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Q8(a)

How the theories of postmodernism are relevant in promoting social justice and empowerment of marginalised communities?

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2025 · Anthropology GS 1 · 20 marks · Post-modernism in anthropology.

(j) Post-modernism in anthropology.

Core demand of the question

- State what postmodern theories contributed to anthropology
- Show how those tools help social justice and empowerment of the marginalised
- Give ethnographic or Indian illustrations
- Add a brief limit so the answer stays critical

Revision summary

Postmodern anthropology doubts grand narratives and treats ethnography as a positioned text, as in Clifford and Marcus.

Foucault links knowledge to power. Said and Spivak ask who may represent the marginalised.

These tools support voice, anti-essentialism, participatory methods and queer or Dalit or Adivasi self-description.

Current examples include Forest Rights claims, testimony movements and counter-mapping.

The limit is that style without land and law does not empower.

Join voice to political economy.

Introduction

Postmodern theories in anthropology doubted grand, single stories told by a confident outsider. They asked who has the right to represent whom. That doubt is useful for social justice when it returns voice, history and power to people who were written as silent 'tribes' or 'cases'.

Body

What the theories actually say

Jean-François Lyotard defined the postmodern as suspicion toward grand narratives. **Michel Foucault** treated knowledge as entangled with power: the clinic, the prison and the census make kinds of people. **Jacques Derrida's** deconstruction, used cautiously, shows how a text privileges one term over another. In anthropology, **James Clifford** and **George Marcus** in *Writing Culture* made ethnography itself a literary and political act. **Renato Rosaldo**, **Lila Abu-Lughod** ("writing against culture"), and **Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak** on the subaltern asked whether the oppressed can speak in our genres. **Edward Said's** *Orientalism* is the neighbouring critique of how "the East" was authored.

These are not a call to invent facts. They are a call to show the author's position, to allow several voices, and to drop the god's-eye monograph.

How that promotes justice and empowerment

- **Voice:** Polyphony and life-history methods let Dalit, Adivasi, Muslim, disabled and queer narrators sit inside the text instead of as illustrations of a caste "system".
- **Against essential culture:** If "the tribe" is a colonial category, empowerment can mean land titles, **Forest Rights Act** claims, and bilingual education rather than preservation as a museum piece.
- **Reflexivity in development:** A scheme that measures women only as fertility numbers repeats **Foucault's** biopolitics. Participatory appraisal, counter-mapping of forest commons, and community radio are practical cousins of postmodern doubt.
- **Gender and sexuality:** Once kinship is not a natural nuclear law, hijra, transgender and chosen-family lives can be written as kinship, not as deviance.
- **Current examples:** MeToo testimonies, anti-CAA street archives, and Adivasi opposition to a mine all produce knowledge from below. Those accounts are data, not noise.

Paulo Freire is not a postmodern philosopher, but his pedagogy of the oppressed is often joined to this political aim in applied work.

A necessary limit

Endless textual play can stall land and wages. Marginalised communities usually want resources and rights, not only a more stylish ethnography. Postmodern tools decentre the expert; political economy, as in Wolf, reconnects voice to structure. Justice needs both.

Flow diagram

Postmodern critique -> Knowledge and power
 Postmodern critique -> Many voices
 Many voices -> Justice claims
 Knowledge and power -> Against essential tribe
 Justice claims -> Limit: rights and resources too

Conclusion

Postmodern theories help justice when they expose how knowledge ranks people, and when they open the text to subaltern voice. Clifford, Marcus, **Foucault**, Said and Spivak supply the method. Empowerment still needs land, law and livelihood. The theories are a method of listening, not a substitute for redistribution.

Facts & figures

Writing Culture

Clifford and Marcus's volume treated ethnography as writing: partial, positioned and political, not a transparent window onto a tribe.

Michel Foucault

He analysed how institutions produce knowledge and subjects. This helps explain census, clinic and criminal labels applied to the marginalised.

Edward Said, Orientalism

He showed how scholarly pictures of 'the East' served power. The lesson travels to how 'tribe' and 'backwardness' are authored.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak

Her question 'Can the subaltern speak?' warns that elite genres may still ventriloquise the oppressed even when they claim to help.

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