Justice Nagarathna: SC Turns Ecocentric | CLAT Legal GK

CURRENT AFFAIRS | 21 SEPTEMBER 2026

Supreme Court judge **Justice B V Nagarathna** said on **Sunday, 20 September 2026** that the apex court is now *"pushing for a shift from an anthropocentric approach to an ecocentric approach in matters of environment"*. She was addressing the valedictory session of a two-day international conference on **"The Future of Environment and Climate Dynamics"**, organised by the **National Green Tribunal (NGT)** at **Vigyan Bhavan, New Delhi**. **President Droupadi Murmu** was the chief guest, according to the Press Trust of India report carried by *The Indian Express*.

Describing the Supreme Court's contribution to environmental jurisprudence as *"overwhelming and significant"*, Justice Nagarathna argued that environmental law must move away from treating nature as **property, commodity or resource**. *"Environmental adjudication is an exercise in foresight, requiring courts to govern the present with an alert consciousness of the future,"* she said. For a CLAT aspirant, the speech is a compact map of Indian environmental law — its philosophy, its constitutional base and its five core doctrines — delivered by a sitting judge who is in line, by seniority, to become the first woman Chief Justice of India.

Anthropocentric versus ecocentric: the core distinction

An **anthropocentric** approach treats human beings as the central or most important element; nature is protected because, and to the extent that, it is useful to people — clean air for health, forests for timber, rivers for irrigation. An **ecocentric** approach places the natural environment and ecosystems at the centre of moral consideration. Justice Nagarathna put the consequence plainly: this entails recognising that human interests do not, simply by virtue of being human, enjoy automatic precedence over the interests of the non-human world. Rather, humans bear obligations towards non-human life that exist **independently of their utility** to humans.

She linked this to Indian tradition, which has long placed human beings *within*, not above, the natural order, and invoked the **Pancha Mahabhutas** — earth, water, fire, air and space — as a framework for environmental leadership. She also stressed that rivers, forests, oceans and air do not recognise political boundaries, so that environmental protection has become an arena where national action and international responsibility are inseparable.

Constitutional / Legal Framework

Article 21 (right to life) has been read by the Supreme Court to include the right to a clean and healthy environment — for instance in *Subhash Kumar v State of Bihar* (1991), which recognised the right to enjoy pollution-free water and air. **Article 48A**, a Directive Principle, obliges the State to protect and improve the environment and to safeguard forests and wildlife. **Article 51A(g)**, a Fundamental Duty, requires every citizen to protect and improve the natural environment, including forests, lakes, rivers and wildlife, and to have **compassion for living creatures**. Both Article 48A and Article 51A(g) were inserted by the **42nd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1976**.

The statutory pillars include the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972, the Water Act, 1974, the Forest (Conservation) Act, 1980, the Air Act, 1981, the Environment (Protection) Act, 1986, and the **National Green Tribunal Act, 2010**, which set up the NGT as a specialised body for environmental disputes. The Act directs the Tribunal to apply the principles of **sustainable development**, the **precautionary principle** and the **polluter pays principle** while deciding cases.

The “Pancha Siddhant”: five doctrines of Indian environmental law

According to reports of the speech, Justice Nagarathna grouped the core doctrines of Indian environmental law as a **Pancha Siddhant**. Each has a landmark case attached to it, and each is a staple of CLAT legal reasoning.

- **Absolute liability** — laid down in *M C Mehta v Union of India* (1987), the Oleum gas leak case. An enterprise engaged in a hazardous or inherently dangerous activity is absolutely liable for harm caused, without the exceptions available under the older English rule of strict liability in *Rylands v Fletcher*.
- **Polluter pays** and the **precautionary principle** — declared part of the law of the land in *Vellore Citizens’ Welfare Forum v Union of India* (1996), a case about tannery effluents. The polluter bears the cost of remedying the damage; and where there is a threat of serious or irreversible harm, lack of scientific certainty is no excuse for postponing preventive measures — with the burden on the developer to show the activity is benign.
- **Public trust doctrine** — applied in *M C Mehta v Kamal Nath* (1997). The State holds natural resources such as rivers, forests and seashores as a **trustee** for the public and cannot hand them over for private use in a way that defeats that trust.
- **Intergenerational equity** — the idea that the present generation holds the environment in trust for future generations. It sits naturally with her remark that courts must govern the present with an eye on the future.

From anthropocentric to ecocentric: the case trail

The shift Justice Nagarathna described is visible in the case law. In *Centre for Environmental Law, WWF-India v Union of India* (2013), dealing with the proposal to translocate **Asiatic lions** from Gir to Kuno, the Supreme Court expressly embraced an **ecocentric** approach, reasoning that the protection of an endangered species is a matter of its own survival and not merely of human interest. In the long-running *T N Godavarman Thirumulpad v Union of India* litigation, begun in the 1990s, the Court gave the word “forest” its dictionary meaning irrespective of ownership, and used a **continuing mandamus** to supervise forest governance for decades.

