NEWS ITEMS ON CAG/ AUDIT REPORTS

1. The making and unmaking of the Electoral Bond Scheme *(scobserver.in)* 11 Apr 2024

The Supreme Court's judgement has validated the concerns expressed by various stakeholders during the planning stage of the Scheme.

On 7 January 2018, between birthday wishes and congratulatory posts, then Finance Minister Arun Jaitley posted a short status update on his Facebook wall. "Electoral bonds are key to evolve a clean political funding system in India" it said. He was following up a longer note titled "Why Electoral Bonds are Necessary" where he explained that the conventional practice of "anonymous or pseudonymous" political funding had created a situation of "unclean money coming from unidentifiable sources."

When Jaitley proposed the Electoral Bond Scheme in the Lok Sabha in the 2017-18 Union Budget Speech, he had explained that it was a way to address donors' "reluctance in donating by cheque or other transparent methods" and to protect them from having to "disclose their identity and entail adverse consequences."

On 2 January 2018, just five days before Jaitley's Facebook justification, the Union had issued a notification announcing the scheme. An Electoral Bond was like a promissory note. Except, it wouldn't have the name of the donor or the donee. This money instrument offered a completely anonymous donation mechanism.

For some, even in those early days, the glossy picture of clean money in political and electoral funding seemed like a mirage. "What was really required—which is what we thought would happen—is the government saying that no amount of donation to any political party will be anonymous," said transparency activist and social worker Anjali Bhardwaj. "Instead, the Scheme allowed political parties to receive any amount of donations through bonds and no one, including oversight institutions like the Election Commission of India, could know the source of this funding."

Thirty phases of sale were completed in the lifespan of the Scheme. Bonds worth ₹16,518 crores were purchased. An RTI filed by transparency activist Commodore Lokesh Batra (Retd.) revealed that ₹571 crore worth of bonds were sold in a 10-day window in January 2024 alone, the last phase that took place before the 2024 General Election starting in April.

The first challenge against the Scheme had been filed in the Supreme Court in September 2017, months before the Scheme was notified in January 2018 by the NGO Association of Democratic Reforms. The matter moved at the usual glacial pace for several years, until the petitioners approached the Court in October 2023, asking for it to be decided before the 2024 General Election. Finally, a Constitution Bench heard arguments over three days in October and November last year. Then, on 15 February 2024, upending many expectations, the Bench declared the Scheme unconstitutional.

The Court's reasoning

The Court upheld the voter's right to information over the donor's right to privacy. In law, there is "no constitutional hierarchy between the right to information and the right to informational privacy of political affiliation," the judgement said. However, the Bench saw that "the scheme only grants de jure and not de facto confidentiality vis-à-vis the political party." The Scheme, CJI Chandrachud wrote, was only confidential to the extent that it deprived voter's right to know, and not political parties' access to this information.

The Supreme Court's decision endorsed the idea of 'one person, one vote'.

It held that "unlimited contribution by companies to political parties is antithetical to free and fair elections because it allows certain persons/companies to wield their clout and resources to influence policy making."

The Court also tested the constitutionality of unlimited corporate funding. It rejected the Union's arguments that the Scheme sought to offer a donations mechanism to corporations so they wouldn't have to resort to using shell corporations to make anonymous donations. It found that there was "no justification" for doing away with the cap on company donations, considering that its purpose was to "deter shell companies from making political contributions."

Then, there was the mini-saga stemming from the Court's directions to the State Bank of India to ensure that all details of the bonds were brought into the public domain by 6 March 2024. The SBI asked for over three months' time, reasoning that it would take some time to match donor and redeemer data, which was in two separate silos.

The Court did not budge. In a hearing on 11 March, the CJI said "There should be a degree of candour on the part of the State Bank of India," and ordered it to submit all the data as is by the end of business hours the next day. By 14 March, the information was in the public domain.

On 15 March, the Court noted that the data submitted by the SBI was incomplete, and lacked details of the alphanumeric entries on each bond. They ordered SBI to submit "all details." This missing piece would make it possible to work out which donor had donated to which party. By the end of 21 March, this data was released.

Since the first stage of public disclosure, several journalistic outlets have engaged in the rigorous task of putting two and two together. They found that the concerns around quid pro quos were well-founded. The list of donors included companies that won tenders for big-ticket infrastructure projects and some that had been in trouble with watchdogs like the Enforcement Directorate and Comptroller and Auditor General of India. The list also included some companies accused of environmental violations.

Quid pro quo and other concerns have hung around the Scheme since the days of its somewhat murky establishment.

For a programme that promised to make election funding more transparent, the way it was pushed through the echelons of government and bureaucracy didn't inspire much confidence.

In the first part of this two-part feature on the Electoral Bond Scheme, we go back to how the Scheme was put together in the first place.

The beginning

Five amendments, introduced through the 2016 and 2017 Finance Acts, created the legal framework for the Electoral Bond Scheme.

The first step, taken in 2016, was an amendment to the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act, 2010 (FCRA). It allowed foreign companies with subsidiaries in India to donate to political parties.

In 2017, an amendment to the Reserve Bank of India Act, 1934 allowed the Union government to "authorise any scheduled bank to issue electoral bond[s]." An amendment to the Income Tax Act, 1961 exempted political parties from keeping a detailed record of contributions received through electoral bonds. Changes made to the Representation of the People Act, 1951 exempted political parties from publishing contributions received through electoral bonds in "Contribution Reports." Finally, changes to the Companies Act, 2013 removed the upper limit on how much a company could donate to a political party, and their obligations to disclose the breakup of contributions made to different parties.

This framework effectively allowed companies making losses, shell companies and foreign companies to secretly donate to parties. It also facilitated kickbacks and quid pro quo deals between political parties and companies.

Nitin Sethi, journalist at the Reporters Collective who wrote a multi-part investigative report on the Electoral Bonds Scheme, told me that it initially seemed like everyone was "okay with" the Scheme. He said that even among reporters who had long studied corruption and political financing, there were very few who saw anything unusual.

By 2019, however, RTIs filed by Commodore Batra, Bhardwaj and other transparency activists had established that the Scheme was introduced despite clear warnings issued by the Reserve Bank of India (RBI), the Election Commission of India (ECI) and various opposition parties.

The file without a name

With the help of the RTI responses received by Batra, Sethi deduced that there was no name attached to the internal file that introduced the idea for the Scheme. Typically, Sethi explained, a new policy idea is proposed by someone within the bureaucratic apparatus or a private citizen. When the idea is suggested by a government officer, a file is created.

"A file was suddenly started at the level of a joint secretary," he said. The skeleton of the idea was in an unmarked A4 sheet that Commodore Batra had accessed through the RTI route. Sethi had written that it was "unlike most memos prepared by the Indian bureaucracy." When I asked him if he knew who it was from, he said: "A couple of us have a sense of who the author was, but going by journalistic standards of evidence, we can't prove it."

The RBI's warning

On 28 January 2017, the Department of Economic Affairs wrote to Rama Subramaniam Gandhi, the RBI Deputy Governor, "requesting early comments" on the amendments to the RBI Act.

The RBI responded within two days, warning the Finance Ministry that the Bonds could "undermine faith in banknotes." Chief General Manager P. Vijay Kumar wrote that though the Scheme required the submission of KYC documents, it was evident that "the original buyer of the instrument need not be the actual contributor to…[the] party." The RBI noted that "the intended purpose of transparency may not be achievable" and that the "principles and the spirit of the Prevention of Money Laundering Act, 2002 (will get) affected."

The RBI also unequivocally said that "there is no special need for, or advantage by, the creation of an Electoral Bearer Bond." Echoing the rationale that the Supreme Court would later use to quash the Scheme, the RBI reminded the Finance Ministry that "existing banking instruments like cheques, drafts, digital modes" can equally achieve the goal of offering a formal and traceable mechanism for donations.

