

Current Affairs - 07 January 2026

THE RIGHT TO DISCONNECT IN AN 'ALWAYS-ON' ECONOMY

The Culture of Overwork in India and Its Consequences

- **The Culture of Overwork**
 - India's workforce is operating under extreme pressure.
 - Data from the International Labour Organization reveal that more than half of Indian workers regularly exceed 49 working hours per week, placing the country among the highest globally for excessive work hours.
 - This relentless pace has resulted in alarming levels of burnout, with a vast majority of employees reporting physical and emotional exhaustion.
 - The expectation of constant digital availability has extended work into evenings, weekends, and holidays, transforming rest periods into unpaid labour and eroding the fundamental concept of work-life balance.
- **Health and Productivity Consequences**
 - The consequences of overwork extend beyond individual discomfort and directly affect public health and economic efficiency.
 - **Prolonged stress** and insufficient rest significantly contribute to lifestyle diseases such as hypertension, diabetes, anxiety, and depression.
 - Work-related stress now forms a notable share of India's **mental health burden**, placing additional strain on healthcare systems.
 - From an organisational perspective, fatigued employees are less creative, more prone to errors, and less engaged.
 - The tragic death of a young employee due to overwork in 2024 serves as a stark reminder of the human cost of unchecked workplace pressure and highlights the urgent need for systemic reform.

Gaps in the Existing Legal Framework

- Despite recent labour reforms, India's current legal framework remains inadequate in addressing the realities of the digital economy.



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- The Occupational Safety, Health, and Working Conditions Code, 2020 sets limits on working hours, but its protections largely apply to traditional workers and often exclude contractual, freelance, and gig employees.
- This omission leaves a significant segment of the workforce **vulnerable to exploitation**, especially those who fear professional repercussions for ignoring after-hours communication.
- The imbalance of power between employers and employees further intensifies the need for explicit legal safeguards.

The Case for the Right to Disconnect

- The right to disconnect aims to restore **dignity and autonomy** to workers by clearly defining boundaries between work and personal life.
- It seeks to ensure that employees cannot be penalised, disciplined, or discriminated against for disengaging from work-related communication beyond their designated working hours.
- Additionally, it provides mechanisms for grievance redressal when such rights are violated.
- By amending existing labour laws to include this protection, the **reform** would recognise mental well-being as a core component of occupational safety and extend coverage to vulnerable segments of the workforce.

The Path Forward Beyond Legislation: Cultural and Organisational Change

- While legal reform is necessary, it is insufficient on its own. The success of the right to disconnect depends on a **broader cultural shift** within organisations.
 - Awareness programmes, sensitisation workshops, and leadership accountability are crucial to dismantling toxic norms that equate long hours with commitment.
 - Employers must prioritise output and innovation over presenteeism and integrate mental health support services into workplace policies.
 - Only through this holistic approach can the law achieve its intended impact.
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AMERICA'S VENEZUELAN ACTIONS ARE MOST UNLAWFUL

- The alleged attack by the United States on Venezuela and the capture of President Nicolás Maduro represents a grave **violation of international law**.
- Even acknowledging the authoritarian nature of the Maduro administration, internal governance failures do not justify external military intervention.
- The incident raises serious legal concerns relating to the use of force, state sovereignty, and the protection accorded to heads of state.
- More broadly, it highlights the **erosion** of the international rule of law in a period marked by declining respect for legal constraints on power.

The Prohibition on the Use of Force

- The cornerstone of the modern international legal order is the prohibition on the use of force enshrined in Article 2(4) of the United Nations Charter.
- This provision forbids states from using force against the territorial integrity or political independence of another state.
- The Charter recognises only two exceptions: self-defence in response to an armed attack, and force authorised by the UN Security Council. Neither condition was satisfied in the Venezuelan case.
- Although this framework is clear, powerful states have repeatedly sought to dilute its force.

The Illegality of Law-Enforcement Justifications

- The U.S. operation was reportedly framed as a law-enforcement measure aimed at apprehending alleged criminals, including the Venezuelan President.
- This rationale stretches international law beyond recognition. International law maintains a firm distinction between domestic criminal jurisdiction and the cross-border use of armed force.
- Military incursions into another state's territory cannot be justified by reference to criminal prosecution objectives.



