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Q1(a)

'Textual perspective is important in understanding of Indian Social System.' Discuss.

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2025 · Sociology GS 2 · 10 marks · Rural and Agrarian Social Structure

Rural and Agrarian Social Structure: The idea of Indian village and village studies; Agrarian social structure - evolution of land tenure system, land reforms.

Core demand of the question

- State what the textual / Indological perspective is in the study of Indian society
- Name the main scholars and the kinds of texts they used
- Show what the perspective can and cannot explain about the living social system
- Contrast it briefly with the field view

Revision summary

The textual perspective explains Indian society through Dharmashastra, epics and related canons.

Ghurye and **Dumont** used that archive to theorise caste as a hierarchical whole.

The approach is strong on civilisational categories and weak on labour, gender and local power.

Srinivas's field view and Desai's Marxism correct the book without discarding it.

Texts remain part of the social system because groups still quote them in law and ritual.

Introduction

- **The textual perspective reads Indian society through its** authoritative books: Dharmashastra, epics, Puranas, Buddhist and Jain canons, and later commentaries. It treats those books as a map of the social system, not as optional literature. **G. S. Ghurye, Louis Dumont**, and the older Indologists made this the first professional grammar of Indian sociology. The living village does not vanish; it is interpreted against a civilisational text.

Body**What the texts give**

Ghurye's Caste and Race in India and his work on gotra, sadhus and Indian costume used Sanskrit sources to fix the **features of caste**: segmental division, hierarchy, restrictions on feeding and marriage, civil and religious disabilities, and lack of unrestricted choice of occupation. **Dumont's** Homo Hierarchicus went further. He argued that the **ideology of purity and pollution**, drawn from Brahmanical texts, is the encompassing principle of the caste system. Status, not power, is the key. The king is encompassed by the priest. **McKim Marriott** and **Dumont-Pocock's** "For a Sociology of India" insisted that Indian facts must be thought with Indian categories, not only with Western class.

- **The textual view is strong on** long continuities: varna as a scheme, ashrama, purushartha, joint-family duties, and the idea of a ranked cosmos. It explains why reformers themselves quoted shastra, and why law courts still meet personal law that grew from text.

Limits of the book view

M. N. Srinivas warned against the **book view** replacing the **field view**. Texts over-represent Brahmanical order. They under-represent women, Adivasis, artisans, and the everyday bargaining of jati. **A. R. Desai** and Marxist historians treated the texts as ideology of a class order, not as a full description. **André Bêteille** showed in Tanjore that land, office and caste do not always coincide as the shastra would like. **M. N. Srinivas**'s sanskritization is itself a comment on texts: lower groups use the book, they are not frozen inside it.

Colonial ethnography often fused the textual perspective with the census, turning fluid jati into a rigid schedule. That was a political use of text, not a neutral reading.

Flow diagram

Shastra and epics -> Indology / Ghurye / Dumont

Indology / Ghurye / Dumont -> Hierarchy and varna-jati

Field view / Srinivas -> Practice and mobility

Hierarchy and varna-jati -incomplete without. -> Practice and mobility

Conclusion

The textual perspective is indispensable for the idea of the Indian social system-hierarchy, duty, and civilisational self-description. It is not a photograph of practice. A sociological answer holds **Ghurye** and **Dumont** together with Srinivas's field and Desai's political economy.

Facts & figures

Ghurye

Used Indology and ethnography together; listed the classical features of caste from textual and historical materials.

Dumont

Homo Hierarchicus (1966) treats purity-pollution as the encompassing ideology of caste, drawn from Brahmanical thought.

Book view / field view

Srinivas's distinction: shastric models versus observed village and urban practice.