NEWS ITEMS ON CAG/ AUDIT REPORTS

1. Kashmir Rail Link: Way out of line *(nationalheraldindia.com)* 06 Mar 2024

The Kashmir Rail Link (KRL) is plagued with escalating costs and unsound decisions. Meant to take 5 years, it is incomplete after 20. The estimate of Rs 1,500 crore has reached Rs 40,000 crore. No one is held accountable for the wastage of public money.

Former prime minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee inaugurated the 111 km Kashmir Rail Link (KRL) from Katra to Banihal in 2003 with the brave words that it would be completed within the next five years.

Two decades later, we are witnessing the spectacle of prime minister Narendra Modi inaugurating a 48 km section between Banihal and Sangaldan. A key section of this rail line remains incomplete; it will probably take another year.

The KRL is one of the most wasteful rail projects implemented in India’s railway history. The Katra–Banihal section, which according to initial railway estimates was to be built at a cost of Rs 1,500 crore, has already cost the railways around Rs 35,000 crore. The last estimated cost of this stretch (provided by the railways in 2015) was Rs 21,652 crore.

If an annual escalation cost of 5 per cent were added to this estimate, along with additional expenditure incurred because of landslides, etc, the cost is likely to be around Rs 40,000 crore by the time it gets completed.

Not only has the cost escalated almost 25 times, the key question to ask is why there has been such an exponential jump from the initial estimates for a 105 km stretch (50 km as the crow flies) between Katra and Banihal?

The answer lies in the nature of the agreement drawn up between the Indian Railways and the Konkan Railway Corporation Limited (KRCL) and IRCON, which annually received 10 per cent of the net profits for every paisa spent on this project. Probably the Vajpayee government agreed to these generous terms in order to encourage infrastructure companies to come forward to construct a line in such hostile terrain.

But such an agreement has been criticised both by the Central Vigilance Commission in 2010 and the CAG (Comptroller and Auditor General), who pointed out that the ‘Railway Board seems to have foregone responsibility on this project’, given that such an arrangement suits vested interests that stand to benefit financially by prolonging it. The arrangement was subsequently discontinued.

Observations by officials of the Northern Railways (NR) in June 2012 were equally damning. An internal report noted that PSUs were given an advance of 30–35 per cent of the cost of construction. Since the money is already available with them, ‘the PSUs do not come back to Northern Railways for any review. Hence, NR has no control over expenditure. PSUs get 10 per cent profit in addition to D&G (Direction & General) charges which are in the range of 10 to 12 per cent. Thus, the cost of [the] project is inflated by 16 to 22 per cent which is quite substantial', the internal report stated.

Sadly, no corrective measures were undertaken by the Railway Board on a rail link that has been beset with problems from the start.

A hastily prepared DPR adopted a sharp 1 in 100 steep gradient formula in a mountainous and earthquake-prone terrain

The DPR alignment was prepared without detailed hydrological and geological studies of the rock structure and soil composition. This resulted in large sums of money being squandered on subsequent remedial action.

Alok Verma, retired chief engineer with the railways, was brought in to prepare a fresh alignment. His team took four years to prepare it (2004–2008). This alignment was different from the conventional slope-skirting type of alignment that had been prepared earlier.

Work was suspended on the Katra– Banihal line in August 2008 and the Railway Board brought in a committee of external experts to examine Verma's proposal. However, as happens in government departments, Verma and his team were abruptly transferred.

The E. Sreedharan expert committee brought in to review the project strongly recommended that the technically flawed alignment be abandoned and the alternative alignment prepared by Verma be adopted. In fact, the Sreedharan committee went to the extent of stating it would cost less to build a double line along Verma's suggested alignment than it would take to complete the present single line.

The Delhi High Court headed by Justice Badar Ahmed also indicted the Railway Board as a result of a PIL filed in 2013 by Prashant Bhushan's Centre for Public Interest as did the Public Accounts Committee of Parliament (2012–14). Both bodies asked the Railway Board to fix responsibility, but the railways functions so opaquely that this never happened.

Verma points out, "The failure to take corrective measures has resulted in the cost of construction being to the tune of Rs 400–700 crore per km of route length, which is about 8–10 times higher than the average cost of construction in our mountainous regions. It has also resulted in reduced line capacity. They have compromised on the number of stations and loop lines, which means only 8 to 10 trains can run on it per day, which is half the capacity of the existing lines in our hilly terrains such as the Konkan railway."

The most alarming aspect of the KRL has been the construction of two bridges across the Chenab and Angi rivers. Verma, who also served as chief bridge engineer in the railways, says, "Both are built close to the LoC (Line of Control) with Pakistan, which makes them vulnerable to enemy attack."

What is more, the railways decided to "build a massive arch bridge over a 359-metre-deep gorge without studying whether the slopes had adequate stability to carry the load of the bridge". The Chenab bridge was scheduled to be completed in 2006, but nine years later, the railways were still struggling with the stability analysis which had not been completed when the Sreedharan committee met in 2015, Verma points out.

The Sreedharan Committee members had "serious reservations about the safety and stability of this bridge and were therefore unable to endorse the present alignment. They further observed that the rock slopes of the gorge and the site conditions are so adverse and complex that stability of slopes cannot be established with the most advanced design techniques globally available", Verma says.

The most shocking aspect of the design was that if these bridges were to collapse due to earthquakes or enemy attacks, the line would remain closed for the next seven to eight years.

The Railway Board has not conducted a serious review of the DPR. Six subsequent lines being built in mountainous terrains in the north-east, and one in Uttarakhand (the Rishikesh–Karnaprayag line) are proceeding using the outdated approach of building on steep gradients, and then spending huge sums of money on slope stabilisation. There seems to be no learning curve for the railways.

The KRL has witnessed 12 incidents of tunnel collapses. There was a tunnel collapse in Tunnel 13 at Sawalkot and another major collapse near the Sangaldan township. The 3.2-km Tunnel 1 near Katra has been under construction for the last 20 years, and is still incomplete, as it is being built across a major geological fault.

Under the present circumstances, it seems unlikely that the tunnel will be used to facilitate troop movement. The Indian Army, unlike in the north-east, had put in no request for a construction of a rail link in Kashmir. The railways could have easily put in a double line at half the cost in order to facilitate troop movement.

No official has yet been brought to task for squandering so much public money. https://www.nationalheraldindia.com/amp/story/national/kashmir-rail-link-on-the-most-expensive-railway-line-ever-built35000-crore-and-counting

2. 23,000 verification, pension cases pending in AG office *(dailyexcelsior.com)* March 7, 2024

Srinagar: Around 23,000 pension and employees' service verification cases of Government employees are pending with the Accountant General's Office in Jammu and Kashmir for the last several months.

The Financial Commissioner in a circular (FD-Code/486/2021-02-1489 dated 20-01-2022) issued to heads of the departments had asked them to get the service books of the retiring employees verified from the Accountant General's Office.

