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Q4(b)

What is the nature of religious change among tribal communities ? Illustrate with two examples from colonial and post independence times

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2017 · Sociology GS 2 · 20 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

- What is the nature of religious change among tribal communities? Illustrate with two examples from colonial and post-independence times
- Treat as a 20-mark answer

Revision summary

Tribal religion changes through conversion, Hinduisation, and revival, not simple loss of 'animism'.

Ghurye's assimilation and Elwin's protection still frame the debate.

Colonial missions in Chotanagpur and the north-east tied faith to literacy and a new identity.

Post-independence politics pits Hinduisation against indigenous census claims.

Displacement makes grove and god a development issue.

Introduction

Religious change among Indian tribal communities is not a straight line from 'animism' to a world religion. It is conversion, Hinduisation, reform, and revival, always tied to land, the state, and honour. Colonial and postcolonial examples show different masters with a similar struggle over identity.

Body

Nature of the change

- G. S. Ghurye read many tribes as backward Hindus awaiting assimilation. Verrier Elwin defended a slower, protected faith world.
- Change includes Christian conversion, Sanskritizing Hinduisation, reformist bhagat movements, and later assertion of a distinct Adivasi dharma.
- **Religion here is also politics:** census labels, missionaries, and Forest Departments arrive together.

Colonial example: Christian conversion in the north-east and Chotanagpur

- Missions offered literacy, medicine, and a new personhood against landlord and spirit fear.
- Munda and Oraon country, and Naga and Mizo hills, show conversion as a social movement, not only a private belief.

- Colonial census froze 'tribe' and 'religion' as boxes, which then organised jobs and later statehood politics.

Post-independence example: Hinduisation, reconversion, and Adivasi revival

- Temple-entry style Hinduisation, Vanvasi Kalyan, and ghar wapsi campaigns treat tribe as a Hindu frontier, a Ghurye path in new clothes.
- Counter-movements claim sarna, gondwana, or other indigenous labels, and demand a separate census code.
- **Narmada** and mining regions show that religious change now sits beside **displacement**: a lost grove is a lost ritual world.

What kind of change it is

- Yogendra Singh's heterogenetic contact fits mission and state. Orthogenetic bhagat reform also appears.
- The nature is syncretic and conflictual, not a clean replacement.

Flow diagram

Tribal communities -> Colonial mission conversion
 Tribal communities -> Hinduisation Ghurye path
 Tribal communities -> Sarna revival
 Land state census -> Tribal communities

Conclusion

Tribal religious change is conversion and counter-conversion tied to literacy, land, and the census. Colonial missions and postcolonial Hinduisation-versus-revival are two historical faces of the same struggle: whether Adivasi faith is a separate citizenship or a waiting room of Hindu society.

Facts & figures

Ghurye and Elwin

Opposed poles: tribe as backward Hindu versus protected distinct culture.

Chotanagpur missions

Colonial Christianisation among Munda and Oraon linked to education and agrarian stress.

Sarna demand

Post-independence claim to a distinct religious code against Hinduisation.

Narmada

Dam displacement as loss of ritual geography, not only of acreage.

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