



*Date: 22-12-25*

## Winter is behind

**A less acrimonious session is an opportunity to build upon**

### Editorial

The winter session of Parliament, which had 15 sittings, witnessed significant and controversial legislative business, along with political grandstanding by the government to mark the 150th anniversary of the national song, Vande Mataram. Ten Bills were introduced and eight were passed by both Houses. Notable Bills that won parliamentary approval include one repealing or amending dozens of outdated laws; another allowing 100% FDI in the insurance sector; one facilitating private sector investment in nuclear power by reducing the liability of suppliers, and, importantly, major changes to the rural employment guarantee scheme, a flagship welfare programme started by the UPA government in 2005. The titles of several Bills, which were in Hindi, caused consternation among Members of Parliament from non-Hindi regions. They pointed to constitutional provisions that require legislation to be drafted in English, with translations made available as required. The insurance Bill is titled Sabka Bima Sabki Raksha, while the rural employment guarantee Bill is called Viksit Bharat - Guarantee for Rozgar and Ajeevika Mission (Grameen), or VB-G RAM G, which became an Act on December 21 with the assent of the President. In the discussion on Vande Mataram, Members spent over 11 hours in the Lok Sabha, with 65 participants, and nearly 13 hours in the Rajya Sabha, with 81 participants. Parliament could instead have passed a unanimous resolution commemorating the song rather than using it as yet another occasion to question the patriotic credentials of political opponents.

A heated debate on electoral reforms went on for nearly 13 hours with 62 speakers in the Lok Sabha and for nearly 11 hours with 57 speakers in the Rajya Sabha. This too was a missed opportunity for an open-minded discussion beyond party lines to address the crisis of credibility in Indian elections. The closed-minded approaches of the BJP and the Congress towards questions of election integrity are not helping India's parliamentary democracy. The Opposition sought a discussion on air pollution in Delhi, a massive public health crisis, but the government did not allow it. Bills were rushed through, and the role of parliamentary committees in shaping legislation remains limited, though Question Hour and Zero Hour were more productive. This winter session was far less acrimonious than in the recent past, a fact acknowledged by Congress President Mallikarjun Kharge. As a result, Congress representatives accepted the customary invitation for tea by the Lok Sabha Speaker and the Rajya Sabha Chairman at the end of the session. These meetings also led to pleasant exchanges between the government and the Opposition. This practice is worth continuing and building upon.

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## The bulldozed demolition of MGNREGA

**The annihilation of this powerful social security Intervention will have catastrophic consequences for crores of people across rural India**

**Sonia Gandhi, [ is Chairperson, Congress Parliamentary Party ]**



The historic Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) became a reality on September 5, 2005, during the first tenure of Dr. Manmohan Singh as Prime Minister. MGNREGA was a rights-based legislation inspired by Article 41 of the Constitution of India, which calls upon the Government to secure citizens' right to work. It was developed and given shape through an extensive process of public consultations that lasted for almost 13 months. Both Houses of Parliament passed the Bill. both enthusiastically and unanimously.

Over the past few days, the Narendra Modi government worked to bulldoze MGNREGA's abolition without any discussion, consultation, or respect for parliamentary processes or Centre-State relations. The removal of the Mahatma's name was only the tip of the iceberg. The very structure of MGNREGA, so integral to its impact, has been annihilated. It must be recalled that it has been the world's largest social security initiative and one that has also been the most intensively studied and evaluated. All these studies have emphasised its transformative effects on the weakest sections of our society.

### A demolition in stages

Right from its conception, MGNREGA was envisioned as more than a mere scheme - as guaranteed employment based on actual demand from rural families in distress. The Modi government has simply annihilated the very idea of a legal guarantee in its new law, which is nothing but a set of bureaucratic provisions.

MGNREGA enacted the right to work in all rural India. The Modi government's new Bill has restricted the ambit of the scheme to rural areas as notified by the Union at its discretion.

Whereas earlier, the central allocation was meant to be uncapped, there is now a pre-determined budgetary allocation that caps the days of employment provided in each State. The number of workdays provided are, therefore, left to the Union Government's priorities rather than the people's needs.

