NEWS ITEMS ON CAG /AUDIT REPORTS

1. Sports Authority of India focused on revenue generation: CAG

(tribuneindia.com) 25 Oct 2023

Is the Sports Authority of India (SAI) failing in its primary role of promoting sports and achieving sporting excellence at the national and international level? If the Comptroller & Auditor General of India's (CAG) report is to be believed, it seems to be true.

In its performance audit report, the CAG has flayed the sports body for focusing more on renting the stadiums for non-sports functions rather than organising meets.

The audit cites how the athletic track at the Jawaharlal Nehru Stadium (JNS), replaced in 2018 for the cost of Rs 7 crore, has not been used for holding an athletics event. On inspection by the Professional Management Group in 2021, the track was found to have developed undulation. Further, the surrounding area over the underground tunnel was found to be sinking.

"…On one hand it was given National Centre of Excellence (NCOE) status, on the other hand it was not in the condition to hold any sporting events for athletics. Also, instead of catering to sports, it had become a source of income by renting out space in the stadium building," the report stated.

The report also cites how SAI earned Rs 28 lakh and Rs 235 lakh in the year 2020-21 and 2021-22, respectively.

At the Major Dhyanchand National Stadium, SAI flouted general financial rules and CVC guidelines by not seeking a tendering process to construct a hostel and administrative block for the National Hockey Academy in 2017.

The report also flagged how the facility was rented out to the Ministry of Home Affairs and National Mission for Clean Ganga Mission for revenue generation.

Regarding the Indira Gandhi Stadium, there are no records of completion certificate and of total expenditure incurred to replace the wooden floor of the main area.

Furthermore, the ambulance at the facility is being used to ferry staff and records and to pick and drop officers.

The CAG also flagged the MOU signed between Glen Mark Aquatic Foundation and SAI to run the National Swimming Academy at the Dr Shyama Prasad Mookerjee Swimming Pool Complex (SPMSPC). Signed in 2015, the agreement has been renewed till 2025.

"It was not understood in the audit what prompted SAI to sign the second agreement when no swimmer from SPMSPC qualified for international event," the report stated.

Problem areas

-NCOEs in Delhi and Chandigarh only operational on paper. Delhi athletes had to be shifted to Sonipat and Bengaluru.

-Rs 4.85 crore spent on squash courts at the Major Dhyanchand Stadium in May 2022. Facilities not being operated under Come & Play scheme or NCOE. The swimming pool was repaired at the cost of Rs 31.38 lakh but is non-functional.

-At the Indira Gandhi Stadium, infrastructure created for tennis, wushu and cue sports lie unused. No table tennis and boxing coaches from 2021-23. Tennis court being used as a dumping ground.

-National Cue Sports Academy at the SPMSPC was made in 2017 after spending Rs 8.66 crore on equipment and coaches and support staff salaries. Of the 10 billiards tables procured, records of only four were found as per stock register.
https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/sports/sports-authority-of-india-focused-on-revenue-generation-cag-556324

2. Can Close Relatives Of State's Executive Head Be Awarded Govt Contracts? Supreme Court Seeks CAG's Response *(livelaw.in)* 24 Oct 2023

The Supreme Court while resuming its hearing in a SLP raising allegations regarding awarding of government tenders by the state government of Arunachal Pradesh, a decade ago, directed the Comptroller and Auditor General of India (CAG) to inform the Bench on the following points:

- "Whether very close relative(s) to the Executive Head of the State can be awarded Government contracts;

- In the event this question is answered in the affirmative, what would be the norms for awarding contract to such persons

This order has been passed in pursuance to the last order wherein the Court expressed its intention to seek assistance from the CAG in the matter without impleading him as a party.

It may be recalled that the present SLP stems from the allegations that contracts were given by the state government of Arunachal Pradesh without floating any tender. The same has been filed by an NGO named "Voluntary Arunachal Sena" and was represented by Advocate Prashant Bhushan.

The petitioner organisation filed the petition in the Supreme Court in 2010 challenging a decision of the Gauhati High Court to dismiss a PIL filed in 2007. Pertinently, Dorjee Khandu, the Chief Minister during 2007-2011 term is a respondent in the petition in personal capacity. The petitioner had also added the incumbent Chief Minister Pema Khandu (son of Dorjee Khandu) as an additional respondent in his personal capacity later.

The matter was being heard by a Bench comprising Justices Aniruddha Bose and Bela M Trivedi.

ASG Nataraj entered appearance on behalf of CAG. During the hearing, Senior Advocates Rajiv Dutta and Vikas Singh, appearing for the present Chief Minister, submitted that the questions asked by the Bench are hypothetical in nature nevertheless, the Court was categorical in receiving views of the CAG on the aforementioned two points and posted the matter on November 21, 2023.

Imperatively, in the earlier proceeding, Chief Minister Pema Khandu, filed a sealed cover report before the Top Court. Concerns were also raised by Bhushan about threats faced by individuals associated with the case. Following this, Justice Bose assured the parties that the Court was aware of these issues and that they would thoroughly review the report submitted to them. https://www.livelaw.in/top-stories/supreme-court-government-tenders-cag-voluntary-arunachal-sena-v-state-of-arunachal-pradesh-240859

STATES NEWS ITEMS

3. UDF alleges corruption in Kerala Health Department; cites CAG report on supply of expired medicines *(thesouthfirst.com)* Oct 24, 2023

The Opposition Congress in Kerala on Tuesday, 24 October, raised corruption allegations against the state Health Department and Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan in connection with procuring medicines by the Medical Services Corporation.

This is the second time in a month that the department, headed by Health Minister Veena George, has come under Opposition attack.

Addressing the media in Kochi, Leader of the Opposition in the Assembly VD Satheesan, citing a Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) report, alleged that certain medicines were procured without examining their quality and 26 hospitals were given medicines which were past their expiry date.

The Health Department is yet to react to the allegations.

'Expired medicines distributed'

The Congress leader alleged that medicines past their expiry date were being distributed to the public through the Medical Services Corporation.

"Expired medicines were given to 26 hospitals. Meanwhile, 483 hospitals were given the medicines which were kept aside from distribution due to lack of quality," he charged.

He also alleged that pharmaceutical companies were selling medicines nearing the expiry date to the government at a much cheaper price than the market rate.

“The Medical Services Corporation is purchasing medicines nearing expiry date and giving them to the common man in the state. Once the medicine is past the expiry date, its molecular combination changes and can affect the health of people,” the Congress leader alleged.

He alleged that most of these purchases were approved by the chief minister or the health minister.

Satheesan also claimed there were no quality checks on the medicines and sought an investigation into the issue by an independent agency.

Earlier issue

Earlier in the month, two people, including the suspected kingpin in the alleged job fraud and bribery charges against a personal staff member of Health Minister George were caught from Theni in neighbouring Tamil Nadu.

Akhil Sajeev had been absconding ever since the bribery charges cropped up. It has been alleged that money was paid for the appointment of a medical officer recently.

The health minister’s office had rejected the allegations against the personal staff member, Akhil Mathew, and complained to the Thiruvananthapuram city police, seeking a detailed probe into the allegation.

The alleged job fraud, in connection with appointments under the Health Department, came up recently after Haridasan, a Malappuram native, said that Mathew, a personal staff member of the health minister, accepted a bribe from him for the appointment of his daughter-in-law as a medical officer.

