

PSIR OPTIONAL · UPSC CSE

EDITION 2026

PYQ Vault

560

questions

50

days

10

years of PYQs

DAY 5

Human Rights · 8 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 · 15 marks

"The implementation of human rights is regarded as a matter of changing the conduct of States." Comment.

FLOW SNAPSHOT — how the answer moves

Intro routes

R1 HR born after WWII / Holocaust → states destroyed their own people → individual placed at the centre, duties assigned to states

R2 HR are claims held simply because we are human → their enjoyment depends on those holding coercive power → implementation targets state conduct

Body flow

state as primary duty-bearer → respect / protect / fulfil (**Annan**) → legal incorporation, independent judiciary, accountability → sovereignty reshaped: "absolute control" → "sovereignty as responsibility" → R2P bars sovereignty as a shield

Counter-view

changing state conduct alone is insufficient → civil society / Amnesty / HRW pressure → **Sen**: a living culture of rights, awareness

Conclusion routes

R1 largely but not only about changing state conduct → must become a living culture, not a declaration

R2 states discipline rights, society sustains them → formal compliance stays hollow without a rights-conscious public

Human rights emerged after the Second world war, when the Holocaust showed that states could destroy the very people they should protect. They place the individual at the centre of political morality and assign duties to states. Their implementation therefore turns mainly on changing how states behave.

The state is the primary duty-bearer. It must respect rights by not violating them, protect them from private actors, and fulfil them through positive action. Kofi Annan held that a state bound by human rights must accept these very duties. This needs constitutional guarantees, domestic incorporation of international standards, an independent judiciary and real accountability, not paper commitments.

Changing state conduct also means changing the state's own claims. Human rights reshaped sovereignty from 'absolute control' into 'sovereignty as responsibility.' Under Responsibility to Protect, sovereignty can no longer shield a government that harms its own people.

However, changing state conduct is not enough by itself. Civil society and groups like Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch must pressure states to act.

A living culture of human rights, built through awareness, is essential for real protection. Implementation is thus largely, but not only, about changing state conduct. It also means turning human rights into a living culture, not merely a declaration.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTION

UPSC 2018 · 20 marks

What do you understand by three generations of Human Rights?

FLOW SNAPSHOT — how the answer moves

Intro routes

- R1** rights not fixed → scope widens with the idea of dignity
→ **Vasak's** three generations
- R2** generations ≠ hierarchy → three successive answers to what dignity demands

Body flow

Vasak classifies → first gen (civil-political / negative "blue" / restraint on the state; Magna Carta, French Declaration; UDHR 3–21) → second gen (socio-economic-cultural / "red" / positive state action; industrialisation, socialism, welfare; UDHR 22–28) → third gen (collective-solidarity / protects communities; decolonisation, inequality 1960s–70s; self-determination, development, peace, environment; Stockholm, Rio)

Counter-view

Cranston (no resources → no rights) + **Hayek** (central planning drains citizen power) vs **Waldron** (the next step to realise the first)

Conclusion routes

- R1** useful to classify, wrong to rank
- R2** indivisible + interdependent → liberty without security is weak; welfare without freedom turns authoritarian

Human rights are not fixed, their scope widens as ideas of dignity grow. Karel Vasak sorted rights into 3 generations - not a ranking, but successive answers to what a dignified life requires.

The 1st generation covers civil & political rights - negative or blue rights that shield the individual from arbitrary state power: life, liberty, free speech, religion & equality before law. Rooted in the Magna Carta and French declaration of Rights, they appear in Articles 3 to 21 of the universal declaration of Human Rights.

The 2nd generation - social, economic & cultural or red rights - demands positive action by the state. These grew with industrialisation, socialism and welfare politics, and sit in Articles 22 to 28 of the same declaration.

The 3rd generation, collective or solidarity rights, protects communities rather than single persons: self-determination, development, peace and a healthy environment.

These took shape during colonisation and inequality debates of the 1960s and 1970s, marked by the Stockholm and Rio Declarations.

The model invites dispute. Maurice Cranston held that "scarcity of resources means second & third generation of rights are no rights at all," and Friedrich Hayek argued that delivering them may justify central planning that moves power away from citizens. Jeremy Waldron replies that they are the logical next step for realising the first.

The frame is useful for classification, but it should not rank one set above another. Rights are indivisible & interdependent: civil liberty without socio-economic security is weak, and welfare without civil freedom can turn authoritarian.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTION

UPSC 2019 · 15 marks

Discuss the doctrine of 'rights as trumps'.

