



CENTRE FOR AMBITION
(An Institute for Civil Services)

BACK GROUNDER APRIL-2017

CABINET APPROVES SIGNING OF AGREEMENT FOR CIRDAP ESTABLISHMENT CENTRE IN HYDERABAD

The Union Cabinet has given its approval for signing of an Agreement between Ministry of Rural Development and Centre on Integrated Rural Development for Asia and the Pacific (CIRDAP) for establishment of CIRDAP Centre at National Institute of Rural Development and Panchayati Raj (NIRD&PR), Hyderabad.

Significance of this move:

- CIRDAP Centre in NIRD&PR premises would give NIRD&PR an advantage of having first-hand knowledge of networking with organizations specialized in rural development programmes which in turn would help in building a repository of institutional knowledge for NIRD&PR.
- This Centre will also help NIRD&PR to enhance its status in the region through linkages with other Ministries/Institutes in the CIRDAP Member Countries (CMCs).
- The faculty of the NIRD&PR and the Ministry officials would benefit from exchange visits to the best practices in the CMCs.

About CIRDAP:

The CIRDAP is a regional Inter – Governmental and autonomous institution which came into existence in 1979 at the initiative of the countries of Asia Pacific region and the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) of the United Nations (UN) with support from several other UN bodies and donors.

- India is one of the key founder members of this Organisation.
- Its Headquarters is located at Dhaka, Bangladesh.
- The objective of CIRDAP is to promote regional cooperation and act as a serving institution for its member countries for promotion of integrated rural development through research action, training, information dissemination etc.

- CIRDAP has one sub – regional office in Jakarta, Indonesia. This sub – regional office of CIRDAP in south-east Asia (SOCSEA) was established in Jakarta, Indonesia in 1997.
- There are 46 countries in Asia Pacific Region, therefore CIRDAP has great potential for expansion for which they would be assisted by CIRDAP Centres.

CABINET APPROVES RATIFICATION OF THE MINIMUM AGE CONVENTION, 1973 AND WORST FORMS OF CHILD LABOUR CONVENTION, 1999

The Union Cabinet has given its approval for ratification of the two fundamental conventions of the International Labour Organization namely:

- Minimum Age Convention concerning minimum age for admission to employment:
- Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention concerning the prohibition and immediate action for elimination of the worst forms of Child Labour.

MINIMUM AGE CONVENTION:

The Convention concerning Minimum Age for Admission to Employment, is a Convention adopted in 1973 by the International Labour Organization.

- It requires ratifying states to pursue a national policy designed to ensure the effective abolition of child labour and to raise progressively the minimum age for admission to employment or work.
- Countries are free to specify a minimum age for labour, with a minimum of 15 years. A declaration of 14 years is also possible when for a specified period of time. Laws may also permit light work for children aged 13–15 (not harming their health or school work). The minimum age of 18 years is specified for work which “is likely to jeopardise the health, safety or morals of young persons”. Definitions of the type of work and derogations are only possible after tripartite consultations (if such a system exists in the ratifying country).

WORST FORMS OF CHILD LABOUR CONVENTION:

The Convention concerning the Prohibition and Immediate Action for the Elimination of the Worst Forms of Child Labour, known in short as the Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention, was adopted by the International Labour Organization (ILO) in 1999.

- By ratifying this Convention, a country commits itself to taking immediate action to prohibit and eliminate the worst forms of child labour.
- The ILO's International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour (IPEC) is responsible for assisting countries in this regard as well as monitoring compliance. One of the methods used by IPEC to assist countries in this regard are Time-bound Programmes.
- The convention includes forms of child labour, which are predefined worst forms of child labour. They are also sometimes referred to as automatic worst forms of child labour.

Background:

India is a founder member of the International Labour Organization (ILO), which came into existence in 1919.

- At present, the ILO has 187 members.
- The principal means of action in the ILO is the setting up of International standards in the form of Conventions, Recommendations and Protocol.
- India has so far ratified 45 Conventions, out of which 42 are in force. Out of these 4 are Fundamental or Core Conventions.

SASEC OPERATIONAL PLAN 2016-25 INCLUDES NINE PROJECTS WORTH \$2.4 BILLION

The Asian Development Bank (ADB) has approved a total of nine projects costing \$2.42 billion as part of the Operational Plan (OP) 2016-2025 of the South Asia Subregional Economic Cooperation (SASEC) program.

Key facts:

- The nine projects comprise of two rail projects in Bangladesh worth \$890 million, two economic corridor

initiatives (a project and program loan) and a bridge project in India worth an aggregate of \$1.2 billion, trade facilitation and airport projects in Bhutan worth \$27 million and key SASEC road and energy projects in Nepal worth \$302 million.

- All these projects are aligned with the SASEC OP's thrusts of developing road and rail links aligned closely with trade routes toward the east, streamlining trade procedures, and improving energy infrastructure.
- These projects will receive ADB financing of \$1.43 billion. These nine projects represent a significant increase compared to the previous 15 years, when the annual average value of projects approved was only about \$500 million.

About SASEC:

Established in 2001, the SASEC program is a project-based partnership to promote regional prosperity by improving cross-border connectivity, boosting trade among member countries and strengthening regional economic cooperation.

- ADB is the secretariat and lead financier of the SASEC program, which to date has supported a total of 46 projects worth \$9.17 billion in transport, trade facilitation, energy and information and communications technology (ICT).
- The SASEC OP, endorsed in June 2016 by the SASEC member countries, is SASEC's first comprehensive long-term plan to promote greater economic cooperation among the member countries in the areas of transport, trade facilitation, energy, and economic corridor development.
- Bringing regional cooperation to a higher level, the SASEC OP plans to extend physical linkages not only within SASEC but also with East and Southeast Asia by the next decade.

CABINET APPROVES MOU BETWEEN FORUM OF REGULATORS AND THE NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF REGULATORY UTILITY COMMISSIONERS

The Union Cabinet has given its approval for signing of a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between Forum of Regulators (FOR) and the National Association of Regulatory Utility Commissioners (NARUC) in the area of large-scale Grid Integration of Renewable Energy.

(3)

- The MoU envisages to promote information exchanges in the areas of Renewable Energy integration regulations and balancing using gas, storage, and demand-side approaches, energy imbalance markets.
- It will enhance the efforts of India's power system for better management of large-scale integration of Renewable Energy into the power grid.
- The fertiliser manufacturers and marketers are free to fix the maximum retail price at reasonable rates under NBS.

NOTIFY HIV-HIT CHILDREN AS DISADVANTAGED GROUP: SC

The Supreme Court has ordered State governments to consider issuing a notification under the Right to Education law, declaring children living with/affected by HIV as a 'disadvantaged group' deserving additional rights to help them gain free and compulsory education, a fundamental right under the Constitution.

About the Forum of Regulators:

The Forum of Regulators was constituted by the Ministry of Power under provisions of section 166(2) of the Electricity Act, 2003 with the primary objective of harmonization of regulations in the power sector framed by the Central Electricity Regulatory Commission (CERC), State Electricity Regulatory Commissions (SERCs) and Joint Electricity Regulatory Commissions (JERCs).

CABINET APPROVES THE FIXATION OF NUTRIENT-BASED SUBSIDY (NBS) RATES

The Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs (CCEA) has approved the Fixation of Nutrient Based Subsidy (NBS) rates for Phosphatic and Potassic (P&K) fertilizers for the year 2017-18.

- As compared to 2016-17, the subsidy for the period 2017-18 has decreased from Rs. 13.241/kg to 11.997/kg (decrease of Rs. 1.244/kg) for P, from Rs. 15.470/kg to 12.395/kg (decrease of Rs. 3,075/kg) for K whereas the subsidy of N has increased from Rs. 15.854/kg to 18.989/kg (an increase of Rs. 3.135/kg) and of S from Rs. 2.044/kg to 2.240/kg (an increase of Rs. 0.196/kg).

About NBS Policy:

Government has been implementing Nutrient Based Subsidy (NBS) Policy for decontrolled P&K fertilizers.

- Under this policy, the subsidy on Phosphatic and Potassic (P&K) fertilizers is announced by the Government on annual basis for each nutrient i.e., Nitrogen (N), Phosphorous (P), Potash (K) and Sulphur (S) on per kg basis which is converted into subsidy per tonne depending upon the nutrient content in each grade of the fertilizers.
- These rates are determined taking into account the international and domestic prices of P&K fertilizers, exchange rate, inventory level in the country etc.

Key facts:

- The court has given States four weeks to issue the notification under Section 2 (d) of The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act of 2009, which mandates the State governments concerned to issue a notification that a child belongs to a disadvantaged group based on reasons ranging from caste, social, cultural, linguistic, geographical, gender, etc. The Act makes education compulsory for children between six and 14 years of age.
- The court ordered that those States which are "unwilling" to issue a notification under Section 2 (d) should file an affidavit "explaining why they consider it unnecessary" to inform that children living with HIV do not belong to a disadvantaged group. The court however noted that at least 11 States have already issued the notification.

Background:

The order was based on a petition which pointed out that HIV-hit children face denial of admission, outright expulsion, segregation, breach of confidentiality to being given chores like cleaning toilets. According to NACO estimates in 2012-2013, around 20.9 lakh people were living with HIV in 2011. Children less than 15 years of age account for seven percent (1.45 lakh) of all infections.

RIGHT TO EDUCATION (RTE) ACT:

The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Act, 2009, which represents the consequential legislation envisaged under Article 21-A, means that every child has a right to full time elementary education of satisfactory and equitable quality in a formal school which

satisfies certain essential norms and standards. Article 21-A and the RTE Act came into effect on 1 April 2010.

- It is seen as the most historic development in universalisation of elementary education in the country. It implies that every child in the age group of 6 to 14 years has Right to elementary education. They are entitled for free and compulsory education.

PROJECT SAKSHAM:

- The Government has approved Rs. 2,256 crore outlay for Project Saksham to bolster the information technology network for the new GST regime.
- Project Saksham is the name given to CBEC's IT Infrastructure Project. This IT Infrastructure project will enable not just the implementation of Goods and Services tax (GST) but also support all existing services in Customs, Central Excise and Service Tax.
- In addition, it will also enable extension of the Indian Customs Single Window Interface for Facilitating Trade (SWIFT) and other taxpayer-friendly initiatives under Digital India and Ease of Doing Business of CBEC.
- It will enable setting up of an information exchange mechanism with GSTN through the use of pre-agreed Application Programming Interface (API) or other secure methods of message exchange.

HYDERABAD BECOMES FIRST CITY TO HAVE 1 GBPS INTERNET SPEED:

Internet Service Provider (ISP) ACT Fibernet has announced the launch of 1Gbps (gigabits per second) wired broadband internet services in Hyderabad, making the 'City of Pearls' India's first 'Giga City'.

El Salvador makes history as first nation to impose blanket ban on metal mining:

- El Salvador has made history after becoming the first country in the world to ban metal mining.
- El Salvador is the most densely populated country in Latin America and, while rainfall is plentiful, holding on to the water is a major issue because of unsustainable farming practices and inadequate industrial controls that have led

to widespread soil erosion and the almost total destruction of its forests.

- More than 90% of El Salvador's surface waters are estimated to be polluted by toxic chemicals, heavy metals and waste matter. The water crisis has steadily deepened since the pro-business Arena Party granted an array of permits for mineral exploration.

RASHTRIYA VAYOSHRI YOJANA

Rashtriya Vayoshri Yojana was recently launched by the government. It was launched in District Nellore, Andhra Pradesh.

What is it for?

The Scheme aims at providing Senior Citizens, belonging to BPL category and suffering from any of the age related disability/infirmity viz. Low vision, Hearing impairment, Loss of teeth and Locomotor disability, with such assisted-living devices which can restore near normalcy in their bodily functions, overcoming the disability/infirmity manifested.

Background:

The proposal for formulation of a Scheme for providing Physical Aids and Assisted-Living Devices for Senior Citizens belonging to BPL Category was announced in the Budget 2015-16. Pursuant to this, the "Rashtriya Vayoshri Yojana" has been formulated.

Key facts:

- The Physical Aids and Assisted-living Devices for Senior citizens will be distributed in Camp mode and the Scheme will be implemented through the sole implementing agency, 'Artificial Limbs Manufacturing Corporation (ALIMCO)', (a PSU under M/o SJ&E), which will undertake one year free maintenance of the aids & assisted living devices.
- The devices will help the Senior Citizens to overcome their age related physical impairment and to lead a dignified and productive life with minimal dependence on care givers or other members of the family.
- The ambitious Scheme, first of its kind in the country is expected to benefit 5,20,000 Senior Citizens over a period of the 3 years.

(5)

- This is a Central Sector Scheme, fully funded by the Central Government. The expenditure for implementation of the scheme will be met from the “Senior Citizens’ Welfare Fund”.
- Under the scheme, free of cost distribution of the devices, commensurate with the extent of disability/infirmity that is manifested among the eligible senior citizens will take place.
- In case of multiple disabilities/infirmities manifested in the same person, the assistive devices will be given in respect of each disability/impairment.
- Beneficiaries in each district will be identified by the State Governments/UT Administrations through a Committee chaired by the Deputy Commissioner/District Collector.
- As far as possible, 30% of the beneficiaries in each district shall be women.

UNDER THE SCHEME, THE FOLLOWING AIDS AND ASSISTED-LIVING DEVICES WILL BE PROVIDED TO ELIGIBLE ELDERLY BENEFICIARY SENIOR CITIZENS, DEPENDING UPON THEIR PHYSICAL IMPAIRMENT:

- Walking sticks.
- Elbow crutches.
- Walkers / Crutches.
- Tripods / Quadpods.
- Hearing Aids.
- Artificial Dentures.

COMPOSITION OF SENIOR CITIZENS:

As per the Census figures of 2011, the population of senior citizens in India is 10.38 crore. More than 70% of the population of senior citizens live in rural areas of the country. A sizeable percentage (5.2%) of the senior citizens suffers from some sort of disabilities related to old age. Projections indicate that the number of elderly population will increase to around 173 million by 2026.

FUNGUS THAT EATS PLASTIC MAY HELP CLEAN ENVIRONMENT

Scientists have identified a soil fungus, which uses enzymes to rapidly break down plastic materials.

Key facts:

- *Aspergillus tubingensis* is a fungus, which ordinarily lives in the soil. In laboratory trials, the researchers found that it also grows on the surface of plastics.
- It secretes enzymes onto the surface of the plastic, and these break the chemical bonds between the plastic molecules, or polymers.
- Using advanced microscopy and spectroscopy techniques, the team found that the fungus also uses the physical strength of its mycelia — the network of root—like filaments grown by fungi — to help break apart the polymers.
- The fungus was found in Pakistan.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THIS DISCOVERY:

Humans are producing ever greater amounts of plastic — much of which ends up as garbage. Since plastic does not break down in the same way as other organic materials, it can persist in the environment over long periods of time.

- Attempts to deal with plastic waste through burying, recycling, incineration or other methods are variously unsustainable, costly and can result in toxic by-products, which are hazardous to human health.
- The new discovery is an advance that could help deal with waste problem that threatens our environment.

‘GRASSOLINE’ MAY POWER FUTURE FLIGHTS

In the quest of more sustainable energy sources, scientists have developed ‘grassoline’ — a biofuel derived from grass that could one day power aircraft.

- Researchers investigated methods that can disintegrate and treat grass until it can be used as a fuel. Due to its vast abundance, grass is the perfect source of energy.

How was it done?

- To improve its biodegradability, the grass is pre-treated at first.
- Then bacteria are added which convert the sugars in the grass into lactic acid and its derivatives.
- This lactic acid can serve as an intermediate chemical to produce other compounds such as biodegradable plastics (PLA) or fuels.
- The lactic acid was then converted into caproic acid, which was further converted into decane. Decane can be used in aviation fuel.

Way ahead:

Right now the amount of biofuel that can be made from grass is still limited to a few drops. The current process is very expensive, and engines should be adapted to this new kind of fuel. Researchers hope to make improvements in this regard.

GOVT WITHDRAWS SUBSIDY TO MILD HYBRID CARS

The government has withdrawn incentives given to mild hybrid vehicles under FAME India scheme.

What is a mild hybrid vehicle?

A mild hybrid vehicle has an electric motor, which on its own cannot run a vehicle but assists normal engine by using recovered energy stored in a battery and helps save fuel.

How mild hybrid vehicles operate?

Mild hybrid technology is different from plug-in or conventional hybrid vehicles. Mild hybrid vehicles use the energy generated while applying the brakes and turn it into electric energy that is then stored in a battery. This energy can then be used to turn the starter motor when the car's start stop system needs it.

In most cases, a mild hybrid will turn its engine off when at idle or when it comes to a halt at a traffic signal for instance. Research shows that mild-hybrids are only 7-15% more fuel efficient as compared to conventional hybrid systems that can run on pure electric power for short distances too.

ABOUT FAME INDIA SCHEME:

With an aim to promote eco-friendly vehicles, the government had launched the FAME India scheme in 2015 offering incentives on electric and hybrid vehicles of up to Rs 29,000 for bikes and Rs 1.38 lakh for cars.

- FAME India – Faster Adoption and Manufacturing of Hybrid and Electric vehicles in India – is a part of the National Electric Mobility Mission Plan. The scheme envisages Rs 795 crore support in the first two fiscals starting with the current year.
- It is being administered by the Heavy Industries Ministry.

'FOREIGN OWNERSHIP NORMS A BARRIER'

The report on foreign trade barriers was recently released by the Office of the United States Trade Representative (USTR). The annual report points to a list of trade irritants in 63 nations.

Trade barriers in India as per the report:

Indian regulations on foreign ownership in e-commerce, banks, insurance and other online-related services were major barriers for overseas investors.

FDI:

India allows for 100% foreign direct investment in business-to-business (B2B) electronic commerce, but largely prohibits foreign investment in business-to-consumer (B2C) electronic commerce transactions.

- Foreign direct investment is allowed in a market-based electronic retailing model, but not in the inventory-based model.
- According to the report, the only exception that was granted was to single-brand retailers. Single-brand retailers who meet certain conditions including the operation of physical stores in India may undertake to trade through electronic commerce. This narrow exception limits the ability of the majority of potential B2C electronic commerce foreign investors to access the Indian market.

EQUALISATION LEVY:

The trade barriers report also pointed out India's tax (6% equalisation levy) on foreign online advertising platforms

(7)

was not par with the international norms and warned the levy in its current form may impede foreign trade and increase the risk of retaliation from other countries where Indian companies are doing business.

The report also pointed out that the levy would result in taxes on business income even when a foreign resident does not have a permanent establishment in India or when underlying activities are not carried out in India.

DATA STORAGE:

According to the report, the Indian requirements of storage of data within India reduce productivity, dampen domestic investment and undermine the ability of information and communications technology companies to offer cutting-edge services.

- The 2012 National Data Sharing and Accessibility Policy, issued by the Ministry of Science & Technology, which requires that all data collected using public funds — including weather data — be stored within the borders of India.
- It also pointed out the Department of Electronics and Information Technology (DEITY) guidelines requiring cloud computing service providers to store data within India to qualify for bidding for government procurements.

COMPULSORY PUBLIC LISTING:

The report also highlighted Insurance Regulatory and Development Authority's (IRDA) discussion paper that called for the compulsory public listing of life insurers that have been in operation in India for seven years or more.

According to the report, such a requirement, if implemented, would be another measure that would have a discouraging effect on foreign investors.

Centre may remove cap on parent maintenance

The government is mulling bringing legislative changes to remove the monthly ceiling of ₹ 10,000 on the maintenance paid by children to parents and introduce a rating mechanism for organisations providing home care services to the elderly.

- If the proposed amendments to the Maintenance and Welfare of Parents and Senior Citizens (MWPSA) Act come through, the maintenance amount to be decided by senior citizen tribunals for the neglected parents will depend on their need and the economic condition of their children.

Present scenario:

The MWPSA Act makes it a legal obligation for children and heirs to provide maintenance to senior citizens and parents.

At present, the maintenance for a parent or senior citizen that can be ordered by the tribunal as payable by the children or relative cannot be more than ₹ 10,000 a month.

What necessitated this move?

There have been complaints from many senior citizens' associations that the maintenance amount was inadequate and not in keeping with the time in view of the rising costs of living.

With the increase in the number of elderly people staying alone at home, the government has realised the urgent need to ensure quality home care services to such people. Therefore, it is proposed that a rating mechanism is developed for such organisations and uniform regulations are developed for monitoring such services.

Way ahead:

The Ministry also intends to put in place a uniform regulation and a rating mechanism for organisations providing home care services to senior citizens.

Day cruise, forest trails planned at Chilika lagoon

The Odisha government is pushing for massive infrastructure improvement around the Chilika lagoon.

- IPE Global, which has been asked to prepare a tourism master plan for the Chilika Lake and its catchment area, with emphasis on preservation of the ecosystem and natural habitat, has proposed 10 key projects with an estimated investment of ₹ 757 crore.

Background:

Chilika, with a wetland spread over nearly 1,165 sq. km and more than 25 pristine islands, has been attracting tourists

from all corners of the globe, but its tourism potential could not be harnessed due to huge infrastructure gap.

About Chilika Lagoon:

- It is the largest coastal lagoon in India and the second largest lagoon in the world after The New Caledonian barrier reef in New Caledonia.
- It is the largest wintering ground for migratory waterfowl found anywhere on the Indian sub-continent.
- It is one of the hotspot of biodiversity in the country, and some rare, vulnerable and endangered species listed in the IUCN Red List of threatened Animals inhabit in the lagoon for atleast part of their life cycle.
- On account of its rich bio-diversity and ecological significance, Chilika was designated as the 1st “Ramsar Site” of India.
- The Nalaban Island within the lagoon is notified as a Bird Sanctuary under Wildlife (Protection) Act, the National Wetlands, mangroves and coral reefs Committee of Ministry of Environment & Forests, Government of India, have also identified the lagoon as a priority site for conservation and management.
- Chilika Lagoon lies in the districts of Puri, Khurda and Ganjam of Odisha State along the eastern coast of India. It is well connected to the Chennai and Kolkata through National Highway No 5, and the Chennai Kolkata rail line passes along the western bank of the Lagoon Balugaon, with Balugaon, Chilika and Rambha being the main stations along the Western shoreline of the lagoon.

NOW, CHINA FLAGS TAWANG RAIL LINK

China has asked India to exercise “restraint” on its plan to link the strategic border district of Tawang in Arunachal Pradesh with a railway network, saying any “unilateral action” might “complicate” the unresolved border issue.

What’s the issue?

Tawang, where the sixth Dalai Lama was born in 1683, is at the centre of Tibetan Buddhism and a friction point between India and China. China has in recent days upped its rhetoric on claims to Arunachal Pradesh, which it says is Southern Tibet.

About Tawang:

- Tawang is a town on India-China border in Arunachal Pradesh.
- It is the smallest of the 16 administrative districts of Arunachal Pradesh in northeastern India and with a population of 49,977 it is the eighth least populous district in the country.
- It is inhabited by the Monpa people.
- Visitors to Tawang district require a special Inner Line Permit from the government.
- The district has two main rivers, the Tawang Chhu and the Naymjang Chhu, that together have 10 main tributaries. These two rivers meet each other before exiting the district in a southwesterly direction.
- There are two major religious festivals of the Monpas viz “LOSAR” and “TORGYA”. Both festivals are celebrated once annually. The LOSAR is celebrated to the commencement of New year. Every third year of Torgya, the festival of Dungyur is celebrated.

ECLIPSES OF BINARY STAR SHED LIGHT ON ORBITING EXOPLANET

A team of scientists from Raman Research Institute, Bengaluru, and University of Delhi have seen for the first time indications of a massive planet orbiting a low mass X-ray binary star system.

- The technique that has been used, namely, X-ray observations, is a new way of detecting exoplanets.

What are X-ray binaries?

X-ray binaries consist of a pair of stars orbiting each other of which one is compact one such as a black hole or a neutron star (in this case, a neutron star). The neutron star draws matter from its less-massive companion. The mass when drawn generates X-rays which are detected by detectors placed in satellites in space.

Key facts:

- The star system in question, MXB 1658-298 is an X-ray binary and a part of the constellation Ophiuchus (serpent bearer).

(9)

- The system is nearly 30,000 light years away and the planet is expected to be nearly 8,000 times as massive as the earth.

HOW WAS THE PLANET DISCOVERED?

Discovered in 1976, this binary star system is so far and so faint that it may be observed only when it shows “outbursts” of X-rays. That is, an increase in X-ray intensity by a factor of 100 or more. Recently this system showed an outburst. This provided researchers with an excellent opportunity to try to trace the orbital evolution of this system.

- As the two stars revolve around each other, the less-massive companion star hides the compact star everytime it crosses the line of sight, in between the detector and the neutron star, giving rise to eclipses.
- In X-ray binaries, the time in-between eclipses of the source can increase, decrease and also shows abrupt changes. This system, MXB 1658-298, is special in that the time between the eclipses increases and decreases periodically.
- The eclipse first arrived about ten seconds earlier and after about a year, arrived about ten seconds later than what would be expected [if these was no other body disturbing the system]. The team was surprised by this unusual behaviour.
- This periodic variation implied that there was a third body orbiting the system.

PowerTex India:

The Government has launched PowerTex India, a comprehensive scheme for powerloom sector development.

The comprehensive scheme has the following components:

- In-situ Upgradation of Plain Powerlooms.
- Group Workshed Scheme (GWS).
- Yarn Bank Scheme.
- Common Facility Centre (CFC).
- Pradhan Mantri Credit Scheme for Powerloom Weavers.

- Solar Energy Scheme for Powerlooms.
- Facilitation, IT, Awareness, Market Development and Publicity for Powerloom Schemes.
- Tex Venture Capital Fund.
- Grant-in-Aid and Modernisation & Upgradation of Powerloom Service Centres (PSCs).

Chenani-Nashri tunnel:

- Chenani-Nashri tunnel, a 10.9 km road tunnel which will shorten the driving time between Jammu and Srinagar by two hours, was recently inaugurated.
- The two-lane Chenani-Nashri tunnel will be Asia’s longest, which will cut the distance between Jammu and Srinagar to around 250km from the current 350km.
- The tunnel, which took seven years to build, will act as an all-weather alternative to the existing Jammu-Srinagar highway. It will link Chenani in Udhampur district with Nashri in Ramban district.
- It is the world’s sixth road tunnel with a transverse ventilation system enabled and controlled by ABB software. It also boasts features like Integrated Traffic Control System (ITCS), Video Surveillance System, FM Rebroadcast System, Entrance Detection Control System and Active Firefighting System.

HRD Ministry releases India Rankings 2017

Union Human Resource and Development Ministry has released the Indian rankings 2017 with the inclusion of two new categories: Common Overall Rank and the General Degree.

Key facts:

- The India rankings 2017 were done under the National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF) that considered more than 3,300 institutes across 20 parameters.
- Regional diversity, gender equity, the inclusion of disadvantaged sections were among some of the specific parameters in the India Rankings 2017.

- India Rankings 2017 would be used to improve the educational institutions of the country. According to the HRD ministry, nearly 705 of the research output in the country came from these institutions, while the top 100 academic institutions of the country accounted for nearly 80% of the output.

Performance of various colleges:

- According to the India Rankings 2017, the Indian Institute of Technology(IIT) Madras tops the list in the Engineering category while IISC, Bangalore sits at the top of the Common Overall Rankings, followed by IIT Madras, IIT Bombay, IIT Kharagpur, IIT Delhi, JNU, IIT Kanpur, IIT Guwahati, IIT Roorkee respectively.
- In the list of the best Management institutes in the country, the Indian Institute of Management(IIM) Ahmedabad gets the top spot while being followed by IIM Bangalore, IIM Calcutta, IIM Lucknow, IIM Kozhikode respectively.
- Similarly, IISc Bangalore tops the list of the best universities in the country, followed by JNU, Delhi and the BHU, Varanasi. Meanwhile, in the list of top colleges in the country, Miranda House, Delhi leads the way with Loyola College, Chennai & Shri Ram College of Commerce, Delhi following it respectively.
- In the list of the top pharma institutions, Jamia Hamdard, New Delhi tops the chart, while being followed by the National Institute of Pharma. Education and Research, Mohali.

OBSERVATIONS:

Although the Central Government funded institutions, in general continue to do well, some of the state-funded universities also are prominent. Some private institutions and universities have also been quietly climbing up to take high positions, thus offering value for money to their students, going by their ranks. Some of these institutions have consistently maintained or improved their positions of last year, clearly indicating that it was not a one-time fluke event. This is clearly a satisfying development in Higher Education.

Finally, a very exciting feature of this year's Rankings is the ranking of General Degree Colleges in Arts and Sciences

from across the country. While many of the names appearing in the top-100 list are well known and famous, there are many others who may not be so well known but have fared well. Clearly these need to be watched out for in future.

AFRICAN DEVELOPMENT BANK TO HOLD 52ND ANNUAL MEETING GUJARAT

India is hosting 52nd annual meeting of the African Development Bank in Ahmedabad.

About African Development Bank Group:

The African Development Bank Group (AfDB) is a multilateral development finance institution established to contribute to the economic development and social progress of African countries.

- The AfDB was founded in 1964 and comprises three entities: The African Development Bank, the African Development Fund and the Nigeria Trust Fund.
- The AfDB's mission is to fight poverty and improve living conditions on the continent through promoting the investment of public and private capital in projects and programs that are likely to contribute to the economic and social development of the region.
- Governing: The AfDB is controlled by a Board of Executive Directors, made up of representatives of its member countries.
- Voting: The voting power on the Board is split according to the size of each member's share, currently 60%-40% between African (or "regional") countries and "non-regional" member countries ("donors"). The largest African Development Bank shareholder is Nigeria with nearly 9% of the vote.
- Representation: All member countries of the AfDB are represented on the AfDB Board of Executive Directors. Member governments are officially represented at the AfDB by their Minister of Finance, Planning or Cooperation who sits on the AfDB Board of Governors. The AfDB Governors meet once a year to take major decisions about the institution's leadership, strategic directions and governing bodies.

- Unit of account: The African Development Bank is using a Unit of Account which is registered as XUA as ISO 4217 standard currency code. It is not exchanged directly by individuals, it is used for accounting between state members

INDIA AND THE AFRICAN DEVELOPMENT BANK:

India joined the African Development Bank in 1982. The country is a key member of the institutions 24 Non-Regional Member Countries, which support the African Development Fund (ADF), the concessional resource window of the Bank. In 2013, Delhi increased its contribution to the 13th replenishment of the fund by 57.28% to USD 18.5 million, among other investments.

CENTRE CLEARS PROPOSAL TO BUY BARAK MISSILES FOR INDIAN NAVY

The government has approved procurement of a fresh batch of Barak missiles for Naval warships to enhance India's maritime capability in view of the changing security dynamics in the Indian Ocean region.

- The approval in this regard was given by the Defence Acquisition Council (DAC) of the Defence Ministry.

Key facts:

- Barak missiles are short range surface-to-air missiles.
- The missiles will be procured under 'Buy Global' category from Rafael Advance Defense Systems Limited of Israel at an approximate cost of around Rs 500 crore.
- Almost all ships of the navy will be equipped with these missiles.

About DAC:

The DAC, set up in 2001 as part of the post-Kargil reforms in defence sector, approves the long-term integrated perspective plan for the forces, accords acceptance of necessity (AON) to begin acquisition proposals, and has to grant its approval to all major deals through all their important phases. It also has the power to approve any deviations in an acquisition, and recommends all big purchases for approval of the Cabinet committee on security.

GOVT. SEEKS OPINION ON CHANGES IN RTI ACT

The Centre has sought public opinion on proposed amendments to the Right to Information Act, with respect to the powers of the Central Information Commission (CIC), filing of applications, complaints and appeals.

Proposed amendments:

- An amendment proposes that an applicant can file complaints within 135 days of filing the application under the Act, and in case of delay a request for condonation will also have to be filed.
- There is another provision empowering the CIC to convert a complaint into a second appeal. Thus, as proposed, it can order the disclosure of information on a complaint. The Commission can also allow an amendment to the complaint during the hearing, if other remedies have been exhausted.
- Also, as suggested, the CIC has been given the power to decide if an appeal or a complaint can be withdrawn on the applicant's request. However, once the issue has been decided, the withdrawal will not be allowed.