He was arrested for allegedly creating a fake email related to temporary appointments in the Ayush Mission, the police said.

Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan had earlier said the health minister’s private secretary and staff members, who were facing the allegations, had themselves lodged separate police complaints in this regard.

The allegations

Haridasan had alleged that a personal staff member of the minister took ₹1 lakh as a bribe for the appointment of his daughter-in-law as a government medical officer.

Haridasan had further charged that a former office secretary of CITU in Pathanamthitta, who allegedly acted as a middleman, had also accepted a bribe for the said appointment. However, his daughter-in-law didn’t get the job.

As the allegations triggered a huge political row in the state, Mathew approached the police, seeking a probe into the matter. The police registered an FIR under IPC sections 419 and 420 (cheating) based on the complaint by Mathew.

Terming the bribery charges against the health minister’s staff as “serious”, the Opposition Congress had said corruption was thriving in all government departments in the state.

Rejecting the allegations, the health minister's office earlier said a complaint has been forwarded to the DGP for a detailed inquiry into the matter.

Minister George also came out strongly against it and said that based on the complaint received, she sought an explanation from the accused personal staff member.

She also said she never tried to cover up the complaint when she received it.

"When I received such a complaint, as a minister, what I did first was… seek an explanation from my staff member against whom the charge was levelled. It was part of the investigation I conducted in my office about the issue," she told reporters in Kannur. https://thesouthfirst.com/kerala/udf-alleges-corruption-in-kerala-health-department-cites-cag-report-on-supply-of-expired-medicines/

4. Kerala: Cong demands probe over distribution of expired medicines in hospitals *(thestatesman.com)* October 24, 2023

Senior Congress leader and Leader of Opposition in Kerala Assembly VD Satheesan on Tuesday said the findings of the Comptroller and Auditor General of India (CAG) that the expired medicines were supplied to the government hospitals by Kerala State Medical Services Corporation Ltd (KMSCL) are shocking and he demanded an impartial investigation into the affairs of the organisation (KMSCL).

Speaking to media persons in Kochi, Satheesan asked Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan to respond to the CAG report over the distribution of expired medicine to government hospitals and he demanded an impartial investigation into the into the affairs of KMSCL.

He said that the CAG in its report has stated that there was a grave laxity on the part of the KMSCL in the quality control of medicines provided in the state.

"There is serious negligence in quality checking. Substandard and fake medicines are becoming easily available in the market. Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan and Health Minister Veena George had approved the purchase," Satheesan said.

"Some companies' drugs have not even been tested. The government is busy extorting money by risking the lives of patients. Expired medicines were supplied to twenty-six hospitals. Around 1,610 batches of medicines have not met the expiry date regulations," he alleged.

Satheesan also asked CM Vijayan to clarify whether the Directorate of Enforcement (ED) has probed the monthly payment controversy involving his daughter Veena or not. https://www.thestatesman.com/india/kerala-cong-demands-probe-over-distribution-of-expired-medicines-in-hospitals-1503234281.html

5. मेडिकल सर्विसेज कॉर्पोरेशन पर CAG की रिपोर्ट, वी डी सतीसन ने लगाए गंभीर आरोप *(jantaserishta.com)* 24 Oct 2023

एर्नाकुलम: विपक्ष के नेता वी डी सतीसन ने कहा कि चिकित्सा सेवा निगम पर सीएजी की रिपोर्ट चौंकाने वाली है. उन्होंने आरोप लगाया कि राज्य के कई अस्पतालों में घटिया दवाएं बांटी गईं और कुछ दवाओं की जांच भी नहीं की गई। केरल में पांच दिन और जारी रहेगी बारिश, 11 जिलों में येलो अलर्ट जारी

तिरुवनंतपुरम: भारतीय मौसम विज्ञान विभाग (आईएमडी) ने चेतावनी दी है कि राज्य में बारिश जारी रहेगी...

सतीसन ने कहा, "गुणवत्ता जांच में गंभीर लापरवाही हो रही है। घटिया और नकली दवाएं बाजार में आसानी से उपलब्ध हो रही हैं। मुख्यमंत्री पिनाराई विजयन और स्वास्थ्य मंत्री वीना जॉर्ज ने खरीद को मंजूरी दे दी थी।" वीडी सतीसन ने यह भी आरोप लगाया कि जोखिम उठाकर पैसे का गबन किया गया मरीज़ों की जान।" छब्बीस अस्पतालों में एक्सपायर्ड दवाएँ आपूर्ति की गईं। मुख्यमंत्री को दवा घोटाले पर जवाब देना चाहिए। विभिन्न गोदामों में आपूर्ति की गई दवाओं के 1,610 बैच 75% शेल्फ जीवन के बिना थे। इसकी निष्पक्ष जाँच होनी चाहिए घटना, "उन्होंने कहा। https://jantaserishta.com/local/kerela/cag-report-on-medical-services-corporation-vd-satheesan-made-serious-allegations-426696

6. सीएजी की आपत्तियों का जवाब नहीं दे रहे अफसर *(jantaserishta.com)* 24 Oct 2023

नोएडा प्राधिकरण के अफसर लेखा परीक्षा (सीएजी) की आपत्तियों का जवाब नहीं दे रहे हैं. अप्रैल से दिसंबर 22 तक के अलग-अलग विभागों से संबंधित कामकाज पर 65 आपत्तियां लगाई गईं थीं जिसमें से प्राधिकरण ने सिर्फ 26 का ही जवाब दिया है.

बाकी आपत्तियों का जवाब नहीं दिया गया या फिर ऐसे जवाब दिए गए जिनके आधार पर आपत्ति को निस्तारित किया जाना संभव नहीं है. सीएजी ने एक बार फिर डेडलाइन देते हुए इस महीने के अंत तक जवाब मांगा है. सीएजी को जवाब देने से पहले नोएडा प्राधिकरण के एसीईओ ने संबंधित विभागों से इस सप्ताह संबंधित

आपत्तियों पर तथ्यात्मक एवं साक्ष्य आधारित अनुपालन आख्या उपलब्ध कराने के निर्देश दिए हैं.

अधिकारियों ने बताया कि ये आपत्तियां उद्यान, नियोजन, वाणिज्य, भूलेख, सामान्य प्रशासन, संस्थागत, औद्योगिक, ग्रुप हाउसिंग के अलावा सिविल, बिजली, जल, जनस्वास्थ्य, टीएसी और नोएडा ट्रैफिक सेल से संबंधित हैं. एसीईओ की तरफ से संबंधित विभागों के प्रभारियों को पत्र जारी करते हुए कहा है कि अनुपालन लेखा परीक्षा से संबंधित ऑडिट प्रस्तर बहुत अधिक समय से अनिस्तारित पड़े हुए हैं जिनका निस्तारण किया जाना है.

लेखा परीक्षा के अंतर्गत अपनी एआईआर रिपोर्ट में अप्रैल से मार्च की समयावधि के दौरान अपनी एआईआर रिपोर्ट में कुल 53 आपत्तियां जारी की गईं थीं. इसके बाद अप्रैल से दिसंबर 22 तक की समयावधि में अनुपालन में लेखा परीक्षा के अंतर्गत 12 आपत्तियों की रिपोर्ट जारी की गईं. ऐसे में कुल 65 आपत्तियां लेखा परीक्षा की तरफ से जारी की गईं.

