



Guiding Dreams, Empowering Future
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EXCLUSIVE CURRENT AFFAIRS BULLETIN

VB-G RAM G ACT, 2025

Recently, the Hon'ble President of India, Droupadi Murmu, gave her assent to the Viksit Bharat – Guarantee for Rozgar and Ajeevika Mission (Gramin) Act, 2025 (VB-G RAM G Act, 2025), thereby replacing the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, 2005 (MGNREGA). The new law marks a significant shift in India's rural employment framework and has important implications for federalism, decentralisation and social justice.

VB-G RAM G Act, 2025 vs MGNREGA

- VB-G RAM G stands for Viksit Bharat – Guarantee for Rozgar and Ajeevika Mission (Gramin).
- The Act replaces the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, 2005 after receiving Presidential assent.
- Objective: To provide a statutory guarantee of 125 days of wage employment per rural household per year, as against 100 days under MGNREGA.
- Coverage: All adult members of rural households who are willing to undertake unskilled manual work.
- Funding pattern: 60:40 Centre-State cost sharing. Under MGNREGA, the Centre bore nearly 90% of the total cost, including full wage expenditure and most material costs.
- Allocation of funds: Based on normative allocation and objective parameters defined by the Union Government, making the scheme less demand-driven compared to MGNREGA.



- Institutional changes: Increased control of the Union Government over planning, approvals and fund flow, with a reduced role for Gram Sabhas and Panchayats.
- Target groups: Emphasis on vulnerable sections such as Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, women, elderly persons and persons with disabilities.
- Government's claim: The Act is projected as a major reform to modernise rural employment, increase the number of workdays, ensure predictable livelihood support and promote comprehensive village development.



Importance of MGNREGA

- ▶▶ MGNREGA was a rights-based legislation that legally guaranteed employment on demand.
- ▶▶ It mandated time-bound wage payments and provided for unemployment allowance if work was not given.
- ▶▶ The Act strengthened democratic decentralisation by empowering Gram Sabhas and Panchayats in planning, selection, execution and monitoring of works.
- ▶▶ MGNREGA acted as a counter-cyclical safety net during droughts, migration seasons and periods of economic distress.

Pros of VB-G RAM G Act

- Increase in guaranteed employment from 100 days to 125 days, potentially raising annual income of rural households.
- Continuation of statutory backing for rural employment, ensuring that the programme remains anchored in law.
- Explicit focus on vulnerable and marginalised sections of society.
- Possibility of better convergence with other rural development, infrastructure and livelihood schemes through a mission-mode approach.
- Clear and predictable Centre-State funding pattern, which may improve fiscal planning and utilisation.

▶▶ Continued on P2



► From P1

Cons of VB-G RAM G Act

- ✓ Shift in character from a rights-based, demand-driven framework to a more scheme-like and centrally controlled structure.
- ✓ Increased centralisation and reduction of federal and Panchayati Raj institutions' role in planning and implementation.
- ✓ Higher financial burden on States due to the 60:40 cost-sharing arrangement, which may adversely affect poorer States.
- ✓ Normative and top-down allocation of funds weakens the core demand-driven nature that was central to MGNREGA.
- ✓ Political and symbolic concerns related to the replacement of MGNREGA and dilution of Gandhian ideals of Gram Swaraj.
- ✓ Possible weakening of accountability mechanisms such as social audits, transparency provisions and community oversight.

Gandhiji's Vision of Gram Swaraj and Repeal of MGNREGA :

MGNREGA was widely seen as a practical expression of Mahatma Gandhi's vision of Gram Swaraj, as it empowered village institutions and promoted decentralised planning. The repeal of MGNREGA through the VB-G RAM G Act has therefore been criticised as a departure from Gandhian principles of self-governance and local empowerment.

Conclusion

The VB-G RAM G Act, 2025 enhances the number of guaranteed employment days and retains statutory commitment to rural employment. However, it significantly alters the philosophical foundation of MGNREGA by shifting from a decentralised, rights-based and demand-driven framework to a more centralised, scheme-oriented model.

