

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

1. **Future-ready for AI** (*millenniumpost.in*) By: Anand Mohan Bajaj | NOV 10, 2023

**Riding on the success of One IA&AD One System, the institution of Comptroller and Auditor General of India has exhibited remarkable brilliance in automating the audit process**



Of late, ‘digital’ is the buzz word and the governments of the day have taken giant strides in automating their business processes as well as service delivery. Under the changed circumstances, the institution of Comptroller and Auditor General of India (CAG) has redesigned the audit process to make the organisation ready for a paperless audit, and is preparing all its audit reports in an on-line mode. This makes the organisation ready to harness the power of AI in future.

The impetus for such a paradigm shift in audit outlook came in the wake of a felt need of making the audit processes more efficient and effective through a state-of-the-art end-to-end automation of process workflow. A workforce of around 40,000 people, spread over 150 offices, offered its unique operational, behavioral as well as technological challenges.

Nevertheless, the audit leadership took a bold decision in 2019 to completely automate the process, from engagement with the units to execution and reporting on audit output and wider stakeholder interaction. One IA&AD One System (OIOS) is unique in the world in the sense that none of the Supreme Audit Institutions (SAIs) of other countries have such a wide-ranging, comprehensive digitised workflow system being used by over 27,000 auditors. This fully automated audit process has now become the medium of conducting audit in the establishment of the CAG (SAI India) since first of April 2023.

This also entailed creation of massive digital infrastructure with SAI India's own Data Center, own communication backbone in the form of IAAD Net and other security and firewall structures. Moreover, every auditor is now equipped with a laptop or desktop having latest technology to easily scan and store voluminous documents.

Just to give an idea about the scale of the operations, on an average 5,000 auditors have been logging on each day in 130 audit offices spread all over India. They have collectively issued over 32,000 Inspection Reports to various government departments since the initiation of the OIOS in a pilot mode in Nov 2020.

The benefit has been immense. It has led to better way of resource planning, better targeting of audit based on risk identification, better management of work during field audits and quicker and more interesting way of reporting on the audit findings. The OIOS is also empowering the SAI India's auditors in data analytics since data collected through online toolkits can be analysed through any analytics software such as Power BI in order to further improve audit processes. The digitisation process entails a complete digital record of each and every step involved in audit and each and every document relied upon by audit in drawing conclusions. No doubt, such information at the finger tips have boosted the auditors' morale in vouching for the final audit report with a lot more confidence.

SAI India have invested heavily in capacity building of its workforce in the form of training in basic computer literacy to advanced data analytics. There has been structured training modules with audio-visual methods for self-learning by the auditors and there has been expert level hand-holding throughout the entire process.

Often, challenges were there from the side of the government audited entities, especially as the offices of state governments have either not been equipped well digitally or have a reluctance to move away from established way of interacting with audit.

For the stakeholders including elected representatives, alert citizens, media and think tanks, the digitisation process would eventually offer interactive reporting which can be customisable at the end of the user for specific needs, adding value to any public policy research, reporting and discourse.

The satisfaction level of the stakeholders is much higher now, since there is only a single source of truth and the process can be verified at any point in time. Moreover, once a document is supplied in a digital form, that same document can be used in multiple cases by audit, reducing the workload of the government officers. SAI India has been leading from the front in its quest for harnessing the benefits of emerging technologies.

SAI India is regarded, in the international audit forums such as the International Organisation of Supreme Audit Institutions (INTOSAI) and its Asian body the ASOSAI, as an organisation which is capable of adapting to changing needs of the time quickly and effectively. SAI India's leadership role in SAI20 (a group under the G20) Auditor Generals' summit held in Goa has been much appreciated by the global audit profession. SAI20 event has established Indian audit's professionalism and its

commitment for delivering high quality reports with the help of information technology.

The institution of CAG has been using the technologies such as Artificial Intelligence, Unmanned Ariel Vehicle, geo-spatial mapping, remote sensing data, image analytics, pattern matching and graph theory in red-flagging risk areas in audit.

Auditing is unique to the SAI India and hence all the processes involved in producing an audit report are also unique. It had to design and develop the processes de novo and had to train its staff in the new ways of doing audit. The audit officers and staff, now equipped with digital devices such as laptops, scanners, document feeder and a digital databank to support their knowledge, can go to an office and conduct their business with least dependence on the auditee, thus reinforcing the constitutionally guaranteed independence to the institution.

In less than a year of implementing such a process automation, the institution of CAG has started reaping the benefits. The audit assignments requiring involvement of many offices are now better coordinated and the data is centrally pooled for quick generation of reports. The MIS generated gives senior management greater control over the progress of audit and mid-course reviews are now easier to conduct.

There has been a great deal of interest in the product, not only by government departments but even by the public auditors from other countries. Enquiries have been received and studies have been conducted on the transformational process at the SAI India.

In the technology domain, even sky is not the limit. Technology changes very fast and if an organisation is not alert to such changes, it would be stuck in the old ways and would not be able to transform. The takeaway from the experience in implementing OIOS has been the knowledge of pivoting an organisation of the size of SAI India towards a direction of technological change. SAI India would be preserving and utilising this knowledge in times to come. Being alert is being alive.

<https://www.millenniumpost.in/opinion/future-ready-for-ai-539987>

## **2. Parliamentary Committee urges strengthening Archaeological Survey of India's documentation efforts** (*economictimes.indiatimes.com*) Nov 10, 2023

The Parliamentary Standing Committee on Transport, Tourism and Culture recently submitted its 'Three Hundred Fifty Ninth Report on Functioning of Archaeological Survey of India' (ASI) in Lok Sabha. Set up in 1861, ASI's mandate is to undertake archaeological research and protect the nation's cultural heritage.

It is also tasked under the National Mission on Monuments and Antiquities (NMMA) to create a database of heritage sites and antiques. But, as the House report points out, of the estimated 58 lakh antiques, ASI has documented only 16.8 lakh. The last Performance Audit of Preservation and Conservation of Monuments and Antiquities carried out by CAG also pointed out the urgent need for a reliable database of

monuments and antiquities by ASI. Documentation is critical to stop pilferage and smuggling of artefacts.

Unesco estimates that India has lost some 50,000 artefacts since 1989. The actual number could be higher. More than 1,200 ancient idols are said to have been stolen only from temples in Tamil Nadu between 1992 and 2017, as per an audit conducted by the Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowments Department in late 2018.

Britain, with its colonial past, is the worst offender. The British Museum has a gallery of exhibits from India. While all colonial powers - the Netherlands, France, Italy and Belgium - have initiated the process of returning artefacts to their erstwhile colonies, Britain remains unfazed. Reportedly, it has a 'stolen goods tour', run by an external guide.

There are several international conventions that support the return of cultural property to its country or people of origin:

1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict.

Unesco 1970 Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property.

1995 UNIDROIT Convention on Stolen or Illegally Exported Cultural Objects.

However, these conventions have limitations. They apply to artefacts illicitly traded after 1970. So, for instance, the British Museum is under no binding obligation to repatriate artefacts taken before 1970.

Under the aegis of its G20 presidency, India initiated meetings of culture ministers in Varanasi. The Kashi Culture Pathway called for a 'strengthened and effective global coalition to bolster the fight against the illicit trafficking of cultural property, particularly by encouraging the ratification and effective implementation of international agreements and conventions'. It 'welcomed progress made at national, regional and international levels towards resolving issues and enabling the return and restitution of cultural property to their countries and communities of origin'.

This found resonance in the G20 New Delhi Declaration of September 9. Paragraph 31 of the declaration highlights culture's role in achieving SDGs. G20 leaders reiterated their 'commitment to strengthen the fight against illicit trafficking of cultural property'.

Responding to a parliamentary question in August, Union culture minister G Kishan Reddy said ASI has retrieved 251 antiquities from foreign countries between 1976 and 2023, of which 238 have been retrieved in the last nine years. But there is much more in private collections globally and in museums in Britain. India should continue to push for the return of its treasures.

Earlier this year, the US repatriated 105 trafficked antiquities to India. According to the Indian government, the artefacts represent a wide geographical spread in terms of their

origin in India - with 47 from eastern India, 27 from southern India, 22 from central India, six from northern India and three from western India.

**Domestically, we need to:**

-Strengthen heritage management.

-Build a robust database of existing antiques and artefacts.

-Invest in museums.

-Increase public engagement and awareness for protecting the country's cultural heritage.

Article 49 of the Constitution says that the state must protect every monument, place or object of artistic or historic interest. Citizens should promise to participate in this endeavour full steam.

November 14, the International Day Against Illicit Trafficking in Cultural Property, will be an ideal day to start this important journey to protect India's incredible heritage. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/opinion/et-commentary/parliamentary-committee-urges-strengthening-archaeological-survey-of-indias-documentation-efforts/articleshow/105132593.cms>

## **STATES NEWS ITEMS**

### **3. HC seeks Delhi govt's stand on PIL for CAG audit of private schools (*business-standard.com*) Updated: November 11, 2023**

The Delhi High Court Friday sought the stand of the city government on a public interest litigation seeking audit of accounts of all unaided private schools here by the Comptroller & Auditor General (CAG).

