M. N. Srinivas: Ace Interpreter of Indian Society

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Abstract

This paper attempts to assess the work of M N Srinivas and the appropriateness of his methodology. The distinction in methodology between idiographic and nomothetic sciences is crucial to any such assessment. Intensive fieldwork and participant observation propagated by Srinivas was appropriate to the idiographic nature of work he carried out. An example of this is his path-breaking study on the religion and society of Coorgs of South India. Social Change in Modern India, a product of his insightful observations of the traditional nature of Indian society based on the trilogy of concepts, Sanskritization, Westernization and secularization, is another example. However, the problematic aspects of Indian society can be analyzed only through propositional or axiomatic models, which are not Srinivas’ forte. Yet, his contribution will have an enduring value for Indian sociology.

M. N. Srinivas was one of the most celebrated Indian sociologists, both at home and abroad. As a senior professional colleague, I had always valued his sage advice and held him in high esteem, and have been greatly stimulated and benefited from his writings. Srinivas claimed to be a social anthropologist and also sociologist. However, when regarded as a sociologist, Srinivas had been an enigma to me until I had to figure out for myself, the real reason, according to me, for his being acclaimed as an outstanding Indian sociologist notwithstanding his undisputed stature as a renowned social anthropologist.

Let me first explain my reason for doubting the credentials of Srinivas as a thoroughbred sociologist. Srinivas defined anthropology, I think, in too restricted a sense, as the study of society other than one’s own. In that sense, a foreigner studying Indian society would be regarded as an anthropologist, whereas an Indian scholar studying the same society becomes a sociologist, the reason being that in order to study a society sociologically a scholar, first of all, should be familiar with the meaning the members of that society attribute to their actions. As compared with the foreign scholar, the native scholar is assumed to be already equipped with such insights. Such a definition of anthropology and sociology is only partially true. But there are others, including myself, who maintain that the major distinction between sociology and anthropology lies, not so much in their subject matter as in their different approaches and methodologies.

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The anthropologists principally employ the method of intensive fieldwork and participant observation for data collection, and holistic and conceptual description for presentation, which was what Srinivas followed. Sociologists, on the other hand, are inclined toward the use of the modern scientific method, which calls for the use of deductive and inductive reasoning, the logic of probability, and appropriate statistical tools and techniques to deal with qualitative and quantitative data. Ideally, the sociologists present their findings in the form of propositional statements. Unlike anthropological studies, sociological studies have to be designed in a manner capable of being replicated by other scholars so that their objectivity and validity can be continually put to test. Thus, anthropology is, by and large, an idiographic science whereas sociology follows the pattern of nomothetic discipline.

There are also basic differences in the type of explanations that are possible in the two types of disciplines. The idiographic model of explanation consists of describing a variety of factors that lie behind a given phenomenon to be explained; whereas the nomothetic model is designed to provide the greatest amount of explanation with the least number of causal variables, and is also aimed at uncovering the general pattern of cause and effect.

Given the models of explanations aimed at in anthropology and sociology, it follows that in anthropology a wide variety of information needs to be collected and the explanation dawns on the researcher even during the process of study, but it has to be concretized at the time of writing the report. It can therefore be recognised that intensive fieldwork and participant observation are techniques of data collection that are well suited for the study of anthropology. On the other hand, in well-designed sociological studies the explanation has to be arrived at before the collection of data, purpose of the data being to verify if the explanation is valid. Therefore, the method of sociology is parsimonious in the collection of data as the data are precisely targeted by formulating beforehand, the variables to be measured. All these procedures of sociological research are spelt out in the complex of research procedures known as survey research methods.

