



VAJIRAM & RAVI
Institute for IAS Examination

ESSAY

UPSC 2026

Topics

1. Oxymorons reflect the ironies of life.
2. A grateful mind is very beautiful.
3. A thorn is a changed bud
4. When two elephants fight, it is the grass that gets trampled.
5. Nature is the symbol of the spirit.
6. A well-educated mind will always have more questions than answers.
7. Shelving hard decisions is the least ethical course.
8. A good leader is one who follows the follower



Topic 1: Oxymorons reflect the ironies of life.

Introduction

One evening, after receiving his long-awaited promotion, a man returned home and stood before the mirror. He smiled at his reflection and said, **"I finally got it."** After a moment of silence, he loosened his tie and looked again. **"Then why don't I feel happy?"** The reflection offered no answer. He continued, almost to himself, **"Perhaps this is what I wanted—but not what I expected."**

In that quiet conversation lies a profound irony of human existence. We often discover that the **fulfilment of one desire** carries the burden of another emotion: **success brings pressure**, freedom brings responsibility, love brings vulnerability, and progress creates new forms of risk. Language captures such experiences through **oxymorons—"bittersweet," "deafening silence," "peaceful resistance," and "joyful tears"**. An oxymoron brings together apparently incompatible ideas yet reveals a deeper truth hidden beneath their surface contradiction. Life too is rarely binary; it is a tapestry where opposites coexist, collide and sometimes complement one another.

Thus, oxymorons reflect the ironies of life because human existence is not composed of isolated opposites but of interdependent contradictions where the presence of one condition often creates, modifies, or even gives meaning to its apparent opposite. Yet, not every contradiction deserves acceptance. Some are creative tensions to be balanced; others are injustices to be overcome. The wisdom of life lies in knowing the difference.

The Human Condition: Where Opposites Coexist

Human life itself is an oxymoron. We seek permanence in a world of change, **certainty in uncertainty** and control over circumstances beyond our command. A young person leaving home for education or employment experiences a bittersweet departure. **Separation brings sadness**, yet that very separation represents growth. Similarly, a parent watching a child become independent experiences pride and anxiety simultaneously. The two emotions arise from the same relationship.

Even failure can become preparation for success. A failed examination may reveal weaknesses; a failed enterprise may teach resilience; a failed relationship may deepen self-awareness. **Abraham Lincoln's repeated political setbacks** before becoming President illustrate how apparent failure can become a pathway to achievement. Suffering too may contain meaning. Difficult experiences can deepen empathy, uncertainty can cultivate courage, and mortality can make life precious. The **Japanese philosophy of wabi-sabi**, which appreciates beauty in imperfection and transience, captures this insight.

Thus, happiness is not necessarily the absence of sorrow. Often, sorrow gives happiness its depth.

Relationships and Morality: Strength in Apparent Weakness

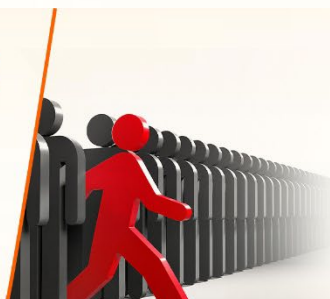
Relationships reveal another paradox. **Love provides security** while simultaneously **creating vulnerability**. The more deeply one cares, the greater the possibility of loss. Trust becomes meaningful precisely because betrayal remains possible.

Morality also works through apparent reversals. **Forgiveness may appear to be surrender**, yet it can **represent strength**. **Nelson Mandela's preference for reconciliation** over revenge after apartheid prevented liberation from becoming another cycle of violence. **Mahatma Gandhi** transformed non-violent resistance into a powerful instrument of political struggle. Conventional power associates strength with force; Gandhi demonstrated that disciplined non-cooperation and willingness to suffer could challenge an empire.

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Thus, what appears weak on the surface may possess greater moral strength. Restraint can be stronger than aggression, forgiveness more enduring than revenge, and sacrifice more meaningful than possession.

Progress and Civilization: Solutions Creating New Problems

Civilization has repeatedly solved old problems while generating new ones. This is one of the defining ironies of progress. Modern cities provide employment, healthcare, and education, yet can produce loneliness, congestion, and homelessness. Technology creates connected isolation: an individual can communicate instantly with someone thousands of kilometers away while remaining emotionally distant from someone sitting beside them.

Artificial intelligence may enhance productivity and scientific capability while raising concerns about employment, surveillance, and human autonomy. The very technologies designed to reduce effort can create new forms of dependence. The lesson is not that progress is undesirable. Rather, every expansion of human capability expands the sphere of human responsibility. Progress changes the nature of problems rather than eliminating them.

Development: Abundance Amidst Scarcity

The modern economy presents another oxymoron: abundance amidst scarcity. Humanity has sufficient productive capacity to generate enormous quantities of food, yet hunger persists because access and purchasing power remain unequal. India's Green Revolution transformed food security and reduced dependence on imports, but its benefits were regionally uneven, and intensive water use created ecological stress in several areas.

Similarly, GDP growth can coexist with unemployment, malnutrition, or inadequate public services. Amartya Sen's capability approach reminds us that development should be judged not merely by income but by people's substantive freedom to live lives they value. Therefore, "abundance amidst scarcity" should not merely be accepted as an irony; it should become a question of justice and governance.

Politics and Governance: Freedom Through Restraint

Political life itself consists of competing values. Democracy seeks majority rule while protecting minority rights. Freedom requires space for individual choice, yet responsibility demands limits when others' rights are harmed. The Indian Constitution embodies such tensions—liberty with reasonable restrictions, equality with affirmative action, federalism with national unity, and rights with responsibilities.

International relations present another paradox. Nations compete for power while cooperating on climate change, pandemics and trade. The nuclear age introduced the disturbing concept of peace through deterrence: the destructive capacity of weapons can discourage war because their consequences make direct conflict irrational. Stable institutions therefore often do not eliminate contradictions; they manage competing interests through rules and restraint.

Nature and Development: From Conflict to Coexistence

The conflict between development and environment is perhaps the most consequential modern contradiction. Development has historically treated forests, rivers and land primarily as economic resources, generating prosperity but also ecological degradation. Yet the opposition is not inevitable. Renewable energy, circular economy, regenerative agriculture and sustainable transport demonstrate that development can operate within ecological limits.

The deeper shift is conceptual: humanity must move from seeing itself as the master of nature to a participant within nature. The question is no longer development or environment, but development within planetary boundaries.

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Beyond Paradox: Not Every Contradiction Is Acceptable

However, not every contradiction should be celebrated as a profound irony. **“Poverty amidst plenty”** is not inevitable when institutions can improve distribution. **“Connected isolation”** need not be the unavoidable price of technology. Colonialism's claim of a **“civilising mission”** alongside exploitation was not a beautiful paradox but a moral contradiction requiring resistance.

Likewise, formal equality may coexist with **substantive discrimination**. Such contradictions reveal institutional failure rather than philosophical complexity. Hence, wisdom lies in distinguishing between creative tension and avoidable injustice.

Synthesis: From Either-Or to Both-And

The deepest lesson of the oxymoron is that many apparent opposites can be reconciled at a higher level. Humanity must move from either-or thinking towards both-and thinking. Growth and sustainability can coexist when development respects ecological limits. Technology and humanity can complement each other when machines augment rather than diminish human agency. Tradition and modernity can coexist when traditions provide identity while remaining open to reform.

At the individual level, maturity means **holding complexity without losing one's ethical center**—being ambitious without becoming enslaved to ambition, vulnerable without becoming weak, and content without becoming complacent. Thus, the goal is neither to eliminate every contradiction nor to accept every contradiction but to transform destructive contradictions into productive tensions.

An oxymoron appears to unite impossibilities, yet its contradiction reveals a truth ordinary language cannot fully express. **Bittersweet captures joy and sorrow**; peaceful resistance shows strength without violence; deafening silence reveals the power of absence. Life works similarly. Failure can educate, love can liberate and wound, freedom can demand restraint, prosperity can coexist with deprivation, and progress can create new vulnerabilities.

Yet the mature response is neither denial nor passive acceptance. Some contradictions must be **balanced, some reconciled and some transformed**. Perhaps the man before the mirror eventually understands his unease: the promotion had not failed him; it had revealed the complexity of human desire.

The irony of life is not merely that opposites coexist but that they often derive meaning from one another. The wisdom of existence lies in knowing when to hold opposites together, when to reconcile them, and when to transform them.

Topic 2: A grateful mind is very beautiful.

Introduction

Every morning, an elderly gardener arrived at a large house before sunrise. He watered the plants, removed fallen leaves and carefully tended the roses near the entrance. The owner of the house was a successful businessman who had spent much of his life pursuing the next achievement, a larger company, a better house, another investment. Yet success rarely seemed enough.

One morning, watching the gardener humming while he worked, the businessman asked, **“You have worked here for twenty years. Don't you ever wish you had achieved something bigger?”**

The gardener smiled and replied, **“Every morning I wake up, my family is well, my hands can still work, and I get to watch something grow. I have received more than I remember to ask for.”**

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The businessman remained silent. He possessed the garden, but the gardener seemed to enjoy it more.

The story captures a simple truth: **the beauty of life depends not merely on what surrounds us, but also on the mind through which we see it. Gratitude is therefore much more than saying “thank you.”** It is the ability to recognize the people, opportunities, experiences and even adversities that have shaped our lives.

A grateful mind does not believe that life is perfect. Rather, it refuses to allow what is imperfect to make it blind to what is precious. Perhaps this is why gratitude beautifies the mind, it transforms **scarcity into sufficiency, achievement into humility, relationships into responsibility and adversity into resilience.**

Gratitude: The Art of Seeing What We Already Have

Human beings naturally notice what is missing. The student scoring ninety marks thinks about the missing ten. The professional receiving a promotion begins imagining the next position. The family moving into a larger house soon discovers another house that appears more desirable.

Aspiration itself is not the problem. Human progress depends upon the desire to improve. The difficulty begins when aspiration destroys appreciation.

Psychologists describe the **“hedonic treadmill”- our tendency to adapt quickly to improved circumstances.** A new car, promotion or possession creates temporary excitement before becoming ordinary. Another desire then replaces it.

