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IN ENGLISH

SPECIAL FOR UPSC & GPSC EXAMINATION

DATE : 30-07-25

The Hindu Important News Articles & Editorial For UPSC CSE

Wednesday, 30 July, 2025

Edition: International Table of Contents

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On Global Tiger Day (July 29, 2025), Assam Chief Minister HimantaBiswaSarma released a landmark report highlighting Kaziranga Tiger Reserve (KTR)'s new status as the third-highest tiger density zone in India. Traditionally known for its one-horned rhinoceros, Kaziranga is now gaining prominence for its conservation of the royal Bengal tiger.

Kaziranga in Assam records third-highest tiger density in India after Bandipur, Corbett

The Hindu Bureau
GUWAHATI

The Kaziranga Tiger Reserve (KTR) in Assam has recorded the third-highest tiger density in India after the Bandipur Tiger Reserve in Karnataka and the Corbett National Park in Uttarakhand, says a report on the status of tigers in the reserve, which is better known for its one-horned rhinoceros.

Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma released the report online to mark Global Tiger Day on Tuesday.

The report stated that 148 tigers were recorded across the 1,307.49-sq. km expanse of the KTR in 2024. The "remarkable" increase since the 2022 estimation was attributed to the first-ever sampling of the Biswanath Wildlife Division, where 27 tigers were recorded.

A royal Bengal tiger inside the Kaziranga National Park. AP

The tiger count grew from 104 in 2022 to 115 in 2024 in the core Eastern Assam Wildlife Division, while the Nagaon Wildlife Division maintained a count of six tigers.

"From Kaziranga to Manas, Assam is not only limited to protecting the tiger, but it is also playing an important role in restoring the tiger's habitat. With the third-highest tiger density in the world, extensive forest cover and bold steps against infiltration, the tiger, the treasure of Assam's forests, is walking proudly and bravely today," Mr. Sarma said.

The report said the KTR has 18.65 tigers per 100 sq. km – behind Bandipur's 19.83 tigers in 1,456 sq. km and Corbett's 19.56 in 1,288 sq. km. KTR officials said the survey was conducted between December 2023 and April 2024 using camera traps, following the protocol of the National Tiger Conservation Authority and the Wildlife Institute of India.

The spatially explicit capture-recapture method, which provides a more precise and ecologically relevant approach, was employed to determine tiger numbers.

Key Highlights of the Report:

- **Tiger Count in Kaziranga (2024):**
  - 148 tigers recorded across 1,307.49 sq. km
  - **Tiger density:**18.65 tigers per 100 sq. km
- **Top 3 Tiger Densities in India (2024):**
  1. Bandipur Tiger Reserve, Karnataka – 19.83 tigers/100 sq. km
  2. Corbett National Park, Uttarakhand – 19.56 tigers/100 sq. km

3. Kaziranga Tiger Reserve, Assam – 18.65 tigers/100 sq. km

Division-wise Tiger Distribution in KTR:

- **Eastern Assam Wildlife Division:** 115 tigers (up from 104 in 2022)
- **Biswanath Wildlife Division:** 27 tigers (first-time sampling)
- **Nagaon Wildlife Division:** 6 tigers

Survey Methodology:

- **Conducted:**Dec 2023 – Apr 2024
- **Tools:**Camera traps
- **Protocol:**National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA)&Wildlife Institute of India (WII)
- Technique: Spatially Explicit Capture-Recapture (SECR) method for accurate estimation

Other Points :

- **Protected Areas & Reserves:**Kaziranga is now important not just for rhinos but for tiger conservation as well.
- **Conservation Techniques:** Understanding SECR method and camera trapping for animal census.
- **Tiger Conservation Framework:** Aligns with Project Tiger, NTCA, and international conservation days like Global Tiger Day.

Conclusion:

Kaziranga's rise as a top tiger habitat reflects India's growing success in wildlife conservation and habitat management. Assam's proactive approach in expanding monitoring to lesser-surveyed divisions like Biswanath has played a key role. This development reinforces the state's ecological significance and aligns with India's broader conservation goals under initiatives like Project Tiger and the Global Tiger Recovery Programme.

UPSC Prelims Practice Question

Ques: With reference to the Kaziranga Tiger Reserve (KTR), consider the following statements:

1. KTR recently recorded the highest tiger density in India.

2. The Biswanath Wildlife Division was included in the tiger survey for the first time in 2024.

3. Kaziranga is located in the state of Arunachal Pradesh.

Which of the statements given above is/are correct?

(A) 1 and 2 only (B) 2 only (C) 1 and 3 only (D) 1, 2 and 3

Ans: B)

Page 08 : GS 3 : Indian Economy

The transformation of India's manufacturing sector in recent decades has been marked by rising informalisation within the formal economy, notably through the increasing use of contract labour. According to the Annual Survey of Industries (ASI), contract labour's share in the formal manufacturing workforce rose from 20% in 1999–2000 to 40.7% in 2022–23. While contract labour is often introduced under the guise of flexibility and efficiency, emerging evidence suggests that excessive reliance on it- especially when misused - negatively impacts labour productivity and long-term economic growth.

