BLOGS

# Reasonableness as the Check on State Power: Administrative Law for CLAT PG

Adtiya Aryan · 25 Feb 2026

Administrative law can feel dry because it deals with files, officials, and procedures. But beneath all that is a very human concern: **how much power should the State have, and how should it use that power?**

The idea of *reasonableness* is what answers this question. Most administrative law cases, even if they appear technical, are really about whether an authority acted sensibly, fairly, and within limits.

In a modern State, administration is unavoidable. Governments cannot run only through laws passed in Parliament. Day-to-day decisions are taken by officers and authorities granting licences, cancelling permissions, fixing penalties, or deciding who qualifies for a benefit.

To do this effectively, the law gives them discretion. The danger begins when discretion turns into unchecked power. Reasonableness is the standard courts use to keep this power under control without paralysing governance.

A common misunderstanding among aspirants is that courts interfere whenever an administrative decision feels wrong. That is not true. Courts are not meant to replace administrators.

Judicial review is about *how* a decision was taken, not whether it was the best possible decision. If an authority stays within legal limits and acts in a reasonable way, courts will not step in even if they might personally disagree with the outcome.

One way courts test reasonableness is by checking **what factors were considered**. Authorities are expected to rely only on factors that the law allows them to consider. In *Ram Manohar Lohia v. State of Bihar*[1], the Supreme Court made it clear that vague justifications cannot support serious restrictions. If an authority relies on irrelevant considerations, or ignores important ones, the decision becomes unreasonable. This principle appears frequently in exam passages where reasons are given but do not actually connect to the action taken.

Another important control comes from the idea that decisions should not be extreme or absurd. This was famously explained in the **Wednesbury case**, where the court said that a decision would be struck down only if it was so unreasonable that no sensible authority would ever take it. Indian courts adopted this approach to avoid excessive interference while still preventing blatant misuse of power.

However, this standard was very narrow. It worked well for routine administrative matters but failed to protect individuals in cases where rights were affected more directly. Over time, courts realised that a decision could be legal and yet deeply unfair.

This realisation became clear after *Maneka Gandhi v. Union of India*[2]. Though it arose in a constitutional context, the case changed administrative law thinking. The Court stressed that fairness and non-arbitrariness are part of governance itself. Administrative action affecting liberty or serious interests could not be defended merely by saying "the law allows it." The action itself had to be reasonable.

As governance expanded, courts began asking more nuanced questions. This led to the use of **proportionality**. Proportionality looks at balance. It asks whether the authority used a sledgehammer when a softer response would have worked. For example, cancelling a licence for a minor technical breach or dismissing an employee without considering alternatives may be legally permitted, but still unreasonable. Courts have increasingly intervened in such cases, especially where consequences are severe.

Reasonableness is also closely tied to **natural justice**. A decision taken without hearing the affected person or without giving reasons often lacks fairness. In *A.K. Kraipak v. Union of India* [3], the Supreme Court made it clear that even administrative decisions must follow basic standards of fairness when they affect rights. Hearing people out and explaining decisions are not formalities they are part of reasonable governance.

For CLAT PG, this concept usually appears quietly. A passage may describe an authority acting strictly "as per rules," but the outcome feels harsh or mechanical. The task is to spot whether discretion was used thoughtfully or blindly. Was the penalty excessive? Were reasons meaningful? Was the individual given a fair chance? These questions point straight to reasonableness.

Seen this way, administrative law stops being a collection of doctrines. It becomes a way of judging power. Every principle judicial review, natural justice, proportionality exists to answer the same concern: *did the State act like a responsible authority?*

If you approach administrative law through this idea, questions become easier to handle. You are no longer hunting for labels. You are simply asking whether power was exercised with care, balance, and fairness. And that instinctive judgment is exactly what CLAT PG is testing.

## References

[1] AIR 1966 SC 740

[2] 1978 SCR (2) 621

[3] AIR 1970 SC 150