NEWS ITEMS ON CAG/ AUDIT REPORTS (07.03.2023)

1. Containing political choice *(thenorthlines.com)* March 7, 2023

Finally, the grave shortcoming in the process of appointing the one of top constitutional positions of Chief Election Commission (CEC) and other Election Commissioners (CE) has been straightened by the latest intervention by the five-judge constitutional bench of the Supreme Court of India.

There cannot be any aspersion on working of the past and present CECs and CEs many of who were persons of eminence and who proved their mettle and made possible tremendous reforms in the election process in India in the past three decades since the days of TN Seshan and some of his successors. But it does not mean that the entire process of such a position of huge importance be left to the vagaries and free choice of the Executives who often deviate for their political interests.

It's ironic that the world's largest democracy, which has elections almost every year, has no legislation governing the appointment of the Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) and Election Commissioners. With such appointments made by the President on the recommendation of the Central Government, arbitrariness and lack of transparency frequently cast a shadow over the entire selection process. As a result, whenever any top officer of the Election Commission (EC) is accused of partisanship, the conduct of Assembly or parliamentary elections suffers. In a welcome intervention, the Supreme Court ruled that the President will appoint the CEC and his/her deputies based on the recommendations of a committee comprised of the Prime Minister, the Leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha, and the Chief Justice of India (CJI). The five-judge Constitution Bench has scathingly stated that 'unrelenting abuse' of the electoral process is the 'surest way to the grave' for democracy, emphasising the need to preserve its sanctity.

Involving the Chief Justice and the Leader of the Opposition in the appointments is an important step towards ensuring that the onerous task of conducting free and fair elections in the country is entrusted to upright, competent, and impartial officers. It is also critical to ensure that key positions such as CEC and Election Commissioners are not reduced to sinecures for retired bureaucrats with political ties. The Supreme Court has stated unequivocally that its instructions on EC appointments will remain in effect until Parliament passes legislation. Despite the fact that Article 324 of the Constitution states that these appointments will be made by the President "subject to the provisions of any law made in that behalf by

Parliament," our legislators have failed to do so for decades. This grave injustice must be corrected as soon as possible by enacting comprehensive legislation.

The committee-based selection procedure should be extended to other constitutional positions, such as the Comptroller and Auditor General and the Chairman of the UPSC. This step can go a long way towards ensuring that important national institutions are truly autonomous and free of political influence.
https://thenorthlines.com/containing-political-choice/

STATES NEWS ITEMS

2. CAG finds 122 cases of illegal mining near allotted areas in Rajasthan
(fortuneindia.com) Mar 07, 2023

The audit also noticed misuse of 22,854 electronic challans to show fake dispatch of 5.2 lakh MT of mineral from 13 mineral leases where excavations did not happen.

A performance audit conducted by the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) of India has found 122 cases of illegal mining near sanctioned mining areas in Rajasthan during the 2015-16 to 2019-20 period. The identified area of illegal mining was 83.25 hectre. The audit also noticed misuse of 22,854 electronic challans to show fake dispatch of 5.2 lakh MT of mineral from 13 mineral leases where excavations did not happen.

The audit stated that the state mining department failed to leverage free of cost technologies available in the public domain to identify and curb illegal mining activities. It noticed irregularities like overlapping of leases and said the department failed to effectively utilize DMGOMS, a web based application it had introduced in 2017, to effectively monitor mining activities. "Demands (worth ₹71.2 crore) related to illegal mining activities were not shown on the demand register maintained at DMGOMS in 53 cases. Dispatch of minerals from mining leases in excess of limits prescribed in Environment Clearance Certificate/Consent to Operate were found but there was no check in the system to prevent the dispatch of mineral in excess of permissible quantity. Penalty of ₹13.99 crore on excess and unauthorized quantities of minerals excavated in 38 mining leases was not imposed by the department," the report said.

Tabled on February 28, 2023, the CAG Report on the Performance Audit on 'Illegal Mining in Rajasthan' was prepared using remote sensing data and GIS technology. The audit involved test checks in 12 mining offices across the state along with joint physical verification of mining sites.

The report also lists out a number of suggestions including use of GIS technology and drone surveys to expedite identification of illegal mining activities.

Rajasthan has the presence of 81 types of minerals of which 57 are being commercially exploited. The state has awared the largest number of mining leases in the country. According to the state mining department, there were 48,486 illegal mining cases during the 2015-16 to 2019-20 period. The instances of illegal mining cited in the CAG's performance audit are in addition to the official numbers of the department. https://www.fortuneindia.com/macro/cag-finds-122-cases-of-illegal-mining-near-allotted-areas-in-rajasthan/111826

3. **Central road fund misused in Punjab: CAG** *(tribuneindia.com)* Mar 07, 2023

The Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) has flagged the "misuse and uneven distribution" of the Central Road and Infrastructure Fund (CRIF) in Punjab, claiming 60 per cent of the grant was spent in former PWD Minister Vijay Inder Singla's home district Sangrur.

Ineligible Sangrur road included

-The Bhalwan-Bhawanigarh-Kakra road in Sangrur district was included under the CRIF despite it being ineligible for the grant

-Having a length of 11.66 km, the project was approved in November 2018, had an estimated outlay of Rs 10 crore

-About 9.9 km of the stretch costing Rs 8.57 crore fell within municipal limits, rendering it ineligible for CRIF

In its report for the 2020-21 financial year that is to be tabled in the Vidhan Sabha, the CAG said the Punjab Government failed to prepare a proposal covering the "core network" of roads from across the state and instead included 60 per cent of the roads from Sangrur alone. One "ineligible" road too was included, it said. The "core network" comprises selected state highways and major district roads that have the potential to be upgraded as national highways. The Union Government's

CRIF rules mandate prioritising selection of roads from the "core network" for upgrade.

As many as 38 road projects spanning 721 km and entailing a cost of Rs 464 crore were proposed to the Centre for upgrade in 2018-19. Of these, 23 roads (60 per cent) comprising 413 km and costing Rs 194 crore were approved for Sangrur district between September and November 2018. Interestingly, a majority of these roads fell in Singla's home constituency Sangrur.

The CAG maintained that five other PWD divisions spent Rs 40 crore from state funds on the upgrade of eight roads having a total length of 145 km during 2018-21, which could have been easily covered under the CRIF had a "balanced approach been adopted" for preparing the "core network". The report also observed that despite the availability of funds and identification of black spots, the government failed to take any initiative towards rectifying these.

