

NEWS ITEMS ON CAG/ AUDIT REPORTS

1. Information on Multi-crore Antrix-Devas Deal Is Exempted under RTI Act, Rules Central Information Commissioner (*moneylife.in*) 29 December 2023

While the multi-crore Antrix-Devas controversy about the S-band spectrum deal between the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO)'s Antrix firm and Devas (backed by American investors), leading to international legal disputes, may have faded from public memory; that there is interest in getting details of the money spent on court cases by this government organisation, effaces through the RTI route.

However, last week, the central information commissioner (CIC) upheld the denial of information by the central public information officer (CPIO) of the Reserve Bank of India, of expenditure on fighting litigations at the Netherlands-based International Court and others. The CIC, qualifying the rejection of information under section 8 (1)(h) of the RTI Act, pointed to the "multiple parallel litigation and ongoing investigations in the process by CBI, ED and corporate affairs."

RTI applicant Paartha Sharathi V filed an RTI application on 5 February 2022, to the CPIO of the Reserve Bank of India, seeking information on:

The total legal costs incurred by Antrix (to date to the end of FY2021) on the litigations with Devas and related parties (like Deutsche Telecom and DMAI), as under:

- a. In Indian courts and Indian legal proceedings
- b. In foreign courts and foreign legal proceedings

He also sought the following copies:

- All letters/ minutes and charge sheets
- Copy of the letter of termination sent by Antrix to Devas, on 25 February 2011
- Copy of the policy decision of the GOI, not to provide orbital slots in S-band, for commercial activities.
- Copy of the CBI charge sheet filed on Devas, Forge Advisors and the shareholders of Devas, or if the FIR and the charge sheet are on the CBI portal - to provide the FIR and charge sheet numbers
- All litigation details

The CPIO of the RBI replied that all the information he has asked for is exempt under provisions of section 8(1)(a) of the RTI Act. Mr Sharathi then filed a first appeal on 5 March 2022 which upheld the CPIO's reply. Thus, he filed the second appeal with the CIC on 12 October 2022.

Last week, on 21 December 2023, CIC Heeralal Samariya ruled that the CPIO and the first appellate authority (FAA) have given appropriate replies of not disseminating the information asked for by the RTI applicant. One, because it comes under the exemption clause of section 8(1)(a) of the RTI Act since its disclosure would adversely affect the security and economic interest of the state; and, two, because they do not have the information available to them.

The CIC observed, “An appropriate response as per the provisions of the RTI Act, 2005 has been provided by the respondent since only such information that is held and available with a public authority can be provided to the information seekers and giving reasons/ opinions/ interpretations, etc. are beyond the scope of duty of the CPIO. Hence, no further intervention of the commission is required in the instant matter.”

The CIC gave the above order because, during the hearing, the CPIO argued that “there are multiple parallel litigations and ongoing investigations in the process by CBI, ED and corporate affairs and accordingly information sought by the appellant has been denied under section 8(1)(h) of the RTI Act.

“Currently, the Devas multimedia is under liquidation. As regards the disclosure of total legal cost incurred by Antrix, the PIO stated that the same falls under the ambit of privileged communication; furthermore the Antrix and Devas deal is surrounded by various cross-border legal disputes and owing to the sensitivity and confidentiality of information sought by the appellant it has been denied under section 8(1)(a) of the RTI Act since its disclosure would adversely affect the security and economic interest of the state.”

RTI applicant Mr Sharathi had argued that “The PIO has deliberately denied information sought in the RTI application. RTI Act is not about what “pertains” to the public authority, but what is in the control and custody of the public authority...All the information sought is in the control of Antrix and the department of space.”

Another of Mr Sharathi’s RTI applications was also heard in the second hearing, wherein he had demanded information about the number of suppliers and vendors of Antrix and those that were blacklisted by it. He had sought information on the number of cases of fraud and their values. However, the CIC ordered that whatever information could be given was disseminated by the CPIO.

Background

-The controversial S-band spectrum deal between ISRO’s commercial arm, Antrix, and private multinational firm Devas Multimedia/Deutsche Telecom, backed by American investors, had come under fire, when the UPA government allocated 70MhZ of S-band spectrum to Devas for Rs1,000 crore.

-The comptroller and auditor general (CAG) pointed out this would result in about Rs2 lakh crore loss to the exchequer.

-This led to ISRO terminating the contract, which Devas Multimedia contested in the International Court. The Netherlands-based International Criminal Court (ICC) tribunal

ordered Antrix to pay Rs4,434 crore in damages for scrapping the \$300mn (million) deal with the city-based Devas Multimedia Ltd.

-However, in July this year, the California Court of the USA rubbished the decision of the ICC and gave an order in favour of Antrix. <https://www.moneylife.in/article/information-on-multi-crore-antrix-devas-deal-is-exempted-under-rti-act-rules-central-information-commissioner/72996.html>

2. **2023: A Cybercrime Report** (*cxotoday.com*) Dec 28, 2023

Statistics seldom tell us the entire story and so it was with reference to cyber crime in 2023. Total instances of cybercrime was the highest in 2023, but so was in 2022 and the year before. Besides proving the fact that cybercriminals remained a step ahead of cyber security, these numbers have little or no relevance in the battle against organized crime.

Barring of course, the growing awareness globally that any significant step towards digital transformation needs to build in cyber security as a fundamental building block. Even as hackers ramped up their abilities to exploit bugs in file-transfer tools and go aggressive with their ransomware extortion tactics, there was a section of folks that preferred to snooze.

Mostly in the higher echelons of power in India where denial of cyber attacks continued unabated in spite of evidence that things weren't hunky dory with citizens' data. While taking a look at some such instances that played out over 2023, we thought it might be of relevance to bring up the Indian context first before taking a global perspective. So, here goes:

One noteworthy trend adopted by cyber criminals over the past 12 months related to an extra focus on under-resourced organizations such as hospitals or government-controlled agencies. In fact, some of the biggest data breaches were reported in the healthcare sector followed by highly sensitive government security areas.

The Aadhar Data Breach

A US cybersecurity company Resecurity claimed in October that they had personal data of as many as 815 million Indian citizens that included Aadhar and passport details. The threat actors refused to specify how they got access to the data, which led the law enforcement agencies in India to largely ignore the report.

