

UPSC CIVIL SERVICES · GS PAPER I (MAINS) & PRELIMS

Indian Society

Every theme of the GS I Indian Society syllabus, explained as living social change.

Compiled by Arvind KrS

25

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Indian Society — Notes for UPSC GS Paper I (Mains) and Prelims

Salient features and diversity, women, population, poverty, urbanisation, globalisation, social empowerment, communalism, regionalism and secularism

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UNIT I

6 CHAPTERS

GS PAPER I

Indian Society: Foundations and Diversity

Mains GS Paper I: Salient features of Indian Society, Diversity of India.

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TOPICS COVERED IN THIS UNIT

01 Salient Features of Indian Society

Understanding Indian Society · Structural Features of Indian Society · Cultural Features and Balances · Vedic Roots That Still Survive · Tolerance, Syncretism, Coexistence · Continuity: Why the Culture Endures · Processes of Social Change · Tradition and Modernity · Indian Society Today (2024–26) · Challenges and the Way Forward

02 Diversity of India and Unity in Diversity

Understanding Diversity · Land, People and Language · Faith, Caste and Everyday Culture · Regions as Cultural Units · Cultural Pockets of Small India · Bonds of Unity · Diversity, Disparity, Marginality · Threats to Unity · Managing Diversity: State and Society · National Identity and Way Forward

03 Caste: Structure, Change and Persistence

Varna, Jati and the Idea of Caste · Caste in the Village Order · Colonialism and Reform · Mobility: Sanskritisation and Beyond · Caste in Democratic Politics · Caste, Work and the City · Marriage, Campus and the Digital · Counting Caste: The Census Debate · Is Caste Disappearing? · Annihilation or Reform? Way Forward

04 Tribal Society: Identity, Diversity and Change

Who Is a Tribe? · Distribution and Diversity · Social Organisation of Tribes · Gender Relations and the Sex Ratio · Religion and Knowledge Systems · Isolation to Integration · Identity, Assertion and Change · Tribal Issues as Social Processes · Law and Policy: A Compact View · Way Forward

05 Family, Marriage and Kinship

The Family as an Institution · Forms of Family in India · Joint Family: Its Life Cycle · The Changing Family Today · Marriage: Sacrament or Contract? · Rules and Choice in Marriage · Inter-caste and Inter-faith Marriage · Kinship: North and South · Socialisation in a Digital Age · Family, State and the Way Forward

06 Religion, Sect and Belief in Indian Society

Religion: Concepts and Thinkers · India's Religious Landscape · Religiosity in Everyday Life · Sects and Sampradayas · Sect versus Caste, Region, Religion · Gurus, Deras and New Cults · Custom, Tradition and Obscurantism · Reason, Reform and the Law · Faith, Courts and Social Change · Religion and Modernity: Way Ahead

INDIAN SOCIETY

MAINS · GS PAPER I

Salient Features of Indian Society

Between 13 January and 26 February 2025, more than 66 crore pilgrim visits were counted at the Maha Kumbh in Prayagraj, a gathering watched over by AI-enabled cameras and anti-drone systems. On 1 April 2026, houselisting began for Census 2027, India's first digital census and the first since 1931 to record the caste of every community. An ancient rite run on modern technology, and a modern State still counting caste: together they capture the defining trait of Indian society, a continuity that absorbs change rather than surrendering to it.

SYLLABUS

PRELIMS

Economic and Social Development – Sustainable Development, Poverty, Inclusion, Demographics, Social Sector Initiatives, etc

MAINS · GS PAPER I

Salient features of Indian Society, Diversity of India

CONTENTS

01	Understanding Indian Society	02	Structural Features of Indian Society
03	Cultural Features and Balances	04	Vedic Roots That Still Survive
05	Tolerance, Syncretism, Coexistence	06	Continuity: Why the Culture Endures
07	Processes of Social Change	08	Tradition and Modernity
09	Indian Society Today (2024–26)	10	Challenges and the Way Forward
11	Previous Year Questions		

This chapter covers:

- what "Indian society" means and the main ways of studying it;
- its structural and cultural features, and the balances it strikes;
- the Vedic roots that still survive;
- tolerance and syncretism, past and present;
- continuity and change: Sanskritisation, westernisation, modernisation, secularisation;
- tradition and modernity today, with 2024–26 evidence and the way forward.

Diversity is treated in Chapter 2, caste in Chapter 3, tribes in Chapter 4, family and marriage in Chapter 5, religion and sects in Chapter 6, and communalism and secularism in Chapters 22 and 24.

01 Understanding Indian Society

A **society** is, in MacIver's phrase, a web of social relationships: a lasting system of groups, roles, norms and institutions through which people cooperate and pass on a way of life. **Indian society** is best seen as a **civilisation of many societies**, stretching from the Jarawa of the Andamans to the towers of Mumbai. These "microcosmic societies" share a stock of ideas (dharma, karma, rebirth, sacred rivers, family duty), a sacred geography and, since **1950**, a common citizenship. Sociologists have studied it through different windows.

APPROACH	KEY THINKERS	WHAT IT STRESSES	ITS BLIND SPOT
Textual (Indological)	G.S. Ghurye; Louis Dumont (1966)	Classical texts; purity–pollution and hierarchy	Brahmanical lens; misses lived variety
Field view	M.N. Srinivas; S.C. Dube	Village studies; how institutions work together	Plays down conflict
Conflict (Marxian)	D.P. Mukerji; A.R. Desai (1948)	Class, economy, colonialism	Reduces caste to economics
From below	Jotirao Phule; B.R. Ambedkar	Society seen from the bottom; "graded inequality"	Less on areas of consensus
Synthesis	Andre Beteille; Yogendra Singh	Caste, class and power can diverge; tradition modernises	Needs local testing

A useful label for the present is Fred Riggs's **"prismatic" (transitional) society**, where old and new structures exist side by side: elected panchayats beside khap councils, smartphones carrying horoscopes.

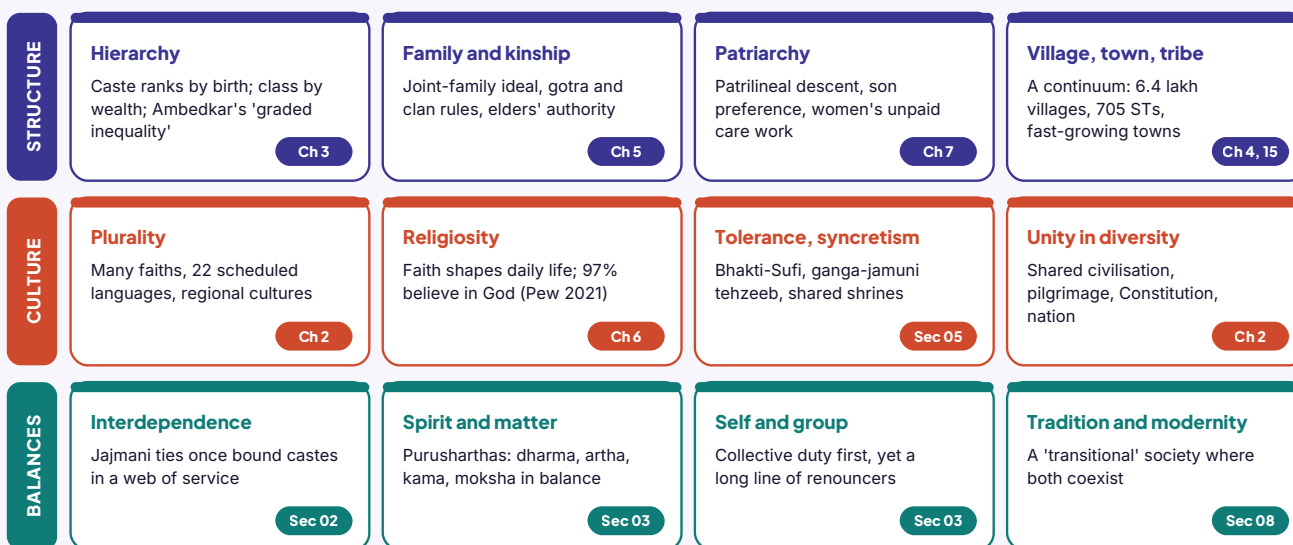
02 Structural Features of Indian Society

| Hierarchy: Caste and Class

Indian society has been organised around **hierarchy**. Dumont argued that the opposition of pure and impure ranks every caste and makes hierarchy the core value; Ambedkar called the result **"graded inequality"**, in which each caste stands above some and below others, so the oppressed rarely unite. Andre Beteille describes a move from a **"harmonic"** order, where inequality was accepted as morally right, to a **"disharmonic"** one, where the Constitution promises equality while practice still ranks people. Caste now overlaps with **class**: ritual rank, land, education and power sometimes coincide and sometimes diverge. In Pew Research Center's **2021** survey, **70%** of Indians said most or all of their close friends were of their own caste (Chapter 3).

Salient Features of Indian Society: Twelve Traits in Three Bands

Each trait is a tendency, not a fixed fact: it varies by region, class and generation. Pointers show where the full treatment lies.



Theme that runs through all twelve: continuity that absorbs change (Sections 06 to 08).

Fig. 1.1 Twelve salient features in three bands, with pointers to the chapters that treat each in full.

