

Remembering M N Srinivas

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who had drifted away from the Congress during 1984-89, the years when Rajiv was in power.

Had the Janata Dal government's collapse in end-1990 been followed by immediate elections, the Congress under Rajiv Gandhi may have won the 240 plus seats it needed to claw its way back to office, albeit with a bit of horse-trading. However, the wounded warrior was not yet trusting of an electorate that had so recently ditched him, and hence propped up the Chandra Shekhar regime, a step that led to a steady identification of the Congress with the government in office, and a consequent continuous fall in its popularity. It was perceived by the voters that the Chandra Shekhar interregnum was crafted solely in order to enable the Congress to revive itself financially, and that when it had generated a sufficient war chest, that party would withdraw support and force new elections. However, when the 'Young Turk' PM saw to it that his men had the bigger bite, trouble ensued, and very quickly friction increased thanks to a Rajiv Gandhi raging at reports of the runaway fund collection being done by a government supported by him. Had Chandra Shekhar agreed to the proposal to accept Rajiv's minions as ministers in charge of juicy departments, he may have been allowed to limp on as prime minister for a year more. Convinced of his own popularity, he refused, opting to face a poll for which both he and Rajiv were completely unprepared.

Funds were painfully dug out and paid in two tranches to the candidates. Publicity material and vehicles were procured. In Tamil Nadu Jayalalitha had made it clear that she did not require Rajiv to 'waste' time on the state, as she herself would ensure victory. The state government, now under central rule, warned Rajiv not to come to Madras, or if he did so, to avoid the planned meeting at Sriperumbudur. They had been getting reports that trouble could be expected there. Influential Congress persons in Delhi countermanded this advice, insisting that Rajiv visit Sriperumbudur, indeed that he spend the night there at the home of a local businessman, which latter request at least his securitymen vetoed. Nine calls were put through to Tamil Nadu governor Bhisma Narain Singh and his advisers from AICC headquarters and 10 Janpath insisting on Rajiv going to Sriperumbudur. Like his mother Indira, who had insisted that her very killers remain on duty close to her,

Rajiv too agreed with the view of his courtiers that he must go for the meeting, and that the warnings of danger should not stand in the way. Finally, the governor's administration gave up its efforts at persuading the former premier from coming to Sriperumbudur. At the site, other members of the Congress Party escorted the LTTE operative Dhanu through the security cordon, and positioned her close to the man who had sent the IPKF into Sri Lanka. Strangely, the very Justice Jain who spent

years poring over numerous conspiracy theories skipped over the role of Rajiv's own party members in getting him to the danger zone and the human bomber close enough to him to finish him. These individuals are even today active in politics, many close to Sonia Maino Gandhi. At Sriperumbudur, Rajiv looked forward to wrapping up the meeting quickly and returning to Madras for some sleep. It was to be a different sort of sleep from any that he had had before. [E]

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SUNDAR SARUKKAI

It is not an accident that the *The Remembered Village* is one of the seminal books by M N Srinivas. This book stands as a monument to the many beliefs he cherished: the power of memory and the importance of remembering, the need to possess the eye of the novelist in understanding people and society, the honesty of the intellect in any intellectual process, and simplicity of expression that is itself so complex to achieve. This book is not just an ethnographic account of Rampura – it is also about the sensitivity of memory and the ethics of remembering. It is this ethics of honesty, simplicity and integrity that allowed him to re-member Rampura, an ethics that marked his approach to intellectual thought until the end. In our re-collection of Srinivas, in the texts we create of the "Remembered Srinivas", it is these qualities of remembrance that we need to hold and cherish.

Remembrance is not always an act that we enter into when a person is no longer with us. Remembrance is primarily about presence and absence. It is the creation of a narrative of that which is absent. It is the quality of the void, of an absence, that incites the move to remember. This absence is not marked only by life and death. We remember the absent and in the process of remembering construct a presence of the absent. We remember the living as

much as we do the dead but our stories and memories of the living are fundamentally different from those of the dead. Our remembrance of the living is one that is always *potentially open to a response* from the person who is remembered, always open to the potentiality of acceptance and rejection. The memory of the dead, the re-membering of the dead, carries within it the angst, the acceptance that this response can *never* be had. This remembrance is a voice offered to the void and because of this, those of us who remember the dead have to invest in ourselves the ethics of speaking for ourselves as well as the person who is no more with us. It is this ethics of remembrance, of speaking both for oneself and the other, that Srinivas so elegantly exemplified in his intellectual life.