Gratitude interrupts this cycle. It does not necessarily increase what we possess; it changes what we notice.

Health that appeared ordinary becomes valuable after illness. Parents whose daily concern was taken for granted become precious with age. Friendship, food, safety and opportunity cease to appear automatically guaranteed.

Thus, **gratitude makes the mind beautiful first by transforming perception.** It teaches us that **abundance is sometimes not the possession of more, but the ability to recognize more.**

From Comparison to Contentment

This capacity is especially important in an age of constant comparison.

Social media exposes individuals to carefully selected images of other people’s achievements, careers, holidays and relationships. **We often compare the edited highlights of another person’s life with the unedited reality of our own.** Consequently, someone else’s promotion makes our work appear inadequate; another person’s holiday makes an ordinary weekend seem disappointing.

Gratitude breaks this cycle without destroying ambition.

A student can aspire for better marks while valuing what she has already achieved. A professional can pursue growth while appreciating present opportunities. A nation can seek greater prosperity while recognizing how far it has travelled.

Contentment and ambition are not opposites. **Contentment says, “What I have has value.” Ambition says, “What exists can become better.” A mature mind can hold both ideas together.**

Gratitude Makes Achievement Humble. Success can create another illusion—that achievement is entirely self-made. A doctor remembers years of study but may forget the teachers who trained her and nurses who support her. An entrepreneur values personal risk but may overlook employees, customers and public infrastructure. A civil servant may clear a difficult examination through immense personal effort, yet that journey may also have depended upon parents, teachers, institutions and countless invisible workers.

Gratitude does not diminish individual merit. It places merit within a larger reality.

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Newton captured this beautifully when he wrote of seeing further by **“standing on the shoulders of giants.” Every generation inherits language, knowledge, institutions and discoveries created by people it will never meet.** A grateful person can therefore say, “I worked hard,” without concluding, “I alone created my success.” This creates humility. Entitlement asks what the world owes us; **gratitude remembers what we owe the world.**

Relationships: Appreciating Before Absence Teaches Us

The deepest effects of gratitude often appear within ordinary relationships. Human beings have a strange tendency to appreciate people intensely when they enter our lives and gradually take them for granted when they remain. A parent preparing meals, a spouse quietly managing responsibilities, a friend listening during difficult periods or a colleague helping without recognition slowly becomes part of the background.

Familiarity can make precisely what is most valuable. Many relationships weaken not because affection disappears, but because acknowledgement disappears. People continue giving but stop feeling seen. Gratitude restores this visibility. **A simple “I noticed what you did” can carry greater meaning than an expensive gift because it acknowledges another person’s effort.**

One of life’s tragedies is that we often understand people’s values most clearly after losing them. Gratitude asks us to reverse this order: **appreciate while presence is still available.**

From Gratitude to Compassion and Service

Gratitude becomes more meaningful when it moves beyond emotion and becomes ethics. Indian thought has long emphasized **kritajñatā-recognition of what one has received.** Respect for parents and teachers, *seva* and traditions of reverence towards nature all reflect the understanding that human beings do not exist independently of others. This changes the question we ask.

A transactional mind asks, “What will I receive if I give?” A grateful mind asks, “What can I give because I have already received it?”

A student supported through a scholarship may later mentor another student. A successful professional may contribute knowledge or resources to society. A citizen who benefits from public institutions may protect public goods rather than treating them as somebody else’s responsibility.

Gratitude can also produce compassion. A person who remembers the teacher who encouraged her, the family that supported her and the opportunities that came her way is less likely to assume that everyone who struggles simply lacks effort. She understands that hard work matters, but so does opportunity. Thus, **a grateful mind becomes beautiful not simply because it appreciates its own fortune, but because appreciation enlarges its sensitivity towards others.**

Gratitude in Public Life

The same idea has significance for governance. Public authority can be seen either as a reward or as a trust. A civil servant exercises power because the Constitution and society entrust that authority to the office. An elected representative occupies office because citizens have temporarily given a mandate. Seen this way, public office becomes less an entitlement and more a responsibility.

Mahatma Gandhi’s idea of trusteeship reflected a similar intuition: possession and power carry obligations towards others.

A grateful administrator therefore does not regard citizens as interruptions to official work. Citizens are the reason the office exists. **The mindset changes from “I deserve this position” to “I have been entrusted with this responsibility.”** Gratitude thus transforms power into service.

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Gratitude Towards Society, Nation and Nature

No generation begins from nothing. Indians today inherited political freedom won through sacrifices they did not personally make, a constitutional democracy built amid extraordinary difficulties and scientific, educational and public institutions developed across generations. Being grateful for this inheritance does not require uncritical glorification.

One can appreciate the Constitution while seeking better constitutional governance. One can honour the freedom struggle while acknowledging injustices that remain. **The highest gratitude towards a nation is not merely praising what previous generations built, but improving what the next generation will inherit.**

The same principle applies to nature. Forests, rivers, soil, wetlands and biodiversity are often described merely as “resources”. Yet human life depends upon ecological systems we did not create. A forest stores carbon and regulates water; soil produces food; wetlands absorb floods.

Indian traditions often treated rivers, mountains and the Earth itself with reverence. Beneath these practices lies a valuable ethical insight: what sustains life should not be treated with careless entitlement.

Environmental stewardship is therefore gratitude extended across generations. If we inherit clean water, forests and biodiversity but leave ecological depletion behind, **we have accepted nature’s gifts without accepting responsibility.**

Gratitude in Adversity

It is easy to speak of gratitude when life is comfortable. Its deeper test comes during suffering. This does not mean romanticizing pain or asking someone facing tragedy simply to “be grateful.” Genuine gratitude does not deny suffering. Rather, it prevents suffering from becoming the entirety of one’s vision.

Viktor Frankl, reflecting on his experiences in Nazi concentration camps, emphasized the human capacity to find meaning even under extreme conditions. His lesson was not that suffering is desirable, but that human beings can sometimes choose their relationship to circumstances they cannot choose.

A person facing illness may still be grateful for a caregiver. Someone who loses employment may recognize the family standing beside them. Communities struck by disasters often discover extraordinary solidarity among strangers.

Pain remains real. But gratitude reminds us that pain may not be the only reality present. This capacity—to see what remains without denying what has been lost -is one of the foundations of resilience.

Anti-thesis: When Gratitude Becomes Complacency

Yet gratitude can also be misunderstood. A poorly paid worker may be told to remain “grateful to have a job.” A woman facing abuse may be asked to appreciate what her family has provided instead of questioning injustice. Marginalized communities may be expected to remain thankful for limited opportunities rather than demand equality.

Such gratitude is not virtue. It is submission disguised as virtue. History would have been different if reformers had simply remained grateful for whatever progress already existed. Ambedkar did not accept caste inequality because limited opportunities had opened. Women’s movements did not abandon demands for equality because earlier reforms had improved their position. India’s freedom struggle itself arose because limited concessions could not substitute for freedom.

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Similarly, **excessive contentment can discourage innovation**. Science progresses because existing explanations are questioned. Democracy improves because citizens demand accountability. Human progress therefore requires dissatisfaction too. The challenge is to ensure that dissatisfaction improves life without making us incapable of appreciating it.

Synthesis: Gratitude Without Complacency

The apparent contradiction disappears once we distinguish gratitude from complacency. Gratitude appreciates **what complacency assumes that what is cannot or need not become better**. A student can appreciate educational opportunities while seeking better learning. A citizen can value democracy while demanding stronger institutions.

A society can cherish tradition while rejecting discrimination embedded within some traditions. The difference lies in motivation. Change driven only by resentment rarely satisfies because every achievement reveals another deficiency. **Change rooted in gratitude becomes stewardship.**

One says, **“Nothing is enough.”** The other says, **“Much has been given; therefore, much can be built.”**
This is gratitude at its highest—not passive satisfaction, but active appreciation.

A Grateful Mind Creates a Grateful Society

Modern life often celebrates visible achievement while overlooking invisible contribution. We admire the scientist but rarely remember every technician behind the experiment. We celebrate prosperous cities while overlooking sanitation workers, construction labourers, farmers and transport workers who make urban life possible.

The COVID-19 pandemic briefly made many such contributions visible. Healthcare workers, sanitation personnel, delivery workers and countless ordinary citizens became essential to sustaining society during the crisis. Such moments reveal a basic truth: **no individual is entirely self-sufficient**.

Recognizing this should produce more than ceremonial appreciation. A grateful society respects labour, values care and ensures dignity for those whose contributions are easily overlooked. Gratitude therefore has a social consequence: it transforms acknowledgement into reciprocity.

Way Forward: Cultivating Gratitude

Gratitude does not always arise automatically in a culture organized around speed, consumption and comparison. It must be cultivated. At the individual level, this begins with attention-noticing ordinary sources of well-being before familiarity makes them invisible. **Reflection and gratitude journals can help but the purpose is not ritual; it is to train perception.**

Families and workplaces should make appreciation specific. People need to know not merely that they are valued, but that their contribution has been noticed. Education should cultivate gratitude alongside ambition by helping children recognize the farmers behind food, workers behind infrastructure, scientists behind technology and generations behind democratic freedoms.

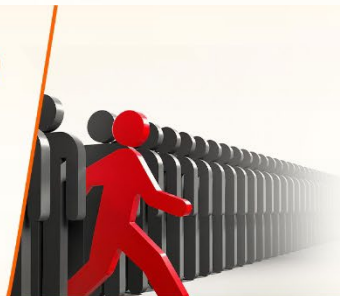
In public life, gratitude should become service. Those who receive education, opportunity, wealth or authority should ask how these advantages can contribute to the common good.

And at the civilizational level, gratitude should extend to future generations. **The ultimate question is not simply, “What have we received?” but “What will others receive because we were here?”**

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Conclusion

Years later, the businessman who had once questioned the gardener grew older. His company had expanded. There were more offices, investments and awards on his walls. Yet the conversation in the garden remained with him. One morning, he reached the garden before the gardener. For the first time in years, he noticed the early sunlight on the roses. He remembered that his father had planted the first rosebush. He noticed the tea his wife had quietly left for him. Then he saw the gardener arriving, older now, carrying the same worn tools.

