VILLAGES AND THEIR CONTRADICTIONS

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Notwithstanding the decline of 'village studies'[1] since the 1980s, nocritical history of Indian sociology is possible without serious engage- ment with the distinctive tradition of scholarship that it inaugurated. Its varying theoretical impulses, methodological approaches, and substan- tive emphases turned out to be constitutive of the identity of sociology in India. Without positing it as a homogeneous research tradition, in this essay is presented a retrospective assessment of an exemplar of this tradition, M.N. Srinivas. The intention here is not to attempt an exhaustive review of village studies, and much less a comprehensive appraisal of Srinivas's contributions. Village studies, to be sure, were meant not simply to add to the empirical corpus of knowledge about the Indian village, but also to further a distinctive understanding of Indian society and culture. Given this larger ambition of village studies, it is imperative to historicise its growth in relation to the larger narrative of the development of Indian sociology.

The delimitation of the scope of the instant essay does not, however, make the review of *The Remembered Village** any easier. First, there is an abundance of scholarly discussion following the original publication of the book in 1976 (see, for instance, *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 1978). Second, social/cultural anthropology has been characterised by much epistemological angst since the time when one could celebrate the famous statement of A.R. Radcliffe-Brown that 'social structure was as real as a seashell' (cited in Panourgia 2002: 422). True, its new edition in 2012, as a timeless classic of sociology and anthropology under the *Oxford India Perennials* series, adds to the aura of the book as a vantage well before the 'interpretive turn' in the discipline. Yet, in hindsight, it is only appropriate to place it amidst the current concerns of reflexivity and the attendant methodological demands placed on the contemporary practitioners of the discipline. One senses this burden when André Béteille avers, 'For Srinivas, studying society and writing about the study of society were not two distinct and separate activities. His writings are in that sense exercises in reflexivity, although he himself might have dismissed that phrase as pretentious (2012: xix).

In any case, we live in times of humbler epistemological claims, and are surrounded by the morally burdened situated observers, who, in turn, are torn by deep-seated scepticism of the conventional notions of scientific truth. Naturally, the present generation of scholars finds it difficult to repose confidence in the empiricism of the discipline as Srinivas did. Indeed, reading Srinivas is not about the debate surrounding 'a natural science of society' alone. Given his iconic place in Indian sociology, it is well-nigh impossible to read his work as an individual standalone piece of scholarship. Of necessity, his writings get read in synchronisation with his distinctive vision of Indian sociology, and the general politics of knowledge production about Indian society and culture. And, his particular blueprint of the disciplinary knowledge has attracted much criticism from the subsequent generation of scholars (Patel 1998, 2005; Deshpande 2007; Oommen 2008). The general refrain is that the Srinivasian brand of sociology precluded the possibility of other (probably more promising ways) of doing sociology in India. Moreover, he has been charged with political conservatism for having accorded the pride of place to Brahmanical Hinduism in his rendering of Indian social structure. Besides, Srinivas's reputation as a 'structural-functionalist' has opened him up to searching critique from radical intellectuals. One wonders if Béteille's following defence in his introduction to the present volume accomplishes a change in general perception:

But he was not the kind of scholar who valued order and stability so much that he kept his eyes away from disorder and change. In his lifetime, young radicals took pleasure in labelling him as a 'structural-functionalist' and a conservative. Srinivas was allergic to 'isms' and I believe that it was rather a jaundiced view of the vocation of sociology that led young radicals in India to label him as a 'structural-functionalist' (2012: xix).

