

NEWS ITEMS ON CAG/ AUDIT REPORTS

1. How Safe Is India's Coastline? (*thecitizen.in*) 27 Nov 2023

Even 15 years after 26/11, loopholes persist in India's coastal security

November 26, 2023 marked the 15th Anniversary of the terrorist attack on Mumbai, the first ever in India by sea-borne assailants. Simultaneous attacks at multiple places claimed 179 lives and damaged iconic buildings in the city.

The unprecedented mayhem was perpetrated by just 10 Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) gunmen from Pakistan who had landed on the Mumbai coast in dinghies, totally undetected by the Coast Guard, the Navy or any other Indian defence system.

The attack, and the response from the Indian security system, exposed multiple flaws in the latter. Post-26/11, the Maharashtra and Central governments put up new systems to detect and neutralise future attacks. But even after a decade and a half, these measures are deeply flawed. Measures to defend India's 7517 km coastline are full of glaring loopholes, experts say.

The American RAND Corporation said in a report done by experts that Indian intelligence officials (RAW) had received prior warnings both from their own sources and from the US that a major sea-borne attack on Mumbai was probable. But lack of specificity in the intelligence prevented specific responses.

And when the attacks began, there was little coordination between the central security agencies and the Maharashtra police. The RAND Corporation suspected that the Central agencies had not shared the intelligence with the local police or, if it was shared, the local police did not act upon it.

The attacks highlighted India's inability to effectively monitor its coastline, a condition that is common to many littoral states in both the developing and the developed world, RAND said.

The security system on the coast was, and continues to be, outdated, with the security personnel posted in key public places like airports and rail stations carrying outdated weapons.

In his July 2023 paper on the website of the Observer Research Foundation (ORF), ex-Indian navy officer Abhijit Singh says that following 26/11, the Central government set up a three-tier security arrangement comprising the Indian Navy (IN), the Indian Coast Guard (ICG) and the State Marine Police, jointly safeguarding India's maritime zone.

Coastal police stations and surveillance infrastructure under a Coastal Security Scheme (CSS) were set up. Radar stations came up along the coastline. Automatic Identification Systems and Joint Operation Centres (JOCs) were set up (to some extent).

“Sagar Kavach” exercises, involving the Navy, ICG and the State coastal police, were held. “Yet there are concerns that the overall state of India’s coastal security remains suboptimal,” Abhijit Singh said.

He cited a case in April 2017, when a Russian couple on a sailing boat, drifted close to the Mumbai harbour without being noticed by any security agency. The vessel was noticed and reported by fishermen. In another case, a foreign ship hit a fishing boat off the coast of Thiruvananthapuram and easily fled. It was not pursued.

In April 2017, the Public Accounts Committee (PAC) of the Maharashtra State Assembly pointed out that 19 new coastal police stations that were supposed to be set up along the 720-km long State coastline, work was yet to begin at seven locations.

Months earlier, a Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) report observed glaring loopholes in Odisha State’s coastal security set-up. Patrol boats were under-utilised and shore-based infrastructure, including manpower, showed shortages. Funds went unspent. Country-wide, there was a 90% shortfall in patrolling, especially at night. There was a decline in physical checks on fishing vessels by the Coastal Police. In the coastal police stations, 75% of the sanctioned posts were unfilled. Only 31% of the infrastructure had been completed. Land acquisition was delayed.

And importantly, the Indian government showed more interest in deep-sea security than in coastal security, though the former is more capital intensive than the latter. Ocean security is increasingly viewed as a matter of international prestige and more money is allotted to it.

“With an inherently expansive vision of maritime security, the Indian Navy tends to view big-ticket initiatives as the building blocks of the security architecture,” Abhijit Singh said.

There are joint exercises in the Arabian Sea and Bay of Bengal. Coastal radar chains are set up. The National Command and Control Communications Intelligence Network (N3CIN), the Maritime Domain Awareness Plan and the Information Management and Analysis Centre (IMAC) have come into play.

“The Navy considers high-profile undertakings as the real measure of success of the coastal security project,” Singh pointed out.

The Coast Guard acknowledges improvements in the security architecture, particularly inter-agency cooperation, but points out that high-technology initiatives alone will not ensure foolproof security. The Coast Guard said that the states’ Marine or Coastal police have to play a major role and for this, they have to be trained, equipped and motivated.

But there are serious lacunae in this area. “For some observers, the marine police’s lack of enthusiasm for littoral patrolling is a symptom of the State governments’ larger apathy towards coastal security. Indeed, barring Tamil Nadu (a state with some experience of fighting LTTE sea-tigers), State administrations have not responded suitably to the needs of littoral security,” Singh pointed out.

“Even in states where things are beginning to improve, progress has been gradual. For instance, in the case of Andhra Pradesh—a State with a vulnerable coastline—seven years after nearly 21 coastal police stations had been established in 2009, only six had their own concrete buildings, with the rest operating out of rented premises. None of the coastal police stations had their own captive jetties despite seven of them, each worth INR 50 lakh, being sanctioned by the central government in 2010.”

“Further, the allotted interceptor boats to the Port City of Vishakhapatnam – a vital regional maritime hub – were mostly non-operational and anchored in the fishing harbour,” Singh added.

Maritime observers say that there are too many agencies involved (15 of them) in maritime security and they are acting without coordination.

“Despite the best efforts of the National Committee for Strengthening Maritime and Coastal Security (NCSMCS), the coordination of coastal security is ad hoc. Unfortunately, the coastal security bill with a proposal to form a National Maritime Authority (NMA) has been caught in red tape since 2013,” Singh pointed out.

Human intelligence collection has lagged behind satellite surveillance. Security agencies have advocated the active tracking of individual fishing boats through on-board transponders. But fishermen are against installation of any identification systems on board as they prefer secrecy, for a variety of reasons.

Port security has also emerged as one of the most neglected areas in littoral security architecture, both Singh and RAND corporation pointed out.

A recent Intelligence Bureau audit noted that the vast majority of minor ports in India have little or no security cover, and many measures taken to secure the coastline have been quite ineffective.

Few out of the 227 minor ports in India had proper security cover. As many as 187 minor ports had minimal security cover and 75 had no security cover at all.
<https://www.thecitizen.in/india/how-safe-is-indias-coastline-976844>

2. Indian Railways Saw Sharp Rise in Train Accidents in 2022 Compared To Previous Year (*thewire.in*) November 28, 2023

According to official data, nine were killed in train accidents in 2021-22 and 45 were injured. No loss of life or injuries were reported in 2020-21

There was an increase in consequential accidents across the Indian Railways’ network in 2021-22, compared to the previous year, according to the New Indian Express.

Consequential train accidents are defined as incidents with “serious repercussion in terms of loss of human life, human injury, loss of Railway property or interruption to rail traffic”, according to the newspaper.

According to official data, nine were killed in train accidents in 2021-22 and 45 were injured. No loss of life or injuries were reported in 2020-21.

There were 35 consequential train accidents 2021-22, against 21 in 2020-21. Of these, 26 were derailments (16 in 2020-21), two collisions (one in 2020-21) and four incidents of fire (three in 2020-21).

Among the causes of the incidents, failure on the part of the railway staff led to 20 accidents and derailments rose in 2021-22, according to TNIE. Sixteen such instances were reported in 2020-21. There were also four cases of equipment failure in 2021-22, while there was none the previous year.

According to the newspaper, the railways paid a sum of Rs 85.88 crore as compensation under Section 124 of the Indian Railway Act for death or injury of passengers – which is less than the Rs 104.38 crore it paid in 2020-21. The railways said that the compensation paid during the year “relates to the number of cases settled and payment made during the year and not necessarily to the accidents that occurred during the year”, according to the report.

As The Wire has previously reported, the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG)’s analysis of railway accidents between 2017 and 2021 indicated that there were 2017 accidents, Of these, derailments accounted for 1392 accidents, or 69%. Among ‘consequential’ train accidents, the percentage of accidents caused by derailments and collisions was 80%.

The auditor also said that institutional problems, rather than ‘human error’, were causing the incidents. “The [Indian Railways] managed the maintenance activities with vacancies in work force and with nominal outsourcing. This revealed that required steps were not taken for adequate staffing in safety category, which can impact quality of maintenance,” the CAG report said.

The Hindu reported in June 2023 that in the Union budget, capital expenditure on “crucial activities related to safety such as track renewal and signalling and telecom” had either dwindled or stagnated over the last few years. <https://thewire.in/government/indian-railways-sharp-rise-train-accidents-2022>

3. 25th anniversary of EVM's reintroduction: Irreplaceable role of this technology in Indian electoral landscape (*firstpost.com*) November 27, 2023

Exactly 25 years ago, the Electronic Voting Machines returned to action permanently. Now, it is difficult to think of conducting India’s gargantuan elections without them

On November 25, 1998, this columnist cast his vote with the press of button at Sarojini Nagar constituency in Delhi Legislative Assembly elections. Later in the day, he rushed to Institute of Driving and Traffic Research, Wazirabad to attend his election duty, the only time ever he had to perform one, being then an employee in a PSU under Delhi Government. This short but intense election duty involved receiving ballot boxes from

the polling officers (along with necessary sets of papers) after the conclusion of polling before locking those up inside strong rooms set up at the premises of the institute.

Why this dichotomy — EVMs in the morning and ballot boxes in the evening? This was because the EVMs were used in six Assembly Constituencies viz Sarojini Nagar, Gole Market, Minto Road, Kasturba Nagar, Jangpura and Delhi Cantonment, while the rest of Delhi NCT voted the old way with the ballot. In all, people of 16 Assembly Constituencies voted with the EVMs in Delhi, Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh on that day.

The EVMs thus returned to action after 14 long years. They had been illegalized by the Supreme Court in its order on March 5, 1984, while adjudicating an election petition — A C Jose v/s Sivan Pillai & Ors. Until then they had been used in 11 elections (select constituencies only) in Nagaland, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Tripura, Arunachal Pradesh and Bihar in the 1982-1983 period. The first time the EVMs were used on an experimental basis were in Parur Assembly Constituency in Kerala in May, 1982.. The ban was not remotely based on any apprehension or complaint about their functioning. It was on the technical ground that the Representation of the People Act, 1951 and Conduct of Election Rules, 1961 did not contain any explicit provision for the EVMs. It was actually a bad loser's complaint, that set the clock back. Meanwhile Election Commission of India's ambitious plans to universalize the EVMs in elections received heavy set back.

The necessary statutory amendments viz insertion of the Section 61A in the RP Act, 1951 was finally notified on March 15, 1989. The amendment came late for the EVMs to keep date with elections to Ninth Lok Sabha (November, 1989). However, between November, 1989 and March, 1990 Election Commission of India procured 1,50,000 EVMs at a cost of Rs 73.5 crores appx (this figure given by ECI in the year 2000 varies slightly with figures given by Law, Justice and Company Affairs Ministry). The Dinesh Goswami Committee on Electoral Reforms (1990), despite itself being satisfied about the credibility of the machines, recommended a high level technological committee appointed by the Department of Electronics to examine the issue.

Promptly a three-member Technical Experts Committee chaired by S Sampath of DRDO (also comprising V Indiresan of IIT, Delhi and Rao C Kasarbada, Director, ERDC, Thiruvananthapuram) was appointed to examine the matter. It gave a positive verdict in April, 1990 and favoured the re-introduction of the EVMs without further loss of time (B C Patra, ECI, Celebrating 40 years of EVM Pride of Indian Elections, P.24).

The EVMs failed to keep a date with the Tenth Lok Sabha Elections, 1991. However, while reply to a starred question (No.110) in Rajya Sabha on September 3, 1991 the then MoS, Law, Justice and Company Affairs, Rangarajan Kumaramangalam informed that 1,50,444 machines had been purchased at a cost of Rs 75.25 crores that were being distributed amongst state governments and UTs. It was proposed that EVMs would be used in all bye-elections and countermanded elections after October 1, 1991. There was a plan to universalize the EVMs after five years. However, things did not went according to the plan. Not a single EVM saw action until another seven years.

The Government's lethargy was evident. Even as the statute was amended in 1988/89, the rules were not framed by the Law and Justice Ministry (this was informed by Vijaya Bhaskara Reddy, the then Law, Justice and Company Affairs during a debate in Lok Sabha on March 18, 1992).

