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Q7(b)

Discuss the theories on the origin of caste system and its criticism in India. Differentiate between caste, class, and race.

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2024 · 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

- Survey theories of caste origin in India and the main criticisms
- Differentiate caste, class and race with Indian and comparative anchors
- Use Ghurye, Dumont, Srinivas, Ambedkar, Nesfield, Risley carefully

Revision summary

Risley's racial origin, Nesfield's occupation, Dumont's purity, Marxist surplus and Ambedkar's endogamy-plus-power are the main origin theories.

Each is incomplete; race science is rejected; census hardened but did not invent caste.

Caste is hereditary ranked endogamy; class is economic position; race is biologicalised group ranking.

Indian class is caste-inflected; American race law is not a copy-paste model.

Ambedkar and Srinivas together correct Dumont's over-ritual picture.

Introduction

Theories of the **origin of caste** try to explain how a ranked, hereditary, endogamous order became the social grammar of much of India. None is sufficient alone. **Caste, class and race** are related systems of inequality that must still be kept conceptually distinct.

Body**Theories of origin and their criticism**

Racial / ethnological. Herbert Risley measured noses and claimed caste began as a racial barrier between "Aryan" and "non-Aryan". **B. S. Guha** later classified Indian types. Criticism: anthropometry does not explain jajmani, endogamy or occupation; it served colonial divide. Genetics today shows mixture, not a frozen race map. This theory is historically important and scientifically failed.

Occupational (Nesfield). Caste grew from guild-like occupations that became hereditary. Criticism: many castes change work; Brahmins are not only priests; occupation follows rank as often as it founds it.

- **Religious / Brahmanical (Dumont, older Indology).** **Homo Hierarchicus:** purity and pollution, status encompassing power, varna ideology. **G. S. Ghurye** listed segmental division, hierarchy, commensality, occupation, and civil-religious disabilities from textual and historical

materials. Criticism: **M. N. Srinivas**'s field view - dominant landed Shudras, sanskritisation - shows power is not always encompassed. **Ambedkar** treated caste as **graded inequality** and a Brahmanical political project, not a harmonious cosmos. **Béteille** showed land, office and caste can diverge.

Political / colonial. Some writers argue the British census **created modern caste**. Criticism: **endogamy and rank are older than 1871; the census hardened and enumerated** what was already a system. **Dirks** is useful if not totalised.

Economic / Marxist (A. R. Desai and others). Caste as ideology of a surplus-extracting order. Criticism: it explains disability and labour well, ritual specificity less well.

Ambedkarite. Caste originates in the **enclosure of marriage** (endogamy) and in the defeat of Buddhist and non-Brahmanical orders; it is maintained by violence and scripture. This is the strongest **ethical-political** origin account for the syllabus.

No single origin (race, occupation, irrigation, or Aryan invasion as cartoon) survives. A working synthesis: **varna ideology plus jati endogamy plus agrarian surplus plus later colonial enumeration**.

Caste, class and race

Caste is a **hereditary, endogamous, ranked** status group with rules of marriage, food and often occupation, legitimated by a sacred hierarchy (varna-jati). Mobility is corporate and slow (sanskritisation, conversion, law).

Class is a **relation to production and market** - land, wage, capital - theoretically open to individual movement. In India class is **caste-shaped**: landless labour is disproportionately SC/ST; capital is not randomly distributed. **Béteille** and **Srinivas** both insisted on studying the overlap without reducing one to the other.

Race is a **supposedly biological** ranking of human groups, historically used in slavery, colonialism and Nazism. India used racial talk (**Risley**) but the everyday engine of rank is **caste**, not colour as in the US Black-White bar, though colourism exists. **Tribe** is yet another legal-political identity, not a race.

- **Differentiation:** caste membership is **ascribed by birth and marriage**; class position is **economic** and can change faster; race claims **biology**. Discrimination can use all three.

Reservation law in India targets caste and tribe lists, not race as in US affirmative action, which is why **Ghurye** versus American race sociology must not be copied blindly.

Fundamentalism and racism can attach to caste (untouchability as pollution of blood). Still, a Jat and a Chamar in western UP are not two races in the **Risley** sense; they are jatis in a class relation over land.

Flow diagram

Origin theories -> Race occupation ritual political economic
 Caste -> Endogamy rank sacred
 Class -> Market and labour
 Race -> Claimed biology

Conclusion

Caste origin theories that rest on race or on a single occupation fail. Ideology, endogamy, agrarian power and colonial listing together explain the system. Caste is hereditary rank, class is economic relation, race is biologicalised ranking. Indian inequality weaves them; analysis should not merge the words.

Facts & figures

Risley

Colonial anthropometry; caste as racial barrier. Method and policy both discredited.

Dumont

Homo Hierarchicus: purity-pollution and status encompassing power as the ideology of caste.

Ambedkar

Caste as graded inequality maintained by endogamy and Brahmanical domination; annihilation, not reform of rank, as the political goal.

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