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Head-of-State Immunity and the Status of President Maduro

- A central legal issue concerns the treatment of President Maduro following his capture.
- Under international law, sitting heads of state enjoy **immunity *ratione personae*** of sitting heads of state from the criminal jurisdiction of foreign courts.
- This immunity is absolute during their term of office and applies regardless of the nature of the alleged offences.
- As a result, domestic courts of another state lack jurisdiction to prosecute a serving head of state.
- Arguments seeking to deny this immunity based on the alleged illegitimacy of Maduro's election or lack of diplomatic recognition are legally unsound.
- International law does not condition immunity on democratic credentials or external recognition.
- The decisive criterion is effective control over state territory and institutions. Since the Maduro administration exercised such control, its head remained entitled to full personal immunity.
- Allowing states to unilaterally withdraw recognition and deny immunity would destabilise diplomatic relations and invite selective enforcement.

Sovereignty, Non-Intervention, and Imperial Overreach

- The forcible apprehension of a foreign national on another state's territory without consent constitutes an **internationally wrongful act**.
 - This violation is particularly acute when the individual concerned is a sitting head of state.
 - Such conduct breaches fundamental principles of sovereignty and non-intervention, which are essential to maintaining international stability.
 - Any attempt to influence or control Venezuela's political trajectory through coercive means further compounds the illegality.
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RETHINKING INDIA'S SKILLING OUTCOMES

Why Skilling Struggles to Attract Aspirations?

- **Low Integration with Education Pathways** - India's GER is 28%, with a target of 50% by 2035 under NEP 2020. Achieving this requires embedding skilling within higher education, not expanding standalone vocational tracks.
- **Limited Reach of Formal Training** - Only about 4.1% of India's workforce has formal vocational training, up marginally from 2% a decade ago—far below OECD levels where vocational enrolment is widespread.
- **Global Comparison Gap** - In OECD countries, 44% of upper-secondary students pursue vocational education, rising to 70% in several European economies, making skilling a mainstream choice.
- **Weak Post-Degree Skilling Culture** - The India Skills Report 2025 shows that graduates rarely pursue skilling after degrees, underscoring the need to align skilling with formal education systems.

Industry's Limited Role in Strengthening Skilling

- **High Industry Dependence on Skilled Labour** - Industries face high attrition (30–40%), long onboarding periods, and productivity losses, making effective skilling economically critical for sectors like retail, logistics, hospitality, and manufacturing.
- **Low Use of Public Skilling Certifications** - Most employers do not rely on government skilling certificates for hiring, preferring internal training, referrals, or private platforms, limiting the value of public skilling programmes.
- **Uneven Impact of Apprenticeships** - While the **National Apprenticeship Promotion Scheme (NAPS)** has expanded participation, benefits remain uneven, especially among larger firms.
- **Lack of Co-Design and Accountability** - Industry is neither incentivised nor required to co-create curricula, standards, or assessments, keeping skilling disconnected from real labour-market needs.

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Skilling as a Driver of Long-Term Economic Growth

- **Accountability, Not Intent, Is the Core Gap** - India's skilling challenge stems from weak accountability rather than lack of funding or policy intent.
- **Workplace-Embedded Skilling** - Expanding apprenticeships under NAPS and integrating skilling into workplaces can rapidly improve job readiness at scale.
- **Industry-Led Execution Models** - Schemes like PM-SETU and ITI modernisation show the value of embedding industry ownership and responsibility into programme design.
- **From Welfare to Economic Strategy** - When skills are integrated into degrees, industry becomes a co-owner, and SSCs are accountable for placements, skilling transforms into a pillar of economic empowerment.
- **Beyond Employment Outcomes** - Effective skilling enhances dignity of labour, productivity, and enables India to convert its demographic advantage into sustained economic growth.

Rethinking India's Skills Strategy

- **Skills Must Translate into Better Pay** - Vocational training cannot succeed unless wages and benefits reflect the skills acquired. Skilling policy must align training with sectoral competitiveness and worker aspirations.
 - **Shift to Demand-Led Training** - Curricula should be guided by real-time labour market data, closer industry-institution coordination, and transparent job prospects to reduce skill mismatches.
 - **Remove Wage-Suppressing Constraints** - Regulatory hurdles, finance and land access issues, corruption, and trade barriers limit firms' ability to pay competitive wages. Skilling must be linked with broader industrial and regulatory reforms.
 - **Scale Placement-Linked Models** - Training works best when combined with rigorous selection, quality instruction, and assured placement support through proven public-private partnerships.
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WHAT ARE BIOMATERIALS?