तक हुए घोटालों के मामले में कार्रवाई नहीं

सीएजी ने मुख्य रूप से वर्ष 15 से तक प्राधिकरण के कामकाज की गहनता से जांच की थी. इसमें स्पोर्टस सिटी, प्राधिकरण की जमीन पर कब्जे सहित कई बिंदुओं पर बड़े स्तर पर गड़बड़ी की रिपोर्ट तैयार कर करीब 30 हजार करोड़ रुपये का घोटाला होना बताया था. यह रिपोर्ट विधानसभा में पेश की जा चुकी है. इस रिपोर्ट को रखे हुए करीब तीन-चार साल का समय हो चुका है लेकिन अभी तक एक भी मामले में किसी भी अधिकारी पर कार्रवाई नहीं हुई है.

आवंटन से लेकर सरकारी जमीन पर कब्जे पर उठाए सवाल
सीएजी ने संबंधित विभागों की आवंटन नीति से लेकर सरकारी जमीन पर हो रखे कब्जों पर सवाल उठाते हुए जवाब मांगा है. हर विभाग के चार साल के कामकाज पर 8 से 10 आपत्तियां लगाई गई हैं. इसमें संपत्तियों के आवंटन के तौर तरीकों पर खासतौर से सवाल उठाया है. इसके अलावा वर्षों से पहले जमीन अधिग्रहित होने के बावजूद उस पर कब्जे को लेकर भी सीएजी ने जवाब मांगा है. वेंडिंग जोन में आवंटित दुकानों को लेकर भी सीएजी ने सवाल उठाया है. सिविल और नोएडा ट्रैफिक सेल के अलग-अलग काम पर जारी किए गए टेंडर से भी असहमति जताई है. https://jantaserishta.com/local/haryana/officers-are-not-responding-to-cags-objections-425642

SELECTED NEWS ITEMS/ARTICLES FOR READING

7. Either repeal or revise the country's fiscal law *(livemint.com)* 24 Oct 2023

Instead of treating the FRBM Act's fiscal deficit cap as a quaint relic of times past, we must debate its basis. Post-covid times hve been blurry, but clarity on policy constraints will help

India is not a country of sticklers, by and large. It explains why the Union finance ministry's economic review for September could use the word 'solid' to describe the Centre's fiscal position, which, thanks to "steady revenue growth" and "prudent rationalisation of revenue expenditure," implies that it will meet its 5.9% deficit target for 2023-24, even though this inflow-outflow gap as a proportion of GDP is almost twice the limit specified by the country's fiscal law. Of course, the 3% cap imposed by the Fiscal Responsibility and Budget Management (FRBM) Act of 2003 has long acquired the look of a relic. Moreover, it always had an escape hatch for crises like covid. Even more pertinently, it's not as if awkward laws do not get glazed over. In the case of Article 377, for example, the judiciary in 2018 wisely chose to 'read down' a part of the penal code that outlawed gay sex. Since legislative action to fix the law would have involved a political rigmarole, that was taken as a practical way out, relieving our leaders of any need to take a stance. Yet, placing the fisc in the same category of touchy subjects is hard to justify. In fact, it's about time the government decided whether to repeal or modify the FRBM Act.

With a stated glide path that aims to reduce the fisc to less than 4.5% of GDP by 2025-26, half a decade past the covid crisis, the government has shown no pretence of abiding by what it clearly considers a dead-letter law. That fiscal policy should not be placed in such a stiff legal straitjacket was so even two decades ago. While it is true that profligacy has long been the bane of Indian public finance, spelling excessive inflation as well as costly credit for the private sector, it's equally obvious that enlarged state outlays play an often-vital role in pumping money around an economy in trying times, as envisaged by Keynes. An ideal policy frame, thus, would be set for counter-cyclical action: that is, with a fiscal stimulus imparted to cushion an economic slump if and when needed; and state expenditure held back to let private impulses expand output when market forces are doing an apt job of resource allocation. Overall, what balance is kept over an extended period would be shaped by the ratio of private and public roles that policymakers deem fit. This may go by ideology. But still, regardless of whether a high level of state spending is expected to 'crowd' private investment 'in' or 'out,' an arbitrary limit for a budget deficit was always a dubious idea. It need not have taken a pandemic to expose fiscal rigidity as faulty. Every economy needs a spender of last resort and it's hard to foretell exactly how much spending may be needed.

What's remarkable is how our mega deficits since covid struck has sent neither inflation nor lending rates into double-digits, despite a robust recovery in commercial activity and an uneven-but-evident spring-back of consumer demand. Although the central bank has kept a vigil on monetary conditions (not to mention allegations of dodgy data), recent experience suggests that FRBM hawks had misjudged how much the Centre can spend without setting off macro instability. About a decade ago, loose policy had severe consequences. This time, the impact has been relatively benign. Unless it's still too early to say so. What if the pandemic's contortions are still to be fully resolved? Either way, given the risks of overspending, it would be prudent of the Centre to tighten its fisc faster than its glide path requires. https://www.livemint.com/opinion/online-views/either-repeal-or-revise-the-country-s-fiscal-law-11698159666202.html

8. GST Evasion: Government expecting ₹50,000 crore mop-up on recovery of dues, multiple notices sent *(livemint.com)* 25 Oct 2023

The Indian government is expected to recover ₹50,000 crore in evaded Goods and Services Tax (GST) in FY24, Business Standard reported. This amount is over double that of what was recovered in FY23 and is likely to potentially be the highest annual tax collection, it added.

In FY24, GST officials have so far identified evasions amounting to ₹1.36 lakh crore; and have already recovered ₹14,108 crore of this. In FY23, an evasion of ₹1.01 trillion was detected, resulting in a recovery of ₹21,000 crore.

A substantial portion of this recovery is expected to come from incorrect claims of input tax credit by insurance companies, GST payments on expatriate services under the reverse charge mechanism, illicit clearances of tobacco products, and property transactions, the report added.

Tax Demands

The GST Departments have over the past few months sent a flurry of notices to companies to comply with tax demands. These include taxes on salaries of MNC's expatriate employees, taxes on online gaming, crypto tax and the expanded scope for Online Information Database Access and Retrieval (OIDAR) service providers.

Among those who received such notices include gaming company Delta Corp. On September 25, it received a notice for a tax shortfall of ₹11,140 crore, whereas, its subsidiaries were issued notices for an amount totalling ₹5,682 crore. The alleged shortfall in the payment of tax pertained to the period between July 2017 and March 2022.

As per the demand, notices were sent by the the Directorate General of GST Intelligence, Hyderabad; dues are follows - Delta Corp: close to ₹11,140 crore; subsidiary Highstreet Cruises and Entertainment: near ₹3,290 crore; and subsidiary Delta Pleasure Cruise Company: about ₹1,766 crore.

On October 23, the Bombay HC provided some relief by directing officials to hold off on final actions till its hearing in the matter is complete.

Earlier on October 18, around 1,000 subsidiaries of multinational corporations (MNCs) operating in India received tax demands pertaining to an 18 percent tax on salaries and allowances paid to foreign expats by the parent companies.

The demands, ranging from ₹1 crore to ₹150 crore, cover the period between FY18 and FY22 for payments by foreign parent companies to expats working in Indian subsidiaries of MNCs. Companies have been given a 30-day window to respond to these tax demands.

