UPSC MAINS · ANSWER PRACTICE

Essay · Essay

We may brave human laws but cannot resist natural laws.

हम मानवीय नियमों का तो
साहसपूर्वक सामना कर सकते हैं,

परंतु प्राकृतिक नियमों का

प्रतिरोध नहीं कर सकते ।

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Answer Hint

Human-made laws and natural laws, limits of human power, laws of nature, science and technology, environmental sustainability, climate change, natural disasters, human freedom and responsibility, ethical governance, sustainable development, harmony between humanity and nature.

Model Answer

Introduction

Human civilisation has advanced through its ability to question authority, challenge established customs and reform unjust institutions. Laws created by human beings can be debated, amended, challenged in courts or peacefully resisted when they violate justice and fundamental rights. However, the natural laws governing the physical universe operate independently of human preferences. Gravity does not cease to function because it is inconvenient, and ecological systems do not remain unaffected merely because societies prioritise economic growth.

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The statement, “We may brave human laws but cannot resist natural laws,” highlights the distinction between rules established by human societies and the fundamental principles governing nature. While human laws can be changed through collective action, natural laws impose constraints that humanity must understand and respect. Nevertheless, this does not mean that human beings are powerless before nature. Through scientific knowledge, innovation and responsible action, they can adapt to natural processes and sometimes influence their effects. The real challenge is to distinguish between resisting the laws of nature and intelligently working within them.

Understanding Human Laws and Natural Laws

1. Human Laws

Human laws are rules established by governments and other legitimate institutions to regulate social conduct, maintain order and protect rights. They reflect political decisions, social values and historical circumstances.

Such laws can be amended, repealed or replaced as society evolves. For example, discriminatory laws can be challenged through democratic movements, constitutional litigation and legislative reforms.

The history of India demonstrates this capacity for transformation. The struggle against colonial rule challenged the legitimacy of laws imposed by a foreign power. Similarly, social reform movements have opposed practices that violated human dignity and equality.

Human laws are therefore not necessarily permanent or morally correct. Their legitimacy depends upon justice, constitutional principles and public accountability.

2. Natural Laws

Natural laws describe the regularities and relationships governing the physical and biological world. Gravity, the laws of thermodynamics, the conservation of energy and the principles governing ecological processes are examples of such regularities.

Unlike human-made rules, these laws do not depend upon political authority or public opinion. A legislature cannot repeal gravity, and a government cannot abolish the relationship between greenhouse gas emissions and global warming simply by passing a resolution.

In ordinary language, the phrase ‘natural laws’ also refers to ecological limits and the consequences of natural processes. These should be distinguished from scientific laws in the strict sense: scientific theories and

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models can be revised as evidence improves, whereas the natural processes they describe continue to operate regardless of human belief.

Why Human Laws Can Be Challenged

1. Human Laws May Be Unjust

The existence of a law does not automatically make it morally legitimate. Laws may protect privilege, suppress dissent or discriminate against particular communities.

India's freedom struggle illustrates how people can peacefully resist unjust laws. Mahatma Gandhi's Salt March of 1930 challenged the British monopoly over salt production and taxation. Civil disobedience demonstrated that moral courage and collective action can expose injustice and encourage legal and political change.

Similarly, movements for civil rights, gender equality and social justice have challenged discriminatory institutions across the world.

2. Human Laws Evolve with Society

Social progress often requires the reconsideration of inherited rules. Laws concerning education, labour rights, marriage, property and political participation have changed as societies have recognised previously neglected rights.

The Indian Constitution established a framework for challenging arbitrary authority and protecting fundamental rights. Judicial review, legislative reform and democratic participation enable citizens to contest government actions within constitutional processes.

Thus, human laws are capable of improvement because human societies possess the ability to reflect, deliberate and correct their mistakes.

3. Human Laws Depend on Enforcement

Human laws require institutions, public cooperation and enforcement mechanisms. Their effectiveness can weaken when institutions become corrupt, when public trust declines or when enforcement is selective.

Natural processes, by contrast, do not depend on the willingness of individuals to obey them. A person may ignore traffic rules and escape punishment temporarily, but ignoring the physical laws governing a moving vehicle does not eliminate the consequences of a collision.

This difference reveals the limits of human authority over the physical world.

Why Natural Laws Cannot Simply Be Resisted

1. Nature Operates Independently of Human Wishes

Human beings may disagree over political boundaries, economic policies or social values, but such disagreements do not change the basic workings of the natural world.

A building constructed without adequate structural support remains vulnerable to gravity and physical stress. Similarly, human settlements built in flood-prone areas without appropriate safeguards remain exposed to flooding.

The consequences may be delayed, but refusing to acknowledge natural processes does not make them disappear.

2. Ecological Systems Have Limits

Forests, rivers, oceans and soils support human civilisation through food production, water availability, climate regulation and biodiversity. Excessive exploitation can undermine these essential functions.

Deforestation, groundwater depletion, soil degradation and pollution illustrate how human activities can disrupt ecological balance. Although technological advances may temporarily increase resource availability, they cannot guarantee unlimited access to finite resources or eliminate every environmental consequence.

Sustainable development therefore requires economic progress within ecological limits.

3. Climate Change Demonstrates the Consequences of Ignoring Nature

Human-induced climate change is a major example of the relationship between human choices and natural processes. The burning of fossil fuels, deforestation and certain industrial activities increase greenhouse gas concentrations, altering the Earth's energy balance.

The resulting warming contributes to rising sea levels, heatwaves, changing precipitation patterns and increased risks from some extreme weather events.

Governments may delay environmental regulations or dispute the economic costs of climate action, but political decisions cannot abolish the physical processes responsible for global warming.

