

CHAMU

Chicago

BETWEEN Singer, Redfield, and Shils, eminent Professors whose knowledge of India was profound and who had each spent at least a year in different parts of India, my stay in Chicago was most rewarding. Between them they unobtrusively took care of my food, shelter, and movements.

On the morning of my arrival while talking to Redfield in his room, Milton Singer came in to say that Chamu was arriving from New York next day. Let no one be puzzled about the identity of Chamu. He is Dr. M. N. Srinivas, an eminent Indian sociologist of Oxford, Baroda, Bombay, Manchester and Delhi, who was a great friend and neighbour of mine in Mysore.

Years ago when I wrote my first novel *Swami and Friends*, and found none to read it, a very young college fellow came forward to go through the manuscript; he read and certified it as readable, which was very encouraging. That was Chamu. He was then a college student; now he is a senior, respected professor – many academic activities and distinctions having come his way. His research and studies constantly took him out of view, if not to another corner of the world at least to another part of the country.

However I always had an annual glimpse of him, when he came down for a couple of weeks each year to see his mother and brothers in Mysore. Our literary contact started years ago with *Swami* continued. He always goaded me on to write my next and not to waste my time; whenever I saw him I discussed with him the subject I had in mind for a new novel, and through his reaction I always got an objective view of anything I might plan to write. So he continued, through years, to be not only the first reader of my first book, but also a critic and adviser on many unwritten ones.

Now I was happy to know that I should be seeing him next day, not only because I longed to speak Tamil to someone but I also hoped he would be able to

Excerpted from R. K. Narayan, My Dateless Diary: An American Journey, 1964, India Thought Publications; Mysore; Penguin Books India, 1988.

“So one of my last (long-time) friends has gone,” noted R.K. Narayan, 93, on being informed of the passing of M.N. Srinivas, 83, a friend of six decades and more. The writer counted him, on the fingers of one hand, among “my constant friends,” people who, for him, never changed in their qualities, their attitudes, and their closeness. Ten days before his death, brought on by pneumonia, in Bangalore, the pioneering social anthropologist had visited the great novelist in Chennai. “He looked well and spent quite a bit of time chatting with me,” said Narayan, adding: “He had evidently come to say his farewell.”

Srinivas – “Chamu” to his friends – was an important figure in Narayan’s life as a writer. He was, as Narayan notes in *My Dateless Diary*, “the first reader of my first book” (*Swami and Friends*, in typescript) and “a critic and adviser on many unwritten ones.”

In October 1956, Narayan made his first serious foray beyond the “triangular boundary” of Mysore, Coimbatore and Madras – a visit to the United States, lasting nearly nine months, at the invitation of the Rockefeller Foundation. This coincided with an extended academic stay in the United States of Professor Srinivas and his wife.

We reproduce here excerpts from *My Dateless Diary: An American Journey* (published in 1960). Narayan’s diary entries relating to 1956-57 convey the flavour of a remarkable friendship that originated in Mysore of the 1930s:

give me a small quantity of betel-nut to which I am addicted. I had exhausted my own stock of it weeks ago; above all I wanted to speak to him about my new book and the problems connected with it.

Overload * * *

When I reached Chamu’s room in the hotel, his wife, Rukka cried through the bathroom door, “So you have come! Don’t go away. I must talk to you.” I liked the mystery and menace of her tone. The moment she was ready to meet me she said with considerable warmth, “Did you want to work off a grudge against us by mentioning our name to Mr – of Mysore before leaving? A nice situation you created for us after you left!”

I understood what she meant. On the eve of my leaving Mysore, with a dozen things to do by way of getting my papers and baggage in order, a man locally employed in a scientific institution clamoured to meet me although I repeatedly sent word that I was too busy. He said he wanted only a few minutes with me, that he would very much like to say goodbye to his favourite author.

No author is so hardened that he cannot be won by such an approach, and so I found for him a quarter of an hour on the day of my departure. I settled him in my study, offered him a cup of coffee as usual, and he told me for exactly the space of five minutes how much he admired my Sunday *Hindu* articles (which anyone may talk about even without reading); and then mentioned his real business with me. He

had his daughter and son-in-law studying in a University in New York State; he wanted me to carry a hamper of condiment, chilli powder and spices for them. He assured me that the whole thing could not weigh more than a pound, but I excused myself all the same, being an air passenger, explaining that if I had space for another pound I should probably take a woollen sweater or some such thing. He looked as if I had refused to carry some life-saving drug to one in dire need. And so I said (this is where Chamu comes into the story):

“If it is so urgent why not try and send it through Dr. M. N. Srinivas who is coming to the States by boat?”

The man brightened up immediately and said, “Oh, I know that family so well. His brother was my classmate. His aunt was – was good to us when we were in Kolar, his cousin has married my nephew,” and so on and so forth. He found so many approaches to Srinivas that I felt at the rate of a pound per kinship, he could ask Srinivas to carry a whole shipload of sweets and spices. The next part of the story is best presented through Chamu.

