

PYQ Vault

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questions

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days

10

years of PYQs

DAY 24

Caste, Religion & Ethnicity in Indian Politics · 10 questions

Every question carries a **Flow Snapshot** — and a **handwritten model answer** on the channel.

No PYQ will be unfamiliar.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTION

UPSC 2016 · 10 marks

Cultural and Regional differences are the enduring bases on which politics is played out in India.

FLOW SNAPSHOT — how the answer moves

Intro routes

R1 Kothari: democracy works through society, not outside it → culture / region as durable ground, not mere survivals
R2 India a mosaic of language-culture-region → identities reshaped by elections, parties, federal bargaining → hence the standing bases of politics

Body flow

Kothari framing → **Brass:** regionalism long-term, nationalism short-term → language proof (Andhra reorganisation → Tamil anti-Hindi → three-language formula) → varied forms (Shiv Sena sons-of-soil → Bodoland / Gorkhaland statehood → Naga secession) → drivers: deprivation, uneven development, cultural anxiety, nativism

Counter-view

Kohli: mishandled movements turn secessionist (Punjab, J&K) → the danger is delayed accommodation, not diversity itself

Conclusion routes

R1 federal-democratic accommodation converts differences into channels of representation
R2 institutionally accommodated, diversity strengthens rather than strains democracy

Rajni Kothari argued that Indian democracy does not work outside society but through it. Caste, language, region and ethnicity are not traditional survivals but reshaped by elections, parties and federal bargaining.

Cultural and regional differences are therefore the durable ground of Indian politics. Paul R. Brass argues that regionalism has been a long-term trend while nationalism has often been short-term. The reorganisation began with Andhra Pradesh and the Tamil anti-Hindi agitations turned cultural assertion into a federal demand the state absorbed through the three language formula.

Other examples include sons of the soil politics in the Shiv Sena, statehood demands like Bodoland and Gorkhaland. The secessionist Naga movement driven by deprivation, uneven development cultural anxiety and nativism.

Atul Kohli warns that mishandled regional movements can turn secessionist, as in Punjab and Jammu & Kashmir. The danger lies in delayed accommodation, not in diversity.

Federal and democratic accommodation has converted them into channels of representation. When institutionally accommodated, these differences strengthen rather than strain Indian democracy.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTION

UPSC 2017 · 15 marks

Religion is still an important factor in Indian politics. Discuss.

FLOW SNAPSHOT — how the answer moves

Intro routes

R1 secularism adopted, communal electorates abolished → yet religion never left → Arts. 25–28 protect belief; faith still drives mobilisation, identity, voting

R2 start from live flashpoints (Ram Mandir / CAA / NRC) → religion visibly active today → trace it back to its colonial embedding

Body flow

colonial inheritance → **Bipan Chandra's** three stages of communalism → divide-and-rule + separate electorates + Partition institutionalise it → contemporary majoritarian turn → **Savarkar's** Hindutva → ethnic-territorial nation, minorities outside the core → mobilisation through conflict → **Brass**: organised, managed violence → fear converted into vote polarisation → religion *not only* communal → **Gandhi's** ethical use → **Bhargava's** “principled distance” as the state's response

Counter-view

religion rarely acts alone → it competes and combines with caste, welfare, development

Conclusion routes

R1 remains important but not the sole driver → guard religious freedom without polarisation weakening citizenship

R2 religion has moved from colonial communal representation → contemporary ideological nationalism → important, but works with governance and development

India adopted secularism at Independence and abolished communal electorates, but religion never left its politics.

Articles 25-28 protect belief, while faith continues to shape mobilization, identity and voting. Its hold is partly a colonial inheritance. Bipin Chandra traces communalism through three stages - communities first see themselves as distinct, then as holding opposed interests and finally as antagonistic. British divide and rule, separate electorates and Partition hardened this into institutional politics.

In its contemporary form, religion works as majoritarian nationalism. VD Savarkar's Hindutva converted Hindu identity into an ethnic-territorial nation, placing Muslims and Christians outside its core. Ram Mandir, the CAA and NRC show that this remains electorally active.

Paul R. Brass views communal force. Mahatma Gandhi used it ethically: "Those who say religion has nothing to do with politics do not know what religion is." Rajeev Bhargava describes the state's answer as "principled distance" i.e. intervention for reform without privileging any faith.

Religion competes with caste, welfare and development. It remains important, but India must protect religious freedom without letting polarization weaken citizenship.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTION

UPSC 2018 · 15 marks

Critically examine the ethnic conflicts in North-East India.

