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1. Karnataka High Court Allows Investigation Against CM Siddaramaiah in Alleged MUDA Scam

Why in News?

The Karnataka High Court has permitted an investigation into Chief Minister Siddaramaiah in connection with the Mysore Urban Development Authority (MUDA) scam. This decision upholds an earlier sanction by Governor Thawarchand Gehlot.

What is the MUDA Scam Case?

In July, anti-corruption activists alleged that Siddaramaiah's wife, Parvathi, received 14 housing sites from MUDA in exchange for land illegally acquired by the authority in 2021. This reportedly caused a Rs. 55.80 crore loss to the state. The governor sanctioned an investigation under the Prevention of Corruption Act (PCA) and the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, despite opposition from the state Council of Ministers.

The Muda Scam in Karnataka refers to allegations of large-scale irregularities and corruption involving the Mysuru Urban Development Authority (MUDA). The scam surfaced in relation to the illegal allotment of land, fraudulent land deals, and the misuse of authority within MUDA, a government body responsible for urban planning and development in Mysuru.

Key Aspects of the Muda Scam

Land Allotment Irregularities: The core of the scam revolves around the illegal allotment of valuable government land. Allegedly, MUDA officials were involved in allotting land to ineligible individuals by bypassing official procedures, often in exchange for bribes.

Misuse of Authority: Senior officials and politicians have been accused of abusing their positions to manipulate land deals, which led to substantial financial losses for the state. There were cases of allotting land meant for public use to private individuals.

Fraudulent Documentation: There are allegations of tampering with official records, forging documents, and altering land allotment documents to benefit specific individuals or groups, bypassing the intended beneficiaries.

Political Involvement: Several politicians have been accused of being involved or benefiting from the scam, although investigations are still ongoing to ascertain the full extent of their participation.

The Muda Scam came under scrutiny after complaints were raised, leading to investigations by anti-corruption agencies, with calls for legal action against those involved. It caused significant political and public uproar, particularly given the rapid urban expansion in Karnataka and the growing demand for land in cities like Mysuru.

Why Did CM Siddaramaiah Challenge the Sanction?

Siddaramaiah argued that the governor is typically bound by the advice of the Council of Ministers, which had recommended against the investigation. He challenged the sanction, claiming the governor overstepped his authority by ignoring the council's advice without sufficient justification.

Court's Decision and Rationale

The court found that while the governor is usually bound by the council's advice, there were "exceptional circumstances" in this case that justified an independent decision. The court noted that the allegations required investigation, and the governor's decision was not made in "hot haste" but with careful consideration.

The court also clarified that private citizens can request permission to investigate public officials under the PCA, not just police officers. As a result, the interim order blocking the investigation was lifted.

Relevance: GS Prelims; Governance
Source: Indian Express

2. What are retractions and why do they matter? What is a retraction index? Why do researchers use potentially duplicated or manipulated work?

Introduction

According to the 'Retraction Watch' database, an Indian scientist at an institute in Lucknow has racked up 45 retractions. It also states that another researcher at a university in Kolkata published 300 scientific papers in a year, which is nearly a paper a day and impossible. This individual had six papers retracted, which cover an array of disciplines including chemistry and virology. Paper retractions are becoming more common worldwide even as the research misconduct problem is worsening in India. Retraction Watch is a blog that reports on retractions of scientific papers and on related topics.

What are retractions?

A retraction is a mechanism that kicks in when a scientific paper published in an academic journal is found to be so flawed as to merit being removed from scientific literature. The academic community is often understanding when a paper is retracted for an honest error but

much less forgiving when a paper is pulled because it contains deliberately manipulated material. For example, the case of John Darsee, a young Harvard University cardiology researcher, stunned the academic community in the 1980s. He had over 80 papers retracted for spreading "inaccuracies and falsehoods".

Scientific fraud is surprisingly endemic: the list with Darsee includes Jan Hendrik Schön, Brian Wansink, Hwang Woo-suk, and of recent Ranga Dias as well, among others. Even Nobel laureates are not spared. Gregg Semenza, a professor at Johns Hopkins University and winner of the 2019 medicine Nobel Prize, has had 12 papers retracted over potentially duplicated or manipulated images.

How often are papers retracted?

Between 2020 and 2022, 2.5 times more papers were retracted than they were between 2017 and 2019. The reasons for retraction include plagiarism, editorial conflicts, image manipulation, and the use of paper mills. During the COVID-19 pandemic, many publishers had fast-tracked the peer-review process for papers they received from scientists. As a result, some 10,000 papers had to be retracted in 2023 because of quality and/or data issues. The number was only around 1,600 in 2013. In 2023, a German neuropsychologist named Bernhard Sabel published the results of using a fake-paper detector he had built: he found that a third of 5,000 neuroscience papers published in 2020 likely had plagiarised and/or falsified content.

What is the retraction index?

A journal's retraction index is the the number of retractions in a given time period multiplied by 1,000 and divided by the total number of published articles, according to a definition provided by scientists Ferric Fang and Arturo Casadevall in a September 2011 paper. They also showed that there's a greater chance of a paper being retracted from a high-impact journal than from a low-impact one. 'Impact' refers to the impact factor: the average number of times a paper was cited in last two years.

Why do scientists falsify papers?

Paper mills are enterprises that churn out fake or low-quality journal papers and sell them to scientists. Thousands of papers published in academic journals worldwide have been linked to Russian, Iranian, and Chinese paper mills.

