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Q8(a)

Colonial administrators helped to construct the very traditionalism which marked the Indian society as "backward". Comment critically.

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2020 · Sociology GS 2 · 20 marks · Impact of colonial rule on Indian society

Impact of colonial rule on Indian society: Social background of Indian nationalism; Modernization of Indian tradition; Protests and movements during the colonial period; Social reforms.

Core demand of the question

- Colonial administrators helped to construct the very traditionalism which marked the Indian society as "backward". Comment critically

Revision summary

Colonial census, law and ethnography froze custom as India's essence.

That traditionalism justified rule and selective reform.

Precolonial hierarchy existed; the Raj simplified it into a backward whole.

Indian elites both defended and attacked the constructed tradition.

Desai and field sociology relocate backwardness in colonial capitalism and living rank.

Introduction

The statement is largely just. Colonial administrators did not find a finished 'traditional India' and merely describe it. They helped construct traditionalism as the mark of backwardness against which the Raj could rule and reform.

Body

How construction worked

- **Census**, ethnography, and **personal law** froze caste, custom, and sati as India's essence, the synecdoche Whitehead named.
- Land settlements invented landlord and village republics that then looked ancient.
- 1935 tribal segregation made isolation a legal tradition.
- **Mission and utilitarian reform needed a backward other:** the pyre, the child marriage, the 'lazy ryot'.

Critical nuance

- Precolonial hierarchy was real. Construction is not creation from zero. Ghurye and Dumont over-read texts; the Raj over-read custom as unchanging.
- **Indian elites joined the game:** some defended 'tradition', some used colonial law against sati, a double inside the construction.
- Srinivas's field view later showed living change-Sanskritization-against the frozen traditionalism.

Consequences

- Sociology inherited a book-view India that was unhealthy when uniqueness became destiny.
- **Nationalists sometimes inverted the mark:** spiritual tradition versus Western materialism, still a colonial binary.
- A. R. Desai insisted the real mark was colonial capitalism, not a timeless custom.

Comment

- Administrators constructed traditionalism as backwardness. Critique must also study Indian collaboration and real ranked practices they simplified.

Flow diagram

Census law ethnography -> Traditionalism as backward
Traditionalism as backward -> Raj reform and rule
Field class history -> Unfreeze

Conclusion

Colonial administration constructed a usable traditionalism that branded Indian society backward. The comment holds if we add that hierarchy pre-existed and that Indians both resisted and inhabited that brand. Sociology's task is to unfreeze India without denying inequality.

Facts & figures

Census of caste

Administrative listing that hardened groups as traditional types.

Personal law

Colonial legal packaging of religion as timeless codes.

Sati regulation

Reform that also staged Hindu custom as the backward mark.

Whitehead synecdoche

Caste standing for the whole society in colonial knowledge.

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