

My Notes....

NATIONAL

PSLV-C40 SUCCESSFULLY PLACES 31 SATELLITES

The Indian Space Research Organisation (Isro) has successfully launched PSLV-C40, which was carrying India's earth observation satellite Cartosat-2 along with 30 nano satellites. The foreign satellites belong to Canada, Finland, France, Korea, UK and USA. Isro's chairman designate K Sivan said that launch is a green flag for some of the important launches including Chandrayaan-2, GSLV MK-II among others in 2018.

What

1. Isro's workhorse PSLV has successfully launched 31 Satellites in a Single Flight ISRO's Polar Satellite Launch Vehicle, in its 42nd flight.
2. The flight, designated as PSLV-C40, successfully lifted off from the First Launch Pad of Sriharkota space port, near Chennai with the 710 kg Cartosat-2 Series Remote Sensing Satellite along with 30 co-passenger satellites.
3. The satellites achieved the Polar Sun Synchronous Orbit of 503 km inclined at an angle of 97.55 degree to the equator. In the succeeding seven minutes, Cartosat-2 series satellite, INS-1C and 28 customer satellites successfully separated from the PSLV in a predetermined sequence.
4. The fourth stage of PSLV-C40 fired twice for short durations to achieve a polar orbit of 365 km height in which India's Microsat successfully separated.
5. After separation, the two solar arrays of Cartosat-2 series satellite were deployed automatically and ISRO's Telemetry, Tracking and Command Network (ISTRAC) at Bengaluru took over the control of the satellite.
6. So far, PSLV has successfully launched 51 Indian satellites and 237 customer satellites from abroad.
7. Another very important satellite this year is the GSAT 11, which will give us about 32 beams covering India and almost 40 Gbps capacity, which is a significant improvement.
8. In addition to that SAT is working on a high throughput satellite, as part of the next generation GSLV Mark III.



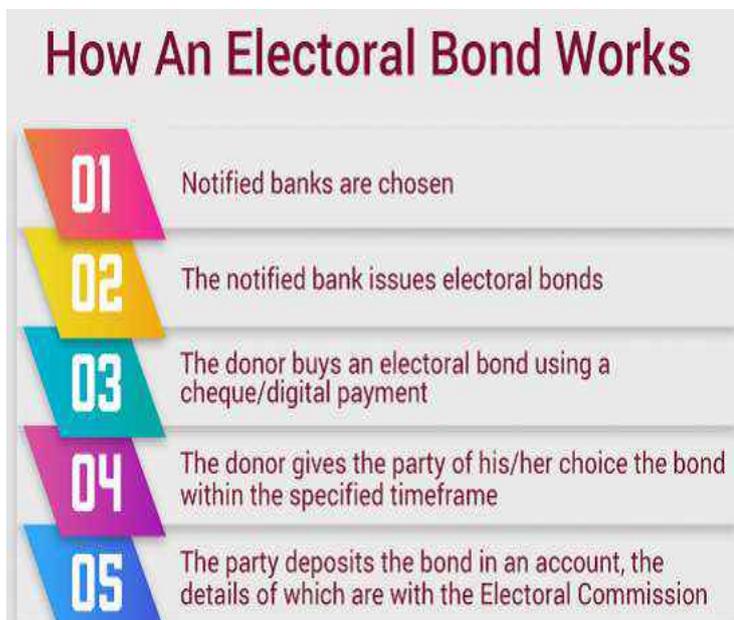
ELECTORAL BONDS NOTIFIED

The Union government on 2 January 2018 notified a framework for electoral bonds -- a financial instrument for making anonymous donations to political parties -- in a

bid to clean up political funding. However, new political parties will be ineligible to receive funds through this route. All Indian citizens and bodies incorporated in India can purchase electoral bonds from specified branches of State Bank of India (SBI) in the multiples of Rs 1,000, Rs 10,000, Rs 100,000, Rs 1 million, and Rs 10 million by making payment from their bank accounts.

What

1. These bonds will be an interest-free debt instrument, resembling promissory notes, where SBI will be the custodian of the donor's funds until political parties redeem them.
2. The purchaser will be allowed to buy electoral bond(s) only on due fulfilment of all the extant KYC [know your customer] norms and by making payment from a bank account. It will not carry the name of payee.
3. Political parties, which have secured at least 1% votes in the last general election to the Lok Sabha or the state Assembly and are registered under the Representation of the People Act, 1951, will be eligible to receive donations through electoral bonds.
4. They can encash the bonds within 15 days of issuance in their bank accounts disclosed to the Election Commission.
5. Electoral bonds will be available for purchase for a period of 10 days in January, April, July, and October, and for 30 additional days during the year in which the Lok Sabha elections take place.
6. The element of transparency is that the balance sheet of donors will reflect that they have bought a certain amount of bonds and political parties will also file their returns (to the Election Commission) that will reflect the extent of electoral bonds that has been received.
7. The name of the donor, quantum and source of money are not known (for present donations). Electoral bonds substantially seek to cleanse the system.
8. Last year, the government had reduced the maximum cash donations to political parties to Rs 2,000, from the earlier limit of Rs 20,000.



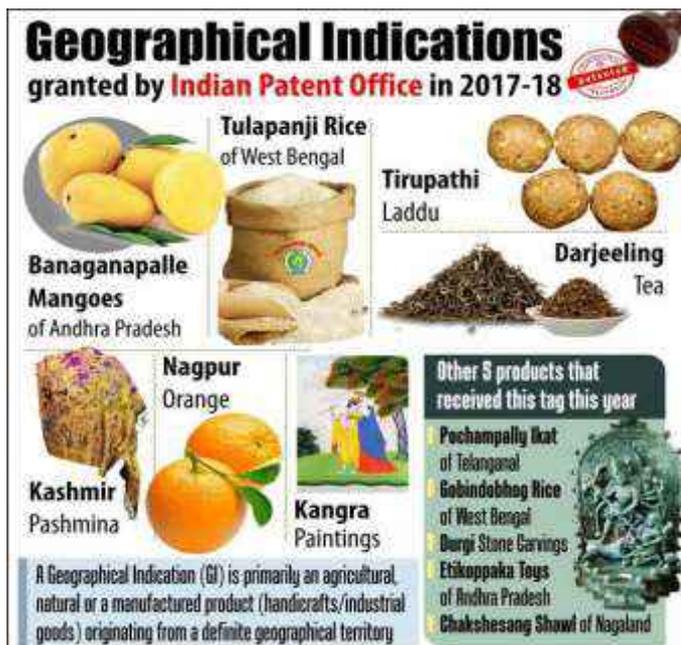
INDIA'S 'FIRST COFFEE' BREWS GI TAG

Baba Budangiri, 250 km from Bengaluru, where coffee was first grown in India, is going for Geographical Indication (GI) of its variety of the Arabica brew. On January 1, the Coffee Board filed an application for the GI tagging of Baba Budangiri Arabica and four other varieties — Coorg Arabica, Wayanad Robusta, Chikmagalur Arabic and Araku Valley Arabica — with the Geographical Indication Registry at Chennai.

What

1. Coffee Board head (coffee quality) said the GI marker and are also profiling the majority variety grown in Baba Budangiri, a variety called Selection-795.

2. Selection-795 (S-795) is considered to be the natural descendant of two of the oldest African cultivars of coffee — *Coffea Arabica* and *Coffea Liberica* — and a third variety is called Kent. Currently, S-795 is the most prominent coffee grown at Baba Budangiri.
3. Edmund Hull in his book 'Coffee Planting in Southern India and Ceylon' says that *Coffea Arabica* originated in Caffa in southern Abyssinia and then found its way to Yemen. According to John Shortt's 'A Handbook on Coffee Planting in Southern India', Baba Budan (Baba Booden), a Muslim pilgrim, brought the brew from Mocha, a port city in Yemen, in the 17th century and introduced the variety in the uninhabited hills that came to be known as Baba Budangiri.



HERITAGE MONUMENTS BILL PASSED

Lok Sabha on 2 January 2018 passed the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Sites and Remains (Amendment) Bill 2017 that allows government to take up infrastructure projects within the 100 metre prohibited periphery around protected monuments.

What

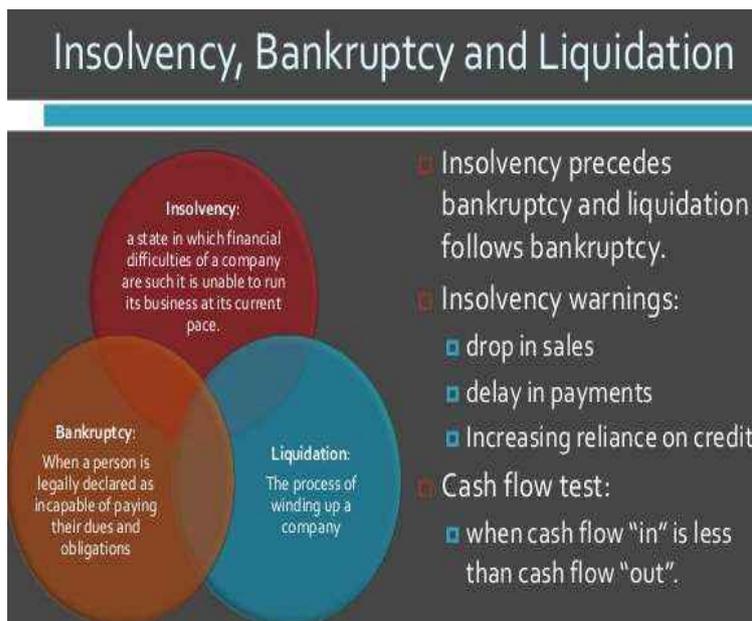
1. The bill proposes amendments in the legislation to the 1958 Act that prohibits carrying out any public work or project or other constructions in any prohibited area around protected monuments.
2. The existing law described 'prohibited area' as land in the 100-metre radius around a protected monument. At present, construction is not allowed in the prohibited areas except for repair and renovation works.
3. The government, on the other hand, said the need was felt to amend the law to allow "construction works related to infrastructure financed and carried out by any department or office of the central government for public purposes which is necessary for the safety or security of the public at large". Besides, such construction works would be taken up when there is no possibility of any other viable alternative to such construction beyond the limits of the prohibited area.
4. The bill also sought to have a new definition of "public works" under the Act.
5. At present, over 3,600 monuments and sites centrally-protected fall under the jurisdiction of the Archaeological Survey of India, which is responsible for their maintenance and upkeep.

