

COMPLETE STUDY PLAN FOR BEGINNERS

Anthropology Optional

UPSC CSE Mains — Paper I & Paper II

From Day 1 to 320+ Marks — A Structured Roadmap

12+ Years

Teaching Experience

320+

Avg. Marks Target

1,200+

Students Enrolled

WELCOME

A Message from K.V. Ramesh

Anthropology Optional is one of the most rewarding choices a UPSC aspirant can make — if approached with structure. In twelve years of teaching, I have seen students with no prior background in the subject score 310 to 330 marks simply by following a disciplined, sequential study plan. This document gives you that plan, free of charge.

This guide is designed for complete beginners — aspirants who are either starting their UPSC journey or those switching to Anthropology Optional from another subject. It covers the full Paper I and Paper II syllabus across a 24-week roadmap, with daily hour targets, revision strategies, answer-writing techniques, and PYQ integration guidelines.

Follow this plan with honesty and consistency. Anthropology rewards students who write precisely and attribute every argument to the correct thinker. That skill is built through structured practice — not passive reading.

"The examiner does not reward knowledge. The examiner rewards structured, attributed, example-rich answers. That is what this plan builds."

— K.V. Ramesh, AURA IAS

HOW TO USE THIS PLAN

Four Rules for Maximum Results

01 Follow the sequence strictly

Do not jump to Paper II before completing the Introduction and Unit 2 topics of Paper I. Each unit builds upon the previous one in terms of conceptual vocabulary.

02 Write one answer every day from Week 5

Reading alone will not produce marks. From Week 5 onwards, write at least one 10-mark answer daily — even rough notes count. Use the PYQ banks to select questions.

03 Attribute every statement to a thinker

Every definition, every argument, every example must be preceded by a thinker's name and the relevant work. This is the single most important habit this plan builds.

04 Revise using the three-pass method

After completing each unit, do three revision passes — first within 24 hours, second after one week, and third before the mock test for that unit.

SYLLABUS OVERVIEW

What You Will Study — Paper I & Paper II

The Anthropology Optional syllabus for UPSC CSE Mains consists of two papers, each carrying 250 marks (total 500 marks). Paper I is theoretical and conceptual; Paper II applies anthropological knowledge to India-specific contexts. Both papers reward answer-writing that is structured, thinker-attributed, and example-rich.

PAPER I — Theoretical Anthropology

Unit	Topic Area	Key Thinkers	Weight
1	Meaning, Scope and Development of Anthropology	Tylor, Boas, Kroeber, Radcliffe-Brown	High
2	Culture, Society, Marriage, Family, Kinship	Murdock, Gough, Levi-Strauss, Morgan, Fortes	Very High
3	Economic and Political Organization	Polanyi, Sahlins, Hoebel, Service, Barth	High
4	Religion, Magic and Science	Tylor, Durkheim, Malinowski, Geertz, Turner	Very High
5	Anthropological Theories	Evolutionism, Functionalism, Structuralism, Post-modernism	High
6	Biological Anthropology — Evolution, Genetics	Darwin, Mendel, Washburn, Weiner	Medium
7	Paleoanthropology — Fossil Record	Leakey, Dart, Dubois	Medium
8	Ethnographic Methods and Fieldwork	Malinowski, Evans-Pritchard, Mead	Medium

PAPER II — Indian Anthropology

Unit	Topic Area	Examples / Case Studies	Weight
1	Evolution of Indian Culture and Civilisation	Indus Valley, Vedic, Pre-historic India	Medium
2	Tribes of India — Characteristics and Distribution	Santhals, Mundas, Nagas, Gonds, Bhils	Very High
3	Language and Communication in India	Language families, linguistic anthropology	Medium
4	Racial and Ethnic Groups in India	Risley's classification, Guha's types	Medium
5	Applied Anthropology — Tribal Development	PTGs, Forest Rights Act, PESA, NGO roles	Very High
6	Social Change Among Tribes	Colonialism, modernisation, globalisation	High

Unit	Topic Area	Examples / Case Studies	Weight
7	Indian Village Studies and Caste	Srinivas, Beteille, Dumont, Ghurye	High

24-WEEK STUDY ROADMAP

Phase-by-Phase Plan — Day 1 to Mains

The plan is divided into four phases: Foundation (Weeks 1–6), Core Theory (Weeks 7–14), Indian Anthropology (Weeks 15–20), and Revision & Answer Writing (Weeks 21–24). Maintain a daily study commitment of 3–4 hours minimum. Students working full-time can extend each phase by two weeks.

