

## **NEWS ITEMS ON CAG/ AUDIT REPORTS**

### **1. It is time for comprehensive reforms to municipal elections:**

**Data** (*thehindu.com*) April 03, 2024

#### **To deal with challenges with respect to the conduct of municipal elections, State Election Commissions need to play a far more significant role**

The Supreme Court judgment on the Chandigarh mayoral election gives us a good occasion to think more broadly about elections to municipalities. Elections to the Lok Sabha and State Assemblies are impressive democratic exercises in terms of timeliness of elections, the manner in which they are convened, and the clockwork nature in which power is transferred from one government to another. But elections to “first-mile” governments, i.e., panchayats and municipalities, is another matter altogether. The Court has only intervened to right one wrong in one city. A lot more remains to be done to strengthen first-mile governments in India.

#### **Safeguarding Local Democracy**

The first issue with respect to municipal elections is that they are not being held on time. This is in violation of the Constitution. As per Janaagraha’s Annual Survey of India’s City-Systems 2023 study, over 1,400 municipalities did not have elected councils in place, as of September 2021 (Table 1).

Table 1 | The table shows urban local governments without elected councils across States and UTs.

Sl. No.	State/UT	Total ULGs	No. of ULGs without elected councils	Sl. No.	State/UT	Total ULGs	No. of ULGs without elected councils
1	A & N	1	1	19	M.P.	409	16
2	Andhra	120	31	20	Maharashtra	399	-
3	Arunachal	19	-	21	Manipur	27	27
4	Assam	102	102	22	Meghalaya	11	11
5	Bihar	249	-	23	Mizoram	23	-
6	Chandigarh	1	-	24	Nagaland	39	39
7	Chhattisgarh	169	20	25	Odisha	114	114
8	D & NH, D & D	3	-	26	Puducherry	5	5
9	Delhi	4	-	27	Punjab	163	-
10	Goa	14	8	28	Rajasthan	213	-
11	Gujarat	165	3	29	Sikkim	7	-
12	Haryana	92*	75	30	T.N.	664	664
13	Himachal	61	-	31	Telangana	142	-
14	J&K	78	-	32	Tripura	20	20
15	Jharkhand	50	8	33	U.P.	750	-
16	Karnataka	338	207	34	Uttarakhand	93	7
17	Kerala	93	-	35	W.B.	126	126
18	Ladakh	2	-	<b>Total</b>		<b>4,766</b>	<b>1,484</b>

\*Haryana - ULBs - Local Self-Government Directory says that there are 92 ULBs in the State, whereas, <https://haryanacmoffice.gov.in/urban-local-bodies-department> says 87 (updated on 15 November 2021)

The CAG's audit reports of 17 States on the implementation of the 74th Constitution Amendment Act (74th CAA) observes that over 1,500 municipalities did not have elected councils in place during the audit period of 2015-2021 across States (Table 2). Among larger cities, the Greater Chennai Corporation had elections in 2022 after a gap of nearly six years, and the Municipal Corporation of Delhi had elections after a delay of seven months, while the municipal corporations of Mumbai and Bengaluru are awaiting elections for over one and a half years and three years after the expiry of the term of their previous elected councils.

Table 2 | The table shows the urban local governments without elected councils as per the CAG's performance audit reports.

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Sl. No.	State	No. of ULGs without elected council
1	T.N.	664
2	M.P.	347
3	Karnataka	210
4	Punjab	129
5	Haryana	50
6	Manipur	27
7	Rajasthan	6
8	Jharkhand	15
9	Andhra	22
10	Odisha	112
11	Uttarakhand	4
<b>Total</b>		<b>1,586</b>

Second, where elections to urban local governments were held, in certain cases, councils were not constituted, and elections of mayors, deputy mayors and standing committees were delayed. In Karnataka, there was a delay of 12-24 months in the formation of elected councils after the declaration of election results in most of the 11 city corporations. As per reports, in 214 urban local governments (out of 304) in Karnataka, there was a 26-month delay in the formation of councils and election of chairpersons and standing committees for the first 2.5-year term, after election results were announced in September 2018. Further, after the expiry of the first term of 2.5 years in May 2023, the same urban local governments did not hold elections for chairpersons and standing committees for more than eight months as of 2023. The delay in Chandigarh by comparison was 12 days. Summary data on the constitution of councils, and elections of mayors, deputy mayors and standing committees are not available easily.

The first challenge of holding timely elections requires determined enforcement with the Supreme Court's intervention. Article 243U of the 74th CAA stipulates that the duration of urban local governments is five years and that an election to constitute an urban local government should be completed "before the expiry of its duration". Further, in case of dissolution of the elected council by the State, the election should be held before the expiration of a period of six months from the date of its dissolution. Despite the Supreme Court stating in *Suresh Mahajan v. State of Madhya Pradesh* (2022) that this constitutional mandate is inviolable, State governments do not hold timely elections for urban local governments.

Everything in the garden of elections is not lovely

The second challenge is what the courts dealt with partially in the Chandigarh case. It appears to be an area that deserves greater policy attention in at least the following aspects: discretion of government officials in scheduling elections on time; the possibility of the State government exercising undue influence on officials to delay

elections; discretion of officials in identifying the presiding officer; the possibility of conflict of interest as the presiding officer may not be independent; and the manual ballot paper-based process. A reform roadmap for timely, free, and fair elections is much needed. The terms of mayors, deputy mayors and standing committees being less than five years accentuates this challenge by necessitating frequent elections, sometimes even annually. In India, 17% of cities including five of the eight largest ones have mayoral terms less than five years. We need a standardisation of mayoral terms of five years.

To deal with these challenges, State Election Commissions (SECs) need to play a far more significant role. Articles 243K and 243ZA of the Constitution state that the superintendence, direction, and control of the preparation of the electoral rolls for, and the conduct of, all elections to panchayats and urban local governments shall be vested in SECs. Our analysis of municipal legislation across 35 States and UTs reveals that while except for Meghalaya, all States have constituted SECs, only 11 have empowered them to conduct ward delimitation. The Court has emphasised that in the domain of elections to panchayats and urban local governments under Part IX and Part IXA of the Constitution, SECs enjoy the same status as the Election Commission of India.

Perhaps it is time to also evaluate a potential role for the SECs in the elections of mayors, deputy mayors and standing committees, given what happened in Chandigarh. Unlike the Lok Sabha and State Assemblies, where there is a clear distinction between the legislature and the executive, in the case of a municipality, the mayor heads both the elected and the administrative wings of the city government. Given the reluctance of State governments to strengthen SECs, perhaps it is only the Supreme Court that can bring greater salience to municipal elections. <https://www.thehindu.com/data/it-is-time-for-comprehensive-reforms-to-municipal-elections-data/article68001908.ece>

## **SELECTED NEWS ITEMS/ARTICLES FOR READING**

- 2. A reform window: On the GST trajectory (*thehindu.com*)** April 03, 2024

### **Buoyant GST revenues create a chance to prioritise its overhaul**

The financial year 2023-24 appears to have ended on a high on the revenue front. Net direct tax collections rose 19.9% by mid-March to hit 97% of revised Budget targets, while the Goods and Services Tax (GST) has yielded a robust ₹20.18 lakh crore. Gross GST revenues in March, for transactions undertaken in February, crossed ₹1.78 lakh crore, the second highest tally since the rollout of the indirect tax six and a half years ago. The only month when collection stood higher was in April 2023, aided by year-end compliances. There is a good chance the same compliance effects will lift this month's tally past ₹2 lakh crore, marking a fresh high. Average monthly collections have grown 11.6% in 2023-24 to over ₹1.68 lakh crore. The growth may be lower than the previous year's 21.8% uptick but establishes a new normal for revenues that the coming year can build on. This should settle the Centre's concerns that the GST has not yielded expected returns. Central GST collections in 2023-24 have overshot revised estimates presented in the interim Budget and the Finance Ministry may have to revise

its 2024-25 targets when it presents the full Budget as those can now be achieved even if growth slips below 10%.

