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Q7(b)

How do you understand the phenomena of the mushrooming of sects and cults in contemporary society? Discuss the factors responsible for the trend

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2024 · Sociology GS 1 · 20 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

- Define sects and cults in the church-sect tradition and in later NRMs
- **Explain mushrooming in contemporary society through named factors:** modernisation, market, charisma, media, crisis of meaning
- Keep a sociological, not sensational, tone

Revision summary

Church-sect theory treats sects as demanding protest groups beside an accommodated church.

Cult, in careful use, names looser or new mystical memberships, not a tabloid insult.

New religious movements are the contemporary research label for much of this field.

Factors include urban migration, a market in belief, charismatic founders and media.

Crises of meaning and weak monopoly of old churches open space for new groups.

India's guru organisations and global NRMs illustrate the same structural trend.

Introduction

Sects and cults are organised religious or quasi-religious groups that stand apart from the dominant church or from mainstream culture. Ernst Troeltsch and later Bryan Wilson developed a church-sect typology. In contemporary usage, new religious movements often occupy the same field. Their mushrooming means a visible increase in small, intense, often leader-centred groups. Sociology explains this trend by social conditions, not by mockery of believers.

Body

How to understand sects and cults

A **church**, in this tradition, is an inclusive, accommodated religious body aligned with the wider society. A **sect** is a voluntary, demanding group that protests compromise and claims a purer path. It often recruits from the dissatisfied. H. Richard Niebuhr noted that sects may become denominations over time. A **cult**, in older American sociology such as Howard Becker's usage, was a looser, more individualistic, often mystical membership. Later media

use of "cult" as a scare word is not a good scientific definition. Roy Wallis distinguished world-rejecting, world-accommodating and world-affirming movements. Eileen Barker's work on new religious movements asked for empirical study of conversion and leaving, against moral panic.

In India, bhakti panths, reform sampradayas, guru-centred organisations, and urban wellness and meditation brands sit on a related spectrum. Some are old sects. Some are new markets of spirituality.

Factors behind the contemporary trend

Modernisation weakens the monopoly of a single parish church and creates a **religious market**, as rational-choice writers such as Rodney Stark argued in one influential line. Urban migration cuts people from village ritual and leaves a demand for belonging. **Charismatic authority**, in Weber's sense, founds new groups around a gifted leader. Mass **media and social media** advertise gurus and apocalyptic messages cheaply. Rapid change produces a crisis of meaning and of trust in established clergy, parties and science. Relative deprivation, after Glock and others, can push people toward groups that promise status, healing or election. Globalisation imports movements and also exports Indian gurus. The same openness that supports secular choice supports sectarian choice. State regulation is often weak until a scandal.

The trend is therefore not proof that society is becoming more irrational. It is a sign that belief has been privatised, marketed and networked. Some groups become violent or exploitative, which is a matter for law. Most remain small attempts to rebuild community and certainty.

Why the mushrooming looks sudden

Census religion tables change slowly. The mushrooming is of organisations, brands and intense memberships, not always of a new majority faith. A city neighbourhood may host a meditation centre, a prosperity church, a caste guru's weekly satsang and an online prophecy group in the same decade. That density is new even when the theological content is old. Factors pile up: spare income among the urban middle class, anxiety about jobs and marriage, distrust of established temples and churches, and a 24-hour screen. Sociology should count organisations and careers of members, and should not treat every new group as a civilisational collapse.

Flow diagram

Church denomination -> Sect protest purity
Sect protest purity -> Cult or NRM
Urbanisation media charisma market -> Cult or NRM
Urbanisation media charisma market -> Sect protest purity

Conclusion

Sects and cults are intense, often voluntary religious organisations outside the comfortable church. They multiply today because modern life breaks old monopolies and supplies markets, media, charisma and a hunger for meaning. Understanding the trend is a sociological task, not a panic.

Facts & figures

Troeltsch church-sect

A classic pair: the inclusive church versus the voluntary, rigorous sect.

New religious movement

A research term meant to study new groups without the stigma built into popular uses of cult.

Charismatic founding

Weber's mechanism by which a new community forms around an exceptional leader before it is routinised.

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