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Q8(c)

Examine the role of science and technology in addressing age-old taboos and superstitions

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2023 · Sociology GS 1 · 10 marks · Social Change in Modern Society

Social Change in Modern Society: Sociological theories of social change; Development and dependency; Agents of social change; Education and social change; Science, technology and social change.

Core demand of the question

- Examine the role of science and technology in addressing age-old taboos and superstitions
- Keep the examination within a 10-mark length

Revision summary

Taboos are sacred prohibitions. Superstitions are rejected causal beliefs.

Science and technology weaken some of both through **germ theory**, vaccines, and daily tools.

Weber's **disenchantment** describes the public shift to calculation.

Durkheim's sacred and caste honour explain why many taboos persist.

Pulse Polio and menstrual-technology debates show both gain and limit.

Introduction

Taboos are prohibitions charged with the sacred or with pollution. Superstitions are causal beliefs that public science rejects. Science and technology can weaken both by offering rival explanations and rival techniques. They do not automatically erase them, because taboos also organise caste, gender, and honour.

Body

How science and technology address them

- **Max Weber**'s **disenchantment** named the replacement of magical means by technical calculation in public life.
- **Germ theory**, vaccines, and the **Pulse Polio** campaign reduced disease explanations that blamed spirit or fate, though rumour still attacked the same campaigns.
- Astronomy and print weakened some eclipse and omen practices in urban middle classes without ending temple ritual.
- Sanitation engineering and latrine programmes meet purity taboos around faeces and caste labour. Technology without a change in who must clean does not finish the taboo.
- Menstrual restrictions have been challenged by biology teaching and by movements around temples such as Sabarimala, with technology of pads and cups as a parallel material change.

Limits

- **Durkheim**'s sacred is a social fact. A laboratory result does not dissolve a group's need for prohibition.

- New technologies create new fears, from radiation talk to vaccine rumour, which are not the old superstition but occupy the same slot of uncontrolled cause.
- Caste pollution rules can absorb scientific language and still exclude.
- Comte's hope of a full positive age under-estimated this persistence.

Examination

- Role is real in public health, agriculture, and some gender taboos where the state and school back the technique.
- Role is limited where taboo is honour and closure rather than a mistaken cause.

Flow diagram

Science and technology -> Rival cause and tool

Rival cause and tool -> Weaker omen and spirit talk

Taboo as honour caste gender -> Persistence

Science and technology -> Persistence

Conclusion

Science and technology address age-old taboos and superstitions by offering calculation, vaccines, and new tools of daily life, which is Weber's **disenchantment** in practice. They do not abolish the sacred as a social fact. Health campaigns show gains. Caste and gender prohibitions show the limit unless power also changes.

Facts & figures

Disenchantment

Weber's term for the retreat of magical means before technical calculation in public life.

Pulse Polio

Indian mass vaccination campaign that treated a disease as a technical public-health object.

Germ theory

The scientific explanation of infection that rivalled spirit and miasma accounts.

Durkheim's sacred

Set-apart prohibitions that bind a group, not only errors of cause.

Sabarimala debate

Public conflict over a temple taboo on women of menstruating age, where law, faith, and biology met.