Revenue Secretary Hasmukh Adhia dismissed the RBI's concerns on the same day. "The RBI has not understood the proposed mechanism" he said in an internal note addressed to the Secretary for Economic Affairs and Arun Jaitley. "The fear of such bearer instrument being used as currency is totally unfounded." And lastly, he wrote, "this advice has come quite late at a time when the Finance Bill is already printed." Jaitely reportedly signed off on the note immediately. "You could see how quickly it was forced through," Sethi said.

Around September 2017, the RBI wrote to Jaitely again. They recommended that RBI be the sole issuer of the bond, and that all bonds be bought and sold only digitally. In his memoir, Subhash Chandra Garg, former finance secretary, explained that this would "kill the most important feature that Arun Jaitely wanted to build in," which was anonymity. Garg was Secretary of Economic Affairs while these discussions on the Scheme were underway.

Garg recalls that Urijit Patel, then Governor of the RBI, had approached the Committee of Central Board (CCB), an internal group that assists the RBI's Central Board of Directors, and had several meetings to discuss the features of a digital bond for political funding.

Garg singled out a line he saw in the minutes of a CCB meeting: "If the government decides to issue electoral bonds in script though SBI (State Bank of India), the Bank (RBI) should let it be." In Garg's telling, these minutes are what the Finance Ministry relied on to construe the consent of the RBI.

In effect, the central bank, under Patel, never expressly submitted its final comments or consent to the Scheme.

The Law Ministry's change of heart

The Scheme then needed the Law Ministry's approval as well. "We had expected the ministry to vet the proposed notification in a routine manner, the way hundreds of other notifications are cleared," Garg wrote. In November 2017, the Scheme was sent for the Law Ministry's approval.

The Law Ministry recommended some alterations. Garg recalled that it had questioned the 1 percent vote-share cut-off imposed on political parties to be eligible to receive bonds. In early December 2017, the Law Ministry recommended that the limit be increased to 6 percent. This would mean that far too few parties would be eligible for the Scheme.

According to Garg, the Law Ministry "made an about turn" later that month, after the Department of Economic Affairs countered that imposing a cut-off "may not be in sync" with Section 29B of Representation of People Act (ROPA) which permits "every political party" to receive corporate funding. Garg notes that the Department of Economic Affairs managed to convince the Law Ministry that the matter came under its purview because it was "a policy matter and not a legal issue."

The Law Ministry was also required to assess whether the amendments could be brought in as a Money Bill, which would mean the Rajya Sabha would not have the power to amend or reject it. In their petition, the Association of Democratic Reforms had argued that the 2016 and 2017 Finance Acts had to be treated as ordinary draft statutes since they legislated on matters beyond the features delineated in the Money Bill provision of the Constitution.

The Law Ministry, on its part, seemed to go out of its way to accommodate the amendment to the Companies Act as a Money Bill. Though it saw that the amendments did not fall under Article 110(1) "in a strict sense," they opined that the changes "may be made" as a Money Bill since they concerned the "IT Act and tax revenue of the government." Dr. R.J.R. Kasibhatla, Deputy Legal Advisor, also wrote that "regular legislative practice and procedure" should be adopted "next time." The consequence of this was that the Scheme was never debated in the Rajya Sabha.

A 'generally supportive' EC, a 'continuing to object' commissioner

On 26 May 2017, as deliberations on framing the finer points of the Scheme were underway, the Election Commission of India wrote to the Ministry of Law and Justice. They warned that the amendments to the IT Act, RoPA and Companies Act "will have a serious impact on transparency." They acknowledged the possibility of "shell companies being set up for the sole purpose of making donations to political parties."

The report was shared with the Finance Ministry on 3 July 2017, which, in Sethi's words, "simply pretended it had never heard from the Commission." In his memoir, Garg writes that Jaitely had advised him to "meet the full EC (all election commissioners) to explain the scheme and secure its concurrence, if possible."

The appointment of Sunil Arora as election commissioner was "expected to bring balance to the approach of the EC."

When Garg met them in September 2017, the committee included Achal Kumar Jyoti (the Chief), Om Prakash Rawat and Sunil Arora. Garg describes Jyoti and Arora as "generally supportive" even as Rawat "continued to object."

Documents unearthed by the RTIs show that Garg told Jaitley that the ECI were "reasonably satisfied" but Jyoti had raised three issues with the Scheme: individual candidates and small parties could not avail the benefits of the scheme; the amendments to the RoPA and the IT Act were inconsistent; political parties were not being mandated to furnish details of the aggregate amount of bonds redeemed in each denomination.

Garg recalls that the ECI was not heard from again after this meeting—until its affidavit submitted to the Supreme Court in March 2019 objecting to the Scheme. Here, the ECI stated that it will not "take any contentious issues" or "join any submissions on merits," as they are "matters between contending parties." It did, however, clarify the position of law on the validity of the Scheme, and stated that the framework "will have serious repercussions/impact on the transparency aspect of political finance/funding of political parties."

In an interview on the judgement, Advocate Shadan Farasat who represented the Communist Party of India (Marxist), stated that the ECI's refusal to take a position was a "reflection on the continuous change we have been seeing in the nature of the ECI's own independence."

Weak opposition from Opposition

Opposition parties, who also stood to gain from the system of anonymous donations, only raised objections to the Scheme in the initial stages. The Finance Minister had written to seven national and 49 state parties, seeking suggestions.

The All India Congress Committee called it a "completely opaque mechanism", noting that only the government will have access to the names of the donors and donees. The Bahujan Samaj Party requested a draft proposal before "giving effective and proper suggestions." The Communist Party of India (CPI) said that it "fail(ed) to understand the need for such a retrograde step."

Support came from BJP's then ally, the Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD), which called it a "landmark step" towards transparency. However, even SAD felt that it would be "more ethical" to only allow profit-making companies to donate.

Adhia, the Revenue Secretary, wrote to the Secretary of the Department of Economic Affairs saying that "no other response had been received till date" apart from the Congress and BSP. Both parties had asked for a draft of the scheme, he said, and requested the DEA to "initiate necessary steps for formulation of the scheme."

Over time, however, other than the CPI, even the political parties which had raised concerns became complicit. "Later on, all the political parties realised it was in their favour," Major General Anil Verma from the ADR said. "The point is that this electoral bond animal favours the ruling party. Wherever, and in whichever state."

Deliberations, which went on between several institutions, departments and high government officials ensued for a few months. It was only when details emerged from the RTIs that it became clear how briskly and conveniently it was all managed within the bureaucratic and administrative apparatus. Recently, Sethi evocatively described the making of the framework as "silent ball pens and correspondence in small print."

The noise began with ADR's petition in the Supreme Court in September 2017. Soon after, the RTIs and the reporting of journalists like Sethi revealed the bull-headedness with which the government had pushed the Scheme through. Part 2 of this feature tells the story of how the Supreme Court became centre stage in the battle between the voter's right to know and the donor's right to secrecy. https://www.scobserver.in/journal/the-making-and-unmaking-of-the-electoral-bond-scheme-part-1/

2. It's Tamil Nadu versus CAG as state repatriates senior audit officer *(timesofindia.indiatimes.com)* Updated: Apr 12, 2024

A confrontation appears to be brewing between Tamil Nadu govt and Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) after the former on April 1 abruptly removed its director-general (DG) of audit, a senior CAG official on deputation, after he was called for an "unscheduled sudden meeting" by the state's finance secretary.

DG audit D Jaisankar has written to CAG that he was repatriated after he objected to the manner in which fund audit authorities at district levels settled 300-400 audit objections in one hour at joint sittings: an exercise which was "unconvincing and unjustified".

