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Codifying Labour Rights in India: Evolution, Comparative Reform and Implementation Challenges

Dr. Sulakshna Dwivedi
Associate Professor, Jagat Guru Nanak Dev Punjab State Open University, Patiala
Dr. Monika Pathak
Assistant Professor, Jagat Guru Nanak Dev Punjab State Open University, Patiala
Dr. Sukhpal Kaur
Assistant Professor, Jagat Guru Nanak Dev Punjab State Open University, Patiala
Dr. Balpreet Singh Chauhan
Assistant Professor, Jagat Guru Nanak Dev Punjab State Open University, Patiala
Dr. Jyotsna Sharma
Corresponding Author, Assistant Professor, Jagat Guru Nanak Dev Punjab State Open University, Patiala

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Abstract: India's labour law framework has undergone its most comprehensive reform since Independence through the consolidation of 29 Central labour laws into four Labour Codes: the Code on Wages, 2019; the Industrial Relations Code, 2020; the Code on Social Security, 2020; and the Occupational Safety, Health and Working Conditions Code, 2020. The reforms seek to simplify labour regulation, improve ease of doing business, enhance compliance through digital governance, and extend social security coverage to emerging categories of workers, including gig, platform, and fixed-term employees. The codification represents a significant shift from a fragmented legislative framework towards a unified, technology-driven regulatory regime that balances economic growth with workers' welfare. This chapter examines the historical evolution of labour legislation in India, tracing its development from colonial labour laws to the post-independence welfare-oriented framework and the eventual transition towards labour market reforms. It critically analyses the rationale behind consolidating multiple statutes into four comprehensive codes, highlighting their objectives, major reforms, and expected implications for employers, employees, and regulatory authorities. The chapter further discusses the limitations of the earlier legal regime, including multiplicity of laws, overlapping definitions, procedural complexities, and compliance burdens, which necessitated structural reform. It concludes that while the

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Labour Codes promise greater regulatory efficiency and labour market flexibility, their successful implementation will depend upon effective rule-making, state-level harmonisation, institutional capacity, and protection of workers' rights in India's evolving employment landscape.
Keywords: Labour Codes, Labour Law Reforms, Code on Wages, Social Security Code, Industrial Relations Code, Occupational Safety and Health Code, Labour Regulation, Employment Law, Gig Workers, Industrial Relations, Ease of Doing Business.

1. Introduction

Labour legislation constitutes one of the fundamental pillars of socio-economic development by regulating the relationship between employers, employees, and the State. In a developing economy like India, labour laws have historically served dual objectives: protecting workers against exploitation while simultaneously promoting industrial growth and economic stability. Since Independence, India's labour policy has been largely welfare-oriented, emphasising social justice, employment security, collective bargaining, minimum wages, occupational safety, and social security.

Over time, however, the Indian labour law framework became increasingly fragmented due to the enactment of numerous statutes addressing different aspects of employment. By 2020, the country had nearly 29 Central labour laws and more than 100 State labour legislations (Ministry of Labour and Employment, 2025; Taxmann's Editorial Board, 2026) governing wages, industrial relations, occupational safety, working conditions, social security, contract labour, migrant workers, factories, and employment conditions. Although these laws were enacted with the objective of safeguarding workers' interests, they created significant compliance challenges for employers because of overlapping provisions, multiple definitions, separate registration requirements, and numerous inspection mechanisms.

Recognising the need to modernise labour regulation in line with changing economic realities, the Government of India initiated comprehensive labour reforms aimed at simplifying the legal framework while improving regulatory efficiency. Consequently, Parliament enacted four Labour Codes between 2019 and 2020 (Government of India, 2019, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c), consolidating 29 Central labour legislations into four comprehensive statutes covering wages, industrial relations, social security, and occupational safety. These reforms represent a paradigm shift from a fragmented compliance-based system to a unified framework supported by digital governance, common definitions, electronic registration, risk-based inspections, and simplified compliance mechanisms. The implementation of these Codes from November 2025

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marks one of the most significant labour law reforms in contemporary India, reflecting the country's commitment to balancing workers' welfare with economic competitiveness.

2. Evolution of Labour Legislation in India

The evolution of labour legislation in India reflects the country's changing socio-economic priorities and industrial development. Labour laws have progressed from basic protective legislation during the colonial period to an extensive welfare-oriented framework after Independence and, more recently, towards regulatory simplification through codification.

In the early stages of industrialisation, labour regulation was primarily intended to protect vulnerable workers employed in factories, mines, plantations, and railways. As industrial activity expanded, legislation gradually incorporated provisions relating to wages, working conditions, occupational safety, social security, industrial dispute resolution, and trade union rights. Following Independence, the Constitution of India provided a strong foundation for labour welfare through the Directive Principles of State Policy and Fundamental Rights, encouraging the State to enact comprehensive labour welfare legislation.

The rapid growth of the organised and unorganised sectors, emergence of service industries, digital platforms, and globalisation created new employment relationships that the traditional legal framework struggled to regulate effectively. Consequently, labour law reforms increasingly focused on balancing labour protection with labour market flexibility, encouraging investment while ensuring decent working conditions. The enactment of the four Labour Codes represents the latest phase in this evolutionary process by integrating multiple laws into a coherent regulatory framework.