It is not easy to delineate this ethics of remembering. Although never explicitly acknowledged as such, *The Remembered Village* is an attempt in this direction. In this book he has already shown us the way to remember, to go beyond the written presence of his notes and extract the images of Rampura which had become a part of him, become a member of his own self. By doing this and succeeding in the evocation of it, he has given us an insight into how presence is so powerfully captured in absence. He has shown us how to pay homage to absence by gathering all that is present – that what is called remembering. Writing about Rampura, reconstruct-

ing the village from written notes, is very different from writing about it from one's memory. The legitimisation of 'truth' to one's observations as an ethnographer, anthropologist and sociologist is not the legitimisation accorded to memory without the aid of the written. When Srinivas wrote the book in spite of losing his notes he was writing a monument to the *ethics of remembrance*. In doing this, he was deprivileging the excessive preoccupation with the 'objectification' of writing by replacing the written object with the *remembering subject*. Accomplishing this with the ethics of honesty and integrity, his book is a testament to the ethics of remembering itself – of creating a presence of the notes that had become ashes, a fate reserved for the bodily presence of many of us.

But honesty and integrity are terms that only imperfectly capture the character of this ethical move of remembrance. The central ethics of remembrance is already present in the word: re-member. When we are asked to remember a person, we are asked to respond to the dynamics of this hyphenation. The prefix *re* means again, back, anew. The word 'member', as the Webster dictionary has it, is described as "to bear in mind; to keep in the memory; to keep (a person) in mind with some feeling, as of pleasure, gratitude, etc; to be careful not to forget" and so on. But these descriptions do not make explicit the ethical dimension of remembering. This is made explicit in the *membership* created in the act of remembering. A membership that binds together the remembered and the rememberer. It is this idea of the 'member' that supplies the ethical response in the act of remembrance. (The dictionary describes the word 'member' as a "part or organ of a human; a distinct element of a whole; a person belonging to some community, association".)

To re-member is thus to make the remembered person a member of ourselves, and also to remember that the remembered person is a part, an element of those of us who take upon ourselves to remember. The voice of the remembered is also a part of our own voice. The gift of remembrance is then to cherish the remembered other as part of our own self – whether we are adulatory or critical. It is this engagement with the quality of remembrance that is dominantly found in Srinivas's reflections – from his *Remembered Village* to his more recent observations on the self-in-the-other. Although quite different from

certain philosophical preoccupations on the self and the other, his was an anthropological observation dependent on a larger ethical principle of acknowledging and being sensitive to the other(s) in our self/selves. It is this awareness and acknowledgement that uniquely characterised his intellectual and personal interactions.

I remember the last five years of his academic life as a colleague of his, much junior to him, at the National Institute of Advanced Studies. And what I recollect most vividly is the ethical responsibility he insisted upon in any academic and intellectual enterprise. He demanded of himself the honesty, clarity and simplicity of expression that he expected of his colleagues. His participation in the lectures in the institute, whatever the subject of the talk or however junior the speaker was, was aimed at instilling these attributes. Because of this, he always responded with innocent enthusiasm to new ideas, whether in sociology, philosophy, literature or lately, even in computers. This ethical stance toward thinking and knowing and a basic fascination with exploring the boundaries of human thought made him, forever, a child of ideas. His most biting comments were reserved for ideologues and frozen ideologies, those that refused to participate in the play and pleasure of new ideas and expressions.

It is this youthful spirit that permeated his view of people and societies. Adding to this spirit was his prodigious memory of names, events, incidents and stories. It was sheer joy listening to his detailed descriptions of people and events, laced with cryptic asides. And when he was speaking you could see the energy and delight in his demeanour – if we were all younger, I would have called it mischievous. It is this age of innocence that marked his approach to academic life, at least those years I shared with him at NIAS. His approach to academics, as far as I understood it, was based on this cardinal principle that no intellectual growth is possible when thought was already based on rigid

ideologies. It is also this that made him see the world in a grain of sand, and the society in the gesture of an individual. Thus, every little event and person was worthy of respect and thought but never of judgment.

Srinivas's contribution over the last many years to our institute, which was in its infant stage, was immense, whether as the chair of the library committee, or helping to formulate policies for the institute. As much as he was an institution builder, he was also a maker of memories, a magician of the spirit. It is only given to a few to have this ability and capacity to create memories for others: whether it was his inexhaustible stories and anecdotes, his care and concern for the ailments of the institute staff, his energetic participation in the many courses (which included playing a cricket match – bowling and batting – with one group of participants, when he was 80), his continued insistence on meticulousness in academic life, childish enthusiasm in his academic, social and personal engagements. It is our remembrance of these memories, a collection of images and texts inhabiting various textures of thought, which contribute to the 'Remembered Srinivas'.

Remembering Srinivas is to first acknowledge the quality of the person who has gifted us the potential to remember. Our remembrances of him speak eloquently of the *afterlife*, a term used by Walter Benjamin in another context. Remembering Srinivas is this acknowledgment of his afterlife and pays homage to the gift that he has bestowed on us in catalysing our own capacity to remember.

If there is an epitaph I could write (being well aware that he would have found a sociological story in the inability to write an epitaph for those of us who are not entombed, not *written* into the ground, but only scattered in the winds like spoken words, making us remember once more the ethics of remembrance when we are without the objectified written), it would only be to say: "He died young". **EPW**

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