



Weaving the warp and weft of employee wellbeing in textiles

March 2026



Amid India's new Labour Codes and rising global expectations for transparency and social responsibility, prioritising occupational safety and health (OSH) is a strategic imperative for the textile and apparel (T&A) industry. **Anjan Chakraborty** and **Arindam Saha** examine the industry's OSH landscape, spotlighting critical gaps and pathways to sustainable growth.

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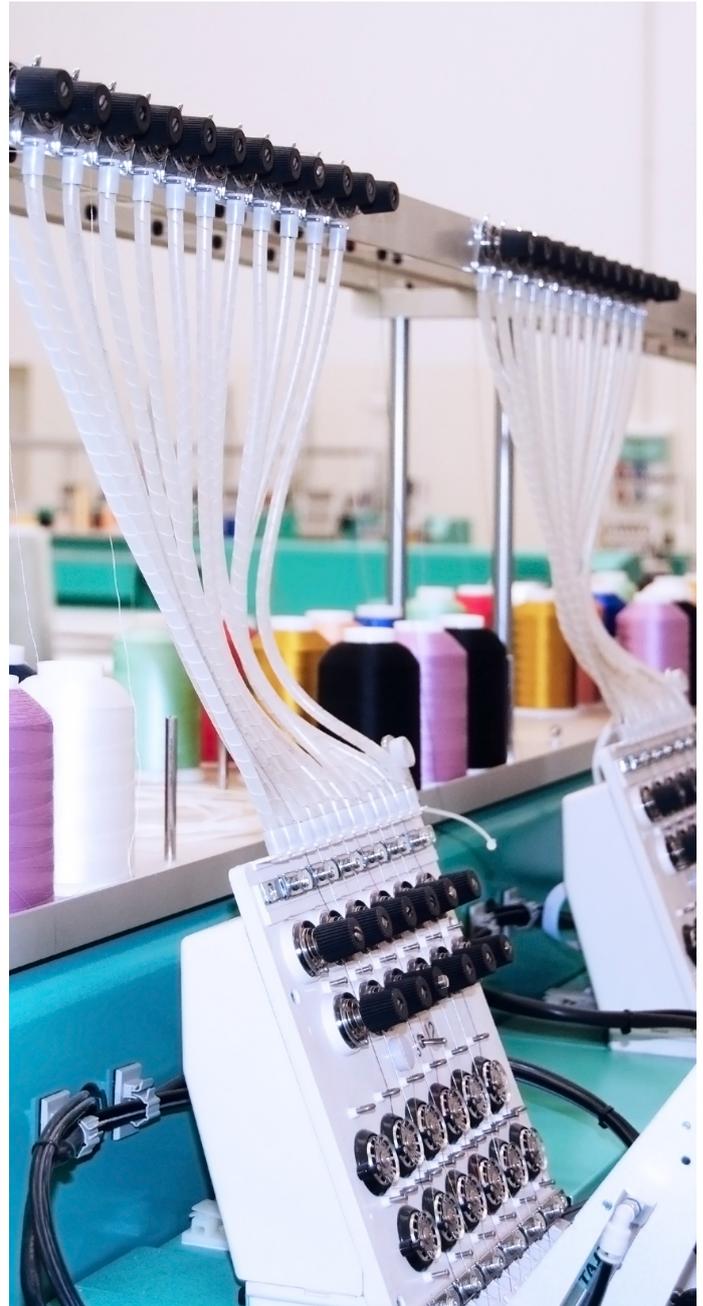
OSH in the T&A industry

In January 2026, two workers in a textile factory in Rajasthan were suspected to have died from suffocation due to poisonous gas emitted by the boiler.¹

Just months earlier, in September 2025, a fire tore through a textile mill in Surat and claimed nine lives and injured nearly 15 others. The blaze erupted after a chemical drum exploded, and a subsequent investigation revealed gross negligence.² The same year, another fire in a textile factory in Maharashtra led to eight deaths.³

These incidents reflect the risks faced by workers across India's textile and apparel factories. As India's second-largest employer after agriculture, the T&A industry—employing over 45 million people—is a strategic pillar of India's economy, contributing 2.3% to GDP, 13% to industrial production and 12% to total exports.⁴ With changing consumption trends and the rise of fast fashion, the pressure to produce quickly and inexpensively can increase risk of compromised working conditions, exposing workers to occupational safety and health issues. This is further exacerbated by remuneration models in fast fashion companies that are often linked to piece-rate pay, incentivising longer working hours to meet production targets.

