

Demography India

A Journal of Indian Association of Study of Population Journal

Homepage: <https://demographyindia.iasp.ac.in/>



Padmavathi Srinivasan (2024). Still Counting...: Anecdotal Memoir of Demographer Krishnamurthy Srinivasan. Chennai: BOHR Publishers (xvii + 293).

Dr. Arun Kumar Sharma *

Abstract

This book chronicles the life and contributions of Prof. Krishnamurthy Srinivasan, an internationally renowned demographer and the 2023 IUSSP Population Laureate. Authored by Dr. Padmavathi Srinivasan, the narrative weaves his personal journey with the evolution of demographic research and policy in India over the last 90 years. Born into a modest background, Prof. Srinivasan rose to lead the International Institute for Population Sciences (IIPS), Mumbai, and collaborated with global experts such as J.B.S. Haldane, R.A. Fisher, and Simon Kuznets. The book reveals lesser-known facets of his career, including his pivotal but reluctant role in recommending Indira Gandhi for the UN Population Award and insights into population policy and education in India. Rich in historical and cultural context, it discusses major shifts in Indian demography, family planning, and academic institutions. Methodologically grounded in oral histories, the book presents an engaging and accurate portrayal of events. Beyond demography, it offers reflections on values, politics, and education, making it relevant to a wider audience of social scientists. Blending biography with broader academic and policy insights, this work stands out as both a significant academic resource and a compelling narrative in Indian English literature.

BOOK REVIEW

*Senior Professor, IIT Kanpur (Ret.) Chief Editor, Demography India Email: arunk@iitk.ac.in

For demographers counting means enumerating births, deaths and migrants but this book takes account of the major events in the life of Prof. Krishnamurthy Srinivasan, who is an internationally acclaimed demographer and IUSSP Population Laureate (2023). Prof. Srinivasan came from a middle-class background and rose to the position of Director of IIPS Mumbai. He played a significant role in the history of demography in India. Ironically, his first job was as a probationary auditor at the Accountant General's office in Madras. He entered the real academic world of statistics and demography in 1956 when he joined three-year Master's in Statistics in ISI Calcutta. He was taught by famous statisticians, such as J. B.S. Haldane, C. R. Rao, and D. Basu, among others. There he also came in contact with visiting faculty, such as R. A. Fisher, Abraham Wald, Jerzy S. Neyman and Simon Kuznets. All of them made a great impact on them. He completed his PhD degree in 1966 from Kerala University under Aleyamma George. The examiners of his thesis were Mindel C. Sheps, Robert G. Potter and C. Chandrasekar; all of them are well known figures in the field of demography. Later he worked with several internationally admired demographers, and published many papers and books (A list of them is given at the end of the book). He was involved in family planning training programs in different countries from 1969 while working at ECAFE at the United Nations in Bangkok. He had quite an enriching experience in these countries including Iran, Indonesia and South Korea.

The writer of the book, Dr. Padmavathi Srinivasan, is a good story teller and a demographer. She is PhD from Bowling Green State University, USA. She is an independent consultant and works with many national and international organizations. Methodologically, the book is based on recounting of events and experiences

through audio recordings which were later transcribed by her. Before reproducing them in the form of book she verified all details for accuracy with Prof. Srinivasan who has a brilliant memory. In the Preface Padmavathi writes:

I was amazed by his remarkable ability to recall the precise date, time and location of events. When I cross-referenced the details of the conferences, workshops, and seminars online, I was surprised to find out that the information matched his recollections, even for events that occurred many decades ago.

The book is interesting to read. We all know about Prof. Srinivasan's association with Gandhigram, Kerala University, IIPS, UN organizations, Australian National University, University of North Carolina, Population Foundation of India and IUSSP, but this book also informs the Indian history and culture of last 90 years which shaped the subject matter and concerns of demography in India.