Almost four years after those 1,50,444 EVMs were supplied, senior officers of M/s Electronics Corporation of India and Bharat Electronics Limited (the manufacturers of the EVMs) came from Hyderabad and Bangalore to Election Commission of India's headquarters in New Delhi to give a demonstration on October 18, 1995. Though it was the weekly meeting day of the full Commission, unfortunately, both Chief Election Commissioner T N Seshan and Election Commissioner M S Gill were on leave, and only Election Commissioner G V G Krishnamoorthy sat through the demonstration. G V G Krishnamoorthy admitted he was impressed. However, PSU officers told him that the batteries of those EVMs, locked in warehouses for four years, would require replacement.

Return of the EVM was not going to be another feather in the cap of iconic T N Seshan. He retired on December 11, 1996 seven months after elections to 11th Lok Sabha without EVMs re-introduced. The Narsimha Rao government (1991-96) appears to have developed cold feet for political reasons. Seshan was succeeded by M S Gill, destined to lead Election Commission of India into 21st century. He apparently proceeded in a systematic manner with re-introduction of the EVMs, as much as with computerization of electoral rolls, and putting the Election Commission of India on the World Wide Web. The year 1997 were spent in building up the case for reintroduction. Two notable meetings were held with political parties in May, 1997 and December, 1997.

Meanwhile, a wakeup call to the Government of India and state governments was sounded in a CAG Report for the year ending March 31, 1997. The Comptroller and Auditor General took a strong view of the fact that 1,50,000 EVM machines procured at the cost of Rs 73.5 crore were gathering dust in different warehouses, whose rent and incidental cost had to be borne by the different state governments. The CAG Audit Report for this contained a separate section titled-"Idle Electronic Voting Machine valued Rs 73.5 crore".

The elections for 12th Lok Sabha came prematurely in February, 1998, before the plan for EVM could be finalized. However, it was not a good idea to try out EVMs directly in Lok Sabha elections either.

The opportune moment came on November 25, 1998, when four states viz Madhya Pradesh, Mizoram, Rajasthan and NCT of Delhi went to polls. Election Commission of India while announcing the elections on September 26, 1998, informed that polls would be conducted in 16 Assembly Constituencies (ACs) comprising 2930 polling stations with EVM. These included five ACs in Madhya Pradesh comprising 1149 polling stations, five ACs in Rajasthan comprising 1070 polling stations, and six ACs in NCT of Delhi comprising 711 polling stations. This columnist's constituency was amongst those. The counting was held on November 28.

This was indeed crossing the Rubicon. The onward march of the EVMs could not be stalled again. In February, 1999, Election Commission of India commissioned Centre

for Study of Developing Society to conduct a detailed study on EVMs experience during the bye-elections in Delhi and Madhya Pradesh. Of the respondents, 90.6 percent held a favourable view of the EVMs. The CSDS report also indicated that 96.5 percent polling staff had received proper training in the EVM. The EVMs reduced the counting process between 2 and 3 hours instead of normal 6 to 12 hours (ECI, Elections in India: Major Events and New Initiatives 1996-2000, P.279).

On June 4, 1999, with guns booming in the heights of Kargil, Goa became the first state where entire legislative assembly elections were conducted with EVMs. Chief Election Commissioner M S Gill inaugurated the first major public centre for demonstration of the EVMs. A massive awareness campaign was undertaken to popularize the EVM functioning. It was also when Election Commission of India developed a set of Comprehensive Guidelines for use of EVM.

The 12th Lok Sabha, shortest in history, had been dissolved on April 26, 1999. The elections in five phases, however, were held in September after the Kargil War and monsoon season ended. The EVMs were used in total of 46 Parliamentary Constituencies in Goa, Gujarat, Haryana, Karnataka, Punjab, Tamil Nadu, Delhi NCT, Pondicherry (now Puducherry), Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, Kerala, Maharashtra, Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu, Orissa (now Odisha) and West Bengal etc in Phase-I, II, III and V. In Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka, there were simultaneous elections for Lok Sabha and legislative assembly. Two separate machines had to be used, differentiated by an acrylic sheet of different colours behind the ballot papers.

The EVMs were universalized in elections to 14th Lok Sabha, 2004. Despite the efficient performance of the EVMs, were subsequently subject to a campaign of calumny to create doubt in public mind regarding vulnerability. This was a bad loser's complaint on part of some political parties. Their complaint against the EVMs has been dependent on results. They complained only when they lost, and accepted the results without batting an eyelid when they won. In reality, the diversity of results in the EVM era, both pro and anti-incumbency, has been more than in pre-EVM era. The reason is that EVMs don't vote, they merely record the votes.

The best reply to doubting Thomas has been introducing of the VVPAT (Voter Verifiable Paper Audit Trail), which was first introduced in 2013, and universalized in Seventeenth Lok Sabha elections, 2019. It has increased the credibility of the EVM, without compromising on the secrecy of the ballot. The voter knows where exactly his/her vote has gone. A Supreme Court order dated April 8, 2019, has made it obligatory to tally VVPAT slips in five polling stations per Assembly Constituency with EVM results. No inconsistency in the results has come to light.

Today, the electorate size of India has crossed 95 crores. India is a whale compared to lobsters in the democratic world. While the EVMs might be optional in other democracies of the world, they are absolutely irreplaceable in India. A thoroughly indigenous product, India has reasons to be proud about her EVMs. <https://www.firstpost.com/opinion/25th-anniversary-of-evms-reintroduction-irreplaceable-role-of-this-technology-in-indian-electoral-landscape-13430212.html>

4. ‘Centre hasn’t defaulted on its share of social security’, says Union Finance Minister (*newindianexpress.com*) Updated: November 25, 2023

THIRUVANANTHAPURAM: The Central government has not defaulted on its share of social security pension payment, Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman said on Saturday. “Old-age pensions fall under the National Social Assistance Programme umbrella scheme. The first tranche for 2023-24, Rs 602.14 crore, was released to the state in October 2023.

The state government has not submitted the request for the second tranche. So where is it pending?” the minister said, addressing a public meeting in Thiruvananthapuram.

The Union minister also replied to other “allegations of neglect by the Centre” raised by the state. The Kerala government had recently announced a protest in Delhi against the ‘neglect’.

On the allegation of delay in sanction of health grants, Sitharaman said all states that followed the norms were issued grants. Health grants to the state are pending since the state has not fulfilled the conditions of the Union Health Ministry and the 15th Finance Commission. They will be released only when the norms are met.

The minister was speaking after inaugurating the credit outreach programme organised by Canara Bank, Indian Overseas Bank and State Level Bankers Committee (SLBC).

The delay in providing GST compensation cess is due to the state’s failure to submit accounts authorised by the accountant general (AG), the minister said.

“The Kerala government has requested the Central government not to release the GST compensation cess until the revenue numbers are reworked by them with the AG. If the state government doesn’t get their numbers right with their own AG, how will the Centre release the compensation cess?” she asked.

Sitharaman said the state government also violated the branding guidelines for centrally sponsored schemes. “It can’t be rebranded by the state government according to its will. Hence the money couldn’t be released. If we still release the money, the CAG will question us and not the state government,” she said.

The Union minister alleged that the delay in paying UGC pay revision arrears was due to the state’s failure to comply with norms. <https://www.newindianexpress.com/states/kerala/2023/nov/26/centre-hasnt-defaulted-on-its-share-of-social-security-saysunion-finance-minister-2636252.html>

STATES NEWS ITEMS

5. Transparent, accountable governance by audit community: Sinha (*dailyexcelsior.com*) November 25, 2023

Lieutenant Governor Manoj Sinha addressed the closing ceremony of ‘Audit Week’ at Convention Centre here today.

In his address, Sinha appreciated the efforts of the audit community towards transparent and accountable governance.

He said the week-long audit day celebrations provide us with an opportunity to reflect on the critical role the audit community plays in contributing to good governance and shaping the governance landscape of our Nation.

“Public audit ensures that every rupee is well spent for the purpose to bring about a change in the lives of the people standing in the last queue of development,” the Lt Governor said.

One of the earliest institutions established to bring transparency, accountability and honesty in public life is the Institution of Comptroller and Auditor General of India. Our forefathers while drafting the Constitution had a clear opinion that the Auditor General would be the most important officer in the democratic processes, he said.

Baba Saheb Ambedkar had said that the position of the Auditor General is the most important in the Indian Constitution and he will be the only person who will see to it that there is no expenditure in excess of what the Parliament has voted for or what is provided for in the Appropriation Bill of the Parliament, the Lt Governor observed.

He impressed upon the Government departments to take quick action on the shortcomings.

In the era of reforms, it should be the endeavor of audit community to present the audit report and necessary facts immediately so that action related to the evaluation of policies and programmes is taken without any delay, he added.

“Audit observation and recommendation should be seen as a guide so that every penny of public exchequer improves the living standards of the common man,” Sinha said.

All officers should change their thinking of looking at audit reports and audit observations as criticism of their work. If you read these reports carefully and follow the recommendations of the audit community, necessary improvements can be brought in governance, he added.

At the ceremony, the Lt Governor talked about the significant change taking place in the administrative and business processes due to e-governance and digital penetration.

He said, this change has brought new challenges and opportunities for audit community to pay special attention to the safety and security of the IT system and also make institutions and youth partners at the Panchayat level.

On the one hand, the use of artificial intelligence and knowledge-based expert systems has facilitated audit risk evaluation, internal control evaluation, and audit planning, while on the other new challenges have also emerged due to concerns about data security and minimum human control, the Lt Governor said.

“We have to strike a balance and use every tool available to ensure proper utilization of resources and make life easier for the beneficiaries of the schemes,” he added.

Sinha commended the key endeavors of the Audit and Accounts Offices of J&K, over the last few years.

He said, initiatives such as bulk settlement of pending audit paras, collaborative corrective action with UT departments to improve their operations, pension adalats, and progress in end-to-end computerization of pension cases showcase their commitment to innovation and efficiency.

These initiatives not only benefit the UT Administration’s departments but also directly impact the lives of the ordinary citizens of our Union Territory, the Lt Governor added.

Pramod Kumar, Principal Accountant General (Audit), J&K and Abhishek Gupta, Principal Accountant General gave a brief overview of the extensive audit exercises and activities conducted by the office of Accountant General in the UT.

Rajeev Rai Bhatnagar, Advisor to Lt Governor; Dr Arun Kumar Mehta, Chief Secretary; Santosh D Vaidya, Principal Secretary Finance Department; Sanjeev Verma, Commissioner Secretary GAD; Anand Jain, IGP Jammu and senior officers were present. <https://www.dailyexcelsior.com/transparent-accountable-governance-by-audit-community-sinha/>

6. Public audit catalyst for positive change in people's lives: LG (*risingkashmir.com*) November 25, 2023

Jammu, Nov 24: Lauding the commendable efforts of the audit community in fostering transparent and accountable governance, Lieutenant Governor Manoj Sinha underscored the pivotal role played by the audit community in shaping the governance landscape of the nation, highlighting the week-long celebrations as a moment to reflect on their dedication to ensuring good governance.

Addressing the closing ceremony of ‘Audit Week’ at Convention Centre Jammu, today, Lieutenant Governor Sinha said public audit ensures every rupee is effectively spent, bringing about positive changes in the lives of those at the grassroots of development.

Drawing attention to the historical significance of the Institution of Comptroller and Auditor General of India, Lt. Governor Sinha reminisced about the visionary framers

of the constitution, particularly quoting Baba Saheb Ambedkar, who regarded the Auditor General as holding the most critical position in the Indian Constitution.

Addressing government departments, Lt. Governor Sinha urged swift action on identified shortcomings. He stressed the importance of the audit community promptly presenting reports and facts in the era of reforms, enabling swift action related to policy and program evaluations.

"Audit observations and recommendations should be seen as a guide so that every penny of the public exchequer improves the living standards of the common man," stated Lt. Governor Sinha.

"Encouraging a positive mindset towards audit reports," he suggested that careful consideration and implementation of recommendations could lead to necessary improvements in governance.

In the context of the evolving administrative and business processes due to e-governance and digital penetration, Lt. Governor Sinha acknowledged the challenges and opportunities for the audit community. He emphasised the need to ensure the safety and security of IT systems and foster partnerships at the Panchayat level.

Commenting on the impact of artificial intelligence and knowledge-based expert systems, Lt. Governor Sinha noted their role in facilitating audit risk evaluation and planning. However, he also acknowledged emerging challenges related to data security and reduced human control, calling for a balanced approach.

