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Reclaim Central Delhi's Land for Public Green Spaces, Not Private Clubs

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Reclaim Central Delhi's Land for Public Green Spaces, Not Private Clubs

 Business Standard

26 May 2026

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INTERVIEW ANGLE

"When the state reclaims elite-occupied public land, what principles should govern its reuse to ensure it serves the broader public rather than a new set of privileged interests?"

EDITORIAL SUMMARY:

Business Standard argues that vast tracts of prime government land in central Delhi remain locked inside exclusive members-only clubs — the Delhi Gymkhana Club, the Delhi Race Club — with restrictive access, even as the Centre moves to reclaim them on grounds of public purpose and lease non-compliance, with eviction orders served on the Delhi Gymkhana Club after 113 years (reported May 23, 2026). The editorial contends that reclaimed land should be converted into open public green spaces rather than redeveloped opaquely, and urges transparency and public consultation so the land serves the broad public rather than a new set of privileged interests.

THE TRIGGER

The immediate occasion is the Centre's move against one of the capital's oldest elite institutions.

- **Eviction orders to the Delhi Gymkhana Club** after 113 years, reported May 23, 2026
- **Grounds:** lease non-compliance and public purpose
- **Wider context:** the Delhi Race Club and other colonial-era members-only clubs hold comparable prime land

The action reopens a long-deferred question — what is prime public land in the national capital actually for?

THE LAND QUESTION

Central Delhi — Lutyens’ Delhi in particular — is among the most valuable government-held land in the country, yet much of it sits under colonial-era leases granted to elite clubs at nominal rates.

- **Restrictive membership:** decades-long waitlists and high fees that exclude the ordinary citizen
- **Public land, private privilege:** state-owned land effectively serving a narrow membership
- **Nominal returns:** leases that bear little relation to the land’s public value

The arrangement is a structural anomaly: a public asset of immense value enclosed for private enjoyment.

THE DELHI GYMKHANA CLUB

ATTRIBUTE	DETAIL
Founded	1913 (colonial era)
Area	~27 acres in Lutyens’ Delhi
Government management control	2020, under an NCLT order over membership malpractices
Land custodian	L&DO (Land and Development Office), Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs

The 2020 takeover of management was itself a response to membership malpractices; the 2026 eviction order escalates this to the question of land tenure.

THE LAND-GOVERNANCE FRAMEWORK

BODY / LAW	YEAR	FUNCTION
L&DO (Land and Development Office)	—	Manages central-government land in Delhi
Delhi Development Authority (DDA)	1957	Urban planning for Delhi
Public Premises (Eviction of Unauthorised Occupants) Act	1971	Legal basis for evicting occupants of public premises
Master Plan of Delhi 2041 (MPD-2041)	—	Statutory framework guiding land use and green norms

Any reuse of reclaimed land must run through these institutions and, crucially, through the green-space provisions of MPD-2041.

THE URBAN GREEN-SPACE DEFICIT

Indian cities are, by global standards, starved of accessible green space.

BENCHMARK / CITY	GREEN SPACE PER CAPITA
WHO recommended norm	~9 sq m
Delhi (average)	20+ sq m (Ridge + Lutyens greens; unequally distributed)
Mumbai	~1.1 sq m
Chennai	~0.5 sq m

Even Delhi's relatively high average masks deep inequality in distribution. Green spaces are not amenities alone – they mitigate the urban heat island, improve air quality, support public health and sustain urban biodiversity.

THE PUBLIC-PURPOSE DOCTRINE

The legal and constitutional case for green reuse is well anchored.

- **Public purpose:** the doctrine that public resources must serve a public end (the Land Acquisition / LARR Act, 2013, embodies the principle, though here the land is already the government's own)
- **Article 21:** the right to a clean and healthy environment as part of the right to life
- **Article 48A:** the directive principle obliging the state to protect and improve the environment
- **Article 51A(g):** the fundamental duty of citizens to protect the natural environment

Together these establish that reclaimed public land carries a constitutional expectation of public, environment-serving use.

