

OBITUARY

Professor Vinay Kumar Srivastava (1952-2020)

With a very heavy heart I am writing this piece: Professor Vinay Kumar Srivastava passed away after an acute illness due to COVID and pneumonia and finally a cardiac arrest at 5 PM on 23rd December 2020. Born on 3rd December 1952, he was brought up in a middle-class family along with three sisters and a brother. Looking at his eloquence and perfection in English, it is hard to imagine that he was educated from a Delhi government hindi medium school and would always tell me that he worked hard to learn this much and his wife influenced him to learn English. Not only in English, but also in other languages, like Hindi-his mother tongue- and Urdu which attracted him the most. Often in the long chatting sessions, he would indulge into undue couplets and poems.

A very amiable personality Professor Srivastava taught me briefly and I always called him Sir and he was mostly addressed me Chaudhury Sahab. Our association goes back to 1986, when I attended his classes, subsequently developed friendship which included doing field work, dining, partying and sharing score of things. He went to Cambridge to do a Ph.D. under Professor Caroline Humphrey in the Department of Anthropology in 1988 with a commonwealth fellowship. After doing a course work, he came back to India to conduct intensive field work among the Raika Reharis of Rajasthan. He would visit Bikaner and surroundings villages frequently for two to three weeks and would be writing the details in the Department of Anthropology, University of Delhi. I very fondly recall that I used to take dictations from him on different things including research articles. What a powerful story teller, once he dictated 25 pages in a go in the sprawling lawn in the front of the Department of Anthropology, University of Delhi. It has been a great learning experience; let me confess I have learned the art of writing with Anthropological and Sociological vocabulary from him. Further I owe a lot to him for imbibing editorial skills in me. Sometime around 1989-90, we (myself and Professor Soumendra Mohan Patnaik) started writing research articles and also were given the task of publishing two joint issues of *Indian Anthropologist* which was then not coming out for three to four years. Late Professors J. S. Bhandari and D. K. Bhattacharya were instrumental in bringing out those volumes. Professor Srivastava was one of the editorials of Journals of Human Ecology published by Late Professor M. K. Bhasin of the same department. He would always promote his students in general and me in particular asking to keep on

writing articles or book reviews. In fact, my latest publication: "Relevance of Methodology of M. N. Srinivas Today: Some Issues", came out online on 10th December 2020 in the *Journal of the Anthropological Survey of India* published by Sage publications only because of his motivation. We planned several joint projects together which got a jeopardized because of his sudden demise. He was editing a volume on 50 key Anthropologist in India who are currently active in which I was to write about myself. I have already started writing on it.

For various reasons, that is, taking special lectures he would frequently come to Lucknow and would say he is visiting Lucknow only to spend some time with Sukant. Sometimes he would stay for 2-3 days with me and we would have long chats mainly on writing skill, teaching skill, analyzing published books and articles, critically analyzing students and teachers in departments of Anthropology and Sociology of University of Delhi and other universities of India and the world and so on.

As Director, Anthropological Survey of India (ASI), he virtually revived the age-old organisation into a vibrant mode. The latest book came out on the Sentinelese on 23rd December 2020 itself when he passed away. Sentinelese is a decaying community as they have been kept under Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG). Recently (about two years back), it came in news because the American National John Allen Chau was allegedly killed by the Sentinelese on the island. The ASI said that, "the right of the people to the island is non-negotiable." They are one of the most isolated communities. Prof. Srivastava maintained that the different sections of the tribals are getting differentially impacted, while talking about the development among the Oraons. The educated Oraons are very much advanced than the non-educated ones. In this manner, Prof. Srivastava maintained that various tribal communities are having fractured nature of change. He took the example of the Sentinelese who are cut off from the mainstream even today. They are not having contact with the outside world. However, they understand various things like the climate is changing, aircrafts are flying, ships are spilling oil and contributing towards pollution. If it is affecting the public, then it is affecting the tribals also. The tribals are much affected by outside interference. Ethnicity continues to be on the rise because of the way they are treated by the outsiders. In this manner, more and more tribal communities are becoming endogamous. Most of them are becoming inwardly because of the problem of ethnicity. Most of them have adapted to modernity like smart phones, television and other household gadgets. They are also getting into administrative services and teaching jobs but simultaneously are also continuing their culture or reviving their culture. Also these ideas and many more were given by Prof. Srivastava to me over a personal interaction of ours sometime in September, 2020.

Just see his extraordinary capability as student: undergraduate in Anthropology Honours, Postgraduate in two disciplines Sociology and

Anthropology- all three degrees from the University of Delhi-Gold Medallist; M. Phil. from Department of Chinese and Japanese Studies, University of Delhi with 'O' Grade and Ph.D. from University of Cambridge U. K.

