

NEWS ITEMS ON CAG /AUDIT REPORTS

1. CAG terms media reports on transfer of officials ‘baseless’ (*thehindu.com*) October 13, 2023

Citing news reports about the transfer of CAG officials, the Congress had accused the Centre of intimidating those who had “exposed corruption” in Ayushman Bharat, Dwarka Expressway project

The Office of the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) of India on Friday dismissed media reports on the transfer of its officials, saying that they were baseless and incorrect.

Taking note of the news reports about the transfer of CAG officials who had “exposed corruption” in the Ayushman Bharat scheme and the Dwarka Expressway project, the Congress had on Wednesday accused the Union government of intimidating the officials, and had demanded their reinstatement.

In a statement, the CAG’s office said: “To set the record straight, matters of transfer and postings are a matter of administrative convenience and to read ulterior motives into these is highly presumptuous.”

‘Completely incorrect’

“Audit reports are prepared by an extensive team over a prolonged period, comprising officers entrusted with field work, central processing and finalisation at the highest level,” it explained. “The referred audit reports also went through multiple hands before due approval, and subsequent tabling in the Legislature; and hence cannot be attributed to any one officer. Furthermore, both referred reports have been presented to the President after approval at the highest level, and laid before the Parliament, and are in the public domain. To attribute any malfeasance to these routine transfers driven by administrative requirements, is completely incorrect,” it added.

Stating that the reports were without any basis and cast aspersions on the functioning of the institution and its chief, G.C. Murmu, it said: “The contentions that the CAG is not signing [approving] any fresh reports and verbal orders have been issued to stop all field work, is categorically and unequivocally rejected... The number of audit reports approved by the CAG, Mr. Murmu, has been on a sharp ascent over the past three years, attaining an all time high of 173 audit reports in 2022-23 (Union and States).”

Of these, 29 Union audit reports and 78 State audit reports were tabled in Parliament and State Legislatures in 2022-23; and the total number of reports tabled -- including those approved prior to 2022-23 -- was 183. In the current financial year to date, 43 audit reports have been approved by the CAG, it said.
<https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/reports-on-the-transfer-of-officials-who-exposed-corruption-are-baseless-cag-office/article67416611.ece#Insipefpl2z6vdx1otd>

2. CAG dismisses allegations of malfeasance in transfer of officers (*ptinews.com*) Updated: October 13, 2023

The CAG on Friday denied any malfeasance in the transfer of auditors connected with reports that unearthed alleged irregularities in the Centre's flagship Bharatmala and Ayushman Bharat schemes, saying transfers and postings are a matter of administrative convenience, and attaching ulterior motives to these is highly presumptuous.

In a statement, the Comptroller and Auditor General of India (CAG) said audit reports went through multiple hands before being approved by the highest authority for tabling in Parliament.

"To set the record straight, matters of transfer and postings are a matter of administrative convenience and to read ulterior motives into these is highly presumptuous," the auditor to the government said.

The statement came after the Congress criticised the government for reportedly transferring auditors Atoorva Sinha and Dattaprasad Surkayant Shirsa who were in charge of audit reports scrutinising the Dwarka Expressway project, and Ashok Sinha, who had initiated the audit of the Ayushman Bharat scheme.

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The CAG reports, which were tabled in Parliament in August, highlighted alleged irregularities in some aspects of the Bharatmala project, a 1,400 per cent increase in cost and inconsistencies in tendering for the Dwarka Expressway project in the national capital and lakhs of claims under the Ayushman Bharat health insurance being made by beneficiaries lined to a single mobile number.

The CAG officials were reportedly transferred last month.

The opposition Congress accused the government of intimidating CAG officers who had exposed "corruption" within various schemes.

Party General Secretary Jairam Ramesh accused the Modi government of threatening and removing individuals who expose corruption.

CAG in the statement dismissed contentions that it was not signing or approving any fresh reports and verbal orders have been issued to stop all fieldwork, saying it "is categorically and unequivocally rejected".

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Of these, 29 Union audit reports and 78 state audit reports were tabled in Parliament and State Legislatures in 2022-23. In the current financial year to date, 43 audit reports have been approved by the CAG.

CAG had approved 165 reports in 2021-22 and 123 in the preceding year. <https://www.ptinews.com/news/national/cag-dismisses-allegations-of-malfeasance-in-transfer-of-officers/670050.html>

3. CAG dismisses allegations of malfeasance in transfer of officers (*theweek.in*) Updated: October 13, 2023

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4. CAG rejects wrongdoing in transfer of three officers (*millenniumpost.in*) Updated: October 13, 2023

Dismissing the allegations of wrongdoing, the Comptroller and Auditor General of India (CAG) has on Friday denied any malfeasance in the transfer of auditors connected with reports that unearthed alleged irregularities in the Centre's flagship Bharatmala and Ayushman Bharat schemes by stating that transfers and postings are a matter of administrative convenience, and attaching ulterior motives to these is highly presumptuous.

In a statement, the CAG said that audit reports went through multiple hands before being approved by the highest authority for tabling in Parliament.

'To set the record straight, matters of transfer and postings are a matter of administrative convenience and to read ulterior motives into these is highly presumptuous,' the CAG said in a statement.

The statement came after the Congress criticised the government for reportedly transferring auditors Atoorva Sinha and Dattaprasad Surkayant Shirsra who were in charge of audit reports scrutinising the Dwarka Expressway project, and Ashok Sinha, who had initiated the audit of the Ayushman Bharat scheme.

In its statement, CAG said that audit reports are prepared by an extensive team over a prolonged period, comprising officers entrusted with fieldwork, central processing and finalisation at the highest level.

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‘Furthermore, both referred reports have been presented to the President after approval at the highest level, and laid before the Parliament, and are in the public domain. To attribute any malfeasance to these routine transfers driven by administrative requirements is completely incorrect,’ the apex auditor said.

<https://www.millenniumpost.in/nation/cag-rejects-wrongdoing-in-transfer-of-three-officers-536553>

5. CAG dismisses allegations of malfeasance in transfer of officers (*latestly.com*) Updated: October 13, 2023

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6. CAG dismisses allegations of malfeasance in transfer of officers (*dailyexcelsior.com*) Updated: October 13, 2023

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7. CAG denies auditors shifted over critical reports on govt schemes (*tribuneindia.com*) 14 Oct 2023

Faced with a controversy over the transfer of auditors who had submitted reports critical of the Modi government's flagship Bharatmala and Ayushman Bharat schemes, the Comptroller and Auditor General of India (CAG) on Friday said transfers and postings were a matter of administrative convenience and "attaching ulterior motives to these is highly presumptuous".

The CAG had reported a 1,400 per cent increase in cost as well as inconsistencies in tendering for the Dwarka Expressway project and exposed lakhs of claims under the Ayushman Bharat health insurance being made by beneficiaries linked to a single mobile number. Officials were reportedly transferred last month. The CAG, however, did not respond to reports stating that the officials had passed verbal orders to “stop all field work”.

In a statement, the CAG said audit reports went through multiple hands before being approved by the highest authority for tabling in Parliament. The statement followed Congress criticism over the transfer of auditors Atoorva Sinha and Dattaprasad Surkayant Shirsa, who had headed the audit into the Dwarka Expressway project, and Ashok Sinha, who was responsible for the audit of the Ayushman Bharat scheme.

The CAG sought to address opposition criticism by stating that both reports were presented to the President after approval at the highest level, laid before Parliament, and were in the public domain. “To attribute any malfeasance to these routine transfers driven by administrative requirements is completely incorrect,” it said.

Audit reports approved by CAG GC Murmu had attained an all-time high of 173 audit reports in 2022-23, 165 in 2021-22 and 123 in the preceding year, it said. Murmu, a 1985-batch Gujarat cadre officer, was appointed as CAG in 2020 after an unusual stint as the first Lieutenant Governor of Ladakh following the abrogation of Article 370. He had been moved to the post after serving as Revenue Secretary at the Centre. <https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/india/cag-denies-auditors-shifted-over-critical-reports-on-govt-schemes-553074>

8. CAG dismisses allegations of malfeasance in transfer of officers (*devdiscourse.com*) Updated: October 13, 2023

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<https://www.devdiscourse.com/article/politics/2628988-cag-dismisses-allegations-of-malfeasance-in-transfer-of-officers>

9. Empowered CAG (*tribuneindia.com*) 16 Oct 2023

Guardian of public purse must stay independent

The office of the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) of India has dismissed as baseless the claim that the transfer of three officers was linked to the submission of reports critical of the Modi government's flagship Bharatmala and Ayushman Bharat schemes. A news portal had reported that the officers were handling the audit reports

that had exposed corruption. Alleging intimidation of officers and questioning the government's silence about the matter, the Congress has demanded the cancellation of the transfers. The CAG report, it has said, documented 1,400 per cent cost inflation and tendering irregularities in the Dwarka Expressway project, and faulty bidding practices as well as 60 per cent cost inflation of the Bharatmala scheme. An audit of Ayushman Bharat showed that lakhs of claims were paid to dead patients and at least 7.5 lakh beneficiaries were linked to a single mobile number.

During the UPA rule, CAG reports used to be a lethal weapon in the hands of the Opposition. The CAG emerged as a key institution responsible for ensuring accountability. Having been at the receiving end, the Congress has accused the BJP of imposing curbs on the custodian of the public purse since 2014. Following the latest controversy, the CAG has denied issuing verbal orders to stop all field work. It has pointed out that the approval of audit reports has been on the rise under the incumbent, Girish Chandra Murmu, a Gujarat-cadre officer who was appointed as the CAG in 2020 after serving as the first Lieutenant Governor of J&K. These facts are not under dispute. The empowerment and independent functioning of the institution, free from government control and political bias, are at the core of the debate.

