



Anthropology an Accidental Encounter: An Insight into Vinay Kumar Srivastava's Journey as an Anthropologist

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Abstract: Vinay Kumar Srivastava was an acclaimed professor of Anthropology who had spent most of his teaching career at the University of Delhi. At the time of his death, he was serving as the Director, Anthropological Survey of India. This article is not a memoir, as I am not merely tracing his career as an anthropologist or writing about his achievements, rather, working on the lines of memory ethnography, this article emphasises his life and works, spanning over two decades, as I had known him through my association and interactions. The article is a humble attempt to pen down and share my recollections, memories, and teachings that I have accumulated over the years with Professor Srivastava as a teacher, mentor, senior colleague, and father figure who had always encouraged me with his silent but steady support. At times, my writing would seem more like an auto-ethnographic account, however, my work reflects on Professor Srivastava's life, not mine.

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On 28 November 2020, a cold chilly winter morning, as I parked my car at Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU), Maidan Garhi campus, my cell phone bell rang. 'Professor Srivastava Sir' flashed on the screen. As I picked up the call, Kumkum Srivastava's (Professor Srivastava's wife) chirpy voice responded "*Today I am Sir's personal secretary and calling on his behalf. He wants to meet you in the evening, come over*". That evening was the last time I met Professor Srivastava (Sir as I used to address him). On 1 December 2020 he was diagnosed and hospitalised with COVID 19, information that he had shared on my WhatsApp chat, reiterated verbatim herein, "*It is just to inform you that my corona report has come. It is positive. Please all those who*

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have come in contact with me in the last ten days should get themselves tested and observe the protocol". Just a few days earlier his article on 'Anatomy of Stigma: Understanding COVID 19' was published. During the COVID 19 lockdown, he had spoken extensively on Stigma and COVID 19 in the webinars organised by various institutions. For me, his webinar lecture on 'Disease, Stigma and the Enemy Approach' presented on 27 May 2020 left an indelible impression as he spoke about Goffman's work on stigma and how he has been inspired by it, so much so that he even picked up the book and showed it to the audience during his lecture. He had stated in his lecture that *the anthropology of outbreaks is conclusive: stigma and 'othering' that pose serious health hazards during epidemics and pose a question, 'Will COVID 19 become a syndemic?'* Professor Srivastava in his editorial for the Anthropological Survey of India Newsletter (April-June 2020) had written about his own experiences when he had traveled by road from Delhi to Kolkata during COVID 19 Lockdown. And that day Professor Srivastava was lying on a hospital bed, inflicted with the same virus, a virus that he had written and spoken about extensively, never to come back home—the irony of life.

Vinay Srivastava's First Brush with Anthropology: The Accidental Encounter

The evening of 28 November 2020 is etched in my heart and mind as that was the day, he had shared the incident of how his anthropological journey began. Professor Srivastava categorically stated that his first brush with anthropology was an accidental encounter. That day we were discussing his upcoming work on a tribute to the anthropologists who had contributed to the growth of anthropology in India. This work was to come up as an edited book, he was working closely with P.C. Joshi. As we were reminiscing on the lives of the anthropologists and their association with anthropology, Professor Srivastava stated 'Rukshanaji¹, I don't have a glamorous story to share. It would be wrong if I say I grew up being interested in anthropology, rather for me it was an accidental encounter – that changed the course of my life'. In the year 1969, Vinay had joined the premedical semester at Deshbandhu College, Delhi University. He was preparing for his degree in medicine. During those days he used to travel by bus from Hauz Qazi, Chandini Chowk to the College. In mid-semester, one day while boarding the bus, he slipped, bruised, and injured his knees and legs. The accident left him incapacitated for almost a month. Once he resumed his premedical classes, he realised that coping with the syllabus was a challenge as he had lost precious time. This he discussed with his father and it was decided

that he would drop a year and prepare for the next term. It was during his stay at home that he came across an advertisement in the newspaper about vacant seats for Bachelor of Science in Anthropology (B.Sc.) at Delhi University. Thus, the next day, he went with his cousin to enquire about the admissions. Not wishing to lose a precious year, he joined B.Sc. in Anthropology (Honours)² at Delhi University.

