

ANANTAM IAS • OPTIONAL NOTES

History Optional Enlightenment and Modern Ideas

Paper 2 • Unit 16

Reason, rights, anti-clericalism and their limits: 40 marks in four years and the intellectual foundation of every other unit in Section B.

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UPSC SYLLABUS

Enlightenment and modern ideas: major ideas of Enlightenment, Kant, Rousseau; spread of Enlightenment in the colonies; rise of socialist ideas up to Marx; spread of Marxian socialism.

What the Enlightenment was

Define it before describing it, since the 2026 paper asked about Kant and the 2025 paper about anti-clericalism, and both need the movement's core commitments stated.

- **Kant's** answer to the question what is Enlightenment, published in 1784, defines it as humanity's emergence from self-incurred immaturity, and his motto **sapere aude**, dare to know, is its compact statement.
- The movement's core commitments were **reason as the test of belief, empirical method, natural rights, religious toleration, and the conviction that institutions should be judged by whether they serve human welfare**.
- **Scientific revolution** supplied the model, since Newton's demonstration that the heavens obeyed discoverable laws suggested that society might too, and Locke supplied the epistemology.
- **Encyclopedie** of Diderot and d'Alembert, published between 1751 and 1772 in twenty eight volumes, is the movement's collective monument and its most effective vehicle.
- **Public sphere** is the concept to name, and **Jurgen Habermas** argued that coffee houses, salons, journals and reading societies created a space where private people reasoned publicly about matters of state.
- **Salons** in France were often run by women, including Madame Geoffrin and Madame du Deffand, and that is the one substantial female role in a movement otherwise dismissive of women's capacities.
- **Geography** matters, since the movement was French in its most radical form, Scottish in its economic and philosophical form through Hume and Smith, German in its idealist form through Kant, and English in its empirical foundation.
- **Enlightened absolutism** in Prussia, Austria and Russia adopted the administrative and legal reforms while refusing the political ones, which demonstrated that rational government and popular sovereignty were separable.

KEY TERMS

Sapere aude — Dare to know: Kant's motto for the Enlightenment, calling for the courage to use one's own understanding.

Kant and Rousseau

Named specifically in the syllabus and asked in 2026 through Kant's relation to liberalism and nationalism. They are the movement's two most difficult figures and they pull in different directions.

- **Kant** grounded morality in reason alone through the **categorical imperative**, requiring that one act only on a maxim one could will to become a universal law, which makes moral worth independent of religion or consequence.

- His political writing supports **liberalism** directly, since he defended freedom of the pen, the rule of law, republican constitutions and the separation of powers, and treated persons as ends rather than means.
- **Perpetual Peace** of 1795 proposed a federation of republics as the route to lasting peace, arguing that republics would be reluctant to go to war because the citizens who bear the cost decide it.
- That argument is the ancestor of the modern **democratic peace** thesis and of the League and the United Nations, and it is the strongest evidence for calling Kant a liberal.
- On **nationalism** the 2026 claim needs care, since Kant's universalism and cosmopolitanism sit awkwardly with nationalism, and he wrote of world citizenship rather than of national self-determination.
- The defensible answer is that Kant was **unambiguously a liberal and only indirectly a source of nationalism**, through his influence on Fichte and Herder and through the idea that peoples should govern themselves by their own reason.
- **Rousseau** is the more disruptive figure, arguing in the **Social Contract** of 1762 that legitimate authority rests on the **general will**, which is not the sum of individual preferences but the community's shared interest.
- **Discourse on Inequality** of 1755 traced inequality to the institution of private property, which makes Rousseau a source for socialism as well as for democracy.
- **Ambiguity** in the general will is the standing criticism, since forcing a person to be free, as Rousseau puts it, can justify majority coercion, and both democratic and totalitarian readings have claimed him.
- Rousseau also broke with the Enlightenment mainstream by distrusting reason and science as corrupting, which makes him a precursor of Romanticism as well as a philosophe.