DG brought audit mechanism to near standstill: TN secretary

At the "sudden" meeting in Chennai on April 1, the audit officer was asked by the finance secretary to withdraw his orders related to "settlement of audit objections", and when he refused, the DG was repatriated to his parent cadre (CAG) that same evening by an order of state govt, sources in CAG familiar with the development told TOI. The officer has sought CAG's intervention.

TN finance secretary T Udhayachandran justified the repatriation and told TOI that Jaisankar had issued certain executive orders in violation of Tamil Nadu Urban Local Bodies Act and Rules, 2023, which "caused irreparable damage" to the functioning of various local bodies in the state.

"He has given many oral instructions in violation of govt orders and brought the audit mechanism to near standstill. And due to non-settlement of audit objections on time, around 100 govt/local body officials could not superannuate," Udhayachandran said.

"Specific reports have been received against the individual officer and consultants engaged by him for misusing their position. There are integrity-related issues that warrant an impartial and deeper look. To ensure free and fair proceedings, the said officer has been repatriated to the parent organisation by following due process," he added.

According to Jaisankar, as part of the drill, local fund audit department of Tamil Nadu has been holding joint sittings monthly at district level, with district commissioner chairing the meeting and other stakeholders, including local fund audit authorities, being members of the group.

DG audit observed that "this arrangement was done in a manner where there is no monitoring and oversight at audit management level. Approximately 300 to 400 audit paragraphs are considered in one hour or so and declared settled by the joint sitting which the undersigned found unconvincing and unjustified".

"As the whole exercise brought pressure to audit staff and it was compromising environment, a circular was issued slightly modifying the process," Jaisankar informed CAG.

New directive from DG audit made it mandatory for audit teams to prepare "annotated statements indicating reply status and acceptability or otherwise and send to DG's office well in advance before joint sitting meeting". It was also made compulsory for each department to take a clearance certificate from audit before retiring regular staff.

"Due to staff shortage at DG audit office, the process took a little time to clear the cases one by one. Peeved at this, there were representations by secretaries to finance secretary on the slow progress in clearing settlement of objections in this way," the ex-DG said in his letter. "On April 1, I was called for an unscheduled sudden meeting by the finance secretary without any agenda in advance," the officer said. https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/its-tamil-nadu-versus-cag-as-state-repatriates-sr-audit-officer/articleshow/109227139.cms

3. Mumbai: Two Decades of Mithi River Cleanup Fall Short Despite Major Investments *(lokmattimes.com)* Updated: April 12, 2024

Mumbai: After the devastating rains in Mumbai on July 26, the neglect of the Mithi River and the price it paid was visible to all. Since then, the clean-up of Mithi has continued unabated for the past two decades. In the meantime, the Comptroller and Auditor General of India (CAG) had taken serious note of the widening and cleaning work of the river.

It should be noted that the works started by the Mumbai Metropolitan Region Development Authority (MMRDA) and the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) in their respective areas have not been completed 100 percent. When the BMC's budget for 2024-25 was presented to the commissioner recently, it was said that the work was 95 percent complete. Mithi River Development and Conservation Authority (MRDPA), an independent agency in the MMRDA, came into existence on August 19, 2005. A senior officer serves as its head. Still, the work is slow despite of crores of rupees have been spent on it.

The Public Accounts Committee of the state legislature submitted its report on the CAG report to the legislature on July 26, 2008. The widening and desilting work was also criticized in strong terms. Shiv Sena's Dattaji Nalawade was the chairman of the committee. The committee had Shiv Sena-BJP members from the opposition benches.

River was never cleaned

The debate in the Legislature never ended decisively. Because despite all, 17.8 km. The widening and cleaning of this long river has not been completed. This work has not been completed 100 percent by Mumbai's two major planning authorities, MMRDA and The Municipal Corporation. Now, if the Special Investigation Team's probe yields some findings are worth looking out for.

https://www.lokmattimes.com/maharashtra/mumbai-two-decades-of-mithi-river-cleanup-fall-short-despite-major-investments-a514/

4. RTI: Pune Zilla Parishad cancelled 135 projects at one go; state auditor says it's people's loss *(indianexpress.com)* Updated: April 10, 2024

The Maharashtra Accountant General said in its audit report last year that the Pune Zilla Parishad decision to cancel the 135 projects had 'resulted in depriving citizens of basic infrastructure'.

On June 13, 2020, the standing committee of the Pune Zilla Parishad adopted a unanimous resolution to cancel all works that were approved before the 2018-19 fiscal and were yet to begin. In a single stroke, 135 projects budgeted at Rs 763.94 lakh were cancelled. In 2023, the Maharashtra Accountant General (AG) flagged the drastic action in its annual audit report, saying it "ultimately resulted in depriving the citizens…of basic infrastructure".

The report, a copy of which was made available to The Indian Express under the Right To Information Act, 2005, shows that the 135 projects were proposed by the Zilla Parishad members between 2015-16 to 2018-19. The projects were related to the construction of roads, bridges, community halls etc, the development of religious sites, works related to the health department etc.

Though the 135 projects had been sanctioned and budgeted, work was yet to begin. "Cancellation of works ultimately resulted in depriving the citizens of ZP Pune of basic infrastructure. This reflects improper planning of Zilla Parishad, Pune, while developing the infrastructure," the audit report said.

The audit report also flagged 117 unfinished projects related to the construction of rural roads, development of tribal areas, repair of roads and bridges etc. Work on these projects had begun between 2018 to 2022 but they were yet to be completed, the report said.

In both instances, the Zilla Parishad had cited issues like non-availability of land, delay in issue of work order due to the monsoon etc.

The Pune Zilla Parishad covers all rural areas of Pune, barring those that fall under the jurisdiction of the Pune Municipal Corporation, the Pimpri Chinchwad Municipal Corporation and the three Cantonment boards of Pune, Khadki and Dehu.

The term of the previous Pune Zilla Parishad ended two years ago. Like several other local bodies in Maharashtra, elections to the Pune Zilla Parishad have been delayed due to petitions pending before the Supreme Court related to providing Other Backward Class (OBC) quotas in civic bodies.

Pandurang Pawar, a former Zilla Parishad member from Junnar taluka, said the unfinished projects were proposed by members themselves. "At times, members propose work at the urging of their voters but then they get entangled in issues like land disputes, land acquisition problems etc. We need a more proactive role from the administration and the people's representatives to ensure that works don't just remain on paper," he said. https://indianexpress.com/article/cities/pune/pune-zilla-parishad-cancels-135-projects-audit-report-9261946/

5. 3 senior Chandigarh IAS officers who went to Paris switched hotels, made unauthorised expenditure, says audit report

(indianexpress.com) Updated: April 12, 2024

Originally, the invitation was meant for the chief architect but three top IAS officers jetted off to Paris on public funds without the external affairs ministry's approval

Three senior IAS officers who went on a trip to Paris in 2015 during their tenure in the Chandigarh Administration made unauthorised expenditures of Rs 6.71 lakh on the foreign tour, changed hotels, and overstayed for a meeting that was meant for one lower-ranking official, as per a special audit report of the Director General of Audit (Central).

The audit report, a copy of which is with The Indian Express, also revealed that the original invitation was meant for the chief architect of Chandigarh but the three IAS officers went on this trip meant for one lower-rank official.

In 2022, The Indian Express highlighted the serious irregularities by the three IAS officers — Vijay Dev, then Chandigarh adviser; Anurag Agarwal, then home secretary; and Vikram Dev Dutt, then secretary (personnel). The information accessed through Right to Information (RTI) Act applications showed how they even switched from their "already booked five-star hotel" to a more plush property to get a better view of Arc De Triomphe and then gave each other approvals to increase their budget, all at the cost of the taxpayer.

