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Promise of Gender Equality Must Be Upheld

Context

- Indian independence in 1947 was an audacious experiment in democracy and equality.
- Freedom meant not merely liberation from colonial rule but the creation of a nation where every citizen, irrespective of caste, creed, class, political allegiance or gender, enjoyed equal status.
- **Granting women equal citizenship** and political rights from the beginning was particularly revolutionary.
- Yet, nearly eight decades later, **the treatment of women in public and political life reveals a persistent gap** between formal equality and lived equality.

The Audacious Promise of Independence

- India began its journey amid Partition, displacement, poverty and institutional weakness.
- The integration of princely states and the rehabilitation of millions of refugees were accompanied by severe shortages of wealth, education, healthcare, housing and industry.
- Despite these challenges, **India chose hope over pessimism**; The Constitution established equal citizenship rather than restricting political rights to the privileged.

- This decision made **democratic inclusion a foundational principle** and ensured that political equality was not a gradual concession but a basic right.

Universal Franchise and Women's Citizenship

- The first general election in 1952 gave women and men **the right to vote** on equal terms.
- Registering women, however, presented a major challenge because many were identified only as someone's daughter or wife rather than as individuals.
- The Election Commission's effort to register women under their own names was therefore an important assertion of **individual citizenship**.
- Though millions of women were initially excluded from electoral rolls because they could not or would not provide their own names, the **larger transformation was significant**.
- Over time, women became increasingly autonomous political participants, and by 2019 the gender gap in voter turnout had effectively disappeared.

From Formal Equality to Lived Equality

- Legal equality does not automatically ensure **social equality**.
- The treatment of women participating in the Jantar Mantar protests demonstrates this continuing contradiction.
- Several women protesters reportedly faced doxxing, with their names, phone numbers and addresses circulated online, followed by abusive messages and threats.
- Such attacks can transform **political participation into a dangerous experience** and discourage women from entering public life.
- The unequal standards applied to women and men are equally troubling.
- When similar political behaviour attracts **greater criticism from women**, it reflects the persistence of gendered expectations in political discourse.

Paternalism and the Politics of Protest

- Describing protesting women as misguided daughters raises concerns about paternalistic politics.
- Such language can position women as children requiring guidance rather than citizens exercising democratic agency.
- **Democracy requires recognition of protest**, dissent and criticism as legitimate forms of political participation.
- Citizens do not lose their democratic rights because their language is offensive or because they challenge powerful political figures.
- The **fundamental question is whether political equality extends beyond voting** to the right to disagree without gender-based intimidation.

The Threat of Online Misogyny

- Digital platforms have expanded political participation while simultaneously amplifying online misogyny.

- Women involved in public debate can face attacks that are political, personal and sexualised.
- Doxxing, rape threats, death threats and character assassination seek to silence participation rather than defeat arguments.
- Such conduct undermines equal citizenship. If women possess legal equality but face **disproportionate social and personal costs** for exercising political speech, equality remains incomplete.

The Way Forward: Protecting the Hope of Equality

- India's democratic achievement rests on the principle that **citizenship is not conditional upon obedience**.
- The rights to vote, protest, criticise and demand accountability must belong equally to all citizens.
- **Political leaders must distinguish between criticism and personal insult**, while institutions and society must protect citizens from harassment and threats.
- Digital platforms and law-enforcement agencies must prevent personal information from being weaponised against political participants.
- Above all, **women must be recognised as autonomous citizens**, not as daughters, wives or dependants subject to special standards of political behaviour.

Conclusion

- India's independence was a bold commitment to equality amid adversity. Its survival through Partition, poverty and institutional fragility demonstrated the **strength of democratic hope**.
- The narrowing of the gender gap in voting shows considerable progress, but online misogyny and **gendered responses to women protesters** reveal that constitutional equality remains unfinished.
- The true test of democracy is not simply whether women can vote, but whether they can speak, protest, disagree and participate in public life without fear.
- **India must therefore ensure that the hope of equality remains a living principle** of citizenship, rather than becoming merely a promise of the past.

Promise of Gender Equality Must Be Upheld FAQs

Q1. What was the foundational promise of Indian independence?

Ans. Indian independence promised equality and democratic citizenship for all.

