Vol. XLV No. 2 April-June, 2026

COMMON CAUSE

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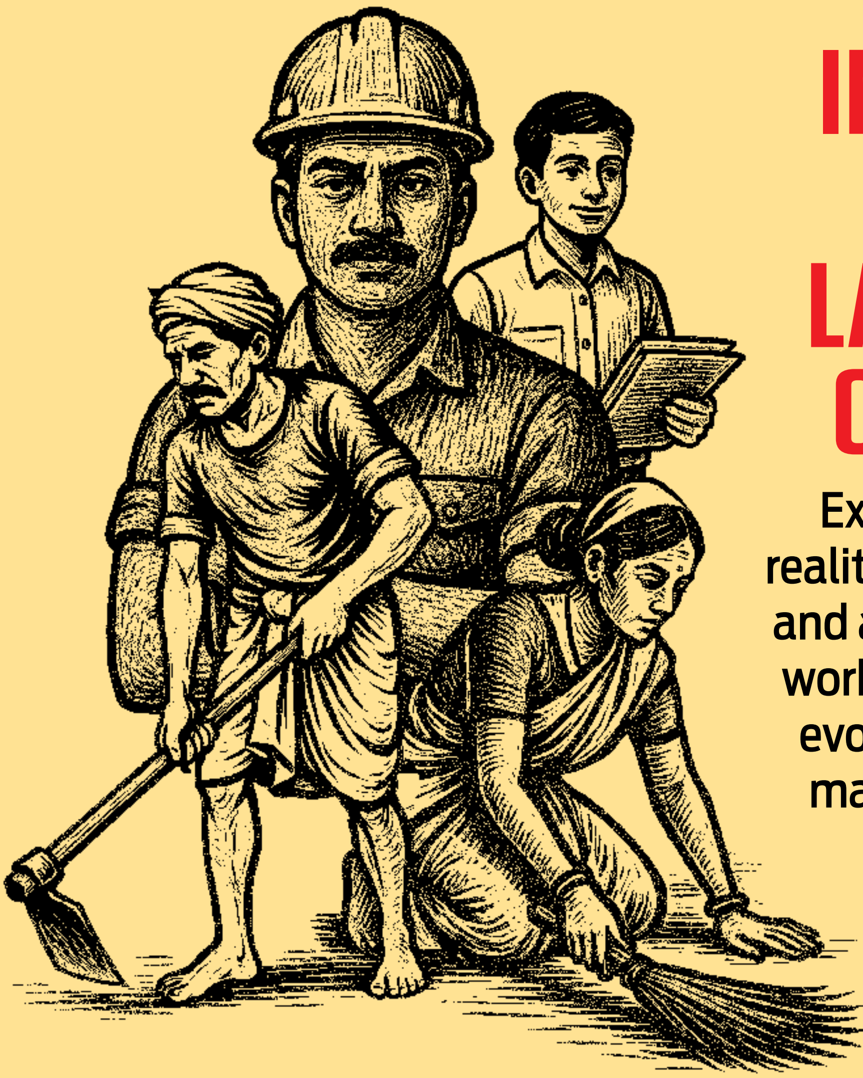

INDIA'S NEW LABOUR CODES

Exploring the realities, struggles, and aspirations of workers in India's evolving labour market & laws

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LABOUR LAWS FOR VIKSIT BHARAT

Fair for Workers or Just Good on Paper?

The idea of Resurgent India always cheers me up. It symbolises our collective aspirations and achievements. My favourite topics are India's intellectual heft, its rich philosophy and cultural diversity. Resurgent India implies that our people are prospering as our country scales new heights. Having said so, I must admit that I am a little uneasy when 'Viksit Bharat' is celebrated too soon. Despite my faith in the long-term India story, it feels like putting the cart before the horse.

The big picture is that India has a lot going for it, and Viksit Bharat does pop up in parts of smart cities. It is equally true that our luxury condos, fast cars, metros and expressways justify the tag. But sadly, it eludes the vast majority who live and work on the margins. Their condition belies any claims of resurgence. The scene is particularly grim in tenements around the hazardous sweatshops that pass for factories. Unlike the Western countries whose growth models we follow, we hardly factor in fair wages or a social safety net in our planning. Rather than profiting from productivity, innovation, and the rise of the rest, our businessmen thrive on cheap labour and the flouting of laws.

So, I was cautiously hopeful when India's new labour codes were enacted under the Viksit Bharat vision. They were celebrated as a 'future-ready' plan meant to balance welfare with the ease of doing business. It began with consolidating 29 fragmented laws into four comprehensive labour codes. These cover minimum wages, equal pay, fair working conditions, and worker safety, etc. They also aim to include the left-out sections, such as domestic workers and gig and platform workers, whose rights have never received the attention of policymakers.

But the proof of the pudding is in the eating. Their success will depend on their implementation on the ground. The new codes recently faced their first major test during labour strikes in NOIDA, Gurgaon, and the NCR. The workers were demanding a wage hike after the food and fuel prices spiked following the war in West Asia. Besides the news of violence, there were also reports of rampant discrimination in wages, no fixed hours of work, and no safety or overtime as mandated by the new labour codes. The crisis was finally resolved, but one hopes the policymakers noticed the gap between theory and practice. Reports from the ground showed that our workplaces remain extremely hazardous and accident-prone, our workers are mostly kept undocumented, and the laws are observed more in breach than in practice.

This issue of your journal is devoted to evaluating India's new labour codes. It includes a ground report from an industrial area in the NCR and special articles on how the new codes address the plight of domestic workers and the gig and platform workers. It also excerpts two recent fact-finding reports on the condition of industrial workers in the NCR region and the abdication of duty by the main stakeholders. For instance, state governments should not be allowed to get away without fixing the minimum wages in a timely fashion, as mandated by law. Our small and unorganised sector, which contributes strongly to the economy, must also rise above the cheap labour syndrome and move up the global value chain to fuel the resurgent India story.

The task is enormous but not insurmountable.

Do let us know what you think at commoncauseindia@gmail.com

Vipul Mudgal
Editor

INDIA'S LABOUR CODES

Reforming Labour or Recasting Labour Rights?

Rishikesh Kumar*

Pic Credit: Stock Photos

Representational Image of Kiln Factory Workers

When India became a founding member of the International Labour Organisation (ILO) in 1919, it committed itself to a simple yet enduring principle: economic progress must be accompanied by dignity at work. The story of labour reform in India did not begin with the Labour Codes. It has been shaped over decades by legislative interventions, workers' struggles, and judicial pronouncements. Among the most significant was the Supreme Court's decision in Air India Statutory Corporation v. United Labour Union, which underscored the principle that contract workers should not be denied fair wages and humane working conditions merely because of the nature of their employment. The judgment reflected a broader constitutional commitment to labour welfare and highlighted the need to prevent the exploitation of vulnerable workers. As India aspires to become a developed nation by 2047, that principle finds itself at the centre of one of the most consequential policy debates in independent India's history.

By the second decade of the twenty-first century, India's labour law framework had become a product of decades of incremental legislation. Industrial disputes, economic transitions, judicial interventions, and social movements had each added new layers to the regulatory landscape. While these laws were enacted to protect workers, the resulting framework was increasingly criticised as fragmented, complex, and poorly suited to emerging forms of employment such as gig and platform work. As India's economy evolved, calls for a

The Four Codes at a Glance:

1. Code on Wages, 2019

Key Highlights	Description
Laws Consolidated	Minimum Wages Act, Payment of Wages Act, Bonus Act, Equal Remuneration Act
Notable Feature	The Code introduces a uniform definition of wages based primarily on Basic Pay and Dearness Allowance, while limiting allowances to 50% of total salary to prevent employers from reducing statutory benefits.
Main Criticism	Weak Enforcement & Informal Sector Challenges: The shift from direct labour-court access to inspectors-cum-facilitators and administrative mechanisms may weaken enforcement, limit workers' access to justice, and reduce the effectiveness of wage protections, particularly in the informal sector.

* *Research Executive (Legal) at Common Cause*

comprehensive restructuring of labour regulation grew stronger.

Against this backdrop, the Government of India undertook an ambitious legislative exercise, consolidating 29 labour laws into four comprehensive codes:

i) the Code on Wages, 2019;

ii) the Industrial Relations Code, 2020;

iii) the Code on Social Security, 2020; and

iv) the Occupational Safety, Health and Working Conditions Code, 2020.

The stated objective was to simplify compliance, improve ease of doing business, promote investment, and extend legal protections to emerging categories of workers, including those in the gig and platform economy.

Yet, beneath the promise of simplification lies a deeper question. Are the Labour Codes a long-overdue modernisation of India's labour market, or do they signal a gradual shift in the balance of power from workers to employers? Supporters view the reforms as essential for economic growth and employment generation in an increasingly competitive global economy. Critics, including trade unions and labour rights advocates, argue that provisions relating to fixed-term employment, retrenchment, collective bargaining, and the right to strike may weaken worker protections in the name of flexibility.

> **"*Are the Labour Codes a long-overdue modernisation of India's labour market, or do they signal a gradual shift in the balance of power from workers to employers?*"**

The debate, therefore, is not merely about labour regulation. It is about the kind of development India seeks to pursue. Can economic flexibility coexist with social justice? Can labour markets become more competitive without making workers more vulnerable? This article critically examines India's Labour Codes through these competing lenses, assessing whether the reforms strike an appropriate balance between efficiency, flexibility, and the constitutional promise of dignified work.

Expanding the Scope of Wage Protection

The Code on Wages consolidates four key wage-related legislations into a single framework and extends minimum wage protection beyond the earlier category of "scheduled employments." By bringing a wider segment of workers within its ambit, the Code seeks to create a more inclusive and simplified wage regime.

Creating a Uniform Wage Framework

A major innovation of the Code is the introduction of a National Floor Wage, below which States

2. Industrial Relations Code, 2020

Key Highlights	Description
Law Consolidated	Trade Unions Act, 1926 Industrial Employment (Standing Orders) Act, 1946 Industrial Disputes Act, 1947
Notable Feature	The Code raises the threshold for prior government approval for lay-offs, retrenchment, and closure from 100 to 300 workers, while retaining compensation, notice requirements, and introducing a Reskilling Fund for affected workers.
Main Criticism	Weakening of Collective Bargaining: By easing layoffs, restricting strikes, and imposing stringent union recognition requirements, the Code shifts the balance of power towards employers, introduces a 51% union recognition threshold, and weakens collective bargaining.

cannot fix minimum wages. The Code also establishes a uniform definition of "wages", reducing inconsistencies that existed across different labour laws and limiting the scope for employers to restructure salary components to avoid statutory obligations.

Concerns over Wage Determination and Enforcement

Despite these reforms, concerns remain regarding implementation and worker participation. The Code does not provide a robust mechanism for periodic revision of the National Floor Wage, raising questions about its ability to keep pace with inflation and rising living costs. Further, unlike ILO standards that emphasise tripartite consultation among governments, employers, and workers, the Code offers limited institutional safeguards for meaningful worker involvement in wage-setting decisions. Questions have also been raised regarding enforcement, as the shift towards inspectors-cum-facilitators and administrative mechanisms may reduce workers' access to effective remedies, particularly in a labour market characterised by informality and unequal bargaining power.

Consolidating Industrial Relations Laws

The Industrial Relations Code consolidates three key labour legislations the Trade Unions Act, 1926, the Industrial Disputes Act, 1947, and the Industrial Employment (Standing Orders) Act, 1946 into a single framework governing trade unions, dispute resolution, layoffs, retrenchment, and closure of establishments.

Formalising Collective Bargaining

The Code introduces measures aimed at strengthening transparency and collective bargaining. Mandatory issuance of appointment letters formalises employment relationships and reduces ambiguity regarding workers' rights and obligations. It also establishes a framework for recognising negotiating unions and negotiating councils, thereby providing a structured mechanism for collective bargaining.

Greater Flexibility, Growing Concerns

The most debated reform under the Code is the increase in the threshold for prior government approval for layoffs, retrenchment, and closure from 100 to 300 workers. While proponents argue that this reduces regulatory burdens and encourages firms to expand and hire, critics contend that it weakens job security for workers employed in medium-sized establishments. The Code also introduces fixed-term employment, granting workers parity in wages and benefits with permanent employees but allowing employers greater flexibility through non-renewal of contracts.

