

NEWS ITEMS ON CAG/ AUDIT REPORTS (20.05.2022)

1. Is there really an acute shortage of teachers in Indian schools? (economictimes.indiatimes.com) May 20, 2022

Now that children are being vaccinated and schools are learning to live with Covid, the pressure for hiring more teachers in public schools will grow. This is likely in view of strong teacher unions and the recommendation by the New Education Policy (NEP) to appoint 1 million new teachers at the whopping cost of ₹64,000 crore a year. Before the state governments, blessed by the central education ministry, proceed for such a hiring spree and bust already fragile state budgets, it is prudent to ask whether the NEP has rightly assessed the shortage.

The education ministry gives a figure of 1.035 million teacher vacancies without explaining how it got that number. Going by the 2019-20 District Information System of Education (DISE) data, the pupil-teacher ratio (PTR) in public elementary schools across India was only 25.1. Given that the Right to Education (RTE) Act mandates a maximum PTR of 30, nationally, there is no teacher shortage in the sense that if students and teachers could be properly rearranged or deployed, the mandated average could be achieved without hiring any new teachers.

Applying the RTE norms - e.g., at the primary level, two teachers for all schools with '60 or fewer' pupils, and one additional teacher for every additional 30 students or a fraction of that - even to existing students and teacher allocations to schools, some schools suffer from teacher shortages, some have just the right number and some have surplus teachers.

When we relocate the surplus teachers from the last category of schools to those suffering from shortage, the net shortage is only 2.5 lakh rather than 10 lakh. In other words, three-fourths of the shortage identified by NEP is not a shortage at all.

Indeed, even the 2.5 lakh shortage figure turns out to be an overstatement once we correct for the padding up of student enrolments in the official data. As per reports by the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) and the Midday Meal Authority (MMA), public schools seriously overstate enrolments to get more state benefits (sweaters, bags and food grain for midday meals). As our April 2021 research (bit.ly/3woltZT) using school-wise data on students and teachers shows, a correction for this overstatement converts the net shortage of 2.5 lakh teachers into a surplus of nearly 1 lakh teachers.

(Only) Three Bags Full...

Over the years, a staggering number of parents have moved their children into low-fee private schools. Between 2010 and 2019, 2.7 crore pupils left public schools for private ones. This mass migration has created an extremely large number of 'mini' schools with very low PTR. By 2019, 48% of India's about 10 lakh public elementary schools were left with only '60 or fewer' pupils each. The average number of pupils in these approximately 5 lakh schools was only 31, and they had only 13.3 pupils per teacher.

The RTE Act requires that even tiny schools with '20 or fewer' pupils employ two teachers. It also prescribes no minimum size for schools, thus maintaining tiny unviable schools that provide scant socialisation opportunity to children.

Our research shows that maintaining a surplus of teachers and a PTR of 25.1, rather than the permitted maximum of 30, already costs the Indian exchequer nearly ₹29,000 crore a year in excess teacher salaries alone. If new teachers are recruited to fill the claimed 1 million teacher vacancies as per NEP recommendation, the nationwide PTR would fall further to 19.9, and would incur an additional cost of nearly ₹64,000 crore each year (in 2019 nominal terms) in teacher salaries for the following 30 years or more, since policy in India does not allow teachers to be laid off once hired.

Adding this extra cost of fresh recruitment to the existing cost of currently surplus teachers, the total extra cost of the lower PTR of 19.9 turns out to be a gargantuan ₹93,000 crore a year in 2019-20 prices. As many as 70 countries enjoy a lower GDP than this figure.

Just as there is need for the consolidation of tiny agricultural holdings in India (48% of the holdings are smaller than half a hectare with the average size at just 0.23 hectare), there is a need to consolidate tiny public schools. Due to the emptying of public elementary schools, by 2019-20, there were 1.3 lakh 'tiny' public schools with only '20 or fewer' pupils. These schools had, on average, 12.7 pupils and two teachers per school, and a very low PTR of 6.7. Teacher salary expense per pupil in these schools averages ₹7,312 a month, or ₹87,852 a year, at 2019-20 prices.

Writing on the Blackboard

This nationwide problem requires GoI's intervention to incentivise the states to undertake necessary school consolidation (merging nearby public schools). For instance, no central resources should be provided for hiring new teachers in at least the 13 major states in which there is a net surplus of teachers, till they consolidate pupils into larger schools and transfer surplus teachers to nearby public schools that may have a teacher deficit.

Instead of appointing yet more teachers in emptying mini-fied schools, let us have fewer higher-quality schools that are pedagogically and economically viable, with direct benefit transfer (DBT) funding for transport to ensure that access is not jeopardised in the pursuit of quality. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/opinion/et-commentary/is-there-really-an-acute-shortage-of-teachers-in-indian-schools/articleshow/91672666.cms>

2. BBMP to build sewage diversion drains near four RR Nagar lakes (deccanherald.com) UPDATED: MAY 20, 2022

The BBMP is all set to build sewage diversion drains near four lakes in RR Nagar Zone at an estimated cost of Rs 50.34 crore.

Funds for the project have been taken from the sums earmarked to set up pre-processing plants near scientific landfills.

The Urban Development Department (UDD) last week gave its consent for the project by slashing the tender rates quoted by the lowest bidders.

The construction of sewage diversion drains near lakes is a new phenomenon in Bengaluru to arrest the flow of sewage into the waterbodies constantly fed with contaminated water.

The construction of sewage diversion drains near lakes is a new phenomenon in Bengaluru to arrest the flow of sewage into the waterbodies constantly fed with contaminated water. The

success rate of these projects is, however, very low as the sewage gets mixed with rainwater whenever the flow is high.

CAG report

A recent report by the Comptroller and Auditor General of India (CAG) highlighted entry of sewage into lakes where concrete structures have come up.

As per the official document accessed by DH, bidders had quoted more than 10% the estimated cost of the BBMP in each of the three projects. Following the government's order to cap tender premium, the UDD negotiated with the bidders to reduce the tender cost to less than five per cent.

The four lakes where the project is expected along with the final project cost are: Mallathahalli Lake (Rs 19.89 crore), Srigandhakaval Lake (Rs 20.34 crore, including development of the lake), and Hosakerehalli Lake and Kenchenahalli Lake (Rs 10.11 crore) of RR Nagar Zone.

While K Damodar and Co has bagged works at two lakes, Nadimpalli Purushotham Raju (NPR Infratech) has won the work of Hosakerehalli and Kenchenahalli lakes.

The UDD has directed the BBMP to engage a third-party quality-monitoring agency to keep a check on the works.

V Ramprasad, convener of citizens' volunteer group Friends of Lakes (FoL), said the sewage diversion drains are of no use during the monsoon season.

“In lakes where such structures have been already built, the diversion drains are able to stop sewage entering into the lakes when the flow of water is slow,” Ramprasad said.

“If there is a heavy flow of rainwater, the sewage gets mixed and enters into the lake,” he said, urging the civic body to focus on stopping the discharge of sewage into the drain.