On October 16, notices were sent to around 70 digital companies including advertising firms, edtech and online gaming firms in line with requirements for 18 percent Integrated GST (IGST). The new tax is effective as of October 1, irrespective of whether the services are for personal or business use.

Previously, only business-to-business services were subject to IGST, and there was no tax obligation for individuals and government entities acquiring non-business services from overseas Online Information Database Access and Retrieval (OIDAR) service providers outside of Indian jurisdiction. These rules have changed.

Major players are not exempt. On October 16, FMCG giant Dabur has received a GST demand notice of ₹320.6 crore, from the Gurugram Zonal Unit of the Directorate General of GST Intelligence (DGGI).

Detection of Evasion

The detection of fraudulent activities and the ensuing recovery efforts in FY24 are largely attributed to various compliance measures and amendments made to the GST system, particularly in emerging sectors, the BS report added.

Furthermore, the GST authorities foresee a significant recovery from blocked tax credits, specifically in cases related to the construction of immovable properties. The Supreme Court has concluded the case and reserved its decision.

As per official data, the total tax evasion between July 2017 and February 2023 amounts to nearly ₹3.08 trillion, with recoveries exceeding ₹1.03 trillion. During the five and a half years leading up to February 2023, the GST authorities arrested 1,402 individuals for tax evasion, as per the report.

Between April 2020 and September 2023, over 6,000 fraudulent cases involving input tax credits, with a total value of more than ₹57,000 crore, were uncovered, resulting in the arrest of 500 individuals.

In the fiscal year 2022-23, 14,000 cases of evasion were detected, an increase from 12,574 cases in 2021-22 and 12,596 cases in 2020-21. This represents a significant effort to combat tax evasion and bolster tax recovery, it added. https://www.livemint.com/economy/gst-evasion-government-expecting-rs-50-000-crore-mop-up-on-recovery-of-dues-multiple-notices-sent-11698206138038.html

9. Govt capex crosses Rs 5L crore, fiscal deficit on track *(newindianexpress.com)* 25 October 2023

Capex at 50% of the budgeted target for fiscal 2023-24; no major concern regarding tax receipts, says official

Government has surpassed the Rs 5 lakh crore mark for capital expenditure (capex), representing over 50% of the budgeted target for the ongoing financial year 2023-24, a senior official said.

The official expressed confidence that revenue and spending trends are in line with expectations, and the fiscal deficit target of 5.9% of the gross domestic product will be achieved for the current fiscal.

“There is no major concern regarding tax receipts, as overall revenue is on track to meet the budget target. Expenditures are also in line with predictions. The centre aims to maintain its glide path for fiscal consolidation and has no reason to believe that the fiscal deficit target will not be met,” the official cited above said.

As per the government’s glide path, it is looking to lower its fiscal deficit to 4.5% GDP by 2025-26. Pre-budget discussions are underway with various ministries, and additional demand is anticipated from key government schemes such as the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme, as well as fuel and fertilizer subsidies due to global geopolitical tensions, according to him.

He further added that additional demands for MNREGS will be considered within prudent limits.

Regarding the recent increase in government bond yields due to rising US Treasury yields and geopolitical tensions, the official stated that it is not currently a big concern.

The government is monitoring the situation and will take appropriate measures if the yields exceed tolerance levels, he said.

In addition, the official also informed that in the period of April-September, collections under small savings schemes have significantly surged. Deposits for senior citizens savings scheme grew over 2.5 times year-on-year, reaching a record high of Rs 74,675 crore ($10.1 billion).

This marks a remarkable 160% increase compared to the corresponding period last year. The newly introduced Mahila Samman Savings Certificate, unveiled in this year's budget, gathered collections amounting to Rs 13,512 crore during April-September.

The interest rate for the Senior Citizens Savings Scheme was raised to 8.2% from 8% in the April-June period and has remained unchanged since then.

Moreover, the investment limit for elderly individuals in the scheme was raised to Rs 30 lakh from Rs 15 lakh starting from April this year.

Meanwhile, the official noted that the interest rate for the Public Provident Fund (PPF) scheme has remained unchanged at 7.1%.

"The government has considered the tax benefits associated with the PPF scheme in maintaining the interest rate, as it prioritizes schemes for senior citizens and women such as the Sukanya Samriddhi Account Scheme. The PPF scheme still offers one of the highest returns, but the costs and revenue loss due to tax benefits need to be factored in," said the official.

From the National Small Savings Fund, against which the Centre and some states borrow, for the fiscal year 2023-2024, the government plans to utilize Rs 4.71 lakh crore to finance a portion of its overall fiscal deficit. https://www.newindianexpress.com/business/2023/oct/25/govt-capex-crosses-rs-5l-crorefiscal-deficit-on-track-2626770.html

10. Indian urban planning needs a major overhaul *(livemint.com)* 23 Oct 2023

A survey has cast fresh light on key reasons why our urban spaces are in such bad shape. We must empower municipal structures and turn them more responsive to people's needs

A survey by think-tank Janaagraha has revealed much of what ails urban planning in India. Despite the obvious pressures of rapid urbanization, it remains woefully shabby. Low levels of governance and fiscal autonomy, apart from sketchy information and weak public accountability, must be addressed for our urban spaces to get anywhere close to rich-world standards. By 2050, over 800 million people are expected to be living in our cities. We'll need robust municipal bodies to cope with the increased civic burden. Any shortfall in meeting a bare minimum of utility and sanitary needs would turn our vast urban sprawls into slums. Sadly, barring perhaps a few cities, most are very poorly run, with almost no attention paid to reforms that would empower local authorities to do what's needed.

The survey's findings, published in Mint's Plain Facts section, are revelatory. It found that a meagre 5% of the changes ever made to city-level laws related to municipal reforms, while the rest were aimed at everyday finances and elections. Further, at least 39% of India's state-capital cities lacked active plans for spatial development, and only nine had plans for all key urban needs, including heritage conservation and sustainability. The problem gets more acute as we move from large urban centres to smaller cities. To be sure, some big city municipalities do rake in huge amounts of revenue. But high politicization has contributed to even their proving unresponsive to the concerns of urban residents. In Mumbai, the urban-scape is dotted with slums with no civic services worth the name and disease a constant threat. This is in stark contrast to the leafy enclaves of some of its upmarket suburbs, presenting a tale of two worlds. The story of squalor amid prosperity plays out elsewhere as well—in Delhi and Bengaluru, for instance. This scenario is partly explained by the level of human resources devoted to municipal tasks. In Mumbai, there are 938 municipal staff per 100,000 people, and in Bengaluru, just 317. In comparison, New York has 5,906 and London 2,936. It's not just about staff strength. It is also about our weak devolution of administrative authority. Very few Indian cities have the fiscal space needed to fix things, let alone the requisite political autonomy. In the country's governance framework, cities hardly count as units. That so little civic data is publicly available speaks volumes of the neglect that urban administration suffers.

