

EDITORIAL HIGHLIGHTS

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Centre fixes minimum wage of ₹300 per day under VB-G RAM G scheme

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

The Centre has fixed a floor wage of ₹300 per day under the Viksit Bharat Guarantee for Rozgar and Aajeevika Mission (Gramin) (VB-G RAM G) Act, 2025, which came into effect on Tuesday replacing the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), 2005.

The 21 States and Union Territories which paid less than ₹300 per day under the MGNREGA have had their wage rates increased to this level, while States already paying above ₹300 saw more minimal hikes.

Four major Hindi-belt

States saw significant wage increases – ₹48 in Uttar Pradesh, ₹45 in Bihar, ₹39 in Madhya Pradesh, and ₹19 in Rajasthan – compared with the last MGNREGA rates set in 2025-26. Barring the U.T. of Dadra and Nagar Haveli and Daman and Diu, where wages remain unchanged from the MGNREGA levels, Telangana recorded the lowest increase of just ₹1, with wages rising 0.33% from ₹307 to ₹308.

Other southern States which were already above the ₹300 level also saw minimal hikes, including Andhra Pradesh (1.6%), Tamil Nadu (2.7%), and Karnataka (3.2%).

Excluding the special rate of ₹450 applicable to certain gram panchayats in Sikkim, Haryana continues to have the highest wage rate at ₹409, but recorded one of the lowest increases of just 2.25%. Haryana (₹409), Goa (₹406) and Kerala (₹401) are the only States with wage rates above ₹400.

'Hike above 15%'

Northern and northeastern States which saw wage hikes above 15% to reach the ₹300 level include Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Jharkhand, Assam, Tripura, Sikkim, and West Bengal.



Small boost: Several States which paid less than ₹300 per day under MGNREGA have had their wage rates jacked up. ARUN KULKARNI

Congress general secretary Jairam Ramesh criticised the notification, saying the wages remain "unjustifiably low". He reiterated the Congress's demand, made during the

2024 Lok Sabha campaign, for a national daily minimum wage of ₹400 for all workers in India.

"The Expert Committee headed by Dr. Anoop Satpathy, set up by the Modi

government, had also recommended a national minimum wage floor of ₹375 per day in 2019," he said.

Mr. Ramesh noted that the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Rural Development, chaired by Congress MP Saptagiri Ulaka, had also consistently recommended higher wages for MGNREGA workers.

Given the "widespread minimum wage protests in industrial hubs like Noida, and at a time when the stagnation of rural wages is widely recognised as a key constraint on our economic growth", the notification was both a "snub to India's workers and an unwise economic policy," he said.

"A just minimum wage for India's workers would adopt Dr. Satpathy's recommendation and accommodate the increase in prices since then," he added.

Burden on States

Mr. Ulaka said his party had opposed the VB-G RAM G Act "from the streets to Parliament" and would continue to do so. "We appeal to the government that the VB-G RAM G be repealed and a strengthened MGNREGA be brought back," he said at a press conference here. He criticised the shift from the rights-based, demand-driven MGNREGA to what he

described as a supply-driven, government-driven VB-G RAM G.

Mr. Ulaka said a key concern was the new cost-sharing arrangement. Under MGNREGA, the Centre bore almost the entire labour cost, while material costs were shared in a 60:40 ratio. Under VB-G RAM G, however, the combined labour and material expenditure is now subject to the 60:40 ratio, he said. "If additional work needs to be provided beyond this, the financial burden will fall on the State government," he added.

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Why has the govt. notified a new set of telecom rules?

How do the rules change the telecom regulatory framework? What powers does the Act give the govt.?

Aroon Deep

The story so far:

The Telecommunications Act, 2023, saw a clutch of rules being notified this month, namely the Telecommunications (Authorisation for Provision of Principal Telecommunication Services) Rules, 2026; the Telecommunications (Authorisation for Captive Telecommunication Services) Rules, 2026; and the Telecommunications (Authorisation for Provision of Miscellaneous Telecommunication Services) Rules, 2026.

What changes for telecom operators and users?