“The drains are meant to carry only rainwater but most of these canals continue to carry sewage. The authorities must levy heavy penalty on those who connect sewage pipes into the drain in a big way,” Ramprasad added. <https://www.deccanherald.com/city/top-bengaluru-stories/bbmp-to-build-sewage-diversion-drains-near-four-rr-nagar-lakes-1110819.html>

3. लैंसडौन और कालागढ़ में कैपा के कार्यों का होगा विशेष आडिट, वन विभाग के प्रस्ताव पर शासन ने लगाई मुहर (jagran.com) 19 May 2022

देहरादून: विभिन्न वन प्रभागों में प्रतिकरात्मक वनरोपण निधि प्रबंधन एवं योजना प्राधिकरण (कैपा) के कार्यों को लेकर आ रही शिकायतों को देखते हुए विशेष आडिट कराने के वन विभाग के प्रस्ताव पर शासन ने मुहर लगा दी है। इस कड़ी में लैंसडौन व कालागढ़ वन प्रभागों में कैपा के कार्यों के विशेष आडिट कराने के सिलसिले में नियंत्रक एवं महालेखापरीक्षक (कैग) को पत्र भेजा गया है। वन विभाग के सूत्रों के अनुसार कैग अगले माह से दोनों प्रभागों में आडिट शुरू कर सकता है। इसके अलावा कुछ अन्य वन प्रभागों और वन्यजीव परिक्षेत्रों में इसी तरह का आडिट कराने की तैयारी है।

कार्बेट टाइगर रिजर्व के अंतर्गत कालागढ़ टाइगर रिजर्व वन प्रभाग में पिछले वर्ष अवैध निर्माण कार्यों का मामला सुर्खियां बना था। तब ये बात भी सामने आई कि इस प्रभाग में वर्ष 2020-21 से 2021-22 तक कैंपा व कार्बेट फाउंडेशन से उपलब्ध लगभग पांच करोड़ की धनराशि से विभिन्न कार्य कराए गए। इनमें पाखरो में टाइगर सफारी के लिए दो बाड़ों का निर्माण, सर्विस मार्ग के अलावा कंडी मार्ग पर 1.2 कि मी में कल्वर्ट व पुलिया निर्माण, मोरघट्टी, पाखरो व कुगड्डा में भवनों का निर्माण जैसे कार्य शामिल हैं। इनके लिए कोई प्रशासनिक व वित्तीय स्वीकृति नहीं ली गई। इनमें कई कार्य ऐसे हैं, जो कैंपा से नहीं हो सकते।

इसके अलावा लैंसडौन वन प्रभाग में वर्ष 2020-21 एवं 2021-22 में 30.88 लाख के कार्य स्वीकृत गतिविधि से इतर खर्च किए गए। यही नहीं, कोटद्वार में खोह नदी पुनर्जीव वीकरण के लिए स्वीकृत दो करोड़ की राशि में से 1.67 करोड़ बाढ़ सुरक्षा दीवार निर्माण में खर्च कर दिए गए, जो कैंपा मद में अनुमन्य ही नहीं है।

इस सबको देखते हुए वन विभाग के मुखिया प्रमुख मुख्य वन संरक्षक विनोद कुमार सिंघल ने कुछ समय पहले दोनों वन प्रभागों में कैंपा से आवंटित धनराशि और इससे हुए कार्यों का कैंग से विशेष आडिट कराने का प्रस्ताव शासन को भेजा। विभागीय सूत्रों के अनुसार शासन ने इसे स्वीकृति देते हुए कैंग को पत्र भी भेज दिया है। आडिट से वास्तविक तस्वीर सामने आ सकेगी। सूत्रों ने बताया कि मसूरी, नैनीताल व अल्मोड़ा वन प्रभागों के साथ ही कुछेक वन्यजीव परिक्षेत्रों में भी कैंपा के अंतर्गत हुए कार्यों को लेकर शिकायतें विभाग को मिली हैं। विभाग अभी अपने स्तर से इनका परीक्षण करा रहा है। आवश्यकता पडने पर इन प्रभागों व वन्यजीव परिक्षेत्रों में भी कैंग से विशेष आडिट कराया जा सकता है। <https://www.jagran.com/uttarakhand/dehradun-city-there-will-be-special-audit-of-the-works-of-campa-in-lansdowne-and-kalagarh-22725939.html>

4. सीएजी जांच शुरू:फर्जीवाड़ा - विवि की मंजूरी लिए बगैर नर्सरी टीचर ट्रेनिंग कोर्स में दाखिला ले छात्रों से करोड़ों वसूले (bhaskar.com) 20 May, 2022

मुजफ्फरपुर: नर्सरी टीचर ट्रेनिंग (एनटीटी) कोर्स के नाम पर बीआरए बिहार विवि में बड़ा फर्जीवाड़ा होने की आशंका जताई जा रही है। विवि से कोर्स की स्वीकृति लिए बगैर ही इसमें दाखिले के नाम पर कॉलेजों में छात्रों से करोड़ों रुपए की वसूली की गई है। मामले की जानकारी मिलने पर विवि ने जब कॉलेजों से इसकी जानकारी मांगी तो सीएजी की भी नजर पड़ गई।

सीएजी की टीम फिलहाल विश्वविद्यालय और इसके अधीन आने वाले अंगीभूत व संबद्ध कॉलेजों के पिछले 6 साल के लेखा-

जांच की जांच कर रही है। टीम ने कॉलेजों से एनटीटी कोर्स में हुए दाखिले से हुई आय का ब्योरा मांगा है। कोर्स के संचालन के नियम और स्वीकृति संबंधी कागजात भी जमा कराने का कहा गया है। फॉर्मेट देते हुए 7 बिंदुओं पर जानकारी मांगी गई है। इस बीच, प्रॉक्टर डॉ. अजित कुमार ने कॉलेजों में नियम विरुद्ध तरीके से इसके संचालन होने पर कुलसचिव को रिपोर्ट देते हुए कार्रवाई की अनुशंसा की है।

कॉलेजों से पूछा गया था कि क्या उनके यहां यह कोर्स चल रहा है

कोर्स के नियम विरुद्ध संचालन की जानकारी मिलने पर विश्वविद्यालय ने कॉलेज प्राचार्यों से इसकी रिपोर्ट मांगी थी। कॉलेजों से पूछा गया था कि क्या उनके यहां यह कोर्स चल रहे हैं। यदि चल रहे हैं तो विवि या एनसीटीई किसकी स्वीकृति ली गई थी। कितनी सीटों पर नामांकन लिए गए? स्वीकृति के काग

जात भी जमा कराने का निर्देश दिया गया था। लेकिन, विश्वविद्यालय के सिर्फ 11 कॉलेजो ने विवि के पत्र का जवाब दिया। इनमें 9 ने कोर्स चलने की बात तों स्वीकारी लेकिन स्वीकृति के कागजात नहीं दिए। 2 कॉलेजो ने कहा कि उनके यहां यह कोर्स नहीं चलता है।

नियम - कोर्स शुरू करने से पहले विवि की स्वीकृति अनिवार्य

कॉलेजो में यूजी, पीजी या वॉकेशनल किसी तरह का कोर्स शुरू करने के लिए विश्वविद्यालय से स्वीकृति लेना अनिवार्य है। कॉलेज से प्रस्ताव आने पर एकेडमिक काउंसिल, सिंडिकेट, सीनेट से मंजूरी के बाद एन ओसी मिलने पर कोर्स के अनुसार, सरकार या अपेक्स बाँडी से अनुमति लेकर ही संचालन हो सकता है। लेकिन, एनटीटी कोर्स के लिए विवि से किसी स्तर पर स्वीकृति नहीं ली गई।

इन कॉलेजों ने दी कोर्स की जानकारी

एलएस कॉलेज, आरबीबीएम, एमडीडीएम, वैशाली महिला कॉलेज, एसएलके सीतामढ़ी, आरएलएसवाई कॉलेज, वसुंधरा बीएड कॉलेज, बीपीएस देसरी, आरआरएस साइंस कॉलेज। एसआरएपी चकियाज, सीएन कॉलेज साहेबगंज ने कहा कि उनके यहां नहीं चल रहा।