A bench headed by Acting Chief Justice Manmohan issued notice on the petition by Jan Seva Welfare Society, and also sought the stand of the CAG as well as all unaided private schools in the capital.

The petitioner argued that unaided private schools cannot be permitted to increase their fee until their accounts are audited by the CAG and examined by the DoE.

Delhi government counsel Santosh Kumar Tripathi opposed the petition and said there was no legal requirement to get the accounts of unaided private schools mandatorily audited by the CAG.

He said the law mandates the schools that have the autonomy to fix the fees can tender their statement of accounts for audit to the Directorate of Education (DoE).

The bench, also comprising Justice Mini Pushkarna, voiced its reservations over burdening the CAG with the additional task of auditing over a thousand unaided private schools.

The CAG's counsel said special auditors could be appointed for this purpose as right to education was an important right.

The petitioner has submitted that according to an RTI response, no unaided schools have been audited by CAG in Delhi after 2010 and the DoE has also not examined their book of accounts, while their fees have been enhanced without any application of mind.

The petitioner voiced concern over private schools charging exorbitant fees and imposing other charges beyond permissible limits, which have resulted in their "unjust and illegal enrichment".

"It is bounden duty of DOE and CAG to Audit the accounts of all private schools in Delhi. However, it has come to notice of the petitioner that DOE and CAG are acting in complete collusion and connivance with the unaided private schools, have totally violated and flouted the provisions and mandate of law," said the petition, filed through lawyers Bankey Bihari, Yogesh Goel and Sanjay Gautam.

"Issue an appropriate writ, order or directions in the nature of mandamus directing no enhancement of Fees till the accounts of unaided schools are audited by CAG and examined by DOE," the petition prayed.

The matter will be heard next in January. [https://www.business-standard.com/india-news/hc-seeks-delhi-govt-s-stand-on-pil-for-cag-audit-of-private-schools-123111000852\\_1.html](https://www.business-standard.com/india-news/hc-seeks-delhi-govt-s-stand-on-pil-for-cag-audit-of-private-schools-123111000852_1.html)

#### **4. Plea wants audit of unaided private schools' accounts, Delhi HC seeks government's stand (*indianexpress.com*) Updated: November 11, 2023**

**The plea by Jan Seva Welfare Society says fee enhancement by unaided schools was affecting students' parents and enriching the schools 'unjustly and illegally'.**

The Delhi High Court on Friday sought the Delhi government's stand in a plea seeking direction for an audit of accounts of all unaided private schools here by the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) to ensure that they do not charge "illegal and exorbitant" fees.

A division bench of acting Chief Justice Manmohan and Justice Mini Pushkarna issued notice to the CAG as well as all unaided private schools. The matter is next listed on March 11, 2024.

Delhi government counsel Santosh Kumar Tripathi opposed the plea stating that there was no legal requirement to get the accounts of unaided private schools mandatorily audited by the CAG. The court asked the counsel appearing for the CAG if it would be able to audit over a thousand such schools here.

The counsel appearing for CAG said that they can appoint special auditors for the exercise as the right to education is a very serious right for transparency and accountability in the education system.

The public interest litigation plea by petitioner Jan Seva Welfare Society states that it came to its notice through an RTI response that no unaided schools have been audited by CAG in Delhi after 2010 and the Delhi government's Directorate of Education (DoE) has also not examined their book of accounts, while their fees have been enhanced without any application of mind.

The plea claims that the "enhancement of fees and imposition of charges beyond permissible limits" by unaided schools is affecting the parents of the children, looting them of hard-earned money, thereby enriching the schools "unjustly and illegally".

"...it is bounden duty of DOE and CAG to Audit the accounts of all private schools in Delhi. However, it has come to notice of the petitioner that DOE and CAG are acting in complete collusion and connivance with the unaided private schools, have totally violated and flouted the provisions and mandate of law," the plea claims.

Among various reliefs, the plea seeks a direction for no enhancement of fees till the accounts of unaided schools are audited by CAG and examined by DoE. <https://indianexpress.com/article/cities/delhi/delhi-hc-unaided-private-school-fees-9022626/>

## 5. उच्च न्यायालय ने निजी स्कूलों के कैग से ऑडिट संबंधी जनहित याचिका पर दिल्ली सरकार से जवाब मांगा (*hindi.theprint.in*) Nov 10, 2023

दिल्ली उच्च न्यायालय ने सभी गैर सहायता प्राप्त निजी स्कूलों के खातों की नियंत्रक एवं महालेखा परीक्षक (कैग) से जांच कराने के अनुरोध वाली जनहित याचिका पर राष्ट्रीय राजधानी की सरकार से रुख स्पष्ट करने को कहा।

कार्यवाहक मुख्य न्यायाधीश न्यायमूर्ति मनमोहन की अध्यक्षता वाली पीठ ने जन सेवा वेलफेयर सोसाइटी की याचिका पर नोटिस जारी किया और कैग के साथ-साथ राजधानी के सभी गैर सहायता प्राप्त निजी स्कूलों से भी उनका रुख पूछा है।

याचिकाकर्ता ने तर्क दिया कि गैर सहायता प्राप्त निजी स्कूलों को तब तक अपनी फीस बढ़ाने की अनुमति नहीं दी जा सकती जब तक कि उनके खातों का कैग द्वारा ऑडिट नहीं किया जाता और शिक्षा निदेशालय द्वारा जांच नहीं की जाती।

दिल्ली सरकार के अधिवक्ता संतोष कुमार त्रिपाठी ने याचिका का विरोध किया और कहा कि गैर सहायता प्राप्त निजी स्कूलों के खातों का अनिवार्य रूप से कैग द्वारा ऑडिट कराने की कोई कानूनी आवश्यकता नहीं है।

पीठ में शामिल न्यायमूर्ति मिनी पुष्करणा ने एक हजार से अधिक गैर-सहायता प्राप्त निजी स्कूलों के ऑडिट के अतिरिक्त कार्य का बोझ कैग पर डालने पर आपत्ति जताई।

कैग के अधिवक्ता ने कहा कि इस उद्देश्य के लिए विशेष लेखा परीक्षक नियुक्त किए जा सकते हैं, क्योंकि शिक्षा का अधिकार एक महत्वपूर्ण अधिकार है।

याचिका में याचिकाकर्ता ने कहा है कि एक आरटीआई प्रतिक्रिया के अनुसार, 2010 के बाद दिल्ली में कैग द्वारा किसी भी गैर सहायता प्राप्त स्कूल का ऑडिट नहीं किया गया है और शिक्षा निदेशालय ने उनके खातों की जांच नहीं की है, जबकि उनकी फीस बिना किसी विचार-विमर्श के बढ़ा दी गई है।

याचिकाकर्ता ने निजी स्कूलों द्वारा अत्यधिक फीस वसूलने और स्वीकार्य सीमा से अधिक अन्य शुल्क लगाने पर चिंता जतायी है।

मामले की अगली सुनवाई जनवरी में होगी। <https://hindi.theprint.in/india/high-court-seeks-response-from-delhi-government-on-pil-regarding-audit-of-private-schools-by-cag/626131/>

## **6. Pb has high subsidy spend, unpaid debt, revenue-fiscal deficit: Study (*timesofindia.indiatimes.com*) Nov 11, 2023**

Chandigarh: Subsidy expenditure as a share of revenue receipts has been significantly high in Punjab over the years. The agrarian state also has a high fiscal and revenue deficit along with high outstanding debt.

A study conducted on the condition of state finances by Delhi-based independent research organisation, PRS Legislative Research, found that between the fiscal years 2017-18 and 2021-22, Punjab spent 17% of its revenue receipts on subsidies while other states spent 8% on subsidies on an average.

Power subsidies accounted for 80% of Punjab's total subsidies in 2021-22.

A major part of the states' subsidy expenditure goes towards providing free or subsidised electricity for various purposes such as agriculture, domestic and industrial use.

For instance, 97% of Rajasthan and 80% of Punjab and Bihar's total subsidy expenditure went towards subsidising electricity in 2021-22.

“While providing subsidised electricity may make it more affordable, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) had observed that most of the benefits from such subsidies may accrue to higher income households,” reads the study. Subsidised power is also an important input in agriculture.



In the past, recommendations have been made to replace agricultural input subsidies by providing direct transfer of funds to farmers. States like Rajasthan, Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka have reduced leakages in electricity subsidy by separating the feeders for agricultural and nonagricultural use, says the study, which is conducted on the basis of states' budget documents and comptroller and auditor general (CAG) accounts.

### **Pb a revenue deficit state**

It has come to fore that since 2015-16, seven states have persistently reported revenue deficit. These include Punjab, Haryana, Andhra Pradesh, Kerala, Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu and West Bengal. Successive finance commissions have recommended that states eliminate revenue deficit.

