



USAID FUNDING IN INDIA

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

CONTEXT: The Finance Ministry's latest annual report has revealed that the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) funded seven projects in India, estimated at \$750 million during the financial year 2023-24. The report states that these projects are being implemented in partnership with the Government of India.



Financial Commitments

For the year 2023-24, USAID allocated \$97 million (approximately ₹825 crore) under the seven projects. The Department of Economic Affairs, which oversees bilateral funding arrangements, detailed these projects in its report.

Areas of Investment

USAID's funding for 2023-24 was not directed towards voter turnout initiatives but focused on:

- Agriculture and food security programs
- Water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) projects
- Renewable energy initiatives
- Disaster management and health programs

- Sustainable Forests and Climate Adaptation Programme
- Energy Efficiency Technology Commercialisation and Innovation Project

Political Controversy

A major political controversy erupted in India after the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE), led by Elon Musk, claimed to have canceled a \$21 million grant to India meant for increasing voter turnout. Adding to the debate, former U.S. President Donald Trump alleged that the previous Biden administration allocated \$21 million to India for boosting voter participation. External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar expressed concerns over these claims and assured that the government is investigating the matter.

The USAID Controversy and India's Political Tug-of-War

The controversy surrounding USAID's presence in India has fueled a divisive political discourse, eroding national confidence and India's global standing.

- The BJP and Congress have engaged in a political battle, accusing each other of foreign affiliations and USAID-backed projects.
- This debate, however, is largely driven by misinformation and misinterpretation, often influenced by the Trump administration's stance, which viewed international aid as wasteful.
- While the U.S. has its own strategic reasons for reassessing foreign aid, it is concerning that India's political parties are echoing these arguments without a deeper understanding.

The Role of USAID in India

USAID has historically supported development projects in India, many of which were undertaken in partnership with the Indian government.

- However, the lack of verifiable data on the impact of these initiatives has led to uninformed and prejudiced discussions.
- In today's globalized world, where countries compete for investment, technology, and talent, framing political opponents as foreign agents may serve as a propaganda tool but ultimately weakens India's aspirations as a global power.

Foreign Aid as a Soft Power Tool

Foreign aid is often used as a form of soft power, allowing stronger nations to influence domestic affairs of recipient countries.

- However, addressing this reality requires a responsible and measured approach, rather than an overreaction that could harm India's interests.
- India itself has transitioned into an aid provider, expanding its global role in development assistance.
- Since 2000, India's Ministry of External Affairs has overseen over \$48 billion in financial assistance to more than 65 countries, including grants, credit lines, and capacity-building programs (ORF analysis).

Political Influence and Foreign Funding Regulations

India's increasing role as a donor nation has coincided with stricter regulations on foreign funding within its own borders.

- These regulations, however, have been politicized, with entities aligned with the ruling government facing fewer restrictions, while others—even those involved in apolitical activities—encounter significant hurdles.
- While foreign influence is a valid concern, addressing it requires well-defined policies and transparency, rather than reactionary rhetoric.

A Strategic Approach to National Security

If the government suspects foreign funding is shaping India's political landscape, it must:

- Adopt a transparent approach rather than fueling polarized debates.
- Develop a clear policy framework for investigating foreign influence.
- Recognize that managing national security in a globally interconnected world is complex, requiring mature and strategic decision-making rather than chaotic public discourse.

India's response to foreign aid and influence must be based on strategic planning and informed policymaking, not political opportunism and misinformation.

FORMATION OF MAKHANA BOARD IN BIHAR

AGRICULTURE

CONTEXT: Following the announcement by Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman regarding the establishment of a Makhana Board in Bihar, Union Agriculture and Farmers' Welfare Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan visited Darbhanga district to engage with makhana producers.



Interaction with Farmers

During his visit, Mr. Chouhan:

- Interacted with makhana farmers and listened to their challenges.
- Accompanied them to a pond to participate in makhana seed sowing.
- Visited a makhana processing unit at the National Research Centre for Makhana, alongside Bihar Deputy Chief Minister Samrat Choudhary and Darbhanga MP Gopal Jee Thakur.

