NEWS ITEMS ON CAG/ AUDIT REPORTS

1. Where India's disability pension scheme falls short *(idronline.org)* September 5, 2023

India's disability pension scheme, the IGNDPS, is marred by poor compensation, strict verification demands, and exclusionary eligibility criteria. How can we fix it?

According to the 2011 census, India has more than 2.68 crore persons with disabilities (PwDs). The Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPwD) Act, 2016, places responsibility upon the government to enact effective measures that can ensure equal rights for PwDs. The measures would need to provide social protection to PwDs, which can help them overcome inequalities stemming from reduced employment opportunities, added costs associated with disabilities, decreased economic resilience, and other related factors.

One such social protection measure is the Indira Gandhi National Disability Pension Scheme (IGNDPS), which was introduced in 2009 to provide disability pensions of INR 300 to PwDs in the 18–79 age group and INR 500 for those who are 80 years or older. To be eligible for the scheme, an individual must have severe (80 percent or more) or multiple disabilities and must fall below the poverty line. Despite enforcing strict eligibility criteria and providing low pensions to PwDs, the scheme received a reduced budgetary allocation in the Union Budget 2023–24. This reduction has been attributed to the constantly rising underutilisation of the resources allocated to states/UTs for implementing the scheme.

The eligibility criteria of the IGNDPS prevent more than 95 percent of PwDs from accessing its benefits. An analysis of the Survey of Persons with Disabilities (NSS 76th Round) reveals that only 5 percent of PwDs meet the eligibility criteria of the scheme. This finding is even more alarming when we consider that the data used in the survey is from the census 2011 census, which has been notorious for undercounting PwDs.

Why IGNDPS does not work
It is imperative to highlight some of the gaps in the scheme to understand why its success has been limited.

1. Outdated and exclusionary eligibility criteria

The logic of restricting benefits based on the severity or number of disabilities follows from the Persons with Disabilities Act of 1995. Even though the more recent RPwD Act offers special provisions for people with benchmark disabilities (40 percent), the IGNDPS has not been updated to reflect this. The scheme further excludes children with disabilities, and this presents financial challenges for the parents of these children.

As per official sources, the IGNDPS still uses the below poverty line (BPL) census of 2002 to identify which PwDs are poor enough to avail of its benefits. The guidelines of the National Social Assistance Programme (NSAP) hold states/UTs responsible for maintaining the eligible beneficiary database. A recent audit of the NSAP by the

Comptroller and Auditor General of India highlights that only 11 of 35 states and UTs have maintained BPL lists used for identification of beneficiaries. Out of these 11, only Kerala and Haryana had prepared an eligible beneficiaries database. Although the Socio-Economic Caste Census (SECC) of 2011 has replaced the old BPL lists in several welfare schemes for better identification of beneficiaries across welfare schemes, the IGNDPS has not adopted it. Following the old BPL list has led to the exclusion of 84 percent of the PwDs with severe disabilities who fall in the lowest income decile.

Due to the lack of a mandate, the amount reaching beneficiaries is highly skewed across states. | Picture courtesy: UN Women Asia and the Pacific / CC BY

2. Inadequate compensation

The central government provides INR 300 as a monthly pension, recommending states contribute an equivalent amount to provide decent assistance to PwDs in line with the RPwD Act. Due to the lack of a mandate, the amount reaching beneficiaries is highly skewed across states—ranging from INR 300 in Bihar to INR 3,000 in Andhra Pradesh.

As per the RPwD Act, the pension for individuals with disabilities should be at least 25 percent more than comparable schemes for others, accounting for the extra costs related to disability. Despite providing higher pension amounts compared to the INR 200 per month offered by similar schemes for widows/the elderly, it remains inadequate at covering the extra costs of disability.

3. Strict document requirements

To avail of the scheme, an individual must possess the correct documents, including an Aadhaar card and a disability certificate issued by the state. But acquiring an Aadhaar card can be a harrowing experience for PwDs, as Aadhaar enrolment centres often lack wheelchair accessibility and an unsympathetic attitude from the staff results in repeated visits to the centres.

The NSS Survey on Persons with Disabilities (2017–18) indicates that only 28.8 percent of PwDs possess a state-issued disability certificate, which is a prerequisite for accessing the pension. Furthermore, the mandate for a Unique Disability Identity (UDID) to access disability schemes introduces the potential for more exclusion, given the array of difficulties associated with securing a UDID.

4. Lack of social audit of the scheme

In its NSAP guidelines, the Ministry of Rural Development (MRD) mentioned that states should earmark at least 0.5 percent of their total budgetary allocation for social audits of schemes. The social audit of schemes is undertaken by potential beneficiaries and is recognised as crucial to maintaining a scheme's transparency and accountability. In 2018, a letter issued by the MRD stated that states/UTs had not been conducting social audits.

Social audit guidelines and a standard operating procedure were thus prepared in order to launch a pilot to address the failure to audit across 22 states. The reports from this pilot social audit in FY 2021–22 highlighted common implementation gaps across states, including limited awareness, administrative loopholes, and a lack of effective beneficiary targeting as well as administrative data.

Strengthening the IGNDPS

Based on these gaps, the following recommendations can be considered to ensure that the scheme is more beneficial to PwDs.

Relaxing the scheme's eligibility criteria: The scheme should be modified to make the eligibility criteria inclusive of children with disabilities and extend disability pension to all persons with benchmark disability (40 percent disability).

Increasing the disability pension amount: The pension amount under IGNDPS was last updated in 2012 to INR 300 per month from INR 200 per month. The current disability pension is abysmally low and needs to be adjusted regularly based on the Consumer Price Index. Further, states should be mandated to (at least) match the central government's contribution.

Changing the approach to identifying beneficiaries: Various expert committees in the past have recommended that the MRD should use data from the SECC, rather than the BPL lists, to identify beneficiaries. However, doing this would still leave out several eligible PwDs as the SECC too has now become outdated. To address this, the government plans to identify beneficiaries through the National Social Registry. This database will use Aadhaar cards to integrate religion, caste, income, property, education, marital status, employment, disability, and family tree data of every citizen.

Using accurate data: Currently, the 2011 census and Survey of Persons with Disabilities are the two main sources of the prevalence of disability in India. It has been reported that 2.2 percent of the Indian population experience disability. This figure is contested as it grossly underestimates the number of PwDs in India. Further, there is a dearth of disability-specific disaggregated data across sectors such as health, education, poverty alleviation, employment, and justice. Therefore, reliable data should be collected to ensure equitable participation of PwDs as envisaged under the scheme. Additionally, as specified in the NSAP guidelines, states must ensure that all the local authorities are maintaining correct records of beneficiaries and funds. This data should then be uploaded to the NSAP-MIS portal of the MRD.

