

Indian Society: Sociological Perspectives
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Week-06
Lecture-27

Sociology of M. N. Srinivas

Welcome back to the class. We are continuing our discussion on the structural functional tradition of Indian sociology. In the previous class, we had a broad overview of structural functionalism as a theory or as a theoretical framework that emerged along with the emergence of sociology starting with at least going back to the time of Comte and Spencer and then Durkheim. But more elaborated later or developed in a more elaborate manner through British anthropologist and which went in a different direction by structural functionalist in the US especially by Talcott Parsons and Robert K. Merton. Now, we are coming back to the Indian scenario trying to understand how structural functionalism served as a very useful or a very important or a very dominant theoretical frame in Indian society or Indian sociology and we are looking at this very eminent sociologist by name M. N. Srinivas and his full name is Mysore Narasimhachar Srinivas born in 1916 and then passed away in 1999.

And M. N. Srinivas is undoubtedly one of the most important figures in Indian sociology. You cannot really study Indian society whether it is about religion or caste or family without invoking M.N. Srinivas's name. Many of the concepts and theories propounded by him became very popular and have also entered into public parlance. For example, the term like dominant caste, vote bank politics, westernization. These are all terms that are used or introduced by M.N. Srinivas as very specific terms or terminologies but later they percolated into the popular discourse and are extensively used by politicians, by journalists, by ordinary people. And he was also a very important institution builder who played significant role in the development of institutions like say Institute for Economic Growth, IEG in Delhi and Institute for Social and Economic Change, ISEC in Bangalore and a host of other places. So, one of the most important figures in Indian sociology played a crucial role in the institutionalization of the discipline of sociology in India. As we know that a discipline requires the collective effort of a lot of people to establish that in different universities and then be the face of that discipline, provide the kind of much needed theoretical and methodological foundation of the discipline and be a pioneer in terms of conducting research and then

disseminating it and to train a set of young scholars or young researchers to be the future scholars of tomorrow. So, in that sense he was a doyen in that sense.

He was instrumental in organizing sociology departments in University of Baroda and Delhi and as I told you he played very important role in the establishment and then the further development of, if not in the establishment at least in the further development of IEG and then ISEC in Bangalore and he studied in University of Bombay for his PhD and then did another DPhil, another research degree from Oxford University and was heavily influenced by structural functionalist approach of Radcliffe Brown. He was his supervisor in Oxford and later moved to Evans Prichard later and he studied extensively about caste, religion, village and kinship in India. These are the most important themes of Indian society. These were the most important themes of Indian society studied at least because they also kind of reflect the dominant orientation of anthropology of Srinivas's time during 1930s, 40s and 50s or even 50s and 60s when he kind of conducted serious studies. So, these are the important works.

The Marriage and family in Mysore, something that was done when he was a student and then religion and society among Coorgis of, among the Coorgis of South India that is a full name. This is a considered to be a classic work, heavily popular. This is the book in which he first introduces this concept of Sanskritization of course later developed later but very considered to be very important one. Then caste in modern India and other essays, social change in modern India. These are all essays and then his, maybe his magnum opus, 'The Remembered Village.'

We will discuss more detail about that book. Considered to be a classic, considered to be one of the most celebrated, most read, most discussed works in Indian society maybe along with Homo Hierarchicus, 'The Remembered Village', one of the most readable, very lucidly written work, 'The Remembered Village'. Then dimensions of social change in India or essays in a society through personal writings, village, caste, and gender, that may be his last work. So, couple of books and then mostly other essays. And these are some of the titles of the work.

This Oxford book, religion, and society among the Coorgis of South India, it is a small book and then The Remembered Village again very slightly thicker one, important book. Srinivas and Structural Functionalism. He initiated a structural functionalist analysis in sociological and social anthropological research in India. One of the most important developments in Indian sociology during the early years of post-independence. So, as I repeatedly mentioned we are discussing Srinivas not only because of his own right as a preeminent sociologist in India but also as somebody who represented or who used structural functionalism as a very important framework to understand Indian society.

So compared to any other traditions or any other theoretical frameworks, structural functionalism was the most important, the most dominant theoretical framework used in Indian society or in Indian sociology. There is a plethora of anthropologists who followed the method adopted by Srinivas. And he was influenced by British anthropological tradition especially by Radcliffe Brown and then Evans Pritchard at Oxford. I mentioned that he registered his PhD, his D. Phil with Radcliffe Brown and then later moved to Evans Pritchard.

In his path breaking works on Coorg and Rampura, he challenged the then dominant paradigm of book view that focused on understanding Indian society through texts. One of the seminal contributions of M.N. Srinivas is his argument about what we call it as the field view in opposition to book view. So, we discussed that when we mentioned Indological approach that there was a powerful group of very influential group of scholars mostly trained in Sanskrit who believed that since India is a very ancient civilization, these ancient texts really carry the essence of Indian society.