There are not many operational changes in India's telecom ecosystem due to the parent act or the rules being notified, as

the major objective of the legislation is to simplify the oft-amended Indian Telegraph Act, 1885, which it replaces (along with other accompanying laws, like the Wireless Telegraphy Act, 1933.

Along the way, the Union government got some greater powers in the text of the parent statute, such as a definition of "telecommunication" that can be used to regulate messaging apps. (While the government initially denied this, last year the Department of Telecommunications (DoT) tried to force WhatsApp to log out users every six hours from web instances of the service, and to "bind" every user to a SIM, as an anti-spam measure.)

Which provisions of the Act have already been brought into force?

This is, of course, not the beginning of the notification of the Act. As early as 2024, the government notified parts of the law,

such as one that renamed the Universal Service Obligation Fund (where telcos are required to pay into a corpus to fund financially unfeasible telecom infrastructure in remote and isolated areas) to the Digital Bharat Nidhi. Another part of the law that was notified was one that allowed the government to seize telecom infrastructure on national security or war grounds.

More parts of the law that have already been notified in previous months include a replacement for the interception orders, where in spite of an industry and civil society push, the government retained senior officials' powers to issue phone and internet tapping orders.

The specific rules notified this month replace the bulk of the licensing framework for telecom operators. This has been replaced with the term "authorisation," accompanied by

language that simplifies and modifies some of the paperwork that telcos and Internet Service Providers (ISPs) have to do. It also adds anti-spam enforcement as an obligation under the Parent Act.

Why are some aspects of the new regime still uncertain?

The new telecom act also recognises satellite internet, but this has been taken away, even as Starlink, the largest satellite internet provider in the world, awaits approvals to launch. "The final Rules have removed explicit references to Global Mobile Personal Communications by Satellite (GMPCS), as contained in the Draft Rules," the law firm Khaitan & Co wrote in a brief. Separately, news reports (and the delay) indicate that the government is yet to give up on concerns of whether it can truly shut off Starlink, seeing how it is used in countries like Iran in defiance of the local government.

At any rate, telcos and ISPs can choose to migrate to this authorisation regime now, or wait until their licenses expire and then apply afresh. As Khaitan & Co pointed out, "a significant volume of operational detail is still awaited ... implementation detail awaits further clarity and remains dependent on further specifications, including the 'sound' track-record criterion, exemption thresholds and technical directions."

THE GIST

The newly notified rules largely replace the old telecom licensing framework with an authorisation regime, simplify compliance for telecom operators and ISPs, and add anti-spam obligations, while leaving day-to-day operations largely unchanged.

Although several provisions of the Telecommunications Act have already been brought into force, implementation is still incomplete, with satellite internet rules, Starlink approvals, and key operational details yet to be clarified.

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Under VB-G RAM G, States' expenditure could go up six-fold

An analysis by *The Hindu* shows that States will have to spend at least ₹51,000 crore in 2026-27, in contrast to about ₹7,700 crore they spent in 2024-25

DATA POINT

Nitika Francis
Pon Vasanth B. A.

The Viksit Bharat Guarantee for Rozgar and Ajeevika Mission (Gramin) (VB-G RAM G), which completely overhauls the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), came into force on July 1, despite serious concerns raised by many States.

One of the key concerns is the shifting of a significant part of the financial burden of this landmark employment guarantee scheme, which has been in force since 2005, from the Centre to the States. Table 1 shows the key changes in the funding patterns.

Though the Government of India had earlier said that the transition to the new scheme "does not impose an undue financial burden on States," it has not spelt out the additional expenditure to be borne by each State. A release from the Ministry of Rural Development on Wednesday said the Centre has made an interim allocation of ₹95,692.31 crore for the States for 2026-27, without mentioning the contribution needed from the States or how much of the interim allocation would be used to settle past dues for the States. This is despite a fundamental shift: MGNREGA was a demand-driven model while under the VB-G RAM G, the Union government shall have the power to determine the "normative allocation (budget to be spent on the scheme)" for every State in a year based on certain "objective parameters" the Centre prescribes. Moreover, the new scheme shifts the responsibility fully to the States for any additional expenditure incurred beyond the "normative allocation"; for unemployment allowance (if employment could not be ensured for the guaranteed 125 days); and the compensation for delay in payments.

