NEWS ITEMS ON CAG/ AUDIT REPORTS

1. GCZMA receives two plaints on blockage of beach access *(timesofindia.indiatimes.com)* 12 March 2024

Panaji: The Goa Coastal Zone Management Authority (GCZMA) has received two separate complaints of illegal constructions carried out in CRZ areas, blocking public access.

In the first case, GCZMA received a complaint that a local in Calangute had illegally constructed a four-storey structure, including a well and 8-10 huts, thus blocking public access to the beach.

A mud road is also alleged to be constructed for fourwheeler access to the constructions, which are being operated as guesthouses for tourists. The road is barely 10-12ms from the beach, the complainant said.

Accordingly, the authority carried out a site inspection through its expert members, engineers and field surveyors, which confirmed that the alleged structures were indeed present on the beach.

In the second case, GCZMA received a site inspection report from the South Goa district committee where two residents of Patnem in Canacona complained that the illegal construction of a compound wall is blocking the traditional pathway at Nagorcem-Palolem.

The district committee's report confirmed that illegal construction of a compound wall has been carried out within 0-200ms of the high tide line.

At present, hearings in both the matters are on by GCZMA.

In recent times, citizens have protested the construction of illegal walls by private parties close to the high tide line on the beaches of Vainguinim, Morjim and Vagator.

The Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG), in its report submitted recently in the Parliament, pointed out instances observed where prohibited activities like infrastructure development in areas of coastal sand dunes were observed in Goa.

"It also depicted that construction of hotels/resorts/guesthouses, dune reclamation for making approach road to the beaches, and landscaping were the major causes of destruction of sand dunes of Goa, prominently along the coastal stretches of Betul to Cansaulim, Sinquerim to Baga, Arambol, and middle of Morjim," the CAG report said.

The audit observed that GCZMA, despite existence of sand dunes, gave permissions for infrastructure development and construction of hotel and residential houses in these areas.

Instances were observed in Goa where the sewage treatment plants were either altogether absent or were functioning without any monitoring leading to discharge of harmful effluents into coastal waters. https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/goa/gczma-receives-two-plaints-on-blockage-of-beach-access/articleshow/108409628.cms

2. 3.43 करोड़ रुपये की परियोजना कचरे से बिजली पैदा किए बिना पानी में चले गए *(jantaserishta.com)* 12 March 2024

गुजरात : गुजरात में जीआईडीसी एस्टेट, अंकलेश्वर में प्लाज्मा तकनीक का उपयोग करके कचरे से बिजली बनाने की लागत पर 3.43 करोड़ रुपये की परियोजना, न केवल पर्यावरण मंत्रालय, परियोजना निगरानी समिति सहित कुप्रबंधन के कारण एक दशक से अधिक समय के बाद भी पूरी नहीं हुई है। जीपीसीबी। नियंत्रक और महालेखा परीक्षक (सीएजी) की रिपोर्ट से पता चला है कि निगरानी में कमियों, कानूनी रूप से बाध्यकारी अनुबंधों की अनुपस्थिति के कारण बिजली का उत्पादन नहीं हो रहा है, जिससे सार्वजनिक धन की बड़े पैमाने पर बर्बादी हुई है।

सीएजी की रिपोर्ट के मुताबिक, सितंबर 2022 के आसपास एक ट्रायल रन और प्रदर्शन आयोजित किया गया था, उस समय यह पता चला था कि यह महत्वपूर्ण परियोजना बहुत खराब स्थिति में थी, यह परियोजना उस उद्देश्य को पूरा नहीं कर सकी जिसके लिए इसे शुरू किया गया था। रिपोर्ट में कहा गया है कि वन, पर्यावरण और जलवायु परिवर्तन विभाग ने अपशिष्ट निपटान और बिजली उत्पादन के लिए एक विदेशी भागीदार कंपनी के सहयोग से 6.26 करोड़ रुपये की परियोजना स्थापित करने के लिए सितंबर 2010 में अंकलेश्वर में परियोजना को मंजूरी दी थी। यूएसए को 2.55 करोड़ रुपये। गुजरात प्रदूषण नियंत्रण बोर्ड निगरानी एजेंसी होने के नाते, अक्टूबर 2012 में एक निगरानी समिति का गठन किया गया था। इस योजना को 18 महीने की समय सीमा के भीतर पूरा करने का लक्ष्य रखा गया था, हालांकि समय-समय पर इस अवधि को बढ़ाया गया था।

वर्ष 2013 में इस परियोजना से विदेशी भागीदार के हटने के बाद, निगरानी समिति ने अगस्त 2013 में प्रौद्योगिकी प्रदान करने के लिए एक नए विदेशी भागीदार को शामिल करने का निर्णय लिया, फिर वर्ष 2014 में मेसर्स टेक्नो प्लाज्मा के बीच एक नए समझौता ज्ञापन पर हस्ताक्षर किए गए। सिस्टम इंक. केंद्रीय मंत्रालय ने 2012 से 2016 के बीच 3.34 करोड़ रुपये आवंटित किये थे, जिसके मुकाबले अगस्त 2019 तक 3.49 करोड़ रुपये खर्च किये गये. ऑडिट से पता चला कि आरएफ टॉर्च और बिजली आपूर्ति प्रणाली की लागत उद्योग भागीदार द्वारा वहन की जानी थी, हालांकि विदेशी भागीदार बदलने के बाद राशि का भुगतान मंत्रालय के फंड से किया गया था। मार्च 2019 में, मंत्रालय के खर्च पर आरएफ टॉर्च की खरीद अनियमित रूप से की गई थी।

ऑडिट रिपोर्ट से पता चला कि आरएफ टॉर्च स्थापित नहीं किए गए थे, लेकिन उनके रखरखाव पर कोई ध्यान नहीं दिया गया, जिससे जंग लग गई, सिस्टम को मरम्मत की भी आवश्यकता थी। इतना ही नहीं, मंजूरी के अनुरूप भूमि भवन की लागत भी नहीं आने दी गयी. 2.55 करोड़ रुपये के योगदान में से 2.42 करोड़ रुपये 2019 के अंत तक खर्च किए गए।

पांच साल तक अनुश्रवण समिति की बैठक नहीं हुई

सीएजी ने कहा है कि वेस्ट-टू-एनर्जी प्रोजेक्ट में अप्रैल 2015 से जनवरी 2020 तक प्रोजेक्ट मॉनिटरिंग कमेटी की कोई बैठक नहीं हुई. इस प्रकार इस योजना में घोर लापरवाही के कारण लोगों की मेहनत की कमाई बर्बाद हो गयी है. जब सीपीसीबी और जीपीसीबी की एक टीम ने सितंबर 2021 के आसपास अंकलेश्वर में साइट का दौरा किया, तो प्लांट चालू नहीं था, लाई गई मशीनरी भी बेकार थी। जनवरी 2023 में मंत्रालय ने इस प्रोजेक्ट को 90 दिन के अंदर पूरा करने का निर्देश भी दिया था.