FLOW SNAPSHOT — how the answer moves

Intro routes

R1 NE = one of India's most ethnically diverse regions → a long cycle of autonomy, insurgency and inter-ethnic violence
R2 Varshney defines ethnic conflict → stake the question: born of diversity, or of state-building?

Body flow

forms of conflict → Nagaland (sovereignty demand / rejected Constitution / 1952 boycott / NSCN) → Assam (ULFA / anti-migrant / Bodoland) → Manipur (Meitei-Naga-Kuki) → Tripura (tribes vs Bengali migrants) → why? development school (**Weiner**: gaps, aspirations, unmet expectations) → instrumentalist turn (**Muni**: “creation of vested political interests”) → federation-building critique (**Baruah**: nation-state building ignored small communities; centralisation + AFSPA → alienation → “genuine federation-building”)

Counter-view

the state's accommodation (Sixth Schedule, Art 371, statehood, Assam & Mizo Accords, development packages) vs the persistence of coercion

Conclusion routes

R1 Kohli: in a multicultural democracy assertion is expected → accommodation over force
R2 conflicts are less natural to diversity than made by state-building → resolution lies in genuine federation-building

North-East India is among India's most ethnically diverse regions and it has seen a long cycle of autonomy movements, insurgencies and inter-ethnic violence.

Ashutosh Varshney defines ethnic conflict as a fight between contending groups for their position in society. The conflicts take several forms. In Nagaland, insurgents demanded sovereign state, rejected the Constitution & boycotted the 1952 election. The NSCN emerged as a major insurgent formation.

Assam saw ULFA, anti-migrant politics and the Bodoland demand. Manipur has faced tensions among Meiteis, Nagas & Kukis and Tripura between indigenous tribes and Bengali migrants.

Myron Weiner and others link the conflicts to development gaps, rising aspirations and unmet expectations.

S.D. Muni argues that ethnicity is less a grassroots passion than "a creation of vested political interests." Sanjib Baruah argues that nation-state building ignored smaller communities, while centralization and AFSPA deepened alienation. He urges a move towards "genuine federation-building".

The state has responded through the 6th Schedule, Article 371, statehood, the Assam and Mizo accords & development packages. These accommodated many demands, but coercion persisted.

Atul Kohli holds that in a multicultural democracy such assertion is expected and democratic accommodation, not force is the durable solution.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTION

UPSC 2020 · 15 marks

Examine the role of religion in Indian electoral politics in the contemporary times.

FLOW SNAPSHOT — how the answer moves

Intro routes

R1 law bars religious appeals (RPA §123(3) + SC 2017) → yet religion stays a strong emotive factor in voting

R2 religion formally out of the ballot → in practice it works as “identity plus,” not alone

Body flow

mobilisation via symbols / sacred sites → **Savarkar's** Hindutva (ethnic-territorial Hindu identity) → BJP's rise since the 1980s tied to Hindu nationalist mobilisation → **Hansen**: set against democratic transformation, not purely religious → **Advani's** “pseudo-secularism” → anti-Congress line → Ram Mandir / CAA / NRC / Babri / “Love Jihad” → vote polarisation + minority consolidation → **Brass**: institutionalised riots prepared & used electorally

Counter-view

religion no longer works alone → **Yadav's** “Identity Plus” → faith combines with governance, employment, development → identity must pair with delivery

Conclusion routes

R1 religion is strong but not sufficient → parties must join identity with governance and delivery

R2 shift from religion-alone to “identity plus” → contemporary parties combine faith with development and security

Indian election law formally keeps religion out of the ballot. Section 123(3) of the Representation of the People Act, 1951 treats a religious appeal for votes as a corrupt practice.

The Supreme Court's 2017 ruling widened this to bar appeals on religion, caste, creed, community and language. But religion remains a strong emotive factor in voting, combined with welfare, leadership and security.

Its main electoral form is mobilisation through symbols and sacred sites. VD Savarkar's Hindutva gave Hindu identity an ethnic-territorial shape. The BJP's rise since the 1980s is closely tied to Hindu nationalist mobilisation.

Thomas Blom Hansen argues that this rise unfolds against a wider democratic transformation and is not purely religious.

L.K. Advani's attack on "pseudo-secularism" sharpened the anti-Congress line. Ram Mandir, CAA, NRC, the Babri judgement and "Love Jihad" debates convert religious issues into vote polarisation.

Paul R. Brass treats riots as institutionalised and politically managed, prepared and sustained for electoral use.

Yogendra Yadav's "Identity Plus" politics shows how caste & faith combine with governance, employment and development. Parties cannot rely on religion alone; they must join identity with delivery.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTION

UPSC 2021 · 15 marks

Explain how caste as a social category is also becoming a political category in the democratic politics of India.