Nothing extraordinary had happened. The house was the same. The garden was the same. His life still contained problems. What had changed was the way he saw it. He finally understood that the gardener had never been content because he possessed more. He had simply learned to notice more.

Perhaps that is what makes a grateful mind beautiful. It does not close its eyes to suffering, ambition or injustice. **Instead, it prevents suffering from erasing hope, ambition from erasing contentment achievement from arrogance and familiarity from becoming indifference.**

A grateful mind understands that life is never entirely self-made. Every achievement carries someone's contribution, every freedom carries someone's sacrifice and every tomorrow carries a responsibility towards those who will inherit it. The businessman had spent much of his life expanding his garden. The gardener had spent his life noticing it. And **therein lies the quiet beauty of gratitude: it may not give us a more beautiful life, but it gives us the eyes to recognize the beauty that life had contained all along.**

Topic 3: A thorn is a changed bud

Introduction

In a small, dust-swept village in Maharashtra, ten-year-old Kabir spent his afternoons tending a small rose patch behind his mud-brick home alongside his grandmother, Amma. One hot summer, during an unprecedented drought, Kabir noticed something curious about his favorite plant. The soft, green tips that usually swelled into fragrant crimson flowers had stopped growing. In their place grew sharp, rigid, grey thorns that pricked his fingers.

Distressed, Kabir asked, "Amma, why has the plant become so cruel? Why did it stop making flowers and start making weapons?"

Amma paused, her weathered hands resting on the dry earth. "Child," she replied softly, "a thorn is not an enemy born of hatred. **A thorn is simply a changed bud.** When the soil turns dry, the sun becomes harsh, and the water runs out, the plant realizes it cannot afford the luxury of blooming. To survive, the tender energy that was meant to produce a flower transforms into a sharp spike. It hardens its heart so its body might live."

Understanding the Metaphor: What are the Bud and the Thorn?

Metaphorically, the bud represents raw potential, innocence, constructive energy, and vulnerability. It is the promise of growth, art, peace, and human capability. It represents a child's curiosity, a youth's ambition, a society's harmony, or a democracy's idealism.

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The thorn, conversely, represents hostility, defensiveness, violence, cynicism, and rigidity. It is the physical or psychological defense mechanism created to withstand a hostile world.

The word "changed" is the most crucial part of the statement. It tells us that nobody is born a thorn. The transformation is not an inherent flaw, but a reaction.

Reason for the Transformation

Understanding why a bud changes into a thorn requires examining the fundamental instinct for survival. Just as a plant hardens when **deprived of water and nutrients**, human beings harden when deprived of their basic needs like food, shelter, economic security, and dignity. Poverty, extreme inequality, and systemic neglect act as the harsh, scorching sun that dries up human potential. Furthermore, when individuals face systemic injustice and exploitation, their foundational trust in society is broken. The vital energy that would otherwise be used for positive creation, community building, and artistic expression is abruptly diverted toward self-preservation.

A bud is inherently vulnerable and requires a safe, predictable environment to open up to the world. In an environment characterized by violence, emotional abuse, or severe economic insecurity, remaining soft becomes a dangerous liability. The human mind and body adapt to this deprivation by building impenetrable walls and projecting hostility to ward off perceived threats, proving the old adage that a **child who is not embraced by the village will eventually burn it down just to feel its warmth**.

The Individual and Social Dimension: Youth and Crime

At the individual level, early childhood experiences shape whether a human mind blossoms or hardens. According to Erik Erikson's theory of psychosocial development, an infant's first critical struggle is between **Basic Trust vs. Basic Mistrust**. When a child's foundational needs for safety and affection are met, they develop trust—the bud of healthy social engagement.

Conversely, psychological studies on Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) demonstrate that severe neglect, abuse, or trauma alters brain architecture. The traumatized individual develops emotional thorns: emotional detachment, aggressive behavior, and pervasive cynicism. The street child who turns into a hardened gang member is not inherently evil; he is a bud that hardened into a thorn to survive an ecosystem of violence.

On a broader social level, we see this in the context of India's demographic dividend. A young population is a blossoming bud capable of driving massive economic and social progress. However, how does this asset become a liability? When socio-economic structures fail to provide quality education, employment, and dignity, youth aspirations are crushed. Prolonged youth unemployment breeds social alienation. The radicalized youth, or the young person joining Left-Wing Extremism (LWE) in central India due to land alienation, is a bud whose constructive potential found no water, leaving only the sharp spine of armed resistance.

The Political and Administrative Dimension:

Institutions, too, begin as buds of high idealism. Why do revolutions meant to bring freedom often end in dictatorships? The **French Revolution** was born as a magnificent bud seeking liberty and equality. Yet, surrounded by foreign wars and internal fear, this democratic bud transformed into the "Reign of Terror"—a vicious thorn of mass executions. The fear for survival destroyed its original ideals.

In governance, we see this in the bureaucracy. Civil services are designed to serve citizens—a bud of public welfare. But how do they change? Over time, faced with political pressure, resource scarcity, and a fear of making mistakes, the bureaucracy hardens. It creates layers of red tape, rigid rules, and an apathetic attitude. The system shifts its priority from nurturing the citizen to protecting itself. The public servant becomes the public authority; the bud becomes a thorn.

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The Militarization of Nations

In global politics, nations ideally want to focus on the welfare, health, and education of their citizens. This peaceful development is the blooming of a nation. However, why do poor countries spend billions on missiles rather than hospitals?

When a nation is placed in a hostile neighborhood, the existential threat forces a change in priorities. The fear of invasion or terrorism forces the state to divert its resources toward massive militaries and nuclear weapons. Peaceful cross-border diplomacy (the bud) hardens into hyper-militarized borders and arms races (the thorn).

The Anti-Thesis: The Necessary Thorn

The metaphor should not imply that every defensive structure is undesirable. A thorn can protect a plant from herbivores. Similarly, boundaries protect individuals, laws protect society, constitutional safeguards protect democracy and national defence protects sovereignty.

The important question is whether the **defensive mechanism remains proportional to the threat**. A healthy immune response protects the body, but an uncontrolled immune response can damage it. Similarly, reasonable regulation protects society, while excessive regulation can suppress innovation.

Therefore, the objective should not be a completely thornless society. It should be a society in which thorns remain necessary, proportionate and protective rather than becoming permanent sources of harm.

The Way Forward: How Do We Restore the Bloom?

If adverse conditions can change buds into thorns, development must focus on creating conditions in which human potential can flourish. At the individual level, this requires adequate nutrition, healthcare, education, emotional support and opportunities. At the social level, it requires equality of opportunity, dignity and protection against discrimination. At the economic level, it requires productive employment, skills and social security.

At the institutional level, governments must strengthen accountability while reducing unnecessary procedural barriers. At the political level, democracy must protect dissent and prevent the fear of instability from becoming an excuse for excessive control. At the international level, countries must combine credible security with dialogue and cooperation. The most effective strategy is therefore not merely to deal with thorns after they appear. It is to prevent circumstances from forcing too many buds to become thorns in the first place.

From Adaptation to Renewal

The deepest lesson of the metaphor is that transformation need not be permanent. Human beings possess the unique capacity to reflect upon the circumstances that have shaped them and consciously choose a different path.

A person who has experienced betrayal can choose empathy rather than cynicism. A society that has experienced violence can choose reconciliation rather than revenge. A nation that has experienced war can build institutions for peace. A government that has experienced policy failure can reform instead of merely defending its past decisions. Therefore, the highest form of resilience is not permanent hardness. It is adaptive flexibility. A person should know how to protect himself during danger but should also know how to trust when the danger has passed. A nation should maintain security while continuing to seek peace. An institution should maintain accountability without losing the courage to innovate.





Conclusion: Let the Thorn Remember the Flower

Years later, Kabir returned to the small garden behind his grandmother's house. The drought had ended. The village pond was full again, the soil had become moist and the rose plant had begun to bloom. Kabir noticed that some of the old thorns were still present.

He asked his grandmother, "If the plant can flower again, why does it still have thorns?" She smiled and replied, "Because the plant remembers the summer. But it does not have to remain a summer plant."

But transformation is not destiny. If circumstances improve, if institutions become just, if opportunities expand and if individuals exercise agency, the underlying potential can find a new direction.

Therefore, a just society should not merely admire the resilience of those who have become thorns. It should ask why they were forced to harden in the first place. The highest form of development is not a society in which everyone learns to survive adversity. It is a society in which fewer people are forced to face adversity without support.

The thorn may protect the plant during a difficult season, but the ultimate purpose of the plant is not to remain protected forever. It is to flower.

Topic 4: When two Elephants fight, it is the grass that gets trampled.

Introduction

On the bloodstained plains of Kurukshetra, great warriors fought over a throne whose meaning was larger to them than the lives beneath their chariots. History remembers Arjuna, Bhishma and Krishna, yet countless unnamed soldiers disappeared into the dust. **The powerful pursued victory; the powerless inherited the wounds of their contest.**

The image of elephants fighting while grass is crushed captures a recurring asymmetry of human civilisation. **Power creates the capacity to absorb shocks, while vulnerability creates the compulsion to bear them.** The same pattern appears when states wage wars, corporations pursue dominance, political elites polarise societies or economies exploit nature.

When powerful actors compete without restraint, they possess the means to externalise the costs of conflict onto those with the least voice and protection; justice therefore requires not eliminating power or competition, but subjecting both to institutions, constitutional morality and collective agency.

The Architecture of Asymmetry

Power is not inherently evil. It enables states to protect citizens, businesses to innovate and institutions to coordinate collective action. The danger begins when power becomes insulated from consequences. **The elephant is not destructive merely because it is large; destruction begins when its strength allows it to ignore the lives beneath its feet.**

This is the ethical problem of unequal bargaining power. **John Rawls** placed the least advantaged at the centre of distributive justice, asking whether social arrangements could be justified to those receiving the smallest share of their benefits. **A just society therefore cannot measure success only by the strength of its winners; it must also ask what happens to those who cannot negotiate with them.**

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When Elephants Fight

Geopolitical history repeatedly demonstrates this asymmetry. During the Cold War, rivalry between the United States and Soviet Union often shifted into weaker states, including Korea, Vietnam and Afghanistan. Local populations bore displacement, destruction and developmental losses while the principal powers possessed far greater capacity to absorb strategic costs. The battlefield of the powerful frequently became the home of the vulnerable.