Interdependence softened the hierarchy. Under the **jajmani system**, described by William Wiser in Karimpur (1936), service castes (kamin) served landowning patrons (jajman) for a share of the harvest, often across religious lines, as with Muslim weavers serving Hindu patrons. It gave security but tied people to hereditary work and could slide into bondage; cash wages, the Green Revolution and migration have largely dissolved it. In its place Srinivas identified the **dominant caste**: locally numerous, landowning and politically weighty, such as the Jats, Yadavs, Vokkaligas or Marathas.

Family, Kinship and Patriarchy

The **joint family** remains the ideal, but about **70%** of households in Census **2011** held a single married couple, and households of nine or more fell from **11.3%** to **6.6%** over **2001–11**. I.P. Desai's "**functional jointness**" still holds: kin living apart share money, care and decisions. **Patriarchy** shapes the family: in Pew's **2022** report, **87%** agreed that a wife must always obey her husband and **94%** said it is very important for a family to have at least one son. In NFHS-6 (**2023–24**) only **18.8%** of households had a woman owning a house or land (Chapters 5 and 7).

Village, Town and Tribe

Census **2011** counted about **6.4** lakh villages, **68.8%** of Indians in rural areas and **705** Scheduled Tribes (**8.6%**). These are not separate worlds. Charles Metcalfe's picture (**1830**) of villages as self-contained "little republics" was overturned by Srinivas and Dube, who showed them tied to towns by markets, pilgrimage, marriage and politics. Census towns, settlements that are urban in character but still governed as villages, rose from **1,362** to nearly **3,900** between **2001** and **2011**, and daily commuting now makes a **rural-urban continuum**. Tribal societies, with clan-based kinship, community land and freer gender norms, have also long traded and exchanged ideas with caste society; Ghurye called tribes "backward Hindus", a view Verrier Elwin and tribal scholars rejected (Chapters 4 and 15).

Cultural Features and Balances

Plurality and Religiosity

India holds every major world religion, **22** scheduled languages and, in Census **2011**, **19,569** raw mother-tongue returns grouped into **121** languages. Its model is the **salad bowl**, not the melting pot. Nehru saw India as "some ancient palimpsest on which layer upon layer of thought and reverie had been inscribed, and yet no succeeding layer had completely hidden or erased what had been written previously" (*The Discovery of India*, **1946**). Religion is a way of life that orders food, dress, the calendar and life-cycle rites: Pew found that **97%** of Indians believe in God, and that practice is about as strong among the urban and college-educated as among villagers. India has modernised without the decline of religion that classical theory predicted (Chapters 6 and 24).

Spirit and Matter, Self and Group

Indian thought did not reject the material world. The four **purusharthas** (dharma, artha, kama, moksha) make wealth and pleasure legitimate within dharma and the Charvaka school was frankly materialist. Vivekananda held that the hungry need bread before philosophy and that serving the poor is worship. A similar balance holds between **group and individual**: family honour and community press on choices of work and spouse, yet Dumont noted that India also honoured the **renouncer**, the "individual-outside-the-world". Urban individualism is growing: in the YouGov–Mint–CPR survey (June **2023**, **10,072** urban respondents), **48%** said personal choice will outweigh social custom in the family of the future.

Orthodoxy, Superstition and Rationalism

Omens and astrology sit beside a rationalist strand running from the Buddha and Charvaka through Kabir's mockery of empty ritual to Phule and Periyar. Harmful beliefs still claim victims, such as women branded witches and girls unwanted through son preference. Maharashtra (**2013**) and Karnataka (**2017**) passed anti-black-magic laws, and Article **51A(h)** asks citizens to develop the scientific temper. Yet in the CSDS–KAS youth survey of **2016**, close to half of young Indians said religion should prevail when it clashes with science.

Vedic Roots That Still Survive

Vedic society moved from pastoral tribes in the Punjab to territorial kingdoms in the Ganga plains, and every institution changed with it.

FEATURE	EARLY VEDIC (C. 1500–1000 BCE)	LATER VEDIC (C. 1000–600 BCE)
Economy	Pastoral; cattle as wealth	Settled farming with iron; crafts
Polity	Tribe (jana); sabha, samiti, vidatha	Kingdoms (janapada); hereditary kings
Social order	Kin-based; varna loose, not hereditary	Four varnas fixed by birth; gotra, ashrama

FEATURE	EARLY VEDIC (C. 1500–1000 BCE)	LATER VEDIC (C. 1000–600 BCE)
Women	Hymn-composers (Ghoshā, Apala, Lopamudra); attend assemblies	Status declines; Gargi and Maitreyi are exceptions
Religion	Nature gods (Indra, Agni, Varuna); rita, the cosmic order	Elaborate ritual; Upanishads: atman, karma, moksha

The Vedic Legacy: What Lives On, What Changed, What Faded

Vedic society (c.1500–600 BCE) left layers that later ages overwrote but never fully erased.

LIVES ON, LARGELY INTACT

- Sanskaras: naming, upanayana, vivaha with agni and saptapadi, antyeshti
- Gotra exogamy in arranging marriages
- Vedic chanting (UNESCO intangible heritage, 2008); havan, Gayatri mantra
- Reverence for rivers, cattle and nature; tirtha and Kumbh
- Hospitality as duty: atithi devo bhava
- Pluralism: 'Truth is one, the wise call it by many names'

LIVES ON, TRANSFORMED

- Four varnas became thousands of birth-based jatis; discrimination now barred (Arts 15, 17)
- Patrilineal, patriarchal family became the joint-family ideal and son preference
- Rita (cosmic order) became dharma: duty by stage and station
- Ashrama and purushartha survive as life ideals, not rules
- Sabha and samiti cited as roots of deliberation

FADED OR REVERSED

- Grand sacrifices (ashvamedha, rajasuya) and animal offerings
- Pastoral economy that counted wealth in cattle
- Vedic deities Indra and Varuna, eclipsed by Shiva, Vishnu, Devi
- Women composing hymns and joining assemblies (Ghoshā, Apala, Lopamudra): lost in the later Vedic age, restored by modern education and law

Verdict: Vedic layers survive most strongly in ritual and the life cycle; Vedic hierarchy survives as caste, but is now contested by the Constitution, reform movements and Dalit assertion.

Fig. 1.2 The Vedic legacy sorted into what lives on, what has been transformed and what has faded.

Much survives. The **sanskaras** still mark a Hindu life from naming to cremation, and most weddings are solemnised before the fire with the seven steps (saptapadi). Gotra rules guide marriage, the "tradition of Vedic chanting" is on UNESCO's intangible heritage list (2008), and the **ashramas** and purusharthas remain ideals of a well-lived life. Belief in karma has spread beyond Hindus: Pew found that **77%** of both Hindus and Muslims hold it. The Rig Veda's "Truth is one; the wise call it by many names" (*ekam sat vipra bahudha vadanti*) is still cited as the charter of Indian pluralism. The darker inheritance survives too: varna hardened into birth-based caste, and the later exclusion of women from learning shaped centuries of patriarchy. **Vedic society lives on most strongly in ritual and the life cycle; its hierarchy survives as caste, now contested by the Constitution.**

05

Tolerance, Syncretism, Coexistence

Tolerance is bearing what one disagrees with; **syncretism** is blending traditions; **pluralism** is valuing difference itself. India has practised all three. Jain **anekantavada** (the many-sidedness of truth) and the Buddhist middle path taught humility about one's own view, and Amartya Sen has traced a long Indian "argumentative tradition" of open debate.

Three Thousand Years of Tolerance and Syncretism

Each age added a layer of accommodation; the present inherits both the ideal and its strains.

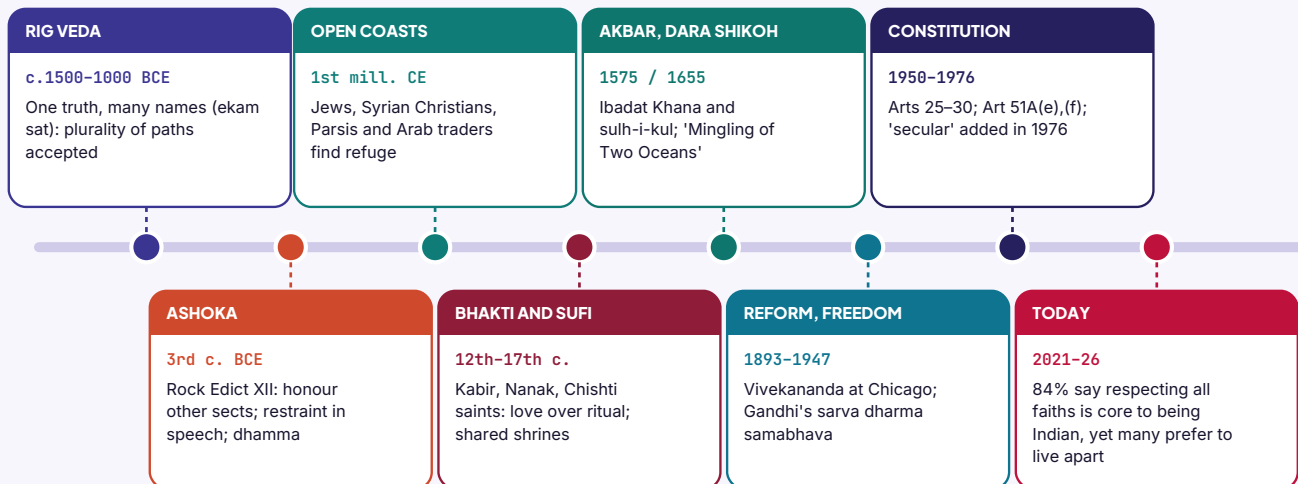


Fig. 1.3 Eight milestones in India's tradition of tolerance and syncretism, from the Rig Veda to present-day surveys.