FLOW SNAPSHOT — how the answer moves

Intro routes

R1 caste as social institution (birth, ritual rank, hierarchy) → democracy changes its function → it becomes a category of political bargaining

R2 Kothari's frame → democracy works through society, not outside it → politics reshapes caste

Body flow

Srinivas: caste dynamic, not frozen → the dominant caste is already political → adult franchise turns numbers into votes → **Kothari**: secularisation (ritual purity → reservations, jobs, tickets, power) + integration (castes fuse and split) + secular consciousness (aware of numbers) → politicisation of caste → **Rudolphs**: caste associations & federations as vehicle (candidates, policy, excluded voters) = modernisation of tradition → caste-based parties institutionalise → **Yadav's** democratic upsurge + **Jaffrelot's** silent revolution → OBCs and Dalits enter power

Counter-view

Béteille: untouchability abolished, caste not → caste survives in public policy → politicisation cuts both ways

Conclusion routes

R1 caste from hierarchy to negotiation → a category of politics, not only of society

R2 a “democracy of castes” → representation widened, but justice needs more than caste arithmetic

Caste began as a social institution resting on birth, ritual rank and hierarchy. In democratic India it has not disappeared but changed function, working as a category of political bargaining.

M.N. Srinivas treats caste as a fundamental but dynamic structure of society. His dominant caste i.e. numerically strong and locally powerful carries a political edge. Adult franchise sharpened it, turning numbers into votes.

Rajni Kothari argues it has not merely been influenced by caste; it has transformed caste. Caste moves from ritual purity toward secular claims over reservations, jobs, party tickets and state power. Castes fuse and split for electoral advantage and lower castes grow conscious of their numbers. Casteism in politics, for Kothari, is the politicization of caste.

Lloyd I. Rudolph and Susanne Hoeber Rudolph identify caste associations and federations that nominate candidates, shape policy and organize excluded voters. Yogendra Yadav's democratic upsurge and Christophe Jaffrelot's silent revolution mark the resulting entry of OBCs and Dalits into power.

However, Andre Beteille argues that the Constitution abolished untouchability without abolishing caste. Caste has moved from hierarchy to negotiation i.e. a category of politics, not only of society.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTION

UPSC 2022 · 20 marks

Ethnicity is the underlying cause which poses a great challenge in the resolution of the problems in the North-East region of India. Comment.

FLOW SNAPSHOT — how the answer moves

Intro routes

R1 NE = India's most ethnically diverse region → **Weber**: ethnicity as a subjective belief in common descent → the claim is partly right, but ethnicity is the language of conflict, not its root

R2 the statement overstates ethnicity as “the underlying cause” → ethnic assertion is visible on the surface, deprivation + neglect lie beneath

Body flow

four forms: autonomy / secession / insurgency / identity riots → NE cases: Nagaland (sovereignty, Greater Nagalim), Assam (Bodo, migrant), Manipur (Meitei-Kuki-Naga) → overlapping, zero-sum claims → resolution hard → but ethnicity rarely erupts alone → instrumentalist view: elites activate identity → **Muni**: creation of vested political interests → deeper cause = deprivation + neglect → **Gurr**: relative deprivation (‘ought’ vs ‘is’, “disposes men to violence”); NE insurgencies = neglect + weak development → federation-building (**Baruah**): central neglect + lost autonomy, not ethnicity → shift from nation-state building to genuine federation-building → India's record: managed better than many post-colonial states (Sixth Schedule, Article 371, statehood, accords) → **Kohli**: accommodation best in a multicultural democracy

Counter-view

primordial reading (ethnicity as given root; overlapping identities make conflict intractable) ↔ instrumentalist + relative-deprivation reading (ethnicity as a mobilised symptom of neglect and denied autonomy)

Conclusion routes

R1 ethnicity is a real challenge, but a demand for recognition, not a fixed cause → remedy: more democracy, not less

R2 conflict deepens only when accommodation is delayed and coercion replaces it → genuine federation-building achieves what coercion cannot

North-East India is among India's most ethnically diverse regions, its politics resting on tribe, language, land and memory. Ethnicity in Max Weber's view, rests on a subjective belief in common descent.

Ethnic mobilization takes 4 forms i.e. autonomy, secession, insurgency and identity riots. Nagaland still raises sovereignty & Greater Nagalim, Assam has seen Bodo and migrant tensions, and Manipur puts Meitei against Kuki and Naga. As these claims overlap and turn zero-sum, resolution is genuinely hard.