Some of the increase in collections may well stem from tax demands raised for past years and tightening the screws on known evasion routes such as fake invoices and fraudulent input tax credits. Yet, an uptick in growth of net GST revenues, which the government has started revealing since last month, and the rise in gross collections from domestic transactions (17.6% compared with 13.6% in February) suggest economic activity has been busy in the last quarter of 2023-24. Perhaps, the only worry is a 5% decline in GST on goods imports during March, from an 8.5% rise in February, which may signal some cutbacks in discretionary consumption. Yet, the overall GST trajectory should give the next government comfort to focus on much-needed reforms to the tax. This must include retrieving the plan to rationalise its multiple rates from deep freeze, expanding it to excluded items such as electricity and petroleum products, and reducing high levies on key products such as cement and insurance. The GST Compensation Cess,

now being used to repay the COVID-19 pandemic-era borrowings made to recompense States, raked in ₹1.44 lakh crore last year, and it is likely possible to wind it down earlier than the extended March 2026 deadline. It is critical to resist the temptation to replace it with a new levy except for truly demerit goods such as tobacco. Taxing hybrid vehicles over 40%, for instance, makes no sense, either for India's green goals or boosting consumption and spurring private investments. <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/editorial/a-reform-window-on-the-gst-trajectory/article68020253.ece>

### **3. Govt's FY24 tax collection target broadly met on back of robust economic activity: Report (*livemint.com*) 02 Apr 2024**

**As per the revised estimate, the gross tax collection target stood at ₹34.37 lakh crore for the fiscal year 2024**

The central government's tax collection target of over ₹34.37 lakh crore for fiscal year 2023-24 (FY24) has been broadly met on the back of robust economic activity and improved compliance, according to a report by PTI.

"Overall targets for tax revenue have been met," PTI quoted an official.

In the revised estimates (RE) presented in Parliament on February 1, 2024, the government had raised the target for direct tax collection in FY24 (April 2023 to March 2024) to ₹19.45 lakh crore, while for indirect taxes (GST Customs Excise) the target was lowered to ₹14.84 lakh crore.

The net direct tax collection grew 19.88 per cent to over ₹18.90 lakh crore till March 17 on higher advance tax mop-up.

The Central Board of Direct Taxes (CBDT) had said that the net direct tax collection of ₹18,90,259 crore (as of March 17) includes corporation tax (CIT) at ₹9,14,469 crore

(net of refund) and personal income tax (PIT), including securities transaction tax (STT) at ₹9,72,224 crore (net of refund).

Advance tax collections for financial year 2023-24 (as of March 17) stood at ₹9.11 lakh crore, a 22.31 per cent growth over the last fiscal.

The advance tax collection of ₹9,11,534 crore comprises CIT at ₹6.73 lakh crore and PIT at ₹2.39 lakh crore.

Refunds of about ₹3.37 lakh crore have also been issued in the current fiscal till March 17.

On a gross basis, before adjusting refunds, the direct tax collection stood at ₹22.27 lakh crore, an 18.74 per cent growth over the year-ago period.

“The provisional figures of Direct Tax collections for the Financial Year 2023-24 (as of March 17, 2024) show that net collections are at ₹18,90,259 crore, compared to ₹15,76,776 crore in the corresponding period of the preceding Financial Year (FY 2022-23), representing an increase of 19.88 per cent,” the CBDT had said in a statement.

GST (goods and services tax) remained a high point during the last fiscal with collections reaching a record high of ₹1.87 lakh crore in April 2023.

In March, the gross GST collection rose 11.5 per cent year-on-year to ₹1.78 lakh crore.

As per the revised estimate, the gross tax collection target stood at ₹34.37 lakh crore for the fiscal year 2024. <https://www.livemint.com/news/india/govts-fy24-tax-collection-target-broadly-met-on-back-of-robust-economic-activity-report-11712061396188.html>

#### **4. India’s atmanirbhar defence sector (*indianexpress.com*) April 3, 2024**

##### **The transformation underway in the defence industrial complex has set the stage for multiple stakeholders to rally and promote domestic technological innovation**

India’s defence ecosystem has undergone transformations in several key areas in recent years. Key institutional and policy changes have spurred defence indigenisation, domestic capital procurement and defence exports.

In an era of uncertainty, the goals of Atmanirbhar Bharat (self-reliant India) and Make In India would mitigate risks on account of disruption or manipulation of critical supply chains — the kind of challenges that have constrained Ukraine in its conflict with Russia.

The Defence Acquisition Procedure (DAP) 2020 prescribed 50 per cent indigenous content (IC) in procurement contracts. To encourage foreign original equipment manufacturers (OEMs) to set up maintenance and manufacturing facilities in India, a new procurement category — Buy (Global-Manufacture in India) — has been

introduced. This will enable ab initio indigenisation of spare parts. The Union Ministry of Defence (MoD) has released several “Positive Indigenisation Lists” that mention items that must be procured only from domestic sources. Nearly 5,000 items currently imported by the Defence Public Sector Units (DPSUs) and the three Services figure in this list.

The Srijan Indigenisation Portal was launched in August 2020. Over 34,000 items currently being imported have been uploaded on the portal — nearly a third of them are already in the process of being indigenised.

Two defence industrial corridors have been established in Tamil Nadu and Uttar Pradesh. These have attracted investments worth Rs 7,000 crore. MoUs for a cumulative potential investments worth over Rs 20,000 crore have also been concluded. In November 2023, the Swedish arms major SAAB announced the first 100 per cent FDI project to manufacture the Carl Gustav M4 rocket system.

Festive offer There has been laudable progress in building naval platforms. The INS Vikrant aircraft carrier, dedicated to the nation by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in September 2022, is the largest warship built in India’s maritime history. It is spawning new technological capabilities across the Indian industry, including SMEs and MSMEs.

The Indian Navy’s Warship Design Bureau has launched Project 17A frigates. The INS Vindhyagiri, launched in August 2023, is the latest example of this. There is equal focus on missiles, long-range artillery guns, multi-barrel rocket launchers and tanks, besides advanced radars, sensors and electronic capabilities.

The government recently constituted a committee to undertake a holistic review of the functioning of the Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO). Building “fit to purpose” domestic capabilities in defence R&D and innovation, commensurate with the challenges of the 21st century, remains the agency’s guiding principle.

The Centre has stipulated that a significant portion of the defence capital procurement budget should be diverted to the domestic defence industry. Since 2020-21, the capital acquisition budget for domestic procurement has risen from around 40 per cent of the total capital procurement budget (Rs 52,000 crore) to 75 per cent (Rs 99,223 crore) in 2023-24. Moreover, since 2022-23, 25 per cent of this domestic capital procurement budget has been earmarked for purchases from the private sector.