RTI Act:

[Right to Information Act 2005](#) mandates timely response to citizen requests for government information. It replaces the erstwhile Freedom of information Act, 2002.

- Under the provisions of the Act, any citizen may request information from a "public authority" (a body of Government or "instrumentality of State") which is required to reply expeditiously or within thirty days.
- The Act also requires every public authority to computerise their records for wide dissemination and to proactively certain categories of information so that the citizens need minimum recourse to request for information formally.
- The Act covers the whole of India except Jammu and Kashmir, where J&K Right to Information Act is in force.
- Private bodies are not within the Act's ambit directly. In a decision of *Sarbajit Roy versus Delhi Electricity Regulatory Commission*, the Central Information Commission affirmed

that privatised public utility companies continue to be within the RTI Act.

GLOBAL INITIATIVE LAUNCHED TO FIGHT FAKE NEWS

A global alliance of tech industry and academic organisations has unveiled plans to work together to combat the spread of “fake news” and improve public understanding of journalism.

Key facts:

- The initiative’s mission is “to advance news literacy, to increase trust in journalism around the world and to better inform the public conversation.”
- The founding funders include Facebook and the Craigslist founder Craig Newmark’s philanthropic fund along with the Ford Foundation, the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, the Tow Foundation, AppNexus, Mozilla and Betaworks.
- Helping the public understand the difference between fraudulent news and serious journalism will constitute an important element of the effort.

Background:

Fake news became a serious issue in the U.S. election campaign, when clearly fraudulent stories circulated on social media, potentially swaying some voters.

Concerns have been raised since then about hoaxes and misinformation affecting elections in Europe, with investigations showing how “click farms” generate revenue from online advertising using made-up news stories.

NO OF BENEFICIARIES UNDER UJJWALA YOJANA CROSSES 2 CR MARK

The number of beneficiaries of PM Ujjwala Yojana for providing LPG connections to BPL households has crossed 2 crore mark in less than a year.

About the Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana:

Under the [Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana](#), Rs.8,000 crore has been earmarked for providing 50 million LPG (liquefied petroleum gas) connections to poor households.

- Under the scheme, an adult woman member of a below poverty line family identified through the Socio-Economic Caste Census (SECC) is given a deposit-free LPG connection with financial assistance of Rs 1,600 per connection by the Centre.
- Eligible households will be identified in consultation with state governments and Union territories.
- The scheme is being implemented by the Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas.

INDIA BECOMES ASSOCIATE MEMBER OF INTERNATIONAL ENERGY AGENCY

India has become part of IEA Association that will allow the country play a more “visible and influential” role in the global energy landscape. This does not cast any additional obligation on India, however, gives an opportunity for the country to become the voice of the developing countries.

How will this membership help India?

- India’s engagement with the International Energy Agency (IEA) has enhanced over the last two decades and the “Association” status would facilitate it to participate in meetings of the standing groups, committees and working groups that constitute the IEA governance structure.
- The “Activation of Association” is expected to serve as a bridge and platform for wider-ranging and deeper co-operation and collaboration between IEA member and Association countries in the future.
- India pursues its key development objectives of energy access, energy security and environmental sustainability. In this context, India has a vision of ensuring 24x7 affordable and environment friendly ‘Power for All’ and deeper engagement with IEA is a component of achieving this vision.
- India can also richly gain from IEA’s data gathering processes, survey methodologies and range of energy data, which could enable India in the near future to set up its own robust integrated database agency.

Background:

India is home to about a fifth of the world's population but uses only about 6% of the world's energy. But growth in the country's energy demand is expected to outpace China in the near future, with its energy demand more than doubling over the next 25 years.

About International Energy Agency:

Founded in 1974, the IEA was initially designed to help countries co-ordinate a collective response to major disruptions in the supply of oil, such as the crisis of 1973/4. While this remains a key aspect of its work, the IEA has evolved and expanded significantly.

Important functions performed by IEA :

- The IEA examines the full spectrum of energy issues including oil, gas and coal supply and demand, renewable energy technologies, electricity markets, energy efficiency, access to energy, demand side management and much more.
- Through its work, the IEA advocates policies that will enhance the reliability, affordability and sustainability of energy in its member countries and beyond.

PUBLICATIONS:

Today, the IEA is at the heart of global dialogue on energy, providing authoritative analysis through a wide range of publications, including the flagship World Energy Outlook and the IEA Market Reports; data and statistics, such as Key World Energy Statistics and the Monthly Oil Data Service; and a series of training and capacity building workshops, presentations, and resources.

The four main areas of IEA focus are:

- Energy Security: Promoting diversity, efficiency, flexibility and reliability for all fuels and energy sources;
- Economic Development: Supporting free markets to foster economic growth and eliminate energy poverty;
- Environmental Awareness: Analysing policy options to offset the impact of energy production and use on the environment, especially for tackling climate change and air pollution; and

- Engagement Worldwide: Working closely with partner countries, especially major emerging economies, to find solutions to shared energy and environmental concerns.

PADAYANIDANCE

Padayani festival was recently celebrated in Kerala.

About the festival:

Padayani is a traditional folk dance and a ritual art from the central portion of the Indian state of Kerala. A ceremonial dance involving masks, it is an ancient ritual performed in Bhagavati temples.

Background:

Padayani was performed by magico-medicine men of Kerala to heal the illnesses not amenable to medical modalities of intervention. It is believed that it is evolved from a symbolic past reminiscent of fencing march of martial art Kalari. Eventually in Kollam, Pathanamthitta, Alappuzha and Kottayam districts of Kerala, the Nair folk became the performers of the modern form of Padayani art, but the design and making of costumes vested with Kaniyar people.

Unique features:

- The dance is performed in honor of Bhadrakali.
- Meaning, a row of warriors, Padayani is an art form that blends music, dance, theatre, satire, facial masks, and paintings.
- Padayani is unique to central Travancore, comprising the Pathanamthitta district of Kerala.
- Padayani is regarded as a remnant of the Dravidian forms of worship that existed before the advent of Brahmanism.
- Kalan Kolam is the major attraction in padayani. This is about a child who is begging his life to lord siva while death comes in his 16th birthday.
- A major attraction of padayani is the song associated with it. Traditionally only a single type of instrument is used to associate the song, thappu.

CAG to audit UN Secretariat in New York

The Comptroller and Auditor General of India will audit the UN Secretariat in New York, a job which till now was the exclusive domain of developed countries.

- The CAG is the external auditor of several UN organisations and India's Shashi Kant Sharma is the Chairman of the UN Board of Auditors.

UN Board of Auditors:

The General Assembly established the United Nations Board of Auditors (Board) in 1946 as an important mechanism to promote accountability and transparency in the United Nations.

- The members of the Board have collective responsibility for the audits.
- Currently the heads of the SAIs of India, Tanzania and Germany are the members of the Board.
- The Auditors-Generals of UN member states are elected to the Board.

Functions of the board:

- The Board performs external audit of the accounts of the United Nations organization and its funds and programmes and reports its findings and recommendations to the Assembly through the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions.
- The Board provides independent assurance to Member States and other stakeholders regarding proper use of the resources of the United Nations and its funds and programmes.
- It reports on financial matters as well as on regularity and performance issues.
- It plays a significant role in assisting the United Nations to improve its operations and its internal control systems.
- The findings and recommendations of the Board have led to continuous systematic improvements in the functioning of the United Nations.

Myanmar joins ADB's South Asia economic body

Myanmar has formally become a full member of South Asia Subregional Economic Cooperation (SASEC) programme of Asian Development Bank (ADB) being the seventh country to join the group.

Significance of this move:

- Myanmar's membership in SASEC can offer a host of opportunities for realising synergies from economic cooperation in the sub-region. Myanmar is the key to realising greater connectivity and stronger trade and economic relations between SASEC sub-region and the countries of East and Southeast Asia.
- SASEC member-countries recognise that most of SASEC's multimodal connectivity initiatives include Myanmar as road corridors in Myanmar provide the key links between South Asia and Southeast Asia and ports in Myanmar will provide additional gateways to the landlocked North Eastern region of India.
- SASEC's energy connectivity and energy trade prospects will be enhanced with the inclusion of Myanmar, involving its substantial resources of hydropower and natural gas.

Background:

Myanmar was accorded an observer status of SASEC in 2013 when ADB's annual meeting was held in India and has been participating in annual SASEC Nodal Officials' meetings as an observer since 2014. It was invited by the participating countries of SASEC countries to become a full member in 2015.

About SASEC:

The SASEC programme of ADB was formed in 2001 in response to the request of Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal to assist in facilitating economic cooperation among them. Sri Lanka and Maldives joined the sub-regional group in 2014.

- As a project-based partnership, SASEC programme has been helping enhance cross-border connectivity, facilitate faster and more efficient trade and promote cross-border power trade.

- The Manila, Philippines-based Asian Development Bank (ADB) serves as the Secretariat for the SASEC member countries.

New tree-living crab species found in Kerala:

- Scientists have discovered a new species of long legged, tree-dwelling crabs in Western Ghats of Kerala. This is the first report of its kind to offer a record of an arboreal crab — a species that lives in trees.
- The new species named Kani maranjandu after the Kani tribe in Kerala, are substantially different from other congeners.
- The characteristic traits of the crab include the structure of its hard upper shell, its male abdominal structure and reproductive parts and diagnostic elongated walking legs.

Doctors artwork finds place in Guinness Book:

- A fingerprint painting, created by a group of Indian doctors as a symbolic representation to end frequent attacks against the fraternity, has found place in the Guinness Book of World Records as the world's largest such artwork.
- Titled "Ray of Hope", measuring 469.75 m, the painting was made up of 15 lakh finger impressions of doctors from different parts of the country, collected over a period of four months.
- The record title is in the name of Dr Naveen Koval, an assistant professor of Pediatrics at Kannur Medical College, Kerala, who conceptualised the work and Indian medical association.

MoU between India and Bangladesh

The Union Cabinet has approved MoU between India and Bangladesh for fairway development of Ashuganj-Zakiganj stretch of Kushiyara river and Sirajganj-Daikhawa stretch of Jamuna river in the Indo-Bangladesh protocol route by undertaking necessary dredging jointly by the two countries.

Benefits of this MoU:

The MoU will considerably reduce the logistics cost of cargo movement to North Eastern India. It will also reduce the congestion through the Siliguri Chicken's Neck corridor.

Background:

The Kushiyara River is a distributary river in Bangladesh and Assam, India. It forms on the India-Bangladesh border as a branch of the Barak River, when the Barak separates into the Kushiyara and Surma. The waters of the Kushiyara thus originate in the state of Nagaland in India and pick up tributaries from Manipur, Mizoram and Assam. The Kushiyara rejoins with the Surma at Markuli in Ajmiriganj upazila and flows south upto Bhairab Bazar receiving the name Kalni. The Kalni meets with the Dhanu, a branch of the Surma and renamed as the meghna.

The Jamuna River is the main distributary channel of the Brahmaputra River as it flows from India to Bangladesh. The Jamuna flows south and joins the Padma River, near Goalundo Ghat, before meeting the Meghna River near Chandpur. It then flows into the Bay of Bengal as the Meghna River.

Cabinet approves agreement on Audio Visual Co-Production between India and Bangladesh

The Union Cabinet has approved the agreement on Audio Visual Co-Production India and Bangladesh.

Salient features of the Agreement:

- The Agreement would cover co-production of films, documentaries, and animations films.
- An audio-visual co-production made in accordance with the proposed Agreement shall be entitled to all the benefits which may be accorded to any national audio-visual work by both countries in accordance with their respective laws and regulations.
- It will lead to exchange of art and culture among the two countries and create goodwill and better understanding among the peoples of both the countries.
- Co-productions provide an opportunity to create and showcase our soft power.
- It leads to generation of employment among artistic, technical as well as non-technical personnel engaged in the arena of Audio-Visual Co-production including post-production and its marketing, thus adding to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of both the countries.

- The utilization of Indian locales for shooting raises the visibility / prospect of India as a preferred film shooting destination across the globe.

Background:

- India has so far entered into audio-visual co-production agreements with Italy, United Kingdom, Germany, Brazil, France, New Zealand, Poland, Spain, Canada, China and the Republic of Korea.
- Cabinet approves extension of implementation of Crime and Criminal Tracking Network and Systems Project by one year
- The Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs has approved the proposal of the Ministry of Home Affairs for extension of the implementation phase of the Crime and Criminals Tracking Network and Systems (CCTNS) Project for another year beyond 31st March 2017.
- The extension would help in achieving the remaining objectives of the project comprehensively.

Impact of the CCTNS Project will lead to:

- Citizen portals in all states and Centre that will facilitate transparency and speed in police service delivery, online registration of complaints and reporting and search of missing persons and stolen goods in self-service mode.
- Pan-India search on complete National Crime and Criminal database that is accessible to the Investigating Officers throughout the country.
- Search facility will be available to Police in regional languages for improved inter-state tracking of criminal movement.
- Reliable network connectivity to all Police Stations in the country.
- National level crime analytics that will be published at, increased frequency to help policy and law makers in taking data backed timely actions and in making appropriate policy interventions.
- Integration with various e-Governance projects such as Aadhaar, National Population Register, Vaahan Project of the Ministry of Surface Transport, Passport Seva and National Emergency Response System Project thus

increasing the synergies and benefit accrued from these individual systems. It will expedite various kinds of police verification requests and investigation.

- Advanced features such as biometric based identification, trend and pattern analytics etc. that will be incorporated to enhance hi-tech investigation capability.

WHAT IS CCTNS PROJECT?

Crime and Criminal Tracking Network and Systems (CCTNS) is a project initiated in June 2009 which aims at creating a comprehensive and integrated system for enhancing the efficiency and effectiveness of policing at the Police Station level.

- This will be done through adoption of principles of e-Governance, and creation of a nationwide networked infrastructure for evolution of IT-enabled state-of-the-art tracking system around “investigation of crime and detection of criminals”.
- CCTNS is a Mission Mode Project (MMP) under the National e-Governance Plan of Govt. of India.

WHAT IT DOES?

- The Project will interconnect about 15000 Police Stations and additional 5000 offices of supervisory police officers across the country and digitize data related to FIR registration, investigation and charge sheets in all Police Stations.
- It will not only automate Police functions at Police station and higher levels but will also create facilities and mechanism to provide public services like registration of online complaints, ascertaining the status of case registered at the police station, verification of persons etc.
- In 2015, an additional objective of establishing a basic platform for an Inter-operable Criminal Justice System (ICJS) was added to the Project.

Benefits:

- The Full implementation of the Project with all the new components would lead to a Central citizen portal having linkages with State level citizen portals that will provide a number of citizen friendly services like Police Verification

for various purposes including passport verification, reporting a crime including cyber-crime and online tracking of the case progress etc.

- The project will enable National level crime analytics to be published at increased frequency, which will help the policy makers as well as lawmakers in taking appropriate and timely action, it will also enable Pan-India criminal/accused name search in the regional language for improved inter-state tracking of criminal movement.
- This would lead to development of a national database of crimes and criminals.

INDIA AND THE UK ANNOUNCE JOINT UK-INDIA FUND

India and the UK have announced the launch of an Early Market Engagement for the joint UK-India Fund, namely a Green Growth Equity Fund which aims to leverage private sector investment from the City of London to invest in green infrastructure projects in India.

- Both governments have reaffirmed their commitment to anchor invest up to £120 million each (i.e. totally £ 240 million) in the joint fund which will be established under the NIIF framework.
- To begin with, the fund aims to raise around £500 million, with the potential to unlock much more in future.

About Green Growth Equity Fund:

The Green Growth Equity Fund will be a sub-fund of NIIF. The Green Growth Equity Fund, promoted jointly by India and the UK, aims to leverage private sector investment to finance investments in the green infrastructure space in India.

- The GoI (through NIIF) and the UK government have committed to anchor-invest up to £120 million each in the joint Fund which aims to raise around £500m, and has the potential to unlock much more in future.
- A secondary benefit will be to attract investors based in the City of London into the Fund and/or its investee companies.
- The Fund will invest in mid to large-sized companies in the green infrastructure space in India. It will pursue a strategy of acquiring a mix of minority and majority stakes

(when it is essential to align interests and professionalize governance).

- GGEF would be managed by a third-party investment manager, selected by NIIF Limited and the UK government through an efficient and robust screening and selection process. At the same time, both partners will keep a watchful oversight on fund expenses and manager incentives, targeted to be kept at optimal levels to ensure best possible returns to investors.

CABINET APPROVES CLOSURE OF MAHATMA GANDHI PRAVASI SURAKSHA YOJANA

The Union Cabinet has approved closure of the Mahatma Gandhi Pravasi Suraksha Yojana (MGPSY) which was set up in 2012 to address the social security-related issues of the Emigration Check Required (ECR)-category workers going abroad for employment to ECR countries.

Why?

The subscription under the MGPSY was very low and no new subscription was received for more than a year. Closure of the scheme will, therefore, obviate the avoidable recurring administrative and record-keeping expenditure.

About the scheme:

Mahatma Gandhi Pravasi Suraksha Yojana is a special social security scheme which includes Pension and Life Insurance, introduced by Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs for the overseas Indian workers in possession of Emigration Check Required (ECR) passports.

- It is a voluntary scheme designed to help workers to meet their three financial needs: saving for retirement, saving for their return and resettlement, and providing free life insurance offering coverage for death from natural causes.

Geotagging of assets created under RKVY

The government has proposed to prepare inventory of the assets created in the last one decade (2007-2017) under RKVY through Geotagging technique.

- National Remote Sensing Centre (NRSC), wing of Indian Space Research Organisation is providing technical support to RKVY division and has come up with a detailed procedure for the same.

- The institute is involved in preparation of the required app, imparting training to the states etc.
- The trained officers at the field level will take the photographs (with details of latitude, longitude, year of creation etc.) of the assets and upload on to the Bhuvan-RKVY platform of NRSC.

What is geo tagging?

It is the process of adding geographical identification like latitude and longitude to various media such as a photo or video. Geotagging can help users find a wide variety of location-specific information from a device. It provides users the location of the content of a given picture.

Why is Geotagging important?

Several assets are created in the states under various schemes of the Ministry of Agriculture. Under RKVY also, states have been utilising substantial amount of funds for creation of infrastructure/assets in agriculture and allied sectors such as soil testing labs, pesticide testing labs etc. Monitoring of such wide spread activities is of paramount importance to states and Government of India to understand flow of funds, inventorising the assets, bringing in transparency, planning of assets for future, and finally informing the farmers about the facilities available.

Cabinet approves Collaboration Agreement to support the Belmont Forum Secretariat

The Union Cabinet has given its approval for signing of the Collaborative Agreement with French National Research Agency (ANR), France for supporting the Belmont Forum Secretariat from January, 2015 to December, 2017 at a total estimated expenditure of Euro 40,000. The Cabinet also approved continued financial support to Belmont Forum Secretariat beyond 2017.

What is Belmont Forum?

The Belmont Forum, created in 2009, is a high level group of the world's major and emerging funders of global environmental change research and international science councils.

What it does?

It provides an opportunity to identify study and deliver international environmental research priorities, for the society, in an accelerated way through trans-national research collaboration between natural and social scientists and alignment of international resources

Members:

India is a member of Belmont Forum, besides Australia, Brazil, Canada, European Commission, France, Germany, Japan, Netherland, South Africa, UK and USA etc.

Ministry of Earth Science (MoES), represents India in the Belmont Forum since 2012.

Secretariat:

In order to coordinate the activities of the Belmont, a Secretariat is hosted by one of the Belmont forum member on rotational basis. ANR, France is hosting the Secretariat from January, 2015 to December, 2017. Expenditure for hosting the Secretariat will be borne by Belmont Forum member countries in kind or cash contribution.

Significance of the agreement signed by India:

The Agreement will help to maintain a certain degree of continuity in the operations of the Forum and also help in smooth coordination of the activities of Belmont Forum. As India is already participating in 4 Collaborative Research Actions (CRAs) and Secretariat will be coordinating the activities of Belmont Forum, Indian scientific community will ultimately benefit from this agreement.

Rail regulator gets green light

The Centre has cleared the decks for setting up an independent rail regulator, named Rail Development Authority (RDA).

Background:

The need for a regulator has been emphasised by various committees, including the Dr. Bibek Debroy Committee on Mobilisation of Resources for Major Railway Projects and Restructuring of Railway Ministry in 2015, the National Transport Development Policy Committee (NTDPC) in

2014 and Expert Group under the Chairmanship of Dr. Rakesh Mohan in 2001.

Key facts:

- RDA will be based in Delhi with an initial corpus of Rs. 50 crore and will be set up through an executive order.
- The RDA will act within the parameters of the Railway Act, 1989 and only make recommendations to the Ministry which will take a final call on passenger and freight fares.

Functions of RDA:

The Authority's primary functions will be to recommend tariff "commensurate with costs," frame principles for social service obligation, and ensure a level playing field for stakeholders by suggesting policies for private investment. It will also fix efficiency standards and resolve disputes related to future concession agreements. It will also collect, analyse and disseminate information and statistics concerning the rail sector.

Composition of RDA:

The Authority will have a Chairman and three members with a fixed term of five years and will be allowed to engage experts from various fields. "The RDA will be an independent body with separate budget. The independence is ensured through separate budget, appointment and removal process," the statement added.

The Chairman and members of the Authority will be appointed by a Search and Selection Committee headed by the Cabinet Secretary with members including the Railway Board Chairman, Department of Personnel and Training Secretary and Chairman of any regulatory body of the Central Government nominated by the Cabinet Secretary.

Significance of this move:

- The move will improve the services offered to passengers, provide comfort to investors in the rail sector and will enhance transparency and accountability.
- Keeping rail fares within affordable limits has led to cross-subsidisation as the goods fares have increased considerably more than the passenger fares in the past.

Now, the regulator should be the final authority in determining the fares instead of making recommendations.

Mexico to put endangered vaquita porpoises in refuge

In a bid to save the world's smallest species of porpoise from extinction, the Mexican government has announced plans to place some of them in a temporary refuge. The plan would be carried out with the help of international organisations.

Controversy:

The plan is controversial with conservationists, some of whom say the vaquita is not an animal that can thrive in captivity.

Background:

Scientists warned in February that there are only 30 vaquita remaining, saying the species faced extinction by 2022.

About Vaquita Marina porpoise:

- The vaquita (*Phocoena sinus*) is the world's smallest cetacean. Its name means "little cow" in Spanish.
- A dark ring around the eyes is its most striking feature, along with a proportionally large dorsal fin.
- The vaquita is unique among the porpoises as it is the only species of that family found in warm waters, and the size of the dorsal fin is believed to be an adaptation to that, allowing for extra body heat to dissipate.
- Vaquita only live in the northern Gulf of California, the Sea of Cortez, Mexico.
- Like many other species of porpoise, vaquita tend to be shy and elusive, avoiding boats when approached. They are most commonly sighted in shallow waters up to 50 metres deep.
- It is classified as critically endangered by the IUCN.

What are Porpoises?

Porpoises are among the smallest members of the cetacean family (whales, porpoises and dolphins). They are only distant relatives of dolphins (they last had a common ancestor roughly 15 million years ago). There are only

seven species of porpoise; the most popular being the widely distributed harbour porpoise.

MoU between India and Bangladesh:

- The Union Cabinet has approved MoU on passenger cruise services on the coastal and protocol routes between India and Bangladesh for starting regular movement of passengers and tourists in water crafts between the two countries.
- The operationalization of this MoU will promote people to people contact and cooperation between the two countries in respect of economic, social and cultural advancement. It will also generate employment opportunities for the people of India and Bangladesh.

National Maritime Day:

- 54th National Maritime Day was observed on April 5th. It was first celebrated on April 5, 1964.
- In India, April 5 is marked as the National Maritime Day commemorating the first voyage of the SS Loyalty, the first ship of Scindia Steam Navigation Company towards United Kingdom on this day in 1919.

Multi-Modal Terminal at Sahibganj

Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi recently laid the foundation stone of the multi-modal terminal at Sahibganj, Jharkhand.

Key facts:

- The terminal at Sahibganj is an important component of the Jal Marg Vikas Project (JMVP) for the augmentation of the navigation capacity of National Waterway-1 (Ganga) from Varanasi to Haldia (1390 km).
- A Roll-on Roll-off (Ro-Ro) terminal at Sahibganj will provide critical connectivity to Bihar at Manihari for the cross –river movement of loaded and empty trucks. This will considerably reduce the cost and time of cargo movement between Sahibganj and Manihari.
- The state of the art terminal at Sahibganj will have cargo handling capacity of 2.24 Million Tons Per Annum (MTPA) on completion in 2019. The overall cost of the Sahibganj terminal is estimated to be Rs 467 Crore.

- The construction of multi-modal terminal and Ro-Ro terminal will help create substantial direct and indirect employment in Sahibganj and Jharkhand. Overall additional employment opportunities for 1.5 lakh persons are expected to be generated under the Jal Marg Vikas Project on Ganga river.

Benefits for Jharkhand:

- The Sahibganj Multi Modal Terminal will link the city and the landlocked state of Jharkhand to foreign shores through the Bay of Bengal.
- The terminal will generate considerable direct and indirect employment for local people also.
- Jharkhand is richly endowed with mineral resources. The multi-modal terminal at Sahibganj will play an important role in transportation of domestic coal from the local mines (in Rajmahal area) to various thermal power plants located along NW-1.

Background:

Sahibganj terminal is the second multi-modal terminal (out of the three) to be constructed on NW-1. In May 2016, IWAI had awarded the contract for the construction of a multi-modal terminal at Varanasi. The third terminal will be constructed at Haldia in West Bengal where the work is expected to commence soon. River Ganga is being developed under the Jal Marg Vikas Project (JMVP) with the technical and financial assistance of World Bank at an estimated cost of Rs. 5369 crore. The project would enable commercial navigation of vessels with capacity of 1500-2,000 DWT.

NW 1: Ganga-Bhagirathi-Hooghly river system from Allahabad to Haldia was declared as National Waterway No.1. The NW-1 passes through Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand and West Bengal and serves major cities and their industrial hinterlands.

Centre hands over to SC accreditation guidelines for NGOs, Vos

The Centre has handed over to the Supreme Court the new guidelines framed for accreditation of nearly 30 lakh NGOs and voluntary organisations (VOs) in the country.

Background:

The Ministry of Rural Development has framed the accreditation guidelines to regulate “manner in which the VOs/NGOs, which are recipient of grants, would maintain their account, the procedure for audit of the account, including procedure to initiate action for recovering of the grants in case of misappropriation and criminal action.”

Some of the important guidelines are as follows :

- NITI Aayog has been appointed as the nodal agency for the purpose of registration and accreditation of VOs/NGOs seeking funding from the Government of India. The Aayog has been also tasked with maintaining of database systems to manage and disseminate information relating to NGOs/ VOs.
- As per the new guidelines, an NGO will be blacklisted if it provides false and misleading information to the Centre.
- Under the stringent guidelines, NGOs would be provided a unique ID and subjected to the Income Tax Act and Foreign Contribution Regulations act. They would be granted accreditation after their internal governance and ethical standards are evaluated.
- Past record of NGOs too would be scrutinized before they are given accreditation. A three-tier scrutiny would be in place to evaluate utilization of funds and the process would also include quality of work done by the NGOs.
- It would be mandatory for the NGOs to execute a bond to refund the amount with 10% interest if they fail to execute the project for which the grant is allocated. Misappropriation of funds would invite both criminal and civil cases.

Need for the new guidelines:

The Supreme Court had in January directed the government to audit nearly 30 lakh NGOs which received public funds but consistently failed to explain how they spent the money.

- The court had ordered that any NGO, found in the audit, to have cooked its books or indulged in misappropriation of the public funds should be subject to immediate criminal prosecution. Besides, the government should initiate civil recovery proceedings from these rogue NGOs. The court

had demanded that the government file a compliance report by March 31, 2017.

- The judicial order was unprecedented as defaulting NGOs were till then only subjected to blacklisting by the government.

Ties severely damaged, says China

The row between India and China on the visit of the Dalai Lama to Arunachal Pradesh has spiralled with the Chinese Foreign Ministry asserting that the Tibetan leader’s visit to the State will escalate the dispute in border areas and will damage Sino-Indian ties.

Border issue between India and China:

Arunachal Pradesh is at the heart of the Sino-Indian boundary dispute in the eastern sector.

- The dispute in this zone is over territory south of the McMahon Line in Arunachal Pradesh, which includes Tawang — which is on the Dalai Lama’s itinerary.
- The McMahon Line was the result of the 1914 Simla Convention, between British India and Tibet, and was rejected by China.

Supreme Court proposes joint trial of Babri cases

Noting that the 25-year pendency of the dual Babri Masjid demolition case trials in Lucknow and Raebareli amounts to “evasion of justice”, the Supreme Court has indicated that it proposes to order a joint trial in a Lucknow court after reviving criminal conspiracy charges against BJP veterans L.K. Advani, Murli Manohar Joshi and other Sangh Parivar leaders in connection with the razing down of the 16th century mosque in Ayodhya on December 6, 1992 by kar sevaks.

Is court empowered to order joint trial of cases?

In this context, the court has invoked its extraordinary constitutional powers under Article 142.

Article 142: The Supreme Court may pass such decree or order as is necessary for doing complete justice in any cause or matter pending before it.

Background:

The recent highway liquor ban was also imposed by the court under Article 142.

FMCG is highest paying sector in India: Randstad

FMCG is highest paying sector in India, according to a survey by Randstad.

Highlights of the survey:

- Employees of fast moving consumer goods (FMCG) industry receive the highest salaries in India at ₹ 11.3 lakh a year as the average annual cost-to-company (CTC) across all levels and functions.
- The FMCG sector is followed by power and information technology, where employees earn average annual salaries of ₹ 9.8 lakh and ₹ 9.3 lakh respectively, according to Randstad 2017 Salary Trends Study findings.
- Pharma and healthcare, offering an average annual CTC of ₹ 8.8 lakh and telecom ₹ 8.7 lakhs take the fourth and fifth position in the list as India's most lucrative industries.
- As far as the location-specific salary trends are concerned, Bengaluru, the IT capital of India tops the chart as the highest paying city in the country, with an average annual CTC of ₹ 14.6 lakhs while Mumbai offered ₹ 14.2 lakh.

Background:

In a country like India where job loyalty is considerably low, salary becomes one of the most critical parameters that workforce takes into consideration while changing jobs. For employers too, it is an imperative to get the internal compensation structure right, which is primarily a function of various facets like capability, experience, location, job profile, industry of operation etc.

Thailand's king signs new constitution

Thailand's new king has signed an army-drafted constitution that sets the country on the path to elections while cementing the grip of the military over any future government.

- The constitution is the nation's 20th since the absolute monarchy was abolished in 1932.

Key features of the new constitution:

- The new charter introduces a different electoral system, a modified proportional method of choosing the 500 members of the lower house of parliament in which people vote for one of 350 constituency candidates; those votes are totalled to determine which of the remaining 150 party list seats go to which party. Under the previous system voters cast two ballots, one for the candidate and one for the party.
- Along with weaker governments, the constitution stipulates that an unelected, 250-seat upper house, or senate, will wield significant influence in the years following the election, currently expected at the end of 2018.
- Membership of the senate will be essentially determined by the military, giving the generals enormous sway over future governments, which would need three quarters of the seats in the lower house to have a majority in both houses.
- Elected governments will also be bound in this constitution to follow the military's 20-year blueprint for Thailand, and it will be easier for the "independent" bodies, like the Constitutional Court, which will have enhanced powers, to constrain those governments even further.

Centre kicks off programme on cyber physical systems

With autonomous vehicles and robot-executed surgeries becoming commonplace around the world, the Department of Science and Technology (DST) has initiated a Cyber Physical Systems (CPS) programme.

