

Book Review: The Remembered Village

Blog Admin

First published in 1976, *The Remembered Village* is the first detailed ethnographic village study that narrates in minute detail the day-to-day social relations between members of diverse castes living in a small village community in India, and has been acknowledged as a classic by many ethnographers and anthropologists. For those new to the sociology of India this fascinating book offers an important reminder that everyday caste relations are fluid and dynamic, just as they are carefully regulated and circumscribed, writes **Jamie Cross**.



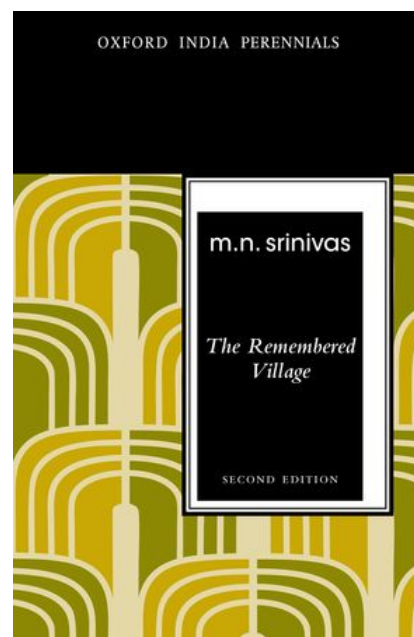
The Remembered Village. Second Edition. M.N. Srinivas. Oxford University Press. March 2013.

Find this book:

'Be bold, stay real' was the slogan of the first Indian non-fiction book festival held earlier this year in Mumbai. Sociologists and social anthropologists were notable by their absence from the festival line-up in which journalists discussed the challenges of writing about contemporary Indian economy and society. Yet non-fiction writing about India is deeply informed by the traditions and methods of the social sciences. In their commitment to field research, their interest in the lived texture of social relationships and their literary realism award winning books like *A Free Man*, by the Indian journalist Aman Sethi, and *Behind the Beautiful Forevers*, by the American journalist Katherine Boo share something with a popular academic monograph written thirty five years ago by a man now credited with establishing the modern sociology of India.

M.N Srinivas's *The Remembered Village*, here re-issued by Oxford University Press, is a sociological monograph of a village in the South Indian state of Karnataka written from memory. Srinivas spent eleven months here in 1948 and continued to visit until 1964. In the late 1960s all three copies of the author's research notes were destroyed in an office fire and, over the next decade, he worked to reconstruct the village from burned fragments and recollections. On its first publication in 1978 the book was celebrated as a modern classic and derided as an intellectual failure. To its champions Srinivas's writing had the qualities of a novel that carried the reader into the South Indian countryside. To its critics, however, the book revealed the inadequacy of structural-functionalist theories of social change, upon whose foundations the work rested.

In 1948 Srinivas was 32 years old and returning to a newly independent India after completing a doctoral thesis in social anthropology at the University of Oxford. He was determined to complete a study of caste relations in village India and to put into practice the principal of 'participant observation' – learning about people by living amongst them – that was key to anthropology's method. In order to best capture India's caste traditions, Srinivas imagined, the anthropologist must put themselves in a place far from the pace of change in cities and centres of government, a place of stasis and continuity with the past. He came closest to what he was looking for in the small multi-caste village of Rampura, near the city of Mysore where he had been born to a Tamil speaking Brahmin family, and just 6km from his father's ancestral home. Srinivas' father had been a civil servant in the Mysore Department of Electricity but – as he explains in the introduction to this book – he wanted to live in a village that remained un-electrified. When he arrived in Rampura he brought with him a cook, 26 pieces of luggage, a kerosene lantern and a special permit permitting him 1 litre of kerosene per month, courtesy of a family connection to a local bureaucrat.



amazon



Mysore market. Credit: [Ben and Debs Blench](#) CC BY-NC-SA 2.0

chapter of the book that introduces the reader to Rampura and to Srinivas' experience of doing fieldwork here remains the most compelling. Over the next 11 months he collects genealogical data, conducts a census, and drinks copious amounts of tea. He gets anxious about collecting fieldwork data and sets bi-weekly targets for himself. He tries not to embarrass people by asking them personal questions too directly but simply tries to keep his eyes and ears open. He plays the clown, inverting ideas about caste status and occupation by pretending to run a shopkeeper's store. His cook makes soup for the villagers and teaches local girls how to prepare delicacies. He tries to form relationships with people across all castes, not entirely successfully, and instead he is gradually absorbed into the fold of the village's high caste community. They treated him, he wrote, like an educated, urbane Tamil Brahmin and as he grows close to them he repeatedly castigates himself on failing to build close ties to communities of Dalits and Muslims who also live in the village.

The remainder of the book is structured like a classic anthropological monograph, with sections on politics, economy and religion. The chapters most likely to be read and reflected upon today are those that attempt to anatomise relationships between castes in a mid-20th century Indian village. For those new to the sociology of India these chapters offer an important reminder that everyday caste relations are fluid and dynamic, just as they are carefully regulated and circumscribed. Here we encounter what Srinivas termed 'Sanskritisation', as lower castes emulate or adopt the ritual practices of those above them in a ritual hierarchy, in order to negotiate their upwards mobility. This term, coined in Srinivas' earlier work, continues to stand as his lasting conceptual contribution to the sociology of India.

Anybody looking for a sophisticated account of change, transformation and development in rural India, however, will be disappointed. Between the 1940s and 1964, by which time he has become the first professor of sociology at the Delhi School of Economics, Srinivas makes repeated visits to Rampura. During this time the village is electrified, it gets a middle school, and new bus services connect it to urban centres. But Srinivas tells us nothing of how access to energy, education or goods and services transforms or reproduces material and symbolic relationships between castes. Instead, as he puts it in the introduction, he set out to write a book about Rampura 'as it was in 1948'. It was this commitment to reconstructing and salvaging the past rather than applying sociology to questions of social and material inequality that saw the book demolished by some of his most vociferous critics. By 1978 his Anglophile commitment to a school of structural functionalism looked increasingly anachronistic as sociologists of India drew energy from the worlds of French structuralism and Marxism. Despite his commitment to an empirical tradition of field-based research Srinivas' remembered village appeared then, as now, impervious to change.

Jamie Cross is a Lecturer in Anthropology and Development at the University of Edinburgh. His current research examines the social and material politics of low carbon energy technologies in contexts of global poverty. A book about the hopes and dreams attached to projects of industrialization in India is due to be published by Pluto Press in early 2014. He tweets at [@jamiejcross](https://twitter.com/jamiejcross). [Read more reviews by Jamie](#).