After the fee was paid, he went to the Department of Anthropology in Delhi University to attend classes. Professor Srivastava vividly described the classroom where the class for the B.Sc. first-year students was held, (incidentally till date the B.Sc. first-year classes are held in the same room). As he entered the room through the backdoor and sat down at the nearest available seat the teacher was winding up the lecture, which he later comprehended was on primates by Professor P.K. Seth. Professor Srivastava waited for the next teacher, a tall young fellow with a French beard and jet-black hair entered the room. What mesmerised the young Vinay was how the teacher on entering the class, first removed the wristwatch, took out the wallet from his pocket, and placed them all on the table. The teacher next rolled up his sleeves, picked up the chalk, walked towards the blackboard, and started delivering the lecture. As the class progressed, the blackboard was filled from one end to the other, with the map of Europe and other descriptions. A lecture focused on prehistoric archaeology. The teacher at times would run his hand through his jet-black hair, slowly covering them with chalk dust, turning them white. That was the first class through which Vinay Srivastava sat in stunned stupefaction, without understanding the context of the lecture but pulled by the aura of his teacher D.K. Bhattacharya. Professor Srivastava had a lifelong association with him. In the memoriam of D.K. Bhattacharya, Professor Srivastava had written, "*One of my teachers who has left an indelible impact on me was Professor D.K. Bhattacharya.... His classes of 1969-70 are unforgettable; he was one of the most involved teachers I came across those days, and he left a profound impression on me*" (2019). That first class was an inspiration for Vinay Srivastava that stamped and sealed his career and life. Thus, as he began his anthropological journey, he carried forward the legacy of his teachers and became a legend who used to turn the class into a magical world. He emulated charismatic charm inspiring many young minds throughout his teaching career³ that spanned over thirty-three years. Vinay Srivastava had touched the hearts of students across disciplines and not just anthropology, as he lectured in institutions spanning the length and breadth of our country, right from Kashmir to Kanya Kumari, North-East India to Gujarat in the west.

Vinay Srivastava- My Teacher and Inspiration

Like all his students, in the year 2001, I too was enthralled by his aura when he took our first class on 'Medical Anthropology' in the second year of the Masters in Anthropology program at Delhi University. That day is engraved in my memory, as after a sumptuous meal in the Post Graduate Women's Hostel (PGW) I was a wee bit sleepy and slumped on my seat at an afternoon class. The lethargy was quite intense among my classmates on that hot summer afternoon, as we waited for Professor Vinay Srivastava's (VKS Sir, as we used to address him) class to begin. He entered the class exactly at 14:30 hours and his charisma was the first thing that became vibrant in the room and all of us sat up straight. Dressed in a crisp white shirt and grey trousers, he captured our attention and as the lecture progressed, we lost track of time, drowsiness forgotten. We sat through two lectures in rapt attention. The only sound was of the chalk scraping on the blackboard and his clear and crisp voice. He had woven his magic through his words, with the blackboard as the witness of the concepts, narratives of everyday life, discussions, and debates that were translated and simplified for us in his unique and inimitable style. That year of his teachings stayed with me, though I hardly interacted with him during my Masters and Doctoral days.

My association with him was renewed after I joined Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) as a faculty in the Discipline of Anthropology, School of Social Sciences in the year 2010. After joining IGNOU our first task was to develop a Masters's Programme in the Open Distance Learning (ODL) mode. We conducted Expert Committee Meetings (ECM) for the course development and Vinay Srivastava joined us as one of the experts in the field. Initially, our meetings used to be very formal, at times heated with discussions and arguments but always there was an element of fun too, as everyone enjoyed the process. It was a learning experience for me and my colleagues when many of the brilliant academics sat together to design a course. At times, opinions differed, but the core was the passion and love for anthropology that we saw in every member.

Professor Srivastava would meticulously read every nuance of the syllabi and put his comments and notes in a detailed manner using his coloured pens. He had a penchant for fountain pens and coloured inks. His copy of the syllabi would become filled with remarks, which he would later pass on to us for preparing the final course structure. After every discussion, Professor Srivastava made it a point to read out the final version, so that there was a consensus about what had been deliberated, only then it was finalised.

