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Q7(c)

Explain the growing salience of ethnicity in the contemporary world with illustrations.

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2021 · Sociology GS 1 · 15 marks · Sociology

Sociology - The Discipline: Modernity and social changes in Europe and emergence of sociology; Scope of the subject and comparison with other social sciences; Sociology and common sense.

Core demand of the question

- Explain the growing salience of ethnicity in the contemporary world
- Keep the explanation within a 20-mark length

Revision summary

Ethnicity is a made we-group; **Barth** emphasised boundaries.

Salience grows with migration, elections, media, and honour-resource claims.

Primordial feeling and elite organisation both operate.

Weberian closure organises labour markets that **Marx** hoped class would unify.

Indian region, caste, language, and lockdown streams illustrate.

Introduction

Ethnicity is a we-group of putative common origin, culture, or language, made in interaction. Fredrik **Barth** stressed boundaries, not a museum of traits. The contemporary world has not melted these boundaries. Migration, democracy, and global markets have made ethnicity more politically salient.

Body**Why salience grows**

- Globalisation moves people and goods while threatening local honour. Ethnicity becomes a portable identity, as Giddens's late-modern self seeks a firm we.
- The nation-state promises civic equality and often delivers ranked citizenship. Ethnic mobilisation is a claim to recognition and resources.
- Clifford Geertz's primordial attachments still matter in kinship and ritual. Paul Brass and instrumentalists show elites organising those attachments for party and job.
- Durkheimian effervescence in festivals and rallies turns a category into a crowd.

Forms

- Language, region, caste-as-ethnicity, tribe, and religion-as-ethnicity overlap in India.
- Diasporas and labour migrants carry ethnicity into new cities. Lockdown reverse migration also sent ethnic-regional streams home together.
- New media scale insult and solidarity faster than the old neighbourhood.

Against the old script

- **Marx** expected class to overtake status. Ethnic closure, in **Weber**'s sense, often organises the labour market instead.
- Parsons's universalism under-predicted ethnic parties and reservations politics.
- Dependency and world-system inequalities give ethnic peripheries a material grievance, not only a song.

Risks and uses

- Salience can protect minorities and languages. It can also become exclusionary nationalism and urban riot.
- Policy that only sees class misses who is hired on the site; policy that only sees ethnicity misses class inside the group.

Explanation stated

- Salience grows because modernity multiplies contact, inequality, and political arenas in which origin-groups can be named and funded.
- It is constructed and consequential, not a return of the tribe unchanged.

Flow diagram

Migration democracy media -> Growing salience

Barth boundaries -> Ethnicity

Resources honour jobs -> Growing salience

Ethnicity -> Growing salience

Conclusion

Ethnicity is more salient because boundaries are politically useful in markets, migrations, and elections. **Barth**, **Weber**, Geertz, and Brass explain how groups are made and mobilised. Indian language, caste, and regional streams, including lockdown returns, are living cases. Class does not replace ethnicity; the two organise each other.

Facts & figures

Barth

Ethnic groups are defined by maintained boundaries in interaction, not by a fixed culture list.

Weberian closure

Status groups restrict association and economic chance; ethnicity often works this way.

Instrumentalism

Elites organise ethnic symbols for power and jobs; Brass is a key Indian-facing statement.

Primordialism

Geertz: deep givenness of assumed blood, language, and ritual that politics can still ignite.

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