

## M.N.Srinivas on Caste System

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 Sanskrit 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 in 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 spreads and electoral politics became a resource in the local world of village society.

By inclination he was not given to utopian constructions – his ideas about justice, equality and eradication of poverty were rooted in his experiences on the ground. His integrity in the face of demands that his sociology should take into account the new and radical aspirations was one of the most moving aspects of his writing. Through use of terms such as “sanskritisation” “dominant caste”, “vertical (inter-caste) and horizontal (intra-caste) solidarities”, Srinivas sought to capture the fluid and dynamic essence of caste as a social institution.

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. Because the vast country like India. Where million of people with different identities, interests are living and experienced series of transformations due to exogenous and endogenous factors. So one cannot offer an absolutist view of India. 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.

Srinivas occupies an eminent place among the first-generation sociologists of India. He belongs to the galaxy of G.S. Ghurye, R.K. Mukherjee, N.K. Bose and D.P. Mukerji. 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. 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 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 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 intercaste 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 presents the results of a number of studies on the structure and change in the village society. Srinivas has written articulates in the 1940s on Tamil and Telugu folk-songs.