Adopt formalisation to power productivity growth

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In recent decades, India's formal manufacturing sector has witnessed a significant negative change in its employment structure. According to the Annual Surveys of Industries (ASI), the share of contract labour in the manufacturing workforce doubled from 20% in 1999-2000 to 40.7% in 2022-23, cutting across all industries. The growing trend towards informalisation within the formal sector has been widely written about in academic and policy circles. Our study, based on plant-level ASI longitudinal data (1999-2000 to 2018-19) at an all-India level, reveals that contractualisation is detrimental to productivity when misused, highlighting the need to promote formalisation to sustain long-term productivity growth.

Plight of contract workers

The shift towards contractualisation is often viewed as a strategy to enhance operational flexibility and access specialised skills as and when required. However, examination of the plight of contract workers suggests that cost avoidance, rather than genuine labour flexibility or skills, is a major factor driving their growing use. Contract workers, typically hired through third-party contractors, are excluded from core labour laws under the Industrial Disputes Act 1947, which governs layoffs, retrenchments, and safeguards against arbitrary dismissals. Consequently, their bargaining power remains weak, leaving them vulnerable to exploitation.

The wage payments of contract workers in 2018-19 were 14.47% lower than their regular counterparts. The unfavourable wage differentials against them were more pronounced in large enterprises (31%), followed by medium and small enterprises (23% and 12%, respectively). Furthermore, if we consider the difference in the overall labour cost for employers on contract and regular workers, the disparities look even starker. The average daily labour cost to the employer for contract workers was 24% lower when compared to regular workers. The labour costs on contract workers were less than 50% of that on regular workers, in at least nine three-digit level industries. In some industries, labour-cost gaps were as high as 78% to 85%, reflecting the severe level of exploitation that contract workers face.

Contractualisation in India's formal manufacturing is linked more to cost avoidance than it being a focus on genuine labour flexibility or skills

Impact on productivity

Undoubtedly, contract workers can bring job-specific skills and serve as a buffer, enabling firms to respond swiftly to market fluctuations. However, contractual employment, particularly when mediated through third-party contractors for the short term, can suffer from principal-agent problem, i.e., the misalignment of long-term interests between employers and contractors. This can lead to moral hazard issues, such as an increased likelihood of worker shirking. Moreover, short-term employment contracts can create instability in the workforce due to high labour turnover, discouraging investments in on-the-job training and innovation, stifling productivity growth in the long run.

Our analysis of real net value added per worker, a standard measure of labour productivity, shows that contract labour-intensive (CLI) enterprises have, on an average, 31% lower labour productivity when compared to regular labour-intensive (RLI) enterprises. The labour productivity gap remains higher especially in small formal enterprises with less than 100 workers (36%), followed by medium-sized enterprises with 100-300 workers (23%). The unfavourable productivity gap for CLI enterprises further widens to 42% in labour-intensive enterprises. These differentials remain significant even after controlling for firm-specific and state-specific factors that could influence labour productivity.

The negative productivity differentials observed in relatively small, medium, and labour-intensive CLI enterprises may be attributed to their higher propensity to employ contract labour as a cost-cutting measure or as a means to circumvent regulations. These are practices that ultimately prove counterproductive in the long run.

However, labour productivity was 5% higher in high-skill CLI enterprises when compared to their low-skill counterparts, with the productivity advantage increasing significantly to 20% in large high-skill CLI enterprises. Similarly, large-size capital-intensive CLI enterprises recorded a 17% gain in labour productivity. However, such types of enterprises account for only about 20% of the total formal manufacturing. The remaining 80% of the enterprises were adversely affected by contractualisation.

Policy suggestions

The central government, in 2020, introduced a labour code on industrial relations, which aims to provide greater flexibility in hiring and firing. The code allows firms to hire non-regular workers on fixed-term contracts directly without third party contractors, though it also seeks to curb the exploitation of non-permanent workers by mandating the provision of basic statutory employment benefits. However, as the labour code awaits implementation, labour unions warn that the increased flexibility in hiring non-regular workers could accelerate informalisation and further erode quality of jobs in the formal sector.

Policymakers can incentivise firms to adopt reasonably longer fixed-term contracts by offering concessions in social security contributions or subsidised access to government skilling programmes. This could enhance workforce stability and support skill accumulation, while also assuaging labour union fears about the potential rise in the precarious employment.

Similarly, the Central government in 2016 implemented the Pradhan Mantri Rojgar Protsahan Yojana (PMRPY) to incentivise job creation in the formal sector by bearing employer's contribution (12%) to Employees' Pension Scheme (EPS) and Employees' Provident Fund (EPF). Though over one crore employees benefited from the scheme, it was discontinued in March 2022. Reviving and extending support under the PMRPY could help curb the misuse of contract labour and promote formalisation in the manufacturing sector.

The Core Issues and Findings

1. Exploitation of Contract Workers

- Contractualisation is often driven not by the demand for specialised skills, but by cost-cutting motives.
- Contract workers are largely excluded from key labour protections under the Industrial Disputes Act, 1947, weakening their bargaining power.
- In 2018-19, contract workers earned on average 14.47% less than regular employees, with the gap rising to 31% in large enterprises.
- In some industries, labour cost disparities reached up to 85%, reflecting stark wage and benefit inequality.

