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Plot No.B 22, Bada Bazar Road, Old Rajinder Nagar, New Delhi-110060

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Celebrated writer, Jnanpith awardee Vinod Kumar Shukla passes away at 88

Shubhomoy Sikdar
RAIPUR

Renowned Hindi poet and author and 2024 Jnanpith Award winner Vinod Kumar Shukla passed away in Raipur on Tuesday.

He was 88. Shukla had been undergoing treatment for age-related ailments at the All India Institute of Medical Sciences, Raipur, since December 2. AIIMS spokesperson Dr. Laxmikant Choudhary said the writer passed away at 4.58 p.m. due to multiple organ failure. In an earlier statement on Monday, the hospital had stated that Shukla had been suffering from a severe respiratory illness and interstitial lung disease. He was being treated for severe pneumonia and was also receiving care for oral candidiasis, according to



Vinod Kumar Shukla

the medical bulletin.

PM expresses grief
Prime Minister Narendra Modi expressed grief over the death. "I am deeply saddened by the passing of renowned writer Vinod Kumar Shukla, a

Jnanpith Award winner. He will always be remembered for his invaluable contribution to the Hindi literary world. My condolences are with his family and fans in this hour of grief. *Om Shanti*," Mr. Modi said in a post on X. Last month, during a visit to Chhattisgarh, the Prime Minister had spoken to the writer and enquired about his well-being.

Shukla was born in 1937 in Rajnandgaon. His journey as a writer began in 1971, when his first poetry collection *Lagbhag Jaihind* was published.

Over the years, he penned several well-received poetry collections, including *Kavita Se Lambi Kavita*. His novels, including *Deewar Mein Ek Khidki Rehti Thi* and *Naukar Ki Kameez*, were also widely acclaimed with the latter being adapted into a film.

Shukla received several recognitions, including the Sahitya Akademi Award, and was the first Chhattisgarhi writer to receive the Jnanpith, India's highest literary honour.

'Great loss'
Chhattisgarh Chief Minister Vishnu Deo Sai described Shukla's passing as a great loss. "Vinod ji, who gave dignity to ordinary life through his acclaimed works like *Naukar Ki Kameez* and *Deewar Mein Ek Khidki Rehti Thi* will forever remain in our hearts as the pride of Chhattisgarh. His works, full of sensitivity, will continue to inspire generations. Heartfelt condolences to his family, readers and fans."

Later in the evening, the Chief Minister announced that the writer will be laid to rest with full State honours.

Jnanpith Award
→ Highest literary honour of India
→ instituted in 1961.
→ creative writers are alive + Indian citizens

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The VB-G RAM G Act 2025 fixes structural gaps

The President of India has assented to the Visit Bharat - Guarantee for Atoms and Apeksa Bharat (GAM Act), 2025, enhancing the statutory wage employment guarantee to 125 days and strengthening rural livelihoods through empowerment, convergence, and attraction-based delivery for a resilient, self-reliant rural Bharat.

A misleading 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 critical 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 misunderstanding of the Act's substance and intent.

What has led to this misunderstanding 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 60 to 125 days. Procedural disentanglement clauses that previously nullified employment allowance in practice have been removed, and time-bound grievance redress mechanisms have been reinforced. The reform directly addresses the long unmet demand for statutory security, income and livelihood.

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 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 equal powers over local plans. What has changed is that decentralised planning is no longer an ad hoc or episodic but institutionalised as a structured and participatory process. Village Gram Panchayat Plans are aggregated at the block, district, State and national levels to enable coordination, convergence and visibility across sectors, not to



Shriyash Chhabra
is Union Minister for Agriculture and Farmers' Welfare, and Rural Development, Government of India

