

— PSIR OPTIONAL · UPSC CSE EDITION 2026

PYQ Vault

560

questions

50

days

10

years of
PYQs

DAY 10

Indian Political Thought · 6 questions

Every question carries a **Flow Snapshot** — and a handwritten model answer on the channel. No PYQ will be unfamiliar.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTION

UPSC 2017 · 15 marks

What do you understand by the notion of Statecraft?
Discuss the theory of statecraft as given by Kautilya.

● FLOW SNAPSHOT — how the answer moves

Intro routes

R1 statecraft = skilful management of state affairs (administration, law, finance, diplomacy, war, welfare) → **Kautilya** gives its first systematic theory

R2 **Bulpitt's** lens: governing challenges + strategic choices of leadership → Arthashastra as practical governance

Body flow

statecraft defined → **Bulpitt** → Arthashastra as practical governance → state ends Matsyanyaya → purpose = yogakshema → Saptanga (organic state, seven interdependent limbs; king central but dependent) → treasury / artha funds army, justice, welfare; clean administration vs corruption → dandniti (coercive order) kept under rajadharma → Mandala + six-fold policy (realist diplomacy: interest, power, balance) → **Boesche**: first great political realist → artha + danda + dharma synthesis

Counter-view

realist, even labelled the first great political realist (amoral, power-centred reading) ⇌ power disciplined by rajadharma and aimed at yogakshema — realist, not amoralist

Conclusion routes

R1 integrated statecraft: artha (foundation), danda (order), dharma (legitimacy), yogakshema (purpose) → realist, not amoralist

R2 **Kautilya's** continuing relevance: earliest, comprehensive, non-Western theory of statecraft that ties power to welfare

Statecraft means the skilful management of state affairs. It covers internal administration, law, finance, diplomacy, war, intelligence & public welfare and the preservation of political authority. **Jim Bulpitt** understands statecraft as a way of reading politics through the governing challenges and strategic choices that leadership faces.

Kautilya's Arthashastra, a 4th Century BCE treatise, gives the earliest systematic theory of statecraft as practical governance. For Kautilya, the state arises to end Matsyanyaya, the law of the fishes, where the strong prey on the weak. Its purpose is yogakshema - security, welfare and the peaceful enjoyment of prosperity.

Inside the state, the Saptanga theory presents seven interdependent limbs as an organic body, where the King is central but cannot rule alone. A strong treasury anchors this body, since artha funds the army, justice & welfare, while clean administration guards against corruption.

Dandaniti supplies the concrete basis of order, with punishment kept within rajadharma.

Outside, the Mandala theory and the six-fold policy give a realist diplomacy based on interest, power and balance.

This realism leads Roger Boesche to call Kautilya the first great political realist. Even so, his statecraft combines artha, danda and dharma to secure yogakshema. He is a realist, but not an amoralist.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTION

UPSC 2019 · 15 marks

Kautilya's views on the elements of the State.

● FLOW SNAPSHOT — how the answer moves

Intro routes

R1 State as a living body — **Kautilya's Saptanga** = seven interdependent limbs; "a single wheel cannot move the chariot"

R2 sovereignty (**Garner**) — making a ~4th-century-BCE account strikingly comprehensive

Body flow

Swami (sovereign king, bound by *rajadharma*, owes *yogakshema*) → **Amatya** (ministers, *Mantriparishad* — institutional base) → **Janapada** (territory + productive population — revenue/social base) → **Durga** (fort — defence, strategic depth) → **Kosha** (treasury — bedrock; funds army, administration, welfare) → **Danda/Bala** (army + coercion — punishment firm, never excessive) → **Mitra** (ally — no state survives in isolation). Thread: organic interdependence; the king must strengthen every limb

Counter-view

theory is monarchy-centred — limbs read as resources for the king's power, not an impersonal/juristic sovereignty distinct from the ruler; including an external ally (*Mitra*) as a "limb" blurs state and statecraft. [Balance: **A.S. Altekar** reads *Mitra*'s inclusion as analogous to recognition in modern statehood]