His publications include about 23 books, 145 research papers and about 200 other write-ups including reviews, newspaper articles, comments and so on. All his publications are crucial in different context and some are frequently referred to by students, research scholars and teachers.

It is very difficult to live the same life without Sir, he was also one of the instrumental persons in the Ethnographic and Folk Culture Society, Lucknow, not only as the Editor of *The Eastern Anthropologist* (2001-2016), but also contributing structurally by participating in its Executive Committee and General Body meetings. We will miss him very deeply and wish to partially fulfil his unfulfilled projects.

Sukant K Chaudhury

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• **Vinay Srivastava: As I remember him**

After joining the online prayer meeting by the family of Vinay, I attended the first official condolence meeting organized by the Ethnographic and Folk Culture Society on 27 December which was heart wrenching for all who were so eager to express the sense of loss which the community of scholars have been experiencing over the week. The loss was monumental, affecting the academic, social, professional and personal dimensions of colleagues across age, gender, region, and nationalities.

His sudden demise was an irreparable personal and professional loss to me as I would always look forward to his sane and selfless advice on important and critical issues affecting the disciplinary practice in various ways. At the back of mind, it was always there that both of us would have enough time to catch up in 2021 when he completes his tenure of Director, Anthropological Survey of India at Kolkata and I am through with my tenure as Vice Chancellor of Utkal University, Bhubaneswar. But it was not destined.

When I am pondering over writing this brief note as a tribute to Vinay Srivastava, I have already written his obituary for two other journals – *Social Change* and *Contributions to Indian Sociology* and have decided not to write for *Indian Anthropologist* to avoid being repetitive. But when Sukant, the current editor of *The Eastern Anthropologist* insisted that I should write, many things started flashing back in the memory lanes.

After three months of his passing away, his departure continues to fill

the present, his words echo in the ear, as if just uttered. One will never forget how he made us understand and realize that - generosity as a precondition of effective leadership; get going and not get stuck by petty considerations ;solving a problem not by creating noise but through silence which allows time to heal ; being aware of the ephemeral and eternal nature of human relationship ; doing it now or never ; remembering an iota of help received and returning bountiful of the same at the earliest ; the capacity of everybody to grow and excel ; maintaining the hierarchies from below and transcending the same at the top. These are some of his oft quoted statements.

One of his statements still echo in my ears: 'every day I wake up, salute the mother earth by touching the ground and think that today is my last day on this planet; and I know one day I will be right'. And like all other cases during his life, no one could prove him wrong in the evening of 23 December 2020.

Soumendra Mohan Patnaik

Professor of Anthropology, University of Delhi.

- For long years, from 1978 to his sad demise in 2020, Vinayji (Professor Vinay Kumar Srivastava) was a dear friend and a valued colleague of mine. He was an outstanding scholar of international repute, and was deeply committed to the profession of teaching Anthropology. Generations of students admired his brilliant exposition of theories and would never miss his classroom lectures and his insightful presentations and interventions at seminars, workshops and conferences. He was a favourite of his teachers and other eminent professors of Anthropology in India, who knew him personally and were aware of his relentless pursuit of academic excellence. Professor Gopala Sarana once confided to me that, whenever he paid a visit to the Department of Anthropology, Delhi University, Vinayji would always come to his mind. A large number of his research publications bear eloquent testimony to his diligence in pursuing quality anthropology. He was recognised as one of the best known anthropologists of India, who played a leading role in promoting the discipline. The vital role he played in revamping and reenergizing Anthropological Survey of India can never be exaggerated.

Vinayji closely observed ways in which the Covid-19 pandemic transformed the world around him and wrote perceptive articles on the subject, which broadened and deepened our understanding of the terrible crisis confronting humanity. To our utter dismay, Vinayji fell a prey to the virus causing the pandemic.

On Wednesday, December 23, 2020, God called him to an abode of eternal rest. He will be sorely missed by his family, friends, colleagues and his former students. I pray to God to give me the strength to bear the loss of such a dear friend.

Prasanna Kumar Nayak,

Retd. Professor, Department of Anthropology, Utkal
University, Bhubaneswar

- Dr. Vinay Kumar Srivastava's Death at 68 years was a shock. He was trained in Anthropology from Delhi University; he tried to integrate all branches of Anthropology. He himself was a proficient and knowledgeable person and a cultural man along with bone and stone. He was the right person to take the charge of Guha's Anthropological Survey of India. I personally thought and believed that all the sections of Anthropological Survey of India must have developed holistically and scientifically under his guidance. His writings, lectures and short comments on matters concerning Anthropology were outstanding. He died in harness and his loss will be felt for long in the Anthropological fraternity.