Apart from extended work hours, the industry is exposed to other risks including low wages, verbal and physical abuse, and the risk of sexual harassment. Workers have also reported poor sanitation facilities and timed washroom breaks.⁵ Besides, a large share of the workforce in the industry in India works outside the formal factory settings in small, unregistered or home-based units with limited access to personal protective equipment (PPE), trainings or health and safety services.



1 The Times of India, 2 textile workers found dead near boiler, kin stage protest

2 Indian Express, Surat textile mill explosion: Mill owner among 5 held after DISH report cites negligence

3 Hindustan Times, Eight killed in major fire at textile factory in Solapur

4 <https://msme.gov.in/sites/default/files/MSME-Connect.htm>

5 The Hindu Business Line, Buy less, think more: The growing clamour for mindful clothing



Occupational safety and health is vital because it protects lives, enhances productivity, ensures legal compliance, and fosters a positive workplace culture. However, organisations face challenges such as lack of awareness, pressure to speed up production, inadequate training, cultural barriers, hazard identification and psychological health concerns.”

- Prakash Tripathi

Senior Manager (Utility), Sangam (India) Limited

Notably, these concerns persist in an industry that significantly impacts the economy. A cornerstone of the micro, small and medium enterprise (MSME) sector with nearly 80% of its capacity, including handlooms, powerlooms, and garment manufacturing, operating under this

classification, India ranks as the sixth largest global textile exporter.⁶ Between January and December 2025, India's textile sector registered exports of \$37.54 billion across 118 countries and destinations, marking a 3% growth over the corresponding period in 2024.⁷



Underpinned by a strong MSME base, this broad-based, diversified growth highlights the resilience of India's T&A export industry that helps sustain millions of rural livelihoods, notwithstanding ongoing geopolitical shifts and inflationary pressures in key markets.”

- Ankur Jain

Partner and Leader—Regulatory and Business Solutions
PwC India

6 <https://msme.gov.in/sites/default/files/MSME-Connect.htm>

7 The Economic Times, India's textile exports maintain growth momentum in December despite tariff shocks

India's steady export growth, expanding market presence, and strong performance in value-added textile and apparel categories underscore its role as a reliable and resilient global sourcing hub. Furthermore, the recently concluded India–EU Free Trade Agreement (FTA) which eliminates tariffs on Indian textiles, apparel, and clothing, will significantly enhance India's access to one of the world's largest consumer markets.⁸ India currently exports about \$7.2 billion worth of textiles and apparel to the EU.⁹

The EU is India's second-largest export destination for textiles and apparel after the United States, and the new

FTA is expected to catalyse investment and facilitate technology transfer among other advantages.¹⁰ However, Indian exporters will need to overcome certain challenges to fully leverage the opportunities in the EU T&A market.

Regions such as the EU are setting up stringent conditionalities related to environmental and social due diligence. Brands are demanding transparency in supply chains, including proof of safe working conditions. Failure to comply could keep Indian T&A exporters from accessing a key market.



8 India Today, India-EU trade deal: Why textiles could be the biggest quiet winner

9 Ibid.

10 <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2219250®=3&lang=1>

The EU Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive (CSDDD) requires companies to systematically identify, prevent and mitigate occupational health, safety and broader human rights risks across their global value chains. This has direct implications for Indian T&A exports as brands will increasingly expect traceable evidence of due diligence processes and safe working conditions.

Besides, exporters to the EU are increasingly expected to align with its Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD)-related reporting standards to maintain business relationships and market access.

CSRD requires better transparency and accountability from companies in the EU through a disclosure of key OSH indicators, including coverage of workers by health and safety management systems, work-related fatalities, recordable accidents and illnesses, and days lost due to work-related injuries and ill health. While CSRD targets EU-based entities, it impacts exporters to the EU by raising the bar for supplier transparency and sustainability reporting, including occupational safety and health. Therefore, Indian exporters must prioritise occupational safety and health to create a safer and more sustainable future for the textile and apparel industry.