Conclusion routes

R1 by binding administration, economy, defence and diplomacy into one organic whole, *Saptanga* is an integrated theory of the state that anticipates its modern elements

R2 reads as an early template of comprehensive national power — leadership, territory, treasury, military, diplomacy — still resonant in national-security and statecraft analysis

Kautilya, in the Arthashastra, conceives the state organically through his saptanga theory - seven limbs or prakritis whose interdependence he captures in the maxim that a single wheel cannot move the chariot.

They are, in Kautilya's sequence : Swami, the sovereign king, central yet bound by rajadharma and the duty of yogaKshema; Amatya, the ministers and the Mantriparishad, who supply the institutional and advisory base; Janapada, territory and productive population, the material and revenue foundation; Durga, the fort, providing defence & strategic depth; Kosha, the treasury, which Kautilya treats as the bedrock of state power since it funds army, administration & welfare; Danda or Bala, the army and coercive power where punishment must be firm but never excessive; and Mitra, the ally, since no state survives in isolation.

Critics observe that the theory stays monarchy centred - the limbs read as resources for the ruler's power rather than an impersonal idea of sovereignty distinct from the King and treating an external ally as a limb blurs state & statecraft.

Yet by integrating administration, economy, defence & diplomacy into one organic whole, Kautilya anticipates the modern state's elements and the logic of comprehensive national power.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTION

UPSC 2020 · 15 marks

Explain the sources of ancient Indian political thought.

● FLOW SNAPSHOT — how the answer moves

Intro routes

R1 no single treatise → thought scattered across genres → embedded in dharma / danda / kingship

R2 **Mahendra Prasad Singh** → religion, morality, sages as sources → ideas gathered, not found in one text

Body flow

Vedas + Upanishads (rajan, sabha/samiti, dharma as inner law) → Epics (Mahabharata/Shantiparva: rajadharma, dandaniti, origin of state; Ramayana: Rama-rajya) → Dharmasutras/Dharmashastras/Smritis (Manusmriti, **Manu** = first law-giver: varna, ashrama, rajadharma) → Arthashastra (**Kautilya**: realist statecraft — admin, tax, diplomacy, war) → Buddhist + Jain (Jatakas, Mahasammat, **Somadeva**: consensual + welfare kingship) → inscriptions / coins / foreign accounts (**Megasthenes**, **Fahien**, **Huan Tsang**: actual practice)

Counter-view

Western doubt (**Max Mueller**: India = only religion) ⇌ Indian depth affirmed (**Bhandarkar**, **Barker**)

Conclusion routes

R1 scattered genres together → rich, serious political tradition

R2 the plurality of sources is itself the defining mark of the tradition

Ancient Indian political thought is not contained in any single treatise. It lies scattered across religious texts, legal codes, epics and statecraft manuals, embedded in ideas of dharma, danda & Kingship. Mahendra Prasad Singh treats religion, morality and the teachings of gods & sages as its main sources.

The Vedas and Upanishads form the earliest layer, naming the rajan, sabha and samiti & treating dharma as the inner law behind authority. The epics carry this forward - the Mahabharata, especially its Shantiparva, on rajadharma, dandaniti and the origin of the state and the Ramayana on Rama-rajya as righteous rule. The Dharmasutras, Dharmashastras & Smritis, foremost the Manusmriti, lay down rules of varna, ashrama and rajadharma, treating Manu as the first law giver. Kautilya's Arthashastra adds a realist science of statecraft covering administration, taxation, diplomacy and war. Inscriptions, coins and the travel accounts of Megasthenes, Fahien and Huan Tsang record actual political practice.

Western scholars like Max Muller doubted that India produced political thought, but Dr. B.R. Bhandarkar and Ernest Barker affirmed its depth. These scattered genres together form a rich and serious political tradition.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTION

UPSC 2021 · 20 marks

Do you think that the Buddhist traditions have lent greater ethical foundation to the ancient Indian political thought? Give your arguments.