THE PUBLIC-TRUST DOCTRINE

The decisive principle is the public-trust doctrine.

– the Supreme Court established that the state is the trustee of natural resources for the people. Resources such as air, water, forests and ecologically fragile land are held in trust for the public and cannot be converted to private ownership in a manner that defeats that trust.

Applied to central Delhi’s reclaimed land, the doctrine points clearly toward public green use rather than re-enclosure for any private interest.

GLOBAL COMPARISONS

CITY	ASSET	LESSON
New York	Central Park (public green from the 1850s)	A deliberately created public green at the city’s heart
London	Hyde Park, Regent’s Park (royal parks opened to the public)	Elite spaces converted to public access
Singapore	“City in a Garden” model	Green integration as a governing urban philosophy

Each illustrates that prime central land, opened to the public as green space, can become a city’s defining civic asset.

THE RISKS IN REDEVELOPMENT

- **Opaque redevelopment:** reclaimed land quietly transferred to new private or commercial interests
- **“Beautification” displacing access:** cosmetic upgrades that exclude rather than welcome the public
- **Process deficit:** absence of transparency and public consultation in deciding reuse

Reclamation without principle could simply substitute one elite use for another.

WAY FORWARD

- 1 **Convert reclaimed club land** into public green spaces and urban forests
- 2 **Insist on transparency** and public consultation in any redevelopment decision
- 3 **Apply the public-trust doctrine** as the governing principle of reuse

- ④ **Avoid re-enclosure** — do not replace one privileged use with another
- ⑤ **Integrate with MPD-2041** green norms and city-wide green-equity goals

UPSC MAINS ANALYSIS

GS Paper 2 — Governance and Public Resources

- Governance of public land: L&DO, DDA, Public Premises Act 1971, lease compliance
- Transparency and accountability in redevelopment of reclaimed public assets
- Public-purpose and public-trust doctrines in resource governance

GS Paper 1 — Indian Society and Urbanisation

- Urbanisation: green-space equity, colonial legacies, elite enclosure of public land

GS Paper 3 link — Environment and Urban Ecology

- Urban heat island, air quality, urban biodiversity, green-space norms

Keywords: Delhi Gymkhana Club (1913, ~27 acres), Delhi Race Club, eviction reported May 23 2026, L&DO, DDA 1957, Public Premises (Eviction) Act 1971, MPD-2041, NCLT 2020 management control, WHO 9 sq m green norm, Mumbai 1.1 sq m, Chennai 0.5 sq m, public-trust doctrine, M.C. Mehta v. Kamal Nath 1997, Article 21, Article 48A, Article 51A(g), Central Park, Singapore City in a Garden.

The reclamation of central Delhi's club land is a test not of the state's power to evict but of its imagination in reuse. Prime public land freed from a colonial-era elite enclosure can travel two very different roads: toward an open green commons that serves the city's heat-stressed, air-starved millions, or toward an opaque redevelopment that quietly installs a new set of privileged claimants. The public-trust doctrine and the constitutional triad of Articles 21, 48A and 51A(g) point unambiguously to the first road. The measure of this reform will be who inherits the land once the gates come down — and on public land, the rightful inheritor is the public.

Sources: Business Standard, PIB

● KEY ARGUMENTS AT A GLANCE

Vast tracts of prime government land in central Delhi remain locked inside exclusive members-only clubs with restrictive access,

even as the Centre moves to reclaim them on grounds of public purpose and lease non-compliance (eviction orders to the Delhi Gymkhana Club after 113 years, reported May 23, 2026); the editorial argues such reclaimed land should become open public green spaces rather than be redeveloped opaquely, and urges transparency and public consultation.