https://jantaserishta.com/local/gujarat/rs-343-crore-project-goes-into-water-without-generating-power-from-waste-3159913

3. वेव सिटी के तीन हजार खरीदारों के लिए गुड न्यूज, जल्द मिलेगा अपना घर; 6 महीने में रजिस्ट्री-पजेशन *(msn.com)* हिन्दुस्तान | 12 March 2024

जीडीए की सोमवार को हुई बोर्ड बैठक में वेव सिटी की संशोधित डीपीआर को मंजूरी मिल गई है। इससे करीब तीन हजार खरीदारों को छह महीने में अपना घर मिल सकेगा। वहीं, प्राधिकरण ने व्यावसायिक भूखंडों का प्रति वर्ग मीटर 8,700 रिजर्व प्राइस बढ़ा दिया है, जिससे इन भूखंडों की कीमत बढ़ जाएगी। इसके अलावा टेंडर में दो नई शर्तों को जोड़ा गया है। जीडीए बोर्ड अध्यक्ष और मेरठ मंडलायुक्त सेलवा कुमारी जे. की अध्यक्षता में सोमवार को मेरठ मंडलायुक्त के कार्यालय सभागार में जीडीए की 164वीं बोर्ड बैठक हुई। इसमें सभी 11 प्रस्तावों को मंजूरी मिल गई।

बोर्ड ने वेव सिटी की संशोधित डीपीआर और लेआउट को स्वीकृति दे दी है। इसका सीधा फायदा तीन हजार घर खरीदारों को होगा। इनकी रजिस्ट्री और पजेशन की प्रक्रिया छह माह में पूरी हो सकेगी। महालेखा परीक्षक (कैग) की 401.30 करोड़ रुपये की ऑडिट आपत्ति के कारण कई बार से बोर्ड में संशोधित डीपीआर स्वीकृत नहीं हो रही थी। पिछले दिनों सरकार की ओर से गठित हाई पॉवर कमेटी ने उत्पल चड्ढा हाईटेक डेवलपर्स प्रा. लि. गाजियाबाद (वेव सिटी) परियोजना को लेकर स्थिति साफ कर दी थी।

कमेटी ने जीडीए बोर्ड द्वारा की गई आपत्तियों का संज्ञान लेकर घर खरीददारों के हितों का ध्यान रखकर वेव सिटी का संशोधित डीपीआर एवं ले आउट शीघ्र स्वीकृत करने का निर्देश दिया। साथ ही कैग आपत्ति की कीमत की जमीन और बैंक गारंटी को बंधक के रूप में रखकर बोर्ड बैठक से स्वीकृत कराने की बात कही थी। बिल्डर प्रतिनिधि का कहना है कि स्वीकृति नहीं मिलने की वजह से विकास कार्य रुका हुआ था।

जीडीए के व्यावसायिक भूखंडों की कीमत बढ़ेगी

बोर्ड बैठक में जीडीए की व्यावसायिक संपत्ति के रिजर्व प्राइस को 8,700 रुपये प्रति वर्ग मीटर की बढ़ोतरी कर दी गई है। क्योंकि प्राधिकरण के बनाए 908 ईडब्ल्यूएस पर आई अतिरिक्त लागत के भार को इस व्यावसायिक भूखंडों पर भारित किया गया है। जीडीए सचिव ने बताया कि प्राधिकरण ने वर्ष 2010 में प्रताप विहार सेक्टर 11 में 348 ईडब्ल्यूएस और राजेंद्र नगर के 560 ईडब्ल्यूएस बनाए थे। शासन ने इनकी कीमत दो लाख रुपये तय की थी, लेकिन इनके निर्माण में लागत ज्यादा आ गई। ऐसे में जीडीए ने इसे आवंटियों से वसूलने का प्रयास किया, लेकिन आवंटी राष्ट्रीय प्रतिस्पर्धा आयोग

चले गए। जहां से प्राधिकरण पर पेनाल्टी भी लगी। जीडीए ने इस केस को आगे दायर किया, लेकिन इस मामले में स्टे ऑर्डर है।

जीडीए को 123 करोड़ का मुनाफा हुआ

जीडीए सचिव राजेश कुमार सिंह ने बताया कि 2022-23 की बैलेंसशीट पास की गई है जबकि वित्तीय वर्ष 2024-25 का बजट भी पास किया गया। प्राधिकरण की बैलेंसशीट के अनुसार प्राधिकरण को 123 करोड़ रुपये का मुनाफा हुआ है। यह मुनाफा संपत्तियों की बिक्री और अन्य साधनों से हुआ है। उन्होंने बताया कि कुछ कर्मचारियों के मेडिकल बिल का भी पास किए गए हैं।

टेंडर के बाद 15 दिन में एग्रीमेंट करना होगा

जीडीए के ठेकेदार टेंडर आवंटित होने के बाद एग्रीमेंट करवाने में देरी करते हैं। इसे देखते हुए प्राधिकरण ने अपनी शर्तों में बदलाव किया है। अब टेंडर आवंटित होने के 15 दिन के भीतर ठेकेदार को एग्रीमेंट करना होगा। अगर वह ऐसा नहीं करता है, तो उसे प्रतिदिन एक हजार रुपये की पेनाल्टी देनी पड़ेगी। वहीं, जीडीए में काम करने वाले ठेकेदार अब अपनी आर्थिक क्षमता से अधिक का काम नहीं ले सकेंगे। https://www.msn.com/hi-in/news/other/%E0%A4%B5%E0%A5%87%E0%A4%B5-%E0%A4%B8-%E0%A4%9F-%E0%A4%95%E0%A5%87-%E0%A4%A4-%E0%A4%A8-%E0%A4%B9%E0%A4%9C-%E0%A4%B0-%E0%A4%96%E0%A4%B0-%E0%A4%A6-%E0%A4%B0-%E0%A4%82-%E0%A4%95%E0%A5%87-%E0%A4%B2-%E0%A4%8F-%E0%A4%97%E0%A5%81%E0%A4%A1-%E0%A4%A8%E0%A5%8D%E0%A4%AF%E0%A5%82%E0%A4%9C-%E0%A4%9C%E0%A4%B2%E0%A5%8D%E0%A4%A6-%E0%A4%AE-%E0%A4%B2%E0%A5%87%E0%A4%97-%E0%A4%85%E0%A4%AA%E0%A4%A8-%E0%A4%98%E0%A4%B0-6-%E0%A4%AE%E0%A4%B9-%E0%A4%A8%E0%A5%87-%E0%A4%AE%E0%A5%87%E0%A4%82-%E0%A4%B0%E0%A4%9C-%E0%A4%B8%E0%A5%8D%E0%A4%9F%E0%A5%8D%E0%A4%B0-%E0%A4%AA%E0%A4%9C%E0%A5%87%E0%A4%B6%E0%A4%A8/ar-BB1jJiSy

SELECTED NEWS ITEMS/ARTICLES FOR READING

4. Energy overdrive: Power sector needs massive investments; govt must do all it takes to avert a crisis *(financialexpress.com)* 12 March 2024

State monopoly in the transmission sector is being progressively undermined too, paving the way for larger private investments.

