NEWS ITEMS ON CAG/ AUDIT REPORTS (on 12.05.2023)

1. Assam citizenship updation process in limbo despite FIR against ex-NRC chief, Wipro *(counterview.net)* Updated: 12 May 2023

After a number of FIRs for alleged involvement with National Register of Citizens (NRC) updation scam in Assam, much talked about Indian Administrative Service (IAS) officer Prateek Hajela now faces a case registered in the Kamrup (metro) chief judicial magistrate's court (CR/155/2023, 12 April 2023).

Former State coordinator of National Register of Citizens (NRC) along with Wipro Ltd and Integrated System and Services (ISS, represented by proprietor Utpal Hazarika) have been sued by well-known Assamese businessman, film maker and a vivid social media user Luit Kumar Barman for their roles in Rs 155 crores money laundering during the NRC Assam updation process (May 2014 to October 2019).

The 1995-batch IAS officer of Assam-Meghalaya cadre was lately relieved by Madhya Pradesh government from assigned responsibilities (where Hajela was in three years inter-State deputation since 2019 following an order of the Supreme Court of India assuming threats to Hajela's life over NRC Assam fraudulent issues), and the IIT graduate turned bureaucrat is expected to return back to his original cadre.

However, reports suggest that Hajela has already applied for voluntary retirement for his service as he is seemingly not interested to return back. However, many social media users, opposing Hajela's proposal, have said this is his escape route.

Complainant Barman, who claims to be a concerned and vigilant Indian citizen against alleged corruption, cited the recently released report of the Comptroller and Auditor General of India (CAG) on social, economic and general sectors for the fiscal year ending on 31 March 2020, where the issue of corruption involving a large amount of public money was mentioned.

CAG recommended penal actions against Hajela and the system integrator (Wipro, an Indian IT company of international repute). Besides Barman, complainants include Haleja's immediate successor of Hajela Hitesh Devsarma, IAS (retired), and Aabhijeet Sarma, president of Assam Public Works, both of whom are also the original petitioners in the Supreme Court for NRC updation in Assam as witnesses.

Hitesh Devsarma and Aabhijeet Sarma have lodged separate FIRs against Hajela alleging financial mismanagements as well as intentional inclusion of illegal migrants' names in the NRC. In two complaints (one with the criminal investigation department of Assam Police and other with the CM's vigilance and anti-corruption wing), Devsarma alleged a massive corruption was done by his predecessor (Hajela) along with some officials and an outsider (named Pralay Seal).

In various public discourses (including a number of television talk shows), Devsarma also claimed that the NRC supplementary list included thousands of illegal migrants' names as the tempered software was intentionally used to defy family tree match scanning in the process.

The CAG report stated that due to lack of proper planning hundreds of software utilities were added in a haphazard manner to the core one of NRC updation. It asserted that highly secure and reliable software was necessary for the exercise. While developing the software, an addition of over 200 software utilities to the primary one was done, the statutory audit body claimed. This was the intended objective of preparing an error-free NRC in Assam.

The NRC authority had to spend Rs 1,579 crore and around 50,000 government servants were used in the process. But confusions surfaced, when around 6,000 temporary workers were paid lower than the prescribed monthly salaries.

Those contractual data entry operators, who were denied the minimum salary as per the country's Minimum Wages Act, received only Rs 5,500 (to 9,100) per month (per person) during 2015-2019. The NRC authority under the Government of India had sanctioned Rs 14,500 (to 17,500) every month for one staff member.

The allegation against Hajela is, without any due process of transparent tendering, delivered the task of supplying staff to Wipro, which engaged a sub-contractor (ISS, owned and managed by Hazarika). Thus an undue benefit to the tune of Rs 155.83 crore was given to the system integrator.

The CAG report, which was tabled before the State legislative assembly for discussion, observed that the difference of margin was exorbitant after allowing Wipro 10% reasonable profit margin. Dissatisfied staff working for Wipro approached the State labour commissioner demanding their legal dues but in vain.

The matter was discussed in both mainstream media and digital outlets a few months back highlighting the State government's daily minimum wages for skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled workers in various sectors, where it was directed that even an unskilled worker can legally claim Rs 240 per day (read Rs 7,200 per month), where the skilled one should get minimum Rs 350 per day (Rs 10,500 per month).

Critics, while commenting over the matter, pointed out three television scribes also being beneficiaries of the alleged money laundering in the NRC updation process. These scribes were sought to be named and shamed on social media.

The NRC updation process began in December 2014 with an initial project cost of around Rs 288 crore and was supposed to be completed within 14 months (by February 2015). But the timeline for the project went on lingering and the final draft was published on 31 August 2019. Because of the time overruns, the project cost escalated up to nearly Rs 1600 crore by March 2022. The released NRC is yet to be notified by the Registrar General of India.

The NRC was supposed to enroll the names of all genuine Indian citizens (or their ancestors) residing in Assam prior to 25 March 1971, and the final draft included a total of 3,11,21,004 citizens' names out of 3,30,27,661 applicants (thus the final draft excluded around 19 lakh people as they could not provide valid documents).

Assam, which had its first prepared NRC in 1951, used to face an influx of migrants from erstwhile East Pakistan and present-day Bangladesh. Rapid demographic changes had alerted the indigenous communities of Assam, which resulted in the anti-foreigner movement of the 1980s.

The six-year long agitation led by All Assam Students' Union (AASU) and the Asom Gana Sangram Parishad culminated in 1985 after signing an accord in New Delhi. The agitating leaders agreed to accept all migrants prior to 25 March 1971 in Assam. Now, the cut-off date for Assam has been challenged in Supreme Court by a civil society group (Motiur Rahman-led Sanmilita Maha Sangha).

APW president Sarma, who lodged police complaints against Wipro (besides Hajela), also sent a letter to Azim Premji, chairperson of Wipro Technologies, informing him about the company's role in the NRC updation process. He later urged Prime Minister Narendra Modi to intervene on the matter so that the guilty individuals are punished under the law.

Pointing out that a large amount of money came from foreign countries to influence the system for incorporating thousands of Bangladeshi families' names in the list, he argued that the Enforcement Department, Central Bureau of Investigation and National Investigation Agency should separately probe into the NRC scam.

Meanwhile, concern over the fate of NRC in Assam continues. Jumping in the controversy, State chief minister Himanta Biswa Sarma has assured appropriate actions against those involved in the irregularities, stating, State government has referred the case against Hajela to the directorate of economic offence. https://www.counterview.net/2023/05/assam-citizenship-updation-process-in.html

2. Do not halt road repairs: UT to MC *(timesofindia.indiatimes.com)* Updated: 12 May 2023

CHANDIGARH: After Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG), based on its AI tool study, raised questions over the MC road recarpeting work, the UT administration has sought Central Road Research Institute (CRRI) help in the matter.

