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Q8(b)

What is sects? Discuss their role in multi-religious societies with empirical examples.

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2018 · Sociology GS 1 · 15 marks · Religion and Society

Religion and Society: Sociological theories of religion; Types of religious practices: animism, monism, pluralism, sects, cults; Religion in modern society: religion and science, secularization, religious revivalism, fundamentalism.

Core demand of the question

- What are sects? Discuss their role in multi-religious societies with empirical examples
- Keep the discussion within a 15-mark length

Revision summary

A sect is a voluntary, strict fellowship versus a church of birth and grace.

Weber and Troeltsch set the contrast; Wilson typed later forms.

In multi-religious societies they reform, convert, and draw fences.

- **Examples:** Ambedkarite Buddhism, Arya Samaj, Pentecostal growth.

They can protect a minority or raise conflict with neighbours and the nation.

Introduction

A sect is a voluntary, disciplined religious group that breaks from a church or a loose tradition to demand intense commitment. Ernst Troeltsch and Max Weber contrasted church and sect. In multi-religious societies sects organise belonging, reform, and sometimes conflict.

Body

What a sect is

- Membership is earned by conversion or strict observance, not by birth alone.
- **Max Weber:** the sect is a community of the religiously qualified; the church is a compulsory institution of grace.
- Bryan Wilson later typed conversionist, revolutionist, and introversionist sects.

Role in multi-religious societies

- They can reform a majority faith from within, as bhakti and Sikh panth histories show in a broad sense of disciplined fellowship.
- **They mark boundaries in a crowded sacred market:** Arya Samaj shuddhi, Tablighi intensity, Pentecostal churches in South India.
- They may protect a minority's everyday life, or raise tension with neighbours and the state.
- Robert N. Bellah's civil religion is not a sect; sects can refuse the nation's sacred.

Empirical examples

- **Indian:** Lingayat debates over separate religion, neo-Buddhist conversion after **Ambedkar**, and missionary-derived churches as sect-to-denomination paths.
- **Comparative:** Protestant sects in the United States as voluntary religion beside a Catholic church type.

Caution

- **Census** religion labels smear sect and community. Field roles differ.

Flow diagram

Sect voluntary intense -> Reform conversion
Sect voluntary intense -> Boundary in plural field
Church by birth -> Contrast type
Sect voluntary intense -> State tension or protection

Conclusion

Sects are intense voluntary fellowships of the qualified. In multi-religious India they reform, convert, and fence groups. **Weber** and **Troeltsch** name the type; Ambedkarite Buddhism and reform associations show the living roles, including peace and polarisation.

Facts & figures

Weber

Sect as community of the religiously qualified; church as compulsory institution.

Troeltsch

Church-sect-mystic types in Christian social teaching.

Ambedkarite conversion

A mass religious move with sect-like discipline and a civic agenda.

Wilson

Typology of sects by response to the world.