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Q4(a)

Do you think that the Buddhist traditions have lent greater ethical foundation to the ancient Indian political thought? Give your arguments

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2021 · PSIR GS 1 · 20 marks · Indian Political Thought

Indian Political Thought: Dharmashastra, Arthashastra and Buddhist traditions; Sir Syed Ahmed Khan, Sri Aurobindo, M.K. Gandhi, B.R. Ambedkar, M.N. Roy.

Core demand of the question

- Do you think that the Buddhist traditions have lent greater ethical foundation to the ancient Indian political thought? Give your arguments. (20 marks)

Revision summary

Buddhist political ethic centres ahimsa, restraint of craving, and a righteous king.

Ashoka's dhamma after Kalinga is the working Indian case of that ethic as policy.

Kautilya's Arthashastra is a parallel science of danda and treasury, morally thinner on universal non-injury.

Dharmashastra often ties the king to varna order; Buddhism judges the king by harm to all beings.

The greater ethical foundation is true of the Buddhist-Ashokan stream, not of every ancient text.

Introduction

Ancient Indian political thought is not only **Kautilya's** reason of state. Buddhist traditions supplied an ethic of non-injury, restraint of the king, and public welfare that **Ashoka's** dhamma made into imperial policy. That is a greater ethical foundation in one important stream, not a monopoly of all ancient thought.

Body

What Buddhist ethics brought

- The **Buddha's** teaching centres dukkha, craving, and ahimsa. Political violence is a moral problem, not only a technique.
- The **chakravartin** ideal is a righteous wheel-turning king who conquers by dhamma more than by the sword.
- Sangha rules modelled a disciplined community with debate, which is an ethic of collective self-restraint.
- Compassion toward subjects, animals, and conquered peoples is a public virtue, not a private monk's hobby.

Ashoka as the political case

- After Kalinga, the edicts turn conquest into remorse and into dhamma as a civic teaching: kindness, truthfulness, and respect among sects.
- **Dhamma-mahamattas** are officers of moral policy. This is state ethic, not only forest philosophy.
- Religious plurality in the edicts is an ancient argument for a public morality above one cult.
- Compared with a pure matsya-nyaya (big fish eat small fish) picture, **Ashoka** is the ethical counter-text.

Kautilya and Brahmanical statecraft

- **Kautilya's Arthashastra** is sophisticated: spies, treasury, and danda. Ethics is present as yogakshema, but success of the kingdom is the test.
- Dharmashastra ranks duties by varna and stage of life. Political right is often the king's protection of that order.
- Buddhist thought does not abolish kingship. It judges the king by harm, craving, and care for all beings, which cuts against a closed varna ethic.
- So "greater ethical foundation" is fair if the comparison is with unrestrained danda-niti. It is unfair if it pretends **Kautilya** had no moral vocabulary.

Arguments, not romance

- **Yes:** Buddhist traditions lent a universal ethic of restraint and welfare that **Ashoka** institutionalised, and that later Indian public talk of ahimsa still cites, including **Gandhi**.
- **Yes:** they challenged sacrifice-centred and caste-closed foundations of political obligation.
- **No, not alone:** republican gana-sanghas, Ashokan borrowings from older dharma, and even **Kautilya's** idea of a king's duty to the distressed are also ethical.
- **No, not complete:** Buddhist kings still waged war; the sangha could become an establishment. Ethic is a foundation, not a guarantee.
- **Habermas's** later deliberative ethic is a modern cousin of sangha debate, not a copy. The ancient gift is the publicness of non-injury.

Verdict

- Buddhist traditions did lend a greater, more universal ethical floor to one major current of ancient Indian political thought, visible in **Ashoka's** dhamma.
- Ancient Indian political thought as a whole remains a conversation among dhamma, danda, and dharma, not a Buddhist monopoly.

Flow diagram

Buddhist ethic -> Ahimsa and dhamma
 Ahimsa and dhamma -> Ashoka edicts
 Kautilya -> Danda and arthashastra
 Ashoka edicts -> Public ethical foundation
 Danda and arthashastra -> Reason of state

Conclusion

Buddhist traditions gave ancient Indian political thought a stronger ethic of non-injury, royal self-restraint, and welfare, which **Ashoka's** dhamma made imperial. **Kautilya** remains the science of power. The greater ethical foundation is real for that Buddhist-Ashokan current, not a erasure of the rest of the archive.

Facts & figures

Ashokan edicts

Inscriptions that recast imperial rule as dhamma after the Kalinga war.

Dhamma-mahamattas

Officers charged with spreading and overseeing dhamma in **Ashoka's** administration.

Arthashastra

Kautilya's treatise on the king's power, economy, and coercion.

Chakravartin

The Buddhist ideal of a wheel-turning righteous monarch.

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