

Editorial of the Day – 24.01.2026**Index**

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1. Right To Dignity– On ASHA And Anganwadi Workers’ Protests (TH)**General Studies 2– Social Justice**

Topic– Welfare schemes for vulnerable sections of the population by the Centre and States and the performance of these schemes; Mechanisms, laws, institutions and Bodies constituted for the protection and betterment of vulnerable sections.

Sub Topic– Issues related to Scheme Workers (ASHA/Anganwadi); Labour Reforms; Centre–State Financial Relations regarding welfare schemes.

Right to Dignity – The Struggle of ASHA and Anganwadi Workers**Introduction**

The persistent protests by Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHA) and Anganwadi workers highlight a critical failure in India's welfare architecture. Despite being the backbone of the nation's public health and nutrition delivery systems (including flagship schemes like ICDS and NHM), these workers are trapped in precarious employment. They are denied fair wages, social security, and legal recognition, signaling a deep erosion of the social contract between the State and its essential workforce.

1. Context and Background of Protests

Current Agitation– Protests, particularly in West Bengal, have intensified with workers demanding a monthly wage of ₹15,000.

Core Grievance– The demand focuses on ending the "honorarium" system and granting permanent employee status.

Paradox of Value– These workers are indispensable for national welfare programs (maternal health, immunization, nutrition) yet remain outside the safety net of formal labor protections.

2. Historical Denial of 'Worker' Status

Origin of Exclusion– Under the Indira Gandhi government, when the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) was launched, Anganwadi staff were deliberately denied formal 'worker' status.

Institutionalization– This precedent allowed the State to bypass standard labor laws. Even as a national union emerged in 1989 due to increasing workloads, the State continued to expand schemes without creating permanent government posts.

Liberalization Era– The classification of these employees as 'scheme workers' during the economic liberalization period further institutionalized their job insecurity.

3. Judicial and Policy Exclusion

The 'Ameerbi' Ruling (1996)– The tribunal ruling in *State of Karnataka vs. Ameerbi* explicitly excluded Anganwadi workers from being treated as government employees/civil servants.

Expansion Without Protection– In 2004, the "Right to Food" was expanded, heavily increasing the workload and dependence on these workers. The ASHA programme (mid-2000s) adopted the same exploitative model, branding workers as "activists" or "volunteers" to avoid paying statutory wages.

4. Administrative Apathy and Budgetary Cuts

Ignored Recommendations– The 45th Indian Labour Conference (2010s) recommended

1. Job regularisation.
2. Minimum wages.
3. Pension and gratuity coverage.

Bipartisan Failure– Both UPA and NDA governments failed to implement these recommendations.

Fiscal Assault (2015)– The Union government slashed the ICDS budget in 2015, triggering recurring financial distress and protests among workers.

5. Centre–State Fiscal Imbalance

The 2018 Freeze– The Central government froze its contribution to the honoraria of ASHA and Anganwadi workers in 2018.

Burden Shift– This forced State governments to bear the brunt of wage demands.

Regional Inequality

Wealthier States (or those with strong unions) could supplement wages from their own funds.

Fiscally Weaker States lagged behind, leading to significant wage disparities for the same work across different regions.

6. Erosion of the Social Contract

Parallel to Gig Economy– The situation of scheme workers mirrors the weak protections for gig workers under new labour codes.

Shift in Priorities– State policy has shifted towards "business metrics" and "fiscal headroom" at the cost of labor welfare.

Exploitative Nature– The continued denial of rightful status is described as "knowingly exploitative," given the State's reliance on their labor for health indices.

7. Way Forward– Restoring Dignity

Legal Reclassification– The Centre must reclassify these "volunteers" as statutory employees under the Code on Social Security.

Statutory Guarantees– This change must ensure

1. Minimum Wages.
2. Pension Coverage.
3. Social Security benefits (PF, ESI).

Fiscal Bridging– Both Centre and States must collaborate to bridge funding gaps and ensure "Equal Pay for Equal Work" across all regions.

Conclusion

The treatment of ASHA and Anganwadi workers as "volunteers" is a convenient legal fiction that allows the State to underpay its most essential workforce. To uphold the constitutional values of dignity and equity, the government must move beyond "honorariums" and institutionalize their rights through the Code on Social Security. Recognizing them as workers is not just an economic necessity but a moral imperative for a just republic.

Source– <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/editorial/right-to-dignity-on-asha-and-anganwadi-workers-protests/article70542869.ece>

2. The Familiar World Order Will Not Return. What India and EU Can Build (IE)

General Studies 1– Indian Society

Topic– Bilateral, regional and global groupings and agreements involving India and/or affecting India's interests.

Sub Topic– India-EU Relations; Effect of policies and politics of developed and developing countries on India's interests; Global Groupings (G20, TTC).

India–EU Relations in a Transforming World Order

Introduction

The strategic importance of India–EU relations was underscored by the presence of the European Council President and the European Commission President as chief guests at India's Republic Day and the concurrent EU–India Summit. This high-level engagement occurs against the backdrop of a shifting global order, characterized by geopolitical uncertainty, economic fragmentation, and the declining effectiveness of traditional multilateral institutions.

