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Q3(b)

Define the concepts of 'Descent' and 'Alliance'. Differentiate between North Indian and South Indian Kinship systems with examples

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2023 · Sociology GS 2 · 20 marks · Systems of Kinship in India

Systems of Kinship in India: Lineage and descent in India; Types of kinship systems; Family and marriage in India; Household dimensions of the family; Patriarchy, entitlements and sexual division of labour.

Core demand of the question

- Define **Descent** and **Alliance**
- Differentiate North Indian and South Indian kinship systems with examples
- Use Dumont, Irawati **Karve**, and related kinship work

Revision summary

Descent places people in a lineage or gotra for ritual and property.

Alliance treats marriage as structured exchange between groups.

Karve and Dumont contrast a northern agnatic-exogamous field with southern Dravidian cross-cousin **alliance**.

Kerala matriliney shows **descent** is not everywhere patrilineal.

Modern markets mix residence without erasing these rules.

Introduction

Descent traces who belongs to a kin corporation across generations. **Alliance** traces how groups are linked by marriage. North and South Indian systems both use **descent** and **alliance**, but they organise the marriage field differently.

Body

Descent

- **Descent** is the rule that assigns a person to a lineage, clan, or gotra for property, ritual, and often surname.
- **North Indian kinship is strongly agnatic in the classical model:** a man belongs to his father's line; a woman marries out and is incorporated into her husband's line for many ritual purposes.
- Clan and gotra exogamy forbid marriage inside a named **descent** set even when the village is large.

Alliance

- **Alliance** theory, associated with Claude Levi-Strauss and used on India by Louis Dumont, treats marriage as a lasting exchange between groups, not only as a contract of two persons.

- South Indian Dravidian kinship prefers cross-cousin marriage, so the same groups repeat **alliance** across generations.
- Dumont argued that South Indian caste and kinship make **alliance** a structural principle, whereas the north stresses hypergamy and wife-givers ranked below wife-takers.

North versus South, with examples

- **Irawati Karve mapped this regional contrast:** Indo-Aryan north versus Dravidian south, with intermediate zones.
- **North:** **village exogamy** in much of the Hindi belt, gotra rules, and a bride who travels to her husband's village; the mother's brother's daughter may be forbidden as too close in some groups and preferred in others, but parallel-cousin marriage is widely barred.
- **South:** Tamil, Telugu, Kannada, and Malayalam Dravidian systems often prefer mother's brother's daughter; the bride may already be a known affine, and the in-law relationship is pre-built.
- Kerala's historical matriliney among some groups (for example Nayar taravad in older ethnography) shows that **descent** itself can be matrilineal, which is not the north Indian default.
- **Marriott-style interaction still matters:** who eats with affines differs by region, but caste endogamy frames both systems.

Modern pressure

- Law, migration, and matrimonial markets mix the two maps. A Tamil software household in Bengaluru may still ask about cross-cousin eligibility; a Haryana household may still refuse same-village matches.
- Honour disputes follow these maps when a match violates **village exogamy** or caste **alliance** rules.

Flow diagram

Descent clan gotra -> North village exogamy hypergamy
 Alliance repeated marriage -> South cross-cousin Dravidian
 North village exogamy hypergamy -> Caste endogamy
 South cross-cousin Dravidian -> Caste endogamy

Conclusion

Descent assigns corporate belonging; **alliance** organises marriage exchange. North Indian kinship leans on agnatic **descent**, **village exogamy**, and hypergamy. South Indian Dravidian kinship leans on repeated cross-cousin **alliance**. Both remain caste-bound.

Facts & figures

Descent

Rule of group assignment across generations, often agnatic in north Indian Hindu kinship.

Alliance

Marriage as lasting exchange between groups; Dumont applied this strongly to South India.

Karve

Regional mapping of North and South Indian kinship types.

Village exogamy

Common northern rule that one does not marry inside the natal village.

Cross-cousin preference

Common Dravidian pattern linking mother's brother and sister's child as repeat affines.

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