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Q8(b)

Critically evaluate the contributions of S.C. Roy to Indian anthropology.

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2023 · Anthropology GS 2 · 15 marks · Emergence, growth and development of Anthropology in India

4. Emergence, growth and development of Anthropology in India-Contributions of the 18th, 19th and early 20th Century scholar-administrators. Contributions of Indian anthropologists to tribal and caste studies.

Core demand of the question

- Critically evaluate the contributions of S. C. Roy to Indian anthropology
- Cover method, monographs, institutions, and limits
- Place him before Malinowski's Indian students as a pioneer
- Keep the evaluation balanced

Revision summary

Roy's monographs on Mundas, Oraons, Birhors, and Kharias founded Indian tribal ethnography from Ranchi.

He recorded **khuntkatti**, parha, sarna, and landlord-mission pressure, including the Birsa context.

Man in India (1921) institutionalised the field.

Limits include evolutionist wording, a thin gender-class analysis, and an outsider professional gaze.

He remains the necessary starting point for Chotanagpur, not the last theory.

Introduction

Sarat Chandra Roy (1871-1942) is often called the father of Indian ethnography. A lawyer at Ranchi, he turned court contact with Mundas and Oraons into long monographs. His contribution is foundational and also limited by the amateur-missionary-colonial moment in which he wrote.

Body

What he wrote and built

- **Major books:** The Mundas and Their Country (1912), The Oraons of Chota Nagpur (1915), Oraon Religion and Customs (1928), The Birhors (1925), The Kharias (1937, with R. C. Roy).
- He described **khuntkatti**, parha, clan, marriage, sarna, and the pressure of Hindu landlords and missions. That remains the baseline for Chotanagpur anthropology.
- He founded the journal **Man in India** (1921) and worked with the Bihar and Orissa Research Society. He professionalised a field that had been notes in gazetteers.
- **Birsa Munda's** movement and land law enter his pages as living politics, not only as custom.

Method

- He was not a year-long Malinowskian camper in one hamlet from the start, but he combined law-court Hindustani, village touring, and texts in a way that was new for an Indian scholar.
- **He took native categories seriously:** bonga, sarna, lineage land.
- He corresponded with **Rivers, Frazer**, and later Indian colleagues, placing Ranchi on the world map of ethnology.

Critical limits

- **Evolutionist and diffusionist frames of his day appear:** "primitive", stages, and some racial vocabulary that later biology dropped.
- Women's land rights and internal class among Mundas are thinner than later Marxist and feminist readings (**archival work after Roy**).
- He wrote as a sympathetic outsider and Catholic-era Ranchi professional, not as a Munda author. The gaze is still from the town.
- **Policy:** he supported protection of **khuntkatti** against landlord grab, which aligns with later FRA spirit, but he did not found a political movement.

Place in the discipline

- Before **Srinivas, Bose**, and **Karve**, Roy showed that Indians could write tribal monographs at international length.
- **L. P. Vidyarthi** and Ranchi anthropology are institutional heirs.
- **Evaluation:** indispensable on middle-Indian tribe and land; incomplete as theory; historically first.

Flow diagram

S Critique of stages and gaze Roy -> Munda Oraon Birhor Kharia
 S Critique of stages and gaze Roy -> Man in India
 Munda Oraon Birhor Kharia -> Khuntkatti sarna parha
 Later theory -> Critique of stages and gaze

Conclusion

S. C. Roy created the Indian tribal monograph, the journal **Man in India**, and the ethnography of Munda, Oraon, Birhor, and Kharia institutions. His limits are evolutionist language and a town-court gaze. Nation and syllabus still start Chotanagpur with him, then add later critique.

Facts & figures

The Mundas and Their Country 1912

Roy's first major monograph on Munda land, clan, and colonial pressure.

Man in India

Journal founded by Roy in 1921, still a marker of professional Indian anthropology.

The Birhors 1925

Monograph on a foraging group later listed as a PVTG, unusual for its time.

Khuntkatti

Lineage village-land institution that Roy placed at the centre of Munda political economy.

Oraon Religion and Customs 1928

Detailed account of Oraon ritual, later used in debates on Hinduisation and sarna.

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