The all-year guarantee of employment has been finished off. State governments have been asked to identify 60 days during peak agricultural season where no work shall be undertaken. One of the greatest impacts of MGNREGA was to increase the bargaining power of the landless poor in rural India, which has elevated agricultural wages. This bargaining power will definitely be eroded under the new law. The Modi government is attempting to suppress wage growth and that too at a time when the proportion of employment in agriculture has risen for the first time since Independence, contrary to what should have been the case.

MGNREGA exempted State governments from most of the financial burden, since the cost-sharing ratio was 90:10, borne by the Union government. This incentivised the State government to implement the scheme in earnest, in response to demand rather than its own fiscal constraints. Now, the new cost-sharing ratio is 60:40. Worse, any expense incurred in excess of the Union government's pre-determined allocation will now have to be borne entirely by the States. Effectively, by transferring a significant portion of the expense onto the States, the Modi government is discouraging States from providing work under the scheme. The finances of States, already under severe stress and strain, will be further devastated.

Aside from demolishing the demand-based nature of the programme, the Modi government has ended the decentralised nature of the scheme. In accordance with the 73rd Constitutional Amendment, MGNREGA provided for the Gram Sabha to undertake the planning of works as well as be the principal implementation authority of the scheme. This constitutional vision of local self-governance will be replaced by a top-down PM GatiShakti National Master Plan (PMGS-NMP) which will inevitably reflect the Union government's priorities rather than local needs. This is centralisation with a vengeance.

The Modi government is resorting to fraudulent claims that it has enhanced the employment guarantee from 100 days (under MGNREGA) to 125 days. For all the reasons outlined above, that will certainly not be the case. Indeed, the real nature of the Modi government's intentions can be understood from its decade-long track record of throttling MGNREGA. It began with the Prime Minister's (in)famous mocking of the scheme on the floor of the House and proceeded apace through a 'death by a thousand cuts' strategy - through, for instance, stagnant budgets, the use of disenfranchising technology and delayed payments to workers.

### **The impact of its loss**

For the last 20 years, MGNREGA has been the most powerful social security intervention at the disposal of the government. It has secured better wages for crores of citizens, stemmed seasonal distress migration, and hugely empowered gram panchayats. The social audits conducted by the gram sabhas brought about a new culture of accountability and transparency. During the COVID-19 pandemic, when the whole economy was severely dislocated, MGNREGA was one of two avenues through which the government was able to reach the poor and most vulnerable sections of society - the other being the National Food Security Act, 2013. Outside of COVID-19, the ever-high demand for work under this scheme only proves its continued necessity for ensuring rural livelihoods. Its demolition will have catastrophic consequences for crores of people across rural India.

### **In cross hairs**

The demolition of the right to work must not be seen in isolation but as part of the long assault by the ruling establishment on the Constitution and its right-based vision for the country. The most fundamental right to vote is under unprecedented assault. The Right to Information has been desecrated with legislative changes that weaken the autonomy of Information Commissioners, and by wholesale exemptions from the Act for ill-defined 'personal information' data. The Right to Education has been undermined by a National Education Policy 2020, which has legitimised the shut down of about one lakh primary schools around the country. The Forest Rights Act, 2006, was markedly weakened by the Forest (Conservation) Rules (2022) which removed the gram sabha from any role in permitting the diversion of forest land. The Right to Fair Compensation and Transparency in Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Resettlement Act, 2013 has been significantly diluted. The National Green Tribunal set up in October 2010 following the passage of the

National Green Tribunal Act, 2010 has been emasculated. Through the three black farm laws, the government attempted to deny farmers the right to a minimum support price. The National Food Security Act, 2013, may very well be next on the chopping block.

MGNREGA realised the Mahatma's vision of Sarvodaya ("welfare of all") and enacted the constitutional right to work. Its death is our collective moral failure - one that will have financial and human consequences for crores of India's working peoples for years to come. It is imperative, now more than ever, to unite and safeguard the rights that protect us all.

