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Q11

Case study. A fresh engineering graduate gets a job in a prestigious chemical industry. She likes the work. The salary is also good. However, after a few months she accidentally discovers that a highly toxic waste is being secretly discharged into a river nearby. This is causing health problems to the villagers downstream who depend on the river for their water needs. She is perturbed and mentions her concern to her colleagues who have been with the company for longer periods. They advise her to keep quite as anyone who mentions the topic is summarily dismissed. She cannot risk losing her job as she is the sole breadwinner for her family and has to support her ailing parents and siblings. At first, she thinks that if her seniors are keeping quiet, why should she stick out her neck. But her conscience pricks her to do something to save the river and the people who depend upon it. At heart she feels that the advice of silence given by her friends is not correct though she cannot give reasons for it. She thinks you are a wise person and seeks your advice. (a) What arguments can you advance to show her that keeping quiet is not morally right? (b) What course of action would you advise her to adopt and why?

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2016 · GS IV · 20 marks · Ethics Case Studies

Case Studies on above issues.

Core demand of the question

- A new engineer finds her company secretly discharging toxic waste into a river that villagers use. Colleagues say anyone who speaks is dismissed. She is the sole breadwinner for ailing parents and siblings. Conscience still pricks
- (a) What arguments show that keeping quiet is not morally right?
- (b) What course of action would you advise and why?

Revision summary

Secret discharge of toxic waste is a continuing harm to downstream villagers.

Silence, once she knows, is moral participation; "seniors are quiet" is not a defence.

Family need is real and does not license using villagers as a means.

She should document, send a written internal alert, then approach the State Pollution Control Board, refuse false logs, and plan other support for dependents.

Anonymous dumping without evidence is weaker than a statutory complaint.

Introduction

A young engineer likes the job and needs the wage. The plant is poisoning a river and buying silence with fear. The question is not whether she must become a headline. It is why silence is a moral failure, and how she can act without a theatrical suicide of the family.

Body

Stakeholders

- Villagers downstream who drink and wash from the river, and who did not consent to the poison.
- The engineer, her ailing parents and siblings who depend on her wage.
- Colleagues and managers who already know, and workers who will also sicken.
- The company, its owners and its lawful permits.
- The State Pollution Control Board, the Central Pollution Control Board, and future users of the river.
- You as the person she has asked for advice.

Values in clash

- Integrity and courage versus fear and prudence for the family.
- Non-maleficence and justice toward villagers versus loyalty to the employer.
- Professional ethics of engineering versus a culture of dismissal.
- Compassion for her family is real; it does not convert the villagers into an acceptable cost.

(a) Why keeping quiet is not morally right

- Silence is participation when you have unique knowledge and the harm is grave, ongoing and hidden. This is not office gossip; it is secret poisoning.
- Villagers are using the river as a life-support. Their **Article 21** right to life includes potable water in any serious constitutional ethic.
- The company has already chosen concealment. That is mens rea in moral form. Your quiet helps the concealment.
- "Seniors are quiet" is an appeal to authority, not to right. A crowd of silent engineers does not wash the river.
- Dismissal threats prove the firm knows the act would not survive daylight. Fear is evidence, not a defence.
- Professional codes and the **Environment (Protection) Act, 1986**, the **Water (Prevention and Control of Pollution) Act, 1974**, and hazardous-waste rules exist because private profit is not allowed to use a river as a sewer.
- **Utilitarian count:** many bodies downstream outweigh one job, however precious.
Deontological count: you must not use villagers as a means to your salary.
- **Virtue:** courage is a mean; recklessness is not required, but cowardice that lets children drink toxin is still cowardice.
- Family duty is real, yet a wage earned by hiding poison is a tainted means. Parents do not need that kind of security as their only story.
- If everyone in her position keeps quiet, the practice becomes the industry standard. Her case is a universalisation test, not a private mood.

(b) Options

- **Option 1:** Lifelong silence.
- **Merit:** short-term wage.
- **Demerit:** ongoing harm, legal risk if later traced, and a broken conscience.
- **Option 2:** Anonymous internet dump of unverified photos.
- **Merit:** speed.
- **Demerit:** may destroy her identity anyway, may be dismissed as malice, and may skip samples that a board needs.
- **Option 3:** Document, use internal then statutory channels, protect herself, and plan the family's safety net.

Action advised

- Do not confront the plant head alone in a corridor without a record. Do not sign a false environmental log.
- **Document:** dates, photographs, if safe; do not steal unrelated commercial secrets. Note health reports if villagers already have them.
- Write an internal note to the environment officer and managing director, copy marked, asking for immediate stoppage and lawful treatment. Keep proof of sending.
- If victimised or ignored, complain to the State Pollution Control Board and, if needed, the Central Pollution Control Board, with the same evidence. That is lawful whistle-blowing, not theatre.
- **Use the Water Act and Environment Act** machinery; a magistrate's complaint or a court can follow if the boards sleep.
- Seek confidential legal aid and, where eligible, the **Whistle Blowers Protection Act, 2014** logic even in a private firm through environmental jurisprudence and labour law against unfair dismissal for a bona fide complaint.
- **Family:** quietly line up another job search, relatives' support, and government health schemes for the parents so that one wage is not the only oxygen. This is prudence, not a bargain with the river.
- Do not delay documentation until "I am ready to be poor". Evidence disappears.
- Refuse to join a lie. If forced to sign a false discharge register, refuse in writing.
- After regulators move, cooperate. Do not become the company's negotiator for a cheaper fine that leaves the pipe open.

Why this path

- It honours villagers and the law first.
- It gives the company a last chance to stop, which is fairness, not naivety.
- It does not require her to destroy the family as the first move, but it does not make the family a veto on the truth.

Flow diagram

Secret toxic discharge -> Engineer knows
Engineer knows -> Silence -> Villagers keep drinking
Engineer knows -> Document and internal note
Document and internal note -> Pollution Control Board
Pollution Control Board -> Stop the pipe

Conclusion

Keeping quiet helps a secret crime against a river and against people who drink from it. Seniors' fear is not a moral argument. She should record, write internally, go to the pollution boards if needed, refuse false papers, and plan the family's lawful safety net - not sell the villagers for a salary.

Facts & figures

Water (Prevention and Control of Pollution) Act, 1974

The principal statute on water pollution; State Pollution Control Boards are the first public door.

Environment (Protection) Act, 1986

Umbrella environmental law under which hazardous discharge and related rules are enforced.

Article 21, Constitution of India

Life and personal liberty, read to include a life with dignity and, in environmental cases, protection from poisoned commons.

Whistle Blowers Protection Act, 2014

A Union statute aimed at public-interest disclosures in the public sector; the ethical analogue in a private plant is a documented complaint to regulators and courts.

Polluter pays

An environmental principle that the firm, not downstream villagers, must bear the cost of its waste.

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