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Officers Who Resisted Political Pressure

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Officers Who Resisted Political Pressure

Honest officers sometimes face pressure from powerful people. This lesson covers three well-known IAS cases: P.S. Appu, Ashok Khemka and Durga Shakti Nagpal. It explains what each did, what followed and what the cases teach about integrity.

At a glance

Four key facts on this topic

01 **Appu** Resigned over the academy revolver case.

02 **Khemka** Cancelled the Vadra-DLF mutation, 2012.

03 **57** Postings in about 33 years.

04 **Nagpal** Suspended in July 2013.



T. N. Seshan, Chief Election Commissioner of India, in 1994. Photo: Rishabh Tatiraju, Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA 3.0.

Who was P.S. Appu, and what conditions did he set?

1 Appu and His Conditions

1.1 Who was P.S. Appu?

P.S. Appu was a senior IAS officer who joined the Bihar cadre in 1951. He rose from district collector to finance secretary and then chief secretary. He died in Bangalore in March 2012.

Later writers called him **erudite and brilliant**. He was also an expert on land reforms. From 1971 to 1975 he served as land reforms commissioner at the Ministry of Agriculture and the Planning Commission.

1.2 What did he ask for before becoming chief secretary?

In 1977, Appu was named chief secretary of Bihar. He first wrote a long letter to Chief Minister Karpoori Thakur. The letter argued against his own appointment.

When Thakur insisted, Appu wrote again and set his terms. They were short and clear:

- Strict office hours for staff.
- Zero tolerance for political pressure.
- Ruthless action against corruption.
- The freedom to leave once he or the chief minister felt he was no longer effective.

Less than a year later, he felt these terms were not being met. He gave up the post and took a central job as additional secretary in the Ministry of Agriculture and Irrigation.

> 7. **Think it through:** Why would an officer list conditions before accepting a promotion? See answer ↓

> **Quick check 1.** True or false: P.S. Appu set conditions, including zero tolerance for political pressure, before taking a post. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: theprint.in; epw.in

Why did Appu resign as LBSNAA director?

2 The Academy Revolver Case

2.1 What happened at Badrinath in 1981?

Appu became director of the **LBSNAA**, the academy at Mussoorie where IAS trainees study, in August 1980. On 1 October 1981, a group of about 40 trainees was on a trek at Badrinath.

That night, one drunk probationer pulled out a .32 calibre revolver and threatened his companions. The group cut the trip short and returned to the academy.

2.2 Why did Appu resign?

Appu wanted strict action against the probationer. The Home Ministry let him off lightly. So Appu resigned in protest.

He then wrote directly to Prime Minister Indira Gandhi on 3 March 1982, six months after first raising the issue. He warned that weak action would send a dangerous message. With influence in the right quarters, one could commit even heinous crimes with impunity.

2.3 Why does this case matter for ethics?

He gave up the directorship to defend discipline in the service.

One trainee, Harsh Mander, later recalled Appu's lesson. An officer has the space to follow conscience, he said, if ready to pay the price.

Quick check 2. True or false: P.S. Appu resigned as LBSNAA director after the Home Ministry went easy on a probationer. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

What did Ashok Khemka do in the Vadra-DLF case?

3 The Vadra-DLF Mutation

3.1 Who is Ashok Khemka?

Ashok Khemka is a 1991-batch IAS officer of the Haryana cadre. In 2012 he held the post of Director General of Land Records and Consolidation. He retired in April 2025.

A **mutation** is the change of an owner's name in the revenue records after a sale. It is the official record that says who owns a piece of land.

3.2 What did he cancel?

Sky Light Hospitality, a firm of Robert Vadra, bought 3.53 acres in village Shikhopur, Gurgaon, on 12 February 2008 for Rs 7.5 crore. The land was later sold to the realty firm DLF.

In October 2012, Khemka cancelled the mutation. He had earlier issued written instructions to officials in four districts to check Vadra's registered deals. He called it his duty to act.

3.3 What happened next?

He was transferred from the land consolidation department on 11 October 2012. He said he got the order at about 10 pm. It was his 43rd transfer. He also said he received threat calls and was denied protection.

