Sources of Social Change in India

I P Desai

Social Change in Modern India by M N Srinivas; University of California Press, Berkeley, 1968; pp 194; $ 5.00.

Professor M N Srinivas was invited to deliver the Tagore Lectures for the academic year 1962-63 at the University of California, Berkeley. He chose "Social change in Modern India" as his theme and delivered three lectures on it in May 1963. Srinivas' theme is the subject of experience of every Indian. Change is disapproved by some, approved by some others with the reservation that it should be at a slower pace; some others want more of it and more rapidly! As a social scientist Srinivas takes the position of a detached observer and looks at change through the glasses of a sociologist or a social anthropologist, as he prefers to call himself. He attempts to answer the questions "what is the direction of change in modern India", "what is the orientation of this change?" and "what are the sources of this orientation?"

Opposing Pulls

On Indian society one pull is that of India's living past and the other that of contemporary western society. But social change is not just a matter of addition and subtraction and the opposing pulls do not produce a neat pattern. For the pull of contemporary western society Srinivas uses the term 'westernization'. The term refers to "the changes brought about in Indian society and culture as a result of over 150 years of British rule and subserves changes occurring at different levels of technology, institutions, ideology or values". Srinivas is aware that the term is vague and omnibus but he uses it because "there is need for such a term when analysing the changes that a non-western country undergoes as a result of prolonged contact with a western one". He discusses in this context why he prefers 'westernization' to 'modernization'. For India's living past he uses the term sanskritization and uses it in a rather limited sense. He writes, "Sanskritization is the process by which a low Hindu caste or tribal or other group changes its customs, ritual, ideology and way of life in the direction of a high and frequently twice born caste." Occasionally a caste claims a position which its neighbours are not willing to concede and the claim is usually made over a period of time, a generation or two". Sanskritization is generally accompanied by and often results in upward mobility for the caste in question. Thus the structural referent of the process of Sanskritization is social stratification and mobility. This has advantages for observation and analysis, but it creates difficulty when it is used in relation to the direction of change. Srinivas says, "Sanskritization is generally accompanied by and often results in upward mobility for the caste in question; but mobility may also occur without sanskritization and vice versa. However, the mobility associated with sanskritization results only in positional changes in the system and does not lead to any structural change".

Adaptive Qualities of Hinduism

As mentioned above, sanskritization is an extensive process which includes changes in the customs, ritual ideology and way of life of a group in the direction of those of a higher caste. What is the relation of such positional changes to structural changes? Do the positional changes have no effect on the structure or the system itself? What relation will it have to the total social system? Srinivas is not unaware of this wider context. Confining the focus of sanskritization to mobility has thrown important light on the features of the caste system, e.g. on caste rigidity and the relation of caste to other subsystems of society. But this narrow focus might become a hindrance to the study of "the complex and intricate interrelations between sanskritization and westernization which offer a fertile field for analysis and speculation". The chapters on westernization and secularization are in fact an exercise in such analysis and speculation.

Ally of the Traditional

Srinivas discusses very briefly the difference between westernization and industrialization and urbanisation and shows why he prefers the term westernization to modernization. Westernization results not only in the introduction of new institutions but also in fundamental changes in the old institutions, e.g. schools, army, civil service and law. The most important value preference in westernization was humanitarianism which subsumes several other values. By humanitarianism Srinivas
SIRUBBER moulded rubber parts for automobiles, manufactured by Sundaram Industries

Compresson Set Apparatus (constant stress) to determine compression set properties.

Tensile Tester to test tensile strength, elongation, modulus, etc.

Rigorously tested to manufacturers' specifications

Complete SIRUBBER moulded rubber kits are supplied for Fiat 1100 and Hindustan Ambassador and Landmaster. Kits containing front suspension rubber parts are also available. Most of the SIRUBBER products are made from imported synthetic rubber.

SIRUBBER moulded rubber parts are also available for Fargo, Plymouth and Leyland.

Quality-conscious manufacturers like Premier Automobiles Ltd. and Rane (Madras) Ltd., accept and use SIRUBBER moulded parts.

Write for a catalogue to:

SUNDARAM INDUSTRIES PRIVATE LIMITED
Rubber Unit, Industrial Estate, Madurai-7
means an active concern for the welfare of all human beings irrespective of caste, economic position, religion, age and sex. Equilateralism and secularization are both included in the humanitarism. It could be maintained that Hinduism had this value but Srinivas is concerned more with its embodiment in legal, political, educational and other institutions and he mentions some of the reforms introduced by the British in these fields.