The UT has also asked MC not to completely suspend the recarpeting work. UT adviser Dharam Pal, said, "The AI tool is new, and its effectiveness has not been studied in detail. We have written to the CRRI asking them to share with us if there is such a tool that we can use for identifying roads for repair. If they confirm it, we have no problem using it."

The CAG has contended that most of the roads are "good condition" based on its analysis using an AI tool.

In a letter to the administration, the CAG had stated that it used AI based survey to identify potholes and cracks on eight roads. In the test, five out of eight roads didn't require any recarpeting, as per the test. But the MC had marked all these roads for recarpeting.

After receiving the letter, the MC had suspended the road recarpeting work.

The adviser said, "We have taken a decision after discussing with Punjab governor and UT administrator Banwarilal Purohit, that in the meantime, the MC should continue repair work of stretches identified by the AI tool and physical inspection. We have conveyed the decision to the MC." https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/chandigarh/do-not-halt-road-repairs-ut-to-mc/articleshow/100173485.cms

SELECTED NEWS ITEMS/ARTICLES FOR READING

3. Indian road projects face execution and funding challenges: Report *(livemint.com)*
Updated: 11 May 2023

Indian road projects, especially those under the hybrid annuity model (HAM), are facing challenges in execution and funding, according to a report by CareEdge Ratings.

The study examined 235 HAM projects awarded between FY16 and FY22, totaling a bid project cost of around ₹2.74 lakh crore and debt of about ₹75,000 crore. Of these, 31% of these projects are operational, 44% are under construction, and 25% are awaiting an appointed date as of December 2022.

The report indicates that operational HAM projects with a combined debt of ₹36,000 crore will likely demonstrate strong cash flow resilience. However, projects with weak sponsors' portfolios awarded prior to FY20 may experience execution challenges, with an aggregate debt of ₹6,000 crore. Sponsors possessing moderate credit profiles are expected to encounter elevated execution and funding risks for their HAM projects, resulting in increased debt levels due to an equity commitment estimated at 3.7 times of cash accruals.

Despite these obstacles, road developers concentrating on HAM projects have witnessed healthy growth in the scale of their operations over the past three years. Nevertheless, there has been a 240 bps moderation in the profit before interest, lease, depreciation and tax (PBILDT) margins to 14% due to a disproportionate increase in input prices. With a robust order book position, the scale of operations is projected to grow by around 15% in FY23, although PBILDT margins may further moderate by 70 bps owing to intensified competition.

The execution pace of the National Highways Authority of India, which is stable at 30 km per day during FY23, is lower than the Ministry's estimates, attributable to pending/delayed receipt of the appointed date and surge in commodity prices. However, the pace of road construction is expected to pick up gradually to around 32-33 km/day in FY24.

Maulesh Desai, director at CareEdge Ratings, however, believes that operational HAM projects with an aggregate debt of ₹36,000 crore are expected to exhibit strong cash flow resilience.

Furthermore, sponsor substitution by NHAI and lenders has provided some respite to projects with weak sponsors.

“CareEdge Ratings expects elevated execution and funding risk for moderate sponsors with equity commitment estimated at 3.7 times their current cash accruals and 70% of net worth. With higher impending equity commitments, the debt levels are envisaged to rise, especially for moderate sponsors lacking an operational asset portfolio. In the interim, a comfortable capital structure may offer some respite to these sponsors," Desai added. https://www.livemint.com/news/india/indian-road-projects-under-hybrid-annuity-model-face-execution-and-funding-challenges-careedge-ratings-report-11683798207365.html

4. 24 big importers found evading Rs 11,000 crore IGST *(economictimes.indiatimes.com)* Updated: May 12, 2023

The Directorate General of GST Intelligence (DGGI) and Directorate of Revenue Intelligence (DRI) have detected alleged Integrated GST evasion to the tune of ₹11,000 crore by 24 large importers.

"So far evasion detected is about ₹11,000 crore in about 24 cases and we have sent notices to seven entities in this regard," a senior official from one of the agencies told ET.

These notices to importers from Mumbai, Kolkata and Chennai jurisdictions were sent out over the last 20 days. The agencies are in the process of sending notices to the others, ET has learnt.

The companies are largely from the steel, pharmaceuticals, gems and jewellery, and textiles sectors.

The tax evasion in these cases has been detected based on data generated by the Advanced Analytics in Indirect Taxation (ADVIT), said the official cited above.

While there were many instances of wrongly availing input tax credits, notices were being sent only in cases where data was independently verified and investigated by field formations, the official said.

The government is now looking to further strengthen ADVIT to capture newer sets of information about importers and exporters.

Changes introduced in it include a comparison report between tax paid and tax payable populated in the GSTR-9 filed by taxpayers under a selected jurisdiction for a financial year.

Officials can now get visibility on place of supply, amount of tax, and ledger utilised, all at one place, giving them a holistic view of payments made by taxpayers under the Know Your Taxpayer dashboard.

"The new functionalities are intended to enable a deeper and richer analysis of revenue and of trends in both import and export," Central Board of Indirect Taxes and Customs (CBIC)

chairman Vivek Johri wrote in a letter to all field formations on May 2. "The functionalities make use of advanced data science models to detect outliers and anomalies both on the customs as well on the GST side... These functionalities will go a long way towards better understanding of our revenue profile and help plug any potential leakages," he wrote.

The government is to start a two-month intensive drive from May 16 to detect fake invoices, fake GST registration and wrong input tax credit. https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/economy/foreign-trade/24-big-importers-found-evading-rs-11000-crore-igst/articleshow/100169200.cms

5. Direct cash transfer for fertiliser *(financialexpress.com)* May 12, 2023

The Union government is unlikely to roll out direct benefit transfer scheme for fertiliser subsidies this fiscal due to reluctance shown by states.

The Union government is unlikely to roll out direct benefit transfer scheme for fertiliser subsidies this fiscal due to reluctance shown by states.

Sources told FE the idea of direct cash transfer was objected to, as under that model, the farmers would have to pay a substantial amount upfront for buying fertilisers prior to the actual subsidy amount being transferred to their bank accounts.

The farmers' inability to pay for the soil nutrients at market rates upfront before subsidies are transferred to beneficiaries' bank accounts is the main factor behind the state governments' hesitation in approving the policy.