Government's Support for Makhana

Mr. Chouhan emphasized that the Central Government is formulating a framework for the Makhana Board based on farmers' inputs. He assured full support in:

- Marketing, branding, and packaging of makhana.
- Mechanization and research to improve farming efficiency.
- Value addition to ensure better earnings for farmers.

Tributes and Acknowledgments

Mr. Chouhan praised former Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee for establishing the National Makhana Research Centre in Darbhanga. He also credited Prime Minister Narendra Modi for initiating the Makhana Board to further support the industry.

Inclusion in Government Schemes

The Union Minister highlighted that makhana farmers cultivating on leased lands might be included in government schemes, ensuring better support and financial assistance.

Challenges and Future Plans

Recognizing makhana as a superfood rich in nutrition, Mr. Chouhan acknowledged the hardships faced by farmers in its cultivation. To ease production, the government is working on:

- Developing thornless makhana seeds.
- Introducing mechanization to reduce manual labor.
- Ensuring fair pricing and global promotion of makhana.

Global Ambitions for Makhana

Mr. Chouhan expressed confidence that makhana would gain international recognition in the superfoods market, ensuring prosperity for Indian farmers.

INACCURATE REPRESENTATION OF OBCs IN TAMIL NADU'S RURAL LOCAL BODIES

INDIAN POLITY

CONTEXT: The recently released report, Status of Devolution to Panchayats in States, has surprised experts by presenting questionable data on the representation of Other Backward Classes (OBCs) in Tamil Nadu's Rural Local Bodies (RLBs). The figures reported do not accurately reflect the actual OBC share in village panchayats, panchayat unions, and district panchayats.



Findings of the Report

Commissioned by the Union Ministry of Panchayati Raj and prepared by the Indian Institute of Public Administration (IIPA), the report provides the following data on OBC representation in Tamil Nadu's RLBs for 2024:

- **Overall OBC representation – 12.39%**
- **Village panchayats – 12.16%**
- **Panchayat unions – 15.42%**
- **District panchayats – 17.25%**

The report also highlights the women's reservation across the three levels of RLBs:

- **Overall women's quota – 57.3%**
- **Village panchayats – 57.2%**
- **Panchayat unions – 58.07%**
- **District panchayats – 55.41%**

These statistics were presented in tables titled "Representation of Weaker Sections and Women in Panchayats" and "Representative Democracy in India and Affirmative Action."

Methodology and Concerns Over Accuracy

Prof. V.N. Alok, the study coordinator from IIPA, stated that the figures were based on data provided by respective State governments and his own updated calculations from 2013. However, he clarified that the study was focused on devolution rather than affirmative action.

Critics have pointed out flaws in the methodology, particularly regarding the women's reservation figures. It appears that the horizontal quota for women has been incorrectly merged with SC/ST reservations, leading to a miscalculation of OBC representation.

Expert Reactions and Disagreement

G. Palanithurai, a veteran academician and former chief adviser for a similar 2015-16 study by the Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS), strongly disagreed with the report's findings. He questioned the credibility of the OBC representation figures, stating that they do not appear accurate or reliable.

CONCLUSION

The discrepancies in the report raise serious concerns about the representation of OBCs in Tamil Nadu's local governance. Experts suggest a re-evaluation of the data to ensure accurate representation and fair policy decisions.

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EXPORT OF UNAPPROVED DRUG COMBINATIONS HALTED

SOCIAL JUSTICE: HEALTH

CONTEXT: The Health Ministry has taken strict action against Aveo Pharmaceuticals, Mumbai, after reports surfaced about the export of unapproved drug combinations containing Tapentadol and Carisoprodol to West African countries. In response, the Ministry has issued a stop activity order, along with the immediate withdrawal of export No-Objection Certificates (NoC) and manufacturing licenses for these drug combinations.



