

The self as institution

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HE gave the academic world the terms "vote bank", "dominant caste" and "sanskritisation". And they became part of our common lexicon – terms used in everyday speech and popular writing. It was this, his astute understanding of the everyday life of the nation and his ability to render academic jargon into common parlance, that gave Professor M.N. Srinivas the stature of a people's sociologist.

Eschewing the purely abstract and theoretical study of India's cultures and societies, he charted a new terrain in which intensive fieldwork became the central methodology, and the representation of the lives of people in accessible writing the key responsibility of researchers.

In his personality was blended the culture of three different places, namely, princely Mysore where he was born and studied till his Masters, nationalist Bombay where he received his doctorate, and Oxford where he came under the influence of anthropologists A.R. Radcliffe-Brown and E.E. Evans-Pritchard. But as he often wrote and said, he also carried with him the sensitivities and sensibilities learnt in Rampura, the other 'university' about which he wrote in the now classic monograph, *The Remembered Village*. He considered himself privileged to have known and won the affection of village residents, and regretted that he had not had the time to write more about them. Although he was popularly known as an authority on caste and its multiple avatars, Professor Srinivas was also concerned with rural India and its myriad problems. He often wished that he had had the time to write a more definitive essay on India's peasants, which he wanted to call the "Moral Universe of the Indian Peasantry".

Of the departments and the institution he helped establish and built – the Department of Sociology, M.S. University, Baroda; the Department of Sociology, Delhi University; the Institute for Social and Economic Change, Bangalore; and the Sociology and Social Anthropology Unit at the National Institute of Advanced Studies (NIAS) – he was most proud of the Sociology Department at Delhi University. He would speak of its faculty as a proud father would of his children, keeping himself updated on its courses and publications, and taking immense pride in it becoming one of the best Sociology departments in the world. His institution-building capabilities

drew on a sense of purpose, perseverance and foresight. He also had the skills, indispensable for institution-builders in India, to negotiate the fault lines of status, power, ego and personal idiosyncrasy.

He was not only a student and scholar of Indian society and its complexities, but was also an adviser who counselled many, including this writer, about ways to make sense of our personal lives in a society in which family, gender, kinship, caste and class often took pernicious and punitive social forms. He vociferously objected to purely negative portrayals and representations of India, and firmly believed that the nation had several achievements to its credit, and that with time, would overcome its many vexing problems – of poverty, caste, gender bias and so on. He objected to the very idea of a caste census, which the present Government plans to conduct in 2001, believing that the complexities of *jatis* and sub-*jatis* could never be authentically recorded.

We often discussed and argued about the state of academia in the country. An issue of recurring concern was about ossified institutions invoking outdated rules to exclude talented scholars, while patronising mediocrity. He himself was a stickler for institutional regularity and academic standards and was most intolerant of anything he considered lax. He was alarmed at the dismal quality of certain types of foreign funded social research, and at a recent symposium organised by an international development agency, he publicly chastised the researchers for oversimplifying and even caricaturing the lives of village residents.

Although vigilant about keeping pace with recent anthropological literature, he tended to dismiss trendy, theoretical work as "academic mantra-tantra". He once took me to task on my paper written for an in-house seminar on "Theory in Anthropology", as he was offended at my criticism of cultural particularism. Sometimes, such differences made for strained relations, but he would relent after a few days and make amends by offering me a piece of *mysore pak*, some *somepadi* or even a "mint-with-a-hole"! He did not always take academic suggestions easily. For me it seems both ironic and sad that after a heated discussion we had about his last public lecture on "Obituary for Caste as a System", he conceded to my suggestion that Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's writings had substantial academic and anthropological worth.

The list of what he wanted to write and do was long. But what he discussed the most and looked forward to eagerly was completing his autobiography. This, he joked, he would auction to the highest bidding publisher, just as celebrity novelists did these days! I now think that he would have wanted this, a likely magnum opus, to be dedicated to "Rukka", his wife Rukmini. Theirs was a special relationship of camaraderie, support and understanding. He also wanted the autobiography to be read as a text as he considered the study of the self to have sociological validity. Indeed, in his case, he developed the self as an institution, adhering strictly to what he believed to be norms of correct social conduct, interaction and protocol. His daughter Lakshmi believes that for him work was the most meaningful part of his life. Yet, MNS, as he was known, was a person of many interests and passions. He delighted in the small and beautiful things of life – the shrieks and bulbs that visited their garden, the fish in the lotus pond, the new fruits and nuts available in the market, fancy stationery, and details of the latest films in town.

Professor Srinivas' last working day, November 10, at the NIAS, was both typical and special. He arrived later than his usual and very punctual 9.10 a.m. and took several people to task for the office car having been sent late. Although he looked tired, he addressed a workshop on "Socio-Anthropological Approaches to Educational Research" and delivered an impromptu and passionate lecture on the need to see education not only as an important issue but as an issue vital to the nation's progress. At tea-break, he was all charm to the participants, asking each of them about their home State and responding with an anthropological observation on each region. As he prepared to leave, he shook hands with every participant. Back at home around 4 p.m., he had a cup of tea and then donned the cap of the concerned public citizen. He rode in the Bangalore City Corporation's jeep, indicating to the ward officer the many areas that required cleaning, clearing or re-doing.

Twenty days later, Professor Srinivas was ready for a different anthropological journey. On November 30, for this, his last field trip, his daughter Tulasi thoughtfully placed his favourite items beside him – a copy of *The Remembered Village*, his reading glasses, and a pen. ■

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