He argued that the move broke the 2010 cadre rules. Those rules promised IAS officers in Haryana a minimum tenure of two years in a post.

> **Quick check 3.** True or false: Khemka cancelled the mutation of land bought by a firm of Robert Vadra, and was transferred soon after. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: governancenow.com; tribuneindia.com; thenewsminute.com

What happened to Khemka after 2012, and what did the 2026 ruling say?

4 Fifty-Seven Transfers

4.1 How many times was Khemka transferred?

Khemka served in 57 postings in about 33 years. Many were short and peripheral. He often said he did only what public servants are expected to do.

In 2015, as Transport Commissioner, he refused fitness certificates to oversized trucks. A transport strike followed in January 2015. The government gave in, and he was moved again.

Three officers at a glance

Officer	What they did	What followed
P.S. Appu	Set terms for his post; resigned over the academy case	Left the post; resigned as director
Ashok Khemka	Cancelled a land mutation in 2012	Transferred; 57 postings; chargesheet
Durga Shakti Nagpal	Acted against sand mining in 2013	Suspended; protests followed

Each case is explained in its own card.

4.2 What was the chargesheet?

The Hooda government chargesheeted Khemka in 2013. It said he had broken All India Service conduct rules by staying on charge for four days after his transfer. In November 2015 the Haryana BJP government dropped it. Khemka called it an exoneration after a 700-day ordeal.

4.3 What did the 2026 High Court ruling say?

The Punjab and Haryana High Court ruled on 29 May 2026 that denying Khemka empanelment at additional secretary or secretary level was discriminatory. It said this violated Articles 14 and 16 of the Constitution.

Khemka had been left out in 2019, when his batch-mates were empanelled.

The Centre had relaxed the same rule for at least 20 other officers. He had retired, so the court told the Centre to treat him as empanelled for future assignments. This shows that protection on paper can work, but sometimes only after many years.

> **Quick check 4.** True or false: In 2026 the High Court held that denying Khemka empanelment violated Articles 14 and 16. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: theprint.in

Why was Durga Shakti Nagpal suspended in 2013?

5 A Suspension in Greater Noida

5.1 Who is Durga Shakti Nagpal?

Durga Shakti Nagpal was a 28-year-old IAS officer. In 2013 she was the sub-divisional magistrate, or SDM, of Gautam Buddh Nagar district, which includes Greater Noida.

She acted against illegal sand mining on the banks of the Yamuna and Hindon rivers. One report said she registered 26 FIRs in one week and arrested 15 people.

5.2 What happened in July 2013?

The Uttar Pradesh government suspended her. Opposition parties criticised the move. The IAS Association met the officiating chief secretary and demanded that the suspension be revoked.

The association said she had been **excessively punished**. It argued that a warning would have been enough if she had made any mistake. Chief Minister Akhilesh Yadav defended the suspension and said tough decisions are sometimes needed.

5.3 Why was her case so widely discussed?

Her suspension came soon after her sand-mining action. The opposition and the IAS Association objected strongly, and many people saw it as retaliation.

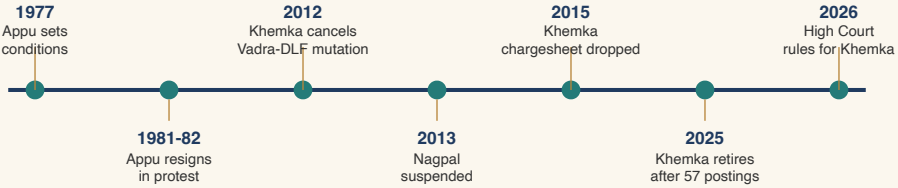
That wide attention is why this case sits beside Appu and Khemka in ethics classes.

> **Quick check 5.** True or false: The IAS Association demanded that Durga Shakti Nagpal's suspension be revoked. *(True or False?)*
>
> See answer ↓

Sources: deccanherald.com; indiawaterportal.org

What do the three cases teach, and what do exams ask?

6 Lessons and Exam Angle



Key dates in the three cases, from 1977 to 2026.

6.1 What do the three cases have in common?

Each officer faced a cost for acting on principle. Appu left posts. Khemka was moved again and again. Nagpal was suspended. Public attention, service associations and courts later helped to reduce the cost.