2. Adverse Impact on Labour Productivity

- Labour productivity in contract labour-intensive (CLI) firms was 31% lower than in regular labour-intensive (RLI) firms.
- The productivity gap worsens in small firms (36%) and labour-intensive sectors (42%), indicating that cost-saving through contract labour often compromises efficiency.
- However, large, high-skill, and capital-intensive CLI enterprises showed a positive productivity differential, but these represent only 20% of total formal manufacturing.

3. Structural Concerns

- Principal-agent problems arise when workers are hired through third parties, leading to misaligned incentives and low accountability.
- High workforce turnover under short-term contracts undermines long-term investment in training and innovation.
- Informalisation within the formal sector creates a dual labour market—one protected, the other precarious—leading to social and economic instability.

Policy Measures and Way Forward

1. Reforming Labour Laws with Balance

- The Industrial Relations Code, 2020 introduces direct fixed-term employment to avoid third-party exploitation, while mandating basic benefits.
- However, concerns remain that increased flexibility may deepen informalisation and job insecurity without strong enforcement mechanisms.

2. Promoting Incentives for Formalisation

- The government should encourage longer-term fixed contracts via:
  - Subsidies for EPF/ESI contributions
  - Access to skilling and upskilling programs
  - Tax incentives for stable employment practices

3. Reviving Employment Incentive Schemes

- Pradhan MantriRojgarProtsahanYojana (PMRPY), discontinued in 2022, had helped over one crore workers by subsidising employer contributions.
- Reviving and expanding such schemes could reduce contract labour dependence and foster sustainable formal job creation.

Conclusion

The growing informalisation of India's formal manufacturing sector, driven by excessive use of contract labour, threatens both equity and efficiency. While short-term cost savings may attract firms, the long-term consequences—lower productivity, reduced worker welfare, and social vulnerability—call for urgent corrective measures. Formalisation, through well-designed policy incentives, legal safeguards, and a reorientation towards skill-based, stable employment, must be central to India's productivity and inclusive growth strategy. As India aims to become a global manufacturing hub, empowering workers and ensuring decent work conditions must be seen not just as moral imperatives, but as strategic economic priorities.

UPSC Mains Practice Question

Ques: The increasing contractualisation within India's formal manufacturing sector is detrimental to long-term productivity growth. Examine with reference to recent data and suggest policy interventions. **(150 Words)**

Page : 08 : GS 2 : Social Justice

The tragic collapse of a school building in Rajasthan's Jhalawar district on July 25, 2025, resulting in the death of seven children and injury to many others, has brought into sharp focus the deteriorating infrastructure of government schools across India. Most victims belonged to marginalised tribal communities, highlighting the deep structural inequities in India's education system. This incident underscores the urgent need for re-prioritisation of public investment in basic education infrastructure, especially in rural and underserved areas.

Deaths in school

Infrastructure of government schools needs urgent attention

On July 25, tragedy awaited students of Classes 6 and 7 at the Piplodi Government School in Rajasthan's Jhalawar district as they assembled for prayer. A part of their school building gave way leading to the deaths of seven and injuries to several others. Most of the students were from tribal communities. The school is in the southeastern part of the State bordering Madhya Pradesh. There was a similar incident the next day in Nagaur district but the school was closed being a holiday. There has been much public anger in the State over the incidents which, quite rightly, have thrown the spotlight on the state of government schools. As in UDISE 2023-24 data, there are more than 70,000 government schools in Rajasthan serving nearly 84 lakh students, especially from the poorer and marginalised sections. Of these, some 8,000 schools have been estimated by the Education Department to be in a poor condition. The Jhalawar school was not among the schools identified as being in a poor state, indicating the extent of the problems. Some ₹650 crore had been allocated in the past two State budgets for boosting the infrastructure but inefficiencies in government have ensured that the measures did not make much difference. Fixing the infrastructure of government schools should be a priority for the State's Bharatiya Janata Party government.

The tragedy in Rajasthan should serve as a wake-up call across India, given the current policy defocus on government-owned education institutions. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 had called for an immediate increase in spending on education, from some 4.6% of GDP to 6%, identifying one-time spends on infrastructure as the lead priority besides identifying other sectors for a boost in support. Five years into the NEP, there is little to suggest that this has been a focus area for governments, Union or State. Policy thrusts have been more towards reducing government support, self-financing, and encouraging private sector contribution. While these may be applicable to higher education, basic school education is a primary duty of the government – as it is across the world including in the most developed nations. Setting up model schools and funding them to serve as exemplars cannot be at the cost of mass school education. Foundational Literacy and Numeracy has been identified as a critical area for boosting workforce productivity and reaping the demographic dividend that will soon run its course as India's population ages. But the discourse on pathways towards achieving them is more on pedagogy, non-formal teaching and so on than the essentials – an infrastructure boost and teacher recruitment and training.

Core Issues and Analysis

1. Infrastructure Crisis in Government Schools

- As per UDISE+ 2023–24 data, Rajasthan has 70,000+ government schools catering to nearly 84 lakh students, predominantly from poor and marginalised groups.
- The state's own education department identified over 8,000 schools in poor condition, yet the Piplodi school was not on that list, reflecting deep flaws in assessment and monitoring systems.
- Despite ₹650 crore allocated over two budgets, poor implementation and administrative inefficiency have undermined actual improvements on the ground.