It said the Centre did not release a grant of Rs 428 crore as the PWD authorities couldn't submit utilisation certificates on time. A delay ranging from eight to 54 months was noticed in the completion of projects. The PWD also could not establish quality control mechanism as mandated under the CRIF rules, it said. https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/punjab/central-road-fund-misused-in-punjab-cag-485893

4. **मंत्री रहते अपने ही जिले की सड़कों पर खर्च दी 60% राशि** *(dainiktribuneonline.com)* March 7, 2023

पंजाब के पीडब्ल्यूडी विभाग ने सेंट्रल रोड एंड इंफ्रास्ट्रक्चर फंड (सीआरआईएफ) का दुरुपयोग करते हुए फंड का 60 प्रतिशत हिस्सा पूर्व पीडब्ल्यूडी मंत्री विजय इंदर सिंगला के गृह जिले में ही खर्च कर दिया। कैग की रिपोर्ट में यह खुलासा हुआ है। पीडब्ल्यूडी विभाग की वर्ष 2020-21 की इस कैग रिपोर्ट को पंजाब विधानसभा में पेश किया जाना है। रिपोर्ट में पाया गया कि सरकार सड़कों का कोर नेटवर्क तैयार करने में विफल रही और 60 प्रतिशत सड़कों का चुनाव अकेले संगरूर जिले से किया गया और एक सड़क को सीआरआईएफ के तहत कवर किया गया, जोकि इस फंड की श्रेणी में ही नहीं आती। 2018-19 में 464 करोड़ की लागत वाली 721 किलोमीटर लंबी 38 सड़क परियोजनाएं केंद्र सरकार को प्रस्तावित की गई थी, जिनमें से 194 करोड़ की लागत वाली 413 किलोमीटर लंबी 23 सड़कों (60 प्रतिशत) को मंजूरी दी गई (सितंबर और नवंबर 2018 में) जो संगरूर जिले में पड़ती हैं। दिलचस्प बात यह है कि इन प्रस्तावित सड़कों का एक बड़ा हिस्सा पूर्व पीडब्ल्यूडी मंत्री विजय इंदर सिंगला के निर्वाचन क्षेत्र संगरूर में पड़ता है। 5 अन्य पीडब्ल्यूडी डिवीजनों ने 2018-21 के दौरान 145 किलोमीटर

लंबी 8 सड़कों के सुधार पर राज्य निधि से 40 करोड़ रुपये खर्च किए। अगर एक कोर नेटवर्क तैयार करने में संतुलित दृष्टिकोण अपनाया जाता तो इस राशि को सीआरआईएफ के तहत आसानी से कवर किया जा सकता था।

रिपोर्ट में पाया गया कि धन की उपलब्धता और ब्लैक स्पॉट की पहचान के बावजूद सरकार ने सड़क सुरक्षा कार्यों की दिशा में कोई पहल नहीं की। पीडब्ल्यूडी विभाग ने उपयोगिता प्रमाण पत्र समय पर जमा करना सुनिश्चित नहीं किया, जिसके कारण केंद्र सरकार के पास 428 करोड़ रुपये की राशि बिना जारी हुए पड़ी रही। कार्य पूरा करने में 8 से 54 महीनों का विलंब हुआ। निष्पादित कार्यों की गुणवत्ता सुनिश्चित करने के लिए विभाग गुणवत्ता नियंत्रण तंत्र की स्थापना नहीं कर सका। रिपोर्ट के अनुसार कोर नेटवर्क परियोजना के विस्तृत विवरण के अभाव में कोई संभावित सड़क (जिसे राष्ट्रीय राजमार्ग घोषित किया जा सकता है) को अपग्रेड नहीं किया गया।
https://www.dainiktribuneonline.com/news/haryana/%E0%A4%95%E0%A5%88%E0%A4%97-%E0%A4%95%E0%A4%BE-%E0%A4%96%E0%A5%81%E0%A4%B2%E0%A4%BE%E0%A4%B8%E0%A4%BE-%E0%A4%AA%E0%A5%80%E0%A4%A1%E0%A4%AC%E0%A5%8D%E0%A4%B2%E0%A5%8D%E0%A4%AF%E0%A5%82%E0%A4%A1%E0%A5%80-%E0%A4%B5%E0%A4%BF%E0%A4%AD%E0%A4%BE%E0%A4%97-%E0%A4%A8%E0%A5%87-%E0%A4%95%E0%A4%BF%E0%A4%AF%E0%A4%BE-%E0%A4%95%E0%A5%87%E0%A4%82%E0%A4%A6%E0%A5%8D%E0%A4%B0%E0%A5%80%E0%A4%AF-%E0%A4%AB%E0%A4%82%E0%A4%A1-%E0%A4%95%E0%A4%BE-%E0%A4%A6%E0%A5%81%E0%A4%B0%E0%A5%81%E0%A4%AA%E0%A4%AF%E0%A5%8B%E0%A4%97-143915

SELECTED NEWS ITEMS/ARTICLES FOR READING

5. Why National Pension Scheme must be modified, not shelved *(economictimes.indiatimes.com)* 07 March 2023

Advocates of NPS argue that as the pension corpus is invested, market returns will fetch a superior bargain relative to OPS. On retirement, the retiree can purchase an annuity that pays out a monthly pension. The recent stock market performance may make NPS seem like a winner. But with only about

20-24% of base salary flowing into the corpus and varied pay grades of government employees, the individual payout will likely be a mixed bag.

Of late, there has been a clamour to revive the old pension scheme (OPS) at the central and state levels. In early November 2022, a group of GoI employees protested demanding restoration of OPS as they felt the new scheme is inadequate. Reintroduction of OPS in Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh in the past year only invigorated the debate. The scheme is set to return in Punjab.

Why have pensions become such a matter of concern? OPS was scrapped in 2004 and replaced by the National Pension System (NPS), with bipartisan support from major political parties. The formidable economic logic that OPS, defined-benefit scheme that ran solely on government funds, was unsustainable fostered this unusual consensus. OPS required the government to pay 50% of the base salary in the last year of employment, and had a dearness relief component as a buffer against inflation.

NPS, in contrast, is a defined-contribution scheme that pools contributions from the government employee and concerned government at 10% of the base salary along with dearness allowance (DA). At present, the government contribution has increased to 14% in most states. However, government employees maintain that NPS yields hardly 15% of the amount they would have secured as pension under OPS, not to mention inflation to erode this meagre pension post-retirement.

