



STRUCTURAL-FUNCTIONALIST, MARXIST AND WEBERIAN PERSPECTIVES ON INDIAN RURAL SOCIETY: READING THE CLASSICAL WORKS OF M.N. SRINIVAS, A.R. DESAI AND ANDRÉ BÉTEILLE

BABU C.T. SUNIL¹ AND M. SANJUNA²

¹Teaches Sociology at Delhi School of Economics, Delhi University, E-mail: sunilbabujnu@gmail.com

²Independent Researcher, Previously taught Sociology in Calicut University and at School of Legal Studies of Kannur University, E-mail: sanjuna@gmail.com

Abstract: This paper critically examines three seminal works—M.N. Srinivas's *The Remembered Village*, A.R. Desai's *Social Background of Indian Nationalism*, and André Béteille's *Caste, Class and Power*—to investigate the theoretical trends in the sociological study of agrarian society in India during the formative period of empirically orientated Indian sociology. These writings were seminal in their respective eras and remain pertinent in modern discourse regarding Indian agrarian systems. The importance of these works is in their methodological and theoretical diversity. These studies exemplify different epistemological perspectives and collectively illustrate the intricate intellectual terrain of postcolonial Indian sociology's development. This study aims to elucidate the diverse methodological approaches that influenced early sociological studies on agrarian India by analysing these canonical texts and to comprehend how these frameworks shaped the discourse on rural society. Furthermore, as Marx, Durkheim (structural functionalist), and Weber are regarded as classical sociologists, these three writings on Indian society assist students in comprehending the application of Marxist, structural-functionalist, and Weberian perspectives within the context of India.

Received : 02 February 2025

Revised : 18 March 2025

Accepted : 05 May 2025

Published : 25 June 2025

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Babu C.T. Sunil & M. Sanjuna (2025). Structural-Functionalist, Marxist and Weberian Perspectives on Indian Rural Society: Reading the Classical Works of M.N. Srinivas, A.R. Desai and Andre Béteille, *Journal of South Asian Research*, 3: 1, pp. 1-20.

Introduction

The sociology of Indian society is both compelling and essential, as it raises a historically significant question: how has Indian sociology engaged with

Indian village/rural/agrarian society? This inquiry holds particular importance because contemporary sociological analyses are deeply rooted in historical trajectories, with many patterns observed in earlier periods continuing to manifest in new forms today. The early sociological tradition in India, led by Indian sociologists and social anthropologists, was primarily concerned with formulating a distinct theoretical, methodological and conceptual approach to studying Indian society. A significant turning point in this intellectual development was marked by the emergence of village studies, which inaugurated a new era in Indian sociology. The agrarian questions were often approached with different perspectives, attributing village studies and ethnographic works to structural functional and Weberian frameworks, and rural studies to historical and Marxist perspectives. The Marxist and structural functional frameworks in India emerged almost simultaneously, roughly in the late 1940s. The 1950s stands out as a landmark moment with the publication of seminal works on village studies such as M.N. Srinivas's (1955) *India's Villages*, S.C. Dube's (1955, 1958) *Indian Village* and *India's Changing Village* and D.N. Majumdar's (1955) *Rural Profile*, M. Marriott's (1955) *Village India*, F. G. Bailey's (1957) *Caste and Economic Frontier: Village in Highland Orissa*, O. Lewis's (1958), *Village Life in Northern India*, and K. Ishwaran's (1966) *Tradition and Economy in Village India*, etc. Though village studies proliferated in 1950s because of Community Development Programme (CDP) of independent India (Taylor, 1956; Bulsara, 1958; Chapekar, 1958; Desai, 1958), which was supported by the Ford Foundation with capitalist interest on South Asian societies (Sunil, 2013), ethnographic studies focusing on village can be traced back to the doctoral work of M.N. Srinivas. He conducted his fieldwork in the 1940s among the Coorg society of Mysore, and subsequently published in 1952, titled *Religion and Society among the Coorgs of South India* (Srinivas, 1952). Though the work focused on religious aspects rather than the agrarian structure, in 1948 Srinivas conducted eleven months of fieldwork in Rampura village and on subsequent visits until 1964, focusing on the village and agrarian structure, resulting in his classic-*The Remembered Village* (Srinivas, 1976).

Similarly, the Marxist approach to understand Indian society can also be traced back to the 1940s. For instance, many works of D.P. Mukerji (1942[1948], 1945, 1958[2002]), who taught in the economics and sociology department of Lucknow University, applied a materialist approach to understand Indian society and culture. However, he was not a Marxist

political activist like A.R. Desai. D.P. Mukerji was often called a 'Marxologist' since he used Marxist methodology without Marxian praxis, as Madan (2009: 10) notes that "Marxism was, of course, one of the abiding themes of D.P.'s work . . . He refused, however, to be called a Marxist; the most he allowed was the designation of Marxologist. It fitted with his temperament and his role as a teacher" (also see Madan, 2011, 2013). However, it was A.R. Desai's (1948[1976]) doctoral work, *Social Background of Indian Nationalism*, paved a way for Marxist analysis of Indian society, subsequently influencing many scholars in understanding Indian history and culture (Kosambi 1956, 1957, 1962; Habib, 1963) and agrarian and peasant societies and movements (for instance Dhanagare, 1983). Many Marxist scholars also debated on the question of the mode of production in agrarian Indian society from 1955 onwards (Nadkarni, 1991).

