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— Converting Possibilities into Reality —

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TODAY'S DATE



13 AUGUST 2026

---THURSDAY---



Kolkata Topper

VAISHNA BISWAS

AIR - 367 | CSE 2025

★ OUR PROVEN LEGACY ★

OUR UPSC TOPPERS 2023



IPS LAXMAN PRATAP
RANK - 597

FORMER ASST. COMMANDANT IN BSF
CITY COLLEGE KOLKATA

OUR UPSC TOPPERS 2024



IRS SARLA JAKHER
AIR 593

CITY COLLEGE KOLKATA



IRS TANMAY
AIR 346

IIT KHARAGPUR



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OUR
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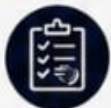


Converting Possibilities into Reality

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UPSC MAINS SPECIFIC

What Was Promised and Where It Falls Short

Why in News?

- **VB-G RAM G (Viksit Bharat–Guarantee for Rozgar and Aajeevika Mission–Gramin)** has replaced MGNREGA and is projected as an enhanced rural employment guarantee programme.
- The government claims **125 days of guaranteed employment**, universal rural coverage, higher wages, greater allocation and technology-driven implementation.
- However, early data indicates a sharp decline in employment generated.
- Person-days reportedly fell from **335.4 million (January–June 2025) to 215.2 million (January–June 2026)** — a decline of **35.8%**.
- The first month of implementation also reportedly witnessed nearly **50% year-on-year decline in rural jobs and households reporting for work**.

What Was Promised?

- **125 days of guaranteed employment** compared with 100 days under MGNREGA.
- **Universal coverage** across rural India.
- **₹95,000 crore central allocation**, with a mandatory **40% state contribution**, taking the proposed total resources to around ₹1.55 lakh crore.
- **₹300 per day floor-level wage**.
- Greater use of **digital technology and monitoring** to improve transparency, accountability and delivery.
- The government presents the scheme as a stronger and more efficient successor to MGNREGA.

Where Does It Fall Short?

- **Employment guarantee vs actual employment:** Increasing the legal entitlement to 125 days has little meaning if workers are unable to obtain work.
- **Declining person-days:** The reported fall in employment suggests a widening gap between the statutory promise and ground-level implementation.
- **Allocation vs utilisation:** A higher budgetary allocation does not automatically translate into greater employment unless adequate funds are actually available and utilised.

- **Inadequate wages:** The ₹300 floor-level wage reportedly remains below minimum wages in many states and below the Satpathy Committee's recommendation of **₹375 per day at June 2018 prices**.
- **Demand suppression:** If workers are unable to access work, the government avoids the corresponding wage expenditure, weakening the demand-driven nature of an employment guarantee.

Major Concerns: Exclusion & Federalism

- **Digital exclusion:** e-KYC requirements may lead to deletion or exclusion of genuine job-card holders.
- **NMMS facial recognition:** Mandatory digital attendance and facial authentication can exclude workers because of technical failures, connectivity issues or authentication problems.
- **Gender impact:** Such barriers can disproportionately affect vulnerable rural workers, particularly women.
- **Fiscal federalism:** The mandatory **40% state contribution** may place a significant financial burden on states, especially fiscally weaker ones.
- **Cooperative federalism:** Greater state financial responsibility without adequate consultation and fiscal support can strain Centre–State relations.
- **Article 258:** The article raises constitutional concerns regarding imposing financial burdens on states for implementing a central law.

Significance & Way Forward

- Rural employment guarantees provide an important **social-security and livelihood safety net** during unemployment, drought and rural distress.
- They support **rural consumption, poverty reduction and women's economic participation**.
- The success of VB-G RAM G should be assessed through **actual work provided, person-days generated, timely wage payments and accessibility**, rather than merely the number of days promised or the size of the allocation.
- Ensure **adequate and predictable funding** to meet genuine demand for work.
- Link wages more closely with **minimum wages and inflation** to protect real incomes.
- Make technology an **enabler rather than a barrier**, with offline/manual alternatives for authentication failures.
- Strengthen **social audits, transparency and grievance redressal mechanisms**.

