bottom, the labourers, have got those ten cents of homestead land. And that has had some political implications, which I

talked about, specially the strengthening of the middle class. If you keep on espousing their cause, you neglect the other revolutionary tasks.

**IC:** So, I wanted to go back to this EPW opening up through its review to other disciplines during Krishna Raj's editorship and I wondered if you would be aware of how this actually happened? Was he really seeking out these different debates within disciplines or was it a political trend that was true of those times?

**NK:** No, I suppose it was partly the response to the political and economic environment, but Krishna Raj was quite active, quite attuned to it, and has promoted a new course for the journal. For example, the mode of production debate during the 1970s and later; there was certain spontaneity about it, but it's partly a response to the changing environment, the Green Revolution in particular.

**IC:** I am wondering also if these debates have any continuity with the kind of orientation that comes in the '90s with his approach to globalisation and there is a certain change in political orientation that happens.

**NK:** I don't know. EPW has changed. I don't know to what extent Krishna Raj has contributed to this. Krishna Raj of course changed his political stand. In fact, I corresponded with him on this.

**IC:** Tell us a bit about that correspondence.

**NK:** There was a letter from the JNU people**,** which Krishna Raj published, I think, with the title *Fallen Angel.* There Prabhat Patnaik, Utsa Patnaik, C.P.Chandrasekhar and others in that group, accused Krishna Raj of getting himself sold to the World Bank. I am not putting it in the exact words, but they said that it would be no wonder if he now toes the BJP line or something of that kind. It was quite a nasty letter. So I talked to him about it. And I wrote to him also because this happened in the '90s when email was there already for easy correspondence; I think it was in 1992-93. He said, "After the fall of the Soviet Union and China going the capitalist way very clearly, many things that we believed in are no longer true. I don't believe in them myself. On the other hand, I am not convinced that this so-called good governance, transparency, open economy and all the rest of it is an answer. There is total confusion. He said, "I will no longer go by that kind of a thing". The other accusation was that Krishna Raj was suppressing some of their [that is the leftist] contributions.

**CRR:** Is it true?

**NK:** The accusation was not in that letter but in private conversations. Anyway, I won't mention names but ---

**IC:** Some of them had stopped writing as well?

**NK:** They stopped writing, that's it; on their own. Even Ashok Mitra (ever the friend of EPW), at one time, was very angry with Krishna Raj for taking a so-called Naxalite position on many issues, and giving more space to Ashok Rudra than he deserved (laughs). Anyway—

**IC:** So what happened with the globalisation?

**NK:** Krishna Raj opened up. His argument was that only the editorial policy has changed. So if someone wrote something along the old lines, it is possible that he didn't publish it any more. Others sections remained open to all political hues.

**IC:** But what about the other sections? Those remained the same, the discussions, the commentary, etc, sections in the EPW?

**NK:** There were some changes that I have not very carefully followed but maybe it was also because old columnists like Ashok Mitra and Balraj Mehta and some other left oriented ones were all gone, by the '90s.

**IC:** Do you have questions related to this period, Ram?

**CRR:** No, more on the 1970s-80s. What role did the journal play in social sciences in India? There was always the view on the so-called percentage economics; a tendency to dismiss it but EPW was also a place where everybody wrote. There was a lot of noise, a lot of excitement, so one wonders how that took place. Is it because it was the only journal or because Krishna Raj took an active interest or the EPW community as such, meaning the writers, friends *et cetera* took an active interest, because in some ways you could say that those were the heydays of the journal - heydays in the sense that they had an impact on policies in the 70s in the so called "Garibi Hatao" period of Indira Gandhi and had an impact on the academia, a large part of which was left-oriented at that time.

**NK:** EPW had a tremendous impact in the social sciences in general, partly because as you say a lot of senior people wrote in the journal and on topics relevant to ongoing political economy. Apart from that, it's a complex thing. Krishna Raj himself has certainly played a role, pivotal role, in the whole thing

because it's not that the articles would be submitted and then reviewed and all that. Krishna Raj actively pursued writers and contributors.

**IC:** From what I have heard, he was very, very encouraging of students, so he would be quicker with student articles. I don't know how far that is true.

**NK:** Probably, later, in the later part of his tenure, he developed this.

**CRR:** Student articles, which were recommended by people, not just any student.

**NK:** Yes.

**CRR:** Supposing Krishnaji was to say, look, so and so is working on this --- In a sense, there were talent scouts you know, to find the—

**IC:** So he had that very active relationship with academics.

**NK:** Yes. Learning that my daughter finished her Masters degree in Mass Communication in 1996, he immediately sent her two books and asked her to review them.

**IC:** So if you were to look at the way in which the journal's role in society has evolved over the years, what would you say about it because you have been following it from its early days?