The findings of the audit report

An invitation was received from Foundation Le Corbusier's Paris, France, regarding a meeting on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the architect's death of Le Corbusier to be held on June 15, 2015, in Villa Savoye, in Poissy. Confirmation was sent to Phillippe Belaval, Le President Du Centre des monument nationaux, Foundation Le Corbusier, Paris. A letter was sent to the Director Services Government of India, Ministry of Home, Delhi, regarding the grant of cadre clearance for three officers of Chandigarh Administration to attend the meeting. The cadre clearance from the Ministry of Home Affairs regarding participation of the said officers was received on June 5, 2015, for attending the event in Paris.

However, the audit mentions that "no certificate regarding the visit was obtained from the Ministry of External Affairs in regard to participation".

The audit report also mentions that these three IAS officers made a seven-day visit for this meeting. Vijay Dev and Vikram Dev Dutt approved each other's tour programmes, and Vijay Dev approved Anurag Agarwal's tour programme — all on June 10, 2015, as per the report.

The report submitted to the Chandigarh Administration mentions, "Originally invitation was meant for Chief Architect UT Chandigarh however, the visit was made by

Secretary level officers. No certificate regarding the visit was obtained from the Ministry of External Affairs in regard to participation."

It was stated that "the visit was for 7 days and the matter was neither presented nor approved by the screening committee," even though norms state that "no foreign travel visit should be exceeding five days without obtaining the approval of the screening committee." It was also said that the nomination of officers concerned was not obtained from the minister.

As per norms, it was also specified that "the visit abroad of the Secretary is to be recommended in case lower level officer could not be substituted". However, in this case, all three top IAS officers jetted off to Paris, overstayed and even switched hotels.

The revised amount of Rs 9.10 lakh meant Rs 1.51 lakh per night for six nights for the then adviser, and Rs 4.43 lakh meant Rs 73,916 per night for six nights. The revised hotel accommodation shot up to Rs 17,97,360, and the unauthorised expenditure reached Rs 6,72,284.

The exchequer paid for these hotel tariffs in addition to the business class tickets from Delhi to Paris and back (costing Rs 1.77 lakh each) and a daily allowance. Initially, the booking was done on June 8, 2015, and the revised bill was dated July 13, 2015.

The audit report mentions that the visit of the officers to attend the meeting was not sponsored by the inviting foundation and UT Administration Chandigarh incurred all the expenses.

Chief architect's expenditures approved

As per RTI details, Chief Architect Kapil Setia spent eight days in Paris from June 12 to 19 for this meeting, and his perks of Rs 4,49,476, a travel allowance of Rs 1,01,219, and a daily allowance of Rs 22,682 were approved as expenditures.

The Indian Express conveyed its queries on the audit report to The Chandigarh Administration on April 3. After a week's wait, the administration confirmed that it had received the audit's objections and observations.

A senior officer of the Chandigarh Administration confirmed, "We have received the audit observations on the Paris trip. We will be getting back on this."

All three IAS officers were sent a query by The Indian Express and informed about the audit report observations on their visit. However, no reply was received. https://indianexpress.com/article/cities/chandigarh/express-exclusive-senior-chandigarh-ias-officers-paris-hotels-unauthorised-expenditure-audit-report-9262010/

6. 3 IAS officers misused funds, upgraded stay on Paris trip, reveals audit report *(indiatoday.in)* Apr 11, 2024

An audit report by the Director General of Audit (Central), Chandigarh, revealed the three IAS officers extended their stay in Paris, upgraded their hotel accommodation, and approved each other's trips, bypassing the rules and guidelines.

Three senior IAS officers spent an excess of Rs 6.72 lakh of taxpayer’s money during a trip to Paris in June 2015, an audit report by the Director General of Audit (Central), Chandigarh, revealed.

Vijay Kumar Dev, who served as the Advisor to the Administrator of Chandigarh at the time, Anurag Aggarwal, the then Home Secretary of Chandigarh, and Vikram Dev Dutt, the then Secretary (Personnel), have come under scrutiny for the misuse of taxpayer funds.

They allegedly extended their stay in Paris, upgraded their hotel accommodation, and approved each other's trips, bypassing the rules and guidelines.

In 2015, the Chandigarh administration received an invitation from the Foundation Le Corbusier, located in Paris. The invitation was for a meeting, commemorating the 50th anniversary of the Swiss-French architect Le Corbusier, who had contributed to Chandigarh's master plan.

The administration nominated four participants for this event. The Home Ministry demanded certificates for Vijay Dev, Vikram Dev Dutt, and Anurag Aggarwal. The travel program was arranged and approved.

However, the audit report found that the officers were approving each other's trips. Vijay Dev approved Vikram Dutt's trip, and Dutt approved Dev's trip. Vijay Dev also approved Anurag Aggarwal's trip.

The audit report has revealed that the initial budget for the trip was Rs 18 lakh, which escalated to over Rs 25 lakh, with business-class tickets costing approximately Rs 1.77 lakh each and hotel accommodations exceeding the original budget by a significant margin.

The audit report highlights that the visit was initially approved for one day but was later extended to seven days without proper approval, violating the norms that limit foreign travel visits to five days without obtaining prior approval.

The audit report found that the invitation was meant for Chandigarh's Chief Architect. Instead, three Secretary-level officers attended, all at the expense of the taxpayer.

The report also revealed that the trip was not sponsored by the hosting foundation.

One of these officers has now retired while the other two have been transferred and hold different positions.

In response to the audit report's findings, the Chandigarh Administration has taken measures to curb wasteful spending, including banning air travel to Delhi and mandating train travel and government accommodation for official trips. https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/chandigarh-ias-officers-misused-funds-upgraded-stay-paris-trip-audit-report-2526194-2024-04-11

7. Audit report finds 'illegalities' in IAS trio's 2015 trip to Paris *(timesofindia.indiatimes.com)* Updated: Apr 12, 2024

CHANDIGARH: Nearly eight years after three senior IAS officers made an official visit to Paris, Chandigarh's director general of audit (central) has pointed out that the trio made "unauthorised" expenditure in excess of Rs 6.72 lakh and flouted rules in extending their visit, hotel bookings, and travel dates.

In June 2015, the then Union Territory's adviser Vijay Dev, ex-home secretary Anurag Aggarwal and erstwhile UT secretary (personnel) Vikram Dev Dutt visited Paris to attend an event marking the 50th death anniversary of the architect Le Corbusier, who planned the city of Chandigarh.

The visit was at the invitation of Foundation Le Corbusier Paris, France. "The visit was for seven days, and it was neither presented nor approved by the screening committee," states the audit report. According to the rule book, no foreign travel visit by a government official should exceed five days without the screening committee's approval.

The visit was to be from June 12 to 18, 2015, but was extended by the officers. The period of journey was revised to June 11 to 19 for Dev; June 11 to 21 for Dutt; and June 12 to 19 for Aggarwal. "No certificate regarding the visit was obtained from the ministry of external affairs in regard to participation... The nomination of the concerned officers was approved by the UT administrator. Approval of Dev, Dutt and Aggarwal was not obtained from the minister concerned," the audit report states. All expenses were incurred by the UT administration, Chandigarh.

RK Garg, a Chandigarh-based RTI activist who accessed the audit report under RTI, said, "The excess expenditure should be investigated. But more importantly, why it took eight years for the audit to be done? The audit was done in 2021-2022 and submitted in 2023." https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/audit-report-finds-illegalities-in-ias-trios-2015-trip-to-paris/articleshow/109227419.cms

8. 8 years on, IAS trio in dock for Rs 7 lakhs 'spending spree' in Paris *(timesofindia.indiatimes.com)* Apr 12, 2024

CHANDIGARH: Nearly eight years after three senior IAS officers went on an official trip to Paris, Chandigarh's director general of audit (central) has found they made "unauthorised" expenditure in excess of Rs 6.7 lakh and flouted rules in extending their visit, hotel bookings, and travel dates, reports Munieshwer Sagar.