"The service books of the Government employees of the UT J&K, who are due to retire w.e.f 01.01.2024 to 01.06.2024, are being verified in the first phase by the Office of Accountant General (J&K)," reads the circular.

An official said that 15,000 service book verification cases of retiring employees are pending with the AG's office for last several months. "Some of the employees are retiring in a couple of months. When will they complete other formalities after service verification?" he asked.

The official said 8,000 pension cases are also pending for last few months and these retired employees are without pension and are facing difficulties. https://www.dailyexcelsior.com/23000-verification-pension-cases-pending-in-ag-office/

3. CM responds to Opp concern about loans *(theshillongtimes.com)*

March 7, 2024

SHILLONG, March 6: Meghalaya government has allayed apprehensions about state falling in a debt trap, with Chief Minister Conrad Sangma clarifying that the state is not financing developmental projects all by taking loans.

"I have been explaining this time and again in the Assembly how we have funded projects. The loan component is there. But loan is only to the tune of what the RBI and the Government of India allows us," Sangma told reporters reacting to VPP's concern over state going on a loan spree.

According to him, the RBI and Centre does not allow state governments to take more loans than the assigned cap. "We have been maintaining the caps. Therefore, it's not an issue at all," the CM asserted.

He then remarked that the opposition MLAs should have stayed back to listen to his reply on the budget. Sangma said that questions could have been raised if only they stayed to hear the response.

"The decision of opposition MLAs to stay away from the reply is not a responsible way of being a public representative. Let us have a healthy debate in House. I was explaining to them and they could have easily asked me for clarification. On the day of the budget reply, I've given a very detailed presentation along with facts and figures and charts. Most people are now clear about what has happened. I don't mind to again reply with the same presentation another time if they wish to (witness it)," the CM said.

Earlier, the Opposition VPP had questioned the 'huge' quantum of loans collected by the MDA Government out of the open market.

VPP president Ardent M Basaiawmoit stated that the state's finances are in terrible condition, adding that the state government had borrowed about Rs 13,000 crore from a variety of sources as of March 31, 2024.

Moreover, Cabinet Minister and MDA Spokesperson, Paul Lyngdoh allayed apprehensions of state falling in a debt trap. "We will certainly nullify those loans by ensuring that there is also revenue generation from the loan," Lyngdoh said on Wednesday.

It may be noted that the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) had last year warned that the state's borrowing trend had increased by over 63% in the past five years and could lead it into a debt trap.

Lyngdoh reiterated the government's ambitious plan of action of making Meghalaya a 10 million dollar economy by the end of the tenure of MDA 2.0.

He highlighted several projects that are doing well in the state including the CM Elevate programme, Meghalaya Grassroots Music Project, which is currently in its second season and engages roughly around 3,000 youngsters. "We have about 15,000 people directly or indirectly engaged by the tourism sector," he added.

The Chief Minister, on the other hand, revealed that the government has been able to make use of the special assistance on capital investment provided on a 50-year loan, which is interest free.

"And for that we have a consolidated fund and we are putting money to pay back so that it will not be a burden on us. We have been able to take more than four times of what the amount was allotted to us," Sangma added. https://theshillongtimes.com/2024/03/07/cm-responds-to-opp-concern-about-loans/

4. रिम्स के डेंटल कॉलेज में आठ साल पहले खरीदा गया ओटी का सामान, अब हो रहा इस्तेमाल *(prabhatkhabar.com)* March 7, 2024

वर्ष 2023 में डेंटल कॉलेज प्रबंधन की ओर से रिम्स जीबी की बैठक में ओटी निर्माण को लेकर प्रस्ताव लाया गया था. इसमें सहमति के बाद ओटी का निर्माण किया जा रहा है.

रांची: रिम्स के डेंटल कॉलेज में ऑपरेशन थियेटर (ओटी) को लेकर वर्ष 2016 में सामान खरीदा गया था, लेकिन उस समय ओटी का निर्माण नहीं होने से यह स्टोर में पड़ा रहा. अब जब ओटी का निर्माण हो रहा है, तब आठ साल बाद उक्त सामान का उपयोग किया जा रहा है. ओटी के सामान की खरीद 1.94 करोड़ में की गयी थी. एजेंसी को इस मद में पैसे का भुगतान भी कर दिया गया था. वर्ष 2020 में सीएजी की ओर से सरकार को सौंपी गयी जांच रिपोर्ट में इसका खुलासा हुआ.

सीएजी की रिपोर्ट में स्टोर में पड़े सामान का फोटो भी संलग्न किया गया था. वहीं, स्वास्थ्य विभाग की कमेटी ने भी अपनी जांच में इसकी पुष्टि की थी. इधर, वर्ष 2023 में डेंटल कॉलेज प्रबंधन की ओर से रिम्स जीबी की 55वीं बैठक में ओटी निर्माण को लेकर फिर से प्रस्ताव लाया गया था. इसमें सहमति के बाद ओटी का निर्माण किया जा रहा है. इसमें उसी सामान का उपयोग किया जा रहा है.

एक्सपायर्ड हो गया 17.85 लाख का सामान

डेंटल ओटी के लिए उपकरण के अलावा 17.85 लाख के अन्य सामान खरीदे गये थे, जिसका उपयोग सर्जरी के दौरान होना था. लेकिन, ओटी तैयार नहीं होने की वजह से ये सामान रखे-रखे खराब हो गये. सीएजी की रिपोर्ट में इसका भी उल्लेख है.

तीन पूर्व निदेशक पर अब तक कार्रवाई नहीं

डेंटल कॉलेज के उपकरण घोटाला में चिह्नित तीन पूर्व निदेशक और एक दंत चिकित्सक की भूमिका संदिग्ध पायी गयी थी. इसके बाद सभी से रिम्स प्रबंधन ने स्पष्टीकरण मांगा था. करीब तीन बार स्पष्टीकरण मांगने के बाद भी प्रबंधन की ओर से कोई कार्रवाई नहीं की गयी है.

डेंटल कॉलेज में उपकरण खरीद में गड़बड़ी की जानकारी मिली है. सीएजी की रिपोर्ट और पूरे मामले की जानकारी के लिए सीनियर डॉक्टरों को लगाया गया है. इस पर नियम संगत कार्रवाई की जायेगी.-डॉ राजकुमार, निदेशक, रिम्स https://www.prabhatkhabar.com/state/jharkhand/ranchi/rims-dental-college-ot-equipment-purchased-eight-years-ago-now-in-use-srn

SELECTED NEWS ITEMS/ARTICLES FOR READING

5. Towards a Viksit Bharat: The farm sector must play a bigger role in our economy *(livemint.com)* 07 Mar 2024

Reducing overall income inequality requires agriculture to perform well, and to that end, we need suitable reforms to boost the sector's output through capital formation and inclusive policies.

Prioritizing infrastructure and logistics capacity in the agriculture sector may help revive primary sector growth. For an inclusive journey towards developed country status, agriculture mustn't get left behind.

