LECTURE

Destroying the negatives
M. N. Srinivas, fire, and photography[1]

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M. N. Srinivas's *The remembered village* bristles with references to photography, from a formal group image of villagers marking Gandhi's death to an account of villagers' enthusiasm for the products of Srinivas's own camera. We learn, among other things, that Srinivas became known as the "chamara man," that he photographed the castration of bulls, that some of his photographs were almost involved in a court case, and that a Dalit worker resisted the ethnographer's camera because the police used photographs to trace runaway servants. This article examines his recounting of the role of the camera in Rampura, and the relationship of photography to memory, evidence, and politics, before moving to a very different village in central India whose recent and current fixation with the camera, and what it makes visible and permanent, is explored.

Keywords: M. N. Srinivas, photography, fire, *The remembered village*, anthropology of India

I recently had the good fortune to stumble across a burnt document in Mumbai's Chor Bazaar. This is the market where legend has it that the violin belonging to Queen Victoria (who never visited India) was sold after it was stolen during her visit to Bombay. This remarkable fact bears repeating: this is the market where legend has it the violin belonging to Queen Victoria (who never visited India) was sold after it was stolen during her visit to Bombay. This is by way of explaining that many of the objects you encounter in this bazaar come prefabulated, and get confabulated and refabulated as they pass from the seller to the often gullible buyer.

You may think I am gullible in lending credence to the story I'm about to tell you, suggesting that the coincidences and temporal overlays to which this document bears witness are fissured with the kind of confabulation to which half a lifetime excitedly browsing in Chor Bazar ought to inure one. The document appears on the face of it be a New Year's greeting card from the photographic company of Bourne and Shepherd dating from 1973 and which reproduces an image taken by the English photographer and cofounder of the firm, Samuel Bourne,

in Calcutta in the 1860s. As you can see (Figure 1) the edges of the card are burnt, an index I assume (gullibly or not) of the catastrophic fire on February 6, 1991, which destroyed Bourne and Shepherd's Calcutta premises in Chowringhee. This image was most likely preserved because it was in the middle of a wad of similar images bundled away and forgotten and because of this the flames of the fire were only able to lick at the external surfaces of this brick of images.

The image perfectly embodies the complexity of what Roland Barthes termed "the anterior future" (1981: 96) and the complex layering of time and event. The 1860s are rephotographed in 1973 and then further indexically seared by the events of 1991 that have left such a powerful trace. The image recalls Barthes' comments on August Salzmann's photograph of the road to Beith-Lehem from Jerusalem: "nothing but stony ground, olive trees; but three tenses dizzy my consciousness; my present, the time of Jesus, and that of the photographer" (1981: 97).

Clearly this document also speaks to the relationship between fire and memory, to what survives and what partially remains. And of course this document is interesting chiefly because of its ruination, because it bears the highly visible signs of the third act of its rephotographing by fire. It is as a ruin that it appeals, its value lying chiefly in what
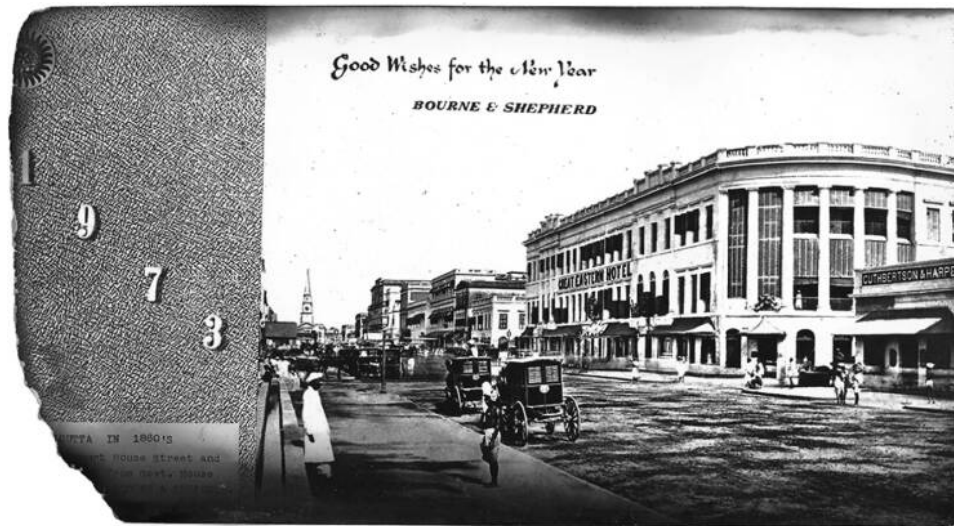
Figure 1: New Year's greeting card for 1973 produced by the venerable Calcutta studio of Bourne and Shepherd. Probably partly incinerated in the fire of 1991; purchased in Chor Bazaar, Mumbai in the early 2000s. Collection of the author.

has been lost and the way in which an act of destruction so explicitly leaves its traces and adds value. In the case of the 1970 Stanford fire in which M. N. Srinivas's office was destroyed, the consequence was the (notional) loss of a "book," this having long served as a trope both for abject destruction (as in the burning of the library at Alexandria, Reformation-era destruction, or Nazi book burning [Canfora 1990; Ovenden 2020]). Canfora suggests that there is a complex dialectic at work and that the "history of libraries in antiquity often ends in flames." He records the fevered dream of the twelfth-century Byzantine poet John Tzetzes concerning an unobtainable book (Dexippus's *Scythian histories*) which was

> licked by flames: its parchment leaves were curled up by the heat, the binding which should have held together the five-leaved gatherings dangled in wretched disarray. Nonetheless, the "divine writing" had survived and was clearly visible . . . The longed-for book, by now impossible to find and very probably destroyed forever, thus appeared in a dream to the scholar who coveted it, as if emerging once more from the flames that had engulfed it. (Canfora 1990: 190–91)

So let us address Srinivas's fire, for which this is obviously an analogical object. Srinivas's *The remembered village*, first published in 1976, was prefaced with the following epigram: "Had not all the copies of my processed notes been burnt in the fire on 24 April 1970 at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences, Stanford, I would not have thought of writing a book based entirely

on my memory of my field experiences. I wish therefore to acknowledge the part played by the arsonists in the birth of this book" (1976: vii).

It was started deliberately (according to his most detailed published account in *Current Anthropology* in 2000) by people he describes simply as "arsonists" who, in the early hours of April 24, 1970, placed Molotov cocktails in the glass-walled telephone booths which were positioned outside some of the studies in the Stanford Center for the Advanced Study of the Behavioral Sciences (2000: 163). The *Stanford Daily* newspaper announced in its edition of Monday, April 27, 1970, "75 Years' Work Destroyed" under a photograph of the "smouldering wreckage" of the building (see Figure 2).[2] Noting that "several scholars" were impacted, the article foregrounded the loss suffered by Srinivas who "left the smouldering wreckage of his office in tears" but was already focused on what could be salvaged, declaring that "more and more I feel I should finish the study of the village" (Kohn 1970: 1).

The "arsonists," Srinivas suggested in his 2000 reflection, were students who had a general grudge: they "regarded the Center as part of the 'Establishment,' allowing 'fat cat' social scientists to . . . enjoy a sybaritic lifestyle in sunny California." There was also an immediate provocation: "a rally on the Stanford University campus on the evening of April 23 to recruit students for the Vietnam War" (M. N. Srivinas 2000: 163). The *Stanford Daily*'s

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2. The newspaper did not publish over the weekend and was catching up on news from the previous Friday.