In June 2015, the then UT's adviser Vijay Dev, ex-home secretary Anurag Aggarwal and erstwhile secretary (personnel) Vikram Dev Dutt went to Paris for an event marking the 50th death anniversary of architect Le Corbusier who planned the city of Chandigarh.

As the trip was for over 5 day, it should've been cleared by a committee, but it wasn't even presented to the panel, the audit found.

Trio extended trip, bill picked up by UT

The three senior IAS officers visited Paris in 2015 at the invitation of Foundation Le Corbusier Paris, France. All expenses were incurred by the UT administration. "The visit was for seven days, and it was neither presented nor approved by the screening committee," states the audit report. According to the rule book, no foreign travel visit by a govt official should exceed five days without the screening committee's nod.

The visit, set to be from June 12 to 18, 2015, was extended by the officers. It was revised to June 11 to 19 for Dev; June 11 to 21 for Dutt; and June 12 to 19 for Aggarwal. "No certificate regarding the visit was obtained from the ministry of external affairs in regard to participation… The nomination of the con-cerned officers was approved by the UT administrator. Approval of Dev, Dutt and Aggarwal was not obtained from the minister concerned," the a udit report states. RK Garg, an activist who accessed the audit report under RTI, said, "The excess expenditure should be investigated. But more importantly, why did it take eight years for the audit to be done?" The audit was done in 2021-2022 and submitted in 2023.

Dev and Dutt were unavailable for comment. Aggarwal said, " It i s a very old matter, nearly a decade old. I don't remember the exact details of the bookings, etc. But one should remember what the visit achieved for the city. It paved the way for the city's architectural heritage (capital complex) to be declared a Unesco World Heritage Site."
https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/chandigarh/8-years-on-ias-trio-in-dock-for-rs-7-lakhs-spending-spree-in-paris/articleshow/109233670.cms

9. Chandigarh: 3 IAS officers blew ₹6.72 lakh excess on Paris tour, reveals audit *(hindustantimes.com)* Apr 11, 2024

Not just this, without approval, the officers – former Chandigarh adviser Vijay Dev, former UT home secretary Anurag Aggarwal and secretary (personnel) Vikram Dev Dutt – went on a tour that was originally intended for a lower-ranking official – the UT chief architect

Three senior IAS officers spent an excess ₹6.72 lakh of taxpayer's money during a trip to Paris in June 2015 by extending their stay and upgrading their hotel accommodation, an audit report by the Director General of Audit (Central), Chandigarh, has flagged.

Not just this, without approval, the officers – former UT adviser Vijay Dev, former UT home secretary Anurag Aggarwal and secretary (personnel) Vikram Dev Dutt – went on a tour that was originally intended for a lower-ranking official – the UT chief architect.

In 2015, an invitation was received from Foundation Le Corbusier Paris, France, regarding a meeting on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of architect Le Corbusier's death to be held at Villa Savoye in Poissy on June 15.

A confirmation was sent to Philippe Belaval, president of the Centre for National Monuments, Foundation Le Corbusier, Paris, and a letter was sent to the director, services, ministry of home, Delhi, regarding the grant of cadre clearance for three officers of the Chandigarh administration to attend the one-day meeting.

But the three IAS officers extended the one-day tour to seven days without authorisation. As per rules, in case foreign travel exceeds five days, approval from the screening committee is required, but in this case, no approval was obtained for the seven-day visit, the audit has pointed out.

Also, a secretary-level officer's visit abroad could only be recommended if the lower-ranking officer was unavailable, says the audit report.

As per the report, the one-day tour was extended to June 12 to 18, 2015, and air travel and hotel bookings were made through a private travel agent.

The audit has raised objections to this, as the air ticket should be procured from an agency authorised by the Government of India only.

By extending the tour, the hotel stay cost rose to ₹9.10 lakh for the then adviser, meaning ₹1.51 lakh per night for six nights; and ₹4.43 lakh for the other two officers, translating to ₹73,916 per night for six nights.

Later, the officers upgraded their lodging bookings from "Inter-continental Hotel" to "Le Royal Hotel", shooting up the hotel accommodation cost to ₹17,97,360, and the unauthorised expenditure to ₹6,72,284, at cost to the taxpayer.

While Vijay Dev incurred extra expenses of ₹4.71 lakh, Vikram Dev and Anurag Aggarwal spent ₹1 lakh excess each, says the report.

Even after repeated attempts, all three officers did not respond to calls and messages.

The audit has also objected that no certificate regarding the visit was obtained from the Union ministry of external affairs. The report states that the initial booking was done on June 8 and the amended bill was procured on July 13, which was almost over a month after the visit.

The report has also highlighted that a participation certificate was not attached to the Travel Allowance (TA) bill. Additionally, it was found that no invoice regarding their stay in Paris was found on record, and payments were made based on bills issued by the agents.

RK Garg, a senior citizen who procured the audit report under the RTI Act, said the CAG should look into the TA bills of all officers who had spent more than ₹10 lakh per annum on travel in the past five years. https://www.hindustantimes.com/cities/chandigarh-news/chandigarh3-ias-officers-blew-6-72-lakh-excess-on-paris-tour-reveals-audit-101712783404218.html

10. Audit Report Reveals Three IAS Officers Misused Funds *(hwnews.in)* April 12, 2024

An audit report from the Director General of Audit (Central) in Chandigarh revealed that three senior IAS officers overspent Rs 6.72 lakh of taxpayer money on a Paris trip in June 2015. The officers, Vijay Kumar Dev, Anurag Aggarwal, and Vikram Dev Dutt, who held significant administrative roles in Chandigarh at the time, are now under scrutiny for this financial misconduct. https://hwnews.in/news/national/audit-report-reveals-three-ias-officers-misused-funds/

11. 3 IAS अधिकारियों ने जनता के पैसों से पेरिस में की मौज! ऑडिट रिपोर्ट में हुए चौंकाने वाले खुलासे *(jansatta.com)* April 12, 2024

Chandigarh IAS Officers Paris Trip: टैक्सपैयर्स के पैसों से पैरिस (Paris) घूम रहे चंडीगढ़ के तीन आईएएस अधिकारी (IAS Officers) इस समय चर्चा का विषय बने हुए हैं। चंडीगढ़ के तीन पूर्व IAS अफसरों पर जनता के टैक्स के पैसों को उड़ाने का आरोप लगा है। तीनों अधिकारी 2015 में फ्रांस की यात्रा पर गए थे। उस दौरान उन्होंनेन्हों नेयहां पर फिजूलखर्ची की थी। चंडीगढ़ के डायरेक्टर जनरल ऑफ ऑडिट (Central) की रिपोर्ट में ये बात सामने आई है।

चंडीगढ़ प्रशासन को पेरिस के ले कार्बुजिए फाउंडेशन ने इनविटेशन भेजा था। यह न्योता स्विस-फ्रेंच आर्किटेक्ट कंपनी ले कार्बुजिए की 50वीं वर्षगांठ के अवसर पर होने जा रही एक बैठक के मद्देनजर दिया था। इस बैठक के लिए चंडीगढ़ सरकार ने चार अफसरों के नाम का चयन किया था। इसके कुछ समय बाद इन्हें गृह मंत्रालय के पास मंजूरी के लिए भेजा था। लेकिन इनमें से केवल तीन अधिकारियों को ही इस मीटिंग में हिस्सा लेने के लिए भेजा गया। जिन अधिकारियों को भेजा गया उनमें विजय देव, विक्रम देव दत्त और अनुराग अग्रवाल शामिल है।