IBC AMENDMENT BILL CLEARED

The Parliament on 2 January 2018 gave its nod to amendments to the insolvency and bankruptcy code that aims to keep defaulting promoters out of the resolution process of insolvent companies. The Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code (IBC) (Amendment) Bill 2017 was passed by Rajya Sabha amid concerns that the changes could bar genuine domestic investors from the insolvency resolution process, adversely affect micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs) and lead to large scale litigation. The bill, which replaces an ordinance, was passed by the Lok Sabha. The amendments will be notified after the President gives his assent.

What

1. The insolvency legal committee is already looking into the suggestions of need a separate framework for MSMEs. It will submit its report in three months.
2. The IBC ordinance sought to bar wilful defaulters, defaulters whose dues had been classified as non-performing assets (NPAs) for more than a year, and all related entities of these firms from participating in the resolution process.
3. The bill, however, allows defaulting promoters to be part of the debt resolution process, provided they repay dues in a month to make their loan account operational and the resolution happens within the overall time frame specified in the code.
4. This will help promoters who had submitted resolution plans before the ordinance barred them from taking part in the resolution process of companies.
5. The bill also allows asset reconstruction companies, alternative investment funds (AIFs) such as private equity funds and banks to participate in the bidding process.
6. The Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code was enacted in 2016 to find a time-bound resolution for ailing and sick firms, either through closure or revival, while protecting the interests of creditors. A successful completion of the resolution process was expected to aid in reducing rising bad loans in the banking system.
7. The bill has also sought to bring any individual who was in control of the NPA under the ambit of the insolvency code. It lays out that the individual insolvency law will be implemented in phases. It also allows guarantors of insolvent firms to bid for other firms under the insolvency process.



NEW CONSUMER PROTECTION BILL INTRODUCED

A bill seeking stringent action against adulteration to protect consumers in the highly competitive e-commerce and direct selling areas was introduced in the Lok Sabha by Consumer Affairs Minister Ramvilas Paswan on 5 January 2018. The new Consumer Protection Bill, 2018, that seeks to replace the 31-year-old Consumer Protection Act, also has provisions to establish a Central Consumer Protection Authority, with powers to initiate class action,

Adjudication simplified

1. The emergence of global supply chain, rise in global trade and rapid development of e-commerce have led to a new delivery system for goods and services and also provided new options and opportunities for consumers.
2. Equally, this has rendered the consumer vulnerable to new forms of unfair trade and unethical business practices. Misleading ads, tele-marketing, multi-level marketing, direct selling and e-commerce pose new challenges to consumer protection and will require appropriate and swift executive intervention to prevent consumer detriment.
3. The Bill has several provisions aimed at simplifying the consumer dispute adjudication process of the consumer dispute redressal agencies, besides enabling consumers to file complaints electronically.

including enforcing recall, refund and return of products.

What

1. The Bill has strong provisions to check adulteration and false or misleading advertisements, besides providing for fine up to Rs 50 lakh and jail up to five years for manufacturers and service providers. Against adulteration, the Bill has provisions for fine up to Rs 10 lakh and life term imprisonment.
2. The objective of the Bill is to "provide for protection of interest of consumers and establish authorities for timely and effective administration and settlement of consumer disputes.
3. This fills an institutional void in the regulatory regime extant. Currently, the task of prevention or acting against unfair trade practices is not vested in any authority.
4. Besides setting up an Authority, the Bill has provisions for product liability action on account of harm caused to consumers due to a defective product and deficiency in services. It also has provisions for 'mediation' as an alternative dispute redressal mechanism.

ADULTERY LAW

The Supreme Court on 5 January 2018 referred to a Constitution bench to decide validity of Section 497 of the Indian Penal Code that punished only man for adultery but treated woman as victim and absolved her of any offence. A three-judge bench of Chief Justice Dipak Misra and Justices A M Khanwilkar and D Y Chandrachud said the **previous apex court judgements** "upholding validity of the provision" **were to be reconsidered** on the ground of "social progression, perceptual shift, gender equality and gender sensitivity".

What

1. Admitting a PIL filed by Joseph Shine through advocate Kaleeswaram Raj on December 8, the bench had observed, "The Constitution confers equal status. A time has come when the society must realise that a woman is equal to a man in every field.
2. This provision, prima facie, appears to be quite archaic. When the society progresses and the rights are conferred, the new generation of thoughts spring, and that is why, we are inclined to issue notice.
3. On 5 January 2018, taking up the matter again, the bench said there has to be a different kind of focus on the affirmative right conferred on women under Article 15 (prohibition of discrimination on religion, race, caste and sex or place of birth) of the Constitution. The court ordered the files to be placed before the CJI for setting up a Constitution bench.
4. During the hearing, Raj submitted that the penal provisions have been treated to be constitutionally valid in three judgments Yusuf Abdul Aziz vs State of Bombay (1954), Sowmithri Vishnu vs Union of India and Another (1985), V Revathi vs Union of India and Others, (1988). Of these, Yusuf Abdul Aziz held that the provision does not offend fundamental rights of equality and no discrimination.

Understanding the text of 497.....

Whoever has sexual intercourse with a person who is and whom he knows or has reason to believe to be the wife of another man, without the consent or connivance of that man, such sexual intercourse not amounting to the offence of rape, is guilty of the offence of adultery.

1. With the Consent of Husband or connivance of husband it will not be regarded as an offence.
2. So here we can clearly understand that even if the woman does not extend her consent, if the husband can extend his consent it will be sufficient for a man to escape culpability.
3. By suggesting that, are we not reducing her to a mere object or commodity or chattel? It is the question here.
4. If we are doing so, are we not violating her Fundamental Right to Equality and Right against discrimination guaranteed under Article 14 and 15(1) of the Constitution of India??

5. According to Section 497 of the IPC, the man indulging in sexual relations with wife of another man without his consent is guilty of offence of adultery and would be punished for a maximum term of five years, or fine or both.
6. In such case, wife is not punishable as abettor. The complaint in this regard can be filed by husband of the woman or anyone else who is taking care of the woman on his behalf.

NABARD (AMENDMENT) BILL 2017 PASSED

Parliament has passed the National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (Amendment) Bill, 2017 with the approval of Rajya Sabha. Lok Sabha already had passed the bill in August 2017. The Bill seeks to amend National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (NABARD) Act, 1981. The Act establishes NABARD for providing and regulating facilities like credit for agricultural and industrial development in the rural areas. What

1. The Bill allows Union Government to increase capital of NABARD from Rs. 5000 crore to Rs 30,000 crore.

2. Further, it allows Union Government to increase the capital more than Rs 30,000 crore in consultation with the Reserve Bank of India (RBI), if necessary.

3. The Bill provides that Union Government alone must hold at least 51% capital share of NABARD.

4. Further, it transfers share capital held by RBI valued at Rs. 20 crore to Union Government.

5. Currently RBI holds 0.4% of paid-up capital of NABARD and remaining 99.6% is held by Union government and this causes conflict in RBI's role as banking regulator and shareholder in NABARD.

6. The **Bill replaces terms 'small-scale industry' and 'industry in tiny and decentralised sector' with terms 'micro enterprise', 'small enterprise' and 'medium enterprise' as defined in MSME Development Act, 2006.**

7. Further, it allows NABARD to provide financial assistance to banks if they provide loans to the MSMEs.

8. The Bill substitutes references to provisions of the Companies Act, 1956 with references to the Companies Act, 2013.

9. It includes provisions dealing with definition of a government company and qualifications of auditors.



NABARD (AMENDMENT) BILL, 2017

Features of Bill

- Increase in capital of NABARD:**

 1. The Bill allows Union Government to increase capital of NABARD to Rs 30,000 crore from Rs. 5000 crore.
 2. Further, it allows Union Government to increase it to more than Rs 30,000 crore in consultation with the RBI, if necessary.
- Transfer of the RBI's share to Union government:**

 1. The Bill provides that the Union Government alone must hold at least 51% capital share of NABARD.
 2. Further, it transfers share capital held by the RBI valued at Rs 20 crore
- Adds Micro, small and medium enterprises (MSME) terms:**

 1. The Bill replaces the terms 'small-scale industry' and 'industry in the tiny and decentralised sector' with the terms 'micro enterprise', 'small enterprise' and 'medium enterprise' as defined in MSME Development Act, 2006.
 2. Further, it allows NABARD to provide financial assistance to banks if they provide loans to the MSMEs.
- Consistency with the Companies Act, 2013:**

 1. The Bill substitutes references to provisions of the Companies Act, 1956 with references to the Companies Act, 2013.
 2. It includes provisions dealing with definition of a government company and qualifications of auditors.

to the Union Government. Currently RBI holds 0.4% of the paid-up capital of NABARD and the remaining 99.6% is held by the Union government and this causes conflict in the RBI's role as banking regulator and shareholder in NABARD.

SC REVISES EARLIER ORDER

The Supreme Court on 9 January 2018 modified its November 2016 order stating that it is now not mandatory to play the National Anthem before a film is screened in

cinemahalls across the country. Today's order comes after the government on 8 January 2018 filed an affidavit asking the Supreme Court to reconsider its order making it mandatory for cinema halls to play the national anthem before screening of films and that it was setting up a inter-ministerial committee to look at any modifications in the existing rules — Prevention of Insults to National Honour Act, if necessary.

What

1. Allowing the request, the apex court, however, emphasised that citizens should show respect to the National Anthem and that the committee should look into all aspects.
2. The government also allowed petitioner Shyam Narayan Chouksey to take up his prayers with the committee. The top court also said that its earlier order granting an exemption to the disabled from standing in cinema halls during National Anthem shall continue to remain in force.
3. The Supreme Court, in its November 30, 2016, order, had directed all cinema halls across the country to play the National Anthem before the screening of films and that **all present must "stand up in respect" till the anthem ended.**
4. The government on Monday also told the Supreme Court that it will set up an inter-**ministerial committee that "has been constituted to look into all aspects** relating to the singing or playing of the National Anthem" and on receiving its recommendations, "the government may bring out the requisite notification or circular or rules in this regard, if required".
5. According to the affidavit, the committee will be headed by Additional Secretary (Border Management), Ministry of Home Affairs, with representatives from the Ministry of Defence, Ministry of External Affairs, Ministry of Culture, Ministry of Women and Child Development, Ministry of Parliamentary Affairs, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Ministry of Minority Affairs, Department of Legal Affairs, Department of School Education and Literacy and the Department of Empowerment of Persons with Disability.