2. Broader Policy Neglect Post-NEP 2020

- The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 recommended raising public education spending from 4.6% to 6% of GDP, especially on one-time infrastructure upgrades.
- Five years on, the recommendation remains largely unimplemented, with central and state governments increasingly shifting focus towards privatisation and self-financing, even in basic education.
- This policy defocus on government school infrastructure has left millions of children in unsafe, under-resourced learning environments.

3. Fundamental Duties and the Right to Education

- The Right to Education (RTE) Act, 2009 mandates that every child has the right to a safe and quality learning environment.
- Neglect of infrastructure violates not just policy mandates but also constitutional guarantees under Article 21A.
- The tragedy reflects a failure of the State to uphold its responsibility towards children's welfare and education.

4. Consequences for Equity and the Demographic Dividend

- Children from tribal, Dalit, and economically backward communities disproportionately depend on public schools.
- Infrastructure neglect directly worsens educational inequality, weakens foundational literacy and numeracy, and threatens the promise of a productive workforce — crucial for India's demographic dividend.

Policy Suggestions and Way Forward

1. **Urgent Audit and Safety Certification**
   - State and central authorities must conduct independent structural audits of all government schools, prioritising those in rural, tribal, and high-risk zones.
2. **Ring-Fenced Funding**
   - Allocate a dedicated infrastructure fund within the education budget with strict implementation timelines and local-level accountability.
3. **Revive Focus on RTE Norms**
   - Ensure compliance with RTE Act norms, including safe classrooms, toilets, clean drinking water, and boundary walls.
4. **Strengthen Local Governance and School Management Committees (SMCs)**
   - Involve local communities and parents through empowered SMCs to monitor infrastructure upkeep and report hazards.
5. **Shift Policy Focus from Privatisation to Public Investment**
   - The push for private participation should not come at the cost of mass elementary education. Public schools must remain the core of India's educational foundation.

Conclusion

The collapse of the Piplodi school is not merely an isolated tragedy but a symptom of chronic neglect of public school infrastructure. In a country where the majority of children rely on government schools for education, especially the most vulnerable, safety and dignity must come before slogans and reforms. The demographic dividend and goals of foundational learning will remain hollow if basic infrastructure is ignored. India must treat this moment not as an aberration, but as a decisive call for systemic change, placing children's safety and education at the heart of its development agenda.

UPSC Mains Practice Question

Ques: Critically examine the impact of poor infrastructure in government schools on equitable access to quality education in India. Suggest policy measures to address the issue. **(150 Words)**

Page 08 : GS 3 : Indian Economy

The latest Index of Industrial Production (IIP) data for June 2025 reveals a troubling slowdown, with industrial growth dipping to 1.5% — a 10-month low. This contraction has been largely attributed to sharp declines in mining (–8.7%) and electricity output (–2.6%), due in part to erratic monsoon patterns and waterlogging in mineral-rich states like Odisha and Jharkhand. Despite growth in capital and infrastructure goods, the data underscores two systemic vulnerabilities: India's industrial output remains heavily dependent on government infrastructure spending, and climate-induced disruptions are yet to be adequately integrated into economic reporting and policy planning.

Core Issues and Analysis

1. Sectoral Breakdown of IIP Performance

- Mining and electricity, which jointly account for 22.3% of IIP, witnessed significant contraction in June due to heavy, uneven monsoon rains disrupting extraction, transport, and power infrastructure.
- Manufacturing output rose modestly, supported by strong performance in:
  - Capital goods (+3.5%)
  - Intermediate goods (+5.5%)
  - Infrastructure goods (+7.2%)
- These numbers suggest that the modest industrial uptick is primarily driven by government-led capital expenditure, not robust private sector revival or consumption demand.

2. Inadequate Acknowledgment of Climate Risks

- Official data narratives (IIP, GDP releases) rarely account for climate-related events, instead attributing economic slowdown to generic factors like "high base effects" or "global headwinds."
- In contrast, institutions like the European Central Bank and Bank of England have begun mapping climate risk into financial and output metrics, acknowledging the material economic threat posed by climate change.

Interrupted growth

Industrial growth is still tied to government spends on infrastructure

The Index of Industrial Production (IIP), the nation's monthly barometer of goods output, revealed a 10-month low growth rate in June, at 1.5%, largely due to the sharp contraction in mining activity, by -8.7% (10.3% in June 2024), and electricity output, by -2.6% (8.6% in June 2024). The early onset of the southwest monsoon, with its erratic and uneven distribution, led to water logging in large parts of the mining belts in Odisha, Jharkhand and West Bengal, hampering a key economic activity. Ranchi's regional meteorological office has said that Jharkhand recorded 504.8 mm (against a normal of 307 mm) between June 1 and July 12 – but five districts were categorised as rain deficient. The resultant damage to the power distribution infrastructure and disruptions to supply chains may have contributed to the sluggish growth in industrial output at 3.9% in June, up from 3.5% a year ago. This in turn, is likely to have led to subdued power demand. While mining and power production collectively make up for almost a quarter (22.3%) of the IIP's weightage, the rest is apportioned for manufacturing activities. The robust growth in capital (3.5%), intermediate (5.5%) and infrastructure (7.2%) goods output, indicates that much of industrial growth continues to hinge on the government's infrastructure spends.