7 लाख रुपये का बढ़ा पेरिस यात्रा का बजट

जांच रिपोर्ट में यह बात भी निकलकर सामने आई है कि इस ट्रिप का शुरुआती खर्च पहले 18 लाख रुपये का था। जो बाद में बढ़कर 25 लाख से ज्यादा का हो गया। बिजनेस क्लास की एक टिकट की कीमत तकरीबन 1.77 लाख रुपये थी। वहीं,हीं होटल भी काफी किफायती था। इतना ही नहीं, हीं ऑडिट रिपोर्ट में यह भी पता चला कि इन सभी की यह पेरिस ट्रिप केवल एक ही दिन की थी, लेकिन इसे बिना किसी की मंजूरी के सात दिन तक के लिए बढ़ा दिया गया। बता दें कि बिना मंजूरी के किसी विदेश यात्रा को ज्यादा से ज्यादा पांच दिन तक के लिए ही बढ़ाया जा सकता है।

चंडीगढ़ प्रशासन ने अब उठाए ये कदम

इस रिपोर्ट में ये भी पाया गया कि ये इनविटेशन केवल चंडीगढ़ के मुख्य आर्किटेक्ट के लिए था, जबकि इसके बजाय सचिव स्तर के तीन अधिकारी इसमें शामिल हुए और वो टैक्सपैयर्स के खर्चों पर। साथ ही, इसमें यह भी सामने आया गया कि इस यात्रा का खर्च ले कार्बुजिए फाउंडेशन की तरफ से नहीं उठाया गया था। इन तीन में से एक आईएएस अफसर अब रिटायर हो चुके हैं, जबकि दो का ट्रां सफर हो चुका है। https://www.jansatta.com/national/chandigarh-ias-officers-lavish-paris-trip-on-taxpayers-money-revealed-in-audit-report/3305231/

12. विदेश दौरे में जमकर उड़ाया पैसा, ऑडिट में पकड़ाया, 3 IAS अधिकारियों ने तो हद कर दी *(navbharattimes.indiatimes.com)* 12 Apr 2024

चंडीगढ़: जनता दिन-रात मेहन कर कमाई का एक हिस्सा टैक्स में देती है और यहां इन तीन आईएएस अफसरों ने उस पैसे से अपने शौक पूरे किए। एक सरकारी जांच रिपोर्ट में पाया गया है कि तीन वरिष्ठ IAS अधिकारियों ने 2015 में पेरिस की यात्रा की थी। उस यात्रा में इन तीनों ने जमकर पैसा उड़ाया था। ऑडिट रिपोर्ट सामने आते ही तीनों का सच बाहर आ गया। चंडीगढ़ के महालेखा

परीक्षा निदेशक (केंद्रीय) ने बताया है कि इन तीनों अधिकारियों ने यात्रा बढ़ाने, होटल बुकिंग और यात्रा की तारीखों में हेरफेर कर के 6.72 लाख रुपये से अधिक का खर्च किया है।

9 साल पहले गए थे पेरिस
जून 2015 में, चंडीगढ़ के उस समय के सलाहकार विजय देव, पूर्व गृह सचिव अनुराग अग्रवाल और पूर्व सचिव (कार्मिक) विक्रम देव दत्त पेरिस गए थे। यह दौरा शहर के नियोजक वास्तुकार Le Corbusier की 50वीं पुण्यतिथि पर एक कार्यक्रम में शामिल होने के लिए था। यह दौरा फ्रांस के फाउंडेशन ले कोरबुसीए के निमंत्रण पर हुआ था। जांच रिपोर्ट में कहा गया है कि यह दौरा सात दिनों का था और इसे स्क्रीनिंग कमेटी के सामने न तो पेश किया गया और न ही मंजूरी दी गई। सरकारी नियमों के अनुसार, बिना स्क्रीनिंग कमेटी की मंजूरी के किसी भी सरकारी अधिकारी की विदेश यात्रा पांच दिनों से अधिक नहीं होनी चाहिए।

जनता के पैसों पर विदेश में खर्चे
तीनों आईएएस अफसरों ने पेरिस यात्रा के बहाने टैक्सपेयर्स के पैसे से खूब इंजॉय किया। मीडिया रिपोर्ट्स की मानें तो तीनों अधिकारियों ने एक दूसरे की ट्रिप पर मुहर लगाई है। विजय देव ने विक्रम देव दत्त, विक्रम देव दत्त ने अनुराग अग्रवाल और अनुराग अग्रवाल ने विजय देव की ट्रिप पर मुहर लगाई। पहले पेरिस यात्रा का बजट 18 लाख था जो बाद में बढ़कर 25 लाख पहुंच गया था। बिजनेस क्लास के टिकट 1.77 लाख रुपये के थे।

ऑडिट करने में इतनी देरी क्यों?
यात्रा 12 जून से 18 जून 2015 तक होनी थी, लेकिन तीनों अधिकारियों ने इसे बढ़ा दिया। यात्रा अवधि को विजय देव के लिए 11 जून से 19 जून, विक्रम देव दत्त के लिए 11 जून से 21 जून और अनुराग अग्रवाल के लिए 12 जून से 19 जून तक संशोधित किया गया था। जांच रिपोर्ट में कहा गया कि इस यात्रा में भाग लेने के संबंध में विदेश मंत्रालय से कोई प्रमाण पत्र नहीं लिया गया। संबंधित अधिकारियों के नामांकन को केंद्र शासित प्रदेश के प्रशासक की ओर से इसे अनुमोदित किया गया था। देव, दत्त और अग्रवाल की स्वीकृति संबंधित मंत्री से नहीं ली गई थी। सभी खर्च चंडीगढ़ के केंद्र शासित प्रदेश प्रशासन की ओर से किए गए थे। चंडीगढ़ के एक आरटीआई कार्यकर्ता आरके गर्ग ने आरटीआई के तहत लेखापरीक्षा रिपोर्ट प्राप्त की और कहा कि अतिरिक्त खर्च की जांच की जानी चाहिए। लेकिन इससे भी महत्वपूर्ण बात यह है कि ऑडिट करने में आठ साल क्यों लग गए? ऑडिट 2021-2022 में हुआ और 2023 में जमा किया गया था।
https://navbharattimes.indiatimes.com/india/three-ias-officers-spend-lots-of-money-during-2015-paris-visit-audit-report-reveals-all/articleshow/109237107.cms

SELECTED NEWS ITEMS/ARTICLES FOR READING

13. Ministry of Defence Releases Tenders for Acquiring 97 More Tejas Mk-1A Jets worth Rs 65,000 Crore *(swarajyamag.com)* Apr 12, 2024

The Ministry of Defence has released a tender to the public sector company Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL) for the procurement of 97 made-in-India LCA Mark 1A fighter jets, in a deal anticipated to cost Rs 65,000 crore.

This order is poised to become the largest-ever placed by the Indian government for indigenous military hardware.

HAL has three months to submit their response to the tender.

This comes just a fortnight after the first serial production Tejas Mk-1A jet took its inaugural flight in Bengaluru. The aircraft was airborne for over 18 minutes during the flight. It is expected to be delivered to the Indian Air Force (IAF) in the next three to four months.

HAL is already supplying the IAF with 83 Tejas MK-1A under a contract signed in 2021 worth Rs 48,000 crore.

This is in addition to the earlier order of 40 Tejas Mk-1 jets. The Tejas Mark 1 variants were initially introduced into the IAF in 2016, with the No. 45 Squadron ‘Flying Daggers’ and later in No. 18 Squadron ‘Flying Bullets’.

The decision to procure more Tejas comes at a critical time as the IAF seeks to modernise its fleet and replace aging MiG-series aircraft.

Tejas Mark 1A will be a more capable fighter than the original Mark 1 variant.

