UPSC MAINS · ANSWER PRACTICE

Essay · Essay

Nearly all men can stand adversity, but to test the

character, give him power.
लगभग सभी मनुष्य प्रतिकूल

परिस्थितियों का सामना कर सकते

हैं, लेकिन किसी व्यक्ति के
चरित्र के परीक्षण के लिए, उसे

शक्ति प्रदान करके देखिए।

EXAM YEAR

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Essay

SUBJECT

Essay

MARKS

125

WORD LIMIT

~1200 words

Answer Hint

Adversity tests endurance while power tests restraint and moral responsibility; examine how authority can reveal integrity, humility or corruption; connect power with leadership, governance, institutions, wealth and social influence; discuss checks and balances, accountability and ethical use of authority; argue that true character lies in how power is exercised when one has the freedom to act without immediate consequences.

Model Answer

Introduction

Adversity tests a person's ability to endure hardship, but power presents a subtler and more revealing test: what does a person do when he has the authority to act according to his own will? A person facing adversity may be compelled by circumstances to remain disciplined, whereas power gives greater freedom to reveal one's values. Hence, power can expose humility or arrogance, justice or favouritism, service or exploitation.

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Body

Adversity Tests Endurance, Power Tests Character

Adversity often brings out courage, resilience and perseverance. A person struggling against poverty, failure or crisis may demonstrate remarkable strength because circumstances leave limited alternatives.

Power is different. It expands choices.

A powerful individual can choose whether to:

- use authority for public welfare or personal gain;
- listen to criticism or suppress dissent;
- respect institutions or manipulate them;
- treat people with dignity or exploit their vulnerability.

Thus, **adversity tests what a person can endure, while power tests what a person chooses to become.**

Power as a Mirror of Character

Power does not necessarily corrupt every individual, but it can amplify existing values and weaknesses. A person guided by integrity may use power to protect the vulnerable, strengthen institutions and uphold justice. Conversely, an individual driven by ego, greed or insecurity may use authority for personal enrichment or domination.

History provides examples of leaders who exercised extraordinary power with restraint and compassion, as well as rulers whose unchecked authority resulted in oppression.

The difference lies not merely in possessing power but in recognising that **authority is a responsibility rather than a privilege**.

Political and Administrative Power

The relevance of the statement is particularly strong in public administration. Civil servants exercise powers that directly affect citizens' lives.

A district administrator may have the authority to acquire land, regulate businesses, impose restrictions or allocate public resources. The ethical question is whether such powers are exercised:

arbitrarily or according to law;

for personal convenience or public interest;

with fear or with empathy;

with secrecy or with accountability.

The principle of constitutional governance is therefore important because even well-intentioned individuals should not possess unlimited power.

Democratic Institutions and Checks on Power

Modern democracy recognises that concentrating excessive power in one individual or institution creates risks of abuse. Separation of powers, judicial review, legislative oversight, elections, transparency, media scrutiny and an independent civil service create institutional restraints.

These mechanisms do not assume that every person in power is immoral. Rather, they recognise a fundamental principle:

Good governance should not depend entirely on the goodness of individuals.

Institutions must make ethical behaviour easier and misuse of power more difficult.

Power Beyond Government

The statement applies equally to economic and social power.

A corporate leader may determine the working conditions of thousands of employees. A wealthy individual may influence opportunities available to others. A teacher possesses intellectual authority over students. A parent exercises authority over children.

In each case, character is revealed through the treatment of those who possess less power.

A powerful person who remains accessible, listens to criticism and protects weaker stakeholders demonstrates ethical maturity. Power accompanied by humility creates trust; power accompanied by arrogance creates fear.

Power and the Indian Ethical Tradition

Indian philosophical traditions have repeatedly connected authority with **dharma and responsibility**. The idea of *Raj Dharma* emphasises that rulers exist for the welfare of society rather than for personal enjoyment of authority.

The principle of **Lokasangraha** in the Bhagavad Gita similarly emphasises action directed towards the welfare and stability of society.

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Thus, legitimate power is not simply the capacity to command. It is the capacity to **serve, protect and create conditions in which others can flourish**.

The Role of Accountability

Ethical character should be supported by institutional mechanisms.

Transparency discourages arbitrary decision-making.

Accountability ensures that authority has consequences when misused.

Rule of law prevents individuals from becoming superior to institutions.

Whistle-blower protection enables wrongdoing to be reported.

Independent oversight provides checks against concentration of authority.

Ethical education helps individuals understand that power carries obligations towards others.

These mechanisms convert personal morality into institutional integrity.

Power and Self-Restraint

The highest test of power is perhaps the ability to **refrain from using power when using it would be unnecessary or unjust**.

A powerful person may win an argument through authority but choose persuasion. A government may possess coercive capacity but prefer dialogue where possible. A manager may punish an employee but choose correction and rehabilitation when circumstances permit.

Such restraint does not represent weakness. It represents confidence governed by ethics.

Conclusion

The quotation reminds us that **character is most clearly revealed when external constraints become weaker and personal choice becomes stronger**. Adversity may demonstrate courage, but power reveals one's relationship with responsibility, temptation and the vulnerable.

Therefore, the true measure of power is not how much authority a person possesses, but **how responsibly he uses it when he could act otherwise**. Ethical leadership transforms power from an instrument of domination into an instrument of service. In a democracy, the ideal is not

merely powerful individuals but **powerful institutions guided by constitutional morality, accountability and human dignity**.

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