1 यूनिट में 50 नामांकन लेना था, सैकड़ों लिए

कॉलेजो में कोर्स शुरू करने के समय स्वयंसेवी एजेंसी ने 1 यूनिट में 50 नामांकन लेने और अधिकतम तीन यूनिट खोलने की बात कही थी। लेकिन कहीं एक यूनिट में सैकड़ों नामांकन ले लिए। प्रति छात्र साढ़े 12 हजार वसूले गए हैं। विवि को जानकारी मिली है कि बेतिया के एक कॉलेज ने बड़ी संख्या में नामांकन ले लिया है।

बिना अनुमति कॉलेज के नाम का उपयोग नियम विरुद्ध

'कोई संस्था या एजेंसी कॉलेज के नाम का उपयोग कर कोर्स शुरू नहीं कर सकती। यह नियम विरुद्ध है। यदि कोर्स चलाने का अधिकार भी है तों संस्था किसी व्यक्ति को संचालन की जिम्मेदारी दे सकती है। कॉलेजो के मामले में विवि के संस्थान के नाम का उपयोग कर दाखिला लिया गया है। जबकि, विवि को इस बारे में कोई जानकारी नहीं है। एनओसी भी नहीं लिया गया है।'

डॉ. अजित कुमार, प्राॅक्टर, बीआरएबीयू <https://www.bhaskar.com/local/bihar/muzaffarpur/news/fraudulent-extorting-crores-from-students-by-taking-admission-in-nursery-teacher-training-courses-without-taking-the-approval-of-the-university-129828414.html>

5. 10 साल बाद फिर बाहर निकला वाड़ा प्रकरण, वाड़ा की कंपनी स्काई लाइट का लाइसेंस हुआ रद्द (punjabkesari.in) 19 May, 2022

चंडीगढ़: 10 साल बाद वाड़ा प्रकरण फिर बाहर निकल आया है क्योंकि हरियाणा की भाजपा-जजपा गठबंधन सरकार ने कांग्रेस अध्यक्ष सोनिया गांधी के दामाद राबर्ट वाड़ा की कंपनी स्काई लाइट हॉस्पिटैलिटी का लाइसेंस रद्द कर दिया है। टाऊन एंड कंट्री प्लाङ्गनग विभाग के निदेशक के.एम. पांडुरंग ने 9 मार्च को 5 पेज का आदेश जारी करते हुए लाइसेंस रद्द किया है। इस आदेश में कैग की रिपोर्ट और जस्टिस एस.एन. दींगरा आयोग की रिपोर्ट का हवाला दिया गया है, जिनमें जमीन के आबंटन से लेकर बिक्री और लाइसेंस के नवीनीकरण के साथ-

साथ निर्धारित समय अवधि में कम्यूशयल कालोनी न बना पाने का जिक्र किया गया है। इस आदेश में तत्का

लीन चकबंदी महानिदेशक डा. अशोक खेमका की टिप्पणियां भी दर्ज हैं, जिन्हें आधार बनाकर यह लाइसेंस रद्द किया गया है। जिस जमीन का लाइसेंस रद्द हुआ है, उस पर अब अगले आदेश तक कोई निर्माण कार्य नहीं हो सकेगा।

बता दें कि पूर्व मुख्यमंत्री भूपेंद्र सिंह हुड्डा की सरकार ने गुरुग्राम के सैक्टर-

83 स्थित शिकोहपुर में 3.52 एकड़ जमीन पर कम्यूशयल कालोनी काटने के लिए ओंकारेश्वर प्रॉपर्टीज प्राइवेट लिमिटेड को 2008 में यह लाइसेंस दिया था। ओंकारेश्वर प्रॉपर्टीज ने यह जमीन राबर्ट वाड्रा की कंपनी स्काई लाइट हॉस्पिटैलिटी को दे दी थी और स्काई लाइट हॉस्पिटैलिटी ने डी.एल.एफ. होम डिवेलपर्स को काफी ऊंचे दामों पर बेच दी थी। चकबंदी विभाग के तत्कालीन महानिदेशक डा. अशोक खेमका ने 2012 में इस जमीन का म्युटेशन (इंतकाल) रद्द कर दिया था, जिसके बाद यह मामला राष्ट्रीय स्तर पर सुर्खियों में आया। भाजपा ने इस मामले को लेकर कांग्रेस पर लगातार निशाना साधा।

यह है मामला

4 जनवरी,

2008 में गुरुग्राम के गांव शिकोहपुर में कम्यूशयल कालोनी के लिए ओंकारेश्वर प्रॉपर्टीज प्राइवेट लिमिटेड को इस जमीन का लाइसेंस दिया गया था। फिर यह जमीन वाड्रा की कंपनी स्काई लाइट को बेची गई। स्काई लाइट ने इस जमीन को डी.एल.एफ. को बेच दिया था। तब नए टाइल के साथ स्क्रूटनी फीस जमा कर वाते हुए सरकार के पास आवेदन किया गया था। 28 मार्च 2008 को 2.701 एकड़ जमीन का लैटर ऑफ इंटेंट जारी हुआ। साथ ही 30 दिनों में सभी कंप्लाइंस पूरा करने के लिए कहा गया। 22 अगस्त 2008 में डी.एल.एफ. ने कंप्लाइंस जमा करवाए। साथ ही स्काई लाइट के साथ कोलाबरेशन एग्रीमेंट भी जमा करवाया गया। 20 मई 2012 में इस कालोनी का बिल्डिंग प्लान अप्रूव हो गया, जिसकी समय अवधि मई 2017 तक रही। इस अवधि तक कालोनी का निर्माण हो जाना चाहिए था। <https://www.punjabkesari.in/chandigarh/news/in-2012-khemka-had-canceled-the-mutation-of-the-land-1603151>

SELECTED NEWS ITEMS/ARTICLES FOR READING

6. Supreme Court strikes down GST on ocean freight ([financialexpress.com](https://www.financialexpress.com)) May 20, 2022

The Supreme Court on Thursday struck down the integrated goods and services tax (IGST) levy on ocean freight, upholding the Gujarat HC decision that had gone in favour of taxpayers.

The Supreme Court on Thursday struck down the integrated goods and services tax (IGST) levy on ocean freight, upholding the Gujarat HC decision that had gone in favour of taxpayers.

“The Supreme Court has held that GST on ocean freight paid in case of import of goods is unconstitutional. As a corollary, the Indian importers who had paid such tax will be eligible to refund. Further, those importers who had not paid the tax on import of services will now not be required to pay tax because of this Supreme Court ruling,” said Abhishek A Rastogi, partner at Khaitan & Co, who argued for the companies.

This judgment may change the landscape of those provisions under GST which are subject to judicial review. As the court has gone ahead to categorically hold that the GST Council

recommendations have only persuasive value, there will be a pragmatic approach to the provisions which are subject to judicial review by way of challenge to the constitutionality of such provisions based on the GST Council recommendations, Rastogi added. <https://www.financialexpress.com/economy/supreme-court-strikes-down-gst-on-ocean-freight/2531612/>

7. Credible numbers: For the true Covid-death picture ([financialexpress.com](https://www.financialexpress.com)) May 20, 2022

A Mahalanobis-style survey, in the pattern of the one conducted to estimate Bengal famine numbers, may give a credible number

As Covid-19 emerged, with tons of easily available data, academic journals and the media were flooded with lots of contradictory predictions of Covid-19 numbers and the onset times of different waves. Most of these proved utterly wrong eventually. There is a new trend now—estimating excess death from Covid, which is primarily non-verifiable, and thus even the weird estimates can hardly be proved wrong. Funny indeed!