Both structural functional and Marxian studies signalled the beginning of a sustained and rigorous engagement with the agrarian structure within the discipline of sociology and social anthropology. However, the Weberian theoretical and methodological approach to study agrarian societies began to emerge over time, reflecting a growing intellectual diversification within the discipline. André Beteille (1966) was a prominent sociologist who approached the Indian village from a Weberian perspective in his empirical study- *Caste, Class, and Power: Changing Patterns of Stratification in a Tanjore Village*.

To explore the theoretical trends in the sociological study of agrarian society in India, this paper critically engages with these three influential works: M.N. Srinivas's *The Remembered Village*, A.R. Desai's *Social Background of Indian Nationalism*, and André Beteille's *Caste, Class and Power: Changing Patterns of Stratification in a Tanjore Village*. These texts were foundational in their respective periods and continue to hold relevance in contemporary discussions on Indian agrarian structures. The significance of these works lies in their methodological and theoretical diversity, each representing a dominant sociological paradigm of its time. Srinivas employed a structural-functionalist framework, Beteille drew upon Weberian analytical tools, and Desai situates his analysis within a Marxian theoretical tradition. By examining these three classical texts, this paper seeks to illuminate the plurality of methodological approaches that informed early sociological engagements with agrarian India and to understand how these frameworks shaped the discourse on rural society. Secondly, since Marx, Durkheim (structural functionalist), and Weber

are considered to be classical sociologists, these three classical texts on Indian society help the students to understand how to read Marxian, Structural functional and Weberian approaches in the Indian context.

Thirdly, the early sociological studies on Indian villages hold critical significance in analysing agrarian society for two primary reasons. First, these works serve as representative models that reflect the dominant analytical frameworks employed during the formative phase of Indian sociology. A critical engagement with these foundational texts offers valuable insight into the ways in which early scholars approached the complexities of the Indian agrarian economy and structure. The conceptual assumptions that underpinned subsequent sociological inquiries into agrarian society can be traced back to these initial studies. Accordingly, the selection of texts in this paper is informed by both the historical period in which they were produced and the methodological approaches they adopted.

Fourthly, these texts are emblematic of distinct epistemological orientations and collectively reflect the complex intellectual landscape of the formation of postcolonial Indian sociology. Srinivas's *Remembered Village* is pivotal in the canon of Indian ethnography. Composed decades after his original fieldwork, the text serves as both a scholarly reminiscence and a methodological affirmation of the efficacy of participant observation. Epstein (1978) notes that the work assumes the stature of a modern classic, not merely for its narrative richness but for its structural-functionalist paradigm, inherited from Radcliffe-Brown and shaped by the broader traditions of British social anthropology. Srinivas's analytical emphasis on the 'field view' challenges the prescriptive and often essentialist 'book view' derived from classical Indian texts, often Brahmanical texts, thereby underscoring the epistemic value of empirical immersion in the lived realities of village life (Joshi, 1978).

Desai's *Social Background of Indian Nationalism* brings yet another methodological perspective to studying Indian society, rooted in Marxian historical materialism. Originally written as a doctoral thesis under the supervision of G.S. Ghurye, his work interrogates the structural foundations of Indian nationalism by situating it within the socio-economic transformations induced by colonial capitalism. His analysis rejects culturalist or idealist interpretations of nationalist consciousness, positing that contradictions within the colonial mode of production conditioned the emergence of nationalism. Desai's treatment of agrarian relations is thus inseparable from his broader

critique of imperialism and Indian class formations, making the work a foundational text in Indian political sociology.

In contrast, Bêteille's *Caste, Class and Power* signals a decisive epistemological rupture with the structural-functionalist orthodoxy that dominated early village studies. Drawing on Weberian sociological theory, Bêteille reconceptualises the village not as a self-contained unit but as a site of dynamic interplay among broader socio-economic and political forces. His analysis of Sripuram—a village situated at the intersection of tradition and modernity—foregrounds the relationality between caste hierarchies, class structures, and political authority. The study exemplifies a shift toward historically grounded, analytically rigorous frameworks capable of capturing the complexities of social transformation in postcolonial India.

In short, these three texts together exemplify the methodological pluralism that characterised the formative period of postcolonial sociology in India, departing from text-based Indological studies to empirically oriented sociology. They offer distinct yet intersecting frameworks for understanding rural society, caste stratification, and agrarian change through functionalist, Weberian, and Marxist lenses. Their ongoing significance is rooted in their empirical contributions and ability to clarify the epistemological currents, influencing the discipline's interaction with issues of structure, agency, and transition in Indian society.