So you can study Indian society by studying these texts which are written several centuries ago. So, they spent lot of time trying to understand the ancient scriptures and then believed that there is a kind of an unbroken continuation over the centuries and getting an access to these texts and then their rationale and their value systems will give you very important insights about how Indian society continue to work even now. That is traditionally understood it as a book view. You as an armchair Indologist or a Sanskrit scholar, you sit in your office and then you read through this material, you read through these scriptures, these Vedas, these Upanishads, this other ancient material, then you deduce your sociological analysis about how Indian society function. And Srinivas was a bitter critic of this particular approach.

Srinivas argued that book view provides you with a very distorted, very obsolete, very outdated understanding about Indian society rather you must go to the field. So, this binary between field view versus book view became a very important matter of contention during his time. So, Srinivas as an anthropologist and as you know anthropologists are not armchair theorists. They go to the village, they believe that the data for their study, data for their theorization must be collected personally. What we call it as this ethnographic approach.

You immerse yourself into the lives of people and a particular technique that was made very popular by these scholars is what is called as a participant observation or in traditional sense what you call it as a field work. You go to the village and for example these scholars like Radcliffe Brown and Malinowski and others they have spent years

together, months together among some of the most isolated places, most remote places, most primitive tribes staying with them and then studying their customs and rituals living along with them. So, trying to become a part of the community and that is that particular technique is known as this participant observation. You try to be a kind of a participant in their everyday activity. At the same time, you are an outsider, you are different, you look different, you do not belong to their tribe or their group.

Yet you try to become a part of that. So, this ethnographic approach was the kind of a specific method that was advocated by M.N. Srinivas and that is why he was a bitter critic of the field view which argued that you can understand his society by reading the text. So this binary between this field work and book view was a very important feature of Srinivas' argument and in the coming class, may be the class after that we are going to discuss one of his very famous essays, Varna and caste in which he puts forward this argument very strongly that focused on understanding in society through text.

So book view is the argument that the knowledge about elements that make up in a society like religion, caste, varna, family, village etc. through sacred text and books, Indological approach. This is something that we discussed already. And then the field view is attaining knowledge about Indian society through the field work. Srinivas argued for a field view of Indian society, used ethnographic method to study caste system in Indian village, caste as well as religion. So, he was a very important proponent of field view.

He conducted very systematic field work in Coorg, then he conducted very systematic field work in Rampura village. Rampura village is a village near Mysore, near Srirangapatna. I hope you know the Srirangapatna is the famous place of Tipu Sultan. So, this Rampura village, Rampura is a pseudo name. They generally do not use this actual name of the village or the people because it might compromise the privacy of those people and places.

So Rampura is a village near Srirangapatna. So, he stayed there over one year, maybe around 10 or 12, 11 months and then did very immersive field work. So, he was a proponent of field work and then a series of scholars, his own students and then other people followed the similar path. So, this tendency of conducting very intense single village studies became the most dominant way of doing sociology during his particular time and that is a very, very important development. Of course, it was criticized later and then later it moved into multi village studies, but Srinivas was single most influence in establishing that very important tradition.

Attaining knowledge about Indian society through field work because he argued that

you cannot really depend upon some text written thousands of years ago to understand how people actually live. In order to understand how people actually live, you need to go to the villages and then observe how people live and then collect data and then try to conceptualize that. So that was his argument. So, this work Marriage and family in Mysore published in 1942. It was originally written in 1938 as an MA dissertation at the University of Bombay and Srinivas himself has mentioned that it is a very amateurish work and which he felt embarrassed going through that later.

Srinivas dealt with Kannada speaking Hindu caste and based his description on data drawn from various secondary sources, provided an account of customs related to marriage, divorce, childbirth, interpersonal relations within family, kinship terminology, death ceremonies, etcetera, focused more on descriptive ethnography rather than on sociological analysis. So, his tendency again was kind of a described to document these terminologies because in many or in every community these things are not documented. So, for example, what are the social practices associated with marriage? How is this bride and bridegroom identified? How is this match actually made? And what are the rituals associated with marriage? And in a village setting what are the traditional roles associated to different castes in performing the marriage of a particular caste person? So, it is an entirely fascinating world in itself. A marriage is not a union of two people. It is not even a union of two families.

It is much more than that. In a traditional village setting, a marriage ceremony is a, it actually offers you lot of insights about how that entire village function and Srinivas elaborates it in his work, later work on remembered village, how the marriage of a dominant caste, a Vokkaliga caste has to happen and how around 16 caste in that particular village have to come together and then do specific traditional obligations in doing that. We will discuss that. So how each of, so it was mostly kind of a descriptive thing. He did not go into more kind of a conceptual analysis rather confined to kind of a descriptive analysis. And then the most important or one of the most important contributions of Srinivas is the religion and society among Coorgis of South India published in 1952.

