SOCIAL ANTHROPOLOGY AND LITERARY SENSIBILITY

M N Srinivas

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NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF ADVANCED STUDIES

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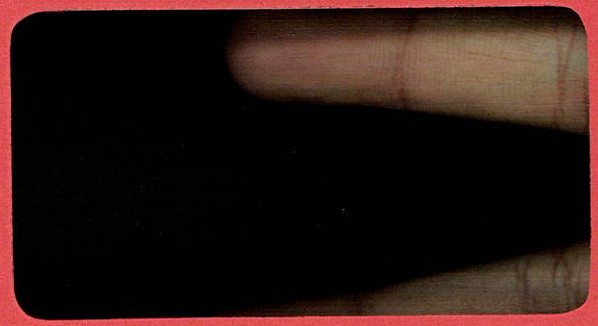

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INTRODUCTION

By way of introduction, I would like to say a few words about my encounters with Mr Hassan Raja Rao, and my relationship with Professor Edwin Thumboo.

I first met Mr Raja Rao when he visited our house on College Road in Mysore in the early 1930s. He came to meet my eldest brother, Parthasarathy (known to his friends as Pachu), and he was accompanied by his French wife. He was in a white *kudta*, and *dhoti* worn the North Indian way. Pachu was a staunch follower of the social reformer and mystic, Pandit Taranath, and Raja Rao may have wanted to talk about Pandit Taranath with Pachu. Anyway, some time later, I read an account of Raja Rao's interview with Pandit Taranath in the Asia magazine, published from New York.

Raja Rao spoke French very well – according to Louis Fischer, the biographer of Gandhi, his French was even better than his English – and during the Paris phase of his life, he had many discussions with French intellectuals, and I read a few

accounts of them published in contemporary journals. I found them heavy going but what impressed me was the fact that Raja Rao moved in such rarified intellectual circles.

My subsequent encounters with Raja Rao were in Bombay during the War years. I used to come across him in the University Library: the librarian, Dr P.M. Joshi was a friend of Raja Rao's, and he also knew my teacher, Professor Ghurye. Dr Joshi arranged a meeting between the two. It is difficult to imagine two men more different. Ghurye was a pronounced Anglophile, always dressed in a suit and tie, while Raja Rao sported a kudta, dhoti and waistcoat. Ghurye was trained initially as a Sanskritist, turning to sociology only after his master's degree. He was committed firmly to science and empiricism, and was an agnostic whereas Raja Rao had been influenced by contemporary French intellectuals and by Mahatma Gandhi. He had also mystical leanings. I wonder how the meeting between the two went.

During his Bombay days, Raja Rao started a "Thursday Club", which met every Thursday evening in a restaurant on Churchgate Street to talk about intellectual matters over glasses

of the newly-launched soft drink, Gold Spot. Among the regulars were several Indians with foreign wives and a few younger men and women who were very keen to meet and talk to the established writers. Raja Rao invited me to the meetings of the Club, but I was aware that I was marginal to the group.

It was during this period that I inflicted a short story of mine on Raja Rao. It was based on a tale I had heard from a poor old Pandit in Mysore, whom I had interviewed a few times to obtain information on the feasts, festivals and *vratas* of Kannadigas (Ghurye wanted me to collect this information for him). The old man was a Sanskrit scholar and had spent several years in Benares compiling a dictionary of Vedic words. It was laborious work but the old man managed to complete what he had set out to do. But the manuscript caught fire accidentally and was reduced to ashes in a matter of minutes. The rest of the story was about how the old man reconciled himself to the destruction of his lifework. I gave the story the title "Old Man of the Books". Raja Rao read it and told me that he was very pleased that I had selected such a theme. But he refrained from telling me that I lacked the skill to handle it.

The last time I saw Raja Rao was in his apartment in Austin, Texas. A friend took me there, and I spent a little time with him, talking about things in general. Raja Rao was courteous and friendly. He also seemed to be in good spirits.

Professor Edwin Thumboo was Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences in the National University of Singapore when I was a Visiting Professor of Sociology at the University, during the year 1981-82. The head of my department took me to the Dean to introduce me to him. The Dean told him, I think, rather sharply, that no funds would be released to the Department if I did not give a faculty lecture! It was a strange kind of compliment, and I spent the best part of 3 or 4 months, preparing the lecture. It was entitled "The Observer and Observed in Sociological Research". It was the first such lecture arranged by the Faculty, and was published. It was followed by three or four others, to my knowledge.

