NEWS ITEMS ON CAG/ AUDIT REPORTS (26.04.2023)

1. **अरावली में अवैध खननः 6 वर्षों में सिर्फ एक सजा** *(hindi.business-standard.com)* Apr 25, 2023

अवैध खनन और रियल एस्टेट निर्माण के कारण दिल्ली से गुजरात के अहमदाबाद तक फैली 692 किलोमीटर लंबी पर्वत श्रृंखला अरावली की बरबादी जगजाहिर है।

नियंत्रक एवं महालेखा परीक्षक (सीएजी) के अनुसार, साल 2011 से 2017 के बीच 90 लाख टन खनिजों का अवैध उत्खनन किया गया है। राष्ट्रीय हरित अधिकरण (एनजीटी) को हरियाणा पुलिस द्वारा दिए गए आंकड़ों से पता चलता है कि पर्यावरण के लिहाज से इस महत्त्वपूर्ण पर्वत श्रृंखला पर अवैध खनन जारी रहने के बावजूद अब तक शायद ही किसी को दोषी करार दिया गया है।

हरियाणा के फरीदाबाद, नूह और गुरुग्राम जिलों में इस पर्वत श्रृंखला पर अवैध खनन के खिलाफ 1 जनवरी, 2017 से लेकर 31 जनवरी, 2023 के बीच 582 शिकायतें दर्ज कराई गई थीं। हरियाणा पुलिस की ओर से दायर शपथ पत्र के अनुसार केवल एक मामले में आरोपी को दोषी करार दिया गया। पिछले छह वर्षों के दौरान हरियाणा पुलिस को प्राप्त शिकायतों में से महज 507 के लिए प्राथमिकी (एफआईआर) दर्ज की गई।

बिज़नेस स्टैंडर्ड ने भी हरियाणा पुलिस द्वारा जमा कराई गई जानकारी और आंकड़ों को देखा है। पर्यावरण प्रेमियों के समूह अरावली बचाओ सिटीजन्स मूवमेंट की एक याचिका पर सुनवाई के दौरान एनजीटी को हरियाणा पुलिस द्वारा मार्च में दी गई जानकारी से पता चलता है कि प्राप्त शिकायतों और दर्ज की गई प्राथमिकी में काफी अंतर है।

अरावली बचाओ ने अप्रैल 2022 में एनजीटी में एक याचिका दायर की थी। इसमें आरोप लगाया गया था कि खनन पर सर्वोच्च न्यायालय के प्रतिबंध के बावजूद गुड़गांव और नूह के 16 स्थानों पर अरावली से पत्थरों का अवैध खनन किया जा रहा है।

साल 2022 में सर्वोच्च न्यायालय ने पर्यावरण ठीक करने के लिए फरीदाबाद, गुरुग्राम और मेवात (नूह) में अरावली से खनन पर प्रतिबंध लगा दिया था।

सर्वोच्च न्यायालय ने साल 2009 में फिर से एक आदेश में कहा था कि सभी खनन गतिविधियों को वैधानिक प्रावधान के अनुपालन तक निलंबित किया जाना चाहिए। खासकर वहां पर जहां गड्ढे और खदानों को खुला छोड़ दिया गया है। https://hindi.business-standard.com/india-news/illegal-mining-in-aravalli-only-one-punishment-in-6-years

2. **Illegal mining in Aravalli: only one punishment in 6 years** *(weeklyblitz.net)* Apr 25, 2023

The devastation of the Aravallis, a 692 km long mountain range stretching from Delhi to Ahmedabad in Gujarat, due to illegal mining and real estate construction is well known.

According to the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG), between 2011 and 2017, illegal mining of 90 lakh tonnes of minerals has been done. Data submitted by the Haryana Police to the National Green Tribunal (NGT) shows that despite illegal mining continuing in this environmentally important mountain range, hardly anyone has been convicted so far.

Between January 1, 2017 and January 31, 2023, 582 complaints were lodged against illegal mining on this mountain range in Haryana's Faridabad, Nuh and Gurugram districts. As per the affidavit filed by the Haryana Police, the accused was convicted only in one case. Out of the complaints received by the Haryana Police during the last six years, only 507 First Information Reports (FIRs) were registered.

BLiTZ has also accessed the information and data submitted by the Haryana Police. Information provided by the Haryana Police to the NGT in March during a hearing on a petition by environmentalist group Aravali Bachao Citizens Movement shows that there is a wide gap between the complaints received and the FIRs registered.

Save Aravalli had filed a petition in NGT in April 2022. It alleged that illegal mining of stones from Aravalli was going on at 16 places in Gurgaon and Nuh despite the Supreme Court's ban on mining.

In the year 2022, the Supreme Court had banned mining from Aravalli in Faridabad, Gurugram and Mewat (Nuh) to improve the environment. The Supreme Court again in an order in the year 2009 said that all mining activities should be carried out in accordance with the statutory provision. be suspended until compliance. Especially where pits and mines have been left open. https://www.weeklyblitz.net/news/illegal-mining-in-aravalli-only-one-punishment-in-6-years/

3. Congress Lashes Out at Opacity Surrounding PM CARES Fund *(thewire.in)* Apr 26, 2023

The Congress party on Tuesday lashed out at Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his PM CARES Fund, calling it a "fraud and a farce". The party was responding to reports that government-run listed firms have contributed at least Rs 2,913.6 crore between 2019-20 and 2021-22 to the Fund.

"The government seeks immunity from scrutiny by arguing that it (the fund) does not receive budgetary support. What else is the contribution of such huge amounts by Navratnas and mini-Navratnas? This is taxpayers' money. Constitutional morality doesn't require legal compulsion," Congress spokesperson Abhishek Manu Singhvi said, according to The Telegraph. "What prevents the Prime Minister from making the details public — receipts and expenditure?"

Business Standard found that the contribution of government-run companies accounts for more than the cumulative donation made by 247 other firms to the fund – 59.3% of total donation of Rs 4,910.5 crore, reports the newspaper. The top five donors are Oil and Natural Gas Corporation (Rs 370 crore), NTPC (Rs 330 crore), Power Grid Corporation of India (Rs 275 crore), Indian Oil Corporation (Rs 265 crore), and Power Finance Corporation (Rs 222.4 crore).

Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge too criticised the opacity around the Fund, tweeting, "PM Cares is equal to PM Shares public money. The Prime Minister's Office told the Supreme Court — No Government money is credited to the Fund. In Delhi High Court, the affidavit said 'the Fund is not State or Public Authority and RTI/CAG scrutiny can't be applied'. An epidemic of loot during adversity by Modi Government."

Singhvi was asked if the Congress believes that money collected by the Fund is being used for political purposed. He replied, according to The Telegraph, "How can we say that when the details of expenditure are not available? What's the problem in putting out details on its website on a monthly basis? Or, bring out a white paper to tell the nation how the money was spent in the last four years. Instead, the government is fighting at different levels, including the courts, to block information. They don't allow CAG scrutiny, not even RTI (Right to Information)."

The PM-CARES has been in the thick of controversy since it was set up in March 2020, because of its avoidance of public scrutiny and receipt of funds from foreign entities, including Chinese companies. The fund is not controlled by the Government of India, according to a reported submission by the Union government to the Delhi high court in January 2023. This reiterated a position mentioned in a 2020 judgment by the Supreme Court, which noted that the trust does not receive any government money.

The PM CARES Fund collected Rs 3,076.6 crore in 2019-20, according to disclosures on its website, which rose to Rs 10,990.2 crore in 2020-21 and fell to Rs 9,131.9 crore in 2021-22. The bulk of the amount seems to have come from corporate India's CSR budgets in its first year.

The PM CARES Fund spent only Rs 2,049 crore in the few days it was operational in 2019-20. This increased to Rs 3,976.2 crore in 2020-21 and Rs 3,716.3 crore in 2021-22.