- They are materials of **natural, synthetic, or hybrid origin** designed to **interact safely and compatibly** with different systems such as the **human body and the environment**.
- They are **derived wholly or partly from biological sources or engineered using biological processes** that are designed to **replace or interact with conventional materials**.
- They are increasingly used across sectors such as **packaging, textiles, construction and healthcare**.
- They are **central to modern biomedicine and bioengineering** and their design is informed by application-specific demands and trade-offs.
- The modern field of biomaterials **combines physics, chemistry, medicine, and biology**, as well as **materials science and tissue engineering**.
- **Metals, plastics, ceramics, glass, cells and living tissue** are currently used to create biomaterials.

They can be broadly categorised into **three types**:

- **Drop-in biomaterials**, which are **chemically identical to petroleum-based materials** and can be used in existing manufacturing systems (such as bi-PET);
 - **Drop-out biomaterials**, which are **chemically different** and require **new processing or end-of-life systems** (such as polylactic acid or PLA);
 - **Novel biomaterials**, which offer **new properties** not found in conventional materials, such as **self-healing materials, bioactive implants, and advanced composites**.
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UAPA'S EVER-WIDENING DEFINITION OF TERRORISM

Origins of the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act

- **Enactment Without a Terror Focus (1967)** - The UAPA was enacted in 1967 to address “unlawful activities” threatening India’s sovereignty and territorial integrity. In its original form, it did not deal with terrorism.
- **Roots in National Integration Concerns** - The law emerged from the work of the **National Integration Council (NIC)**, set up in 1961 to counter communalism, regionalism, and other divisive forces.
- **Constitutional Backing** - NIC recommendations led to the **Constitution (Sixteenth Amendment) Act, 1963**, introducing reasonable restrictions on fundamental rights to protect national integrity. The UAPA operationalised these changes.
- **Shift Towards Terrorism Came Later** - Initially focused on secessionist and integrity-related activities, terrorism entered the UAPA framework only decades later.

Terrorism Brought Within the UAPA Framework (2004)

- **Shift After Repeal of POTA** - A major change came in 2004 when Parliament amended the UAPA after repealing the Prevention of Terrorist Activities Act, responding to concerns over misuse.
- **Creation of a Terror-Specific Chapter** - The Act’s title was expanded, and **Chapter IV** (Sections 15–23) was introduced to define terrorist acts, prescribe punishments, and criminalise related activities.
- **Definition of Terrorist Acts** - Section 15 defined terrorism as acts using explosives, firearms, hazardous substances or lethal weapons, causing or likely to cause death, injury or property damage, with intent to threaten India’s sovereignty or strike terror.
- **Expanded Scope of Unlawful Activity** - The amendment widened “unlawful activity” to include acts causing “disaffection against India” and strengthened penalties for membership of banned organisations, including life imprisonment or death if loss of life occurred.

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Post-26/11 Amendments: Expansion of UAPA Powers (2008)

- **Trigger: Mumbai Terror Attacks and UNSC Mandate** - Following the 26/11 attacks and citing UNSC Resolution 1373, Parliament amended the UAPA to strengthen India's counter-terror framework.
- **Broadening the Definition of Terrorism** - The insertion of "by any other means" in Section 15 vastly widened the scope of terrorism, enabling non-violent or disruptive acts to be construed as terrorist offences.
- **Harsher Procedural Regime** - Police custody was extended to 30 days and judicial custody to 180 days. Anticipatory bail was barred, and regular bail was restricted if accusations appeared "prima facie true."
- **Reversal of Burden of Proof** - Section 43E introduced presumptions of guilt for possession of arms linked to terrorism, departing from standard criminal law principles.
- **Expanded Offences and Institutions** - The amendments criminalised conspiracy, recruitment, and training, classified attacks on public functionaries as terrorism, introduced "terrorist gangs," and established special courts.

Economic Offences Brought Under UAPA (2012)

- **Expansion to Economic Security** - In 2012, the UPA government amended the UAPA to include threats to "economic security" within the definition of terrorism, covering financial, food, energy, livelihood, and environmental security.
 - **Counterfeit Currency as Terrorism** - The production, smuggling, and circulation of counterfeit Indian currency were explicitly designated as terrorist acts.
 - **Corporate and Institutional Liability** - New Sections 22A–22C extended criminal liability to companies, trusts, and societies, holding office-bearers responsible unless they proved lack of knowledge.
 - **Longer Bans and Global Alignment** - The period for declaring organisations "unlawful associations" was extended from two to five years, and new schedules incorporated international conventions and currency security features.
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