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AN INTERVIEW WITH M.N. SRINIVAS

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Professor M.N. Srinivas is widely acknowledged as pre-eminent among the founding fathers of modern social anthropology and sociology in India. Born in 1916 in a traditional Brahman family in the south Indian city of Mysore, Srinivas graduated from Mysore University in 1936. At Bombay University, he studied sociology under G.S. Ghurye, the leading Indian sociologist of his day, and completed his PhD thesis on the martial caste group of Coorgs in 1944. In 1945, he went to Oxford where, under the supervision of A.R. Radcliffe-Brown and E.E. Evans-Pritchard, he reanalysed his Coorg material for his DPhil thesis, subsequently revised for publication as *Religion and Society among the Coorgs of South India* (1952a). This pioneering book, quickly acclaimed as a 'functionalist' classic, established Srinivas's scholarly reputation.[1] During 1948, after being appointed to a lectureship in Indian sociology at Oxford, Srinivas carried out fieldwork in Rampura, a village near Mysore, which is the subject of *The Remembered Village* (1976), written largely from memory in Stanford in 1970 after his fieldwork notes were destroyed by fire.

Srinivas returned to India in 1951 as professor of sociology in the M.S. University of Baroda (in Gujarat) and in 1959, he took up the newly-established chair of sociology at the Delhi School of Economics. In the words of André Béteille, who joined the Delhi department in its first year:

> Srinivas's reputation and the reputation of the Delhi School of Economics attracted a succession of very able and dedicated students from all parts of the country and from overseas. The place became a hive of intellectual activity, and the weekly

> research seminars over which Srinivas presided were among the best I have attended anywhere in the world. (Béteille 1996: 239)

However this department is judged today – as a world-class department that is still the best in India, or one that is decaying along with its buildings – few among even its severest critics would dispute Srinivas's success in creating a major centre of modern sociology and social anthropology in Delhi. In 1972, Srinivas returned to his home state of Karnataka to take a leading role in another new institution, the Institute of Social and Economic Change in Bangalore. He retired from ISEC in 1979 and later joined the National Institute for Advanced Studies in Bangalore, where he continues to work and write.

Srinivas's long list of publications is of course the basis of his international academic reputation, especially among anthropologists.[2] His theses on 'Sanskritisation', the 'dominant caste', and 'vertical' (inter-caste) and 'horizontal' (intra-caste) solidarities have been especially influential. To the Indian public, for forty years, he has also been well-known as a perceptive commentator, particularly about caste in contemporary society and politics.[3] Moreover and not to be overlooked, he has also played a vitally important role in the institutional development of social science within his own country.

Srinivas on his own life and work

M.N. Srinivas's next major project is to write his autobiography. However, he has already published several essays about his own life and work: two particularly describe his education (1996a: ch. 1 [1973]; 1997), two more are about Baroda

(1996a: ch. 2 [1981]) and Delhi (1995), and there are also reflections on Stanford and other tribulations (1978: 128-36). A useful biographical essay by A.M. Shah (1996) has appeared as well. In 1988, André Béteille interviewed Srinivas in New Delhi in two separate sessions, and the draft text of those interviews, written up immediately afterwards but never published, has been made available to me. On 21 December 1998, I interviewed Srinivas in Bangalore, but my suitcase containing the tape-recording was stolen on the next day. With great sympathy and patience, Srinivas agreed to re-do the interview on 30 December and the 90-minute tape-recording has been transcribed. My two interviews were not of course identical, but they covered most of the same ground. I particularly wanted to ask Srinivas about various matters which he had not mentioned in print or to Béteille in 1988, but obviously he also talked about things he had described before and when he did so, there were no significant discrepancies with his earlier accounts.

What follows is an edited, shortened version of my interview transcript, which places the material in chronological order and includes some necessary corrections.[4] I retain as much of Srinivas's diction as possible and where necessary for the sense, my own questions (prefaced by 'CF:') are included. I have also included a few extracts from Béteille's interview text.

Mysore and Bombay

Srinivas summarised his early education in his interview with Béteille.

> I started at Mysore which is my home town. There I did an honours degree in social philosophy. It was a very ambitious programme, covering an immense

variety of subjects, which would have daunted any undergraduate student anywhere. But I had some very good teachers, including Professor A.R. Wadia, with whom I maintained an association for many years, and Professor M.H. Krishna, who was a very able teacher of history. From Mysore I moved on to Bombay for my postgraduate studies in 1936. There were several reasons, academic and personal [for moving to Bombay]. Let me dispose of the personal ones first. I was the youngest of four sons. I had lost my father in 1935 when I was still in my teens, and the family circumstances were somewhat straitened. Since I was considered bright, it was hoped that I would take the competitive examinations and enter the provincial civil service. I was terrified by the prospect. I had failed to secure a first in my BA, and I had no desire to face another public examination. Bombay provided a kind of escape. My brothers were generous with their support. Then as well as later they deprived themselves to further my prospects.