The general perception is that the earlier sharing pattern was roughly in the ratio of 90:10 between the Centre and the State; now the shift to a 60:40 pattern would result in a three-fold increase in States' expenditure.

However, an analysis by *The Hindu* showed that the increase in States' expenditure could be nearly 600%, when compared with 2024-25, the latest year for which actuals on expenditure are available. The analysis, based on conservative estimates, showed that States will have to spend at least ₹51,000 crore in 2026-27, in contrast to about ₹7,700 crore they spent in 2024-25. The projected figure does not include West Bengal. Table 2 shows the country-level estimates and the method used to arrive at the projections, based on the new wage rates for each State notified by the Centre.

Minister for Rural Development Shivraj Singh Chouhan was quoted as saying that "no eligible rural worker should remain without work even for a day". However, the government had come under criticism in recent years for failing to ensure even 100 days of work.

The Hindu's estimates conservatively assume an increase of 25% in the total person days generated in 2024-25 instead of considering a minimum of 125 days of employment for registered households. For the administration and materials related expenditure, the analysis has applied the inflation based on Consumer Price Index (CPI) for the amount spent for each State in 2024-25. Uttar Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, and Bihar will be among States, whose expenditure could see an increase of 600% to 800% (Chart 1).

Chart 2 shows how MGNREGA expenditure had come down since 2020-21 despite the Government's stated commitment to spend more for the scheme. Moreover, the report available for the year 2025-26 showed that the Centre had to clear ₹20,422 crore pending as dues to all States.

Overburdening the States

The data for the charts were sourced from the Ministry of Rural Department's reports available online, Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, Reserve Bank of India, Union Budget, and the VB-G RAM G Act



Table 1: This shows the key changes in the funding pattern between the two schemes (Centre:State)

Category	MGNREGA	VB-G RAM G
Labour wages	100% by Centre	60:40 ratio
Material costs	75:25 ratio	60:40 ratio
Administrative expenses	75:25 ratio	60:40 ratio
Number of guaranteed workdays	100	125
Exceptions for any States or Union Territories	None	90:10 ratio in total expenditure for NE States, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, and Jammu and Kashmir. Full expenditure to be borne by the Centre for ITI, about

Table 2: This shows the rough estimates for 2026-27 under VB-G RAM G and the increase in the expenditure

Category	2024-25	2026-27 (projections)	Calculation method
Wages	₹73,335.05 cr	₹1,05,769.18 cr	25% increase in PDG for each State
Person days generated (PDG)	268.2 cr	335.25 cr	25% increase assumed (100 to 125)
Materials	₹25,985.44 cr	₹27,884.24 cr	Adjusted for inflation as per CPI for 2025-26 and 2026-27 (projected)
Admin	₹4,770.55 cr	₹5,119.14 cr	Adjusted for inflation as per CPI for 2025-26 and 2026-27 (projected)
Total	₹1,04,091.04 cr	₹1,38,772.56 cr	
Centre's contribution	₹96,401.97 cr	₹87,804.25 cr	
Centre's share	92.6%	63.3%	
States' contribution	₹7,689.07 cr	₹50,968.31 cr	10% for NE States, no cost for UTs without legislatures and 40% for the rest
States' share	7.4%	36.7%	

Chart 1: This shows the top 15 States that will have to spend the highest amount under the new scheme. A few States will experience a six-to-eight fold increase in expenditure

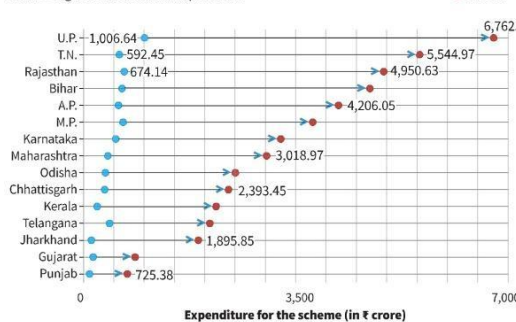
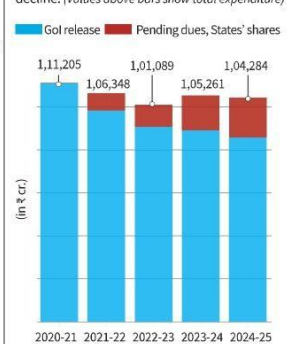


Chart 2: The Centre's allocation has seen a decline. (Values above bars show total expenditure)



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A unified policy architecture for India's energy future

India has made remarkable progress in transforming its energy landscape over the past decade. From achieving near-universal household electrification and expanding access to clean cooking fuel to becoming one of the world's fastest-growing renewable energy markets, it has demonstrated a strong commitment to ensuring energy access while advancing sustainable development.