Anti-clericalism and religion

The 2025 paper asked whether Enlightenment anti-clericalism echoed the Renaissance and Reformation while sharing neither's paganism nor faith. That quotation needs a precise answer.

- **Anti-clericalism** attacked the political power, wealth, censorship and privileges of the church rather than religion as such, and the distinction matters for the question.
- **Voltaire** is the emblematic figure, with his *écrasez l'infame* directed at clerical fanaticism, his campaigns in the **Calas affair** of 1762 against judicial persecution, and his *Treatise on Toleration*.
- Voltaire was a **deist and not an atheist**, holding that a rational creator was demonstrable from the order of nature while revelation, miracles and priesthoods were not.
- **Deism** was the movement's characteristic religious position, and it retained God as first cause while removing him from history, which is exactly why it shares neither Renaissance paganism nor Reformation faith.
- **Renaissance** anti-clericalism, as in Erasmus, sought reform within Christianity and drew on classical antiquity, and its revival of pagan learning was aesthetic and philological rather than religious.
- **Reformation** anti-clericalism attacked the institution in the name of a purer faith, so Luther and Calvin were more devout than the clergy they denounced, not less.
- Enlightenment anti-clericalism differs from both because it attacked clerical authority **in the name of reason rather than of either antiquity or scripture**, which is the answer the 2025 quotation is looking for.

- **Atheism** did exist, notably in Holbach and in Diderot's later writing, but it was a minority position even among the philosophes.
- **Practical results** included the toleration edicts of Joseph II and of Louis XVI, the dissolution of the Jesuits in 1773, and eventually the French Revolution's Civil Constitution of the Clergy and the disestablishment written into the American First Amendment.

The limits of the Enlightenment

Any answer that presents the movement as uniformly progressive will be marked down. The limits are well documented and examiners look for them.

- **Women** were largely excluded from the universalism, and Rousseau's *Emile* prescribes an education for Sophie designed entirely around pleasing men.
- **Mary Wollstonecraft's** *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* of 1792 answered Rousseau directly, arguing that women appeared irrational because they were denied education, and it is the essential citation here.
- **Race and slavery** expose the sharpest contradiction, since Enlightenment thinkers including Hume and Kant wrote passages of straightforward racial hierarchy while the movement supplied the language of universal rights.
- **Abolition** nonetheless drew on Enlightenment arguments, and the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade of 1787 and the Haitian revolution both used them, so the contradiction was exploited from within.
- **Colonialism** was justified as well as criticised by Enlightenment thought, since the idea of stages of civilisation ranked societies and licensed the improvement of the backward by the advanced.
- **James Mill's** *History of British India* is the clearest case of Utilitarian Enlightenment thought producing a comprehensive dismissal of an entire civilisation.
- **Class** limited it too, since most philosophes were suspicious of popular participation and wrote for an educated public, and Voltaire's remark about the rabble is representative.
- **Counter-Enlightenment** developed in response, with Burke defending prescription and prejudice against abstract reason and Herder asserting the value of particular cultures against universal standards.
- The balanced verdict: the Enlightenment supplied the vocabulary of universal rights that its own practitioners applied selectively, and the subsequent history of that vocabulary is the history of people demanding it be applied to them.

The spread of Enlightenment in the colonies

Named explicitly in the syllabus and the part that connects Section B to Section A. Colonial reception was selective and often turned against the coloniser.

- **American colonies** received it most directly, and the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution translate Locke and Montesquieu into institutions.
- **Latin America** received it through creole elites educated in Europe, and **Bolivar's** Jamaica Letter and Angostura Address are Enlightenment documents with a colonial subject.

