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Q6(c)

How do little tradition and great tradition coexist in contemporary Indian society ?

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2022 · 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

- How do little tradition and great tradition coexist in contemporary Indian society?
- Keep the explanation within a 20-mark length

Revision summary

- **Redfield**: great tradition is textual and civilisational; little tradition is local and peasant.

In India they exchange through Sanskritisation, temples, and media.

- **Marriott**: universalisation and parochialisation.

Census labels sit over many local cults.

Standardising politics tries to freeze the great; practice keeps both.

Introduction

Robert **Redfield** distinguished a great tradition of reflective, textual, urban civilisation from little traditions of local peasant practice. In India they do not sit in two boxes. They feed each other through temples, media, and caste, which McKim **Marriott** called a continual parochialisation and universalisation.

Body

The terms

- **Great tradition**: Sanskritic liturgy, classical law, pan-Indian epics, and now also constitutional and scientific canons.
- **Little tradition**: village deities, local festivals, oral custom, and caste-specific rites.
- **M. N. Srinivas's Sanskritisation is one traffic**: local groups take on great-traditional marks of rank.
- **The reverse traffic is also real**: local goddesses enter urban temples and television serials.

How coexistence works now

- A wedding may hire a Vedic priest and still keep a lineage custom the priest does not script.
- Pilgrimage sites join rustic vows to a national sacred geography. **Durkheim's** sacred is scaled up without erasing the local shrine.
- Cinema, television, and phones carry great-traditional stories into little-traditional homes, and they carry village speech into the city.

- Caste associations fund both a local math and a modern hostel, which is Rudolphs' modernity of tradition in religious dress.
- **Census** Hinduism is a great-traditional label over many little cults. The same person ticks one box and worships a boundary goddess.

Tension, not fusion only

- Reformers and Hindutva projects try to standardise a great tradition and discipline little practices as superstition or as authentic core, depending on the campaign.
- Christian and Muslim Indians have their own great textual traditions and local saint cults; **Redfield**'s pair is not a Hindu monopoly.
- Urban middle-class "spirituality" may drop the village and keep a packaged yoga, which is great tradition without peasant little tradition.

Contemporary coexistence

- The pattern is simultaneous use, not a one-way death of the little.
- **Marriott**'s universalisation (local becomes civilisational) and parochialisation (civilisational becomes local) still describe the traffic.

Flow diagram

Great tradition texts cities -> Universalisation
 Little tradition local cults -> Parochialisation
 Universalisation -> Contemporary coexistence
 Parochialisation -> Contemporary coexistence
 Sanskritisation media pilgrimage -> Contemporary coexistence

Conclusion

- **Little and great traditions coexist in India by constant exchange:** Sanskritisation and local absorption, temple and television, **Census** label and shrine. **Redfield** named the poles. **Srinivas** and **Marriott** named the traffic. Standardising projects try to freeze the great; everyday practice keeps both.

Facts & figures

Redfield

Peasant society and culture: great and little traditions in a civilisational field.

Marriott

Universalisation and parochialisation as two-way Indian traffic between poles.

Srinivas

Sanskritisation as local groups adopting great-traditional rank marks.

Census religion

A single official name covering internally diverse little traditions.

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