As a result of these initiatives, the value of India’s defence production crossed the Rs 1,00,000 crore mark for the first time in financial year 2022-23 to touch Rs 1,08,684 crore. Defence Public Sector Undertakings accounted for nearly 75 per cent of this.

Significantly, private sector companies accounted for Rs 21,083 crore, about 20 per cent of the total with joint ventures accounting for the rest. The defence production target for 2023-24 is Rs 1,35,000 crore and India expects the value of its defence production to reach Rs 1,75,000 crore by 2025.

The Innovations for Defence Excellence (iDEX) initiative, launched in 2018, aims to involve industry, including MSMEs, start-ups, individual innovators, R&D institutes and academia.

The iDEX Prime framework under iDEX was launched in 2022 to support start-ups with grants-in-aid up to Rs 10 crore to enable the development of high-end solutions. Funding under the Technology Development Fund (TDF) scheme has been enhanced from Rs 10 crore to Rs 50 crore per project. The DRDO has launched the Dare to Dream Innovation contest to support start-ups and innovation. A quarter of the defence R&D budget in 2023-24 has also been earmarked for academia and private industry.

In 2019, the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) placed India among the top 25 arms exporters (at 23rd position) for the first time. India has set a defence exports target of Rs 35,000 crore by 2025.

Equally path-breaking is PM Modi's consistent effort to craft policies that provide equal career opportunities to women in the armed forces. This will help the forces in tapping a large pool of latent talent.

The government's Nari Shakti initiative has played a major role in the transformation of the nation, especially the armed forces. Sainik Schools, which have long served as grassroots institutions for recruitment in the armed forces, are no longer a male bastion. The doors of the National Defence Academy have also been thrown open to women. The number of women officers has risen sharply in recent years.

The goal of a Viksit Bharat (developed India) by 2047 requires the defence sector to be more resilient and self-reliant. The transformation underway in the defence industrial complex has set the stage for multiple stakeholders to rally and promote domestic technological innovation while cementing strategic partnerships around the world. The day is not far when India will become an integral part of the global defence value chains. <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/atmanirbhar-bharat-indias-defence-sector-defence-transformation-defence-ecosystem-9247668/>

## **5. MoRTH raises Rs 40,314 crore through asset monetisation in FY24 (*moneycontrol.com*) APRIL 02, 2024**

**"NHAI's total asset monetisation programme has crossed Rs 1 lakh crore till date," he added**

The Ministry of Road Transport and Highways (MoRTH) has raised Rs 40,314 crore through various modes of asset monetisation in 2023-24 against the target of Rs 28,968 crore, a senior government official said on Tuesday.

The ministry had raised Rs 15,968 crore through monetisation of 4 toll-operate-transfer (TOT) bundles, Rs 15,700 crore through Infrastructure Investment Trust (InvIT) and Rs 8,646 crore through securitisation, the official told PTI. "NHAI's total asset monetisation programme has crossed Rs 1 lakh crore till date," he added.

The ministry had raised Rs 32,855 crore in 2022-23 through various modes of asset monetisation. Currently, MoRTH monetises its assets under three different modes — toll-operate-transfer (TOT) model, Infrastructure Investment Trust (InvIT) and project-based financing to provide all categories of investors an opportunity to invest in assets pertaining to highways and associated infrastructure.



Infrastructure Investment Trust (InvIT) is an instrument on the pattern of mutual funds, designed to pool money from investors and invest in assets that will provide cash flows over a period of time. The official also said that during the financial year 2023-24, NHAI achieved construction of 6,644 km of National Highways against the target of 6,544 km.

"This is the highest ever National Highway construction achieved in a financial year by NHAI," he added. At 6,644 km, construction increased in FY 2023-24 by around 20 per cent compared to 5,544 km in FY 2022-23 and around 53 per cent against 4,331 km in FY 2021-22.

Govt to soon come out with tender for introducing GPS-based highway toll collection system: Gadkari Govt to soon come out with tender for introducing GPS-based highway toll collection system: Gadkari

According to the official, the capital expenditure by NHAI in 2023-24 for the development of national highway infrastructure reached an all-time high of Rs 2,07,000 crore. The capital Expenditure increased by around 20 per cent compared to Rs 1,73,000 crore in FY22-23 and Rs 1,72,000 crore in FY21-22. <https://www.moneycontrol.com/news/india/morth-raises-rs-40314-crore-through-asset-monetisation-in-fy24-12562211.html>

## **6. Clearing the mess (*millenniumpost.in*) 2 Apr 2024**

The National Highways Authority of India's (NHAI) recent enforcement of the 'One Vehicle, One FASTag' norm is a significant improvement in the field of India's electronic toll collection. The move promises to further streamline operations and enhance the user experience across the country's vast network of highways. This initiative, designed to discourage the misuse of FASTags—such as using a single tag across multiple vehicles or linking several tags to one vehicle—came into effect this Monday, following an extension granted to accommodate Paytm FASTag users amid broader financial transitions encouraged by the Reserve Bank of India (RBI).

At its core, the 'One Vehicle, One FASTag' rule is a significant stride towards optimising the efficiency of toll collections and further supplementing the smoother, more seamless flow of traffic at toll plazas nationwide. With over 8 crore users and a penetration rate nearing 98 per cent, FASTag has already revolutionised toll collection by employing Radio Frequency Identification (RFID) technology, allowing for direct toll payments from linked accounts without halting the vehicle. This system not only reduces congestion and idle times at toll booths but also aligns with environmental goals by cutting down emissions from idling engines. The necessity for such an initiative stems from instances of misuse that have surfaced, undermining the system's integrity and fairness. The NHAI's move to mandate 'One Vehicle, One FASTag' and push for updated KYC processes as per RBI guidelines aims to rectify these issues, ensuring that every FASTag in circulation is used as intended—to facilitate efficient and transparent toll transactions for the vehicle it is registered with.

This initiative also comes at a time when digital financial solutions are under increased scrutiny for security and compliance, as evidenced by the RBI's advisory regarding Paytm Payments Bank Ltd (PPBL) accounts. One may note the broader context in

which these measures are being implemented, with the aim to push towards greater accountability, security, and efficiency in India's rapidly evolving digital landscape. The benefits of adhering to the 'One Vehicle, One FASTag' norm extend across the spectrum of stakeholders. For road users, it promises reduced wait times and a more predictable travel experience. Toll operators are expected to see lower operational costs and improved audit controls, while the government stands to gain from reduced fuel consumption and emissions, alongside enhanced transparency in toll transactions.

However, the transition is not without its challenges. Users accustomed to the flexibility of using multiple FASTags or a single tag across vehicles will need to adjust. The requirement for updated KYC documentation adds another layer of compliance.