In fact, Béteille's introduction to the second edition takes pains to rescue Srinivas from being dubbed a 'structural-functionalist'. Béteille writes, 'Radcliffe-Brown was a "structural-functionalist"; I do not believe that the label fits very well with either M.N. Srinivas or E.E. Evans-Pritchard' (*ibid.*: xv). Furthermore, he asserts, '[N]o matter how much he might owe to the influence of Radcliffe-Brown, Evans- Pritchard, Fortes and

Gluckman, he knew that his intellectual quest was different from theirs' (*ibid.*: xix). A careful re-reading of *The Remem- bered Village* does offer us an opportunity to re-assess Srinivas and his sociology independently of the labels we have been accustomed to assigning him and his work. What strikes one are the two epigraphs, excerpted from Marcel Mauss and Claude Lévi-Strauss respectively, with which the volume opens. One needs to dwell on them as it comes from a 'structural-functionalist'!:

'The anthropologist has to be also a novelist able to evoke the life of a whole society' [Mauss] and 'When we say that a social fact is total it does not mean only that everything which is observed is part of the observation; but also, and mostly, that in a science where the observer is of the same nature as his object, the observer is himself a part of his observation' [Lévi-Strauss] (p. vi).[2]

Not only does *The Remembered Village* exemplify what Sol Tax writes in his foreword, 'a good ethnography must necessarily be a high art' (2012: xxiv), but it also anticipates subsequent debates about the nature of anthropological knowledge in all its subtlety (see also Joshi 1978).

Srinivas's Rampura: Construals and Misconstruals

Whatever be the sources of Srinivas's methodological inspiration, he succeeded in offering the students of Indian society a field of her/his own: Rampura became our own Trobriand Island, the Nuerland, Navaho country, and Tepoztlan. And, the guiding spirit to enter the field was not markedly different from what led British social anthropologists to far-off exotic places: to capture for posterity the fast-disappearing cultures. Srinivas explicitly states his objective: 'to present an account of traditional social life and culture' (p. 32). This sense of urgency to do so was not unique to him; it informed many other anthropologists of his generation as well. He writes, '…conditions were changing so rapidly that if the information was not collected immediately, it would be lost forever (p. 33). In a way, the stated focus 'on the understanding of village structure and social relations' (p. 54) has the subtext of doing it before the forces of change alter them in unforeseen ways.

Given the extensive familiarity that Srinivas's work commands, there is no need to dwell

on his substantive insights on the village social structure. His assertion, that 'landownership and wealth were occasionally able to mitigate if not overcome the effects of birth in a ritually low caste' (p. 125,) has informed many studies of caste mobility. His findings on 'a certain amount of overlap between the twin hierarchies of caste and land' (p.187) have animated subsequent research on social stratification. His nuanced distinction between caste and *varna* has become part of sociological common sense: 'In striking contrast to the kind of hierarchy conceptualized in Varna, uncertainty as to relative rank characterized the hierarchy as it operated at the grassroots level' (p. 193). We know too well that 'the hierarchy had its strictly local features' and, 'thus it was not surprising to find occasionally the respective ranks of the local sections of a single jati varying in different villages' (*ibid.*). His subtle understanding of the uncertainty and contestation over mutual rank made us appreciate the possibility of mobility in the caste system. Students of Indian society were forcefully made aware of 'the chasm between claimed and conceded status' (p. 195) in the caste system. At the same time, Srinivas was hardly oblivious of the power of land-ownership in the local stratification system. He notes, 'for an agricul- turalist, there was no greater tragedy than loss of land. It meant the loss of security, status, and even membership of the village community' (pp. 131–32).

Quoting Richard Burghart, Veena Das (2006: 199) notes the construction of Srinivasian anthropology in active avoidance of the Brahmanical traditions of knowledge. The minuteness and comprehen- siveness of empirical details in the present volume are a testimony to Srinivas's commitment to the field view. Srinivas observes, The articulated criteria of ranking were usually ritual, religious or moral resulting in concealing the importance of secular criteria. The influence of the latter was, however, real. For instance, while landownership and numerical strength were crucial in improving caste rank, any claim to high rank had to be expressed in ritual and symbolic terms. But at any given moment there were inconsistencies between secular position and ritual rank(p. 196).