CF: Why were you so clear that you wanted to go to Bombay and why had you no interest in Calcutta and its anthropology?[5]

Calcutta was not unattractive, it was outside our horizon. The person [Krishna] who taught social anthropology in Mysore – one of the minor papers in social philosophy was social anthropology – was a professor of history and archaeology, who had attended some lectures of Edvard Westermarck in the London School of Economics. He had also done some anthropology on the side in the hope that it would strengthen his qualifications for a job. He taught Lowie's *Primitive Society* to us in the thirties, which was very advanced, and I don't think any of us studied

the book from end to end, but he told me that the best sociologist in India was Ghurye.[6] By a strange accident, my paper in sociology – we had eight papers for the final exam – went to Ghurye. The questions were unusual and were not from the textbook I had read. In the end, I didn't have even time to read my notes of that wretched book before the exam, and I go there and I see strange questions. I had to suck my answers out of my thumb and luckily for me, by then I had been introduced in a kind of way to Haldane and Dean Inge and Russell and so on. I think I quoted some things from Haldane and probably Russell or Huxley, and Ghurye was a terrible Anglophile. Answers to five questions were mandatory; I'd answered only four. But [afterwards in Bombay] Ghurye told me he gave me 66 per cent; in those days, it was quite high. He said, 'Yours were the best answers', and then he asked me what other papers I had studied for the honours course. It was a very impressive list, believe it or not. He said, 'You don't need to do MA by papers, taking exams, you do it by submitting a thesis'; *Marriage and Family in Mysore* (1942) was the result. That was my introduction to empirical work. Ghurye also insisted that I publish it and got me a grant from the university. The book got a full-page review in *Nature* and it was laudatory. Ghurye was very pleased; he regarded *Nature* with reverence, and a full-page review in *Nature* for a master's thesis by his student was a feather in *his* cap. I was then his research assistant. He asked me to apply for two positions of lectureship which were available and I applied for one. [But I did not get it.] I had no job and no prospect of a job. It was in that condition that I applied to Oxford and to Columbia. Even though the War was on, I got a reply from Oxford and the reply from Columbia came much later. It was Ghurye who recommended Radcliffe-Brown – I don't

think he was familiar with his work – because he [Radcliffe-Brown] was also a student of Rivers.

Oxford[7]

[In Bombay] I found I had come to a dead end with [Ghurye's] Riversian approach and I was looking for something else. It was then that I read Ruth Benedict [*Patterns of Culture*]. I saw that here at least was a design, a pattern, and when I applied to Oxford I did propose the subject of culture patterns among three south Indian groups. I didn't know that R-B [Radcliffe-Brown] was totally opposed to the Benedictian approach, which had an ancestry that was directly opposed to R-B's natural science of society. So we didn't take to each other initially, but then he went away to his Welsh village for the summer holidays [in 1945] taking with him my two volumes of the Coorg thesis. Then he said, 'You write an essay on culture patterns'. That summer I worked very hard and completed a long piece on culture patterns using Kluckhohn and a good deal of American literature. I had a paper ready for him when he came back. He read it and then he said, 'This is all right, you can go on and work on that'. I think once he approved of it, I had a doubt in my mind, partly because I thought I should have a much deeper grounding in psychology to pursue culture patterns; I didn't have that. And secondly, was it the best thing I could do?

I think my shifting to the Coorgs was due to looking for another subject. Then R-B suggested, 'Why don't you study the Coorg material on religion using the structural-functionalist approach?' I got frightened, I thought he was proposing that I go back to the field and collect more data. I told him that it was impossible, I

couldn't have got into the field with wartime travel conditions. So he said, 'No, no, there is plenty of material on ritual in your thesis. All that you have to do is to look at it differently through functionalist eyes.' Probably he asked me to read the *Andaman Islanders* and Fustel de Coulanges [*The Ancient City*]; he laid a great emphasis on Fustel and Durkheim's *Elementary Forms*, [Bateson's] *Naven* and also [Robertson Smith's] *Religion of the Semites*. I read them and started discussing problems in the sociology of religion. I think we started coming closer.