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As of March 2021, Grade C employees constitute 87% of all civilian GoI employees. Grade A employees make up only 3.6% of the total number. Grade C and B employees want OPS back. This sizeable vote bank is being wooed with gusto across states. The average growth rate in the NPS subscriber base during the last five years has been highest for the corporate sector, followed by the state and central governments. But this sector also shows the greatest volatility in employment, reinforcing the perception that government jobs are synonymous with stability.

Moreover, perennial state elections build pressure to make announcements regarding jobs and OPS. A case in point is Gujarat, where the maximum number of government jobs promised was 20 lakh, and the minimum 10 lakh. Political parties, of course, ignore the overwhelming majority of the workforce: unorganised labour.

Assuming the average government employee works for 30 years, the true cost of OPS (in states that repeal NPS) will be revealed in 2034 when the first batch of NPS employees retire. As OPS is an unfunded, 'pay-as-you-go' scheme, pensions will be paid by future taxpayers. When promises pour forth from election to election, the government treasury will see no matching inflow.

In Chhattisgarh, Punjab, Rajasthan and Himachal Pradesh, urban unemployment rates in the past four years have exceeded 50%. Also, the average pension growth rate in these states in the past five years has been higher than that of their own tax revenues. For these states and West Bengal, outstanding liabilities during this period have grown on average at 10% while fiscal deficit has exceeded 3% of GSDP, above the limit set by fiscal legislation.

For India, tax revenues have been rising. But inflation, subsidy bills and unemployment have created persistent challenges. India's debt profile appears sound. However, recent inflation numbers have spooked markets, leading to rising costs of borrowing. Revised estimates reveal revenue expenditure exceeded receipts by ₹11.1 lakh crore in FY2023. This trend is expected to continue.

Pensions constituted the fifth-largest component of government expenditure - 4% of GDP last year. Burgeoning revenue expenditures without provisioning for these will spell fiscal disaster. Hard-fought gains to rein in the fiscal deficit will be sacrificed at the altar of populism. Adding OPS to the list of government priorities would be dangerously fiscally unsustainable. To give NPS the boot would be like throwing the baby out with the bathwater. If NPS is not ideal, let its best features be retained. Annuity payments can be inflation-indexed, differential rates of government contribution introduced for different pay grades, and employees incentivised to contribute at higher rates.

India's aim should be adequate and timely pension, and to enhance pension coverage. NPS and the Atal Pension Yojana have made strides towards the latter. To address the former, NPS must be modified, not shelved. https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/opinion/et-commentary/why-national-pension-scheme-must-be-modified-not-shelved/articleshow/98460131.cms

6. MGNREGS woes: Payment delays, Aadhaar seeding troubles and budget cuts *(thehindu.com)* March 7, 2023

In 14 States, more than 50% of workers are not eligible for the Aadhaar-based payment system

From being called a "living monument of failure" to "digging holes," the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) has long been subject to harsh criticism by the ruling dispensation. While the NDA government hasn't done away with the UPA's legacy scheme, payment delays, technological imposition and paucity of funds have left the programme in a state of disrepair.

For instance, the Centre is yet to clear wages worth thousands of crores in West Bengal and Rajasthan. The recently introduced Aadhaar-based payment system (ABPS) will impact close to 80% of workers in Maharashtra who are yet to complete the relevant formalities. Also, the Budget allocated to the scheme was slashed by 33% for FY24.

Despite the steep cut, Union Rural Development Minister Giriraj Singh recently claimed that the allocations were higher than what was given during the UPA regime. Chart 1 shows that the allocation formed only 1.3% of the total budget in FY24, the lowest-ever. The share peaked at 3.4% in FY09.

From February 1, 2023, payments to MGNREGS beneficiaries were to be made only through ABPS. However, as on February 20, only 44% of the total workers in India were eligible for ABPS. In 14 States, more than 50% of workers were not eligible. In Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Maharashtra, where more than 2 crore workers each are enrolled under the scheme, over 60% were not eligible. Chart 2 shows the State-wise share of workers who were not eligible for receiving payments through ABPS as on February 20. States have been divided into four categories based on the number of workers enrolled in MGNREGS.

Rajendran Narayanan, a faculty member at Azim Premji University, said, "Till the workers link their job cards and bank accounts with Aadhaar, they will not be allowed to take up MGNREGA work. That can have serious consequences because it takes time to do this process and this is the peak season of MGNREGA. Also, rectifying errors in the Aadhaar-based payments is nearly impossible for the workers and field officials."

MGNREGS also suffers from inordinate delays in payment of wages. The payment process has two stages. Stage 1, which is the States' responsibility, involves creating a Funds Transfer Order with worker details. This is sent in digital format to the Centre. Stage 2, which is the Centre's responsibility, involves processing the Funds Transfer Orders and transferring the wages to the worker's account. Chart 3 shows the wages (in Rs. crore) that were not yet processed by the States and the wages that were yet to be cleared by the Centre as on February 25. For instance, in Rajasthan, nearly Rs. 78 crore or 1.5% of total transactions is yet to be processed at the State level, while the Centre is yet to clear dues worth Rs. 1,138 crore or 18% of all transactions. In West Bengal, close to 98% of transactions worth Rs. 2,897 crore are pending with the Centre.

Further, several States such as West Bengal, Madhya Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra and Nagaland are running negative balances with payments pending for wages and material. This makes it difficult for them to take up new work. At the same time, they have pending payments ranging from Rs. 200 crore to over Rs. 1,000 crore. In Gujarat, Telangana, Bihar, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh, while the existing balance is positive, the pending payments far exceed the balance, which if cleared, will push the States into negative territory. Chart 4 shows balance remaining with States and payments that are due in Rs. crore. https://www.thehindu.com/data/data-mgnregs-woes-payment-delays-aadhaar-seeding-troubles-and-budget-cuts/article66567835.ece

7. PSU bank reforms: The road ahead for creating well-governed, efficient, financially prudent state lenders *(financialexpress.com)*
March 7, 2023

Public sector banks (PSBs) have undergone significant corporate governance reforms over the years to improve their performance, transparency, and accountability. In the current scenario, when questions are being raised on the lending practises and risk analysis capacity of state-run lenders, it becomes more important that PSBs are well-governed, efficient, and financially prudent. In this year's budget, finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman has proposed corporate governance reforms in the banking sector, which will require amendments to the Banking Regulation Act, the Banking Companies Act, and the Reserve Bank of India Act to improve bank governance and enhance investors' protection. In the case of PSBs, corporate governance reforms attain greater significance as they play an important role in the Indian economy and account for almost 60 percent of the banking sector in India. In the past, the government and the regulator have taken various steps to strengthen the functioning of these state-run lenders.