The office of the CAG has spoken about fulfilling its constitutional duty to ensure transparency and accountability in governance. Nothing less is expected. <https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/editorials/empowered-cag-553576>

10. CAG dismisses allegations of malfeasance in transfer of officers (*theprint.in*) October 13, 2023

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11. CAG dismisses allegations of malfeasance in transfer of officers (*newstrum.in*) Updated: October 13, 2023

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<https://www.newsdrum.in/business/cag-dismisses-allegations-of-malfeasance-in-transfer-of-officers-1544906>

12. CAG dismisses allegations of malfeasance in transfer of officers (*english.mathrubhumi.com*) 14 October, 2023

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CAG had approved 165 reports in 2021-22 and 123 in the preceding year. <https://english.mathrubhumi.com/news/india/cag-dismisses-allegations-of-malfeasance-in-transfer-of-officers-1.8985909>

13. कैग ने अधिकारियों के स्थानांतरण में गड़बड़ी के आरोपों को खारिज किया (*hindi.theprint.in*) 13 October, 2023

भारत के नियंत्रक और महालेखा परीक्षक (कैग) ने केंद्र की प्रमुख भारतमाला और आयुष्मान भारत योजनाओं में कथित अनियमितताओं का खुलासा करने वाली रिपोर्ट से जुड़े लेखा परीक्षकों के स्थानांतरण में किसी भी तरह की गड़बड़ी से शुकवार को इनकार किया। कैग ने कहा कि यह स्थानांतरण और पदस्थापना प्रशासनिक सुविधा का मामला है तथा इसके पीछे कोई दुर्भावना खोजना ठीक नहीं है।

कैग ने एक बयान में कहा कि संसद में ऑडिट रिपोर्ट प्रस्तुत करने के लिए सर्वोच्च प्राधिकार द्वारा अनुमोदित होने से पहले यह कई हाथों से गुजरती है। कैग ने कहा कि अधिकारियों का स्थानांतरण और पदस्थापना प्रशासनिक सुविधा का मामला है और इसके पीछे किसी तरह की दुर्भावना खोजना ठीक नहीं है।

कैग का यह बयान ऐसे वक्त आया है जब कांग्रेस ने द्वारका एक्सप्रेस-वे परियोजना की जांच से संबंधित ऑडिट रिपोर्ट की प्रभारी लेखा परीक्षक अतूर्वा सिन्हा और दत्तप्रसाद सूर्यकांत शिरसा तथा आयुष्मान भारत योजना के ऑडिट की शुरुआत करने वाले अशोक सिन्हा को स्थानांतरित करने के लिए सरकार की आलोचना की।

कैग ने कहा कि ऑडिट रिपोर्ट लंबी अवधि में व्यापक टीम द्वारा तैयार की जाती है, जिसमें उच्चतम स्तर पर 'फील्डवर्क', केंद्रीय स्तर पर इस पर गौर करने के साथ अंतिम रूप देने वाले अधिकारी शामिल होते हैं।

बयान में कहा गया है कि ऑडिट रिपोर्ट भी उचित अनुमोदन और बाद में सदन में प्रस्तुत करने से पहले कई हाथों से गुजरती है, इसलिए इसका श्रेय किसी एक अधिकारी को नहीं दिया जा सकता।

कैग ने कहा, “इसके अलावा, दोनों संदर्भित रिपोर्ट शीर्ष स्तर पर अनुमोदन के बाद राष्ट्रपति को प्रस्तुत की गई हैं और संसद के समक्ष रखी गई हैं तथा सार्वजनिक हैं। प्रशासनिक जरूरत की वजह से होने वाले इन नियमित तबादलों में किसी भी तरह की गड़बड़ी का आरोप लगाना पूरी तरह से गलत है।”

अगस्त में संसद में प्रस्तुत की गई कैग रिपोर्ट में भारतमाला परियोजना के कुछ पहलुओं में कथित अनियमितताओं, लागत में 1,400 प्रतिशत की वृद्धि और राष्ट्रीय राजधानी में द्वारका एक्सप्रेसवे परियोजना के लिए निविदा में विसंगतियों का खुलासा किया गया। इसके अलावा, आयुष्मान भारत स्वास्थ्य बीमा के तहत एक ही मोबाइल नंबर से जुड़े लाभार्थियों द्वारा लाखों दावों को उजागर किया गया था।

पिछले महीने कैग अधिकारियों का तबादला किए जाने की खबरें आई थीं। विपक्षी दल कांग्रेस ने सरकार पर उन कैग अधिकारियों को डराने-धमकाने का आरोप लगाया, जिन्होंने विभिन्न योजनाओं में

“भ्रष्टाचार” का खुलासा किया था। कांग्रेस महासचिव जयराम रमेश ने नरेन्द्र मोदी के नेतृत्व वाली सरकार पर भ्रष्टाचार उजागर करने वालों को धमकाने और हटाने का आरोप लगाया।

कैग ने बयान में उन दलीलों को खारिज कर दिया कि वह किसी भी नयी रिपोर्ट पर हस्ताक्षर या अनुमोदन नहीं कर रहा और सभी ‘फील्डवर्क’ को रोकने के लिए मौखिक आदेश जारी किए गए। कैग ने कहा कि इसे “स्पष्ट रूप से खारिज किया जाता है।”

बयान में कहा गया कि नियंत्रक और महालेखा परीक्षक जी सी मुर्मू द्वारा अनुमोदित ऑडिट रिपोर्ट की संख्या में पिछले तीन वर्षों में तेजी से वृद्धि हुई है, जो 2022-23 (केंद्र और राज्यों) में 173 ऑडिट रिपोर्ट के सर्वकालिक उच्च स्तर पर पहुंच गई है। बयान में कहा गया कि इनमें से 29 केंद्रीय ऑडिट रिपोर्ट और 78 राज्य ऑडिट रिपोर्ट 2022-23 में संसद और राज्य विधानसभाओं में प्रस्तुत की गईं। चालू वित्तीय वर्ष में अब तक कैग द्वारा 43 ऑडिट रिपोर्ट को मंजूरी दी जा चुकी है। <https://hindi.theprint.in/india/cag-rejects-allegations-of-irregularities-in-transfer-of-officers/613694/>

14. AB-PMJAY: The messy path to universal health coverage (*financialexpress.com*) 16 Oct 2023

As the CAG report on PMJAY shows, in healthcare, one can’t expect new solutions to not beget newer problems in a perpetual problem-solution cycle

The Ayushman Bharat Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana (AB-PMJAY)—India’s flagship publicly financed health insurance (PFHI) scheme—celebrated its fifth anniversary this September. A CAG report on the performance audit of the AB-PMJAY preceded this important milestone. It observed many of the same issues that have traditionally bedeviled PFHIs in India, such as inclusion and exclusion errors, duplication and fraud, poor provider engagement, and persistent out-of-pocket expenses. Even before the roll-out of AB-PMJAY, PFHIs attracted considerable academic opprobrium on the ground that they lacked strong indigenous evidence, and some suggested rolling back this expedient measure in favour of public provisioning of healthcare as the predominant means. Does the CAG report reinforce this argument? Does the AB-PMJAY route merit a rethink?

Despite the ‘messiness’ of complex health systems, linear thinking continues to preside over much of academic and policy discourse and feeds the fallacy that elegant, unilateral solutions can sustainably plug health system gaps. The state of the UK and Canadian health systems smash the commonly held notion that overarching public involvement is the sole, eternal panacea for UHC. While many experts have contested that the challenges with the UK and Canadian healthcare are attributable not to poor design but to inadequate funding, it is the latter that is the problem. Any solution that naively presumes the governments’ endless ability to fund public health care amid other competing sectors and priorities will be foredoomed. This is not to argue against public healthcare provisioning, but to emphasise that in a messy system such as healthcare, one can’t expect new solutions not to beget newer problems in a perpetual problem-solution cycle.

Grint has described wicked problems as those which admit to no straightforward and rational solutions, lack past precedents, have no definitive end, and are inseparable from their context. These are to be addressed through ‘clumsy’ solutions that are syncretic,

creative, expedient, and often ad hoc and imperfect. Accordingly, the pragmatic answer to UHC in a diverse landscape like India lies not in a single policy elixir, but is destined to be an evolving mishmash of different approaches. This requires a careful balancing of three major approaches: hierarchist (centralised governmental control), egalitarian (decentralisation), and individualist (private initiative and innovation).

At least for the near future, the contours of AB-PMJAY are rather easily foreseeable. Being poorly positioned to receive or absorb dramatic increases in funding quickly, it is poised to continue offering thin health care coverage, even as ambitious expansions of the beneficiary pool occur driven by populist motives. This warrants that it is complemented by parallel avenues to improve healthcare access, while the imperfections of the AB-PMJAY are steadily and simultaneously addressed.

Much of these will have to do with reducing costs and increasing efficiencies in private health care. For example, while private health insurance is inequitable by nature, allowing more affordable, simplified, and attractive commercial insurance options can not only benefit a chunk of citizens but also have salutary effects on the private care free market. Same goes for contributory health insurance, currently being planned by the Union government for the middle-income population, despite its many glaring drawbacks. Policy incentives for gainful consolidation of private healthcare providers will need to be looked at beyond the purview of PFHIs.

Economic theory tells that besides driving up the demand for care, generous health insurance contributes to overall healthcare inflation through inducing technological innovations. Tech innovations, particularly in the advanced care space, are important drivers of healthcare costs today, and this relentless march of technology has more or less to be reconciled with. Rather, greater attention is now warranted to making routine primary and secondary care as cost-effective as possible through cost-reducing innovations. Highly protocol-driven primary care featuring task shifting from doctors to mid-level health care providers and strongly aided by digital technologies are an apt example. Similarly, indigenous models of home-based care and self-care need to be increasingly explored. Evidence available globally shows that home-based care can be cost-effective without impinging on quality and patient satisfaction.

Very often, AB-PMJAY has been posited as an alternative to investing directly in public hospitals. This is a dangerous paralogism, and rather, the AB-PMJAY merits a whole new way of looking at public sector reform. Much like strategic purchasing in health has found widespread credence, strategic public sector strengthening, particularly in the secondary care space and in under-resourced regions, is the need of the hour under AB-PMJAY. Impending health care reorganisation under universal health insurance is also likely to warrant strong decentralised administrative capacities. Particular attention is merited on strengthening district level organs which remain hobbled by human resource shortages.

Many of the issues highlighted in the CAG report can be redressed with a robust, well-functioning digital health and data system. There is a need for a whole new perspective from where to view the current digital health movement. A robust digital infrastructure, first and foremost, needs to be seen as an instrument for effectively managing the ineluctable messiness of the health system, through its integrative, economising, and

analytical functions. <https://www.financialexpress.com/opinion/ab-pmjay-the-messy-path-to-universal-health-coverage/3273541/#inslyy3d5iyyz9bwk4r>

15. India's Nuclear Security Conundrum (*intpolicydigest.org*) 15 Oct 2023

When discussing nuclear security, transparency and rigorous oversight are indispensable conditions for maintaining peace and stability.

In the complex theatre of international relations, few subjects carry the enormous weight that nuclear security does. Nations endowed with nuclear capabilities bear a solemn responsibility to adhere to rigorous safety and security protocols. These protocols serve to protect not just their own national interests, but also the collective well-being of the global community. This article aims to delve into the intricate concerns surrounding India's Atomic Energy Regulatory Board (AERB), its complex relationship with the Department of Atomic Energy (DAE), and the profound implications stemming from the lack of an autonomous nuclear regulatory institution.

When discussing nuclear security, transparency and rigorous oversight are indispensable conditions for maintaining peace and stability. While it's understandable that nations like India, which possess military nuclear programs, would envelop the specifics of their military arsenals in layers of secrecy, the state of their civilian nuclear regulatory frameworks can offer critical insights into the overall landscape of nuclear security. One might reasonably conclude that a nation with a military nuclear program would establish even more stringent security measures to safeguard its strategic assets.

In the case of India, however, there is a conspicuous absence of a truly independent nuclear regulatory body. The AERB, which is charged with overseeing the safety and security protocols of India's nuclear establishments, is not genuinely autonomous. Instead, it functions under the purview of the DAE, the very organization responsible for nuclear operations within India. This embedded relationship casts doubt on the AERB's ability to impartially scrutinize and, if necessary, halt DAE operations that might not adhere to global standards—even if those operations carry substantial safety and security risks.

Within India, the volume of concern has been steadily increasing regarding the country's swiftly expanding nuclear program on one hand and the noticeable absence of robust safety and security measures on the other. The Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) of India has rung alarm bells concerning loopholes in nuclear security and the problematic relationship between the AERB and the DAE. These domestic worries are not insular; they have significant implications on an international scale.