At that time one of my brothers passed away, he was financing me. I had taken some money with me but it was nowhere near adequate. I thought I would return [to India], but there was no way I could return. My eldest brother said, 'No, you go ahead, and I'll sell a bit of the ancestral land and we'll support you, you should not come back.' [Then Srinivas applied for a Carnegie research grant.] I think R-B wrote a strong letter supporting me and I got the grant. Anyway, between October '45 and October '46, I had worked out the structure of the thesis and I discussed in particular the concept of ritual idiom with Radcliffe-Brown. That is when I discussed purity and pollution as providing the framework, and for analysis of the Coorg wedding ritual I went to the *Andaman Islanders*, which was very helpful to me. I discussed with him the linkage of Coorg ritual with the groups, the *okka* [joint family] and the village and so on. By the time E-P [Evans-Pritchard] came [as Srinivas's supervisor after Radcliffe-Brown's retirement], I had worked it out. And when I was discussing Hinduism for the last chapter – the whole idea of 'spread' also I owe to R-B – the ideas of Sanskritisation and Westernisation came up from the material; they were not imposed on it. So the thinking was done and E-P was very good to me, he just okayed my chapters and I did my thesis.[8]

CF: How much influence did E-P have on you and your work?

As far as supervision was concerned, he just let me write and finish; he did not interfere with what I was doing, but he also saw, from his point of view, a problem in my approach. He thought I had put too much faith in the Durkheimian approach and he wanted me to be more sceptical of Durkheim. And he almost pooh-poohed Durkheim in a particular interview which I remember. But that didn't influence me, and this was picked up later around 1949-50 when I went back to Oxford, when I had revised the manuscript and he had recommended the publication of the book to the Clarendon Press, which had accepted it. I showed the manuscript to him before it went to the Press finally, and in a meeting in his house he told me that Godfrey Lienhardt had looked at the manuscript and told him that it was too deterministic, and that it reduced religion to society à la Durkheim; Godfrey did not approve of this and E-P also did not like it. Then he asked me, 'Would you like to revise?' But I was simply fed up with that manuscript, I had worked too long at it, I had written too many drafts, and I could see no way of revising it and making it non-deterministic. So I told him that I had done all that I could do with the material I had; either it went to the Press as it was, or he could throw it into the fire before which he was sitting. I think he saw the predicament I was in and let it go.[9]

But E-P's influence was much more subtle on me and it is not easily visible. In my many conversations with him in the pub and elsewhere, I learnt to appreciate his position, which incidentally was my own in the sense that along with the acceptance of theories I had a deep streak of scepticism towards all theorising,

because I came from the social philosophy stream to sociology. As a student in the honours course [in Mysore], my colleagues in metaphysics were always talking about systems – Hegelian, Kantian and so on, and lots about Shankara's system.[10] I had some scepticism and E-P deeply strengthened that scepticism. This scepticism of E-P's has been missed by his colleagues and even his students.[11] I think his approach was that you accept an idea for its heuristic value and use it and see how far it enables you to explain the phenomena you have encountered; there is no need to make a judgment on its truth-value. This is perfectly acceptable to me. I also saw how careful E-P was as a scholar, and I remember his discussions with Lienhardt over the terms which the Nuer used for God and so on – endless discussions – and the kind of depth he brought into his scholarship was very impressive.

His treatment of me as a person, as an individual, as an equal individual, also made a deep impression on me. E-P was a Catholic, he was an Englishman who was very, very insistent that he was a Welshman, but he was very critical of the British in some senses. He said, 'Chamu, it is easy for me to accept you, you are different. But it is very difficult for me to accept some of these Jewish scholars who try to pass for Englishmen.'[12] My distinctness made it easier for him to deal with me as an equal. So in that way E-P influenced me; E-P influenced my outlook, whereas R-B influenced my approach – I would put it this way.

CF: What about the influence of your fellow students, and Meyer Fortes?

I think Meyer Fortes did influence me as regards kinship. I did attend a course of lectures by him on kinship; it was very useful for me. Max [Gluckman] was a

friend of mine; Max was very warm and particularly generous to me. I had decided to go to India and accept a chair in Baroda, and I took Max to Radhakrishnan.[13] Max was looking around for a professor in comparative religion at Manchester, and Max suddenly told Radhakrishnan that 'If Chamu were available, I would certainly have him along in Manchester.' I think Radhakrishnan was shocked, because he thought of me as a sociologist-anthropologist; to him, scholarship in religion meant Hindu philosophy, scriptures, and so on. Initially, there was some kind of tension between E-P, on the one hand, and Meyer and Max, on the other, and I think this took a certain amount of time to settle down. But after that, Meyer also was very supportive and generous. By and large, I would say, beginning with Radcliffe-Brown and going on to Evans-Pritchard, Meyer Fortes and Max – all of them have been very good to me.