Understanding Tapentadol and Carisoprodol

- Tapentadol is an opioid pain reliever used to treat moderate to severe pain.
- Carisoprodol is a muscle relaxant that acts on the brain and spinal cord to relieve pain.
- While both drugs are individually approved by the Central Drugs Standard Control Organisation (CDSCO), their combination is not authorized in India.
- Neither Tapentadol nor Carisoprodol is included in India's Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances (NDPS) list.

Regulatory Crackdown on Pharmaceutical Non-Compliance

To strengthen regulatory compliance in the pharmaceutical sector, the CDSCO and State Drug Regulators launched risk-based inspections in

December 2022.

• Key findings:

- 905 manufacturing units inspected
- 694 regulatory actions taken, including stop production orders, stop testing orders, license suspensions/cancellations, warning letters, and show-cause notices

Strict Enforcement by Maharashtra FDA

The Maharashtra FDA took additional steps on Saturday:

- Issued a stop production order to Aveo Pharmaceuticals.
- Directed State Drugs Control Authorities and Zonal Offices to immediately withdraw all export NoCs and manufacturing licenses granted for any combination of Tapentadol and Carisoprodol.

Conclusion

The Indian government's decisive action underscores its commitment to regulating the pharmaceutical sector, ensuring drug safety, and preventing the export of unauthorized medications.

FIRST DETAILED GEOLOGICAL MAP OF THE MOON'S SOUTH POLE

SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

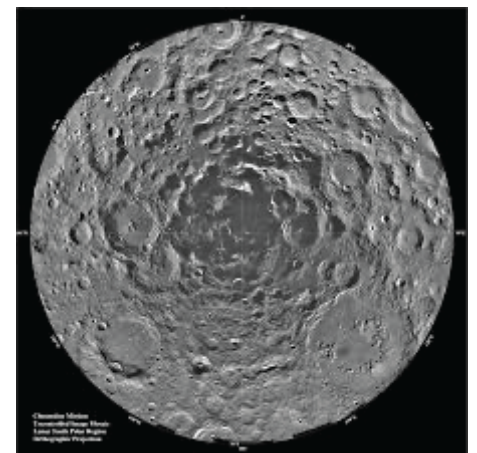
CONTEXT: Astronomers are analyzing the first-ever detailed geological map of the moon's south polar region, where India's Chandrayaan-3 lunar module, Vikram, landed on August 23, 2023.

- The map is expected to provide new insights into the moon's origin and evolution.
- It was created by researchers from PRL Ahmedabad, Panjab University Chandigarh, and ISRO's Laboratory for Electro-Optics Systems, Bengaluru.
- Data from the Pragyan rover's nine-day mission was used to study the chemical composition of the lunar regolith (loose rock fragments and dust covering the surface).

Confirming the Moon's Magma Ocean

Findings from Chandrayaan-3 have confirmed long-held suspicions that the moon harbors an underground ocean of molten rock, or primordial magma.

- Earlier data from missions like Apollo, Surveyor, Luna, and Chang'e 3 hinted at a sea of lava beneath the surface.



- However, previous landings were near the lunar equator and mid-latitudes, leaving the actual extent of magma unknown.
- Chandrayaan-3, landing 630 km from the south pole, was the first mission to land in a high-latitude polar region, making it ideal for solving this mystery.
- In September 2024, scientists from PRL announced that the Alpha Particle X-ray Spectrometer aboard Pragyan detected magma under the landing site, proving that ancient molten lava extended across the entire moon.

Mapping Vikram's Landing Site

A new map of Vikram's landing site, published in the journal *Advances in Space Research* on January 20, reveals an undulating landscape of highlands and flat plains.

- Scientists identified that debris covering the Chandrayaan-3 landing zone originated from the Schomberger crater, a primary impact site.

A Common Origin of Earth and Moon

Analysis of the region suggests it is about 3.7 billion years old, coinciding with the emergence of microbial life on Earth.