NIRBHIK, NIRGHAT DECOMMISSIONED

Warships INS Nirbhik and INS Nirghat were decommissioned in Mumbai, after serving the Navy for 30 and 28 years respectively. The warships were decommissioned at a solemn ceremony at the Naval Dockyard on 11 January 2018. The ceremony involved the **traditional lowering of the ensign and commissioning pendants with the playing of 'Last Post'.**

What

1. The chief guest for the ceremony was Rear Admiral R B Pandit, Flag Officer Commanding Western Fleet, who had commanded INS Nirghat earlier.
2. Cdr V R Naphade, (Retd) and Commodore S Mampully, (Retd), the commissioning Commanding Officers of Nirbhik and Nirghat respectively were the guests of honour.
3. The ships, belonging to the Killer squadron, are inheritors of a proud legacy as their original avatars were flag bearers of the naval offensive action on Karachi harbour during the India-Pakistan war in 1971.
4. The warships, in their new avatar, were commissioned at Poti, in the erstwhile USSR on December 21, 1987, and December 15, 1989, respectively.
5. They participated in many operations including Op Parakram and Vijay and were deployed off Gujarat on many occasions for patrolling.

SAKSHAM 2018 CAMPAIGN LAUNCHED

The Petroleum Conservation Research Association (PCRA) under the aegis of Ministry of Petroleum & Natural Gas has launched month long Saksham 2018 (Sanrakshan Kshamta Mahotsav). Saksham is annual flagship event of PCRA with active involvement of Oil & Gas PSUs along with other stakeholders like State Governments.

What

1. Saksham aims at creating focused attention on fuel conservation through people centric activities and sensitize masses about conservation and efficient use of petroleum products leading to better health and environment.
2. It also aims to intensify efforts for making citizens aware about conservation and effective utilization of petroleum products.
3. It seeks to enthuse masses with new energy coupled with all-out effort for saving precious fuel, which will also contribute in keeping our environment green.

About PCRA

1. The PCRA is an organization under the aegis of the Indian Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas.
2. It was established in 1978. It is engaged in promoting energy efficiency in various sectors of the economy.
3. It helps government in proposing policies and strategies aimed at **reducing India's dependency on oil, in order to save money, reduce environmental impact of oil use and also conserve fossil fuel.**

NARI PORTAL LAUNCHED

Union Minister for Women and Child Development Maneka Gandhi on 2 January 2018 launched a web portal, NARI, which will provide information on all government schemes for women. Users can log on to <http://www.nari.nic.in> to access information on different programmes offered by various state governments as well as the Centre.

What

1. The NARI portal carries details on 350 different schemes for women and will be updated from time to time.
2. The schemes are divided into seven different categories — education, health, employment, housing and shelter, addressing violence, decision making and social support.
3. Gandhi also unveiled a website for NGOs called e-SAMVAD, an interactive portal allowing NGOs to contact the ministry and share their feedback, suggestions, grievances and their best practices.
4. The government will initiate a trial run of mobile phones with a panic button from January 26 in Uttar Pradesh. Although the government in an order in April 2016 made it mandatory for all mobile phone manufacturers to provide a panic button feature in cell phones from January 2017, its implementation has been delayed.
5. The move aims at improving security for women by providing them a tool to alert the local police.

HOUSING SCHEME GUIDELINES AMENDED

The Housing and Urban Affairs (HUA) Ministry has amended the guidelines of housing scheme for urban areas under Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana to enhance its coverage.

What

1. Areas falling within notified planning or development area under the jurisdiction of an industrial development authority or special area development authority or urban development authority or any such body under state legislation which is entrusted with the functions of urban planning and regulations shall also be included for

Flashback

1. Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana is a programme by Government of India to **ensure** "Housing for all by 2022".
2. Under this, there is a Credit Linked Subsidy Scheme on home loans for properties in urban market belonging to Economically Weaker Section (EWS), Low Income Group (LIG) and Middle Income Group 1 & 2 (MIG).
3. It can be availed for new or resale purchase of home, construction, or for extension or improvement of rooms, kitchen, toilet etc.

- coverage under PMAY(U), according to the amended guidelines.
2. The housing scheme is being implemented by rural development ministry in rural areas under Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (Gramin) and by HUA ministry in urban areas under Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (Urban).
 3. The beneficiaries in the permanent wait list of PMAY (G) will have the flexibility for opting for a house under PMAY(G) or PMAY (U).
 4. The benefits of all existing and future rural schemes will not be denied to a beneficiary who would avail a house under this amendment.

SC REFERS PLEA ON SECTION 377

The Supreme Court on 8 January 2018 referred to a larger Bench a plea seeking decriminalisation of gay sex between two consenting adults. A Bench comprising Chief Justice Dipak Misra and Justices A M Khanwilkar and D Y Chandrachud said the issue arising out of section 377 of the Indian Penal Code (IPC) required to be debated upon by a larger Bench. Section 377 of the IPC refers to 'unnatural offences' and says whoever voluntarily has carnal intercourse against the order of nature with any man, woman or animal, shall be punished with imprisonment for life, or with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to ten years, and shall also be liable to pay a fine. The Bench was hearing a fresh plea filed by one Navtej Singh Johar seeking to declare section 377 as unconstitutional to the extent that it provides prosecution of adults for indulging in consensual gay sex.

What is Section 377?

1. Section 377 of IPC – which came into force in 1862 – defines unnatural offences.
2. **It says, “Whoever voluntarily has carnal intercourse against the order of nature with any man, woman or animal, shall be punished with imprisonment for life, or with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to 10 years, and shall also be liable to fine.”**
3. **Moreover, the law also mentions that “penetration is sufficient to constitute the carnal intercourse necessary to the offence described in this section”.**

What was the High Court ruling on Section 377 in 2009?

1. Following a PIL by Delhi-based Naz Foundation, an NGO fighting for gay rights, the Delhi HC on July 3, 2009, struck down Section 377 of the IPC, holding that it

Right to Privacy judgment affects Section 377?

1. In August 2017, the Supreme Court, in a landmark verdict, declared right to privacy a fundamental right, ushering in hope for the gay and LGBT community.
2. The apex court had concluded that privacy included at its core the preservation of personal intimacies and that sexual orientation was an essential attribute of privacy. Discrimination against an individual on the basis of sexual orientation is deeply offensive to the dignity and self-worth of the individual. Equality demands that the sexual orientation of each individual in society must be protected on an even platform. The right to privacy and the protection of sexual orientation lie at the core of the fundamental rights guaranteed by Articles 14, 15 and 21 of the Constitution, the SC held.
3. The SC decision will definitely strengthen arguments for decriminalisation of homosexuality.

Supreme Court's verdict on transgenders

1. In the April 2014 verdict, hailed by gender rights activists, the apex court directed the government to **declare transgenders a 'third gender' along with male and female.**
2. It also asked the Centre to include them in the OBC quota. Underlining the need to bring them into the mainstream, the verdict by a bench of Justices KS Radhakrishnan and AK Sikri said transgenders should have all rights under the law, including marriage, adoption, divorce, succession, and inheritance.

- violated the fundamental rights of life and liberty and the right to equality as guaranteed in the Constitution.
2. Section 377 of the IPC, in so far as it criminalises consensual sexual acts of adults in private, is violative of Articles 21 (Right to Protection of Life and Personal Liberty), Article 14 (Right to equality before law) and Article 15 (Prohibition of discrimination on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth) of the Constitution.
 3. The HC held that the Section 377 denied dignity to an individual and criminalised their core identity on the basis of their sexuality adding that it also violated Article 14 by targeting homosexuals as a class.

Supreme Court reverses the High Court verdict?

1. The Supreme Court reversed the HC verdict in December 2013 and upheld the constitutional validity of Section 377 of IPC, while giving the power to the legislature to formulate a law on homosexuality.
2. **The judgment said, “We hold that Section 377 does not suffer from the vice of unconstitutionality and the declaration made by the division bench of the High Court is legally unsustainable.”**

NEW SIT SETS UP FOR ANTI-SIKH RIOTS

The Supreme Court on 11 January 2018 constituted a three-member special investigation team (SIT) headed by former Delhi High Court judge Justice S N Dhingra to probe into 186 anti-Sikh riots related cases.

What

1. Besides Justice Dhingra, retired IG rank officer Rajdeep Singh and serving IPS officer Abhishek Dular would be part of the SIT, which has been asked to submit its status report within two months. The matter will be heard next on March 19.
2. On 10 January 2018, the apex court had maintained that the previous SIT had not carried out further investigation in respect of 186 cases in which closure reports were filed.
3. The 1984 anti-Sikh riots, which had erupted after the assassination of then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, had claimed the lives of 2,733 people in Delhi alone.

UIDAI INTRODUCES 'VIRTUAL ID'

As it looks to address concerns regarding privacy of Aadhaar data, the Unique **Identification Authority of India (UIDAI) has introduced a concept of 'Virtual ID'**, which is a temporary number that can be generated by users for the purpose of verification and authentication. The UIDAI has taken a slew of measures to safeguard the privacy of citizens, primarily after reports emerged that Aadhaar data can be accessed by unauthorised means. The 'Virtual ID', which will be mapped with the Aadhaar number, can be shared with authorities to authenticate identity for availing various services and it will provide users an option of not sharing their Aadhaar number.

What

1. The ID will be a temporary, revocable 16-digit number that can be shared with agencies like a telecom operator, for verification of identity.
2. The 'Virtual ID' along with biometrics will furnish limited details like names, addresses, and photographs to the agency concerned for verification.
3. However, experts feel that though the intention of the government is good, it has to be seen what security parameters are put in place to safeguard the 'Virtual ID'.
4. Cybersecurity was not introduced at the start by the UIDAI and that is why there have been so many cases regarding data breach. Also, he said people have become increasingly concerned about privacy and consequently, the UIDAI had come up with the concept of a 'Virtual ID'.
5. **“However, the UIDAI needs to define the security parameters and how it will ensure privacy. As the virtual ID is not covered by the Aadhaar Act and the Information**

6. The UIDAI has to define the technical details as well as the time frame for which the virtual ID can remain active. The authority has only said a user can generate as many 'Virtual IDs' as he or she wants but it is yet to define the time frame. The UIDAI has also introduced the concept of **'limited know-your-customer (KYC)' under which it will only** provide need-based or limited details of a user to an authorised agency that is providing a particular service.
7. The UIDAI said it would start accepting the 'Virtual ID' from March 1 and from June 1, 2018, it would be compulsory for all agencies that undertake authentication to accept the 'Virtual ID' from users. Agencies that do not migrate to the new system to offer this additional option to their users by the stipulated deadline will face financial disincentives.
8. **"An Aadhaar number**-holder can use the 'Virtual ID' in lieu of the Aadhaar number whenever authentication or KYC services are performed. Authentication may be **performed using the 'Virtual ID' in a manner similar to using the Aadhaar number,"** a UIDAI notification said.
9. According to the UIDAI, agencies that undertake authentication will not be allowed to generate the 'Virtual ID' on behalf of the Aadhaar holder.
10. As many as 1.19 billion biometric identifiers have been issued so far and Aadhaar is required as identity proof by various government and non-government entities.