**NK:** I don't know how influential the journal is now, but it has improved in many respects, I would say at the same time, not losing its traditional character. But I don't know; I've been out of action for a long time now. In the academic world, I think it still plays a very important role and most probably the people take EPW publications more seriously now than earlier. This I can see from what has been happening to some of my students. They manage to get promotions on the basis of the articles published in the EPW, which would not have happened earlier. But as for its contribution to social sciences in general, one can't really say much with assurance.. It has made a concrete contribution if you look at the whole period from the first 50 years or so. You can't periodise it further. Krishna Raj established the foundations and Ram is carrying it out.

**IC:** In between those two years, I don't have too many people telling me about R.K. Hazare's editorship; when he was there for a short period after—

**NK:** Yes, R.K.Hazare and someone else?

**CRR:** R.K.Hazare.

**IC:** He was there 1967 to 1969, and I am hoping that some other people—

**NK:** Ashok Mitra would have told you about him.

**IC:** A little bit, not much because Krishna Raj was still very active as assistant editor during that period. I think he is the one who has the longest—

**CRR:** Actually, we did not ask Dr.Krishnaswamy, but the other day I discovered Dr.Krishnaswamy wrote an obituary on Hazare. This is about ten years ago.

**IC:** May be the RBI governors might have a little bit to say.

**CRR:** No, not really. He is from a different era.

**IC:** I wanted to ask you more specifically about the articles that you have published and the discussions around them. I know that also apart from your own articles, one of the longest and the most detailed reviews of Sumanto Banerjee's book on Naxalbari was written by you. So that's when I saw the continuity between your understanding of Left politics in Bengal and looking at Kerala later on. That I was curious about, but generally I wanted to know a bit about the debates around what you published.

**NK:** On the prices piece that I wrote, there were lots of others who had also written on the subject at that time, with a lot of discussion. My contribution was discussed in that context. Prabhat Patnaik was writing, Amit Bhadhuri was writing, Amiya Bagchi was writing – all on similar issues. My work was based on Ashok Mitra's book on class relations.

The demographic part that I have been doing in the last twenty years or so: I did some work on the sex ratio, which in fact did not get the attention that I thought it deserved (laughs). I argued that the sex ratios are better among the poor people and this may not be because there is less discrimination, but because generally there is poor nutrition anyway and lack of access to health care, which takes an equal toll of both girls and boys. Anyway, it's a speculative kind of writing.

**IC:** I am wondering, you know, why these don't come up later because these are articles you published in the 80s.

**NK:** Yes the 1980s.

**IC**: And if we look at the debates that come up in the 90s post liberalisation, there's quite a bit around fertility, around reproductive rights.

**NK:** My articles have probably become dated although I edited a book along with Vina*di*, Vina Mazumdar, you must have seen that. Some publisher in Calcutta published it. You haven't seen it?

IC: That's the Stree—

**NK**. The book was called the *Enduring Conundrum* or something like that on sex ratios.

**IC:** That's by Stree Publishers?

**CRR:** Not Stree. By Rainbow!

**IC:** So that is the work you did later with Vina Mazumdar.

**NK:** With Vina Muzumdar, I wrote only the introduction. Nirmala Banerjee wrote a piece and this IAS person, what is his name—

**IC:** Kasturi?

**NK:** Not Kasturi. Aginihotri. Anyway, I edited that book. Vina Mazumdar wrote a long piece on Asok Mitra (the ICS Mitra not the EPW Ashok Mitra). Not a very interesting collection, actually.

**IC:** Do you feel some of the interests you had in the '80s were before their time because people started focusing on those almost a decade later.

**NK:** Now, the thing is this: fertility decline is taking place everywhere. It's no longer a big issue; it is a question of time. You know, places like Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh also have started to see fertility decline. In Tamil Nadu, it has taken place at a very rapid rate; same in the case of Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka, apart from Kerala. So, the population issue is not attracting as much attention as it did in the late '60s, early '70s and continuing into the '80s. Not just in the Indian context but the third world as a whole. Many countries in Africa are now showing clear signs of fertility declining. So it's simply a matter of time when the world population will stabilise at fifteen billion or twenty billion or whatever; nobody can predict the likely number. So, I don't think population is being discussed with as much attention now as it was in the '80s, except in the context of environment.

**IC:** But your interest in it continued because you also did something on religion and fertility.

**NK:** That's a response to a piece by Mari Bhat. Mari did a very dishonest thing. He made a projection based on the continuation of current fertility differences. True, Muslim fertility rates were higher when he wrote. That was about fifteen years ago, something like that. Whatever it is, they were already on a decline. He made some forecasting based on those rates, which is a dishonest thing to do because the rates were declining.

In fact, Mari Bhat made a calculation which showed that some of the districts in UP and Bihar would become Muslim majority ones, if the current rates continue, which is an absurd thing to say.(Laughs) And what does it matter? There are some districts in India even now where there is a Muslim majority. In Telangana, no?

**CRR:** No. Malapuram in Kerala.

**NK:** Yes.

**IC:** I think I have finished my questions. Thank you.