- The Earth and Moon share similar evolutionary histories, evident in:
 - The tilt of the Moon's orbit in relation to Earth's rotation.
 - Their alignment to the ecliptic plane of the solar system.
 - Their complementary geochemistries, sharing common isotopes.
- Astronomers believe that 4.5 billion years ago, a Mars-sized planetary body collided with young Earth, ejecting debris that eventually solidified into the Moon.
- The Moon's surface, pummeled by asteroids, has preserved some of the oldest impact craters, including the South Pole-Aitken Basin, where Vikram landed.

Studying Crater History

Lunar craters hold immense significance for astrogeologists because:

- The airless and arid lunar environment preserves craters for millennia, unlike on Earth.
- Impact basins provide original records of space rock collisions from the solar system's formation.
- Moon craters help scientists estimate the age of planetary surfaces across the solar system.
- However, human activities on the Moon could disturb this valuable data.

Littering the Lunar Surface

Since 1959, when the Soviet Luna 2 probe crash-landed on the Moon, numerous robotic and crewed spacecraft from various countries have left waste and debris behind.

- Scientists remain uncertain about how landers, rovers, and astronauts have affected the lunar regolith and exosphere.
- The lunar exosphere (a thin atmosphere formed by solar wind and space rock collisions) is at risk of contamination.
- The exhaust fumes from spacecraft landings may alter the distribution of lunar ice reserves, making scientific observations inaccurate.

Future Concerns Over Lunar Colonization

As more missions head to the Moon and mining operations begin, concerns over:

- Environmental preservation,
- Scientific accuracy, and
- The long-term impact of human activity will grow.

This geological mapping effort underscores the importance of balancing exploration with conservation as humanity expands its lunar ambitions.

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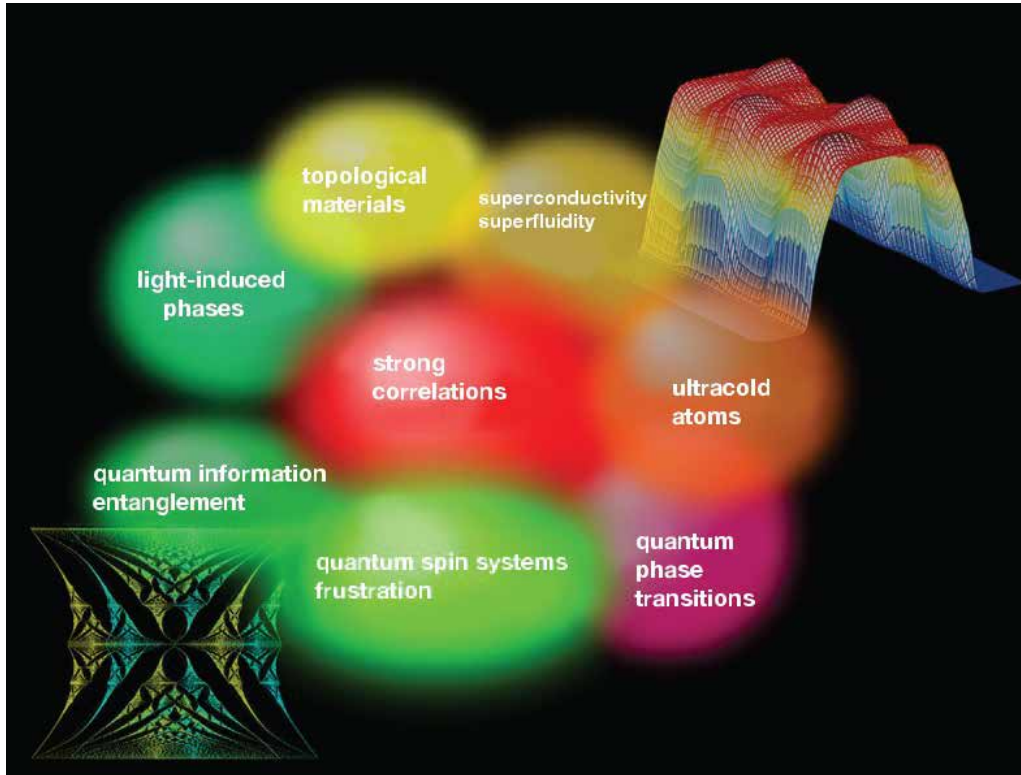
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UNDERSTANDING CONDENSED MATTER PHYSICS

SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

CONTEXT: Condensed matter physics is one of the largest and most active fields in modern physics.

