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Cutting off a Rural Lifeline and the Directive Principles

Context

- The central government's move to replace the Mahatma Gandhi Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) represents **a fundamental attack on India's constitutional vision** of social and economic justice.
- Passed using the government's majority in the Lok Sabha, the proposed Bill alters the very nature of MGNREGA by dismantling its **rights-based and democratic framework**.
- This is not a routine policy reform but a serious erosion of the **Directive Principles of State Policy** and a direct assault on the rural working poor, warranting scrutiny by the Standing Committee of Parliament.

Constitutional Foundations of the Right to Work

- **Article 41 of the Constitution** directs the State to make effective provision for securing the right to work within its economic capacity.
- During the Constituent Assembly debates, this provision emerged as a compromise between **socialist members**, who sought to make the right to work a fundamental right, and **capitalist interests**, who opposed such an obligation.
- As a result, the right to work was placed among the Directive Principles, **non-justiciable but central to economic democracy**.
- B.R. Ambedkar described the Directive Principles as **instruments of instruction essential for economic democracy**, while K.T. Shah dismissed them as **pious wishes**.
- Decades of unemployment and exclusion under capitalist development have shown how fragile this constitutional promise remained until political circumstances forced a shift.

MGNREGA Act

- The Act guaranteed **100 days of work per rural household**, was **universal**, and open to all adults willing to perform manual labour.
- Crucially, it was **demand-driven**, responding to actual need rather than fixed bureaucratic targets.
- This structure gave MGNREGA **deep democratic content**. Households retained freedom to seek better employment while relying on MGNREGA as a fallback.
- **Equal wages for men and women**, full central funding of wages, and meaningful roles for **States and panchayats** strengthened its inclusive and federal character.

- It was **among the first such laws in the capitalist world**.

Concerns Surrounding the Proposed Viksit Bharat- G RAM G Bill 2025

• Dismantling the Core Features of MGNREGA

- The proposed Bill under the Modi government **scraps these foundational principles**.
- The demand-driven mechanism is replaced by **normative financial allocations** fixed by the Centre, absolving it of legal responsibility once funds are exhausted.
- At the same time, **States are burdened with 40% of costs**, despite ongoing fiscal stress and denial of their fair share of tax revenues.
- The Bill introduces **extreme centralisation**, transferring control over project design, implementation, and audits to the Union government.

• Undermining the Federal Structure

- This undermines the **federal structure of the Constitution** and marginalises States and panchayats, which earlier had authority to design projects based on local needs.
- A clear **class bias** is evident in the prohibition of work during peak agricultural seasons. With increased mechanisation, agricultural employment has shrunk sharply.
- Evidence shows that workers opt for MGNREGA during peak seasons only when agricultural wages fall below MGNREGA rates or work is unavailable.
- The ban **weakens workers' bargaining power**, forcing them into exploitative conditions imposed by large landowners, **disproportionately harming women**.

• Digital Exclusion and Symbolic Politics

- The Bill legalises **Aadhaar linkage and mandatory digital attendance** for eligibility and wage payments, despite widespread evidence of exclusion due to poor connectivity and technical failures.
- These measures **transform a rights-based guarantee** into a bureaucratic hurdle.
- Renaming the scheme as the **Viksit Bharat-G RAM G Bill 2025** reflects symbolic politics rather than substantive reform and risks provoking widespread resistance from those whose livelihoods are threatened.

Social Realities and Agrarian Distress

- The harsh working conditions under MGNREGA highlight persistent rural distress.
- **Women often lift up to 3,000 kilograms of mud per day** to meet productivity norms.
- Their participation, **over 50% in most States**, signals not choice but **the absence of better alternatives**.
- The social composition of workers underscores the law's constitutional importance. **Adivasis (18%) and Scheduled Castes (19%)** are vastly overrepresented relative to their population share, together forming **over two-thirds of the workforce**.

- Rolling back their rights constitutes **an attack on constitutionally protected communities**, worsened by their removal from advisory and grievance redress mechanisms in the draft law.