● FLOW SNAPSHOT — how the answer moves

Intro routes

- R1 moral concerns already present in Indian thought → Buddhism's shift = Dhamma over Danda as the test of power
- R2 Parekh's "rebel child of Hinduism" → breaks Brahmanical hierarchy while sharing Karma/rebirth → raises the ethical bar

Body flow

Agganna Sutta / Mahāsammata → consent + function, not divine command
 → Four Noble Truths / Eightfold Path / Five Precepts → governance as means to reduce suffering → Dasa-rājadhamma / Dhammarāja → ruler as moral exemplar → Ghoshal vs Kautilya → supremacy of moral law over the state → Aśoka → welfare, rajukas, tolerance, conquest by Dhamma

Counter-view

deepened, did not invent → shared Hindu premises → Kshatriya prominence retained → coercion + caste left intact → order depends on a virtuous ruler → Thapar: ideals hard to institutionalise

Conclusion routes

- R1 claim holds → Buddhism placed the state under Dhamma → compassion / equality / welfare become the measure of power
- R2 "greater" = moral law made supreme over the state → authority as an instrument of emancipation, even if the ethic was deepened, not originated

Ancient Indian political thought already carried moral concerns, but the Buddhist tradition gave them a wider, more demanding form by making Dhamma, not Danda, the test of legitimate power. Bhikhu Parekh calls Buddhism the "rebel child of Hinduism"—sharing Karma and rebirth, yet breaking from Brahmanical hierarchy.

The break begins at the origin of authority. The Aggana Sutta traces Kingship to Mahasammata, the Great elect, chosen by people to keep order. Power rests on consent and function, not divine command and the ruler answers to a moral standard.

That standard runs through the tradition. The 4 Noble truths, 8 fold path and 5 precepts treat suffering, poverty & violence as political problems, making governance a means to reduce them. The Dasa-rajadhamma and the Dhammaraja ideal bind the King to generosity, non-violence and self-restraint, so he becomes a moral exemplar, not merely a holder of coercive power.

The contrast with the Arthashastra sharpens the claim. Upendra Nath Ghoshal notes that where Kautilya could excuse breaches of morality for the state's security, Buddhism stood for the "unqualified supremacy of the moral law over governmental affairs." Asoka turned this into public ethics - welfare, rajukas, tolerance and conquest by Dhamma, not the sword.

Yet "greater" must be qualified. Buddhism deepened, but did not invent, ethics in Indian politics; it shared Hindu premises, kept Kshatriya prominence and left coercion and caste intact. Its order rested on a virtuous ruler, and Romila Thapar notes the difficulty of turning such ideals into lasting institutions.

On balance the claim holds. Buddhism's contribution was to place the state under Dhamma, making compassion, equality and welfare the measure of power.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTION

UPSC 2023 · 20 marks

Buddhist thought on Dhamma facilitates the emancipation of political action. Explain.

● FLOW SNAPSHOT — how the answer moves

Intro routes

- R1 Dhamma = righteousness / justice / moral law → stands above Ānā (command) → guided by it, power freed from greed, turned to welfare
- R2 in Buddhism politics rooted in ethics → command alone not legitimate → Dhamma gives political action its moral direction → hence emancipatory

Body flow

Dhamma superior to state → empowers order + restrains tyranny → force without Dhamma not legitimate → one standard binds king & subject, public & private acts → power becomes responsibility, else *Rativijja* → emancipation = freedom from greed / domination / caste arrogance / ritual hierarchy / self-interest → worth by conduct not birth → **Ambedkar**: morality protecting weak from strong → reduces suffering, not domination → no fixed system, only a moral compass → **Aśoka** (welfare / impartial justice / tolerance) → **Gandhi** (Ahimsa) + **Thich Nhat Hanh** (mindful action)