Urban reforms must begin by letting Indian cities look after themselves better through far more meaningful public representation, backed by access to financial resources. Municipal bodies need greater leeway on levies for them to raise money at reasonable rates from bond markets. The private use of public zones by the well-off—think of cars parked on streets and gated enclosures of public roads—should be neither free nor lightly charged. With tech trackers available, road pricing could also be experimented with as a revenue source. So long as civic charges are progressive, with the rich paying much more, cities could find new ways to fund themselves. As our economy emerges and we hope to attract the world's gaze as a beacon of success in this 'Asian century,' we need cities and towns that are worthy of being identified as among the world's best. Things like leaky sewage pipes and bad air quality must not let us down—especially not if we aim to host mega events like the Olympics. Our urban spaces need to spiff up.
https://www.livemint.com/opinion/online-views/indian-urban-planning-needs-a-major-overhaul-11698071809104.html

11. How tech-driven monitoring is revolutionising India's malnutrition fight *(timesofindia.indiatimes.com)* 24 Oct 2023

In any assessment of a nation's socio-economic progress, the health and well-being of its women and children is paramount. Undernutrition is not merely a health concern, it is fundamentally an economic and human capital issue with profound implications for a country's development and future.

Recognising this, the Indian government is implementing the Saksham Anganwadi and Mission Poshan 2.0.

This integrates three existing schemes - Anganwadi Services, Poshan Abhiyaan, and the Scheme for Adolescent Girls. It shifts the focus from energy and micronutrient sufficiency to prioritising improved health, wellness and sanitation, all underpinned by well-defined strategies. At its heart is a people-centric approach of engagement and behaviour change through jan andolan.

Historically, the lack of real-time malnutrition data has been a major problem.

Addressing this, the women & child development ministry developed and deployed the 'Poshan Tracker' ICT Application.

This smartphone App, designed for Anganwadi workers, was launched on March 2021, accompanied by provision of smartphones to all Anganwadi centres. Over 13.9 lakh Anganwadi centres have since registered, benefiting over 10.3 crore individuals, including pregnant women, lactating mothers, children under 6 years, and adolescent girls. Close to 95% of registered beneficiaries are Aadharauthenticated to ensure last mile delivery.

The Poshan Tracker identifies and monitors child malnutrition symptoms like stunting and wasting. Under Mission Poshan 2.0, growth monitoring devices are provided at AWCs for monthly child assessments.

For the first time in India, and perhaps in the world, the Poshan Tracker application provides real-time nutritional status of individual children at the level of Anganwadi centres. The application is emerging as a game-changer in ensuring nutrition and good health for the most vulnerable.

Since April 2023, data on nearly 7 crore children is being uploaded monthly. This provides actionable insights to states and UTs for timely intervention. Previously, the most reliable data source has been the National Family Health Survey (NFHS), which is limited in scope and scale compared to Poshan Tracker, and only available at a frequency of 4-5 years.

Of the total registered children, about 7.2 crore (91%) were measured at AWCs in August 2023. The results show substantially lower rates of wasting compared with NFHS5 findings. For August 2023, only 2.1% children aged 0-5 years were found to have severe acute malnutrition (SAM) and 4.8% moderate acute malnutrition (MAM), against 19.3% wasting as per NFHS-5 (2019-21) among children 0-5 years.

The Poshan Tracker facilitates targeted interventions and data-driven decision-making and empowers frontline workers and policymakers to access critical information effortlessly, enabling well-informed actions and efficient allocation of resources. Heat maps for each state provide robust analysis of malnutrition hotspots. It also enables digitisation and automation of physical registers previously maintained by Anganwadi workers freeing them to focus on nutrition delivery and early childhood care and education.

The application has facilitated transparency in governance of Anganwadi services schemes. A critical reflection of this is the Poshan Tracker dashboard, which provides information on Anganwadi infrastructure and key activities like provisioning of take-home ration and hot cooked meals to beneficiaries, growth measurement of children, and complete beneficiary management.

The Tracker allows beneficiary migration between Anganwadi centres, without any data loss. It is accessible in 22 regional languages, apart from English and Hindi, making it truly universal. The Poshan Helpline (14408), operationalised since November 2022, allows beneficiaries to raise concerns and facilitates monitoring of gaps in services, if any. To ensure last-mile tracking, SMS alerts to beneficiaries have been introduced on delivery of takehome ration (under the Supplementary Nutrition Program of Anganwadi Services).

Poshan Tracker promotes collaboration and synergy among diverse stakeholders, facilitates seamless coordination among authorities at various levels and fosters a unified approach. During Poshan Maah and Poshan Pakhwada, activities of other ministries/ departments are recorded on the Jan Andolan Dashboard of Poshan tracker, facilitating horizontal convergence. It has been integrated with RCH and UWIN portals of the health & family welfare ministry. Leveraging the power of data and analytics, the government can fine-tune strategies and interventions to ensure maximum impact and sustainable outcomes.

In its pursuit of Suposhit Bharat, the Indian government is harnessing the full potential of technology and innovation for saturation level coverage. The Poshan Tracker exemplifies India's commitment to leveraging ICT applications for the greater public good, enabling a healthier and brighter future for generations to come. https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/how-tech-driven-monitoring-is-revolutionising-indias-malnutrition-fight/articleshow/104662679.cms?from=mdr

12. A mandatory makeover *(millenniumpost.in)* 23 Oct 2023

With prices consistently touching the cap in all blocks of collective segments across power exchanges, there is a need to revamp price discovery for fairness and efficiency

In the complex and ever-evolving landscape of the Indian power sector, the mechanism for price discovery plays a pivotal role. It not only determines the cost of electricity but also influences investment decisions, grid stability, and consumer bills. Recently, from August 28 to September 4, 2023, we witnessed a trend of prices consistently touching the regulatory cap in all blocks of the one or all collective segments of power exchanges. This occurrence underscores the urgency of reevaluating and reshaping the price discovery mechanism of the collective segments on the power exchanges following a double-sided closed auction “pay as clear” model. To take a reasoned view, we need to delve into the intricacies of the issue and propose steps to achieve a more efficient price discovery process in the collective segment(s) of the power exchanges.

The multi-exchange model
The multi-exchange model in the Indian power sector allows multiple power exchanges to operate concurrently, intending to foster competition and offering market participants a choice of platforms for trading electricity. It was introduced with the aim of promoting transparency, efficiency, and fair competition, both for the market and within the market. However, recent events in the collective segment (DAM and RTM) have raised the need to look at a more robust methodology of the price discovery mechanism within this structure.

Price discovery
Discovered prices in the collective segment serve as the signal that is referenced by the power sector participants. It determines the uniform clearing price at which electricity is bought and sold, impacting producers, consumers, and the functioning of the grid due to behaviour of the participants. In a well-functioning market, prices should reflect the actual supply and demand dynamics, ensuring efficiency and fairness. However, the recent instances of prices consistently hitting the regulatory cap throughout the day has necessitated the exploration of a more robust method of discovering prices. Prices in all blocks of the collective segments across power exchanges consistently reaching the cap

price, indicates an imbalance between supply and demand as well as the power of the market participants to influence the prices.

Why does this matter?
Efficiency: Consistently hitting the price cap suggests that the market is constrained to efficiently balance supply and demand. This can lead to higher costs for consumers and uncertainty for producers. In fact, a study of demand and supply curves in individual blocks generates insights on how the discovery of the uniform clearing price is influenced by marginal bids placed by a few participants. Also, if there are single side bids on multiple exchanges (buy or sell), they are unexpressed in the marketplace.

Fairness: Market participants, especially small and medium-sized players, may find it challenging to compete in an environment when prices hit the regulatory cap in all time blocks.

Quality of services: A skewed liquidity structure also results in a dominant exchange garnering the entire volume of the collective segment. As a result, there is no incentive to improve the quality of service and provide advanced analytics for the users.