‘Excess death’ is not an alien concept though. When Covid ravaged Italy in 2020, one of my Italian acquaintances wrote me an e-mail: “Many people are dying, who have never been checked for Covid-19, so they do not enter the official counts.” Well, is it only Italy’s story? Possibly not.

There’s reason to believe that many Covid-related deaths were not recorded as ‘Covid’ elsewhere—not a fault of the concerned authority though. No country was prepared for the pandemic. Because of the initial scarcity of test-kits, overwhelmed healthcare system, and, of course, social stigma, such under-reporting is inevitable—especially if the concerned disease is highly contagious in nature.

Defining ‘excess deaths’ is a tricky task though. Leading magazines and top medical journals argued that those who had Covid but might have died on a similar timeframe from other ailments should be excluded from the count. However, it is advocated that people who have died of preventable causes during the pandemic—because the overwhelmed health infrastructure could not treat them—should be attributed to Covid. By the same token, quarantine measures might have reduced deaths from accidents and occupational injuries, and also social distancing led to a decrease in deaths from flu-like diseases. These should also be kept in mind while estimating the Covid number.

The World Health Organization’s recent estimate of more than 4.7 million Covid deaths in India—nearly 10 times higher than official records suggest—sparked controversy. There are other estimates though. A University of Chicago study even estimated 6.3 million excess deaths in India during the pandemic through August 2021. In fact, a March 2022 Lancet article estimated that 18.2 million deaths worldwide. The dynamic estimate made by The Economist magazine shows about 14.7-25.1 million global excess deaths, which is 2.3-4 times the official toll so far. The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimated more than 1 million excess deaths in America also.

Such widely varying estimates are based on various government and private data, and different types of models. Understandably, Covid data from different sources contain errors and biases of different magnitude and directions. And estimating anything, in general, based on possible biased data of unknown nature is subject to error of an unknown amount. Partial data is another

serious problem. For example, if Covid mortality in Maharashtra or Kerala is used to draw a pan-India picture, that would provide a highly biased estimate.

Data-based conclusions are not unique, we know. Interestingly, the above-mentioned Lancet article used six models to estimate expected mortality; final estimates were based on an ensemble of these models. Well, couldn't other models give different estimates? Nobody really knows how appropriate a model is, in general. 'Wisdom', certainly, plays an important role in choosing an 'appropriate' model.

Although it may sound surprising, to estimate Covid's excess death for any country, Covid-data may not be needed at all. All-cause mortality data during the last few years may suffice, if it is available and credible. One may build a 'suitable' time series model for the total number of deaths up to 2019, keeping the trend and the possible disasters in the country during these years in mind. Had there been no Covid, the expected number of deaths in 2020 and 2021 could be obtained from the fitted model. If we subtract this from the total all-cause death figure of 2020-21, that would give the estimated Covid number. In fact, using Covid-data for this purpose might even induce an error of unknown magnitude. However, the all-cause deaths may not be fully recorded or released in a timely manner, or even be questionable in a country. With so many contradictory and widely varying estimates, finding Covid's exact death toll may be like chasing an unknown in an unknown direction. And that would possibly remain elusive, unless a credible large-scale survey is conducted all over the country.

Yes, one may recall a seven-decade-old history. During the Bengal famine in the 1940s, Prasanta Chandra Mahalanobis, India's 'Plan Man', conducted a large-scale sample survey of famine-ravaged villages, for causal analysis, and to assess the extent of the disaster and an estimate of the number of people affected. The survey provided very useful findings such as one-fourth of the number of families (1.5 million people) who had owned rice land before the famine had either sold in full or in part such land or had mortgaged it, and the economic position of nearly 4 million people deteriorated during the famine. Well, only a credible survey like that might bring out the actual Covid story clearly. It is not easy though—Mahalanobis's shoes are yet unfilled. Contradictory pictures of the Covid-disaster would continue to create buzz. <https://www.financialexpress.com/opinion/credible-numbers-for-the-true-covid-death-picture/2531479/>

8. Indian Railways' Dedicated Freight Corridors to be used to run passenger trains in case of exigencies ([financialexpress.com](https://www.financialexpress.com)) May 20, 2022

Indian Railways' Eastern and Western Dedicated Freight Corridors, which have been designed for the exclusive movement of freight trains at a high speed, will now be used in times of exigencies for passenger train services, as per an official order of the Railway Board. According to sources quoted in a PTI report, this move will come into effect in case of natural calamities or train accidents where passengers will be transported to their destinations on the parallel Dedicated Freight Corridor network. This is likely to benefit the travellers of the Delhi – Howrah route and Delhi – Mumbai route – two of the busiest railway routes in India. These two rail routes also run parallel to the two DFCs.

As per the order, the Railway Board has decided that in case of exigencies, running of passenger trains on the Dedicated Freight Corridor network on corresponding Indian Railways' lines can be permitted. According to the Railway Board officials, the Eastern DFC and Western DFC, are being built only for freight and as a rule, high speed freight trains (100 km per hour) are

being operated on the said corridors. The report said, there is no provision for running passenger train services on the DFC.

The Railway Board has given permission to operate passenger train services on the Dedicated Freight Corridor network only under special circumstances. According to the report, 80 per cent of the Eastern DFC and Western DFC run parallel to the Delhi – Howrah rail route and Delhi – Mumbai rail route respectively. This will allow passenger train services to run on the Dedicated Freight Corridor in case of a disruption in the existing railway routes. The report further said these busy railway routes witness disruptions if there is a breach in the rail tracks due to any reason. This results in more congestion as well as diversion of train services, affecting the overall operations, the report added. <https://www.financialexpress.com/infrastructure/railways/indian-railways-dedicated-freight-corridors-to-be-used-to-run-passenger-trains-in-case-of-exigencies/2532136/>

9. Why carbon is the ‘crop’ of the future (thehindubusinessline.com) May 19, 2022

This regenerative method of farming can improve farm incomes, nutrition and soil health

There are ‘no free lunches’ is a perfect way to sum up the deep impact industrialised agriculture has had on our planet. The modern-day gift horses of industrialisation and the global supply chains have allowed us to expand our horizons and our “palates” — turning the erstwhile “life source and a public common” into a global business opportunity.

Agriculture is now a surgical economic activity. This leads to the new epoch of ‘corporate-environmental food monopolies’, as stated by Harriet Friedman and Phillip Mcmicheal in their seminal paper.

We know now, beyond any doubt, that industrial agriculture gets less food out of the ground, with fewer nutrients, less efficiently, more expensively, and with greater environmental devastation than small and organic farming. This is no longer a debate. In other words, modern agriculture externalises its true cost to others.

To be fair, agriculture, along with ‘writing and cities’, launched what we now think of as civilisation and global trade did pull millions out of poverty but it is also significant to remember that it has also kept a colonialist imprint on the planet in a different way: with differentiated access to nutritious food, reducing the biodiversity of our diet, injudicious ecological practices like monocropping and systematic erosion of soil and mounting cost of technology, chemicals — exiling the farmers out of their fair share of the progress and most importantly, deepening the climate change crisis. So what can fix the broken food systems of our times?

An alternative model

Carbon farming promises a bold new agricultural business model — one that fights climate change, creates jobs, and saves farms that might otherwise be unprofitable. In essence, a climate solution, and increased income generation opportunity and ensuring a food security net for the population — right under our feet.

Carbon Farming is a whole farm approach to optimising carbon capture on working landscapes by implementing practices that are known to improve the rate at which CO₂ is removed from the atmosphere and stored in plant material and/or soil organic matter.

