UPSC MAINS · ANSWER PRACTICE

Essay · Essay

When two elephants fight, it is the grass that gets trampled.

जब दो हाथी लड़ते हैं, तब घास ही रौंदी जाती है ।

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SUBJECT

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MARKS

125

WORD LIMIT

~1200 words

Answer Hint

Powerful actors may pursue conflict while weaker sections bear disproportionate costs; examine the proverb through individual relationships, society, politics, economy, international relations and environment; distinguish legitimate competition from destructive conflict; emphasise dialogue, institutional checks, justice and protection of vulnerable stakeholders

Model Answer

Introduction

The proverb “When two elephants fight, it is the grass that gets trampled” captures a fundamental irony of power: those who possess the greatest strength may initiate or sustain a conflict, while those with the least power often suffer its greatest consequences. The elephants symbolise powerful individuals, institutions, corporations or nations, while the grass represents ordinary citizens, vulnerable communities and weaker stakeholders.

The proverb therefore raises an important ethical question: Who bears the cost when the powerful compete?

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Understanding the Metaphor

The strength of the elephants gives them the ability to fight, but the grass has neither the power to influence the conflict nor the ability to escape its consequences. The metaphor highlights three realities—**power asymmetry, unintended consequences and vulnerability**.

However, the proverb should not be interpreted to mean that every conflict between powerful actors inevitably harms the weak. Strong institutions, democratic safeguards and negotiated settlements can prevent such collateral damage.

The real lesson is that power must be accompanied by **responsibility and restraint**.

Individual Life: Conflict Within Families and Organisations

Even at the individual level, power struggles can affect innocent people.

When parents engage in prolonged conflict, children may experience emotional insecurity despite having no role in the dispute. Similarly, when two senior executives compete for organisational control, junior employees may face uncertainty, workplace hostility or loss of opportunities.

Thus, responsible leadership requires separating **personal rivalry from institutional or familial welfare**.

A mature person understands that winning an argument or defeating a rival may become meaningless if the relationship or institution itself is damaged.

Society: The Vulnerable Bear Disproportionate Costs

Social conflicts often demonstrate the same principle.

When powerful social groups compete for influence, marginalised communities may experience displacement, discrimination or insecurity. Economic disputes between influential groups can affect workers and consumers who possess little bargaining power.

This creates an ethical obligation to ensure that conflicts are resolved without transferring their costs to vulnerable populations.

Social justice therefore requires **voice, representation and protection for weaker stakeholders**.

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Politics and Governance

Democratic politics inevitably involves competition. Political parties, interest groups and institutions may disagree over policies and power. Such competition can be healthy when it occurs within constitutional boundaries.

The problem arises when political rivalry becomes so intense that **public welfare becomes secondary to the struggle for power**.

If institutions are weakened for short-term political advantage, citizens ultimately suffer through poor governance, policy instability and declining institutional trust.

Constitutional institutions, judicial review, parliamentary scrutiny, independent oversight and a free media can act as safeguards against this transfer of political conflict to ordinary citizens.

Good governance therefore requires **competition without destruction and power without arbitrariness**.

Economy: Corporate and Market Power

The economic sphere also contains powerful “elephants.”

Large corporations competing for market dominance may engage in aggressive pricing, acquisitions or technological races. While competition can benefit consumers, excessive concentration of economic power may harm small businesses, workers and consumers.

Similarly, trade disputes between major economies can affect developing countries through disrupted supply chains, commodity-price fluctuations and reduced investment.

The lesson is not to eliminate competition but to ensure **fair competition with adequate regulatory safeguards**.

Antitrust regulation, labour protection, consumer rights and transparent markets can prevent the weakest participants from becoming collateral damage.

International Relations: Great-Power Rivalry

The proverb becomes particularly relevant to international relations.

When major powers compete militarily or strategically, smaller states and ordinary populations can bear significant costs. Proxy conflicts, economic sanctions, disrupted trade and refugee flows can extend the consequences

far beyond the principal competitors.