The status of PM CARES has been controversial for its nature and the lack of transparency around it. Earlier this year, in January, the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) told the Delhi high court that the PM CARES Fund is not a "public authority" under Article 12 of the Constitution of India and so is not answerable to the public about its functioning under the Right to Information Act, 2005.

Even without legal compulsion, Singhvi said, the government on its own should be making details of the Fund public. "The disclosure should be made on the sacred principles of transparency and accountability. What's the problem in transforming the fund into a statutory fund? What's there to hide that the government is ensuring zero accountability, zero audit, zero transparency? What are the criteria for the deployment of the fund? Who are the beneficiaries?" he continued. https://thewire.in/politics/congress-lashes-out-at-opacity-surrounding-pm-cares-fund

STATES NEWS ITEMS

4. Non exercise of due diligence by J&K Bank leads to doubtful recoveries: CAG *(thekashmirimages.com)* Apr 26, 2023

Srinagar: Non-exercise of due diligence by J&K Bank at the time of sanctioning and enhancing bill discounting facility in favour of some construction companies has resulted in disbelieving recoveries of over Rs 113 crores, says a report by the Comptroller and Auditor General of India (CAG).

Bill Discounting is a trade-related activity in which unpaid invoices which are due to be paid at a future date are sold to the bank. The bank takes the bill and pays the borrower after deducting some amount as discount. The bank then presents the bill to the borrower's customer on the due date of the bill and collects the total amount.

The companies where due diligence by J&K Bank has not been applied at the time of sanctioning and enhancing bill discounting facility include M/s Beigh Construction Company Limited with doubtful recovery of ₹ 102.55 crore and M/s Ace Engineering Infratech Private Limited with a doubtful recovery of ₹ 11.98 crore.

The financial soundness of Ms/ ITNL should have been ascertained by the bank before extending/enhancing the bill discounting facility in favour of the borrower company, especially in view of M/s ITNL's obligation to honour the bills as per the tripartite agreement, the CAG observed.

The top account scrutiny body of the country explained that the National Highways Authority of India (NHAI) in 2015 awarded the work of four-laning of Amravati Chikhli project to M/s Amravati Chikhli Expressway Limited (ACEL) for an amount of ₹ 2,288.18 crore (for Km 166.00 to 360.00).

The AECL, according to the report, was a Special Purpose Vehicle of M/s IL&FS Transportation Network Limited (ITNL).

The work for execution of a portion (Km 220 to Km 260) of four-laning of the project at a cost of ₹ 461.25 crore was awarded by ACEL to M/s Beigh Construction Company Limited (borrower company) in 2017.

Audit scrutiny of the Residency Road branch of the Jammu and Kashmir Bank revealed that a bill discounting facility of ₹ 57.60 crore was sanctioned in favour of the borrower company against the primary security of hypothecation of all types of stock, consumables, spares, etc.

As per an agreement, the ITNL was required to irrevocably and unconditionally honour the bill presented to them by the bank. The bank in 2018 further enhanced the limit of the bill discounting facility to ₹ 86.34 crore against the available primary security.

The CAG says that the bank also sanctioned three term loans aggregating ₹ 8.79 crore between August 2017 and May 2018 in favour of the borrower company for purchase of machinery and other items.

In 2018, the ITNL defaulted in payment of the bill discounted by the bank due to a severe financial crisis in IL&FS and its group companies. The account of the borrower company (M/s Beigh) was classified as non-performing asset (NPA) on 30 September, 2019.

The auditor says the IL&FS was referred to the National Company Law Tribunal (NCLT) for revival and the bank filed its claim with IL&FS. As of December 31, 2021, an amount of ₹ 113.99 crore was outstanding against the borrower company.

For the implementation of four-laning of Amravati-Chikhli National Highway project, ITNL was to achieve financial closure. Thus, M/s ITNL was to enter into agreement with the funding agencies for financing the project. However, it had not achieved financial closure and the bank, while sanctioning/ enhancing bill discounting facility, did not take cognizance of non-achievement of financial closure by ITNL, the CAG points out.

As per the tripartite agreement though the bill discounting facility was extended in favour of the borrower company, ITNL was under obligation to honour the bills presented for payment by the bank. But the bank did not obtain adequate tangible collateral security to safeguard its interests.

Audit noticed that ACEL was among 'Red entities' identified as per the orders of National Company Law Tribunal (NCLT). This meant that it would not be in a position to make payment obligations towards the bank, being the unsecured creditor.

"The bank did not serve SARFAESI (Securities and Reconstruction of Financial Assets and Enforcement of Security Interest Act, 2002) notice to the borrower company as a result of which it could not enforce the mortgaged security valuing ₹ 11.44 crore available against the credit facilities extended to the borrower company (December 2021)," says the CAG report.

Thus, due to non-exercising of due diligence at the time of sanctioning/enhancing bill discounting facility in favour of M/s Beigh Construction Company Limited, the recovery of ₹ 102.55 crore {outstanding amount of ₹ 113.99 crore less by ₹ 11.44 crore (value of security available with the bank)} had become doubtful.

The sanction of credit facility in favour of M/s Ace Engineering Infratech Private Limited without obtaining adequate security cover and release of credit facility without complying with the pre-disbursement condition has also resulted in doubtful recovery of ₹ 11.98 crore. https://thekashmirimages.com/2023/04/26/non-exercise-of-due-diligence-by-jk-bank-leads-to-doubtful-recoveries-cag/

5. Gujarat govt issues guidelines to strengthen financial management of 100 PSUs *(indianexpress.com)* Apr 26, 2023

To strengthen financial mangement of 100-odd state public sector undertakings (SPSUs) in Gujarat, the state government on Tuesday issued specific guidelines related to capital restructuring and dividend distribution.

A resolution issued by the state finance department said, "Government of Gujarat has set up about 100 state SPSUs in different sectors. These SPSUs have been set up for achieving specific objectives. However, it has been observed that most PSUs have been conservative in financial management.

As a result, there is a need for strengthening the financial management of these SPSUs in the form of capital restructuring as well as Dividend distribution in order to realise the potential for market capitalisation, net worth, returns to investors and prudent management of available financial resources."

The resolution, containing "guidelines" issued for PSUs controlled by the Gujarat government or entities where the state has a controlling stake, stressed on "efficient management of state's investment in state PSUs" – an issue highlighted by the Comptroller and Auditor General of India (CAG) in its recent report on state's finances.

"SPSUs have not done enough exercise in restructuring their capital by issue of bonus shares to maintain healthy balance in capital and net worth," the resolution stated, while directing all SPSUs to pay a minimum annual dividend of 30 per cent of Profit After Tax or five per cent of net worth, whichever is higher.

Currently, there are 61 SPSUs that report a profit. About 30 of them are in the red, and eight others neither report profit nor loss. Of the 100 SPSUs in Gujarat, 64 are government companies, four are statutory corporations and 32 others are government-controlled other companies.

Of these, 16 companies are inactive SPSUs, of which at least six are under liquidation. Claiming to provide a level-playing field to SPSUs vis-a-vis private companies, the resolution said: "Some of the SPSUs are not able to deploy cash/bank balances for viable business expansion. In such cases, buy-back of shares improves investor confidence in the company and is likely to help the company raise capital…." It allowed SPSUs with a net worth of at least Rs 2,000 crore and cash and bank balances of Rs 1,000 crore to exercise the buy-back option. https://indianexpress.com/article/cities/ahmedabad/govt-issues-guidelines-to-strengthen-financial-management-of-100-psus/

6. **T.N. govt to consult legal experts on CAG report findings exposing irregularities in various departments during AIADMK rule: Health Minister** *(thehindu.com)* Apr 25, 2023

Health Minister Ma. Subramanian on Tuesday said that the report of the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) has exposed irregularities in various departments during the AIADMK rule and the State government will consult legal experts to analyse the financial losses, unnecessary expenditure and corruption pointed out in the report to arrive at a decision.

