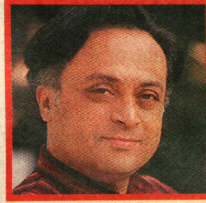


Caste In His Own Mould

KAUTILYA



by JAIRAM RAMESH

An institution builder passes away but lives on in his contributions

THE DATE: SEPTEMBER 21, 1999. THE VENUE: Delhi's India International Centre. The occasion: a public lecture by an 83-year-old doyen of Indian sociology who has devoted over 50 years to studying caste and social change in India. He comes with a prepared text and speaks, as usual, incisively. Age has not dimmed his formidable intellectual prowess one bit. He speaks of why anti-caste Bhakti movements in our history did not institutionalise egalitarianism. He talks about the paradox of individual castes thriving just as the caste system is dying. He expounds on how the diffusion of economic growth is breaking the caste-occupation link for good. He explains how the universal adult franchise and massive affirmative action are bringing about a welcome transformation of a deeply stratified society.

The scholar speaks non-stop for an hour. He patiently answers questions. He is asked about the future of caste. He replies that caste will now be conceived in terms of ethnicity and not in terms of hierarchy. He is accused by some to be an apologist for the upper castes to which the response is that he is only an academic. He is asked for his prescription to demolish the caste system faster. His answer—rebuild the architecture of Indian villages. Kautilya himself has many questions but asks just one—why is the course of social justice movements in south India so very different from that in the north.

Views are exchanged—different impacts of Islam and Christianity, the zamindari-ryotwari and the rice-wheat dichotomy, the values of the upper castes, the rise of social reform movements, etc. But time is short and the shishya is invited to the guru's Bangalore abode for a fuller discussion. The great man also invites Kautilya to a seminar on IT that he is co-organising. Kautilya suggests that IT is fast becoming a revenge of the Brahmins and the upper classes. The great man merely smiles.

Fast forward to December 3, 1999. The venue: Indian Institute of Science, Bangalore. The occasion: a seminar on how information technology can become socially purposeful in India. The mood is sombre for just three days ago, one of the organisers of the seminar, the same active 83-year-old public intellectual, has suddenly passed away. The scholar: M.N. Srinivas, India's pre-eminent social anthropologist. He was the author of numerous classics, like *Religion and Society Among the Coorgs of South India* (1952), *Caste in Modern India* (1962), *Social Change in Modern India* (1966), *The Remembered Village* (1976), *The Cohesive Role of Sanskritisation* (1989) and *Village, Caste, Gender and Method* (1996). *The Remembered Village* made history not just for its

content but for the way it came to be written. Srinivas was on sabbatical at Stanford in the US when anti-Vietnam war demonstrators burnt down the building where he was working on this book. He had then to "remember" almost two decades of field research. He was an ardent advocate of intensive field studies, his own areas being first Coorg and later Rampura village in Mysore district. He moulded successive generations of academics. And he was one of the key founding fathers of the Delhi School of Economics, a rare sociologist accepted by that most arrogant and clanish breed—the economists.

Srinivas made many contributions but two are seminal. The first, originally propounded in his Coorg book, was called "Sanskritisation", a process by which a "low" caste or tribe or other group takes over the customs, ritual,

beliefs, ideology and style of life of a high and, in particular, a "twice-born" caste. Later other scholars were to point out that Sanskritisation is not just Brahmin-centric. In 1996 Srinivas wrote that Sanskritisation began as an emulatory phenomenon but has become a gesture of defiance. The second, put forward in 1955 and derived from his Rampura experiences, was that of "dominant caste" which Srinivas defines as one that is numerically preponderant over others and wields preponderant economic and political power. In one of his last essays, Srinivas highlights the conflict between the old and the

new dominants and suggests that the taming of dominant castes is a major task for Indian democracy, especially in the more backward regions.

Srinivas was also among the earliest to argue that the pan-Indian, fourfold categorisation of castes was not reflective of Indian social life. What constitutes our society are a myriad of *jatis* that, most distinctively, marry among themselves and have evolved as occupational groups. There are 4,635 such communities in India. Building on Louis Dumont's famous statement that whoever had power was a Kshatriya, Srinivas wrote elaborately, and now it is not politically fashionable to accept this, that there has always been fuzziness in the caste system, with medieval mobility coming from fission and modern mobility from fusion.

Srinivas was deeply critical of the Mandal Commission. It is also true that he glossed over the horrible inequities of the caste system. Even so, he epitomised Indian scholarship and intellectual pursuits at its shining best, an all-too-rare commodity these days.

The author is secretary of the AICC's Economic Affairs Department. The views expressed here are his own.