Eleven states budgeted a revenue deficit in the financial year 2023-24. Of these, Punjab (3.5% of GSDP), Himachal Pradesh (2.2%), Kerala (2.1%), West Bengal (1.8%) and Andhra Pradesh (1.5%) have budgeted revenue deficit after accounting for revenue deficit grants in 2023-24. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/chandigarh/pb-has-high-subsidy-spend-unpaid-debt-revenue-fiscal-deficit-study/articleshow/105138477.cms>

## **7. Punjab Farmers Struggle amidst Plummeting Groundwater Levels (*indiaspend.com*) Nov 13, 2023**

A study from the Central Ground Water Board found that Punjab's groundwater levels could drop nearly 1,000 ft by 2039.

Sangrur: "Ours was the first family in the village to use a motor, in 1963, for irrigating 16.6 acres of land. The water used to be at eight feet in the well then," said Bhajan Singh (62), of Kaleran village in Sangrur district of Punjab, about 60 km south of Ludhiana. "By 2000, when the land was divided between us brothers, the water level had plummeted below 80 feet, making it impossible for the monoblock motor to function. The level of groundwater has been dipping even further since then."

Bhajan Singh now owns 9.5 acres of the family land. The first tubewell he dug, in 2000, hit water at 110 ft, and was dug up to 290 ft--a common practice meant to future-proof the tube well and avoid repeated costs of digging. A 12.5 horsepower (hp) submersible motor was installed at 110 ft to pump the water. Twenty years later, in 2020, he dug another tubewell, this time hitting water at 220 ft, and needing a 25 hp motor to pump it out. This time, they dug up to 450 ft.

In the course of two decades, thus, Singh noted that the water level had declined by 110 ft. This mirrors the larger trend seen across Punjab, where the groundwater level has plummeted to below 98 feet over the course of two decades, as per a study conducted by Punjab Agriculture University from 1998 to 2018.

Bhajan, who cultivates wheat and paddy on his land, is deeply troubled by the receding groundwater levels. Paddy is a water intensive crop, needing up to 5,000 litres of water to grow a kg of the grain. "There is hardly enough groundwater to irrigate fields, especially paddy during the kharif season (June - September)," he said.

### **Community resilience**

Bhajan Singh represents the sentiments shared by numerous farmers hailing from 75 villages in the Dhuri, Malerkotla, Amargarh, and Mehal Kalan blocks of the Sangrur, Malerkotla (carved out of Sangrur in June 2021), and Barnala districts of Punjab. Together, they have been engaged in a grassroots movement advocating for the allocation of canal water for both irrigation and domestic consumption.

Their collective, ‘Nehri Paani Prapti Sangharsh Committee’ (NPPSC), has persistently called for access to canal water for these villages, nestled between the Bathinda branch canal and the Kotla branch canal.

“The villages located between these two canals lack sufficient water for irrigation,” NPPSC convenor Jarnail Singh Jahangir explained. “Groundwater levels have declined to the point where farmers are drilling tube wells up to 500 ft deep to access water. The extracted groundwater is now unsuitable for drinking and affects crop yields.”

Sukhwinder Singh of Mubarakpur village in Malerkotla district, about 60 km south of Ludhiana, refers to poor-quality water as ‘do number paani’ and good quality as ‘ek number paani’. Expressing his concerns, the 50-year-old explained that with good quality water, an acre of land yields approximately 35 quintals of paddy. However, with poor quality water, the yield is merely 20 to 22 quintals. “If we get canal water, we would be getting good quality irrigation,” he said.

Sukhwinder Singh too has dug tubewells thrice on his farmland of 15 acres. He dug the first one in 2000 to 180 ft (hitting water at 70 ft) for Rs 80,000. Then in 2012, he dug another to 360 ft (hitting water below 100 ft) for Rs 1.25 lakh, and finally in 2017, yet another to 450 ft (with water at 130 ft) for Rs 2 lakh. Now, he says, the groundwater level at his farm has receded to below 180 ft. In addition, he installed filters to manage the contamination of groundwater.

“The expenses of farmers have only been growing,” Jarnail Singh said. “As farmers dig deeper wells to tap into groundwater, high power motors need to be installed to pump out the water, which costs them more.”

### **Living in the ‘dark zone’**

Sangrur, Malerkotla and Barnala districts lie in the Malwa region of Punjab, which is south of the river Sutlej. Except one district, Sri Muktsar Sahib, all 14 districts in this region are found to have over-exploited the groundwater levels in most of its blocks, including blocks where these 75 villages are located, according to a 2020 block-wise groundwater resources assessment by the Central Ground Water Board.

This situation is reflected across most of Punjab, with about 78% of the assessment units in the state being classified as “over-exploited”, and the rest categorised as “critical” (4%), “semi-critical” (6.7%), and “safe” (11.3%), according to the CGWB report. The severity of the issue is such that a study from the CGWB found that Punjab's groundwater levels could drop nearly 1,000 ft by 2039.

Punjab Agricultural University in Ludhiana has highlighted in multiple studies the proliferation of tubewells and the reduced availability of canal water as one of the key contributors to the depletion of groundwater.

A study revealed that until 1970-71 there were about 190,000 tubewells in Punjab. By 2011-12 this had risen to 1.38 million, following the availability of free or subsidised electricity. Subsequently, the count further increased by an additional 100,000 in 2019.

Currently, 72% of Punjab's land is reliant on tubewells for irrigation, while the remaining 28% depends on canal water.

With the aim of rectifying this trend, the state government has asserted its commitment (see here and here) to reversing this trajectory by ensuring the availability of canal water for irrigation purposes.

Similarly, in response to recent protests staged by the NPPSC, the state's water resource department assured that the construction of three distributaries dedicated to irrigation, namely Kanganwal, Malerkotla Minor, and Rohira, will be completed by March 2024, said Bhupinder Longowal of the Kirti Kisan Union, a peasant organisation in Punjab actively leading this cause.

“This development is poised to significantly bolster farmers in 35 villages located within the Mehal Kalan and Malerkotla blocks, enabling them to efficiently irrigate their fields. However, completion for the remaining villages may take a few more years, we have been told,” Longowal added.

### **Is canal irrigation feasible?**

“[Canal irrigation] can only serve as a temporary solution whereas in reality, the water scarcity issue remains,” said Kahan Singh Pannu, a former bureaucrat who worked with the Punjab Irrigation Department. “Constructing a canal and providing water to one area may result in a reduced share of water for other areas, leading to a similar water crisis elsewhere.”

Pannu elaborated on the water distribution process in each canal, emphasising that the release of water is calculated based on the specific crop requirements of farmers. “The Kotla and Bathinda branch canals currently carry about 3,000 cusecs of water each, determined by scientific calculations to meet the needs of the command area of farms. Therefore, any further distribution from these canals will alter the allocation of water to the farmlands already being irrigated for more than 100 years.”

Additionally, canal water is being provided for drinking and domestic use to several villages experiencing deteriorating groundwater quality, as also to cities like Ludhiana and Jalandhar where water quality has declined. Consequently, the widespread distribution of canal water will contribute to its further scarcity, he added. According to a recent study, over-extraction of groundwater has led to the intrusion of contaminants such as uranium, arsenic, manganese, zinc, copper, lead and iron into the aquifers, deteriorating the quality of the water.

Balbir Singh Seechewal, an environmentalist and a member of Rajya Sabha of Punjab from the state's ruling party, said the construction of more distributaries will not

exacerbate the water crisis. “Previously, a significant portion of canal water remained underutilised, failing to reach the farmers due to frequent damage of distributaries caused by poor construction, with little attention paid to this matter. However, the current government is actively addressing this problem,” he said.

“The state government has decided to increase the irrigated area using canal water from 30% to 70%, recognising that enhanced canal water usage for irrigation will subsequently reduce the extraction of groundwater. Additionally, the government is promoting laser-level irrigation and offering subsidies for the installation of drip and sprinkler irrigation systems to combat this issue,” Seechewal said.

### **Crop diversification a solution**

This year, the state saw the largest ever expanse allocated to water-intensive rice crops, surpassing all previous records, with nearly 3.2 million hectares dedicated to paddy cultivation.

Pannu suggests a potential solution to the depleting groundwater for irrigation in Punjab: to diversify the cultivation of crops away from water-guzzling paddy. He points out that paddy is not Punjab's traditional crop, and proposes that the government (state or Centre) should instead ensure that farmers receive equivalent income from cultivating other crops.

Rice is neither a staple of Punjab's diet nor suited to the agro climatic character of the region. India must shift rice growing east from Punjab and Haryana, to help prevent an impending water crisis by 2030, IndiaSpend reported in June 2019. About 4,118 litres of water is required to grow one kilogram of rice in Punjab, compared to 2,169 litres in West Bengal, a natural habitat for the crop, estimates by the Commission for Agricultural Costs and Prices show.

“Chauna na tey sadey Punjab di fasal hai na hi sadi khurak. (Paddy doesn't fall under our traditional crops or foods),” says Sukhwinder Singh of Mubarakpur village. “In my village, approximately 200 trolleys [a trolley is 60 quintals] of paddy are produced, yet not even half a trolley of paddy is consumed within the village throughout the year.”

