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Q18

Analyze the salience of 'sect' in Indian society vis-a-vis caste, region and religion.

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2022 · GS I · 15 marks · Social Empowerment, Communalism and Secularism
Social empowerment, communalism, regionalism and secularism.

Core demand of the question

- Analyze the salience of 'sect' in Indian society vis-a-vis caste, region and religion
- Show where sect cuts across those three, and where it is captured by them
- Keep a 15-mark length

Revision summary

Sect means sampradaya or panth inside a larger religion.

It can recruit across caste, yet it often becomes a new endogamous circle.

It wears a regional language and shrine map.

Religion, caste, and region remain the thicker grids of law, marriage, and state.

Sect is the inner badge used when those three are too coarse or too crowded.

Introduction

- **A sect in India is a bounded path inside a wider faith:** a sampradaya, panth, or denomination with its own guru, book, and mark. It matters because it can split a religion, cross a caste, or sit inside a region without replacing any of the three.

Body**Sect and religion**

- Religion names a large identity such as Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Christian, or Jaina; sect names Vaishnava, Shaiva, Lingayat, Sunni, Shia, Ahl-i-Hadith, **Khalsa**, Nirankari, or Syrian and Pentecostal churches.
- **Sect is therefore intra-religious salience:** people fight conversion, shrine, and law inside one census religion.
- Bhakti and Sufi panths historically made religion livable as a local path rather than as a single church.
- Politics can freeze a sect as if it were the whole religion, which is why Shia-Sunni or **Khalsa**-other Sikh lines become public when votes and processions meet.

Sect and caste

- Many Hindu sampradayas claim a guru who takes disciples across jati, which is the sect's promise of a religious public beyond birth.
- In practice Lingayat, Satnami, or certain Dalit panths also became new ranked communities, so sect can harden into a caste-like boundary.

- Endogamy often remains inside the sect's inner circle even when the discourse is equality, which is why caste still organises marriage while sect organises the temple or dargah.
- Reservations and census categories sometimes meet sects that want ST, OBC, or minority status, which shows sect bargaining with the caste-state, not floating free of it.

Sect and region

- **Sects are mapped:** Chaitanya Vaishnavism in Bengal, **Varkari** in Maharashtra, Virashaiva in Karnataka, Kashmir's older Shaiva and later Islamic lineages, Kerala's **Syrian Christians**.
- Region supplies language, festival, and shrine circuits that make a sect feel like a homeland.
- Migration carries the sect into a new city, where it may become a caste-like association among strangers, as in urban jati-sampradaya sabhas.

Salience today

- Sect is most salient when a religious majority is too large to mobilise without a sharper badge, or when a minority needs an inner law and a guru against the outer census box.
- Caste remains the stronger grid of marriage and job; region remains the grid of language and state; religion remains the grid of festival and personal law.
- **Sect is the flexible fourth:** sometimes a bridge across caste, sometimes a knife inside religion, always wearing a regional face.

Flow diagram

Religion -> Sect panth sampradaya
 Caste -> Sect panth sampradaya
 Region -> Sect panth sampradaya
 Sect panth sampradaya -> Crosses or hardens caste
 Sect panth sampradaya -> Splits religion locally

Conclusion

Sect is salient in India as a path inside religion, a possible but incomplete escape from caste, and a regional style of worship. It never abolishes caste, region, or religion; it reorganises how those three are performed in shrine, marriage, and vote.

Facts & figures

Sampradaya / panth

Indian terms for a sectarian path with guru, mark, and canon.

Lingayat / Virashaiva

Karnataka-centred Shaiva tradition that has claimed a status beside, not only inside, Hindu caste society.

Varkari

Maharashtra bhakti panth of Vitthala that mixes castes on pilgrimage while marriage stays largely jati-bound.

Shia and Sunni

Major Islamic sectarian division that is socially live in Indian towns and law debates.

Khalsa

Sikh initiated order that can stand as sect and as the public face of a religion.

Syrian Christians

Kerala Christian grouping in which denomination, region, and status rank intertwine.

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