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# **Daily Current Affairs**

RAO'S IAS



## **Topics of the day:**

- 1 Israel's brutality in Gaza, India's pin-drop silence**
- 2 Safety net for the gig workers**
- 3 On Samsung workers' right to unionise**
- 4 India, and Russia discuss new initiatives for the Northern Sea Route**
- 5 GRAP Stage 1 plan kicks in New Delhi**
- 6 Sept. wholesale food prices leapt 9.5%**

## 1. Israel's brutality in Gaza, India's pin-drop silence

- **Context:** October 7, 2024, marked one year of Israel's war on Gaza and its relentless bombing of the Gaza Strip killing nearly 42,000 people. The prime victims of the heartless war have been civilians, women and children in Gaza, the West Bank and now Lebanon; 16,705 Palestinian children have been killed, the largest in any conflict in one year.

### New Delhi response:

- It hardly provoked any reaction in India. Even though the war itself was the revenge for the Hamas attack, what Israel has done is even more horrific.
- It's unsettling to see how India is staying silent about the heavy attacks on Gaza, with the area being destroyed and people forced to flee repeatedly from a country like India which once led the world's largest anti-colonial movement and stood by so many nations in their fight for freedom. India used to be a strong supporter of Palestine and was one of the first non-Arab countries to recognise the PLO, but now it seems more aligned with Israel and its main ally, the U.S.

### Protests in India:

- Kerala has seen two big rallies, in Malappuram and Kozhikode. Other than these, and a few small protests in Kolkata and Chennai, there has hardly been any in the different States. India, it seems, is not

outraged at how Israel is treating the Palestinians.

- But the government curbed these protests, Cases have been filed against people for supporting or organising protests against the genocide in Palestine

### Driven by Elite:

- The Hindutva right's decision to downplay the Palestinian cause and support the Zionists in Israel is a key reason why there's so little concern over the issue. This shift seems to be largely shaped by the views of the political elite.
- The register of Hindu nationalism deliberately sees Palestine as a Muslim issue, which means any support for it can be condemned as appeasement of a community.
- Left parties have unequivocally condemned Israel, organised a few modest protests, and also supported the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) campaign.
- Not only parties but the Civil society's response in India was also muted.

### Reason:

- India's political interest is focused on the US by making every effort to make close with the US and vice versa. The US's interest is to counter China and promote it as a World power. This deeply concerns the upper and middle-class people of India who care about India's position globally.
- Even though the television channels covered the Israel-Palestine war in the past days, the

coverage is shown from the perspective of Israel's concern which invoked the prism of fighting terrorism and sidelining the core political issues. This makes the elite take a shift in their interest by ignoring the twin frames of colonisation and decolonisation driving this conflict.

- As a result, some argue that India should support this stance, given our own experience with cross-border terrorist attacks. However, the issue in Palestine didn't begin on October 7; it has a much deeper historical context that both liberal and right-wing apologists, whether in the West or India, are hesitant to acknowledge.
- Israel takes the Hamas attack as an excuse and doing what it wants with the strong US support which has sought to control West Asia through Israel — their indispensable outpost in the Muslim world.

#### **Ties with Israel:**

- However, India used to balance its support for Israel with concern for the Palestinians' situation. That's no longer the case. This shift reflects India's increasing technological, defence, and commercial ties with Israel. The partnership between the two countries has grown stronger, especially after Israel's military assistance to India during the 1999 Kargil war with Pakistan.

**The level of violence Israel is inflicting on Palestine is truly shocking. If we're not angered by their lack of humanity, the illegal occupation, annexation, and ethnic**

**cleansing happening there—especially when we're watching it unfold live on TV and social media—then we're also part of the problem. It is as if the moral architecture of liberalism and human rights has ceased to exist.**

## **2. Safety net for the gig workers**

- **Context:** The Union Ministry of Labour and Employment is drafting a national law to incorporate gig workers into social security schemes, offering benefits such as health insurance and retirement savings
- The government is expected to require aggregators to contribute 1%-2% of their revenue to establish a social security fund, which would provide health insurance and other benefits. The government is also revising the definition of gig and migrant workers to make them more inclusive and reflective of current employment realities.
- It is also working to create a social security fund for gig workers.
- A dispute resolution mechanism will also be introduced.

#### **Gig workers:**

- Gig workers are independent contractors, online platform workers, contract firm workers, on-call workers and temporary workers. Gig workers enter into formal agreements with on-demand companies to provide services to the company's clients.
- Aggregator companies that employ gig and platform workers will be asked to take the

lead in registering their workers on the portal. Workers registered on the Labour Ministry's e-Shram portal are eligible for life and accidental insurance, along with other benefits.

