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Q1(c)

Regionalism and Autonomy

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2025 · Anthropology GS 2 · 10 marks · The concept of ethnicity

7.3 The concept of ethnicity; Ethnic conflicts and political developments; Unrest among tribal communities; Regionalism and demand for autonomy; Pseudo-tribalism. Social change among the tribes during colonial and post-Independent India.

Core demand of the question

- Define regionalism and political autonomy in the Indian Union
- Show how language, tribe, ecology and history produce regional claims
- Give constitutional devices and living examples
- State how autonomy can both hold the Union and strain it

Revision summary

Regionalism politicises territory through language, tribe, history or economy.

- **Autonomy is the constitutional reply:** new states, Fifth and Sixth Schedules, PESA, **Article 371**, Inner Line.

Bhuria and Xaxa named the gap between paper PESA and practice.

Bomma, Sarkaria and Punchhi frame the Union-state balance.

Examples include Telangana, Bodoland, Gorkhaland, Naga accords and resource belts under **Samata** and FRA.

Introduction

Regionalism is the political use of a territory's language, history, tribe or economy against a larger centre. Autonomy is the legal space that the Constitution gives such a region so that it can stay inside the Union. Anthropology reads both as identity and as resource politics, not only as map-drawing.

Body**What regionalism is**

It is not the same as secession. Most Indian regionalisms ask for a state, an autonomous council, a hill district, or special fiscal treatment. Linguistic reorganisation after the **States Reorganisation Commission** (Fazal Ali, 1955) and the creation of Andhra, then later Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Uttarakhand and Telangana, show the Union answering region with new states.

Tribal regionalism is older than language politics in the hills. Naga, Mizo, Bodo, Gorkha and Jharkhand movements mixed **ethnicity, land and mission or mining history**. **F. G. Bailey** and **Sachchidananda** already saw "tribe" becoming a regional political category.

Constitutional autonomy

- **Article 3** lets Parliament form new states.
- **Fifth Schedule** and **Tribes Advisory Councils**, with the Governor's regulations, are the plains-and-peninsula device. **PESA, 1996**, after the **Bhuria Committee**, tries to put Gram Sabha at the centre of land, minor forest produce and intoxicants in **Fifth Schedule** areas. Implementation is uneven, as the **Xaxa Committee** (2014) recorded.
- **Sixth Schedule** gives Autonomous District Councils in parts of Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura and Mizoram. Bodoland Territorial Region after the 2020 accord is a later, thicker council.
- **Articles 371A to 371J** special-status clauses protect Nagaland land and social practice, Sikkim, Mizoram, Manipur hills, Andhra-Telangana, Karnataka Hyderabad-Karnataka, and others.
- **Inner Line** under the Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulation, 1873, still structures Arunachal, Nagaland, Mizoram and now Manipur.

S. R. Bommai v. Union of India (1994) limited arbitrary central takeover of states. **Punchhi** and **Sarkaria** Commissions discussed federal balance. The Supreme Court in the **NCT of Delhi** cases and in **Kerala/Centre** fiscal disputes keeps returning to the same tension: region wants room, Union wants one market and one security policy.

Living examples

Telangana combined language pride with a claim that coastal Andhra took canal and job surplus. Gorkhaland remains an autonomous hill council rather than a state. In the North-East, **ILP, AFSPA debates and peace accords** (Naga Framework, Bodo, Bru resettlement) show autonomy as a peace technology. Resource regionalism - Odisha bauxite, Jharkhand coal, Ladakh **Sixth Schedule** demand after 2019 - ties identity to **Samata** (1997) and forest-rights litigation.

Autonomy fails when councils are captured by a single elite, when funds bypass Gram Sabha, or when a new inner minority (Bru in Mizoram, non-Bodo in BTR) is squeezed.

Flow diagram

Regional claim -> Language
 Regional claim -> Tribe and hills
 Regional claim -> Economy and resources
 Regional claim -> Fifth Sixth 371 PESA new state

Conclusion

Indian regionalism usually asks to rearrange the Union, not to leave it. Fifth and Sixth Schedules, PESA, **Article 371** and new states are the toolkit. The test is whether autonomy protects land and language without creating a smaller domination inside the region.

Facts & figures

Bhuria Committee

Recommended tribal self-rule that became the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996.

Sixth Schedule

Autonomous District Councils for specified tribal areas in four North-Eastern states, with law-making on land, forest and local custom.

Samata (1997)

Supreme Court restricted transfer of tribal land in Scheduled Areas to non-tribals, including mining leases, unless law clearly allows it.

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