There has been a general reluctance, both institutionally and in public economic discourse in India, to explicitly correlate disruptions in economic activity with climate-related events, especially in official narratives such as the IIP or GDP data releases. The Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation and the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) tend to frame industrial and economic under-performance in terms of 'high base effects; supply chain bottlenecks; input cost fluctuations; global demand softening; and domestic consumption contraction'. Climate-related disruptions, such as in mining belts, are rarely mentioned in IIP or national accounts commentary. Economic data agencies in India have been slow to integrate climate risk frameworks into routine macroeconomic reporting, unlike institutions such as the European Central Bank or the Bank of England which have begun mapping climate risk to output and financial stability. True, climate attribution is complex: linking a specific event such as waterlogging in a coal mine to broader climate change involves scientific rigour and probabilistic modelling. Policymakers often avoid this due to fear of politicising economic data. Indeed, the RBI's Financial Stability Reports now include climate-related risks. But this has not yet filtered into production-side metrics such as the IIP. The time has come for India to make a systemic shift to integrate climate attribution to economic activity.

- India lacks a climate-attribution framework in its macroeconomic reporting, despite early evidence that climate volatility (e.g., erratic rainfall, heatwaves) is increasingly disrupting sectors like mining, agriculture, energy, and infrastructure.

3. Structural Vulnerabilities and Policy Implications

- The over-reliance on public infrastructure spending to drive industrial growth makes the sector vulnerable to policy and fiscal fluctuations, and unsustainable without robust private investment and diversified demand.
- Mining dependence, without climate-resilient infrastructure and planning, risks repeated disruption during monsoons and extreme weather events.
- The lack of climate-risk integration in industrial metrics limits the effectiveness of policy responses and underestimates long-term risks to growth and stability.

Policy Recommendations and Way Forward

1. **Integrate Climate Attribution into Macroeconomic Data**
    - Revamp national reporting tools like IIP and GDP commentary to include climate-related disruptions, using scientific modelling and localised data.
2. **Build Climate-Resilient Infrastructure**
    - Invest in drainage, transport, and energy infrastructure in vulnerable mining and industrial zones to minimise weather-related losses.
3. **Diversify Growth Drivers**
    - Reduce over-reliance on government capex by incentivising private investment, particularly in sustainable manufacturing and green technologies.
4. **Institutional Climate Risk Frameworks**
    - Mandate institutions like the National Statistical Office (NSO) and RBI to adopt climate-adjusted risk metrics, enabling forward-looking policy.
5. **Sub-national Planning**
    - Equip states with climate-impact dashboards to better track disruptions and align state industrial policies with resilience frameworks.

Conclusion

India's industrial performance in June 2025 is a reminder of multiple intersecting vulnerabilities — a narrow dependence on public infrastructure spends, fragile mining and power sectors, and a growing blind spot toward climate-related disruptions. If India seeks to sustain high-growth trajectories and meet its climate goals, it must shift from reactive to resilient planning. Mainstreaming climate attribution in economic data, building adaptive industrial ecosystems, and fostering private sector participation are not just policy options but imperatives in the Anthropocene economy.

UPSC Prelims Practice Question

Ques: With reference to the Index of Industrial Production (IIP), consider the following statements:

1. IIP is compiled and published by the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) on a monthly basis.

2. Mining and electricity sectors together account for over 50% weightage in the IIP.

3. Manufacturing is the largest component of the IIP in terms of weightage.

Which of the above statements is/are correct?

(A) 1 only

(B) 2 and 3 only

(C) 3 only

(D) 1 and 2 only

Ans : C)

Page 09 : GS 1 : Indian Society

India's recent Gini Index score of 25.5, which places it among the world's most equal societies, stands in sharp contrast to the ground realities of pervasive inequality across social, economic, and digital domains. While the Gini coefficient — a widely used statistical tool to measure income inequality — offers a numerical picture of distribution, it often fails to capture the multidimensional and structural nature of inequality, especially in countries like India with vast informal economies, gender divides, and socio-technological gaps.

Why the Gini Index is wrong about India

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The Gini Index ranked India among the world's most equal societies, by giving the country a score of 25.5. This places India in a 'moderately low' inequality category. While this may be cause for celebration, the lived reality in India paints a very different picture. Inequalities, lived and those captured in statistics, permeate into everyday life in urban and rural India. The question that therefore arises is, on what basis can India be considered one of the world's most equal societies? While there is sufficient critique on the flawed methodology used in the Gini Index, this article highlights the general state of inequality that plagues India. While gender, economic, health, educational, and social inequalities have always been endemic to India, with technology and a modern ways of life, new forms of inequality such as digital and banking inequality have arisen.

Forms of inequalities

One of the fundamental forms of inequality is wealth inequality. A ride through any busy street in urban India in a luxury car which costs an average of ₹30 lakh, driven by a chauffeur who earns and supports a family on approximately ₹3 lakh per year, will highlight the stark wealth inequality that exists. Statistics also supports this reality. According to a study titled 'Income and Wealth Inequality in India, 1922-2023: The Rise of the Billionaire Raj', in 2022-23, 22.6% of the national income went to just the top 1% of the population. Further, the study mentions that data on wealth inequality is challenging to capture because of the large-scale prevalence of informal employment, low-income levels, and high thresholds for non-taxable incomes, which means that data on tax pertains to less than 10% of the adult population. The reason for the lack of data itself is indicative of inherent wealth inequality, as a large part of the population has to rely on the informal sector for employment, earning significantly less than those employed in the formal sector.