Sukhwinder Singh says that if the government had been providing a minimum support price (MSP) for traditional crops like cotton and maize, there would not have been so much groundwater exploitation. A guaranteed minimum support price on other crops is also among the major demands of the Samyukt Kisan Morcha, an umbrella body of farm unions.

However, “In the case of Punjab, mainly wheat and paddy are procured, while other crops have suffered at the hands of private companies due to lack of effective implementation of MSP,” agricultural specialists Shruit Bhogal and Kamal Vatta have pointed out in a researched article. “Public procurement of crops other than paddy and wheat is non-existent in the state. Thus, farmers consider the adoption of alternative crops as an unconvincing option.”

The state government has been promoting crop diversification, asking farmers to grow crops other than rice but with little success, India Spend reported in September 2022. Even after spending Rs 274 crore on a crop diversification programme during 2014-19,

the sown area of rice increased by 7.18% in Punjab at the cost of other crops, found an audit report by the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) of India.

### **Future of farming**

Last year, Laal Mohammad (42) of Issapur village in Sangrur district cultivated another kharif crop, moong or green gram, based on the advice of CM Bhagwant Mann, hoping to sell it at the MSP of Rs 7,257 per quintal. Heavy rains in September 2022 damaged the crop, leading to no profits.

For this kharif season, he opted to grow bajra as fodder for cattle. Of his 1.75 acres of land, he sold the fodder harvested from 1.5 acres for Rs 27,000 for the season, while he reserved the remainder for feeding his own cattle.

Mohammad originally purchased the land from a local farmer in his village for Rs 25 lakh, with plans to cultivate vegetables and wheat. He applied to the state government for a power connection and took a Rs 3.5 lakh loan from a government bank to drill a tube well for irrigation. However, he never received any updates on his application.

“Using the tubewell of the farmer from whom I bought the land, I can only irrigate my fields once a week, which is insufficient for water-intensive crops,” he stated.

A marginal farmer, Mohammad now shoulders the burden of repaying his loans. In addition to farming, he works as a gardener, earning Rs 400 per day to support his family of seven. Selling the land isn't an option for him. “No one would buy my land as there's no water available for irrigation,” he lamented.

Meanwhile, Bhajan Singh, also waiting for news on his application for a power connection, chose not to farm this year. Instead, he leased his land for an annual price of Rs 48,000 per acre and travelled to Australia to visit his two sons. His eldest son graduated with a bachelors in technology and is currently employed there, while the younger one is pursuing a bachelors in agriculture.

Bhajan Singh never wanted his sons to pursue farming. “Farming is a challenging occupation, and now we're facing water scarcity issues too,” he said.

Sukhwinder Singh, whose two sons have also settled abroad, expressed concerns about the depleting water resources. “Parents don't want their children to struggle in the future,” he said. “How can we sustain farming without adequate water resources?” <https://www.indiaspend.com/agriculture/punjab-farmers-struggle-amidst-plummeting-groundwater-levels-881460>

## **8. Acute Shortage of Doctors Plagues Bihar Year after Tejashwi's big Announcement (*newslick.in*) 11 Nov 2023**

**The state's doctor-population ratio is very poor with one doctor per 22,000 people at government hospitals.**

Patna: The acute shortage of doctors, particularly specialists, in Bihar's government hospitals has severely impacted the poor, who are one-third of the state's 13.7 crore total population.

As per reports, the OPD and emergency services of Chapra Sadar Hospital, in Saran district, have an acute shortage of specialist doctors. The hospital, which has only 28 doctors despite 72 posts, has no skin doctor or pathologist for the last eight years.

"Hundreds of patients return daily without even the basic check-up due to the shortage for years," a district health official told NewsClick.

Most primary or community health centres are non-functional and even district hospitals have a shortage of doctors and basic medicines.

Contrary to the state government's claims, health infrastructure is poor as ultrasound and X-ray machines in most hospitals are defunct.

As per local dailies, since the coalition government was formed 14 months ago, several seriously ill patients could not be hospitalised due to either unavailability of medical staff or lack of equipment. These poor patients eventually become victims of quacks in rural Bihar.

The government recently admitted in the Assembly that the doctor-population ratio is very poor with one doctor per 22,000 people.

Around 8,000 post of doctors are vacant, agriculture minister Kumar Sarvjeet said in the Assembly two days ago while replying to CPI(ML) MLA Manoj Manzil, who questioned the shortage of specialist doctors and asked when the government will fill the vacancies. Sarvjeet also informed that recruitment of doctors is under way and hundreds of doctors will be appointed soon.

According to health department official data, the state has 21,755 vacancies for doctors but only 13,845 doctors, including 10,929 permanent and 2,916 contractual, are filled.

Going by the WHO norm of having one doctor for every 1,000 people, Bihar should have 1.30 lakh doctors. But the state has nearly 1.19 lakh doctors, including private, Ayush, homeopathy, Unani and dentists.

A recent surprise visit to government hospitals by state ministers, MLAs, MLCs and top health officials exposed the lack of basic facilities. Attendants expressed complained of doctors not visiting their patients due to staff shortage and being asked to purchase medicines from outside. Some of the patients were asked to get diagnostic tests done from outside.

In November 2022, deputy chief minister Tejashwi Yadav, who also has the health portfolio, announced a plan to improve health facilities but the situation remains the same a year later.

Two months before the announcement, Yadav's surprise midnight visit to the Patna Medical College and Hospital revealed that doctors and other medical staff were absent

and there was a lack of sanitation with dogs inside the wards of the state's largest government hospital. Patients and their attendants complained of the unavailability of medicines and other facilities.

Subsequently, Yadav convened a high-level meeting of all civil surgeons and gave an ultimatum of 60 days to ensure proper treatment at government hospitals and improve their condition.

However, a month after the meeting, Yadav visited the Nalanda Medical College and Hospital to check among other things treatment being provided to dengue patients and found utter negligence. Several patients and their relatives complained of not getting medicines and being asked to buy medicines and drinking water from outside. Besides, nurses allegedly refused to attend to them at night.

Following the visit, Yadav said that 705 doctors were either absent or worked for only more than six months over 5-12 years yet were paid. He said that action would be taken against such doctors.

Yadav also admitted that several doctors posted in rural health centres hardly work and continue to practise in urban areas.

The Comptroller and Auditor General of India's (CAG) 2022 report also highlighted Bihar's alarming healthcare situation with mainly district hospitals having a severe lack of resources and workforce, including doctors, nurses and paramedic staff.

According to the report, Bihar has had a persistent shortage of doctors, nurses, paramedical staff and technicians from 2014 to 2020 yet the health department didn't publish the total number of vacancies. The CAG also highlighted the despite the shortfall of beds, ranging from 52% to 92%, the strength has not been increased even after a decade.

The poor state of healthcare was noticed during the audit of the functioning of hospitals in Bihar Sharif, Hajipur, Jehanabad, Madhepura, and Patna districts from 2014-15 to 2019-20. <https://www.newsclick.in/acute-shortage-doctors-plagues-bihar-year-after-tejashwis-big-announcement>

## **9. Activists take storm water drain issue to Prime Minister Narendra Modi (*bangaloremirror.indiatimes.com*) Updated: Nov 11, 2023**

The pathetic condition of storm water drains can be seen at several locations in the city. Unfortunately, poor maintenance of storm water drains is leading to flooding of low-lying areas, thus making life miserable for residents of such areas vulnerable to flooding during the monsoon.

Now, the BBMP is expecting Rs 500 crore from the Central Government for the development and maintenance of storm water drains in the city. The civic body has submitted a proposal to the Finance Commission and the National Disaster Response

Force to give Rs 250 crore each to enable them to find a permanent solution to flooding in the city.

Meanwhile, Mahithi Hakku Adhyayana Kendra Trustee BH Veeresh and Managing Trustee S Amaresh wrote a detailed letter to Prime Minister Narendra Modi requesting to order a probe by the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) into the misappropriation of funds released by the Central Government to the State Government for undertaking preventive measures within BBMP limits.

“I wanted the Prime Minister to order a CBI probe into the misappropriation of funds allocated for mitigating flooding woes in the city. Though the Report of the Comptroller and Auditor General of India highlighted irregularities in utilising the Central Government funds, the authorities did nothing to follow the CAGI suggestions and recommendations. I demanded a thorough inquiry into the misappropriation of funds meant for improvement and strengthening of storm water drains,” said Veeresh BH, Trustee of Mahithi Hakku Adhyayan Kendra. The storm water drains are meant to carry rainwater to the nearest water body, but these drains are carrying sewage. The authorities have failed to ensure no sewage flow into the storm water drains, he added. CAG, in its 136-page report, highlighted how the absence of a complete set of records hampered the audit analysis. The CAG report has stated that the BBMP had taken up 175 desilting works at a total cost of Rs 117.29 crore during 2013–17 for selective chainage and not for the entire stretch of the drains, and only the files pertaining to 14 works costing Rs 17.56 crore were furnished by the BBMP to audit for verification.