Power minister R K Singh's plan for near-doubling of the capacity in the entire electricity value chain by 2030 involves a Herculean task, and requires much higher level of private investments than what's in the pipeline. Yet, success of his endeavour is critical to India's energy security, and the ambition to achieve high economic growth on a sustained basis. Power demand in recent quarters have outpaced all projections, and is tending to go up further. Peak demand could be as high as 380 giga watt (GW) by 2030, way higher than the current level of 243 GW. The minister is optimistic when he says that the conditions in the sector are now more conducive for private risk capital. His confidence stems from the fact that the vicious circle of payment defaults that bogged down the sector for long has been corrected to a large extent, using a tactics that combined persuasion and coercion. Distribution entities' (discoms) outstanding dues to the power producers have come down by two-thirds from the June 2022 level of Rs 1.35 trillion to the current level of less than `45,000 crore. That definitely is an unprecedentedly steady pace of dues reduction.

What enabled this achievement in the first place is prompt release of subsidy amounts from state budgets. With most states complying with a phased payment plan, the dues are hopefully on course to be eliminated. In tandem with this, the technical losses of discoms are being brought down with smart meters helping the process a lot. State monopoly in the transmission sector is being progressively undermined too, paving the way for larger private investments. Most parts of the nation is now seamlessly connected to a single grid, and in Singh's words, India' is now "the largest synchronised grid in the world." The unified grid has an inter-regional capacity to transfer 116 GW of power from one corner of the country to another, even while maintaining consistent frequency.

While these accomplishments are commendable, the plan drawn up by Singh still involves a lot of uncertainties. There is a big gap between the investments required to double capacities in such a short period, and the actual prospects. It is also a daunting challenge to reform and modernise the distribution sector, which still lacks sufficient competition in most parts of the country. Another major issue that needs tackling is the intermittent nature of the renewable energy (RE). Capacity creation in the RE segment has been quicker in recent years; yet, RE share in actual energy supplies is still around a fifth only, as there is a problem with such energy when it comes to meeting peak demand. In fact, a shortage is already being felt during the peak hours in the night.

The government has been prescient in according high priority to capacity creation, accelerating the coal-based thermal power projects for the medium term, and deciding not to exert itself to add costly gas-based units. It, however, face three distinct challenges in meeting the objective of averting a serious power crisis: lack of enough credit flows to the coal-mining and thermal-power ventures; a political hurdle that makes it difficult to replicate the Mumbai model of multiple distribution licensees that use same infrastructure based on common carrier principle; and a lack of investor zeal in RE battery-storage. The power minister seems mindful of these challenges, and the need to devise appropriate policies. https://www.financialexpress.com/opinion/energy-overdrive-power-sector-needs-massive-investments-govt-must-do-all-it-takes-to-avert-a-crisis/3421768/

5. Central Government's Payment Security Mechanism to Drive 1.5 Lakh Electric Bus Procurement, Here's All about It

(swarajyamag.com) 12 Mar 2024

The central government is developing a payment security mechanism (PSM) to facilitate the procurement of 1.5 lakh electric buses (e-buses).

This move aims to protect e-bus suppliers from financial risks associated with state transport utilities (STUs) that operate these buses, as per a report by The Economic Times.

Currently, e-buses are purchased by central agencies and then transferred to STUs for operation, with the STUs being responsible for reimbursing the bus manufacturers.

However, challenges such as inefficiencies in fare collection and inadequate bus maintenance have affected the viability of these operations.

E-bus suppliers have long requested a PSM backed by the central government to ensure their payment security.

In the interim budget for 2024-25, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman announced plans to expand and strengthen the e-vehicle ecosystem, including supporting manufacturing and charging infrastructure and encouraging greater adoption of e-buses for public transport through a payment security mechanism.

Industry estimates suggest that an investment of Rs 1.2-1.5 lakh crore will be necessary to deploy 1 lakh e-buses.

The government is currently engaging with stakeholders to define the specifics of the PSM scheme, which will be activated in case of default by state governments or transport utilities in paying bus makers.

Presently, around 4,000 electric buses are operating in India, compared to a total of 15 lakh diesel and CNG buses in the country. In August 2023, the centre launched the PM-eBus Sewa Scheme, aiming to deploy 10,000 e-buses under a public-private partnership model, with an estimated cost of Rs 57,613 crore over the next decade.

Amit Goyal, chair of the PHDCCI Housing and Urban Development Committee, emphasised the importance of a rapid rollout of the PM-eBus Sewa scheme for 169 cities, particularly highlighting the significance of electric buses for smaller cities and hill stations.

Convergence Energy Services Limited (CESL), a green energy-focused venture of Energy Efficiency Services Limited (EESL), recently invited proposals for the selection of an operator to procure, supply, operate, and maintain 3,600 e-buses, as part of the PM-eBus Sewa scheme.
The central government is developing a payment security mechanism (PSM) to facilitate the procurement of 1.5 lakh electric buses (e-buses).

This move aims to protect e-bus suppliers from financial risks associated with state transport utilities (STUs) that operate these buses, as per a report by The Economic Times.

Currently, e-buses are purchased by central agencies and then transferred to STUs for operation, with the STUs being responsible for reimbursing the bus manufacturers.

However, challenges such as inefficiencies in fare collection and inadequate bus maintenance have affected the viability of these operations.

E-bus suppliers have long requested a PSM backed by the central government to ensure their payment security.

In the interim budget for 2024-25, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman announced plans to expand and strengthen the e-vehicle ecosystem, including supporting manufacturing and charging infrastructure and encouraging greater adoption of e-buses for public transport through a payment security mechanism.

Industry estimates suggest that an investment of Rs 1.2-1.5 lakh crore will be necessary to deploy 1 lakh e-buses.

The government is currently engaging with stakeholders to define the specifics of the PSM scheme, which will be activated in case of default by state governments or transport utilities in paying bus makers.

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6. Central transfers — arresting the decline in shares of some States *(thehindu.com)* Mar 12, 2024

The income distance criterion and cesses and surcharges are areas that need review

There are many issues that the Sixteenth Finance Commission will have to deal with. In this article, we focus on one issue which has been raised by many States, particularly those in the south of India. The issue (or the complaint) is that these States have been facing a decline in their share out of the resources transferred from the Centre to the States, from Finance Commission to Finance Commission.

In finding a solution to this issue, we need to look at: which States have been gaining and which are losing their share over time; the criteria of horizontal distribution which has led to some States steadily losing their share; and what can be done to reverse this trend.

The shares of groups of States and those for selected States are shown, for the Twelfth Finance Commission to the Fifteenth Finance Commission (final report). In the case of the southern States, there has been a steady fall in their share, from 19.785% to 15.800%. In a comparison of these two Commissions, the northern and eastern States have also lost. The 'gainer States' were the hilly, central, and western States including Maharashtra.

