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Q5(c)

Village as little republic

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2023 · Anthropology GS 2 · 10 marks · Evolution of the Indian Culture and Civilization

1.1 Evolution of the Indian Culture and Civilization-Prehistoric (Palaeolithic, Mesolithic, Neolithic and Neolithic-Chalcolithic), Protohistoric (Indus Civilization). Pre-Harappan, Harappan and post-Harappan cultures. Contributions of the tribal cultures to Indian civilization.

Core demand of the question

- Write a note on the village as a little republic
- State Metcalfe's phrase and later uses
- Show anthropological criticism
- Keep the note within a 10-mark length

Revision summary

Metcalfe called Indian villages little republics that outlasted kingdoms.

Maine and **Gandhi** reused the image for custom and swaraj.

Srinivas, Lewis, Marriott, and Bêteille showed caste, jajmani, and markets.

Dumont placed caste civilisation above the village isolate.

The **73rd Amendment** created elected local government, not Metcalfe's timeless hamlet.

Introduction

- **Charles Metcalfe** called the Indian village a little republic: a self-sufficient, enduring community of cultivators that survived the fall of kingdoms. The phrase shaped colonial policy and later nationalist praise. Anthropology treats it as a partial myth.

Body

The phrase and its heirs

- **Sir Charles Metcalfe** (1830) described village communities as little republics with hereditary officers, common land ideas, and continuity through war.
- **Henry Maine** and some revenue officers used the same picture for custom and joint property.
- **M. K. Gandhi** turned the village into the moral unit of swaraj. **Jawaharlal Nehru** and planners later mixed praise with a need to modernise the same village.

What ethnography found

- **M. N. Srinivas** showed dominant caste, faction, and outside markets. Rampura was not a sealed republic.
- **Oscar Lewis, McKim Marriott, and André Bêteille** showed jajmani inequality, caste rank, and land conflict.

- Villages paid revenue, sent labour, and took caste law from wider kingdoms. **Dumont** argued that caste civilisation, not the village isolate, is the true unit.

What remains useful

- Local officers, common irrigation, and panchayat memory are real.
- Calling that a republic hides landlords, women, and Dalits who did not vote in any ancient assembly.

After 1992

- The **73rd Amendment** made an elected gram panchayat a constitutional local government. That is a republic in a new legal sense, still not Metcalfe's timeless isolate.

Flow diagram

Metcalfe little republic -> Gandhi village swaraj

Srinivas Beteille -> Caste faction market

Caste faction market -> Not a sealed republic

73rd Amendment -> Elected panchayat

Conclusion

The little-republic phrase names local continuity. It is false as autarky and equality. Srinivas and Beteille replaced it with caste, faction, and the wider state. Panchayati Raj is a modern republic of a different kind.

Facts & figures

Charles Metcalfe

Colonial minute (1830) describing Indian village communities as little republics.

Henry Maine

Used village community and custom in legal-historical writing that fed the same isolate picture.

M. N. Srinivas

Rampura work showing dominant caste and external ties, against a sealed republic.

André Beteille

Tanjore study of land, caste, and class inside a village linked to a wider agrarian system.

73rd Amendment

Constitutionalised Panchayati Raj; local government is elected, not a hereditary little republic.