### Labour codes:

- In 2019 four labour codes were introduced, which merge 29 central labour laws into broad codes namely
  - Wages code
  - Social security
  - Industrial relation code
  - Occupational safety health working conditions.
- The only code where gig and platform workers are mentioned is the Social Security Code 2020.
- gig and platform workers are perceived as a subset of informal sector workers. Like informal workers gig workers also register themselves under the e-Shram portal through self-declaration.

### Definition of worker:

- The problem with how gig workers are treated stems from the Social Security Code 2020, which defines them outside the traditional employer-employee relationship. This means gig workers are seen as independent contractors, keeping them in a grey area. The Code puts them in the informal sector but doesn't clarify their real employment status.

- There's also a major gap in benefits. Formal workers get 26 weeks of paid maternity leave under the Maternity Benefit Act, of 1961, while informal workers, including gig workers, only receive a small cash benefit of ₹5,000-₹10,000. So, the Code only provides gig workers with limited social security schemes, not the same protections as formal workers.
- Also minimum wage protection, occupational safety and health are missing for the gig workers. Also, they are not covered under the dispute resolution mechanism

### Core issue:

- If the Union Ministry of Labour and Employment truly wants to protect gig workers, it needs to clearly define the employment relationship in gig and platform work. This means taking away the facade created by "aggregators" and recognizing them as employers. Establishing this clear relationship is crucial for improving the situation for gig workers.
- A significant example is the U.K. Supreme Court's ruling on the Uber case in 2021, which classified Uber as an employer and its drivers as "workers," requiring Uber to comply with existing labour laws. By clearly defining the employment relationship, gig workers can be included under the proposed

four labour codes, removing the need for separate legislation.

- Introducing separate laws for specific workforce segments undermines this goal. The key is to recognise the employment relationship in gig work. Once this is addressed, the rest will follow.

### 3. On Samsung workers' right to unionise

- **Context:** The realisation of their fundamental right to form a registered trade union to collectively bargain for better terms of employment is at the heart of the protests by Samsung India workers at Sriperumbudur in Tamil Nadu.
- **The story so far:** Workers want to negotiate with Samsung on equal terms to improve their work conditions. In response, the State government formed a "workmen committee" but also used police force to suppress the strike that started on September 9.
- Labour law expert R. Vaigai criticized this approach, saying that legally, the Samsung India Workers Union (SIWU) should have been registered under the Trade Unions Act, 1926 before forming the committee. Instead of allowing proper collective bargaining under the Industrial Disputes Act, the government's actions seem to favour Samsung.

- Meanwhile, Samsung and the State allege SIWU is backed by CITU, with Samsung objecting to its name being used in the union.

#### Right to form Union:

- The Supreme Court in B.R. Singh versus Union of India in 1989 upheld the right to form associations or unions as a fundamental right under Article 19(1)(c) of the Constitution.
- The State or the courts could "reasonably" restrict the formation of unions, associations, and cooperative societies under Article 19(4) of the Constitution only if there is a danger to public order, morality, sovereignty or integrity of India. The restrictions must be based on logic and not arbitrary.
- The court also noted that "Trade unionists act as mouthpieces of labour,"
- The State, through the Registrar of Trade Unions, is responsible for registering trade unions under the 1926 Act, giving workers a voice and providing legal immunity. **Section 4 of the Act allows just seven members to apply for registration, and Section 6 requires the Registrar to only check if the union's rules comply with the Act.**
- A. Soundararajan, CITU Tamil Nadu Secretary, accused the State of deliberately blocking SIWU's registration.

#### Collective bargaining:

- The Madras High Court, in Rangaswami versus Registrar of Trade Unions, succinctly defined the history and object of the Trade Unions Act as "the organisation of labour to

enable collective bargaining". 'Collective bargaining' is defined in Article 2 of the International Labour Organization (ILO) Collective Bargaining Convention of 1981 as negotiations between employees and employers or their organisations to determine working conditions and terms of employment

### Roots of collective bargaining:

- The concept of collective bargaining dates back to the late 18th and early 19th centuries when coal miners fought for basic working conditions. It became a key factor in protecting workers' rights, especially after the Great Depression of the 1930s and World War II, evolving alongside democratic governance worldwide.

### Historical Context in India:

- In India, early examples of collective bargaining can be seen during the 1918 Ahmedabad Mills strike, led by Mahatma Gandhi. He helped establish a committee with representatives from both workers and employers to resolve wage issues after the revocation of a plague allowance.

### Global Perspective on Workers' Rights:

- Susan Hayter, in an ILO document, described freedom of association and collective bargaining as fundamental workers' rights. Similarly, a 1937 Senate address in the U.S. emphasized that the recognition or denial of these rights distinguishes between despotism and democracy. The National Labour Relations Act (Wagner Act) in the U.S.

made an employer's refusal to negotiate with unions an 'unfair labour practice.'

