

Tribute to a titan

Narendar Pani explores Prof Srinivas's links with old Mysore literature

THE TRIBUTES paid to the late Prof MN Srinivas have concentrated, quite understandably, on his many contributions to sociology.

Prof Srinivas being one of the founding fathers of Indian social anthropology, it could not have been otherwise. His concept of Sanskritisation, his exposition of the role of the dominant caste and his understanding of the resilience of caste all went to make him an icon of Indian sociology. And yet, as with other great minds, Prof Srinivas's contributions cannot be fully appreciated from within the boundaries of sociology alone.

The times in which Prof Srinivas functioned as well as the value of his method for Indian conditions had its impact on other social sciences as well. Indian empirical economists prior to the 1970s functioned almost entirely with secondary data.

Prof Srinivas found this approach exasperating. He believed one needed to live and participate in a community in order to understand how it functioned.

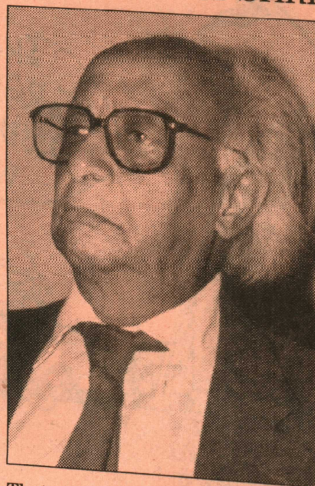
He did manage to convince some younger economists in the 1970s that this approach was essential especially when studying issues where people may not be forthcoming, like indebtedness.

Prof Srinivas may have convinced fewer economists than he would have liked, but he did stop them from claiming, as they once did, that an economist studying the wheat economy did not need to be able to recognise a wheat plant.

The links between Prof Srinivas's work and fields outside sociology were also not confined to the social sciences. Among the less explored dimensions of his work is its relationship to the literary tradition of old Mysore.

This tradition, if it can be called that, covers a wide range of writers from RK Narayan in English to Masti Venkatesha Iyengar and Navaratna Rama Rao in Kannada.

The concerns of these writers varied a great deal. But their writing had some common strands.



Their work was marked by a certain irreverence; they were not very comfortable with grand treatises; and they all had an immaculate sense of detail.

The need to place Prof Srinivas in this literary context is not because he was a great litterateur. He did write a couple of short stories which have had their fans among fellow sociologists.

He also shared with R K Narayan a fondness for writing non-fiction about the world around him.

If RK Narayan's *The Emerald Route* looked at Karnataka as a whole, Prof Srinivas published a personalised account of Bangalore. But such pieces were too few and far between to build his credentials as a litterateur.

Prof Srinivas himself was quite dismissive of his literary credentials and tended to treat his forays into literature as one of the indiscretions of youth.

If Prof Srinivas must still be placed in this literary context, it is because of the influence of this tradition on his sociology. Like the litterateurs of this tradition, Prof. Srinivas was not quite comfortable with grand theories.

By the very nature of his profession he did come up with new concepts. But his focus remained on trying to gain insights into specific situations rather than coming up with a theory that sought

to explain all situations.

Without the prop of a grand theory Prof Srinivas had to rely quite heavily on the quality of his insights and his sense of detail. He had the ability to see in the little nuances of day to day life, the changing trends in Indian society.

His fondness for detail may have also helped him resist the temptation to convert some of his deeper insights into all encompassing theories.

Prof Srinivas also shared the irreverence of old Mysore litterateurs. When his field notes were burnt in a fire, others, more in awe of established sociological institutions and practices, would have been shattered.

But Prof Srinivas simply went on to write about the village as he remembered it. And to some, especially those outside the field of sociology, *The Remembered Village* is something they will remember Prof Srinivas by more

than all his earlier erudite essays.

Perhaps the greatest quality of the old Mysore literary tradition is that it does not allow its celebration of irreverent detail to slip into cynicism. And this was true of Prof Srinivas as well.

He, like others of his generation, was an unrelenting critic of India fifty years after independence.

His innate conservatism also made him uncomfortable with some of the change brought about in Indian society. But he always stressed the significance of these changes, even those he did not like, in the democratising of India.

The old Mysore tradition, in more ways than one, provided the base from which Prof Srinivas could reach out to different corners of the world. The more his work flowered in western academia, the deeper were his roots at home.

