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VIKSIT BHARAT-GUARANTEE FOR ROZGAR AND AJEEVIKA MISSION (GRAMIN) BILL

The Union government has proposed replacing MGNREGA with the Viksit Bharat-Guarantee for Rozgar and Ajeevika Mission (Gramin) Bill. While promising expanded employment and technological efficiency, the move has raised concerns over fiscal federalism, demand-driven design and the dilution of the rural safety net.

VB—G RAM G Bill at a glance

A look at the key provisions of the **Viksit Bharat—Guarantee for Rozgar and Ajeevika Mission (Gramin) or VB—G RAM G Bill, 2025**, being brought by the Centre to replace the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, or MGNREGA:

What's the bill?

VB—G RAM G Bill, 2025 proposes to establish a modern statutory framework aligned with Viksit Bharat 2047, guaranteeing 125 days of employment per rural household whose adult members volunteer to do unskilled manual work.

What makes it better than MGNREGA?

- The new bill represents a major upgrade over MGNREGA, fixing structural weaknesses while enhancing employment, transparency, planning, and accountability.
- It proposes guaranteed 125 days of wage employment a year, up from 100 days under MGNREGA, giving rural households higher income security.
- While MGNREGA works were scattered across many categories, the new bill focuses on four major types of works: ensuring durable assets that directly support water security, core rural infrastructure, livelihood-related infrastructure creation and climate adaptation.

How will it benefit... The rural economy?

- It aims to strengthen rural economy by productive asset creation, higher incomes, and better resilience.
- It seeks to improve water security, core rural infra, livelihood infra, climate resilience, higher employment and consumption, and reduced distress migration.

The Farmers?

- The bill mandates 60 days of no-work during peak sowing/harvesting period, preventing labour shortages during critical farm operations.
- It also prioritises water works to improve irrigation, groundwater and multi-season cropping potential.

The Labourers?

- The guaranteed 125 days of wage work means 25% more potential earnings than MGNREGA.
- The bill also mandates states to pay unemployment allowance if no work is provided to an applicant.



Why shift to normative funding?

- A demand-based model leads to unpredictable allocations and mismatched budgeting. Normative funding uses objective parameters, ensuring predictable, rational planning while still guaranteeing that every eligible worker receives employment or unemployment allowance.

What transparency measures are built into the new bill?

- AI-based fraud detection; central and state steering panels for oversight; focus on four key verticals for rural development; enhanced monitoring role for panchayats; GPS/mobile-based monitoring; real-time MIS dashboards; weekly disclosures; and stronger social audits.

Will cost sharing burden states financially?

- No. The structure is balanced and sensitive to state capacity. It will be 60:40 (Centre: state) for all states, except Northeastern and Himalayan states as well as UTs
- States can seek extra support during disasters.

What happens to workers during the no-work period?

- Workers shift to agriculture, which pays higher seasonal wages, benefitting both farmers and labourers.
- 60 days is aggregated, not continuous, and workers still get 125 guaranteed days in the remaining ~300 days.

Main Arguments (Rationale for Reform)

Need for Reform in MGNREGA: MGNREGA has faced long-standing issues such as delayed wage payments, asset quality concerns, leakages and weak worksite monitoring. Reforming design and implementation was necessary to improve efficiency and accountability.

Enhanced Employment Guarantee: VB-G RAM G proposes 125 days of guaranteed wage employment per rural household annually, compared to 100 days under MGNREGA, signalling an intent to strengthen livelihood security amid rural distress.

Avoiding Agricultural Labour Distortions: The Bill restricts employment during a 60-day notified peak sowing and harvesting period, addressing criticism that MGNREGA distorted farm labour availability and agricultural wages.

Technology-Driven Governance: Use of biometric authentication, GPS-enabled attendance, mobile-based monitoring and AI-driven fraud detection aims to reduce leakages and improve transparency, building on DBT reforms under MGNREGA.

Crisis-Time Performance Legacy: The government highlights record employment generation during the pandemic – 389 crore person-days in 2020–21 and 364 crore in 2021–22 – demonstrating the scheme’s counter-cyclical role during economic shocks.

Challenges / Criticisms

- **Adverse Fiscal Federalism Shift:** MGNREGA mandated 100% central funding of wages and 75% of material costs. VB-G RAM G shifts to a 60:40 Centre–State sharing ratio (90:10 for North-East and Himalayan states), significantly burdening fiscally constrained states.
- **Risk of Suboptimal Implementation:** States struggling to mobilise their share may limit coverage or delay payments, echoing the experience of PM Fasal Bima Yojana where delayed state contributions undermined scheme performance.
- **Erosion of Demand-Driven Architecture:** MGNREGA was designed as a rights-based, demand-driven programme where states assessed labour demand and the Centre responded with funds. VB-G RAM G replaces this with “normative allocations” determined by the Centre, weakening decentralisation.
- **Threat to Legal Entitlement:** MGNREGA provided a statutory right to work with unemployment allowance for non-provision. Centralised allocation risks converting a rights-based guarantee into a budget-limited welfare programme.
- **State Capacity and Equity Concerns:** Backward states with high poverty, weak revenue bases and high MGNREGA dependence may be disproportionately affected, undermining regional equity and inclusive growth objectives.

Way Forward

- **Restore Strong Central Funding:** For flagship social protection schemes like rural employment, the Centre should bear a dominant share of financing, especially wages, to prevent exclusion due to state fiscal stress.

- **Retain Demand-Driven Core:** Normative allocations may be used as a baseline, but demand-based supplementary funding must be guaranteed to preserve the scheme's legal and counter-cyclical character.
- **Differentiated Fiscal Design:** Introduce variable Centre-State ratios based on state poverty levels, fiscal capacity and distress indicators, rather than a uniform 60:40 formula.
- **Technology with Human Oversight:** Digital tools should complement – not replace – local verification. Safeguards against biometric failures, digital exclusion and wrongful deletions must be institutionalised.
- **Strengthen Panchayati Raj Role:** Empower Gram Panchayats in planning, monitoring and social audits to preserve bottom-up governance and community accountability.

MGNREGA undoubtedly required reform, but VB-G RAM G risks weakening India's rural employment safety net through poor fiscal design and centralisation. Sustainable reform must balance efficiency with federal equity, demand responsiveness and the rights-based spirit of rural employment guarantees.

INDIA-RUSSIA RECIPROCAL EXCHANGE OF LOGISTICS SUPPORT (RELOS) AGREEMENT

The ratification of the India–Russia Reciprocal Exchange of Logistics Support (RELOS) agreement institutionalises military logistics cooperation, expanding India's operational reach from the Indo-Pacific to the Arctic while reinforcing its strategic autonomy in a multipolar world.

