Machiavelli

Background and Context

Let's step into the world of **Niccolò Machiavelli (1469–1527)**—a thinker who changed the way politics was understood forever.

Machiavelli lived in an **Italy that was internally divided and corrupted,** a land torn between **the two swords—the Pope and the Emperor.** Imagine the chaos of a country with no unity, pulled apart by both **religion and power struggles.**

He observed that **religion divides while nationalism unites.** For Machiavelli, it was time for **European secularism**—a politics free from the chains of religious authority. He believed that leaders must face the **real world, not an imagined one**—this is why he is called the father of **political realism.**

Machiavelli was not just a philosopher sitting in a room. He was a **diplomat of Florence to France,** a man of action whose **political experience shaped his pragmatic outlook.** He is remembered as one of the **greatest patriots,** because he wanted nothing more than to see his Italy strong, united, and free from foreign domination.

The Prince

The Prince is not a book of lofty ideals. It is **practical advice to any enterprising person who wants to come to power.** Machiavelli wanted to show rulers how to survive and succeed in the brutal game of politics.

This work was **inspired by Julius Caesar,** the man who transformed Rome, and by the **emerging bourgeoisie class**—the ambitious, rising middle class of his time. They wanted power, and Machiavelli told them exactly how to get it.

Unlike **Plato**, who believed in **soul craft—the philosophy of governance,** Machiavelli focused on **state craft—the art of governance.** For him, politics was not about creating a perfect world but about **understanding reality, power, and human nature.**

He would tell a ruler, *"If you want to lead, you cannot just be good—you must be smart, bold, and sometimes even ruthless."*

On Politics

For **Machiavelli, politics is a field of profession, distinct from morality.** He refused to see politics as a **profession of goodness.** Instead, he declared that **national interest is the ultimate reality**—a ruler's first and foremost duty is to safeguard the state, even if it means using deception, force, or cunning.

In his eyes, **politics is autonomous—separate from religion or ethics, with its own standard of morality.** He believed that a prince cannot afford to be guided by traditional virtues like kindness or honesty if they threaten the survival of the state. His message was clear: *"In politics, success is the highest virtue."*

However, **Sabine's criticism** reminds us that Machiavelli's ideas were **narrowly dated, narrowly located, and pessimistic,** reflecting the chaotic times of Renaissance Italy. Yet, centuries earlier, **Kautilya's Arthashastra** had already presented **similar pragmatic ideas**—proving that realpolitik was not born in Europe alone.

On Human Nature

Machiavelli believed that **man is by nature selfish, ungrateful, deceitful, cowardly, fickle-minded, and avaricious.** He didn't call these traits sins or moral failings. For him, this is simply **a fact of life**—something proven by **history, observation, and psychological analysis.**

He argued that **human nature is constant, unchanged through time,** and marked by

universal egoism. People do not trust each other; they **prioritize their own interest over everything else.** And here's the twist—Machiavelli didn't judge this as good or bad. He said, *"A wise ruler accepts this reality and governs accordingly, not with illusions of virtue."*

Where Plato dreamed of ideal men and Aristotle sought virtuous citizens, **Machiavelli stared straight into the dark corners of human behavior** and said:
"This is who we are. Now, how do we rule such a world?"

Fear vs Love

Machiavelli asked a timeless question: **"Should a ruler be feared or loved?"**

He observed that **fear stems from the will of the king**—from the ruler's power and the people's **fear of losing their possessions, security, or lives.** Only the **Prince can provide this security,** and that makes fear a powerful tool of control.

Love, on the other hand, comes from the will of the people. It is based on gratitude and loyalty, which, as Machiavelli knew, can easily fade when times get tough.

Just like **Hobbes,** Machiavelli saw **fear as the true basis of authority**—something that keeps people disciplined and united. His verdict was clear: **"It is better to be feared than loved—because fear is more reliable."**

But he added a warning: a wise ruler must avoid hatred. Fear works when it is balanced with respect and justice, not cruelty.

Property and Power

The rise of the **emerging bourgeoisie**—a class driven by wealth and ambition—gave Machiavelli deep insight into **the nature of greed.** He boldly advised that a ruler should **execute rather than simply confiscate property** if loyalty is to be maintained. Why? Because people can forgive the death of a rival, but they **never forgive the loss of their wealth.**

For Machiavelli, a prince must embody **both a fox and a lion:**

- **The fox**—with **intelligence, manipulation, and the ability to appeal to self-interest.**
- **The lion**—with **force and defence when necessary.**

He knew that **power is attractive, but it often demands coercion.** To maintain it, the prince must act with **cold-blooded logic,** and if necessary, **completely destroy opponents** so they can never rise again to take revenge.