3. Need for Labour Reforms

The demand for comprehensive labour reforms emerged due to significant structural deficiencies in India's existing labour regulatory framework, a concern first articulated in policy terms by the Second National Commission on Labour, which recommended consolidating the existing statutes into a smaller number of functional codes (Government of India, 2002). The multiplicity of labour laws created uncertainty, increased compliance costs, discouraged investment, and complicated enforcement.

One of the principal concerns was the existence of different definitions of fundamental terms such as "employee," "worker," "wages," "establishment," and "employer" across various statutes (Kharbanda & Kharbanda, 2026). These inconsistencies resulted in conflicting interpretations, frequent litigation, and administrative difficulties. Employers were often required to maintain numerous registers, submit multiple returns, obtain separate registrations under different laws, and comply with overlapping inspection procedures administered by various authorities.

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Another important factor necessitating reform was the changing nature of employment. The traditional employer-employee relationship was increasingly replaced by contractual employment, outsourcing, fixed-term employment, platform work, and gig economy arrangements, a global trend also documented by the International Labour Organization (2022). Existing labour laws provided limited protection to these emerging categories of workers, leaving substantial sections of the workforce outside the formal social security framework.

Economic liberalisation and India's aspiration to improve its global competitiveness also contributed to the reform agenda. Simplification of labour regulations was viewed as essential for improving the ease of doing business, attracting domestic and foreign investment, consistent with global benchmarking of regulatory environments for firms (World Bank, 2023), encouraging formalisation of enterprises, and generating employment opportunities. Simultaneously, reforms sought to strengthen social security coverage, improve occupational safety standards, facilitate digital compliance, and create a transparent inspection system. Thus, labour reforms aimed to achieve an appropriate balance between industrial growth and workers' welfare in a rapidly changing economic environment.

4. Rationale Behind Codification

The codification of labour laws was undertaken with the objective of replacing a fragmented legal regime with a simplified, integrated, and transparent regulatory framework. Instead of administering 29 separate Central labour laws, employers, employees, and regulatory authorities now operate under four comprehensive Labour Codes covering all major dimensions of employment regulation.

The foremost rationale behind codification was simplification (Gayathri, 2025). Consolidating multiple statutes reduced duplication of provisions, harmonised definitions, eliminated inconsistencies, and created greater legal certainty. The introduction of a uniform definition of "wages" across all four Codes significantly simplifies the calculation of statutory benefits such as provident fund, gratuity, employee compensation, maternity benefits, and bonuses. Likewise, electronic registration, unified licensing systems, common returns, and web-based inspections substantially reduce compliance burdens.

Codification also reflects the Government's emphasis on digital governance and regulatory transparency. The Inspector-cum-Facilitator model (Gayathri, 2025) replaces purely punitive inspections with a more facilitative compliance approach, encouraging voluntary adherence to labour standards. Furthermore, the Labour Codes extend social security protection to gig workers, platform workers, fixed-term employees, and unorganised workers—categories largely excluded under the previous legislative framework.

The reforms also seek to improve industrial relations by recognising negotiating unions, strengthening grievance redressal mechanisms, promoting collective bargaining, and

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facilitating dispute resolution. Simultaneously, enhanced occupational safety provisions, uniform working conditions, increased penalties for non-compliance, and simplified registration procedures contribute towards creating a more accountable labour administration system. Thus, codification aims to balance flexibility for employers with enhanced protection and welfare for workers in an increasingly dynamic labour market.

5. Historical Evolution of Labour Laws

5.1 Colonial Labour Legislation

Labour legislation in India originated during British colonial rule, primarily to regulate labour employed in factories, plantations, railways, mines, and ports. The earliest legislative interventions were motivated less by worker welfare and more by the need to improve industrial productivity, maintain social order, and respond to international criticism regarding poor working conditions in colonial industries.

The Factories Act of 1881 (Commercial Law Publishers (India) Pvt. Ltd., 2025) marked the beginning of organised labour regulation in India. It introduced limited restrictions on child labour and prescribed basic working conditions in factories. Subsequent amendments through the Factories Acts of 1891, 1911, 1922, and 1934 gradually expanded provisions relating to working hours, health, safety, welfare, and employment of women and children.

The early twentieth century witnessed increasing labour unrest, growth of trade unions, and demands for legal protection. Consequently, several important legislations were enacted, including the Trade Unions Act, 1926, which recognised trade unions; the Payment of Wages Act, 1936, which regulated timely wage payments; and the Employers' Liability and Workmen's Compensation legislations, which introduced compensation for workplace injuries. Although these enactments improved labour conditions, their primary focus remained limited to selected industries and organised sectors.

5.2 Post-Independence Framework

Following Independence in 1947, India adopted a welfare-state model that placed considerable emphasis on labour welfare and social justice (Kharbanda & Kharbanda, 2026). The Constitution of India reinforced this commitment through Fundamental Rights and Directive Principles of State Policy, particularly Articles 38, 39, 41, 42, 43, and 43A, which promote equitable working conditions, living wages, social security, worker participation in management, and protection against exploitation.

During the post-independence period, Parliament enacted numerous labour welfare statutes, including the Industrial Disputes Act, 1947, Factories Act, 1948, Minimum Wages Act, 1948, Employees' State Insurance Act, 1948, Employees' Provident Funds and Miscellaneous Provisions Act, 1952, Maternity Benefit Act, 1961, Payment of Bonus Act, 1965, Payment of

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Gratuity Act, 1972, Equal Remuneration Act, 1976, Contract Labour (Regulation and Abolition) Act, 1970, and Inter-State Migrant Workmen Act, 1979. These laws significantly expanded labour protection by regulating wages, industrial relations, occupational safety, social security, maternity benefits, contract labour, and worker welfare.

