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Q4(a)

How do religious communities contribute to the cultural diversity of India?

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2024 · Sociology GS 2 · 20 marks · Religion and Society

Religion and Society: Religious communities in India; Problems of religious minorities.

Core demand of the question

- **Define cultural diversity in the Indian sense:** languages, rituals, law, food, festivals, and institutions
- Show how named religious communities produce and institutionalise that diversity
- Cover Hindu sects, Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains, Parsis, and tribal religions
- Note conflict, hierarchy and the state's personal-law mosaic as part of the same contribution

Revision summary

Religious communities produce diversity through worship, kinship, law, education and neighbourhoods.

Hindu sects, Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, Jains, Buddhists, Parsis and tribal religions each add institutions.

Articles 25-30 protect this as a constitutional plurality.

Caste-like ranking and communal conflict mean diversity is stratified.

Personal law is both a cultural contribution and a gender problem.

Introduction

India's cultural diversity is not a food festival. It is a **living arrangement of languages, kinship rules, worship, law and neighbourhoods** that religious communities have historically produced. **M. N. Srinivas**'s local and all-India Hinduism, **T. N. Madan** on religious identity, and **Imtiaz Ahmad** on Muslim caste-like stratification show communities as social structures, not only as belief. They contribute diversity by keeping different public worlds in one political territory.

Body

What communities contribute

- **Hindu society itself is internally diverse:** Shaiva, Vaishnava, Shakta, Bhakti regional cultures, and jati custom. That internal plurality is a community contribution, not a homogeneous bloc. Muslim communities added Persian-Arabic literacy, Sufi shrines that overlap Hindu pilgrimage geographies, distinct kinship (including cousin marriage in many groups), and a personal-law tradition. Christians-Syrian, Latin, tribal and Dalit Christians-added schools, hospitals and new associational forms, especially in the South and Northeast. Sikhs institutionalised sangat, langar and a distinct script and law. Jains and Buddhists (including **Ambedkarite Navayana**) shaped ethics of ahimsa, urban mercantile trust, and a modern

anti-caste religion. Parsis left a dense urban civic footprint in Bombay. Tribal sarna, donyi-polo and related practices keep non-Sanskritic sacred geographies that the Forest Rights struggle also defends.

Diversity appears in **calendar and cuisine**, in **architecture**, in **music**, and in **family law**. The Constitution's **Articles 25-30** protect profession, practice, institutions and minority education. That legal pluralism is itself a contribution: communities run schools, waqf, gurdwaras and maths as public-cultural infrastructure.

Contribution is not only harmony

Communities also contribute **hierarchy and conflict**. Caste among Hindus, and caste-like ranking among Muslims and Christians, structure diversity as inequality. Communal riots, temple-mosque disputes, and anti-conversion politics show diversity as a field of power. **Ashis Nandy** and others distinguished religion as faith from religion as ideology; sociology must keep both. Personal laws can protect cultural difference and freeze gender inequality. Uniform civil code debates are therefore debates about how much diversity the family may carry.

Religious communities also **translate** into electoral blocks, which is diversity entering democracy (Kothari's Congress system and its later fragmentation). The contribution to culture is then inseparable from the contribution to politics.

- **Everyday diversity is also neighbourhood-level:** a dargah sharing a qasba with a temple, a Kerala church calendar beside Onam, a Punjab gurdwara langar that feeds across faith while caste can still appear in who cooks. **S. C. Dube's** village studies and later urban ethnography show syncretism and boundary-making as twins. Festivals become public culture on television; that is contribution as well as commodification. Diaspora temples and mosques then export Indian diversity and sometimes a harder identity than the mixed street at home.
- **A fair account says:** without these communities there is no Indian cultural diversity as we know it; with them, diversity is stratified and sometimes violent. The sociological task is to describe both.

Flow diagram

Religious communities -> Ritual calendar food
 Religious communities -> Personal law and trusts
 Religious communities -> Schools shrines maths
 Religious communities -> Electoral and conflict fields
 Ritual calendar food -> Cultural diversity
 Personal law and trusts -> Cultural diversity
 Schools shrines maths -> Cultural diversity

Conclusion

Religious communities contribute India's cultural diversity by institutionalising different languages of worship, kinship, education and law inside one state. They also organise inequality and conflict. Diversity here is a structured plurality, not a slogan of automatic tolerance.

Facts & figures

Articles 25-30

Freedom of religion and minority educational and cultural rights in the Constitution.

Navayana

Ambedkar's Buddhist conversion as a modern religious community with an anti-caste culture.

Imtiaz Ahmad

Documented caste-like stratification among Indian Muslims, complicating a flat 'community' picture.

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