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Q9

Examine the uniqueness of tribal knowledge system when compared with mainstream knowledge and cultural systems.

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2021 · GS I · 10 marks · Indian Society and Diversity

Salient features of Indian Society, Diversity of India.

Core demand of the question

- Examine the uniqueness of tribal knowledge system when compared with mainstream knowledge and cultural systems
- Keep the examination within a 10-mark length

Revision summary

Tribal knowledge is local, oral, and tied to land and ritual.

Apantani, Toda, Andaman, and forest calendars are working cases.

Mainstream knowledge is textual, professional, and state-certified.

Sanskritic tradition is also old, but it is a different archive.

FRA and the Biodiversity Act try to keep tribal knowledge from being stolen or erased.

Introduction

Tribal knowledge is place-based, oral, and woven into ritual and livelihood. Mainstream knowledge in India is more textual, professional, and state-certified. Uniqueness is method and relation to land, not a lack of reason.

Body

What is unique

- **It is ecological and specific:** **Apantani** wet rice-fish, **Warli** and **Gond** forest calendars, **Toda** buffalo lore, and **Andaman** coastal reading of sea and wind.
- Transmission is apprenticeship and story, not a university degree. Elders, shamans, and women seed-keepers are the archive.
- **Health and cosmos are not split:** bone-setting, herb, and spirit sit in one healing, which **Verrier Elwin** noted and which AYUSH now sometimes extracts as 'data'.
- Property in knowledge is often collective. A seed or a song is not a patent until the market arrives.

Contrast with mainstream systems

- Mainstream school science is written, experimental, and portable. It can fly a satellite; it often fails a local monsoon micro-site that the tribe already named.
- Sanskritic 'mainstream' culture is also traditional, but it is textual and varna-ordered. Tribal systems are typically outside that varna book even when they borrow a god.

- The **Forest Rights Act, 2006**, and the **Biological Diversity Act, 2002**, exist because mainstream law long treated this knowledge as empty land.

Caution

- Do not romanticise. Tribal knowledge can be wrong on a vaccine and right on a fish season. Uniqueness is complementary, not a replacement for public health.

Flow diagram

Tribal knowledge -> Place oral commons
Mainstream -> Written portable certified
Tribal knowledge -> Complement
Mainstream -> Complement

Conclusion

Tribal knowledge is unique as situated, oral, and commons-based ecology. Mainstream systems are mobile and certified. Policy should protect the first and teach the second, not rank them as savage and civilised.

Facts & figures

FRA 2006

Recognises forest dwellers' rights, including community forest resource, which shelters knowledge-in-use.

Biological Diversity Act 2002

Access and benefit-sharing for biological resources and associated knowledge.

Apatani

Arunachal valley system of rice, fish, and careful water, a textbook of indigenous agronomy.

People's Biodiversity Registers

Local documents meant to record community knowledge before it is patented away.

Elwin

Wrote tribal life as a knowledge world, against a purely isolation-or-assimilation cartoon.