Although the responsibility for nuclear security is fundamentally a national concern, the haunting specter of nuclear terrorism and the peril of nuclear materials falling into unauthorized hands have global repercussions. These concerns resonate not just within international bodies, but also among neighboring nations.

Pakistan, for instance, has voiced apprehensions regarding multiple security lapses within India's nuclear infrastructure. The possibility of cross-border ramifications is undeniable; a security breach could result in a transboundary dissemination of

radioactivity that would be catastrophic for the region. These apprehensions underline the urgency of addressing the existing gaps in India's nuclear regulatory schema.

The lack of a robust security framework poses significant risks, both in terms of transboundary security implications and in emboldening unsavory elements within the system, as well as potential terrorist organizations within India. The scenario of such elements acquiring nuclear materials for financial benefits—or even more alarmingly, for acts of terrorism—is a nightmarish vision.

The ramifications of such a lapse in security are unfathomably devastating. They stretch beyond national borders and possess the capability to disrupt regional and even global stability. Adherence to stringent safety and security measures is not merely a matter of compliance with international norms; it is, in essence, a matter of worldwide security.

As India nurtures ambitions to integrate itself into global non-proliferation frameworks—including its aspiration for membership in the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG)—it must manifest an unwavering commitment to establishing robust nuclear security protocols. This commitment should be contingent upon New Delhi's ability to fundamentally restructure its existing regulatory framework to meet the highest international standards of safety and security. In the same vein, the forthcoming review conference of the Convention on the Physical Protection of Nuclear Material (CPPNM) should serve as a moral impetus for India to assume a greater sense of nuclear responsibility. These international forums present India with an opportunity to demonstrate its commitment to nuclear security, responding to concerns voiced both domestically and by the global community.

The absence of an independent nuclear regulatory institution in India is a matter of serious concern, not just for India but for the international community as a whole. The complex interrelationship between the AERB and the DAE presents considerable risks, both in terms of national safety and security and within the context of international peace and stability. These concerns go beyond mere compliance with international norms; they are moral and strategic imperatives. The potentially catastrophic consequences of lax nuclear security cannot be ignored. India must recognize its responsibilities on both a domestic and international scale, and take decisive action to address the current gaps in its nuclear regulatory framework. Only then can India credibly claim to be a responsible and reliable actor in the global nuclear milieu. <https://intpolicydigest.org/the-platform/india-s-nuclear-security-conundrum/>

16. Where India's disability pension scheme falls short (*timesofindia.indiatimes.com*) October 14, 2023

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

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

opportunities, added costs associated with disabilities, decreased economic resilience, and other related factors.

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

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

Why IGNDPS does not work

It is imperative to highlight some of the gaps in the scheme to understand why its success has been limited.

1. Outdated and exclusionary eligibility criteria

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

As per official sources, the IGNDPS still uses the below poverty line (BPL) census of 2002 to identify which PwDs are poor enough to avail of its benefits. The guidelines of the National Social Assistance Programme (NSAP) hold states/UTs responsible for maintaining the eligible beneficiary database. A recent audit of the NSAP by the Comptroller and Auditor General of India highlights that only 11 of 35 states and UTs have maintained BPL lists used for identification of beneficiaries. Out of these 11, only Kerala and Haryana had prepared an eligible beneficiaries database. Although the Socio-Economic Caste Census (SECC) of 2011 has replaced the old BPL lists in several welfare schemes for better identification of beneficiaries across welfare schemes, the IGNDPS has not adopted it. Following the old BPL list has led to the exclusion of 84 percent of the PwDs with severe disabilities who fall in the lowest income decile.

2. Inadequate compensation

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

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

3. Strict document requirements

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

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

4. Lack of social audit of the scheme

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

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

Strengthening the IGNDPS

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

17. Why This Armed Force Personnel Was Denied Disability Pension: Know India's New Disability Pension Rules (*indiatimes.com*) 15 Oct 2023

Clarifying the provision of disability pension in military services, the Armed Forces Tribunal (AFT) in India has ruled that a soldier with obesity-caused diabetes and hypertension is not eligible for disability pension.

The Tribunal passed this order over a soldier asking for disability pension, since there is no connection between such health problems and military service.

Why was the IAF soldier's disability pension request denied?

Sergeant Saji Kumar Damodaran, an Indian Air Force (IAF) soldier had sought disability pension for his hypertension and diabetes, claiming that he had no such diseases when he joined the IAF in 1995 but was afflicted later because of "service conditions" and, hence, these should be treated as "attributable to, or aggravated by, military service".

The Armed Forces tribunal examined the Body Mass Index (BMI) of the soldier when he was released (discharged) in 2018 on medical grounds after 23 years of service and correlated it with the BMI parameters of the World Health Organisation (WHO).

It was found that Damodaran was 47.61% overweight at the time of discharge and the tribunal deduced that his hypertension and diabetes were primarily due to obesity.

What is disability pension?

Disability pension refers to when a soldier is entitled to better retirement benefits on account of a medical downgrade following a disability.

For the same rank, a disability pension can be 20 to 50% more than a normal pension and comes with tax exemption.

How the disability pension was plagued with issues

Earlier this year, a Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) report had found out that almost 40% of officers, and 18% of personnel below officer rank (PBOR) who retire every year are drawing disability pensions.

The CAG had brought up the issue of disability pensions being awarded on account of lifestyle diseases such as diabetes and hypertension.

Various armed forces officials said the claims for disability pensions shot up following the implementation of the sixth pay commission report in 2006 that enhanced benefits.

"A detailed scrutiny of records showed that before 2006, hardly any top officers claimed disability pensions. But by 2015, about 21% of them were claiming it. If someone has a disability, they should declare it earlier in service and not a few months before retirement," Lieutenant General BK Chopra, then director general of Armed Forces Medical Services, said in a letter to the defence secretary.

What are the new rules on disability pension for military personnel?

In September, new rules governing disability pension for military personnel were announced.

The new rules titled 'Entitlement Rules for Casualty Pension and Disability Compensation Awards to Armed Forces Personnel, 2023' redefine pension and eligibility criteria for disability pension.

A new concept of "impairment relief" was introduced in the new rule replacing the previous "disability element".

The new rules for the first time incorporate lifestyle diseases like hypertension and Type-2 diabetes but the impairment relief will only apply to those who have acquired disabilities while on active duty in high altitude areas or due to excessive physical exertion during the period of military service.
<https://www.indiatimes.com/news/india/why-this-armed-force-personnel-was-denied-disability-pension-know-indias-new-disability-pension-rules-617726.html>

STATES NEWS ITEMS

18. J&K Administration Attempts to Refute IAS Officer's Charges of Corruption in PM-JAY (*thewire.in*) 14 October 2023

The administration went on record with the LG himself appearing to try and brush off allegations. But serious questions remain. Even before IAS officer Ashok Parmar, the CAG had pointed to 'financial discrepancies' in the PM's flagship scheme, PM-JAY earlier this year.

Srinagar: Lieutenant Governor Manoj Sinha's administration has responded to IAS officer Ashok Kumar Parmar's allegations of irregularities in the implementation of Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya scheme (PM-JAY) in Jammu and Kashmir.

A spokesperson of the J&K administration said that "a thorough examination of irrefutable facts and figures refutes baseless claims" made by Parmar in his letter to the Central Bureau of Investigations which alleged irregularities in the insurance contract.

But gaps remain in the administration's telling of what steps they took versus what the contract allowed them to do. A local paper has written about the findings of an Anti-Corruption Bureau, but they do not seem to pertain to the specific charges levelled by the IAS officer. The findings of a CAG report earlier this year have also cast a cloud over how the PM-JAY functioned in the UT. The CAG report also says measures had been suggested to the J&K administration to bring an end to "financial discrepancies."

What was the IAS officer's allegation?

As first reported by The Wire, the letter written by the IAS officer has alleged that the Sinha-led J&K administration violated the terms of contract by giving a 15% addendum to Bajaj Allianz. The company was awarded the three-year-contract on December 26, 2020.

Bajaj Allianz had sought to pull out of the contract in September 2021, less than a year after it came into force, by reportedly citing losses. But the state administration offered 15% addendum to the existing contract for four more months ending March 2022.

The administration spokesperson said that the term of the policy was three years "with the option of annual renewal upon mutual agreement."

But the policy document states that the contract “is subject to renewal after two years”. (emphasis added)

So the contract was renewed before one year despite the contract saying it is subject to renewal only after two years. In addition, the Sinha-led administration took no action against Bajaj Allianz when it applied to terminate the two-year contract in the first year itself.

Instead, the administration, which is run directly by the Union government, offered Bajaj a 15% addendum. According to Parmar’s letter, the decision was taken in violation of the financial rules and despite objections by J&K’s law and finance departments.

‘Interim arrangement’

The J&K administration defended itself, citing that it had followed relevant advice from all internal departments.

“The interim arrangement was thoroughly vetted by the Law department, Finance Department, and Learned Advocate General, contradicting claims that the government ignored advice from its own departments,” the spokesperson said. He added that the ‘interim arrangement’ was the “most cost-effective option, serving public interest during the transition period.”

The administration offered Bajaj Allianz Rs 3,261.60 per family unit between December 2021 and March 2022 on a “Stop Loss basis”. IFFCO Tokio General Insurance Company, which had emerged as the lowest bidder with a quoted rate of Rs 1840 per family in 2021, was awarded the contract in 2022.

While the administration said that the “interim arrangement” with the Bajaj Allianz was made to “prevent service disruption” due to “the imminent expiration of the policy”, it didn’t explain why the administration didn’t refund the claims itself by appointing nodal officers in empaneled hospitals rather than hiring a broker (Bajaj Allianz) to do it.

The administration also failed to explain why the “generous period of 22 days was allocated for bid preparation and submission” when it could have done so with urgency to ensure any disruption of services.

The J&K administration spokesperson said that the contract caused “substantial loss of Rs 93.82 crores” to Bajaj Allianz.

However, an official told The Wire earlier, “Insurance companies cannot claim that they are running into a loss due to a particular insurance policy for J&K as that is what insurance is all about. Diversification leads to its viability,” effectively, saying that the argument holds no water in the insurance world.

Number of beneficiaries

The administration also sought to contradict the claims made by IAS officer Parmar that the number of beneficiaries during the interim period increased by 1,087,108. The spokesperson said that the increase in beneficiaries was “consistent throughout both the primary policy and the interim period”.

However, the spokesperson didn't cite any figures.

Reacting to the story which appeared in The Wire on the alleged irregularities in PM-JAY scheme, Sinha said that the Bajaj Allianz was paid Rs 982 crore as premium by the administration while the company disbursed claims amounting to Rs 1228 crores.

A local newspaper published out of Srinagar, elaborating on the J&K administration's stand has reported that the Anti-Corruption Bureau had investigated the matter. Citing the ACB probe, the paper says:

“It (ACB probe) revealed that the total premium paid to Bajaj during the whole policy period, with effect from 26 December 2020 to 14 March 2022 including interim arrangement on stop loss basis was Rs 304.59 crore. The total claims payout to hospitals by Bajaj was Rs.398.41 crore. This simply means that the insurance company has suffered a loss of Rs 93.82 crores”.

