

Indian Society: Sociological Perspectives
Dr. Santhosh R
Department of Humanities and Social Sciences
Indian Institute of Technology, Madras
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Sociology of M. N. Srinivas: Varna and Jati

Welcome back to the class. In the previous two classes, we had a detailed discussion on M.N. Srinivas.

In the first class, we looked at his theoretical orientation and in the last class, we looked at the major concepts of theories provided by Srinivas. And in today's class, we are looking at one of his very famous essays, titled Varna and Jati and this is an abridged version of that essay, which is published in this book, Social Stratification by Deepankar, edited by Deepankar Gupta. And there are several reasons why I decided to have a discussion on this particular essay, because it serves as a very important essay to which demonstrates Srinivas' critic of the Indological position. And then it also highlights his very seminal contribution in making this distinction between Varna and Jati and then highlighting how an empirical analysis of a caste is important rather than relying on the Sanskrit sources.

So, today's would be a rather brief class looking into the Varna and Jati. So, as I mentioned, it is an abridged version of Srinivas Varna and Caste, a very important essay. This is actually taken from Varna and Caste, a caste in modern India and other essays by published in 1962. So, an attempt is made in this brief essay to consider the relation between caste as it is in fact, and as is subsumed by the traditional concept of Varna. So he makes it very clear that his intention in this essay is to make a distinction between caste as it is, as it is in the sense as it exists in the real empirical scenario and how it is subsumed under the category of Varna.

The consideration of this relationship is both important and overdue as the concept of Varna has deeply influenced the interpretation and the ethnographic reality of caste. So, as I mentioned, as we discussed in the previous class, Srinivas is a very strong supporter of the field view. And he is a very staunch critic of the book view. Book view is the methodology adopted by scholars, mostly orientalist and then Indologists and the Sanskritists who believed that by reading the ancient scriptures and Sanskrit text, they

will get a deeper understanding about the contemporary Indian society. And the field view on the contrary is a product of modern anthropology and sociology which believes that you need to use your empirical method, going out in the field and then collecting data using your empirical, various empirical research methodology including participant observation data collection and then other forms of interviews.

So that would give you a more accurate, reliable picture about society. So, this distinction is very clear and Srinivas, as I mentioned, is a very strong advocate of field view who adopted ethnographic methods to understand Indian society. Varna has been the model to which observed facts have been fitted and this is true not only of educated Indians but also sociologists to some extent. So, he says that there is a major misunderstanding, the way in which Varna has been understood as the way in caste operate. As I mentioned in the previous class, even the caste is a western category, it is a Portuguese term which originated from the *casta* in Portuguese language, and it was *Jati* that actually is the reality.

Jati is the very specific social group confined in a given geographic and linguistic region. So, the layman is unaware of the complexities of Varna. To him, it means simply the division of Hindu society into four orders, that is Brahmana, Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and the Sudra. That is the Brahmins, the Brahmin tradition, the priest and the scholar, Kshatriya as the ruler and the soldier, then Vaishya the merchant and Sudra the peasant, labourer, and the servant. So, this is the commonsensical understanding about Indian society.

The first three castes are twice born as the men from them are entitled to don the sacred thread at the Vedic rite of Upanayana, something that we mentioned. The first three varnas are seen as the twice born because there is a ritual called as this Upanayana where they ceremoniously wear a sacred thread, and the sacred thread will be there on their person throughout their life. The untouchables are outside this varna scheme. And then the layman's view of Varna is comparatively late view and Varna which literally means colour, originally referred to the distinction between Aryas and Dasas. So, he says that this particular understanding is much, much recent.

Actually in the Vedas it is mentioned as only twofold division between the Arya and Dasas and Varna literally means colours. So, the people of fairer colour and the people of darker complexion is what is mentioned in that. He quotes Ghurye as we already discussed a very important scholar in Sanskrit. So, he states that the Rigvedic distinction between Arya and Dasa gave place to a distinction between Arya and Shudra in later times. In the Rigveda along with the distinction between Arya and Dasa, there is a division of society into three orders, Brahmin, Kshatriya and Vaishya.