India has a lot of groundwork to cover in bridging all forms of divides

Gender inequality is another fundamental form of inequality in India. Women have historically been marginalised from the workforce and comprise about 35.9% of the worker population ratio. The number is starker at senior and middle management levels where women accounted for only 12.7% leadership roles as of 2024. While India has the third largest startup ecosystem in the world, women-run start-ups stand at only 7.5% of all active startups in the country. Social norms aggravate gender inequality in terms of spending family resources on the girl child, and in matters of inheritance.

With rapid development of technology, access to digital technology is crucial to broadly navigate through modern day life such as easily accessing formal banking channels. While India has made commendable progress in providing access to the Internet to a large part of the population, a careful analysis of the numbers points to a severe digital divide. Lack of access to the Internet and to digital technology exacerbates the digital divide, leading to lack of opportunities for a certain demography.

For instance, only 52.7% schools have functional computers, and Internet is accessible in only 53.9% of schools across India. This contributes to the digital divide because only students from a certain socio-economic background, who have access to schools with functional computers and the Internet, will be adept in the use of technology and computers, a critical skill in today's times.

Access to quality higher education and even basic entry-level jobs are difficult for students left behind. They are then pushed into employment that requires lower skills. This digital divide will continue to perpetuate the cycle of inequality at the household level.

Other forms of digital technology also contribute towards fuelling educational inequality. For instance, combined access to broadband within households, encompassing both urban and rural areas, stands at 41.8%. This deepens educational inequality because when education becomes virtual, which is a routine occurrence in New Delhi when schools are closed during November and December because of severe air pollution, only those students in households with access to a broadband system and digital technology can continue with their education.

Inequality across realms

Inequality in one realm often permeates into other realms. For instance, digital inequality severely affects the lower income demography. However, overall, digital inequality affects women more than men. For example, only 25% of women in rural India have access to the Internet, compared to 49% of men in rural India. The Internet is a fundamental medium in accessing opportunities and technology such as Internet banking. It guarantees financial freedom and job postings. Lack of access to the Internet disables women from accessing these opportunities that are readily available to male adults, further exacerbating digital and gender inequality.

While we have reasons to pat ourselves on our backs for achieving some amount of equality in the last few years, the methodology to adjudge the ranking by Gini Index, seen along with actual and lived realities, makes one wonder as to how we achieved this ranking. It is only when a large part of the population has access to equal opportunities can we truly be among the world's most equal societies. Until then, as a society and a country, we have a lot of groundwork to cover in bridging all forms of divide.

Critical Analysis

1. Limitations of the Gini Index in the Indian Context

- The Gini Index primarily measures income inequality, ignoring wealth inequality, informal sector incomes, and non-monetary aspects like access to education or healthcare.
- In India, only a small proportion of adults pay income tax, as the vast majority are engaged in the informal sector, making data skewed and incomplete.
- The recent research, *"Income and Wealth Inequality in India, 1922–2023"*, shows that the top 1% captured 22.6% of the national income, highlighting stark inequality not reflected by the Gini score.

2. Structural and Multidimensional Inequality

a) Wealth Inequality

- A symbolic example — a ₹30 lakh car driven by a chauffeur earning ₹3 lakh/year — starkly illustrates the wealth gap.
- Lack of formal employment and income tax records among the majority of Indians highlights the undocumented nature of poverty and inequality.

b) Gender Inequality

- Women constitute only 35.9% of the workforce and a mere 12.7% in leadership roles.
- Despite a vibrant startup ecosystem, only 7.5% of active start-ups are women-led, showing persistent gender gaps in entrepreneurship and employment.
- Social norms, inheritance bias, and family-level resource allocation continue to favour men.

c) Digital and Educational Inequality

- Digital access remains skewed — only 53.9% schools have Internet and functional computers in 52.7%.
- With online education increasingly common (e.g., air pollution shutdowns in Delhi), children without broadband at home (only 41.8% households) face educational exclusion.
- Only 25% of rural women have Internet access, compared to 49% of rural men, compounding gender and digital inequality.

Intersecting Inequalities: A Vicious Cycle

- Digital, gender, educational, and economic inequalities reinforce each other:
  - Digital exclusion reduces women's access to banking, job portals, and formal education.
  - This limits their participation in skilled employment, thereby perpetuating gender and economic inequalities.
- Intersectionality — a woman from a rural, poor, Dalit background — suffers from multiple, reinforcing disadvantages, unseen by tools like the Gini Index.

Conclusion

The Gini Index, while useful as a broad statistical measure, grossly underrepresents India's multidimensional inequalities. True equality goes beyond income parity — it includes access to education, technology, opportunities, and representation. To claim a place among the world's most equal societies, India must ensure that equal access becomes a lived reality, not just a statistical illusion. Bridging inequality requires holistic, intersectional policy interventions, reliable data collection, and a focus on inclusive development that empowers the most marginalised. Until then, India's "equality" remains more myth than reality.