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 ₹22,000 crore in 2014-15 to ₹86,000 crore in 2024-25. Person days provided increased from 12.1 lakh crore in the period 2014-15 to 3,282 crore thereafter. Central funds disbursed increased from ₹2.1 lakh crore to ₹5.3 lakh crore, and completed works expanded from 53 lakh to 862 lakh. Women's participation rose from 48% to 56.7%. Over 99% of fund transfer orders are now generated on time, and nearly 99% of active workers are listed in 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 anchored in 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 provided during natural disasters, or other extraordinary situations. States may recommend special initiatives, which include 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,

perhaps aggregating to 60 days in a financial year covering peak sowing and harvesting seasons during which work shall not be undertaken. Differentiated notification 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 UPWA record

From its very first term, the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government failed to match rhetoric with delivery under MGNREGS. While the Congress manifesto promised "at least 100 days of work at a real wage of ₹100 per day", the government opted wages at ₹80 as early as 2009 and kept them frozen for years. The Centre openly admitted that States were acting arbitrarily under the scheme and justified the wage freeze by blaming State governments for the Congress-led Centre was unable to control its own State governments, allowing MGNREGS to become vulnerable to misuse, false job cards, and financial leakages.

The UPA's second term saw a steady decline in commitment to the scheme. Budgetary allocations were cut from ₹60,000 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 Rajendra Prasad acknowledged that employment under MGNREGS had fallen sharply – from 7.5 crore workers in 2010-11 to just 6.5 crore by November 2013. Delayed fund release, lack of transparency in payments, and administrative apathy undermined the scheme's impact, leading to widespread unemployment, directly undermining the legal guarantee.

The Comptroller and Auditor General's 2013 report laid bare the state of MGNREGS during the UPA years. It highlighted widespread irregularities, including the issuance of fake or defective job cards, thousands of crores worth of unutilised funds, 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 treat a framework that often under-delivered, or to reform it into a modern, enforceable, and integrated engine for growth and development. The map and experience that advances welfare through development. The new Act preserves the legal right to work, expands entitlements, strengthens worker protection, and corrects structural weaknesses revealed through years of implementation. This is not a demolition but a process of renewal grounded in experience.

MGNREGA	VB-G RAM G
◆ 100 wage employment days	◆ 125 wage employment days
◆ Work scattered across categories; no robust national strategy	◆ Localised planning; mandates Visit Gram Panchayat Plans
◆ Centre bears unshared wage costs; states bear unemployment allowance	◆ State cost-sharing for wages; GOI for most states; 90% for certain special-category regions
◆ No explicit statutory "pause window"	◆ States can notify up to 60 days in a FY when work will not be executed
◆ Wage payment within a stipulated time window	◆ Weekly wage payments mandated; fortnightly at most
◆ Gram Panchayat planning is central	◆ Integrated institutionalised convergence and infrastructure planning

End the exploitation

Child trafficking needs concerted action from government and civil society

One of the worst forms of modern slavery is child trafficking, and the Supreme Court of India has issued a stern wake-up call about the prevailing situation in India. In a December 19 judgment, it observed that child trafficking is a "deeply disturbing reality" in the country where sexual exploitation of children by organised cartels continues to flourish despite protective laws. It was hearing a case regarding a minor who was forcibly exploited sexually by a gang of traffickers in Bengaluru. The Court upheld the conviction of the gang members under the Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act. The offence, it said, struck at the very foundations of dignity, bodily integrity and the state's constitutional promise of protection to every child against exploitation. A Bench of Justices Manoj Misra and Joymalya Bagchi drew attention to the complex and layered structure of organised crime networks which operate at various levels of recruiting, transporting, harbouring and exploiting minor victims. The Bench laid down guidelines to follow in child trafficking cases, particularly the need for "sensitivity and latitude" while hearing the child's testimony. It may not be possible for the child to narrate with precision and clarity the nature of the crime, it said, pointing out that courts must not disbelieve her testimony because of minor inconsistencies in her evidence.