India's ambition to become a developed nation by 2047 depends on the strategic implementation of enabling reforms. While innovative ideas have been proposed for a Viksit Bharat, the primary sector has largely been left out. Despite being home to 18% of the world population with a median age of 28.2 years, we tend to overlook our core strength—i.e., domestic private consumption, which constitutes nearly 61% of GDP—while focusing on export-led growth.

While the idea of accelerating to a new growth orbit by raising the industrial sector's share of national output is widely accepted, and also expected to make India a self-reliant economy, it may not be sufficient to feed our masses, let alone livestock. It may also mean inadequate support for our small-scale industries, including sunrise sectors like food processing, which alone contributes 11.6% of gross value added (GVA) in the agriculture sector and 10.5% of GVA in manufacturing, apart from contributing significantly to employment and investment.

In its July 2023 bulletin, the Reserve Bank of India argued for raising the contribution of the industrial sector to 35% of GDP in the next 24 years from its present level of 25.6%. Historically, farm-sector growth has been slow, with industry and services relied upon for fast expansion. Like many other economies, India leapfrogged from the primary to the services sector, which now accounts for over 60% of GDP. At which sector's cost can industry get another 10% share? With rising aspirations and fast urbanization, demand for services is only going to rise and its share is likely to expand. This means the primary sector is expected to have a shrinking slice of the economic pie.

Since our post-liberalization experience has been one of a worsening skew in income distribution, it needs a rebalance, as promised by the government's commitment to the idea of "Sabka saath, Sabka vikaas, Sabka vishwaas, Sabka prayaas" (everyone's accompaniment, development, trust and endeavour) in building an Atmanirbhar Bharat (self-reliant India) through inclusive economic growth.

While devising a national strategy, we must ascertain the sources of inequality. Decomposing Gini coefficients calculated from income data from 1951 to 2023, we see that rising primary-sector income has a far better equalizing effect on the distribution of total income than the two other sectors, as the Gini coefficient in the farm sector is 0.32, against 0.56 for industry and 0.60 for services. Also, a 1% rise in primary-sector income is seen to reduce income inequality, while the same in the industrial and service sectors add to inequality (more so in the latter). Reducing overall income inequality requires agriculture to perform well, and to that end, we need suitable reforms to boost the sector's output through capital formation and inclusive policies.

Capital formation in agriculture has crucial implications for its future growth and sustainability. Gross capital formation (GCF) in the agriculture-and-allied sector hovers at around 14% of the sector's GVA and is dominated by private investments (with a share of 84%). This needs a boost with an eye on long-term asset creation. Increasing public investment in irrigation and R&D while building market infrastructure can help improve the productivity and profitability of farming and create conducive conditions for larger sums of private investment.

As Indian agriculture is prone to the vagaries of climate change, we need technological, institutional and policy interventions to increase investments in developing a better understanding of climate-smart farming. The goal is to increase production while adapting to climate constraints. Also, subsistence farming must become sustainable. Widely dispersed benefits of digital and genetic technologies, improved early warning systems for weather and a redesigned agricultural insurance programme could help the sector acquire resilience. Let us not forget that apart from feeding the country, agriculture remains the main source of inputs for high-potential industries like food processing.

In the absence of sustainable growth in the primary sector, it may not be in a position to benefit from production-linked incentives. Hence, output and productivity of the sector must rise. Food and beverages account for 45.9% in the Consumer Price Index basket, and stubborn food inflation has been a major policy concern, although other factors also play a role. Inflation control, however, means farmers sometimes face policy inconsistencies, such as selective price restrictions and export bans; although these measures aim to increase the local availability of some commodities and limit price fluctuations, they also push up uncertainty in an already-fragile agricultural sector.

High priority must be given to schemes aimed at strengthening infrastructure and logistical capacity in agriculture. There are plans for a critical role to be played by the PM Kisan Sampada Yojana in setting up additional food parks, cold-chain projects and agro-processing clusters, even as food processing, preservation and lab-testing capacities are expanded.

The strong link between the primary sector's performance and people's well-being necessitates lasting solutions, instead of ad hoc interventions. If the farm sector joins India's growth story, we would be assured of a successful launch into a new growth orbit towards an inclusive Viksit Bharat. https://www.livemint.com/opinion/online-views/towards-a-viksit-bharat-the-farm-sector-must-play-a-bigger-role-in-our-economy-11709733880796.html

6. Farmers’ enrollment under PMFBY crosses a record 40 million

(financialexpress.com) March 7, 2024

An official said that 42% of farmers who would enroll under the crop insurance are those who had not availed loans from the banks.

The enrollment of farmers under the Pradhan Mantri Fasal Bima Yojana (PMFBY) has crossed a record 40 million in 2023-24, an increase of 27% from the 31.5 million enrolled in FY23, an agriculture ministry official said.

An official said that 42% of farmers who would enroll under the crop insurance are those who had not availed loans from the banks.

In 2022-23, out of 31.5 million farmers enrolled, 39% were non-loanee farmers.

“The crop insurance scheme is gradually moving towards a subscription-based model rather than a loan-based scheme,” Ritesh Chauhan, CEO,PMFBY had earlier said.

In terms of area, coverage of heavily-subsidised crop insurance scheme has crossed 60 million hectare in 2023-24, which is an increase of around 21% from FY23.

According to an agriculture ministry statement, since the launch of PMFBY in 2016, `31,139 crore was paid by farmers as their share of premium, against which claims of around `1.56 trillion have been paid to them.

“For every `100 of premium paid by farmers, they have received about `500 as claims,” it noted.

Under the PMFBY, which is currently being implemented in 22 states and union territories, the premium to be paid by farmers is fixed at just 1.5% of the sum insured for rabi crops and 2% for kharif crops, while it is 5% for cash crops.

Meanwhile, Telangana, which had exited the crop insurance after implementing it during 2016-2020, has recently decided to implement the PMFBY from the next kharif season. The Jharkhand government is discussing rejoining the crop insurance at the earliest.

Earlier, states like Gujarat, Jharkhand, West Bengal and Bihar exited the scheme, because of ‘higher cost of premium subsidy’ to be borne by them.

It is optional for the farmers to opt for PMFBY.

The balance premium is equally shared amongst the Centre and states and in case of North-Eastern states, the premium is split between the Centre and states in a 9:1 ratio.

The claim-premium ratio, which was 99% in 2018-19, has declined to 68.7% in 2021-22. Last fiscal, the ratio was 76.7%.

Under PMFBY, the finance ministry has made a provision of `15,000 crore for FY25, while as per the revised estimate, `14,600 crore has been provided for the crop insurance scheme.

The official said many states like Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra, Odisha, Meghalaya and Puducherry have opted for universalisation of crop insurance scheme which implies that the state government bears the cost farmers' premium.

Several insurance companies, both in the public and private sectors, are implementing crop insurance launched in 2016.

