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Mysore Narasimhachar Srinivas has invested a lifetime studying Indian society and culture. He has contributed some seminal concepts to sociological literature to facilitate their understanding.

And, even today, as the JRD Tata Visiting Professor to the National Institute of Advanced Studies, Bangalore, or chairman of the Institute for Social and Economic Change, Nagarbhavi, the doyen of Indian sociology and Padma Bhushan award winner in 1976 continues to build on an already extensive academic repertory.

At a time when the country is undergoing unprecedented social turmoil with people pitted against each other in seemingly endless caste and class attrition, political parties engrossed in the consolidation of their votebanks (a term coined by Prof. Srinivas) and some of the country's basic constitutional principles held up for scrutiny, it is time to turn to the distinguished academician for his interpretation.

In this interview, Prof. Srinivas takes his home state of Karnataka as the starting-point of an assessment, lending meaning to phenomena which disturb and distress the daily newspaper reader.

He goes against the grain of conventional wisdom at several points — including the future of the Bahujan Samaj Party leader Kanshi Ram's brand of politics or the definition and applicability of the "secular" concept in India — but he remains dispassionate and, at the same time, hopeful till the end.

At the present juncture, an impartial understanding of the nature of caste, its national variations, the role it has played in the growth and evolution of political power structures and the future of a largely traditional society "modernising" to meet the demands of a growing population, provides reassurance. Economic, particularly rural,



Photographs by Leonard Aarons

They are now important on the political scene... both at the district level and at the state level.

Then, there are the Idigas, who are engaged in the production and sale of indigenous liquor, toddy and arrack. They are numerically strong in the western part of Karnataka. They have seen good days. And then, several other castes, e.g. — the Bedas (hunters), Besthas (fishermen) and others... are powerful in some pockets of Karnataka.

And then, I must also say that the Dalits in Karnataka have had their share of power... But one of the things that has happened as a result of the Dalits having had access to education and jobs in the

nance.

Dominance has moved forward from small but ritually high and land-owning castes to the numerically strong, land-owning Vokkaligas and Lingayats. Now, castes which have numerical strength but whose members were either small land-owning or marginal farmers have, through access to education and political power, begun to challenge the Lingayats and Vokkaligas. But all these people also know that the Scheduled Castes (SCs), in particular, enjoy certain concessions and preferences given to them by the Constitution, which are enabling them to gain access to political power, education, etc. I welcome this situation.

(OBCs) and SCs coming into the middle class; lifestyles will grow common, along with dress, food habits, access to education, etc... And this will, I think, result in marriages across the lines of caste, language and even religion. I would like to see more members of the SCs, STs, OBCs and, if I may add, minorities coming into the middle class because such mobility is a homogenising as well as secularising agent.

Q: What do you make of Kanshi Ram's visit to Karnataka? What are the prospects of a parallel Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) - Samajwadi Party (SP) alliance in this state?

A: My feeling is — and I don't

So, there is conflict between the old dominant castes and the newly-ambitious numerically-strong castes (which are called the intermediate castes in UP). This is one level of conflict. Another thing is that even the Kurmi, Keori and Lodha want to distinguish themselves socially from the Scheduled Castes. They are also oppressors of the Scheduled Castes.

If you look at the UP elections — you find that in the more affluent parts of the state in western UP — the upwardly-mobile Keoris and Lodhas voted for the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), and not the SP-BSP. That is why I say please, don't write off the BJP.

'I do not see harmony on the horizon'

'I do not see harmony immediately on the horizon — in fact, I see the opposite. But, in 20 to 25 years, we will witness the effects of the changes that are taking place...'

The doyen of Indian sociology and Padma Bhushan award winner in 1976, **M. N. SRINIVAS**, discusses a wide range of social and cultural issues with **UTTAM SEN.**

fluence your understanding of what is happening on the ground. I am a sociologist. I try to look at what is happening on the ground and interpret it as honestly as I can.

The fact that these people — the upwardly mobile Lodhas and Kurmis — voted BJP means that the BJP seems to have projected itself as the party of the middle class. As they move on, they move away from traditional caste-based alliances.

