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NCPCR's Nationwide Child Labour Campaign Highlights Persistent Gaps in Child Protection, Education, Rehabilitation and Social Security

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Recent Developments:

- The **National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR)** rescued more than **3,800 children** from child labour and facilitated registration of more than **575 FIRs** during its **Pan-India Rescue and Rehabilitation Campaign** conducted from **12 June to 31 August 2026**.
- The campaign involved **State Governments, Union Territory Administrations, District Magistrates, Labour Departments, police authorities and other stakeholders**, with targeted operations at child labour and trafficking hotspots.
- The campaign also focused on **rehabilitation, restoration to families, educational mainstreaming, compensation and follow-up monitoring**, indicating that rescue alone is insufficient for eliminating child labour.
- The development is significant for **GS Paper II**, particularly **social justice, vulnerable sections, child rights, governance and implementation of welfare legislation**.

Understanding Child Labour:

Meaning and Scope:

- **Child labour** refers to work that deprives children of their childhood, dignity, education and development and involves activities that are harmful to their physical, mental, social or moral well-being.
- The worst forms of child labour can include **slavery, trafficking, forced labour, commercial sexual exploitation, illicit activities and recruitment for armed conflict**.
- Child labour should therefore be distinguished from every form of work performed by children because **age, nature of work, working conditions and its impact on education and development** determine whether an activity amounts to prohibited child labour.
- The **International Labour Organization** treats elimination of hazardous and exploitative child labour as essential for protecting children's rights and building productive human capital.

Status and Nature of Child Labour in India:

Magnitude and Vulnerability:

- The **2011 Census** identified approximately **43.53 lakh working children in the 5–14 years age group**, making child labour an important social and developmental challenge in India.
- Child labour has historically been associated with sectors such as **beedi manufacturing, carpet weaving, fireworks, mining, construction, domestic work and informal manufacturing**, where regulation and inspection can be difficult.
- Children engaged in labour are particularly vulnerable to **trafficking, exploitation, physical abuse, school dropout and intergenerational poverty**.

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- The recent NCPCR campaign demonstrates that child labour remains closely connected with **trafficking and informal-sector exploitation**, requiring coordinated action by multiple agencies.

Major Causes of Child Labour:

Poverty and Income Insecurity:

- **Poverty** remains a major structural driver because households with unstable incomes may depend on children's earnings for basic consumption.
- Debt, seasonal migration, unemployment and economic shocks can increase the probability of children entering the labour market.
- Child labour can consequently become part of a **poverty trap**, where immediate income is prioritised over long-term education and skill formation.

Educational Deficits:

- Poor access to quality schools, inadequate infrastructure, long distances, weak learning outcomes and household responsibilities can reduce **school attendance and retention**.
- Children who fall behind academically may become more vulnerable to entering low-skilled employment.
- The problem therefore requires convergence between **education policy, social protection and labour enforcement** rather than relying exclusively on punitive measures.

Informal-Sector Demand:

- Employers in parts of the **informal economy** may prefer children because they can be paid lower wages and are often easier to control.
- Weak registration of enterprises, subcontracting and fragmented supply chains make detection and enforcement more difficult.
- Child labour can therefore persist even when formal-sector regulation is relatively strong.

Social and Cultural Factors:

- **Caste-based occupational patterns, gender discrimination, early marriage, household responsibilities and traditional expectations** can contribute to school exclusion.
- Girls may face an additional burden because unpaid domestic and care work can remain invisible in conventional labour statistics.
- Seasonal migration can further disrupt children's schooling and increase their vulnerability to exploitation.

Consequences of Child Labour:

Health and Psychological Impact:

- Exposure to **toxic chemicals, dust, heavy machinery, excessive working hours and hazardous environments** can cause injuries, chronic illness and impaired physical development.
- Long working hours and exploitative conditions can produce **stress, anxiety, low self-esteem and psychological trauma**, while depriving children of recreation and social development.

Education and Human Capital:

- Child labour can cause **school absenteeism, poor learning outcomes and permanent dropout**, thereby reducing future employment opportunities.
- Loss of education also limits the development of market-relevant skills and reduces the quality of India's human capital.

- At the macroeconomic level, persistent child labour can weaken the ability to realise India's **demographic dividend**.

Intergenerational Poverty:

- Children who leave school early often enter low-paid and insecure occupations as adults, reproducing the same socioeconomic disadvantages within the next generation.
- Child labour therefore represents both a **symptom of poverty and a mechanism through which poverty is reproduced**.

Constitutional and Legal Safeguards:

Constitutional Framework:

- **Article 23** prohibits **traffic in human beings and forced labour**, providing a broader constitutional safeguard against exploitation.
- **Article 24** prohibits the employment of children below **14 years** in factories, mines or other hazardous employment.
- **Article 21A** provides for **free and compulsory education for children between 6 and 14 years**, making education a crucial instrument for preventing child labour.
- **Article 39(e) and 39(f)** direct the State to protect the health and strength of workers and ensure that children develop in conditions of freedom, dignity and protection from exploitation.