The Remembered Village: Agrarian Economy in Srinivas's Structural Functionalism

Srinivas first employed structural functionalism in his *Coorg* study (Srinivas, 1952). Unlike Western anthropologists, Srinivas's *Coorg* study called into doubt the notion of caste as rigid and unchangeable, highlighting the pervasiveness of societal change. Following Radcliffe-Brown, Srinivas applied structural functionalism, examining the interrelation between society and religion. The work elucidates the interconnection between religion and the everyday lives of individuals through quotidian routines, concepts of purity and pollution, auspiciousness and inauspiciousness, rituals and festivals and inter-caste disparities and mobility. The introductory chapter provides a historical account of Coorgs and their indoctrination into the Hindu fold, especially into the *Shaivite*. The changes brought by British rule, moving from rice cultivation to coffee plantation and the abolition of slavery, resulted in a lack of lower caste

labourers. Then the fixation of annual wages and remunerations stabilised the social structure. Then Srinivas introduces his theory of Sanskritization and horizontal and vertical solidarity.

The concept of social mobility through Sanskritization is further underscored by the fact that castes are practically subdivided into sub-castes or *jatis*, defined as “a very small endogamous group practising a traditional occupation and enjoying a certain amount of cultural, ritual, and juridical autonomy” (Srinivas, 1952: 24) within a linguistic region. Each *jati* aligns with a comprehensive hierarchy delineated by the caste classifications of the *Varna* system. This aids them in delineating their own identity and the hierarchy of social groups from other places. The subcastes inside the hierarchy’s intermediate levels, albeit theoretically restricted, possess the potential for upward social mobility by assimilating the upper caste’s practices, customs, rituals, and pantheon. Horizontal and vertical solidarity are continually negotiated to sustain societal equilibrium. “A village is a multi-caste association and the unity of the village always demands that caste-ties are checked sufficiently” (Ibid: 200). In short, this inter caste relationship based on functional duty of caste makes the social structure continue.

Though his Coorg study provides his structural functionalist approach to understand a society and the economic interrelationship of different castes, the focus is more on religion and its interconnection with the structure of the society. His *Remembered Village* (Srinivas, 1976) offers a nuanced ethnographic portrayal of Rampura, drawing on participant observation as his primary ethnographic methodological tool. This approach allows Srinivas to unravel the village’s intricate socio-economic and cultural fabric while employing a structural-functionalist framework to situate the agrarian economy within a broader socio-cultural context. By conceptualising the village as a holistic system composed of interrelated economic, social, political, and religious spheres, Srinivas captures the complex interplay between these domains, shedding light on the multifaceted nature of rural life.

At the heart of Srinivas’s analysis lies the interdependence between caste and landownership, which he identifies as the critical axis around which the social and economic structure of the village revolves. Agriculture, particularly rice cultivation, is not merely an economic activity but a central organising principle that determines the social rhythms and power dynamics within the village. The *Okkligas*, the dominant landowning caste, occupy the pinnacle of the social hierarchy, exerting significant influence over both the economic and

political spheres. While the Brahmins are accorded ritual respect and perform vital religious functions within the village, the Okkligas hold tangible power, controlling land and resources. At the lower end of the hierarchy, *Harijans*, the landless labourers, occupy the most subordinated position. In contrast, intermediary castes—such as washermen, barbers, potters, artisans, and traders—occupy varied roles depending on their socio-economic functions.

The agricultural calendar, punctuated by the cultivation and harvest of rice, dictates the temporal and social organisation of the village. The post-harvest period emerges as a significant phase of social cohesion, where the cycle of economic labour intersects with the village's social and cultural life. Marriages, festivals, and community celebrations typically occur during this period, highlighting the interdependence of economic and social functions in agrarian communities. This temporal rhythm underscores the deep connections between the agrarian economy and the social fabric, with agricultural labour serving not only as a means of subsistence but also as the foundation for community solidarity.

In Srinivas's analysis, land is not simply an economic asset; it symbolises status, power, and social hierarchy. The preoccupation with landownership is pervasive in Rampura, with land as the primary avenue for securing social mobility and economic stability. In post-independence, however, land gradually ceased to be an attractive investment for many, except for those directly involved in cultivation. Large landowners, in particular, retained their economic dominance through patron-client relationships, wherein landless labourers were often employed through arrangements that included land lease, crop shares, and cash wages. These patronage systems were central to the maintenance of social order, where the reciprocity of relationships was a cornerstone of the village's social economy.

Srinivas's analysis also reveals the differentiated relationship between men and women with regard to landownership and agricultural labour. While both genders contribute to agricultural production, their roles are mediated by gendered expectations and divisions of labour within the household and the wider community. These divisions reflect the broader social hierarchies and emphasise the intersectionality of caste, gender, and economic roles in shaping the lived experiences of villagers.

Caste, or *jati*, is not merely a structural feature of society but a fundamental mechanism of social organisation, regulating access to land, labour, and social

prestige. Unlike the pan-India Varna system, caste in Rampura is closely linked to traditional occupations, endogamy, restrictions on inter-dining, and the rules of purity and pollution. The interlocking hierarchies of caste and landownership are pivotal in shaping both the social stratification and economic relationships of the village. Srinivas illustrates that caste operates as a dual mechanism: on one hand, it enforces separateness and social distance, on the other, it fosters economic interdependence through the division of labour. Each caste group, irrespective of its position in the hierarchy, fulfils specific economic and social roles that others cannot easily substitute. For instance, the lower castes, such as the barbers, perform indispensable functions, such as ritual duties in weddings, that bind the community together, despite their low status in the social order.