- Ensure meaningful Centre–State consultation and adequate fiscal support for states.
- Ultimately, the expansion from 100 to 125 days will be meaningful only when the formal guarantee is converted into a substantive right to dignified rural employment

2.How Sustainable is India's E20 Push?

Why in News?

- India is rapidly moving towards **E20**, petrol containing up to **20% ethanol**, as part of its Ethanol Blended Petrol (EBP) programme.
- The government told Parliament that ethanol blending has helped save around **₹2 lakh crore in foreign exchange** and substitute nearly **32 million tonnes of crude oil imports**.
- However, Opposition leaders have raised concerns about **vehicle damage, lower mileage, rising maintenance costs and the pace of the E20 rollout**.
- The key debate is whether E20 can simultaneously ensure **energy security, economic viability, food security and consumer protection**.

What is E20 and Why is India Promoting It?

- **E20 = 20% ethanol + 80% petrol.**
- Ethanol is a domestically produced biofuel, mainly derived from **sugarcane, molasses, maize and surplus foodgrains**.
- India's objective is to reduce dependence on imported crude oil and thereby:
 - Save **foreign exchange**.
 - Reduce crude oil import dependence.
 - Provide an assured market for farmers and ethanol producers.
 - Utilise surplus agricultural produce.
 - Reduce dependence on fossil fuels and potentially lower emissions.
- India's distillery capacity has expanded to around **18–20 billion litres**, with about 500 distilleries, while oil companies have contracted around **10.5 billion litres** for the current ethanol year.

Production, Food Security & Import Concerns

- Current ethanol procurement is diversified:
 - **Maize:** ~45%

- **FCI rice:** ~22%
 - **Sugarcane juice:** ~16%
 - **B-heavy molasses:** ~10%
 - **Damaged foodgrains:** ~4.5%
 - **C-heavy molasses:** ~1.1%
- There is currently **no clear evidence of a major surge in maize or ethanol imports**; direct ethanol imports for petroleum blending are also prohibited.
 - However, the sustainability concern arises during **droughts, crop failures or food shortages**.
 - Diversion of rice, maize and sugarcane towards ethanol could create a **food vs fuel** dilemma if agricultural supplies become constrained.
 - Sugar stocks have reportedly remained around **5 million tonnes**, suggesting that diversion towards ethanol has not so far created a major shortage.
 - Thus, E20 is more sustainable when based on **surplus agricultural feedstock and non-food biomass**, rather than essential food supplies.

Impact on Vehicles & Consumers

- Vehicles manufactured after **April 2023**, following BS-VI Phase 2/RDE requirements, were designed for E20 compatibility and use ethanol-resistant components.
- The major concern is the large **legacy fleet** of vehicles designed for E5/E10.
- Ethanol can:
 - Degrade older rubber and plastic components.
 - Absorb moisture because it is **hygroscopic**.
 - Increase corrosion risks in older fuel systems.
 - Potentially affect fuel pumps, injectors and filters.
 - Reduce fuel efficiency because ethanol has lower energy density than petrol.
- Consumer surveys have reported mileage and maintenance concerns among older vehicle owners.
- However, government and manufacturer studies indicate that **E20-related engine damage has not emerged as a widespread problem**, while efficiency losses in E10-compatible vehicles may be around **2–6%**, depending on vehicle and driving conditions.

- Therefore, the central concern is not necessarily that E20 will damage every vehicle, but that **rapid transition without adequate information, compensation or compatibility safeguards can impose costs on owners of older vehicles.**

