"When the conscious mind expands to embrace deeper levels of thinking, the thought wave becomes more powerful and results in added energy and intelligence." -Maharishi Mahesh Yogi

AYODHYA: A RISING LIGHT OF FAITH

Ayodhya today stands as a radiant symbol of devotion, unity, and spiritual renewal. The heartfelt emotions surrounding the sacred city reflect a nation rediscovering its roots with pride and serenity. In this atmosphere of divine joy, even the idea of "falghosting" transforms into a reminder of how deeply people wish to be included in the collective celebration of faith.

For millions of devotees, Ayodhya represents the timeless grace of Maryada Purushottam Shri Ram, whose life inspires righteousness, compassion, and unwavering truth. The renewed focus on Ayodhya has awakened a profound sense of inner peace and cultural confidence across the nation. People from all walks of life feel connected through shared devotion, and this connection is strengthening the threads of unity.

Those who express longing to be part of the Ayodhya dialogue are guided by the same love and reverence. Their desire reflects the inclusive spirit of Ram Bhakti, where every prayer, every emotion, and every devotee holds a sacred place. Lord Ram's teachings remind us that every voice carries value, and every heart seeking harmony deserves to be embraced.

Ayodhya's divine resurgence is also bringing people together in kindness. Communities are celebrating with mutual respect, families are reconnecting over traditions, and individuals are finding renewed strength in spiritual reflection. The positive energy flowing from the city is touching lives far beyond its boundaries.

This moment is not just about a place; it is about a spiritual awakening that uplifts the entire nation. Ayodhya's message today is one of hope, purity, and togetherness. As the light of Ram's ideals shines brighter, it encourages all to walk the path of truth, love, and unity.

Ayodhya stands as a beacon of blessings-reminding us that when hearts unite in devotion, every journey becomes meaningful, peaceful, and beautifully divine.

India's Labour Codes: Towards a Coherent and Modern Regulatory Framework

■ **MS. VIDHYA SOUNDARARAJAN**

The Second National Commission on Labour (2002) had highlighted how India's maze of labour laws had become overly complex and fragmented. Acting on its recommendations, last week, the government notified four major labour codes on Wages (2019), Industrial Relations (2020), Social Security (2020), and Occupational Safety, Health and Working Conditions (OSHW) (2020), effectively merging 29 older laws into a more coherent framework. This is a welcome step: long overdue and among the most awaited reforms in recent years. By simplifying definitions, enabling digital compliance, and streamlining registration and inspections, the new codes cut red tape, reduce legal uncertainty, and make it easier to do business, especially for the manufacturing and services sector.

The code on Wages marks a major shift by introducing a statutory national floor wage. Earlier, the wage floor served only as a guideline for states and was not legally binding. The code also extends minimum wage coverage to all sectors, replacing the earlier system that applied only to a list of scheduled employments. Under the old framework, several occupations such as private security, courier and care services were often left out of individual state schedules. By making coverage universal and establishing a binding floor wage, the reform strengthens income security for workers while providing greater predictability in labour costs for employers, supporting both fairer industrial relations and more informed business planning.

The Social Security code brings together nine earlier laws and, for the first time, extends coverage to unorganised, gig, and platform workers. It also includes fixed-term employees, who are now entitled to pro-rata gratuity and benefits on par with permanent staff. By recognising non-traditional forms of work, like gig and platform work, the code reflects the changing realities of India's labour market. These changes are especially significant, since research consistently finds that access to social security improves worker welfare while simultaneously increasing productivity, reducing absenteeism, and improving retention. Firms that embrace these standards can also gain reputational advantages and align more easily with global value chains that prioritise Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) goals.

The OSHW Code significantly expands the scope of workplace welfare and protection. It mandates annual health check-ups (for employees above 40 years of age) and welfare facilities such as canteens, restrooms, first-aid centres, and crèches, extending these requirements to a wider range of establishments. These provisions mark a clear improvement over earlier laws like the Factories Act, which were unevenly enforced and applied mainly to factories. In parallel, the code introduces greater flexibility for employers. Draft provisions allow state governments to set limits on permissible overtime hours, subject to worker consent. Several states have since raised the quarterly overtime cap from 75 hours to as high as 125 or 144 hours, while requiring double wages for overtime work. Admittedly, effective enforcement and ensuring that consent remains voluntary are crucial for these provisions to be meaningful in practice. Still, when implemented alongside strong labour protections, such measures can create a win-win: offering higher income potential for workers and greater operational flexibility for firms.

The Industrial Relations code brings greater flexibility to workforce management by raising the threshold for prior government approval for retrenchment and closure from 100 to 300 workers. This allows firms to adapt more easily to changing market conditions while retaining essential worker protections. In the long run, such flexibility can encourage formal job creation, as firms are less likely to avoid hiring or stay below legal limits. By lowering these barriers, as supported by many studies, the code supports a shift toward formal employment, giving workers better access to regulated working conditions, social security, and job stability, while helping businesses grow more efficiently.