The CAG report has stated that a robust policy governing storm water drain management did not exist, and the state government and the BBMP failed to consider urban surface runoff (average annual rainfall being 969 mm during 2013–19) as a water resource despite the growing scarcity of water in the state/city.

“The BBMP must implement the suggestions and recommendations of the CAG report. I wrote a letter to the Urban Development Department complaining about the non-implementation of suggestions made by the CAG report,” said Mahithi Hakku Adhyayana Kendra, Managing Trustee S Amaresh. <https://bangaloremirror.indiatimes.com/bangalore/others/activists-take-storm-water-drain-issue-to-prime-minister-narendra-modi/articleshow/105133610.cms>

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

- 10. Direct benefit transfers reach Rs 3.2 trillion so far in FY24; full-year transfers may touch Rs 7 trillion (*financialexpress.com*)** Nov 11, 2023

**Given the government’s ongoing drive for saturation of welfare schemes and launch of a few new schemes such as Vishwakarma scheme for artisans, the DBT transfers in FY24 are expected to be around Rs 7 trillion, the same level as in FY23.**

The Centre has transferred of assorted subsidies and sops to the beneficiaries through the direct benefit transfer (DBT) worth about Rs 3.2 trillion so far in the current



financial year. These transfers have roughly been at the same level as in the year-ago period, despite discontinuation of the fiscally expensive extra free food grains scheme from January 2023.

Given the government's ongoing drive for saturation of welfare schemes and launch of a few new schemes such as Vishwakarma scheme for artisans, the DBT transfers in FY24 are expected to be around Rs 7 trillion, the same level as in FY23.

Of the DBT transfers so far in FY24, Rs 2.07 trillion or 65% was in kind and the balance cash transfers to Aadhaar-linked banks accounts.

Subsidies worth about Rs 0.86 trillion were transferred to beneficiaries via foodgrains under the public distribution system (PDS) so far in FY24. The food DBT through PDS will likely end the year around Rs 2.2 trillion in FY24 compared with Rs 2.73 trillion. The reduction in the food DBT was due to the discontinuation of free grains scheme.

The supply of free grains in addition to PDS grains was initially launched for the April-June period of FY21 after Covid broke out; it was later extended till December FY23.

Among other major DBT schemes, the government has provided fertiliser subsidy worth Rs 1.21 trillion to farmers so far in FY24. Around Rs 42,000 crore have been transferred for job guarantee scheme (MGNREGS) so far in FY24. 23523

Assistance for beneficiaries under Pradhan Mantri Gramin Awas Yojana-Rural (PMAY-R) beneficiaries so far in FY24 stood at about Rs 23,523 crore.

The DBT system has enabled the government to save significantly on its social-sector welfare expenditure through targeted deliveries. The government's cumulative savings on expenditure, thanks to the DBT till FY22-end, was 2.73 trillion.

The jump in DBT from FY19 onwards could be largely attributed to the increased use of Aadhaar-enabled DBT platforms for in-kind food and fertiliser subsidy distribution. According to an estimate by the Centre, the Aadhaar-enabled DBT platform helped eliminate 41.1 million fake LPG connections, 42 million duplicate ration cards and resulted in 10% savings on wages on account of the deletion of non-existent MGNREGS beneficiaries. <https://www.financialexpress.com/policy/economy-direct-benefit-transfers-reach-rs-3-2-trillion-so-far-in-fy24-full-year-transfers-may-touch-rs-7-trillion-3304530/>

## **11. Direct taxes jump, in lift for spending (*livemint.com*) Nov 10, 2023**

Net direct tax collections in FY24 jumped 22% from a year earlier to touch ₹10.6 trillion, official data released on Friday showed, creating additional spending room for the government in an election year. Provisional data till 9 November showed the government has so far collected 58% of the ₹18.2 trillion budgeted for FY24.

Gross direct tax receipts (without adjusting for refunds of ₹1.77 trillion) were ₹12.37 trillion, 18% above last year's ₹ 10.52 trillion.

Tax collections that are expected to beat budget estimates may help the government meet its fiscal deficit target and create space for welfare spending, economists said, despite limited progress on the disinvestment front.

Gross goods and services tax (GST) revenues grew strongly in October, with tax collections rising at a 10-month-high pace of 13.4% to hit the second-highest monthly tally of ₹1.72 trillion. Direct tax collections may surpass budgetary estimates yet again, said Amit Singhanian, partner, tax, Shardul Amarchand Mangaldas & Co.

Out of the total net direct tax collections, net corporate tax and personal income tax collections rose 12.5% and 32%, respectively. Net collection of personal income tax and securities transaction tax (STT) rose 31%.

Net direct tax collections in FY23 stood at ₹ 16.61 trillion, up 17.6% from FY22's ₹ 14.12 trillion, exceeding both budget and revised estimates. In FY22, net direct tax collections reached ₹14.09 trillion against ₹ 9.45 trillion in the covid year of FY21, a growth of 49%.

“While personal income tax collections are registering over a 30% growth, corporate income tax collections still need to pick up. A clearer picture should emerge once the filing season concludes at the end of November,” said Rohinton Sidhwa, partner, Deloitte India.

The Centre has set a target of ₹9.2 trillion for corporate tax collection and ₹9 trillion for personal income taxes for FY24.

Direct taxes collected during the second quarter have been stronger than in the first, and if this trend continues, experts expect the government to exceed its targets.

The Centre is unlikely to meet its ₹51,000 crore disinvestment target for the year as big-ticket divestment plans, including that of IDBI Bank, are unlikely to be completed this year.

However, higher tax revenue and non-tax revenues, including higher dividends from the Reserve Bank of India and likely higher dividends from banks, may help.

The Centre aims to narrow the fiscal deficit—the difference between its income and spending—to 5.9% of gross domestic product in FY24. Buoyant direct tax collections will help the government meet its fiscal deficit target, which is crucial as it may not meet its divestment target and incur additional expenditure in the form of fertilizer subsidy, cooking gas subsidy and MNREGA ahead of the general elections slated next year, said Devendra Kumar Pant, chief economist, India Ratings & Research.

“We expect a similar trend (high direct tax collection) to follow in the coming quarters. The additional tax revenue will bridge the shortfall,” Pant added.

The higher-than-expected revenue also means the Centre can direct some proceeds towards developmental schemes without having to worry about breaching the fiscal deficit. Government spending will be key for India's economic growth, as private spending is yet to pick up in a big way.

The Reserve Bank of India has estimated India's growth at 6.5% for FY24. The Indian economy expanded 7.8% in the first quarter of FY24, up from 6.1% during the previous quarter, on higher government expenditure and strong services growth. <https://www.livemint.com/news/india/direct-taxes-jump-in-lift-for-spending-11699638944792.html>

## **12. MQ-9B Drone Acquisition: India's Letter of Request Sets Stage for Strategic Advancements** (*financialexpress.com*) Nov 10, 2023

Stage getting set for the finalisation of 31 MQ-9 Predator B Drones from the US soon.

Responding to media queries at a special briefing following the 2+2 India-US Ministerial Dialogue in New Delhi, Defence Secretary Giridhar Aramane said: "A Letter of Request (LOR) has been sent to the US (General Atomics) and are now awaiting their response." "The US companies have to take clearance from the government," he said.

How will India deal with imminent threats?

The Indian Defence Secretary said: "We have the necessary capabilities to deal with the immediate threat."

The Indian Navy is the lead service in the deal of 31 Predator drones from the US based General Atomics. And the two countries are keen to close the deal before the end of FY 23-24.

Financial Express Online had previously reported that India is poised to secure a strategic advantage in acquiring MQ-9B long endurance drones, as negotiations reveal an estimated 27 percent cost reduction compared to other nations procuring from the US.

Following the Defence Acquisition Council's approval earlier this year, India has initiated the Letter of Request (LOR) process, projecting an indicative cost of USD 3,072 million for these advanced drones.

Each MQ-9B drone is anticipated to cost USD 99 million for India, significantly lower than the USD 161 million incurred by the UAE, a country with prior acquisitions. Notably, the 16 drones previously procured by the US at USD 69 each lacked essential components such as sensors, weapons, and certification, constituting 60-70% of the total cost.

India's substantial deal size and the manufacturer's potential recouping of initial investments from prior transactions contribute to this advantageous pricing. However, potential integration of indigenous radars and missiles may prompt a reassessment of costs, highlighting the complexities of such acquisitions.

Both the Indian Air Force and the Indian Army have consistently supported these acquisitions, stressing the importance of technological know-how. India seeks a 15-20

percent transfer of technology, with major components like engines, radar processor units, avionics, sensors, and software set to be manufactured domestically.

Pending final approval from both governments, India plans to procure 11 off-the-shelf drones immediately, with the remaining units assembled domestically. These MQ-9B drones, known for their high-altitude long-endurance capabilities, are instrumental in enhancing India's surveillance capabilities, monitoring land and maritime boundaries effectively.