UPSC Mains Practice Question

Ques: The Gini Index fails to capture the lived realities of inequality in India.Examine the limitations of statistical tools in assessing social inequality in a complex society like India. **(250 words)**

Page : 08 Editorial Analysis

Bihar's dark side — the hub of girl child trafficking

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She left Chhattisgarh with a small bag and a dream. A man had convinced her family that she would be trained as a dancer, earn well and support them. Her parents, who were desperate and worn down by years of poverty, let her go. By the time she was found in Bihar, she was not the same girl. She had been broken by control, violence and rape. She was 14. Her story is not rare.

Until June this year, the Bihar police rescued 271 girls in the State – 153 of them trafficked into orchestras, the remaining 118 forced into the flesh trade. In Saran district, the number of girls rescued from these 'dance troupes' since January is 162. Between March and June this year, the Just Rights for Children (JRC) partners, working alongside district police forces, rescued 116 girls from orchestra groups.

The conditions in which these girls, stripped of dignity and brutalised into submission, were found were appalling – overcrowded, unhygienic rooms. They were presented on stage as performers, but in reality, they were victims of trafficking and sexual abuse.

Human trafficking is among the largest organised crimes globally. It inflicts severe physical, psychological and economic harm on individuals of all ages, but women and children are the most vulnerable. Once they are pulled in, getting out is almost impossible. Nearly 138 million children were engaged in child labour in 2024, including around 54 million in hazardous work, according to estimates by the International Labour Organization (ILO) and UNICEF.

Bihar as a trafficking destination

Bihar's emergence as one of India's most active destinations for trafficking is not incidental. At the heart of this crisis lies a complete absence of regulatory oversight and social acceptance for girls being commodified. Geography and poverty deepen this vulnerability. The State's porous border with Nepal and seamless railway connectivity to trafficking-prone States such as West Bengal, Jharkhand, Odisha, Chhattisgarh, Assam and Uttar Pradesh facilitate trafficking flows through Bihar.

In States such as West Bengal, where music and dance are integral to cultural identity, parents encourage their daughters to pursue the arts. These aspirations are preyed upon by traffickers who promise good money and even stardom. False promises of love, marriage or employment are also used to lure girls. In districts such as Saran, Gopalganj, Muzaffarpur, Rohtas and West Champaran – the 'orchestra belt' – girls, some as young as 12, are being sold to orchestras for as little a sum as ₹10,000. They are forced to wear inappropriate clothing and dance to vulgar songs before inebriated men. The girls are punished if they refuse and raped if they resist.

The State must act against the system of 'dance troupes' and 'orchestras' that fuel trafficking, which is also made worse by an absence of regulatory oversight, geography and poverty

How the system fails children

According to the National Crime Records Bureau data, 2,878 children were trafficked in 2022, including 1,059 girls. This is a figure that barely scratches the surface. Many cases never reach a police station because families are either complicit or fear to speak. The laws are not inadequate, but in fact, comprehensive. The Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act, the Juvenile Justice Act, the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act, the Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act, the Child and Adolescent Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act, and provisions under the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita criminalise child labour, trafficking and sexual exploitation.

But conviction rates remain abysmal. Most cases are filed as kidnappings or missing person reports. Anti-Human Trafficking Units (AHTUs) are under-resourced. Investigations that concern multiple States often collapse due to jurisdictional confusion and bureaucratic delay. When girls are rescued, many are sent right back to the same families that sold them.

Despite rescue after rescue, orchestras in Bihar continue to operate with impunity. Just Rights for Children, a network of over 250 NGOs working to end violence against children, approached the Patna High Court seeking urgent prohibitory orders against orchestras. The petition calls for an immediate ban on the employment of minors in orchestras.

In response, the High Court directed the Bihar government to act without delay, recognising the trafficking and exploitation of children in orchestras to be a "serious issue". Such an acknowledgement must translate into protection at every stage of the trafficking chain.

Prevention must begin where trafficking begins. Schools must monitor attendance. When a child goes missing for weeks, it must trigger alerts and reports. Panchayats must maintain migratory registers. When children disappear, someone in the village always knows and that someone must be required to act. Parents should be made aware of what might happen to their daughters.

Transport vigilance must be ramped up. The Railway Protection Force (RPF) has been monitoring vulnerable corridors and conducting awareness drives at railway stations. This model must extend to inter-State bus routes, local terminals and private carriers. Transport departments must train their staff to identify signs of trafficking.

AHTUs need full-time officers trained to coordinate measures across borders, track networks and follow a case from rescue to prosecution. They should be held accountable.

There should be an immediate and absolute prohibition on the employment of minors in orchestras. These groups must be identified, mapped and regulated. Premises where girls are confined must be sealed. Owners, landlords and organisers must be prosecuted and their assets must be attached. The Labour Department must be mandated to inspect, report and act. Prosecution must be time-bound and rehabilitation must be long-term and state-supervised. Children must not be sent back to the environments that enabled their exploitation. Victim compensation schemes must be enforced rigorously.

Prevention is protection. Prosecution is protection. Prosecution is prevention. Trafficking is not the failure of a few systems. It is the collapse of many. Laws and enforcement are only one part of the solution. Ending exploitation is possible through prosecution.

The Centre for Legal Action and Behaviour Change (C-Lab) recently released a report, 'Building the Case for Zero: How Prosecution Acts as the Tipping Point to End Child Labour - The Case from India', that drew data from 24 States. It showed that prosecution is key to securing justice. Along with law enforcement, the NGO network rescued 53,651 children from trafficking and kidnapping (in 27,320 raids), pursuing legal action in every case. Nearly 90% of these children were trapped in the worst forms of child labour.