But IAS officer Parmar's letter is about the alleged scam playing out between December 2021 and March 2022 and refers to Bajaj Allianz being granted an additional 15% in alleged violation of financial rules.

CAG pointed out financial discrepancies

Earlier this year, the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) of India has said that the PM-JAY scheme is marred with irregularities and measures have been suggested to J&K administration to bring an end to financial discrepancies.

The CAG report said that during 2018-2021, 16865 and 335 numbers of ineligible beneficiaries respectively were identified by State Health Agency (SHA), the nodal body responsible for implementing the scheme in J&K, after clearing the SECC data, suggesting that ineligible beneficiaries had made it to the SECC database.

The CAG report states that Rs 10.96 lakh were disbursed for the treatment of 48 patients who had previously been declared deceased while 459 beneficiaries were charged for their treatment in empanelled hospitals.

The report also states that the SHA failed to levy penalties amounting to Rs 20.93 crore on the insurer for non-performance of various activities. “Since no penalties were levied by the SHAs, no such recoveries were made from the defaulting hospitals, thereby not deterring the hospitals from deviating from the performance indicators specified under the scheme,” the report said. <https://thewire.in/government/jammu-kashmir-ias-officer-pmjay-manoj-sinha>

19. जम्मू कश्मीर: पीएम-जन आरोग्य योजना में भ्रष्टाचार के आरोपों को प्रशासन झुठलाने की कोशिश में (*thewirehindi.com*) 15 Oct 2023

श्रीनगर: जम्मू कश्मीर में प्रधानमंत्री जन आरोग्य योजना (पीएम-जेएवाई) के कार्यान्वयन में अनियमितताओं के संबंध में आईएएस अधिकारी अशोक कुमार परमार के आरोपों पर उपराज्यपाल मनोज सिन्हा के प्रशासन ने जवाब दिया है.

जम्मू कश्मीर प्रशासन के एक प्रवक्ता ने कहा कि 'अकाट्य तथ्यों और आंकड़ों की गहन जांच परमार द्वारा सीबीआई को लिखे पत्र में किए गए आधारहीन दावों को झुठलाती है, जिनमें बीमा अनुबंध में अनियमितताओं का आरोप लगाया गया था.'

लेकिन प्रशासन के जवाब में यह अंतर बना हुआ है कि उन्हें अनुबंध में क्या करने की अनुमति दी गई थी और इसके बरअक्स उन्होंने क्या कदम उठाए. एक स्थानीय अखबार ने एंटी-कॉर्प्शन ब्यूरो के निष्कर्षों के बारे में लिखा है, लेकिन वे आईएएस अधिकारी द्वारा लगाए गए विशिष्ट आरोपों से संबंधित नहीं प्रतीत होते हैं.

इस साल की शुरुआत में कैग रिपोर्ट के निष्कर्षों ने भी केंद्रशासित प्रदेश में पीएम-जन आरोग्य योजना के कामकाज पर संदेह व्यक्त किया था. कैग रिपोर्ट में यह भी कहा गया था कि जम्मू कश्मीर प्रशासन को 'वित्तीय विसंगतियों' को समाप्त करने के लिए उपाय सुझाए गए थे.

आईएएस अधिकारी के आरोप

द वायर ने अपनी रिपोर्ट में बताया था कि अधिकारी आईएएस द्वारा लिखे गए पत्र में आरोप लगाया गया है कि मनोज सिन्हा के नेतृत्व वाले जम्मू कश्मीर प्रशासन ने बजाज आलियांज को 15 फीसदी अतिरिक्त देकर अनुबंध की शर्तों का उल्लंघन किया है. कंपनी को 26 दिसंबर 2020 को तीन साल का अनुबंध दिया गया था.

कथित तौर पर घाटे का हवाला देकर बजाज आलियांज ने अनुबंध लागू होने के एक साल से भी कम समय में सितंबर 2021 में अनुबंध से बाहर निकलने की मांग की थी, लेकिन राज्य प्रशासन ने मार्च 2022 को समाप्त होने वाले चार और महीनों के लिए मौजूदा अनुबंध में 15 फीसदी अतिरिक्त की पेशकश कर दी.

प्रशासन के प्रवक्ता ने कहा कि पॉलिसी की अवधि 'आपसी सहमति पर वार्षिक नवीनीकरण के विकल्प के साथ' तीन साल थी.

लेकिन पॉलिसी संबंधी दस्तावेज में कहा गया है कि अनुबंध 'दो साल के बाद नवीनीकरण के अधीन होगा.'

इसलिए अनुबंध में यह कहे जाने के बावजूद कि इसका नवीनीकरण केवल दो वर्ष के बाद ही किया जा सकता है, इसे एक वर्ष से पहले ही नवीनीकृत कर दिया गया. इसके अलावा, सिन्हा के नेतृत्व वाले प्रशासन ने बजाज आलियांज के खिलाफ कोई कार्रवाई नहीं की, जब उसने पहले वर्ष में ही दो साल के अनुबंध को समाप्त करने के लिए आवेदन दिया था.

इसके बजाय, सीधे केंद्र सरकार द्वारा चलाए जाने वाले प्रशासन ने बजाज को 15 फीसदी अतिरिक्त की पेशकश कर दी. परमार के पत्र के अनुसार, यह निर्णय वित्तीय नियमों का उल्लंघन करते हुए और जम्मू कश्मीर के कानून एवं वित्त विभागों की आपत्तियों के बावजूद लिया गया था.

जम्मू कश्मीर प्रशासन ने अपना बचाव किया
जम्मू कश्मीर प्रशासन ने यह कहते हुए अपना बचाव किया है कि उसने सभी आंतरिक विभागों के उचित परामर्श का पालन किया था.

प्रवक्ता ने कहा, 'अंतरिम व्यवस्था की कानून विभाग, वित्त विभाग और विद्वान महाधिवक्ता द्वारा पूरी तरह से जांच की गई थी. जो इस दावे का खंडन करता है कि सरकार ने अपने ही विभागों की सलाह को नजरअंदाज कर दिया.'

उन्होंने कहा कि 'अंतरिम व्यवस्था' ही तब 'सबसे अधिक प्रभावी विकल्प' था.

प्रशासन ने दिसंबर 2021 और मार्च 2022 के बीच बजाज आलियांज को 'स्टॉप लॉस आधार' पर प्रति परिवार इकाई 3,261.60 रुपये की पेशकश की. इफको टोकियो जनरल इंश्योरेंस कंपनी, जो 2021 में प्रति परिवार 1840 रुपये की उद्धृत दर के साथ सबसे कम बोली लगाने वाली कंपनी के रूप में उभरी थी, को 2022 में अनुबंध दे दिया गया था.

प्रशासन ने कहा कि बजाज आलियांज के साथ 'अंतरिम व्यवस्था' जल्द ही 'पॉलिसी की समाप्ति' के कारण 'सेवा व्यवधान को रोकने' के लिए की गई थी, लेकिन इसने यह नहीं स्पष्ट किया कि प्रशासन ने मध्यस्थ (बजाज आलियांज) को नियुक्त करने के बजाय पैनल में शामिल अस्पतालों में नोडल अधिकारी नियुक्त करके दावों का भुगतान स्वयं क्यों नहीं किया.

प्रशासन यह समझाने में भी विफल रहा कि 'बोली तैयार करने और जमा करने के लिए 22 दिनों की उदार अवधि क्यों दी गई' जबकि वह सेवाओं में किसी भी तरह के व्यवधान को रोकने के लिए तत्परता से ऐसा कर सकता था.

जम्मू कश्मीर प्रशासन के प्रवक्ता ने कहा कि इस अनुबंध से बजाज आलियांज को '93.82 करोड़ रुपये का भारी नुकसान' हुआ.

लाभार्थियों की संख्या

प्रशासन ने आईएस अधिकारी परमार के इन दावों का भी खंडन करने की कोशिश की कि अंतरिम अवधि के दौरान लाभार्थियों की संख्या में 10,87,108 की वृद्धि हुई. हालांकि, उन्होंने अपनी ओर से कोई आंकड़ा नहीं बताया.

पीएम-जन आरोग्य योजना में कथित अनियमितताओं को लेकर द वायर में प्रकाशित रिपोर्ट पर प्रतिक्रिया देते हुए सिन्हा ने कहा कि बजाज आलियांज को प्रशासन द्वारा प्रीमियम के रूप में 982 करोड़ रुपये का भुगतान किया गया था, जबकि कंपनी ने 1228 करोड़ रुपये के दावों का भुगतान किया था.

श्रीनगर से प्रकाशित एक स्थानीय अखबार ने जम्मू कश्मीर प्रशासन के रुख का विस्तार से वर्णन करते हुए बताया है कि एंटी-करप्शन ब्यूरो (एसीबी) ने इस मामले की जांच की थी. एसीबी जांच का हवाला देते हुए अखबार में कहा गया है:

'इसमें (एसीबी जांच) में पता चला कि 26 दिसंबर 2020 से 14 मार्च 2022 तक स्टॉप लॉस के आधार पर अंतरिम व्यवस्था सहित पूरी पॉलिसी अवधि के दौरान बजाज को भुगतान किया गया कुल प्रीमियम

304.59 करोड़ रुपये था. बजाज द्वारा अस्पतालों को कुल दावा भुगतान 398.41 करोड़ रुपये था. इसका सीधा सा मतलब है कि बीमा कंपनी को 93.82 करोड़ रुपये का नुकसान हुआ है.'

लेकिन आईएस अधिकारी परमार का पत्र दिसंबर 2021 और मार्च 2022 के बीच हुए कथित घोटाले के बारे में है और इसमें वित्तीय नियमों के कथित उल्लंघन में बजाज आलियांज को अतिरिक्त 15 फीसदी दिए जाने का जिक्र है.

कैग ने भी बताई थीं विसंगतियां

इस साल की शुरुआत में भारत के नियंत्रक और महालेखा परीक्षक (कैग) ने कहा था कि पीएम-जन आरोग्य योजना अनियमितताओं से घिरी हुई है और वित्तीय विसंगतियों को समाप्त करने के लिए जम्मू कश्मीर प्रशासन को उपाय सुझाए गए हैं.

कैग रिपोर्ट में कहा गया था कि 2018-2021 के दौरान राज्य स्वास्थ्य एजेंसी द्वारा क्रमशः 16,865 और 335 अयोग्य लाभार्थियों की पहचान की गई थी.

कैग रिपोर्ट में कहा गया है कि 48 मरीजों के इलाज के लिए 10.96 लाख रुपये का भुगतान किया गया था.