Restrictions on Collective Action

Concerns have also been raised regarding the Code's impact on workers' bargaining power. The requirement of prior notice for strikes and restrictions on industrial action during conciliation and arbitration

3. Code on Social Security, 2020

Key Highlights	Description
Law Consolidated	Employees' Provident Funds Act, 1952 Employees' State Insurance Act, 1948 Maternity Benefit Act, 1961 Payment of Gratuity Act, 1972 Etc.
Notable Feature	Gratuity entitlement for fixed-term employees and provision for voluntary registration of unorganised workers.
Main Criticism	Exclusionary Social Security Framework: Mandatory Aadhaar-based registration, coupled with vague welfare guarantees and excessive reliance on future schemes, risks excluding migrant and informal workers while creating uncertainty over social protection for gig and platform workers

proceedings are viewed by many as limiting the effective exercise of the right to strike. Critics argue that these provisions, coupled with easier retrenchment norms, tilt the balance in favour of employers and diverge from ILO standards that view collective bargaining and industrial action as essential components of freedom of association.

Expanding the Social Security Net

The Code on Social Security consolidates nine existing legislations, including laws relating to provident funds, employee insurance, maternity benefits, and welfare of unorganised workers, into a single framework. Its most significant contribution is the formal recognition of gig workers and platform workers, bringing previously excluded categories of labour within the ambit of social security for the first time. This expansion broadly aligns with ILO principles that advocate extending social protection to all workers, irrespective of the nature of employment.

Towards Inclusive Welfare Protection

The Code seeks to broaden access to social security benefits by providing for schemes relating to provident fund, gratuity, maternity benefits, health protection, employment injury compensation, old-age support, housing, and welfare measures for unorganised workers. The inclusion of maternity benefits and welfare provisions for gig and platform workers reflects an effort to adapt labour protection to the realities of a changing workforce and the growing digital economy.

4. Occupational Safety, Health and Working Conditions Code, 2020

Key Highlights	Description
Law consolidated	Integrates 13 labour legislations, including the Factories Act, 1948, Mines Act, 1952, Plantations Labour Act, 1951, etc.
Notable Feature	Inspector-cum-Facilitator Model: Replaces the traditional inspector system with a compliance-oriented approach focused on guidance and awareness, while retaining enforcement powers for violations. Inspections are largely web-based and randomised to enhance transparency and reduce arbitrariness.
Main Criticism:	Protection Without Accountability: While the Code consolidates workplace safety laws and expands coverage, its reliance on delegated rule-making, weak enforcement mechanisms, and inadequate safeguards for women workers risks turning statutory protections into paper guarantees.

Recognition Without Guaranteed Coverage

While the recognition of gig and platform workers is widely regarded as a progressive step, concerns remain regarding the actual delivery of benefits. Registration under the Code requires Aadhaar-based identification, which may create barriers for migrant workers, informal workers, and individuals lacking stable documentation. Further, many of the substantive welfare benefits are left to future schemes to be framed by the government, raising concerns that legal recognition may not necessarily translate into effective social security coverage.

Challenges of Implementation and Uniformity

The Code provides significant discretion to the Central Government in designing and administering social security schemes, while offering limited clarity on funding responsibilities and implementation mechanisms. Critics argue that the absence of uniform minimum standards across States could result in uneven access to benefits and inconsistent implementation. Questions have also been raised regarding the legal status of gig workers, who, despite being recognised under the Code, continue to remain outside the traditional employer-employee relationship, potentially limiting the extent of protection available to them.

Unlike ILO standards that emphasise tripartite consultation among governments, employers, and workers, the Code offers limited institutional safeguards for meaningful worker involvement in wage-setting decisions.

Consolidating Workplace Safety Laws

The OSH Code consolidates 13 labour legislations governing workplace safety, health, and working conditions, including laws relating to factories, mines, plantations, contract labour, building and construction workers, and inter-State migrant workers. By creating a unified framework, the Code seeks to simplify compliance and establish more uniform standards across sectors.

Expanding Safety and Welfare Protection

A key feature of the Code is the extension of occupational safety and health obligations to a wider range of establishments, including those employing ten or more workers and all hazardous establishments irrespective of workforce size. The Code mandates health and safety measures, periodic medical examinations for workers engaged in hazardous occupations, and welfare facilities for contract labourers.

Advancing Inclusion in the Workplace

The Code introduces several measures aimed at making workplaces more inclusive. It expands the definition of inter-State migrant workers to include self-employed migrants and provides benefits such as travel allowances, welfare portability, and access to grievance redressal mechanisms. The Code also permits women to work in all establishments, including night shifts, subject to their consent and the provision of adequate safety, transportation, and security measures by employers.

Persistent Implementation Concerns

Despite its ambitious scope, concerns remain regarding the effective enforcement of workplace safety standards. Much of the operational framework has been left to subordinate legislation and future rule-making, creating uncertainty regarding implementation. Critics argue that India's longstanding challenges in enforcing occupational safety norms may persist unless monitoring and inspection mechanisms are significantly strengthened. Questions have also been raised regarding the adequacy of safeguards against workplace harassment and violence, particularly for women workers, as well as the gap between statutory protections and their actual realisation on the ground.

Where Do the Labour Codes Fall Short?

The Labour Codes promise simplification, flexibility, and wider coverage. Yet the real debate is not whether the laws are simpler, but whether workers are better protected than before. A closer look reveals three major concerns.

Flexibility for Employers, Uncertainty for Workers

Perhaps the biggest criticism of the Labour Codes is that they make it easier for employers to hire and fire workers while offering limited

Despite its ambitious scope, concerns remain regarding the effective enforcement of workplace safety standards. Much of the operational framework has been left to subordinate legislation and future rule-making, creating uncertainty regarding implementation.

additional security in return. The Industrial Relations Code raises the threshold for prior government approval for layoffs, retrenchment, and closure from 100 to 300 workers. Supporters argue that this will encourage firms to expand and create jobs. Critics, however, fear that it weakens job security for workers in medium-sized establishments.

The restrictions on strikes and the additional procedural requirements imposed on trade unions have also raised concerns. At a time when unionisation in the private sector is already weak, limiting workers' ability to collectively bargain may further shift the balance of power towards employers. The introduction of fixed-term employment reflects the same trend: while workers receive equal benefits during employment, the ease of non-renewal can make employment more insecure in practice.

Rights on Paper, Uncertainty in Practice

The Social Security Code's recognition of gig and platform workers has been widely welcomed. However, recognition alone does not automatically translate into protection. Many welfare benefits are dependent on future schemes and executive decisions, leaving workers uncertain about what they are actually entitled to receive. Similarly, mandatory Aadhaar-based registration may create barriers for migrant and informal workers who often struggle with documentation.

> ***"The Labour Codes promise simplification, flexibility, and wider coverage. Yet the real debate is not whether the laws are simpler, but whether workers are better protected than before"***

The Occupational Safety, Health and Working Conditions Code faces a similar challenge. While it promises better safety standards, welfare measures, and broader coverage, many important details have been left to future rules. India's experience suggests that labour rights often fail not because laws are absent, but because implementation is weak. Without adequate inspections, monitoring, and grievance mechanisms, legal protections may remain largely symbolic.

The Challenge of Implementation and Accountability

The success of the Labour Codes ultimately depends on how effectively they are implemented. Questions remain regarding the division of responsibilities between the Centre and States, funding arrangements, and the functioning of new dispute-resolution mechanisms. The shift from traditional labour inspectors to the Inspector-cum-Facilitator model places greater emphasis on self-compliance, raising concerns about oversight in sectors marked by informality and labour violations. Extending social security and workplace protections to millions of unorganised, gig, and migrant workers will also require substantial administrative capacity, digital infrastructure, and awareness-building.

Ultimately, the Labour Codes will be judged not by the promise of simplification but by their ability to improve workers' lives. As India moves towards the vision of Viksit Bharat 2047, the real question is whether labour reforms will merely make business easier, or whether they will also make work more secure, dignified, and equitable for the millions who power the country's growth.

WAR FOR FAIR WAGES

Workers' Struggle for a Dignified Life

Anumeha Yadav *

Noida, Uttar Pradesh: At 8 am, an hour before factories would start work. Maina Devi (workers' names have been changed on request) waited for her company bus on the sidewalk next to a large warehouse in Phase 2 of Noida's industrial area.

It had been a week since she and hundreds of workers from multiple factories on the borders of Delhi stopped work for four days protesting against low wages and difficult work conditions. Several factories still showed damage. Amid police presence and fresh notices on factory gates reassuring workers of revised wages, Devi was heading to work, her thumb in a fresh bandage.

Employed at Gurudas Amardas International Private Limited, that makes wire harness for automobiles and shielded cables used in automation and data communication, the migrant worker from Uttar Pradesh's Moradabad, 160 km away from her factory, had punctured her left thumb the previous day while putting a wire on the terminal.

Pic Credit: Anumeha Yadav

A workers' residential area devoid of basic amenities

Despite the injury being extremely painful, Devi told *The Migration Story* that she had no choice but to go to work as she was supporting her three children and missing a day's work would mean losing Rs 530.

* *A freelance journalist. Her reportage focuses on the rights and social security of lower income workers, primarily migrants to India's metropolises*

The company had hired her on a monthly wage of Rs 11,313, which after the strikes is set to rise to Rs 13,690. Earlier, she had worked for two years in garment factories in the Noida hosiery complex. “They paid even lower, only Rs 9,000 rupees a month,” Devi said. “For two years, I stood daily at the table, cutting threads in 12 hour-long shifts and the company did not increase our wages by even one rupee.”

From 2024 to 2026, she had worked three to four hours overtime nearly daily, she added. For this, the company had paid her Rs 25 for every additional hour of work after the regular eight-hour shift. This was in breach of the law that requires an employer to pay at least twice the normal wage as overtime for each extra hour. But most employers do not pay this rate, she said.

“You must stand from 8 or 9 am to 9 pm every day. At the most, you go to the toilet as a break. But one must rush back from to the station. Otherwise, production targets, handling 40 to 50 pieces an hour, pile up and become impossible,” she recalled.

As per the Minimum Wages Act, State governments are mandated to revise the minimum wages every five years. But both Uttar Pradesh and Haryana governments, where workers in the industrial areas around the national capital went on large strikes in April, had not done so in over 10 years.

“*As per the Minimum Wages Act, State governments are mandated to revise the minimum wages every five years. But both Uttar Pradesh and Haryana governments, where workers in the industrial areas around the national capital went on large strikes in April, had not done so in over 10 years.*”

This status quo was disrupted when Devi and her co-workers joined hundreds of other workers in the industrial complex in Noida to protest against poor wages, long working hours, and extremely low overtime pay. Videos posted by the firm’s young workers recorded their colleagues in large numbers picketing the factory gate peacefully, while policemen in riot gear approached them carrying batons.

The protests resulted in the Uttar Pradesh government revising the base or minimum wage rate; the wages of most workers such as Devi were now set to rise from Rs 11,313 to Rs 13,690.

“*Ho gaya sahi. Clear ho gaya sab* (It got corrected. It was sorted),” said young women workers who had gathered around Devi.

A Decade of Stagnant Wages

In Noida Phase-II, the protests began on April 9 and from there spread across industrial belts in more than eight sites in NCR. As per labour activists’ estimates, the protests involved around 50,000 factory workers in Noida alone. Protests further spread among domestic workers and gig workers.

Uttar Pradesh, where Noida is located, had not increased minimum wages since 2012. The law requires that minimum wage be revised at least every five years.

Yogesh Kumar, an activist with Inqilabi Mazdoor Kendra, a non-registered organisation which aims to act as a labour collective for registered unions, said that the recent protests in Noida had followed a series of similar wage hike demands by workers of Honda automobile manufacturing plant in Haryana’s Manesar on April 2, 70 km from Noida.

“From Honda, it spread to nearby Munjal Showa Limited plant on April 4, then to Satyam Auto, Roop Polymers by April 6, and from there to garment companies such as Richa Global and Modelama by April 8,” said Kumar. "Workers came out of Richa Global's three of six factories in Manesar. After they won a wage hike on April 9, workers of Richa Global factories in Noida – the same firm runs five factories in Noida – and workers of Mothersons Sumi Wiring (an automobiles sector firm) started asking for similar wage increase. This intensified April 13 onwards."

Haryana announced a revision on April 9, 2026, after workers did a series of strikes and protests that spread from factory to factory in automobile, ancillary, and garment exports units in Industrial Model Town Manesar, near Gurugram.