Carbon farming can incentivise our farmers to introduce regeneratively practices in their agricultural processes — helping them shift their focus from improving yields to functioning ecosystems and sequestering carbon that can be sold or traded in carbon markets.

It not only improves the health of soil but can also result in improved quality, organic and chemical-free food (farm-to-fork models) along with boosted/secondary income from carbon credits for the marginalised farmers.

The total value of the global carbon markets grew by 20 per cent in 2020 — the fourth consecutive year of record growth — and is well on its way in raising critical mass of investors.

The value of traded global markets for carbon dioxide (CO₂) permits grew by 164 per cent to a record €760 billion (\$851 billion) in 2021.

Carbon thus can effectively prove to be the ‘cash crop’ of the future for farmers. There is also a case for our soil.

An international initiative called ‘4 per 1000’, launched at the 2015 Paris climate conference, showed that increasing soil carbon worldwide by just 0.4 per cent yearly could offset that year’s new growth in carbon dioxide emissions from fossil fuel emissions.

Studies show that soil removes about 25 per cent of the world’s fossil-fuel emissions each year and has been the missing link from the globally prescribed carbon management practices and narrative.

Soil is one of the most untapped and underutilised defences against climate change and acts as an efficient carbon sink. And India should capitalise on it to achieve its Net Zero target and decarbonising pathway.

According to the Third Biennial Update Report submitted by the Union government in early 2021 to the UNFCCC, the agriculture sector contributes 14 per cent of the total GHG emissions.

Amongst these, greenhouse gas emissions from rice cultivation during 2016 accounted for 71.322 million tonnes “CO₂ equivalent”, which analysts say might have gone up to 72.329 million tonnes “CO₂ equivalent” during 2018-19. This can be reduced by switching to regenerative agriculture practices and carbon farming can institutionalise and accelerate that shift. Regenerative agriculture and climate farming has gained wide acclaim and patronage globally.

It is also big on political agendas and climate manifestos. It was reported that Advisers to US President Joe Biden have suggested that the new administration launch a carbon bank for farmers as part of a plan to fight climate change, using the Commodity Credit Corporation — the same government war-chest Trump used to bail out mostly white, mostly wealthy farmers for income lost due to his trade war — to pay agricultural producers to sequester carbon in the soil. He has already declared the soil to be the next frontier of climate change fight. This is also followed by the global private sector boom with corporate behemoths like McDonald’s, Target,

Cargill, Danone, General Mills, and others pledging to use funds to support regenerative practices and many food brands like Applegates — launching their own regenerative food brands to entice the climate conscious consumers.

April 2022, in fact, has been the biggest year in carbon capture investment with big tech companies like Stripe, Alphabet, Meta and Shopify announcing \$925 million worth of carbon removal offsets over the next eight years. Stripe had spent \$15 million last year in buying carbon credits.

Netflix's much publicised documentary Kiss the Ground that makes a compelling case for the healing power of soil for our food security, nutrition and climate has also become a 'global sales pitch' for a transition to the regenerative agriculture.

This private sector enthusiasm and burgeoning market sentiment has to be matched by public sector boost.

Meghalaya leads the way

In India, Meghalaya is currently working on a blueprint of a 'carbon farming' Act to create a prototype of sustainable agriculture model for the entire North-East region. North-East Region has shown tremendous progress in adopting organic and sustainable agriculture practices and Sikkim has shown the way already. But there is tremendous potential.

Out of the 5.5 million hectares of cultivated land available in the North-East, organic farming barely covers 3 per cent of arable land.

An extensive and pioneering carbon farming Act — with a robust transition plan can effectively demonstrate the idea of creating a carbon sink on working land and farm our way out of climate crisis, improve nutrition, reduce the punishing inequalities within farming communities, alter the land use pattern and provide the much-needed solution to fix our broken food systems. <https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/opinion/why-carbon-is-the-crop-of-the-future/article65431204.ece>

10. Repair economy can plot climate burden fight (*livemint.com*) May 20, 2022

Intense heatwaves with temperatures over 45°C have seared India this summer. The worst-hit has been the working poor confined to tasks that can only be done outside. We are all now too familiar with weird weather events happening due to climate change across different geographies at different times. In its latest report, the UN's apex climate science body, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), clarifies that the world is short of time on climate action. According to the report, fresh global emissions have to start declining by 2025 and be brought close to zero by 2050 to keep global heating below 1.5°C above the baseline levels of 1850. We need to encourage much greater innovation for a lighter carbon footprint.

A circular economy focused on repair is one way to plot India's climate burden fight, enhance resource security, decrease the energy load, heal the planet, and open avenues for green jobs. As opposed to a linear economy, a circular or a repair economy focuses on rebuilding back, extracts fewer virgin materials, and less waste makes it to the landfills. The challenge is to make the reverse logistics of repair scalable and profitable and creatively involve the unorganized informal sector that's doing most of India's repair work. A study by Ellen

MacArthur Foundation points out that a circular economy in India will bring an annual benefit of ₹40 trillion by 2050 and reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 44%.

Government rules

There is a greater governmental push towards such sustainability ideas now. The new Securities and Exchange Board of India (Sebi) rules that kicked in on 1 April establish environmental, social and governance (ESG) parameters for India Inc. The government has notified various statutes that encourage circularity and repair like the extended producer responsibility, e-waste management rules, metals recycling policy, and so on. Policy instruments that encourage repair as a right help the economy and the planet, encourage thrift and ensure material longevity. Many global giants in Electronics have been known to encourage monopoly in repair and make products that are either unserviceable anywhere else or end up as waste as no repair is available at all. To make it truly viable, such thinking (like that of repair, the longevity of products or circularity and e-waste management) must go beyond the mandatory CSR compliances, and be embedded in our culture of work, remodelling linear input-output manufacturing, and optimizing material usage through better product design and service responsibilities.

Saving resources

There is a lot of talk on green energy now. The World Bank's Minerals for Climate Action report points out that a transition to clean energy will deplete minerals that are limited in supply. For instance, solar photovoltaic (PV) technology requires minerals like aluminium and silver, while wind turbines need steel and rare elements like neodymium. A long-term solution, therefore, is to encourage conservation, circularity, repair, reuse and recycling as far as possible. By encouraging repair, we are saving resources to put them to use where they will be needed more.

Digital pathways

The digital sector ensured continuity in difficult times, and it's now impossible to visualize any industry without it. It has the onus not only to get things to work but also to encourage sustainability and clear some bottlenecks. For instance, the increased switch to digital and electronics is leading to the problem of e-waste. According to the UN global e-waste Monitor 2020, a record 53.6 million tonnes (mt) of electronic waste was generated globally in 2019, up 21% in just five years. Such e-waste comprises hazardous substances such as lead and mercury and also iron, steel, copper, and aluminium that can be moved to recycling plants. Leveraging digital technology for reverse logistics could create greater value for a repair economy.

However, to beat throwaway consumptive societies, we must also design lovable objects that last. Singed by the covid aftermath, as we build back, material repair offers hope, mending products, and the planet. Francisco Martínez, an ethnographer at the University of Helsinki, points out that repairing a product generates a deep sense of care, pride, belonging and civic participation and is therefore therapeutic. To counter the adverse effects of climate change, it's imperative to act with greater compassion for the planet—and the rewards of the larger goal will be for all to savour. Repair is one such compassionate move that's good for all. <https://www.livemint.com/opinion/columns/repair-economy-can-plot-climate-burden-fight-11652982193825.html>

11. India asks regulator to allow utilities to import up to 30% of coal needs ([thehindubusinessline.com](https://www.thehindubusinessline.com)) May 20, 2022

The demand to allow more imported coal reflects the severity of the domestic shortage

India has asked its federal power regulator to allow power generators to import up to 30 per cent of the country's coal requirement until March next year, according to a power ministry letter seen by Reuters.

