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Q1(c)

What are the distinct features of islam as practised in India, and how have they changed over time ?

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2017 · Sociology GS 2 · 10 marks · Perspectives on the study of Indian society

Perspectives on the study of Indian society: Indology (G.S. Ghurye); Structural functionalism (M.N. Srinivas); Marxist sociology (A.R. Desai).

Core demand of the question

- What are the distinct features of Islam as practised in India, and how have they changed over time?
- Keep the note to a 10-mark length

Revision summary

Indian Islam is regional, often shrine-centred, and internally ranked.

Minority status after Partition made community a political fact.

Reform and print pushed scriptural uniformity against custom.

Caste-like divisions and dargah practice persist.

Change is toward a firmer boundary, not toward one identical piety.

Introduction

Islam in India is a lived religion of many regions, languages, and schools, not a single imported copy of Arabia. Its distinct features grew from conversion, local custom, and a minority position in a caste society. Those features have shifted with reform, partition, law, and the market.

Body

Distinct features

- **Syncretic practice:** dargah, urs, and shared saints sat beside mosque and sharia, as in Ajmer and many qasba towns.
- Caste-like ranking among ashraf, ajlaf, and arzal, so Indian Islam did not abolish graded inequality.
- Regional languages, Sufi silsilas, and customary **personal law** made practice local rather than uniform.
- A minority civic location after 1947 made identity more political than in a Muslim-majority state.

Change over time

- Colonial census and **personal law** froze 'Muslim' as a legal community, which **Imtiaz Ahmad** and others later showed was internally diverse.

- Reformist and Islamist currents, print, and madrasa networks pushed toward scriptural uniformity and against shrine custom.
- Urban middle-class piety, Tablighi circuits, and satellite preaching recast everyday observance.
- Communal violence and security politics thickened boundary-making, even as class and region still split the community.

Continuity

- Dargah culture, caste among Muslims, and regional rites have not vanished. They compete with purification drives.

Flow diagram

Islam practised in India -> Dargah custom region

Islam practised in India -> Internal ranking

Reform law nation -> Bounded identity

Dargah custom region -> Change and persistence

Bounded identity -> Change and persistence

Conclusion

Indian Islam is distinct in syncretism, internal hierarchy, and minority politics. Over time, law, reform, and the nation-state have pushed toward a more bounded community, while local custom still refuses a single mould.

Facts & figures

Ajmer dargah

A shared shrine that shows syncretic visitation beyond a closed congregational Islam.

Ashraf-ajlaf

Status ranking among Indian Muslims that caste society helped shape.

Imtiaz Ahmad

Stressed caste and regional diversity against a monolithic 'Muslim society'.

Personal law

Colonial and postcolonial legal identity that standardised a community for the courts.