"Subsidy component of the fertiliser sold is quite high while the farmers' ability to buy fertilisers at actual market rate is limited," an official said. Out of 140 million farmers in the country, around 78% have small holding of less than two hectare.

Under the proposed pilot project for a modified scheme for direct benefits transfer to farmers where sale of subsidised fertilisers to farmers was to be capped, taking into consideration their land holdings, has not made much progress.

In case of urea, farmers pay a fixed price of Rs 266 per bag (45 kg) against the cost of production of around Rs 2,550 per bag. The balance is provided by the government as a subsidy to fertiliser units.

The retail prices of phosphatic and potassic (P&K) fertiliser, including Di-ammonium Phosphate (DAP) were 'decontrolled' in 2020 with the introduction of a 'fixed-subsidy' regime as part of Nutrient Based Subsidy mechanism announced by the government twice in a year.

Currently, sale of all subsidised fertilisers to farmers or buyers is made through 0.26 million point of sale (PoS) devices installed at outlets since March 2018. Beneficiaries are identified through Aadhaar number, Kisan Credit Card and other documents.

The government releases subsidies on various fertilisers to the companies on the basis of actual sales made by the retailers to the farmers.

The expenses on account of fertiliser subsidy touched the record level of Rs 2.52 trillion in FY23.

IT was the third year in a row that the annual Budget spending on fertiliser was above Rs 1-trillion mark, against a lower range of Rs 70,000– 80,000 crore in the past few years.

The government has budgeted Rs 1.79 trillion as fertiliser for the current fiscal.

In terms of volume, imports account for a third of domestic soil nutrients consumption of around 65 million tonne annually. https://www.financialexpress.com/economy/direct-cash-transfer-for-fertiliser/3083809/

6. GST e-invoicing threshold to be lowered to Rs 5 crore *(financialexpress.com)* 12 May 2023

The finance ministry has decided to lower the threshold for mandatory e-invoicing under the goods and services tax (GST) to Rs 5 crore from the Rs 10 crore at present, effective August 1, a move that will help improve the tax collections further.

According to a notification by the Central Board of Indirect Taxes and Customs, firms with an annual turnover of Rs 5 crore will have to generate e-invoices for business transactions. Under the e-invoice system, GST registered persons have to upload all B2B and export invoices to the Invoice Registration Portal (IRP). The IRP generates and returns a unique Invoice Reference Number, digitally signed e-invoice and QR code to the user. This is then transferred to the GST portal.

Over the years, the government has been reducing the threshold and bringing more and more taxpayers in the fold of e-invoicing in order to bring in transparency and gathering data for comparison with the returns filed by taxpayers.

Initially from October 1, 2020, e-invoicing was mandatory for businesses with an annual turnover of Rs 500 crore. This was then lowered to Rs 100 crore from January 1, 2021 and further brought down to Rs 50 crore from April 1, 2021. Effective April 1, 2022 the threshold was further reduced to Rs 20 crore and then to Rs 10 crore from October 1 last year.

Experts noted that businesses should get their systems in place over the next few months. MS Mani, Partner, Deloitte India, said, “The progressive reduction in the e-invoicing threshold has been one of the contributory factors in the increasing GST collections, however impacted businesses would need to modify their supply and distribution activities to ensure compliances from August 1.”

Vivek Jalan, Partner, Tax Connect Advisory, noted that e-invoice is another way to curb the menace of fake invoices and the government is making it further stringent by reducing the threshold limit for generating e-invoices.

"It is pertinent to note that even the B2B customers of these new taxpayers to whom e-invoice would now be applicable would be affected," he said. In case they accept the invoices without e-invoice compliance from such suppliers then their input tax credit would be denied resulting in GST loss for them to the extent of 18% generally, which could severely impact their bottomline. https://www.financialexpress.com/economy/gst-e-invoicing-threshold-to-be-lowered-to-rs-5-crore/3083870/

7. More teeth for PMLA *(financialexpress.com)* 12 May 2023

The government's apparent determination to strengthen the laws and systems against money laundering is unexceptionable, given that curbing black money and formalisation of the economy are its declared policy priorities. Over the last few years, it has acted on these objectives quite convincingly, though it is debatable whether and how much these efforts have borne fruit. The expansion of the clan of "reporting entities" under the Prevention of Money Laundering (PMLA) Act, 2005, by including the whole brethren of chartered accountants, company directors/secretaries, partners of firms and trustee among others, will doubtless help constrict the flow of criminal money into the country's financial system and the larger economy. It will make it much more difficult for the launderers to camouflage the illegal source of cash, and help foil the co-mingling of such funds with legitimate money.

The new rules strike at the base of the strategy of using front companies to launder ill-gotten cash. In all the three phases of money laundering—placement of "dirty cash" in the formal system, complex layering of the subsequent transactions to escape trail, and re-appropriation of the "laundered" gains—professionals come to the aid of the wrong-doers, willy-nilly. As reporting entities, they can now do the same only at the risk of being booked under a stringent law, languishing in the custody of enforcement agencies for months on end without bail, and being punished with rigorous imprisonment and hefty fines upon conviction.

This is indeed going to be a powerful deterrent for the professionals from being complicit in acts of money laundering. The reinforced PMLA rules are not a one-off; rather, they complement the strengthening of accounting standards and audit regulation apart from enhanced shareholder rights and overall regulatory oversight on incorporated firms and partnerships. With a huge repository of transactions data at their disposal, the authorities are much better equipped now to track down financial offenders than ever before, and have also started using data analytics and AI to improve professional outcomes.

Though domestic interests are sufficiently compelling, the timing of the latest batch of the PMLA rules—the Act came into being in 2005—has also to do with the multilateral Financial Action Task Force's impending assessment of the country's compliance with its 40-odd recommendations, regarding national anti-money laundering frameworks. New Delhi being the current chair of G20 wouldn't want to be seen lacking in the adoption of the FATF norms, a product of G7 deliberations. Given the relatively more attractive returns the Indian capital and

consumer markets offer amid a global growth slump and the country's robust macro-economic fundamentals, many would have proposed a calibrated approach rather than an unmitigated crackdown. However, for a country, which has ambitions to create a few international financial services centres, starting with the GIFT City, and take businesses from the likes of London, Dubai and Singapore, it is important to have the reputation of running a foolproof financial-sector regulatory system.