Looking forward, the success of the 'One Vehicle, One FASTag' initiative hinges on effective communication, robust support systems for users navigating the transition, and stringent enforcement to prevent misuse. Initiatives like these are critical for ensuring that the nation's roadways remain conduits for economic growth and environmental sustainability. Stakeholders across India's vast highway network should comply with a new set of rules. They must participate in a larger vision of a digitally empowered, efficiently managed highway ecosystem. The road ahead is clear, and with collective adherence to initiatives like 'One Vehicle, One FASTag,' a lot of mess can be cleared at once. <https://www.millenniumpost.in/editorial/clearing-the-mess-558294>

## **7. World Bank raises India forecast, sees Indian GDP growing at 7.5% (*financialexpress.com*) April 3, 2024**

The World Bank in its latest South Asia Development update on April 2 has projected that the Indian economy will grow at 7.5 percent in 2024, revising its earlier projections higher by 1.2 percent for the same period. Meanwhile, the overall growth in South Asia is expected to be at 6 percent in 2024, driven mainly by the growth in India coupled with recovery in Pakistan and Sri Lanka's GDP.

Additionally, the output is expected to grow by 5.7 percent in FY 24/25 in Bangladesh along with a high inflation and restrictions on trade and foreign exchange constraining the economic activities.

As per the report, with the projected growth of 6 percent in 2025, South Asia is expected to be the fastest growing region in the world for the coming two years. "In India, which accounts for the bulk of the region's economy, output growth is expected to reach 7.5% in FY 23/24 before returning to 6.6 percent over the medium term, with activity in services and industry expected to remain robust," the bank said in its report.

Following the contraction in FY 22/23, Pakistan's economy is expected to grow by 2.3 percent in FY 24/25 as business confidence improves. In Sri Lanka, output growth is expected to strengthen to 2.5% in 2025, with recoveries in reserves, remittances and tourism.

"South Asia's growth prospects remain bright in the short run, but fragile fiscal positions and increasing climate shocks are dark clouds on the horizon," said Martin Raiser, World Bank Vice President for South Asia. Raiser further added that to make

growth resilient, countries need to adopt policies to boost private investment and strengthen employment growth.

Franziska Ohnsorge, World Bank Chief Economist for South Asia, said, “South Asia is failing right now to fully capitalise on its demographic dividend. This is a missed opportunity.” Ohnsorge emphasised that if the region employed as large a share of the working-age population as other emerging markets and developing economies, its output could be 16 percent higher.

According to the report, inflation in India has remained within the Reserve Bank of India’s 2–6 percent target range since a spike in mid-2023, and the policy rate has remained unchanged since February 2023. However, food price inflation has been elevated, partly reflecting a weak harvest due to El Niño. Further, the World Bank said that economic activity in India surprised on the upside in 2023Q4, with growth of 8.4 percent from a year ago. “The expansion was supported by rapid increases in investment and government consumption. More recent survey data point to continued strong performance,” report said.

In February, India’s composite purchasing managers index (PMI) stood at 60.6, well above the global average of 52.1 (a value above 50 indicates expansion). Growth in FY 2023/24 is estimated to have exceeded earlier forecasts, it said. Financial conditions in India have remained accommodative. Domestic credit issuance to the commercial sector (including public and private borrowers) grew by 14 percent (year-on-year) in December 2023, the fastest pace since 2013. Financial soundness indicators continued to improve. The nonperforming-loan ratio fell to 3.2 per cent last year, well below its recent peak, in March 2018, of about 11 percent.

Regulatory capital totalled 17 percent of bank assets in the second quarter of 2023, surpassing both regulatory requirements and peer averages. FDI as a share of GDP fell in 2023, but a rebound in foreign portfolio investment inflows in FY 2023/24 contributed to foreign reserves rising 8 percent in the year to January 2024, reaching a level sufficient to cover about 11 months of imports, the World Bank report said. “In India, output growth is projected to reach 7.5 percent in FY 2023/24 on the back of robust growth in Q3 of FY 2023/24. Growth is expected to moderate to 6.6 percent in FY 2024/25 before picking up in subsequent years as a decade of robust public investment yields growth dividends,” the bank added.

Moreover, the expected slowdown in growth between FY 2023/24 and FY 2024/25 mainly reflects a deceleration in investment from its elevated pace in the previous year. “Growth in services and industry is expected to remain robust, the latter aided by strong construction and real estate activity. Inflationary pressures are expected to subside, creating more policy space for easing financial conditions,” it said. The report also added that over the medium term, the fiscal deficit and government debt are projected to decline, supported by robust output growth and consolidation efforts by the central government. <https://www.financialexpress.com/policy/economy-world-bank-raises-india-forecast-seesnbspindian-gdp-growing-at-7-5-3444729/>

## **8. We need judicial system reforms to ensure swift disposal of case** (*livemint.com*) 03 Apr 2024

**A huge pile-up of cases has kept the judiciary overloaded while much can be done to offer India relief by clearing the backlog. Here's a guide.**

A recent report says that there are over 40 million cases pending in India's judicial system. In the slothful manner that their adjudication takes place, it may take aeons to clear the backlog. There are many reasons for this terrible situation in a realm as vital as justice and therefore multiple remedial measures are required to arrest the delays.

One of these measures is granting no more than the three adjournments. Alas, this is practised more in the breach, thus adding to delays in the disposal of cases and keeping our courts clogged. It drew criticism from Chief Justice of India D.Y. Chandrachud when the Supreme Court celebrated its 75th anniversary recently and he expressed his thoughts on reducing delays.

What needs to be done? Judicial delays make life miserable for both businesses and citizens. This is the third in a series of articles which we are writing to persuade the ecosystem to reform and reduce delays in our system.

The unique feature of the three-adjudgment rule is that it was introduced as a part of our 'ease of doing business' reforms within the justice delivery system. This provision under the law states that a maximum of three adjournments can be given during the hearing of a lawsuit. However, the prescribed protocol of permitting a maximum of three adjournments per case is disregarded in more than half the cases being addressed by courts. While it appears that some courts are attempting to follow the rule and are also publishing monthly data on adjournments granted per matter, broader efforts at the institutional level are required for the judiciary to stop granting a fourth adjournment. For example, we should use a monetary disincentive by imposing a levy of ₹10,000 for the first adjournment sought by a disputant and double that sum for every subsequent one.

Why do lawyers seek more than three adjournments and courts grant these in spite of the fact that it is irregular? Many lawyers, especially senior ones, have many briefs on their hands, and when conflicting timings of case hearings arise in different courts, their juniors are asked to seek fresh dates. Most often, judges oblige. Lawyers on the opposite side tend to play ball, as they themselves may need such favours in some other matter. This acts as an unwritten code, but disputants are the victims of frequent adjournments for the calendar convenience of a few professionals.

Let's analyse the contours of the 44 million cases pending in different courts in the country today. Lawyers have not appeared in court in more than 7.5 million cases. In 4.1 million cases, the accused has been declared a fugitive, and in 3.2 million cases, witnesses have not reached courts. In around 3.6 million cases, vital records are either missing or documents are not available.

Effective court management is crucial for the smooth and efficient operation of the judicial system. The primary objective of court management is to guarantee the fair and timely delivery of justice. In developed countries with functional systems, in most

cases, the judge confers with lawyers on both sides on clear timelines for each step as soon as a matter is lodged. Alas, this is not practised in India—and it calls for thought.

While India has a National Courts Management Systems (NCMS) policy and several states have followed suit, its implementation in letter as well as spirit will hold the key. A National Framework of Court Excellence (NFCE) has also been developed to establish quantifiable performance benchmarks for Indian courts, tackling concerns related to quality, responsiveness and timeliness.

