

## Revisiting the Legacy of M N Srinivas

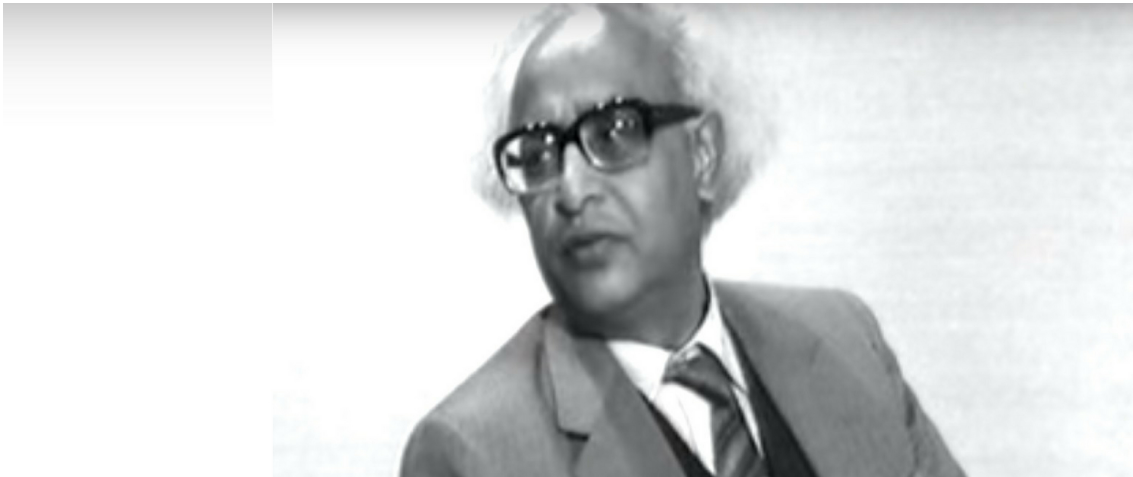
JOSEPH THARAMANGALAM

JOS CHATHUKULAM

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Joseph Tharamangalam (jtharama@icloud.com) is Professor Emeritus, Department of Sociology/Anthropology, Mount Saint Vincent University, Halifax, Canada. Jos Chathukulam (chathukulam@isec.ac.in) holds the Sri Ramakrishna Hegde Chair on Decentralisation and Development, Institute for Social and Economic Change, Bengaluru.

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The sociological imagination is a powerful tool in capturing and understanding social reality. M N Srinivas made a major contribution to establish sociology in newly independent India. The Institute for Social and Economic Change (ISEC) in Bengaluru organised an international seminar on the legacy of Srinivas to commemorate the occasion of his 100th birth anniversary. The ISEC was co-founded by V K R V Rao and Srinivas in 1972. The conference emphasised the need to move beyond his legacy and to re-imagine the sociological imagination for the 21st century and beyond.

As a pioneering architect of Indian Sociology and Anthropology, Srinivas was the founder of three prominent Sociology departments in Baroda, Delhi and Bengaluru, teacher and patron of more than a generation of sociologists and anthropologists and the creator of such widely used concepts as "Sankritisation", "Dominant Caste" and "Vote Banks". The conference

focused on Srinivas's favorite themes of Mobility and Change. It brought together eminent scholars from India and abroad, several of them Srinivas's former colleagues and students.

"Re-visiting" a scholar like Srinivas, now already a legend (even a "fiction" according to the valedictorian Shiv Visvanathan), requires placing him and his legacy in today's context, and asking critical questions about the relevance and significance of his legacy. The conference participants, who included admirers, critics, and some in the middle, rose to the occasion, openly and vigorously discussing the "many Srinivases" and their legacies.

## **Srinivas's Sociological Imagination**

As may be expected, the sociological imagination of Srinivas, his methodology and theoretical perspective, loomed large in the early discussions. Srinivas is renowned to have effected a paradigm change in Indian Sociology in two respects. First, rejecting what he called the "book-view" of society as promoted by indologists, orientalist and others (thus anticipating the later critique of orientalism, etc) he pioneered a "field-view", one that was to be obtained by intense field-work in local communities, most prominently in the Indian "village". The result was the rejection of an essentialised and static view of Indian society as a rigid and inflexible, chaturvarna system, governed by unchanging religious beliefs and laws, a view adopted even by Henry Maine and Karl Marx.

Srinivas's field view showed a dynamic social system (village and caste) that is fluid, resilient and adaptive to changing social forces; his concepts such as of Sankritisation and dominant caste were central to this new understanding. He also effected a paradigm change in another respect by aiming to transcend the dichotomy of two different yet similar social sciences, Sociology and Anthropology. The former was developed by western scholars to study "their" on society, and the latter to study "Other" societies (in effect what they saw as (the now colonised) primitive, homogenous and undifferentiated societies devoid of history), Srinivas collapsed the two into one, adding his own innovations, in order to create "a sociology we want" for India.

But in effect he adapted the approach and the ethnographic method of British Social Anthropology as the most suitable for the study of Indian society. To be fair, it must be added that he did not reject historical and macro-studies, but insisted that micro studies generated by intense fieldwork using the method of participant observation should be the starting point for the latter kind of inquiry if it was to avoid the pitfalls of the book-view and the use of what he termed "conjectural history".

Gopal Guru brought a novel perspective to the discussion by arguing that Srinivas's sociological imagination was rooted in a "root text" of the social and political thought of modern India, especially in those of Ambedkar (a statement, especially the latter part left largely unexplained). To this, Sujata Patel responded by arguing that Srinivas could never free himself from the legacy of colonial ethnography, and asserted that such a legacy "should be completely erased" from the sociological imagination of India.