Starvation of Funds and Manufactured Failure

- Since 2014, MGNREGA has been **systematically underfunded**, even as **corporate tax concessions** and write-offs have expanded.
- Worker participation has risen to **over 7.7 crore**, yet expenditure has stagnated below **2% of GDP**.
- In 2024–25, nearly one crore workers were denied work, wage arrears ran into thousands of crores, and households received **less than 50 days of work on average**.
- Promises of **125 days of work** in the new Bill appear **cynical and hollow**.

Conclusion

- MGNREGA remains an **indispensable lifeline** for India's rural poor amid agrarian distress and unemployment.
- The proposed Bill **dismantles its rights-based, democratic, and federal foundations**, bulldozing the **Directive Principles of the Constitution** and undermining the vision of economic democracy.
- **Strengthening, not weakening**, the right to work is the true constitutional mandate, and the proposed replacement fails that test decisively.

Cutting off a Rural Lifeline and the Directive Principles FAQs

Q1. What constitutional principle does MGNREGA seek to uphold?

Ans. MGNREGA seeks to uphold the constitutional principle of the right to work under Article 41 of the Directive Principles.

Q2. Why was the role of the Left crucial in the enactment of MGNREGA?

Ans. The Left was crucial because its parliamentary support enabled the adoption of a rights-based, demand-driven employment law.

Q3. How does the proposed Bill alter the nature of MGNREGA?

Ans. The proposed Bill replaces the demand-driven guarantee with centrally fixed financial allocations, removing the State's obligation to provide work.

Q4. Why is the prohibition of work during peak agricultural seasons criticised?

Ans. The prohibition is criticised because it weakens workers' bargaining power and forces them into exploitative agricultural employment.

Q5. What does the social composition of MGNREGA workers indicate?

Ans. The social composition indicates that Adivasis and Scheduled Castes disproportionately depend on MGNREGA, reflecting deep structural inequality.

Source: **The Hindu**

A Bold Step Amid an Ambitious Nuclear Energy Target

Context

- Human development is closely linked to rising energy consumption. Earl Cook's 1971 Scientific American study showed that as societies evolved—from primitive to digital stages—their energy needs expanded steadily.
- Today's digital economy adds new, significant energy demands.
- This article highlights how India's pursuit of higher human development is inseparable from a massive expansion and decarbonisation of energy supply, placing nuclear power—and the SHANTI Bill, 2025—at the centre of its long-term development strategy.

Energy Growth Required for India's Human Development Goals

- Human Development Index (HDI) closely correlates with per capita **Final Energy Consumption** (FEC), linking development outcomes with energy availability.
- As a G20-member aspiring to an **HDI of 0.9** or higher, India would need to generate around 24,000 TWh of energy annually, even after accounting for improvements in energy efficiency and electrification.
- Of this, about 60% would be used as electricity, while the remaining would go into hydrogen production via electrolyzers, essential for decarbonising hard-to-abate sectors such as steel, fertilisers and plastics.
- If alternative low-energy hydrogen production methods mature, electricity demand could reduce.
- India's electricity generation in 2023-24 was about 1,950 TWh, with a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of ~4.8% in recent years. At this pace, reaching 24,000 TWh would take four to five decades.
- However, **two major challenges**
 - First, India must decarbonise its energy mix while scaling generation.
 - Second, electrification of end uses must expand sharply, as electricity currently accounts for only about 22% of FEC.
- Achieving development goals therefore requires not just higher generation, but a transition away from fossil fuels towards hydro, nuclear, solar and wind power, alongside systemic energy redesign.

Nuclear Power and India's Decarbonised Energy Mix

• Limits of Renewable Energy Sources

- India's hydro and wind potential is inherently limited, while high population density restricts the availability of land for large-scale solar photovoltaic deployment.
- Although hydro, solar and wind must be fully utilised, their combined potential is insufficient to meet the energy levels required for India to achieve an HDI above 0.9.
- As a result, **nuclear power** must be significantly expanded, and fossil fuels will remain necessary in the interim.