Then, the other thing is that because of shrewd leadership in the north, Muslims voted as a body with Mulayam Singh Yadav's SP. According to political commenta-

tors of the Muslims. Mulayam Singh has changed his stance. He calls himself a Sanatani Hindu.

However, the point I am making is that I do not see the SP-BSP alliance as a very stable one. It resembles the KAHM (Kshatriya-Adivasi-Harijan-Muslim) alliance in Gujarat some years ago.

Given the present situation in the country, I think the next 25 to 30 years will be turbulent. And we should be prepared for turbulence. I don't expect harmony.

As long as our economy is good, as long as our agriculture, horticulture, dairy, poultry, etc. are on the up and up, I expect these con-

phasis on rural development, and the fact that there is wide realisation now among the politicians that control of population will not be enforced through contraceptive methods but through providing employment, health services, primary education and, in particular, female education and empowerment, we can make earnest efforts to wipe out poverty. I think we will move gradually into a more rational and stable political order. I think parties will be judged more and more by their economic and social agenda and not by continuous appealing to particular combinations of votebanks.

Q: Secularism has recently been in the news. How do you understand the concept?

A: Secularism is NOT a clear concept. As everybody knows in the USA there is a "wall of separation" between the Church and State. Secularism also carries with it the notion of the supremacy of the rational outlook — of rationality, science, etc. Further, the State is not to be identified with any religion and all religions have a right to exist and practise their rituals. The question has to be asked whether the State, not being identified with any religion, makes sense to illiterate villagers, when our most important political personages, e.g. the President and the Prime Minister, are constantly visiting temples, godmen etc. at the expense of the State. It is true that they also visit mosques, churches and gurdwaras.

It is easier to explain to people that we are a multi-religious State, especially when 99 per cent of them follow some form of religion.

England, which probably has a larger proportion of rationalists and atheists than India, still calls itself a Christian country and its Head of State has the official title of "Defender of the Faith." And England has practised a policy of religious and political tolerance better than any other State. Why can't we follow England's example? Why not?

development and the eradication of poverty are seen as the instruments with which populist politics can be brought to an end to usher in a more rational civic order.

The following is the text of the interview:

Q: How do you view caste in Karnataka today and what do you see in the future?

A: Caste in Karnataka has undergone substantial changes in the last 70 years or so. To summarise it very briefly and at the risk of over-simplification, power has gone to the two dominant castes, Lingayats and Vokkaligas, from the earlier group which enjoyed political pre-eminence and had a near monopoly of education and the professions, namely the Brahmins.

Power has been transferred from the Brahmins to the dominant castes, the Lingayats and Vokkaligas; of the two, the Lingayats are numerically stronger than the Vokkaligas, particularly in the state of Karnataka, as distinct from the princely state of Mysore; both the Lingayats and the Vokkaligas are represented in all the professions and they are particularly strong in the rural areas, as landowners and agriculturists.

They send a sizeable percentage of MLAs into the state legislature. They also send MPs to Parliament and since the late '20s — and certainly since the '30s — both of them have had access to education, the professions and jobs in the government. As a result of the policy of reservation for the Backward Classes (BCs), which was introduced in the princely state of Mysore in the '20s and since Independence, the chief ministers of the state, to begin with, were either Vokkaligas or Lingayats. And one of the paradoxes which has occurred because of this shift of power is that after political clout was transferred to the dominant castes and to the others, Karnataka has had three Chief Ministers from the minority castes, viz. Devaraj Urs, Gundu Rao and Ramakrishna Hegde.

Devaraj Urs was the person who demonstrated that a member of a minority caste could hold the chief ministership of the state by bringing together all the smaller backward castes in opposition to the two dominant castes.

As a result of the political mobilisation which has taken place on the basis of caste in the country and in Karnataka, numerically strong castes which were not economically powerful have come into the political mainstream. For example, the shepherds, Kurubas, are numerically strong in parts of Karnataka.

government and entry into the professions (is that) they are now represented in the government, though not adequately in relation



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to their numbers. The exploitation of the Dalits (who contribute to agricultural labour) continues to occur in the rural areas, particularly in the more backward regions.

