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Q8(b)

"Relative deprivation is a major source of ethnic conflict." Elaborate the statement with relevant examples.

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2024 · PSIR GS 1 · 15 marks · Indian Nationalism

Indian Nationalism: Political Strategies of India's Freedom Struggle; Perspectives on Indian National Movement; Gandhi, Tagore, Nehru, Ambedkar, and the socialists.

Core demand of the question

- Define relative deprivation (15 marks)
- Show the causal path to ethnic conflict
- Elaborate with Indian and comparative examples
- Note other sources of ethnic conflict so the claim is not a single-cause slogan

Revision summary

Relative deprivation is the perceived gap between a group's entitlement and its actual share, relative to others or to its past.

Gurr linked that gap to political violence; ethnicity supplies a ready we-they organisation of the grievance.

Conflict often follows blocked mobility or lost rank more than shared absolute poverty.

Indian language and job conflicts, some insurgencies, and cases such as **Sri Lanka** illustrate the pattern.

Elite strategy, state bias, and security dilemmas also matter; relative deprivation is a major source, not the only one.

Introduction

Relative deprivation is the gap between what a group believes it is entitled to and what it actually receives, measured against another group or against its own past. **Ted Gurr** made the idea central to the study of rebellion. The statement that it is a major source of ethnic conflict is strong and largely right, provided it is not treated as the only source.

Body

From comparison to conflict

- **Ethnic identity supplies a we-they map. Relative deprivation supplies the grievance:** we have less office, less land, less respect, or less security than they do, or less than we had. Political entrepreneurs then organise fear and hope. **Dahl's** polyarchy can absorb some of this through bargains. If the state is seen as captured by one ethnic bloc, **legitimacy** fails and obligation to a common authority weakens.

Absolute poverty alone does not always produce ethnic war. Groups that are poor together may not mobilise as ethnic enemies. Groups that are rising but blocked, or falling after privilege, often do. That is the relative in the term.

Examples

In India, language and job competition in states, the demand for reorganisation, and later caste-and-community conflicts over reservations show relative deprivation among groups who compare educational and public-employment shares. Kashmiri and some North-Eastern insurgencies mixed secessionist nationalism with the sense of political and economic slight. Hindu-Muslim violence has often followed rumours of displacement in towns where one community's market position seemed to threaten another's. Sri Lanka's Tamil-Sinhala conflict followed competitive claims over language, university places, and the state. Northern Ireland and the former Yugoslavia showed similar comparison of status after political change.

Ambedkar's account of caste is related but not identical: graded inequality can produce deprivation that is absolute as well as relative. Ethnic conflict in the North-East also involves land, insurgency networks, and Centre-state militarisation, which are not only feelings of gap.

Elaborate, do not reduce

- **Relative deprivation is major because it explains timing:** conflict often rises when expectations rise faster than delivery, or when a previously dominant group loses rank. It does not erase elite manipulation, colonial classifications, or security dilemmas. **Gramsci** would add that hegemony can keep deprivation from becoming conflict until a crisis of authority. A full elaboration therefore uses Gurr's mechanism, illustrates it, and keeps a residual list of other causes.

Flow diagram

Relative deprivation -> Comparison of shares
Comparison of shares -> Ethnic grievance
Ethnic grievance -> Political entrepreneurs
Political entrepreneurs -> Ethnic conflict
Other causes -> Ethnic conflict

Conclusion

Relative deprivation is a major source of ethnic conflict because groups act on comparisons of entitlement and share, not only on absolute misery. Indian and comparative cases show the mechanism. Other causes remain. The statement should be accepted as a leading explanation, not as a complete one.

Facts & figures

Ted Gurr

Why Men Rebel treated relative deprivation as a principal psychological and social source of political violence.

Language reorganisation

Indian state reorganisation struggles mixed cultural recognition with competition over jobs and public status among language groups.

Sri Lanka

University and language policies after independence fed Tamil-Sinhala comparisons of state-controlled opportunity.

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