NEWS ITEMS ON CAG/ AUDIT REPORTS

1. ASI संरक्षित इमारतें हो रही हैं लापता, स्मारकों के संरक्षण पर उदासीन है संस्कृति मंत्रालय *(janchowk.com)* December 13, 2023

ऐतिहासिक एवं पुरातात्विक इमारतें किसी भी देश और समाज के लिए बेशकीमती होती हैं। ऐसी इमारतों को धरोहर के रूप मे संरक्षित किया जाता है। लेकिन भारत में ऐतिहासिक एवं पुरातात्विक महत्व के भवन गायब हो रहे हैं। ऐसे स्मारकों पर धार्मिक संगठन और भूमाफिया कब्जा करके उनके स्वरूप को बदल दे रहे हैं। वर्तमान में देश में 3,695 केंद्रीय संरक्षित स्मारक हैं। पिछले एक दशक में एएसआई द्वारा संरक्षित 1655 स्मारकों में से कम से कम 92 संरक्षित स्मारकों के गायब होने की खबर है। यानि या तो उनके अस्तित्व को मिटा दिया गया या उनके स्वरूप को बदल दिया गया।

भारत के नियंत्रक और महालेखा परीक्षक (CAG) और भारतीय पुरातत्व सर्वेक्षण (Archaeological Survey of India) द्वारा 2013 में संयुक्त रूप से किए गए एक निरीक्षण से पता चलता है कि केंद्रीय संरक्षित स्मारकों पर अवैध अतिक्रमण, पूजा एवं नमाज के लिए कब्जा या भूमाफियाओं द्वारा जमीन का गलत उपयोग करने से स्मारक अस्तित्वविहीन हो रहे हैं।

"महरौली (कुतुब मीनार के पास) में अतिक्रमित स्मारकों में कई मस्जिदें, मदरसे और मंदिर संचालित हो रहे हैं।" लेखिका और विरासत संरक्षणवादी स्वप्ना लिडल का कहना है कि अगर स्मारकों में पूजा की अनुमति है तो एएसआई के लिए निर्माण और स्मारकों की आवश्यक संरचना में बदलाव को नियंत्रित करना असंभव है।

पिछले साल कश्मीर के अनंतनाग में मार्तंड सूर्य मंदिर में उपराज्यपाल मनोज सिन्हा द्वारा पूजा आयोजित किए जाने के बाद एएसआई ने आपत्ति जताई थी।

देश के कई हिस्सों से संरक्षित स्मारकों के गायब होने पर संसदीय समिति ने गहरी चिंता और निराशा व्यक्त की है। परिवहन, पर्यटन और संस्कृति पर संसदीय स्थायी समिति ने अप्राप्य स्मारकों पर पैनल की सिफारिशों के जवाब में केंद्रीय संस्कृति मंत्रालय ने भी गंभीरता नहीं दिखाई।

पिछले हफ्ते संसद में पेश की गई अपनी 363वीं रिपोर्ट में, वाईएसआर कांग्रेस पार्टी के सदस्य वी. विजयसाई रेड्डी की अध्यक्षता वाली समिति ने यह भी सिफारिश की कि भारतीय पुरातत्व सर्वेक्षण (एएसआई) - जो संस्कृति मंत्रालय के तहत काम करता है वह धार्मिक महत्व के ऐतिहासिक केंद्रीय संरक्षित स्मारकों (सीपीएम) पर पूजा/ धार्मिक गतिविधियां... प्रदान करने के लिए "अनुमति देने की संभावना तलाशें।"

2017 में तत्कालीन संस्कृति मंत्री महेश शर्मा ने संसद को बताया था कि एएसआई ने पाया है कि केवल 24 स्मारक नहीं मिल रहे हैं।

संसदीय समिति ने पिछले साल अपनी 324वीं रिपोर्ट में सिफारिश की थी कि "एएसआई तुरंत शेष सीपीएम का सर्वेक्षण करे, जिनका सीएजी ऑडिट सर्वेक्षण में निरीक्षण नहीं किया गया था और यह पता लगाया जाए कि क्या 24 स्मारकों के अलावा देश में कोई अन्य गायब स्मारक हैं।"

324वीं रिपोर्ट "भारत में अप्राप्य स्मारकों और स्मारकों की सुरक्षा से संबंधित मुद्दे" पर थी। नवीनतम 363वीं रिपोर्ट-324वीं रिपोर्ट पर संस्कृति मंत्रालय द्वारा की गई कार्रवाई पर है।

इसमें कहा गया है कि "समिति के पूछने पर, मंत्रालय ने सूचित किया है कि शेष स्मारकों का कोई और अध्ययन नहीं किया गया है ताकि यह पता लगाया जा सके कि कितने और स्मारक गायब हैं...। समिति यह जानकर परेशान है कि अध्ययन किए गए स्मारकों के नमूनों में से कम से कम 24 स्मारक अप्राप्य हैं, मूल अध्ययन के लगभग एक दशक बाद भी, शेष स्मारकों के लिए कोई और सर्वेक्षण नहीं किया गया। मंत्रालय ने इस टिप्पणी पर समिति को कोई जवाब नहीं दिया है।

संसदीय समिति ने संस्कृति मंत्रालय के इस व्यवहार पर पत्र लिखकर "अपने दृष्टिकोण का पुनर्मूल्यांकन" करने का आग्रह किया है, और आगे कहा है कि "समिति महत्वपूर्ण मुद्दों को संबोधित करने वाली समिति की सिफारिशों के जवाब में मंत्रालय की ओर से गंभीरता की इस स्पष्ट कमी पर अपनी गहरी चिंता और निराशा व्यक्त करती है। समिति के विचारों की अवहेलना करना देश की सांस्कृतिक विरासत के विकास और संरक्षण के प्रति मंत्रालय के विश्वास, विश्वसनीयता और गंभीरता को कम करता है।"

2014 में एएसआई के दिल्ली सर्कल ने 13 और स्मारकों की पहचान की जो उनके बताए गए स्थान पर मौजूद नहीं थे। प्रधानमंत्री की आर्थिक सलाहकार परिषद ने जनवरी में "राष्ट्रीय महत्व के स्मारक: युक्तिकरण की तत्काल आवश्यकता" शीर्षक से एक रिपोर्ट प्रकाशित की थी। इसने एएसआई के तहत स्मारकों की संख्या में कमी की सिफारिश की थी।

संभावित अधिसूचना रद्द करने या राज्य पुरातत्व विभागों को हस्तांतरित करने के लिए नामित स्मारकों में औपनिवेशिक अधिकारियों की कब्रें, और मुगल काल के कोस मीनार राजमार्ग चिह्नक शामिल थे।

विरासत विशेषज्ञ सोहेल हाशमी ने कहा कि "कौन सा स्मारक महत्वपूर्ण है या महत्वहीन यह एक ब्रिटिश अवधारणा है जो हम पर थोपी गई है।"

उन्होंने अंग्रेजों द्वारा अपनी ऐतिहासिक संरचनाओं के प्रति दिखाई गई देखभाल की तुलना भारत में स्मारकों के प्रति की गई उपेक्षा से की।

उदाहरण के लिए, ट्राफलगर स्क्वायर (लंदन में) के पास, चार ईंटें प्रदर्शित हैं जिन्हें रोमन-युग की सड़क के अवशेष के रूप में वर्णित किया गया है जो सीवर निर्माण के दौरान उजागर हो गई थी। जब नई दिल्ली बनी (20वीं सदी की शुरुआत में) तो यहां सेंट्रल विस्टा के लिए करीब 300 कुएं और बावड़ियां तोड़ दी गईं।"

उन्होंने कहा कि "125 वर्ष से अधिक पुरानी किसी भी संरचना को संरक्षित किया जाना चाहिए। यह महत्वपूर्ण है या नहीं इसका निर्णय केवल विशेषज्ञ ही कर सकते हैं, नौकरशाह नहीं।"
https://janchowk.com/zaruri-khabar/asi-protected-historical-and-archaeological-buildings-are-going-missing/

2. Pension Scheme Dilemma: OPS is fiscally unstable while NPS needs more strengthening *(moneycontrol.com)* DECEMBER 14, 2023

The primary task is to take the four states – Rajasthan, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, and Himachal – which implemented OPS between 2022 and 2023, back to NPS. This is easier said than done

The recent election results proved the futility of the roll-back of the pension reforms for government employees, in electoral politics. Congress lost both Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh, despite reintroducing the defined-benefit, pay commission-linked, old pension scheme (OPS). Prime Minister Narendra Modi's BJP opposed the move and they won both states.

Ideally, that should create a consensus among political parties to avoid this suicidal path. Anticipatedly, AAP and, Congress may now soft pedal on implementing the election promise for OPS in Punjab and Karnataka, respectively.

But that may not be sufficient to seal the deal for the market-linked, defined-contribution-based National Pension System (NPS), introduced in 2004.

Not An Easy Task

The primary task is to take the four states – Rajasthan, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, and Himachal – which implemented OPS between 2022 and 2023, back to NPS. This is theoretically easy.

With NPS infrastructure in place and the legacy contributions locked with the central authorities; pension accounts can go live by a simple executive order. States can deposit the contributions for the paused period to the National Security Depository Limited (NSDL) to square up the accounts.

However, in practice, any such reversal wouldn't be easy, mostly for political reasons.

Both Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh rolled back pension reforms at the beginning of the 2022-23 fiscal year. Over the last one and a half years, they expanded OPS benefits to lakhs of employees in quasi-government organisations like universities, corporations, boards etc.

In Rajasthan over 1400 employees who joined service after 2004 (when NPS came into effect) and retired after April 2022 (when the state exited NPS), were granted pension under OPS. Also, some post-2004 recruits, who retired between 2004 and 2022, had refunded the NPS benefits to avail of OPS.

It means the lobby for OPS is now much bigger than it was, in Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh. Naturally, return to market-linked reforms will face maximum resistance from both the states.

Jharkhand implemented the scheme in October 2022. Himachal did so early this year. So, they may face fewer problems in re-migrating to NPS. Punjab notified the return to OPS but did not notify the rules. Karnataka is yet to notify rollback of pension reforms. These two states are, therefore, saved from the destruction.

It is not clear, how the dice will roll. However, one can safely assume that it would be extremely courageous even for the new BJP governments in Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh to announce re-migration to NPS, on their own, ahead of the 2024 Lok Sabha election.

Reform Opportunity

Ideally, everyone should wait for a divine intervention from the Centre, which will have its own set of complications and opportunities, to clear the mess.

For the federal government, the task at hand is to ensure that such a circus is not repeated any time in the future. The precedence created by Congress and followed by AAP is dangerous for the fiscal reforms and may be revived with the change in government.

It is also necessary to force states like West Bengal and Tamil Nadu to undergo pension reforms. According to a recent RTI reply by the Pension Fund Regulatory and the Development Authority (PFRDA), both states notified NPS only for all India services.

Tamil Nadu was the first state to get out of OPS around 2003, during the Jaylalitha rule. In those days, NPS architecture was under construction and, states were allowed to keep the employees' and employer's contributions in personal deposit (PD) funds in the treasuries.

After the creation of due infrastructure, by the Manmohan Singh government, states transferred the funds to National Pension System Trust for investments in market-linked instruments.

Tamil Nadu avoided joining the Trust-operated investment activities. They used the pension funds to boost their cash flow.