In India, the initiation of teaching programmes in sociology preceded the introduction of training in survey research methods. The research method that was practised and advocated in the department of sociology, Bombay University, where Srinivas received his initial research training, was anthropological fieldwork. When Srinivas continued his research studies at Oxford, his guide there was A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, a well-known social anthropologist, who too favoured the anthropological fieldwork method. In this manner, Srinivas was firmly set in the anthropological fieldwork technique. Therefore, when he started his teaching career in India with an opportunity of shaping the programmes in sociology both at Baroda and Delhi Universities, he spontaneously introduced his research students to the methods he inherited from his teachers.
Oddly enough, the training programmes for research students in survey research methods were first introduced in India mostly in the departments of Economics by American sociologists under the sponsorship of the Ford Foundation, in the 1950s. Later on, when reports of some city surveys began to appear, the established Indian sociologists reviewed them with snide comments (Mukherjee 1978:66). The sociologists, however, were not entirely unjustified, for, unless theory and method are deftly integrated in the design of the study, which was rarely the case, the survey results can be sterile. All the same, training programmes in social science research methodology soon found their entry into departments of sociology in most of the Indian universities including the Department of Sociology of Delhi University headed by Srinivas. However, as for himself and for his own research students, Srinivas strictly adhered to the anthropological fieldwork method. Arguably, it is his phobia for mathematics, which he developed during his early schooling (Srinivas 1996: 2), which discouraged him from acquiring new skills of survey research methods. But it is also possible, as I will show presently, that the particular research method he clung to was admirably suited to the nature of the subject matter that he was investigating.

I have dwelt upon the research methodology of Srinivas in a rather too detailed a fashion, in order to make two important observations which, I hope, will be helpful in evaluating Srinivas’ works as well as the appropriateness of his methodology. First, let me refer to the quality of the knowledge content of his works in general. In this context, I should like to advert to my earlier remarks about the distinction between the methodology and explanatory models in idiographic and in nomothetic sciences. Such a distinction is important to recognise the fact that the properties of knowledge are also influenced by the type of methods and models employed in its production. Srinivas’ works are mostly cast in the idiographic mould. Therefore, in evaluating his contributions one has to exercise caution lest one should put to test idiographic knowledge by nomothetic criteria.

I should like to illustrate my point with a simple example. Srinivas is well known for the theoretical development of the concept of Sanskritization, which has proved seminal to his descriptions of several social-cultural phenomena. However, he has used this concept in different places with different causal implications but without adducing valid evidence for varying his stand. He first used this concept in his book, Religion and Society among the Coorgs of South India. In that study, he describes Sanskritization as a cultural process of social mobility in the caste system, whereby a lower caste can move up in the caste ranking by imitating the ritual way of life of a higher caste. In the causal sense, here he uses Sanskritization as an independent variable. At a subsequent point of time when Srinivas uses the concept in connection with another of his concepts ‘Westernization’, he elaborates ‘Sanskritization’ by treating it as one among the three main axes of power namely
the ritual, the economic and the political, Sanskritization being the ritual dimension. In this context, he employs Sanskritization as an interdependent variable (Srinivas 1962: 45). The concept of Sanskritization is subjected to further elaboration when Srinivas is explaining social change in modern India. Here he tries to correct the impression conveyed by his initial use of the term which leads one to think that Sanskritization automatically results in the achievement of higher status for the group, and now accepts the possibility of Sanskritization also being a dependent variable when the economic and political dimensions become independent variables (Srinivas 1962: 56-57). I have given this illustration not in order to pick holes in Srinivas’ analysis but to demonstrate the inherent limitations of his methodology when verifiable information is called for. The problem of causality can be resolved efficiently only through the nomothetic approach. All the same, Srinivas’ analysis is stimulating and thought provoking, regardless of all the uncertainty about the nature of the causal connections between the variables he is investigating.

My second observation relates to the appropriateness of Srinivas’ methodology to the subject matter he has dealt with. It can be better expressed in Srinivas’ own words. In one of his more recent writings entitled ‘Social Anthropology and Literary Sensibility’, he makes it clear that the nature of the social reality that he was studying defies the distinction between sociology and social anthropology, and so makes the use of fieldwork incumbent upon the scholar. And I quote,

‘I consider sociology and anthropology as fundamentally the same, both concerned with the study and understanding of human societies in space and time. Such a view is particularly relevant in India for it would be irrational to separate the study of tribal societies from that of peasants, and the upper castes, minorities, and the working and middle classes in urban areas. All these groups and categories are an integral part of Indian culture and civilization, and they share certain institutional forms, beliefs, ideas, values, and modes of worship, though it may not always be easy to identify the tribal and near-tribal elements in the culture of the so-called higher groups. But the former are there, and surface during crises in the life of an individual, family or community. Recognition of the existence of several layers in the culture, and of the links between them, is necessary for a proper understanding of Indian culture even though the elite tend to ignore the existence of the “lower layers.”

