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EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

The Thermal Cost of India's Textile Surge — Heat Stress, Labour Rights, and Export Ambitions

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The Thermal Cost of India's Textile Surge — Heat Stress, Labour Rights, and Export Ambitions

 The Hindu

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GS3

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 The Hindu

3 tags

CONTEXT

The **Hindu editorial** addresses an often-overlooked dimension of India's textile and garment export surge: the severe **heat stress imposed on factory workers** as global warming raises workplace temperatures and production intensity increases. The editorial argues that India's ambition to become a global textile hub cannot be built on the thermal exploitation of its labour force.

THE EDITORIAL ARGUMENT

1. The Scale of the Problem

An estimated **259 billion labour hours** are lost annually in India between 2001 and 2020 due to heat stress-related productivity loss, predominantly in labour-intensive sectors including textiles, garments, construction, and agriculture. In the textile sector specifically, inadequate cooling infrastructure, poorly ventilated sheds, and rising ambient temperatures combine to create unsafe working conditions.

2. India's Textile Export Context

India's textile and garment sector has seen significant growth driven by the **China+1 diversification** strategy among global brands. India is positioned as an alternative manufacturing hub, with exports exceeding \$44 billion in FY26. However, this competitiveness is partly achieved through suppressed labour standards — including inadequate workplace cooling infrastructure.

3. The Labour Rights Dimension

Heat stress at workplaces is not merely a productivity issue — it is a **fundamental occupational safety and health (OSH) concern**. Heatstroke, cardiovascular strain, reduced concentration, and dehydration are occupational hazards that disproportionately affect:



- **Women workers** — majority of garment manufacturing labour
- **Contract and migrant workers** — with less bargaining power to demand safe conditions
- **Workers in small and medium textile units** — outside the compliance radar of major factory Acts

4. The Policy Gap

India lacks **mandatory heat-safety standards** for manufacturing workplaces. The Occupational Safety, Health and Working Conditions Code, 2020 (one of four Labour Codes) provides a framework but has not been fully operationalised, and heat-specific thresholds are absent.

5. What the Editorial Recommends

- **Mandatory temperature limits** for industrial workplaces — including minimum cooling requirements
- **Wet-bulb temperature monitoring** at factory level as a legal compliance requirement
- **Climate-adapted work schedules** — rest periods, hydration standards, and shift adjustments in peak summer
- **Inclusion of heat safety in GST-linked compliance frameworks** to incentivise adoption

KEY DATA POINTS

METRIC	DETAIL
Labour hours lost (heat stress)	~259 billion hours/year (2001–2020 average, India)
Key sectors affected	Textiles, garments, construction, agriculture
India textile exports (FY26)	>\$44 billion
Primary driving trend	China+1 diversification by global brands
Labour codes on OSH	Occupational Safety, Health and Working Conditions Code, 2020
Policy gap	No mandatory heat-specific standards for industrial workplaces



UPSC RELEVANCE

GS Paper 3 — Economy / Environment

- Textile sector exports — India’s position in global supply chains
- Labour codes — four Labour Codes 2019–2020, their coverage and gaps
- Climate change adaptation — heat stress as an economic and labour issue

GS Paper 1 — Society

- Labour rights — OSH standards, gender dimensions (women in garment factories)
- India’s demographic dividend — contingent on a healthy and productive workforce

Mains Angle

“India’s textile export ambitions require confronting the hidden thermal cost imposed on its workforce. Examine the intersection of climate change, labour rights, and industrial competitiveness.” (GS3 + GS1)

FACTS CORNER

ITEM	FACT
Labour hours lost to heat stress	~259 billion/year in India (2001–2020)
India textile + garments exports	>\$44 billion (FY26)
Global textile market	~\$1.5 trillion
India’s textile export share	~3-4% of global total
Key driver	China+1 supply chain diversification
Affected workers	Women dominate garment workforce (~70%+)
Relevant law	Occupational Safety, Health and Working Conditions Code, 2020
Four Labour Codes	OSH Code, Wages Code, Industrial Relations Code, Social Security Code
Wet-bulb temperature	Combined measure of heat and humidity; >35°C wet-bulb is lethal for humans


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