The agriculture ministry has stated that the PMFBY, which is the third largest insurance scheme globally in terms of premium, shields farmers from crop loss or damage arising out of unforeseen events. https://www.financialexpress.com/policy/economy-farmers-enrollment-under-pmfby-crosses-a-record-40-million-3416238/

7. Inadequate government funding keeps healthcare, education in crisis mode *(livemint.com)* 06 Mar 2024

India has made huge policy strides on these two key issues in the past 10 years, but the healthcare system remains in the ICU and the education sector is yet to achieve a pass mark. We explore the Modi government's track record in the fourth part of our pre-election series.

As national elections loom large, Prime Minister Narendra Modi is on an inauguration spree. The past fortnight has seen him unveil dozens of new health and educational facilities, underscoring the political importance of these two massive welfare areas. While the union government shares duties on these issues with states, for its part, the Modi government has a mixed record as it heads for the polls.

Tackling a once-in-a-century pandemic and its cascading effects, passing key policies and laws, and yet implementing only incremental reforms instead of systemic ones – this summarises the government's 10-year report card on health and education.

The covid test

The pandemic exposed chinks in India's public-infrastructure armour in both education and health, and its urgent need for funding. Yet, money ploughed into these ministries has been range-bound, and their collective budget for 2024-25 as a share of GDP is lower than pre-covid levels, even as tax collection has hit new records.

Views about the government's pandemic response remain polarised. While the vaccination of over a billion people was creditable, the loss of lives exposed administrative deficiencies. "In hindsight, covid management could have been better," said K Sujatha Rao, a former union health secretary. "While the introduction and scaling-up of vaccinations was extremely creditworthy, the huge amount of human suffering, be it in terms of loss of life or jobs, could have been avoided or substantially reduced had policy been based on public-health principles."

Mampi Bose, a faculty member at Azim Premji University, said that while covid-19 laid bare the importance of health research, it did not lead to bigger budgets for this.

Education was badly hit, too, as school closures and economic distress cut short many children's studies and caused them to shift from private schools to government schools. As classrooms went online, the entire system was caught unawares and the resulting learning losses could take years to undo.

Ayushman Bhava?

Ayushman Bharat, launched in 2018, is one of the government's flagship health schemes. Its two components—revamping existing primary healthcare centres and giving ₹5-lakh-a-year insurance cover to poor families—aim to provide need-based care.

Having catered to 63.3 million hospital admissions worth ₹79,664 crore to date, the scheme has helped many Indians reduce their out-of-pocket spending. Participation from government hospitals has improved since its initial days, said Oommen Kurian, senior fellow at Observer Research Foundation, adding, "Now there are more government hospitals than private ones in the scheme, thus offering additional resources to the public health infrastructure."

However, the insurance cover component (Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana, or PM-JAY) has seen a consistent, gross underutilisation of funds. Anaudit by the Comptroller and Auditor General in 2023 also found implementation problems such as delays in hospital empanelment and processing of rejections, and dead patients availing treatment.

Experts also point out that allocation for primary healthcare needs to go up. "More investment is needed in primary and preventive care and infrastructure for curative services," Bose said.

Fighting diseases

India's non-communicable disease burden has risen sharply due to fast-food consumption, limited policy action and sedentary lifestyles. A 2023 health ministry-funded study showed that 11.4% of Indians aged 20 and above (over 100 million) are estimated to be living with diabetes, while 28.6% are obese.

The government has rolled out screening programmes and affordable cardiovascular and diabetes medicines under its generic-drugs scheme, but regulations to tackle "high fat, salt and sugar" foods are weak. The food safety regulator's 2022 proposal to introduce star ratings to red-flag unhealthy packed foods is in cold storage.

Meanwhile, maternal and child deaths have come down – infant mortality by 28%, under-five mortality by 30%, and maternal mortality by 25% between 2014 and 2020 – showed latest-available data from the Sample Registration System. Some impressive outcomes were also seen in malaria control and immunisation, Rao said.

On the flip side, the government has failed to meet its elimination and prevalence reduction targets for infectious diseases such filariasis, kala-azar and tuberculosis.

Several other initiatives to tackle issues around nutrition, housing, drinking water, indoor air pollution, sanitation, and rural roads have also had immense positive externalities on healthcare issues, Kurian pointed out.

“However, despite a solid foundation and a tech backbone for a universal healthcare push being prepared over the last decade, we have yet to see focused, additional resources being ploughed into the sector as seen in drinking water, sanitation and housing," Kurian said. “That remains the binding weakness, and the primary reason behind the shortfall of human resources and high vacancies in public healthcare, despite improvements."

Policy leap in education

One initiative that the government counts as a milestone is the 2020 rollout of the first revision to the National Education Policy (NEP) in nearly three decades. The NEP has been lauded for a focus on improving early-childhood learning through foundational skills.

“This new policy did three things simultaneously: it acknowledged the vital importance of early childhood education, elevated it to the status of school education, and integrated it into the continuum of educational opportunities offered to children," non-profit Pratham Education Foundation said in a 2022 report.

However, setbacks haven't been far behind. Experts have said the exit options now available at various stages of college could encourage students to drop out. With education being on the concurrent list, the cooperation of states is vital to its success, but some states governed by opposition parties have voiced concerns about it while others have talked about ditching it entirely.

Education = employability?

More children are now in schools, especially at the secondary level, which had previously been a huge challenge. The gross enrolment ratio—children enrolled at a grade as a share of the population in the relevant age group—for higher secondary rose from 44.5% in FY14 to 57.6% in FY22.

But with the spotlight increasingly on learning outcomes and employability, these successes won’t suffice. Pratham’s surveys have shown little improvement in reading and numeracy skills among children, and a Wheebox survey showed just over 52% of young adults are ready to enter the job market. While the government has made progress, its record on adequate budgeting and calibrated reform remains sketchy. https://www.livemint.com/news/india/inadequate-funding-keeps-healthcare-education-in-crisis-mode-11709720311545.html