According to the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG), as of 2021-22, the funds retained by Tamil Nadu earned four to five percent interest from LIC and treasury bills. In comparison, professionally driven NPS earned an average of 9.5-10 percent.

The CAG held that Tamil Nadu had to pay 2.2 percent from its pocket to pay general provident fund comparable return (7.1 percent) to employees. To look at it from the state government's perspective, they enjoyed access to cash at rock bottom interest.

Employees are the ultimate losers as they will go home with lower returns than available through market investments. This is a blatant misuse of power by the state to cover up its poor finances.

West Bengal is the worst. The Marxist government of the past denied front-ending pension expenditure and bringing accounts in order. Leftist employee associations were happy to get OPS. The state kept delaying the release of dearness allowances to restrict running expenditures. Employees missed the best of either side.

The Mamata Banerjee government follows the same policy. To add, the state has almost stopped recruitment. The vacancies are filled by lowly paid contractual staff (who are bound to be more loyal to the party). Even the sensitive home department is full of them.

There are also anomalies in pension contributions. Many states, like Rajasthan, did not abide by the central formula for 14 percent contribution by the state and 10 percent by the employees. Media reports claim many states are irregular in depositing contributions to the NPS authorities.

Who Will Bell The Cat?

To cut the long story short, the NPS story is in a mess. While hapless state employees blame it on the 'market' for insufficient returns, which keeps the myth of OPS alive, the truth might be lying elsewhere.

The irresponsible act of Congress and other parties in the (now-belied) hope for votes, not only added to the mess but, also created an opportunity for a goods and services tax (GST) like reform to strengthen the decades-old fiscal and administrative reforms agenda.

OPS is no solution. It's a threat to the nation's fiscal stability. But, NPS must be strengthened and should be made mandatory. The question is who will bell the cat and when? https://www.moneycontrol.com/news/opinion/pension-scheme-dilemma-ops-is-fiscally-unstable-while-nps-needs-more-strengthening-11902461.html

3. India is increasing medical institutes and seats but that will not be enough to improve healthcare *(scroll.in)* 13 Dec 2023

Public and private institutes continue to face a shortage of faculty and specialists as well as inadequate infrastructure.

India added 225 new medical colleges in the last five years, with the total number surging 47% to 704 as of 2023-'24, the Union government told the Lok Sabha in August 2023. Similarly, the number of medical seats grew 61% to 107,950. The number of postgraduate seats also doubled in the country in the last eight years.

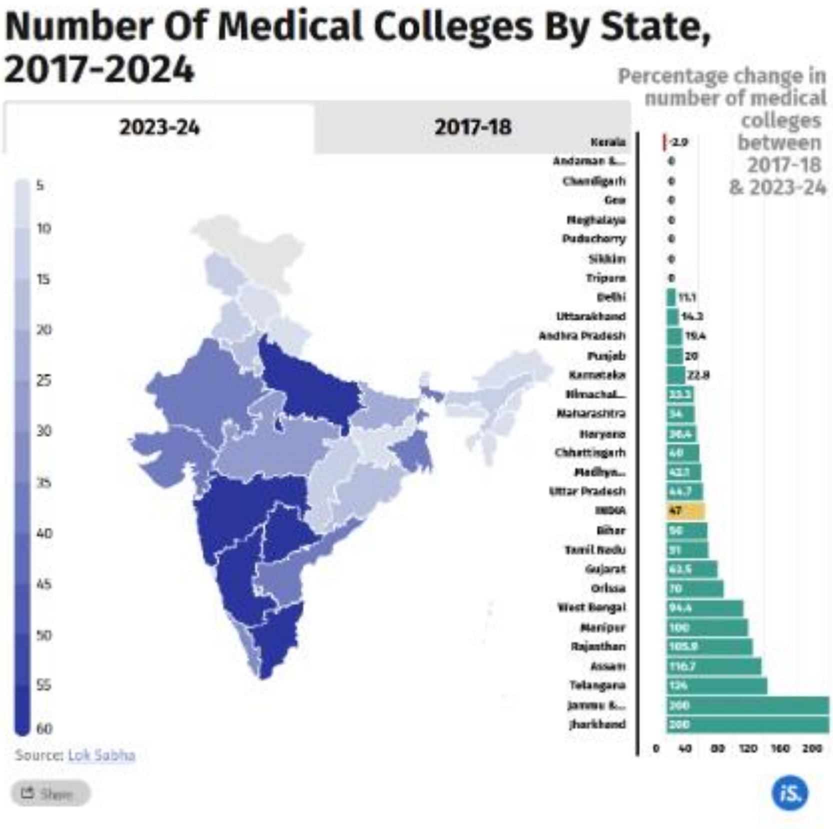
Yet, both public and private institutions continue to face a range of issues including faculty shortages and infrastructure issues, revealed a study on medical education by the Center for Social Economic Progress, a Delhi-based think-tank. The study also highlighted regulatory complexities and budget constraints which impede private-sector involvement in medical education.

India has 0.9 doctors for every 1,000 people, close to the World Health Organization standard of 1:1,000. Yet, the country's secondary care institutions in the public sector have an acute shortage of specialists, data show. Experts call for more investment on medical education, ensuring availability of infrastructure and faculty, and increased participation from the private sector to improve postgraduate medical education in the country, thereby increasing the number of specialists.

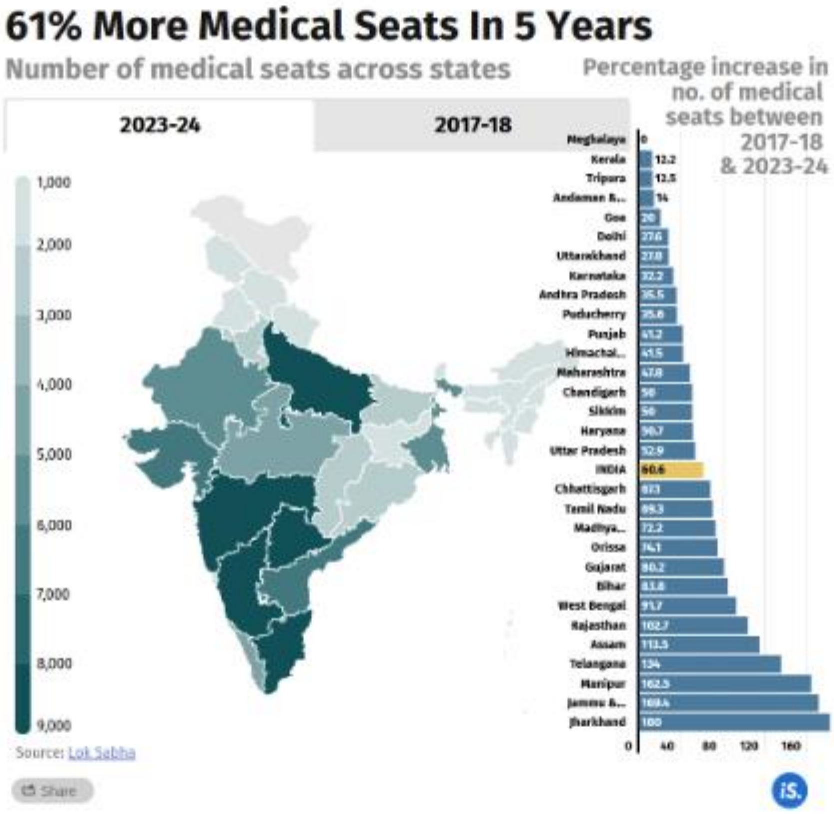
Telangana added 31 colleges
During this period, Telangana added 31 medical colleges–highest among all states–followed by Tamil Nadu, with 25 colleges, and Uttar Pradesh, which added 21 colleges. Jammu and Kashmir and Jharkhand tripled the number of colleges, while Assam, Manipur, Rajasthan and Telangana doubled the number of medical institutions, data show.

Kerala, which has among the best primary healthcare systems in India, had 33 colleges as of 2023-24, down from 34 in 2017-'18.

The top five states – Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra and Telangana – have 47% of all medical colleges, data show. The distribution of medical colleges across states can impact the availability of healthcare services and the quality of medical education in different regions, said the Center for Social Economic Progress study.



The number of seats rose 60.6%, with 4,890 seats added in Telangana – the highest of any Indian state. This was followed by 4,750 more seats in Tamil Nadu and 3,475 in Maharashtra. Six states – Assam, Jammu and Kashmir, Jharkhand, Manipur, Rajasthan and Telangana – have more than double the number of seats as they did five years ago, data show.



Over the last decade, the number of medical colleges and seats has increased primarily due to the growth of government medical colleges and the relaxation of norms for setting up new medical colleges, according to the Center for Social Economic Progress study.

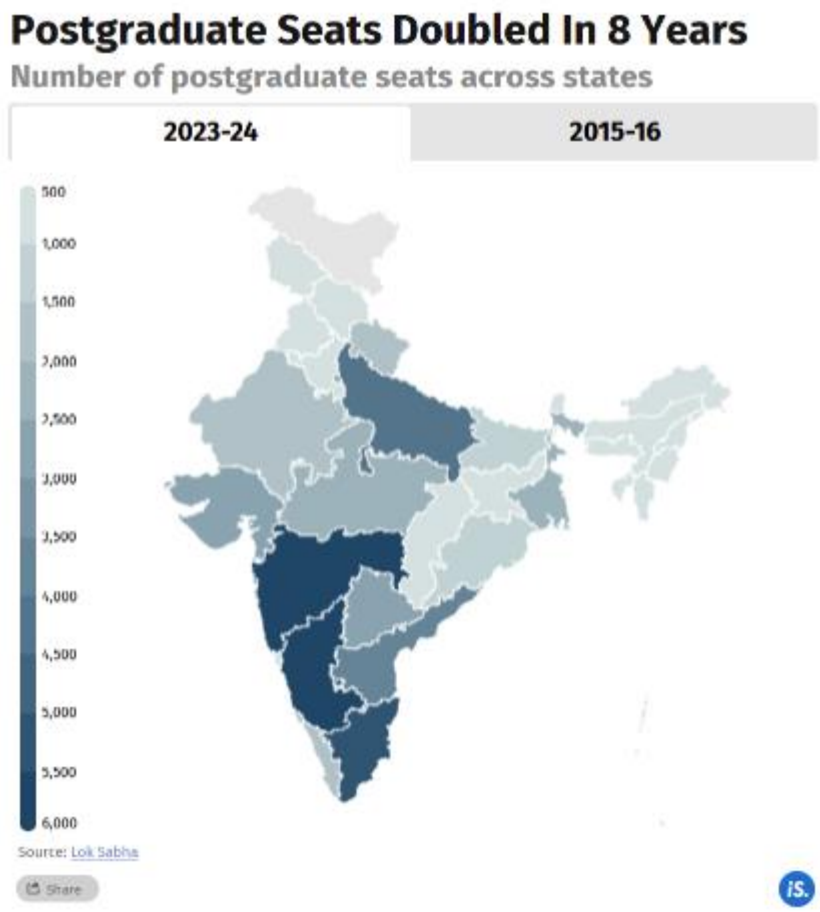
Further, the increase in seats in both public and private colleges at the undergraduate level was higher than the rate of expansion of medical colleges, the study noted, indicating "that at least part of this expansion was on account of the relaxation of existing norms, thus enabling higher student intake, without any real augmenting of accompanying physical and human infrastructure".

