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Q1(a)

Scope and relevance of Social and Cultural Anthropology

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2023 · Anthropology GS 1 · 10 marks · Social-cultural Anthropology.

(a) Social-cultural Anthropology.

Core demand of the question

- Write a note on the scope and relevance of Social and Cultural Anthropology
- Keep the note to a 10-mark length of about 150 words

Revision summary

Social and cultural anthropology studies learned life in the round, from Tylor's culture to Boas's fieldwork.

Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown added living systems and social structure.

The scope is kinship, economy, politics, religion, and change.

Relevance lies in development, health, law, and comparison, as Srinivas and Elwin showed in India.

Geertz keeps public meaning inside that same scope.

Introduction

Social and cultural anthropology studies how people live together and how they make meaning. Its scope is the whole of social life, and its relevance is that those lives still have to be known on the ground.

Body**Scope**

- **Edward Tylor** treated culture as a learned whole of knowledge, belief, art, law, and custom, which set the first wide frame for the subject.
- **Franz Boas** made fieldwork, language, and history the method, and he refused to rank peoples on a single ladder of civilisation.
- **Bronislaw Malinowski** at Omarakana in the Trobriand Islands showed that economy, kinship, magic, and law hang together in one living system.
- **A. R. Radcliffe-Brown** asked how institutions maintain social structure, so the scope includes both meaning and organisation.
- The field therefore covers kinship, economy, politics, religion, gender, law, and change, using ethnography and comparison rather than laboratory isolation.

Relevance

- Development, public health, and law need this knowledge because a scheme that ignores caste, clan, and local tenure often fails, as **M. N. Srinivas** showed for the Indian village and **Verrier Elwin** argued for tribal policy.

- Medical and applied anthropology use the same tools in clinics, camps, and courts, from **W. H. R. Rivers** onward to contemporary public-health ethnography.
- In a world of migration and media, **Clifford Geertz** and later global ethnography keep the subject relevant by reading public meanings, not only village custom.

Flow diagram

Social cultural anthropology -> Fieldwork holism
Social cultural anthropology -> Kinship economy religion law
Kinship economy religion law -> Policy health courts
Fieldwork holism -> Policy health courts

Conclusion

The scope of social and cultural anthropology is holism plus ethnography across institutions. Its relevance is practical: policy and comparison still need the local social fact.

Facts & figures

Edward Tylor

Defined culture as a complex whole of knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, and custom acquired by a member of society.

Bronislaw Malinowski

Trobriand fieldwork showed that kula, kinship, and magic belong to one functioning whole.

Franz Boas

Set historical particularism and first-hand ethnography against unilinear ranking of peoples.

M. N. Srinivas

Village ethnography in India showed why caste, faction, and ritual must enter any account of social change.