Syncretism in Everyday Life

The Bhakti and Sufi movements carried religion into the language of ordinary people. Kabir, a weaver claimed by Hindus and Muslims alike, and Guru Nanak taught that God is found in love, not ritual; Chishti shrines at Ajmer and Delhi still draw people of all faiths. The meeting of Indian and Persian traditions produced Urdu, khayal and qawwali. Delhi's **Phool Walon Ki Sair**, begun in **1812**, carries floral offerings to both the Yogmaya temple and the dargah of Bakhtiyar Kaki at Mehrauli, and Sabarimala pilgrims stop at the Vavar mosque in Erumeli. This shared culture, called **ganga-jamuni tehzeeb**, shows up in data: Pew found that **18%** of Muslim and **29%** of Sikh women wear a bindi, and that **17%** of Hindus celebrate Christmas.

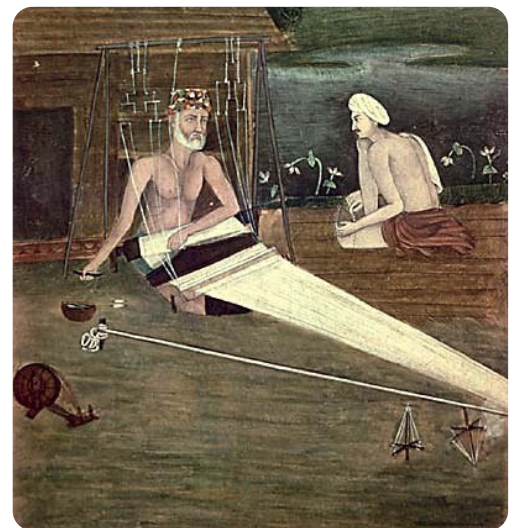


Fig. 1.4 Kabir at his loom with a disciple, in a painting of about 1825.

CONCEPT: "LIVING TOGETHER SEPARATELY"

Pew's survey of **29,999** adults (**2019-20**) found a paradox. **84%** said respecting all religions is very important to being "truly Indian", and **91%** felt very free to practise their faith. Yet **99%** of married people had a spouse of the same religion, **86%** of Hindus said all or most close friends were Hindu, **36%** of Hindus would not accept a Muslim neighbour, and **67%** of Hindus and **80%** of Muslims thought it very important to stop women of their community marrying outside it. Indians, Pew concluded, "**live together separately**": tolerance as peaceful coexistence of bounded communities, which holds in calm times but can fray when politics mobilises fear.

Why Tolerance Matters Now

Tolerance lets a society this diverse work as one democracy; the Preamble's **fraternity** and Article **51A(e)** and **(f)**, on common brotherhood and the composite culture, make it a civic duty. It underpins soft power, from yoga to the G20 theme of **2023**, "One Earth, One Family, One Future" (*Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*). It is also under strain: **65%** of Pew's respondents called communal violence a very big problem (Chapter 22).

CASE IN POINT: WHY CALICUT STAYED CALM AND ALIGARH DID NOT

Ashutosh Varshney's *Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life* (**2002**) mapped every reported Hindu–Muslim riot from **1950** to **1995**. Rural India accounted for only **3.6%** of the deaths, while eight cities with about **18%** of the urban population accounted for nearly **46%**. Calicut (Kozhikode), about as Muslim as Aligarh (**36–38%**), had not had a communal riot in a century; Aligarh was among the most riot-prone. The difference lay in **associational ties**: in Calicut, Hindus and Muslims traded together and shared trade unions, clubs and parties, and used these networks to scotch rumours. Tolerance survives where people are woven together, not merely placed side by side.

06

Continuity: Why the Culture Endures

Few civilisations have kept so long and unbroken a thread of language, ritual and belief. Tagore's poem "Bharat Tirtha" pictured India as a shore where Aryans and non-Aryans, Dravidians, Huns, Pathans and Mughals arrived and merged into one body.

- **Absorption, not replacement:** newcomers were added as new layers, castes and sects, not allowed to erase the old.
- **No single church:** with no one book, priesthood or centre, the culture had no single point at which it could be captured.
- **Family and caste as carriers:** socialisation, endogamy and ritual pass values across generations.
- **Sacred geography:** char dham, jyotirlingas, shakti peethas, dargahs and the Kumbh cycle knit regions together.
- **Oral and performing traditions:** Ramlila, Vedic chanting, kathas and folk theatre carry memory without schools.
- **Constitutional shelter:** Articles **25–30** protect faith and the right of groups to conserve their culture.

IN THE NEWS 2025: THE MAHA KUMBH AND DEEPAVALI

The Maha Kumbh at Prayagraj (13 January–26 February **2025**) recorded over **66** crore visits by the Uttar Pradesh government's count, managed with AI-enabled cameras; a crowd crush on 29 January, which killed **30** people by the official count, showed the strain of such scale. On 10 December **2025**, at a UNESCO session hosted at Delhi's Red Fort, **Deepavali** became India's **16th** element on the intangible heritage lists, joining the Kumbh (**2017**).

Continuity and Change: How Indian Society Holds On While Moving

Anchors of continuity and forces of change meet in 'adaptive continuity': old forms carry new content, new forms carry old content.

ANCHORS OF CONTINUITY

Family and kinship

first school of values; elders, rites, duty

Caste and community

endogamy, networks, mutual aid

Ritual and festival cycle

sanskaras, fasts, pilgrimage, fairs

Oral and textual memory

epics, folk forms, guru-shishya

Local community

village, mohalla, panchayat, shrine

Constitutional shelter

Arts 25–30; Art 51A(f): composite culture

ADAPTIVE CONTINUITY

old and new fused

Arranged marriage found on matrimonial apps

Kumbh run with AI cameras, 66 crore visits

Caste associations act as pressure groups

Nuclear homes, 'functionally joint' ties

FORCES OF CHANGE

Colonial rule and English education

new ideas of rights, reform

Constitution and law

Art 17; Hindu Code laws 1955–56

Industry, cities, migration

new jobs without caste rules

Mass education, esp. of girls

later marriage, smaller families

Markets and globalisation

consumption, media, mobility

Digital life

64% of women have used the internet (NFHS-6)

Fig. 1.5 Anchors of continuity and forces of change meet in "adaptive continuity", where old forms carry new content.

07

Processes of Social Change

Yogendra Singh, in *Modernization of Indian Tradition* (1973), sorted change by source: **orthogenetic** change arises from within a culture, **heterogenetic** change from contact with others, at both the cultural level (great and little traditions) and the structural level (family, caste and village; bureaucracy, polity and economy).

CONCEPT: SANSKRITISATION AND ITS CRITICS

M.N. Srinivas coined **Sanskritisation** in his study of the Coorgs (1952): the process by which a "low" caste, tribe or other group adopts the customs, rituals, beliefs and way of life of a higher, usually twice-born, caste, giving up meat and liquor, wearing the sacred thread or claiming Kshatriya descent. It usually follows a rise in wealth or power. Critics note that it brings **positional, not structural, change**: some groups climb while the ladder stays; it treats upper-caste ways as superior, spreads dowry and the seclusion of women, and devalues Dalit labour and culture. Anti-Brahmin and backward-class movements reversed the direction, putting pride in one's own identity in place of imitation (**de-Sanskritisation**).

Great and Little Traditions

Robert Redfield set the **great tradition** of texts and pan-Indian temples against the **little tradition** of village deities and oral lore. McKim Marriott, studying Kishan Garhi in Uttar Pradesh (1955), found traffic both ways: **universalisation** of local cults and **parochialisation** of pan-Indian gods and epics. Milton Singer found Madras industrialists practising **compartmentalisation** (1972): modern rules at the office, ritual at home.

Two Indian Models of Social Change

Left: Yogendra Singh's grid of sources and levels (1973). Right: Redfield's great and little traditions as Marriott and Singer used them in India.