But there is a flip side. PMLA like many other strict laws like the Army Act, NDPS Act, etc, could be misused by the enforcement wings, given that the burden of proof can be on the accused. The salient principle of criminal justice—innocent until proven guilty—is often reversed in PMLA offences, thanks to the tough bail conditions under Section 24. It is in the domain of the judiciary to look at this issue. https://www.financialexpress.com/opinion/more-teeth-for-pmla/3083893/

8. Indian economy continue to show resilience, GDP growth to stay above 6% in 2023-2028: PHD Chamber *(financialexpress.com)* 12 May 2023

India is constantly showing resilience and growing above the pre-pandemic level of GDP growth during the post pandemic and geo-political developments, according to a report by PHD Chamber of Commerce and Industry. It said that per the IMF data, India recovered significantly from -5.8 per cent GDP growth in 2020 to 9.1 per cent in 2021 and 6.8 per cent in 2022 with projected growth rate of 5.9 per cent in 2023. The growth rate for 2021 to 2028, it said, are significantly higher than the growth rate of 3.9 per cent that India posted in 2019, before the pandemic and also above the top 10 leading economies and overall world economic growth.

How is India faring against the world economy?

While the world economic growth had recovered in 2021 at 6.2 per cent from -2.8 per cent in 2020, it decelerated again to 3.4 per cent in 2022 and is projected to decelerate further at 2.8 per cent in 2023 and 3.0 per cent in 2024. Further, among the top 10 leading economies, eight of them including United States, China, Germany, United Kingdom, France, Canada, Italy and Brazil, will perform below their GDP growth rates of 2019, even as India's economic growth will be above 6 per cent in 2023-2028, according to IMF data. "Going ahead, continued economic reforms in India would further strengthen the economic fundamentals of the country to maintain a steady economic growth trajectory in the coming years," said PHDCCI.

What's affecting many of the economies' recovery process was the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, high commodity prices, inflation trajectory and synchronized move by the central banks in increasing the interest rates. Per the IMF data, India remained a growth leader among top 10 leading economies with 5 per cent GDP growth followed by China at 4.4 per cent, South Korea at 2.1 per cent, United States at 1.8 per cent, Canada at 1.6 per cent, France at 1.2 per cent, United Kingdom at 1.0 per cent, Germany at 0.9 per cent, Italy at 0.8 per cent and Japan at 0.3 per cent.

What's helping India maintain a leading position?

While India has proven its reliance on sharp recovery from the pandemic years and its consistent growth rate as the driving force behind staying at the top position, what all factors will help the country drive the growth? "Strengthening of connectivity with Global Value Chains (GVCs) will help to improve supply side bottlenecks and reduce costs of doing business. Enhanced competitiveness of the Indian economy will attract more and more investments and help to create more employment opportunities for the growing young population in the country," PHDCCI said. However, it also maintained that the industry needs a great hand holding in a difficult environment caused by global economic uncertainties. "We need to focus more on the manufacturing sector as high cost of borrowings, high prices of raw materials have impacted the price – cost margins of the producers. Reduced cost of doing business such as easier compliances and a robust Single Window System will enhance ease of doing business in the country," said Saket Dalmia, President, PHD Chamber of Commerce and Industry. https://www.financialexpress.com/economy/indian-economy-continue-to-show-resilience-gdp-growth-to-stay-above-6-in-2023-2028-phd-chamber/3084469/

9. India's growing renewables sector needs regulation *(idronline.org)* 12 May 2023

Given the growth of the renewable energy sector in India and its ambitious goals in the coming years, the question looms about regulation of the sector.

Currently, to push the growth of the sector, renewable energy is exempt from certain land, water or mineral use regulations that India has. However, with the growing use of these natural resources by the sector, experts have been pointing out the necessity of regulations for renewable energy.

Last year, 2022, was an important milestone in India's ambitious renewable journey. India set a goal of 175 GW of renewables capacity addition to be achieved by 2022, the 75th year of India's independence. While the goal was not met entirely, India made significant progress – from 2.8 GW of solar capacity in 2014 to 64 GW in early 2023; from 21 GW of wind capacity to 42 GW over the same period. Additionally, solar projects of around 52 GW capacity are under implementation and another 40 GW are under tendering stage. The country, so far, has achieved 122 GW of renewable energy capacity against 204 GW of coal thermal power.

India is now looking towards 2030 and has set a target of achieving 500 GW of installed capacity from non-fossil fuels, including around 270 GW of solar capacity.

Commenting on the journey so far, Bhargavi S. Rao, senior fellow, and trustee of Environment Support Group (ESG), a trust that works on environmental and social justice initiatives, says that India's renewable energy journey was not planned or inclusive. She says that it was a top-down approach where the central government decided on a target and everyone worked towards achieving it. The government has exempted the renewable sector from environmental clearances time and again, saying it does not cause any pollution or ecological impact.

But as the renewable sector grows, the challenges that it throws up indicate a need for regulation in certain areas.

While the development of renewable energy facilitates the shift to a low-carbon economy, it also puts increasing pressure on resource availability. It includes land for setting up large-scale projects, water for operating and maintaining power plants, waste disposal at the end of equipment life, and minerals used for equipment, says Bharath Jairaj, Executive Director, Energy Programme, World Resource Institute India (WRII).

Problems of unregulated land acquisition for renewables

The Government of India continues to have a dominant role in shaping and governing the RE sector and supports scaling up of the sector.

Harjeet Singh, Global Engagement Director, Fossil Fuel Non-Proliferation Treaty Initiative, a civil society campaign supporting a just transition to renewable energy, said that the Indian government has been facing international pressure to scale up renewables. There has been a concern about energy security too. This global push and concerns are reflected in India's targets and execution plans. But policymakers should not overlook the emerging concerns, he said.

Land is an important component of any infrastructure development, including RE development. To regulate the entire land acquisition process, India has the Right to Fair Compensation and Transparency in Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation, and Resettlement Act, 2013 (LARR Act). It asks for consent from private landowners whose land is being acquired. It also asks for conducting Social Impact Assessment (SIA) within six months. Recognising that adhering to the LARR Act may pose as a challenge to the growth of RE sectors, the central government allowed states to establish alternative mechanisms for acquiring private land for RE development, says a report published by Forum for the Future and other partners, that appeared in 2021.

The report, which talks about just and responsible actions for transitioning to renewable energy, gives an example of the Karnataka Solar Policy that allows the District Commissioner all powers to re-classify agricultural land. The Karnataka government has devised a lease model instead of purchasing the land for Pavagada solar park. where farmers are monetarily compensated while the solar park is operated on their lands. However, in a conversation with Mongabay-India last year, the locals alleged that they were not briefed on the park's impact on their land or the decommissioning procedures at the end of the lease term.