So he elaborates that how it was understood in the Vedic times or in the ancient times. Now that is not the focus of our discussion. Our focus is what is that Srinivas has to say something new or what is the revision provided by Srinivas in the understanding of Varna and caste. I shall now describe the features of the caste system implicit in the Varna schemes and then try to see how they differ from or conflict with the system as it actually functions. This is a very important claim as it actually functions.

So I hope it is clear to you that according to Srinivas, the book view or the Sanskrit scriptures tell you a kind of an ideal imaginary ought to be situation whereas he as an anthropologist is able to present the how it actually exists in the empirical scheme. Firstly, according to the Varna scheme, there are only four castes excluding the untouchables and the number is the same every part of India because that is the kind of a commonsensical understanding for Varna, Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra. But an anthropologist who is familiar with or any person who is familiar with the complexities of Indian society knows that this is an oversimplified model. Every linguistic group has hundreds of castes and each of these fourfold division contains hundreds of castes. But even during the Vedic period, there were occupational groups which were not subsumed by Varna even though it is not known whether such groups were caste in the sense sociologists understand them today.

Today in any linguistic area, there are to be found a number of castes. According to Ghurye, each linguistic region there are about 200 caste groups which are further subdivided into 3000 smaller units, each of which is endogamous and constitutes the area of effective social life for the individual. And this is a very staggering number. So, he says that in every linguistic region, you know that Indian subcontinent is divided on the basis of linguistic regions and in every linguistic region, for example, Tamil speaking, Kannada speaking or Marathi speaking regions, in each of these things there are at least 200 caste groups which are further divided into much smaller caste groups which are, which number around 3000. And in reality, these smaller numbers are the one which actually function as the real determinant factors in influencing the everyday activities of these people.

And even as referring only to the broad categories of society, it has its own shortcomings. It has already been seen that the untouchables are outside the scheme. But as a matter of actual fact, they are an integral part of society. Another very important point. This fourfold Varna division does not include untouchables.

But a cursory look at Indian villages tell you that the untouchables are an integral part of the village economy, village social life. Of course, they are excluded, they are

discriminated, they are kept out, but they form a very important integral part in the everyday functioning of that village. So, in that sense, in a nutshell, the Varna scheme fails to account for the existence and the relevance of untouchables. Another very important factor, point that Srinivas talks about is the category of Shudras subsumes in fact a vast majority of non-Brahminical caste which have little in common. It may at one end input the rich, powerful and highly Sanskritized groups and other tribe and other tribes whose and at the other tribes who assimilation into Hindu fold is only marginal.

The Shudra category spans such a wide structural and cultural gulf that its sociological utility is very limited. It is a very important point. If you look into the Varna scheme as something like this, there are Brahmins, then there are Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and then Shudras and then there is untouchables here. So, Srinivas argues that in the latter part, he says that in the Indian peninsular region, that is a sub-continental peninsular region comprising of Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Andhra, Maharashtra, Karnataka region, in this region there are hardly any Vaishyas or Kshatriya castes. Mostly you will find the Brahmins and the Shudras.

So in those regions, except the Brahmin caste, who are a tiny majority in terms of the population, Shudra, Varna expands almost all through this region, including the caste who are just below Brahmins, and it goes all the way down till the caste who are just above that of the untouchables. So, this includes almost every service caste, every craftsman, some of the tribal group. So, such a broad category makes this category itself ineffective because somebody who belongs here and somebody who belongs here may not have anything in common, even though they belong to the Shudra caste. I hope you understand. For example, in Karnataka, a Vokkaliga or a Lingayat who occupies this position and a barber or a, you know, a washerman who occupies this position may not have anything much in common.

So in that sense, this category itself loses its analytical edge. It is well known that occasionally Shudra caste after the acquisition of economic and political power, Sanskritized its customs and ways and succeeded in laying claims to Kshatriyas, something that we discussed in the previous class. The classic example of Rajgorns, originally tribe but also successfully claimed to be Kshatriyas after becoming rulers of a tract in central India shows up Varna system classification. So, this, he also says that this Varna system provides you with a very rigid understanding of caste, as if it is a closed system where there is no mobility possible once you are in a caste, that caste will not move kind of thing. So, he says that this historical accounts of Sanskritization tells you that there was some amount of mobility possible, of course very slow, it takes more time, but that was nevertheless possible.