The distance criterion

The shares of individual States in tax devolution depend on the criteria and the weights used by different Commissions. The distance criterion has been accorded the highest weight amongst these criteria. Its weight was reduced from 50% to 47.5% by the Thirteenth Finance Commission and further reduced to 45% by the Fifteenth Finance Commission. Earlier, the Eleventh Finance Commission had given this criterion a weight of 62.5%. The equalisation principle has always been regarded in India and elsewhere as a key principle governing distribution. Economic and social justice demand this.

The main reason for the loss of the southern States is the income distance criterion. Distance criterion means that the farther a State is from the highest income State, the higher its share. The main reason for the gain of the hilly States is area/forest criterion, although its impact is not separately shown. Between these two Finance Commissions, the loss to the southern States due to the distance criterion amounted to 8.055% points, although the overall loss was much less at 3.985% points, implying that there was a gain under other criteria.

Although on account of the distance criterion, low-income States such as Bihar and Uttar Pradesh have gained over time, they have lost on account of other criteria. Bihar and Uttar Pradesh show, in terms of their overall share, a loss of 0.970% points and 1.325% points.

Are States getting funds they are entitled from the Centre?

On population

One other criterion that has caused some controversy is population. Until the Fourteenth Finance Commission, the data for the population in 1971 was used. For the Fifteenth Finance Commission, data for the population in 2011 was used. However, in order not to penalise States that showed better performance in reducing fertility rates, the demographic change criterion was introduced. The joint impact of these two changes has been marginal for all groups of States. For Tamil Nadu, the joint impact was marginally positive.

Steps to take

As mentioned, we cannot give up the income distance criterion. Some raise the question whether such a criterion can continue indefinitely. This is a legitimate question. But this question can be raised in relation to many other issues. Perhaps one step that the Sixteenth Finance Commission can consider is to reduce its weight while correspondingly raising the weights attached to other criteria.

Related to the question of share is also the quantum of the divisible pool. While accepting the recommendation of the Fourteenth Finance Commission to raise the share of all States to 42% from 32%, the Centre increased the cesses and surcharges, thereby reducing the size of the divisible pool. This is not desirable. One option is to limit the share of cesses and surcharges to 10% of the Centre's gross tax revenues. After the recommendation of the Fourteenth Finance Commission, the share of the States in the combined revenue receipts increased from 63.9% to 68.1%. It increased further to 70.7% in 2020-21. Since then, it has fallen to 67.5% in 2022-23, although this level is still higher than 61.3% in the Twelfth Finance Commission period.

To sum up, there is a case to address the issue raised by some of the States regarding their declining shares. The major factor contributing to this situation is the adoption of income distance criterion and giving it a weight as high as 45%. But in any scheme of fair distribution, this criterion cannot be given up.

The Finance Commission can reduce the weight of this criterion by 5% to 10% points. Also, cesses and surcharges may be subjected to some upper limit by the Sixteenth Finance Commission. https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/central-transfers-arresting-the-decline-in-shares-of-some-states/article67939930.ece

7. India remains world's top arms importer, says SIPRI *(millenniumpost.in)* 11 Mar 2024

India remains the world's top arms importer and its imports increased by 4.7 per cent between2014–2018 and 2019–2023, Swedish think tank SIPRI said in a new report on Monday.

Russia continued as India's main arms supplier, the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) said, adding around 55 per cent of arms imports by European states in 2019–23 were supplied by the US, up from 35 per cent in 2014–18.

"India was the world's top arms importer. Its arms imports increased by 4.7 per cent between 2014–18 and 2019–23," the think-tank said in a statement.

“Although Russia remained India’s main arms supplier (accounting for 36 per cent of its arms imports), this was the first five-year period since 1960–64 when deliveries from Russia (or the Soviet Union before 1991) made up less than half of India’s arms imports,” it said.

According to the report, Pakistan significantly increased its arms imports (43 per cent).

Pakistan was the fifth largest arms importer in 2019–23 and China became even more dominant as its main supplier, providing 82 per cent of its arms imports, the report said.

Arms imports by two of China’s East Asian neighbours increased, Japan’s by 155 per cent and South Korea’s by 6.5 per cent, it said.

China’s own arms imports shrank by 44 per cent, mainly as a result of substituting imported arms — most of which came from Russia, with locally produced systems.

“There is little doubt that the sustained high levels of arms imports by Japan and other US allies and partners in Asia and Oceania are largely driven by one key factor: concern over China’s ambitions,” said Siemon Wezeman, Senior Researcher with the SIPRI Arms Transfers Programme.

“The US, which shares their perception of a Chinese threat, is a growing supplier to the region,” it said.

Thirty per cent of international arms transfers went to the Middle East in 2019–23. Three Middle Eastern states were among the top 10 importers in 2019–23:

Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Egypt. Saudi Arabia was the world’s second-largest arms importer in 2019–23, receiving 8.4 per cent of global arms imports in the period, the SIPRI said.

Saudi Arabian arms imports fell by 28 per cent in 2019–23, but this was from a record level in 2014–18.

Qatar increased its arms imports almost fourfold (396 per cent) between 2014–18 and 2019–23, making it the world’s third biggest arms importer in 2019–23, according to the report.
https://www.millenniumpost.in/business/india-remains-worlds-top-arms-importer-says-sipri-555490

8. Indian Army, IAF to Get Anti-Drone Systems as Defence Ministry Inks Rs 200 Crore Deal Under iDEX Initiative: All about It

(swarajyamag.com) Mar 12, 2024

The DRDO anti-drone system.

The Ministry of Defence (MoD) has recently finalized a groundbreaking Rs 200 crore contract for anti-drone systems, catering to the needs of both the Indian Army and Indian Air Force (IAF).

The deal, signed with Big Bang Boom Solutions Private Limited (BBBS), marks the largest contract under the Innovations for Defence Excellence (iDEX) initiative, reported The Hindu.

Vivek Virmani, CEO of iDex operating under the MoD, mentioned the iDEX program's aim to cultivate an environment of innovation and technological advancement within the defense sector.

“The focus of the iDEX programme is to foster an ecosystem of innovation and technology development in defence. It is our constant endeavour to engage with young innovators who can bring technologically advanced solutions for modernising the Indian military", he said.

Other noteworthy advancements include the incorporation of Advanced Electronically Scanned Array (AESA) radar and kamikaze drones, allowing for customizable upgrades as per user requirements.

The system's core sensor, empowered by Artificial Intelligence and computer vision algorithms, facilitates precise identification, classification, and location tracking of drones.

“This is a significant milestone for us. Our product pipeline and mix for the next 10 years are robust and the team is raring to go. We have already started discussions on repeat orders and export opportunities,” Praveen Dwarakanath, CEO, BBBS, said. https://swarajyamag.com/amp/story/news-brief/indian-army-iaf-to-get-anti-drone-systems-as-defence-ministry-inks-rs-200-crore-deal-under-idex-initiative-all-about-it

9. Have NPAs really declined? *(financialexpress.com)* March 12, 2024

Targeting zero NPAs may be utopian, but zero tolerance for NPAs is necessary

Since then, the GNPAs had come down to Rs 8.29 trillion or 7.6% of GA during 2020-21 and further to 6.9% by the end of the 2022 fiscal. (PTI)

According to the RBI’s report on the Trends and Progress of Banking in India, banks have improved their profitability and reduced their non-performing assets (NPAs). Their bad loans have fallen from 11.2% in 2018 to 3.2% as of September 2023. This brings a huge respite.