- National Labor Relations Board versus Jones & Laughlin Steel Corp held that employees have a fundamental right to organise and select representatives of their choosing for collective bargaining
- The Indian Supreme Court has acknowledged the importance of collective bargaining in achieving social justice in modern industrial life, as seen in the Karnal Leather Karmchhari vs. Liberty Footwear Company case. In another case, Ram Prasad Vishwakarma vs. The Chairman of, the Industrial Tribunal, the court highlighted how labour was at a significant disadvantage before the concept of collective bargaining came into practice.

### Right to strike:

- The right to strike labour is a legal right recognised with certain restrictions under the Industrial Disputes Act.
- The court has observed the right to demonstrate and, therefore, the right to strike, as important weapons in the armoury of workers
- However, the Industrial Disputes Act of 1947 does not grant an absolute right to strike. Section 22 places restrictions, such as prohibiting strikes without prior notice, striking during ongoing conciliation proceedings, or within specified time frames. In the All India Bank Employees case, the Supreme Court affirmed that while the right to form associations is guaranteed, unions

must follow industrial laws when pursuing their objectives.

#### Workmen committee:

- Section 3 of the 1947 Act covers the constitution of a 'works committee'. The statute empowers the appropriate government to direct the employer to form a 'works committee' consisting of an equal number of representatives of employers and workers engaged in the establishment
- Samsung India has raised a complaint with the Labour Commissioner, claiming that using the name "Samsung" in the Samsung India Workers Union (SIWU) violates the **Trade Marks Act, 1999**. According to Section 29(5) of the Act, a registered trademark is infringed if it's used as part of a business or trade name. However, trade unions aren't businesses; they're formed to manage relations between workers and employers, as per Section 2(h) of the **Trade Unions Act, of 1926**. In the U.S., courts have developed the concept of "nominative fair use," allowing unions to use enough of a company's brand elements to reasonably connect the union with the company.

#### 4. India and Russia discuss new initiatives for the Northern Sea Route

- **Context:** Both countries discussed a wide range of issues, including the training of Indian sailors for polar navigation and joint projects for Arctic shipbuilding

- An MoU has been drafted between both countries for the development of cooperation in cargo shipping in the NSR

#### Northern Sea Route:



- The Northern Sea Route (NSR), a maritime route in the Arctic Ocean that connects the Pacific and Atlantic oceans through the Arctic, is piquing the interest of numerous nations—India, Russia, and China, in particular.
- The Russian Arctic is a trove of unexplored energy and critical mineral reserves, strategic deposits for Beijing, and instrumental for future-proofing the Chinese economy from geopolitical shocks and energy supply disruptions.
- The NSR represents a shortcut for the transfer of goods between Europe and Asia and thus offers significant cost savings for shipping companies.
- The lack of schedule reliability along Arctic shipping routes represents a major obstacle to developing the NSR.

#### Relevance of NSR for India:

- China's BRI partnerships with Norway, Finland, Denmark, etc. have failed primarily

because PSR-linked projects are beset with financial, sovereignty and security risks.

- It also causes worries in Moscow.
- These worries are exacerbated by Beijing's historical interest in Russia's Far East. For Russia, balancing China's economic footprint in the Far East is a strategic imperative. To that end, Moscow invited its long-time partner, India, to invest in the NSR as well. During Modi's visit to Moscow, he made a stop at Rosatom, the NSR infrastructure operator, and signed two MoUs that specifically addressed trade and logistics projects in Russia's Far East and Arctic regions.
- India's interest in the Northern Sea Route (NSR) focuses on developing the Chennai-Vladivostok Eastern Maritime Corridor, which could cut India-Europe travel time by two weeks. At the Global Maritime India Summit 2023, Russia invited Indian companies to explore this corridor's potential, offering training for Indian seafarers in Arctic waters.
- The NSR collaboration is both a strategic and economic priority for India, enhancing energy trade with Russia, particularly after the Ukraine conflict. It also aims to deepen ties with Russia's Arctic and Far East regions, rich in untapped gas, minerals, and petroleum, where ONGC Videsh holds a stake in the Arctic LNG II project.
- The Indo-Russian NSR collaboration builds on Russia's crucial role in India's energy

security matrix, as energy trade has emerged as a cornerstone of the partnership in the modern era, especially in recent times after Russia's special military operations in Ukraine.

### 5. GRAP Stage 1 plan kicks in New Delhi

- Context: the Delhi government on Monday notified a total ban on the production, sale, storage, and bursting of firecrackers till January 1, 2025.
- Order was issued by the Delhi Pollution Committee.