And this was done, it was on his second doctoral dissertation from Oxford, came out after proper field work in Coorg, grounded in a clearly defined theoretical framework of structural functionalism. So, he tried to understand the role of religion among Coorgs, the Coorgi people and then tried to understand how this particular religion provides a kind of stability and then how it plays an integrative role to the society. The book explores the complex in relation between ritual and the social order in Coorg society. As I, as we mentioned, typical to the structural functionalist framework, he was preoccupied with the whole question of how a society maintains its integrity or its order or its equilibrium.

And these three terms are used interchangeably, equilibrium, social order and social integration.

So how a stability, these are maybe three or four terms that are used interchangeably in social structural functionalist discourse. So, he looked into, explored everyday practices, notions of purity and pollution, auspicious and inauspicious rites, rituals and festivals, inter-caste distances, exceptions and mobility that create social structural, that create social structural polarities. So, this is how you look into that. When you go to society, you look at various practices, various institutions, various arrangements and then try to see that how each one of them provide a kind of a semblance of social structure to that particular society or how it provides social structural solidarities. Along with primary data collected through ethnographic fieldwork, she was effectively used secondary literature to map region's history.

So this is, that is why I mentioned, a religion society among Coorgs of South India is a celebrated work, considered to be a classic. It is a must read for almost every master's, students of social anthropology in India. And Srinivas analysis of social structure of India mainly focused on the caste system, family, village and 'nad' which is a cluster of villages. So, this 'nad' is a vernacular term used in Tamil, in Malayalam, in Kannada which talks about the kind of a cluster of villages with similar kind of socio-cultural context. The book concentrated on the various rituals and customs and festivals of the Coorgs and the role played by different caste in them.

And if you are familiar with the rural scenario, you know that every village festival, I am not talking about the specific caste festivals, but every village will have a village deity, village temple and this village temple is seen or it is celebrated as a collective festival, a collective festival of different castes. Each caste will have traditional obligations to do. Each caste will have traditional rights to do. Each caste will have, it will be their traditional obligation or right or an honor to do specific part into that. For example, the Brahmins could be the priest, the agricultural caste might be the people who provide the financial resources and then the oilmen, the thelis might be the people who supply the temple with the necessary oil.

The porters might make new pots and supply them and then the untouchable caste might be entrusted with cleaning the leftover food and other things. So every caste has designated and in many parts in South India, untouchable castes are supposed to do the drum beating and then walk around the temple and then announce the festival and which came, which emerged as a born of contention because this was seen as a demeaning act by the caste and then they refused to do that in many places which resulted in further violence by the caste Hindus or upper caste Hindus. And identified a correlation between

various customs and rituals and how they emphasize and tend to preserve the social structure of the region. And this is exactly what we discussed. And major theoretical contribution of this book is the concept of Sanskritization.

So as I mentioned, we first come across this term Sanskritization in his work, this particular book 'Religion and Society among Coorgs of South India' and actually initially he used the term Brahmanization, not Sanskritization, he used the term Brahmanization in that book but later in his later writings he revised it into Sanskritization. While the exposition of interrelatedness of different aspects of society made possible by the adoption of the functionalist paradigm is strength of the core book. Its weakness also stems from the same source. This criticism can be leveled against any structural functionalist who would say that the interrelatedness of different aspects of society is the most important point of analysis and that made possible by the adoption of the functionalist paradigm is the strength of the core book, it is the weakness also stems from the same source. Religion in this framework is reduced to ritual and is sought to be understood in terms of its function in the maintenance of social order.

So it is very severely criticized that Srinivas understanding of religion was very limited or he used religion in a very limited sense rather, reduced it into what are the kind of the rituals and then the practices that are associated with ritual. He did not move into a deeper cultural understanding of religion into the realms of meanings and then symbols and other things and he overlooked the concerns with meanings of religions and with the ideas of God, soul, sin, sacrifice etc. Anthropological literature provides you with fascinating insights about how religions work, the kind of taboos, the kind of mythologies, the kind of symbolic systems associated with that, but Srinivas's treatment of religion was rather peripheral. The dogmatism and narrowness of functionalist paradigm limited the scope of the study. Again very, very strong words, the dogmatism and narrowness as I told you, they come with a purpose of looking into how different social structures contribute to the overall stability of society.

So it was a very limited and restricted agenda of a functionalist, a more kind of mechanical treatment of a society. So that really prevented Srinivas from exploring furthermore into more fascinating aspects. And maybe the most prominent work of Srinivas is this book, Remembered Village. As I mentioned, his ethnographic work of the village near Srirangapatna in Mysore. And there are stories about why he named it as a remembered village because he lost all the field notes that he has prepared in an accidental fire in Oxford and later he seems to have, he recollected these memories and then written from his memory.

