

MISUSE OF VPN

In the digital age, Virtual Private Networks (VPNs) have emerged as essential tools for online privacy and security. They encrypt internet traffic, mask IP addresses, and allow users to access content restricted by geography. VPNs have become indispensable for individuals working remotely, journalists protecting sources, and users seeking secure connections on public Wi-Fi networks. However, alongside their legitimate uses, VPNs are increasingly being misused, creating significant legal, ethical, and cybersecurity concerns.

One of the primary areas of misuse is the circumvention of legal and regulatory frameworks. VPNs enable users to bypass content restrictions imposed by governments, streaming services, or corporate networks. While accessing region-locked educational resources or entertainment content might seem harmless, the same technology can be exploited to engage in activities that contravene laws. From online gambling and piracy to evading cybersecurity regulations, VPN misuse facilitates a digital shadow space where accountability is minimal, and illegal activities proliferate.

Cybercriminals also exploit VPNs to cloak their identity while executing fraudulent schemes, including phishing attacks, ransomware distribution, and financial scams. By masking IP addresses and location, they make detection and prosecution extremely difficult. This creates not only legal challenges for law enforcement but also risks for innocent users whose data may inadvertently be entangled in these activities.

Moreover, VPN misuse affects organizations that rely on digital governance and network monitoring. Employees using unauthorized VPNs can bypass corporate firewalls, access sensitive data, or leak confidential information. This not only compromises cybersecurity but also undermines trust and accountability in the professional ecosystem.

However, it is important to note that the issue is not with VPNs themselves but with their unethical or illegal use. The technology is neutral, and its benefits for privacy, freedom of expression, and secure communication are undeniable. The challenge lies in creating a balanced framework that preserves these benefits while minimizing misuse. Governments and regulatory authorities must focus on awareness campaigns, promoting responsible usage, and implementing mechanisms to detect criminal exploitation without infringing on privacy rights.

Educational institutions, organizations, and internet users also have a role to play. Understanding the risks, using VPNs for legitimate purposes, and avoiding attempts to bypass laws or security protocols are essential for maintaining digital integrity. Awareness and accountability are key in ensuring that VPNs remain tools for empowerment rather than instruments for malpractice.

The misuse of VPNs represents a growing challenge in the digital era. While these networks safeguard privacy and enhance accessibility, their potential for illegal activities cannot be ignored. A collaborative approach involving governments, organizations, and users is necessary to harness the benefits of VPNs responsibly while curbing abuse. Only then can society strike a balance between security, freedom, and legality in the online world.

The VB-G RAM G Act 2025 fixes structural gaps

■ SH. SHIVRAJ SINGH CHOUHAN



The President of India has assented to the Viksit Bharat Guarantee for Rozgar and Ajeevika Mission (Gramin) Act, 2025, enhancing the statutory wage employment guarantee to 125 days and strengthening rural livelihoods through empowerment, convergence, and saturation-based delivery for a resilient, self-reliant rural Bharat.

A misreading by some

Yet, even as the VB-G RAM G Act comes into force, there are some who have advanced a set of assumptions that do not withstand careful scrutiny. It is being claimed that the employment guarantee has been weakened, that decentralisation and demand-based rights have been undermined without consultation, and that the reform represents fiscal withdrawal that is disguised as restructuring. Each of these assertions rests on a misreading of the Act's substance and intent.

What has led to this misreading is a deeper conceptual error the assumption that welfare and development are opposing choices. The new framework is built on the opposite understanding: that welfare, anchored in an enhanced statutory livelihood guarantee, and development, anchored in durable infrastructure creation and productivity enhancement, are mutually reinforcing. Income support, asset creation, agricultural stability and long-term rural productivity are treated as a continuum rather than a trade-off. This is not aspirational rhetoric but an approach embedded in statutory design.

The suggestion that the legal right to employment has been diluted is incorrect. The Act retains the statutory and justiciable character of the employment guarantee while strengthening its enforceability. Far from being curtailed, the entitlement has been expanded from 100 to 125 days. Procedural dis-entitlement clauses that previously nullified unemployment allowance in practice have been removed, and time-bound grievance redress mechanisms have been reinforced. The reform directly addresses the long-recognised gap between statutory promise and lived reality.

It is also argued that demand-based employment has been abandoned in favour of top-down planning. This rests on a false binary.

Demand for work continues to originate from workers. What changes is that demand is no longer addressed only after distress has set in. By anchoring execution in advance, participatory village-level planning, the reform ensures that when workers seek employment, work is actually available rather than denied due to administrative unpreparedness. Planning, in this sense, does not suppress demand; it operationalises it.