Compliance and progress reports on the NFCE will usher in transparency and accountability in judicial processes. E-filing is another useful approach, as we found during the covid pandemic, involving the use of video conferencing for regular case management proceedings to help expedite dispute resolution.

The public's trust in the judiciary would have suffered due to its apparently decreasing reliability and dependability, which could lead to increased social, political and economic tensions in India. For instance, at the close of 2021, Indian prisons were holding over 500,000 inmates, 77.1% of whom were awaiting trial. This situation has prompted a World Bank report to label the Indian judiciary as "notoriously inefficient." Serious attempts have to be made that can help to improve the current situation. For instance, simplifying and updating the rules governing court management.

Also, in many instances, judicial officers in joint courts are typically assigned a team comprising one bench clerk, one assistant bench clerk, one stenographer and two peons. Regardless of whether there are 800 or 8,000 files, the same staff is responsible for handling them. The rise in the number of court files does not correspond with an increase in the staff count. This needs remedial action, with appropriate allocations.

The NCMS policy advocates the incorporation of technology to enhance court operations, but it must be enforced vigorously for proper application. It should also include a social audit, which would help, as we have seen in many other policies. This will enhance the efficiency of the court system while safeguarding the rights of all parties and delivering justice in a fair and unbiased manner. <https://www.livemint.com/opinion/online-views/we-need-judicial-system-reforms-to-ensure-swift-disposal-of-cases-11712058624978.html>

## **9. India aims for 24x7 power for all but what lies ahead for rural electrification? (*moneycontrol.com*) APRIL 03, 2024**

**In December 2014, the government of India launched the Deen Dayal Upadhyaya Gram Jyoti Yojana (DDUGJY) with the objective of electrifying all un-electrified villages as per the Census of 2011, which is the latest report covering the demographic, social, and economic data of India.**

On April 28, 2018, Prime Minister Narendra Modi tweeted that every single village of India has access to electricity, calling it a "historic day in the development journey of India."

Six years later, India is staring at the government's ambitious bid to achieve 24x7 electricity access for all by 2024, a target revised after it was missed in 2022.

To be sure, rural electrification and 24x7 electricity access are two different targets of the Government of India. The rural electrification mission aims at providing electricity connections to households, while through the 24x7 electricity supply mission, the government wants to ensure zero to almost no power cuts across all electrified households in India.

At this juncture, Moneycontrol looks at India's rural electrification journey so far and answers key questions about the challenges.

### **What has the government done to enhance rural electrification?**

On September 25, 2015, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Sustainable Development Goals, with one of its aims being to ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable, and modern energy to all.

In December 2014, the government of India launched the Deen Dayal Upadhyaya Gram Jyoti Yojana (DDUGJY) with the objective of electrifying all un-electrified villages as per the Census of 2011, which is the latest report covering the demographic, social, and economic data of India.

Later, in October 2017, the government launched the Pradhan Mantri Sahaj Bijli Har Ghar Yojana (SAUBHAGYA) aimed at achieving universal household electrification throughout the country. Under this scheme, electricity connections would be provided to all willing un-electrified households in rural and urban areas.

The electrification would be carried out by distribution companies (discoms) and state power departments with funds provided by the Central government.

A total of 28.6 million households were provided electricity up to March 31, 2022, as per data from the Ministry of Power, and both the SAUBHAGYA and DDUGJY schemes were declared closed on March 31, 2022. The number of villages electrified as of March 31, 2022, was 597,464, representing 100 percent of the total as per the defined norms of the Ministry of Power.

### **When is a village declared electrified?**

Does an electrified village mean that all its households have electricity? Simply put: No.

As per the definition of the government of India for the mission, a village is declared electrified if at least 10 percent of its households have electricity. There are two additional criteria for a village to be declared electrified.

1. Basic infrastructure such as a distribution transformer and distribution lines are provided in the inhabited locality as well as the Dalit basti hamlet, where it exists.

2. Electricity is provided to public places such as schools, the panchayat office, health centres, dispensaries, and community centres.

But this definition was formulated only after February 2004. Prior to October 1997, a village was classified as electrified if power was used within its revenue area for any purpose. After October 1997 and before February 2004, a village was deemed to be electrified if power was used for any purpose in the inhabited locality within the revenue boundary of the village.

### **What are the hurdles?**

Ensuring the financial health of discoms run by state governments and the modernisation of transmission and distribution in states such as Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Telangana, Assam, and Himachal Pradesh are the biggest challenges in ensuring 24x7 power supply.

Rural and even urban areas in these and some other states continue to face unscheduled power cuts even though they are termed “illegal” by the Union power minister.

Currently, the average power supply in India is for 23.5 hours per day in the urban areas and 20.5 hours in the rural areas. With electricity a concurrent subject, state power utilities are responsible for energy supply and distribution. Policies may be made at the Centre, but the states need to implement them.

### **Is decentralised renewable energy the solution?**

India has committed to generating at least 50 percent of its electricity from non-fossil sources by 2030. Further, the country intends to achieve net zero emissions by 2070.

As a step toward this, the government is looking at decentralised solar photovoltaic (PV) systems to provide rural electrification. The government on January 4 unveiled a new solar scheme for particularly vulnerable tribal groups (PVTG) under the Pradhan Mantri Janjati Adivasi Nyaya Abhiyan (PM-JANMAN) programme.

Launched on November 15, 2023, the PM-JANMAN initiative will focus on 11 critical interventions through nine ministries for implementation.

The mission covers electrification of 100,000 un-electrified households through off-grid solar systems in PVTG areas located in 18 states - Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Gujarat, Jharkhand, Karnataka, Kerala, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Manipur, Odisha, Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu, Telangana, Tripura, Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand and West Bengal, and the Union Territory of the Andaman & Nicobar Islands.

In the tribal areas of these states, electricity supply through the grid is not feasible. Hence, the government has introduced this off-grid solar scheme.

The government also intends to cover a number of new households in the rural areas through the recently announced 'PM Surya Ghar: Muft Bijli Yojana', which has an outlay of Rs 75,021 crore. The scheme provides Central Financial Assistance of 60

percent of the system cost for 2 kW systems and 40 percent of the additional cost for systems of 2 kW to 3 kW capacity.

The CFA is capped at Rs 78,000 for 3 kW systems. At the current benchmark price, consumers can get Rs 30,000 subsidy for a 1 kW rooftop solar (RTS) system, Rs 60,000 for 2 kW systems and Rs 78,000 for 3 kW systems or higher.

Through the PM Surya Ghar: Muft Bijli Yojana, the government also intends to build a model solar village in each district for the adoption of RTS in rural areas.

"Urban local bodies and panchayati raj institutions can also benefit from incentives for promoting RTS installations in their areas. The scheme has a component for the payment security of RESCO (renewable energy service company)-based models, as well as a fund for innovative RTS projects," the ministry said. <https://www.moneycontrol.com/explainers/india-aims-for-24x7-power-for-all-but-what-lies-ahead-for-rural-electrification-article-12538211.html>

## **10. India continues to rely heavily on coal to meet 260 GW peak demand (*millenniumpost.in*) 2 Apr 2024**

New Delhi: India will continue to rely heavily on electricity generated using coal during the ensuing summer season when peak demand is projected to cross 260 gigawatts (GW) on likely intense heat conditions in parts of the country, a Power Ministry official said on Tuesday.