About the programme :

- CPS is an interdisciplinary field that deals with the deployment of computer-based systems that do things in the physical world, such as, for instance, the self-driven cars produced by Google and Tesla.
- Even smart grids (where electricity is optimally distributed on the basis of calculations in real time by micro-processors) as well as autonomous unmanned vehicles and aircraft navigation systems qualify as 'cyber physical systems.'
- Still at a nascent stage, it has been conceived as a ₹ 3,000-crore exercise that would, at first, take root in some of the

Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs), according to officials familiar with the project. An initial budget of ₹ 100 crore has been earmarked for the project in the current financial year.

- The thrust of the initiative would be to “break silos” in academia and encourage greater synergy between the university scientists and industry.

INDIA TAKES OVER CONTROL OF KUDANKULAM UNIT 1

India has taken over full operational control of Unit 1 of the Kudankulam Nuclear Power Plant (KKNPP). An agreement was signed in this regard recently.

- With the deal, the Russian and the Indian sides have confirmed fulfilment of all warranty terms and obligations of the contractor (ASE Group of Companies) for the construction of Unit 1.

About Kudankulam Nuclear Power Plant:

Kudankulam Nuclear Power Plant is situated in Koodankulam in the Tirunelveli district of the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu.

- The reactors are pressurised water reactor of Russian design. Thermal capacity is 3,000 MW, gross electrical capacity is 1,000 MW with a net capacity of 917 MW.
- When completed the plant will become the largest nuclear power generation complex in India producing a cumulative 2 GW of electric power.
- Pressurized water reactors (PWRs) are one of three types of light water reactor (LWR), the other types being boiling water reactors (BWRs) and supercritical water reactors (SCWRs). In a PWR, the primary coolant (water) is pumped under high pressure to the reactor core where it is heated by the energy released by the fission of atoms. The heated water then flows to a steam generator where it transfers its thermal energy to a secondary system where steam is generated and flows to turbines which, in turn, spin an electric generator. In contrast to a boiling water reactor, pressure in the primary coolant loop prevents the water from boiling within the reactor. All LWRs use ordinary water as both coolant and neutron moderator.

First NIMCARE World Health Day Summit 2017

The first NIMCARE World Health Day Summit 2017 was recently held in New Delhi.

- The slogan of the first NIMCARE World Health Day Summit is, ‘Unite for a Healthy Mind’.
- The summit will focus on the importance of talking about depression as a vital component of recovery.

Background:

Out of all the mental health disorders, depression is the most common. Depression affects people of all ages from all walks of life and in all countries. As per the National Mental Health Survey 2015-16 conducted by NIMHANS, 5.2% of the Indian adult population suffers from depression in some form or the other. The problem of depression often gets ignored due to lack of understanding on the part of family members. The social stigma attached to a mental disorder, even if it is easily treatable, is also a major problem in India.

Way ahead:

The stigma surrounding mental illness, including depression, remains a barrier to people seeking help throughout the world. Talking about depression, whether with a family member, friend or medical professional; in larger groups, for example in schools, the workplace and social settings; or in the public domain, in the news media, blogs or social media, helps break down this stigma, ultimately leading to more people seeking help.

NIM CARE is a non-profit organisation founded in the year 2009, a registered Charitable Trust under the Government of Tamil Nadu.

MIS for monitoring PMKSY Projects

The government has launched MIS for monitoring PMKSY Projects.

Key facts:

- Under the new MIS, Project wise nodal officers have been nominated for regularly feeding the physical and financial progress of the projects.

- Project wise/ Priority wise /Statewise physical/financial details in tabular/graphical format are available in MIS.
- It has the feature of comparing the progress of the project on quarterly basis and also provides details of the constraints affecting the progress of the project.

About PMKSY:

PMKSY has been conceived amalgamating ongoing schemes viz. Accelerated Irrigation Benefit Programme (AIBP) of the Ministry of Water Resources, River Development & Ganga Rejuvenation (MoWR, RD&GR), Integrated Watershed Management Programme (IWMP) of Department of Land Resources (DoLR) and the On Farm Water Management (OFWM) of Department of Agriculture and Cooperation (DAC).

Objectives of the scheme:

The major objective of PMKSY is to achieve convergence of investments in irrigation at the field level, expand cultivable area under assured irrigation, improve on-farm water use efficiency to reduce wastage of water, enhance the adoption of precision-irrigation and other water saving technologies (More crop per drop), enhance recharge of aquifers and introduce sustainable water conservation practices by exploring the feasibility of reusing treated municipal waste water for peri-urban agriculture and attract greater private investment in precision irrigation system.

Implementation of the scheme:

The scheme will be implemented by Ministries of Agriculture, Water Resources and Rural Development.

- Ministry of Rural Development is to mainly undertake rain water conservation, construction of farm pond, water harvesting structures, small check dams and contour bunding etc.
- MoWR, RD &GR, is to undertake various measures for creation of assured irrigation source, construction of diversion canals, field channels, water diversion/lift irrigation, including development of water distribution systems.
- Ministry of Agriculture will promote efficient water conveyance and precision water application devices like drips, sprinklers, pivots, rain-guns in the farm “(Jal

Sinchan)”, construction of micro-irrigation structures to supplement source creation activities, extension activities for promotion of scientific moisture conservation and agronomic measures.

Monitoring:

Programme architecture of PMKSY will be to adopt a ‘decentralized State level planning and projectised execution’ structure that will allow States to draw up their own irrigation development plans based on District Irrigation Plan (DIP) and State Irrigation Plan (SIP).

- It will be operative as convergence platform for all water sector activities including drinking water & sanitation, MGNREGA, application of science & technology etc. through comprehensive plan. State Level Sanctioning Committee (SLSC) chaired by the Chief Secretary of the State will be vested with the authority to oversee its implementation and sanction projects.
- The programme will be supervised and monitored by an Inter-Ministerial National Steering Committee (NSC) will be constituted under the Chairmanship of Prime Minister with Union Ministers from concerned Ministries.
- A National Executive Committee (NEC) will be constituted under the Chairmanship of Vice Chairman, NITI Aayog to oversee programme implementation, allocation of resources, inter ministerial coordination, monitoring & performance assessment, addressing administrative issues etc.

India jumps 12 spots in WEF’s global travel & tourism ranking

The Travel & Tourism Competitiveness Report 2017 has been released by the World Economic Forum.

- The report ranks 136 countries across 14 dimensions, revealing how well countries could deliver sustainable economic and societal benefits through their travel and tourism sector.

About the index:

The Travel and Tourism Competitiveness Index measures “the set of factors and policies that enable the sustainable development of the travel and tourism sector, which in turn, contributes to the development and competitiveness

of a country". The Travel and Tourism Competitiveness Index enables all stakeholders to work together to improve the industry's competitiveness in their national economies.

Performance of India:

- India is ranked 40
- India is one of the countries that improved the most as it gained 12 places in Asia, but lagged behind its other Asian peers like Japan and China which were ranked way ahead at 4th and 13th place, respectively.
- Some of the factors that helped India climb up the ladder include international openness through strong policies such as implementing visa on arrival and e-visas, and improvements in the country's ground transport infrastructure which benefited the travel and tourism sector in the country.
- India has seen continued growth in international arrivals over the past 15 years, reaching the 8 million mark in 2015. The report, however, noted that though health conditions are improving, they remain "inadequate". Similarly, ICT readiness, security concerns and human resources are improving, but remain "weak".

Global scenario:

In the global ranking Spain, France and Germany were ranked at the top three positions, making them the most tourism friendly economies.

- Traditional strong travel and tourism destinations, including Japan (4th), the United Kingdom (5th), the United States (6th), Australia (7th), Italy (8th), Canada (9th) and Switzerland (10th), have also made it to the top 10.
- While advanced economies still hold the top slots, 12 of the top 15 most improved countries are emerging markets.

Ken-Betwa link hits green hurdle

India's apex forest advisory body- the Forest Advisory Committee (FAC), has imposed tough conditions on the Ken-Betwa river interlinking project.

Background:

Given the ecological and environmental impact posed by the project, the project had to pass multiple authorities for clearance. A forest advisory clearance was seen to be the last step before the project was to begin.

What has the FAC said?

As compensation for the pristine Panna tiger habitat that would be inundated by the project, the Water Ministry had agreed to acquire about 8,000 hectares of forest land from the Madhya Pradesh government and revive them as forest.

- But the FAC said this land was not good enough as it was fragmented, and, to meaningfully revive a forest that is part of tiger habitat, the land acquired ought to be contiguous. This would require, according to the FAC, "revenue lands/non-forest lands by way of purchase or otherwise by the project proponents and the government".
- While a State can relatively allocate forest land for Central projects, transferring private or revenue land is harder, time-consuming and costly. The FAC has also asked for the project's main canal to be re-aligned.

About the project:

The Ken and Betwa rivers in the states of Uttar Pradesh (UP) and Madhya Pradesh (MP) are to be linked under an historic agreement that marks the first such project in India's ambitious and controversial national river-linking project.

- The project envisages construction of a dam across river Ken in Chhatarpur district in Madhya Pradesh to irrigate 6.35 lakh hectare area of land, drinking water purposes and generation of 78 MW hydropower.
- The project comprises two powerhouse of 2x30 MW and 3x6 MW each, two tunnels of 1.9 km long upper level, 1.1 km long tunnel lower level and a 221 km long Ken-Betwa link canal, proposed on the left bank of the river.
- The project will provide irrigation facilities for 6,35,661 hectares of land in Panna, Chhatarpur, Tikamgarh districts in Madhya Pradesh, and Banda, Mahoba and Jhansi districts in Uttar Pradesh.

Sarin gas: what is it?

The United States believes the Syrian government employed a sarin-like nerve agent in recent deadly attack in the country's northwest.

What is Sarin gas?

The name sarin comes from the chemists who discovered it by chance: Schrader, Ambros, Ruediger et Van der Linde.

- Originally conceived as a pesticide, sarin was used by Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein's regime to gas thousands of Kurds in the northern town of Halabja in 1988.
- Inhaled or absorbed through the skin, the gas kills by crippling the respiratory center of the central nervous system and paralyzing the muscles around the lungs.
- The combination results in death by suffocation, and sarin can contaminate food or water supplies, according to the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).
- Symptoms of exposure to the agent include nausea and violent headaches, blurred vision, drooling, muscle convulsions, respiratory arrest and loss of consciousness.
- Sarin is 26 times more deadly than cyanide gas. Even when it does not kill, sarin's effects can cause permanent harm—damaging a victim's lungs, eyes and central nervous system.
- Heavier than air, the gas can linger in an area for up to six hours, depending on weather conditions.

Atmosphere found around Earth-like planet GJ 1132b

Scientists say they have detected an atmosphere around an Earth-like planet for the first time.

Key facts:

- Scientists studied a world known as GJ 1132b, which is 4-times the size of our planet and lies 39 light years away.
- Their observations suggest that the "super-Earth" is cloaked in a thick layer of gases that are either water or methane or a mixture of both.

- The discovery of planet GJ 1132b was first announced in 2015. It lies in the Vela constellation in the southern hemisphere.
- While it is a similar size to Earth, the star it orbits is much smaller, cooler and dimmer than our Sun.
- The observations of planet GJ 1132b suggest that it has a thick atmosphere containing either steam and/or methane.
- Discovering an atmosphere, and characterising it, is an important step forward in the hunt for life beyond our Solar System. But it is highly unlikely that this world is habitable: it has a surface temperature of 370C.

North India to get its first DNA bank for wild animals

In a milestone for wildlife conservation in the country, Indian Veterinary Research Institute (IVRI) is planning to set up a DNA bank for wild animals, the first of its kind in North India. Scientists have so far collected samples of 140 species. A DNA bank exists in Hyderabad at present.

What is it for?

Through the DNA bank, scientists at IVRI's Centre for Wildlife will be able to tell the name and schedule of the species if they get only a part of the meat, hair, blood, skin or bone of any animal.

- The move will help clamp down on wildlife poaching and smuggling, and also aid in research on wildlife species.

Need for DNA Bank:

Forest and police officials at times catch poachers and recover animal parts but the species of the animals is difficult to determine. Experts at times are able to suspect the species based on the type of meat or bone and the population of animals present in the area of origin of the body parts.

But if scientists get any animal's meat, hair, blood or any other part from which cells can be obtained, they will compare it with the DNA bank to know the name and schedule of species. The schedule of the species will help in knowing that whether animal falls in endangered category or not.

Kolkata- Khulna-Dhaka bus service flagged off

A Kolkata-Khulna-Dhaka bus service was recently ceremoniously flagged off from Kolkata. This is a part of several initiatives being taken to strengthen bilateral relations between India and Bangladesh.

- This is for the first time, Kolkata and Khulna are being directly connected through a bus route.
- It will be a 409 Km long bus route from Kolkata via Khulna to Dhaka.

Background:

Presently, the bus services are being operated on the Kolkata-Dhaka and Kolkata- Dhaka-Agaratala routes. They are being run by the State Transport Corporations of West Bengal and Tripura, besides Bangladesh Road Transport Corporation.

Indo – Mongolian Joint Exercise : Nomadic Elephant

Twelfth iteration of Indo – Mongolian Joint Military Exercise Nomadic Elephant is presently underway at Vaireng in Mizoram.

Key facts:

- Nomadic Elephant is aimed at training the troops in Counter Insurgency & Counter Terrorism Operations under the United Nations mandate.
- The joint training will also lay emphasis on conducting operations by a joint subunit, comprising of troops from both the armies, in adverse operational conditions aimed at enhancing the interoperability between the two armies.

UN counter terrorism strategy:**About Mongolia:**

- Mongolia is a landlocked unitary sovereign state in East Asia.
- It is sandwiched between China to the south and Russia to the north.
- It is also the world's second-largest landlocked country behind Kazakhstan and the largest landlocked country that does not border a closed sea.

- Meeting of Inter-State Council

The Union Home Minister, Shri Rajnath Singh recently chaired the 11th Standing Committee meeting of the Inter-State Council.

- The council was attended by Chief Ministers of various states.

What is the inter-state council?

The Council is a recommendatory body to investigate and discuss subjects, in which some or all of the states or the union government have a common interest.

Key facts:

- Article 263 of the Constitution of India provides for the establishment of an Inter-State Council.
- It considers recommendations for the better coordination of policy and action, and also matters of general interest to the states.
- The inter-state council is not a permanent constitutional body for coordination between the states and union government. It can be established 'at any time' if it appears to the President that the public interests would be served by the establishment of such a council.

What is the composition of the inter-state council?**The Council shall consist of:**

- Prime minister who is the chairman.
- Chief ministers of all states who are members.
- Chief ministers of union territories and administrators of UTs as members.
- Six union ministers of cabinet rank in the union council of ministers nominated by the prime minister are also members.

Bharat ke Veer

It is a web portal and mobile application launched recently on the occasion of Valour Day of Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF).

- The portal is an IT based platform, with an objective to enable willing donors to contribute towards the family of a braveheart who sacrificed his/her life in line of duty.
- This website is technically supported by National Informatics Centre (NIC) and powered by State Bank of India.

What it does?

This domain allows anyone to financially support the bravehearts of his choice or towards the “Bharat Ke Veer” corpus. The amount so donated will be credited to the account of ‘Next of Kin’ of those Central Armed Police Force/Central Para Military Force soldiers.

To ensure maximum coverage, a cap of 15 lakh rupees is imposed and the donors would be alerted if the amount exceeds, so that they can choose to divert part of the donation to another braveheart account or to the “Bharat Ke Veer” corpus.

Who will manage the fund?

“Bharat Ke Veer” corpus would be managed by a committee made up of eminent persons of repute and senior Government officials, who would decide to disburse the fund equitably to the braveheart’s family on need basis.

Background:

The Valour Day is celebrated in remembrance of an act of unparalleled bravery displayed by a small contingent of CRPF personnel, pitted against a full-fledged infantry brigade of Pakistani Army, trying to overrun their post, at Sardar Post, Rann of Kutch, Gujarat on April 09, 1965. They not only defeated the Pakistani brigade but also killed 34 Pakistani soldiers and captured 4 of them alive. The CRPF successfully defended the post till the arrival of reinforcements. The saga of valour of Sardar Post is a rich source of inspiration to the officers and men of CRPF and befittingly 9th April is observed as the “Valour Day”.

Vulnerable tribes: lost in a classification trap

A recent Anthropological Survey of India (AnSI) publication has brought to the fore startling revelations about the Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) in the country including the fact that no base line surveys

have been conducted among more than half of such groups.

Highlights of the survey:

- According to the survey, of the 75 PVTGs, base line surveys exist for about 40 groups, even after declaring them as PVTGs. Base line surveys are done to precisely identify the PVTG families, their habitat and socio-economic status, so that development initiatives are implemented for these communities, based on the facts and figures.
- Among the 75 listed PVTG’s the highest number are found in Odisha (13), followed by Andhra Pradesh (12), Bihar including Jharkhand (9) Madhya Pradesh including Chhattisgarh (7) Tamil Nadu (6) Kerala and Gujarat having five groups each. The remaining PVTGs live in West Bengal (3) Maharashtra (3), two each in Karnataka and Uttarakhand and one each in Rajasthan, Tripura and Manipur. All the four tribal groups in Andamans, and one in Nicobar Islands, are recognised as PVTGs.
- Some of the PVTGs are distributed in more than one State. The Birhor are recognised as a PVTG in four States, while 10 other groups are PVTG in two States, namely the Sahariya, Kurumba, Koraga, Korwa, JenuKuruba, Kattunayakan, Katkari/Kathodi, Kharia, Kolam, and Lodha. Thus, the number of the PVTGs at the national level would be 63.
- Regional and State-specific variations in welfare schemes for PVTGs has also been highlighted. While Odisha has established exclusive micro-projects for the PVTGs, there are none such in for the five PVTGs in Gujarat.
- In Tamil Nadu, development schemes are being monitored through the Tribal Research Centre, Ooty, and implemented by the State government. However, in Karnataka, all affairs of two the PVTGs are handled by the Social Welfare Department, which extends some schemes as per their knowledge, barely receiving any professional advice. Only recently, the Karnataka Tribal Research Centre was established at Mysore while many States did so decades ago.
- In some cases, a PVTG receives benefits only in a few blocks in a district, while the same group is deprived in adjacent blocks. The reason is that micro-projects extend benefits only within their jurisdiction.

- There is a huge variation in the number of PVTGs ranging from a few individuals as in case of Great Andamanese, Onge and Sentinelese and about a little more than a thousand people as in the case of Toda of Nilgiris. Although PVTGs are slowly witnessing decadal increase in their population, quite a few still face stagnation such as the Birhor in central India. Some are declining like the Onge and Andamanese.
- Smallest population size among the PVTGs are the Sentinelese (as per the last contact effort on March 9, 2005, groups of 32 and 13 persons were sighted at different places). They still shy away from others. The Great Andamanese (57 persons) and the Onge (107 persons in 2012 as per Andaman Adim Janjati Vikas Samiti) are the dwindling populations. In main land, the Toto of West Bengal (314 families with 1,387 persons as per 2011 census) and the Toda of Tamil Nadu (1,608, inclusive of 238 Christian Todas as per TRC, Udagamandalam [Ooty], 2011)) have population less than 2000 persons. The Saharia people of Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan are the largest among the PVTGs with population more than 4 lakhs.
- Literacy rate among the PVTGs has gone up significantly over the past. From a single digit literacy rate, the figures have increased to 30 to 40 % in many of the PVTGs. However, as is the case with entire India, female literacy rate is still considerably lower compared to male counterpart.
- The authors have pointed out at a considerable increase in the age of marriage among PVTGs. The incidence of girl child being married while still being a minor, among these tribes has been decreasing.

Way ahead:

The survey has asked the State governments to conduct baseline surveys to arrive at accurate demographic and socio-economic figures of the PVTGs. It also points out that the PVTG list requires revising and refinement to avoid overlapping and repetition.

Background:

PVTGs are more vulnerable among the tribal groups. Due to this factor, more developed and assertive tribal groups take a major chunk of the tribal development funds, because of which PVTGs need more funds directed for their

development. In this context, in 1975, the Government of India initiated to identify the most vulnerable tribal groups as a separate category called PVTGs and declared 52 such groups, while in 1993 an additional 23 groups were added to the category, making it a total of 75 PVTGs out of 705 Scheduled Tribes, spread over 17 states and one Union Territory (UT), in the country (2011 census).

Industry charts agenda for India-Bangladesh trade

Leading industry bodies of India and Bangladesh, the FICCI and the FBCCI, have brought out a six-point agenda to boost trade and investment between India and Bangladesh.

The agenda includes:

- Setting up a Joint Task Force on Tariff and Non-Tariff Barriers.
- Setting up a Joint Task Force to promote Indian investments in Bangladesh in the focus areas of infrastructure, education, healthcare, power and tourism.
- Connectivity initiatives for expansion of sub-regional cooperation among BBIN (Bhutan-Bangladesh- India-Nepal) countries to cover links through road, rail, rivers, sea, transmission lines, petroleum pipelines and digital.
- Pursuing joint investments and a road-map for cooperation in the Bay of Bengal in exploration of hydrocarbons, marine resources, deep sea fishing, preservation of marine ecology and disaster management.
- Collaboration in knowledge sharing to facilitate innovation and research and forming a partnership on skill development.

'Swachagraha-Bapu Ko Karyanjali' exhibition

To mark the 100-year anniversary of Satyagrah movement, led by Mahatma Gandhi, an exhibition "swachagraha" Bapu Ko Karyanjali"- A Mission, An Exhibition, at the National Archives of India, was recently inaugurated.

Key facts:

- The exhibition aims to sensitise future generations to fulfill Gandhi's dream of Swachh Bharat, "where society's reflection would be as clean as the thought within, of every citizen of India.

- The 'digital' and 'experimental' exhibition hopes to form a link between the essential principle of Satyagrah 'Jeevan-Chakra' evolved with the 'Swacchagraha movement'.
- The exhibition succinctly depicts the events that unfolded in Champaran on April 10, 1917, when Gandhi started the Satyagrah movement, to fight for the rights of Indigo plantation farmers living in the region.

About the Satyagraha:

It was undertaken in the erstwhile undivided Champaran district in northern Bihar. Mahatma Gandhi went there in April, 1917 on learning about the abuses suffered by the cultivators of the district, forced into growing indigo by British planters/estate owners.

- Even Gandhi was reluctant to commit himself to task in the beginning. But he was so thoroughly persuaded by Rajkumar Shukla, an indigo cultivator from Champaran that he decided to investigate into the matter.
- Gandhi's method of inquiry at Champaran was based on surveys by the volunteers. The respondents who willingly gave statements should sign the papers or give thumb impressions. For those unwilling to participate, the reasons must be recorded by the volunteers. The principal volunteers in this survey were mostly lawyers like Babu Rajendra Prasad, Dharnidhar Prasad, Gorakh Prasad, Ramnawami Prasad, Sambhusaran and Anugraha Narain Sinha.
- In June 1917, the British administration declared the formation of a formal inquiry committee with Gandhi aboard. The Government accepted almost all its recommendations to the benefit of the ryats. The principal recommendation accepted was complete abolition of Tinkathia system. It was a major blow to the British planters who became resentful. But they could not prevent the passage of Champaran Agrarian Act in Bihar & Orissa Legislative Council on March 4, 1918.

Tu-142M:

- Navy's flagship anti-submarine aircraft Tu-142M will be turned into a museum.
- The aircraft will be given to the Andhra Pradesh government to be converted into a museum and kept on

the Beach Road close to the Submarine Kursura in Visakhapatnam.

World Homeopathy Day:

- World Homeopathy Day is being observed on 10 April 2017.
- It commemorates the 262nd birth anniversary of the founder of Homeopathy, Dr. Christian Friedrich Samuel Hahnemann, a German physician.

Two-child norm tied to jobs in Assam

The Assam government has released the new draft population policy.

Highlights of the policy:

- The policy suggests denial of government jobs to people with more than two children. Any person getting a job after meeting this condition would have to maintain it till end of his service.
- For employment generation schemes like grant of tractors, houses and for other government benefits, this two-children norm will be applicable. Besides, all elections such as panchayats, municipal bodies and autonomous councils held under the State Election Commission will also have this norm for candidates.
- The policy also aims to make education up to university level free for all girls. This includes facilities like fees, transportation, books and mess dues in hostels. This step is likely to arrest the school dropout rate.
- The proposed population policy also seeks to debate on increasing the legal age of marriage from 18 for girls and 21 for boys. If anybody had child marriage then he would be ineligible for government job.
- The policy would also seek stringent laws to prevent violence and sexual abuse of women.
- Besides, a proposal for providing incentives is included for poor persons, who take care of their elderly parents. The policy will also care for the adolescents.
- The policy proposes to set up a State Population Council and a State Population Research Centre.

Reclamation will cause ecological damage to Vembanad, says panel

A committee constituted by the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change, has held the Cochin Port Trust (CPT) responsible for CRZ violations in Vembanad, which was classified as a Critically Vulnerable Coastal Area in the CRZ 2011 notification.

Background:

It has been alleged that the CPT has reclaimed stretches of Vembanad backwaters and has violated the Coastal Regulation Zone (CRZ) notification.

Concerns:

- The committee is concerned because such reclamation can cause large-scale damages to the site.
- Also, activities in violation of CRZ provisions will definitely affect the ecological health of a very sensitive ecosystem like Vembanad, which is a declared Ramsar site, a Critically Vulnerable Coastal Area, and a protected wetland system.

Vembanad:

- Vembanad is the longest lake in India, and the largest lake in the state of Kerala.
- Spanning several districts in the state of Kerala, it is known as Punnamada Lake in Kuttanad, Kochi Lake in Kochi.
- Several groups of small islands including Vypin, Mulavukad, Vallarpadam, Willingdon Island are located in the Kochi Lake portion. Kochi Port is built around the Willingdon Island, and the Vallarpadam island.
- The Nehru Trophy Boat Race is conducted in a portion of the lake.
- Government of India has identified the Vembanad wetland under National Wetlands Conservation Programme.
- The Vembanad Wetland system was included in the list of wetlands of international importance, as defined by the Ramsar Convention for the conservation and sustainable utilization of wetlands in 2002. It is the largest of the three Ramsar Sites in the state of Kerala.

Aadhaar must for web-access to Survey of India maps

The Survey of India, the country's oldest scientific organisation and official maker of maps, has set up a web portal called Nakshe that allows 3,000 of its 7,000 maps to be downloaded for free.

Key facts:

- To download the maps, one would require to provide their Aadhaar number.
- The SoI maps —prepared for defence and civilian purposes — are considered a standard reference for the shape, extent and geographic features of the country.
- The maps will make it easier for residents of villagers and panchayats to readily access information. Currently, organisations and people who want specific maps need to fill forms and sometimes visit the SoI.

About Survey of India:

Survey of India, The National Survey and Mapping Organization of the country under the Department of Science & Technology, is the oldest scientific department of the GOVT. of INDIA. It was set up in 1767 and has evolved rich traditions over the years.

- In its assigned role as the Nation's principal mapping agency, Survey of India bears a special responsibility to ensure that the country's domain is explored and mapped suitably to provide base maps for expeditious and integrated development and ensure that all resources contribute their full measure to the progress, prosperity and security of our country now and for generations to come.
- The Survey of India acts as adviser to the Government of India on all survey matters, viz Geodesy, Photogrammetry, Mapping and Map Reproduction.

HEALTHCARE SECTOR NEEDS INNOVATIVE MODES OF FUNDING: PWC REPORT

A Healthcare Federation of India (NATHEALTH)-PwC report has identified the gaps in the healthcare funding in the country and has proposed reforms to fill the gap.

Background:

The Indian government spends only about 1.5% of its GDP on healthcare, which is among the lowest globally for any country. Besides, access to capital has been one of the biggest roadblocks to the growth of the Indian healthcare sector.

In this context, there is a need to concentrate on innovative funding methods. The New Health Policy 2017 too had highlighted that innovative modes of funding were needed to meet the requirements of the healthcare sector.

Reforms suggested:

- Conventional modes of resource mobilisation must be aided by an innovative funding mechanism to improve healthcare investments in India.
- Funding should be mobilised from pension funds and that investments should be routed through public-private partnership and long-term debt.
- It has also suggested funding through business trust entities such as Real Estate Investment Trusts along with funds sourced through bilateral investment treaties.

Way ahead:

FDI in the sector has significantly increased in the last three years. However, healthcare expenditure's share in GDP remained around 1.6% in FY16 and innovative funding modes would support the target of taking it to 2.5% by 2030. While the opportunity for improvement of health services in India is huge, it is for the government and the entire healthcare ecosystem to work together so that benefits percolate to the segment that require them the most.

Motor Vehicle Amendment Bill passed by Lok Sabha

The Lok Sabha has passed the Motor Vehicles (Amendment) Bill, 2016. The Bill amends the Motor Vehicles Act, 1988 to address issues such as third party insurance, regulation of taxi aggregators, and road safety.

What is the Bill all about?

Motor Vehicles (Amendment) Bill authorises the government to exempt or waive off any section to promote innovation. The provisions of the Bill talk about improved

citizen centric services, reducing the number of accidents and several steps proposed to reduce the footfalls to regional transport offices (RTO).

The bill proposes hefty penalties for various traffic offences, three-year jail term for parents of minors caught driving and causing fatal accidents, and a ten-fold increase in compensation for the families of accident victims, among other things.

Highlights of the Bill:

- The Bill caps the maximum liability for third party insurance in case of a motor accident at Rs 10 lakh in case of death and at five lakh rupees in case of grievous injury.
- The Bill provides for a Motor Vehicle Accident Fund which would provide compulsory insurance cover to all road users in India for certain types of accidents.
- The Bill defines taxi aggregators, guidelines for which will be determined by the central government.
- The Bill also provides for: (i) amending the existing categories of driver licensing, (ii) recall of vehicles in case of defects, (iii) protection of good samaritans from any civil or criminal action, and (iv) increase of penalties for several offences under the 1988 Act.
- Improving delivery of services to the stakeholders using e-Governance is one of the major focuses of this Bill. This include enabling online learning licenses, increasing validity period for driving licenses, doing away with the requirements of educational qualifications for transport licenses are some of the features.
- The Bill caps the maximum liability for third party insurance, but does not cap the compensation amount that courts can award. In cases where courts award compensation higher than the maximum liability amount, it is unclear who will pay the remaining amount.
- Under the Act, compensation for hit and run victims comes from a Solatium Fund.
- State governments will issue licenses to taxi aggregators as per central government guidelines. Currently, state governments determine guidelines for plying of taxis. There could be cases where state taxi guidelines are at variance with the central guidelines on aggregators.

FIRST 'SILK ROAD' TRAIN SETS OFF ON 18-DAY 7,500-MILE JOURNEY FROM BRITAIN TO CHINA:

- The first rail freight service from Britain to China was recently flagged off from Britain.
- Thirty containers filled with UK-produced goods have set off on the 7,500-mile journey from Stanford-le-Hope in Essex which will take 18 days.
- The service is part of China's One Belt, One Road programme of reviving the ancient Silk Road trading routes with the West.

NATIONAL LAW ON COW KILLING NOT FEASIBLE:

- In response to a popular demand for a nationwide law for banning cow slaughter, few experts have said that the demand was not feasible as it was a "State subject" and the Constitution would have to be amended for such a law.
- The protection and preservation of animals is Entry 15 of the State List of the Seventh Schedule of the Constitution, which empowers the States to make laws on subjects like banning cow slaughter.

G20 MINISTERS IN-CHARGE OF DIGITAL ECONOMY ISSUE DECLARATION ON 'SHAPING DIGITALISATION FOR AN INTERCONNECTED WORLD'

G20 Ministers responsible for the digital economy met in Dusseldorf, Germany recently for a ministerial conference.

- They have issued a declaration on 'Shaping Digitalisation for an Interconnected World', laying out priorities and a roadmap for policies.