The Haryana wage revision was done after nearly 11 years.

Even these revisions may not adequately address rising costs. For instance, accounting for price rise, as per the All India Consumer Price Index Numbers (for Industrial Workers), if a worker earned Rs 10,000 minimum wages per month in 2015, then to keep pace with inflation, the worker would need to earn Rs 15,466 per month in 2026.

But most Indian workers, even in the formal or organised sector, earn rock-bottom wages. An analysis in the Azim Premji University's State of Working India Report shows that in 2015, 92% women and 82% men earned less than Rs 10,000 a month.

The minimum wage in Uttar Pradesh for unskilled work in 2015, was just Rs 9,078. Thus, the base minimum wage on which revisions occur are already very low. This is half of what the Seventh Central Pay Commission had recommended 10 years ago as a living wage.

Mass Strikes, Minor Relief

Following large scale protests for over three days that impacted vehicle movement on National Highway 9, Uttar Pradesh finally increased the minimum wages, to Rs 13,690 for "unskilled" category, that includes workers employed as helpers and thread-cutters.

Women workers spoke of minor relief after the mass strikes: "They have increased our overtime pay from Rs 30 to Rs 40 an hour," said Diksha, a young woman worker in a refrigeration factory.

> ***"Haryana announced a revision on April 9, 2026, after workers did a series of strikes and protests that spread from factory to factory in automobile, ancillary, and garment exports units in Industrial Model Town Manesar, near Gurugram."***

Most were hopeful that some improvement may follow by next month. "I worked for Rs 10,000 last year. Now, they are saying the company will pay us Rs 13,000, let us see," said Kakoli, a worker from Kolkata, who works in Richa Global, one of Delhi-NCR's biggest garment export factories with an annual turnover of over Rs 2,000 crore which works with global brands such as Zara and Marks and Spencer.

The Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU), a national union affiliated with the Communist Party of India (Marxist), issued a statement on April 14 critiquing the government's actions as too little, too late.

"The so-called wage increase is a sham – far below survival levels," it noted. "Workers in Uttar Pradesh and Haryana are paid significantly less than in Delhi despite identical living costs. In the face of soaring inflation, the demand for a minimum wage of Rs 26,000 per month is not merely a demand but a necessity."

On April 17, CITU general secretary Elamaram Kareem questioned the Uttar Pradesh police for arresting labour activists -- Noida police have arrested over 300 persons, including activists -- who had gone to meet the district magistrate of Gautam Buddha Nagar.. "It is a shocking repression," he stated. "CITU Delhi State General Secretary Aniyan P.V., President Virender Gaur, were illegally detained by the police on April 17. Earlier, in the early hours of 16 April our district secretary, Ram Swarath, was similarly illegally detained."

Diksha Singh, Assistant Commissioner of Police of Gautam Buddha Nagar, refused to comment on the arrests to The Migration Story. "All I can say is that the protests began at the hosiery complex and spread to other areas." Diksha Singh said the protests were instigated by a handful of labour activists on WhatsApp.

> ***Following large scale protests for over three days that impacted vehicle movement on National Highway 9, Uttar Pradesh finally increased the minimum wages, to Rs 13,690 for "unskilled" category, that includes workers employed as helpers and thread-cutters.***

'We Cleared Our Own Path'

On April 17, a large number of policemen and industrial area securitymen continued to monitor road junctions. Several factories' glass facades were broken because of stone pelting. Almost every factory gate now displayed prominent notice about wage increase in each grade of skills and for different categories of workers.

Sukhvarsha Projects Private Limited, a garment unit, employs over 100 workers and runs 24 hours in three shifts. Its workers said the intensity of the protests and the repression that followed may have come as a surprise to other city residents, but the conditions were building up for weeks.

"Why did the Uttar Pradesh government not increase the wage rate before the *bawaal* (chaos) ensued?" said Sushil Verma, a worker supervisor at the factory from Agra. "Why did the government take so many days after the Haryana government's wage announcement? It is after the workers gathered, after the *tod-phod* (damage to factories) that the government took any initiative on our wages."

Outside Noida Electronics Company Limited, a worker from Agra said, "For some time now, there have been problems and wage theft has been going on. Workers slowed down work, thousands came out and finally agitated only to ask to correct this theft. This had to happen."

(This article was first published by the Migration Story, India's first newsroom to focus on the country's vast internal migration population.)

The Writer's Note—Action Still Awaited

The last three months – from

Pic Credit: Anumeha Yadav

Workers returning to the their workplaces in the presence of police deputed to maintain law and order

March to May – northern India witnessed a range of protest actions, strikes, agitations by workers in the manufacturing sector, the causes and repercussions of which are still unfolding. After a series of protests at construction sites of large refineries in Barauni in Bihar and Sonipat in Haryana in late February, Manesar in Haryana on the outskirts of Delhi recorded a series of strikes by workers in the automobile and ancillary units, which in a matter of days had spread to workers of garment factories. From Manesar in Haryana, the strikes spread to Noida in Uttar Pradesh.

The protests in Noida intensified between April 8 and 18. More than 40,000 workers stopped work and came out on the streets demanding corrections in wages and better work conditions at 80 sites.

Most Noida workers said that the rising cooking gas prices for those lacking a gas connection – Rs 400 rupees for a kilo of LPG that barely lasts a family of three for three days – acted as a spark in a tinderbox.

In Noida Special Economic Zone, the contrast of India's growth story is stark. It boasts of top industrial infrastructure and accounts for over Rs 11,000 crore worth exports in 2025 covering engineering, garments and pharmaceuticals, but in Nayagaon, a few kilometers away, factory workers earn less than Rs 11,000 and live in congested tenements with inadequate sanitation. Delays or missing work leads to pay cuts. The rooms lack light and adequate ventilation and often have four to five inhabitants sharing one room for a rent of over Rs 5,000. Migrant workers are able to sustain themselves in the city on low wages only because of this duality of rural-urban existence, where the family in the village sustains on subsidised foodgrains.

> ***"On April 17, a large number of policemen and industrial area securitymen continued to monitor road junctions. Several factories' glass facades were broken because of stone pelting. Almost every factory gate now displayed prominent notice about wage increase in each grade of skills and for different categories of workers."***

Besides notices announcing minimum wages being revised after over a decade, from Rs 11,313 to Rs 13,690 for "unskilled" work and from Rs 13,940 to Rs 16,868 for "skilled" work such as stitching, several factories, including Mothersons Sumi Wiring and DLJM Pvt Ltd. an injection moulding firm, displayed communication trying to pacify workers. But it is still to be seen if employers and the government will implement it, say unions.

Even days later, when I visited, several factories' glass facades remained broken in several places from stone pelting. Security guards working at the factories' gates described heavy stone pelting in the area including at the police station. They said that last they had witnessed such scenes was during a labour agitation in Noida in February 2013. They described it having been more intense though shorter in length.

IS VIKSIT BHARAT ANTI-LABOUR?

India's Growth Story Can Also be Pro Worker

Divya Chauhan *

Pic Credit: Stock Photos

Representational Image of Labourers

The country was taken aback by the recent remarks of the Chief Justice of India, which laid bare the realities confronting millions of workers.

While hearing a PIL involving domestic workers, Chief Justice Surya Kant remarked that trade unionism had been largely responsible for stalling industrial growth in the country. *"How many industrial units in the country have been closed thanks to trade unions?"* he asked before adding that traditional industries across India had been shut because of "*jhanda unions*"[1].

The significance of the remarks lies less in the judge who made them than in how familiar they sounded. Trade unions are no longer widely discussed as democratic organisations through which workers negotiate unequal relationships with employers. They are not remembered as institutions that fought for the eight-hour workday, workplace safety, maternity protections or minimum wages. Increasingly, they are viewed as obstacles to growth itself.

Seen in isolation, the Court's comments might be dismissed as a stray judicial remark. Seen in the context of contemporary India, however, they reveal something larger: a development model that is becoming increasingly impatient with labour.

When Workers Become the Problem

Only weeks earlier, the Supreme Court's remarks comparing unemployed youth to "cockroaches" and "parasites" generated controversy.[2] The later clarification apart, the language itself was revealing. It reflected a political culture increasingly willing to view those left behind by economic transformation as burdens. Unemployment is increasingly seen as an individual failing rather than a structural problem, and the unemployed are dehumanised.

Over the last decade, India has witnessed a steady transformation in the way political elites, policymakers and large sections of the media discuss labour. What makes the present moment distinctive is not merely the weakening of labour's bargaining power but the ideological confidence with which anti-labour positions are now articulated. The objective is no longer simply to restrict labour's power. It is to redefine labour's expectations.

Workers are encouraged to think of themselves as individual market actors rather than members of a collective class. Legally, they may retain the right to unionise. Materially, however, collective organisation increasingly occurs under conditions of intimidation, surveillance and hostility.

** Legal Officer at Common Cause*

Collective bargaining is framed as an economic obstruction. Labour rights are tolerated in theory but viewed with suspicion when workers attempt to exercise them in practice.

This shift is central to understanding the politics of *Viksit Bharat*. The question is not whether workers formally possess rights. It is whether the institutions that allow workers to exercise those rights are being steadily delegitimised.

"This shift is central to understanding the politics of Viksit Bharat. The question is not whether workers formally possess rights. It is whether the institutions that allow workers to exercise those rights are being steadily delegitimised."

The Price of Viksit Bharat

The events in Noida earlier this year offer a useful place to begin. Thousands of workers took to the streets demanding something astonishingly modest: legal wages, regulated working hours, overtime pay and weekly leave. Not higher wages. Not extraordinary benefits. Just legal wages.[3]

Videos from Noida Phase II showed workers running through smoke while police in riot gear chased them through one of the country's most celebrated industrial corridors. Vehicles were torched, women workers were beaten, and FIRs were filed against workers and "unknown persons". Workers alleged years of stagnant wages amid spiralling inflation, withheld overtime, contractual exploitation and abusive working conditions in factories powering Noida's manufacturing economy. Days later, the Uttar Pradesh government revised minimum wages retrospectively and initiated proceedings against more than 200 contractors accused of violating labour laws.[4] Workers had to disrupt industrial production before the law became visible. Rights that existed on paper required confrontation to become meaningful in practice.

The pattern was hardly confined to Noida. Early last year, in Manesar, the Haryana police cracked down on protesting Maruti Suzuki workers who had been conducting a prolonged *dharna* over labour conditions. Protest sites were dismantled, and workers were forcibly dispersed after Section 144 orders were reportedly imposed in the area. Once again, the issue ceased to be the grievances that produced the protest and became the protest itself.[5]

The government's labour codes sit at the centre of this transformation. Presented as modernisation, the reforms alter the balance between labour and capital. The Industrial Relations Code, for instance, extends restrictions on strikes through notice requirements, cooling-off periods and procedural barriers that, unions argue, make effective collective action substantially more difficult.[6]

The government has repeatedly defended the labour codes as a long-overdue rationalisation of an unwieldy regulatory framework, arguing that flexibility will encourage investment and job creation. However, this narrative obscures a fundamental historical reality. Labour law did not emerge as a benevolent gift from the State, nor was it designed to burden employers with unnecessary regulation. It emerged because employers and workers enter the labour market with vastly unequal power. One side controls capital, hiring decisions and workplace conditions; the other depends upon wages to survive. Labour protections, collective bargaining rights and trade union freedoms were created to moderate this imbalance.

The official story of *Viksit Bharat* is one of rising infrastructure, global supply chains, industrial corridors, semiconductor ambitions, AI data centres and ease of doing business. The unofficial story can be seen in factories, construction sites, warehouses and delivery routes across the country. It is visible in the growing dependence on contract labour and the expansion of precarious work.

In West Bengal, tea plantation workers, represented by the Paschim Banga Cha Majoor Samity, recently petitioned the International Labour Organisation under Article 24, alleging systemic violations of labour rights despite India's commitments under ratified international conventions. Their petition describes starvation deaths, severe malnutrition, non-payment of wages, the denial of minimum wages, and persistent discrimination against women and Adivasi workers.[7] The fact that such allegations emerge from one of India's oldest organised industries illustrates how legal guarantees often fail to translate into material protections.