Furthermore, Srinivas introduces the notion of caste mobility within the rigid caste system. While caste itself is essentially impermeable, opportunities for upward mobility exist primarily through emulating higher-caste customs. This emulation process is not confined to caste boundaries alone but extends to intra-caste differentiation, where wealthier, more prestigious households adopt the practices and rituals of higher castes, especially Brahmins. The phenomenon of Sanskritization—where lower castes attempt to acquire higher status through cultural imitation—further underscores the fluidity and internal tensions within the caste system.

Finally, Srinivas explores the dynamics of classes and factions within the village, which are often determined by landownership, caste, and lineage. These factions represent vertical social groupings, wherein a landowner at the top wields significant power over his clients and dependents at the bottom. The factional structure is marked by both horizontal relationships, among peers of similar caste or age, and vertical relationships between patrons and clients. The reciprocity embedded in these patron-client ties is crucial for the functioning of the village economy and for maintaining social stability, solidarity and equilibrium. Rampura functions as a microcosm of larger societal patterns through these complex social arrangements where power, hierarchy, and social networks are inextricably intertwined.

A.R. Desai's Marxist Perspective: The Political Economy of Agrarian Transformation in Colonial India

A.R. Desai's (1948[1976]) *Social Background of Indian Nationalism* stands as a foundational Marxist intervention into the study of Indian society, offering

a historically grounded critique of colonial capitalism and its transformative impact on the agrarian economy. Desai situates his analysis within a broader framework of structural change, arguing that the advent of British colonialism fundamentally dismantled the indigenous socio-economic order that had governed rural India for centuries. His work is particularly significant for its nuanced engagement with pre-colonial agrarian structures and the political economy of colonial rule, thereby offering a critical lens through which the evolution of Indian rural society can be understood.

Desai begins by outlining the agrarian structure of pre-British India, which he characterises as decentralised, self-sufficient, and largely insulated from the broader currents of market exchange. Villages functioned as autonomous economic units, producing primarily for subsistence through local labour and resources. The economic organisation was deeply embedded in social institutions such as caste, kinship, and customary rights, with land tenure governed collectively rather than through private ownership. According to Desai, the village community held land, and local councils or assemblies exercised authority over its use, not by individuals or the state. The role of kings and landlords was largely extractive, confined to the collection of a portion of the agricultural surplus, without exerting direct control over land or labour. In this sense, Desai emphasises that feudalism in India differed fundamentally from its European counterpart—it was marked less by legally defined property relations and more by social obligations and customary entitlements mediated through caste.

The British colonial intervention, Desai argues, inaugurated a radical rupture in this structure. Guided by the imperatives of industrial capitalism, the British did not merely impose a foreign administrative system; they reconstituted the economic base of Indian society. India was integrated into the global capitalist economy not as an autonomous agent but as a dependent appendage, simultaneously a source of raw materials and a captive market for British manufactured goods. To facilitate this integration, the British introduced a system of private property in land through various land tenure reforms, most notably the Zamindari and Ryotwari systems. These reforms effectively commodified land and transformed it into an alienable asset, undermining the collective rights and customary norms that had previously governed its use.

This structural reconfiguration of land relations led to the emergence of new agrarian classes—landlords, tenants, and landless labourers—marking

the beginning of class polarisation in rural India. The commercialisation of agriculture, particularly through the promotion of cash crops such as indigo, cotton, and opium, was driven not by local economic needs but by the demands of British industry. This externally imposed transformation subordinated agricultural production to imperial priorities, often to the detriment of subsistence cultivation. The fragmentation of landholdings through the monetisation of land rents and the growing prevalence of debt among peasants further exacerbated rural distress. Land, once a means of subsistence, became a marketable commodity. Peasants, stripped of security and subjected to exploitative rent relations, increasingly lost control over the means of production.

Desai identifies the resultant indebtedness, pauperisation, and immiseration of the peasantry as key outcomes of colonial agrarian policy. The social consequences were profound: the rural economy became characterised by a bifurcated class structure in which a small, absentee landowning class extracted surplus from an increasingly impoverished and disenfranchised peasantry. Land was often concentrated in the hands of non-cultivating proprietors whose primary interest was maximising revenue rather than improving agricultural productivity. Consequently, investment in agricultural infrastructure, technological innovation, or scientific methods remained negligible, resulting in a stagnating agrarian economy. Furthermore, the traditional forms of solidarity and mutual dependence that had sustained village communities were systematically eroded. Caste, once a mediating institution in the social and economic life of the village, began to lose its integrative role in the face of commodified class relations. Desai's analysis persuasively illustrates that the colonial transformation of the agrarian economy was not a neutral process of modernisation but a disruptive force that fractured the indigenous social fabric and institutionalised new forms of exploitation.