Despite the increase in medical seats, availability of medical seats remains a key concern in India, as per the study by the Center for Social Economic Progress. In 2022, 1.76 million aspirants appeared for the National Eligibility cum Entrance Test, or NEET, a national pre-medical entrance examination. While 56.3% candidates qualified, according to data from the National Testing Agency responsible for conducting NEET, only 12% secured a seat in a medical college, the study noted.

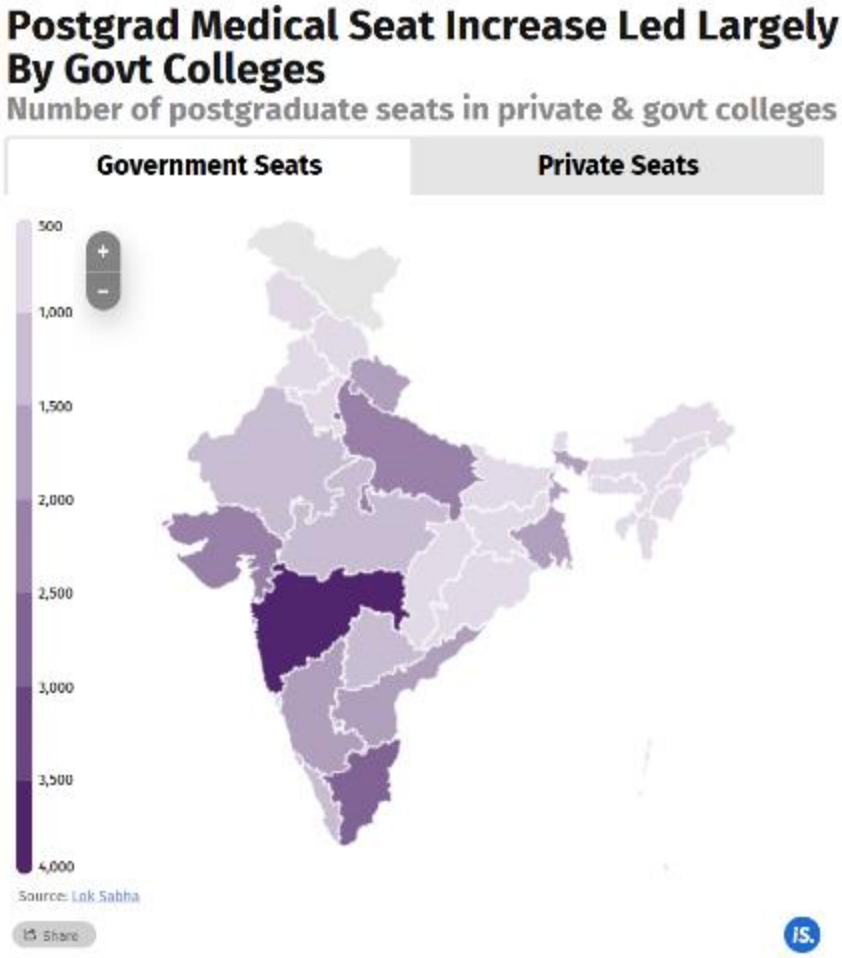
Further, availability of specialists remains a key concern. Non-communicable diseases, which often require specialist care, account for two-thirds of India's deaths. The estimated deaths due to non-communicable diseases increased from 37.9% in 1990 to 61.8% in 2016, as per data from the health ministry, emphasising the need for specialists.

From 2005 to 2021, specialist shortfalls at community health centres – the secondary level of healthcare which tend to patients referred from primary health centres –

increased from 46% to 80%, the study noted. Specialist production depends on factors like medical colleges, teaching faculty, and available seats, but detailed data are lacking, it said. Government data show that the number of postgraduate seats in the country doubled – from 25,850 in 2015-'16 to 52,935 in 2023-'24.



Most of this increase has been in the government medical colleges. Public colleges contribute more to PG seat expansion, with private colleges favouring Diplomate of National Board seats. The government introduced the Diplomate of National Board course in 1975 to address the shortage of doctors and teaching faculty. The Diplomate of National Board focuses on practical training, and currently contributes 19.7% of the all PG seat pool, with 67% of the DNB seats in the private sector.



The postgraduate-to-undergraduate seat ratio in India is 0.67:1, which is low in comparison with other countries such as China (1.01), the United States (1.85) and the United Kingdom (5.98), the study noted. This is coupled with a rise in vacant seats at the postgraduate level.

These vacant seats are often in fields with historically low demand and limited student interest, and typically include non-clinical and pre-clinical fields such as pharmacology, anatomy, physiology, biochemistry and microbiology, the study noted. “While most MBBS seats are occupied, a sizable number of seats remain vacant at the PG level,” said Khushboo Balani, a research associate and one of the authors of the study. “Demand plays a crucial role, and low-demand PG seats may remain unfilled or even be given away at a reduced cost, while high-demand seats remain inadequate.”

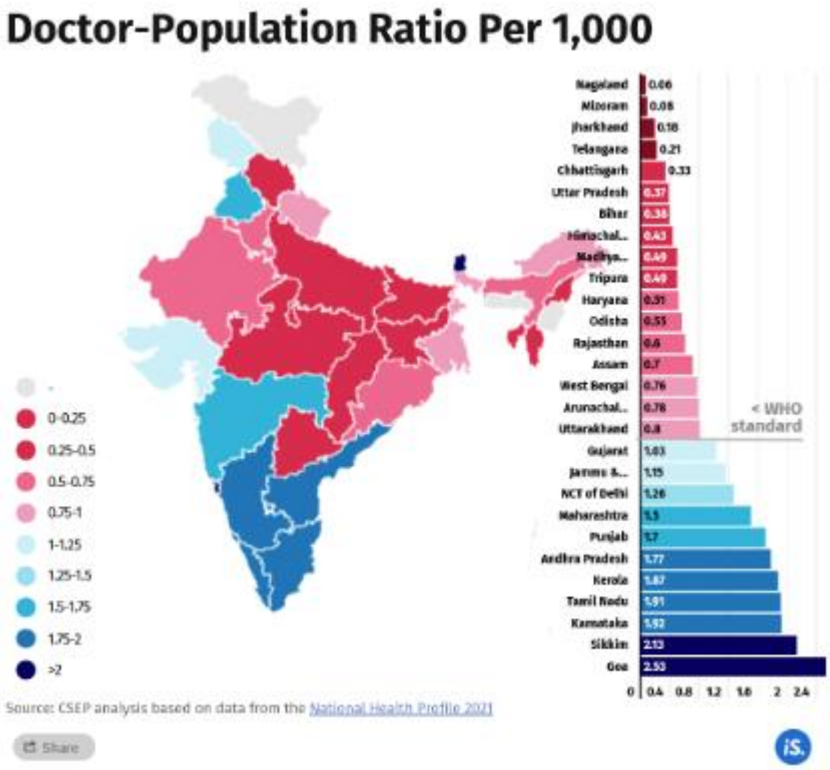
IndiaSpend has reached out to the offices of Mansukh Mandaviya, India’s health minister, Amit Biswas, undersecretary for medical education, and Chandan Kumar, under secretary for medical education for comment on the faculty shortages in indian medical colleges and how the government plans to address specialist shortage in the public health system in India. We will update the story when we receive a response.

Doctor-population ratio

At 0.92 doctors per 1,000 population, the number of MBBS doctor supply is close to the World Health Organization guideline of 1 doctor per 1,000 people, as per the

National Health Profile 2021. This ratio varies significantly across states. Goa has the highest doctor-population ratio at 2.53 doctors per 1,000 people, followed by Sikkim at 2.13. Karnataka and Tamil Nadu had ratios of 1.92 and 1.91, respectively. In contrast, states such as Bihar and Uttar Pradesh had lower ratios of 0.38 and 0.37, respectively.

“While government colleges do improve local availability, due to their bond requirements, the larger problem of overall doctor availability remains unaddressed. In essence, establishing a medical college in an under-resourced area doesn’t assure enhanced local availability,” said Balani.



The doctor-population ratio in India improved from 0.66 in 2010 to 0.9 in 2019, but much of this increase is driven by select states, the study noted. Factors like per capita income, state-specific policies, and retention incentives for doctors play substantial roles and state-specific incentives and disincentives further influence doctor availability, the study noted.

Experts also point to the fact that doctors refuse to move to rural areas due to bad living conditions and expensive education. The rural doctor shortage is not primarily about supply; we are producing enough doctors, said Rakhal Gaitonde, professor of public health at the Sree Chitra Tirunal Institute for Medical Sciences and Technology. “The core problem is that many doctors opt against practising in rural areas for various reasons. These encompass concerns about the quality of education for their children (and the quality of education in general), limited professional networks, feelings of isolation, and inadequate preparation during their education,” said Gaitonde.

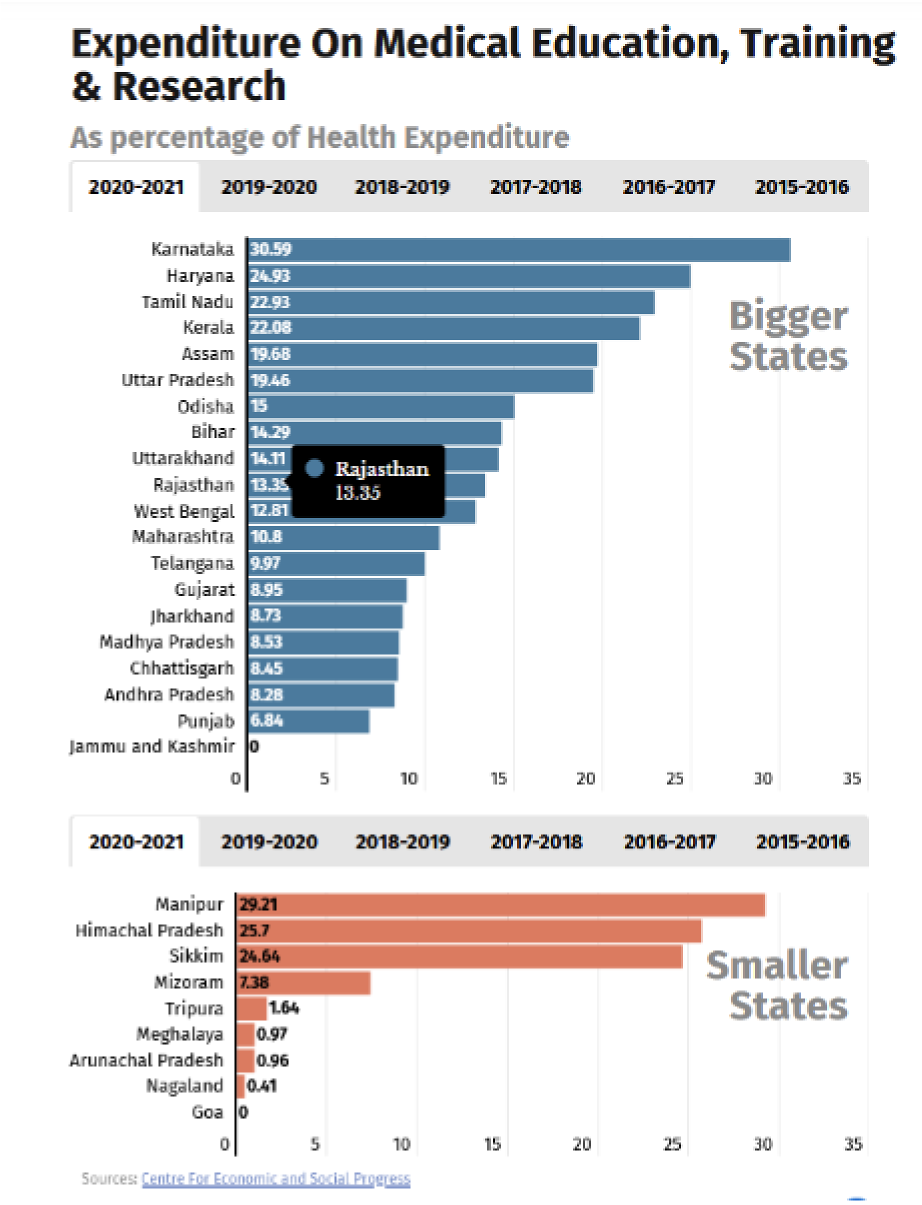
Reasons for shortage

a. Funding for medical education

The expenditure on medical education, training, and research as a percentage of total health expenditure varied significantly across Indian states between 2015-’16 and 2020-’21, the study found, based on data from the Combined Finances reports of the Comptroller and Auditor General.