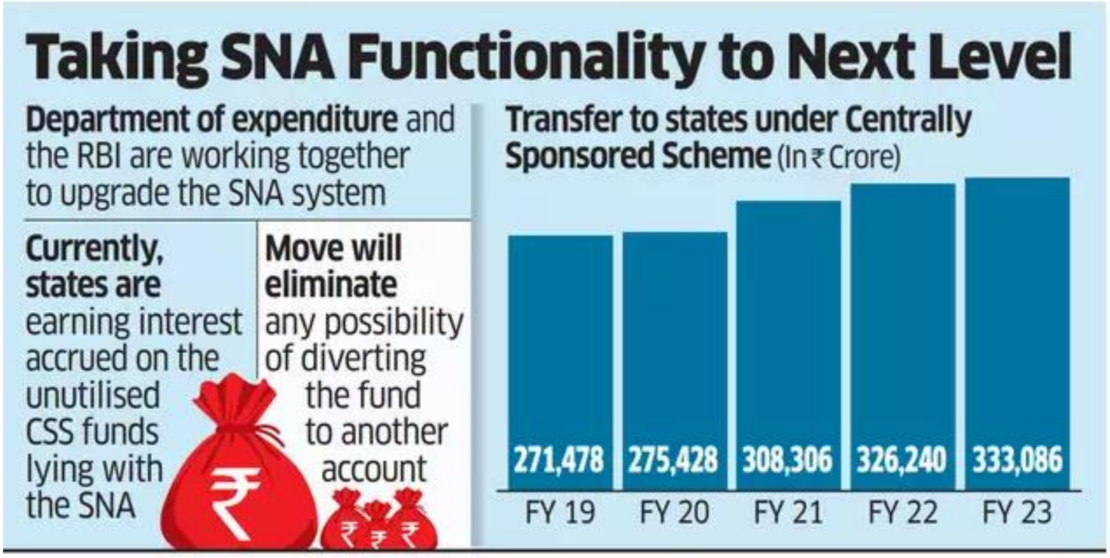
8. Unspent Central funds to states to be settled in real time from Apr 1 *(economictimes.com)* March 07, 2024

Settlement of the unspent amount from the funds that the Centre sends to states through the single nodal agency (SNA) will happen within a day from April 1, eliminating the need to park it outside the government account for more than 24 hours.

The SNA account is used for transferring funds to states for centrally sponsored programmes and there are timelines for the expenditure. The settlement of unspent money currently happens on a quarterly or monthly basis. The Department of Expenditure and the Reserve Bank ofIndia are working together to upgrade the SNA system to settle the unused amount by the states in real time, which will also eliminate disputes over the payment of interest earned on such unspent funds lying in state SNAs, officials in the know said.

The government and the banking regulator have already launched a pilot project in five states and will implement it across India from April 1, they said.

"This is taking the SNA functionality to the next level, making the usage of funds more efficient and in a more transparent manner," a senior official told ET.



Currently, states are earning interest accrued on the unutilised funds lying with the state-level single nodal agencies, the official said. Several states have not paid interest on the Centre's share on such funds, he added.

With most of the states not complying with the communication sent to them on sharing of the interest, the Centre has said unless the states pay the interest by March 31, it would not release the 50-year interest free loans offered to them. "With the new SNA functionality, that dispute will not arise and states have to exhaust the amount before getting the fresh sanction," the official said.

This will also eliminate any possibility of diverting the fund to another account.

Last year, finance secretary TV Somanathan said how data analytics helped the Centre detect that some states were parking money from SNA accounts to some other bank accounts, which was prohibited. The Centre had budgeted to provide ₹1.3 lakh crore to states as interest-free, long-term capex loans for the ongoing fiscal year. However, the target was cut to Rs 1.05 lakh crore, with some states failing to meet the eligibility criteria to receive the loan.

For the fiscal year 2025 also, the Centre has budgeted an outlay of ₹1.3 lakh crore as interest-free, long-term capex loans to states. https://m.economictimes.com/news/economy/finance/unspent-central-funds-to-states-to-be-settled-in-real-time-from-apr-1/amp_articleshow/108277013.cms

9. India to be 3rd largest, upper-middle class economy by 2031: CRISIL *(fortuneindia.com)* Mar 6, 2024

India will be the world's third largest economy and an upper middle income country by fiscal 2031, market research firm CRISIL has predicted. The agency forecasts India's GDP to grow 6.8% next fiscal after a 7.6% expansion during the current fiscal.

CRISIL's India Outlook 2024 report, released on March 6, said the country's growth momentum will continue through this decade, piggybacking significant private investments in emerging sectors, continuing government spending on infrastructure build out, ongoing reforms push and efficiency gains from increasing digitalisation and physical connectivity.

"The next seven fiscals will see the Indian economy cross the $5 trillion mark and close in on $7 trillion at an estimated 6.7% average annual growth. By fiscal 2031, India will be the No. 3 economy and an upper middle-income country, which will be a big positive for domestic consumption. India's manufacturing sector is at a sweet spot due to high capacity utilisation across key sectors, opportunities from global supply-chain diversification, thrust on infrastructure investment, the green-transition imperative and strong balance sheets of lenders", Amish Mehta, Managing Director and CEO of CRISIL Ltd, said.

"Continuous reforms, enhanced global competitiveness and moving up the value chain will boost the share of manufacturing in India's GDP beyond the projected 20% in fiscal 2031", he adds.

The report notes that after years of stagnancy, fixed investments by private companies have started inching up and have ample headroom for growth, while government initiatives keep boosting the infrastructure segments in India. It also points out that enhanced profitability and strategic deleveraging have created healthier balance sheets for Indian firms. CRISIL estimates India Inc., revenue growth to be in the range of 9-10% next fiscal. The report says India's industrial capex will rise to Rs 6.5 lakh crore annually on average between FY 2024 and 2028 from Rs 3.9 lakh crore in the preceding five fiscals.

"There is ample opportunity for both manufacturing and services to cater to domestic and global demand. We project manufacturing and services to grow 9.1% and 6.9%, respectively, between fiscals 2025 and 2031. Despite some growth catch-up by manufacturing, services will remain the dominant driver of India's growth", Dharmakirti Joshi, Chief Economist, CRISIL notes.

The near- and medium-term challenges identified in the report include geopolitical uncertainties, global indebtedness, uneven global economic recovery, climate change and technological disruptions. https://www.fortuneindia.com/macro/india-to-be-3rd-largest-upper-middle-class-economy-by-2031-crisil/116071

10. Indian Navy Commissions First Squadron of Submarine-hunting MH 60R Helicopter *(news18.com)* MARCH 06, 2024

The Indian Navy commissioned its first squadron of the newly inducted submarine-hunting MH 60R Seahawk multi-role helicopter at INS Garuda in Kochi on March 6. A maritime variant of the Blackhawk helicopter, MH 60R Seahawk is armed with Hellfire missiles, MK-54 torpedoes, and precision-kill rockets.

"The MH 60R helicopter would enhance India's blue-water capabilities, extending the operational reach of the Navy and supporting sustained naval operations across spectrums and over vast maritime domains," read a statement from the Indian Navy.

ALL YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT MH 60R

-The helicopter is designed for anti-submarine warfare (ASW), anti-surface warfare (ASuW), search and rescue (SAR), medical evacuation (MEDEVAC) and vertical replenishment (VERTREP), the Navy stated.

-The helicopters, equipped with strong encrypted communication links, will operate from frontline ships and aircraft carriers providing flexibility of operation, enhanced surveillance and attack capability to the Indian Navy.

-The helicopters have commenced operation from various ships, including the indigenous aircraft carrier INS Vikrant.

-The Indian government signed a deal with the USA in February 2020, to acquire 24 fourth-generation MH 60R helicopters, of which, six units (a whole squadron) are getting commissioned in Kochi on March 6.

-The helicopters that was used for Osama Bin Laden in Pakistan was from the same family.