Of course, amidst all the denials from official sources, the one thing that was conveniently swept under the rug was the report that the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) had conducted review of the Aadhar database and reported that the UIDAI hadn't effectively regulated its client vendors or safeguarded the security of their data vaults. The red flag was raised in April 2022.

The Byju's Data Breach

India's beleaguered ed-tech sector took a hard knock when it was reported that the bellwether Byju's had inadvertently let out sensitive student data through a technical glitch. A news report claimed that a server-side misconfiguration could have exposed data related to loans, payouts, and identity documents of its students.

It said that the volumes of sensitive data released could be in the millions, though the company itself denies this. However, it does confirm a security lapse but suggests that no data or information was exposed or compromised during the week that the servers were exposed. The data exposure was first reported by search engine Shodan on August 15, which was promptly brought to the notice of Byju's on August 22.

Hackers go after WordPress Sites

Back in 2021, reports emanated of how over a million websites running on the popular content management system WordPress got hacked, thanks to a breach that hit the world's largest web hosting provider GoDaddy. A similar attack surfaced in 2023 though the scale was much smaller and the flaw was injected via Linux backdoors onto websites.

This time the number was 17,000 and the flaws existed in some premium theme plugins that WordPress shares with its users. The attack injected the flaws that redirected visitors to fake tech support pages, phony lottery winnings and some push-notification scams. The irony though was that these attacks were reportedly active since 2017 and could've affected 2 million WordPress websites over six waves.

Government Data is in Demand

Earlier this year, there were reports of major security breaches around railway ticketing platform RailYatri, though technically this took place at the fag end of 2022. The company confirmed the breach after the government ministry first denied that any breach was made or that any data was sold on the dark web.

Then there was the alleged breach around the CoWIN portal, created originally to track the Covid-19 vaccination process. The breach was a result of a bot via messaging platform Telegram that was returning personal data including Aadhar and passport details. Once again the Health Ministry denied the breach but a month later two arrests were made from Bihar.

The global scenario was worse

At a global level we had major data breaches reported from the US Department of Health that impacted over 88 million individuals as well as cyber attacks on Boeing, Microsoft and some other big names in the industry. While there were several instances, we chose just a couple to present the challenges that the industry is facing and will face in 2024.

The MOVEit File Transfer Scam – This was by and large the most damaging breach of 2023 where this file-transfer tool used by enterprises to securely share files got hit by a vicious attack in May and whose impact is felt even now. The flaw allowed criminals to carry out a second round of mass hacks this year to steal sensitive data from thousands of MOVEit customers. Data suggests that the breach has impacted more than 2500 organizations with hackers accessing data of over 84 million individuals.

When Microsoft lost its key – On the one hand Microsoft was busy connecting AI to its product suite (via OpenAI), while on the other it went and lost an email signing key that allowed China-backed hackers to break into thousands of email inboxes, including those of federal government agencies. Of course, Microsoft sought to smudge the entire issue and gathered more flak for its efforts there than on the actual missing key.

As we move into the New Year, it may be worth mentioning what a recent IBM study revealed. The average average cost of data breach is now at an all-time high of \$4.45 million. If you thought that's astounding, sample this: Hardly 50% of the companies breached have plans to enhance their security budgets to reduce the risk of data breaches going forward.

If you read that last paragraph and didn't go WTF, well, we can only say cybersecurity needs an intervention from God as cybercrime is definitely under Satan's control!!!
<https://cxotoday.com/news-analysis/2023-a-cybercrime-report/>

STATES NEWS ITEMS

3. Lack of coordination between MC departments leading to losses: CAG (*hindustantimes.com*) Dec 29, 2023

According to the CAG report, the audit team has pointed out the absence of proper coordination mechanisms between the property tax and building branch wings of the MC

The lack of coordination between the property tax wing and building branch wing of the municipal corporation has led to substantial revenue losses to the civic body over the past several years, according to a recently released report of the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG).

The 2021-2022 report has raised objections over this administrative gap.

According to the CAG report, the audit team has pointed out the absence of proper coordination mechanisms between the property tax and building branch wings of the MC.

A key concern highlighted in the report is the absence of a maintained property demand and collection register. Instead, the MC relies on an online list of properties, with the last survey conducted back in 2013-2014, it said.

The audit team also noted a significant discrepancy in the linkage between the E-Naksha system, used for maps and completion certificates, and the property tax portal. The lack of information sharing between these branches is seen as a potential cause for the observed revenue loss.

Officials from the audit team emphasised that the MC depends on the property tax portal, primarily through self-assessment forms, for tax collection.

However, a critical shortcoming identified is the absence of a mechanism to collect property tax on new properties and issue timely intimation for tax deposit. This gap, according to the report, creates an environment where property tax evasion can go undetected, directly impacting MC's income.

In response to the objections raised, MC officials in the report have indicated that the matter will be escalated to higher authorities. They acknowledge the need for a comprehensive mechanism to bridge the existing gap and ensure effective coordination between the property tax and building branch wings.

<https://www.hindustantimes.com/cities/chandigarh-news/lack-of-coordination-between-mc-departments-leading-to-losses-cag-101703788892068.html>

4. Change in government can't alter decision on investigation or prosecution in cases of misappropriation of public money: Karnataka High Court (*thehindu.com*) Updated December 29, 2023

When public money and loot of it forms the fulcrum of allegations, the government, which is the conscience keeper of people, should not indulge in acts of changing previous decisions with the change in the government, said the High Court of Karnataka.

Sanction of prosecution

Also, the court said that “if on an allegation based upon certain decision, sanction is accorded for prosecution, it cannot be said that change in government would change the decision, as the allegation remains the same.”

Justice M. Nagaprasanna made these observations while refusing to quash a criminal case registered against Mallayya Koravanavar, an Assistant Director of Agriculture (M&N), Gadag district, under the provisions of the Prevention of Corruption Act in connection with illegality in implementation of Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act scheme.

Enquiry by Lokayukta

As the Comptroller and Auditor General of India (CAG) in its 2013 report had found irregularities in generation of bills and wrongful disbursal of payments to people who have never worked during the period 2007-13 in several districts, the State government in September 2014 had referred the allegations to the Lokayukta under Section 7(2A) of the Karnataka Lokayukta Act.

On receiving enquiry reports from the Lokayukta, the government had granted sanction for prosecuting some of the officers, including the petitioner, and subsequently prosecution was launched before the competent courts.