For instance, Andhra Pradesh saw fluctuations from 8.28% to 12.23%, while Arunachal Pradesh experienced a wide range from 0.96% to 16.76%. States like Karnataka consistently invested a significant proportion, increasing from 27.04% to 30.59%. These figures reflect the diverse priorities and resource allocations for medical education across the country, as IndiaSpend reported in May 2022.

The health sector budget has been growing slowly, said Sandhya Venkateswaran, senior fellow at the Center for Social Economic Progress. “It is important to consider not only the overall health budget but also how it is allocated, including the budget for medical education. The persistent gaps in the healthcare workforce have been a concern for years, yet the budget for medical education hasn’t seen any substantial increase.”

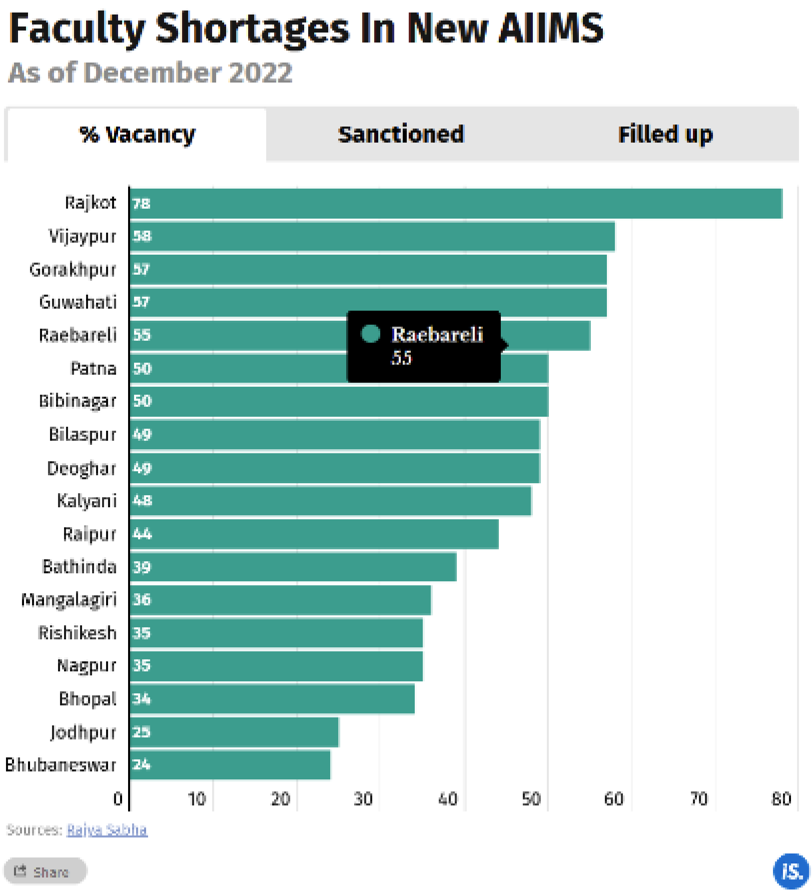


The study found a strong and linear correlation between state-level spending on medical education and seats at government medical colleges. Assuming that the impact of spending will be seen with a lag, the authors looked at spending in 2014-'15 and available seats in 2018-'19. States like Nagaland and Sikkim did not have government medical college seats despite spending on medical education, the study found. In contrast, Goa, spending Rs 606 per capita (4.6 times the national average), had one medical college with 0.1 seats per 1,000 population.

There is high investment, low returns and long gestation period because medical colleges are resource-intensive and require substantial infrastructure, said Gaitonde. "Larger states with fiscal capacity are better equipped to make such investments since it takes several years to produce the first doctors and see returns on investment. The interplay of supply and demand, along with fiscal capacity, drives the growth of medical colleges."

Lack of teachers, faculty and patients
Despite expansion efforts, both old and new medical institutions, including 11 of 18 operational AIIMS, grapple with severe teaching faculty shortages, resulting in high teacher-student ratios exceeding the recommended 1:2 or 1:3, the study found.

Additionally, there has been a reduction in sanctioned teaching posts and increased vacancy rates. These faculty shortages are more pronounced in public institutions compared to private ones. Newly established AIIMS-like institutions also face resource overburdening due to high student-teacher ratios, the study found. Student-teacher ratios vary from 2:1 in Bilaspur to 5.4:1 in Gorakhpur, the government told Lok Sabha in December 2022.



Gaitonde stressed the need for a more holistic approach instead of looking to build a medical college to solve the problems of medical education. He stressed on the need for well-qualified faculty, support staff, and comprehensive planning, and financial incentives in drawing doctors from the private sector, and suggested that to retain quality medical professionals in public sector medical colleges, appropriate incentives should be provided.

The study identified complex hiring processes and administrative issues as the main reasons for these vacancies. In contrast, private colleges tend to have lower vacancy rates due to the risks associated with derecognition. “A fundamental structural problem is the opportunity cost of teaching compared to practising. This factor often discourages doctors from transitioning to teaching roles, demanding attention to find innovative solutions to incentives for teaching faculty," said Venkateswaran of the Center for Social Economic Progress.

Public vs private

Private colleges have more undergraduate medical seats than government colleges, as we said above. However, experts believe that private colleges can also help bridge the demand-supply gaps when it comes to specialists, which requires high investments.

Amrita Agrawal, visiting fellow at the Center for Social Economic Progress, stressed that the challenge becomes more prominent when dealing with specialist training, which demands more elaborate infrastructure. She also pointed out that "localising production does not necessarily equate to an increase in the local availability of specialists due to inter-state migration".

"Most private sector seat capacity is concentrated in developed Southern states, highlighting the supply and demand dynamics that drive private sector expansion. However, we have seen doctors graduating from some southern states with large private medical seats migrating to other parts of India," said Agrawal. https://scroll.in/article/1060002/india-is-increasing-medical-institutes-and-seats-but-that-will-not-be-enough-to-improve-healthcare

STATES NEWS ITEMS

4. 13-12-CMDA makes and unmakes masterplans *(timesofindia.indiatimes.com)* Dec 14, 2023

Chennai: The Chennai Metropolitan Development Agency (CMDA) that draws 'masterplan' for the city, is the same agency that also permits conversion of waterbodies and farmlands for residential and commercial development under the guise of 'reclassification'.

While the Town and Country Planning Act allows modification of the master plan, it cannot be done for individual survey numbers.

However, CMDA misinterprets sub-section 4 of Section 32 of Town and Country Planning Act and reclassifies individual survey numbers. Result: Multi-storied buildings are standing deep inside waterbodies and agricultural lands.

"The CMDA should review the master plan and ensure proper utilization of already declared residential areas. Only if it is fully developed, should they accept reclassification of other survey numbers within a given area to improve housing stock. Otherwise, reclassification in that area should be discouraged," said N V Rakhunath, retired Chief Planner, CMDA.

CMDA is guilty of another deceit as well: The entire 'reclassification' process is a sham and non-transparent. Once in a while, the reclassification notification is published in a few newspapers. But there is no information on how many people have objected to the proposal.

Experts also blame the CMDA for shrinking water bodies through Eri schemes that led to massive 2015 floods. The 2017 Comptroller and Auditor General of India report on performance audit of flood management and response in Chennai and its suburban areas pointed out that the builtup area in CMA increased from 90.88sqkm in 1979 to 541.14sqkm in 2016. Correspondingly, while the water bodies came down from 100.98sqkm to 91.31sqkm, the extent of green cover and vegetation too shrank from 548.53sqkm to 442.43sqkm.

David Manohar, an Arappor Iyakkam activist, opposed reclassification of land use saying the practice would continue to adversely impact spread of waterbodies, more so if the reclassification process is not transparent. “In November 2022, the CMDA approved a proposal to reclassify six acres of land in Nandambakkam, a floodplain, as a residential and institutional zone. This inspite of the fact that the area was the most-affected in 2015 deluge,” he said.

D S Sivasamy, retired additional director, municipal administration, said the CMDA should first notify flood plains, wetlands, catchment, buffer zones of ecologically sensitive areas in the expanded CMA in the Third Master Plan. No development should be allowed in these areas. “Any proposal for reclassification of such areas should be rejected at the local body level itself. It should not be forwarded to CMDA,” he said.
https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/chennai/13-12-cmda-makes-and-unmakes-masterplans/articleshow/105970702.cms

5. चेन्नई में इस बार साइक्लोन भले ही अलग हो, मुश्किलें अब भी वही पुरानी हैं *(bhaskar.com)* 14 Dec 2023

चेन्नई और उसके पड़ोसी जिलों में 3-4 दिसंबर को साइक्लोन मिचौंग के कारण हुई भारी बारिश ने एक बार फिर शहरी सिस्टम का सच बता दिया है।

चेन्नई के दक्षिणी और उत्तरी क्षेत्रों में भयंकर बाढ़ आई और ये दोनों हिस्से एकमात्र अपवाद थे, उसके अलावा पड़ोसी जिले कांचीपुरम, चेंगलपट्टू और तिरुवल्लूर बाढ़ से समान रूप से प्रभावित हुए।

बारिश का ये दौर 2015 की बारिश से भी भारी था, लेकिन शहर में कुछ खास बातें अब भी वैसी ही लगती हैं। उदाहरण के लिए, वेलाचेरी में, जो हाल के वर्षों में बहुत लोकप्रिय इलाका है, चाहे वो हो या तमिलनाडु के पुराने औद्योगिक एस्टेटों में से एक, अंबत्तूर इंडस्ट्रियल एस्टेट इनमें, थोड़ा बदलाव आया है।

उन क्षेत्रों में जनता नाराज थी, जहां राहत कार्य, बिजली आपूर्ति और इंटरनेट सहित सेवाओं की बहाली, और सैनिटरी नैपकिन जैसी जरूरी चीजों की जरूरत थी।

2015 की चेन्नई बाढ़ पर नियंत्रक एवं महालेखा परीक्षक (CAG) की 2017 की रिपोर्ट में बताया गया कि जलाशय से 21 घंटे तक लगातार 29,000 क्यूसेक पानी छोड़ा गया था। इसके साथ ही अपस्ट्रीम टैंकों और जलग्रहण क्षेत्रों से अधिशेष पानी के कारण बाढ़ का पानी अड्यार नदी में प्रवाहित होने लगा।

