Indian Journal of Anthropological Research
Vol. 3, No. 2, December 2024, pp. 391-395
ISSN: 2583-2417 © ARF India. All Right Reserved
URL: www.arfjournals.com

Book Review

The Remembered Village by M.N. Srinivas; Publication Year: 1978; Edition: 1st Edition; Pages: 356; Oxford, Oxford University Press

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A Groundbreaking Ethnographic Account of Rural India

M.N. Srinivas' *The Remembered Village* (1978) is a landmark in Indian anthropology, offering an exclusive, memory-driven ethnographic account of rural life in post-independence India. Written after a fire destroyed his original field notes, the book is a remarkable reconstruction of his research in Rampura—originally Kodagahalli, a village in Karnataka—based purely on recollection. This unusual approach has resulted in a close and immersive portrayal of village life, social structures, and cultural dynamics, making the book a deeply personal and insightful study of a society in transition.

One of the book's strongest aspects is its narrative style. Unlike rigid academic texts, *The Remembered Village* reads like a compelling memoir, drawing readers into the rhythms of rural life. Srinivas' personal narratives, combined with analytical depth and candid reflections, make the book both accessible and intellectually stimulating. However, the book reflects its time—written in the mid-20th century, its perspectives on caste and gender may appear outdated to contemporary readers. Nevertheless, its value lies in its detailed ethnographic insights and its ability to humanise sociological theories.

The Legacy of M.N. Srinivas and His Approach

Srinivas, one of India's most influential sociologists, a student of A R Radcliffe-Brown and Evans Prichard at Oxford made invaluable contributions to the field of social sciences. Reflecting on his return to India from Oxford, he wrote in his essay, *Itineraries of an Indian Social Anthropologist* (1973)[1], "……

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that had I continued at Oxford I could have been a much more rigorous scholar and written more books and papers, but I am also certain that I would have experienced an emotional and spiritual desiccation which would have affected my work as well as my relations with those with whom I came in contact." He believed that human social relations were an essential part of an anthropologist's analysis, and estrangement from one's society and culture has consequences on one's 'perceptions and interpretations' It is this deep connection with his soil and his people that is mirrored in his work moulding the study of Indian society.

He completed his PhD dissertation at the University of Bombay, which was published as *Marriage and Family in Mysore* (1942). He introduced key concepts like "Sanskritisation," in his work *Religion and Society Among the Coorgs of South India* (1952). Among his extensive research works, *The Remembered Village* held special significance for Srinivas, as it was his most personal and ambitious ethnographic study.

His dominance in the field of social sciences can be assessed from what Sociologist André Béteille wrote in his obituary "The passing of M.N. Srinivas marks the end of an era in the life of the social sciences in India" (*Economic & Political Weekly*, January 2000).

A Study of Rural India in Flux

In 1948, at the age of 32, Srinivas reached Kodagahalli (Rampura) just a few days after Mahatma Gandhi's assassination. Kodagahalli village was chosen for its size and diverse caste composition (19 Hindu caste groups and one Muslim group, with a total population of 1,523). It was a relatively "traditional" village, untouched by modernisation, making it an ideal location for his study of caste dynamics, social hierarchy, and power structures. His fluency in Kannada and proximity to his natal village further helped him integrate into the community. Srinivas lived in the village for 11 months, gathering data, and continued revisiting it for shorter durations over the next few years.

Set against the backdrop of India's independence, *The Remembered Village* captures a society in transition, where caste hierarchies, economic structures, and social norms were being renegotiated. Unlike colonial ethnographers, such as John C. Nesfield or Herbert Risley, who documented Indian society in a rigid, taxonomic manner, Srinivas' narrative is deeply human-centred. He combines personal stories with theoretical insights, allowing the reader to experience the village through his eyes. Apart from verifying a few facts from what remained of his diaries, the rest of what we read today is actually 'the

remembered village' in the literal sense of the word. This method makes the book accessible, engaging, and, at times, almost novelistic in its storytelling.

The Remembered Village is divided into three parts. The first section, made up of three chapters, sets the scene. Srinivas explains how he came across Rampura—partly driven by a sentimental curiosity about his roots, as his family, though urbanised, owned paddy fields nearby. But beyond that, the village met most of his research criteria: it was small, had multiple castes, relied on rice farming, and had seen little progress.

The book has been planned into chapters like "How It All Began," "The Field Situation," "Three Important Men," "The Universe of Agriculture," "The Sexes and the Household," "Relations Between Castes," "Classes and Factions," "The Changing Village," "The Quality of Social Relations," "Religion," and "Farewell". It begins by introducing the field setting and key informants, followed by an exploration of agriculture, emphasising the patterns of rural life and their intricate dependencies on land, water, and livestock.

