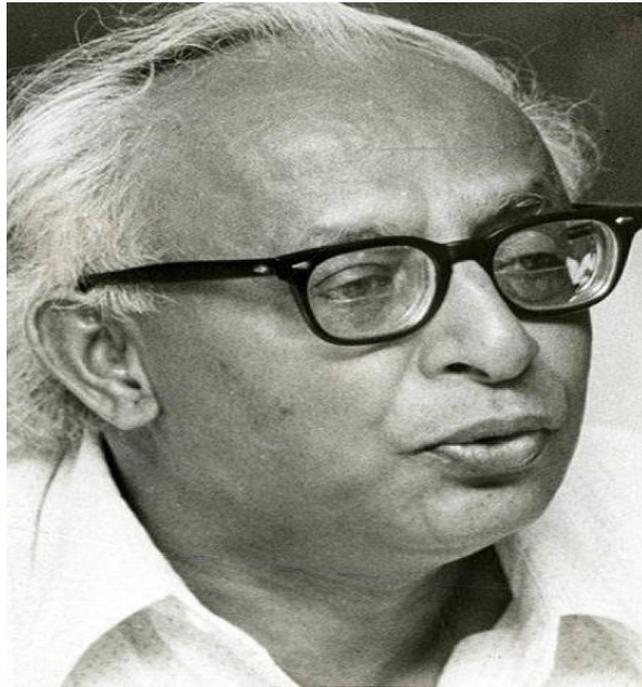


Module-19

M.N.SRINIVAS

(1916-1999)



Developed by:

Dr. Subrata Chatterjee
Associate Professor of Sociology
Khejuri College
P.O- Baratala, Purba Medinipur
West Bengal, India

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INTRODUCTION

Mysore Narasimhachar Srinivas (1916-1999) was a world-renowned Indian sociologist. He is mostly known for his work on caste and caste systems, social stratification and Sanskritisation in southern India. Srinivas' contribution to the disciplines of sociology and social anthropology and to public life in India was unique. It was his capacity to break out of the strong mould in which (the mostly North American university oriented) area studies had been shaped after the end of the Second World War on the one hand, and to experiment with the disciplinary grounding of social anthropology and sociology on the other, which marked his originality as a social scientist.

It may be important to point out that it was the conjuncture between Sanskritic scholarship and the strategic concerns of the Western bloc in the aftermath of the Second World War which had largely shaped South Asian area studies in the United States. During the colonial era, the Brahmins or Pandits were acknowledged as important interlocutors of Hindu laws and customs to the British colonial administration. The colonial assumptions about an unchanging Indian society led to the curious assemblage of Sanskrit studies with contemporary issues in most South Asian departments in the U.S. and elsewhere. It was strongly believed that an Indian sociology must lie at the conjunction of Indology and sociology.

Srinivas' scholarship was to challenge that dominant paradigm for understanding Indian society and would in the process, usher newer intellectual frameworks for understanding Hindu society. His views on the importance of caste in the electoral processes in India are well known. While some have interpreted this to attest to the enduring structural principles of social stratification of Indian society, for Srinivas these symbolized the dynamic changes that were taking place as democracy spread and electoral politics became a resource in the local world of village society.

As part of his methodological practice, Srinivas strongly advocated ethnographic research based on fieldwork, but his concept of fieldwork was tied to the notion of locally bounded sites. Thus some of his best papers, such as the paper on dominant caste and one on a joint family dispute, were largely inspired from his direct participation (and as a participant observer) in rural life in south India. He wrote several papers on the themes of national integration, issues of gender, new technologies, etc. It is really surprising as to why he did not theorize on the methodological implications of writing on these issues which go beyond the village and its institutions. His

methodology and findings have been used and emulated by successive researchers who have studied caste in India.

Important Books by M.N Srinivas

- Marriage and Family in Mysore (1942)
- Religion and Society Among the Coorgs of South India (1952)
- Caste in Modern India (1962), Asia Publishing House
- The Remembered Village (1976)
- Indian Society through Personal Writings (1998)
- Village, Caste, Gender and Method (1998)
- Social Change in Modern India
- The Dominant Caste and Other Essays (ed.)
- Dimensions of Social Change in India

Theoretical and Methodological Perspectives:

Srinivas has initiated the tradition of macro-sociological generalizations on micro-anthropological insights and of giving a sociological sweep and perspective to anthropological investigations of small-scale communities (Qoshi, 2000). Srinivas wanted to understand his countrymen not on the basis of western textbooks or from indigenous sacred texts but from direct observation, field study and field experience.

He made intensive field study of Coorgs between 1940-42. In his study, he describes the concept of functional unity by explaining the interaction in ritual context of different castes of Coorgs, mainly Brahmins (priests), Kaniyas (astrologers and magicians) and Bannas and Panikas (low castes). In the context of the study of Rampura also, he describes that the various castes in a village are interdependent.