Highlights of the declaration:

- The declaration talks about the need for greater availability of affordable broadband connectivity, improved digital skills, and literacy, greater digital entrepreneurship and broader adoption of digital technologies and services for the digital economy to contribute to achieving the goals of the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.
- Another core theme is support for MSMEs (Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises) which might be constrained by

their scale in adoption of digital technologies. MSMEs benefitting from the digital revolution is crucial for inclusive growth.

- The declaration includes three annex papers on 'A Roadmap for Digitalisation: Policies for a Digital Future', 'Digital skills in vocational education and training' and 'G20 Priorities on Digital Trade'. Collaboration between the countries and with all stakeholders, including academia and private sector and sharing of best practices forms a key part of all three papers.

Background:

In 2016, in Hangzhou, G20 leaders proposed to 'collectively leverage the opportunities and address challenges of an increasingly digital world, in order to enable a thriving and dynamic digital economy that drives inclusive global growth and benefits all. Accordingly, a G20 Task Force on the digital economy was established in Hangzhou.

G20:

The G20 (or G-20 or Group of Twenty) is an international forum for the governments and central bank governors from 20 major economies. It was founded in 1999 with the aim of studying, reviewing, and promoting high-level discussion of policy issues pertaining to the promotion of international financial stability.

The members of the G20 are Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Canada, China, France, Germany, India, Indonesia, Italy, Japan, Republic of Korea, Mexico, Russia, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, Turkey, the United Kingdom, the United States and the European Union.

HIV/AIDS Bill passed in Parliament

The Lok Sabha has passed the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) and Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) (Prevention and Control) Bill, 2017, which will strengthen the rights of the people infected with the disease. Rajya Sabha has already passed the Bill.

Key provisions in the bill:

Provisions related to the role of governments: Under the Bill, central and state governments are obliged to provide for anti-retroviral therapy (ART) and management of opportunistic infections (infections that take advantage of

weakness in the immune system and occur frequently). The bill also prohibits specific acts of discrimination by the state, or any other person, against HIV-positive people, or those living with such people.

PROVISIONS RELATED TO DISCRIMINATION:

The Bill lays down penal provisions for any discrimination practised against a person with HIV/AIDS and breach of confidentiality. The protection mandated in the Bill extends to the fields of employment, healthcare services, educational services, public facilities, property rights, holding public office, and insurance. It also provides for confidentiality of HIV-related information and makes it necessary to get informed consent for undertaking HIV tests, medical treatment and research.

PROVISIONS RELATED TO OMBUDSMAN:

The bill also provides for an ombudsman. According to the provisions of the Bill, an ombudsman shall be appointed by each state government to inquire into complaints related to the violation of the Act and the provision of health care services. The ombudsman shall submit a report to the state government every six months stating the number and nature of complaints received, the actions taken.

PROVISIONS RELATED TO GUARDIANSHIP:

Provisions related to guardianship are also specified. A person between the age of 12 to 18 years who has sufficient maturity in understanding and managing the affairs of his HIV or AIDS affected family shall be competent to act as a guardian of another sibling below 18 years of age. The guardianship will apply in matters relating to admission to educational establishments, operating bank accounts, managing property, care and treatment, amongst others.

ROLE OF COURTS:

Cases relating to HIV positive persons shall be disposed off by the court on a priority basis. In any legal proceeding, if an HIV infected or affected person is a party, the court may pass orders that the proceedings be conducted (a) by suppressing the identity of the person, (b) in camera, and (c) to restrain any person from publishing information that discloses the identity of the applicant. When passing any order with regard to a maintenance application filed by an HIV infected or affected person, the court shall take into account the medical expenses incurred by the applicant.

Background:

There are approximately 21 lakh persons estimated to be living with HIV in India and the percentage of patients receiving anti-retroviral therapy (ART) treatment currently stands at a mere 25.82% as against the global percentage of 41%, according to the 2015 Global Burden of Diseases (GBD).

MALALA RECEIVES HIGHEST UN HONOUR TO PROMOTE GIRLS EDUCATION

United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres has appointed Nobel laureate Malala Yousafzai as a UN Messenger of Peace to promote girls education.

- At 19, Yousafzai is the youngest Messenger of Peace, the highest honor given by the United Nations for an initial period of two years.

About UN Messenger of Peace:

United Nations Messengers of Peace are distinguished individuals, carefully selected from the fields of art, literature, science, entertainment, sports or other fields of public life, who have agreed to help focus worldwide attention on the work of the United Nations.

These prominent personalities volunteer their time, talent and passion to raise awareness of United Nations efforts to improve the lives of billions of people everywhere.

Appointment: The United Nations Secretary-General appoints Messengers of Peace.

G7 ministers seek united front on Russia and Syria's Assad

Foreign ministers from the Group of Seven (G7) major industrialised nations met recently in Italy, looking to put pressure on Russia to break its ties with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

- The G7 also lent support to the U.S. for its attack on the Syrian government-controlled Shayrat airfield in Homs province.
- While the G7 united to isolate Mr. Assad diplomatically and urged Russia to do the same, no agreement was reached on sanctions against Russia for supporting the Syrian regime.

Background:

A chemical attack took place in Syria recently. The U.S. and its allies hold Syrian President Bashar al-Assad responsible for the attacks.

About G7:

The Group of 7 (G7) is a group consisting of Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the United Kingdom, and the United States. The European Union is also represented within the G7.

- These countries are the seven major advanced economies as reported by the International Monetary Fund: the G7 countries represent more than 64% of the net global wealth (\$263 trillion).
- A very high net national wealth and a very high Human Development Index are the main requirements to be a member of this group.
- The G7 countries also represent 46% of the global GDP evaluated at market exchange rates and 32% of the global purchasing power parity GDP.

Belle-II 'rolls in' to collision point

The High Energy Accelerator Research Organisation (KEK) has completed the much-awaited 'rolling-in' of the Belle-II experiment in Tsukuba, Japan.

About the experiment:

Belle II is an upgraded detector to allow the experiment to record the enormous numbers of particle processes that are produced by the SuperKEKB accelerator.

- This experiment is designed to study violations of the Standard Model and dark matter.
- The Belle II experiment will accumulate 50 times more data than the previous experiment, Belle, and pursue violations of the symmetry between particles and anti-particles as well as new laws of physics. It is a grand collaboration of 700 scientists from 23 countries.
- Complementary to the direct search experiments being carried out at the Large Hadron Collider in CERN, Belle-II will indirectly probe new physics using intense electron-positron beams and a sensitive detector.

Contributions from India:

Belle-II has a significant Indian participation both on experimental and theoretical sides.

- The fourth layer of the six-layer, highly sensitive particle detector, which is at the heart of Belle-II, has been built by Indian scientists.
- Scientists from the Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs) in Bhubaneswar, Chennai, Guwahati and Hyderabad; the Institute of Mathematical Sciences (IMSc), Chennai; Punjab University; Punjab Agricultural University; MNIT (Malaviya National Institute of Technology), Jaipur; IISER (Indian Institutes of Science Education and Research) Mohali; and TIFR, Mumbai, are participating in this research.

GST Network to encrypt companies' data to check leaks

Goods and Services Tax Network (GSTN), the company that will pore through millions of invoices daily to ensure that the tax applied on transactions is limited to the value added at that stage, will encrypt the data submitted by businesses and have firewalls to prevent leaks.

- Only two people will have access to data—the taxpayer himself and his assessing officer. The same data will be stored at four different locations to safeguard it.

GSTN:

GSTN is a private, not-for profit company in which the central government and states and Union territories together hold 49%. The rest is owned by financial institutions.

- The company will provide information technology support to all stakeholders for smooth implementation of the new taxation regime across the country and will be the repository of all information related to taxation and entities registered under GST.
- GSTN will mobilize working capital by levying a user fee on state governments for its services.

West Bengal's Haldia port cleanest in India: Ministry:

- The Haldia port of West Bengal has emerged as the cleanest in a first-ever ranking of all major Indian ports on sanitation parameters. Vizag port came second.
- The ranking of all 13 Indian ports was conducted by the Quality Council of India (QCI) during the 'Swachhta Pakhwada'.
- The ranking was based on the efforts made by these ports to address waste generating sources with respect to port operation, office area, township area and the response to incoming ships.

URJA MITRA:

- URJA MITRA App, which was launched recently by the Ministry of Power, empowers citizens by real time information sharing on power supply.
- The app is a first of its kind application which provides a central platform, Web-Portal as well as Mobile App, for State Power Distribution utilities to disseminate power outage information to urban/rural power consumers across India through SMS/email/push notifications.

New Taxi Policy Guidelines

The safety measures, recommended by the Ministry of Women and Child Development, concerning safety of women commuters availing of cab services have been included in the new Taxi Policy Guidelines.

- These measures were recommended by the WCD Minister, Smt Maneka Sanjay Gandhi to the Ministry of Road Transport and Highways and Shipping (MoRTH).

Recommendations of WCD Ministry included in the New Taxi Policy Guidelines:

- The taxis should be mandatorily fitted with GPS panic devices.
- For the safety of women and child passengers, the central locking system in the taxis should not be allowed.
- The driver's identification along with the photo and registration number of the vehicle should also be prominently displayed in the taxi.

- Violation of the stipulated rules by the taxi operators/drivers should be strictly dealt in accordance with law.
- Sharing of seat should be subject to willingness of passengers.

BIMSTEC Grid Interconnection

The Union Cabinet has approved the proposal of the Ministry of Power for Signing of "Memorandum of Understanding for Establishment of the BIMSTEC Grid Interconnection".

- This MoU will provide a broad framework for the Parties to cooperate towards the implementation of grid interconnections for the trade in electricity with a view to promoting rational and optimal power transmission in the BIMSTEC region.
- It will be signed among member states of BIMSTEC at the upcoming 3rd BIMSTEC Energy Ministers' Meeting to be held in Nepal shortly.

This MoU will facilitate:

- The optimization of using the energy resources in the region for mutual benefits on non-discriminatory basis subject to laws, rules and regulations of the respective Parties.
- The promotion of efficient, economic, and secure operation of power system needed through the development of regional electricity networks.
- The necessity of optimization of capital investment for generation capacity addition across the region.
- Power exchange through cross border interconnections.

Background:

The "Plan of Action for Energy Cooperation in BIMSTEC" was formulated in the first BIMSTEC Energy Ministers' Conference held in New Delhi on October 4, 2005. In this plan, under the "BIMSTEC Trans-Power Exchange and Development Project", it was decided that a Task Force led by Thailand, with representatives of member countries, will give a report on draft MoU for grid interconnections.

- Total five meetings Task Force for BIMSTEC on Trans-power Exchange were held and the draft MoU for

establishment of BIMSTEC Grid Interconnection was finalized by the Task Force on 16th Mar 2015.

- In the BIMSTEC Leaders' Retreat 2016, held in Goa on 16th October 2016, the Leaders decided to expedite the signing of the MoU on BIMSTEC Grid Interconnection. Eventually, during the 4th meeting of BIMSTEC Senior Officials on Energy held on 11th-12th January 2017, the MoU was discussed and finalized.
- BIMSTEC: The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) is an international organisation involving a group of countries in South Asia and South East Asia viz. Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Bhutan and Nepal.

Petrol, diesel prices to be fixed daily

From May, oil marketing companies are expected to introduce a daily revision of petrol and diesel prices in select markets, on a pilot basis.

- The move is expected to shield the state-owned oil companies from the volatility in global crude prices which keep changing everyday.

Significance of this move:

- Daily price change will remove the big leaps in rates that need to be effected at the end of the fortnight, and consumers will be more aligned to market dynamics.
- Analysts say that a daily change in price will help the OMCs to get accurate price reflecting international oil prices and rupee-dollar fluctuations, and will also enable them to not make big cuts or surge in prices which are often not taken well by consumers as well as becomes a political issue.

Background:

In many countries, auto-fuel prices move in sync with the price of crude oil. Now, state-run fuel retailers revise prices on the 1st and 15th of every month based on average international price of crude in the preceding fortnight and the currency exchange rate.

While petrol price was freed from government control in June 2010, diesel rates were deregulated only in October 2014.

Global interest in PSLV soars

The Indian PSLV (Polar Satellite Launch Vehicle) space vehicle has received more than double its normal share of inquiries from prospective customers ever since it launched a record 104 satellites in a single flight in February. ISRO is also ramping up availability of the PSLVs.

- The PSLV, with a near impeccable 37 successes in 39 flights is a clear leader in the category of rockets that lift small satellites to low Earth orbits or LEOs.

About PSLV:

The Polar Satellite Launch Vehicle is an expendable launch system developed and operated by the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO). It was developed to allow India to launch its Indian Remote Sensing (IRS) satellites into Sun-synchronous orbits, a service that was, until the advent of the PSLV, commercially available only from Russia. PSLV can also launch small size satellites into geostationary transfer orbit (GTO).

The PSLV has four stages using solid and liquid propulsion systems alternately. The first stage, one of the largest solid rocket motors in the world, carries 138 tonnes of hydroxyl-terminated polybutadiene urethane-bound (HTPB) propellant.

- ISRO has envisaged a number of variants of PSLV to cater to different mission requirements. There are currently three operational versions of the PSLV — the standard (PSLV), the core-alone (PSLV-CA) without the six strap-on booster motors, and the (PSLV-XL) version, which carries more solid fuel in its strap-on motors than the standard version.
- In 2015 India successfully launched 17 foreign satellites belonging to Canada, Indonesia, Singapore, the United Kingdom and the United States. Some notable payloads launched by PSLV include India's first lunar probe Chandrayaan-1, India's first interplanetary mission, Mangalyaan (Mars orbiter) and India's first space observatory, Astrosat.
- On 15 February 2017, India successfully launched a payload of 104 foreign satellites in polar orbit around the Earth using PSLV tripling the previous record held by Russia for most number of satellites sent to space in a single launch.

Panel to suggest norms for Bitcoins, virtual currencies

To examine the existing framework for virtual currencies, the department of economic affairs in the Ministry of Finance has constituted an inter-disciplinary committee chaired by Special Secretary (Economic Affairs) with representatives from the departments of revenue and financial services and the ministries of home Affairs as well as electronics and Information Technology.

- The committee will also include experts from the RBI, the central government's think tank NITI Aayog and the country's largest bank, State Bank of India.

Key facts:

- The committee recommends measures to close the regulatory gaps to keep a check on virtual currencies, including Bitcoins.
- The panel has been asked to submit its report within three months and its terms of reference require it to take stock of the present status of Virtual Currencies both in India and the world over, examine the existing regulatory and legal structures governing them and suggest measures for dealing with such currencies.
- The committee will necessarily examine how to cope with money laundering opportunities as well as consumer protection concerns that could arise from the use of virtual currencies.

Background:

The circulation of Virtual Currencies which are also known as Digital/Crypto Currencies has been a cause of concern. This has been expressed in various fora from time to time. The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) had also cautioned users, holders and traders of virtual currencies (VCs), including Bitcoins, about the potential financial, operational, legal, customer protection and security related risks that they are exposing themselves to.

Centre files curative plea on AFSPA

The government has asked the Supreme Court to urgently reconsider its July 2016 verdict which ripped open the cloak of immunity and secrecy provided by the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act of 1958 (AFSPA) to security

forces for deaths caused during encounters in disturbed areas.

Background:

The Supreme Court had held that "there is no concept of absolute immunity from trial by a criminal court" if an Army man has committed an offence. The judgment had held that every death caused by security forces in a disturbed area, even if the victim was a dreaded criminal or a militant or a terrorist or an insurgent, should be thoroughly inquired into to address any allegation of use of excessive or retaliatory force.

The judgment came on a plea by hundreds of families in Manipur for a probe by Special Investigation Team.

What the centre says?

- The centre argues that the judgment had become a fetter on security forces involved in anti-militancy operations.
- The centre also observed that the principles of right to self-defence cannot be strictly applied while dealing with militants and terrorist elements in a hostile and unstable terrain because of the complexity and the reality of the conduct of military operations and tactics, especially while combating terrorists.

What is AFSPA?

AFSPA, enacted in 1958, gives powers to the army and state and central police forces to shoot to kill, search houses and destroy any property that is "likely" to be used by insurgents in areas declared as "disturbed" by the home ministry.

- The Act provides army personnel with Constitutional safeguards against malicious, vindictive and frivolous prosecution.
- Security forces can "arrest without warrant" a person, who has committed or even "about to commit a cognizable offence" even on "reasonable suspicion".

How is a region declared 'disturbed'?

Section (3) of the Afspa empowers the governor of the state or Union territory to issue an official notification in The Gazette of India, following which the Centre has the authority to send in armed forces for civilian aid. Once

declared 'disturbed', the region has to maintain status quo for a minimum of three months, according to The Disturbed Areas (Special Courts) Act, 1976.

Bihar sets up court for prohibition cases

A year after enforcing stringent prohibition laws, the Bihar government has set up a special court for speedy trial in cases registered against violation of the law.

- Following the High Court directive, the first special court has been set up in Patna.

Need for special courts:

Bihar became a dry State on April 5, 2016. In last one year, over 45,000 people have been arrested for violating the liquor laws and 44,996 were sent to jail. Police and Excise department officials conducted 2,18,722 raids and seized over 3.5 lakh liters of liquor. Every day, trucks and vans loaded with liquor are being seized in different parts of the State. The border districts have also become more vulnerable for smuggling of liquor bottles.

Indian Institute of Petroleum and Energy (IPE) at Visakhapatnam in Andhra Pradesh:

- The Union Cabinet has given its approval for setting up of Indian Institute of Petroleum and Energy (IPE) at Visakhapatnam in Andhra Pradesh as "an Institute of National Importance" through an Act of Parliament.
- The Institute will have the governance structure as well as legal mandate to grant degrees in a manner similar to that enjoyed by IITs. A separate Act will also impart the required status to the Institute to become a "Centre of Excellence" in petroleum and energy studies.
- The Cabinet has also approved Rs 655.46 crore as capital expenditure to set up IPE and contribution of Rs 200 crore towards its Endowment Fund.
- The objective is to meet the quantitative and qualitative gap in the supply of skilled manpower for the petroleum sector and to promote research activities needed for the growth of the sector.

Songkran:

- Thai New Year – or Songkran – takes place every year on April 13.

- The word Songkran comes from a Sanskrit word and literally translates as "astrological passage".
- The celebration marks the end of a 12-month cycle and the beginning of a new solar year, as the sun moves into Aries in April.

Fun & feast as several communities celebrate new year, harvest festivals:

The second spell of Hindu new year and harvest festivals falls are being celebrated across the country:

- Bengalis celebrate Poila Boishakh.
- Malayalis celebrate Vishu.
- Tamilians celebrate Puthandu.
- Assamese celebrate Rongali Bihu.
- Punjabis celebrate Baisakhi.
- Odia celebrates Maha Vishuba Sankranti.

Pradhan Mantri Mudra Yojana (PMMY)

Loans extended under the Pradhan Mantri Mudra Yojana (PMMY) during 2016-17 have crossed the target of Rs. 1,80,000 crore for 2016-17.

Key facts:

- Sanctions currently stand at Rs. 1,80,087 crore with final data still awaited from some of the smaller non-banking lenders.
- Of this amount, Rs. 1,23,000 crore was lent by banks while non-banking institutions lent about Rs. 57,000 crore.
- Data compiled so far indicates that the number of borrowers this year were over 4 crore, of which over 70% were women borrowers.
- About 20% of the borrowers were from the Scheduled Caste Category, 5% from the Scheduled Tribe Category, while Other Backward Classes accounted for almost 35% of the borrowers.

About the Pradhan Mantri MUDRA Yojana (PMMY) scheme:

The PMMY Scheme was launched in April, 2015. The scheme's objective is to refinance collateral-free loans given by the lenders to small borrowers.

- The scheme, which has a corpus of Rs 20,000 crore, can lend between Rs 50,000 and Rs 10 lakh to small entrepreneurs.
- Banks and MFIs can draw refinance under the MUDRA Scheme after becoming member-lending institutions of MUDRA.
- Mudra Loans are available for non-agricultural activities up to Rs. 10 lakh and activities allied to agriculture such as Dairy, Poultry, Bee Keeping etc, are also covered.
- Mudra's unique features include a Mudra Card which permits access to Working Capital through ATMs and Card Machines.

There are three types of loans under PMMY:

- Shishu (up to Rs.50,000).
- Kishore (from Rs.50,001 to Rs.5 lakh).
- Tarun (from Rs.500,001 to Rs.10,00,000).

National Lok Adalat settles over 6 lakh cases in one day

The Second National Lok Adalat for 2017, conducted on April 8, through out the country from taluk level courts to High Courts, has settled nearly 6.6 lakh cases.

- Out of this, 3.68 lakh cases have been reduced from court pendency and about 2.92 lakh cases were settled even before they could be filed in courts.
- The cases ranged from matrimonial disputes, partition suits, civil matters, cheque bounce cases, motor accident claims, revenue disputes pending in courts, criminal compoundable cases and service matters pertaining to pension, retrial benefits, etc.

What is Lok Adalat?

NALSA along with other Legal Services Institutions conducts Lok Adalats. Lok Adalat is one of the alternative dispute redressal mechanisms, it is a forum where disputes/

cases pending in the court of law or at pre-litigation stage are settled/ compromised amicably.

How they operate?

Lok Adalat is a non-adversarial system, whereby mock courts (called Lok Adalats) are held by the State Authority, District Authority, Supreme Court Legal Services Committee, High Court Legal Services Committee, or Taluk Legal Services Committee.

- They are held periodically for exercising such jurisdiction as they determine.
- These are usually presided over by retired judges, social activists, or other members of the legal profession.
- The Lok Adalat shall not decide the matter so referred at its own instance, instead the same would be decided on the basis of the compromise or settlement between the parties.
- The members shall assist the parties in an independent and impartial manner in their attempt to reach amicable settlement of their dispute.

Their Ambit:

The Lok Adalats can deal with all Civil Cases, Matrimonial Disputes, Land Disputes, Partition/Property Disputes, Labour Disputes etc., and compoundable criminal Cases.

Key facts:

- Lok Adalats have been given statutory status under the Legal Services Authorities Act, 1987.
- Under the said Act, the award (decision) made by the Lok Adalats is deemed to be a decree of a civil court and is final and binding on all parties and no appeal against such an award lies before any court of law.
- If the parties are not satisfied with the award of the Lok Adalat though there is no provision for an appeal against such an award, but they are free to initiate litigation by approaching the court of appropriate jurisdiction by filing a case by following the required procedure, in exercise of their right to litigate.
- There is no court fee payable when a matter is filed in a Lok Adalat. If a matter pending in the court of law is referred

to the Lok Adalat and is settled subsequently, the court fee originally paid in the court on the complaints/petition is also refunded back to the parties.

- The persons deciding the cases in the Lok Adalats are called the Members of the Lok Adalats, they have the role of statutory conciliators only and do not have any judicial role; therefore they can only persuade the parties to come to a conclusion for settling the dispute outside the court in the Lok Adalat and shall not pressurize or coerce any of the parties to compromise or settle cases or matters either directly or indirectly.
- The disputing parties plead their case themselves in Lok Adalats. No advocate or pleader is allowed, even witnesses are not examined.

RBI tightens norms on bank performance

The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) has come out with a revised prompt corrective action (PCA) framework for banks, spelling out certain thresholds, the breach of which could invite resolutions such as a merger with another bank or even shutting down of the bank.

- The revised norms have set out three thresholds. The thresholds are based on capital, net non-performing assets, profitability and leverage ratio.

What happens when there is breach of any threshold?

- The breach of the first threshold will invite restriction on dividend distribution or require parents of foreign banks to bring in more capital. This will get triggered if capital adequacy ratio (including capital conservation buffer) falls below 10.25% or common equity tier-I (CET1) capital ratio falls below 6.75%. Breach of either CAR or CET1 would trigger corrective action. The trigger for net NPA is 6% and 4% for leverage ratio. Two consecutive years of negative return on assets (RoA) will also be classified in threshold one.
- The breach of the second threshold will occur when the capital adequacy ratio falls below 7.75% or CET1 goes below 5.125%. The net NPA threshold is breach of 12% and leverage ratio below 3.5%. Three consecutive years of negative ROA will also trigger threshold two. Breach of threshold two will result in restrictions on expansion of branches and higher provisions.

- The breach of the last threshold happens when CET1 falls below 3.625% and net NPA goes above 12%. Negative ROA for four consecutive years will also be considered as a breach of the third threshold vis-a-vis the profitability parameter. Restrictions, in addition to that of threshold one and two, will be put on management compensation and directors' fees if the third level is breached.
- Corrective action that can also be imposed on banks includes special audit, restructuring operations and activation of recovery plan.
- The banks can also be asked to bring in new management, or even can supersede the bank's board, as a part of corrective action.

Way ahead:

The provisions of the revised PCA framework will be effective from April 1, 2017 based on the financials of the banks for the year ended March 31, 2017. The framework would be reviewed after three years.

Allow anchor investors in SME IPOs

Investment bankers have asked the Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI) to allow anchor investors in public issues of small and medium enterprises (SMEs) while also enhancing the upper limit for paid-up capital of such companies to allow relatively larger firms to enter the capital market while ensuring institutional investor participation in the dedicated segment.

Background:

With SME segment growing leaps and bounds, the SME segment is being approached by many institutions who are keen to participate as 'anchors' in SME IPOs. However, the existing regulatory framework does not permit it.

Who are Anchor investors?

Anchor investors are institutional investors that can bid for shares ahead of the IPO and have a lock-in of 30 days. This rule ensures that investors who want to flip shares on listing, do not use the 'anchor' route.

- Anchor investors or cornerstone investors are invited to subscribe for shares ahead of the IPO to boost the

popularity of the issue and provide confidence to potential IPO investors.

- The benefit for institutional investors applying in anchor quota is that they get guaranteed allotment. Allotment to investors applying in an IPO depends on the number of times the issue gets subscribed.

Right to access Internet cannot be curtailed, says SC

The Supreme Court has clarified that a general prohibition on all online content about pre-natal sex determination will curtail the fundamental right to know of a genuine information-seeker. The clarification came based on a petition demanding for strict adherence by search engines to Section 22.

What section 22 says?

Section 22 is about prohibition of advertisement relating to pre-natal determination of sex.

What has the Court said?

The court held that the prohibition should kick in only if the content found online is violative of Section 22 under the Pre-conception and Pre-natal Diagnostic Techniques (Prohibition of Sex Selection) (PCPNDT) Act of 1994.

Important observations made by the court:

- Citizens have the right to access the Internet to gain information, wisdom and knowledge and their right cannot be curtailed unless it encroaches into the boundary of illegality.
- Calling the Internet a “virtual world” and a “world which is invisible in a way,” the Supreme Court observed that the fundamental right of expression includes “the right to be informed and the right to know and the feeling of protection of expansive connectivity” the Internet offers on the click of a button.

Assurance by Internet search engines:

The three Internet search engines — Microsoft, Google India and Yahoo! India — gave their assurances to the Supreme Court that they would neither advertise nor sponsor advertisements violative of the PNPCDT Act. The trio said they had already appointed ‘in-house’ experts to spot illegal content.

- Nodal officers have already been appointed at State levels to keep tabs on the Net for offensive material contravening Section 22 of the Act.

- In case the nodal officers detect illegal online content, they would communicate with the search engine’s experts, which would take it off within the next 36 hours of receiving the information. These experts would then follow it up by providing the nodal officers concerned with an action taken report.

IMA issues advisory to tackle swine flu cases

With over 100 deaths due to swine flu (H1N1 virus) across Maharashtra this year, including in Aurangabad, Pune and Nashik district, the Indian Medical Association (IMA) has issued an advisory to its members from the three concerned branches.

Guidelines:

- All cases of suspected or confirmed swine flu should be given anti-virals as per the protocol and carry out vaccination of healthcare providers among other crucial measures.
- Doctors handling flu patients should wear N-95 mask, while patients should wear surgical masks.
- All should stay — at least 3 meter — away from a flu patient while coughing and sneezing. One should not cough in hands and use disposable paper.
- All hospitals and clinics should have enough surgical masks to be given at the reception to every patient of cough with fever.
- As per the advisory, all high risk patients, heart and diabetes patients should take flu vaccination, whereas people traveling to Pune, Nasik and Aurangabad should consult their doctors regarding precautions and treatment advice.

Swine Flu:

Swine Influenza (swine flu) is a respiratory disease of pigs caused by type A influenza viruses that causes regular outbreaks in pigs. H1N1 is a flu virus. When it was first detected in 2009, it was called “swine flu” because the virus was similar to those found in pigs.

- Transmission from Pigs to Humans: The H1N1 virus is currently a seasonal flu virus found in humans. Although it also circulates in pigs, one cannot get it by eating properly handled and cooked pork or pork products.
- In 2009, H1N1 was spreading fast around the world, so the World Health Organization called it a pandemic.
- Every working person in the country will be covered under the social security code whether she belongs to the organised sector or the unorganised sector. For the first time, cover to agricultural workers is being provided along with self-employed people. The target is to provide social security benefits to 45 crore workers.

Spread:

- Swine flu is contagious, and it spreads in the same way as the seasonal flu.
- When people who have it cough or sneeze, they spray tiny drops of the virus into the air. If a person comes in contact with these drops or touch a surface that an infected person has recently touched, the person can catch H1N1 swine flu.
- Pregnant women who contract the H1N1 infection are at a greater risk of developing complications because of hormonal changes, physical changes and changes to their immune system to accommodate the growing foetus.
- The proposed code seeks to cover “any factory, any mine, any plantation, any shop, charitable organisations” and all establishments or households employing casual, part-time, fixed-term, informal, apprentice, domestic and home-based workers. All such establishments or factories will be liable to pay compensation if they fail to contribute towards the social security schemes of the workers.
- The total contribution to be made by employers towards Employees’ Provident Fund and Employees’ State Insurance Scheme is proposed to be capped at 30% of the workers’ income. At present, employers contribute 31.5% of the workers’ income towards these schemes.
- According to the proposed code, self-employed workers will contribute 20% of their monthly income towards provident fund, pension and other related schemes. Self-employed workers will also include “a person who takes land on share cropping or any other form of rent, and tills the same using his own or family members’ labour.”

Labour code to provide social security cover to all workers

Small entrepreneurs have raised some concerns over the government’s proposal to provide social security coverage to its entire workforce.

- Small entrepreneurs feel that they may have to bear a little bit of financial burden due to contribution (towards social security schemes).
- All the entities – whether factories or households – will have to register their workers through an Aadhaar-based registration system, according to another proposal, and self-employer workers will be required to register themselves.

Background:

The Centre had last month proposed a labour code on social security which will provide social security cover to the entire workforce in the country, including self-employed and agricultural workers.

Highlights of the ‘draft code on Social Security and Welfare’:

- According to the code, even households employing domestic help will also have contribute towards schemes including provident fund and gratuity for the worker. Factories employing even a single worker will have to contribute towards social security benefits, as per the proposal.
- A National Social Security Council, chaired by the Prime Minister, has been proposed to streamline and make policy on social security schemes related to all the Ministries. Other members would include: Finance Minister, Labour Minister, Health and Family Welfare Minister along with employer and employees’ representatives.

Operation Meghdoot:

- Operation Meghdoot the code-name for an Indian Armed Forces operation, was launched 33 years ago on April 13th.
- It was launched in 1984, when Pakistan started permitting mountaineering expeditions into Siachen Glacier because of which India had to keep a close watch on Siachen.

- The operation was launched to capture the Siachen Glacier in the Jammu and Kashmir. The military action resulted in gaining control over the world's highest battlefield.
- Siachen Glacier is 76.4 km long and covers about 10,000 sq km uninhabited terrain. It lies in the Karakoram Range in the North West India.

Mother of all Bombs:

- The GBU-43/B – dubbed the ‘Mother of all bombs’ – has been dropped on an Islamic State complex in Afghanistan by the US forces.
- The Moab or GBU-43/B is the world's largest non-nuclear weapon.
- It is designed to destroy heavily reinforced targets or to shatter ground forces and armour across a large area.
- Its blast is equivalent to 11 tons of TNT. By comparison, the nuclear weapon dropped on Hiroshima had a blast yield of 15 tons of TNT.
- While it has a blast radius that stretches a mile in each direction the bomb leaves no lasting radiation effect because it is non-nuclear.