Legal protection exists on paper. But enforcing it in daily practice is harder, and it can take years.

6.2 What does the exam ask?

8. **Exam angle:** Ethics papers use these cases for questions on integrity, moral courage and political neutrality. Write the facts briefly and then say what the officer should do. See answer ↓

Quick check 6. True or false: The cases show that legal protection for civil servants always works quickly. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Remember this

- **Appu:** set conditions in 1977 and resigned as LBSNAA director over the revolver case.
- **Khemka:** cancelled the Vadra-DLF mutation in 2012 and faced 57 postings.
- **Nagpal:** suspended in July 2013 after acting against sand mining.
- **2026:** High Court ruled Khemka’s empanelment denial violated Articles 14 and 16.

Explain it back: Pick one officer. Say what pressure they faced and how the system responded.

Practice MCQs

1. Which Haryana IAS officer cancelled the mutation of a land deal involving Robert Vadra's company and DLF in 2012?

A. Durga Shakti Nagpal

B. Harsh Mander

C. Ashok Khemka

D. P.S. Appu

See answer ↓

2. P.S. Appu is best remembered for expertise in which subject?

A. Land reforms

B. Foreign trade

C. Railway budgeting

D. Space policy

See answer ↓

3. Durga Shakti Nagpal was suspended in 2013 after taking action against which activity?

A. Cattle smuggling

B. Tax evasion

C. Illegal sand mining

D. Forest felling

See answer ↓

4. About how many postings did Ashok Khemka serve in during his roughly 33-year career?

A. 57

B. 12

C. 27

D. 103

See answer ↓

5. Which post did Ashok Khemka hold when he cancelled the Vadra-DLF mutation?

A. Chief Secretary of Haryana

B. Transport Commissioner

C. Director General of Land Consolidation

D. Registrar of the High Court

See answer ↓

6. In which year did P.S. Appu die?

A. 2002

B. 2018

C. 2012

D. 2007

See answer ↓

Answer Key

1. **C.**
   It was **Ashok Khemka**. In October 2012 he cancelled the mutation of land bought by Vadra's Sky Light Hospitality. He was transferred soon after, on 11 October 2012. Appu, Nagpal and Mander were not involved in this case.
   ↑ Q1
2. **A.**
   Appu was an expert on **land reforms**. He served as land reforms commissioner from 1971 to 1975. A tribute after his death described his keen awareness of land issues.
   ↑ Q2
3. **C.**
   She had acted against **illegal sand mining** on the Yamuna and Hindon river banks, as the SDM of Gautam Buddh Nagar. Her suspension drew protests from the IAS Association and opposition parties.
   ↑ Q3
4. **A.**
   Khemka was transferred or posted about **57 times** by the time he retired in April 2025. Many of his postings were short and peripheral.
   ↑ Q4
5. **C.**
   He was the **Director General of land consolidation**, and he also held the registration charge. He became Transport Commissioner only later, after 2014.
   ↑ Q5
6. **C.**
   Appu died in Bangalore on 29 March **2012**. A tribute in Economic and Political Weekly that year called him an extraordinary civil servant.
   ↑ Q6

Quick-check answers

1. **True.** He wrote them down for Chief Minister Karpoori Thakur before accepting the chief secretary job. ↑ 1
2. **True.** He resigned in protest and later wrote to the Prime Minister. ↑ 2

3. **True.** He was moved out of the consolidation department on 11 October 2012. ↑ 3
4. **True.** The Centre had relaxed the same rule for at least 20 other officers. ↑ 4
5. **True.** Its office-bearers met the officiating chief secretary and made this demand. ↑ 5
6. **False.** Khemka needed 14 years and a court order to win relief on empanelment, and the chargesheet took over two years to drop. ↑ 6
7. **Think it through.** Because he knew that a senior post without the freedom to refuse pressure would only make him a mouthpiece. He chose to lose the post rather than his independence. ↑ 7
8. **Think it through.** A good answer names the value at stake, the pressure applied and the remedy. Remedies include fixed tenure, transparent transfer rules and civil society support. ↑ 8

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