Energy Security, Economics & Way Forward

- Ethanol blending can strengthen India's **energy security** by substituting imported crude. The government estimates that the programme has already replaced around **32 million tonnes of crude oil imports.**
- However, ethanol is not automatically cheaper than petrol. Ethanol procurement reportedly costs around **₹270/litre**, compared with a petrol pump price of roughly ₹105/litre, but the two fuels operate under different **tax, pricing and cost structures.**
- Hence, the economic benefit should be assessed through **lifecycle cost, foreign-exchange savings, farmer incomes, fiscal costs and consumer impact**, rather than pump price alone.
- A sustainable E20 transition requires:
 - **Phased rollout** with adequate notice to consumers.
 - Clear labelling of **E10/E20 compatibility** at fuel stations.
 - Support for owners of older vehicles.
 - Greater use of **second-generation ethanol** from agricultural residues and non-food biomass.
 - Protection of **food security** during droughts and crop failures.
 - Independent testing of vehicle performance, mileage and component durability.
 - Greater transparency in ethanol pricing and procurement.
- **Way forward:** India's E20 push can reduce import dependence and strengthen energy security, but its long-term sustainability depends on balancing **energy security + farmer interests + food security + consumer welfare + environmental sustainability.** The transition should therefore be **phased, evidence-based and consumer-centric**, rather than driven solely by blending targets.

3. Timely Reset for the Food Security Act

Why in News?

- The **draft National Food Security (Amendment) Bill, 2026** proposes changes in the entitlement structure under the **National Food Security Act (NFSA), 2013**.
- The debate comes amid evidence of improvement in food affordability, but also persistent **hunger, malnutrition and inability to afford a healthy diet**.
- The share of households unable to afford the ICMR-NIN recommended diet reportedly declined from about **52% in 2011-12 to 25% in 2023-24**.
- However, around **25% of rural and 21% of urban households** still cannot afford an adequate healthy diet, highlighting the need to move from **food security towards nutrition security**.

Proposed Change in AAY Entitlement

- Under NFSA, Priority Households (PHH) receive 5 kg foodgrains per person per month, while Antyodaya Anna Yojana (AAY) households receive a flat 35 kg per household.
- The draft proposes 7 kg per person per month, capped at 35 kg for AAY households.
- This may reduce entitlements for smaller AAY households:
 - 1-member household → **7 kg instead of 35 kg**
 - 2-member household → **14 kg instead of 35 kg**
 - 3-member household → **21 kg instead of 35 kg**
 - 4-member household → **28 kg instead of 35 kg**
 - 5 or more members → **35 kg**
- The concern is that smaller households may not necessarily be less vulnerable. They could include **elderly persons, widows or persons with disabilities**.
- Therefore, any reform should incorporate an explicit **“no-loss” safeguard**, ensuring that existing AAY households do not receive less than 35 kg per month.

Coverage and Nutrition Concerns

- NFSA permits coverage of up to **75% of the rural and 50% of the urban population**, but the beneficiary ceiling of **81.35 crore** is based on Census 2011.
- With India's population estimated at around 146.4 crore in 2025, the existing ceiling covers only about 55.6% of the population.

- The ceiling should be reassessed using updated population data and transparent deprivation criteria once Census 2027 data becomes available.
- Food security must also move beyond a cereal-centric approach towards nutrition security.
- NFHS-6 reportedly shows improvement in stunting, but little improvement in wasting and underweight.
- Only around 15% of children aged 6–23 months reportedly receive a minimally adequate diet.
- India also faces a double burden of malnutrition — undernutrition alongside rising diabetes and other non-communicable diseases.

Diversifying the PDS

- The solution is not to reduce cereal entitlements, but to complement them with more nutritious foods.
- ICMR-NIN guidelines recommend limiting cereals and millets to around 45% of energy intake, with greater contributions from:
 - Pulses and beans
 - Milk and other protein sources
 - Nuts
 - Vegetables and fruits
 - Healthy fats
- States can gradually expand PDS baskets to include pulses, millets and locally appropriate nutritious foods, while ensuring adequate procurement and supply chains.
- Food, nutrition and health programmes should work together through the PDS, Anganwadi services and PM POSHAN.
- Dietary diversification should receive separate budgetary support rather than being financed by reducing existing cereal entitlements.
- Any new intervention should first be tested through State-level pilots assessing nutrition outcomes, household expenditure, wastage, exclusion and fiscal sustainability.

Way Forward: From Food Security to Nutrition Security

- Preserve the 35 kg AAY entitlement through a clear no-loss guarantee.