One of my friends was John Peristiany, who was a kind of protégé of Evans-Pritchard and later went back to Cyprus. Godfrey [Lienhardt], Emrys Peters and I were quite close to each other; we used to meet each other often and gossip. Godfrey, as a recently-converted Catholic, used to have fierce religious arguments with all of us, but he was also a very warm human being, and I remember whenever he had an argument with me, the following morning I would receive a gift from him. And in a way Mary Douglas and I were also close, and Franz Steiner as well.[14] I remember with nostalgia my Oxford days. I came back to India and I think, on the whole, it was the right decision for me, but I did leave behind a bunch of friends who were very dear to me.

CF: How important were the seminars at Oxford for you and other students?

They were very important and the Friday seminars were occasions when others could come; they were open and after the seminar people used to go to the pub, the King's Arms, and discuss. E-P made the seminars a little more rigorous in the first few years when I was there; I think he had begun to see that the students should know something about the history of the discipline, so he initiated this series of seminars on important anthropologists. It began with Lienhardt's very critical seminar on Radcliffe-Brown, it was followed by my piece on Maine's *Ancient Law*, and then E-P did a piece on McLennan; Meyer Fortes and Max also did one each. I think the seminars were important and then the pub sessions were also important.

The Friday pub sessions were for everybody, but there were other pub sessions where E-P was to meet his students, or it was an ad hoc group. Sometimes he would even ring me or Godfrey up and say he would be at the White Horse in Headington: 'Would you like to drop in for a drink?' Then we used to discuss everything under the sun and in particular anthropological problems; if there were any philosophical, theological sides to them, they were also discussed. [At another point in the interview, describing the influence of Catholicism on the Oxford anthropologists, Srinivas said: 'I never flaunted my religion, but I came from a religious background; they knew I was a Hindu and a Brahman.'] It was very informal and free and you could express yourself, and you could differ from each other – of course in a very civilised kind of way – but the point is that it was restricted to a few people. I think the wives of some of E-P's colleagues started complaining that it meant a lot of time away from the house and a lot of money being spent. I don't think it was a lot of money because we never drank spirits. Of course, I couldn't drink pint after pint … I mean these people were trained to have

pint after pint; I got easily tipsy, so one and a half was more than enough! But then if Emrys and Godfrey were there, we would go to Emrys's place and have something to eat and discuss. These pub sessions were serious and a lot of discussion was done. Franz Steiner would attend occasionally. So I would say that the Friday seminars were important, but they would be more for the consumption of the public, of the students; usually there would be thirty or forty people there, and only a few would 'perform'.

CF: The Africanists were clearly dominant …

Yes, there is no doubt about it; the Africanists were dominant, and particularly if you did not know something about the Nuer, Azande, Tallensi and other African tribes, you'd be lost in that seminar. Max not only brought in the Bantu, Zulu and others into this equation, he in a way had absorbed Evans-Pritchard very deeply. I don't know how far he had mastered West Africa, Meyer's domain; I do know that E-P had influenced Max considerably. Max would often say 'E-P is the genius' and he was full of admiration for E-P. He did not like leaving Oxford, but E-P persuaded him to go to Manchester to spread the discipline. E-P regarded Max as his protégé, though his Marxism upset him.

I think the African dominance must have affected my work. Dumont [1980: 160] says my 'dominant caste' is taken from 'dominant clan' of African literature. I think the fieldwork depth of the Africanists impressed me – whether you take E-P or Meyer or Max. I mean the depth of fieldwork was very important and I really did want to do a participant-observation study; my Rampura thing was the closest I came to it. So – this goes back to Ghurye – my attention was on the field, and

when I was in Baroda one of our leading economists, K.T. Shah, tried to tell me that I should concentrate on Manu.[15] It was the last thing I wanted to do. We were beginning to witness major changes that would completely change the culture of rural India; my agenda was fieldwork, village studies, tribal studies and so on, to recover … in a sense it was an urgent anthropology project. So in that sense I was very much influenced by the Africanists.

CF: Did you feel you were just a social anthropologist working with other social anthropologists, rather than an Indianist?

I didn't feel an Indianist. But then there was an interest in India. E-P was very keen to extend social anthropology to include non-western civilisations. (He was very anti sociologists studying Britain – that is the other side of it.) Of course he had come into contact with Islam and of course he was a Christian, and he particularly wanted studies of Hindu civilisation, Chinese civilisation and so on. He had a very strong prejudice in favour of classical scholarship. He did feel that we should move with our upper caste, namely the orientalists in Oxford; they had higher status, they were more respected. E-P's own efforts to introduce an anthropology honours course failed because periodically he was told it was 'barbarology'. He was a very Oxford man in the sense that he had all the prejudices and preferences of an Oxford man and a public-school boy – he went to Winchester – and all this influenced his approach. He was certainly at home in Oxford, it was really his place. And he was at home with scholarship, scholarship was a big thing to him.

