NEWS ITEMS ON CAG /AUDIT REPORTS

1. CAG to assume chair of Asian Organisation of Supreme Audit Institutions from 2024-2027 *(aninews.in, theprint.in, latestly.com)*

22 September, 2023

The 59th Governing Board meeting of the Asian Organisation of Supreme Audit Institutions (ASOSAI) was held in Busan, Republic of Korea from September 20-22. Girish Chandra Murmu, the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) of India and a permanent member of the ASOSAI Governing Board attended the meeting.

CAG of India will assume the Chair of ASOSAI from 2024 to 2027 and will also be hosting the 16th ASOSAI Assembly in 2024.

The Asian Organization of Supreme Audit In
stitutions (ASOSAI) is the Asian Chapter of the International Organization of Supreme Audit Institutions (INTOSAI).

It aims to promote understanding and cooperation among member institutions by facilitating the exchange of ideas and experiences in the field of public audit.

Recognising the evolving landscape of audit practices, the CAG of India advocated for the establishment of a Working Group on IT Audit and Data Analytics within ASOSAI. This initiative seeks to foster collaboration among member Supreme Audit Institutions (SAIs) and facilitate the development of essential knowledge and skills in IT usage and audit practices. The goal is to collectively explore the strategic implications of IT-related advancements across Asian SAIs.

Murmu, as the Chair of the Special Committee responsible for establishing this ASOSAI Working Group, presented a comprehensive feasibility study report. The Governing Board unanimously approved the formation of the ASOSAI Working Group on IT Audit and Data Analytics, with the CAG of India appointed to lead this initiative.

CAG of India also chairs the Board of Editors of ASOSAI Journal. In this capacity, he is closely associated with ASOSAI's training, research and publication activities in the area of public auditing.

On the sidelines of the ASOSAI meeting, Murmu engaged in bilateral discussions with Hussam Abdulmohsen Alangari, President of the General Court of Audit (GCA), Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and Datuk Wan Suraya Wan Mohd Radzi, Auditor General of Malaysia. These discussions revolved around enhancing bilateral relations and fostering collaboration between their respective SAIs.

CAG Murmu also visited the Philippines and held bilateral meetings with Gamaliel Asis Cordoba, Chairperson of the Commission of Audit, Philippines, on September 15-16. They discussed on a wide range of areas for cooperation, specifically in the fields of Citizens' Participation in Audit, Audit of Public Debt and Use of Information Technology in the Auditing process.

CAG Murmu holds significant positions within INTOSAI, where he serves as a member of the Governing Board and as the Chair of the INTOSAI Knowledge Sharing and Knowledge Services Committee (KSC). He also chairs the INTOSAI Working Group on IT Audit (WGITA) and the Compliance Audit Sub-Committee (CAS).

Furthermore, the CAG of India is a member of the UN panel of external auditors. His current responsibilities include external audits for the World Health Organization (WHO) from 2020 to 2027, Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) from 2020 to 2025, Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) from 2021 to 2023, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) from 2022 to 2027, and International Labour Organization (ILO) from 2024 to 2027. These key positions place the CAG of India in a pivotal role in shaping international standards and best practices in the field of public audit. https://www.aninews.in/news/business/business/cag-to-assume-chair-of-asian-organisation-of-supreme-audit-institutions-from-2024-202720230922221549/

2. Aadhaar biometrics not reliable in India's climate: What Moody's has said *(indianexpress.com)* Updated: September 25, 2023

Since many essential services are predicated on the Aadhar-based verification, unreliability of biometric technologies becomes a major issue.

AadhaarAt a government centre in Shahada, Maharashtra, where Aadhar data is taken, either to rectify old details or create a new identity. (Express photo by Prashant Nadkar/File)

Raising major red flags about Aadhaar – India's 12-digit universal identity – global rating major Moody's Investors Service has questioned the reliability of biometric technologies, especially for people in hot and humid climates, and pointed to consequent service denials caused by this.

The concerns come a year after the country's top auditor, the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) of India had pulled up the Unique Identification Authority of India (UIDAI) for Aadhaar's "deficient data management".

What Moody's has said about Aadhaar
Moody's has noted that Aadhaar, which is the world's largest digital ID program, enables access to public and private services, with verification via fingerprint or iris scans, and alternatives like One-Time Passcodes, with an aim to integrate marginalised groups and expand welfare benefits access.

"However, the system faces hurdles, including the burden of establishing authorisation and concerns about biometric reliability," Moody's said.

"The system often results in service denials, and the reliability of biometric technologies, especially for manual labourers in hot, humid climates, is questionable," it added.

Why the reliability concerns are alarming

The concerns over Aadhaar's reliability are significant given that it is the primary identity document that is linked to a number of the government's welfare schemes. So, if the technology is not reliable, it might result in people not receiving various subsidies from the government that they are entitled to. Bear in mind, a number of the people who depend on government subsidies are also those who need it the most.

Here are some stats –

As of July 31, 2023, 765.30 million Indians had linked Aadhaar with ration card to avail ration through Public Distribution System. Over 280 million residents linked Aadhaar with cooking gas connection for LPG subsidy through PAHAL.

Over 788 Million Aadhaar have been uniquely linked with the Bank Accounts on NPCI Mapper. And almost 100 per cent of farmer-beneficiaries under PM Kisan Yojna are connected via Aadhaar.

"(Un)reliability becomes an issue because you are predicating the delivery of essential services on the biometrics working flawlessly — which they don't," Laavanya Tamang, senior researcher at LibTech India, an action research organisation which focuses on the delivery infrastructure of welfare programmes such as PDS, told The Indian Express.

"The consequences of such failures can be extremely grave. For instance, there are documented cases in Jharkhand of starvation deaths linked to Aadhar biometrics failing and people consequently not being able to receive rations from the PDS," Tamang, who works in Jharkhand, said.

Even as it has become the de facto identity for over 1.3 billion Indians, issues around Aadhaar's privacy and reliability have been repeatedly raised over the years.

Last year, in a report, the CAG said that there are issues of data-matching, errors in authentication, and shortfall in archiving in Aadhaar. It added that the data of Aadhaar card holders have not been matched with their Aadhaar number even after 10 years in some cases.

It has also criticised the absence of a system to analyse the factors leading to authentication errors, and said that even though UIDAI was maintaining one of the largest biometric databases in the world, it did not have a data archiving policy, which is considered "a vital storage management best practice".

"UIDAI provided Authentication services to banks, mobile operators and other agencies free of charge till March 2019, contrary to the provisions of their own Regulations, depriving revenue to the Government," the CAG noted in a 108 page report last April. https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/explained-economics/aadhaar-biometrics-reliable-moodys-climate-8955019/

3. Don’t diminish states’ role: Rather than an overarching central data protection board, state-level ones are needed *(financialexpress.com)* 23 September 2023

Given that state governments themselves handle substantial data while dispensing subsidies, services, and more under their own state-level schemes, a state-level DPB would have been better positioned to address issues of consent and data breach.

In the era of rapid technological advancement where the issue of privacy and data protection has taken center stage, the passing of the Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023 recently is a welcome step. This is a landmark legislation as it safeguards the privacy rights of the citizens of the world’s largest democracy regardless of gender, caste, religion, or domicile. While the Act has made an honest effort to shape the data protection ecosystem of the country by balancing the protection of citizen’s data and allowing space for using data for the growth of the digital economy, there are some glaring gaps.

Chapter V of the Act talks about a Data Protection Board (DPB) and its composition. This Board, appointed by the central government, will exercise control over data collected by the state governments for functions under List II of the Seventh Schedule of the Constitution such as health, education, public order, and so on.

Given that state governments themselves handle substantial data while dispensing subsidies, services, and more under their own state-level schemes, a state-level DPB would have been better positioned to address issues of consent and data breach. Devolution of enforcement and grievance redressal to regional levels would have only increased efficiency and reduced possible operational bottlenecks and would also have aligned with the implementation design/ framework of the Right to Information Act and the Consumer Protection Act, which established state and district-level structures.

This trend would also have mirrored global practices, seen in countries like Germany and Australia.

Further, Sections 7(b) and 9 of the Act empower the central government to exempt certain entities from obtaining consent of data principals for providing subsidies, benefits, services, licenses, and so on.

However, such notification power has not been devolved upon state governments, despite their similar and almost equal responsibility in providing these kind of benefits and services through state schemes. This defies logic.

The central government is the largest collector and processor of personal data. However, it exercises a significant amount of control over the DPB like the power of appointment and removal of the chairperson and members of the Board.

Further, provisions like section 27(3) lay down that the Board, on receipt of a reference from the central government, may modify or suspend the direction issued by it. This creates a situation wherein the Board’s ability to deal with data breaches by the central government itself is severely eroded. This is also against the principle of natural justice: nemo judex in causa sua (no one is a judge in his own cause).

With this, it would be naïve to expect that the Board would be strong enough to issue orders against the central and state governments, Chief Election Commission, Supreme Court, high courts, CAG, and so on and impose a penalty on them for data breaches.

The scope and applicability of Chapter III-Exemptions should have been defined as narrowly as possible. As the Act deals with a fundamental right, the exemptions to the provisions of this act ought to have been limited to the reasonable restrictions as laid down in Article 19(2) of the Constitution with minimal discretionary powers left to the central government. Besides, there has to be a prescribed mechanism by law to review each such decision either by a parliamentary body or by a quasi- judicial institutional arrangement.

The Puttaswamy judgment had laid down that the restrictions to privacy must be proportionate and not arbitrary. However, the power given to the central government to exempt entities by merely issuing a notification does not only not satisfy this principle of proportionality but also requirements of necessity, reasonableness & fairness. For example, section 17(3) empowers the central government to exempt specific data fiduciaries, including startups, from certain provisions—such as Section 5, Sections 8(3) and 8(7), Section 10, and Section 11. The concern arises notably in relation to Section 8(3), which mandates data fiduciaries to maintain accuracy and consistency of personal data when used for decisions impacting data principals.

This obligation is a reasonable requirement expected of any kind of data fiduciary; giving exemptions from this requirement for any one, including start-ups, is entirely unjustified. In today's world of generative AI, such incomplete datasets may lead to algorithmic inaccuracy and possible unintended bias.

Section 8(1)(j) of the Right to Information Act, 2005 states that personal information causing undue privacy invasion need not be disclosed, except when public interest outweighs privacy concerns.

Section 44 of the DPDP Act replaces this with a broad ban on public disclosure of all personal data, eliminating the determinative public interest test. This severely weakens the RTI Act. The former RTI provision should, therefore, have been retained as an exemption.

There was a need to make the legislation even more gender friendly, for the consequences of data breach for a woman are differential and in certain cases more severe.

While we can freely celebrate the surge of innovation propelled by the rise of AI and the unprecedented speed of technological advancements, we would have conquered the sea yet left a giant monster lurking at the bottom if we neglect to address the complex questions of data protection and privacy. It is important to understand that while "digital-by-design" might be an attractive slogan, it is rather essential that "privacy-by-design" is inculcated in our values of data governance. https://www.financialexpress.com/opinion/dont-diminish-states-role-rather-than-an-overarching-central-data-protection-board-state-level-ones-are-needed/3252280/

4. Vande Bharat trains: PM Modi's infra push transforming passenger experience, fuelling India's economic growth *(news9live.com)* 24 September 2023

The modernisation of Indian Railways is a vital component of India's net zero mission, climate change mitigation and the drive towards a $26 trillion economy

As part of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's vision of making rail travel easy and pleasant, the PM virtually flagged off nine new Vande Bharat trains on Sunday, which added to the tally of 25 already plying on the railway routes of the country. With these latest additions, Vande Bharat trains will start running on a total of 34 routes across India.

These new Vande Bharat trains will operate between Udaipur to Jaipur, Tirunelveli-Madurai-Chennai in Tamil Nadu, Hyderabad to Bengaluru, Vijayawada to Chennai, Kasaragod to Thiruvananthapuram in Kerala, Rourkela to Bhubaneswar, and Jamnagar to Ahmedabad from Sunday and will have 8 coaches instead of 16 coaches.

This modernisation of the Indian Railways is part of India's commitment towards a 'net zero mission' and climate change mitigation goals. As part of this goal, today over 80 per cent of the broad-gauge network in the country has been electrified.

The script
Be it the electrification of railways or the rapid launch of modern trains like Vande Bharat, the Modi government has brought about a radical change in the rail travel experience of the Indian public. As soon as Modi assumed the post of PM, he started drawing a blueprint for changes in the railways, and today India is the fourth-largest railway network globally, encompassing a staggering 22,593 operational trains, including 9,141 freight and 13,452 passenger trains.

Each day, this extensive railway system serves a staggering 24 million passengers and transports a colossal 203.88 million metric tons of freight. Notably, in the fiscal year 2021–22, passenger traffic soared to a remarkable 3.54 billion, marking a substantial increase from the previous year's figure of 1.28 billion. Furthermore, in the fiscal year 2022–23, the railway's freight volume reached an impressive 1,109.38 million metric tons, demonstrating a notable year-on-year growth rate of 8 per cent.

Explain more, please
Railways are important for India's high growth imperative as infrastructure is a key enabler in helping India become a US $26 trillion economy. The Indian railway system, considered the backbone of the economy, ranks as the world's fourth-largest, surpassed only by the US, China, and Russia. Managed by the Railways Board, which holds a monopoly on rail services, it covers vast distances across the nation. The extensive railway network excels in transporting bulk commodities and vehicles, offering an energy-efficient and economical mode of transportation.

The Indian Railways witnessed remarkable progress under PM Modi’s government and achieved its highest-ever performance in rail safety and modernising infrastructure. Since 2014, railways have seen substantial improvements under Modi’s leadership, with electrification and track renewal reaching unprecedented levels, along with passenger amenities and cleanliness getting prioritized.

Safety became a top priority for Indian Railways after deteriorated railway tracks and outdated coaches were identified as the primary culprits behind these accidents.

The Vande Bharat Express, India’s inaugural domestically manufactured semi-high-speed train, features upgraded passenger facilities and air purification systems. It was developed and constructed by the Integral Coach Factory, a government-owned entity located in Chennai. The government plans to introduce 400 Vande Bharat trains over the next five years.

Simultaneously, there is a goal to replace the traditional coaches in all express and mail trains with modern Indian-made coaches, including LHB coaches designed by the German company Linke Hofmann Busch.

The National Rail Plan 2030

The railways run about 13,300 passenger trains and 9,200 freight trains daily, covering around 7,200 stations. and these trains carry 23 million passengers and around 3 million metric tons of freight every day.

To create a forward-looking railway system, the Indian Railways have devised a National Rail Plan (NRP)-2030, which aims to boost the railways’ freight modal share to 45 per cent by 2030 through strategic operational and commercial policy initiatives.

The other key objectives of the plan are to substantially reduce freight transit time by raising average train speeds to 50 km/h, identify new Dedicated Freight Corridors and High-Speed Rail Corridors, evaluate rolling stock requirements for passengers and freight, along with locomotive needs for electrification and modal share goals. The NRP aspires to create capacity ahead of demand, accommodating growth up to 2050.

The need for new trains

Train coaches have a finite service life before retirement, and in the Indian Railways, passenger coaches, specifically the coaches made at the Integral Coach Factory (ICF) typically serve for 25 to 30 years. During this period, they undergo maintenance every 5 to 10 years to ensure operational efficiency.

As their service period concludes, these coaches are retired and repurposed into Newly Modified Goods Wagons (NMAG) rakes. When converted into NMG coaches, they remain in service for another 5 to 10 years, facilitating the transportation of goods between states. The transformation process involves sealing the coach from all sides, removing seats, fans, and lights, and reinforcing it with iron strips to enhance durability and utility during this new phase of service.