A similar pattern emerged at Indian Oil Corporation's Panipat refinery expansion project. In early 2026, more than 20,000 workers halted work and launched a strike over basic working conditions. Contract labourers reported that adequate drinking water, sanitation facilities, and other essential amenities received serious attention only after production was disrupted.[8] Although work resumed after several days and some concessions were granted, many workers argued that their core demands remained only partially addressed.

The situation is often far more severe in sectors that operate largely beyond public scrutiny. Investigations into the brick kilns of Telangana and Andhra Pradesh have documented the conditions faced by nearly half a million migrant workers from western Odisha. Workers frequently labour under arrangements resembling debt bondage, while employers openly disregard labour regulations. Women are forced to bathe and relieve themselves in the open, exposing them to serious risks, including sexual violence. Children are routinely pulled out of school and often made to work without pay. Exposure to fly ash and coal dust creates serious health hazards, while regulatory oversight remains strikingly absent. Officials empowered to inspect work sites or prosecute violations rarely visit kilns without prior notice to owners, contributing to the normalisation of exploitation.[9]

> ***“Labour law did not emerge as a benevolent gift from the State, nor was it designed to burden employers with unnecessary regulation. It emerged because employers and workers enter the labour market with vastly unequal power.”***

Even workers employed within State-supported welfare infrastructure face similar insecurity. According to a 2024 IndiaSpend report, Delhi's Jan Suvidha Complexes, established under the Swachh Bharat Mission to provide sanitation facilities to residents of informal settlements, rely on caretakers and sanitation workers who often experience chronic wage delays and low pay. Workers responsible for maintaining facilities used by hundreds of thousands of people report working well beyond standard hours while struggling to receive wages on time.[10]

The contradiction is striking: public infrastructure intended to improve dignity for some citizens is sustained by workers whose own economic and social security remains deeply precarious.

Evidence from the recently released *Crushed 2025* report further highlights the gap between legal reform and workplace reality. Drawing on the experiences of more than 7,000 injured workers in India's automotive supply chains, the report found widespread violations of protections ostensibly guaranteed under the new labour codes. Appointment letters remain absent for 97 per cent of workers, excessive working hours persist, minimum wage violations are common, and hazardous workplaces continue to produce preventable injuries. Fifty per cent workers reported that safety inspections often occur only after accidents have already taken place.

Taken together, these cases illustrate a pattern that extends beyond individual employers or isolated violations. Across sectors, workers are increasingly expected to absorb the costs of India's growth while possessing fewer effective mechanisms through which to negotiate its terms.

The rise of platform capitalism intensifies this labour vulnerability. Gig workers exist in a legal grey zone where companies exert extensive control over wages, incentives, surveillance and performance while denying employer responsibility by classifying workers as "partners" or "independent contractors". If the objective is genuinely inclusive development, labour policy must begin not from the assumptions embedded in formal employment contracts but from the realities of how most Indians actually work. A majority of workers remain employed in informal, precarious or semi-formal arrangements where employer accountability is often weak and social protections are difficult to access. For such workers, meaningful protection requires universal access to healthcare, maternity benefits, pensions and social security that are not contingent upon a stable employer-employee relationship.

International Experiences Suggest Solutions

Several middle-income countries have demonstrated that alternative approaches are possible. Countries like Thailand[11] have expanded social protection by treating welfare as a right attached to individuals rather than a privilege attached to formal employment. By contrast, many advanced industrial economies, including the United States, the United Kingdom and Germany, operate through clearly defined employer-employee frameworks reinforced by State-funded safety nets, automated payroll reporting systems and active oversight institutions.

> ***"Gig workers exist in a legal grey zone where companies exert extensive control over wages, incentives, surveillance and performance while denying employer responsibility by classifying workers as "partners" or "independent contractors""***

Regulatory bodies and worker-representation structures help ensure that the costs of labour protection are distributed across a broader social framework rather than being left solely to individual workers or employers.[12] The lesson to be learnt is that labour protection can be embedded within successful development strategies rather than treated as an obstacle to them.

The argument for stronger labour protections is often dismissed as a moral appeal that must be balanced against economic efficiency. Yet international evidence suggests that the relationship may run in the opposite direction. India's ambition to become a global manufacturing hub increasingly depends upon improving the quality and productivity of work itself. According to ILO labour productivity[13] estimates, India continues to lag behind many comparable economies in output per hour worked, while assessments of labour rights point to persistent weaknesses in workplace protections, safety standards and enforcement.

Experiences from comparable countries such as Chile and Costa Rica are instructive. As workplace injuries declined through stronger safety measures and more effective enforcement, labour productivity rose steadily, particularly in manufacturing and construction sectors similar to those that India hopes to expand. Safer workplaces reduce absenteeism, improve workforce retention, enhance skills accumulation and increase efficiency over time.[14]

No nation develops in the abstract; every development model rests on a labour model. The real question facing India is whether workers will be treated merely as instruments of growth or as citizens whose rights and welfare are fundamental to development itself. The debate, therefore, is not growth versus labour, but what kind of growth a democratic society should aspire to build. The future of *Viksit Bharat* will ultimately be judged not by the highways it builds or the investments it attracts, but by whether the workers who make that development possible share its dignity, security and rewards.

> ***The real question facing India is whether workers will be treated merely as instruments of growth or as citizens whose rights and welfare are fundamental to development itself***

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BEYOND THE PRIVATE SPHERE

Domestic Work, Wages and Collective Organising

Aditi Yajnik*

Domestic work has increasingly emerged as a significant source of employment for women across the world, particularly in urban and rapidly developing economies. As more households rely on paid assistance for caregiving, cleaning, cooking, and other forms of household maintenance, the demand for domestic labour has expanded considerably over the past few decades. At the same time, domestic work continues to remain one of the most informal and least regulated sectors of employment globally. Workers in this sector often face inadequate legal protections, low wages, long working hours, and limited access to social security or labour rights, largely because domestic work takes place within private households and is frequently excluded from formal labour frameworks.

Alongside the steady increase in the number of domestic workers worldwide, many have also observed a pronounced trend toward the feminisation of this workforce. Women constitute the overwhelming majority of domestic workers, reflecting broader gendered divisions of labour in society where care work and household responsibilities are traditionally associated with women.

> ***“Domestic work remains one of the most informal and least regulated sectors of employment globally. Workers in this sector often face inadequate legal protections, low wages, long working hours, and limited access to social security or labour rights.”***

Economic inequalities, migration patterns, limited access to formal employment opportunities, and entrenched social norms have further contributed to the concentration of women in domestic labour. Consequently, domestic work has become not only a major avenue of female employment but also a site where issues of gender, class, migration, and labour rights intersect in complex ways.

Definitions and Classification

The United Nations' International Standard Industrial Classification of All Economic Activities (ISIC)[1] identifies domestic work within the industrial sub-category titled “Activities of private households as employers of domestic personnel” (commonly referred to as “private households with employed persons”). This classification seeks to formally recognise the economic activities carried out within households through the employment of domestic workers, including tasks such as cleaning, cooking, childcare, elderly care, gardening, driving, and other forms of household maintenance and caregiving labour. By placing domestic work within an internationally recognised economic classification framework, the UN acknowledges the sector as a significant component of labour markets and household economies rather than merely an extension of unpaid familial responsibilities.

The International Labour Organization (ILO), through its *Domestic Workers Convention, 2011 (No. 189)*, provides a comprehensive definition of domestic workers. According to the ILO, a domestic worker is “any person engaged in domestic work within an employment relationship,” while “domestic work” itself refers to “work performed in or for a household

* *Part of larger movement organized by National Platform for Domestic Workers*

or households." This definition is intentionally broad and inclusive, encompassing workers employed on a full-time, part-time, temporary, live-in, live-out, or casual basis, provided that the work is undertaken as part of an employment arrangement. The ILO's formulation is significant because it moves domestic labour out of the realm of invisibility and private obligation, recognising it instead as legitimate labour deserving of dignity, labour protections, fair remuneration, and social security rights comparable to those available in other sectors of employment.

Recent estimates by the ILO suggest that there are approximately 75.6 million[2] domestic workers worldwide aged 15 years and above, making domestic work one of the largest sources of informal employment globally. The sector employs nearly three-fourths of the global domestic workforce.

Legal Battles and Home as a Place of Work

The State has historically demonstrated a persistent tendency to overlook and inadequately address the concerns and rights of domestic workers, resulting in their continued exclusion from comprehensive labour protections and welfare frameworks. One of the principal reasons for this neglect lies in the deeply informal character of domestic work itself. Domestic labour is typically performed within private households, often without written contracts, fixed working hours, standardised wages, or clearly defined employer–employee relationships. Because of this informality, domestic work frequently falls outside the conventional structures through which labour is regulated, monitored, and protected by the State. The absence of formal documentation and institutional oversight has made it difficult for governments to accurately recognise, record, and regulate the sector in the same manner as other forms of employment.

Another significant factor contributing to this longstanding neglect is the reluctance to acknowledge the household as a legitimate site of economic production and labour. Historically, home has been perceived as a private and personal sphere rather than a workplace subject to public regulation and labour standards. This public–private divide has allowed domestic work to remain largely invisible within legal and policy frameworks, despite its essential contribution to sustaining households and enabling broader economic productivity. Since domestic workers operate within intimate household settings, States have often hesitated to intervene, citing concerns over privacy and the sanctity of the home.

> ***"According to the ILO, a domestic worker is "any person engaged in domestic work within an employment relationship," while "domestic work" itself refers to "work performed in or for a household or households."***"

Private households culturally and historically have occupied an ambiguous position within labour and legal frameworks. Unlike factories, offices, or other conventionally recognised workplaces, the household has rarely been acknowledged as a formal site of employment, despite the fact that it is a space where labour is systematically performed in exchange for wages. A private household is a complex and deeply negotiated site of labour relations.

In the absence of formal contracts or institutional oversight, domestic workers are often compelled to negotiate directly with employers regarding wages, workload, working hours, leave, mobility, food, accommodation, and other conditions of employment. These negotiations are shaped not only by economic considerations but also by broader social hierarchies of gender, caste, class, ethnicity, migration status, and age. Since the workplace is simultaneously someone else's home, domestic workers must navigate unequal power dynamics embedded within intimate and personal spaces. Employers frequently exercise control through paternalistic attitudes, emotional expectations, or informal arrangements that blur the boundaries between employment and familial obligation. Terms such as "part of the family" are often invoked to mask working conditions or to avoid recognising domestic workers as formal employees entitled to rights and protections.

The household as a workplace is distinct from most other labour settings because it combines intimacy with economic dependency. Unlike workers in factories or offices who operate within collectively regulated spaces, domestic workers are typically isolated within individual homes, making collective bargaining and unionisation particularly difficult. The invisibility of labour performed within households further contributes to the social and legal marginalisation of domestic workers. Yet despite these constraints, domestic workers continuously engage in everyday forms of negotiation and resistance, asserting claims to fair wages, dignity, rest, and humane working conditions.

In this sense, the household is not merely a passive site of employment, but also a contested social space where power, labour, gender relations, and ideas of care and servitude are constantly being negotiated and redefined.

> ***"The absence of formal documentation and institutional oversight has made it difficult for governments to accurately recognise, record, and regulate the sector in the same manner as other forms of employment."***

Minimum Wages

Since the adoption of ILO's Convention No. 189 on Domestic Workers in 2011, the struggle for the legal recognition and protection of domestic workers has gained significant momentum across many countries. Simultaneously, the growing assertion by domestic workers themselves as an integral part of the labour force has strengthened demands for greater visibility, labour rights, and state accountability.

However, the nature and impact of these efforts have varied considerably across different States and regions in India, shaped by local political priorities, labour regimes, and social attitudes toward domestic work. One important initiative undertaken in some States has been the inclusion of domestic workers within the ambit of minimum wage legislation. By recognising domestic work as wage labour deserving statutory remuneration, such measures represent an important step toward formalising the sector and addressing the historical undervaluation of domestic labour. At the same time, the implementation and enforcement of these protections continue to face significant limitations due to the informal and fragmented nature of domestic work.

The Minimum Wages Act empowers both the Central and State Governments to fix and periodically revise the minimum wages payable to workers, taking into account factors such as the nature and duration of work, the skill level required, and the basic living needs of workers, including considerations relating to calorific intake and subsistence requirements. At present, 14 States and Union Territories have minimum wages fixed for domestic workers.