Dr. B. B. Goswami

Former Joint Director,
Anthropological Survey of India

- **Loss of a Public Intellectual**

The untimely passing away of Professor Vinay Kumar Srivastava has created a void in Indian social science fraternity. We all know of his research work on the religious practices and ascetic ideology of a pastoral community based on a non-Brahmanical perspective on renunciation, his popular edited volume on Methodology and Fieldwork and many other scholarly publications. His ideas are easy to understand and apply, owing to his lucid style of writing and deliberation.

I see him as a social anthropologist, public sociologist and organic intellectual, based on my long association with him for about 28 years. He was an excellent story teller, always in pursuit of academic credentials and above all, always concerned with improving the human condition of vulnerable communities. Prof. Srivastava had a habit of sharing his quality conversation with various people, for example, interaction with teachers, students, colleagues, auto/taxi drivers and local people.

It was always a pleasure to listen to him during his frequent visits to Lucknow. I have been immensely benefitted by his comments, feedback and quality inputs in my doctoral research, research papers, management of the department at Ravenshaw University, Cuttack & Lucknow, conferences, seminars and academic writing workshops and above all the Indian sociological society.

In November 2020, I had a long interaction with him while he was

travelling by taxi from Kolkata to New Delhi. He suggested me to organise lecture series on “The Idea of India” after the normalcy of the COVID-19 situation, besides assuring the support of the Anthropological survey of India. The implementation of his suggestions would be a rich tribute to him in near future. ‘COVID, as a Social Stigma’, and ‘COVID vis-à-vis the Tribes of India - An anthropological Response’ were perhaps his last articulations on contemporary pandemic. He became the victim of this deadly virus and left for heavenly abode but his presence will always be felt through his scholarly publications in social science discipline in general and Anthropology in India.

D R Sahu,

Professor of Sociology, University of Lucknow

• **Vinay: A teacher and a friend**

My first memory of Vinay is of this young bearded lecturer with a cigarette in his hand in front of the Anthropology Department. He was one of the two teachers who accompanied nine of us to Nagaland for our compulsory fieldwork dissertation in Oct-Nov 1985. The teacher –student intimacy which at that time developed between him and the nine students continued till the very end. He was my proxy supervisor for the MSc dissertation and was the official supervisor for my MPhil thesis on the Sahariya of Madhya Pradesh. I continued in Anthropology because of Vinay’s teaching (his lectures were a performance, where we would wait for him to offload his wrist watch, wallet and even belt, so that by the end he would be covered in chalk dust). It amuses me to think now that Vinay and I could have landed at the same university as fellow students and would have been colleagues, had I opted for Cambridge instead of Oxford in 1987. Vinay taught me much more than anthropology. He introduced me to Urdu language and poetry, and palmistry & jyotish. Whenever I hear poetry by Ahmad Faraz and Faiz Ahmad Faiz, I am reminded of Vinay, who was both a teacher and good friend to me.

Vibha Joshi

University of Oxford

• **Professor Vinay Kumar Srivastava: A Life Devoted to Humanizing and Emancipatory Social Science**

That Professor Srivastava trusted my abilities by accepting my request to be my thesis supervisor (perhaps seeing raw enthusiasm and interest in me about using ethnography in my doctoral research in Psychology) in July, 2001 was my first glimpse of a thoroughly kind human being that he always was. I already knew him as an excellent teacher and an inspiring researcher when he delivered two lectures in the Department of Psychology, University of Delhi

on ethnography in October, 2000. As his Ph.D. student, I could observe from close quarters his active contribution towards realizing the humanizing and emancipatory potential of social science research. He used to encourage me to narrate openly all my fieldwork experiences related to my doctoral researcher in the villages and cities of Kachchh (that were struck by a massive earthquake in January, 2001) rather than discussing *only* the nature of data. I soon realized that he wanted me to reflect on what I learnt about *myself* rather than *only* the research participants' suffering and healing. It became clearer to me through such insightful discussions with him that ethnography or qualitative research provide an opportunity to the researcher to *locate* oneself experientially and theoretically/paradigmatically that facilitate the process of getting closer to or empathizing with the worldview or experiences of participants within the interactional spaces in the field – that could be potentially humanizing and emancipatory for them as well as the researcher. He will always be remembered as an academic devoted to humanizing and emancipatory social science!

