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Q3(a)

Examine the structural and cultural theories of caste system in India

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2016 · Anthropology GS 2 · 20 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

- Examine the structural and cultural theories of caste system in India
- Keep the answer to a 20-mark length of about 250 words

Revision summary

Structural theories treat caste as jati groups, land, and dominant caste.

Srinivas, Bailey, and Bêteille lead that side.

Cultural theories treat purity, transaction, and Sanskritisation.

Dumont and Marriott lead that side.

A full account of India needs both handles.

Introduction

Structural theories explain caste as a system of relations and groups. Cultural theories explain it as meanings of purity, karma, and style. Indian anthropology needs both.

Body

Structural theories

- **Émile Durkheim** and British functionalists, via **Radcliffe-Brown** to **M. N. Srinivas**, treated caste as a social structure of interlocking jatis.
- **Srinivas** added dominant caste, faction, and village as the working structure, not varna boxes.
- **F. G. Bailey** and **André Bêteille** stressed land, class, and power as the skeleton that ritual only dresses.
- **G. S. Ghurye** mixed Indology with structure: caste as a Hindu social order with endogamy and hierarchy.

Cultural theories

- **Louis Dumont** made purity and impurity the encompassing ideology of homo hierarchicus.
- **McKim Marriott** used coded transactions and little-great tradition rather than one Dumontian whole.
- **Sanskritisation** is cultural mobility inside the same ranked meanings.

Examination

- Structure without culture cannot explain why food and marriage rules bite.

- Culture without land cannot explain the dominant caste or **panchayati** capture.
- Tribe-caste continuum and **Ambedkar's** politics further show that meaning and power both move.

Flow diagram

Structural jati land -> Caste system

Cultural purity Sanskritisation -> Caste system

Srinivas Dumont Bailey -> Caste system

Conclusion

Caste is a structure of groups and a culture of purity and imitation. Srinivas, Dumont, and the materialists each hold one handle; the system is the grip of both.

Facts & figures

M. N. Srinivas

Structural field caste: dominant caste, Sanskritisation, village.

Louis Dumont

Cultural theory of hierarchy as purity ideology.

McKim Marriott

Cultural-transactional view of caste and little-great tradition.

F. G. Bailey

Political-economic structure of caste teams and resources.