In a strategic move, the Indian Navy, in 2020, leased two MQ-9B Sea Guardian drones from General Atomics for one year, focusing on surveillance in the Indian Ocean. This lease has been subsequently extended, underlining the drones' continued importance in bolstering India's maritime security. <https://www.financialexpress.com/business/defence-mq-9b-drone-acquisition-indias-letter-of-request-sets-stage-for-strategic-advancements-3304375/>

### **13. India's quest for smart ports and sustainable trade** (*financialexpress.com*) Nov 11, 2023

**With shifting dynamics in global trade, Indian sea ports have undergone significant enhancements to increase their global competitiveness.**

In a major announcement during the recent G20 meeting in New Delhi, the India-Middle East-Europe Economic (IMEC) Corridor has emerged as a transformative opportunity to catapult Indian ports to the forefront of global trade. This ambitious corridor also reflects India's steadfast commitment to strengthening its maritime trade infrastructure, signalling a forward-looking approach to economic advancement. It also presents India with an opportunity to expand its successes under the regional Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR), and the domestic Sagarmala initiatives. With shifting dynamics in global trade, Indian sea ports have undergone significant enhancements to increase their global competitiveness.

This includes infrastructural upgradations and trade facilitation measures, from the introduction of Direct Port Entry and Direct Port Delivery to the implementation of Centralized Parking Plazas, de-congestion of port areas, automated gate operation and RFID container tracking system. The initiation of the Unified Logistics Interface Platform (ULIP) stands as a major future step to bring together all logistics stakeholders onto a unified platform. Moreover, measures like faceless assessments, Port Community System (PCS) and other efficiency-driven initiatives have streamlined India's maritime trade ecosystem, which could also be highlighted through a 20 percent reduction in import release time according to the latest National Time Release Study (TRS) conducted by the Central Board of Indirect Taxes and Customs (CBIC) in 2023 compared to 2020.

While the IMEC corridor is still at a nascent stage, it presents an opportunity to explore India's role within and beyond its immediate boundaries. There is an untapped potential in linking IMEC across regions, including through India's existing connectivity initiatives in its eastern neighbourhood and ASEAN countries, thus extending the reach and influence of this corridor. To align Indian ports with global best practices, the next

phase of reforms must focus on further strengthening the infrastructure and digital connectivity. Addressing critical issues like low draft capacity, perishable goods handling infrastructure, fortified last-mile connectivity, a robust domestic logistics system, port mechanization, and improved inland waterways connectivity must be prioritized. The maritime sector is essential to India's global trade activities, facilitating 95% of the country's international trade through its sea ports.

The efficient functioning of these ports is not only crucial to India's ambition of strengthening its manufacturing sector but also pivotal in establishing itself as a vital player in the global value chain. To realize this vision, initiatives focused on the development of Multimodal Logistics Parks (MMLP) need to be expedited, ensuring seamless cargo movement across diverse modes of transportation. Projects identified under the PM Gati Shakti program, particularly those related to MMLPs, must be executed promptly, in tandem with the full operationalization of Dedicated Freight Corridors, thereby ensuring swift and cost-effective goods transportation via rail. The journey towards trade facilitation at Indian ports has been marked by a sustained drive towards digitization, a move that has significantly enhanced efficiency and transparency.

Indian ports have witnessed a remarkable transition towards paperless trade, with further measures needed to complete this transition towards a fully paperless trade ecosystem. This encompasses the integration of various systems to enable seamless message exchange among stakeholders in the trade ecosystem, encompassing Partner Government Agencies (PGAs) and Indian Customs Electronic Commerce/Electronic Data Interchange (ICEGATE), as well as exchanges between ICEGATE and custodians, particularly for processes like the Customs' 'Out of Charge'. Moreover, all stakeholders must transition to the Unified Logistics Interface Platform (ULIP) including the private stakeholders such as shipping lines and container freight stations for digital message exchanges.

Sustaining efforts to encourage the trade community to avoid hard copies should continue to remain a priority, achieved through capacity building and outreach initiatives led by relevant stakeholders, including port authorities and customs authorities. As the global momentum towards green ports is gaining traction, India must also outline a strategic blueprint for the transition towards Green Ports. This entails the integration of renewable energy sources, adopting eco-friendly and climate-resilient practices in port operations. Adhering to the International Maritime Organization's alignment with the 9 UN Sustainable Development Goals, which encompasses mandates on safe, efficient, and sustainable ports, becomes paramount.

Incorporating green initiatives like enhancing the use of solar energy at ports, setting benchmarks for zero-emission trucks and port equipment, and participating in green shipping corridors akin to the United States-Singapore corridor are vital steps towards achieving this end. As India embarks on a journey of deeper integration into the global supply chains, technological innovation and infrastructural upgrades at its ports will be pivotal. Coordinated efforts from various stakeholders within the port ecosystem along with international collaborations have the potential to elevate India's role in the global value chains, propelling the nation closer to its aspirational goal of a USD 5 trillion-dollar economy. The pursuit of smart ports and sustainable practices is not only a strategic necessity but also a beacon guiding India towards a prosperous and

environmentally conscious future in the realm of global trade.  
<https://www.financialexpress.com/business/infrastructure-navigating-the-future-indias-quest-for-smart-ports-and-sustainable-trade-2-3305826/>

#### **14. From climate pledges to action: unbiased data is a must for strong regulation** (*livemint.com*) Nov 13, 2023

The Paris climate agreement, concluded in 2015, has been instrumental in rallying countries around the world to commit to reducing greenhouse-gas (GHG) emissions. But setting ambitious climate targets has not always resulted in meaningful action. The United Nations' recent 'global stocktake' report shows that we are falling short of the drastic cuts needed to achieve climate stability, underscoring the urgent need for governments to act swiftly and decisively to keep global warming within safe limits.

As former regulators, we are confident that developing effective solutions is still feasible. While four economic sectors—industry, transportation, electricity and buildings—account for 75% of global GHG emissions, well-designed public policies could effectively reduce pollution from these sectors, promote consumer savings, safeguard public health and stimulate sustainable economic growth.

But crafting effective policies to transform our fossil-fuel-based economies in time to avert climate catastrophe and meet humanity's energy needs is a daunting task. Tackling it head-on requires a combination of technical, economic and political expertise, along with significant financial resources and labour, but the agencies charged with devising and implementing these critical policies are understaffed and underfunded. Too often, regulators have no choice but to rely on the information provided to them by the very industries they are charged with overseeing. This dynamic can result in weak regulation and missed policy objectives.

Crucially, independent NGOs can diminish this power imbalance by providing policymakers with the information and technical knowhow they need to design robust regulations that reduce harmful emissions effectively.

The US Environmental Protection Agency's efforts to reduce truck pollution are a case in point. In 2016, when the EPA was drafting rules to limit GHG emissions from heavy-duty vehicles, like commercial trucks, various industry bodies provided policymakers with contradictory data. The International Council on Clean Transportation (ICCT), an independent think tank, undertook its own comprehensive study, which included detailed cost projections for the proposed regulations.

The ICCT's impartial analysis provided the EPA with data demonstrating the cost-effectiveness of a stringent pollution standard.

Consequently, these regulations are expected to result in emission cuts equivalent to 294 coal plants, save truck owners \$170 billion in fuel costs, and prevent up to \$209 billion in damages over the next 30 years, positioning the United States as a world leader in truck efficiency.

Since then, the ICCT has assisted several governments in crafting regulations to improve commercial-truck efficiency. Using the organization's research, the European Commission drafted its first-ever rule targeting pollution from commercial trucks, which is projected to reduce truck emissions by 150 million tonnes by 2035.

Specialized NGOs can also assist emerging economies, especially those with fewer resources, in kick-starting transformative climate programmes. By facilitating the rapid adoption of clean-energy solutions, such organizations can increase access to affordable, pollution-free electricity. Moreover, rules that promote the use of cutting-edge technologies can foster innovation, enhance competitiveness, and help countries position themselves as climate leaders, benefiting their people and the planet.

In 2006, for example, India launched a nationwide appliance-efficiency program. Through a dedicated division of the Bureau of Energy Efficiency (BEE), officials collaborated with NGOs such as CLASP (formerly known as the Collaborative Labelling and Appliance Standards Program) to adapt key features from successful efficiency-labelling programmes to the Indian market. CLASP's in-depth analysis also helped the BEE identify which appliances it should focus on.

These insights enabled the BEE to launch its star labelling programme rapidly. The agency then collaborated with another NGO, The Energy and Resources Institute, to develop an efficiency programme tailored for small businesses. By facilitating cooperation with business leaders, TERI played a pivotal role in creating robust and cost-effective efficiency rules.

Since its launch, India's appliance-labelling programme has offset 400 million tonnes of GHG emissions—roughly equivalent to the annual emissions from India's transportation sector—and is projected to account for 30% of the country's emissions reduction by 2030.

