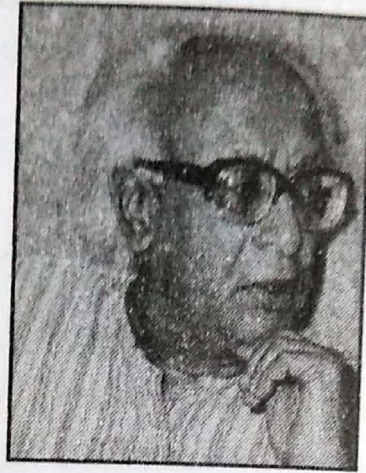


# M.N. Srinivas



Mysore Narsimhacharya Srinivas (1916-1999) was born in a Brahmin family in Mysore on 16th November, 1916 and died at the ripe age of 83 at Bangalore on 30th November, 1999. Srinivas, who was himself from a Brahminic background, emerged as a breath of fresh air in the over-Brahminized world of Indian scholarship. Srinivas had initiated the tradition of basing macro-sociological generalizations on micro-anthropological insights and of giving a sweep and perspective to anthropological investigations of small-scale communities (Srinivas, 1996:22). He obtained MA, LLB and PhD from Bombay, and DPhil from Oxford. He was Professor of Sociology at Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda and University of Delhi; and Senior Fellow, Sociology Unit at Institute for Social and Economic Change, Bangalore; and J.R.D. Tata Visiting Professor, National Institute of Advanced Studies, Bangalore.

M.N. Srinivas, an internationally renowned scholar, was a student of G.S. Ghurye at the Department of Sociology of Bombay



University. He was an institution-builder, a creative researcher and a devoted teacher in a remarkable manner. He took up the challenge of building a Department of Sociology at M.S. University Baroda, which involved starting from scratch in every respect. Instead of choosing to be a lecturer at Oxford with all the prestige. Later on, he also helped in the setting of the Department of Sociology at Delhi University. However, he went to Oxford afterwards but he did not stay much and left in 1951. He joined the Institute of Social and Economic Change at Bangalore after leaving Delhi School of Economics. Srinivas was one of the few who preferred to be a professor and remained one all his life rather than accepting the offer of joining the powerful and prestigious post in the government.

### **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 (Joshi, 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 Telugu 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.

Srinivas also realized the need for a mathematical and statistical orientation in sociology. His self-analysis (1973) underlines this point. There are cogent reasons of both an ideological and a practical nature which explain why the secondary level of analysis described above is not usually pursued by scholars. The practical considerations are easy to detect. Perhaps, more in the past than at present, the fear of mathematics drive many brilliant and diligent scholars to the 'humanistic' disciplines like sociology.

### Writings of Srinivas

Srinivas has written on many aspects of Indian society and culture. He is best known for his work on religion, village community, caste and social change. He was influenced by Radcliffe-Brown's



notion of structure, who was his teacher at Oxford. He studied Indian society as a 'totality', a study which would integrate "the various groups in its interrelationship, whether tribes, peasants or various cults and sects" (Patel, 1998). His writings are based on intensive field work in South India in general and Coorgs and Rampura in particular (Shah, 1996). Srinivas produced outstanding works, for instance:

1. *Marriage and Family in Mysore* (1942)
2. *Religion and Society Among the Coorgs of South India* (1952)
3. *India's Villages* (1955)
4. *Caste in Modern India and Other Essays* (1962)
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Srinivas has also written many other important essays including 'On Living in a Revolution' (1986), 'Some Reflections on Dowry' (1984), 'The Insider and the Outsider in the Study of Cultures' (1984) - all illuminating dimensions of ongoing social change in India. Thus, Srinivas' writings are interdisciplinary in nature. We would like to discuss here on the following themes of Srinivas' contribution:

1. Social change: Brahminization, sanskritization, westernization and secularization
2. Religion and society
3. Study of village
4. Views on caste
5. Dominant caste

### **Social Change**

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### **Social Change**

'Social change' as a theme continues to be a significant concern of Indian sociologists and social anthropologists. This holds true not



only for the pre-1950 phase but also for post-1950 period. Srinivas (1966) attempted to construct a macro-level analysis using a large number of micro-level findings on the processes of 'sanskritization', 'westernization' and 'secularization'. Interestingly enough, Srinivas returned to his micro-empirical setting - a village - after nearly a quarter of century and in a diachronic frame highlighted the nature of social change in that village over a period of time (Srinivas, 1977).