-The MH 60R is also capable of firing torpedoes, missiles and advanced precision kill weapon system rockets.

-The helicopter has been rigorously tested in Indian Reference Atmosphere (IRA) conditions and is fully integrated into the fleet.

-The advanced weapons, sensors and avionics suite make the Seahawks ideal for the Indian Navy's maritime security needs, offering enhanced capabilities for both conventional as well as asymmetric threats.

-MH 60R helicopter's deployment in the Indian Ocean Region would strengthen the Indian Navy's maritime presence, dissuading potential threats and ensuring a secure and safe environment in this strategically crucial region, the Navy further said.

-This is the only helicopter in the Indian Navy with self-defence capability from incoming gunfire or missiles. https://www.news18.com/india/indian-navy-to-commission-first-squadron-of-submarine-hunting-mh-60r-helicopter-on-march-6-8802227.html

11. Discoms' dues to gencos down a third since mid-2022: Singh *(financialexpress.com)* March 07, 2024

The outstanding dues of electricity distribution entities (discoms) to gencos dropped more than a third since mid-2022 to under Rs 45,000 crore now, and was declining further at an unprecedented pace, Union minister for power, new and renewable energy R K Singh said on Wednesday.

This, and the fact that "states no longer default on release of the subsidy amounts," have made the sector commercially viable after several years, the minister said, adding that the "Modi 3.0 government's" first=100-days agenda would include a definitive action plan to double the capacities across the electricity value chain, from generation to distribution, by 2030.

"The peak (power) demand is already 243 gigga wattt (GW), up from 130 GW in 2013-14. The demand is growing exponentially. While the estimated demand for 2030 is 366 GW, my assessment is it (demand) will rise to even higher levels, say, 370-380 GW. I need to almost double the capacity of everything and add many more substations," Singh told FE in an interview.

The minister recalled that, the power sector, long crippled by a vicious cycle of payment defaults, had seen nearly 70,000 MW of power capacities becoming insolvent, and a dearth of fresh private investments.

"Outstanding dues (to gencos) have come down to Rs 44,701 crore as of March 5, and all states are (complying)," Singh said, and noted that "at one point of time in 2022, these dues had touched a staggering Rs 1.35 trillion."

The minister attributed the sector's turnaround to various steps taken by the current government, including restrictions on defaulting discoms' access to the power exchanges and the allowance for payments in installments. "I have also stopped funding by REC-PFC to loss making discoms. We keep giving money to discoms, now we shall give money only with conditions attached to it. All these trajectories are in sync with one another. As a result the AT&C losses, which were 27% in 2014 have come down to 15.41% in 2022-23. It has been a steady decline," the minister said.

The country had a cumulative installed power capacity of 430 GW as of January, 2024, as per the latest report by Central Electricity Authority, including 182 GW of renewable energy and 240 GW from thermal sources.

Indications are the country's electricity demand would seriously overshoot the supplies in the medium-term, as the manufacturing sector shows its mettle and per-capita power consumption rises faster. As this raises the spectre of prolonged outages during peak hours in the scorching summers over the next few years, the power ministry unveiled a contingency plan to add another 30 giga watt (GW) of coal-based capacity to nearly 50 GW that was already in the works. https://www.financialexpress.com/business/industry-discoms-dues-to-gencos-down-a-third-since-mid-2022-singh-3416158/

12. Elimination of Extreme Poverty: What the Consumption Expenditure Survey data tells us *(moneycontrol.com)* MARCH 06, 2024

The PPP $1.9 poverty line in 2011-12 was Rs 790 per person per month in rural areas and Rs 967 in urban India. For 2022-23, accounting for inflation factors provided in the HCES, poverty line in rural areas is Rs 1,452 and urban areas is Rs 1,752. Only 2.5% of rural and 1% of urban population has consumption expenditure lower than the above numbers, and hence are the only ones still below the poverty line

Recently released Household Consumption Expenditure Survey (HCES) data for 2022-23 has led to a series of poverty estimates, and commentary surrounding the extent of poverty decline in India over the last decade. Heightened interest in the findings of the survey is understandable given the long gap of 11 years between the latest and the previous such survey in 2011-12.

There are two key results from HCES 22-23. First, that extreme poverty (defined as poverty according to the World Bank's 2011 PPP$ 1.9 poverty line of per capita per month consumption of Rs. 1454 in rural areas and Rs. 1750 in urban area) has now been eliminated; it is less than 2 percent, compared to 12.5 percent in 2011-12. Second, that consumption inequality in India has declined from its 2011-12 level – a finding consistent from most, if not all, household surveys, private or public, conducted over the last decade. This is in major contrast to the discussion on increasing consumption (and income) inequality in India.

Some have recently pointed out changes in survey methodology, arguing that the two surveys are "non-comparable". This is an important issue that merits a discussion, particularly on what evidence is there to argue that the two surveys are "non-comparable". There are changes across every survey – particularly because consumption items itself undergo changes.

The National Statistical Office (NSO) seemed to have been well aware of murmurs regarding "incomparability". All surveys contain differences from previous surveys – computer tabulation versus worksheet, elimination of some items (telephones? vs. mobiles, etc). This does not render the survey as "incomparable". There is NO reference in the Fact Sheet that 2022-23 survey is not comparable to 2011-12; instead, there is this statement:

The changes "are required to be noted while comparing the results of HCES:2022-23 with those of the previous surveys." (Page 4 of the Fact Sheet On HCES: 2022-23, MOSPI, GoI).

India's Poverty Line

Before further discussion, it is important to understand how poverty calculations are undertaken. There are two important inputs into an estimate of poverty. The first is a poverty line i.e. the level of consumption below which a person is deemed poor. The second important and necessary input is data on (fractile) consumption expenditures of the population. The consumption expenditures give us a consumption distribution (see statement 4 of the Fact Sheet on HCES: 2022-23).

Some contend that India does not have an official poverty line. This is an error. In 2009, and prior to the release of the 2009/10 HCES survey, the government pre-announced the poverty line for different states (and regions) of the country. This came to be known as the Tendulkar poverty line.

The worldwide official home of poverty estimates is the World Bank, and soon after the release of the GOI Tendulkar poverty line, the World Bank offered the PPP $ 1.9 poverty line. There is a less than 3 percent difference between PPP$ 1.9 and Tendulkar lines, and hence the World Bank line has attained universal acceptance.

The PPP$ 1.9 line in 2011-12 was Rs 790 per person per month in rural areas and Rs 967 in urban India. For 2022-23, on the basis of inflation factors provided in the Fact Sheet, the poverty line in rural areas is Rs 1,452 and for urban areas it is Rs 1,752. That is, anyone who earns less than these amounts in a month for rural and urban areas respectively is classified as poor as per the World Bank PPP$ 1.9 line.