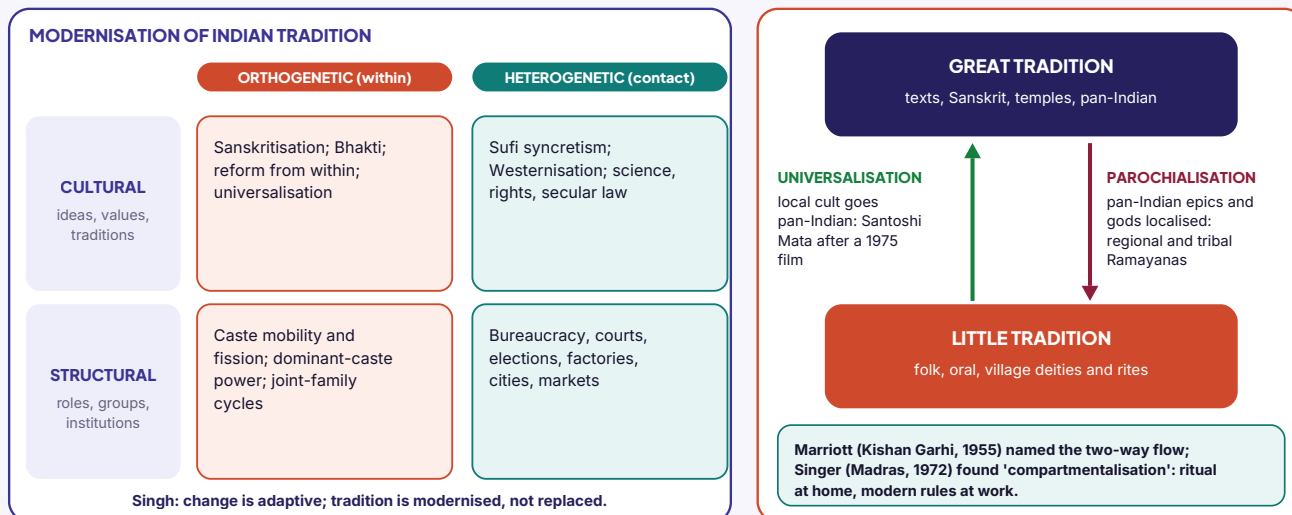


Fig. 1.6 Yogendra Singh's grid of sources and levels of change, and the two-way flow between great and little traditions.

Westernisation, Modernisation and Secularisation

Srinivas defined **westernisation** as "the changes brought about in Indian society and culture as a result of over 150 years of British rule, the term subsuming changes occurring at different levels ... technology, institutions, ideology and values". It began among upper castes and could run alongside Sanskritisation, as print and radio spread Sanskritic rites. **Modernisation** is a broader shift to rational, universal values and achieved status. **Secularisation** in the West meant the retreat of religion; in India it has meant weaker purity-pollution rules in cities, family law moved out of priestly hands by the Hindu Code laws (1955–56) and rituals turned into status display, while belief stays strong.

Four Processes of Social Change Compared

Srinivas's two concepts describe imitation of reference groups; modernisation and secularisation describe changes in values and institutions.

SANSKRITISATION Srinivas, 1952	WESTERNISATION Srinivas, 1966	MODERNISATION Lerner; Y. Singh, 1973	SECULARISATION Srinivas; Indian variant
MEANING A 'low' caste, tribe or group adopts the customs, rituals and lifestyle of a 'twice-born' caste	MEANING Changes from 150+ years of British rule in technology, institutions, ideology, values	MEANING Shift to rational, scientific, universal values; achieved rather than ascribed status	MEANING Religion loses control over other spheres; rational, this-worldly explanations gain
SOURCE Orthogenetic: from within; pre-colonial	SOURCE Heterogenetic: from outside	SOURCE Mixed: colonial, national and global	SOURCE Mostly heterogenetic
CARRIERS Castes rising in wealth or power; contact with temples, sects	CARRIERS Upper castes first: English education, professions	CARRIERS State, markets, schools, cities, media	CARRIERS Education, law, science, urban life
EXAMPLES Giving up meat and liquor, wearing the sacred thread, claiming Kshatriya origin	EXAMPLES Courts, railways, press, dress and diet; humanitarianism of social reform	EXAMPLES Constitution, Green Revolution, IT and UPI, rising age at marriage	EXAMPLES Weaker purity-pollution rules in cities; rituals turned into status display
LIMITS Positional, not structural, change; spreads dowry and seclusion of women	LIMITS Often surface imitation; today closer to Americanisation	LIMITS Risk of equating 'modern' with 'Western'; tradition adapts rather than dies	LIMITS Religiosity stays high (97% believe in God); India's model is equal respect, not exclusion

Fig. 1.7 Sanskritisation, westernisation, modernisation and secularisation compared by meaning, source, carriers, examples and limits.

COMMON CONFUSION: WESTERNISATION, MODERNISATION, GLOBALISATION

They are **not** synonyms. **Westernisation** names a source (Britain, now often America).

Modernisation names a direction (rationality, rights, achievement), which Japan reached without westernising. **Globalisation** names a two-way process of interconnection, especially since **1991** (Chapter 17).

08 Tradition and Modernity

Tradition and modernity are not two ends of one road. Lloyd and Susanne Rudolph showed in *The Modernity of Tradition* (**1967**) that caste associations, a "traditional" form, became vehicles of democratic participation. Gandhi wanted the cultures of all lands blown freely about his house but refused "to be blown off my feet by any" (*Young India*, **1921**). Ambedkar warned the Constituent Assembly in **1948** that democracy in India was "only a top-dressing on an Indian soil, which is essentially undemocratic". India's modernity has been selective: quick to take up technology and markets, slower to change marriage, caste and gender norms.

DOMAIN	TRADITIONAL FORM	MODERN FORM	TODAY'S BLEND
Marriage	Arranged, within caste	Choice, companionship	"Arranged-love" matches on matrimonial apps
Family	Joint household	Nuclear household	Functionally joint; grandparents mind children
Caste	Ritual rank, hereditary work	Equal citizenship	Caste associations, quotas, a caste census
Religion	Priest- and sect-led ritual	Secular State, science	Online darshan, e-booked pilgrimages
Authority	Elders, khap councils	Courts, rights	Courts curbing khaps (<i>Shakti Vahini</i> , 2018)

Youth surveys capture this mixed modernity. The CSDS–KAS study of **2016** found approval of inter-caste marriage up from **31%** (**2007**) to **55%**, yet only **4%** of married respondents had married outside their caste and **84%** had arranged marriages; by **2021**, **61%** supported inter-caste marriage but only **45%** inter-faith marriage. Attitudes change faster than practice.

09 Indian Society Today (2024–26)

Recent evidence points two ways. Faith, endogamy and family authority remain strong: India Today's first Gross Domestic Behaviour survey (March **2025**, **9,188** respondents in **21** States and one UT) found **61%** opposed to inter-faith and **56%** to inter-caste marriage, with **94%** support for inter-faith marriage in Kerala but **90%** opposition in Chandigarh, so urban literacy alone does not make attitudes liberal. Yet NFHS-6 (**2023–24**) shows women aged 15–49 who have used the internet up from **33.3%** to **64.3%** in five years and

marriage before 18 among women aged 20–24 down from **23.3%** to **20.1%**, while the fertility rate has fallen to **1.9** (SRS **2024**). Change is arriving through women, technology and demography more than through ideology.

IN THE NEWS 2026: CENSUS 2027 COUNTS CASTE

On 30 April **2025** the Cabinet Committee on Political Affairs decided that Census 2027 would enumerate the caste of all communities, the first such count since **1931**. Houselisting ran in most States between 1 April and 30 September **2026**; population enumeration follows in February **2027** (reference date 1 March for most States), with online self-enumeration. Supporters expect hard data for welfare and social justice; critics recall that the colonial census, by ranking castes from **1901**, drew hundreds of petitions for higher status and hardened once-fluid identities. How the data are used will matter more than the count.

10 Challenges and the Way Forward

- **Caste:** endogamy, discrimination, honour crimes.
- **Communal distance:** segregation, rumour, polarisation.
- **Patriarchy:** son preference, unpaid care, curbed mobility.
- **Superstition:** witch-hunting, quackery, fatalism.
- **Regional chauvinism:** language rows, hostility to migrants.
- **Thinning community:** lonely elderly, consumerism.
- **Digital fault lines:** misinformation, online hate.
- **Selective modernity:** new tools serving old prejudice.

The task is to keep what binds and reform what wounds. Ambedkar's **constitutional morality** and fraternity should guide public life, and **associational ties** across communities should be built through mixed schools, workplaces and housing. Education should nurture the scientific temper, inter-caste couples deserve support (as under the Dr. Ambedkar Scheme for Social Integration through Inter-Caste Marriages, **2013**), Ek Bharat Shreshtha Bharat (**2015**) can link regions, and caste data from Census 2027 should widen opportunity rather than deepen division. India's genius has been to change without breaking; the task now is to make continuity carry equality.

USING THIS CHAPTER IN MAINS

Open with a thinker or concept rather than a generic line on diversity. For continuity and change, organise the answer around anchors (family, caste, ritual, sacred geography) and forces (law, education, cities, markets, technology), and close with "adaptive continuity". On tolerance, show its depth and its limits, and offer civic ties as the remedy. Ready material: Pew **2021** (**84%**, **99%**), CSDS–KAS **2016** and **2021**, India Today GDB **2025**, NFHS-6, Census 2027 caste count, Maha Kumbh **2025**, Deepavali on UNESCO's list; Calicut versus Aligarh; Nehru's palimpsest, Gandhi's open windows, Ambedkar's "top-dressing".