### **Religion and Society**

Srinivas' work *Religion and Society among the Coorgs of South India* (1952) led him to formulate the concept of 'Brahminization' to represent the process of the imitation of life-ways and ritual practices of Brahmins by the lower-caste Hindus. The concept was used as an explanatory device to interpret changes observed in the practices of Brahmins by the lower castes through intensive and careful field study. The notion of Brahminization, however, had implicit possibilities of further abstraction into a higher level concept, 'sanskritization', which Srinivas introduced because his own field data and those of many others indicated limitations of using only Brahminic model as frame of reference. Later, sanskritization, as a concept, thus, replaced Brahminization at a more abstract level.

Srinivas achieved this through enlarging the meaning of sanskritization and by distinguishing it from another concept, westernization, using both terms in a systematic manner to explain the processes of social change in India. This conceptual scheme, though referring mainly to the processes of cultural imitation, has a built-in structural notion, that of hierarchy and inequality of privilege and power, since the imitation is always by the castes or categories placed lower in social and economic status. We find a systematic formulation of the two concepts in Srinivas' *Social Change in Modern India* (1966), wherein he defines 'sanskritization' as the process by which a 'low' caste or tribe or other group takes over the custom, ritual, beliefs, ideology and style of life of a high and, in particular, a 'twice-born' (*dwija*) caste. The sanskritization of a group has usually the effect of improving its position in the



local caste hierarchy. The major emphasis in study of social change through concepts of sanskritization and westernization and of the levels of traditions is on the changes in cultural styles, customs and ritual practices. There are, however, some presuppositions in the processes of both sanskritization and westernization, which do imply precedent or concomitant structural changes, such as improvement in economic position of the sanskritizing caste, superiority and dominance of the caste being emulated and psychological disenchantment among the low castes from their own position in the caste hierarchy. Nonetheless, sanskritization brought changes within the framework of Indian tradition whereas westernization was a change resulting from the contact of British socio-economic and cultural innovations. Along with these concepts, Srinivas has used the term 'secularization' to denote the process of institutional innovations and ideological formulation after independence to deal with the question of religious groups and minorities. This became a national ideology.

Srinivas considers village as the microcosm of Indian society and civilization. It is the village, which retains the traditional composition of India's tradition. 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. He conducted field work among the Coorgs and came out with his publication, *Religion and Society among the Coorgs of South India* (1952). Dumont and Pocock consider the book as a classic in India's sociology. It is in this work that Srinivas provides a basic structure of India's traditions. T.N. Madan hails the publication in these words:

The strength of the *Coorgs* lies in its being firmly grounded in a clearly defined theoretical framework which happened to be essentially the one developed by Radcliffe-Brown who suggested the theme of the dissertation to Srinivas. *Religion and Society* is a very lucid exposition of the complex interrelationship between ritual and social order in Coorg society. It also deals at length and insightfully with crucial notions of purity and pollution as also with the process of incorporation of non-Hindu communities and cults in the Hindu social order and way of life.



In *Religion and Society*, Srinivas was concerned with the spread of Hinduism. He talked about 'Sanskritic Hinduism' and its values. Related to this was the notion of 'sanskritization' which Srinivas employed "to describe the process of the penetration of the way of life of the remotest parts of India. Imitation of the way of life of the topmost, twice-born castes was said to be the principle mechanism by which lower castes sought to raise their own social status". Curiously, Srinivas did not take up for consideration the phenomenon of the persistence of the masses of Hindus of low or no status within the caste system. For him, the most significant aspect of the history of the Coorgs, worthy of being recorded, was the history of this incorporation into the Hindu social order. Srinivas thinks that the only meaningful social change is that which takes place among the weaker sections for attaining higher status by imitating values of twice-born. And, those of the lower castes and tribal groups, who fail in this race of imitation, are doomed to remain backward. Srinivas spells the doom as below:

Splinter groups like Amma Coorgs are decades, if not centuries, in advance of their parent groups; the former have solved this problem by sanskritizing their customs entirely while the latter are more conservative.

What Srinivas spells out about the imitating lower castes seems to be the announcement of a new age. If we attempt to identify traditions of Indian society, according to Srinivas, these are found among the higher castes - the twice-born. In other words, the traditions, rituals and beliefs, which are held and shared by the Brahmins, the Baniyas and the Rajputs, constitute Indian traditions. And, the beliefs of the lower sections of society, the untouchables and the tribals, do not have any status as tradition. For him, Indian traditions are high-caste Hindu traditions, lower-caste traditions are no Indian traditions. Obviously, but he anchors tradition into sanskritization, Srinivas was actually interested in caste. He considered it to be the 'structural bases of Hinduism'. He was not fascinated by Hinduism in its holistic form. He looked for it in the caste system. Thus, his thesis of Indian traditions runs something like this: "Indian traditions are Hindu



traditions, and Hindu traditions are found in caste system. Holistic Hinduism is beyond his scope of discourse."

