Indian Society: Sociological Perspectives
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Sociology of M. N. Srinivas: Basic Concepts

So, friends, welcome back to the class. Yesterday, we started our discussion on M.N.Srinivas, as I mentioned, considered to be one of the very important social anthropologists and sociologists in India, of course, considered to be a pioneer. And then we looked at his background, the major works that he completed and then how he kind of was a very important proponent of structural functionalism in the study of Indian society.

So, in today's class, we are trying to go through some of his very important basic concepts. And of course, end the discussion with a kind of critical analysis of M.N. Srinivas. So, these concepts are important, because these concepts really paved the way for conceptually understanding Indian society in general and specifically that of caste in more particular ways. And as I mentioned this yesterday in the previous class, these concepts, while they are coined by Srinivas as specific sociological concepts have permeated into the public realm, into the public discourse.

And they are quite frequently used by the media people, by the general public in general and the politicians. So, that is the kind of influence that this particular scholar has had on Indian society. So, there are two, one of his very important contributions is the kind of clarity that he brought in into the analysis of Varna and caste. This I am going to take up separately in the coming class, where I discuss one of his essays, an abridged version of his essays, where he distinguishes between Varna and caste, because there was quite a lot of confusion among the common public about the usage of this term Varna and caste. And many times, they used it interchangeably, because Varna, the fourfold Varna division is kind of well-known across the Indian society and beyond the Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras.

So, that was many times erroneously equated with caste. So, one of the very important contributions to Srinivas is to distinguish these two things. And this falls very much within his overall argument that in order to understand the empirical reality of Indian society, one must not solely depend on the ancient scriptures and then the Sanskrit text

rather, go into the field and then try to understand how people live in their actual everyday setting. So, the scholars who are considered to be the kind of a Sanskritists or Indologists, who are kind of armchair theorists, who depended mostly on the secondary sources, they did not have this opportunity to understand how actually people live and then make use of this category. So, one of his very important contributions is to very, very, very strongly argue that the conceptual framework of Varna is very different from that of the caste or what he calls it as the Jati.

Jati is the term, that is the Indian term in order to indicate the much smaller geographically bounded, in numerous numbers of caste. Whereas Varna is just four in nature and caste is again is a Portuguese term, it is not an Indian term. So, Jati is used now in anthropological circles or sociological circles to basically look at the specific geographic bounded phenomena. So, Varna means colour and a reference category rather than a reality of social order. So, one of the very important points that Srinivas highlights is that Varna as a category is least effective as a conceptual tool because it is a very amorphous category, it is a very broad and vague category and it does not really help you beyond a point in understanding the actual realities of life that we will discuss as I mentioned, we are going to discuss that particular paper in the coming class.

Then Varna scheme that is Brahmana, Kshatriya, Vaishyya and Shudra are the fourfold Varna scheme and interestingly the untouchables are kind of outside of the Varna scheme. The Varna scheme does not formally even recognize the ex-untouchables or the caste whom we consider today as this scheduled caste or scheduled tribe, they were considered as the depressed classes or the ex-untouchables. So, they are not even there inside the fourfold Varna scheme. Many, there are few accounts in which they are called as a panchamas or that is the fifth Varna, but they are strictly outside this scheme of four varnas and they are not a part of this larger Varna scheme. And a reference of fourfold Varna scheme can be found in the Purusha Sukta of Rigveda.

That is the foundational text from where the idea of Varna has been elicited. So, Purusha Sukta talks about fourfold division of Varna. Whereas on the other hand caste, the Jati, is the Varna scheme only refers to the broad categories of the society and not its real and effective units. As I told you, the caste is the reality. For example, a Varna called as Kshatriya only tells you about a kind of very broad and vague relative position of a number of maybe hundreds of castes who claim that Kshatriya Varna.

But beyond the point, it does not really explain how these castes actually work in a given geographic area at a given point in time. So, is the case with Brahmin. Of course, Brahmin, they represent an entirely different class in terms of their ritual position. But within Brahmin, there are so many different divisions, so many different groups, there is

hierarchy within caste, there are very strict endogamous rules within caste, there are strict rules about interaction within Brahmin Varna. So, beyond a point, the category of Varna becomes ineffective.