ARAVALLI HILLS PROTECTION : Supreme Court Directions & Policy Initiatives



The Supreme Court has issued comprehensive directions to protect the Aravalli hills, one of India's most critical ecological barriers. The Court has adopted a uniform and scientifically workable definition of the Aravalli range, mandated large-scale mapping, regulated mining activities, and emphasised sustainable restoration, complemented by government initiatives such as the Aravalli Green Wall Project.

Supreme Court Definition of Aravalli Hills

- The Supreme Court has defined Aravalli hills as landforms rising 100 metres or more above the surrounding terrain.
- This uniform definition replaces earlier vague, geological or notification-based definitions used by States.
- The objective is to simplify identification, mapping and enforcement across different States.
- Critics argue that this definition may exclude smaller ridges and plains, but the Court considered it administratively workable.

Directions on Mapping and No-Go Zones

- The Court directed scientific mapping of the entire Aravalli range using satellite imagery and modern geospatial tools.
- Mapping must include hills, slopes, valleys, groundwater recharge zones, wildlife corridors and forest patches.
- Based on mapping, States must identify no-go zones where mining and stone-crushing are permanently prohibited.
- No-go zones include forests, wildlife corridors, tiger habitats, water bodies,

aquifers and critically polluted NCR areas.

Aravalli Range: Geographical and Ecological Basics

- The Aravalli range stretches about 720 km from Gujarat to Delhi, passing through Gujarat, Rajasthan, Haryana and Delhi.
- It is one of the oldest fold mountain systems in the world.
- The range acts as a natural barrier preventing the Thar Desert from advancing into the Indo-Gangetic plains.
- It hosts biodiversity hotspots, forests, wildlife corridors and major groundwater recharge zones.
- The Aravallis regulate the climate of the National Capital Region by blocking dust storms, heatwaves and desertification.
- They support local livelihoods through forests, minerals and eco-tourism.
- Degradation of the Aravallis adversely affects air quality, water security and public health in North India.

Threats to the Aravalli Range

- Illegal mining and excessive legal extraction have caused habitat fragmentation and forest loss.
- Stone-crushing units contribute to groundwater depletion, dust pollution and accelerated desertification.
- Urban encroachment, deforestation and construction activities fragment the range and worsen NCR pollution and water stress.
- Inconsistent definitions adopted by States earlier created enforcement loopholes.
- Despite Supreme Court bans since 2002, illegal mining mafias continued to exploit these loopholes.

► Continued on P3

SHANTI Bill, 2025 & Nuclear Energy Reforms in India :

The SHANTI Bill, 2025 marks a major structural reform in India's nuclear energy sector. It replaces the Atomic Energy Act, 1962 and the Civil Liability for Nuclear Damage Act, 2010, opening nuclear power generation to private firms, joint ventures and foreign entities for the first time since Independence, while retaining State control over strategic nuclear activities.

India's Existing Nuclear Power Infrastructure (Visual Overview)

India currently operates 24 nuclear reactors across 7 locations with a total installed capacity of about 8.78 GW. These include PHWRs, BWRs and VVERs located at Rawatbhata, Kakrapar, Tarapur, Kaiga, Kalpakkam, Narora and Kudankulam.

SHANTI Bill, 2025: Overview

- Replaces the Atomic Energy Act, 1962 and the Civil Liability for Nuclear Damage Act, 2010.
- Allows private firms, joint ventures and foreign entities to build, own, operate and decommission nuclear power plants.
- Ends the monopoly of NPCIL in nuclear power generation.
- Strategic nuclear activities remain under



exclusive State control.