While Patel's view may represent an interesting standpoint, some other serious shortcomings of Srinivas's "Field -View" were highlighted by other speakers (Tharamangalam). First and foremost, following the line of Patel's argument, it was explained how Srinivas's Sociology suffered from the legacy of the structural functionalism of British Social Anthropology, a quintessentially colonial discipline that constrained Srinivas to look for and see the Indian village (and caste) as a system of reciprocity, cooperation, interdependence and harmony (even mutual empathy and friendship). Even as this super-star fieldworker did not fail to note and document instances of violence deployed to enforce compliance of caste rules, of sheer exploitation and meanness, such violence and force did not become part of his analysis; he does not see a structure of violence, neither physical, nor what Bourdieu calls "symbolic violence" in the way the upper castes owned the definition of the situation and its rules and enforces these on the subalterns.

There is no theory of economic and political power, though these figure prominently in such concepts as Sankritisation and Dominant Caste, concepts used to explain mobility, resilience and adaptation "within the system", especially in its middle ranges. The limitation of his perspective was compounded by Srinivas's "top-down" view, necessitated by his location in the village as guest and neighbor of the "headman" of the dominant caste, with limited and somewhat controlled access to the social world of the Dalits, physically separated by a highway. While Srinivas admitted this shortcoming in many of his writings, the fact remains that his field -view from the top may have failed to capture the social world of the Dalits and their subjectivity "with sensitivity, empathy, and from the perspective of the people", the stated aim of the field -view. We neither hear their voices nor learn how they view the caste system and the material and ideological forces that support the system.

## **Caste and Village Today**

Many presentations drew on recent and ongoing empirical studies exploring economic and political changes, and how these have impacted the structure of caste and the village. This important question, initiated and pioneered by Srinivas himself, was extensively dealt with by several speakers, mostly based on their own ethnographic work. On the economic front, a general finding that has been well established by researchers, and confirmed at the conference, is the increasing concentration of poverty and multiple deprivations at the bottom, especially among Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes SCs and STs. The reasons are complex, landlessness combined with jobless growth, decline of jajmani relations in favour of a growing free market for labour, increasing availability of migrant and footloose labour and so on.

Behind this has been a model of development that neglected agriculture (except in the Green belt during the Green Revolution period), neglected primary education and health care, and from the perspective of the theme of the seminar, entrenched caste-based exclusion. What may be surprising is that the gap has increased even in educational achievements and educated and skill-based employment due to such factors as unequal

access to elite and professional education (exacerbated by increasing privatisation with the advent of neoliberalism) , and, of course caste-based discrimination at all levels, in particular in the most important private sector (K P Kannan, S Madheswaran). Nevertheless, some new economic forces may be bringing about radical changes in the caste structure, even decline of some dominant castes following decline of their economic status (V Anil Kumar).

A somewhat different picture emerges when examining the impact of democratic politics, especially at the village level. In rural Karnataka where the decentralised and democratic planning exercise by the Panchayati Raj Institutions has been relatively more advanced, there is increasing contestation and Dalit assertion, leading also to realignment of caste forces, even fragmentation within castes. There is increasing access to benefits from such rights-based programmes as the MGNREGA despite low awareness of their entitlements (Kripa Ananthpur, R Siva Prasad).

Dalit assertion and the refusal to accept caste rules have led to increasing violence (“atrocities against Dalits” and the law against it). However, as James Manor argued drawing on years of research across Karnataka, the dominant castes have been showing increasing willingness to negotiate to prevent such violence, not because of any change of heart on their part, but because of a “change of mind”, of rational calculation to minimise opportunity costs. Even as the incidents of violence has increased, those of “accommodation” and ‘stalemate” has outnumber such incidents of violence.

John Moolakkattu and Jos Chathukulam examined the interface between caste and class and argued that Srinivas had finally moved away from his sankritisation days and came to appreciate the importance of a class approach (property relations) to social change, particularly in the urban areas. Sobin George highlighted the dilemma sociologists face when multiple Dalit perspectives (many narratives) emerge from the micro level (one village) and argued that it is the situation in which a person encounters caste that gives meaning to caste relations. Valerian Rodrigues felt that the vaunted Human Development Index (HDI) is inapplicable for groups like the Dalits since it fails to factor in self-respect and dignity, which are so crucial in the emancipation of such groups. G K Karanth warned that sociology and social anthropology are increasingly becoming dependent on secondary data, the web, rather than Srinivas’s field-view.

D. Rajasekhar described the caste-wise and region-wise differences in awareness on and access to social security benefits in Karnataka. Sujit Kumar chronicled how neoliberal industrial strategies like outsourcing in the coal sector have impacted on the livelihood of workers in places like Dhanbad. Janaki Abraham argued in the context of the Sree Narayana Guru movement in Kerala that what is often described as imitation or mimicry of upper caste practices is actually a kind of political appropriation. Tanweer Fazal examined the Pasmanda movement within the Muslim community in Bihar and Maharashtra in a comparative perspective to demonstrate the connections between caste, religion and class

in that movement. Marchang Reimeingam, drawing on the experience of Manipur, talked about how the means of livelihood of STs in Northeast India have changed from subsistence-based agriculture to a diversified modern market oriented economy. There was also an off-theme presentation of a technical nature on the role of road infrastructure and air pollution in the recent suburbanisation of India's cities by Matthew J. Holian and Kala Sridhar.

A new sociological imagination is needed to capture the totality of the social world of the village and beyond, the rapidly changing relationship between caste and class (and power), and especially of the subjective experiences and perspectives of the subalterns that did not figure adequately in Srinivas's field-view. Srinivas's former students and colleagues (including the first author of this paper) are almost unanimous in asserting that their Guru par excellence would have been only too happy to see his legacy being revised and taken forward to engage with a rapidly changing India.

**Image-Credit/Misc:**

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