 And Varna scheme does not resemble the reality of Indian social life, produced a distorted image. We will discuss this in the coming class, so I am not going to elaborate on that. The position with which each caste occupies in the local hierarchy is frequently not clear. It is all we are going to discuss. In the caste system, there is a lack of clarity in the hierarchy, especially in the middle region, each caste claims superior state.

  So, these are all very important points that Srinivas talks about, because in our understanding, in the classical understanding, we believe that this hierarchy is very clear. Who comes on the top and who comes on the bottom is very clear. And we believe that there is a kind of a complete consensus about this relative hierarchy. But Srinivas very rightly pointed out that, while there is clarity about who occupies the topmost position and who occupies the lowermost position, there is lot of contestations and confusion in between these two extreme positions. Or the middle part of the hierarchy produces lot of confusion and contestations.

  Based on this, Srinivas defined caste as a hereditary endogamous, usually localized group having a traditional association with an occupation and a particular position in the local hierarchy of caste. So, this is a very important definition. It is a hereditary because it is hereditarily decided. You are born into a caste; you can't change it. You are born into a caste; you live in a caste, and you die in that caste.

 And it is endogamous. Even now, even now, as you know, one of the most, while all other traditional characteristics of caste system has disappeared to a large extent or to some extent, the most important, the central feature, a central characteristic feature of caste system that sustains this whole thing is the rule that one has to get married within the one's own group. That is very evident that if you look into that, the percentage of inter-caste marriages in India is still less than some 5 percentage or in other words, predominantly, marriages take place within the caste. So, this endogamy is the main pillar on which caste is established. And a usually localized group having a traditional association with an occupation is again very important.

 Every caste used to have a traditional association with the occupation, but that is kind of a disturbed with the recent changes and other things. And a particular position in the local hierarchy of caste. This term is very important, this local hierarchy is very important because the influence of caste is region specific. A caste you need to understand in connection not at a pan Indian level, but with respect to its local specificity. While

generally it is true that the higher caste are better of caste and lower caste are the poorest, the ranking of caste on principally economic and political considerations would produce a stratification different from the stratification based on ritual considerations.

And this is another very important and very contentious argument. The whole argument about can we draw two kinds of parallel systems of stratification, one based on ritual purity, the other based on economic status. And so, in the stratification based on ritual purity, the Brahmins occupy the topmost position, and the untouchables occupy the lowermost position. And then there are others in between. And then economic class there are very wealthy people and there are very poor people, there are people in between.

So, the whole question is, is there a kind of a parallel between these two systems of stratification? Or can we say that the ritual stratification gets replicated in the class stratification? And that is a very, very interesting fascinating question. But one of the very important points that Srinivas points out is that stratification, so there could be differences, it does not get replicated exactly because you will find quite a lot of upper-class people who could be poor. And many a times those who occupy this particular position, those who occupy the position just below that of the Brahmins, they tend to be more economically well off than even the Brahmins. So, there are, so unless you take the specificities of a local context and then analyze how it works, it is going to be quite difficult.

Introduced the concept of dominant caste, Sanskritization and Westernization to understand the ground reality of social life in India. So, these are the three very important concepts that Srinivas introduced. One is dominant caste, then Sanskritization and Westernization. So, let us briefly go through each one of them. Now, dominant caste, he makes a reference about dominant caste in his study on Rampura village, that is where he kind of theorized it completely though we had mentioned it earlier.

So, he talks about dominant caste is different from the upper caste. So, as I mentioned earlier in the caste hierarchy, the among the twice born castes, the Brahmins occupies the highest position. There is hardly any dispute on that. But are the Brahmins really the more powerful is a very important question. Are the Brahmins the really powerful group or are they the most powerful group? And what Srinivas saw in the Rampura village, and he gives a lot of examples about how the village priest who is a Brahmin had to depend upon the village head man for a lot of his support and help and guidance and other things.