One reason they're becoming more prevalent is because of research institutes' desire to improve their national and international university rankings, where the primary criterion is research output. In today's academic setting, one's paper count can determine one's chances of being promoted, securing grants and getting awards. PhD students are sometimes required to publish papers to graduate. This "publish or perish" culture encourages paper mills.

Misconduct makes scientists lose trust in one another and in literature. In a 2000 article in the journal Nature, H.N.J. Arst wrote, "All honest scientists are victims of scientists who commit misconduct." Retractions are thus a way for science to correct its mistakes.

Reducing the prevalence of misconduct is an open problem in research policymaking. It needs to answer questions like: can journals detect bad papers with AI and what is a way to evaluate research quality over quantity?

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Science & Technology
Source: The Hindu

3. Project Cheetah: Where things stand after two years

Introduction
Project Cheetah, which saw the introduction of the African sub-species of the wild cat in India, completed two years on September 17.

The ambitious project has two overarching objectives. First, to establish a stable, breeding population of cheetahs in central India. Two, to use cheetahs as an umbrella species to restore open natural ecosystems such as scrubs, savannahs, grasslands, and degraded forests.

Two years in, Project Cheetah has seen marginal successes. Many challenges remain, as well as questions regarding its long-term outlook. Here is a status check.

Project Cheetah began with the intercontinental translocation of African cheetahs from Namibia and South Africa to the Kuno National Park in Madhya Pradesh. This translocation took place in two batches of eight and then 12 cheetahs.

These cheetahs were initially kept in soft-release bomas, small enclosures inside the national park to get them adapted to the local environment. Although confined to an area of roughly 1 sq km, the cheetahs hunted live prey inside these bomas. While some cheetahs were later released in the wild, they were later brought back into the enclosures. Mating within the translocated cohort of cheetahs led to the birth of 17 cubs.

Of the 20 translocated cheetahs, eight (40 per cent) have died due to a variety of reasons, from attacks during mating to septicaemia caused by tick infestation under the cheetahs' radio

collars. Of the 17 cubs, five (29 per cent) have also perished. As of today, 24 cheetahs (12 adults and cubs each) survive.

The next batch of 6-8 African cheetahs will be translocated to the Gandhi Sagar Wildlife Sanctuary, also in Madhya Pradesh.

Cheetahs still not in wild

The project has seen marginal successes, mainly on two fronts. First, with respect to the successful breeding of the African cheetahs in a new climate and ecology, and the survival of 12 out of the 17 cubs born. Second, Pawan and Veera, who were released into the wild last December spent a considerable amount of time in a free range, and travelled to far-off distances north of Kuno, even entering Rajasthan.

However, the project faced a significant setback in August this year when Pawan was found dead ostensibly due to drowning (the autopsy report has not yet been made public). After this incident, all 24 surviving cheetahs have been put in enclosures. This has raised questions about the spotted felines' capabilities to establish their own habitat in the wild. Authorities say that more cheetahs will be released after the monsoon season.

But conservation scientists have criticised the delay in releasing the cheetahs into the wild, and questioned authorities' lack of transparency in the matter. Ravi Chellam, a Bengaluru-based wildlife biologist and conservation scientist, said that a Namibian policy states that large wild carnivores should not be kept in captivity for more than three months. Beyond this period, the carnivore should either be euthanised or held in captivity permanently.

Barring the late Pawan and Veera, who is now in an enclosure, all the other cheetahs have been in enclosures for over a year now. This is contrary to the government's own Cheetah Action Plan which had said that cheetahs will be released in the wild after a 4-5 week quarantine period, followed by a 1-2 month acclimatisation period, according to Chellam.

Problem of inadequate prey

A deficit in the prey base is one of the biggest challenges facing the project. The project's latest annual report has found that the density of chital, the primary prey for cheetahs (and leopards), has declined from 23.43 animals per sq km in 2021 to 17.5 animals per sq km in 2024. The current population of chital in Kuno National Park is about 6,700.

This is far less than the numbers required to sustain the 91 leopards and 12 adult cheetahs in the park. The leopard population would need about 23,600 prey animals and cheetahs about 3,120 prey animals, annually. "With the current population of chital (6700), and other prey (about 100 ungulates), there is a huge deficit of prey in Kuno National Park," Project Cheetah's annual report said.

The report has prescribed immediate intervention by way of prey augmentation at Kuno as well as Gandhi Sagar, the next home for cheetah translocation. According to Chellam, this reflects poorly on the project management given that in 2022, Kuno was specifically chosen due to its prey density. "What has happened to drastically change the ground situation in such a short period of time?", he asked.

Road ahead

Experiences from the project so far have shown that the free-ranging cheetahs often ventured far and wide, often crossing state boundaries or entering human habitats. An analysis of their movements using radio collars showed that Veera travelled a distance of 5.82 km daily, while Pawan travelled 4.75 km daily, on average. Veera often ventured into territorial forests outside the national park. These insights have brought into spotlight the interstate landscape conservation plans.

Conservation of the interstate Kuno-Gandhi Sagar landscape spread over the protected areas, territorial forests of Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan has been spelt out as the way forward to establish a population of 60-70 cheetahs in the region. This would be subject to measures such as prey management, setting up of an adequate mechanism for interstate coordination, and the protection of the open ecosystem habitat.

This large landscape criss-crosses several forested patches outside sanctuaries, parks and tiger reserves, and is spread over eight districts of Madhya Pradesh and seven districts of Rajasthan. The conservation of this landscape would be a herculean task as it would involve restoring the habitats adequately, and ensuring that risks to cheetahs are minimised before they can populate the space.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Environment
Source: Indian Express