Global OSH landscape

With the T&A industry employing over 90 million people worldwide,¹¹ OSH is a fundamental necessity across all regions; yet laws, regulations and their enforcement remain uneven across different countries.

The International Labour Organisation (ILO) code of practice on safety and health in textiles, clothing, leather and footwear industries was adopted in 2021,¹² but the document was mostly advisory in nature, and its adoption remains discretion-based where most of the current initiatives are either self- or industry-led.

Private players globally are setting ambitious OSH related targets and implementing initiatives which trickle down and impact the value chain. A case in point is a leading global fashion retailer which aims to ensure fair wages for workers, conducts regular factory training programmes, and works with trade unions, and workers to improve grievance redressal. Another leading global athletic apparel company is making efforts to create a safe and healthy work environment by focusing on leadership accountability.

Overlooking OSH can have significant business and economic repercussions as well as important social and ethical implications. Additionally, reputational damage due to OSH violations and incidents can erode investor confidence, consumer trust and market value.

Repeated violations can trigger significant operational setbacks—as seen previously when allegations of unsafe and exploitative conditions in supplier factories prompted trading suspensions for a particular apparel brand. Such breaches can also result in trade restrictions and exclusion from responsible sourcing programmes or brand partnerships, further disrupting business continuity.

11 ILO, Decent work challenges and opportunities in the textiles and clothing sector

12 ILO, Safety and health in textiles, clothing, leather and footwear

Countries including India have been working on reforming labour laws and consolidating their worker safety frameworks, including gender responsive provisions.

India's recently released new Labour Codes mark a fundamental transformation in the country's regulatory and workforce framework. For the T&A industry, which has traditionally operated with fragmented structures and challenging working conditions, these reforms necessitate significant improvements in worker safety and compliance to meet the updated standards.

The 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) aim to boost workplace health and safety by streamlining 29 existing labour laws.

The OSH Code 2020 will affect the T&A industry across the entire supply chain. The code directly addresses many of the challenges faced by the T&A industry by setting uniform, comprehensive standards for workplace safety, health, and welfare, ensuring better protection for workers.

The code introduces updated safety standards, mandatory health check-ups, greater access for women to various job roles, enhanced safety measures for women working in night shifts, and the establishment of safety committees. This makes it imperative for the T&A industry to reassess its practices, culture, and workforce safety measures.



Compliance with the new Labour Codes will mean considerable operational adjustments, increased accountability, and potential cost implications. However, it could also present a significant opportunity for manufacturers to improve employee wellbeing, reduce accident rates, and enhance the industry's reputation. Moreover, the codes will benefit those with operations spanning multiple states who were previously subject to differing regulations.”

- Arnab Basu

Clients and Industries Leader

PwC India



The National Occupational Safety and Health Advisory Board that replaces six boards under different acts, will bring together representatives from trade unions, employer associations, and state governments to advise the Central government on standards and regulations. This standardisation will enhance fairness, predictability, and streamline compliance procedures.

While the OSH code establishes essential guidelines, it is ultimately up to leaders to champion compliance by asking the right questions. These include:

- **Compliance readiness:** Do the current workplace safety and health practices fully align with the new OSH code requirements across operations and supply chain?
- **Skilled workforce:** Does the current workforce have the required skills and training to implement OSH practices and systems aligned with regulatory requirements?
- **Technology enablement:** How can the organisation effectively leverage technology to improve health and safety management, monitor compliance and report incidents in real time?
- **Inclusive systems:** Are the OSH frameworks and policies inclusive enough to identify and address safety challenges of all relevant stakeholders? How will they prepare to accommodate expanded job roles for women and meet the enhanced safety requirements?
- **PPE and targeted training:** Is the company providing appropriate, role-specific PPE and targeted safety training, and are they monitoring their effective use and impact?
- **Cost and benefits:** What is the cost-benefit analysis of the new activities which have been planned for improving health and safety management?



In day-to-day operations, true efficiency comes only when safety is non-negotiable. Occupational safety and health isn't just compliance for us, it's the backbone of a reliable factory floor. As buyers demand greater transparency and India's new Labour Codes set higher benchmarks, safeguarding workers becomes both our greatest responsibility and our strongest competitive edge."

