

M. N. Srinivas: the man and his work

By T. N. Madan

TO SAY that someone's death has created a void that is difficult to fill is often only trite, but sometimes it is true. The unexpected death of Mysore Narasimhachar Srinivas (better known as M. N. Srinivas) after a short illness on November 30, exactly two weeks after his 83rd birthday, removes from our midst a most distinguished scholar and citizen, one without peer. Since the 1950s he was internationally recognised as a front rank leader among scholars devoted to the study of Indian society, and his views on matters of national concern, which appeared in major newspapers and magazines from time to time, were read by the interested public with avid interest. Prof. Srinivas's death will be widely and deeply mourned.

Prof. Srinivas discovered sociology during his undergraduate days at Mysore University. It interested him sufficiently to go to Bombay for further studies in the subject at the only university department of sociology in the country at that time. He evinced early interest in research and wrote a Master's level dissertation on the basis of published materials, which was published as *Marriage and Family in Mysore* in 1942. He proceeded to engage in the generation of primary data through fieldwork in Coorg, and earned a Ph.D. on its basis under the supervision of G.S. Ghurye, one of the two sociology professors in the country at that time. Prof. Srinivas later went to Oxford, where he reanalysed his material to write a theoretically informed interpretation of the significance of domestic rituals in the maintenance of social order among the Coorgs. Prof. A. R. Radcliffe Brown, one of the most famous anthropologists of his time, and his successor, E. E. Evans Pritchard, were Prof. Srinivas's mentors at Oxford. They were sufficiently impressed with his work to appoint him to the newly created Lectureship in Indian Sociology and, at the same time, enabled him to undertake a fieldwork based study of a multi-caste village near his home city of Mysore.

Prof. Srinivas was already back in India, as the first Professor of Sociology at the M.S. University of Baroda, when the Oxford doctoral dissertation was published in 1952 by the Clarendon Press, under the

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title of *Religion and Society among the Coorgs of South India*. It immediately attracted wide scholarly attention and was acknowledged as a modern classic within a few years. Among other things, Prof. Srinivas pointed out that Hinduism and Hindu society were absorptive in character, gradually incorporating diverse folk cults and communities, and characterised by much variety. He wrote of the regional and all-India levels of Hinduism and of the caste system. He also identified the process through which lower castes seek to raise their ritual and social status by adopting traits characteristic of upper-caste lifestyles, and called it 'Sanskritisation'.

The 1950s were witness to elections in India at various levels on the basis of universal adult franchise. Prof. Srinivas was quick to see that caste loyalties would be utilised in electoral politics. He came out boldly in a number of addresses and articles pointing out that caste would thus find a new lease of life, that it would not wither away under the impact of modern political institutions but adapt to them. In data-rich and insightful analyses of village politics, he showed how numerical and economic strength, combined with high caste status and the ability to use physical force, enabled some families to emerge as the 'dominant caste', and direct others to follow their lead. Prof. Srinivas thus illumined the process of the formation of 'vote banks'.

Prof. Srinivas combined a steady flow of publications with time-consuming and remarkably successful work as an institution builder. After placing the Department of Sociology at Baroda University on a firm foundation, he moved on to Delhi in 1959 at the invitation of Vice-Chancellor V.K.R.V. Rao to start the teaching of sociology at the Delhi School of Economics. He spent the next two decades nurturing the new Department, and had the satisfaction

of seeing it recognised by the University Grants Commission as a Centre for Advanced Studies. In 1970 he was persuaded by Prof. Rao to become the Joint Director of the Institute of Social and Economic Change in Bangalore, with Mr. Rao himself as the Director. Again Prof. Srinivas established a sociology division and later assumed the institute's chairmanship.

In the midst of all these and other professional responsibilities, Prof. Srinivas managed to maintain his presence on the international academic scene. He held many visiting appointments and fellowships in England, the U.S. and elsewhere. It was during his stay as a Fellow at the Advanced Centre for Behavioural Sciences at Stanford (U.S.) that his processed field-notes of 18 years of field work in a Karnataka village got gutted when, in 1970, rioting arsonists set on fire the building in which he had his office. Out of this misfortune, Prof. Srinivas evolved a new genre of sociological writing, based on the imaginative recreation of field observations aided by a good memory. The resultant book, appropriately entitled *The Remembered Village* (1976), was received, like the *Coorgs* and *Social Change* books, most enthusiastically by sociologists and social anthropologists everywhere. It was praised for its sociological worth no less than for its literary merit.

Prof. Srinivas's achievements won him many accolades and honours. Of these, particular mention may be made of the following: the honorary doctorate of the University of Delhi; the Padma Bhushan; the Rivers and the Huxley Medals of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland, the latter medal being the highest honour that the Institute may bestow; the Corresponding Fellowship of the British Academy; and the Foreign Fellowship of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. At the time of his death, Prof. Srinivas was J.R.D. Tata Visiting Professor

at the National Institute of Advanced Studies (NIAS) in Bangalore.

When I think of Prof. Srinivas, three qualities stand out in my memory above all others. First (and here I speak as much from personal experience as from what I have heard from others), his genuine interest in other human beings of all stations, high and low, which found particular expression in his support of students (not only his own) and young scholars. His wide sympathies combined with keen observation and a marvellous sense of humour made him the adorable raconteur that he was. His ability to laugh, including at himself, was infectious.

Secondly, I was impressed by his eye for significant detail in commonplace things and events and his truly impressive ability to write about it engagingly. He never paraded theories nor did he feel the need for jargon. It is not widely known that he published two short stories, *The legend on the wall*, when he was still in his late twenties, and *The image maker* in 1988. Both are literary gems. I asked him several times, "why only one or two?"; he never gave me an answer and indeed played down the achievement.

Thirdly, I respected Prof. Srinivas's intensely felt social concerns. He agonised over the shortcomings of national politics, the academia, and civil society. In the last couple of years, he spoke to me and wrote in letters about the distress he felt to witness the mindless exploitation of religion by the fanatics of all religious communities, and the equally unthinking attitude of most secularists towards religion as a social force. He regretted that the serious study of the role of religion as a source of social legitimacy had suffered a decline in our times. In fact, his last conversation with me in September this year was about a conference on religion that he was helping to organise at NIAS later next year. He wanted me to write a paper for it, and said: "I am giving you a year's notice: don't say later I didn't tell you well in advance!" It is so ironical that he went away without giving any notice, quietly — the Srinivas way.

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