अपना आधा कार्यकाल पूरा कर चुकी द्रमुक (DMK) सरकार ने दावा किया है कि इस बार स्थिति से निपटने में फर्क आया है। इसने इस स्थिति में अपना पक्ष समझाने के लिए ₹4,000 करोड़ की तूफान जल निकासी परियोजना के पूरे होने का हवाला भी दिया है।

मुख्यमंत्री एम.के. स्टालिन ने चार जिलों में साइक्लोन प्रभावित प्रत्येक परिवार को ₹6,000 के वितरण की घोषणा करने में कोई समय नहीं गंवाया। जाहिर तौर पर इस आलोचना के जवाब में NGO ने कहा राहत प्रयासों में उतना भाग नहीं लिया, जितना उन्हें लेना चाहिए था, सरकार ने घोषणा की कि इन सेवाओं को प्रसारित करने के लिए एक प्रणाली मौजूद है।

अन्नाद्रमुक महासचिव एडप्पादी के. पलानीस्वामी ने तूफान जल निकासी परियोजना कर प्रभाव पर शक जताया है, और इसके पूरे श्वेत पत्र की मांग की है, और यह भी मांग की है कि राहत राशि दोगुनी की जाए।

हालांकि, कुछ लोगों का मानना है कि ऐसा देखा गया है कि विपक्षी दल ने अपनी उपस्थिति बनाए रखने में बहुत कम काम किया है।

वर्तमान स्थिति की एक सकारात्मक विशेषता यह है कि केंद्र और राज्य सरकारों के बीच सुचारू कामकाजी संबंध हैं। यह खुशी की बात है, क्योंकि सनातन धर्म पर द्रमुक के बयानों पर विवाद के बाद से भाजपा और द्रमुक के बीच संबंध विशेष रूप से निचले स्तर पर हैं।

कई केंद्रीय एजेंसियां इस संकट को कम करने के प्रयासों में शामिल थीं, रक्षा मंत्री ने चेन्नई का दौरा किया और गृह मंत्री ने घोषणा की कि बाढ़ से संबंधित कार्यों के लिए धन आवंटित किया जाएगा अगले कुछ हफ्तों में सभी प्रभावित क्षेत्रों में स्थिति सामान्य हो जाएगी।

लेकिन जन-उत्साही व्यक्ति और नागरिक समाज समूह मांग कर रहे हैं कि निरंतर तरीके से कदम उठाए जाएं ताकि सरकार ऐसे संकट के लिए तैयार रहे और बाढ़ की समस्या का स्थायी समाधान खोजा जा सके, क्या किया जाना चाहिए इस पर बहुत सारे केस अध्ययन मौजूद हैं।

पिछले कुछ वर्षों में, 'नियमितीकरण योजनाओं' के नाम पर अस्वीकृत लेआउट को लापरवाही से अनुमति दी गई है। इस सोच को रोकने की जरूरत है।

अधिकारियों के लिए जल निकायों और पल्लीकरनई दलदल जैसे प्राकृतिक आर्द्रभूमि का उचित रखरखाव करना जरूरी है।

नागरिकों को लगता है कि दलदल, जो 5,000 हेक्टेयर से घटकर लगभग 700 हेक्टेयर रह गया है, अगर पास के पेरुंगुडी डंपिंग यार्ड में बायोमाइनिंग प्रोजेक्ट में तेजी लाई जाए, तो ये शहर के लिए स्पंज के रूप में ज्यादा काम कर सकता है।

सरकार को इस मामले पर सीधी बहस तय करने के अलावा, चेन्नई बाढ़ आपदा शमन और प्रबंधन पर पूर्व सिविल सेवक वी. थिरुप्पुगाज़ की अध्यक्षता वाली समिति के निष्कर्षों को भी बताना चाहिए।

अब समय आ गया है कि सरकार मध्य तमिलनाडु में कावेरी डेल्टा के उपजाऊ हिस्सों में दूसरी राजधानी या वैकल्पिक राजधानी विकसित करने के विचार पर विचार करे। https://www.bhaskar.com/career/news/this-time-the-cyclone-may-be-different-in-chennai-but-the-problems-in-its-areas-are-still-the-same-read-the-hindu-editorial-of-13-december-132285567.html

6. पीएम आवास योजना: बिहार के 10 जिलों में जांच, ऐसे ऐसों को 'लिफ्ट' कराया कि पूछिए मत *(navbharattimes.indiatimes.com)*

Updated: 14 Dec 2023

Bihar PM Awas Yojana Reality Check: बिहार में पीएम आवास योजना की सच्चाई जानने के लिए एक जांच की गई। इस जांच में जो बातें सामंने आईं, उसे जान कर सरकार भी हैरान रह गई। इस योजना का लाभ ऐसे लोगों को दिया गया जो इसके योग्य ही नहीं थे। और जो योग्य थे, उन्हें अंगूठा दिखा दिया गया। ये जांच सीतामढ़ी समेत बिहार के कुल 10 जिलों में की गई थी।

सीतामढ़ी: बिहार में पीएम आवास योजना ग्रामीण की धरातल पर क्या हाल है, इसकी जांच हुई है। जांच में जो सच्चाई सामने आई है, उसे जानकर सरकार हैरान है। महालेखाकार, बिहार ने अपनी टीम से 10 जिलों में पीएम आवास योजना ग्रामीण की सच्चाई का पता लगाया है। पाया गया है कि एक-दो नहीं बल्कि कई गड़बड़ियां है। इसकी रिपोर्ट मिलते ही राज्य सरकार ने सभी डीएम और डीडीसी को पता चली गड़बड़ियों से अवगत कराया है और मार्गदर्शिका के अनुरूप उक्त योजना का कार्यान्वयन कराने की बात कही है। ये मामला जान कर आप भी हैरान रह जाएंगे।

जांच में मिली गजब की गड़बड़ियां

पीएम आवास योजना ग्रामीण की योजना की धरातल पर हाल, अभिलेख एवं आवास सॉफ्ट पर रहे आंकड़ों के आधार पर जांच/अंकेक्षण में पाया गया है कि उक्त योजना को लेकर वार्षिक कार्य योजना का निर्धारण नहीं किया जाता है। इससे लक्ष्य की प्राप्ति में कठिनाई होती है। योजना में पारदर्शिता लाने को चयनित लोगों की सूची पंचायत भवन पर प्रदर्शित की जानी है, पर नहीं की जाती है। ग्राम सभा से चयनित की सूची को अनुमोदित करानी है, लेकिन इसकी खानापूर्ति कर ली जाती है। रिपोर्ट के अनुसार, सीतामढ़ी के बैरगनिया प्रखंड में ऐसा हुआ है कि एक प्रस्ताव में जिस व्यक्ति को योजना के लाभ के अयोग्य करार दिया गया, उसे दूसरे प्रस्ताव में योग्य बता दिया गया।

दिव्यांग को आरक्षण का लाभ नहीं

जांच दल की माने, तो आवास योजना में दिव्यांग को पांच फीसदी का आरक्षण है, जिसे नजरंदाज किया जा रहा है। प्राकृतिक आपदा पीड़ितों को भी आवास का लाभ दिया जाना है, इसका अनुपालन नही किया जा रहा है। भूमिहीनों को वास भूमि उपलब्ध करानी है। जांच में पाया गया है कि भूमि के लिए राशि दे दी गई और वास भूमि का निबंधन कराए बिना लाभुकों को आवास की राशि दे दी गई। हद तो यह कि सूची को भंग कर भी कई लाभुकों को योजना का लाभ देने का मामला सामने आया है। ग्रामीण विकास विभाग के सचिव ने कहा है कि प्रतीक्षा सूची में यदि अवयस्क सदस्य का नाम शामिल हो, तो आवास की स्वीकृति के पूर्व प्रखंड स्तर से इसकी जांच करा ले कि परिवार में कोई वयस्क सदस्य तो नहीं है। वयस्क सदस्य नहीं होने और लाभुक के योग्य होने पर उन्हें अभिभावक के साथ संयुक्त रूप से सहायता राशि का भुगतान किया जाये।

राशि लेकर भी वास भूमि क्रय नही

महालेखाकार की टीम ने दस जिलों में पाया कि गरीब लोगों को वास भूमि क्रय को राशि दी गई, तो विलंब से क्रय किया अथवा क्रय किया ही नहीं। ऐसा अनुश्रवण के अभाव में हो रहा है। राज्य सरकार ने कहा है कि जो लाभुक वास भूमि क्रय नहीं करते है, उनसे राशि की वसूली की कार्रवाई करें। साथ ही भूमि निबंधन के बाद ही पीएम आवास योजना की स्वीकृति दी जाए। इधर, पता चला है कि आवास के योग्य गरीबों का नाम आवास सॉफ्ट ऐप पर अपलोड नहीं होने के कारण वो फायदे से वंचित रह गए हैं। रिपोर्ट में अयोग्य व्यक्तियों को भी योजना का लाभ देने पर सवाल खड़ा किया गया है। महिला सदस्य के नाम पर आवास की स्वीकृति देने की बात कही गई है। कई जिलों में इसका अनुपालन नहीं किया जा रहा है। इस तरह की और भी कई गड़बड़ियां पकड़ी गई हैं। https://navbharattimes.indiatimes.com/state/bihar/sitamarhi/bihar-pm-awas-yojana-reality-check-by-cag-and-found-many-irregularities-in-bihar/articleshow/105975347.cms

SELECTED NEWS ITEMS/ARTICLES FOR READING

7. Reverting to OPS will put huge burden on states' finances: RBI

(tribuneindia.com) Dec 14, 2023

A Reserve Bank of India report has said reverting to the DA-linked Old Pension Scheme (OPS) will exert huge pressure on states' finances and restrict their capacity to undertake developmental expenditure.

The governments of Rajasthan, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Punjab, and Himachal Pradesh have informed the Central government and Pension Fund Regulatory and Development Authority (PFRDA) about their decision to revert to OPS for their state government employees. These state governments have requested for withdrawal or refund of their contribution to the Centre.

"Internal estimates suggest if all the state governments revert to the OPS from the National Pension System (NPS), the cumulative fiscal burden could be as high as 4.5 times that of NPS, with the additional burden reaching 0.9% of GDP annually by 2060," the report said.

"Thus, any reversion to OPS by the states will be a major step backwards, undermining the benefits of past reforms and compromising the interest of future generations. Any further provision of non-merit goods and services, subsidies, transfers and guarantees will render their fiscal situation precarious and disrupt the overall fiscal consolidation achieved in the past two years," it said.

This will add to the pension burden of older OPS retirees whose last batch is expected to retire by early 2040s and, therefore, draw pension under the OPS till the 2060s. This may have led some states to budget for fiscal deficits above 4% of GSDP in 2023-24 against the all-India average of 3.1%. They also have debt levels exceeding 35% of GSDP against the all-India average of 27.6%.

The RBI's report on 'State Finances: A Study of Budgets of 2023-24' also said the provision of non-merit goods and services, subsidies, transfers and guarantees will render their fiscal situation precarious.