E-P was also a member of the Faculty of Oriental Languages – I don't know in what capacity, maybe as a specialist on Islam; there was E-P, H.A.R. Gibb [Professor of Arabic], Radhakrishnan and others. E-P liked that; 'You know, Chamu, they finish their business very soon, they don't talk nonsense like others, you are not allowed to smoke, you have to be in a gown, and you finish your business.' E-P was very keen to extend the frontiers of social anthropology in Oxford to include the non-western civilisations, and he wanted India to be there. I think in a way Oxford has contributed [to the study of India], because Dumont did his work in Oxford and he was influenced by E-P; I don't know if he could have done the same work if he had been in Paris. Then Dumont was followed by Pocock and Pocock was also very good.[16] So I think Oxford has contributed to Indian studies in a significant way.

Baroda and Delhi

CF: When you came back to Baroda, you published an article in *Sociological Bulletin* [Srinivas 1952b], which was extremely critical of Indian anthropology.

When did you read it? How does it sound? I have not yet had the courage to go back to it.[17]

CF: It sounds like a polemical and well-argued attack on most of what Indian anthropology was; it reads like a manifesto. Did you have that sort of intention in mind?

Yes, I had that intention. Actually, it's not that I didn't respect Ghurye, but I thought that Ghurye's framework was dead and that a new kind of sociology should emerge placing emphasis on intensive fieldwork, not just the Riversian type of fieldwork, I mean the hit-and-run type. At that time, the prevalent syllabus, in the whole of western India, was the Bombay syllabus and I regarded it as out-of-date. I paid a good deal of attention to devising a syllabus. There I had certain problems. I tried to use MacIver's *Community*, but I found it irrelevant for Indian conditions. I also tried other books, including Homans's *Human Groups*, but I did find I could use Raymond Firth's *Human Types*. I evolved a syllabus – Indian social institutions, general sociology – and I did emphasise the study of African anthropology; I wanted students to study *The Nuer*. At Baroda I started with students whose knowledge of English was not very good, many of them came from villages, and I was also teaching in the home science faculty and the girls were too young and their [intellectual] background was not enough. But I spent a lot of time devising a syllabus and making changes in it – how to bring in African and American material. One of the books I remember was [Whyte's] *Street Corner Society*; I could talk about the whole of American society using that as a text. [Weber's] *The Protestant Ethic* was a basic text and I insisted on the intensive study of at least two monographs. I said Durkheim's *Elementary Forms* must be read from cover to cover, hoping that the teacher will talk generally about Durkheim. And I suddenly discovered Julian Pitt-Rivers had published *People of the Sierra*; I wanted my students to know something about Europe, something about Japan. Like that I worked out a syllabus, and I sent the PhD people out on short trips to explore the region. One of the pieces I wrote [Srinivas 1953] was about prospects of sociological research in Gujarat with a map showing how it was

really terra incognita. For village studies, the actual culture of the people, there was nothing available.

I came to know Nanubhai Amin, an industrialist and my very close friend, because I wanted to see some villages in Gujarat. Nanubhai, though an industrialist, was still interested [in agriculture] and he had a 100-acre farm fifty miles from Baroda. I used to go with him in the early days by train and bullock-cart, and I came to know Gujarat villages. Arvind [A.M.] Shah did a village study; he has been writing on the family [Shah 1973; 1998], and he is about to finish a kind of sociological history of the village. Shah, along with his friend Ramesh Shroff, also wrote on the people who keep genealogies, the Bhats and Barots [Shah and Shroff 1976]. In Gujarat I also got Narayan Sheth, and I talked to Nanubhai whether he would allow him to study his factory as a social system, because I was already planning a foray into urban areas. Nanubhai was very generous and he allowed Narayan Sheth to study his factory, although Sheth was in some ways critical of the set-up in the factory [Sheth 1968]. Then I got my colleague I.P. Desai; he was used to the survey method and he wanted to undertake a study of a town in Saurashtra, Mahuva [Desai 1964]. The point is Baroda became a place for this kind of research. Surendra [Y.V.S.] Nath from Delhi studied the Bhils of Ratanmals; Morris Carstairs visited us, and Adrian Mayer, Freddy Bailey, Dick Rooksby, and also American scholars – Kim Marriott came. David Pocock became a very good friend of my colleague I.P. Desai and he used to stay with I.P. I introduced David to Nanubhai Amin and then David got to know the Patidars; he has written on the Patidars quite sensitively and with scholarship [Pocock 1972; 1973]. So Baroda became a small centre and the University Grants Commission gave us some money, around 1958.

