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Q1(d)

Totemism

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2016 · Anthropology GS 1 · 10 marks · Religion

5. Religion: Anthropological approaches to the study of religion (evolutionary, psychological and functional); monotheism and polytheism; sacred and profane; myths and rituals; forms of religion in tribal and peasant Societies (animism, animatism, fetishism, naturism and totemism); religion, magic and science distinguished; magico-religious functionaries (priest, shaman, medicine man, sorcerer and witch).

Core demand of the question

- Write a note on Totemism
- Keep the note to a 10-mark length of about 150 words

Revision summary

A totem is an emblem or kin-like species for a group.

Durkheim read it as the clan worshipping itself.

Lévi-Strauss read it as a system of differences.

Taboo and exogamy often travel with the emblem.

Indian tribal clans use totems as identity, not as science of animals.

Introduction

Totemism links a human group to a plant, animal, or object as emblem, kin, or ritual partner. It is a classic of religion and classification.

Body**Readings**

- **Durkheim** treated the Australian totem as the clan's flag; worship is society made sacred.
- **Frazer** gathered taboos and descent from the totem species.
- **Radcliffe-Brown** stressed ritual attitudes to nature. **Malinowski** tied some totems to food and anxiety.
- **Lévi-Strauss** in Totemism said species are good to think: totems classify groups, they are not a failed zoology.

Indian notes

- Clan totems appear among many tribes. The point is social identity and marriage rule, not a zoo.

Flow diagram

Totemism -> Durkheim clan sacred

Totemism -> Levi-Strauss classify

Totemism -> Exogamy identity

Conclusion

Totemism is a relation between group and natural emblem. **Durkheim** saw society; **Lévi-Strauss** saw a logic of difference. Both remain teaching tools.

Facts & figures

Durkheim

Elementary Forms: Australian totemism as elementary religion.

Lévi-Strauss

Totemism (1962): 'good to think', not a primitive mistake.

Frazer

Compiled totemic marriage and food taboos on a world scale.

Radcliffe-Brown

Ritual value of natural species in social structure.

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