This was not cruelty for its own sake, but a **calculated survival strategy.** As Machiavelli would say: *"It is better to be decisive and feared than to appear weak and lose power."*

End Justifies Means

One of **Machiavelli's most controversial yet powerful ideas—"The End Justifies the Means."**

Machiavelli **clearly separated ethics and politics.** For him, **dual morality** was the reality of life:

- **Ordinary men sacrifice for principles.**
- **A prince sacrifices principles for the state.**

In other words, if lying, deception, or even cruelty protects the **state and national interest,** then it is not only acceptable—it is necessary. **Nothing, he argued, is superior to national interest, especially during dilemmas.**

This harsh realism made him famous—and infamous. **Gandhi, in *Hind Swaraj,* criticised this view** with a beautiful metaphor: *"You cannot grow rose flowers from babool (thorn) seeds."* For Gandhi, noble ends require noble means. But Machiavelli would reply: *"A prince who clings to morality at all times will lose both power and the state."*

He believed that **politics is not a game of perfection but of survival,** and sometimes **dirty hands are the price of leadership.**

Religion

For **Machiavelli, religion was not about divine truth or spiritual salvation.** He saw it as a **disciplinary force—useful to control the masses** and maintain social order. He believed that religion could make people obedient, loyal, and morally disciplined, which in turn helped the ruler **strengthen the state.**

This was a **practical and utilitarian approach.** He did not focus on whether God exists or not; instead, he cared about how belief in God could be **used as a tool of governance.**

Centuries later, **Voltaire echoed this sentiment when he said, "If God didn't exist, it would be necessary to invent him."** Why? Because without religion, rulers would lose a powerful means to shape the behaviour of the masses.

Machiavelli's realism here is striking: *"Religion serves politics, not the other way around."*

Other Advices

Machiavelli's other powerful advice to a prince—practical, sharp, and brutally honest, just like the man himself.

First, Machiavelli said, *"A prince must act in a magnificent manner with pomp and show, becoming a true showman."* Why? Because **power is not just about strength—it is about perception.** If the people see their ruler as grand and impressive, they will respect and follow him.

Second, he warned rulers to **trust the common man more than nobles or feudal lords.** Why? Because nobles are **ambitious and may challenge authority,** while the common man simply wants peace and security.

Third, Machiavelli insisted on maintaining **an army of nationals only,** never mercenaries. Mercenaries, he said, **fight for money, not loyalty,** and they will abandon you when times get tough.

Fourth, be expansionist. He advised two strategies:

- **In same cultures, adopt direct rule.**
- **In different cultures, rule through lieutenants** who know local customs and can maintain order.

Finally, punishments. He advised that **punishments should be delivered through subordinates** to avoid resentment, while rewards should come directly from the prince to win loyalty.

Role of Fortune

Machiavelli's fascinating idea of fortune (luck)—a concept that shows his deep understanding of life's unpredictability.

Machiavelli acknowledged that no matter how skilled or wise a ruler is, **fortune—luck—plays a powerful role in success.** A prince might have **all the qualities of leadership,** yet **bad luck can ruin him.** History is filled with examples of great leaders who failed because fate turned against them.

But Machiavelli was not one to surrender to destiny. He believed that **prior arrangements and courage are essential to make fortune favour a prince.** In other words, luck may shape opportunities, but **only a bold and prepared ruler can seize them.**

He often compared fortune to a wild river: *"When it floods, it causes destruction, but with dams and barriers, we can control its force."* Similarly, **fortune may be unpredictable, but preparation and courage can bend it in your favour.**

The Discourses vs The Prince

In **The Discourses,** Machiavelli praised **republicanism**—a government built on **virtue, civic responsibility, and active citizen participation.** He believed that when a society is **virtuous and united, a republic is the best form of government.** It creates freedom, stability, and collective strength.

But in **The Prince,** the tone is very different. Here, Machiavelli advocated **authoritarianism for a corrupted society.** Why? Because when people are divided, selfish, and weak, only a strong ruler—a prince—can **unify the state, impose order, and defend it from enemies.**

His rule of thumb was crystal clear:
"Monarchy whenever necessary, republic whenever possible, but never oligarchy or aristocracy."
He saw oligarchy and aristocracy as dangerous—they serve the ambitions of a few, not the common good.

Through these two works, Machiavelli was teaching us that **the form of government must match the moral condition of the people.** A wise leader adapts to the times.

Realism and Legacy

Machiavelli's Realism and Legacy—a legacy that still shapes politics, diplomacy, and leadership today.

The political thinker **Dunning once observed that Machiavelli was unfortunate, not because he was wrong, but because he was criticised for telling the truth.** Machiavelli held up a mirror to politics and showed it as it truly is—not as we wish it to be.