Plugging Leaks

1. Users can go to the UIDAI website to generate their virtual ID, which will be valid for a defined period of time, or till the user decides to change it
2. They can give this virtual ID to service agencies along with the fingerprint at the time of authentication
3. Since the system-generated temporary, revocable 16-digit virtual ID **will be mapped to an individual's** Aadhaar number itself at the back-end, it will do away with the need for the user to share Aadhaar number for authentication
4. It will also reduce collection of Aadhaar numbers by agencies

OPERATION DIGITAL BOARD

The Centre and state governments had resolved to launch "operation digital board" and also to initiate a scheme to identify out of school children from September 2018. This was informed by the HRD minister Prakash Javadekar at the end of the first day of the 65th Cabinet Advisory Board of Education (CABE) meeting in Delhi on 15 January 2018. During the meeting, the district-wise findings of the National Achievement Survey (NAS) for classes III, V and VIII were also tabled. A number of CABE sub-committee of reports were also submitted on 15 January 2018.

What

1. The sub-committee on out of school children will submit the final report on January 31, 2018 and it recommended that there is a need to have a standardised definition of out of school children and that states should conduct a joint survey to identify such children.
2. We will take the identification process to the grassroots level so that it doesn't remain on paper. Since admissions in schools continue till July-August, a scheme will be launched in September for this, said Javadekar.
3. The recommendations also include ensuring Aadhaar UID also to all out of school children and that will be ensured by the district collector and introduce pre-primary education in all government schools.
4. The sub-committee on girls' education is likely to submit its final report by February 2018. Among the draft recommendations, the committee suggested one residential, English medium, CBSE schools for girls on lines of Navodaya Vidyalayas in each district, extend mid-day meal support up to Class XII, free education up to PG

- level and residential degree colleges and polytechnics for women in the district headquarters and exclusive women university in each state.
5. "operation digital board" has been 50 to 60 years now since the launch of "operation blackboard. Each state during the meeting shared their achievements right from digital intervention to out-of-school children.
 6. Twenty-two state education ministers were present at the meeting. Javadekar also said it was resolved in the meeting to promote human value education, life skill education and experiential learning.
 7. The minister said that the frequency of CABE meetings will be increased with fewer agenda items for comprehensive discussion.

INTERNATIONAL

SIX COUNTRIES ENTER UNSC

Equatorial Guinea, Ivory Coast, Kuwait, Peru, Poland and the Netherlands formally joined the ranks of the non-permanent members of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) **"to make a difference," the body's president said.**

What

1. One after the other, ambassadors representing **the council's six new member countries - five men and a woman, Polish envoy Joanna Wronecka - placed their flag among those of the body's nine other members.**
2. The UN Security Council has 15 members, including five with permanent seats who have the power to veto resolutions - Britain, China, France, Russia and the United States.
3. Three women and 12 men are among the 15 ambassadors who will soon be seated at the U-shaped table in the **center of the Security Council's chamber.**
4. In addition to Wronecka and US envoy Nikki Haley, Karen Pierce will take her seat **later this month as Britain's new ambassador.**
5. The six countries who left the UN Security Council on December 31 are Egypt, Italy, Japan, Senegal, Ukraine and Uruguay.

CABINET NOD TO INDIA, UK PACT

The Centre on 3 January 2018 approved a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) **between India and London's transportation authority** to improve public transport in the country. The MoU is aimed at improving the overall public transport system, improve passenger services and promote the use of high capacity buses in India.

What

1. The Union Cabinet chaired by the Prime Minister Narendra Modi has approved the signing and implementation of the MoU between Ministry of Road Transport and **Highways and Transport for London', a statutory body established under the Greater London Authority Act, 1999 (UK) to improve public transport in India.**
2. It will go a long way in strengthening ties and promoting bilateral relations between India and the United Kingdom.
3. It said the MoU will help in strengthening the integrated public transport for all.
4. This will help people from poorer strata of the society to have access to a quality public transport system.

FIRST IN GULF INTRODUCE VAT

Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates introduced value-added tax from January 1, a first for the Gulf which has long prided itself on its tax-free, cradle-to-grave welfare system. Saudi Arabia compounded the New Year blow for motorists with an unannounced hike of up to 127 per cent in petrol prices with immediate effect. They are the latest in series of measures introduced by Gulf oil producers over the past two years to

boost revenues and cut spending as a persistent slump in world prices has led to ballooning budget deficits.

What

1. The five percent sales tax applies to most goods and services and analysts project that the two governments could rise as much as USD 21 billion in 2018, equivalent to 2.0 per cent of GDP.
2. But it marks a major change for two super-rich countries where the mall is king. Dubai has long held an annual shopping festival to draw bargain hunters from around the world to its glitzy retail palaces.
3. Saudi Arabia has deposited billions of dollars in special accounts to help needy citizens face the resulting rise in retail prices. The other four Gulf States -- Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman and Qatar -- are also committed to introducing VAT but have decided to delay the move until early in 2019.
4. The hike in fuel duty in Saudi Arabia was the second in two years. But it still leaves petrol prices as some of the lowest in the world. High-grade petrol rose 127 per cent from 24 cents a litre (USD 1.09 a gallon) to 54 (USD 2.46), while low-grade petrol rose 83 per cent from 20 cents a litre (91 cents a gallon) to 36.5 (USD 1.66). Duty on diesel and kerosene remained unchanged.
5. Saudi Arabia has introduced a raft of measures to raise revenue and cut spending as it bids to balance its books. Last month, it slashed the government subsidy on electricity supply, leading to a sharp rise in bills.
6. Riyadh posted budget deficits totalling \$260 billion over the past four fiscal years and does not expect to balance its books before 2023.
7. To finance its mounting public debt, the kingdom has withdrawn around \$250 billion from its reserves over the past four years, reducing them to \$490 billion. It has also borrowed around USD 100 billion from the international and domestic markets.

INDIA, UK INK PACTS ON ILLEGAL MIGRANTS

India and the UK have signed two agreements on return of Indians, who are living in Britain as illegal migrants, and sharing criminal records and intelligence. The development comes close on **heels of India seeking UK's help in early extradition of liquor tycoon Vijay Mallya from Britain to face the law at home in connection with cases of fraud and money laundering amounting to around Rs. 9,000 crores.**

What

1. The memorandums of understanding (MOUs) were signed by **UK's Minister of Immigration Caroline Nokes and India's Minister of Home Affairs Kiren Rijju.**
2. The new deals reflect increased co-operation between the two countries, which already enjoy a close relationship, according to a British government release issued.
3. The MoU on criminal records exchange will lead to British and Indian law enforcement bodies sharing criminal records information, fingerprints and intelligence.
4. This will assist the police in protecting the public from known criminals, including sex offenders and also allow the courts in both countries to access more information to support tougher sentencing decisions.
5. The agreement on returns paves the way for a quicker and more efficient process for documenting and returning Indian nationals who have no right to be in the UK to India.
6. This has proven difficult in the past due to some Indians not having the required paperwork or travel documentation for them to be accepted back in their home country.
7. The official release added that the agreement commits both countries to taking a more flexible approach to verifying the identity and nationality of individuals, which will help speed up the returns process.

CHINA TO BUILD SECOND OVERSEAS MILITARY BASE

After establishing its first overseas military base in Djibouti, in the horn of Africa in the Indian Ocean, China is now in talks with Pakistan to build its second overseas **military base close to Iran's Chabahar port**. China plans to push for greater maritime capabilities along strategic sea routes and if the deal to acquire Pakistani military base goes through, the new facility will come up at Jiwani close to Iran border in the Gulf of Oman only 85 **km from China's Gwadar port in Pakistan**.

What

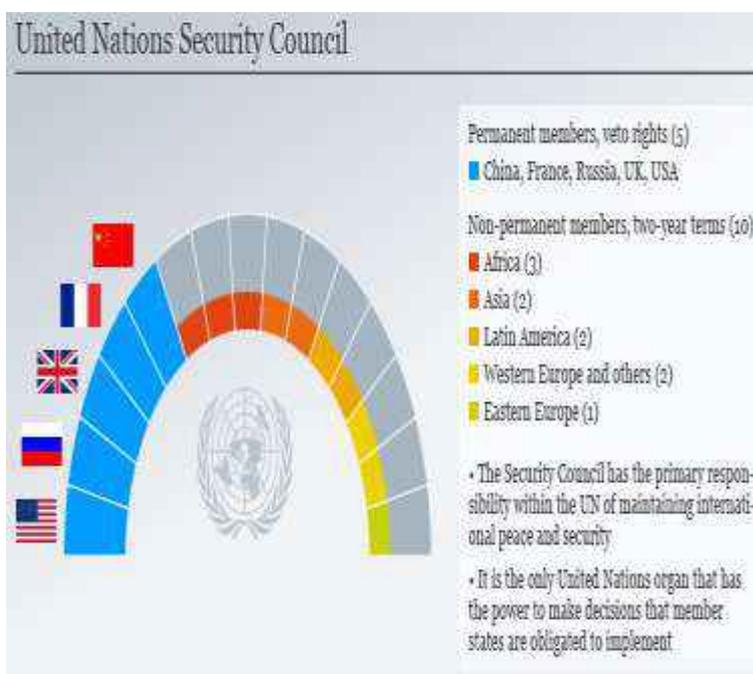
1. **Meanwhile, Donald Trump's decision to suspend its military aid to Pakistan is helping** boost close ties between China and Pakistan, a report in the state-run Global Times said. The US administration had, a few days ago, withheld \$1 billion military aid to Pakistan and Trump accused it of providing safe havens to terrorists.
2. Both Beijing and Islamabad have the ability to build a joint naval and air facility in Pakistan, but it is unnecessary at this time.
3. It could be a backup plan in response to the Indo-Pacific strategy of the US and its allies and that if the US and its allies push their Indo-Pacific strategy to the extreme, China will surely carry out a plan with Pakistan to ensure the security of sea routes.
4. The report also said that Islamabad has allowed Chinese currency in bilateral trade and financing transactions as China has stepped up its investments in the \$50 billion China-Pakistan Economic Corridor.
5. The first phase of the strategically located Chabahar port was inaugurated in December by Iranian President Hassan Rouhani. India, Iran and Afghanistan are committed to developing the port into a massive project that can handle a cargo of 80 million tonnes — the existing capacity is just 2.5 million tonnes.

