On Srinivas's 'Sociology'

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The posthumous publication of M.N. Srinivas's *Collected essays** is an opportunity to debate his understanding of Indian society as well as his sociology. Srinivas played a major role in the institutionalisation of the profession. He began publishing his ideas regarding the nature of Indian society soon after independence. He was also instrumental in organising the discipline in two departments, those of Baroda and Delhi. Additionally, Srinivas was a public intellectual–from his Baroda days, he took active role in the public domain, wrote in newspapers and popular magazines, and simultaneously developed a point of view regarding the interface of sociologists with public life in which he continued to be active as an educationist and critical commentator. It is no wonder that his ideas, concepts and theories on Indian society have found concurrence among his contemporaries and also came to have popular acceptance. Generations of students have understood and still continue to understand and assess the nature of Indian society through his perceptions.

This book contains forty-two essays, organised in eight parts, encompassing almost all aspects of Srinivas's work and is, in many ways, representative of the discipline as it was practiced in India in the 1960s and the 1970s, the period when Srinivas's oeuvre came to be institutionalised as Indian sociology. The book starts with essays that deal with facets of village life drawn from ethnographic material on Rampura, and moves on to those that deal with caste, and then to issues of gender, religion and social change in India. The book also incorporates essays that explore the nature of the discipline and its method, together with some autographical essays. It includes an introduction by A.M. Shah, his student and colleague of many years. Certainly, for the student studying the history of sociology in India, this is a veritable treasure trove.

It is impossible to do justice to all aspects of Srinivas's work. Here I will concentrate on his views regarding the discipline and his ideas regarding content and methods with a view to debate these and thereby assess how these frame his ideas regarding Indian society.

Sociology and Social Anthropology

Srinivas contends that sociology in India is and should be social anthropology. What does this imply? At an apparent level, there are no differences between the two disciplines. The questions asked by Srinivas are questions that both disciplines have answered. For instance, Srinivas's concerns relate to classical questions of sociology: What is contemporary society, in this case Indian society? How does one characterise it? His answers are focused on the future in the same way classical sociologists such as Max Weber or Emile Durkheim and other European sociologists conceived of change from the old to the new. Like them, he is interested in capturing the defining characteristic of the past as it reformulates itself in the future, as is explicated in his book *Social change in modern India* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1966).

Additionally, it is not the choice of methods that distinguishes the two disciplines. If Srinivas believed that the fieldwork methods are the most superior, European sociologists have used varying methods to understand the transition from pre modern-to-modern societies, for example, Marxist 'historical materialism' as against Durkheim's 'positivism' or Weber's 'ideal types'.

Then, are there no differences between the two disciplines? Is sociology the same as social anthropology? This is not so as we know. Although there are differences among sociologists as to what constitutes the distinctive characteristic of the sociological tradition, most would agree that there are three characteristics defining this discipline. The first is a substantive theory of modernity together with an understanding of the process of modernisation. The second is a concern with methods and methodologies. Today, this aspect of the discipline is understood in terms of a concern for reflexivity, and various contemporary sociologists have distinct frameworks on this concept and perspective. The third aspect characteristic of the discipline relates to an assessment of the pre-modern. Most sociologists theorise the per-modern in order to understand the modern. This was especially true of all classical sociologists. Thus, sociologists in Europe, whatever their theoretical differences, distinguished between the feudal and capitalist or *Gemeinschaft-Gesselschaft* or mechanical and organic solidarities. On the other hand, social anthropologists studied pre-literate and pre-modern societies, either in terms of culture or structures.

What is Srinivas's choice? Srinivas takes an unequivocal position on behalf of social anthropology. Many of his early essays delineating this point of view form part of this volume. And, within social anthropology,

he opts for the perspective put into place by Bronislaw Malinowski and A.R. Radcliffe-Brown. In an essay written in 1952 for the *Sociological bulletin*, he declares:

> (a) modern sociologist regards a society as a system of unity the various parts of which are related to each other. He considers that any single aspect of society abstracted from its matrix of sociological reality, is unintelligible except in relation to the other aspects. And even when he is writing only about a single aspect of a society like religion or law or morals, he brings to bear on his study his knowledge of the total society (p. 460).