The term Kshatriya, for instance, does not refer to a close ruling group, which always has been there since the time of Vedas. More often it refers to a position attained or claimed by local group whose traditions are luck enabled. So, he gives you examples about how certain groups are conferred these particular titles, which later enable them to claim the Kshatriya status. And there are anthropological historical evidences where the kings could radically alter the caste, the status of different castes. The kings could confer a particular title or a king could punish an entire group by lowering their ritual status or making them abandon their whole place and then move to may be on charges of treason or violence or certain other things.

So all these things were possible. So, in fact, in peninsular India, very important point, there are no genuine Kshatriyas and Vaishyas. In this area, these two categories only refer to the local caste which have claimed to be Kshatriyas and Vaishyas by virtue of their occupation and martial tradition. And the claim is not seriously disputed by others. So that is again very important point.

So in terms of the geographical distribution, you will not find large scale Kshatriya or Vaishyas castes in this peninsular India. And again, keep in mind peninsular India is quite substantive in its, in terms of its geographical width. The Varna model has produced a wrong and distorted image of caste. This is another very important critic of Srinivas. It is necessary for a sociologist to free himself from the hold of the Varna model, if he wishes to understand caste system.

It is hardly necessary to add that this is more difficult for any sociologist than it is for non-Indians. He argues that the position which each caste occupies in the local hierarchy is frequently not clear. It is true, however, that in most areas of the country, the Brahmins are placed at the top and untouchables at the bottom. And most people know who are the Brahmins and who the untouchables. But in southern India, the Lingayats claim equality with, if not superiority with the Brahmin.

And orthodox Lingayat do not eat food cooked or handled by Brahmins. The Lingayats have priests of their own caste who also minister to several non-Brahmin castes. Such a challenge to the ritual superiority of Brahmin is not unknown, though not frequent. The claim of a particular caste to the Brahmin is, however, more often challenged. Food cooked by or handled by Marka Brahmins of Mysore, for instance, is not eaten by most Hindus, not excluding Harijans.

So he says that this Varna scheme, as we talked about this fourfold division caste, it presents a very distorted picture about caste. And the example that he gives about the Lingayats, of course, Lingayats, you know, as a caste that came, as a result of a social

reform movement by Basavanna and others. So, this particular group consider themselves to be superior to Brahmins and do not take food that is prepared by Brahmins. One of the striking features of caste system as it actually exists is the lack of clarity of hierarchy, especially in the middle range. As I mentioned, there is a lot of disputes and lack of consensus about the relative hierarchy in the middle regions.

Each caste tries to prove that it is equal to or a superior caste and a superior to its equal and arrangements are advanced to prove superiority. The vegetarian caste occupy the highest position in the hierarchy and approximation to vegetarianism is adduced as an evidence to higher status. We discussed that. The drinking of liquor, the eating of the domestic pig, which is a scavenger and the sacred cow, all these tend to lower the ritual status of a caste. Similarly, the practice of a degradation, degrading occupations such as butchery or defiling occupations such as cutting hair or making leather sandals tend to lower the ritual rank of a caste.

There is a hierarchy in the diet and occupation, though this varies somewhere from region to region. The caste from which a man accepts a cooked food and drinking water are either equal or superior while the caste from the which it does not are inferior. You know, there are very, we discussed that when we discussed G.H. Ghurye's features of caste system. Similarly, the practice of certain customs such as shaving the heads of widows and the existence of divorce are also criteria of hierarchical rank. So, as I mentioned, many caste which had accorded much greater freedom to their women folk later curtailed this freedom in order to show their similarity with the Brahmin caste. And that included making them to wear a dress, white colored dress or curtailing their freedom to participate in social activities or even prohibiting their prospects of remarriage. So, all and he gives the example of this Smiths or Achari caste in the southern part of India, which occupies a very, very unique position because they claim to be the Vishwakarma Brahmins, they claim to be a to the Brahmin position, but it is often ridiculed and opposed by others. So, what he says in essential or in essence is that the Varna model is really incapable of explaining all these complications involved in this kind of thing, because these contestations are hardly understood or explained within the Varna model.