The complexity of the concept of westernization can be seen in the fact that different aspects of westernization sometimes combine to strengthen a particular process, sometimes work at cross purposes and are occasionally mutually discrete. For example, education, high income and urbanization result in secularization of the style of life, which includes a radical change in the technology of eating as well as in the timing of meals. A new attitude towards food begins to emerge; it is looked at more from the point of view of whether it promotes health and efficiency and less from whether it is traditionally permitted or prohibited. In other instances, westernization in one area of behaviour does not result in westernization in another related area or level—the two remain discrete. For example, a bulldozer driver may pretend traditional black magic for his pleasure or a printer may decorate his machinery with vermillion before beginning the day's work. The introduction of printing made possible the transmission of not only modern knowledge but also knowledge of traditional epics, mythology and other religious literature. Westernization in this instance instead of eroding the traditional, strengthens it.

In the political field, westernization has given birth not only to nationalism but also to revivalism, communalism, castesim and heightened linguistic consciousness and regionalism. Srinivas then makes an important point. When the links between western stimulus and Indian response are few and visible, the identification of the process is not difficult. But when the links are few and not visible, the identification becomes difficult—for instance, the relation between westernization and the backward classes movement or Arya Samaj or linguistic consciousness. He therefore suggests that westernization may be qualified by the prefix 'primary', 'secondary' and 'tertiary'. Primary westernization is that in which the linkage is direct and simple. In this context a discussion of the role of the pull of Sanskritization in the wider sense might have been useful.

Not A Blotting Paper Role

Another important point which Srinivas makes is that for understanding different facets of westernization and its transmission, knowledge of the social background of not only the Indian agents but also the British agents and knowledge of Indo-British relationship at different periods will be very helpful. It is absurd to assign a purely "blotting paper role" to Indians; they did not merely absorb everything they came into contact with—this had no doubt happened in the case of a few individuals—but transmitted to others what they had absorbed. The point is elaborated while discussing the elite in India.

The British in India fell into several distinct occupational and social categories—official and non-official, merchants and traders, military and civilian officers and missionaries. They also came from different social strata of British society. The pattern of lending and borrowing between the British and Indians differed according to the strata to which the former belonged.

By the beginning of the nineteenth century, the British were masters of a great part of India and they had overwhelming and organised force at their disposal with which to impose their will on the Indian population. This gave them a sense of superiority over Indians, but it was probably mellowed by the personalities of the local implementers of British policy, the men on the spot who had much latitude because of the great distance between India and the UK and poor communications. The situation changed after the advent of the steamship and the cutting of the Suez Canal. But distance and poor communications could also give the men on the spot more latitude to be harsher than the policy wanted them to be. While it may be admitted that the Englishman's view of India and Indians varied according to his occupation and the particular period of Indo-British history, could it be denied that at all times, underlying the social, economic and political policy of the British there was the consciousness of cultural and military superiority? It could not be otherwise. It may be admitted, however, that the personalities of the implementers of British policy in India was a factor, among others, in determining the attitudes of Indians. The desire for continuance of British rule in the early period later changed to prayer for more concessions to the Indians. The change from this prayer to the slogan of "Quit India" can be understood in terms of the interactions between the British and British policy and the new elite of India and their expectations. That brings Srinivas to discussion of the new elite.

The New Elite

Srinivas discusses the social background and "a few ideas and beliefs which formed part of the tradition" of the new elite and their attitudes towards their own society and towards the west. He is mainly concerned with "who participated in the westernization process in a more immediate sense, who attended the new educational institutions, entered the professions, took up jobs in the bureaucracy, and engaged themselves in trade, commerce and industries in the big developing towns." As far as the Hindus are concerned, there was, and to a very limited extent still is, a very broad and general correlation between traditional caste hierarchy and the new western occupational hierarchy. A traditional modern continuum still exists: Brahmins, Baidyas, Kayasthas and Banias took western education and reaped its rewards; whereas members of the low artisan, servicing and landless labour castes became launderers, barbers, domestic servants, peons, etc." Srinivas, however, cautions that the scope of this continuum could be easily exaggerated. For example, it is doubtful whether such a continuum exists in industry. In terms of their castes, the new elite varied regionally and also over a period of time. His view is that there is a certain amount of continuity between the traditional elite and the new or westernized elite. Such continuity exists in a double sense; (1) some members or sections of the traditional elite transform themselves into the new elite and (2) there is a continuity between the old and new occupations.