I visited Singapore two or three times after I had ceased to be a Visiting Professor at the University. I used to call on Professor Thumboo and he managed to take time off his busy schedule to talk to me. During my last visit to him, some time

in the 1980s, I found him in a state of excitement. He had just returned from a visit to Dhvanyaloka in Mysore and Professor C D Narasimhaiah had presented him with a rosewood plaque portraying Krishna and Arjuna in the their chariot at the beginning of the Mahabharata War. The entire scene was done by Mysore craftsmen, with bits of ivory inlaid into the rosewood. Professor Thumboo told me that he loved it, and recalled how he had carried it in his hands to the plane. He then presented me with a poem he had written on Krishna. It was his latest creation. I valued the gift: Professor Thumboo was Singapore's most distinguished poet.

Finally, I must mention that I am highly honoured to be invited to give the first Hassan Raja Rao lecture, endowed by Professor Thumboo. I sincerely thank Professor C D Narasimhaiah for inviting me to deliver it.

I

In this lecture, I propose to explore briefly the relationship that I think exists between social anthropology and literary sensibility. Before I proceed further, I would like to state that I consider social anthropology and sociology as

fundamentally the same, both concerned with the study and understanding of human societies in space and in time. Such a view is particularly relevant in India for it would be irrational to separate the study of tribal societies from that of peasants, and the upper castes, minorities, and the working and middle classes in urban areas. All these groups and categories are an integral part of Indian culture and civilization, and they share certain institutional forms, beliefs, ideas, values, and modes of worship, though it may not always be easy to identify the tribal and near-tribal elements in the culture of the so-called higher groups. But the former are there, and surface during crises in the life of an individual, family or community. Recognition of the existence of several layers in the culture, and of the links between them, is necessary for a proper understanding of Indian culture even though the elite tend to ignore the existence of the "lower" layers. However, it should be possible for individual scholars in a department or research institution to specialize on the study of tribals, peasants or industrial workers, and paradoxical as it may appear, such specialization within a single discipline emphasizes the need for collaboration with colleagues in other disciplines. Thus anthropologists studying peasants may need to collaborate with agricultural economists and economic historians while

those studying industrial workers collaborate with labour economists, and lawyers specializing in industrial disputes.

It is well-known that all over the world science and technology command greater prestige than the social sciences and humanities, India presenting an extreme instance of such discrimination. As a result, social scientists are defensive about their disciplines, a minority of them even thinking that their intellectual and status problems would both be solved by the greater mathematization of their disciplines. While there is a need to use statistical methods, and to quantify information when necessary, there are vital areas of social life which demand different skills and qualities. Further, social anthropology has strong links with history, in particular social and economic history, literature, ethics, religious studies, and philosophy.

II

Fortunately, in both social anthropology and sociology as they are practised in India, a tradition of fieldwork has come to be accepted as part of the disciplines, with the result that generally a candidate for the Ph.D. degree carries out a first-

hand study of a community, group, an organization such as trade union, or a category such as clerks, housewives, or school teachers. In my considered opinion, carrying out field-work in a community or category of people different from the field-worker's, has an impact not only on the latter's intellectual development but also on his personality.

The post-War years proved to be a creative period for social anthropology and sociology in India, several scholars, Indian as well as foreign, carrying out fieldwork-studies of tribes, villages, castes, urban slums and factories. While the earlier studies had been carried out in a few brief forays into the field with the aim of obtaining a general account of the social life and culture of the indigenes, the new ones were based on long stays in the field, and concentrated on the study of some aspect or aspects of local life. The method used was "participant observation", and it assumed, for heuristic purposes, that the various aspects of a society are inter-related, and formed a whole. For the first time in the country's history, a vast amount of accurate information was collected on the social life and culture of several tribes, villages, castes, and other social forms. While it is true that Indian society has always been changing,

the changes that began to occur since the establishment of British rule were qualitatively different from earlier changes, and the pace of change accelerated sharply since 1947. In a word, the studies carried out by anthropologists in the 1950s present a picture of Indian society and culture before their character began to change fundamentally, and therefore, they are likely to be of great value to future historians of India.

Anthropologists owe the method of participant-observation to Bronislaw Malinowski, a Polish anthropologist who spent a good part of the war years 1914-1918, studying Pacific Islanders, first, the natives of Malibu, and then the Trobriand Islanders. He wrote a great deal on the Trobriand Islanders' culture and society, and his writings established new standards of fieldwork. He insisted that the anthropologist live among the indigenes, master their language, and converse with them in it, and collect as much information as possible by participating in their day-to-day activities. The information collected through the use of participant-observation was qualitatively different from that collected in short forays, and often, through interpreters. Malinowski also emphasised that it was not enough to collect information, but that the

anthropologist should go beyond it and try to look at the world as the indigenes did. This is an extremely difficult thing to do, for only by the exercise of his imagination and ability to empathise with others, can the anthropologist cross the barriers between himself and the indigenes. In doing this, the anthropologist is close to the novelist who places himself in the position of the diverse characters in his novel.