- It focuses on studying the properties and behavior of solid and liquid matter.
- Scientists in this field examine large collections of strongly interacting particles, unlike in gases where interactions are optional and infrequent.



Key Subfields of Condensed Matter Physics
Due to its vast scope, condensed matter physics has several specialized branches, including:

1. Electronic Condensed Matter

- Studies electron behavior in solids and liquids.
- Includes research on semiconductors, crucial for modern electronics.

2. Magnetic Condensed Matter

- Explores different types of magnets and magnetism.

3. Soft Matter Physics

- Investigates materials that are easily deformed but not broken, such as biological tissues.

4. Nanoscience

- Focuses on extremely small objects that exhibit both classical and quantum properties.
- The 2023 Nobel Prize in Chemistry was awarded for work in this field.

5. Superfluidity

- Studies materials that flow without resistance, like electrons in superconductors.

Technological Advancements from Condensed Matter Research

Research in condensed matter physics has led to:

- **Modern computing**
- **Optical fibers**
- **Lasers**
- **Nanofabrication**
- **New chemical synthesis methods for advanced materials**

Quantum Condensed Matter and Future Technologies

Recent research has expanded into quantum condensed matter, where quantum physics enables unusual behaviors not seen in macroscopic solids and liquids.

- Findings in this area are paving the way for next-generation technologies, including quantum computers and novel electronic devices.



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SUPREME COURT GRANTS INTERIM PROTECTION TO RANVEER ALLAHBADIA

INDIAN POLITY

CONTEXT: On February 18, the Supreme Court granted interim protection from arrest to podcaster and influencer Ranveer Allahbadia in connection with multiple FIRs registered against him over remarks made on the YouTube show "India Got Latent."



- A Bench comprising Justices Surya Kant and N. Kotiswar Singh imposed strict conditions, including:
 - Prohibiting Allahbadia and his associates from posting any content on social media until further orders.
 - Directing him to surrender his passport to the police.
- These conditions contradict previous Supreme Court rulings, which warn against excessive restrictions that unduly curtail personal liberty while granting interim relief.

Why Did Allahbadia Approach the Supreme Court?

Allahbadia faced multiple FIRs registered in Maharashtra, Assam, and Rajasthan under various laws, including:

- **Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS), 2023**
 - **Information Technology Act, 2000**
 - **Indecent Representation of Women (Prohibition) Act, 1986**
- These charges alleged that he promoted obscenity and engaged in

sexually explicit discussions.

- Allahbadia approached the Supreme Court seeking:
 - Consolidation of the FIRs to avoid facing multiple investigations.
 - Interim protection from arrest, similar to anticipatory bail.
- Under Article 32 of the Constitution, such petitions are considered to:
 - Protect fundamental rights.
 - Prevent arbitrary police action.
- The Supreme Court often clubs multiple FIRs or allows proceedings under a single FIR while staying the others.
- In *Parteek Bansal v. State of Rajasthan (2022)*, the Court criticized multiple FIRs for the same offense, recognizing it as a form of harassment and misuse of state machinery.

How Is Interim Relief Granted?

There is no fixed law governing the conditions for interim relief in criminal cases. Judges have the discretion to impose conditions based on factors such as:

1. **Flight risk** – Whether the accused might abscond.
2. **Intimidation of witnesses** – Whether the accused might threaten witnesses.
3. **Tampering with evidence** – Whether the accused might interfere with the investigation.