The Minister said that the CAG report had pointed out lapses in a number of departments, including School Education, Rural Development, Highways and Public Works department. The AIADMK government, due to its administrative incompetence and malpractices, had caused huge financial losses that had been exposed by the CAG report with evidence, he told reporters.

The report, he said, was a proof of the many irregularities that took place in several departments during the AIADMK regime from 2016 to 2021.

He said that the report has brought out corruptive practices in several departments, particularly those helmed by former Chief Minister Edappadi K. Palaniswami. "There has been large-scale irregularities in the Public Works and Highways departments," he said, alleging that basic rules of awarding tenders were violated.

Referring to the Highways department, he said the government machinery was misused to such an extent that bidding was done using computers of government officials. From 2019 to 2021, 57 computers of officials of the Highways department were used by 87 contractors to submit bids. During 2019-2021, for the 907 tenders, it was found that two to four bids were submitted for each tender from the same IP address, he said.

Mr. Subramanian also referred to lapses in the Rural Development department. From 2016 to 2021, the Union government had sanctioned construction of 5.09 lakh houses under the 'Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana' in the State. But only 2.80 lakh houses were constructed. The houses, he said, were allotted to ineligible beneficiaries. The report has pointed out that persons belonging to the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe communities who should have benefitted under the scheme were not identified appropriately. https://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/chennai/tn-govt-to-consult-legal-experts-on-cag-report-findings-exposing-irregularities-in-various-departments-during-aiadmk-rule-health-minister/article66778634.ece

7. **Karnataka Farmers from 17 Villages Displaced For Residential Project: Farms Razed, Compensation under Colonial-Era Law** *(article-14.com)*
Apr 26, 2023

Bengaluru: On the morning of 24 February 2023, excavators or bulldozers rolled into the three-acre farm of Suresh Gowda in Shamarajapura, Yelahanka taluk, 15 km north of the city of Bengaluru. His cabbage crop, almost ready to harvest and worth Rs 400,000, was uprooted and destroyed.

When farmers from the neighbouring Ramagondanahalli, Kempanahalli and Doddabettahalli villages gathered to protest the bulldozing, nine of them were arrested and kept in custody for five days.

They were charged under sections 143 (unlawful assembly), 341 (wrongful restraint), 353 (assault or criminal force to deter public servant from discharge of his duty), 504 (intentional insult with intention to provoke breach of peace), 506 (criminal intimidation), and 149 (members of unlawful assembly) of the Indian Penal Code (IPC), 1860.

"All of a sudden, 2,000 policemen landed in our area, and nine farms were bulldozed without any prior intimation to the farmers,"Ramesh M, one of the arrested farmers from Ramagondanahalli, and a member of the Dalit Sangharsha Samiti, told Article 14.

The large police force intimidated the farming community, he said.

Chandrika Gowda, whose 3-acre farm in Doddabettehalli was also bulldozed, said her family depended on the daily income from their small farm.

Gowda grows flowers, vegetables and fodder for her five cows. Every day, the flowers and vegetables are harvested and sent to markets in the Bengaluru suburbs of Yeshwantpur and Yelahanka, income she lost overnight.

Feeding her cattle has become a challenge. “I have to either leave them at a goshala (cattle shelter) or at the local MLA’s house, and hope that they will be taken care of,” said Gowda.

Over the next few weeks, dozens of farms in Ramagondanahalli, Kempanahalli and Doddabettahalli were bulldozed under police supervision, at the behest of the Bangalore Development Authority (BDA) which is acquiring these lands for the development of a 3,500-acre residential layout called the Dr Shivaram Karanth (SK) Layout.

Residents of the villages, who have been living here for generations, depend mainly on agriculture, dairy farming and livestock rearing. Ramesh said his village alone has 5,000 cattle, and contributes 2,000 litres of milk per day to Bengaluru. In a year of good rains, a farmer can harvest 40 sacks of ragi or finger millet per acre.

“Where can we earn this money if we are displaced?” asked Ramesh. “There is no answer from either the BDA or the government.”

A 3,500-Acre Residential Layout Across 17 Villages

In December 2008, the BDA published a notification announcing its intent to develop the Dr K Shivaram Karanth Layout, over 3500 acres of land covering 17 villages in Bangalore North taluk. The layout would be the second largest proposed by the BDA ever.

The notification was set aside in 2014 by the high court of Karnataka in response to litigation by a number of affected people. In 2017, the matter went to the Supreme Court after the BDA filed appeals.

According to the farmers, in 2018, the BDA received conditional approval from the Janata Dal (S)-Congress government in Karnataka to develop the layout, with the BDA bearing all expenses.

In 2019, affected farmers saw a gazette notification regarding acquisition of the land against payment of compensation according to the Right to Fair

Compensation and Transparency in Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Resettlement Act, 2013, called the LARR Act.

According to Ramesh, Rs 9,500 crore was set aside for compensation.

However, in December 2020, a two-judge bench of the Supreme Court headed by Justice Abdul Nazeer allowed the BDA to acquire land under the Land Acquisition Act, 1894, the colonial-era precursor to the 2013 Act.

In 2021, farmers were informed of a final notification under which compensation would be paid according to the LAA, 1894. Land-owners were offered residential plots measuring 30 ft X 40 ft in lieu of farmland surrendered to the BDA, as an alternative to compensation under the LAA, 1894.

Nidhi Hanji, a lawyer with Environment Support Group (ESG), a Bangalore-based trust working on social justice issues, said the 1894 law was a colonial legislation enabling government acquisition of private lands for public purposes.

"But the problem with the old act is that the amount of compensation granted under it is not enough," said Hanji. "It doesn't do any justice to the people who are losing their land."

More importantly, the 2013 law on land acquisition by government agencies mandates a social and economic impact assessment of the project, and resettlement and rehabilitation based on a social impact assessment.

Under the LARR Act, compensation is calculated according to a detailed formula, is tax-free and considerably more sizable than the 1894 law. Those losing land also receive a solatium and other benefits.

"There has been no discussion on rehabilitation. The farmers should be given compensation before they start demolition," Hanji said. "The SC order doesn't say don't follow the law."

10,000 To Be Displaced, Will Incur Deep Losses

A day before Ugadi, the Kannada new year, the farms wore a barren look.

Mounds of soil with rotten cabbage heads, uprooted cucumber and tomatoes, rows of uprooted mango trees, now dried and desiccated, lay on the land. Farms with silver oak trees and coconut trees were destroyed too. Cattle across these villages were without fodder for days after the bulldozing.

Article 14 sought comment from the BDA but received no responses. BDA commissioner Kumar Naik did not respond to calls. The additional land acquisition officer directed us to the deputy commissioner for land acquisition, but calls to her office were not answered either. Emails and Whatsapp messages to them were not answered.

“This government claims to be gaurakshaks (cow-protectors), but they are doing the opposite,” said Muniraju, who uses one name, a farmer who was arrested. He said the BDA was “harassing” farmers using the 1894 colonial law.
Muniraju said the farmers did not object to the development of the new layout. “But we need proper compensation according to the 2013 Act,” he said.

According to the final notification, an estimated 1,853 families would be displaced. At an average of four to six persons per household, that would be nearly 10,000 people.

Also, since the dismissal of the preliminary notification, many affected persons built houses or sheds or other structures to improve their land.

When the SC revived the notification and upheld it in 2020, a question arose regarding what would happen to these constructions erected in the interim period.

The SC in May 2021 constituted a committee headed by Justice A V Chandrashekhar, a retired judge of the Karnataka high court. “Anyone who had a legitimate claim with legal documents, their buildings could get left out of the acquisition,” said Hanji.

Rina Mahindra, a resident of Avallahalli village, whose land comes under the proposed SK Layout, said the Chandrashekhar Committee was supposed to have regularised structures that fall within the layout but had not announced a decision in her case. “... they are yet to visit us despite us having submitted all the details a year and a half ago.”