The anthropologist employs certain well-known techniques to make certain that the information he collects is accurate. Typically, he conducts a census of the community he is working in, traces the genealogy of every household, interviews individuals who are reputed to be well-versed in one or more aspects of local culture, and when necessary, conducts surveys, and uses questionnaires. The camera, and now-a-days the tape-recorder, are his basic tools. But quite apart from the techniques and strategies employed, it is vital for the anthropologist to win the friendship of the indigenes, for only then will they part with information which they consider important, sacred or confidential. He should realize that when he is doing fieldwork, the indigenes are his teachers, not only elderly men and women, priests, knowledgeable farmers, but

even little children. If I may make a reference to my fieldwork in Rampura village exactly fifty years ago, I found that I had something to learn from everyone, that everyone including a few boys, took a hand in educating me regarding the rich and varied culture of the village. I have often felt that I have really studied in four universities; Mysore, Bombay, Oxford, and last but not least, my field-village of Rampura.

Even when an anthropologist is investigating one specific aspect of local life such as kinship or economics, he collects, and has to collect, information on all other aspects for he should learn how the area of his special interest is related to other areas. Explanation often consists in elucidating the relationship of an institution or complex of institutions, with other institutions or institutional complexes. This is what is meant by placing an institution in the total context of social life and culture.

III

Typically, the anthropologist studying a culture different from his, begins with bewilderment at what the indigenes around him are doing and saying, and over a period of time, he

(or she) begins to understand what is going on around him. Confronted with the strange happenings which he is witness to, the anthropologist tries to work out the logic underlying the indigenes' behaviour. After months of such effort, he is able to, with some luck, work out the rules underlying the culture of the indigenes. This part of his task is, however, purely cerebral. The cerebral understanding of the rationale of the indigenes' culture is fortified by an emotional element as a result of the anthropologist's sharing the life of the indigenes, their joys as well as sorrows. The emotional element is crucial for it brings home to him sharply that he had been trapped in the values and world-view he had been socialised into, during his early years, and that there was no reason whatever to assume that it was the only proper way to live. There were other ways of living as well and they had been evolved over the centuries, if not millenia, in response to specific external forces. Those world-views had ensured the survival of the indigenes, and that was why the latter had held on to them. Fieldwork experience teaches the anthropologist this vital lesson, in the process forcing him to realise that his own inherited culture was only one among several.

The experience of intensive fieldwork affects the anthropologist's personality. It also affects the quality of his integration with his natal culture. To put it bluntly, he rejects, not only cerebrally but viscerally, the idea that its values are universal, and that people who do not share them are inferior. I am not concerned here with the rightness or wrongness of this view, but only with its existence as a fact.

If I may refer to my own field-experience of Rampura village, during the first few weeks, the villagers' actions, speech and behaviour were at best only partially intelligible, even though I belonged to a lineage which owned land in a nearby village. But with the passage of time, and my increased understanding of the villagers' life and problems, my attitude towards them changed radically, and finally, I think that I began to think like them. Their mental world was, by and large, an unchaging one, and their activities closely meshed in with the changes in the seasons. They rarely travelled more than 30 or 40 miles. One of my peasants, a middle-aged man, asked me whether they did not speak Kannada in England. (Which reminded me of the Englishman who returned from a trip to France and exclaimed in wonder that in France even little

children spoke French.) Agricultural land was not only their source of livelihood, and insurance against poverty, but their attachment to it seemed to be charged with a mystical element. I envied the stability and certainty of rural life and the warmth of social relationships in the village, in spite of conflicts which were always there. It brought home to me the fact that I was footloose, wandering from place to place, and always conscious of the good things in other cultures as well as of the foibles in my own culture. The villagers were integrated with their culture in a way that I could never aspire for.

As my understanding of peasant agriculture increased, I found that much of the criticism of Indian peasantry and their agriculture in contemporary text-books on Indian economics arose out of ignorance of the difficulties faced by agriculturists, and especially, the poorer ones. Much later, my experience of Rampura led me to write a paper, "Village Studies and Their Significance" (*Caste in Modern India and Other Essays*, Media Promoters and Publishers, Bombay, 1962, pp. 120-135) in which I argued that Indian intelligentia were ignorant of the difficulties and problems of the peasants, and also of the

intellectual and moral resources they commanded. The latter were considerable.