US FAIL TO GET UNSC ACTION

The US has failed to get the UN Security Council (UNSC) to act on the Iranian protests with most members questioning if it was even the right forum to take up internal affairs of a country while expressing support for the nuclear deal with Tehran that is opposed by President Donald Trump. At the session convened at the request of Washington, US Permanent Representative Nikki Haley pledged solidarity with the Iranian protesters and condemned the Tehran government for suppressing them.

What

1. Ahead of the meeting it was clear that the Council would not be able to even come up with a resolution or a statement on the Iranian protests because of opposition from veto-wielding permanent member Russia and others.
2. The demonstrations against economic hardships began on December 28 in Mashad and spread to other places. Citing official media reports, Assistant Secretary-General Taye-Brook Zerihoun said that more than 20 Iranians died during the protests, while over 1,000 protesters were detained.



3. There was concern over the nuclear deal made in 2015 by Iran with the five permanent members, Germany and the European Union that lifted sanctions against Tehran.
4. It has been opposed by Trump who has to certify this month to the US Congress that Iran is complying with it in order for Washington to continue with the terms of the agreement.
5. **Russia's Permanent Representative Vassily Nebenzia said that if the Council followed the reasoning behind convening the the meeting over domestic protests in Iran, it should have met after the protests in the US that followed the killing of an African-American teenager in Ferguson by a white police officer in 2014.**
6. **Iran's Permanent Representative Gholamali Khoshroo brought up the Occupy Wall Street movement in New York in 2011 that was suppressed by law enforcement and other protests.**

ECONOMY

INDIA'S FIRST AGRO OPTIONS CONTRACT

Finance Minister Arun Jaitley on 14 January 2018 launched options trading in guar seed on the commodity bourse NCDEX and asserted that the new initiative will benefit farmers and ensure better prices in the coming days. Higher production has led to fall in prices of some agri-commodities in some places, he said, adding that options trading are one of the major steps towards taking farmers out of this situation.

What

1. NCDEX is the second exchange after MCX to launch options trading in commodities. In October 2017, MCX had launched gold options. Guar seed is the first agri-commodity options.
2. Options are derivatives which give a buyer the right but not the obligation to buy or sell an underlying asset or instrument at a specific price on or before a certain date.
3. Lauding the contribution of farmers, he said they have left no stone unturned to serve the nation. They have worked hard to turn a food shortage country to a surplus now.
4. Many steps have been taken in the last few years to take farmers out of this situation. There has been some impact that options trading is a step in that direction.
5. In the beginning, options trading may look like a small step but when its awareness increases in the coming days, it is will benefit farmers.
6. The option trading is a powerful tool to hedge price risks...this will boost the development of the agri-commodity market.
7. Options will protect farmers from downward price movement as well as give them an opportunity to sell their produce at higher prices in case of price increase.
8. NCDEX launched guar seed options as it is one of the most liquid contracts on the exchange platform. Around 1.5 million farmers are associated with this commodity.

INDIA IN MANUFACTURING INDEX

The World Economic Forum (WEF) has ranked India at 30th position on a global manufacturing index -- below China's 5th place but above other BRICS peers, Brazil, Russia, and South Africa. Japan has been found to have the best structure of production in the Geneva-based WEF's first 'Readiness for the future of production report' and is followed by South Korea, Germany, Switzerland, China, Czech Republic, the US, Sweden, Austria and Ireland in the top 10. Among BRICS nations, Russia is ranked 35th, Brazil 41st, and South Africa at 45th place.

What

1. The report, which analyses development of modern industrial strategies and urges collaborative action, has categorised 100 countries into four groups -- Leading (strong current base, high level of readiness for future); High Potential

- (limited current base, high potential for future); Legacy (strong current base, at risk for future); or Nascent (limited current base, low level of readiness for future).
2. India has been placed in the 'Legacy' group along with Hungary, Mexico, Philippines, Russia, Thailand, and Turkey, among others. China figures among 'leading countries', while Brazil and South Africa are in 'nascent' ones.
 3. The 25 'leading' countries are in the best position to gain as production systems stand on the brink of exponential change, the WEF said in the report published ahead of its annual meeting in Davos, Switzerland, later this month.
 4. At the same time, no country has reached the frontier of readiness, let alone harnessed the full potential of the Fourth Industrial Revolution in production.
 5. About India, the 5th-largest manufacturer in the world with a total manufacturing value added of over \$420 billion in 2016, the WEF said the country's manufacturing sector has grown by over seven per cent per year on average in the past three decades and accounts for 16-20 per cent of India's GDP.
 6. It listed human capital and sustainable resources as the two key challenges for India and said the country needs to continue to raise the capabilities of its relatively young and fast-growing labour force.
 7. This entails upgrading education curricula, revamping vocational training programmes and improving digital skills, the WEF said, while adding that India should continue to diversify its energy sources and reduce emissions as its manufacturing sector continues to expand.
 8. It also took note of the government's 'Make in India' initiative to make the country a global manufacturing hub and of "a significant push" to improve key enablers and move towards a more connected economy with the announcement of a \$59 billion investment in infrastructure in 2017.
 9. In terms of scale of production, India has been ranked 9th, while for complexity it is at 48th place. For market size, India is ranked 3rd, while areas where the country is ranked poorly (90th or even lower) include female participation in labour force, trade tariffs, regulatory efficiency and sustainable resources.



World Economic Forum

1. WEF is independent international organization committed to improving state of world by engaging business, political, academic and other leaders of society to shape global, regional and industry agendas.
2. It was incorporated as a not-for-profit foundation in 1971.
3. It is headquartered in Geneva, Switzerland.

10. Overall, India is ranked better than its neighbours Sri Lanka (66th), Pakistan (74th) and Bangladesh (80th).
11. Other countries ranked below India include Turkey, Canada, Indonesia, New Zealand, Australia, Hong Kong, Mauritius and the UAE.
12. The countries ranked better than India include Singapore, Thailand, the UK, Italy, France, Malaysia, Mexico, Romania, Israel, the Netherlands, Denmark, the Philippines and Spain.
13. In a separate list of the countries best positioned to capitalise on the fourth industrial revolution to transform production systems, the US has been ranked on the top, followed by Singapore, Switzerland, the UK and the Netherlands in the top five. India has been ranked 44th on this list, while China is at 25th place and Russia at 43rd. However, India is ranked better than Brazil (47th) and South Africa (49th).
14. The report has been developed in collaboration with A T Kearney and calls for new and innovative approaches to public-private collaboration are needed to accelerate transformation.

FIRST EVER INDIAN COMPANY

Adani Group has been named in the top 15 global utility solar power developers that include likes of First Solar, Total, SunEdison and Engie. Adani, ranked 12th, is the only Indian company on the list put out by Greentech Media, a Wood Mackenzie business. There are a number of developers active in single markets (predominantly China, India and the US) that have developed more capacity than some of the companies covered in this report.

What

1. Top of the list is First Solar with an operational capacity of 4,619 MW and in-development capacity of 4,802 MW. Adani has 788 MW of operational capacity and another 1,270 MW under development.
2. Adani is moving into the Australia solar market with the development of the 140 MW Whyalla and 170 MW Rugby Run plants.
3. It could potentially look to acquisitions to grow outside of India - the company had been rumoured to be interested in the acquisition of Equis Energy, the report said.
4. Adani Renewables is targeting 10 GW of installed renewable power by 2022. The company currently has 12 MW of operational wind assets, as well as 788 MW of solar PV.
5. "The top 15 companies have an additional 33.5 GW of announced projects in the pipeline.
6. First Solar, Canadian Solar and Total have the largest project pipelines. SunEdison has the fifth-largest portfolio, though the company is in the process of divesting much of its portfolio to other developers after filing for Chapter 11 bankruptcy in April 2016.

INDIA REJECTS US SOLAR CLAIM AT WTO

India hit back on 8 January 2018 at **Washington's latest legal assault on its solar** power policies at the World Trade Organization, rejecting a US legal claim and exploring **possible new protection of India's own solar industry**. Last month the United States triggered a new round of litigation at the WTO, arguing that India had failed to abide by a ruling that it had illegally discriminated against foreign suppliers of solar cells and modules. In a statement published by the WTO on 8 January 2018, India said it had changed its rules to conform to the ruling and that a US claim for punitive trade sanctions was groundless. **"India underscores that the United States' request is not a valid request.**

What

1. It said Washington had skipped legal steps, failed to follow the correct WTO procedure, and omitted to mention any specific level of trade sanctions that it **proposed to level on India, leaving India "severely prejudiced"**. India would be

- vindicated if the proper process was followed. “In view of the above, India strongly objects to the US request of 19 December 2017.
2. Renewable energy has become an area of severe trade friction as major economies compete to dominate a sector that is expected to thrive as reliance on coal and oil dwindles.
 3. India unveiled its national solar programme in 2011, seeking to ease chronic **energy shortages in Asia’s third**-largest economy without creating pollution.
 4. But the United States complained to the WTO in 2013, saying US solar exports to India had fallen by 90 per cent.
 5. The WTO judges agreed that India had broken the trade rules by requiring solar power developers to use Indian-made cells and modules.
 6. In a separate move that could protect its solar industry from global competitors, not only US rivals, India told the WTO last week that it was considering the case for imposing temporary emergency tariffs on solar cells, modules and panels, after a petition from the domestic industry.
 7. So-called safeguard tariffs are permitted by the WTO if there is evidence of serious **harm, or threat of serious harm, to a country’s production from a sudden, unforeseen surge** in imports.
 8. India said the market share of imports had increased from 86 per cent in 2014-15 to 90 percent in 2017-18, with growing losses for Indian producers and a fourfold rise in inventory levels.
 9. That amounted to prima facie evidence of serious injury to Indian firms, India said in the WTO filing.

GUJARAT TOPS NEW LOGISTICS INDEX

The logistics performance of Indian states and Union territories is “sub-par” owing to a host of inefficiencies, according to a study which also suggests measures for improvement. The Logistics Ease across Different States (LEADS) index, a composite indicator to assess international trade logistics across states and Union territories, is based **on a stakeholders’ survey** conducted by Deloitte for the ministry of commerce and industry. While Gujarat topped the first-of-its-kind index, Punjab and Andhra Pradesh took the second and third positions, respectively.