MONDAY, APRIL 27, 1970   STANFORD, CALIFORNIA

Behavioral Sciences Fire

75 Years' Work Destroyed

Figure 2: *Stanford Daily* report on the fire that destroyed Srinivas's notes. April 27, 1970. Courtesy of the *Stanford Daily*.

press coverage suggests, conversely, that the protests were not about "fat cat social scientists" but rather the presence of ROTC on campus; the Reserve Officer Training Corps was a route through which commissioned officers were directly inducted from the university into the US military.

On April 29, 1970, the *Stanford Daily* reported that a document survival expert ("an anonymous Palo Alto woman") had volunteered to help in the recovery of damaged documents and that her "first obligation . . . will be to help recover the research material of M. N. Srinivas, sociologist from the University of Delhi. Twenty-two years of Srinivas's research on the caste system of India were lost in the fire." The front page of the same day's newspaper announced "US Troops Enter Cambodia As Asian War Policy Widens," situating the protests against ROTC in the context of the escalation of an American imperial war.

President Richard Nixon who had assumed the presidency at the beginning of the previous year was reported on the following day (April 30) by the *Stanford Daily* as having sent a "sympathy note" (see Figure 3). "'It can be small compensation for you to know,' wrote Nixon, 'that the overwhelming proportion of the American people, and of the American academic community, utterly reject the tactics of a person or persons who did this . . . To say that they are deranged does not excuse them. To say, what is more probably the case, that they

are simply evil, does not make them go away." Nixon concluded his note with the hope that the "great insights of social anthropology . . . might serve in this moment to help you understand this tragedy." Anthropologists, no doubt will be surprised and (I hope) troubled by this ringing endorsement of their project by Richard Nixon, though we should remember that he was writing in the wake of Project Camelot, a massively funded mid-1960s (1961–65) attempt to harness social science to counterinsurgency, and the forerunner of the "Human Terrain System" in Afghanistan and Iraq. In 1966, following the formal closure of Project Camelot, the US defense budget still included $34 million for behavioral and social science research (Price 2016).

I hope that a good part of my text will embrace Nixon's challenge through an attempt to apply anthropological insights to Srinivas's response to the fire, but there is some basic political contextualization still required to understand the actions of students whom Nixon described as "deranged" or "evil." It is worth recalling that this was two years after the shock of the Tet Offensive, and the subsequent escalation of the military
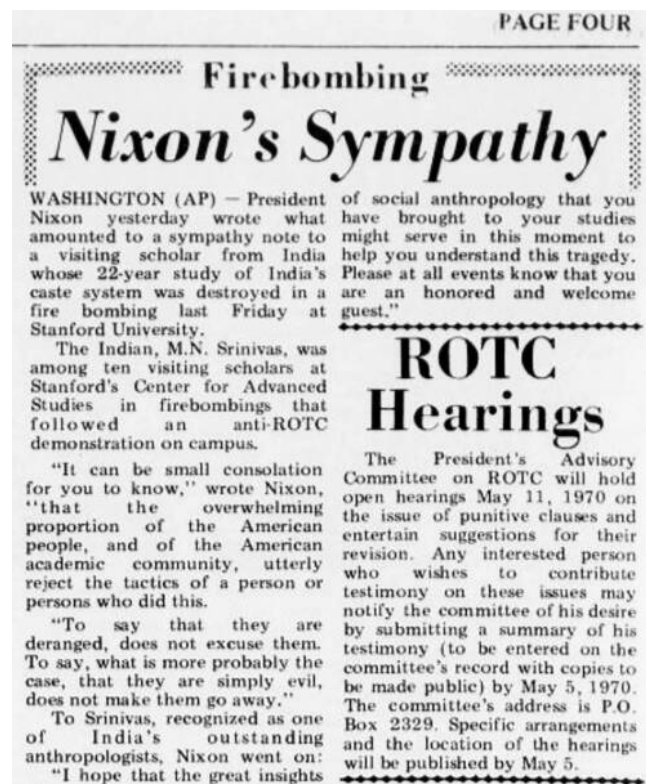

PAGE FOUR

Firebombing

Nixon's Sympathy

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Nixon yesterday wrote what amounted to a sympathy note to a visiting scholar from India whose 22-year study of India's caste system was destroyed in a fire bombing last Friday at Stanford University.

The Indian, M.N. Srinivas, was among ten visiting scholars at Stanford's Center for Advanced Studies in firebombings that followed an anti-ROTC demonstration on campus.

"It can be small consolation for you to know," wrote Nixon, "that the overwhelming proportion of the American people, and of the American academic community, utterly reject the tactics of a person or persons who did this.

"To say that they are deranged, does not excuse them. To say, what is more probably the case, that they are simply evil, does not make them go away."

To Srinivas, recognized as one of India's outstanding anthropologists, Nixon went on:

"I hope that the great insights

of social anthropology that you have brought to your studies might serve in this moment to help you understand this tragedy. Please at all events know that you are an honored and welcome guest."

ROTC Hearings

The President's Advisory Committee on ROTC will hold open hearings May 11, 1970 on the issue of punitive clauses and entertain suggestions for their revision. Any interested person who wishes to contribute testimony on these issues may notify the committee of his desire by submitting a summary of his testimony (to be entered on the committee's record with copies to be made public) by May 5, 1970. The committee's address is P.O. Box 2329. Specific arrangements and the location of the hearings will be published by May 5.

Figure 3: Report in the *Stanford Daily* on Nixon's letter to Srinivas. April 30, 1970. Courtesy of *Stanford Daily*.

draft. Fire and burning was already in the air: the United States would drop almost four hundred thousand tons of napalm on Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia during the course of the war. Designed to stick to flesh, napalm burned at temperatures of between 800 and 1200 celsius. Photographs of the suffering it caused displayed in the media played a large part in stoking domestic United States discontent about the war, although it, and the burning of villages in search-and-destroy missions, has now become the subject of celebratory computer games such as *Air Conflicts Vietnam*. The later 1972 Pulitzer-winning image by Nick Ut showing a terrified Kim Phuc running away from exploding napalm has become iconic. Photographs such as these in turn encouraged actions such as the burning of draft cards as performances designed to be photographed and circulated as news events. The fire that so impacted Srinivas was thus born of other fires.

The consequences of the Stanford fire are well known: the three copies of processed notes, representing many years of analysis, were for contingent reasons all present in the office and all were incinerated. The Associated Press reported that Srinivas was in a state of shock and unable to speak. Children wrote him letters of sympathy enclosing dollar bills (M. N. Srinivas 2000: 163). Srinivas dismissed the "arsonists" and was reluctant to frame the Stanford protests in any engaged way in the context of Vietnam, the huge bombing program and incursion into Cambodia (which, as the *Stanford* Daily recorded, was becoming public at exactly the time of the fire). This is consonant with the picture that Andre Beteille paints of his former supervisor as "by no means a radical" (Beteille 2012: xv), although one apparently who had more time (this is in certain respects hugely surprising) for what Ambedkar said about the village than for the views of M .K. Gandhi or Jayaprakash Narayan (whom he apparently knew [Beteille 2012: xv]).[3] Ambedkar believed villages were "infected by ancient prejudices" and were "sink[s] of localism" and "den[s] of ignorance," a position which is hard to reconcile with Srinivas's evident love of Rampura (Jodhka 2002: 3351).