Chapter 1 at a Glance

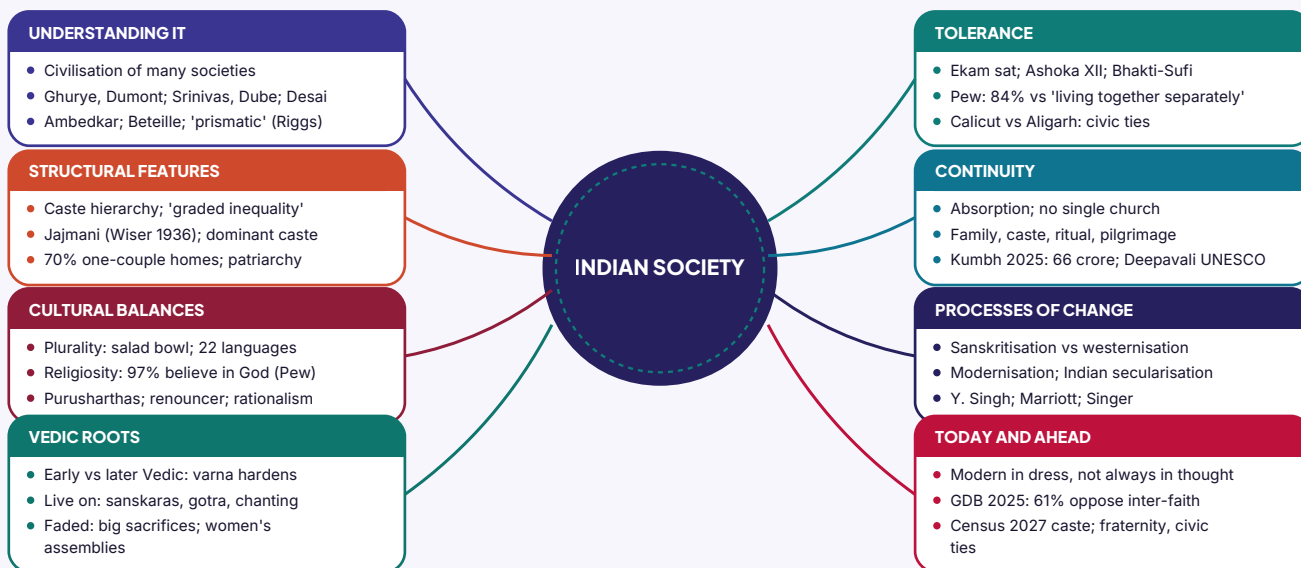


Fig. 1.8 Chapter 1 at a glance: the whole chapter on one page for quick revision.



Previous Year Questions



2023

GS I · 15 MARKS

What are the main features of Vedic society and religion? Do you think some of the features are still prevailing in Indian society?

Approach: Open by dividing the period into early (Rig Vedic) and later Vedic phases. Describe society (pastoral to agrarian; kinship, a loose varna order hardening by birth; sabha and samiti; women composing hymns, later excluded) and religion (nature gods, rita, sacrifice, then Upanishadic karma and moksha). Then sort survivals: sanskaras, saptapadi, gotra rules, Vedic chanting (UNESCO), ashrama and purushartha ideals, belief in karma (Pew: 77%); transformed survivals such as caste and patriarchy; and what faded. Conclude on a selective, contested legacy. (Sections 04, 02, 03)

2021

GS I · 15 MARKS

How does Indian society maintain continuity in traditional social values? Enumerate the changes taking place in it.

Approach: Begin with Yogendra Singh's "modernisation of tradition" or Nehru's palimpsest. Anchors of continuity: family socialisation and functional jointness, caste endogamy, ritual and pilgrimage (Maha Kumbh 2025), oral traditions, constitutional protection of culture. Changes: Sanskritisation and westernisation, secularisation of law, smaller households, later marriage, women online (NFHS-6), wider acceptance of inter-caste marriage (CSDS-KAS), the Census 2027 caste count. Conclude: change is adaptive; old forms carry new content. (Sections 06, 07, 08, 09)

2019

GS I · 10 MARKS

What makes the Indian society unique in sustaining its culture ? Discuss.

Approach: Define culture as a shared way of life and note India's unbroken civilisational thread. Give the reasons: absorption rather than replacement of newcomers, a religion without a single church, family and caste as carriers, sacred geography and pilgrimage, oral and performing traditions (16 UNESCO elements, Deepavali in 2025), syncretism and tolerance, and constitutional shelter (Articles 25–30, 51A(f)). Add a line of balance: the same continuity preserves caste and patriarchy. Conclude with adaptive continuity as the source of uniqueness. (Sections 06, 05, 03)

2017

GS I · 15 MARKS

The spirit of tolerance and love is not only an interesting feature of Indian society from very early times, but it is also playing an important part at the present. Elaborate.

Approach: Distinguish tolerance, syncretism and pluralism. Trace the early roots: ekam sat, anekantavada, Ashoka's Rock Edict XII, Bhakti–Sufi saints, Akbar's sulh-i-kul, ganga-jamuni tehzeeb. Show its present role: holding a plural democracy together (fraternity, Article 51A(e)), soft power (Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam, G20 2023), shared festivals. Add its limits through Pew's "living together separately" and communal strains, and use Calicut versus Aligarh to argue that civic ties keep tolerance alive. Conclude on fraternity as a duty. (Sections 05, 03, 10)

LOTUSARISE IAS

INDIAN SOCIETY

MAINS · GS PAPER I

Caste: Structure, Change and Persistence

On 23 September 2026, the Madurai Bench of the Madras High Court upheld Tamil Nadu's order to rename streets and hamlets that carry caste names, remarking that some were too derogatory to be uttered in open court; village panchayats had already proposed new names for over 8,000 habitations. That summer, census rehearsals had tested a question not put to every Indian since 1931: your caste. One arm of the State erases caste from public view while another counts it. That is caste today: officially disowned, socially alive.

SYLLABUS

PRELIMS

Economic and Social Development – Sustainable Development, Poverty, Inclusion, Demographics, Social Sector Initiatives, etc

MAINS · GS PAPER I

Salient features of Indian Society, Diversity of India; Social empowerment

CONTENTS

01	Varna, Jati and the Idea of Caste	02	Caste in the Village Order
03	Colonialism and Reform	04	Mobility: Sanskritisation and Beyond
05	Caste in Democratic Politics	06	Caste, Work and the City
07	Marriage, Campus and the Digital	08	Counting Caste: The Census Debate
09	Is Caste Disappearing?	10	Annihilation or Reform? Way Forward
11	Previous Year Questions		

This chapter covers:

- varna, jati and the main theories of caste;
- caste in the village order and under colonial rule;
- mobility: Sanskritisation and its alternatives;

- caste in politics, work, cities, marriage and online life;
- the caste census debate;
- whether caste is disappearing, and the way forward.

Tribes are treated in Chapter 4, exclusion and affirmative action in Chapter 20 and Dalit and backward-caste movements in Chapter 21; laws and schemes for SCs and OBCs are in our Social Justice notes.

01 Varna, Jati and the Idea of Caste

The word **caste** comes from the Portuguese *casta*, meaning breed or lineage. Indians use two words for two different things. **Varna** is the four-fold scheme of the texts (Brahmana, Kshatriya, Vaishya, Shudra), first pictured in the Purusha Sukta of the Rig Veda as limbs of a cosmic being; those placed outside it, the *avarna*, were treated as untouchable. **Jati** is the group a person is actually born into: hereditary, endogamous, usually tied to an occupation, and counted in thousands, each region with its own set and ranking. Varna is the map; jati is the territory.

Varna and Jati: The Textual Scheme and the Lived Reality

Varna is a four-fold classification found in texts; jati is the endogamous group a person is actually born into.

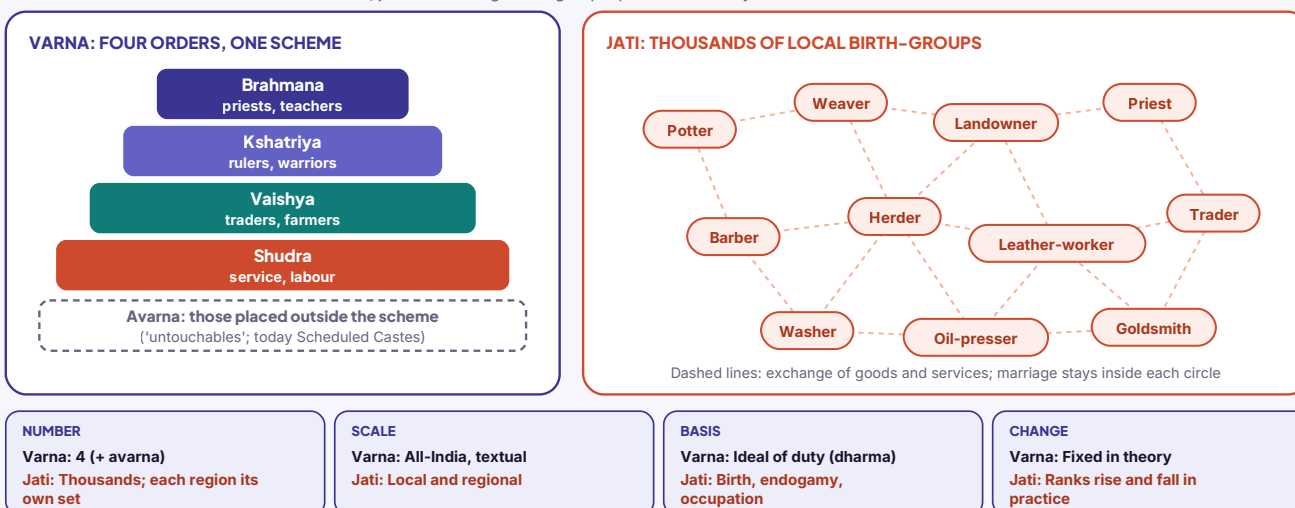


Fig. 3.1 Varna as a textual ladder and jati as a web of local birth-groups that exchange services but marry within themselves.