- **Prakash S. Bhat**

General Manager, Environment, Health and Safety, Fashion Yarn Business
Grasim Industries Limited

Thus, effective policy implementation combined with a collaborative multi-stakeholder approach is essential to improving OSH. Our recommendations to enhance OSH in the next chapter are tailored to India's regulatory

environment and industry context, but the underlying principles and strategies hold broad relevance and can be applied across global settings.

Our take

02

Managing OSH from policy to practice

With the OSH code in place, translating policy into effective practice will take considerable time and sustained effort. While the government needs to primarily focus on policy enforcement, private companies could adopt innovative processes and technologies to improve working conditions and boost compliance. Industry associations on their part could facilitate collaboration and resource sharing to foster systemic improvements. Following are select recommendations for relevant stakeholder groups:



For the government and policymakers

- **Focus on enforcement:** By actively monitoring compliance, imposing appropriate penalties for violations, and providing clear guidelines, the government could create a strong deterrent against unsafe practices and negligence. The government and policymakers also need to periodically amend the laws as per the requirements. Moreover, existing capacity at institutional and individual levels needs to be built for effective enforcement. Usage of tech-enabled monitoring, evaluation and reporting system could also be considered.
- **Develop preventive programmes:** It would be important to utilise workplace hazard data and collaborate with health experts to design proactive interventions addressing chronic health issues and ergonomic risks specific to the industry.
- **Strengthen awareness and compliance support, particularly for MSMEs:** This entails conducting

awareness campaigns and providing targeted guidance to help MSMEs understand and meet OSH requirements more effectively. Periodic awareness sessions on worker protection policies to reinforce safe practices could also be mandated. Since each part of the value chain faces unique OSH challenges, adopting a cluster-based approach in which solutions can be tailored to the specific risks and conditions which are common to that cluster would be more effective.

- **Promote and facilitate research and investments in OSH:** The government could provide targeted incentives such as grants, tax benefits, and subsidies to R&D firms and institutes to advance innovation in workplace safety, including smart safety systems, automation, artificial intelligence, and robotics. It could also facilitate public-private partnerships to accelerate research and deployment of emerging technologies.





Building institutional capacity, leveraging technology for real-time oversight, and launching targeted awareness and support programmes—especially for MSMEs—are critical to transforming policy into meaningful workplace safety and productivity outcomes.”