Then V.K.R.V. Rao invited me to Delhi, and I knew that I needed a big metropolitan place in which to work. I thought of Bombay but my relations with Ghurye had deteriorated so much that Ghurye wouldn't have me, and anyway I'm glad I didn't go to Bombay. Delhi was the place where I had freedom. Rao was Vice-Chancellor and B.N. Ganguli was the Director of the School of Economics. Ganguli was an extraordinarily benign person, a scholar, friendly, and very broad-minded, not like a narrow-minded economist. Thanks to Ganguli and Delhi University, I got Arvind Shah who moved to Delhi, and André Béteille, Veena Das and Jit Singh Uberoi, who joined me as Reader in Islamic Sociology, but I don't think he liked it; he took towards his study of Sikhs. We managed to combine sociology with social anthropological approaches, which I think is a positive thing about the department.

CF: You say Ganguli was a generous man, but the economists completely dominated the Delhi School of Economics in those days. How did you get on with and negotiate with all the economists?[18]

[The economics department became a Centre of Advanced Study five years before the sociology department.] Delhi University was then very prominent in the sciences – physics, chemistry, zoology and botany: all four were Centres of Advanced Study – and in economics. I was a bit upset, I thought they would make sociology a Centre. They didn't; we became a Centre only in 1968. When economics became a Centre, they had several professorships. They invited Amartya Sen, Jagdish Bhagwati and I.G. Patel.[19] A little later, Sukhamoy Chakravarti and an econometrician, A.L. Nagar, joined the School. So it was a

very high-profile team. Among the economists, Rao and K.N. Raj were very close to the Planning Commission and politicians. They were interested in policy-making; all the time they talked about equity, disparities in income and rate of growth, and building macro-economic models using mathematics. The economists attracted very good students from Calcutta and other parts of India. But these students, after doing very well at the master's level, either found jobs or went into the I.A.S.,[20] or by and large they went to universities abroad for their PhD. The Delhi School's economics professors did not concentrate on producing their own PhDs, whereas we took students on from MA. I attended innumerable committees to try and secure scholarships for my students to go to the field. André went to Tamil Nadu, I didn't want André to go to Bengal, and Ramaswamy went to Coimbatore to study textile trade unions; Anand Chakravarti, who was a Delhi man, went to Rajasthan to study Rajasthani villages, and B.S. Baviskar went to study sugar co-operatives in Maharashtra. Even M.S.A. Rao, who was in the Ghurye tradition, took up the study of a fringe village in Delhi. There were girls too – one studied volunteer associations, Veena Dua studied the Arya Samaj in Jullundur, and Khadija Gupta studied a small town in Aligarh. So the field tradition became dominant.[21]

I will come back to the economists. Jagdish Bhagwati went away; he didn't fit into this Marxist set. Marxism was the dominant ideology of the economists – Marxism and macro-economics. They laughed at the kind of things we were doing. We were studying kinship, caste, villages, religion, and they looked upon us as backward people.[22] But I think Raj once told me that since I came, it was not only the Delhi School of Economics, but the Delhi School of Economics and Sociology. With the departure of Amartya Sen, Jagdish Bhagwati, Pranab

Bardhan, the star element got greatly reduced, although of course there were still very able people – Nagar, Mrinal Datta Chaudhuri. Now a few people are saying that sociology has stronger roots in Delhi. [But I would not agree.] I would say that somehow the sociology department has continued to pursue its goals. We still should do much, much better than we are doing, but I think it is clearly the best department in the country and probably one of the best in Asia. So I'm very happy with the department and really proud of it, and particularly with the array of students who have made their mark in the discipline.

Sociology and social anthropology in India today

In 1988, Béteille asked Srinivas whether he still believed in the unity of sociology and social anthropology.

Yes, I do. I do not believe that there is any real difference in aim between sociology and social anthropology. At any rate, I do not believe that the distinction has much value as far as the study of Indian society and culture is concerned.

When I look at developments in India during the last thirty years, I do not feel at all discouraged. My own students have worked on all kinds of subjects and branched off in many different directions. They have worked on family, marriage, kinship, religion and ritual which fall squarely within the conventional boundaries of social anthropology. But they have also worked on agrarian structures, social stratification, trade unions, co-operatives, and so on. Moreover, they and their students have done fieldwork in every part of the country and in every type of community, from the tribal hamlet to the urban slum. This may not quite add up to

> a natural science of society, but it is not an unimpressive record. You must also remember that all this has been done mainly within the last thirty to thirty-five years. Very little research was being done in sociology, outside a few places [such as Bombay and Lucknow], in the pre-Independence period.

In 1998, however, while rightly not changing his mind about the record of achievement, Srinivas expressed his fear for the future of field research.