Domestic work is not defined uniformly across State gazette notifications, and the scope of tasks recognised under the category varies considerably from one State to another. States such as Kerala, Karnataka, and Maharashtra adopt differing approaches in identifying the nature of domestic labour covered under minimum wage

Pic Credit: Stock Photos

A woman in traditional attire dusting an ornate chair outdoors

and labour notifications. While some States include a broader range of activities such as gardening, driving, watch and ward duties, or security-related services within the ambit of domestic work, others adopt a narrower understanding that largely confines domestic work to housekeeping, cleaning, cooking, and caregiving responsibilities. These variations reflect differing administrative approaches as well as broader social perceptions regarding what constitutes domestic labour. However, a large proportion of domestic work continues to be classified as unskilled labour, revealing the persistent undervaluation of household and care-based work despite the labour often involved in performing such tasks.

In this context, part-time domestic work, particularly by workers employed across multiple households, has become increasingly preferred among middle-class households. This preference is shaped by several economic and social factors, most notably the availability of relatively inexpensive labour and the flexibility such arrangements offer to employers. Unlike live-in domestic work, part-time arrangements generally do not impose responsibilities relating to boarding, lodging, or long-term welfare obligations on employers. At the same time, this system shifts a significant degree of economic insecurity onto workers, who often depend on multiple employers and fragmented working hours to secure a sustainable income.

The State's limited and often fragmented recognition of domestic work as legitimate labour is evident not only in the inadequate fixation of wages and uneven extension of labour protections, but also in the absence of clarity regarding fundamental conditions of employment such as working hours, overtime, and rest periods. Under minimum wage frameworks, the standard working day across sectors is generally understood to be eight hours. However, this framework inadequately captures the realities of domestic work. Live-in domestic workers, whose labour is deeply intertwined with the rhythms of the household, often remain available for work far beyond prescribed hours, making the distinction between working time and personal time increasingly blurred. Similarly, part-time domestic workers may spend less than eight hours in a single household, yet cumulatively work well beyond the standard workday across multiple employers. Despite this, the fragmented and dispersed nature of their labour frequently prevents their total working hours from being formally recognised within existing labour regulations.

Worker Collectives and Unions

The organisation of domestic workers through unions and workers' collectives remains relatively limited, particularly when compared to more formal sectors of employment. This is largely due to the dispersed nature of domestic work, which takes place within private households and is often characterised by isolation, informality, and lack of fixed workplaces. The absence of a common physical site of employment makes sustained collective mobilisation difficult, while the diversity of working arrangements ranging from full-time live-in work to short-hour engagements across multiple households further fragments the workforce. Despite these structural constraints, various unions and grassroots collectives have emerged over time to organise domestic workers and advocate for their rights, marking an important shift in how this sector is politically and socially understood.

These unions have not only functioned as platforms for collective bargaining but have also served as alternative spaces of learning and empowerment. Through regular meetings, training sessions, and awareness campaigns, they have worked to help domestic workers recognise their labour as skilled, valuable, and deserving of fair remuneration. A central focus of such efforts has been to challenge the normalisation of underpayment and informal arrangements by fostering an understanding of "fair wage for fair work." In doing so, unions have played a crucial role in shifting domestic workers' self-perception from isolated individuals negotiating independently within households to members of a broader collective workforce with shared interests and rights.

> ***"Despite structural constraints, various unions and grassroots collectives have emerged over time to organise domestic workers and advocate for their rights, marking an important shift in how this sector is politically and socially understood."***

In addition to worker education, unions and collectives have also undertaken outreach initiatives aimed at sensitising employers about the rights and entitlements of domestic workers. These campaigns often emphasise the importance of written agreements, regulated working hours, respectful working conditions, and timely payment of wages. By engaging directly with employers, these organisations attempt to bridge the gap between legal provisions and everyday practices within households, where informal norms often override formal labour standards.

The emergence of domestic workers as a distinct political and labour category has been shaped significantly through collective mobilisation and sustained organising efforts by unions, worker associations, and advocacy networks. Organisations such as the National Platform for Domestic Workers[3] have played an important role in building nationwide campaigns demanding comprehensive and rights-based legislation for domestic workers. These campaigns have sought not only legal recognition but also a broader transformation in how domestic work is socially and economically perceived. By foregrounding domestic workers as skilled and indispensable contributors to households and urban economies, such movements challenge the long-standing tendency to treat domestic labour as informal, naturalised, or merely supplementary work. At the centre of these struggles lies an important contradiction within contemporary labour structures. Campaigns for national legislation therefore seek to address this structural invisibility by demanding recognition of domestic work as legitimate labour deserving regulated wages, decent working conditions, and social protections comparable to those available in other sectors.

Conclusion

Domestic work continues to occupy an ambiguous and often contradictory position within contemporary labour systems. Despite the growing dependence of households and economies on domestic workers for care, cleaning, and other forms of (re) productive labour, the sector remains largely informal, weakly regulated, and insufficiently recognised within labour frameworks. The continued perception of the household as a private sphere rather than a legitimate workplace has contributed to the invisibility and systematic undervaluation of domestic labour, particularly that performed by women from marginalised social and economic backgrounds.

At the same time, increasing mobilisation by domestic workers through unions, collectives, and rights-based campaigns has challenged these long-standing exclusions and asserted domestic work as dignified labour deserving fair wages and legal protection. Initiatives such as the inclusion of domestic workers within minimum wage frameworks and the creation of worker-led wage rate charts represent important efforts toward recognising and valuing domestic labour. In this context, the regulation of paid care and household work is not merely a question of labour policy, but one that carries broader implications for social justice, gender relations, and the reorganisation of care within society.

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GIG AND PLATFORM WORKERS

Do the New Labour Codes Cover Their Issues?

Dr. Sarthak Bhatia

Pic Credit: Mohd Aasif

A bunch of gig workers waiting outside the platform's outlet to collect orders

Platform-based work has become ubiquitous in the country, with "the potential to become a major form of work in the future[1]. Platforms like Uber, Ola, Zomato, Swiggy, Rapido, Urban Company, Porter, etc. have become household brands providing myriad services to the affluent and aspirational sections of the population. Their rapid expansion into even smaller cities and towns is routinely invoked as a marker of the success of euphoric campaigns like Digital India. The backbone of these services are the gig and platform workers, most visibly those working for ride-hailing, food delivery and home-based services platforms.

These workers increasingly report being underpaid, overworked, and disenchanted with the digital economy. For the first time, such workers have been covered under India's new labour codes, whose stated objective is to secure labour reforms and the dignity of work. In this article, we try to understand their issues and analyse the Code on Social Security and some recently promulgated state legislations that aim to secure welfare for the gig and platform workers.

Platform Economics

The point of entry for the typical platforms of the late 2000s—Uber and Airbnb— was the conception of sharing economy, which asserted that technology companies could usher in a novel basis for the economy sharing idle resources and personnel between participants. The platforms were meant to mediate between different sides of the market. These companies positioned themselves as 'aggregators', 'intermediaries', or 'digital marketplaces', building bridges between the demand and supply in real time.

It was claimed that network effects - the mechanism by which the value of a product or service increases as more people use it - would enable digital marketplaces to substitute traditional markets while securing consumer interest through ratings and feedback mechanisms[2]. The platforms thus posited themselves as neutral participants facilitating exchange at minimal transaction costs using algorithmic models and real-time data.

The platform's relationship with workers was based on terms of service agreements, rather than employment contracts; workers were classified as independent contractors working at their personal expense (costs related to vehicle ownership, fuel, maintenance, insurance, smartphone, data, etc). The relationship was therefore posited by the former as lying outside the worker-employer paradigm, absolving the platforms of the legal

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responsibility to pay for any social security or even minimum wages. The future of work, mediated by digital technologies without the constraints of fixed-term contracts, was hailed as flexibility, autonomy and independence for the workers.

In practice, however, platforms exert far greater control over the workers. Most platforms use rating systems to monitor worker behaviour, automate decision-making to organise production processes, and leverage data to refine their operations or develop new services. Platforms frequently change terms of services to modulate workers' behaviour. This includes incentive-based payments, surge pricing, and worker classification based on 'performance' , amongst other mechanisms. Absent a novel regulatory framework capable of stabilising their contractual relationship with the workers, platforms have circumvented existing legislation and even thwarted new legislation through direct lobbying (and appeals to consumer interests). These companies can work in a regulatory grey zone by obfuscating both the degree of control over workers and the workers' dependence on the platform, and by positioning themselves as merely technology companies rather than employers.

Issues of Platform Workers

The most consistent pattern observed with platform work is the precarity of work, the unpredictability of income, and the opacity in conditions of engagement. Precarity is intensified by a structured lack of clarity on how exactly work is allocated or how the number of workers is regulated by the platforms. Even customer ratings do not appear to be central since platforms use internal systems for allocating work. Kept in the dark about specific requirements governing work, workers are forced to remain 'logged in' and be available for work for ever longer durations. The workday has effectively lengthened to twelve or fourteen (or even more) hours that are needed to secure a decent wage after expenses are deducted[3]. The absence of regulations related to earnings and to minimum rest periods is the structural condition to overstretch and overwork, leading to stress and safety-related issues.

> ***"The lack of any meaningful social security net has led to increasing misery for workers. Lacking social protection benefits and any income support when not working in case of illness or accidents, the workers bear major risks with regard to the physically demanding nature of the work"***

Extensive surveillance to discipline workers and a tendency to 'experiment' with different conditions of work effectively sustain the platform companies' own flexibility to operate. Workers frequently report a lack of clarity over fines and deductions in their earnings. Transgressions that can be punished range from not wearing the designated uniform or not carrying company bags (for which the platforms devise novel ways of surveillance) to cancelling gigs or even organising workers. Platforms are frequently accused of blocking worker IDs, leading to the loss of income, simply with a push notification.

The lack of any meaningful social security net has led to increasing misery for workers. Lacking social protection benefits and any income support when not working in case of illness or accidents, the workers bear major risks with regard to the physically demanding nature of the work. Platform work is extensively shaped by the gamification of the workers' mobile applications, with some platforms even offering fragmented, conditional benefits like an expanded insurance cover and more gigs, tactics that effectively reinforce workers' self-exploitation. On the other hand, platforms pointedly shift the onus onto the customers by encouraging them to pay workers tips for completing the gigs.

Code on Social Security 2020

The Code on Social Security 2020 (CSS) seeks to consolidate and amend existing laws, and introduce new schemes related to the social security and welfare of employees, unorganised workers, gig and platform workers[4]. The code's definitions of the latter are notably broad and vague: Gig and platform workers are defined as having work arrangements that lie "outside of the traditional employer-employee relationship" with the addition that the platform workers "solve specific problems or provide specific services" for other organisations and individuals "using an online platform". An aggregator is a "digital intermediary or a marketplace" connecting buyers and sellers. The code brings all categories of aggregators under the same framework, while leaving open the option of legislating for workers belonging to sector-specific aggregators to a future date.

The code frames two broad operational mechanisms regarding gig and platform workers: registration of workers, and the constitution of social security organisations to notify welfare schemes[5]. Workers are to be mapped to a unique ID which shall make them eligible for benefits under any schemes launched by the state or central government. The code envisages the constitution of a National Social Security Board that would notify central govt welfare schemes (related to life and disability cover, accident insurance, health and maternity benefits, old age protection, creche, skill upgradation, and other benefits).

The schemes could be partially or fully funded by the state and central govt, or by the contributions from the aggregators and the workers or through CSR funds. The contribution of the aggregators is capped at 5% of the total payouts made to the workers[6]. Other than representatives of various state and centre govt, including the director of ESIC and PF commissioner, the board will also have five members, each representing the gig & platform workers and the aggregators nominated by the central government.

It is unclear if the code considers the gig workers and platform workers as part of the unorganised sector, although Chapter 9 of the code groups the three kinds of workers together. Unorganised sector workers had expanded protections under the Unorganised Workers' Social Welfare Security Act 2008 (now subsumed by the CSS). A 2021 petition filed by Indian Federation of App-based Transport workers and others in the Supreme Court argues that gig and platform workers are essentially employed by the aggregators/ platforms and should be considered as 'wage workers' or 'unorganised workers' within the meaning of UW act, 2008; and hence eligible for the benefits therein.

State Based Legislation

The CSS also provides for the constitution of State Unorganised Workers' Social Security Boards that enables state governments to frame specific schemes related to different sections of unorganised sector workers, while also providing a separate tripartite consultative mechanism. At

Pic Credit: Mohd Aasif

A gig worker delivering food on a rainy day.

least five states have either promulgated or drafted legislation related to gig and platform workers[7] each providing specific mechanisms to ensure the security and welfare of gig and platform workers.