Very often, Srinivas's limpid prose conceals the depth of analysis of particulars. Before moving on to the larger issue of reflexivity, it is apt to quote the following:

At the source of the emulation, however, were such factors as the acquisition of wealth, especially landed wealth, and political power. Traditionally, improvement in the secular

status of a caste group was followed by an attempt to claim a higher rank for it in the local hierarchy. This meant, among other things, the Sanskritizing of its customs, ritual and lifestyle. *The Sanskritization of a caste's lifestyle was both essential for its upward mobility and, contrary as it may seem, a symbol of its high rank* (p.203: italics mine).

Contrary to the general perception, Srinivas never claimed an all- encompassing view of an Indian village for himself. In the particular case of Rampura, he admits, 'I realize only too clearly that mine was a high caste view of village society' (p. 219). Further, 'Though I knew several Muslims and Harijans well, I did not know these two sections of village society as intimately as I wanted to. I would have obtained a new angle on the village if I had spent more time in their areas (p. 56). If awareness of one's location as a researcher is a cardinal feature of reflexivity, we do not find it wanting in Srinivas in *The Remembered Village*. He appears to be equally aware of the politics of the making of an ethnographic text. For him, communicating 'the "feel" of social relationships in the community studied' (p. 58) is hardly an innocuous intellectual enterprise. The expectations of the professional peers, one's training in the anthropological craft, and the economy of presentation all go into the making of an ethnographic text. The anthropologist's relationship with the community is just a strategic resource to construct the holistic narrative of the community to further her/his knowledge. Such an aware- ness hardly eludes Srinivas. Nor is there an absence of 'the crucial role played by the state in a long-range view of changes in the village' (p. 280). He writes, 'in 1948, it still retained enough continuity with the past while the potential was building up for radical change' (p. 257). However, 'when I was doing fieldwork, I concentrated my attention on reconstructing the traditional social structure which made me less sensitive to the factors making for change (p. 272).

In a recent assessment of S.C. Dube's village monographs, Saurabh Dube (2010) does not find the terms history, change, and transformation absent; they are just muted. Moreover, these monographs do project villagers 'as subjects moulding the present, rather than as mere vectors and victims of timeless tradition' (*ibid.*: 36). The same is equally true for Srinivas. The protagonists inhabiting the pages of *The Remembered Village* are anything but passive. Besides, we need to revisit the hitherto existing critique of the ethnographic present in which these village monographs get constructed. The charge of the denial of temporal co- evalness

between the anthropologist and the anthropological object in the context of village studies overlooks the fact that there are 'questions of simultaneous, contrary constructions within ethnography, entailing time- less objects of anthropological assumption that were also coeval subjects in the time-space of the nation' (*ibid.*). After all, anthropological practices in the academic context of a new nation have not been the mere replica of the same in the metropolitan context. By characterising Srinivas as a mere structural-functionalist *a la* Radcliffe-Brown we lose sight of the ways in which metropolitan theories come to be appropriated and translated by the practitioners of the discipline in contexts imbued with nationalism and the prospects of nation-building.

Rampura and the Indian Village: The Methodological Leap

Rampura's status as a quintessential Indian village compels us to reflect on the issues of method and substance in the study of the village. To be sure, in the first wave of village studies, the village was, more often than not, used as a perspective, a methodology that lights up the study of a variety of other phenomena and processes (Redfield 1955). It was used as a methodological resource to impart a new scope to the understanding of ancient civilisations. For the pioneers, the village studies were meant not to understand India and her changes alone. Instead, it signalled an effort to seek an understanding of a great civilisation and the enormously complex changes it experiences. Questions of method acquired primary importance in this collective endeavour:

What forms of thought for understanding a small community are relevant when the community is an Indian village? What changes in ways to which anthropologists are accustomed when they work in isolated tribal communities are demanded when they work in a village that is part of a larger society, when they study a local culture that is part and cause and product of an ancient civilisation? (Redfield and Singer 1955: xi)

