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Q5(c)

Tribalism and Pseudotribalism

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2025 · Anthropology GS 2 · 10 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

- Define tribalism as political and cultural self-making
- Define pseudotribalism
- Give Indian examples of both
- Show how ST lists, elections and courts sit in the middle

Revision summary

Tribalism is modern ethnic-political self-making among Adivasi and hill peoples.

Pseudotribalism is the accusation of performing tribe for ST entry or capture of benefits.

Lokur tests and Gazette politics sit in the middle; courts follow the list more than folklore.

Powerful listed groups and unlisted forest people show why one word "tribe" is too coarse.

Grade vulnerability (PVTG to dominant ST) instead of only true versus fake.

Introduction

Tribalism is the making of a political "we" out of clan, language, hill and memory.

Pseudotribalism is the charge that a group performs tribe to enter a list, a quota or a council, without the historical life that the word was meant to name. Anthropology has to use both terms carefully, because the state invented the list that people now perform.

Body

Tribalism

It is not a primitive leftover. Naga nationalism, Mizo Zawlbuk-to-church public, Jharkhand adivasi mobilisation, Bodo assertion, and Dongria defence of Niyamgiri are tribalism as **modern politics**. Xaxa treats this as historically injured people using ethnicity. **Article 342, Fifth and Sixth Schedules, PESA and FRA** are the legal stage.

- **Tribalism can be exclusive:** a majority tribe squeezing a smaller one inside a **Sixth Schedule** council, or hill-valley violence in Manipur. Then tribalism is also a **dominant ethnicity**, close to what Srinivas described for caste.

Pseudotribalism

The term appears in Indian debate when communities with **peasant or caste histories** seek ST status (some Gujar-Meena conflicts in Rajasthan, tea-tribe claims in Assam, demands in

Uttarakhand and Himachal). Administrators say: they are not isolated, not "shy", not "primitive" - the Lokur tests again. Anthropologists should not swallow the insult, but they should admit **strategic essentialism**: folklore teams, dress, and a newly written origin myth for the Gazette.

André Bêteille warned that tribe and caste are colonial-administrative cousins. **Pseudotribalism** is often the state's word for a claim it does not want to grant. Sometimes the word is fair: a locally dominant group seeks ST to capture land and jobs meant for a more vulnerable neighbour.

The middle

Courts rarely "scientifically" certify tribe. They ask whether the President's list and the state process were followed. **Inclusion and exclusion** are political. A better language is **graded vulnerability**: PVTGs at one end, powerful listed groups at the other, unlisted forest people in between. Pseudotribalism as a slur cannot replace that grading.

- **Elections heat both**: ST reserved seats reward a tribal we; they also reward whoever can look most tribal on polling day.

Flow diagram

Tribalism -> Naga Mizo Jharkhand Niyamgiri
Pseudotribalism charge -> List and quota claims
List and quota claims -> Gazette Art 342
Naga Mizo Jharkhand Niyamgiri -> Gazette Art 342

Conclusion

Tribalism is real politics of historically distinct communities. Pseudotribalism names opportunistic listing, but it is also a bureaucratic weapon. The ST list, **PVTG layer** and Gram Sabha rights are the test, not costume.

Facts & figures

Strategic essentialism

A group simplifies and stages its culture to be seen by the state, common in ST-inclusion campaigns.

PVTG layer

A subset of STs recognised as more vulnerable, which already admits that not all listed tribes stand in the same place.

Bêteille

Argued that tribe and caste in India are entangled administrative categories, which complicates any pure-versus-pseudo test.

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