Commending the Audit and Accounts Offices of Jammu and Kashmir, Lt. Governor Sinha highlighted their key initiatives, including bulk settlement of pending audit paras, collaborative corrective actions, pension adalats, and progress in computerising pension cases. These efforts, he noted, not only benefit government departments but also directly impact the lives of citizens in the Union Territory.

The event was attended by Pramod Kumar, Principal Accountant General (Audit), J&K, Abhishek Gupta, Principal Accountant General, Rajeev Rai Bhatnagar, Advisor to Lt. Governor, Dr. Arun Kumar Mehta, Chief Secretary, Santosh D Vaidya, Principal Secretary Finance Department, Sanjeev Verma, Commissioner Secretary GAD, Anand Jain, IGP Jammu, and other senior officers. <http://risingkashmir.com/public-audit-catalyst-for-positive-change-in-peoples-lives-lq>

7. Govt Deptts should take quick action on shortcomings: LG (*greaterkashmir.com*) November 25, 2023

Jammu, Nov 24: Lieutenant Governor Manoj Sinha Friday urged the government departments to take quick action on the shortcomings and said that public audit ensures every rupee was well spent to change the lives of the people.

An official spokesman in a statement issued here said that addressing the closing ceremony of 'Audit Week' in Jammu, the LG impressed on the government departments to take quick action on the shortcomings.

“In the era of reforms, it should be the endeavour of the audit community to present the audit report and necessary facts immediately so that action related to the evaluation of policies and programmes is taken without any delay,” he said. “Audit observation and recommendation should be seen as a guide so that every penny of public exchequer improves the living standards of the common man.”

Sinha said that all officers should change their thinking of looking at audit reports and audit observations as criticism of their work.

“If you read these reports carefully and follow the recommendations of the audit community, necessary improvements can be brought in governance,” he said.

“Public audit ensures that every rupee is well spent to bring about a change in the lives of the people standing in the last queue of development,” the LG said.

He appreciated the efforts of the audit community towards transparent and accountable governance.

Sinha said that the week-long audit day celebrations provide an opportunity to reflect on the critical role the audit community plays in contributing to good governance and shaping the governance landscape of the nation.

“One of the earliest institutions established to bring transparency, accountability, and honesty in public life is the institution of Comptroller and Auditor General of India. Our forefathers while drafting the Constitution had a clear opinion that the Auditor General will be the most important officer in the democratic processes,” he said. “Baba Saheb Ambedkar had said that the position of the Auditor General is the most important in the Indian Constitution and he will be the only person who will see to it that there is no expenditure over what the Parliament has voted for or what is provided for in the Appropriation Bill of the Parliament.”

The LG talked about the significant change taking place in the administrative and business processes due to e-governance and digital penetration.

He said that this change had brought new challenges and opportunities for the audit community to pay special attention to the safety and security of the IT system and also make institutions and youth partners at the Panchayat level.

“On the one hand, the use of artificial intelligence and knowledge-based expert systems has facilitated audit risk evaluation, internal control evaluation, and audit planning, while on the other new challenges have also emerged due to concerns about data security and minimum human control,” Sinha said. “We have to strike a balance and use every tool available to ensure proper utilisation of resources and make life easier for the beneficiaries of the schemes.”

He commended the key endeavours of the Audit and Accounts Offices of J&K, over the last few years.

The LG said that initiatives like bulk settlement of pending audit paras, collaborative corrective action with J&K departments to improve their operations, pension adalats, and progress in end-to-end computerisation of pension cases showcase their commitment to innovation and efficiency.

“These initiatives not only benefit the J&K administration’s departments but also directly impact the lives of the ordinary citizens of J&K,” he said.

Principal Accountant General (Audit), J&K, Pramod Kumar and Principal Accountant General Abhishek Gupta gave a brief overview of the extensive audit exercises and activities conducted by the office of Accountant General in J&K.

Advisor to Lt Governor Rajeev Rai Bhatnagar; Chief Secretary Arun Kumar Mehta; Principal Secretary Finance Department Santosh D Vaidya; Commissioner Secretary GAD, Sanjeev Verma; and IGP Jammu Anand Jain were also present on the occasion. <https://www.greaterkashmir.com/jammu/govt-depts-should-take-quick-action-on-shortcomings-lq/>

8. Why Kashmir’s power crisis despite resources and surplus generation? (*groundreport.in*) November 27, 2023

Despite being a region rich in resources, Jammu and Kashmir is currently grappling with its worst power crisis in two decades, particularly during the harsh winter season. Despite having a surplus generation capacity, the power situation in Kashmir has reached a critical point that hasn’t been seen since 2004, when residents had to endure power outages lasting up to 18 hours a day.

The promises made by the J&K administration, which has been under the direct control of the central government since its demotion from a state to a Union Territory on August 5, 2019, have not been fulfilled.

Despite the majority of areas having smart meters installed, the power situation continues to worsen each day, causing difficulties for consumers. No one seems to be able to alleviate the worsening power situation. During the hot and humid summer season, there was some improvement in the power supply, but with the arrival of winter, power outages, both scheduled and unscheduled, have become a common occurrence, causing inconvenience to the public.

The Power Development Department (PDD) and power corporation had assured consumers that there would be an improvement in the power scenario. However, contrary to these assurances, the electricity situation has deteriorated. Consumers are now subjected to unscheduled power cuts, indicating that the power situation is chaotic and consumers are facing a severe electricity crisis.

What much power J&K is generating currently?

The paradox lies in the fact that Kashmir has an identified power generation potential of 16,475 MW but currently generates only 3,263 MW of electricity from 21 power projects. More than 85% of this comes from hydropower projects, the largest of which is the Baglihar project on the Chenab basin with an installed capacity of 900 MW.

So, why is a region with such abundant resources facing a power crisis? The answer lies in a combination of factors including coal shortages, an imbalance between supply and demand, and infrastructural issues.

Jammu and Kashmir is capable of producing 3188 MW of energy, is currently facing a severe power crisis. Despite the region's ability to generate a surplus of nearly 900 MW of electricity from its 21 hydroelectric projects, it continues to experience significant power shortages.

Moreover, there is a significant imbalance between supply and demand. Overall, J&K has a requirement of about 2,600 MW of electricity. However, the power supply to the Kashmir division is 1200 MW while to Jammu is 900 MW. This leaves a deficit of about 500 MW.

Root cause

The root of the problem lies in several factors, primarily the unequal power-sharing agreements between Jammu and Kashmir and the National Hydro Projects Corporation (NHPC), a central government-owned company. These agreements only allocate a small percentage of the power generation for consumption within the state.

Despite producing a surplus of about 900 MW, Jammu and Kashmir is facing a deficit of 500 MW of power supply. There is, however, conflicting data regarding the energy demands of Jammu and Kashmir. Some official agencies state that the demand is as high as 4000 MW.

According to a recent report in the Indian Express, H Rajesh Prasad, the principal secretary of J&K's Power Development Department said, Due to a prolonged dry spell, rivers in Jammu and Kashmir have less water flow, causing a drop in power generation. Initially at 1,050 MW, it fell to 700 MW by September and is now at 200-250 MW.

Another report mentions a record low of 50-100 MW in power generation. The Jhelum river's discharge is much lower than last year, exacerbating the power supply situation in the region, despite its ample resources for power generation.

No funds for small projects

According to a report by the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG), no funds have been released for small projects in Jammu and Kashmir over the past five years. The report highlighted that the central government did not release funds for 20 sites proposed under the Prime Minister's Development Package due to high project costs and unviable tariffs.

The report also pointed out a lack of coordination between nodal agencies and line departments/agencies, which resulted in delays in obtaining clearances, approvals, and finances for the projects. Furthermore, the projects' execution was not adequately monitored.

Independent Power Producers (IPPs) cited the lack of financing by banks due to the non-availability of a buyback agreement with the J&K government as a significant obstacle to project development.

The report also noted that the Jammu and Kashmir Power Development Corporation's (JKPDC) failure to complete the transmission line alongside the commissioning of the Dah hydro project resulted in a loss of revenue of Rs 16.45 crore due to non-utilisation of power generation of 59.37 MUs.

Interestingly, three projects with a generation capacity of 12 MWs were selling power outside the Union Territory, contradicting the hydro policy's objective of addressing energy problems in the remote and hilly areas of the Union Territory. The power demand in these areas was estimated at 4,217 MW (21,887 MUs) by the end of 2021-22.

Kashmir hydropower projects and capacity

Jammu and Kashmir with an estimated capacity of 20,000 MW, which includes 1,500 MW for small hydro projects. However, as of October 2021, only 2,813.46 MW (16 percent) of this potential had been harnessed, which included 79.75 MW of small hydro projects.

The region has several hydroelectric projects. For instance, the Baglihar project on the Chenab basin has an installed capacity of 900 MW. Other projects include Sawalkote (1,856 MW), Kirthai I (390 MW), Kirthai II (930 MW), Pakal Dul (1,000 MW), Kwar (540 MW), Kiru (624 MW), Bursar (800 MW) in the Chenab basin, and the multi-purpose Ujh project (212 MW) in the Ravi basin. These projects have a total installed capacity of 6,352 MW.

Additionally, the Jammu Kashmir Power Development Corporation (JKSPDC) runs 21 power projects, producing 1137.68 MW. The private sector contributes an additional 42.5 MW through four projects. The National Hydro Power Corporation (NHPC) generates 2,009 MW from seven projects.

Despite the significant potential and existing projects, the region is still facing a power deficit, indicating the need for more efficient utilization of its resources. <https://groundreport.in/why-kashmirs-power-crisis-despite-resources-and-surplus-generation/>

9. Audit awareness week observed in Dimapur (*nagalandpost.com*)

November 25, 2023

The Comptroller & Auditor General (AG) of India, in alignment with the nationwide observance of Audit Diwas on November 16, followed by Audit Awareness Week, conducted Audit Diwas at Hotel Saramati, Dimapur on November 24, 2023.

According to a DIPR report, Deputy Commissioner Dr. Tinojongshi Chang welcomed pensioners and officials, urging pensioners to share their grievances during the event. A. Principal Accountant General (A&E), Nagaland, Pitoho Chophy, highlighted the event's objective of celebrating the organization's history, evolution, and its contribution to governance. Chophy emphasized the importance of strengthening relationships and enhancing transparency.

Senior Deputy General Audit Kahoto J. Yeptomi advised departments to submit pension papers six months before employees' retirement for a seamless process. Personal copies of Pension Payment Orders and GPF Final payments were distributed to pensioners, with the list uploaded on the office website. Various pavilions addressed Pension, GPF, RoP, Loan, Pay Slip, and Inspection Report Settlement for awareness and grievance redressal.

The AG also addressed outstanding Inspection Reports of Auditee units in Dimapur, Chumukedima, and Peren. Renjano Ezung, Assistant Audit Officer, chaired the program. <https://nagalandpost.com/index.php/audit-awareness-week-observed-in-dimapur/>

10. Chandigarh Police's salary scam: How some cops got excess pay (*indianexpress.com*) Updated: November 25, 2023

As many as 13 police personnel have been arrested in connection with the 2019 salary scam of the Chandigarh Police. A nearly three-year-long police investigation suggests that approximately Rs 1.10 crore was embezzled, with excessive amounts credited to the salary accounts of hundreds of police personnel. Here is an attempt to decode the scam that shook the UT police.

What is the salary scam and when was it exposed ?

In 2019, the audit department identified the disbursement of an excess amount in certain salary accounts of Chandigarh Police personnel, primarily those of head constables and constables between 2015 and 2018. The then SP (Crime) Manoj Kumar Meena conducted a preliminary investigation after this discovery, leading to a special audit by the Comptroller of Auditor General (CAG). The CAG's special audit revealed embezzlement of approximately Rs 1.60 crore transferred to various salary accounts of police personnel.

Consequently, an FIR under relevant charges, including forgery, cheating, and under the provisions of the Prevention of Corruption (PC) Act, 1988, was registered at Sector 3 police station. Initially, 40 salary accounts receiving excessive payments were shortlisted, which later rose to 79. Further investigation revealed that around 200 accounts received excess amounts. All UT police employees were linked to the e-Sevaarth application, which helped in providing details of their pay and allowances.

What was the modus operandi?

According to the investigation, personnel in the A4 Branch, responsible for preparing salaries of constables and head constables, engaged in a well-planned conspiracy. They made bogus claims for LTC leaves, pay arrears, travel, dearness, and medical allowances, etc, and submitted vouchers for the same to the account branch.