These ECMs were also an eye-opener as we saw Professor Srivastava not only as a great teacher but a crusader for the development of the subject, a person who was concerned about the way forward for anthropology. This aspect is reflected in many of his writings like *'The Future of Anthropology'* in *Economic and Political Weekly* (1999), *'Some Thoughts on Anthropology in India'* (2007), *'The Impact of Anthropology'* (2009), *'Indian Anthropology Today'* (2012), or when he wrote about *'The State of Research Culture in Indian Universities'* (2017). He spoke about his apprehensions extensively in the webinar lecture series that he had done during the COVID 19 lockdown phase. His first lecture on the Facebook page of *Anthropology (Indira Gandhi National Open University)* titled *'Anthropology Today'* delivered on 21 May 2020 was a revolution in the virtual world, the viewers exceeded four thousand five hundred in numbers. To date, it remains one of the most searched videos on our Facebook page. Professor Srivastava had also taken the cause of anthropology and Tribes in India at the State level in matters of policymaking⁴ when he had had the opportunity to express his views at ST, SC Commissions, and other such platforms. *'Concept of 'Tribe' in the Draft National Tribal Policy'* (2008) *'Draft of the Policies for Great Andamanese and Sentinelese'* (2020) are some of his notable works in this area. His last edited work on *'India's Tribes: Unfolding Realities'* was part of a series that he was working on. A signed copy of this book is the most treasured gift that I received from him on 28 November 2020 - the last day we met. His concern and feel for the growth of anthropology were also reflected in the development of the IGNOU syllabus where he would put forward his points, subtly yet with an underlying force.

During the ECMs, I saw another facet of his life that I was earlier unaware of- his relations with his colleagues. I still remember one incident vividly that showed his bonding with my Ph.D. supervisor Professor Subhadra Mitra Channa, his colleague, and friend for years. On that particular day, Professor Channa's phone was ringing consistently during one of the sessions in the year 2010, and owing to the perennial network and connectivity issues in our IGNOU campus, she was not able to receive the call. So much so that it became a distraction. Vinay Srivastava, during one such failed attempt by Channa to receive her call, stated *'Subhadraji why don't you put your phone on silent mode?'* It was a time when we all were getting accustomed to our android phones and she replied *'I am trying to do so, but it's not happening.'* So, he offered to do it for her. He too struggled with the new gadget and technology; after failed attempts, they finally decided to switch off the phone. The conversation might seem mundane, though the underlying emphasis is on the courteous way he

treated Professor Channa. There was much affection in his voice and the banter that continued between them was proof enough of the congenial relationship they shared as colleagues. Yes, there is cut-throat competition in academics and lobbies too, yet there was genuine love and respect that was also visible. During our ECMs when we have anthropologists from all over the country on the same platform, I have observed this bonding and also his respect for his senior colleagues. He addressed Professor Ranjana Ray as '*didi*' (elder sister). Professor Kamal Kant Misra would be cordially addressed as Misra Saheb.

This article would be half-finished if I do not write about my meetings with him at his home. After the ECMs, we had the task of assigning units to writers, willing to contribute to IGNOU course work and thereafter editing them. Professor Srivastava had contributed numerous units for our courses. Initially, in terms of unit writing, he would say, '*assign the work to the budding and upcoming anthropologists, I am too old now*'. That was his way of promoting the younger generation. However, during one such discussion I had blurted out in my usual manner without restraining my thoughts or words, '*no one can write as you do and this is the legacy that you would leave for generations to come, your writings would be a reason for students to join anthropology- the only treasure that you would leave behind for your students*'. He pondered upon it for some time, thereafter we never had this discussion again, as he never refused to write units for us. However, busy he was Professor Srivastava had always been there for the IGNOU fraternity. He was with us as a unit writer, editor, nominated member of the School Board for School of Social Sciences, nominated member of Academic Council for IGNOU, and above all as our mentor and guide. I bonded with him during the days we used to sit and edit (rather I learned the nuances, style, and technique of editing) when we were working on the course 'Comparative Ethnography'. This course was a challenge in itself as we had used thirty-two ethnographies over six thematic blocks. There were three units in each block. Each unit dealt with two ethnographies. Units were written by eighteen authors from across the universities in India. Often times we would work in the evening at his home after he returned from work.