FLOW SNAPSHOT — how the answer moves

Intro routes

R1 Dworkin's trumps image → rights shield the individual against majority calculation

R2 Taking Rights Seriously → "rights as political trumps" → fundamental rights override collective interest

Body flow

meaning of a trump → priority of the right over the good → rejection of greatest-happiness utilitarianism → rights protect dignity / autonomy → moral (not merely constitutional) rights against government → Rawls parallel → society must not always balance in its own favour → Dworkin's narrow exceptions

Counter-view

Greene: the frame cannot handle conflicts between genuine rights → **Costa Neto:** trumping and balancing are complementary → no right is absolute

Conclusion routes

R1 rights as trumps secure the individual, but the metaphor strains when rights collide

R2 strong rights, yet not absolute → trumping tempered by balancing

Ronald Dworkin advanced the doctrine of rights as trumps in *Taking Rights Seriously* (1977) to defend the individual against the calculations of the majority. He begins with the claim that "individual rights are political trumps held by individuals."

A trump is a right so fundamental that no collective or governmental interest can override it, however large the social gain.

The doctrine rests on the priority of the right over the good. Dworkin rejects the utilitarian appeal to the greatest happiness of the greatest number; certain rights - free speech, a fair trial, equality - protect dignity and autonomy.

John Rawls offered a parallel formulation: justice places certain rights beyond the reach of social calculation. A society that always balances such rights in its own favour does not take them seriously.

Dworkin allows narrow exceptions – where the original right is not truly at stake, or its cost to society is disproportionate. The deeper difficulty appears when rights collide.

Jamal Greene argues that the frame cannot handle conflicts between genuine rights, forcing each side to deny that its opponents hold any. For this reason, trumping & balancing may instead be complementary : rights remain strong, but none is absolute.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTION

UPSC 2020 · 15 marks

Assess the significance of right to property in political theory.

FLOW SNAPSHOT — how the answer moves

Intro routes

R1 property at the centre of liberal thought → its significance lies in how sharply thinkers disagree over what it secures

R2 one right, opposite verdicts → from **Locke's** labour-foundation to **Marx's** critique

Body flow

Locke (labour + person + liberty + consent + right to resist) → **Plato** vs **Aristotle** (conflict / corruption vs virtue) → **Smith** / **Bentham** (instrument of progress) → **Laski** (social service) / **Gandhi** (trusteeship) → **Marx** (exploitation, alienation, class) → **Rawls** / **Sen** (redistribution as justice)

Counter-view

a foundational liberal right vs a Marxist source of exploitation and inequality

Conclusion routes

R1 important for liberty and dignity, but bounded by justice and redistribution

R2 significance inseparable from fraternity, social justice, inequality

The right to property sits at the centre of liberal political thought, yet its significance lies in how sharply thinkers disagree over what it secures.

John Locke, in *Second Treatise of Government*, gave it strongest foundation: men convert common into private property by mixing their labour with it, and each holds a 'property' in his own 'person'.

Property is thus linked to labour, liberty and consent – government may not tax or seize it without the people's agreement, and rulers who destroy it forfeit their authority.

This was contested early. Plato saw private property as a source of conflict and corruption, prescribing communism for his rulers, while Aristotle treated property in limited measure as a source of virtue. Adam Smith and Jeremy Bentham later defended it as an instrument of social progress.

Modern thought narrowed the claim. Harold Laski linked property to social service and Mahatma Gandhi to trusteeship. Marx went furthest, treating it not as a natural right but as the basis of exploitation, alienation and class division. Rawls and Sen reply through redistribution as part of a just society.

Property remains important for liberty and dignity, but its significance cannot be separated from justice, fraternity and the problem of inequality.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTION

UPSC 2021 · 15 marks

Can there be universal conception of human rights?
Give your arguments.

FLOW SNAPSHOT — how the answer moves

Intro routes

R1 universal conception defensible → rights inherent in all, equal moral worth & dignity (**Kant, Locke**)

R2 UDHR 1948 + Vienna 1993 already give universality a global, agreed form

Body flow

universalist foundation (inherent rights, dignity; **Kant, Locke**; UDHR, Vienna) → relativist challenge (hegemonic Western values; Asian values — **Lee Kuan Yew, Mahathir**; community over individual liberty) → limits of relativism (shields FGM, child marriage; dominant groups define "culture"; **Sen** — a pretext for authoritarianism, Asia too diverse) → resolution (**Donnelly's** relative universalism, "culture is not destiny"; **Gutmann's** deliberative universalism, dialogue)

Counter-view

is universality a Western imposition, or does relativism merely shield abuse and authoritarian power?