The money was credited to the accounts of police personnel, even to those who had previously declined to submit medical or TA bills during the probe. It was revealed that the involved personnel withdrew the excess amount and paid a significant share to salary branch personnel. Evidence emerged that many beneficiaries remained silent and paid commissions to the accused personnel.

Who were the suspects arrested in the scam, and what are the allegations against them?

Almost all dealing hands, including the then in charge of the A4 branch (salary branch), Junior Assistant Balwinder Kumar, Home Guard Volunteer (HGV) Surjit Singh, ASI Vinod Kumar, Constable Rajbir Singh, and nine others including a retired policeman, have been arrested. Sources indicate that the arrested individuals were posted in the accounts branch to perform treasury duties, which include preparing bills for salary, pay arrears, LTC leave encashment, etc.

Surjit acted as a conduit between the dealing hands and beneficiary cops. Some beneficiaries cops were also arrested. In an internal probe, the then Assistant Controller (Accounts & Finance) Sudhir Parashar concluded that an in-depth probe was required against members of the salary branch, including its in charge. He mentioned in the report: “The salary of Section Officer Jagdeep Singh Sehrawat for the entire tenure in the police department checked, and nothing was found overpaid”.

The probe officer further maintained, “The role of two previous section officers – Jaspal Singh and Ravinder Kumar – needs to be verified in detail”.

How did the scam create differences between CAG and the police department?

On March 10 this year, Director General of Audit (Central) Sanjeev Goyal held a press conference, claiming that inadmissible payments on account of pay and allowances, LTC, and other benefits totaling more than Rs 1 crore were made to police personnel. Despite alerting the police, no action was taken. DGP (UT) Praveer Ranjan later claimed that it was Chandigarh Police that urged the CAG to conduct a special audit of its police personnel’s accounts. Goyal also claimed that the UT police’s bills and vouchers, amounting to a whopping Rs 84 crore, went missing between 2017-2020.

What is the current status of the case?

Currently, a Special Investigation Team (SIT) supervised by SP (Crime) Ketan Bansal and DSP (Crime) Udaypal Singh Rawat is overseeing the investigation. Three chargesheets, comprising one main chargesheet and two supplementaries, have been filed in the district court at Sector 43.

Out of the 13 accused, at least eight have been granted bail by the concerned court. In March 2023, the UT police announced that the entire embezzlement amount had been fully recovered from the beneficiaries. <https://indianexpress.com/article/cities/chandigarh/chandigarh-polices-salary-scam-9041507/>

11. Goa's unpaid debt up 618% to 31k crore in 2 decades: RBI (*timesofindia.indiatimes.com*) Nov 28, 2023

PANAJI: Goa's gross fiscal deficit has increased by 680% since 2004-05 as the government struggles to earn enough revenue to meet its yearly expenses, particularly expenditure on social welfare schemes and infrastructure development. To try and fund this deficit, the state has relied on borrowings, mainly state development loans that have pushed Goa's outstanding liabilities from Rs 4,417 crore in 2005 to Rs 31,758 crore in 2023, a 618% jump.

The Reserve Bank of India's Handbook of Statistics, which was released recently, shows that Goa's economy has also grown in size during the near two decade period. From a gross state development product of Rs 12,713 crore in 2004-05, Goa's economic heft has risen to Rs 55,547 crore at constant prices in 2021-22. The figures for the year ending March 2023 are awaited.

The increase in borrowings has had an impact on interest payments that the state has to make to service the state development loans. From Rs 323 crore in 2004-05, the state ended up paying Rs 1,988 crore to service the state's debt, a 515.48% increase.

While Goa is well within the fiscal deficit limits, that has not stopped the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) of India from cautioning the state about the burgeoning debt. The CAG has repeatedly asked Goa to prepare a roadmap to repay outstanding loans.

In the current financial year, the government has managed to limit its borrowings to half of Rs 3,500 crore, which is the permissible borrowing limit for 2023-24.

RBI's Handbook of Statistics on state government finances shows that Goa's capital expenditure rose from Rs 598 crore in 2004-05 to Rs 6,058 crore in 2022-23. Similarly, social sector spending has also jumped from Rs 798 crore in 2004-05 to Rs 8,659 crore in the last financial year. Expenses on social welfare schemes, which usually hovered around Rs 5,000 crore, spiked during the Covid19 pandemic, peaking at Rs 10,286 crore in 2021-22. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/goa/goas-unpaid-debt-up-618-to-31k-crore-in-2-decades-rbi/articleshow/105547576.cms>

12. A Himalayan fiasco: Silkyara tunnel crisis was long in the making (*nationalheraldindia.com*) Alok Kumar Verma | Nov 26, 2023

Ignoring scientific evidence and expert advice, approving broad gauge rail and wide roads in the Himalayas, and the tearing hurry to meet deadlines decided by political bosses proves costly

One of the lessons from the Silkyara–Barkot tunnel collapse in Uttarakhand is that politics is too serious a business to be left to politicians. Ignoring scientific evidence and expert advice, approving projects for broad gauge rail lines and wide roads in the Himalayas without waiting for adequate ground surveys, and being in a tearing hurry to meet deadlines decided by political bosses is costly. The nation pays the price.

The planning and execution of projects in challenging terrains should be left to engineers. The politician's role is best confined to project approvals and progress reports, so that lapses caused by negligence and ignorance can be spotted before it is too late.

The projects of widening existing roads in the Himalayas are recent compared to the 25 years of planning and execution that went into mega railway projects. While the engineering challenges are similar, the Railway Board, the apex authority of Indian Railways, doesn't seem to have learned from experience. For a proper understanding of the unfolding crisis, we must look at the big picture.

The recklessness seen in the execution of the Char Dham project is evident in various railway projects in the Himalayan region. I was intimately connected with all the ongoing projects approved in the last 20 years — one each in seven Himalayan states. Not one of them has been completed, yet.

During this same period, China has been able to construct a number of remarkably high-capacity train lines in terrain that appears to be as difficult as the Himalayas. The Chongqing–Lanzhou, Chengdu–Kunming, and Nanning–Kunming lines are much longer and operate at a much higher speed than anything we are constructing on our side.

China is also building a 1,629-km line from Chengdu to Leh (the Sichuan–Tibet Line) that would run close to the border with India. International experts are describing this as the most challenging railway project in history. China has also finalised plans to connect Lhasa with Hotan in the far-west that will pass through the disputed Aksai Chin territory.

While the nation prays for the rescue of the 41 trapped workers at Silkyara, little or no attention was paid to the lives of 80 workers who died in Manipur and Mizoram when a railway cutting and a railway bridge collapsed during construction at Tupul and Aizawl, the latter as recently as August this year.

In 2017, the Railway Board approved plans for two of the biggest projects so far in the Himalayas: a 456-km line from Bilaspur in Himachal Pradesh to Leh in Ladakh, and 327-km Char Dham lines to link Badrinath, Kedarnath, Gangotri and Yamunotri in Uttarakhand. Both these projects had serious flaws, which I had pointed out in a series of detailed articles. Seven years down the line, the Railway Board seems to have shelved both the projects.

Strangely, the Leh project report had failed to account for the impact of high altitude on feasibility and cost of construction of long tunnels and large bridges. At that elevation — 3,500– 5,000 m above sea level — oxygen supply gets restricted and people have trouble breathing. The cost of transporting material and equipment to that height was also not factored in, as I had pointed out in my published articles.

The last three years have, in fact, seen a surge of approvals for the construction of five mega road tunnels at those very same high altitudes in Ladakh. Nowhere is it clear if the alignment plans for these tunnels have taken into consideration the impact of high altitude. (I might also add here that a new alignment I had suggested for one of the projects in the Himalayas turns out to be similar to what China has opted for in the region).

The outcome of starting construction without workable alignments is starkly clear from the following trends:

1. Extremely high cost of construction at Rs 400-700 crore per km of route length, which is about 8 to 10 times higher than the average cost in other mountainous regions of the country.

2. With compromises made in mid-course changes in the alignment in order to deal with geological surprises, the line capacity stands at a maximum of just 8 to 10 trains per day, which is half the capacity on existing lines, such as the Konkan Railway, in other mountainous regions.

3. The stupendously high bridges that these flawed alignments require near international borders — like the much flaunted Chenab Bridge (‘world’s highest railway bridge’) at 359 m above the bed of the Chenab river), the Anji Bridge on the Kashmir line, and the Noney Bridge on the Manipur line — will be easy targets for the enemy in times of war. A major collapse could result in closure of the lines for years.

4. Massive slope-stabilisation measures of doubtful longevity are being carried out at a total of around 40 huge bridges and 35 tunnels of 5-to15-km length, in order to glue and stitch together the crushed, fragmented or rubble-like rock strata. Many 50-to-100 m high slope cuttings that are being built will pose a grave risk to the safety, stability and survivability of each of these lines in major earthquakes and excessive rainfall events that are common on the southern face of Himalayas where these lines are being built.

The above features are proof of what happens when projects are approved and construction started on alignments designed without essential ground investigations of the geological, geotechnical and hydrological conditions on the alignment. The recklessness in the execution of the Char Dham project is also evident in many railway projects in the Himalayan region

Such problems were faced on the comparatively less challenging Konkan Railway project, where the alignment having been prepared without ground studies had to undergo many changes during construction to deal with geological surprises.

In the note put up to the Cabinet Committee for approval of the Kashmir Rail Link in 2002, the Railway Board had recorded that with the experience gained on the Konkan project, it was confident of building the line in five years.

The most important lesson — namely, that construction should not start without a properly surveyed and designed alignment — was not learned, and so the blunder continued with the Kashmir project. Worse, it was repeated in each of the remaining six projects.

For four years now (2019-23), the Railway Board has been considering a plan to construct a 200- 250 kmph semi-highspeed line on standard gauge in Kerala, ignoring the deeply flawed alignment based on inadequate and unreliable ground surveys, warnings from the international consultant, and widespread public protests.

*** My own experience on the Katra-Banihal rail link project in J&K is instructive. Once construction started, and the flaws in the alignment became apparent, my team and I took four years (2004-08) to develop a new alignment — actually, a new type of alignment different from the conventional slope-skirting type of alignment — for the line.

The Railway Board suspended construction in August 2008, and set up a committee of external experts to examine my proposal to abandon the existing alignment and start construction afresh on the new alignment.

With the posting of a new member (engineering) and member (traffic), the review was scuttled and I was transferred out of the project. About 75 per cent of the alignment was still changed, but with the sole aim of somehow completing construction, regardless of the cost, time, safety and sustainability of the line.

In September 2010, the Delhi High Court held that the new members had colluded in self-interest to scuttle the review. A PIL was filed, which resulted in an order by the HC to the Railway Board to appoint a new expert committee to examine my proposal for a change of alignment.

By then, Rs 5,500 crore had already been spent on construction. In 2012–14, the CAG and the Public Accounts Committee (PAC) of Parliament also examined the performance audit of the project. PAC asked the Railway Board to fix responsibilities for the loss incurred due to changes in the alignment.

The new expert committee submitted its report in February 2015, and unanimously recommended that my alignment be adopted, as it offered the most cost-effective solution for a high-capacity, stable, safe and reliable line. It recommended that other projects in the Himalayas might follow this new type of alignment as a model.

However, the Railway Board insisted that construction would be completed by the middle of 2018 and refused to alter the alignment. It also blamed the government's insistence on a speedy start and evidence of progress on the ground for its inability to design an appropriate alignment. This was a blatant misrepresentation because the Railway Board had approved the alignment five years before the government approved the project.

Such being the games that governments and government agencies play, projects in the Himalayas and other challenging terrain like Kerala raise uncomfortable questions that warrant a closer scrutiny. <https://www.nationalheraldindia.com/opinion/a-himalayan-fiasco-uttarakhand-silkyara-tunnel-crisis-was-long-in-the-making>

13. To compensate for mining projects, Adivasi land in Jharkhand is being taken over for afforestation (*scroll.in*) Nov 26, 2023

New forests are coming up in areas traditionally used by locals for cultivation, for accessing forest produce, for grazing livestock and even burying the dead.

Walking in the forest near Ramgarh's Jitra Tungri hamlet seems straightforward at first. But soon it turns into a strenuous trudge through knee-high grass and brambles, dodging the occasional snake and avoiding what looks like a gaping crater.

The cavity in the earth is due to coal mine subsidence; locals manage to avoid it and all the other perils and reach the top of the hill without batting an eyelid while I stumble and trip along in their wake.