Gross NPAs (GNPAs) of the scheduled commercial banks (SCBs) had grown from Rs 57,396 crore in 2004-05 to Rs 69,953.75 crore in 2008-09, a jump of 21.87% over a period of five years and further to Rs 10.35 trillion or 11.2% of the gross advances (GA) by 2017-18.

Since then, the GNPAs had come down to Rs 8.29 trillion or 7.6% of GA during 2020-21 and further to 6.9% by the end of the 2022 fiscal. This ratio is estimated to fall to a 10-year low of 3.9% by the end of the 2023 fiscal. RBI’s Financial Stability Report (FSR) predicts the GNPA ratio will improve to 3.6% by March 2024.

Much of the decline in GNPAs, however, is attributable to the massive write-off. RBI data indicates that the public sector banks alone wrote off bad loans worth Rs 10 lakh over the past five years. Yet, the recoveries have also played a part.

Apart from the routine recovery processes, commercial banks in India take recourse to recover their loans and advances through multiple modes and channels. The National Asset Reconstruction Company Ltd. (NARCL) and India Debt Resolution Company Ltd. (IDRCL), popularly called the bad banks, have also been established to recover large-sized loans.

Lok Adalats have been encouraged by RBI to recover loans up to Rs 10 lakh. Going by the data, the Lok Adalats do not appear to have been effective. During the past 12 years, from 2010-11 to 2021-22, a total of 3.84 lakh cases involving a sum of Rs 4.9 trillion were referred to the Lok Adalats. Of these, only 4.36% or Rs 21,340 crore could be recovered. The highest proportion of pending loans that could be recovered through Lok Adalats was 11.76% in 2011-12. Since then, the recovery rate has only declined and was as low as 2.33% in 2021-22.

Provided by the Recovery of Debt and Bankruptcy Act 1993, the country today has 39 Debt Recovery Tribunals (DRTs) and five Debt Recovery Appellate Tribunals (DRAT). Following the enactment of the Securitisation and Reconstruction of Financial Assets & Enforcement of Security Interest Act, 2002 (SARFAESI Act), securitisation appeals (SAs) may also be filed with the DRTs. In 2008-09, the recoveries through the DRTs looked encouraging. More than 81.1% of the NPAs referred to it were realised. Since then, however, their recovery rate has slid. From 2010-11 to 2021-22, a total of 3.19 lakh cases involving a sum of Rs 12.34 trillion were referred to the DRTs, of which Rs 86,600 crore, or a mere 7.02%, could be recovered. The recovery rate through the DRTs, which was 27.66% in 2010-11, declined to 3.60% in 2020-21. Surprisingly, the DRT recovery rate increased to 25.68% in 2021-22.

The SARFAESI enables commercial banks to auction commercial or residential properties to recover secured loans from defaulting borrowers. During 2010-22, banks sought to recover pending loans from 19.32 lakh defaulting borrowers involving a sum of Rs13.34 trillion. They could only recover Rs 2.85 trillion, or a mere 21.35% of the loans under default.

Regarding the recoveries under the Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code (IBC), the available data reveals that it began on an optimistic note, recording a recovery rate of 49.61% in 2017-18. Since then, the recovery rate has declined to 23.80% in 2021-22. Over a period of five years since 2017-18, as many as 5,263 cases involving Rs 7.15 trillion were brought under the IBC. Of these, Rs 2.50 trillion or 35% were recovered. A Press Information Bureau (PIB) release informs that recoveries through the IBC mechanism had reached Rs 3 trillion, marking the highest number of resolutions since the enactment of IBC in FY23.

Taken together, as many as 4.06 lakh cases involving Rs 37.73 trillion were referred to various recovery channels during 2010-22. Of these, only Rs 6.43 trillion, a mere 17.04%, could be realised. Disquietingly, the overall recovery rate has come down from 31.40% in 2010-11 to 18.41% in 2021-22.

Clearly, while the write-off and provisions make NPAs look significantly lower, the continued generation of new NPAs and their low-paced recoveries by different channels do not augur well for the health of the banking sector.

Regulations provide for all the enabling conditions which banks must leverage to intensify their efforts. Targeting zero NPA may be utopian, but zero tolerance for NPAs is necessary to tame the menace of their rising numbers.

Taking NPAS off their balance sheet may make banks look better and enable them to make enhanced lending, but this may be fraught with dangers. NPAs and deterioration of asset quality due to delay and default risks, thus, continue to remain major concerns and a focus for reforms in the banking sector.

Lending is integral to commercial banks and necessary for their growth and profitability. Yet, due diligence in lending and efficient assets side management is critical for continuing the defaults to a bare minimum and within the norms. Taking prompt and necessary actions within the bounds of the law to recover and realise the interest and principal with minimum delay and default is no less important. https://www.financialexpress.com/opinion/have-npas-really-declined/3421764/

10. Spectrum auction prices are still too steep *(livemint.com)* 12 March 2024

The DoT is refusing to align prices of 5G spectrum with market conditions and is instead trying to maximise revenue. This is no doubt a consequence of the so-called '2G scam' campaign the BJP ran when it was in opposition.

An auction for eight bands of 5G spectrum will begin on 28 May. The spectrum holdings of telecom service providers (TSPs) and how they bid in the previous auction offer some insights on how the latest sale will pan out. The receipts are unlikely to touch the reserve price of almost ₹1 trillion.

Yet the auctions are good. For one, they settle the vexed question of how to apportion spectrum – through administrative fiat or bids. While an auction is the more expensive option for TSPs, it does have the benefit of predictability. Companies have participated in many such auctions over the years, so they know there is no need to snatch up every bit of spectrum on offer lest competitors gobble them. That a public policy has almost become a non-event is an indication of increased ease of doing business.

Telecom minister Ashwini Vaishnaw said on Monday that he has formalised the abolition of the wireless operating licence, making it easier for startups to enter the sector at a lower cost. India's digital story needs TSPs to be healthy and happy to invest in ways that startups demand.

However, the DoT is refusing to align prices of spectrum with market conditions and instead trying to maximise revenue. This is no doubt a consequence of the so-called '2G scam' campaign the BJP ran when it was in opposition, alleging kickbacks in spectrum allocation. To date, investigative agencies have failed to provide evidence for this in court. One consequence of the investigation, however, is that officials now treat revenue maximisation as the singular objective, when it needn't be.

Of the eight spectrum bands on offer this time, the 800 Mhz band is the most expensive and the most crucial to Reliance Jio, Airtel, Vodafone Idea and state-owned BSNL. The total spectrum on offer this time is 118.8 Mhz, from which the government hopes to earn ₹21,341 crore or about 22% of the total value to be realised from the auctions.

