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Q4(c)

Is caste mobility a recent phenomenon? Discuss in the light of Indological and Empirical context.

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2023 · 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

- Ask whether caste mobility is a recent phenomenon
- Discuss Indological and empirical contexts
- Use texts, inscriptions, and village studies
- Give a clear no, with what is new

Revision summary

- **Caste mobility as group rank-claim is old:** dynastic Kshatriya status, grants, and Puranic origin tales.

Srinivas and Bailey show village and frontier mobility in the twentieth century.

The colonial census froze names and made paper rank fights.

Mandal, Indra Sawhney, and adult franchise made the state the main arena.

Ambedkarite assertion is a recent path that refuses **Sanskritisation** as the only honourable move.

Introduction

Caste mobility is the movement of a person or a group in the rank order of jati and varna. It is not a product only of modern jobs and elections. Indology and ethnography both show older paths. What is recent is the scale, the state, and the language of rights.

Body

Indological context

- Dharmashastra presents varna as birth-based, yet it records **apad dharma**, mixed unions, and the **vrata** of groups seeking recognition.
- **Kshatriya** status was claimed by many regional dynasties. **Rajput** formation, discussed by **Dirk Kolff** and others, is a long military-and-marriage process, not a Vedic fossil.
- Temple inscriptions and copper plates show land grants that raise a group's local rank. **Kayastha** and other scribal groups negotiated status across centuries.
- Bhakti saints criticised birth rank and opened devotion; they did not abolish jati, but they made a moral path around it.
- **Sanskritisation** in Srinivas's sense has pre-modern analogues: claims to gotra, vegetarian style, and Puranic origin.

Empirical and historical context

- **M. N. Srinivas** showed twentieth-century village mobility through ritual copying after land and numbers rose.
- **F. G. Bailey** showed political and economic mobility on a tribe-caste frontier.
- Colonial census froze names and made rank a paper fight. That was new as a technology, not as a desire to rise.
- **Non-Brahmin** movements, **Phule**, **Periyar**, **Ambedkar**, and **Mandal** (1990) made mobility a claim on the state: education, jobs, and elected office.
- **Indra Sawhney** (1992) and later OBC lists turned empirical backwardness into a legal ladder. This is recent as constitutional machinery.

What is not recent

- Group climbing through land, war, sect, and origin tales is old.
- Individual escape through sainthood, army, or city trade is old.

What is recent

- Adult franchise, reservation, courts, and a national OBC/SC public.
- Urban jobs and English education as a mass path.
- Dalit assertion that rejects **Sanskritisation** as the only honourable climb.

Answer

- Caste mobility is not recent as a social fact.
- Recent tools have changed its speed, its arena, and who can refuse the old ritual path.

Flow diagram

Indology inscriptions -> Old group claims
 Srinivas Bailey -> Village ritual mobility
 Mandal reservation franchise -> State path
 Old group claims -> Not only recent
 State path -> New arena

Conclusion

Indology and inscriptions show groups claiming higher rank long before the census. Village studies show **Sanskritisation** in living memory. The Republic added reservation and parties. Mobility is old; the democratic state path is new.

Facts & figures

Sanskritisation

Srinivas's term for group ritual copying to claim higher caste rank; the behaviour has older Indological analogues.

Rajput formation

Historical process of military, marriage, and origin-claim mobility, not a single Vedic census category.

Mandal 1990

Central implementation of OBC reservation in public employment after the **Mandal Commission** report.

Indra Sawhney 1992

Supreme Court judgment that structured OBC reservation, creamy layer, and the ordinary 50 percent ceiling.

F. G. Bailey

Bisipara ethnography of economic and political mobility on a tribe-caste continuum.

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