Kumar Ravi Priya

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- The sudden and untimely demise of Vinay Kumar Srivastava (VKS) who as the Director, Anthropological Survey of India and Professor of Anthropology, University of Delhi served and enriched the discipline of Social Anthropology was unbelievable and saddened many of his colleagues and students alike to the core. It's difficult to 'contain' his kaleidoscopic engagement with social anthropology (both as a discipline/ subject and as practice), yet a humble attempt is made here. VKS did M.Sc. Anthropology from Hans Raj College, University of Delhi in 1974 and M.A. Sociology from Delhi School of Economics, University of Delhi in 1976. In both he was awarded Gold Medal. His M.Phil. in 1983 was from Department of Chinese and Japanese Studies, University of Delhi. He was awarded Ph.D. in 1994 from University of Cambridge. A detour at this juncture is warranted. His vivid description of his Ph.D. fieldwork ... '... I have always Jaipur as my second home as a doctoral student ... then as an independent researcher collect data during fieldwork at Pali Marwar under Doctoral supervisor ...' (2009). It needs to be underlined that VKS Ph.D. was under the supervision of Caroline Humphrey (who herself was supervised by Edmond Leach). It was in July 1993 that VKS Ph.D. titled 'On religion and renunciation: The case of the Raikas of Western Rajasthan' became available to the wider academia for consumption. Over a period of time his research interests developed in the realms of comparative religion, caste system, family dynamics, medical systems, and anthropological theory and methods. A cursory glance at his more than four decades of teaching and practicing Social Anthropology tells us that he taught sociology at Hindu College, University of Delhi, from September 1976 to January 1985.

Subsequently, he joined the Department of Anthropology, University of Delhi, as Lecturer in Social Anthropology in January 1985. In September 1986 he became a Reader in Social Anthropology and in January 1997 became Professor. He was Principal, Hindu College, University of Delhi, from 10 March 2010 to 7 March 2011. He was Professor, Social Anthropology, Department of Anthropology, University of Delhi till nearly the end of 2017. He became the Director, Anthropological Survey of India in August 2017. His other significant assignments/ positions included Director-in-Charge, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad Institute of Asian Studies; Member, National Commission for Sub-categorization of the Other Backward Classes under Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, Government of India; and Member, Commission for De-notified, Nomadic, and Semi-nomadic Communities (2015–2018), Government of India. His vibrant tenure as the Director, Anthropological Survey of India came to an unfortunate and abrupt end as he passed away on 23rd December 2020.

Primitive Classification (1903) by Emile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss (the English translation of which appeared in 1963) stated that ‘... the prime and fundamental concern of social anthropology is classification; to distinguish and classify to acquire a meaning....’. Following this line of argument, VKS academic writings and deliberations can be heuristically classified into two intersecting ‘spheres’ of works. The first set of writings engage with the nature and subject matter of social anthropology itself in general and the ways it is understood, taught and practiced in India in particular. Flowing from this set of writings is equally significant strand of intellectual pointedness is his emphatic concerns towards the nature, context and modalities of doing research in social anthropology having India as its ‘landscape’. His unbiased and brazen commitment towards such a matter is very much visible in *A note on life-history method* (1990), *The ethnographer and the people* (1991), *A note on the Interview Schedule* (2010) among others. However, it was the edited volume titled *Methodology and Fieldwork* (2004) under the series Oxford in India Readings in Sociology and Social Anthropology wherein he wrote its Introduction and Sectional Introductions that we see his firm yet subtle grasp on the matter at hand. The Volume addressed the central issues of nature of social research; travails of fieldwork; expositions on survey methods and most importantly, myriad issues of ethics in research. Second set of his writings marked by captivating and seamless academic deliberations is centred around the tribal issues in India whether it is *Concept of ‘Tribe’ in the Draft National Tribal Policy* (2008), *On the concept of tribe* (2010), *Tribes in India: Concepts, Institutions and Practices* (2013) and alike. Very true to the notion of public intellectual, even in the COVID-19 times, he was very active as he regularly spoke on anthropology, anthropologists, tribes and pandemics on YouTube and other avenues. His critical analysis and methodical treatment of the methodological issues pertaining to social anthropological research motivated research scholars as well as teachers/ faculty members of the younger generation alike. An esteemed colleague to many and mentor to numerous

young beautiful minds, VKS untimely demise has left a deep void both in the personal and professional spheres which is very difficult to be filled in.

Sumit Saurabh Srivastava

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- I knew about Srivastava Sir since I was a M. A. student in 1997-1999, particularly from Prof. Sukant Chaudhury Sir, when he was organising a National Seminar on Ecology in 1999. Srivastava Sir had to come, but he could not come and later on he came many times to deliver Keynote addresses and lectures.

What a powerful speaker!

The audience may be 20-200, all would be spell bound, even after taking heavy Indian lunch without dosing all would be attentive. The lectures would be full of content, Sociological vocabulary, examples and case studies, theoretical relevance etc. He would always stress upon the fact that students must be empathetic and learn up to perfection. We will miss him but will follow him in content and spirit.

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