The post-independence framework successfully institutionalised labour rights; however, over the decades, the proliferation of numerous statutes also increased regulatory complexity and administrative burdens.

Table 1. Evolution of India's Labour Law Framework

Source: Author's compilation based on Government of India (2019, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c); Ministry of Labour and Employment (2025a, 2025b); International Labour Organization (2019, 2024b, 2025, 2026).

Period	Major Development	Key Characteristics
1881–1947	Colonial Labour Legislation	Factory regulation, child labour protection, limited welfare provisions
1947–1991	Welfare State Approach	Expansion of labour rights, industrial relations, social security, occupational safety
1991–2019	Liberalisation Era	Labour reforms, global competitiveness, ease of doing business initiatives
2019–2020	Codification of Labour Laws	Consolidation of 29 Central labour laws into four Labour Codes
November 2025 onwards	Implementation Phase	Digital governance, unified compliance, expanded social security, simplified regulation

5.3 Problems with the 29 Central Labour Laws

Despite their welfare objectives, the 29 Central labour laws created several practical and administrative challenges that ultimately necessitated comprehensive reform.

One of the most significant problems was legislative fragmentation. Different laws contained varying definitions of common terms such as "employee," "worker," "wages," and "establishment," leading to inconsistent judicial interpretations and compliance uncertainties.

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Employers were required to maintain multiple statutory registers, submit separate returns, obtain different registrations and licences, and interact with several labour authorities.

The compliance burden was particularly severe for businesses operating across multiple states, where central and state labour laws often overlapped. Frequent inspections by different departments increased administrative costs and reduced operational efficiency. Moreover, several labour laws were designed primarily for traditional manufacturing industries and did not adequately address emerging employment models such as fixed-term employment, gig work, platform-based services, outsourcing, and digital labour markets.

The social security framework also suffered from limited coverage, leaving a substantial proportion of India's workforce—especially unorganised, gig, and platform workers—outside statutory protection (Taxmann's Editorial Board, 2026). In addition, procedural delays in dispute resolution, multiplicity of adjudicatory mechanisms, overlapping authorities, and inconsistent enforcement reduced the overall effectiveness of labour regulation.

These challenges collectively highlighted the need for a simplified, integrated, technology-enabled labour law framework capable of promoting both economic efficiency and social justice. The enactment of the four Labour Codes was intended to address these longstanding deficiencies by harmonising definitions, reducing compliance burdens, strengthening social security, modernising labour administration, and creating a more balanced regulatory environment.

6. Need for Labour Codes

The enactment of the four Labour Codes marks one of the most significant structural reforms in India's labour regulatory framework since Independence. The previous labour law regime comprised 29 Central labour legislations enacted over several decades to address different aspects of employment, industrial relations, social security, wages, occupational safety, and working conditions. Although these laws played a crucial role in protecting workers' rights, their multiplicity resulted in overlapping provisions, inconsistent definitions, procedural complexities, and substantial compliance burdens for employers. These challenges necessitated a comprehensive legislative reform aimed at creating a simpler, more transparent, and efficient labour regulatory system.

The Labour Codes seek to balance the interests of employers and employees by promoting labour market flexibility while preserving essential labour protections. They aim to encourage industrial growth, improve regulatory efficiency, expand social security coverage, strengthen occupational safety standards, and facilitate digital governance. The consolidation of multiple statutes into four integrated Codes reflects the Government's broader objective of promoting economic competitiveness while ensuring decent working conditions for workers across organised and unorganised sectors.

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The principal objectives underlying the Labour Codes include improving ease of doing business, reducing compliance costs, encouraging formalisation of employment, extending social security to previously uncovered workers, and establishing a technology-driven labour administration system.

6.1 Ease of Doing Business

One of the foremost objectives of the Labour Codes is to improve India's business environment by reducing regulatory complexity and encouraging investment. Prior to codification, employers operating across multiple states had to comply with numerous labour statutes requiring separate registrations, licences, inspections, returns, and maintenance of different statutory registers. Such fragmented compliance mechanisms increased administrative costs, delayed business operations, and discouraged formal sector expansion.

The Labour Codes simplify this framework by introducing common definitions, electronic registration systems, unified licensing procedures, web-based inspections, and standardised compliance mechanisms. These reforms are expected to reduce transaction costs, minimise regulatory uncertainty, and facilitate easier establishment and expansion of industrial and commercial enterprises. By creating a more predictable legal environment, the Codes seek to attract both domestic and foreign investment while enhancing India's global competitiveness.

6.2 Simplification of Compliance

Simplification of compliance constitutes one of the most significant features of the Labour Codes. Under the earlier regime, employers often maintained numerous registers, submitted multiple statutory returns, and interacted with several regulatory authorities under different labour laws. The multiplicity of compliance requirements frequently resulted in duplication of records, inconsistent reporting, and increased administrative expenditure.

The Labour Codes streamline these obligations through harmonised definitions, common electronic registers, unified returns, and integrated licensing systems. The introduction of the Inspector-cum-Facilitator model also shifts regulatory emphasis from punitive enforcement towards advisory and facilitative compliance. Web-based inspections based on risk assessment further improve transparency while reducing discretionary inspections. Consequently, employers are expected to experience lower compliance costs without compromising statutory labour protections.