However, the government on March 28, 2023, issued a notification withdrawing all the cases registered by the Lokayukta against various public servants based on enquiries conducted acting on 2014 order of the government. The petitioner, based on 2023 notification, sought quashing of the case against him while also contending that sanction granted for his prosecution was not by a competent authority.

Though the court accepted petitioner's contention that Commissioner for Agriculture, who granted sanction, was not competent, it refused to accept his contention that criminal case against him cannot be continued in view of the 2023 order of withdrawal of cases.

The 2023 notification “does not take away every proceeding lock stock and barrel. It, at best, would take away the investigations pending in cases” the court said, while observing that any other interpretation would be putting a premium on the case of the State, which in one breath finds it necessary to hold an enquiry against public servants and in the another breath the orders for conducting enquiry is ‘blissfully withdrawn.’

“The issue involved is with regard to several hundreds of crores being misappropriated by public servants in implementation the scheme. Fake bills are generated, persons who have never worked have been granted money. What is granted is not the money belonging to the officers, it is public money. Therefore, in cases where trial is on, the trial cannot be disturbed,” the court observed.

While quashing sanction, the court reserved liberty to the government to grant sanction for petitioner’s prosecution afresh as per law. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/karnataka/change-in-government-cant-alter-decision-on-investigation-or-prosecution-in-cases-of-misappropriation-of-public-money-karnataka-high-court/article67683358.ece>

5. What is Karnataka Rakshana Vedike? Face of state’s language war also at centre of Belagavi, Cauvery disputes (*financialexpress.com*) December 29, 2023

Emerging as a force in Karnataka’s linguistic landscape post-2000, the KRV, with its motto “Kannada is caste, Kannada is religion, and Kannada is god,” has positioned itself as the guardian of the Kannada language.

In a recent flare-up, members of the Karnataka Rakshana Vedike (KRV) made headlines on Wednesday as they went on rampage in Bengaluru, vandalising commercial establishments and tearing down non-Kannada signages, insisting on a 60% inclusion of Kannada. This incident follows the state government’s directive to predominantly display Kannada signboards, with the Bruhat Bengaluru Mahanagara Palike (BBMP) setting a deadline of February 28, 2024.

Law enforcement has responded with the registration of five FIRs, the detainment of hundreds of activists, and the arrest of 28 individuals, including KRV president TA Narayana Gowda in response to Wednesday’s violence.

Emerging as a force in Karnataka’s linguistic landscape post-2000, the KRV, with its motto “Kannada is caste, Kannada is religion, and Kannada is god,” has positioned itself as the guardian of the Kannada language. Claiming a membership of Rs 62 lakh, the KRV has been actively involved in agitations on various issues, such as Hindi imposition by the Centre, the Cauvery water-sharing dispute with Tamil Nadu, and the border dispute with Maharashtra.

Before 2005, the KRV primarily held influence in central Karnataka. However, it gained prominence after members protested the inclusion of Belagavi in Maharashtra, a city central to the Karnataka-Maharashtra border dispute.

“Flexing its muscle” in politics, the KRV boasts of reshaping the political scenario in Belagavi. Pro-Kannada activist Sannerrappa states, “Belagavi was a stronghold of the Maharashtra Ekikaran Samiti, which had 6-7 MLAs in the area. We managed to bring down their political power,” The Indian Express reported.

Despite condemnation of the recent vandalism, major political parties in the state have been relatively subdued in their response. Deputy CM and Bengaluru Development Minister DK Shivakumar clarified, “There is a law which says signages should have

60% Kannada in them... Those living and doing business in Bengaluru should follow it.”

In an interview to NDTV on Wednesday, Union Parliamentary Affairs Minister Pralhad Joshi, a Karnataka native, defended the demand stating, “This is not England.”

The KRV’s influence has been noted in shaping policy, with its successful agitation for local representation in the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) office. The organisation, advocating for jobs for locals, gained prominence with protests against the absence of Kannadigas in the vacant CAG posts.

The KRV also takes credit for the cessation of Hindi announcements on the Bengaluru Metro in 2017, launching campaigns like #NammaMetroHindiBeda (Our Metro, We do not want Hindi). Former CM Siddaramaiah, who was in office at the time, later ordered the withdrawal of cases against KRV members involved in the protests.

As the KRV continues to assert its stance on linguistic identity, its influence remains a focal point in Karnataka’s political and social landscape. <https://www.financialexpress.com/india-news/what-is-karnataka-rakshana-vedike-face-of-states-language-war-also-at-centre-of-belagavi-cauvery-disputes/3350407/>

SELECTED NEWS ITEMS/ARTICLES FOR READING

6. Can Railways change track in 2024? (*thehindubusinessline.com*)
Updated - December 28, 2023

ROLLING ALONG. Project execution and rollout of Vande Bharat trains have been noteworthy. But safety is a problem area

As 2023 draws to an end, assessing Indian Railways’ (IR) performance unveils a mixed landscape. Amidst significant strides in infrastructure, the year reveals underwhelming freight loading and financial performance.

First, the positives. Thanks to more focus and vigorous execution in 2023, the two Dedicated Freight Corridors, mooted in early 2000s but having languished due to tardiness in land acquisition and contract execution, are nearing completion. Hopefully, the entire project, the now truncated eastern corridor from Sonnagar to Ludhiana and the western corridor from Jawaharlal Nehru Port in Mumbai to Dadri should be fully functional by 2024-end. More than 200 freight trains are already running on the corridors.

The project cost has increased manifold since the sanction to ₹1.24-lakh crore; the heavy burden of servicing the loans has prevented competitive freight transport pricing and therefore the expected reduction in logistics costs. Nevertheless, early signs of completion of a project that has been dragging along for a decade is a positive factor.

The Udampur-Srinagar-Baramulla Rail Link (USBRL), symbolic for connectivity and seamless integration of J&K with India, while being critically important for national security, is perhaps the most ambitious IR rail project ever. But lackadaisical progress reflects poorly on IR’s credentials in executing and implementing large projects.

Yet, focused work in the past year has left only some hiccups related to a three km tunnel near Katra and the construction of Anji bridge. The first Delhi-Srinagar train is expected to run sometime next summer.

In 2014 the Modi government secured the first ever High-Speed Rail project between Mumbai and Ahmedabad, intending to complete it by 2021. The goal post kept shifting, however, due to non-cooperation between the Centre and Maharashtra governments.