Until March 2023, about 5,000 structures were regularised.

2013 Law Applicable For Land Acquisition, Said SC

Activist Leo Saldanha of ESG, who is helping the farmers to get fair compensation, said in November 2022, a three-judge SC bench ruled in the Mahanadi Coalfields case that the Land Acquisition Act of 2013 is the law of the land as far as any land acquisition was concerned.

In the SK Layout case, the two-judge bench, headed by Justice Abdul Nazir who was named governor of Andhra Pradesh after his retirement, passed an order emphasising the 1894 law.

"The BDA is acting on the basis of this SC order, when it is aware that the Mahanadi coalfields case is the more pertinent order for land acquisition," said Saldanha. According to him, the BDA should not have destroyed the farmlands, and should have complied with the LARR Act of 2013.

The ESG has now sent a petition to chief minister Basavaraj Bommai asking that the government issue an ordinance favouring the farmers. The chairman of the BDA is S R Vishwanath, the Bharatiya Janata Party legislator representing Yelahanka.

Discrepancies In BDA Projects

Meanwhile, several BDA residential projects in different parts of Bengaluru have remained unused over decades, or were executed improperly.

In 2014, the BDA took up land between the Bangalore-Mysore Road and the Bangalore-Magadi Road comprising 12 villages to develop the Nadaprabhu Kempegowda Layout. In the first phase, the BDA developed 26,500 sites on 2,252 acres. The purchasers of these plots have been unable to construct homes due to inadequate infrastructure. Construction of roads, water supply and drainage and electrification are pending.

A CAG report said the BDA had improperly executed the Kaniminike housing project, off the Bangalore-Mysore highway. In 2007, the BDA had been allotted land off the highway to construct affordable housing for economically weaker sections. However, until the end of December 2021, 85 % of the flats had remained unsold.

The report said the BDA had wasted Rs 27.24 crore without determining the feasibility of the mini-housing project.

An audit report (ordered after a complaint was lodged with the Karnataka Lokayukta) submitted in 2021 found that while the BDA had acquired 37,168 acres of land to develop 64 layouts, it was yet to utilise 1,171 acres.

Buildings were constructed on 11,399 acres of land, but compensation was not given to the landowners, the report said. It also noted that 1,207 acres of land were vacant, and the BDA was yet to pay compensation to former owners of this land.

Possible Damage To Eco-Sensitive Zone

The proposed SK Layout falls in the eco-sensitive zone of the Thippagondanahalli (TG Halli) catchment area and watershed of the Arkavathy river that supplies drinking water to Bengaluru.

Besides, there are 13 lakes, 23 secondary nalas or streams and 40 tertiary nalas within the proposed zone. These lakes are interconnected by raja kaluves (canals) that store water for the villages. Unplanned development has already left Bengaluru bereft of hundreds of lakes that used to dot the city.

Additionally, 9,651 trees are estimated to be felled for the project. Bengaluru has already seen a drastic decline by 88% in green spaces from 1973 to 2017 due to urbanisation.

Other areas of important biodiversity surrounding the project that could be impacted by surface run-off during construction include the Jarakabande Kaval Reserve Forest and Puttenahalli Bird Conservation Reserve, located less than a mile away.

As much as 69% of the proposed project site falls within Zone-I of the TGR notification, issued by the government of Karnataka in November 2003 to protect the watershed of the TG Halli catchment area. The TGR notification prohibits overexploitation of groundwater, and disposal of solid and liquid waste in the area without scientific processing.

The SK Layout, with its proposed 33,660 residential plots and four high-rise apartment buildings with 15,000 flats, could degrade the eco-sensitive area , deplete groundwater and pollute water bodies, adversely affecting aquatic flora and fauna and public health, said residents.

ESG, on behalf of the farmers represented by Ramesh, has filed a case in the National Green Tribunal stating that the BDA should have conducted an accurate and comprehensive Environment Impact Assessment (EIA) study considering the irreversible land use changes and degradation of the environment.

However, they claimed, the BDA submitted an "inaccurate and incompetent" EIA that lacks verifiable evidence. The State Environment Impact Assessment Authority of Karnataka accepted the report and cleared the project. No effort was made to involve public participation, ESG members said.

Local residents unnerved by the razing of their farmland pinned their hope on the case in the tribunal. People had never witnessed such "atrocities against farmers", said Ramesh. https://article-14.com/post/karnataka-farmers-from-17-villages-displaced-for-residential-project-farms-razed-compensation-under-colonial-era-law--64488531042aa

SELECTED NEWS ITEMS/ARTICLES FOR READING

8. Russian military supply issues to India raise fresh concerns for the Indian military *(financialexpress.com)* Apr 26, 2023

As reported, it is about $ 2 billion of payments from India to Russia got stuck over the last year. The reason is: Russia simply does not want the surplus of Rupees stacked in its reserve. While India is unable to settle payments in US dollars due to the fear of sanctions, Russia has turned down India's request to make payments in rupees.

The idea of rupee trade flourished as India looked at buying cheap oil from Moscow to contain a rising import bill amid high commodity prices. India also began to build up a similar mechanism with other nations such as Mauritius and Sri Lanka.

Initially, the oil import surged on the back of the Rubble-Rupee mechanism, and the overall bilateral trade largely remained in favour of Russia. What is adding to this is the defence transactions as Russia has decided to stop supplying credit for about $10 billion worth of spare parts as well as two S-400 missile defence system batteries that are yet to be delivered.

Despite the agreement on the smooth transaction under the alternative currencies mechanism which avoids the international Society for Worldwide Interbank

Financial Telecom (SWIFT) protocol under the existing dominant regime, Russia is not willing to accept Rupees for such defence contracts.

Both sides are struggling to resolve the issue as External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar recently admitted that there are discussions going on between India and Russia on the payments issues and they need to be worked through.

Rupee-Rouble exchange –All that is not simple

The talk over alternative currencies exploded with immense possibilities that Russia and China looked at amid harsh economic sanctions imposed by the US government. The idea of bypassing the dollar was too lucrative to ignore amid the constant threat of economic sanctions which revolve around the dominant reserve currency of the world.

Indian authorities have also tried to propose the idea that Russia balances the payments from India by adjusting them with the purchase of Indian goods. However, the idea had to be dropped given that Russia has a trade surplus of $37 billion (according to last year's figures) with India.

Russia has played down India's offer to invest in Indian debt and capital markets to avoid stockpiling.

On top of that, Russia is unwilling to accept payments in rupees due to fluctuating exchange rates. India is also being cautious on its part, especially in procuring defence-related payments in US dollars due to fears of being slapped with secondary sanctions by the US.

While India's procurement accounts for 20% of Russia's defence exports, most of the items are related to the serviceability and maintenance of military equipment of Russian origin. The Indian armed forces maintain roughly seventy percent of the arsenal of Russian origin. Around 70% of the equipment of the India Air Force (IAF) is of Russian origin. The mainstay of the IAF–Sukhoi Su-30 MKI– fighter jet constitutes the bulk of 14 squadrons. In addition to that, there are also MiG-29UPG and MiG-21 combat helicopters, IL-78 tankers, two IL-76 aircraft, seven Kilo-class submarines and more than 1,200 T-90 tanks – all of which are expected to be in use for another decade and would require spare parts and technical assistance from Russian defence firms.

"The difference is between the urgent economic needs versus the military purchase," comments a senior international trade analyst.

India has also offered to consider paying in euros and dirhams – which India generally uses for imports of discounted Russian crude oil. However, India could also be at a loss due to unfavourable exchange rates, according to foreign trade experts.

“That raises some concerns,” says a former vice chief of IAF.

What is the way out?

“While this itself presents a great opportunity for India to scale up indigenous production and push alternative supply issue, it cannot be resolved overnight,” he laments.