Streamlining the documentation process: Difficulty in accessing Aadhaar and the poor penetration of disability certificates should not be a roadblock to accessing the scheme. The scheme should therefore serve deserving beneficiaries without any documentation mandates until it achieves 100 percent coverage. Furthermore, various states have implemented the scheme based on different eligibility criteria. For instance, Rajasthan has reduced the severity of disability to 40 percent, whereas Delhi and Kerala use an annual income criterion of below INR 1,00,000 to identify eligible PwDs. This lack of uniformity leaves out beneficiaries and prevents statewise comparisons of the scheme's implementation.

Regularising the social audit process: The MRD should ensure timely appropriation of budgetary costs to enable states to undertake the social audit. The ministry should also push all the states to conduct social audits periodically and make audit reports public to further bolster accountability.

Being the only national-level financial assistance programme for PwDs, the disability pension scheme is of immense significance. Thus, it is essential to focus on its implementation and ensure effective and successful disbursements. Doing so will also uphold the value of leaving no one behind as enshrined in the Sustainable Development Goals. https://idronline.org/article/advocacy-government/where-indias-disability-pension-scheme-falls-short/

2. States use off-Budget borrowing to foot power subsidy bills: CSEP *(business-standard.com)* Sep 05, 2023

According to the report, the aggregate loss of 68 discoms increased by 66 per cent to Rs 50,281 crore in FY21

A large chunk of off-Budget borrowing by states, which own distribution companies, or discoms, are used to foot electricity subsidies, according to a study by the New Delhi-based think tank Centre for Social and Economic Progress (CSEP).

The report, titled "The Nature and Implications of Off-Budget Borrowings in India: Centre and States", says in 2021, the five southern states -- Telangana, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Kerala, and Tamil Nadu -- together accounted for debt worth Rs 2.34 trillion, approximately 93 per cent of the combined off-Budget borrowing by the states.

"State governments, who are the primary owners of the bulk of distribution companies or discoms, spend heavily to pay for electricity subsidies, which has considerably strained the state's finances. Funds are used to cover subsidy costs, infuse capital, cover losses and service debt obligations," the report said.

According to the report, the aggregate losses of 68 discoms increased 66 per cent to Rs 50,281 crore in 2020-21, rendering them incapable of running everyday operations without a capital dump by the states.

Servicing their debt has become a "far-fetched idea".

The report says Andhra Pradesh Power Finance Corporation (PFC) borrowed Rs 15,161 crore in FY21. It is followed by Tangedco, which is a subsidiary of the Tamil Nadu Electricity Board and is responsible for installing thermal/gas/hydro power plants, along with generating renewable energy. It raised Rs 14,700 crore of the state's off-Budget borrowing of Rs 15,396 crore.

Punjab State Power Corporation got Rs 8,238 crore of the Rs 15,550 crore extra-budgetary funds. Telangana spent Rs 2,922 crore on its power companies.

Besides, the report says states drew flak from the Comptroller and Auditor General for not being able to reap the benefits of the Ujwal DISCOM Assurance Yojana, launched in 2015 for reviving power distribution companies, as only 16 states took over the debt obligations of power corporations, while 11 joined to improve their operational efficiencies.

"The financial distress caused by discoms is consistent across states. Guarantees, too, if and when materialised, will add to the debt burden. The power sector accounts for more than 60 per cent of the total outstanding guarantees by the state governments. The 15th Finance Commission was concerned about the financial sustainability of the power sector on account of highly subsidised prices to several consumer groups, including agriculture, as well as the sector's inefficient regulations, and its unattractiveness to the private sector," the report says. https://www.business-standard.com/economy/news/states-use-off-budget-borrowings-to-foot-power-subsidy-bills-csep-study-123090401130_1.html

STATES NEWS ITEMS

3. 5 years after floods, is Kerala equipped for heavy rain? *(hindustantimes.com)* Sep 05, 2023

On August 15, 2018, 40-year-old Jijo Abraham was across the Indian Ocean in Muscat, but his eyes were glued to visuals from Kerala. Terrified, he watched as the television screen showed the river Pampa cascading dangerously into human settlements. Jijo was worried for his parents, for his home which is situated just on the banks of the enraged river.

He remembers calling almost incessantly back home, and hearing his father's breathless voice, the sound of furniture being dragged across the floor as the family desperately shifted furniture and appliances from the ground to the first floor of their two-storey home in Chengannur. "During those days, I would call every few hours to check on them. Till about 2 am, my father had moved most things to higher ground. By then, floodwater had already begun to seep in. That was my last phone conversation with him," Jijo said.

By the time the sun rose, things had turned grim. Floodwaters had engulfed the neighbourhood. Those in single storey homes were evacuated to relief camps in boats and canoes by local fishermen. Abraham's family was, for the most part, safely ensconced on the first floor, waiting for the rain to subside. But at one point in the morning, Jijo's father, CG Abraham stepped out and braved the shoulder-high water to bring his sister-in-law, who lived nearby, home. On the way, he found time to assist locals to carry a generator from a nearby church to higher ground.

He returned securely, but at 8.30 am, waded out into the water again, to shut the front gate. "He didn't return for a while, and I stepped downstairs to look for him," said his wife Soshamma. The water was ice-cold; the current so strong that the 63-year-old woman could barely stand. Desperate, she persisted, and stumbled through, only to find her husband lay prone next to a tree. He was breathing, but barely; it was clear that he had slipped and fallen into the water. Within minutes, the shallow sound of air whistling through his nose was gone and he was dead.

Jijo was in disbelief, but for the family in Chengannur, there was no time for grief. The water was still rising, and there was no sign of a rescue mission. So, for two days and two nights, the 63-year-old Soshamma and her sister-in-law, sat with the body tied to a staircase to prevent it from flowing away. Jijo flew in on the 18th, and only when he called everyone he could- the local legislator, journalists, and local officials- his family was evacuated.

Five years later, Jijo's two storey home, white and brown with a green roof still stands, but carries the markers of the Kerala's "nootandile pralayam"(flood of the century) that claimed lives of 480 and affected over five million people, swallowing homes, panchayat offices and large tracts of paddy fields in areas like Chengannur. In one corner of the living room, for instance, the plaster continues to peel off despite being painted several times over, showcasing the structural damage to the home.

In many ways, the flood was a watershed moment in the state's ecological history, raised pertinent questions about the state of rivers and streams, dam management, disaster preparedness and quality of weather alerts.

Half a decade on, HT spent time in Chengannur, speaking to victims and officials to understand if the state was equipped to handle another deluge or not.

What went wrong

Between August 1 and August 30, 2018, Kerala received 821 mm of rainfall as against a normal of 419.3 mm, a departure classified by the India Meteorological Department(IMD) as "large excess". A report submitted by the state relief commissioner of the state disaster management authority (SDMA) in September 2018 noted that the extreme rainfall came in two batches, from 8-10 August in northern Kerala and 15-17 August to the south.