Main Arguments: Significance of RELOS for India–Russia Relations

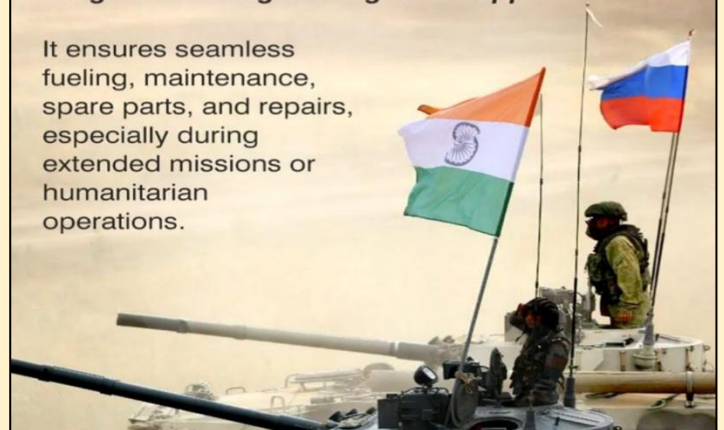
- **Institutionalising Defence Logistics Cooperation:** RELOS establishes a formal framework for reciprocal access to military bases, ports, and airfields, governing refuelling, repairs, maintenance, and movement of troops, warships, and aircraft during exercises, training, and other mutually agreed operations.
- **Enhancing India's Strategic Reach:** For India, access to Russian facilities – from Vladivostok in the Pacific to Murmansk in the Arctic – extends the Indian Navy's and Air Force's operational endurance during long-range deployments, particularly for Russian-origin platforms that dominate India's defence inventory (nearly 60% by some estimates).
- **Arctic and Indo-Pacific Convergence:** RELOS aligns with India's Arctic Policy (2022) by enabling logistical access near the Northern Sea Route, critical amid climate-induced opening of Arctic shipping lanes. Simultaneously, it complements India's Indo-Pacific strategy by leveraging Russia's vast Eurasian footprint without aligning with any single bloc.
- **Support for Multipolarity:** For Russia, reciprocal access to Indian ports and airfields strengthens its operational presence in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), reinforcing Moscow's vision of a multipolar order amid Western sanctions and strategic isolation.

What is RELOS?

The RELOS agreement allows military aircraft, ships, and troops from both countries to use each other's facilities for:

- **Joint exercises and training**
- **Humanitarian operations and disaster-relief missions**
- **Deployment of troops and equipment, regulated alongside logistics support**

It ensures seamless fueling, maintenance, spare parts, and repairs, especially during extended missions or humanitarian operations.



- **Operational Flexibility Beyond Combat:** The agreement explicitly covers humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR), joint exercises, and training, reflecting India's preference for flexible, non-alliance-based security cooperation rather than treaty-bound military alliances.

Comparison with India's Logistics Pacts with the U.S.

- **Functional Similarity with Strategic Distinction:** RELOS is comparable to LEMOA (2016) with the U.S., which enables reciprocal logistics support. However, unlike COMCASA (2018) and BECA (2020), RELOS does not involve encrypted communications or geospatial intelligence sharing, preserving India's strategic autonomy.
- **Balanced Hedging Strategy:** While U.S. foundational agreements enhance interoperability within the QUAD framework to counterbalance China in the Indo-Pacific, RELOS demonstrates India's parallel commitment to long-standing defence ties with Russia, avoiding exclusive alignment.
- **Tailored to Bilateral Context:** RELOS is customised to India-Russia defence cooperation, particularly relevant for sustaining Russian-origin equipment, unlike U.S. pacts which are oriented towards interoperability with American platforms and systems.

Criticisms and Strategic Concerns

Geopolitical Signalling Risks: At a time of heightened Russia-West tensions, deeper military cooperation with Russia could invite diplomatic pressure on India from Western partners, especially amid sanctions regimes.

Limited Interoperability Gains: Unlike COMCASA or BECA, RELOS does not significantly enhance network-centric warfare capabilities or intelligence integration, limiting its transformative impact on military modernisation.

Dependence on Legacy Platforms: By facilitating sustainment of Russian-origin equipment, RELOS may indirectly slow India's diversification of defence imports and indigenisation under Atmanirbhar Bharat.

Arctic Militarisation Concerns: Increased military logistics access in the Arctic could entangle India, even indirectly, in great power rivalries in a region India officially approaches through scientific, environmental, and commercial lenses.

Operational Utilisation Uncertainty: The agreement's real value depends on frequency of use and political will; without regular exercises or deployments, RELOS risks remaining largely symbolic.

Way Forward

Strategic Transparency: India should clearly communicate that RELOS is a logistics-enabling arrangement, not a military alliance, reinforcing its doctrine of strategic autonomy.

Balanced Defence Diversification: Use RELOS pragmatically for sustainment while continuing diversification of defence procurement and indigenisation under Make in India-Defence.

Arctic Engagement with Restraint: Leverage Arctic access primarily for scientific research, commercial shipping insights, and climate cooperation, avoiding overt militarisation.

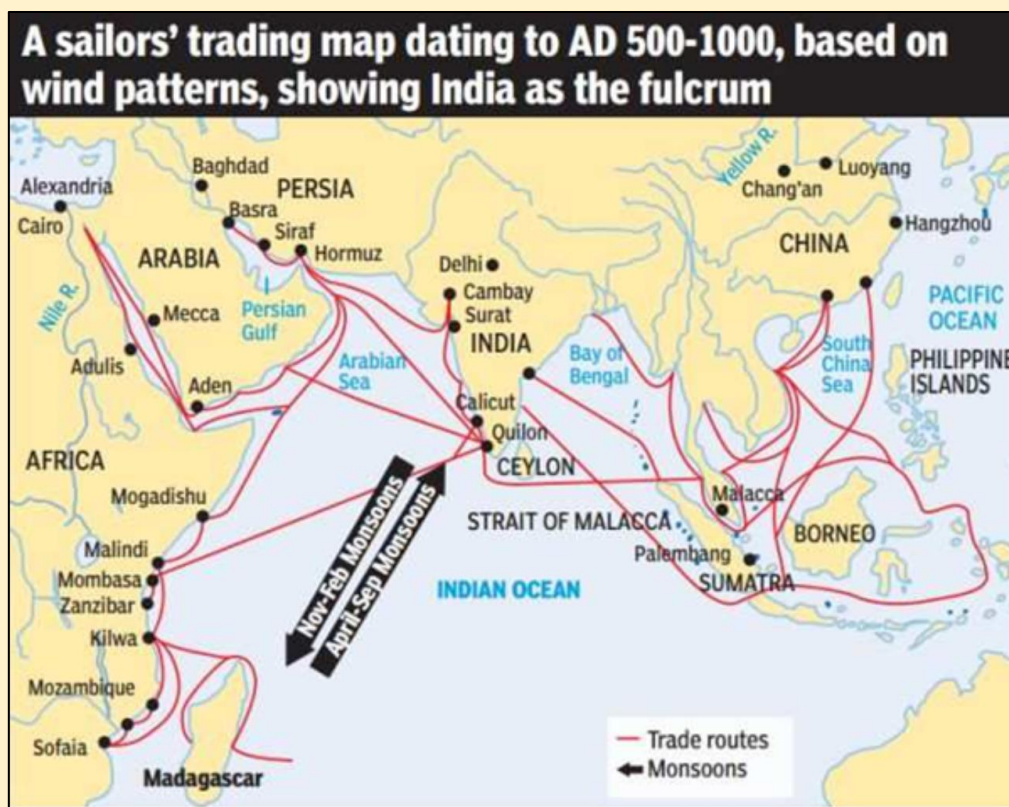
Synergy with Multilateral Engagements: Position RELOS as complementary to, not contradictory with, India's engagements with QUAD, ASEAN, and SCO frameworks.