Russia has emerged as India’s fifth-biggest trading partner, from 25th rank during FY22. Amid the ongoing Ukraine war, trade between India and Russia has reached a record high of $39.8 billion in 2022-23. However, India has a huge trade deficit with Russia which is now reached $34.79 billion, from April through January 2022-23 (FY23). The trade deficit is mostly on account of oil imports from Russia. https://www.financialexpress.com/business/defence-russian-military-supply-issues-to-india-raises-fresh-concerns-for-the-indian-military-3062479/

9. Savings from Direct Benefit Transfer exceeds ₹50,000 cr in FY’22 *(thehindubusinessline.com)* Apr 25, 2023

Savings through Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT) under various welfare schemes by the Central government crossed ₹50,000 crore in Fiscal Year 2021-22 latest update on government portal shows. In FY 2020-21, it was estimated at ₹44,000 crore.

The Government says that DBT and other governance reforms have led to removal of duplicate/ fake beneficiaries and plugging of leakages etc., and due to this the government has been able to target the genuine and deserving beneficiaries. As on date DBT is used in 312 schemes, being implemented by 53 Central Ministries and Departments.

Data shows, maximum gain was seen in Public Distribution system (PDS) where government managed to save ₹33,600 crore. This happened mainly on account of deletion of 4.2 crore duplicate and fake/non-existent Ration Cards (since 2013 till 2021). Also, it needs to be noted that during FY 22, government distributed free foodgrains to 80 crore people.

Although subsidy for fertilizer not given directly to farmers but to the manufacturers,, estimated saving was around ₹8,700 crore in FY22. This happened as there was Reduction of 158.06 lakh tonnes of fertilizer sale to retailers.

Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) saw saving of over ₹7',500 crore. The portal says based on field studies Ministry has estimated 10 per cent savings on wages on account of deletion of duplicate, fake/ non-existent, ineligible beneficiaries.

Issues in DBT

A survey by Dvara Research found a variety of exclusionary factors at every stage of the delivery pipeline of DBT. The survey was based on response from around 2,500 respondents in seven States — Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Bihar, Tamil Nadu, Assam, Chhattisgarh and Andhra Pradesh. The agency has also given recommendations for improvement in enrolment and grievance redress mechanism.

Based on the responses, the agency has listed three issues each related with enrolment and receiving the payment. For example, one of the most prominent issues faced by citizens attempting to enroll is the lack of accessibility/proximity to enrolment points, unavailability, or erratic availability of officials/operators responsible for enrolment.

Similarly, there are delays accepting and pushing the applications forward. Some of the respondents also talked about difficulty in procuring the required documentation and errors/issues found therein.

In terms of receiving money in their bank accounts through DBT, one of the most prominent issues is disruptions to payment schedule. Reasons for disruptions could be spelling errors in Aadhaar details, pending KYC, frozen or inactive bank accounts, mismatch in Aadhaar and bank account details, etc.

Aim

DBT was started on January 1, 2013. with the aim of reforming the government delivery system by re-engineering the existing process in welfare schemes for simpler and faster flow of information/funds and to ensure accurate targeting of the beneficiaries, de-duplication and reduction of fraud. First phase of DBT was initiated in 43 districts and later 78 more districts were added in 27 schemes pertaining to scholarships, women, child and labour welfare. DBT was further expanded across the country on December 12, 2014.

https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/economy/savings-from-direct-benefit-transfer-exceeds-50000-cr-in-fy22/article66776263.ece

10. India to triple renewables auctions as 2030 green target looms *(economictimes.indiatimes.com)* Apr 26, 2023

India will more than triple the capacity of auctions used to allocate renewable energy projects as the nation seeks more progress toward a 2030 clean power target.

A new federal government timeline outlines plans to strike agreements on installations of a total of 50 gigawatts of solar and wind projects during the year through March 2024. That compares with an average of 15 gigawatts auctioned annually in the last five fiscal years, according to BloombergNEF.

The nation is accelerating project installations to hit a goal to have 500 gigawatts of clean energy generation capacity in 2030, which will also include hydro and nuclear plants. Surging demand for electricity has underscored the need for new investment, though projects in India face challenges like high interest rates and competition from developed markets offering green subsidies.

Delivering more renewables projects will also require sufficient land to locate the installations and long-term buyers for electricity generated, said Rohit Gadre, a BNEF analyst. Those factors are "critical to the success of the plan, failing which the tenders will likely end up being under-subscribed," Gadre said.

Rising energy demand is creating an incentive for some states to consider new long-term renewable power deals to supplement existing coal-fired capacity, while there's also growing interest in contracts from the commercial and industrial sector.

According to the government's calendar, India plans to auction 15 gigawatts of projects in each of the first two quarters of the fiscal year that began this month, with about 10 gigawatts offered in both of the subsequent quarters. State-run power companies Solar Energy Corp. of India Ltd., NTPC Ltd., NHPC Ltd. and SJVN Ltd. will be conducting the auctions for the government.

The schedule "will give developers visibility," said Subrahmanyam Pulipaka, chief executive officer of the National Solar Energy Federation ofIndia, an industry group. "There's bound to be greater traction."

https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/industry/renewables/india-to-triple-renewables-auctions-as-2030-green-target-looms/articleshow/99782979.cms

11. No budget for persons with disabilities in India *(timesofindia.indiatimes.com)* Apr 25, 2023

Over the last decade, India has adopted a host of measures for people with disabilities, including signing and ratifying international conventions such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) and the Incheon Strategy. Subsequently, national disability laws and policies have seen a shift. The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016, came into force to give effect to UNCRPD. However, real change can only be accomplished by allocating resources to successfully implement these policies. In India, the budgetary allocation towards the welfare of persons with disabilities has always been quite limited. In FY 2023–24, the Department of Empowerment and Welfare of Persons with Disabilities (DEPwD) under the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment (MSJE) was allocated INR 1,225 crore, which amounts to 0.027 percent of the total budget. The total outlay in FY 2023–24 increased by approximately 7.5 per cent compared to the previous year, but the outlay for the DEPwD increased by only 1 per cent.

Understanding budgetary allocation towards disability in recent year

Within ministries

For persons with disabilities, barriers to access span various sectors, including health, education, transport, housing, labour, and justice. But only three central ministries have dedicated budgetary allocations for persons with disabilities. These are the Ministry of Rural Development (MoRD), the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (MoHFW), and the MSJE. However, the disability specific allocation constitutes a relatively negligible portion of the budgets of these ministries.

As part of the MSJE, the DEPwD bears primary responsibility of catering to the needs of persons with disabilities, both independently and in collaboration with other ministries. An analysis of the DEPwD’s budget between FY 2016–17 and FY 2023–2024 reveals that although the budgetary allocation to it rose steadily until FY 2020–21, it subsequently declined and stagnated. However, the overall allocation for the MSJE increased by 12 percent between FY 2021–22 and FY 2022–23.

The MoRD's spending on disability is limited to only the Indira Gandhi National Disability Pension Scheme —the allocation for which has also stagnated since FY 2016–17. Again, this is despite the continuously rising total outlay for the ministry, which received a 16 percent hike in FY 2023–24. Despite the increase, the allocation to the scheme remained the same at INR 290 crores. The scheme currently provides a negligible pension of INR 300 per month, which might not make any significant difference to its beneficiaries. Further, it is only available to those who have more than 80 percent disability, are living below the poverty line, and are in the 18–79 age group. In FY 2021–22, only approximately 4 percent of all persons with disabilities in India benefitted from the scheme.

Unlike the budgets for schemes under DEPwD and MoRD, the budgets for disability under the MoHFW have seen an increase of 25 percent from FY 2022–23 to FY 2023–24, but the funds are distributed to only two organisations.

For disability-related schemes

A granular analysis of disability-specific schemes provides a comprehensive look at the fluctuations in the disability budget. Between FY 2019–20 and FY 2023–24, the largest proportion of funds within the DEPwD was allocated to Assistance to Disabled Persons for Purchase/Fitting of Aids and Appliances (ADIP) and the Scheme for Implementation of Persons with Disability Act (SIPDA). However, while the allocation to ADIP increased in FY 2023–24, it declined for SIPDA.