India had asked utilities to import 10 per cent of its total requirement, or about 38 million tonnes, to blend with local coal as demand was outstripping supply, adding that delivery of 19 million tonnes had to be ensured by end-June.

However, in a May 18 letter to the secretary of the Central Electricity Regulatory Commission (CERC), a federal power ministry official citing a "public interest" provision in India's electricity law said it was "imperative" power generators be allowed to use more imported coal.

The demand to allow more imported coal reflects the severity of the domestic shortage, which has caused the country's worst power cuts in more than six years as a heatwave bakes vast swathes of South Asia.

"In the public interest, CERC is hereby directed to immediately allow the higher amount of blending of up to 30 per cent with imported coal in compliance with the decision of the Ministry of Power, without beneficiaries' consultation up to March 31," the letter read.

No clear definition on beneficiaries

It was not immediately clear if beneficiaries meant power distribution companies or end-consumers. The power ministry did not immediately respond to a request seeking comment.

The power ministry official said CERC had denied permission to some State government-run utilities to import, as the quantity could potentially violate rules which restrict generators from blending imported coal beyond a certain extent without the consent of beneficiaries.

"There is an urgent need to save domestic coal to build reasonable coal stocks at power plants before the monsoon," the official said in the letter, adding that power plant inventories were depleting at a "worrisome" rate. <https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/economy/india-asks-regulator-to-allow-utilities-to-import-up-to-30-of-coal-needs/article65438471.ece>

12. Bridging the health policy to execution chasm ([thehindu.com](https://www.thehindu.com)) UPDATED: MAY 20, 2022

India's States need to act quickly in setting up a public health and management cadre for a healthier society

In April this year, the Union government released a guidance document on the setting up of a 'public health and management cadre' (PHMC) as well as revised editions of the Indian Public Health Standards (IPHS) — for ensuring quality health care in government facilities. For a country where politicians take pride in inaugurating super-specialty hospitals and where the health focus has traditionally been on medical care or attention on treating the sick, these two developments to strengthen public health services are welcome.

A background, the fallout

The 'public health and management cadre' is a follow up of the recommendations made in India's National Health Policy 2017. At present, most Indian States (with exceptions such as Tamil Nadu and Odisha) have a teaching cadre (of medical college faculty members) and a specialist cadre of doctors involved in clinical services. This structure does not provide similar

career progression opportunities for professionals trained in public health. It is one of the reasons for limited interest by health-care professionals to opt for public health as a career choice.

The outcome has been costly for society: a perennial shortage of trained public health workforce. The proposed public health cadre and the health management cadre have the potential to address some of these challenges. With the release of guidance documents, the States have been advised to formulate an action plan, identify the cadre strengths, and fill up the vacant posts in the next six months to a year.

The revised version of the IPHS once again underscores the continued relevance of improved quality of health services through public health facilities. This is the second revision in the IPHS, which were first released in 2007 and then revised in 2012. The regular need for a revision in the IPHS is a recognition of the fact that to be meaningful, quality improvement has to be an ongoing process. The development of the IPHS itself was a major step. Nearly two decades ago, in many countries including India, there was limited attention on ensuring quality. Increasing access to health services and improving the quality of care were perceived as a sequential process: first focus on increasing access and then a thought may be given to ensuring quality (which rarely happened).

Role and relevance

The voices for having public health services and workforce in India have always been few and feeble. Understandably, the need for a public health cadre and services in India rarely got any policy attention. Arguably, the reason was that even among policymakers, there was limited understanding on the roles and the functions of public health specialists and the relevance of such cadres, especially at the district and sub-district levels. At best, epidemiologists were equated with public health specialists, failing to recognise that the latter is a much broader and inclusive group of specialists. However, the last decade and a half was eventful. The initial threat of avian flu in 2005-06, the Swine flu pandemic of 2009-10; five more public health emergencies of international concern between years 2009-19; the increasing risks and regular emergence and re-emergence of new viruses and diseases (Zika, Ebola, Crimean-Congo Hemorrhagic fever, Nipah viruses, etc.) in animals and humans, resulted in increased attention on public health. In 2017, India's National Health Policy 2017 proposed the formation of a public health cadre and enacting a National Public Health Act. Yet, progress on these fronts was slow as usual.

The COVID-19 pandemic changed the status quo. For months together, everyone was looking for professionals trained in public health and who had field experience; they were simply far and few. It became clear that 'epidemic' and 'pandemic' required specialised skills in a broad range of subjects such as epidemiology, biostatistics, health management and disease modelling, to list a few. In the absence of trained public health professionals at the policy and decision making levels, India's pandemic response ended up becoming bureaucrat steered and clinician led. Every struggle in the pandemic response was a reminder that a clinician, no matter how skilled in the art of treating a patient, or a bureaucrat, no matter how experienced in administration, could not fulfil the role of the epidemiologists and public health specialists, who are specially trained to make a decision when there is limited information about a pathogen and its behaviour.

A continuing role in care

A public health workforce has a role even beyond epidemics and pandemics. A trained public health workforce ensures that people receive holistic health care, of preventive and promotive services (largely in the domain of public health) as well as curative and diagnostic services (as part of medical care). A country or health system that has a shortage of a public health workforce and infrastructure is likely to drift towards a medicalised care system. In 2022, there is greater clarity on the role of the public health workforce, which is a remarkable starting point. However, the delay in policy decisions on a public health cadre is also a reflection of a long and tortuous journey of policy making in India. These two new cadres have come up late but the focus now has to be on accelerated implementation.

The revised IPHS is an important development but not an end itself. In the 15 years since the first release of the IPHS, only a small proportion — around 15% to 20% — of government health-care facilities meets these standards. This raises a legitimate question on whether development (and revision) of such quality standards is ritualistic practice or whether these are considered seriously for policy formulation, programmatic interventions and for corrective measures. If the pace of achieving IPHS is any criteria, there is a need for more accelerated interventions. Opportunities such as a revision of the IPHS should also be used for an independent assessment on how the IPHS has improved the quality of health services.

Imperfect implementation

Drafting of well-articulated and sometimes near perfect policy documents, even though in a delayed manner, is a skill which Indian policymakers have mastered well. However, the implementation of most such policies leaves a lot to be desired. The IPHS implementation in the last 15 years is one such example. It is difficult to predict the outcome of the PHMC guidance document; however, the past can guide the process.

The effective part of implementation is interplay: policy formulation, financial allocation, and the availability of a trained workforce. In this case, policy has been formulated. Then, though the Government's spending on health in India is low and has increased only marginally in the last two decades; however, in the last two years, there have been a few additional — small but assured — sources of funding for public health services have become available. The Fifteenth Finance Commission grant for the five-year period of 2021- 26 and the Pradhan Mantri Ayushman Bharat Health Infrastructure Mission (PM-ABHIM) allocations are available for strengthening public health services and could be used as catalytic funding — which should be used in the interim — as States embark upon implementing the PHMC and a revised IPHS.

The third aspect of effective implementation, the availability of trained workforce, is the most critical. Even the most well-designed policies with sufficient financial allocation may falter because of the lack of a trained workforce. As States develop plans for setting up the PHMC, all potential challenges in securing a trained workforce should be identified and actions initiated.