The reserve price set by DoT is steep when considering the portions bought by TSPs over the years. In 2016 only 20% of the spectrum on offer was sold. This rose to 65% in 2021 but fell to 14.5% in the most recent action in 2022. Despite this being the most valuable band for companies, they did not go overboard in bidding for it. The relatively high demand in 2021 was due to a 24% reduction in prices by the DoT. But since prices were steep in 2022, demand was muted. This time DoT, despite the clear price signal, has decided to keep prices unchanged.

An auction for the relatively new 3500 Mhz band was held for the first time in 2022. This is a crucial band not only for 5G but for 6G as well. But despite the value on offer, of the 7,260 Mhz offered, the effective demand was only 76%. Despite this, DoT has gone ahead and raised the prices across the board for all circles by almost 11%.

It has long been established that these auctions are not meant to offer a windfall to the exchequer, but a transparent way to apportion airwaves among competing companies. That's why airwaves can now be sold, shared or leased by buyers after a one-year lock-in period. But such activity is now muted since there are only two healthy Indian TSPs, an ailing third competitor, and the almost moribund BSNL, which depends on lakhs of crores of tax money to pay salaries and pensions.

The private companies, Reliance Jio, Airtel and Vodafone Idea, need to invest big in 5G technology as the Indian digital story depends on the quality of service they offer. It makes no sense to wring them dry.

The allegations made by the BJP when it was in the opposition have come full circle, leaving the DoT reluctant to come up with a rational pricing structure. The pattern of unsold spectrum in previous auctions ought to have informed the department's decision. Vaishnaw is among those who seem to be aware that demand will be lukewarm in the May auction, but this awareness doesn't seem to be informing policy on pricing. https://www.livemint.com/opinion/online-views/spectrum-auction-prices-are-still-too-steep-11710224590083.html

11. Indian economy on robust track *(timesofindia.indiatimes.com)* 12 March 2024

With Q3 GDP posting a robust six-quarter high growth of 8.4 percent beyond the street expectations, the outlook for FY24 stands revised by the National Statistical Office (NSO) to 7.6 percent, up from 7.3 percent and the Q4 growth is expected to be 5.9 percent which further affirms the growing resilience of the economy. Thus, the average GDP of the first 3 quarters of FY24 is at 8.2 percent. Hence, GDP data holds significance in creating an environment of economic buoyancy. Based on the higher revenue flows, the fiscal deficit for FY24 is revised down to 5.8 percent.

As against the GDP, its gross value added (GVA) during Q3 works out to 6.5 percent in line with the poll outcome. Agriculture and Allied activities emerged as a notable exception to the ongoing economic recovery as kharif production succumbed to uncertainties in the monsoon. In terms of sectoral GVA of the farm sector, it recorded down to 0.8 percent in Q3 down from 1.6 percent in Q2 causing concern. The robust expansion of GDP during the October – December period, showcased sustained momentum after achieving growth rates exceeding 8 percent in the two preceding quarters.

Among many reasons for the steady growth of the domestic economy despite upside external sector risks, corporate earnings are on the rise. Capex push of the government continues. The infrastructure focus begets employment opportunities that can potentially create demand for consumption. The growth of private final consumption expenditure (PFCE) of the government is at 3.5 percent in Q3 compared to 2.4 percent in the previous quarter. Government final consumption Expenditure (GFCE) recorded a growth of 10.6 percent. However, the gross fixed capital formation (GFCF) recorded a negative growth of -3.2 percent.

Consumption demand is more pronounced in urban areas while the rural sector is sluggish due to a slowdown in the farm sector on account of the impact of EL Nino. However, the poor are shielded from food price hikes through the provision of free food grains under PM Garib Kalyan Anna Yozana. In February, manufacturing activity in India reached a five-month high due to increased new export orders and sustained domestic demand. The HSBC India Manufacturing PMI increased to 56.9, with new export orders hitting a 21-month high. The seasonally adjusted HSBC PMI – India Services Business Activity Index registered 60.6 in February, down from 61.8 in January. In the PMI parlance, a print above 50 means expansion, while a score below 50 denotes contraction.

Upside outlook:
According to IMF, the expected growth of India put at 6.5 percent in CY24 and CY25, the global growth is projected at 3.1 percent in 2024 and 3.2 percent in 2025 on account of greater-than-expected resilience in the United States and several large emerging markets and developing economies, as well as fiscal support in China. The forecast for 2024–25 is, however, below its historical (2000–19) average of 3.8 percent, with elevated central bank policy rates to fight inflation, a withdrawal of fiscal support amid high debt weighing on economic activity, and low underlying productivity growth. Inflation is falling faster than expected in most regions, during unwinding supply-side issues and restrictive monetary policy. Global headline inflation is expected to fall to 5.8 percent in 2024 and to 4.4 percent in 2025, with the 2025 forecast revised down.

The World Bank, in its latest ‘Global Economic Prospects Report’, projects India’s GDP to grow by 6.4 percent in the year FY25. In FY26, the growth is expected to accelerate to 6.5%. Robust investment, supported by higher public investment, improved balance sheets of banks and corporates, and strong growth in services is likely to lead to the expansion of the Indian economy. According to India Ratings, the Indian economy is, at present, challenged with lower consumption growth, and, a slowdown in the farm sector is impacting people in the lower income brackets. The projections by Moody’s and CMIE have come days after the NSO, in its second advance estimates data, revised the FY24 growth estimate upward to 7.6 percent, from the 7.3 percent projected in January.

How India Stood Ahead:
According to CEA, a structural transformation of the economy is underway both in terms of physical and digital infrastructure that potentially could defy expectations. It is time that global rating agencies take cognizance of the ongoing resilience of the economy and reassess. The high-frequency indicators continue to point towards good performance in Q4 of FY24. The industrial growth rate is picking up in mining, manufacturing, and construction sectors on a durable basis though gyrating on month on month-on-month basis. Private sector capital formation could pave the way for higher growth going forward. The predictions on the withdrawal of El Nino could lead to normal monsoon in the next year. Good harvest both for Kharif and Rabi crops could correct the slowdown in the agriculture sector. Data on global confidence level in the Indian economy for 2024 is pegged stronger at 85 percent, compared to China – 82 percent, Indonesia – 82 percent, the Philippines – 74 percent, the USA – 45 percent, and the UK – 42 percent.

Forward view:
CPI inflation has eased to 5.1 percent in January, down from 5.69 percent in December, and WPI for January 2024 stood at -0.33 percent as compared to -0.98 percent in December 2023. With the US Federal Reserve, ECB, and Bank of England well poised to bring down the interest rates in the next few months with their inflation going down close to their target, RBI is targeting CPI inflation to move down to 4 percent to start bringing down the interest rates. When the interest rate goes down, private investments may resume and FPI inflows in 2024 are set to go up with foreign investors reposing greater confidence, the buoyancy in the economy will increase. Many strategies, developmental plans, and programs working their way towards Viksit Bharat 2047, and the economy can see a higher growth trajectory.