What

1. Logistics, or the management of the flow of resources such as cargo, documents, information and funds through a range of activities and services between points of origin and destination, is a key parameter in deciding the trade competitiveness of a state or country.
2. In a major push to developing an integrated logistics framework in the country, including industrial parks, cold chains and warehousing facilities, the government in November granted infrastructure status to the logistics sector, enabling the industry to access cheaper finances.
3. The government also created the position of a special secretary in the commerce ministry to exclusively handle logistics and appointed former director general of the Directorate General of Supplies and Disposals, Binoy Kumar, to the post.
4. LEADS is **loosely based on the World Bank’s biannual Logistics Performance Index (LPI)**, on which India was ranked 35 among 160 countries in 2016, up from 54 in 2014. LEADS is based on eight parameters such as infrastructure, services, timeliness, track and trace, competitiveness of pricing, safety of cargo, operating environment and regulatory process. The study is based on a perception-based survey of 2,885 respondents across the country over a six-week period.
5. The study found that supply chain efficiencies and economies of scale are yet to be unlocked, mostly due to suboptimal investment in building scale in infrastructure, automation, human capital and technology.

6. It highlighted problems such as inadequate terminal capacity, poor last-mile terminal connectivity and issues in regulatory services provided by government agencies, among others.
7. It also underlined issues specific to certain states. For example, respondents reported that labour unions created impediments for trade efficiency in states like West Bengal, Kerala, Maharashtra and Himachal Pradesh.
8. **India's merchandise exports increased 13% to \$271 billion during the January-November 2017 period while its services exports rose 4% to \$135 billion during the same period.**
9. The managing director of a logistics firm, who did not wish to be named, said the study should be used by states to put their house in order. The point-based index clearly shows the areas that states need to work upon. Performance improvements by states on the logistics index would help them attract industries.

100% FDI IN SINGLE-BRAND GETS NOD

The Union cabinet on 10 January 2018 allowed 100% foreign direct investment (FDI) in single-brand retail without prior government approval and liberalized local sourcing norms— steps that could benefit companies like Swedish furniture retailer IKEA of Sweden AB and fashion house Hennes and Mauritz AB (H&M). Although 100% FDI is already permitted in single-brand retail, only up to 49% was allowed through the so-called automatic route and investment above that needed government approval. Now this decision smoothens the way for new entrants to start retail operations in the country.

What

1. The cabinet eased the local sourcing rule for foreign single-brand retailers; such entities are not required to meet the 30% target for local sourcing by their Indian units for five years if they are already doing so for their global operations.
2. So far they have been required to source locally 30% of the value of goods purchased for their Indian business initially as an average of five years; later they were required to meet the requirement on a yearly basis.
3. **The government did not define the 'state-of-the-art' and 'cutting-edge technology' it has previously said would be required of high-tech companies to open single-brand stores.**
4. The current FDI policy says that local sourcing norms will not apply for up to three years after the opening of the first store for single-brand retailers of products having 'state-of-art' and **'cutting-edge' technologies and where local sourcing is not possible.**
5. The government has rejected the application of Apple Inc. to open stores under that **provision, holding that its technology is not 'cutting edge'.**
6. In August, the government set up a committee under department of industrial policy and promotion (DIPP) secretary Ramesh Abhishek to clearly define these two terms. The recommendations of the committee have not been made public yet.
7. Retail experts hold that while the FDI relaxation will remove entry barriers for foreign single brand retail companies altogether, more important concerns regarding local sourcing and FDI in multi-brand retail remain.

49% FDI IN AIR INDIA CLEARED

The disinvestment process in Air India gained momentum on 10 January 2018 with the Union Cabinet clearing a proposal to allow foreign airlines to invest up to 49% under approval route in the national carrier. "Foreign investment(s) in Air India, including that of foreign airline(s), shall not exceed 49% either directly or indirectly. Substantial ownership and effective control of Air India shall continue to be vested in Indian national. The decision was taken at a meeting of the Union Cabinet chaired by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, during which a clutch of decisions on Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) was cleared.

What

1. The government said the latest amendments are "intended to liberalise and simplify the FDI policy so as to provide ease of doing business in the country. In turn, it will lead to larger FDI inflows contributing to the growth of investment, income and employment."
2. At present, under the government-approval route, foreign airlines are allowed to invest in the capital of Indian companies operating scheduled and non-scheduled air transport services up to 49% of their paid-up capital.
3. However, this provision was not applicable to Air India till now, thereby implying that foreign airlines could not invest in Air India.
4. It has now been decided to do away with this restriction and allow foreign airlines to invest up to 49% under approval route in Air India subject to conditions," the statement said.
5. The Union Cabinet on 28 June 2017 gave an "in-principle" go-ahead for the strategic disinvestment of debt-ridden Air India after tasking a Group of Ministers to work out its modalities.
6. The airline has a debt of more than Rs 52,000 crore and is surviving on the bailout package extended by the previous UPA government.
7. In 2000, the then A B Vajpayee government had cleared the disinvestment of Air India but it could not go through following protests.
8. After the Cabinet decision became public, low-cost carrier IndiGo and the Tata Group had evinced interest in the airline.

SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

INDIA'S FIRST MULTI-PETAFLUPS SUPERCOMPUTER

India's first multi-petaflops supercomputer would be inaugurated at the Indian Institute of Tropical Meteorology (IITM) in Pune. Union Minister of Earth Sciences, Dr Harsh Vardhan, will dedicate it to the nation on January 8. The acquisition of the supercomputer is part of the Ministry of Earth Sciences' (MoES) endeavour to provide world class services (relating to weather, climate, ocean, seismological forecast) to the people of India.

What

1. In order to provide useful services, MoES runs several computationally intensive applications on High Performance Computers (HPC). In the last 10 years, the HPC infrastructure at MoES institutes has grown from 40 Tera flops in 2008 to 1 Peta flop in 2013-14.
2. At present, MoES' HPC system stands at 368th position in Top500 list. With around 1.0 PF peak capacity, India's HPC ranking is much below the rankings of major countries that generate weather/climate forecasts.

In top 30 leagues

1. With the addition of the Pune HPC facility, India is expected to rise from the 368th position to around top 30 in the Top500 list of HPC facilities in the world. In terms of dedicated HPC resources for weather/climate community, India will be placed at the 4th position after Japan, UK and USA.
2. The HPC facility being inaugurated at IITM will be used for carrying out research on improving weather and climate forecasts and its applications.
3. This MoES HPC facility will also be utilised by other MoES institutes (like INCOIS, IMD, NIOT, NCAOR, NCESS) for research activities to improve their respective weather and climate services.
4. The second HPC facility at NCMRWF, Noida will be mainly used to cater to daily operational forecasts of respective MoES institutes (INCOIS, IMD, IITM, NCMRWF).
5. This new HPC facility will enable MoES scientists to use more detailed components of the Earth System for making better weather and climate forecasts at very high resolution.

3. To provide better services and improve its position, MoES has recently augmented its computational capacity up to 6.8 PF installed at two MoES Institutes: 4.0 Peta Flops HPC facilities at IITM, Pune and 2.8 Peta Flops at NCMRWF, Noida.
4. With this augmentation, MoES HPC facility will be No 1 in terms of peak capacity and performance.

CRYPTOCURRENCIES PANEL SUBMITS REPORT

A committee appointed by the government last year to examine issues related to cryptocurrency has submitted its report, a senior law ministry official said on 11 January 2018. The panel is also examining pros and cons including launching an own cryptocurrency. Addressing the '2nd Global Summit P2P Digital Asset System,' organised by ASSOCHAM, Additional Secretary in the Department of Legal Affairs Anadee Nath Mishra said the government is also looking into the allegations that people who had black money had diverted the same to cryptocurrencies in India during demonetisation.

What

1. It was reported that during the period of demonetisation, some people used illegal money in bitcoins and that is believed to be the main factor behind the sudden increase in the prices of bitcoins.
2. The government is also examining the use of black money, a press release issued by the industry body quoted Mishra as saying.
3. There has been a phenomenal increase in recent times in the price of virtual currencies (VCs) including bitcoin, in India and globally.
4. The VCs don't have intrinsic value and are not backed by any kind of assets. The price of bitcoin and other VCs therefore is a matter of mere speculation resulting in spurt and volatility.
5. There is real risk of investment bubble of the type in ponzi schemes which can result in sudden and prolonged crash exposing investors, especially retail consumers losing their hard earned money. Consumers need to be alert and extremely cautious as to avoid getting trapped in such ponzi schemes.
6. The VCs are stored in digital or electronic format, making them vulnerable to hacking, loss of password, malware attack, which may also result in permanent loss of money.
7. As transactions of VCs are encrypted they are also likely being used to carry out illegal activities such as terror- funding, smuggling, drug trafficking and other money-laundering acts.
8. There were reports that people who couldn't convert their money use this channel to launder their illegal money and it could have been one of the reasons for sudden rise in the value of bitcoins.
9. The Income Tax (IT) department has also carried out enquiries and notices have been given to a number of people who have transacted in bitcoins.

ECO-FRIENDLY METHOD FOR RAW BIOMASS

An international team of researchers, including from India and Bangladesh, has developed a cost-effective method of converting non-edible agricultural biomass, such as jute, or the waste by-product from food crops, into commercially valuable chemicals for food and pharmaceutical companies. Researchers from the University of Wollongong (UOW), working with colleagues in India, Bangladesh and Taiwan who participated in the study, say that most large-scale crops produce a huge quantity of non-edible biomass and turning that waste product into an economically valuable product will add significant value to those crops.

What

1. Collected raw biomass such as bagasse, rice husk, wheat straw, cotton stalk, corn cob and low grade jute from different areas of India and Bangladesh and converted it into high-value chemicals such as xylose and arabinose, furfural and HMF (5-hydroxymethylfurfural), which are used in the food industry and in

- pharmaceuticals, said materials scientist Md Shahriar Hossain from UOW's Australian Institute for Innovative Materials (AIIM).
2. Furfural is a biorenewable chemical. Five-carbon sugars and furfural were highly valued products with widespread uses.
 3. Xylose and Arabinose are healthy, five-carbon, low glycemic index sugars. Used in food products, these five-carbon sugars can play an important role in the management of blood glucose and insulin levels related to sucrose intake.
 4. In addition, furfural is one of the leading value-added chemicals produced from biomass because of the variety of uses it can be put to.
 5. Furfural and its derivatives have been widely applied as fungicides, pesticides, drugs and bioplastics, flavour enhancers. Also, there has also been renewed interest in furfural for its potential use in the production of biofuels, such as bioethanol and biodiesel.
 6. The method the researchers developed has advantages over existing conversion methods as it produces a very high yield of five-carbon sugar and furfural, and the catalyst materials used are recyclable, making it significantly cheaper and more environmentally friendly and efficient.
 7. All the raw biomasses (sugar mill waste bagasse, rice husk, wheat straw, cotton stalk, corn cob and low grade jute) used in this research are abundant, very cheap, and renewable resources in Bangladesh and other South Asian countries, the researchers said in the study published in Scientific Reports.
 8. This discovery will add significant economic value to the agricultural waste materials through industrialisation of our technique in Bangladesh and other South Asian countries.

