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Q4(a)

What are the different types of caste mobility in India? Highlight the various factors responsible for it

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2025 · Anthropology GS 2 · 20 marks · Caste system in India

3.2 Caste system in India-Structure and characteristics, Varna and caste, Theories of origin of caste system, Dominant caste, Caste mobility, Future of caste system, Jajmani system. Tribe-caste continuum.

Core demand of the question

- Name the main types of caste mobility in India
- Explain each with a mechanism and an example
- Highlight economic, political, religious and legal factors
- Keep **Sanskritisation**, but do not let it swallow the whole answer

Revision summary

Types include **Sanskritisation**, Westernisation, dominant-caste politics, conversion, ethnicisation, passing and legal listing.

Srinivas explained ritual copying; Mandal and Indra Sawhney explain political listing.

Ambedkarite conversion exits Hindu rank but meets list-law limits for some religious groups.

Economic, electoral, religious and judicial factors interact and can contradict.

Tribe-caste continuum is a related gradient, not the same as **Sanskritisation**.

Introduction

Caste mobility is change in the standing of a person, a family or a whole jati in a local or national rank order. **M. N. Srinivas** made **Sanskritisation** famous. India also moves by **Westernisation, conversion, politicisation, migration, law and the market**. Types must be separated before factors are piled on.

Body

Types

- **Sanskritisation**: A jati copies the ritual, diet and story of a higher local caste. Srinivas's Coorgs and many OBC peasant castes used this. It is group mobility in the village rank order, often without leaving Hinduism.
- **Westernisation and education**: English, white-collar jobs and urban housing, which Srinivas paired with **Sanskritisation**. A Nayar or Kayastha family may rise in class while ritual rank lags.
- **Dominant-caste politicisation**: Numbers plus land become party power (Yadav, Jat, Thevar). Rank is claimed as **backwardness plus rule**, a post-Mandal type.
- **Conversion**: To Islam, Christianity, Sikhism or Buddhism (**Ambedkar**, 1956). It can exit Hindu rank, but **Soosai v. Union of India** (1985) and later debates show that Dalit Christians and Muslims may lose SC lists while still facing stigma. Buddhist converts from SC remain in the list by later legal-political settlement.

- **De-Sanskritisation / ethnicisation:** A jati stresses a tribal or regional past (some Gujjar, some Kurmi, Jharkhand adivasi assertion) to enter **ST or OBC lists**.
- **Individual passing and hypergamy:** A family hides jati in a city; a woman marries up. Fragile, and often exposed in marriage markets.
- **Corporate legal mobility:** A community campaigns for **OBC, SC or ST** inclusion. This is administrative mobility. **Jarnail Singh, Indra Sawhney, Maratha reservation** (Jaishri Laxmanrao Patil, 2021) and the **102nd and 105th Amendments** (NCBC; then restoring state OBC lists) are the legal weather of this type.

Tribe-caste continuum (Bailey, Sinha) is adjacent: a group slides along a forest-peasant gradient rather than jumping a varna.

Factors

- **Economic:** land reform, Green Revolution, Gulf and factory remittances, IT salaries. Political: adult franchise, Mandal 1990, panchayat reservation. Religious: bhakti, Arya Samaj shuddhi, Ambedkarite Buddhism. Demographic: urban anonymity. Legal: prevention of atrocities law, which punishes some humiliations that used to enforce rank; creamy-layer rules, which split class inside a caste.

Factors do not work one way. A rich Jat may Sanskritise in marriage and ethnicise in a reservation rally in the same year.

Flow diagram

Caste mobility -> Sanskritisation
 Caste mobility -> Education class
 Caste mobility -> Party and Mandal
 Caste mobility -> Conversion
 Caste mobility -> List SC ST OBC

Conclusion

Sanskritisation, Westernisation, conversion, politicisation, ethnicisation and legal listing are different types of caste mobility. Land, votes, religion and the Supreme Court's reservation docket are the main factors. No single ladder explains all of them.

Facts & figures

Sanskritisation

Srinivas's term for a caste raising local rank by adopting higher-caste ritual, diet and origin stories.

Indra Sawhney 1992

Upheld OBC reservation, creamy layer and a general 50 percent ceiling, shaping legal mobility through lists.

Jaishri Laxmanrao Patil 2021

Struck down Maharashtra's extra Maratha quota as exceeding the ceiling without an exceptional case, showing the Court as a gate on corporate caste claims.

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