In Srinivas, we do not have a two-stage model of structural transformation, that of transition from pre-modern to modern. Rather, Srinivas discusses only one structure, that of the caste system which seems to encompass both stages. Secondly, in his work we do not have a theory of modernity. Instead, we have a theory of social change based on mobility of groups in society, perceived in terms of the two processes of sanskritisation and westernisation.

Srinivas, it is clear, collapses sociology into social anthropology, and shows his bias for the traditions associated with social anthropology. When we assess the substantive answers he gives to the questions mentioned above, we realise that Srinivas is not interfacing the two disciplines; rather he is arguing that sociology should be defined as social anthropology. In his work, we do not see a merging of the two disciplines, rather a formal collapse of sociology into social anthropology.

In so doing, Srinivas was following the footsteps laid down much earlier by his first supervisor, G.S. Ghurye. Though Ghurye was the Head of the Department of Sociology in the University of Bombay, the discipline was steeped in anthropological traditions that emphasised the Orientalist perspective. Srinivas's later training with the British school of social anthropology only helped to legitimise this orientation towards anthropology. However, his own theoretical proclivities made him also distance himself from Ghurye's Orientalist perspective. It is no wonder, thus, Srinivas states that in order to understand society in India there is a need for social anthropology to distinguish itself from its contemporary Indian variants such as physical anthropology and ethnology.

The collapse of sociology into social anthropology, I would suggest, has implications on Srinivas's sociology. This can be seen in his discussions of the caste system, especially in his work on Rampura (see *infra*). The system emerges as a timeless structure fashioned by the past. Yet, Srinivas was clearly interested in understanding and assessing the changes occurring in modern India. This can be seen in various essays,

such as 'The Caste System and Its Future', 'Some Reflections on Dowry', 'On Living in a Revolution', 'Nation Building in Independent India', 'Science Technology and Rural Development in India', and in some of his autobiographical essays, especially, 'Practicing Social Anthropology in India' (all published in this volume) These essays point to his interest in the process of modernisation. To this effect, he discusses the way the caste system is changing and argues that the contemporary political process has created the context of the radical reorganisation of the caste system and possibly its demise. For example, he argues,

> ... with the emergence of large castes competing with one another to secure secular benefits, the weakening of purity-impurity ideas, and the ideological rejection of hierarchy, both in the Constitution and by huge sections of the population, all point to systemic change. As caste as a system begins to break down, individual castes are likely to continue as they secure a variety of benefits for members in addition to giving them a sense of identity. As India becomes more urban and heterogeneity becomes the norm, ethnic-including caste-identities are likely to assume much greater importance (p. 684)

Is there, thus, a theory of modernisation that Srinivas is articulating? Though not spelt out clearly, the distinction between sanskritisation and westernisation is in one sense a distinction between two kinds of mobility in different periods–pre-modern and modern. He attests that in contemporary India sanskritisation continues to be practiced together with westernisation. It seems *post facto* that Srinivas does not make a sharp distinction between pre-modern and modern, and that he is, in fact, arguing for a theory of incremental change, rather than that of change with breaks, as do sociologists. It is because he considers this kind of change 'civilisational' in character that his sociology leans on anthropology (and some kind of Orientalism), that his oeuvre cannot distinguish between the two stages of structure. What is the implication of this for Srinivas's assessment of the caste system and his ideas on India? In what follows, I discuss two aspects of his work–the first relates to his reading of caste in a village, Rampura, and the second his assessment of contemporary India and the role played by modern processes.

The Caste System in the Village: The Merging of the Social and the Spatial

Srinivas's analysis of the structure of caste is best seen in a discussion of it in Rampura, the village, which became 'his' village. In a series of

papers describing this village, Srinivas discusses the caste system by dividing the population by occupation. It is only after that he sees its link with agriculture, and analyses the practices of various castes, in connection to their occupation. The idea here is to show the organic integration of each caste with others and the way these relate with each other, in a functional perspective elaborated by Radcliffe-Brown. The system is shown to have flexibility because of the integration of the parts in the whole.