It is expected that soon Indian economy will become the 4th largest economy overtaking Germany. Crisil Ratings projected India's GDP growth at 6.8 percent in the next fiscal and expects the country to become an upper middle-income nation by 2031 with the economy doubling to USD 7 trillion. As per the World Bank definition, lower-middle income countries are those with per-capita income of USD 1,000-4,000, and upper-middle income countries are those with per capita income between USD 4,000-12,000. In its India Outlook report, Crisil said the Indian economy will take support from domestic structural reforms and cyclical levers and can retain — perhaps even improve — its growth prospects to become the third-largest economy by 2031. https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/blogs/kembai-speaks/indian-economy-on-robust-track/

12. India's economic trajectory points to upper-middle income status by 2036 *(cnbctv18.com)* Mar 11, 2024

India, recognised as the fastest-growing economy among G20 developing nations, is setting its sights on transitioning into a developed economy by 2047. According to India Ratings and Research (Ind-Ra), the current estimated GDP of $3.6 trillion in FY24 could pave the way for India to enter the upper-middle income category (per capita income $4,466-13,845) between FY33 and FY36, reaching a milestone of a $15-trillion economy by FY47.

Ind-Ra has, however, set an ambitious estimate of the country becoming a $30-trillion economy by 2047, dependent on certain factors.

Dr Sunil Kumar Sinha, Senior Director and Principal Economist at Ind-Ra, emphasised the pivotal role of real GDP growth, inflation (GDP deflator), and the INR/USD exchange rate in shaping India's economic trajectory.

“The onward journey of Indian economy from India Ratings and Research (Ind-Ra) estimated USD3.6 trillion dollars in FY24 will depend on the rate at which the real GDP growth, inflation (GDP deflator) and INR/USD exchange rate evolve,” Sinha said.

“We expect the Indian economy under different scenarios to enter into the upper-middle income category (per capita income USD4,466-13,845) over FY33–FY36 and to a USD15 trillion economy over FY43-FY47,” Sinha added.

Until 2006, the World Bank classified India as a low-income country. In 2007, India moved to the lower-middle income country and since then has remained there. India’s per capita GDP stood at $2,390 in 2022, the report stated.

Ind-Ra's ambitious estimate of reaching $30 trillion by FY47 requires a substantial annual growth rate of 9.7% in current USD terms from FY24 to FY47. Historical data over the past 50 years highlights that sustaining such a high growth rate for a decade is rare, with only two instances in 1973-1982 and 2003-2012.

While India exhibits robust economic growth, global trade challenges and protectionist measures adopted by developed economies since FY12 pose potential obstacles. The shift towards trade fragmentation and climate-related policy changes further complicates India's journey towards the $30-trillion target by 2047.

Despite uncertainties surrounding the $30-trillion target, Ind-Ra's estimates suggest that India's per capita income could range from $9,218 to $9,920 between FY43 and FY47. This projection places India in proximity to the high-income country threshold of $13,846 per capita.

Beyond economic indicators, Ind-Ra identifies key factors influencing India's economic trajectory, including energy transition, low carbon manufacturing/services, and the expansion of the middle class. India's commitment to energy transition, showcased at the COP26 Summit, positions it as a major player in renewable energy, with ambitious targets such as 500GW renewable energy capacity by 2030 and achieving a net-zero economy by 2070.

The focus on low-carbon products and services, as exemplified by India's first green hydrogen plant-based stainless steel manufacturing facility commissioned in March 2023, is expected to contribute significantly to India's growth.

Additionally, the rising incomes and aspirational lifestyle of the middle-income class are identified as key drivers of demand for goods and services. According to People

Research on India's Consumer Economy, the middle-class population is projected to grow substantially, reaching 715 million in 2030-31 and 1.02 billion in 2046-47. https://www.cnbctv18.com/economy/india-economic-trajectory-gdp-points-to-upper-middle-income-status-by-2036-19242951.htm

13. Artificial intelligence's new frontier *(hindustantimes.com)* The Economist | Mar 12, 2024

The promise and perils of a breakthrough in machine intelligence

Picture a computer that could finish your sentences, using a better turn of phrase; or use a snatch of melody to compose music that sounds as if you wrote it (though you never would have), or solve a problem by creating hundreds of lines of computer code—leaving you to focus on something even harder. In a sense, that computer is merely the descendant of the power looms and steam engines that hastened the Industrial Revolution. But it also belongs to a new class of machine, because it grasps the symbols in language, music and programming and uses them in ways that seem creative. A bit like a human.

The "foundation models" that can do these things represent a breakthrough in artificial intelligence, or AI. They, too, promise a revolution, but this one will affect the high-status brainwork that the Industrial Revolution never touched. There are no guarantees about what lies ahead—after all, AI has stumbled in the past. But it is time to look at the promise and perils of the next big thing in machine intelligence.

Foundation models are the latest twist on "deep learning" (dl), a technique that rose to prominence ten years ago and now dominates the field of AI. Loosely based on the networked structure of neurons in the human brain, dl systems are "trained" using millions or billions of examples of texts, images or sound clips. In recent years the ballooning cost, in time and money, of training ever-larger dl systems has prompted worries that the technique was reaching its limits. Some fretted about an "ai winter". But foundation models show that building ever-larger and more complex DL does indeed continue to unlock ever more impressive new capabilities. Nobody knows where the limit lies.

The resulting models are a new form of creative, non-human intelligence. The systems are sophisticated enough both to possess a grasp of language and also to break the rules coherently. A dog cannot laugh at a joke in the New Yorker, but an AI can explain why it is funny—a feat that is, frankly, sometimes beyond readers of the New Yorker. When we asked one of these models to create a collage using the title of this leader and nothing more, it came up with the cover art for our American and Asian editions (we tried to distract our anxious human designers with a different cover in our European editions).

Foundation models have some surprising and useful properties. The eeriest of these is their "emergent" behaviour—that is, skills (such as the ability to get a joke or match a situation and a proverb) which arise from the size and depth of the models, rather than being the result of deliberate design. Just as a rapid succession of still photographs gives the sensation of movement, so trillions of binary computational decisions fuse into a simulacrum of fluid human comprehension and creativity that, whatever the philosophers may say, looks a lot like the real thing. Even the creators of these systems are surprised at their power.

This intelligence is broad and adaptable. True, foundation models are capable of behaving like an idiot, but then humans are, too. If you ask one who won the Nobel Prize for physics in 1625, it may suggest Galileo, Bacon or Kepler, not understanding that the first prize was awarded in 1901. However, they are also adaptable in ways that earlier ais were not, perhaps because at some level there is a similarity between the rules for manipulating symbols in disciplines as different as drawing, creative writing and computer programming. This breadth means that foundation models could be used in lots of applications, from helping find new drugs using predictions about how proteins fold in three dimensions, to selecting interesting charts from datasets and dealing with open-ended questions by trawling huge databases to formulate answers that open up new areas of inquiry.

