

# Experts Explain | Jan Vishwas Bill 2026: Scale, scope and impact of India's major decriminalisation exercise

Although the 2023 Act aimed to improve ease of doing business, the present Bill amends laws across sectors including industry, infrastructure, municipal governance, as well as colonial-era legislations.

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Union Minister of Commerce and Industry Piyush Goyal during a press briefing on the Jan Vishwas (Amendment of Provisions) Bill, 2026, at Vanijya Bhawan, in New Delhi on April 3, 2026. Photo: ANI/Jitender Gupta

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Last week, the Parliament passed the [Jan Vishwas \(Amendment to Provisions\) Bill, 2026](#). The Bill proposes to amend 784 provisions across 79 Central laws. Earlier, the Jan Vishwas (Amendment of Provisions) Act, 2023, had amended 183 provisions across 42 laws to improve ease of doing business.

The present Bill, however, moves beyond this. By extensively decriminalising and rationalising punishments across a wider spectrum of laws, it pushes the reform into areas that shape a citizen's routine, [day-to-day encounters](#) with the law.

### Scope of the Bill

In an attempt to rationalise the penal framework, the Bill amends laws across a broad range of sectors. These amendments collectively decriminalise or rationalise 1,018 individual actions and omissions treated as offences under the law.

In the realm of business and industry, the Bill amends laws like the Tea Act, the Coir Industry Act, and the Legal Metrology Act, 2009.

For municipal governance, the Bill proposes changes to laws like [Delhi Development Act](#), the [Delhi Municipal Corporation Act](#), and the [Cantonments Act, 2006](#).

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In transportation and infrastructure, the Bill touches upon the Motor Vehicles Act, the Coastal Shipping Act, and the Petroleum and Minerals Pipelines (Acquisition of Right of User in Land) Act, 1962.

The Bill also amends [colonial-era legislations](#) such as the Cattle Trespass Act, the Live Stock Importation Act, and the Indian Succession Act, which continued to rely on criminal law to enforce routine compliances.

### The amendments

Across the 79 laws, the Bill proposes four broad sets of changes:

**Decriminalisation:** The Bill decriminalises a total of 805 offences, removing criminal sanctions such as imprisonment or fines and replacing them with civil mechanisms such as warnings and monetary penalties. These offences are removed from the ambit of the

criminal justice system and will no longer attract police action and criminal court proceedings. They will however, in most cases continue to be regulated.

**Omission:** The Bill proposes to omit 125 offences. Redundant or outdated offences have been omitted and effectively decriminalised. Offences that continue to pose public harm but are already covered under the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023, (BNS) have also been omitted from the specific laws, yet retain criminal liability under the general law.

**Compounding:** Thirty-five offences have been proposed to be made compoundable, allowing violators to settle the case by paying a prescribed sum, avoiding prolonged litigation. While this brings some procedural flexibility, the violations continue to be criminalised.

**Rationalisation of punishments:** For 53 offences, the Bill reduces imprisonment terms, removes disproportionately harsh punishments such as life imprisonment or death, and revises fines to contemporary standards.

Underlying these amendments is a conscious attempt at rationalising the way in which the state responds to violations of the law.

## Fines vs penalties

The Bill clarifies the distinction between fines and penalties. Fines remain court-imposed and often require the full criminal justice process, even for nominal fine amounts. Penalties, by contrast, are civil in nature and imposed by designated adjudicatory officers, enabling quicker and more efficient enforcement.

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## Offences being decriminalised

The offences being decriminalised or rationalised broadly fall into following categories:

**Outdated and redundant offences:** The Bill removes minor or obsolete offences that have little to no impact or harm. For example, it omits offences such as allowing a child under seven to relieve themselves in public or extinguishing lamps. Similarly, the offence of loitering or begging for alms in cantonments or hawking goods in any railway carriage have been decriminalised.

**General contraventions:** Dozens of Central laws criminalise any non-compliance with any provision of the law, rules, or regulations, making such omnibus provisions a key source of overcriminalisation. Such provisions have been decriminalised for around 17 laws and omitted from around five laws. For instance, under the Motor Vehicles Act, 1988, the provision

has been decriminalised by providing a warning for the first contravention and a penalty for any second or subsequent contravention.

**Procedural defaults:** To improve ease of doing business, the Bill seeks to decriminalise minor lapses, where the underlying conduct may not be inherently criminal. For instance, under the Tea Act, 1953, it decriminalises failing to furnish returns and furnishing false returns by replacing fine with a warning for the first contravention and civil penalty for the subsequent contravention. Similar offences have been decriminalised for around 29 laws, and have been omitted from around six laws.

Provisions that criminalise failure to comply with any order, direction, requisition, and notices have also been decriminalised in around 18 laws, omitted from six laws and made compoundable in two laws. For instance, under the Delhi Development Act, 1957, the offence of failing to comply with a requisition for removal of any construction material, tool, machinery, scaffolding or other things has been decriminalised.

**Obstruction:** The offence of obstructing a public servant appears across several laws, often without a clear definition of “obstruction” and with varying punishments. Such offences have been decriminalised or omitted across around 20 laws. For instance, under the Marine Products Export Development Authority Act, 1972, the offence of obstruction has been omitted.

## Grading punishments

While the law often defaults to criminalisation, the Bill introduces a more structured and graded approach to enforcement. In several laws, it provides for warnings and improvement notices for minor or first-time contraventions, giving individuals and businesses an opportunity to remedy lapses before harsher consequences are imposed.

For instance, under the Delivery of Books and Newspapers (Public Libraries) Act, 1954, contraventions were earlier punishable with a criminal fine. This is replaced with: a notice with an opportunity to remedy for the first contravention, suspension of registration for repeat violations, and permanent cancellation for persistent non-compliance.

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More serious contraventions, particularly those that involve significant public harm, continue to attract criminal sanctions. But even in these cases, the Bill attempts to align punishments

with the BNS to ensure proportionality.

This reflects a broader rethinking of the State's enforcement architecture: reserving criminal law for serious harm, while recognising the impracticality of invoking the full machinery of the criminal justice system for trivial violations.

### **Why were these reforms needed?**

As of December, 2024, there were 370 Central laws with 7,305 criminal offences in force. 5333 offences attracted jail terms. More than 74% of these laws were not core criminal justice laws but regulated subject matters such as taxation, municipal governance, corporate governance, etc.

So, the Bill marks an important step towards making the criminal law landscape more reasonable. While it may not solve all problems confronting India's criminal justice system, it is an important step forward.

*The authors are with Crime & Punishment, Vidhi Centre for Legal Policy and were part of the team that assisted the Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade (DPIIT), Ministry of Commerce, on the Jan Vishwas exercise.*