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Mapping the Legislative Vacuum in India's Heat Crisis

Context

- The **phenomenon of extreme heat** in India has undergone a significant transformation, evolving from a seasonal inconvenience into a **widespread national crisis.**
- Once largely confined to the arid northwestern and central regions, heatwaves now affect coastal and temperate zones, with over **57% of districts classified as heat-prone.**
- Despite its broad geographic spread, the impact of extreme heat is unevenly distributed, revealing deep-rooted inequalities based on class, caste, and gender.
- For millions of informal workers, heat is not merely discomfort, it is **a fundamental threat to life** and livelihood.

Changing Geography of Heatwaves

- India's heatwave patterns have expanded beyond their traditional boundaries.
- Regions previously considered relatively immune, such as coastal and temperate areas, are now increasingly vulnerable.

- This shift reflects broader climatic changes, making extreme heat a **persistent and pervasive issue** rather than a seasonal anomaly.
- The result is a nationwide **thermal canopy** that affects all regions, albeit with unequal consequences.

Socio-Economic Dimensions of Thermal Inequality

- While extreme heat affects everyone, its burden is disproportionately **borne by the poor.**
- Affluent populations can mitigate heat exposure through private cooling systems, but nearly 400–490 million informal workers lack such cooling autonomy.
- For them, survival depends on continued outdoor labour under hazardous conditions.
- Even slight increases in temperature significantly **reduce productivity**, leading to income loss.
- Consequently, workers are forced into a difficult choice between protecting their health and securing their livelihoods.

Frontline Realities: Evidence of Harm

- Ground-level evidence reveals the harsh realities faced by vulnerable workers.
- Sanitation workers and waste pickers operate in environments where heat is **intensified by toxic emissions** from unsegregated waste, creating dangerous micro-climates.
- Reports of burns from handling heated waste without protective gear highlight the severity of these conditions.
- This situation reflects a **climate-caste nexus,** where marginalised communities engaged in stigmatised occupations face the highest exposure to environmental hazards.

Sector-Wise Vulnerabilities

- **Gig Workers:** Delivery personnel face algorithmic pressures that discourage rest, even during extreme heat alerts.
- **Construction Workers:** High physical exertion combined with heat from materials like steel and concrete increases health risks.
- **Street Vendors:** They suffer both physically and economically, as heat reduces customer activity and spoils perishable goods.

Legal and Institutional Gaps

- India’s current legal framework is inadequate to address the challenges posed by extreme heat.
- The **Factories Act of 1948** provides protections only for indoor workers, leaving outdoor labourers unprotected.
- Similarly, the Occupational Safety, **Health and Working Conditions (OSHWC) Code of 2020** lacks mandatory provisions for heat safety, relying instead on discretionary measures.
- Additionally, the exclusion of heatwaves from the Nationally Notified Disaster list limits states’ financial capacity to respond effectively.
- This creates a fiscal vacuum, restricting the allocation of resources for relief and adaptation.

Towards Addressing Thermal Injustice

- **Recognition as a National Disaster:** Including heatwaves in the National Disaster list would unlock funding and enable stronger administrative action.
- **Adoption of the Heat Index:** Using a combined measure of temperature and humidity would provide a more accurate assessment of risk.
- **Strengthening Labor Protections:** Mandatory work-rest cycles and provision of protective equipment should be enforced under existing labour laws.
- **Right to Cool:** Recognising access to cooling as a fundamental right would ensure the establishment of public cooling shelters and water facilities.
- **Protection for Gig Workers:** Legal safeguards must prevent platforms from penalising workers during extreme heat conditions.
- **Income Compensation Mechanisms:** Financial support systems, including innovative insurance models, should be implemented to offset income loss.

Conclusion

- Extreme heat in India is **no longer just an environmental issue**; it is a reflection of systemic social and economic inequalities.
- The **concept of thermal injustice** highlights how vulnerable populations bear the brunt of climate impacts while lacking the means to adapt.
- Addressing this crisis requires **a shift from fragmented, advisory-based responses to a comprehensive framework** grounded in rights, equity, and accountability.
- Ensuring thermal safety must become an integral part of the social contract, reinforcing the constitutional promise of justice and dignity for all.

Mapping the Legislative Vacuum in India’s Heat Crisis FAQs

Q1. What is the Right to Cool?
Ans. The Right to Cool refers to the idea that access to cooling resources and protection from extreme heat should be recognized as a fundamental right under the right to life.

Q2. Who are the most affected by extreme heat in India?
Ans. Informal workers such as construction labourers, street vendors, and sanitation workers are the most affected.

Q3. What is meant by cooling autonomy?
Ans. Cooling autonomy refers to the ability to access resources like air conditioning to protect oneself from heat.

Q4. Why is the current legal framework inadequate?
Ans. The current legal framework is inadequate because it does not provide mandatory protections for outdoor workers against heat.

Q5. What is one suggested solution to address thermal injustice?
Ans. One suggested solution is to recognise heatwaves as a national disaster to enable better funding and

response.