Common bail conditions include:

- Surrendering the passport.
- Paying a high bail bond to ensure participation in the investigation.
- Making periodic appearances before authorities.

However, the Supreme Court has cautioned against excessive restrictions, such as:

- Sharing Google Maps location PIN (ruled unconstitutional in *Frank Vitus v. NCB, 2024*).
- Forcing an accused to reside in a specific locality.

In *Satender Kumar Antil v. CBI (2022)*, the Supreme Court ruled that "impossible" bail conditions defeat the purpose of granting bail.

Is This Case Different?

The condition preventing Allahbadia from airing any show on YouTube or other media platforms amounts to a gag order.

- This falls under the doctrine of "prior restraint", which prohibits speech before it occurs.
- Courts have consistently ruled against prior restraints on free speech, except in exceptional circumstances.

- In 2021, the Supreme Court stayed a Kerala High Court ruling that restricted activist Rehana Fathima from posting on social media.
 - While granting interim bail to Alt News co-founder Mohammed Zubair in 2021, a Supreme Court Bench led by Justice D.Y. Chandrachud rejected a request to prohibit him from tweeting, stating:
 - Such restrictions create a "chilling effect" on free speech.
 - A gag order would violate the fundamental right to practice one's profession.
- Thus, Allahbadia's case raises concerns about free speech and judicial overreach in imposing bail conditions.

THE FUTURE OF THE GLOBAL LABOUR MARKET

INDIAN ECONOMY

CONTEXT: The global labour market is not future-ready, with a significant transformation in skills expected by 2030.

- A FICCI-KPMG study estimates a global talent shortage of over 85.2 million people, leading to \$8.45 trillion in unrealized annual revenue.
- India has a unique opportunity to capture a large share of this economic potential.

Key Geographies and Workforce Demand

Workforce mobility will be particularly crucial in three major regions:

- **Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC):** High demand for manufacturing and construction workers.
- **Europe (including the UK):** More reliance on service-sector workers due to an aging population.
- **Australia:** Growing need for skilled labour in various industries.

Across all these sectors, there is a rising demand for skills in automation, AI, big data, IoT, blockchain, resource efficiency, and sustainability.



Barriers to Global Workforce Mobility

Despite opportunities, several barriers hinder the efficient migration of skilled workers:

- **Regulatory and Immigration Barriers:** Complex visa processes and work permit restrictions.
- **Recruitment Malpractices & Trafficking:** Exploitative recruitment practices harm migrant workers.
- **Policy Barriers & Skill Mismatches:** Non-recognition of Indian degrees in some countries, especially in medicine.
- **Language & Cultural Barriers:** Challenges in integration affect productivity.

India's Efforts to Overcome Challenges

The Government of India has introduced several initiatives to address these issues:

- **Bilateral Agreements & FTAs:** Agreements with GCC nations and the UAE to protect Indian workers' rights.
- **Skill Development Programs:** Aligning workforce skills with global market needs.
- **Digital Workforce Support:** Online recruitment platforms ensuring legal protections against fraud.

Strategic Measures for India

To capitalize on the growing demand for skilled labour, India must focus on:

1. **Sector-Specific Skill Training** – Aligning workforce skills with the needs of target geographies.
2. **Regulation of Recruitment Practices** – Stricter oversight on recruitment agencies to prevent exploitation.
3. **Recognition of Qualifications** – Mutual recognition of academic and professional qualifications for easier workforce integration.
4. **Incentivizing Public-Private Partnerships** – Encouraging private sector participation in skill training and job facilitation.
5. **Promoting Circular Migration & Mobility** – Temporary work visas and rotational workforce models to balance labour demand.

India's Advantage in Global Labour Markets

Despite shifting immigration policies, India remains a preferred supplier of skilled labour due to:

- A low level of hostility towards Indian workers in most global markets.
- A growing Indian diaspora in regions like Australia.
- Government efforts to curb illegal migration, enhancing India's reputation as a reliable workforce provider.