Snippets of Vinay Srivastava's Life as a Family Man

The first time I visited Vinay Srivastava at his home was in 2012 when we were editing the course on Comparative Ethnography. It was an awkward moment for me as I was nervous and was still in awe of my teacher. After we sat down, he introduced me to his younger son Rohan⁵, who was studying in the 7 standard with, '*Rohan, seek didi's blessing by touching her feet, she is a*

teacher'. I was overwhelmed as I had never in my wildest dream imagined this kind of courtesy. I reacted instantly with a 'No Sir' but he said 'I insist, as now you are a guru and my son should learn how to pay reverence to his gurus'. That's where family values come from. Professor Srivastava practiced in everyday life what he preached.

It was a hot summer afternoon in June 2019. Around 4 o'clock I rang the bell of his house; Professor Srivastava opened the door wearing a yellow T-shirt. I was taken aback for a moment, as I had always seen him in white kurta pajamas at home. With a shy smile, he stated '*Gopi left this behind for me to wear*'. The pride, love, and happiness that he was wearing his son's T-shirt reflected in his voice.

Likewise, during another conversation, on sharing household chores, he had revealed that every day he washed his clothes and helped his wife with the dishes at night. It was difficult for me to comprehend this, as, I knew him as a teacher passionately involved in his reading, writing, and teaching. I could only revel in his self-effacing persona as I got the opportunity to know my teacher as a great, noble, and humble soul, much attached to his family. His love for music, singing ghazals, and penning Urdu poetry under the pen name Khurshid were some of the talents that slowly unfolded during our interactions and conversations. The last verse of the ghazal '*Muhabbat karne wale kam na honge, tere mehfil mein lekin hum na honge*' as he sang in his soulful voice still resonates in my memory. Many had written about his generous nature and how he had been there when someone had reached out for help. I too received his generosity during the COVID 19 lockdown when I was forced to vacate the rented apartment and was almost homeless for four months. He gave me space in his house to store my belongings, till I found an apartment. After the incident with my landlord, despite his busy schedule, he would often call me up to enquire about my health and wellbeing. Likewise, he had touched many a heart. As Professor Subhadra laments to date, '*I lost my best friend and just not my colleague*'.

During the past year, after Professor Srivastava's demise, many of his friends and colleagues have commented on his nature and how he was never angry. However, I would beg to defer as in Professor Srivastava I had seen the emotion of anger and displeasure twice. What is important to learn here is how he channelised his anger about his professional experience of presenting a memorial lecture in a university. He had written about 'the jolt' he felt when the organising committee requested him to cut short his lecture owing to time constraints. As per the norms of memorial lectures, he had prepared a session

for one hour and was just given twenty minutes. This was unacceptable to him and instead of venting out at the organisers, he expressed his views through an article. *'Remembering Scholars and Academic Ancestors, Paying Them Tribute'*⁶ is a valuable article on how to conduct a Memorial Lecture. Herein, he had meticulously penned the difference between *festschrift* and a memorial lecture, highlighting the nuances, the protocol to be followed while conducting and delivering a memorial lecture. A masterpiece left for posterity. Another time he had expressed his displeasure with regards to a family matter, as it was too personal, I shall refrain from writing about it. Giving up on anger stems from his innate nature. A true renouncer in every sense of the term, I quote him from one of our conversations, *'your attitude in life how you deal with adversities, and the relationship you have with yourself can help determine your happiness quotient. Your unhappiness- unfulfilled needs, wants, desires occupy all of your time-life, thoughts, emotions, mind- everything. So, if you want to be happy, don't hate anybody for having all that you don't have. Be content, satisfied with what you have.'* This was also a take on the anthropology of happiness that he was working on, an encouragement that came after he visited the Jarwas in Andaman and Nicobar Islands, whom he had observed in their natural environment.

Vinay Srivastava's Association with his Field

Any write-up on Professor Srivastava would fail in its mission if his commitment to fieldwork is not mentioned. Anthropology was his way of life; the everyday mundane life was his field which he observed and analysed. Even years after his fieldwork among the Raikas of Rajasthan he had maintained his relationship with the field and its people. Professor Srivastava emphasised that one should not look at the field as a mere source of information but must give due credit to the people in the field. He would always address them as *my friends from the field* and not as my subjects or respondents. He was a thorough fieldworker and had conducted much empirical research. *Methodology and Fieldwork* (2005) *Experiences of Fieldwork and Writing* (2015) were some of his phenomenal works besides many others.