In 1998, the Narasimhan Committee recommended several reforms, including the establishment of a board of directors with a majority of independent directors, the separation of the roles of chairman and CEO, and the introduction of performance-based compensation for executives. Almost all of these reforms have been implemented. Today, the board of a PSB is on par with any of its competitors in the private sector. But if we need to prepare our state-run lenders for the next two decades, we need to iron out certain issues, which have also been plaguing India Inc.
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A DIVERSE BOARD

Traditionally, the boards of state-run banks have directors who are experts in fields such as agriculture, rural economy, banking, finance, law, industry, and chartered accounting. We need to ensure that such representatives are not political nominees so that they contribute to the bank’s development and are not silent spectators. Additionally, boards of PSBs should have adequate female representation. According to a recent report, the current 18% female representation on Indian boards is essentially a result of the corporate law mandate in the country. This needs to change, and PSBs could take the lead in this. Needless to say, such representation will have a significant impact on the morale of female bankers and will encourage more diversity in the banking sector. A more diverse and innovative workforce is essential for the success of any organisation in today’s globalised and competitive environment.

The government can also look at bringing back the representatives of workers and officers on the board of the bank; this will ensure 360-degree feedback, which is today what all organisations aspire to have as a successful strategy for employee development, retention, and overall organisational growth.

TALENT ACQUISITION

Most of the bank officers at the entry level are recruited by the Institute of Banking Personnel Selection (IBPS). Unlike in the past, the best talents are not joining the PSBs for a career. Reasons are not far to seek: the availability of better initial job opportunities in the private sector, IT, and other service sectors. Also, there is no uniformity in the promotional avenues in PSBs. In most PSBs, an officer has to wait more than 27/30 years to become a general manager, and after that, he or she will be left with hardly any time to become a full-time director. PSBs therefore need to develop a uniform career growth trajectory that also allows performing candidates to get trained in various roles, move between banks in the same capacity to acquire a variety of job knowledge, and be put on a fast track in order to retain them. We need to have a more merit-based culture, where high performers are rewarded and low performers are held accountable.

SPECIALIST ROLES

Of late, there is a trend where the lateral entrants are rising very fast in their career paths in the PSBs, which is a bit frustrating for the cadre officers who have all the field exposure and have to move through the internal promotion policy, which takes time. A reasonable amount of field exposure as a branch head or area head should be a must for any higher-level promotion in banking. The specialists, which include IT professionals, risk rating officers, and economists, who join at a fairly senior level should have a market-linked package that is higher and better than their peers in the general cadre, but they should remain in that zone only. PSBs need to continue to invest in their employees' development and create a culture of performance, accountability, and customer focus to remain competitive in today's dynamic banking industry.

FEAR FACTOR

As a professional and being in the business of taking risks, some of your decisions may go wrong at some point in time. Though much work has been done towards this end, the fear factor is still there in the minds of bankers. Recently, bankers have sought the provision of immunity for its board members in line with the existing exemption granted to the top brass of the National Bank for Financing Infrastructure and Development, or NaBFID. A more reassuring, transparent system along these lines that safeguards bona fide decisions could go a long way in removing the fear. https://www.financialexpress.com/industry/banking-finance/psu-bank-reforms-the-road-ahead-for-creating-well-governed-efficient-financially-prudent-state-lenders/2998893/

8. **Find less costly ways to address pension concerns instead of OPS: Raghuram Rajan** *(millenniumpost.in)* March 6, 2023

Former RBI Governor Raghuram Rajan has expressed his concern over the decision of some states to restart the old pension scheme and suggested that some less costly ways should be found to address the demands of government pensioners. Rajan further said the old pension scheme does involve massive future outlays because of the indexation of pensions to current salaries.

"This is an enormous obligation, not necessarily in the short run, but in the long run," he said, adding obviously, state governments have to think through the long-term implications for government finances, and whether civil servants are the most in need of help among the constituencies they deal with.

RBI Guv Rajan, currently Katherine Dusak Miller Distinguished Service Professor of Finance at The University of Chicago Booth School of Business, said as he understands it, it may be infeasible technically or legally to move back to the old pension scheme.

"If so, there may be less costly ways of addressing the concerns that prompt such moves," Rajan told PTI in an email interview.

In a major move, a select group of central government employees have been given a one-time option to opt for old pension scheme.

The employees who joined the central government services against posts advertised or notified before December 22, 2003, the day National Pension System (NPS) was notified, are eligible to join the old pension scheme under the Central Civil Services (Pension) Rules, 1972 (now 2021). Under Old Pension Scheme (OPS), employees get a defined pension. An employee is entitled for a 50 per cent amount of the last drawn salary as pension.

OPS was discontinued by the NDA government in 2003 with effect from April 1, 2004.

Under the new pension scheme (NPS), employees contribute 10 per cent of their basic salary towards pension while the government contributes 14 per cent.

Governments of Rajasthan, Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand have informed the central government/ Pension Fund Regulatory and Development Authority (PFRDA about their decision to restart OPS for their employees.

The government of Punjab on November 18, 2022, issued a notification regarding implementation of OPS for the state government employees who are being covered under NPS. Jharkhand too has decided to revert to OPS. https://millenniumpost.in/business/find-less-costly-ways-to-address-pension-concerns-instead-of-ops-raghuram-rajan-510889?infinitescroll=1

9. Greening the economic growth - The way ahead for India *(economictimes.indiatimes.com)* March 07, 2023

Green growth is one of the seven priorities set forth in the Union budget for 2023–24. It reflects a very serious approach by the government towards the environment and sustainable development. Last year, in the month of June, Prime Minister Narendra Modi launched a global initiative, "Lifestyle for Environment — the LiFE Movement" wherein the thrust is on collective, anthropocentric, and robust action to further the goal of sustainable development. In this direction, the budget for 2023–24 reiterates the ambitious goal of achieving net-zero carbon emissions by 2070 through an environmentally conscious lifestyle by transforming consumption and production behaviour. Steps are outlined towards an energy transition, renewable energy, energy storage, and reduced dependence on fossil fuel imports. LiFE mission envisages a mix of technology and tradition to reduce, reuse, and recycle for ingraining the circular economy as an integral part of our culture and lifestyle. It entices the Rio principle of "common but differentiated responsibility" as enunciated in the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development.