Further on, he states, ‘While there is need to use statistical methods, and quantify information when necessary, there are vital areas of social life which demand different skills and qualities.’ He amplifies that areas of social life he has in view ‘has strong links with history, in particular, social and economic history and philosophy.’ And it becomes clear from his following statement that the special skills and qualities required for the study are those implied in anthropological fieldwork. I quote his statement: ‘Fortunately, in both social anthropology and
sociology, a tradition of fieldwork has come to be accepted as part of the disciplines...’. Srinivas also has left us in no doubt as to what type of explanations he was seeking in his analyses. ‘Explanation often consists in elucidating the relationship of an institution or complex of institutions, with other institutions or institutional complexes. This is what is meant by placing an institution in the total context of social life and culture’ (Srinivas 1998: 2525-26).

As a sample of Srinivas’ explanation, we may consider his following conclusion about the religion of Coorgs of South India: ‘Coorg religion was a variant of Hinduism, the latter consisting of several levels which I labelled “local”, “regional”, “peninsular”, and “All India”’. (Srinivas 1966: 149). Srinivas was able to arrive at such a conclusion by an intensive field study of the Coorg society and by synthesizing his insights drawn from that study with his knowledge of Indian history, religion, philosophy and civilization as a whole. As he puts it, ‘Actually, the study of a village or a small town or a caste provides a strategic point of entry for the study of Indian society and culture as a whole’ (Srinivas 1966:158). It is from such studies as this that Srinivas has been able to derive some of his theoretical formulations such as Sanskritization and Westernization which are rich in meanings, enabling us to have a grasp of the traditional Indian society and its changing contours.

In this connection it needs to be pointed out that in his theoretical formulations, Srinivas has made use of the structural-functional theoretical framework as developed by Radcliffe-Brown. Unlike other scholars who regard structural functionalism as a theory, Srinivas refers to it as the structural functional method in which ‘theory and data are fused together in an inseparable whole, setting a new trend for the writing of monographs’. He further points out that the structural functional method rendered unfashionable the previous tendency to explain contemporary institutions and ritual by reference to the sacred scriptures of the Hindus, and in its place the new method shows a better way of finding explanations in the inter-relationships of the ongoing system itself (Srinivas and Panini 1973: 201). Therefore, it cannot be gainsaid that fieldwork has served well Srinivas’ analytical purposes.

Having made the aforesaid observations on Srinivas’ methodology, let me now say something about the distinctive contribution of Srinivas to our understanding of Indian society. Here again, it is useful to keep in view the nature of the social reality that he is investigating, the type of social data he is dealing with and the theoretical model in which he has presented his data.

Srinivas regarded himself as an empiricist who did not identify himself with any school of theoretical perspective (Shah 1996: 217). As an empiricist, what Srinivas was doing was to interpret the meaning present in the Indian society of his time, which, although linked with sacred scriptures and historical evidence, could
not be directly deduced from them. He was one of those sociologists who strongly advocated the cultivation of the ‘field view’ of society compared with the earlier popularity of the ‘book view.’

Generally, in collecting information from the field or the current society, the social facts are distinguished in terms of their two different dimensions, one stressed by Durkheim, and the other, by Weber. Durkheim laid stress upon the externality and objectivity or the ‘thing-like’ character of social facts, whereas Weber drew attention to the intentionality of social action. Since Srinivas was especially concerned with the meaning existing in the society, he naturally had to concentrate on the dimension stressed by Weber and this again justifies Srinivas’ strong preference for the method of anthropological fieldwork which pays attention to the subject’s own meaning for his or her behaviour.

The pioneers of Indian sociology did recognise the strong religious base and qualitatively distinct nature of the Indian society, but could not hit upon the right methodology of studying society as conceived by the people themselves. Srinivas got his chance when he went to Oxford where he studied under Radcliffe-Brown. From his guide he learnt both the major technique for the analysis of a religiously pervasive society as well as an appropriate model of organising such data. The language of religion is ritual and Srinivas learnt how to decipher that language from Radcliffe-Brown who had propounded a theory of ritual (Singer 1996: 23).