Indian Railways has three coach production units, Integral Coach Factory Perambur (ICF), Rail Coach Factory Kapurthala (RCF), and Modern Coach Factory Raebareli (MCF). According to the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) report, among the total inventory of 49,033 ICF conventional coaches, 609 coaches had reached the end of their 25-year lifespan as of March 31, 2018. Additionally, approximately 13 per cent of coaches (6,259 coaches) fell within the age range of 20 to 25 years and would require replacement within the next five years.

The CAG also emphasized that the operation of coaches beyond their intended lifespan in the railway system poses a safety risk to passengers.

The CAG report for 2020 on locomotives says that Indian Railways is expected to require at least eight more years to transition the current inventory of 903 Integral Coach Factory (ICF)-type rakes to the safer LHB rakes.

Focus on improving infrastructure
PM Modi has placed a significant focus on improving railway infrastructure in India because a well-developed and efficient railway network is crucial for economic growth. India's railways are a lifeline for transporting essential commodities, and enhancing their infrastructure can positively impact the nation's economy.

Improved railway infrastructure is part of PM Modi's broader strategy to modernize the country's transportation network, stimulate economic growth, create jobs, and address critical infrastructure challenges. It reflects the government's commitment to making India more competitive on the global stage and improving the quality of life for its citizens. https://www.news9live.com/analysis/vande-bharat-trains-pm-modis-infra-push-transforming-passenger-experience-fuelling-indias-economic-growth-2297623

5. 'By 2024, India's National Highway Road Network Will Be Equivalent to US': Nitin Gadkari *(outlookindia.com)* 25 September 2023

The Union Minister of Road Transport and Highways, Nitin Gadkari, speaks to Neeraj Thakur and Rajat Mishra about his strategies for growth and dealing with issues like land acquisition and infrastructure financing. Edited excerpts

Since 2014, India has seen massive infrastructure development—especially of roadways and expressways. How did you manage to develop infra projects at a rapid pace?
When I was a minister in Maharashtra, I got the opportunity to build the Mumbai-Pune Expressway, 85 flyovers, Bandra Worli Sea Link and so on. At that time, my former secretary had told me about a statement by John F Kennedy about inspiration and motivation. He said that American roads are not good because America is rich, but America is rich because the prosperity is coming from the roads. Wherever there is infrastructure, water, power, transport and communication, we will get industry, trade and business. At the same time, it will create more employment opportunities.

The dream of Prime Minister Narendra Modi is to make India a $5 trillion economy. Our mission is to make India the third-largest economy in the world, and roads are very important to achieve this. That's why our prime minister has given the highest priority to infrastructure development since 2014.

The budget for roads and highways is Rs 2.8 lakh crore. We have public-private investment; we do not have resource constraints. We are everywhere—from Karnataka and Haryana to Kashmir and Kerala. By the end of 2024, our national highway road network will be equivalent to that of the US.

Building all these projects requires a lot of negotiation in terms of land acquisition. In the past, most of India's infrastructure projects met with protests by people because they did not want their land to be acquired. This government does not seem to be facing that kind of problem. What has been your strategy?

We decided that land acquisition and rules will be finalised by the states. And now we are paying good prices to the farmers. Before taking charge as minister, we had 406 stalled toll projects and non-performing assets (NPAs) worth Rs 3.85 lakh crore in the banks. My ministry and I saved the banks from the NPAs of Rs 3 lakh crore. Today, we do not have any problem. First of all, for land acquisition, we already have an arrangement with the state governments for persuasion. Then we get the clearances from the environment and forests ministries of both the Union and state governments. Without acquiring 90 per cent of the land, we do not go ahead with the final project. It is not just my credit, but the credit goes to all the stakeholders.

"It Is Time That Along With The Government's Budget, We Have More Public-Private Investment. By The End Of 2024, Our National Highway Road Network Will Be Equivalent To That Of The US."

Recently, you said that you have not seen a single good detailed project report (DPR) in your lifetime for roads. You have also said that you are thinking of inviting international firms to implement projects. What do you think is the reason behind this?
The problem is that as part of the tender process, we have to do the DPR. So, there is a problem with our procedure. We are trying to rectify things and involve people who can make perfect DPRs to reduce the cost.

The Comptroller and Auditor General of India (CAG) has expressed concerns over cost overruns in the Dwarka Expressway. What is your response?
The 29-km Dwarka Expressway is a state-of-the-art project. In our Bharatmala programme, we have proposed 5,000 km at a cost of Rs 91,000 crore; adding a 2-4 lane shoulder. The cost is coming to Rs 18 crore per km. It was written within brackets that the ring road and the bridge cost would be worked out after the finalisation of the DPR. We have not finalised the cost because the DPR was not ready. Now, the CAG has erroneously calculated that the average cost is Rs 18.2 crore per km by ignoring the nature of the project which has been clearly mentioned in the CCEA (Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs) Approval Document.

The e-tender process was transparent and multiple bidders participated in every package. Now, the CAG considers that if the cost is Rs 18 crore per km for 2-4 lane pure shoulder, this cost is coming to Rs 250 crore. For example, under package 1, the length of the expressway built was 76 km. There were five bidders; the tender cost was Rs 1,514 crore, but we awarded it at Rs 1,349 crore, which is 10.91 per cent lesser than the tender cost. Similarly, under package 2, the length was 145 km and the tender cost stood at Rs 1,469 crore. But we awarded it at Rs 1,540, which is 4.83 per cent higher than the tender cost. But in package 3 and package 4, we awarded the tender less than the tender cost by 25.12 per cent and 13.73 per cent, respectively. The cumulative award cost of all four packages is 12 per cent lesser than the cost put together.

There are tunnels and bridges, as it is a state-of-the-art project, so 563 km means it is a 231.5-km single-lane road. In this particular project, the cost was Rs 9.35 crore per lane km. We have saved Rs 700 crore, with 12 per cent lower civil cost.

The National Highways Authority of India (NHAI) has been temporarily barred by the government from accessing the debt market. Do you think that that was a sign of caution?

Not at all. Our rating is AAA; our problem is our expenditure is not there. Now, I will give the example of the InvITs (Infrastructure Investment Trusts) model. When we launched our bonds in the capital market, on the first day, the bond was oversubscribed seven times. We are giving 8.05 per cent interest per year and, especially for poor people, we give them a monthly interest of 8.05 per cent at AAA rating, while the bank interest is just 5.05 per cent.

How are you insulating India from future troubles with infrastructure development?
Our traffic density is very high. One thing is very important. If you want good services, you have to pay, either to us or to somebody else. Public-private investment is the BOT (build-operate-transfer), HAM (hybrid annuity mode), and then different types of projects. I have successfully implemented the project in Mathura where sewage water is converted to clean water. It was purchased by Indian Oil, and we are earning Rs 20 crore per year.

We can even attract capital investment from the private sector in solid waste management and to increase the speed of growth. It is time that along with the government's budget, we have more public-private investment. The road sector is an ideal investment. It is a success story for the world. https://www.outlookindia.com/national/by-2024-india-national-highway-road-will-be-equivalent-to-us-nitin-gadkari-interview-magazine-319141

STATES NEWS ITEMS

6. The many gaps in Gujarat's conservation strategy for sloth bears *(indianexpress.com)* 25 September 2023

The conservation status of sloth bear is same as that of Asiatic lion on the IUCN (International Union for Conservation of Nature) Red List of Threatened Species. But a CAG report finds gaps in Gujarat's conservation strategy on many counts.

With the Gir forest having been aggressively promoted as an ecotourism destination, Gujarat has taken a lot of pride in its Asiatic lion conservation success story.

Sloth bears, however, seemingly have not been garnering as much attention. One of the four bear species found in India, sloth bears are accorded legal protection at par with lions by the Central laws, and have the same conservation status as the big cats on the Red List of Threatened Species maintained by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN).

A recent report by the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG), tabled in the Gujarat Assembly during the three-day monsoon session this month, has underlined grey areas in the conservation and management of six sanctuaries in the northern, central, and southern regions of the state which form parts of sloth bear corridor. The report by the national auditor, conservationists say, shows how the state government's policies have been majorly focussed on lions, wild asses and some bird sanctuaries.

"Sloth bears are under-appreciated and under-studied species, shadowed by lions and (other) charismatic animals. Thankfully, the CAG chose to focus on sloth bear areas of Gujarat and has flagged issues that need urgent action," says Prof Nishith Dharaiya, co-chair of the Sloth Bear Expert Team of the IUCN.

Dharaiya is an associate professor at the Gujarat government-run Hemchandracharya North Gujarat University in Patan. "The sloth bear population in Gujarat has been on the rise since the year 2000 onwards. This is good news for us. But it also makes us think where the surging population will live as their habitat is shrinking and getting fragmented," he further says, adding, "In the present times, we may not be able to create new corridors. But we can certainly protect and conserve existing corridors."

From 247 in 2006, the population of the shy sloth bear rose to 343 in 2016 in the state, as per the official data.

There have been some man vs. wild incidents too as far as these furry animals are concerned. Encounters have been reported in the districts of Banaskantha and Panchmahal. In March 2017, a lactating mother bear killed a forest official and two villagers in Banaskantha district, after which a team of policemen armed with AK-47 assault rifles killed the bear – 67 rounds were fired after tear gas was used. In December last year, another incident of a sloth bear attacking five persons was reported from Panchmahal. The villagers of Lavaria in Sehra taluka, which falls in the Devgadh Baria forest range, had reportedly attacked the bear with stones before the animal turned on them.

The sloth bear survey in 2022 estimated the population to be 358, up from 343 in 2016. On the other hand, the Asiatic lion population of Gujarat was estimated to be 674 in 2020. However, sloth bears are also found in other states of India whereas Gujarat's forests are the only habitats of Asiatic lions in the world.

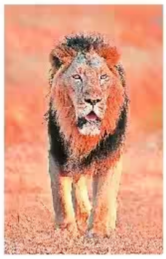
'Ad-hoc' management

The CAG audited Jessore Sloth Bear Sanctuary and Balaram Ambaji Wildlife Sanctuary in Banaskantha district, Ratanmahal Sloth Bear Sanctuary in Dahod district, Jambughoda Wildlife Sanctuary spanning Chhota Udepur and Vadodara districts, Shoolpaneshwar Wildlife Sanctuary in Narmada district and Purna Wildlife Sanctuary in Tapi district. The Narmada district is also home to the Statue of Unity, the world's tallest statue, and one of the prime tourist attractions of Gujarat.

The report covers the activities and policies of the government between 2016-17 and 2021-22.

Rohit Vyas, a conservationist from Vadodara who is a member of the Gujarat State Board for Wildlife (GSBWL), the apex wildlife decision-making body chaired by Gujarat Chief Minister Bhupendra Patel, sees no harm in the government promoting lions and a few sanctuaries only.

Wildlife Census



SPECIES	POPULATION										
	2005	2006	2009	2010	2011	2014	2015	2016	2020	2022	2023
Asiatic lion	359	-	-	411	-	-	523	-	674	-	-
Leopard	-	1070	-	-	1160	-	-	1395	-	-	2274
Sloth bear	-	247	-	-	293	-	-	343	-	358	-
Wild Ass	-	-	4038	-	-	-	4451	-	6082	-	-
Blue bull (nilgai)	-	-	-	119546	-	-	186770	-	-	-	-
Crocodile	-	-	-	-	-		1098	-	-	-	-
Others+	-	-	-	-	-	-	988269	-	-	-	-

+Blackbuck, spotted deer, sambhar, Indian gazelle, four-horned antelope, barking deer, peafowl, monkey, wild boar and wild pig etc

Source: CAG report and Gujarat forest department

AVG ANNUAL PILIGRIM FOOTFALL BETWEEN 2016-21

Temple	Sanctuary	No of piligrims
Kedarnath	Jessore	4,800
Muniani Kutia	Jessore	4,800
Zand Hanuman	Jambhughoda	83,000
Ambaji	Outside Balaram-Ambaji	25-30 lakh
Balram-Mahadev	Outside Balaram Ambaji	50-60 thousand

ANNUAL TOURIST FOOTFALL BETWEEN 2016-21

Jessore	2,053
Ratanmahal	16,063
Jambughoda	29,460
Purna	31,134
Shoolpaneshwar	33,018

No Tourist flow in Balaram-Ambaji

"Gir, Blackbuck National Park, Velavadar, Wild Ass Sanctuary in the Little Rann of Kutch (LRK), and Nal Sarovar Birds Sanctuary are natural choices for ecotourism; as elsewhere, and the wildlife is nocturnal. Sloth bears fall in the latter category though the sanctuaries in which bears are found in Gujarat have excellent variety of birds. So, this is a blessing in disguise as tourism is increasing in leaps and bounds in the state, and the tourist carrying capacity of no protected area (PA) has been assessed through scientific studies. Hence, there is no cap on the number of tourists who can visit these PAs. This is leading to a lot of pressure on sanctuaries," says Vyas.

The CAG report also highlights that Gujarat doesn't have a forest policy, its sanctuaries don't have management plans and therefore they are managed "on an ad-hoc basis."

It further underlines that eco-sensitive zones of sanctuaries don't have zonal master plans and that not enough scientific research is being undertaken to keep tab on invasive species. It also notes that final notification under Section 26A of the Wildlife Protection Act (WLPA) for declaring Jessore and Balaram Ambaji as sanctuaries is still pending though these areas were declared sanctuaries in 1978 and 1989 respectively.

Mulu Bera, Gujarat's Minister for Forest and Environment, Climate Change, Tourism, and Cultural Activities concedes there is work pending for Jessore and Balaram Ambaji sanctuaries. "A settlement commissioner has been appointed for settling rights of people in these two sanctuaries. But the commissioner has not submitted a report so far. Hence the process is still ongoing. But we want to complete the task at the earliest," says Bera, adding, "We will study the CAG report and we will accept its recommendations if required."

Grey Area – Shrines Inside Sanctuaries

Almost every sanctuary and other protected areas in Gujarat have one or more religious places. These include Kedarnath Mahadev temple and Muniji's Kutiya inside Jessore, Ambaji temple with the access road passing through Balaram Ambaji sanctuary, the Mahakali temple atop Pavagadh hill in a reserved forest in Panchmahal district, Tulsishyam and Kankai in Gir National Park and Sanctuary and so on. Those going on pilgrimages to these places are granted access around the year.

On September 21, Bera was part of a launch ceremony of a padayatra (foot march) to Ambaji on the occasion of Bhadarvi Poonam, in which 25-30 lakh pilgrims participate and walk through patches that form part of the bear corridor.

The apex audit institution has observed in its report that the six sanctuaries it audited were "open to tourists throughout the year". "Even though tourists were not allowed inside the sanctuary after sunset, Audit noticed (September 2021) that tourists were present inside the sanctuary even at dusk" – the report highlighted with regards to the Shoolpaneshwar sanctuary in Narmada.

A photograph of tourists at dusk in the Piplod Range of Shoolpaneshwar Sanctuary recording the time taken of the photo at 6.45 pm is part of the CAG report.

The audit body also underlined that in the absence of a monitoring mechanism, "there was no ceiling on the number of visitors and vehicles entering the sanctuaries" and "the impact of tourism on the natural environment and pollution was not monitored. This could have an adverse effect on wildlife in sanctuaries".