रिपोर्ट में यह भी कहा गया कि राज्य स्वास्थ्य एजेंसी विभिन्न गतिविधियों में विफलता के लिए बीमाकर्ता पर जुर्माना लगाने में भी विफल रहा. <https://thewirehindi.com/259652/jammu-kashmir-admin-attempts-to-refute-ias-officer-s-charges-of-corruption-in-pm-jan-arogya-yojna/>

20. मप्र टाइगर कंजर्वेशन को लेकर कितना गंभीर?:वन विभाग के अफसर फंड का दुरुपयोग कर सकें इसलिए मप्र में 16 साल से नहीं बना टाइगर कंजर्वेशन फाउंडेशन (money.bhaskar.com) 14 October 2023

मप्र टाइगर कंजर्वेशन को लेकर कितना गंभीर है, इस बात का अंदाजा ऐसे लगाया जा सकता है कि केंद्र ने टाइगर रेंज वाले राज्यों में 22 जून 2007 को वाइल्डलाइफ एक्ट की धारा 38 एक्स के तहत टाइगर कंजर्वेशन फाउंडेशन (टीसीएफ) का गठन करने के लिए गाइडलाइन जारी की। इसके तहत अन्य टाइगर रेंज वाले राज्यों में तो टीसीएफ का गठन कर लिया गया, लेकिन मप्र में 16 साल बाद भी टीसीएफ नहीं बनाया गया।

इसकी बजाय मप्र 1997 में गठित एमपी टाइगर सोसायटी (एमपीटीएस) को ही टीसीएफ का पर्याय मानकर इसका संचालन कर रहा है। नियमों के अनुसार वाइल्ड लाइफ एक्ट के तहत 2007 में ही वन विभाग को एमपीटीएफएस को भंग कर टीसीएफ का गठन करना था, लेकिन 2007 में इस सोसायटी का नाम एमपी टाइगर फाउंडेशन सोसायटी (एमपीटीएफएस) रख दिया गया। इसमें दो तरह से फंड आता है। पहला राष्ट्रीय और अंतरराष्ट्रीय संगठन द्वारा दिए जाने वाले अनुदान और दूसरा डायवर्सन शुल्क के रूप में इस सोसायटी को फंड दिया जाता है

फाउंडेशन बनता तो कैग के सीए ऑडिट करते, मनमाना खर्च नहीं होता

वाइल्ड लाइफ एक्टिविस्ट अजय दुबे ने मुख्य सचिव को शिकायत की कि पूर्व के पीसीसीएफ (वाइल्ड लाइफ) अफसरों और वन मंत्री ने मिलकर एमपीटीएफएस सोसायटी के बजट का निजी हितों के लिए उपयोग किया है। इस एमपीटीएफएस सोसायटी होने के कारण इसके बजट की राशि को फिजूलखर्ची करने में आसानी थी। अब तक करीब 50 करोड़ से अधिक की राशि का मनमर्जी से इन्होंने उपयोग कर लिया है।

ऐसा इसलिए क्योंकि टीसीएफ की गाइडलाइन के अनुसार भारत के महालेखाकार और नियंत्रक (कैग) के उपबंधों के तहत लेखाओं का ऑडिट कैग में इम्पैनल्ड सीए ही कर सकते हैं। इसके चलते वन विभाग के अफसर फंड का दुरुपयोग करने में दिक्कत होती। लिहाजा, अवैध संस्था एमपीटीएफएस ही संचालित हो रही है। आरोप है कि एमपीटीएफएस द्वारा फर्म्स सोसायटी एक्ट के अनुसार आम सभा और कार्यकारी समिति की बैठक की जानकारी भी नहीं दी जाती।

फर्म्स-सोसायटी को नहीं दी ऑडिट रिपोर्ट, NTCA ने मांगा जवाब

इस मामले में फर्म्स सोसायटी ने एमपीटीएफएस को नोटिस जारी कर वित्त ऑडिट रिपोर्ट 2002 से जमा करने के लिए कहा है। यानी सोसायटी के पदाधिकारियों ने 2002 से कोई वित्तीय ऑडिट की सूचना फर्म्स एंड सोसायटी में जमा नहीं कराई है। इससे भी इस मामले में वित्तीय अनियमितता होने का सवाल उठ रहा है। वहीं पीसीसीएफ ने मप्र टीसीएफ के सीनियर मैनेजर सुरेंद्र कुमार खरे को नोटिस जारी कर टाइगर फाउंडेशन का गठन न किए जाने को लेकर जवाब मांगा है।

भास्कर ऑडिट -मनमाने तरीके से खर्च किया बजट

टीएफएस से वन विभाग के डिप्टी सेक्रेटरी आईएएस मोहित बुंदस को विदेश भेजने के लिए डेढ़ लाख रुपए जारी किए गए, गृह विभाग ने विदेश जाने के प्रस्ताव पर ही रोक लगा दी। कारण बताया कि मोहित बुंदस के खिलाफ दहेज प्रताड़ना का मामला दर्ज है इसलिए उन्हें विदेश जाने की अनुमति नहीं दी जा सकती है। अब उन्हें जर्मनी भेजने के लिए दोबारा इसी सोसायटी से फंड उपलब्ध कराया जा रहा है।

वन्यप्राणी अध्ययन के लिए तनजानिया एवं दक्षिण अफ्रीका के प्रवास पर 30 अगस्त 2022 को वन मंत्री विजय शाह, एपीपीसीएफ (वाइल्डलाइफ) शुभरंजन सेन व पीसीसीएफ रमेश गुप्ता को भेजा गया था। हवाई यात्रा, ठहरना, लोकल यात्रा एवं अन्य व्यवस्थाओं पर करीब 33 लाख रुपए खर्च इसी एमपीटीएफएस से खर्च किया गया। हालांकि आज तक एक भी सिफारिश इनके द्वारा नहीं दी गई। सीधी बात

असीम श्रीवास्तव, चीफ वाइल्ड लाइफ वार्डन

केंद्र के नियम आने के 16 साल बाद भी टाइगर कंजर्वेशन फाउंडेशन क्यों गठित नहीं किया गया? -हमारे पास पहले से एमपी टाइगर सोसायटी और विकास निधि से फंड का उपयोग टाइगर कंजर्वेशन के लिए किया जा रहा था। इसलिए सरकार ने यह कहा कि हम पहले से ही चल रहे सिस्टम को संचालित करते रहेंगे। इसे भंग कर नया सिस्टम नहीं बनाएंगे।

एनटीसीए ने कभी आपको फाउंडेशन बनाने के लिए नहीं कहा?

- एनटीसीए ने पहले तो हमें काफी रिमांडर भेजे, हमने उन्हें बताया कि फाउंडेशन जो काम करेगा वहीं हमारी सोसायटी भी कर रही है। हम सभी नियमों का पालन कर रहे हैं। इसके बाद वे भी मान गए।

सोसायटी में पारदर्शिता को लेकर सवाल उठ रहे हैं?

- सोसायटी एक्ट के नियमों का पालन करवा रहे हैं। वहीं विकास निधि का महालेखा परीक्षा विभाग ही ऑडिट करता है। <https://money.bhaskar.com/local/mp/bhopal/news/how-serious-is-mp-about-tiger-conservation-131992956.html>

21. Panchkula: एसीसी सीमेंट की प्रॉपर्टी की खरीद-फरोख्त में एक और खुलासा, 32 करोड़ की स्टांप ड्यूटी की भी चोरी (amarujala.com) 14 October 2023

एसीसी प्रॉपर्टी की खरीद-फरोख्त मामले में चौंका देने वाला खुलासा हुआ है। दरअसल हरियाणा सीएजी की टीम ने जून 2023 में एसीसी प्लॉट के आसपास की 122 एकड़ जमीन का सर्वे किया था। सर्वे में जिस जमीन को 2021 में बेचा था, सीएजी ने उसमें 32 करोड़ रुपये स्टांप ड्यूटी चोरी की रिपोर्ट तैयार की है।

अब सवाल यह उठता है कि आखिरकार सरकार की ओर से सीएजी की रिपोर्ट पर आगे क्या कार्रवाई की जाएगी। सबसे बड़ी बात यह है कि एसीसी की प्रॉपर्टी की खरीद फरोख्त में शामिल अधिकारियों और कर्मचारियों के खिलाफ सरकार की तरफ से जमीन की रजिस्ट्री के 21 माह बाद भी अभी तक कोई कार्रवाई अमल में नहीं लाई गई है।

रेजिडेंशियल एरिया बनाने के लिए ली जानी थी सीएलयू जिस कंपनी ने एसीसी की प्रॉपर्टी खरीदी है, उसके द्वारा सरकारी तंत्र का इस्तेमाल कर रेजिडेंशियल एरिया बनाने के लिए सीएलयू लेने की कोशिश की जा रही है। दूसरी तरफ हरियाणा कॉमर्स एंड इंडस्ट्रीज डिपार्टमेंट ने 21 माह में करीब दर्जनभर से ज्यादा बार चिट्ठी लिखकर एसीसी की करीब 122 एकड़ जमीन की मलकियत विभाग के नाम ट्रांसफर करने को लेकर पत्र लिखा है, लेकिन अभी तक इस मामले में कोई कार्रवाई नहीं की है, ना ही मलकियत ट्रांसफर की गई है।

उपमुख्यमंत्री दुष्यंत चौटाला के आदेशों पर 9 फरवरी 2023 को भी अतिरिक्त मुख्य सचिव इंडस्ट्रीज एवं कॉमर्स विभाग ने भी राजस्व विभाग के अतिरिक्त मुख्य सचिव को पत्र भेजकर एसीसी सूरजपुर की जमीन का राजस्व रिकार्ड में नाम इंडस्ट्रीज विभाग के नाम पर करने और इस जमीन के हस्तांतरण पर रोक लगाने को कहा था।

सीबीआई से जांच कराने की मांग
एडवोकेट विजय बंसल ने भूपेंद्र सीमेंट वर्क्स सूरजपुर पंचकूला में एसीसी लिमिटेड द्वारा 2040 करोड़ के घोटाले की जांच सीबीआई से कराने की मांग की है। इससे पूर्व भी विजय बंसल ने प्रधानमंत्री नरेंद्र मोदी, मुख्यमंत्री मनोहर लाल और संबंधित अधिकारियों को पत्र लिखकर इस मामले में संज्ञान लेने के लिए कहा था।

विजय बंसल द्वारा भेजे पत्र पर तत्कालीन केंद्रीय मंत्री कुमारी सैलजा ने भी 28 जुलाई 2006 को संज्ञान लेकर तत्कालीन मुख्यमंत्री भूपेंद्र हुड्डा को चिट्ठी लिखकर इस जमीन का सीएलयू न बदलने के लिए कहा था।

मशीनरी उखाड़ बेचने की मांगी इजाजत
एडवोकेट विजय बंसल ने बताया कि लीज डीड खत्म होने के बाद जमीन भवन एवं मशीनरी, हरियाणा सरकार की होनी थी, जिसके लिए 8 मई 1998 को तत्कालीन हरियाणा सरकार ने आदेश पारित कर एसीसी फैक्ट्री की जमीन और मशीनरी को हरियाणा सरकार के सुपुर्द करने को कहा गया, लेकिन कंपनी ने उल्टा सरकार के विरुद्ध ही माननीय हाईकोर्ट में 8033/1998 केस दायर कर दिया और मशीनरी उखाड़ कर बेचने की इजाजत मांगी, परंतु कंपनी को मशीनरी को बेचने की इजाजत आज तक नहीं मिली है।