1. Nature of the Changing World Order

Weakening Transatlantic Framework- The traditional security and trade architecture led by the US is facing strain, creating a vacuum in global leadership.

Impact of Conflict- The Russia-Ukraine war has fundamentally altered the European security architecture and disrupted energy supply chains, forcing Europe to look for new partners.

China-Centric Vulnerabilities- There is a growing realization of the strategic risks associated with economic and technological over-dependence on China.

Decline of Multilateralism- Institutions like the WTO are facing paralysis, signaling a decline in rule-based multilateralism.

Rise of Multipolarity- The world is moving towards strategic autonomy and selective partnerships rather than rigid blocs.

2. Strategic Rationale for the Partnership

A. European Union's Perspective

Strategic Sovereignty- The EU aims to build capacity in defence, digital technologies, and critical supply chains to reduce reliance on external powers.

De-risking- A specific desire to reduce over-dependence on the US (for security) and China (for supply chains).

Indo-Pacific Pivot- The EU is actively searching for stable, democratic partners with large markets in the Indo-Pacific region, with India being a prime candidate.

B. India's Perspective

Foreign Policy Recalibration- India is adjusting its policy to navigate current geopolitical turbulence (e.g., balancing relations between the West and Russia).

Economic Transformation- India views external partnerships as essential tools to support domestic economic growth and technological modernization.

Strategic Autonomy- India seeks to maintain its independence while deepening ties, avoiding formal alliance entanglements.

3. Major Pillars of Cooperation

I. Trade and Economic Engagement

FTA Revival- Negotiations for the India-EU Free Trade Agreement (FTA) were revived in 2021 after a decade-long hiatus.

Current Status- The EU is already one of India's top trading partners and a leading source of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI).

Expected Benefits of FTA

- a. **Market Access-** Expanded access for Indian goods and services in Europe.
- b. **Investment-** Attraction of high-quality technology and capital.
- c. **Value Chains-** Stronger integration of India into global value chains (GVCs).
- d. **Resilience-** Improved supply-chain resilience against geopolitical shocks.

Connectivity- Collaboration on strategic connectivity projects like the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC).

II. Technology, Innovation, and Digital Cooperation

Strategic Importance- Technology is now viewed as a determinant of geopolitical influence.

Shared Concerns- Both sides worry about the concentration of technological power (Big Tech monopolies) and the ethical implications of digital tools.

Institutional Mechanism- The establishment of the EU-India Trade and Technology Council (TTC) to steer cooperation.

Priority Sectors

1. Artificial Intelligence (AI).
2. Semiconductor manufacturing.
3. Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI).
4. Research and Innovation ecosystems.

Mobility– Expansion of programs to facilitate the movement of students, researchers, and scientists.

III. Defence and Security Cooperation

Emerging Partnership– Europe is becoming a key supplier for India's access to advanced defence platforms.

Strategic Alignment

1. EU– Needs defence modernization and rearmament.
2. India– Focuses on Atmanirbhar Bharat (self-reliance) and defence indigenisation.

Key Areas

1. Maritime security and stability in the Indo-Pacific.
2. Cybersecurity and Space governance.
3. Joint Defence manufacturing and R&D.

Counter-Terrorism– Continued cooperation on intelligence sharing and capacity building.

IV. Role of Individual European States

France– A long-standing strategic partner in defence (Rafale, Scorpene), nuclear energy, and space.

Germany– A major economic engine with increasing engagement in defence.

Italy & Spain– Rising importance in trade and industrial collaboration.

Nordic Countries– Leaders in sustainability, green technologies, and innovation.

V. Cooperation in Global Governance

Rules-Based Order– A shared commitment to upholding international law.

Institutional Reform– Joint advocacy for reforming the UN Security Council, global financial institutions, and trade bodies.

Global Issues

- a. **Climate Change**– Commitment to the Paris Agreement.
- b. **Development**– Sustainable development initiatives in the Global South.
- c. **Financing**– Infrastructure financing and development partnerships.

4. Key Challenges in the Partnership

Russia-Ukraine Conflict– Divergent voting patterns and positions (India's neutrality vs. EU's active opposition).

Geopolitical Balancing– India's continued relations with Russia vs. the EU's complex engagement with China.

Values Gap– Occasional friction regarding political values and human rights discourse.

Economic Barriers– Regulatory hurdles and market-access issues (e.g., EU's carbon tax/CBAM).

Perception– Influence of negative public narratives and perception gaps between the two regions.

5. Way Forward

FTA Conclusion– Prioritize the early conclusion of a balanced, forward-looking Free Trade Agreement.

Deepening Ties– Strengthen technology and defence industrial cooperation to move beyond buyer-seller relationships.

People-to-People– enhance academic exchanges and tourism to build cultural understanding.

Multilateral Coordination– Align positions in global forums to advocate for shared interests.

Pragmatism– Focus on shared interests rather than getting bogged down by ideological rigidity.

Conclusion

The old-world order defined by past alliances is fading. India and the EU must leverage this global turbulence as a strategic opportunity. By building a partnership anchored in democracy, strategic autonomy, and economic resilience, they can act as stabilizing forces and contribute meaningfully to shaping an inclusive, multipolar global order.

Source– <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/the-familiar-world-order-will-not-return-what-india-and-eu-can-build-10491525/>