

# The Public Scientist

Sociology was his discipline but his influence went beyond academia and across the world

By DIPANKAR GUPTA

**P**ROFESSOR M.N. Srinivas was a professional sociologist, but his demise will sadden scholars in a number of disciplines. His influence went beyond academia and its cloistered specialisations. In fact, he was one of the very few who enjoyed the stature of a national intellectual in our country.

In the years prior to Independence, sociology and social anthropology in India had benefited enormously from such sterling figures as G.S. Ghurye, D.P. Mukherji, N.K. Bose and Radhakamal Mukherjee. Today, however, their contributions are usually taken as some kind of intellectual pre-history and not as crucial building blocks for ongoing research. This is probably sad, but it means that contemporary sociology and social anthropology in India begins with M.N. Srinivas. Why is this so?

The first reason is that with Srinivas, detailed field-worked monographs became the order of the day. Fieldwork no longer meant moving from village to village, tribe to tribe, but locating oneself in the dense interactive framework of a village (or even an urban vicinage) and observing, preferably as a participant, relations between people in order to add to theoretical knowledge.

It was therefore his monograph demonstrating the strength of field-based research—*Religion and Society among the Coorgs of South India*—that brought Srinivas immediate world recognition. His findings on caste ranking, inter-caste relationships as well as ritual observances began to be stated as social facts, employed and discussed by academics with diverse theoretical preferences. Moving beyond the confines of Indian sociology, his work began to have resonances worldwide. Little wonder he was later honoured as a Fellow of the British Academy.

The other reason for his immense authority over Indian academics today is because he was one of the first truly modern social scientists of our times. His work self-consciously eschewed ideological inclinations, though some do read a preference for the functionalist framework in his earlier works. Even so, it was not nationalism, national pride, the glory of India and sentiments of that order that are discernible in Srinivas' writings. His was a more 'academic' approach, to be judged on that merit. If certain policy prescriptions emerged from such a position, it was after the fact, certainly never before it.

Among his many contributions, it's the conceptualisation of 'Sanskritisation' which is the best known. Srinivas wasn't the first to notice that members of subjugated classes try and better their station by emulating the ways of superior castes better off and more powerful than they. But the unique point he was able to score was that Sanskritisation could now be understood not as a peculiarly Indian obsession but as part of the general theory of social emulation, social mobility and reference group behaviour. Indeed, the way the principles of Sanskritisation have sensitised scholars working in societies different from ours is a tribute to Srinivas' intellectual acumen.

Along with Sanskritisation, Srinivas also enlivened the concept of 'dominant caste'. According to him, a caste was dominant if it was economically well-endowed, not too low according to traditional rankings and had the gift of numbers on its side. The term 'dominant' itself is significant as we aren't talking merely in terms of high and low castes. Instead, the emphasis is on power. Some castes are able to swing everyday social life in their favour, whereas others have little option but to bow to the superior dispensation of the powerful.

So simple that one wonders why they weren't thought of earlier, Srinivas' aptitude and emphasis on fieldwork brought these concepts to light in all their fecundity. Caste ranking was no longer only a matter of ritual status, but also of power and wealth. If true, then with the opening up of the economy, castes whose mobility was limited in the closed village economy could now find ways of improving their conditions should they have access to wealth and political power.

A realisation that paved the way for studies of modernisation in India. It was now clear that the Indian caste system was not so rigid as to disallow ambitions of moving upwards. It is not as if everybody wants to emulate the Brahmin. Ritual ranking by itself is an insufficient incentive. Power and economic status are what eventually tilt the balance. So, it isn't as if Brahmins always provide the template for either

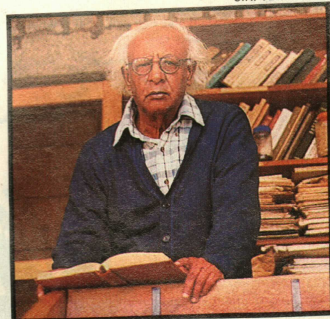
modernisation or upward mobility. Facts that square up nicely with the empirical reality in late 20th century India.

In recent years, Srinivas had been speaking out very forcefully on matters relating to caste reservations and on the controversy regarding whether or not caste be made a category in the Indian census enumeration. Given his understanding of caste ranking and mobility, Srinivas was not at all convinced that just because certain castes figure low in terms of Brahminical ranking, they were deprived and dispossessed. Granting them reservations would derail the whole purpose, with debilitating results for India's modernisation programme.

It needs also to be said that Srinivas was an excellent essayist. Neophytes in the discipline could be eased into the subject through his extremely readable, yet profound essays on varna and jati, on modernisation and caste mobility. His *Social Change in Modern India and other Essays* is an all-time classic that appeals to the novice, the specialist and the lay reader alike. In recent years he's been more forthright in terms of his policy prescriptions regarding the Indian nation-state, and on the direction democratic India is taking. His edited volume, *Caste: Its Twentieth Century Avatar* and his most recent work, *Indian Society Through Personal Writings* reveal this.

In the ultimate analysis, Srinivas' distinction comes from his ability to trust his common sense and hone it to conceptual perfection. Thus he could lift everyday experiences to sublime levels which everybody, Indian or non-Indian, Indianist or non-Indianist could enjoy and profit from. This is why he was one of India's few truly public intellectual figures. ■

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Srinivas: common sense sociologist