With a friendly government at the helm since mid-2022, this year has seen vigorous progress. While opening the line partly between Surat and Ahmedabad seems meaningless, it is expected that the entire line should be operational by 2028-29. India needs at least a couple of HSRs; whether it suits our needs or not should be debated only after building some lines.

Vande Bharat success

Another welcome development has been large-scale deployment of Vande Bharat trains. The year began with a mere six in service, but will end with nearly 50 of them, changing the very landscape of higher-end travel in India. The excellent or fair patronage of most of these trains shows that there is a clear space for fast and comfortable trains even with higher fare.

But this also brings out the negatives of the year. Some of the Vande Bharat trains were deployed on political merit; these trains run with poor occupancy, e.g., Bhopal-Jabalpur and Bhopal-Indore as they fail to cut travel time. The power given to zones to cut fare in case of poor occupancy is a fruitless exercise. Deployment should be made after traffic surveys.

This would be even more important in 2024 as the sleeper version is badly-delayed. Continued deployment of day trains may not find takers. It also raises the question of track upgrade to higher speeds. Work on raising the speed of Delhi-Howrah and Delhi-Mumbai sections to 160 kmph has seen tardy progress. The Balasore accident dented IR's safety record, which had otherwise shown improvement in the last five years with the closure of all unmanned railway crossings and improvements in track maintenance. It was followed by at least four more accidents with fatalities and injuries; Delhi-Kamakhya Express derailment near Buxar, fire cases in Patalkot Express near Agra and Delhi-Darbhanga Superfast Express near Etawah and the collision of two trains near Vizianagaram.

Safety paramount

The focus in 2024 must shift strongly to improving safety of rail travel, including track and signalling upgrades. Money is not the problem; the Centre has been infusing huge capex in IR.

On the issue of signalling why is the progress of installation of Kavach, a unique system developed by IR engineers, so slow? Is it due to the confounding stand of the Ministry that the efforts to expedite the deployment of Kavach were hampered by industrial capacity constraints? The responsibility of creating capacities through a partnership with industry rests with IR and such excuses will never work if IR's safety record has to improve.

IR is given to unnecessary hype like greening of its operation through electrification. But it is silent on the fate of more than 500 diesel locomotives, on the need for 'hydrogen trains' amidst electrification, and on the requirement for airport-like stations, when basic functionalities are generally found wanting. The recent announcement to add 3,000 passenger trains to eliminate waiting lists needs to take saturated capacities into account.

The crying need is to make travel comfortable for the common man, if India has to attain any semblance of a developed country.

A great IR self-goal has been the dismal roll-out of IRMS, the unified service to banish departmentalism. The cure has turned out to be worse than the disease. While internecine cut-throat continues at the highest levels with department-based appointments, IRMS at the entry level is the lowest choice among Civil Services aspirants. Only 90 out of 150 vacancies could be filled up, as many candidates likely to qualify choose another service.

Last but perhaps the most important, is financial performance. In an economy growing nearly 7 per cent, one would expect rail freight and total revenue to expand at a minimum of 10 per cent. All it seems to be achieving is between 3-4 per cent, leaving no surplus for meeting investments, which implies increased reliance on the Centre for the same.

The question is: In 2024 can IR work with a strong sense of purpose, riding on initiatives like Gati Shakti to improve its loading and revenue performance significantly? <https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/opinion/can-railways-change-track-in-2024/article67684105.ece>

7. Direct tax collection on course to grow 3 times to over Rs 19 lakh crore as Budget 2024 nears (*livemint.com*) Dec 29, 2023

Under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, India's tax landscape is poised for a substantial uptick, with projections indicating a climb beyond Rs 19 lakh crore over the next decade.

This forecasted surge in collections reflects a bolstered financial scope for the government to introduce more taxpayer-friendly measures, PTI reported.

Net direct tax collections, encompassing personal income tax and corporate tax, have displayed a remarkable trajectory, ascending from Rs 6.38 lakh crore in FY 2013-14 to an impressive Rs 16.61 lakh crore in FY 2022-23. This fiscal year alone has seen a robust 20% growth in collections, propelling estimates towards the Rs 19 lakh crore mark by March 31, 2024.

Over the years, the government has diligently endeavoured to streamline the tax regime by offering reduced rates and curbing exemptions. Initiatives such as incentivised lower tax rates for corporates and individuals who forgo exemptions have been implemented, aligning with the agenda to simplify taxation.

In the 2023-24 Budget, amendments to the individual income tax regime further sweetened the deal for taxpayers. The introduction of a more enticing tax structure, including raised basic exemption limits and the incorporation of standard deductions, aims to alleviate the tax burden on individuals.

However, proposals such as the inclusion of credit card foreign currency spending under the RBI's Liberalised Remittance Scheme (LRS) faced strong opposition, leading to a deferment due to potential compliance issues.

In tandem with direct tax growth, GST collections have soared, hitting a monthly peak of Rs 1.87 lakh crore in April 2023. Notably, the GST Council's recent deliberations clarified the taxation framework for online gaming, instituting a 28% tax levy at the time of entry and mandating overseas gaming entities to register with GST authorities.

The imposition of the highest tax rate has curtailed the rapid expansion of the online gaming industry, prompting expectations for governmental reconsideration and potential court judgments to provide relief for stakeholders.

As the country gears up for the upcoming general elections, the government is set to present a vote on account in February, with the full Budget anticipated in July 2024. <https://www.businesstoday.in/union-budget/story/direct-tax-collection-on-course-to-grow-3-times-to-over-rs-19-lakh-crore-as-budget-2024-nears-411258-2023-12-29>

8. Cash transfers might not be the best way to meet India's welfare aims (*livemint.com*) Dec 28, 2023

In the recent state elections, incumbent governments in all except Madhya Pradesh lost. There are many factors that influence the electorate's voting behaviour, with economic performance being important but not the sole one. So, drawing any conclusion on the relative performance of states based on election results is unlikely to yield fair conclusions. However, there are some common threads from the way the campaigns were conducted that could be a precursor of things to come in India's general elections of 2024.

The issues of jobs, price rise and general distress were raised by the opposition and to a certain extent may have resonated with the electorate, but these were certainly not the main ones. The campaigns were largely centred around various benefits promised by the main political parties. Despite the Prime Minister slamming a 'revdi' (or freebie) culture in an October 2022 speech, most parties were not shy of offering these in different forms to various groups. In some ways, there is now a consensus that direct cash transfers are as much a part of policy as the usual themes of growth, employment and redistribution. Each party is competing with the other on the quantum of benefit but not on the principle of cash transfers. This has led to an expansion of benefits by way of free bus tickets to women, revival of the old pension scheme for government employees, and cash transfers to unemployed youth, apart from subsidies on cooking gas, housing, etc, and also cash transfers for marriages, births and so on.

