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PrepAlpine

Email: info@PrepAlpine.com

Website: PrepAlpine.com

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DAILY CURRENT AFFAIRS DATED 10.02.2026

GS Paper II: Current Affairs

1. Bonded Labour in India: Fifty Years After Abolition

a. Introduction

Bonded labour is one of the most persistent forms of unfreedom in modern India. It refers to a situation in which a person is forced to work to repay a debt or advance, usually under exploitative and indefinite conditions. Although it was legally abolished in 1976, it continues in hidden and informal parts of the economy.

The persistence of bonded labour directly violates constitutional morality. Article 23 prohibits forced labour in all forms, while Article 21 guarantees the right to live with dignity. When individuals are trapped in debt-based servitude, both these guarantees are undermined. Therefore, bonded labour is not merely a labour issue — it is a serious question of human rights and social justice.

b. Understanding Bonded Labour

Bonded labour typically begins when a poor individual or family takes an advance from an employer or contractor to meet urgent needs such as medical expenses, marriage costs, or basic survival. In exchange, they agree to work until the debt is repaid. However, the terms are rarely fair. Wages are suppressed, accounts are manipulated, and additional charges are imposed, making the debt nearly impossible to clear.

Core Features of Bonded Labour

- The initial advance creates a debt trap that ties the worker to a specific employer.
- Wages are extremely low, delayed, or arbitrarily adjusted against the alleged debt.
- Workers are not free to leave the workplace.
- Entire families, including women and children, may be compelled to work.
- In extreme cases, the debt passes to the next generation, creating inter-generational bondage.

Thus, bonded labour is not merely about low wages. It involves restriction of freedom, coercion, and structural vulnerability.

c. Legal and Constitutional Framework

India has a comprehensive legal structure to combat bonded labour. However, the gap lies more in implementation than in legislation.

Structural Causes Behind Persistence

STRUCTURAL PYRAMID OF BONDED LABOUR



i. The Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act, 1976

- Abolished the bonded labour system in all forms.
- Extinguished all bonded debts.
- Declared bonded labourers free from obligation.
- Made it the responsibility of district authorities to identify, release, and rehabilitate victims.
- Criminalised the practice.

ii. Constitutional Safeguards

- Article 23 prohibits trafficking and forced labour.
- Article 21 guarantees the right to live with dignity.
- Article 39 directs the State to protect workers and children from exploitation and prevent economic compulsion.

Together, these provisions establish a strong constitutional foundation against economic coercion.

iii. Rehabilitation Measures

- The revised rehabilitation scheme (2016) provides financial assistance, which may extend up to three lakh rupees in severe cases.
- A release certificate formally recognises the individual as a freed bonded labourer and enables access to benefits.

Despite this robust framework, bonded labour continues in certain sectors, indicating weaknesses in enforcement and governance.

d. Contemporary Presence: Where It Persists

Bonded labour is largely concentrated in the informal economy, where regulation is weak and oversight limited.

Sectors Commonly Affected

- Brick kilns
- Stone quarries
- Jewellery manufacturing units
- Agriculture and plantations
- Small workshops and roadside eateries

Migration and Vulnerability

- Workers often migrate from economically weaker states such as Bihar, Jharkhand, and Odisha to industrialised regions.
- Migrants frequently lack local identity documents.
- Awareness of legal rights is limited.
- Social security benefits are not easily portable across states.

As a result, dependence on contractors increases, and vulnerability to bondage deepens.

The persistence of such practices highlights that the problem is not isolated but rooted in structural factors.

e. Structural Causes Behind Persistence

Bonded labour survives not merely because of individual wrongdoing but due to systemic weaknesses.

i. Poverty and Chronic Indebtedness

- Extreme poverty forces families to accept advance payments.

- Limited access to institutional credit makes informal loans the only option.

ii. Dominance of the Informal Economy

- A large portion of India's workforce lacks formal contracts.
- Small and scattered production units often evade inspection.

iii. Weak Enforcement

- District Vigilance Committees may function irregularly.
- Identification of victims is often reactive rather than preventive.

iv. Lack of Awareness

- Many workers are unaware that bonded labour is illegal.
- In some regions, debt-based labour is socially normalised.

v. Inter-State Coordination Gaps

- Migrant workers fall between jurisdictions.
- Weak coordination between source and destination states hampers rehabilitation.

vi. Social Marginalisation

- Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes are disproportionately affected.
- Historical exclusion intersects with economic vulnerability.

These structural causes show that bonded labour is deeply embedded in broader patterns of inequality and governance deficits.

f. Governance and Human Rights Dimensions

Bonded labour reflects deeper governance failures.

i. Developmental Dimension

- Indicates incomplete inclusive growth.
- Economic expansion has not ensured secure livelihoods for the poorest.

ii. Rights-Based Dimension

- Violates human dignity.
- Undermines constitutional guarantees.
- Contradicts India's commitment to Sustainable Development Goal 8.7, which calls for eradication of forced labour.