As India looks ahead to the goals of energy self-reliance by 2047 and net-zero emissions by 2070, the next phase of the energy transition will require an increasingly integrated approach to planning and governance. A policy brief released by the Indian National Science Academy (INSA) in May 2026 highlights the importance of a unified national energy framework that can help align diverse energy resources, technologies and institutions towards common national objectives.

The complexity of India's energy system

The need for such an approach is evident from the scale and complexity of India's energy system. While domestic energy production continues to expand, there is a dependence on imports for a significant share of oil and natural gas requirements. At the same time, energy demand is expected to grow steadily as economic development, industrialisation and urbanisation continue. Managing these multiple priorities, energy security, affordability, sustainability and economic growth, requires coordinated planning across sectors and fuels.

India has already established strong foundations through initiatives such as the Saubhagya Scheme, the Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana, and ambitious renewable energy programmes. Renewable energy installed capacity has grown from approximately 40 GW in 2015 to approximately 260 GW by 2025, reflecting a determination to diversify the energy mix. As



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A policy brief
from the
INSA-Centre for
Science,
Technology,
Innovation and
Policy outlines a
four-pillar
framework

the energy ecosystem becomes more diverse, however, greater coordination among generation, transmission, storage, distribution and emerging technologies will become increasingly important.

How the framework works

The INSA policy brief proposes a framework built around four mutually reinforcing pillars: adequacy, access, affordability and appropriate sustainability.

First, adequacy focuses on ensuring reliable and diversified energy supplies through a balanced portfolio of conventional and emerging energy sources, supported by modern infrastructure, energy storage and digital technologies. The objective is to strengthen energy resilience while reducing long-term vulnerabilities.

Second, access emphasises reliable and equitable energy services for all citizens. Building on the country's achievements in electrification and clean cooking access, the framework advocates strengthening last-mile delivery, improving service quality and expanding decentralised energy solutions where appropriate.

Third, affordability recognises that a successful energy transition must remain economically viable for households, businesses and industries. The framework highlights the role of innovative financing mechanisms, efficient markets and consumer-focused safeguards in supporting an inclusive transition.

The fourth pillar, appropriate sustainability, underscores the importance of pursuing sustainability in a manner that is aligned with India's developmental priorities and resource endowments. Rather than adopting a one-size-fits-all approach, the framework advocates solutions that reflect India's unique social, economic and environmental context.

This includes support for local communities, workforce development and region-specific transition pathways.

The policy brief also identifies circular economy practices and carbon capture, utilisation and storage (CCUS) as important cross-cutting enablers that can complement renewable energy deployment and contribute to reducing emissions from industrial sectors.

Recognising that energy transitions occur over decades, the framework proposes a phased approach. Near-term priorities include strengthening infrastructure, accelerating renewable energy deployment, supporting emerging technologies such as green hydrogen, and developing institutional mechanisms that can facilitate long-term coordination. Over time, the emphasis would shift toward deeper integration of low-carbon technologies, expanded use of bio-resources and the development of a more interconnected and resilient energy ecosystem.

Viewing energy as whole

At its core, the framework highlights the value of viewing India's energy system as an integrated whole. Coal, renewables, biomass, natural gas, waste-to-energy systems and emerging clean technologies each have a role to play in supporting the country's development aspirations. Their effectiveness can be enhanced through greater coordination and long-term strategic planning.

India's energy transition is not only about expanding capacity; it is about creating a resilient, affordable and sustainable energy system capable of supporting future growth. By providing a common framework for aligning diverse energy pathways, the proposed approach offers a constructive road map for advancing national priorities while strengthening energy security for generations to come.