The lesson is not that humanity must surrender to nature, but that it must align its development choices with scientific evidence.

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4. Natural Disasters Reveal Human Vulnerability

Earthquakes, cyclones, volcanic eruptions and floods demonstrate that human settlements remain exposed to natural hazards. Their consequences, however, depend significantly on human preparedness.

For example, an earthquake may be unavoidable, but deaths and damage can be reduced through earthquake-resistant construction, effective building codes, early-warning systems, public awareness and emergency response.

Similarly, flood risks can be reduced through appropriate drainage, wetland conservation, floodplain management and responsible urban planning.

Nature imposes constraints, but human intelligence can reduce vulnerability to them.

The Limits of Human Power Do Not Mean Human Helplessness

The statement must not be interpreted as an argument that humanity should passively accept every natural event. Human beings have significantly improved their ability to understand and respond to nature.

1. Science Enables Adaptation

Scientific knowledge allows humanity to predict certain natural events, develop medicines, improve agricultural productivity and build infrastructure suited to local conditions.

Meteorological forecasts help authorities prepare for cyclones, while satellite technology assists in monitoring forests, oceans and environmental changes. Vaccines and public-health interventions reduce the burden of diseases caused by biological agents.

These achievements do not abolish natural laws; they use knowledge of those laws to reduce suffering.

2. Technology Can Change Conditions, Not Eliminate Every Constraint

Irrigation, renewable energy, improved crop varieties and water-treatment technologies can expand human capabilities. However, each intervention operates within physical and ecological conditions.

For instance, groundwater extraction can support agriculture in the short term, but excessive extraction may lower water tables and make future access more difficult. Desalination can increase freshwater supplies, yet it requires energy and careful management of concentrated brine.

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Technology is therefore most effective when combined with an understanding of long-term consequences.

3. Disaster Management Converts Knowledge into Protection

India's experience with cyclone preparedness demonstrates that natural hazards need not automatically become catastrophic disasters. Early warnings, evacuation planning, shelters and coordination between agencies can significantly reduce casualties.

Institutions such as the National Disaster Management Authority support preparedness, mitigation and response. These efforts reflect a practical principle: while natural events cannot always be prevented, the vulnerability of communities can often be reduced.

4. Environmental Restoration Can Repair Some Damage

Afforestation, wetland restoration, river conservation and the protection of biodiversity can help recover ecological functions. Renewable energy and energy efficiency can reduce emissions, while sustainable agriculture can improve soil and water management.

Nevertheless, restoration has limits. Some ecological damage may be irreversible on human timescales, and certain species or habitats cannot be recreated once lost.

This makes prevention and precaution especially important.

The Ethical and Philosophical Dimensions

The distinction between human and natural laws also raises important ethical questions.

1. Freedom Must Be Accompanied by Responsibility

Human beings possess the capacity to make choices, but those choices have consequences for other people and future generations. Freedom to exploit resources does not automatically justify doing so without regard to environmental damage.

Responsible freedom recognises that individual and collective decisions operate within shared ecological systems.

2. Humility Is Essential for Progress

Scientific and technological achievements can create an illusion that humanity has complete control over its surroundings. Yet environmental crises, emerging diseases and natural disasters reveal the limitations of this belief.

Humility does not oppose innovation. Instead, it encourages evidence-based decision-making, openness to new information and caution when interventions may have far-reaching effects.

3. Intergenerational Justice Matters

The benefits of economic growth may be enjoyed today, while its environmental costs are transferred to future generations. Excessive resource extraction, biodiversity loss and climate change can restrict the choices available to those who come after us.

Intergenerational justice requires current societies to protect the natural systems upon which future well-being depends.

4. Development Must Respect Ecological Sustainability

Economic development is necessary to reduce poverty, improve living standards and expand opportunities. However, development that destroys the resources supporting human life can undermine its own objectives.

The Sustainable Development Goals recognise the interconnectedness of human welfare, economic progress and environmental protection. Sustainable development seeks to reconcile these objectives rather than treating them as mutually exclusive.

Human Laws Must Reflect Natural Realities

Although natural laws cannot be repealed by legislation, human laws can regulate activities that affect the natural environment. Environmental protection laws, pollution standards, forest conservation measures and building regulations translate scientific understanding into public responsibility.

Effective environmental governance requires more than formal legislation. It depends on credible enforcement, public participation, scientific assessment and cooperation between governments, businesses and citizens.

India's environmental challenges illustrate this need. Urban flooding, air pollution, water scarcity and the degradation of natural habitats cannot be resolved solely through administrative orders. They require coordinated planning, responsible consumption, technological innovation and changes in development practices.

Human laws are most effective when they recognise the realities of the natural world. Legislation that ignores ecological constraints may create temporary benefits but leave society exposed to greater long-term risks.

Conclusion

Human beings can challenge unjust laws because human institutions are products of collective decisions and remain open to moral scrutiny, democratic reform and constitutional change. Natural laws, however, operate independently of human preferences. Their consequences cannot be eliminated by denial, political authority or wishful thinking.

Yet, the limits imposed by nature do not condemn humanity to helplessness. Science, technology, responsible governance and collective action enable societies to adapt to natural processes, reduce disaster risks and restore some damaged ecosystems.

The essential lesson is that wisdom lies in knowing what must be changed and what must be understood and respected. Unjust human laws should be challenged courageously, while natural laws should guide human decisions through evidence and experience.

True progress does not consist of conquering nature at any cost. It consists of developing the knowledge, humility and responsibility required to live within its limits while improving the quality of human life. Humanity may resist injustice in its institutions, but its long-term survival depends on cooperating with the natural world.

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