PHASE 1	Foundation	Weeks 1-6
PHASE 2	Core Theory (Paper I)	Weeks 7-14
PHASE 3	Indian Anthropology (Paper II)	Weeks 15-20
PHASE 4	Revision & Mock Tests	Weeks 21-24

Week	Phase	Topics to Cover	Hrs/Day	Key Task
Wk 1	Foundation	Introduction to Anthropology — Social, Cultural, Socio-Cultural Anthropology; Scope and history	2-3	Write definitions of 10 key terms daily
Wk 2	Foundation	Nature of Culture — Tylor, Boas, Kroeber; Ethnocentrism vs Cultural Relativism; Culture change	2-3	Thinker attribution table for Unit 2.1
Wk 3	Foundation	Nature of Society — Social institutions, Goffman's Total Institution; Stratification; Age sets	2-3	Compare chart: Social Anthropology vs Sociology
Wk 4	Foundation	Marriage — Universal definition problem, Nayar case, Forms of marriage, Gough, Stephens	3	Write one 10-mark answer on polyandry
Wk 5	Foundation	Family — Universality debate, Types, Impact of urbanisation and feminist movements	3	PYQ bank review: 2013-2020 family questions
Wk 6	Foundation	Kinship — Terminology (Morgan), Descent types, Radcliffe-Brown vs Levi-Strauss, Alliance theory	3	First timed answer: 20 marks in 25 minutes
Wk 7	Core Theory	Economic Organization — Formalist vs Substantivist, Polanyi, Kula Ring, Conspicuous consumption	3	Compare table: Reciprocity / Redistribution / Market
Wk 8	Core Theory	Political Organization — Band/Tribe/Chiefdom/State, Big Man, Customary law, Hoebel, Barth	3	Answer: Law and justice in simple societies

Week	Phase	Topics to Cover	Hrs/Day	Key Task
Wk 9	Core Theory	Religion — Tylor, Durkheim (Sacred/Profane), Malinowski, Evans-Pritchard, Geertz, Turner	3	Compare: Religion vs Magic vs Science
Wk 10	Core Theory	Anthropological Theories I — Evolutionism, Diffusionism, Historical Particularism, Functionalism	3	Theory flowchart from Morgan to Malinowski
Wk 11	Core Theory	Anthropological Theories II — Structuralism, Culture & Personality, Neo-evolutionism, Ecology	3	Answer: Contribution of Levi-Strauss to anthropology
Wk 12	Core Theory	Biological Anthropology — Genetics, Mendel, Race, Relevance of Mendelian genetics	3	PYQ review: biological anthropology 2013-2024
Wk 13	Core Theory	Paleoanthropology — Fossil record, Human evolution, Australopithecus to Homo sapiens	3	Timeline chart: hominin evolution
Wk 14	Core Theory	Fieldwork methods — Participant observation, Ethnographic techniques, Ethics in research	2-3	First full Paper I mock (timed 3 hours)
Wk 15	Paper II	Indian prehistory — Palaeolithic, Mesolithic, Neolithic; Indus Valley Civilisation	3	Site-to-period mapping chart
Wk 16	Paper II	Tribes of India — Distribution, PTGs, Constitutional provisions, Scheduled Tribes criteria	3	State-wise tribal distribution table
Wk 17	Paper II	Tribal social organisation — Lineage, clan, marriage among Indian tribes; Santhals, Mundas	3	Answer: Tribal marriage customs with examples
Wk 18	Paper II	Applied anthropology — Tribal development, PESA, Forest Rights Act, NGO roles, Globalisation	3	Answer: Impact of globalisation on tribal communities
Wk 19	Paper II	Village studies and caste — Srinivas (Dominant Caste), Beteille, Dumont (Homo Hierarchicus)	3	Compare: Ghurye vs Beteille on caste
Wk 20	Paper II	Social change, Ethnicity, Language families in India; Racial classification (Guha, Risley)	3	Full Paper II mock (timed 3 hours)
Wk 21	Revision	Rapid revision Paper I — Thinker index, Compare tables, Key definitions bank	4	Answer writing: 3 x 20-mark answers per day
Wk 22	Revision	Rapid revision Paper II — Case studies, Government schemes, Contemporary tribal issues	4	Answer writing: 3 x 20-mark answers per day

Week	Phase	Topics to Cover	Hrs/Day	Key Task
Wk 23	Mock Tests	Full-length mock: Paper I (3 hours) + evaluation + gap analysis + targeted re-reading	5	Identify 5 weak topics and re-read them
Wk 24	Mock Tests	Full-length mock: Paper II (3 hours) + evaluation + final thinker revision + strategy notes	5	Prepare last-night revision sheet

DAILY STUDY SCHEDULE

How to Spend Your Study Hours Each Day

Time Slot	Activity	Duration	Notes
Session 1 (Morning)	New topic reading from the current week's unit	60-75 min	Read actively — underline definitions, circle thinker names
Session 2 (Afternoon)	Thinker attribution practice — write thinker, argument, and source from memory	30-45 min	Close the book and write. Check accuracy afterwards.
Session 3 (Evening)	Answer writing — one 10-mark or one 20-mark question from the PYQ bank	30-45 min	From Week 5 onwards — mandatory. 10-mark: 8 mins. 20-mark: 20 mins.
Session 4 (Night)	Revision of previous day's topic — compare tables and key definitions	20-30 min	This is the 24-hour revision pass of the three-pass method.

