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Q8(b)

Critically examine the concept of tribe-caste continuum and its relevance in contemporary India

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2015 · Anthropology GS 2 · 15 marks · Caste system in India

3.2 Caste system in India-Structure and characteristics, Varna and caste, Theories of origin of caste system, Dominant caste, Caste mobility, Future of caste system, Jajmani system. Tribe-caste continuum.

Core demand of the question

- Critically examine the concept of tribe-caste continuum and its relevance in contemporary India
- Keep the answer to a 15-mark length of about 200 words

Revision summary

Tribe-caste continuum names a range from clan community to ranked jati.

Ghurye and Bose stressed Hindu absorption; Bailey named the continuum.

Sanskritisation is the walk along it.

ST law still needs a tribal pole for land.

The idea is relevant in contact zones, risky if it excuses dispossession.

Introduction

The tribe-caste continuum treats tribe and caste as poles of one Indian social range, not as two species. People move along it by Hinduisation, land, and the state's lists.

Body

The concept

- **G. S. Ghurye** placed tribes as backward Hindus. **N. K. Bose** and others saw absorption into the caste web.
- **F. G. Bailey** and later Indian anthropologists spoke of a continuum: isolated clan to ranked jati.
- **Srinivas's** Sanskritisation is the cultural walk along that line.

Relevance now

- **ST and SC lists freeze poles that the field still mixes:** a Gond household may be temple-going and forest-right claiming at once.
- **Fifth Schedule** and **FRA** need a tribal pole for law, even when the continuum is culturally true.
- Contemporary politics of conversion, vanvasi talk, and reservation raids all fight over where a group sits on the line.

Critique

- The continuum can hide conquest and mining as mere "Hinduisation".
- **Elwin** insisted some groups are not just unfinished castes.
- **Relevance is heuristic:** good for Central India contact zones, weaker for many North-Eastern polities.

Flow diagram

Tribe pole -> Caste pole
Sanskritisation -> Caste pole
ST list FRA -> Tribe pole

Conclusion

The continuum still explains contact and Sanskritisation. It must not erase ST territorial rights or treat every tribe as a caste in waiting.

Facts & figures

G. S. Ghurye

Classic source for tribes as backward Hindus on the way into caste.

F. G. Bailey

Field models of tribe and caste as connected political economies.

N. K. Bose

Civilisational absorption of tribes into the Hindu social web.

FRA 2006

Law that treats forest dwellers as rights-holders, not as incomplete castes.