The two World Wars demonstrated how conflicts involving powerful states can produce enormous human suffering among civilians.

Even contemporary geopolitical competition can affect food, energy and economic security across countries that are not directly involved.

Hence, diplomacy, multilateral institutions, confidence-building measures and international law are essential to ensure that great-power rivalry does not become a burden imposed upon weaker nations.

War and Peace

The proverb is most directly visible in war.

Decision-makers may initiate military action for strategic objectives, but civilians often face destruction of homes, loss of livelihoods, displacement and humanitarian crises.

This raises the ethical principle of **distinction and proportionality**: even during conflict, civilian life must be protected as far as possible.

A responsible state must therefore consider not merely whether it can win a conflict but **what human cost that victory will impose**.

The true measure of power is not only the capacity to defeat an opponent but also the ability to exercise restraint.

Environment: Nature as the Grass

The “grass” can also represent nature.

Powerful economic interests may compete for land, minerals, forests and water. Industrial expansion may generate employment and growth while imposing environmental costs on local communities.

In such situations, forests, rivers, biodiversity and vulnerable populations can become the “grass” trampled by competing economic interests.

Environmental impact assessments, community participation, sustainable resource management and the **polluter-pays principle** can help reconcile development with ecological protection.

The idea of sustainable development is essentially an attempt to ensure that present competition for resources does not destroy the interests of future generations.

Science and Technology

Technological competition between powerful corporations and nations can produce similar consequences.

The race for artificial intelligence, semiconductor technology, biotechnology and data can generate innovation and economic benefits. However, it can also create risks involving privacy, misinformation, job displacement, cyber insecurity and unequal access.

If technological development is driven exclusively by competition, society may become the unintended “grass.”

Therefore, **ethical innovation** requires safety standards, accountability, transparency and human-centred technological development.

The Paradox of Power

The proverb also contains a deeper paradox: **the powerful may win the conflict but still damage the ecosystem in which they themselves exist.**

A political institution weakened by constant rivalry eventually becomes less capable of governing. A corporation that destroys consumer trust harms its own long-term market position. A nation that destabilises its neighbourhood may ultimately face insecurity itself.

Thus, protecting the “grass” is not merely an act of compassion. It is also an enlightened recognition of **interdependence**.

From Power Struggle to Responsible Power

The solution is not to eliminate differences or competition. Competition can generate innovation, accountability and progress.

The objective should instead be to **institutionalise competition**.

Strong institutions can ensure that powerful actors operate within rules. Independent regulators can control economic concentration. Democratic institutions can manage political disagreements. International organisations can facilitate diplomatic settlements. Civil society can give vulnerable groups a voice.

Most importantly, decision-makers must internalise the principle that **power creates responsibility**.

The Role of Ethical Leadership

Ethical leadership transforms the meaning of strength.

A powerful leader who humiliates weaker opponents demonstrates domination. A powerful leader who exercises restraint demonstrates character.

Mahatma Gandhi's philosophy of non-violence illustrates that moral authority can challenge physical or institutional power. Similarly, democratic leadership requires persuasion rather than coercion wherever possible.

The strongest actor is therefore not necessarily the one capable of inflicting the greatest damage, but the one capable of **choosing restraint despite possessing the power to harm**.

Conclusion

“When two elephants fight, it is the grass that gets trampled” is ultimately a warning against irresponsible power. Conflicts between powerful individuals, institutions, corporations or nations often impose disproportionate costs upon those who have the least ability to protect themselves.

Yet the proverb also provides a blueprint for better governance. **Power must be restrained by ethics, competition by rules, authority by accountability and conflict by dialogue.**

A just society is not one in which powerful actors never disagree; it is one in which their disagreements do not turn the vulnerable into collateral damage.

The true test of power, therefore, is not **how forcefully one can defeat another**, but **how responsibly one can exercise strength without trampling those who stand beneath it**.

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