

A scholar remembered

M.N. Srinivas, 1916-1999.

PARVATHI MENON

MN. SRINIVAS, India's most distinguished sociologist and social anthropologist, died in Bangalore on November 30 from complications arising from a lung infection. He had turned 84 on November 16. While India has lost a keen observer and interpreter of contemporary social change, the city of Bangalore, where Srinivas and his wife Rukmini spent the last 27 years, will feel the loss of an ardent campaigner for the city's civic and environmental betterment. The genial visage of the internationally acclaimed scholar with his leonine shock of white hair had become a familiar sight for the residents of the city he was so involved with.

Srinivas' last public lecture, which he gave on October 7 at the National Institute of Advanced Studies, Bangalore, was titled "Obituary on Caste as a System". It may have appeared ironic to many that Srinivas, the first Indian sociologist to anticipate the persistence and longevity of caste in modern India, should, towards the end of his life, have written a requiem for that very system. Indeed, he did nothing of the sort in the lecture, its provocative title notwithstanding. His talk was an exploratory foray into the changing contours of caste, and on how emerging rural economies were transforming caste as a system. It is perhaps fitting that in what was to be his last talk, Srinivas should have returned to the theme that forms the *leit motif* of his scholarship spanning over five decades. His death cut short a line of enquiry pregnant with new insights on one of India's most complex social institutions.

The hallmark of Srinivas' scholarship was its accessibility and its firm roots in the Indian reality. He was among the earliest social anthropologists in India to break out of the confines of textual authority on which the discipline had till then rested. His social laboratory was the village, factory, classroom and home, where people lived, worked, and in general played out a multiplicity of social and cultural roles. "Srinivas' scholarship was

not marked by high flights of theory," said T.N. Madan, a noted sociologist and Srinivas' friend for over three decades. "He had the rare gift of conveying insightful observations in simple language. The term 'vote bank', the notion of the 'dominant caste', or the concept of 'sanskritisation' have become part of common speech. His scholarship was remarkable for its accessibility."

Srinivas is perhaps best known for having coined and elaborated on the concept of "sanskritisation", the process by which castes placed lower in the caste hierarchy seek upward mobility by emulating the rituals and practices of the upper or dominant castes. He first propounded this theory in his book, *Religion and Society Among the Coorgs of South India* (1952). Written for his D.Phil degree at Oxford University, the book is an ethnographical study of the then little known Coorg community. It was a path-breaking study for several reasons. To begin with, it validated fieldwork as an essential methodology of the disciplines of sociology and social anthropology. Secondly, it offered a ground view that challenged the colonial notion of caste as static and unchanging. Through terms such as "sanskritisation", "dominant caste", "vertical (inter-caste) and horizontal (intra-caste) solidarities", Srinivas sought to capture the fluid and dynamic essence of caste as a social institution. Thirdly, it rejected the idea of a rigid, pan-Indian caste system, widely upheld in scholarship then. Instead his study asserted the importance of the regional dimensions of caste and the "little traditions" of Hinduism. At a time when an influential section of India's intelligentsia optimistically believed that caste would disintegrate under the march of modernisation, it was both prescient and brave of Srinivas to have argued to the contrary. Caste, he firmly believed, would continue to find expression in the public and private lives of Indians. Srinivas, however, never supported caste-based reservation as a programme to alter unequal caste equations.

The Remembered Village (1976), a socio-anthropological study done in 1948 of the village of Rampura near Mysore,

remains Srinivas' finest monograph, one that he considered his best. It was this book that won him international recognition and established his scholarly reputation. How Srinivas lost his precious Rampura field notes in a fire at Stanford University and reconstructed the book from memory has become part of sociological lore. This tragedy later brought its own rewards. Friends and colleagues of Srinivas agree that the insights, readability and novel-like sensibilities of this outstanding work of ethnography derived from the quality of recall that Srinivas put to effective use in writing it. (This was not Srinivas' last encounter with fire, nor indeed with being called upon to "remember". In 1972, while shifting from New Delhi to Bangalore, the container which carried a large number of his books and papers caught fire as it was being transported by train. And then, in December 1998, he gave an extensive interview to anthropologist Chris Fuller for the journal *Anthropology Today*. Fuller lost the recording a day later when his suitcase was stolen from a train. Fuller notes that "with great sympathy and patience", Srinivas agreed to redo the whole interview a few days later.)

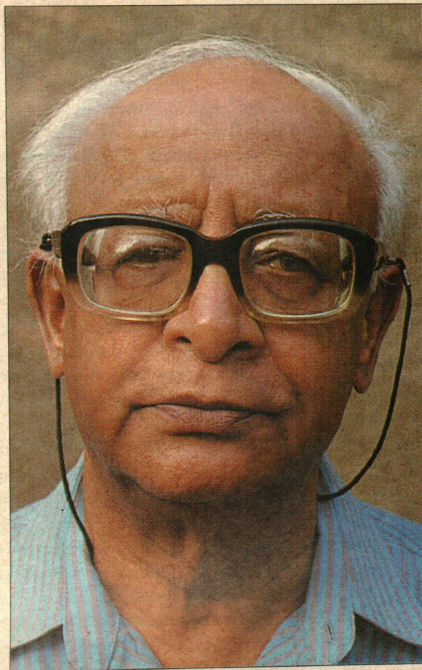
MYSORE NARASIMHACHAR SRINIVAS was born on November 16, 1916 in Mysore, although his parents were from Arakere, a village 20 miles (32 km) away. Srinivas, the youngest of four sons, studied in Mysore. He took an honours degree in social philosophy from Mysore University, "an ambitious programme, covering an immense variety of subjects, which would have daunted any undergraduate anywhere" he recalled in his interview to Fuller. Srinivas has written about how, as an "overprotected Brahmin boy", he experienced his first "culture shocks not more than fifty yards from the back wall of our house... The entire culture of Bandikere was visibly and olfactorily different from that of College Road. Bandikere was my Trobriand Islands, my Nuerland, my Navaho country and what have you. In retrospect, it is not surprising that I became an anthropologist, an anthropologist all of whose

fieldwork was in his own country."