That is exciting, and promises to bring great benefits, most of which still have to be imagined. But it also stirs up worries. Inevitably, people fear that AIs creative enough to surprise their creators could become malign. In fact, foundation models are light-years from the sentient killer robots beloved by Hollywood. Terminators tend to be focused, obsessive and blind to the broader consequences of their actions. Foundational AI, by contrast, is fuzzy. Similarly, people are anxious about the prodigious amounts of power training these models consume and the emissions they produce. However, AIs are becoming more efficient, and their insights may well be essential in developing the technology that accelerates a shift to renewable energy.

A more penetrating worry is over who controls foundation models. Training a really large system such as Google’s PaLM costs more than $10m a go and requires access to huge amounts of data—the more computing power and the more data the better. This raises the spectre of a technology concentrated in the hands of a small number of tech companies or governments.

If so, the training data could further entrench the world’s biases—and in a particularly stifling and unpleasant way. Would you trust a ten-year-old whose entire sense of reality had been formed by surfing the internet? Might Chinese- and American-trained ais be recruited to an ideological struggle to bend minds? What will happen to cultures that are poorly represented online?

And then there is the question of access. For the moment, the biggest models are restricted, to prevent them from being used for nefarious purposes such as generating fake news stories. Openai, a startup, has designed its model, called DALL-E 2, in an attempt to stop it from producing violent or pornographic images. Firms are right to fear abuse, but the more powerful these models are, the more limiting access to them creates a new elite. Self-regulation is unlikely to resolve the dilemma.

Bring on the revolution

For years it has been said that AI-powered automation poses a threat to people in repetitive, routine jobs and that artists, writers and programmers are safer. Foundation models challenge that assumption. But they also show how AI can be used as a software sidekick to enhance productivity. This machine intelligence does not resemble humankind but offers something entirely different. Handled well, it is more likely to complement humanity than usurp it. https://www.hindustantimes.com/technology/artificial-intelligence-s-new-frontier-101709927205362.html

14. State's cropping system, unviable: Punjab eco survey *(financialexpress.com)* March 12, 2024

The survey tabled in the state assembly last week also pitched for crop diversification to oilseeds and pulses.

The cropping pattern of growing water-intensive rice and wheat along with free electricity supplied to farmers has resulted in depletion of ground water levels, and the model is economically and ecologically un-viable, the economic survey (2023-24) of Punjab government has noted.

The survey tabled in the state assembly last week also pitched for crop diversification to oilseeds and pulses.

"Easy access to power may have incentivized farmers to over-exploit ground water resources," the survey stated. As per the state budget, out of total allocation of Rs 13,660 crore for agri and allied activities for 2024-25, Rs 9330 crore has been earmarked for free power (subsidy) for the farmers in Punjab.

Stating that yield of cereals, pulses and oilseeds in Punjab has been higher compared to national average, the survey said "yields are stagnating in wheat and rice and it is another reason for crop diversification to be the way forward,".

"This cropping system of Punjab is becoming economically and ecologically unviable given the deterioration of soil health, depletion of water table and squeezing of farm incomes as cost of cultivation increases," the survey has noted.

It stated that oilseeds and pulses which have adequate demand deficit in the country could offer one avenue for crop diversification.

This comes at a time when the government is learnt to have assured agitating farmers that it will procure maize, cotton and pulses varieties – arhar, urad and masoor – at the minimum support price (MSP) not just from farmers in Punjab but from across the country for the next five years.

The offer by the centre, according to official sources, is subject to the condition that farmers diversify from water-intensive paddy cultivation. Earlier, the government had offered the same facility for farmers from Haryana and Punjab, but they refused to accept it.

The survey has noted the total cropped area is held by food grain production in Punjab and is majorly occupied by the wheat and paddy crops due to assured economic return in the form of MSP provided to the farmers, on these two crops.

In 2021-22, Punjab produced nearly 14% of the country's wheat output of 107.7 million tonne (MT) with just less than 12% share of the total area under its cultivation at the national level. During the same period, the State also contributed almost 10% of the total rice production of 129.4 MT with only 6.4% of the total area under rice cultivation in the country.

To address the issue of indiscriminate use of electricity by the farmers, the Punjab government has launched a pilot direct benefit transfer scheme being implemented in six agriculture feeder areas where the participant farmer gets a fixed allocation of electricity consumption. It has stated if the farmer consumes less than the fixed allocation, he/she receives a financial benefit for electricity not consumed. https://www.financialexpress.com/policy/economy-states-cropping-system-unviable-punjab-eco-survey-3421751/

15. Cochin Shipyard's Rs 15-crore price tag for 3rd Ro-Ro stumps corp *(newindianexpress.com)* 12 Mar 2024

Sandith Thandasherry, who built the country's first solar-powered boat, said CSL's vessels are complex, which could be reason behind the cost escalation.

KOCHI: The Cochin Shipyard Ltd's (CSL) demand for a whopping Rs 15 crore to build a third roll-on roll-off vessel for the Kochi corporation has put the local body in a quandary.

The demand, coming at a time when cost-effectiveness is the buzzword among Kerala's shipbuilding companies, also means that the commissioning of the third Ro-Ro vessel between Vypeen and Fort Kochi will be delayed further.

To put the new amount in context, the total cost of Sethusagar 1 and 2, the two Ro-Ro vessels delivered by CSL in 2017, was Rs 7.6 crore, or Rs 3.8 crore for each vessel.

The corporation's health standing committee chairman T K Ashraf, and opposition leader Antony Kureethara have written to the CEO of the Cochin Smart Mission Limited (CSML), urging a thorough examination of the cost escalation, which is nearly four times the individual cost of the previous two vessels.

"The corporation is planning to purchase the third vessel using CSML fund. The cost estimate for the same, according to CSL, is Rs 15 crore. CSL has not given any explanation for the cost escalation. So, we have asked the CSML CEO to inquire into it," said Ashraf. CSL did not respond to queries by TNIE.

Ashraf said there is no order to entrust CSL with the vessel's manufacturing. "The corporation can float tenders and invite parties who can build a Ro-Ro at a much lesser cost," he said.

Sandith Thandasherry, who built the country's first solar-powered boat, said CSL's vessels are complex, which could be reason behind the cost escalation.

"An electric Ro-Ro vessel can be built for Rs 10 crore. We are building two electric Ro-Ro vessels, each costing Rs 9.5 crore, for the State Water Transport Department," said Sandith, who is also the founder of NavAlt.

Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan had inaugurated the Ro-Ro service on April 28, 2018, and declared the project a floating bridge between Fort Kochi and Vypeen.

In the initial days, the service came as a huge relief for commuters. However, frequent disruption of service due to technical glitches turned a bane and sparked demands for a third Ro-Ro vessel. https://www.newindianexpress.com/states/kerala/2024/Mar/12/cochin-shipyards-rs-15-crore-price-tag-for-3rd-ro-ro-stumps-corp