Except, for such a prodigious amount of rainfall(the first twenty days of August broke a 87 year record), there was no warning. 62-year-old Pushpavally Kunjamma, who has a home that stands less than 500 metres from the Pampa, said that waterlogging during the monsoons was not unusual. So when it started to rain, she did not think much of it. "But that day, the water rose fast. I was at home with my elder daughter and her two children aged three and two. By the evening, the water had entered my kitchen. I knew if we waited, we would drown. We picked up our identity cards, property certificates and just left. There was no warning, and there was no time," she said.

The SDRF (State Disaster Response Force) report had red flagged this lack of warning, noting that the IMD had issued a red alert in four districts on August 15, but the eventual rainfall showed that a red alert should have been issued in all 14 districts. A red alert is issued for 'heavy to very heavy rainfall' ranging between 115.6 mm and 204.4 mm.

A second report by the National Institute of Disaster Management into the floods said that the rainfall till the end of July, that was at 857.4 mm higher than the July average of 726.1 mm, had meant that all 35 major reservoirs in the state were close to the full reservoir level (FRL). "They had no buffer storage to accommodate the heavy inflows from 8th August onwards. The continued exceptional heavy rainfall in August in catchment areas compelled authorities to resort to heavy releases downstream. This led to overflowing of river banks which in turn led to widespread flooding," the report, released in 2020 said.

Overall, the SDMA report outlined, 9,500 kilometres of roads were destroyed, over 10,000 homes fully damaged, 99,000 partly damaged and over 65,000 hectares of land inundated for days.

The things that have changed

One of the first things the Pinarayi Vijayan government announced after the floods was the 'Rebuild Kerala Initiative' (RKI)- an expansive policy framework that would prepare the state for future disasters. The core aim, the chief minister said, was to rebuild the state but from the perspective of climate resilience; from establishing 'civil defence forces' to strengthening wetland monitoring mechanisms; to a central command centre for reservoir management.

Sekhar L Kuriakose, member secretary of the Kerala SDMA said that several important facets of these have been worked on in the past five years. "One of the primary projects under the RKI is that we have published flood susceptibility maps. Whether it is policy or legal interventions, they are now part of risk-informed master planning," Kuriakose said.

A key issue in 2018, that led to bitter criticism by the opposition, was improper dam management that many believe accentuated the crisis. These concerns were given heft by a 2021 Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) report tabled in the state assembly that said, "Communication infrastructure was non-functional in some areas including dam sites and government offices during or subsequent to the 2018 floods...the responsible authorities failed to issue mandatory alerts or warning when the rain situation deteriorated," the report said.

Professor R Ramakumar, an expert member of the Kerala State Planning Board, said there are now better protocols in place. "We now have warning systems in place to alert locals when shutters are opened to release excess water. Blue, orange and red alerts now exist when sluice gates are opened depending on the urgency," Ramakumar said.

Similarly, Ramakumar said, there are time appropriate mechanisms to relocate people to relief camps and safer areas in landslide-prone zones. "There are also 'karma senas' or action teams deployed at the panchayat level to respond to disasters," he said.

A major area where the government says it has made serious interventions is the clean-up of existing rivers, streams, and canals as well as the reclamation of river systems that disappeared in recent decades.

In Chengannur, for instance, before 2018, the Illimala-Moozhikkal stream, once an important rivulet of the river Pampa that coursed through four panchayats, was clogged with sediment and solid waste. A natural drainage system, its health is key to releasing the pressure on Pampa, particularly during floods.

Between April 2021 and March 2022, the 12 kilometre stream was finally de-silted and cleaned, officials said.

The things that haven't

But 8 kilometres away from Puliyoor, under the Cheloorkadavu bridge in Edanadu, there is evidence of continued infringement, and not everything has been accomplished yet. In the year 2013, a project to revive the river Varattar, a system that was once believed to be the original course of the Pampa, but has since disappeared, was launched. There was a full-fledged campaign that included participation from the local stakeholder- panchayats, legislators and ministers- under the name "Varatte Aaru". But the floods in 2018 ruined a lot of that work, with large scale deposits of silt and mud. With barely any work since then, the river has dried up again; the river-bed is over-run by weeds and invasive plants.

The year 2022 saw the "second phase" of the rejuvenation project launched, but on the ground, there has been little progress over the last six months. On one side of the Cheloorkadavu bridge, the river is barely deep. On the other side, the river is visibly narrowing, hemmed in by banks with wild plant growing.

PR Pradeep Kumar, a CPI leader and former councilor admitted that this was once a "big river". "It used to be called the Adi Pampa as it was the earlier form of Pampa. It was a big river, but has now shrunk considerably to resemble a stream. Work has now started to clear the encroachments on both sides so that it can absorb the excess water from Pampa. It is an important instrument of flood control," he said.

CR Neelakandan, a prominent environmental activist and writer said that the only achievement that the Kerala government could boast of, was dam management. "We can say that the way excess water is released from them is better. That is the only positive from my perspective," he said.

Neelakandan said "Encroachment of rivers has also increased, and while they are being cleaned, there is no scientific process followed. This has led to uneven sand banks on river beds." https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/surviving-the-deluge-kerala-s-flood-of-the-century-and-the-long-road-to-recovery-101693855539946.html

SELECTED NEWS ITEMS/ARTICLES FOR READING

4. Army to buy next generation armoured recovery vehicles for plains and mountains *(theprint.in)* September 5, 2023

Request for Information issued Tuesday for procurement of these vehicles from Indian vendors. Army currently uses BEML-built ARVs which are based on T-72 tank hulls.

The Indian Army plans to procure 170 tracked Armoured Recovery Vehicles (ARVs) to operate in plain, semi-desert and desert terrain along with high altitude and mountainous terrain.

A Request for Information (RFI) was issued Tuesday by the Army for the procurement of these vehicles from Indian vendors.

These vehicles are needed for recovery of tanks and heavy equipment in case of breakdowns during an operation. The Army currently uses state-run BEML built, which are based on Russian-made T-72 tank hulls.

Multiple Indian companies like the Kalyani Group, Mahindra, Tata and L&T are expected to respond to the RFI besides state-run BEML among others.

Given the various terrains that it operates in, the Army requires the ARVs to be able to operate in plain, semi-desert and desert terrain along the western borders, as well as, high altitude and mountainous terrain as occurring along the northern borders such as eastern Ladakh, central sector and North Sikkim.

Specifying the weather conditions, the Army stated that the ARV should operate day and night and in conditions such as snowy, rainy, dusty and sandy, commonly encountered in both terrains.

