

2nd Sem Hons
CC-4

Ethnographic approaches

M.N. SRINIVAS

2.3.1. Life Sketch of M. N. Srinivas

Mysore Narasimhachar Srinivas (1916–1999) was a world-renowned Indian sociologist. He is mostly known for his work on caste and caste system, social stratification and Sanskritization in southern India. He is also famous for his ideas on the concept of “Dominant Caste”.

Srinivas's essays combine empirical richness and analytical rigor, theoretical sophistication with elegant prose. The mind that conceived them is sharp as well as wide-ranging. The hand that penned them is sensitive to nuance and style.

He was interested in economics, politics, history and literature, but came to those topics and disciplines from his own deep base in sociology and social anthropology. At the same time, Srinivas recognized the difference between sociology and journalism, between scholarship and common sense. His desire was to go beneath the surface of events to explore the structural and historical forces that shaped and reshaped these events. But he also paid attention to communicating the results of his enquiries in accessible prose. And he refused to take recourse to jargon. If he coined new words or terms, he made sure they aided understanding rather than obfuscating it.

2.3.2. Methodological approach of Srinivas

Srinivas was basically interested not to understand the countrymen through the Western books or through sacred books and literature rather was interested to study them from direct observation and his field experiences. So he made an intensive study on the Coorgs. Srinivas studied mostly about the caste and religion to highlight the structural-functional aspects and the dynamics of caste system. According to Srinivas there are basically two ways of understanding our society. Those are: book view and field view.

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Book view is to understand the society from the books and literature available and is otherwise known as Indological approach. But Srinivas has emphasized more on field view, where understanding society from field work is considered as important.

2.3.3. Works & Writings

M.N. Srinivas has written various books and articles based on the field work experiences. His major contribution includes:

- A. Social Change
- B. Religion and Society
- C. Dominant Caste
- D. Sanskritization

The various scholarly writings of Srinivas include

- A. Social change in Modern India (1966)
- B. Religion and Society among Coorgs of South India(1952)
- C. Caste in Modern India and Other Essays(1966)
- D. The Dominant Caste and Other Essays (1987)
- E. India's Villages (1955)
- F. India: Social Structure (1980)

Sanskritization

Srinivas coined the term Sanskritization to reflect the social mobility present in Indian Society. According to M.N. Srinivas "Sanskritization is a process by which a "low" Hindu caste, or tribal or other group, changes its customs, ritual, ideology, and way of life in the direction of a high, and frequently, a "twice" born caste. It is followed by a claim to a higher position in the caste hierarchy than traditionally concealed to the claimant caste by the local community. Such claims are made over a period of time, sometimes a generation or two before they are conceded." In his study of Mysore Village, Srinivas finds that at some time or the other, every caste tries to change its rank in the hierarchy by giving up its attributes and trying to adopt those of castes above them. this process of attempting to change one's rank by giving up attributes that define a caste as low and adopting attributes that are indicative of higher status is called 'Sanskritization'. This process essentially involves a change in one's dietary habits from non- vegetarianism to vegetarianism, and change in one's occupation habits from unclean to clean occupation. The attributes of a caste become the basis of interaction between castes.

Dominant Caste

The concept of dominant caste has been used for the first time in sociological literature by an eminent Indian Sociologist M.N. Srinivas in his essay Social System of a Mysore Village, which was written after his study of village Rampura. The concept occupies a key position in the process of 'Sanskritisation'. The term dominant caste is used to refer to a caste which "wields economic or political power and occupies a fairly high position in the hierarchy." These castes are accorded high status and position in all the fields of social life. The people of other lower castes look at them as their 'reference group' and try to imitate their behavior, ritual pattern, custom and ideology. In this way, the dominant caste of a particular locality plays an important role in the 'process of cultural transmission' in that area. The members of a dominant caste have an upper hand in all the affairs of the locality and enjoy many special opportunities as well as privileges. Srinivas has defined the following six major characteristics of Dominant caste.

- i) Land Ownership
- ii) Numerical Strength
- iii) High place in local hierarchy
- iv) Job in administration and urban sources of income
- v) Political involvement

Religion and Society

Srinivas' work Religion and Society among the Coorgs of South India (1952) led him to formulate the concept of Brahminization to represent the process of the imitation of life-ways and ritual practices of Brahmins by the lower-caste Hindus. The concept was used as an explanatory device to interpret changes observed in the ritual practices and life-ways of the lower castes through intensive and careful field study. The notion of Brahminization, however, had implicit possibilities of further abstraction into a higher level concept, 'Sanskritization'.

Srinivas achieved this through enlarging the meaning of Sanskritization and by distinguishing it from the other concept of Westernization, using both the terms in a systematic manner so as to explain the processes of social change in India. This conceptual scheme, though referring mainly to the processes of cultural imitation, has a built-in structural notion, that of hierarchy an inequality of privilege and power, since the imitation is always by the castes or categories placed lower in social and economic status.

In Religion and Society, Srinivas was concerned with the spread of Hinduism. He talked about "Sanskritic Hinduism" and its values. Related to this was the notion of 'sanskritization' which Srinivas employed "to describe the process of the penetration of Sanskrit values into the remote parts in India. Imitation of the way of life of the topmost, twice-born castes was said to be the principle mechanism by which the lower castes sought to raise their own social status".

Social Change

Change is ever present in the society. It is a reality. Human society also experiences change in

different dimensions in different times. While focusing on change every kind of change is not considered under the concept of Social Change. The basic meaning of Social change is the change in the social structure. The term social change refers to any significant alteration in behavior patterns and cultural values. This type of change may have a lasting effect on a society's culture that has undergone transformation