The shift from the old "inspector-raj" system to an "Inspector-cum-Facilitator" model marks a move toward cooperative, tech-driven compliance. Risk-based, digital inspections reduce arbitrariness and bring India's labour framework closer to global standards. Industry has welcomed the change, citing less paperwork, fewer overlaps, and reduced human interface. With unified portals like Shram Suvidha, compliance is now simpler and more transparent. While some worry about weaker enforcement, inspections haven't been abolished-just made more targeted, less intrusive, and more transparent, improving both efficiency and accountability.

Finally, the formal recognition of non-standard forms of employment signals a forward-looking orientation. While gig and platform workers do not yet enjoy full employee status and hence lack entitlements such as collective bargaining or minimum wage guarantees, their inclusion in the social security framework represents an important first step toward more inclusive labour regulation.

All in all, the new labour codes mark a major step toward bringing India's workplace laws in tune with today's economy. They aim to strike a balance: protecting workers while making it easier for businesses to grow and hire formally. The real test, however, lies in how smoothly and consistently these reforms are rolled out across states. If implemented well, they could make compliance simpler, improve working conditions, and boost India's competitiveness. Taken together, these changes move India closer to its goal of building a more resilient, fair, and inclusive economy.

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The Moon River: People's Story of Chenab

■ **MS MANU KOTWAL**

Chenab, which translates as the Moon River, is the largest of the five tributaries of the River Indus. It flows for about 974 kilometers from the High Himalayas of Lahaul to the forests of Jammu and Kashmir and onto the plains of Pakistan. Its main tributaries in India include Miyar, Marusudhar, and Tawi. In the vast plains of Punjab in Pakistan, it is met by Jhelum, Ravi, and Sutlej to form the mighty Panjnad before it meets the Indus. Its catchment, spread across 67,430 km2, is shared between the two countries.

Chenab is Chandrabhaga (Crescent Moon) in its headwaters. It was the River Asikni in Rigveda and the Acesines for the ancient Greeks. From sparse mountain settlements of Lahaul to the bustling urban centers of Sialkot, more than 10 million people live and prosper along the Chenab. Hydropower projects, both operational and under construction on the river, have an installed capacity of more than 5000 MW (Central Electricity Authority 2024), and its canals irrigate hundreds of thousands of acres in Pakistan and India (Shakir et al).

Even as the river supports human settlements, agriculture, hydropower, and wildlife, it is facing stark impacts of climate change, damming, pollution, encroachments, ever-increasing abstractions, and catastrophic floods.

The Indus Water Treaty (1960) classifies Chenab as a 'Western River' and states that "India shall be under an obligation to let flow all the waters of the Western Rivers." Today, Chenab has been dammed several times over for hydropower in the Indian Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir and for irrigation in Pakistan. Its last free-flowing stretch is in Himachal Pradesh, but a cascade of hydropower dams is planned here too.

As squabbles over water-sharing darken in the Indus Basin and around Chenab, it is easy to forget that Chenab has always been the river of love and union. It has been bringing together faiths, languages, arts, trade routes, humans, and non-humans throughout its basin. Its origin is a 'Sacred mandala' in Buddhist texts and a meeting place of lovers in Hindu lore. Its fish sanctuaries protect and celebrate endangered fish. Shrines along its banks welcome both Hindus and Muslims. Late Punjabi poet Mohan Singh, who wanted his ashes spread across the Chenab once wrote,

Ganga BanaweDevteTe Jamuna Deviyan,
Ashiq Magar Bana Sake Paani Chenab Da

Ganga makes Gods, Yamuna makes goddesses,

But it takes the waters of Chenab to make a Lover.

The river is a pivotal character in the abiding love stories of the subcontinent, right from its origin to its confluence with Indus. Couples like Bhonka Soni, Heer Ranjha, Sohni Mahiwal, and Mirza Sahiban found home on the banks of Chenab. The headwaters of the river are rich in the stories of shepherds, their cattle, sheep, and loyal dogs, while the middle reaches worship sacred fish. The plains in Punjab sing of the buffalo herders and tell the story of the dolphins. Chenab is not just a channel of flowing water to be harnessed for irrigation and hydropower but a part of the rich, syncretic biocultural heritage of South Asia. Between the rhetorical statements of political leaders and conflict-driven media narratives, stories of the people along the Chenab have been overshadowed. However, these inspiring, complex, and sometimes heartbreaking stories provide a fuller, richer picture of the basin.