But Bera says the Forest Department is regulating access. "We are strictly regulating the movement of people within PAs. We are not allowing entry to any pilgrim or tourist after sunset and maintain records of vehicles at entry and exit points. We don't grant passage to people without passes. We strive constantly to ensure that wildlife is not disturbed by human activities," the Minister, who had flagged off a batch of 100 volunteers from Gandhinagar on Monday for keeping clean 300-km long routes leading to Ambaji temple during the annual 15-day-long pilgrimage to Ambaji, says. The Poonam fair is on till September 29.

When asked about CAG's observation that "nothing was on record to establish that the neighbouring state authorities were consulted (except for Jessore) before submission of proposal to the MoEF&CC for declaration of ESZ (eco-sensitive zone)" and that this resulted in "0 ESZ" on interstate boundaries of Balaram Ambaji, Jessore, Ratanmahal and Shoolpaneshwar sanctuaries, Bera said, "Notifying ESZ is a legal requirement for all states of India and the neighbouring states should have acted proactively to identify ESZ in their respective jurisdictions for Gujarat sanctuaries on their borders. Nonetheless, we will hold necessary discussions on these issues with concerned states."

Bera rejects suggestions that government policies are tilted in favour of lions and a few other species at the cost of sloth bears. "We have done a lot for sloth bears also and we will do more. We are also positive about drafting a tourism policy for sloth bear areas," he says.

Nityanand Srivastava, principal chief conservator of forests (wildlife) and chief wildlife warden of Gujarat, agrees that the Balaram Ambaji sanctuary has been fragmented but claims a notification under Section 26A of WLPA is not a deciding factor. “It is true wildlife habitat in that area is fragmented due to cultivation and other human activities. To resist tourism pressure, we are not allowing any expansion of facilities at religious sites.”

The CAG report also faults Gujarat for not having declared critical wildlife habitat within protected areas, and Vyas says that if tiger range states of India can do that, Gujarat too can. But an officer of the state government says the government is in no hurry to do that.

“Forest rights of tribals living inside sanctuaries have been recognised under the Forest Rights Act, 2006. Such rights have fragmented sanctuaries. Given the size of some sanctuaries, the government doesn’t want to further fragment habitats by declaring parts of them as critical wildlife habitat,” said the officer on the condition of anonymity.

Vyas says that being nocturnal, bears remain active at night, the time when humans are usually not active, and therefore man-bear conflict incidents are low as compared to man-leopard and man-lion conflict incidents.

“However, we have to bear in mind that maldharis (cattle-herders) of Gir have become habituated to living with lions and leopards. Also, lions and leopards and humans don’t compete for the same resources. However, bears are omnivorous. They eat insects. They also eat fruits and thus humans and bears compete for the same resources. Therefore, as bear population increases, the severity of conflict can also increase,” says Prof Dharaiya, adding that Jambughoda-Dahod-Ratanmahal and Balaram Ambaji-Polo reserved forest, Balaram Ambaji-Jessore are potential bear corridors that could hold answers to many challenges in bear landscape of Gujarat. Apart from Balaram Ambaji Sanctuary, CAG found ecotourism facilities in Purna, Shoolpaneshwar, Ratanhmahal, Jessore, and Jambhughoda sanctuaries. The average annual flow of tourists to these five sanctuaries was between 2000 to 33,000 between 2016-21.

The audit institution’s report also observed that there was no checkpost to regulate the flow of pilgrims to the Zand Hanuman temple in Jambughoda. Similarly, the temple boundary was not demarcated and there was a possibility of unauthorized expansion, there was improper solid waste management and coconut husks were piled and burnt up by vendors inside the temple campus while littering of plastic bags was common. The report also found gaps in waste management in Shoolpaneshwar, Ratanmahal, and Purna sanctuaries.

CAG OBSERVATIONS

NO SPECIFIC FOREST POLICY

Gujarat does not have a state-specific forest policy, and the Forest Department has not established a mechanism for ensuring the implementation of provisions of the National Forest Policy and National Wildlife Action Plan. The CAG noted that 15 years after 2009 — when it had pointed out that the state had no specific forest policy — the Forest

Department told the apex audit institution in November last year that the preparation of the state forest policy was “under process”

DECLARATION OF CRITICAL WILDLIFE HABITATS

The state hadn’t declared Critical Wildlife Habitats (CWHs) after 14 years of implementation of Forest Rights Act (FRA). The preparation of management plans was delayed and sanctuaries were managed on an “ad-hoc basis”. The PCCF (Wildlife) in 2019 issued instructions to CCFs and DCFs to submit proposals for forming expert panels for declaring CWHs where of six, only Ratanmahal and Jambughoda submitted proposals in September 2020 but were not approved till November last year.

FOREST RIGHTS ACT

Fresh areas were being cleared for cultivation despite provisions of the FRA that stipulated that no fresh land could be brought under use including cultivation. The FRA has been in implementation since 2008. An instance of Shoolpaneshwar Sanctuary in the Narmada district was cited, where three villages, Babadokti, Govalpatdi and Ambagam — covering a total of 518.93 hectares and being part of the sanctuary — were shown as “non-sanctuary” area in the map notifying the Eco Sensitive Zone (ESZ)

ECO-TOURISM POLICY

The state Ecotourism Policy 2007 was not updated/ modified considering the provisions of ‘Policy for ecotourism in forest and wildlife areas’ issued by the MoEF &CC in 2018. Ecotourism sites were developed in the sanctuaries violating the Forest Conservation Act (FCA) and Wildlife Protection Act (WPA).Sanctuaries were open to tourists all through the year, which would adversely affect mating and regeneration of wildlife
https://indianexpress.com/article/cities/ahmedabad/conservation-red-flags-sloth-bears-cag-report-8954413/

7. PM-KISAN Scheme: Area covered exceeds cultivable land *(highlandpost.com)* 25 September 2023

Shillong: The implementation of a farmer scheme known as PM-KISAN by the Meghalaya government was found deficient in many respects.

As per PM-KISAN guidelines, potential beneficiaries of the scheme are necessarily required to possess cultivable land. In order to avail the scheme, the beneficiary was required to furnish proof of land holding by way of land documents.

Due to the special nature of land holding in Meghalaya, the beneficiaries were allowed to produce documents such as certificate, in lieu of land documents, duly certified by the headman, Nokma and Doloi, as proof of cultivable land in possession of the beneficiary.

However, audit scrutiny of PM-KISAN data for the period from 2018-19 to 2020-21 showed that out of the total 1,85,526 beneficiaries covered under the scheme, declaration of cultivable land was available for 1,11,572 (60 per cent) of the total beneficiaries of PM-KISAN.

This was revealed in the CAG report on social and economic sectors which was tabled in the Assembly last week.

As per the CAG report, the total cultivable land declared by the beneficiaries of PM-KISAN measured 9,72,477.06 hectares.

Records of the Directorate of Economics and Statistics showed that the total cropped area in Meghalaya was 3,12,166 hectares in 2018-19 and 3,09,424 hectares in 2020-21.

This was in stark contrast to the total cultivable land of 9,72,477.06 hectares in possession of the 1,11,572 beneficiaries covered under PM KISAN.

The CAG report also mentioned that 73,954 beneficiaries did not furnish any declaration of cultivable land being possessed by them.

“Thus, the PM-KISAN benefits apparently have been extended to cover cultivable land far in excess of the total cultivable land of the State,” the report said.

It also said that the land area being covered under the scheme exceeded the total cultivable land by a whopping 6.63 lakh hectares (214 per cent).

The CAG report also concluded that the genuineness of the beneficiaries in Meghalaya being covered under the PM-Kisan Scheme is doubtful and the risk of claims by ineligible beneficiaries cannot be ruled out.

“Further, the adequacy of the scrutiny done by District Agriculture Officers concerned and the Department of Agriculture before registering the beneficiary under the scheme was questionable,” the report added. https://highlandpost.com/pm-kisan-scheme-area-covered-exceeds-cultivable-land/

8. CAG asks govt to probe medicine procurement at higher rates

(themeghalayan.com) 25 September 2023

"Procurement of medicines at rates higher than the approved rates of the Central Purchase Board from non-approved manufacturers by the DHS (MI) had resulted in avoidable excess expenditure," said the CAG in its report on social and econmic sectors for the year ended March 31, 2022.

SHILLONG: The Comptroller and Auditor General of India (CAG) has recommended to the state government to initiate inquiry into procurement of medicines by the Directorate of Health Services (Medical Institutions) at higher rates and fix responsibility on the officials concerned for the lapses.

“Procurement of medicines at rates higher than the approved rates of the Central Purchase Board from non-approved manufacturers by the DHS (MI) had resulted in avoidable excess expenditure," said the CAG in its report on social and economic sectors for the year ended March 31, 2022.

"The State government may initiate inquiry to identify the reasons for procuring medicines from unapproved suppliers at higher rates and fix responsibility on the official(s) concerned for the lapses," it said.

The report said scrutiny of records of the DHS (MI) pertaining to procurement of drugs and medical supplies during the period 2019-20 to 2021-22 showed that the DHS (MI) floated notice inviting tender (NIT) in two bids system (technical & financial bids) on November 5, 2018 inviting original manufacturers for supply of drugs and chemicals.

The technical bids were opened on January 7, 9, 10 and 14, 2019.

Financial bids were opened by the Central Purchase Board (CPB) headed by the additional chief secretary in-charge health and family welfare department in its meeting dated May 14, 2019.

Based on analysis of the rates quoted by the bidders, the CPB came out with the approved rate of essential drugs list-2019, containing 1,329 number of medicines along with names of approved manufacturers for supply of the drugs.

As per the terms and conditions of the NIT, the rates once approved shall remain valid throughout the period covered by the contract executed with the successful tenderers. If any of the items are approved in favour of the tenderer, the tenderer shall have to supply the approved items till the end of the contract tenure, failing which all items approved in his favour shall be forfeited and such items shall be offered to the next lowest bidder. Moreover, the concerned stockists/distributors shall be blacklisted and debarred from participating in any government tender for a period of five years.

Further scrutiny showed that the CPB had approved (January 2019) M/s Maxmed Lifescience Private Limited, New Delhi and M/s East African (India) Overseas, Uttarakhand for supply of two medicines viz Dry Syrup Cefpodoxime Proxitil 50mg + Clavulanic Acid 125mg 30,l (dry syrup) and Tablet Ofloxacin 200mg + Ornidazole 500mg (tablet) at the rates of Rs 53 per bottle and Rs 25 per strip of 10 tablets respectively.

Audit observed that the DHS (MI) had placed supply orders (January to May 2019) to M/s Arengh Medical Supplier, Tura for supply of two lakh bottles of dry syrup at the rate of Rs 70.40 per bottle and to M/s Wholesale Pharmaceuticals, Shillong for supply of 80,370 strips of tablets at the rate of Rs 90 per strip.

This has resulted in excess expenditure to the tune of Rs 0.87 crore.

Thus, due to procurement of two medicines at a higher rate than the approved rates of the CPB from unapproved suppliers, DHS (MI) incurred avoidable excess expenditure to the tune of Rs 0.87 crore, the report said.

On this being pointed out, the DHS (MI) stated (August 2022) that the two medicines were included in the essential drugs list and due to urgent requisition from districts, the medicines were procured at the market rates on emergency basis, as the approved suppliers could not supply the medicines immediately at the approved rates.

“The reply is not acceptable in view of the fact that 1.50 lakh bottles of dry syrup and 80,370 strips of tablet 500mg, ordered on January 31, 2019, were supplied/delivered by the suppliers only in December 2019 and September 2019 respectively i.e, after 11 to 19 months from the date of placing the orders,” the report said adding “As such, the procurement cannot be termed as emergency purchase which necessitated procurement of these medicines at higher rates.”

The CAG further said the DHS (MI) could not furnish copies of indents for the medicines from the district authorities, nor did they produce recorded evidence of inability of the approved suppliers to supply the medicines.

“Moreover, no documentary evidence was produced in support of any action taken against the defaulting firms for breach of contractual obligations,” it said.

The matter was reported to the state government in February 2023, but reply is awaited.
https://themeghalayan.com/cag-asks-govt-to-probe-medicine-procurement-at-higher-rates/

9. CAG: Lack of weighbridge monitoring costs state crores *(theshillongtimes.com)* 24 September 2023

SHILLONG: Owing to the failure in enforcing compliance of the guidelines under contract agreement for establishment of integrated gate-cum-weighbridges coupled with the absence of monitoring on the functioning of the weighbridges have cost the state crores of rupees.

The Comptroller and General of India (CAG) report has revealed that the aforementioned conditions have resulted in non-realisation of Rs 23.75 crore.

The CAG has found the state’s Transport department not exercising due diligence in selection of licencees for weighbridges, ensure functioning of all the weighbridges and also failed to realise the annual fees on time. This, it said, has defeated the objective of setting up the weighbridges to detect and prevent overloading by goods transport vehicles.

The CAG audit noted that out of the 13 weighbridges approved for 13 locations by the department, only eight were operational, and further scrutiny of records revealed that seven out of the eight operational weighbridges were observed to have outstanding dues of annual fees.

The department neither took over the weighbridges nor took steps to recover the outstanding annual fee from the licencees, resulting in non realisation of annual fee amounting to Rs 9.49 crore, the audit report said.

It pointed out that four other weighbridges — Wageasi, North Garo Hills, Ratacherra, East Jaintia Hills, Tikkrikilla, West Garo Hills, and Masighat, South Garo Hills — were yet to be made operational as on January 2023, even after 10-11 months of signing the agreement albeit the weighbridges were required to be made operational within three months of signing the agreement. “Despite breach of agreement by these three licencees, the Transport department neither terminated their contracts nor blacklisted them, as provided in the agreement, nor did it take steps to allot the weighbridges to the next higher bidder. The inaction of the Transport department resulted in non-realisation of annual fees amounting to 10.13 crore,” the report said.

The CAG also observed that the failure of the department in taking timely action to execute the agreement with the successful bidder led to potential loss of revenue of Rs 1.69 core from unrealised annual fee and that there was a loss of revenue of 2.44 crore due to under reporting of vehicles.

“Apart from loss of government revenue, the under-reporting of trucks passing through these weighment bridges indicated that the Transport department failed to monitor the movement of overloaded trucks, thus defeating the very purpose of setting them up. Reason for the same is yet to be received from the CoT (Commissioner of Transport), though called for in April 2022,” the report said.

According to relevant rules, each weighbridge including private weighbridges permitted by the government is to be supervised by an Enforcement Inspector who will check and ensure that no vehicle carries weight above the permissible limits as fixed by the competent authority under the relevant law made from time to time. Contravention of these limits will attract penalty as provided in Section 194 of the Motor Vehicles Act. “However, audit did not find any record to evidence that each of the two weighbridges had regularly been supervised by an Enforcement Inspector,” it added.

The CAG report pointed out that failure of the CoT to ensure regular monitoring of the two weighbridges encouraged the licencees to under-report the quantum of trucks passing through the weighbridges, which remained undetected and ultimately resulted in loss of weighment fee amounting to Rs 2.44 crore.

The CAG report was tabled in the Assembly on Friday. https://theshillongtimes.com/2023/09/24/cag-lack-of-weighbridge-monitoring-costs-state-crores/

10. Only 18 vehicles passed via five check-gates of Forest Dept? *(highlandpost.com)* 25 September 2023

Shillong: In order to check illegal transportation of minor minerals and other forest produce, the Forest Department had established 58 check-gates in the State for regulating and controlling the export of minor minerals and other forest produce.

As per monthly returns furnished to the Range Forest Office, Byrnihat by the in-charge of the check-gate during the year 2020-21, as many as 9,778 vehicles carrying minor minerals had passed through four check-gates at Kiling, Maikhuli, Barapathar and 9th Mile under Divisional Forest Officer (Territorial), Shillong and 4,268 vehicles passed through one check-gate (Dhanua check-gate) under Divisional Forest Officer (Territorial), Tura during 2019-21.