- **Haiti** is the sharpest case, since enslaved people took the Declaration of the Rights of Man at its word and the French Republic responded with an expeditionary force.
- **India** received it through English education, and **Rammohan Roy** is the exemplary figure, applying rationalist criticism to Hindu practice while arguing from Indian scripture.
- **Derozio and Young Bengal** at Hindu College in the 1820s and 1830s represent the most radical reception, questioning religion and social convention outright, and the movement's shallowness is the standard criticism.
- **Selective adoption** is the pattern, since Indian reformers took reason, rights and criticism while rejecting the accompanying claim that European civilisation was uniquely rational.
- **Nationalist turn** followed inevitably, since a doctrine of universal rights and self-government cannot be taught to a colonised people without being applied to their own condition.
- **Naoroji, Ranade and Dutt** used Enlightenment political economy against the empire that had taught it to them, and the drain theory is Adam Smith turned on Britain.
- **Critique of the Enlightenment** also travelled, and Gandhi's **Hind Swaraj** of 1909 rejects modern civilisation, industrialism and the idea of progress in terms that connect him to the Counter-Enlightenment tradition.

Socialist ideas before Marx

Named in the syllabus and asked in 2025. The utopians deserve treatment on their own terms rather than only as Marx's predecessors.

- **Saint-Simon** proposed rule by industrialists, scientists and engineers, coined the formula that the government of men should give way to the administration of things, and influenced both socialism and technocracy.
- **Fourier** designed the **phalanstere**, a self-sufficient community of about sixteen hundred organised so that work matched natural passion, and Engels credited him with an early insight that the position of women measures social progress.
- **Robert Owen** ran **New Lanark** as a model mill with schooling and shorter hours, attempted the New Harmony community in Indiana from 1825, and helped found the cooperative and trade union movements.
- **Louis Blanc** advanced the social workshop and the right to work, which the Second Republic conceded in the National Workshops of 1848 and then abandoned, precipitating the June Days.
- **Proudhon**, author of the formula that property is theft, was a mutualist and anarchist rather than a socialist in the collectivist sense, and his quarrel with Marx is worth a line.
- **Blanqui** contributed the idea of revolution by a disciplined conspiratorial minority, and it reaches Lenin more directly than the utopians do.
- **Engels's** *Socialism, Utopian and Scientific* of 1880 supplied the label and the charge, that they described desirable societies without a mechanism for achieving them, and that is the 2025 quotation's source.
- The fair defence is that Owen and Fourier generated **real institutions** in cooperatives, trade unions and educational reform, so their practical legacy exceeded the utopian label.

- **Ricardian socialists** in Britain, including Thomas Hodgskin, argued from Ricardo's own labour theory of value that labour was entitled to its whole product, which shows socialism emerging from classical economics rather than only from moral revulsion.

Marx and the spread of Marxian socialism

Named in the syllabus as spread rather than doctrine, so cover the transmission as well as the theory.

- **Historical materialism** holds that the mode of production conditions social, political and intellectual life, stated most compactly in the 1859 Preface, and it is the method rather than any prediction that has proved durable.
- **Communist Manifesto** of 1848 with Engels, and **Capital** volume one of 1867 with its analysis of surplus value, are the two texts to name.
- **First International**, founded 1864, spread the doctrine across European labour movements and split in 1872 over the quarrel with Bakunin's anarchists.
- **Second International** from 1889 organised mass socialist parties, of which the German SPD was the largest, and it collapsed in 1914 when its member parties supported their own governments in war.
- **Revisionism** under **Bernstein** argued that capitalism was not collapsing and that socialism could arrive through parliamentary reform, against **Kautsky's** orthodoxy.
- **Lenin** adapted the doctrine for a backward agrarian society through the theory of the vanguard party in **What Is To Be Done** of 1902 and the theory of imperialism as capitalism's highest stage in 1916.
- **Spread beyond Europe** followed anti-colonial politics, and Marxism appealed in Asia and Africa because its theory of imperialism explained colonial subordination in a way liberalism did not.
- **India** received it through **M. N. Roy**, a founder of the Mexican and Indian communist parties and a figure at the Comintern's 1920 congress where he debated Lenin on the colonial question.
- **Indian historiography** absorbed it deeply, and **D. D. Kosambi, R. S. Sharma, Irfan Habib and Bipan Chandra** produced a Marxist historical tradition of international standing, which is the most durable Indian legacy of the doctrine.
- **Assessment** to close on: as a predictive science Marxism failed, since revolution came in agrarian Russia and China rather than industrial Britain, and as an analytical method for class, ideology and the state it remains among the most productive frameworks in the discipline.