In short, Desai's Marxist analysis reveals how the colonial capitalist project restructured rural India to serve imperial interests, producing a legacy of underdevelopment, class antagonism, and agrarian crisis that would persist into the postcolonial period. His work challenges the notions of a timeless, unchanging village India, instead situating rural transformation within the broader dynamics of capitalist expansion and colonial domination. In doing so, Desai provides an essential framework for understanding the historical roots of contemporary agrarian issues in India.

Weberian Approach to Understand Agrarian Economy: Bêteille's Caste, Class and Power

André Bêteille's (1966) *Caste, Class and Power: Changing Patterns of Stratification in a Tanjore Village* offers a foundational sociological investigation into the complex interplay of caste, class, and power within the agrarian economy of Sripuram, a village in Tanjore district of Tamil Nadu. Bêteille's work is significant not only for its methodological rigour, rooted in ethnographic fieldwork, but also for its theoretical contribution to understanding the ways in which structural forces—economic, political, and social—intersect and evolve over time within rural India. The crux of his analysis lies in a profound shift he observes in the distribution of power: from being inextricably tied to caste to becoming more fluid and contingent on numerical strength and political mobilisation, particularly in the context of post-independence democratic reforms.

Central to Bêteille's argument is the transformation of the agrarian landscape in Sripuram, wherein traditional caste-based power relations are increasingly undermined by external forces such as political democratisation, economic modernisation, and the breakdown of hereditary landholding patterns. As he notes, the Brahmin elite, traditionally the landowners and custodians of political power in the village, have seen their dominance erode as a result of educational and professional opportunities, which drew them away from the village and into urban centres. This migration of the Brahmin elite, coupled with the sale of land, disrupted long-established social hierarchies and paved the way for the ascendancy of non-Brahmin groups within the local agrarian economy. The sale of land and the redistribution of resources thus epitomise the fluidity that began to characterise landownership in Sripuram; a shift that paralleled broader socio-political changes across rural India.

Bêteille's work stands out for its dissection of the evolving relationship between caste and class, challenging the notion that these are fixed or static categories. His analysis is driven by an understanding of class as relational, not merely as a product of individual economic position but as a dynamic force shaped by historical, political, and social conditions. He identifies four principal aspects that are crucial to understanding the transformation of class relations in Sripuram: i) the evolution of class structures traditionally grounded in agriculture, crafts, and services, and how these have been reshaped by changing socio-economic forces, ii) the impact of Western education and the rise of professional occupations, which have introduced new avenues of social

mobility and altered traditional class alignments, iii) the ways in which class structures in the village are linked to broader external political and economic forces, particularly those arising from state interventions and macroeconomic changes, and iv) the transformations in landownership and the relations of production, catalysed by state-led reforms and legislative changes that redefined the agrarian economy.

Béteille's focus on the changing patterns of landownership is critical to understanding the broader shifts in the agrarian structure. The previously rigid system, wherein Brahmin landowners rented land to non-Brahmin tenants and employed Adi-Dravida labourers, has become more fluid, as new landowners—previously excluded from landholding—emerge within the village. The dissolution of the direct correspondence between caste and landownership marks a significant moment in the transformation of rural economies, with the expansion of the landowning class beyond traditional Brahmin elites. Yet, despite these changes, caste-based stratification continues to shape social and economic relations within Sripuram. The persistence of caste, even in the face of economic shifts, underscores the entangled nature of caste and class in rural India.

What distinguishes Béteille's analysis is his treatment of power as not solely determined by caste but as a more diffuse, multi-dimensional force. His observation that power has 'detached itself' from caste is critical to understanding power dynamics in rural India. Power is no longer concentrated in the hands of a Brahmin elite; instead, it is increasingly contingent upon numerical strength, political organisation, and the shifting terrain of economic relationships. The introduction of universal suffrage, for example, significantly altered the balance of political power in the village, giving greater influence to numerically dominant non-Brahmin and Adi-Dravida groups. This shift reflects a broader democratising process within Indian society, in which political power is no longer a direct extension of religious or caste-based authority. However, while Béteille's treatment of the transformation in power dynamics is insightful, certain aspects of his argument raise questions. For instance, Béteille identifies the overlap of caste and class, particularly in tenant-farming arrangements, where small landholders may become tenants. This overlap, he argues, creates a more fluid and less sharply defined class structure. While this is an important observation, the extent to which this mobility occurs remains ambiguous. Béteille's notion of fluidity may not fully capture

the persistence of entrenched economic divisions, particularly regarding the unequal distribution of resources and power. While undoubtedly present, the extent of social mobility may not be as widespread or as fluid as he suggests. This raises questions about the real degree of class fluidity and the persistence of socio-economic inequality.

Moreover, Bêteille's analysis of class relations lacks sufficient attention to the complex, intra-caste dynamics that shape class identity within the same caste group and the relationships between members of different caste systems. As highlighted in his study, the overlapping of caste and class suggests that the boundaries between these categories are porous. Yet, his treatment of these dynamics remains somewhat general and does not fully explore how economic class relations function within and between caste groups. The intra-caste distinctions and the varying levels of economic privilege within each caste group merit further examination, particularly in terms of how these groups negotiate their relative status within the broader economic framework.