As an umbrella scheme with essential components such as the Accessible India Campaign, Skill Development of Persons with Disabilities, and Unique Disability ID, SIPDA is fundamental in protecting and furthering the rights of persons with disabilities. The number of components under it have doubled from six to 13 between 2016 and 2022. Despite the scheme's contribution, its budget has declined over the past few years—falling from INR 315 crore in FY 2019–20 to INR 150 crore in FY 2023–24.

There are deeper issues that might be contributing to the continuous reductions in the allocation to SIPDA. While most schemes under the DEPwD experience some level of underutilisation of funds, the magnitude of unspent funds is relatively higher in the case of SIPDA. In FY 2020–21 and FY 2021–22, only 41 percent and 51.7 percent respectively of the funds allocated to SIPDA were utilised. When the scheme's low expenditure was questioned by a parliamentary standing committee, the department cited an insufficient number of proposals for the sub-schemes under SIPDA from the states and UTs and the COVID-19 pandemic as the leading causes. This means that the central and state government agencies lack the capacity to develop programmes that effectively utilise allocated budgets—beyond providing aid, disability pensions, and cash transfers. They are stuck in a vicious cycle, where ineffective implementation leads to low expenditure, which then creates a cash-strapped ministry.

The scheme also suffers from lack of data on allocations to its components. There is no visibility on the resources allocated to the sub-schemes for skill development, disability research, or improved accessibility for persons with disabilities. Only the amount spent on some of them by DePW in FY 2016–17 to 2021–22, is currently available in the public domain. According to our calculation, this amounts to only 0.023 percent of the department's total spending during this time. Thus, disability continues to be under-researched in India.

In sectoral schemes

In addition to the disability-specific schemes analysed above, several sectoral schemes under central ministries also cover persons with disabilities. However, it is difficult to ascertain the allocations and expenditure trends for such schemes due to lack of publicly available data. For instance, Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan, under the Ministry of Education, has a component of inclusive education for children with special needs. While data on the programme's budget as a whole is available, there is a dearth of disaggregated data. The only exception is FY 2018–19, when INR 1,023.50 crore was approved for children with special needs. But this figure was a mere 4 percent of the total budget for the programme. This specific allocation has also been reported to be inadequate and underspent. This lack of availability of disability disaggregated data cuts through all sectors. For example, in skilling and training, there is no provision for disaggregated spending for persons with disabilities under the Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana.

Towards better budget allocations and practices

In recent years, continuous neglect has plagued efforts concerning schemes for persons with disabilities. This neglect translates into repeated underspending, which then leads to stagnant or reduced funding. While the policies are progressive and beneficial, their budgetary allocation continues to be dismal.

In order to overcome budgetary shortages, we must first make the case for why better allocations are needed. We need to build the government's capacity to implement disability programmes that go beyond distribution of aids, cash transfers, and cursory rehabilitation. Examples of such programmes include schemes for the development and testing of inclusive teaching, disability-friendly curriculum and content, advocacy for inclusion and rights of persons with disabilities, and initiatives for improved accessibility to public spaces. Such programmes can be piloted and scaled with the support of civil society organisations that can readily augment the government's capacity. Given the glaring knowledge gap about disabilities in India, funding for research is necessary as well.

Funding for schemes improves when their outcomes are encouraging. Investments in the monitoring and evaluation of disability programmes will result in progress tracking, which is a critical component of the UNCRPD and Sustainable Development Goals. Progress tracking will help ensure disability disaggregated data, which can strengthen disability policy and inform programme design at a hyperlocal scale.

Lastly, funding for disability should not be restricted to the MSJE and must be distributed across ministries including road transportation, railways, rural and urban development, law, and labour. Convergence in disability schemes across ministries will reduce the dependence on the MSJE for funding, while also ensuring well-rounded disability-friendly initiatives.

Re-evaluating budgetary requirements regularly and improving spending on crucial areas such as disability education, research, and accessibility are critical. We can help create a more inclusive nation by reimagining disability spending along these lines. https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/blogs/developing-contemporary-india/no-budget-for-persons-with-disabilities-in-india/

12. India's Key Forests on Chopping Block *(newsclick.in)* Apr 26, 2023

The record of Indian governments in rehabilitation and compensation inspires no hope or confidence among those who depend on these forests.

Coal minister Pralhad Joshi recently informed the country that India's coal production rose to 784.41 million tonnes between February and April 2023, compared with 681.5 million tonnes during the same period last year. This reportedly marks an increase of 15.10%.

Joshi said he expected domestic coal production to touch 1.31 billion tonnes by 2024-25. He announced steps his ministry had taken to enhance coal production. These included higher utilisation of mining capacities of captive coal blocks and the augmentation of railway connectivity to these blocks.

But the most significant step the Union Ministry of Coal has taken is its decision to add 141 new coal blocks through commercial auctioning. This is part of the seventh round of mines put on auction, with 106 coal blocks up for grabs on 29 March.

Some of these coal blocks are located in central India and will involve chopping down vast swathes of forests, namely the Tara Block in Chhattisgarh's Hasdeo Arand forest and the Mahan forest in Madhya Pradesh. While Tara has a forest cover of 81% density and is spread over 1,596 hectares, Mahan has a forest cover of 97% and spreads over 372 hectares. Hasdeo Arand, one of the last contiguous stretches of dense forest in central India with a land mass stretching over 1,70,000 hectares, has 22 coal blocks underneath it. The Mahan forest extends to the Sanjay-Dubri National Park and Tiger Reserve on its west and the Guru Ghasi Das National Park on its southern boundary.

A decade ago, the Union Ministry of Forest and Environment categorised these forests as inviolate. The former MoEF minister Jairam Ramesh had dubbed these "no-go" areas. But the problem with Ramesh and subsequent MoEF ministers was that they failed to give their observations legal sanctity.

Post-independence, forest and agricultural land has been taken to make space for power and mining projects. Mahan falls in the Singrauli-Sonbhadra region—considered India's energy capital. Several power plants have come up here due to plentiful water and coal supplies. There is no contest India needs electricity supplies; the problem is that the emissions from these power plants remain unmonitored. In the last few years, a recurrent problem has been the breaking of several ash dikes built around them, submerging villagers and cattle. This belt has now been dubbed as one of the most critically polluted regions in India, plagued by severe air and water pollution.

When this reporter visited the Mahan forest almost a decade ago, the slogan "Jal, Jungle, Zameen" was painted across every home in a swathe of villages. Summing up the villagers' relationship with these forests, Bachan Lal, a farmer of Amelia village in Singrauli, said, "The forest is our mother. We cannot live without it. Our livelihood, our water, our air is all linked to it." Villagers from 54 villages had organised themselves under the banner of the Mahan Sangharsh Samiti. They pointed out that coal mining in this forest would result in the displacement of over 25,000 people.

The record of Indian governments in rehabilitation and compensation inspires no hope or confidence. Elderly Jeetlal Vaiga had already been displaced when the Reliance Sasan Ultra Mega Power Plant had come up. He explained how he found it impossible to start life afresh in a tin shack with the hot summer sun beating mercilessly down on his new home. Vaiga narrated the plight of many villagers who had died by suicide rather than move to their new surroundings.

The situation is the same in Hasdeo Arand, where tribal families heavily depend on the forest for their livelihood, food, water, and medicinal needs. In Mahan, tribals said each family stood to earn around Rs 1 lakh a year from the produce they collected from the forest. It is similar in Hasdeo Arand. Over 1,000 members of tribal communities living in Hariharpur and Fatehpur villages in the Surguja area of Chhattisgarh faced displacement and had been opposing giving up their land for a new mining project, having witnessed great suffering in nearby areas due to mining companies' operations.