The US-China trade war shows how the same dynamic operates without conventional warfare. Beginning in 2018, successive rounds of tariffs and counter-tariffs disrupted global supply chains, raised costs for businesses and consumers, and created uncertainty far beyond Washington and Beijing. Countries such as India, Vietnam and Mexico also experienced shifts in trade and investment as firms sought alternative production bases. When two economic elephants pull in opposite directions, the grass of global commerce bends even when it never entered the contest.

The lesson extends beyond trade. Sanctions, export controls, currency tensions and strategic decoupling can transmit shocks across borders, particularly to developing economies with limited fiscal and bargaining capacity. The powerful can often absorb disruption; vulnerable societies cannot. Interdependence therefore makes restraint not merely a moral virtue, but an economic necessity.

The Corporate Elephant

The same asymmetry appears without armies or battlefields. In markets, the elephant may wear a corporate suit. Large firms possess capital reserves, technological advantages and bargaining power that smaller enterprises cannot easily match. Competition itself can generate innovation and efficiency; the ethical problem arises when market power becomes sufficiently concentrated to shift risks downward onto workers, suppliers, consumers or smaller competitors. Amartya Sen's entitlement approach offers a deeper understanding of this process. Famines, he showed, need not arise simply because food is unavailable; people may starve because their entitlements, the means through which they command food, collapse. The lesson extends beyond famine: scarcity hurts most when those with the least power also lose access to the means of survival.

The Democratic Commons

Politics can become another arena where elephants fight. When competing elites treat elections as wars of total victory, institutions become weapons, social identities become instruments and citizens become vote banks. The damage extends beyond political rhetoric: administrative attention is diverted, public trust weakens and ordinary citizens may become collateral damage in battles fought for control of institutions.

This is why Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's constitutional morality remains crucial. Democracy cannot mean merely counting heads; it must restrain the passions of those who temporarily command the majority. Political competition is legitimate, but it must remain bounded by rights, rule of law and institutional restraint. The defeated must remain citizens, not become enemies.

The Civil War Within

This destructive clash unfolds equally within the human psyche. On the eve of battle, Arjuna's agonizing dilemma between emotional kinship and righteous duty paralyzed his will, causing his bow Gandiva to slip from trembling hands. When unexamined ambition collides with moral conscience, this internal friction tramples our peace of mind, leaving the inner self exhausted by a war between unchecked desires.

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The Grass of the Future

The most profound form of externalised cost appears when present power consumes the future. Industrial competition has encouraged extraction of forests, minerals, fossil fuels and groundwater at a pace ecosystems cannot always sustain. Coastal communities, indigenous populations and poorer households often face the earliest consequences of environmental degradation despite contributing far less to its creation.

Rachel Carson's Silent Spring exposed how indiscriminate pesticide use could move through food chains and disturb entire ecosystems. India's constitutional jurisprudence has carried this concern into the domain of rights. In Vellore Citizens' Welfare Forum v. Union of India, the Supreme Court recognised sustainable development, the precautionary principle and intergenerational equity as important principles of environmental governance, alongside the broader protection of life under Article 21.

The constitutional idea is profound: the present generation does not own nature absolutely; it holds it in trust. Future citizens cannot participate in today's political and economic decisions, yet they will inherit their consequences. When forests disappear, aquifers decline or the climate becomes more unstable, the grass beneath today's elephants may become the children and grandchildren of those who never had a voice in the original contest.

Not Every Elephant Is the Enemy

Yet the metaphor becomes misleading if it teaches us to fear every form of power or competition. Competition between political parties can prevent authoritarianism; competition among firms can produce innovation; rivalry among nations can stimulate scientific achievement. A world without competing interests could become stagnant, monopolistic and intellectually closed.

The real question is therefore not whether elephants should exist, but whether their strength is governed by rules that protect those beneath their feet. Competition creates progress when its gains are broadly shared and its losses are fairly distributed. Power becomes predatory not when it is strong, but when it becomes unaccountable.

When the Grass Learns to Rise

The vulnerable, however, are not merely passive victims. Grass survives because its roots are dispersed, interconnected and capable of regeneration. Human communities display a similar resilience when individuals organise around shared interests. Collective action can transform those without conventional power into participants capable of negotiating with institutions and challenging entrenched authority.

Mahatma Gandhi's Satyagraha demonstrated that moral authority and collective non-violence could challenge an empire possessing overwhelming military power. The Chipko Movement showed village communities resisting destructive commercial forestry, while Ela Bhatt's SEWA organised women workers to strengthen their economic agency. These examples reveal an important truth: the grass becomes harder to trample when it grows together. Yet resilience must never become an excuse for injustice. Asking the poor to endlessly adapt to displacement, pollution or exploitation simply because they are "resilient" shifts responsibility from the powerful to the powerless. A just society does not merely teach the grass how to survive elephants; it teaches elephants where they may safely walk.

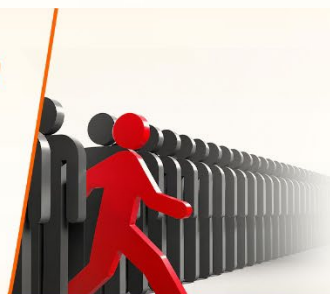
From Strength to Stewardship

This is where institutions become the bridge between power and justice. Rule of law ensures that strength does not place an actor above common rules. Voice ensures that those affected by decisions can participate in shaping them. Accountability ensures that those who create costs cannot indefinitely transfer them to others.

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In economic life, credible competition policy can prevent excessive concentration without punishing legitimate enterprise. In development, social and environmental assessments can expose costs that markets or governments might otherwise overlook. In constitutional democracies, independent courts, legislatures, media and civil society provide counterweights to concentrated authority. **Good institutions do not abolish power; they make power answerable.**

The same principle must operate beyond national borders. The **Non-Aligned Movement** demonstrated how smaller states could collectively preserve strategic autonomy during the Cold War. Contemporary developing-country coalitions in climate negotiations similarly seek greater voice for those disproportionately affected by global environmental change. International institutions remain imperfect, but they represent humanity's attempt to prevent the strongest from becoming the sole authors of global rules.

The Moral Test of Power

Gandhi's talisman provides perhaps the simplest ethical test. Before exercising authority, one should remember the face of the poorest and most vulnerable person who may bear its consequences. This transforms power from a privilege of command into a responsibility of care. **The measure of leadership is not how much power it can accumulate, but how safely that power can be exercised by those who possess it.**

This principle also deepens the meaning of development. A nation cannot be judged solely by the size of its economy, the strength of its military or the speed of its technological progress. It must also be judged by whether a farmer can survive displacement, whether a child can access opportunity, whether a minority can trust institutions and whether future generations inherit a world capable of sustaining dignified life.

Beyond the Battlefield

Let us return to Kurukshetra after the chariots have fallen silent. The warriors who fought for glory eventually became memories; the ordinary people who survived had to rebuild fields, families and communities. **The battlefield celebrated power, but civilisation was rebuilt by those who had possessed almost none of it.**

That is the enduring warning hidden in the image of fighting elephants. Power will always compete; interests will always collide; ambition will always seek greater ground. The task of civilization is not to eliminate these forces, but to prevent their conflicts from consuming those least able to escape them.

A civilisation is not ultimately measured by how high its elephants rise, but by whether the grass beneath them is allowed to live, grow and reach the sky.

Topic 5: Nature is the symbol of the spirit.

A flock of birds flying thousands of kilometers across continents appears, at first sight, to be merely responding to seasonal changes. Yet the sight of migratory birds evokes something profoundly human—direction, endurance, memory, and an instinctive return to a distant home. Nature thus often speaks a language deeper than its physical appearance. The river symbolises continuity, the mountain evokes steadfastness, the lotus suggests transcendence, and the changing seasons remind us of impermanence and renewal. **Nature becomes the visible vocabulary through which the invisible spirit expresses itself.**

Nature, Spirit and the Meaning of the Statement

The statement acquires depth when its three terms are understood philosophically. **Nature** is the material and living world of which human beings are a part. **Spirit** represents consciousness, values, creativity, moral imagination and the human capacity to seek meaning beyond immediate material existence. A **symbol** is something visible that points towards something deeper and invisible.

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Thus, nature is not merely an external landscape surrounding humanity. Its patterns—interdependence, evolution, adaptation, sacrifice, renewal and transformation—mirror principles that operate within the human spirit. The Upanishadic vision of **“Tat Tvam Asi” - “That thou art”**, captures this interconnectedness: the self is not fundamentally separate from the larger reality. Similarly, Spinoza viewed nature and the divine as inseparable expressions of one reality. Nature, therefore, can be understood not merely as matter but as a field in which existence reveals its deeper unity.

Nature as the Visible Expression of the Invisible Spirit

Human beings have always looked at nature and discovered meanings that exceed its physical form. A **river** does not merely transport water; it becomes a symbol of life's journey—constantly changing yet retaining continuity. A **mountain** represents stability and aspiration because it rises above the ordinary landscape. The **lotus**, rooted in mud yet blooming above the water, has become a powerful metaphor for spiritual elevation without withdrawal from worldly reality.

The same symbolism appears in the behaviour of living organisms. The migration of the Arctic tern across enormous distances represents endurance and orientation. The **Baya weaver bird**, constructing an intricate nest through repeated effort, reveals an astonishing combination of instinct, adaptation and architectural ingenuity. A tiny seed breaking through soil symbolises the latent force of life seeking expression.

Nature therefore provides the human spirit with a vocabulary for understanding itself. As **Wordsworth** found spiritual renewal in landscapes and **Tagore** repeatedly saw nature as a bridge between the finite self and the infinite, the contemplation of nature becomes a journey inward.

Spirit Discovering Itself Through Nature

The relationship, however, is not one-directional. It is not merely that nature expresses the spirit; **the spirit interprets nature and discovers itself through it**. A scientist looking at a star sees physical processes; a poet sees infinity; a farmer sees the rhythm of seasons; a spiritual seeker sees interconnectedness. The object remains the same, but consciousness gives it different layers of meaning.