Bêteille's brief foray into the role of intermediaries, moneylenders, and the state in mediating class relations is an interesting avenue that warrants further exploration. He notes the emergence of new actors, such as moneylenders, who function as crucial intermediaries in the agrarian economy. Yet, his analysis of these actors and their role in class stratification is not sufficiently detailed to fully grasp the impact of such intermediaries on the socio-economic fabric of Sripuram. More attention to the nature of these relationships—particularly the ways in which they perpetuate economic inequalities—would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the rural economy's transformation.

In conclusion, Bêteille's work provides a compelling and rigorous analysis of the changing relationships between caste, class, and power in Sripuram. Still, it also raises important questions that invite further inquiry. The fluidity of class relations he describes deserves a more nuanced investigation, particularly in terms of how caste, class, and power intersect and are mediated by economic, political, and social structures. While his analysis of the transformation of landownership and the decline of Brahmin hegemony offers valuable insights into the agrarian economy, a more detailed exploration of intra-caste dynamics and the role of intermediaries would deepen our understanding of the persistence of inequality in rural India.

Critical Methodological Engagement with Srinivas, Desai, and Bêteille

A comparative methodological analysis of M.N. Srinivas, A.R. Desai and André Bêteille reveals foundational differences in theoretical orientation and the sociological imagination with which Indian agrarian society was approached. While Srinivas and Bêteille conducted ethnographically grounded studies of specific South Indian villages such as Rampura and Sripuram, Desai adopted a macro-historical analysis of Indian society as a whole through a Marxist lens. These three texts, emblematic of structural functionalism, historical materialism and Weberian interpretivism, represent key moments in the methodological evolution of sociology of India. A critical reading of these works not only reveals their epistemological commitments but also their sociopolitical embeddedness.

Srinivas's *The Remembered Village* operates within the structural-functionalist paradigm, heavily influenced by the British anthropological tradition, especially the legacy of A.R. Radcliffe-Brown. As Epstein (1978) aptly noted, Srinivas's ethnography combines the rigour of anthropology with the narrative finesse of a novelist, offering a vivid, if selectively remembered, reconstruction of village life. Yet, this 'memory ethnography' raises serious methodological concerns. T.N. Madan (1978) provocatively likened the reading of *The Remembered Village* to reading literary fiction such as Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* or U.R. Ananthamurthy's *Samskara*—a comparison that, while admiring of the text's prose, subtly critiques its subjective and interpretive nature.

Srinivas's positionality—as a Brahmin scholar embedded within the dominant caste—significantly conditions his field perspective. His reliance on the dominant caste's worldview, coupled with limited interaction with marginalised groups such as Dalits, leads to an asymmetrical portrayal of village society. Scholars such as Parvathamma (1978) have critiqued this bias, highlighting how the structural-functionalist insistence on social cohesion and order often eclipses underlying tensions of inequality and conflict. Therefore, Parvathamma (Ibid) calls *Remembered Village* a 'Brahminical Odyssey'. Moreover, though innovative, Srinivas's emphasis on the concepts of 'dominant caste' and 'Sanskritization' largely elides the economic and political transformations that reshaped rural India during the postcolonial period.

In contrast, A.R. Desai's *Social Background of Indian Nationalism* is situated within the Marxist tradition of historical materialism. Unlike the micro-level analyses of Srinivas and Bêteille, Desai's work offers a panoramic view of

Indian agrarian society through a dialectical analysis of pre-colonial, colonial, and nationalist phases of socio-economic transformation. He argues that pre-British Indian villages were largely self-sufficient, governed by communal forms of landholding, and structured by a caste-based but relatively stable social order. The British colonial intervention, he contends, imposed capitalist relations of production, introducing private property in land, commercialisation of agriculture, and class differentiation through revenue settlements such as the Zamindari and Ryotwari systems. Therefore, his Marxist methodology draws strength from its capacity to link the macro-structural transformations of colonial capitalism to the fragmentation and proletarianisation of the Indian peasantry. He highlights the formation of agrarian classes and the commodification of land and labour as key processes that disarticulated the traditional rural economy. However, Desai's work is not without limitations. His portrayal of the pre-colonial village as an egalitarian and cohesive unit may reflect a romanticised reconstruction, influenced by the nationalist historiography of his time.

Moreover, Desai's alignment with the nationalist economists, such as Dadabhai Naoroji—particularly in emphasising the “drain of wealth”—positions his work closer to political economy than empirical sociology. While analytically robust, his Marxist framework tends to impose a universalising model of historical stages—feudalism, capitalism, imperialism—onto a context where socio-cultural specificities such as caste complicate such linear schemas. While Desai acknowledges the autonomy of caste as a social formation, his framework often subordinates it to class, raising unresolved tensions in interpreting Indian social reality.

Furthermore, Desai asserts that class consciousness among the peasantry was subsumed within the broader nationalist movement. He argues that the Indian bourgeoisie mobilised peasant discontent to serve its own political ends, a view supported by Irfan Habib's (1988) distinction between class struggles ‘from below’ and intra-elite conflicts ‘from above’. Yet, this macroscopic narrative fails to capture the lived realities, everyday practices, and intersubjective meanings that define rural life.