Various initiatives launched Minister on Ambedkar Jayanti

Enroute to the digital payments gaining the proportions of a mass movement, the Prime Minister Narendra Modi launched a series of initiatives on the 126th birth anniversary of Dr. Bhim Rao Ambedkar on 14th April.

Various initiatives launched include:

1. BHIM Aadhaar platform for merchants:

BHIM-Aadhaar digital payment platform is the merchant interface of the BHIM App. It will pave the way for making digital payments by using the Aadhaar platform.

How it operates? Any Indian citizen can pay digitally using their biometric data like their thumb imprint on a merchants' biometric enabled device which could be smart phone having a biometric reader. Any citizen without access to smart phones, internet, debit or credit cards will be able to transact digitally through the BHIM Aadhaar platform. Already, 27 major banks are now on board with 7.15 lakh

merchants so that they can start accepting payments using BHIM Aadhaar.

2. New incentive schemes for the BHIM – Cash back and Referral bonus:

These schemes have an outlay of Rs. 495 crore for a period of six months. This is to ensure that the culture of digital payments permeates down to the grassroots.

Under the Referral bonus scheme both the existing user who refers BHIM and the new user who adopts BHIM would get a cash bonus credited directly to their account. Under the Cashback scheme the merchants will get a cash back on every transaction using BHIM. Both schemes are to be administered by MEITY and implemented by NPCI.

MoU Signed Between NSFDC & Development Commissioner (Handlooms)

National Scheduled Castes Finance and Development Corporation (NSFDC) under Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment and Development Commissioner (Handlooms) under Ministry of Textiles have signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU).

- The objective of signing this MoU is to help Scheduled Caste weavers and their families by promoting production and marketing of high value quality Handlooms products at Block level Cluster in various States like Gujarat, Maharashtra, Rajasthan, Odisha etc.

Key facts:

- As per the MoU, signing parties shall popularize the schemes of DC (Handlooms) amongst the SC weavers through Awareness Programmes and advertisements in electronic/print media in SC weavers concentrated areas.
- They shall collaborate for capacity building including skill upgradation and economic development of SC weavers and their families for achieving the desired outcome.
- Exhibitions/Fairs shall be organized by both the parties for providing marketing assistance to SC weavers for enhancing their earnings.
- Both the parties shall also organize relevant skill development programmes for up-gradation of skills of the

scheduled caste weavers in clusters and also for sharing knowledge and experience.

- This endeavour shall enable scheduled caste weavers to sharpen their skills for production and marketing of high value quality handloom products and better marketing linkages and therefore to have more income.

Background:

Handlooms Sector is a part of Textile Industry, the second largest economic activity after agriculture. There are around 44 lakh Handloom weavers in the country out of which 3.90 lakh are Scheduled Caste Weavers. Under the cluster approach, new strategy for promoting production and marketing of high value quality handloom products shall be adopted to ensure more earnings of the Scheduled Caste Handloom Weavers.

About NSFDC:

National Scheduled Castes Finance and Development Corporation (NSFDC) was set up in 1989 as a non profit company under Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, Government of India for financing, facilitating and mobilizing funds for the economic empowerment of persons belonging to the Scheduled Castes families living below double the Poverty Line.

Regulatory body issues new ad norms for celebrities

Advertising Standards Council of India (ASCI), the ad industry's self-regulatory body, has released a set of guidelines for celebrity endorsements that bring personalities, including doctors, authors, activists and educationists, into the celebrity category.

- The guidelines aim to clamp down on random or exaggerated claims made by celebrity advertising.
- The objective of this move is to protect consumer interest while encouraging celebrities and advertisers to refrain from endorsing misleading advertisements, especially of products or services which can cause serious financial loss or physical harm.

Background:

Celebrities have a strong influence on consumers and are guided by the choices they make or endorse. It's important

that both celebrities and advertisers are aware of the impact and power of advertising and therefore make responsible claims to promote products or services

Important guidelines:

- From now on, celebrities will be held responsible for the claims made in ads in which they appear.
- Celebrities must do due diligence and ensure that the claims made in their endorsements are not misleading.
- The council puts the onus on the advertiser and the advertising agency to ensure that celebrity brand endorsers are aware of ASCI codes.
- Celebrities are also banned from endorsing "any advertisement of a product or treatment or remedy that is prohibited for advertising" under the Drugs & Magic Remedies (Objectionable Advertisements) Act and the Drugs & Cosmetic Act".
- Celebrities are also banned from appearing in any ad in which "a product which by law requires a health warning is injurious to health" on its packaging or advertisement.
- If a celebrity seeks advice directly or through the agency from ASCI on whether the advertisement potentially violates any provisions of the ASCI code or not, then the he would be "considered as having completed due diligence". However, ASCI's Advertising Advice will not be construed as pre-clearance of the Advertisement.

Significance of this move:

Celebrities have been deployed by marketers to add credibility to their brand offering. These celebrities, however, have a huge responsibility to ensure that the products they endorse or feature in, are true to the claims made in those advertising messages. The guidelines will help in ensuring that claims made in advertising are not misleading, false or go unsubstantiated

About ASCI:

The Advertising Standards Council of India (ASCI), established in 1985, is committed to the cause of Self-Regulation in Advertising, ensuring the protection of the interests of consumers.

- ASCI was formed with the support of all four sectors connected with Advertising — Advertisers, Advertising Agencies, Media (including Broadcasters and the Press) and others like PR Agencies and Market Research Companies.
- ASCI is not a Government body, nor does it formulate rules for the public or for the relevant industries.

Modi to honour 16 Odisha families linked to 1817 revolt

Descendants of 16 families associated with a little-known but bloody rebellion against British colonialism, called the Paika rebellion of 1817 will be felicitated by the Prime Minister.

About Paika rebellion:

Two-hundred years ago in 1817, a valiant uprising of soldiers led by Buxi Jagabandhu (Bidyadhar Mohapatra) took place in Khurda of Odisha. This is known as Paika rebellion.

Reason for the revolt:

The Paikas were the traditional land-owning militia of Odisha and served as warriors. When armies of the East India Company overran most of Odisha in 1803, the Raja of Khurda lost his primacy and the power and prestige of the Paikas went on a decline. The British were not comfortable with these aggressive, warlike new subjects and set up a commission under Walter Ewer to look into the issue.

- The commission recommended that the hereditary rent-free lands granted to the Paikas be taken over by the British administration and this recommendation was zealously adhered to. They revolted against the British.
- However, the rebellion had several other underlying causes – like the rise in the price of salt, abolition of the cowrie currency for payment of taxes and an overtly extortionist land revenue policy.
- Although initially the Company struggled to respond they managed to put down the rebellion by May 1817. Many of the Paik leaders were hung or deported. Jagabandhu surrendered in 1825.

Allahabad HC becomes ‘pilot project’ for case backlog study

The Supreme Court has decided to put the Allahabad HC under the microscope as a “pilot project” to investigate how High Courts deal with pendency.

Key facts:

- This is a “target-specific” exercise to study how criminal appeals face years of delay as appellants face “inhuman compulsions” inside jails.
- The court has called for real-time statistics from the Allahabad HC and has also roped in some senior advocates to assist the Supreme Court.
- The court has directed the HC Registrar to hand over particulars of the criminal appeals, category-wise and year-wise, for the study in four weeks.
- It also sought the High Court to produce details of the institution and disposal statistics of last 10 years, average disposal time of the appeals, identified causes for the delay, steps already taken and in contemplation for tackling and accelerating disposals, mechanism in place to oversee the process and progress recorded.

Background:

In Allahabad high court, 9.24 lakh cases are pending – highest among all the HCs – of which 3.09 lakh cases are over 10 years old. As on June 30, 2016, 40.54 lakh cases were pending in the 24 HCs, which are grappling with 44% shortage of judges. Rajasthan high court has the oldest pending case in the country. It is pending for 61 years now.

CM Connect app

Chief Minister N. Chandrababu Naidu has launched a new mobile app CM Connect. The app Andhra Pradesh runs on Microsoft’s Kaizala platform.

Key facts:

- The app will be useful in receiving feedback from the public directly on any given issue.
- With this App, people can share the confidential information with the Chief Minister directly.

- The app would help in effective planning, improving and implementation of the schemes and programmes.

UP Signs 'Power For All' Agreement With Centre

The Uttar Pradesh government has signed an agreement with the Centre for "Power for All". With this, Uttar Pradesh, which was the only state in the country which had not signed the agreement, has finally come on board the central government scheme.

About the scheme:

24x7 Power for All scheme is a joint initiative of the central and state governments, with the objective of providing round-the-clock electricity to all households, industry, commercial businesses and any other electricity consuming entities within four years.

NASA Finds Evidence of Hydrothermal Vents on Saturn's Moon Enceladus

NASA has made the next big announcement about Saturn: The Cassini team found evidence of hydrothermal vents on Enceladus's ocean floor.

What are hydrothermal vents?

Hydrothermal vents are fissures in the rocky core of Enceladus. They release water that has been heated by geothermal activity, and the jets of hot water carry minerals and nutrients that could support life.

Significance of this discovery:

Hydrothermal vents were detected by the Cassini spacecraft when it flew through the water geysers that erupt from Enceladus's surface. Microbes, algae, tube worms, crabs, and even fish swim around hydrothermal vents in Earth's oceans. Maybe a similar alien ecosystem exists on the seafloor of Enceladus.

About Cassini Mission:

Cassini-Huygens is an unmanned spacecraft sent to the planet Saturn. Cassini is the fourth space probe to visit Saturn and the first to enter orbit.

- Its design includes a Saturn orbiter and a lander for the moon Titan. The lander, called Huygens, landed on Titan

in 2005. The spacecraft was launched on October 15, 1997. This was the first landing ever accomplished in the outer Solar System.

Objectives:

- Determine the three-dimensional structure and dynamic behavior of the rings of Saturn.
- Determine the composition of the satellite surfaces and the geological history of each object.
- Determine the nature and origin of the dark material on Iapetus's leading hemisphere.
- Measure the three-dimensional structure and dynamic behavior of the magnetosphere.
- Study the dynamic behavior of Saturn's atmosphere at cloud level.
- Study the time variability of Titan's clouds and hazes.
- Characterize Titan's surface on a regional scale.

Nepal, China hold first ever military exercise:

- Nepal and China are planning to hold the first-ever joint military exercise- Sagarmatha Friendship-2017, with a special focus on combating terror and disaster management.
- The military exercise will also focus on common interests like disaster management.
- Sagarmatha is the Nepali name of Mount Everest, the world's highest peak, that is bordering between Nepal and China.

Not just a love hormone

According to a recent study, Oxytocin, often referred to as "the love hormone," is involved in a broader range of social interactions than previously understood.

Key facts:

- The new study pinpoints a unique way in which oxytocin alters activity in a part of the brain called the nucleus accumbens, which is crucial to experiencing the pleasant sensation neuroscientists call "reward."

- The findings not only provide validity for ongoing trials of oxytocin in autistic patients, but also suggest possible new treatments for neuropsychiatric conditions in which social activity is impaired.

Background:

Oxytocin has also been dubbed the hug hormone, cuddle chemical, moral molecule, and the bliss hormone due to its effects on behavior, including its role in love and in female reproductive biological functions in reproduction.

- Oxytocin is a hormone that is made in the brain, in the hypothalamus. It is transported to, and secreted by, the pituitary gland, which is located at the base of the brain.
- It acts both as a hormone and as a brain neurotransmitter.
- The release of oxytocin by the pituitary gland acts to regulate two female reproductive functions: Childbirth and Breast-feeding.

Telangana Cabinet clears bill to increase quotas for STs, Muslims

Both the houses of Telangana Legislature have cleared a bill which increases the reservations for Scheduled Tribes and backward sections among the Muslim community in government jobs and educational institutions.

- The Telangana Backward Classes, Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes (Reservation of Seats in Educational Institutions and of Appointments or Posts in the Services under the State) Bill, 2017 was cleared amid opposition from many MLAs.

Key facts:

- Under the bill, quota for STs will be increased to 10% from the existing 6%, while that for BC-E category (the backward sections among the Muslim community) will go up to 12% from the existing 4%.
- The total reservations in the state, consequently, will go up to 62% from the existing 50%.

What necessitated this move?

The state defends its move by saying that “after the bifurcation of the combined Andhra Pradesh state, the percentage of

Muslims in Telangana has gone up and 90% of them are poor and socially backward.”

Background:

The Sudhir Commission which was set up to take stock of the socio-economic and educational status of Muslims observed in its report that in Telangana, following the general trend across India, the proportion of Muslim employees had fallen. The commission’s report observed that Muslim employees were just 7.36 per cent of the total workforce in the state.

Way ahead:

The reservation exceeds the Supreme Court’s 50% ceiling for such benefits. Now, the Centre has to include the bill in the 9th schedule of Constitution to grant it immunity from a judicial review.

Canberra keen on joining naval games

Australia is keen on joining the Malabar trilateral naval exercises among India, Japan and the U.S., and has requested observer status at the upcoming edition, scheduled for July.

Background:

Australia had been a part of the exercises in 2007. But a sharp response from China, which saw the joint exercises as a coalition against it, put an end to the quadrilateral format.

Japan and the U.S. are keen on expanding the games to include Australia with officials from both countries specifically stating so on various occasions. However, India has been reluctant to antagonise China.

About Malabar exercise:

The Malabar drills, which began in 1992 as a bilateral naval exercise between India and the U.S., has since grown in scope and complexity, acquiring considerable heft in recent times. In 2015, it was expanded into a trilateral format with the inclusion of Japan.

Technical textiles use in govt. projects gets push

Technical textiles or functional textiles, considered a sunrise sector in the country, is all set for demand taking off for products such as geo and agro textiles.

What are technical textiles?

Technical Textiles are defined as Textile material and products manufactured primarily for their Technical performance and functional properties rather than aesthetic and decorative characteristics.

- Technical textiles include textiles for automotive applications, medical textiles (e.g., implants), geotextiles (reinforcement of embankments), agrotextiles (textiles for crop protection), and protective clothing (e.g., heat and radiation protection for fire fighter clothing, molten metal protection for welders, stab protection and bulletproof vests, and spacesuits).
- Functional textiles can be woven or non-woven. Automobile, geo, medical, industrial, and agro textiles are among the range of products that are made in the country.

Background:

Technical textiles is a thrust area for the Government because of the value addition involved. It can be used in infrastructure projects, including ports, roads, and railways, and in sectors such as agriculture.

Challenges for the sector:

Technical textiles is a fragmented sector with several small and medium-scale industries manufacturing specialised products. The main challenges for technical textiles in the country are awareness among consumers, need for technology and knowledge about it among entrepreneurs, the investments and time needed to be innovative and develop applications, and raw material availability.

Election Commission seeks funds for paper trail units

Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) has requested the Union Law Ministry for urgent release of funds, given the “prevailing environment,” to facilitate procurement of VVPAT (voter verifiable paper audit trail) machines for the 2019 Lok Sabha elections.

What is VVPAT?

VVPAT stands for Voter-Verified Paper Audit Trail. VVPAT system maintains a physical trail of all votes cast. Small slips of paper records the details of the vote. The Election Commission (EC) first introduced VVPAT in the 2014 Lok Sabha elections.

How is it related to EVMs?

When a vote is cast on the electronic voting machine, a small paper slip bearing the name and symbol of the candidate is generated. This paper appears for about 10 seconds. The slip will then automatically fall in a sealed safe box, attached to the EVM, thus maintaining a physical paper trail of all the votes cast.

Background:

EC feels that with most of the political parties having declared their lack of faith in EVMs, VVPAT machines are the need of the hour.

Way ahead:

Over 16 lakh VVPATs would be required, at an estimated cost of ₹ 3,174 crore, to cover all polling stations in the next Lok Sabha polls.

Energy: going where the wind blows

For the first time, wind power installations (windmills) in the country have crossed the 5 Gigawatt mark, to reach 5,400 MW in 2016-17. The earlier record was 3,472 MW of 2015-16. The current year might see installations of 6 GW.

Significance of this expansion:

The Centre wants to buy electricity from wind power producers and sell it to electricity supply companies in other states, which are bound by law to buy a portion of their needs from wind and solar sources.

Background:

India, with 32,280 MW, has the fourth biggest capacity in the world, after China, the U.S. and Germany. The national target is 60 GW by 2022. Wind accounts for 10% of India’s total power capacity of 3.2 lakh MW; and 4% in terms of electricity produced.

The Indian wind industry has been around since the late 1980s. For many years, it existed only in T.N., the windiest State. In the last decade, it spread to eight other States that have any wind potential — four other southern states, M.P., Maharashtra, Gujarat and Rajasthan.

Terms in News Khurki and Teenkathiya systems:

- **Khurki:** Under Khurki system, the British planters used to pay some money to the farmers (Raiyyat) by mortgaging their lands and houses and compelling them to sow indigo.
- **Teenkathiya:** The British administration and Jamindar had established “Teen Kahitya” system under which teen katha land out of one bigha was reserved for indigo (Neel) farming. The farmers had to bear the cost of indigo farming and the British planters used to keep the yields without compensating the farmers.

Country’s first Vistadome coach inaugurated in Visakhapatnam:

- Indian Railways has launched the country’s first ever Vistadome coach services on Visakhapatnam-Araku route.
- Features of the coaches include glass roof, LED lights, revolving seats and GPS-based info system.

Power Purchase Agreement for Rewa Ultra Mega Solar Power Project signed

Madhya Pradesh government has signed a power purchase agreement (PPA) with the Delhi Metro Rail Corporation (DMRC) to supply 24% of electricity generated from the Rewa ultra mega solar project to be set up in the state.

About the project:

Rewa Ultra Mega Solar (RUMS) project is a joint venture of Solar Energy Corporation of India and MP Urja Vikas Nigam, where in both parties have 50% stake.

- When completed, it will be the world’s largest single-site solar power project.
- IFC, a member of the World Bank Group, is the lead transaction advisor for this project that will mobilise USD 550 million in private investment and avoid a million tonnes of GHG (Greenhouse gas) emissions.

Background:

India’s solar power capacity has crossed 12 GW, with the addition of 5,525 MW solar power generation capacity last fiscal year. Among the states, Andhra Pradesh added the maximum solar capacity in 2016-17 (1,294.26 MW), followed by Karnataka (882.38 MW) and Telangana (759.13 MW). Other major additions were in, Tamil Nadu (630.01 MW), Rajasthan (543 MW), Punjab (388 MW), Uttar Pradesh (193.24 MW) and Uttarakhand (192.35 MW).

The Centre has set an ambitious target of adding 175 GW of renewable energy capacity by 2022, which includes 100 GW of solar, 60 GW from wind, 10 GW from bio-power and 5 GW from small hydro-power (up to 25 MW capacity each). At present, of the 310 GW installed power generation capacity, 46 GW is from renewable power generation capacities.

Portal and Mobile App of RUSA

The government has launched the unique portal and mobile app of Rashtriya Uchchatar Shiksha Abhiyan (RUSA).

- The portal is a one-stop for States’ Higher Education Plans, decision of the States’ Higher Education Councils and details of the resources under this scheme.

Some of the key highlights of the App are:

- It will capture the fund allocation as per the Project Approval Board, the instalment-wise fund release by the centre and the state, the institution-wise key project, vendors appointed and the payment made to them as also stage-wise photos and time stamps of payments made and comments entered.
- Component-wise details give a quick snapshot into the funding of RUSA projects. Whether it is infrastructure grants of equity initiatives, this window gives a peek into the funds approved, the amount released, the sum utilized and the percentage of work completed.
- Stakeholders can also get granular details on the money released from the centre and the state. The date stamps give a picture on the timelines followed and the pictures provide the ground reality.

- Tracking projects is the soul of this App, and every initiative is tagged with a unique ID number, thus providing the entire story of how an idea germinated and matured.
- A powerful Dashboard gives an overall picture of the scheme and the state-wise performance of the impact that the programme has made.
- Expand the institutional base by creating additional capacity in existing institutions and establishing new institutions, in order to achieve enrolment targets.
- Correct regional imbalances in access to higher education by setting up institutions in unserved & underserved areas.

About RUSA:

RUSA was initiated to incentivise and disincentivise state actions. It aimed at creating new universities through upgradation of existing autonomous colleges and conversion of colleges in a cluster.

- The scheme was launched in 2013 and aimed at providing strategic funding to eligible state higher educational institutions.
- The central funding (in the ratio of 60:40 for general category States, 90:10 for special category states and 100% for union territories) would be norm based and outcome dependent. The funding would flow from the central ministry through the state governments/union territories to the State Higher Education Councils before reaching the identified institutions.
- Improve equity in higher education by providing adequate opportunities of higher education to SC/STs and socially and educationally backward classes; promote inclusion of women, minorities, and differently abled persons.

31st Meeting of the Central Consumer Protection Council

Shri Ram Vilas Paswan, Union Minister of Consumer Affairs, Food and Public Distribution, chaired the 31st Meeting of the Central Consumer Protection Council held recently.

- The topics discussed in the meeting included the points put forth by the Members on challenges in combating adulteration, strengthening the enforcement machinery and testing Infrastructure, training and capacity Building of all stakeholders.

Consumer Protection Councils:

The Consumer Protection Act postulates establishment of Consumer Protection Councils at the Central and State levels for the purpose of spreading consumer awareness. The objects of the Councils, as per the Act, shall be to promote and protect the rights of the consumers such as:

Objectives of the scheme are as follows:

- Improve the overall quality of state institutions by ensuring conformity to prescribed norms and standards and adopt accreditation as a mandatory quality assurance framework.
- Usher transformative reforms in the state higher education system by creating a facilitating institutional structure for planning and monitoring at the state level, promoting autonomy in State Universities and improving governance in institutions.
- Ensure reforms in the affiliation, academic and examination systems.
- Ensure adequate availability of quality faculty in all higher educational institutions and ensure capacity building at all levels of employment.
- Create an enabling atmosphere in the higher educational institutions to devote themselves to research and innovations.
- The right to be protected against the marketing of goods and services which are hazardous to life and property.
- The right to be informed about the quality, quantity, potency, purity, standard and price of goods or services, as the case may be so as to protect the consumer against unfair trade practices.
- The right to be assured, wherever possible, access to a variety of goods and services at competitive prices.
- The right to be heard and to be assured that consumer's interests will receive due consideration at appropriate forums.

- The right to seek redressal against unfair trade practices or restrictive trade practices or unscrupulous exploitation of consumers.
- The right to consumer education.

Central Consumer Protection Council:

The Consumer Protection Act empowers the Central Government to establish a Central Consumer Protection Council consisting of the Minister in charge of consumer affairs in the Central Government as its Chairman and such number of other official and non-official members representing such interests as may be prescribed.

- Under the Consumer Protection Council Rules 1987, the membership of the Council is restricted to 150 members including the Central Minister in charge of Consumer Affairs as the Chairman. The term of the Council is three years.
- To monitor the implementation of the recommendations of the Council, the Central Government may constitute a standing working group from amongst the members of the council under the Chairmanship of the Member Secretary of the Council.
- The Council shall meet as and when necessary, but at least one meeting of the Council shall be held at such time and place as the Chairman may think fit.

PM launches projects related to SAUNI Yojana

Phase I of SAUNI (Saurashtra Narmada Avtaran Irrigation) project was recently dedicated to the Nation. This is the second milestone in the Rs 12,000 crore project to pump Narmada water in 115 dams of arid Saurashtra region after the PM dedicated to public phase-I of the Link-I canal in August last year.

What is the SAUNI Yojana?

The project is not a part of the Narmada project but is based on it. 1 MAFT (million acre feet) flood water has been allotted to Saurashtra by the state government and this water will be pumped to major reservoirs in the region under the SAUNI Yojna. Unlike traditional irrigation projects, SAUNI is technically a 'linking' project, where the water will be filled in irrigation dams that are already

equipped with canal network. This network of canals will then help channel water into farms.

Also, SAUNI project involves making pipe canals instead of the conventional open canals. The pipelines in the SAUNI project are underground, which means that no land needs to be acquired.

SC refers anti-defection law issue to larger Bench

The Supreme Court has agreed to hear a plea of former Samajwadi Party leader and MP Amar Singh seeking its direction that anti-defection law is not applicable to an elected member of a House, who had been expelled by his party.

- The court said the issue raised by the petitioner needed to be examined by a larger bench and referred the case to the Chief Justice of India to constitute an appropriate bench to decide the case.

Background:

In 1996, the Supreme Court had concluded in *G. Viswanathan versus Hon'ble Speaker, Tamil Nadu Legislative Assembly* that a legislator expelled from his party shall be deemed to have "voluntarily given up" his membership of that party who got him elected and nominated him to the House. This legal fiction of deeming him to continue in the party post-election as an "unattached member" makes him therefore vulnerable to disqualification from the House on the ground of defection under the Tenth Schedule (anti-defection law) of the Constitution.

Under the Viswanathan judgment, the expelled legislator would still be susceptible to the "whims and fancies" of the leaders of the party which threw him out despite the fact that subsequently, after his expulsion, he had gone ahead and formed his own political party.

What's the issue?

At the centre of the controversy is the Supreme Court's interpretation of paragraph 2(1) of the Tenth Schedule in the Viswanathan judgment of 1996. The court held that even if a member was thrown out or expelled from the party, for the purposes of the Tenth Schedule he would not cease to be a member of the political party that had set him up as a candidate for the election. He would continue

to belong to that political party even if he was treated as “unattached.” The court had held that the act of voluntarily giving up the membership of the political party may be either “express or implied.”

The anti-defection law:

The 10th Schedule to the Constitution, popularly referred to as the ‘Anti-Defection Law,’ was inserted by the 52nd Amendment in 1985.

The grounds for disqualification are mentioned under Articles 102 (2) and 191 (2). A Member of Parliament or state legislature is deemed to have defected:

- When the elected member voluntarily gives up his membership of a political party.
- If he votes or abstains from voting in such House contrary to any direction issued by his political party or anyone authorised to do so, without obtaining prior permission.
- Independent members would be disqualified if they joined a political party.
- Nominated members who were not members of a party could choose to join a party within six months; after that period, they were treated as a party member or independent member.

Exceptions under the Law:

- Any person elected as speaker or chairman could resign from his party, and rejoin the party if he demitted that post.
- A party could be merged into another if at least two-thirds of its party legislators voted for the merger.
- The law initially permitted splitting of parties, but that has now been outlawed.

Met dept. expects a ‘normal’ monsoon

In its first official forecast of the season, the IMD expects India to have normal monsoons this year.

Key facts:

- Rains are likely to be 96% of the 50-year average of 89cm for the monsoon season of June to September. They are

expected to fan out favourably and “help agriculture.” This estimate falls at the bottom edge of what it considers ‘normal’ monsoon rains. However, due to the looming threat of El Nino and adoption of new weather model, the IMD says there is significant element of uncertainty in this forecast.

- The El Nino — characterised by surface waters of the equatorial Pacific warming up more than half a degree — is known to dry up monsoon rains every six out of 10 years. This year, international weather models as well as the IMD’s own dynamical global climate forecasting system model indicate that El Nino conditions might set in during the “latter part of the monsoon.”
- Another climate phenomenon, called the Indian Ocean Dipole (IOD), which refers to a swing in the sea surface temperatures in the western and eastern Indian oceans, is also known to influence the Indian monsoon. A ‘positive’ IOD can counter an ominous El Nino. In its assessment, the IMD expects “weak positive IOD” to develop in the latter half of the monsoon, which means that it’s unlikely to be a potent ally this year.

Background:

India saw drought years in 2014 and 2015. As for 2016, it received 3% less than the 89 cm average, despite an IMD forecast of ‘above normal’ rains.

Given the deficient pre-monsoon rains over large parts of Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and Kerala, good rains are essential this year to trap enough soil moisture for a healthy kharif crop, which is vital to keep inflation down and rural consumption up.

About IMD:

The India Meteorological Department (IMD), also referred to as the Met Department, is an agency of the Ministry of Earth Sciences of the Government of India.

- It is the principal agency responsible for meteorological observations, weather forecasting and seismology.
- IMD is also one of the six Regional Specialised Meteorological Centres of the World Meteorological Organization.

- It has the responsibility for forecasting, naming and distribution of warnings for tropical cyclones in the Northern Indian Ocean region, including the Malacca Straits, the Bay of Bengal, the Arabian Sea and the Persian Gulf.

Australia visa cut to hit Indian IT workers

The Australian government has scrapped the Australian “457” visa programme that allowed Australian companies to hire foreign workers in a number of skilled jobs for a period up to four years. The programme will be replaced with a more stringent system, making it difficult to hire non-Australian citizens. This is aimed at giving priority for Australian workers for Australian jobs.

- According to the notification, the new visa programme will cut more than 200 eligible jobs for skilled migrants — from 651 to 435, visa fees are set to increase, and the visas will be restricted to filling “critical skills shortages”.

New regime:

- The new Australian visa will have two streams: one for the short term, allowing entry for up to two years, and a medium-term option granting up to four years access, which will be similar to the current 457 visa, the Australian government said. “The occupation list for the four-year visa includes IT professionals, so there continues to be visa options for skilled Indian nationals.”
- But both streams will come with several riders such as mandatory labour market testing with limited exemptions, a new non-discriminatory workforce test, criminal history checks, a market salary rate assessment and a new two-year work experience requirement. Further, English language requirements will be tightened for the medium-term stream.
- The new visa will also include a strengthened training obligation for employers sponsoring foreign skilled workers to provide enhanced training outcomes for Australians in high-need industries and occupations.

How would this affect Indians?

The move is expected to impact Indian IT and other companies. India provides the highest number of temporary skilled workers to Australia of any country; eight out of the top 10 occupations for Indian 457 visa

holders (as at December 2016) were IT professionals. According to the Australian Department of Immigration and Border Protection, Indians constituted 76% of the total ‘457’ visas issued in the three IT streams, and 57% of permanent migrant visas issued in the skilled stream of workers last year.

Way ahead:

The Centre is studying the implications of the Australian government’s decision to scrap a visa programme that benefited Indians. It has warned that the move could have an impact on negotiations on the free trade agreement — Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreements (CECA) — between both countries.

Railways seek aid for unviable routes

The Railway Ministry has sought compensation for operating railway lines of strategic and national importance — a practice discontinued following the merger of Railway and Union Budgets.

What’s the issue?

Every year, the Indian Railways used to get subsidy from the Finance Ministry for losses incurred on railway operations on strategic lines. After the Budget merger, the Finance Ministry had discontinued the practice of providing annual subsidy to the Railways for operating loss-making strategic routes as the Railways was no longer required to pay an annual dividend.

However, recently, two Parliamentary bodies — Standing Committee on Railways and Estimates Committee — recommended that the Finance Ministry should continue compensating the Railways for losses in operating strategic lines for the following reasons:

- Considering the role of Railways in nation building, reimbursement to Railways on their operating losses on strategic lines is justifiable.
- Also, these lines mainly cater to defence movements on border areas and development of social and backward region.
- The compensation also helps the Railways in providing relief towards “socially desirable projects” which are usually loss-making projects.

RBI raises red flag over banks' telecom exposure

The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) has raised a red flag over banks' loans to telecom players and asked the lenders to increase their standard asset provisioning more than what is prescribed so that they can build 'necessary resilience.'

- RBI has asked the banks to make provisions for standard assets in this sector at higher rates so that necessary resilience is built in the balance sheets should the stress reflect on the quality of exposure to the sector at a future date.

What's the concern?

Telecom players are reeling under a huge debt — estimated to be about 1 4.2 lakh crore — amid a tariff war and a consolidation among some of the players. The telecom sector is reporting stressed financial conditions, and presently interest coverage ratio for the sector is less than one.

Interest coverage ratio of less than one means the company's EBIDTA (Earnings Before Interest, Taxes, Depreciation and Amortization) is not sufficient to repay interest, let alone principal.

Background:

Debt accumulation and potential NPAs have been on the rise across a range of sectors including telecom. Alarming debt levels in the backdrop of recent declining revenues increase debt serviceability risks for the telecom sector. Five sectors, including telecom, contribute to 61% of the stress in the banking system.

Channakeshava temple turns 900

The Channakeshava temple in Belur — a masterpiece of Hoysala architecture — turned 900 this year. Belur, along with Halebid, is proposed as a UNESCO heritage site.

About the temple:

The temple, constructed by Vishnuvardhana of the Hoysala dynasty, is a monument recognised by the ASI. Considered to be the first temple of Hoysala style, it was built between 1106 and 1117. The temple is regarded a marvel of architecture in typical Hoysala style. It commemorates the king's victory in 1104.

The Battle of Adyar: distant drum

History lovers, curious onlookers, veterans and NCC cadets gathered recently in Chennai to commemorate The Battle of Adyar, a turning point in modern Indian history.

About Battle of Adyar:

The Battle of Adyar took place on 24 October 1746. The battle was between the French East India Company men and Nawab of Arcot forces over the St. George Fort, which was held by the French. It was part of the First Carnatic War between the English and the French.

- The French captured Fort St. George from the British East Indian Company. Nawab of Arcot, a close ally of the British, set out to regain it by sending troops, led by his son Mahfuz Khan, to Madras. While leading an army of 10,000, he was dispersed by French forces, forcing him to move south. Khan seized San Thomé and formed a battle line on the north bank of the Adyar River on October 22 to prevent the French from moving up reinforcements from Pondicherry.
- 200 French and French-trained Indian troops led by Captain Paradis, force marched from Pondicherry, crossed Quibble Island and took positions on the south bank of the Adyar River and faced ineffective artillery fire from Khan's forces.
- On 24 October, Paradis was informed that a similar sized army led by de la Tour was on its way from St. George Fort. He decided to ford the Adayar river to attack the rear of Mahfuz Khan's battle line. de la Tour arrived too late to support Paradis, who with disciplined firing and then charging with bayonets, broke the Nawab's line. Mahfuz Khan's troops fled and the Battle of the Adyar River ended with the French retaining control over Fort St. George.

Trump's order targets H-1B programme

President Trump has signed an executive order that directs federal agencies to review employment immigration laws to promote "Hire American" policies.

Key facts:

- The order makes no immediate changes to work visa programs but tells the Departments of Labor, Justice,

Homeland Security and State to study existing laws and procedures and recommend changes.

- In the case of one program, H-1B temporary visas, the order directs the agencies to suggest changes to help ensure that the visas are awarded to the most skilled, best-paid immigrant workers.
- The order also calls for a crackdown on fraud and abuse in the current system of work visas — which the agencies had already signaled they would do.

What is the H-1B program, and why is the president focused on it?

The H-1B program grants 65,000 work visas a year to foreigners, with 20,000 more visas granted to foreigners with advanced degrees and an unlimited number of extra visas available for universities, teaching hospitals and other nonprofit organizations. The program is aimed at highly skilled workers, and most of the visas are awarded to technology companies, although other specialty industries such as fashion also use the visas.

- Under federal law, employers that use a large number of H-1B workers are supposed to document that they tried to hire Americans for the jobs. All H-1B employers are also required to pay prevailing wages to the immigrant workers who receive the visas.
- Labor Department data shows that about 40% of the visas go to entry-level workers and another 40% go to people with limited experience and skills. The Trump administration says that more of the jobs performed by those people could and should be filled by Americans.

How are the visas allocated?

Visa applications must be sponsored by employers. Every April 1, the government begins accepting applications for the next fiscal year, which starts Oct. 1. This year, the government received 199,000 H-1B applications in the first five days and then stopped accepting them.

Because there are more applicants than visas, the visas are awarded by lottery. Each visa is good for three years and can be renewed for three more years. Immigrants who are applying for a permanent residency visa, known as a green card, can typically stay longer while waiting for approval.

Textiles India 2017:

- It is the first ever global B2B Textile and handicrafts event in India. Hosted by the Ministry of Textiles, the event was inaugurated recently.
- Textiles India 2017 is a landmark global trade event for the Indian Textile and handicraft Sector that will showcase the entire range of textile products from 'Fibre to Fashion'.
- The aim of the event is to make it one of the key annual destinations for International Buyers.

Buzz over photograph of 'Indian wolf' in Sunderbans:

- An Indian wolf (*Canis lupus pallipes*) has reportedly been sighted for the first time in the Sunderbans. the forest department is yet to verify the veracity of the claim.
- The sighting is significant since wolves in Bengal are mostly found in the western parts bordering Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand.
- The Indian wolf is a Schedule I animal in the Wildlife (Protection) Act 1972 of India.
- It prefers to live in scrub lands, grasslands and semi-arid pastoral/ agricultural landscape. Less than 2,000 wolves are currently found in the forests of India.
- It is categorised as 'endangered' by the International Union for Conservation of Nature.
- Less than 2,000 wolves are there in the Indian forests.

CONSTITUTION (ONE HUNDRED AND TWENTY-THIRD AMENDMENT) BILL 2017 AND NATIONAL COMMISSION FOR BACKWARD CLASSES (REPEAL) BILL, 2017

The Union Cabinet chaired by the Prime Minister has given Ex-post facto approval for introduction of the following bills in the Parliament:

- Constitution (One Hundred and Twenty-third Amendment) Bill 2017.
- National Commission for Backward Classes (Repeal) Bill, 2017.

The Constitution Amendment Bill is for:

- Constitution of a Commission under Article 338B for socially and educationally backward classes by name of National Commission for Backward Classes.
- Insertion of Clause (26C) under Article 366 with modified definition viz. “socially and educationally backward classes” means such backward classes as are so deemed under Article 342A for the purpose, this Constitution.

NCBC repeal Bill is for:

- Repeal of the National Commission for Backward Classes Act, 1993 along with Savings Clause for namely the National Commission for Backward Classes (Repeal) Bill, 2017.
- Dissolution of the National Commission for Backward Classes with effect from such date as the Central Government may appoint in this behalf and the National Commission for Backward Classes constituted under sub-section (1) of Section 3 of the said Act shall stand dissolved.

Key facts:

- The proposed Act of repeal is necessary in view of setting up of the National Commission for Backward Classes by insertion of Article 338B of the Constitution.
- The decision will also enable effecting continuity in the functioning of the National Commission for Backward Classes under Article 338B.

THE GOVERNMENT DECIDES TO DO AWAY WITH BEACONS FOR ALL CATEGORIES OF VEHICLES

With a view to strengthening healthy democratic values in the country, the Central Government has decided to do away with beacons of all kinds atop all categories of vehicles in the country. States are also being stripped of their power to specify persons whose vehicles can use blue flashing lights.

Background:

Amendments in this regard will be made in the Central Motor Vehicles Rules of 1989. A specific clause in Rule 108 of the 1989 regulations, which empowers the Centre and the States to designate some dignitaries as entitled to red lights on top of their vehicles, is being abolished. Its abolition would mean

that neither the Centre nor the States would have any dignitary that governments can nominate for the usage of red beacons.

What necessitated this move?

Beacons on vehicles are perceived symbols of VIP Culture, and the government believes they have no place in a democratic country.

Exceptions:

Beacons, however, will be allowed on vehicles concerned with emergency and relief services, ambulance, fire service etc.

abinet approves permission to avail external assistance by State Government entities from bilateral agencies

The Union Cabinet has approved the policy guidelines to allow financially sound State Government entities to borrow directly from bilateral ODA (Official development Assistance) partners for implementation of vital infrastructure projects.

Key facts:

- The guidelines will facilitate the State Government entities to directly borrow from the external bilateral funding agencies subject to fulfilment of certain conditions and all repayments of loans and interests to the funding agencies will be directly remitted by the concerned borrower.
- The concerned State Government will furnish guarantee for the Loan. The Government of India will provide counter guarantee for the loan.

Significance of this move:

Several State agencies are implementing major infrastructure projects of national importance. These projects, even if viable and sound, have huge funding requirements and borrowing by the State Governments for such projects may exhaust their respective borrowing limits. Therefore, in order to accelerate the pace of investment in major infrastructure projects in the country without compromising the need for external assistance for other sectors, this enabling provision in the existing guidelines was considered necessary to facilitate direct borrowing by the State Government entities from bilateral external agencies.

Present scenario:

Presently, external development assistance from bilateral and multilateral sources is received by the Government of India:

- For projects/programmes in the Central sector.
- For projects executed by Central Public Sector Undertakings.
- On behalf of the State Governments for State sector projects/programmes to be implemented by the State Governments and/or local bodies and public sector undertakings.

The existing guidelines do not allow direct borrowings by the State Government entities from external agencies.

A frog's mucus could treat flu

Researchers have found that skin mucus secreted by a colourful, tennis ball-sized frog species- *Hydrophylax bahuvistara*, found in Kerala can be used to develop an anti-viral drug that can treat various strains of flu.

Key facts:

- The secretion from frog contains peptide, or chain of amino acids. The researchers have named the newly identified peptide "urumin" after the urumi, a sword with a flexible blade that snaps and bends like a whip.
- Urumin is not toxic to mammals, but "appears to only disrupt the integrity of flu virus".
- It seems to work by binding to a protein that is identical across many influenza strains, and in lab experiments, it was able to neutralise dozens of flu strains.
- More research is needed to determine if urumin could become a preventive treatment against the flu in humans, and to see if other frog-derived peptides could protect against viruses like dengue and Zika.

INDIA, CHINA TO RESUME STALLED DIALOGUE ON CORRIDOR WITH MYANMAR, BANGLADESH

The stalled consultation process for the BCIM (Bangladesh, China, India, Myanmar) Economic Corridor is set to resume, with officials and scholars from the four

countries shortly meeting in Kolkata after a gap of more than two-and-half years. The last meeting of the Joint Study Group (JSG), which has government sanction, was held at Cox's Bazaar in Bangladesh in December 2014.

Background:

The idea of creating a corridor of regional integrity was first floated in 1999 but there has been little progress in implementing the grand plan.

Officially, China and India say the process of finalising the BCIM is not easy because of several reasons, including the restive nature of the region the planned corridor will pass through. Privately, diplomats and bureaucrats from the two countries blame each other for the tardy progress.

About BCIM Economic Corridor:

The BCIM economic corridor hopes to connect Kolkata with Kunming, capital of the Yunnan province. It envisages formation of a thriving economic belt, focusing on cross-border transport, energy and telecommunication networks.

Starting from Kunming, the route passes through nodal points, such as Mandalay and Lashio in Myanmar. It heads towards Kolkata after passing through Manipur and Silchar, before crossing Bangladesh via Sylhet and Dhaka, with branches extending to the ports of Cox Bazar and Chittagong.

Aryabhata: Looking back at first Indian 'space baby'

India's first satellite – Aryabhata – was launched successfully by a Russian rocket on 19th April 42 years ago in 1975, taking the country on an exciting space odyssey as far as the Moon and the Mars.

About Aryabhata:

Aryabhata is the first Indian spacecraft that was also built in the country. Named after the 5th century astronomer, the experimental spacecraft did not last its design life of six months in space. But this kick-started the Indian capability to build satellites solidly on track.

- It was meant to study distant celestial bodies that emit X-rays, Sun and Earth's ionosphere.

- ISRO Satellite Centre (ISAC) — which has built nearly 90 bigger and far more sophisticated spacecraft since then — proudly observes April 19 every year as Aryabhata Day or Technology Day.

Video gaming to be featured at 2022 Asian Games:

- Competitive video games will become a medal sport for the first time ever at the 2022 Asian Games.
- They will appear as a demonstration event at the 2018 edition of the next Asian Games, to be held in Indonesia, as part of the run-up to esports' official inclusion as a medal sport in the 2022 Asian Games in Hangzhou, China.
- Asian Games is a multi-sport competition, touted as second only to the Olympics in terms of size. It is held every four years.

One Part Woman bags Sahitya Akademi award:

- The English translation of writer Perumal Murugan's novel Mathorubhagan (One Part Woman) has won the Sahitya Akademi's award for translation in English. The translation was done by Aniruddhan Vasudevan.
- The Sahitya Akademi Award is a literary honor in India, which the Sahitya Akademi, India's National Academy of Letters, annually confers on writers of the most outstanding books of literary merit published in any of the major Indian languages (24 languages, including the 22 listed in the Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution, along with English and Rajasthani) recognised by the Sahitya Akademi.

Legal Aid and Empowerment initiatives

Three key legal aid and empowerment initiatives of the Department of Justice were recently launched. These initiatives are aimed at fulfilling the department's core mandate of enhancing 'access to justice' for the poor and vulnerable communities, including making accessible quality and effective legal aid for them.

Following initiatives were launched:

Pro bono legal Services:

The 'Pro bono legal services' initiative is a web based platform, through which interested lawyers can register

themselves to volunteer pro bono services for the underprivileged litigants, who are unable to afford it.

- The Department of Justice has launched the online application for this initiative on its website doj.gov.in. Through this online portal, litigants from marginalised communities (including members of scheduled castes and scheduled tribes, women, children, senior citizens, persons with low income and persons with disabilities) can also apply for legal aid and advice from the pro bono lawyers.
- This is aimed at fulfilling the mandate of quality legal aid for all.

TELE LAW: MAINSTREAMING LEGAL AID THROUGH COMMON SERVICE CENTRE:

Through this initiative, the Department of Justice and NALSA are partnering with CSC- E- Governance Service Limited for mainstreaming legal aid to the marginalized communities through the Common Service Centers (CSCs). This initiative is aimed at facilitating delivery of legal advice through an expert panel of lawyers – stationed at the State Legal Services Authorities (SLSA). The project would connect lawyers with clients through video conferencing facilities at CSCs, operated by para legal volunteers. For this purpose, this initiative would also play a pivotal role in empowering 1000 women para legal volunteers.

- Using CSCs for mainstreaming legal aid services for the marginalized at the panchayat levels would ensure that legal aid reaches populations which remained untouched due to geographical challenges and/or lack of infrastructure.
- The project would be launched across 1800 panchayats in Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, North Eastern States and Jammu & Kashmir.

DISTRICT FACILITATION CENTRE TO REDUCE PENDENCY: ENGAGEMENT OF NYAYA MITRA:

Nyaya Mitra scheme is aimed at reducing pendency of cases across selected districts, with special focus on those pending for more than 10 years.

- Functionalized through a retired judicial or executive officer (with legal experience) designated as the 'Nyaya Mitra', the project would be operated out of District Facilitation Centres, housed in CSCs.

- Nyaya Mitra's responsibilities would include among others assistance to litigants who are suffering due to delay in investigations or trial, by actively identifying such cases through the National Judicial Data Grid, providing legal advice and connecting litigants to DLSA, CSC Tele Law, other government agencies and civil society organisations. He/she shall also refer the marginalized applicants to Lok Adalats for dispute resolution and render assistance towards prison reforms within the district, in coordination with the district judiciary and other stakeholders.
- This initiative would be launched in 227 districts including 27 districts from North East and Jammu & Kashmir and 200 districts from Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Maharashtra, Rajasthan, Odisha, Gujarat, West Bengal etc. and would be operated out of CSCs.

Government of India to issue Sovereign Gold Bonds 2017-18

Government of India, in consultation with the Reserve Bank of India, has decided to issue Sovereign Gold Bonds 2017-18 – Series I.

- The Bonds will be sold through banks, Stock Holding Corporation of India Limited (SHCIL), designated post offices and recognised stock exchanges viz., National Stock Exchange of India Limited and Bombay Stock Exchange.

Key features of the bond:

- Issuance: To be issued by Reserve Bank India on behalf of the Government of India.
- Eligibility: The Bonds will be restricted for sale to resident Indian entities including individuals, HUFs, Trusts, Universities and Charitable Institutions.
- Denomination: The Bonds will be denominated in multiples of gram(s) of gold with a basic unit of 1 gram.
- Tenor: The tenor of the Bond will be for a period of 8 years with exit option from 5th year to be exercised on the interest payment dates.
- Minimum size: Minimum permissible investment will be 1 gram of gold.
- Maximum limit: The maximum amount subscribed by an entity will not be more than 500 grams per person per

fiscal year (April-March). A self-declaration to this effect will be obtained.

- Interest rate: The investors will be compensated at a fixed rate of 2.50% per annum payable semi-annually on the nominal value.
- Collateral: Bonds can be used as collateral for loans. The loan-to-value (LTV) ratio is to be set equal to ordinary gold loan mandated by the Reserve Bank from time to time.
- Tradability: Bonds will be tradable on stock exchanges within a fortnight of the issuance on a date as notified by the RBI.

Anti-dumping duty likely on hydrogen peroxide

Government is planning to impose anti-dumping duty of up to \$118 per tonne on import of hydrogen peroxide used by industries in applications such as corrosion control and paper bleaching from six countries.

- The move is aimed at guarding domestic players from cheap imports of 'hydrogen peroxide' from Bangladesh, Taiwan, Korea, Indonesia, Pakistan and Thailand.

Hydrogen peroxide:

- Hydrogen peroxide is a colourless liquid, slightly more viscous than water.
- Hydrogen peroxide is the simplest peroxide.
- It is used as an oxidizer, bleaching agent and disinfectant. It is also used as ripening agent.
- Concentrated hydrogen peroxide, or "high-test peroxide", is a reactive oxygen species and has been used as a propellant in rocketry.
- Hydrogen peroxide is unstable and slowly decomposes in the presence of base or a catalyst. Because of its instability, hydrogen peroxide is typically stored with a stabilizer in a weakly acidic solution.
- Hydrogen peroxide is found in biological systems including the human body. Enzymes that use or decompose hydrogen peroxide are classified as peroxidases.

Logistics pact with U.S. ‘almost done’

India is all set to notify the operationalising of the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) with the U.S.

- The notification includes designating the points of contact for the U.S. military to work with and setting up a common account for payments. The U.S., which has similar agreements with several countries, has already notified the details.
- After the notification, the U.S. is expected to formally ratify the agreement which will then operationalise the pact.

Background:

India and the U.S. concluded the logistics agreement, the first of the three foundational agreements between the two nations, last August. However, its implementation has been delayed, as India was unable to streamline administrative procedures to enable its operationalisation.

The LEMOA pact:

LEMOA stands for Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA), a tweaked India-specific version of the Logistics Support Agreement (LSA), which the U.S. has with several countries it has close military to military cooperation. It is also one of the three foundational agreements — as referred to by the U.S.

- LEMOA gives access, to both countries, to designated military facilities on either side for the purpose of refuelling and replenishment. India and the U.S. already hold large number of joint exercises during which payments are done each time, which is a long and tedious process.
- Under the new agreement, a mechanism will be instituted for book-keeping and payments and officials, who will act as nodal points of contact, will be designated on both sides.
- The agreement will primarily cover four areas — port calls, joint exercises, training and Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief. Any other requirement has to be agreed upon by both sides on a case-by-case basis.

- However, this is not a basing agreement. There will be no basing of the U.S. troops or assets on Indian soil. This is purely a logistical agreement.

What are the foundational agreements for?

They are meant to build basic ground work and promote interoperability between militaries by creating common standards and systems. They also guide sale and transfer of high-end technologies.

Other foundational agreements:

The other foundational agreements are the Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA) and the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement for Geospatial Information and Services Cooperation (BECA).

The COMCASA and BECA enable technology transfer and seamless communication between the military systems of the two countries.

‘U.S. must support Paris accord’

The nodal climate agency of the United Nations, the UNFCCC, is seeking alternative sources of funding, in the face of likely budget cuts by the United States.

Background:

The U.S. government recently postponed a meeting to decide whether to remain in the Paris Agreement. The U.S. government’s budget proposal which aimed at slashing funds for the Global Climate Change Initiative could lead to a reduction of 20% of funding towards the UNFCCC’s operational costs.

About the Paris agreement:

The Paris Agreement is ambitious in several respects. It resolves to hold global temperature rise to “well below 2 degrees Celsius” above pre-industrial levels and to pursue efforts towards a 1.5 degrees C temperature limit.

- This ambitious goal is complemented by a binding obligation to submit mitigation contributions every five years and to pursue domestic measures to achieve them. For every five-year cycle, states must put forward contributions more ambitious than their last.

- To ensure delivery, the agreement puts in place a robust transparency framework. States will provide information on the implementation of their contributions, which is then subject to a technical expert review process. In addition, the agreement envisages a “global stocktake” every five years to assess collective progress towards long-term goals.
- Significantly, the global stocktake will also take into account “equity” — thus paving the way for conversation on burden-sharing between nations.
- The agreement puts in place strong top-down elements that are expected to discipline self-determination and enhance ambition. The agreement also recognises the fact that the global temperature goal must be achieved in the context of sustainable development and poverty eradication.
- The Paris agreement presses countries as far as they could on differentiation and finance. The agreement includes a provision requiring developed countries to send \$100 billion annually to their developing counterparts beginning in 2020. This figure is expected to increase with time.
- Airports Council International (ACI) is the only global trade representative of the world’s airport authorities. Established in 1991, ACI represents airports’ interests with governments and international organizations, develops standards, policies and recommended practices for airports, and it provides information and training opportunities to raise the standards around the world.

For the First Time, UNESCO’s Peace Prize Goes to a Mayor:

- A Unesco jury has awarded the organization’s prestigious ‘peace prize’ to the mayor of Lampedusa, the Italian island which gained fame as a hotspot for migrant arrivals.
- Mayor Giusi Nicolini was awarded the prize together with French NGO SOS Mediterranee, for their work in saving the lives of refugees and migrants and for welcoming them with dignity.
- The peace prize, also known as the Félix Houphouët-Boigny Peace Prize, named after the first president of Ivory Coast, has been awarded by Unesco each year since 1989, to recognize individuals and groups who “safeguard, maintain, and seek peace”.

After Mars, ISRO decides it’s time to probe Venus:

- The Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) has invited scientists to suggest studies for a potential orbiter mission to Venus – somewhat similar to the one that landed in Mars in 2013.
- ISRO plans to send a spacecraft that will initially go around Venus in an elliptical orbit before getting closer to the ‘Yellow Planet’. It will carry instruments weighing 175 kg and using 500W of power.
- Venus, the second planet from the Sun, comes closest to Earth roughly every 583 days, or about 19 months.
- Venus, our closest planetary neighbour, is similar to Earth in many aspects. However, it takes only 225 days to revolve around the Sun. Secondly, the surface is very hot due to nearness to the Sun.
- Ever since the then USSR sent the Venera mission to Venus in February 1961, there have been close to 30 missions to the planet, the last one being Japan’s Akatsuki in 2010. These comprised orbiters, landers, atmospheric probes and fly-bys.

Civil Services Day:

- The Civil Services Day is organized on 21st April every year, when civil servants re-dedicate themselves to the cause of the citizens and renew their commitment to public service.
- This day coincides with the date on which Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel had addressed the first batch of probationers at the All India Administrative Service Training School at Metcalfe House, New Delhi in 1947.

GMR Hyderabad Airport gets carbon neutrality certificate:

- The GMR Hyderabad International Airport Limited has received the Carbon Neutrality (Level 3+) Certificate from the Airports Council International (ACI).
- The certification comes under ACI’s Airport Carbon Accreditation Programme that is the industry standard for assessment of an airport’s efforts to manage and reduce carbon emissions. The programme was launched in June, 2009 and comprises four levels.

- The erstwhile Soviet Union tops the list with 16 Veneras and two Vegas. The US had Mariner, Pioneer and Magellan missions.

Loan for Developing National Waterway-1

In a major boost towards realising country's ambitious inland waterways project, the World Bank has approved a \$375 million loan for capacity augmentation of National Waterway-1(River Ganga) under Jal Marg Vikas Project (JMVP).

National Waterway-1:

The government is developing NW-1 (River Ganga) under JMVP from Haldia to Varanasi (1390 Km) with the technical and financial assistance of the World Bank at an estimated cost of Rs 5369 crore. The project would enable commercial navigation of vessels with capacity of 1500-2,000 DWT.

- NW-1 will pass through Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand and West Bengal, serving the major cities of Allahabad, Varanasi, Ghazipur, Bhagalpur, Patna, Howrah, Haldia and Kolkata, and their industrial hinterland including several industries located in the Ganga basin.
- Under the project, there are going to be three multi-modal terminals—one each at Varanasi (Uttar Pradesh), Sahibganj (Jharkhand), and Haldia (West Bengal), two inter-modal terminals- at Kalughat and Ghazipur, a new Navigation Lock at Farakka, five Roll on-Roll off (Ro-Ro) terminals, development of Ferry services at Varanasi, Patna, Bhagalpur, Munger, Kolkata and Haldia and Vessel repair and maintenance facilities.
- The Project also includes proposal for Performance Based Maintenance Dredging Contract for Provision of Least Assured Depth (LAD) of 3 metres between Farakka to Kahalgaon, and Sultanganj to Barh; LAD of 2.5 metres between Barh to Doriganj, and Doriganj to Ghazipur; and LAD of 2.2 metres between Ghazipur to Varanasi.
- In addition, the project will enable IWAI setting up of River Information Service System on NW -1 for the first time in India. River Information System (RIS) are equipment, hardware and software information technology (IT) related services designed to optimize traffic and transport processes in inland navigation.

One Crore MGNREGA assets geotagged

Mahatma Gandhi NREGS has reached a new milestone today by geotagging one Crore assets and putting them in public domain.

- The geotagging exercise started from 1st September, 2016. One Crore assets have been geotagged and put in public domain in the last seven months. It is expected that the exercise will lead to greater transparency and ensure accountability at field level.

Need for geotagging:

The scale of rural assets created under MGNREGA is very large. Since the inception of the programme in financial year 2006-07, about 2.82 Crore assets have been created under the programme. On an average, about 30 Lakh Assets are created annually which includes a variety of works such as water harvesting structures, plantations, rural infrastructure, flood control measures, individual assets for sustainable livelihood, community infrastructure and so on.

What is geotagging?

Geotagging is the process of adding geographical information to various media in the form of metadata. The data usually consists of coordinates like latitude and longitude, but may even include bearing, altitude, distance and place names.

Background:

GeoMGNREGA is a unique endeavor of the Ministry of Rural Development in association with National Remote Sensing Centre (NRSC), ISRO and National Informatics Centre. A Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) was signed by Ministry of Rural Development with NRSC in June 2016 for geo-tagging the assets created under MGNREGS in each gram panchayat. Strength of Space technology has been leveraged.

Pursuant to the signing of MoU, training manuals were developed in consultation with NRSC. Training was imparted to around 2.76 Lakh personnel across the country with the help of National Institute of Rural Development and Panchayati Raj (NIRD&PR).

Indian Navy test-fires land attack version of BrahMos missile

Indian Navy recently successfully test fired BrahMos Land Attack Supersonic Cruise Missile from a ship. This variant of Long Range BrahMos Missile was fired from Indian Naval Ship Teg, a Guided Missile Frigate, on a target on land.

Key facts:

- BrahMos Missile has been jointly developed by India and Russia, and its Anti Ship variant has already been inducted into Indian Navy.
- Land Attack variant of BrahMos Missile provides Indian Naval Ships the capability to precisely neutralise selected targets deep inland, far away from coast, from stand-off ranges at sea.
- The missile has a range of 400km.

Background:

The technology upgrade to the extended range BrahMos has come after India gained entry into the 34-nation Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR) in June 2016, which “removed the caps” on the missile’s range. The MTCR basically prevents the proliferation of missiles and UAVs (unmanned aerial vehicles) over the range of 300-km.

India and Republic of Korea sign Inter-Governmental MOU for Defence Industry Co-Operation in Shipbuilding

India and the Republic of Korea (RoK) have signed an Inter-governmental Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) for Defence Industry Co-operation in Shipbuilding.

- The Inter-Governmental MoU, was conceived under the overall umbrella of the ‘Special Strategic Partnership’ between both sides as declared in the Joint Statement of the Prime Minister of India and the President of RoK in May 2015.

The salient points of the MoU are as follows:

- Develop and strengthen defence industry co-operation between Republic of India and the Republic of Korea.
- The two sides will recommend the organisations for collaborating in the implementation of specific projects.

- The organisations recommended for co-operative projects may conclude separate agreements (contracts) between them to implement the specific projects.
- The MoU will come into effect from the date of signature by both sides and will be initially valid for a period of five years and would be automatically extendable for further successive five year at a time.

“Quality Mark” Award Scheme for Dairy Cooperatives initiated by NDDB

As part of the innovative initiatives under the “White Revolution” umbrella Schemes, the Department of Animal Husbandry, Dairying and Fisheries has supported the National Dairy Development Board (NDDB) developed initiative of “Quality Mark” Award Scheme for dairy Cooperatives to promote and encourage enhancement of safety, quality and hygiene of milk and milk products manufactured by dairy cooperatives.

Aim of the scheme: It is aimed at bringing about process improvement in the entire value chain from producer to the consumer to ensure availability of safe and quality of milk and products both for the domestic and foreign market.

Key facts:

- The “Quality Mark” Award Scheme for dairy Cooperatives in the country has been initiated to instill confidence in the consumers for the quality of milk being marketed by them by ensuring availability of safe and good quality milk and milk products.
- The initiative does not propose any new/ additional system for Food Safety and Quality Management but lays down minimum standards against each link of the processes required for ensuring quality and safety.

‘Public data office’ (PDO) technology

The Centre for Development of Telematics (C-DoT) has developed a ‘public data office’ (PDO) technology solution to deliver low-cost Wi-Fi solutions. The mass PDO solution is priced at Rs 50,000.

Key facts:

- The concept of PDO will enable vendors to sell low-cost Wi-Fi-based broadband services anywhere.

- The vendor will get a tech solution pack including both software and hardware elements. It will include a Wi-Fi access point with e-KYC, one-time password authentication and a mechanism to manage service vouchers. A billing system will also accompany the package.
- The service will be available over a license-free ISM (industrial, scientific and medical) band.
- For commercial production of the device, C-DoT plans to transfer the technology to nearly 20 manufacturing partners including Bharat Heavy Electricals (BHEL) and Himachal Futuristic Communications (HFCL).
- According to C-DoT, in semi-urban or rural areas, the technology will be available in 2.4 GHz and 5.8 GHz bands, which do not require any regulation for access.
- Meetings of the COPs of BRS Conventions are generally held every alternate year. India has participated in the earlier meetings of the COPs of the BRS Conventions. Previously, COP 12 of Basel Convention and COP 7 meetings of Rotterdam and Stockholm Conventions were held in Geneva, Switzerland in May 2015.

Key facts:

- Conference of Parties (COPs) to the BRS Convention include – the 13th meeting of the Conference of Parties to “Basel Convention (BC COP 13); the 8th meeting of the Conference of Parties to “Rotterdam Convention (RC COP 8) and 8th meeting of the Conference of Parties to “Stockholm Convention (SC COP 8).
- While the Basel Convention will discuss the control of transboundary movements of hazardous wastes and their disposal, the Rotterdam Convention will deliberate on the prior informed consent procedure for certain hazardous chemicals and pesticides in international trade” and the Stockholm Convention is on persistent organic pollutants (POPs)”.
 - The most important matters to be deliberated during COPs include – listing of chemicals under Rotterdam and Stockholm Convention may have an impact on industrial growth. The inclusion of chemicals under Rotterdam Convention does not ban the chemical. However, importing countries need to follow the PIC procedure.

About C-DOT:

The Centre for Development of Telematics (C-DOT) is an Indian Government owned telecommunications technology development centre. It was established in 1984 with initial mandate of designing and developing digital exchanges.

- Sam Pitroda started the C-DOT as an autonomous telecom R&D organisation.
- C-DOT has expanded to develop intelligent computer software applications. It is one of the 2 Indian Government organisations which have been appraised at Maturity Level 5 of CMMI-DEV v1.3, other being Bharat Electronics Limited (BEL) Software Technology Centre.

INTER-MINISTERIAL DELEGATION TO PARTICIPATE IN BASEL, ROTTERDAM, STOCKHOLM CONVENTIONS IN GENEVA

An inter-ministerial Indian delegation headed by the Secretary, Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change, Shri Ajay Narayan Jha, has left to participate in the 2017 Conference of Parties (COPs) to the Basel, Rotterdam, Stockholm (BRS) Conventions.

