

VINAY KUMAR SRIVASTAVA

3rd December 1952 - 23rd December 2020

Vinay Kumar Srivastava was born on 3rd December 1952 to middle class parents in the walled city of Delhi. He was educated in the local school of the region. To all extents and purposes he was a brilliant student all through. This may be seen from the fact that he received gold medals all through his graduation (1972) and post-graduation in Anthropology (1974) from Hans Raj College, University of Delhi as well as for his Masters in Sociology from the Delhi School of Economics, University of Delhi (1976). He was awarded the University Medal in 1972 as the best candidate from B.Sc. Anthropology. In 1974 he was awarded the University Medal for being the best candidate in M.Sc. Anthropology. He was also awarded the All India Post Graduate Scholarship (1974-1976). For the same period he got the National Scholarship during his M.A. in Sociology. He received Smt. Kunda Datar Gold Medal for being the best candidate in M.A. Sociology and the R.D. Sanwal Memorial Prize for scoring the best marks in M.A. Sociology.

He continued with an M.Phil. from the Department of Chinese and Japanese studies in 1983. Then he went on to complete his Ph.D. from Cambridge University, UK under the supervision of Professor Carolyn Humphreys in 1994.

His teaching assignments continued from an early age, so much so, that he was one of the rare few professors to complete their service with over 41 years of teaching to his credit. He began by teaching Sociology at the Hindu College, University of Delhi from 15 September, 1976 and stayed there up to 21 January, 1985. He was the Teacher-in-charge at the college at many occasions. He then joined the Department of Anthropology, University of Delhi as a Lecturer on 21 January 1985, becoming a Reader in 1986 and a Professor in 1997. This link with the Hindu College remained unbroken since he went back as a Principal of the Hindu College from 10 March 2010 till 7 March 2011 when his lien expired. He then returned back to the Department of Anthropology.

His dedication to brilliance and a superior intelligence in his research work shone throughout his career. At every stage in his career, he had brought in a

variety of works that were very relevant to the times as well as being new ideas in academia. They were written in his impeccable English which made them very good reading material. From his works on China during his M.Phil. to his studies on nomadic pastoralists and other tribal communities, he brought in a degree of fieldwork expertise coupled with academic writing of a kind that had rarely been seen in the country. This was apparent even from his writing that compiled data from a rare fieldwork conducted in Jharkhand at the village during his B.Sc. where Kamre Baba was using his religious organization for the welfare of the village. This work is also illustrated with many rare photographs of Kamre Baba whose memory is enshrined in the village today in the form of a marble statue.

It would be painful and difficult today to recreate the reason for the great followership that he had gained over the years. This was his passion for teaching. He could teach without pause for many hours at a stretch without halting and often did so. He was pleased to lecture to students anytime. He never carried notes. He always used the entire black/white board to such an extent, that his pathway on the board mirrored a summary of the lecture that he delivered. It was not only a very interesting set of lectures; it was full of information, references, quotes and anecdotes given from memory. They became such a draw that students from all classes who were free and wished to learn more about a particular topic requested to attend his classes which he freely allowed. Many students, including me, benefitted from his vast repertoire of knowledge and scholarship displayed during his lectures. He would read new books every week and they would get neatly slotted into the class and the subject that he would be teaching.

This was the basis of his huge fan following, over and above that was brought about by his writing. Many students from other departments came to him asking for help relating to their work or about the Civil Services Examinations syllabus in Sociology or Anthropology. He also taught them formally, but he often guided them personally. He was invited often to lecture to students at the hostels or at different kinds of fora. Even after he became the Director of the Anthropological Survey of India, he took to the new online technology like a duck to water and began an extensive series of lectures in all aspects of Anthropology. He wanted, as he told me once, that there should be lectures available to students for every topic in Anthropology. Today, these lectures are like the beacons that show the way to neophytes and form a set of advanced pathways to unravel his ideas and his vision for Anthropology for those who are professionals.

He always encouraged writing and putting forth this knowledge in the public sphere. He put Indian anthropological writing into the current International sphere not only through his writing but also through encouraging the writings of others. The works that he edited are legion, and in many of them he encouraged others to present their views and field data as well as to highlight new arenas of Anthropology.

When it came to Anthropology, he was an immaculate artist in his readings

and writings. He went through both Physical Anthropology as well as Social Anthropology with equal amounts of detail and expertise. He often attributed this to his early training in Anthropology where fieldwork data was collected and written down by everyone in all the sub-fields of Anthropology.

Through all of his interactions with his students, his love for humanity shone through in his relations – with the faculty as well as in his complex and in-depth relations with others in different departments. These relations were not restricted to Anthropology and existed all through the country and even beyond it. It is this network of relations, the lectures, the interactions that he provided and the guidance that he gave would be greatly missed in Anthropology. He was the voice of the sane in an increasingly strident and clueless media barrage to our senses.

In his interactions with the students as well as for the public, he would occasionally bring in short comments about his family, through which we learnt about them. It is also in his asides that we learnt of his love for the arts, especially of Urdu poetry and of many other things that he felt strongly about. His own passionate help given to those near him as well as to the communities on which he conducted his study shall be remembered by many. These interactions would be my personal loss, something I would feel keenly at every Seminar, Conference and Workshop, and at every visit to the Department of Anthropology at the University of Delhi. He would have the occasional ‘spring-cleaning’ where he would give away his own and others’ papers and books to those around him.

This simplicity of life coupled with the complexity of his thoughts was the hallmark of his Directorship of the Anthropological Survey of India. After a bout of Covid in late November 2020, he recovered but was having problems with his breathing and so was readmitted to hospital. He left us on 23rd December 2020 to cope with his loss and the yawning emptiness he left within people, the subject and the academic disciplines that he worked through to understand the reality of our current social situation.

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