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World Day Against Child Labour 2026 and India's Legal Framework

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World Day Against Child Labour 2026 and India's Legal Framework

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WHY IN NEWS

June 12 is the **World Day Against Child Labour**, observed annually since 2002 under the **International Labour Organization (ILO)**. The 2026 theme is “**Red card to child labour: fair play for children, decent work for adults,**” linking the elimination of child labour to decent work and fair wages for adults. The day is an occasion to revise the global picture and India’s comprehensive constitutional and legal framework against child labour.

THE GLOBAL PICTURE

INDICATOR	DETAIL
Children in child labour (2024)	About 138 million globally
In hazardous work	About 54 million
Trend	Down by over 20 million since 2020; nearly halved since 2000 (from 246 million)
Sectoral split	Agriculture 61%, services 27%, industry 13%
Target missed	SDG Target 8.7 sought to end child labour by 2025

While the long-term trend is downward, the world **missed its 2025 elimination target**, and progress has been uneven, with agriculture remaining the largest employer of child labour. (These figures are from the **ILO-UNICEF report “Child Labour: Global Estimates 2024,”** released in June 2025, the current standing baseline.)

INDIA'S REALITY IN NUMBERS

INDICATOR	DETAIL
Working children (Census 2011)	About 10.1 million aged 5 to 14 (down from 12.6 million in 2001)
Decline	About 2.6 million fewer in a decade
Concentration	Mainly agriculture and the informal, often home-based, economy

The fall in India's numbers tracks the spread of schooling and prohibition, but the child labour that remains is concentrated where enforcement is hardest: the informal, agricultural and home-based economy.

INDIA'S CONSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK

India's Constitution treats the protection of children as both a fundamental right and a directive principle.

PROVISION	WHAT IT SAYS
Article 24	Prohibits employment of children below 14 in factories, mines or hazardous work (a Fundamental Right)
Article 21A	Right to free and compulsory education for children aged 6 to 14 (added by the 86th Amendment, 2002)
Article 23	Prohibits trafficking in human beings and forced labour
Article 39(e) and (f)	(DPSP) Children must not be abused or forced by economic necessity into unsuitable work; childhood to be protected
Article 45	(DPSP) Early childhood care and education for children below 6

THE LEGAL AND POLICY ARCHITECTURE

INSTRUMENT	DETAIL
National Policy on Child Labour, 1987	Born of the Gurupadaswamy Committee ; adopted a gradual, sequential approach focused on rehabilitation, leading to the NCLP
Child and Adolescent Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act, 1986	As amended in 2016, it bans all employment of children below 14 (except a family enterprise or the entertainment industry, with safeguards) and bars adolescents (14 to 18) from hazardous occupations
M.C. Mehta v. State of Tamil Nadu (1996)	The Sivakasi case: the Supreme Court ordered employers of children in hazardous work to pay Rs 20,000 per child into a Child Labour Rehabilitation-cum-Welfare Fund , with the State to provide an adult family member a job or deposit Rs 5,000
RTE Act, 2009	Operationalises Article 21A (free and compulsory education, 6 to 14)
ILO Conventions 138 and 182	Minimum Age and Worst Forms of Child Labour; India ratified both on 13 June 2017
Enforcement	The PENCIL portal (online enforcement) and the National Child Labour Project (NCLP) (rehabilitation)

The 2016 amendment renamed the law to include “adolescent” and aligned it with the RTE age, creating a continuum of protection. But it also drew criticism: by permitting children to “help” in a **family enterprise** after school, in non-hazardous work, it is argued to have legitimised the **dominant Indian form of child labour**, since “family enterprise” is undefined in the informal economy and home-based work is almost impossible to inspect or to verify against schooling.

THE ANALYSIS: LAW VERSUS ENFORCEMENT

Despite a robust legal framework, child labour persists, which is the heart of the policy challenge.

- ❶ **Poverty is the root cause.** Children work because families are poor, the demand-side driver the 2026 theme targets through “decent work for adults.”
- ❷ **The informal and agricultural sectors are hard to police.** Most child labour is in agriculture and home-based or informal work, beyond easy inspection.
- ❸ **Migration and supply chains.** Seasonal migration and opaque supply chains hide child labour.
- ❹ **The “family enterprise” exception** is criticised as a loophole that can mask exploitation.

The way forward is **convergence**, pairing prohibition with demand-side fixes: **RTE and PM POSHAN (the Mid-Day Meal scheme)** raise the opportunity cost of withdrawing a child from school; **MGNREGA and direct-benefit social protection** reduce a household's reliance on a child's wage; and strong enforcement through **PENCIL** and district task forces, plus supply-chain due diligence, matches prohibition with the conditions that make childhoods free. This links **SDG Target 8.7** (end child labour) with **SDG 16.2** (end abuse and exploitation of children), pursued globally through **Alliance 8.7**.

UPSC RELEVANCE

Prelims

- **World Day Against Child Labour:** June 12 (observed since 2002, by the **ILO**, founded 1919)
- **Article 24:** prohibits child labour below 14 in hazardous work (a Fundamental Right); **Article 21A:** Right to Education
- The **Child and Adolescent Labour Act, 1986** (amended 2016); the **National Policy on Child Labour, 1987** (Gurupadaswamy Committee)
- **M.C. Mehta v. State of Tamil Nadu (1996):** Rs 20,000 employer contribution to a Child Labour Rehabilitation-cum-Welfare Fund
- India ratified **ILO Conventions 138 and 182 on 13 June 2017**; enforcement via the **PENCIL portal** and **NCLP**
- Global child labour (2024): about **138 million** (agriculture 61%); India (Census 2011): about **10.1 million** working children (5 to 14)

Mains Angles

- ① **GS2 Vulnerable Sections:** “India’s legal prohibition of child labour is strong, but its elimination depends on tackling poverty.” Examine.
- ② **GS1 Society:** Discuss the social and economic causes of the persistence of child labour despite legal safeguards.
- ③ **GS2 Governance:** Evaluate the enforcement architecture (PENCIL, NCLP) and the case for closing the “family enterprise” loophole.

FACTS CORNER

FACT	DETAIL
Day	World Day Against Child Labour, June 12 (since 2002); ILO (founded 1919)
2026 theme	“Red card to child labour: fair play for children, decent work for adults”
Constitutional core	Article 24 (FR), Article 21A (RTE), Article 23, 39(e)/(f), 45
Key law / policy	1986 Act (amended 2016); National Policy on Child Labour, 1987
Landmark case	M.C. Mehta v. Tamil Nadu (1996): Rs 20,000 rehabilitation fund
ILO conventions	138 (minimum age) and 182 (worst forms); India ratified 13 June 2017
Global figure	~138 million (2024); 54 million hazardous; agriculture 61%
India (Census 2011)	~10.1 million working children (5 to 14)
Goals	SDG 8.7 (with 16.2); Alliance 8.7

Sources: ILO, Ministry of Labour and Employment, PIB

Source: World Day Against Child Labour 2026 and India's Legal Framework — Ujiyari.com | Free UPSC & State PCS Current Affairs

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