Back at Stanford, Srinivas was given a new office, at the back of the building, and persuaded by another Center fellow, the anthropologist Sol Tax, that he must press ahead with his volume, investing his own personality in his narrative. But, as Srinivas recalls, the ruins of the event created problems: "Several cardboard boxes, each filled with scraps of partially burnt notes, had been stored in the study, and an acrid smell of burnt paper pervaded the room. Try as I might, I could not ignore the smell; it stood in the way of my efforts to recall my days in Rampura" (2000: 164). The acrid smell of the fire, a memory of the recent catastrophe, obstructed more distant memories (Rampura in the late 1940s). David Shulman has argued that in the South Indian tradition smells serve as "characteristic markers of identity, capable of transformation, but generally linked to a sense of profound layers of experience and being" (1987: 131), but the Stanford fire had clearly, in the short term, deformed Srinivas's relationship to experience.

So far I have focused on the act of destruction that was to give birth to Srinivas's best known book. I will now focus on a different act of destruction, the one signaled in my title, "destroying the negatives." To get there we should briefly reprise the role that photography played in Srinivas's publications, and especially *The remembered village*, a work that is saturated with references to photography. Srinivas was an eager, albeit self-deprecating photographer and in *The remembered village* he provides numerous details of what interested him as a photographer. He appears to mention only one photograph in the village that is not evidently taken by him (and which he does not reproduce), this being a group image of villagers commemorating the assassination of Gandhi. He notes that the feast that concluded the thirteen days of mourning was traditional: "only the photograph was a new addition" (1976: 10).

Srinivas's camera, he writes, contributed to his popularity. Although he was, he claims, a "poor photographer," he makes up for this by his "willingness to snap everything [he] saw." Photography is presented as a pleasurable activity and an engine of social warmth. He "proudly" shows his photos and reports that "generally, the villagers loved being photographed, and the examination of the prints provoked much laughter and comment" (1976: 20). The "myth" that the photographs would be shown abroad added to the pleasure and his camera became, as he put it, "a passport to every place" (1976: 20).

In a particularly rich passage Srinivas notes that his arrival with his camera to photograph people at work

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3. "He warned me in particular about the views of the Indian village of the two greatest Indians of the twentieth century, Gandhi and Tagore. He came to know Jayaprakash Narayan . . . He was somewhat more impressed by what Dr Ambedkar had said about the Indian village, although he found his opinions too strident" (Beteille 2012: xv).

"broke the monotony" of their labor (1976: 20). Furthermore, his camera opened up gender barriers and he was invited to photograph wives, daughters, and daughters-in-law. Srinivas seems close here to accepting the Benjaminian proposition that it is a "different nature which speaks to the camera than the eye" (Benjamin 1999; Pinney 2010). Little of this highly engaged practice is evident in the images he chooses to reproduce in *The remembered village*, whose plates are largely landscape studies. All this enthusiastic endeavor earned him the nickname "chamara man" which, as he notes, in Kannada (as also Hindi [*chamar* or *chanvar*]) "means the long hair of yak's tails," which were used by servants to keep flies away from rajas and by priests during the puja of icons (1976: 20). A local pun opens up a vision of photography as a technique that respects ritual protocols and conventional expectations.

This metaphorical association between the camera and technologies that help present divine and political power in their most potent and perfected form, and make them visible and palpable, points to a similar set of associations in the village which will occupy the second half of my discussion. If you were to draw a line directly between Delhi and Mumbai and cut it in half (at a distance, which I happen to know through studying the fare tables in railway

timetables, of 694 km) you would find yourself in an industrial town called Nagda Jn. And if you were to then travel 6 km south you would come to a village called Bhatisuda, where I have been working intermittently since 1982 (see Pinney 1997, 1999).

In that village you will hear echoes of the metaphor that informs "chamara man." For instance, Jagdish Sharma, the *pujari* (priest) of the Krishna temple once joked that my video camera embodied "yantra, mantra, [and] tantra," yantra being the design ("made in Japan"), mantra being the information it stored, and tantra being the magic of technology (its "mashinari").

Chamara whisks (*chanvar* in Hindi and *pichhi* in Malwi) feature in printed images of deities (for instance, in images of the renouncer king, Baba Ramdevji Pir, in which his devotees are shown protecting their master) and serve not only as devices for conferring value and signaling one's devotion but are often, when deployed in pairs, a means of establishing frontality and symmetry, which are key elements in local photographic aesthetics (see Figure 4). Jains dance with whisks in temple festivals, temples often display them by the deities' throne, and village goddess mediums use them to confer protective and curative blessings. The cameraman as *chamaraman* directs our attention to the expectation in rural India that
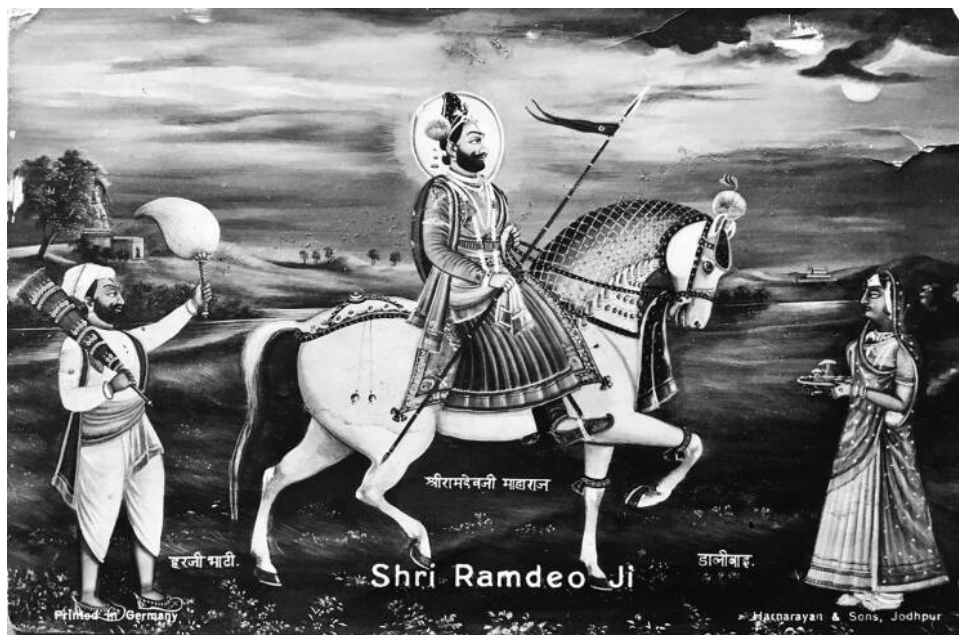

Figure 4: Ramdevji's devotee Harji Bhati (on left) honoring his master with a *chanvar*. Bromide postcard published by Harnarayan and Sons of Jodhpur, Rajasthan, printed in Germany, c. 1928. Collection of the author.

photography, *contra* Walter Benjamin, is usually seen as a mechanism for the preservation and consolidation of aura, rather than its destruction.

