

# M.N. Srinivas

Nominated by Prof. David Gellner, Head of the School of Anthropology and Museum Ethnography, University of Oxford



Srinivas: Back row, Right-hand side. From the School of Archaeology and Museum Ethnography archives.

MN Srinivas was the founder of social anthropology in India (which tends to be known in India as 'sociology'). He was born in Mysore into an urbanized but traditional Brahmin family.

His early education was in Mysore, but then, supported by his elder brothers, he went to Bombay, as it was then, and studied under the leading Indian anthropologist, G.S. Ghurye, who had himself studied with Rivers in Cambridge. Srinivas did fieldwork in the mountains of Coorg, southern Karnataka, between 1940 and 1942. This was the basis of a doctorate submitted in 1944 and examined by Raymond Firth.

Disillusioned with the eclectic evolutionism that he had been taught, Srinivas decided to go abroad for a second doctorate. He left India for Oxford in 1945, while the war was still on. Radcliffe-Brown persuaded him to reanalyse his Coorg material in a structural-functionalist framework, which he found liberating and exciting. He received his Oxford DPhil in 1947, by which time Evans-Pritchard had replaced Radcliffe-Brown. Both men thought very highly of Srinivas and Evans-Pritchard created a lectureship in 'Indian sociology' for him, while generously allowing him to spend the first year of it doing fieldwork in the village he called Rampura, just outside Mysore.

Srinivas taught in Oxford for 2.5 years from January 1949 to June 1951, when he returned to India to take up a professorship of sociology in Baroda. After eight years there he took up another new chair in Delhi. Following thirteen years in Delhi he returned to south India to set up the Institute for Social and Economic Change (ISEC) in Bangalore. In 1992 he shifted to the National Institute of Advanced Study (NIAS), also in Bangalore. Through his institution-building, his students, his research, and his publications MN Srinivas was enormously influential. His concepts of Sanskritization, dominant caste, and vote bank (the latter invoked by journalists in India on a daily basis, without any knowledge of its provenance) have entered the everyday language of analysts of Indian society.

Srinivas's Oxford doctorate was published as *Religion and Society among the Coorgs* in 1952 and was immediately recognized as a classic. A planned monograph on Rampura was long deferred, due to the exigencies of teaching and administration. Finally, in 1970, Srinivas received a year-long fellowship at Stanford where he planned to write the book. In a fire started by Vietnam war protestors, all three copies of his fieldnotes were burned. His initial reaction was to give up the attempt to write the book, but, urged on by Sol Tax, he was persuaded to write it from memory. The result was the even more classic, *The Remembered Village*, loved by generations of Indians, even those who read no other anthropology. It shares with RK Narayan—a childhood friend of Srinivas's—clear and limpid English prose, but with, in addition, the anthropologist's attention to caste, class, and gender, to provide an unrivalled portrait of the lives and passions of an Indian village 70 years ago, just after India's independence.

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