“That man got at me through my brother with whom he renewed his acquaintance. He had been a cricket player once upon a time and you know how my brother melts at the sight of an old cricketer. I told him to send his package along next day.

“Next day, when I returned home at night I found the passage of our home choking with a wooden chest, the sort of

thing the thirteen pirates sat on, a burlap sack, apparently filled with coconut, a smaller trunk containing sweets judging from the swarm of ants, a basket containing possibly brinjals and cucumbers, and three more nondescript bundles. I had come home at midnight from a farewell dinner, and the sight of this luggage upset me.

"I summoned the man next morning and lectured to him and said that unless he reduced the bulk of his gift to his son-in-law by seventy per cent I would leave it behind. He again started off on how his cousin was married to our nephew, how devoted he was to my cricket-loving brother, how he had watched my Oxford career with pride and satisfaction but I was adamant. He had to take them away.

"Later in the day they were ready in the passage again, for me. All that he had done was to substitute a steel trunk for the old pirate's chest, the other articles remained unchanged. It was too late to do anything about it now. You may imagine our plight as we lugged all this around, the trouble we had at Bangalore, Bombay, Southampton, London, Manchester, every port, custom, and railway station, porter's tips, vigilance, counting and recounting, in addition to the problem of our own baggage.

"This trip was completely ruined for us thanks to your introduction, and by the time we arrived at the New York port our patience was at an end; just when we were hoping to be rid of the whole thing we found that the man's son-in-law had not arrived to collect his baggage as promised. The port was in the throes of a dock strike. I had to spend eight hours trying to get help to move the goods to my hotel.

"Finally I had to dump them in the hotel corridor because they were too unwieldy and large for any normal check room. I wrote to his son-in-law, telegraphed, and finally called him on the telephone, because I was leaving New York but still none turned up, I waited as long as I could and finally left the goods just in the hotel corridor and came away. I don't know or care what happened to them... I have only to thank you for all this travail."

* * *

Westward bound

On the (rail) road to San Francisco, with Chamu and his wife in another compartment, four doors off. Life in train for the next forty hours. Food in the train, bath in the train, and neighbourly visits to and from Chamu, with many occasions

to narrate my new story, and discuss it with him. It is so comfortable that I enjoy having an illusion of being a permanent dweller here, and so arrange my little possessions around on that basis. Find a comradeship with all and sundry, – including the very fat, crew-cut, teen-ager, always tottering with drink. He is a nuisance, as he pushes the door of every compartment in the corridor and peeps in, much to the consternation of Mrs. Chamu.

Our life is punctuated by movements to and from the dining car at various intervals – pushing and pulling the heavy doors all along the vestibule. Our biceps are greatly strained. Chamu and I have divided the labour, each doing it one-way. We march along as everyone in the lounge stares at Rukka's colourful sari, with open-mouthed wonder. We notice, however, a red-haired girl and two others being exceptions, who never look up, maintaining a concentrated gaze on their beer-glass all day. The steward is proud of being able to give us rice and buttermilk, and watches over us, as Rukka produces from her handbag South Indian condiments and spice-powder to help us through our meals. We form such a close community (although lasting only forty hours) that even the drunken teen-ager begins to say, "Good morning," "How do you do?" and "Excuse me," every time we pass.

I plan to do some writing but the hours pass unnoticed.

* * *

Berkeley

Tuesday. Arrive Berkeley. We decide to get down here rather than go up to San Francisco. We climb down by means of a step-ladder. Professor David Mandelbaum and his wife are there to receive Chamu and wife and take us to a hotel. I have a feeling of being an intruder, the real expected guest being Chamu. I have got down here because Chamu is here, otherwise I should have gone to San Francisco and then on to Palo Alto which was really my original destination. But I never get there.

I think Chamu is the luckiest house-hunter in the world. Over lunch at Mandelbaum's he was suggested a house at Albany, a suburb of Berkeley. After lunch David went upstairs to his study and Ruth drove us to Albany. 1050, Peralta Avenue (the name attracted us).



This was practically to be my second home in Berkeley for the next two months. Rukka saw the house, liked it, Chamu endorsed her view even without looking at the house, on hearsay, and there they were ready to move in as soon as the lady of the house who had recently lost her husband and was going to live with her daughter in New York was able to move her things out. I never saw anyone make such a quick decision about a house.

Chamu is a philosopher and a logician, a man who can specify what he wants. I sometimes envy him his clear-headedness and luck. What a contrast to my own management of my affairs.

* * *

Sunday Excursion

Half the Sunday spent in finding my way to Chamu's house at Peralta Avenue in Albany. In this process came across a number of places with picturesque names, such as Euclid, Scenic, Cedar, Spruce, Sonoma, Pomona, Carmel. Felt tired. Finally managed to reach Albany. Mrs. Chamu was good enough to keep rice and curry and curd for me. Evening John came down to take me for the Diwali celebrations at the International House. I resisted going there at first – afraid of the air of fraternity. But yielded for want of a better occupation... The air was so heavily, deliberately Indian that I felt oppressed and persuaded John to come out...