Frequently, villagers find puzzling photographic images that lack frontality and symmetry, are not full body, and may catch people in informal poses or expressions which diverge from the idealized self-image they hope to present to the camera.[4] It is in this context that it becomes useful to make explicit that "mantra" (in its earlier usage by Jagdish Sharma) is conceptualized as something very different from the contingency, the uncontrollable flow of information, that made possible the Benjaminian optical unconscious, or the kind of data "misrecognition" that the historian Carlo Ginzburg argued made his Friulian *benandanti* archives so rich. These "archives of repression" (Ginzburg 1989: 157) provided him with rich evidence of subaltern Friulian peasants, the benandanti or "wellfarers" who fought night battles with evil forces to protect the health of their crops, their villages, and communities.

Ginzburg recorded all this in his *I benandanti* issued in 1966, and published in English translation as *The night battles* in 1983. In a later essay, "The inquisitor as anthropologist," Ginzburg explored the paradox whereby incomprehension and prejudice seemed to establish the foundations of dialogical possibility. He notes, for instance, that the inquisitors had never encountered the word "benandante" and had no idea whether they were dealing with "witches" or "counterwitches." It was this unknowing, Ginzburg suggested, that was the precondition for the "truly astonishing" ethnographic value of these Friulian records, in which "not only words, but gestures, sudden reactions like blushing, even silence, were recorded with punctilious accuracy by the notaries of the Holy Office" (1989: 160).

What Ginzburg brilliantly draws attention to is the manner in which "a conflicting cultural reality may leak out" from heavily controlled texts (1989: 161). This dialogic potential is most fully realized through misrecognition. He notes that his own task as a historian was much

easier "when the inquisitors did not understand . . .When they were more perceptive, the trial lost . . . its dialogic elements" (1989: 163). The parallel between Ginzburg's inquisitors and photography's "rawness" (Edwards 2001) is worth exploring. Developing Benjamin's ontology of photographic contingency (albeit with no acknowledgment), Barthes records how the camera's inability to recognize, discriminate, and filter destine it to produce documents of future ethnographic value. This emerges clearly at two points in *Camera lucida*, where he notes that William Klein's photographs teach him "how Russians dress" and (having noted that many of Nadar's male subjects had long fingernails) asks "an ethnographical question: how long were nails worn in a certain period?" (1981: 30). Such questions are only possible, he observes, because "the Photograph is pure contingency [and] it immediately yields up those 'details' which constitute the raw materials of ethnological knowledge" (1981: 28).

Mantra brings with it a sense of something highly skilled, something learned and perfectly executed. In the village you will often hear mantras (such as "om aim hrim clim") articulated in such a careful manner that your attention is drawn to the materiality of sound and to the understanding that efficacy resides in perfect pronunciation. It is expected that cameras should be used in a similar way. Against this background Srinivas's self-deprecation of his photographic skills and all his talk of photographs as mere "snaps" shines through as charmingly disingenuous, for his efforts and skills were evidently highly regarded by villagers. If we take the "chamara man" metaphor seriously, then they conceived of themselves as kings or gods and Srinivas as a servant or pujari attending to their needs.

Rampura villagers' witty metaphorical association between the camera and technologies which help present divine and political power in their most potent and perfected form (sanctified, auratic, symmetrical, and, if possible, devoid of contingency) directs us to the ways in which they hope photography will be used, and the way in which Srinivas was evidently happy to accede to their wishes. Did the fire and loss of all his contingent data allow Srinivas to produce a textual version of the kind of images that the chamaraman produced? Perhaps it makes sense to see *The remembered village* not only as authored by a chamaraman but as an exemplary chamara text. It is as if contingency and exorbitance were incinerated in the Stanford fire, leaving only the idealized symmetry of memory. The fire "thinned" the exorbitance of Srinivas's field data, clearing a path for the distilled remembering and suddenly possible literariness of his text.

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4. See Sutherland 2011 on similar (teasing) sentiments in Spiti in Himachal Pradesh: "When I recently returned some of [Sutherland's photographs] I was told that my black and white photographs were so awful that when I leave, people tear them up and put them in the fire" (2011: 5). Sutherland observes that his photographs were "qualitatively different from the static, self-composed individual colour portraits that they value" (2011: 15).

In central India, in 2016, I observed the visit of a Jain guru, Lokendra, to the village in which I was staying. He had come to perform the installation of a statue commemorating an important Jain (Bhairav Bharatiya) who had been murdered during Indira Gandhi's Emergency (1975–1977), and also to inaugurate a spice packaging plant run by Bhairav's grandson. The mix of political radicalism and cultic conservatism (Bhairav was an atheist communist now being serenaded by a religious renouncer), and of peasant socialism and capitalism was compelling. Then, in the Jain household in which I was living, I found myself photographing Guru Lokendra's chanvar—his silver-handled whisks, which should ideally, in this part of India, be made with hair from the tail of a *surya gai*, a "sun cow" or free cow that lives in the jungle (see Figure 5). As I photographed these powerful instruments I found myself thinking of Benjamin's insistence that photography has a destiny or outcome that is "native" to it. I knew that Benjamin would have been both fascinated by and hostile to these whisks. Chanvar while not exactly "cameras" are devices for how to look and behold. One might think of them as constituent elements of that very re-auraticizing "frame" which Bazin had argued was destroyed by photography's "screen" (Rajadhyaksha 1987). From the perspective of Bazin or Benjamin they might be best thought of as "anti-cameras,"

technologies of representation caught up in an antagonistic relationship to photography.

Formality and symmetry in photographic images also underwrite consent and an ethics of agreement in the making of the image. This is a point that Susan Sontag makes in her brief vignette of Chinese camera practices, which opens with the observation that "private" photographs coexist alongside "revered leaders [and] revolutionary kitsch" (1979: 171). These images of "loved ones" renounce informality—"none is a candid photograph." Their aesthetic is "characteristic [of the] visual taste of those at the first stage of camera culture" and is also an *ethics*, for "in China taking pictures is always a ritual; it always involves posing and necessarily, consent" (1979: 172). The formal aesthetic qualities of Chinese photography are subject to perceptive albeit essentialized analysis: "The Chinese resist the dismemberment of reality. Close-ups are not used [the subject] is always photographed straight on, centered, evenly lit, and in its entirety." The Chinese do not expect to find beauty in "the cracked peeling door," or "the picturesqueness of disorder" (1979: 172).

Echoing this concern with the camera as a device for generating consensus, Srinivas's most arresting observation, in a separate essay on fieldwork, concerning photographic practice, is an incident in which he is "invited"

Figure 5: Guru Lokendra's *chanvar*, photographed during his visit to the village. Photograph by author.

by two brothers, who were enemies of the headman, to photograph part of a tank embankment which had been breached by flood water and had ruined their banana crop. He obliges them and they obtain a promise from Srinivas that he would "send them copies of the pictures which [he] had taken" (M. N. Srinivas 1979: 24). Subsequently he learnt from the headman that the two brothers had initiated a lawsuit against him for the destruction of his crop and that his photographs were likely to be used in evidence. Srinivas expresses his response in the following words: " I felt humiliated and assured the headman that I had no knowledge of this matter when I took the photographs and that I would destroy the negatives" (2002: 537). Srinivas concludes the paragraph by reproaching himself for his "foolish behaviour."

