UPSC MAINS · ANSWER PRACTICE

Essay · Essay

A people that values its privileges above its principles loses both

जो समाज अपने सिद्धांतों से अधिक अपने विशेषाधिकारों को

महत्व देता है, वह दोनों को खो

देता है।

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MARKS

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~1200 words

Answer Hint

Privileges and principles; ethical leadership; constitutional morality; equality and social justice; democracy and accountability; rule of law; corruption and misuse of power; historical examples; individual responsibility; inclusive development; balancing rights with duties

Model Answer

Introduction

Every society faces a fundamental moral choice: whether to protect the privileges enjoyed by a few or uphold the principles that ensure dignity, fairness and justice for all. Privileges may offer immediate advantages, such as power, wealth, status or preferential access to opportunities. Principles, on the other hand, represent enduring commitments to truth, equality, liberty, justice and integrity. When a society places its privileges above these principles, it may gain short-term benefits but gradually undermines the foundations on which its prosperity and stability depend.

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The statement highlights a paradox of social and political life. Privileges are often protected in the name of tradition, security, identity or personal interest. Yet when these advantages are secured at the cost of fairness and ethical conduct, they weaken public trust, encourage resentment and erode institutions. Ultimately, even those who benefit from unjust privileges become vulnerable to the instability they help create.

Body

1. Understanding Privileges and Principles

Privileges are advantages available to individuals or groups because of their position, wealth, family background, social identity or access to authority. Some special entitlements are justified, such as protections for vulnerable groups or additional responsibilities attached to public office. The problem arises when privileges become arbitrary, hereditary or disconnected from legitimate public purposes.

Principles are standards that guide conduct and institutional decision-making. They include honesty, impartiality, equality before the law, respect for human rights and accountability. Principles establish boundaries on the exercise of power and ensure that individual interests do not override the common good.

A society committed to principles does not necessarily reject every privilege. Instead, it evaluates privileges according to fairness, constitutional values and their contribution to public welfare. A society that reverses this order risks transforming legitimate differences into entrenched inequalities.

2. How Privileges Undermine Principles

When privileges are valued above principles, several interconnected problems emerge.

- **Erosion of equality:** Preferential treatment based on wealth, caste, family connections or political influence weakens the idea that every person deserves equal dignity and opportunity.
- **Decline of integrity:** Individuals begin to justify dishonesty, corruption and favouritism whenever these practices protect their personal advantages.
- **Institutional weakening:** Public institutions become instruments for serving powerful interests instead of fulfilling their constitutional responsibilities.

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- **Loss of public trust:** Citizens lose confidence in systems that appear to reward connections rather than merit, fairness or accountability.
- **Social fragmentation:** Groups excluded from opportunities may experience alienation, resentment and a diminished sense of belonging.

Thus, the defence of narrow privileges gradually damages the moral and institutional foundations that make collective prosperity possible.

3. Democracy and the Importance of Constitutional Principles

Democracy is not merely a system of elections; it is a commitment to political equality, civil liberties, accountability and the rule of law. If powerful individuals or groups value their privileges above these principles, democratic institutions can become hollow.

Constitutional government requires public officials to exercise authority within established limits. When leaders manipulate institutions to retain power, disregard legal accountability or suppress legitimate criticism, they weaken democracy itself.

The Indian Constitution provides a framework for preventing such concentration of privilege. Equality before the law under Article 14, the prohibition of discrimination under Article 15, equality of opportunity in public employment under Article 16 and the protection of life and personal liberty under Article 21 express commitments that cannot legitimately be subordinated to arbitrary personal interests.

Constitutional morality requires citizens and institutions to respect these values even when doing so is inconvenient. The strength of democracy lies not in the absence of competing interests but in the ability to resolve conflicts through fair and lawful procedures.

4. Historical Lessons: When Privilege Defeats Principle

History offers numerous examples of societies weakened by the excessive protection of privileged interests.

In pre-revolutionary France, entrenched privileges enjoyed by sections of the clergy and nobility contributed to widespread perceptions of inequality and injustice. The contrast between the advantages of privileged estates and the burdens borne by much of the population fuelled social discontent and helped create the conditions for the French Revolution.

Similarly, apartheid in South Africa institutionalised racial privilege and denied basic rights to the majority population. Although the system

protected the advantages of a minority for decades, it generated profound injustice, international condemnation and lasting social divisions. Its eventual dismantling demonstrated the importance of equality and human dignity.

India's colonial experience also illustrates the consequences of prioritising domination over justice. Colonial policies frequently placed imperial economic and political interests above the welfare and aspirations of Indians. The freedom struggle challenged this arrangement through demands for self-government, civil liberties and equality.

These examples demonstrate that privileges maintained without moral legitimacy may survive temporarily, but they weaken social cohesion and eventually invite resistance.

5. Social Hierarchies and the Challenge of Equality in India

Indian society has historically contained hierarchies based on caste, gender, economic status and social background. In many instances, inherited advantages restricted access to education, occupations, property and public participation.

Social reformers challenged such arrangements by asserting the dignity and equality of individuals. Jyotirao Phule and Savitribai Phule worked to expand educational opportunities, particularly for marginalised communities and women. B. R. Ambedkar challenged caste-based exclusion and emphasised liberty, equality and fraternity as essential foundations of democracy.