- **Ranen Banerjee**

Partner, Government Sector Leader

PwC India



For the private sector

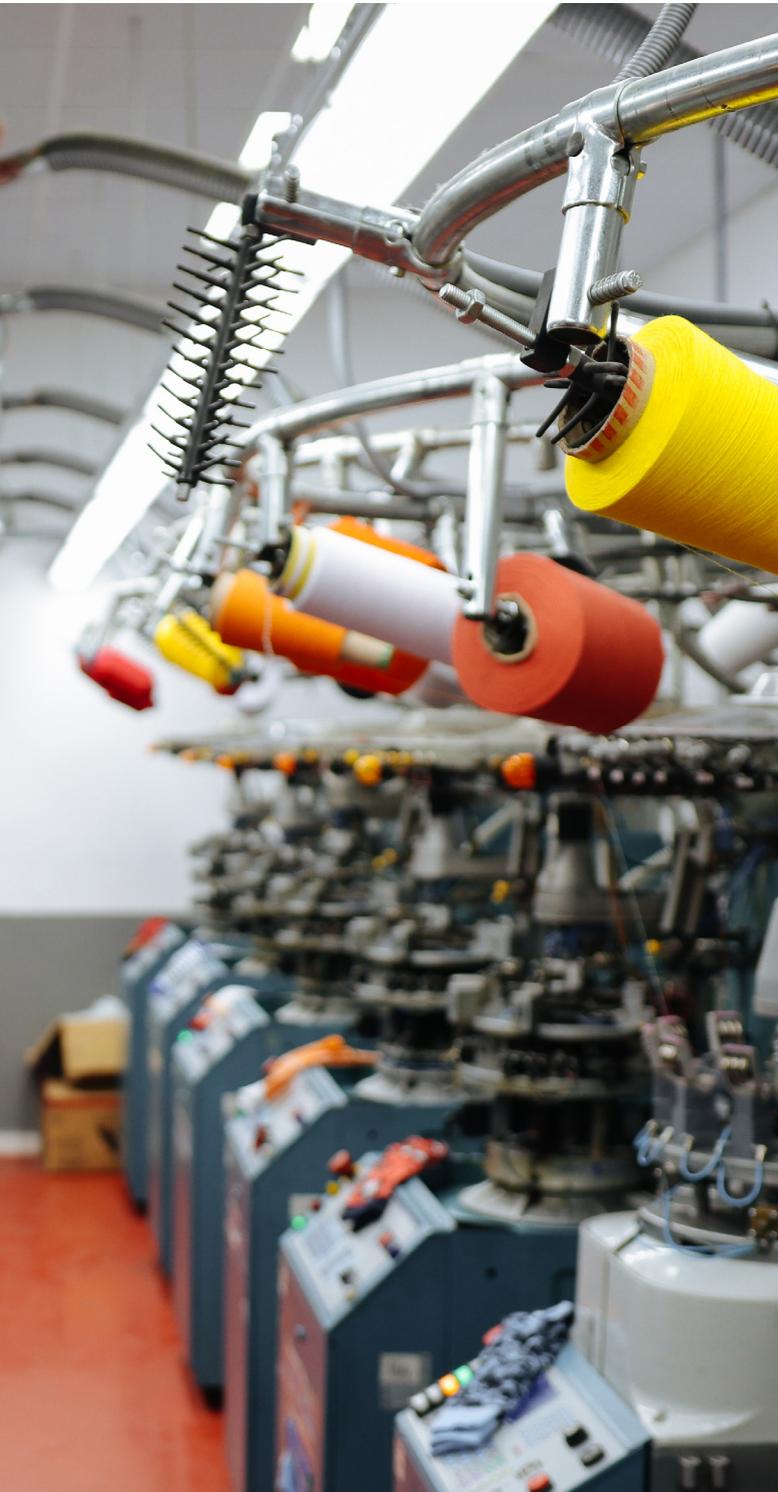
- **Establish inclusive OSH systems and transparent reporting:** The private sector is required to meet the mandates of the OSH Code by putting in place the necessary systems, processes, and technology solutions to ensure full adherence to the regulations. This includes developing inclusive frameworks and policies with active involvement of the workers, labour unions, women employees, and migrant labourers to address the diverse challenges they face.
- **Create supply chain-wide OSH awareness:** Organisations need to extend OSH training, awareness and capacity-building beyond tier-one suppliers. They could include OSH requirements in responsible sourcing agreements with the suppliers. Companies could also roll out recognition and financial incentives for OSH champions—employees who proactively advocate, promote, and uphold safety standards within the workplace. Collaborating with the government could further scale awareness and capacity building initiatives in a cost-effective manner.
- **Provide appropriate PPE and targeted safety training:** PPE suited to specific job roles, body size and workplace conditions should be provided. There should be specialised training on effective usage of PPEs, safe working with moving machinery components, chemical handling and waste management.

- **Strengthen communication and grievance redressal:** Companies could create clear channels for recording workforce grievances, analyse the causes for grievances and redress those proactively to prevent recurrence.



For industry associations

- **Disseminate best practices in OSH:** Industry associations could promote regional and cross-industry knowledge sharing by co-developing, documenting, and disseminating proven OSH best practices. In addition, they could partner with government bodies and industry stakeholders to design and implement large-scale OSH awareness and training initiatives.
- **Advocate for supportive policies and incentives:** Industry bodies need to engage with policymakers to develop and strengthen regulatory frameworks, and fiscal and non-fiscal support mechanisms to raise OSH standards.
- **Facilitate collaboration and partnerships:** Industry associations could encourage brands, manufacturers and technology providers to share resources and foster system-level transformation. Moreover, collaborating with startups, research institutions and technology providers could accelerate the adoption of innovative safety solutions across the T&A value chain.



