

2024

DAILY CURRENT AFFAIRS





Daily Current Affairs from *The Hindu*, *The Indian Express* & *The Assam Tribune*

23rd Feb 2025

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1. Doing the Right Thing

Context: The Election Commission of India (ECI) has been the cornerstone of free and fair elections in India. However, the appointment process of election commissioners (ECs) has been questioned for years, raising serious concerns about the autonomy and impartiality of this vital institution. In India, several civil society organizations (SCOs), have been advocating for a transparent and bipartisan appointment process to the election commission to ensure its independence and impartiality. Some notable organizations among these are Association for Democratic Reforms, Internet Freedom Foundation, Common Cause, etc.

Key points

- **Historical Context:** Organizations like the Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR), Common Cause, and Lok Satta Movement have campaigned for reforms since 2015. BJP leader L.K. Advani also emphasized the need for bipartisan appointments.
- **Legal Challenges and Judicial Response:** *ADR's 2015 Petition* - Challenged exclusive executive control over EC appointments under Article 324(2). Referred to a Constitution Bench in 2018 but no expedited hearings.
Supreme Court's 2023 Ruling (Anoop Baranwal vs Union of India) - Directed the creation of a selection committee comprising the Prime Minister (PM), Leader of Opposition (LoP), and Chief Justice of India (CJI) until Parliament legislated a law. Highlighted Parliament's 70-year failure to enact legislation under Article 324(2).
- **2023 Act and its Implications:** Replaced the CJI with a Union Cabinet Minister nominated by the PM in the selection panel. Committee composition: PM + Cabinet Minister + LoP.
Criticisms - Partisan Bias: Reduced judicial oversight, granting the ruling party a 2:1 majority in appointments. Undermined SC's Intent: Overturned the spirit of the 2023 Supreme Court ruling. Optics: Raised concerns about the ECI's perceived independence.
- **Challenges:** *Executive Overreach* - 2023 Act perpetuates ruling party dominance in EC appointments.
Public Perception - Erosion of trust in the ECI's independence due to partisan appointments.
- **Implications for Indian Democracy:** *Threat to Electoral Integrity* - Risks of biased oversight in elections.
Institutional Erosion - Weakens the ECI's constitutional mandate as an impartial arbiter.
Precedent - Executive's ability to override judicial recommendations sets a dangerous template for other autonomous bodies.
- **Way ahead:** *Restore CJI's Role* - Reintroduce the CJI into the selection panel to balance executive influence.
Legislative Reform - Enact a bipartisan law aligning with global standards (e.g., UK's cross-party model).
Judicial Urgency - Supreme Court must prioritize cases critical to democratic institutions.
Public Awareness - Civil society must sustain pressure for transparent processes.
- **Conclusion:** The integrity of India's electoral process hinges on the independence and impartiality of the Election Commission, real and visible. Embracing a bipartisan and neutral collegium-based appointment system, drawing from global best practices, would not only fortify the ECI's autonomy but also bolster public confidence in the democratic process.

2. Indian industry needs innovation, not mindless toil

Context: The recent debate surrounding corporate leaders urging Indians to work longer hours sheds light on the structural issues in India's labour market. While these appeals might stem from a desire for economic growth, they fail to acknowledge the harsh realities of India's predominantly informal workforce. The over-reliance on cheap labour, rather than technological advancement, continues to hinder India's long-term industrial progress. Amid these debates, it is important to examine the implications of this labour-dependent strategy, highlighting its impact on productivity, innovation, and economic sustainability.