Their contributions demonstrate that social progress requires questioning privileges that deny others equal opportunities. At the same time, substantive equality may require targeted support for disadvantaged groups. Constitutional safeguards, reservations and welfare measures seek to address historical and structural barriers rather than perpetuate arbitrary privilege.

The essential distinction is between privileges that preserve unjust dominance and affirmative measures designed to make equality meaningful. A principled society evaluates both through evidence, fairness and constitutional objectives.

6. Corruption and the Misuse of Public Office

Public office is a position of trust, not a personal entitlement. When officials value private benefits above public service, corruption becomes a direct expression of privilege overriding principle.

Bribery, nepotism, favouritism and the misuse of public resources divert opportunities away from deserving citizens. Public contracts may be awarded for personal connections rather than competence, while welfare benefits may fail to reach those for whom they are intended.

Such practices impose economic costs and damage institutional credibility. They also create a cycle in which wealth and influence reinforce one another, making it harder for ordinary citizens to access justice and opportunities.

Ethical governance requires transparency, independent oversight, effective grievance redressal, protection for whistle-blowers and timely accountability. Civil servants must uphold political neutrality, impartiality and integrity, even when pressured by influential individuals.

When public institutions follow principles consistently, citizens are more likely to trust them. That trust is itself a valuable social asset.

7. Economic Inequality and Inclusive Development

Economic privilege becomes especially harmful when it allows a small section of society to influence public policy disproportionately or restrict access to essential opportunities.

Unequal access to quality education, healthcare, credit, technology and decent employment can prevent talented individuals from improving their circumstances. When economic background determines life outcomes more strongly than effort or ability, social mobility declines.

Excessive concentration of wealth may also weaken aggregate demand, intensify social tensions and limit the productive potential of the population. Economic growth becomes less sustainable when its benefits remain inaccessible to large sections of society.

Principle-based development seeks to combine enterprise with social responsibility. Progressive and fair taxation, accessible public services, equal opportunity, skill development and transparent regulation can help broaden participation in economic growth.

The objective is not to penalise achievement or deny legitimate rewards for effort. It is to ensure that prosperity does not depend on exclusion, exploitation or privileged access to public resources.

8. Individual Ethics and the Responsibility of Citizens

The relationship between privileges and principles extends beyond governments and institutions. Individuals also face choices between

personal convenience and ethical responsibility.

A person may use personal connections to bypass a queue, seek unfair academic advantages, evade taxes or secure employment through nepotism. Each act may appear insignificant, but widespread acceptance of such behaviour normalises the idea that rules apply only to the less powerful.

Conversely, citizens who refuse bribery, respect public property, treat others fairly and hold institutions accountable strengthen the culture of integrity.

Principled conduct does not require individuals to abandon their legitimate rights. It requires them to exercise those rights without denying the dignity and rights of others.

A healthy society therefore depends on both ethical institutions and responsible citizens. Laws can discourage misconduct, but lasting change also requires values that encourage fairness even when wrongdoing might go undetected.

9. Principles Must Be Practical, Not Merely Idealistic

Although principles are essential, they should not be treated as abstract slogans detached from social realities. A society must carefully distinguish between legitimate entitlements, necessary protections and unjust privileges.

For example, constitutional protections for vulnerable communities help address unequal starting conditions. Special arrangements for persons with disabilities may be necessary to ensure meaningful participation. Similarly, public servants may receive certain service-related benefits to enable them to perform their duties effectively.

Such arrangements do not automatically violate equality. They become problematic when they lack legitimate justification, become disproportionate or serve private interests rather than public purposes.

Principles must therefore be interpreted through reason, evidence and democratic deliberation. The objective is not uniform treatment in every circumstance, but fair treatment consistent with dignity, justice and legitimate public goals.

10. Rebuilding Trust Through a Principle-Centred Society

A society can prevent the domination of privilege by strengthening institutions and encouraging ethical public behaviour.

- **Rule of law:** Apply laws impartially, regardless of wealth, status or political influence.
- **Transparency:** Make public decisions, procurement processes and the use of public funds open to scrutiny.
- **Accountability:** Ensure that misconduct has proportionate and timely consequences.
- **Equal opportunity:** Improve access to education, healthcare, employment and justice.
- **Ethical education:** Promote constitutional values, empathy, honesty and civic responsibility.
- **Democratic participation:** Enable citizens to question authority and participate meaningfully in decision-making.

These measures can help transform principles from declarations into everyday practice. They also protect legitimate individual freedoms by ensuring that no person or group can exercise unchecked power over others.

Conclusion

A people that values its privileges above its principles ultimately weakens the very foundations that sustain its advantages. Unchecked privilege erodes equality, encourages corruption, undermines institutions and creates social divisions. The resulting loss of trust and stability eventually threatens both the privileged and the disadvantaged.

Principles, by contrast, provide the moral and institutional framework through which societies can resolve conflicts, distribute opportunities fairly and preserve human dignity. India's constitutional vision of justice, liberty, equality and fraternity offers a durable guide for balancing individual interests with collective welfare.

The true measure of a progressive society is not how successfully it protects the advantages of a few, but how fairly it creates opportunities and safeguards the rights of all. Privileges may provide temporary power, but principles create lasting legitimacy. A society that places justice above convenience and integrity above personal gain is better equipped to preserve both its freedoms and its future.