वास्तविकता में सूरजपुर स्थित फैक्ट्री में मशीनरी नहीं है। विजय बंसल ने 1 अगस्त 2018 को उद्योग विभाग हरियाणा से पूछा था कि माननीय हाईकोर्ट में जो यह केस विचाराधीन है उस पर आपका विभाग क्या कार्यवाही कर रहा है। इस पर विभाग ने सूचित किया कि इस केस से संबंधित फाइल गुम हो गई है। इसकी डीडीआर पुलिस थाना, सेक्टर-17 चंडीगढ़ में दर्ज है।

विजय बंसल ने जिला राजस्व अधिकारी से आरटीआई के माध्यम से पूछा था कि महाराजा पटियाला द्वारा पट्टे पर दी गई जमीन एसीसी कंपनी के नाम कैसे हुई, जिसपर राजस्व विभाग ने जवाब दिया

कि 1960-61 से पहले का रिकार्ड मौजूद नहीं है। न ही इस कार्यालय में लीज पर दी गई भूमि का राजस्व रिकार्ड उपलब्ध है। <https://www.amarujala.com/haryana/panchkula/theft-of-stamp-duty-worth-rs-32-crores-in-purchase-and-sale-of-property-of-acc-cement-2023-10-14?pageId=2>

22. प्राधिकरण आएगी स्थानीय निधि लेखा परीक्षा की टीम:यही पर करेगी 900 करोड़ रुपए की वित्तीय अनियमितता की जांच, अधिकारियों की खुलेगी पोल (money.bhaskar.com) 14 October 2023

वित्तीय वर्ष 2012 से 2016 तक नोएडा प्राधिकरण में करीब 900 करोड़ रुपए की वित्तीय अनियमितता सामने आई थी। स्थानीय निधि लेखा परीक्षा (लोकल ऑडिट) के परीक्षण ने अपनी रिपोर्ट में इसका जिक्र किया था। ये ऑडिट 2018-19 के दौरान कराए गया। इन वित्तीय अनियमितता पर लगाई गई आपत्तियां के जवाब के लिए नोएडा प्राधिकरण में स्थानीय लेखा परीक्षा की टीम आएगी। यहां फाइलों को खंगालने के अलावा अधिकारियों से सवाल जवाब भी करेगी।

ताकि इन घोटालों व अनियमितता में लिप्त अधिकारियों और कर्मचारियों जिन्होंने प्राधिकरण में जमकर मुनाफाखोरी की उनके नाम सामने लाए जा सके। दरअसल, स्थानीय लोकल ऑडिट की ओर से कई बार प्राधिकरण अधिकारियों को लखनऊ बुलाया गया। आधे अधूरे दस्तावेज होने से उन्हें जांच करने में दिक्कत हो रही थी। बताया गया कि अब स्थानीय ऑडिट टीम प्राधिकरण में ही अपना डेरा जमाएगी। बता दे इससे पहले सीएजी की टीम नोएडा प्राधिकरण में काफी लंबे समय तक फाइलों का ऑडिट किया।

बता दे 2017 में सत्ता बदलने के बाद शासन ने नोएडा प्राधिकरण में व्याप्त वित्तीय अनियमितताएं की जांच के लिए सीएजी को कहा था। उन्होंने करीब एक साल तक प्राधिकरण में जांच की और 400 पेज की एक रिपोर्ट तैयार की। जिसमें 30 हजार करोड़ रुपए के वित्तीय अनियमितता की बात सामने आई थी। हालांकि जांच रिपोर्ट शासन को सौंपने के बाद भी इस पर एक्शन नहीं लिया गया।

इनमें से कई फाइलों के जवाब का इंतजार अब भी है। इसके बाद 2018-19 में ही स्थानीय निधि लेखा परीक्षा ने भी नोएडा प्राधिकरण के चार साल के फाइलों की जांच की। जिसमें करीब 900 करोड़ रुपए बड़ी गड़बड़ी सामने आई। ये रिपोर्ट मंगलवार को विधानसभा में पेश की गई। कयास लगाए जा रहे हैं कि इस रिपोर्ट पर बड़ा एक्शन हो सकता है। <https://money.bhaskar.com/local/uttar-pradesh/gautambudh-nagar/news/local-fund-audit-team-will-come-to-the-authority-financial-irregularities-worth-rs-900-crore-will-be-investigated-here-officials-will-be-exposed-131989599.html>

23. Delhi to expand tree adoption policy, citizens push for tree census first (india.mongabay.com) 13 October 2023

The Tree Authority, Delhi, is planning to introduce a tree adoption policy that will facilitate interested individuals, corporations and institutions to adopt, maintain and preserve trees in the capital. Meanwhile, those closely monitoring tree felling in the city are sceptical about the plan because of poor implementation of past commitments by the authorities. They also say there is not enough staff to execute the plan and essential tree-related data such as species, age, health of the trees is also not available – something which should be prepared before the adoption of trees.

The tree adoption policy, which is to be implemented by the Department of Forest and Wildlife (DFW) and the Government of the National Capital Territory of Delhi (GNCTD), will be an extension of a similar scheme implemented by the Municipal

Corporation of Delhi (MCD) and expanded beyond the municipal limits to cover the entire capital. The MCD has already introduced an online portal for tree adoption.

In a Tree Authority meeting held on August 30, it was decided that the DFW and GNTCD will assess the MCD scheme and present the proposal for its extension in the forthcoming meeting. This August 30 meeting was held after a Delhi High Court directive on July 31 instructed the Tree Authority, Delhi to convene a meeting by August 31 and submit a comprehensive status report by September 4.

Bhavreen Kandhari, the founder of Warrior Moms, a pan-India initiative of mothers fighting air pollution and other environmental issues, says that by including tree adoption by citizens, as a way of tree preservation, the authorities are shifting part of the responsibility, to the citizens. She expresses the contradiction of the government, noting that, “On one hand, we are encouraged to plant and adopt trees, but on the other hand, mature trees are being cut down without much thought. The government has plans to plant some 10 million saplings in its Winter Action Plan, but it’s hard to see the point when five grown trees are being cut down every hour,” she claims. “We are facing a serious public health crisis and we should be doing everything we can to save these mature trees,” she adds.

Urban ecologist, Vallari Sheel, a resident of Vasant Vihar, alleges that the tree adoption policy is a way for the forest department to improve its image. “They are cutting thousands of trees every day. What will citizens do to protect them? Even if someone adopts a tree, they’re uncertain about its future – it might be chopped down any day,” says Sheel, who is pursuing her Ph.D. from the Department of Forestry and Environmental Resources at North Carolina State University, USA, remotely. She, however, acknowledges that engaging people and encouraging stewardship is a positive aspect of the initiative.

Both Kandhari and Sheel emphasised the need for proper data on Delhi’s trees, such as species identity, health, geographical details etc., before moving ahead with any other plans on conserving trees.

Aditya N. Prasad, an advocate involved in multiple court cases regarding tree protection in Delhi, says that while the authorities have discussed tree adoption before, there has not been much progress on it. In 2022, media reports said that the Delhi Forest Department is working on a policy that will allow tree adoption. It was in an initial discussion stage at that time but now, even after a year, there is no implementation plan charted out.

Prasad points out that the prevailing act (the Delhi Preservation of Trees Act, 1994) calls for conducting a tree census. This should precede the adoption and other plans to preserve trees, he says. He adds that Section 13 of the act notes that the Tree Authority should specify rules, including reaching out to the original tree owners for any objections, subject to which tree adoption procedures can take place. Prasad highlights that a Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) is required for tree adoption.

Tree census, a long pending work

According to the minutes of the Tree Authority meeting on August 30, the tree census will begin with isolated patches and green areas/city forests managed by the DFW. The

census data, based on parameters such as location, land type, GPS coordinates, circumference and tree health, will be presented in the next Tree Authority meeting.

Prasad is not convinced that this census will actually take place. “The authority has been discussing a census for years, yet practical steps have yet to be taken,” he said. The authority organised the recent meeting only after a court order, he pointed out.

A tree is being concretised in concrete in Vasant Vihar. In a census conducted by volunteers, citizens found that approximately 3,500 trees out of a total of 5,000 are concretised in concrete in the area.

Concrete around a tree in Vasant Vihar. In a census in the area, conducted by citizen volunteers, they found that approximately 3,500 trees out of a total of 5,000 had concrete filled in close to the trunk. Photo by Vallari Sheel.

The tree census has been pending in Delhi for about three decades. The Tree Authority, constituted under the Delhi Preservation of Trees Act, 1994, is tasked with preserving trees, conducting tree censuses, developing and maintaining nurseries, and evaluating proposals from government departments and private entities regarding construction projects. However, as Prasad notes, little progress has been made.

Similar commitments have been made earlier, too. In a meeting in 2012, members discussed various aspects of the tree census, including methodology, scale, costs and involved agencies. In 2013, the authority once again raised the idea of conducting a tree census, providing details about trees, their scientific names, and girth, but this initiative failed to materialise. In 2017, the department admitted “..conducting tree census is a herculean task requiring large manpower and so could not be undertaken by the forest department. It was felt that, ideally, such a task could be dealt by a separate Directorate of Census to track the health and number of trees. It was decided that the different land-owning agencies like PWD, CPWD, IF& CD, MCD, NDMC, DDA, etc., and RWAs owning land over which trees are standing may be asked to prepare an inventory of trees owned by them at their own level.”

Mongabay India talked to Amit Anand, the Additional Charge of Conservator of Forest in the Government of Delhi, regarding the tree census and adoption policy.

He explained that the census will commence on a pilot basis in select areas before being expanded to cover the entire city of Delhi. When questioned about previous commitments made by the department to conduct a census, he emphasised that a census is a rigorous scientific process. Without proper scientific methods and documentation, it holds little significance. He acknowledged that the department lacks the capacity to undertake this task alone, emphasising the need for collaboration across various departments. “We can only take on what we can chew,” he added.

Regarding concerns from the public that the census should precede the adoption policy, he expressed a differing view. He mentioned that the census could be carried out at various stages, such as during plantation or disease assessment. “We are currently in the process of preparing our report, which will be submitted to the Tree Authority,” Anand stated.

Defunct authority and public effort

In 2021, Prasad wrote a letter to the Chief Secretary of the Delhi government, in which he pointed out that the Tree Authority is mandated to meet at least once in three months as per Section 4 of the Delhi Preservation of Tree Act (DPTA), 1994 but the meetings have not been scheduled according to the mandate.

It should have met at least 104 times till 2021 since it was constituted on July 24, 1995. However, the Tree Authority has met only eight times till 2021, he wrote in the letter. The last meeting was also held only after the court's intervention.

In past, the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) of India has also highlighted the inadequacy in the functioning of the Tree Authority of Delhi. In a report that appeared in 2017, CAG revealed that out of the required 12 meetings, only one meeting was conducted within the audited period of 2014-2017. "Absence of regular meetings indicate lack of seriousness in its approach towards preservation of trees and afforestation," it concluded.

Prasad told Mongabay India that Delhi's Tree Authority has insufficient workforce or technical capability to conduct the census or monitor the well-being of trees after adoption. Without an active Tree Authority, citizens are trying to conduct a census at their level by manual count and observation. Such censuses were conducted in Vasant Vihar, Saryodaya Enclave and Saket, etc.