Key points

- **India's Workforce:** India's workforce is overwhelmingly informal, with only 21.7% of workers in salaried jobs, according to the 2023-24 Periodic Labour Force Survey. India's workforce is overwhelmingly informal, with only 21.7% of workers in salaried jobs, according to the 2023-24 Periodic Labour Force Survey.
- **Aspects of India's Industrial Structure:**
 - Cheap Labour as a Competitive Strategy* - One of the most striking aspects of India's industrial structure is its heavy reliance on cheap labour as the primary source of competitive advantage.
 - The Evolution of Labour Exploitation* - Throughout history, economies have used labour-intensive methods to drive industrial growth, particularly in their early stages. During the Industrial Revolution in Britain, factories exploited workers by enforcing excessively long hours under inhumane conditions.
 - The Structural Shift Toward Informality* - Indian businesses have systematically shifted away from the organised sector, where labour laws ensure minimum wages, job security, and worker benefits, to the unorganised sector, where such regulations are largely absent.
 - The Rise of Contract Labour and Migrant Workforces* - Over half (56%) of all workers who joined India's factory sector after 2011-12 were employed on a contract basis rather than as permanent employees.
- **Way forward:**
 - Invest in Technology and Automation* - Embracing advanced manufacturing technologies, artificial intelligence, and automation can boost productivity without extending working hours.
 - Prioritise Skill Development* - Enhancing workforce skills through education and vocational training will create a more capable and efficient labour force.
 - Strengthen Labour Laws and Worker Protections* - Enforcing fair wages, job security, and social benefits will not only improve living standards but also stimulate domestic consumption.
 - Encourage Formalisation of Enterprises* - Incentivising businesses to operate within the formal sector will promote accountability, better wages, and stable employment opportunities.
- **Conclusion:** India's continued dependence on cheap labour as a competitive strategy. While it has provided short-term gains for industries, it has stifled innovation, weakened domestic demand, and limited global competitiveness. If Indian industry is to thrive in the 21st century, it must move beyond exploitative labour practices and adopt a more forward-thinking approach that prioritises productivity, innovation, and worker welfare. The shift from a labour-intensive model to a technology-driven economy will be critical in ensuring long-term industrial and economic growth.

3. Talent shortage — global challenge, India's opportunity

Context: The global labour market is undergoing a significant transformation, and it is evident that the skills required in 2030 will be markedly different from those needed today. This shift presents both a challenge and an opportunity for India. While the world faces an impending shortage of skilled workers, India is uniquely positioned to leverage its workforce potential. However, to fully capitalise on this opportunity, India must address various challenges, including regulatory barriers, skill mismatches, and immigration restrictions.

Key points

- **Overview:** The global labour market is undergoing a significant transformation, and it is evident that the skills required in 2030 will be markedly different from those needed today.
- **Geographic Regions and Sectoral Demands:** *GCC and Australia* - These regions have a strong demand for workers in manufacturing and construction, sectors that require large-scale labour mobility.
Europe - As one of the oldest post-industrial societies, Europe has a growing need for service-sector workers, particularly in healthcare, due to its aging population.
Emerging Sectors - Across all regions, there is a rising demand for expertise in automation, artificial intelligence (AI), big data, predictive analytics, the Internet of Things (IoT), blockchain, and sustainability.
- **Barriers to Workforce Mobility:** *Regulatory and Immigration Barriers* – Complex visa processes and stringent work permit regulations restrict skilled migration.
Recruitment Malpractices and Trafficking – Exploitative recruitment practices and human trafficking pose risks to migrant workers, a concern highlighted by Prime Minister Narendra Modi.
Policy Barriers and Skill Mismatches – Many Indian degrees, particularly in medicine, are not universally recognized, leading to underemployment or unemployment of skilled professionals.
Language and Cultural Barriers – **Integration challenges**, such as language proficiency and cultural adaptation, affect workforce productivity.
- **Strategies to Enhance Workforce Mobility:** *Bilateral and Free Trade Agreements (FTAs)* - Agreements with GCC nations and other key markets aim to protect the rights of Indian workers and facilitate their smooth migration.
Skill Development Programs - Government initiatives focus on aligning workforce training with global market demands.
Digital Platforms for Workforce Support - Online recruitment systems are designed to prevent exploitation and protect migrant workers, especially in the GCC region.
- **Conclusion:** As the global labour market undergoes a transformation, India stands at a crucial juncture. With a rapidly growing workforce, the country has a unique opportunity to fill the talent shortage projected for 2030. However, achieving this goal requires a coordinated effort involving government policies, skill development initiatives, and international collaborations. By addressing regulatory challenges, streamlining workforce mobility, and leveraging its young and skilled population, India can secure a significant share of the global labour market and drive its own economic growth in the process.