While renewable capacities continue to be added, authorities are building coal stocks at power plants to meet the peak demand, the official said, adding that solar power would also help immensely in meeting the demand.

The ministry, which has been reviewing the situation regularly, has directed all power generating companies, especially thermal plants, to delay their maintenance plans, while gas-based power plants have been told to be available for generating electricity.

The Indian Meteorological Department on Tuesday forecasted that India is set to experience extreme heat during the April-June (summer) period, with the central and western peninsular parts expected to face the worst impact.

Besides, above-normal heatwave days are likely over most parts of the plains during summer. Ten to 20 days of heat waves are expected in different parts of the country against a normal of four to eight days, as per IMD projections.

According to estimates by the power ministry, the peak demand in the country could reach 260 GW during this summer, higher than the record 243 GW in September last year. Also Read - 'Domestic air traffic may touch 153.4 mn in 2023-24'

The official said, on the condition of anonymity, that this time hydropower generation would be lesser compared to last year due to the low level of water in reservoirs across the country. Therefore, coal-based thermal power plants and solar energy will meet a large part of the high demand for electricity in the country during this summer.



The official informed that Union Power Minister R K Singh and other top officials in the ministry are holding review meetings on the anticipated situation of extreme heat wave in the country with other ministries like railways and coal, state officials, and power companies for the past 15 days.

The review meetings are done every year before summer by the ministry, but this time, demand is expected to be at an all-time high level of 260GW in the country.

The official also stated that the ministry has asked all power-generating companies, especially thermal plants, to delay their maintenance plans as it is very time-consuming. <https://www.millenniumpost.in/business/india-continues-to-rely-heavily-on-coal-to-meet-260-gw-peak-demand-558321?infinitemscroll=1>

## 11. **What next for clean air?** (*thehindubusinessline.com*) Updated - April 02, 2024

### **The National Clean Air Programme has had some success. But Phase II must address issues such as data quality**

It's been five years since India launched the National Clean Air Programme (NCAP). It initially aimed to slash PM10 concentrations by 20-30 per cent across 131 cities by 2024, with a budget of nearly ₹10,000 crore, backed by financing from the Fifteenth Finance Commission.

Having witnessed its share of hits and misses, NCAP now stands at a crossroads. With the deadline of the first phase of NCAP having been shifted to 2026 and a revised target of 40 per cent reduction in PM10 concentrations, a crucial question arises — should it continue to maintain its current trajectory, or bring in a paradigm shift to win the battle for breathable air?

Government figures from the latest meeting of the NCAP Monitoring Committee held in October 2023 indicate that air quality has improved in 90 cities. Additionally, there are 539 continuous ambient air quality monitoring stations (CAAQMS) across the country now, up from 165 in 2019.

However, despite the progress made so far, most Indian cities are yet to meet the National Ambient Air Quality Standards, showing that several challenges still exist. NCAP, with its established foundation, offers a valuable springboard for cleaner air. The next phase of NCAP must embrace a more strategic approach and go back to redefining what clean air is.

First, India needs an official emission inventory database. Most cities still do not know what is polluting the air. The first phase of NCAP recognises the importance of building city- and national-level emission inventories for the country.

However, only 44 cities have completed their emission inventory studies so far, and we still lack a national official emission inventory database. Until we know exactly where our pollution comes from in real time, we won't be able to tackle it.

Analysis by the Council on Energy, Environment and Water (CEEW) of national emission inventory studies shows that there exist significant variations in sectoral estimates and contributions across these studies.

Developing a consistent and up-to-date inventory by harmonising methodologies and data sources, such as fuel usage and emission factors, will help accurately reflect emission trends and quantify the impact of sectoral interventions.

One example of such a database is the European Environment Agency National Inventory under the Gothenburg Protocol, which provides sectoral contributions across countries and years. This can serve as a model for India, paving the way for a more data-driven approach to air quality management.

Second, NCAP must transition from PM10 to PM2.5 as the benchmark for performance assessment. PM2.5 poses more deleterious effects on human health and is considered a better criterion for air quality assessment.

This may have been difficult in the first phase of NCAP due to limited monitoring, but now with the increase in the number of CAAQMS, this transition is feasible. Further, the current system of fund disbursement for air quality action only considers PM10 improvement and fund utilisation certificates. This does not create incentives for holistic sectoral actions such as reducing biomass burning, industrial emissions compliance, and density of public transportation.

When it comes to disbursing funding, just concentrating on PM10 improvement is not enough. Air quality funding should be linked with the kind of parameters formulated under the Swachh Vayu Survekshan framework, which not only promotes PM reduction, but also a host of other sectoral actions that improve air quality.

Funds for local bodies

Third, the fight for clean air needs innovative financing mechanisms for Urban Local Bodies (ULBs). NCAP recognises this too, and encourages ULBs to raise funds by leveraging market forces through bond issuance and entering into public-private partnerships for City Action Plans.

CEEW research indicates that ULBs are responsible for over 35 per cent of activities under the City Action Plans, yet they face financial shortages, as highlighted by a recent RBI report on municipal finances.

To address this, alternative financing tools such as social impact bonds and municipal bonds can help generate autonomous revenue and overcome resource constraints. Indore and Surat are already successfully leveraging these bonds.

Finally, for the second phase of India's clean air programme, it is imperative to transition the financing and planning of clean air action from the city and urban agglomeration level to the airshed level (an area that goes beyond borders and includes regions with similar topography and meteorology).

This shift will extend the programme's reach beyond urban centres, encompassing rural areas for a more inclusive impact. It would require a clear demarcation of airsheds,

followed by the establishment of effective transboundary administrative frameworks to foster collaboration and coordination among stakeholders.

A precedent for such an approach is the establishment of the Commission on Air Quality Management in 2021 for the Delhi-NCR region, aimed at promoting research and establishing task forces to enforce, monitor, and oversee the execution of various orders within the common airshed.

The National Clean Air Programme has laid the groundwork for cleaner air in India, but its second phase requires a more robust approach. NCAP 2.0 presents an opportunity to build on existing successes, address shortcomings, and leverage data-driven strategies. The next five years should lead to bluer skies, an understated factor in economic growth and human development.  
<https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/opinion/what-next-for-clean-air/article68021073.ece>

## **12. AI- What is critical and urgent** (*timesofindia.indiatimes.com*) April 2, 2024

AI is already everywhere. I happened to open a video on WhatsApp. The video just didn't feel real. It didn't on two counts- first, whether the person's image and voice got cloned through AI on the video. Secondly, if what he spoke was misleading.

So I sent it to the "Times Verified". They are backed by the Times group, the print version of its newspaper, "Times of India" serves as a beacon of trust not only filtering out fake news but consistently providing perspectives of opposing views. Yet they came back saying videos can be fabricated at many levels and hence the service restricts itself to verifying messages only.

The benefits of AI especially in law and order, traffic management, health, education, and productivity are already showing up with astonishing benefits to humankind. This is just the start.

However, there are a few critical fronts that AI needs to be constrained which I will try to outline with a balanced perspective. But there is one critical front that is super urgent to solve.