Operationalisation through Exercises: Conduct regular joint exercises and HADR drills to translate the agreement into functional military and diplomatic capital.

RELOS reflects India's calibrated foreign policy – deepening defence cooperation with Russia while maintaining diversified strategic partnerships. Its success will lie in judicious operational use that enhances reach without compromising India's autonomy or diplomatic balance.

PROJECT MAUSAM

Archaeological Survey of India organised a National Workshop on the Project Mausam titled as "Islands at the Crossroads of Maritime Networks within Indian Ocean Region."



About Project Mausam:

- **Nature:** It is an Indian government-led cultural-diplomacy and maritime heritage initiative.
- **Nodal ministry:** It was launched in 2014 by the Ministry of Culture.
- **Objective:** It aims to explore the multi-faceted Indian Ocean 'world' – collating archaeological and historical research in order to document the diversity of cultural, commercial, and religious interactions in the Indian Ocean.
- **Countries involved:** A total of 39 Indian Ocean littoral countries have been identified under Project Mausam.
- **Significance:** It serves as a tool for soft power diplomacy and counters historical narratives by focusing on shared Afro-Asian heritage.

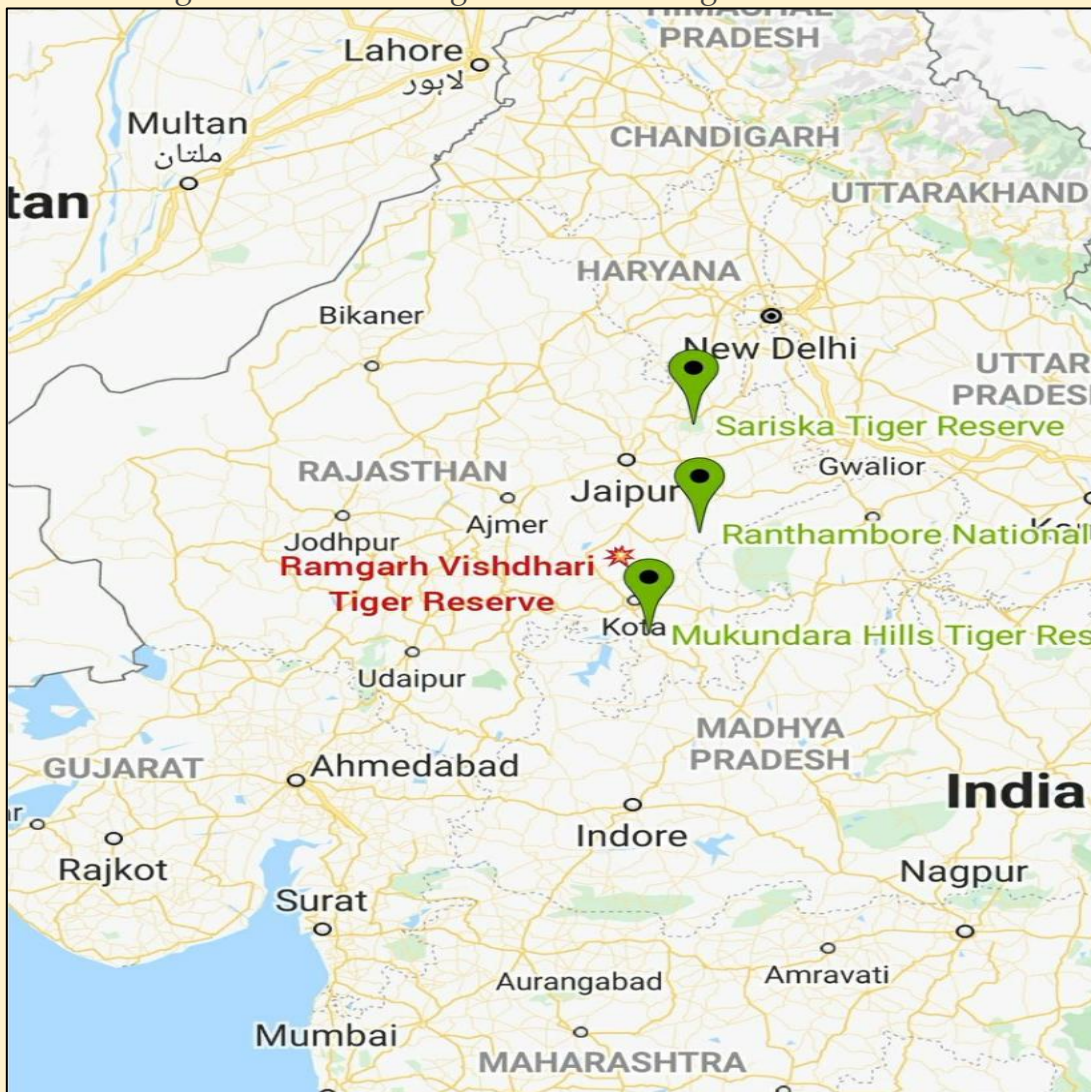
- **Implementation:** The project is implemented by the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) as the nodal agency with research support of the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts (IGNCA) and National Museum as associate bodies.
- **Working mechanism:** The project will have two major units, viz. Project Research Unit and World Heritage Nomination Unit.