Important Provisions of SHANTI Bill, 2025

- Unified legal framework for nuclear energy production, use, regulation, licensing, safety and waste management.
- Covers non-power nuclear applications in healthcare, agriculture, industry and research.
- Licensing of power plants, fuel fabrication, transport, storage and import/export of nuclear materials.
- Uranium enrichment, off-site spent fuel reprocessing and heavy water production reserved for the Central Government.
- Centre empowered to frame policies on nuclear safety, waste management and electricity tariffs.

Strengthening Regulation: Atomic Energy

continue under strict environmental oversight.

- ▶ Permanent mining bans apply in identified no-go zones such as forests, wildlife corridors and critical water recharge areas.
- ▶ Stone-crushing units are to be regulated or relocated to reduce air pollution.
- ▶ The Court favoured graded controls based on ecological risk instead of blanket bans.

Sustainable Mining Management Plan (MPSM)

- ▶ States are required to prepare a Management Plan for Sustainable Mining (MPSM).
- ▶ The plan must demarcate no-mining zones and limited-mining zones based on scientific assessments.
- ▶ Mandatory restoration and rehabilitation of mined sites is required.
- ▶ The focus is on strict enforcement and elimination of illegal mining activities.

Government Green Initiatives: Aravalli Green Wall Project

- The Aravalli Green Wall Project was

Regulatory Board (AERB)

- ▶ AERB granted statutory status.
- ▶ Enhanced regulatory independence, transparency and safety oversight.
- ▶ Clear separation between nuclear promoter and regulator roles.

Rationale and Objectives

- Nuclear capacity stagnated at 7–8 GW despite high potential.
- Critical for energy security, decarbonisation and Net-Zero 2070 goals.
- Target of ~100 GW nuclear capacity by 2047.
- Supports three-stage nuclear programme and thorium utilisation.
- Enables advanced technologies such as Small Modular Reactors (SMRs).

Participation Framework

- Private Indian companies allowed up to 49% minority equity.
- Joint ventures permitted.
- Foreign entities allowed under safeguards.
- Private firms may build, operate, maintain plants and handle non-strategic fuel-cycle activities.

Conclusion

The SHANTI Bill, 2025 modernises India's nuclear sector by opening it to private and foreign participation, reforming liability norms and strengthening regulation. It aims to scale nuclear capacity from about 8 GW to nearly 100 GW by 2047, supporting India's energy security and climate goals while retaining State control over strategic nuclear functions.

launched in June 2025.

- It proposes a 5 km wide and about 1,400 km long green buffer across 29 districts in four States.
- The project aims to restore around 26 million hectares of degraded land by 2030.
- It aligns with India's commitments under the UN Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD).
- Objectives include land degradation neutrality, carbon sequestration and control of desert expansion.
- Effective implementation requires strong inter-State coordination and community participation.

Conclusion

The 100-meter Aravalli hill rule hurts nature. It skips small ridges and slopes under that height. This lets private mining enter those areas. The rule lacks science links to wildlife or water zones. It helps mining lobbies more than ecology. Mapping and Green Wall look good but hide weak checks. Demand full mining bans and stricter rules for true protection.

▶ From P2

Supreme Court Interventions (2002–2025)

- Since 2002, the Supreme Court has intervened to protect the Aravallis using the Forest Conservation Act, 1980.
- The Court has also relied on the Environment Protection Act, 1986 and Article 21 of the Constitution (Right to a clean environment).
- Mining bans and monitoring mechanisms were imposed to curb ecological damage.
- In 2024–25, the Court accepted recommendations of the Central Empowered Committee (CEC).
- The CEC recommended a landscape-level approach instead of fragmented, site-specific case handling.

Mining and Stone-Crushing Regulations

- ▶ No new mining leases or renewals are permitted until mapping, carrying capacity studies and cumulative impact assessments are completed.
- ▶ Existing legal mining operations may



India–Oman CEPA (2025)

Core Facts :

- India and Oman signed the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) in December 2025.
- The agreement aims to deepen cooperation in trade in goods, services, investment and professional mobility.
- Oman will provide zero-duty access on 98.08% of its tariff lines.
- These tariff lines cover about 99.38% of India's exports to Oman by value.
- From the first day of implementation, Indian exports worth around USD 3.6–3.64 billion will enter Oman at zero duty, instead of the earlier average duty of about 5%.