The charge of centralisation overlooks the architecture of the law. Gram panchayats remain the primary planning and implementing authorities, and gram sabhas retain approval powers over local plans. What has changed is that decentralised planning is no longer ad hoc or episodic but institutionalised as a structured and participatory process. Viksit Gram Panchayat Plans are aggregated at the block, district, State and national levels to enable coordination, convergence and visibility across sectors, not to override local priorities. What is centralised is coherence; the decision-making authority remains local. This corrects fragmentation without undermining decentralisation.

Claims that the reform was pushed through without consultation are equally inconsistent with the record. The Bill was preceded by extensive consultations with State governments, technical workshops and multi-stakeholder discussions. Core design features - village planning structures, convergence mechanisms and digital governance systems were shaped by feedback from States and by lessons drawn from years of implementation.

An increase in allocations, equity

The broader premise that the employment guarantee was systematically weakened over the past decade does not align with facts. Budgetary allocations increased from ₹33,000 crore in 2013-14 to 286,000 crore in 2024-25. Person days generated rose from 1,660 crore in the period up to 2013-14 to 3,210 crore thereafter. Central funds released increased from ₹2.13 lakh crore to 78.53 lakh crore, and completed works expanded from 153 lakh to 862 lakh. Women's participation rose from 48% to 56.73%. Over 99% of fund transfer orders are now generated on time, and nearly 99% of active workers are linked to the Aadhaar Payment Bridge. These trends point to sustained commitment and improved delivery, not neglect.

What became evident over time, however, was that implementation experience had also revealed structural weaknesses in the earlier

framework itself-episodic employment, weak enforceability of unemployment allowance, fragmented asset creation and persistent scope for duplication and ghost entries. These weaknesses were visible on the ground during drought years, migration spikes and periods of disruption such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Fiscal restructuring under the new Act is also mischaracterised as abdication. The central government's contribution is increasing - the provision for the Centre's share rises from ₹86,000 crore to nearly 295,000 crore, underscoring continued and enhanced support for rural employment. The 60:40 funding model follows the long-established structure of centrally sponsored schemes, while the north-eastern and Himalayan States and Jammu and Kashmir are accorded a differential 90:10 ratio. Far from signalling fiscal withdrawal, this framework reinforces shared responsibility and accountability.

Equity is ensured through rule-based normative allocation, with State-wise allocations determined on objective parameters prescribed in the Rules. States are treated not as mere implementing agencies but as partners in development, empowered to notify and operationalise their own schemes within the statutory framework. Flexibility is explicitly preserved: during natural disasters, or other extraordinary situations, States may recommend special relaxations, which includes expansion of permissible works and temporary enhancement of employment. Rule-based allocation and contextual flexibility are thus balanced in a manner consistent with cooperative federalism.

The Act empowers States to notify, in advance, periods aggregating to 60 days in a financial year covering peak sowing and harvesting seasons during which works shall not be undertaken. Differentiated notifications may be issued at the level of districts, blocks, or gram panchayats based on agro-climatic conditions, ensuring that the enhanced employment guarantee complements agricultural operations.

The UPA's record

From its very first tenure, the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government failed to match rhetoric with delivery under MGNREGA. While the Congress manifesto promised "at least 100 days of work at a real wage of 100 per day", the government capped wages at 100 as early as 2009 and kept them frozen for years, ignoring inflation and rising

rural distress. The Centre openly admitted that States were acting arbitrarily under the scheme and justified the wage freeze by blaming State governments for 'indiscriminate increases'. This admission itself exposed a serious governance failure: the Congress-led Centre was unable to control even its own State governments, allowing MGNREGA to become vulnerable to misuse, fake job cards, and financial leakages.

The UPA's second term saw a steady decline in commitment to the scheme. Budgetary allocations were cut from 240,100 crore in 2010-11 to 33,000 crore by 2012-13, despite growing demand from States. In a parliamentary reply in 2013, Minister of State Rajeev Shukla acknowledged that employment under MGNREGA had fallen sharply from 7.55 crore workers in 2010-11 to just 6.93 crore by November 2013. Delayed fund releases, lack of transparency in payments, and administrative apathy discouraged workers from seeking employment, directly undermining the legal guarantee promised under the Act.

The Comptroller and Auditor General's 2013 report laid bare the true state of MGNREGA during the UPA years. It highlighted widespread corruption and mismanagement: over 4.33 lakh fake or defective job cards, thousands of crores lost to unaccounted withdrawals and irregular work, delayed or denied wages in 23 States, and poor record-keeping in more than half of India's gram panchayats. States with the highest concentration of rural poor- Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and Maharashtra used only about 20% of allocated funds, proving that the scheme failed precisely where it was needed most.

