

Austerity as civilisational responsibility: Lessons from Ancient Bharat

The Prime Minister of India made a patriotic call for austerity measures for the citizens amid heightened global uncertainty. It is now the citizens' duty in national interest to follow this for the larger and greater good of the nation.

In ancient Bharat, too, there were austerity measures suggested by the state: not as impositions of hardship, but as expressions of Dharmic responsibility, collective wisdom and civilisational maturity. The idea that the citizens must voluntarily restrain consumption during calamity or adversity is, in fact, among the oldest crisis management mechanisms of Indian statecraft.



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times, even ordinarily impermissible actions may be undertaken for sustenance, thereby reflecting that austerity and adaptive conservation are not punishments but pragmatic and Dharmic responses to extraordinary circumstances.

Grains, Gold and the Sacred Duty of Conservation

The hoarding of grain and gold during public crises was expressly condemned in the ancient Indian textual universe. The *Arthashastra* (*Adhikarana* IV, Chapter 2) articulates punishment for those who withheld essential commodities during scarcity, while simultaneously encouraging the populace to contribute voluntarily to public granaries.

Gold (*Suvarna*) in ancient Bharat held an irreplaceable economic role, much as foreign exchange does today. Royal edicts and treatises alike warned against the unproductive accumulation of gold during emergencies. Resources that could sustain the war-chest, feed armies or support public works were not to be locked away in personal coffers when the realm faced external threat.

The Powerful Voice of the Texts

The philosophical underpinning of austerity in ancient Bharat is most powerfully captured in this verse from the *Manusmriti* (11.234), which underlines the virtue of austerity (*Tapa*) as the foundation of strength and *Dharma*:

तपोमूलमिदं सर्वं दैवमानुषकं सुखम् ।
तपसा पूयते सर्वं तपसा प्राप्यते फलम् ॥

"Austerity is the root of all happiness, both divine and human. Everything is purified by austerity, and through austerity one attains all fruits."

The concept of *Tapa* (austerity or disciplined self-restraint) here is not limited to the ascetic in the forest; it is presented as a civic and social virtue that is accessible to and expected of every person. Voluntary restraint of the body and its appetites, in the service of a higher ethical goal, is precisely the spirit behind the clarion call.

The second verse comes from the *Arthashastra* about Kautilya's foundational maxim on the relationship between treasury and national power (*Adhikarana* II, Chapter 8):

कोशमूलो दण्डः ।

"Treasury is the backbone of administration."

This profound aphorism conveys that all state power - military strength, administrative

THE PRIME MINISTER'S CLARION CALL FOR AUSTERITY MEASURES IS A SINCERE AND HONEST EFFORT FOR THE FUTURE PROSPERITY OF THE NATION AND THE WELFARE OF ALL INDIANS

capability and the capacity to protect citizens - flows from a healthy national treasury. A nation that conserves its resources safeguards its sovereignty. Citizenry who execute the call to reduce fuel consumption, avoid unnecessary imports and forgo non-essential luxuries are, in Kautilya's scheme, directly sustaining the foundations of national power.

The Ideal of *Samashti*: Collective Welfare over Individual Desire

Ultimately, the ancient Indian worldview did not regard austerity as deprivation but as the highest expression of *Samashti* consciousness, i.e. the awareness that the individual is embedded in and responsible to the collective. The *Rig Veda* speaks of *Samgachhadhvam* ("let us move together") as the foundational principle of civilised community life. From that vantage point, voluntary restraint during crisis was never seen as a sacrifice alone, but as a *Yajna*: an offering to the nation's fire.

From Kautilya's precise codes of conduct to the Gita's exhortation of *Tapa* as civic virtue, ancient Bharat bequeathed to its civilisational inheritors a rich and nuanced perspective of state-guided, *Dharma*-rooted austerity. The Prime Minister's call today stands in direct continuity with ancient Indian wisdom. It is not a novel inconvenience but an ancient duty, reawakened. For a civilisation that has always understood that true strength lies not in what one consumes but in what one is willing to conserve, the path forward is clear: *Mitavyayita*, i.e. measured and purposeful restraint. It is because of this that we are today the world's fastest-growing economy.

As good citizens, we must ensure and follow the Prime Minister's appeal, just as we voluntarily followed the lockdown and COVID protocols, united in spirit and solidarity towards the well-being and protection of one and all. The Prime Minister's clarion call is, hence, a sincere and honest effort for the future prosperity of the nation and the welfare of all Indians.

Fable with Moral

The Cobra and the Crows

Panchatantra (*Mitra bheda*)

There was a big banyan tree where a crow couple had made a nest. In the hollow of the same tree, lived a black cobra. The crows lived in constant fear because the black cobra would climb up the tree and eat the newborns, whenever the female crow hatched her eggs. They were helpless as they could do nothing to save them.