> It is not only my fear. This fear is expressed by members of the faculty in Delhi that people now don't do the kind of fieldwork that they were doing. I think if the Department of Sociology in Delhi loses this tradition of intensive fieldwork, it will be a very big loss for sociology in India. [In other departments, said Srinivas, there were also too few people committed to intensive fieldwork.] Other factors are also coming in; you no longer get funding from the government or the University Grants Commission, but from the foundations, particularly the foreign foundations, which have their own agendas. They are very sharply focused on immediate returns, such as the supply of drinking water to villages in a particular district. I am not saying that this is not important; I think it is extremely important. But funds for research are draining away, not only for the social sciences, but even for science and technology. So what will happen to the social sciences is really very bleak. I think the prospect for the kind of field research anthropologists hope for and want – I think it's in danger of disappearing completely. By temperament, I'm an optimist, but I don't see any way of that tradition coming back. I don't see any future for intensive research, and that's a very sad thing.

As Srinivas and I also briefly discussed, funding is not the sole factor causing a declining commitment to fieldwork. Another significant one is the influence on Indian scholars of contemporary American sociology and anthropology, with their currently fashionable emphases on high theory and cultural studies, rather than empirical research. Moreover, like the economists, a growing number of India's ablest social science teachers and students now go abroad, especially to America. Yet intellectual fashions always change and a new generation – especially, perhaps, overseas Indians searching for their own 'roots' – may rediscover that there is no substitute for ethnographic fieldwork. When he dismissed K.T. Shah's advice to concentrate on Manu, Srinivas was and still is right, but only time will tell whether his pessimism is justified about prospects for the modern intellectual tradition to which he has contributed so much.

Notes

In addition to my special gratitude to M.N. Srinivas and André Béteille, I also thank Tony Good, Mattison Mines and Johnny Parry for useful advice.

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[1] Although inferior in quality to Srinivas's Coorg monograph, Aiyappan's study (1944) of the Iravas, his own low caste in Kerala, was the first functionalist monograph about an Indian community; had it been published in a less obscure series, it might have attracted much more attention. Aiyappan's book was a revised version of his PhD thesis submitted at the LSE in 1937 and supervised by Raymond Firth, who was also the external examiner for Srinivas's Bombay PhD thesis. Firth recalled to me that Aiyappan was one of three Indians studying anthropology at the LSE in the 1930s; the most outstanding of them was P.N. Haksar, who eventually became the powerful secretary to the Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi. Srinivas narrowly escaped becoming an administrator himself after an uncomfortable interview with Haksar, who wanted him to become secretary in the Ministry of Education just before he planned to go to Stanford to write his book about Rampura (Srinivas 1995: 50).

[2] An almost complete bibliography of Srinivas's publications is in Shah, Baviskar and Ramaswamy (1996: 219-26).

[3] From an early and influential collection of essays (Srinivas 1962) to a recent edited volume on caste (Srinivas 1996b), there has been a strong focus on policy and politics, as well as on comparative ethnography.

[4] The penultimate version of the interview text was read by Srinivas and Béteille. Srinivas made a few minor corrections and suggested various clarifications, some of which I have accepted; Béteille noted a few factual errors which have been rectified.

[5] India's first department of anthropology, which specialised in the study of tribal groups, was founded in Calcutta University in 1921. Its early leading figures included L.K. Ananthakrishna Iyer and K.P. Chattopadhyay and, later on, N.K. Bose; D.N. Majumdar, who made Lucknow University a major anthropological centre, was trained in Calcutta.

[6] G.S. Ghurye was trained as a Sanskritist before he became a sociologist. In the 1920s, he studied under W.H.R. Rivers in Cambridge where he was attracted to diffusionism; his paper on 'The ethnic theory of caste' written in Cambridge eventually grew into his influential book *Caste and Race in India* (1932), revised and reprinted several times under various titles. This book eclectically combines social and physical anthropology, history and textual studies, but his eclecticism ranged far wider, so that he wrote prolifically on all manner of topics. Srinivas's period in Bombay and his eventually strained relationship with Ghurye are discussed by him (Srinivas 1996a: 7-12; 1997: 3-8) and by Shah (1996: 201-6), who also cites Ghurye's reflections on Srinivas.

[7] For his own account of Oxford, see Srinivas (1996a: 12-19; 1997: 8-14).