Contrast this with the debate before the enactment of the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) or National Food Security Act (NFSA). Even though there was general consensus on their desirability, their fiscal cost caused concern, with purists

frowning on their impact on fiscal discipline. Fiscal prudence, however, hardly finds any mention in the discussion on cash transfers, with governments, both state and central, increasing such programmes as well as the quantum of money.

The use of redistributive transfers is not new, nor is the use of such devices as political instruments. While Indira Gandhi had used ‘Garibi Hatao’ as a slogan, the recent push to create a class of labharthis (beneficiaries) is no different. There is also merit in most of these schemes. The free bus scheme has allowed more women to participate in work outside home, increased their mobility and thus empowered them. The idea of a pension for people after the end of their working lives is an essential part of any social contract in most democracies. So is the case with various subsidies, which have helped soften the distress arising out of a pre-pandemic slowdown in the economy or the pandemic itself. While concrete evidence is not available, small surveys and studies confirm that these scheme help.

The issue is not one of redistributive transfers, be it in the form of cash or in kind (such as free grains under the NFSA), but their relative priority vis-à-vis government expenditure on investment and other key programmes. Governments and political parties love them as they are easy to implement, do not require dealing with uncomfortable political-economy issues and are seen as rewarding in the short-run. Voters also see immediate tangible benefits without any bureaucratic interference.

But these have fiscal consequences that are not immediately visible. The cash transfer to farmers has come with a slowdown in agricultural investment. While governments are wiling to dole out cash for an unemployment allowance, there is no attempt to raise wages under NREGA to market levels.

The cost of the free ration scheme is insignificant, but there has been no attempt to restore its coverage to the proportions mandated by the NFSA despite a rise in population. Cash transfers to women are welcome, but there is hardly any increase in the financial allocation for essential schemes such as maternity benefit or the Integrated Child Development Scheme. There is competition to raise health insurance, but primary, secondary and tertiary health services have had little change.

The net benefit to voters may not be quantifiable in the short-run, but the long-run implications are likely to be adverse. This raises basic questions over the role of public policy in ensuring equitable, accessible and universal public services. Also of sufficient investment in physical and human capital for high growth. The rush for cash transfers as a panacea to every problem in our economy and society may continue, but it may not be the best way to spur growth or even redistribution. <https://www.livemint.com/opinion/online-views/cash-transfers-might-not-be-the-best-way-to-meet-india-s-welfare-aims-11703777659145.html>

9. India must grab the AI opportunity to speed up growth (*livemint.com*) Dec 28, 2023

We have grown so used to AI working behind the scenes to improve our web experience that we don’t even sense it but the next wave will take us from autopilot to co-pilot mode.

In August, Chandrayan-3's landing on the moon signified more than India's advancement in science and technology. It signalled to the world India's spirit of innovation, extraordinary talent and the desire to invest in the power of technology to change lives and take the country forward.

In many ways, India is already leading the world in people-centred innovation. The success and reach of platforms like UPI and Aadhaar are compelling examples of democratizing access to technology for people who were traditionally outside those perimeters. With advancements in artificial intelligence (AI) and large language models, we are at an inflection point. AI breakthroughs will profoundly augment how we work and live. This will be the next massive shift in computing, of a magnitude similar to the personal computer, internet, mobile device and the cloud.

The next generation of AI is fundamentally different from the AI we are accustomed to. For years, AI has powered online experiences from what we watch to what we buy, working behind the scenes to serve us recommendations. That version of AI has become such a second nature that we often don't even recognize it. You could say we've been using AI on autopilot.

With this next generation of AI, we are moving from autopilot to co-pilot. We now have a natural language user interface to interact with these models, and a powerful reasoning engine. This allows us to move away from 'narrow AI' that can accomplish specific tasks to a future where AI agents will be able to accomplish several different tasks based on our interests and preferences. I am seeing incredible shifts driven by AI, from basic search to engaging conversations, and actionable intelligence, and eventually the ability to drive actions on our behalf. With these shifts come immense opportunities for people, organizations and our nation.

Earlier this year, the global population moved past 8 billion people. Today, one out of every six people on earth lives in India. AI presents a tremendous opportunity for India to drive innovation at billion-scale, setting us on the path of inclusive growth. In a world of increasing economic complexity, AI has the power to unlock immense possibilities and solve some of the toughest problems India faces in areas like healthcare, education, climate change, financial inclusion, cybersecurity and more. From enabling faster detection of diseases and driving cutting-edge innovations in manufacturing to enabling financial inclusion for the under-banked, AI will take technology to every Indian's doorstep. A research study suggests that AI has the potential to add \$957 billion to the Indian economy by 2035.

But the biggest opportunity perhaps lies in AI's ability to improve the human condition. In the past few years, we've seen the ever-expanding ways in which AI is helping improve lives. AI is helping save eyesight, make progress on new cures for cancer, generate new insights about proteins, and provide predictions to protect people from hazardous weather.

Microsoft is working closely with the government and industry on several AI applications at scale for societal impact. One of them is an AI chatbot, Jugalbandi, which enables local language computing, making it easier for citizens to access government services in their own language. This is an example of the deep relevance

of AI in enabling access to critical services for millions of people across India in languages of their choice.

AI is helping vulnerable communities in India better understand and respond to natural disasters. SEEDS, a disaster response and preparedness non-profit organization, has been working with communities most vulnerable to heat waves, using AI to measure the temperature disparity between slums and other parts of the city. With the support of Microsoft's AI for Humanitarian Action grant, SEEDS has developed an AI model to predict the impact of multiple hazards like cyclones, earthquakes or heat waves in any given area.

Although AI is undoubtedly one of the defining technologies of our time, it's not enough to focus only on its many opportunities. As technology moves forward, it's just as important to ensure proper control over AI as it is to pursue its benefits. Countries around the world are asking common questions. How can we use it to solve our problems? How do we avoid or manage the new problems it might create? How do we control a technology that is so powerful? These questions call not only for broad conversation, but also decisive action.