-You might know or you might not know the growing power of AI to track down your thoughts and movements to know a lot of things about you. Even what your close family and friends might not be aware of, even in some instances, you might not be aware of yourself too. The data privacy lens has to be very stringent, something we don't have the culture for. But on the other side, that the AI can provide a customized service knowing my priorities and preferences is a huge plus that certainly needs to be balanced in.

-The AI is already the scanner for copyright infringements too. Because at the core, AI is all about learning from historical data. Those data generation materials and even human data points, many a times people from unprivileged backgrounds need to be recognized and in many cases, compensated. But we need to also keep the perspective that we as humans read books, blogs, newspapers, and whatnot and use those

perspectives to generate our content by writing up another book, blog, or newspaper column. Isn't that a similar copyright violation too?

-The Gemini, the AI model from the Google stable ran into trouble with the Indian government due to the output it produced on the country's prime minister. You could laugh it away but indeed was extremely poor-quality output. The government reacted and expressed its strong views to regulate all emerging AI models. But the huge possibility is that every government will talk about regulating, but no one would pragmatically do so for a real possibility of losing out in competition with other countries. Not only that, in India's case, it will mean all major AI models bypass nearly a billion and a half people. But then what kind of models they would be with such an exclusion?

-The gender and racial biases with AI. The AI models are purely based on historical data generated by us humans only. We couldn't still let go of our biases, so how would the outputs generated by that data be? However, the data modeling techniques need to advance quicker, and training on learning patterns and relationships from the humongous quantity of unstructured data in a variety of formats fast forwarded to pivot out of the current AI's frequent outputs of plausible but untrue assertions.

-There is a fear that AI will take over the human race. It is clear that AI is developing itself exponentially, whereas we humans are growing relatively at a sedate sequential pace. But the crucial difference is that we possess the consciousness that AI doesn't.

However, it is a real possibility that AI can create havoc for humankind when misused with commands from a few ill-directed fellow humans. Having said that, right now as we speak, the human decision-making process poses a bigger threat to humankind. Look around the world and you what I am saying.

The above ones are strategic and critical on how humans leverage AI.

-What might sound comparatively tactical, but is critical and urgent to solve is the example of that video over WhatsApp. If his image and voice can be cloned, yours and mine too and for some it was already cloned for fraud and mischief purposes. Imagine you getting cloned into a position of emergency and the fraudsters asking for money from your loved ones. Or your image getting morphed into porn, which even when it is proved it was a fake, the scars might remain the rest of your life. Or inversely someone getting exposed for committing a crime on a video but denying saying it's a fake video. Our trust in anything and everything will be foundationally challenged.

I can't say that just watermarking each image and video can be a comprehensive solution, but we need an immediate solution before the trust breaks down. We can't expect the tech platforms alone to do this, we need independent agencies and the government to ramp up their fake-checking capability.

But on the other side, if you send me a drawing of a pig flying, it's up to me to decide if it's a prophecy or its stupidity or I just leave it to what it is, a piece of art. That art was a point of view, not factual. But I don't need a government or a tech platform to say whether it was true or fake driven by their priorities and biases.

But right now it looks like “we don’t have much agreement on anything, indeed we are still working out what the arguments are”.

Meanwhile, I have exited many WhatsApp groups that resemble an echo chamber of a few group members filtering in just those forwarded messages that confirm their biases and strong views. This is not AI doing this last-level filtering. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/blogs/arise/ai-what-is-critical-and-urgent/>

### **13. Progressing in the Cybersecurity Landscape: Trends and Strategies to Stay Ahead (*financialexpress.com*) April 2, 2024**

**Organisations should acknowledge the need for security tools that empower developers to work efficiently without compromising protection.**

As India marches ahead to be a digital force to reckon with, the challenges of safeguarding sensitive information and protecting against cyber threats continue to grow simultaneously. The enormous growth in cyber-attacks post the pandemic has highlighted the pressing need for robust cybersecurity measures.

To ensure up-to-date protection against cyber threats, organisations and individuals need to be aware of specific trends in cybersecurity and the strategies organisations can adopt to stay ahead of evolving threats.

#### **Ransomware Readiness**

Ransomware attacks have become a growing concern, affecting organisations worldwide. Thales 2023 Data Threat Report reveals that less than half (48 percent) of IT professionals in India have implemented a formal ransomware plan, despite 52 percent reporting a significant increase in ransomware attacks. 82 percent of respondents in India who fell victim to ransomware attacks last year experienced data loss. Solutions like CipherTrust Transparent Encryption Ransomware Protection (CTE-RWP) can help address this critical issue. Such solutions can actively monitor the file system, identify and prevent unwanted encryption and data exfiltration, and provide organisations with enhanced protection against ransomware attacks.

#### **Navigating Consolidation and Complexity**

The cybersecurity landscape has been marked by abundant security tools, leading to increased complexity and challenges in managing cyber risks. Organisations recognize the need for consolidation to streamline operations and mitigate security vulnerabilities. Our recent study found that over 62 percent of large organisations globally employ more than five critical management systems. Alarmingly, only 65 percent of global enterprises possess a comprehensive understanding of their data’s location, while 20 percent struggle to classify their data consistently. Hence, there is a need to acknowledge these concerns and aim for a holistic approach to security by having various solutions under one roof rather than multiple disparate solutions.

#### **Forging Stronger Developer Relationships**

The dynamics between security and development teams have traditionally not been that easy. However, a paradigm shift is underway, driven by recognising developers’ critical

role in the security buying process. Organisations should acknowledge the need for security tools that empower developers to work efficiently without compromising protection. Solutions like the CipherTrust Platform Community edition and CipherTrust Secrets Management can address developers' needs by protecting and automating access to secrets across DevOps tools and cloud workloads, encompassing credentials, certificates, API keys, and tokens.

### **Navigating Data Sovereignty Concerns:**

When it comes to cloud security, compliance is the topic of the moment. As countries around the globe are adopting more stringent regulations for data protection, organizations are more concerned about data sovereignty than ever. According to a recent survey by Thales, 82 percent of respondents in India expressed concerns that data sovereignty and privacy regulations would impact their cloud deployment plans. Cloud providers like Google and AWS are now offering ways to provide customers with more control to prove to regulators that information is held and safeguarded by local laws.

### **Preparing for the Quantum Computing Era**

Quantum computing represents both excitement and apprehension in the realm of cybersecurity. Although the precise timing of its arrival and adoption remains uncertain, IT professionals understand the potential impact of this technology on existing security measures. And before it arrives, it will be crucial for the industry to make its operations and data security quantum ready. To reduce the risk of data Theft and decryption in the quantum computing era, companies must embrace a hybrid posture by implementing a quantum-resistant security layer on top of the existing one.

In conclusion, the increasing cyber-attacks have emphasized the critical importance of robust cybersecurity measures in our rapidly expanding digital world. Organisations and individuals need to stay updated on the trends in cybersecurity to protect against evolving threats effectively. By addressing areas like ransomware readiness and navigating consolidation, organisations can enhance their cybersecurity defenses and safeguard sensitive information in an ever-changing threat landscape. <https://www.financialexpress.com/opinion/progressing-in-the-cybersecurity-landscape-trends-and-strategies-to-stay-ahead/3444061/>

## **14. Mumbai, 'under construction': Is there a solution to the series of unnecessary, wasteful projects? (*scroll.in*) 03 April 2024**

**The opposing views on the proposal to demolish the Malabar Hill Reservoir reflect why the infallibility of technical advice can be questioned.**

The engineering departments of the Municipal Corporation of Greater Mumbai seem hell bent on new construction work that does nothing for the city. A few years ago it was bridges across the city that were declared unsafe, calling for urgent reconstruction. This was triggered by the collapse of a footbridge near the Chatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Terminus in 2019.