● **Focus areas:**

- To study and document the Indian Ocean “world” shaped by monsoon winds (Mausam).
- To prepare transnational nominations for the UNESCO World Heritage List, such as the “Routes followed by the Cholas” and the “Spread of Buddhism”.
- To promote research on themes related to the study of maritime routes through international scientific seminars and meetings and by adopting a multidisciplinary approach.
- To encourage the production of specialized works, as well as publications for the general public, with an attempt at promoting a broader understanding of the concept of a common heritage and multiple identities.

RAMGARH VISHDHARI TIGER RESERVE

Marking the state’s first inter-state tiger translocation and country’s second, a tigress is set to be airlifted from Pench Tiger Reserve to Ramgarh Vishdhari Tiger Reserve.



About Ramgarh Vishdhari Tiger Reserve:

Location: It is located in Rajasthan's Bundi district.

Establishment: The Government of Rajasthan declared it a sanctuary under Section 5 of the Rajasthan Wildlife and Bird Protection Act, 1951 on 20th May, 1982. It was notified as a tiger reserve on May 16, 2022.

Area: Spread over 1,501.89 sq.km., the reserve has a 481.90 sq.km. core area and a 1,019.98 sq.km. buffer zone.

Importance: It is strategically positioned to serve as a crucial corridor between the Ranthambore Tiger Reserve to the northeast and the Mukundara Hills Tiger Reserve to the south.

Associated rivers: The Mez River, a tributary of the Chambal River, meanders through the reserve.

Topography: The reserve's topography is characterized by the rugged terrains of the Aravalli and Vindhyan mountain ranges, interspersed with valleys and plateaus.

Vegetation: It mainly consists of dry deciduous forests.

Flora: The habitat is dominated by Dhok (*Anogeissus pendula*) trees. Other important flora includes Khair, Ronj, Amaltas, Gurjan, Saler, etc.

Fauna: The area is dominated by leopards and sloth bears. Other important fauna include the Jungle cat, Golden jackal, Hyaena, Crested Porcupine, Indian Hedgehog, Rhesus macaque, hanuman langur, etc.

DHRUVA SYSTEM

The Department of Posts released a draft amendment to the Post Office Act, 2023, aimed at introducing an interoperable, standardised and user-centric DHRUVA system.

About DHRUVA System:

Full Form: DHRUVA stands for Digital Hub for Reference and Unique Virtual Address.



Development: It is developed by the Department of Posts and it sets the foundation for a nationwide Digital Address Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI).

Objective: It envisions a standardized, interoperable, and geocoded digital addressing system that supports secure, consent-based, and seamless sharing of address information.

Builds upon DIGIPIN: It builds upon the earlier launch of the Digital Postal Index Number (DIGIPIN) – the National Addressing Grid introduced by the Department of Posts.

Related to AaaS: At its core is the concept of Address-as-a-Service (AaaS) – the array of services associated with address data management to support secure and efficient interactions between users, government entities, and private sector organizations.

Significance: By recognizing digital addresses as core infrastructure, akin to Aadhaar and Unified Payments Interface (UPI), DHRUVA sets out to streamline everything from e-governance and online commerce to urban planning and emergency services.

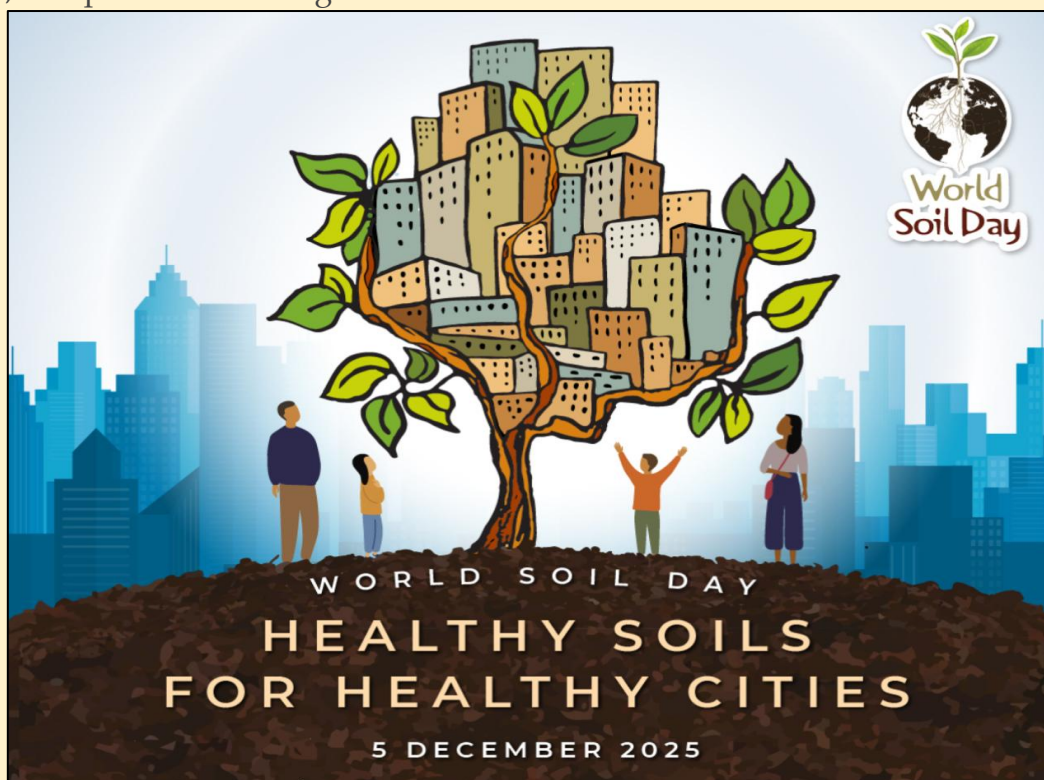
User-centric design: The policy also places emphasis on user-centric design, ensuring that citizens have meaningful control over how their address data is used and shared.

Control over data: Citizens will retain full control over their digital address identity, with options to manage access, update details, and share their verified address securely for various use cases.

Other features: It will also feature multilingual support, mobile-first access, and integration with identity systems like Aadhaar, thereby improving usability and accessibility for all demographics.

WORLD SOIL DAY 2025

World Soil Day 2025 highlights the theme “Healthy Soils for Healthy Cities”, drawing attention to the critical but overlooked role of urban soils in climate resilience, flood control, food systems, biodiversity, and public health as global urbanisation accelerates.



Main Arguments

Urban Climate Regulation: Healthy soils covered with vegetation help **combat heat islands**, absorb heat, and sequester carbon – acting as natural air conditioners for urban spaces.