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As US reshapes its Asia strategy, India must rewire its regional leadership

THE UNITED STATES is reshaping its Asia strategy as it accepts that China can no longer be contained at an acceptable economic or military cost. This shift is reducing India's strategic importance in Washington's calculations while expanding US engagement across South Asia. As both the US and China compete for influence in India's neighbourhood, New Delhi must act to preserve its strategic autonomy and rewire regional leadership.

The shift in American approach is driven by declining influence and a series of strategic setbacks. In Europe, the Ukraine war has imposed high financial and military costs on Washington, which now wants European nations to shoulder more of NATO's burden. In the Middle East, the Iran war proved costly for the US. Iran was not subdued, while attacks on US bases in Gulf countries weakened confidence in America's security guarantees and made close ties with Washington appear riskier for regional stability. Old US partners such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE are expanding ties with China.

In the Indo-Pacific, despite housing thousands of troops and maintaining military alliances with Japan, South Korea, Australia, and many ASEAN countries, and being part of frameworks such as the Quad and the Australia-UK-US Security Partnership, the US faces a different reality. China has become the largest trading partner for most economies in the region, and Asian manufacturing supply chains remain deeply tied to Chinese industry. This economic dependence has made many governments reluctant to fully align with US strategic objectives against Beijing. Malaysia's

withdrawal from the trade deal with the US is an example.

As Washington recognises these limits, its China strategy is changing. Instead of trying to contain Beijing, it increasingly appears to be treating China as a de facto equal — a G2 partner. In the Asia-Pacific, the US is seeking to preserve its influence without openly confronting China. It has become noticeably quieter on issues such as the Quad and Taiwan to avoid provoking Beijing.

Washington's view of India is also undergoing a shift. For nearly two decades, India was central to Washington's Indo-Pacific strategy and the Quad was a democratic counterweight to China. However, Washington now sees India not as a key strategic partner but more as a large market for American goods and technology and a subordinate partner. The February 7 US-India joint statement calls for India to align its economic and security interests more closely with those of America. Strategic cooperation is increasingly giving way to greater US strategic influence over India.

The US now appears to be following China's playbook by expanding its engagement across South Asia. China has spent more than a decade building its "string of pearls" through ports, infrastructure financing and connectivity projects in countries around India. Its regional presence now includes the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, Gwadar Port, Hambantota Port, Colombo Port City, Belt and Road projects in Nepal, major investments in Bangladesh and infrastructure projects across the Maldives.

Rather than treating South



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Asia as India's natural sphere of influence, Washington is deepening defence, maritime, digital and infrastructure cooperation with Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal and the Maldives. The appointment of Sergio Gor as both US Ambassador to India and Special Envoy for South and Central Asia reinforces the impression that Washington increasingly views South Asia as an integrated strategic space rather than through an India-centric lens.

This competition will give Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka and the Maldives greater leverage to play India, China and the US against one another to extract economic and political concessions.

Both Washington and Beijing also have an interest in keeping Pakistan strategically relevant as a counterweight to India. Pakistan has positioned itself as a swing state by maintaining close ties with the US, China, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey and Iran. As the world's only nuclear-armed Muslim country, it holds growing strategic value in West Asia. Its ability to engage both Sunni states (Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait and Turkey) and Shia states (primarily Iran) further strengthens its regional influence. As the US and China view Pakistan as an important partner, India's strategic environment becomes more challenging.

While India's trade surplus with South Asia has grown from about US\$6.7 billion to nearly US\$20 billion over the past two decades, its political and strategic challenges remain. SAARC is largely dysfunctional, and relations with Bangladesh, Nepal and the Maldives con-

tinue to fluctuate. Pakistan is a failed state thriving on external steroids. Intensifying US-China competition is likely to deepen these challenges.

India cannot stop great-power rivalry in South Asia, but must avoid becoming an object of external power-politics. The playbook is simple. India must strengthen its economic base by prioritising manufacturing, artificial intelligence, semiconductors, critical minerals, defence production, and other advanced industries, while reducing its dependence on imported industrial inputs from China.

It should preserve strategic autonomy by keeping relations with both Washington and Beijing transactional and judging each issue on its merits. India must build connectivity projects, more responsive development partnerships and consistent political engagement with most neighbours.