A strategy rooted in prevention

To succeed, we need a strategy rooted in prevention, and we need to call it PICKET. First, it begins with 'Policy' – strong and clear policies that prohibit child labour and exploitation. Second, 'Institutions' must be required to monitor, prosecute and rehabilitate. Third, the 'Convergence' of agencies, digital infrastructure and survivor-centred response is essential to combat trafficking. Fourth, 'Knowledge' is key where community awareness and intelligence gathering are crucial. The insights of survivors are among the most powerful tools we have to dismantle trafficking networks. Fifth, 'Economically', trafficking must be made unviable. And, sixth, 'Technology' must be used to track traffickers, build databases, generate heat maps and predict movement patterns. None of this will work unless States share data, digitise case records and cooperate.

Justice is not punishment, but it is prevention before harm. The only way to prevent the next girl from being trafficked is to dismantle the system that allows it. We have the tools. We have the laws. All that remains is the will. The longer we wait, the more we lose.

GS. Paper 02 **Social Justice**

UPSC Mains Practice Question: **Despite comprehensive legal frameworks to prevent child trafficking in India, conviction rates remain abysmally low. Examine the challenges in law enforcement and inter-state coordination. Suggest systemic reforms. (250 words)**

Context :

The disturbing rise in girl child trafficking in Bihar, particularly through orchestras and the flesh trade, exposes a deep and systemic failure of institutions meant to protect the most vulnerable. Between January and June 2025, 271 girls were rescued, many as young as 12, trafficked under false pretenses and subjected to sexual exploitation and inhuman conditions. Despite strong legislation in place, a lack of enforcement, accountability, and coordination has allowed these crimes to flourish. Bihar, due to its porous borders, connectivity, and poverty, has emerged as a major hub in the trafficking ecosystem.

Core Issues and Analysis

1. Root Causes of Girl Child Trafficking in Bihar

- Geographic vulnerability: Bihar's border with Nepal and proximity to States like West Bengal, Odisha, Jharkhand, and Chhattisgarh makes it a prime transit and destination hub.
- Socio-economic factors: Poverty, lack of education, patriarchal norms, and limited opportunities make girls vulnerable to false promises of employment, love, or stardom.
- Cultural manipulation: Orchestras are misused under the guise of cultural performance but are often fronts for sexual exploitation and forced labour.

2. Institutional and Legal Failures

- Inadequate enforcement: While laws like the POCSO Act, JJ Act, Bonded Labour Act, and ITPA exist, conviction rates remain abysmally low.
- Poor case registration: Many cases are disguised as missing persons or kidnappings, avoiding trafficking charges.
- Weak Anti-Human Trafficking Units (AHTUs): They are often understaffed, lack inter-state coordination, and are bureaucratically hamstrung.
- Rehabilitation gaps: Survivors are often returned to abusive homes or denied sustained psychosocial care, creating a vicious cycle of re-trafficking.

3. The Orchestras as Fronts for Exploitation

- Girls are trafficked for as little as ₹10,000 and made to dance in vulgar shows before inebriated men.
- Rescued girls report being raped, beaten, and confined in inhuman conditions.
- Despite repeated rescues, orchestras continue to operate with impunity, indicating state failure and social acceptance of such exploitation.

Recommendations and Way Forward

A. Immediate Legal and Administrative Action

- Absolute prohibition on employment of minors in orchestras and sealing of all such venues.
- Criminal prosecution of organisers, landlords, and traffickers with asset seizure and time-bound trials.
- Mandatory inspections by the Labour Department and local administration.

B. Strengthening Prevention and Surveillance

- Schools must monitor attendance and trigger alerts when children go missing.
- Panchayats to maintain migratory registers and raise community-based red flags.
- Transport surveillance — extend the Railway Protection Force (RPF) model to inter-state buses, private carriers, and border check posts.

C. Capacity Building and Coordination

- Strengthen AHTUs with trained personnel and inter-state jurisdiction.
- Digitise case records, enable data sharing, and use heat maps to track trafficking patterns.
- Ensure coordination across police, child protection bodies, NGOs, judiciary, and labour inspectors.

D. Strategy of PICKET

1. Policy: Enforce strong laws prohibiting exploitation.
2. Institutions: Empower enforcement and rehabilitation agencies.
3. Convergence: Synchronise digital, legal, and institutional response.
4. Knowledge: Leverage community awareness and survivor insight.
5. Economy: Make trafficking economically unviable for traffickers.
6. Technology: Use predictive tools, databases, and surveillance to disrupt networks.

Conclusion

Trafficking of girls in Bihar is not an isolated law-and-order issue, but a humanitarian, socio-economic, and institutional collapse. India's constitutional commitment to child rights, dignity, and freedom from exploitation (Articles 23, 24, 39) demands urgent action. Laws exist, but enforcement lags. Prosecution must not be viewed merely as punishment, but as prevention, deterrence, and justice. Ending girl child trafficking requires a multi-pronged, victim-centric, and technology-enabled strategy, grounded in political will and coordinated action. The cost of delay is measured in broken lives.