In addition, India has established itself as a leading manufacturer of energy-efficient air conditioners, owing to the growing demand for sustainable cooling solutions amid rising global temperatures. With efficiency programmes cutting corporate emissions by 105 million tonnes annually, Indian industry now ranks among the world's most energy-efficient.

Although such activities rarely attract significant attention, unbiased research provides regulators with the data they need to devise transparent and effective environmental policies. Technical assistance from independent NGOs can lay the groundwork for the policy successes needed to overcome the climate crisis.

As developing and developed economies enhance their state capacities, they will grow more confident in setting ambitious targets, creating a virtuous cycle. Given the right support, we can ensure that the world's next climate-action report card features grades that make future generations proud. <https://www.livemint.com/opinion/online-views/from-climate-pledges-to-action-unbiased-data-is-a-must-for-strong-regulation-11699859627577.html>

## **15. Greening ‘wastelands’ doesn’t guarantee a greener India** (*timesofindia.indiatimes.com*) Nov 12, 2023

In pursuit of India’s net-zero goals, wastelands are being repurposed for renewable energy and afforestation projects. This poses a threat to the diverse ecosystems they encompass and the communities dependent on them.

In 2019, the Ministry of Rural Development published the latest edition of the Wasteland Atlas of India, which categorised approximately 17 percent of India’s terrain as wastelands, that is, land that appears barren or degraded. According to the ministry, these are areas that are not being utilised to their maximum potential, and can be repurposed for more ‘productive’ uses such as setting up industries, renewable energy projects, or afforestation programmes.

However, this categorisation fails to view semi-arid, non-forested landscapes as distinct ecosystems and instead sees them as degraded forest land. It does not acknowledge that these wastelands encompass diverse ecosystems such as grasslands, shrublands, and deserts. These ecosystems are often referred to as open natural ecosystems or ONEs, and have immense ecological and social value.

Not all wastelands are lying waste

ONEs are found in only 10 percent of India’s dry, sub-humid, and semi-arid zones, particularly in states such as Maharashtra, Gujarat, Rajasthan, and Andhra Pradesh. They are rich in biodiversity and contain several animal species including the great Indian bustard, the blackbuck, the Indian fox, the Indian wolf, and the striped hyena. They also have immense potential for sequestering or storing carbon from the atmosphere. Grasslands, for instance, can capture about 146 tonnes of carbon per hectare below the ground each year. Additionally, approximately 25 nomadic pastoralist communities in India such as the Dhangars in Maharashtra and the Rabaris in Rajasthan depend on ONEs. As noted by the Planning Commission in the Report of the Task Force on Grasslands and Deserts 2006, ONEs provide nearly 50 percent of the fodder for India’s 500 million livestock.

A lack of awareness about the value of ONEs and their subsequent misclassification as ‘wastelands’, however, makes it easier to divert these lands, threatening the very existence of these landscapes and that of the communities who depend on them.

Proposed climate solutions are creating a new set of pressures on wastelands

As India races towards achieving its net-zero carbon goals, wastelands are being earmarked for various climate-related projects by businesses, nonprofits, and the government. While these initiatives are being lauded as an important part of India’s climate goals, they directly impact the health of ONEs.

Greening wastelands: The idea of greening wastelands through afforestation and tree plantations is proposed as a potential pathway to create additional carbon sinks and to increase green cover. Actors advocating for this include the forest department and other government agencies, CSR wings of private sector companies, and well-meaning development consultants and nonprofit organisations.



While tree plantations have become a trending environmental intervention, they can destroy the ecosystem of these semi-arid landscapes. For one, they can alter the soil composition in the area. Additionally, species that are planted often require large amounts of water, leading to the deterioration of groundwater tables, and ultimately resulting in the depletion of water resources in an already water-scarce landscape. Such interventions can also alter the biodiversity present in the region.

The Banni grassland in Gujarat's Kutch district provides an interesting insight into the same. The grassland is home to more than 40 species of grass that support a variety of wildlife, including several migratory birds and the Indian desert fox. In the 1950s, to keep the salinity of the region in check, the state government introduced a South American tree called *Prosopis juliflora*, locally referred to as gando baval or mad babul. The tree adapted to the region very quickly and now covers more than 50 percent of the grassland. This, however, has had a devastating impact on the desert fox, which uses the saline grasslands as its habitat. Since woods are unsuitable for fox habitation, their number has rapidly declined.

Energy transition: Another significant arena of climate action is the transition from a fossil-fuel-based brown economy to a green low-carbon economy run on renewable energy. Dismantling the 'brown' economy, however, requires large swathes of land for setting up solar, wind, and green hydrogen energy power plants. ONEs, majorly under the wasteland classification, are seen as ideal for setting up the physical infrastructure required for this.

Since the construction of the solar park, however, the grazing patterns of herders have been disrupted.

States such as Gujarat, Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra, and Karnataka, with the largest number of ONEs, are also the ones identified as having high potential for renewable energy. This could have consequences for the ecological health of the landscape as well as for the people and communities dependent on these lands. For example, the setting up of solar energy parks and wind energy projects in Rajasthan and Gujarat has led to a decline in the population of the great Indian bustard. In addition to loss of habitat, power lines act as a hazard, resulting in mortality from electrocution and collision. Such projects also restrict access to common grazing lands for pastoralists. For example, India's first solar park, which was built in Charanka, Gujarat, in 2012 on a dryland area of 2,180 hectares, of which more than 1,000 hectares was classified as wasteland. This area has been historically used by semi-nomadic Rabari herders. Since the construction of the solar park, however, the grazing patterns of herders have been disrupted, affecting their mobility and resource use. They can no longer access these areas to collect firewood or graze their livestock.

### **What needs to change?**

While such interventions may be well-intentioned, they fail to take into account the varied ecosystems that fall under the wasteland categorisation. The unintended consequences of these actions can, in fact, undermine our climate goals. To ensure that India's green energy transition doesn't happen at the expense of vital ecological

resources like ONEs, governments, businesses, and the development sector must focus on the following:

### 1. Strengthening protection of ONEs through reclassification of wastelands

As a first step in ensuring the legal protection of ONEs, government bodies must carry out a reclassification of these lands. ONEs are weakly protected, particularly due to their classification as wastelands. Approximately 70 percent of the areas with ONEs overlap with landscapes that the government classifies as wastelands. Additionally, less than 5 percent of ONEs come under the government's Protected Area network, which comprises national parks, wildlife sanctuaries, and reserves. This leaves them deprioritised as significant areas for conservation and makes them vulnerable to ecosystem degradation and diversion to other types of land use. The Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Resettlement Act, 2013, also lays down a clause that mandates the creation of an inventory of unused or barren lands at the district level. This in turn makes it easier for government and private actors to bypass the rights of communities and divert lands that may fall under the wasteland category.

### 2. Proposing evidence-based interventions

Land-use decisions must be well informed and consider ecological and social factors. Prioritisation exercises carried out by government and non-governmental stakeholders can play a key role in this process. These involve evaluating and ranking different parcels of land to determine their significance or allocation for particular purposes. This can help identify land that needs to be prioritised for conservation as it may contribute to carbon sequestration, or is heavily used by communities, or is rich in biodiversity. Such a prioritisation should include calculating trade-offs that need to be made when identifying lands suitable for renewable energy projects or for other land uses. These exercises should also be used to determine future wastelands classification and incorporate the needs and voices of local communities in decision-making processes. This can help ensure that the energy transition aligns with the unique socio-ecological needs of different landscapes and doesn't further deplete ONEs.

### 3. Regulating the renewable sector

The adoption and development of green energy has become pivotal to India's climate goals. While this is a critical piece, it has taken priority over conserving biodiversity, protecting natural ecosystems and existing carbon sinks, and upholding the rights of local communities. Notably, the green energy industry in India is exempted from both social as well as environmental impact assessments, making ONEs particularly susceptible to diversion. For example, in 2020, a local community in Rajasthan had to resort to legal action to contest the development of the 1,500 MW Fatehgarh Ultra Mega Solar Park in Jaisalmer district. They argued that their livelihoods depended on the land being diverted for the solar project, even though the state government that claims control over the land had categorised it as a 'wasteland'.

There is, therefore, a need to formulate a policy that mandates impact assessments for such projects that significantly threaten peoples' access to these landscapes as well as risk destroying biodiversity and carbon sinks.

#### 4. Safeguarding climate-resilient livelihoods

While the transition to renewable energy sources is a crucial step in climate change mitigation, it is equally important to focus on supporting climate-resilient livelihoods. Arguably, pastoralism is one of the more climate-resilient and sustainable livelihoods in India, contributing to 4.5 percent of the GDP, according to the Meat Atlas 2021. Pastoralists have traditionally been using several strategies to adapt to climate variabilities. These include developing climate foresight and migrating based on weather patterns and resource availability as well as selecting appropriate breeds to rear based on climatic and geographical conditions. Pastoralists also use ONEs and wastelands for grazing livestock and to transit through migratory routes. The role of grazing has been acknowledged in the maintenance of these ecosystems. Securing the livelihoods of pastoralists, therefore, can significantly contribute to the sustenance of ONEs.