ANSWER WRITING FRAMEWORK

The Formula Every Anthropology Answer Must Follow

Step 1 — Define	Open every answer with a precise academic definition of the concept. Attribute it immediately. Example: 'Tylor (1871) defines culture as that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom...'
Step 2 — Theorise	Present the dominant theoretical positions on the topic. Name each thinker explicitly. Never write 'some scholars argue' — write 'Radcliffe-Brown (1952) argues...'
Step 3 — Illustrate	Follow every argument with a cross-cultural or Indian tribal example. For Indian examples, cite specific communities — Nayars of Kerala, Todas of Nilgiris, Mundas of Jharkhand, etc.
Step 4 — Critique	Briefly note the limitations of the dominant position or a counter-argument. This signals higher-order thinking to the examiner.
Step 5 — Conclude	Close with a statement of contemporary relevance. How does this concept apply to modern India, tribal development, or current social issues?

THINKER QUICK REFERENCE

20 Thinkers You Must Know Before Mains

Thinker	Core Contribution	Key Work
E.B. Tylor	Definition of culture; animism as origin of religion	Primitive Culture (1871)
Franz Boas	Cultural relativism; historical particularism; anti-ethnocentrism	Multiple works
A.L. Kroeber	Superorganic culture; merged social and cultural anthropology (1948)	Anthropology (1948)
Malinowski	Functionalism; Kula Ring; magic reduces anxiety; fieldwork method	Argonauts (1922)
Radcliffe-Brown	Structural functionalism; social structure over culture; comparative sociology	Structure and Function (1952)
Evans-Pritchard	Azande witchcraft; anthropology as branch of history; stateless societies	Witchcraft (1937)
Levi-Strauss	Structuralism; alliance theory; binary oppositions; atom of kinship	Elementary Structures (1949)
Emile Durkheim	Sacred vs profane; religion as collective representation; totemism	Elementary Forms (1912)
Clifford Geertz	Religion as cultural system; thick description; interpretive anthropology	Interpretation of Cultures (1973)
Victor Turner	Liminality; communitas; ritual process; Ndembu society	Ritual Process (1969)
Kathleen Gough	Nayar marriage; challenge to universal definition of marriage	The Nayars (1959)
Karl Polanyi	Economy embedded in society; reciprocity, redistribution, market exchange	Great Transformation (1944)
G.P. Murdock	Nuclear family universality; Social Structure; cross-cultural survey	Social Structure (1949)
E.A. Hoebel	Primitive law; comparative legal anthropology	Law of Primitive Man (1954)
Marshall Sahlins	Original affluent society; Big Man system; Stone Age Economics	Stone Age Economics (1972)
Arnold van Gennep	Three-stage rites of passage: Separation, Liminality, Incorporation	Rites of Passage (1909)
M.N. Srinivas	Dominant caste; Sanskritisation; village studies in India	Social Change in India (1966)
G.S. Ghurye	Father of Indian sociology; caste and tribe distinction	Caste and Race in India (1932)
Louis Dumont	Homo Hierarchicus; caste as ideology; purity and pollution	Homo Hierarchicus (1966)
S.C. Roy	Pioneer of Indian tribal studies; Mundas and their Country	The Mundas (1912)

PYQ STRATEGY

How to Use Past Year Questions for Maximum Marks

Map PYQs to topics, not years

Never study PYQs year by year. Instead, collect all questions on a topic — for example, all questions ever asked on Cultural Relativism — and identify the recurring themes, angle variations, and marks distribution. This reveals exactly what the examiner wants from that topic.

Notice the pattern shift after 2016

UPSC shifted from straightforward definition questions before 2016 to analytical and application-based questions from 2017 onwards. '20-mark questions now require you to analyse, compare, or critique — not merely define. Adjust your answer framework accordingly.

Practise the 10-mark format separately

Many aspirants neglect 10-mark questions assuming they are easier. In reality, a 10-mark answer must deliver the same quality as a 20-mark answer, compressed into 80–100 words per point. Practise writing a complete, thinker-attributed 10-mark answer in under 8 minutes.

Use PYQs as revision tools, not just practice tools

In your final two weeks before Mains, read PYQs without writing — use them to mentally rehearse your answer structure. This activates memory and builds examination confidence without the time cost of full written practice.

Ready to Go Beyond This Free Plan?

This study plan gives you the structure. The Complete Programme gives you live classes, 180+ hours of recorded lectures, evaluated answer writing sessions, PYQ banks mapped to every topic, and personal mentorship by K.V. Ramesh.

Enroll at www.kvrameshanthro.com | Call: +91 93103 64056

Pillar No. 36, RTC X Roads, Hyderabad, Telangana | ramesh4anthro@gmail.com

This document is provided free of charge as a public service to UPSC aspirants. All content is the intellectual property of K.V. Ramesh and AURA IAS. Reproduction for commercial purposes is prohibited. © 2026 K.V. Ramesh Anthropology. All rights reserved.