The Dalits in Karnataka, particularly the more educated sections, are getting organised. They challenge the power and authority of the dominant and higher castes... which, in the short run, has exacerbated the conflict. Militancy will increasingly lead to clashes with other castes, particularly the dominant castes, inevitable in India's progress towards democracy...

(At the other extreme) as a result of discrimination ...in jobs and the services... there has been a diaspora of the Brahmins initially to the big cities of India and then abroad. World War II gave them opportunities, followed by Independence and the opening of Europe, America, Singapore and Australia. They continue to be prominent in education and research; but they have gone out of the system, they are no longer a political force; others are coming up and offering good competition. **Q: You see a conflict situation... Is there no stage or juncture in the future at which one could look forward to harmony or integration?**

A: I see conflict... The Brahmin has more or less disappeared from the political scene... the people who are very prominent in politics are the dominant castes... the dominance which goes with landownership and presence in government and the legislature, access to education, etc.

What has happened is that the numerically strong castes, which did not have access to education and political power, are now in competition with the dominant castes for access... And we do not have a system in which there is some preference for latecomers to education, jobs, etc.; this has led to some kind of conflict between the dominant castes and the numerically strong castes. I call this the phenomenon of shifting domi-

come this provision of the Constitution...

No democracy can be viable when about 23 per cent of the

population are without access to power. The Constitution, in its wisdom, has given the SCs and Scheduled Tribes (STs) reservation, and my hope as a citizen is that in the next 10 to 15 years, untouchability as a social and economic phenomenon will be wiped out from Karnataka.

This will also mean that sizeable numbers of the Scheduled Castes will be moving into the urban areas. This has begun already.

And I must mention that I regard some amount of caste conflict as creative. While I deplore bloodshed and I do want a non-violent revolution in the country... we will not achieve equality, or at least a society without gross inequalities, without wiping out untouchability and without not giving the Backward Classes access to education and so on.

I do not see harmony immediately on the horizon — in fact, I see the opposite. But, in 20 to 25 years, we will witness the effects of the changes that are taking place.

Q: While talking about the middle classes recently, you mentioned the growth of homogeneity within their ranks, viz. — regional, caste and other barriers are being overcome to make for an integrated category.

Do you envisage such a movement gaining momentum in Karnataka over the next 20 to 25 years?

A: Certainly. In Karnataka, I envisage an increasing number of the Other Backward Classes



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think I am wrong — Mr. Kanshi Ram should have visited Karnataka in 1930. He is about 60 years too late.

Our situation in Karnataka and the south generally is quite different from UP, Bihar, and Rajasthan, which Dr. Asish Bose (demographer) has called the Bimaru states. We are not Bimaru. We are healthy. We are vigorous. The BCs and SCs are being empowered. So, Mr. Kanshi Ram has missed the bus here.

I may be wrong. But let us see. Somebody will take me to pieces (on this).

Q: The Backward Classes, Scheduled Castes, minorities and Dalits have turned the tables on the Congress in the north. Do you see such a thing happening here?

A: This is a very important political question. Because the traditional votebank of the Congress was supposed to be the weaker sections — the SCs, the tribes and the minorities — and now, in popular political wisdom, they are going over to the other parties, particularly in UP, to the SP-BSP. The Congress has lost its base to the other parties; so goes the story.

To me, there are some inherent difficulties in envisaging this alliance on a long-term basis. In the rural areas, land is owned by the dominant castes, including what are called — in the north — the intermediate castes, and the SCs and STs work as labourers on the land owned by them.

As I see it, since the SCs and STs are landless and since, in many parts of the country, they do not have education and are beholden to the dominant caste which exploits and ill-treats them, there is a conflict of interest between the two.

They may tactically get together for immediate gains but, as a long-term phenomenon, I can't see the OBCs and the SCs forming a political alliance.

As I told you earlier, there is a conflict between the dominant castes and the numerically strong castes, which now have access to education and political power at the local level and — through political power — access to education and the professions.

Don't allow your emotions to in-

tors in the north, they saw Mulayam Singh Yadav as the pro-

licts to be manageable. What I am hoping is that with the recent em-

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