Rao, who has followed the Pavagada power project, said that the LARR Act was not followed for taking the land in this case. By law, all land acquired should follow guidelines under the Act. However, given that the land in Pavagada is taken on 'lease' and not 'acquired', it does not come under the provisions of the Act. The government hired retired revenue officials who moved door-to-door and negotiated the land agreement. Farmers, mostly marginalised, were offered Rs. 21,000 per acre per year. Those who have three acres of land were promised Rs. 63,000 every year, she said. In the absence of regulation in this case, the farmers were left with the short end of the stick.

Most solar parks are coming up in low-income areas, where people may not have resources to bargain for their interests.

With the Indian government approving 57 solar parks and ultra-mega solar power projects of 39 GW capacity around the country, the potential of negative socio-economic impacts looms. Most of these parks are coming up in low-income areas, where people may not have the resources to bargain for their interests, Rao said.

Existing policies also enable states to establish Special Purpose Vehicles (SPVs) to purchase or lease land for RE projects. These SPVs may commission independent bodies to conduct an SIA. While the intention is to accelerate the growth of the renewable sector, experts opine that these tools, not following established procedure, may overlook some genuine social and environmental concerns. As tools such as SPVs are not required to follow standard norms like public hearing, Environmental Impact Assessment etc., there is a risk that they can overlook potential adverse impacts.

Renewables need natural resources

With the scaling-up of the renewable sector, stress on natural resources, land, and water, will also increase. As per a 2021 study by Institute for Energy Economics and Financial Analysis (IEEFA), solar and wind infrastructure may occupy up to 95,000 square kilometres of land, equivalent to the size of Bihar, by 2050. This may increase the potential of land conflicts.

Multiple instances of land conflicts are already taken to court. In 2020, after a case filed by the local community, Rajasthan High Court had to order a stay on the 1500 MW Fatehgarh Ultra Mega Solar Park in Jaisalmer district. The people, mostly marginalised, claimed that they have been traditionally using these lands for their livelihood, but the state government claims control over the land and categorises it as a 'wasteland'. Rao says that the concept of 'wastelands', or unproductive lands, was introduced during the time of the British in India and is still in official use by the government. These are in fact common lands that people have been using for their livelihood since the time of their ancestors, especially those who are landless.

Another case is that of the great Indian bustard, a critically endangered bird species that was threatened due to renewable energy infrastructure coming up in its habitat. Local residents and RE companies have been at loggerheads over the issue. A similar case took place in Maharashtra where the Mumbai High Court, in 2010, directed the state to prohibit new windmills inside the Koyna Wildlife Sanctuary where windmills had been established illegally, in violation the Wildlife (Protection) Act,1972, and the area where they were set up was falling within a reserve, making it in violation of the Forest (Conservation) Act, 1980 as well.

Excess water usage for cleaning solar panels exists in several states in India.

A study published in Nature in 2022 highlights that, "Over 74% of the solar farms installations in India were built on land cover types that could create potential biodiversity and food security conflicts – 67.6% of agricultural land and 6.99% of natural habitat – of which 38.6% of agricultural land may have potential to cultivate seasonal crops."Another natural resource that is needed for the growth of renewables, is water. A joint study by The Energy Resource Institute (TERI) and Niti Aayog has estimated that India will need at least 0.35 BCM water to clean solar panels by 2022 in case it has 47 GW of capacity that Himachal Pradesh extracts from the ground annually. India has achieved 64 GW of solar capacity. MNRE has realised that excess water

usage for cleaning solar panels exists in several states in India and pushing for judicious use of the precious resource.

Critical minerals and waste management of renewable power are other issues that need regulation.

Harjeet Singh says that internationally there is already a discourse going to regulate the renewable sector, especially mining critical minerals, human rights issues, etc. "Regarding increasing land conflict, I think the government is recognising it to some extent and focusing on decentralised system. This is the way to deal with the future challenges-decentralised and community-driven projects," he said.

Emphasising the recycling of critical minerals, he said that it will be the main thrust area of future. The government must find a balance between promoting the sector and ensuring it is environment-friendly, human rights are protected, and it is sustainable. https://idronline.org/article/climate-emergency/indias-growing-renewables-sector-needs-regulation/

10. Green Hydrogen adoption in India – Opportunities, challenges and the way ahead *(economictimes.indiatimes.com)* 12 May 2023

Green Hydrogen (GH2) should be viewed as a complement to other alternative energy sources rather than a standalone solution.

Over the last ten years, India's economy has shown a phenomenal performance in balancing growth and inflation. As a result, India is set to double its GDP to become a USD 7 trillion economy by 2030. While the country currently ranks third in the world for energy consumption, it is expected to see the highest percentage growth in this sector over the next few years. Despite its considerable reliance on imported fossil fuels, which costs more than USD 90 billion per year, India has implemented a number of steps to decarbonize its economic growth path and meet climate targets established following the Paris Agreement. According to the Climate Change Performance Index 2023 study, India ranks in the top five countries and is the best among the G20 countries. In addition, India has pledged to achieve its net-zero emissions goal by 2070 and become energy self-sufficient by 2047.

Green Hydrogen (GH2) will be critical in achieving the aforementioned objectives. While electricity accounts for around 17% of total energy use in India, more efforts are required to reduce greenhouse gas emissions from the remaining 83%. Green Hydrogen will make a significant contribution to the clean energy transition because it is a zero emission source of energy. GH2 can be utilised in hard-to-abate sectors such as shipping, steel, aviation, and in industries that already use Grey Hydrogen derived from natural gas, such as refineries and fertilizers.

Green Hydrogen initiatives introduced in India

Several policies and guidelines have been established by India to promote green hydrogen, including the Green Hydrogen Policy, Harnessing Green Hydrogen by Niti Ayog, and the National Green Hydrogen Mission (NGHM). The NGHM aims to achieve a green hydrogen production capacity of at least 5 MMT per year, generate investments of over Rs. 8 lakh crore, and create over 6 lakh jobs. The government has taken significant steps, such as waiving inter-state transmission charges and providing GH2 plants with open access to the grid. The government has announced Rs. 19,744 crore in the latest budget for several programmes to encourage green hydrogen, including domestic manufacturing of electrolysers and GH2 production.

Green Hydrogen - Upcoming action plans

India is taking major steps towards green hydrogen usage. By June 2023, the government intends to create a framework for the distribution of incentives of roughly Rs 1,300 crore, which will be distributed through a competitive bidding process. The goal is to support 3.6 million tonnes of GH2 capacity over the next three years, with the incentive amount per kilogramme of GH2 decreasing annually. In addition, The Solar Energy Corporation of India (SECI) plans to issue a mega tender to aggregate demand for fertiliser plants and refineries. Furthermore, Kandla port on the west coast and Tuticorin port on the east coast have been designated as India's first green hydrogen and green ammonia refuelling hubs. By the end of 2023, hydrogen fuel cell technology will be used to power 8 trains on narrow-gauge heritage routes.