Thus, bonded labour lies at the intersection of development, rights, and federal governance.

g. Key Challenges in Eradication

Even with strong laws, practical difficulties persist.

i. Identification Challenges

- Worksites are remote and hidden.
- Victims may fear retaliation.

ii. Low Conviction Rates

- Investigations and prosecutions are often slow.
- Evidence collection is complex.

iii. Delays in Rehabilitation

- Financial assistance may be delayed.
- Delays reduce trust in state intervention.

iv. Data Gaps

- Reliable real-time national data is limited.
- Policy responses become reactive instead of preventive.

These challenges demonstrate that legal abolition alone is insufficient without administrative capacity and social support systems.

h. Way Forward

A sustainable solution requires a multi-dimensional strategy.

i. Strengthening Local Governance

- District Vigilance Committees must conduct regular inspections.
- Community-level monitoring mechanisms should be activated.

ii. Improving Inter-State Coordination

- Stronger coordination between source and destination states.
- Tracking and welfare continuity for migrant workers.

iii. Expanding Social Protection

- Portable social security benefits.
- Health insurance, banking access, and accident coverage.
- Use of digital databases of unorganised workers to ensure portability.

iv. Ensuring Deterrence

- Strict and time-bound prosecution of offenders.
- Accountability mechanisms for negligent officials.

v. Addressing Root Causes

- Convergence of employment schemes and skill development programmes.
- Financial inclusion to reduce dependence on informal credit.
- Awareness campaigns to delegitimise debt-based servitude.

Such a holistic approach links economic empowerment with legal enforcement.

Conclusion

Fifty years after its formal abolition, bonded labour persists not due to absence of law, but because of structural poverty, weak enforcement, and social marginalisation. The challenge is both economic and moral.

Eradicating bonded labour requires more than punitive action. It demands inclusive growth, effective labour governance, migrant protection, social security portability, and community awareness. Only when freedom from exploitation becomes a lived reality for the most vulnerable can the constitutional promise of dignity and justice be truly fulfilled.

GS Paper II: International Relations

2. India–Seychelles Relations and the Colombo Security Conclave

a. Introduction

India and Seychelles share a strong maritime partnership rooted in geography, democratic values, and common security concerns in the Western Indian Ocean Region. Over time, this relationship has evolved from limited defence cooperation into a comprehensive strategic partnership covering maritime security, renewable energy, climate resilience, digital governance, and sustainable development.

A major recent development is the inclusion of Seychelles as a full member of the Colombo Security Conclave. This step reflects India’s effort to institutionalise regional maritime cooperation under its broader Indian Ocean vision, now articulated through the framework of Mutual and Holistic Advancement for Security and Growth Across Regions.



b. Strategic Context: Why Seychelles Matters

i. Geographical Significance

- Seychelles is located in the Western Indian Ocean near major Sea Lanes of Communication (SLOCs).
- Sea Lanes of Communication are the main maritime trade routes through which global trade and energy supplies move.
- A significant portion of India’s trade and energy imports passes through these waters.
- The region faces threats such as piracy, illegal fishing, arms trafficking, and drug smuggling.
- Monitoring such a vast maritime area requires cooperation with island nations like Seychelles.

Thus, Seychelles occupies a strategically sensitive maritime position that directly affects India’s economic and security interests.

ii. Political and Diplomatic Foundations

- Diplomatic relations were established in 1976.
- Regular high-level visits indicate sustained political engagement.

- India has extended lines of credit and grant assistance to support Seychelles' development.
- Cooperation has expanded beyond defence into development and capacity building.

Therefore, Seychelles is not merely a small island state; it is an important strategic partner in India's maritime framework.

c. The Colombo Security Conclave: Structure and Purpose

i. Formation and Growth

- The Colombo Security Conclave was formed in 2011 by India, Sri Lanka, and Maldives as a trilateral security initiative.
- It later expanded to include Mauritius and Bangladesh.
- Seychelles' admission as a full member marks a significant widening of this regional security mechanism.

This expansion reflects a shift from informal coordination to a more structured regional security architecture.

ii. Core Areas of Cooperation

Functional Cooperation

- Maritime security and surveillance
- Counter-piracy operations
- Counter-terrorism coordination
- Cyber security cooperation
- Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR)

Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief refers to coordinated responses during natural disasters and emergencies, which are frequent in the Indian Ocean region.

Through regular meetings, joint exercises, and information-sharing, the Conclave institutionalises practical security cooperation.

Strategic Importance

- It allows India to shape a regional framework rather than depend on extra-regional powers.
- It strengthens India's aspiration to act as a "net security provider" — a country that contributes positively to regional stability.
- It reinforces India's leadership role in the Indian Ocean.