The crows sought advice of a jackal, who lived in the nearby banyan tree. Narrating their woes, they said, "dear friend, It has become dangerous to live here. Please tell us a way to prevent our babies from being eaten up by the wicked black cobra." The jackal replied that even powerful enemies could be overcome with the use of wit. On hearing this, the crows requested the jackal to help them to eliminate this wicked cobra.

The jackal told them a plan. He asked them to fly into the capital of the kingdom, not far in terms of distance and visit the house of someone who was wealthy and also careless. He instructed them to observe if something valuable was lying around. If so, they were asked to pick it up when the servants were watching and fly back slowly to ensure that the servants could follow them. "Return to your tree and drop it in the hollow of the tree where the cobra lives. When the servants reach and see it, they will kill the cobra," added the jackal.

The crows accepted the jackal's advice and flew off immediately according to his plan. As they flew above the

capital, the female crow noticed wealthy women swimming in a lake. They had left gold and pearl necklaces on the banks of the lake, which were being guarded by royal servants.

At once the female crow swooped down, and picked up a big necklace in her beak, and started flying slowly. When the royal servants noticed her, they picked up sticks and stones, and started throwing at her. They ran to chase her.

As per the plot, she dropped the necklace in front of the hollow of the tree, where the black cobra was asleep. She sat on one of the branches for the royal servants to notice.

When the royal servants arrived, the black cobra came out of the hollow of the tree to see what all the noise was about. The black cobra confronted the king's servants, but the servants attacked the cobra with sticks and stones to recover the necklace.

They killed the wicked cobra and returned with the necklace. The crows having got rid of the cobra, lived happily ever after.

Moral of the Fable: Intelligence overcomes might

Did you know?

Centuries before modern trade agreements, Manipur served as India's overland gateway to Southeast Asia. As early as 200 BCE, a branch of the ancient Southwest Silk Road, known as the Shuyanduo Dao, passed through Manipur's hills, followed the Chindwin River into Myanmar, and connected with markets across the Far East. The Imphal Valley functioned as a major commercial and production hub supporting regional and international trade. Chinese merchants transported raw silk, Sichuan textiles, and ironware, while local goods such as malabathrum, wax, ivory, and ponies were widely exchanged. Today, the border town of



Moreh serves as India's key land port, linking trade across India, Myanmar, China, and Thailand, and continuing the historic Southwest Silk Road corridor. Now, under India's Act East Policy, the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway is restoring Manipur's ancient role as a gateway between South and Southeast Asia.

Wisdom Word Search

K G N L A L L U P T K L S
I E A L I B O J A H A A T
Y L I Q L C I M E A P L H
Q U A T A J L W I B K O A
M P M D H J A I E A P N B
A A J S S E L Q N K O I A
M O T N E P L K A L T T K
A J M W T L I O S U L I S
L K Q N G C H J K P L K E
T S E L P H A M A S D N L
I W J S H N S L B I U G G
S E N M I T L O N O I W X

WORDS TO FIND

Keithel, Lallup, Lalon Itik, Mamal, Sel, Selpham, Senmitlon, Thabak Sel, Thabklup, Yumsel

KEITHEL - Market; a place of trade and social exchange where goods and services circulate within the community.
LALLUP - Traditional Labour Tax/Service System; a historical institution of compulsory state service that structured labour and economic organization in pre-colonial Manipur.
LALON ITIK - Business; the practice of trade, enterprise, and organized commercial activity.
MAMAL - Price/Cost; the value assigned to goods or services in exchange.
SEL - Money; a medium of exchange and measure of value in economic transactions.
SELPHAM - Treasury; the repository or institution responsible for managing public wealth and revenue.
SENMITLON - Economy; the system through which wealth, resources, labour, and exchange are organized within society.
THABAK SEL - Wage; remuneration received in return for labour or service rendered.
THABAKLUP - Workers' Group; an organized collective of labourers formed for shared work and mutual support.
YUMSEL - Domestic Income; the earnings or economic resources generated within a household.

Note: These terms come from Manipuri, one of India's 22 Scheduled Languages.

Marvels of India

HARAPPAN URBAN COMMERCE

The Harappan urban commerce was the world's first planned economy.

Cities as Commercial Engines
The economy of the Sindhu-Saraswati civilisation thrived on agriculture, crafts and trade, built on the surplus produced by peasants. Well-planned urban centres like Mohenjo-daro and Harappa served as major trade hubs with advanced infrastructure, including warehouses and docks.



Standardised Weights: World's First Trade Regulation
Standardised weights and seals testify to an elaborate economic structure supporting trade, with direct Mesopotamian commerce peaking between 2400 and 2000 BCE. The Harappans developed the first accurate system of standardised weights and measures, some of which were as precise as 1.6 mm.

