

Scholarship and social insight

M.N. Srinivas turns 80

R. L. KAPUR

M. N. SRINIVAS, the world-famous social anthropologist, turned eighty on November 16, 1996. I am neither a social anthropologist nor have I been his student in any formal sense; so I am not in a position to assess critically his academic contributions. I see him as a very special human being who has enriched my life in many ways and taught me many things without perhaps being aware of what I have gained from him. His personal qualities are what I shall talk about, hopefully without outraging his well-known sense of modesty and certainly without using my professional expertise to psychoanalyse him in any way!

I had never heard of Prof. M. N. Srinivas before I went to Edinburgh to work with well-known psychiatrist and social anthropologist, Morris Carstairs. Carstairs had done some seminal field work in Rajasthan and among the Bhils of central India, the result of which was the well-known book *The Twice Born*. Consider it my personal misfortune or a lacuna in our system of education; I had already acquired a degree in psychiatry and was ready to practise my profession without a deep understanding of the customs and mores of Indian society or of the unwritten rules regarding how people should relate to one another. Finding myself in an alien culture I developed a passion for understanding my own and decided to do my research in cultural psychiatry, that is, in finding relationships between patterns of mental disorder and cultural practices.

Carstairs heavily influenced me in this direction and insisted that I read the writings of his friend 'Chamu' before I started my work. I remember picking up the book *Religion and*

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Society amongst the Coorgs of South India in 1969 to be precise. My first impression, I must admit, was not very positive. Here was a man using very simple language to say very simple things about ordinary people and that too in a highly personalised way. Where was the science in it, I wondered.

Only after I started my own work in a South Kanara village did I realise the value of the personalised approach. The villagers would not even talk to me about the things I wanted to know, if I presented myself only as a researcher. I found it necessary to start working as a doctor in their midst, helping them with their day-to-day health problems. In time they started revealing their psychological problems to me. I read the book about the Coorgs once again and many other writings of Srinivas, to pick up in a very amateur way some principles and strategies of participant observation. Not having any background in sociological theory, I perhaps missed a lot. But whatever I learnt was so helpful that I adopted Srinivas as my teacher, as Ekalavya did Dronacharya.

He became a larger-than-life figure for me. Imagine my surprise when I found him one day in my house to purchase some furniture which I planned to sell since I was returning to Edinburgh after completing my field work. Heaven knows how he came to know about this furniture, but I remember quickly selling him the stuff for half the price before he got the chance to ask for my thumb. Prof. Srinivas will probably contest the 'half price' but I would have happily given the furniture free, if he had let me do that.

Years passed before we crossed paths again and I found him as a senior colleague at the National Institute of Advanced Studies (NIAS). What I say now arises out of my experience of working closely with him.

What strikes you most about this man? The first is his courage to pick up boldly such topics for examination as are of the deepest concern to all of us. He looks at these issues with an extremely wide angle lens, making sensitive observations on apparently disparate phenomena and before we start getting anxious about what he is

leading us to, he weaves his observations into a unitary whole from which the insights ooze out effortlessly.

To illustrate this, let me pick up at random one of his papers. I choose his short article, "Changing Values in Indian Society" (Srinivas, 1993). In this, he examines the Indian Constitution, Indian democracy, India's agriculture, India's economic development, the status of Indian women, corruption, violence, the spread of dowry, the role of the media and films, elitism in education, the glamour of power, the rise of consumerism, the new teen-age culture, the brain drain, the lure of the foreign and the rise in stress-related diseases - showing how all these are both the cause and result of changing values. So simple is his language and so homely the metaphors that it all seems to be an informal exchange among friends at the local *paan* shop. Yet the conclusions hit you in the pit of your stomach and force you into deep thinking about the future of Indian society. How does Srinivas wield this magic? I feel the explanation lies in his great sense of empathy which allows him to enter other people's lives, the people he is observing and the people he is addressing.

His apparent simplicity of communication often hides the hard work and the emotional strain that go into his academic endeavours. He is loath to talk casually on any topic and it is for this reason that sometimes, if sufficient notice is not given, he declines an invitation to deliver a lecture even on a subject thoroughly familiar to him. To those who do not know him this may appear stand-offish, if not rude, but those who have seen him going through great anguish and 'labour pains' while writing an article or before delivering a lecture understand that this comes from his need to be thorough. Srinivas' mind is continuously ticking away and new ideas are evolving all the time. These need to be put in some kind of order before he feels ready to speak or write.

His empathy strikes you in very personal ways as well. I have found myself taking his advice on many personal matters. His concern for you when you are sick is touching. Quite recently, he rang me up to say how

