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# Laying down the sword of Damocles

Jan Vishwas Bill revises assumption that every citizen is a potential criminal until proven innocent in a reform that could enhance ease of doing business and ease of living

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Jan Vishwas Bill 2026 Decriminalizes 1,000+ Offenses to Boost Ease of Living

**By Anant Goenka, President, FICCI, and Vice Chairman, RPG Group**

As the summer heat rises, Delhiites should be delighted to know that putting up a sunshade, a weather frame, or a canopy no longer requires the municipal commissioner's written permission under Section 318 of the Delhi Municipal Corporation Act, 1957. This welcome development is an outcome of the passage of the Jan Vishwas Bill in the Rajya Sabha on April 2.

While it did not get the ovation it deserved, it is the most significant governance reform to enhance the ease of doing [business](#) and ease of living that [India](#) has seen in years. It is not an incremental effort; the Bill's scale and scope will positively impact a range of industries, from drugs and pharmaceuticals to mining, shipping, port operations, [banking](#), and marine exports.

The Bill amends 784 provisions across 79 central Acts, effectively removing over 1,000 criminal offences. In comparison, the previous avatar of the Bill, introduced in August last year, sought to amend 16 central Acts, while the first Jan Vishwas Act in 2023 amended 288 provisions across 42 Acts. Taken together, these reforms underscore a decisive shift towards the Prime Minister's vision of trust-based governance, a critical pillar in advancing India's Viksit Bharat ambition.

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The earlier Bill was referred to a select committee chaired by Tejasvi Surya, which held 49 meetings, conducted extensive consultations, and submitted its report to Parliament. The final Bill is substantially broader in scope and more thoughtful than the original proposal. It replaces imprisonment clauses for minor, technical, and procedural violations with graded civil penalties. A system of warnings has also been introduced for the first time in several statutes; a penalty applies only if the warning is ignored. The reform could enable the closure of nearly five crore pending minor offence cases, with the commerce and industry minister already urging officials and prosecutors to act swiftly under the new provisions.

As we celebrate the reform, calling it a job done would be far from reality. For decades, India has been one of the most over-criminalised countries in the world. In 2023, a study by the Vidhi Centre for Public Policy found that central laws included over 7,300 crimes, of which over 5,300 were punishable by imprisonment. A 2022 report by the Observer Research Foundation and TeamLease, a workforce-solutions company, noted 26,134 criminal provisions across business laws. Even the United States, known for its harsh criminal justice system, had 5,199 crimes under federal statutes in 2019.

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To their credit, state governments have also taken Jan Vishwas seriously, with 14 states and the Legislative Assembly of Jammu and Kashmir having passed their own Jan Vishwas Bills. However, the state governments have largely conducted a tick-the-box exercise, including acts that do not significantly impact businesses or citizens. For example, Odisha has decriminalised the offences of failing to keep records and failing to file returns under the Odisha Electricity (Duty) Act, 1961, along with amendments to value-added tax and excise acts. These laws apply only to a few businesses. Madhya Pradesh was the first state to pass the Jan Vishwas Act in 2024; however, the law merely replaced criminal fines with civil penalties in many places.

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As India moves out of the shadow of colonialism towards a trust-based legal system, both the Centre and the states need to undertake further reforms of a similar nature, particularly for statutes with wide-scale application to businesses and citizens. The government's comprehensive exercise and the select committee's laudable work establish a good model to follow.

In addition to periodic Jan Vishwas exercises, we need an institutional filter for the flow of new offences being added to the books. Among others, the Bill needed to amend three laws enacted just a few months ago. Every new Bill introduced in Parliament or in a state legislature that proposes criminal punishment for regulatory, procedural, or civil matters should undergo a mandatory impact assessment. The assessment should ask whether criminal punishment is required and whether it is proportional to the offence.

The instinct to reach for imprisonment as a regulatory tool remains deeply embedded in our legislative culture. India's founding vision was of a republic governed by law, not by the whims of the state. For too long, the proliferation of criminal punishments in regulatory legislation has inverted that vision. The Jan Vishwas Bill, 2026, does not just reform 79 statutes; it revises the assumption that every citizen is a potential criminal until proven innocent. Dismantling that assumption, one provision at a time, is what a democratic government owes to the people.

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