Q2. Why was universal franchise significant for women?

Ans. Universal franchise recognised women as equal political citizens from the beginning.

Q3. What does the treatment of women protesters reveal?

Ans. It reveals a gap between formal equality and lived equality.

Q4. How does online misogyny threaten democracy?

Ans. Online misogyny can silence women's political participation through intimidation.

Q5. What is the true test of gender equality?

Ans. Gender equality requires women to speak, protest and disagree without fear.

Source: **The Hindu**

A Timely Reset for the Food Security Act

Context

- India's food security debate has entered a new phase.
- Data from the latest household consumption survey show the share of households unable to afford the ICMR-National Institute of Nutrition (NIN) recommended diet **fell** from about 52% in 2011-12 to **25% in 2023-24**.
- This is real progress, but crores of households still cannot afford a healthy diet.
- Against this backdrop, the draft **National Food Security (Amendment) Bill, 2026** proposes linking **Antyodaya Anna Yojana (AAY)** entitlements to household size — a move that needs careful scrutiny to ensure it corrects inequity without weakening existing food access.

The Problem with Flat Entitlements

- Currently, Priority Households get 5 kg of foodgrain per person monthly, while AAY households get a flat 35 kg regardless of size.
- This protects small, vulnerable families but disadvantages larger ones — a seven-member AAY household gets only 5 kg per person, and an eight-member household gets just 4.4 kg, less than what Priority Households receive.
- The draft Bill proposes 7 kg per person, capped at 35 kg.

Who Loses, Who Gains

- This reform sounds fair on paper, but the numbers tell a different story.
- It would **cut support** for households with **one to four members** by **20% to 80%**, while leaving households of five or more unchanged — and crucially, no AAY household would receive additional grain.
- **Tamil Nadu's** data illustrates the scale of impact: 84.5% of its AAY households have fewer than five members, and the state estimates its monthly AAY allocation could fall by about 35.6%.
- Many smaller households include vulnerable individuals — an elderly person living alone, a widow, or a person with disability — who need protection, not reduced support.

Safeguarding the 35 kg Entitlement

- Experts recommend an explicit **"no-loss safeguard"** to preserve the existing 35 kg entitlement for every AAY household.
- Support beyond 35 kg for larger or highly dependent households should be examined separately, using consumption evidence, nutritional needs and transparent costing — not bundled into a formula that quietly reduces support for smaller households.

The Coverage Gap

- Beyond entitlement design, coverage itself needs updating.
- The National Food Security Act (NFSA) allows coverage of up to 75% of the rural and 50% of the urban population, but its 81.35-crore beneficiary ceiling is still based on Census 2011.
- Against India's estimated 2025 population of 146.4 crore, this ceiling covers only 55.6% of people.
- The ceiling should be recalculated once Census 2027 data is available, with updated population and deprivation criteria guiding a transparent review.

Beyond Grain: The Nutrition Challenge

- Food security cannot mean cereal security alone. **NFHS-6** data show **stunting** among children under five **fell from 35.5% to 29.3%**, but **wasting and underweight rates barely moved**.
- Only about 15% of children aged 6-23 months get a minimally adequate diet.
- Meanwhile, India faces a parallel crisis — the ICMR-INDIAB study estimated 101 million Indians had diabetes and 136 million had prediabetes in 2021.
- This is India's "**double burden of malnutrition**," where undernutrition and diet-related non-communicable diseases (NCDs) coexist.

Why More Grain Isn't the Answer

- A 2025 ICMR-INDIAB study found carbohydrates supply 62.3% of daily energy for Indians nationally, and people with the highest carbohydrate intake had 30% higher odds of new type 2 diabetes.
- Interestingly, simply replacing refined cereals with whole-wheat or millet flour did not reduce this risk when carbohydrate share stayed high — but replacing some carbohydrate calories with protein-rich foods showed greater benefit.
- ICMR-NIN's 2024 guidelines recommend cereals and millets provide at most 45% of energy, with the rest coming from pulses, milk, nuts, vegetables and other protein sources.