Perhaps we should be outraged by this, not only because of his complicity with the headman but for the breach of what Ariella Azoulay, in her profoundly important work, terms photography's "civil contract" (Azoulay 2008). She argues that we cannot individually own photographs, they are temporally in our possession and since they speak to higher political and egalitarian truths we are not at liberty to destroy them (2008: 13).[5] A similar "civil contract" was imposed on me when I first took a video camera to Bhatisuda village in 2004 and villagers insisted that I film Dalit *ghorlas*, or mediums, to provide evidence of the intensity of their practices. These goddess mediums saw my camera as an ally in a political battle for legitimacy: higher castes disparaged their practices as goddess "mimicry," an untruth which the camera would, it was hoped, disprove through the documentation of the superabundance of affect (Pinney 2010). However, perhaps we should see Srinivas's agreeable complicity with the destruction of his contentious negatives as a metaphor for his investment in a certain practice of photography—one based on consent and convention rather than its possible deployment as a radical practice of transgression and inquiry of the kind that Benjamin eulogized. Like the Chinese practices glimpsed by Sontag they involve a necessary consent and acquiescence to a local ethics and aesthetics.

Srinivas's readiness to participate in the destruction of evidence (in this case of photographic data) and to openly acknowledge it in the wake of the grievous de-

struction at Stanford is paradoxical to say the least. But this is part of a larger *pharmakon*-like duality frequently visible in his writing, in which phenomena and actions oscillate between poison and cure (Derrida 1981: 71). Take, for instance, his account in a 1998 interview with Chris Fuller of his response to Evans-Pritchard's suggestion that he revise once more the text which would appear as *Religion and society among the Coorgs* in 1952. Already rewritten through numerous drafts and accepted by the Clarendon Press, Srinivas declared that he had had enough and that "either it went to the Press as it was, or he could throw it into the fire before which he was sitting" (Fuller 1999: 5). (This might be taken simply as evidence of the biting cold of postwar Oxford winters: my point is that in 1998 he appears to avoid its obvious metaphorical resonance with the 1970 Stanford events).[6] Equally striking is the anecdote, dating from 1956, included in his widow Rukmini Srinivas's charming memoir/cookbook *Tiffin* published in 2015, relating to a journey Srinivas, the anthropologist Julian Pitt-Rivers, and their wives made to the American Anthropological Association meeting in La Jolla, California.[7] They drove down from Berkeley, and

> On the second day, we drove down the cliff-side, past seemingly unending stands of California eucalyptus with piles of tinder and layers of dry leaves. Chamu [i.e., Srinivas] said in passing, "Looks like the perfect place for an arsonist." Julian laughed. I didn't give a thought to Chamu's remark. Soon we left the eucalyptus groves and drove through exclusive residential estates, when flashing lights and highway patrol cars blocked out way. The Malibu hills were ablaze.
> (R. Srinivas 2015: 261)

This fiery imagination provides, perhaps, one frame through which we might understand the metaphors of, and allusions to, fire which (in addition to photography) come thick and fast in *The remembered village*. We are told that Kulle Gowda's diminishing passion for gambling and liquor was like "a fire which was on its way out" (1976: 81). Then there is the memorable case of the young Dalit by the name of Pijja who had taken twigs from one of Nadu Gowda's trees to feed

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5. "A document that is not the creation of an individual and can never belong to one person or narrative conclusively" (Azoulay 2008: 13).

6. Though maybe, following Maud Ellman's discussion of Eliot's "The Waste Land," it is better viewed as "an affirmation masked as a denial" (2001: 262).

7. It strangely prefigures Jobson's 2020 apocalyptic account of the smoky-ripe-for-burning 2018 San Jose AAA (Jobson 2020).

his sheep. Nadu became increasingly angry in an ensuing dispute with the headman about the extent of the fine for this technical theft. Nadu Gowda then claimed that if he merely opened his eyes, Pijja would be reduced to ashes, in a reference to Shiva (who had incinerated Kama with fire from his "third eye" after he was disturbed while deep in meditation) (1976: 91). The same Nadu Gowda subsequently admitted to feeling "fire in his stomach" when contemplating the excellence of the headman's cultivated fields (1976: 99).

Fire also appears benignly in Srinivas's account of the manner in which, when he first arrived in Rampur, neighbors used to exchange live embers as the chief means of obtaining fire for cooking. This, as Srinivas notes, had great "symbolic" significance since it established a relationship of reciprocity ("it meant that both the giver and taker were in a relationship with each other"). Offenders who were ostracized from the village were denied this access to neighborly fire (1976: 233).

Charles Sanders Peirce had, of course, invoked the relationship of smoke to fire as an example of the index, and the contagion of fire to fire via embers serves as an equally good example of the physical contiguity that Peirce pointed out was also the condition of photography. Fire's appearance as part of Rampura's social process in Srinivas's text is perhaps one of the ways in which he reaches back beyond the charred remnants of his notes (whose acrid smell stood in the way of recollection). The poison becomes the cure within the fluid space of the *pharmakon*.

In Bhatisuda, photography is not used as a vehicle of memory, of *yad* or *yadgar*, in the sense of a unidirectional archival gesture. People have little interest in archiving their selves photographically through assemblages of curated images. Photography is more commonly seen and mobilized as a generative conduit to live power. Roland Barthes famously wrote of looking at a photograph of Napoleon's younger brother taken in 1852 and marveling that he was "looking at eyes that looked at the Emperor" (1981: 3). Peirce prefigured this through his stress on the endless chain of contagion that characterizes indexicality (Peirce 1955: 98–119). This comes close to describing the Bhatisuda theory of photography. Photographs of the deceased are desired so that they might be used as the basis for endlessly morphed ancestor images which are worshipped throughout the year on specific dates and for a fortnight during *pitra paksa*, or ancestors' fortnight. The images that emerge (earlier this was done through over-painting by itinerant artists [Pinney 1997], now it

is done with Photoshop) are future-oriented idealizations from which contingency is stripped away (see Figure 6).

They then join other ancestors grouped together in special areas of puja rooms where they frequently manifest themselves in the bodies of their descendants, especially if they have met sudden and untimely deaths. Among Jains in the village the unsettled *prets* which manifest with oracular powers are known as *pattarbabjis*. In Bhatisuda the most powerful presence has been that of Munna, who died as a child from tetanus and who has incarnated in his older brother Prakash on a very frequent basis for several decades. The pattarbabji in Prakash is activated by photography and fire: he seems to draw down the power from a beautiful montaged image of Munna depicted inside rose petals, and supercharge his body

Figure 6: The photographer Suresh Punjabi of Suhag Studio with a recently prepared memorial photograph for a village client (caption reads: "Sva Shri Dayaram Setiya Prabhumilan [met god] . . . 01.09.2014 & Sva Shrimati Rambha Bai Setiya Prabhumilan . . . 14.01.2006"). Photograph by author.

Figure 7: Giving arati to ancestors in the puja room of a rural Jain home. The black-and-white portrait at bottom left is that of Bhairav Bharatiya, a farmers' leader who was murdered during the Emergency. Munna is to the right of Bhairav's and Chimmanlal's portrait can be seen at bottom right. Photograph by author.

by breathing in huge quantities of smoke from a *havan*, or sacred fire. This chain of indexicality produces a frenzied energy (*dhunana*, or "thrashing" as the local term has it): he pounds the earth floor with his hands, loudly grunting and breathing in more and more smoke before subsiding into quietude and then offering predictions and advice to family members. This triangulation of photography, fire, and loss has been endlessly repeated through the years

Figure 8: The clean caste Holi fire, early in the morning of *phalgun purnima*. Photograph by author.

with periodic additions to the population of pattabarbjis occasioned by tragic untimely deaths that have created roaming prets whose power needs to be channeled. The most recent case in the same *gotra* (lineage) is that of Chimmanlal. A popular lawyer renowned for his work with the poor, he died suddenly in 2013 of a heart attack. His memorial portrait now hangs alongside Munna and other forebears in the puja room of my oldest friend Pukhraj, whose son Atit now regularly thrashes with the presence of Chimmanlal (see Figure 7). The photograph, together with fire and smoke, serve as physical conduits to the pattarbabji. It is as if Atit can smell the smoke in the charred remains of the Bourne and Shepherd image with which I opened this discussion.