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## Lessons from China on tackling pollution

**India need not emulate China's political system to achieve a turnaround, but It can draw on the principles that made China's progress possible**

**Amrita Nambiar, [ PhD Candidate, Macquarie Law School, Macquarie University, Australla ]**

China and India have long grappled with severe air pollution. Yet their trajectories over the past decade have diverged sharply. Once a global symbol of smog, Beijing managed to cut its annual PM2.5 levels by more than 50% between 2013 and 2021, while Delhi continues to rank among the world's most polluted cities. How is Beijing breathing easier?

### **Clean-air transformation**

Beijing's transformation was neither accidental nor incremental. It stemmed from a multifaceted approach enabled by two major policy drives: the Air Pollution Prevention and Control Action Plan and the Blue Sky Protection Campaign. These measures focussed on sweeping, top-down interventions across energy, transport, and industry. Beijing's strategy was anchored in three features: coherent policy, strict enforcement, and regional coordination. The government expanded electric mobility, shut down or relocated hundreds of polluting industries, replaced thousands of coal-fired boilers with natural gas, imposed stringent China VI vehicular emission standards, built one of the world's densest PM2.5 real-time air quality monitoring systems, and imposed substantial penalties for non-compliance. Most importantly, Beijing didn't act alone. Its coordination with the neighbouring Tianjin-Hebei provinces through a unified 'airshed' strategy ensured regulation of transboundary air pollution. The turnaround was remarkable- PM2.5 levels dropped from the average 102 µg/m<sup>3</sup> in 2013 to 31 µg/m<sup>3</sup> in 2024.

India does not lack environmental laws, but from the shortage of coherence in implementing them. A strong statutory framework - the Air (Prevention and Control of Pollution) Act of 1981, the Environment Protection Act, 1986, and rules governing waste, construction, and emissions-exists alongside courts, tribunals, and pollution-control boards. Indirectly, various laws such as the Factories Act, 1948 and the Motor Vehicles Act, 1988 also shape air-quality outcomes. Yet regulatory fragmentation undermines their impact. Over the years, India has rolled out many initiatives: the National Clean Air Programme, the Graded Response Action Plan, odd-even rationing, construction bans, dust-control rules, crop-residue measures, work-from-home advisories, and Delhi's Air Pollution Mitigation Plan 2025. The Centre has also

established the Commission for Air Quality Management (CAQM). These interventions, however, are largely reactive and activated during pollution peaks rather than embedded in long-term planning; and agencies function in silos.

The core difference between the two approaches lies in governance, enforcement, and coordination. China's Environmental Vertical Reform created a clear hierarchy for realising local governments' environmental protection responsibilities. This top-down structure ensured uniform actions, strict enforcement, and rapid implementation. Delhi, however, operates within a fragmented governance system involving the Union government, the Delhi government, pollution control boards, and multiple municipal bodies. As a result, decision-making becomes slower, enforcement weaker, and accountability more diffused. Beijing's regulatory agencies also possess sweeping authority and substantial resources. On the other hand, India's pollution control boards remain chronically understaffed and underfunded. Also, Beijing modelled inter-provincial alignment through the airshed strategy whereas the CAQM's directives to address stubble burning from adjoining States remain unauthoritative.

China has made large sustained investments in clean energy, electric mobility, and industrial relocation. Delhi's own industrial relocation attempts, such as the Bawana project, have faltered due to inadequate infrastructure and poor service delivery. Even 'sustainable' alternatives such as waste-to-energy plants have failed to meet air-quality norms. Delhi's pollution load is further intensified by industrial and vehicular emissions, corrupted Pollution Under Control (PUC) checks, construction dust, open waste burning, and meteorological inversions that trap winter pollutants. Public transport expansion has lagged behind the city's growth. Odd-even rationing has shown negligible long-term impact. Behavioural change too, has been slower in India.

### What India can borrow

India need not emulate China's political system to achieve a turnaround, but it can draw on the principles that made China's progress possible. First, governance must shift from episodic responses to a long-term sustained, mission-oriented strategy and treat air pollution as a national public health emergency. Second, India must accelerate its transition to clean energy. Beijing's move away from coal drove major PM2.5 reductions; Delhi similarly needs to expand and adopt energy-efficient standards suitable for all sectors. Third, transport reforms must be enforced, not merely announced. BS-VI norms require credible PUC systems, modern testing centres, a robust vehicle-scrappage policy, and congestion management. Expanding EV charging infrastructure, incentivising electric mobility, and dramatically strengthening public transport are essential. Fourth, industrial policy must shift from relocation on paper to functional industrial zones with full utilities, transport access, and real-time emissions monitoring. Finally, air pollution must be governed as a regional problem. A Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei style airshed model should guide Delhi-NCR.