Under the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 12 of UN, different countries commit themselves to making fundamental changes in their production processes and consumption behaviors. International organisations, governments, producers, consumers, firms, and businesses are all required to contribute to making these changes towards sustainable production and consumption patterns. LiFE vision is perfectly commensurate with SDG 12. The 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD), popularly known as the "Earth Summit" adopted the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation, which acknowledged that fundamental changes in the way we produce and consume are indispensable requirements of sustainable development. The Paris Agreement under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) was signed by 196 countries, including India, on December 12th , 2015, to hold the increase in the global average temperature to well below 2 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels and pursue efforts to limit the rise in temperature to 1.5 degrees above pre-industrial levels. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) indicates that crossing the 1.5°C threshold will cause the risk of severe climate change, which may result in severe droughts, heatwaves, and rainfall.

The Paris Agreement envisages an economic and social transformation based on the best available science. Nationally Determined Contributions (NDC) and NDC actions are required to be laid down by each signatory of the Paris Agreement for reducing greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions and building resilience to adapt to the impacts of climate change. Countries are invited to submit their Long-Term Low Greenhouse Gas Emission Development Strategy (LT-LEDS). The agreement aims to reach the peak of GHG emissions before 2025 and then decline by 43 percent by 2030.

Climate finance is crucial for adaptation to climate change. Paris Agreement and SDG 12 recognise this aspect and emphasize on financial and technical support to developing countries to strengthen their scientific, technological, and innovative capacities to move towards more sustainable patterns of consumption and production. Developed countries must take the lead in this direction and assist developing countries financially and technologically. The slogan "one earth, many efforts" very appropriately calls for multiple efforts from all countries and peoples of the world.

The emphasis is on developing sources of renewable energy, and India has the fastest-growing renewable energy capacity in the world. India has committed to reducing its emissions intensity (the amount of emissions per unit of GDP) by 33-35% from 2005 levels by 2030 and increasing its share of non-fossil fuel power capacity to 40% by 2030. India has set a target to install 450 GW of renewable energy capacity by 2030, including 280 GW of solar power, 140 GW of wind power, 10 GW of biomass power, and 5 GW of small hydro power.

The Green Hydrogen Mission is one such step in this direction. Green hydrogen has a critical role in the energy transition and in achieving the ambitious target of energy independence in India by 2047. Presently, India imports over forty percent of its primary annual energy requirements which costs into an import bill of about $90 billion. India heavily depends on imported fossil fuels for industrial and transportation sector needs. We can reduce our energy dependence on fossil fuels by switching to alternative, renewable energy sources. Green hydrogen, which is produced using electricity from renewable sources by splitting water into hydrogen and oxygen, will be very useful in easing our dependence on fossil fuels. Presently, production of green hydrogen is costly but it is likely to become a cost- effective energy alternative across industry, transportation, and other sectors by the end of this decade. With an ambitious annual target of reaching 5 MMT production of green hydrogen by the year 2030, the budget sets aside Rs 19,700 crore for the Green Hydrogen Mission.

With just a 4 per cent share in the global accumulation of GHGs and lower than average per capita emissions, India is a very low contributor to global warming and climate change, but the economic geography of the country makes it highly vulnerable to the shocks of climate change. Hence, India must take a leadership role in the global efforts towards the control of GHG emissions. A long-term strategy towards a low-GHG emission-based development and a zero-carbon target requires a sharp reduction in fossil fuel consumption and faster development of affordable alternative sources of energy.

Environmental policies like command and control (CAC), cap and trade (CAT), emission fees, and carbon credits have their own merits and demerits. Developing countries, like India, have largely and moreover ineffectively relied on regulatory framework for emission control. On the other hand, developed countries, particularly from North America and European Union, have experienced with the CAT policies but with limited success. France has already rolled them back, while in Switzerland the policy was defeated in a referendum. Emission fees are particularly unpopular among polluters. The idea is based on the controversial "polluter pays principle" and it is difficult to get it through parliamentary procedure. The pricing policy for emission control has also been criticised for being unethical. The odd-even number scheme for vehicular emission control is likely to be ineffective over a long period of time. Given the weaknesses of CAC and CAT policies and the requirement of strict monitoring for compliance, these policies turn out to be practically difficult to implement successfully.

In a country like India, where pollution control is a state subject with wide regional variations in emission and sequestration, coordinated and concerted efforts are required from all states under the direction of the Union government. States can effectively deal with the regional public bad problems, like localised hotspots and acid rains, but to control GHG emissions, all state Pollutio Control Boards (PCBs) must act under central direction. The Center needs to equitably allocate climate funds to different states according to their needs and their efforts towards climate control. The Fifteenth Finance Commission, in its horizontal devolution formula, has already recommended allocating 10 percent to forests and ecology. Incentives may also be created for pro-environmental changes in the production and consumption behaviour and for the development and usage of energy from non-fossil fuel sources. https://energy.economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/renewable/opinion-greening-the-economic-growth-the-way-ahead-for-india/98469012

10. A doubtful green cover *(indianexpress.com)* March 7, 2023

For the better part of the past four decades, the Forest Survey of India's State of Forest Reports have shown a steady increase in the country's forests. The report of the latest survey released last year, for instance, showed that the country added more than 1,500 sq km of forest between 2019 and 2021. But experts have maintained that these reports are not satisfactory indicators of ecological health. The area under plantations has gone up while the country has consistently lost good forests in the past three decades. Now, an investigation by this newspaper in association with the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ) has revealed that bungalows of ministers and senior officers, the Reserve Bank of India building and parts of the campuses of AIIMS and IIT in Delhi are classified as "forests" in official maps. It shines a light on the ambiguities and grey areas that could prevent the country's afforestation programme from achieving its potential.

Forest restoration is critical to India's climate goals. The country has committed to creating an additional sink of 2.5 billion to 3 billion tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent by increasing its forest cover. This would require it to increase its forest cover by about 25 million hectares in the next seven years. Plantations grow fast and on paper, they can help attain carbon targets more quickly. But trees in such green patches are also cut down more frequently. Moreover, plantations are mostly monocultures that are no substitute for biodiverse ecosystems. They are susceptible to fires, pests and epidemics and often act as a barrier to natural forest regeneration.