The night sky inspired ancient civilisations to develop calendars and astronomy, while forests, rivers and mountains became the settings of myths and spiritual traditions. Human beings have converted their encounters with nature into music, poetry, philosophy, religion and art. This suggests that the relationship between nature and spirit is partly **interpretive**. Nature becomes a mirror in which humanity recognises its own aspirations, fears and possibilities. Thoreau's retreat to Walden was not simply a withdrawal into the wilderness; it was an experiment in recovering the self from the distractions of material civilisation. Gandhi's emphasis on simplicity similarly connected restraint in consumption with freedom of the human spirit. Thus, **nature is both landscape and inner landscape**.

Nature and Spirit: A Complementary Relationship

Nature and spirit are not necessarily opposites. Rather, they can be understood as complementary dimensions of existence. Nature provides the **material conditions for life**, while spirit provides the **meaning and ethical direction** with which life is experienced.

The human capacity for reflection itself emerged within nature. The human brain is a product of evolution, yet it has become capable of contemplating evolution. Humanity is therefore nature becoming conscious of itself. This complementarity can be seen in everyday life. Silence in a forest can facilitate introspection; observing ecological interdependence can inspire humility; witnessing regeneration after destruction can generate hope.

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Conversely, the human spirit can transform its relationship with nature through conservation and creativity. A degraded landscape can be restored; a polluted river can be cleaned; traditional ecological knowledge can preserve biodiversity. The relationship therefore becomes: **Nature nourishes the spirit, while the awakened spirit learns to nurture nature.**

Yet Nature Is Not Merely Harmony: The Contradiction

However, romanticising nature would weaken the argument. Nature contains both **cooperation and competition, creation and destruction, beauty and brutality**. The same ecosystem that sustains life also contains predation. A forest fire destroys trees but may release nutrients and enable ecological regeneration. Evolution produces extraordinary diversity but also extinction.

Even cooperation itself has evolutionary complexity. Bees work collectively for the hive, while species compete intensely for resources. Mycorrhizal fungi connect trees underground, demonstrating ecological solidarity, while natural selection simultaneously rewards competition.

This raises a philosophical challenge: **Can nature really be considered a symbol of the moral spirit if nature itself is morally neutral?**

A tiger killing a deer is neither compassionate nor cruel. Those are human moral categories. Therefore, nature should not be treated as a simplistic moral textbook. Rather, **human consciousness interprets nature and draws philosophical insights from it**. Nature may not possess human morality, but contemplating nature can enlarge human morality.

The lesson, therefore, is not that humans should imitate every natural behaviour, but that nature reveals the **complexity, interconnectedness and dynamism of existence**.

Nature Shaping the Evolution of the Human Spirit

Nature has also played a formative role in the development of human consciousness and civilisation. The unpredictability of rainfall encouraged observation and anticipation. Agriculture required patience and collective effort. Rivers became centres of settlement and civilisation. The movement of celestial bodies generated calendars and astronomy. Natural disasters demanded cooperation and institutional responses.

In this sense, civilisation is not simply humanity's victory over nature; it is also **humanity's response to nature**. The earliest agricultural communities had to understand seasons, soil and water. Their rituals and festivals consequently became intertwined with agricultural cycles. India's harvest festivals, for instance, historically reflected ecological rhythms rather than merely religious calendars.

Nature thus shaped not only human bodies through evolution but also human minds through experience, **consciousness into culture and civilization**.

The Spirit's Capacity to Transcend Nature

Yet the human spirit possesses another distinctive quality: it does not merely adapt to nature; it seeks to **transcend limitations**. Humans transformed fire into technology, natural materials into architecture, observations of birds into aerodynamic knowledge, and understanding of disease into modern medicine.

The Wright brothers' fascination with flight emerged from observing birds, while modern biomimicry continues this relationship. Velcro was inspired by the way burrs attach themselves to animal fur; aerodynamic design has repeatedly





drawn lessons from birds and fish. Here, the spirit does not conquer nature blindly—it learns from nature to transcend constraints.

This distinction is important. Human progress should not mean domination of nature, but creative transcendence within ecological limits. The true achievement of the spirit is therefore not to escape nature but to understand it deeply enough to transform without destroying.

When Spirit Becomes Alienated from Nature

Modern civilisation, however, has often weakened this relationship. When nature is viewed merely as a collection of commodities—forest as timber, river as water supply, mountain as mineral reserve—the relationship changes from reverence to extraction.

Consumerism can create a paradox: material abundance increases while inner fulfilment does not necessarily increase. The more nature is externalised as a resource, the more humans may become psychologically alienated from the very environment upon which their existence depends.

The climate crisis illustrates this contradiction. Human intelligence has reached unprecedented levels of technological sophistication, yet humanity is altering the atmospheric and ecological systems that sustain it. The problem is therefore not simply a failure of technology. It is partly a failure of values.

The crisis emerges when the human spirit forgets that it is itself embedded in nature.

Nature as a Moral Test of the Human Spirit

Our treatment of nature consequently becomes a test of our collective consciousness. A civilisation that can restrain present consumption for the sake of people not yet born demonstrates a capacity for moral imagination. A society that protects a forest despite its immediate commercial value recognises that value is not reducible to price.

The Bishnoi tradition offers a striking example. The willingness of communities to protect trees at great personal cost demonstrates how ecological protection can become an expression of ethical conviction. Similarly, sacred groves preserved across parts of India illustrate a cultural idea in which certain natural spaces are protected not because they are immediately profitable but because they possess intrinsic cultural and spiritual significance.

Environmental ethics therefore expands the boundaries of morality—from human-to-human responsibility towards human-to-nature and intergenerational responsibility. The question becomes not merely: “What can nature provide us?” but: “What do we owe to the natural world that sustains us?”

From Domination to Co-evolution

The answer does not lie in rejecting development or romanticising a pre-industrial past. Humanity has legitimate aspirations for health, prosperity, mobility and dignity. The challenge is to reconcile the creative spirit of humanity with the regenerative capacity of nature.

This requires a shift: from exploitation to stewardship, partnership and co-evolution.

Sustainable development, circular economies, renewable energy, ecological restoration and nature-based solutions represent attempts to make this transition practical. Biomimicry provides perhaps the clearest contemporary illustration. Instead of asking how to overpower natural systems, science increasingly asks: How does nature solve problems?

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Termite mounds have inspired passive cooling systems; the structure of lotus leaves has informed self-cleaning surfaces; natural ecosystems inspire circular production models. The modern spirit is thus rediscovering an ancient truth: **sometimes the path to technological advancement lies not in defeating nature but in listening to it.**

The Deeper Synthesis: Nature and Spirit as Two Dimensions of One Whole

Ultimately, nature and spirit should not be placed in rigid opposition.

Nature reflects the spirit: Its resilience, diversity, transformation and interconnectedness provide symbols through which human beings understand themselves. **Nature shapes the spirit:** Human consciousness, culture and civilisation have evolved through continuous interaction with the natural world. **The spirit transforms its relationship with nature:** Through consciousness and ethics, humanity can move from exploitation towards stewardship.

Thus, nature is neither merely an **object outside us** nor merely a **metaphor inside us**. We are simultaneously **products of nature, observers of nature and interpreters of nature.**

The environmental crisis therefore represents something deeper than ecological imbalance. It reveals an imbalance within the human spirit itself—between desire and restraint, power and responsibility, individuality and interconnectedness, progress and humility.

The solution consequently requires not only cleaner technologies and better policies but also a transformation in consciousness.

Conclusion

A migrating bird does not know that its journey will inspire poetry; a river does not consciously symbolise the passage of time; a lotus does not deliberately teach transcendence. Yet human consciousness encounters these phenomena and discovers meanings within them.

That is the extraordinary relationship between nature and spirit. **Nature gives the spirit a world to experience; the spirit gives nature a world of meaning.** The mature civilisation of the future will therefore neither seek to conquer nature nor merely worship it. It will recognise itself as **nature becoming conscious, ethical and responsible.**

As **Tagore's vision of harmony between humanity and the natural world** suggests, freedom does not lie in separation from the larger web of existence, but in finding one's place within it.

In that sense, nature is indeed the symbol of the spirit—not because everything in nature is morally or spiritually perfect, but because in contemplating nature, humanity encounters the deepest questions of existence and, ultimately, itself.

Topic 6: A well-educated mind will always have more questions than answers.

Introduction

"The only true wisdom is in knowing you know nothing." — Socrates

When the Oracle at Delphi declared **Socrates the wisest man in Athens**, the philosopher was perplexed. He knew he possessed little certain knowledge. His eventual insight was simple yet profound: **his wisdom lay in recognising the limits of what he knew.** Intellectual humility, rather than accumulated certainty, became the beginning of his philosophy.

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Socrates' realisation captures the paradox at the heart of education. The uneducated mind may be certain because it sees only the visible shore; the educated mind asks more questions because **education reveals the ocean beyond it**. Genuine learning therefore does not eliminate uncertainty; it makes uncertainty visible and turns ignorance into disciplined inquiry.

True education does not multiply certainty; it deepens awareness of uncertainty. By teaching individuals to question inherited assumptions, test received answers, and revise their judgments, education creates minds that remain intellectually humble without becoming incapable of decisive and responsible action.

The Expanding Coastline

Human knowledge resembles an island surrounded by an immense ocean of the unknown. As the island expands, its coastline of contact with unexplored territory also widens. **Isaac Newton** describing himself as a child playing on the seashore captures this humility. Every meaningful answer moves the boundary of ignorance rather than eliminating it.

The history of science illustrates this progression. Newtonian mechanics explained phenomena that had puzzled humanity for centuries, yet Einstein revealed its limits, while quantum mechanics challenged classical intuitions about reality itself. **Karl Popper** similarly argued that scientific theories remain open to **falsification**. Scientific progress therefore changes not only what humanity knows, but also the questions it is capable of asking.