Climate Change and the Headwaters of Chenab

Rivers Chandra and Bhaga meet to form Chandrabhaga, as River Chenab is known in its headwaters, at the sacred confluence in village Tandi of Himachal Pradesh. The rivers bring together waters from the Greater Himalayas, Zanskar Himalayas, and Pir Panjal Ranges. While their origins are less than a mile from each other, the rivers circumambulate the Baralachala peak (4950 masl) in opposite directions to meet at Tandi. This epic journey is immortalized in several folktales and songs of the region.

Glaciers feeding the headwaters of Chenab are receding, like most glaciers in the Himalayas. The region has witnessed warming of more than 1.14° C in the past 60 years (Das et al), and in the last 25 years, the area of glaciers in the headwaters has decreased by 23 sq kms (Vatsal et al). Studies estimate that the basin is likely to retain only 50%-52% of the area of glaciers by the end of the century in the changing climate (Tawde et al).

Bara Shigri, the largest glacier in Himachal Pradesh, which feeds River Chandra, is receding at an alarming rate and now has more than 60 glacial lakes growing on its surface (Prakash et al). Mulkila group of glaciers which feed River Bhaga have reduced in area and their rate of deglaciation has increased significantly compared to the previous decades. Ghepan Gath glacier overlooking River Chandra upstream the shrine of GhyepanDevta, a syncretic protector of Lahaul valley has developed a lake that has increased by 178% in the last 30 years. Several glacial lakes in the basin are at the risk of GLOFs (Sattar et al).

Flash floods are repeating, taking away precious valley soils, crops, roads, and bridges with them. Villages like Lindur are cracking and subsiding as the underlying glacier melts. Water supply has become increasingly erratic, and the centuries-old dependence on glacial springs is shaken.

Climate change and its effects are being felt strongly in this region where sparse communities practice organic farming, live a life of hardship, and have an extremely low carbon footprint.

Hydropower Projects on Chenab

More than 39 large hydropower projects are commissioned, under construction, or in the planning stage in the Chenab Basin of India (Cumulative Impact Assessment of Chenab Basin Projects, Ministry of Environment and Forests, Government of India). If all the projects are constructed, less than 10% of the river will flow free (SANDRP 2013). Local communities in most places have been up in arms against these projects.

Chenab basin in Indian Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir is dammed heavily with completed and under-construction projects including 900 MW Baglihar, 690 MW Salal, 1000 MW Dul Hasti, 390 MW Dul Hasti, 850 MW Ratle, 540 MW Kwar, and 624 MW Kiru Hydropower Projects (cea.nic.in).

In Pakistan, Chenab is highly engineered with headworks and water diversions including Marala Headworks, Khanqi Headworks, Qadirabad Headworks and the Trimmu Barrage where River Jhelum meets the Chenab (Ali et al).

The last free-flowing frontier of Chenab remains in the headwaters in Himachal Pradesh, India. Here too, 16 large Hydropower dams are planned in the Lahaul district including 300 MW Gyspa Dam (sandrp 2013).

Agriculture in Chenab Basin

Agriculture is the primary occupation of communities in the headwaters of Chenab. Farmers of Lahaul and Spiti have one of the highest per capita incomes in the state of Himachal. The cropping profile of Lahaul valley is changing from barley and potatoes to vegetables like lettuce, peas, cauliflower, broccoli, and kale. Apples in the Lahaul valley ripen late in the season and are supposed to be remarkably sweet.

Agriculture is lucrative, but water is a limiting factor. As glacial melt decreases and spring yields go down, newer techniques like Lift Irrigation Schemes, Siphon Irrigation, Sprinkler Irrigation are emerging. Traditional dug-out canals called Kuhls fall in disrepair as the Irrigation and Public Health Department places PVC pipes inside earthen canals for increasing irrigation efficiency. Flash floods, mudslips, and landslides have washed away more than 100 acres of cropland in the Chandrabhaga basin.

In the downstream Jammu, in addition to maize, wheat, and jowar, red kidney beans (Rajmah) are grown over mountain slopes and terraces. They are rain-fed or irrigated by kuhls.

Mountain slopes of the Paddar region in Jammu are irrigated by dug-out canals and are rain-fed. Traditional crops like Amaranthus, corn, and Bajarbhang or Himalayan Quinoa are grown in this region. Personal vegetable gardens are ubiquitous throughout the Himalayas.

Further downstream, Akhnoor plains and Shivalik region is known as the 'Kandi' region with sandy soils. Parts of this region are irrigated by the waters of Chenab through the Ranbir Canal, built in the late 19th Century. Main crops here include wheat, maize, and sugarcane. Marigold flowers are grown in abundance during the October-November festival season.

Groundwater in Chenab Basin

India is the largest groundwater user in the world and a majority of drinking and irrigation supply depends on groundwater. While the same holds true for Chenab Basin, the way groundwater is used here, especially in the hills, is different than the rest of the country.