FIRST TIME MICROBES IN SPACE

Astronauts aboard the International Space Station (ISS) have for the first time identified microbes in space without having to samples back to Earth for tests. The ability to identify microbes in space could aid in the ability to diagnose and treat astronaut ailments in real time, as well as assisting in the identification of DNA-based life on other planets. It could also benefit other experiments aboard the orbiting laboratory. Identifying microbes involves isolating the DNA of samples, and then amplifying – or making many copies – of that DNA that can then be sequenced, or identified. The investigation was broken into two parts: the collection of the microbial samples and amplification by Polymerase Chain Reaction (PCR), then sequencing and identification of the microbes.

What

1. NASA astronaut Peggy Whitson conducted the experiment aboard the orbiting laboratory, with **NASA microbiologist and the project's Principal Investigator Sarah Wallace** and her team watching and guiding her from the US.
2. As part of regular microbial monitoring, petri plates were touched to various surfaces of the space station. Working within the Microgravity Science Glovebox (MSG) about a week later, Whitson transferred cells from growing bacterial colonies on those plates into miniature test tubes, something that had never been done before in space.
3. Once the cells were successfully collected, it was time to isolate the DNA and prepare it for sequencing, enabling the identification of the unknown organisms – another first for space microbiology.
4. The MinION device was used to sequence the amplified DNA. The data were downlinked to the team in Houston for analysis and identification.
5. The samples were returned to Earth soon after. Biochemical and sequencing tests were completed in ground labs to confirm the findings from the space station.

Researchers ran tests multiple times to confirm accuracy. Each time, the results were exactly the same on the ground as in orbit.

E-SANSAD AND E-VIDHAN PROJECTS

The Centre is pushing for 'paper-less' Parliament and state legislatures as part of the Digital India initiative to make their functioning more transparent and economise the entire process of law making. The implementation of the 'e-Sansad' and 'e-Vidhan' projects would be discussed at length at the two-day All India Whips Conference beginning on 8 January 2018 at Udaipur in Rajasthan. Both houses of the Parliament have been making notebook computers available to MPs for quite some time now to enable them easy access to agenda papers, questions and other documents.

What

1. As part of the 'Go Green' initiative, the Lok Sabha had discontinued circulation of hard copies of annual reports of ministries, private member bills, parliament questions and made them available online in almost real time basis.
2. The e-Sansad and e-Vidhan projects would make the functioning of Parliament and State Legislatures participative, responsive, transparent, productive and more accountable to the public and make the entire Legislative process more efficient, said an official of the Parliamentary Affairs Ministry.
3. 18th All India Whips Conference, scheduled to be inaugurated by Parliamentary Affairs Minister Ananth Kumar on 8 January 2018, will consider roll-out of the two projects that seek to implement digitisation in Parliament and state legislatures and make their function paperless.
4. Some states have made good progress in the field of automation of their Legislatures, yet consumption of huge volume of papers is still going on in these states," he said adding that the Parliamentary Affairs Ministry would provide funding to the "maximum extent" for the implementation of the e-Vidhan project in state legislatures.
5. A whip is an important functionary of the parliamentary unit of a political party. The functionary's main function is to ensure floor management in both Houses of the Parliament and also has the responsibility for ensuring discipline within the party.
6. A key function of the Whip is to ensure that members of their parties in Parliament and legislature vote in line with the organisation's official policy on important issues and also to make sure that the members are present when voting for an important issue.

ZUMA SPACECRAFT LAUNCHED

SpaceX began the New Year with a mystery-shrouded mission to deliver a government spacecraft, called Zuma, into orbit. After more than a month of delays, a SpaceX Falcon 9 rocket vaulted toward the skies at 8 pm on 7 January 2018 with the secretive payload. It launched from Cape Canaveral Air Force Station in Florida. The space exploration firm, which is headed by Tesla CEO Elon Musk, had initially scheduled the Zuma mission last November. SpaceX gave a couple reasons for the schedule changes. The company said it **delayed the mission for 'fairing testing'**. The fairing is the very top portion of the rocket that houses the payload. **'Extreme weather' also slowed down the firm's launch preparations.**

What

1. **SpaceX finally declared that both the rocket and the payload were 'healthy'** and ready for launch.
2. On 7 January 2018, Zuma was delivered to low-Earth orbit, which is typically **defined as any orbital path less than about 1,200 miles above the Earth's surface, according to NASA. Zuma's destination was not disclosed.**
3. When asked about the project in November, Northrop Grumman (NOC) – the Virginia-based aerospace and Defence Company that built the spacecraft – declined to give any details about which arm of the government funded it. The US government assigned Northrop Grumman the responsibility of acquiring launch services for this mission.

4. Northrop Grumman realizes this is a monumental responsibility and we have taken great care to ensure the most affordable and lowest risk scenario for Zuma.
5. SpaceX completed a record 18 launches last year and it plans to do even more this year, according to spokesman James Gleeson.

NEW CATALYST CAN CREATE FUELS FROM SHALE GAS

Scientists have developed a platinum and copper alloy catalyst that can convert methane in shale gas into hydrocarbon fuels. Platinum or nickels are known to break the carbon-hydrogen bonds in methane found in shale gas to make hydrocarbon fuels and **other useful chemicals. However, this process causes 'coking'** – the metal becomes coated with a carbon layer rendering it ineffective by blocking reactions from happening at the surface.

What

1. The new alloy catalyst developed by scientists at University College London (UCL) in the UK and Tufts University in the US is resistant to coking, so it retains its activity and requires less energy to break the bonds than other materials.
2. Currently, methane reforming processes are extremely energy intense, requiring temperatures of about 900 degrees Celsius.
3. This new material could lower this to 400 degrees Celsius, saving energy. The study, published in the journal Nature Chemistry, demonstrates the benefits of the new highly diluted alloy of platinum in copper – a single atom alloy – in making useful chemicals from small hydrocarbons.
4. A combination of surface science and catalysis experiments and powerful computing techniques were used to investigate the performance of the alloy.
5. These showed that the platinum breaks the carbon-hydrogen bonds, and the copper helps couple hydrocarbon molecules of different sizes, paving the way towards conversion to fuels, researchers said.

THE MAN WHO DECODED OUR DNA

Khorana's birth anniversary is 9 January 2018; he would have been 96 years old. He died in November 2011. Khorana won the 'Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine' in 1968 along with colleagues Marshall W. Nirenberg and Robert W. Holley. The India-born scientist also constructed the world's first synthetic gene. The scientist went to high school in Multan, which is now in Pakistan. He then studied at the Punjab University in Lahore - also now in Pakistan - from where he earned a master's degree in science.

What

1. Khorana lived in India until 1945, when a government fellowship made it possible for him to go to England, where he studied for a PhD degree at the University of Liverpool.
2. In 1948-1949, he spent a postdoctoral year in Zurich in Switzerland.
3. Through his career, Khorana also conducted research at universities in England, Switzerland, and Canada, and it was at the University of Wisconsin that he and two fellow researchers received the Nobel Prize in 1968.

STEM CELLS CONVERT TO NERVE CELLS

Researchers have, for the first time, coaxed human stem cells to become sensory interneurons – the cells that give us our sense of touch. The new protocol could be a step towards stem cell-based therapies to restore sensation in paralysed people who have lost feeling in parts of their body, researchers at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) in the US said.

What

1. Sensory interneurons, a class of neurons in the spinal cord, are responsible for relaying information from throughout the body to the central nervous system, which enables the sense of touch.

2. The lack of a sense of touch greatly affects people who are paralysed. For example, they often cannot feel the touch of another person, and the inability to feel pain leaves them susceptible to burns from inadvertent contact with a hot surface.
3. In a second study, published in the journal eLife, Butler and her colleagues discovered how signals from a family of proteins called bone morphogenetic proteins, or BMPs, influence the development of sensory interneurons in chicken embryos. The first study applies those findings to human stem cells in the lab.
4. When the researchers added a specific bone morphogenetic protein called BMP4, as well as another signalling molecule called retinoic acid, to human embryonic stem cells, they got a mixture of two types of sensory interneurons.
5. DI1 sensory interneurons give people proprioception – a sense of where their body is in space – and DI3 sensory interneurons enable them to feel a sense of pressure.
6. The researchers found the identical mixture of sensory interneurons developed when they added the same signalling molecules to induced pluripotent stem cells, which are **produced by reprogramming a patient's own mature cells such as skin cells**.
7. This reprogramming method creates stem cells that can create any cell type while also maintaining the genetic code of the person they originated from.
8. The ability to **create sensory interneurons with a patient's own reprogrammed cells** holds significant potential for the creation of a cell-based treatment that restores the sense of touch without immune suppression.

FIRST BLUE MOON IN 150 YEARS

A rare total lunar eclipse that involves the second full moon of the month – popularly referred to as a Blue Moon – is set to take place on January 31 for the first time in over 150 years. This will be the first eclipse of 2018. For the Indian subcontinent, the Middle East and Eastern Europe, the eclipse will already be underway as the Moon rises.

What

1. The Pacific Ocean will be turned towards the Moon at the time and the eclipse will take place during the middle of the night. Central and eastern Asia, Indonesia, New Zealand and most of Australia will get a fine view of this Moon show in the evening sky.
2. Alaska, Hawaii and northwestern Canada will see the eclipse from start to finish. Moonset will intervene for the rest of North and Central America, however. The duration of the total phase is 77 minutes, with the moon tracking through the **southern part of the Earth's shadow**.
3. **During totality, the Moon's lower limb will appear much brighter than the dark upper limb**, 'Space.com' reported. After this year, the next time that a Blue Moon passes through Earth's umbra will be on December 31, 2028, and, after that, on January 31, 2037. Both of these eclipses will be total.
4. Before 2017, there was an eight per cent partial eclipse on December 31, 2009, but the last total eclipse of a Blue Moon happened all the way back in March 31, 1866.

MISCELLANEOUS

ALL INDIA HIGHER EDUCATION SURVEY

The Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) in higher education of Indian has registered an increase from 24.5% in 2015-16 to 25.2% in 2016-17 according to latest All India Higher Education Survey (AIHES) released by HRD Ministry. The survey findings were based on responses of 795 universities, 34,193 colleges and 7,496 standalone institutions. There are total of 864 universities, 40,026 colleges and 11,669 standalone institutions in the country.