And how the village priest behaved in a very, very, very submissive way in front of the village head man. Or what Srinivas asserts or argues is that the village head man who belongs to a dominant caste, he belongs to a Vokaliga caste. Vokaliga is an agriculture

caste who has a huge amount of land under his control, who employs lot of people, who is politically powerful, who represents the leader of the big group. So, he had huge real political power, real power in the context compared to the Brahmin, who is not that wealthy, who does not have that much land and who is economically dependent on this particular head man. So, on the basis of that he argued that this could be true in every part of Indian society.

So, the ritually most superior people need not be powerful when it comes to economic and political matters. So, he says that there are dominant castes in every, every, every particular context of rural India. And he talks about some four, three or four important features that define the nature of dominant caste. One is that it should be sizable amount of arable land and economic power. One of the most important points as you know, in rural India, economic well-being or economic wealth is decided on the basis of the land you possess.

And Indian society has been feudal in its nature. Even now, in many parts of the country, you will find structures similar to that of feudalism. The land distribution has not really happened many times. There is a huge inequality in terms of the ownership of land. So, traditionally, there are castes who are considered to be the agricultural caste, not the service caste.

So, this agricultural caste people tend to have huge tracts of land, in which a lot of people who are considered, who mostly come from the lower caste and the untouchable caste, who are the traditionally the landless labourers. Landless labourers, they work in their land. And because of this very nature of dependence and you know that in a rural scenario, the ability to get a job or your entire livelihood will be dependent upon the job opportunities provided by the landowner or landlord. And that is the very reason why the amount of land, sizable land, of arable land that one owns really is an important factor determining whether a particular caste becomes the dominant caste or not. And then secondly, the political power, of course, political power when it comes to the modern democratic system, it has assumed a different character.

But even during colonial or pre-colonial period, the political affairs of a region was mostly controlled by the people who have ownership over land. And second one is this political power is very specifically a byproduct or it is a product of the numerical preponderance. So, if you look into the nature of dominant castes across India, you will find that in most of the places, dominant castes are the caste who have maximum people belonging to that particular group or they are the majority in that particular village or in that particular region. And this serves on this numerical preponderance, or numerical majorities is very relevant on various accounts. On the one hand, especially in a colonial

or even post-colonial scenario, your numbers matter when it is, when you have to show your physical strength or when you have to show your political strength, the numbers matter.

In a modern election system, every vote counts. So, many a times this voting happens on the basis of your caste affiliation. So, a candidate from a numerically majority group tend to win. And more than that, the physical strength in terms of physical confrontation, the many times this numerically larger group are able to easily control the numerically lesser group and then occupy a high place in the local hierarchy.

That is another thing. So, most of the time, the dominant caste will not be the highest occupying the highest position, but they will also not be too low in the ritual hierarchy. They would be mostly immediately below that of the Brahmins. So, for example, in Kerala, Nairs were considered to be a dominant caste. In Karnataka, Vokaligas are considered to be a dominant caste in the southern part of Karnataka, whereas Vokaligas are considered in the southern part and then Lingayats are considered to be dominant caste in the northern part of Karnataka. In Andhra, there are Reddy and Kammas and in Tamil Nadu, there are different gaundars and other groups.

So, all of them never are considered to be the untouchable castes. They are all the, maybe the present day OBCs or upper caste who belong just below that of the Brahmin caste. And modern education, modern occupation and physical force also contribute to the dominance of a caste. So, the, again, given the, their economic facilities and economic background, these are the caste who made use of their modern education and then which enabled them to get the modern occupations. If you look into every region and then look into the caste profile of the people who embraced modern education, again, it is very evident that in almost every region, it was the Brahmins followed by other upper caste people who made use of the modern education during 1930s, 40s, 50s when modern education was introduced.

And that really helped them to acquire modern occupations whenever they were offered. And the lower caste people had to really do the kind of a catching up game in a much-delayed manner. So, dominant caste are products of a historical process acquiring economic and political power and the ability to raise themselves in the ritual hierarchy occur over a longer period of time. So, there are very interesting historical accounts about how this dominant caste position was assumed.