In desert terrain, while the vehicle should be able to sustain a minimum operating temperature of 0° to 5° Celsius, it should also be able to sustain a maximum temperature of 40° to 45° Celsius.

In high altitude and mountainous terrain, while the vehicles must tolerate a minimum operating temperature of (-) 20° to (-)10° Celsius, the maximum must be at 40° Celsius.

As for the engine capabilities, the RFI states that the requirement is of a diesel fuel-based engine or power packed turbocharged system. It should be capable of starting in sub-zero conditions.

"Armoured Workshops having armoured fighting vehicles on repair load are often required to provide repair and recovery cover to disabled Armoured Fighting Vehicles (AFVs) during operations under hostile conditions," the Army said in its RFI, regarding the operational requirements of the vehicles.

It added that the tracked ARVs will then provide repair and recovery during operations.

One of the requirements of the Army is that it should possess adequate cross-country mobility and protection.

Since the vehicle will perform a repair and recovery role, it should carry at least six persons including the driver and commander and utility equipment such as crane, dozer, winches, general tools and special maintenance tools, ancillary equipment to undertake repair and recovery roles.

The vehicle should have an operational life of at least 32 years with maximum one overhaul or major repair intervention. It should be capable of being transported by existing in-service tank transporter vehicles of the Army, IAF transport aircraft and broad-gauge railway military bogey.

When it comes to weapon systems, the vehicle will have one Remote Controlled Weapon Station (RCWS) with an in-service 12.7 mm anti-aircraft machine gun and smoke grenade launcher. It should also be capable of detecting chemical agents and nuclear radiations for protection of the crew. https://theprint.in/defence/army-to-buy-next-generation-armoured-recovery-vehicles-for-plains-and-mountains/1746961/

5. Three years after forming seven new defence PSUs, govt mulls merger of five units: Report *(moneycontrol.com)* September 4, 2023

The government is exploring the possibility of merging five of the seven new defence public undertakings (DPSUs) in under three years of forming them from the former Ordnance Factory Board (OFB), according to a report in the Times of India dated September 2.

According to the report, SBI Caps has received the mandate to facilitate the merger of five PSUs, which includes merging Yantra India Limited in Nagpur with Munitions India Limited in Pune, and merging Troops Comforts Limited (TCL) and Gliders India Limited (GIL) in Kanpur along with India Optel Limited (IOL) in Dehradun with Bangalore-based Bharat Electronics Limited (BEL).

The production units of the Ordnance Factory Board were converted into seven defence public undertakings, comprising 41 units, effective October 1, 2021, to boost operational independence, and efficiency, and foster innovation within the ordnance factories.

The newly established defence public undertakings would possess increased functional and financial independence, and heightened accountability, enabling them to better assimilate new technologies, the government said while announcing the split of the entities. https://www.moneycontrol.com/news/india/three-years-after-forming-seven-new-defence-psus-govt-mulls-merger-of-five-units-report-11308981.html

6. DRDO restructuring must not be delayed *(thestatesman.com)* September 5, 2023

The government last week announced the formation of a nine member panel, comprising former defence personnel, academia and industry, under the chairmanship of Vijay Raghavan, former Principal Scientific Advisor to the Government, to undertake a detailed assessment of the DRDO (Defence Research and Development Organization). This follows years of complaints on its functioning and output by all stakeholders including the armed forces. The committee is to submit its final report within three months.

The primary task of the committee is to consider restructuring and redefining the role of the DRDO, streamline its research efforts, foster cooperation with foreign entities and rationalize its laboratories. It would also devise strategies to enable it to attract talent, retain skilled personnel and build an environment conducive to innovation and research. All earlier committees including the Kargil, Shekatkar and Rama Rao committees have recommended its revamping, but nothing moved.

The DRDO was formed in 1958 by amalgamating the Technical Development Establishment of the army and the Directorate of Technical Develop- ment and

Production with the Defence Science Organization. Its journey commenced with 10 establishments and laboratories which have currently grown to 52 laboratories, all engaged in research in multiple domains. Its staff comprises of approximately 30,000 of which only 30 per cent belong to the scientific community.

Its vision statement is ‘empowering the nation with state of the art indigenous defence technologies and systems,’ while one of its missions is,‘design, develop and lead to production state of the art sensors, weapon systems, platforms and allied equipment for our defence services.’ It has failed in both. The DRDO’s budget was enhanced by 9 per cent this year to Rs 23,260 crores of which approximately 12,850 crores are for R & D. Nationally, India allocates only 0.7 per cent of its budget for R & D, which is low, especially when we consider shortfalls in technology.

In December 2019, the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Defence tabled a report which stated, “The committee stresses the need for a complete revamp and re orientation of DRDO functions.” It added that the DRDO needs to enhance collaboration with the private sector and aca- demia. It stressed that the organization should concentrate on research only in fields where capability weak- nesses exist in India.

There is no doubt that the DRDO has delivered missile technology with little progress in other fields, which remains a matter of concern. Where it has delivered, it has been after con- siderable delays and cost overruns, resulting in dissatisfaction amongst the services. In the pre-Aatmanirbhar days, when India imported most of its defence needs, all defence procurement demands were routed through the DRDO, which then suggested which technologies they could deliver and when. Classic examples include Anti-tank guided missiles and UAVs.

In most cases the government accepted their suggestions and blocked procurements ignoring requests of the armed forces. At the end of the day, either the promised prototype was never delivered or what was fielded was way below specifications sought by the forces and that too after prolonged delay.

The result was that capabilities essential for national security were left short. Their hold and power over procurements were legendary. The DRDO also avoids involving the private sector, which the government is currently keen to incorporate. Like the Ordnance Factory Board (OFB), the DRDO is also a PSU and like the OFB it failed to meet its targets. The government scrapped the OFB and converted its factories into seven defence PSUs. These are now producing results. They are competing in open tenders with the private sector without any special consideration. It is the turn of the DRDO to be similarly revamped.

It may be incorrect to compare two diverse organizations but while ISRO successfully launched Chan- drayaan 3, the DRDO failed to produce even the basic weapon system, the rifle. It is not that ISRO has an unlimited budget while DRDO does not. India’s space budget is amongst the lowest in the world while its accomplishments surpass almost the best. ISRO did so largely employing indigenous technologies and involved the academia and the private sector at every stage, which should also have been the approach of the DRDO.

For DRDO to claim that defence applications are largely delinked from dual use technologies is also incor- rect, especially in the current age. Its lack of success is possibly because of its work ethos, lack of collaboration with other sectors and misplaced priorities. The change in performance of the erstwhile OFB factories is testament that a change in organization structure can prove advantageous.

What is essential is that the DRDO must stick to research on major technological national short- comings. Even in these fields it should collaborate with academia and the private sector as is being done by ISRO. Laboratories, earmarked for research in other fields, should either be closed or privatised.