Green Hydrogen - Implementation challenges

Making it economically viable

The high cost of manufacturing green hydrogen (GH2) using renewable energy is the most significant barrier to its adoption in India, accounting for around 65% of the entire cost. According to the European Commission, the cost of producing GH2 is between Rs 250-525/kg ($3-6.5/kg), while grey hydrogen costs Rs 150/kg ($1.8/kg). According to NITI Aayog, GH2 utilising Round-The-Clock (RTC) RE with Transmission & Distribution waiver is projected to cost $2.1/kg by 2030, whereas GH2 using onsite RE may be in the range of $1.8-$2.4/kg. Low-cost renewable energy plants, local electrolyser manufacturing, and technological advances in electrolysers can all help to reduce the cost of GH2.

Green Hydrogen - Is it a chicken and egg problem?

The growth of any upcoming industry requires the government to incentivize supply and create demand through policy interventions. For the GH2 industry, the measures to boost demand have not kept pace with the substantial incentives provided for supply. In October 2021, the draft National Hydrogen Energy Mission Document stated specific Green Hydrogen Consumption Obligations (GHCO) for fertilizer production and petroleum refining sectors to gradually increase to 100% by FY 34-35. The city gas networks were also planned to blend natural gas with green hydrogen at a progressive rate. The draft document predicted that the increased adoption of green hydrogen consumption would gradually reduce production costs and have a marginal impact on final product prices. This would allow for a smoother transition to green

hydrogen adoption without affecting the consuming sectors. However, the published version of the NGHM document in January 2023 did not specify GHCO. Instead, it provided a general guideline for the minimum share of green hydrogen or its derivative products' consumption by designated consumers as energy or feedstock, taking into account availability of resources, relative costs, and other economic factors. Several Indian companies are cautious about investing in green hydrogen due to uncertainty surrounding demand.

Availability of RE at a reasonable price

It is critical for the success of GH2 to ensure a steady and inexpensive supply of renewable energy (RE). Despite several policies to make renewable energy available, the reality on the ground is somewhat different. The usage of renewable energy in the grid can lead to a shift in supply and demand hours on a daily load curve. Calculating the ultimate rate for RE to be available in real-time at GH2 locations is the key challenge, and it varies by state. States also lack rules defining incentives for GH2 plants, and investors are concerned about RE supply continuity over the plant's 20-25-year lifespan.

Production dependent on limited natural resources - Water and land

According to an EY analysis, India will need 115 GW of renewable energy power and 50 billion litres of demineralized water by 2030 to meet its 5 MMTPA GH2 objective. GH2 manufacturing is dependent on limited natural resources such as water and land. The creation of GH2 requires a lot of power and water, with each kilogramme of hydrogen requiring roughly 9 litres of demineralized water. A typical GH2 facility generating 10 tonnes per day requires an electrolyzer capacity of 5000 m3/hour, which requires renewable energy supply from a 150 MW plant, which typically requires around 750 acres of land. With a growing population and economy, the demand for water will only increase, and land and water scarcity in many parts of India will pose a significant challenge for large-scale adoption of GH2.

Overcoming challenges

● To reduce Green Hydrogen (GH2) costs, India needs consistent and low-cost renewable energy.
● India needs to invest in indigenous manufacture of Electrolysers and secure geo-political partnerships for procurement of critical minerals to overcome Electrolyser related challenges.
● Hydrogen hubs near demand centres can lower GH2 transportation costs.
● India must invest in sustainable water usage and utilize industrial/municipal wastewater or seawater for electrolysis.
● R&D is necessary to enhance Electrolysers' efficiency, stack life, and reduce water and power requirements.
● To encourage exports, GH2 projects and RE plants may be eligible for tax and duty waivers.

Ensuring consistent availability of RE at least possible rate

To ensure the success of GH2, it is crucial to guarantee consistent availability of renewable energy (RE) at the lowest possible cost. A reduction of one rupee in RE expenses can result in a

Rs 60 reduction in GH2 costs. Central and state authorities need to collaborate to establish clear pricing for RTC RE power and ensure its continuity throughout the project's 25-year operating life. The utilization of RE in combination with grid-scale battery storage can maximize RE usage, safeguard RE and GH2 investments, and provide flexibility in power system management. To lower power costs, it may be necessary to waive or decrease banking, transmission, and distribution charges. States must release GH2 policies quickly, specifying incentives for duties and tax exemptions, subsidies, infrastructure facilities, and banking.

The way forward

Green Hydrogen (GH2) should be viewed as a complement to other alternative energy sources rather than a standalone solution. Despite the challenges of high production costs and the need for regulatory support and large-scale investment, green hydrogen is a vital element in India's shift toward clean energy. Overcoming these barriers is crucial to sustain India's progress towards achieving clean energy goals. https://energy.economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/renewable/green-hydrogen-adoption-in-india-opportunities-challenges-and-the-way-ahead/100177937

11. Climate finance needs could cost India 85.6 lakh crore by 2030 *(downtoearth.org.in)*
11 May 2023

Climate adaptation measures need to take into account the infrastructure gap caused by climate events

The cumulative total expenditure for adapting to climate change in India is estimated to be Rs 85.6 lakh crore by 2030, according to the Reserve Bank of India's Report on Currency and Finance.

Climate adaptation measures need to take into account the infrastructure gap caused by climate events. This could be at least 2.5 per cent of the annual Gross Domestic Product (GDP).

It is also not advisable to not have a uniform climate mitigation strategy across sectors because emission intensities differ. For a developing country like India, the transition impact is considered minimal when following the Current Policies in the 2030 scenario but even then the GDP will shrink by 1.19 per cent.

Sector-specific climate mitigation strategies can address the crisis to an extent, as suggested by the report. In order to avoid the 3.9 GT scenario, renewable energy, electric vehicles and energy-efficient appliances should cater to 55 per cent of the country's future energy requirements.

For the remaining 45 per cent (industries, animal husbandry and agriculture) a combination of deploying efficient carbon pricing or transferring the responsibility to producers can help address the issue.

Usually, October and November constitute the peak cyclone season for India; but the Bay of Bengal has been witnessing cyclones during the summer in the last few years

A cyclonic storm called Mocha is likely to form in the southeast Bay of Bengal between May 7 and 9, 2023. Usually, October and November constitute the peak cyclone season for India.