Findings of central bank report

Internal estimates suggest if all the state governments revert to the OPS from the National Pension System (NPS), the cumulative fiscal burden could be as high as 4.5 times that of NPS, with the additional burden reaching 0.9% of GDP annually by 2060.
https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/business/reverting-to-ops-will-put-huge-burden-on-states-finances-rbi-571739

8. RBI study on state budgets: State of finances *(indianexpress.com)* Updated: Dec 13, 2023

Fiscal position of states has improved. However, they must guard against imprudent schemes

The Covid-19 pandemic adversely impacted the fiscal position of both central and state governments. The latter saw their combined fiscal deficit rise to 4.1 per cent of GDP in 2020-21, their debt-to-GDP ratio also went up, as their revenues came under stress, while the pressure to spend rose during this period. However, their fiscal position has since then witnessed considerable improvement, as outlined in a study by the Reserve Bank of India on state budgets. Alongside, states have, aided by the Centre, also tried to maintain a healthy momentum in their capital spending to provide the much-needed fillip to investment activity in the economy.

As per the study, the consolidated fiscal deficit of states fell from 4.1 per cent of GDP in 2020-21 to 2.8 per cent in 2022-23. The deficit in 2022-23 was, in fact, lower than what states had pegged in their budgets as well as the revised estimates. For 2023-24, states have projected their deficits at 3.1 per cent. This, however, is lower than the limit of 3.5 per cent for the year, implying that states are not utilising the entire fiscal space available to them. For the current financial year, states had projected a healthy rise in their revenue receipts. However, data available for the first half of the year shows that their revenue growth has been slightly lower than what they had budgeted for. However, the study notes that while states' revenue expenditure has decelerated (committed expenditure which includes interest payments, pensions etc have been pegged at the same level as last year), capital spending continues to grow at a robust pace. Their capital outlay has risen by a staggering 52.6 per cent, aided by the Centre's assistance for investments. In the Union budget, the central government had provided for a 50-year interest-free loan to states for investments with an outlay of Rs 1.3 lakh crore.

The study, however, lists several challenges for state finances. For one, the decision of some to shift back to the old pension scheme will impose a fiscal burden. This will have implications for the space available to them to allocate more for capital spending. While overall, the fiscal position of states has improved, not all of them have seen such healthy improvements. In fact, some states continue to have significantly higher debt and deficit levels. In such states, as well as others, the inclination of political parties to announce fiscally imprudent schemes, especially in the run-up to elections, can only worsen matters. These need to be guarded against. https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/editorials/express-view-on-rbi-study-on-state-budgets-state-of-finances-9067313/

9. Twelve of 31 states, UTs project debt more than 35% of GSDP at FY24 end *(business-standard.com)* Updated: Dec 13, 2023

More than 33 per cent of India's constituent units, the states and Union Territories with legislature, have projected their debt to cross 35 per cent of their respective gross state domestic product (GSDP) at the end of 2023-24.

Twelve states -- Arunachal Pradesh, Bihar, Goa, Himachal Pradesh, Kerala, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Punjab, Rajasthan, and West Bengal -- have caught the eye of the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) because of their fiscal mismanagement.

The RBI in its latest annual publication has warned that any additional allocation for non-merit goods and services, subsidies, transfers, and guarantees could jeopardise the fragile fiscal situation of these states, potentially disrupting the fiscal consolidation achieved over the past two years.

These states have projected their fiscal deficit surpassing 4 per cent of their respective GSDP this financial year.

None of the Union Territories has projected its debt to cross 35 per cent of GSDP. If these -- Jammu and Kashmir, Delhi, and Puducherry -- are taken out of the list, 42 per cent may have their debts above 35 per cent of respective GSDP at the end of this financial year.

However, the number of states having this high proportion of debt has come down since Covid-hit 2020-21. Sixteen states had this kind of high debt at the end of FY21. That came down to 13 the next year. Now, it is 12, according to the Revised Estimates for 2022-23 and Budget Estimates for 2023-24.

Andhra Pradesh, Jharkhand, Tripura, and Uttar Pradesh are no longer in this category. But all of them barring Uttar Pradesh have projected their debt to cross 30 per cent of GSDP at the end of the current financial year. Uttar Pradesh has projected bringing it down to 28.6 per cent in FY24 from 30.7 per cent a year ago.

Collectively all states and Union Territories have projected their debt-GSDP ratio to inch up to 27.6 per cent at the end of 2023-24 as against 27.5 per cent in 2022-23 (Revised Estimates).

High debt eats into the resources of states, leaving little for capital expenditure. For instance, Punjab has projected interest payments constituting 22.2 per cent of its revenue receipts this financial year. For West Bengal it is 20.11 per cent, for Kerala 19.47 per cent, for Himachal Pradesh 14.6 per cent, and for Rajasthan 13.8 per cent.

It is not that only the poor states have high debt in proportion to their GSDP. Goa, which has the highest per capita income in the country, has projected its debt-GSDP ratio at 38.3 per cent at the end of 2023-24. The projected ratio is higher than the 35.2 per cent at the end of even the Covid-struck year of 2020-21.

Among Union Territories, Jammu and Kashmir and Puducherry have projected their debt to cross 30 per cent at the end 2023-24. With elections yet to be held in the former, it is the Centre which presents the Budget for it. Delhi is an outlier since it projected just debt to be 1.7 per cent of its GSDP at the end of 2023-24.

The RBI's report -- State Finances: A Study of Budgets – has highlighted the medium-term challenges to fiscal sustainability and underscored the risks associated with some states contemplating a return to the old pension scheme (OPS).

It has warned such a shift could impose a substantial burden on state finances, limiting their capacity to undertake growth-enhancing capital expenditure.

The central bank's estimates suggest that if all states revert to the OPS from the National Pension System (NPS), the cumulative fiscal burden could balloon to 4.5 times that of the NPS with an additional burden of 0.9 per cent of GDP annually by 2060.

Of the 12 states, Rajasthan and Himachal Pradesh have reverted to the OPS, while Punjab is in the process of doing so. https://www.business-standard.com/economy/news/twelve-of-31-states-uts-project-debt-more-than-35-of-gsdp-at-fy24-end-123121300819_1.html

10. Defence Ministry approves Rs 2800 crore rockets for Pinaka weapon system *(economictimes.indiatimes.com)* Updated: Dec 13, 2023

In a major boost for the Indian Army, the Defence Ministry has approved a Rs 2,800 crore proposal for buying around 6,400 rockets for Pinaka multibarrel rocketlauncher systems.

The Defence Ministry's Defence Acquisition Council's recent meeting had cleared the proposal for the acquisition of two types of these rockets, known as Area Denial Munition Type 2 and Type-3, defence sources told ANI.

The rockets would be procured by the Indian Army from indigenous sources only and two main contenders include the Economic Explosives Limited of Solar Industries and the Munitions India Limited-- one of the ammunitionproducing companies created by the corporatisation of the erstwhile Ordnance Factories, they said.

The Indian-made Pinaka weapon system, named after the bow of Hindu god Shiva, has been developed by the Defence Research and Development Organisation.

The weapon system is one of the first few Indian military terms to have been exported to foreign countries, including Armenia.

Private sector companies involved in the project include Larsen & Toubro, Tata Defence and Economic Explosives Limited have set up production lines for the Pinaka system that are being supplied in bulk to the armed forces.

As part of larger artillery modernisation plans, the army has a requirement of 22 regiments of the Pinaka MBRL.

Pinaka regiments of the Indian Army include launchers with automated gun aiming and positioning systems and command posts.

The trials of the Pinaka rockets have also been conducted recently by the forces in Pokharan firing ranges in Rajasthan and multiple successful test firings have been carried out during these tests. https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/defence-ministry-approves-rs-2800-crore-rockets-for-pinaka-weapon-system/articleshow/105968162.cms

11. Why India should aspire for 10% GDP growth, not 8% *(livemint.com)* 13 Dec 2023

A lowering of India's growth ambition is underway right now. A decade earlier, the ambition was to achieve a growth rate of 10%; now, increasingly, an 8% growth rate is being talked about as the aspirational rate. This is unnecessary.

India needs to aspire to grow at 10% a year while its demographic transition remains favourable, and take concerted steps to marshal policy and spending priorities to achieve that growth.

A slowing world economy is cited as the major constraint to India growing faster. It is a factor, no doubt, which would depress demand for imports from the rest of the world for any country experiencing slowdown.

However, neither the experience of other large economies that have experienced fast growth nor the internal dynamics of India's growth suggests that slow global growth is a binding constraint on domestic growth.

China grew at a compound annual growth rate of 10% plus between 2004 and 2014. World growth was between 2.9% and 3.5%, depending on the currency units used to measure output. The country grew at a compound annual growth rate of over 9% over the 19 years prior to the pandemic year of 2020 (calculated from World Bank data for GDP in constant local currency units).

Between 2000 and 2022, China's GDP per capita grew from $2,093.9 (constant 2015 dollars) to $11,563, a five-fold increase.

In contrast, India's per capita income grew from $755 to $2,085 over the same period, using the same measure.

India has demonstrated sporadic stints of fast growth. But during the period of relatively fast growth between 2003-04 and 2013-14, the compound annual growth rate was a shade less than 6.8%. The global financial crisis of 2007-09 impacted India's growth as well.

How did China manage to register such spectacular growth, even when world growth meandered at one-third of China's growth rate?

The secret was high levels of investment. China registered an investment rate, total investment as a share of GDP of 33.7% in 2000, the ratio climbed to a peak of 47% in 2011, and hovers above 40% in the post-pandemic period.

Of course, foreign direct investment helped, but in China's case, the primary role of FDI was not so much to augment domestic savings as to improve the quality of the investment. China's domestic savings have typically exceeded domestic investment, reflecting in national income accounts as a current account surplus.

India, in contrast, managed to pull up the share of gross fixed capital formation above 30% for the first time in 2004-05. It kept climbing to a peak of 35.8% in 2007-08, and stayed above 33% of GDP till 2012-13.

In 2013-14, the year of the taper tantrum, in which the prospect of monetary policy tightening by the US Fed markets and currencies tumbling around the world, including in India, causing some to include India in a club of so-called Fragile Five, the share of fixed capital formation in GDP stood at 31.3%.

Thereafter, this crucial figure of investment fell steadily, slipping below 30% and staying there, reaching 26.6% in the pandemic year of 2020-21 (figures from the Economic Survey).

Foreign direct investment (FDI) is a part of the capital formation counted in these figures. The FDI that pours in, but does not get absorbed in real investment, merely adds to the foreign exchange reserves.

Unabsorbed capital inflows from abroad account for the climb in India's foreign exchange reserves — India has had a negative current account surplus, so does not add to its forex reserves via export surpluses, unlike in China's case.

So, what can be done to boost growth, even in a slowing world?

To begin with, let us be clear that even if exports do not offer an automatic route to higher GDP growth in a world that collectively decelerates the pace of imports, an economy can, through higher productivity and competitiveness, hope to substitute exports from other countries to gain market share and boost its overall exports.

This is not easy, but not impossible, as China demonstrated in the first decade of this century.

But the real boost to growth comes, for a large economy like India, not so much from external demand as from domestic demand driven by investment.

The real constraint on growth is investment. Investment will generate the savings needed to finance it, if necessary by augmenting domestic resources via imports, and by shrinking the consumption of fixed income earners by means of higher prices.

How can investment go up? Direct government action is a primary source. State-funded investment in roads, railways, and power infrastructure has been sustaining the growth India has had.

Private sector fixed capital formation, after hitting a high of 27.5% of GDP in 2007-08, has been slowing thereafter, slumping below 24% in 2016-15, and touching a low of 21.3% in the demonetization year of 2016-17, before recovering to over 22% in 2018-19 and 2019-20, before slipping below 20% of GDP in the pandemic year.