In regard to the ideas and beliefs which formed part of the tradition of the new elite, Srinivas writes "It
is important to remember that the elite played a creative role in re-interpreting Indian thought, traditions, culture and history in response to European criticisms. Their role was far from restricted to borrowing things, ideas and institutions from the British. The borrowing was selective and the borrowed item subjected to elaboration and interpretation. A knowledge of the background and traditions of the elite group explains to some extent the selectiveness. Among such traditions Srinivas mentions the tolerance of Hinduism and the intellectual tradition inherited by the elite groups, characterised by continuous self criticism — for example the strong reaction to the hyperdeveloped sacrificialism of the Brahmans in Buddhism and Jainism and also among some Brahmins and the Bhakti movement of medieval India which embodied the revolt against the idea of inequality inherent in caste as well as against the intellectualism of the traditional path to salvation.

"The tradition of tolerance, syncretism and self-criticism manifested themselves early in British rule", says Srinivas. A westernized intelligentsia had emerged among Indians by the sixties of the nineteenth century and leaders of this class became the torch-bearers of a new and modern India. The leaders include the great names of the Tagores, Vivekananda, Ranade, Gokhale, Tilak, Patel, Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru and Radhakrishnan. The westernized intelligentsia increased in strength and numbers and the dawn of independence in 1947 invested them with the power to plan a peaceful revolution of Indian life.

Nationalism VS Social Reform

This new elite had their own dilemmas and conflicts. They had an ambivalent attitude towards their own society as well as towards the ruling British. Indian society had to be rid of its evils and put on a path that would enable it to develop and eventually compete with the western countries on equal terms. On the other hand, it should be made known to the west, and in particular Britain, that India was a great country that had temporarily fallen on evil days and that wanted to be free at the earliest possible moment in order to be able to set its house in order. "Even to the superficial student of the nineteenth century it is clear that the urge to reform traditional society preceded the urge for freedom". The movement towards reform of Indian society found, by about the last quarter of the nineteenth century, that it had a rival interest gripping the minds of the new elite — nationalism. Naturally, there was a debate between those who held that the reform of society should have priority over the demand for freedom and others who held the opposite view. Indians were divided in their attitude towards the British and British policy. Thus the model for social reform was western society which they admired. It was controlled by the same society from which they wanted to be freed. The difficulty of the situation was that they could not tell their people that western policy was desirable but that political control by this society was not desirable. They had to put before their people the model of a society which was not alien to their traditional society and culture. So they justified social reform by quoting the authority of the Shastras and in this way they could carry forward reform of society and also the political movement. Thus re-interpretation of Hinduism and the movement for political power went hand in hand. This was the dilemma of the new elite: they could get political power at the cost of social reform or they could get social reform at the cost of political power. This explains how political moderates and social radicals did not have mass following. It would have been relevant to classify the elite further according to their ideology and their attitude towards westernization and political and social reform.

Government as Agent of Sanskritisation

It may appear undesirable from the rationalist standpoint that religion and policies be mixed up. But the mixing up was there and it had important consequences for the process of change. The political exigencies weakened the concepts of pollution and purity, particularly those affecting the hierarchy and untouchability. The other area which was affected was that of life cycle rituals, particularly those affecting the position of women. In both these areas, there was greater secularization during the period of the nationalist movement in spite of the religious element in it. Secularization also spreads through the changes in traditional social structures — in family, caste and village communities from which Hinduism received great support. These points are discussed by Srinivas at some length. After Independence, he points out, the state itself has become a secularizing agency by passing legislation affecting religion, caste, family and village communities, which dissociates Hinduism and the social structure from one another and thus reforms them both.

While this is happening, Srinivas also notes that "Sanskritization is not only spreading to new sections and areas, it is also increasing among groups which are considered to be already sanskritized in their style of life. The spread of sanskritization is aided by mass media, and by such secular processes as the increased popularity of education and greater mobility, spatial as well as social. The idea of the equality of all men before law and the abolition of Untouchability, are throwing open a culture which was the monopoly of small traditional elites to the entire body of Hindus. The effects of some acts of legislation, such as the introduction of prohibition of the consumption of alcoholic drinks in many States, and the banning of the sacrifice of birds and animals in Hindu temples, are such as to make the government an unwitting but powerful agent of sanskritization."

The total situation is summed up by Srinivas in the following words quoted at the beginning:

"It is necessary however to reiterate that one of the results of a century of westernization — secularization is subsumed under westernization — is reinterpreted Hinduism in which Sanskritic elements are pre-dominant."

In the Speculative Tradition

One may agree or disagree with Srinivas but he needs to be congratulated for attempting to answer the question which our political leaders and others have avoided. This is the difference between the nineteenth century climate of thought and the present one. In the last century, the leaders were clear and forthright. Today either we do not have the courage of our convictions or we have become less speculative and more empirical and always want more evidence. Probably both these things are happening.