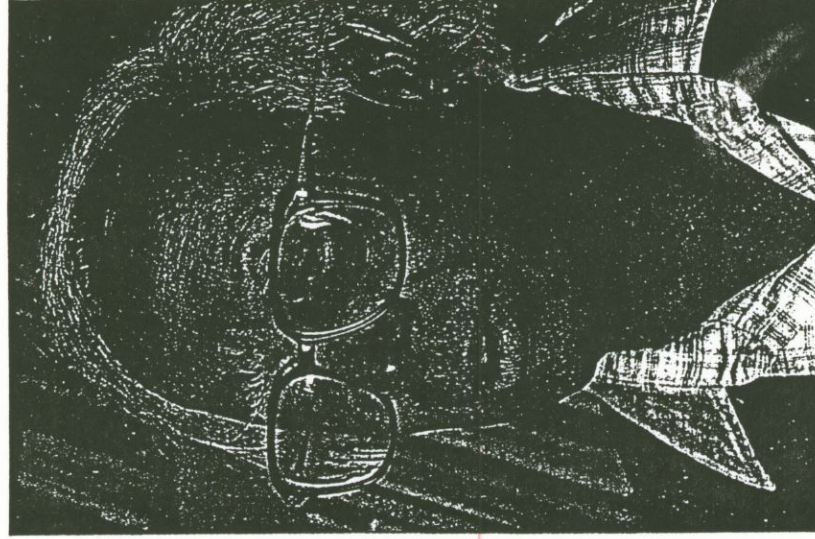
worried he was about my continued cold and sore throat and offered to give me some herbal lozenges, sent to him by his daughter in the U.S. He fulfilled his promise at the very first opportunity. Only a person who can feel for others in such personal way can, I believe, do good social anthropology.

His powers of observation can take a very funny turn sometimes. A few months ago, he wondered why a particular person wore such tight clothes. "His whole self seems to be bursting out of his shirt," he said perplexedly. Frankly, I had not noticed this oddity before. The statement not only demonstrated Srinivas' powers of observation but also told me a lot about the person who was being described.

What also stands out about Srinivas is his humility. Whenever I go to discuss anything with him, he starts by saying "I do not know much about it", but then ends up giving references and cross references of work carried out in fields far away from his own. "I wonder if you have read so and so", he asks tentatively, as if his inquiry might offend the storehouse of knowledge that you must be. In a talk he once gave about his life and work, he took pains to explain how his scholarship was purely a matter of accidents. "I took up the humanities because I wanted to escape science." "I did not take up medicine because I wanted to escape cutting up bodies." "I did not apply for the Mysore Civil Service because I was scared of competitive examinations."

His laconic sense of humour is a delight. A couple of years ago, I invited him to dinner. I wrote asking him to bring his wife Rukmini with him. At the same time I wrote to another friend asking him to bring his wife Thelma with him. As it happened the wires got crossed and the letter which reached Prof. Srinivas asked him to bring Thelma with him. He telephoned me and I distinctly remember his words: "Dr. Kapur, I have received your letter and I shall be delighted to come. But Thelma? You see... I do not know her... how do I ...?" All this was said with such a quiet intensity as if to convey that he would do anything to respond to my request, only if he knew how to.

There are very few people I know who are as curious as Prof. Srinivas. His curiosity and as a result his knowledge about current affairs of all kinds



the task before him. A total involvement that ended with a playful but elegant gesture over a task well done, something like Tendulkar raising his bat after completing a century. No teacher of mine has even examined my writing in this involved manner; nor I must admit, have I ever paid such attention to any of my students' work.

A personal tribute to Srinivas cannot be completed without referring to his frankly admitted commitment to spirituality and religion. He is a Hindu and proud to be one. Such is his conviction that he has no difficulty recommending that the crisis India is going through can only be met with a philosophy and social ethics "firmly rooted in God as a creator and protector and the sustainer of human species" (Srinivas, 1993). The idea of God as a creator, he believes, is "also a cure to anthropocentrism, since it requires that man has to be friendly to all nature including animals and birds and to the environment as a whole. The recent Western sensitivity to the environment and to animal rights needs a firmer basis than calculated self-interest and that can only come from a religious world-view."

In another article he says: "Organised religion is necessary not only to provide succour to millions of people but also to produce rebels and mystics who cleanse it periodically. The pharisee and the mystic are both bound together in a permanent relation of opposition and complementarity" (Srinivas, 1995). Only a Hindu could say this.

There is so much I want to say about the wide range of interests and passions Srinivas has, for example, food, cricket, paisley ties, malt whiskeys, pipes, walking sticks, art pieces, detective novels (which are as much a part of his existence as religion is) but that will take many more pages. But let me close by referring to his life mate Rukmini. While having qualities and attributes that are very much her own, she is such a complement to Srinivas that it is difficult to imagine one without the other. A connoisseur of good food will understand what I am trying to say. While individual spices have a flavour of their own, some form such a natural blend that together they achieve a new height of pleasure. Such is the pleasure of seeing them together. May they both live many years to give joy to many. ■

put us to shame. Last year he started talking about the pop singer Steven Kapur a.k.a. "Apache Indian" to some young faculty members at the NIAS. One of them did not know Steven Kapur and later asked me agitatedly, "But why does Prof. Srinivas know about Steven Kapur?" I have a very simple answer to such questions. Srinivas knows about a great many things. Only the other day he was talking to me about the Miss World competition. I am sure he knew all the participants by their names, the countries they represented and many other bits of information about them that I would love to know but feel too embarrassed to ask.

Here is an experience I shall never forget. I had done some work on Punjab militancy and had given my monograph to Prof. Srinivas for his comments. He returned the document to me in 15 days with the text underlined in red and green ink and with question marks, exclamation marks, annotations, references, ideas for further research, gentle hints at my stupidity as well as practical suggestions about what to do with this document. Most astounding were the words written in a red circle; "Completed. M. N. Srinivas, 2nd November, 1994, 8-13 p.m." This is not obsessiveness. Obsessiveness feels hollow and makes others anxious. What I saw in this comment was a total involvement in