And again, it is not a static process. It is not that a particular caste is considered to be dominant throughout the era. It is a, it is a fluctuating situation. It is a dynamic situation. There are castes who are able to climb up in the, in the class hierarchy and also in the

ritual hierarchy where Srinivas uses the term Sanskritization to elaborate that. The concept of dominant caste is to point out the flexibility or mobility within the caste system.

So, as he mentioned, one of the very important contributions of Srinivas is that he was able to show, despite the, or he was able to show that the caste system is not completely inflexible. Or he was able to demonstrate that there is some sort of mobility, upward and downward mobility has been a part of caste hierarchy throughout the centuries. Because many times it is argued that caste system is a closed system of stratification. It is a closed system of stratification where vertical mobility is impossible, especially when you compare it with a class system where it is easier for the, it may be possible for the poor people to move upward, or it may be possible for the rich people to move downward and then become poor. It is a kind of more open system of stratification whereas caste is considered to be closed system of stratification.

But Srinivas and a lot of others have argued that that is not the case completely. There were some amount of mobility was possible. Another very important contribution of Srinivas is this introduction of this term Sanskritization. And again, he come across this particular phenomenon during his study of the Coorg village in 1950s. So, where he initially defines it as a Brahmanization, not as a Sanskritization and later only he introduces this term Sanskritization.

And Srinivas himself is not very happy with the term Sanskrit because it can be misleading because it has nothing much to do with the Sanskrit as a language. And so, he observed that in Coorg society, there is a tendency to imitate by the tendency among the lower caste, some sections of the lower caste to imitate the lifestyles and ideas and ideologies of the Brahmins and then to claim a higher position than what is granted to them by others. And so, that is why he defined it as a Brahmanization and he defined it as a way in which other caste people are trying to imitate the lifestyles and values and habits of the Brahmins. But later, he came across or he come across the kind of a similar phenomenon as reported by other anthropologists, where Brahmins are not the models of emulation or Brahmins are not the model for this imitation rather, it is other upper caste people, especially the dominant groups. So, that is the reason why he changed this definition from Brahmanization to Sanskritization.

So, what does Sanskritization mean? He says, it is a process by which a low Hindu caste or tribal or any other group changes its customs, rituals, ideology and ways of life in the direction of a high and frequently twice born caste. So, twice born caste, I hope you know, among the Varna system, the first three Varnas, the Brahmins, Kshatriyas and Vaishyas, they undergo this ritual called as, you know, twice born, the sacred thread

ceremony, an elaborate ritual, which is considered to be the second birth of the child. It is an initiation ceremony, it is mostly, it is there in all the first three Varnas. So, he defines Sanskritization as a process through which a low, in inverted comma, because this lowness is given to them by others, a low Hindu caste or a tribal or any other group changes its customs, rituals, ideology and ways of life in the direction of a high and frequently twice born caste. So, what are these rituals, ideologies, and other things? Many times, most of the thing is to claim a vegetarian diet, because he gives a lot of examples about how different castes either give up their non-vegetarian diet or pretend as if they are giving up a non-vegetarian diet and then embracing a vegetarian diet.

And another example could be, say, prohibition of widow remarriage. In communities where widow remarriage were freely allowed, that is being restricted or more restriction was imposed on widows and then women and then, you know, child marriage, prevalence of child marriage. So, a host of practices that were followed by the Brahmins or upper caste people are now being adapted or accepted by this particular group with a hope that their ritual status might be increased, enhanced. It is accompanied by upward mobility of the caste in question. However, the mobility results only in positional changes in the system and does not lead to structural changes.

So, what he argues is that this was never an automatic or an easy process, because you claiming a upper caste position is one thing, but getting it granted by others is another. That is how this whole identity works, as you know. I can claim to be of a different caste or a different position, but in reality, that materializes only when others also accept that I have increased, or I belong to a higher position. If others do not accept, then I remain only with my own claim that I belong to a different class. So, it only changes within the kind of a position, but it did not change, bring in any kind of a structural change.