Cyclones forming during this time of the year are categorised as summer cyclones. Over the last few years, the Bay of Bengal has been seeing summer cyclones.

So far, there is no forecast regarding Mocha's landfall over India's coast. This is because predicting the path of summer cyclones is very difficult. Slow-moving cyclones can change paths, recurve or even dissipate without reaching the land. With warming sea temperatures, cyclones can also intensify extremely rapidly, exceeding the forecasted timeframe.

According to India Meteorological Department Director General Mrutyunjay Mohapatra, cyclogenesis is maximum in May. The details of Cyclone Mocha's path and intensity will be provided after the low-pressure area is formed around May 7, 2023.

Some of the other recent summer cyclones that hit India include

Cyclone Fani (May 2019)
Not only the worst cyclone to hit Odisha in this century, it was also the longest-lived cyclone in the Bay of Bengal ever observed (11 days in the sea and land put together). It had formed in April, which is the pre-monsoon season.

Super Cyclone Amphan (May 2020)

It made landfall near Digha in West Bengal and ravaged almost the entirety of south Bengal, including Kolkata.

It was also the costliest tropical cyclone on record in the North Indian Ocean. The economic losses in India amounted to $14 billion according to the World Meteorological Organization.

Marine heatwaves are likely to have helped intensify the cyclone from Category 1, that is cyclonic storm to Category 5 which is super cyclone in less than 36 hours.

Cyclone Nisarga, (June 2020)
It was the strongest tropical cyclone to strike the Maharashtra coast in June since 1891. Mumbai bore the brunt of it, along with some parts of Madhya Pradesh.

Cyclone Yaas, (May 26, 2021)
It devastated several parts of West Bengal and impacted nearly 10 million people. Coastal areas experienced squalls upto 100 kilometres , apart from large-scale flooding.

Cyclone Tauktae (May 2021)
It left a trail of destruction along Gujarat's Saurashtra coast affecting three states on the country's western coast — Maharashtra, Saurashtra and Kutch region in Gujarat and south Rajasthan.

Cyclone Asani, May 2022
Asani had formed May 7 in the Bay of Bengal and dissipated May 12. It had pulled the monsoon winds into the Andaman Sea but did not pull any further. Very heavy rain was reported in Kerala, Andhra Pradesh and Odisha.

Considering the impacts of cyclones over the last few years, Odisha's CM Naveen Patnaik held a meeting earlier this month to audit his state's preparedness for Mocha. The CM specially urged the NDRF, ODRAF, and Fire Services to be prepared. https://www.downtoearth.org.in/video/climate-change/mocha-and-summer-cyclones-in-india-89160

12. AI: Neither artificial nor intelligent *(deccanherald.com)* 12 May 2023

In 1997, when IBM's supercomputer 'Deep Blue' defeated world chess champion Garry Kasparov, it signalled a pivotal turning point for human civilisation. The world felt that artificial intelligence (AI) could outsmart human intelligence. But that was only the beginning. Any modern chess engine might easily defeat the best human player.

In the quarter century since, AI has taken over every aspect of our lives and lifestyles, not just chess. Siri and Alexa have been a part of our lives for about a decade now. Google's popular search engine is another AI application. However, the recent breach of the barrier by OpenAI's chatbot, ChatGPT, has dealt a serious blow to the co-existence of AI and human intelligence.

AI quickly widened its scope. GPT-4 is much more potent than its predecessor. Investments in AI development and research are rising steadily. In a tweet, author Yuval Noah Harari stated: "The danger is that if we invest too much in developing Al and too little in developing human consciousness, the very sophisticated artificial intelligence of computers might only serve to empower the natural stupidity of humans."

The issue of how "artificial" AI is comes up. It's designed by humans, it's programmed by humans, and the algorithm that drives its creation is also outlined by humans.

Moreover, how "intelligent" are AI bots? If we think about it properly, their 'intellect' is shallow by nature, as they can only tackle specific problems for which they are designed. Additionally, the nature of their intelligence differs greatly from ours. Consider the Moravec paradox, which was developed in the 1980s by robotics expert Hans Moravec of Carnegie Mellon University and his colleagues. In 1988, Moravec noted that "it is comparatively easy to make computers exhibit adult-level performance on intelligence tests or playing checkers, and difficult or impossible to give them the skills of a one-year-old when it comes to perception and mobility."

Recently, Kate Crawford, a University of Southern California professor and a Microsoft researcher, examined what it takes to create AI in her 2021 book Atlas of AI. She believes that the name is deceptive because AI is neither intelligent nor artificial. In addition to the algorithms created by human programmers, a vast amount of natural resources, energy, and human labour are used to create AI. Furthermore, it lacks intelligence in the sense of human intelligence. Additionally, it requires extensive human training to operate, and the statistical logic it uses to

create meaning is entirely different. “Since the very beginning of AI back in 1956, we’ve made this terrible error, a sort of original sin of the field, to believe that minds are like computers, and vice versa. We assume these things are an analog to human intelligence, and nothing could be further from the truth,” says Crawford.

In a New York Times article, Noam Chomsky and his co-authors said that ChatGPT and similar systems are “a lumbering statistical engine for patternmatching, gorging on hundreds of terabytes of data and extrapolating the most likely conversational response or most probable answer to a scientific question.” Human intelligence, on the other hand, “seeks not to infer correlations among data points but to create explanations.” GPT-3, ChatGPT’s predecessor, shocked the entire world by writing an op-ed in The Guardian. Back in 2020, American tech entrepreneur Kevin Lacker asked, “How many rainbows does it take to jump from Hawaii to seventeen?” while administering a Turing test to GPT-3.

The GPT-3 responded, “Two.” Thus, despite a remarkable AI’s ability to write in the same style as humans, it still lacks common sense in its comprehension of how the physical and social worlds function. Whatever its level of development, AI will always have this kind of weakness. According to Chomsky and his co-authors, “ChatGPT and similar programmes are incapable of distinguishing the possible from the impossible.” Here, human intelligence would defeat AI by a margin of 10 goals!

In his 2018 book, Intelligence is not Artificial, Italian-American author Piero Scaruffi wrote that most of the “intelligence” of our machines is due to the environment that humans structure for them. He wrote, “AI is just computational mathematics applied to automation.” Scaruffi perceived that “[H]umanity is at risk because it is increasingly forced to coexist with very stupid machines in these vast algorithmic bureaucracies. The risk is that we will end up creating not superhuman technology but subhuman societies.” Sounds like what Yuval Noah Harari tweeted more recently?