Registration of Workers and of Aggregators: State legislation mandates registering the aggregators as well as making them responsible for ensuring that workers are registered, and that an updated worker database is sent to the respective boards for monitoring purposes.

Income Security: The CSS considers income security within the ambit of social security, but it is in the state legislation that we find how its specific contours are defined for the gig and platform workers. In all but one state, income security is narrowly framed as pertaining to only the responsibility of the aggregators/platforms to inform workers about the reasons for any deductions in their payouts, and to make time-bound payments. Jharkhand makes a significant departure by mandating that aggregators pay workers at least a minimum wage calculated on the basis of time spent and distance travelled per task, requiring the welfare board to ensure that aggregators contribute to the welfare fund.

Termination From Work: Against the widespread practice of blocking IDs on the smallest pretexts and without stated reasons, the state legislations prohibit aggregators from

> ***“Aggregators must also take measures to prevent any discrimination on the grounds of religion, race, caste, gender, place of birth, or disability by these systems.”***

terminating workers without providing valid reasons grounded on the principles of natural justice, providing prior notice. Some states mandate the aggregators to have an exhaustive list of grounds for termination in the worker contract itself.

Welfare Fund: The state boards are to establish social security and welfare funds from which benefits and entitlements will be disbursed to the workers. These funds will draw contributions from aggregators, workers, the state & central govt, corporate social responsibility funds, and other sources. Crucially, the state legislations seek to raise a welfare fee/cess from aggregators, based on the category/type of aggregators, as a percentage of the total payouts made to the workers[8]. The state government, through the welfare board, shall be responsible for monitoring, verifying and collecting the contributions made by the aggregators, and for obtaining relevant information on each transaction. Although state legislation includes provisions to prevent overlap with contributions sought under the CSS, several platforms recently filed a petition in the Karnataka High Court to challenge the constitutionality of the state’s Platform Workers Act[9]. The aggregator contribution might not be adequate to provide meaningful social security, especially as compared to the contributions made by employers in the “traditional” sectors[10].

Grievance Redressal: Aggregators are mandated to provide a human point of contact for worker grievance redressal, an important provision for platform-based workers who are often forced to navigate automated systems[11]. Aggregators are also required to constitute Internal Dispute Redressal Committees and appoint Grievance Redressal Officers. Where necessary, workers may escalate unresolved issues to the welfare board and, thereafter, to an appellate body.

Automated Monitoring and Decision-Making Systems: To ensure transparency, aggregators are mandated to publish the procedures by which workers can obtain information about automated systems including algorithms governing work allocation and fare determination for a gig, and the effect of other parameters like the customer feedback or other ratings system. Aggregators must also take measures to prevent any discrimination on the grounds of religion, race, caste, gender, place of birth, or disability by these systems. The Bihar act even allows workers the 'right to request a review of algorithmic and platform decisions affecting their livelihoods' and includes provisions for human oversight of automated decisions. The aggregators are likely to contest these measures, framing algorithmic disclosures as an infringement of their proprietary technological systems. The EU platform work directive tackles issues of algorithmic accountability more substantively and may provide a useful comparative benchmark for a rights-based regulatory framework[12].

Occupational Safety and Health: None of the laws explicitly deal with concrete measures to address occupational safety and health-related issues of the workers, confining the responsibility of the platforms only to provide "a safe working environment". This lacuna is especially central for home-based workers who face specific risks of safety and dignity in private workplaces.

Conclusion

The CSS and state-level legislation mark an important point of entry for regulation of working conditions in the platform economy. Although detailed analysis of the legislation might be possible once rules are framed and the welfare boards start functioning[13], important issues related to worker misclassification, lack of Occupational Health, Safety and Working Conditions (OSH) provisions, limited financial liability for aggregators, and the propensity towards welfarism remain significant impediments.

Global experience of platform regulation underlines that rights groups and workers' unions will need to organise effectively to secure fair wages and meaningful social security, wanting classification as employees rather than independent contractors. Nonetheless, within the limits set by the categorisation, the state laws bring workers some protection against arbitrary platform power. Jharkhand and Karnataka are notable for trying to frame a rights-based approach rather than one premised on welfare schemes, with the former explicitly listing workers' rights in the legislation.

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4 The Code on Social Security, 2020 (Act No. 36 of 2020) was partially brought into force in November 2025.

5 The code also lays down the requirement to create helpline and facilitation centres for dissemination of workers in Section 112.

6 The contribution is limited to 1-2% of the annual turnover of the aggregators, with aggregators having more than one business to be treated as separate businesses. The central govt also may exempt an aggregator or a class of aggregators from making any contributions.

7 These are: Rajasthan platform based gig workers (registration and welfare) act, 2023; Karnataka platform based gig workers (social security and welfare) act, 2025; Jharkhand platform based gig workers (registration and welfare) act, 2025; Bihar platform based gig workers (registration, social security and welfare) act, 2025; Telangana platform based gig workers (registration, social security and welfare) act, 2026

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13 Till date, only the Karnataka Welfare board has been constituted.

SUMMARY: SAFE IN INDIA REPORT 2026

Exposing Lack of Occupational Safety & Health

Divya Singh Chauhan *

Safe in India's *CRUSHED 2026* report examines occupational safety and health (OSH), labour standards and worker protection across India's automotive supply chains, drawing on the experiences of more than 11,000+ injured workers assisted since 2016. In addition to documenting injury trends and workplace conditions, the report presents a comparative assessment of OSH standards across Haryana, Karnataka, Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu, and reviews the implementation of key worker protection provisions under the Occupational Safety, Health and Working Conditions (Central) Rules, 2025.

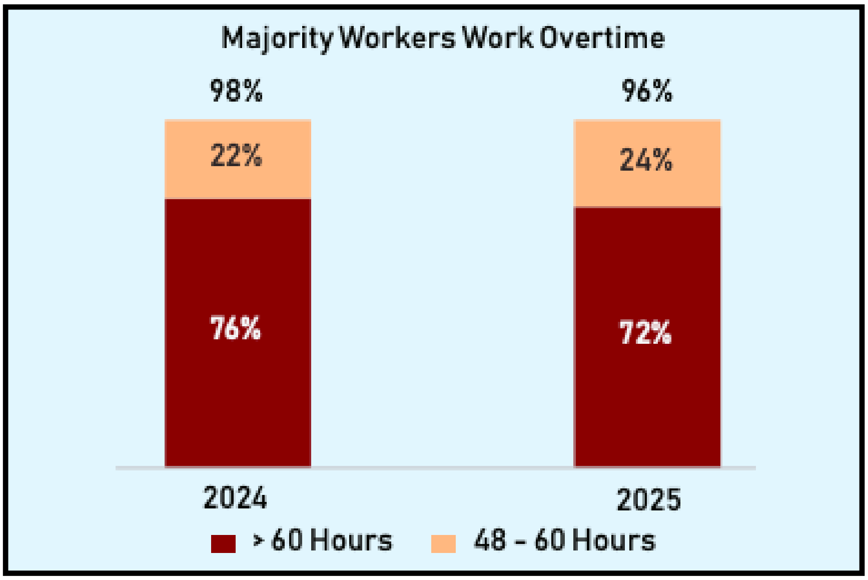

Figure 1: Majority Workers Work Overtime, Fig. 7, p.10, Exec. Summary, Crushed 2026

Drawing on workers' experiences, the report argues that several workers protections given under the Occupational Safety, Health and Working Conditions (Central) Rules, 2025, remain inadequately implemented. Despite the statutory weekly limit of 48 working hours, 72 percent of injured workers reported working more than 60 hours a week, while a further 24 percent worked between 48 and 60 hours.

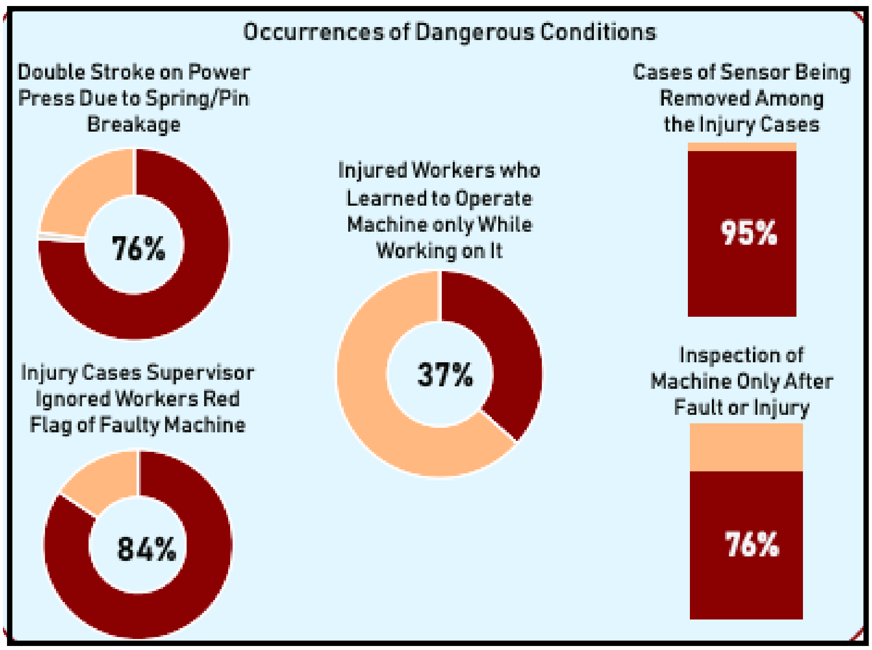

Figure 2: Occurrences of Dangerous Conditions, Fig. 8, p.11, Exec. Summary, Crushed 2026

The report finds that workplaces remain dangerously hazardous despite legal requirements

* *Legal Officer at Common Cause*

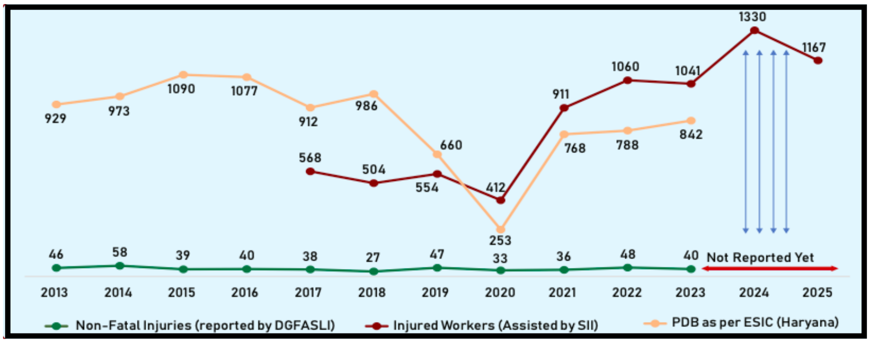

Figure 3: Serious Gap in Accidents in Factories in Haryana as Reported by DGFASLI vs PDB as per ESIC vs Injured Workers Assisted by SII, Fig. 10, p. 11, Exec. Summary, Crushed 2026

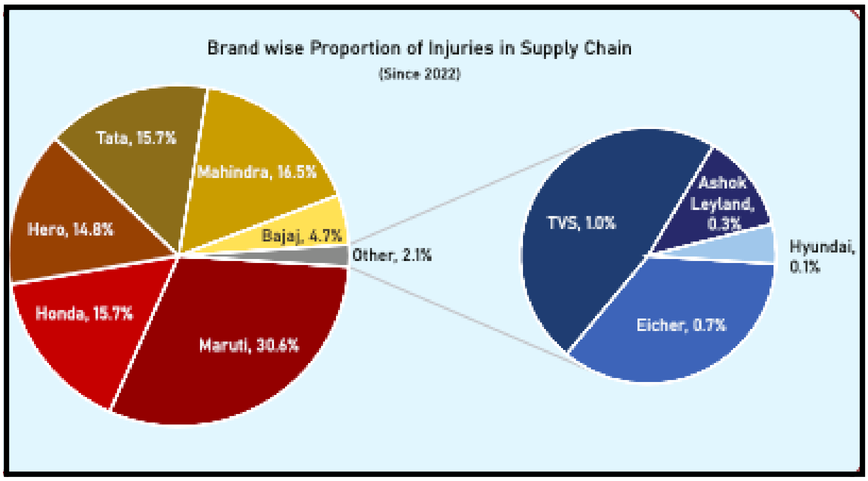

Figure 4: Brand-wise Proportion of Injuries in Supply Chain, Fig. 13, p. 12, Exec. Summary, Crushed 2026

concerning safety. Use of unsafe machinery emerged as a major concern. Among injury cases examined, 76 percent involved double strokes on power press machines due to spring/pin breakage, 84 percent involved supervisors ignoring workers' warnings about faulty machinery, 95 percent reported that machine inspections were carried out only after faults or injuries had occurred, 76 percent involved the removal of machine sensors, and 37 percent of injured workers reported learning to operate machines only while working on them.