Helping States

One, the level of interest among States in implementing the public health and management cadres needs to be explored and a centre of excellence in every State should be designated to guide this process. States which are likely to show reluctance need to be nudged through appropriate incentives. Two, the idea of mapping and an analysis of human resources for public health and then scaling up of recruitment are logical. However, it needs to be ensured that in an overzealous attempt to achieve numbers, the quality of training of the required workforce is not compromised. Setting up these two new cadres should be used as an opportunity to improve

and standardise the quality of training in public health institutions. Three, it would take a few years before the PHMC becomes fully functional in the States. However, the implementation process needs to be started in the next few months to avoid the risk of it becoming a low priority. Four, the success of the PHMC would be dependent upon the availability and the equitable distribution of health staff for all other categories at government health facilities. Therefore, as new cadres are being set, efforts need to be made to fill vacancies of health staff in all other positions as well.

Three years before the COVID-19 pandemic had started, the Indian government had committed, through NHP 2017, to achieve the goal of universal health coverage — which envisages access to a broad range (preventive, promotive, curative, diagnostic, rehabilitative) health-care services which meet certain quality standards, at a cost which people can afford. The public health and management cadres and the revised IPHS can help India to make progress towards the NHP goal. To ensure that, State governments need to act urgently and immediately. <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/bridging-the-health-policy-to-execution-chasm/article65431354.ece>

13. Centre tells 6 big defaulting states to clear dues or lose power supply (timesofindia.indiatimes.com) May 19, 2022

NEW DELHI: The power ministry has warned six big defaulting states to clear dues of generation companies (gencos) and Coal India Ltd (CIL) or lose access to electricity as the outstanding amounts were causing supply side strains.

In separate letters to chief secretaries of Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra Tamil Nadu and Jammu & Kashmir, power secretary Alok Kumar said the piling dues because of an “unprecedented inability” of their state distribution utilities (discoms) was threatening the reliability of power supply .

Tamil Nadu tops the list with outstanding of Rs 20,842 crore to gencos and Rs 729 crore to CIL. Maharashtra is next with dues of Rs 18,014 crore to gencos and Rs 2,573 crore to CIL. Maharashtra owes Rs 11,176 crore to gencos and Rs 308 crore to CIL. UP owes Rs 9,372 crore to gencos and Rs 319 crore to CIL. Madhya Pradesh owes Rs 5,030 crore to gencos and Rs 256 crore to CIL. J&K owes Rs 7,275 crore to gencos but has no outstanding against CIL as it does not have any thermal power plant of its own.

Kumar said if the utilities continue to renounce their responsibilities towards timely payments to their creditors and do not clear their past and current dues “urgently” this will have a perilous effect on power supply. The lack of adherence to basic payment discipline by the utilities is also adversely affecting new investments in the sector, he added.

All discoms taken together owe gencos a whopping Rs 1.3 lakh crore, the highest since 2017 and marking more than four-fold increase over Rs 24,910 crore which discoms owed to gencos in March that year.

The dues do not include amounts disputed by discoms, a fact that makes the situation more grim. The ballooning overdues strains the sector and underlines the challenges for the Centre’s reforms initiatives at the state level.

The dues cast a shadow on the viability of gencos and underline the poor financial condition of states, their lack of accountability and populism overwriting commitment to reforms in the

hope of reaping political dividend. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/business/india-business/centre-tells-6-big-defaulting-states-to-clear-dues-or-lose-power-supply/articleshow/91672212.cms>

14. Wheat crisis: UP govt reduces allocation of wheat under food schemes ([indianexpress.com](https://www.indianexpress.com)) May 20, 2022

With wheat procurement figures bottoming out, the state government Thursday changed the quantum of wheat and rice allocated to beneficiaries of various government schemes in Uttar Pradesh.

Under the National Food Security Act, the scale of distribution has been revised for the period between June 2022 and March 2023.

As per the revised guidelines, the allocation of wheat has been reduced to 14 kg for Antyodaya cardholders from 20 kg earlier, while the allocation of rice has been increased to 21 kg from 15 kg earlier.

Priority Household cardholders would now get 2 kg wheat and 3 kg rice per unit – against 3 kg wheat and 2 kg rice per unit earlier. Meanwhile, there would be no wheat allocation under the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana and each beneficiary would get only 5 kg rice from May to September. Earlier, the beneficiaries were eligible to receive 3 kg wheat and 2 kg rice per unit, informed a senior government official. There are 3.61 crore cardholders and 14.98 crore units that are given subsidised or free ration in Uttar Pradesh under various government schemes. <https://indianexpress.com/article/cities/lucknow/wheat-crisis-up-govt-reduces-allocation-of-wheat-under-food-schemes-7926832/>

15. Funds to control air pollution in Chennai went down the drain (timesofindia.indiatimes.com) May 20, 2022

CHENNAI: Greater Chennai Corporation received about Rs 181 crore in 2020-21 to implement projects to reduce air pollution from the Union government, but it chose to divert most of the funds for road and storm water drain construction, claiming these projects helped reduce pollution in the city. This was revealed through a Rajya Sabha reply by the ministry of environment, forest and climate change in March.

The National Clean Air Programme was introduced in 2018 and the ministry of environment had asked to reduce ambient air pollution. The Greater Chennai corporation that received Rs 90 crore every six months since then hasn't come up with or completed any project under this programme. The electrical department has only created an application that monitors the ambient air quality data that was collected through sensors in 15 smart poles in the city.

Greater Chennai Corporation officials stated that the programme had to be implemented in 2019-2020 and 2020- 2021 never took off and all the funds were used for capital expenditure for projects such as roads and drains. Now, we will use these funds exclusively for this purpose.

Chennai, Madurai and Trichy are among the cities that have not attained the ambient air quality goals. Concentration of fine particulate matter with a diameter of 10 microns or less (PM10) that can induce adverse health effect have remained 60 in 2020 and 2021 in Chennai. This year, the civic body has planned a slew of projects that include setting up of LPG crematoriums in place of gasifier for Rs 30 crore, nonmotorised transport corridor for Rs 40 crore, bio-mining

projects to manage legacy solid waste and construction and demolition waste plants for Rs 22 crore and other greening activities such as gardens under flyovers. They have also allocated Rs 2 crore for IIT Madras to study hotspots of air pollution in the city and to suggest projects to reduce pollution in those areas.

IIT-Madras professor Shiv Nagendra, stated, that they have begun studying the hotspots in the city that have higher suspended particles in the air. "A model dust collector machine has been created for smaller streets. We are also planning to study construction sites and traffic signals where there is resuspension of dust. The dust resettles causing no change in the ambient air quality, we will propose interventions to reduce that," he said. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/chennai/funds-to-control-air-pollution-in-city-went-down-the-drain/articleshow/91674202.cms>

16. Three incomplete road projects in Meluri draw corruption allegations (morungexpress.com) 19 May 2022

Kohima: Three road construction projects in Meluri sub division of Phek district have come under the scanner, with the contractor and PWD officials being accused of “fraudulently” withdrawing money without completing the works and violating the terms and conditions of the work orders.

Two of these projects are the stretches from Lephori to Molhe Post (26 kms) and from Akhen to Star Lake (15 Kms).

Regarding these projects, the Rising People’s Party (RPP), Phek filed a complaint letter to the OC, Meluri Police Station alleging that the contractor “siphoned” approximately Rs 65 Crore “in complete violation of the terms and conditions laid down in the work orders.”

The third project is the black topping work on the stretch from T-01 to Kanjang (38 kms), which the RPP and villagers allege has not been completed and was done without adhering to the specifications of the DPR.

All these three projects run along the same stretch of road and the works were allocated to the same contractor, informed a member of the Lephori Village Council (LVC). All three projects were allocated to the same contractor but under two different firm names.