The government has already earmarked 25 per cent of its defence R&D budget for the private sector. This could be increased. The government regularly announcing negative lists for procurement implies that R&D needs to be given more credence. Additionally the national R & D budget should be raised from 0.7 to 1 per cent ini- tially and steadily higher.

Unless the DRDO, which is the backbone of R & D within the country, gets its act together, issuing negative lists would be meaningless. ISRO has shown that results do not flow from scientists emerging from IITs alone but from cohesion, a conducive working environment and teamwork including the academia and the pri- vate sector.

The DRDO could also become a hub for coordinating research being conducted by the private sector and the academia in multiple fields, while it itself concentrates on specific fields. It does not need to adopt the US's DARPA (Defence Advanced Research Projects Agency) model, which is just a funding body. It could handle coordination with simultaneous research.

Multiple committees have recommended revamping of the DRDO, over the years, but to no avail. The last such committee was in August 2020 under Dr Ramagopal Rao, Director IIT, Delhi. Its report also appears to have been buried. The current committee has been established as the PMO finally appears concerned about the tepid performance of the DRDO. Hopefully, this time there will be some positive outcome. https://www.thestatesman.com/opinion/drdo-restructuring-must-not-be-delayed-1503218650.html

7. Seeking corporate funding, ASI begins 'Adopt a Heritage 2.0' scheme *(hindustantimes.com)* September 5, 2023

The Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) on Monday launched the "Adopt a Heritage 2.0" programme under which corporates are invited to fund amenities at monuments from their corporate social responsibility (CSR) funds.

G Kishan Reddy, Union minister of culture and tourism, said the programme seeks to foster collaborations with corporate stakeholders through which companies can contribute to the preservation of monuments for the generations to come.

"Central and state agencies, social organisations such as trusts, institutions, NGOs, corporate offices and stakeholders should come forward to adopt heritage monuments.

The aim of "Adopt a Heritage 2.0" programme is to enhance the visitor experience at centrally protected monuments, improve amenities, and bolster the culture and heritage value of the country," said Reddy.

The programme is a revamped version of the scheme launched in 2017 by the tourism ministry.

Stakeholders can apply to adopt a monument or specific amenities at a monument through a dedicated web portal with www.indianheritage.gov.in, which contains details of monuments that are up for adoption along with gap analysis and financial estimation of amenities.

Meenakashi Lekhi, Union minister of state for culture, said the scheme has been relaunched after addressing gaps in the earlier version. "We have redone the scheme since there were gaps in the previous scheme that needed to be fixed. This is happening at an opportune moment since the G20 presidency is an opportunity to showcase the cultural heritage of our country," said Lekhi, during the launch of the programme at Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts.

She said while India is dotted with plenty of monuments, they are not valued enough by people. Seeking the cooperation of stakeholders, she said it was time to protect our collective heritage. "Just as heritage lies abandoned, a whole lot of corporate funds go unused...It's time to reclaim our heritage since arts and crafts cannot survive without patronage. It's time to come together and identify the gaps," said Lekhi.

The minister added that the process for selection of stakeholders for heritage adoption will be carried out after due diligence and discussions with various stakeholders and assessment of the economic and developmental opportunities at each monument.

In addition to the launch of the revamped programme, a mobile app showcasing heritage monuments of India (Indian Heritage Atlas) and a permission portal, which will digitise the process of obtaining permission for filming at monuments, were also launched.

Lekhi said the permission portal will make it easier for people to secure necessary permits for shooting and other activities. "People continuously call us and seek help in getting permission for shooting or photography at various places. To increase transparency and smooth functioning, we have launched the permission portal," she said.

Across the country, ASI has 3,696 monuments under its protection. Under the previous scheme, around four to five monuments, including the Red Fort, were adopted by various corporate entities.

Gurmeet Chawla, additional director general (administration), said the previous scheme included a number of stakeholders and layers whereas the revamped scheme focused solely on ASI-protected monuments. "Earlier, there was not enough clarity on how the funds from revenue-generating activities such as light and sound shows or interpretation centres will be treated. Now, we have specified clearly that this is not a profit generating scheme and the funds generated will be used on the monument itself. We have also told them that we will give them credit in a limited manner at the monument in such a manner that the credit board gels with the aesthetics and ethos of the monument," said Chawla. https://www.hindustantimes.com/cities/delhi-news/seeking-corporate-funding-asi-begins-adopt-a-heritage-2-0-scheme-101693852175081.html

8. Carbon market: Good intent, hard to implement *(financialexpress.com)* September 5, 2023

Such a market will need high CO2 taxes to go. There's no clarity if India is headed there

An ambition to develop carbon market—the government recently announced a National Steering Committee—is a welcome development. It reflects political and economic maturity to use competition as the preferred option to achieve the desired policy objectives. It is particularly interesting because the tradeable commodity i.e., carbon emission reduction, is a notional construct. It was devised to internalize an externality (negative consequence of a process, in this case emission of greenhouse gases) into prices of goods and services.

However, the proposed design and architecture requires refinement on multiple fronts, including economic, legal, financial, and administrative.

First and foremost, while the Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC) was updated almost a year ago, there was no explicit recognition that the carbon market will serve as the primary mechanism to drive NDC commitments. Not linking the policy objective to the instrument will be a missed opportunity, likely resulting in higher economic cost.

Economic theory prescribes compliance (carbon tax) route or market mechanism route to internalize externalities. These two options, developed by two famed British economists i.e., Arthur Cecil Pigou (Pigovian Tax) and Ronald Coase (Coase Theorem), are considered as two ends of the spectrum and mutually exclusive.

India already imposes high implicit carbon taxes on all forms of fossil fuels. Therefore, development of a carbon market must go hand in hand with rationalizing taxes by bringing energy in the GST framework. Since there is no recognition of this fact, it is likely that carbon market and high taxes may co-exist.

Further, the framework proposes that existing compliance mechanisms such as Renewable Portfolio Obligations and Energy Efficiency Targets may remain applicable. Therefore, targets under the carbon market appear additional, over, and above existing requirements. Hence, some key sectors of the economy may be subject to multiple requirements. This will increase the cost of production, directly by increasing the cost of energy, and indirectly through multiple compliance requirements.

From economic standpoint, this construct appears inconsistent with the ambition to accelerate growth, in-particular to rapidly expand manufacturing. It has also been proposed that carbon market is a response to EU's Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM). This appears stretched, because an easier approach would be to simply rename the existing taxes as carbon taxes.

Carbon markets in Europe and US evolved because of lack of political consensus on national policy for mitigation and regulatory provisions, such as carbon tax. In India, that is not the case. We have an ambitious mitigation plan combined with high implicit carbon taxes. Therefore, we believe that carbon market is a strategic policy choice, adopted as a conscious strategy. The need to rationalise energy taxes is a consequence of this strategic choice.