A roadmap to efficiency: To ensure a more efficient price discovery mechanism in the interest of all stakeholders, several steps need to be taken:

Increased liquidity Unexpressed bids on competing exchanges should be bundled together to increase the liquidity. The current approach of a double-sided closed anonymous auction in the collective segment has been beset by a lack of liquidity. This imbalance threatens to render the price discovery mechanism based on a "pay as clear" structure redundant, particularly within the framework of a uniform clearing price structure.

Enhanced data transparency Transparency is the cornerstone of a robust price discovery process. Power exchanges should provide comprehensive and real-time data on supply, demand, and market conditions. This data should be accessible to all market participants, allowing them to make informed decisions.

Market surveillance and oversight Effective market surveillance and oversight are essential to prevent market manipulation and ensure fair play. For ensuring efficient price discovery, monitoring mechanisms should be swift and robust which are essential elements for effective oversight.

Coordination among exchanges Power exchanges must work together to coordinate price discovery. This could involve sharing data, aligning trading hours, and harmonising rules to create a more unified market. Such coordination can reduce price disparities and enhance efficiency.

Market participants' education Market participants should be well-informed about the dynamics of the power market. This includes understanding how prices are determined and the impact of their trading activities on the market. Education and awareness programs can help foster a more knowledgeable and responsible market.

Regulatory support for renewable energy
Promoting renewable energy sources, such as solar and wind, can contribute to a more balanced supply-demand equation.

Regulatory support for renewable energy projects can help reduce the risk of price spikes by diversifying the energy mix.

Entity to run uniform price discovery
In the realm of India's power exchanges, where electrons are traded like commodities, a critical question arises – who should be responsible for the vital task of uniform price discovery? The method and entity entrusted with this crucial role hold the power to shape the efficiency and fairness of the entire power market.

An entity like Grid Controller of India (Grid India) with capabilities including expertise in managing complex situations and hands on experience in optimising the power system while considering the market constraints emerges as one choice to conduct uniform price discovery across collective segments of power exchanges in the Indian power market. Additionally, its proposed operation under government authority and oversight adds credibility to the uniform price discovery process. In terms of technical competence, we need an entity with capability in managing complex price discovery algorithms, crucial in a market with liquidity challenges, and Grid India’s access to extensive data will facilitate precision in determining prices, even in conditions of constrained liquidity. Moreover, the entity's government affiliation will enable the implementation of safeguards and audit mechanisms to prevent market manipulation, protecting consumers and producers. This entity will have the robust infrastructure and extensive networks to enable seamless communication and coordination with power exchanges, market participants, and regulatory bodies, ensuring efficient information dissemination. Government affiliation instills trust and credibility in the uniform price discovery process.

Conclusion
The recent episodes of prices consistently touching the cap in all blocks of the collective segments across power exchanges have highlighted the need to improve the price discovery mechanism. It is imperative that stakeholders in the Indian power sector come together to address these issues promptly.

By implementing measures such as bundling all bids expressed on the multiple exchanges, enhanced data transparency, market surveillance, reserve capacity mechanisms, and coordination among exchanges, we can create a more efficient and fair price discovery process. Moreover, a designated entity owned by the Government of India should be made responsible for uniform price discovery in the collective segments, which can bring greater stability, transparency, and technical competence to the system, giving assurance to the stakeholders.

As we look ahead, it is our collective responsibility to ensure that the Indian power sector thrives on principles of equity, efficiency, and sustainability. By reshaping the price discovery mechanism, we can pave the way for a brighter future for India's energy landscape—one that benefits consumers, producers, and the nation as a whole. https://www.millenniumpost.in/opinion/a-mandatory-makeover-537730?infinitescroll=1

13. Fossil-fuel use must end immediately if climate goals are to have a fighting chance *(financialexpress.com)* October 25, 2023

The battle lines are clear: the worst affected nations and communities want an immediate pledge on phasing out fossil fuels while the richest nations stack their weight behind abating and removing emissions.

The COP28 in December should play out like an epic blockbuster with twists and turns where the climate agenda emerges victorious at the last moment—or at least that's the hope as the renewed discussions on gathering momentum happen alongside lacklustre climate meets across the world. In reality, the world is moving woefully slowly on climate action despite the mounting destruction from extreme weather and the breach of the planet's boundaries.

The battle lines are clear: the worst affected nations and communities want an immediate pledge on phasing out fossil fuels while the richest nations stack their weight behind abating and removing emissions. This is technical speak for preventing carbon emissions from coal, oil, and natural gas from entering the atmosphere and removing what has been emitted. It is done through fixes like the CCS (carbon capture and storage) technologies that store carbon underground or under the sea and are being touted as a convenient solution to lowering emissions without stepping away from fossil fuels. The reality is not that straightforward.

The problem is that such a technology-driven approach to solving a planetary crisis has significant limitations. CCS has been around since the 1970s, but all evidence points towards its futility in scrubbing carbon out of the air. Instead, whatever carbon is captured is pumped underground through oil and gas shafts to recover more of the fuels. There are examples of projects around the world where storage methods are faulty, unreliable, and leaky with little or no carbon pollution actually reduced in reality.

Proponents of CCS, such as oil and gas firms and even some governments, now have come out to say that a premature phaseout of the carbon-heavy fuels is dangerous. The EU too has declared it will push for the phaseout of unabated fossil fuels at the COP (except for France), but the apprehension is that CCS will indefinitely extend their use and even greenlight their expansion.

The issue is complex as the global economy remains heavily dependent on hydrocarbons. Fossil fuel use must be reduced by more than a quarter of current levels if runaway climate change is to be checked. There is no room for new exploration or extraction of coal, oil, and gas. Yet shipping, aviation, and most of the world's road transport still run on varying grades of petroleum and strengthening growth and development will mean doubling energy needs within a decade or two.

The right to development and better living standards in the Global South, too, are primary drivers that are making a case to exploit local fuel reserves. Brazil has okayed exploratory drilling in the Equatorial Margin offshore zone despite it being an ecologically sensitive region along the Amazon. The country draws 88% of its power from renewable sources and it argues that the added revenue from oil and gas projects will improve the people's lives in the impoverished region. The UK too has granted a licence to the Rosebank oil field—the largest undeveloped field in the North Sea oil patch—over its stated goal of energy security, even though it could emit the same emissions as 90 countries put together.

It comes as no surprise then that apart from the petroleum industry's record high profits of $219 billion in 2022—its highest ever—natural gas has emerged as the go-to fuel for economic growth. It burns relatively cleaner than coal and oil, can be piped and shipped across borders, and a recent survey by the Financial Times found that it's being seen as an investment as dependable as renewables. This is happening even though methane, which makes up 85 – 90% of the fuel, has 86 times the global warming potential of CO_2 over 20-odd years. And when gas projects may not advance as planned, breakthrough technologies for batteries and deflationary prices of solar and wind power take over the markets.

Globally, fossil fuels received an incredible $7 trillion in subsidies in 2022. Critics argue that this keeps them artificially close to the levelised cost of electricity of renewables, but the subsidies continue to flow even as the world is predicted to warm by 1.5°C by the mid-2030s. Meanwhile the power from utility-scale solar and even offshore wind energy farms is now cheaper than from new coal and gas plants; the subsidies, if re-directed to renewables, could do wonders to move the needle on decarbonisation.