The industry could further consider cloud-based infrastructure, shared data systems, and collaborative platforms to democratise access to sophisticated safety management tools. T&A MSMEs would then have access to centralised monitoring systems. The Internet-of-Things (IoT) sensors measuring air quality, noise levels, and temperature could transmit data to shared cloud platforms. Virtual reality (VR) safety training modules—expensive for individual MSMEs to develop—could be created once and deployed across thousands of facilities through cloud platforms. Additionally, collaborative incident databases would enable a sector-wide incident reporting and learning system.

The government has launched several initiatives to support the T&A industry. These include the Production Linked Incentive (PLI) Scheme for Textiles, which offers ₹10,683 crore in incentives for incremental turnover and employment generation.¹³ The Amended Technology Upgradation Fund Scheme (ATUFS) provides capital subsidy and interest reimbursement to encourage technology adoption. In addition, the Prime Minister Mega Integrated Textile Region and Apparel initiative aims to develop seven integrated textile parks with world-class infrastructure.¹⁴ While these measures are important, there is scope to further strengthen them by integrating OSH elements. For instance, the government could consider incentivising cloud-based safety management systems, making technology adoption for OSH attractive.

13 [https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1913958®=3&lang=2#:~:text=by%20PIB%20Delhi-,Government%20has%20approved%20the%20Production%20Linked%20Incentive%20\(PLI\)%20Scheme%20for,be%20set-up%20in%20Odisha.&text=44.44-,Source:%20DGCIS%20provisional%20data%2C%20figures%20are%20rounded%20off.,in%20a%20written%20reply%20today,](https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1913958®=3&lang=2#:~:text=by%20PIB%20Delhi-,Government%20has%20approved%20the%20Production%20Linked%20Incentive%20(PLI)%20Scheme%20for,be%20set-up%20in%20Odisha.&text=44.44-,Source:%20DGCIS%20provisional%20data%2C%20figures%20are%20rounded%20off.,in%20a%20written%20reply%20today,)

14 <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleaselframePage.aspx?PRID=1782689®=3&lang=2>

03

Digital technologies to mitigate risks

Given the scale and complexity of textile operations, traditional approaches often fall short of meeting OSH standards. Advanced technologies such as IoT sensors, wearable devices, mobile reporting apps, and data analytics offer powerful tools to continuously track workplace conditions, promptly identify hazards, and enable real-time incident reporting.

AI-powered technologies could serve as a critical enabler to significantly enhance compliance with OSH standards. AI-based computer-vision platforms are already being used in factory settings to detect unsafe behaviours such as missing PPE, speeding forklifts, or unguarded platforms in real time. Besides, large language model (LLM)-based assistants are assisting in streamlining documentation, analysing incident data, and supporting risk analytics for faster decision-making. Machine learning tools are increasingly strengthening supply chain risk monitoring by validating submitted data and flagging anomalies that could undermine compliance.



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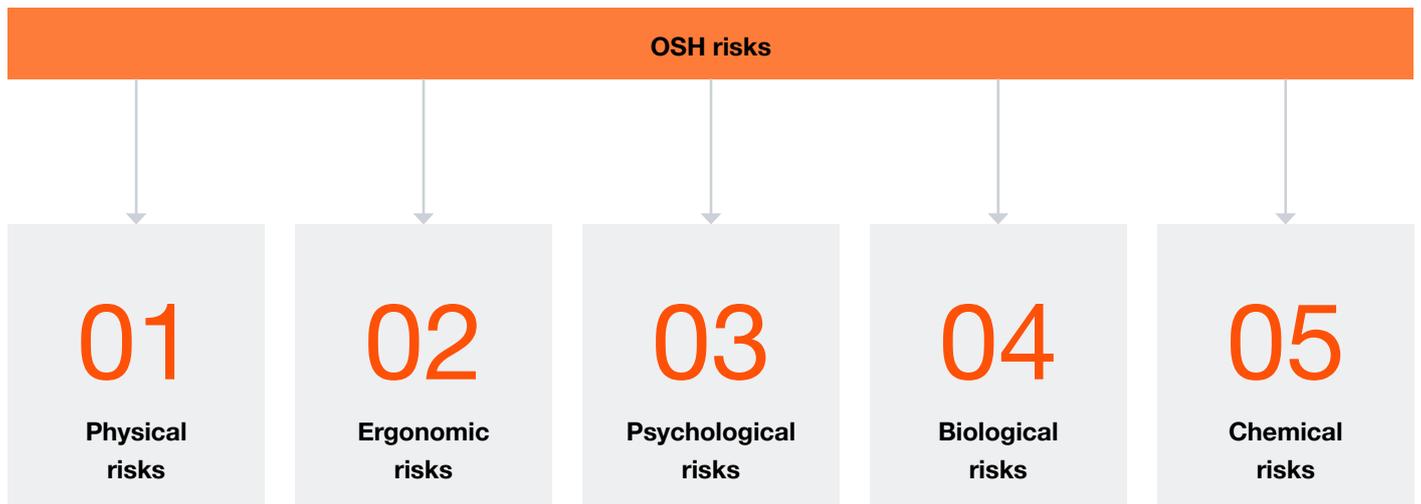
Now, with the advent of agentic AI, safety technologies have gained an unprecedented degree of autonomy and adaptability. Unlike traditional AI systems that follow pre-defined rules, agentic AI can respond to dynamic environments and independently trigger safety actions without human intervention.”