The concept was in this book, Religion and Society among cools of South India and of course later developed much later. Adoption of new customs, rituals, beliefs, habits, and new lifestyles of local high caste, as we discussed changing dietary and occupational habits, obtaining the service of Brahmin priest, performing Sanskritic, calendrical festivals, etc. A very, very important point. Many times, the marriages were conducted when the community elders would officiate the marriages. Now, the caste which want to undergo the process of Sanskritization, they would invite, they started inviting Brahmin priest or they started following quite a lot of Sanskritic cultures.

So, this Sanskritization, as I mentioned, it has nothing much to do with Sanskrit as a language, but it has to do with Sanskritic Hinduism. So, it is, Srinivas used the term Sanskritization to tell that it is an attempt to adopt to Sanskrit Hinduism, which are represented by the Brahmins and the other upper caste people. Because if you look into

Hinduism, again, you know that it is not a homogenous religion, there is no homogenous theology. It is such a diverse and bewildering diverse society, diverse set of communities with all sorts of customs, rituals and worship patterns and other things. So, you, for example, scholars like Mickey Marriott and others or Radcliffe Brown, following Radcliffe Brown, they talk about this great tradition and little tradition.

So, great tradition is represented by the, is what you understand as a Sanskritic, a Pan-Indian textual based religion, whereas little traditions are traditions followed by lower caste people, localized, much more confined to specific geographic areas. So, this particular movement of Sanskritization, Srinivas argues, is a movement towards claiming or following the kind of a Sanskritic pattern, a kind of a more upper caste pattern. Exposure to new ideas and values which have found frequent expressions in the vast body of Sanskrit literature sacred as well as secular. This is exactly what we are talking about.

It is something to do with the Sanskrit Hinduism. So, as I mentioned, giving up of non-vegetarian food, giving up of drinking and then adopting a kind of a more sattvic life, imposing more restrictions on women and then inviting Brahmin priests and then a host of things are considered to be part of Sanskritization. And in the case of the caste which enjoyed higher economic and political power, but ranked low in ritual status, Sanskritization occurred sooner or later because without their claim to a higher position was not fully effective. Without it, their claim to a higher position was not fully effective. So, in case of caste which enjoyed higher economic and political power, but ranked low in ritual status, for example, imagine a caste and there are very interesting classic studies about say the caste whose occupation is toddy tapping, to produce a toddy from the palm trees and then coconut trees, the caste in Tamil Nadu and in Kerala. There are studies which say that specific periods in colonial period because of prohibition and other thing, their economic status went up very significantly.

They made huge money through this arrack business or illicit toddy, illicit liquor business and a host of other things, their economic status went up very high, but a mere increase in the economic status is not sufficient to claim a higher position in the ritual status. So, they started claiming that we too belong to a ritual, a ritually higher position and then started adopting. So, most of the time this mobility in the upper caste, the class position is often accompanied by a claim in the higher position in the ritual hierarchy. Sanskritization is not confined to Hindu caste, but also occurs among the tribal and semi-tribal group.

Bhils of western India, gonds and Oraons of central India etc. So, Srinivas has seen or there are not Srinivas, there are lot of other anthropological works which have recorded

or reported that this process is also seen among tribals and semi-tribals. The ages of Sanskritization were not always Brahmin's, but also other dominant caste, Lingayat of Karnataka which I have already mentioned. As I told, Brahmins were never seen as a worthy model because Brahmins are not really known for their valor or physical strength or aggression or their masculinity. Brahmins are not known for being good fighters, they are known to be more for their intellectual abilities and then scholarship and other things. So, imitating a Brahmin group was not seen as desirable among lower caste.

It was seen as more effeminate, not good enough, not courageous enough, not masculine enough. So, Brahmins were not the preferred models in many places. Then he also introduces concept of Westernization. It refers to the changes that has happened in the Indian society and culture due to the prolonged contact with the British raj.

Specifically, he talks about these 150 years of British rule. Sanskritization and Westernization are linked process. Sometimes they have complementary relations, sometimes contradictory. So, it is a very interesting, Srinivas has some very interesting analysis about the social change during the colonial and the post-colonial context. How the exposure to Western society and a combination of Sanskritization helped the mobility of certain caste. So, sometimes they were complementary, certain other times they were not, they were contradictory.

