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Q2(b)

Delineate the major features of S. S. Sarkar's classification of Indian populations. Was his classification better than Risley? Explain

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2025 · Anthropology GS 2 · 15 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

- State **S. S. Sarkar**'s classification of Indian populations and its main features
- State Risley's scheme
- Compare criteria, number of types, and political use
- Judge whether Sarkar was better, and on what grounds

Revision summary

Risley used nasal index and seven racial types tied to caste rank for the colonial census.

Sarkar offered fewer types, more tribal and linguistic caution, and less nose-to-varna politics.

Sarkar is better than Risley as a critique of colonial ranking, not as a modern genetic map.

Guha's 1931 types are another typological cousin.

Reservation law now uses social backwardness, not racial census boxes.

Introduction

Herbert Hope Risley classified Indian peoples for the colonial census by nose, colour and caste ranking. **S. S. Sarkar** classified them later as a human biologist, using a wider set of morphological and genetic hints. The question is whether Sarkar improved on Risley, not whether either scheme is true for ever.

Body

Risley's scheme

- Risley (1901 census, **The People of India**) offered seven types: **Turko-Iranian, Indo-Aryan, Scytho-Dravidian, Aryo-Dravidian, Mongolo-Dravidian, Mongoloid, Dravidian**. The **nasal index** was his favourite number. He tied type to caste rank: finer noses higher in the varna ladder. The scheme served empire: it made inequality look like biology.

B. S. Guha later used a different set of types for the 1931 census and the Anthropological Survey. Both remain **typological races**.

Sarkar's scheme

S. S. Sarkar, working in the mid-twentieth century, proposed a simpler set often taught as **Australoid, Indo-Aryan, Irano-Scythian, Mundari-speaking (or Mundari-Malayan), Mongolian**, with regional notes on Negrito traces in the south-west hills. He paid more attention to **tribal India, language families and prehistoric archaeology** than Risley did. He treated many South Indian and central Indian populations as having an Australoid base with later overlays, rather than as a single "Dravidian race" invented to match a language.

- **Features of his approach:** fewer grand types; more weight on tribes (Munda, Bhil, Chenchu, Kadar debates); scepticism of Risley's nose-to-caste ladder; use of blood groups as they became available, still inside a racial typology.

Was it better?

Better as science than Risley: Sarkar dropped the crudest caste-equals-race move. He saw language and biology as different maps. He took tribal variation seriously. **Not good enough as modern biology:** both men sorted living people into boxes. **Cavalli-Sforza**, later craniometrics, and **Reich's** ancient DNA show clines, mixture and caste endogamy as social history, not seven or five races. The so-called Negrito problem in India remains a weak, recycled label.

Guha is often preferred in Indian syllabi because of anthropometry at a national scale. Sarkar is preferred to Risley because he is post-colonial in mood and less serviceable to census ranking. Neither is a substitute for genetics plus ethnography. The **Anthropological Survey of India's People of India** project and the **Census's refusal to list race are the institutional aftermath: the state still counts SC, ST and OBC, not Risley types.** **Indra Sawhney** and later reservation law treat backwardness as social and educational, which is the right lesson from the failure of racial census.

Flow diagram

Risley -> Nasal index and seven types
Risley -> Caste as race
Sarkar -> Tribes and fewer types
Sarkar -> Language not equal biology
Genetics -> Clines and mixture

Conclusion

Sarkar's classification is better than Risley's because it weakens the nose-caste ladder and attends to tribes and language. It is still a racial typology. Living anthropology uses clines, caste endogamy and history, not Risley or Sarkar as a final map.

Facts & figures

Risley types

Seven groups from Turko-Iranian to Dravidian, built on anthropometry and used in the 1901 census narrative.

S. S. Sarkar

Indian human biologist who classified populations with more weight on Australoid tribal bases and less on caste-as-race.

People of India

Anthropological Survey project that documented communities as cultural units rather than Risley races.

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