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Q2(c)

Deconstruct the colonial history of Indian Anthropology highlighting the critical role played by the Indian Anthropologists in sustaining its autonomy.

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2024 · 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

- Outline colonial institutionalisation of anthropology in India
- Show how it served the census, tribe lists and indirect rule
- Show how Indian anthropologists built departments, critique and autonomy
- Name Roy, Ghurye, Elwin, Majumdar, Guha, Karve, Bose, Srinivas, Vidyarthi

Revision summary

Colonial anthropology served census, forest and criminal-tribe administration.

S. C. Roy professionalised ethnography; ASI and university departments Indianised the job.

Ghurye versus Elwin was an Indian debate on assimilation and isolation.

Srinivas, Karve, Bose, Majumdar and Vidyarthi supplied Indian concepts and village-tribe fields.

Autonomy means an Indian agenda and terms, not a refusal of world methods.

Introduction

- **Colonial Indian anthropology was born as a** knowledge of rule: tribes, castes and races were listed so that the army, the forest department and the census could work. Indian scholars used the same methods, then turned them into a profession that could criticise the empire and, later, the developmental state. Autonomy here means an Indian research agenda, not the absence of Western training.

Body

Colonial apparatus

Asiatic Society collecting, missionary grammars, and **official ethnography** - **Risley's** anthropometry and People of India, **Thurston** in Madras, **Russell and Hiralal** in the Central Provinces, **Hutton** and the census - produced the **tribe and caste gazetteer**. The **Criminal Tribes Act, 1871** (later 1924) turned ethnographic types into police categories, a harm **P. K. Bhowmick** later fought for the Lodha. Forest Acts (1865, 1878, 1927) needed a picture of "shifting cultivators" as wasteful. **Verrier Elwin** began as a missionary-adjacent outsider inside this world, then wrote The Aborigines (1943) against rapid assimilation.

Anthropology in India was thus **administrative, racial and museum-based** before it was a university subject. **B. S. Guha** at the Anthropological Survey (founded 1945, on a colonial survey logic) still used racial types even as he Indianised the institution.

Indian professionalisation

S. C. Roy of Ranchi, often called the father of Indian ethnography, published *The Mundas and Their Country* (1912) and founded *Man in India* (1921). He wrote as a lawyer-scholar of Chotanagpur, not as a district officer. **G. S. Ghurye** at Bombay built sociology-anthropology on Indology and diffusion, arguing tribes were **backward Hindus** - a nationalist assimilation that opposed Elwin's isolationism. That **Ghurye-Elwin debate** is itself Indian autonomy: the quarrel is about the nation's tribal policy, not about London's syllabus alone.

D. N. Majumdar at Lucknow combined physical and social anthropology and village work (*Caste and Communication in an Indian Village*). **N. K. Bose** offered the **Hindu method of tribal absorption** and a swadeshi cultural politics close to **Gandhi**. **Irawati Karve** mapped kinship regions and refused to treat India as a copy of African segmentary models. **M. N. Srinivas** brought British structural-functional fieldwork home as **sanskritisation, dominant caste and the field view**, training a generation that could study India without a district gazetteer as the last word. **L. P. Vidyarthi** at Ranchi built a tribal research centre, the **sacred complex**, and **nature-man-spirit**, an Indian conceptual set for Chotanagpur and beyond. **S. C. Dube, T. C. Das, K. P. Chattopadhyay** and later **Surajit Sinha** (tribe-caste continuum) thickened the same autonomy.

Departments at Calcutta, Bombay, Lucknow, Delhi, Ranchi and the **Anthropological Survey of India** created jobs, journals and a Hindi-English teaching corpus. After 1947, anthropologists sat on the **Scheduled Tribes** lists, the **Dhebar Commission**, and planning cells - a new risk of becoming the state's experts, which **Xaxa** later criticised.

How autonomy was sustained

Autonomy was not autarky. Srinivas trained at Oxford; Karve read Kroeber; Vidyarthi used Redfield. The critical move was **problem choice**: Indian village, Indian tribe, **Indian civilisation**, Indian development. They rejected Risley's racial ranking as policy, even when some still used anthropometry in the lab. They built **Indian terms** - sanskritisation, sacred complex, tribe-caste continuum, dominant caste - that the world now cites.

- **They also fought colonial leftovers**: denotification of "criminal tribes", opposition to a purely museum tribal, and, in Elwin's NEFA philosophy, a brake on extractive integration. **A. Aiyappan, C. von Fürer-Haimendorf** (an émigré who Indianised his field) and **B. K. Roy Burman** (buffer zone, development anthropology) continued that civic role.

Limits remain. English journals, Delhi-Ranchi hierarchies, and dependence on ministry grants can reproduce a new centre. Autonomy is a practice of **fieldwork in Indian languages and of conceptual invention**, which the colonial census never needed.

Flow diagram

Census Risley CTA -> Colonial ethnography

Srinivas Vidyarthi Karve. Census Risley CTA. Roy journals -> Indian departments

Ghurye Elwin -> Tribal policy debate

Srinivas Vidyarthi Karve -> Indian concepts

Conclusion

Colonial anthropology listed peoples for rule. Indian anthropologists took the field method and built departments, debates and concepts that could serve - and criticise - the republic. Roy, Ghurye, Elwin, Majumdar, Guha, Karve, Bose, Srinivas and Vidyarthi are the spine of that autonomy.

Facts & figures

S. C. Roy

Munda ethnography and Man in India (1921); a professional Indian anthropology outside the district gazetteer.

Ghurye-Elwin debate

Ghurye: tribes as backward Hindus to be assimilated. Elwin: protection of aboriginal culture, especially in NEFA.

Criminal Tribes Act 1871

Colonial law that stigmatised communities as born criminals; denotified after Independence, with Bhowmick's Lodha work as a later anthropological intervention.

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