Béteille, while sharing Srinivas's ethnographic orientation, departs significantly in his methodological alignment by employing a Weberian framework centred on class, status, and power. His study represents an early attempt to introduce Weberian class analysis into the Indian sociological

discourse, a pioneering and problematic move. Bêteille's central claim is that the locus of power in rural India has been shifting from traditional caste hierarchies to more fluid, economically defined class relations—a process accelerated by democratisation, land reforms, and the penetration of market forces. However, as Bêteille himself acknowledges, the applicability of Weberian class categories in a rural, pre-industrial, caste-dominated society remains fraught with conceptual ambiguity.

Weber's notion of 'class situation' is rooted in market access and property ownership—conditions that were only partially operative in Indian villages. This theoretical disjuncture leads to a conceptual inconsistency: Bêteille both critiques and deploys the concept of class in ways that are not always reconcilable with the empirical reality of Indian villages. Moreover, his analysis, like Srinivas's, is limited by his inability to fully engage with the life-worlds of the landless Adi-Dravidas, constrained by entrenched caste-based spatial segregation and social distance. This limitation reflects a methodological challenge and an epistemological blind spot in early Indian village studies.

In short, a critical methodological comparison of Srinivas, Bêteille, and Desai reveals the richness and complexity of sociological approaches to Indian agrarian society. Each represents a distinct epistemological project: Srinivas's functionalism maps social structure from within; Bêteille's Weberianism interrogates stratification across caste and class; and Desai's Marxism historicises the transformation of agrarian relations under capitalism. Yet, each also possesses methodological limitations regarding caste bias, theoretical inconsistency, or macro-historical abstraction. The task, then, is not to privilege one framework over another, but to engage in a dialectical synthesis that is attentive to both structure and agency, history and ethnography, class and caste.

Concluding Discussion: Politics of Knowledge in Indian Agrarian Sociology

While the works of Srinivas, Desai and Bêteille are often read in terms of their methodological divergences—structural functionalism, Marxian historical materialism and Weberian interpretivism respectively—a deeper, meta-sociological engagement reveals a shared, though unspoken, political undercurrent. Positioned within the formative decades of Indian sociology, these studies were not merely academic inquiries into agrarian society but

were also implicit engagements with the politics of knowledge production in postcolonial India. The constraints of these canonical works are the most revealing for modern sociological analysis. Instead of indicating epistemological failure, these deficiencies reveal the structural limitations, disciplinary oversights, and ideological legacies that influenced the initial development of Indian sociology.

Each of these scholars, in their own way, began by confronting a foundational tension in the discipline: what is the appropriate methodological frame for understanding Indian society, and more specifically, its agrarian base? Their works were not simply empirical investigations but epistemological experiments—struggles to carve out legitimate knowledge about Indian society against the backdrop of inherited colonial paradigms and Orientalist textualism. In this sense, these early studies should be understood as situated interventions in the ongoing contest over the epistemic sovereignty of Indian sociology.

Srinivas's departure from the scriptural orientation of earlier Indological and textualist approaches marked a decisive shift. By rooting his analysis in ethnographic fieldwork and coining the concept of the *dominant caste*, he sought to recalibrate sociological attention away from static Varna schemata and toward the dynamic intersections of caste and land. This was a profound epistemological rupture, as it centred the everyday materialities and power dynamics of agrarian society in the sociological gaze—elements that had been previously marginalised or filtered through Brahmanical textual frameworks. The ideology of structural functionalism is inherent in Srinivas's work, which indirectly justifies that the caste-based hierarchy is good for society since it maintains an equilibrium. Therefore, Srinivas's *Remembered Village* justifies caste-oriented capitalism. Desai's intervention, by contrast, was overtly political. Writing from within a Marxian tradition, he rejected the sanitised, Brahmanical interpretations of Indian society and reoriented the sociological lens toward class conflict, modes of production, and the structural transformations induced by colonial capitalism. His work reframed Indian history not as a cultural continuity but as a field of struggle shaped by imperial exploitation and class antagonisms. In this sense, Desai's methodology was not merely an analytical choice but a political act—an assertion that sociology must be historically grounded, materially aware, and critically engaged.

In contrast, Bêteille enacted a methodological break by introducing a Weberian vocabulary of class, status, and power into the Indian context at a

time when structural-functionalism dominated the sociological mainstream. His work implicitly challenged the equilibrium-based assumptions of structural-functionalist theory by foregrounding the tensions, overlaps, and contradictions between caste and class. While Bêteille never framed his intervention as explicitly political, Weberian social theory analysis indirectly supports capitalism, and a generalisation from a Tamil society is far from the North Indian reality. People from Tamil Nadu were much more critical about the caste system, especially after Periyar, and Dravidian consciousness gave political awareness, and therefore, a social change in Tamil Nadu was obvious. This was not evident in other states except in communist-influenced Kerala and Ambedkar's Maharashtra. Thus, from his Weberian approach, studying a south Indian village cannot make a generalisation about Indian society.