So that is the argument and that is why he mentioned it as a remembered village. So

many scholars point out that maybe this particular incident because this is a very unusual work. It is an extremely readable work, and it would remind you of books like *Malgudi Days* by R.

K. Laxman, just like a novel you can read. And at the same time, it is not a fictional one, it is a product of ethnographic work. So, it has lot of scientific rigour in that, systematic analysis in that. It chronicles the events, it tells you about the social structure of that particular village, it looks into the kind of various caste hierarchy in that village, it goes into the economic and social and political and cultural and social realms of the village. So, it is a widely celebrated work, one of the most well read and well circulated book of Indian sociology. It presents a comprehensive account of the multicast village of Rampura in South Karnataka, also the experience of his field work.

And for example, he talks about how he initially went to that village and then how he had to get a house, he has to get a house to stay and then how he befriended a Brahmin family there and they offered him to stay there and how he stayed with this particular Brahmin family, and they provided him with a peculiar understanding of that village and how his people could easily identify his Brahmin, Srinivas was a Brahmin. So how the Brahmins in the village identified themselves with Srinivas being one among them and then how that his perceived identity provided a kind of a particular entry point into the village at the same time how that acted as a barrier for Srinivas to get access to people who are considered untouchables or lower caste and others. It is a very, very fascinating thing. So, it is a must-read book for every sociology or anthropology student. And he explored several aspects of the village life, he looked in the social structure, the economy, the cultural region, social change and everything as I mentioned.

Though the book is about the village, its core focus was on caste and more specifically on upper caste and the rural elite. So, there are very elaborate works on the village head man, the village accountant, the village priest and how basically his focus was on the Vokkaliga caste because Vokkaligas are the most dominant agricultural caste in that region, that part of Karnataka, the southern part of Karnataka. So, his focus was on this Vokkaliga caste, and he has very lucid elaboration about the village head man. Village head man and his family and the relationship with other castes are mentioned very, very elaborately. So, as I told you for example, there is very elaborate mentioning about how a village, a marriage in the house of this upper caste person is conducted.

So it is surprising to see that almost every caste, around 16 castes in that village will have to perform specified traditionally obligated services to the conduct of that marriage. The people, the mochis or the people who do the leather work, they have to present the bridegroom with a new pair of chapels and the dobies, the washerman community they have to present the kind of a white cloth on which this bride and bridegroom is supposed

to walk. So, these are all traditional obligations for which they are provided a kind of a compensation. So, a marriage ritual is not the private affair of the family or even the caste alone. It is an affair of the whole village where every caste is supposed to perform specified functions which includes that of the lower caste people who are supposed to clean the place, supposed to dispose of the leftover food and other things.

So in contrast to his earlier major works, it captures the totality of village life, its human elements and convey the feel of Rampura to the reader. As I mentioned you, it is a beautifully readable work, very, very lucidly written work where you can look at the character, it is not a very the usual, very formal kind of an account. It is a very personal account; you can feel the people. For example, the head man, you can understand the comprehensive account of the character of this head man. So yeah, so this work Rampura Village became an instant sensation among scholars and it actually enhanced Srinivas status as a very, very important person, important sociologist in India and it became one of the most maybe talked about or discussed work in India because there were lot of people who criticized Srinivas for being providing a very one-sided view because of his identity as a Brahmin, because of his proximity or because of his decision to live along with the upper caste quarter.

It prevented him from having adequate access to the lower caste and so the account of Srinivas from the perspective of Dalits is very, very minimal in this work. That is one of the major criticisms raised against Srinivas. He glosses over the kind of, or he rather does not give adequate attention to the systems of exploitation, systems of discrimination as practiced in the village. He rather provides a kind of perspective from a more comfortable upper caste position.

That has been one of the major criticisms against this book. But as I told you, highly influential popular work and these are the references that I have used and for this work as well as the coming classes. And one of the important works is T.N. Madan, another doyen of Indian sociology, his work, an introduction to Srinivas's over, an essay taken from the book, *The Pathways, approaches to the study of society in India*.

Then T.K. Oommen, the concept of dominant caste, some queries, it is an article written in contributions to Indian sociology. Then Sujatha Patel's work, social anthropology or Marxist sociology, assessing the contested social version of M.N. Srinivas and A.R. Desai. Then Taramangalam and Chathukulam, revisiting the legacy of M.N. Srinivas, a more recent article appeared in EPW. So, these are the references used. So, we will wind up the class now and then we will continue with the major concepts of Srinivas in the coming class. Thank you.