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Q8

Case study. In line with the Directive Principles of State Policy enshrined in the Indian Constitution, the government has a constitutional obligation to ensure basic needs - "Roti, Kapda aur Makan (Food, Clothes and Shelter)" - for the under-privileged. Pursuing this mandate, the district administration proposed clearing a portion of forest land to develop housing for the homeless and economically weaker sections of the society. The proposed land, however, is an ecologically sensitive zone densely populated with age-old trees, medicinal plants and vital biodiversity. Besides, these forests help to regulate micro-climate and rainfalls; provide habitat for wildlife, support soil fertility and prevent land/soil erosion and sustain livelihoods of tribal and nomadic communities. In spite of the ecological and social costs, the administration argues in favour of the said proposal by highlighting that this very initiative would provide housing to human rights as a critical welfare priority. Besides it, it fulfils the government's duty to uplift and empower the poor through inclusive housing development. Further, these forest areas have become unsafe due to wild-animal threats and recurring human-wild life conflicts. Lastly, clearing forest-zones may help to curb anti-social elements allegedly using these areas as hideouts, thereby enhancing law and order. (a) Can deforestation be ethically justified in the pursuit of social welfare objectives like, housing for the homeless? (b) What are the socio-economic, administrative and ethical challenges in balancing environmental conservation with human development? (c) What substantial alternatives or policy interventions can be proposed to ensure that both environmental integrity and human dignity are protected?

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2025 · GS IV · 20 marks · Ethics Case Studies

Case Studies on above issues.

Core demand of the question

- (a) Can cutting this forest for housing be ethically justified?
- (b) Socio-economic, administrative, ethical challenges of the balance

- (c) Substantial alternatives that protect both forest and dignity

Revision summary

DPSPs demand both housing for the weak and protection of the environment.

Clearing a biodiverse forest can unhause tribals while housing someone else.

The ethical first search is vacant plots, infill and degraded land, with **FRA** consent if forest is touched at all.

A photo colony in a core habitat fails public-trust and land-ethic tests.

The poor who live from the forest count as the poor, not as an obstacle.

Introduction

The Constitution asks the State to care about **roti, kapda and makan**. A district wants to **cut a living forest** to house the homeless. The same forest **holds rain, tribes, medicine and soil**. This is not 'trees versus poor people'. It is **which poor, which land, and whether the State did the easier violence**.

Body

(a) Can deforestation be ethically justified for housing?

Not as a first resort, and not in this dense old patch. Shelter is a real duty (**Article 21** with DPSPs on livelihood). A living forest that holds rain, tribes and soil is also a duty (**Article 48A**, public trust, **FRA**). Ethics of **lesser harm** can justify **some** tree loss on **already degraded** land after an honest search. It cannot justify **the easiest green core** so that a colony photograph is ready this financial year. If the only story is "the poor cannot eat biodiversity", the speaker has **erased the poor who already eat from that forest**. **So: no ethical blank cheque** for this proposal; **a narrow maybe** only after brown-land failure is proved in public.

(b) Socio-economic, administrative and ethical challenges

Socio-economic: urban homeless need **makan**; forest users need **produce and identity**; a cleared slope can **dry a town** and **raise future disaster costs**. **Administrative:** EIA theatre, **forged gram sabhas**, **target-driven** housing missions, weak **land records**, and a contractor who arrives before the botanist. **Ethical: which poor; consent versus consultation; present voters versus unborn; means** (a grove as a shortcut) versus **ends** (dignity). Leopold's land ethic and **Gandhi's** talisman collide unless the officer **counts the tribal face as the poorest face too**.

(c) Substantial alternatives

Publish a vacant-land audit of government plots, infill, unused staff colonies and rental housing. **Build vertical** on brownfield. **Repair existing public buildings first**. **If forest is touched at all: edge only, gram sabha consent, no-go core, real compensatory ecology** (not distant eucalyptus), and **livelihood shares** for displaced users. **PMAY** and **rental** policy should **precede** a chainsaw. That package protects **environmental integrity and human dignity** together.

A civil servant who only quotes **makan** has forgotten that the grove is also **kapda** - shade - for the people who already live there.

Flow diagram

Homeless makan -> Choice
Forest tribe rain -> Choice
Choice -> Degraded land infill
Choice -> Do not cut core

Conclusion

Shelter is a constitutional care. A dense old forest is not the first place to keep that promise. Audit degraded land, get consent, and do not manufacture a new displaced tribe in the name of housing.

Facts & figures

Article 48A

A Directive Principle that the State shall protect the environment and wildlife.

Public trust doctrine

Courts have said the State holds natural resources in trust for the people, including those not yet born.

FRA

The **Forest Rights Act**, which recognises forest dwellers' rights and requires community processes before diversion.