Microsoft is committed to developing AI in a safe and responsible way. We have nearly 350 people working on responsible AI, helping us implement best practices for building safe, secure and transparent AI systems designed to benefit society. We also recognize that the guard-rails needed for AI require a broadly shared sense of responsibility and should not be left to technology companies alone. It will take an ecosystem approach, with industry, academia, civil society and government coming together and learning from one another.

As India looks to build on its technological and digital transformation, the time is right for it to re-imagine, re-orient and redeploy AI at every level to realize its \$5 trillion economic goal. The AI opportunity for India is huge, and by adopting it strategically and taking the lead in positive regulation, we can move India forward at an even faster pace to improve lives and livelihoods. <https://www.livemint.com/opinion/online-views/india-must-grab-the-ai-opportunity-to-speed-up-growth-11703777748969.html>

10. Anchored in innovation, Indian Navy's indigenisation drive charted new waters in 2023 (*orissapost.com*) Dec 29, 2023

With Indian Ocean maritime landscape witnessing a monumental shift and India placing a premium on self-reliance, Indian Navy strategically advanced itself through an unwavering focus on indigenisation in 2023. As ship manufacturers like MDL and GRSE earned the Navy's confidence, Indian Navy's indigenisation drive not only resulted in groundbreaking achievements but also paved the way for new naval projects. Let's navigate through the waves of progress and innovation that defined the Indian Navy's quest for self-reliance this year.

INS Vagir

In January 2023, the Chief of the Naval Staff commissioned the fifth of the Kalvari class submarine, INS Vagir under Project 75. Designed and built by Mazagon Dock Shipbuilders Limited (MDL), the boat was delivered to Indian Navy in December 2022

after completion of its sea trials. INS Vagir has the record of lowest build time among all indigenously developed submarines till date.

The Kalvari class submarines are highly swift platforms with advanced stealth features and are installed with advanced long-range guided torpedoes and anti-ship missiles. INS Vagir has a test depth of 350 meters with a submerged displacement of 1,775 tonnes and a range of 1020 kilometres. The submarine is equipped with state-of-the-art SONAR and sensor suites which make them a potent platform for both offensive and defensive operations.

INS Imphal

After concluding its successful sea trials and final machinery trials in August 2023, INS Imphal — the third of Visakhapatnam-class destroyer under Project-15B — was delivered to the Indian Navy in October by Mazagon Dock Shipbuilders Limited (MDL). It was commissioned December 26, 2023. The destroyer has a displacement of 7,400 tonnes and a range of 15,000 kilometres with an endurance of 45 days.

Projects in queue for maritime defence

Initial Operational Clearance for INS Vikrant

February 2023 was a significant milestone for the navy when Naval LCA and MIG-29K aircrafts completed successful maiden landings on the deck of INS Vikrant during aviation integration trials. INS Vikrant attained Initial Operational Clearance (IOC) in May later that year validating the ‘aviation facilities complex’ and accomplishing day and night landings of MiG-29K, along with completing landing trials for all helicopters in the Naval inventory.

Project P17A frigates

President of India Droupadi Murmu in August 2023 launched the third of the Garden Reach Shipbuilders & Engineers (GRSE) built frigates INS Vindhyagiri under Project P17A from Kolkata. Later, in September 2023, INS Mahendragiri, the last among the seven P17A frigates, was launched at Mazagon Dock Shipbuilders Limited (MDL) in Mumbai by Vice President of India Jagdeep Dhankar.

Fleet support ships

The Ministry of Defence in August 2023 signed a contract with Hindustan Shipyard Limited (HSL) Visakhapatnam, to procure five fleet support ships (FSS) for the Indian Navy with an estimated total cost of approximately Rs19,000 crore. These fleet support ships play a defining role in assisting ships at sea, providing fuel, water, ammunition, and stores, ensuring operational continuity of the Indian naval fleet without the need to return to harbour. In addition, these ships can be deployed for Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) operations. The inclusion of these 45,000-tonne ships can be termed a great feat as these will be the first of their kind to be manufactured in India by an Indian shipyard.

As 2023 concludes its maritime chapter, the Indian Navy’s indigenisation drive in 2023 set the stage for a future – defined by self-reliance, innovation, and unparalleled naval strength. From the swift and stealthy INS Vagir to the powerful INS Imphal, the Navy witnessed the fruition of projects that underscored its commitment to self-sufficiency.

With milestones like the Initial Operational Clearance for INS Vikrant and the launch of Project P17A Frigates, the Navy charted a course towards technological prowess. The signing of the Fleet Support Ships contract with HSL in August showcased India's capability to manufacture a wide variety of naval assets.

Year 2023 also witnessed groundbreaking achievements, robust naval projects, and a resounding commitment to bolstering India's maritime prowess from within its shores. The name of the game in 2023 for the Indian Navy was indigenisation, marking a transformative stride in maritime defence. <https://www.orissapost.com/anchored-in-innovation-indian-navys-indigenisation-drive-charted-new-waters-in-2023/>

11. Critical, offshore mineral blocks set for auction in 2024: Official *(business-standard.com) Dec 28, 2023*

Auctioning of critical mineral and offshore mineral blocks as well as giving exploration licences in 2024 are set to rejuvenate the country's mining sector that has the potential for a multiplier effect on economic growth.

As the government focuses on self reliance, Mines Minister Pralhad Joshi told PTI, "every few months (in 2024) we will bring out a new batch of critical minerals for auction." Not just critical minerals, exploration of deep-seated minerals like gold and copper, as well as offshore areas are on the priority list.

In November, the government launched the first tranche of e-auction of 20 mines of critical and strategic minerals. The blocks include copper, lithium, nickel and potash.

A committee, set up by the mines ministry, had identified 30 minerals as critical and strategic, considering their economic importance and supply risk vis-a-vis India's priorities and future requirements for energy transition.

Besides, a new Mineral Concession namely exploration licence for 29 deep-seated minerals and critical minerals has been introduced through the Mines and Minerals (Development and Regulation) Amendment Act, 2023. Critical minerals, including lithium and cobalt, are crucial for technology, manufacturing and other industries.

Deep-seated minerals are those located deep within the earth's crust, and are more difficult to extract. Gold, copper and diamonds are among deep-seated minerals.

According to the minister, the rules for exploration of offshore mineral blocks will be finalised soon and then auction of such blocks will start.

The Offshore Areas Mineral (Development and Regulation) Act, 2002 has been amended to provide an auction route for awarding production leases for offshore minerals.