✓ **SUPPORTING**

- Colonial-era clubs such as the Delhi Gymkhana Club (founded 1913, around 27 acres in Lutyens' Delhi) and the Delhi Race Club hold prime public land under nominal leases, with decades-long membership waitlists that exclude the broader public, while the government already took management control of Delhi Gymkhana in 2020 under an NCLT order over membership malpractices.
- The land sits with the Land and Development Office (L&DO) under the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs, with eviction enabled by the Public Premises (Eviction of Unauthorised Occupants) Act, 1971, and reuse to be planned within the Master Plan of Delhi 2041 framework.
- Indian cities face an acute and unequal green-space deficit against the WHO norm of around 9 sq m per capita — Mumbai near 1.1 sq m and Chennai near 0.5 sq m — and urban green spaces deliver heat-island mitigation, cleaner air, public health and biodiversity benefits that private clubs do not.
- The public-trust doctrine, affirmed by the Supreme Court in *M.C. Mehta v. Kamal Nath* (1997), holds the state as trustee of natural resources for the public, reinforced by Article 21, Article 48A and Article 51A(g) — a constitutional basis for converting reclaimed land to public green use.

⚠ **COUNTER**

Reclamation alone guarantees nothing: opaque “beautification” or commercial redevelopment could simply replace one privileged use with another, and heritage, existing institutional functions and due-process rights of current occupants must be weighed rather than steamrolled.

→ **WAY FORWARD**

Convert reclaimed club land into public green spaces and urban forests through transparent, consultative redevelopment anchored in the public-trust doctrine and

integrated with MPD-2041 green norms — ensuring the land serves the broad public rather than a new set of elite interests.

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MAINS ANSWER FRAMEWORK

QUESTION

"Prime public land in India's capital remains locked inside colonial-era members-only clubs even as cities face an acute green-space deficit." Discuss the constitutional and governance principles that should guide the reuse of reclaimed public land, with reference to the public-trust doctrine. (250 words)

INTRODUCTION

Business Standard argues that vast tracts of prime government land in central Delhi remain locked inside exclusive members-only clubs with restrictive access, even as the Centre moves to reclaim them — the eviction orders to the Delhi Gymkhana Club after 113 years, reported May 23, 2026, being the trigger — and that such reclaimed land should be converted into open public green spaces rather than redeveloped opaquely.

BODY

The clubs in question are colonial inheritances. The Delhi Gymkhana Club, founded in 1913, occupies around 27 acres of Lutyens' Delhi under a nominal lease, with decades-long membership waitlists that exclude the ordinary citizen; the Delhi Race Club and other members-only institutions sit on similarly prime public land.

The government had already taken management control of Delhi Gymkhana in 2020 under an NCLT order over membership malpractices, and the land itself rests with the Land and Development Office (L&DO) under the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs, with the Delhi Development Authority (1957) handling planning. Eviction is enabled by the Public Premises (Eviction of Unauthorised Occupants) Act, 1971, and reuse must be planned within the Master Plan of Delhi 2041.

The case for green reuse is strong: against the WHO norm of around 9 sq m of green space per capita, Mumbai stands near 1.1 sq m and Chennai near 0.5 sq m, and even Delhi's relatively high average (boosted by the Ridge and Lutyens greens) is unequally distributed. Green spaces mitigate the urban heat island, clean the air, support public health and sustain biodiversity.

The constitutional foundation is the public-trust doctrine, which the Supreme Court affirmed in M.C.

Mehta v. Kamal Nath (1997), holding the state as trustee of natural resources — air, water, forests, ecologically fragile land — for the public, reinforced by Article 21 (right to a healthy environment), Article 48A (directive principle on environmental protection) and Article 51A(g) (fundamental duty). Global precedents — New York’s Central Park, London’s Hyde and Regent’s Parks, and Singapore’s “City in a Garden” — show public green spaces becoming defining civic assets. The risk is that opaque redevelopment or “beautification” simply substitutes new private or commercial interests for the old elite ones.

CONCLUSION

Reclaiming the land is necessary but not sufficient. Reclaimed club land should be converted into public green spaces and urban forests through transparent, consultative redevelopment, anchored in the public-trust doctrine and integrated with MPD-2041’s green norms. The test of reform is not who is evicted, but who inherits — and the rightful inheritor of public land is the public.

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