A Balanced Way Forward

- The Public Distribution System (PDS) cannot deliver a complete healthy plate, but it can offer affordable, shelf-stable diversity — pulses, local rice, wheat, millets and healthy edible oils, supported by effective Minimum Support Price (MSP) procurement.
- This diversification should link the PDS with Anganwadi services and **PM POSHAN** school meals, offering eggs, milk or suitable alternatives where feasible.
- Importantly, this must be separately budgeted — not financed by cutting cereal entitlements — and tested through phased state pilots before wider rollout.

Delivering with Dignity

- **India's food distribution infrastructure is now formidable** — by end 2025, nearly all 5.51 lakh fair price shops used electronic point-of-sale devices, and **One Nation One Ration Card** covered nearly all

beneficiaries.

- Going forward, these systems must ensure offline alternatives and doorstep access for people with limited mobility, and guarantee that authentication failures never lead to denial of entitled foodgrains.
- Fair price shops could also support voluntary, confidential referrals to India's growing network of Ayushman Arogya Mandirs for NCD screening — without linking this to ration eligibility.

Three Safeguards for Reform

- The article proposes three anchors for the amendment:
 - Preserve the 35 kg entitlement through a no-loss guarantee;
 - Periodically review the adequacy of this ceiling for larger or more vulnerable households using solid evidence; and
 - Finance dietary diversification separately, without reducing existing cereal entitlements.

Conclusion

- India's next food security reform must do more than move tonnes of grain — it must protect the vulnerable from hunger while addressing the deeper dietary roots of diabetes and other lifestyle diseases, ensuring every household eats enough, eats healthier, and receives its entitlement with true dignity.

A Timely Reset for the Food Security Act FAQs

Q1. What change does the draft National Food Security Amendment Bill, 2026 propose?

Ans: The draft Bill proposes providing AAY households 7 kg of foodgrain per person monthly, subject to the existing maximum ceiling of 35 kg.

Q2. Why could the proposed AAY reform disadvantage smaller households?

Ans: Smaller AAY households could lose 20–80% of existing support, while larger households remain unchanged, potentially harming elderly, widowed, and disabled beneficiaries.

Q3. Why should the 35 kg AAY entitlement be protected?

Ans: A no-loss safeguard would prevent reductions for vulnerable smaller households while allowing separate consideration of additional support for larger, dependent families.

Q4. What is India's broader nutrition challenge beyond foodgrain access?

Ans: India faces a double burden of malnutrition, with persistent undernutrition alongside rising diabetes and prediabetes linked partly to unhealthy dietary patterns.

Q5. How can India's food security system promote healthier diets?

Ans: The PDS can diversify beyond cereals by adding pulses, millets and healthy oils, while linking nutrition initiatives with Anganwadis and school meals.

Source: TH

VB-G RAM G - Has the New Rural Employment Law Weakened India's Employment Guarantee?

Context

- The article critically examines the Viksit Bharat-Guarantee for Rozgar and Aajeevika Mission Gramin (**VB-G RAM G**), which replaced the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA).
- Despite government claims of expanded employment guarantees and higher allocations, early implementation data indicates a sharp decline in rural employment generation.
- This has raised concerns over livelihood security, **cooperative federalism** and workers' rights.

Government Claims vs Ground Reality

- The Centre has projected VB-G RAM G as an upgraded version of MGNREGA with –
 - **125** days of guaranteed employment (up from 100 days).
 - Universal rural coverage.
 - Record budgetary allocation by the Centre.
 - Additional 40% financial contribution by States.
 - Greater efficiency through digital monitoring.
- However, official data presents a **contrasting picture** –
 - **Nearly 50%** year-on-year decline in rural employment generated during the first month of implementation (July 2026).
 - Employment generation between January–June 2026 declined from about 335.4 million person-days (2025) to 215.2 million person-days, a fall of 35.8%.
 - The number of households demanding work reportedly declined by nearly 50%, despite persistent rural distress, unemployment and drought conditions.

Major Criticisms of VB-G RAM G

- **The “125-day employment” myth:** Although the law promises 125 days of guaranteed employment,
 - Workers are often denied work despite demand.
 - The legal responsibility to guarantee employment has effectively shifted to State governments.
 - The Centre has not committed sufficient financial resources beyond its own “normative allocation,” making the guarantee difficult to implement.
- **Inadequate financial allocation:**
 - ₹95,000 crore of Central allocation, and an additional 40% contribution by States, taking the total notional outlay to about **₹1.55 lakh crore**.
 - However,
 - Budgetary allocation is meaningful only if work is actually provided.
 - Complex cost-sharing **discourages** States from expanding employment.