“How on earth did a JCB get here?” I wonder about a construction vehicle that dug trenches atop the hill earlier this year. This is where the district forest department has dug up the farms that these villagers were cultivating, planting trees to compensate against a forest cut down somewhere else.

“Sab kuch chheen liya hai toh hum log marne par aa gaye hain. Kuch khaane ke liye rahega nahi toh hum karenge kya? Bahar jayenge toh yahan kaun dekhega? (Everything has been snatched away and we have been pushed towards death. What will we do if there is nothing to eat? If I migrate, who will look after my family here?),” said Binod Rajwar, a resident of the hamlet.

Rajwar, in common with his fellow residents of Jitra Tungri, is one of the victims of afforestation – a Union government scheme wherein diversion of forests for a project in one place is compensated for by planting double the area of degraded forest land or equivalent non-forest land elsewhere.

The afforestation in question has affected people’s farming, pastoralism and other forest-dependent activities which fall under individual or community forest rights as enshrined in the landmark Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006 commonly known as Forest Rights Act or FRA.

In this instance, afforestation has been done on 22 hectares near the hamlet – an area roughly half the size of Vatican City – to compensate for forests elsewhere that had been cut down for mining. The issue here is that these new forests are coming up in areas that were traditionally used by locals for cultivation, for accessing forest produce, for grazing livestock and even for burying their dead. Therein lies the problem, as the legal rights of the forest dwellers come into conflict with the forest department’s interpretation of the law’s mandate.

Earlier this year, the Jharkhand forest department dug pits and trenches in land under cultivation near this hamlet and planted trees which, locals say, are of no use to them. The trenches prevent bullock carts or tractors from accessing local farmlands, forcing the farmers to stop cultivation and pushing them towards penury and destitution.

The majority of Jitra Tungri’s population belongs to the scheduled tribe category. The jungle is an inseparable part of their tribal identity. Now, the loss of a forest in one part of the district has upended their lives in another.

The people of Jitra Tungri tried pointing the forest department officials towards alternative plots that are less suitable for farming. In a bid to save their farms, they even planted saplings in places that would not require large trenches. But, they claim, the department bulldozed through all opposition.

“Simply writing letters doesn’t do anything,” Ramgarh Divisional Forest Officer Nitish Kumar responded to the villagers’ charges. “When we invited them for meetings, they did not engage with us. Even today, if they get titles to the forest land and show us the documents, we will consider it.”

In Bachra village in the neighboring Hazaribagh district, a group of villagers similarly claim to have been robbed of their farmland, and therefore their livelihood, due to another compensatory afforestation project.

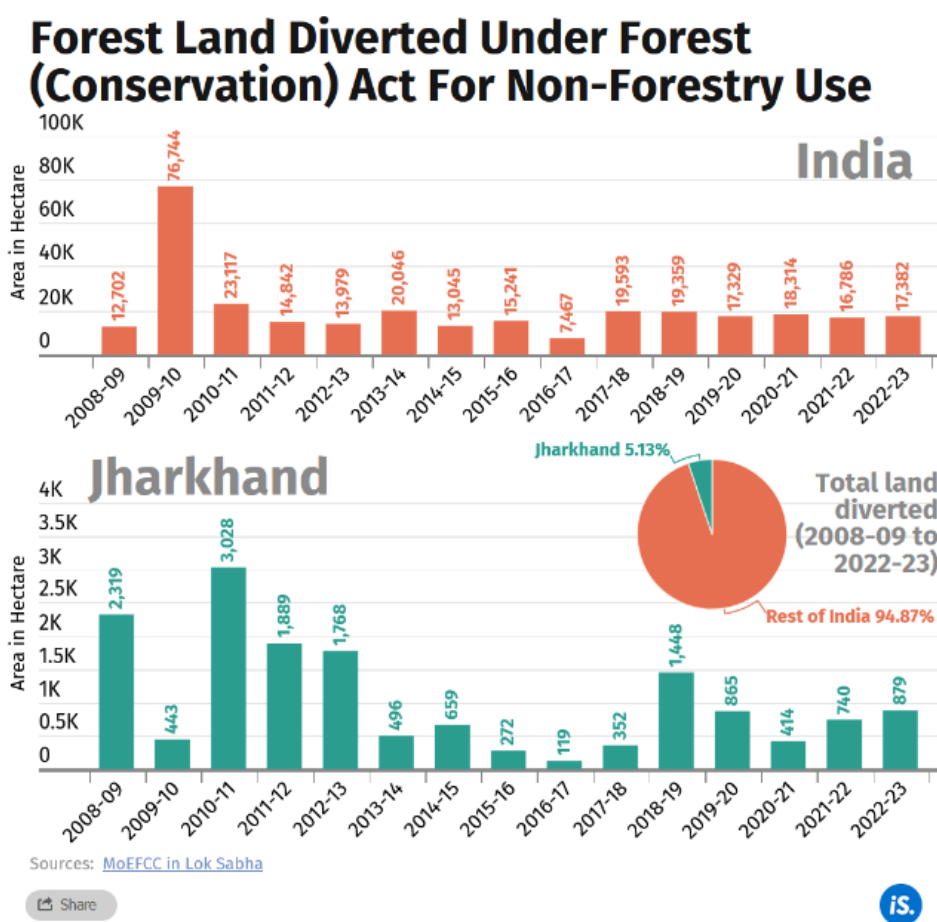
Those belonging to the scheduled tribe category, who make up a statistical majority of the local population, have been opposing the plantation whereas another group, made up of those from the Other Backward Classes category who do not use those farmlands and are a statistical minority in the village, has been supporting the afforestation.

Green and clean?

This is not the first time forest rights in India have come in conflict with controversial plantation schemes, as IndiaSpend had reported in 2019. Many policies in India are inherently at odds with the Forest Rights Act, leaving people’s rights to the subjective interpretation of local administration, experts say.

Officially, India’s forest cover stands at 21.7%, registering an increase of 1,540 sq km in the 2021 forest assessment as compared to the 2019 assessment. The eastern Indian state of Jharkhand (the state’s name literally translates to ‘land of trees’) has 29.8% of its land under forests, higher than the national average.

Between 2008-'09 and 2022-'23, India approved 305,000 hectares of forest land to be diverted for non-forest use for 17,301 projects. Around one-fifth of these forests – 58,282 hectares – were lost to mining alone in this period.



In the same period, states and Union territories undertook compensatory afforestation on 934,000 hectares, environment minister Bhupender Yadav told Parliament on August 7.

However, the national forest numbers have been controversial for a long time, with experts insisting that the assessment does not paint the correct picture and pointing to four crucial issues that undermine the data.

The first problem lies in the definition of “forest”. The Forest Survey of India uses satellite imagery and algorithmic interpretation to classify vegetated areas into “very dense”, “moderately dense” and “open” forest. The issue is that the Forest Survey of India classifies all patches of trees with a canopy density of 10% or more as forests – which in practice means that it includes monoculture plantations such as coconut, rubber, coffee and timber in its calculation of “forested areas”.

Such classification, experts have repeatedly argued, is classic “greenwashing”, with the Forest Survey of India – whose report says that the forest-rich northeastern states of India have cumulatively lost 1,020 sq km of forests – making up for this loss by categorising monoculture plantations as “forests”.

A related issue, experts say, is that the Forest Survey of India does not put its forest cover data in the public domain but merely provides topline numbers – thus, there is no independent oversight and verification of the Forest Survey of India’s claims. This, researcher MD Madhusudan pointed out, leads to glaring discrepancies, which were further underlined in a report in *The Hindu* in March.

Experts therefore argue that India’s actual forest cover might be less than official numbers – this, while India’s stated aim is to increase total forest cover to 33% of its land area, and it has committed to have an additional carbon sink equivalent to 2.5 to 3 billion tonnes of carbon dioxide through additional forest and tree cover by 2030.

The money trail

The Union government undertakes afforestation through various schemes such as Green India Mission, Namami Gange, and the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme. States, too, have their own schemes. The Jharkhand government had announced its target of planting 25 million saplings in the 2023 monsoon season. This is in addition to the afforestation already undertaken in Jitra Tungri, Bachra and other hamlets in the region.

Of all these schemes, the most lucrative is the cash-rich compensatory afforestation fund. When a public or private entity makes an application to cut down a forest for a project, the permission given to them comes with the caveat that they have to pay for compensating it. Over the years, it was observed that there was under-utilisation of the money collected towards compensatory afforestation by states, and so, the Supreme Court in 2001 ordered the establishment of a Compensatory Afforestation Fund and a Compensatory Afforestation Fund Management and Planning Authority.

In 2006, separate bank accounts were opened in which the compensatory levies (money paid by companies or agencies towards the forests they diverted) were deposited, and

an ad hoc authority was established for the management of this fund. In 2016, the government enacted the Compensatory Afforestation Fund Act and, after its rules were formalised in 2018, an amount of Rs 54,685 crore (\$6.5 billion) from this ad-hoc authority was brought under government control. Now, the Compensatory Afforestation Fund Management and Planning Authority is tasked with managing and utilising the fund.

The management of compensatory afforestation funds was controversial even before the Act came in place. In 2013, the Comptroller and Auditor General, the government's auditor, released its report on India's track record of compensatory afforestation, wherein it flagged "serious shortcomings in regulatory issues related to diversion of forest land, the abject failure to promote compensatory afforestation, the unauthorised diversion of forest land in the case of mining and the attendant violation of the environmental regime".

An expert, speaking to IndiaSpend on the condition of anonymity, said, "CAF [compensatory afforestation] funds are blood money, because we have already lost those forests and this money is supposed to help compensate for them. No plantation can truly make up for lost forests, and even those plantations are not happening in earnest."

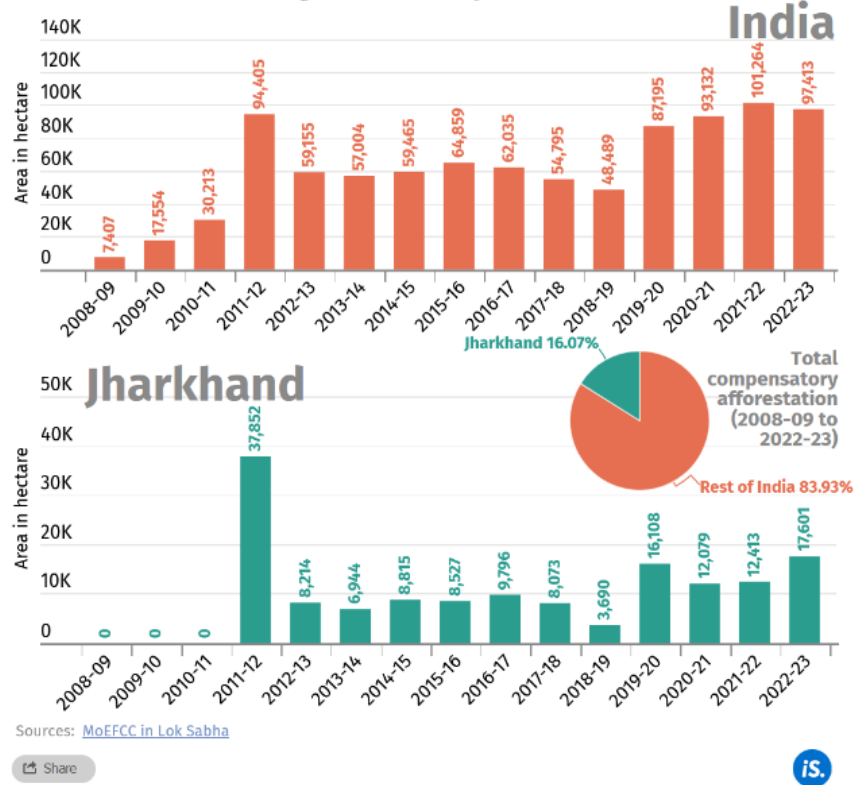
Other experts have flagged the Compensatory Afforestation Funds Act saying that "it goes further than any other law in the past in denying tribals' rights in the forests, grabbing their village forests, pastures and commons, and intensifying their forcible relocation from protected forests", something IndiaSpend noticed first-hand during field trips in Jharkhand.

Coal, forests, forest rights

Jharkhand, one of India's most coal-rich states, has diverted 15,691 hectares of forest land for coal mining and other non-forest use between 2008-'09 and 2022-'23. Mining is one of the largest causes for forest diversion in India, and a 2019 study across more than 300 Indian districts had found that districts that produced coal, iron or limestone saw on average 450 sq km higher forest loss compared to those that did not produce the same minerals.