The Inward Negation of Certainty

Indian philosophical thought mirrors this relentless inquiry through the Upanishadic method of **Neti, Neti "not this, not that."** In the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, truth is approached not by accumulating dogmatic definitions, but by systematically questioning and shedding incomplete perceptions. By deconstructing every premature certainty, the seeker discovers that ultimate wisdom begins where finite answers exhaust themselves before the infinite.

From Schooling to Awakening

"Education is not the learning of facts, but the training of the mind to think." — Albert Einstein

Education becomes meaningful when information is accompanied by curiosity, reflection, and independent reasoning. Memorisation can reproduce an answer, but education should enable a person to ask why it is valid, where it may fail, and how it can be improved. Schooling transfers accumulated knowledge; education teaches the mind how to interrogate it. **John Dewey's emphasis on reflective learning captures this distinction.**

This distinction matters in an examination-oriented society where credentials can sometimes overshadow curiosity. The **National Education Policy 2020** recognises this challenge through its emphasis on critical thinking, experiential learning, and multidisciplinary education. A person may possess degrees, vocabulary, and information yet remain intellectually dependent on authority. The problem is not possessing answers; it begins when answers become unquestionable.

When Tradition Meets a Question

Civilisation advances whenever someone asks an uncomfortable question about something considered normal merely because it has always existed. **Raja Ram Mohan Roy** questioned the acceptance of Sati; **Jyotirao Phule** challenged caste-based exclusion; **Savitribai Phule** confronted restrictions on women's education; and **Dr. B. R. Ambedkar** questioned the moral legitimacy of caste hierarchy. Every social reform begins by asking whether inherited practice remains defensible.

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Questioning tradition does not require contempt for tradition. It requires distinguishing between practices that preserve collective wisdom and customs that preserve inherited injustice. Without such scrutiny, discrimination survives in the name of culture and inequality in the name of social order. The educated mind respects tradition enough to understand it, but possesses enough independence to reform it when justice demands.

The Question Behind Every Discovery

The same intellectual restlessness drives scientific and economic innovation. Every major breakthrough begins by questioning an assumption that others have accepted as inevitable: why must a particular process work this way, why must an existing technology remain dominant, or why must a social problem have only one solution? **Joseph Schumpeter's idea of creative destruction captures how such questioning can transform economic structures.**

India's digital transformation illustrates this spirit. **UPI** challenged the assumption that everyday payments required conventional intermediaries and fragmented systems. **Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI)** subsequently created new possibilities in payments, identity, and welfare delivery. Yet the deeper lesson lies beyond technology: innovation begins when dissatisfaction with the present becomes curiosity about the possible. A well-educated mind does not merely ask what exists; it asks what could exist.

When Power Cannot Be Questioned

An educated society must also ask questions of authority. Democracy survives not because citizens always agree, but because disagreement is given legitimate institutional space. Parliament, elections, judicial review, free expression, the **Right to Information**, and civil society create channels through which public power can be examined. An authority that cannot be questioned gradually begins to mistake its own assumptions for truth.

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's idea of constitutional morality deepens this insight. Constitutional democracy requires institutions and citizens to restrain arbitrary power through constitutional principles rather than majoritarian impulses. **Amartya Sen's emphasis on public reasoning** similarly treats open discussion as central to social choice. Democracy therefore institutionalises the question mark, converting dissent from a threat to governance into a mechanism of accountability.

The Humility of Knowing Nature

Humanity's relationship with nature reveals the cost of believing that our present knowledge is complete. Development models often treated forests, rivers, and the atmosphere as limitless resources and waste sinks. Climate change, biodiversity loss, and water stress have exposed the consequences of that assumption. Nature frequently teaches humanity that ignorance becomes expensive when confidence outruns understanding.

This uncertainty demands not paralysis but intellectual humility. **Sustainable development** and the **precautionary principle** recognise that some ecological consequences may be irreversible. India's constitutional framework reflects this responsibility through **Articles 21, 48A, and 51A(g)**, while **intergenerational equity** asks whether present prosperity unfairly transfers environmental costs to those yet unborn. An educated civilisation asks not only what it can extract, but what consequences it may still fail to understand.

The Question Within

The deepest questions are often directed not toward nature or society, but toward oneself. **Mahatma Gandhi described his life as experiments with truth**, treating moral conviction not as a finished possession but as something tested through experience. His approach demanded continual examination of motives, methods, and consequences. The educated conscience does not merely ask whether others are wrong; it possesses the courage to ask, "Could I be wrong?"

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Such self-questioning creates the foundation of empathy and moral growth. Prejudice often survives because inherited beliefs are never examined, while ethical maturity emerges when individuals subject even comfortable assumptions to scrutiny. Gandhi's experiments with truth illustrate this movement from certainty toward humility. Education becomes moral education when knowledge teaches the individual not merely to judge the world, but also to examine the judge within.

When Machines Have the Answers

The **rise of Artificial Intelligence** gives the quotation a new dimension. Machines can increasingly retrieve information, summarise evidence, and generate plausible answers within seconds. As the cost of obtaining information falls, the scarce human capacity becomes the ability to frame meaningful questions, evaluate context, and exercise judgment. When machines become better at answering, humans must become better at asking.

The deeper questions created by AI are not merely technical. Who should be accountable for an algorithmic decision? When does efficiency become unfairness? Which decisions should remain under human control? Can technological progress justify large-scale displacement or surveillance? Such questions cannot be settled by computation alone. **The future may not suffer from a shortage of answers, but from a shortage of meaningful questions joined to responsible judgment.**

When Questions Become a Prison

Yet the statement should not become an invitation to perpetual doubt. A society that questions everything but decides nothing can become incapable of action. During pandemics, natural disasters, and security crises, governments often must act before complete information is available. Waiting for perfect certainty can itself become irresponsible when delay imposes greater human costs than an imperfect decision.

There is also a difference between **healthy skepticism and nihilistic doubt.** The first asks what evidence supports a claim; the second assumes that no evidence can ever be sufficient. The first strengthens knowledge; the second can nourish conspiracy theories and misinformation. An educated mind questions claims, not reality merely because reality is inconvenient. Its skepticism remains anchored in evidence, logic, and ethical responsibility.

The Discipline of the Question

The mature intellectual follows a continuous cycle: **question, investigate, evaluate, decide, and revise.** This is neither blind certainty nor permanent skepticism. A scientific hypothesis is tested; a policy is evaluated; a constitutional interpretation is debated; a personal belief is examined against experience. The answer is accepted provisionally, with the humility that better evidence may require its modification.

Good governance institutionalises precisely this form of intellectual humility. **Pilot projects, regulatory sandboxes, social audits, and evidence-based policymaking** allow institutions to act while remaining capable of learning. The state, like the educated mind, must possess the courage to decide and the humility to revise. Such flexibility is not weakness; it is protection against the arrogance of assumed infallibility.

Living With Complexity

Education ultimately changes humanity's relationship with uncertainty. The dogmatic mind says, **"I know, therefore I need not question."** The nihilistic mind says, **"Everything is uncertain, therefore nothing can be known."** The educated mind occupies the difficult middle ground: **it recognises what is known, acknowledges what remains uncertain, and uses available evidence to make responsible judgments.**

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This matters because modern problems rarely have single causes or simple solutions. Climate change is environmental, economic, and ethical; poverty concerns income, capabilities, opportunity, and dignity; artificial intelligence is simultaneously technological, legal, and moral. Education does not simplify complexity merely to make it comfortable; it provides the intellectual patience to hold competing truths together while searching for wiser choices.

The Open Page

The wisdom of Socrates began not with an extraordinary answer, but with an honest recognition of the limits of his knowledge. His questions became a lifelong method of inquiry, reminding humanity that certainty without examination can become intellectual arrogance. The empty space beyond every answer is therefore not a deficiency in education; it is the very space in which education continues to live.

A truly educated person questions the world because knowledge is incomplete, questions society because traditions can become unjust, questions authority because power can become arbitrary, questions technology because efficiency is not morality, and questions oneself because conviction can conceal prejudice. Yet questioning must ultimately lead to judgment, and judgment must remain open to correction.

The true purpose of education is to cultivate a mind humble enough to question, rational enough to evaluate, courageous enough to decide, and ethical enough to act. A civilisation that fears questions chooses stagnation, while one that welcomes thoughtful inquiry preserves the possibility of reform. Socrates taught that wisdom begins with recognising ignorance; the well-educated mind carries that wisdom forward by asking the next right question and acting responsibly upon what it learns.

Topic 7: Shelving Hard Decisions Is the Least Ethical Course

Introduction

In the grand court of Hastinapura, King Dhritarashtra repeatedly looked away as ethical norms were violated by his sons. Paralyzed by blind affection and fear of internal conflict, he postponed confronting their growing arrogance and misconduct. His hesitation did not preserve peace; instead, it allowed resentment and injustice to deepen until the conflict culminated in the devastating Kurukshetra war, destroying the very order he sought to preserve.

Dhritarashtra's tragedy illustrates a timeless truth of ethical conduct: evading a difficult decision is itself a consequential choice. When individuals or institutions bury difficult dilemmas beneath procedural delays, political convenience or personal discomfort, problems rarely disappear. Instead, unresolved tensions accumulate, making eventual correction more painful. Shelving a hard decision may preserve comfort in the present, but it can transfer a much greater burden to the future.

Shelving difficult choices can convert manageable challenges into compounding crises; authentic moral leadership therefore requires the courage to confront structural dilemmas through institutional responsibility, constitutional morality and timely, ethical action.

The Moral Anatomy of Omission

Human psychology often treats harmful action as more blameworthy than equally harmful inaction. This tendency, known as omission bias, can make decision-makers believe that doing nothing is morally safer than taking an unpopular decision. Yet when a foreseeable harm can reasonably be prevented, refusing to act is itself a choice. Silence, delay and administrative inaction can therefore carry moral consequences comparable to direct action.