His **realistic tradition** has echoed across centuries and influenced **International Politics,** especially thinkers like **Hans Morgenthau,** the father of modern realism, and even **USA foreign policy,** which often prioritises national interest over moral ideals.

His ideas also shaped the **Behavioural school of thought,** which studies politics through human behaviour rather than abstract ideals.

World leaders like **Mao Zedong** and the entire concept of **Realpolitik**—politics based on practical needs and power rather than ideology—owe much to Machiavelli's fearless pragmatism.

Machiavelli's message is timeless:
"Politics is not about how things *should* be, but how they *are*."
And that is why he remains both controversial and indispensable.

Machiavelli as a Child of Renaissance

Machiavelli in the grand backdrop of the Renaissance—a period of rebirth that changed the world and gave rise to modern thinking.

The **Renaissance and Reformation** shaped Machiavelli's sharp and fearless ideas. During this time, **secularism replaced the medieval religious dominance** of the Church. People began to look at life not just through the lens of faith, but through **reason, science, and human potential.**

This age was also marked by **nationalism, enlightenment, materialism, and the early sparks of the industrial revolution**—all defining the rise of **modernity.** Machiavelli absorbed these changes and became the voice of a **new political era.**

He is often called **the first modern and transitional thinker** because he bridged two worlds:

- **The Medieval world** of **empires, confederations, religion, and feudal Lords (House of Lords).**
- **The Modern world** of **nation-states, science, capitalism, and the House of Commons.**

Machiavelli broke away from the old, moralistic, religious view of politics and gave us a **realistic, secular, and modern understanding of power.**

Idealism in Machiavelli

We often think of Machiavelli as cold, ruthless, and calculating. But beneath his **hard-nosed statecraft,** there was a subtle **layer of idealism.**

He believed that **a prince must forget his self-interest for the sake of national interest.** This was his highest principle. For all his advice about cunning and power, Machiavelli's ultimate goal was not selfish ambition—it was the **strength, unity, and survival of the state.**

This shows that even the harshest realist has an **idealistic vision** at heart. Machiavelli was not telling rulers to be cruel for cruelty's sake; he wanted them to be tough because **national interest must always come first.**

In this sense, Machiavelli's realism was a **means, but his idealism—love for the state—was the end.**

The modern relevance of Machiavelli

When we look at today's world—its politics, diplomacy, and business—we can almost hear Machiavelli whispering from the pages of *The Prince*. His ideas of **realism, national interest, and power play** are not just historical lessons; they are the heartbeat of modern strategy.

Take **foreign policy.** Countries today, just like the princes of Machiavelli's time, put their **national interest above morality.** When nations sign defense deals, break alliances, or balance between rival powers, they're not thinking about ideals—they're thinking like Machiavelli: *"The survival of the state comes first."* Look at India's careful balancing between the US, Russia, and China. It's a masterclass in **realpolitik**—a term born from Machiavelli's legacy.

His idea that **"it is better to be feared than loved"** resonates in modern leadership. We see it in leaders who are respected not just for their kindness, but for their **decisiveness and strength.** Sardar Patel's tough stance during the integration of princely states or Lee Kuan Yew's strict policies in Singapore reflect this Machiavellian wisdom—strength earns stability.

Machiavelli's showman advice is everywhere today. Leaders know that **image and perception are as powerful as reality.** From high-profile political rallies to carefully curated public images, modern politicians master the art of **being both fox and lion—clever in strategy, strong in execution.**

Even in business, Machiavelli's fingerprints are visible. CEOs who make bold, sometimes ruthless decisions—like Steve Jobs at Apple—reflect his belief that **fortune favours the prepared and the daring.** His concept of **Virtù vs Fortuna (skill vs luck)** is as relevant in boardrooms as it is in politics.

What makes Machiavelli truly modern is his honesty. He told rulers—and now tells us—that **the world is not about how it should be, but how it is.** And that's why, even 500 years later, his ideas guide leaders, diplomats, and strategists across the globe.

PYQ

1. "Machiavelli's secularism." 2020, 10
2. Critically examine Machiavelli's views on religion and politics. 2018, 15
3. Explain how Machiavelli's application of empirical method to human affairs marks an important stage in the evolution of political science. 2014, 20
4. Discuss the importance of Machiavelli in the history of political thought. Is it correct to say that Machiavelli theory is narrowly local and narrowly dated? 2007, 60
5. Comment on: Machiavelli political philosophy was narrowly local and narrowly dated (Sabine). 2003, 60
6. Comment on: Power is an end in itself and he (Machiavelli) inquires into the means that are best suited to acquire, retain and expand power, thus separates power from morality, ethics, religion and metaphysics (Ebenstein on Machiavelli). 2000, 20