The Hasdeo Arand coal fields comprise Tara, Parsa, Parsa East, and Kente Basan. The total mining area of Parsa is more than 1,200 hectares, 800 of which is forest land. Permission to mine in forest and revenue land requires the Gram Sabha's consent, but the Hasdeo Arand residents claim they never consented to the projects of mining companies. The Chhattisgarh Bachao Andolan activists told this reporter that the local administration had conducted fake Sabhas or meetings in which signatures were forcibly obtained behind locked doors. They said the opinion of the majority of villagers was never sought. On 11 October 2021, 350 villagers walked 300 kilometres to the capital, Raipur, to protest against these "fake sabhas".

The two issues they highlighted during their march were that they had been assured the second stage of mining of the Parsa East Ketan coal block would start in 2028, but it was advanced to 2021, and "forcible" land acquisition continued. The second issue was that land acquisition for Parsa's new block was based on fraudulent consent obtained in "fake Sabhas".

The protestors met the governor and Chhattisgarh Chief Minister Bhupesh Baghel, who gave them assurances. The villagers walked back. But within a week of returning home, they learned the MoEF had given the green signal for mining to start in the Parsa Block. Alok Shukla, a leader of the Chhattisgarh Bachao

Andolan, told the media that the villagers believed both the central and the State governments had failed them.

Warnings from different government bodies to the MoEF have also been ignored. The Central Mine Planning and Design Institute Limited, involved with planning for coal exploration, had cautioned the MoEF that coal deposits in Mahan will provide optimum coal only for seven to eight years. They questioned why a key forest was being destroyed for a short-lived gain.

The Ministry of Coal hoped to get around this criticism by arguing that the proposed coal mining in Mahan will be underground (not open cast). But experts warn that the spillover through mining in terms of residue and construction of roads, etc., will destroy a large swathe of forest area.

The Ministry of Mines justified opening up a new coal block in Hasdeo Arand based on the report submitted by the Indian Council of Forestry Research and Education, which had permitted open-cast mining here. How ICFRE, a body researching forestry, could sanction such a move defies imagination. A caveat ICFRE’s report contained was that 14 of the 23 proposed coal blocks should not be cleared, given their density and the pristine quality of the forests.

But the Wildlife Institute of India has emphasised that the vast biodiversity in this region, one of the best habitats for elephants and tigers, serves as a key corridor for wildlife. In 2021, leading conservationists wrote to the Chhattisgarh government, emphasising how this forest was a catchment area for the Hasdeo River, a major tributary of the Mahanadi. Although the mine was allotted to the Rajasthan Rajya Vidyut Utpadan Nigam, the Adani Group has operated it since 2013 and has a 74% share in the project (and its earnings).

The ICFRE made some critical observations of how mining has been undertaken so far since it has opted for horizontal digging rather than digging deeper, thereby not touching the millions of tonnes of coal lying at the bottom.

Experts are concerned that the loss of these primary forests will irreversibly damage the rich biodiversity in central Indian forests. Debadityo Sinha, who leads the climate and ecosystems practice at the Vidhi Centre for Legal Policy, has warned about irreversible damage to these forests by mining, thermal power plants, and damming rivers.

But the coal ministry bypassed the issue by stating that the “required forest and environmental clearances would have to be obtained by a successful bidder” in its auctions.

According to the Ministry of Coal, the mines are on offer under the Coal Mines Special Provisions (CMSP) Act and the Mines and Minerals (MMDR) Act. In all, 106 coal mines are being put up for auction under under the CMSP and MMDR Acts.

India lost over 6 lakh hectares of forest in recent years and has witnessed the highest rise in deforestation in 30 years, with a surge in losses between 2015 and 2020, according to a report by UK-based Utility Bidder.

The Forest (Conservation) Amendment Bill, 2023, introduced in the Lok Sabha on 29 March, will de-reserve lakhs of hectares of green areas that are deemed forests. Currently, there is no clear estimate of how many hectares could be lost if this amendment is implemented on the ground.

Sinha said that according to the amendment, forests not notified before 1980 (when the Indian Forest Act was passed) would no longer require prior approval before getting axed.

Conservationists say the government cannot sideline its own people when it draws up plans to develop energy resources. It also forgets the critical role of forests in mitigating climate risks, purifying air, and sequestering carbon. https://www.newsclick.in/indias-key-forests-chopping-block

13. 14 years later, Maha Police Megacity Project as good as dead *(hindustantimes.com)* Apr 25, 2023

Fourteen years after nearly 7,000 working and retired police officials from all over the state invested their life’s earnings in the ‘Maharashtra Police Megacity Project’ at Lohegaon – a dream residential project which promised these policemen spacious residences with top-class amenities – the project is yet to see the light of day.

So much so that the aggrieved policemen – under the aegis of the Maharashtra Police Megacity Project Bachav Samiti – are now threatening legal action if they do not get their prized homes in which they have invested or a refund in case the project has been shelved.

According to the Samiti, approximately Rs525 crores was invested in the project which is now stuck due to the inordinate delay. Out of the Rs525 crores, Rs350 crores was given to a private construction company for completion of the first phase of the project. Alongside, an agreement was inked with the builder stipulating that the builder would pay the investors rent until such time they got rightful possession of their homes. Fourteen years later, the project has not even started leading the investors to believe that their investment is dead.

Madan Dadasaheb Patil, former Kolhapur superintendent and Samiti member, said, "We invested in this project hoping for a good future for our family but now, we are left with zero outcome. The investments of so many families are stuck."

"Our demand is that we either get the flats that were promised to us or the refund if the project has been shelved. It has been too long a wait for the result of our investment, and some of the investors will not even be able to see the project completed within their lifetime. We urge the government to step in and take over the project," Patil said.

According to the Samiti, the project was initiated in 2009 when the then city police commissioner circulated a notice urging policemen from all over Maharashtra to invest in it and get homes in return. After getting confirmation from all those who were investing in the project, a 12-member, self-declared committee was appointed and a private builder was brought on board to enter into a contract to develop the project. Patil said that the contract was given to the private builder without issuing an official tender.

As per a press release issued by the aggrieved policemen, a memorandum of understanding (MoU) was signed between the committee which addresses itself as the 'Society' and the builder in 2010 and an official agreement of sale was signed between the parties in 2017.

Vikas Madurang Kadam, a retired policeman, said, "According to the agreement, the builder was supposed to deliver the entire project by 2021 however he did not live up to his promise. Before Covid-19 struck in 2020, barely 10% of the work had been completed. After Covid however, the work ground to a halt and there has been no development ever since."

Members of the Samiti have expressed their displeasure over the functioning of the 'Society' which in 2023 approved funds to the same builder whom it declared a wilful defaulter in 2022. The Samiti members are now threatening to take the legal route if their demands are not met. https://www.hindustantimes.com/cities/pune-news/maharashtra-police-officials-threaten-legal-action-over-stalled-housing-project-101682444600829.html

14. Bengal government to review incomplete projects, scrap some *(telegraphindia.com)* 26 April 2023

The Bengal government has decided to review 600-odd projects, which chief minister Mamata Banerjee had announced over the last decade or so but could not be rolled out because of a variety of reasons, and scrap the ones that have lost relevance.

There are 602 projects, which were worth about Rs 3,500 crore and announced by the chief minister in the past 10 years but could not be kicked off as yet.

"All these projects are being reviewed. If the projects have lost relevance, they will be scrapped.... It will save a huge amount of money at a time when there is an acute crisis of funds," said a senior government official.

While taking a decision on the schemes that should be scrapped, the focus will be on the necessity of the projects, added the source.

"We have found that many projects have lost relevance these days as these were announced a long ago. For example, a new hospital building was announced in a district some six years ago. But after that, a super-speciality hospital has come up within a radius of 4km. Now, the proposed hospital has no relevance," said a source.