Child and Adolescent Labour Law:

- The **Child and Adolescent Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act, 1986**, substantially amended in **2016**, provides the principal statutory framework for regulating child and adolescent labour.
- The amended framework generally **prohibits employment of children below 14 years**, subject to limited statutory exceptions such as assistance in certain family enterprises after school hours and work as a child artist under prescribed conditions.
- It prohibits the employment of **adolescents between 14 and 18 years in hazardous occupations and processes**.
- The framework combines **prohibition, regulation, penalties and rehabilitation**, reflecting a shift from merely regulating child labour towards its elimination.

Protection Against Trafficking and Exploitation:

- The **Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023** contains provisions addressing the **selling and buying of children for specified exploitative purposes**.
- The **Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act, 1956** addresses trafficking for commercial sexual exploitation.
- The **Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015** provides mechanisms for the **care, protection, rehabilitation and social reintegration** of children in need of care and protection.
- The **Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act, 2012** strengthens protection against sexual offences involving children and is relevant where child labour overlaps with sexual exploitation.

Government Measures:

National Policy and Rehabilitation:

- The **National Policy on Child Labour, 1987** adopted a multi-dimensional approach based on **legislative action, convergence of developmental programmes and project-based interventions**.
- The **National Child Labour Project** was launched in **1988** to withdraw children from hazardous occupations and facilitate their rehabilitation through education, vocational training, nutrition and healthcare.

- The NCLP approach has subsequently been integrated with broader educational interventions, and the Government has merged the **NCLP Scheme with Samagra Shiksha**, strengthening convergence with the formal education system.

Enforcement and Digital Monitoring:

- The Ministry of Labour and Employment developed the **PENCIL portal**, or **Platform for Effective Enforcement for No Child Labour**, to facilitate complaints, monitoring and coordination among enforcement authorities.
- The platform seeks to connect enforcement mechanisms with rehabilitation and child-tracking processes, thereby improving institutional convergence.
- The recent NCPCR campaign similarly emphasised **regular reporting, Action Taken Reports, interdepartmental coordination and follow-up rehabilitation**, reflecting the importance of implementation capacity.

Judicial Interventions:

Vishal Jeet Case:

- In **Vishal Jeet v. Union of India, 1990**, the Supreme Court recognised trafficking and child prostitution as serious socioeconomic problems and emphasised preventive and rehabilitative approaches.

M.C. Mehta Case:

- In **M.C. Mehta v. State of Tamil Nadu, 1996**, the Supreme Court issued directions concerning children employed in hazardous industries and strengthened the framework for their protection and rehabilitation.

Bachpan Bachao Andolan Case:

- In **Bachpan Bachao Andolan v. Union of India, 2011**, the Supreme Court addressed the exploitation and trafficking of children and reinforced the responsibility of authorities to protect vulnerable children.

Key Challenges:

Implementation Gap:

- India has a relatively comprehensive legal framework, but **weak enforcement, inadequate inspections, informal employment and fragmented supply chains** can reduce its effectiveness.
- Rescue operations must therefore be accompanied by **prosecution, rehabilitation, family support, education and long-term monitoring**.

Rehabilitation Gap:

- Removing a child from employment without addressing household poverty can result in **re-entry into labour**.
- Effective rehabilitation requires educational mainstreaming, social security, livelihood support for families, counselling and access to essential services.

Informal Economy:

- The highly fragmented nature of the informal sector makes identification of employers and supply-chain responsibility difficult.

- Greater accountability is required for **subcontracting networks and industries with high child-labour risks**.

Way Forward:

A Convergent Strategy:

- India should move from a **rescue-centric approach towards a prevention-and-rehabilitation model** based on convergence among labour, education, women and child development, police, social security and local-government institutions.
- Targeted social protection should focus on households facing **poverty, migration, debt, unemployment and economic shocks**, which are major pathways into child labour.
- School retention should be strengthened through **quality education, transport, nutrition, scholarships, counselling and bridge courses** for rescued children.
- Technology-enabled identification, geospatial mapping of hotspots and stronger supply-chain monitoring can improve enforcement.
- Community institutions, schools, local governments and civil society organisations should be empowered to identify vulnerable children before exploitation occurs.

Value Addition for UPSC:

Key Facts and Conceptual Linkages:

- **Current Affairs:** NCPCR rescued **3,800+ children** and saw **575+ FIRs** during its **Pan-India Rescue and Rehabilitation Campaign**, conducted from **12 June to 31 August 2026**.
- **Constitutional Linkage:** **Articles 21A, 23, 24, 39(e) and 39(f)** collectively establish an important constitutional framework for protecting children from exploitation and ensuring education and dignified development.
- **Legal Linkage:** The **Child and Adolescent Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act, 1986**, as amended in **2016**, is the principal legislation governing child and adolescent labour.
- **Governance Linkage:** NCPCR's campaign demonstrates the importance of **cooperative and multi-agency governance** involving Union, State, district and enforcement authorities.
- **Development Linkage:** Child labour reduces **human capital formation**, weakens the quality of the workforce and can undermine India's ability to convert its young population into a demographic dividend.

SDG Linkage: Elimination of child labour contributes directly to **SDG 4 — Quality Education**, **SDG 8 — Decent Work and Economic Growth**, and **SDG 16 — Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions**