

NEWS ITEMS ON CAG/ AUDIT REPORTS

1. सीएजी ने आयोजित की ऑनलाइन निबंध प्रतियोगिता

(*virarjun.com*) 22 November 2023



सीएजी द्वारा आयोजित दूसरी राष्ट्रीय ऑनलाइन निबंध लेखन प्रतियोगिता के विजेता के साथ विजेता के साथ। साथ में है प्रतियोगिता के अंग्रेजी वर्ग के विजेता एवं हिंदी वर्ग के विजेता।

भारत के नियंत्रक एवं महालेखा परीक्षक (सीएजी) द्वारा आयोजित दूसरी राष्ट्रीय ऑनलाइन निबंध लेखन प्रतियोगिता का आयोजन ऑडिट दिवस समारोह के दौरान किया गया। इस प्रतियोगिता में भाग लेने के लिए कुल 2266 प्राविष्टियां प्राप्त हुईं जिनमें से 820 को विचार के योग्य समझा गया। हिंदी और अंग्रेजी दोनों भाषाओं में आयोजित इस प्रतियोगिता में प्राथम, द्वितीय व तृतीय स्थान पर आने वाले विजेताओं को पुरस्कार देकर सम्मानित किया गया।

अंग्रेजी की श्रेणी में प्राथम पुरस्कार: इंद्रप्रास्थ कालेज फार वूमन, दिल्ली विवि की प्िराशनिका मजूमदार को मिला।

द्वितीय पुरस्कार: खल्लीकोटे यूनिवर्सिटी ऑइशा के प्रादीप वुमार महापात्रा को मिला।

तृतीय पुरस्कार: हिन्दू कालेज, दिल्ली विवि की रिया सिंह को मिला।

हिन्दी की श्रेणी में प्राथम पुरस्कार : सेंटर फॉर बेसिक साइंसेस, पं. रवि शंकर शुक्ला विवि, रायपुर के निखिल वुमार महेश्वरी को मिला द्वितीय पुरस्कार : इलाहाबाद सेंट्रल यूनिवर्सिटी के अत्यंत वुमार को मिला।

तृतीय पुरस्कार: नल्सर यूनिवर्सिटी ऑफ लॉ, हैदराबाद की अनविता पाराशर को मिला
<https://epapervirarjun.com/epapermain.aspx>

2. Five Reasons, According to Reports, Why the Indian Railways Have Gone Off-Track (*thewire.in*) Nov 22, 2023

Reports on the Railways published on various outlets point to a misuse of funds and its consistent inability to generate profits.

The Indian railways has been facing criticism for prioritising AC coaches over their sleeper counterparts, with concerns raised about poor maintenance and heightened scrutiny regarding accidents – the most recent one in Balasore being one of the most horrific in Indian history.

Here are five reasons why the Indian railways has been performing poorly:

Poor operating ratio

According to a report by the Comptroller and Auditor General of India (CAG), the finances of the Indian railways slipped into “concern zone” in 2021-'22 as it recorded its worst ever operating ratio of 107.39%. This means that during that year, the Railways spent more than Rs 107 to earn Rs 100.

While the government initially tried to blame the pandemic for the railways’ poor financial condition, a report in Scroll shows that the operating ratio worsened sharply around four years before the pandemic in 2016 and has stayed close to 100% since then.

“A closer look at the railways books shows that the failure to generate enough revenue surplus is the reason behind the poor shape of its financials,” the report notes. It highlights, with the help of numbers, how critical this failure has proven to be and how wide the deficit is.

Misuse of funds

Another CAG report from December 2022 showed that funds from the Rashtriya Rail Sanraksha Kosh (RRSK) – a special fund created by the Narendra Modi government in 2017 to improve railway safety – was spent on foot massagers, crockery, electrical appliances, furniture, winter jackets, computers and escalators, developing gardens, building toilets, paying salaries and bonuses and erecting a flag.

The fund should have received Rs 20,000 crore each year – with Rs 15,000 from the Union and Rs 5,000 from the railways’s revenues. However, over a four-year period, the Indian railways was only able to drum up Rs 4,225 crore – leaving a shortfall of Rs 15,775 crore in their contribution.

Poor maintenance

The national auditor has also pointed out that at the end of 2020-'21, the railways needed to replace old assets worth Rs 94,873 crore from the Depreciation Reserve Fund.

Of this, roughly 60% of the funds or Rs 58,459 crore were to be used for renewal of tracks. However, the CAG report says only Rs 671.92 crore or 0.7% of the funds were used.

This, when a 2015 white paper by the government said that 4,500 km of track should be renewed annually. Since then, this has not happened in a single year till at least 2021-'22.

Overcrowding

The Indian Railways has been systematically replacing Sleeper and Second Class coaches with AC coaches in various train services. A report in the Hindu noted that in four pairs of trains operating out of Mangaluru Central Railway Station, one Sleeper

Coach each was replaced by an AC 3 tier Economy Class coach each in May this year. Subsequently, an AC 3 tier Economy Class coach was introduced in place of a general Second Class coach each in Bagmati Superfast Express, Rapti Sagar Superfast Express and Muzaffarpur Express in September.

Those holding an unreserved ticket to travel in General Coaches also may find it tough to get seats. With a relatively smaller share of people able to afford the higher costs of AC coaches, and in scenarios where alternative arrangements are not possible, incidents of general ticket holders making their way into reserved compartments have become common, the report said.

The report also said that zone wise comparison indicated a sharp rise in AC seats in the Central, Northern and Western Railways, while the rise in Southern and Eastern Railways was not that steep.

In July, senior officials of the railways told the Hindu that besides the reduction in non-AC coaches, another reason for overcrowding was because the fully unreserved Jan Sadharan trains were discontinued after the pandemic as they were considered to be loss making.

Lack of punctuality

The CAG noted that the number of mail and express trains that were punctual declined from 79% in 2012-'13 to 69.23% in 2018-'19.

More recently, the Times of India reported that the average speed of passenger trains in India had declined by more than 5 km per hour as compared to last year. For freight trains, the average speed fell by almost 6 km per hour. <https://thewire.in/government/five-reasons-according-to-reports-why-the-indian-railways-have-gone-off-track>+

3. India's Railway System, A Lifeline for the Masses Yet A Tragedy For Countless; Why Is The Indian Government Not Focused On The Most Critical Aspects Of Indian Railways? (*inventiva.co.in*) Nov 22, 2023

India's railway system, one of the largest in the world, has a rich history dating back to the nineteenth century. However, the contemporary challenges it faces, coupled with missed opportunities for growth and modernization, raise concerns about the efficiency and safety of this critical infrastructure. With so many tragedies involving Indian Railways, sadly, the Indian government is ignorant or playing safe on so many vital and urgent aspects of this crucial transport system. The current state of the Indian railways, focusing on safety standards, financial woes, and the government's emphasis on high-speed trains at the expense of necessities, needs urgent focus and evaluation. The question - is the Indian government not doing much that is needed because it is the vehicle for the less affluent?

The recent train collision in Balasore, Odisha, the many instances of derailment, yet another instance where a few coaches caught fire on the New Delhi – Bihar train and

subsequent reports of overcrowding and violence during the festive season shed light on the misplaced priorities in the Indian railway system.

Indian Railways serves as the lifeline for millions of people, especially those who cannot afford air travel. It plays a pivotal role in connecting India's vast and diverse landscape, reaching even the smallest villages that may be inaccessible by other means of transportation.

For a significant portion of the population, the railway network is not just a mode of travel but a crucial link that bridges the geographical and economic gaps. The affordability and extensive reach of the Indian Railways make it an indispensable means of transportation for the masses, fostering social inclusion and economic connectivity.

Thus, the importance of Indian Railways cannot be stated; the government's push for initiatives like the Vande Bharat trains, touted for their high speed, neglects fundamental issues such as safety, punctuality, seat availability, and revenue generation.

The clamour for seats and space within India's bustling railway system has given rise to a host of challenges, with incidents such as stampedes telling us of the urgent need for systemic improvements.

The sheer volume of passengers, issues like overcrowded trains, and the unavailability of seats have created an environment ripe for chaos and safety hazards. Instances of stampedes, tragic and avoidable, highlight the strain on the system and the dire consequences of insufficient infrastructure.

As travelers jostle for limited space, especially during peak seasons or festival rushes, the railway authorities face the critical task of not only ensuring the availability of seats but also managing the flow of passengers to prevent dangerous situations. Addressing these issues is paramount to enhancing the safety and experience of millions relying on the Indian railways for their journeys.

The Great (Hidden) Turmoil, Indian Railways

Financially, the Indian Railways has faced challenges, with an operating ratio of 107.39% in 2021-22 – the worst ever.

The failure to generate sufficient revenue surplus hampers crucial investments, notably in safety measures. The Rashtriya Rail Sanraksha Kosh, a fund dedicated to railway safety, has suffered as the Railways failed to provide its share, impacting critical projects.

Infrastructure Deficit and Unmet Targets

The ageing infrastructure of the Indian railways is a significant concern. The failure to meet targets for track renewals, with derailments linked to insufficient renewals, emphasizes the need for urgent action.

The reduction of non-AC coaches, as claimed by social media users, adds to the challenges, leading to overcrowding and passenger discomfort.

The inability to replace old assets worth Rs 94,873 crore from the Depreciation Reserve Fund showcases the impact of poor revenues on essential projects.

The government's flagship Vande Bharat trains, designed for high speed, have failed to reach their average speed targets due to track conditions.

On June 3, the proposed virtual inauguration of the Goa-Mumbai Vande Bharat Express train by Prime Minister Narendra Modi was overshadowed by one of the deadliest train accidents in Indian history that occurred the night before – a collision involving three trains in Odisha's Balasore city resulted in over 290 fatalities and left more than 900 injured.

While the Goa-Mumbai train eventually commenced operations towards the end of June with much fanfare on official social media handles, it spotlighted the ongoing issues within the Indian Railways, contradicting the government's emphasis on high-speed initiatives such as the Vande Bharat trains.

Social media users promptly highlighted that flights on the same route were available at cheaper prices, bringing to light the misplaced priorities in railway policies under the Modi government.

The Misguided Social Media VS Reality

The tragic incident in Balasore and the affordability concerns of Vande Bharat trains are examples of the railways' skewed focus on modernization, neglecting fundamental aspects like safety, punctuality, seat availability, and revenue generation.

As the festive season unfolded, reports emerged of violence due to train cancellations, overcrowding, and a stampede at Surat station that claimed one life and injured three; these incidents are enough to shed light on the deteriorating state of affairs within the Indian Railways.

The Financial Inadequacy

Financially, the Indian Railways found itself in dire straits, as revealed by a report from the Comptroller and Auditor General in August. The operating ratio, a key financial metric, reached an alarming 107.39% in 2021-'22, indicating that the Railways spent more than Rs 107 to earn Rs 100 during that period.

While the government attributed this to the adverse impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on revenues, data showed a consistent decline since 2016-'17, with the ratio hovering around 100%.

The failure to generate a revenue surplus has hampered the Railways' ability to make critical investments. The Rashtriya Rail Sanraksha Kosh, a fund dedicated to railway safety, failed to achieve its annual allocation target of Rs 20,000 crore due to the Railways' inability to provide its share.

Only Rs 4,225 crore was contributed between 2017-'18 and 2022-'23, with a significant portion diverted for questionable expenditures, as highlighted by a 2022 Comptroller and Auditor General report.

Similarly, the Depreciation Reserve Fund, meant for asset replacement and renewal, received only Rs 3,440 crore from internal resources between 2017-'18 and 2022-'23, less than half the allocated amount in 2013-'14 alone.

The consequence of these financial woes is evident in the Railways' inability to replace old assets worth Rs 94,873 crore, particularly in track renewal, where only a fraction of the required amount was utilized.

Social media reports surfaced claiming a reduction in non-AC coaches and an increase in air-conditioned coaches to boost revenue, leading to passenger complaints of overcrowding and seat unavailability.

While Railway Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw denied these claims, numerous news reports over the past few years have detailed reductions in non-AC coaches, prompting concerns about affordability and passenger comfort.

Later Than Before And More

The Comptroller and Auditor General's audit in April last year further stressed the issue of timeliness in the Indian Railways, revealing a decline in punctuality from 79% in 2012-'13 to 69.23% in 2018-'19.

Recent reports from The Times of India also highlighted a decline in the average speed of passenger and freight trains, bringing into question the efficiency of the entire railway network.

Even the government's flagship Vande Bharat trains, designed for speeds of 110 km per hour to 130 km per hour, failed to achieve an average speed of 100 km per hour.

Officials attribute this to safety concerns arising from inadequate track conditions, emphasizing the challenges of operating high-speed trains without addressing the broader network's issues.

How We Stack Up?

The Indian railway system, one of the world's largest, boasts a history dating back to the nineteenth century; however, despite its vast coverage, it faces numerous challenges in the contemporary era.

In comparison to several other countries, India's railway system faces notable challenges and lags behind in crucial aspects. While countries like China boast the world's most extensive high-speed rail network, India struggles with outdated infrastructure and safety concerns.

China's investment in modern infrastructure and cutting-edge technology has set a global benchmark for efficiency and speed, a standard that India has yet to achieve.

Japan is renowned for its punctuality and precision in railway operations, particularly with its Shinkansen or "bullet trains." European countries like Germany and France prioritize sustainability and have well-integrated systems combining high-speed trains with local commuter services.

In contrast, India's railway technology lags, and the focus on high-speed trains has often overshadowed the essential need for overall infrastructure improvement. The United States, while having a broad railway network, falls behind in passenger train services concerning coverage and speed.

India can learn valuable lessons from these global counterparts to address its challenges, enhance safety, and modernize its railway infrastructure effectively.

The Last Bit, India's railway system, among the world's largest, has a rich history dating back to the nineteenth century; however, despite its extensive reach, it grapples with numerous challenges that hinder its efficiency and safety, taking countless meaningful lives.

In order to shine through, the government's emphasis on high-speed trains should not overshadow the critical importance of addressing safety concerns, upgrading infrastructure, and ensuring the overall efficiency of the railway network.

There are valuable lessons to be learned from countries with advanced and seamlessly integrated railway systems, and the future success of India's railways lies in a comprehensive approach that prioritizes, above all – safety, along with technological innovation, the overall enhancement of the passenger experience, strictly in that order. <https://www.inventiva.co.in/trends/indias-railway-system-a-lifeline-for-the-masses-yet-a-tragedy-for-countless-why-is-the-indian-government-not-focused-on-the-most-critical-aspects-of-indian-railways/>

4. Zero Waiting List for Indian Railways Passengers (*dailyexcelsior.com*) November 22, 2023

India railways has just announced that it aims to achieve zero waiting list for confirmed tickets by 2027, but only after pictures of overcrowded platforms and trains across India surfaced last week in which several fell unconscious due to suffocation and at least one passenger died. Many passengers having confirmed tickets could not even board their trains. It is just like women singing songs to distressed children to induce them to sleep, or just giving lollipops to divert them from the real crises they suffer.

However, uneasy lies behind this big announcement for the Indian Railways which has been systematically restructured and developed at the cost of the government money only to hand it over to private sector. Everybody can see how the independent operations of Indian Railways and even budget making have been made dependent on the Central government general budget in 2017 under the Modi regime, along with making it without a full time Union Cabinet Minister for quite some time now. Indian Railways has now fallen into dire financial stress, and have lost its capacity to plan and implement its projects with its own earnings. Burden of loans has been on the increase which would ultimately make the Indian Railways unsustainable breaking open the door for privatization.

How can Indian Railways implement its big announcement made on November 16 at a time when it is undergoing a difficult phase of financial crisis? Until now for every

problem Government has been saving itself behind the blind of financial crisis? Had it not been an election year, we could not have seen many projects being announced and implemented. Government was just sleeping for the last four years.

The reported big plan now includes putting out 3,000 new trains on tracks in the next 3-4 years, to increase the number of trains from the current 10,748 to over 13,000, apart from a big planned transformation of tracks. It has been reported that India Railways will lay out a network of 4000-5000 km track per year. The passenger carrying capacity of India Railways has also been planned to increase to 1000 crore yearly as against the present 800 crore. We have also seen recently several launches of high-speed trains, such as Vande Bharat trains, purportedly to cut down the travel time of the passengers.

Amidst these big claims we have been reading reports about the burning of trains, accidents, and casualties, apart from crimes committed inside the running trains. Obviously, the government has little concern about the passenger security and proper amenities for them. Cleanliness and even availability of potable water has been given low priority.

Modi government that has made the Indian Railways even without full time Union Cabinet Minister for quite some time hampering the proper working of the largest department in the public sector. The latest report of the CAG tabled in the Parliament during the last monsoon session has even flagged that Indian Railways could not generate a net surplus from its gross earnings of freight traffic, passenger services and sundry segments during 2021-22.

The same report had pointed out that funds for pension schemes were diverted for publicity of other schemes (which was PM's personalized publicity as is the case in all department funds of Ministries/Departments that CAG report has not mentioned categorically for obvious reasons).

Operating ratio of the Indian Railways during the period under consideration was 107.39 in 2021-22 against 97.45 in 2020-21. It meant Railways spent 107.39 paise to earn 100 paise (rupee one). A higher operating ratio indicates a poorer ability to generate surplus. As compared to the operating ratio of 97.45 during 2020-21, there was deterioration in 2021-22. Situation has been deteriorating over the years.

Total expenditure was increased in 2021-22, CAG found, by 35.19 per cent and capital expenditure by 22.61 per cent. Revenue expenditure also increased by 49.30 per cent. Total working expenditure incurred was 75.83 per cent on staff costs, pension payments and lease hire charges on rolling stock. An additional expenditure of Rs 7,778.43 crore more incurred than the sanctioned budget of Rs 5,762.20 crore.

In financial year 2021-22, Indian Railways recorded a loss of Rs. 15,024.58 crore. Parliamentary Standing Committee on Railways had also pulled up Ministry of Railways for revenue losses. It is a great concern for the Indian Railways that freight trains remained operation at only 60 per cent capacity due to demand slackness from closure of industries and factories or unannounced recession. Nation's four major railroads still have less traffic than a decade ago.

There is more dangerous trend in the Indian Railways finances, that have a total shareholder equity of Rs 454.78 billion and total debt-to-equity ratio to 923.3 per cent. Though, as of now, Modi government has ruled out full privatisation of Indian Railways, its several components, such as departmental units, public sector units, special purpose vehicles for completion and fructification of many railways projects including ticketing arms, IRCTC etc have been divested or privatised.

Modi government also intends to privatize the operations of the Dedicated Freight Corridors. Hundreds of trains and pair of routes have already been announced to be privatised which would comprise about 3 percent of mail and express trains by the end of 2023. Moreover, the sword of debt trap is hanging over India Railways.

Indian Railways is actually in very bad shape, and such big announcement are intended only to catch attention of the people in an election year. Can electorate forget that trains hardly run on time, coaches and toilets are dirty, and Indian Railways is unable to spend enough money on maintenance and upkeep of coaches, seats, toilets, catering services, and even on providing potable water.

Train journey has increasingly become unsafe over the years due to crimes and accidents. For example, theft cases have gone up significantly since 2014. The cases of theft reached the highest mark of 36,584 in 2018. However, no data on theft cases is available in the last four years. Big announcements mean nothing if government does not even provide real time data regarding safety of persons and their articles. NCRB records reveal that more than 16,000 people were killed in nearly 18,000 railway accidents in 2021.

The big announcements are meant to just cover up the disturbing reality of the Indian Railways. https://www.dailyexcelsior.com/zero-waiting-list-for-indian-railways-passengers/#google_vignette

5. **Faceless audit needs a human face** *moneycontrol.com*) Nov 22, 2023

India needs faceless audit, but faceless audit must, as it were, have a humane, functional institutional framework, and not leave tax-filing companies to struggle against a wall of impenetrable incomprehension

In this world, nothing can be said to be certain, except death and taxes, said Benjamin Franklin, American founding father, whose fame for this phrase competes with that for his visage adorning the hundred-dollar bill. Franklin knew a thing or two about electricity, running a newspaper, being an ambassador for his country, and the postal system, which he presided over. But he was presumptuous about the certainty of taxes, particularly in India.

In India, a company pays taxes in advance, files its returns and waits for the tax department's audit. Even before Vinod Rai put, as Comptroller and Auditor General of India, the fear of God in anyone who dared cause a loss to the exchequer, the taxman was conditioned to demand additional taxes, over and above what the company had filed in its return. Before 2020, this led to several rounds of meetings between the taxman and the company's chartered accountant, a certain level, and kind, of give and

take, and eventual finalising of the company's taxes. In 2020, the government introduced faceless audit, hailed as revolutionary by industry.

Going Round in Circles

Now, the faceless audit is preceded by Computer Aided Scrutiny Selection. Not everyone is blessed with the taxman's special attention. Only those chosen by that arbiter of modern existence, an algorithm of some description or the other, is destined for this privilege. And when chosen for scrutiny, the company's interaction with the taxman is faceless: anonymous, based on documents and remote discussion, without scope for personal interaction or personal give and take. This, indeed, is most welcome.

However, the literal meaning of revolutionary has to do with going round in circles. This revolving exercise does not have a swift or happy ending, either – thanks to the faceless remoteness of the interaction between the taxman and the chartered accountant.

Two kinds of problems come up. India is up there with the advanced world, when it comes to audit standards. Having near-identical standards does not translate into uniform styles of presentation. How the accounts are presented in SAP would differ from how the same accounts look for a company that relies on Oracle for its enterprise resource planning software. These would look different, again, in the style of home-grown Tally.

Large multinational companies, Indian or foreign, would use an offering from one of the larger ERP software providers, SAP, Oracle, Microsoft and a few others. Taxmen from our major cities, who habitually look at the accounts of big companies, would be familiar with the different presentation formats of these different ERP providers. But not necessarily those from smaller towns.

The trouble is that the taxmen selected for faceless audits for large companies are not necessarily drawn from the metropolitan circles. A company could land with a taxman from Lucknow or the Kerala Circle. Incomprehension would lead to endless queries, delays, frustration and extended prevarication. The solution? Restrict allocation of large accounts to taxmen from large cities for faceless audit, while undertaking extensive training of all taxmen on all styles of accounts presentation.

Improve the Review Process

Another problem is the delay in taking up a return for review. Often, the axe would fall shortly before expiry of the deadline for review. A summary notice would be shot off by the taxman, extending the period of review and finalisation.

By the time the company files its reply, answering every query raised by the taxman, the officer who raised the query might well have been transferred out. His replacement would take his time to wrap his head around the queries and the answers. Yet more delay, in other words.

There could be two kinds of reasons for taxmen putting off scrutiny of the files under their charge till the last moment. Either they are too few, and handle more accounts than they can efficiently manage. Or the system of supervising taxmen and holding them to account for deviating from their expected standards of performance is badly deficient.

Either way, companies all geared up to celebrate the faceless audit system end up like Indian fans at the ICC World Cup finals this year at Ahmedabad.

The faceless audit system is well-intentioned, but its execution lacks finesse. A mountaineer might make a bold leap over a crevasse, and fellow climbers might applaud. However, if the leap is not long enough to carry him over to the other side, the result would be disaster, however courageous the decision or however graceful the takeoff.

There is no excuse whatsoever, in a country of millions of eligible jobseekers, for a vital government department like direct taxes to go understaffed. Given the intent to improve ease of doing business and ease of tax compliance, there is no excuse for not instituting either proper training or work supervision of the taxmen.

India needs faceless audit, but faceless audit must, as it were, have a humane, functional institutional framework, and not leave tax-filing companies to struggle against a wall of impenetrable incomprehension.
<https://www.moneycontrol.com/news/opinion/faceless-audit-needs-a-human-face-11786061.html>

STATES NEWS ITEMS

6. Audit Week Celebrations: AG Office Srinagar organises debate competition (*risingkashmir.com*) 22 November 2023

The Office of the Principal Accountant General (PAG), Srinagar, organised an Inter University and College Debate competition at the Sher-e-Kashmir University of Agricultural Sciences and Technology - Kashmir (SKUAST-K) on Tuesday. The event witnessed a convergence of young minds and experts in an interactive exchange of ideas and perspectives.

Pramod Kumar PAG (Audit), J&K, Inabat Khaliq, DAG (Audit), J&K, and Prof. N. A. Ganai Vice-Chancellor, SKAUST-K, along with other dignitaries, participated as judges and guest speakers.

Six teams participated in debates addressing issues such as Artificial Intelligence, Tourism's role in development, and the appropriate age for accessing social media. The event provided a platform for young minds to engage in meaningful discussions on critical issues, fostering their intellectual growth and preparing them for future leadership roles.

The team from S. P College, represented by Shayan Showkat Allaie and Shahzaib Parvaiz, emerged as winners outshining Kashmir University's Khaleel Firdous Shah and Eleena Raja. The winners were represented with awards and mementos. Additionally, Lubna Parvaiz from Govt College for Women was recognised for her skills receiving the Best Speaker award.

A range of activities are scheduled until November 25, marking the week-long celebration of CAG India's foundation day. <https://risingkashmir.com/audit-week->

[celebrations-ag-office-srinagar-organises-debate-competition-0b53bbfc-de56-42c3-8492-b91c9b42db64](https://brighterkashmir.com/celebrations-ag-office-srinagar-organises-debate-competition-0b53bbfc-de56-42c3-8492-b91c9b42db64)

7. Audit Week Celebrations: AG Office Srinagar holds debate competition (*brighterkashmir.com*) 22 November 2023

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8. In Gujarat, Agriculture in Stress Due To Saltwater Ingress (*indiaspend.com*) 22 November 2023

Increased soil salinity, coupled with the destruction of its mangrove cover and unplanned development, puts Gujarat's food security at risk

Hyderabad: Rathod Ghanubha Ravubha of Zanzmer village in Gujarat's Bhavnagar district remembers a time when the land was fertile and he used to produce sorghum, millet and groundnut. "Those days were good," says the frail-looking Ravubha as he along with a few workers removes the weeds on his farm. "Since the salinity has increased in the soil, the production has reduced by 40%."

Gujarat has a coastline extending to 1,600 km--the longest of any Indian state, more than the distance between New Delhi and Kolkata. The climate is arid and humid, and rainfall is scarce in certain parts of the state, and in such areas depend on groundwater for irrigation and domestic uses. That vital lifeline is now being affected by increased salinity.

Seawater intrusion was first detected in the 1970s. Extensive exploitation of groundwater due to rapid industrialisation and the indiscriminate digging of tube wells are the main causes for salinity.

“Three acres of my land was in a low-lying area, and I could not utilise it for agriculture due to salinity, because of which we could farm only in one season each year,” says Popat Vasram Parmar, a farmer of Dwaraka, who adds that it was only after installing sprinklers that he was able to cultivate the whole land.

According to a 2020 study by Pardeep Kumar, Professor at Chaudhary Sarwan Kumar Himachal Pradesh Krishi Vishvavidyalay, Palampur and Pradeep K. Sharma, Professor at Sher-e-Kashmir University of Agricultural Sciences and Technology, Jammu, published in *Frontiers in Sustainable Food Systems*, nearly 75% of salt-affected soils in the country exist in the states of Gujarat (2.23 million ha), Uttar Pradesh (1.37 million ha), Maharashtra (0.61 million ha), West Bengal (0.44 million ha) and Rajasthan (0.38 million ha).

Salinity drastically limits agricultural productivity as most cash crops are sensitive to high salt content in soil. In the Middle Ages, armies spread salt on the lands of conquered kingdoms to prevent them from rehabilitating themselves. Almost all major crops show yields that are only between 20% to 50% of record yields in areas where the soil shows high salinity levels.

Agriculture in the state has been severely affected by coastal salinity, which, in turn, has led to farmers facing mounting losses. "Due to salinity, the cotton crop production has reduced, and the development of onion is not up to the mark--the top of the onion gets burnt, and the ball does not develop below it," says Bhaliya Shantibhai Bachubha, a farmer from Vejedari village in Gujarat's Bhavnagar district.

According to estimates based on data from the 2012-14 moving average, India loses 16.84 million tonnes of agricultural production yearly as a result of soil salinisation, which has a significant impact on the country's economy.

Gujarat topped the list with a loss of Rs 10,063 crore during this period, while Uttar Pradesh is second with a loss of Rs 8,129 crore. The largest areas of the nation which are affected by salinity (>50% of the agricultural land) are in Gujarat and Uttar Pradesh. These two states account for about 79% of the nation's monetary losses.

Besides its impact on agricultural productivity, groundwater contamination has led to various health issues. "Twenty years ago there were no diseases like stones in kidneys and skin diseases. Now, due to salinity in the water, the ratio of cases of kidney stones, skin disease and joint pains has increased a lot," says Kanubhai Lagarbhai, a farmer of Pratappara village in Gujarat's Bhavnagar district. He himself suffers from ringworm (a fungal infection) and joint pains.

Other common diseases in the area are fluorosis, which manifests as brown or white specks on the teeth, and intestinal diseases. "Farmers spend a lot of time working in their fields which are irrigated with saline water, which can lead to urinary system stones, hypertension and heart diseases," says Ramesh Bajania, a paediatrician from Dhrangadhra in Gujarat's Surendranagar district.

In 2018, the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) of India had pulled up the Gujarat government for its lack of progress in salinity ingress prevention and the sharp escalation in the cost of schemes due to delays in carrying out the work.

Depletion of mangroves exacerbating salinity

Gujarat, with 1,107 sq km of mangroves, is second only to West Bengal. Mangrove ecosystems support local economies by being a reliable source of honey and other forest produce; they serve as vast carbon sinks; they moderate salinity and prevent the ingress of seawater into the land.

This habitat is now under intense stress. Developmental activities such as the Sagarmala Project, for port modernisation and development on new ports, is affecting fragile ecosystems, which in turn causes loss of livelihood to local populations.

“We will pay a heavy price with the loss or degradation of mangrove ecosystems, as the ability to mitigate climate change gets weakened, affecting people's lives and property,” says T.V. Ramachandra, a coordinator of Energy & Wetlands Research Group at the Center for Ecological Sciences, Indian Institute of Science, Bengaluru.

In addition to being directly responsible for the loss of mangroves in the area, industrial expansion also has an indirect effect. The degradation of mangroves was mainly caused by the salt pans industry, which flourished in intertidal areas.

According to Ramachandra, salinity intrusion into the land is a serious issue as it affects the livelihood of farmers in the coastal areas. Such intrusion happens due to deforestation, removal of mangroves, and constructing dams upstream of rivers which alters the water and sediment transport downstream. “Our studies in the Sharavathi river basin highlights how saltwater intrusion downstream is affecting people, depleting drinking water as well as water for agriculture, etc.,” says Ramachandra.

“Mangroves are saviours for the coastal communities as they reduce storm surges, thereby reducing seawater flooding and salinisation,” says R Ramasubramanian, a senior fellow, Coastal Systems Research at the M S Swaminathan Research Foundation. As this demonstration shows, mangroves break up surging seas during periods of storm, and prevent the surge from impacting on the land. “Mangroves offer many benefits by protecting coastlines from erosion and seawater salination, reducing the impact of climate change disasters, and absorbing and storing more carbon than any other ecosystem.”

Migration due to land degradation

According to a 2005 study by South Asian Network for Development and Environmental Economics, in Gujarat, environmental concerns have a big influence on human migration. Short-term migrants seem to be motivated, in particular, by environmental degradation occurring at the village level. Village commons serve as pastures and are a valuable resource for middle-class households that raise cattle--the deterioration of the land, therefore, forces them to relocate to greener pastures.

Irrigation is another important aspect that influences people's decisions to migrate. Roughly 40% of households with land have access to irrigation. It was discovered that the likelihood of migration is lower for households with access to irrigation, which can boost land productivity. In general, it was found that the ability to utilise irrigation is more likely to discourage migration than land ownership.

“Climate change has forced marginalised communities to make a heart-wrenching choice: stay and endure the relentless encroachment of saline waters, or leave their ancestral homes in search of safer shores,” says Anjal Prakash, Research Director at the Bharti Institute of Public Policy, Indian School of Business, Hyderabad. “The silent migration of these communities, driven by ecological necessity, is a stark reminder of the social impacts of coastal salinity.”

Mitigation measures

Policymakers face significant challenges in balancing the goals of sustainable land management, food security, and poverty alleviation. Land degradation is one huge challenge. Large areas of land have become unproductive due to soil salinisation alone. Globally, soil salinisation is expected to worsen in the future due to climate change scenarios, which include rising sea levels and their effects on coastal areas, rising temperatures and increased evaporation, etc. Restoring degraded areas, particularly soils impacted by salt, is one way to protect food security. With this in mind, the Indian government has set a goal to restore 26 million hectares of degraded land by 2030.

Salinity is a longstanding issue. According to a 2020 study by Swayam Siddha, The Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda and Paulami Sahu, Central University of Gujarat, published in SN Applied Sciences, salinity ingress affected 779 settlements with an area of 1.65 million hectares and a population of 1.33 million in Gujarat, according to data from 1976.

In 1976 and 1978, the Gujarat government created High Level Committees (HLCs) to recommend preventive measures against saline infiltration and to establish corrective procedures. There was an increase of 92% and 85%, respectively, in the areas affected by SWI in Madhavpur-Malia and Lakhpat-Malia between 1977 and 2008. Seawater inundation at Una-Madhavpur Reach resulted in a loss of 1,237 hectares.

To investigate the distribution of salinity throughout the pre- and post-monsoon periods, 2D maps were created utilising the locations of the wells and associated data. During the last 15 years, these maps were used to identify the interchange of the freshwater and saltwater interface and the ensuing sea water intrusion. According to the study's findings, groundwater has been saltier over the years.

“To mitigate the devastating effects of coastal salinity-induced migration, we must act decisively,” says Anjal Prakash. “Investing in resilient infrastructure, equitable policies, and sustainable livelihoods is not just a moral imperative; it's a survival strategy for our shared future.”

A slew of recent initiatives by the Gujarat government may also help farmers like Ravubha. To address the issue of salinity ingress in the coastal villages, the Gujarat government has approved canal projects worth Rs 102 crore. The project seeks to control the problem of salinity in the coastal villages of the Gir Somnath district.

The project will be developed by the Water Resources Department, and aims to increase the fertility of 87,797 hectares of land. This will help in providing water for irrigation in the Saurashtra region, improving the quality of underground water, and thus benefiting agricultural labourers. The project will be taken up by the state water resources department and will involve the locals, NGOs, experts and the Gujarat government.

The Coastal Salinity Prevention Cell (CSPC), in collaboration with organisations like The Tata Trusts, Aga Khan Rural Support Program (AKRSP), and Ambuja Cement Foundation (ACF) based in Ahmedabad, has also been working in coastal regions to develop sustainable solutions for addressing the many challenges of salinity ingress.

Many NGOs, in coordination with the state government, have taken up initiatives to provide sustainable solutions in order to address saltwater ingress. Seen here is a check-dam built by the Ambuja Cement Foundation in Kodinar in Gujarat's Gir Somnath district.

The CSPC, started in 2008, aims to mitigate salinity and adaptation issues through research and implementation to provide a better quality of life to the communities in the coastal regions of Gujarat. "Salinity is a major problem, and our main focus is on improving the drinking water and sanitation services of the coastal villages of Gujarat," says Arvind Parmar, the head of the WASH (Water, Sanitation and Hygiene) programme at CSPC. The programme was initiated after 2010, and as a part of the initiative it has created and screened films at schools and villages to create awareness on sanitation and hygiene.

CSPC also promoted the usage of drip irrigation and sprinklers to stop water logging and reduce salinity ingress. Farmers were encouraged to diversify their livelihood by focusing on animal husbandry and other traditional farming like floriculture, horticulture and other options to withstand climate instabilities and to augment their income.

To increase water availability for irrigation and to reduce salinity, farm ponds and check dams were built to store rainwater. CSPC has helped create awareness on various sustainable solutions and the effective mitigation and prevention of salinity ingress.

"Earlier, we had one crop of groundnut, the crop was always poor because of salinity in the water, we struggled to source drinking water too, and the water supplied was of low quality," says Haribhai, a farmer of Pipli village in Gujarat's Ahmedabad district, adding that things have improved thanks to the recent initiatives.

A woman filling clean drinking water supplied by the Coastal Salinity Protection Cell in Gujarat's Bhavnagar district.

Meanwhile, the Dutch government is in talks with the Gujarat government to set up a Centre of Excellence on Saline Farming in Gujarat to help farmers take up agriculture on salt-affected farms. The Netherlands had problems similar to Gujarat, but with cutting edge technologies, it turned itself around to the point where it is now the world's second largest exporter of agricultural produce.

The governments of the Netherlands and Gujarat are now working to create a knowledge-sharing platform that will educate locals on ways to cultivate in salt-affected lands, which could help farmers from the coastal villages of Gujarat to a better livelihood.

IndiaSpend reached out to the Principal Secretary of the Gujarat Coastal Zone Management Authority asking about the initiatives taken up by the state government to address the issues of salinity on November 20. We will update this story when we receive a response. <https://www.indiaspend.com/agriculture/in-gujarat-agriculture-in-stress-due-to-saltwater-ingress-882484>

9. Vizhinjam International Seaport development may harm sensitive coastal, marine ecosystem: Study (*newindianexpress.com*) Published: 22nd November 2023

It explores geomorphological, ecological, livelihood impacts of Vizhinjam port activities

THIRUVANANTHAPURAM: Historian Ramachandra Guha released a report of the Janakeeya Padana Samithi (JPS) constituted by the coastal protesters to assess the impact of Vizhinjam International Seaport in Thiruvananthapuram (VIST) in a function organised in Thiruvananthapuram, on World Fisheries Day on Tuesday.

The study stated that the port development has the potential to harm the sensitive coastal and marine ecosystem, affecting marine biodiversity, and the livelihoods and cultural spaces of marginalised fisherfolk. It was prepared under the chairmanship of K V Thomas, former scientist of National Centre for Earth Science Studies.

The report was constituted to holistically examine the geomorphological, ecological, and livelihood impacts of the construction activities related to the Vizhinjam International Seaport, conducted by Vizhinjam International Seaport Limited (VISL) and Adani Vizhinjam Port Private Limited (AVPPL), from 2015 to the present. It demanded the government take appropriate steps to minimise the adverse impact of the port and ensure transparency. The study report also mentioned major recommendations.

The Kerala State Human Rights Commission (KSHRC) suo motu shall investigate if the VISL and AVPPL have adhered to the foundational principles of the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights.

The consent of local self-governing institutions and grama sabhas must be obtained before any new plans for infrastructure development are implemented. It also stated that the Janakeeya Samara Samithi should appoint a person of high repute as 'People's Ombudsman' who can investigate complaints from individuals and groups who have been treated unfairly.

The facts mentioned in the CAG report about the unfair advantage to the concessionaire and potential loss to public revenues should be reviewed by a government-constituted Finance Standards Committee. The report suggested that the government should

constitute a special task force for reviewing the coastal development projects, with members consisting of appropriate independent experts for considering a long-term plan to balance economic development with environmental sustainability.

It suggested the government to commission the Kerala State Biodiversity Board (KSBB) to address the imminent threat to biodiversity from the Vizhinjam port project before further phased development of the port is initiated. It also asked the government to request the appropriate departments of the Kerala University to undertake a comprehensive evaluation of the true economic, ecological, and cultural value of these services by an inter-disciplinary team with the full and informed participation of the fishing communities.

Another recommendation made was for the government to constitute an inter-departmental committee to oversee the speedy and correct implementation of all resettlement and compensation matters promised by both the government and the AVPPL to the affected fishing communities.

What it recommends

- The Kerala State Human Rights Commission suo motu shall inquire if the VISL and AVPPL have adhered to the foundational basics of the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights

- The consent of local selfgoverning institutions and grama sabhas must be obtained before any new plans for infrastructure development are implemented
<https://www.newindianexpress.com/cities/thiruvananthapuram/2023/nov/22/vizhinjam-international-seaport-development-may-harm-sensitivecoastal-marine-ecosystem-study-2635023.html>

10. Punjab’s farmers are struggling as groundwater levels plummet, with few solutions in sight (*scroll.in*) Nov 21, 2023

Farmers want canal water for irrigation, while the government backs crop diversification. Both initiatives have seen limited success.

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

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

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

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

Community resilience

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

Their collective, “Nehri Paani Prapti Sangharsh Committee”, has persistently called for access to canal water for these villages, nestled between the Bathinda branch canal and the Kotla branch canal.

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

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

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

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

Living in the dark zone

Sangrur, Malerkotla and Barnala districts lie in the Malwa region of Punjab, which is south of the river Sutlej. Except one district, Sri Muktsar Sahib, all 14 districts in this region are found to have over-exploited the groundwater levels in most of its blocks,

including blocks where these 75 villages are located, according to a 2020 block-wise groundwater resources assessment by the Central Ground Water Board.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Is canal irrigation feasible?

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

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

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

Balbir Singh Seechewal, an environmentalist and a member of Rajya Sabha of Punjab from the state's ruling party, said the construction of more distributaries will not exacerbate the water crisis. "Previously, a significant portion of canal water remained underutilised, failing to reach the farmers due to frequent damage of distributaries caused by poor construction, with little attention paid to this matter. However, the current government is actively addressing this problem," he said.

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

Crop diversification

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

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

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

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

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

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

The state government has been promoting crop diversification, asking farmers to grow crops other than rice but with little success, IndiaSpend reported in September 2022. Even after spending Rs 274 crore on a crop diversification programme during 2014-'19, the sown area of rice increased by 7.18% in Punjab at the cost of other crops, found an audit report by the Comptroller and Auditor General of India.

Future of farming

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Sukhwinder Singh, whose two sons have also settled abroad, expressed concerns about the depleting water resources. “Parents don't want their children to struggle in the future,” he said. “How can we sustain farming without adequate water resources?”
<https://scroll.in/article/1059144/punjabs-farmers-are-struggling-as-groundwater-levels-plummet-with-few-solutions-in-sight>

11. Bogus Dayanand Social Security Scheme beneficiaries to be weeded out (*heraldgoa.in*) 22 Nov 2023

5 years after CAG rap for wasteful expenditure, Social Welfare Dept to carry out an impact assessment survey; notices being issued to ineligible beneficiaries

PANJIM: Almost five years after Comptroller and Auditor General of India (CAG) criticising the State government for wasteful expenditure, Department of Social Welfare now plans to carry out an impact assessment survey to weed out bogus Dayanand Social Security Scheme (DSSS) beneficiaries.

Speaking to O Herald, Director of Social Welfare Ajit Panchwadkar said, “The impact assessment survey was done five years ago and now it is time to do it again. We will weed out those beneficiaries whose income has gone up. May be earlier, they were eligible for the benefits but now their financial condition has improved.”

Commenting on a recent media report that the State government has discovered that wealthy businessmen from the tourism sector, whose monthly income is more than Rs 5 lakh, are beneficiaries of the scheme, the official did not rule out the possibility but said that the department has not received any complaint in this regard.

“We have not received complaints as such. However, we cannot rule out. We cannot say that they are bogus beneficiaries. What happens is that today the financial condition of a beneficiary is weak but if he or she makes efforts, it improves. Checks and balances have to be there. We will devise a mechanism through which accounts will be reconciled,” Panchwadkar said.

The official said that the government has decided to adopt the method of Aadhar based payment system of financial assistance to the beneficiaries.

“Now, saving accounts linked with an Aadhar Card number will only be accepted along with fresh application forms by the directorate. All the beneficiaries have been asked to link their bank accounts to their Aadhar card number within a period of three months starting from November 1, 2023. If the beneficiaries fail to link their Aadhar then financial assistance will be suspended till the Aadhar number is linked to the bank account,” he said.

“There are 1,39,002 beneficiaries of DSSS in the State. It’s a huge number. We will have to chase those who have taken the benefits even when he was not eligible. We are sending notices. Some amount has been recovered and some are yet to be recovered. Notices are being sent almost on a daily basis. Whenever we find such ineligible cases we stop the payment, track the payment history and send notices to the beneficiary for recovery of payment already made,” he said.

According to the official, out of 1,39,002 beneficiaries, 86,304 are senior citizens, 2,655 single women, 31,802 widows, 11,784 persons with disabilities, 418 HIV patients and 39 Bachpan.

All these beneficiaries are paid doles in a range of Rs 2,000 to Rs 3,500 per month.

In 2018, the CAG had criticised the State government for incurring wasteful expenditure.

It had pointed out that crores of taxpayers' money was given to 'ineligible and bogus beneficiaries, under the DSSS. <https://www.heraldgoa.in/Goa/Bogus-Dayanand-Social-Security-Scheme-beneficiaries-to-be-weeded-out/213967>

SELECTED NEWS ITEMS/ARTICLES FOR READING

12. Centre issues Rs 10,000 crore tender for acquisition of 12 Su-30 MKI fighter jets (*indiatoday.in*) Nov 22, 2023

The Narendra Modi-led central government has issued a Rs 10,000 crore tender for the procurement of 12 Su-30MKI fighters for the Indian Air Force.

In a step to improve the squadron strength of the Indian Air Force (IAF), the Ministry of Defence issued a Rs 10,000 crore tender to Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL) for the acquisition of 12 Sukohi-30 MKI fighter jets.

HAL is expected to respond to the tender by the end of December.

The decision of the central government came amid the depleting fighter strength of the Indian Air Force.

Notably, the new aircraft will fill in the void that has been created by the loss of 12 Su-30MKI fighters in accidents in the past 20 years.

The aircraft will be manufactured in India by Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL) and will carry 60 per cent indigenous contents.

The aircraft will be the most modern Su-30MKIs in the Indian Air Force fleet of more than 260 such aircraft.

ABOUT SU-30MKI

The Su-30MKI is a multi-role air dominance fighter that can carry a versatile array of weapons including the Astra Mk-1 long-range air-to-air missile, Brahmos Air Launched missile, and an array of bombs, among others.

The Su-30MKI, a 4.5 generation aircraft, can carry out complex manoeuvres at both high speeds and low speeds, which includes the iconic vertical charlie manoeuvre.

The aircraft, with the capability of air-to-air refuelling, can also carry out long range patrol and other endurance missions.

The IAF is also in the process of upgrading its Su-30MKI fleet with an upgrade programme of over Rs 30,000.

The IAF, with Su-30MKI and Rafale fighter jets, has developed a strong package of fighters that can carry out tactical as well as strategic missions as per requirements.

<https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/indian-air-force-tender-to-hal-for-su-30-mki-fighter-jets-2465944-2023-11-22>

13. Avoid cost overruns to achieve strong infra-led growth (*newindianexpress.com*) Nov 22, 2023

Infrastructure-led growth gives a strong foundation to modern transformation, provides jobs and stokes all-round demand.

It is heartening to note that recent projections for the Indian economy have been positive, with both business pundits and sales figures indicating strong growth and muted inflation. A recent Goldman Sachs report said that though India's real GDP growth rate is likely to moderate marginally to 6.3 per cent in 2024 from 6.4 per cent estimated for 2023, economic activity will remain resilient through 2024. High institutional spending, a driver of growth, will be a tale of two halves: pre-elections, government spending will dominate; post-elections, private investment is expected to reaccelerate. Macroeconomic data seems to support this projection. For instance, the sale of commercial vehicles, an important barometer of economic activity, is expected to be 30 per cent higher this financial year. This is driven by higher sales of heavy vehicles, a demand which in turn has been triggered by an enhanced freight movement through the country.