Conclusion routes

R1 universal in foundation, culturally sensitive in application

R2 not one imposed model, but a shared core settled through cross-cultural dialogue

A universal conception of human rights is defensible, if carefully framed. Universalism holds that rights are inherent in every person, owed simply by being human. This rests on the equal moral worth and dignity of all, grounded in Immanuel Kant's account of human dignity and John Locke's natural rights.

The universal declaration of Human Rights, 1948 gave this global form, and the 1993 world conference affirmed that rights are universal, indivisible and independent.

The claim faces a real challenge. Cultural relativists argue that universalism imposes a hegemonic, largely western set of values. The Asian values debate sharpens this: Lee Kuan Yew and Mahathir Mohamad held that western individual liberty does not suit societies built on community & authority.

Relativism, however, has limits. It can shield practices like female genital mutilation & child marriage and lets dominant groups define culture to protect power.

Amartya Sen shows that Asian values often become a pretext for authoritarianism and that Asia is too diverse to share one set of values.

Jack Donnelly's relative universalism treats rights as universal in principle but flexible in application - "culture is not destiny". Amy Gutmann's deliberative universalism adds dialogue to settle moral conflict.

A universal conception, in this manner, is very much possible: universal in foundation, culturally sensitive in practice.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTION

UPSC 2022 · 15 marks

Human Rights are complex and contested social practice that organises relations between individuals, society and the State. Comment.

FLOW SNAPSHOT — how the answer moves

Intro routes

R1 reject "rights as moral possessions" → recast as a social practice born after WWII

R2 the Holocaust ended absolute sovereignty → the individual placed at the centre of political morality

Body flow

the practice reorders three relations → individual (**Kant**: dignity, an end not a means) → society (shared standards, coexistence among diverse ways of life) → State (sovereignty into duty; protector and violator) → complexity = moral + legal + political registers, across domestic, international, cultural

Counter-view

contestation from the same root → **Berlin** (no single hierarchy of values) → **Walzer**, *Spheres of Justice* (justice rests on shared understandings and social practices; no one universal theory)

Conclusion routes

R1 contestation flows from its practical character → it does not weaken them

R2 keeps human dignity at the centre → among the most inspiring political ideas of the twentieth century

Human rights are not simply moral possessions held by individuals. They are better understood as a social practice that took shape after the Second world war. By placing the individual at the centre of political morality, this practice reorders the relationship between the individual, society and the state.

For the individual, rights protect dignity & autonomy, treating the person, as Immanuel Kant insisted, always as an end and never merely as a means. For society, they set the shared standards of justice and equality that allow coexistence among diverse ways of life. For the state, they turn sovereign power into duty, binding it to respect, protect & fulfil rights and exposing it as both protector & violator.

Their complexity lies in the fact that they work at once as moral claims, legal norms and political standards, across domestic law, international law and culture. They are contested for the same reason.

Isaiah Berlin rejects any single hierarchy of values, while communitarians like Michael Walzer, in *Spheres of Justice*, argue that justice rests on shared understandings and social practices, leaving no single universal theory of rights.

This contestation does not weaken them. By keeping human dignity at the centre of politics, human rights remain among the most inspiring political ideas of the 20th century.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTION

UPSC 2023 · 10 marks

Comment on the multicultural perspective on Rights

FLOW SNAPSHOT — how the answer moves

Intro routes

R1 difference-blind equality is insufficient → uniform treatment ignores cultural location

R2 universal citizenship vs social / cultural diversity → real equality needs recognition, not sameness

Body flow

recognition + accommodation premise → **Kymlicka**: group-differentiated rights (autonomy, language, representation), freedom depends on a societal culture → **Parekh** broadens it to immigrants / non-citizens → **Taylor**: a politics of recognition

Counter-view

Barry: illiberal, anti-Enlightenment → **Okin**: group rights reinforce gender inequality

Conclusion routes

R1 exposes majority bias, but must stay bounded by fundamental rights

R2 dialogical multiculturalism = recognition + individual liberty + gender equality

Multiculturalism challenges the liberal assumption that uniform, difference-blind treatment secures equality. It argues that universal citizenship, by applying rights identically ignores the social and cultural location of minorities.