Flood Prevention: Urban soils function as **sponges**, absorbing rainfall, filtering water, and recharging aquifers – vital as cities face more intense climate-driven floods.

Urban Food Systems: Fertile soils underpin **rooftop farms, community gardens**, and short food chains that enhance urban nutrition and local resilience.

Biodiversity Support: Soil ecosystems host **billions of organisms**, sustaining decomposers, pollinators, and plant life essential to urban ecological balance.

Human Well-Being: Soil-rich green spaces provide **mental and physical health benefits**, reducing stress and encouraging outdoor activity (“Vitamin N”).

Challenges / Criticisms

Widespread Soil Degradation: Nearly **one-third of global soils are degraded**, with urban soils hit hardest by contamination, compaction, and erosion.

Soil Sealing by Infrastructure: Excessive use of **concrete and asphalt** suffocates soil life, blocks infiltration, and increases flood risk.

Loss of Organic Matter: Construction, pollution, and poor landscaping degrade soil fertility, affecting vegetation growth and food safety.

Industrial Contamination: Heavy metals, chemicals, and waste severely reduce urban soil quality, threatening human health and ecological integrity.

Low Public Awareness: Soil remains an invisible resource; urban citizens and municipalities often overlook its critical ecosystem services.

Way Forward

Urban Soil Restoration: Promote **soil testing, compost addition, organic amendments**, and enforce restrictions on further soil sealing.

Green Infrastructure Expansion: Develop **parks, rain gardens, bioswales, tree belts**, and permeable pavements to manage floods and heat.

Strengthen Urban Agriculture: Encourage **community gardens, rooftop cultivation, and balcony plantations** to improve soil health and food resilience.

Responsible Soil Management: Promote **reduced chemical input**, mulching, native species planting, and topsoil conservation in urban planning.

Soil Literacy & Composting: Integrate **soil education in schools**, community workshops, and household composting to build a culture of soil stewardship.

Healthy cities are built not just on steel and concrete but on living soils that regulate climate, sustain biodiversity, absorb floods, nurture gardens, and improve human well-being. As urbanisation accelerates, protecting and restoring soils must become a central pillar of India’s environmental and urban policy.

WORLD'S LARGEST GRAIN STORAGE PLAN

India's Pilot Project under the "World's Largest Grain Storage Plan in Cooperative Sector" has prompted significant policy upgrades to strengthen food-grain storage at the Primary Agricultural Credit Society (PACS) level.



Ministry of Cooperation & Panchayats, Government of India

Benefits of Food Grain Storage Plan



Ensured food security



Reduced food grain wastage



Fair prices for farmers' produce



Secure storage facilities for agricultural products




The initiative aims to address national storage deficits by converging multiple central schemes to create modern agri-infrastructure.

Design of the Grain Storage Plan

The plan focuses on developing godowns, processing units, Fair Price Shops and Custom Hiring Centres through coordinated use of schemes such as AIF, AMI, SMAM and PMFME. State-wise implementation began after cabinet approval in May 2023, with progress monitored through designated field agencies.

Key Lessons from the Pilot Phase

The pilot highlighted several constraints, including outdated construction norms under AMI, limited financial capacity of PACS, lack of standardised documentation, and delays due to absent hiring assurances.

It also underscored the need to align PACS selection with storage-deficit locations mapped by national procurement and warehousing bodies.



Benefits of Food Grain Storage Plan



Prevention of distress selling at low prices



Lower transportation costs



Diversified business activities for PACS



Improved financial capacity of PACS




Major Policy Enhancements Introduced

In response, the government revised cost norms, expanded subsidies and eased financial conditions. Loan repayment under AIF was extended to 2+8 years. Construction cost ceilings were raised to ₹7,000/MT for plain areas and ₹8,000/MT for northeastern states.

Subsidies for PACS were increased to 33.33%, with additional support for ancillary works such as weighbridges and internal roads. Detailed SOPs, model DPRs and unified documentation were issued to streamline execution.

The plan aims to empower PACS by establishing **decentralized storage facilities, processing units, and custom hiring centres.**

Warehouses and other infrastructure will be developed at PACS in 24 States/Union Territories, improving storage and reducing food wastage.

Under the Pilot Project of the Grain Storage Plan, grain storage godowns were constructed at **11 PACS across** Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Assam, Telangana, Tripura, and Rajasthan.

The Pilot Project has been extended, with over **500 additional PACS** identified for the construction of godowns.

Subsidies and interest subvention are provided to PACS through the-Agriculture **Infrastructure Fund (AIF)** and **Agricultural Marketing Infrastructure Scheme (AMI).**

PACS are village level cooperative credit societies that serve as the last link in a three-tier cooperative credit structure headed by the **State Cooperative Banks (SCB) at the state level.**

The pilot demonstrated the feasibility of PACS godowns operating as hubs for procurement, Fair Price Shops and hiring centres. To broaden impact, the plan has been widened to include all cooperative societies and federations, enabling scalable storage infrastructure capable of supporting national food-security objectives.

SABHASAAR

SabhaSaar has been made available to all States/UTs, and Gram Panchayats are progressively adopting it for routine Gram Sabha and Panchayat meetings.



About SabhaSaar Initiative:

Nature: It is an AI-enabled voice-to-text meeting summarisation tool.

Nodal ministry: It is launched by the Ministry of Panchayati Raj.

Objective: It aims to streamline documentation and empower stakeholders with instant access to meeting insights in panchayats, administrative bodies, and rural development projects.

Adoption: It has been made available to all States/UTs, and Gram Panchayats are progressively adopting it for routine Gram Sabha and Panchayat meetings.

Significance: It will bring uniformity in minutes of the gram sabha meetings across the country. Panchayat officials can use their e-GramSwaraj login credentials to upload video/audio recordings on 'SabhaSaar'.

Use of AI: It leverages the power of AI to generate structured minutes of meetings from gram sabha videos and audio recordings. The AI model used in SabhaSaar operates on AI and cloud infrastructure provisioned through the India AI Compute Portal under the India AI Mission of MeitY.

Built on Bhashini: It is built on Bhashini, an AI-powered language translation platform launched by the government to bridge literacy, language, and digital divides. The tool generates transcription from a video or audio, translates it into a chosen output language and prepares a summary.

Transcription in major Indian languages: It enables transcription in all major Indian languages like Hindi, Bengali, Tamil, Telugu, Marathi and Gujarati, in addition to English.

EMPEROR PERUMBIDUGU MUTHARAIYAR II

Recently, Vice President of India released a commemorative postal stamp in honour of Emperor Perumbidugu Mutharaiyar II.