"Currently, we are making rules. We are making seven types of rules under that Act to ensure that we can auction offshore mineral blocks. We have got 15 blocks explored by GSI (Geological Survey of India)... we have to do inter-ministerial consultations," Mines Secretary V L Kantha Rao told PTI.

After finalising the rules, he said the auctions are likely to be done in March or April next year.

"Furthermore, we are doing two things. One is getting a regime of exploration licence under which people can bid... for that we are making rules... and (then) we will auction some blocks for exploration," he said. https://www.business-standard.com/industry/news/critical-offshore-mineral-blocks-set-for-auction-in-2024-official-123122800234_1.html

12. Property Tax Surge: 70% of municipal bodies in India report increase in collection over last 3 years (*indianexpress.com*) Dec 28, 2023

Out of the 4,771 ULBs that report to the MoHUA, 3,417 ULBs registered an increase in property tax collection in 2022-2023 over the previous year as on December 20.

OVER THE PAST three years, a silent grassroots finance reform has been taking shape with at least 70 per cent of the total 4,900 urban local bodies in the country reporting an increase in property tax collection, The Indian Express has learnt.

With over Rs 1 lakh crore in Central funding tied to property tax reform in the coming years, 3,086 ULBs across 22 states reported an increase in property tax collection in 2022-23 commensurate with their state's five-year GSDP (Gross State Domestic Product) growth rate, sources in the Union Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs (MoHUA) said.

In fact, this is a criterion for municipalities to be eligible for funds. In total, the 15th Finance Commission had recommended Rs 1,21,055 crore for urban local bodies over five years ending 2025-26. So far, out of Rs 21,791 crore allocated for ULBs under the 15th Finance Commission for this financial year, Rs 5,705 crore has been given, MoHUA officials said.

Out of the 4,771 ULBs that report to the MoHUA, 3,417 ULBs registered an increase in property tax collection in 2022-2023 over the previous year as on December 20.

This is for the first time that the Ministry, along with the non-profit group Jaanagraha, is collecting the annual audited accounts of all ULBs, standardising them to enable comparison, and digitising the records to make them public. This practice has evolved after the 15th Finance Commission's recommendations in 2020 for devolutions to ULBs from 2021-2026.

Urban local bodies had many revenue sources, but once these merged with the GST, it was the states which benefited, not municipalities. For local bodies, property tax is a big revenue source, but politics stalled any hike in tax rates. A carrot and stick approach, incentivising increase in tax rates with more funds, advocated by the Finance Commission three years ago, seems to be slowly bearing fruit.

The conditions for accessing the funds get more stringent every year – starting with the requirement that states notify the floor rates of property tax, then submit their annual audit accounts showing property tax collection and finally, have an increase in collections.

Among the cities which have reported an increase in collection are 40 out of the 50 cities that have a population over 1 million, including Mumbai, Chennai and Hyderabad. Delhi, Srinagar and Chandigarh are not part of the million-plus cities under MoHUA as they are in Union Territories.

According to 15th Finance Commission Chairman NK Singh, property tax was one obvious way to make ULBs sustainable. “You cannot really have a viable third tier without, in the long run, financial sustainability on their own. You cannot genuinely have the devolution of the three Fs – functions, finance and functionaries, embedded in the Constitutional amendment, without their becoming financial entities,” he told The Indian Express.

Before the Goods and Services Tax (GST) was implemented in 2017, the ULBs had multiple sources of revenue, many of which were merged with the GST. While states benefited from this, the ULBs did not, Singh pointed out. He said the commission held meetings with the ULBs in every state and recognised that there was “huge reluctance” on their part to increase property tax collection.

“In many cases, the state governments also found that this would be, politically, a difficult pill to swallow. We decided ‘let’s take the bull by the horns’. Let us make this a performance criteria...This is a classic case where penalties and incentives work. Penalty was that you lose out on the grants-in-aid and the incentive is that those who comply with it are able to fully avail of it. We induced change, far-reaching reforms in the governance architecture through very well-calibrated penalties and incentives,” Singh said.

He said the ULBs were yet to reach their potential in terms of financial sustainability and hoped that the conditions would not be relaxed by successive Finance Commissions.

As a result of the Finance Commission recommendations, for the first time, the financial data of all ULBs is being put in the public domain through cityfinance.in, which was launched in June 2020.

On the impact of the exercise, Jannagraha CEO Srikanth Viswanathan said: “There has been a tremendous change in property tax reforms since 2020 as the amount of money at stake has never been this high – there is over Rs 1 lakh crore under the 15th Finance Commission, Rs 5,000 crore in the form of the credit worthiness grant under Special Assistance Scheme, Rs 50,000 crore of additional borrowing for states that was linked to property tax reform, and further incentives available under AMRUT.”

According to him, state governments have played an important role. “There is leadership from the state governments as in many cases the state governments have to set the base rates. Individual mayors and municipal commissioners are also taking initiative to increase collections.”

With a sample of 201 municipal corporations, an RBI report in November 2022 found that municipal corporations’ own revenue, including property tax, was 31-34 per cent of the total revenue from 2017-2018 to 2019-2020.

“Property tax, which accounts for around half of the total tax collections of MCs, amounts to less than 0.5 per cent of GDP with significant inter-state variations. Many of the larger cities, however, were able to increase property tax collections over 2017-20. Poor enforcement mechanisms, coupled with multiple outdated exemptions, dated property rolls and databases, sub-optimal tax rates, property undervaluation and weak tax administration have resulted in significant under-recoveries in the majority of the Indian cities,” the RBI report said.

A 2021 toolkit released by MoHUA and Jaanagraha found that while property tax was one of the major sources of municipal corporations’ own revenue, the collections were far below the potential. “The aspiration for property tax collections should be to reach Rs. 40,000 crores in 2024 from the current estimate of approximately Rs. 20,000 crores,” the toolkit said. <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/two-in-3-civic-bodies-post-jump-in-property-tax-higher-than-5-year-gsdg-growth-rate-9086948/>

13. BMC re-floats tender, cost up by 31% from Rs 165 cr to Rs 216 cr (*indianexpress.com*) Dec 28, 2023

The BMC’s documents state that the Project Management Consultant (PMC) has submitted a revised estimate to the authorities that showed a cost escalation above 30 per cent.