## मुक्त व्यापार से खुलेगी प्रगति की राह

डा. जयन्तीलाल भंडारी, ( लेखक अर्थशास्त्री है )



ट्रंप की टैरिफ चुनौतियों और वैश्विक व्यापार के मोर्चे पर अनिश्चितताओं के बीच भारत के निर्यात में बढ़ोतरी का रुझान दिखा है। नवंबर 2024 से नवंबर 2025 के बीच भारत का कुल निर्यात 64.05 अरब डालर से बढ़कर 73.99 अरब डालर हो गया। निर्यात में 15.52 प्रतिशत की मजबूत वृद्धि हुई है। इसके पीछे मुक्त व्यापार समझौतों यानी एफटीए की अहम भूमिका मानी जा रही है। नए वर्ष में अमेरिका, यूरोपीय संघ और कई अन्य देशों के साथ एफटीए के आकार लेने से भारत का निर्यात नई ऊंचाई पर होगा तथा भारत की व्यापार घाटे की चिंताएं कम होंगी।

इसी पृष्ठभूमि में 19 दिसंबर को केंद्रीय मंत्रिमंडल ने भारत-न्यूजीलैंड एफटीए को मंजूरी दी है। दोनों देशों ने 14 साल पहले एफटीए पर बातचीत शुरू की थी। इस एफटीए से जहाँ वस्तुओं और सेवाओं में व्यापार के साथ- साथ निवेश प्रवाह को बढ़ाने और आपूर्ति श्रृंखला को मजबूत करने में मदद मिलेगी। इससे कृषि, खाद्य प्रसंस्करण, नवीकरणीय ऊर्जा, फार्मा, शिक्षा और सेवाओं जैसे क्षेत्रों में नए अवसर बनने की भी उम्मीद है।

इससे पहले ही 18 दिसंबर को ओमान के साथ एफटीए पर हस्ताक्षर हुए हैं। इस एफटीए को आधिकारिक तौर पर समग्र आर्थिक भागीदारी समझौता (सीपा ) कहा गया है। इस एफटीए के तहत भारत के 98 प्रतिशत निर्यात को ओमान में शून्य दर पर पहुंच मिलेगी। इसमें ओमान को होने वाले 99 प्रतिशत से अधिक निर्यात शामिल हैं। इससे भारत के कपड़ा, रत्न आभूषण, दवाई, वाहन, कृषि उत्पाद और चमड़ा उद्योग को बड़ा फायदा होने की उम्मीद है। खासतौर से भारत से करीब 3.64 अरब डालर के निर्यात पर ओमान में फिलहाल लगने वाला पांच प्रतिशत शुल्क शून्य हो जाएगा। इसके बदले में भारत ने ओमान से आने वाले विभिन्न उत्पादों पर आयात शुल्क में कमी सुनिश्चित की है। भारत ने अपनी करीब 78 प्रतिशत टैरिफ लाइन पर शुल्क में उदारता की पेशकश की है। ऐसे में मूल्य के लिहाज से ओमान से भारत में 95 प्रतिशत उत्पादों के शुल्क कम होंगे। इनमें खजूर, मार्बल और पेट्रोकेमिकल उत्पाद शामिल हैं। निश्चित रूप से इस एफटीए के तहत भारत के हित में कई अहम बातें हैं। भारत ने घरेलू हितों की रक्षा के लिए कुछ सख्त कदम भी उठाए हैं। पेशेवर आवाजाही पर भी एफटीए में भारत के हित हैं। पहली बार ओमान ने भारतीय पेशेवरों की आवाजाही पर व्यापक रियायतें दी हैं। 'इंट्रा- कारपोरेट ट्रांसफरीज' का कोटा 20 प्रतिशत से बढ़ाकर 50 प्रतिशत कर दिया गया है। टेंडर के आधार पर सेवा प्रदान करने वाली कंपनियों के लिए समय की अवधि को 90 दिनों से बढ़ाकर दो साल कर दिया गया है। आइटी, बिजनेस सर्विसेज, आडियो-विजुअल, शिक्षा और स्वास्थ्य सेवाओं में भारतीय कंपनियां अब ओमान में 100 प्रतिशत प्रत्यक्ष विदेशी निवेश कर सकेंगी एफटीए लागू होने के बाद भारत के उत्पाद और सेवा निर्यात ओमान में बढ़ सकेंगे और भारत का प्रतिकूल व्यापार असंतुलन कम होगा। ओमान के आधुनिक बंदरगाहों के उपयोग से पूर्वी यूरोप तक