About Emperor Perumbidugu Mutharaiyar II:

- **Dynasty:** Perumbidugu Mutharaiyar belonged to the Mutharaiyar dynasty, which ruled central Tamil Nadu from 705 AD-745 AD.
- **Other names:** He was also known as 'Suvaran Maran' and 'Shatrubhayankar.'
- **Capital:** He ruled primarily from Tiruchirappalli.
- **Great administrator:** He is believed to have fought bravely in several battles alongside the Pallava king Nandivarman, and is remembered as a great administrator.
- **Patronage:** He seems to have patronised Shaivya and other scholars, as a Jain monk Vimalachandra is mentioned as visiting his court to debate them.
- **Political Status:** Initially, the Mutharaiyars were powerful feudatories of the Pallavas. As Pallava central authority weakened, Perumbidugu II emerged as an influential regional power.
- **Territorial extent:** The Mutharaiyars held sway over areas including Thanjavur, Pudukkottai, Perambalur, Tiruchirappalli, and others near the Cauvery river.
- **Cultural significance:** As the feudatories of the Pallavas, the Mutharaiyars were great temple builders. Muttarayars were also engaged in cave temple enterprises up to the opening decades of the ninth century.
- **Legacy:** They acted as a bridge between Pallava and Chola traditions, especially in temple architecture and governance.
- **Decline:** The Mutharaiyar rule declined in the mid-9th century after Vijayalaya Chola captured Thanjavur, marking the rise of the Imperial Cholas.

RUDRESWARA (RAMAPPA) TEMPLE

Recently, Ambassador and Permanent Representative of India to UNESCO-Paris visited the Rudreswara (Ramappa) Temple, in Palampet village of Mulugu district.



About Ramappa Temple:

Location: It is located in the state of Telangana.

Construction: It was constructed in 1213 AD during the reign of the Kakatiya Empire by Recharla Rudra, a general of Kakatiya king Ganapati Deva.

Presiding deity: The presiding deity here is Ramalingeswara Swamy.

Other names: It is also known as the Rudreswara Temple.

Uniqueness: It is probably the only temple in India that is named after the architect. The temple got its name Ramappa because of its chief sculptor Ramappa.

Structure: The temple stands on a 6 feet high star-shaped platform (Upapitha) with walls, pillars and ceilings adorned with intricate carvings.

Use of sandbox technique: The temple construction was done using the sandbox technique. This is a technique where the foundation pit is filled with a mixture of sand-lime, jaggery and black myrobalan fruit.

Earthquake-proof: It is made out of clay mixed with acacia wood, chaff and myrobalan fruit (a family of amla), and the bricks used in building the gopuram of the temple are light enough to float on water. Using this technique has made the temple light, meaning, in case of a natural event like an earthquake, the probability of it collapsing would be very low.

Historical Recognition: The traveller Marco Polo reportedly described it as the “brightest star in the galaxy of temples”.

Significance: In 2021, the temple was inscribed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site as “Kakatiya Rudreshwara (Ramappa) Temple, Telangana”.

COALSETU POLICY

The Union Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs recently approved the CoalSETU Policy by creation of new window in the NRS Linkage Policy.



About CoalSETU Policy:

- **Full Form:** CoalSETU stands for Coal Linkage for Seamless, Efficient & Transparent Utilisation.
- **Nature:** It is a new auction-based coal linkage window under the Non-Regulated Sector (NRS) Linkage Policy, allowing any domestic industrial buyer to secure long-term coal linkages for own use or export (up to 50%), except resale within India.
- **Objective:** It will allow allocation of coal linkages on auction basis on long-term for any industrial use and export.
- **Nodal ministry:** It is implemented by Ministry of Coal, Government of India.
- **Participation:** Any domestic buyer requiring coal can participate in the linkage auction. Traders are not allowed to bid under this window.

- **Key features of the policy:**

- **New CoalSETU Window in NRS Policy (2016):** It allows any industrial consumer to participate in coal linkage auctions. Existing NRS auctions for cement, sponge iron, steel, aluminium, CPPs will continue.
- **No End-Use Restrictions:** Coal can be used for own consumption, washing, or export (up to 50%). Coking coal is excluded from this window.
- **Export Flexibility:** Companies may export up to 50% of allotted coal. Coal can also be shared across group companies as per operational needs.
- **Alignment with Coal Sector Reforms:** It complements the 2020 reform allowing commercial mining without end-use restrictions.

- **Focus areas:**

- To ensure transparent, seamless and efficient utilisation of domestic coal resources.
- To promote ease of doing business and reduce dependence on coal imports.
- To boost availability of washed coal and support export opportunities.

PAX SILICA

The Congress party recently targeted Prime Minister over India's exclusion from the United States-led strategic initiative, Pax Silica.



About Pax Silica Initiative:

- **Nature:** It is a U.S.-led strategic initiative to build a secure, prosperous, and innovation-driven silicon supply chain—from critical minerals and energy inputs to advanced manufacturing, semiconductors, artificial intelligence (AI) infrastructure, and logistics.
- **Nomenclature:** The term 'Pax Silica' comes from the Latin term 'pax' which means peace, stability, and long-term prosperity. Silica refers to the compound that is refined into silicon, one of the chemical elements foundational to the computer chips that enable AI.

- **Objective:** It aims to reduce coercive dependencies, protect the materials and capabilities foundational to AI, and ensure aligned nations can develop and deploy transformative technologies at scale.
- **Countries that are part of Pax Silica:** These include Japan, South Korea, Singapore, Netherlands, United Kingdom, Israel, United Arab Emirates and Australia.
- **India's position:** Despite being part of the Quad critical minerals initiative and having a critical technology partnership with the US, India is not part of Pax Silica.
- **Major focus areas:**
 - Pursue projects to jointly address AI supply chain opportunities and vulnerabilities in priority critical minerals, semiconductor design, fabrication, and packaging, logistics and transportation, compute, and energy grids and power generation.
 - Pursue new joint ventures and strategic co-investment opportunities.
 - Protect sensitive technologies and critical infrastructure from undue access or control by countries of concern.
 - Build trusted technology ecosystems, including ICT systems, fibre-optic cables, data centres, foundational models and applications.

PONDURU KHADI

Ponduru Khadi, which was appreciated by Mahatma Gandhi 100 years ago, recently received Geographical Indication (GI) tag.



About Ponduru Khadi:

Location: Ponduru Khadi, is a famous handspun and handwoven cotton fabric from Andhra Pradesh.

Other names: It is locally known as Patnulu and it is produced in Ponduru village in Srikakulam district.

Associated schemes: It has been nominated for the One District One Product (ODOP) scheme from the Srikakulam district.