The resulting panic was the perfect, instant fertiliser that led to numerous bridge replacement projects bursting forth. These were strongly advised by a professor from

one of Mumbai's oldest engineering colleges. Luckily, cooler heads prevailed and reconstructions were trivial.

Over the past year, there has been a debate on the proposal to demolish the Malabar Hill Reservoir, deemed unsafe, and reconstruct it at a cost of over Rs 700 crore. According to the original proposal, this will require the construction of an additional tank at a further cost of Rs 700 crore and the cutting of 189 trees plus transplanting of another 200.

Fortunately, protests by citizens have persuaded the civic body to appoint a technical Committee of seven experts, four of whom are professors of the Indian Institute of Technology, and an eighth member who is a civic officer.

After the inspection of the tank, four of the experts, including one of the IIT professors, submitted a final report saying the tank needs minor repairs that are not urgent and that these can be carried out compartment by compartment without cutting any trees or interrupting the water supply.

The remaining three IIT professors and the civic officer have refused to sign that report and instead submitted an independent final report saying the tank cannot be repaired in stages and a separate additional tank – involving the cutting of several hundred trees – is a must. The first four have refused to sign the second report.

With two final reports in diametrically opposite conflict with each other, how does one proceed? The simplest option will be to invite international tenders for repair of the tank, compartment by compartment, without cutting any trees or interrupting the water supply. Let the international construction industry say it cannot be done. Then, work can proceed based on the second final report.

But if it can be done, without cutting trees and interrupting water supply, then two important issues arise.

The first is that we are being led to believe that professors, for no other reason other than that they have a high academic degree, are considered both technically infallible as well as immune to cajolement of any kind. It is now time to question that.

Second, what of the municipal officers who conceived of the scheme in the first place? An expenditure of Rs 1,400 crore is not trivial.

Should the hydraulic engineer and their colleagues not be held responsible for proposing a completely unnecessary project? Does no one lose their job? Or at least suffer a demotion? If there is zero punishment, will it not encourage more useless projects, with some going through with their uselessness undetected? <https://scroll.in/article/1066067/mumbai-under-construction-is-there-a-solution-to-the-series-of-unnecessary-wasteful-projects>

**15. Madras HC seeks status report of probe in misappropriation of PMAY funds (dtnext.in) 02 April 2024**

**The Directorate of Vigilance and Anti-Corruption (DVAC) submitted that the investigation is underway and 25 witnesses have been questioned till now.**

CHENNAI: The Madras High Court directed the State to file the status report regarding the probe into the allegation of misappropriation of government subsidy funds in Prime Minister Awas Yojana (PMAY) scheme.

The first division bench comprising Chief Justice SV Gangapurwala and Justice J Sathya Narayana Prasad heard a litigation seeking to take action against the erring officials involved in the misappropriation of government funds to the tune of Rs.54.40 lakh meant for welfare schemes.

The Directorate of Vigilance and Anti-Corruption (DVAC) submitted that the investigation is underway and 25 witnesses have been questioned till now.

After the submission, the bench directed the DVAC to submit the status report of the probe and posted the matter to April 23 for further submission.

The litigant ML Dhamodaran from Thiruvallur submitted the RTI details received regarding the beneficiaries of PMAY in Sholavaram panchayat, Thiruvallur.

The litigant contended that the district collector of Thiruvallur and block development officer of Sholavaram implemented the government welfare scheme on their whims and fancies by accounting the scheme money for unbuilt houses, dubious and ineligible beneficiaries.

Originally, the Union government had introduced the PMAY housing scheme to alleviate the problem of homelessness with the State government's participation. Despite the target groups for the housing scheme are the poor people from marginalized communities living in rural areas.

However, in Sholavaram panchayat between 2011 - 2017 as many as 39 beneficiaries were given funds under the PMAY scheme, who are ineligible to the scheme, said the litigant.

Due to this Rs.54.40 lakh of government funds has been misappropriated by the officials, said the litigant.

Even though a representation was given to the DVAC in regard to the misappropriation, no action has been taken, said the litigant and sought to direct the State to take action. <https://www.dtnext.in/news/tamilnadu/madras-hc-seeks-status-report-of-probe-in-misappropriation-of-pmay-funds-777664>



**16. Protection of water bodies is needed, but who should do it?**  
(*newindianexpress.com*) 03 Apr 2024

BENGALURU: While Bengaluru and surrounding areas are facing a severe water crisis in this scorching summer heat, and the lakes are serving little purpose due to contamination, a debate has now started on who should work on rejuvenation of water bodies and how.

Anand Malligavad, who has been working on reviving water bodies in the outskirts of Bengaluru, faces strong criticism from experts and activists. He has revived 35 lakes since 2016 in panchayat limits, Electronic City, Jigani, Anekal, Kammasandra and Bommasandra. He has been invited by the Uttar Pradesh government to help in cleaning Sangam in Prayagaraj, ahead of the Kumbh Mela, scheduled to be held in 2025, using the natural cleaning models.

“Most lakes in and around Bengaluru have become septic tanks. Studies have also shown that stagnant polluted water is dangerous. Recharge of ground water is not possible if lakes are not desilted. Instead of using construction materials and machines, I use natural methods, floating wetlands and plants that absorb nutrients and clean untreated water, by allowing it to flow down the natural course. Also, 85% of the lake area is filled with natural rain water after rejuvenation and the remaining 15% is allowed to flow with sewage water, where STPs and wetlands are put up,” he said.

He added that silt and sludge that is extracted and collected is used for constructing bund and walkway in the same area.

However activists oppose the idea. Members of Friends of Lakes said, his method left homes around Kammasandra and Bommasandra lakes flooded.

“Residents are also not happy with his working. The lakes which he is working on are in city outskirts and the working is not approved by the government agencies,” the members said.

However the panchayat members of Anekal said: “Some one is doing something, let him do. We are open to suggestions for improvement. He works faster and with lesser funds compared to others.”

Prof TV Ramachandra from Centre for Ecological Sciences, IISc said: “In our system even if something small is happening it is not appreciated. I have spoken to him and given him suggestions as he lacks scientific knowledge. Somebody is doing something, if others have more suggestions, they should give it, instead of criticising.”

Mahesh T, senior environmental officer, Karnataka State Pollution Control Board (KSPCB) said, the Board has heard of Malligavad’s work and as routine exercise water quality will be monitored. So far no complaints have come. Whether [https://www.newindianexpress.com/states/karnataka/2024/Apr/03/protection-of-water-bodies-is-needed-but-who-should-do-itwork\\_order\\_is\\_awarded\\_to\\_an\\_individual\\_or\\_an\\_agency\\_it\\_is\\_upto\\_the\\_custodian\\_of\\_the\\_lake](https://www.newindianexpress.com/states/karnataka/2024/Apr/03/protection-of-water-bodies-is-needed-but-who-should-do-itwork_order_is_awarded_to_an_individual_or_an_agency_it_is_upto_the_custodian_of_the_lake).