The chapter on caste explores its hierarchical yet fluid nature, showcasing both its rigidity and adaptability through concepts like Sanskritisation. A significant theme in the book is the evolving nature of caste. Kodagahalli was a microcosm of India's caste system, where everyday interactions, economic dependencies, and power struggles were shaped by social stratification. Srinivas observed that while independence had stirred ideas of equality among the youth, their understanding of it was selective. Upper-caste young men embraced notions of equality when it came to education and political rights but continued to expect Dalits to adhere to their traditional caste roles. This contradiction was a key insight into how caste adapted rather than disappeared in the face of modernity.

Family and sex are examined through gender roles, marriage customs, and attitudes toward sexuality, revealing both everyday norms and controversial aspects. The discussion on social change highlights modernisation, electoral politics, and technological shifts, illustrating how villagers selectively adapt. Individual relations are explored through themes of envy, reciprocity, hierarchy, gossip, and humour, seizing the complexities of social interactions. The chapter on religion presents the pragmatic and evolving nature of the village belief system and its role in both devotion and social negotiation. The book ends with a farewell, reflecting on ethnographic challenges and the villagers' resistance to change, leaving a poignant impression of rural life. In this last chapter *Farewell,* as Srinivas prepares to leave the village, he also offers glimpses of those he is leaving behind—their resistance to change and

even of the younger generation. With that, we, like Srinivas, find ourselves on the rough and bumpy road to Mysore, catching "a few brief tantalizing glimpses of the shimmering Kaveri flowing in the distance" (Celarent, 2012; p 1876)[2].

The Role of the Anthropologist: Insider and Outsider

One of the book's most compelling aspects is Srinivas' self-awareness of his position as both an insider and an outsider. As an urban, Oxford-educated Brahmin, he acknowledges the privilege that allows him access to the upper-caste villagers while simultaneously recognising the limitations it imposes on his study. He candidly admits that his research focuses on a "high-caste view" of village society, as his primary interactions were with Peasants and Lingayats, while Dalits and Muslims remained peripheral to his study.

This awareness is evident in his reflections on caste. While Srinivas expresses strong anti-casteist views, his actions reveal underlying contradictions. For instance, despite professing indifference to caste restrictions, he hired a Brahmin cook and largely avoided the Dalit colony. However, his writing does not shy away from these inconsistencies; instead, it highlights the complex realities of caste in everyday life. One particularly striking anecdote involves a conversation with his informant, Kempu, who challenges him on Brahmin arrogance. Srinivas responds by claiming he would eat food cooked by a Dalit, momentarily reversing the power dynamic. However, the lingering question remains whether this claim was ever implemented.

At the same time, Srinivas openly acknowledges his Brahmin background and how it influences every aspect of his work. As an exemplary writer he not only writes about how he observed the villagers but also allows the reader to learn about how villagers studied him. By portraying himself both directly and through the perspectives of three key figures and several others, he adds depth and complexity that is sometimes missing in the more strictly egalitarian approaches of later scholars.

Legacy and Influence

What makes *The Remembered Village* groundbreaking is not just its content but its methodological and stylistic innovations. The book marked a shift in Indian anthropology from colonial studies to indigenous scholarship. Srinivas' reflexive approach—placing himself within the narrative—was ahead of its time, anticipating later trends in ethnographic writing that emphasise the positionality of the researcher.

Additionally, the book played a crucial role in shaping post-independence Indian sociology. Its focus on rural development, caste mobility, and social change influenced subsequent research on Indian villages and the moderniation process. Even today, it remains a foundational text for anyone studying Indian anthropology, rural sociology, or caste dynamics.

In recent years, scholars and visitors returning to Kodagahalli have noted how caste relations have evolved over the six decades since Srinivas' study. While overt caste discrimination has diminished in some respects, caste continues to structure economic and social relationships in subtler ways. This persistence of caste, despite political and social transformations, reinforces the enduring relevance of Srinivas' work.

Conclusion

The Remembered Village is more than an ethnographic study; it is a literary and sociological masterpiece that captures the intricacies of village life with depth, nuance, and honesty. Srinivas' ability to blend narrative and reflections with academic rigour makes this book an essential read for scholars and general readers alike. It offers a window into a rapidly changing India while raising timeless questions about caste, social hierarchy, and the role of the observer in research. Even decades after its publication, the book remains a vital and thought-provoking work, continuing to shape discussions on Indian society and ethnographic practice.

Notes

1. Srinivas, M. N. (1973). Itineraries of an Indian social anthropologist. *International Social Science Journal, 25*(1/2), 129–148.
2. Celarent, B. (2012). The Remembered Village by M. N. Srinivas. *American Journal of Sociology, 117*(6), 1870-1878.