However, according to the CAG report on revenue sector which was tabled in the Assembly last week, the information furnished in January 2022 by the two DFOs on the number of vehicles carrying minor minerals and those passing through these check-gates did not match.

The CAG report also revealed that a total of 14,046 vehicles had actually passed through the five check-gates.

However, as per records of the two DFOs, only 18 vehicles had passed through these check-gates.

The Forest Department in March 2023 stated that the number of vehicles passing through the check-gate is based on the information/records submitted by the concerned Range Forest Officer (RFO) and as such, the number of vehicles as per the RFO records should be considered.

"The reply of the department indicates that there was no system of information exchange between the RFOs and the DFOs concerned. Moreover, it also shows that the DFOs (T) did not have any system to verify the actual number of vehicles passing the check-gates with the number of transport challans issued the office of DFOs (T)," the CAG report said. https://highlandpost.com/only-18-vehicles-passed-via-five-check-gates-of-forest-dept/

11. Fish market in Saiden lying unused for three years *(highlandpost.com)* 24 September 2023

Injudicious selection of the site for setting up of modern and hygienic fish market at Saiden, Nongpoh has led to non-utilisation even after more than three years of completion, resulting in idle expenditure of Rs 1.44 crore.

This was revealed by the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) of India in its latest report for 2020-22.

The National Fisheries Development Board (NFDB) had approved Rs 1.64 crore in December 2015 for construction of a modern and hygienic fish market at the village with a fund sharing ratio of 55:45 between the board and Meghalaya government.

The dorbar shnong had handed over an area of 2,902.50 sqm for the project, the agreement which was entered on July 12, 2019 with the Department of Fisheries. As per the agreement, the fish market, on completion was to be handed over to the dorbar shnong for its operational expenses and maintenance, etc.

Though the fish market was inaugurated on August 17, 2018 it was handed over to the executive committee of the dorbar shnong of Saiden almost a year after its inaugural, on July 12, 2019.

Reasons for delay in handing over the market complex to the Dorbar Shnong, as per the MoA were not available on record though the department stated that the delay in handing over the market complex was delay in installation of transformer and water pump.

The report said the fish market, which is 6.2 kms away from Nongpoh main market, was done without any feasibility study and this has resulted in low footfall at the fish market.

The CAG report said the Director of Fisheries also failed to furnish any recorded evidence of joint survey or spot inspection or review meetings with stakeholders which suggests that no feasibility study was conducted by the department and the land provided free of cost by the dorbar shnong was the only criteria for selection of the site for construction of a modern fish market.

The objective of the project was to improve the livelihood of the fish farmers of the State by providing proper storage facilities and hygienic fish market for selling the harvested fish.

"This has defeated the main objective of providing a modern and hygienic market for fish farmers for marketing their produce," the report added. https://highlandpost.com/fish-market-in-saiden-lying-unused-for-three-years/

12. Insurance company got undue benefit of Rs 11.38 cr: CAG *(theshillongtimes.com)* 23 September 2023

SHILLONG, Sep 22: The Comptroller and Auditor General of India (CAG) has found that the inability of the State Nodal Agency (SNA) to protect the interest of the government in efficient implementation of MHIS-IV and PMJAY resulted in the extension of undue financial benefit of Rs 11.38 crore to the insurance company of the scheme.

Scrutiny of records of the CEO, SNA pertaining to the implementation of MHIS-IV and PMJAY showed that M/s Reliance General Insurance Company Limited was selected (December 2018) as insurer for the scheme at the agreed premium of Rs 1,630 per beneficiary household per annum and accordingly, contract agreement was executed on December 3, 2018.

According to Clause 8B(c), the administrative cost is 12, 15, and 20 per cent if the claim ratio is less than 60 per cent, between 60 and 70 per cent, and between 70 and 80 per cent respectively.

Further, clause 21A (a) to (c) of the contract agreement provides that the insurer shall be responsible for beneficiary identification, registration and to ensure availability of sufficient number of IT infrastructure/kits, at the designated location so as to complete the registration drive of 50 per cent of the targeted 7,88,256 households within four months (January 23, 2019 to May 31, 2019). The cost of registration was to be borne by the SNA.

In this regard, the audit observed undue financial benefit of Rs 3.86 crore to the insurer.

Scrutiny of records showed that the SNA intimated (January 15, 2019) the insurer to deploy 130 kits for registration drive and complete the registration process by May 31, 2019.

However, the CEO, SNA had in February 2019 expressed concerns over the slow pace of registration drive.

On March 18, 2019, the insurer requested the CEO, SNA for immediate deployment of additional 100 to 150 additional kits to speed up the registration process. The SNA in a meeting held on March 29, 2019 approved the deployment of 170 additional kits to speed up the registration process with the condition that the cost for deployment of the additional kits (Rs 3.69 crore) shall be adjusted out of the registration fee collected by the insurer from the beneficiaries on behalf of the SNA.

Despite deployment of additional 170 kits over and above the existing 130 kits, the insurer could achieve registration of only 28.28 per cent of the households as against the target of 50 per cent by May 2019.

In view of this, the SNA had extended the due date for completion of the registration drive up to August 31, 2019. The total registration fee collected from beneficiaries up to August 31, 2019 was Rs 4.52 crore which was transferred (January 29, 2020) in full to the SNA by the insurer in contravention of the decision taken by the SNA in the March 29, 2019 meeting.

It was further observed during audit that the insurer added the deployment cost of the additional 170 kits amounting to Rs 3.69 crore to its claim ratio leading to inflation of claim ratio to 60.48 per cent from the actual 57.59 per cent which consequently paved the way for enhancement of the administrative cost to 15 per cent instead of the admissible 12 per cent. This resulted in short refund of surplus premium to the tune of Rs 7.55 crore.

The inclusion of cost of deployment of additional kits enhanced the administrative cost to 15 per cent and the insurer refunded (July 2020) Rs 31.51 crore only in place of the admissible Rs 39.06 crore which was not challenged by the SNA.

Due to this, the SNA extended undue financial benefit of Rs 3.86 crore (short refund of surplus premium of Rs 7.55 crore reduced by Rs 3.69 crore deposited by the insurer as registration fee) to the insurer.

According to the report, the SNA’s acceptance of the refund amount of Rs 31.51 crore from the insurer as against the admissible refund of Rs 39.06 crore was tantamount to extending undue favour to the insurer and it resulted in the loss of Rs 3.86 crore to the state exchequer.

When this was pointed out, the department forwarded (January 2023) the reply furnished by the insurer (August 2022) which stated that inclusion of deployment cost of additional kits in the claim ratio calculation was as per agreement mutually arrived at in the March 29, 2019 meeting.

According to the report, the reply is a misrepresentation of facts as it was decided in the meeting that deployment cost of additional kits has to be met from the registration fee collected by the insurer on behalf of the SNA.

The audit also observed that the delay in refunds of surplus premium by the insurer within the prescribed time resulted in non-realization of interest amounting to Rs 7.52 crore which was tantamount to the extension of undue financial benefits to the insurer to that extent.

Clause 8 (B), (C), and (E) of the contract agreement envisages that after the adjustment of a defined per cent towards administrative cost and after settling all claims, the remaining amount should be refunded by the insurer to the SNA within 60 days of the date of expiry of the policy cover period, failing which, the insurer shall be liable to pay interest @ one per cent of the refund amount due and payable to SNA for every seven days of the delay beyond 60 days.

The scrutiny of records revealed that the insurer had refunded Rs 31.51 crore (July 6, 2020) and Rs 12.44 crore (September 17, 2021) being surplus premium for the policy years of February 2019 to January 2020 and February 2020 to January 2021 respectively.

"This indicates that the refunds were made after a delay of 14 and 25 weeks of the due dates," the report said.

It further stated that due to delay in refund of the surplus premium, a total amount of Rs 7.52 crore was payable by the insurer being interest for the delay @ one per cent of the refunded amount which was not levied by the SNA.

"Non-realisation of interest amount to the tune of Rs 7.52 crore was tantamount to extension of undue financial benefit to the insurer. Thus, the SNA did not enforce the provisions of the contract agreement entered for efficient implementation of MHIS-IV and PMJAY and extended undue financial benefit of Rs 11.38 crore (Rs 3.86 crore plus Rs 7.52 crore) to the insurer," the report added. https://theshillongtimes.com/2023/09/23/insurance-company-got-undue-benefit-of-rs-11-38-cr-cag/

13. Review revenue estimation, collection system, govt told *(theshillongtimes.com)* 23 September 2023

SHILLONG, Sep 23: The Comptroller and Auditor General of India (CAG) has recommended to the state government to review its revenue estimation and collection mechanism and put in place adequate measures to enable it to prepare a more realistic budget and strengthen its revenue collection apparatus.

According to a report of the CAG, revenue raised by the government during 2021-22 (Rs 2,824.96 crore) was 20 per cent of Revenue Receipts (Rs 14,274.14 crore), lower than the revenue raised during 2019-20 (26 per cent) and 2020-21 (24 per cent).

The remaining 80 per cent of Revenue Receipts during 2021-22 was received from Government of India in the form of state's share of Union taxes and duties and grants-in-aid.

The report said the state's revenue receipts increased by Rs 1,269.72 crore (13.49 per cent) and Rs 3,590.91 crore (34 per cent) during 2020-21 and 2021-22 over the previous year respectively.

The increase was mainly on account of an increase in share of Union taxes/duties and grants-in-aid and contributions as compared to the previous year, the report said.

The report stated that the actual realisation of revenue during 2021-22 was Rs 2,300.38 crore as against the budget estimates (BEs) of Rs 2,579.23 crore.

Thus, the shortfall came to Rs 278.85 crore (10.81 per cent). However, in comparison to the previous year, the actual overall revenue realisation increased by 10.99 per cent.

The increase was mainly on account of increase in State Goods and Services Tax (36 per cent), taxes on vehicles (26 per cent) and taxes on goods and passengers (17 per cent).

The report also stated that the actual realisation of revenue under Non-Tax Receipts during 2021-22 was Rs 524.58 crore against BEs of Rs 2,694.03 crore, a shortfall of Rs 169.45 crore (24.42 per cent). When compared with the previous year, the shortfall was most pronounced in 'Other Administrative Services' (86.17 per cent), Public Works (10.07 per cent), and 'Police' (9.19 per cent). https://theshillongtimes.com/2023/09/24/review-revenue-estimation-collection-system-govt-told/

14. Govt departments don't give hoots about CAG reports *(highlandpost.com)* 24 September 2023

Meghalaya's various government departments don't give a hoot about the audit reports published by the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) of India.

As per the latest CAG, Meghalaya Social Economic Sectors Audit Report for 2020-22 report tabled in the just concluded autumn session of the assembly, the departments remained mum even on Public Accounts Committee (PAC) Reports tabled in the house throughout the many past years, with few of the department also even denying even to reply back to say what kind of actions they have taken to rectify the financial irregularities pointed out in the reports and the PACs in the past.

The CAG report in fact called for the state government to take steps to address the issue of inaction from the departments.

A whooping 3,639 paragraphs are yet to be replied to by the various departments of the state over a period of 33 years.

The CAG report on Social and Economic Sectors for the year ended 31 March 2022 pointed out that "analysis of the position of outstanding paragraphs showed that 3,639 paragraphs relating to the period from 1988-89 to March 2022 were outstanding."

Out of this 1,789 paragraphs are more than five years old. The report said that out of the total 3,639 outstanding paragraphs pertaining to 700 Inspection Reports (IR), the CAG was yet to get even the first reply against 792 paragraphs pertaining to 116 IRs from the audited departments.

"Lack of action on IRs and audit paragraphs for long periods is fraught with the risk of perpetuating financial and compliance irregularities pointed out in those reports. It may also result in dilution of internal controls in the governance process as the irregularities pointed out in audit are not acted upon by those in charge of the governance process," the CAG said.

This, it said, results in inefficient and ineffective delivery of public goods and services, fraud, corruption and loss to the public exchequer.

The CAG advised the state government, that it needs to institute an effective mechanism to review and take expeditious action to address the concerns flagged in the IRs and audit paragraphs.

The CAG said that that all Heads of Departments (HoDs) are required to send their responses to draft audit paragraphs proposed for inclusion in the CAG's Report within six weeks of their receipt. But many did not reply and therefore could not be included in this annual report.

It said that during 2020-22, ten draft paragraphs were forwarded to Additional Chief Secretary, Principal Secretary, Commissioner & Secretary of the departments concerned, drawing their attention to the audit findings and requesting them to send responses within the stipulated time. The matters contained in these draft paragraphs were brought to their personal attention through demi-official letters, stating that since these paragraphs were considered for inclusion in the CAG's audit report, it would be desirable to include their comments/responses to the audit findings. Despite this, three of the departments did not furnish reply to four draft paragraphs as on the date of this report.

Further, it was pointed out that the Administrative Departments are required to take suitable action on the recommendations made in the Report of the PAC/COPU (Committee on Public Undertakings) presented to the state legislature and submit action taken notes (ATNs) indicating action taken or proposed to be taken on these recommendations. The PAC specified the time frame for submission of ATNs as six weeks up to its 32nd Report (December 1997) and six months in its 33rd Report (June 2000).

The CAG further pointed out that a review of 17 reports of the PAC involving 15 departments presented to the legislature between April 1995 and March 2020 revealed that none of these departments had submitted the ATNs to the PAC as of March 2022. Similarly, review of six reports of COPU involving four Departments, viz Transport, Commerce & Industries, Tourism and Power presented to the legislature between April 2008 and March 2020 revealed that out of 18 ATNs received, only seven had been sent to the Assembly Secretariat as of March 2022.

The CAG lamented that they had no idea what was the “fate of the recommendations contained in the Reports of PAC/COPU” and “whether they were being acted upon by the administrative departments could not be ascertained in audit.”

Moreover, it was not only the government bureaucracy which was lackadaisical about financial discipline. Even legislators were not too interested in strengthening the financial frameworks as the CAG pointed out that in 2020-21 and 2021-22, PAC and COPU, (which are chaired by MLAs) did not submit any report to the State. https://highlandpost.com/govt-departments-dont-give-hoots-about-cag-reports/

15. CAG report ‘hints’ at Saubhagya scam *(theshillongtimes.com)* 22 September 2023

SHILLONG: The Saubhagya ‘scam’ seems to have returned to haunt the NPP-led MDA government riding a Comptroller and Auditor General report.

The CAG report, tabled in the House on Friday, said undue financial benefits were given to contractors under the Saubhagya and Deen Dayal Upadhyaya Gram Jyoti Yojana. The observation is contrary to the clean chit an inquiry committee had given the state government on the alleged scams.

The CAG observed that the reimbursement of insurance charges without obtaining documentary evidence in support thereof, resulted in an undue financial benefit of Rs 1.96 crore to turnkey contractors (TKCs) under the DDUGJY and Saubhagya schemes.

To implement DDUGJY and Saubhagya, the MePDCL issued 22 letters of award (LoAs) under the TKCs. The conditions of payment against insurance charges for work completed under the two schemes were clearly stipulated in the terms and conditions of the LoAs.

The LoAs said the payment against the supply of materials would be on submission of specified documents while payment against insurance charges would be released on presenting a certified copy of the insurance policy or certificate.

Further, clause 30.1 of the general conditions of the contract said the contractor should take a joint insurance policy in the names of the employer and the contractor.

According to the conditions, the cost of the insurance premium was to be reimbursed to the contractor on submission of documentary evidence for the premium paid. It was also stipulated that the contractor should obtain competitive quotations for such insurance and get prior approval from the employer before taking the insurance.

Scrutiny of the records of MePDCL showed that during the period from June 2017 to January 2021, the company spent a total of Rs 616.89 crore under the two schemes. The expenditure included the reimbursement of Rs 1.97 crore towards insurance charges.

However, the audit revealed that against these payments, a certified copy of the insurance policy amounting to Rs 58,252 was submitted by the TKCs of DDUGJY. Documentary evidence sought for the remaining reimbursement of Rs 1.96 crore was neither available nor furnished for audit.

From the available insurance policy documents, it was noticed that no joint insurance policy was made and prior approval from the MePDCL for an insurance policy as stipulated in the bidding documents was not sought.

"The above indicates that the reimbursement of insurances was made without any documentary evidence in support of the supplies being insured from the TKCs of DDUGJY and Saubhagya," the report said.

While accepting the audit observation, the CE (Projects) of MePDCL stated that the TKCs of DDUGJY have been intimated to submit copies of insurance documents, which are yet to be received.

Similarly, in respect of Saubhagya, the Meghalaya government said letters were issued to two TKCs (Satnam Global Infraprojects Limited and Onycon Enterprise Limited) to submit the original insurance policy or insurance certificate to substantiate the amount already paid towards insurance charges within a month.

In another observation, the CAG noted that the state government initially planned to award the Saubhagya contract to the TKCs at rates fixed by the department. However, on September 10, 2018, the government issued two tenders splitting the contract into two packages — A for Khasi-Jaintia Hills and B for Garo Hills.

M/s Satnam Global Infra Projects Limited submitted a quotation of Rs 269.04 crore as against the estimate of Rs 173.60 crore for package A while M/s Onycon Enterprise quoted Rs 283.82 crore.

For package B, Satnam quoted a rate of Rs 325.11 crore while Onycon quoted Rs 284.61 crore against the estimate of Rs 179 crore.

Later, the two contractors agreed to reduce their bid values by 5% which was accepted by MePDCL.

The contract for package A was awarded to Satnam for Rs 260.04 crore (on February 25, 2019) while package B was awarded to Onycon for Rs 275.66 crore (on March 5, 2019).

The CAG observed that if the contracts had been executed at rates fixed by the department the total expenditure would have come to Rs 365.12 crore for supply component and erection component. However, the total payment made to the two contractors was Rs 521.26 crore, which resulted in avoidable expenditure of Rs 156.14 crore, the report added. https://theshillongtimes.com/2023/09/23/cag-report-hints-at-saubhagya-scam/

16. CAG रिपोर्ट में सौभाग्य घोटाले के 'संकेत' *(jantaserishta.com)*

23 September 2023

ऐसा लगता है कि नियंत्रक एवं महालेखा परीक्षक की रिपोर्ट के आधार पर सौभाग्य 'घोटाला' एनपीपी के नेतृत्व वाली एमडीए सरकार के लिए फिर से चिंता का विषय बन गया है।

शुक्रवार को सदन में पेश की गई कैग रिपोर्ट में कहा गया है कि सौभाग्य और दीन दयाल उपाध्याय ग्राम ज्योति योजना के तहत ठेकेदारों को अनुचित वित्तीय लाभ दिया गया। यह टिप्पणी उस क्लीन चिट के विपरीत है जो एक जांच समिति ने कथित घोटालों पर राज्य सरकार को दी थी।

सीएजी ने पाया कि समर्थन में दस्तावेजी साक्ष्य प्राप्त किए बिना बीमा शुल्क की प्रतिपूर्ति के परिणामस्वरूप डीडीयूजीजेवाई और सौभाग्य योजनाओं के तहत टर्नकी ठेकेदारों (टीकेसी) को 1.96 करोड़ रुपये का अनुचित वित्तीय लाभ हुआ।

डीडीयूजीजेवाई और सौभाग्य को लागू करने के लिए, एमईपीडीसीएल ने टीकेसी के तहत 22 पुरस्कार पत्र (एलओए) जारी किए। दो योजनाओं के तहत पूरे किए गए कार्य के लिए बीमा शुल्क के भुगतान की शर्तें एलओए के नियमों और शर्तों में स्पष्ट रूप से निर्धारित की गई थीं।

एलओए ने कहा कि सामग्रियों की आपूर्ति के खिलाफ भुगतान निर्दिष्ट दस्तावेज जमा करने पर होगा, जबकि बीमा शुल्क के खिलाफ भुगतान बीमा पॉलिसी या प्रमाण पत्र की प्रमाणित प्रति पेश करने पर जारी किया जाएगा।

इसके अलावा, अनुबंध की सामान्य शर्तों के खंड 30.1 में कहा गया है कि ठेकेदार को नियोक्ता और ठेकेदार के नाम पर एक संयुक्त बीमा पॉलिसी लेनी चाहिए।

शर्तों के अनुसार, भुगतान किए गए प्रीमियम के दस्तावेजी साक्ष्य प्रस्तुत करने पर बीमा प्रीमियम की लागत की प्रतिपूर्ति ठेकेदार को की जानी थी। यह भी निर्धारित किया गया था कि ठेकेदार को ऐसे बीमा के लिए प्रतिस्पर्धी कोटेशन प्राप्त करना चाहिए और बीमा लेने से पहले नियोक्ता से पूर्व अनुमोदन प्राप्त करना चाहिए।

एमईपीडीसीएल के रिकॉर्ड की जांच से पता चला कि जून 2017 से जनवरी 2021 की अवधि के दौरान कंपनी ने दोनों योजनाओं के तहत कुल 616.89 करोड़ रुपये खर्च किए। व्यय में बीमा शुल्क के लिए 1.97 करोड़ रुपये की प्रतिपूर्ति शामिल थी।

हालाँकि, ऑडिट से पता चला कि इन भुगतानों के विरुद्ध, डीडीयूजीजेवाई के टीकेसी द्वारा 58,252 रुपये की बीमा पॉलिसी की प्रमाणित प्रति प्रस्तुत की गई थी। 1.96 करोड़ रुपये की शेष प्रतिपूर्ति के लिए मांगे गए दस्तावेजी साक्ष्य न तो उपलब्ध थे और न ही ऑडिट के लिए प्रस्तुत किए गए थे।

उपलब्ध बीमा पॉलिसी दस्तावेजों से, यह देखा गया कि कोई संयुक्त बीमा पॉलिसी नहीं बनाई गई थी और बोली दस्तावेजों में निर्धारित बीमा पॉलिसी के लिए एमईपीडीसीएल से पूर्व अनुमोदन नहीं मांगा गया था।

रिपोर्ट में कहा गया है, "उपरोक्त इंगित करता है कि डीडीयूजीजेवाई और सौभाग्य के टीकेसी से बीमा की गई आपूर्ति के समर्थन में बीमा की प्रतिपूर्ति बिना किसी दस्तावेजी सबूत के की गई थी।"

ऑडिट अवलोकन को स्वीकार करते हुए, एमईपीडीसीएल के सीई (प्रोजेक्ट्स) ने कहा कि डीडीयूजीजेवाई के टीकेसी को बीमा दस्तावेजों की प्रतियां जमा करने के लिए सूचित किया गया है, जो अभी तक प्राप्त नहीं हुई हैं।

इसी तरह, सौभाग्य के संबंध में, मेघालय सरकार ने कहा कि दो टीकेसी (सतनाम ग्लोबल इंफ्राप्रोजेक्ट्स लिमिटेड और ओनीकॉन एंटरप्राइज लिमिटेड) को एक महीने के भीतर बीमा शुल्क के लिए पहले से भुगतान की गई राशि की पुष्टि करने के लिए मूल बीमा पॉलिसी या बीमा प्रमाण पत्र जमा करने के लिए पत्र जारी किए गए थे।

एक अन्य अवलोकन में, सीएजी ने कहा कि राज्य सरकार ने शुरू में विभाग द्वारा निर्धारित दरों पर टीकेसी को सौभाग्य अनुबंध देने की योजना बनाई थी। हालाँकि, 10 सितंबर, 2018 को, सरकार ने अनुबंध को दो पैकेजों में विभाजित करते हुए दो निविदाएँ जारी कीं - ए खासी-जयंतिया हिल्स के लिए और बी गारो हिल्स के लिए।

मेसर्स सतनाम ग्लोबल इंफ्रा प्रोजेक्ट्स लिमिटेड ने पैकेज ए के लिए 173.60 करोड़ रुपये के अनुमान के मुकाबले 269.04 करोड़ रुपये का कोटेशन प्रस्तुत किया, जबकि मेसर्स ओनीकॉन एंटरप्राइज ने 283.82 करोड़ रुपये का कोटेशन प्रस्तुत किया।

पैकेज बी के लिए, सतनाम ने 325.11 करोड़ रुपये की दर उद्धृत की, जबकि ओनीकॉन ने 179 करोड़ रुपये के अनुमान के मुकाबले 284.61 करोड़ रुपये की दर उद्धृत की।

बाद में, दोनों ठेकेदार अपनी बोली मूल्यों को 5% तक कम करने पर सहमत हुए जिसे MePDCL ने स्वीकार कर लिया।

पैकेज ए का ठेका सतनाम को 260.04 करोड़ रुपये (25 फरवरी, 2019 को) में दिया गया, जबकि पैकेज बी का ठेका ओनीकॉन को 275.66 करोड़ रुपये (5 मार्च, 2019 को) में दिया गया।

सीएजी ने पाया कि यदि विभाग द्वारा निर्धारित दरों पर अनुबंध निष्पादित किया गया होता तो आपूर्ति घटक और निर्माण घटक के लिए कुल व्यय 365.12 करोड़ रुपये आता। रिपोर्ट में कहा गया है कि हालांकि, दोनों ठेकेदारों को किया गया कुल भुगतान 521.26 करोड़ रुपये था, जिसके परिणामस्वरूप 156.14 करोड़ रुपये का परिहार्य व्यय हुआ। https://jantaserishta.com/local/gujarat/indications-of-saubhagya-scam-in-cag-report-2838794

17. सीएजी: वेटब्रिज मॉनिटरिंग की कमी से राज्य को करोड़ों का नुकसान

(jantaserishta.com) 24 September 2023

एकीकृत गेट-कम-वेटब्रिज की स्थापना के लिए अनुबंध समझौते के तहत दिशानिर्देशों के अनुपालन को लागू करने में विफलता के साथ-साथ वेटब्रिज के कामकाज पर निगरानी की अनुपस्थिति के कारण राज्य को करोड़ों रुपये का नुकसान हुआ है।

भारत के नियंत्रक एवं महालेखाकार (सीएजी) की रिपोर्ट से पता चला है कि उपरोक्त शर्तों के कारण 23.75 करोड़ रुपये की वसूली नहीं हुई है।

कैग ने पाया है कि राज्य का परिवहन विभाग वेटब्रिजों के लिए लाइसेंसधारियों के चयन में उचित परिश्रम नहीं कर रहा है, सभी वेटब्रिजों का कामकाज सुनिश्चित नहीं कर रहा है और समय पर वार्षिक शुल्क वसूलने में भी विफल रहा है। इसमें कहा गया है कि इससे माल परिवहन वाहनों द्वारा ओवरलोडिंग का पता लगाने और रोकने के लिए वेटब्रिज स्थापित करने का उद्देश्य विफल हो गया है। https://jantaserishta.com/local/meghalaya/cag-lack-of-weighbridge-monitoring-costs-state-crores-2842909

18. Punjab’s debt rose by Rs 50,000 crore under AAP government: Governor seeks details of fund utilisation while opposition demands an audit *(opindia.com)* September 24, 2023

On Friday (22 September), Governor Banwarilal Purohit sought details from Punjab Chief Minister Bhagwant Mann regarding the utilisation of funds citing the alarming surge in the state’s debt under the AAP regime. While replying to CM Mann’s letter written a day earlier, the Governor stated that he has learned that Punjab’s debt has gone up by about Rs 50,000 crore under the Aam Aadmi Party dispensation.

After highlighting the rise in debt, he sought from Chief Minister Bhagwant Mann details of the utilisation of “this huge amount”.

Notably, he was responding to Mann’s letter in which the Punjab CM had requested the Governor to take up the issue of the rural development fund (RDF) amounting to Rs 5,637 crore pending with the President and the Prime Minister.

Responding to his demand, the Governor asserted that it would be appropriate “to wait for the decision of the Supreme Court” as the state government had already moved a plea on the matter before the apex court, earlier in July.

In response to Mann’s letter, the governor wrote, “I have received your letter regarding the Rural Development Fund (RDF) amounting to Rs 5,637 crore and requesting for my intervention to take up the case with the Prime Minister. At the outset, I would like to convey that I am duty-bound to serve the people of Punjab.”

He added, “I have learned from the media reports that you have already approached the Hon’ble Supreme Court of India before approaching me. It would be appropriate to wait for the decision of the highest court before anything is done on this issue.”

Seeking details about the utilisation of funds, the Governor emphasised that through a detailed response regarding the fund utilisation from the state government, he could highlight that the funds were utilised properly and convince the Prime Minister regarding his request.

In the letter, he added, “Further, I have learned that the debt of Punjab rose by about Rs 50,000 crore during your regime. Details of utilisation of this huge amount may be furnished so that I will be able to convince the prime minister that money has been properly utilised.”

Opposition writes a letter to the Governor demanding a comprehensive audit regarding utilisation of funds

Following the exchange of letters between CM Bhagwant Mann and the Governor, opposition parties in Punjab have raised a demand to conduct an audit of the borrowings under Mann’s leadership. Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) launched an attack on the Aam Aadmi Party and asked if the money was spent only on “self-promotion” and paying the “air travel and hotel bills” of Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal.

Subsequently, the Leader of the Opposition in the Punjab Assembly, Partap Singh Bajwa wrote a letter to the Governor on Saturday (23rd September). In the letter, he pointed out that the additional debt of Rs 50,000 crore has resulted in an increase in the debt-to-GDP ratio to 47.6 percent.

Bajwa highlighted the election promises of the AAP government and how the Arvind Kejriwal-led party had assured voters that they would alleviate Punjab from its debt burden but the reality is completely different.

He stated, “However, it has come to our attention that the reality seems to diverge significantly from these assurances. In just 18 months, the AAP-led government has borrowed a staggering Rs 50,000 crore.”

Bajwa added that the most concerning aspect is the apparent lack of transparency and accountability in the “utilisation of this substantial loan”.

Asserting that it is a challenge to obtain information from the current government, he demanded, “These circumstances underscore the urgent need for an immediate and comprehensive audit, under the purview of the Accountant General of Punjab. This audit is not just a request, it is a demand for transparency and accountability.” https://www.opindia.com/2023/09/punjab-governor-cm-bhagwant-mann-debt-50000-crores/

19. Flood damage highlights ‘uncontrolled’ sand mining in northern India *(thethirdpole.net)* September 22, 2023

When a spike of rainfall hit the Indian state of Uttarakhand from early July to late August 2023, the town of Kotdwar experienced a series of disasters. Four rivers – the Khoh, Sukhro, Malan and Paniyali – flow through the town. As the rivers flooded, a bridge over the Malan collapsed on 13 July, as did a bridge over the Paniyali on 28 July. Then on 8 August, the approach road to the bridge over the Khoh broke apart. Many houses, small bridges, roads, and security walls were damaged as the rivers surged.

Across the state of Uttarakhand, almost 100 people were killed in disasters between 15 June and 15 September, with 1,100 landslides recorded in the state in 2023 so far – the highest in eight years.

Dharamveer Prajapati, a resident of Kotdwar, stands in front of a house that was half washed away in the floods. “There was a cloudburst on 8 August and again on 13 August. The water moved forward destroying everything that came its way,“ he says, pointing to the Khoh River. “At least 40-45 houses were destroyed. Now, it doesn’t seem as if any house existed here.”

Role of illegal sand mining highlighted

Part of the reason for the significant destruction seen in Kotdwar was the record rainfall which drove the rivers to flood. But Uttarakhand’s rivers have long been plagued by illegal sand mining.

In July, a video went viral in which Ritu Khanduri Bhushan, speaker and representative for Kotdwar in the Uttarakhand Legislative Assembly, criticised a senior state bureaucrat over ignoring the condition of bridges, and went on to mention khanan [mining] in this regard.

The mining of sand and boulders from river beds, mostly for production of cement, has the effect of the deepening the river channel and increasing the speed of water flowing through it. This increased flow can lead to more erosion of river banks, and more damage to structures in floods. In 2012, after a case was heard in India's Supreme Court against the destructive effects of sand mining in the country's rivers, the Ministry of Mines framed guidelines for sand mining. Recent reporting reveals that the state of Uttarakhand has lobbied for loosening such restrictions over the last few years, and ignored the rules.

Speaking to The Third Pole, Bhushan says: "We have continuously raised the issue of illegal mining in Kotdwar. Uncontrolled mining was carried out in Malan, Sukhro and River Khoh. Mining should happen in rivers but we have to understand the way we are doing it."

According to Prajapati, illegal mining takes place in the Khoh in the day and at night. "Due to mining, small and big bridges broke at many places. Bridges on River Sukhro and River Malan were also damaged due to the same reason," he says.

In August, the Uttarakhand High Court ordered a stop to mining activities in the Malan, Sukhro and Khoh rivers in Kotdwar, while hearing a public interest litigation case regarding bridge breakages due to illegal mining.

Government's own reports cite problems

A 2015 environmental assessment report on sand mining in the Malan by the Uttarakhand Forest Development Corporation, a state government body, specifically mentioned erosion and floods as outcomes of irregular sand mining in the river basin. While there are supposed to be rules in place pertaining to river dredging and river training, these have been flouted, according to Mujeeb Naithani, a right to information (RTI) activist based in Kotdwar.

Speaking to The Third Pole, he says: "Under the garb of river training, we see illegal mining happening here. In Kotdwar, initially, the banks of the river were weakened by digging. At some places in the river, excavation was done to a depth of 6 metres [when it is only allowed up to 3 metres]. If there was river training, the water would have moved straight ahead and it would have taken a lot of time to [erode] one-fourth of the river banks. But there were no shores left. That is why erosion took place up till houses and other infrastructure."

Mujeeb shared copies of letters written by the Uttarakhand Irrigation Department in 2020 in which illegal mining is confirmed to be occurring in Kotdwar's rivers, and the risk of security walls around the river being breached during the rainy season is also noted.

In Uttarakhand, the problem of illegal sand mining is not restricted to Kodtwar. A damning report on illegal sand mining by the Comptroller and Auditor General of India

(CAG) was tabled in the Uttarakhand Assembly this year. It states bluntly that, “All Government agencies like Geology and Mining Unit, District Collector, Police Department, Forest Department and Project proponent and Garhwal Mandal Vikas Nigam Ltd. collectively failed to prevent and detect illegal mining.” It added that the government of Uttarakhand had “failed to implement Government of India’s initiative called Mining Surveillance System for over five years,” and that the state government had itself used 3.7 million tonnes of “illegal mined material” in the state capital, Dehradun.

Kulbhushan Upmanyu, an environmentalist and president of civil society organisation Himalaya Niti Abhiyan says: “Illegal sand mining is a major issue, not only in the plains but also in the rivers in the hilly areas of the Himalayan states. We do not see tractors being used in farming in the mountains but tractors keep roaming on the banks of rivers for mining. This has become a lucrative business because there is no investment in [dealing with] it. The government also does not take any strict actions.”

The CAG report tabled in the Uttarakhand Legislative Assembly points out that many fines for illegal activity have simply not been collected. “The [Industrial Development] Department, therefore, suffered revenue loss of INR 1.24 crore due to not imposing the required penalty on illegal mining/storage,” it says.

Sand mining and destructive floods in Himachal Pradesh

The neighbouring state of Himachal Pradesh was even worse hit than Uttarakhand in recent floods. The state government has estimated the damage caused by catastrophic rainfall between 24 June and 31 August 2023 at INR 120 billion (USD 1.44 billion), with more than 360 people killed.

Increased water levels in the Beas River caused floods in Kullu, Mandi, Hamirpur districts in Himachal Pradesh, and downstream in the neighbouring state of Punjab. There have been complaints of illegal mining in the Beas which leading the river to change its course, causing floods. Nearly 12,000 villages in 20 districts across Punjab and 65 lives were lost in the floods. Authorities have largely focused on encroachment on the riverbed as the main reason for the scale of the disaster.

Vikramaditya Singh, minister of public works in the Himachal Pradesh state government, tells The Third Pole: “Along with heavy rains in the state, the condition of the rivers also deteriorated due to illegal mining. This is also an important reason for the suffered loss. The erosion increased because the banks were damaged and the river changed its course. Taking a lesson from these incidents, on August 23, we have stopped all the stone crushers running on Beas and its tributaries. We will also take similar action against crushers operating on other rivers.”

Anil Kumar, an expert in riverine processes, paleo hydrology and sedimentology at the Wadia Institute of Himalayan Geology in Dehradun, Uttarakhand, saw the floods in the Beas River in person in August. He says that floods reached a height of 8-9 metres near Pandoh Dam in Mandi District.

“Due to mining, huge pits are often formed in the riverbed. When suddenly strong waves of water arrive, the flow is obstructed, resulting into an accumulation of energy,” Kumar tells The Third Pole. "At that mining point, the river changes the direction of flow. This is when erosion takes place."

Kumar says more research is needed into the effects of sand mining on Himalayan rivers. But so far, the problem looks set to continue. In late August in Kodtwar, tractors were still queuing along the broken approach road to the bridge, with boulders brought from the river lying next to them. Mules, used to transport the mined material away, were standing nearby. https://www.thethirdpole.net/en/livelihoods/flood-damage-highlights-uncontrolled-sand-mining-northern-india/

20. Debt on Himachal Pradesh: छोटे राज्य पर कर्ज का बड़ा पहाड़, जल्द एक लाख करोड़ के डेब्ट ट्रैप में फंसने वाला है हिमाचल

(etvbharat.com) September 24, 2023

शिमला: छोटे पहाड़ी राज्य हिमाचल की दुखती रग अगर कोई है तो वो कर्जका विशाल पहाड़ है. कर्ज के जाल में बुरी तरह से जकड़े जा चुके देश के टॉप फाइव स्टेट्स में हिमाचल का भी नाम है. विधानसभा के मानसून सेशन में हिमाचल की वित्तीय स्थिति पर श्वेत पत्र रखा गया. बजट सेशन में सीएम सुखविंदर सिंह सुक्खूने ऐलान किया था कि उनकी सरकार आनेवाले समय में राज्य की वित्तीय स्थिति पर श्वेत पत्र लाएगी.

कर्ज पर श्वेत पत्र: डिप्टी सीएम मुकेश अग्निहोत्री की अगुवा गु ई में गठित की गई कैबिनेट सब-कमेटी की श्वेत पत्र वाली रिपोर्ट बताती हैकि इस समय हिमाचल प्रदेश पर 76,630 करोड़ रुपए का कर्जहै. जल्द ही ये आंकड़ा एक लाख करोड़ को पार कर जाएगा. कारण येहैकि इस समय हिमाचल प्रदेश की प्रत्यक्ष देनदारियां 92774 करोड़ रुपए हैं. अभी हिमाचल सरकार को नए वेतन आयोग की सिफारिशों के तहत कर्मचारियों का बकाया पैसा देना है. इसके अलावा डीए की किश्तें बाकी हैं. ऐसेमें आनेवालेपांच साल में कर्जका आंकड़ा सवा लाख करोड़ के करीब हो जाएगा.

कंगाली में आटा गीला: हिमाचल प्रदेश छोटा पहाड़ी राज्य है और विकास कार्यों के लिए यहांकी सरकार केंद्रीय सहायता पर निर्भर है. पिछली सरकार के समय सेहिमाचल की हालत कंगाली में आटा गीला वाली हो रही है. पूर्वकी जयराम सरकार के समय मेंकोरोना नेहिमाचल की आर्थिकी की रीढ़ पर्यटन की कमर तोड़ दी तो मौजूदा सरकार के समय में भयावह आपदा ने राज्य के विकास की गाड़ी को एक दशक पीछे धकेल दिया. इस तरह हिमाचल की स्थिति दयनीय हो गई.

OPS ने बढ़ाई मुश्किलें: इसके अलावा अब हिमाचल की कांग्रेस सरकार ने कर्मचारियों के लिए ओपीएस लागू कर गू दी। अब हिमाचल को एनपीएस के तहत जमा किया गया शेयर भी नहीं मिल पाएगा. अभी हिमाचल सरकार को 18 साल से ऊपर की महिलाओं के लिए 1500 रुपए प्रति महीना की गारंटी के साथ दूध व गोबर खरीद जैसी गारंटियों को भी पूरा करनेका दबाव है. ऐसेमेंहिमाचल का कर्जके जाल सेनिकलना असंभव प्रतीत हो रहा है.

वाटर सेस से धन जुटानेकी कवायद भी कानूनी पेंच में: सत्ता में आनेके बाद सीएम सुखविंदर सिंह नेहिमाचल की नदियों के पानी पर बनी जलविद्युत परियोजनाओं पर वाटर सेस लगानेका फैसला लिया. इस कवायद सेहिमाचल सरकार नेसालाना एक हजार करोड़ रुपए जुटानेका लक्ष्य रखा था, लेकिन हिमाचल की वाटर सेस कवायद को कंपनियों नेहाईकोर्ट मेंचुनौती दे दी. मामला हाईकोर्ट मेंहै

और अभी येकानूनी पेंच मेंफंसा हुआ है. इसके अलावा हिमाचल सरकार नेबीबीएमबी परियोजनाओं का 4000 करोड़ रुपए बकाया वापस पानेके लिए भी हाथ-पांव मारेहैं. राज्य सरकार को आस हैकि पंजाब से 2024 मार्चमेंशानन प्रोजेक्ट हिमाचल को वापिस मिल जाएगा. उस प्रोजेक्ट सेभी हिमाचल को सालाना 200 करोड़ की आय होगी, लेकिन येसारी भविष्य की बातें हैं.

श्रीलंका जैसे हो सकतेहैंहिमाचल के हालात: सत्ता संभालनेके बाद सीएम सुखविंदर सिंह का एक बयान खूब चर्चामें रहा था, जिसमें उन्होंने कहा था कि हिमाचल के हालात श्रीलंका जैसेहो सकतेहैं. बेशक येचेतावनी थी, लेकिन हकीकत मेंहिमाचल की स्थितियां आर्थिक इमरजेंसी जैसी हैं. वर्ष 2017 मेंहिमाचल के हर नागरिक पर 66 हजार रुपए से अधिक का कर्जथा. अब श्वेत पत्र के अनुसार ये बढक़र 102818 रुपए हो चुका है.

हिमाचल प्रदेश पर कर्ज: वित्तीय वर्ष 2021-22 के अंत में 68 हजार 630 करोड़ रुपए का कर्जथा. तब इस कुल कर्जमें 45 हजार 297 करोड़ रुपए मूल कर्जथा और 23333 करोड़ रुपए ब्याज की देनदारी के रूप मेंथा. हिमाचल की स्थिति येहैकि सरकार को कर्ज पर चढ़े ब्याज को चुकानेके लिए भी लोन लेना पड़ रहा है. कैग रिपोर्ट मेंभी दर्जहैकि आगामी पांच साल के भीतर राज्य सरकार को 27,677 करोड़ रुपए का कर्जचुकाना है. वित्तीय वर्ष 2021-22 के कर्जका आंकड़ा लेंतो एक साल मेंही कुल लोन का दस प्रतिशत यानी 6992 करोड़ एक साल में अदा करना है. राज्य सरकार को अगलेदो सेपांच साल की अवधि मेंकुल लोन का चालीस फीसदी यानी 27677 करोड़ रुपए चुकाना है. इसके अलावा अगलेपांच साल के दौरान यानी 2026-27 तक ब्याज सहित लोक ऋण की अदायगी प्रति वर्ष 6926 करोड़ होगी.

एक दशक में ढाई गुणा बढ़ा कर्ज: हिमाचल प्रदेश में दस साल के अंतराल मेंही कर्जका बोझ ढाई गुणा गु से अधिक हो गया है. पूर्वमेंप्रेम कुमार धूमल के समय जब 2012 मेंभाजपा सरकार ने सत्ता छोड़ी तो प्रदेश पर 28760 करोड़ रुपए का कर्जथा. अब कर्जका बोझ 76 हजार 660 करोड़ रुपए से अधिक हो गया है. सरकारी खजानेका बड़ा हिस्सा कर्मचारियों के वेतन, अन्य वित्तीय लाभ और पेंशनर्सकी पेंशन आदि पर खर्चहो जाता है. वर्ष 2017-18 मेंवेतन व मजदूरी पर 10765.83 करोड़ रुपए का खर्चहुआ था. तब पेंशन पर 4708.85 करोड़ रुपए व ब्याज के भुगतान पर सरकार ने 3788 करोड़ रुपए चुकाए. फिर 2018-19 मेंवेतन पर 11210.42 करोड़ रुपए, पेंशन पर 4974.77 करोड़ व ब्याज भुगतान पर 4021.52 करोड़ रुपए खर्चकिए गए. वित्तीय वर्ष 2020-21 मेंवेतन पर खर्च 12192.52 करोड़ रुपए हो गया. इसके अलावा पेंशन पर 6398.91 व ब्याज भुगतान पर 4640.79 करोड़ रुपए खर्च करने पड़े.

हर सरकार के समय बढ़ा कर्जका बोझ: हिमाचल मेंकांग्रेस और भाजपा की सरकारें कर्जका ठीकरा एक-दूजे पर फोड़ती आई हैं. बजट पेश करनेके बाद ये तथ्य सामने आता हैकि सरकार को लिए गए कर्जके ब्याज की अदायगी के लिए सौ रुपए के मानक में दस रुपए खर्च करने पड़तेहैं. अमूमन राज्य सरकार एक समय में एक तिमाही मेंडेढ़ हजार करोड़ रुपए सेढाई हजार करोड़ रुपए कर्ज लेती है. सुखविंदर सिंह सरकार के पहले बजट के आंकड़ों के अनुसार हिमाचल प्रदेश सरकार वित्त वर्ष 2023-24 में 11068 करोड़ का कर्ज चुकाएगी. इसमें से 5562 करोड़ रुपए तो सिर्फ लिए गए कर्जके ब्याज की अदायगी पर खर्चहोगा. कर्जकी किश्तों के रूप में 5506 करोड़ रुपए चुकानेहोंगे. वित्त वर्ष 2023-24 के अंत मेंराज्य पर 87 हजार करोड़ का लोन हो जाएगा और इसी प्रकार 2024-25 तक हिमाचल का कर्ज एक लाख करोड़ का आंकड़ा पार कर जाएगा.

कर्ज से मुक्ति के लिए नहीं कोई रोडमैप: सरकार के श्वेत पत्र में कर्जका आंकड़ा और कारण तो खूब गिनाए गए हैं, लेकिन इस जाल मेंसेकैसेनिकलें, इसका रोड मैप नहीं है. पूर्वमेंवीरभद्र सिंह सरकार

के समय सीनियर लीडर विद्या स्टोक्स की अगुवाई में रिसोर्स मोबिलाइजेशन कमेटी बनाई गई थी. उस कमेटी ने सरकारी खर्च कम करनेकी सलाह दी थी, लेकिन सुखविंदर सिंह सरकार नेसीपीएस की नियुक्ति के साथ कई कैबिनेट रैंक भी बांटे हैं. राज्य के खर्चबेलगाम हो रहेहैं. श्वेत पत्र के अंत में कमेटी के चेयरमैन डिप्टी सीएम नेसिफारिश की हैकि राज्य सरकार संसाधन जुटाने व फिजूलखर्ची रोकनेके लिए कदम उठाए. हालांकि कमेटी नेजीएसटी राजस्व वृद्धि परियोजना, शराब की बिक्री पर मिल्क सेस, वाटर सेस जैसे कदमों का उल्लेख किया है, लेकिन कोई स्पष्ट रोड मैप नहीं है.

पर्यटन और कृषि सेक्टर होगा मददगार: हिमाचल सरकार के पूर्ववित्त सचिव आईएएस केआर भारती का कहना हैकि राज्य मेंराजस्व का सबसे बड़ा जरिया आबकारी विभाग है. उनका कहना हैकि हिमाचल सरकार को पर्यटन, हाइड्रो पावर पर और अधिक फोकस करना होगा. सैलानियों का आंकड़ा कम से कम पांच करोड़ सालाना होनेसे पर्यटन सेक्टर में उछाल आएगा. दिल्ली से हवाई सेवाओं को सुचारू करनेसेही हिमाचल को पर्यटन से बड़ी रकम मिल सकती है. वहीं, कैग नेभी हिमाचल को कृषि सेक्टर व सिंचाई सुविधाएं बएं ढ़ानेका सुझाव दिया है. कैग के अनुसार कृषि सेक्टर को मजबूत कर राज्य की आर्थिक दशा सुधारी जा सकती है. कृषि सेक्टर को मजबूत करनेसे पहलेराज्य को सिंचाई सुविधाएं बएं ढ़ानेकी जरूरत है.

लोकलुभावन घोषणाओं ने बढ़ाया खजाने का बोझ: पूर्वसीएम जयराम ठाकुर का कहना हैकि चुनाव जीतनेके लिए लोकलुभावन घोषणाएं की जाती हैं. इससे खजाने पर बोझ पड़ता है. कांग्रेस सरकार ने सत्ता में आनेके बाद आठ हजार करोड़ रुपए का लोन लेलिया है. वहीं, सीएम सुखविंदर सिंह सुक्खूका कहना हैकि हिमाचल को ओपीएस लागू कर गू ने की कीमत चुकानी पड़ रही है. केंद्र सरकार नेरेवेन्यूडेफिसिट ग्रांट में कटौती कर दी है. बरसात के कारण हिमाचल को दस हजार करोड़ रुपए से अधिक का नुकसान हुआ है. केंद्र सरकार को इसेराष्ट्रीय आपदा घोषित करना चाहिए. साथ ही हिमाचल को विशेष पैकेज मिलना चाहिए. सीएम सुक्खूने कहा कि राज्य सरकार आर्थिक गाड़ी को पटरी पर लानेका प्रयास कर रही है. आनेवाले समय मेंहिमाचल की आर्थिक स्थिति बेहतर होगी. अभी जो उपाय किए जा रहेहैं, एक दशक में उनके बेहतर परिणाम आएंगे . https://www.etvbharat.com/hindi/himachal-pradesh/state/shimla/debt-on-himachal-pradesh-white-paper-on-himachal-financial-condition-himachal-debt-reasons/hp20230923071944005005860

21. Nagaland: CAG flags excess payment of Rs 7.20 Cr by Agri Dept for machineries *(morungexpress.com)* September 24, 2023

Dimapur: The Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) of India has flagged that the Nagaland Agriculture Department arbitrarily reduced/ increased procurement of Tractors, Power Tillers and Brush Cutters and deviated from the physical and financial targets approved by Government of India.

It its report for the year ending March 31, 2022, the CAG informed that financial assistance/cost norms of Rs 1.25 lakh per beneficiary was not followed and expenditure of Rs 3.41 crore was incurred on five items which was not approved by the Centre. The department also made excess payment of Rs 7.20 crore to the supplier without actual receipt of the full items, the report highlighted.

According to the General Financial Rules (GFR), 2017, all materials are to be counted, measured or weighed and subjected to visual inspection at the time of receipt to ensure that quantities are correct, the quality is according to the required specifications and there is no damage or deficiency. Details of the material should thereafter be entered in the appropriate stock register and the officer-in charge of stores should certify that he has actually received the material and recorded it.

As per the Sub-Mission on Agricultural Mechanisation (SMAM) operational guidelines, the cost norms for financial assistance for procurement of machinery/ implements under 'Promotion of Farm Machinery and Equipment in North Eastern Region' sub- component, the maximum financial assistance was limited to Rs 1.25 lakh or 100 per cent cost of machinery/ implement/ equipment per beneficiary.

The CAG informed that as per records examined in April 2022, that Government of Nagaland on September 2018 submitted a proposal to the Department of Agriculture, Cooperation and Farmers Welfare (DAC&FW), Government of India (GoI) for 'Promotion of Farm Machinery and Equipment in North Eastern Region' under SMAM amounting to Rs 33.33 crore for the year 2018-19. The Centre in October 2018 approved the proposal for Rs 24.40 crore on a 90:10 sharing pattern between Central (₹21.96 crore) and State (₹2.44 crore) Governments.

The Centre in November 2018 released the entire share of Rs 21.96 crore (in two instalments of Rs 10.98 crore each) to the State and the Nagaland Government in turn released Rs 24.40 crore to the implementing Department.

However, examination of records revealed that instead of providing financial assistance to the beneficiary, the department in November 2018 issued five supply orders for Rs 21.79 crore (inclusive of GST and transportation charges) to three suppliers empanelled by the Nagaland Government for supply of machineries/ equipment during 2018-19.

The CAU audit found that instead of providing the maximum admissible financial assistance of Rs 1.25 lakh per tractor to each beneficiary, the department procured 49 tractors at a cost of Rs 4.90 crore in violation of the scheme operational guidelines and distributed the tractors for free to 49 beneficiaries. This not only resulted in denial of intended benefits to 351 beneficiaries but also led to allowance of financial assistance in excess of the maximum limit of Rs 1.25 lakh to 49 beneficiaries. The excess financial assistance amounted to ₹4.29 crore.

Similarly, it was found that the department procured 350 Power Tillers at a cost of Rs 7.63 crore in violation of the scheme operational guidelines and distributed the tillers for free to 350 beneficiaries. This also resulted in denial of intended benefits to 450 beneficiaries and led to allowance of financial assistance in excess of the maximum limit of Rs 1.25 lakh to 350 beneficiaries. The excess financial assistance amounted to Rs 4.19 crore.

In the case of Brush Cutter, the department reportedly procured 1,652 units, against the approved target of 752 units, at a cost of Rs 8.46 crore in violation of the scheme operational guidelines and distributed the same to 1,652 beneficiaries.

The records showed that the supplier M/s HT Enterprises, Dimapur (registered as M/s Hyusinlo Thong) was paid Rs 8.46 crore (including GST of Rs 1.29 crore) by the department for supply of 1,692 Brush Cutters on the certificate given by the Officer incharge of Departmental Central Store, Dimapur, that the materials were received

(December 2018 to February 2019) in full and in good condition and accounted for in the stock register.

The copies of the manufacturer invoices, e-way bills and consignment note/ lorry receipts of transporters were however not available on record, the CAG said. It further informed that the department could not furnish the copies of the manufacturer's price, departmental analysis of rates and government approved rates of farm machineries/ equipment.

To authenticate the actual supply of the machineries, the CAG took up the matter with the Commissioner of Goods and Services Tax (CGST), Dimapur with the request to furnish e-way bills101 and GSTR-2A returns. As per the e-way bills and GSTR-2A provided by the CGST, the supplier had actually purchased Brush Cutters worth Rs 1.26 crore (including GST of Rs 19.22 lakh) from a Guwahati based dealer during 2018-19.

The CGST, Dimapur, Nagaland also stated that M/s HT Enterprises, Dimapur had paid tax of Rs 12,676 only (CGST Rs 6,338 and SGST Rs 6,338). "The above information from the Tax Authorities clearly indicated that the supplier had not supplied the full quantity of 1,692 Brush Cutters but the Department made the payment in full," the CAG said.

Meanwhile, in addition to the farm implements, the department also procured 400 Falcon Premium Garden Tools at a cost of Rs 0.80 crore and executed four more components at a cost of Rs 2.61 crore which was not approved by GoI and "was thus irregular," the CAG stated.

It noted that financial assistance norms of Rs 1.25 lakh per beneficiary was also not followed leading to deprival of benefits to 801 beneficiaries. Further, expenditure of Rs 3.41 crore (Rs 0.80 crore plus Rs 2.61 crore) was incurred on five items which was not approved by GoI.

In reply, the government, in October 22, told the audit that the Directorate of Agriculture has awarded supply orders to empanelled dealers with procurement rates as per the cost norms given in the Operational guidelines for smooth services and timely completion of targeted operations. As for the Department Analysis of rates and Government approved rates of farm machineries/ equipment, the Department followed cost norms given in the SMAM Operational Guidelines, 2018-19, it was added.

The department further said that they do not maintain manufacturer invoices, e-way bills, etc and that the department has no mechanism to check GST payment by the supplier. The Department's only concern is whether all materials were received in full and in good condition as per the supplied terms and conditions, it said.

The CAG however observed that the justifications provided by the Department are "indicative of the fact that the proposal was submitted to GoI only to obtain the funds whereas the actual implementation of the scheme deviated from the scheme guidelines."

It recommended that the State Government investigate the matter and fix responsibility on the officers/ officials involved in the procurement process for making excess payment to the supplier; and ensure that the scheme is implemented as per the physical and financial targets approved by the GoI. https://morungexpress.com/nagaland-cag-flags-excess-payment-of-rs-720-cr-by-agri-dept-for-machineries

22. Central government grants to Puducherry show 1.7 per cent decline in two years: CAG report *(newindianexpress.com)* 23 September 2023

The decline in grants has significant implications as it constituted 31.03% of total revenue receipts for 2021-22.

PUDUCHERRY: The grant-in-aid from the Government of India has witnessed a decline over the past two fiscal years, according to a report released by the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) for the year 2021-2022 in Puducherry assembly. In 2019-20, the grants amounted to Rs 2,668 crore fell to Rs 2,482 crore in 2020-21, and further to Rs 2,439 crore in 2021-22. The 2021-22 grants show a 1.73% decline compared to the previous year.

Grant constitutes 31.03% revenue receipts

The decline in grants has significant implications as it constituted 31.03% of total revenue receipts for 2021-22. However, there has been a contrasting surge in revenue receipts, which increased from Rs 5,890 crore in 2020-21 to Rs 7,859 crore in 2021-22. This increase of Rs 1,969 crore, marks a growth of 33.43%. The buoyancy of revenue receipts to Gross State Domestic Product also increased from 4.64% in 2020-21 to 6.63% in 2021-22.

Own tax revenue soars, arrears accumulate

The annual growth rate of own tax revenue saw an increase of 66.12% in 2021-22. However, the arrears of revenue, amounting to Rs 1067.90 crore is a concern.

Revenue expenditure on rise

The CAG report also reveals that during 2021-22, revenue expenditure increased by Rs 1,488 crore, marking a 20.50% increase from the previous year. It constituted a substantial 98.17% of the total expenditure. The GSDP increased from 20.34% in 2020-21 to 23.34% in 2021-22. The buoyancy of revenue expenditure with reference to revenue receipts during 2021-22 was 0.61%. Committed expenditure constituted 54.92% of revenue expenditure and 61.13% of revenue receipts during 2021-22.

In a concerning trend, capital expenditure witnessed a decrease. As compared to Rs 315 crore in 2017-18, the expenditure for 2021-22 stood at Rs 163 crore.

Pending projects and utilisation certificates

The report also highlights issues of stalled projects and unadjusted utilisation certificates. An amount of Rs 124.94 crore remained blocked in 60 incomplete projects by the PWD and electricity department. The PWD reported a committed pending liability of Rs 76.68 crore as of March 2022 towards payment to contractors.

Unadjusted advances and cases of misappropriation
As of March 31, 2022, 1,100 temporary advances, worth Rs 130.7 crore drawn by various Drawing and Disbursing Officers, remained unadjusted. Shockingly, 296 advances, worth Rs 17.65 crore, remained unadjusted for more than a decade.

The UT government reported 322 cases of misappropriation, loss, theft, and defalcation till March 2022, involving government funds of Rs 27.98 crore. Out of these, FIRs were lodged for only 50 cases. https://www.newindianexpress.com/states/tamil-nadu/2023/sep/23/central-government-grants-to-puducherry-show-17-per-centdecline-in-two-years-cag-report-2617393.html

23. पुडुचेरी को केंद्र सरकार के अनुदान में दो वर्षों में 1.7 प्रतिशत की गिरावट देखी गई: CAG रिपोर्ट *(jantaserishta.com)* 23 Sep 2023

पुडुचेरी विधानसभा में वर्ष 2021-2022 के लिए नियंत्रक एवं महालेखा परीक्षक (CAG) द्वारा जारी एक रिपोर्ट के अनुसार, भारत सरकार से अनुदान सहायता में पिछले दो वित्तीय वर्षों में गिरावट देखी गई है। 2019-20 में, अनुदान की राशि 2,668 करोड़ रुपये थी जो 2020-21 में गिरकर 2,482 करोड़ रुपये हो गई, और 2021-22 में 2,439 करोड़ रुपये हो गई। 2021-22 अनुदान में पिछले वर्ष की तुलना में 1.73% की गिरावट देखी गई है।

अनुदान में 31.03% राजस्व प्राप्तियाँ शामिल हैं
अनुदान में गिरावट के महत्वपूर्ण निहितार्थ हैं क्योंकि यह 2021-22 के लिए कुल राजस्व प्राप्तियों का 31.03% था। हालाँकि, राजस्व प्राप्तियों में विपरीत वृद्धि हुई है, जो 2020-21 में 5,890 करोड़ रुपये से बढ़कर 2021-22 में 7,859 करोड़ रुपये हो गई है। 1,969 करोड़ रुपये की यह वृद्धि, 33.43% की वृद्धि दर्शाती है। सकल राज्य घरेलू उत्पाद के मुकाबले राजस्व प्राप्तियों की उछाल भी 2020-21 में 4.64% से बढ़कर 2021-22 में 6.63% हो गई।

स्वयं का कर राजस्व बढ़ता है, बकाया जमा होता है
2021-22 में स्वयं के कर राजस्व की वार्षिक वृद्धि दर में 66.12% की वृद्धि देखी गई। हालाँकि, 1067.90 करोड़ रुपये का राजस्व बकाया चिंता का विषय है।