How the unit is examined

Four questions in four years, on Enlightenment ideas, anti-clericalism, Kant and the pre-Marxian socialists. All are conceptual rather than narrative.

- Where the question names a **thinker**, give the principal work, the central concept and one specific argument, since generalities score poorly in a conceptual unit.
- On anti-clericalism, hold the **three-way distinction** between Renaissance, Reformation and Enlightenment critiques, because the 2025 quotation is built on exactly that.
- Always state the **limits**, meaning women, race, slavery, class and the colonial application, since an uncritical account of the Enlightenment reads as dated.
- Connect to **Section A** wherever possible through Rammohan Roy, Derozio, the drain theory and Hind Swaraj, since colonial reception is named in the syllabus.

- For the utopians, name **four of them with their distinctive proposal**, and give both Engels's charge and the fair defence.

Last-mile revision

- Kant 1784 on Enlightenment, *sapere aude*, categorical imperative, Perpetual Peace 1795; Rousseau's Social Contract 1762 and general will, Discourse on Inequality 1755.
- Encyclopedie 1751-72; Habermas on the public sphere; Voltaire's Calas affair 1762 and deism; Jesuits dissolved 1773.
- Limits: Wollstonecraft 1792 answering Rousseau; Hume and Kant on race; Burke and Herder as Counter-Enlightenment.
- Colonies: American Declaration, Bolivar's Jamaica Letter, Haiti, Rammohan Roy, Derozio and Young Bengal, Hind Swaraj 1909 as critique.
- Utopians: Saint-Simon, Fourier's phalanstere, Owen at New Lanark and New Harmony 1825, Blanc's workshops 1848, Proudhon, Blanqui; Engels 1880 supplies the label.
- Marx: Manifesto 1848, Capital 1867, 1859 Preface; First International 1864 and the 1872 split; Second International 1889 collapses 1914; Bernstein against Kautsky; Lenin 1902 and 1916.
- India: M. N. Roy and the 1920 Comintern debate; Kosambi, Sharma, Habib and Bipan Chandra in historiography.

Common errors to avoid

- Calling Voltaire an atheist. He was a deist attacking clerical power, not religion as such.
- Presenting the Enlightenment as uniformly progressive. Its treatment of women, race and colonies is the standard qualification.
- Treating Rousseau as a straightforward Enlightenment figure. He distrusted reason and science and prefigures Romanticism.
- Reading Kant as a nationalist. He was a cosmopolitan whose influence on nationalism was indirect through Fichte and Herder.
- Dismissing the utopians as merely naive. Cooperatives, trade unions and educational reform came out of their practical work.
- Saying Marxism was simply falsified. It failed as prediction and remains productive as an analytical method, and Indian historiography is the evidence.

Mains Practice

“Immanuel Kant was an advocate of liberalism and nationalism.”

10 marks · 150 words · 2026

“Anti-clericalism of the Enlightenment echoed the sentiments of the Renaissance and the Reformation, yet it neither endorsed the paganism of the Renaissance nor shared the faith of the Reformation.” Discuss.

10 marks · 150 words · 2025

The ideas raised by Enlightenment thinkers were profoundly unsettling and challenging to old regime society and political order.

10 marks · 150 words · 2024

Enlightenment was not confined to scientific revolution alone; humanism and ideas of progress too were its inseparable constituents.

10 marks · 150 words · 2023