I recall that when Prof. Srinivasan joined IIPS as the director I was doing my PhD in IIT Bombay and often visited IIPS. We knew him as a technical expert on birth intervals but before reading this book I had no idea that this man played an important role in Mrs. Indira Gandhi getting UN Population Award in 1983 jointly with Mr. Qian Xinzong, and freezing the Assembly and Parliament Seats beyond 2001. I only admired him for his generous and bighearted nature. After reading this book I also learnt that his recommendation of Mrs. Indira Gandhi for the UN Population award was essentially a bureaucratic decision that he was obligated to take against his conscience. He was against it, especially he was not happy with the forced sterilizations. It was the officials in the secretariat who felt that a nomination for the

award coming from director of IIPS would be better since he was professionally well-known and respected within and outside India.

I have no hesitation to say that many of us joined IIPS in 1970s because it was seen as a UN institution and we had high expectations of getting decent jobs after doing certificate and diploma. When we did not get a suitable job despite passing the courses with silver and gold medals we got frustrated. IIPS had advertised for the post of lecturers. I also applied and my application form was so abusive of IIPS that I did not expect any interview letter. Yet, he called me for the interview and experts interviewed me in a very cordial atmosphere. Prof. Srinivasan's question to me was: how can we say anything significant about changes in fertility based on the study of only 450 couples (sample size of my PhD work)? This is a different story that I was not selected for the job. Since then, I had developed a great admiration for Prof. Srinivasan. He was also very affectionate towards me and whenever he met me, he always enquired what I was doing.

The book informs about the career, values, beliefs, personality and political ideas of Prof. Srinivasan. He is essentially a pragmatic person who follows a middle of the road approach in all matters. To quote him on the diversity of views on family planning: While J. Krishnamurti supported measures whether governmental or otherwise, to control birth rates as long as they were voluntary and driven by concern for women, Mata Nirmala Devi was opposed to such policies. The contrasting stances of these two mystics perfectly illustrate the essence of the Indian ethos – where diagrammatically opposing opinions and beliefs coexist harmoniously, without one dominating the other (pp. 178-179).

I should say that the book is useful for all social scientist, not for demogra-

phers alone. The episodes included in the book certainly tell us about the life of Prof. Srinivasan but they also tell us about the history of research and teaching of demography in India. They tell us about how Western thinking on impact of population on development in the context of the developing countries has shaped Indian policies and population curricula. The book explains the context in which family planning programme was launched in India, IIPS was granted the status of a deemed university in 1985, target setting approach was used to control population, and National Statistical Commission was formed for various planning requirements of statistics. It identifies the issues connected with quality of data and the major theoretical ideas prevalent among Indian demographers. It also has interesting things to say about the future of demography in India. Prof. Srinivasan has several things to say on the changing nature of demography in India. However, to me his general comment on the status of education in India is revealing:

It is troubling to note that, according to the Economic Survey of India, 2023-24, only 51.4 % of the youth in India were deemed employable. Where are remaining youth to be accommodated? They need to be gainfully employed somehow, or there is risk of their being on the streets, engaging in anti-social and criminal activities. With this in mind, it is necessary to improve the quality of educational institutions and their relevancy to meet the national needs and divert from their current profit orientations to centres of true learning, knowledge, and skill development.

Prof. Srinivasan's work aligned with his passion and, therefore, today he can talk about

“a continuous journey of exploration and growth”

without retirement. I have chosen majorly the concerns of Indian demographers

and curiosity about Prof. Srinivasan but the book may also be seen as a good piece of literature in Indian English in its own right. There are several pages that present dramatic events in Prof. Srinivasan's life in an artistic manner and entertain the readers without creating any stigma against any group of people. They include episodes about his birth followed by a mysterious fever and recovery, how his recorded age was inflated by one year, and charisma of Gandhiji whom he saw

at Mayavaram junction. Prof. Srinivasan recounts:

*I could not take my eyes off him –
the thin figure clad in a dhoti,
stick-like legs, a toothless mouth,
and a wide smile. He waved at the
excited crowd and smiled, as many
hands reached out to touch his
feet. His charisma was
overwhelming, as he had cast a
magical spell on all of us.*