

# The Remembered Village by M.N. Srinivas

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Transition might be an odd concept to associate with a scholarly book. Manuscripts in the humanities and social sciences are often the results of years of research, analysis and writing. The publication of a book comes more often as a welcomed conclusion of a project that, even though at times invite for a future debate, marks the end of an argument made by an author. Yet, transition might be the best concept to describe *The Remembered Village* (1976) by M.N. Srinivas (1916-1999).

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Written from memory after an arson destroyed his fieldwork notes and data, Srinivas's book captures the life in an Indian village in 1948. This was a period marked by independence and abrupt changes in all aspects of Indian politics, culture, society and even academia. Srinivas recognised this as a transformative period and decided that this was the time to record the ways of rural India before they were overtaken by new governmental promises of technology, development, but most importantly, equality. Such awareness to change is what makes Srinivas's book a key text in the history of anthropology in India. New dilemmas came with a new acquired feeling of freedom. While independence allowed developing new areas of research without the constraints of a colonial government it also pushed anthropologists, such as Srinivas, to confront their privileged position as observants of a society that was strange to them, yet, they considered their own.

Such confrontation is the most noticeable characteristic that readers encounter while engaging with Srinivas's text. In contrast to the work of colonial ethnographers, such as John C. Nesfield or Herbert Risley, who produced massive volumes of data which read as scientific reports and a collection of 'facts', in *The Remembered Village* the author and his informants are a central part of the story. Maybe as a result of losing his notes, Srinivas places himself as part of the narrative. His analysis of the village 'Rampura' and its inhabitants is delivered through a recollection of anecdotes rather than an academic unfolding of statistical data or an argument. This approach allows Srinivas to paint a picture full of social nuances, geographical textures and even environmental smells that make the village come alive. We learn about how Srinivas learnt how to differentiate between good and bad soil for agriculture; what kind of questions or jokes he could make to his subjects; and even how the stench of cow dung served him as a geographical reference while making his way around the village. More interestingly, the informal narrative style adopted by Srinivas allows for slippages of his personality and positionality to emerge. For instance, in his numerous interactions with his host, the village headman, we get to know about Srinivas culinary preferences; his desire for more privacy during fieldwork and his position within the caste system.

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Indeed, Srinivas positionality is one of the most striking thinking points that readers can take from the book. As a male urban Brahmin anthropologist educated in Oxford, Srinivas is well aware that his reality is quite different from that of his subjects of study. Money, food or work are not pressing matters for him but he is aware that these are key issues in village life. Srinivas also considers himself somewhat free of the restrictions of caste and he is not shy in condemning what he sees as problematic practices such as untouchability. However, his standing on the question of caste is quite ambiguous. For instance, while Srinivas constantly claims that he is not bothered by the local fixations on caste status or issues of ritual purity and impurity, he nevertheless observed them. Before arriving to Rampura, Srinivas hired a Brahmin cook to prepare his meals. He also avoided doing research in the Dalit colony located at outskirts of the village. Srinivas argues that these decisions were not related to his own observations of caste rules but to the expectations that villagers had of him and his behaviour. Srinivas was a guest, a Brahmin guest, and he was expected to follow certain unspoken rules. If Srinivas wanted to build trust and gain access to the lives of his informers and research subjects, he needed to respect the rules and traditions that were important to the villagers.

Taking such approach was problematic and Srinivas knew it. When reflecting about caste and untouchability he acknowledges that his research lacked the presence of Dalit and Muslim perspectives as his work only presented 'a high caste view of village society. I stayed in a high caste area, and my friends and companions were all Peasants or Lingayats' (219). Srinivas tries to overcompensate the lack of the Dalit or Muslim experience by positioning himself as a firm anti-casteist and nationalist. For instance, Srinivas observed the contradictions in the way local youths bought into new ideas of equality promoted by Congress but only when this was convenient for them. Local upper caste youths would fight for access to education and political power but still expected Dalits to fulfil their traditional caste obligations. Srinivas noted that 'ideas of equality had stirred their minds [his young informants] but they naturally found it easier to be convinced of their equality with the higher castes and classes than to concede similar claims made by those lower' (217). Srinivas reinforces his anti-casteism by recounting an occasion when he was confronted by one of his informants about his status as a Brahmin. Kempu, one of his informants, complained to Srinivas about the arrogance of Brahmins who referred to all non-Brahmins as Shudras. Kempu, testing his observation of caste rules, then asked Srinivas if he would be prepared to eat food cooked by Peasants. Srinivas took his informant by surprise: 'Village-style, I offered Kempu a counter-challenge. I told him that I would be willing to eat food cooked by a Harijan [Dalit], and would he join me on the occasion? Kempu backed down at once and replied that I was quite different from other Brahmins' (217).

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This anecdote is quite revelatory of the contradictions of Srinivas's own positionality. He is quick to point the contradictions of his informants while claiming that he would eat food prepared by Dalits. Yet, we know that during his fieldwork he observed caste rules and had a Brahmin cook working for him. Similarly, Srinivas is less critical of the fact that the access to his informants and the ways of the village are precisely due to his status and privilege as a Brahmin. While Brahmin scholars have produced countless studies of Dalit life, we hardly see analysis that take the opposite view. Even today, it is very unlikely that a Dalit researcher would get access to the life of villagers beyond his own caste and jati. Finally, Srinivas positionality uncovers how 'Otherness' continued to be constructed and sustained by anthropology in independent India. Such 'Otherness', however, was not equally distributed. While Srinivas considered himself different than everyone in Rampura, it is clear that there was a descending degree of otherness in which rural upper caste people were more similar to him than Dalits, Muslims or Adivasis.

The observations made above are noticeable because of Srinivas exposure of his own positionality. At the time that it was written, taking such a style was innovative. While this reflexivity in anthropological writing is more of a norm today, one has to recognise that this owes a great deal to the work of Srinivas and his ideas. Similarly, *The Remembered Village* also began the transition of research topics selected by Indian scholars and not colonial authorities. For instance, village development and the urbanization of Indian society became key themes for Srinivas and his peers. More importantly, *The Remembered Village* became a key anthropological text both within and outside the subcontinent. It's a required reading for any project trying to understand the history of Indian anthropology.