

OBITUARY



**PROF. VINAY KUMAR SRIVASTAVA
(1952-2020)**

Prof. Vinay Kumar Srivastava was known to me very well for many years since the time when he became one of my Ph.D. supervisors in 1994. He had returned a few months earlier after having completed his Ph.D. from Cambridge University under Prof. Caroline Humphreys. He had worked on the Raika/Rabaris, a nomadic tribal community of Rajasthan, for his Ph.D. which was eventually published by Oxford University Press. This engagement with the nomadic communities was something he carried with him till the end, having prepared a massive set of reports for the Niti Aayog regarding the nomadic communities of India in 2020 as Director of the Anthropological Survey of India.

As one became closer and interacted more, the many facets of his personality shone out. One day he related that at the age of seven it was discovered that according to his horoscope, he was fated to have fallen ill and died at an early age of eleven years. This worried his father. The guru who had looked at the horoscope also prescribed its cure and so he was apprenticed to learn about astrology and palmistry and their predictive nature from this early age as an antidote. He then became a practicing astrologer and palmist, and he would give readings at weekends, a practice he discontinued later. In later years, this gave him a keen sensitivity to healing practices through astrology and palmistry as a part of his learning in Medical Anthropology, on which he conducted fieldwork and wrote a paper in the early bulletins of the journal of the SIMA. This bulletin was discontinued after some years.

In 1995, I remember that we collected together as researchers to discuss our views regarding the World Conference on Women to be held at Beijing. When I discussed this with him, he corrected my pronunciation, at which point I was informed of his M.Phil. at the Department of Chinese and Japanese studies at the University of Delhi in 1983 where he secured an O-grade. He worked on

the charisma-building process in China after the death of Chairman Mao in September 1976 after conducting his fieldwork in Hong Kong. Thus, the work incorporated issues like power, authority and control which were explained in a number of research works. This included a paper on the *Mao Cult, Charisma and Social Science* published in the *China Report* (Vol. 21, No. 4, pp. 359-370).

It was also apparent from his teaching that we were being given information from a variety of subjects. This included Law (of which he had a good knowledge and where he used to go to lecture), Criminology (which he used to teach to the Certificate Course students in the Department), some Philosophy and Sociology. Through our faculty we came to know that the Sociology Department also used to hold their weekly seminars for research scholars on Fridays, so we shifted ours to Thursday so that each could visit the others' Departments on these days. We had standing instructions from Prof. Srivastava to call him in case we were a speaker short on Thursdays. It was then that I came to know of his M.A. in Sociology that he had completed in 1976, soon after he had completed his Masters in Anthropology in 1974 from Hans Raj College. That his education was continuous was apparent from the fact that he had completed his Bachelors in Anthropology from Hans Raj in 1972.

When he became the Principal of Hindu College, I realised that he had not only taught Sociology in Hindu College from 15 September 1976 to 21 January 1985 but was also Teacher-in-Charge of the Department. This background put him in conflict when he was appointed Professor at the Department of Sociology at the D'School but he eventually talked it over with many friends, family and colleagues and elected to stay on at the Department of Anthropology – to our sigh of relief.

In 1994, when I submitted my proposal to him for checking, typed by my own hand on an Olympia 1966 Portable, he took it and asked me to wait. Eventually, he called for me from the Department library and took me to his room. I looked at the returned document with trepidation since it was absolutely red with his corrections and markings. The back of the sheets of paper had to be used, too, since he had run out of space for his comments. At the end of these 'massacred' spaces he had written 'Very Good Attempt!' I mention this to make a note that Prof. Srivastava was critical and expected his students (and perhaps others) to do their very best, but he was always encouraging of their every effort.

I began my Ph.D. with a disadvantage, since I had used up a year of my fellowship. Perhaps, Prof. Srivastava learnt of this. He said that a friend of his had commissioned him to write a paper on joint families for a journal. He wanted to have my assistance for it. I soon brought him many books and papers for his perusal at which point he advanced me the two thousand rupees given to him to write the piece. He completely ignored me (and the paper) for a time after that and the journal became defunct soon after. I came to realise that this was his way of advancing me some money to carry on my researches without letting

me know of it. This habit of his generosity, of his left hand doing what his right hand never knew, was something he continued, This was a fact we learnt from many others only after his demise that he had bestowed large sums of money to many others.

Many have spoken of his more than three hundred or more research papers, books, reviews and articles that have been such a pleasure to read over the years. Many have and will learn through and from what he wrote. For instance, even as I write this, I can feel the way his obituaries of others have affected the way I have written about him. However, he was also intensely personal in his approach, in his feelings and his work. As we remember this persona at his death due to cardiac arrest after suffering from Covid-19 on 23rd December 2020, we may look back at his enormous contribution to Anthropology and to society without hagiography. It is perhaps incumbent upon us to continue his work without wallowing in the misery of his loss.

Prof. Abhik Ghosh,
Chairperson,
Department of Anthropology,
Panjab University,
Chandigarh.



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