More recently, in *M K Ranjitsinh v Union of India* (2024), a case about the critically endangered **Great Indian Bustard** and overhead power lines, the Supreme Court recognised a **right against the adverse effects of climate change** flowing from **Articles 14 and 21**. That judgment marks the climate turn in Indian environmental jurisprudence — and it is directly relevant to a conference titled "The Future of Environment and Climate Dynamics".

The CLAT Angle

Environmental principles are among the most reliable sources of **legal-reasoning passages**. A typical question sets out a principle — for instance, *"Where there are threats of serious or irreversible damage, lack of full scientific certainty shall not be used as a reason for postponing measures to prevent environmental degradation"* — and asks whether a factory can continue operating while a study is pending. Know which doctrine does what: **absolute liability** removes defences; **polluter pays** allocates cost; the **precautionary principle** shifts the burden of proof; the **public trust doctrine** limits what the State may give away.

In GK, the likely hooks are the **42nd Amendment** (Articles 48A and 51A(g)), the **NGT Act, 2010**, and landmark cases such as *M C Mehta* (1987), *Vellore Citizens* (1996), *WWF-India* (2013) and *M K Ranjitsinh* (2024). In reading comprehension, the anthropocentric–ecocentric contrast is ideal material for "what does the author mean by…" questions.

Other voices at the conference

The NGT's Chairperson, **Justice Prakash Shrivastava**, said that environmental protection must go beyond identifying challenges and focus on building laws, institutions and partnerships capable of responding to emerging threats. *"Those with fewer resources often face the greatest risk. Climate action must therefore be inclusive, equitable, and attentive to vulnerable communities and future generations,"* he said. **Solicitor General Tushar Mehta** said environmental challenges can no longer be addressed by a single institution or discipline and need the combined efforts of law, governance, science, economics and society. Union Minister **Manohar Lal** also spoke.

Justice Nagarathna tied these threads together with the idea of **environmental justice**. Courts in many jurisdictions, including the Supreme Court, she said, have emerged as central actors in giving concrete meaning to that idea, aligning environmental protection with **substantive equality** — so that governance accounts not only for aggregate outcomes but for their differentiated social impacts.

Analysis: what an ecocentric turn would change

The practical difference between the two approaches shows up in how courts weigh competing claims. Under an anthropocentric lens, a project that harms a wetland may be justified if the human benefits — jobs, power, housing — outweigh the human costs. Under an ecocentric lens, the wetland's own ecological integrity counts as a value in the balance, even where no human is directly harmed. That does not mean development always loses; Justice Nagarathna herself acknowledged that environmental governance will frequently require **reconciliation between development and conservation**. It means the scales start in a different place.

There are, however, genuine questions. Ecocentrism relies heavily on judicial balancing, which critics say can blur the line between adjudication and policy-making. Scientific uncertainty is common, and the precautionary principle can cut both ways. And the doctrine's success depends on institutions — pollution

control boards, forest departments and the NGT — having the capacity to implement court orders. The speech's emphasis on foresight is a reminder that environmental cases are, by nature, decisions about risks that have not yet fully materialised.

Key Facts

- Speaker: **Justice B V Nagarathna**, Supreme Court of India; date: **20 September 2026**.
- Event: valedictory session of the NGT's international conference **"The Future of Environment and Climate Dynamics"**, Vigyan Bhavan.
- Chief guest: **President Droupadi Murmu**.
- Core claim: the SC is shifting from an **anthropocentric** to an **ecocentric** approach.
- Nature should not be treated as property, commodity or resource.
- Five doctrines cited: absolute liability, polluter pays, precautionary principle, public trust, intergenerational equity.
- NGT Chairperson: **Justice Prakash Shrivastava**; NGT set up under the **NGT Act, 2010**.
- **Articles 48A and 51A(g)** added by the **42nd Amendment, 1976**.
- *WWF-India* (2013): ecocentric approach in the Asiatic lion translocation case.
- *M K Ranjitsinh* (2024): right against adverse effects of climate change under Articles 14 and 21.

Memory Hook / Mnemonic

For the five doctrines, remember **"A-P-P-P-I" — Absolute liability, Polluter pays, Precaution, Public trust, Intergenerational equity."** Match cases with **"Mehta '87 made it Absolute, Vellore '96 made the Polluter Pay, Kamal Nath '97 held it in Trust."** And the shift in one line: **"Anthropo asks 'what is nature worth to us?' — Eco asks 'what do we owe to nature?'"**

Read online, with the interactive 10-question quiz: https://clatgurukul.com/justice-nagarathna-ecocentric-approach-environmental-jurisprudence-clat/