माल पहुंचाने में लगने वाले समय और खर्च में भारी कमी आएगी, जिससे भारतीय निर्यातकों की वैश्विक प्रतिस्पर्धात्मकता भी बढ़ेगी।

मोदी सरकार के दौरान मारीशस, संयुक्त अरब अमीरात और आस्ट्रेलिया के साथ एफटीए पर प्रगति हुई है। एक अक्टूबर से भारत और चार यूरोपीय देशों आइसलैंड, स्विट्जरलैंड, नार्वे और लिचेस्टाइन के समूह यूरोपियन फ्री ट्रेड एसोसिएशन (एफ्टा) के बीच भी एफटीए लागू हो गया है और एफ्टा देशों को निर्यात बढ़ने लगे हैं। इसी क्रम में भारत और ब्रिटेन का एफटीए भी महत्वपूर्ण है। अब नए वर्ष 2026 में अमेरिका, यूरोपीय यूनियन पेरू, चिली, आसियान, मेक्सिको, कनडा, दक्षिण अफ्रीका, इजरायल, भारत-गल्फ कंट्रीज काउंसिल सहित अन्य प्रमुख देशों पक्षों के साथ भी एफटीए आकार लेते हुए दिखाई देंगे। इन देशों के साथ एफटीए में सिर्फ उत्पाद निर्यात ही शामिल नहीं होंगे वरन् सेवा सेक्टर परिदृश्य से संबंधित निर्यात भी शामिल होंगे। चूंकि सेवा निर्यात में भारत की विशेषज्ञता बढ़ती जा रही है, इसलिए जहां भारत के प्रशिक्षित श्रमिकों एवं पेशेवरों के लिए एफटीए वाले देशों में काम के मौके बढ़ेंगे, वहीं भारत की सेवा निर्यात से कमाई की ऊंची संभावनाएं बढ़ेंगी।

भारत के लिए एफटीए के लाभों के मद्देनजर एक अप्रैल से लागू होने वाले नए श्रम कानून मील का पत्थर साबित होंगे। केंद्र सरकार ने जिन बहुप्रतीक्षित चार नई श्रम संहिताओं को अधिसूचित किया है, उनसे श्रमिकों के साथ उद्योग कारोबारों को भी राहत मिलेगी। ये श्रम कानून स्वतंत्रता के बाद से सबसे व्यापक और प्रगतिशील श्रम उन्मुख सुधार हैं। नए श्रम कानून भविष्य के लिए एक ऐसे इकोसिस्टम का निर्माण करेंगे, जो श्रमिकों के अधिकारों की रक्षा करेगा और इससे उद्योग - कारोबार को एफटीए के अधिकतम लाभ हासिल होने की उम्मीद बनी है।

नए वर्ष 2026 में भारत दुनिया के प्रमुख देशों के साथ एफटीए को तेजी से आकार देने की डगर पर आगे बढ़ेगा। उम्मीद करें कि नए साल में होने वाले एफटीए भारत को निर्यात, सेवा, निवेश, तकनीकी सहयोग और पेशेवरों की आवाजाही की नई आर्थिक शक्ति बनाते हुए देश को वर्ष 2027 तक दुनिया की तीसरी सबसे बड़ी अर्थव्यवस्था और वर्ष 2047 तक विकसित राष्ट्र बनाने की डगर पर आगे बढ़ाएं।

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