Srinivas studies of caste and religion (1952, 1959, 1962, and 1966) highlighted not only their structural-functional aspects, but also the dynamics of the caste system in rural setting. He proposed conceptual tools like 'dominant caste', 'sanskritization- westernization' and 'secularization' to understand the realities of inter-caste relations and also to explain their dynamics. The concept of 'dominant caste' has been used in the study of power relations at the village level. Srinivas (1960) presents the results of a number of studies on the structure and change in the village society. Srinivas has written articles in the 1940s on Tamil and Telgu folk-songs.

Srinivas explains two basic concepts to understand our society. They are:

(a) Book view, and (b) Field view.

(a) Book view (bookish perspective):

Religion, varna, caste, family, village and geographical structure are the main elements, which are known as the bases of Indian society. The knowledge about such elements is gained through sacred texts or from books. Srinivas calls it book view or bookish perspective. Book view is also known as Indology, which is not acceptable to Srinivas and he emphasized to the field view.

(b) Field view (field work):

Srinivas believes that the knowledge about the different regions of Indian society can be attained through field work. This he calls field view. Consequently, he prefers empirical study to understand our society. Srinivas took the path of small regional studies rather than the construction of grand theories. In this context, field work plays an important role to understand the nativity of the rural Indian society.

Description about Values

Considering the values, norms and behavior of people in a country such as India, one cannot ignore the influence of the scriptures and the epics. It is possible that the influence of some scriptures such as the Manudharmashastra on the conduct of Hindus has been greatly exaggerated, especially by reformers but that is no reason for ignoring the influence of the sacred books. The only point is that such influence varies from region to region and group to group, and therefore difficult to generalize. While dealing with values Srinivas says, "values are a difficult subject to discuss with respect to any people but the difficulty increases enormously when dealing with a country as vast, diverse, stratified and complex as India where values vary from one section of the people to another on the basis of region, language, religion, sect, caste, class and ethnicity. There are also significant differences between villagers and city dwellers. Indeed, the complexity is so great that one is tempted to abandon the task as hopeless but then valour is sometimes, though very rarely, better than discretion.

Srinivas, in his most of studies and especially in village studies tried to find the importance of values and norms in defining social relationship. According to him, "while values and norms varied from group to group, the locally dominant caste or other ethnic group provided a model for emulation for the non-dominants. But this operated in a circuitous way. Since the dominant castes were wealthy, powerful and enjoyed high status, lower groups were not permitted to take over their customs, manners and lifestyles.

Study of Village:

Besides religion and caste, the third tradition component of Srinivas' study is village. Srinivas got the seed idea of studying India's villages from his mentor Radcliffe-Brown in 1945-46. When settled in India after his return from Oxford, he conducted the study of Rampur – a Mysore village – which gave him the concept of 'dominant caste'. The study has been contained

in *The Remembered Village* (1976), it is here only that Srinivas takes some time to discuss social and economic changes, which have taken place in Rampura. He informs: Technological change occupied a prominent place in the life of the people of Rampura soon after independence. Technological change, of course, went hand in hand with economic, political and cultural changes. The main aim of Srinivas has been to understand Indian society. And, for him, Indian society is essentially a caste society. He has studied religion, family, caste and village in India. He was a functionalist and was influenced by Radcliffe-Brown, Robert Redfield and Evans Pritchard. These anthropologists were functionalists of higher stature.

Ideologically, they believed in status quo: let the Dalits survive and let the high castes enjoy their hegemony over subaltern. Srinivas' search for the identity of traditions makes him infer that the Indian traditions are found in caste, village and religion. For him, it appears that Indian social structure is on par with the advocates of Hindutva, say, the cultural nationalism. Srinivas though talks about economic and technological development, all through his works he pleads for change in caste, religion and family. Even in the study of these areas he sidetracks lower segments of society. They are like 'untouchables' for him. Srinivas has extensively talked about the social evils of the caste society; he pleads for change in caste system and discusses westernization and modernization as viable paradigms of changes.

But his perspective of change is Brahminical Hinduism or traditionalism. In his zeal for promoting sanskritization, he has marginalized and alienated religious minorities. For him, Indian traditions are those, which are manifested in caste and village. His traditions are Hinduized traditions, and in no sense secular ones. Srinivas, in a straightforward way, rejects secularism and stands in favour of Hindu traditions. In his critique of Indian secularism, which appeared in a short article in the *Times of India* in 1993, he finds secularism wanting because he believes that India needs a new philosophy to solve the cultural and spiritual crises facing the country and that philosophy cannot be secular humanism.

It has to be firmly rooted in God as creator and protector. Srinivas' construction of sanskritization and dominant caste put him closer to Hindutva ideology of cultural nationalism. At this stage of discussion, Doshi (2003) comments regarding India's traditions, it can be said that any tradition emanating from caste system cannot be nation's tradition as the constitution has rejected caste. Srinivas' widely known classic, *The Remembered Village*, has all the qualities of a classic novel on changing village in a part of South India. Srinivas has portrayed the character types in 'Three Important Men of Village Rampura': the village headman and the landlord of the old type; the broker between village and the outside world, Kulle Gowda; and the powerful enterprising landlord of the new type, Nadu Gowda.