Notably, Jharkhand has also done better in compensating for these chopped forests. It tops the list in forests compensated in the year 2022-'23, standing at 17,600 hectares. For the next year 2023-'24, Jharkhand has received Rs 282 crore for carrying out compensatory afforestation.

Details Of Compensatory Afforestation



One of the coal mines in question in Ramgarh, where Jitra Tungri falls, is the Giddi A mine leased to Central Coalfields Limited, a Government of India undertaking. The old mine had diverted 1.44 hectares of forests, and compensated for it by authorising the forest department to take up plantation on double the degraded forest land on its behalf.

Similarly, forest diverted for the Jharkhand Open Cast Mine and for an arch bridge led to a total forest diversion of 10.87 hectare, or area equivalent to around 20 football fields, within Ramgarh, forest department officials told IndiaSpend. Taken together, they compensated for these three diversions by taking up plantation on 22 hectares near Jitra Tungri or area equivalent to around 41 football fields. They planted 36,652 saplings at a cost of Rs 29 lakh (about \$35,000), as per the officials.

Before undertaking afforestation, the department approached the village mukhiya, or headman, Ramesh Ram and asked him to hold a gram sabha, or village council, meeting. A gram sabha needs 10% of its total members to be present, failing which it gets adjourned. However, the sabha was held with just 16 people, and it gave permission to the forest department to undertake tree plantation.

“The forest department came here several times, but had to turn around because of our opposition,” said Dhaneshwar Rajwar, a resident of the hamlet. “Then they brought the full force of the system and turned this place into a war zone. When we opposed again, they showed us a handwritten paper (the one that was signed by the gram sabha at the end of its meeting) which had very general words about plantation to be undertaken in

the village, without any more details. This village has a population of around 500, but only 16 people were called for gram sabha which is against the rule.”

Ram now claims that he did not know where the plantation was going to be undertaken, its scale, and how it would affect people. He has joined the villagers in opposing the plantation. The question of how he held a gram sabha despite the absence of a quorum is, however, unanswered.

‘With trees come their laws’

Basanti Devi is part of a family of ten. Her family used to farm a piece of forest land, growing paddy and a local millet called Kulthi, among other crops.

“Now we can neither take bullocks nor tractors there,” Basanti Devi told IndiaSpend. “The way they have dug a trench, the land is of no use to us. We are now worried about how we will get by, since I have small children. My in-laws have been living here and cultivating this land for generations.”

Diglal Rajwar had already sown Kulthi seeds when the afforestation process began. “We lost a lot of seeds and money, only the land where rice was planted was left for us,” he said. “That’s why we will have to fight. That land is everything... Baad me ladne nahi dega (we have to fight now, it will be too late later).”

Local villagers pointed out that the species of trees planted on the land are useless to them. “Woh toh aisa ped hai jisme chidiya bhi nahi baith sakte hain, na usme ghosla de sakte hain, neeche ghaas bhi nahi hoga... (Those are the kind of trees where even birds won’t sit or nest, even grass won’t grow beneath them),” said Basanti Devi.

The afforestation programme, which appears to focus on quantity over quality and environmental sense, has been criticised by experts for introducing non-native saplings into various forested landscapes. This, experts have pointed out, is a double blow: not only are the non-native trees of no economic use to the indigenous tribes, these trees also quickly overwhelm the environment at the expense of native trees and shrubs.

Given their understanding of the habitat, residents of Jitra Tungri hamlet decided to take matters into their own hands and undertake their own plantation. “At least that way our land would have been saved,” said panchayat member Chhaya Rajwar. “We were trying to spare our useful land and use the rest for plantation.”

The villagers tried to assert their agency in the kind of species taken up for plantation, but it was not recognised. They claim to have planted around 30,000 saplings, most of them Mahua and other fruit-bearing trees, on the concerned forest land themselves. These were allegedly discarded by the forest department which prefers to plant its handpicked varieties, oblivious to the part native trees play in the traditions and culture of the tribal people.

Resident Sheela Marandi said that in her Santhali community, there is a tradition wherein the woman marries the Mahua tree first before marrying the groom. She is

disappointed that the saplings prepared by villagers in the nursery, including Mahua, Sakhua and other fruit-bearing trees, were discarded by the forest department.

“Genthi hoye gelo (there is Genthi), Tena, Barjariya, Jamun, Kend, Ghalwa, Bel, Mahua, Khokhdi, Putka, Karel hoye gelo (there is Karel) – these are all forest produce that are beneficial to us, we forage them from the jungle,” said Sumitra Devi, an elderly villager. “We eat some of it and also sell it. Mahua tree’s flowers are dried, its oil is used as a medicine for treating stomach ache, headache. In weddings also, these trees have a lot of importance. Even for snakebites, we know which jadi booti (herbs) to use. That is how much the jungle matters to us.”

While the locals have not been explicitly prohibited from accessing forest produce, they want the department to plant more of these trees, particularly Mahua, that are important to them.

The district forest department confirmed that villagers are no longer permitted to cultivate that land or take animals there for grazing.

“Ped lagana koi buri baat nahi hai, lekin ped ke saath saath unka kanoon bhi toh laagu hoga. Isiliye takleef hai (It is not a bad thing to plant trees, but with the trees will come their law),” said panchayat member Chhaya Rajwar, who claims to have been kept in the dark about the gram sabha in question.

She is worried that their cattle will venture into the land out of habit and the department will file cases against villagers. Cattle trespass in a reserved forest or protected forest is an offense as per the Indian Forest Act, 1927. Hay for cattle, firewood for burial and access to the farmed land were subjects that came up repeatedly in interaction with residents of this hamlet.

The law vs the land

Ramgarh’s District Forest Officer Nitish Kumar countered the villagers’ complaints, saying, “What happened in Jitra Tungri was that people did not want to give up their farm lands. We are supposed to only consult the gram sabha; we do not require consent, especially when they want to do things unilaterally.”

According to Kumar, the department held several meetings to take people into confidence, even invited them to his office, and told them that genuine forest rights claims will be settled.

“I said I will come to the village, give me a date. They didn’t. I contacted local public representatives but people didn’t want to listen. If you just claim rights without engaging with the law.... Nobody was ready, they have an encroachment agenda.”

On the subject of species to be planted, Kumar’s response unwittingly underlined the point the villagers were making, about the forest department preferring quick-growing varieties to trees endemic to the environment. The official told IndiaSpend that planting trees like Mahua “is very tough”. Such fruit-bearing trees take 15-20 years to fully grow, he said, and there is often theft of saplings. He said the department tries to maintain a 60-40 ratio of hardy trees and fruit-bearing trees.

Kumar stated that not all of the people who claim eligibility for forest rights are entitled to it as per the Forest Rights Act. “I have not denied burial rights or access to medicinal plants – they always have access to that. Now if you want to do farming, it is allowed up to the extent as was happening before 2005 [as per the Forest Rights Act], not more. If you had two acres before 2005 but have 20 acres now, I can’t give 20 acres, I can only give two,” said Kumar of individual forest rights which are acknowledged by titles. “Even today, we are ready to consider genuine claims.”

The Forest Rights Act covers the rights of forest-dwelling scheduled tribes “who primarily reside in and who depend on the forests or forest lands for bona fide livelihood needs” and of other traditional forest dwellers, meaning any member or community that has for at least three generations prior to December 13, 2005, primarily resided in and depended on the forest or forest land for bona fide livelihood needs.

The residents of Jitra Tungri and Bachra claim that they are covered under these definitions. Experts and activists point out that the government has not done anything to secure forest rights in cases like these. In neighbouring Chhattisgarh where nearly every third person is a tribal, people routinely receive ownership or titles to less forest land under Forest Rights Act than they claim, IndiaSpend reported in October.

“The issues in fact are getting more and more complicated at the ground level,” said Tushar Dash, an independent researcher working on forest rights. “There is no compliance of the Forest Rights Act at all. In fact, when the CAMPA Act [Compensatory Afforestation Fund Management and Planning Authority] was proposed in Parliament, MPs had proposed to include compliance of FRA and consent of the gram sabha in it. That proposal was not considered then, and an assurance was given that it will be included in the Rules, which also did not happen.”

Dash pointed out that the ministry and the state forest departments are putting certain conditions while approving the new annual plans of operations [states’ CAMPA plans]. “They have started mentioning that wherever CAMPA projects are getting implemented, prior to implementation the state authorities have to ensure compliance of FRA procedures and also consultation of gram sabha. That is on paper, but we have found that on the ground, for example in Odisha, there is no mechanism in place to safeguard and protect rights, to see that FRA is not violated.”

Sharachchandra Lele, distinguished fellow at the Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and the Environment who researches forest governance said that this is a story that keeps on repeating and he has seen the forest department proceed with plantation on land where individual forest rights claims were still pending. Once the cultivated land gets planted over, as has happened in the case of Bachra and Jitra Tungri, the recognition of cultivation rights becomes almost impossible, said Lele.

“Moreover, if it is forest land inside the revenue boundary of a village, it is almost a given that it falls within the customary boundary of the village and hence it is their Community Forest Resource [CFR] area. Even if the CAMPA process does not explicitly talk about gram sabha consent, if CFR rights were recognised on that land, then the gram sabha would be the final authority. It is because forest rights are not recognised that the forest department treats all forest land as theirs,” said Lele while also pointing out that sub-divisional and district-level committees that are supposed to

adjudicate on IFR and Community Forest Resource claims don't meet regularly and de facto, it is the forest department which takes decisions on titles in practice.

Caste and forest rights

Chhaya Rajwar's fears of the forest department filing cases against villagers for cattle grazing on plantations found echoes around 60 km away, in Hazaribagh's Bachra village.

Hazaribagh district is around two-and-a-half hours away by road from the state capital Ranchi. If one starts from Hazaribagh's Katkamsandi block, the winding road to Bachra village takes almost as long, with not a soul in sight. No buses or other vehicles can be seen, other than the occasional motorbike, as the road traverses the moderately dense jungles of Katkamsandi. After dusk, the only lights to be seen are the single yellow bulbs inside houses.

The region is desolate, and rumours of left-wing extremism contribute to the desolation. A number of outfits have been operating or were operating in the past in certain remote and poorly connected pockets of the country, and parts of Jharkhand used to be considered affected by extremism.

When we visited the area, it was a little after noon, and some locals had gathered at an under-construction house to talk to IndiaSpend about their plight.

In December 2022, the forest department officers and staff, along with heavy machinery, descended on the area in force, backed by a police escort. What followed was a months-long protest to prevent the department from undertaking plantations here.

"We had around one bigha (0.610 acre) of land that we were cultivating for generations," said local resident Devanti Devi. "Since losing the only farmland we had, my husband's labour earnings of Rs 200 a day is all the income we have, and it is not sufficient. We are a family of six, including two children. We are protesting, but they are not listening."

Caste introduces a further complexity into the mix. In Bachra, there are natives from the Bhogta and Oraon tribes that fall in the scheduled tribes category. The village is also home to Mehtas and Ranas, who fall in the Other Backward Classes category.

In this region, farming in forested land is being done by the tribals, whereas the Mehtas and Ranas own their own farmlands. Thus, while the Bhogta and Oraon tribals protest the afforestation programme, the Mehtas and Ranas are dissociated from these protests since they are not directly impacted. The schism within the village makes it impossible for the residents to put up a united front.

Sohan Singh Bhogta, an elderly man with a scraggy white beard who is opposed to the plantation, said, "Pehle itna kha rahe the, ab itna kha rahe hain (At first we were eating this much, now we are eating this much)," while making a shrinking motion with his hands.

“On the day they first came for plantation, all of us gathered here,” Sunil Singh Bhogta, 32, told IndiaSpend. “Things got so heated that many of us got injured in the protests. Every time they came, they brought a big force.

“This went on for four months. My plot is around one acre, where a big trench has now been dug. On one side, they planted trees while on the other, they left a small parcel for me. The same has happened with my brothers.”

In search of work, Sunil migrated around 1,800 km west to Mumbai’s Uran soon after IndiaSpend met him, since he has a Rs 20,000 loan to repay and mouths to feed.

Basanti Devi, who was part of the village forest rights committee, said that the committee was not notified about the plantation. “What if they take away our houses next?” she asks. “They had threatened to demolish our houses [built on forest land] in the past. My rights have been snatched, something I had never thought was possible.”