Gains for Indian Goods :

- Labour-intensive sectors such as textiles, leather, footwear, gems and jewellery receive almost complete duty-free access.
- Engineering goods, processed food, chemicals and pharmaceuticals gain improved price competitiveness in the Omani market.
- The agreement benefits MSMEs, women-led enterprises and artisan-based units.
- Oman can be used as a trade and logistics hub for accessing Gulf, East African and African value chains.

India's Offer and Safeguards

- India has offered tariff concessions on 77.79% of its tariff lines.
- These concessions cover about 95% of imports from Oman by value.
- Sensitive sectors such as dairy, tea, coffee, rubber, tobacco and several agricultural products are excluded or placed in sensitive lists.
- Gold and silver bullion, jewellery and certain labour-intensive products are also protected.
- These safeguards aim to protect Indian farmers, MSMEs and domestic industries from import surges.

Services Trade and Mobility Provisions

- ▶▶ Oman has offered one of its most liberal services commitments to India under CEPA.
- ▶▶ Key sectors covered include IT, business services, healthcare, education and professional services.
- ▶▶ The agreement provides liberal Mode-4 (movement of natural persons) commitments.
- ▶▶ Quota for intra-corporate transferees has been increased from 20% to 50%.
- ▶▶ Visa validity for contractual service suppliers and professionals has been extended, often up to two years with scope for extension.
- ▶▶ These provisions enhance employment, project-based work and long-term professional opportunities for Indians.

Strategic Significance

- India–Oman CEPA is India's second major trade agreement in the Gulf region after the India–UAE CEPA.
- The agreement aligns with India's broader West Asia engagement and Indo-Pacific maritime vision.
- Oman's strategic location near the Strait of Hormuz enhances its importance for India's energy and maritime security.
- Omani ports act as gateways for Indian trade with the Gulf, East Africa and parts of Central Asia.
- Thus, the CEPA adds strategic depth beyond purely commercial trade benefits.
- Partnerships, maritime and energy security, and diaspora engagement.
- GS Paper III: Role of FTAs/CEPAs in India's export strategy, trade competitiveness, MSME integration into global value chains.
- Essay and Interview: Balancing trade liberalisation with protection of vulnerable domestic sectors.

Conclusion

The India–Oman CEPA, 2025 significantly enhances India's trade competitiveness in the Gulf region by providing near-total duty-free access for exports and liberal mobility provisions for professionals, while carefully safeguarding sensitive domestic sectors. By combining economic gains with strategic and maritime advantages, the agreement represents a balanced and forward-looking trade partnership.

PM Modi's Visit to Ethiopia & Adwa Victory Monument



WHY IN NEWS

Prime Minister Narendra Modi paid homage at the Adwa Victory Monument in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia during his official visit in December 2025. The visit highlighted India's historical solidarity with Africa and its commitment to South-South cooperation.

BATTLE OF ADWA (1896)

- Year: 1896
- Fought Between: Ethiopian forces & Italian colonial army
- Outcome: Decisive Ethiopian victory, Ethiopia retained its sovereignty, One of the rare instances where an African nation defeated a European colonial power.

HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE

- Symbol of African resistance to colonialism
- Inspired anti-colonial movements across Africa
- Reinforced Ethiopia's status as a never-colonised nation
- Important milestone in global anti-imperialist history

DIPLOMATIC AND STRATEGIC SIGNIFICANCE

- Strengthens India-Africa relations
- Deepens India-Ethiopia strategic partnership
- Reflects India's commitment to: Sovereignty and territorial integrity, Anti-colonial values, South-South cooperation.
- Enhances India's image as a development partner

HONOUR CONFERRED

- Prime Minister Modi was awarded Ethiopia's highest civilian honour
- Known as the "Great Honour of Ethiopia"
- Recognition of India's role in strengthening bilateral relations.