The twin balance-sheet problem — over-leveraged companies that are unable to service their debts, causing banks to be burdened with bad loans — hit private investment badly.

This problem is being tackled, with the help of the Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code, recapitalization of banks, after writing off unpaid loans, and tighter lending norms.

However, the private sector has not yet started investing, as is evident from any and every minister using every possible forum of industrialists to urge the private sector to invest.

Sound macroeconomic policy and optimism about overall growth is one factor that would largescale private investment. For that, India needs fiscal consolidation via curbing expenditure and augmenting tax revenues.

Another is specific policy, such as the public-private-partnership policy for infrastructure that built assets like the Delhi and Mumbai airports, highways and ports, but has now fallen defunct.

Creating policy such as designing ultra-mega power projects and bidding them out to private players also materialized tens of thousands of crore rupees worth of private investment to generate thousands of MW of power generation capacity.

It is not enough for the private sector to invest in capacity for meeting consumption demand, at a time when spare capacity has been a feature of the Indian economy in the recent past.

We need policy to incentivize private investment in infrastructure, in particular new urbanization that India needs to accommodate the tens of crore people who would move from village to town as growth creates more jobs in industry and organized services, rather than in agriculture.

It is not enough for bloated government expenditure to boost private consumption to prop up growth, as in the recent past. India needs coherent policy to draw in largescale private investment in infrastructure. Tame global growth is an opportunity to boost domestic infrastructure, as commodity prices fall for India to import what it needs.

India should aim for sustained growth in excess of 10% a year. https://www.livemint.com/opinion/online-views/why-india-should-aspire-for-10-gdp-growth-not-8-11702464536625.html

12. How a plan to end poor countries' debt crises created a new one *(livemint.com)* 14 Dec 2023

A plan to prevent another developing-country debt crisis is now at the root of the latest financial troubles destabilizing economies from Ghana to Sri Lanka and Pakistan.

Scarred by the Latin American and Asian crises of the 1980s and 1990s, when dollar-denominated loans forced dozens of countries to default or restructure their debts, a wave of economists pushed a plan to remake low-income countries in the image of richer ones. Instead of borrowing in dollars and falling hostage to currency swings that could make debts unpayable, governments would issue bonds in their own currencies, like the U.S. or Japan do. If a crisis hit, they could inflate their way out of trouble or change payment terms without courts in New York or London going after their assets.

It hasn't turned out as planned.

Rather than using them to phase down foreign-currency borrowing, cash-starved governments for the past decade and a half relied on local-currency bonds to plug budget shortfalls on salaries and other running expenses without building up sufficiently strong institutions to manage that debt. Local-currency debt is now the biggest drain on many developing countries' balance sheets. Interest payments several times higher than what they are spending on dollar-denominated borrowings are eating into investments in health, education and other areas that could help strengthen their economies.

In Sri Lanka, where the government this fiscal year was set to spend nearly 40% of its revenue just paying interest on local-currency debt, it helped propel an economic crisis that led to the fall of President Gotabaya Rajapaksa last year.

Ghana in 2022 spent a third of its revenue paying interest on its local debt, as interest rates on three-month local treasury bills ballooned to 36%. Interest payments on its domestic debt were three times what it paid on a similar stock of external debt, and more than it budgeted for education and healthcare combined.

In Pakistan, interest payments on local-currency debt are expected to eat up more than half the government's revenue this year, seven times what it will spend on its dollar debt.

The high cost of local-currency borrowings is complicating discussions on how to provide debt relief for some of the world's poorest countries. China, which has lent heavily to developing countries, has joined with holders of dollar bonds to pressure governments to restructure domestic borrowings when they default on foreign debts, causing steep losses for the local banks and pension funds that hold the bulk of these local-currency bonds.

The resulting strain has also created disagreement between the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, two agencies that have spent much of the past two decades encouraging poor countries to build up their domestic debt markets.

The shift toward local-currency borrowing can be traced back to the earlier debt crises that swept through Latin America and Asia. Three academics—Barry Eichengreen at the University of California, Berkeley; Ricardo Hausmann, a former Venezuelan minister and current Harvard professor; and Ugo Panizza, who is now a professor at the Geneva Graduate Institute—attributed the chaos to what they called the "original sin" of borrowing in dollars.

They said this exposed countries to changes in U.S. monetary policy and the whims of international currency markets.

The solution, the economists said, was to issue debt in their own currencies.

The IMF and the World Bank got on board, training finance officials on issuing local-currency bonds and helping governments and central banks buy software and computers.

Stephen Kaboyo helped to develop the domestic-debt market in Uganda in the 2000s and was a regular at those events. The response to their debut sales was overwhelming. “Then we started thinking, this is not just a local bond market," said Kaboyo, who is now the managing director of a Ugandan financial-services firm. “We need to attract international players."

Other developing countries also rolled out the red carpet for Western investors. Foreign investment in domestic bond markets was seen as a barometer of financial sophistication.

Western banks and investors were looking for yield amid the near-zero interest rates. When Ghana pitched its dollar debt during roadshows in the U.S. and Europe, hedge funds began asking when they could invest in its local-currency bonds.

“Everybody was searching for yield without paying much attention to the sustainability of the debt that was being built up," said Samuel Mensah, who, as an adviser to the Ghanaian government funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development, attended many of these roadshows.

Bonds in unstable currencies such as Ghanaian cedi, Egyptian pounds or Kenyan shillings could fetch interest rates of close to 20%, around double those on dollar-denominated bonds. The $23 billion in assets that European and U.S. investment funds had in local-currency government and corporate bonds in 2008 had swelled to about $160 billion five years later, according to data from Morningstar Direct.

By 2017, around 60% of Ghana’s medium-term domestic bonds were held by investors based outside the country, said Mensah. In Egypt, foreigners held nearly a third of local-currency debt, according to the IMF.

The IMF and World Bank’s system for spotting emerging risks remained focused on foreign-currency debt, however. Of the five indicators the two Washington-based institutions use to assess whether a low-income country’s debt is sustainable, none look at the cost of domestic borrowings.

Though the IMF and World Bank regularly flagged Ghana’s high domestic-debt levels in reports, there were no real consequences, such as withholding loans, said Mensah, who advised the finance ministry until 2017. “They would give you a slap on the wrist," he said. “They issued more warnings about international debt than they did about domestic debt, because of the currency risk associated with international borrowing."

Local officials—under pressure from governments to find funds at a time when development aid was in decline—struggled to manage the increasingly sophisticated financial instruments they were issuing. Mensah said that for two years the Ghanaian debt-management office didn’t have access to real-time data on its own bond prices and yields through a Bloomberg or other financial-data terminal.

Starting in 2019, a different group of economists issued warnings about the risks of local-currency debt.

In a series of papers, they showed how international investors, focused on take-home profits in hard currency, were quicker to dump local-currency debt than dollar bonds when the Federal Reserve increased interest rates or the dollar increased in value. For countries with both local and dollar-denominated debts, this could set off a vicious circle. As investors sell local-currency bonds, they inadvertently further depress the value of the local currency, which in turn drives up inflation and the cost of servicing both local-currency and dollar debt.

“You had this double whammy effect," said Hyun Song Shin, the head of research at the Bank for International Settlements, a consortium of central banks.

Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 proved the spark that lit the powder keg. Within weeks, the Fed began hiking interest rates, as soaring energy prices exacerbated inflation already stoked by pandemic-era stimulus policies.

By June 2022, international investors pulled roughly $50 billion out of emerging markets’ local-currency bond funds, according to fund-flow tracker EPFR. Egypt ran out of foreign currency to defend the Egyptian pound and was forced to devalue. The Ghanaian cedi has lost nearly half of its value against the dollar since early last year. Street protests began to spread and governments struggled to pay for public services.

Power producers in Ghana, who say the cash-strapped government owes them more than $1.5 billion, have threatened indefinite blackouts. Kenya in April missed salary payments for civil servants.

The turmoil made it harder to repay dollar debt, too. Sri Lanka defaulted in April 2022. Ghana followed in December.

Under pressure from China and other foreign bondholders, Ghana in February asked investors to swap outstanding cedi bonds for new ones of lesser value. Sri Lanka made a similar move in July.

This eased debt-servicing costs, but also meant that local banks have less capital to lend to companies and households. “Some would say you’re robbing Peter to pay Paul," said Theophilus Acheampong, an economist at the University of Aberdeen.

Few developing nations are pulling back from issuing domestic debt despite the growing cost. They have little choice. China has economic problems of its own and slashed lending to poorer countries. Higher interest rates for better-rated debt means the search for yield has fallen off.

Indermit Gill, the World Bank’s chief economist, said he is pushing for an overhaul of the IMF and World Bank’s debt-sustainability framework for low-income countries to give more weight to local-currency debts. “If we don’t provide that accurate information to the market, then we are abetting the problem," he said.

Allison Holland, the chief of the IMF's debt-policy division, said that borrowing in their own currencies allows governments to smooth out the impact of fiscal shocks and that the current debt-assessment framework "has proved itself fit for purpose."

"The responsibility for incurring debt, and more importantly on how to use this financing, resides with the country authorities," she said.

Eichengreen, the Berkeley professor, said the strength of economies like Brazil and South Korea during the turbulence of the past year and a half—countries that were at the center of past crises—shows how domestic-debt markets have proved a resilient funding source. Those countries' central banks also moved quickly to control inflation.

Hausmann didn't respond to requests for comment.

Domestic borrowing has been less beneficial to smaller, more fragile economies, especially when governments struggled to keep a lid on spending, said Panizza, who worked closely with Eichengreen.

"The problem ended up being more complicated than we thought," he said. "If you're going to issue domestic debt and pay a ridiculous interest rate, it is just going to bite back." https://www.livemint.com/economy/how-a-plan-to-end-poor-countries-debt-crises-created-a-new-one-11702532815096.html

13. Over 22,000 KRIDL projects, many of them awarded without tender, pending: report in Karnataka Assembly *(indianexpress.com)* 13 Dec 2023

Other issues flagged by the report include shortcomings in maintaining documents of work executed, procuring equipment from unregistered suppliers and executing work without technical approval

As many as 22,066 projects awarded to the scam-hit Karnataka Rural Infrastructure Development Ltd (KRIDL) between 2016-17 and 2020-21 remain incomplete, according to a report of the Committee of Public Undertakings, which also said this amounted to a fourth of all the work taken up by the agency in the period.

Of the incomplete work, 5,086 projects have been pending since 2016-17, 6,079 since 2017-18, 4,386 from 2018-19, 3,373 since 2019-20 and 3,142 since 2020-21. The total number of projects awarded to KRIDL during the period was 84,574, of which the most, 24,963, were allocated in 2018-19. And funds allocated to KRIDL swelled from Rs 5,212.01 crore in 2016-17 to 17,320 crore in 2020-21.

Another highlight of the report is that many of the projects were directly awarded to KRIDL under section 4(G) of the Karnataka Transparency in Public Procurement Act, which allows work to be awarded without a standard tendering process. "Though the objective of the exemption was to facilitate speedy completion of works, the corporation (KRIDL) did not take up the work. This is against the objectives of the corporation," the report tabled in the Assembly Wednesday noted.

In order to bypass the tendering process in projects exceeding Rs 2 crore, government departments were found to divide large projects into smaller ones. The report highlighted that 12 projects worth a total of Rs 92.43 crore were divided into 85. According to the report, this “shows that departments were prioritising handing over works to KRIDL rather than calling tenders for works”.