Historical significance: During the pre-independence era, Mahatma Gandhi mentioned its virtues in his Young India (the national weekly that Gandhiji edited).

Raw material: It is produced from one of three types of cotton: hill cotton, punasa cotton, or red cotton.

Source of cotton: Cotton is indigenous to Srikakulam district and is grown in and around Ponduru. The entire process, from cotton to fabric, is carried out manually.

Uniqueness: The process of cleaning the cotton with the jawbone of Valuga fish is unique to Ponduru khadi and is not practiced anywhere else in the world. Ponduru is the only place in India where spinners still use single-spindle charkhas with 24 spokes, also known as the “Gandhi Charkha”.

High quality fabric: The fabric is known for its very high yarn count of about 100–120, indicating extreme fineness.


PM VISHWAKARMA SCHEME

Recently, National Steering Committee (NSC) for PM Vishwakarma scheme approved several proposals and policy measures to improve loan sanctions and disbursements.

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PM Vishwakarma

Honouring Skills of Vishwakarmas



Objectives

- Enables the recognition of artisans and craftspeople as **Vishwakarma**, making them eligible to avail the benefits.
- Provides skill upgradation to hone the skills, make relevant and suitable training opportunities.
- Provides support for better and modern tools.
- Provides beneficiaries an easy access to collateral free credit and reduce the cost of credit by providing interest subvention.
- Provides incentives for digital transactions to encourage digital empowerment of Vishwakarmas.
- Provides a platform for brand promotion and market linkages.



About PM Vishwakarma Scheme:

- **Launch:** It was launched in September 2023 to provide holistic, end-to-end support to traditional artisans and craftspeople (Vishwakarmas).
- **Nodal ministry:** It is a central sector scheme launched by the Ministry of Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises.
- **Objective:** It aims to strengthen and nurture the Guru-Shishya parampara, or family-based practice of traditional skills by artisans and craftspeople working with their hands and tools.
- **Services offered:** It offers services like market linkage support, skill training, and incentives for digital transactions to artisans and craftspeople engaged in specified trades.
- **Time period:** It is fully funded by the central government with an outlay of ₹13,000 crore for five years (FY 2023-24 to FY 2027-28).
- **Coverage:** About five lakh families were covered in the first year and about 30 lakh families will be covered over five years.
- **Key Features of the Scheme:**
 - **Recognition:** Recognition of artisans and craftspeople through PM Vishwakarma certificate and ID card.
 - **Skill Upgradation:** Basic Training of 5-7 days and Advanced Training of 15 days or more, with a stipend of Rs. 500 per day;
 - **Toolkit Incentive:** A toolkit incentive of upto Rs. 15,000 in the form of e-vouchers at the beginning of Basic Skill Training.
 - **Credit Support:** Collateral free 'Enterprise Development Loans' of upto Rs. 3 lakhs in two tranches of Rs. 1 lakh and Rs. 2 lakh at a concessional rate of interest fixed at 5%.
- **Eligibility:**
 - It is available for rural and urban artisans and craftsmen across India.
 - It covers 18 traditional crafts such as Boat Maker; Armourer; Blacksmith; Hammer and Tool Kit Maker; etc.
 - Aged 18+, engaged in traditional trade, no similar loans in the past 5 years.
 - Only one member per family is eligible for registration and benefits.

VIKSIT BHARAT SHIKSHA ADHISHTHAN BILL, 2025

The Union government has tabled the Viksit Bharat Shiksha Adhishtan Bill, 2025 in the Lok Sabha, proposing a fundamental restructuring of India's higher education regulatory framework.

The Bill seeks to subsume existing bodies such as the University Grants Commission (UGC), All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE) and National Council for Teacher Education (NCTE) into a single overarching authority.

Single Regulator with Three Independent Verticals

The proposed legislation envisages a unified higher education regulator with three distinct verticals responsible for regulation, accreditation and academic standards.

The government has cited overlapping jurisdictions, excessive compliance burdens and weak quality assurance as key shortcomings of the existing system. By mandating outcome-based accreditation linked to institutional autonomy, the Bill aims to shift higher education governance towards a performance-oriented and transparent framework.

Institutions of National Importance Covered

A major departure from past practice is the explicit inclusion of Institutions of National Importance within the ambit of the new law. Section 2(1)(a) applies the Act to IITs, IIMs, NITs, IISc and similar institutions established by Acts of Parliament under the Ministry of Education.

Section 2(2) grants the law overriding effect on matters of coordination and standards, marking a clear reduction in the regulatory insulation these institutions have traditionally enjoyed.

Expanded Powers and Autonomy Safeguards

Sections 10 and 11 establish a Regulatory Council as the common regulator for higher education, with wide-ranging powers linked to accreditation and compliance.

While Section 49 includes a provision stating that the autonomy and independence of Institutions of National Importance will be protected, this safeguard is to be operationalised through future regulations approved by the Central Government. Provisions such as Section 45 on policy directions and Section 47 on supersession powers expand executive discretion across the sector.

Wide Institutional Scope and NEP Linkage

Beyond elite institutions, the Bill covers central, state and private universities, deemed universities, affiliated and autonomous colleges, technical and teacher education institutions, open and online education providers, and foreign universities operating in India. Professional practice in medicine, law, pharmacy and veterinary sciences remains with existing councils.

The government argues the legislation gives statutory backing to the National Education Policy 2020, which called for a single regulator, graded autonomy and globally competitive higher education institutions.

INDIA'S FIRST WILDLIFE-SAFE ROAD

The National Highways Authority of India has introduced India's first wildlife-safe road on National Highway 45 in Madhya Pradesh. The initiative aims to reduce animal-vehicle collisions while balancing highway development with wildlife conservation in ecologically sensitive regions.

Location and Ecological Significance

The project has been implemented on a 2 km ghat section of an 11.96 km highway stretch passing through the Veerangana Durgavati Tiger Reserve. The corridor also connects areas near the Nauradehi Wildlife Sanctuary, making it a critical zone for wildlife movement and conservation efforts.



Innovative Table-Top Red Markings

A key feature of the project is the introduction of table-top red markings, inspired by Dubai's Sheikh Zayed Road. These are 5 mm thick, hot-applied thermoplastic red surface layers laid across the carriageway in identified danger zones.

The slightly raised texture alerts drivers and naturally slows vehicles without causing sudden braking or discomfort. The bright red colour signals entry into a speed-restricted, wildlife-sensitive corridor, supported by international research and safety guidelines.

As part of a holistic safety approach, NHAI has constructed 25 dedicated wildlife underpasses to allow safe animal movement beneath the highway.