4. Why does VOC port need an outer harbour?

Context: The ₹7,056-crore outer harbour project at VOC port in Thoothukudi is being revived after facing delays for over 20 years. The size of container ships has increased significantly, with some extending over 400 meters and carrying 22,000 TEUs. VOC port can currently handle only half this capacity, making an outer harbour necessary for handling larger vessels. Modernizing the inner harbour alone is not sufficient to meet future demand.

Key points

- **Alignment with the Sagarmala Scheme:** The outer harbour will allow VOC port to handle 14,000-TEU Neo Panamax and other large vessels. This will help VOC port leverage its proximity to international sea routes and become a key trade hub. By 2044, container traffic at the port is expected to grow to 8-4.3 million TEUs from 0.74 million TEUs in 2023-24.
- **Delays and Infrastructure Challenges:** The inner harbour's draught is being increased from 14.2 m to 15.5 m to accommodate larger ships. Plans for a new transshipment port at Kanyakumari have been delayed due to multiple factors. The lack of a backup area in the inner harbour limits its potential as a container yard.
- **Potential Impact of the Sri Lanka Crisis:** The economic crisis in Sri Lanka has affected port operations in Colombo, creating an opportunity for VOC port. If developed on time, VOC port could attract more mainline vessels and transshipment business. The second phase of the outer harbour project will enable handling vessels requiring an 18-m draught.
- **Reducing Transshipment Costs:** 65% of containers from Thoothukudi are currently transshipped at Colombo. Exporters and importers pay \$150 per TEU and face a week-long transit delay due to this dependency. Developing VOC port as an alternative to Colombo will reduce costs and save foreign exchange.
- **Industrial Growth and Future Prospects:** Several industries, including solar manufacturing, vehicle production, and space technology, have emerged near the port. The increase in cargo volume from these industries highlights the need for port expansion. The outer harbour project has faced multiple delays since its approval in 2005, resulting in lost economic opportunities.
- **V. O. Chidambaranar (VOC) Port:** V. O. Chidambaranar (VOC) Port is in Thoothukudi, Tamil Nadu. It is one of India's 12 major ports and plays a crucial role in international trade. The port handles container, bulk, and liquid cargo, supporting various industries. VOC Port is strategically located near international sea routes, making it a potential transshipment hub. It currently handles ships with a draught of up to 14.2 meters, with plans to expand.
- **Sagarmala project:** The Sagarmala project aims to modernize the port for handling larger vessels. It will serve industries such as solar energy, automobiles, and space technology.

Q. Discuss the significance of the V.O. Chidambaranar (VOC) Port in India's maritime trade and its potential as a transshipment hub. What challenges does the port face in handling larger vessels, and how can infrastructure development address these challenges? (V.O. ৰ গুৰুত্ব ব্যাখ্যা কৰা। ভাৰতৰ সামুদ্রিক বাণিজ্যত চিদাম্বৰনাৰ (ভিঅ "চি) বন্দৰ আৰু ট্ৰেন্সশ্বিপমেণ্ট হাব হিচাপে ইয়াৰ সম্ভাৱনা। বৃহৎ জাহাজ পৰিচালনা কৰাৰ ক্ষেত্ৰত বন্দৰটোৱে কি প্ৰত্যাহ্বানৰ সন্মুখীন হয়, আৰু আন্তঃগাঁথনি বিকাশে এই প্ৰত্যাহ্বানবোৰ কেনেদৰে মোকাবিলা কৰিব পাৰে?)