From Mysore, Srinivas moved to Bombay and later to Oxford University. He did his Masters under G.S. Ghurye, during which he did a dissertation he later published as *Marriage and Family in Mysore* (1942). Srinivas would later recall that the seeds for his ideas on sanskritisation were sown during his fieldwork for his M.A. dissertation. At Oxford, Srinivas worked under the two leading anthropologists of the day, A.R. Radcliffe-Brown and E.E. Evans-Pritchard. In his interview to Fuller, Srinivas speaks of this period as one of both intellectual excitement and growth.

Srinivas returned to India in 1951, and joined the Department of Sociology of M.S. University, Baroda. He formulated a new syllabus for the department and built it into a reputed centre of socio-anthropological teaching and research. In February 1959, he was invited to Delhi University to establish and head the Department of Sociology at the Delhi School of Economics, which was recognised as a centre for advanced study in 1968. Srinivas attracted the best talent to the department and built it into one of the leading departments in the country in the field, combining sociology with social anthropological approaches. Its competitor at the Delhi School was the Economics Department which had an array of distinguished economists such as K.N. Raj, Amartya Sen, Pranab Bardhan, Mrinal Dutta Chaudhuri and others on its faculty. In his interview to Fuller, Srinivas hints at the competition and tension between these two strong departments. "Marxism was the dominant ideology of the economists - Marxism and macro-economics. They laughed at the kind of things we were doing. We were studying kinship, caste, villages, religion, and they looked upon us as backward people," Srinivas told Fuller.

In 1972, Srinivas returned to his home State and joined the Institute for Social and Economic Change set up by V.K.R.V. Rao in Bangalore as Joint Director, a position he gave up in 1979. He joined the National Institute of Advanced Study (NIAS) as the J.R.D. Tata Visiting Professor in 1992 and started a unit of sociology and social anthropology in 1997. He and R.L. Kapur set up the Women's Policy, Research and Advocacy Unit at the NIAS. His interest in issues relating to gender began with his



T.N. MADAN

participation in the Status of Women in India Report, 1975.

After shifting to Bangalore, Srinivas continued to write on those themes that flowed from his early anthropological work - caste, modernisation, sanskritisation, social change, gender, the practice of social anthropology, and so on. His most recent publication, *Indian Society through Personal Writings* (1998), dedicated to his old friend, novelist R.K. Narayan, is a collection of essays - some biographical, some on caste disputes in Rampura, an account ("idiosyncratic, if not capricious") of Bangalore, and so on. Interestingly, in the book *Village, Caste, Gender and Method* (1998), he also included two short stories.

Srinivas had for some time been working on his autobiography. He believed that an autobiography could become a productive tool of sociological research. He wrote in a recent book about how and why sociologists in India have not tried to use their own lives as ethnographical data for analysis. "It is my plea," he wrote, "that the movement from studying one's own culture or a niche in it, to studying oneself as an ethnographic field, is a natural one... Sociology of the Self should be a rich field, given the diversities and unities which the members of Indian civilisation are heirs to."

As a commentator on current trends in Indian society, Srinivas was surprising-

ly reticent on the impact of the growth of Hindu fundamentalism in recent years. T.N. Madan, however, says that Srinivas was, in fact, "deeply worried about the political link between religion and politics, between the mindless use of religion by Hindu communalists and its equally mindless rejection by the secularists." All of this he felt had led to the "decline in the serious study of religion". Srinivas had been involved in coordinating an international seminar on religion to be held in September 2000 at the NIAS. According to Madan, he was also critical of sections of the English press for allowing their anti-Bharatiya Janata Party sentiments to often turn into a sweeping anti-Hindu position.

Yet Srinivas was remarkably outspoken in his defence of the Indian media from the pressures of globalisation. He participated in the public debate on the entry of the foreign media into India with a forceful plea that it be kept out. He did not oppose this on the narrow grounds of "westernisation", but on the grounds that it would compromise and distort the independent news agenda of the Indian press. He became increasingly interested in issues relating to Information Technology and had helped draft the Bangalore Declaration during IT.Com, 1998, held in Bangalore.

Srinivas and his wife Rukmini, a geographer teaching at the Aditi Mallya International School in Bangalore, have had a large circle of friends, students and colleagues. Their two daughters, Lakshmi and Tulasi, live in the United States. Lakshmi has a Ph.D in Sociology from the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA) and is now on its faculty. Tulasi is doing her doctorate in Anthropology at Boston University.

H.Y. Sharada Prasad and R.K. Narayan count as two of Srinivas' oldest friends. Talking to *Frontline* from New Delhi, Sharada Prasad recalled several of Srinivas' personal qualities. "He had a tremendous range of interests," he said. "He was a keen observer of individuals, their lives, thought processes, stories and problems. It was so easy to converse with him... amazing for a scholar of his international standing." Chuckling at the memory of their last meeting at NIAS a few months ago, Sharada Prasad said of his friend, "Everything was so unstructured about him. He did not stand on a pedestal and say 'Behold, here I am'." ■