Yet, despite these important interventions, each of these thinkers ultimately grappled with the incommensurability between Western-derived theoretical models and the specificities of Indian agrarian reality. The methodological frameworks they employed—borrowed respectively from British social anthropology, German interpretive sociology, and Marxist historiography—could not fully account for the layered complexities of caste, land relations, and rural economy in India. The limitations of Srinivas, Bêteille, and Desai become most apparent only when viewed from our present standpoint, shaped by decades of postcolonial critique, subaltern studies, feminist interventions, and Dalit scholarship. Their blind spots—such as Srinivas's Brahmin-centric view of village life, Bêteille's theoretical ambivalence about class, or Desai's macro-historical abstraction are not mere oversights, but structural silences rooted in the disciplinary conditions of their time. However, their partialities, lacunae, and contradictions are diagnostic of the evolving nature of Indian sociology itself. Therefore, a critical re-engagement with Srinivas, Bêteille, and Desai does not call for their dismissal but for their re-contextualisation. They must be read as foundational figures who initiated a tradition of methodological experimentation, even as they remained entangled in the epistemic structures they sought to resist.

Works Cited

- Bailey, F. G. (1957). *Caste and Economic Frontier: Village in Highland Orissa*. New York: The Humanities Press.
- Bêteille, A. (1966). *Caste, Class, and Power-Changing Patterns of Stratification in a Tanjore Village*. Bombay: Oxford University Press.

- Bulsara J. F. (1958). 'Community Development Programme in India: The Social Impact of Community Development and Other Projects on Rural Life'. *Sociological Bulletin*, 7 (2): 81-97.
- Chapekar, L. N (1958). 'Community Development Project Blocks in Badlapur'. *Sociological Bulletin*, 7 (2): 111-22.
- Desai, A. R. (1948[1976]) *Social Background of Indian Nationalism* [Fifth Edition]. Bombay: Popular Prakashan.
- Desai, A. R. (1958). 'Community Development Projects: A Sociological Analysis'. *Sociological Bulletin*, 7 (2): 152-66.
- Dhanagare, D.N. (1983). *Peasant Movements in India, 1920-1950*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Dube, S. C. (1955). *Indian Village*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Dube, S. C. (1958). *India's Changing Village*. London: Routledge.
- Epstein, T. Scarlett. (1978). 'The Remembered Village: A Modern Classic'. *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, 12 (1): 67-74.
- Habib, Irfan. (1963). *The Agrarian System of Mughal India*. Bombay: Asia Publishing House.
- Habib, Irfan. (1988). 'Problems of Marxist Historiography', *Social Scientist*, 16 (12): 3-13.
- Ishwaran, K. (1966). *Tradition and Economy in Village India*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Joshi, P. C. (1978). 'The Remembered Village: A Bridge between Old and New anthropology'. *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, 12 (1): 75-89.
- Kosambi, D. D. (1956). *An Introduction to the Study of Indian History*. Bombay: Popular Book Depot.
- Kosambi, D.D. (1957). *Exasperating Essays: Exercise in the Dialectical Method*. Poona: People's Book House.
- Kosambi, D.D. (1962). *Myth and Reality: Studies in the Formation of Indian Culture*. Bombay: Popular Prakashan.
- Lewis, O. (1958). *Village Life in Northern India*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Madan, T. N. (1978). 'M. N Srinivas's earlier Work and The Remembered Village: An Introduction'. *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, 12 (1): 1- 14.
- Madan, T.N. (2009). "Forward", in Srobona Munshi (ed), *Redefining Humanism: Selected Essays of D.P Mukerji*. New Delhi: Tulika.
- Madan, T.N. (2011). *Sociological Traditions: Method and Perspectives in the Sociology of India*. New Delhi: Sage.
- Madan, T.N. Ed. (2013). *Sociology at the University of Lucknow: The First Half Century (1921-1975)*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

- Majumdar, D.N. Ed. (1955). *Rural profile*. Lucknow: The Ethnographic and Folk Culture society.
- Marriott, M. Ed. (1955). *Village India*. Bombay: Asia Publishing House.
- Mukerji, D.P. (1942[1948]). *Modern Indian Culture: A Sociological Study*. Bombay: Hind Kitab.
- Mukerji, D.P. (1945). *On Indian History: A Study in Method*. Bombay: Hind Kitab.
- Mukerji, D.P. (1958[2002]). *Diversities: Essays in Economics, Sociology and Other Social Problems*. New Delhi: Manak.
- Nadkarni, M.V. (1991). 'The Mode of Production Debate: A Review Article'. *Indian Economic Review*, 26 (1): 99-104.
- Parvathamma, C. (1978). 'The Remembered Village: A Brahminical Odyssey'. *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, 12 (1): 91-96.
- Srinivas, M. N. (1952). *Religion and Society among the Coorgs of South India*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Srinivas, M. N. (1976). *The Remembered Village*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Srinivas, M. N. Ed. (1955). *India's Village*. Bombay: Asia Publishing House.
- Sunil, Babu C.T. (2013). 'Sociology, Village Studies and the Ford Foundation'. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 48 (52): 113-118.
- Taylor, C. C. (1956). *A Critical Analysis of India's Community Development Programme*. New Delhi: Community Projects Administration, Government of India.