G.S. Ghurye, in *Caste and Race in India* (1932), listed six features: **segmental division** (membership by birth); **hierarchy**; **restrictions on feeding and social intercourse**; **civil and religious disabilities and privileges**; **restricted choice of occupation**; and **endogamy**. Ambedkar, in "Castes in India" (1916), singled out endogamy as the essence: caste is a group that closed its doors to marriage, and practices such as child marriage and enforced widowhood grew up to keep them closed.

THINKER	KEY WORK	CORE IDEA
G.S. Ghurye	<i>Caste and Race in India</i> (1932)	Six features; caste as a many-sided institution
Louis Dumont	<i>Homo Hierarchicus</i> (1966)	Purity–pollution orders all ranks; status above power

THINKER	KEY WORK	CORE IDEA
B.R. Ambedkar	<i>Annihilation of Caste</i> (1936)	Endogamy is the essence; religious sanction sustains it
M.N. Srinivas	Coorg (1952) and Rampura studies	Sanskritisation; dominant caste; vote bank
Andre Beteille	<i>Caste, Class and Power</i> (1965)	Caste, class and power can come apart
Dipankar Gupta	<i>Interrogating Caste</i> (2000)	Many rival hierarchies; castes as competing identities

CONCEPT: PURITY, POLLUTION AND ITS CRITICS

For Louis Dumont, caste rests on one opposition: the **pure** and the **impure**. Contact with death, bodily waste and leather pollutes, so the Brahmin stands at the top, the castes doing "polluting" work at the bottom, and even the king ranks below the priest in status. Critics reply that this reads caste from the top and from the texts. Gloria Raheja and Dipankar Gupta showed that the dominant landowner, not the priest, was often the centre of village life, and Dalit thinkers from Phule to Ambedkar insisted that the lowest castes never accepted the ideology that degraded them. Caste is ideology and power together.

02 Caste in the Village Order

In the village, caste worked as an economy. Under the **jajmani** system, service castes (kamin) served landowning patrons (jajman) for a share of the harvest. It gave security and mutual obligation, and could cross religious lines, but it tied families to hereditary work, could slide into bonded labour and gave the kamin no exit. Cash wages, the Green Revolution and migration have largely dissolved it.

Real power lay with the **dominant caste**, Srinivas's term from his study of Rampura in Karnataka: a caste that is numerically strong, owns much of the land and wields political power, often with fair ritual rank, Western education and government jobs. Post-1947 land reforms moved land from absentee upper-caste landlords to intermediate cultivating castes such as the Reddys and Kammas, the Patidars or the Jats, and adult franchise turned their numbers into votes. Andre Beteille's study of Sripuram in Thanjavur (1965) showed the next step: Brahmins who once combined ritual rank, land and power were selling land and losing office to non-Brahmins, so that **caste, class and power** no longer coincided. Caste also reaches beyond Hindus: Muslims divide into ashraf, ajlaf and arzal groups (the Pasmanda movement speaks for the latter two), Dalit Christians face separate churches and graveyards in some places, and Mazhabi Sikhs remain socially distinct.

03 Colonialism and Reform

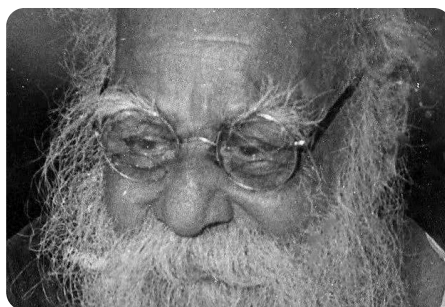
Nicholas Dirks argues in *Castes of Mind* (2001) that colonial rule made caste the defining fact of Indian society. Censuses from 1871 counted castes, and H.H. Risley's census of 1901 ranked them in order of social precedence, prompting hundreds of petitions claiming higher places and the birth of caste associations to

press them. The Criminal Tribes Act (1871) branded whole communities as born offenders; land settlements turned upper-caste rights over produce into ownership; and the Government of India Act, 1935 listed the "depressed classes" in a schedule, the origin of the term Scheduled Castes. Once counted and written down, fluid identities hardened.

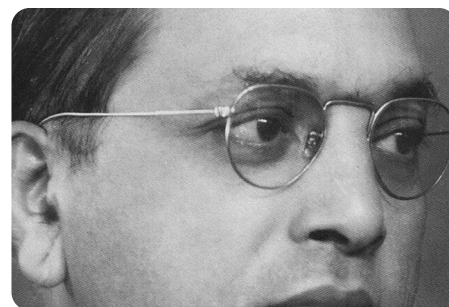
Resistance came from below as well as from reformers. Jyotirao Phule's *Gulamgiri* and Satyashodhak Samaj (1873), Narayana Guru's call for "one caste, one religion, one God", Ayyankali's struggle for Pulaya children's schooling, the Vaikom Satyagraha (1924–25) and Periyar's Self-Respect Movement (1925) attacked the ideology of birth. Ambedkar led the Mahad water satyagraha (1927) and, after the Poona Pact (1932), argued that caste could not be reformed from within; Gandhi campaigned against untouchability through the Harijan Sevak Sangh while defending varna as a division of duties.



Jyotirao Phule



E.V. Ramasamy (Periyar)



B.R. Ambedkar

Fig. 3.2 Three critics who attacked caste as an ideology of birth, in Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu.

CASE IN POINT: CASTE IN THE PRISON MANUAL (2024)

In *Sukanya Shantha v Union of India* (3 October 2024), filed by the journalist whose reporting had exposed the practice, the Supreme Court examined State prison manuals written in the colonial era. Several assigned sweeping and latrine cleaning to "lower" castes, cooking to "suitable" castes, and treated members of denotified tribes as habitual offenders. The Court held these rules violated Articles 14, 15, 17, 21 and 23, ordered the manuals revised within three months and the caste column struck from prison registers. Colonial categories, the case shows, can outlive colonialism inside ordinary institutions.

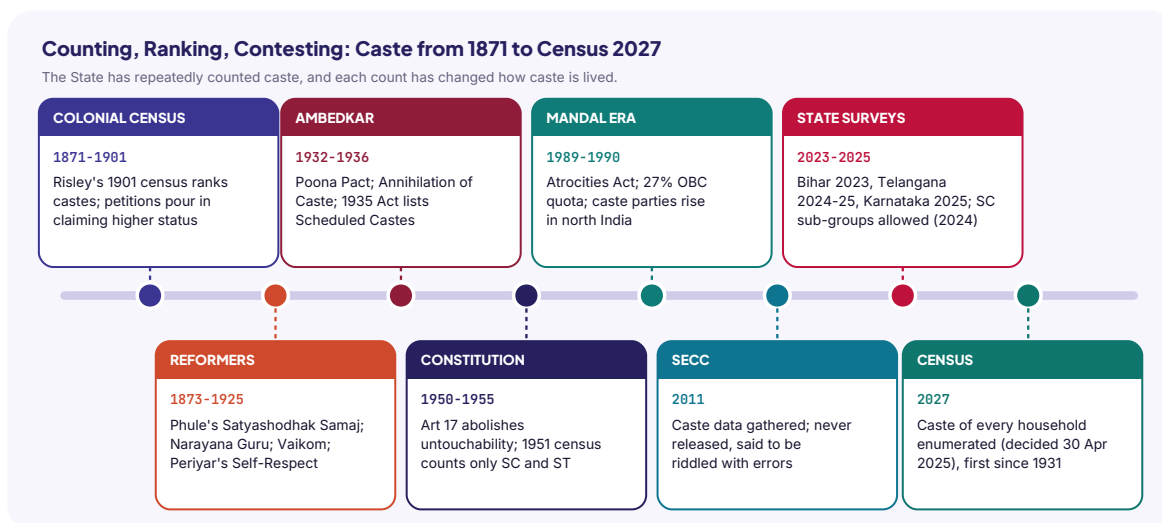


Fig. 3.3 From Risley's ranking to Census 2027: each act of counting caste has reshaped it.

04

Mobility: Sanskritisation and Beyond

Caste mobility is **group mobility**. Through **Sanskritisation** (Chapter 1), a caste that gains wealth or power adopts upper-caste customs and claims higher rank. The Nadars of Tamil Nadu, once toddy-tappers barred from temples, became a prosperous trading caste and, through the Nadar Mahajana Sangam (1910), pressed a Kshatriya claim; Ahirs, Gopas and Goalas of north India merged under the name **Yadav** in the 1920s, claiming descent from Krishna. Such moves change a caste's place on the ladder, not the ladder itself.