Similarly, a honey hub was announced at Deganga in North 24-Parganas in 2019 at a cost of Rs 9.71 crore. But the work did not start as the government did not allot the required money.

"The state will take up only those projects which are absolutely necessary," he added.

Besides, a total of 266projects, which were kicked off following the chief minister's announcement but areincomplete even after 5-10 years, are causing a headache for the cash-strapped government.

“These projects will be reviewed to ensure that they are completed at the earliest. In case any of these projects have lost relevance, the government can scrap some of them,” the official added.

Sources at Nabanna said the majority of the projects which could not be completed on time always led to cost escalation and the state couldn’t spend more on them because of struggling coffers.

“For example, a Cultural Bhavan was proposed to be constructed in Bankura six years ago. As the project could not be completed, the estimated cost has gone up from Rs 2.05 crore to more than Rs 2.75 crore. Now, it is difficult for the state to allot the additional money and the file is pending at Nabanna,” said a source.

Not only this, a hut shed in Barasat municipality was planned six years ago at a cost of Rs 2.91 crore. The first instalment of Rs 1.10 crore was allotted on time. But the second and third instalments were not released on time, leading to cost escalation.

The sources said in the case of projects which were delayed, the failure of the executing agencies to complete them on time had left the state in an awkward situation.

“For example, the public works department has a total of 108 pending projects.... As all the delayed projects lead to cost escalation, the executing agencies cannot shrug off their responsibility,” said a source.

A section of officials said it was easier for the government to scrap the projects which were not kicked off yet.

“Non-starter projects can be scrapped at any time as no money has been spent on them. But scrapping the delayed projects will be relatively tough as funds have already been spent on them,” said a source. https://www.telegraphindia.com/west-bengal/bengal-government-to-review-incomplete-projects-scrap-some/cid/1932376

15. 9 years on, CITCO says Hotel Parkview land not viable for convention centre *(hindustantimes.com)* Apr 26, 2023

Nine years after the UT administration released a grant of ₹9.5 crore for a convention centre at Hotel Parkview in Sector 24, the Chandigarh Industrial and

Tourism Development Corporation Limited (CITCO) has now said the site is not viable and has instead proposed to construct the centre at Sector 31.

UT had provided CITCO ₹7 crore in 2014 and ₹2.5 crore in 2016 for the centre, envisaged to provide space for exhibitions and meetings. Almost a decade later, the expected construction cost has gone up to ₹25 crore.

A senior CITCO officer said the site in Sector 24 was not viable, as it was in a low-lying area, besides the premises were already being used for hotel operations. "We have requested the administration to change the site to near the Confederation of Indian Industries (CII) office in Sector 31," the officer added.

As per UT Estate Office's plan, the centre will be constructed under the public private partnership (PPP) model.

Kashmir Chand, chairman of CITCO Progressive Workers' Union, said CITCO kept sitting on the project for nine years despite getting the grant, causing the project cost to multiply manifold: "Now, they are saying the site is not viable."

8 firm show interest to run Chef Lake View restaurant

As many as eight private firms have shown interest to run the Chef Lake View restaurant at Sukhna Lake. The matter will be taken up in CITCO's upcoming board meeting. In February, CITCO had invited expressions of interest from private players to run the restaurant that had reported a profit of ₹2 crore in 2022-23. https://www.hindustantimes.com/cities/chandigarh-news/citco-proposes-new-site-for-convention-centre-funded-by-ut-administration-after-9-year-delay-8-firms-show-interest-in-running-chef-lake-view-restaurant-at-sukhna-lake-101682452703372.html

16. For every kilometre, Haryana Roadways suffers a loss ₹34 *(hindustantimes.com)* Apr 26, 2023

Every time the wheels of Haryana roadways bus cover a distance of one kilometre, the roadways bears a net loss of ₹34 as the operational cost for every single kilometre is about ₹73 while the receipt is only ₹39, according to official data.

Not just this, ever since the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has come to power in Haryana after dethroning the Congress in October 2014 assembly elections, the revenue deficit of the Roadways has been on the rise. Case in point: The Roadways revenue deficit in 2022-23 is being estimated to be over ₹1,000 crore -- up from ₹931 crore in 2021-22 and ₹447 crore in 2014-15 fiscal.

Over the years, there has been a sharp fall in the daily operations of roadways buses, also in terms of kilometres covered and the number of passengers ferried daily. The daily operated kilometres has come down from 13 lakh in 2014-15 to 8.88 lakh per day now.

However, in 2021-22, the daily gross distance the roadways buses operated was 6 lakh km and the daily passengers carried daily was over 4 lakh, according to statistical abstract of Haryana.

"There are a number of factors, including agitations, behind the roadways suffering losses. In the past, there were situations when we had more buses than the number of drivers and conductors. In 2019-20 the number of conductors on the rolls were more than the number of buses...I have taken steps to stop the slide in revenue losses and plug the possible paths of revenue leakages," Mool Chand Sharma, transport minister, told Hindustan Times.

"Due to the Covid-19 waves, the roadways suffered the most. The farmers' agitation was yet another setback to the roadways. Whenever there is an agitation, the roadways has to bear the brunt."

He said soon, 1,138 conductors will be recruited via Haryana Kaushal Rozgar Nigam Limited (HKRNL) to run the roadways fleet in full capacity.

As per the data, in 2021-22 the total receipts of the roadways came down to ₹1,072 crore against an expenditure of ₹2,041 crore. Similarly, in 2021-22, the roadways earned ₹38.56 receipts per km even though the expenditure rose to ₹73.45 per km.

In sharp contrast, the overall receipts of the roadways in 2014-15 stood at ₹26.89 per km against ₹37.22 expenditure per km.

On the other hand, in 2022-23, the receipts per km improved to ₹39.23 and the expenditure was also brought down to ₹72.83 per km.

"The exact loss in revenue receipts that the roadways has to bear at present is ₹33.60 per kilometre. As a result of certain steps taken last year, we contained expenditure and improved revenue receipts per km also," said the transport minister, adding that the number of people travelling in the roadways buses daily at present is over 5 lakh and the gross total kilometre operated by buses per day is around 8.88 lakh km.

E-ticketing/ road blocks in fare hike

Transport department officials say what also adds to the financial woes of the roadways is the facility of free travel to 42-odd categories. Now, the government has reduced the age limit from 65 to 60 years to avail 50% concession while travelling in roadways buses.

A senior transport department official said the chief minister’s office (CMO) has been repeatedly turning down proposals to hike the bus fare. Sources say the health department is also sitting tight over transport department’s request to foot the expenditure of fuel etc for using roadways buses during the Covid-19. It is learnt that a proposal is being prepared to seek refund in lump sum from different departments like social justice, police, public relations etc in lieu of free travel facility to different categories in Haryana roadways.

As Haryana was probably the first state to introduce e-ticketing using the National Common Mobility Card (NCMC) on a pilot basis in six districts, it is being expanded to other districts. The state government has also proposed to implement a revenue leakage detection system (RLDS) in Haryana roadways through deployment of sensors in buses to count the number of passengers in real-time and detect revenue leakage. Such measures are expected to increase ticketing revenue annually.

In fact, chief minister Manohar Lal Khattar, in his budget speech, had said the state government has also decided to increase the sanctioned fleet strength of Haryana roadways from 4,500 to 5,300 while proposing to add another 1,000 buses in 2023-24 through the kilometre system of which 200 will be mini buses.

“These measures are likely to increase ticketing revenue by about ₹150 crore annually,” Khattar had said.

The transport minister said 400 conductors were trained when e-ticketing was started. “The e-ticketing is going to be a game changer as this will plug the leakage of revenue and curb corruption,” said Sharma, adding that to boost the revenue collection, the fleet of roadways buses is being increased. https://www.hindustantimes.com/cities/chandigarh-news/haryana-roadways-bears-a-net-loss-of-rs-34-per-km-revenue-deficit-to-be-over-rs-1-000-crore-in-202223-101682451264356.html