Srinivas’ path-breaking contribution to Indian sociology, Religion and Society among the Coorgs of South India, came out of his Ph.D. dissertation which he submitted to the Oxford University. In that study, as pointed out by Milton Singer, Srinivas ‘goes considerably beyond Radcliffe-Brown’s redefinition of the “sacred” in terms of “ritual value” and an analysis of rituals and myths in terms of “symbolic action” and “symbolic” thought…. His most original contribution to a theory of ritual is his analysis of the hierarchies of ritual purity and ritual pollution among different castes, occupations and age and sex groups. Srinivas’ linking of this analysis to social strategies that different groups adopted for changing their social and “normal ritual status” by changing their ritual practices and beliefs generated the famous theory of “sanskritisation” and “desanskritisation”, and his later theory of secularization and Westernization’ (Singer 1996: 49–50).

It is well known that traditional Indian civilization was conceived in a sacred world view of the natural as well as the supernatural universes compared with the traditional western civilization in which sacredness is attributed only to the supernatural universe. Srinivas has interpreted the sacred world view of the Indian people by rank-ordering categories of people as well as things according to their degrees of sacredness and in his concept of Sanskritization he brings out the intertwining of religion and society in a virtual inextricable way (e.g., Srinivas 1989: 51–71).
Finally, it is because of his insightful characterization of the nature of traditional Indian society that Srinivas is able to describe with a similar discernment, the qualitative changes that Indian society is undergoing. In his slender volume, *Social Change in Modern India* (Srinivas 1966), he gives a comprehensive yet succinct view of the qualitative changes taking place in the nature of Indian society by deftly using the trilogy of theoretical concepts of Sanskritization, Westernization and secularization. Each concept signifies a system of meanings as well as a process of transformation affecting not merely social consciousness but also culture and social structure.

Through the use of his concept of Sanskritization, Srinivas explains the process of institutionalization of Hinduism, which one may regard as the foundation of traditional Indian civilization. Sanskritization explains how in Hinduism the various exclusive ‘tribe-like’ groups are integrated in a hierarchical order of caste system. In the caste system each group retains its primordial loyalties but the several groups are integrated into a hierarchical moral order on the basis of a pantheistic religious world view, in which religious beliefs and practices of the highest caste are regarded as the superior model. Thus religion and social structure are closely intertwined so much so that Srinivas regards the caste system as the structural basis of Hinduism.

By using the concept of Westernization, Srinivas depicts the fundamental changes brought about in the traditional society as a result of British rule. Westernization implies a new system of meanings linked to the introduction of new technology, institutions, ideology and values, which are at variance with their traditional Indian counterparts. Westernization set in motion a process of secularization that led to de-Sanskritization in which the members of the upper castes who were closer to the British power were the first ones to be affected. It is these westernized Indian elite who became the trailblazers in the accentuation of the process of secularization in Indian society.

Although the process of secularization was set in motion as part of Westernization it became more pronounced and broadbased after Independence and with the declaration of India as a secular state. The concept of secularization has two dimensions, namely, desacralization of society and rationalization of thought and action. Because of the peculiar religious world view of Hinduism, the desacralization process in India is much more complex as compared with the West. Srinivas gives a graphic account of the growing irrelevance of the rules of purity and pollution and of the sacred-ritual elements connected with life-cycle events and group cults, and the corresponding changes in the basic institutions of the traditional Indian society. Such changes, as pointed out by Srinivas, are reflected in the growing tendency to reinterpret the Hindu religion itself in a more puritanical fashion by dismissing the now desacralized elements as being extrinsic to Hinduism.

I have referred to some of the significant features of Srinivas’ works so as to highlight the kind of knowledge he has generated, which relates to the basic
character of Indian society and culture. It enables us, for example, to compare Indian society with other societies, say, European or Japanese; or to compare the emerging modern Indian society with its pre-modern counterpart. This in itself is no mean achievement. However, if we were interested in explaining the problematic aspects of the Indian society we would have to develop theoretical knowledge in the form of propositional or axiomatic model, which is not Srinivas’ forte. But even for the building up of such knowledge, Srinivas’ contribution would provide a solid foundation. It is in that sense, I believe, Srinivas’ contribution will have an enduring value for Indian sociology.

References


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