Other routes rejected imitation. **Westernisation** through English education and professions created a new elite. **Protest** movements, from Adi-Dharm in Punjab (1926) to the Dalit Panthers of Bombay (1972), replaced shame with pride (**de-Sanskritisation**). **Conversion** was an exit: on 14 October 1956 at Nagpur, Ambedkar embraced Buddhism with hundreds of thousands of followers. The newest twist reverses Srinivas's model: powerful landowning castes such as the Patidars (2015), Jats (2016) and Marathas (2023–24) have agitated to be classed as backward, because in a quota democracy backwardness is also a resource.

05

Caste in Democratic Politics

Srinivas coined the term "**vote bank**" in the 1950s for blocs delivered by caste leaders. Rajni Kothari's *Caste in Indian Politics* (1970) argued that democracy **politicised caste** and, in doing so, secularised it: to win, castes had to bargain and form alliances, which loosened ritual rank. Dominant castes ruled the first decades; then peasant and backward castes rose behind Charan Singh and Karpoori Thakur, and after Mandal (1990) Christophe Jaffrelot's "silent revolution" brought OBC leaders to power across the Hindi belt. The BSP, founded by Kanshi Ram in 1984, mobilised Dalits as a *Bahujan* majority.

Caste politics now plays out **within categories**. Bihar created a Mahadalit group (2007) for the poorest SCs; Pasmanda Muslims demand a share apart from elite Muslims; and after *State of Punjab v Davinder Singh* (2024) allowed States to sub-classify SCs, Telangana divided its 59 SC castes into three groups in 2025. Sociologically the verdict recognises that castes inside one list are unequal and that the more advanced among them have taken most of the gains.

The associations that carry these claims are themselves new forms of caste. **Caste associations**, which Lloyd and Susanne Rudolph saw as democratic vehicles, now run hostels, scholarships and matrimonial meets; caste cooperative banks, such as the Saraswat Bank (1918), and caste WhatsApp groups pool money and information; the Dalit Indian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (2005) promotes Dalit business. Caste has turned from a ladder of ritual rank into a set of interest groups, which makes it harder to eradicate but easier to bargain with.

06

Caste, Work and the City

Few Indians now follow a hereditary trade, yet stigmatised work remains caste-marked. Of 54,574 sewer and septic-tank workers validated under the NAMASTE scheme by December 2024, 67.9% were SCs, 15.7% OBCs and 8.3% STs; the Ministry called the work "occupation-based rather than caste-based", but the overlap is plain. In white-collar markets, caste works through names and networks: matched job applications with Dalit names drew fewer calls in a 2007 field experiment (Chapter 20). Satish Deshpande observes that

upper castes, having converted inherited caste advantage into degrees, property and contacts, can now describe themselves as "casteless"; their caste is invisible because it no longer needs to be named.

Ambedkar saw the city as the way out, calling the village "a sink of localism, a den of ignorance, narrow-mindedness and communalism" (Constituent Assembly, 1948). Cities have indeed loosened rules of touch and food: offices, eateries, metros and hostels mix castes daily, and a Dalit middle class has emerged. But housing tells another story. In a 2012 audit in Delhi NCR, 18% of Dalit seekers were refused outright by phone and 44% face to face, against almost none of the upper-caste seekers; Muslims fared worse. Census block data for 147 cities show segregation that does not fall with city size: about 60% of Ahmedabad's neighbourhoods had no SC or ST residents. In IHDS-II (2011-12), 20% of urban households admitted practising untouchability in some form.

Is Caste Disappearing in Urban India? What the Evidence Shows

Field experiments, surveys and census data point to change in public conduct and persistence in private life.

RENTING A HOME

44%

of Dalit seekers refused face to face in Delhi NCR, against 3% of upper-caste Hindus (Thorat et al., 2012 audit)

NEIGHBOURHOODS

~60%

of Ahmedabad's census blocks had no SC or ST residents; segregation does not fall with city size (147 cities, 2011 data)

JOB APPLICATIONS

0.67

odds of an interview call for a Dalit name against 1.0 for an upper-caste name with the same CV (2007 study)

SEWER WORK

92%

of 54,574 profiled sewer and septic-tank workers are SC, ST or OBC; 68% SC (NAMASTE, 2024)

UNTOUCHABILITY

20%

of urban households (30% rural) admitted practising it in some form (IHDS-II, 2011-12)

MARRIAGE

5.8%

of marriages are inter-caste nationally; 55% in Mizoram, about 1% in Madhya Pradesh (IHDS-II)

Counter-evidence: mixed offices, eateries and transport; a growing Dalit middle class; an online rental audit found clear bias only against Muslims.

Fig. 3.4 Six pieces of evidence on caste in urban India: change in public conduct, persistence in housing, work and marriage.

07

Marriage, Campus and the Digital

Endogamy is caste's strongest wall. In IHDS-II only 5.8% of marriages were inter-caste, from 55% in Mizoram to about 1% in Madhya Pradesh, and the national rate has hovered near 5% for marriages made since 1970. A study using the same survey found that a couple's own education barely raises the odds of an inter-caste match, while the education of the groom's mother does, a sign of how firmly parents arrange marriages. Matrimonial portals have digitised the old rules with caste and sub-caste filters; "caste no bar" remains a small, if growing, column. Couples who defy families still risk violence in the name of honour (laws: see our Social Justice notes).

Caste and gender are bound together. Uma Chakravarti's term "**Brahmanical patriarchy**" (1993) names the control of women's sexuality that endogamy demands: caste purity rested on guarding daughters, while Dalit women faced caste and sexual violence at once, a double or, with poverty, triple burden that Dalit feminists have long described. Violence follows assertion: NCRB recorded 55,698 crimes against SCs in 2024, 3.6% fewer than in 2023, with land, water, temple entry and wedding processions among the common triggers.

Campuses bring castes together and expose friction: the deaths of Rohith Vemula (Hyderabad, 2016), Payal Tadvī (Mumbai, 2019) and Darshan Solanki (IIT Bombay, 2023) made discrimination in higher education a

national issue, and the UGC's equity regulations of January **2026** were put in abeyance by the Supreme Court within weeks. **Online**, caste has found a stage: reels and songs celebrating caste pride and dominance circulate widely, while Ambedkarite creators build a Dalit counter-public. Caste also travels: in **2023** Seattle became the first US city to ban caste discrimination, while California's governor vetoed a similar bill.

IN THE NEWS 2025–26: TAKING CASTE OFF THE STREET

On 16 September **2025**, the Allahabad High Court called the recording of an accused person's caste in an FIR "identity profiling" and noted caste-glorifying reels and vehicle stickers. Within days Uttar Pradesh banned caste-based political rallies, dropped caste from police records (except where law requires it, as under the Atrocities Act), and ordered caste stickers on vehicles fined and caste "territory" signboards removed. Tamil Nadu's order of 6 October **2025** to rename "colonies" and streets with caste names, stayed by the High Court in **2025**, was upheld in September **2026**. Supporters see a cleaner public sphere; sceptics note that banning symbols does not touch land, jobs or marriage.

08

Counting Caste: The Census Debate

The **1931** census was the last to publish caste data for all; from **1951** only SCs and STs were counted, and the caste data of the Socio-Economic and Caste Census (**2011**) were never released. States have now gone ahead, and the Union has followed.

EXERCISE	KEY FINDING	WHAT FOLLOWED
Bihar survey (2023)	EBC 36.0% , BC 27.1% , SC 19.7% , ST 1.7%	Quotas raised to 65% ; struck down by Patna HC (2024); appeal pending
Telangana survey (2024–25)	Backward Classes 56.3%	Bills for 42% BC quota await assent
Karnataka survey (2025)	Fresh count after the 2015 survey was shelved	Report (May 2026) not yet acted on
Census 2027	Caste of all households (decided 30 Apr 2025)	Enumeration Feb 2027 ; open entry for non-SC/ST castes

Supporters argue that justice needs numbers: courts demand quantifiable data for quotas and sub-classification, welfare cannot be targeted on **1931** estimates, and only a count can show who holds land, jobs and seats, including the privileged castes whose advantage goes unrecorded; Kanshi Ram's slogan asked for a share in proportion to numbers. Critics recall that Risley's census hardened identities, fear pressure to breach the **50%** quota ceiling and endless claims, and point to the difficulty of classifying thousands of names and synonyms. Design will matter as much as intent: in the July **2026** rehearsal, the castes of non-SC/ST respondents were written into an open column, so the Registrar General must code thousands of names,

synonyms and spellings into a usable list before the data can be trusted. A caste count is a mirror, not a remedy: its value depends on whether the data are used to target disadvantage or to mobilise identity.

09 Is Caste Disappearing?

In 2003 Srinivas wrote an "obituary" of caste as a *system*: jajmani, ritual ranking and caste councils were dying. Yet caste as an *identity* has grown stronger. Beteille's formulation fits: caste has retreated from the public domain of law and office but survives in marriage, networks and politics. That is why caste is both **fluid** and **static**.

DIMENSION	FLUID	STATIC
Rank	Castes rise and fall (Nadars, Yadavs)	Untouchability stigma clings to SCs
Boundaries	Blocs form and split (Mahadalit, Bahujan, Pasmanda)	About 95% still marry within caste
Work	Hereditary trades largely gone	Sewer and sanitation work caste-marked
Space	Mixed offices, transport, eateries	Segregated hamlets and city blocks
Politics	Alliances shift every election	Caste remains the unit of mobilisation

From System to Identity: What Has Weakened, What Persists, What Is New

Srinivas (2003) wrote an 'obituary' of caste as a system; caste as identity has meanwhile grown stronger.