### *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 marginalized and alienated religious minorities. For him, the traditions are those, which are manifested in caste and village. 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.

Srinivas concentrated on the study of some vital aspects of Hindu society and culture and his study did not explore the dimensions of interaction and interface between the Hindu and non-Hindu segments. The area that he studied did not have a large non-Hindu presence. He hoped that other sociologists would take up the study of the non-Hindu segments of Indian society and culture without which an Indian sociology, Indian in the sense of being comprehensive and authentic and hence truly representative of the plurality and complexity of India, would not emerge. In this context, Joshi (2000) viewed that Srinivas' self-definition and self-perception was never that of a Hindu sociologist but that of an Indian sociologist studying Hindu religion and its social



institutions in a specific area through intensive fieldwork at the ground level.

### 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 Okkalings, 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 sanskritization, 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.

### Criticism

The life mission of Srinivas has been to understand Indian society. He though talks about economic and technological development but in the study of these areas sidetracks lower segments of society. In his endeavour 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. The construction of sanskritization and dominant caste put him closer to *Hindutva* ideology of cultural nationalism. One can say that his understanding was more elitist or presents only upper caste view.

The indigenous concepts of social change prevailing among sociologists in the 1950s and, to a large extent also in the 1960s were formulated by M.N. Srinivas under the labels 'sanskritization' and 'westernization', which he regarded as "limited processes in modern India and it is not possible to understand one without reference to the other" (see *Caste in Modern India*, 1966: 8-9). Srinivas had evolved the concept of sanskritization while preparing his doctoral dissertation under the guidance of Radcliffe-Brown and Evans Pritchard at Oxford (1952). He finally formulated the concept as denoting the process by which a 'low' Hindu caste or tribal or other group, changes its customs, rituals, ideology, and way of life in the direction of a high and frequently 'twice-born caste'.



In 1956 Srinivas posited the concept of westernization as follows: "The British conquest of India set free a number of forces - political, economic, social and technological ... (which) affected the country's social and cultural life profoundly and at every point, and that the withdrawal of the British from India not only did not mean the cessation of these forces but, meant on the contrary, their intensification" (Srinivas, 1966: 53).

Now, as a summary of certain characteristics spontaneously observable in society, these concepts cannot claim any originality (Mukherjee 1979: 50). What Srinivas characterized as sanskritization in the idiom of sociology currently fashionable, had been described by the proto-sociologists Lyall and Risley as 'Aryanization' and 'Brahminization', as mentioned by Mukherjee in the first chapter of his book *Sociology of Indian Sociology* (1979). Possibly, sanskritization is a more precise expression of the process under reference, as is claimed by Srinivas who does not deny the antecedents to his concept (Srinivas, 1962: 42-43). Similarly, the process of westernization was noted by several proto-sociologists mentioned by Mukherjee (1979) and described in virtually the same manner as done by Srinivas.

The pioneers also were not unaware of the two processes and took particular note of them in the context of their respective value preferences, theoretical formulations and research orientation (e.g., Coomaraswamy and D.P. Mukerji). The two processes have, respectively, two levels of meaning - 'historic-specific' and 'contextual-specific', as Yogendra Singh has remarked regarding sanskritization (1973: 6) and Milton Singer had noted earlier (1959: 179).

### Conclusion

Srinivas occupies an eminent place among the first-generation sociologists of India. His focus on 'field view' over the 'book view' is a remarkable step in understanding the reality of Indian society. This reflects sociology of nativity. His field work among the Coorgs relates his approach as structural-functional and represents



an exposition of the complex interrelationship between ritual and social order in Coorg society. It also deals with the crucial notion of purity and pollution as also with the process of incorporation of non-Hindu communities into the Hindu social order. This refers to the concept of 'sanskritization' which he used to describe the process of the penetration of Sanskritic values into the remotest parts of India.

### Srinivas' Framework Summarized

#### Background

1. Educated and training in sociology.
2. Academic career at Bombay, Baroda, Delhi, Bangalore and Oxford.
3. His interest in understanding the rural social life.

#### Aim

1. Dynamics of caste system in rural setting

#### Assumptions

1. Structure and change.
2. The tradition of basing macro-sociological generalizations on micro-anthropological insights.
3. 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.

#### Approach

1. Structural-functional approach
2. Macro-micro perspective

#### Methodology

1. Anthropological investigations of small-scale communities
2. Functional unity
3. Field investigations
4. Descriptive study

#### Typology

1. Dominant caste
2. Brahminization
3. Sanskritization
4. Westernization
5. Secularization

#### Issues

Different aspects of Indian society and culture:

1. Indian society and culture
2. Religion and society
3. Village study
4. Inter-caste relations
5. Social change

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