[8] In his interview, Béteille asked Srinivas about the differences between Radcliffe-Brown and Evans-Pritchard:

> Firstly, they were not as sharp in 1946 when E-P took over from R-B, as they came to be later on. Secondly, the differences, sharp as they were, came to be exaggerated somewhat in later years by others both within and outside Oxford. There were several intellectual differences, but there were other aspects as well. … E-P was a practising Roman Catholic. R-B professed to be a rationalist, and

> tended to be somewhat assertive in his arguments against religion. Although I admired both very greatly, I felt closer and more sympathetic to E-P. Of the two, he had the more subtle mind, and an enormous capacity for establishing close personal relations with people of the most diverse kinds. … There were intellectual disagreements at the start and they grew over time. But there was also a strong mutual regard, as least when I first knew them. R-B always held that E-P was the most outstanding anthropologist of his generation; perhaps the only other person for whom he had that kind of respect was Gregory Bateson. E-P in his turn thought and spoke well of R-B. He said to me shortly after we first met that I was lucky to be learning anthropology from one of the best anthropologists in the world. … After the Marett lecture in 1950 [Evans-Pritchard 1950], there was a parting of the ways, intellectually, between E-P and those closest to him on the one side and R-B on the other. [Béteille: Did this not put you in an awkward position since you retained a high regard for R-B despite your very close association with E-P?] It did, but only to some extent. E-P was capable of great generosity with those whom he liked. When my book on the Coorgs was ready for publication, he himself suggested that the foreword should be written by R-B.

On Evans-Pritchard's intellectual and personal differences with Radcliffe-Brown, see also Barnes (1987) and Goody (1995: 77-86).

[9] Evans-Pritchard anonymously reviewed the Coorg book favourably in the *Times Literary Supplement* in 1952 (p. 585); 'he wanted to give me a leg up', Srinivas told me. Evans-Pritchard, reacting to Srinivas's functionalism, commented: 'Perhaps he is

at his best when he ceases to feel that he must write in the language of social anthropology'.

[10] Shankara (8th-9th centuries) was the great philosopher of Hindu monism.

[11] Evans-Pritchard 'with what seemed to some a paradox maintained that only in the Catholic Church could one find freedom of thought, since only those who knew what it was to affirm belief in so much knew what scepticism really could be' (Lienhardt 1974: 303).

[12] Srinivas is addressed as 'Chamu' by his friends. Evans-Pritchard's comment as recalled by Srinivas appears consistent with his ambivalent friendships with Fortes, Gluckman and others, as discussed by Goody (1995: 58-76).

[13] S. Radhakrishnan, the distinguished Hindu philosopher (who later became President of India), was then the Spalding Professor of Eastern Religions and Ethics at Oxford.

[14] Srinivas contributes a memoir (1999) to the recent collection of Steiner's essays.

[15] *The Laws of Manu*, the most famous classical Sanskrit text of Hindu religious law.

[16] Louis Dumont succeeded Srinivas as lecturer in Indian sociology at Oxford before returning to Paris in 1955. David Pocock worked closely with Dumont in Oxford and together they founded the influential journal *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, which began publication in 1957.

[17] Srinivas has previously referred to this article, admitting that it was 'brash, narrow and dogmatic' but defending its argument in the context of its time (1978: 129). The 1978 article is noteworthy because in it Srinivas vigorously defends himself and his work against criticisms he has more usually ignored.

[18] In India, economics has far greater prestige, especially in relation to sociology and anthropology, than it does in Britain or America. That of course is a major reason why many of the best Indian students choose economics and why, among the world's leading economists, so many are Indians. Of the figures mentioned by Srinivas, Amartya Sen (the Nobel laureate for economics in 1998) is now the most famous, but all of them are or were highly distinguished economists. Moreover, especially in the heyday of the Planning Commission, from the mid-1950s to mid-1960s, Delhi's top economists were very close to the centre of political power; K.N. Raj, for example, was told by the Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, in the early 1960s that 'I should feel free to go to him for any help I needed and that, in any case, I should see him at least once a year and report on the progress the School was making' (Raj 1995: 28). Thus in the Delhi School of Economics – unlike the LSE, let alone most other western universities – sociology has always had to sustain its position in relation to the academic and political predominance of economics. For (mostly anecdotal) insights into the relationship between economics and sociology in Delhi, see Kumar and Mookherjee (1995).

[19] I.G. Patel was a visiting professor during one academic year in the 1960s when on leave from the Ministry of Finance, but he never held a permanent post in the university.

[20] Entry into the elite Indian Administrative Service is by public examination.

[21] The research mentioned by Srinivas produced monographs by Béteille (1996 [1965]), Ramaswamy (1977), Chakravarti (1975), Baviskar (1980), Rao (1972), as well as numerous other publications. Articles by several Delhi sociologists, including Dua and Gupta, are in Srinivas, Shah and Ramaswamy (1979). Das (1977), which

began as a thesis supervised by Srinivas, is an exception in being based on textual study.

[22] I.G. Patel confirmed to me that Srinivas correctly recalls how he and his fellow economists looked upon sociologists in those days.

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