More broadly, while markets are generally better than alternatives such as taxes, we need to recognise that real world markets need to be designed well to minimise inefficiencies and maximise the desired outcomes. So, details matter. Following aspects need to be carefully considered.

First, the fundamental design principle is to minimise the transaction costs by keeping rules simple. This improves viability, enabling higher investment and innovative business models. Operationalising the proposed scheme appears administratively complex due to involvement of multiple ministries (ministry of power, ministry of environment, forests, and climate change) and agencies (the Central Electricity Regulatory Commission, the Bureau of Energy Efficiency, the Steering Committee, etc). This will likely increase costs and reduce demand. Instead, focus should be on maximising carbon mitigation through discovery of least cost options.

Second, should the existing emissions be allocated free and grandfathered? There are pros and cons. Grandfathering is more acceptable and administratively simpler. On the other hand, while a detailed baselining requires effort, it is fairer since it encourages innovators and early movers. We recommend free allocation to start with, benchmarked to the industry best practice. Beyond best practice, permits should be purchased. For hard-to-abate sectors, baselines can be adjusted gradually as technologies evolve and pilots demonstrate success.

Third, generating meaningful demand will be the key to success. Experience from the REC and ESCert markets indicates that a combination of flexible regulation, financially unviable buyers (power distribution companies) and supplier enthusiasm resulted in an oversupplied market. Therefore, the market design needs to identify buyers with willingness and capability. Further, clear financial penalties need to be applied to those failing to meet the regulatory requirement.

The regulatory framework for the scheme requires further refinements. The CERC has been designated as the regulator. However, this may be challenged since the carbon market is being implemented under the Energy Conservation (Amendment) Act, 2023, while CERC derives authority under the Electricity Act, 2003.

Further, clarity is required on the regulation of carbon derivatives, such as futures and options. Since mitigation projects take several years, a market mechanism for trading in futures is essential. It is integral for efficient mitigation options to be discovered and adopted. We need to learn from the previous experience of jurisdictional conflict between CERC and FMC/SEBI.

Last but not the least, fungibility of various instruments (RECs, ESCerts) will need to be specified domestically, at-least till carbon credits become the standard. Likewise, market participants will expect international fungibility to optimise meeting their obligations. Therefore, monitoring and verification protocols will need to be aligned to global standards.

Markets, if designed well can be more efficient and lead to least cost solutions. As Coase theorem states, “If there are zero transaction costs, the efficient outcome will occur regardless…” Let’s follow the mantra to design a carbon market that minimises the transaction costs and maximises carbon mitigation. https://www.financialexpress.com/opinion/carbon-market-good-intent-hard-to-implement/3232973/

9. Punjab: Sapling @ Rs 1.66 lakh, brick Rs 400! MGNREGA buy raises stink *(tribuneindia.com)* 05 Sep 2023

As strange as it may sound, a brick was purchased at Rs 400, a cement bag at Rs 3,500 and a sapling at Rs 1,66,750 in the Gidderbaha Assembly segment for the development work done under Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) between 2017-18 and 2021-22.

PURCHASE UNDER THE SCANNER

Item	Amount
Sapling	₹1,66,750
390 bricks	₹1,56,000
350 bricks	₹1,40,000
Cement (15 bags)	₹52,500

Muktsar DC has ordered a probe into the alleged irregularities.

The information was provided by the Department of Rural Development and Panchayats under the Right to Information (RTI) Act. RTI activist Karandeep Singh of Roranwali village in the Lambi Assembly segment said: “If a fair probe is conducted, a multi-crore scam will be exposed and a number of officers will be found guilty.”

As per the information, bill number 114 shows that a sapling was purchased for Rs 1,66,750 from Parmod Kumar on November 18, 2018. As per bill number 112, as many as 390 bricks were bought for Rs 1,56,000 on April 1, 2020. Similarly, bill number 123 shows 350 bricks were purchased for Rs 1,40,000 on February 12, 2020. As per bill number 47, as many as 15 units of cement were bought for Rs 52,500 for beautification of Chatteana village on December 22, 2017. The Congress was in power in the state during the period.

The RTI activist said he had sent a complaint in this regard to the Chief Minister's Office, Deputy Commissioner and other senior officers. "As per the documents, some daily-wagers have worked for 400 to 1,100 days in a year," he claimed.

Officials of the Department of Rural Development and Panchayats said it could be the fault of a data entry operator. "However, the truth will come out after a probe. It is astounding that a brick is shown purchased at Rs 400 and a cement bag at Rs 3,500," they added.

Meanwhile, Muktsar DC Ruhee Dugg said, "I have marked a probe to the Gidderbaha SDM. An assistant panchayat officer's services were terminated last month." https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/punjab/sapling-rs-1-66-lakh-brick-rs-400-mgnrega-buy-raises-stink-541324

10. As Bengal Govt's Political tussle with the Union Plays Out, Children's Nutrition Has Suffered most *(thewire.in)* 05 Sep 2023

Kolkata: At the heart of the expansive Shonagachi Tea Estate in north Bengal, the Shishualaya – literally 'abode for children' – was a key place for workers.

Here, children under six received their early education and meals. But of late, the rice and dal in the pots seem to be running out faster than usual. Eggs, which used to be served earlier are now a distant memory.

Rima Oraon, an Anganwadi worker, couldn't hide her frustration. "We don't have enough money for rice and dal and salt, let alone eggs. And the government insists that only if we finish online accounting and record keeping for the earlier meals can we get money for future meals. Don't they understand the challenges we face?" she asks.

The children around Rima are in various stages of play. Some have hoisted themselves up on a window. Others are running around. Maybe there will be some lessons, maybe there will be a meal.

Rima was told she would get an Android phone that would help her with the mandatory online record keeping. But no such phone arrived. She initially visited cyber cafes but they proved very expensive, leading her to abandon the process entirely.

As an Anganwadi worker, Rima is in charge of mothers and their children of up to five years. The mothers and children of many as 262 households depend on this Shishualaya's meals everyday.

Since June, funds had dried up, leaving Rima to borrow from local kirana stores. Eventually, the shopkeepers' goodwill waned.

Rima has told the government's Integrated Child Development Services authorities that she has only been feeding khichdi to children. But her pleas have not led to action.

At lunch time when The Wire visited, some children chimed, “Didi, we want eggs.” Rima says the household must suspects that she makes off with the money for eggs. “But that is not true,” she says.

Over the past three months, a persistent demand for eggs has become a source of concern for Anganwadi workers across the state. The initial plan of the Bengal government had aimed to provide one whole egg three times a week to children attending approximately the 120,000 Anganwadi centres across the state.