Maritime Trade and Lothal's Dockyard
Papers in the *Journal of Archaeological Science* and the *Journal of Maritime Archaeology* by Gupta, Prabhakar and Jain have established the existence of the dockyard at Lothal. The brick-lined basin, over 200 m. long, confirms Lothal's role in Harappan interregional and maritime trade.

International Commerce
Harappan seals and cubical weights found at Mesopotamian sites like Ur and Kish attest to the presence of Harappan merchants in Mesopotamia. Cotton, first cultivated in the Sindhu-Saraswati valley, was traded as raw fibre and woven textiles, thereby linking the Harappans to an expansive commercial circuit.

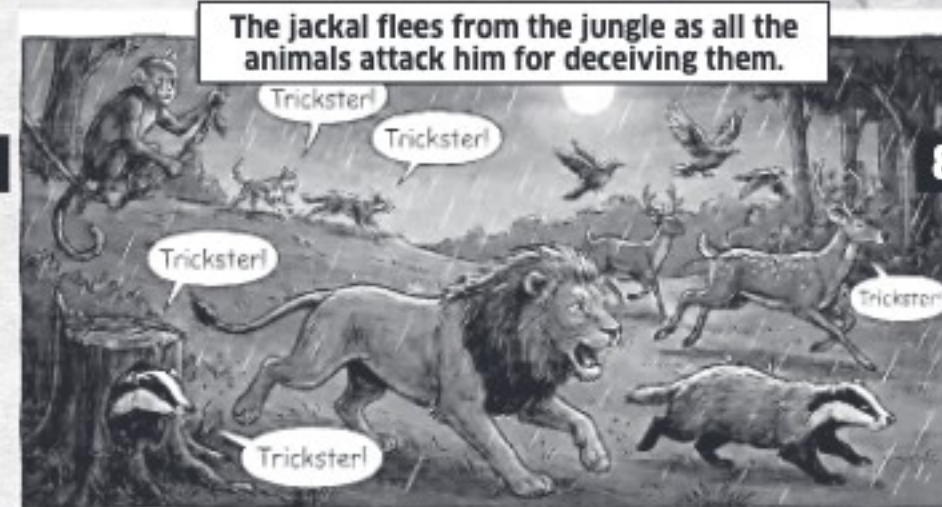
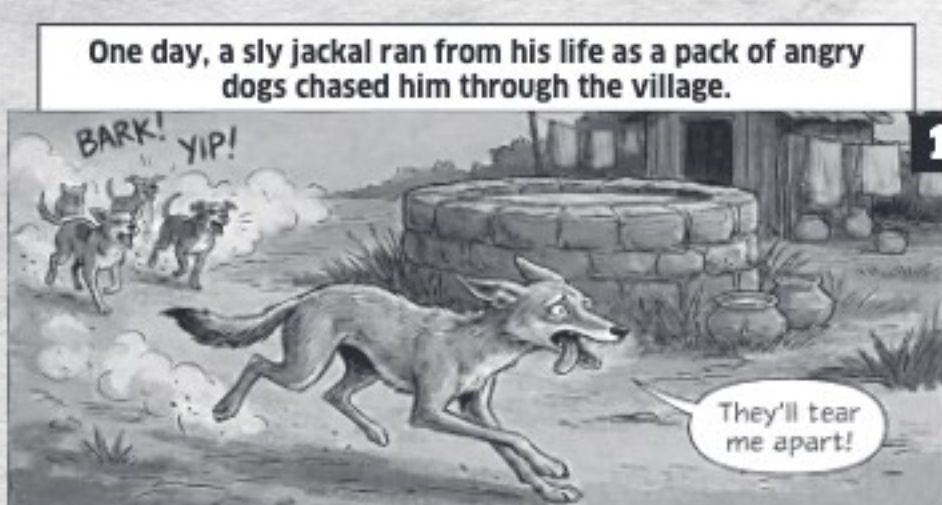
QUIZ Economy, Commerce & Finance

Questions	Option A	Option B	Option C	Option D
1 Which ancient port city was a major hub for trade with the Roman and Arab Empires on the west coast of India?	Arikamedu	Bharuch	Korkai	Dholavira
2 Which of the following was a major export item from ancient India to West Asia?	Wine	Horses	Black Pepper	Lapis Lazuli
3 Which was a standard unit of measurement for gold and often functioned as a currency during the Chola and Pandyan dynasties?	Kalanju	Karshapana	Jital	Fanam
4 Which of them formed a major source of revenue for the monarchy in ancient India?	War Booty	Land Revenue	Forest Produce	Religious Funds
5 Which crop was introduced to India by the Sufi saint, Baba Budan, by smuggling a few beans from Yemen and planting them in Karnataka?	Arecanut	Banana	Coffee	Dates

ANSWERS: 1 - B, 2 - C, 3 - A, 4 - B, 5 - C

panchatantra

The Blue Jackal



MORAL OF THE STORY: Don't tell lies and deceive others