BMC re-floats tender, BMC, Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation BMC, Mumbai news, Mumbai, Maharashtra news, Indian express news “It is pertinent to submit here that the design and drawings of revised tender is same as earlier tender, however, there has been an increase in estimated cost from Rs 164 crore, to Rs 216 crore,” the BMC’s document stated.

The Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) on Thursday re-floated its tender for constructing a multi-level underground parking lot at an escalated cost of 31 per cent. The BMC in March this year had floated a tender for constructing the parking lot at a cost of Rs 165 crore, which attracted four bidders. The cost of the new tender has been pegged at Rs 216 crore.

The tender for the Worli site was floated in March and in July, the BMC received responses from four bidders. However, the BMC’s document states that the winning bidder had submitted a revised offer stating that the actual work could be taken up only at a cost of Rs 198 crore. Following this, the BMC scrapped the previous tender and floated a new one.

The BMC’s documents state that the Project Management Consultant (PMC) has submitted a revised estimate to the authorities that showed a cost escalation above 30 per cent. “It is pertinent to submit here that the design and drawings of revised tender is same as earlier tender, however, there has been an increase in estimated cost from Rs 164 crore, to Rs 216 crore,” the BMC’s document stated.

When contacted, a civic official said that cost has been revised considering the delay in deadline and the need to complete the project within a shorter span of time. The official also maintained that a partial increment of the cost has been considered by keeping in mind inflation rate of raw materials.

“It will take at least two months to finalise the contractor and the work order would be issued one month after that and the construction will also take two years, this will cost us some time for which we have to keep in mind the rate of inflation as well,” the official added.

The BMC’s tender also mentions that the finalised bidder will be responsible for maintaining the lot for 20 years, apart from constructing and designing it.

According to civic sources these parking lots will have multiple platforms that will be operated by a shuttle and dolly system. This system provides maximum usage of parking space since it can accommodate a vehicle in each of the platforms.

To expand the existing infrastructure of vehicular parking in Mumbai, the BMC has mooted the idea of creating multilevel underground parking lots at multiple locations in the city and suburbs, including Flora and Fountain at Hutatma Chowk, Worli, Mumbadevi, Mahim and Bandra.

While the Bandra project has hit a roadblock following protests from local residents for digging the Patwardhan Park, where the proposed parking lot was supposed to be built, the authorities went ahead with the remaining sites. The Worli site will have a capacity to accommodate 640 cars, while the one at Hutatma Chowk will be able to accommodate 176 cars. <https://indianexpress.com/article/cities/mumbai/bmc-re-floats-tender-cost-up-by-31-from-rs-165-cr-to-rs-216-cr-9086903/>

14. Misuse of BMC’s credit notes to evade taxes under I-T lens (*timesofindia.indiatimes.com*) Dec 29, 2023

MUMBAI: The income tax (I-T) department is investigating whether the BMC’s credit note policy was misused by developers for tax evasion. It recently issued a notice to the municipal administration.

The BMC policy to issue credit notes was aimed at tiding over the revenue crisis. These were issued to BMC developers or land owners to construct residences for project-affected people.

The I-T department is investigating whether contractors and builders avoided adding the credit note income to their taxable component.

The BMC had issued credit notes worth Rs 415 crore to three contractors, who sold these to other builders, including prominent groups, mostly at a discounted rate. The builders used it to settle their pending dues with the BMC against their different construction projects across the city.

The credit notes can be used to pay property tax and settle penalties, or these may be sold in the open market.

The BMC is unwilling to break its fixed deposits to pay for PAP projects, so it introduced the credit note policy during the pandemic. It asked developers to buy land and build houses, and hand these over to it. In lieu of payments, the BMC issued credit notes to the developers along with transfer of development rights (TDR).

The BMC replied to the I-T notice and provided details of credit notes issued to contractors and developers to build residences under the PAP scheme and its subsequent use by other builders to settle pending dues with the BMC.

No construction was initiated after the credit notes worth Rs 415 crore were issued recently in the name of three developers who selected the land parcels for PAP housing. On receiving the credit notes, the developers sold these in the open market at a discounted rate to other builders, who then used these to settle pending dues with the BMC.

The BMC aims to construct 35,000 residential units under the PAP scheme by spending Rs 20,000 crore in the form of the credit notes and FSI-TDR.

The central GST is also examining the allegation that builders avoided GST payments on these transactions as no money was involved. GST sources said these were commercial transactions involving negotiable instruments that attract GST of up to 18%.

BMC sources said they made payment to the contractors through the credit note after adding all tax components into it, so it was the responsibility of the developers and builders to pay taxes. The BMC said it added credit note payments in its expenditure list and its receipt under the income head. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/mumbai/misuse-of-bmcs-credit-notes-for-tax-evasion-i-t-department-investigates/articleshow/106363505.cms>

15. Probe ‘irregularities’ in purchase of equipment used in civic bodies: Chhattisgarh Governor (*newindianexpress.com*) 29 December 2023

RAIPUR: Chhattisgarh Rajbhawan has sought a probe and a follow-up action into the alleged massive irregularities regarding the purchase of Mini Sky Lift machines (used as truck mounted) by the department of public administration for its use in various municipal bodies across the state.

This is the first directive by the Rajbhawan after the assembly polls into any alleged fraudulent deal in the government purchase, carried out during the Congress regime from 2018 to 2022. There were at least 225 sky lift machines (the figure actually could be more) supplied by only one company Vandana Agro Industries for various nagar panchayats and nagar palikas.

The details accessed under the Right to Information (RTI) revealed the purchasing was done at a price more than double the existing market rates. I submitted the details to the Governor urging for a probe”, said advocate Dinesh Kumar Soni, who is also an RTI activist.

Soni further requested the Rajbhawan to place instruction for registering criminal offence against the government officials for “conniving” with the supplier company leading to huge loss to the state in the “corrupt deal”.

“The given mini sky lift machine, which is available in the market at a price of around Rs 5 lakh, was supplied to the state government at over Rs 14 lakh each. Such scam is not possible without the connivance of the then urban development minister and the officials. The quality of the many supplied machine appears inferior. The appeal was made to the Governor Biswabhusan Harichandan to register a FIR,” Soni added.

<https://www.newindianexpress.com/nation/2023/dec/29/probe-irregularities-in-purchase-of-equipment-used-in-civic-bodies-guv-2645892.html#:~:text=New%20Indian%20Express-.Probe%20'irregularities'%20in%20purchase%20of%20equipment%20used%20in%20civic%20bodies,double%20the%20existing%20market%20rates.>