The village mukhiya, Prakash Kesri, said the locals are now surviving on government rations. “This area has very few labour opportunities, which means migration, just like the way Sunil has to migrate,” Kesri said. “The tree plantation has forced people to the brink of starvation. I am afraid people will be forced to die by suicide.”

The afforestation in Bachra is to offset forests that were diverted elsewhere, the district forest office confirmed to IndiaSpend, but the officials did not share details of the project, such as which deforested areas are sought to be compensated by this afforestation, how many saplings were planted and at what cost.

Saba Alam, divisional forest officer of Hazaribagh West division, said that 50% of plantation activities in the division right now are that of compensatory afforestation, and confirmed that the plantation in Bachra was also undertaken as per the Compensatory Afforestation Fund Act.

“They have some houses there and they claim they have given an FRA application for a title, but we have no knowledge of that application,” Alam said, referring to the protestors. “From what I gather, there were only 5-6 houses there before 2005, now there are 18-19 houses. We have not touched the houses... I don’t think there were permanent farms either, but I’m not sure about that. After the FRA enactment there may be some kind of encroachment.”

He claimed that the villagers were consulted about the tree plantation, but when asked to share supporting documents, he did not respond to calls or messages. This story will be updated when we hear from the officer.

Birender Rana, a representative of the minority other backward classes faction of the village, reached out to IndiaSpend and claimed that the people who claim to be suffering are actually encroachers and have no forest rights.

“They have been living here only for eight-10 years,” said Rana. “They have applied for titles several times. If their claims were genuine, they would have been given titles. They have a lot of land other than this forest land.”

Rana claimed that the forest department had taken due permission from the gram sabha before undertaking the plantation work. He, too, did not share any documents to support this claim.

Consent vs consultation

Jharkhand Jungle Bachao Andolan's Sanjay Basu Malik said he has been seeing such violations as in Bachra and Jitra Tungri for decades now.

“Often it happens that the forest department selects such land for plantation that is claimable, where people can apply for individual or community forest rights in the future [as allowed by FRA],” Malik said. “In many instances, people have uprooted those saplings, court cases were filed... Now the department digs trenches to alienate people from the forests.”

Malik argued that it should be the gram sabha that leads the afforestation drive, and that it should have a right over the compensatory afforestation funds, whereas in practice it is barely even consulted as mandated by the Compensatory Afforestation Funds Act.

A key issue that fuels the existing confusion is that there are various laws surrounding forest lands, and these laws typically don't speak to one another. “The biggest challenge with the FRA,” says environmental lawyer Arpitha Kodiveri, “is that we've not created harmonising legal principles in other forest laws.

“So essentially, the FRA is like a standalone Act, whereas the Indian Forest Act, the Forest Conservation Act and even the Compensatory Afforestation Fund Act very seldom mention how forest rights will be protected under those legislations. And so you have a situation where it's almost like the laws are already in conflict.”

IndiaSpend visited Jitra Tungri on September 17, which is the last day of the month of Bhadrapada in the Hindu calendar. On this day, pujas and rituals are held in honour of Vishwakarma, who as per Hindu mythology was the architect of the gods.

People pray to Vishwakarma and perform rituals to honour their workplace and the tools of their trade, such as tractors, ploughs and other farming implements. Binod Rajwar's family had decorated their tractor in colourful streamers for the occasion, with everyone dressed in festive finery.

Despite the celebratory atmosphere, Binod is worried. His family has lost half the land they were cultivating owing to the forest department's trenches. Their income has reduced by over 50%, and he and his brothers will have to do manual labour to support the household.

“Jitna ladai tha humne lada, ab toh aage kuch nazar hi nahi aa raha hai... (We fought as much as we could, now I cannot see a way out),” said Rajwar, as he watched his toddler son playing nearby.

<https://scroll.in/article/1059255/to-compensate-for-mining-projects-ativasi-land-in-jharkhand-is-being-taken-over-for-afforestation>

14. दिल्ली जल बोर्ड सीएजी से अपने खातों की जांच कराने को तैयार, हाई कोर्ट को दी जानकारी (etvbharat.com) Nov 28, 2023

दिल्ली जल बोर्ड (डीजेबी) ने दिल्ली हाई कोर्ट को बताया है कि उसने अपने छह साल के खातों को जांच के लिए भारत के नियंत्रक और महालेखा परीक्षक (सीएजी) को भेज दिया है. दिल्ली हाईकोर्ट में सुनवाई के दौरान डीजेबी की ओर से पेश वकील ने कहा कि 2015-16 से लेकर 2020-21 तक के वार्षिक खाते तैयार कर लिए गए हैं और उन्हें सीएजी को भेज दिया गया है.

दरअसल दिल्ली हाईकोर्ट दिल्ली जल बोर्ड का 2015 से लेकर इस वर्ष तक की वार्षिक बैलेंस शीट मेंटेन करने की मांग करने वाली याचिका पर सुनवाई कर रही है. इस संबंध में बीजेपी नेता हरीश खुराना ने याचिका दायर की है.

याचिकाकर्ता की ओर से वकील समृद्धि अरोड़ा ने कहा है कि दिल्ली वाटर बोर्ड एक्ट की धारा 70 के मुताबिक दिल्ली जल बोर्ड को अपने लाभ और हानि का बैलेंस शीट मेंटेन करना होता है. उन्होंने मांग की कि दिल्ली जल बोर्ड को निर्देश दिया जाए कि वह 2015 से लेकर 2021 तक की बैलेंस शीट जारी करे.

याचिका में मांग की गई है कि सीएजी को निर्देश दिया जाए कि वह एक तय समय में दिल्ली जब बोर्ड के खातों का ऑडिट करे. पहले की सुनवाई के दौरान दिल्ली सरकार और दिल्ली जल बोर्ड की ओर से पेश वकील संजय घोष ने कहा था कि ये याचिका एक राजनीतिक दल के नेता की ओर से दायर की गई है, जिनके राजनीतिक हित हैं. उन्होंने कहा था कि आडिट का काम चल रहा है. याचिका में कहा गया है कि दिल्ली वाटर बोर्ड एक्ट की धारा 70 के मुताबिक वार्षिक खाते को मेंटेन करना अनिवार्य है. इन खातों की सीएजी हर साल ऑडिट करेगी. याचिका में कहा गया है कि 11 मई, 24 मई, 22 जुलाई को आरटीआई के जरिये दायर आवेदन के जवाब में कहा गया है कि 2015-16 से लेकर आगे का बैलेंस शीट तैयार किया जा रहा है. याचिका में कहा गया है कि दिल्ली जब बोर्ड और सीएजी दोनों दिल्ली वाटर एक्ट की धारा 70 के मुताबिक अपना संवैधानिक दायित्व निभाने में विफल रहे हैं. वार्षिक वित्तीय खातों को में टेन करना पारदर्शिता बरकरार रखने के लिए जरूरी है. <https://www.etvbharat.com/hindi/delhi/state/new-delhi/delhi-jal-board-ready-to-get-its-accounts-audited-by-cag-informed-to-high-court/dl20231128103203595595334>

SELECTED NEWS ITEMS/ARTICLES FOR READING

15. Towards the 16th Finance Commission: Over Rs 1.3-trillion FC grants go abegging (financialexpress.com) November 28, 2023

FE analysis of the first four years of the 15th FC's six-year award period showed that states have lost Rs 1.3 trillion or roughly 15% of the combined Central government grants.

While the Centre is soon expected to set up the 16th Finance Commission (FC) that will inter alia suggest the level of grants to promote national goals during FY27-FY31, an FE analysis of the first four years of the 15th FC's six-year award period showed that states have lost Rs 1.3 trillion or roughly 15% of the combined Central government grants. This was mainly due to their inability to meet the eligibility conditions for the incentives. Half of the under-utilisation can be attributed to the non-compliance with the conditions by urban and rural local bodies.

To put this in perspective, the loss of grants in these four years is equivalent to size of the 50-year interest-free capital expenditure loans scheme extended by the Centre to states in the FY24 (Budget Estimate).

FC grants fall under five broad categories: those meant to address stubborn revenue deficits among some states, funds for local governments; disaster management; sector-specific and state-specific.

Except for the revenue deficit grants, the actual flow of funds on other heads of grants remained below the recommended amount during the award periods of earlier Commissions as well. This was mainly due to challenges faced in the release of conditional grants. Grants for local bodies, revenue deficit grants and disaster management grants constitute 83% of all grants in 15th FC.

Nearly half of this is accounted by urban and local bodies, reflecting the thrust of the Centre on improving services and infrastructure development at the local levels, with urban areas being seen as the centres of economic growth.

However, the lack of wholehearted efforts by the states in reforming these bodies or delays thereof has starved many local bodies. The utilisation level of grants among local bodies so far in 15th FC period has been less than 79%, compared with 94% in 12th FC, and been the lowest since 10th FC period. While 40% of the grants are unconditional, the rest are linked to reforms and eligibility conditions.

Both in FY22 and FY23, the Centre's grants release for urban and rural bodies has been a third lower than the Finance Commission's approved estimate. Sources said the reduction in outlay for municipalities and rural bodies was on account of non-compliance with conditions such as regular civic body elections and presentation of the balance sheet as per accrual accounting, among others.

Sudipto Mundle, who was a member of the 14th FC, said ways must be found to get states interested in fulfilling the conditions so that urban local bodies and panchayats fully utilise the grants. "The action has to be taken by the state governments, whereas the recipient of these grants would be the third-tier of the government. If states are also given some extra money for fulfilling the performance conditions, then they might take an active interest," Mundle said.

Making the Centre's stand clear, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman said in Thiruvanthapuram on Saturday said Kerala would get the full grants under million-plus cities programmes and health grants only if it fulfils the eligibility conditions.

The 15th FC (FY21-FY26) has recommended grants aggregating to Rs 12.34 trillion, which is 19.5% of total recommended transfers to states that includes tax devolution. That's a substantial jump in the share of grants from 12% in the 14th FC (FY16-FY20).

The compositional shift in the share of grants in total transfers under the 15th FC award was a balancing act after a sharp increase in general-purpose resource transfer through a 42% share in the Centre's divisible tax pool since the 14th FC from 32%. The move was to ensure that sectors like health, education, rural roads and agricultural reforms get adequate attention. These programmes were largely funded through cess and surcharges which essentially reduced the Centre's divisible tax pool. The rejig was also to ensure that states don't go overboard and spend more on 'freebies,' while cutting back on asset creation programmes.

Of the Rs 3.69 trillion revenue deficit grants in FY21-FY26 for 17 states, the entire amount would be fully utilised as these are based on revenue deficit assessment and no specific conditions are attached. The idea was to taper the grants over a period. Nonetheless, many states are yet to have a revenue surplus as anticipated by the 15th FC. Tamil Nadu which was to come out of a revenue deficit after the first two years (FY21-FY22) of the six-year award period, ran a revenue deficit in FY23 and projected a deficit in FY24 as well. Haryana which got a revenue deficit grant for FY22 only, ran a deficit in FY23 as well.

One grant which did exceptionally well was health sector grants which outpaced the Finance Commission approvals for FY22-FY24, indicating the seriousness of the states in lapping up the funds for the sector which was found lacking after Covid broke out in 2020.

Among other major grants, disaster management grants have nearly been fully utilised. The states also have to make an effort to fully utilise grants related to agricultural reforms and those related to state-specific grants. <https://www.financialexpress.com/policy/economy-towards-the-16th-finance-commission-over-rs-1-3-trillion-fc-grants-go-abegging-3319086/>

16. Raising the stakes on climate funding – the significance of blended finance (*livemint.com*) 28 Nov 2023

Blended finance structures, which combine concessional and commercial capital, can help balance risk-reward profiles and lower the risk threshold for private capital

It is a fact that the last decade has been the hottest in 125,000 years! Climate change is a reality, and the Earth is getting warmer each day. The Paris Agreement, signed by 200 countries in 2015, aims to limit the long-term global temperature rise to 1.5°C.

The G20 Summit in New Delhi recently recognized the need for increased global investments to meet the climate goals of the agreement. To implement their climate goals by 2030, developing countries will require \$5.8-5.9 trillion. An additional \$4 trillion per year is needed for clean energy technologies by the end of this decade to reach net zero emissions by 2050.

According to recent IMF data, fossil-fuel subsidies reached a record \$7 trillion last year, which means oil, coal, and natural gas cost the equivalent of 7.1% of global GDP.

