

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.