- The funding model risks shifting responsibility for poor implementation from the Centre to States.
- **Higher wage claims:** The law prescribes a floor wage of ₹300 per day. However, critics argue that –
 - The wage remains below statutory minimum wages in many States.
 - It is significantly lower than the **Satpathy Committee** recommendation of ₹375 per day (2018 prices) for a national minimum wage.
 - Consequently, wage enhancement may not adequately address rural livelihood concerns.
- **Digital governance and worker exclusion:**
 - VB-G RAM G relies heavily on digital monitoring through **e-KYC verification**, facial recognition system, National Mobile Monitoring System (NMMS), and geo-tagged attendance.
 - However,
 - Large-scale deletion of job cards following e-KYC requirements has excluded many genuine workers.
 - Facial recognition and app-based attendance create operational difficulties, especially in remote rural areas.
 - **Digital compliance** has become a **barrier to accessing employment** rather than improving service delivery.
 - **Concerns over cooperative federalism:** The law mandates 40% State funding, however,
 - States were not adequately consulted before introducing the new funding model.
 - The arrangement allegedly conflicts with **Article 258** of the Constitution (Allocation of administrative functions between the Union and States).
 - It envisages Central financial support where States implement Central laws imposing additional responsibilities.
 - The new model may weaken the **fiscal autonomy** of States instead of promoting genuine cooperative federalism.

Concerns

• Legislative and democratic:

- VB-G RAM G was enacted without meaningful consultation with workers' organisations, State governments, Parliamentary Standing Committees, and Opposition parties.
- **Parliamentary scrutiny** was limited despite widespread objections from labour unions and civil society groups.

• Socio-economic: The weakening of the employment guarantee framework may –

- Reduce livelihood security for rural households.
- Increase vulnerability during agricultural distress and drought.
- Disproportionately affect women workers, who constitute a significant share of rural employment guarantee beneficiaries.
- Worsen rural unemployment at a time of growing economic uncertainty.

- **Constitutional and governance issues:**

- Imposing additional financial obligations on States without adequate compensation raises constitutional concerns (Article 258).
- **Governance issues:** Fiscal federalism, social security and right to livelihood, digital inclusion versus digital exclusion, accountability in welfare delivery, and evidence-based public policy.

Critical Analysis

- The new legislation **weakens** rather than strengthens India's rural employment guarantee system.
- While concerns deserve careful examination, **a balanced assessment** would also require evaluating the government's stated objectives (over a longer implementation period) of –
 - Improving efficiency,
 - Reducing leakages and
 - Expanding employment opportunities.
- Since the programme is **relatively new**, its long-term outcomes will depend on adequate funding, effective Centre-State coordination, and timely correction of implementation bottlenecks.

Conclusion

- India's rural employment guarantee remains a crucial social protection mechanism for millions of vulnerable households.
- To achieve the objectives of **inclusive growth** and Viksit Bharat, employment guarantee reforms must strengthen—not dilute—access to work by facilitating rather than excluding beneficiaries.

VB-G RAM G FAQs

Q1. How the funding pattern under VB-G RAM G may affect cooperative federalism?

Ans. Mandatory higher State funding without adequate Central support may strain State finances and weaken cooperative federalism.

Q2. What is the impact of excessive digitalisation on the implementation of rural employment guarantee programmes?

Ans. Digital requirements such as e-KYC and facial recognition can improve transparency but may also exclude genuine beneficiaries.

Q3. Why is adequate wage determination important for the success of rural employment guarantee schemes?

Ans. Wages must at least match statutory minimum wages and inflation to ensure livelihood security and meaningful employment.

Q4. What are the socio-economic implications of declining rural employment generation?

Ans. It can increase rural distress, aggravate migration, disproportionately affect vulnerable households, etc.

Q5. What measures are needed to strengthen rural employment guarantee programmes in India?

Ans. Ensure adequate funding, timely wage payments, simplified digital processes, stronger Centre-State coordination, etc.

Source: IE

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