But ethnicity rarely erupts on its own. On the instrumentalist view, elites activate identity for power. S.D. Muni holds that ethnicity in India is "not so much ... popular grassroots passions as a creation of vested political interests."

Ted Robert Gurr ties conflict to relative deprivation i.e. the gap between the "ought" and the "is" that "disposes men to violence".

Sanjib Banuah argues the central neglect and lost autonomy, not ethnicity drive it. He urges a shift from "nation-state building" to "genuine federation-building".

India has managed ethnic conflict better than many post-colonial states through 6th Schedule councils, Article 371, statehood & peace accords. Atul Kohli view that such politics is normal in a multicultural democracy, met by accommodation.

Ethnicity, therefore is a real challenge but a demand for recognition not a fixed cause. The remedy is more democracy, not less because conflict deepens when accommodation is delayed & coercion replaces it.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTION

UPSC 2023 · 20 marks

The rise of caste politics is to be attributed to both regional aspirations and electoral manifestations. Comment.

FLOW SNAPSHOT — how the answer moves

Intro routes

R1 rise ≠ survival of hierarchy → transformation by democracy → **Kothari's** “politicisation of caste”
R2 the statement's two engines named → regional aspirations + electoral competition drive caste's political rise

Body flow

politicisation of caste → regional aspirations (caste composition varies by region → **Naicker's** non-Brahmin Dravidian identity vs high-caste / North Indian dominance → Dalit Panthers' Maharashtra roots → **Rudolphs'** “bullock capitalists” as landowning regional forces) → electoral turn (adult franchise → numbers into votes → tickets / candidate selection / vote banks → caste parties BSP / SP / RJD convert caste into representation → social-engineering coalitions) → **Srinivas**: reservation + political opportunity transform the hierarchy

Counter-view

empowerment but double-edged → **Varshney**: elections successful, democracy between elections weak → **Mehta**: representation-responsiveness gap → fragmentation as easily as empowerment

Conclusion routes

R1 both claims hold → regionally grounded aspirations channelled through electoral competition
R2 **Kaviraj**: hierarchy of castes → democracy of castes → but justice cannot end at caste arithmetic

The rise of caste politics is viewed not as the survival of old hierarchy but as its transformation by democracy. According to Rajni Kothari, politics has not merely been influenced by caste. It has transformed caste itself i.e. the "politicization of caste".

Regional aspirations mattered because caste composition varies across regions, giving caste politics distinct local forms. E.V. Ramaswamy Naicker built a non-Brahmin Dravidian movement that used regional identity against high-caste & North Indian dominance. In Maharashtra, the Dalit Panthers grew from regional conditions of caste oppression. Lloyd and Susanne Rudolph argue landowning backward castes i.e. "bullock capitalists" become regional political forces.

The Bahujan Samaj Party among Dalits, the Samajwadi Party and Rashtriya Janata Dal among Yadavs and backward castes converted caste into electoral representation.

Parties used social engineering to fuse several castes into winning coalitions. As M.N. Srinivas argues, reservations and political opportunity transform the hierarchy itself.

However, Ashutosh Varshney in *Battles Half won*, argues that caste mobilization has made elections successful while democracy between elections stays weak. Pratap Bhanu Mehta discusses a gap between representation and responsiveness. Caste can fragment competition as easily as it empowers.

Caste politics rose from regionally grounded aspirations channelled through electoral competition. As Sudipta Kaviraj argues, it shaped India from a hierarchy of castes towards a democracy of castes.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTION

UPSC 2024 · 10 marks

“Relative deprivation is a major source of ethnic conflict.”
Elaborate the statement with relevant examples.

FLOW SNAPSHOT — how the answer moves

Intro routes

R1 conflict not from difference but from perceived disadvantage → **Gurr's** 'ought-is' gap
R2 relative deprivation defined → a group compares status / resources / recognition → identity becomes grievance

Body flow

deprivation mechanism (economic, social, cultural, language exclusion) → North-East (Assam, Nagaland): neglect + weak development → Bodo: land, language, institutional exclusion → Telangana: deprivation within a larger state → **Guru**: Dalit exclusion (bottom-up) → **Yadav**: Jat / Patidar status-anxiety (dominant castes fear decline)

Counter-view

deprivation supplies the grievance but is not sufficient → it erupts as conflict only when politically mobilised

Conclusion routes

R1 deprivation = grievance, mobilisation = trigger
R2 the answer lies in recognition, representation and equitable development

Ethnic conflict rarely grows from mere difference; it grows from the perception of being unfairly left behind. Ted Robert Gurr calls this as relative deprivation i.e. "the tension that develops from a discrepancy between the 'ought' and the 'is' of collective value satisfaction.