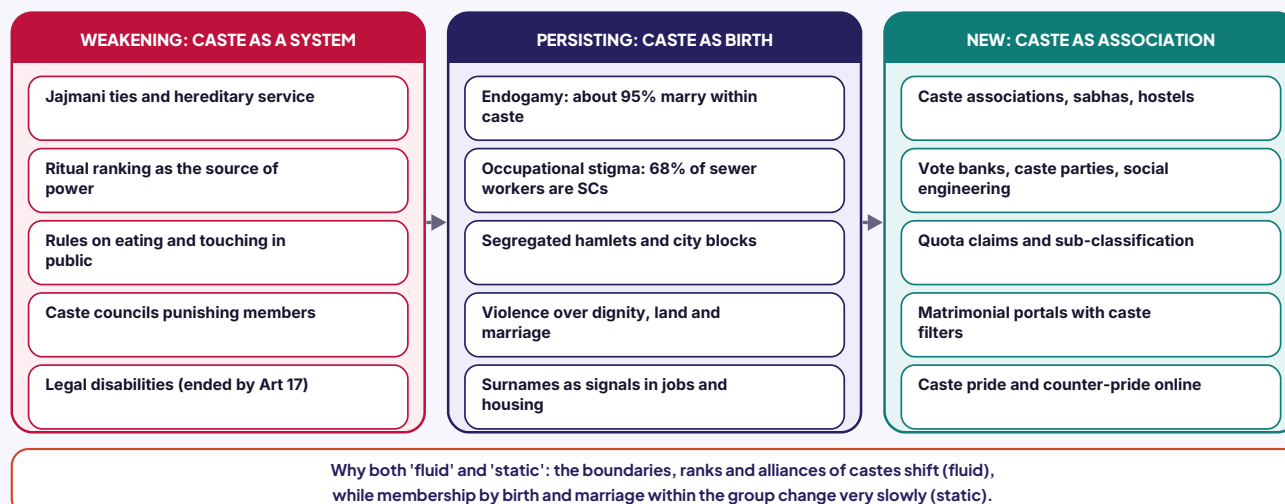


Fig. 3.5 Caste as a system is weakening, caste as birth persists, and caste as association is new.

Caste has therefore **not** lost relevance for understanding even a multicultural India: it still explains stratification, voting, marriage, the urban map and divisions among Muslims, Christians and Sikhs. What has changed is its meaning, from a moral order of hierarchy to a resource of identity and network, as Dipankar Gupta's picture of rival, horizontal castes suggests.

Annihilation or Reform? Way Forward

The great debate remains Ambedkar's. In *Annihilation of Caste* (1936), written for a Lahore reform society that cancelled his address, he argued that caste is "a notion", "a state of the mind" sustained by scriptural authority, so interdining and temple entry would not end it; the real remedy was **inter-marriage**, because only "fusion of blood" could create a feeling of kinship. Gandhi first defended varna as hereditary duty without hierarchy, yet by the **1940s** would bless only marriages between a caste Hindu and a Dalit. The Constitution took Ambedkar's route on rights (Article 17) and a gradual one on society.

- **Enforce the law:** faster atrocity trials, special courts.
- **End manual sewer work:** full mechanisation, new livelihoods.
- **Protect couples:** safe houses, support for inter-caste marriage.
- **Fair housing and hiring:** anti-discrimination rules for private markets.
- **Equity on campus:** working cells, mentoring, accountability.
- **Use Census 2027 data well:** privacy, targeting, sub-classification.
- **Beyond symbols:** pair renaming with land and jobs.
- **Constitutional morality:** fraternity taught in school.

Caste will not be annihilated by decree, but it can be emptied of hierarchy: when birth stops deciding where one lives, works and marries, caste becomes just a name.

USING THIS CHAPTER IN MAINS

Open with a thinker or a precise distinction (varna and jati, system and identity). Frame "is caste disappearing?" as change versus persistence and end on caste's changed meaning. Ready material: IHDS-II (5.8% inter-caste; 20% urban untouchability), Delhi rental audit (44%), NAMASTE (68% SC), 147-city segregation study, Bihar survey 2023, Census 2027, Davinder Singh 2024, Sukanya Shantha 2024; Ghurye, Dumont, Srinivas, Beteille, Kothari, Gupta; Ambedkar's "state of the mind".

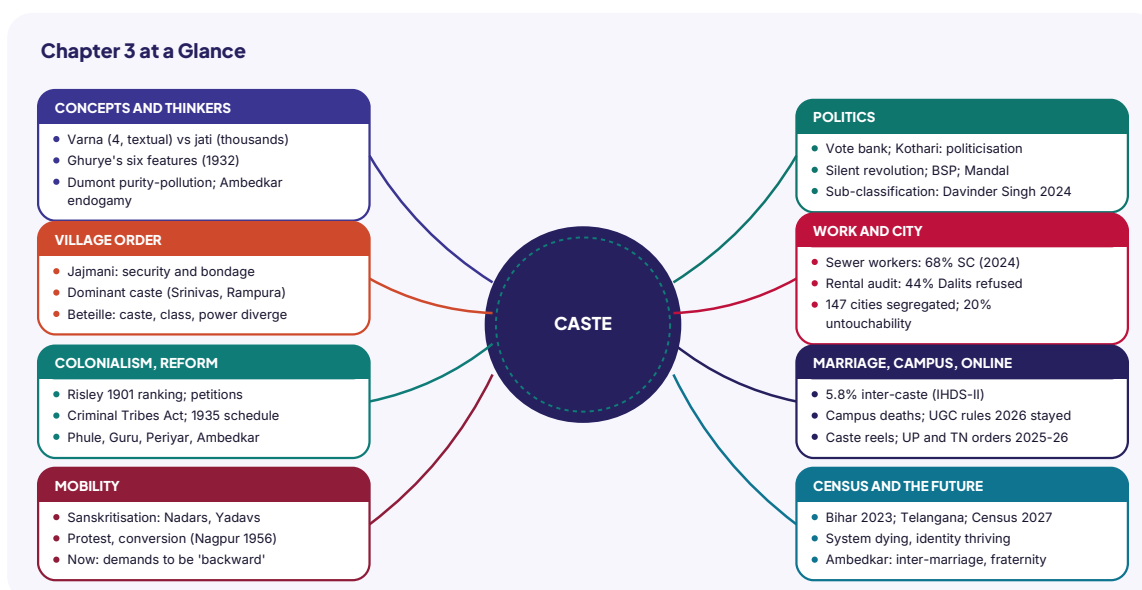


Fig. 3.6 Chapter 3 at a glance: the whole chapter on one page for quick revision.



Previous Year Questions



2026

GS I · 15 MARKS

Is caste disappearing in urban India? Illustrate your answer with examples.

Approach: Begin with Ambedkar's hope that cities would free Dalits. Changed: mixed workplaces and transport, weaker purity rules, a Dalit middle class, DICCI. Persistent: rental refusals in Delhi NCR (44% face to face), neighbourhood segregation across 147 cities, 20% of urban households admitting untouchability, caste-marked sewer work (68% SC), matrimonial filters, campus deaths. Conclude that caste is retreating from public conduct, not from housing, work and marriage. (Sections 06, 07, 09)

2023

GS I · 15 MARKS

Why is caste identity in India both fluid and static?

Approach: Define caste identity as birth-based jati membership. Fluidity: Sanskritisation and Kshatriya claims (Nadars), mergers such as the Yadavs, colonial census reclassification, new blocs (Mahadalit, Bahujan, Pasmanda), demands for backward status, conversion and urban anonymity. Stasis: birth ascription, about 95% endogamy, untouchability stigma, caste-marked work and segregated housing. Use Srinivas's "obituary" of the system against the strength of identity. Conclude that boundaries move, membership does not. (Sections 04, 05, 09)

2020

GS I · 10 MARKS

Has caste lost its relevance in understanding the multi-cultural Indian Society ? Elaborate your answer with illustrations.

Approach: Case for decline: Article 17, the end of jajmani, mixed urban life, Srinivas's obituary. Continuing relevance: caste among Muslims, Christians and Sikhs, voting and sub-classification politics, endogamy (IHDS), urban segregation, caste data in Bihar 2023 and Census 2027. Use Beteille and Gupta to argue that caste's meaning has changed from hierarchy to identity. Conclude that caste remains a key lens, though no longer the only one. (Sections 09, 05, 06, 01)

2018

GS I · 10 MARKS

"Caste system is assuming new identities and associational forms. Hence, caste system cannot be eradicated in India." Comment.

Approach: Accept the first part: caste associations (Rudolphs), caste banks and WhatsApp groups, political blocs and vote banks, quota agitations, DICCI, matrimonial portals and online caste pride. Question the conclusion: associational caste is horizontal, unlike ritual hierarchy, and law, education, cities and inter-caste marriage erode birth-based rank. Bring in Ambedkar's remedy and recent steps (UP and Tamil Nadu orders). Conclude that hierarchy can be dismantled even if identity endures. (Sections 05, 07, 10)

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