Jean-Paul Sartre's idea of **bad faith** offers a useful ethical lens here. Individuals sometimes pretend that circumstances leave them no meaningful choice, thereby escaping responsibility for decisions they actually make. Similarly, a public authority that repeatedly hides behind procedure, uncertainty or jurisdiction may technically avoid taking a decision but cannot escape responsibility for foreseeable consequences. **Non-decision can become a disguised form of decision.**

The Trap of the Eleventh Hour

At the individual level, this ethical avoidance quietly dismantles personal potential and career trajectories. A professional who repeatedly defers difficult, disciplined choices, such as **upskilling, confronting workplace conflicts, or taking calculated risks**, succumbs to chronic procrastination. Forced into eleventh-hour decisions under acute pressure, they inevitably settle for hurried, compromised outcomes that permanently derail their growth, proving that **self-evasion always extracts a heavy toll.**

Why Hard Decisions Are Shelved

Hard decisions are often postponed because their **costs are immediate while their benefits are distant.** Political leaders may fear electoral backlash, administrators may fear professional consequences, and institutions may prefer the safety of the status quo. Behavioural tendencies such as **loss aversion, status quo bias and diffusion of responsibility** reinforce this reluctance. The result is a preference for temporary comfort even when delay increases long-term costs.

This creates a serious leadership dilemma. Ethical leadership requires accepting reasonable present costs to prevent greater future harm. Whether reforming taxation, restructuring subsidies, regulating emerging technologies or addressing social discrimination, the politically convenient option is not necessarily the morally defensible one. A leader must therefore look beyond immediate popularity and consider **who bears the consequences of postponement,** especially when vulnerable groups possess little influence over present decision-making.

The Administrative Refuge of Procedure

Within public administration, moral avoidance can disguise itself as procedural caution. Files may circulate between departments, committees may repeatedly seek further opinions, and responsibility may be shifted across institutional boundaries. **Procedure is essential when it protects fairness, evidence and accountability, but it becomes unethical when it serves merely as a shield against responsibility.** The distinction lies in whether procedure facilitates a decision or indefinitely prevents one.

Delayed grievance redressal demonstrates the human cost of such inertia. For a powerful citizen, a delayed administrative decision may be an inconvenience; for a pensioner awaiting benefits, a victim seeking justice or a poor family dependent on welfare, delay can become deprivation. Administrative ethics therefore requires not merely procedural correctness but **responsiveness and timeliness.** When delay imposes foreseeable harm, timely action itself becomes an element of justice.

The Social Cost of Postponement

Social injustice often survives because societies postpone confronting uncomfortable questions. Child marriage, gender discrimination, caste-based exclusion and violence against vulnerable groups cannot be eliminated merely through declarations; they require sustained institutional intervention. When enforcement, rehabilitation and social reform are repeatedly delayed, affected individuals lose opportunities that cannot always be recovered later, particularly in **education, health and economic participation.**

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The ethical significance of timely intervention becomes clearer when viewed through the principle of equal dignity. A child denied education today cannot simply recover every lost opportunity decades later. Similarly, delayed action against discrimination allows prejudice to become institutionalised. **For privileged groups, postponement may appear tolerable; for vulnerable communities, it can become lived injustice.** Ethical governance must therefore give greater urgency to harms borne by those with the weakest voice.

Fiscal Procrastination and Intergenerational Justice

Political incentives can encourage governments to defer reforms whose benefits are long-term but whose costs are immediate and visible. Delayed fiscal consolidation, inefficient subsidies or inadequate investment in public infrastructure may offer short-term political comfort while creating larger burdens for future citizens. This raises the question of **intertemporal justice**: should one generation consume resources today while transferring financial and developmental liabilities to those who have no voice in present decisions?

Amartya Sen's capability approach provides an important perspective. Human development depends on expanding people's capabilities through education, nutrition, healthcare and social opportunities. Delayed investment in these areas can create cumulative disadvantages because childhood nutrition, foundational learning and early healthcare involve **time-sensitive developmental opportunities**. Shelving such investments is therefore not merely an economic failure; it can become an ethical failure to protect future capabilities.

The Ecological Debt of Delay

Environmental governance provides perhaps the clearest example of the cost of postponement. For decades, scientific evidence warned about greenhouse gas emissions, ecological degradation and resource depletion, yet transitions were often delayed because immediate economic costs appeared politically difficult. The consequence is that mitigation becomes increasingly expensive while adaptation burdens grow, particularly for poorer communities that contributed comparatively less to historical emissions.

The **precautionary principle** directly addresses this dilemma. Where potential environmental harm is serious or irreversible, lack of complete scientific certainty should not become a justification for postponing preventive action. India's environmental jurisprudence has incorporated principles such as precaution and **intergenerational equity**, including through Vellore Citizens' Welfare Forum v. Union of India. Ethical environmental governance therefore asks whether **present prosperity is being financed by transferring ecological risks to future generations.**

Public Health and Decisions Under Uncertainty

Yet difficult decisions cannot always wait for complete information. The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated that governments often have to act amid scientific uncertainty. Waiting for perfect evidence before implementing preventive measures can allow risks to multiply, while excessively severe measures can create economic and social costs. **Ethical decision-making therefore requires proportionality**: action should be based on the best available evidence while remaining responsive to changing information.

This principle extends beyond pandemics to natural disasters, financial crises and emerging technologies. A responsible decision-maker does not demand certainty that is impossible to obtain, but neither does uncertainty become an excuse for reckless action. The ethical approach is to assess the **magnitude and reversibility of potential harm**, protect vulnerable groups, adopt proportionate measures and establish mechanisms for revision. Responsible action under uncertainty is therefore different from impulsive decision-making.

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When Delay Is Ethical

Not every postponement is unethical. Democratic governance sometimes requires time for consultation, evidence gathering, negotiation and institutional preparation. A government may delay implementing a controversial reform to consult affected communities, a regulator may wait for safety standards before approving a new technology, and a legislature may reconsider a proposal after receiving expert evidence. Such delays can **strengthen justice rather than undermine it.**

The decisive question is therefore not simply, “Was the decision delayed?” but, **“What was the purpose of the delay?”** Ethical delay is evidence-driven, transparent, proportionate and time-bound. It uses time to reduce uncertainty, build consensus or strengthen institutional capacity. Unethical delay, by contrast, merely protects decision-makers from immediate political or personal costs. **Prudence seeks to improve the eventual decision; evasion seeks to avoid responsibility for making it.**

The Ethical Test of Postponement

A useful ethical test can therefore be applied whenever a difficult decision is deferred. Decision-makers must ask whether the delay is reducing or increasing foreseeable harm, whether vulnerable groups are being protected, whether there is a clear timeline for resolution and whether someone remains accountable for the eventual outcome. These questions prevent **“waiting” from becoming an indefinite administrative strategy.**

This framework also distinguishes consultation from buck-passing. Consultation is valuable when it produces better evidence, wider legitimacy or stronger implementation capacity. It becomes unethical when institutions repeatedly seek opinions without moving towards resolution. Similarly, caution is valuable when consequences are irreversible, but it becomes cowardice when leaders use uncertainty merely to avoid political costs. **Ethical governance requires both humility about uncertainty and courage about responsibility.**

The Middle Path of Ethical Action

The tension between reckless haste and indefinite postponement can be understood through the spirit of **Buddha's Middle Path.** Applied metaphorically to governance, it suggests avoiding both extremes: impulsive action without reflection and endless deliberation without decision. The mature process is to identify the problem, examine evidence, evaluate alternatives, decide proportionately, implement the decision and remain willing to correct it when evidence changes.

Modern governance can institutionalise this balance through **pilot projects, phased implementation, sunset clauses and periodic evaluation.** Such mechanisms allow governments to confront difficult problems without pretending that the first policy response will be perfect. They transform decision-making into a learning process. The objective is therefore not to eliminate uncertainty before acting, but to build institutions capable of **acting responsibly while learning continuously from consequences.**

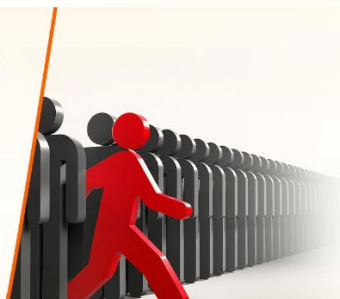
Leadership and the Courage to Decide

Ultimately, hard decisions test the character of leadership. Political popularity, bureaucratic safety and institutional convenience can all encourage avoidance, but ethical leadership requires accepting reasonable present burdens when they prevent greater future suffering. This requires **foresight, courage, empathy and accountability.** Leaders must be willing to explain difficult choices honestly rather than conceal them behind slogans, procedural complexity or temporary compromises.

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The ethical leader therefore does not confuse **decisiveness with haste or patience with avoidance**. Decisiveness means accepting responsibility for a reasoned choice; patience means using time to improve that choice. Both can be ethical when guided by public interest. What becomes unethical is the deliberate refusal to confront foreseeable harm merely because the consequences of action are politically or personally inconvenient.

The Final Accounting of Time

Returning to Hastinapura, Dhritarashtra's tragedy was not merely that he faced difficult choices; it was that he repeatedly avoided confronting wrongdoing because immediate confrontation appeared more painful than continued accommodation. The resulting conflict demonstrated that **problems suppressed by convenience do not disappear; they accumulate beneath the surface**. Time can heal some conflicts, but it can also magnify unresolved injustice.

The ethical value of delay therefore depends upon its **purpose, process and consequences**. When postponement reduces uncertainty, builds consensus and strengthens justice, it is prudence. When it merely protects decision-makers from responsibility, it becomes evasion. The ethical test is not whether a decision was fast, but whether the passage of time made the eventual outcome more just, more informed and less harmful.

Ultimately, ethical leadership means having the courage to bear a reasonable burden today so that a greater burden is not imposed tomorrow. A well-governed society neither rushes blindly nor waits indefinitely. It **deliberates when deliberation improves justice, acts when delay magnifies harm, and remains accountable for both action and inaction**. The true test of leadership is therefore not whether difficult choices can be postponed, but whether we have the courage to confront them when responsibility demands it.

Topic 8: A good leader is one who follows the follower

Introduction

In 1916, Raj Kumar Shukla, an ordinary peasant from Champaran, approached Mahatma Gandhi at the Lucknow Congress session. He wanted Gandhi to see the suffering of indigo farmers under the exploitative tinkathia system. Gandhi initially had other commitments, but Shukla remained persistent and eventually persuaded him to visit Champaran. Gandhi went with him, listened to the peasants, studied their grievances and only then decided how the movement should proceed. The man who was to become the leader of the Champaran movement first allowed himself to be led by an ordinary farmer.