At the book store John met a friend – a Dr. Schurman, an expert in Chinese, Japanese, Arabic, who proposed that we



R.K. Narayan and M.N. Srinivas in Chennai, mid-November 1999: "constant friends" over six decades and more.

adjourn for a drink somewhere. He drove downtown in search of 'Lemon and Cat' or some such well-known 'quiet' pub. It was as usual dim-lit, 'atmosphere-ridden', but so full that we had to get out again and search for another place; finally he drove us to his flat, where he could provide us fruit juice and beer. I was impressed with this man's knowledge of Eastern languages. For light reading he read Chinese literature in the original, and Greek and Hebrew when he wanted to bite into harder stuff. Being a woeful failure at learning languages, not knowing any except Tamil and English, I was definitely impressed and wanted to proclaim that he should be the grand moderator in the Tower of Babel. We dispersed at midnight.

Picked up by John at noon, and then on to Chamu's for a South Indian lunch. Chamu, the saviour! After lunch, John drives us over the Berkeley Hills, Tilden National Park, Grizzly Peak, and Redwood forests, till sun-set – all through wonderful mountain scenery.

I was getting obsessed with the thought that I was not putting my camera to good use. So brought it out today and exposed a few rolls – delicately framing each picture around huge elms and redwood, and with Chamu, wife, and John in each spot. I took so much time to compose each picture that the others became

impatient. I begged them to stand still. But unfortunately I forgot to re-adjust the shutter from where John has set it for time exposure under the Golden Gate Bridge the other evening, and so no one turned up in a recognisable shape when the films were later developed; thus lost a chance of immortalising the magnificence of the scenery and company that we enjoyed that afternoon.

End of a guest

Another day of house-hunting, having firmly decided to stay in Berkeley rather than at Palo Alto in order to write my novel... My preference is for Albany because of Chamu's proximity...

While browsing around the campus bookstore I suddenly look up and notice Hotel Carlton staring me in the face, never having noticed its presence before. Walk in and find Kaplan, the manager, extremely courteous and full of helpful suggestions – he's willing to give me a room where I may use a hot plate for cooking my food, daily room service, separate bed and study, ideal in every way, the perfect hotel for me. And it costs seventy-five dollars a month...

For the first time a settled place where I don't have to keep my possessions in a state of semi-pack. I am able to plan my work better. I am enchanted with the place, everything is nearby, two cinemas, three or four groceries, and any number of other shops, I can walk down and buy whatever I may need and peep at the Campanille clock to see the time, its chime is enchanting.

A Party

After dinner picked up by John to join a party on the Hills at Ed Harper's...

I looked about and saw Chamu engaged in an earnest conversation with a young professor, in the quiet seclusion of the fire-place. I approached them with a feeling of relief at finding someone to talk to; but they stood with their backs to the assembly and were engrossed in their own talk. I overheard Chamu say, "Tell me, do the Australian Aborigines correlate copulation with population?" I asked Chamu later why he should bother about the question. He said, "Oh, anything to keep his mind engaged. Otherwise, he would have bothered me to explain the caste-system in India."

Writing The Guide

Nothing much to record, the same rou-

tine, I have got into the routine of writing – about one thousand five hundred to two thousand words a day anyhow. I have the whole picture ready in my mind, except some detail here and there and the only question is to put it in type. Some days when I feel I have been wasting my time, I save my conscience by telling Kaplan at the desk, "I am going to be very busy for the next few weeks trying to get on with my book." A restatement of purpose is very helpful under these circumstances.

Graham Greene liked the story when I narrated it to him in London. While I was hesitating whether to leave my hero alive or dead at the end of the story Graham was definite that he should die. So I have on my hands the life of a man condemned to death before he is born and I have to plan my narrative to lead to it. This becomes a major obsession with me. I think of elaborate calculations: a thousand words a day and by February first I should complete the first draft. In order to facilitate my work I take a typewriter on hire, after three days of tapping away it gets on my nerves, and I lounge on the sofa and write with my pen. Whatever the method my mind has no peace unless I have written at the end of the day nearly 2,000 words. Between breakfast and lunch I manage five hundred words, and while the rice on the stove is cooking a couple of hundreds and after lunch once again till six, with interruptions to read letters and reply to them, or to go out for a walk along the mountain path, or meet and talk to a friend.

Telephone from Chamu to say that his neighbour, an elderly man, who often used to invite him to watch television died suddenly of a heart-attack while shaving in the morning. Chamu and his wife terribly shaken. In the United States death sounds unreal. The man had said "How do you do?" from the road as I was waiting for Chamu to open the door on the previous evening. Chamu's landlord had also died similarly three months ago. So a feeling of insecurity about Peralta Avenue itself...

Having written the last sentence of my novel I plan to idle around Berkeley for a week and then leave on my onward journey. I have lived under the illusion that I would never have to leave Berkeley. Berkeley days were days of writing, thinking, and walking along mountain paths, and meeting friends. And so, when the time comes for me to plan to leave, I feel sad.

(Copyright © R. K. Narayan)