In the last 10 years, more than 1,600 square km of forest land has been cleared for infrastructure or industrial projects — nearly a third of this has been diverted in the past three years. But the government has also embarked on a number of afforestation programmes. In 2016, it made it incumbent on developers to offset the loss of forests due to developmental projects and initiated the Compensatory Afforestation Programme (CAP). The investigation shows that large sums of money deposited in the afforestation fund are lying unused. Funds are, however, just one part of CAP's problem. The programme's plantation-centred approach means that compensatory afforestation takes place in discontinuous patches — the new green tracts are a far cry from the dense forests they are meant to replace. The government's reluctance to reveal the granular data of the country's forest cover means that such anomalies rarely come to light. The key takeaway of the investigation is that the government needs to be more transparent in the way it maps the country's forests.

https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/editorials/the-express-view-a-doubtful-green-cover-deforestation-express-investigation-8482766/

11. Climate injustice *(financialexpress.com)* March 7, 2023

Environment minister Bhupendra Yadav's recent statement on the Global North's (developed nations) "tendency of profiteering from disaster (climate change)" is not an exaggeration. The minister has done well to remind rich nations that the climate crisis is "starkly different from other global crises" and therefore traditional responses need to be shunned. Whether it is the continued refusal to shoulder responsibility for historical emissions, or protectionist measures in the name of climate action, or reluctance to provided adequate funds for adaptation and mitigation measures in the developing world, the West continues to dodge the question of what makes for meaningful climate action on its part.

Instances of the rich nations' "traditional response" abound. A recent example is Europe's Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM), which is just protectionism with a greenish tinge. The European Union intends to impose a carbon tariff on energy-intensive imports. While the EU accounted for just 15% of India's exports in 2019-2021, half of the exports are products that will be covered under the CBAM, affecting India-based producers' competitiveness. India joined other developing nations to protest this at the climate summit in Egypt last year, and has now taken the matter to the World Trade Organization. It is amply clear that the measure is intended to protect investments within the EU's geography as it implements measures to realise its green targets, even if this comes at the cost of developing economies.

The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), when it was established in 1992, urged developed-countries to "take all practicable steps to promote, facilitate and finance the transfer of, or access to, climate technologies to other Parties, particularly to developing countries." Indeed, the UNFCCC states that developing nations' implementation of climate commitments "will depend on the effective implementation" of developed countries' commitments "related to financial resources and transfer of technology". The fact that, 23 years later (in 2015), the Paris Agreement was still talking of a "vision of fully realising technology transfer" is quite telling of how the developed world has dragged its feet. An intent to profit from intellectual property rights continues to impede any significant transfer. Researchers at the Institute of Advanced Sustainability Studies, Potsdam/University of Erfurt, as per a report in Science Daily, say that the Global North's patents on low-carbon technologies give it significant competitive advantage. Thus, for much of the developing world, tech transfers remain "critically insufficient". As a consequence, many such nations could get "locked into high-emission energy systems."

It is not just knowledge transfer, the developed world's reluctance to fund meaningful climate action is well known. Against an initial commitment of $100 billion annually in climate finance for developing nations by 2020, a total of just $83.3 billion was claimed to have been mobilised. The Green Climate Fund, has received commitments of just $10.3 billion so far. Even the $100 billion per year target is grossly inadequate. While India and other developing nations point at how rich nations exhausted a large chunk of the carbon budget for keeping the planet to a 1.5oC-warming pathway, developed nations continue to shrug off historical responsibility. Indeed, many experts have pointed out that their announcements of net zero target are hardly ambitious—deadlines that allowed for the developing world to catch up with them would have been much more meaningful. The developed nations must listen to Yadav and act in the interest of the planet, not just theirs. https://www.financialexpress.com/opinion/climate-injustice/3001400/

12. Less than 1% of earth has safe levels of air pollution, study finds *(business-standard.com)* Mar 07, 2023

It's no secret that air pollution is a serious problem facing the world today. Just how serious? A new study on global daily levels of air pollution shows that hardly anywhere on Earth is safe from unhealthy air.

About 99.82% of the global land area is exposed to levels of particulate matter 2.5 (PM2.5) — tiny particles in the air that scientists have linked to lung cancer and heart disease — above the safety limit recommended by the Word Health Organization, according to the peer-reviewed study published Monday in Lancet Planetary Health. And only 0.001% of the world's population breathes in air that is considered acceptable, the paper says.

Conducted by scientists in Australia and China, the study found that on the global level, more than 70% of days in 2019 had daily PM2.5 concentrations exceeding 15 micrograms of gaseous pollutant per cubic meter — the WHO recommended daily limit. Air quality is particularly worrisome in regions such as southern Asia and eastern Asia, where more than 90% of days had PM2.5 concentrations above the 15 microgram threshold.

While any amount of PM 2.5 is harmful, scientists and regulators are typically less concerned about daily levels than they are about chronic exposure.

"I hope our study can change the minds of scientists and policymakers for the daily PM2.5 exposure," said Yuming Guo, the lead researcher and an environmental health professor at Monash University. "Short-term exposure, particularly sudden increase, to PM2.5 has significant health problems … If we can make every day with clean air, of course the long-term exposure of air pollution would be improved."

While scientists and public health officials have long been at alert to the dangers — air pollution kills 6.7 million people a year, with nearly two-thirds of the premature deaths caused by fine particulate matter — quantifying the global exposure to PM2.5 was a challenge due to a lack of pollution monitoring stations.

Guo and his coauthors overcame that challenge by marrying ground-based air pollution measurements collected from more than 5,000 monitoring stations worldwide with machine learning simulations, meteorological data and geographical factors to estimate global daily PM2.5 concentrations.

When it came to estimating annual exposure across all regions, the researchers found that the highest concentrations occurred in eastern Asia (50 micrograms per cubic meter), followed by southern Asia (37 micrograms) and northern Africa (30 micrograms). Residents of Australia and New Zealand faced the least threat from fine particulate matter, while other regions in Oceania and southern America were also among the places with the lowest annual PM2.5 concentrations.

They also examined how air pollution changed over the two decades up to 2019. For instance, most areas in Asia, northern and sub-Saharan Africa, Oceania, and Latin America and the Caribbean experienced an increase in PM2.5 concentrations over the 20 years, driven in part by intensified wildfires. Annual PM2.5 concentrations and high PM2.5 days in Europe and northern America decreased, thanks to stricter regulations. Fine particulate matter is made up of soot from vehicles, smoke and ash from wildfires and biomass cook-stove pollution, plus sulfate aerosols from power generation and desert dust.

The article also points out how levels of fine particulate matter vary depending on the season, a reflection of human activities that accelerate air pollution. For instance, northeast China and north India recorded higher PM 2.5 concentrations from December to February, likely linked to an increased use of fossil fuel-burning heat generators during the winter months. South American countries such as Brazil, on the other hand, had increased concentrations between August and September, probably connected to slash-and-burn cultivation in the summer. https://www.business-standard.com/article/current-affairs/less-than-1-of-earth-has-safe-levels-of-air-pollution-study-finds-123030700110_1.html

13. Unregulated Tourism in the Himalayas Comes at the Cost of Ecological Hazards *(thewire.in)* Mar 07, 2023

If you ask anyone in Kedarnath valley in the Indian state of Uttarakhand about their worst nightmare, chances are they would mention the flash floods of June 2013. Even nearly a decade later, residents in the region wonder what caused the havoc that killed more than 5,000 people and damaged properties worth millions of dollars.