- Ankur Basu

Partner – Technology Consulting and Industry 4.0 Lead
PwC India

Investing in agentic AI could further empower manufacturers to effectively identify and mitigate a wide range of risks typically associated with OSH in the T&A industry. This section elaborates on these risks, highlights existing technologies being used to address them, and outlines how agentic AI can further enhance safety and efficiency.

Figure 1: OSH risks



1. Physical risks

In the textile industry, physical risks could include insufficient ventilation, extreme heat, injuries from contact with moving parts of machinery or tools, not using protective aids, blockage in exit ways (especially in case of a fire), and absence of facilities such as pure drinking water and separate washrooms.

To combat physical risks, IoT-based fire detection and alarm systems are being used by textile and apparel manufacturers to continuously monitor temperature, smoke and gas levels across facilities and send instant alerts. Meanwhile, virtual reality-based fire safety modules can simulate fire emergencies in a safe and integrated environment, enabling workers to develop hazard recognition and emergency response skills without facing actual danger.

Automated and pre-programmed cutters are also being used to reduce direct contact of workers with blades and minimise lacerations and repetitive strain injuries, while innovative gadgets ensure high-risk zones like ironing and cutting areas are well ventilated. Together, such technological interventions contribute to safer workplaces, lower injury rates, and greater worker comfort.

Next step

Autonomous monitoring systems

While IoT-based alarm systems monitor factory conditions and send alerts, agentic AI could take this a step further. When unsafe or unhealthy conditions are detected, AI agents could autonomously adjust ventilation systems. They could also autonomously collect data on workplace incidents through voice or sensor input, generate reports, correct system anomalies and automatically notify relevant compliance officers. This reduces reporting delays and improves response times, fostering a safer work environment.

2. Ergonomic risks

Employees in the industry face ergonomic risks from monotonous, highly repetitive, high-speed tasks and awkward working positions. Typically, the reasons include poor ergonomic design of workstations and work conditions, poorly designed machinery, and prolonged working hours. Ergonomic challenges also arise when workstations and tools do not account for average body dimensions, increasing the risk of musculoskeletal disorders in repetitive tasks.

Here too, technology has begun to play a key role in providing relief to workers. A case in point is an Indian integrated linen manufacturing facility. The facility adopted an AI-driven predictive maintenance solution to improve asset reliability and overall uptime. The solution also reduced ergonomic risks for maintenance workers by minimising manual data collection and inspection time. As a result, it lowered physical strain and reduced exposure to hazardous working conditions.

Next step

Smart ergonomics

AI-driven wearable devices could be used to monitor workers' postures and movements in real time, recommending ergonomic adjustments or alerting supervisors when injury risks emerge. Building on this, agentic AI could enable adaptive workload management by dynamically adjusting shifts, task assignments, or workloads based on real-time assessments of worker fatigue, stress levels, or functional capacity detected through biometric sensors. Digital logbook solutions on tablets are already being used on the factory shopfloor to autonomously record shift performance, thereby enabling workers to spend time on value-added activities.