A victim of sex trafficking, particularly a minor, is not an accomplice, it noted, and "her deposition is to be given due regard and credence as that of an injured witness". The Court's observations must not go in vain and the onus is on the government and civil society to do what is necessary to protect children. The net must be spread wide to end other forms of exploitation as well such as forced child labour. Stringent laws may be in place, but on the ground, much more needs to be done like giving teeth to anti-trafficking units or passing an anti-trafficking Bill. Last year, the Ministry of Home Affairs told Parliament that India had recorded as many as 10,659 cases of human trafficking between 2018 and 2022, but of the persons arrested for the crime in the same period, the conviction rate was just 4.8%. The issue of rehabilitation after rescue also has to be thought through; mere compensation is not enough. The focus must be on prevention and protection, and one way to ensure this is to keep children in school till they are 14 as the Right to Education Act promised. With the advent of the digital space, trafficking is a shape-shifting evil, and government and social entities must be prepared to tackle all its forms.

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The upskilling gap: why women risk being left behind by AI

With 10 hours less per week for self-development than men, India's working women need flexible learning and 'time-saving' policies to compete

DATA POINT

Shravani Prakash
Tanu M. Goyal
Chellsea Laulha

As 2025 ends, Indians are consumed by two anxieties - whether artificial intelligence (AI) will take over their jobs, and whether the future belongs to 80-hour work weeks or the right to disconnect after office hours. But for millions of working women, a near 80-hour work week is already a lived reality, as their workday continues long after office hours, filled with unrecognised and unpaid labour. Unfortunately, no AI or algorithm has yet threatened to take over women's "unpaid work" or rescue them from the long hours spent on cooking, cleaning, caregiving, planning, and emotional management.

India's latest Time Use Survey (TUS) 2024 makes this reality unmistakable: 40% of women now participate in the labour force. They are not simply learning into paid work; instead, they are working a relentless second shift. As women take on more paid work, their unpaid responsibilities hardly decline - instead of substitution, there is stacking. This results in working women being left with limited time for personal development, leisure, or adequate rest.

Chart 1 highlights a stark imbalance in how Indian men and women divide their working hours. On average, working women spend around 9.6 hours a day on combined paid and unpaid work. A substantial share of this time is, however, spent on unpaid work that largely comprises elderly and childcare activities, domestic chores such as cooking and cleaning, and other voluntary work and subsistence production. This burden peaks when women are in their prime ages (25-39 years), leading to their total working hours exceeding 70 hours a week. In contrast, men record lower

total hours of work. On average, they spend about 8.6 hours a day on combined paid and unpaid work, with more than 80% of this time devoted to paid activities (wage/salaried work, remunerative self-employment, and production of goods and services for sale). Across the working life cycle, men's total work hours typically fall within the range of 54-60 hours per week, largely because their unpaid workload is minimal and stable across life stages.

Women's working hours exceed men's across nearly every age group. The gap is widest in the 25-39 age range, when women spend double the time on unpaid caregiving than men, with childcare forming the largest component. Even later in life, while men's unpaid contributions rise marginally (often to care for ageing parents), the broader unequal contract at home remains intact, regardless of age, occupation, or income level.

Women don't have more hours in a day, but they simply offset the burden of double shifts by cutting back on time for self-care. On average, women in India sleep fewer hours in a week than men, with the gap widening to around 2.2-2.5 hours a week during their prime working years (Chart 2).

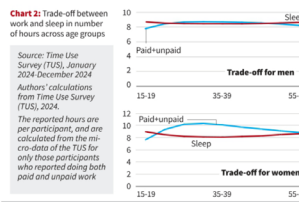
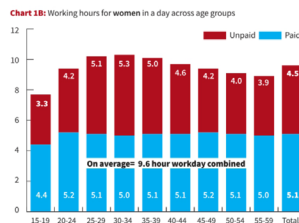
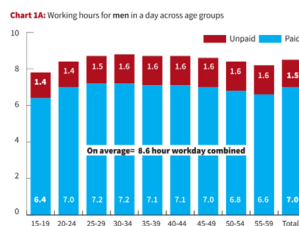
Women, on average, also spend 10 hours less than men every week on self-development activities, including learning, skill enhancement, building self-awareness and practices that support mental, emotional, and physical well-being. Once again, this gap is widest (around 11-12 hours per week) during the prime age group. These figures matter immensely in an AI-disrupted economy, since time for upskilling and self-development is essential to transition from low-skilled to higher-value work.

