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Q2(a)

"Tribes are backward Hindus." Critically comment with reference to the contributions of G.S. Ghurye.

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2023 · Anthropology GS 2 · 20 marks · Problems of exploitation and deprivation of Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Other Backward Classes. Constitutional safeguards for Scheduled Tribes and...

7.1 Problems of exploitation and deprivation of Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Other Backward Classes. Constitutional safeguards for Scheduled Tribes and Scheduled Castes.

Core demand of the question

- Critically comment on the statement that tribes are backward Hindus, with reference to **G. S. Ghurye**
- State Ghurye's thesis and evidence
- Place Elwin, Bose, and later ethnography against it
- Give a clear critical judgement

Revision summary

Ghurye held that Indian tribes are incomplete Hindus who should be absorbed into caste civilisation.

He was right that many middle-Indian groups already share festivals, rank, and landlords with peasants.

Bose, Srinivas, Roy, and Bailey document that continuum.

He was wrong to treat Khasi matriliney, Naga polity, Munda khuntkatti, and sarna or church as mere backwardness.

Elwin, Haimendorf, and the **Xaxa Committee** keep tribe as a distinct historical and legal category.

Introduction

G. S. Ghurye argued that Indian tribes are not a separate civilisation but backward Hindus, that is, groups on the edge of caste society who already share many Hindu beliefs and who should be absorbed further. The statement is a policy claim as well as a description, and it must be tested against hill and forest ethnography.

Body**Ghurye's thesis**

- In *The Aborigines - So-Called - and Their Future* and later *The Scheduled Tribes*, **Govind Sadashiv Ghurye** rejected the colonial isolation of "aborigines".
- He held that many tribes already worshipped Hindu gods, used Hindu festivals, and sat on a caste-like rank ladder next to peasants.

- "Backward" meant incomplete Sanskritisation and weak access to plains resources, not a different human type.
- **Policy followed description:** education, Hindu social reform, and administrative integration, against **Verrier Elwin**'s call to protect a distinct hill genius.

What the thesis gets right

- **N. K. Bose**'s Hindu method of tribal absorption and **M. N. Srinivas**'s Sanskritisation show real traffic: Oraon, Munda, Bhil, and Gond groups take on Hindu festivals, gotras, and vegetarian elites.
- **S. C. Roy** already recorded Oraon and Munda contact with Hindu landlords and missionaries. Tribe and caste are a continuum in much of middle India, as **F. G. Bailey** later said of Bisipara.
- **Census** and reservation politics often treat "tribe" as a legal list, while everyday rank behaves like a jati.

What the thesis gets wrong

- Language families (Austroasiatic, Tibeto-Burman, Dravidian hill tongues), clan land such as **Munda khuntkatti**, Naga morung, and Khasi matriliney are not delayed varna.
- Elwin's NEFA, Apatani, and Baiga work, and later **Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf** on Gonds and Nagas, show political and ritual systems that do not wait to become Hindu jatis.
- Calling tribes "backward Hindus" erases Christian Naga and Mizo publics, Buddhist Monpa monasteries, and sarna or sacred-grove religion as mere deficit.
- **Xaxa Committee** (2014) treated ST as a political-historical category of dispossession, not as incomplete Hindus.

Critical comment

- Ghurye correctly attacked a museum view of tribes and correctly saw Hinduisation in the plains fringe.
- He wrongly made Hindu society the only future, and he used "backward" as a civilisational rank.
- Anthropology now reads tribe-caste contact as two-way, historically specific, and legally Scheduled, not as a single ladder into Hinduism.

Flow diagram

Ghurye -> Backward Hindus
 Backward Hindus -> Absorption
 Elwin Haimendorf -> Distinct land language
 Bailey Bose Roy -> Tribe caste continuum
 Tribe caste continuum -> Ghurye
 Distinct land language -> Not only Hindu deficit

Conclusion

Ghurye's phrase names contact and absorption in middle India. It fails as a general law. Tribes are historically distinct in land, language, and polity even when they take Hindu rites. Integration without erasure is the better policy reading.

Facts & figures

G. S. Ghurye

Sociologist who argued that so-called aborigines were backward Hindus and opposed Elwin's protectionist NEFA line.

Verrier Elwin

Argued for development along tribal genius, land protection, and limited outsider rush, especially in NEFA.

N. K. Bose

Described a Hindu method of absorbing tribal groups through occupation and festival without sudden race replacement.

F. G. Bailey

Bisipara study treating tribe and caste as a political continuum in highland Odisha.

Xaxa Committee 2014

Official review that treated Scheduled Tribes as historically dispossessed communities, not as incomplete Hindus.

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