To frame the debate as a choice between welfare and development is to pose a false dichotomy. Welfare, when anchored in a guaranteed livelihood, and development, when anchored in durable rural infrastructure and productivity, are not competing objectives but interdependent ones. The real decision was whether to freeze a framework that often under-delivered, or to reform it into a modern, enforceable, and integrated employment guarantee that advances welfare through development. The new Act preserves the legal right to work, expands entitlements, strengthens worker protections, and corrects structural weaknesses revealed through years of implementation. This is not demolition, but a process of renewal grounded in experience.

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The Christmas Tree: More than Just a Decoration

■ FR. JAIMON JOSEPH

As December comes around, the Christmas tree becomes a ubiquitous sight: in our churches; schools; living rooms, markets, and town squares. Decorated with lights, stars, and candles, it stands as one of the most recognisable symbols of Christmas. Looking past these decorations, this tree carries a deep history and a message that resonates with us today.

Historical Roots

Long before the Christian era evergreen plants were symbols of resilience and continuation of life. In the dead of winter, when everything else looked grey and lifeless, these trees were offered some signs of the continuation of life.

In the early Middle Ages, as Christianity spread across Europe, especially in Germany, old local traditions were incorporated and took on new meanings and symbolisms. One of the traditions associated with the origins of the Christmas tree comes from the "Paradise Play," a theatre performance held on Christmas Eve during the Middle Ages. In the play, a "Paradise Tree" decorated with apples symbolized the Garden of Eden. With the passage of time, the apples were replaced with ornaments, and other decorative elements and in the sixteenth century, the protestant reformer Martin Luther added candles to the decorative tapestry of the Christmas tree to represent the light of Christ. Thus, the symbolism associated with the tree itself was transformed: from representing humanity's fall to celebrating the new life and hope at the heart of the Christmas story.

The Christian Meaning



The theological significance of the Christmas Tree is very profound as it symbolizes the following: The Evergreen: It signifies the continuation of life even in the dead of the win-

ter cold and correspondingly in difficult situations of our life; The Lights: These represent the idea of hope breaking through the dark, Christ as "light" (Jn 8.12) in a world

which is often foggy and dark offers us direction; The star or angel: These at the top point us to Bethlehem, to divine guidance, the Good News proclaimed to all humanity and our yearning for the divine.

A Message for our Times

Honestly acknowledging, Christmas can be a stressful time: decorations; Church services; despatching of greeting cards; exchanging cakes and wishes; shopping sprees; posting social media messages .. the list goes on. But this tree, in its simplest form, challenges us to push back against these seasonal chores:

Firstly, it is a call to hope: In a world that feels fractured by division and uncertainty, Christmas shines as a reminder that goodness prevails. Just as the evergreen stays green, we are invited to stay rooted and keep the faith, no matter the season.

Secondly, an invitation to be the light of Christ: We are invited not just to admire the glow of the light. The message of Christ's birth is a call to action: to let His light shine through us in compassion, justice, forgiveness, and service to the needy and those who live in the peripheries as the late Pope Francis reminds.

Thirdly, offers a vertical outlook: The Christmas tree reminds us of balance: to be grounded in the world yet looking to the heavens. Let us not lose the light of Christ which comes from above, while enjoying the festivities.

Every Christmas is a steady reminder that the season is about who we welcome into our lives. It is an invitation to live with a little more hope, a little more light, a little more charity, a little more compassion and a lot more peace.

Where are the sympathizers of Palestine when Hindus are being persecuted in Bangladesh?

■ AJAY KUMAR

There is no shortage in India of leaders and political parties who do not hesitate to stand with Muslims in any corner of the world. When Israel takes action against Hamas terrorists in Gaza, leaders of many parties and Muslim organizations here start beating their chests and even turn violent in protest. Congress General Secretary Priyanka Vadra even arrived in Parliament carrying a Palestine bag as a mark of protest. But these same people feel ashamed to speak even a word when Hindus are persecuted or even killed anywhere in the world. These leaders, who constantly attack the Bharatiya Janata Party or Hindu organizations in the name of Dalits and backward classes, do not see the atrocities being committed against Hindus in Bangladesh and Pakistan. This can be called the peak of Muslim appeasement politics. Today, protests are being held across the country over the murder of a Hindu youth in Bangladesh, but except for a few exceptions, no major Muslim organization or Muslim vote-based leader is present. This clearly shows their attitude towards Hindus. From Congress leader Rahul Gandhi to

Samajwadi Party's Akhilesh Yadav, Azad Samaj Party's Chandrashekhhar Azad, and Rashtriya Janata Dal's Tejashwi Yadav, all are maintaining silence. The reason is clear: fear of losing the Muslim vote bank. This petty politics of Muslim appeasement has been going on for years by riding on the backs of Dalits and backward classes.