Discussions on transforming development finance urgently are now gathering pace. Given the need to bring immediate liquidity into clean energy markets, would it not be possible to allocate a percentage of fossil profits directly into development of wind and solar power across the world?

A tripling of the G20's renewable energy capacity, as agreed in Delhi this year, could indeed stave off seven billion tons of CO_2 emissions between now and 2030 and further deflate clean energy tariffs, if it is not matched by similar ambitions for abatement technology. By inference, this could mean that new natural gas projects worth billions of dollars in investments may end up as stranded assets well before they are designed to go offline. A decisive shift in the funding towards renewables may happen when the insurers and underwriters demand that big businesses and investors declare their role in, and exposure to, climate risks.

As the world draws closer to COP28, all eyes will thus be on securing serious commitments that get to work immediately. The pushback from the supporters of conventional energy is predictable, but this year's meet is almost being seen as a do-or-die window for humanity. The small island nations and the poorest of the Global South are pleading for an end to fossil fuels as to them climate change has become an existential threat. One therefore hopes that as the delegates pour over every word that goes into the final declaration, the intent will be to hammer out the boldest, most progressive climate solutions that the world can afford at this moment. https://www.financialexpress.com/opinion/fossil-fuel-use-must-end-immediately-if-climate-goals-are-to-have-a-fighting-chance/3285505/

14. Green financing needs more incentives for greening the wheels

(moneycontrol.com) OCTOBER 25, 2023

The total number of vehicles plying on Indian roads has seen a six-fold increase since the start of this decade, amounting to ~14 percent of transport sector emissions. Reducing the sector's emission intensity is thus crucial to attaining India's goal of Net Zero emissions by 2070, as announced at the 26th Conference of the Parties at Glasgow in 2021, with a five-pronged agenda — termed Panchamrit (five elixirs). Given the arduous Panchamrit targets, the government is focussed on changing the inter-modal composition, currently dominated by roads, towards railways and waterways. The shift will be more cost-effective, too, and thus a double win.

The Transportation Plan

The National Rail Plan, for one, aims to increase the modal share of rail to 45 percent of the logistics market by 2030-31 from 26 percent at present. Shifting of freight from road to rail is expected to bring down the logistics cost from 13-14 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) currently to a global average of 8 percent by 2030 as, alongside being more emissions efficient, railways has the least cost per tonne-km in the transport sector.

The development of Gati Shakti multi-modal cargo terminals and dedicated freight corridors (DFCs), with focus on proliferating the growth of railway cargo traffic, are thus steps in the right direction. The DFCs will help decongest the road network and are expected to save 450 million tonne of CO_2 in the first 30 years of operations. On the waterways front, the union ministry of ports, shipping and waterways (MoPSW)'s Rs 5,000 crore package will facilitate the construction of vessels for inland waterways through 'Make in India'. Given that greenhouse gas footprint for a unit distance of cargo transported by waterways is almost half compared to railways and about one-tenth compared to road freight, the construction of vessels presents an opportunity to decarbonise the sector.

Coming back to roads, the policy framework needs to be accompanied by a behavioural shift towards more sustainable modes of transportation. While awareness for transitioning towards greener modes is increasing, it is imperative to continue passenger-level incentivisation and the enabling policy environment. With the increasing penetration of electric vehicles — which crossed the 1 million mark in India this September — it is important not to discount the role of schemes such as the Faster Adoption and Manufacturing of (Hybrid &) Electric Vehicles (FAME-II) and support for the development of 22,000 charging stations (via oil PSUs) across the country. With the exponential expansion in clean technology manufacturing, it is imperative to provide support for capacity expansion to original equipment manufacturers to reduce ramp-up time and improve productivity optimisation through early equipment management. Along with the government's push to Make in India, the country's supplier potential comprising core commodities, innovative enterprise, and a sizable young skilled workforce puts it in a sweet spot between Europe and China to be a clean technology manufacturing hub, with a potential opportunity of $300 billion by the end of the decade.

Investment Requirement

However, for this shift to happen, significant investment is required from both government and industry. CRISIL estimates infrastructure spend to double from an estimated Rs 66.7 lakh crore over fiscals 2017-2023 to ~Rs 142.9 lakh crore between fiscals 2024 and 2030. Of this, ~Rs 36.6 lakh crore is expected to be green investments, marking a 5x rise. With more than two-thirds of the contribution towards core infrastructure spending expected to be contributed by the central and state governments during fiscals 2024-2030, developing new avenues of financing is an inevitable imperative. Key learnings from the successful monetisation in the power and mining sectors need to be followed for the roads and renewables sectors, which account for ~44 percent of the infrastructure capex.

Development of the domestic green bond market needs to continue, backed by the promise shown by the raising of Rs 160 billion in 2 tranches by the government of India, though green bond issuances constitute only ~0.7 percent of the total bond issuances in India since 2018. We expect Indian companies to raise ~3.3 times the current level from green bonds and external commercial borrowings. The development of climate information architecture for batteries, modules, and electrolysers will help in better classification systems for funds, with the usage of uniform labels and taxonomies, reduce the associated concentration risks and mitigate greenwashing.

An enhanced limit for priority sector lending will also incentivise banks to increase lending in the green financing segment. The enhanced limit needs to be facilitated by access to low-cost capital. The creation of loan loss reserve to cover default due to specific risks will bolster the investments and help in multiple structuring options for risk underwriting, debt and equity with or without first loss guarantee, among others. The entry into new and emerging areas involves significant risks for investors and can be spurred by the sharing of these risks between the government, regulators and industry. A recent example is the provision of viability gap funding of Rs 3,760 crore for 4 MWh of battery energy storage systems.

Government support needs to be accompanied by tax incentives for investment in green bonds. These tax incentives can take the shape of inclusion of green mobility funds for corporate social responsibility investments and coverage of additional issuance costs (green certification) for issuers. Additionally, guarantee structures and commitments signifying the extension of term loans through interest waiver mechanisms or term relaxation measures will enable the development of robust viability assessment measures. Thus, while sustainable mobility and transportation is rapidly gaining pace in India, the opportunities offered by the identification of avenues for green financing for sustainable transportation need to be capitalised upon. This requires us to forge new partnerships among government, academia and industry. https://www.moneycontrol.com/news/opinion/green-financing-needs-more-incentives-for-greening-the-wheels-11593131.html

15. Why 1000 Cr Lying Unused In District Administration Bank Accounts In Telangana? *(hydnews.net)* OCTOBER 24, 2023

The state government has taken a sensational decision to close all bank accounts opened by the various departments at the district level under specific central and state sponsored schemes and transfer the unspent funds to the state exchequer.

According to sources, this is being done to see that the state gets some oxygen from the impact of recession on state's economy. It is estimated that hundreds of bank accounts were opened and nearly Rs 1,000 crore funds were lying idle in the scheduled banks for last five years.

It was also found that the authorities concerned were utilising the interest money generated from the deposited funds for other purpose without any required permission from the state Finance department which is the custodian of all funds released by the state and Union governments.

Finance deparyment had instructed all the district Collectors to submit the details of all the bank accounts opened by district heads of departments mainly Panchayat Raj, Rural Development, Education, Medical and Health, Agriculture, Municipal Administration and Urban Development, SCs, STs, BCs and Minorities welfare and Housing departments.

In the recent review, officials of the Finance department brought to the notice of the minister the issue of the funds earmarked for schemes and non-utilisation of the same due to various reasons.