6.3 Formalisation of Employment

A significant proportion of India's workforce has traditionally been employed in the informal sector with limited legal protection, inadequate social security, and poor working conditions. The Labour Codes seek to encourage formalisation by simplifying labour regulations and extending legal protection to broader categories of workers.

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The introduction of common definitions of wages and employees, simplified registration procedures, digital compliance mechanisms, and enhanced social security provisions encourages enterprises to transition from informal to formal operations. Formalisation not only improves regulatory compliance but also provides workers with access to statutory benefits such as provident fund, insurance, gratuity, maternity benefits, occupational safety, and dispute resolution mechanisms. The inclusion of gig workers, platform workers, and fixed-term employees within the broader labour policy framework further reflects the changing nature of employment in India's evolving economy.

6.4 Digital Governance

Digital governance represents a major innovation introduced by the Labour Codes. Traditional labour administration relied heavily upon manual registrations, paper-based records, physical inspections, and multiple reporting mechanisms, which often resulted in delays, inefficiencies, and limited transparency.

The Labour Codes promote electronic registration of establishments, online licensing systems, electronic maintenance of statutory registers, web-based inspections, and digital filing of returns. The Inspector-cum-Facilitator framework also incorporates technology-based inspection schemes designed to improve accountability and reduce arbitrary enforcement. Digital governance facilitates faster service delivery, improves record management, enhances regulatory transparency, and supports evidence-based labour administration. These reforms are expected to create a more efficient interface between employers, employees, and regulatory authorities.

7. Overview of the Four Labour Codes

The Government of India consolidated twenty-nine Central labour legislations into four comprehensive Labour Codes covering wages, industrial relations, social security, and occupational safety. Together, these Codes establish an integrated legal framework governing employment relations across organised and unorganised sectors.

Table 2. Consolidation of 29 Labour Laws into Four Labour Codes

7.1 Code on Wages, 2019

Labour Code	Year	No. of Acts Consolidated	Major Area Covered
Code on Wages	2019	4	Wages, bonus, equal remuneration, minimum wages

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Labour Code	Year	No. of Acts Consolidated	Major Area Covered
Industrial Relations Code	2020	3	Trade unions, industrial disputes, standing orders
Code on Social Security	2020	9	Provident fund, ESI, gratuity, maternity benefit, gig workers
Occupational Safety, Health and Working Conditions Code	2020	13	Health, safety, welfare, contract labour, migrant workers

Source: Author's compilation based on Government of India (2019, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c) and Ministry of Labour and Employment (2025a).

The Code on Wages, 2019 (Government of India, 2019) consolidates four important labour legislations relating to wages:

- Payment of Wages Act, 1936
- Minimum Wages Act, 1948
- Payment of Bonus Act, 1965
- Equal Remuneration Act, 1976 (International Labour Organization, 2019; OECD, 2024)

The Code introduces a uniform definition of "wages," one of its most significant reforms, thereby eliminating inconsistencies across earlier statutes. It extends minimum wage protection to all employees irrespective of scheduled employment, empowers the Central Government to prescribe floor wages, prohibits gender discrimination in wages and recruitment, strengthens bonus provisions, and simplifies wage-related dispute resolution. The Code also promotes electronic payment of wages and digital compliance mechanisms. (World Bank, 2024; International Labour Organization & Institute for Human Development, 2024)

7.2 Code on Social Security, 2020

The Code on Social Security, 2020 (Government of India, 2020a) consolidates nine major labour legislations concerning social security benefits, including provident fund, employee state insurance, gratuity, maternity benefits, and compensation for employment injuries.

A landmark feature of the Code is the inclusion of unorganised workers, gig workers, and platform workers within the social security framework (Government of India, 2020a). It empowers both Central and State Governments to formulate welfare schemes covering life insurance, disability benefits, health care, old-age protection, education, skill development, and

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maternity benefits. The Code also establishes Social Security Boards and promotes universal registration through digital platforms.

7.3 Occupational Safety, Health and Working Conditions Code, 2020

The Occupational Safety, Health and Working Conditions (OSH) Code (Government of India, 2020c) consolidates thirteen labour laws regulating workplace safety, health, welfare, and employment conditions. It establishes uniform occupational safety standards applicable across factories, mines, plantations, construction establishments, contract labour, inter-state migrant workers, and other specified establishments.

The Code significantly expands employer responsibilities by requiring appointment letters, annual health check-ups, welfare facilities, safe working environments, accident reporting, and occupational disease reporting (Eastern Book Company, 2026). It also recognises workers' rights to obtain information regarding workplace safety and report hazardous conditions. The Code permits employment of women in night shifts subject to consent and prescribed safety measures and introduces higher penalties for violations.

7.4 Industrial Relations Code, 2020

The Industrial Relations Code, 2020 (Government of India, 2020b) consolidates three major legislations governing industrial relations:

- Industrial Disputes Act, 1947
- Industrial Employment (Standing Orders) Act, 1946
- Trade Unions Act, 1926 (NITI Aayog, 2022; International Labour Organization, 2024a)

The Code introduces several important reforms including recognition of negotiating unions, constitution of negotiating councils, mandatory Grievance Redressal Committees, Worker Re-skilling Fund, simplified standing order procedures, fixed-term employment, and revised provisions relating to strikes, lockouts, retrenchment, and industrial dispute resolution. These reforms seek to promote harmonious industrial relations while improving flexibility in labour management.