Now, researchers maintain that melting glaciers played a major role in the disaster.

A study by the Wadia Institute of Himalayan Geology and the Indian Institute of Technology Kharagpur showed that the rapid melting of glaciers in the Himalayas can lead to sudden floods, which in turn causes serious damage to life and property.

Rapid retreat of glaciers also means the formation of glacial lakes, which pose potential threats to the population downstream. These glaciers can burst and cause massive destruction to lives and property. Scientists use the term 'glacial lake outburst flooding' (GLOF) to describe incidents when water breaches glacial lakes and flows into downstream rivers.

A 2019 study indicated that parts of the Hindu Kush, Karakoram and western Himalaya sub-regions contain 2,420 glacier lakes, of which 52 are potentially dangerous.

Glacial lakes can burst as a result of an earthquake or rainstorm or if they are unable to contain water any longer, which was the cause behind the disaster in Kedarnath in June 2013. The region had received an unusual amount of rainfall, which led to the depletion of the Chorabari glacier and attendant landslides. Debris then filled the glacial lake and it could not contain water anymore.

Unregulated tourism and construction

In a 2020 report, the National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) of the Indian government noted that the Indian Himalayan Region faces critical challenges while coping with the effects of climate change.

It also acknowledged that urban centres, towns and some villages in mountainous areas “are being burdened beyond their capacity by tourism and rural-to-urban migration.”

NDMA recommended a series of regulations that would create a buffer zone and restrict tourism in Glacial Lake Outburst Floods-prone areas and nearby regions in order to reduce the scale of pollution in those areas.

But in 2022, 100 million tourists, including pilgrims, visited Uttarakhand, and experts continue to caution that unregulated tourism that exceeds the region’s carrying capacity can have disastrous impacts.

“[The] government is planning massive tourism activities like the Char Dham project,” Hemant Dhyani, an environmental activist and former member of the Supreme Court-appointed High-Powered Committee on the Char Dham Project, told FairPlanet. “We are looking at the Himalayas as a major economic resource and exploiting it beyond its carrying capacity. This carrying capacity assessment was never done.”

Dhyani said that in 2022 more than 15,000 people were permitted to go to Badrinath and Kedarnath – two to three times more than the carrying capacity environmental experts have estimated.

For Uttarakhand, tourism is one of the major drivers of economic growth. Located in the lap of the Himalayas, this ecologically fragile region is known and revered for several Hindu temples that granted it the sobriquet of ‘Abode of Gods.’ The area is particularly famous for the pilgrimage circuit of Char Dham – Yamunotri, Gangotri, Kedarnath and Badrinath.

But environmental activists and experts have continually raised concerns over the government’s revenue-driven over-exploitation of the tourism sector at the cost of ecological hazards.

Dhyani said that religious tourism sites, such as Char Dham, have been hugely commercialised and exploited to the point of becoming unsustainable.

In March 2022, a glacier slid down in Uttarakhand's Pithoragarh district and blocked a long stretch of the road. It took days before the road could be cleared of snow.

Environmental experts said the glacier broke off as an indication of human-made climate change in the Himalayan region, triggered by unplanned and unchecked development projects and unregulated tourism.

In the aftermath of the June 2013 tragedy in Uttarakhand, India's Planning Commission published a Strategy Paper that mentioned that the disaster was aggravated due to the unplanned development in the region. The paper also called for regulating tourism and supporting infrastructure in eco-fragile areas like the Char Dham pilgrimage circuit.

Why glaciers melt

One of the biggest factors causing glaciers to melt is the emission of black carbon aerosols into the atmosphere.

Black carbon is emitted as a result of incomplete combustion of fossil fuels, the use of brick kilns, household cooking with firewood and the burning of animal dung and coal briquettes. The combustion of fossil fuels in motor vehicles and aircrafts also contributes to the emission of black carbon.

Scientists from the Wadia Institute of Himalayan Geology, an autonomous institution operating under the Ministry of Science and Technology, in a 2016 study conducted at Chirbasa station near Gangotri Glacier noted that black carbon from crop incineration and forest fires may influence the melting of Gangotri Glacier – the source of river Ganga, a site holding religious significance for millions of Indians.

A statement by the ministry noted that black carbon concentration in the region had increased by 400 times during summer, and crop burning and forest fires were the reasons behind this seasonal increase, according to the study.

"This can trigger glacial melt because of the light-absorbing nature of black carbon," the statement further read. Since 2000, fires have damaged over 44,554 hectares of forest area, according to data from the Uttarakhand State Forest Department.

Frequent helicopter rides to and from pilgrimage sites in the area also contribute to the emission of black carbon, which in turn accelerates the recession of glaciers.

The situation is similar in the region of Kashmir, where unregulated tourism activities play a role in glacier retreat.

A joint study from 2020 by the University of Kashmir and Nichols College in Massachusetts revealed that the Kolahoi glacier, the biggest in the region and which feeds most of its agricultural land, had lost nearly 23% of its area since 1962 and has fragmented into smaller parts.

The study warned the glacier recession has resulted in the formation of proglacial lakes, which could potentially become prone to glacial lake outburst floods.

In 2022, at least 365,000 Hindu pilgrims trekked along the treacherous routes across the mountainous terrain in southern Kashmir to pay homage to an ice stalagmite in a cave, which is regarded as a symbol of the Hindu god Shiva. This annual pilgrimage called Amarnath Yatra went on for 44 days.

Environmental activists have repeatedly warned about the environmental hazards of allowing a large number of pilgrims to visit the cave in such an ecologically sensitive area.

In a 2017 report, the Jammu and Kashmir Coalition of Civil Society noted that several glaciers, which were not far away from the pilgrimage site, were being damaged due to the over-exploitation of the region by pilgrims.

"The ecology, the environment and the health of the glacier can be under severe threat in case the Baltal route to the holy cave was frequented by thousands of pilgrims," the report read. "The Thajiwas glacier which is not far away from the helipad at Neelgrath is at threat due to the helicopter sorties. There are three huge glaciers on the Baltal side, en route to the cave and with constant trampling by the Yatris [pilgrims], have been damaged extensively."