It will come with around 40 major and minor improvements over Mark 1. These improvements include the introduction of an active electronically scanned array radar for detection of enemy aircraft at greater ranges and resistance to jamming, and a faster turnaround time of each aircraft after each sortie.

With the new order, HAL will ramp up its production rate from the 10-12 jets per year to 24 jets per year.

HAL chief C B Ananthakrishnan said in an interview to Hindustan Times, "Our current goal is to deliver 24 aircraft from the Bengaluru and Nashik facilities by 2025-26."

As and when they are able to make 24 jets per year, HAL will look for increasing the rate to 30 aircraft per year.

"Once we have reached that goal, we can ramp up production to 30 aircraft per annum. It is possible if we can streamline the supply chain," the HAL chief added.

It is expected that with the increased production rate of 30 Tejas per year, HAL might be able to deliver the first 83 jets one year ahead of schedule in 2028 as opposed to 2029. https://swarajyamag.com/defence/ministry-of-defence-releases-tenders-for-acquiring-97-more-tejas-mk-1a-jets-worth-rs-65000-crore

14. NDA's Ambitious Highway Push: 50,000 Km of Expressways By 2037 To Cut Logistic Costs *(swarajyamag.com)* Apr 11, 2024

The National Democratic Alliance (NDA) as part of 100-day agenda for quick implementation after the formation of the new government in May 2024, could unveil mega plan for building 50,000 km of new, access-controlled, expressways by 2037 to help reduce logistic costs.

The programme is expected to replace the Bharatmala scheme and will sync all future road projects with the government’s Vision 2047 for the sector.

Bharatmala Pariyojana is India's largest infrastructure programme to develop about 35,000 km of National Highway corridors, connecting over 580 districts in the nation. The programme signalled a paradigm shift to corridor approach of infrastructure development.

"The idea is to reduce logistic costs in India, decongest India's roads and make the road infrastructure experience world-class, befitting a developed nation," reports ET, quoting a senior government official.

Preparations for awarding new projects are already underway, pending approval on Vision 2047. Once greenlit, the ministry will commence the bidding process.

In addition, the government has opted to increase private sector involvement in road projects by predominantly using the build-operate-transfer (BOT) mode for future bids.

The ministry recently updated the model concession agreements for both BOT and toll-operate-transfer (ToT) projects, simplifying them and making them more appealing to investors in order to attract private investments. https://swarajyamag.com/infrastructure/100-days-of-nda-30-unveiling-mega-plan-for-50000-km-of-new-expressways

15. 10 Years of Make in India has laid foundation of solid economic growth in coming decades *(timesofindia.indiatimes.com)* April 11, 2024

Jefferies Equity Research Outlook Report has said that, Strong Reform Measures initiated by PM Narendra Modi-led government in the last 10 years have laid the foundation of solid economic growth in the coming decades. It Stated that, over the last 10 years, India's GDP has grown by 7 % CAGR in USD terms to $ 3.6 trillion. With this, the economy became the 5th largest economy, up from being the 8th largest economy. The Report predicted that India would become the 3rd largest economy by 2027, with expected market capitalisation of $10 trillion by 2030, if it continues the pace of reforms. This could only help it maintain its status as the fastest growing economy, the Report said.

The Report stated, over the next 4 years, India's GDP will touch $ 5 trillion, making it the 3rd largest economy in the world by 2027, overtaking Japan and Germany. The country will be the fastest growing economy with the tailwinds of demographics:

1. Ensuring consistent labour supply;

2. Improving institutional strength, and;

3. Improving governance.

The Report further said that:

1. GST implementation in 2017 simplified taxation and improved trade efficiencies, similar to Euro;

2. Bankruptcy reforms drove a massive cleaning up of corporate and banking sector balance sheets, and improved governance.

3. RERA cleaned-up housing sector, laying the foundation for a multi-year housing upcycle, and;

4. The government's focus on physical infrastructure in the form of roads, airports, railways etc., and digital infrastructure in the form of Unique Identification Number or Aadhaar Card, UPI (Unified Payments Interface) & DBT (Direct Benefit Transfer) has helped the Startup ecosystem.

India, with the highest population in the world, also has favourable demographics with a vibrant and young population, whose average age is below 30 years. The young demographics implies that the ratio of working age population is yet to peak, unlike several large economies and other comparable emerging market economies, the Report said.

The report added that a strong earnings growth profile, track-record of generating peer beating returns, rising India market weight, and deep markets that consistently achieves a high volume of trade would attract incremental foreign flows. The Indian markets, the Report adds, saw $ 20 billion of equity flows in 2023.

Focus on RBI Deputy Governor, Michael Debabrata Patra's Observations

RBI Deputy Governor has reportedly predicted that, India's economy will become the world's largest economy by 2050, driven by 10% growth rate, taking the following challenges head on:

1. Increasing female labour participation;

2. Enhancing exports, and;

3. A focus on high-value tourism and financial services.

RBI Deputy Governor said while delivering the keynote address on The Indian Economy: Opportunities and Challenges at Nomura's 40th Central Bankers' Seminar in Kyoto, Japan on March 25 that, India can achieve a growth rate of 10 % in the next decade and become the 2nd largest economy by 2032 and the largest by 2050. He said, the growth trend of India is on the cusp of a post-pandemic upshift, with early signs of it rising above 7 % recorded before COVID-19 struck. He said, this prediction is based on the energies and transformation which are driving the nation to overcome its challenges.

Patra said, India's recent growth performance has surprised many. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) has revised its forecast for 2023 upwards by 80 basis points between April 2023 and January 2024. In its latest update, IMF expects India to contribute 16 % of global growth, the 2nd largest share in the world in terms of market exchange rates.

Today, India is the 5th largest economy in the world, poised to overtake Germany and Japan within the ensuing decade. In Purchasing Power Parity terms, the Indian economy is already the 3rd largest economy in the world, said Patra.

The tailwinds driving this growth, according to him include:

1. Favourable demography;

2. Rupee being among the least volatile currencies in 2023, and;

3. Transformative change leveraging technology by automating repetitive tasks, improving communication and collaboration, and gaining insights from data.

Stating that inflation in India is moderating after surging from the multiple and overlapping supply shocks from:

1. The pandemic,

2. Weather-induced food price spikes,

3. Supply chain disruptions, and;

4. Global commodity price pressures following the Russia-Ukraine conflict.

He added that inflation has fallen back into the tolerance band since September 2023.

Patra stated, the innate strengths, energies, and the transformation are driving the nation to overcome its challenges to achieve a growth rate of 10 % in the next decade & is likely to become the 2nd largest economy in the world by 2032 and the largest economy by 2050.

Patra listed the following Challenges:

1. Contribution of labour to value addition in India compares poorly in a cross-country perspective;

2. In terms of appropriate skills for a specific job, only 51 % are employable, highlighting the criticality of the upskilling missions that are underway, such as, Skill, India that aims to bridge the skill gap and enhance employability;

3. The challenge of increasing female labour participation is a key challenge, and;

4. India’s manufacturing and services finding expression in Global markets i.e., Make in India for the world.

Deputy Governor of RBI, Michael Debabrata Patra has stressed that intensified efforts are needed to raise India’s exports of goods and services from $ 768 billion or 2.4 % of the world total to $ 1 trillion, each for merchandise and service exports or 5 % of the Global trade by 2030.

According to him the potential exists:

1. In the form of sectors like IT and digital services;

2. Value-added agricultural products;

3. High-value tourism;

4. Financial services,

5. Retail, and;

6. E-commerce.

10 years of the Make in India initiative of the Modi government seems to have paid off handsomely, laying a solid foundation for the economy as indicated in the Jefferies Report. https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/blogs/truth-lies-and-politics/10-years-of-make-in-india-has-laid-foundation-of-solid-economic-growth-in-coming-decades-jefferies-equity-research-outlook-report/

16. Only two years left to save world from climate catastrophe: UN climate chief *(hindustantimes.com)* Apr 11, 2024

The world has only two years left to avert climate catastrophe, UN climate chief Simon Stiell warned on Wednesday in an emotive speech titled “Two years to save the world.”