- Periodically review whether the 35 kg ceiling is adequate for larger households and households with high dependency.
- Update NFSA coverage using current population and deprivation data.
- Strengthen digital portability and transparency, while ensuring offline alternatives so authentication failure does not deny food.
- Use fair price shops for nutrition awareness and referral, without linking such services to ration eligibility.
- Expand affordable access to pulses, protein-rich foods, vegetables, fruits and healthy oils through coordinated government programmes.
- Ensure procurement policies and MSP support encourage production of pulses, millets and oilseeds.
- India's food-security policy must evolve from merely ensuring "enough calories" to ensuring "adequate, diverse and healthy diets."
- The ultimate measure of reform should be whether vulnerable households can access their entitlements with dignity, eat enough nutritious food and remain protected from both hunger and diet-related diseases.

4. Great Nicobar Island Project: Tribal Concerns and Key Issues

Why in News?

- The **Tribal Council of Great and Little Nicobar** has alleged that its concerns regarding the **₹91,000-crore Great Nicobar Island (GNI) development project** are being overlooked by the Andaman and Nicobar administration.
- The Council has particularly raised concerns about the possible impact on the **Shompen**, a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG), and the rights and rehabilitation of the Nicobarese community.
- The issue highlights the tension between **strategic infrastructure development, tribal rights and ecological conservation**.

Great Nicobar Project

- The GNI project envisages large-scale infrastructure development, including:
 - International container transshipment port
 - Airport
 - Power plant

- Township and associated infrastructure
- The project is located in an ecologically sensitive and tribal-dominated region.
- A proposed power plant at **Galathea** is located near Shompen settlements, raising concerns about disturbance to their traditional habitat and way of life.

Tribal Concerns

- The Shompen, numbering fewer than 300, are hunter-gatherers and classified as a PVTG.
- The Tribal Council alleges that officials suggested that the Shompen should adopt a “modern lifestyle” with the development of the project.
- This raises concerns over the principle of tribal autonomy and protection of indigenous ways of life.
- The Council has also demanded relocation to its ancestral villages along the western coast of Great Nicobar.
- It has questioned why adequate tribal consent was not sought regarding the notification of wildlife reserves in the Nicobar group.
- The Council claims that these concerns raised during the July 16 meeting were not reflected in subsequent administrative directions.
- Contradictory statements regarding relocation and project-affected villages have further increased uncertainty.

Constitutional & Legal Dimensions

- **Article 244:** Provides for special administration of Scheduled Areas and tribal interests through the Fifth and Sixth Schedules; although these provisions do not directly apply to the Nicobar Islands in the same manner, they reflect the broader constitutional commitment to tribal protection.
- **PVTG protection:** Shompen communities require special safeguards because of their small population, vulnerability and dependence on traditional habitats.
- **Forest and environmental laws:** Large infrastructure projects in ecologically fragile areas must balance development with biodiversity and forest conservation.
- **Tribal consultation and consent:** Development affecting indigenous communities should follow principles of meaningful consultation, participation, rehabilitation and protection of traditional rights.
- **UNDRIP principle:** The broader international principle of **free, prior and informed participation/consent** is particularly relevant to projects affecting indigenous peoples.

Significance & Way Forward

- **Development vs conservation:** Great Nicobar is strategically important for India's presence in the Indian Ocean, but strategic objectives must not override ecological and tribal concerns.
- **Tribal rights:** The objective should be **development with tribal participation**, not assimilation of indigenous communities into a prescribed "modern lifestyle".
- **PVTG-sensitive planning:** Projects should avoid disturbing isolated communities and their traditional habitats as far as possible.
- **Independent assessment:** Environmental, social and tribal impacts should be assessed through transparent and independent mechanisms.
- **Meaningful consultation:** Tribal councils and affected communities should receive complete project information and participate meaningfully in decisions affecting their land, livelihood and culture.
- **No forced displacement:** Rehabilitation, if unavoidable, must be based on legally protected rights, informed participation and culturally sensitive safeguards.
- **Balanced approach:** India's infrastructure ambitions in strategically important islands should follow the principle of "**development without displacement and conservation without exclusion.**"