Will Kymlicka defends group-differentiated rights, territorial autonomy, language rights, guaranteed representation to protect minority societal cultures, since freedom itself depends on a secure cultural context. Bhiku Parekh widens this to immigrants and non-citizen minorities, while Charles Taylor grounds it in a politics of recognition.

The perspective also draws strong criticism. Brian Barry sees it as illiberal, rejecting enlightenment values of individual freedom. Susan Moller Okin objects that group rights can reinforce gender inequality, since many cultures discriminate against women.

Multiculturalism rightly exposes the majority bias within liberal democracies. Yes its claims must stay bounded by fundamental rights. A dialogical approach combining cultural recognition with individual liberty and gender equality is the soundest position.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTION

UPSC 2024 · 20 marks

The debate on human rights is caught between the limitations of both universalism and cultural relativism. Comment.

FLOW SNAPSHOT — how the answer moves

Intro routes

R1 "caught between" = a deadlock → universalism over-reaches, relativism under-protects

R2 each side half-right, half-blind → the debate advances only when their strengths combine

Body flow

universalism (**Kant**, dignity, UDHR) → its limit: it carries Western liberal assumptions → cultural relativism (**Boas**, legitimacy through local context) → its limit: shields FGM / child marriage, becomes an authoritarian cloak → Asian values (**Lee Kuan Yew**) → **Sen's** reply: Asia too diverse, serves power not culture

Counter-view

relativism's charge of Western hegemony vs the universalist charge that relativism excuses abuse

Conclusion routes

R1 **Donnelly's** relative universalism → universal in principle, flexible in application, "culture is not destiny"

R2 **Gutmann's** deliberation → shared principles applied through dialogue, not by imposing the dominant view

The point in the question is a deadlock : **universalism over-reaches**, **cultural relativism under projects** and **human rights seem trapped between the two**.

Each side is partly right and partly blind, and the debate moves forward only when their strengths are combined.

Universalism holds that rights belong to every person, irrespective of culture, religion or nationality. Its moral anchor is Immanuel Kant's idea of human dignity, expressed in the Universal Declaration of Human rights. Its limitations is that this universal language often carries western liberal assumptions. By treating one cultural vision as the standard for all, it can disregard genuine differences in how societies understand dignity and freedom.

Franz Boas made this view prominent by rejecting **ethnocentrism & the claim that any culture is superior**. Relativism can shield harmful practices such as female genital mutilation & child marriage and is invoked by authoritarian regimes.

The Asian values argument of leaders like Lee Kuan Yew placed community & order above individual rights. Amartya Sen replied that Asia is too diverse for any single set of "Asian values", and that such claims usually serve power, not culture.

The way out lies between the two. Jack Donnelly's relative universalism keeps rights universal in principle but flexible in application, since "culture is not destiny".

Amy Gutmann adds that common standards should emerge through deliberation, not by imposing the dominant understanding. Rights are best defended as shared principles, applied through dialogue.

• FORUMIAS •

PSIR OPTIONAL 2026

Programs Starting This Month

FOR UPSC CSE 2026 ASPIRANTS

O-AWFG Prime 2026

📅 Started · 2 June 2026

● ONGOING

O-AWFG 2026

📅 Started · 2 June 2026

● ONGOING

ATS 2026

📅 Started · 7 June 2026

● ONGOING

OGP Advanced 2026

📅 Starts · 14 June 2026

○ UPCOMING

OGP Advanced+ 2026

📅 Starts · 14 June 2026

○ UPCOMING

STRUCTURED MENTORSHIP • ADVANCED ANSWER WRITING • TEST SERIES •
PERFORMANCE TRACKING

Enrolment & Mentorship Queries

📞 93117 40432

Amit Pratap Singh • PSIR Faculty, ForumIAS

• FORUMIAS •

PSIR OPTIONAL 2027

Programs Starting This Month

FOR UPSC CSE 2027 ASPIRANTS

O-AWFG Prime 2027

COHORT 2

● ONGOING

📅 Started · 8 June 2026

O-AWFG 2027

COHORT 2

● ONGOING

📅 Started · 8 June 2026

ATS 2027

COHORT 2

○ UPCOMING

📅 Starts · 14 June 2026

BUILD STRONG FOUNDATIONS • MASTER PSIR CONCEPTS •
DEVELOP ANSWER WRITING EARLY

Enrolment & Mentorship Queries

📞 93117 40432

Amit Pratap Singh • PSIR Faculty, ForumIAS