However, not every anthropologist develops empathy towards the people he (or she) studies. There have been a few negative accounts of primitive peoples by Western anthropologists. Granted that some peoples are unfriendly, it is also likely that the anthropologists writing about them were not to empathise with them with the result that the pictures portrayed became hostile.

I have come across a few Western anthropologists who had done fieldwork in India, and were so repelled by caste and untouchability that their accounts assumed the character of denunciations of the people and their culture. Occasionally this resulted in their advocating the need to look at Indian society "from the bottom up" instead of "from top down" which they accused their predecessors, especially Indians, of having done. It was, however, significant that these had turned a blind eye to discrimination based on class and race in their own cultures.

IV

Fieldwork experience is essential, and the anthropologist who does it is obliged to publish his findings as a book, or as papers in professional journals. If his research has been financed by his university, foundation or government agency, then he has an obligation to publish. Also, without publication he cannot obtain a job, let alone move up in the academic ladder.

Fieldwork experience, however, is not an end in itself. The results of fieldwork have to be written up, and this calls for an array of skills different from those required for fieldwork. First of all, it calls for the ability to distance oneself from the field experience. Moving away physically from the field is essential to distancing, and living in an academic environment where other anthropologists are also writing and presenting papers at seminars, also promotes distancing. What are termed "writing blocks" are frequently an inability to look at the patterns underlying individual acts of behaviour, let alone the links existing between the patterns. Writing is a difficult enterprise in the best of times, and is the product of long and

lonely hours. But writing is essential to achieve clarity in thinking, and without writing, it is not possible to move forward in thinking.

Since the 1920s, when "functionalism" became the leading paradigm in British social anthropology, monographs providing general accounts of a people's social life gave place to ones focussing on a particular aspect of social life such as economic exchange, religion or kinship. However, the selected aspect of study was viewed in relation to other aspects, and the totality of culture. A holistic view underlay the description of particular institutions.

The transition to new social anthropology made the task of writing anthropological reports both more difficult and more exciting. It was no longer enough to provide a description of the social life of the indigenes under certain routine heads, and then speculate on where they had migrated from and from when they had borrowed various trails of their culture. Ideally, the new monographs attempted to explicate, develop, verify or criticise some theoretical point or points in kinship, economics, politics or religion. In the finest monographs there was a seamless

fusion of theory and description. This called for not only deep grounding in theory and analytical ability but also a gift for stating the case with economy and clarity, using technical terms and concepts only when necessary. This needs to be said for there is a widespread impression that the use of jargon is necessary to establish one's scholarly credentials.

When an anthropologist is writing about the people he has studied, he is really engaged in the task of translating their ideas, beliefs and values into the universal language understood by all anthropologists, if not a wider public. When a seemingly bizarre custom or ritual is placed in the total context of the culture, it begins to make sense. This involves laying bare the logic underlying the institutions of that culture. Where possible, the anthropologist brings in a comparative perspective to enhance the readers' understanding of the phenomenon he has studied. However, making sense of an institution has to be distinguished from lending one's approval to it. The former is a congnitive phenomenon while the latter involves ethical, and sometimes even aesthetic, considerations.

Translation of culture is especially difficult when writing on such crucial areas as ethics, world-view, and religion, as the task generally involves the use of some multi-vocal and emotive terms of the indigenes. For instance, some words which the peasants of Rampura used freely such as *muyyi*, *hada* and *dakshinya* I found very difficult to translate into English. Similarly, it is difficult to translate the terms religion, and sacred and perfume into Kannada or any other Indian language.

V

Marcel Mauss, the distinguished French sociologist, once observed that "the sociologist has to have the sensitivity of a novelist". (Mauss attended Malinowski's seminars at the London School of Economics in the 1920's, along with Raymond Firth and others). I interpret Mauss's statement to mean that the anthropologist should not only have the novelist's sensitivity in the matter of observing people and their interaction with each other, but that he should also have the imagination and empathy to understand what the people he is studying are thinking and feeling, and finally, write about them with skill and sensitivity. It is here that participant observation plays a crucial

role for it rouses the anthropologist's dormant empathy enabling him to get under the skin of the indigenes and figure out how they look at the world. As I stated earlier, the understanding that results from the use of participant observation is not only cerebral but involves the emotions. In a single movement, it enables the anthropologist to move close to a different culture while at the same time distancing him from his natal culture. And, paradoxically, understanding a different culture is essential to understanding one's own. It is a truism that the study of "the other" enables one to understand oneself.