To support this initiative, a daily allocation of Rs 6.50 per child was decided. Eggs would be given on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. Pregnant mothers were also included in the plan, with an allocation of Rs 7.34 for eggs and vegetables, supplemented by an extra Rs 0.84 for potatoes. For Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday, the allocation for children was adjusted to half an egg, at a cost of Rs 4.34, inclusive of Rs. 1.09 for vegetables.

In February of 2023, Smriti Irani, the Union minister of women and child development, raised concerns over the appropriate utilisation of funds designated for the ICDS scheme in Bengal. Bengal minister of state (independent charge) of the same department, Shashi Panja, said there was no such ICDS money lying unspent. She said that the Bengal government has instead been raising concerns about reduced fund allocations and delayed disbursements for the ICDS.

Since June this year, the Mamata Banerjee government has entirely stopped disbursing financial support for essentials like eggs and vegetables under the ICDS, leading to a lack of crucial nutritional aid for young children and expectant mothers.

“The state government is pressuring Anganwadi workers to manage multiple centres since new hiring has practically ceased. How many centres can an Anganwadi worker effectively handle when she also needs to prepare and provide nourishing meals to mothers and children, and accompany them to nearby hospitals? Consequently, even though the centres are technically operational on paper, the workers are facing significant challenges in running them. Due to a lack of government funds, arranging food has become a struggle,” stated Ratna Dutta, general secretary of the Paschimbanga Rajya ICDS Karmi Samiti, an organisation with a membership of over 70,000 workers.

As the dispute between the state and central authorities continues, it is Anganwadi workers like Rima Oraon who keep borrowing money to ensure that children continue eating.

“During the COVID pandemic, many centres were forced to shut down, which was devastating for children and expecting mothers. As the dispute between the central and state governments continues, these centres are again facing critical challenges. The government must ensure these facilities remain functional regardless of the ongoing circumstances,” said Sabir Ahmed, a researcher working on maternal and child health, nutrition, and education at the Pratichi Trust founded by Nobel laureate Amartya Sen.

Across the state, many Anganwadi centres are in dire condition without proper kitchens or toilets. In recent times, there were multiple reports on local media of unhygienic and contaminated food being provided to children and expecting mothers.

Like Rima, other Anganwadi workers in the state have also made complaints of their inability to update the Poshan Tracker – the real-time mobile application brought by the Ministry of Women and Child Development to track nutritional parameters. Anganwadi workers were expected to note down key parameters including height, weight and the circumference of a child's arms.

In West Bengal, an Anganwadi worker receives a monthly salary of Rs 8,250, while a helper receives Rs 6,300. The workers are advocating for the implementation of a minimum wage, provision of smartphones, and an additional Rs 500 per month for internet connectivity to update the Poshan app. As per Poshan Tracker, the state has 109,454 registered workers and another 98,787 helpers.

While the Union government has allocated funds to procure smartphones for the Anganwadi workers, the West Bengal government is yet to start initiative. Many Anganwadi workers The Wire spoke to said the lack of a smart phone, lack of connectivity and language barriers make it an impossible exercise.

"This scheme cannot be stalled for any reason. It is one of the most important flagship projects in the country," said the former editor of Anandabazar Patrika, Anirban Chattopadhyay, who has been working on developmental economics.

"There is a huge problem of infrastructure, the workers are also ignored. Our civil society is silent on these issues. The project must be continued at any cost, now is not the time to see who is at fault, the centre or the state," added Chattopadhyay. https://thewire.in/rights/poshan-tracker-anganwadi-icds-bengal-centre

11. Centre tells Telangana to probe misuse of Beti Bachao funds *(newindianexpress.com)* 05 September 2023

A total of Rs 71.14 lakh, was reportedly spent on activities such as wall writings, cultural events and online publicity to promote BBBP, as indicated in a service book.

The Ministry of Women and Child Development has issued directives to the State Women and Child Welfare Department to conduct a thorough investigation into allegations of misuse of Rs 71.14 lakh sanctioned for the Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao (BBBP) initiative in Karimnagar district.

Deputy director of the women and child department for BBBP, Rachana Bolimera, wrote to Bharati Holikeri, special secretary, of the department for women, children, disabled, and senior citizens, expressing her concern over the lack of action against erring officers for the past 17 months. In her letter, she urged for the recovery of misused funds from the officers responsible.

The matter came to light when BJP senior leader and advocate B Mahender Reddy filed a complaint with the Prime Minister's Office regarding the alleged misuse of funds. Subsequently, the case was transferred to the BBBP wing for further investigation.

Speaking to the media, Mahender Reddy said that the Union government had allocated Rs 93.70 lakh for Karimnagar district for the years 2018-19 and 2019-20 to create awareness and safeguard the education of children under the BBBP scheme.

A total of Rs 71.14 lakh, was reportedly spent on activities such as wall writings, cultural events and online publicity to promote BBBP, as indicated in the service book. However, there was little evidence of the actual utilisation of these funds for their intended purposes.

An inquiry into the issue of misuse of funds was conducted by inquiry officer V Padmavati, who submitted her report to the State Women and Child Welfare Department on February 15, 2022. Despite the findings, no action has been taken against the officers responsible for the misuse of the funds.

The BJP leader called upon the state women and child welfare special secretary to take prompt and decisive action against the two officers involved in the alleged misappropriation of BBBP funds. https://www.newindianexpress.com/states/telangana/2023/sep/05/centre-tells-telangana-to-probe-misuse-of-beti-bachaofunds-2611761.html

12. Huge money spent on Forest-Closures using Substandard Material, devoid of specifications *(thenorthlines.com)* September 5, 2023

Shocking it may sound but the fact of the matter is that forest division Reasi has reportedly spent crores of rupees to build a Closure for an area of around 35-40 kanals with nominal or no fresh plantation.

According to sources, officials of the forest division Reasi, ostensibly to conserve and develop green spaces, reportedly built a Forest-Closure allegedly by using sub standard material and deficient structure, causing huge loss to the state exchequer.

"The local authorities are accountable for this loss in the division. Officers, including block officers, ranger officers, and the Divisional Forest Officer (DFO) must answer to the sub standard work," said sources, adding "They should also answer whether the responsibility of this use of substandard material and high scale bungling solely lies with contractors or if government officials are also involved in this scandal?"

Sources shared that there is huge quality differentiation in the requisite material and the material used on the ground.

"Concrete work appears to have been done without proper depth of plinth and levelling, raising questions about the project's structural integrity. There is an inappropriate ratio of sand, gravel and cement in the construction of the concrete structure," said sources, adding that even the iron poles and angles are not of good standard, that would not sustain the vagaries of weather and also intrusion of wild animals.

Sources who are in the know of the entire execution of the project said that this loss is not a personal loss to any of the officers of the forest department, but it certainly their connivance to some beneficial deal out of the bounty is not ruled out.