Table 6. Industrial Relations: Old Framework vs New Framework

Aspect	**Earlier Laws**	**Industrial Relations Code**
Workman	Defined	Replaced with broader concept of worker/employee
Negotiating Union	No statutory framework	Recognised

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Aspect	Earlier Laws	Industrial Relations Code
Negotiating Council	Not available	Introduced
Fixed-term Employment	No statutory recognition	Recognised
Standing Orders	Applicable to 100 workers	Applicable to 300 workers
Reskilling Fund	Not available	Introduced
Strike Notice	Mainly public utility services	Mandatory notice in most establishments
Tribunal	Single member	Judicial and Administrative Members

Source: Author's compilation based on Government of India (2019, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c); PRS Legislative Research (2020); Ministry of Labour and Employment (2025a, 2025b).

8. Comparative Analysis of Earlier Labour Laws and the New Labour Codes

The Labour Codes represent a paradigm shift from fragmented labour regulation towards a unified legal framework. The following comparative analysis highlights major reforms introduced under the new Codes.

8.1 Uniform Definition of Wages

Under the earlier labour laws, different statutes adopted different definitions of "wages," leading to confusion in calculating statutory contributions such as provident fund, gratuity, bonus, and compensation (Commercial Law Publishers (India) Pvt. Ltd., 2025). The Labour Codes establish a single, uniform definition applicable across all four Codes. This harmonisation simplifies compliance, reduces litigation, and ensures consistency in determining statutory benefits.

8.2 Applicability

Several earlier labour legislations applied only to specific scheduled employments, industries, or categories of workers. The Labour Codes significantly broaden applicability by extending coverage to a larger segment of the workforce. For example, the Code on Wages applies minimum wage provisions to all employees, while the OSH Code extends occupational safety standards beyond factories to various commercial establishments meeting prescribed thresholds.

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8.3 Registration (International Labour Organization, 2024a; International Labour Organization, 2026)

Earlier labour laws required separate registrations under different statutes. The Labour Codes introduce electronic registration systems and common registration procedures, thereby reducing duplication and facilitating easier compliance. Establishments operating under multiple labour legislations now experience greater administrative efficiency through integrated registration mechanisms.

8.4 Digital Compliance

The Labour Codes promote digital governance by encouraging electronic maintenance of registers, online submission of returns, digital licensing, and web-based inspections. Electronic compliance enhances transparency, improves accessibility, reduces paperwork, and enables faster regulatory processing compared to traditional manual systems.

8.5 Inspector-cum-Facilitator

The earlier labour administration largely relied upon labour inspectors responsible primarily for enforcement. The Labour Codes replace this approach with the Inspector-cum-Facilitator model, whose role extends beyond inspection to advising employers and employees regarding statutory compliance. Risk-based inspection schemes further improve transparency while reducing unnecessary inspections.

8.6 Gig and Platform Workers

Traditional labour laws largely excluded gig workers and platform workers from statutory protection because of the absence of conventional employer-employee relationships (International Labour Organization, 2022). The Code on Social Security recognises these categories for the first time and empowers governments to frame welfare schemes relating to health insurance, maternity benefits, disability benefits, life insurance, old-age protection, skill development, and social security funding. This represents one of the most progressive features of the Labour Codes.

8.7 Contract Labour

The OSH Code rationalises the regulation of contract labour by introducing integrated licensing systems and permitting common licences applicable across multiple establishments or states under prescribed conditions. It also places greater responsibility on principal employers for ensuring welfare facilities for contract labour while strengthening safeguards against exploitation.

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8.8 Fixed-Term Employment

The Industrial Relations Code formally recognises fixed-term employment. Fixed-term employees are entitled to wages, allowances, working conditions, and statutory benefits equivalent to permanent employees performing similar work. They are also eligible for gratuity under prescribed conditions even without completing the traditional five-year qualifying period, thereby enhancing labour flexibility while protecting workers' interests. (OECD, 2024; World Bank, 2024)

8.9 Working Hours

The OSH Code consolidates provisions governing working hours, overtime, weekly holidays, leave, and rest intervals across multiple earlier legislations. It prescribes maximum daily and weekly working hours while requiring employee consent for overtime work. Uniform standards promote consistency across industries and improve regulatory clarity.

8.10 Women's Employment

A notable reform under the OSH Code concerns the employment of women during night shifts. Unlike earlier restrictions under the Factories Act, the Code permits women to work between 7:00 p.m. and 6:00 a.m., subject to their consent and adequate safeguards relating to safety, transportation, working hours, and welfare measures. This provision reflects changing workforce participation patterns while emphasising workplace safety.

8.11 Industrial Relations

The Industrial Relations Code introduces several institutional reforms aimed at strengthening collective bargaining and dispute resolution. These include mandatory Grievance Redressal Committees, recognition of negotiating unions, constitution of negotiating councils where multiple trade unions exist, revised strike and lockout procedures, and simplified industrial dispute resolution mechanisms. These reforms seek to reduce industrial conflict while promoting structured employer-worker dialogue.