The next few years can see transformational growth riding on the government's spending on roads, airports and cities. Analytics firm Crisil says India is expected to spend ₹143 lakh crore on infrastructure over the seven years up to 2030, more than twice the ₹67 lakh crore spent since 2017. The firm has forecast a GDP growth of 6.7 per cent through 2030-31—and painted a picture of India escaping poverty to become the fastest-growing large economy and a middle-income country with the per capita income rising from \$2,500 now to \$4,500 by 2031.

Infrastructure-led growth gives a strong foundation to modern transformation, provides jobs and stokes all-round demand. However, there may be many a slip between the cup and the lip. As Goldman Sachs itself admits, money will be scarce as “elevated headline inflation will prevent the central bank from monetary easing before October next year”. Rapid infrastructure-led growth—like what we have seen in China recently and in Japan after the Second World War—depends on high-performance standards. For instance, heavy cost overruns due to delays can stall important projects. A recent statistics ministry report showed that 411 large infra projects were hit by cost overruns totalling a humungous ₹4.3 lakh crore. Where is the additional money going to come from? Further, of the total 1,788 projects monitored in October, as many as 837 had been delayed. Close monitoring and completion are the watchwords if these optimistic growth forecasts are to be realised.

<https://www.newindianexpress.com/opinions/editorials/2023/nov/22/avoid-cost-overruns-to-achieve-strong-infra-led-growth-2634992.html>

14. NHAI to audit all its 29 ongoing tunnel projects (timesofindia.indiatimes.com) Nov 22, 2023

New Delhi: After the Silkyara tunnel mishap, the National Highways Authority of India (NHAI) will conduct a safety audit of all its 29 under construction tunnels across the country, reports Dipak Dash.

Officials said NHAI chairman Santosh Yadav has instructed officials to undertake this exercise quickly by involving the regional officers, project directors and independent consultants.

The total length of tunnels being constructed by NHAI currently is 79 km. Himachal Pradesh accounts for the maximum 12 tunnels, followed by six in Jammu and Kashmir. Earlier, there were instances of cave-in at the site of under construction tunnels in J&K.

Sources said in the second phase, the highways authority will carry out safety audit of all completed tunnels as well.

In response to whether the government needs to relook at the plan and scale of tunnel construction, mainly in hilly states road transport & highways secretary Anurag Jain Powered said SOPs are in place. He said if need arises, the government will take a look it. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/delhi/nhai-to-audit-all-its-29-ongoing-tunnel-projects/articleshow/105399850.cms>

15. Sold Down The River? Cleanup Going Nowhere (timesofindia.indiatimes.com) Nov 22, 2023

New Delhi: In January, on the orders of the National Green Tribunal, a high-level committee was set up to oversee the rejuvenation of the polluted Yamuna. Ten months later, the deadline for the elaborate plans of the committee, among them the upgradation of 18 sewage treatment plants, desilting of 200km of trunk sewer lines, setting up of 40 decentralised sewage treatment plants and trapping of drains, has been pushed from 2023 to 2024.

This, even as the river struggles to support aquatic life.

Admittedly, the panel's agenda was disrupted by the Supreme Court staying NGT's appointment of lieutenant governor VK Saxena as committee head in July. On Monday, Saxena tweeted that froth, sewer and effluent remained unchecked in the Yamuna. Delhi government has its own river revival agenda with a deadline of 2025. Yet, despite several government agencies working on several fronts in the matter, the river water has continued to be muddled.

To ensure 100% treatment of sewage to prevent contamination of the river water, Delhi government planned to construct three new STPs, new decentralised sewage treatment plants, rehabilitation of three existing STPs and capacity enhancement of the existing STPs. Of the three new STPs, the Okhla project, the biggest one, is yet to be completed. It was initially to have been commissioned by December 2022. On May 2 this year,

DJB vice-chairman Somnath Bharti claimed that much of the work was done and the STP would be commissioned by June. However, the new deadline came and went.

Similarly, of the 18 STPs identified for upgradation, the deadline for nine plants has changed from December this year to March 2024. They include Nilothi Phase 2, Keshopur Phase 2 and 3, Narela and Coronation Pillar Phase 1 and 2. Only two of the 18 are anywhere close to completion.

Cleaning the 200km of underground trunk sewer lines has also been only partly accomplished. The minutes of the high-level committee's latest meeting says only 90.3km have been desilted when the entire stretch was to have been cleaned by June. A DJB official explained, "All the DJB projects have been hit by a funds crunch. The finance department has been objecting to and raising questions whenever we seek approvals for funds." There was no official response from the water utility to TOI's queries.

In September, at a review meeting, DJB officials informed the government that the Najafgarh drain alone contributed around 67% to the river's total pollution load. The highlevel committee's data shows that 21 of the 44 untrapped drains falling into the Najafgarh drain have been trapped now. About 450 million gallons per day of wastewater flows into the drain daily. Trapping the sub-drains falling into the Shahdara outfall drain and supplementary drain will likely be completed by December.

It has proved challenging for DJB to install sewer connections in many slums because of narrow lanes. The water utility, therefore, began working on 'decentralised STPs' in unauthorised colonies with enough land. DJB has assessed that 318 such colonies need such facilities, and has completed them in seven while continuing work in 140. There are 161 colonies where the forest department's no-objection to the projects is awaited.

A DPCC official listed its efforts to bring unauthorised colonies under the sewerage network to prevent untreated waste from reaching the river. "Only two common effluent treatment plants (CETPs) to treat effluent from industries met the norms in 2021. Now, all 13 CETPs comply with the standard," the official claimed.

The steps taken haven't changed the quality of water. Delhi Pollution Control Committee's reports on Yamuna water samples show that dissolved oxygen level, which should be 5 mg/l or above to support aquatic life, met the standard at Palla and Wazirabad in October this year and last year, but DO was nil at five locations in October 2022 and only at Asgarpur this year. The levels were extremely low at Agra Canal Okhla (0.4 mg/l), Okhla Barrage (0.7 mg/l), Nizamuddin Bridge (1mg/l), ISBT Bridge (1.3 mg/l) and ITO Bridge (2.2 mg/l).

The prescribed biochemical oxygen demand, which indicates requirement of oxygen, is 3mg/l or less. The reading was 36 mg/l at ISBT Bridge, 43 mg/l at Agra Canal Okhla, 41 mg/l at Okhla Barrage and 50 mg/l at Asgarpur this October. The water in the major drains also tested below the required standard in respect of BOD.

Experts aren't too happy with the extended deadlines. Yamuna activist Diwan Singh said, "It's high time the court gave a timeline and the Delhi and central governments stuck to the deadlines." Bhim Singh Rawat, associate coordinator, South Asia Network

on Dams, Rivers and People, added, “While the focus of the high-level committee has been treating pollution, which is an unending process, the July floods were due to encroachments and constructions on the floodplain. The committee must also focus on ensuring environment flow in the river, protect its floodplain and involve independent experts and civil society. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/delhi/sold-down-the-river-cleanup-going-nowhere/articleshow/105399910.cms>