This relationship between vision and fire is sometimes made highly explicit. Consider, for instance, *nazar utharna*, the removal of the evil eye. The person afflicted with nazar (the patient) sits before the healer (in this case the healer was the patient's father but elsewhere it is likely to be Brahman priests or Dalit shamans (*ghorlas*) who perform this procedure. The healer prepares a one-foot-long wick made from raw cotton which is then soaked in ghee. This is then placed against a knife and presented to the head of the patient seven times before being fixed to the knife and allowed to hang vertically over a small water pot (*lota*) which is placed directly in front of the patient.

The wick is then ignited and as it burns, with the accompaniment of much hissing and spluttering, drops of burning ghee regularly drop into the water pot below where a film of soot starts to gather. This material process visualizes the transference of the physical presence of nazar into the water pot, the relocation of nazar from the body of the afflicted onto the surface of the water. It recalls the common anti-nazar phrase to be seen throughout north India which declares *buri nazar walle tera muh kala* (evil nazar person your face [will go] black), except that in nazar utharna it is a kind of watery eye that turns black. Georges Bataille would have loved it.

The transformative power of fire is endlessly manifest elsewhere in the village from the *khappar*, the bowls of fire which help precipitate the appearance of goddesses, to the *satis* made immortal by their incineration, to the endless professional activities of *ghorlas* (male mediums for goddesses) and the *dipas* and fireworks which illuminate the darkness of *amavasya* (the dark fifteenth, or new moon) so that Lakshmi can see her way on the night of Divali. A typical diary entry from the final day of the autumnal *nauratri* (nine nights of the goddess) reads as follows:

Dashera, the 10th, is the day of the village-wide *visarjan* [immersion]. I wake at 4 a.m. and quickly turn out for the Durga *jelus* [procession] where a drummer is already beating out a rhythm. Two Banjara men who are already thrashing, holding swords in one hand and a khappar in the other, are shortly joined by the elderly figure of Nathu Patidar. They circle the *kambh* [the wooden pole that embodies Durga] for about half an hour, this proving very difficult to photograph in the dark before sunrise. Two khappars are offered to the Durga shrine and one is taken to the old panchayat well where it is immersed, thrown into its abandoned hollow depths. Immediately after this a fast-moving figure also with a khappar and sword rockets past at high speed. I try to follow him as far as the Bhilsuda road where he disappears. His mercurial enigmatic velocity propels him into the unfathomable darkness.

As important are the blazing fires of Holi that play such a central role in sustaining the myth of the unity of the village (see Figure 8). The Holi *ag* is the central dramaturgical energy in a festival whose ideological claim is one of the equality of all members of the village. *Sabhi ek hain* as the claim goes, everyone is one: high and low, clean caste and Dalit, male and female, old and young are all, it is continually reiterated, unified as simple villagers. A further entry from my diary:

It is almost 5 a.m. and there is the merest glimmer of the rising sun starting to pulse in the east, just beginning to ripple the solid blue-blackness of night. And then a young Rajput arrives, the village *mukhiya*, the hereditary chief, who circles the fire setting it alight. The tinder at the bottom ignites, and then starts to engulf the entire structure, which once fully afire starts to radiate the most profound heat, burning away the winter and ushering in the spring. Recumbent figures, young and old, release themselves from their habitual crumpled stances, stretching themselves as the mounting heat starts to pervade their being. The flames jet into a region high above the village, and the heat starts to manifest itself as a massive irradiating force. It is difficult to overstate the nature of the image that the fire presents of a community seemingly thermally at one with itself. It is, as Guy Debord might have said (if he were an anthropologist), "Community distilled as pure spectacle."

Except of course that it's not, for it is subject to hierarchy and fission in its social implementation, and my photographs and notebooks reveal that there were three other Holi fires: ones organized by Ravidasis, Bagdis, and

Banjaras (these being the two largest Dalit and Adivasi communities in the village). When clean castes are asked about this a range of responses is offered: we used to have a single fire but then the Dalits and Adivasis decided that it was too far to walk. When Dalits and Adivasis are asked the response usually stresses exclusion: they won't let us use their wells, or enter their temples, so why would they let us circle their fire?

The by-product of fire is also crucially important. Certain images, notably Sai Baba's, commonly exude *vibhuti* (ashes), and vibhuti also plays a central role in the diagnoses that Dalit shamans offer (both as a visual field in which ash, along with grains of rice, is minutely examined as part of the consultation) and as a medicine to be eaten directly, or kept with the patient's body folded in paper or sewn in a red cloth pouch. Most villagers will carry such a packet of ash and have many pouches distributed in various parts of their house. Ash is also a constituent, along with grains of rice, pins, lime, perfume, and flowers, in the construction of red cloth spheres, about the size of an eyeball, known as *ban ka sadhan*, that are frequently hung from rafters and roof structures as protective devices against nazar (Pinney 2018: 100–1).

Let us return to events in Stanford and the legacy of the 1970 fire. It is those events which gave birth to the myth which is *The remembered village*, the bird reborn from the ashes, as the Latin inscription on a scroll subsequently given to Srinivas on his departure by Stanford Center fellows declared: *Ex igni renascimur* enclosed an image of a phoenix. If their knowledge of Hindu renunciatory practices had been greater perhaps they might have been tempted to depict Gandhi, or an *aghori* (Shaivite renouncer), internalizing the heat of desire, quenching fire, in order to reconstruct themselves, as Dumont argued, as an individual standing "outside the world" in a paradigmatic example of distantiation (Dumont 1970; Parry 1994: 251–71).

In his introduction to his 1955 edited volume *India's villages*, Srinivas had made a very strong defense of distantiation and defamiliarization as ethnographic method. It was, he said, "much more difficult" for an Indian to study India than for a non-Indian since "one is [so] fundamentally and even hopelessly enslaved in one's own society, that detachment is well-nigh impossible" (1955: 4). Fire perhaps, and the loss of his original notes, granted a manumission, a freedom from that enslavement through the physical destruction of the overly familiar life of the village embedded in his original data.

But perhaps the literary and narrative qualities that were released and authorized by the destruction by fire of the notes which would have underpinned a far more austere ethnography ("the social structure of a multi-caste village in South India" was his original working title) is best understood in terms of what Gaston Bachelard, in his classic *The psychoanalysis of fire* (1987), termed the *Novalis complex*. Novalis, the German Romantic, is often described as a "magical idealist" and engages Bachelard because of the manner in which fire functions not as destructive force, as the dramatic play of light and shade, but as a generator of heat and "the need for shared warmth" (1987: 40). Bachelard discusses agricultural fires which purify the fields as "fires of fusion" but Novalis demands our attention because he eschewed the "purely visual knowledge of [fire as] light," eulogizing instead "a satisfaction of the thermal sense and the deep-seated consciousness of calorific happiness" (Bachelard 1987: 40).