Lephory to Molhe Post

As per the documents accessed by The Morung Express, the work order No CE (R&B) TB/LPHRY-MOLHE/2011-12 for construction of road from Lephori to Molhe Post was issued on November 28, 2011 to M/S Rhino Construction, Government registered Class-1 contractor & supplier.

The total working estimate of this project was at Rs 30 crore, wherein an additional fund of Rs 15 crore each was allotted on two occasions. The approval for the first additional fund was issued on March 6, 2017 and the second on October 4, 2018.

In the allotment work order issued by the Chief Engineer, PWD (R&B) Kohima on November 20, 2011, it was stated that “the work should be completed within 24 months w.e.f November 2011” and that “the date commencement shall be reckoned from the 7th day of issue of this work order or the actual date of commencement of work, whichever is earlier.”

Subsequently, after three years, a completion certificate was issued by the EE, PWD (R&B) dated January 21, 2014 stating “the contractor has successfully completed the said work on stipulated time and as per specification and terms specified in the BOQ and cost.”

The EE also gave ‘Good’ remarks to the quality of work, financial soundness of the contractor, technical proficiency, resourcefulness and general behaviour.

However, members of the Lephori Village Council (LVC) have claimed that there was not even a beginning to the said project and a completion certificate was issued.

In this regard, the RPP, on April 11, 2022, wrote a complaint letter to the OC of the Meluri Police Station asking that an FIR be filed without delay.

The complaint letter was filed against the firm/contractor/executive engineer PWD (R&B), Phek division/Chief Engineer (PWD (R&B) for allegedly “siphoning off/fraudulently withdrawing Rs 65,67,27,000 sanctioned against 2 work orders (road projects) in complete violation of the terms and conditions laid down in the work orders, namely Akhen to Star Lake (15 Km) and Lephori to Molhe Post (26 Kms).”

The RPP stated that “there was no work whatsoever done by M/S Rhino Construction Agency but the sanctioned amount of Rs. 30 crore was withdrawn fraudulently by way of issuance of Completion Certificate....and two additional fund of Rs 1500 lakh each was sanctioned.” It alleged that the total amount of Rs 30 crore was “fraudulently withdrawn without work being done.”

The complaint letter further stated after the matter was dragged to the High Court, Kohima Bench in the case—‘Kezuwete Wezah & 3 others (petitioners) Vs the State of Nagaland and 9 others,’ the contractor, L Metha submitted an affidavit to the High Court stating that he would complete the construction of road from Lephory to Molhe Post by March 2022, “which he has not done.”

Substantiating this, LVC members said that despite the assurance through an affidavit, no work has been carried out till today.

Akhen to Star Lake

The construction of road from Akhen to Star Lake (15 kms) was also allotted to M/S Rhino Construction Agency amounting to Rs 569.27 lakh (Five crore, sixty nine lakh and twenty seven thousand).

The terms and conditions of the allocation work order, dated April 11, 2011, state that the work should be completed within 24 months w.e.f April 20, 2011.

Towards this project, Rs 285 lakh (Two crore eighty five lakh only) was paid under State Plan during 2014-15. The Under Secretary to the Government of Nagaland, in a letter addressed to the Chief Engineer PWD (R&B) dated December 19, 2014, stated that “this sanction is issued with the clearance of the Planning Department vide their UO.No.382 dated 16/12/2014 and concurrence of the Finance Department vide their UO.No.605 dated 19/12/2014.”

Chairman of the Lephori Village Council, Zarpa Katiri said that excavation on the hill has been done “but there’s no point.” He said that that “excavation has been done 90 degree in

namesake.” Katiri claimed that except for “Shaktiman” trucks, the road is not motor able for other cars.

The RPP in its complaint letter also stated that the road alignment and excavation from Akhen to Star Lake “is not fit for motor transport/not pliable.”

T0-1 to Kanjang

The third project, which was black topping/construction of road from T-01 to Kanjang (38 kms) covering Matikhru, Lepthori and Kanjang amounting to Rs 2672.77 lakh (twenty six crore seventy two lakh and seventy seven thousand) was allotted to M/S Nagaland Steel Engineering Works.

A letter issued by the Chief Engineer, PWD (R&B) to the contractor on November 21, 2017 titled “issue of notice to proceed with the work” stated that time of completion will be 18 months from the date of issue of this work order.

Villagers however claimed that only about 7-8 Kms have been blacktopped adding that “no specification has been followed as per the DPR and there are no drainages and culverts.” However, they stated that a signboard has been put up by the firm at T-01 junction signalling completion of the project.

It was learnt that on April 22, Nagaland Commissioner, Rovilatuo Mor visited the project sites starting from Kanjang village to Molhe Post on foot, as the road is not motorable. He was accompanied by Lepthori EAC, village guards, DBs, GBs and village council chairpersons from Meluri, Lepthori, Kanjang and Akhen.

One of his companions said the Commissioner was not too pleased with the kind of work that has been carried out. <https://www.morungexpress.com/index.php/three-incomplete-road-projects-in-meluri-draw-corruption-allegations>

17. Rs 12 crore benches scam comes to light in cash-starved NMC! (nagpurtoday.in) 20 May 2022

Nagpur: The cash-starved Nagpur Municipal Corporation (NMC) is again in headlines, of course for a dubious reason. Even as the investigations into the multi-crore stationery scam is still going on, another scandal has come to light in the civic body. This time it is Rs 12 crore benches scam, according to media reports.

The reports said that the NMC had installed over 17,500 benches at public places in the city at the cost of about Rs 12 crore. However, this figure is only on paper. In reality, only between 10,000-12,000 benches were installed but the bills for remaining ones were cleared without actual delivery.

An initial probe by the NMC team has found several irregularities. On paper, many of these benches were shown as installed, but on inspection the NMC team found no benches in the marked places. The probe also revealed that benches that were procured by the civic body were not only of poor quality but purchased at inflated prices.

The civic body installs benches in public places such as gardens, religious places, markets etc for citizens to rest. The benches are installed on the recommendations of Corporators. Funds

under Mayor, Deputy Mayor, Standing Committee and Weaker Sections Committee were used for this purpose.

Following the reports, the Municipal Commissioner Radhakrishnan B had ordered a probe some two months ago. Consequently, a team under Deputy Municipal Commissioner Nirbhay Jain started the investigation. The team gathered details and information from the Public Works Department from all 10 zones and submitted a report this week.

According to sources, the Standing Committee had approved and made budgetary provisions for the installation of either concrete or iron benches in societies and at public places. Even financial provisions were made available from the Mayor and Deputy Mayor's offices. The amount was spent under several heads — road repair and construction, ward fund, financially weaker sections, DPC funds among others.

As per the initial probe report, in 2019-20, the NMC had spent over Rs 4.44 crore to procure 6,587 benches, in 2020-21 and 2021-22, the Public Works Department spent over Rs 2.95 crore and Rs 4.51 crore to procure 4,424 benches and 6,551 benches, respectively. The initial probe revealed that certain contractors were allegedly indirectly paid in lump sum after allotment of orders for benches. These irregularities were observed in almost all wards in 10 zones.

The highest number of benches — 3,200 — were installed in Hanuman Nagar Zone, followed by Gandhibagh 3,027, Dharampeth 2,278 and Mangalwari 2,172.

Taking cognizance of the team's findings, Municipal Commissioner and Administrator Radhakrishnan B has ordered a thorough probe. <https://www.nagpurtoday.in/nasty-act-rs-12-crore-benches-scam-comes-to-light-in-cash-starved-nmc/05201225>