Professor Srivastava never missed an invitation to address and delineate about anthropology, that was his way of reaching out to the margins and popularising the subject. As stated earlier everyday life was the field for him and this was reflected in his writings too, *My Tryst with Urban Studies, Sociological and Anthropological: Experiences of Teaching and Learning*⁶ a work that elucidated on his experiences as a teacher. *Reminiscing Fieldwork and Writing up Culture an Account of Producing the Doctoral Dissertation* (2015), herein he

recollects about his own doctoral work- trials and tribunals. *On Sanitation: A Memory Ethnography and Remembered City* (2014), and *Lived in City, Delhi as I Experienced and Delhi of my Consciousness* (2013), are some of his prodigious writings based on memory ethnography.

With COVID-19 taking the world by a storm that had brought our everyday daily routine to a standstill, he reached out through the webinars. He was known as a good orator who mesmerized his audience. During the webinars this came into prominence when he articulated and elucidated - why empirical research is relevant in an era of misinformation, and what our responsibilities as anthropologists are when the world was moving towards anthropology at a distance- the field being out of bounds. He was concerned with delineating the relevance of research in these changing times- what problems we should study? Why and with whom? With what methodologies and methods? The ethical issues and concerns that ought to be looked into and with what intentions for impact and change? Professor Srivastava brought home the fact that an anthropologist is always at work and the COVID-19 Lockdown was no deterrent for the anthropologist to give up observing the field- which was now our own home, neighbourhood, and the virtual world.

Professor Srivastava was always open to new ideas and believed that ideas keep growing. This was evident from the array of his works that ranged from mental health, anthropology of Qawwali, stigma, tribes, anthropology of happiness, and also death, the list goes on. Summing up I leave the readers with this inspirational quote from Professor Srivastava's work '*Let there be no weight on us of the baggage of our ideas. The time-bound thoughts will cease; the time-free thoughts will survive. One should be as light as possible. Throw the weight of ideas, and then only will new thoughts develop.*' (2019).

Notes

1. Professor Vinay Kumar Srivastava whom I had always addressed as 'Sir' would always add a suffix to my name 'Ji'. Many times I had asked him just to call me by my name as I was his student but he would always say, "Rukshanaji now you are a teacher and so I must give you your due credit".
2. Education:
 - (a) Early Education: Anglo Sanskrit Victoria Jubilee School, Daryaganj, Delhi was where Professor Vinay Kumar Srivastava began his schooling. He used to joke that despite having attended one of the best schools of that time, he learned English in the Hindi medium, as all his teachers used to give lectures in Hindi. His inspiration to improve his skills in reading and writing English came from Professor D. K. Bhattacharya. Since his graduation days, he followed a strict routine of reading and writing at least two pages every day;

- (b) Bachelor of Science (Honours) Anthropology (1972), Delhi University;
- (c) Master of Science in Anthropology (1974), Delhi University, with specialisation in physical anthropology;
- (c) Master of Arts in Sociology (1976) Delhi University;
- (d) Master of Philosophy in Chinese and Japanese Studies (1983), University Delhi;
- (e) Commonwealth Fellowship program (1988) to King's College London;
- (f) Ph.D. with accolades (1994) from Cambridge University, United Kingdom.

Details of his education cited from [http:// www.anthropologyindiaforum.org/v-k-srivastava](http://www.anthropologyindiaforum.org/v-k-srivastava)

3. Career as a Teacher: Vinay Srivastava taught sociology at Hindu College for nearly a decade (1976–1985). In 1985 he joined the Department of Anthropology, University of Delhi, as a lecturer. In 1986 became a reader and then in 1997, a professor of anthropology.
4. Career as an Administrative Officer: He was Principal (2010–2012) at Hindu College and then became the Director, Anthropological Survey of India at Kolkata in 2017- till his death on 23 December 2020.
5. Professor Vinay Kumar Srivastava is survived by one daughter; Sonal Srivastava and two sons; Tussar Srivastava and Rohan Srivastava.
6. Professor Srivastava used to send his upcoming publications via email mostly in word format before they went to press. *'Remembering Scholars and Academic Ancestors, Paying Them Tribute'* and *'My Tryst with Urban Studies, Sociological and Anthropological: Experiences of Teaching and Learning'* were among the article that I had the opportunity to read owing to his email communications. However, I couldn't trace the original publications and thus, not able to cite them herein.

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