- The theme of the meetings and the high-level segment will be – “A future detoxified: sound management of chemicals and waste”.

Agenda of the meetings:

The agenda of the 2017 BRS COPs meetings cover a wide gamut of issues including – technical guidelines on transboundary movements of electrical and electronic waste and used electrical and electronic equipment; technical guidelines for environmentally sound management of wastes, consisting of, containing or contaminated with low persistent organic pollutants (POPs) in Basel Convention, national reporting, capacity building and technical assistance; listing of chemicals viz chrysotile asbestos, paraquat dichloride, fenthion, trichlorfon, short chain chlorinated paraffins, tributyltin compounds, carbofuran and carbosulfan under Annex III to the Rotterdam Convention and listing of chemicals viz short chain chlorinated paraffins, decabromodiphenyl ether and Hexachlorobutadiene under Annex A, B, and C to the Stockholm Convention.

BRS Conventions – Brief Background:

The Basel, Rotterdam and Stockholm (BRS) Conventions are multilateral environmental agreements, which share the common objective of protecting human health and the environment from hazardous chemicals and wastes.

- To enhance cooperation and coordination among the BRS Conventions, their respective conferences of the Parties have taken a series of decisions. This “synergies process” aims to strengthen the implementation of the three conventions at the national, regional and global levels by providing coherent policy guidance, enhancing efficiency in the provision of support to Parties to the Conventions, reducing their administrative burden and maximising the effective and efficient use of resources at all levels, while maintaining the legal autonomy of these three multilateral environmental agreements.
- In addition to initiating reforms to the secretariats of the three Conventions on an administrative as well as operational level, this process is changing the way in which the implementation of the Conventions are undertaken at the national and regional levels. Parties to the Conventions and entities supporting countries in the implementation of the Conventions, such as regional centres, intergovernmental organizations and non-governmental organizations, also undertake efforts to increase coherence in the implementation of the Conventions.

Earth Day:

- Earth Day 2017 is being celebrated around the world today (April 22).
- This year’s campaign is dedicated to an ambitious goal – to achieve global climate and environmental literacy in the space of three years, by Earth Day 2020.
- Earth Day was first celebrated in 1970. The idea for it was first proposed at a UNESCO conference a year earlier, when activist John McConnell suggested a day to honour the planet and the idea of peace. US senator Gaylord Nelson founded Earth Day in the US. It was made into an international day in 1990 and now is celebrated by over 193 countries every year.

- The aim of the day is to bring attention to environmental issues to spark changes that will result in a healthy, sustainable environment. This includes addressing climate change and finding ways to protect the planet for future generations.

PLENARY MEETING OF THE DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE (DC) AND IMFC OF THE WORLD BANK GROUP AND THE IMF

Plenary Meeting of the Development Committee (DC) of the World Bank Group and the IMF and the Restricted Session of the International Monetary and Finance Committee (IMFC) were recently held in Washington D.C.

- The meetings comprised of discussion sessions on the ‘Forward Look’ exercise carried-out by the World Bank focusing on ‘A Vision for the World Bank Group in 2030 – Progress and Challenges’, Progress Report on the Shareholding Review and a paper on ‘A Stronger World Bank Group for All’.
- The discussions also centred on the global economic outlook, the resource base and governance framework of IMF and the importance of inclusiveness in terms of distribution of the benefits from global integration.
- Indian finance minister Arun Jaitley participated in the meetings. He called for renewing the commitment to reach a decision on Selective Capital Increase (SCI) and General Capital Increase (GCI) by Annual Meetings 2017 in line with the 2015 Lima roadmap.

MINISTERIAL COMMITTEES:

The IMF Board of Governors is advised by two ministerial committees, the International Monetary and Financial Committee (IMFC) and the Development Committee.

IMFC:

The IMFC has 24 members, drawn from the pool of 187 governors. Its structure mirrors that of the Executive Board and its 24 constituencies. As such, the IMFC represents all the member countries of the Fund.

- The IMFC meets twice a year, during the Spring and Annual Meetings. The Committee discusses matters of common concern affecting the global economy and also advises the IMF on the direction its work.

- At the end of the Meetings, the Committee issues a joint communiqué summarizing its views. These communiqués provide guidance for the IMF's work program during the six months leading up to the next Spring or Annual Meetings. There is no formal voting at the IMFC, which operates by consensus.

DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE:

The Development Committee is a joint committee, tasked with advising the Boards of Governors of the IMF and the World Bank on issues related to economic development in emerging and developing countries. The committee has 24 members (usually ministers of finance or development). It represents the full membership of the IMF and the World Bank and mainly serves as a forum for building intergovernmental consensus on critical development issues.

A step forward for Indo-Bangla ties

The Tripura government has commenced the land acquisition process for the construction of India-Bangladesh Friendship Bridge over river Feni that demarcates boundaries between the two countries in south Tripura.

- The process for acquiring land for a four-lane approach road and a connecting road on Indian side in southern Tripura has also begun.

Key facts:

- Government of India is bearing the entire burden of expenditure towards the construction of the 150-metre bridge which will connect Sabroom of India and Ramgarh in Bangladesh.
- Rehabilitation package is ready to compensate people who would be dislodged for construction purposes.
- The bridge would facilitate implementation of a protocol India earlier signed with Bangladesh to use Chittagong sea port as a 'port of call'. The port is 72 kilometre away from Sabroom.
- India is also expanding rail network up to Sabroom to handle cargo consignments that would arrive from Chittagong port. Ultimate connectivity plan is to benefit

Tripura and other landlocked northeastern States with international and domestic shipments using the sea port.

Soon, underwater tunnels will connect Howrah with Kolkata

The construction of the first underwater metro tunnel in the country deep under the bed of the Hooghly river has begun.

Key facts:

- Two tunnels will be built. By the end of July, two tunnels running parallel will connect the twin cities of Howrah and Kolkata located on either side of the Hooghly.
- The tunnels are being dug at a depth of 30 metres below the earth's surface and 13 metres below the riverbed.
- The twin tunnels, about 520 metres long, are crucial to the much-awaited ₹ 8,900 crore East West Metro project that will connect Salt Lake Sector V in the eastern part of Kolkata to the Howrah Maidan across the river.
- Of the 16.6 km East West Metro route, 5.8 km is on an elevated corridor and 10.8 km will run underground. The 520-metre tunnels under the river are part of the 10.8 km underground stretch.
- The diameter of the two tunnels running across the river is 5.5 metres and the distance between the two tunnels will vary at different places — 16.1 metres under the river, 18 metres at the Howrah station, and 13 metres at the Howrah Maidan (from where tunnelling started in May 2016).

Centre mulls nodal body for transport

The Union government is planning to establish a single unified transport ministry by merging the Ministries of Aviation, Railways, Surface Transport and Shipping so as to ensure greater ease of doing business and boost India's trade. In this regard, inter-ministerial discussions have already started discussions for establishing a 'Logistics and Integrated Transport Board' as a nodal body at the central level for all transport-related matters across modes.

Key facts:

- The Board is likely to be chaired by a Union Cabinet Minister or a Secretary to Government of India.

- It will include top officials from other Ministries concerned such as Finance, Commerce & Industry, External Affairs and Home, as well as senior representatives from the Indian industry and legal experts, especially to address competition aspects.
- The aim, however, is to gradually set up a single unified transport ministry by merging the ministries of Aviation, Railways, Surface Transport and Shipping to ensure greater ease of doing business and boost India's internal and external trade. It is also in line with the NDA government's slogan of 'minimum government and maximum governance'.
- The cargo spacecraft mission provides an "important technological basis" to build a Chinese space station. It can reportedly carry six tonnes of goods, two tonnes of fuel and can fly unmanned for three months.
- It is part of China's plan to establish a manned space station around 2022. It is placed at 380 kilometres above Earth.

New guidelines for inland fisheries

The Union government has issued guidelines for the States on framing a Bill on inland fisheries and aquaculture, amid mounting concern over the pollution and encroachment of waterbodies in Kerala and the long-standing demand to protect the traditional rights and livelihood security of inland fishers.

Need for a single ministry:

Nearly all of the 100 largest economies, all of the OECD countries, and all of India's emerging market 'peers,' the BRICS countries, have a Ministry of Transport or similar integrated equivalent rather than the collection of mode-specific ministries found in India. Some of these consolidated national agencies are also combined with the Ministry (or equivalent) of communication, a categorisation reminiscent of India's early post-independence structure.

In this regard, the National Transport Development Policy Committee, chaired by Rakesh Mohan had recommended setting up of a single unified ministry with a clear mandate to deliver a multi-modal transport system that contributes to the country's larger development goals including economic growth, expansion of employment, geographic expansion of opportunities, environmental sustainability, and energy security.

Tiangong-2: China's first cargo spacecraft docks with orbiting space lab

China's first cargo spacecraft-Tianzhou-1 cargo resupply spacecraft, docked successfully with the Tiangong-2 space lab recently, marking a major step towards Beijing's goal of establishing a permanently manned space station by 2022.

About Tiangong-2:

The Tiangong-2 space laboratory, or Heavenly Palace 2, was home to two astronauts for a month last October in China's longest ever manned space mission.

Key facts:

- The guidelines were issued by the Department of Animal Husbandry, Dairying and Fisheries (DADF) under the Union Ministry of Agriculture to address the inadequacies in the existing regulations by States.
- According to the guidelines, encroachment or reclamation of rivers, lakes and wetlands and pollution of water sources is to be treated as a punishable offence. Dumping of solid waste in lakes, wetlands and lagoons has also been recommended for punishment.
- The guidelines propose regulations on the use of fishing craft and gear to protect commercially important fish species from exploitation.
- States have been asked to notify protected areas and fishing holidays in waterbodies during the fish breeding season and ensure safe passage for migration of fish brooders to wetlands.
- The Centre has also instructed States to consider aquaculture on a par with agriculture and ensure uniform incentives, tax benefits and concessional tariffs for both sectors.
- Certification of fish seed and fish feed, disease monitoring and control and curbs on exotic species and destructive fishing practices are other provisions recommended for inclusion in the Bill.

- A participatory approach with the involvement of NGOs and self help groups has been mooted to ensure sustainability of inland fisheries.

Material tougher, more conductive than copper developed

Researchers have developed thin carbon nanotube (CNT) textiles that exhibit high electrical conductivity and a level of toughness about 50 times higher than copper films, currently being used in electronics.

How was it prepared?

Tough nano-architected conductive textile are made by capillary splicing of Carbon nanotubes.

- Beginning with catalyst deposited on a silicon oxide substrate, vertically aligned carbon nanotubes were synthesised via chemical vapour deposition in the form of parallel lines of 5 micrometre wide, 10 micrometre in length, and 20-60 micrometre in heights.

Potential applications:

Aligned carbon nanotube sheets are suitable for a wide range of application spanning from the micro to the macro-scales. The structural robustness of thin metal films has significant importance for the reliable operation of smart skin and flexible electronics, including biological and structural health monitoring sensors.

3D-printing conquers glass:

- Scientists have developed a novel way to 3D-print objects using glass, an advance that could be used to make very small optical components for complex computers.
- The process is known as Stereolithography. Stereolithography is a form of 3D-printing technology used for creating models, prototypes, patterns and production parts in a layer by layer fashion using photopolymerisation, a process by which light causes chains of molecules to link, forming polymers.
- The material, which remains a liquid, is washed out in a solvent bath, leaving only the desired cured structure. The polymer still mixed in this glass structure is subsequently removed by heating.

Engaging Asia arbitration summit:

- The summit was recently held in New Delhi.
- The Summit brings together lawyers and corporates from participating countries to discuss Asia's potential in driving worldwide growth in commercial arbitration.
- It provides participants an opportunity to discuss the surge in arbitration in Asia, especially among economic powers such as India and China, and Southeast Asia.
- The Summit presents a platform for the international arbitration community to engage with policy makers and share experiences in best practices. It also provides ample opportunity to network on the sidelines with leading arbitration lawyers and corporate counsels.

'Mother of all marches' in Venezuela:

- The Mother of All Marches, also known as the Mother of All Protests, was a day of protests held on 19 April 2017 in Venezuela against their president Nicolas Maduro and the chavist regime.
- The protests began after the Supreme Tribunal of Justice dissolved the National Assembly and took over its legislative powers, on 29 March, 2017, in what was called a self-coup.

Panchayati Raj Diwas:

- National Panchayati Raj Day is the national day of India celebrated by Ministry of Panchayati Raj on 24 April annually.
- This date marks a defining moment in the history of decentralization of political power to the grassroots level.
- The Constitution (73rd Amendment) Act, 1992 that came into force with effect from 24th April, 1993 has institutionalized Panchayati Raj through the village, Intermediate and District level Panchayats.

India becomes no 2 LPG importer:

- India has replaced Japan as world's number two importer of liquefied petroleum gas or LPG.
- Japan recorded a drop of 3.2% in LPG imports during the period under review to 10.6 million tonnes.

- China continues to occupy numero uno position as world's largest LPG importer.

The Paths We Walk

A Documentary Photo exhibition called "The Paths We Walk" was recently inaugurated in New Delhi.

Key facts:

- The exhibition has been organized by the National Trust under Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment in collaboration with Society for Child Development.
- The Documentary photo exhibition is intended to tackle negative myths of disability and employment of persons with Autism, Cerebral Palsy, Intellectual Disability and Multiple Disabilities.
- The photo exhibition is just a glimpse of the vast capabilities of persons with Disabilities. It has been a joint collaborative effort of NGOs working for the welfare of persons with disabilities.
- The month of April is celebrated across the World as the World Autism Awareness Month. The National Trust has been organizing conferences and events during the months to create awareness and celebrate diversity

About National Trust:

The National Trust is a statutory body under the Ministry of Social Justice & Empowerment, Government of India and set up under the National Trust for the Welfare of Persons with Autism, Cerebral Palsy, Mental Retardation & Multiple Disabilities Act.

Objectives:

- To ensure people with disabilities lead independent life with dignity.
- To support & strengthen NGOs & other service providers.
- To appoint legal guardian to take care of the need of people with disabilities.

Government e-Marketplace (GeM)

In the light of alleged irregularities, the government has reiterated that GeM is the most transparent, accountable

and efficient public procurement portal and has already resulted in savings of crores of Rupees to the Government.

- The government noted that the processes on GeM are completely transparent and GeM is the first Government portal that places all the procurements- big or small- by Government organizations in public domain, with details about the buyer, seller, item, quantity and price.
- The government has also assured that there are adequate checks and balances in place on GeM which do not allow suppliers to get away with supplying at a higher price to the Government, than the prevailing market or Last Procurement Price (LPP).

About GeM:

Government e-Marketplace (GeM) aims to transform the way in which procurement of goods and services is done by the Government Ministries/Departments, PSUs, autonomous bodies etc.

- DGS&D with technical support of NeGD (MeitY) has developed GeM portal for procurement of both Products & Services.
- GeM is a completely paperless, cashless and system driven e-market place that enables procurement of common use goods and services with minimal human interface.

Panel moots UID numbers for cows

The Centre has proposed issuing "Unique Identification Number Sequences" for cows and their progeny to protect them from cattle smuggling. A government committee has also iterated the same.

Background:

The plan is the brainchild of the Union Agriculture Ministry for "tamper-proof identification of cattle using polyurethane tags with a Unique Identification Number Sequence."

Important recommendations made by the committee:

- Each animal be tagged with proper records of identification details, including age, breed, sex, lactation, height, body, colour, horn type, tail switch and special marks.

Need for tagging:

Cattle smuggling has become a “by-product” of the dairy industry. Stray, “retired” and abandoned cattle face high risk of falling into smugglers’ hands.

Solve a problem, win ¹ 1 crore

The Centre is set to launch a scheme for students from higher educational institutions to volunteer to offer innovative, original and practical solutions to problems facing the country and get rewarded for their efforts.

Key facts:

- The scheme will be called IDEAS, or Innovations for Development of Efficient and Affordable Systems. It is an initiative to challenge young minds with problems of society in general, to come up with innovative, original, practical and economical solutions.
- The Human Resource Development Ministry has identified a handful of areas pertaining to which the problem-solving skills of students will be tested. These are affordable healthcare, computer science and ICT, energy (making solar/renewable resources cheaper, energy efficiency, etc.), affordable housing, healthcare, agriculture, education, water resources and river systems, affordable infrastructure, defence, cybersecurity and information security, and environment and climate change.
- The scheme will invite students to find solutions to problems in these fields — and offer a prize of ¹ 1 crore to the best solution in each field.
- Under each of the above areas or themes, 10 problem statements will be prepared and widely publicised. All higher educational institutions will be eligible and encouraged to participate, but participation of IITs, NITs and CFTIs will be mandatory.

SC for broad anti-torture legislation

Referring to the setback suffered by the CBI in its efforts to get Kim Davy — a Danish citizen and prime accused in the Purulia arms drop case of 1995 — extradited from Denmark, the Supreme Court has observed that India may be finding it tough to secure extraditions because there is a fear within the international community that the accused persons would be subject to torture here.

Background:

A Danish court had rejected the plea on the ground that he would risk “torture or other inhuman treatment” in India.

What next?

Considering it a matter of both Article 21 (fundamental right to life and dignity) and of international reputation, the court has asked the government to consider promulgating a standalone, comprehensive law to define and punish torture as an instrument of “human degradation” by state authorities. Such a law is in the national interest.

1997 convention:

India has signed the UN Convention against torture way back in 1997. But, it has still not ratified it. The Convention defines torture as a criminal offence.

Efforts in this regard:

A bill was also proposed in this regard. But, no action has been taken on the Prevention of Torture Bill 2010 even six years after it was passed by the Lok Sabha on May 6, 2010 and recommended by a Select Committee of the Rajya Sabha of which he had been Chairman.

The centre contends some States were not in favour of such a law and the Indian Penal Code and the Criminal Procedure Code were more than sufficient.

Hindi being ‘promoted’ as per Act: Rijju

Faced with criticism that the Central government is unfairly imposing Hindi on non-Hindi-speaking States, the government has iterated that it was only promoting the language as per an Act of Parliament.

Background:

In May 2015, the government had issued an order that as per the Official Languages Act, 1963, all government files would have to be issued bilingually, in Hindi and English.

What’s the issue?

In March, the Department of Official Language of the Home Ministry pulled out a 2011 report of a Committee of

Parliament on Official Language and sent it to the President for approval.

- The “progressive” use of Hindi in the Central government offices is reviewed by this Committee every 10 years under the Official Languages Act, 1963 and the Rules framed under it.
- As many as 110 out of the 117 recommendations in this report were accepted by the President. The Home Ministry has issued an advisory to all States and government departments to implement the recommendations.

Important recommendations made by the committee include:

- Giving students the option of writing their exams in Hindi.
- Making minimum knowledge of Hindi compulsory for government jobs.
- Ensuring that the government spends more on Hindi advertisements than English ones.
- The railway ministry should buy equipment with lettering in Devnagri script.
- Railway tickets should be bilingual, with Hindi being one of the two languages.
- Hindi should be an option for UPSC aspirants.
- Cabinet ministers should deliver their speeches in Hindi as much as possible.
- Making it mandatory at railway stations in ‘C’ category (non-Hindi speaking) states such as Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Telengana and Kerala to have announcements in Hindi.

What the constitution says?

Article 351 says it shall be the duty of the Union to promote the spread of the Hindi language, to develop it so that it may serve as a medium of expression for all the elements of the composite culture of India and to secure its enrichment by assimilating without interfering with its genius, the forms, style and expressions used in Hindustani and in the other languages of India specified in the Eighth Schedule, and by drawing, wherever necessary or desirable, for its vocabulary, primarily on Sanskrit and secondarily on other languages.

Niyamgiri’s hero gets Goldman Prize

Activist Prafulla Samantara is one of the six winners of the Goldman Environmental Prize for 2017. He is being honoured for his historic 12-year legal battle that affirmed the indigenous Dongria Kondhs’ land rights and protected the Niyamgiri Hills from a massive, open-pit aluminum ore mine.

About Goldman Prize:

The annual prize awarded by the Goldman Environmental Foundation honours grassroots environmentalists, who risk their lives to protect the environment and empower those who have the most to lose from industrial projects that threaten their traditional livelihoods.

- Since 1990 when the awards were first instituted, six Indians — Medha Patkar, M.C. Mehta, Rasheeda Bi, Champaran Shukla, Ramesh Agrawal and Prafulla Samantara have won the prize.

- Apart from a medal and citation, winners receive a substantial cash award though the exact amount is not revealed. Reuters reported in 2014 that individuals won \$175,000 (₹ 1.13 crore approx) as prize money.

- The Goldman Environmental Prize recipients are selected by an international jury from confidential nominations submitted by a worldwide group of environmental organizations and individuals. The winners are announced every April to coincide with Earth Day.

About Dongria Kondhs:

- The Dongria Kondh in southwestern Odisha is one of India’s so-called “particularly vulnerable tribal groups.”
- The Kondhas are believed to be from the Proto-Australoid ethnic group. Their native language is Kui, a Dravidian language written with the Odia script.
- They have a subsistence economy based on foraging, hunting & gathering but they now primarily depend on a subsistence agriculture i.e. shifting cultivation or slash and burn cultivation or Podu.
- The Dongria Kondh call themselves Jharnia meaning those who live by the Jharana (streams). Hundreds of perennial streams flow from Niyamgiri hill, and there are

hundreds of Dongria villages by the streams. The Dongria are considered the protectors of these streams, hills and jungles by the people of the nearby plains.

‘Child artistes can work only for 5 hours a day’

The Labour Ministry has proposed the draft Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Amendment Rules, 2017 to fix the working conditions for child artistes and for employing children in family enterprises.

Key provisions:

- While a child artiste will not be allowed to work for more than five hours a day, a child “assisting” in a family business can only work for three hours a day.
- Children will be allowed to assist their family in running family enterprises “without affecting” their school education. The family would include parents, real siblings, and “real brother and sister of the parents”. Such children will not be allowed to engage in any production, supply or retail chain which is “remunerative for the family and hazardous activities.”
- At least 20% of the income earned by the child artiste will be required to be deposited in a fixed deposit account “in a nationalised bank”. The money would be credited to the child after she turns 18.
- The permission of the district magistrate would be mandatory for engaging a child artiste. The production unit must nominate a person, who would be held responsible for the safety and security of the child artiste. A child cannot take part in a “street performance for monetary gain”.

Background:

The government had brought a new law to govern child labour, known as the Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Amendment Act, 2016, which put a blanket ban on employment of children below 14 years of age. However, it had made two exceptions in favour of child labour: children could work as child artistes (in the entertainment sector), and could “help” in their family enterprises.

Appointments Committee of the Cabinet:

- The Appointments Committee of the Cabinet has approved extension in service to Shri Pradeep Kumar Sinha, IAS as Cabinet Secretary for a further period of one year beyond his tenure.
- The Appointments Committee of the Cabinet (ACC) decides appointments to several top posts under the Government of India.
- Composition: The committee is composed of the Prime Minister of India (who is the Chairman), the Minister of Home Affairs.
- Originally the Minister in-charge of the concerned Ministry was also the part of the committee but as per the new notification the minister of concerned ministry has been excluded from the committee.

Veteran actor K. Viswanath wins Dadasaheb Phalke award for 2016:

- Renowned filmmaker and actor Kasinadhuni Viswanath, best known for his award-winning movies in Telugu, Tamil and Hindi, has won the Dadasaheb Phalke award for the year 2016 for his outstanding contribution to the film industry.
- He won the Padma Shri in 1992 and the Andhra Pradesh government has honoured him with 20 Nandi awards.
- He will be the 48 recipient of the award, the highest recognition in Indian cinema, which consists of a golden lotus, a cash prize of ₹ 10 lakh and a shawl.

Astronaut Peggy Whitson Sets NASA Record For Most Days In Space:

- NASA astronaut Peggy Whitson has officially set the U.S. record for most cumulative days in space, surpassing astronaut Jeff Williams’ record of 534 days.
- Whitson also is the first woman to command the space station; she has commanded it twice. Her first stint as commander was in April 2008 and she’s commanding the current crew.
- She also holds the record for most spacewalks by a female astronaut. Whitson took her eighth spacewalk in March.

Ghana, Kenya and Malawi to pilot GSK malaria vaccine from 2018:

- Ghana, Kenya and Malawi will pilot the world's first malaria vaccine from 2018, offering it for babies and children in high-risk areas as part of real-life trials. Combined with existing malaria interventions, such a vaccine would have the potential to save tens of thousands of lives in Africa.
- The injectable vaccine, called RTS,S or Mosquirix, was developed by British drugmaker GlaxoSmithKline to protect children from the most deadly form of malaria in Africa.
- This is WHO's pilot programme to assess whether the Mosquirix's protective effect in children aged 5 to 17 months can be replicated in real-life.
- It will also assess the feasibility of delivering the four doses needed, and explore the vaccine's potential role in reducing the number of children killed by the disease.

RDPR bags awards:

- Karnataka Rural Development and Panchayat Raj (RDPR) Department has bagged e-Puraskar Award for the best performance in empowering panchayats by using Information and Communication Technology (ICT) tools, for 2016-17. The State bagged the award for its Ganshi Sakshi Kayak GPS-enabled ICT tool.
- Kerala bagged the second prize, while West Bengal secured third prize in the category of ICT tools.
- Ministry of Panchayat Raj has been conferring e-Puraskar for bringing in transparency, efficiency and accountability in the functioning of panchayats through ICT tools. The cash prize for the first position is Rs. 2 crore, Rs. 1 crore for second position and Rs. 50 lakh for third position.

Three Year Action Agenda

Breaking away from the five-year planning process, NITI Aayog has readied a draft three-year action agenda and circulated it to the States for comments. The draft has been prepared through extensive consultation with State governments.

Background:

In May 2016, the Prime Minister's Office directed Niti Aayog to come up with a 15-year vision document for the period up to 2031-32. This would be complemented with a seven-year strategy starting 2017-18 to convert the vision document into implementable policy and action as part of the National Development Agenda and a three-year draft action plan.

Highlights of the draft:

- The action agenda will span a three-year time frame involving mostly executive decisions, the strategy will be for a seven-year period and include decisions that need legislative changes while the vision would be for 15 years and incorporate institutional changes that may need Constitutional amendments.
- The agenda includes proposals for shifting additional revenues to high priority sectors, doubling farmers' income by 2022, creating jobs, bringing down land prices and expanding tax base through measures such as taxing agricultural income.
- The draft action agenda makes a strong case for tackling tax evasion, expanding the tax base and simplifying the tax stem through reforms. One related proposal is consolidating existing custom duty rates to a unified rate.
- In the area of urban development, the draft stresses on the need to bring down land prices to make housing affordable through increased supply of urban land. It proposed more flexible conversion rules from one use to another, release of land held by sick units, more generous floor space index, reform in the Rent Control Act and promoting dormitory housing.
- For creating jobs, the action points include creation of Coastal Employment Zones to boost exports and generate high-productivity jobs and enhancing labour-market flexibility through reforming key laws.
- The action points also propose addressing high and rising share of NPAs in India's banks through supporting the auction of larger assets to private asset reconstruction companies and strengthening the State Bank of India-led ARC.

Online Statement Of Transaction (e-SOT) and the e-PRAN card launched for Atal Pension Yojana (APY)

With a view to digitally empower the Atal Pension Yojana (APY) subscribers and improve the quality of service, the facility of online viewing of the statement of transaction(e-SOT) and also the e-PRAN card have been launched. More than 45 lakhs APY subscribers are likely to be benefited.

About APY:

The Atal Pension Yojana (APY) was launched in May, 2015. APY is available for all citizens of India in the age group of 18-40 years.

- Under the APY, the subscribers would receive a minimum guaranteed pension of Rs. 1000 to Rs. 5000 per month from the age of 60 years, depending on their contributions, which depends on the age of the subscriber at the time of joining the APY.
- The Same amount of pension is paid to the spouse in case of subscriber's demise. After the demise of both i.e. Subscriber & Spouse, the nominee would be paid with the pension corpus.
- There is option for Spouse to continue to contribute for balance period on premature death of subscriber before 60 years, so as to avail pension by Spouse.
- There are tax benefits at entry, accumulation and pension payment phases. If the actual returns on the pension contributions during the accumulation phase are higher than the assumed returns for the minimum guaranteed pension, such excess returns are passed on to the subscriber, resulting in enhanced scheme benefits.

IPR Awareness Campaign for Schools

The Cell for IPR Promotion and Management (CIPAM) in collaboration with the International Trademark Association (INTA) has kicked off the IPR Awareness campaign for schools across the country.

Background:

The National Intellectual Property Rights (IPR) Policy, which was approved by the Union Cabinet in May 2016, is a significant move forward to encourage creativity and stimulate innovation in the country. Outreach and

Promotion is the first and foremost objective of the National IPR Policy and is critical to shaping an IP environment that is conducive to fostering creativity & innovation in the country.

Highlights of the new IPR policy:

- The new policy seeks to encourage innovation and improve access to healthcare, food security and environmental protection.
- The Policy will allow compulsory licensing with restrictions in case of a public health emergency such as epidemics and it is compliant with the World Trade Organization's guidelines.
- The policy seeks to put in place a legal framework that will encourage the IPR regime and reduce the time taken by the government to approve a trademark to a month by 2017. Currently, the process takes more than a year.
- The policy makes the department of industrial policy and promotion (DIPP) the nodal agency for regulating IP rights in the country.
- The Policy states "India shall remain committed to the (World Trade Organisation's) Doha Declaration on Trade Related IPR Agreement (TRIPS) and Public Health."
- It also says "India will continue to utilise the legislative space and flexibilities available in international treaties and the TRIPS Agreement." These flexibilities include the sovereign right of countries to use provisions such as Section 3(d) and CLs for ensuring the availability of essential and life-saving drugs at affordable prices.
- To ensure strong and effective IPR laws, the Policy states India will engage constructively in the negotiation of international treaties and agreements in consultation with stakeholders.

About CIPAM:

Cell for IPR Promotion and Management (CIPAM) has been created as a professional body under the aegis of DIPP to take forward the implementation of the National IPR Policy that was approved by the Government in May 2016, with the slogan – "Creative India; Innovative India".

CIPAM is working towards creating public awareness about IPRs in the country, promoting the filing of IPRs through facilitation, providing inventors with a platform to commercialize their IP assets and coordinating the implementation of the National IPR Policy in collaboration with Government Ministries/Departments and other stakeholders.

- The doctrine also talked about the steps initiated for establishment of the “Defence Cyber Agency”, “Defence Space Agency” and “Special Operations Division”.
- The doctrine has added surgical strikes, even those across the border, among the nation’s possible responses to terrorist attacks.

JOINT DOCTRINE OF ARMY, NAVY, IAF UNVEILED

With aim to match the pace of fast changing nature of war, the ministry of defence has released the Joint Doctrine of Armed Forces stressing on the need for synergy amongst the three Services namely Army, IAF and Navy and hone strategy for inter-operability to achieve the political and military objectives in an effective manner.

- This doctrine is the second in the series after its first version was released in 2007. It included the lessons learnt over the past ten years and is aligned with the doctrines of individual Services.

Highlights:

- The Joint Doctrine will serve as a cornerstone document for application of Military Power in a synergized manner and also establish a broad framework of concepts and principles to understand approach to joint planning and conduct of operations across all the domains of conflict.
- Taking the strategic scenario into account, the doctrine said India will have to have deterrent capabilities to protect its interests on the Line of Actual Control(LAC) facing China and Line of Control(LOC) with Pakistan. The document noted that while conflicts the world over for gaining territorial control were diminishing, India, however, has to protect its territory as the LAC and LOC are disputed.
- It also mentioned proxy war in Jammu and Kashmir and volatile situation in Af-Pak region is another major challenge for India while describing Radicalisation of youth in some states through social media was another contemporary challenge facing national security, the document said adding management of digital environment is priority area.

Judgment turns focus on removal of police top brass

The Supreme Court’s recent judgment reinstating T.P. Senkumar as Director-General of Police in Kerala has brought the spotlight back on the issue of executive privilege in appointing and removing top officials.