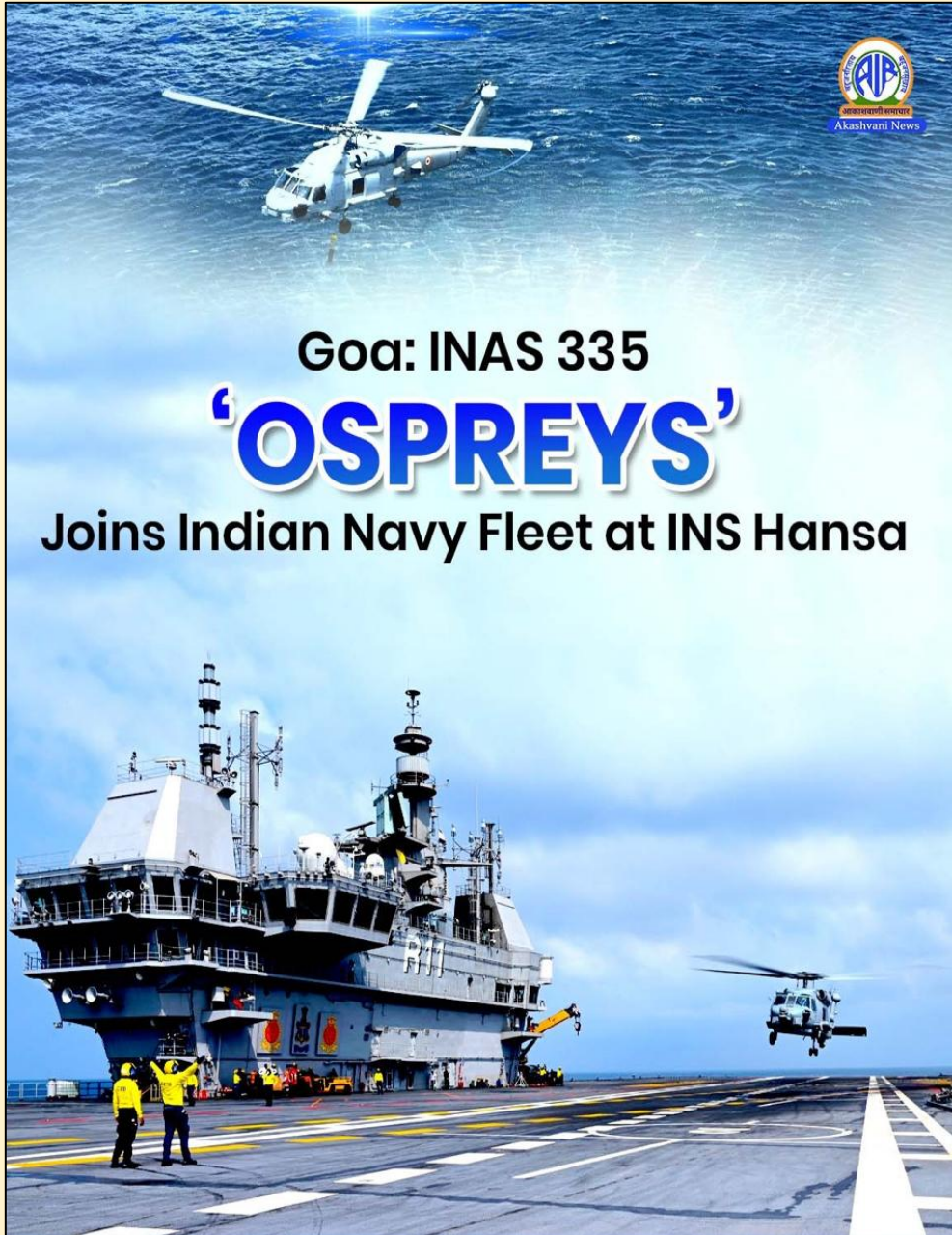
An eight-foot-high fence has been installed along the road to guide animals towards these underpasses and prevent them from straying onto the carriageway. Speed detection devices have also been deployed to alert motorists and encourage responsible driving.

Monitoring and Sustainable Highway Vision

Cameras have been installed on minor bridges, which also function as animal crossing points, to monitor wildlife movement. The project aligns with NHAI's Green Highways initiative, promoting sustainable and environmentally responsible infrastructure. If successful, the model is expected to be replicated on other national highways across the country.

INAS 335 'Ospreys'

The Indian Navy has commissioned INAS 335 'Ospreys' at INS Hansa, Goa, formally inducting its second squadron of MH-60R multi-role helicopters. The commissioning marks a major enhancement of naval aviation capability on the western seaboard and strengthens India's operational readiness amid a complex and contested maritime security environment.



Strategic Boost to Western Seaboard Aviation

Commissioning the squadron, Chief of Naval Staff Admiral Dinesh K Tripathi stated that the induction comes at a time of shifting geopolitics, rapid technological change and emerging non-traditional threats.

He emphasised that robust maritime security and credible deterrence are essential to protect India's sea lines of communication and expanding maritime interests. The MH-60R squadron is expected to significantly improve the Navy's ability to respond swiftly across the western maritime theatre.

Enhanced Multi-Role Operational Capability

The MH-60R helicopters are equipped with advanced sensors, modern avionics and a potent weapons suite. They are optimised for anti-submarine warfare, maritime strike and search-and-rescue missions.

Admiral Tripathi noted that the induction of the helicopter as the first operational squadron on the western seaboard marks an important milestone, enhancing maritime domain awareness and rapid response capabilities. The platform has already demonstrated its effectiveness during exercises such as TROPEX-25, the Tri-Services Exercise 2025, and Operation Sindoor.

Historical Context and Capability Expansion

The commissioning coincides with significant milestones in India's naval history. The year 2025 marks 75 years since the approval of the Fleet Air Arm, which transformed the Navy into a multidimensional force. December 17 also commemorates the launch of Operation Vijay in 1961, when naval aviation played a key role in the liberation of Goa.

Admiral Tripathi also highlighted ongoing capability enhancement plans, including the acquisition of 15 MQ-9B Sea Guardian remotely piloted aircraft and the contract for 26 Rafale-M carrier-borne fighters.

Focus on Aatmanirbharta and Operational Readiness

The Navy has underlined its commitment to Aatmanirbharta by integrating indigenous weapons, sensors and systems on the MH-60R platform. These include software-defined radios, data links and depth charges, supported by indigenous infrastructure, training and maintenance capabilities.

The newly commissioned squadron is fully operational and ready for deployment with the fleet from day one, reinforcing shipborne aviation as a central pillar of India's maritime power.

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