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Q2(b)

Discuss Whitehead's contention that caste has potential to displace class and colonial contradiction.

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2020 · Sociology GS 2 · 15 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

- Discuss Whitehead's contention that caste has potential to displace class and colonial contradiction

Revision summary

Whitehead warns that caste became a colonial **synecdoche** of India.

That frame can hide class exploitation and colonial contradiction.

Electoral caste blocs can reroute wage politics into identity alone.

Field studies show caste and class usually interlock, not replace.

The task is nexus analysis, not choosing one master key.

Introduction

Judy Whitehead's contention is that caste, especially as colonial knowledge made it India's master institution, can stand in for the whole social world and push class struggle and colonial contradiction to the margin. The insight is powerful. Displacement is a tendency, not a completed fact.

Body**The contention**

- Colonial ethnography and census froze caste as a timeless, all-encompassing system, a **synecdoche** of India.
- Once caste is the name of every relation, class exploitation on land and the colonial drain become side plots.
- Textual rigidity, which Dumont later theorised as ideology, can turn real contradictions into oppositions in thought.

How displacement works

- Politics mobilises jati blocs, as Kothari noted, and a wage demand can become a reservation demand without touching the mill owner.
- Nationalist and later electoral honour fights can hide the bourgeois path A. R. **Desai** described.
- Village studies that stop at ritual rank underplay malik and mazdoor.

Why displacement is not destiny

- **Caste and class usually interlock:** dominant castes own land; Dalit labour is both graded and cheap.
- Guha's subaltern insurgency and Tebhaga show colonial and class contradiction erupting in peasant grammar, not only in varna talk.
- **Beteille's Sripuram is the anti-synecdoche:** caste, class, and power can move at different speeds.

Use of Whitehead

- Use the contention as a warning against book-view India and against politics that names only caste.
- Do not erase caste to 'restore' class; that would repeat the opposite displacement.

Flow diagram

Colonial caste knowledge -> Caste as whole India
Caste as whole India -> Displaces class colonial contradiction
Caste-class nexus -> Correction

Conclusion

Whitehead is right that caste-as-essence can displace class and colonial contradiction in knowledge and in politics. Indian sociology grows when it studies the nexus: ranked honour organising surplus under a colonial, then bourgeois, state.

Facts & figures

Synecdoche

Caste standing for the entire Indian social character in colonial thought.

Census and ethnography

Administrative tools that rigidified caste as the primary fact.

Desai

Insists colonial capitalism and class remain the political-economic contradiction.

Sripuram

Beteille's demonstration that class and power are not reducible to caste rank.

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