Background:

This verdict draws from a September 2006 judgment in what is known as the Prakash Singh case where the Supreme Court said a DGP should have a two-year tenure and can be removed only in consultation with the State Security Commission under certain conditions.

About the Prakash Singh case:

In the Prakash Singh case, the Supreme Court directed State Governments to constitute a State Security Commission to ensure that the State “does not exercise unwarranted influence or pressure on the State police and for laying down the broad policy guidelines so that the State police always acts according to the laws of the land and the Constitution of the country.”

- “This watchdog body shall be headed by the Chief Minister or Home Minister as Chairman and have the DGP of the State as its ex-officio Secretary. The other members of the Commission shall be chosen in such a manner that it is able to function independent of government control,” the 2006 judgment stated.
- A 2014 report prepared by the Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative revealed that while States have set up State Security Commissions, the intended independent character of these bodies has been given the go-by.

Northeast India's largest IT hub opens in Tripura:

- Northeast India's sixth and largest Information Technology (IT) hub was recently inaugurated in Tripura to boost employment and e-governance besides to export software technology.
- This IT hub would help to create employment opportunities for the IT educated youths and to further extend the e-governance to the door step of people.

India is now 5th largest military spender:

- The report titled 'Trends in world Military expenditure, 2016, which ranks countries based on their military spending was recently released. The report was released by Swedish think-tank Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI).
- India is now the world's fifth largest spender on defence for 2016 after having moved up from the 7th place following its largest annual military spending increase since 2009.
- While India spent \$55.9 billion in 2016, its northern neighbor China — the second largest spender — did four times more at \$215 billion. Pakistan does not figure in the top 15 spenders.
- The US is the top spender at \$611 billion. Russia is third at \$69.2 billion and Saudi Arabia fourth at \$ 63.7 billion.

OVER RS.ONE LAKH CR INVESTMENT APPROVED FOR HOUSING OF URBAN POOR

Ministry of Housing and Urban Poverty Alleviation has sanctioned 1,00,537 more houses for urban poor under Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (Urban) with an investment of Rs.4,200 cr taking the total investment so far approved to Rs.1,00,466 cr. This is 307% more than the investment approved of Rs.32,713 cr during 2004-14 for affordable housing in urban areas.

- With the latest sanctions, the Ministry has so far approved construction of 18,75,389 houses for Economically Weaker Sections under PMAY(Urban) in 2,151 cities and towns in 34 States/UTs as against 13.80 lakh houses sanctioned during 2004-15 with an approved investment of Rs.32,009 cr.

- The total investment approved so far includes central assistance of Rs.29,409 cr, assistance from State Governments and beneficiary contribution.

About PMAY-Urban:

The Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (Urban) Programme launched by the Ministry of Housing and Urban Poverty Alleviation (MoHUPA), in Mission mode envisions provision of Housing for All by 2022, when the Nation completes 75 years of its Independence.

The Mission seeks to address the housing requirement of urban poor including slum dwellers through following programme verticals:

- Slum rehabilitation of Slum Dwellers with participation of private developers using land as a resource.
- Promotion of Affordable Housing for weaker section through credit linked subsidy.
 - Affordable Housing in Partnership with Public & Private sectors.
 - Subsidy for beneficiary-led individual house construction /enhancement.

Key facts:

- The beneficiaries are poor and people living under EWS and LIG categories in the country.
- The scheme is divided into three phases. In the first phase, a total of 100 cities will be covered from April 2015 to March 2017. In phase two, 200 cities will be covered from April 2017 to March 2019. In the third phase, the leftover cities will be covered from April 2019 to March 2022.
- The government is providing an interest subsidy of 6.5% on housing loans which can be availed by beneficiaries for 15 years from start of loan date.
- The government will grant Rs 1 lakh to all the beneficiaries of the scheme. In addition, Rs 1.5 lakh will be given to all eligible urban poor who want to construct their houses in urban areas or plan to go for renovation in their existing houses. One can also avail loans under this scheme to build toilets in existing houses.

ASHRINKING HOME FOR ENDEMIC BIRDS

According to a study by IUCN experts, 17 Western Ghats species have smaller ranges than what was thought earlier.

- The study used land cover, forest type (satellite imagery), temperature, precipitation and 'citizen science' using the eBird online birding checklist.

Highlights of the study:

- The study found that for 17 of 18 bird species, the distribution was smaller than what IUCN earlier estimated.
- IUCN overestimated the habitat of these bird species by up to 88%. Of the 18 species, habitats of 12 were overestimated by over 50%.
- An example is the Malabar grey hornbill which IUCN classifies as 'Least Concern' and believes is distributed across 2.3 lakh sq.km in Kerala and Karnataka. But when researchers used a spatial modelling technique, they found its range was just 43,060 sq. km, or, nearly 81% less than the estimates. This would put the bird in the 'Near Threatened' category.
- Again, the Nilgiri pipit appears to have lost 88% of its habitat, making it "endangered" rather than "vulnerable."

Concerns:

These species are in danger because as per the IUCN guidelines, 'less vulnerable' species receive a lower conservation focus.

Supreme Court pulls up States on food panels

The Supreme Court has criticised the Centre and the State governments for the lacklustre implementation of the National Food Security Act of 2013, including a rather casual approach taken to the mandatory setting up of the State Food Commissions meant to monitor the implementation of the statute.

- The court found that the situation has come into existence owing to the "flexibility" provided by the Act to States to designate "some existing Commission to act as the State Food Commission". The result, the apex court found, was that many States have opted for this flexibility.

Background:

As per the act, every State Government shall, by notification, constitute a State Food Commission for the purpose of monitoring and review of implementation of this Act.

- The State Commission shall consist of: A Chairperson, five other Members and a Member-Secretary, who shall be an officer of the State Government not below the rank of Joint Secretary to that Government.
- The act requires that there shall be at least two women, one person belonging to the Scheduled Castes and one person belonging to the Scheduled Tribes, whether Chairperson, Member or Member-Secretary.

National Food Security Act (NFSA), 2013:

As passed by the Parliament, Government has notified the National Food Security Act, 2013 on 10th September, 2013 with the objective to provide for food and nutritional security in human life cycle approach, by ensuring access to adequate quantity of quality food at affordable prices to people to live a life with dignity.

- The Act provides for coverage of upto 75% of the rural population and upto 50% of the urban population for receiving subsidized foodgrains under Targeted Public Distribution System (TPDS), thus covering about two-thirds of the population.
- The eligible persons will be entitled to receive 5 Kgs of foodgrains per person per month at subsidised prices of Rs. 3/2/1 per Kg for rice/wheat/coarse grains.
- The existing Antyodaya Anna Yojana (AAY) households, which constitute the poorest of the poor, will continue to receive 35 Kgs of foodgrains per household per month.
- The Act also has a special focus on the nutritional support to women and children. Besides meal to pregnant women and lactating mothers during pregnancy and six months after the child birth, such women will also be entitled to receive maternity benefit of not less than Rs. 6,000. Children upto 14 years of age will be entitled to nutritious meals as per the prescribed nutritional standards.
- In case of non-supply of entitled foodgrains or meals, the beneficiaries will receive food security allowance.

- The Act also contains provisions for setting up of grievance redressal mechanism at the District and State levels. Separate provisions have also been made in the Act for ensuring transparency and accountability.

The Supreme Court has asked the government to frame a statutory law to regulate the flow of public money to the NGOs.

- The government had recently handed over the guidelines to the court, appointing NITI Aayog as the nodal agency for NGO registration. But the court said the guidelines might not prove sufficient for “systematising the entire process of accreditation, fund utilisation and audit of NGOs”.

Why a law in this regard is necessary?

CBI records filed in 2016 in the Supreme Court had shown show that only 2,90,787 NGOs file annual financial statements of a total of 29,99,623 registered ones under the Societies Registration Act.

- In some States, the CBI said the laws do not even provide for the NGOs to be transparent about their financial dealings. In the Union Territories, of a total of 82,250 NGOs registered and functioning, only 50 file their returns.
- New Delhi has the highest number of registered NGOs among the Union Territories at 76,566. But none of these organisations submit returns, the CBI chart showed. In Kerala, which has 3,69,137 NGOs, there is no legal provision to submit returns. The same is the case for Punjab with 84,752 and Rajasthan with 1.3 lakh NGOs.
- Uttar Pradesh, which has the highest number of NGOs at 5.48 lakh among the States, has only 1.19 lakh filing returns. Tamil Nadu has 1.55 lakh NGOs registered; however, only 20,277 file returns. Andhra Pradesh has 2.92 lakh NGOs, but only 186 file financial statements annually.
- West Bengal has 2.34 lakh registered NGOs, of which only 17,089 active NGOs file annual returns.

Proposed guidelines:

The Ministry of Rural Development had framed the accreditation guidelines to regulate “manner in which the VOs/NGOs, which are recipient of grants, would maintain their account, the procedure for audit of the account,

including procedure to initiate action for recovering of the grants in case of misappropriation and criminal action.”

Some of the important guidelines are as follows:

- NITI Aayog has been appointed as the nodal agency for the purpose of registration and accreditation of VOs/NGOs seeking funding from the Government of India. The Aayog has been also tasked with maintaining of database systems to manage and disseminate information relating to NGOs/ VOs.
- As per the new guidelines, an NGO will be blacklisted if it provides false and misleading information to the Centre.
- Under the stringent guidelines, NGOs would be provided a unique ID and subjected to the Income Tax Act and Foreign Contribution Regulations act. They would be granted accreditation after their internal governance and ethical standards are evaluated.
- Past record of NGOs too would be scrutinized before they are given accreditation. A three-tier scrutiny would be in place to evaluate utilization of funds and the process would also include quality of work done by the NGOs.
- It would be mandatory for the NGOs to execute a bond to refund the amount with 10% interest if they fail to execute the project for which the grant is allocated. Misappropriation of funds would invite both criminal and civil cases.

Artificial womb experiment delivers hopes

Scientists have successfully tested an artificial womb filled with clear liquid on pre-natal lambs.

What you need to know about this experiment?

A fluid environment is critical for foetal development. The foetus — breathing liquid, as it would in the womb — lies in a clear-plastic sack filled with a synthetic amniotic fluid. It is designed to continue what naturally occurs in the womb.

- The umbilical cord is attached via tubes to a machine outside the bag, which removes CO2 and adds oxygen to blood passing through it. There are no mechanical pumps — it is the foetus’ heart that keeps things moving.

- Sheep have long been used in experiments for prenatal treatment, especially because lung development is highly similar.

Significance of this experiment:

The new system mimics life in the uterus and could, if approved for human use, dramatically improve the odds. This could help extremely premature babies avoid death or life-long disability.

High Court spells out steps to stop pollution in Dal Lake

The Jammu & Kashmir High Court has come down heavily on authorities for failing to preserve the famous Dal Lake.

The court has ordered a slew of measures to contain the ever growing pollution and encroachments in and around the waterbody.

These measures are as follows:

- Re-structure and refurbish existing Sewage Treatment Plants (STPs).
- Rope in non-governmental and other organisations “for technical experience” and install CCTV cameras “to strengthen” the LAWDA’s Enforcement Wing.
- Implement a rehabilitation project for lake-dwellers who are being displaced as part of the conservation programme.
- Seek guidance of the World Wildlife Fund, which has created a network called the India Water Stewardship Network and Alliance for Water Stewardship, “to ensure sustainable water management”.
- Examine whether a non-profit trust can be formed, like a ‘Dal Lake Fund’. It can be given the task of restoration of the lake.
- Encourage good Samaritans to save the lake. This can be done by encouraging school and college students to take part in community service programmes, focusing specifically on clean environment in and around the lake.

About Dal lake:

- Dal lake is the second largest lake in Jammu and Kashmir and is integral to tourism and recreation in Kashmir. It is

named the “Jewel in the crown of Kashmir” or “Srinagar’s Jewel”.

- Mughal gardens on the shore, such as Shalimar Bagh and Nishat Bagh were built during the reign of Mughal Emperor Jahangir.
- The lake covers an area of 18 square kilometres and is part of a natural wetland which covers 21.1 square kilometres, including its floating gardens. The floating gardens are known as “Rad” in Kashmiri.
- The lake is located within a catchment area covering 316 square kilometres in the Zabbarwan mountain valley, in the foothills of the Shankracharya hills, which surrounds it on three sides.

‘Religious freedom deteriorating in India’

The annual report of the U.S Commission on International Religious Freedom released recently said that religious tolerance and religious freedom continued to deteriorate in India in 2016.

Important observations made by the report:

- Hindu nationalist groups and their sympathisers perpetrated numerous incidents of intimidation, harassment, and violence against religious minority communities and Hindu Dalits. These violations were most “frequent and severe” in 10 of India’s 29 States.
- National and State laws that restrict religious conversion, cow slaughter, and the foreign funding of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) helped create the conditions enabling these violations.
- The report also blames police and judicial bias and inadequacies that “have created a pervasive climate of impunity in which religious minorities feel increasingly insecure and have no recourse when religiously motivated crimes occur”.

Legislation against Doping

Advocating a zero tolerance policy towards doping, Sports Minister Vijay Goel has asked the National Anti-Doping Agency (NADA) to consider the possibility of making it a criminal offence.

- The minister has also directed NADA, the Indian Olympic Association, the National Sports Federations and the Sports Authority of India (SAI) to adopt a policy of ‘Zero tolerance’ towards doping.
- NADA has also been directed to sensitise the players at grassroots level about the ill-effects of doping through regular seminars and information campaigns at schools and colleges.

About NADA:

National Anti Doping Agency (NADA) was set up as registered society under the Societies Registration Act of 1890 on November 24, 2005 with a mandate for Dope free sports in India.

The primary objectives are to implement anti-doping rules as per WADA code, regulate dope control programme, to promote education and research and creating awareness about doping and its ill effects.

About WADA:

The World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) is a foundation initiated by the International Olympic Committee based in Canada to promote, coordinate and monitor the fight against drugs in sports. The agency’s key activities include scientific research, education, development of anti-doping capacities, and monitoring of the World Anti-Doping Code, whose provisions are enforced by the UNESCO International Convention against Doping in Sport.

Government of India is one of the Foundation Members of World Anti Doping Agency (WADA) (1999-2002).

What else you need to know?

Given that many governments cannot be legally bound by a non-governmental document such as the World Anti-Doping Code, they are implementing it by individually ratifying the UNESCO International Convention against Doping in Sport, the first global international treaty against doping in sport, which was unanimously adopted by 191 governments at the UNESCO General Conference in October 2005 and came into force in February 2007.

The UNESCO Convention is a practical and legally binding tool enabling governments to align domestic policy with

the World Anti-Doping Code, thus harmonizing the rules governing anti-doping in sport.

It formalizes governments’ commitment to the fight against doping in sport, including by facilitating doping controls and supporting national testing programs; encouraging the establishment of “best practice” in the labelling, marketing, and distribution of products that might contain prohibited substances; withholding financial support from those who engage in or support doping; taking measures against manufacturing and trafficking; encouraging the establishment of codes of conduct for professions relating to sport and anti-doping; and funding education and research.

Lokpal panel: CJI among equals

The Supreme Court has upheld the provision of the Lokpal law giving no primacy to the Chief Justice of India’s opinion on who should be appointed as Lokpal Chairperson and Members.

Background:

The judgement came based on a petition filed by an NGO — Just Society — against the Lokpal Act of 2013 not giving any primacy to the opinion of the CJI or his nominee judge in the matter of selection of Chairperson and Members of the Lokpal.

What else has the court said?

- The Chief Justice of India’s opinion need not always get primacy. It is the prerogative of the legislature to decide whether the opinion of the Chief Justice of India should get primacy.
- It is not the mandate of the Constitution that in all matters concerning the appointment to various offices in different bodies, primacy must be accorded to the opinion of the Chief Justice or his nominee.

Implementation of the act:

Terming the Lokpal and Lokayukta Act of 2013 an “eminently workable piece of legislation”, the court asked the government to proceed ahead with the appointment of Lokpal Chairperson and members even in the absence of a recognised Leader of Opposition (LoP).

The judgment goes against the very logic of the government's argument that appointment of Lokpal Chairperson and members is not currently possible, and would have to wait till the 2013 Act is amended to replace the LoP with the single largest Opposition party leader.

Highlights of the Lokpal Act of 2013:

- The Act allows setting up of anti-corruption ombudsman called Lokpal at the Centre and Lokayukta at the State-level.
- The Lokpal will consist of a chairperson and a maximum of eight members.
- The Lokpal will cover all categories of public servants, including the Prime Minister. But the armed forces do not come under the ambit of Lokpal.
- The Act also incorporates provisions for attachment and confiscation of property acquired by corrupt means, even while the prosecution is pending.
- The States will have to institute Lokayukta within one year of the commencement of the Act.
- The Act also ensures that public servants who act as whistleblowers are protected.

Powers:

- The Lokpal will have the power of superintendence and direction over any investigation agency including CBI for cases referred to them by the ombudsman.
- As per the Act, the Lokpal can summon or question any public servant if there exists a prima facie case against the person, even before an investigation agency (such as vigilance or CBI) has begun the probe. Any officer of the CBI investigating a case referred to it by the Lokpal, shall not be transferred without the approval of the Lokpal.
- An investigation must be completed within six months. However, the Lokpal or Lokayukta may allow extensions of six months at a time provided the reasons for the need of such extensions are given in writing.
- Special courts will be instituted to conduct trials on cases referred by Lokpal.

Judicial performance index proposed

NITI Aayog has proposed a slew of measures in its recently released draft three-year action plan to improve judicial performance and policing in the country.

Proposed measures to improve judicial performance:

- A judicial performance index should be introduced to reduce delays. This could help High Courts and their chief justices keep track of the performance and processes at district courts and subordinate levels for reducing delay.
- The performance index for courts will entail fixing of 'non-mandatory time frames for different types of cases to benchmark when a case has been delayed.'
- The index can also include certain progress on process steps already approved by High Courts and such an annual evaluation should give judges in High Courts 'a sense of where they are failing and what they need to fix.'
- Since the subordinate judiciary is largely within the domain of the High Courts, this could also spur competitive reform of the judiciary in those States.
- Repeal all irrelevant legislation by March 2019 and reform land ownership laws — which account for 67% of litigants in civil suits.
- Citing inordinate delays in India's judicial system and its low rank on enforcing contracts in the World Bank's ease of doing business report for 2017, the think tank has also called for streamlining judicial appointments on the basis of online real-time statistics on the workload of pending cases.
- Such data will help enable priority appointment of judges at the lower judiciary levels keeping in mind a scientific approach to assess the number of judges needed to tackle pendency.

Measures to improve policing:

- Create a task force to identify 'non-core functions' that can be outsourced to private agents or government departments in order to reduce the workload of the police.

- Functions such as serving court summons and antecedents and address verification for passport applications or job verifications can be outsourced.
- India's police to population ratio should reach the United Nations norms of 222 per lakh population, over the next seven years, from the current level of 137.
- Red-flagging the adverse implications of crimes against women beyond 'the obvious horror for affected individuals', the Aayog has asked the Home Ministry to push for greater hiring of women in the police force, with a target of 30% of all new recruits.

India, Sri Lanka ink key agreement on economic cooperation

Following an overarching Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) signed recently between India and Sri Lanka, both sides will collaborate in a host of energy and infrastructure projects across the island. The MoU provides a road map that will require further discussions.

The MoU includes:

- Setting up of a Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) plant in suburban Colombo and a solar power plant in Sampur in Trincomalee.
- Indian assistance to enhanced use of natural gas in Sri Lanka.
- Joint investment in the petroleum sector and partnerships in highways and transportation, the spotlight remains on the proposed joint venture to develop a World War-era oil storage facility in Trincomalee, the strategically located port town on the island's east coast.
- As per the MoU, the countries will also jointly set up Industrial Zones and Special Economic Zones in Sri Lanka. Colombo has been keen on attracting Indian investment into the island.

PM launches low-cost flights

The first flight under the UDAN —Ude Desh Ka Aam Nagrik — scheme for regional connectivity was recently inaugurated by the PM.

Key facts:

- The first UDAN flight was inaugurated on the Shimla-Delhi route.
- The Shimla-Delhi flight is operated by Alliance Air, a subsidiary of Air India.
- The fare for 24 seats on the flight has been fixed at Rs. 2,036.
- Air India will receive a subsidy of Rs. 3,340 per passenger from the government for capping the fare.
- The government will collect 80% of the subsidy by charging a levy of up to Rs. 50 per ticket on flights deployed on the national route. The remaining 20% will come from respective State governments.

Background:

Five airlines —SpiceJet, Alliance Air, TruJet, Air Deccan and Air Odisha Aviation — recently won bids to fly 128 routes connecting 70 airports under the regional connectivity scheme.

About UDAN:

Udan is a market-based policy intervention that builds on similar programmes in the US, Canada and Australia. It is also consistent with universal service approaches established for other network-based services such as railways and telecom.

- The objective of the Scheme is to make flying affordable for the masses, to promote tourism, increase employment and promote balanced regional growth. It also intends to put life into un-served and under-served airports.
- It offers viability gap funding to operators to fly smaller aircraft to such airports with a commitment to price tickets for at least half of the seats at ¹ 2,500 for an hour-long flight.

Flexible pension for informal staff mooted

The 'Financial Security for India's Elderly' report by PFRDA has recommended providing flexibility to workers from the informal economy and the agricultural sector in contributions and withdrawals from pension plans.

- The report also recommends a specific pension scheme for young women along the lines of the government's Sukanya Samridhi Scheme for young girls.

Need for flexibility and specific scheme:

- Workers from the informal economy and the agricultural sector should be allowed flexible contributions and withdrawals from pension plans due to the vagaries of their incomes and the risk of disasters.
- Also, agriculture sector employs the highest population in India and is highly dependent on monsoons. In a year of bad monsoons, the earnings of many of the farmers are very low even to suffice their basic needs, let alone put something aside for pension in later years.
- Young girls are labourers who work on a daily basis and are unsure of whether they would be employed the next day.
- Also, since women, who account for 70% of non-workers in India, are financially dependent on their male counterparts, and generally outlive men, the 'feminisation' of the elderly is going to be increasingly evident in the years to come, and could bring with it huge fiscal burdens.

Bhutan out of vehicle pact

Bhutan government has announced that it is not ready to go ahead with the process at present. It asked the other members of the 'BBIN' grouping — India, Bangladesh and Nepal — to continue to operationalise it without Bhutan.

- The decision to step out of the BBIN process comes on the back of severe domestic opposition to the motor vehicles agreement, primarily on fears of vehicular pollution and environmental degradation if trucks from neighbouring countries are given access to Bhutan, a country that prides itself on its "carbon neutrality" and preserving the environment.

Background:

The BBIN Motor Vehicles Agreement, signed on June 15, 2015, allows vehicles to enter each other's territory and does away with trans-shipment of goods from one country's truck to another at the border, a time consuming and costly process.

Poet Shankha Ghosh conferred Jnanpith Award:

- Eminent Bengali poet and literary critic Sankha Ghosh has been conferred the 52nd Jnanpith Award.
- He is also a Sahitya Akademi awardee. Ghosh was also honoured with Padma Bhushan in 2011.
- The Jnanpith Award is one of the prestigious literary honours in the country. The award was instituted in 1961.
- Eligibility: Any Indian citizen who writes in any of the official languages of India is eligible for the honour.

All-woman battalion:

- The Centre has decided to raise an all-woman India Reserve Battalion (IRB) in Jammu and Kashmir to tackle women stone throwers.
- The all women contingent will be among the five IRBs sanctioned by the Centre for the State last year.
- The women battalion would also be assigned other law and order duties but its personnel will be primarily deployed for tackling protesters.
- The IRBs are being raised to provide jobs to the local youths with 60% of the vacancies to be filled with candidates from the border districts. The cost of raising each battalion is around Rs. 61 crore, and 75% of the expenditure will be borne by the Centre.
- IRB personnel are normally deployed in their respective States but they can be sent elsewhere if required.

Over 21 lakh LED Street Lights installed across India under Street Light National Programme

Under the Government of India's Street Lighting National Programme (SLNP) over 21 lakh conventional street lights have been replaced with LED street lights across the country.

- The installation of LED street lights has resulted in Annual energy savings of 295 million unit kWh, avoided capacity of over 73 MW and reduction of 2.3 lakh tonnes of CO₂ annually.
- Rajasthan had the highest replacement of LED bulbs.

Background:

Under Street Light National Programme (SLNP), Government aims to replace 1.34 crore conventional street lights with energy efficient LED lights.

- The project has been implemented across 23 states and union territories. Energy Efficiency Services Limited, a Public Energy Services Company under the administration of Ministry of Power, Government of India (GoI) is the implementing agency for SLNP.
- EESL also undertakes social audits in all states post the completion of the project.

What you need to know about EESL?

Energy Efficiency Services Limited (EESL) is a joint venture of NTPC Limited, Power Finance Corporation, Rural Electrification Corporation and POWERGRID, Energy Efficiency Services Limited (EESL) was set up under Ministry of Power (India) to facilitate implementation of energy efficiency projects.

60% work on Kundli-Palwal e-way over

The government has informed that 60% of the work on the 135-km Eastern Peripheral Expressway, being constructed from Kundli to Palwal, has already been completed. Efforts are being made to complete its construction by August.

What you need to know about the Eastern Peripheral Expressway?

This is the first access-controlled expressway being constructed at a cost of Rs. 4,418 crore.

- After its completion, vehicles would not have to enter Delhi for mutual transit to the States of Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Punjab, Haryana, Rajasthan, Himachal Pradesh, and Jammu and Kashmir.
- The Eastern Peripheral Expressway would pass through Baghpat, Ghaziabad, Gautambuddh Nagar and Faridabad.

Money laundering may be made criminal offence

The Central government is considering a proposal to make money laundering a separate criminal offence to be investigated by the Enforcement Directorate, irrespective of a probe by other agencies.

- The Special Investigation Team (SIT) on black money has also been of the view that money laundering investigations by the Enforcement Directorate should be allowed without any dependence on registration of cases by other police agencies under the legal provisions listed in the schedule of the Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA).

What necessitates this move?

Under the current arrangement in India, the fate of money laundering cases depends on that of the probe and prosecutions in predicate offences pursued by primary agencies. Such restrictions on money laundering investigations on several occasions cause impediments in taking the cases to their logical conclusion. Classifying it as a criminal offence will facilitate quick action against those indulging in money laundering.

Practice in developed countries:

Money laundering in itself has been defined as a criminal offence in several countries. There are also separate legislations for dealing with funds generated through activities like drug trafficking or terror financing.

- The United States has very stringent laws to check money laundering.
- In the United Kingdom, police have to prove predicate offence through circumstantial evidence, linking it to the funds generated and laundered. Wherever money laundering is treated as a stand-alone crime, U.K. agencies are not required to wait for the outcome of investigations into the predicate offence.
- Also, they are not supposed to prove that the funds are proceeds of a particular offence. Based on enough circumstantial evidence, they have to just establish that the proceeds had a criminal origin.

Way ahead:

To classify this as a criminal offence, the government will have to bring about several amendments to the PMLA, including the current definition of the “proceeds of crime” that is right now dependent upon the predicate offences as listed in the Act’s schedule.

What does ED do?

Directorate of Enforcement is a specialized financial investigation agency under the Department of Revenue, Ministry of Finance, Government of India, which enforces the following laws:

- Foreign Exchange Management Act, 1999 (FEMA) – A Civil Law, with officers empowered to conduct investigations into suspected contraventions of the Foreign Exchange Laws and Regulations, adjudicate, contraventions, and impose penalties on those adjudged to have contravened the law.
- Prevention of Money Laundering Act, 2002 (PMLA) – A Criminal Law, with the officers empowered to conduct investigations to trace assets derived out of the proceeds of crime, to provisionally attach/ confiscate the same, and to arrest and prosecute the offenders found to be involved in Money Laundering.

What is PMLA 2002?

Prevention of Money Laundering Act, 2002 is an Act of the Parliament of India enacted to prevent money-laundering and to provide for confiscation of property derived from money-laundering.

- PMLA and the Rules notified there under came into force with effect from July 1, 2005.
- The Act and Rules notified thereunder impose obligation on banking companies, financial institutions and intermediaries to verify identity of clients, maintain records and furnish information.

Campaign sends 596 dropouts to school

Altogether 596 students who had dropped out of school have returned for admissions to them in Tripura under a special campaign by the State's School Education Department and the Centre's Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan (RMSA). The campaign was carried out in all eight districts of the State.

Background:

Tripura had an alarming rate of school drop-outs at the height of insurgency, when scores of schools became non-functional, mainly in the hilly areas. Most had left school

in Classes VIII or IX mainly due to family reasons. The majority of school drop-outs are girls.

About RMSA:

The scheme was launched in March, 2009 with the objective to enhance access to secondary education and to improve its quality. It is envisaged to achieve an enrolment rate of 75% from 52.26% in 2005-06 at secondary stage of implementation of the scheme by providing a secondary school within a reasonable distance of any habitation.

- The other objectives include improving quality of education imparted at secondary level through making all secondary schools conform to prescribed norms, removing gender, socio-economic and disability barriers, providing universal access to secondary level education by 2017, i.e., by the end of 12th Five Year Plan and achieving universal retention by 2020.

- Important quality interventions provided under the scheme are: (i) appointment of additional teachers to reduce PTR to 30:1, (ii) focus on Science, Math and English education, (iii) In-service training of teachers, (iv) science laboratories, (v) ICT enabled education, (vi) curriculum reforms; and (vii) teaching learning reforms.

- Important equity interventions provided in the scheme are: (i) special focus in micro planning (ii) preference to Ashram schools for upgradation (iii) preference to areas with concentration of SC/ST/Minority for opening of schools (iv) special enrolment drive for the weaker section (v) more female teachers in schools; and (vi) separate toilet blocks for girls.

- Implementation mechanism of the Scheme: The scheme is being implemented by the State government societies established for implementation of the scheme. The central share is released to the implementing agency directly. The applicable State share is also released to the implementing agency by the respective State Governments.

A safer alternative to lithium-ion batteries

Researchers at the U.S. Naval Research Laboratory (NRL) developed the nickel-zinc (Ni-Zn) batteries in which a three-dimensional Zn "sponge" replaces the powdered

zinc anode, or positively charged electrode, traditionally used.

Background:

Previous zinc-based rechargeable suffer from a major drawback: Repeated cycles of charging and discharging cause zinc atoms to pile up on one of the electrodes. That causes the growth of “dendrites,” tiny zinc spears that can pierce other parts of the battery, causing it to short-circuit and fail.

Benefits of Ni-Zn batteries:

With 3D Zn, the battery provides an energy content and rechargeability that rival lithium-ion batteries while avoiding the safety issues that continue to plague lithium. Zinc-nickel battery provides nearly the same electrical jolt, but not the fire risk of Li-ion cells.

Potential applications:

With the benefits of rechargeability, the 3D Zn sponge is ready to be deployed within the entire family of Zn-based alkaline batteries across the civilian and military sectors.

India to seal pact with Russia-led grouping

India is set to formalize a free trade agreement with the Eurasian Economic Union, clearing the decks for negotiations on deepening trade relations with the five former Soviet republics.

- The joint statement on the FTA is likely to be issued during the upcoming Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin at St. Petersburg.

About Eurasian Economic Union:

The Eurasian Economic Union comprises Russia, Belarus, Armenia, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan.

- A treaty aiming for the establishment of the union was signed on 29 May 2014 and came into force on 1 January 2015.
- The Eurasian Economic Union has an integrated single market of 183 million people and a gross domestic product of over 4 trillion U.S. dollars (PPP).

- The union introduces the free movement of goods, capital, services and people and provides for common policies in macroeconomic sphere, transport, industry and agriculture, energy, foreign trade and investment, customs, technical regulation, competition and antitrust regulation.

- Trade between India and the five Eurasian countries stands at about \$11 billion.

Significance of this pact:

The Eurasian market could open up new export opportunities in medical tourism, IT and IT-enabled services, besides traditional sectors like spices, marine products, coir and rubber.

