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Q8(b)

Distinguish a 'Theocratic State' from a secular, liberal, democratic state. Illustrate your answer with examples from tribal and contemporary societies.

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2024 · Anthropology GS 2 · 15 marks · Social change and contemporary tribal societies

7.2 Social change and contemporary tribal societies: Impact of modern democratic institutions, development programmes and welfare measures on tribals and weaker sections.

Core demand of the question

- Define theocratic state versus secular, liberal, democratic state
- Illustrate with tribal sacred chiefdoms or priest-kings and with contemporary examples
- **Keep anthropology:** legitimacy, law, dissent, women and minorities

Revision summary

A theocratic state derives sovereignty and law from the sacred and from priestly or god-king office.

A secular liberal democracy derives them from a constitution, rights and contested elections.

Tribal illustrations are sacral chiefs, priest-dairymen and sacred mountains, not full modern theocracies.

India is designed as the second type; custom under PESA is subordinate to Fundamental Rights.

Fundamentalism is the project of closing that gap toward sacred coercion.

Introduction

A **theocratic state** claims that **sovereign authority is divine** and that law is first a sacred code administered by priests or by a ruler as god's deputy. A **secular, liberal, democratic state** claims that **sovereignty is popular**, that law is human and revisable, that religions are plural and that individuals have rights against the majority. Anthropology compares how each produces legitimacy, not which temple is true.

Body

Theocratic authority

In a theocracy, office is **sacred**. The Egyptian pharaoh, early **Tibetan** priest-rule, **Iran's** post-1979 velayat-e faqih, and historic **Papal States** are textbook forms. Law is revelation plus interpretation. Dissent is heresy. Citizenship may depend on faith.

Tribal and traditional societies rarely built a full territorial theocracy, but they show **sacral kingship and priest-chiefs**. **Shillong's** Khasi states mixed custom and sacred geography. **Zulu** and some African kingships were ritual as well as military. **Toda** priest-dairymen of the

Nilgiris controlled sacred buffaloes, not a modern state. **Ahom** swargadeo and many Gond and Bhil chiefs used **sacred kingship** (Hocart, Frazer's older language, later African political anthropology). **Vidyarthi's** Gaya is a sacred complex inside a republic, not a theocratic state. The point of illustration is **legitimacy by the sacred**, which can exist at village scale (a pahan or jhankar who must bless sowing) without a Vatican.

- **A contemporary tribal example of tension:** Niyamgiri Dongria Kondh treat the mountain as a god. That is **sacred sovereignty over a landscape**. The Indian Union is a secular republic that, in 2013, let Gram Sabhas speak. The episode is a meeting of theocratic feeling for land with democratic procedure, not a Dongria state.

Secular, liberal, democratic state

Secular: the state does not establish one church; in India, principled distance (**Articles 25-28, Bommai**). **Liberal:** basic rights, rule of law, limits on majority (Fundamental Rights, independent courts). **Democratic:** rulers are chosen in contested elections, and can be removed (**adult franchise**, panchayats, Parliament).

- **India is this type** in constitutional design, **with exceptions and failures:** personal laws, religious trusts, and majoritarian movements that want a sacral nation. **Sixth Schedule** councils and **PESA** custom sit inside the secular constitution; they are not licensed theocracies, which is why custom must yield to women's dignity and to Fundamental Rights.

Contrast

| | Theocratic | Secular liberal democratic |

|---|---|---|

| Source of law | Revelation, priestly office | Constitution, legislation, courts |

| Dissent | Blasphemy | Protected speech within public order |

| Plural religions | Subject or banned | Equal civic status |

| Headship | God, imam, god-king | President/PM and elected houses |

| Tribal analogue | Priest-chief, sacred mountain as law | Gram Sabha under PESA plus Constitution |

Fundamentalism (question 6b) seeks to push a democracy back toward theocracy. **Ethno-nationalism** (7c) may sacralise blood rather than a church. A liberal democracy can still be religious in society (**religiosity**). The distinction is **who may coerce**.

Failed democracies that hold elections but police ritual (or that lynch in the name of a cow or a book) are **democracies under theocratic pressure**, not a third stable type.

Flow diagram

Theocracy -> Sacred law and office

Secular liberal democracy -> Constitution and votes

Priest-chief sacred land -> Theocracy

PESA Gram Sabha plus rights -> Secular liberal democracy

Conclusion

A theocratic state rules in the name of the sacred; a secular liberal democracy rules in the name of equal citizens. Tribal priest-chiefs and sacred landscapes show the first logic at small scale. India's Constitution chooses the second, while still housing custom and religiosity. The test is whether a dissenter and a religious minority can live without a priest's permission.

Facts & figures

Articles 25-28

Constitutional cluster of religious freedom and secular limits on the state as church.

Bommai 1994

Secularism as a basic feature of the Indian constitutional state.

Niyamgiri 2013

Gram Sabha process inside a secular republic about a sacred tribal landscape.

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