The report further finds that substantial under-reporting of industrial accidents continues despite statutory reporting requirements. In Haryana, only 40 non-fatal industrial injuries were reported to DGFASLI for 2023, while Safe in India assisted more than 1,500 workers injured during the same period through its Worker Assistance Centres.

The findings indicate that workplace injuries are spread across the supply chains of multiple leading automobile brands. Since 2022, 98 percent of injured workers assisted by Safe in India came from the supply chains of Maruti Suzuki, Mahindra, Honda, Tata Motors, Hero and Bajaj. Maruti Suzuki accounted for 30.6 percent of injuries, followed by Mahindra (16.5 percent), Honda and Tata Motors (15.7 percent each), Hero (14.8 percent) and Bajaj (4.7 percent).

CRUSHED 2026 points to continuing gaps between the protections provided under the Occupational Safety, Health and Working Conditions (Central) Rules, 2025 and workplace realities. It documents persistent shortcomings in occupational safety, working hours, accident reporting, worker documentation and social security, and recommends stronger implementation of the Rules through improved enforcement, transparency and collaboration among government, industry, workers' organisations and civil society. The report argues that improving working conditions is not only a critical human issue but also a business imperative, and that without these improvements, India will struggle to strengthen its manufacturing professionalism and labour productivity.

Visit https://www.safeinindia.org to download full report

SUMMARY: FACT-FINDING REPORT

Recent Repression of Workers' Movements

Mohd Aasif *

Pic Credit: Jan Hastakshep

Fact-Finding Team Comprised of Journalists, Academicians, Lawyers and Activists Launches the report at Press Club of India, New Delhi

On 19th June 2026, Jan Hastakshep, a group of journalists, lawyers and trade unionists, organised a well-attended public meeting-cum-press conference at the Press Club of India, New Delhi. The occasion was the launch of its fact-finding report on the repression of the workers' movements in Noida and Gurgaon-Manesar. The report was based on the findings of two separate investigation teams that visited the sites of workers' protests at Noida and Gurgaon Manesar factory area. The excerpts are given below:

The fact-finding report notes that Noida and Greater Noida house around 20,000 industrial units, employing around 1.7 million workers, over 75 percent of them contract workers. A large number of workers in Noida live in flood-prone areas of the Hindon River in slum-like conditions. Typically, the whole family lives in a single room with a dimension of 8 fee by 10 feet. Similarly, Gurgaon has approximately 20,000 small and large industrial units with employment patterns just like Noida, with over 70 percent accounting for contract workers out of a total of around one million workers.

The report states that over the past one and a half decades, the companies have been replacing permanent workers with contract workers, mostly hired through third-party agencies and contractors. A large number of workers in NCR are informal workers, and most of the companies maintain separate unofficial registers for such employees, depriving them of appointment letters or salary slips. In order to keep the employees informal, companies dismiss them for a few days and rehire them. Often, such workers do not receive essential benefits such as bonuses, Employee Provident Fund (EPF), Employee State Insurance (ESI), or leaves and therefore, for all practical purposes, they don't exist on any government records.

Contract workers face another form of discrimination. They

> ***"Contract workers face another form of discrimination. They are not allowed to be members of any union in and around the industrial area. The report suggests that if a union enrols contract workers, the labour department revokes the recognition of the union, acting upon the complaint of company management."***

** Research Executive at Common Cause*

are not allowed to be members of any union in and around the industrial area. The report suggests that if a union enrols contract workers, the labour department revokes the recognition of the union, acting upon the complaint of company management. In the absence of collective bargaining, the contract workers are left at the mercy of the company management with the government agencies looking the other way.

The report notes that the Haryana government had not increased the minimum wages of workers and contract labourers for 10 years (despite the statutory requirement of doing so every five years). Workers were found to be receiving around Rs. 11,200 only as monthly wages, that too without the dearness allowance and after deducting the ESI, EPF and canteen expenses. The report says that the workers' protest was triggered by their distressed conditions, low wages, soaring inflation and the recent fourfold increase in the prices of cooking gas. Most of the workers' families in and around the factories in Noida, Gurgaon-Manesar, are forced to put their children to work before they turn 18 while discontinuing their education. In the recent strikes, the workers came out on the streets demanding a modest raise in wages and their mandatory rights.

State Violence on Workers

On 7th April 2026, several trade union leaders were arrested in order to prevent them from participating in the negotiation with the representatives of the district administration, labour department, and company management. Police allegedly threatened them "not to be seen in Manesar again". Yet, the movement continued. The next day, Haryana government announced minimum wages of Rs. 15,200 for unskilled workers and Rs. 18000 for skilled workers. However, the management refused to post the notice on the company notice board for workers' assurance.

This, says the report, created another wave of agitations, which prompted police action like an unprovoked lathi-charge, injuring 30 contract workers, including 10 women. Workers submitted their complaint to Assistant Labour Commissioner regarding police violence at the factory. During the night, police conducted raids in the villages and arrested 44 people, including women. The fact-finding committee reports that police raided villages in plain clothes and mistreated and arrested workers from their houses, showing no arrest documents. Serious charges were slapped on them, including those of attempts to murder, which have been denied by the workers. The arrested individuals include trade union activists, students, journalists, or those seen in the CCTV footage.

The report notes that the police action came with violations of due procedures. Arrested people were deprived of legal assistance and are struggling to obtain bail. This has also led to an atmosphere of fear, with a large number of them fleeing to their hometowns and those who have returned are not going back to their previous workplaces.

Pic Credit: Jan Hastakshep

Workers, Rights Activists, and Journalists Attending Report Launch cum Public Meeting at Press Club of India, New Delhi

COMMON CAUSE EVENTS

Participation in World Bank Group Country Partnership Framework Consultation

On 6 April 2026, Ms. Divya Singh Chauhan, Legal Officer, Common Cause, participated in a stakeholder consultation convened by the World Bank Group on its newly approved Country Partnership Framework (CPF) 2026–31 for India. The meeting brought together representatives from think tanks, civil society organisations, the private sector and the International Finance Corporation (IFC) to discuss the Framework's priorities and implementation strategy for the next five years.

YLAC Stakeholder Consultation on Compensation for Wrongful Imprisonment in India

On 28 April 2026, Ms. Divya Singh Chauhan, Legal Officer, and Mr. Rishikesh Kumar, Research Executive (Legal) from Common Cause participated in a stakeholder consultation with fellows from the Young Leaders for Active Citizenship (YLAC) as part of its Policy in Action Program. The interaction was organised to support YLAC's policy research on Compensation for Wrongful Imprisonment in India. During the discussion, the Common Cause team shared insights on key challenges within India's criminal justice system, including prolonged undertrial detention, the need to reinforce the principle that "bail is the rule, jail is the exception". They also highlighted the importance of developing a comprehensive compensation framework that includes rehabilitation of those wrongfully imprisoned.

Panel Discussion on Strengthening Domestic Workers

On 16 June, 2026, Common Cause Team participated in a panel discussion on the issues related to rights, dignity and legal protection of domestic workers on the occasion of International Domestic Worker's Day. Rishikesh, Research Executive (legal) at Common Cause shared the perspective of the ogranisation. The event was organized by SEWA and was attended by well-attentive audience. The conversations highlighted a shared vision: a future where domestic workers are recognized as workers, their rights are protected, and they have access to dignified work, social security, and safe workplaces.

Editorial Meeting on Judicial Definition Project

On 28th April 2026, Radhika Jha from Common Cause attended the Editorial Committee Meeting of the Judicial Definitions Project. The meeting was held to discuss the activities within the Project in the recent few months and the course of action for the upcoming months. Outreach projects, adding localised state-wise knowledge and efforts towards scaling up the project were discussed.

Pic Credit: SEWA Delhi

Rishikesh Kumar, Research Executive (Legal) Addressing a Public Meeting on International Domestic Workers' Day

Democratic Backsliding and Democratic Resilience

Common Cause Director, Dr Vipul Mudgal, spoke at an online event organised by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace on June 16, 2026. The title was "Democratic Backsliding and Democratic Resilience." Dr Mudgal spoke on the leading role civil society has played in India's struggle to regain a stronger democracy. The event was organised in collaboration with the scholars at the Universities of Harvard, Stanford, Notre Dame, UPenn, UVA, and Cornell.

He said many civil society organisations in India have been working to restore citizens' confidence in the Constitution and the rule of law. Working against all odds, some organisations have been focusing their energies on probity in public life, the rule of law, accountable governance, and free and fair elections. He said it was not the mandate of civil society to hold street protests or to participate in politics. However, they have been using awareness campaigns, public forums and the courts to meet their objectives.

Dr Mudgal cited many Public Interest petitions filed by Common Cause and the Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR), among others. He said many civil society organisations have been holding public hearings and documenting cases of egregious attempts at exclusion of citizens from public processes. He told the participants of the well-attended and interactive session that even though many PILs have not yielded the desired results, they have been able to expose questionable policies and create awareness around them. The other speakers included leading activists, journalists and human rights defenders.

The participants of the collaborative forum have been surveying existing literature and commissioning more to glean practical, concrete lessons practitioners can use to answer questions they are facing right now. This group of scholars is also working with pro-democracy actors in about a dozen countries to learn from their comparable situations. Some of these experiences offer useful lessons while others are cautionary tales. They are also in touch with Members of Parliament, judges, civil society leaders from across the political spectrum (such as the leader of Black Lives Matter in America), and top academics working on these issues.

The backdrop of the event was the fact that authoritarians around the world have been learning from and supporting one another. In recent years, freedom fighters living under dictatorships have banded together to fight back, collaborating with scholars to learn what techniques work against modern autocrats. The democracy activists aim to form a network of transnational relationships and real-time learning appropriate to the peril the world is facing.

The organisers believe that cross-border collaborations offer opportunities for democracy defenders to think strategically together about how to fight back in countries where democracy is being challenged. The democracy scholars believe that active citizens working together could materially change the outcome of this history.

COMMON CAUSE CASE UPDATES

Writ for Supreme Court Directions on Police Reforms (W.P. (C) 310/1996)

The battle for police reforms has been going on for the last 29 years. The Supreme Court took 10 years to give a historic judgment in 2006, in the petition filed by Prakash Singh, Common Cause and NK Singh IN 1996. Since then, it has been a struggle to get the Court's directions implemented. On July 3, 2018, responding to an interlocutory application filed by the Ministry of Home Affairs regarding the appointment of acting Director General of Police (DGP) in the states, the Supreme Court gave a slew of directions to ensure that there were no distortions in such appointments. It laid down that the states shall send their proposals to the UPSC three months before the retirement of the incumbent DGP.

Despite clear directions, implementation across states on this issue remained inconsistent, resulting in recurring contempt and compliance proceedings before the Court.

On July 28, 2025, the court issued notice, and on August 18, 2025, the Court declined to entertain one of the contempt petitions, observing that the dispute appeared to arise from inter-personal rivalry between officers rather than a matter of public interest. This matter was listed several times from October 2025 till February 12, 2026. Two contempt petitions filed against the states of Telangana and Tamil Nadu were considered by the Court. The Court once again reiterated its previous order and directed that the states comply with their previous directions.

On March 12, 2026, the court disposed civil contempt petition regarding the State of Tamil Nadu as infructuous and directed the UPSC to ensure that the meeting regarding appointment of DGP be held on March 20, 2026, and recommendations made be implemented without any delay. In the same order, contempt petitions for the state of Bihar, Telangana and Andhra Pradesh were disposed for the reasons mainly associated with the UPSC recommendations.