What is caste? To answer this question, we have to assess one of Srinivas's earlier essays on caste. As early as in 1954, Srinivas published the now classical essay entitled '*Varna* and Caste' (also in this volume). In this essay, he initiates a discussion on the nature of the caste system in India. Clearly, his emphasis on *jati* comes out of methodological proclivity for the field view. If hierarchy–this volume contains his critique of Louis Dumont's position–does not define caste, then what does? His answer is *jati*. Second, he suggests that caste is best understood by focusing not only on the middle ranks, but also in the context of internal ranking of each *jati* in relation to others. Because there is ambiguity of rank and status, it becomes the precondition of mobility. It is in this context that he coins a new concept–that of 'dominant caste', the peasant caste which dominates the village.

How does one understand the caste system in the village? There seems to be an ambiguity in Srinivas's work regarding the relationship between caste and village. Firstly it is not clear what is the system, village or caste? One presumes that he is discussing the caste system as the structure defining Indian society. However, the village is also seen as a system. For instance, in the essay 'The Social System of the Mysore Village', both the title and the introductory lines suggest this theme: 'Rampura is a village of many castes, yet it is also a well-defined structural entity' (2000: 40) Again, in another essay, he attests that the traditional caste system 'cannot be disentangled...as it operates in the village' (p. 237). Does this mean that the caste system is equivalent to the village system? This ambiguity is reflected in the way castes are understood in the village and the way the village is assessed in context to the castes.

What kind of village system do we obtain from the ethnography of Rampura? Srinivas discusses the structures of the castes and shows how these interact in the village. He asserts that, while the traditional structure of the caste system is resilient, it is also adapting itself to new changes, that being inaugurated through the economy and the polity. In his ethnography, he describes these changes. The market is creating new opportunities, new techniques are being introduced, oil mills set up, new

bus routes started, and new businesses being initiated. Srinivas applauds these changes and yet when he is examining these he is freezing them in the village. Why? Why is it that there is no description of the way the market links the villages to the towns and cities and to the nation? The nation is organised in terms of the state. Why is the state absent when he discusses the panchayat?

More specially, why is the social reduced to the spatial? Is there an unconscious equation of spatial and social units, that of village and caste with the nation-state and nation? Does this linkage make in Srinivas's sociology the village a 'microsam' of the 'macrosam', India? What are the implications when socialities and territory are reduced to each other? What kind of sociology is constructed when a slice of contemporary is frozen? Does it then lend itself to an interpretation as if it is the past rather than the present?

The concept of village in India, as in other parts of the world, which were colonised, has a specific history in terms of its colonial origins. The concept was constructed and legitimised in the context of a need to use definable spatial areas for administrative control. In the colonial mind, space was integral to power. The Orientalist ideology constructed the Asiatic village system as the cornerstone of the East. Henceforth village and village-level collection of information and knowledge became a mode of understanding the East and its institutions. However, this knowledge was not merely for the archives. It was meant to construct a policy of rule and ultimately to create, a bipolar constellation of power and authority, the state and the village.

By the nineteenth century, the village in India had become burdened with many meanings: it was an archaic and primary nucleus of Indian society; it had a large degree of political-administrative autonomy; despite paying taxes to various revenue collectors; an economic self-sufficiency; subsistence agriculture, low technology crafts and services; a sense of timelessness of lifestyles; and immobility of people; accompanied by their ideological integration to land.

The language of the village remained part of the nationalised ideology. However, in the context of the need to frame a national identity it was reconfirmed now as the repository of the civilisational ideas of the Indian nation. Empirical research, when it started in the early decades of the twentieth century, attempted to reinforce the position. The attitude was further bolstered by the practical need of ethnographers to find a place to stay and a place to study. In the process, the village became the locale of study, a way to do 'good' ethnography, a place, which is called 'my village'. Space became coterminous with social life, paradoxically in a context when colonial policies and capitalist relations had opened up

the so-called relative insularity of villages. It is ironic that, though conceptually Srinivas did not agree with the position that the village was a self-sufficient and isolated unit, the emphasis on the village as a unit of ethnographic study made his paradigmatic principles contradict his avowed intentions.