The area has a carrying capacity of only 4,300 persons per day, but a report revealed that a typical pilgrimage day last year saw over 12,000 devotees visit the cave.

Despite the serious concerns raised by environmental experts, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi declared the Amarnath pilgrimage as beneficial for the tourism sector.

Disaster mitigation efforts

After reports emerged that the town of Joshimath in Uttarakhand was sinking, the government announced it would conduct a carrying-capacity study of different hill towns. It also said that it would immediately halt construction projects in areas where the carrying capacity is exceeded.

Environmental activist Hemant Dhyani said that this is an issue of policy intervention. "We should rectify our approach to development in the Himalayas."

In 2014, the government in Uttarakhand published an Action Plan on Climate Change, in which it stated the administration will "put into motion a process of building awareness on climate change and its impacts among the population and communities in general," and that "the state will examine the possibility of incorporating climate change – related modules into the educational curriculum across various levels."

"Appropriate external agencies will be co-opted as necessary to support the awareness and capacity-building processes," the action plan further stated.

Dhyani maintained that the initiatives referenced in the government's climate change action plan and the government's 2012 notification to declare the Bhagirathi river an eco-sensitive zone should all be implemented.

"That is the blueprint and that should be replicated across all river valleys in the Himalayas to protect the massive land-use change in the region," he said.

Ayush Joshi, an environmental technologist and climate change researcher, told FairPlanet that there is an urgent need to "stop current forms of infrastructural growth in sensitive regions."

"[The government should] establish an independent Himalayan Commission that can permit, regulate and prohibit various shapes and forms of development and establish a 100 km buffer [from glaciers towards downstream] as Sensitive Zones across the state," Joshi added.

In Kashmir, the administration launched an initiative in 2022 to reduce the amount of trash along the route of the Amarnath pilgrimage. It stationed over 300 volunteers along the pilgrimage route who collected and processed the waste, and the organic waste was then converted into compost.

As a pilot project, a start-up based in Indore, Madhya Pradesh installed six solar cookers on the Amarnath route last year, with the goal of reducing the use of firewood for making tea and other food items for pilgrims. https://thewire.in/environment/tourism-himalayas-ecological-hazards

14. Andhra CID begins probe into ₹3,300 crore skill development scam *(hindustantimes.com)* Mar 07, 2023

The Crime Investigation Department of the Andhra Pradesh police on Monday initiated a probe into an alleged scam worth ₹3,300 crore in the AP State Skill Development Corporation (APSSDC) during the previous Telugu Desam Party regime.

The notices were served based on the statement given by one of the accused who expressed willingness to turn approver in the court and the deposition made by three IAS officers. According to the official release, the TDP government in 2016 established the APSSDC to cater to the unemployed youth by providing them training in various skills and making them employable.

The preliminary probe by the CID has revealed that as part of a project under the corporation, the then government had signed a memorandum of understanding with a consortium involving Siemens Industry Software India Ltd and Design Tech Systems Pvt Ltd, for executing the project worth ₹3,300 crore.

As part of the MoU, Siemens Industry Software India would set up six centres of excellence for skill development worth ₹3300 crore and the state would pay around 10% of the total project cost and the rest would be borne by Siemens and Design Tech as grant-in-aid. "The state government issued a GO granting a work order for ₹371 crore to Siemens and Design Tech to establish centres of excellence. No tender called for the project, and this was done without the approval from the state cabinet. In fact, the CMO even sent out a note about the project and how the state government would benefit from it," the official release said.

It said the investigation revealed that Siemens Industry had not spent a single rupee from their own resources on this project, but in fact, siphoned off major portion of

₹371 crore contributed by the state. The money was diverted to shell companies like Allied Computers, Skillers India Pvt Ltd, Knowledge Podium, Cadence Partners and ETA Greens, the official release quoting the CID investigation said.

In fact, Siemens Global Corporate Office had conducted an internal investigation into the project and realised that the project manager had siphoned off the money released by the government to shell companies as hawala, and fired him.

"In 2018, the ACB had received complaints from a whistle blower on these allegations. However, the people in power blocked any investigation from taking place and started removing key documentary evidences from the state secretariat," the release said.

It further said the GST intelligence wing, and IT department was also investigating into the case, even before the present state government took up the investigation.

In light of the development, the investigation agency would be sending notices to other officials concerned in the case, the official release added. https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/andhra-cid-begins-probe-into-3-300-crore-skill-development-scam-101678133342878.html

15. Mega project on slow lane, water crisis looms in Odisha *(newindianexpress.com)* 07th March 2023

KENDRAPARA: With the advent of summer, a large number of villages in Kendrapara's Mahakalapada and Marsaghai blocks are facing the risk of water scarcity as the ambitious drinking water supply project is moving at a snail's pace.

Foundation stone of the mega project was laid by Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik in 2018. Taken up at a cost of Rs 241 crore, the project was supposed to be completed in two years. The project envisages to supply water in the salinity-hit coastal pockets of the two blocks. It will benefit a population of 2.36 lakh by providing drinking water through pipelines to 148 villages of 26 gram panchayats in Mahakalapada and 52 villages of 16 gram panchayats in Marsaghai.

Arjun Mandal of Batighar said the lone tube-well in his village became defunct six months back. Now, women and children are forced to walk around 2 km to fetch water from tube-wells and wells in nearby villages. Similar is the situation in Suniti, Jamboo, Tubi, Talachua, Rangani, Kansarabadadandua, Ajagarapatia and other villages.

Rajanikant Das of Jamboo village said as many tube-wells have become defunct, villagers are using contaminated water from ponds, rivers and other sources. “The scarcity will worsen in the coming months. Many seaside villages are headed for a water crisis as soaring mercury levels result in parched conditions during the early summer. Besides, the groundwater salinity level is rising due to over-exploitation by prawn farm owners in many villages,” Das claimed.

Contacted, executive engineer of Rural Water Supply and Sanitation (RWSS) Basant Nayak said the first phase work of the project will be completed within six months following which water will be supplied to villages in Mahakalapada. It will take another year to complete the remaining work and provide water to Marsaghai villages.

Nayak further informed that the proposed mega project will have a capacity to provide 25 million litre drinking water. At least 28 overhead water tanks will be built under the project which involves laying of around 150 km pipeline, construction of six underground reservoirs and two water treatment plants at Jadupur and Manikunda.
https://www.newindianexpress.com/states/odisha/2023/mar/07/mega-project-on-slow-lane-water-crisis-looms-in-odisha-2553945.html