It was brought to the notice of the Court that the state of Chhattisgarh had not appointed a regular DGP from the panel of recommended names by UPSC, and an acting DGP had been working since February 4, 2025. Since the UPSC had sought an explanation from the State Government on March 3, 2026, the court, prior to taking any coercive action against the State authorities, issued notice to show cause as to why the UPSC recommendations of May 13, 2025, had not been implemented so far and as to why the acting DGP should not be restrained from performing the duty. Counsel for the State of Chhattisgarh sought and was granted six weeks' time to have instructions.

The states of Punjab, Manipur, Arunachal Pradesh, Goa and Mizoram were directed to show cause that, in the absence of any valid law having been enacted by them in terms of liberty granted by Prakash Singh (Supra), why appropriate action under the Contempt of Courts Act should not be taken for withholding recommendations for appointment of their respective DGPs out of the panel to be prepared by the UPSC. The counsel for Himachal Pradesh was granted six weeks' time to get instructions. The states of Jharkhand and Uttar Pradesh were directed to show cause as to why the proposal for the appointment of DGP as per Prakash Singh judgment had not been forwarded to UPSC. The counsels representing the State Governments/Union Territories were directed to submit a copy of their reply affidavit to Mr. Raju Ramchandran, learned Amicus Curiae, as well as to the counsel for the UPSC.

On May 19, 2026, the court was apprised that a compliance affidavit had been filed by the States of Arunachal Pradesh and Chhattisgarh. As per the status report filed by the UPSC, acting DGPs were working in Manipur and Jharkhand, and no proposal for appointment of regular DGPs had ever been received by the

UPSC from them. As per the affidavit filed by the States of Punjab, Uttar Pradesh, Gujarat, and West Bengal, proposals had been received in March April and May 2026 respectively. The UPSC pointed out that no proposal had been received regarding Himachal Pradesh and the AGMUT cadre, pertaining to Arunachal Pradesh, Goa, and Mizoram. All the States, which, according to the UPSC, had not complied with the directions of this Court, were directed to file a compliance affidavit. The court directed that the be listed for August 18, 2026.

On May 27, 2026, the application filed by the State of Manipur requesting appointment of DGP from outside Manipur cadre once the tenure of the acting DGP came to an end on May 31, allowed by the court. The said application had been filed narrating the unprecedented ethnic and civil unrest that had taken place in the State.

On May 29, 2026, the counsel for Karnataka brought to the notice of the court that inadvertently in the order of March 12, 2026, it could not be mentioned that the State had also complied with the direction of appointment of a regular DGP, on recommendations of the UPSC. The same was taken on record by the court.

M.A. in Writ Petition on Illegal Mining in Odisha (M.A. 18/2025)

In January 2025, Common Cause filed a Miscellaneous Application (MA) in the writ petition on Illegal Mining in Odisha. The MA prayed for directions to the State to expedite the recovery/attachment proceedings on an urgent basis by complying with directions contained in previous orders passed by the Supreme Court and to take immediate action to pursue all available remedies before the appropriate forum (Division bench of High Court or SLP before this Hon'ble Court) to have unfavourable orders reversed or altered. The MA was listed several times in January, February, March, April and May 2025.

The IA filed by Common Cause on February 23, 2023, focused on getting directives issued for the Union of India and the State of Odisha to impose limits on the extraction of minerals and on constituting a committee of two or three independent experts to suggest and recommend such limits and submit its report in a time-bound manner. The matter was disposed of by the Supreme Court on May 7, 2025.

The IA also sought an updated status report on the amount of penalty deposited by the lessees, including the amount to be recovered, lease-wise details of the ore reserve, extraction permitted, the current status of the mining lease, total iron ore reserves and total permitted extraction in the State as directed in the judgment dated August 2, 2017. Significantly, the Supreme Court granted Common Cause, the petitioner, the liberty to file an independent writ petition for the same relief, which had been sought in the IA. The Court also granted our request that the State of Odisha be called upon to file a status report regarding the points referred to in paragraphs 3 and 6 of the SC's order dated March 5, 2025, which is the prayer in the MA as well. The matter is directed to be listed in July 2025.

On July 28, 2025, a notice was issued, and Common Cause was granted liberty to serve the same through the Standing Counsel for the State. The MA was tagged with the Writ against the State of Odisha (W.P.(C) No. 675/2025) filed by Common Cause. Subsequent hearings on September 2 and September 17, 2025, addressed compliance issues, including extension of mining leases and joint inspection of mines. On December 10, 2025, the Court observed "We are informed that several writ petitions are pending before the High Court, wherein orders passed in recovery proceedings have been challenged and stay obtained. The Court directed that status report be filed on or before April 2, 2026. And Miscellaneous Application and the connected matters be relisted in the second week of April 2026.

This matter was taken up on March 24, 2026, when due to demise of the previous amicus curiae, Mr. Rao, new amicus Mr. Gautam Narayan was appointed by the court, and the parties were directed to provide all documents to Mr. Narayan. The State of Orissa was directed to file affidavit in compliance with the order dated December 10, 2025. On April 21, 2026, and May 12, 2026 the matter was listed before the Court for hearing. On hearing the counsels, the Court directed the registry to r-list the matter in the week commencing 20th July 2026.

Writ Against State of Odisha (W.P.(C) No. 675/2025)

On May 7, 2025, the Supreme Court, in M.A. No. 18 of 2025, the Supreme Court disposed of an earlier interlocutory application, granting liberty to Common Cause to file an independent writ petition for similar reliefs. Pursuant to this liberty, Common Cause filed the writ petition on July 8, 2025, seeking the following directions: (a) Constitution of a committee of independent experts to recommend a limit to be imposed on the extraction of iron and manganese ore in the State of Odisha to ensure environmental sustainability and Inter-generational equity, and submit its report in a time-bound manner; and (b) Direction to the Respondents to impose a limit on the extraction of iron and manganese ore in Odisha based on the aforesaid expert committee report.

On July 8, 2025, Common Cause filed this writ seeking directions for the constitution of a committee of independent experts to recommend a limit on the extraction of iron and manganese ore in the State of Odisha, to ensure environmental sustainability and inter-generational equity, and for the imposition of such limits by the Respondents based on the recommendations of the said expert committee. Notice was issued on July 28, 2025, and Common Cause was granted liberty to serve the same through the Standing Counsel for the State. The matter was tagged with the previous miscellaneous application (M.A. 18/2025) filed by Common Cause. On July 29, 2025, during the hearing, the Supreme Court expressed displeasure over the State of Odisha's failure to file a counter-affidavit.

On September 17, 2025, the Supreme Court considered an interim application filed by a lessee, wherein the State's counter affidavit disclosed that the validity of the mining lease in question had been extended up to April 16, 2036, subject to general conditions and statutory clearances. The Court allowed the lessee to restart mining only after verification of all clearances by the competent officer. Additionally, a joint inspection involving the State's Mining Department was ordered to determine the quantity and quality of iron ore. Following the inspection, the lessee was granted four months to sell the ore under the supervision of State officers, with proceeds adjusted against penalties from prior proceedings and deposited with the Special Purpose Vehicle (SPV). The State was further directed to initiate auction proceedings in accordance with the law.

On October14, 2025 Common Cause submitted that despite multiple opportunities granted to the respondent, State of Odisha, neither counter affidavit has been filed nor has the status report with regard to recovery process been placed before the Court. The Court granted one last opportunity to the State to file counter affidavit and the status report by October 27, 2025. On October 29,2025, expressing its displeasure that the State had not been diligent enough to recover the dues running into crores of rupees, the Court observed "We record our serious displeasure at the mode and manner in which the State of Odisha has been proceeding for recovery of the dues from the defaulting lessees. The chart which has been pointed out to us by Mr. Bhushan suffers from lack of essential data." Time was granted to the State of Odisha to file a better counter by December 1, 2025.

The counter filed by Ministry of Environment of Forest and Climate Change was taken on record. The Ministry of Mines was directed to file its counter, and the petitioners were directed to file respective rejoinders. On February 10, 2026, the Court directed that the petition be de-tagged from the batch of matters. The matter was taken up on April 10, 2026, when the court directed that the writ petition be re-listed on July 22, 2026. And interim orders, if any, would continue till the next date of hearing.

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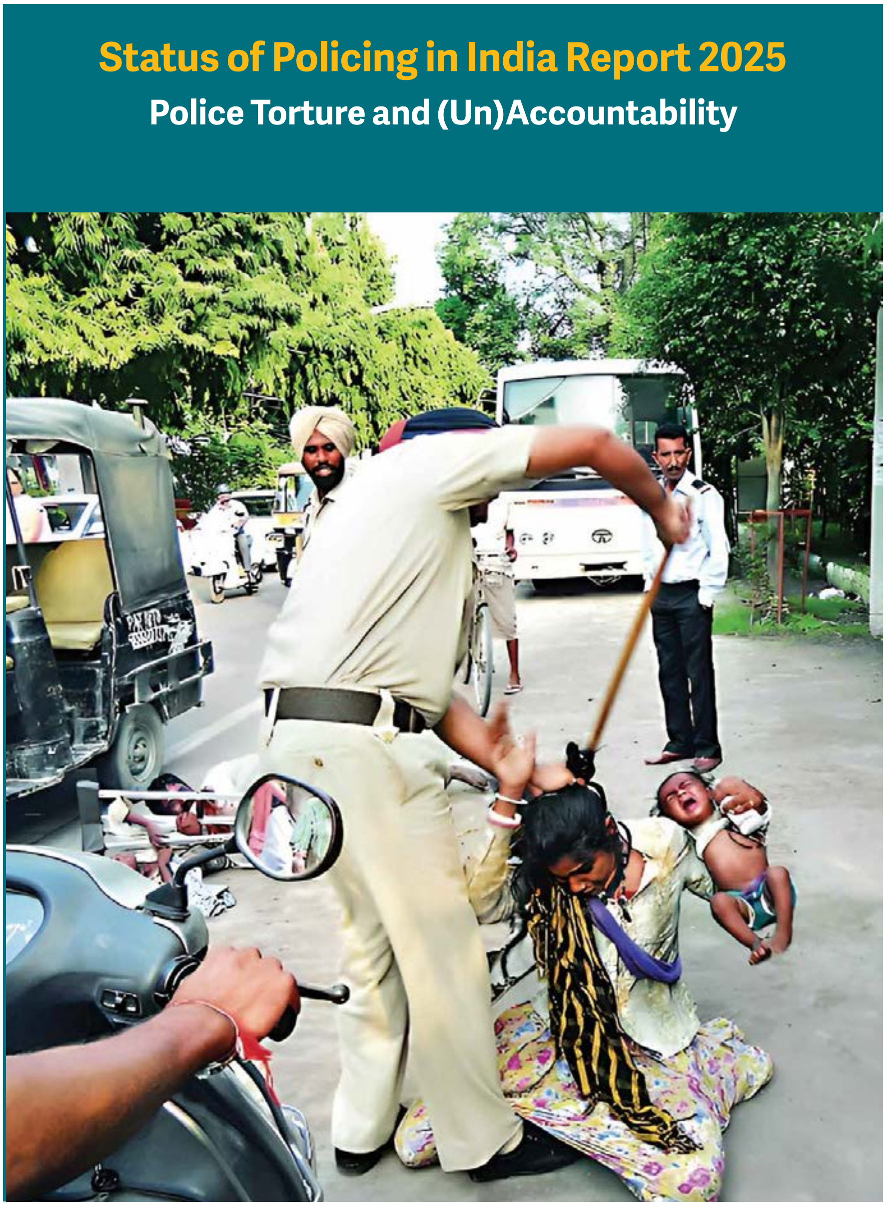

Jointly prepared by Common Cause and its academic partner, Lokniti-CSDS, the Status of Policing in India Report 2025: Police Torture and (Un)Accountability, explores the nature, causes and factors that contribute to the perpetuation of police violence and torture in India.

SPIR 2025 surveyed 8,276 police personnel at 82 locations such as police stations, police lines, and courts across 17 states and UTs. Responses were gathered from urban and rural areas, state capitals, district headquarters, and other small, medium and big towns. The respondents cover the police personnel of constabulary ranks, upper subordinates, and IPS officers. The study includes in-depth interviews with stakeholders who are supposed to act as safeguards against police torture—judges, lawyers and doctors

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Printed & Published by Vipul Mudgal on behalf of Common Cause, 5 Institutional Area, Nelson Mandela Road, Vasant Kunj, New Delhi 110070, Printed at PRINTWORKS, C-94, Okhla Industrial Area, Phase - 1, New Delhi - 110020
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