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Q3(a)

"Sanskritization is a culture-bound concept." Critically comment to assess the strength and limitation of this concept in developing a theoretical framework to study social change.

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2023 · Anthropology GS 2 · 20 marks · Indigenous and exogenous processes of socio-cultural change in Indian society

5.3 Indigenous and exogenous processes of socio-cultural change in Indian society: Sanskritization, Westernization, Modernization; Inter-play of little and great traditions; Panchayati Raj and social change; Media and Social change.

Core demand of the question

- Critically comment on the claim that Sanskritisation is a culture-bound concept
- Assess its strength and limitation as a theory of social change, with **M. N. Srinivas**
- Compare it with other change concepts
- Give ethnographic limits

Revision summary

Srinivas defined Sanskritisation as group copying of a higher caste's ritual style to claim better rank.

Its strength is empirical fit with Indian caste mobility and the little-great tradition traffic.

- **It is culture-bound:** it belongs to Hindu caste civilisation, not to all societies.

Limits include conversion, non-Brahmin politics, class, and gender costs of new taboos.

A theory of Indian social change needs Sanskritisation plus **Westernisation**, law, and conflict.

Introduction

M. N. Srinivas named Sanskritisation for the way a lower caste copies the ritual, diet, and customs of a locally higher caste, often a twice-born model, in order to claim a better rank. Calling it culture-bound means it grows from Indian caste civilisation and may not travel as a general law of social change. That is both its strength and its limit.

Body

The concept

- **Srinivas, from Coorg and Rampura, saw mobility through** imitation of a prestigious style: vegetarianism, teetotalism, new gotra stories, bans on widow remarriage, and temple rights.
- It is group mobility, usually slow, and it needs a gap between de facto power (land, numbers) and de jure rank.
- It is not the same as **Westernisation** (Srinivas's other term), which copies British-derived education, dress, and law.
- **McKim Marriott's** universalisation is a related cultural flow from little to great tradition.

Strength as theory

- It is empirically thick. **Okkaligas, Yadavs, Ezhavas** (with **Sri Narayana Guru** as a more reformist path), and many tribal elites show ritual copying plus a new origin tale.
- It explains change **inside** caste without assuming that caste must first vanish.
- **It links culture to stratification:** style is a weapon, not a decoration.
- **It is culture-bound in a useful way:** it names a specifically Indian mechanism that class theory from Europe would miss.

Limitations

- Culture-bound also means weak export. Latin American or African rank systems need other words. Even inside India, **Islamisation, Christianisation, and Dalit conversion** (**Ambedkar**, 1956) are not Sanskritisation.
- It underplays **conflict and law**. **Jyotirao Phule**, non-Brahmin parties, and reservation change rank through politics, not only through copying the Brahmin.
- Dominant castes may Sanskritise and still dominate, so the concept can hide power as mere fashion.
- Women's labour and beef or liquor bans can raise male status while tightening control of women, a point later feminists made against a male-ranked model.
- **André Beteille** showed land and education splitting ritual rank from class. Sanskritisation then describes a leftover idiom, not the main engine.

Theoretical framework for social change

- Use Sanskritisation for ritual-rank mobility in a caste field.
- Add **Westernisation**, secularisation, Mandal politics, and conversion for the rest.
- Do not treat it as a master key for all Indian change.

Flow diagram

Sanskritisation -> Copy higher ritual style
Copy higher ritual style -> Claim better rank
Westernisation -> School law dress
Phule Mandal conversion -> Political rank change
Sanskritisation -> Caste field only

Conclusion

- **Sanskritisation is strong because it is culture-bound:** it fits caste civilisation and village ethnography. It is limited for the same reason: it cannot explain conversion, class, or law-led change, and it travels poorly as a universal theory. Srinivas remains necessary, not sufficient.

Facts & figures

M. N. Srinivas

Named Sanskritisation from Coorg and Mysore village work as ritual-rank mobility through imitation.

Westernisation

Srinivas's companion concept for change through British-derived education, technology, and law.

Marriott universalisation

Local rite rewritten as a pan-Indian or Sanskritic form; a related cultural flow, not identical with caste climbing.

Sri Narayana Guru

Ezhava movement in Kerala that combined temple rights and reform; only partly a copy of Brahmin style.

André Beteille

Tanjore study showing class and education can move without matching ritual Sanskritisation.

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