It is noteworthy that after the fall of Sheikh Hasina's government in Bangladesh, violence that began in August 2024 has targeted the Hindu community. According to reports, thousands of Hindu homes were attacked, temples were demolished, and women were subjected to atrocities. Especially backward and Dalit Hindus, such as the Namasudra and other castes, have been the worst affected. According to Human Rights Watch and local media, at least 200 Hindus have been killed, while property worth millions of dollars has been destroyed. If we focus specifically on Dalit Hindu communities, the picture becomes even more horrifying. These people, living in rural areas of Bangladesh, were already victims of poverty and discrimination. Violent mobs burned their villages and abducted women. Yet Dalit

leaders in India are silent. Why? Because they do not want to upset the Muslim vote bank. This hypocrisy is clearly visible when these leaders play the Dalit card during domestic elections. Congress leader Rahul Gandhi, who portrays himself as a messiah of Dalits, raised slogans of justice. During the "Bharat Jodo Yatra," he ate at Dalit homes and carried out a "Nyay Yatra." But when Dalit Hindus are being massacred in Bangladesh there is not a single word from him. No statement in Parliament or on social media. Why? In reality, Rahul's silence is strategic. In the 2024 Lok Sabha elections, Congress bet on a Muslim-Dalit alliance. Raising the Bangladesh issue could break that alliance. Remember, when violence erupted in Manipur, Rahul immediately visited the state but Bangladesh? Complete silence. This is not Dalit politics; it is vote bank politics. Muslim appeasement while riding on Dalit shoulders.

From Samajwadi Party founder Mulayam Singh Yadav to Akhilesh Yadav, the PDA (Backward, Dalit, Minority) formula has been their main weapon. In the 2022 Uttar Pradesh Assembly elections, they strengthened the Muslim-Yadav

alliance. But atrocities against Dalit Hindus in Bangladesh? Akhilesh's tongue seems paralyzed. Why? Because nearly 40 percent of the Samajwadi Party's votes come from Muslims.

Akhilesh has never mentioned the Bangladesh violence. Instead, he targets the Ram Temple to keep Muslims happy. To weaken Dalit leader Mayawati, the Samajwadi Party supported Chandrashekhhar Azad. But if Dalit rights are being crushed in Bangladesh, why the silence? This is petty backward-class politics where Hindu Dalits are forgotten. Chandrashekhhar Azad of the Azad Samaj Party (Kanshiram) calls himself a Bhim Army warrior. He took to the streets against the Citizenship Amendment Act and incited Dalit youth.

But when Dalit Hindus are being persecuted in Bangladesh his eyes are closed. Chandrashekhhar called the Citizenship Amendment Act anti-Dalit, even though Dalit Hindus from Bangladesh are ready to become refugees. Chandrashekhhar, an MP from Nagina, Uttar Pradesh, has entered into an alliance with the Samajwadi Party. In the lure of Muslim votes, he is ignoring the

issue of Hindu Dalits. On social media, he talks about caste discrimination, but the pain of Dalits in Bangladesh neither appears before his eyes nor reaches his ears. It is clear that his revolution is only for votes, not for genuine Dalit welfare.

Tejashwi Yadav of the Rashtriya Janata Dal runs the Muslim-Yadav formula in Bihar. His father, Lalu Prasad Yadav, always practiced Muslim appeasement. Tejashwi tried to woo Dalits in the 2025 Bihar Assembly elections, but Bangladesh? Not even a single tweet. In Bihar, the 17 percent Muslim vote is decisive. Tejashwi's silence is tactical.

He attacks the Modi government over the Citizenship Amendment Act and the National Register of Citizens, but avoids the issue of Hindu refugees from Bangladesh so that the Muslim vote bank is not angered. Recall that when Rohingya Muslims faced atrocities, Lalu and Tejashwi raised an uproar. But when Hindu Dalits are targeted silence.

This is the dark truth of backward-class politics. These leaders treat Dalits and backward classes merely as vote banks but remain silent when real danger arises. In Bangladesh, the Hindu population

has declined from 20 percent to 8 percent. Dalit Hindus are the most vulnerable. The Indian government has given refuge to refugees, but the opposition remains silent. Why? Because the Muslim vote share of 18 to 20 percent can change electoral outcomes. This is double standards talk of Dalit reservation at home, but ignoring the massacre of Dalit Hindus abroad. Political analysts believe that the upcoming 2026 West Bengal and 2027 Uttar Pradesh Assembly elections are a major reason behind this silence. Dalit organizations like the Bhim Army are also trapped in Muslim alliance politics.

Meanwhile, the Bharatiya Janata Party has raised the Bangladesh issue through Dalit leaders like Ramdas Athawale. If Dalit and backward leaders abandon Muslim appeasement, Hindu Dalits can benefit. The Bangladesh government should be questioned, and refugees should be given the benefits of the Citizenship Amendment Act. Otherwise, this petty politics will continue. Dalits must understand that these leaders who climb on their backs are actually hungry for votes. Raise the pain of Bangladesh only then will a true revolution come.