Consumption Expenditure And Poverty Line

Statement 4 of the Factsheet gives us a consumption distribution (reproduced below) – the second important piece of information needed to arrive at poverty estimates. It can be easily seen that the average monthly per-capita consumption expenditures from the survey are greater than the poverty line for households that belong to the fractile class greater than 5. That is, only for the bottom 5 percent of the population in the rural areas is the average monthly per-capita consumption expenditure lower than the poverty line.

CONSUMPTION DISTRIBUTION

Fractile class of MPCE	Average MPCE (Rs.)	
	Rural	Urban
0-5%	1,373	2,001
5-10%	1,782	2,607
10-20%	2,112	3,157
20-30%	2,454	3,762
30-40%	2,768	4,348
40-50%	3,094	4,963
50-60%	3,455	5,662
60-70%	3,887	6,524
70-80%	4,458	7,673
80-90%	5,356	9,582
90-95%	6,638	12,399
95-100%	10,501	20,824
All Classes	3,773	6,459

Source: Household Consumption Expenditure Survey: 2022-23 Fact Sheet , p10.

moneycontrol

This establishes that using the Tendulkar poverty line, the poverty rate in India has to be less than 5 percent, and any poverty estimate greater than this is incorrect either due to use of different "unofficial" poverty lines, or due to some other methodological or computational errors. NITI Aayog's CEO mentioned that poverty in India is less than 5 percent, and that is indeed true as can be seen simply from the consumption distribution and poverty lines.

We can go further and provide a near precise estimate of poverty in India. Given that we have the average MPCE of the bottom 5 percent of the population, we can statistically interpolate the mean monthly per-capita consumption expenditures for every percentile. By definition, the average MPCE for 0-5 percent would mean that at least some households would have an MPCE greater than the average while others would have it lower. Estimating the mean consumption at the percentile level allows us to approximately identify the population below the poverty line. This is done separately for rural and urban households.

Based on this exercise, we find that rural poverty stands at 2.5 percent and urban poverty is down to 1 percent, with all India headcount ratio (HCR) at 2 percent. That is, only 2 percent of Indian households have a consumption expenditure lower than the Tendulkar poverty line. Note, that the only information we need for estimating poverty in 2022-23 is the latest consumption distribution, and an inflation update of the poverty lines. Both these sets of data are in the Fact Sheet. And note also that we do this without any reference from previous surveys.

The reader (or critic) can object to the choice of the official poverty line, however, what is not credible or acceptable (as some have argued) that given CES data, and given the Tendulkar poverty line, that the poverty level in India is more than 2 percent. https://www.moneycontrol.com/news/opinion/elimination-of-extreme-poverty-what-the-consumption-expenditure-survey-data-tells-us-12409541.html

13. Delayed upgradation of hospitals in Mumbai's suburbs; patients rely on private care *(citizenmatters.in)* March 07, 2024

When Sangeeta Kharat noticed a lump near her neck, she sought treatment at MT Agarwal Municipal Hospital, Mulund, near her residence. Doctors diagnosed her with thyroid nodules, an abnormal growth of cells on the thyroid gland, and referred her to Lokmanya Tilak Municipal Corporation Hospital at Sion for further treatment.

Sangeeta's son, Rajan, initially opted for treatment at Sion Hospital. However, due to the distance and frequency of trips with his job, they decided to switch to a nearby private hospital despite higher costs. Rajan said, " If the MT Agarwal super-speciality hospital had been available, we wouldn't have needed to go to the private hospital."

Like Sangeeta, many residents in the suburbs of Mumbai are compelled to turn to private hospitals, leading to out-of-pocket expenditure, all because of delayed redevelopment of municipal hospitals in the suburbs.

To alleviate burden on tertiary hospitals like KEM, Sion, and Nair Hospital, BMC planned to upgrade hospitals in suburban areas and allocated budget for the same.

However, these projects have been stalled for several years due to a lack of coordination and follow-ups with Health Infra Cell (HIC), issues with tendering, and contractor appointments.

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The MT Agarwal Municipal Super Speciality Hospital in Mulund west is one such case. The hospital started in 1958 with 25 beds. Over time, it grew into a 110-bed hospital. However, in 2015, the hospital building was declared dilapidated. At that time, BMC decided to redevelop this hospital as a super speciality hospital with 470 beds. Until 2018, BMC could not finalise a contractor and was compelled to scrap the tenders thrice due to the project’s estimated costs.

Impact of delays on patients

For the redevelopment, all departments of MT Agarwal Hospital were relocated to two separate premises in Mulund: one in the T ward office area and the other behind R mall, spanning approximately 1.3 km. Hospital staff members said that patients from areas such as Bhandup, Vikhroli, and Thane frequently visit the hospital, and the constant commuting between the two facilities has become exhausting for them.

The first building houses departments for medicine, paediatrics, and emergency care, and the second building offers services such as sonography and X-rays, ophthalmology, orthopaedics and surgery. Patients admitted to the wards or emergency department often need to travel to the second building for these tests, which is inconvenient and time-consuming. An auto driver from Mulund, who wished to remain anonymous, shared that patients referred for sonography or X-rays in the OPD have to rush to the other facility for these tests.

Consequently, obtaining test results and revisiting doctors can take up to three to four days, causing delays in diagnosis and treatment. To avoid such delays, many people opt to undergo tests at private labs despite the increased financial burden it entails.

BMC initiated an ICU at this hospital and outsourced the facility from another organisation. However, it was discovered that the organisation had employed unqualified doctors, increasing ICU deaths. Subsequently, FIRs were filed against three doctors from the ICU, and BMC blacklisted the organisation last year. Now, the ICU facility has been closed for more than six months.

Hospital staff expressed that the super-specialty hospital had been constructed on time, and it could have prevented deaths in the ICU, sparing patients the need to seek treatment at Sion or Rajawadi Hospitals.

Another unintended consequence of the this hospital redevelopment project, which has been ongoing for the past seven years, is the pollution it causes. Residents in this area complained poor health due to dust pollution. “Despite complaints filed by some societies to BMC, no precautions were taken to mitigate the dust and pollution levels. It was only after the implementation of a dust mitigation policy that the contractor installed metal boards last year," said a resident. He also mentioned that not all construction areas are adequately covered, so residents still suffer from dust.

Super-specialty services postponed

In this year's budget, BMC asserted that 80% of the MT Agarwal hospital's construction has been completed, and it will be operational by June 2024. However, a BMC official said that the facilities available in the old hospital will be functioning in the new building within the next six months. However, the commencement of super-specialty services is anticipated to require more than a year.

M T Agarwal hospital

MT Agarwal Hospital's redevelopment has been going for seven long years, severely impacting the residents of Mulund, who are compelled to go for private speciality hospitals. Pic: Shailaja Tiwale

Former BJP corporator Prakash Gangadhar, who continually followed up on the redevelopment of M.T.Agarwal Hospital, said that despite budgetary allocation, the BMC administration failed to complete the hospital in time. He remarked that though BMC claims that 80 % of work has been completed, major interior work remains pending, and it will likely take nearly a year for the hospital to be fully operational.