“The officers of the forest department were duty bound to keep check on the quality and quantity of the material being used by the contractor, but unfortunately they preferred to stay inside their cozy offices, thus resulting into the present mess,” said sources, adding that even a non-technical person can question the quality of work done.

They said instead of constructing a reinforced concrete plinth beam, they just threw cement on the ‘unlevelled' ground and the same has started ripping off, exposing ‘quality work' of the forest department.

“Furthermore, there is a notable absence of a mandatory public information boards mentioning the details of the project executed like the number of trees planted, the extent of the Closure area, name of the project, its cost and other mandatory details about the materials used, such as poles and barbed wire,” said sources, adding that for such a huge Closure, a retired forest official confided that there should have been plantation over 10, 000 plants of trees, but in present case not more than 700-800 plants had been planted.

He said that even out of those few plants, many would have perished because of mismanagement by the officials of the forest department.

“The plants were sowed in the month of June, making it certain that they will perish as hot summers is not a proper period for the plantation,” stated sources, adding that the main purpose of building this closure was to fulfil personal interests.

Meanwhile, highlighting the stark contrast between the alleged corruption and the ideals of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's slogan, “Na Khaye Gay na Khane Denge” (We will neither indulge in corruption nor allow it), locals vowed to write to the Prime Minister's office to seek intervention, as they believe that the Division Office Reasi has disregarded the essence of this slogan and of the project.

“Any individual attempting to expose corruption within the Forest Division Reasi is reportedly facing pressure and intimidation from the Divisional Forest Officer (DFO),” maintained sources, adding that now the locals are urging the Lieutenant Governor and the Principal Secretary to intervene immediately and establish a committee to conduct a thorough and transparent investigation into the matter.

When contacted, forest officials not only refused to speak over the matter, but also threatened the journalists of moving in and around the Closure for further gathering of the information.. https://thenorthlines.com/huge-money-spent-on-forest-closures-using-substandard-material-devoid-of-specifications/

13. AYUSH Jharkhand allegedly hacked, records of 320,000 patients leaked *(business-standard.com)* Sep 5, 2023

Cyber threat analysis company CloudSEK on Monday reported that personally identifiable information (PII) and medical diagnoses of over 320,000 patients, along with sensitive data about doctors, were found to have been leaked on the dark web from the Ministry of AYUSH website for Jharkhand.

The breach was initiated by a threat actor who goes by the name ‘Tanaka’, and the compromised data included sensitive information about doctors, such as their PII, login credentials, usernames, passwords, and phone numbers. Information about 500 login credentials, some in cleartext (unencrypted form), was exposed on the dark web.

The website for Jharkhand is designed and developed by Bitsphere Infosystem, an information technology services firm based in Ranchi. The threat actor shared a post titled ‘bitsphere.in’ on an English-speaking hacking forum, CloudSEK said in a report.

Email queries sent to officials of the AYUSH ministry, the office of the director at AYUSH Jharkhand, and Bitsphere Infosystem remained unanswered at the time of going to press.

The Ministry of AYUSH website for Jharkhand serves as a critical resource providing information about ayurveda, yoga, naturopathy, unani, siddha, and homeopathy treatments. It connects patients to doctors working in these medical disciplines and is also used for education and research in these fields.

Although the database is relatively small, at around 7.3 megabytes in size, it contains over 320,000 patient records, including their PII information and medical diagnoses. It also contains contact information for 737 people who used the ‘contact us’ form on the website, as well as 472 records containing PII information of doctors. The database also contains PII information for 91 doctors, along with information about where they are posted.

The link between the compromised data and AYUSH Jharkhand’s website was established by cross-referencing chatbot and blogpost data shared by the threat actor with publicly accessible data on the website.

CloudSEK’s contextual artificial intelligence digital risk platform, XVigil, was used to identify the source of the leaked data.

“CloudSEK researchers found a deeply concerning data breach that has far-reaching implications for patient and doctor confidentiality. The breach raises serious concerns about the digital security of health care data,” the analytic platform said.

In its report, CloudSEK also warned that the leaked data could enable account takeovers, as commonly used or weak passwords could lead to ‘brute force’ attacks. It would equip malicious actors with the details required to launch sophisticated phishing attacks.

‘Brute force’ refers to attacks that use trial and error to guess login credentials or encryption keys.

Breach of health care databases may have severe implications as it includes sensitive data such as reproductive, sexual, and mental health data. This new report comes months after a Telegram bot was allegedly found leaking personal data collected by the government’s CoWin portal.

Last year, the servers of the All India Institute of Medical Sciences in New Delhi were infiltrated in a cyberattack, paralysing its operations. https://www.business-standard.com/india-news/health-data-of-320k-people-allegedly-leaked-from-ayush-jharkhand-s-website-123090401010_1.html

14. Tamil Nadu audit lays bare mini-scams in GCC *(timesofindia.indiatimes.com)* Sep 5, 2023

CHENNAI: Two years after a state audit exposed several mini-scams, running to several crores, in the Greater Chennai Corporation’s projects and spendings, no action has been taken against any contractor or official involved in the racket. The inaction is despite the fact that the audit report suggested blacklisting of contractors, penalizing officials involved and retrieving the lost money.

The 2019-20 audit said the GCC had paid 27.8 lakh GST to contractors for procuring bleaching powder worth 2.2 crore, though bleaching powder purchased entailed 0% GST payment.

The audit sought blacklisting of contractors – Bloom Bio Care Pharma, Srivari Enterprises and Kumaran Industries – who had charged 18% ‘GST’. It also sought action against GCC officials for paying the amount. In another irregularity, the GCC transferred 18 lakh from its noonmeal scheme account to an unknown individual’s account though he was in no way related to the civic body. Officials have not retrieved this money so far, and it has to be retrieved along with interest, the audit said. The corporation had also rented a Tata Indica car for a solid waste management department officer for 11 months at a cost of 5 lakh for the period, though the actual on-road cost of the car itself was only 4.3 lakh. Also, 13 GCC cars were lying unused and the commissioner’s office had two excess cars at that time, it said.

The GCC had purchased stainless steel water bottles worth 37.1 lakh for GCC school kids from private shops without any tender. For the 4.8 crore spent for night shelters, no bills on what they spent for or how have been given. It was the accounts committee chairman, K Dhanasekaran, who first raised the issue. When contacted, GCC vigilance officer R Gunavarman said the directorate of vigilance and anti-corruption had taken note of some of these irregularities. “We cannot do a simultaneous probe,” he said. However, the DVAC told TOI that they have not received any formal complaint from the GCC so far. GCC commissioner Dr J Radhakrishnan said necessary standard operating procedures will be followed to take action on the issues mentioned in the audit. https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/chennai/tn-audit-lays-bare-mini-scams-in-gcc/articleshow/103373465.cms?from=mdr