Unlike the dependence on dug wells or tubewells in India and Pakistan, groundwater in the hilly regions of Chenab is harvested from mountain springs or unique harvesting structures. Groundwater comes from rainwater or glacial melt which infiltrates fractures of rocks like granite, phyllite, schist, and slate and emerges as springs, or in the form of seepage collected in ancient water harvesting structures called Bawlis or Nauns. Springs and water sources are also called as 'Nags' (serpent gods). Rate of infiltration is very low in the mountainous region and yet majority of drinking water or irrigation schemes depend on groundwater.

Baolis are small stepwells constructed to collect trickling spring water. Duggar region in Jammu is spectacularly rich in intricately carved Baolis dating back to a thousand years. Most are in a state of disrepair and many have gone dry because of unplanned development in the upstream including roads, dumping of garbage, blasting etc. Declining groundwater levels have serious implications for drinking water and irrigation security.

Plateaus like Kishtwar depend exceedingly on springs. In addition, the Central Ground Water Board estimates that 50% of the shortfall in Kishtwar's water supply (8 hundred thousand gallon/day) can be fulfilled by tapping springs (CGWB 2016-17). However, groundwater contamination with fluoride, iron, and pesticides is a threat here.

Nauns are pavilions carved in stone with spouts that channel springs into the villages spread across the mountains of Lahaul, Pangi, and Paddar region. Their documented history goes back to more than a thousand years. Even today, villages like Pandel and Tunkhel in Paddar valley depend entirely on Nauns for drinking water.

Deforestation, change in land use pattern, intense grazing, and climate change has affected the discharge and water quality of springs across Chenab Basin.

Groundwater use in the basin is not only utilitarian. The sources have evocative names, are surrounded with stories, songs, and lore and are worshipped with evocative traditions in the valleys.

Pehad Baba Fish Sanctuary

This syncretic shrine on the banks of River Tawi flowing through the Shivalik hills is a sanctuary to Mahseer fish, which are dwindling in the wild. Mahseer fish need clear, flowing water with high dissolved oxygen, deep river pools, and good river connectivity. A population of a Mahseer in a river stretch indicates a healthy river.

Tawi river meanders here forming a deep pool called 'Davar' in Dogri language which holds water even in periods of drought. This pool provides a habitat for a sizable population of Mahseer fish. Devotees from diverse religions consider the fish as "devta" or the deity itself. They are fed with flour balls and not hunted.

Pehad Baba or Bhed Baba Shrine and Fish Sanctuary remains one of the important in-situ conservation sites of Mahseer fish in Chenab Basin. There are a few more Pehad Baba shrines in the Tawi Basin which protect the Mahseer.

Community Fish Sanctuaries spread across India are the last bastions for fish species like Mahseer which have gone locally extinct in Indian rivers due to dams, diversions, pollution, encroachments, mining, invasive fish and overfishing. Fish sanctuaries protect not only brood stock of fish but also provide a habitat for other aquatic species (SANDRP 2023). These sites protect the river from pollution and infrastructure development. Pehad Baba Fish Sanctuary welcomes devotees from various religions and backgrounds.

Unity of Chenab

Poets and storytellers of yore attributed human-like characteristics to each of the five rivers of Punjab: Indus is said to be the river of masters, Ravi of Honor, Sutlej of Seekers, and Jhelum of transgressors.

Chenab, however, is the River of Lovers (Chenab Ashqaan).

True to its nature, the Chenab basin showcases a beautiful syncretism of deities, places of worship, and beliefs. Origin lakes of Rivers Chandra and Bhaga are sacred for Buddhists and Hindus, and the confluence of these rivers at Tandi, where the Chandrabhaga begins is worshipped in both faiths. One can see Buddhist tsatsa and Hindu lamps at the confluence, standing in the memory of the departed. Deities like Gyephan Devta, Trilokinath, and Mrikula Devi are worshipped by all communities.

At Bandarkoot where River Marusudhar meets Chandrabhaga and Chenab gets its monicker, syncretic shrines like Baba Zain ud din Reshi welcome Muslims and Hindus to celebrate the winter harvest festival of Baisakhi.

At Pehad Baba Fish Sanctuary on the Tawi River in Jammu, Hindus, Sikhs, and Muslims pay homage to the river and the fish. On the riverbanks of Akhnoor where Chenab leaves India, a Sikh Gurudwara, Hindu temple and archeological sites and Muslim darghas stand together peeping into the river. The love story of Sohni Mahiwal travels upstream from Pakistan to India, and no one bothers about the religion of the lovers who lost their lives in Chenab.

Chenab has been inherently shared since time immemorial. This unity has resulted in a complex cultural richness of the basin. Unity, sharing, and syncretism is the immutable character of Chenab, the Moon River.

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