• Need for Reliable Baseload Power

- Solar and wind are **intermittent energy sources**, with output varying by time of day and season.
- Large-scale electricity storage to balance this variability is costly and often economically unviable, especially for seasonal fluctuations.
- To ensure affordable and reliable power, India's energy mix requires **baseload generation** that is independent of weather or time.
- Nuclear power plants provide stable baseload electricity, making them essential for a decarbonised system.

• **Indigenous Nuclear Capability**

- India has built strong indigenous capacity across the nuclear energy supply chain.
- While uranium must be imported due to limited domestic reserves, the country has developed technologies for fuel fabrication, heavy water production, and equipment manufacturing.
- The Nuclear Power Corporation of India Limited (NPCIL) has mastered the design and operation of Pressurised Heavy Water Reactors (PHWRs), including the 700 MW class.

• **Expansion of Nuclear Power**

- Currently, **three 700 MW PHWR** units are operational, a fourth is nearing completion, and two more are under advanced construction.
- In 2017, the government approved the construction of 10 additional 700 MW PHWRs, with work progressing steadily, signalling a major scale-up of nuclear capacity.

• **Safety, Regulation and Waste Management**

- India established a nuclear regulatory body in the 1980s with robust oversight capabilities.
- The Bhabha Atomic Research Centre (BARC) has developed technologies for reprocessing spent fuel and managing nuclear waste.
- Together, these efforts make nuclear power a technically feasible, safe, and cost-effective pillar of India's long-term decarbonised energy strategy.

The SHANTI Bill, 2025: A New Push for Nuclear Energy

• **Ambitious Nuclear Expansion Target**

- Building on recent successes in nuclear power, the Union government has set a target of 100 GW of installed nuclear capacity by mid-century.
- It is planning for a major expansion of the sector to support long-term development and decarbonisation goals.

• **Consolidated Legal Framework**

- Parliament has passed the Sustainable Harnessing and Advancement of Nuclear Energy for Transforming India (SHANTI) Bill, 2025.

- It is an overarching legislation that consolidates and harmonises provisions of the Atomic Energy Act, 1962 and the Civil Liability for Nuclear Damage Act, 2010.

• Regulatory and Safety Provisions

- The Bill provides continuity in regulation by stating that the Atomic Energy Regulatory Board (AERB) “shall be deemed to have been constituted under this Act.”
- It clearly assigns the primary responsibility for safety, security and safeguards to the licensee of the nuclear facility, strengthening accountability.

• Strategic Significance

- With its ambitious capacity target and streamlined legal framework, the SHANTI Bill represents a bold policy step.
- Such decisive measures, coupled with long-term vision, are viewed as essential for India’s transition to a developed, energy-secure and low-carbon economy.

A Bold Step Amid an Ambitious Nuclear Energy Target FAQs

Q1. Why is energy consumption closely linked to human development?

Ans. Human development rises with energy availability, as higher energy consumption supports income growth, education, healthcare, industrialisation and digitalisation across successive stages of societal advancement.

Q2. How much energy does India need to reach an HDI of 0.9?

Ans. Estimates suggest India must generate around 24,000 TWh annually, even with efficiency gains, to achieve an HDI of 0.9 comparable to advanced economies.

Q3. Why are renewables alone insufficient for India’s long-term energy needs?

Ans. Limited hydro and wind potential, land constraints for solar, and intermittency make renewables inadequate alone, necessitating reliable baseload sources like nuclear power.

Q4. What makes nuclear power essential in a decarbonised energy mix?

Ans. Nuclear provides stable, low-carbon baseload electricity, avoiding costly large-scale storage and ensuring reliable supply independent of weather or time-of-day variations.

Q5. What is the significance of the SHANTI Bill, 2025?

Ans. The SHANTI Bill consolidates nuclear laws, strengthens regulatory clarity, assigns safety responsibility to licensees, and supports India’s ambitious target of 100 GW nuclear capacity.

Source: TH