Sanskritization mobility within the framework of caste system, Westernization mobility outside the framework of caste system. As you know, for example, in Westernization, mostly you make use of the opportunities provided by these 150 years of British rule. You move away from your traditional occupation, you get secular education, then you get employment and then you embark on an upward mobility of caste. The concept subsumes the changes occurred at different levels in technology, institutions, knowledge, beliefs, and values.

As you know, the impact of this 150 years of British rule is quite expansive. Then origin can be dated back to the period of British Raj. Along with exploitation of the Indian society, British Raj brought some radical changes in the Indian society and culture. The land survey and revenue settlement, establishment of new bureaucracy, army, police and courts of law, development of communication, railway, post, and telegraph, established educational institution. I do not need to elaborate all these things; you already are familiar with that. It made possible the transmission of modern as well as traditional knowledge to large number of people, knowledge which could no longer be the privilege of the few hereditary group.

And again, you know the kind of a revolutionary transformation brought in by the British

rule in India is the secularization of education. The introduction of secular education and democratization of education. They opened school and, in these schools, it was not the religious, textual religious knowledge that was imparted, it was secular education that was imparted, science, languages and then social sciences where anybody, any child could be enrolled and that was something a revolutionary step. And if you are familiar with the local history of your region, you will know how that every lower, the so-called lower caste had to fight in the 19th and 20th century in order to enroll their children into these educational institutions. So, now we are coming to the latter part of this essay, where we try to understand what were the major criticisms levelled against Srinivas.

One is that Srinivas could never free himself from the legacy of colonial ethnography because he, what he did, you know going to village and then studying, staying there for a prolonged period of time and then coming back, it is a typical continuity of the British ethnography which he could not escape. Then methodological ambiguities in Srinivas work as an outcome of the adjustment of the structural functional approach with colonial modernity when it examined the inter-linkages of caste and village and clear whether he is studying the system of caste or village. Again, lot of people have spoken about his lack of clarity on these two distinctly different phenomena, caste, and village because he used the ethnographic framework to go to a village and then study, but of course the whole thing of caste also came into picture. This ambiguity leads to the teleological position whereby caste can be understood only in the context of village and village in the context of caste. Sujatha Patel's criticism because whenever you talk about caste, you presume that it takes place or the village is a seat of caste and in order to understand caste you need to study village, so a kind of a teleological arrangement.

The clutches of structural functionalism constrained Srinivas to see the Indian villages and caste system of reciprocity, cooperation, independence and harmony, (Taramangalam and Chhatukulam 2008) and this is a very well often articulated criticism that just like any structural functionalist who would mostly see or who would see only the equilibrium then the stability and the order of society, Srinivas for Srinivas caste system represented that of reciprocity and then a balance. He did not pay attention or sufficient attention to the extremely inhuman nature of discrimination and then injustice prevalent in the village. And there is a huge amount of Dalit criticism against Srinivas because as he himself mentioned once he went to the village, he started staying in the house of a Brahmin household there and that very much curtailed his perspective. So, his account from the perspective of the lower caste is very very minimal, so that bias is something very glaring.

Largely excluded religious minorities and groups that fall outside the Hindu fold in exploration of Indian social life. Again, a very important thing, he has hardly studied any

non-Hindu groups and as I mentioned his analysis of the lower caste were also very minimal. The central concept Srinivas especially dominant caste is inadequate to understand the changing social realities of rural India. The analytical usefulness of these categories has diminished (Oommen 1970). So, criticism about how these terms have changed for example in Kerala you cannot no longer talk about Nairs as a dominant caste because that there is huge kind of social transformation within that society and Nairs have lost their control over the land and there are very different kind of mobilities have happened in the particular society.

So, how these categories lose significance. So, these are the references used for this class, Caste in Modern India and Srinivas, Social Change in Modern India, University of California. So, I hope these two classes would have given you some general orientation about Srinivas' overall contributions and we will discuss one of his very abridged version of his very famous essay, 'Varna and Caste' in the coming class. Thank you.