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Q1(e)

Characteristics and communication between Little and Great Traditions.

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2025 · Anthropology GS 2 · 10 marks · Indigenous and exogenous processes of socio-cultural change in Indian society

5.3 Indigenous and exogenous processes of socio-cultural change in Indian society: Sanskritization, Westernization, Modernization; Inter-play of little and great traditions; Panchayati Raj and social change; Media and Social change.

Core demand of the question

- Define Little and Great Traditions
- State their characteristics
- **Show how they communicate:** universalisation, parochialisation, Sanskritisation and the opposite flows
- Give Indian examples including tribes and villages

Revision summary

Redfield's Great Tradition is textual, specialist and pan-regional; the Little Tradition is local, oral and village or tribal.

Marriott's universalisation and parochialisation, and Srinivas's Sanskritisation, describe the traffic between them.

Vidyarthi's Gaya **sacred complex** is a pilgrimage switchboard.

Tribal festival-taking and sacred-grove law (FRA, PESA) are living two-way examples.

The pair is a civilisation process, not two separate India.

Introduction

Robert Redfield distinguished Little and Great Traditions in peasant civilisations. **McKim Marriott**, **Milton Singer** and **M. N. Srinivas** made the pair a working tool for India. Communication between the two is the point of the question, not a static list of traits.

Body

Characteristics

- **The Great Tradition is the literate, pan-regional, textual and specialist stream:** Vedas and Puranas, shastra, classical Islam of the qazi and madrasa, Buddhist and Jain canons, temple Agamas, court music. It is carried by priests, monks, lawyers and urban elites. It claims universality.
- **The Little Tradition is the local, often oral, village and tribal stream:** harvest rites, lineage gods, possession, caste panchayat custom, sacred groves, local dargahs. It is carried by households, mediums, bards and elders. It is specific to a place.

Redfield insisted they are **dimensions of one civilisation**, not two countries. **Indian civilisation** is the long conversation between them.

How they communicate

Marriott, in Kishan Garhi, named **universalisation** (a local goddess or rite is rewritten as a Sanskritic deity or pan-Indian festival) and **parochialisation** (a Puranic story is pulled down into a village plot, a local name, a local pond). Srinivas's **Sanskritisation is a related mobility strategy: a caste copies the Great Tradition's ritual style**. **Islamisation** and **Christianisation** are parallel upward or outward pulls. **Tribalisation** and revival of sacred groves, or the reclaiming of a village deity against a temple committee, are reverse flows.

L. P. Vidyarthi's sacred complex of Gaya - sacred geography, sacred performances, sacred specialists - shows a pilgrimage city as a switchboard between village ancestors and a pan-Hindu Gaya-shraddha. **N. K. Bose** described tribes taking Hindu festivals while keeping clan gods. **S. C. Roy's** Oraon and Munda work already showed this two-way traffic.

A living example is **Ayyappa** at Sabarimala, where forest pilgrimage, tribal hill memory and a Sanskritic vrata meet, later litigated in **Indian Young Lawyers Association v. State of Kerala**. Another is **PESA and FRA** recognising Gram Sabha and community forest resource - the Little Tradition of grove and commons - against a Forest Department that once spoke only the Great Tradition of colonial statute.

- **Cinema, television and social media now carry both:** a televised katha is Great Tradition in a Little living room; a village reel can become a national saint overnight.

Flow diagram

Little Tradition -> universalisation Great Tradition
 Great Tradition -> parochialisation Little Tradition
 Little Tradition -> Sanskritisation Great Tradition

Conclusion

Little and Great Traditions are two circuits of the same civilisation. Universalisation, parochialisation and Sanskritisation are the wires between them. Indian examples run from Gaya and Kishan Garhi to sacred groves now named in forest-rights law.

Facts & figures

Robert Redfield

Named Little and Great Traditions as complementary streams inside peasant civilisations, including India.

McKim Marriott

From Kishan Garhi, described universalisation of local rites and parochialisation of pan-Indian stories.

Sacred complex

L. P. Vidyarthi's model of sacred geography, performances and specialists, used at Gaya to show civilisation in a pilgrimage town.

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