Source: The Hindu

Food Worth ₹1.55 Lakh Cr. Wasted Annually

Context

- The International Day of Zero Waste, observed on March 30, highlights the urgent issue of food waste.
- This year's focus underscores the stark contradiction of massive food wastage alongside widespread hunger and malnutrition.
- In India, such waste also reflects the loss of farmers' and workers' hard-earned produce and effort.
- This article highlights the scale and implications of food waste in India and globally, examining its economic, environmental, and ethical dimensions while outlining systemic challenges and actionable pathways to reduce food loss.

Global Food Waste Crisis: A Moral and Systemic Failure

- According to the United Nations Environment Programme **Food Waste Index Report 2024**, the world wastes 1.05 billion tonnes of food annually, with households contributing 60%, food services 28%, and retail 12%.
- This massive wastage reflects systemic inefficiencies in supply chains, policy gaps, and consumption patterns, even as 783 million people face hunger and over 3.1 billion cannot afford a healthy diet.

India's Paradox: Waste Amid Hunger

- India ranks **second** globally in food waste, losing 78–80 million tonnes annually worth ₹1.55 lakh crore, behind China (108 million tonnes).
- Despite lower per capita waste (55 kg annually compared to 73 kg in the U.S. and 75 kg in Germany), India ranks **111th in the Global Hunger Index**, with about 194 million people undernourished.
- This highlights a stark contradiction between food surplus and widespread hunger.
- **Punjab Case Study: Production Without Efficiency**
    - Punjab produces surplus food but suffers heavy losses due to extreme weather and poor infrastructure.
        - Around 20% of fruits and vegetables are lost post-harvest.
        - Over 8,200 tonnes of foodgrains were damaged in FCI storage (2019–2024) — the highest in India.
        - Key issues include inadequate storage, weak cold-chain systems, lack of mechanisation, and poor packaging and grading, as highlighted by NITI Aayog.

Environmental Consequences

- Food waste contributes **8–10% of global greenhouse gas emissions**.

- If it were a country, it would be the third-largest emitter after China and the U.S.
- Decomposing food releases methane, a highly potent greenhouse gas. Additionally, wasted food implies loss of critical resources—water, land, energy, and labour.
- For instance, producing 1 kg of rice requires ~5,000 litres of water, intensifying concerns like groundwater depletion in Punjab.

Structural Causes of Food Loss

- Food waste is driven by:
    - Post-harvest inefficiencies at the farm level
    - Inadequate storage and cold-chain infrastructure
    - Fragmented logistics and supply chains
    - Cultural normalisation of waste in consumption patterns

Pathways to Reduce Food Waste

- **Strengthen Cold-Chain Infrastructure** – India processes only 8% of its produce, compared to 65% in the U.S. A national cold-chain mission, especially in key agricultural states, is essential for reducing losses.
- **Legal Framework for Food Redistribution** – Inspired by European models, India should enact laws to prevent destruction of surplus food and promote donation through tax incentives and food banks.
- **Empower Farmers at the Source** – Post-harvest losses begin at the farm gate. Solutions include:
    - Mechanised drying and storage systems
    - Hermetic storage bags and mobile cold units
    - Reforming laws like the Jute Packaging Materials Act to allow modern storage solutions
- **Improve Data and Accountability** – India lacks a national database on food waste. Mandatory measurement and public reporting for businesses, caterers, and institutions can improve accountability and efficiency.
- **Cultural and Behavioural Change** – Reviving the traditional ethos of “Anna (food) as sacred” can drive responsible consumption. Awareness must translate into collective civic responsibility through education and community initiatives.

Conclusion: From Awareness to Action

- Food waste is not just inefficiency—it is a **moral, economic, and environmental crisis**.
- Addressing it requires systemic reforms, infrastructure investment, policy intervention, and a cultural shift towards valuing food as a precious resource.

Food Worth ₹1.55 Lakh Cr. Wasted Annually FAQs

Q1. What is the scale of global food waste?

Ans. Globally, 1.05 billion tonnes of food is wasted annually, with households contributing the largest share, highlighting systemic inefficiencies amid widespread hunger and food insecurity.

Q2. Why is India’s food waste situation concerning?

Ans. India wastes 78–80 million tonnes annually despite high hunger levels, reflecting a paradox of surplus production alongside widespread malnutrition and inadequate access to food.

Q3. What are the main causes of food loss in India?

Ans. Food loss arises from poor storage, weak cold-chain infrastructure, inefficient supply chains, post-harvest losses, and consumption patterns that normalise waste across households and markets.

Q4. How does food waste impact the environment?

Ans. Food waste contributes 8–10% of global emissions, wastes water and resources, and releases methane in landfills, worsening climate change and environmental degradation.

Q5. What measures can reduce food waste effectively?

Ans. Key measures include cold-chain development, food redistribution laws, farmer support, better data tracking, and promoting responsible consumption through cultural and behavioural change.

Source: TH