3. Psychological risks

Workers across the value chain grapple with a range of issues such as job insecurity, verbal abuse, intensified targets, and inadequate wages. The problem is further compounded by the lack of grievance redressal mechanisms.

Mobile applications could play a key role here. An Indian textile company has reduced operational inefficiencies and at the same time cut down psychological stress among employees by digitising its sampling process. Previously reliant on manual, paper-based systems, the company faced frequent errors, delays, and redundant work, which contributed to employee frustration and increased workload.

In another example, a series of AI-enabled grievance applications were launched by the ILO recently to empower workers in Indonesia's apparel, footwear and palm oil industries.¹⁵ The ILO is also using a call-in voice response system on smartphones to educate workers in Indonesia and Cambodia on labour rights.¹⁶

Next step

AI-powered health chatbots and virtual assistants

Employee-facing AI assistants could provide personalised health advice, answer queries on workplace safety, and guide workers on mental health resources. These AI agents could operate autonomously, be available 24/7, and escalate serious health concerns to human supervisors when needed. Smart camera-based solutions could track man-down scenarios and promptly alert supervisors in emergency situations.



¹⁵ ILO press release

¹⁶ ILO, Smart phones, smart workplaces

4. Biological risks

Biological risks often arise from poor sanitary conditions or contamination in the workplace. Infestations, particularly in environments where natural fibres are stored and processed, could also pose health risks.

Many of the biological OSH-related risk responsive actions were introduced during the COVID-19 pandemic. Even now, many factories continue to practice measures such as physical distancing on production lines, handwashing stations and PPEs, and daily temperature screenings.

Next step

Contaminant detection and hygiene monitoring

AI agents could detect elevated levels of contamination, and automatically trigger ventilation systems, alert workers or initiate sterilisation protocols. They could monitor worker hygiene practices through camera feeds or wearable devices, ensuring adherence to protective equipment requirements, and sanitation guidelines.



5. Chemical risks

T&A processing often releases toxic substances and hazardous chemicals including biocides, surfactants, bleaches, acids, dyes, and pigments, which can cause respiratory irritation and long-term health effects if inhaled over extended periods. Workers are also exposed to hazardous dyes and solvents, which happen to be carcinogens and endocrine disrupting chemicals. In Madagascar, for instance, perchloroethylene used for stain removal is particularly harmful for pregnant women. Despite wearing masks fitted with cartridges, female workers had to undergo health checks more than twice a year due to the toxicity of perchloroethylene.¹⁷

Advanced technologies are making T&A processing safer. Laser technology is now widely used in the T&A industry to create designs on denim, eliminating the need for chemical sprays. Nanobubble technology and supercritical CO₂ dyeing technology have significantly reduced usage of chemicals in the dyeing of fabric and apparel. Enzyme-based washing technology has helped the textile industry replace harsh chemicals.

Next step

Automated material handling and PPE management

AI-driven robots or systems could manage the safe handling, storage, and disposal of hazardous chemicals. In parallel, AI tools could track PPE usage among workers and forecast when equipment needs replacement by analysing exposure levels and wear patterns.

17 <https://researchrepository.ilo.org/esploro/outputs/encyclopediaEntry/Drivers-and-constraints-for-occupational-safety/995218984902676>

04

How PwC India can help

As global supply chains adapt to increasing due diligence and sustainability demands, OSH must evolve from a basic compliance obligation into a shared strategic business priority. From strategic advisory and policy development to system and technology design, PwC India could play a critical role in helping stakeholders enhance OSH standards in the textile and apparel industry, using technology as a fulcrum.

PwC India's dedicated team with strong expertise in textile and apparel manufacturing works closely with the technology team to tailor solutions that address the specific challenges of the industry. This collaborative approach ensures that recommendations are practical and relevant.



Figure 2: PwC India’s suggested support framework to enhance OSH



Source: PwC analysis

In the long run, strengthening OSH across the T&A industry hinges on shared accountability, with the government, industry bodies, brands and suppliers working together to build safer, more resilient workplaces. As the new Labour

Codes take effect, this is the moment for all stakeholders to accelerate compliance, deepen collaboration, and commit to raising safety standards across the value chain.

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