Until women's time is valued, freed, and mainstreamed into policy and growth strategy, India's 2047 Viksit Bharat vision will remain constrained by women's invisible labour, time poverty and underutilised potential.

Survey shows that nearly 40% of women outside the labour market cite household responsibilities as the reason. Even the recent rise in women's workforce participation is driven largely by unpaid family work and low-paid self-employment. The AI era could make this worse, as women's jobs are more automation-prone, and AI-driven performance metrics risk penalising caregivers whose time constraints remain invisible to algorithms. True empowerment cannot mean merely adding jobs, unless paid employment replaces women's drudgery instead of compounding it. Policy, technology, and workplaces must be redesigned around women's time - an undervalued resource that underpins both care and productivity. These must shift towards an outcome-based approach that explicitly uses time-use data to free women's time from unpaid work and redirect it toward higher-value, remunerative activities.

The gender budget can be a key tool to enable this by integrating time-use metrics. Budgets must prioritise and sustain outlays to time-saving infrastructure such as affordable childcare and elderly care, piped water, clean energy, and safe public transport. Simultaneously, to adapt and thrive in a rapidly changing world of work, women must have access to lifelong and flexible upskilling opportunities designed around their time, mobility, and digital constraints. This calls for sustained gender budget allocations to expand programmes that build locally relevant vocational capabilities, strengthen technology and digital skills, and scale targeted initiatives such as the India AI Mission and AI Careers for Women programmes.

Double shift for women



Maternal mortality dropped as institutional deliveries rose to 89%: Health Minister

Nadda lays foundation stone for two medical colleges in Madhya Pradesh; says health benefits provided to mothers and children through 1,81,000 Ayushman Arogya Mandirs across the country

The Hindu Bureau
BHOPAL

Union Health Minister J.P. Nadda said on Tuesday that the country's institutional delivery rate had gone up to 89%, leading to a significant reduction in the maternal mortality rate (MMR) during childbirth.

Mr. Nadda made the statement after laying the foundation stone for a medical college in Madhya Pradesh's Dhar district. He laid foundation for another medical college in Betul district. The two colleges will be operated on a public-private partnership (PPP) model.

"The rate of institutional deliveries in the country has increased to 89%, which led to a significant reduction in the MMR. The Narendra Modi government is striving through its healthcare services to ensure that citizens remain healthy and do not fall ill in the first place," Mr. Nadda said.

He said the two medical colleges would also be the first of its kind in the coun-



Union Health Minister J.P. Nadda with Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister Mohan Yadav at an event in Dhar on Tuesday. ANI

try that would function through the PPP model.

"The establishment of the medical college would provide better healthcare services to the people of Betul and the surrounding tribal areas," he said, claiming that a "radical transformation" had taken place in the health sector under Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

"Until the end of the 20th century, there was

only one All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS) in Delhi. Former Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee opened six AIIMS during his tenure. Now there are 23. In 2014, there were 387 medical colleges. Today, there are 819 medical colleges. Including those in Dhar and Betul, the number of medical colleges has reached 821," the Health Minister said.

"Health benefits are be-

ing provided to mothers and children through 1,81,000 Ayushman Arogya Mandirs [health and wellness centres]. Today, keeping in mind the health of everyone in the country, not only is the benefit of the Ayushman Yojana being provided, but 12 types of vaccines are also being administered to protect the life of every child through immunisation," he added.

The medical colleges in Dhar and Betul are going to be constructed at an estimated cost of ₹260 crore and ₹300 crore respectively, as per a State government statement.

Medical colleges

The State currently has 33 medical colleges, including 19 government institutions.

"In 2003, there were only 1,250 seats [in the State]. In 2023-24, this increased to 4,875, and in the 2025-26 academic session, it further rose to 5,550 [government: 2,850, private: 2,700]. The total number of PG (MD/MS) seats has also increased to 2,862," the government said.