My title "destroying the negatives" was provoked in the first place by Srinivas's account of his obeisance to the headman when confronted with a legal case in which his own photographs would be used as evidence. He introduces this instance as an example of his failure to "steer clear of factions." This leads towards a further, and final sense in which we might interpret Srinivas's legacy as involving the destruction of the negatives, that is as an embracing of positivity (albeit one which has been widely politically critiqued).

Bachelard argues that we need to grasp the affective primitivity of fire, a primitive phenomenology which "fabricates objects out of phantoms that are projected by reverie [creating] images out of desires, material experiences out of somatic experiments and fire out of love" (1987: 38). For Bachelard, Novalis's poetry was an attempt to "re-live *primitivity*" to reawaken the "need for shared warmth."

In a passage which seems to echo in an extraordinary way the manner in which Srinivas took the light and drama of the arson at Stanford and turned it into the gift of warmth, Bachelard characterizes the Novalis complex as involving the "consciousness of an inner heat which always takes precedence over a purely visual knowledge of light" (1987: 40). For Novalis fire is translated into "thermal satisfaction," a "communion at the interior" where there is a "thermal sympathy" in which heat is "diffused and equalized" such that it becomes" "indistinct like the contour of a dream" (1987: 40). To all those who criticize Srinivas for his supposed biases I would stress this: he provides the contours of a dream

(albeit an unreflexive one), one which villagers made for him.

Novalis's stress on the calorific happiness provided by heat rather than the destructive light and shadows of fire is very firmly echoed in Srinivas's essay on "Village studies and their significance." This is a stirring defense of intensive participant observation anthropology as against economics and other disciplines. In a prolonged discussion of why economists are wrong to criticize Indian peasants for their approach to cattle he recounts how once he "saw a peasant thrusting paddy sheaves into the mouth of a bullock, and I asked him why, when there was an acute rice shortage in the cities, he was giving it stuff which could keep human beings alive, and he replied 'Didn't it help me in sowing and transplanting? Why shouldn't it eat a little of what it helps me to grow?'" (1962: 125). This put me in mind of the recent birth of twin calves to a cow named Ganga in Bhatisuda. Cows almost never birth to more than one calf but Ganga produced two. Word spread quickly and numerous villagers came with their mobiles to photograph this *aschary* (amazing) event. The general feeling was that if livestock were properly cared for they would repay their owners with blessings.

Srinivas' earlier book *Religion and society among the Coorgs of South India* made quite clear Srinivas's commitment to the "field view" approach to anthropology as opposed to the "book view" approach and clearly demonstrated an investment in the village community as a self-sufficient unit of analysis (this view was made even more explicit in *India's villages*). Consider in this context a striking map painted on the side of the village primary school in Bhatisuda (Figure 9). Mirroring the *panchkoshi*, or five circles that are a feature of pilgrimage sites such as Ujjain and Banaras, the map positions Bhatisuda at the center of an ordered cosmos. It is surrounded by Nagda
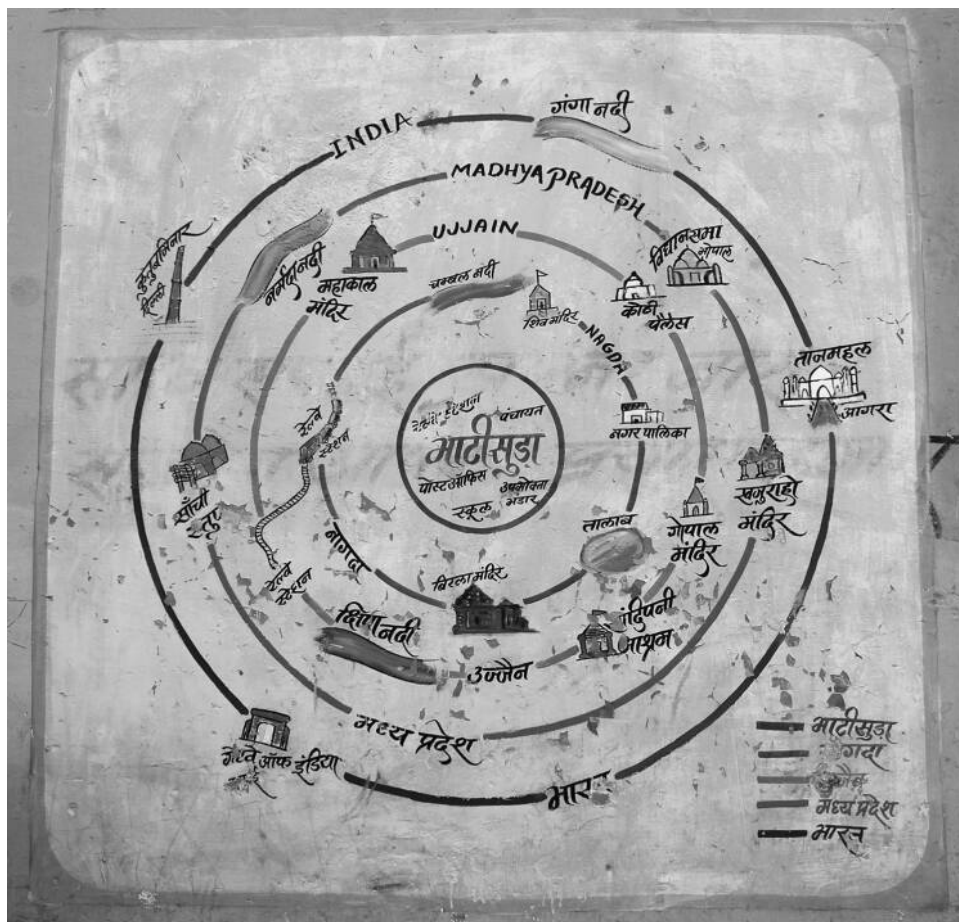

Figure 9: Painted map on the wall of the village school showing Bhatisuda at the center of its region and nation. Photograph by author.

with its Shiv temple and Birla temple and then Ujjain to which it is linked by railway, then Madhya Pradesh, and finally India marked by the Qatabminar in Delhi, the Ganges, and the Taj Mahal.

This worldview echoes other aspects of life in the village. The ripples evoke the seven generations of ancestors who should continue to be worshipped through memorial portraits. The map also serves as a concentrically ordered talisman against the massive anxiety about *chinta* or uncertainty that besieges peasants precariously living in a state of continual emergency. Although fire may energize a huge number of dramatic "thrashings" or possession events in the village, these are all highly social events and are (unexpectedly, perhaps) largely integrative. And this image of order reminds us that Bhatisudans don't generally relish photography for its contingency (its "blushes" as Carlo Ginzburg might say [Pinney 2016]). The light and shade of fire, and of photography (in its evidential charge), is softened for incorporation into what (within castes certainly, though within the "village" more contentiously) are consensual projects rooted in calorific happiness. The map exemplifies how the village—or at least those who control its public signs—attempts to collapse time into space, the village becoming a chronotope that excludes, or minimizes, the unexpected.