Table 8. Occupational Safety Reforms

Earlier Laws	**OSH Code**
Separate Acts	Unified Code
Different safety standards	Uniform standards
Limited worker rights	Right to report unsafe conditions
No appointment letter requirement	Appointment letters mandatory

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Earlier Laws	OSH Code
Separate licences	Common licence
Women restricted in night shifts	Permitted with safeguards
Inspector	Inspector-cum-Facilitator

Source: Author's compilation based on Government of India (2019, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c); Ministry of Labour and Employment (2025a); OECD (2024, 2026).

8.12 Standing Orders

The threshold for mandatory standing orders has been revised to establishments employing 300 or more workers (Government of India, 2020b). Employers may either adopt the Model Standing Orders issued by the Government or prepare customised standing orders for certification. Electronic submission, deemed certification, and simplified amendment procedures significantly improve administrative efficiency.

8.13 Social Security Reforms

Perhaps the most transformative aspect of the Labour Codes is the expansion of social security coverage. The Code on Social Security integrates multiple welfare legislations while extending protection to unorganised workers, gig workers, platform workers, and fixed-term employees. It promotes universal registration, establishes Social Security Boards, introduces digital databases, and enables governments to formulate comprehensive welfare schemes covering health care, maternity benefits, accident insurance, disability support, pensions, and old-age protection. These reforms reflect a shift towards inclusive social protection consistent with the changing nature of employment in India's labour market.

Table 7. Social Security Reforms

Earlier Laws	Social Security Code
Separate welfare laws	Unified Code
No gig worker welfare	Gig worker welfare schemes
No platform worker recognition	Platform workers recognised
Multiple registration procedures	Universal registration
Separate welfare boards	Integrated Social Security Boards

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Earlier Laws	Social Security Code
Limited digital systems	Online registration and database

Source: Author's compilation based on Government of India (2019, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c); International Labour Organization (2024a, 2024b); NITI Aayog (2022).

9. Implications for Employers

The introduction of the Labour Codes has significantly transformed the regulatory landscape for employers in India. By consolidating twenty-nine Central labour laws into four comprehensive Codes, the reforms seek to reduce compliance burdens while encouraging greater operational flexibility. However, they also impose enhanced responsibilities in relation to employee welfare, occupational safety, and statutory compliance.

One of the most significant advantages for employers is the simplification of compliance procedures. The earlier labour law framework required multiple registrations, licences, statutory registers, and periodic returns under different legislations. The Labour Codes replace these fragmented requirements with integrated registration systems, electronic record maintenance, common returns, and web-based compliance mechanisms. This reduces administrative costs, minimises duplication of records, and facilitates easier regulatory compliance, particularly for enterprises operating across multiple states.

The introduction of a uniform definition of "wages" provides greater certainty in calculating statutory contributions relating to provident fund, gratuity, bonus, and other employment benefits. Previously, differing definitions across various labour laws frequently resulted in disputes, litigation, and inconsistent compliance practices. A common definition enhances transparency and simplifies payroll administration.

The Inspector-cum-Facilitator framework also represents a significant shift from the traditional inspection-based approach. Rather than focusing solely on enforcement and prosecution, regulatory authorities are now expected to advise employers regarding statutory compliance and facilitate voluntary adherence to labour standards. Risk-based inspections supported by digital platforms reduce unnecessary physical inspections and improve transparency in enforcement.

The Industrial Relations Code introduces greater flexibility in workforce management through the recognition of fixed-term employment, simplified standing order procedures, and revised thresholds for retrenchment, lay-offs, and closure in specified establishments. These reforms enable organisations to respond more effectively to changing business conditions while maintaining statutory safeguards for workers.

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Despite these advantages, employers also face increased obligations under the Labour Codes. The Occupational Safety, Health and Working Conditions Code expands employer responsibilities by requiring appointment letters for all employees, annual health examinations where prescribed, improved welfare facilities, comprehensive occupational safety measures, reporting of workplace accidents and occupational diseases, and enhanced compliance with health and safety standards. Similarly, the Social Security Code extends welfare obligations to new categories of workers, including gig workers and platform workers, through schemes notified by the appropriate government.

Consequently, while the Labour Codes simplify compliance and improve business efficiency, employers must invest in strengthening human resource management systems, digital infrastructure, occupational safety mechanisms, and employee welfare programmes to ensure full compliance with the new legal framework, a pattern consistent with wider OECD (2024) findings on the compliance costs of labour-market modernisation.

Table 4. Employer Obligations: Before and After the Labour Codes

Earlier Framework	**Labour Codes**
Multiple registrations	Common electronic registration
Separate licences	Integrated licensing
Numerous inspections	Risk-based inspections
Manual compliance	Online compliance portal
Different wage calculations	Uniform wage definition
Separate records	Consolidated registers
Limited safety obligations	Comprehensive occupational safety responsibilities
Different authorities	Integrated regulatory framework

Source: Author's compilation based on Government of India (2020b); PRS Legislative Research (2020); Ministry of Labour and Employment (2025a).

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Table 3. Major Changes Introduced under the Labour Codes

Parameter	Earlier Labour Laws	Labour Codes
Number of Central Acts	29	4
Definition of Wages	Different under different Acts	Uniform definition across Codes
Registration	Separate registration under different Acts	Single electronic registration
Returns	Multiple returns	Unified electronic returns
Registers	Numerous statutory registers	Common electronic registers
Licensing	Multiple licences	Integrated licensing system
Inspection	Traditional Labour Inspector	Inspector-cum-Facilitator
Compliance	Manual	Digital and online
Social Security	Organised sector focused	Extended to gig, platform and unorganised workers

Source: Author's compilation based on Government of India (2020a); International Labour Organization (2024a, 2025, 2026); NITI Aayog (2022).