Ideally, the anthropologist should go to the field after a sound training in his discipline, after he has read the available literature on the geographical area he has selected for fieldwork, and then spend a year or more in the collection of data in the field, and write up some of his material for publication. The anthropologist has to be a careful scholar, an observant and intrepid field-worker, and finally, possess the skill and sensitivity of a novelist while writing up his findings. As Evans-Pritchard said long ago, "If the right kind of temperament is not always found with ability, special training, and love of careful scholarship, it is rarely combined also with the

imaginative insight of the artist which is required in interpretation of what is observed, and the literary skill necessary to translate a foreign culture into the language of one's own" (*Social Anthropology*, Cohen and West, London, 1951, p.82).

VI

When an anthropologist is studying a society which has a literary tradition, he has to become familiar with its literature for the latter provides a window to the thoughts, emotions, values, dilemmas and conflicts of the indigenes. But where the literature is extensive, and spans several centuries, as it does in the case of major Indian languages, all that the anthropologist can do is to seek the help of scholars in the local language, in locating relevant books and papers, and in studying them. He will particularly need their help in interpreting difficult and arcane texts.

I do not need to comment at length on the fact that certain classes of literature like biography, including autobiography, memoirs and diaries are indispensable to the

anthropologist in providing him with information and insights about the culture, especially the culture of earlier periods. For instance, Navaratna Rama Rao's *Kelavu Nenapugalu* (Jeevana Karyalaya, Bangalore, 1954) provides a sensitive and graphic account, frequently illuminated by irony and humour, of the social life and culture, and of taluk administration, in princely Mysore during the first two decades of this century. Another excellent memoir is M R Srinivasa Murthy's *Rangannana Kanasina Dinagalu* which narrates the experiences of a school inspector in princely Mysore during the twenties and thirties. Nirad Chaudhary's *Autobiography of an Unknown Indian* is memorable both for its vivid portrayal of his childhood in East Bengal at the beginning of this century, and later, of intellectual and political life in Calcutta.

Fiction too can be a valuable source of information and insight into culture but here the anthropologist needs to know the literature well enough to be able to distinguish between fiction which reflects and illuminates the lives, ideals and conflicts of the people, and fiction which does not. This is obvious no doubt, but I have mentioned it in order to stress the need for caution in the use of fictional literature.

In my Master's thesis on marriage and family among the Kannada castes in princely Mysore, I found not only folklore but fiction a rich source of information and insight. For instance, I discovered that one of the earliest novels in Kannada, M.S. Puttanna's *Madidunno Maraya*, had almost the quality of a documentary as far as the family life of Brahmins was concerned, and Masti Venkatesh Iyengar's short stories had sharp insights into the family life, and the position of widows among the higher castes. K.V. Puttappa's (Kuvempu) *Kanoor Subbamma Heggadathi*, which I came across after I had finished writing my thesis, is a compelling account of social life and culture of the Malnad region of princely Mysore. And no one who wishes to understand the culture of Dakshina Kannada region can ignore the novels of Shivarama Karanth. Sociological studies of the novels of Kuvempu and Shivarama Karanth will greatly enhance our knowledge of the culture of Malnad and Dakshina Kannada regions during the decades preceding Independence. But the studies need to be carried out either by anthropologists who have a very good knowledge of Kannada, or by Kannada literary critics and scholars who are

familiar with modern anthropology. In other words, it calls for dual expertise.

It is not only writing in the regional languages that sheds light on Indian culture and society but also modern Indian writing in English. Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*, first published in England in the 1930's, narrates the story of how Mahatma Gandhi's Civil Disobedience Movement of 1930 produced a social revolution in a sleepy plantation village nestling in the mountains of the Malnad region. The reader experiences the excitement and the stirring of new ideas and values in what was only some months previously, an isolated, hierarchical and feudal social pond whose miseries had greatly increased after the starting of a coffee plantation by a British planter. R K Narayan's novels portray, with humour and irony, the life of the middle classes in a small south Indian town. His *Dark Room*, for instance, narrates poignantly the unsuccessful attempt of a wife to protest against the arbitrariness and infidelity of an over-bearing husband.

The value of biographical literature, including autobiography, biography, memoirs and diaries as sources for cultural and economic history, is well-known. Historians regard

them as essential to their work, and anthropologists working in societies with a literary tradition, have also used them even when their main source of information was fieldwork. While this is as it should be, it is surprising that anthropologists have yet to look at their own lives as sources of information about their culture, especially as they are undergoing radical change. Anthropology started as the study of "the other", an exotic other, but now there are dozens of anthropologists engaged in the study of their own cultures. The culmination of the movement from the study of other to studying one's own culture is surely the study of one's own life? The latter can be looked at as a field, with the anthropologist being both the observer and observed, ending for once the duality which inheres in all traditional fieldwork.