The district officials neither utilised the funds nor returned to the government. For instance, the government released funds under self-employment scheme to SCs, STs and BCs welfare departments in the last financial years. Many of the district officials did not extend the financial benefit to the identified beneficiaries and the funds were kept in the banks.

Similarly, the district authorities did not utilise the Central funds released under healthcare and for the development of infrastructure in the government educational institutions in many districts. Many district authorities did not communicate the non-utilisation of funds to the Finance department and in some cases, the officials utilised interest money for personal uses.

Sources said that finance 'big babus' wanted all the collectors to complete the task of furnishing the details of unspent funds to the Finance department on priority basis. Once the funds are shifted to state head, the Finance wing will utilise them for urgent needs. The district officials were also instructed to stop opening new bank accounts and the deposit of money without prior approval from the government in the future. https://hydnews.net/2023/10/more-than1000-crore-lying-unused-in-district-administration-bank-accounts-in-telangana/

16. ED alleges another Rs 175 crore bribes in rice milling 'scam' of Chhattisgarh, payments made to 'higher powers' *(moneycontrol.com)*

OCTOBER 23, 2023

The Enforcement Directorate (ED) on Monday alleged another "scam" in poll-bound Chhattisgarh as it claimed that a former managing director of the state MARKFED and an office-bearer of a local rice millers' association generated Rs 175 crore bribes for the "benefit of higher powers".

Over the last few months, the federal probe agency has claimed to have unearthed a coal levy, a liquor duty and an illegal online betting app "scam" in the state that has a Congress government led by Chief Minister Bhupesh Baghel. The ED has alleged that in all these instances, kickbacks worth crores of rupees were generated through a nexus of local politicians and bureaucrats. It has arrested a number of Indian Administrative Service (IAS) officers, a police official and some others in these above-mentioned cases till now.

In the latest custom rice-milling special incentive "scam", the ED has alleged in a statement that it has found a similar nexus following searches conducted in the central Indian state against former MARKFED MD Manoj Soni, some office-bearers of the state rice millers' association, including treasurer Roshan Chandrakar, district marketing officers (DMOs) and a few rice millers, on October 20 and 21.

The agency said its criminal action under the Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA) stems from a complaint filed by the income-tax department before a court in state capital Raipur, where the tax department had alleged that the office-bearers of the Chhattisgarh rice millers' association "colluded" with officers of the state marketing federation limited (MARKFED) and "hatched a conspiracy to misuse the special incentive where Rs 40 per quintal of paddy was paid by the state government to rice millers for custom milling of rice".

The state is known as the rice bowl of the country due to a high volume of paddy production. The ED said this amount of Rs 40 was "exorbitantly" increased to Rs 120 per quintal of paddy and this was paid in two instalments of Rs 60 each. "The office-bearers of the Chhattisgarh state rice millers' association under the leadership of its treasurer Chandrakar, in connivance with Soni, MD of MARKFED, started collecting a kickback amount of Rs 20 per instalment for each quintal of paddy milled from the rice millers. The details of the rice millers who have paid the cash amounts were sent by the district rice millers' association to the concerned DMO," the ED has found.

The DMOs, upon receiving the bills of the rice millers, cross-checked those with the details received from the district rice millers' association concerned and this information was then passed on to the MARKFED head office, it said. The bills of "only those rice millers who have paid a cash amount" to the association were cleared by the MD, MARKFED for payment, it has alleged. The ED probe has found that on the basis of the increase in the special allowance from Rs 40 to Rs 120 per quintal, payments of Rs 500 crore were released, generating "kickbacks" of Rs 175 crore, which were collected by Chandrakar with the active assistance of Soni for the benefit of "higher powers".

The agency has said it has seized "incriminating" documents, digital devices and "unaccounted cash" amounting to Rs 1.06 crore during the raids. The 90-member Chhattisgarh Assembly will go to polls in two phases on November 7 and November 17 and the counting of votes will be taken up on December 3. In Chhattisgarh, the electoral battle is largely between the two main national parties — Congress and BJP.
https://www.moneycontrol.com/news/politics/ed-alleges-another-rs-175-crore-bribes-in-rice-milling-scam-of-chhattisgarh-payments-made-to-higher-powers-11588651.html

17. 358 classrooms ready for Delhi govt schools, dues keep them locked *(timesofindia.indiatimes.com)* Oct 24, 2023

Over 350 new classrooms have been constructed for six Delhi government schools in north and northwest districts but have not been handed over for use as the government is yet to pay PWD over Rs 1,667.2 crore.

In all 358 classrooms are made. These classrooms are for some of the crowded schools. An NGO, Social Jurist, has written to the lieutenant governor (LG) seeking his intervention.

A senior DoE official said: "The matter pertains to the state government's top-up funds over and above the Sarva Siksha Abhiyan (SSA) funds. A cabinet note is being moved to the planning, law and finance departments for their views. Then the matter will be put up to the council of ministers for decision."

Delhi government did not respond on the matter.

Some of the schools that will benefit from the extra classrooms are the Government Girls Secondary School (GGSS) Mukundpur, Government Boys Senior Secondary School (GBSSS) Bakhtawarpur on SV Lancer Road, Government Girls Senior Secondary School (GGSSS) at Rani Bagh, Sarvodaya Vidyalaya Co-Ed School in Sector 7, Rohini, and the Government Co-ed Middle School at Punjab Khore.

The construction of 32 classrooms and four toilets in GGSS Mukundpur, 50 classrooms and six toilets in GBSSS Bakhtawarpur and 18 classrooms and two toilets in SV Lancer Road was sanctioned in 2017-18.

In the case of the Mukundpur school delay, Social Jurist filed a petition in Delhi High Court. The court said: "The state government shall certainly look into the issues raised in the present petition and take appropriate steps in accordance with law."

In the details submitted to the LG, Social Jurist said: "Till date, 52%-85% of the work has been completed in three schools but the construction was stopped for the last 2 years because the Delhi government has failed to pay Rs 525.3 crore to the PWD for completionof the newly constructed school buildings."

Construction of 108 classrooms and 10 toilets in GGSSS Rani Bagh was sanctioned in 2017-18 and the construction is complete. The government's due to PWD is Rs 625.21 crores for this school.

The construction of 90 classrooms in SV Co-ed Vidyalaya, Sector 7, Rohini and 60 classrooms in Govt Co-Ed, MS Punjab Khore, was sanctioned in 2019-20 and is complete. Due to the non-payment of Rs 516.6 crore to the PWD by the Delhi Government, the newly constructed school building has not been handed over, the NGO has said.

"It is respectfully submitted that as the sleeping Delhi Govt fails to pay Rs 1,667.2 crore to PWD, thousands of students of government schools are being deprived of using six additional newly constructed school buildings having 358 classrooms for more than 2 years," Ashok Agarwal, an advisor to Social Jurist, wrote to the LG.

"It is important to mention here that Rs 1667.2 crore can only be given to PWD after the approval of the council of ministers but the same is not happening for reasons best known to the AAP Government. In view of the alarming situation, you are most kindly requested to ask the government of NCT of Delhi to convene a council of ministers' meeting to consider and approve the payment," Agarwal wrote.
https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/delhi/358-classrooms-ready-for-delhi-govt-schools-dues-keep-them-locked/articleshow/104663550.cms