#### GRAP:

- The Graded Response Action Plan (GRAP) was introduced following the Supreme Court's 2016 order in M.C. Mehta vs. Union of India to tackle air quality in Delhi's National Capital Region. Implemented under various Air Quality Index (AQI) categories (Moderate, Poor, Very Poor, Severe, and Severe+), it outlines incremental measures as air quality worsens to prevent PM10 and PM2.5 levels from exceeding moderate levels. Initially managed by the EPCA, the Commission for Air Quality Management (CAQM) took over in 2020 to oversee efforts across Delhi and neighbouring states.

#### Moderate & Poor AQI Category:

- **Measures:** Increase bus and metro services, enforce pollution control measures in industries, stop garbage burning, and sprinkle water on roads to reduce dust.

#### Very Poor AQI Category:



- **Measures:** Increase the frequency of mechanized road cleaning, stop the use of diesel generator sets, and enhance traffic management to reduce congestion.

#### Severe AQI Category:

- **Measures:** Close brick kilns, hot mix plants, and stone crushers. Introduce a ban on construction activities and implement odd-even schemes for vehicular control.

#### Severe+ or Emergency AQI Category:

- **Measures:** Halt entry of trucks into Delhi, shut down schools, and increase the frequency of public health warnings.

#### Additional measures include:

- **Environment Protection Charge (EPC):** A 1% charge on 2000cc and above diesel cars in Delhi-NCR (2016).
- **Environment Compensation Charge (ECC):** Imposed on trucks entering Delhi (2015).

### 6. Sept. wholesale food prices leapt 9.5%

- **Context:** Inflation in India's wholesale prices rose to 1.84% in September, up from 1.31% in August. Food prices saw a significant jump, reaching a two-year high of 9.5%, compared to August's 10-month low of 3.3%. Notably, the cost of vegetables surged nearly 49%, representing the largest increase in 14 months.

#### Wholesale Price Index (WPI):

- WPI measures price changes in goods sold in bulk by wholesalers to other businesses, reflecting inflationary trends in the economy.

- It is calculated and published monthly by the Office of Economic Advisor, Ministry of Commerce and Industry. The index reflects the overall price level for the month, rather than a specific date.

- Analysts use WPI to assess supply and demand dynamics in industries such as manufacturing and construction. An increase in WPI indicates inflationary pressure.

#### Difference between WPI and Consumer Price Index (CPI):

- WPI focuses solely on wholesale prices, while CPI measures the average prices households pay for a basket of goods and services.
- Although WPI is a measure of inflation in some economies, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) has shifted its focus to CPI for policy-making, including setting repo rates.

#### New WPI Series:

- The base year for the WPI was updated from 2004-05 to 2011-12, effective April 2017, to align it with other economic indicators like GDP.

#### Calculation Method:

- WPI is calculated using a weighted average of the prices of goods in a basket, with weights based on total wholesale sales.

#### The basket includes three main groups:

- Primary Articles: 22.62%
- Fuel and Power: 13.15%
- Manufactured Products: 64.23%
- The 2011-12 series tracks prices of 697 items, including 117 primary items, 16 fuel

and power items, and 564 manufactured products.

**Mains practice question:**

1. Discuss the challenges faced by gig workers in India regarding social security and labour rights. Analyze the implications of the proposed national law by the Union Ministry of Labour and Employment to incorporate gig workers into social security schemes. Suggest measures to effectively address the core issues related to the employment relationship in gig work.

**Prelims questions:**

1. Which of the following statements about the Northern Sea Route (NSR) is/are correct?

- 1) The NSR connects the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans through the Arctic.
- 2) The NSR is primarily developed by China for its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).
- 3) India has signed an MoU with Russia for cooperation in cargo shipping in the NSR.
- 4) The NSR offers significant cost savings for shipping companies.

- A. 1 and 3 only
- B. 1, 3 and 4 only
- C. 2 and 4 only
- D. 1, 2, 3 and 4

Ans: B

What are the main groups included in the calculation of the WPI?

- A. Primary Articles, Services, Manufactured Products
- B. Raw Materials, Intermediate Goods, Finished Goods
- C. Consumer Goods, Capital Goods, Durable Goods
- D. Primary Articles, Fuel and Power, Manufactured Products

Ans:D

Consider the following :

- 1) The Graded Response Action Plan (GRAP) was introduced following the Supreme Court's order in M.C. Mehta vs. Union of India.
- 2) The GRAP is managed by the Environment Pollution (Prevention & Control) Authority (EPCA).
- 3) The plan categorizes air quality levels into Moderate, Poor, Very Poor, Severe, and Severe+.
- 4) Under GRAP, the production, sale, storage, and bursting of firecrackers have been banned till January 1, 2025.

Which of the above statements is correct?

- A. 1, 3, and 4 only
- B. 1, 2, and 3 only
- C. 1, 3, and 2 only
- D. All of the above

Ans: A