Thus, the Conclave represents India's effort to create a cooperative and rules-based maritime order.

d. Key Areas of India-Seychelles Cooperation

i. Maritime and Defence Cooperation

- Maritime surveillance and patrol support
- Capacity building and training of personnel
- Hydrographic surveys — mapping of sea floors for safe navigation
- Information-sharing mechanisms

A key concept here is Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA), which refers to effective understanding of all activities occurring in the maritime environment. Enhanced MDA helps counter piracy, illegal fishing, and trafficking.

ii. Blue Economy and Ocean Research

- The Blue Economy means sustainable use of ocean resources for economic growth and environmental protection.
- Cooperation includes marine scientific research and ocean observation.
- Focus is on balancing economic use with ecological sustainability.

This area aligns with both countries' interest in long-term ocean resource management.

iii. Climate and Renewable Energy

- Seychelles, as a Small Island Developing State (SIDS), faces severe risks from sea-level rise and extreme weather.
- India supports renewable energy projects and climate resilience initiatives.
- Cooperation aligns with India's broader climate diplomacy and sustainable development commitments.

iv. Digital and Capacity Building Initiatives

- Training programmes in public administration.
- Technical cooperation in digital systems.
- Support for governance modernisation.

Such initiatives deepen long-term institutional partnerships beyond immediate security concerns.

These diverse areas of engagement show that the relationship is multidimensional rather than limited to defence.

e. Strategic Significance for India

i. Securing the Western Indian Ocean

- The Western Indian Ocean is witnessing increasing geopolitical competition.
- Stable partnerships strengthen India's ability to safeguard SLOCs.
- They improve response capacity during emergencies.

ii. Balancing External Influence

- The Indian Ocean has seen growing involvement of extra-regional powers.
- Strong ties with island nations prevent strategic vacuums.
- Regional cooperation strengthens India's influence in its maritime neighbourhood.

iii. Advancing India's Indian Ocean Vision

- India's earlier doctrine of Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) emphasised cooperative security.
- The newer framework — Mutual and Holistic Advancement for Security and Growth Across Regions — expands this to include sustainability, economic growth, and climate solutions.
- Seychelles fits naturally within this expanded maritime vision.

Thus, India-Seychelles ties are part of a broader strategic and doctrinal evolution.

f. Challenges and Emerging Concerns

Despite strong cooperation, certain issues require sustained attention.

i. Geopolitical Competition

- Increasing strategic competition in the Indian Ocean may complicate alignments.
- Smaller states often balance multiple external partners.

ii. Climate Vulnerability

- Rising sea levels threaten territorial integrity and economic stability.
- Climate risks may strain governance and resources.

iii. Maritime Crime

- Illegal fishing
- Drug and arms trafficking
- Piracy threats

These issues highlight that cooperation must be continuous and adaptive.

g. Way Forward

i. Strengthening Maritime Coordination

- Integration of Maritime Domain Awareness systems among Conclave members.
- Regular joint exercises and shared surveillance protocols.

ii. Expanding Blue Economy Cooperation

- Sustainable fisheries management.
- Marine research partnerships.

iii. Climate and Renewable Energy Prioritisation

- Focused adaptation projects.
- Renewable energy expansion support.

iv. Digital Public Infrastructure Support

- Sharing elements of India's digital governance model.
- Capacity-building initiatives for administrative efficiency.

Institutionalising the Colombo Security Conclave through regular mechanisms will ensure durability of cooperation.

Conclusion

India-Seychelles relations reflect the transformation of India's Indian Ocean engagement from limited defence ties to a comprehensive strategic partnership. Seychelles' entry into the Colombo Security Conclave strengthens a cooperative regional security framework built on shared responsibility and capacity building.

In an era of maritime competition and climate uncertainty, such partnerships are essential for maintaining a stable, secure, and inclusive Indian Ocean order. Through sustained engagement and institutional consolidation, India can reinforce its role as a responsible maritime power committed to collective security and sustainable growth across the region.

Reader's Note — About This Current Affairs Compilation

Dear Aspirant,

This document is part of the PrepAlpine Current Affairs Series — designed to bring clarity, structure, and precision to your daily UPSC learning.

While every effort has been made to balance depth with brevity, please keep the following in mind:

1. Orientation & Purpose

This compilation is curated primarily from the UPSC Mains perspective — with emphasis on conceptual clarity, analytical depth, and interlinkages across GS papers.

However, the PrepAlpine team is simultaneously developing a dedicated Prelims-focused Current Affairs Series, designed for:

- factual coverage
- data recall
- Prelims-style MCQs
- objective pattern analysis

This Prelims Edition will be released separately as a standalone publication.

2. Content Length

Some sections may feel shorter or longer depending on topic relevance and news density. To fit your personal preference, you may freely resize or summarize sections using any LLM tool (ChatGPT, Gemini, Claude, etc.) at your convenience.

3. Format Flexibility

The formatting combines:

- paragraphs
- lists
- tables
- visual cues

—all optimised for retention.

If you prefer a specific style (lists → paras, paras → tables, etc.), feel free to convert using any free LLM.

4. Monthly Current Affairs Release

The complete Monthly Current Affairs Module will be released soon, optimized to a compact 100–150 pages — comprehensive yet concise, exam-ready, and revision-efficient.

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