To meet the set targets, a substantial amount of climate finance is required. However, investing in climate initiatives can pose additional risks, especially due to the lack of a well-established track record in key sectors of climate investment, both globally and in India.

Green projects, while promising long-term benefits, often require significant upfront investment. Hesitancy among investors is compounded by increased risk perceptions, a lack of universally defined green standards, geopolitical and foreign exchange risks, and concerns about greenwashing.

Institutional investors, wielding substantial capital, tend to favour areas with well-defined business models, cash flow transparency, and sizable investment opportunities, criteria that are met by a limited set of climate assets.

The majority of investments in climate-related sectors are directed towards relatively mature industries that have established business models, such as renewable energy, and increasingly, electric vehicles.

Blended finance and concessional capital have a pivotal role in reducing risk thresholds for investing in climate themes globally, and in India. From a governmental perspective, availability of blended finance enhances the effectiveness of financial support by promoting economically viable businesses that generate long-term climate outcomes. It also reduces the risk threshold for global investors who are interested in investing in climate themes and in India, thereby increasing the flow of climate investment funds into the country.

To attract large-scale institutional investment for climate objectives, it is crucial to create a portfolio of projects that offer an appropriate risk-reward profile and can be easily invested in by such investors. Blended finance structures, which combine concessional and commercial capital, can help balance risk-reward profiles and lower the risk threshold for private capital. This is particularly important when investing in climate themes that are not yet mature commercially, or in regions with perceived geopolitical and currency risks.

Globally, there are various structures available to utilize blended finance for mobilizing private capital. These structures can create a multiplier effect of 2-5x in terms of commercial equity and 20-30x including commercial debt and equity. It is crucial to increase this ratio for the effectiveness of blended finance in mobilizing large pools of commercial capital to achieve India's climate targets and encourage investment in areas related to key programmes such as Faster Adoption and Manufacturing of (Hybrid &) Electric Vehicles (FAME), Sustainable Alternative Towards Affordable Transportation (SATAT), climate-focused PLIs, and the Green Hydrogen Mission.

For instance, first-loss facilities help absorb the first economic loss before other investors lose value. This can significantly improve the risk-return profile for other investors. Public institutions and governments can offer guarantees that act as a strong signal for investors and help address country-specific or development risks. To mitigate

the risk of country-specific currency, global investors can use forex hedges, forward contracts, and swaps. Viability gap funding can establish the viability of the first set of investments and catalyze private capital that would otherwise wait for increased maturity and improved risk-return profiles before investing in a nascent sector.

Both equity and debt capital providers must reconsider their financing priorities to not only concentrate on green asset classes and technologies but also on how they use digital technologies to connect with customers, evaluate risks, and manage relationships. We should take several steps towards a digitally green future, and everyone must join the Call for Climate Action to create a better world for the next generation. <https://www.livemint.com/opinion/online-views/raising-the-stakes-on-climate-funding-the-significance-of-blended-finance-11701076592994.html>

17. India set to begin ambitious defence projects worth Rs 1.4 trillion (*business-standard.com*) Updated: Nov 24 2023

India is poised to grant preliminary approval for three major indigenous projects, including the construction of another aircraft carrier, 97 additional Tejas fighters, and 156 Prachand light combat helicopters, with a combined value of approximately Rs 1.4 trillion, according to a report by The Times of India (TOI).

The Defence Acquisitions Council, led by Rajnath Singh, is expected to initiate the "acceptance of necessity (AoN)"—the initial step in the procurement process—during a meeting scheduled for the end of the month, November 30. Following the AoNs, the procurement process will proceed to tender and commercial negotiations, culminating in the submission of the three deals to the Cabinet Committee on Security for final approval.

These projects include the 97 Tejas Mark-1A fighters, which is estimated to cost around Rs 55,000 crore. These fighters will complement the 83 jets already ordered under a contract with Hindustan Aeronautics (HAL). These additions are vital for increasing the Indian Air Force's fighter squadrons addressing the current shortfall.

The second indigenous aircraft carrier (IAC-2) is expected to be built at the Cochin Shipyard for approximately Rs 40,000 crore, following a "repeat order" of INS Vikrant (IAC-1). The construction of IAC-2, with a tonnage of 44,000 tonnes, will take 8-10 years. India's need for carrier-based aircraft is currently met by the MiG-29K jets, with further plans for the acquisition of Rafale-Marine fighter jets.

The 156 Prachand helicopters, costing around Rs 45,000 crore, will be used for offensive operations in high-altitude areas like Siachen Glacier and eastern Ladakh. These helicopters, armed with various weaponry, will complement the existing fleet already inducted under a previous contract.

While budgetary constraints led to opting for a smaller electric-propulsion IAC-2, China is already operating two aircraft carriers and building two more. In contrast, the United States boasts 11 nuclear-powered carriers, each capable of carrying a substantial complement of fighters and aircraft. Therefore, these defense projects are crucial to bolstering India's preparedness. <https://www.business-standard.com/india->

[news/india-set-to-begin-ambitious-defence-projects-worth-rs-1-4-trillion-123112400536_1.html](https://www.indiatoday.in/news/india-set-to-begin-ambitious-defence-projects-worth-rs-1-4-trillion-123112400536_1.html)

18. Army to boost firepower with 200 mounted howitzers under 'Make in India' push (*indiatoday.in*) UPDATED: Nov 27, 2023

According to Indian Army, the mounted howitzers will boost India's mobile firepower in high-altitude border areas, including the Line of Actual Control (LAC) with China.

The Indian Army will soon issue a tender to buy as many as 200 new mounted howitzers equipped with 105mm field guns worth over Rs 3,000 crores, defence sources told India Today. The Defence Ministry is soon expected to clear the tender for these indigenously designed, developed, and manufactured (IDDM) mounted howitzers, sources said.

According to Indian Army, the mounted howitzers will boost India's mobile firepower in high-altitude border areas, including the Line of Actual Control (LAC) with China.

A tender is set to be issued soon to Indian firms for this "Make in India" project to buy the 200 new mounted howitzers.

Additionally, the Indian Army is expected to receive clearance for 400 new howitzers, also known as Towed Artillery Gun Systems (TAGS). The proposal for these howitzers is slated to be presented for clearance in the upcoming defense acquisition council meeting of the Ministry of Defence.

Over the last decade, the Army has concluded four contracts for the procurement of 155mm howitzers. These gun systems, including Dhanush, Sharang, Ultra Light Howitzer (ULH), and K-9 Vajra Self Propelled Guns, have already been inducted, with multiple regiments being equipped with these advanced weapons.

The Dhanush Guns represent an electronic upgrade of the renowned Bofors Guns, while the Sharang Guns have been up-gunned from 130mm to 155mm caliber. Notably, seven and five regiments have already been equipped with Self-Propelled guns.

The future standard caliber for all artillery guns will be 155mm, featuring automated systems and assemblies.

The Army's focus lies in the development of cutting-edge technologies in sighting systems, ammunition manufacturing, metallurgy, and the networking of guns, ensuring a robust and modernized artillery arsenal for the country's defense forces. <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/india-army-mounted-howitzers-make-in-india-initiative-defence-ministry-2468262-2023-11-27>

19. Ministry of Education reaches out to CBI for investigation into West Bengal mid-day meal irregularities (*thehindu.com*) Nov 25, 2023

The Union Ministry of Education has approached the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) to start an investigation into the alleged irregularities in the mid-day meal scheme in West Bengal.

“There are a lot of irregularities relating to the mid-day meal scheme in West Bengal. The Central teams have visited the State a number of times. The Ministry of Education is forced to recommend a CBI investigation. The Ministry has written to CBI in this regard,” Subhas Sarkar, Minister of State for Education, said on November 25.

Mr. Sarkar, a BJP MP from Bankura, was referring to the visit of Central teams in April this year. Leader of Opposition Suwendu Adhikari recalled that he had written to “Hon’ble Union Minister for Education and Skill Development Shri Dharmendra Pradhan Ji on 5th January, 2023, highlighting that the biggest ongoing Financial Scam in WB is the systematic misappropriation & diversion of PM POSHAN funds by the State Govt’s Administrative machinery”.

Mr. Adhikari said that he was elated to know that the Ministry had written to the CBI. “My perseverant persuasion to fix culpability and ensure strict punishment for those who misappropriated funds meant for the nutrition and nourishment of the children of West Bengal, has been honoured,” he said.

The development comes at a time when the West Bengal government is grappling with several scams, including the school recruitment scam, irregularities in the distribution of food grains under the public distribution system and municipal recruitment.

West Bengal Education Minister Bratya Basu said no official of the State had signed the JRM (Joint Review Mission), which had a motive to stir up some turbid waters regarding the loss of ₹100 crore. “It has since been clarified on the basis of that very report that far from suffering the loss of ₹100 crore, the State government had saved ₹18.8 crore. However, we welcome any inquiry into any schemes,” he said.

Trinamool Congress spokesperson Kunal Ghosh said that the BJP was depriving small children of mid-day meals by raking up the issue and people of the State will give a fitting reply in the upcoming Lok Sabha polls. He also pointed out that the Bankura MP will soon become a former MP in the same election. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/ministry-of-education-reaches-out-to-cbi-for-investigation-into-wb-mid-day-meal-irregularities/article67574159.ece>

20. Massive irregularities under MGNREGA scheme alleged in Bolangir (*odishatv.in*) 26 NOV 2023

Though many people in Odisha are forced to move outside the State to work as migrant labourers, massive irregularities under MGNREGA scheme have allegedly surfaced in some villages of Muribahal block in Odisha's Bolangir district.

As per reports, huge funds released under the scheme have allegedly been siphoned off. Even works under the scheme have allegedly not often been executed on the ground, and merely shown on the papers.

Though the government is providing 200 days of work under MGNREGA per year, many labourers including a divyang in the block have not received their wages despite working under the scheme. Even funds under the scheme have been allegedly siphoned off by the block authorities and employees in the name of the gram sathi and ghost labourers.

Take the case of divyang labourer Bidyadhar Sahu from Kandhenjhula village. Bidyadhar can neither speak nor hear properly. Though under compulsion he worked under MGNREGA scheme to make his living, he is yet to get a single penny for his work. However, as per the allegations by his family members, it has been falsely mentioned in the documents that Bidyadhar, his father Kasta Sahu and three others have received wages of Rs 1,50,000 in three phases.

However, as per the allegation by Bidyadhar's family members, gram sathi Mamata Behera and her husband Laba Behera went to their home and took their fingerprints with the assurance of depositing the money in their account. But the amount is yet to be deposited.

Following the development, Bidyadhar's family members lodged a complaint at Muribahal police station in this regard. However, no steps were allegedly taken by the police following which they had to lodge their complaint before the SP.

“Gram sathi Mamata Behera and her husband Laba Behera siphoned off Rs 1.5 lakh under MGNREGA scheme by taking our fingerprints. We requested them a lot to return our money, but they didn't pay any heed to our plea,” said Bidyadhar's mother, Meena Sahu.

Meanwhile, the employees of Jana Seva Kendra in the village admitted that money has been withdrawn without taking the signature of the beneficiaries. “Earlier money has been withdrawn under MGNREGA scheme without taking signatures from the beneficiaries. Now, we have become careful after the row,” said Phakir Behera, an employee of Jana Seva Kendra in the village.

Even allegations have been made that money has been siphoned off under the scheme in the name of a divyang person who can't walk properly. Money has been allegedly withdrawn in the name of Sukru Chhura by mentioning that the divyang person has worked in the village pond project under MGNREGA.

“I was not doing any work under MGNREGA as I am unable to work. My wife was working under the scheme,” said Sukru Chhura.

Though as per the rule, gram sathis are given the responsibility only to execute the work and they can't work as labourer under the scheme, gram sathi Mamata's name has been mentioned as a labourer in the MGNREGA portal.

However, Mamata brushed aside the allegations against her. “The allegations about irregularities under the scheme in the village are false and baseless. Some persons are alleging that I have siphoned off their money. However, they have actually received their amount,” said Mamata.

Meanwhile, responding to the allegations, Kantabanjhi SDPO Gourang Charan Sahu said that they are aware of the complaints and steps are being taken in this regard. “Proper action will be taken after an investigation into the incident,” said Sahu. <https://odishatv.in/news/odisha/massive-irregularities-under-mgnrega-scheme-alleged-in-bolangir-221154>