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Q1(d)

Explain the definitional problems concerning the tribal communities in India.

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2020 · 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

- Explain the definitional problems concerning the tribal communities in India
- Keep the note to a 10-mark length

Revision summary

Tribe in India has no single cultural definition.

Colonial marks, Ghurye's Hinduisation and Elwin's protection compete.

Scheduled Tribe is a legal list, not an essence.

Some listed groups are peasants; some forest dwellers are unlisted.

Definition is a power relation to state and market.

Introduction

Defining 'tribe' in India is a political and scholarly problem. **Census** lists, colonial isolation, and Hinduisation theses do not name one people with one culture.

Body

Competing definitions

- Colonial ethnography used isolation, animism, and 'primitive' as marks. The 1935 Act then segregated some groups administratively.
- G. S. Ghurye called many tribes backward Hindus. Verrier Elwin stressed distinctness and protection.
- The Constitution uses **Scheduled Tribe** as a list, not as a sociological essence.

Problems

- Language, forest, and shifting cultivation do not fit all listed groups; some ST communities are peasant or urban.
- Identity assertion for autonomy needs a people; the list can both enable reservation and freeze a colonial label.
- Overlap with caste, as in some plains groups, blurs tribe versus jati.
- **Exclusion errors:** unlisted forest dwellers miss **FRA** and reservation.

Sociological caution

- Tribe is a relationship to the state and the market, not a museum type.

Flow diagram

Colonial isolation marks -> ST list
Ghurye Hinduisation -> ST list
Elwin distinctness -> Autonomy identity

Conclusion

Definitional problems arise because tribe is at once a colonial category, a Hinduisation debate, and a constitutional schedule. Autonomy politics must use the list without mistaking it for a single culture.

Facts & figures

Scheduled Tribe

Constitutional list that governs reservation and special administration.

Ghurye-Elwin

Assimilation versus protection as definitional poles.

Government of India Act 1935

Colonial segregation that shaped later tribal administration.

FRA

Forest title law that depends on who counts as a forest dweller.

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