Mongabay India talked to Vallari Sheel, who led the census in Vasant Vihar. She gives the details of the census conducted in 2015-16, saying that the volunteers found some 5,000 street trees, of which 3,500 were concretised around the trunk. As per the National Green Tribunal order, one-metre radius of the trunk should be kept free from any concrete development. The census in Vasant Vihar also revealed that several trees have nails, barbed wires, or similar objects around them. Additionally, around 793 trees were found to be infested with termites. Based on the findings, the Delhi High Court has ordered the authorities (MCD and PWD) to de-concretise trees in Vasant Vihar.

"The concept revolved around the belief that having a database with the count of trees would discourage tree cutting. While it might not eliminate tree felling completely, it would improve the situation. Additionally, we anticipated that the local community would gain knowledge about the trees in their vicinity through the census process," she added. <https://india.mongabay.com/2023/10/delhi-to-expand-tree-adoption-policy-citizens-push-for-tree-census-first/>

24. No tenements were built in water bodies: TNUHDB (*dtnext.in*) 13 Oct 2023

CHENNAI: In response to the report of the Comptroller and Auditor General of India (CAG), the Tamil Nadu Urban Habitat Development Board (TNUHDB) on Friday explained that the tenement project in Moorthingar Street of Chennai is not built on watershed land and there is no additional expenditure has been provided to the project.

According to the TNUHDB department, the Moorthingar Street project area is not built on watershed land, and all the tenements are being built on residential classified land.

"It has been certified that the land measuring 55,33.2630 square meters situated in the field no 779/66 and 77969 does not have any water bodies and the land is a residential area. According to the report of the revenue department, the said area has been changed from water body classification to residential classification in the gazette notification," said a release from TNUHDB.

Further, the department said that the construction work for 4 buildings is nearing completion and infra works such as power lift, roads, street lights, drinking water supply and rainwater drainage will be started soon.

"Expenditure is paid to the contractor only for completed works and no additional expenditure has been provided to the contractor," the department noted.

Earlier, the CAG report had slammed the TNUHDB for allowing the construction of tenements on a water body.

<https://www.dtnext.in/news/tamilnadu/no-tenements-were-built-in-water-bodies-tnuhdb-741773>

SELECTED NEWS ITEMS/ARTICLES FOR READING

25. 95% of FY24 allocation utilised: MNREGS outlay to see Rs 30k-crore hike (*financialexpress.com*) October 16, 2023

With 95% of the Budget allocation for the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) having already been utilised so far in the current fiscal, the Centre will likely provide an additional Rs 30,000-40,000 crore for the flagship scheme soon, sources said.

Simultaneously, the government will also try and plug leakages in the scheme, given the instances of misappropriation being reported.

Approval for the extra allocation would be sought in the first Supplementary Demand for Grants to be presented in the winter session of Parliament in December. In the interim, the government will ensure fund flows to run the scheme smoothly without disruptions, the sources said.

The Centre has so far released Rs 56,994 crore or 95% of the Budget estimate of Rs 60,000 crore for MNREGS in FY24.

As against the funds availability of Rs 67,403 crore (including some write-back of funds from the previous year) as of October 15 of the current fiscal, the expenditure stood at `66,704 crore or 99% of the available funds.

Given that five-and-half months are left in the year, the Budget expenditure on the scheme may reach Rs 90,000 to Rs 1 trillion as the person-days generated (work provided) under the scheme may be around 3 billion," an official said.

However, the extra allocation for the scheme won't impact the fiscal deficit as it could be adjusted against savings in other schemes expected for the year.

So far in FY24, 1.93 billion person days of work have been generated under the scheme. In FY23, 2.94 billion person days were generated compared to 3.63 billion in FY22 and a record 3.89 billion in FY21, the pandemic year.

According to official data, month-wise work demand has moderated from 33.7 million in June to 18.5 million in September 2023, indicating that people are finding other viable options for gainful employment.

Besides person days expected, the average wage increase could also inflate expenditure to some extent even though the Centre is tightening measures to plug leakages in the scheme.

Under MGNREGS, the average wage rate per day per person has been on the rise due to minimum wage revisions by states. The average wage stood at Rs 237.96 so far in FY24 from Rs 217.9 in FY23, Rs 208.84 in FY22, Rs 200.71 in FY21 and Rs 182.09 in FY20.

Rampant misappropriation of funds allocated under the flagship scheme is one of the main triggers for the Centre to make a five-year low provision of Rs 60,000 crore in the FY24 Budget for the jobs programme.

The Centre has even stopped MNREGS fund flows to West Bengal since December 2021 due to allegations of corruption, including no trace of work after their competition, existing works fraudulently shown as MGNREGS works etc.

Niti Aayog member Ramesh Chand recently told FE that work demand under MNREGS is no indicator of distress and cited reports which said much of the work is being done through machines in violation of the scheme.

“Even though there is no rural distress, the government will provide an adequate budget to keep the workflow in H2Y24. There are some state elections next month also,” another official said.

According to data from the Centre for Monitoring the Indian Economy, the rural unemployment rate in July declined to 7.89% from 8.73% in June, whereas urban unemployment rose to 8.06% from 7.87% in the same period.

MGNREGS is a scheme under the ministry of rural development, that aims at providing at least 100 days of guaranteed wage employment in a financial year to every household in rural areas of the country, whose adult members volunteer to do unskilled manual work. <https://www.financialexpress.com/policy/economy-95-of-fy24-allocation-utilised-mnregs-outlay-tonbspsee-rs-30k-crore-hike-3273536/>

26. India’s power struggle: Renewable generation has fallen short of the targetted level (*financialexpress.com*) October 14, 2023

India is currently the third largest electricity generator globally. Electricity security has improved through the creation of the national power system and major investments from the private sector. Since 2000, 700 million people have gained access to electricity

and the focus is on integrating higher shares of variable renewable energy (RE) into the energy mix.

In the 11th and 12th Five Year Plans, a massive impetus was given to bolster the power sector. The FYP XII period (2012-2017) was the first when the capacity installation target was achieved. Against the targeted 88.5 GW, the actual capacity achieved was 99 GW. The bulk came from coal-fired plants. Given an installation target of 72.3 GW, they delivered 84.85 GW. The private sector installing about 50 GW was an inflection point.

Then why do power shortages occur? It is because the supply is unable to match rapidly increasing demand. Owing to the highly volatile nature of power demand, it is difficult to make precise predictions as to how it pans out. The ominous question is whether India's power generation, if not in surplus, would be adequate to meet the expanding demand in future.

When the National Energy Plan was rolled out for 2017-22, it projected a peak electricity demand of 225 GW and total energy requirement of 1,566 BU for FY2022. It was expected that the growth would be 6.18% and 5.51% per annum, respectively. The generation was proposed accordingly with emphasis on RE sources. This was the first energy plan which shifted significantly from conventional energy sources to new and RE sources. At the end of FY2017, total installed capacity of RE stood at just 57 GW, against the total installed capacity of 326 GW. Plans were laid out to increase RE capacity to 175 GW by FY2022 in anticipation they would contribute about 20% of the total energy (excluding hydro). But that turned out to be 11%.

With 47.8 GW capacity under different stages of construction, it was presumed that new capacity required in the thermal power sector could only be 6.4 GW. The margin being wide, the feeling was that even if the capacity from coal-based plants fell behind the target, there would not be any shortage of electricity in the country. It was assured that sizeable extra thermal power capacity was under construction. However, by the end of 2022, total conventional energy capacity added was 30.7 GW. Out of this, only 105 MW came from gas, the rest was from coal-based thermal power stations.

Meanwhile, RE achievement was not as expected. A lot more needs to be done to expedite RE installation despite India being the fourth largest globally in terms of installed capacity. The capacity shortfall has meant any spike in temperatures or demand patterns affected continuity of the energy supply system.

The first fright was in October 2021. A monsoon disruption in July and August saw the power demand shoot up abruptly. The primary reason was that imported coal-based plants worked at low capacity, deliberately curtailing generation due to soaring prices of the fuel and shipping rates. With coal as the go-to option when the chips are down, it pressured domestic coal-based plants (DCB) to fill in the gap, stretching the supplies and transportation. The fact that few DCBs regulated their coal intake when it was available in plenty further exacerbated the situation. The materialisation of planned increase in solar and wind capacities would have helped tackle the crisis effectively.

The second power crunch came in April-May 2022. With the mercury shooting up, peak power demand started creeping up between 9-11 PM, when the renewables are at their

minimum in terms of generation. Again, it was domestic coal producers who stepped in. In August this year, demand shot up again due to a long break in monsoon and, on September 1, it reached 240 GW at 12-10 PM. In many days of August and September 2023 adequate power was not available throughout the day even at maximum permissible rate of Rs 10/unit.

As Per the National Energy Plan 2023, peak energy requirement is likely to be 277 GW. This means total generation, including plant losses, should be about 290 GW. Even if nuclear (7 GW), gas (25 GW), hydro (50 GW) and renewables (10 GW) kick in, 200 GW of thermal would be required. There is likely to be a shortfall even if all the under construction thermal power stations are taken into account. With the available capacity, the prospects of meeting the energy demand of more than 2,000 BU appear grim as the pace of RE installation fell short of expectations till FY2022. Only about 110 GW could be installed against the target of 175 GW. At the current pace, we are likely to reach at the most 200 GW by FY 2027.

Meeting the requirement of about 1,400 BU through coal-lignite would be difficult. The idea is not to make gloomy prophecies, but to face the harsh reality head on and strengthen measures to meet country's the power demand. India has the resolve, resource and resilience in abundance to do so. <https://www.financialexpress.com/opinion/indias-power-struggle-renewable-generation-has-fallen-short-of-the-targetted-level/3272331/>

27. Impending energy crisis brings coal back into play (*financialexpress.com*) 15 Oct 2023

India's pledge to become carbon-neutral by 2070 and its national energy plan seem to fall further apart. The latest National Electricity Plan (NEP) envisages the installed capacity of coal-based thermal power to rise by 23% from the current level by 2022-23. However, it is becoming increasingly clear that an even higher reliance on the "dirty fuel" than NEP may be required to avert a serious energy crisis in the country.

The peaking and subsequent phasing out of coal-fired power may get delayed. This because of a sharper-than-expected rise in domestic demand for power, and the realisation that renewable capacity addition could lag the tall targets. There are also concerns about the huge intermittency and variability of renewable-based generation. Efficient integration of the RE capacities to the grid to meet the peak power demand is also a challenge.

The country has been jolted by the two major power crises in the last two years – October 2021 and April-May 2023 – as it struggled to meet peak power demand in many parts of the country and outages occurred. The government has already aired its concerns about the unravelling energy situation, and indicated that coal-based capacity addition may have to be scaled up.

Union Power Minister R K Singh has recently said the country might add 25-30 giga watt (GW) coal-based thermal electricity, in addition to 50 GW under works to keep pace with the recent sharp rise in the county's power demand, and the projections for the future. The minister added that the government hasn't formulated any plan to phase out old coal-based thermal power plants, and cited the Central Electricity Authority's

(CEA) statement in January that, “no retirement or re-purposing of coal-based power stations will be done before 2030.”

