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Q1(c)

'Isolationism' as a dominant feature of colonial tribal policy

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2016 · Sociology GS 2 · 10 marks · Tribal communities in India

Tribal communities in India: Definitional problems; Geographical spread; Colonial policies and tribes; Issues of integration and autonomy.

Core demand of the question

- 'Isolationism' as a dominant feature of colonial tribal policy
- Keep the note to a 10-mark length

Revision summary

Colonial policy used **excluded areas** and inner lines as isolation.

The aim mixed protection of custom with forest and frontier control.

Isolation was never total; markets and missions entered.

Elwin inherited protection; **Ghurye** attacked it as stagnation.

Schedules today still carry this spatial exception.

Introduction

Colonial tribal policy often isolated hills and forests as excluded or partially **excluded areas**. Isolationism was a dominant administrative feature, even when traders, missionaries, and forest law already broke the seal.

Body**What isolationism was**

- **Inner line**, **excluded areas**, and separate codes kept tribes from the general plains law, ostensibly to protect custom.
- The administrator-anthropologist could treat the tribe as a museum of primitive order.
- Verrier **Elwin** later radicalised protection; the colonial root was control of frontier and forest revenue as much as kindness.

Why 'dominant' needs care

- **Ghurye stressed that isolation was never complete:** Hinduisation, moneylenders, and tea gardens entered.
- Isolation sat beside recruitment of labour and reservation of forests, which is contact on unequal terms.

Legacy

- Fifth and Sixth Schedules inherit a protective geography. The debate remains **Elwin** versus **Ghurye**.

Flow diagram

Colonial policy -> Excluded inner line
Excluded inner line -> Protect and control
Trader forest mission -> Broken isolation

Conclusion

Isolationism marked colonial tribal policy as a legal geography of exception. It was dominant as a file category, not as a lived absence of the plains.

Facts & figures

Excluded areas

Colonial legal islands with separate tribal administration.

Inner Line

A permit boundary that limited plains entry into some hill tracts.

Elwin

Turned isolation into a moral argument for Adivasi freedom.

Ghurye

Called isolation a barrier to joining Hindu society.