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# India's Heat Crisis — Why the Legislative Vacuum Is Deadly

21 April 2026

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# India's Heat Crisis — Why the Legislative Vacuum Is Deadly

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## WHY IN NEWS

India faces a structural **heat governance failure**: over **57% of districts** — housing **76% of the population** — are classified as facing high-to-very-high heat risk. Yet **heatwaves are not classified as a “notified disaster”** under the **Disaster Management Act, 2005**, meaning no automatic compensatory or relief mechanism is triggered when heatwaves strike. In 2024, extreme heat cost India **247 billion labour hours** and **\$194 billion in income losses**. Over **400-490 million informal workers** have zero access to cooling — a crisis that sits at the intersection of climate change, labour law, public health, and governance.

## THE SCALE OF INDIA'S HEAT EXPOSURE

### Climate Data

METRIC	VALUE
Districts with high-to-very-high heat risk	57% (housing 76% of population)
Labour hours lost to heat (2024)	247 billion hours
Income lost to heat (2024)	~\$194 billion
Informal workers without cooling access	400–490 million
Heat-related deaths officially recorded annually	~300-400 (severely undercounted)
True heat-related mortality (estimated)	Several thousand/year

**Note:** India's heat-related mortality is dramatically **undercounted** because:

- Heatstroke deaths must be diagnosed as such; many are attributed to cardiac arrest or organ failure
- Rural deaths go unrecorded
- The absence of a notified disaster framework means no systematic data collection

## The “Wet-Bulb Temperature” Problem

Current Indian heatwave classification uses **dry-bulb temperature** thresholds:

- Heatwave: 40°C+ in plains (4.5°C above normal)
- Severe heatwave: 47°C+ or 6.4°C above normal

But this ignores **humidity** — the actual physiological threat. The **wet-bulb temperature** (combining heat and humidity) determines the body’s ability to cool itself through sweating:

- A wet-bulb temperature of **35°C** is the theoretical **human survivability limit** (the body cannot cool itself)
- Parts of coastal India and the Indo-Gangetic Plain have already recorded wet-bulb temperatures of **31-33°C** during peak summer
- IPCC projects parts of South Asia crossing the 35°C wet-bulb threshold by 2050 under high-emission scenarios

## THE LEGISLATIVE VACUUM

### What “Notified Disaster” Status Means

Under the **Disaster Management Act, 2005**, a “notified disaster” triggers:

- **State Disaster Response Fund (SDRF)** disbursement for relief
- **National Disaster Response Fund (NDRF)** for extreme events
- Mandatory disaster management plans at district, state, and national level
- Activation of National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) protocols
- Legal obligations on employers, local bodies, and hospitals

**Heatwaves are currently NOT notified** — meaning these mechanisms don’t activate for heat events. Drought and cold waves are notified; heatwaves are not.

### Existing Heatwave Policy

India has **Heat Action Plans (HAPs)** at city and state levels — most comprehensively in **Ahmedabad** (launched 2013 after a deadly 2010 heatwave). These are voluntary frameworks, not legally binding:

CITY/STATE	HAP LAUNCH	KEY MEASURES
Ahmedabad	2013	Cooling centres, hospital protocols, SMS alerts
Odisha	2016	State-level HAP; early warning system
Delhi	2017	HAP with construction worker protections
Maharashtra	2018	District-level HAPs

But HAPs are **inconsistently implemented**, not legally binding, and do not trigger compensation for heat-affected workers.

### The Informal Worker Crisis

India's **informal economy** employs ~90% of the workforce — construction workers, agricultural labourers, street vendors, delivery workers, domestic workers. For these workers:

- **No right to temperature-based work stoppages** (unlike formal sector, where some states have guidelines)
- **No paid sick leave** for heat-related illness
- **No occupational heat safety standard** (India has no equivalent to OSHA's heat illness prevention standard)
- **No compensation** for income lost due to heat

The **Code on Occupational Safety, Health and Working Conditions, 2020** (one of the four labour codes) includes provisions for workplace safety — but heat-specific standards have not been notified under it.

## INDIA COOLING ACTION PLAN (ICAP)

The **India Cooling Action Plan (ICAP)**, released in 2019 by MoEFCC, is India's long-term cooling strategy:

TARGET	GOAL
Reduce cooling demand	20-25% reduction by 2037-38
Reduce refrigerant use	Phase down HFCs under Kigali Amendment
Energy efficiency	25-30% improvement in cooling equipment
Cooling access	Thermal comfort for all by 2037-38

ICAP acknowledges the “**cooling paradox**”: increasing cooling demand is driven by rising temperatures, but conventional cooling (air conditioning) runs on electricity often generated from coal — worsening the climate that requires cooling in the first place.

## Kigali Amendment

The **Kigali Amendment to the Montreal Protocol (2016)** — ratified by India in 2021 — mandates phase-down of **HFCs (hydrofluorocarbons)**, powerful greenhouse gases used as refrigerants. India must reduce HFC consumption by **85% by 2047** under this schedule. This creates both regulatory pressure and an opportunity to develop a domestic HFC-free cooling industry.

## WHAT INDIA NEEDS

Policy recommendations from experts:

RECOMMENDATION	RATIONALE
<b>Notify heatwaves as disasters</b> (DM Act amendment)	Triggers SDRF/NDRF, mandatory plans, employer obligations
<b>Wet-bulb temperature metric</b> in HAPs	More accurate physiological risk assessment
<b>Heat-specific OSH standard</b> under Labour Code	Mandatory rest breaks, shade, water, early stopping
<b>Employer liability</b> for heat illness in informal work	Incentivise shade/water/rest provision at construction sites
<b>Universal cooling access</b> — community cooling centres	Public infrastructure in heat-vulnerable areas
<b>Urban heat island mitigation</b> — green spaces, cool roofs	Long-term temperature reduction in cities

## UPSC RELEVANCE

PAPER	ANGLE
GS1 — Geography	Heatwaves, wet-bulb temperature, Indo-Gangetic Plain, climate change
GS2 — Governance	Disaster Management Act 2005, NDMA, SDRF/NDRF, labour law
GS3 — Environment	Climate change, IPCC, ICAP, Kigali Amendment
GS3 — Economy	Informal economy, labour productivity, income loss
Mains Keywords	Heatwave, notified disaster, DM Act 2005, wet-bulb temperature, ICAP, Kigali Amendment, informal workers, HAP, NDMA, SDRF

## FACTS CORNER

- **Heat-risk districts:** 57% of India's districts; 76% of population
- **2024 heat cost:** 247 billion labour hours; \$194 billion income loss
- **Informal workers without cooling:** 400-490 million
- **Heatwave — NOT a notified disaster** under DM Act 2005 (drought and cold wave are)
- **Ahmedabad HAP (2013):** First city HAP in India; launched after 2010 heatwave
- **Wet-bulb 35°C:** Human survivability threshold — body cannot cool itself above this
- **ICAP (2019):** India Cooling Action Plan; 20-25% cooling demand reduction by 2037-38
- **Kigali Amendment (2016):** HFC phase-down under Montreal Protocol; ratified by India 2021; 85% HFC cut by 2047
- **DM Act 2005:** Governs disaster declaration; NDMA (national), SDMA (state), DDMA (district)
- **NDRF:** National Disaster Response Force — operational force for disaster response
- **Code on Occupational Safety, Health and Working Conditions, 2020:** One of four labour codes; heat standards not yet notified

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