However, pastoralism isn't recognised officially by the government. The government must first collect official data on the number of pastoralists in the country and formally recognise pastoralism as a distinct land-use category. There is a need not only to conserve the landscapes they rely on, but also to ensure the right of access for pastoralists.

#### 5. Learning when not to intervene

In the shift from a brown economy to a green economy, it is essential not to oversimplify the narrative as 'green good, brown bad'. An important point of action for various stakeholders is to recognise when not to intervene. Governments, businesses, and the development sector advocating for the utilisation of ONEs must cultivate a deeper understanding of these landscapes. They must be able to identify which landscapes should remain untouched by industries and other interventions, taking into account the characteristics of specific ecosystems and the needs of the people who are dependent on them. This will help them recognise where interventions are inappropriate, and where they are not.

A transition to renewable energy should be accompanied by a transition in how we view natural ecosystems. Sustainable management of land, rights of local communities, and issues of equity need to be strengthened in the face of changing pressures on land and livelihoods. It is imperative for the various stakeholders intervening in the landscape to be cognisant of the harmful impacts of greening initiatives on ONEs and push for science and context-based programmes and initiatives that protect people and natural landscapes. ONEs are rich in biodiversity and play an important role in carbon sequestration. Protection of these ecosystems should thus be an important aspect of our climate goals. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/blogs/developing-contemporary-india/greening-wastelands-doesnt-guarantee-a-greener-india/>

#### **16. The data protection law needs more teeth** (*thehindubusinessline.com*) Nov 10, 2023

**A close look at the Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023 shows that it falls short of being a foolproof legal framework to prevent theft or misuse of data**

Data privacy has been a matter of concern in India ever since the advent of the digital revolution in the country. Personal data can be on financial matters, health-related issues, consumption habits and so on. There can be unpleasant consequences for the owner if unscrupulous elements gain access to it. Against this backdrop, the Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023 Parliament passed recently is a step in the right direction.

However, a close look at its provisions would show that it falls short of being a foolproof legal framework to prevent theft or misuse of data: it should be considered only a decent beginning. For one thing, there are some loose ends to be tied up. For another, it has to be updated regularly as new types of crimes appear in the fast-changing digital scenario.

### **Key omissions**

First, some of the important omissions in the Act with respect to the areas it covers.

At the height of the Covid-19 pandemic the Kerala government transferred to the US-based company Sprinklr health-related data of more than 1.75 lakh people who had been in quarantine. This created a controversy. It subsided gradually, but the questions it raised remain.

Section 16 of the Act says that “the Central government may, by notification, restrict the transfer of personal data by a Data Fiduciary for processing to a country or territory outside India as may be so notified.” But the Sprinklr experience shows that when the Data Fiduciary in such transfer of personal data is a State government or its agency, the transfer should happen only with the prior permission of the Central government. This condition ought to be an integral part of the Act. In this case the Central government’s responsibility to protect Indian citizens supersedes the State government’s.

Section 3 (b) says the Act shall “also apply to processing of digital personal data outside the territory of India, if such processing is in connection with any activity related to offering of goods or services to Data Principals within the territory of India...” This provision may partially defeat the purpose it is meant for. Suppose the medical data of X is sent abroad as in the Kerala case and it falls into wrong hands, there is a possibility that any adverse information contained in it will be used to her disadvantage. If an insurance company acquires the data, her children, if any of them are settled abroad, will have to pay a heavy price in terms of higher than normal insurance premium because the insurer can claim that they would inherit the disease. Hence the provision may be altered to read as irrespective of the fact whether there is any intention to offer goods and services in India or abroad....

De-digitising digital data and taking a printout or converting it into another form and saving it should be considered an offence. This provision may be added to Section 3 (a).

Section 8 (7) (a) says a Data Fiduciary shall “erase personal data upon the Data Principal withdrawing her consent or as soon as it is reasonable to assume that the specified purpose is no longer being served.” Instead of using the word “reasonable”, a time limit should have been prescribed, making the section more precise.

The exemption that may be given under Section 17 (3) to startups, which include private limited companies, partnership firms and limited liability partnerships, from the purview of Section 5, Section 8 (3) and (7), Section 10 and Section 11, can create problems in future. For instance, there may be pharma companies among these which hold health-related data of a large number of people.

A justice delivery system is judged by its impartiality and ability to dispense quality justice in the shortest possible time. In the case of this Act, the Chairperson and Members of the Data Protection Board of India should be above suspicion. Section 22 (3) stipulates that a Chairperson or Member of the Board shall not take up any employment within one year after the end of her tenure on the Board except with the prior approval of the Central Government.

Whether there is any restriction on taking up consulting is not clear. Besides, there has to be a provision asking the Chairperson or a Member to recuse herself from the case if the parties involved include a family member, employers of an immediate family member, or companies in which her family members have a financial interest.

### **Lurking threats**

As mentioned earlier in this article, there are lurking threats to personal data privacy that find no place in the Act. The threats are present almost everywhere. In your smartphone, laptop, television, and whatnot.

Malls and showrooms are among centres of large-scale data misuse. Shops demand personal data from customers, often much more than what is essential. Experience shows that in several cases this data, in digitised form, is passed on to interested parties. This is nothing but data sale, which should be made a punishable offence in the Act. Customers' right to say no and still purchase goods and receive other benefits needs to be protected.

The digital revolution gave a big boost to online marketing in the country. There has been a mushrooming of operators in the field, both Indian and foreign. The merchandise they deal in range from fast-moving consumer goods to prescription drugs. After initial hiccups the government managed to bring them somewhat within the ambit of Indian laws. Still precautionary measures are needed in certain areas.

For instance, online pharmacies — often other pharmacies too — store details of medicines bought for a patient. Measures have to be designed to ensure that the details of the patient and the medicines are not transferred illegally.

Health-related data means big money for certain groups, including insurance companies. Therefore, the law must have suitable additions to cover testing laboratories, diagnostic imaging centres, and so on.

There are instances of big companies, including multinationals, asking employees to submit details of the financial situation, including shareholdings, investments, liabilities, etc., of their immediate family. This is in clear violation of their fundamental right and can put them in difficult situations. Such data transfer should be stopped. The

Act has to take note of this. Even the practice of asking employees to furnish all details of their own financial situation is questionable.

There is another data security risk that goes apparently unnoticed in everyday life. Strangely, it has emerged from the use of digital technology to increase “security”. Many flats now have doors that are opened using biometric data such as finger print. An important question is: who will take responsibility for the security of this data? The residents’ association need not be technically equipped for the task. The manufacturer will most likely pass the buck, claiming to be a mere seller. The lawmakers will have to intervene here.

We often ignore the possibilities of data theft from a third-party app or other apps pre-installed by the mobile manufacturer. There can be malware attacks, hacking attempts, etc., if the software is not safe enough. The company along with the app developer must be held responsible for any data theft or loss. The company must be held responsible also for any data loss due to a software update done without the user’s permission.

Lastly, the law should provide for a government portal for aggrieved parties to file complaints in secrecy. Secrecy because the offender should be deprived of an opportunity to destroy evidence. <https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/opinion/the-data-protection-law-needs-more-teeth/article67521947.ece>

## **17. 43 years on, Khalapur dam project remains incomplete** (*timesofindia.indiatimes.com*) Nov 11, 2023

Navi Mumbai: Four decades after approval was granted the Jambrung dam near Dolvali railway station in Khalapur taluka alongside the Karjat-Khopoli railway track remains incomplete. The minor irrigation project is aimed to provide potable water and for farming purposes covering a dozen villages under five gram panchayats. The areas have started seeing housing projects.

The Rs 40 crore project spread over 26 hectare of land will have a gross storage capacity of 2,565 thousand cubic metre

The Jambrung Dam project taken up in 1980 is to provide water to Jambrung, Beed, Kharvali, Vani, Kelvali, Mankivali, Navghar, Anjarum, Ghodivali, Navande, Hal among other villages. The project cost was Rs 59 lakh in the year 1980.

The cost was revised in 2011 to over Rs 18 crore as the land fell under forest area. Rs 345 lakh has been spent for forest land acquisition. Cost revision is going on as people wait to quench their thirst.

A Marathwada based company has been engaged for the dam construction work. Locals are not satisfied with the progress of the work since it was commenced two years ago by the existing contractor. Work is executed for a month or so in a year as was experienced in the past. The dam will provide water to about 300 hectares of land collectively on season and crop basis throughout the year. Jambrung villager Prashant Khandekar said, “The work has been held up since monsoon and is likely to restart

soon. The project will solve the water needs of more than 15000 people and also their farm water needs.”

The water resource department deputy engineer VR Deshmukh said, “So far 20% of the project work has been completed. The dam base work is ready and the project is expected to be complete within two years.”

<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/navi-mumbai/43-years-on-khalapur-dam-project-remains-incomplete/articleshow/105137595.cms>