Conflict becomes likely where groups face economic discrimination, unequal access to land, cultural suppression or denial of language rights. The insurgencies in Assam and Nagaland grew from perceived neglect and weak development. The Bodo movement combined grievances over land, language & institutional exclusion while Telangana expressed deprivation within a larger state.

Gopal Guru links Dalit mobilisation to long-standing social & economic exclusion. Yogendra Yadav argues that Jats and Patidars seek reservations when they fear loss of status.

Deprivation therefore supplies the grievance, though it hardens into conflict when politically mobilised. Recognition and equitable development remain the confirmed response.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTION

UPSC 2025 · 10 marks

Delineate the key factors that have shaped the evolving political landscape in Jammu and Kashmir post 2019.

FLOW SNAPSHOT — how the answer moves

Intro routes

R1 Aug 5, 2019 abrogation as the pivot → special-status autonomy replaced by integration with the Union
R2 post-2019 landscape reset → every later factor flows from one constitutional change

Body flow

Article 370 + 35A removed → J&K-Union legal relation altered → bifurcation into two UTs → centralisation + political reorganisation → NC & PDP lose the autonomy plank → demand restoration of voice → **Balraj Puri**: autonomy erosion / democratic breakdown → representation stays live → security restrictions + civil-rights debate → Centre's integration via development / investment (tourism, handicrafts, agriculture, IT)

Counter-view

central integration + development claim vs the regional demand for restored voice → ethnic / religious / regional identities + Pakistan-backed militancy persist

Conclusion routes

R1 integration must be matched by restored representation → stability rests on dialogue + confidence-building
R2 the landscape is still evolving, not settled → its direction depends on political voice, not security alone

The abrogation of Article 370 on August 5, 2019 reset the political landscape of Jammu and Kashmir. It moved the region from a special-status autonomy framework to closer integration with the Union.

Removal of special status and Article 35 A protections altered J&K's legal relationship with India. Bifurcation into two UTs increased centralization and reorganized political structure.

National Conference and People's Democratic Party, which had built their appeal on regional autonomy and identity, lost their earlier framework and now demand restoration of political voice. Balraj Puri earlier traced J&K's unrest to autonomy erosion and democratic breakdown.

Security restrictions and the civil rights debate shaped participation, even as the centre advanced integration through development and investment in tourism, handicrafts, agriculture and Information Technology.

Ethnic, religious and regional identities and Pakistan backed militancy persist. The way forward is through dialogue, representation and confidence building.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTION

UPSC 2025 · 15 marks

Caste remains a vital axis for political mobilisation in India. How would the caste census address the aspirations of people? Discuss.

FLOW SNAPSHOT — how the answer moves

Intro routes

R1 caste no longer ritual hierarchy → a secular resource for bargaining (Kothari: politicisation of caste)

R2 reservation / representation / welfare rest on caste location → caste = axis of mobilisation

Body flow

the census extends this logic → credible data for aspirations → **Mandal Commission**: OBC share 52% vs 36–65% estimates → replaces guesswork → **Rohini Commission**: uneven OBC benefit → sub-categorisation protects EBCs from dominant segments → exposes upper-caste over-representation → evidence-based welfare / education / employment → being counted = recognition + dignity (Bihar survey)

Counter-view

fear of sharpened caste competition → benefits captured by better-placed groups → must balance social justice with constitutional equality

Conclusion routes

R1 arithmetic must become responsiveness, not fresh division

R2 recognition deepens democracy only if it serves justice over division

Caste in India no longer works as ritual hierarchy. It has become a secular resource for political bargaining. **Rajni Kothari** argues that democratic politics does not merely use caste but politicizes it, turning numerical strength into claims over reservation, representation and welfare.

The Mandal Commission placed the OBC share at 52%, while other estimates range between 36% and 65%. The Rohini Commission showed that OBC quota benefits are unevenly distributed across castes. Census data can rationalize sub-categorization so that Extremely Backward Castes are not crowded out by dominant segments.

It can also expose the over-representation of upper castes in institutions and guide welfare, education and employment policy.

For many communities, being counted answers an aspiration for recognition and dignity, as the Bihar caste survey's demand for expanded quotas showed.

Critics, however, fear that enumeration may sharpen caste competition and that benefits may be captured by better placed groups.

The democratic value of caste data therefore depends on balancing social justice with constitutional equality. Counting can deepen justice only if it converts arithmetic into responsiveness not fresh division.

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