PYQ (2023)

Q. Consider the following pairs: Area of conflict mentioned in news : Country where it is located -

1. Donbas : Syria
2. Kachin : Ethiopia
3. Tigray : North Yemen

How many of the above pairs are correctly matched?
(a) Only one (b) Only two (c) All three (d) None



BHARAT TAXI

Bharat Taxi is India's first cooperative-run, government-backed ride-hailing platform, designed as a zero-commission alternative to private cab aggregators like Ola, Uber and Rapido.

About Bharat Taxi :

- India's first cooperative-run ride-hailing platform.
- Drivers are member-owners, not gig workers.
- Operated by Sahakar Taxi Cooperative Limited.
- Initiative of NeGD and Digital India Corporation under MeitY.
- Supported by the Ministry of Cooperation.
- Planned launch: Delhi, 2027.
- Pilot runs conducted with cars, autos and bikes.
- Zero commission initially; 100% fare to drivers.
- Later ~20% cooperative fee, redistributed to drivers.
- No surge pricing under normal conditions.
- Integrated with DigiLocker, UMANG and API Setu.
- Built on Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI) model like UPI and ONDC.
- Police-verified drivers with safety and emergency features.
- Supports Atmanirbhar Bharat and cooperative economy.





Kavachi Volcano

Why in News?

- Scientists have captured rare underwater footage of sharks living inside the crater of the Kavachi Volcano near the Solomon Islands.
- The discovery challenges earlier assumptions that active submarine volcanoes cannot support marine life.
- Highlights the ability of organisms to survive in extreme volcanic and acidic environments.

About Kavachi Volcano

- Type: Submarine (underwater) volcano
- Location: South Pacific Ocean
- Geographical Position: South of Vangunu Island, Solomon Islands
- Tectonic Setting: Located on the Pacific

Ring of Fire

- Special Feature: One of the most active and visible submarine volcanoes in the world

Volcanic Activity & Scientific Importance

- Highly active and unpredictable
- First recorded eruption: 1939
- Frequently forms temporary volcanic islands that disappear due to erosion
- Eruptions release: Lava, Ash and dust, Volcanic gases, Pyroclastic materials.
- Discovery of sharks inside the crater shows: High adaptability of marine life, Survival in acidic, hot, low-oxygen conditions
- Helps in understanding: Extreme ecosystems, Evolutionary biology, Possibility

ty of life in extreme environments (astrobiology relevance)

PYQ 2025

Q. Consider the following substances:

1. Pyroclastic debris
2. Ash and dust
3. Nitrogen compounds
4. Sulphur compounds

How many of the above are products of volcanic eruptions?

Options:

- (a) Only one
- (b) Only two
- (c) Only three
- (d) All four

Correct Answer: (d) All four

WHY IN NEWS...?

The Union Railway Minister informed the Lok Sabha during the Winter Session of Parliament that the indigenously developed Kavach system has been successfully commissioned over more than 2,000 km of the Indian Rail network. The implementation is progressing rapidly across various railway zones.

WHAT IS KAVACH?

- Kavach is an indigenously developed Automatic Train Protection (ATP) system.
- It is designed to: Prevent train collisions, Control over-speeding, Avoid Signal Passing at Danger (SPAD), Enhance operational safety through real-time monitoring and automatic braking intervention.

DEVELOPMENT AND IMPLEMENTING AGENCIES :

Developed by:

- Research Designs and Standards Organisation (RDSO), Ministry of Railways

Industry Partners:

- Medha Servo Drives Pvt. Ltd.
- HBL Power Systems Ltd.
- Kernex Microsystems



CURRENT STATUS (As of December 2025)

- 7,129 km of optical fibre cable laid
- 860 telecom towers installed
- 767 railway stations connected to data centres
- Trackside equipment deployed across 3,413 km
- 4,154 locomotives fitted with Kavach
- Nearly 40,000 railway staff trained in system operation

IMPACT AND SIGNIFICANCE

- Major reduction in consequential train accidents (nearly 90%)
- Accidents reduced from 135 (2014) to around 11 currently
- Enhances passenger safety and operational efficiency
- Demonstrates India's growing capability in indigenous railway technologies
- Supports the vision of Atmanirbhar Bharat in critical infrastructure.