10. Implications for Employees

The Labour Codes seek to balance labour market flexibility with enhanced worker protection by extending statutory rights and welfare measures to a broader segment of the workforce. The reforms introduce several provisions that improve legal certainty, strengthen occupational safety, and expand social security coverage.

A major benefit for employees is the extension of minimum wage protection through the Code on Wages, 2019 (Government of India, 2019). Unlike the previous legal framework, which restricted minimum wages primarily to scheduled employments, the Code empowers governments to prescribe minimum wages applicable across all sectors. The introduction of floor wages by the Central Government also seeks to reduce regional disparities in wage determination while ensuring a minimum standard of living for workers.

The uniform definition of wages promotes greater transparency in determining statutory benefits such as provident fund contributions, gratuity, bonus, maternity benefits, and

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employee compensation. Workers are less likely to experience disputes regarding wage calculations arising from multiple legal definitions under earlier legislation.

The Social Security Code substantially broadens the scope of labour welfare by recognising unorganised workers, gig workers, and platform workers within the social security framework. Although detailed schemes are subject to government notification, the legislative recognition of these categories reflects an important step towards inclusive social protection in an evolving labour market. Workers employed through digital platforms may eventually gain access to health insurance, accident benefits, maternity benefits, pensions, disability support, and other welfare measures.

The Occupational Safety, Health and Working Conditions Code strengthens workers' rights by establishing higher occupational safety standards, requiring employers to provide safer workplaces, welfare facilities, appointment letters, and periodic health examinations. Employees are also granted the right to obtain information regarding workplace safety and report hazardous working conditions without fear of retaliation.

The Industrial Relations Code strengthens institutional mechanisms for dispute resolution by mandating Grievance Redressal Committees in eligible establishments and recognising negotiating unions or negotiating councils for collective bargaining. These provisions encourage constructive dialogue between employers and employees while reducing industrial disputes.

Nevertheless, certain provisions have generated concerns among labour organisations (International Labour Organization, 2022). Increased thresholds relating to standing orders and prior government permission for retrenchment and closure may reduce employment security in some establishments. Trade unions have also expressed reservations regarding restrictions on strikes and increased managerial flexibility. Thus, while the Labour Codes improve several aspects of worker welfare, their practical impact will depend upon effective implementation, judicial interpretation, and balanced enforcement by regulatory authorities.

Table 5. Employee Rights under the Labour Codes

Earlier Position	**Labour Codes**
Limited coverage of minimum wages	Universal wage protection
Social security largely confined to organised workers	Coverage extended to gig, platform and unorganised workers
No statutory recognition of gig workers	Gig workers recognised

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Earlier Position	Labour Codes
Limited protection for fixed-term employees	Equal benefits with permanent employees
Multiple grievance mechanisms	Unified grievance framework
Limited safety rights	Enhanced occupational safety rights
No right to safety information	Right to receive workplace safety information

Source: Author's compilation based on Government of India (2019, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c); Ministry of Labour and Employment (2025a, 2025b); World Bank (2024, 2025, 2026).

11. Challenges in Implementation

Although the Labour Codes constitute a landmark legislative reform, their successful implementation presents several legal, administrative, and institutional challenges.

One major challenge relates to the formulation and notification of detailed rules by both the Central and State Governments. Since labour falls under the Concurrent List of the Constitution, effective implementation requires substantial coordination between different levels of government. Variations in state rules may create inconsistencies that undermine the objective of uniform labour regulation, a delay repeatedly flagged in legislative tracking of the Codes (PRS Legislative Research, 2020). (Ministry of Labour and Employment, 2025a; PRS Legislative Research, 2026)

The transition from the previous legal framework to the new Codes also requires considerable administrative preparedness. Labour departments, employers, employees, trade unions, and professional practitioners must familiarise themselves with the revised provisions, compliance requirements, and digital governance systems. Capacity building, awareness programmes, and institutional training therefore become essential for successful implementation.

Digital compliance mechanisms, although beneficial in the long term, may create initial challenges for small and medium enterprises, particularly those operating in rural and semi-urban areas with limited technological infrastructure (World Bank, 2023). Establishments may need to invest in digital record management systems, electronic payroll software, and online compliance platforms to meet statutory obligations. (World Bank, 2025)

The extension of social security to gig workers, platform workers, and unorganised workers also presents practical challenges relating to worker identification, registration, contribution mechanisms, financing, and benefit delivery. Since employment relationships in the gig economy differ substantially from traditional employment contracts, determining employer

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liability and funding responsibilities may require further regulatory clarification. (NITI Aayog, 2022; International Labour Organization, 2024a)

Industrial relations may also witness transitional uncertainties. The implementation of negotiating unions, Grievance Redressal Committees, revised strike provisions, and standing orders requires organisational restructuring in many establishments. Trade unions have raised concerns regarding certain provisions perceived as reducing collective bargaining strength and employment security.

Finally, effective enforcement remains a significant challenge. Although the Inspector-cum-Facilitator model emphasises advisory functions, successful implementation depends upon adequate staffing, technological capability, transparent inspection systems, and consistent interpretation of statutory provisions. Without strong institutional capacity, the objectives of simplified compliance and improved worker protection may not be fully realised.