The village acquires in Srinivas's oeuvre a spatial, territorial and structural significance. A localised setting became representative of a whole nation, a whole society. Such a position refracts any attempts to locate the varied networks that bind the village(s) to regions, the country and the global system. If we enlarge our imaginative boundaries to incorporate these networks, it will become apparent that our concerns will then shift to those three networks, labour, capital and communication, which inter-cross and interconnect the villages in the global system, changing thereby the entire set of principles which make the frame of reference for sociological theory.

If social processes and external social forces are ignored by the collapse of the social to the spatial, then this collapse also makes possible an exclusion of groups and communities within the nation-state whose culture and practices cannot be explained by the caste system, or the dual system of '*varna*' and '*jati*', as Srinivas understood it. Tribes, religious and ethnic groups (other than caste), as well as the emerging interest groups that did not conform to the caste principles in their ways of living and functioning did not figure in his work. The issue is not only of conservatism of this approach, but the larger question of exclusion of a large number of groups that constitute the sociological space. And, surely, this should become a question that all sociologists need to assess about their own work? What kind of sociological spaces become distilled when we use spatial categories? Alternatively, what kind of spatial categories need we use so that these can incorporate all the socialities that we are discussing?

Ethnographical Imagination and Assessing Social Change in Modern India

From the late 1960s onwards, Srinivas seems to have moved away from understanding social structure in terms of village. As mentioned above, his commentaries now have a wider canvas and focus on changes occurring in the nation and nation-state. Although the focal point remains the caste system, he is increasingly looking at those aspects of the caste system that are moulding themselves to external and internal changes. As mentioned above, critical to his understanding of caste system is the mobility structures prevalent during the pre-British period and the post-

British period, and then extended into the post-independence period (for instance, the essay 'Mobility in the Caste System'). Here he highlights the role played by economic changes brought by the British (for example, the missionary activities, the start of educational institutions, economic opportunities such as the transport and communication, growth of industries and towns, and new system of law and order). He also highlights the political changes inaugurated after the organisation of caste associations and their conversion to movements such as backward class movements. All these trends have intensified since independence and changed the nature of the caste system.

It is interesting that the index on which he defines social change in India and on which rests his theory of the caste system is that of mobility. While examining mobility in modern India, Srinivas highlights the continuous adaptive character of the system and its ability to adjust to new processes emerging through nation building and state interventions. Many of the essays in this volume allude to the way politics has intervened to change the caste system and led to the growth of backward caste movements all over the country. He argues that government policy has now created three strata: the forward caste, the backward classes, and the scheduled caste and tribes ('The Caste System and Its Future'). These strata are increasingly competing with each other as they try to get a share in the existing resources available in the country. Thus, the caste system of today contrasts sharply with that of the earlier versions of the system, which respected different occupation and ways of living. These changes make caste adaptive to new influences, modify and moderate its characteristics, but do not lead it to transform or completely vanish. In Srinivas's work, the structure of Indian society determined by caste emerges as a kind of adjustment mechanism that expands and fits into any changes and which envelops every external influence within its auspices.

These perceptions, I would argue, are possible only because of Srinivas's commitment to doing ethnography. Without his emphasis on doing ethnographical work and continuously interpreting and reinterpreting social processes, it would have been difficult for Srinivas to perceive and comment on these changes. It is even possible to argue that a commitment to ethnography seems to dominate his oeuvre over other aspects including the theoretical principles associated with social anthropology and this helps in making his work contemporary. This can be seen not only from the above examples on his assessment of the caste system, but also his understanding of gender.

For instance, late in his career, Srinivas became aware of the way gender exploitation was connected to the caste system, and this volume

incorporates three essays on gender. From the late 1970s onwards he started writing on gender. His two essays in this volume–'The Changing Position of Indian Women' and 'Some Reflections on Dowry'–bring out an interesting shift in Srinivas' theoretical position. In the first essay, he essentially locates women within the village, within the Hindu religion-moral mould of the family. Their ritual functions are elaborated and their position never leaves the confines of space and hierarchy. Change occurs in terms of education and 'career consciousness'. However, while writing on dowry he suddenly becomes sensitive to the inequalities, to the 'status asymmetry' and the perpetual dependence of women that form the basis of such a 'vile institution' as dowry. The way to overcome this system was, according to Srinivas, not just strengthening legislations but starting a wide social movement that shakes the mantle of an unjust structure. This points very significantly to Srinivas' empirical sensitivity and highlights the way it helps him to reformulate his earlier formulations and transcend them.

No wonder, Srinivas is insistent that an insider best sees the assessment of these structures, their parts and interconnections rather than an outsider. According to Srinivas, an insider is more privileged in understanding his own society. Arguing against Edmund Leach's contention that anthropologists studying their own society 'do not do it well', he contends that it is the opposite. For one, the sociologist studying his own society, is well versed with its language (that is an immense edge), culture that he has experienced all along; and, in the Indian context, the diversity makes this whole insider-outsider question an issue of degree than of kind. One is never completely an outsider in India or completely an insider. Against Leach's opinion that initial pre-conceptions of the insider prejudice research, Srinivas contends that such a handicap may be transcended by way of being a well-trained, sensitive anthropologist.

Srinivas states that

> [in] participant observation, the anthropologist has to go much further than the mere collection of information and its analysis, difficult enough though these tasks are. He has to try and see the world from the point of view of the people he is studying. This requires a gift of empathy, the ability to place oneself in the shoes of others much in the same way a novelist is able to place himself in the shoes of his characters and view events and situations from their diverse points of views. [...] Ideally, the anthropologist should be able to empathise with the Brahmin and the untouchable, with the landowner and the landless labourer, and with the moneylender and his debtors (p. 583).

Did Srinivas empathise with these people? Is his sociology the sociology of the people who do not have power or prestige or wealth? The emphasis given to those in the middle rank and their mobility upward, together with insignificance towards hierarchy, have made many commentators comment on the conservatism in Srinivas's analysis.

Obviously, the field view of sociology is his major contribution to Indian sociology. However, this field view has been constrained by his theoretical perspective. Certainly, this viewpoint helps him to reorganise his own work and move towards asking sociological questions, and it also gave a generation of students a gateway to move out of earlier ideological bearings of Indology.

What kind of ethnography does one get through such an approach? This issue relates to the way ethnography was related to the functionalist paradigm and framed in the context of the principles of the liberal ideology of the nineteenth century. This ideology argued that state and market, politics and economics were analytically separate and largely self-contained domains each with a separate logic. Epistemically, it made a distinction between subject and object and suggested that the subject, the philosopher and the scientist, should distinguish himself from the object that he observed. Functionalism, by distinguishing the subject from the object, by not ever accepting that the object is the creation of the subject, also emphasised the fact that ethnography so constructed merely mirrors the subject's ideology and advocates research that can become empiricist.

What we see in Srinivas is a simple model of social change, a model that perceives social change as dependent on changes in the economy and polity. There is no recognition that the consequences may become causes for the initiation of new processes or that a combination of events and processes may trigger off conflicts which can in turn organise socialities in distinct and different ways. Surely, the problem is also with the way ethnography is practiced uncritically? Today ethnography has acknowledged the power dimension in the relationship between the insider and the outsider and the politics in the construction of knowledge. A lack of criticality can derail any good ethnographical inquiry.

What is the implication of this for sociology? Not only do we seem to lose a sense of history, but also, with it, an analysis of colonialism as a force and process of destruction, of capitalism as a generator of change that distributes rewards unequally, and of development and planning as a process of elite-organised ideology of refashioning society. At the end of this brilliant ethnography we remain empty handed for we do not obtain any concepts or theory that can evaluate and understand the contemporary processes of change and conflict in society. In order to have this

repertoire we have to accept that change, especially in the epoch of the world system, is exogenous, market-oriented and one which distributes rewards unequally and thereby constructs localities and regions, classes and ethnic groups in unequal relation with each other.

Such a process does not accept spatially created boundaries of social investigation. Rather, it demands that social scientists study the processes as they are being reconstructed and through this process organise the frame of ethnographic investigation. The publication of Srinivas's *Collected essays* allows us to reflect on some of assumptions and theories that frame sociology in India.

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