

M N Srinivas: A Personal Note

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IT was in the early 1940s that I first met M N Srinivas in Mysore, where he was Chamu to everybody – just as his elder brother, M N Parthasarathy, the city's prominent cricket buff, was Pachu to all. By then Chamu had spent some years at the Bombay University's School of Economics and Sociology (USES), specialising in sociology. At his persuasion, I went over to Bombay to join the USES and thus started a journey that took me to places I had not foreseen – except that both Chamu and I viewed our stint at the USES as preliminary to a higher degree at Oxford or Cambridge as was the fashion those days. Amongst the undreamt of events (in my case at least) was meeting Sachin Chaudhuri, who also was in a sort of way connected with USES. Of this later.

For the next few years, Chamu and I shared a room in the University Hostel, opposite the Marine Lines station. Though Srinivas' principal interest was sociology, it was not confined to that subject. It ranged over politics and economics, history and language, literature, food and beverages, cricket, and so on. There was never a lack of subjects to discuss with him, whether we were sitting in India Coffee House, drinking coffee, or enjoying curd-rice or dosa at Ramdev's on Apollo Street or walking back late in the evening to the hostel. He had a phenomenal memory for detail, a faculty which made a tremendous difference to his sociological contributions. He was argumentative in those days, and evinced quite often traces of intellectual *hauteur*. More than all, he had a strong sense of the absurd and no matter what or who the discussion was about, he could find enough that was incongruous and laugh at it heartily.

Conditions at that time were such that there was no shortage of grist to his mill. USES had an odd collection of people, both at the faculty level and as researchers, who were engaged in activities that went beyond the confines of academia. Second world war was raging fiercely in both the western and eastern theatres; within the country, the 'Quit India' movement had gathered momentum, elevating political tension to previously unknown levels; simultaneously, a variety of 'plans' for independent India were being formulated by political parties, individuals and groups. Differences between the Congress and the Muslim League were getting wider, and fears of partition accompanied by communal conflict filled the air. Spending for the war had activated inflationary pressures in the country. And so on. USES provided for us a platform where all these could be discussed freely often fiercely, especially

when the Communists turned up and joined the fray. The remarkable thing was that in this environment, though we found much to argue about, we also could find as much to laugh about – thanks mainly to Srinivas.

It was at around this time that I met Sachin Chaudhuri in Chamu's company. Sachin hardly ever came to the USES those days; he was then General Manager of Bombay Talkies, a film company associated with Devika Rani and Himansu Rai. Sachin had a swanky office on Churchgate Street, and at that first meeting he carried himself well in a dress – shirt and tie – an outfit in which I did not see him again in later years. It was during that meeting that Sachin brought up the idea of publishing a journal like *The Economist* of London – not, of course, a copy but something tailored to suit our needs. Some perfunctory discussion of what objectives to seek, what kind of audience to address, who will finance it and under what conditions and so on ensued. But it was obvious that the journal was as yet a beam in Sachin's eye. None of us had any set idea on these issues and naturally no conclusions were reached – except that the journal's scope should be broad and open to free thought. Things had to wait until, after the war, the question of India's independence had been settled, and adequate financial backing was secured. However, Sachin left us with the impression that he would be discussing the project with several others and would come back to us later.

Chamu and I, however, kept mulling over the project along with others at the USES. In the meantime, G N Acharya, a common friend of ours who had long been associated with *The Bombay Chronicle*, had agreed to edit a monthly and started pressing us for contributions. Several discussions with Acharya left us with the feeling that there was, indeed, a great need for public debate on the country's chronic problems of poverty, economic backwardness, communal strife, caste and so forth; and that a responsible platform for such debate could be provided by a journal of the kind Sachin and Acharya were, in their respective ways, thinking about. Further, it became clear to many of us that whatever our research commitments, contributing to public understanding of the challenges that free India would have to face in the future was important. And that any attempt in that direction merited whatever support we could offer.

Acharya did start a journal in 1944 or so, but it did not survive for long. But our meetings with Sachin had restarted, both jointly and individually. Sachin and Chamu were liberals in the full sense of the term.

They believed strongly in democracy, freedom of thought and expression, and social development whose concrete evidence lay in improvement in the quality of life – not for a few but for the generality of people. While there was no denying the necessity of economic growth for social betterment, much more was needed to make life not just livable but enjoyable. With his deep knowledge of Indian society, Chamu never tired of emphasising the need for social and economic structures having to change in harmony – since a change in one always had its counterpart in the other. Economic policy, he argued, did not operate in a vacuum, but in the context of given social and political environments. Radical economic policies would require radical social changes also; if this was not appreciated, the results might prove disastrous. I believe some of these discussions left a lasting impression on Sachin, as is evident from the shape he gave subsequently to *The Economic Weekly (EW)*.

When *EW* actually got started, neither Chamu nor I was in India. But both of us kept in touch with Sachin, and this relationship became much closer after we returned to India in the early 1950s. Srinivas went to Baroda where he set up the University's new Department of Sociology and I joined the Reserve Bank of India in Bombay. The remarkable set of village studies which appeared in *EW* (and which were later published as a book) was largely a consequence of Chamu's influence over the new generation of sociologists and social anthropologists who had started working in various parts of the country. More importantly, Srinivas was among the few persons with whom Sachin kept in continuous touch – seeking advice, cajoling articles or book reviews, or just scouting for new ideas over a drink in the evening. Chamu and Sachin had personality differences – one was meticulous in everything while the other loved to be expansive (and expensive); one tended to be conventional in the British sense while the other was typical *bhadralok*; one tended to be a scientist, the other an artist. Nevertheless, they obviously respected each other, and each contributed to the other's *Weltanschauung* considerably.

Srinivas's influence on the journal continued long after Sachin Chaudhuri's death. He served as a member of the board of trustees of the Sameeksha Trust from 1966 to 1999 and as chairman of the board from 1991 to 1998. Early in 1999, he resigned from the Trust due to the pressure of multifarious other activities into which he was drawn as an internationally reputed sociologist and as an active citizen. For me, a friendship of nearly 60 years has ended, leaving a variety of pleasant memories of a good friend and a brilliant scholar.