Finally, India must avoid actions that create confusion about its longstanding positions. For example, India has consistently rejected third-party mediation with Pakistan, as it did by dismissing US President Donald Trump's claim of mediation during Operation Sindoor. It should therefore avoid forums that invite outside powers into South Asian affairs. India's high-level participation in the June 25-26 South Asia Dialogue in Colombo, alongside representatives from Pakistan, the US, the UK, Sri Lanka and the Maldives, blurred that position.

At a time when both Washington and Beijing are expanding their influence in South Asia, India should avoid actions that could be seen as accepting a larger role for external powers in its neighbourhood.

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PPP 2.0 should focus on matching capital to risk



ARVIND MAYARAM

TWENTY YEARS ago, I was among those involved in developing India's public-private partnership (PPP) framework. It transformed airports, highways and ports, but also produced stressed assets following the global financial crisis and the domestic slowdown. As confidence waned, public capital expenditure replaced PPPs as the principal model for financing infrastructure. That retreat was understandable. It was also a mistake.

Today, India faces a challenge far greater than the one we confronted two decades ago. By March 2025, the infrastructure pipeline had expanded to more than 13,000 projects with an aggregate value approaching Rs 185 lakh crore. Yet this is only a fraction of what will be required as India pursues the goal of becoming a developed economy by 2047. Simultaneously, it must finance the green transition — renewable energy, transmission, green hydrogen, climate-resilient cities and adaptation infrastructure. Recent estimates suggest that achieving net zero could require investments exceeding \$20 trillion by 2070. No country has financed a transformation of this scale without mobilising vast pools of private capital. India's leading corporates will develop and operate many of these assets, but their balance sheets cannot finance investments of this magnitude. India needs not merely more capital, but a fundamentally different financing architecture. The central lesson from the first generation of PPPs is not that partnerships failed. It is that the financing model failed.

Infrastructure assets generate economic value for 30-50 years. Yet many PPP projects were financed through bank loans with repayment schedules of just 7-10 years. Projects therefore carried their heaviest debt-service burden when revenues were most uncertain. When growth slowed after 2008, revenues underperformed while debt obligations remained fixed, contributing to rising NPAs and undermining confidence in the model.

The central flaw was simple: Long-lived assets were financed with short-lived capital. The challenge today is no longer merely capital scarcity. It is capital circulation — matching the right capital to the right risk at the right stage of a project's life cycle.

Governments are uniquely placed to finance high-risk phases such as project preparation, land acquisition and construction.

But once projects stabilise, scarce public capital should not remain locked in mature assets. Ownership and financing should progressively migrate to investors whose liabilities match long-duration infrastructure.

The opportunity is enormous. Global pension funds, insurance companies and sovereign wealth funds control more than \$110 trillion, much of it seeking stable, inflation-linked, long-term returns. India has already created the building blocks. InvITs have emerged as credible investment vehicles, while the National Investment and Infrastructure Fund has demonstrated the ability to attract global institutional capital. What is missing is a mechanism through which government capital, developer capital and institutional capital can continuously replace one another as project risks decline.

This is where circular finance becomes relevant. Government-supported finance and developers should fund projects through construction. Once revenues stabilise, InvITs should acquire operational assets, allowing governments and developers to recycle capital into new projects. As risks decline further, high-cost bank debt should be refinanced through infrastructure debt funds and ultimately held by pension funds, insurance companies and other long-term investors. The cost of capital should decline as project risks decline. Today's financing architecture often does the opposite.

That is why the RBI should mandate dynamic risk-based repricing of infrastructure loans. Banks currently retain construction-stage risk premia long after projects have been de-risked, removing incentives for refinancing and capital recycling. Equally important is reviving infrastructure debt funds as the bridge between operational infrastructure and long-term institutional investors.

Every rupee locked indefinitely in a mature infrastructure asset is a rupee unavailable for financing the next highway, transmission line or renewable-energy project. The first generation of PPPs sought to mobilise private capital. The second must ensure that the same capital finances successive generations of infrastructure. In an economy that must build, decarbonise and maintain fiscal discipline, capital circulation may prove as important as capital mobilisation.

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