राजस्व व्यय बढ़ रहा है
सीएजी रिपोर्ट से यह भी पता चलता है कि 2021-22 के दौरान, राजस्व व्यय में 1,488 करोड़ रुपये की वृद्धि हुई, जो पिछले वर्ष की तुलना में 20.50% की वृद्धि है। यह कुल व्यय का 98.17% था। जीएसडीपी 2020-21 में 20.34% से बढ़कर 2021-22 में 23.34% हो गई। 2021-22 के दौरान राजस्व प्राप्तियों के संदर्भ में राजस्व व्यय की उछाल 0.61% थी। 2021-22 के दौरान प्रतिबद्ध व्यय राजस्व व्यय का 54.92% और राजस्व प्राप्तियों का 61.13% था।

एक चिंताजनक प्रवृत्ति में, पूंजीगत व्यय में कमी देखी गई। 2017-18 में 315 करोड़ रुपये की तुलना में 2021-22 में खर्च 163 करोड़ रुपये रहा।

लंबित परियोजनाएँ और उपयोगिता प्रमाण पत्र
रिपोर्ट रुकी हुई परियोजनाओं और असमायोजित उपयोगिता प्रमाणपत्रों के मुद्दों पर भी प्रकाश डालती है। पीडब्ल्यूडी और बिजली विभाग की 60 अधूरी परियोजनाओं में 124.94 करोड़ रुपये की रकम फंसी हुई है। पीडब्ल्यूडी ने ठेकेदारों को भुगतान के लिए मार्च 2022 तक 76.68 करोड़ रुपये की प्रतिबद्ध लंबित देनदारी की सूचना दी।

असमायोजित अग्रिम और दुरूपयोग के मामले

31 मार्च, 2022 तक, विभिन्न आहरण और संवितरण अधिकारियों द्वारा निकाले गए 130.7 करोड़ रुपये मूल्य के 1,100 अस्थायी अग्रिमों का समायोजन नहीं किया गया। चौंकाने वाली बात यह है कि 17.65 करोड़ रुपये मूल्य के 296 अग्रिम एक दशक से भी अधिक समय तक समायोजित नहीं किए गए।

यूटी सरकार ने मार्च 2022 तक गबन, हानि, चोरी और गबन के 322 मामले दर्ज किए, जिसमें 27.98 करोड़ रुपये का सरकारी धन शामिल था। इनमें से सिर्फ 50 मामलों में ही एफआईआर दर्ज की गई. https://jantaserishta.com/local/tamil-nadu/puducherry-sees-17-per-cent-decline-in-central-government-grants-in-two-years-cag-report-2838184

SELECTED NEWS ITEMS/ARTICLES FOR READING

24. As many as 412 infra projects show cost overruns of Rs 4.77 lakh crore in August: Official report *(zeebiz.com)* September 24, 2023

As many as 412 infrastructure projects, each entailing an investment of Rs 150 crore or more, have been hit by cost overruns of more than Rs 4.77 lakh crore in August this year, an official report said. According to the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, which monitors infrastructure projects worth Rs 150 crore and above, out of 1,762 projects, 412 reported cost overruns and as many as 830 projects were delayed.

"The total original cost of implementation of the 1,762 projects was Rs 25,01,400.62 crore and their anticipated completion cost is likely to be Rs 29,78,681.31 crore, which reflects overall cost overruns of Rs 4,77,280.69 crore (19.08 per cent of original cost)," the ministry's latest report for August 2023 said.

According to the report, the expenditure incurred on these projects till August 2023, is Rs 15,57,188.10 crore, which is 52.28 per cent of the anticipated cost of the projects.

However, it stated that the number of delayed projects decreased to 624, if delay is calculated on the basis of the latest schedule of completion.

Further, it stated that for 339 projects, neither the year of commissioning nor the tentative gestation period has been reported.

Out of the 830 delayed projects, 194 have overall delays in the range of 1-12 months, 190 have been delayed for 13-24 months, 323 projects for 25-60 months and 123 projects have been delayed for more than 60 months.

The average time overrun in these 830 delayed projects is 36.96 months.

Reasons for time overruns as reported by various project implementing agencies include delay in land acquisition, delay in obtaining forest and environment clearances, and lack of infrastructure support and linkages.

Delay in tie-up for project financing, finalisation of detailed engineering, change in scope, tendering, ordering and equipment supply, and law and order problems were among the other reasons.

The report also cited state-wise lockdowns due to COVID-19 (imposed in 2020 and 2021) as a reason for the delay in implementation of these projects.

It has also been observed that project executing agencies are not reporting revised cost estimates and commissioning schedules for many projects, which suggests that time/cost overrun figures are under-reported, it added. https://www.zeebiz.com/economy-infra/news-as-many-as-412-infra-projects-show-cost-overruns-of-rs-477-lakh-crore-in-august-official-report-255710#

25. Rivers in peril: Battling pollution for a brighter and sustainable tomorrow *(financialexpress.com)* September 23, 2023

Widespread water contamination has emerged as a formidable challenge in India, with a staggering 1,95,813 habitations across the country reporting inadequate water quality.

Rivers, with their innate natural charm, serenity, and crucial ecological significance, have long held our fascination. They are not mere bodies of water but rather the life force of our planet, coursing through ecosystems, nurturing life itself. Unfortunately, this enchanting beauty is now under threat due to the improper handling of sewage waste.

A report from the Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB) in 2015 has revealed that nearly 37,000 million litres per day (MLD) of "untreated" sewage water is discharged into rivers across the nation. Yamuna River in Delhi, which grapples with a substantial influx of pollution stemming from domestic sewage and industrial waste, culminates in severe contamination. In a 2018 report by the Central Pollution Board, it was revealed that 17 rivers in Karnataka were contaminated. By the close of 2022, these 17 river stretches were producing around 884.25 million liters per day (MLD) of sewage.

The rapid growth of cities, industries, and populations has led to the once-pristine waters now being contaminated by a mix of harmful substances. The perilous pollution jeopardises river ecosystems, endangering aquatic life, and communities that surround it.

Dealing with water contamination
Widespread water contamination has emerged as a formidable challenge in India, with a staggering 1,95,813 habitations across the country reporting inadequate water quality, thereby posing a grave threat to the public. According to a study published in The Lancet, water pollution has been attributed to more than half a million deaths in India alone in 2019, underscoring the far-reaching global impact of water pollution, which is responsible for a staggering 1.4 million deaths worldwide.

This stark reality not only poses grave health risks but also underscores the significance of World Rivers Day, celebrated annually on the fourth Sunday of September worldwide, to raise awareness about rivers' critical role and their mounting susceptibility to climate change.

The government is increasingly acknowledging the pressing nature of the situation and is taking decisive measures to protect their rivers. They are bolstering policies and regulations, aiming for stricter oversight of industrial discharges and sewage treatment procedures. Moreover, the government is making substantial investments in the expansion and enhancement of sewage treatment infrastructure to accommodate the escalating needs of urban areas.

An illustrative example of such an effort is the Namami Gange Programme, initiated in 2014 and overseen by the National Mission for Clean Ganga (NMCG). This collaborative endeavour involves coordination among central and state government entities, local authorities, and various stakeholders. While the program has achieved notable successes, it also grapples with ongoing challenges linked to the intricate problems of pollution, water management, and river conservation within the Ganga River basin. Furthermore, the government has launched initiatives like the Atal Mission for Rejuvenation and Urban Transformation (AMRUT) and the Smart Cities Mission of the Ministry of Housing & Urban Affairs to combat water pollution comprehensively.

Waste treatment

Advanced wastewater treatment facilities, combined with the adoption of eco-friendly methods, hold significant potential for substantially reducing the pollution that enters our rivers. The emerging startups within the waste sector are going to play a pivotal role in tackling this urgent issue by pioneering innovative technologies and solutions for sewage waste and pollutant treatment. They are committed to responsible waste management, ensuring that pollutants are properly treated before being released into water bodies.

One such exemplary enterprise is Mudita & Radhesh, with a specific focus on transforming waste materials like Butchery Chicken Waste into valuable resources. Their primary objective involves developing innovative solutions aimed at transforming waste materials into valuable resources, thereby mitigating the volume of waste deposited into rivers.

Another noteworthy enterprise, Bintix, works towards a zero-waste future by offering door-to-door waste management services for various waste types. Their digital platform tracks the movement of waste from the point of origination to the recycling center, ensuring that plastics and other waste don’t end up in the rivers. In addition, Jal Sevak leads the way in pioneering on-site greywater recycling in India. Greywater, which results from activities like bathing and washing, is a form of mildly polluted wastewater. Their IoT-based innovative approach revolves around recycling greywater in households and public toilets, thus reducing the volume of wastewater entering sewers and pits—a critical step in the fight against water pollution.

Recognizing the potential of innovations in addressing waste management and disposal challenges, the Swachhata Startup Challenge, a collaborative initiative between the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs (MoHUA) and Agence Française de Développement (AFD), was launched and implemented by Villgro. This initiative seeks to boost efficiency, societal impact, and transparency while reducing single-use plastics. It encourages local innovations in waste management, including collection, recycling, upcycling, and sustainable products. It also fosters partnerships between urban bodies and startups to promote innovative technology adoption.

Promising collaborations led by the Indian government and organizations like AFD are key in the fight against river pollution, offering hope for a cleaner and sustainable future. By pooling resources and expertise, stakeholders can implement holistic solutions, while public awareness and community involvement empower individuals as local river custodians. At an individual level, people can combat river pollution by using biodegradable paints, avoiding dumping waste, reporting oil disposal and littering, joining cleanup efforts, and refraining from ash immersion.

Through collective action, responsible waste management practices, and a shared commitment to safeguarding our precious waterways, we can pave the way for a brighter tomorrow—one where our rivers flow unpolluted and thrive, providing for generations to come. https://www.financialexpress.com/opinion/rivers-in-peril-battling-pollution-for-a-brighter-and-sustainable-tomorrow/3253127/

26. How to decarbonise India's coal power *(financialexpress.com)*

September 23, 2023

The recent G20 declaration gives much guidance on agreed positions on clean energy transition. For example, the nations could have "net zero pathways of their own choice" depending on their "national circumstances" while "ensuring uninterrupted power supply" are some of the guarded positions negotiated. For India, the coal sector is the largest one to undergo a massive transition over the next two decades. India is in its growth phase, with per capita electricity consumption of 1,200 units, when the world average is 4,000. Considering the expected economic growth over the coming decades, more than three times additional electricity may be needed around 2050; of course, with the maximum growth of non-fossil sources and efforts for energy efficiency. Therefore, some growth of new coal plants is unavoidable.

India has nearly 600 coal power generation units of varying vintage, size and location that are operating currently. India is also building new units for reliable delivery of power supply. They use more than 800 million tonnes of coal and generate nearly 212 GW, providing 70% of the power generated in the country. While China increased coal capacity from 580 GW in 2009 to 1,100 GW in 2019, India might barely go from 212 GW to 280 GW in the next 10 years, due to timely decarbonisation efforts and commitment to a net zero pathway.Given the magnitude of the problem and the concern of ensuring reliable power supply that is critical for a growing economy, how do we navigate the gradual closing down the plants while ensuring reliability and also growth? How do we gradually transit to the renewable energy(RE) future, given RE cannot deliver continuously and uniformly, even as we move to shut down coal-based generating units? We examine some criteria here.

Be firm on pension reforms: The Centre must stick to basic tenets of NPS, take steps to improve employment benefits in the private sector

Age of plants

Closing down old plants, say, above 25 years or 30 years, has become an oft-repeated suggestion. But this is a simplistic solution, often suggested by activists. At present, 52% of the plants in operation have been built in the last 15 years. They usually have a lifetime of 40 years at least. But they often recover capital deployed only in 20-25 years. Thereafter, they give power at competitive prices, challenging even renewables. Moreover, some coal plants would be needed to provide flexible power, when RE is not available—at least for some time. Therefore, they are valuable and may provide an alternative to expensive storage solutions, if flexibility is assured.

Technical efficiency

The quantum of kwh/kw delivered by a plant can decide its productivity and also its economic competitiveness. However, this often depends on other factors such as proximity to high demand centres and not necessarily technical efficiency alone.

CO2 coefficients of the power plants

Typically, they range from 0.7-1.2 kg/kwh. However, the high values are for older plants, which are fewer and may be used for flexible power on a temporary basis.

Location-related factors

During 2016- 2019 period, the Central Electricity Authority issued closure instructions for plants totalling a production capacity of nearly 9,000 MW , mostly coal-based, on the basis of the lack/concern over availability of land, water and coal. The land-use issues for highly urbanised locations are important, mainly due to the resulting air pollution and forgone value of expensive land. Water near some areas also is increasingly getting scarce.

Distance from coal mines

Retiring those plants that are quite far from the mines earlier may avoid transport costs as well as CO2 emissions.

Thus, the conventional thinking of closing because of age, technical efficiency and CO2 coefficients has limited validity.

As mentioned, the coal sector also has to grow, though guardedly. The new coal plants can be located near the coal mines (or the coast, if the coal is imported), to reduce additional costs and CO2 emissions from its transport. The new plants can mainly come up near coal mines(except a few), as not all locations can satisfy their demand with RE in the immediate future.

In conclusion, India would need a roadmap for growth and decarbonisation that considers granularity at the plant level. Although micromanagement using any single criterion should be avoided, a broad set of criteria could be made clear. Location-wise exercises may be needed, but these should, again, be at the regional level without rigid rules, not at the state level. The criteria for closure should focus on requiring less new plants and maintaining reliable supply rather than aiming for minor CO2 gains. Adding more transmission links would be a very effective way to manage the demand due to scattered RE sources. Even connecting with hydro power from Nepal, Bhutan, and Arunachal Pradesh may be perhaps the first level of defence to avoid new coal-based capacity. A new Irade study shows that it could save several hundred million tonnes of CO2, depending on various scenarios. https://www.financialexpress.com/opinion/how-to-decarbonise-indias-coal-power/3252289/

27. Mumbai: Dahisar-Bhayander Flyover Project Costs Soar, Doubles To ₹4027 Crores; BMC Grapples with Escalating Expenses *(freepressjournal.in)* September 23, 2023

The administration attributes this rise in cost to various factors, including the incorporation of a viewing gallery, installation of CCTV cameras, sound barriers, and GST charges

The cost of the Dahisar-Bhayander flyover bridge project has seen a substantial increase, doubling the last estimated cost. This project holds significant importance as one of BMC's ambitious undertakings. In July 2023, the project's cost was estimated at ₹1998.22 crores, but it has now surged to ₹4027 crores. Notably, this escalation has occurred while the project is still in the tender stage.

To alleviate traffic congestion in Mumbai, BMC has initiated several projects, including the construction of flyover bridges, the widening of roads, and the development of the Coastal road. It has been observed that residents from Mira Road and Dahisar also commute to Mumbai for business and employment opportunities. Consequently, BMC embarked on the construction of the Dahisar-Bhayander flyover bridge. The decision to undertake this project was made in June 2022 when the initial estimated cost was ₹1600. However, there was a lack of interest from potential bidders. Subsequently, consultants recommended an increase in project costs due to its extensive nature. Tenders were then invited in October 2022, with the revised cost estimated at ₹1998 crores.

Once again, the project cost has surged, reaching an estimated ₹4027 crores. BMC administrators have approved this cost increase. The administration attributes this rise in cost to various factors, including the incorporation of a viewing gallery, installation of CCTV cameras, sound barriers, and GST charges. The project is slated to be completed within 42 months, excluding the monsoon season.

Interestingly, BMC has selected Land T company for the construction of the project. Initially, the project was slated to be implemented by MMRDA, but it was subsequently transferred to BMC by the state government. Consequently, BMC will now bear all associated costs. https://www.freepressjournal.in/mumbai/mumbai-dahisar-bhayander-flyover-project-costs-soar-doubles-to-4027-crores-bmc-grapples-with-escalating-expenses