As a result, it appears that many relevant experts are quite unwilling to declare AI to be “artificial” or “intelligent,” at least by the yardstick of human intelligence. The term “artificial intelligence” seems to describe just the name of these types of machines, not their capabilities. https://www.deccanherald.com/opinion/in-perspective/ai-neither-artificial-nor-intelligent-1217624.html

13. Digital technology can help India transform public healthcare *(livemint.com)* 12 May 2023

The healthcare industry in India is one of the fastest-growing sectors and yet it remains one of the most challenging areas of public service delivery. Digital technology is a rapidly evolving landscape that has the potential to revolutionize healthcare in India by improving access, affordability and quality of healthcare services.

India has established its digital prowess by developing digital public goods like Aadhaar, which is now central to India’s public service delivery architecture, and the Unified Payments Interface

which has revolutionised daily life by enabling cashless transactions even in the most remote areas.

Digital pathways moving the needle on transformation: The government launched its flagship Ayushman Bharat Digital Mission (ABDM) two years ago, given the need for a comprehensive, integrated digital healthcare ecosystem and to move towards proactive, holistic and citizen-centric healthcare.

The Ayushman Bharat Health Account (ABHA) has created a uniform, robust and transparent framework as an identifier for patients across healthcare providers. Details and medical records of patients can be accessed digitally, and the potential of building the health profile at a population level can open doors of care continuum and quality healthcare.

Nearly 400 million ABHA IDs have been created, 30 million health records linked, and 1.75 million health professionals registered along with nearly 2 million health facilities, and the mission is gathering pace.

Platforms to lead transformation: Digital Bharat Collaborative (part of Piramal Foundation), with a presence in eight states, is a platform that marks the coming together of multi-sectoral organisations in partnership with state governments to support public state systems to improve availability, accessibility and quality of public services for all citizens by leveraging technology. Significant change efforts are already underway in Bihar and Assam, with ABDM building blocks and building digital competencies of citizens and over 5,000 state officials.

Looking ahead: While much ground has been covered in just two years, a lot more needs to be done to truly unlock the potential of digital health.

Integration of data sources: While digitisation of data is key, the integration of multiple data sources is critical. Capturing the data inputs at the source of patient engagement in the Hospital Information Systems and frontline applications as the only source of truth for all programs will ensure accuracy and transparency.

Not just tall claims: Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana (AB-PMJAY) is one of the largest health assurance schemes globally, covering about 550 million beneficiaries—40% of India's population. AB-PMJAY is successfully using digital public infrastructure to provide end-to-end services. This has helped citizens from vulnerable sections in getting quality services, right from admissions to treatment, discharge and ease of claims process. Seeding ABHA IDs and linking health records can further enable a seamless process.

Prioritisation of top programmes: Central government programmes need to be prioritised for the adoption of digital health accounts, where ABHA IDs can be seeded to build adaption and use cases. Authentic ABHA-linked records can really boost the delivery of programmes to address tuberculosis, hypertension and reproductive, maternal, child and adolescent health that play a key role in impacting India's health indicators.

Immediate adoption of ABDM and health records of over 200 million citizens enrolled in central health programmes like ESIC, CGHS, and in railways and defence will boost the coverage of use cases and build a strong repository of services.

Setting examples with data anonymity: With the digitisation of data comes increasing concern about data privacy. To allay these concerns, consent mechanisms and anonymization (delinking personal identifiable information, or PII) need to be mandated to access data for any clinical, research or program decision purposes. This will enable India to become a role model on data privacy and governance.

The government will be able to better track and stem life-threatening illnesses like tuberculosis and breakouts of deadly viral epidemics like measles and conjunctivitis, while policymakers would be armed with relevant data to chart robust policies for prevention and treatment without personal details of patients being revealed.

Confidentiality and Confidence go hand in hand: The Supreme Court of India declared the right to privacy as a fundamental right in 2017, after which the Data Privacy Bill was introduced and now the Digital Personal Data Protection Bill 2022 has been drafted.

In the meantime, as a measure to build confidence and trust of users, under ABDM Health Data Management Policy, ABDM has already adopted certain principles to govern the use, collection and processing of personal, sensitive data. This is a step in the right direction to ensure effective guardrails for data privacy.

Every life matters: While some schools of thought may see the progress of digital technology as detrimental to privacy and inclusion, ABDM and platforms like Digital Bharat Collaborative have proven to be valuable assets that are touching lives in a balanced and responsible manner by keeping the citizen at the centre of every solution, such that will truly build a strong Bharat in the years to come. https://www.livemint.com/opinion/online-views/digital-technology-can-help-india-transform-public-healthcare-11683857820472.html

14. 550ha yet to be freed, but Noida will spend Rs 500 crore on new land *(timesofindia.indiatimes.com)* May 12, 2023

NOIDA: The Noida Authority has allocated Rs 500 crore to acquire new land at a time when over 550 hectares are yet to be freed from encroachers.

Apart from conducting anti-encroachment drives, the Authority is now carrying out a survey of "dumped" land parcels, which lie unused across sectors, to find their status.

Officials said that they would reclaim the "dumped" land soon while they also acquire more land in the new sectors for allotment to new investors.

Noida Authority CEO Ritu Maheshwari said, "Only a handful of land parcels lie vacant in Noida. So, the land records department is locating 'dumped' land to put the same to use. Besides, the law department is fighting to regain land under dispute or litigation.

The Authority is also taking back land from non-functional industrial, IT and ITES units, among others, for allotment of land to new investors." The Authority has issued over 500 notices to such nonfunctional industrial and IT/ITES units after a 2022 government notification stipulated the immediate cancellation of land allocation for units not made operational by December 31, 2022.

The project and land records departments have also been conducting drives to free the 568 hectares of Noida Authority land that remain encroached. These include notified, acquired, rural extension population and village society land, which remain encroached.

In 2017, this figure stood at 705 hectares.

The Authority has removed encroachments from over 40 hectares in the past five years. The land freed has a market value of Rs 3,000 crore.

The Authority has also regularised over 97 hectares in the name of eligible farmers and ensured fencing or boundary walls around the land parcels to prevent future encroachments.

During the UP Global Investors' Summit in February this year, the Noida Authority signed MoUs worth Rs 90,000 crore. It now faces a significant challenge to hand over land to investors.

Following the summit, in July, the Authority was given a target to transform MoUs worth Rs 60,000 crore into actual investments. Maheshwari said that the Authority, so far, has successfully materialised investments worth Rs 40,000 crore. https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/noida/550ha-yet-to-be-freed-but-noida-will-spend-rs-500-crore-on-new-land/articleshow/100172636.cms