



T.N. GODAVARMAN THIRUMULPAD V. UNION OF INDIA (1995–ONGOING)

Constitutional Interpretation & Basic Structure

PRELIMS SNAPSHOT

- ◆ 1. Prelims Snapshot (Fact Box)
- 📅 Year: 1995 – Ongoing (continuing mandamus)
- ⚖️ Case: T.N. Godavarman Thirumulpad v. Union of India
- 👤 Bench Strength: Multiple benches over decades (originated with 3 Judges)
- 📖 Key Articles Involved: Article 21, Article 48A, Article 51A(g); Forest (Conservation) Act, 1980
- 🧠 Doctrine Evolved: Continuing Mandamus; Expanded definition of “forest”
- 💬 Famous Line: “Forest is not a piece of land—it is an ecosystem.”

CONTEXT & BACKGROUND

This case began with a PIL filed by T.N. Godavarman, a former zamindar from Tamil Nadu, seeking enforcement of the Forest (Conservation) Act, 1980 to prevent rampant deforestation in his region. The Supreme Court took a broader view and converted it into



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a pan-India case, aimed at protecting forest cover nationwide. The Court invoked its constitutional duty under Article 21 (Right to Life) and Article 48A (environmental protection) to develop a comprehensive regime of forest governance.

CONSTITUTIONAL ISSUES RAISED

- What constitutes a “forest” under the Forest (Conservation) Act, 1980?
- Can the Court ensure long-term enforcement of environmental duties under Part IV and Part IVA of the Constitution?
- How far can judicial powers go in managing executive and legislative gaps in environmental law?

VERDICT & RATIO DECIDENDI

The Supreme Court:

- Interpreted the term “forest” not by ownership or classification, but by dictionary meaning, thus vastly expanding protection
- Imposed a pan-India freeze on deforestation without central clearance
- Introduced the concept of “continuing mandamus”, meaning the



the case remains open for periodic review and directions

- Established the Central Empowered Committee (CEC) for monitoring compliance

This case is one of the longest-running public interest environmental litigations in Indian legal history.

DOCTRINE / PRINCIPLE EVOLVED

- Continuing mandamus as a tool for long-term enforcement of constitutional duties
- Right to a healthy environment under Article 21
- Reaffirmed the importance of intergenerational equity, sustainable development, and precautionary principle in judicial environmentalism



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IMPACT & LEGACY

- Revolutionised forest governance and environmental law enforcement in India
- Led to protection of large forest tracts across the country
- Regularly used by the Court to intervene in mining, deforestation, and biodiversity destruction cases
- Strengthened institutional mechanisms like CAMPA, CEC, and State-level Monitoring Committees
- Laid the foundation for the National Green Tribunal (2010) and deepened judicial environmental oversight



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RELEVANCE FOR UPSC

- GS Paper 2:
 - Environmental governance, judicial activism, constitutional mandates
 - Forest policy and conservation laws
- GS Paper 4 (Ethics):
 - Intergenerational justice, environmental stewardship, constitutional morality
- Essay Paper:
 - Useful for themes like Environment and Development, Green Justice, Judicial Activism for Sustainability
- UPSC Interview:
- Relevant for discussions on NGT, forest policy, judicial overreach, or the balance between development and conservation

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