As Robert Redfield and his compatriots were refashioning the methodo- logical tools in their determination to move from 'primitive' societies to 'peasant' civilisations, Srinivas accomplished for Indian sociology the fundamental shift from the *book view* to *field view* (Srinivas 1955a, 1996). Partly, Srinivas's call for the 'field view' was a reaction to the

then fashionable understanding of methodology popularised by the American sociology. The latter had accorded a pride of place to survey research based on opinion polls and questionnaires. Also, Srinivas was responding to the then prevailing trend of Indological research based primarily on textual studies, mostly religious scriptures. These reactions and responses made Srinivas the most forceful champion of the methodology of *fieldwork* in Indian sociology. But, where to do this fieldwork? Obviously, in a bounded, concrete space; a space that can be simultaneously made to appear a microcosm of Indian society. Not surprisingly, Rampura made its grand entry into sociological literature as the much-discussed site of Srinivas's fieldwork, and subsequently as *The Remembered Village*.

Methodologically, the study of the village was looked at as a strategic point of entry for the study of Indian society and culture as a whole. It was seen as productive of much more than knowledge about a single village. To Srinivas (1955c: 88), apart from providing the anthropologist with insights into rural life, it was an attempt to answer a theoretical question. Clearly, the stage was set for the marked transition from the study of 'preliterate communities', that is, tribes, to that of a civilisational society, that is, the village. To the extent that this methodological call was inspired by the British variety of structural-functionalism, Sujata Patel (1998) reads it as a move away from Malinowskian 'culture' to Radcliffe-Brownian 'structure'. In any case, its apparent boundedness as a self-reproducing community made Indian village the pre-eminent locus for ethnographic investigation – a village the anthropologist could enter, stay in, and leave, and later could call her/his own. The village was now firmly ensconced as the master key to open up the analytical treasure of a complex and changing society. Once the methodological supremacy of the 'village studies' was thus esta- blished, sociologists lost no time in riding on this wave: to each, her/his village. In the epilogue to the revised edition of his *Caste, Class, and Power*, Béteille reiterates the then-prevailing ethos, 'By now the novelty has gone out of village studies, but they are still of very great value, both for the training in the craft of anthropology, and for the insights they provide into social processes, social relations, and social institutions' (1996: 232). Spending time in a village for sociological research (even for a year, and at least once in your professional career) not only made one a *pucca* sociologist, but also qualified one to pontificate on the virtues of sociology as an empirical and comparative discipline.

But then, the village was not just a convenient site of ethnographic investigation. For Srinivas, the village is a well-defined structural entity commanding the loyalty of all who live there. Though the villagers are generally affiliated to different castes, there exist numerous counter- vailing bonds which neutralise the divisiveness of caste. First, the physical characteristics of the village themselves impart a strong unifying identity to the village. Most often, the village is a close and isolated cluster of huts surrounded by fields and cut off from othervillages and towns. This makes the village a 'tight little community' in which everyone is known to everyone else. Second, a great deal ofexperience is common to the entire village be it agricultural activities, Hindu festivals, climatic sufferings owing to drought or floods,epidemics such as cholera, plague, or small pox. Third, physical isolation and the commonality of experience give rise to a certain patriotism of the village. The villagers do not get tired of enumerating the virtues of their village; they revel in criticising other neighbouring villages..

Conclusion

The foregoing discussion suggests the need to recalibrate the methodo- logical co-ordinates of the conventional village studies tradition. This tradition has served a crucial disciplinary function by offering us insights into continuing economic disparities, caste relations, and changing powerstructure that characterise contemporary villages. Yet, we cannot ignore new ways of looking at villages where questions of gender and ecology, migration and mobility get foregrounded. More importantly, the village displays the increasing breakdown of old structures of power and authority in social, economic, and ritual terms. Besides, the delinking of land and authority has generated a historic transformation in 'Village India'. Some of these transformations have been manifested in the ways dalits and the extremely marginalised backward castes have utilised democratic political processes in the country to acquire their share of the public resources.

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