Stiell called on countries to urgently strengthen their climate plans, known as nationally determined contributions (NDCs), under the Paris Agreement. Current NDCs will barely reduce emissions by 2030, he said, despite the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change’s warning that global greenhouse gas emissions must peak before 2025 and fall 43% by 2030 to limit warming to 1.5°C.

“As of today, NDCs — in aggregate will barely cut emissions at all by 2030. We still have a chance to make greenhouse gas emissions tumble, with a new generation of national climate plans,” Stiell said, speaking at the Chatham House in London. “But we need these stronger plans, now. And while every country must submit a new plan, the reality is G20 emissions are around 80% of global emissions.”

Stiell emphasised that a new climate finance deal at the UN Climate Conference (COP29) in Baku in November will be crucial for developing countries to strengthen their NDCs. He called on developed and developing nations to agree on a deal with more concessional finance, new funding sources, reformed development banks, and debt relief for the most vulnerable countries.

The remarks come as global temperatures continue to soar. March was the tenth consecutive month to be the hottest on record. The global average temperature in the last twelve months (April 2023 – March 2024) is the highest on record at 0.70°C above the 1991-2020 average, the EU’s Copernicus Climate Change Service said on Tuesday.

COP29 will be critical for countries like India, which have demanded immediate delivery of climate finance by developed nations. India's environment minister Bhupender Yadav has stressed that trillions of dollars in accessible, affordable finance will be needed by 2030.

The UN expert laid particular emphasis on the need for G7 and G20 nations to do more. Without bolder climate action, supply chain disruptions and inflation will worsen dramatically, he added.

With 64 countries holding elections this year, including the U.S. presidential race, Stiell appealed to voters to choose climate action. "The only surefire way to get climate at the top of the cabinet agenda is if enough people raise their voices," he said.

Seill also stressed on the need for a "quantum leap" to address inequalities and climate finance. "Because it's hard for any government to invest in renewables or climate resilience when the treasury coffers are bare, debt servicing costs have overtaken health spending, new borrowing is impossible, and the wolves of poverty are at the door. A quantum leap this year in climate finance is both essential and entirely achievable," he added.

He added that such a deal should have four key components: one more concessional finance, especially for the poorest and most vulnerable countries; two, new sources of international climate finance; three, reformed development banks to make them work better for developing countries; and four, debt relief for countries that need it most to give them the fiscal space for climate investment.

"Developing countries spent more than four hundred billion dollars servicing debts last year," Stiell emphasised.

Environment minister Yadav on December 15 said that India has been continuously highlighting two major concerns of the global south – technology and climate finance. "At G20, held under India's Presidency, it was agreed that the climate finance requirement will be to the tune of trillions of dollars by 2030. And that this should be available, accessible and affordable," he said in an interview at the time. https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/only-two-years-left-to-save-world-from-climate-catastrophe-un-climate-chief-101712764054882.html

17. Rs 222 crores of 'entitled' MPLAD funds in Gujarat went unutilized for five years, says ADR report *(newindianexpress.com)* 11 April 2024

The state MPs receive an annual grant of Rs five crore from the central government for the development of their constituencies.

AHMEDABAD: A data from the Association of Democratic Reforms revealed that 26 Gujarat BJP MPs have missed out on substantial grant allocated for their constituencies by both Central as State governments.

The data further revealed that an amount of Rs 222 crores is found to be sitting unutilized by the MPs in the state.

The Member of Parliament Local Area Development Division of the Government of India annually allocates a fund of five crore rupees to each MPs across the nation.

As per the data released by the Association of Democratic Reforms (ADR's Gujarat unit), state MPs receive an annual grant of Rs five crore from the central government for the development of their constituencies.

Overall, each MP is entitled to a grant of Rs 25 crore over a period of five years from May 2019 to May 2024.

However, in the fiscal year 2020-21, no grant was disbursed due to the pandemic, and in 2021-22, a reduced grant of Rs 2 crore was provided for the same reason.

Meanwhile, Association of Democratic Reforms (ADR) data shows that only Rs 220 crore out of the total Rs 442 crore of grants earmarked for MPs, amounting to Rs 17 crore have been released by the government.

Meaning the MPs are not fully utilizing their allocated funds for the betterment of their constituencies.

Panthika Jog, the Gujarat Coordinator of the Association of Democratic Reforms (ADR), remarks, "Even among the grants earmarked for MPs, the central government has not disbursed the installments for 2022-23 to 18 MPs."

"The central government attributes the reduced allocation to non-compliance with certain regulations by the Gujarat government. Like, due to the Gujarat government's failure to submit progress reports and certificates of grant utilization to the central government, the grants have not been released," she added.

According to the ADR report, 16 MPs, including Home Minister Amit Shah, have only received a grant of Rs 9.5 crore each over the past five years. Meanwhile, nine MPs have been allocated Rs 7 crore each, and the sole MP from Rajkot, Mohan Kundaria, has received only a grant of Rs 5 crore.

"This disparity in grant allocation is worrisome, as it limits the ability of MPs to address the needs of their constituencies effectively," said Jog. https://www.newindianexpress.com/nation/2024/Apr/11/rs-222-crores-of-entitled-mplad-funds-in-gujarat-went-unutilized-for-five-years-says-adr-report

18. At Rs 3.1K crore, revenue mop-up of top local bodies of UP soars 33% *(business-standard.com)* Apr 11 2024

The top 17 urban local bodies of Uttar Pradesh registered 33 per cent year-on-year (Y-o-Y) growth in revenue collection. These cities cornered Rs 3,100 crore in the last financial year (FY24) over Rs 2,340 crore in FY23.

Of the Rs 3,100 crore these local bodies collected nearly Rs 1,585 crore or more than 50 per cent in taxes. While Lucknow and Kanpur topped the revenue chart with Rs 904 crore and Rs 534 crore respectively, Ghaziabad, Prayagraj and Agra followed with Rs 350 crore, Rs 253 crore and Rs 215 crore.

These corporations include Lucknow, Kanpur, Varanasi, Ghaziabad, Agra, Gorakhpur, Prayagraj, Aligarh, Meerut, Jhansi, Ayodhya, Mathura, Bareilly, Saharanpur, Shahjahanpur, Moradabad and Firozabad.

Amrit Abhijat, principal secretary of the state's Urban Development department, said: "Geographic information systems-based databases and surveying were some of the focus areas assigned to the municipal commissioners to facilitate higher tax collection." Additionally, the department upgraded online portals and mobile applications to streamline property tax collection and bill payments.

According to a former UP Chief Secretary, the rising tax and non-tax revenue from the local bodies augurs well for the urbanisation agenda of the Yogi Adityanath government.

"Such robust collection means the municipal corporations will depend less on state financial grants. This will foster local development and infrastructure projects, and encourage other urban and rural local bodies to follow suit," he added.

To boost revenues collection, the department adopted revenue-based schemes like the Atal Mission for Rejuvenation and Urban Transformation, which stresses on local body financial stability.

Moreover, implementation of revenue-based schemes like the Chief Minister Green Road Infrastructure Development Scheme fostered competition for revenue generation among municipal corporations.

To incentivise timely payments, the urban development department and local bodies offer discounts to taxpayers. The department takes punitive action against property owners who default on tax payments, including property sealing and auctions. https://www.business-standard.com/amp/economy/news/at-rs-3-1k-crore-revenue-mop-up-of-top-local-bodies-of-up-soars-33-124041100588_1.html