Delays in upgrade of suburban civic hospitals

Like MT Agarwal, upgradation of several other civic hospitals is also delayed. Shri Harilal Bhagwati Municipal super-speciality Hospital Borivali (West), started in 1968, is one of the major peripheral hospitals. Due to the dilapidated building structure, the hospital shifted to Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Hospital, Kandivali (W), along with all departments in October 2013.

The first phase of the new hospital commenced in 2016, but offers only OPD services. In the second phase, BMC planned to redevelop the hospital with a 1,000-bed super-specialty. However, due to cost escalation, BMC reduced the number of beds to 490. The cost of this super-speciality hospital is estimated around Rs 500 crore. Over five years, 60% of the work was done, and according to BMC data, it is projected to be functional from October 2024.

Hemangi Raut of Shiv Arogya Sena criticised BMC's handling of delays in Bhagawati super specialty Hospital building project. She said, "Despite inquiries, BMC blames contractors for incomplete work, leading to frequent contractor renewals or changes. Why hasn't the BMC imposed penalties on contractors and compelled them to finish the remaining work?"

Patients from Malad to Palghar previously relied on Bhagwati Hospital. However, since the demolition of the old hospital, all patients are now redirected to Shatabdi Hospital in Kandivali or Cooper Hospital in Vile Parle.

under construction hospital building

Like redevelopment of MT Agarwal Hospital is delayed, several other upgradation projects for other municipal hospitals are also approved but going slow. Pic: Shailaja Tiwale

Another example is the proposed super-specialty hospital proposed at Govandi's Pt. Madan Mohan Malviya Centenary Hospital. This hospital will provide specialised services for the eastern suburbs of Mumbai, including Mankhurd and Bainganwadi, with an expanded capacity of 580 beds in addition to the existing 210 beds. According to BMC, 70% of the work on this hospital has been completed and it is expected to be fully operational by June 2024.

Similarly, redevelopment of Siddharth Hospital in Goregaon is stalled for the past five years. Originally built in 1998 with a six-story building, the hospital’s structure deteriorated over time, leading to its demolition in 2019. All departments were relocated to other peripheral hospitals in Kandivali, Jogeshwari, and Borivali.

The redevelopment plan aims to upgrade the hospital from its current capacity of 175 beds to 300 beds. According to BMC data, only 30% of the work has been completed, with the hospital expected to be functional by December 2025. BMC allocated Rs 25 crore for this hospital in the 2022-23 budget, but the funds were not utilised.

Five years ago, the 100-bed Krantiveer Mahatma Jyotiba Phule Hospital (KMJPH) in Vikhroli was closed due to its dilapidated condition. In response, the BMC established a temporary outpatient department (OPD) facility on the premises, while inpatient services were relocated to the nearby BMC-operated Ambedkar Maternity Hospital in Vikhroli.

A local resident highlighted that in cases of emergencies, there is no hospital in the entire Vikhroli-Bhandup belt. Even when residents go to Ambedkar Hospital, they are redirected to Rajawadi Hospital in Ghatkopar.

BMC decided to upgrade the hospital with 500 beds and allocated Rs 10 crore for the redevelopment of this hospital in 2022-23, but the funds were not utilised. BMC has stated that the hospital’s plan has been approved by MHADA, and the tendering process is currently underway.

Expansion of KB Bhabha hospital in Bandra to 500 beds is also underway from 2018. BMC officials said that 80% work of the new building is completed.

Struggling patients; BMC’s promises

In this year’s budget, the civic body specified that most hospital redevelopment projects would be expedited.

However, when Citizen Matters tried to reach Dr. Sudhakar Shinde, the additional municipal commissioner of BMC, he did not respond, despite repeated attempts.

Dr. Avinash Supe, former Director of BMC tertiary hospitals, said, “Now that most hospital buildings are constructed, the next challenge is to complete the interior works and set up the hospitals. If BMC utilises the capital expenditure budget effectively this year, hospitals will be functional by the end of the current year.”

However, he also expressed concerns about the upcoming election year. He said that fund utilisation tends to be lower during election years.

There is budget allocation and plans for redevelopment of hospitals, so the implementation will happen at some point. However, till then, patients like Sangeeta will continue to spend their limited resources on expenditure incurred at private hospitals. https://citizenmatters.in/mumbai-public-hospitals-upgradation/

14. HC expresses concerns over incomplete Hancock Bridge, seeks BMC, Railway's response *(indianexpress.com)* Updated: March 7, 2024

Expressing concerns over lack of safe passage for pedestrians crossing the railway line through Hancock bridge in South Mumbai due to non completion of second phase of the bridge, the Bombay High Court on Wednesday sought reply from BMC and Railways giving status of construction and facilities available for pedestrians.

The bench restored the proceedings in a PIL by an activist seeking expedited construction of the bridge situated between Sandhurst Road and Byculla station.

The Court was informed by the BMC lawyer that another bridge called Carnac Bunder bridge situated between Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Terminus (CSMT) and Masjid Bunder on the suburban line, which was demolished for reconstruction, will be made operational by December 15.

A division bench of Chief Justice Devendra Kumar Upadhyaya and Justice Arif S Doctor was hearing notice of motion by activist Kamlakar Shenoy argued through advocate Aniesh Jadhav, seeking restoration of PIL seeking that intervention of court was required

The PIL, which was earlier disposed on April 23, 2018 had sought construction of the bridge and arrangements of a pedestrian bridge or alternate mode for crossing over the railway line. The plea was disposed of, noticing the fact that the bridge was already demolished and a new project of reconstruction was underway and no further directions were required to be given at that stage.

However, the HC had granted liberty to the petitioner to reopen present proceedings in case of emergency attention required of the court. Shenoy argued that the way for pedestrians to cross over the railway line is not yet made available.

However, senior advocate Anil Sakhare representing Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) submitted that the first phase of the bridge is completed, however the service road is yet to be completed. He added, for the purpose of construction of service road, acquisition proceedings have been initiated.

However, on account of some litigation issues the land could not be acquired. He referred to the orders of the HC and city civil court restraining acquisition of certain private lands for the construction of the bridge.

"This was done in 2018 we are in 2024, six years have passed and the bridge is not yet complete? Only one phase of the bridge is working, what about the other phase? Because of non completion of the bridge on the other phase, pedestrian's problems remain the same," CJ Upadhyaya remarked. Sakhare responded that the Foot Over Bridge (FOB) is available for pedestrians.

"Having regard to the fact that pedestrians are yet to be provided with a safe passage for crossing over the Railway line, the proceedings of PIL are revived and the PIL petition is restored," the HC noted

It directed that affidavit in reply by BMC and Railways be filed within three weeks, stating therein the status of construction of bridge and facilities available to pedestrians for crossing the railway line. The HC will hear the matter next on March 27. https://indianexpress.com/article/cities/mumbai/hc-expresses-concerns-over-incomplete-hancock-bridge-seeks-bmc-railways-response-9199830/