This incident captures the paradox in the statement, **"A good leader is one who follows the follower."** Ordinarily, a leader is expected to show the way while followers walk behind. However, leadership is not merely about giving direction; it is also about understanding the people who are being led. The word "follows" signifies humility, listening, empathy and willingness to learn, while the "follower" represents citizens, employees, students, soldiers or communities whose experiences provide the leader with knowledge and legitimacy. A good leader therefore follows the **aspirations, experiences and legitimate interests** of followers before giving them direction.

Leadership begins by listening

The first meaning of following the follower is the willingness to listen. A leader sitting at the top of an organisation may have authority and broad information, but people at the ground level often possess deeper knowledge of actual problems. A farmer understands the practical difficulties of cultivation better than a policymaker sitting in a capital city. A frontline health worker may understand the barriers to vaccination better than a senior administrator. An employee dealing with customers may notice problems that senior management cannot see.

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Therefore, **listening is not merely a moral virtue**. It is also a source of better decision-making. A leader who listens before deciding can convert scattered experiences into collective wisdom.

The follower knows the road

A leader may know the destination, but followers often know the road. This is particularly important in public administration. A policy designed in the capital may look perfect on paper but encounter difficulties during implementation. A welfare scheme may provide financial assistance, but beneficiaries may struggle with documentation, banking access or digital connectivity.

This is why field visits, social audits and citizen feedback are important. They allow policymakers to learn from the people who experience the policy directly. The principle can be seen in the social audit mechanism under MGNREGA, where local communities participate in examining whether public works, wages and expenditure have actually reached the intended beneficiaries.

The follower therefore becomes not merely a recipient of governance but a **source of accountability and knowledge**.

The wisdom of the frontline

The importance of following followers becomes even clearer in organisations. A senior officer may understand strategy, but a junior employee may understand the practical difficulty of implementing that strategy. A military commander may have the larger operational picture, but soldiers on the ground possess immediate knowledge of terrain and local conditions.

Modern organisations therefore increasingly value decentralised decision-making and bottom-up communication. The best leader creates a system where information can move upward even when instructions move downward. This is particularly important in a rapidly changing world. When information changes quickly, leadership cannot depend entirely on one person's knowledge.

A good leader therefore does not need to have all the answers. The leader needs to create conditions in which **the right answers can emerge from the collective intelligence of the organisation**.

The leader who serves creates stronger followers

Leadership is ultimately about creating capable followers rather than dependent followers. A weak leader may prefer subordinates who never question decisions. A strong leader encourages people to think independently.

This is **particularly important for innovation**. If a junior scientist is afraid to challenge a senior scientist, a technical error may remain hidden. If an employee cannot question a flawed strategy, the organisation may continue making the same mistake.

Therefore, good leadership creates psychological safety, where people can express disagreement without fear. A leader who follows followers in this sense is not surrendering authority. The leader is **sharing intellectual space**.

Gandhi and the art of following before leading

Gandhi's Champaran movement provides a deeper example because he combined following with moral leadership. He followed Raj Kumar Shukla physically to Champaran. He followed the peasants by listening to their experiences. But once he understood their situation, he did not simply follow their anger. He provided a disciplined and non-violent direction to their struggle.

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The distinction became even clearer after the **Chauri Chaura incident in 1922**. When protesters killed policemen, Gandhi suspended the Non-Cooperation Movement even though many political workers opposed the decision. Here, Gandhi demonstrated that a leader must follow the people's aspirations but cannot surrender principles to the temporary emotions of the crowd.

Therefore, good leadership consists of two movements. First, the leader moves towards the people to understand them. Second, the leader moves ahead of them when principles require direction.

The psychological foundation is empathy

A leader cannot follow followers meaningfully without empathy.

Daniel Goleman's work on emotional intelligence highlights empathy as an important component of effective leadership. A leader with empathy attempts to understand how situations appear from another person's perspective. This is especially important during crises.

A manager dealing with an employee's poor performance may see only declining productivity. An empathetic manager may also discover financial stress, family responsibilities or workplace difficulties affecting performance.

Similarly, an administrator dealing with migration may see numbers and statistics, while migrants experience fear, insecurity and uncertainty. Empathy does not mean agreeing with everyone. It means **understanding before judging**. Therefore, following the follower is also an exercise in emotional intelligence.

Education: the teacher must follow the learner

The principle applies naturally to education.

Traditionally, the teacher was considered the sole authority in the classroom. But effective education requires understanding the learner's interests, abilities and difficulties.

A teacher who notices that students are struggling with a concept may change the method of teaching. The teacher continues to lead the classroom but follows the learning needs of students.

This is increasingly important in the digital age. Students have access to vast amounts of information. The teacher's role is therefore shifting from merely providing information to guiding students in understanding, questioning and applying knowledge.

The best teacher follows the learner's curiosity while leading the learner towards deeper understanding.

Business leadership follows the customer

The principle also operates in business.

Companies survive when they understand changing consumer needs. Customer feedback, product testing and market research are institutional forms of following the follower.

The customer may not know how to build a product, but the customer knows whether the product solves a real problem. Similarly, employees often know organisational weaknesses better than senior management because they experience them every day.





A successful organisation therefore creates mechanisms through which customers and employees can influence decisions.

The leader does not surrender the strategic vision. Instead, the leader modifies the path according to the realities discovered through listening.

Thus, business leadership requires both **vision and responsiveness**.

International leadership requires listening to the weaker

The principle extends beyond national boundaries. International institutions often face questions about unequal representation and the dominance of powerful countries. Developing countries argue that global governance must better reflect the interests of the Global South.

India's advocacy for issues such as climate justice, food security, development finance and equitable access to technology reflects this demand for a more representative global order.

In climate negotiations, for example, developed countries may focus strongly on emissions reduction, while developing countries emphasise poverty reduction, historical responsibility and climate finance. A good global leader must listen to both concerns.

Leadership in a diverse world cannot mean imposing one perspective on everyone. It requires **building consensus among different experiences and interests**.

When following becomes populism

However, the statement has an important limitation. A leader who follows followers blindly can become a populist.

Public opinion is not always identical to public interest. Citizens may favour immediate subsidies, but governments must also consider fiscal sustainability. People may resist infrastructure projects because of immediate inconvenience, even when the projects provide long-term benefits. Social media may amplify emotional opinions that are not based on facts.

Therefore, a leader must sometimes disagree with followers.

Gandhi's decision after Chauri Chaura illustrates this. He refused to allow the movement to continue along a violent path even when popular anger was high.

A leader who only follows public opinion becomes a reflection of the crowd. A true leader must sometimes **follow the people to understand them and then lead them beyond their immediate preferences**.

Following the follower does not mean abandoning vision

There is another important qualification. Some transformative leaders succeed precisely because they see possibilities that followers cannot yet imagine.

Steve Jobs often pursued products based on his own vision rather than existing consumer demand. Political leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr. did not merely follow existing public opinion; they sought to transform it by appealing to higher ideals of equality and justice. Therefore, leadership cannot be reduced to responsiveness. A leader must sometimes say:

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“I understand what you want today, but I believe we must work towards something better tomorrow.”

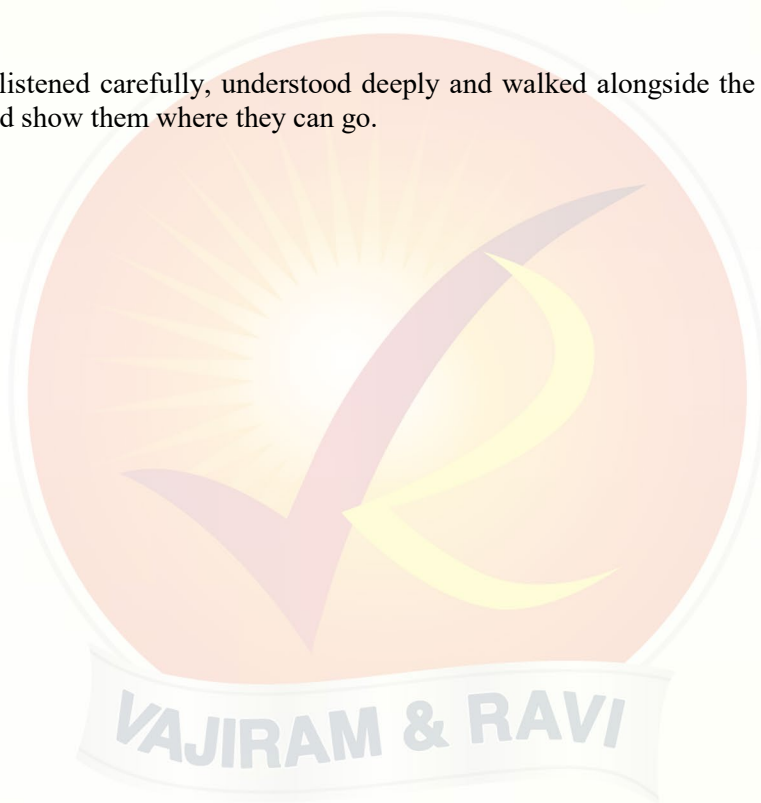
This is where vision becomes important. The leader follows the follower in understanding the present but leads the follower towards the future.

Conclusion: The journey from Champaran

Years after Gandhi first met Raj Kumar Shukla, the peasant from Champaran remained an ordinary man, while Gandhi became one of the world's most recognised leaders. Yet the story began with the leader following the follower. Gandhi did not lose his leadership by listening to Shukla. He discovered the direction of his leadership through him.

This captures the true meaning of the statement, **“A good leader is one who follows the follower.”** The leader must follow the follower's experience, but not blindly follow every demand. The leader must listen to the people, but retain the courage to uphold principles. The leader must understand the present, while possessing the vision to shape the future. A good leader does not always begin by saying, **“Follow me.”** Sometimes the leader begins by asking, **“Show me where the problem is.”**

And when the leader has listened carefully, understood deeply and walked alongside the people, he earns the moral authority to walk ahead and show them where they can go.



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