The Road to 'Viksit Bharat'

India's ability to tap into the \$8.45 trillion in unrealized global economic potential will directly influence its growth trajectory.

- Arvind Panagariya, Chairman of the 16th Finance Commission, predicts India's GDP could reach between \$6.5 trillion and \$9 trillion by 2030.
- By ensuring strategic workforce deployment, India can move closer to the \$9 trillion target and realize its vision of becoming a developed nation (Viksit Bharat).

HARSH WORKING CONDITIONS OF INDUSTRIAL WORKERS

INDIAN ECONOMY

CONTEXT: A recent research project in Ludhiana, Punjab, involved interviews with migrant industrial workers. These workers, employed in factories producing garments, auto components, and other products, often worked 11-12 hours daily. During peak production periods, they endured continuous work without breaks. Their non-working hours were primarily spent on cooking and commuting, leaving little time for rest or personal activities.



The Misconception of Long Working Hours

Some corporate leaders in India have advocated for longer working hours, seemingly unaware that the majority of Indian workers already work excessively long hours under informal conditions. According to the 2023-24 Periodic Labour Force Survey, only 21.7% of India's workforce held salaried positions, while the rest were either casual workers or self-employed. Even among salaried workers, nearly half lacked job security, paid leave, or social benefits.

Dependence on Cheap Labour Over Innovation

Indian industry primarily relies on cheap labour rather than technological advancements for competitiveness. In contrast, developed nations have transitioned from extracting surplus through extended working hours to optimizing productivity through

innovation and efficient management. The International Labour Organization (ILO) reported in 2024 that the average weekly working hours in India were 46.7, significantly higher than the 38 hours in the United States and 36.6 hours in Japan.

The Shift from Organized to Unorganized Sectors

Large businesses in India have facilitated a shift from regulated, organized industries to unorganized sectors where labour laws are weak or nonexistent. Small, unregistered enterprises employing fewer than 10 workers dominate industrial clusters in cities like Coimbatore and Ludhiana. Over 70% of India's manufacturing workforce—around 68 million workers in 2021-22—is employed in such informal settings.

Exploitation of Small Enterprises

Unlike Japan, where small and large firms share mutually beneficial relationships, India's larger firms often exploit smaller suppliers. Delayed payments, refusal to adjust prices for rising costs, and lack of financial support weaken small enterprises, leading to intense competition and underpayment. Furthermore, these firms face increasing challenges from cheaper imports and inadequate access to credit.

Increasing Reliance on Contract Workers

Factories increasingly employ contract workers instead of directly hired employees. Since 2011-12, 56% of new workers in the factory sector have been contract workers. These employees, often migrant labourers, work under precarious conditions with low wages and no employment benefits. Their economic vulnerability stems from social disadvantages, lack of assets, and absence of social security. While wages have remained suppressed, corporate profits have soared, with the share of profit in the factory sector rising from 31.6% in 2019-20 to 46.4% in 2021-22.

The Garment Industry's Stagnation

Despite India's vast labour force, its garment industry has failed to dominate global markets. Over the past two decades, India's share in global garment exports has stagnated at 3.1%, while countries like China, Bangladesh, and

Vietnam have excelled. Research suggests that India's garment industry suffers from a reluctance to modernize, with business owners relying on low wages rather than investing in technology and innovation.

The Downside of Cheap Labour Dependence

India's dependence on cheap labour has hindered growth across industries, including the IT sector. Low wages and long working hours have suppressed domestic purchasing power, limiting market expansion. The lack of investment in innovation and modernization has further weakened India's competitive edge globally.

The Urgency for Change

Stretching workers to their limits for short-term profits is unsustainable. In the long run, an overworked and impoverished workforce will stifle industrial growth, leaving businesses struggling for innovation and expansion. Industry leaders must recognize the necessity of improving working conditions, investing in technology, and fostering fair labour practices to ensure long-term economic progress.





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