Counter-view

risk of politicisation → ethno-nationalist capture of Dhamma → moral ideals hard to fix in secular institutions

Conclusion routes

- R1 power must serve welfare → authority morally accountable → political action guided by Dhamma
- R2 not a return to moralism, but Dhamma as a moral compass → authority becomes an instrument of moral & social emancipation

In Buddhist thought, Dhamma is not personal piety alone. It means righteousness, justice and moral law – the natural truth discovered by the Buddha – and it stands above the ruler's command, or *Ānā*. Political action becomes emancipatory when guided by this law, for Dhamma frees power from greed & turns it towards welfare.

Dhamma is treated as a force superior to the state. It works two ways: it empowers the ruler to keep order and it restrains him from tyranny. Command may carry force, but force without Dhamma is not legitimate. One ethical standard binds King and subject, and applies to his public & private conduct alike. Dhamma thus turns power into responsibility; politics without it becomes *Rativijja*, the science of pleasure.

The emancipation lies in what Dhamma removes – greed, domination, caste arrogance, ritual hierarchy and narrow self-interest. Since worth is judged by conduct, not birth, political standing stops being a caste privilege.

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar described Dhamma as a "universal morality that protects the weak from the strong and safeguards the growth of the individual". Politics so conceived reduces suffering instead of multiplying command.

Dhamma prescribes no fixed system ; it offers a moral compass for accountable rule. Asoka gives it public form, making welfare, impartial justice and tolerance the work of the state. In modern times, Mahatma Gandhi's resistance shows the force of Ahimsa and Thich Nhat Hanh links Dhamma with mindful, compassionate action.

Its limit is real- Dhamma can be captured by nationalism & is hard to fix in secular institutions. Even so, under Dhamma political authority becomes an instrument of moral & social emancipation.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTION

UPSC 2024 · 15 marks

Dharmashastra presents a duty-centric worldview for individuals and communities. Comment.

● FLOW SNAPSHOT — how the answer moves

Intro routes

R1 dharma from root *dhr*, "to hold" → society held together by duties, not rights

R2 duty-centric worldview → role + obligation as the axis → harmony through *svadharma*

Body flow

svadharma: varna + ashrama fix the duty → individual virtues (honesty, self-restraint, reverence for parents/teachers) → **Basham**: moral conduct and the individual's role in social order → duties extend outward (family, community, divine order, fellow humans) → *Rajya-dharma*: ruler as custodian, governance = responsibility not entitlement → morality the binding thread; ethical failure = *adharma*

Counter-view

Kothari: order secured but hierarchy hardened → **Ambedkar**: duties assigned by birth → caste + gender inequality

Conclusion routes

R1 **Kane**'s contextual reading: regulatory, even flexible, yet bound by status

R2 duty linked power to protection, but turned role into rank

Dharma comes from the root dhr "to hold" & dharmashastra holds society together not through rights but through duties. Every individual has a role and every role carries obligations; social harmony rests on their performance. This is the principle of svadharma - conduct fixed by one's varna and stage of life, from Brahmacharya to Sannyasa. The individual is asked to practise honesty, self-restraint, compassion and reverence for parents and teachers. According to A.L. Basham, Dharmashastra defines not only moral conduct but also the individual's role in maintaining social order.

These duties extend beyond the individual - to family, community, the divine order and fellow human beings. Rajya-dharma carries the same logic to the ruler: governance is responsibility, not entitlement and the King remains custodian of justice and welfare. Morality is the binding thread; without ethical conduct, dharma becomes adharma.

This duty-centrism, however, carried a cost. Rajni Kothari notes that dharma secured order but hardened social hierarchy; B.R. Ambedkar argued that duties assigned by birth institutionalised caste and gender inequality. P.V. Kane offers a fairer reading – historically regulatory, even flexible, yet always bound by states. Dharma linked power to protection, but also turned role into rank.

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