In fact, this is not a situation unique to India. “Capital investment in the energy sector continues to flow into fossil fuels, which are responsible for 75% of global greenhouse gas emissions,” the International Monetary Fund said in its report.

As such, India’s capacity addition in the renewable energy sector is lagging the tall targets set. Raising RE capacity to 500 giga watt (GW) by 2030 from the current level of 172 GW requires annual addition of 45 GW. The current RE capacity pace is much slower – just 13-GW of new RE capacity was set up in FY23.

“India was targeting that 50% of energy will come from non-fossil fuels (by now). But that may not happen soon,” said Pramod Agarwal, ex-Chairman and Managing Director of Coal India.

To phase out coal-fired plants will require substantial private investments, notes the IMF in its latest financial stability report. It also highlighted that investments made in the renewable energy in the emerging and developing economies lags behind those done in the area of fossil fuels. “Estimates suggest that a target ratio of about 4:1 for renewable over fossil fuel investment is required globally throughout this decade,” the report said.

“Today we are consuming about 1 billion tonne of coal. Projections are that by 2030, this will rise to 1.3-1.4 billion tonne,” said Partha S Bhattacharya, also a former Chairman of Coal India. “Renewable will grow faster but coal-based power will also have to grow because India will have to catch up in per capita consumption,” he said (see chart).

India’s per capita power consumption is just about 1,300 units which is one-third of the world average, one-fifth of China, and up to one-tenth to one-twentieth of advanced countries.

“India is a country where RE is not a substitution but it is complimentary to coal,” Bhattacharya said. “(Coal) will continue till 2040 or so. RE will reach some 1,000 GW and will then taper off.”

The NEP-2022-2032 envisages the average plant load factor (PLF) of installed coal capacity of 235.1 GW at 58.4% in 2026-27, and that of 259.6 GW such capacity to be about 58.7% in 2031-32.

Plant load factor is a measure of knowing the average capacity utilization of a thermal power unit. It is the measure of the total generation by a power plant compared to the maximum output it could produce.

“Though the share of coal-based generation may continue to be high, operation of coal-based plants in a more flexible mode, unlike as base load stations earlier, needs to be emphasised in the wake of huge intermittency and variability of renewable-based generation,” the plan noted.

The NEP also targets at increasing the share of non-fossil based capacity to 57.4% by 2026-27 and further to 68.4% by the end of 2031-32 from around 42.5% at present. However, experts believe that this is a stiff target.

Further, challenges remain in the renewable energy sectors. With the COP28 lined up to take place next month, targets will remain focused at reducing carbon emissions. However, the need is to focus on challenges more than that on setting targets, analysts feel.

IMF sees prices of renewable energy rising as the advance economies accelerate their energy transition. “The supply of critical metals and minerals is projected to fall short of demand, putting upward pressure on their prices and further raising the costs of renewable energy,” it said.

The report also highlighted that since 2000, the emerging and developing nations have had a share of three-fourth of the world’s 9,000 coal-fired power plants and about 90% of the global capital tied in coal-fired power plants.

Out of this 90%, however, only 20% of the current coal-fired generation is covered by agreements among countries. IMF has categorized India as an “established coal-user economy.”

Among other challenges for RE are the installation cost, storage system, and transmission. “Installation of 500-GW capacity for non-fossil is a stiff target to achieve till 2030 as that means 50-GW addition every year. And last year the addition was only of 13 GW,” Agarwal said.

Ashok Khurana, Director General of Association of Power Producers, sees a challenge developing for distribution companies and their finances. “If the RE capacity that is coming up operates at PLF below 45%, it would jack up the cost of power.” He fears that discoms may not be able to afford (pass on the cost of) such RE power, given the cost-reflective tariffs to consumers.

Analysts believe that private investments can help in building a stronger foundation for RE sources and combat the above-mentioned challenges. However, this would require a lot of project re-structuring.

“In the initial set of deployments, there should be financing support (for RE investors) and more PPP (public-private partnership) structures are required,” said Vikas Gaba, National Head- Power at KPMG. <https://www.financialexpress.com/business/industry-impending-energy-crisis-brings-coal-back-into-play-3273450/>

28. We must not overlook the risks IMF has noted (*livemint.com*) 15 Oct 2023

A sense of jubilation greeted the International Monetary Fund (IMF) projection that India’s economy will grow 6.3% during 2023-24, placing it among the fastest growing economies. The multilateral lender’s latest edition of the World Economic Outlook, released during this year’s annual meeting in Marrakech (in conjunction with World Bank), claimed that the 20bps upward revision in India’s gross domestic product (GDP)

estimate was due to “stronger-than-expected consumption” in April-June. As a matter of fact, national income data for that quarter did demonstrate private final consumption growing by over 9% year-on-year, thereby helping overall GDP grow by 7.8%. But then, New Delhi’s euphoria over the IMF forecast seems to ignore some of the risks that the institution feels could jeopardize global, and hence Indian, growth prospects. Pierre Olivier Gourinchas, IMF’s research director and economics counsellor, said that while the aggregate global economic growth was slowing, there was considerable divergence between growth trends in the advanced and emerging or developing economies. In his words, global economic growth is “limping along and not sprinting”. This needs parsing, especially how they can come to affect the Indian economy.

A long train of risks has been visiting the global economy since the start of the pandemic and there is no certainty that these are likely to be retrenched any time soon. The pandemic shattered the fragile and freshly wrought financial and economic stability that had been achieved almost a decade after the 2008 financial crisis. The economic shock, in the form of upended supply chains and disrupted economic networks, was further aggravated in February 2022 when Russia attacked Ukraine, sending commodity prices shooting. Global central banks had to raise benchmark interest rates multiple times in a coordinated move to staunch the inflationary spiral which, in turn, dampened economic activity and rendered asset markets volatile. The global economy was just about re-adjusting to this reality and re-calibrating its response when the outbreak of the Palestine-Israel conflagration added a new dimension to the matrix of risks.

This begs the question: does the IMF projection imply that India is insulated from all the risks? The problem with risks is that they can emerge from least expected quarters and expose vulnerabilities. While there is an entire panoply of risks confronting India, the one risk that could have a short-term impact on the Indian economy springs from the IMF assertion of divergence in growth and inflation trends globally and its likely impact on volatile asset markets. The Fed’s higher-for-longer policy is driving up yields in US bond markets, which will result in portfolio fund outflows from India, leading to pressure on the rupee and its concomitant effect on cost of imports, balance of payments and domestic inflation rate. The second risk arises from uncertainty over oil prices if the Palestine-Israel conflict drags for long and its net expands to cover other West Asian economies such as Saudi Arabia, Iran, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon or even the UAE. The final risk lies in the misplaced exultation at the 6.3% GDP growth estimate: India needs to grow by over 8% every year, for many years continuously, to enable prosperity for a wider cohort of the Indian population and, most importantly, to successfully escape the low middle-income trap. <https://www.livemint.com/opinion/online-views/we-must-not-overlook-the-risks-imf-has-noted-11697383651794.html>

29. State exchequer incurs loss as govt spends crores to avail services of SC advocates (*english.mathrubhumi.com*) 15 Oct 2023

Kochi: Seeking the services of senior advocates of the Supreme Court in cases, including those of political importance, has incurred huge financial liability for the state exchequer. According to an RTI reply, Rs 7.25 crore was spent from the treasury for advocates of the apex court within the last three years.

It is learnt that the state government had sought the service of top court advocates, who charge lakhs for hours, in cases including the gold smuggling scam and KIIFB masala bonds.

Here, it needs to be noted that the government has been seeking the service of SC advocates in spite of spending more than Rs 155 crore (monthly) as salaries for state advocates in various ranks, including advocate generals and government pleaders.

During the first Pinarayi government, Rs 17.87 crore was spent for the purpose. When late Oommen Chandy was the chief minister, Rs 12.17 crore was spent on SC advocates, stated the RTI reply sought by MK Haridas, president of 'Proper Channel', a social organisation.

SC advocates who appeared for the state in Kerala High Court from April 2021 - August 2023 and money spent for their service

Harin P Raval Rs 70 lakh
CS Vaidyanathan Rs 60 lakh
KK Venugopal Rs 23.5 lakh
Fali S Nariman Rs 30 lakh J
Subhash Sharma Rs 9.90 lakh
Safir Ahmad Rs 4 lakh Madan
B Lokur Rs 24 lakh
Mohammad Nizamuddin Pasha Rs 8 lakh
Vinod K Anand (Clerk of Fali S Nariman) Rs 3 lakh

Advocates who appeared for the state in SC from April 2021 - August 2023 and their fees

Jaideep Gupta Rs 1.29 crore
Ranjit Kumar Rs 71.50 lakh
KK Venugopal Rs 50 lakh
Pallav Sisodia Rs 38.50 lakh
Kapil Sibal Rs 36.50lakh
Rakesh Dwivedi Rs 25 lakh
Harin P Raval Rs 19.80 lakh
Chander Uday Singh Rs 19 lakh
KN Balagopal Rs 18.70 lakh
PV Surendranath Rs 17.60 lakh
V Giri Rs 17.50 lakh
R Basant Rs 11 lakh

<https://english.mathrubhumi.com/news/kerala/exchequer-incurs-loss-as-kerala-govt-spends-crores-to-avail-services-of-sc-advocates-1.8988665>

30. Kerala Vigilance detects irregularities in panchayats (*newindianexpress.com*) 14 Oct 2023

THIRUVANANTHAPURAM: The Vigilance and Anti Corruption Bureau (VACB) on Thursday conducted raids at 57 grama panchayats and detected large-scale irregularities in the issuance of building construction permits and building numbers. It was found that

1,689 applications for building permits and 504 applications for building numbers were pending without any valid reasons while in several places, commercial buildings constructed by flouting the norms were found to have received building numbers. Such discrepancies were noted in Mulanthuruthy in Ernakulam, Valapattanam in Kannur, Kulasekharapuram in Kollam, Kallara in Kottayam, Kanjirappally and Puthussery and Kumaramputhur in Palakkad.

In Palamel panchayat in Alappuzha district, officials have passed a bill despite lab reports citing that weak concrete has been used for road construction.

It was also found that one contractor was given the majority of PWD works in several panchayats. In Thrikaripur panchayat in Kasaragod, out of 69 tendered works, 27 were given to one particular contractor. Similar incidents were reported in Pattanakkad panchayat in Alappuzha (21 out of 54 works), Chenkal panchayat in Thiruvananthapuram (12 out of 15), and Kallara panchayat in Kottayam (11 out of 35).

In Kattakada panchayat in Thiruvananthapuram, four works were given to a single contractor without any tender bid. Certain aided schools in Edaricode in Malappuram, Vellamunda in Wayanad, Kuttiaattoor in Kannur and Thrikaripur and Chenkal in Kasaragod were found functioning without a fitness certificate of the panchayat.

In Pallikkal and Chenkal panchayats, two aided schools were found to have structural weaknesses though they possessed fitness certificates.

In Wadakkanchery panchayat in Thrissur and Kallara panchayat in Kottayam, overseers were found to have received huge amounts from private engineers and contractors via payment apps. <https://www.newindianexpress.com/states/kerala/2023/oct/14/kerala-vigilance-detects-irregularities-in-panchayats-2623715.html>