Q. Consider the following statements: (PYQ 2025)

- I. Indian Railways have prepared a National Rail Plan (NRP) to create a future ready railway system by 2028.
- II. 'Kavach' is an Automatic Train Protection system developed in collaboration with Germany.
- III. 'Kavach' system consists of RFID tags fitted on track in station section.

Which of the statements given above are not correct?

- (a) I and II only
- (b) II and III only
- (c) I and III only
- (d) I, II and III

INDIA – NEW ZEALAND FREE TRADE AGREEMENT (FTA)

WHY IN NEWS...?

India and New Zealand concluded negotiations on a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) on 24 December 2025. The agreement provides zero-duty access to 100% of Indian exports and is expected to attract USD 20 billion in Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) over the next 15 years. The deal aims to deepen trade, services, and mobility cooperation while safeguarding India's sensitive sectors.

FTA – BASIC FEATURES :

- Removes or reduces tariffs on 90–95% of traded goods.
- Unlike Preferential Trade Agreements, FTAs cover almost all product categories.
- Aims to promote trade, investment, and economic integration.

TRADE TARGETS AND MARKET ACCESS

- Bilateral trade target: Increase from USD 2.4 billion to USD 5 billion within 5 years.
- India's average tariff reduction: From 16.2% to 9.06% over 10 years.
- New Zealand offers: Zero-duty access on 100% of Indian exports, Removes average tariff of 2.2%.

EXCLUDED / SENSITIVE SECTORS

- Dairy products
- Onions
- Almonds
- Sugar
- Certain vegetables and animal products
- Nearly 30% of tariff lines excluded to protect domestic farmers and MSMEs

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE AGREEMENT :

1. NEW ZEALAND'S OFFERS

- Zero duty on all Indian exports
- Market access for: Textiles and garments, Leather goods, Auto components.
- GI protection expanded to Indian products

2. INDIA'S OFFERS

- Liberalisation of 70% tariff lines
- Covers nearly 95% of New Zealand's export value
- Immediate zero-duty access for: Wood



products, Wool, Sheep meat.

3. INVESTMENT AND MOBILITY PROVISIONS :

- USD 20 billion FDI commitment with rebalancing clause
- Education and mobility benefits: No cap on Indian students, 20 hours/week work rights, 3–4 years post-study work visas.
- Professional mobility: 5,000 visas for IT, Yoga, AYUSH professionals, 1,000 Working Holiday Visas.

4. SERVICES SECTOR :

- India's most ambitious services offer to date
- Covers 118 service sub-sectors
- Boosts IT, healthcare, education, professional services
- Enhances global competitiveness of Indian service providers

5. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE FTA :

- India's 7th Free Trade Agreement since 2021
- Strengthens India's footprint in the Pacific region
- Reduces dependence on traditional markets

- Enhances India's role in Indo-Pacific economic architecture

6. ECONOMIC BENEFITS :

- Boosts exports and employment
- Enhances supply chain integration
- Strengthens diaspora and people-to-people ties
- Encourages skill mobility and investment flows

7. CHALLENGES :

- Risk to MSMEs due to cheaper imports
- Trade imbalance concerns: Imports rose by 82%, Exports grew only 31% (2017–22)
- Non-Tariff Barriers (NTBs)
- Visa and regulatory constraints
- IPR and labour-related compliance issues

CONCLUSION

The India–New Zealand FTA strikes a balance between liberalisation and domestic protection. It enhances India's trade diversification, strengthens global economic integration, and promotes long-term growth through investment, services, and strategic cooperation.