12. Critical Evaluation

The Labour Codes represent one of the most ambitious labour law reforms undertaken in independent India. They seek to modernise labour regulation by balancing economic growth, ease of doing business, and labour welfare within a unified legislative framework. Nevertheless, the reforms have generated both appreciation and criticism among policymakers, employers, trade unions, labour economists, and legal scholars.

From a regulatory perspective, the consolidation of twenty-nine Central labour laws into four integrated Codes significantly enhances legislative coherence. Uniform definitions, simplified compliance procedures, electronic governance, and common registration systems reduce legal ambiguity and administrative complexity (Taxmann's Editorial Board, 2026). The recognition of gig workers, platform workers, and fixed-term employees reflects the evolving nature of employment relationships in the twenty-first century.

The emphasis on digital governance, web-based inspections, and Inspector-cum-Facilitator mechanisms also promotes transparency and accountability while reducing opportunities for discretionary enforcement. These reforms align India's labour administration with international trends emphasising regulatory simplification and technology-enabled governance.

However, critics argue that certain provisions may prioritise labour market flexibility over employment security (Kharbanda & Kharbanda, 2026). Increased thresholds relating to standing orders and prior permission for retrenchment may reduce procedural safeguards previously available to workers in medium-sized establishments. Similarly, expanded managerial discretion regarding workforce restructuring has generated concerns among labour unions regarding job security.

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Another important concern relates to the practical implementation of social security provisions for gig and platform workers. Although the legislative framework recognises these categories, the effectiveness of welfare schemes depends upon detailed subordinate legislation, funding arrangements, registration mechanisms, and coordination among governments, digital platforms, and employers.

The Labour Codes also raise broader policy questions concerning the balance between flexibility and protection in labour markets. While excessive regulation may discourage investment and formal employment, insufficient worker protection may increase labour market insecurity and inequality. Consequently, the long-term success of the Labour Codes will depend not merely upon legislative design but also upon balanced implementation, judicial interpretation, stakeholder cooperation, and continuous policy evaluation.

13. Future Outlook

India's labour market is undergoing rapid transformation due to technological advancement, digitalisation, automation, platform-based employment, artificial intelligence, and changing business models. The Labour Codes provide a flexible legislative framework capable of adapting to these emerging developments. (International Labour Organization, 2025; International Labour Organization, 2026)

Future labour policy is likely to focus increasingly on universal social security coverage, digital labour platforms, remote work, hybrid employment models, skill development, and lifelong employability (OECD, 2024). Continuous expansion of digital governance through integrated labour portals, electronic inspections, and online dispute resolution mechanisms may further improve regulatory efficiency. (OECD, 2024; OECD, 2026)

The growing importance of the gig economy will require additional policy interventions relating to contribution mechanisms, occupational safety, social insurance, and collective representation of platform workers. Similarly, increasing workforce participation by women may encourage further reforms relating to workplace safety, flexible work arrangements, childcare facilities, maternity protection, and equal employment opportunities.

Artificial intelligence and automation will also reshape labour markets by creating new forms of employment while reducing demand for certain traditional occupations (United Nations Development Programme, 2023). Consequently, worker reskilling, lifelong learning, vocational training, and social protection will become increasingly important policy priorities. (International Labour Organization, 2026)

From an international perspective, India's Labour Codes align with global trends emphasising labour market flexibility, simplified regulation, digital governance, and inclusive social protection, trends also traced in recent human development and employment outlook reporting (United Nations Development Programme, 2023; OECD, 2024). Continued dialogue among

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governments, employers, employees, trade unions, and civil society will be essential for ensuring that labour reforms remain responsive to changing economic realities while preserving the constitutional commitment to social justice.

14. Conclusion

The consolidation of twenty-nine Central labour legislations into four comprehensive Labour Codes represents a historic milestone in the evolution of labour law in India. The reforms seek to modernise labour regulation by simplifying compliance, harmonising legal definitions, promoting digital governance, strengthening occupational safety, expanding social security, and improving industrial relations within a unified statutory framework.

The Labour Codes demonstrate a conscious attempt to balance the twin objectives of economic efficiency and social welfare. Simplified compliance mechanisms, electronic governance, risk-based inspections, common definitions, and integrated registration systems enhance regulatory efficiency and support the ease of doing business. Simultaneously, expanded social security coverage, improved occupational safety standards, recognition of gig and platform workers, and strengthened grievance redressal mechanisms contribute towards greater worker protection. Nevertheless, the effectiveness of these reforms ultimately depends upon their implementation. Harmonisation of Central and State rules, institutional capacity building, stakeholder awareness, digital infrastructure, and transparent enforcement will determine whether the Labour Codes achieve their intended objectives. Continuous monitoring, periodic legislative review, and constructive engagement among governments, employers, trade unions, and workers will remain essential for ensuring that labour law reforms promote inclusive economic growth while safeguarding workers' dignity, rights, and welfare.

The Labour Codes should therefore be viewed not merely as legislative consolidation but as an evolving framework capable of responding to the dynamic nature of India's labour market. Their long-term success will depend upon balancing industrial competitiveness with the constitutional vision of social justice, equitable employment, and decent work for all (Ministry of Labour and Employment, 2025). (Ministry of Labour and Employment, 2025a; Ministry of Labour and Employment, 2025b)

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