Views on Caste:

Srinivas views caste as a segmentary system. Every caste, for him, is divided into sub-castes which are:

1. The unit of endogamy;
2. Whose members follow a common occupation?
3. The units of social and ritual life;
4. Whose members share a common culture; and
5. Whose members are governed by the same authoritative body, viz., the panchayat?

Besides these factors of the sub-caste, for Srinivas, certain other attributes are also important. These are:

1. Hierarchy:

To Srinivas, hierarchy is the core or the essence of the caste system. It refers to the arrangements of hereditary groups in a rank order. He points out that it is status of the top-most or Brahmins and the bottom-most or untouchables, which is the clearest in terms of rank. The middle regions of hierarchy are the most flexible, who may be defined as members of the middle ranks.

2. Occupational differentiation:

Srinivas finds a close relationship between a caste and its occupation. He says that caste is nothing more the “systematization of occupational differentiation”. Castes are known by their occupations and many derive their name from the occupation followed, e.g., Lohar, Sunar, Kumhar, Teli, Chamar etc. He also stresses that occupations are placed in a hierarchy of high and low.

3. Restrictions on commensality, dress, speech and custom are also found among castes. There is a dietic hierarchy and restrictions on acceptance of food.

4. Pollution:

The distance between castes is maintained by the principles of pollution. Srinivas too argues that the castes must not come into contact with anything that is polluted whether an object or being. Any contact with polluted renders a caste impure and demands that the polluted caste undergo purification rites. If pollution is serious such as when a high caste person has sexual relations with an untouchable, the person involved may be removed from his or her caste.

5. Caste Panchayats and Assemblies:

Besides the above mentioned attributes of a caste, every caste is subject to the control of an order maintaining body or a Panchayat. Elder of each caste in a village together maintain the social order by exercising their authority collectively. Further, every caste member is answerable to the authority of its Caste Assembly. The authority of a Caste Assembly may extend beyond village boundaries to include in its jurisdiction of caste in other villages.

From the above, we can infer that the attributes of a caste definitely determined the nature of inter-caste relations. These attributes or customs of caste also determine the rank of a caste. This becomes obvious in the work of Srinivas on caste mobility or sanskritization.

Sanskritization:

We have seen above that how every caste is assigned in the caste rank order on the basis of the purity and impurity of its attributes. In his study of a Mysore village, Srinivas finds that at some time or the other, every caste tries to change its rank in the hierarchy by giving up its attributes and trying to adopt those of castes above them.

This process of attempting to change one's rank by giving up attributes that define a caste as low and adopting attributes that are indicative of higher status is called 'sanskritization'. This process essentially involves a change in one's dietary habits from non-vegetarianism to vegetarianism, and a change in one's occupation habits from an 'unclean' to a 'clean' occupation. The attributes of a caste become the basis of interaction between castes. The creation of pattern of interaction and interrelations is best expressed in Srinivas' use of the concept of 'dominant caste'.

Idea of Dominant Caste:

Besides caste, Srinivas looks for yet another source or manifestation of tradition. He found it in the notion of 'dominant caste'. He first proposed it in his early papers on the village of Rampura. The concept has been discussed and applied to a great deal in work on social and political organization in India.

He had defined dominant caste in terms of six attributes placed in conjunction:

- (1) Sizeable amount of arable land;
- (2) Strength of numbers;
- (3) High place in the local hierarchy;
- (4) Western education;
- (5) Jobs in the administration; and

(6) Urban sources of income.

Of the above attributes of the dominant caste, the following three are important:

- (i) numerical strength,
- (ii) economic power through ownership of land, and
- (iii) political power.

Accordingly, a dominant caste is any caste that has all three of the above attributes in a village community. The interesting aspect of this concept is that the ritual ranking of a caste no longer remains the major basis of its position in the social hierarchy. Even if a caste stands low in the social hierarchy because of being ranked low, it can become the dominant ruling caste or group in a village if it is numerically large, owns land and has political influence over village matters. There is no doubt that a caste with relatively higher in ritual rank would probably find it easier to become dominant. But this is not the case always.

We take an example from the village Rampura in Mysore to illustrate the above. In this village, there are a number of castes including Brahmins, peasants and untouchables. The peasants are ritually ranked below the Brahmins, but they own lands and numerically preponderant and have political influence over village affairs.

Consequently, we find that despite their low ritual rank, the peasants are the dominant caste in the village. All the other castes of the village stand in a relationship of service to the dominant caste, i.e., they are at the back of the dominant caste. Srinivas was criticized for this concept with the charge that it was smuggled from the notion of dominance, which emerged from African sociology. Repudiating the critique, Srinivas asserted that the idea of dominant caste given by him had its origin in the field work of Coorgs of South India.

His field work had impressed upon him that communities, such as the Coorgs and the Okkaligas, wielded considerable power at the local level and shared such social attributes as numerical preponderance, economic strength and clean ritual status. He further noted that the dominant caste could be a local source of sankritization, or a barrier to its spread. Sanskritization and dominant caste are therefore representation of Indian tradition. And, in this conceptual framework, the traditions of the lower castes and Dalits have no place, nowhere in village India; the subaltern groups occupy the status of dominant caste.