The Bhatisuda school map returns us to a central debate about method that opened up a gulf between Srinivas and Dumont in the 1950s. This was not only to do with book view versus field view. The opening sentence of the very first (1957) issue of Dumont and Pocock's *Contributions to Indian sociology* made a claim that "the first condition for a sound development of a Sociology of India is found in the establishment of a proper relation between it and classical Indology" (1957a: 7). Conversely, in *The remembered village*, Srinivas complained that the "efflorescence in Indological research in the nineteenth century also led indirectly to the downgrading of folk religion," folk religion being one of his central concerns (1976: 289). Because, as Dumont and Pocock had stated, "India is one," a problem then arose of the relationship between constituent elements and the overall structure. In a review essay, also in the first volume of *Contributions*, focusing on McKim Marriott's *Village India* and Srinivas's *India's villages*, Dumont and Pocock pressed the point further, noting that many of the contributors to those volumes were evidently imprisoned by a false category (imposed by the editors) and wanted to "overthrow the village as a social fact of the first order," i.e., to rebel against the Srinivas agenda (1957b: 23). Dumont and Pocock protested the phantom "idea"

of the village which was in danger of producing its own simulacrum: "A field-worker takes a village as a convenient centre for his investigation and all too easily comes to confer upon that village a kind of sociological reality which it in fact does not possess." It is buildings and people, they suggest which generate this problem: "The architectural and demographic fact which the village is lures us away from a structural perspective, where things exist only in the relations which are the proper objects of study, to an atomistic or elemental point of view where things exist in themselves" (1957b: 26). From this perspective Srinivas had been "lured," bewitched into thinking that an entity which can only have meaning in its relationship to others is a thing in itself. As Dumont and Pocock further argued "we have not to do with things, but with structural fact: they do not exist in themselves but only in relation to others (1957a: 13). Dumont and Pocock's approach is exemplified much better by another map displayed in Bhatisuda, displayed in a small shop selling SIM cards, and which shows the local Vodafone (or "Voda") network (Figure 10). The Voda poster advertises the more than eighteen thousand cities and villages which have coverage, set incongruously above a somber northern scene of a tent near a gloomy lake. Rather than the self-contained centricity of the school map, this diagram of the Voda network maps links between relational entities.

Bhatisuda, which I have usually visited several times a year since 1982, has seen enormous changes. *Kaccha* mud houses have been replaced by *pakka* brick and concrete structures. A highly varied arable pattern with huge subsistence diversity has been almost obliterated by two cash crops (soya and wheat). The boom in tractor ownership in the last decade, and the arrival of combine harvesters from the Punjab in the past three years, have dramatically changed labor opportunities for the rural poor and have had dramatic environmental impacts, as anything that obstructs the free passage of machinery has been removed from the landscape. Dalits now call themselves "Dalits," signifying a profound elevation of political consciousness (the term was unknown here when I first visited in the early 1980s), and Ambedkar is now a significant part of the political landscape.

But this has done little to diminish the idea that the village is potentially a place of peace and tranquility, whose *shanti* is opposed to the tumult of the city. It remains the place where very deep histories remain visibly embedded in a locality through the presence of *bheru* clan shrines, *sagats*, and *jhujhars*. In this context the Bhatisuda map's concentric logic makes perfect sense.

If the Vodafone map might be taken to illustrate Dumont's view of the structural network within which locality can only ever have a spurious reality (since even if you have a local tower it needs to be connected to a much wider grid), the school map might be taken as an emblem of Srinivas's view of "India's villages" of which Rampura was offered as one example. In the final moving and elegiac chapter of *The remembered village*, Srinivas describes his farewell from the olfactory warmth of Rampura in preparation for teaching in Oxford in January. As he notes, "the prospect of leaving the warmth and sun of Mysore for the cold and wet of an Oxford winter was not exactly exciting" (1976: 336). He describes his own self-pity at this imminent relocation and his envy of villagers "who spent all their lives in one place, whose relationships were stable, and whose routines never varied." Despite the fact that much of *The remembered village* shows *how untrue* this characterization is, the reader is persuaded that Rampura is (as he writes) a "snug and cosy place," just as most Bhatisudans think of their village with affection as a place of tranquility despite its high levels of unemployment, dramatic class inequalities, and exclusionary caste practices. The Bhatisuda map, with the village school and post office at the center and swathes of blue rivers (including the Chambal and the Narmada) seems to visually echo the most lyrical description in the whole of Srinivas's account, which he saves for his last paragraph. He is sitting on the bus en route for Mysore, from where he will proceed to Bombay and then Oxford. It is a scene of departure, of loss (the chapter is titled "Farewell") recollected in Stanford following the fateful fire of 1970. His farewell to the village and parallel farewell to the dry information of his ethnographic field data release a poetic desire to immerse himself in what is disappearing: "I wanted to drink in every detail of the vanishing countryside," he writes. "The land dipped and rose, and went round sudden rises, while the bus rattled along [and] through it all I had brief and tantalizing glimpses of the shimmering Kaveri flowing in the distance" (1976: 340). This concluding passage of Srinivas' memory ethnography demonstrates what words can do, which the camera usually cannot. It is perhaps the most beautiful testimony to what he described in the book's epigram as "the part played by the arsonists in the birth of this book" and the sometimes creative consequences of destruction.
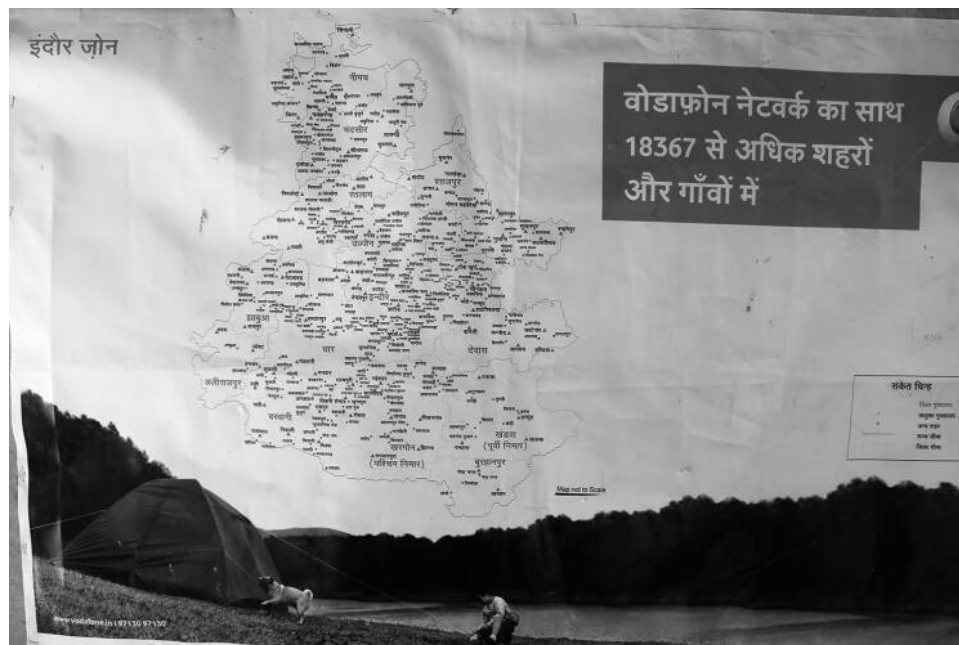
Acknowledgments

Figure 10: Poster advertising the Vodafone network in the Indore zone displayed in a village top-up shop. (Vodaphone network ka sath 18367 se adhik shaharon aur gamvon mem ["with Vodafone network more that 18367 cities and villages"]). Photograph by author.

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