The Varna model has been the cause of misinterpretation of the realities of caste system. A point that has emerged from the recent field research is that the position of caste in the hierarchy may vary from village to village. It is not only that the hierarchy is nebulous here and there and that castes are mobile over a period of time, but the hierarchy also to some extent local. The Varna scheme offers perfect contrast to this picture, very important and valid criticism that the Varna model is incapable of accounting for the diversities prevalent in the Indian caste system. The Varna scheme is a hierarchy in the

literal sense of the term, because ritual considerations form the basis of differentiation.

So another very central theme which we are going to discuss more elaborately in the coming classes is the preoccupation of the Varna scheme with the ritual purity, ritual status. As you know, this hierarchy keeping brahmins on the top and untouchables at the bottom is an explication of the ritual hierarchy. But Srinivas argues that this ritual hierarchy does not translate itself into other forms of hierarchy in the everyday realities of a society. So, in these examples, as I mentioned in the previous class, he quotes a lot of instances from the Rampura village where he studied extensively to show that the brahmins, though they claim to be ritually superior, were in fact in real life were dependent on the other land-owning caste called as the Vokkaligas in Mysore. Because the Vokkaligas are more politically powerful, they are more economically well off, they are more influential, powerful.

And they are more stronger, they are more, they have all kind of power associated with that. So, in comparison to them, the brahmins, though they have a nominally higher ritual status, were seen as inferior and dependent on them, dependent on them in material terms. So, he gives a lot of examples about how a brahmin, in this, please read through this thing, he talks about how the Brahmin priest of Rampura, he comes to the house of the village head man for advice and then how he treats his mother with a lot of respect. So, all these things, and he also gives an example of how the Vokkaliga boys tried to pull the dhoti of a village brahmin priest of the temple, which is something unimaginable in the usual sense, because we always think that the brahmin priests are always revered, and respected. But here he is an example of the brahmin youth boys trying to tease or trying to insult a brahmin priest and of course goes with impunity.

The member of a higher caste often goes to a rich and powerful member of a lower caste for help and advice. It is clear that in such cases the former is dependent upon the latter. When the member of different castes come together, their mutual positions are determined by the context in which the contact takes place. For example, a ritual context, the priest would occupy the higher position, very important in a temple for example, or at a time of marriage, the priest occupies a higher position, while in a secular context, the head man would occupy the higher position. This way of formulating situation is not satisfactory as behind the particular context lie the permanent positions.

In the example given above, the head man and the mother knew where they are dealing not with an ordinary peasant, but with a brahmin and a priest at that. He normally occupied a position of respect and a priest of the Rama temple; he had a special claim on the head man's help and support. Helping him would result in the acquisition of the punya or the spiritual merit. Helping any poor man confers spiritual merit, but more

merit would accrue when the poor man is also brahmin and a priest. The head man also needs the service of the priest and when any important brahmin friends visited Rampura, he asked the priest to provide food for them.

So you know stories about how the reciprocity work. The Varna scheme has certainly distorted the picture of caste, but it has enabled ordinary men and women to grasp the caste system by providing them with a simple and clear scheme which is applicable to all part of India. So that is what he says as the relevance of caste. Though of course it has simplified and maybe distorted the picture of caste, but it has made it possible for the ordinary people to make sense of this whole thing. Varna has provided common social language which holds good or is thought to be hold good for India as a whole. A sense of familiarity even when it does not rest on facts is conducive to unity.

It is interesting to note that the mobility of caste is frequently stated in Varna terms rather than terms of the local caste situation. This is partly because each caste has a name and a body of customs and traditions which are peculiar to itself and to local area and no other caste would be able to take up its name. You know how the influence of every caste is confined to its local linguistic region. A few individual or families may claim to belong to a locally higher caste, but not a whole caste. Even the former event would be difficult as a connection of these individuals or families would be known to all the area.

So it is an elaboration of these arguments from his thing where he talks about Vokkaligas and Kurbas and others. So, this I just thought of including in the course as a very important essay by Srinivas and you also get a sample to see his writing style and the way in which he makes a very important argument about Varna and caste. And as I mentioned, this essay reflects a lot of important arguments about the methodology, about the importance of empirical work and others. So, we are winding up the discussion on structural functionalism and caste with this class. And the coming class we will discuss Andre Beteilie, another very important Indian sociologist as yet another pioneer in the study of caste. Thank you.