Other issues flagged by the report include shortcomings in maintaining documents of work executed, procuring equipment from unregistered suppliers and executing work without technical approval.

Several cases of irregularities at KRIDL have been reported over the years. One of the most recent controversies was that the agency, meant for building rural infrastructure, was handed work in Bengaluru city. A Lokayukta report had found that only two of the 116 projects scrutinised were carried out properly. Though a large percentage of the bills for these projects were cleared, the report found that only 20-30 per cent of them were executed. https://indianexpress.com/article/cities/bangalore/22000-kridl-projects-awarded-without-tender-pending-report-karnataka-assembly-9066576/

14. **Crorepati Fake MGNREGA Beneficiaries in 2 Tamil Nadu Districts Swindle Money** *(newsclick.in)* 13 Dec 2023

The modus operandi includes creating fake job codes and constructing assets using machinebut documenting them as work done by MGNREGA workers.

Coimbatore/Tiruppur: R Narayanasamy (43), a businessman from Chinniyampalayam village panchayat, in Tamil Nadu’s Coimbatore district, is a partner in a gold finance company. He stays in a two-storey house and received Rs 11 crore compensation for giving up his agricultural land for Coimbatore Airport’s expansion.

Nevertheless, he received Rs 4,864 and Rs 14,196 in his bank account as wages under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) scheme in FY21 and FY22, respectively. Similarly, his wife N Bakkiyam (48) received Rs 17,152 between January 2021 and March 2023.

Another crorepati resident and textile mill owner, S Rangasamy (43), received a total of Rs 23,000 in FY21 and FY22.

These so-called MGNREGA workers are among the 18 ineligible beneficiaries identified by the MGNREGA ombudsperson of Coimbatore district, B Navaneethakrishnan, during his field inquiry this October.

“I have received complaints against hundreds of ineligible beneficiaries, but I have huge limitationsbeing the only staff in my office. So I inquire only very serious allegations,” Navaneethakrishnan tells 101Reporters.

He has recommended to district collector Kranthi Kumar Pati that money be recovered from ineligible beneficiaries and legal actioninitiated against panchayat president Rajalakshmi Devarajan and erring authorities in the Rural Development and Panchayat Raj Department.

Navaneethakrishnan informs that he has recommended withholding MGNREGA funds for the village until the money is recovered.

“There are 63 such ineligible job card holders in my village panchayat. The ombudsperson could establish the identity of only 18,” complainant M Selvaraj (70) tells 101Reporters.

Selvaraj, who used information in the MGNREGA website to unearth corruption, claims that he has sent the details of the remaining 45 people to the authorities and is awaiting action.

The situation is no better in neighbouring Tiruppur district. Among the many shocking irregularities at Erasinampalayam village panchayat, in Mulanur block, is the swindling of wages by creation of fake job codes.

According to the inquiry report submitted to Tiruppur collector T Christuraj by ombudsperson M Premalatha, the panchayat has paid Rs 37,185 in wages for the work done on agricultural land owned by P Muthusamy, son of Palanisamy, at Naranavalasu. However, no such individual exists, which means no work was done. The land documents of a namesake from Erasinampalayam village was used to swindle money.

Premalatha has recommended to the collector to instruct the Mulanur block development officer (village panchayats) to recover the money from jobcardholders who were credited wages for the work not done under MGNREGA.

Modus operandi

Reports of ombudspersons accessed by 101Reporters reveal that the modus operandi of swindling money includes creating fake job codes without doing work under MGNREGA—creating assets like roads, compound walls and public utilities using machines, but documenting them as works done by MGNREGA workers.

Wages are credited only to select beneficiaries who are in connivance with corrupt officials, mostly the panchayat president and/or secretary. A panchayat has many worker clusters with about 50 members each. There will be a cluster supervisor among the workers.

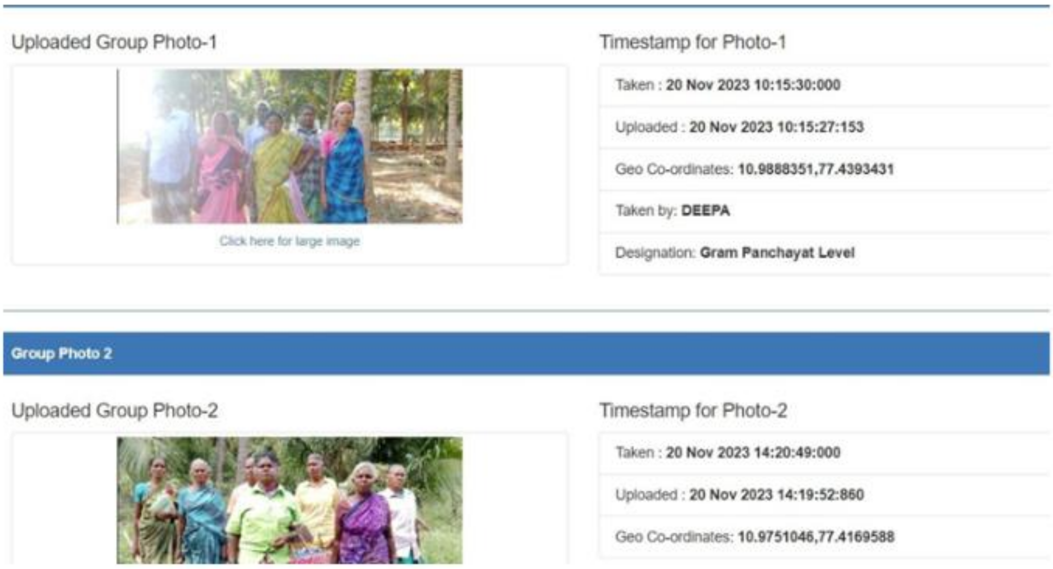
“Some of the ineligible beneficiaries claimed the money was credited by mistake and they returned it to the panchayat. How is it possible if they had not shared their account numbers? Coincidentally, all of them live in the same neighbourhood of my panchayat president, whose husband was also the president in the previous two terms,” says Selvaraj.

When 101Reporters contacted Rajalakshmi, her husband N Devarajan asserted, “You can consider me as the president’s personal assistant. The media reports about the scam are fake. They are paid reports.” He confirmed that the MGNREGA funds to the panchayat has not been withheld yet but refused to comment about the ombudsperson's report.

According to the data of Chinniyampalayam village panchayat, ineligible beneficiaries mostly worked on construction/asset creation jobs, not under regular MGNREGA works like conserving water bodies and drought proofing.

“When the panchayat secretary creates a job card, the panchayat president has the responsibility to verify the jobseeker’s financial status. Same diligence has to be followed in verifying land documents while providing administrative sanction for the works on an individual’s lands. But sometimes these are wilfully overlooked even at the level of BDOs,” says Premalatha.

Though uploading of e-muster rolls (attendance register) on the National Mobile Monitoring System (NMMS) was implemented earlier this year to prevent fake attendance, the scenario is different on the ground.



Group photos uploaded on the NMMS portal makes it difficult to identify individuals.

“Instances of fake attendance came down at first, but cluster supervisors started to use a loophole on the NMMS app. As only the group photo needs to be uploaded, they gave attendance to even those who did not feature in the photograph [i.e. those who do not work],” says R Kalaivani, ombudsperson of Thanjavur district.

Kalaivani holds the distinction of being the only ombudsperson in Tamil Nadu who was once a worker under MGNREGA. She had been a cluster supervisor before she was appointed to her current position.

Ombudspersons invisible

Thirty-seven of the total 38 districts in Tamil Nadu, except Chennai, have MGNREGA ombudspersons. However, not many know about them. Last year, appointments were advertised in newspapers. But their effectiveness reflects in the poor number of complaints they receive.

“Ombudspersons keep insisting the authorities to display their contact details at every village panchayat office. But the officials do not wish to do that as it can turn against them,” says Premalatha, who has completed 55 inquiries since she took over a year-and-a-half ago.

Tiruppur district has 265 village panchayats across 13 blocks. There was not even a single complaint from over 90% village panchayats. Not because there is no grievance, but nobody knows there is a mechanism to complain.

A February 8 letter from Amit Kataria, joint secretaryMGNREGA, ministry of rural development, to state governments mentions that all necessary support to carry out the assigned functions of ombudspersons, including support staff, office equipment, complaint box, telephone helpline, shall be provided by the district authority specified by the state government.

Contrarily, the ombudspersons in Tamil Nadu are working alone even without stenographers. “I have written to the district administration to provide me with separate staff, but nothing happened. An ombudsperson is equivalent to a district revenue officer (DRO). Will they give such a chair and table to the DRO?” asks Navaneethakrishnan.

In the hierarchy of district administration in Tamil Nadu, the DRO is next only to the collector and fills in during his/her absence. However, since MGNREGA ombudspersons are not full-time government employees, they receive minimal support from the officials, especially at district rural development agencies (DRDAs).

R Sumathi, assistant project officer (wages and employment) at Tiruppur DRDA, tells 101Reporters that ombudspersons voluntarily visit the field to receive complaints so that they will get a sitting charge (apparently, ombudspersons are not entitled to salaries).

Vehemently denying this, Navaneethakrishnan and Premalatha say the allegation defies logic. “If we are voluntarily getting complaints for non-issues, how are we receiving such an abysmally low number of complaints?” asks Premalatha.

Navaneethakrishnan also laments that officials at panchayat union offices sit on files for months together whenever ombudspersons seek an information or action taken report from them.

Ineffective, corrupt social audits

Until a few months ago, there were social audit wings at DRDAs across the state. However, they were disbanded after numerous allegations, including seeking bribes in return for not escalating corruption, surfaced. The state government is now on the move to hire new members.

Headed by a district resource person employed on contract, the wing had a block resource person in every block. It trained about 10-20 members of the general public in every block and took them along while auditing.

“There were many instances where the wing members informed the panchayat presidents in advance about what they will audit during their visit,” says Karuna Muthiah, an independent researcher on rights-based campaigns. He was earlier a part of the Villupuram district social audit wing.

“What has happened in Tiruppur and Coimbatore has been happening across the state. Initially, MGNREGA wages were handed over in cash. So, if a job cardholder’s name is misused, he or she might never know about it. But since money is credited to bank accounts nowadays, it is very obvious that ineligible beneficiaries are colluding with the erring authorities,” he says.

“Even if a financial irregularity is unearthed, the high-level committee instituted to act upon it is highly skewed. Of the five members, four, including the collector and DRDA officials, are government employees. The district resource person had severe limitations in taking action even if corruption was established through inquiry,” says Muthiah.

He also questions the very composition of the wing at the statelevel. “The director, joint director and assistant directors were all past DRDA officials. They may downplay many irregularities as administrative difficulties.”

Corruption in MGNREGA begins when the panchayat issues job cards to ineligible beneficiaries. Fake attendance is given by some cluster supervisors, appointed only because they are in connivance with the panchayat president or secretary.

“Not just MGNREGA, reports of social audits, ongoing projects and income and expenses of the panchayat are also submitted at gram sabha meetings. People should attend them and question irregularities if any.The best way to end corruption in MGNREGA is public verification of data on the website. The supervising officers are outsiders, but locals know whether a work is really going on and can identify ineligible beneficiaries, fake attendance, etc.,” says Premalatha. https://www.newsclick.in/crorepati-fake-mgnrega-beneficiaries-2-tamil-nadu-districts-swindle-money