What

- GER is statistical measure for determining number of students enrolled in undergraduate, postgraduate and research-level studies within country and expressed as a percentage of population.
- India is aiming to attain GER of 30% by 2020, but it is still far behind countries like China with GER of 43.39% and US with 85.8%.
- The proportion of students pursuing higher education in India **hasn't increased dramatically from 2015-16 to 2016-17.**
- It was in range of 23% to 25% since 2013-14. Tamil Nadu has highest GER in India at 46.9%.
- Six states have registered GER higher than national average (25.2%), with their share of students entering higher education is growing twice as fast as overall rate.
- These states are Tamil Nadu (46.9%), Himachal Pradesh (36.7%), Kerala (34.2%), Andhra Pradesh (32.4%), Haryana (29%) and Punjab (28.6%).
- However, eight states UP (24.9%), Madhya Pradesh (20%), Odisha (21%), Bihar (14.4%), Gujarat (20.2%), Rajasthan (20.5%), Mizoram (24.5%) and West Bengal (18.5%) had GER ratio far less than the national average.
- Bihar has lowest GER with just 14.4% of its eligible population (in age group of 18 to 23 years) pursuing higher education.

Gender Parity Index (GPI)

- India registered its best performance on the GPI in last seven years — 0.94 in 2016-17 from 0.86 in 2010-11.
- GPI is calculated as quotient of number of females by number of males enrolled.
- GPI equal to 1 indicates 1, value less than 1 indicated disparity in favour of males.
- In Seven states — Goa, Himachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, J&K, Nagaland, Sikkim and Kerala — women in higher education have outnumbered men.

FIRST WOMAN DIRECTLY APPOINTMENT AS JUDGES OF SC

The Supreme Court collegium has recommended the name of senior advocate Indu Malhotra as the first woman lawyer to be directly appointed as a judge of the apex court. Along with her, Uttarakhand High Court Chief Justice K M Joseph, who was part of the bench which in 2016 had quashed the imposition of President's Rule in the state, has also been cleared for elevation to the apex court.

What

- Malhotra, who was designated as a senior advocate in 2007, would be the first woman lawyer to be directly appointed as a judge of the top court, instead of being elevated from a high court.
- She will be the seventh woman judge since independence to make it to the Supreme Court.
- At present, Justice R Banumathi is the lone woman judge in the apex court.
- The first woman to be appointed as a judge of the apex court was Justice M Fathima Beevi in 1989.
- Thereafter, Justice Sujata V Manohar, Justice Ruma Pal, Justice Gyan Sudha Misra and Justice Ranjana Prakash Desai made it to the top court as judges.

CENTRE ON BRAHMAPUTRA STUDIES SET UP

A high-powered panel of the Brahmaputra Board has approved Rs 237 crore projects for protection of Majuli Island in Assam from flood and erosion and suggested setting up a Centre for Brahmaputra studies in IIT, Guwahati. The Centre for Brahmaputra studies will cover multi-disciplinary aspects of hydrology, environment, inland waterways, agriculture and sociology. The central government will support establishment of the Centre.

What

1. Majuli Island, with an area of 524.29 sq km, is the world's largest river island.
2. Geomorphologically, the entire Majuli island is a part of alluvial flood plains of the Brahmaputra river. The area of the island was 734 sq km in 1914. Though it was reduced to 502.21 sq km by 2004, subsequent reclamation of land increased its area to 524.29 sq km in 2016.
3. Protection of the island from flood and erosion under the project will be done through strengthening of existing embankment at 24 locations, construction of five spurs with boulder and geo bags (filled with earth\sand), construction of sluice and bank revetment (sloping structure) at 14 locations.
4. The project was approved by the High-Powered Review Board (HPRB) in its last meeting, chaired by the Union water resources minister Nitin Gadkari, at Borgos, Kaziranga in Assam on December 30, 2017.
5. The Board in its meeting had taken many other decisions on the river Brahmaputra. It includes setting up the Brahmaputra Board office complex in Majuli and handing over the works to the National Projects Construction Corporation (NPCC) - a PSU under the water resources ministry.
6. It was also decided in the meeting that the HPRB to actively take up afforestation and catchment area treatment in the upper riparian states to prevent soil erosion and sedimentation.
7. The Board also approved that the task of preparing master plan, feasibility reports and detailed project reports (DPRs) for development of the complete Brahmaputra basin be given to another PSU of the ministry - WAPCOS (Water and Power Consultancy Services).

NUCLEAR INSTALLATIONS EXCHANGED

India and Pakistan on 1 January 2018 exchanged lists of their nuclear installations under an agreement that aims to prevent both sides from attacking such facilities. The exchange was done through diplomatic channels simultaneously at New Delhi and Islamabad.

What

1. This is the twenty-seventh consecutive exchange of such a list between the two countries.
2. The Agreement on the Prohibition of Attack against Nuclear installations between India and Pakistan that governs the exchange of these lists was signed on December 31, 1988 and came into force on January 27, 1991.
3. It ensures that both countries inform each other of nuclear installations and facilities that are to be covered under the agreement on the first of January every year.
4. The list-exchange comes in the backdrop of a heated back-and-forth between the two countries over the harassment and ill-treatment of jailed Indian national Kulbhushan Jadhav's mother and wife by Pakistan.

NOD FOR BARAK MISSILES

The Defence Ministry has given its final approvals for the procurement of 131 Barak missiles for Indian Navy and 240 precision-guided munitions (PGM) for Indian Air Force (IAF) together estimated at Rs.1,714 crore. The proposals were cleared by Defence Minister Nirmala Sitharaman. It is a regular procurement through the revenue expenditure.

PGM

1. The 240 KAB-1500 PGMs will be

Barak surface-to-air missiles (SAM)

1. 131 Barak surface-to-air missiles (SAM) and associated equipment will **be bought from Israel's Rafael Advanced Defence Systems Ltd** for Rs.460 crore.
2. They will be installed on all frontline warships of the Indian Navy.
3. These are SAM designed to be used as a ship-borne anti-missile defence system.

- procured from Rosoboronexport of Russia at a cost of Rs.1,254 crore. PGM is variant of the KAB PGMs.
- It has been in service of IAF and has been employed by Su-30 fighter jets. Due to the value of the contract, the approval of Defence Ministry was required.
 - This procurement will address the deficiency of Precision Guided Munitions in IAF arsenal and also enhance offensive capabilities of the IAF.

ASIA'S LONGEST TUNNEL ROAD

The Centre on 3 January 2017 approved the Zojila pass tunnel project in Jammu and Kashmir to provide all-weather connectivity between Srinagar, Kargil and Leh. Once the 14.5-km tunnel is completed, it will be Asia's longest single tube two-lane road. The project was conceived 20 years ago to provide all-weather connectivity to the strategically important Kargil and Leh regions.

What

- Zojila pass is situated at an altitude of 11,578 feet on the Srinagar-Kargil-Leh National Highway which remains closed during winters (December to April) due to heavy snowfall and avalanches cutting off the Leh-Ladakh region from Kashmir. The tunnel will be built from Baltal to Drass on the Srinagar-Leh highway.
- Once the project is completed, the travelling time between Baltal to Drass will be reduced to 14 minutes from the current 3 and a half hours.
- The total capital cost of the project is Rs 6,808.69 crore, which includes the cost of land acquisition, resettlement and rehabilitation and other pre-construction activities, as well as the maintenance and operation cost of the tunnel for four years.
- The project will be implemented by the Ministry of Road Transport and Highways through the National Highways and Infrastructure Development Corporation Limited.
- The construction will start by May next year and will take seven years to complete.

FIRST IN CYCLONE OCKHI

Ockhi is the first severe cyclonic storm in almost 40 years to have travelled about 2,400 kilometres from the Bay of Bengal to as far as the Gujarat coast, Met Department official said day. Ockhi, which formed as a depression over southwest Bay of Bengal on November 29 last year intensified into a cyclone off the Kanyakumari coast in Tamil Nadu on November 30 and travelled up to the Gujarat coast before it dissipated on December 6 after weakening into a low pressure area.

What

- This is the first severe cyclonic storm to have travelled more than 2,000 kilometres – forming over the Bay of Bengal, emerging into the Arabian Sea and travelling up to the Gujarat coast.
- On storms that travelled similar or longer distances than Ockhi, referred to one that occurred nearly a century ago. In December, 1922, a cyclone that originated in the Bay of Bengal travelled about 4,000km up to the Coast of Yemen.
- Cyclones in November, 1966, November, 1977, and November, 1978, which formed over the Bay of Bengal, emerged into the Arabian Sea and covered a distance of over 3,000km.
- However, these cyclones did not affect Kanyakumari as they traversed across Tamil Nadu, north of 10°N latitude, before emerging into the Arabian sea.
- Ockhi was also significant in the sense that it led to copious rainfall especially in the southern districts of Tamil Nadu with Tirunelveli and Kanyakumari getting 42 per cent and 23 per cent of excess rainfall respectively during the North-East monsoon season.

6. Cyclone Ockhi left a trail of destruction in the southern districts of Tamil Nadu, apart from devastating coastal areas in Kerala and Lakshadweep.

‘OPERATION ALERT’ LAUNCHED

The Border Security Force (BSF) has launched “Operation Alert” along the over 200 km-long International Border (IB) in Jammu and Kashmir to curb the increasing movement of infiltrating militants from across the border. There are inputs that **there is movement of militants and accordingly, we have declared ‘Ops Alert’ on the border,”** Inspector General of BSF Jammu Frontier told. The BSF gave a military send-off by organising wreath-laying ceremony at Frontier headquarters in the honour of the late Head Constable Radha Pada Hazara, who was killed in sniper firing by Pakistan rangers along the IB in Samba sector.

What

1. It is because of that alertness that they have acted like that (resorting to sniper firing). The moral of the BSF is high and will continue to remain high.
2. The BSF was to maintain peace along the border, but Pakistan was always trying to disturb this peace. It is because of this machination of Pakistan that they martyred one jawan by sniping.
3. There was movement under thick cover of fog and one intruder was spotted well inside Indian Territory and he was fired upon and shot dead. He was resident of **Sialkot district (of Pakistan). It was an infiltration attempt,” the officer said. Either he was a member of the infiltration group or their guide.**

GLOBAL DIGITAL MAP

In order to cater to domestic as well as international customers, companies offering outsourcing services under the India BPO promotion scheme (IBPS) are operating in 16 languages, including Spanish, English, Arabic and Hindi. The scheme, which was launched by the Ministry of Electronics and IT to put smaller towns on the global digital map, has so far provided employment to 10,968 people across the country.

What

1. According to an official in the ministry, a total of 61 cities in 21 states and Union Territories have been already covered by the scheme.
2. The regional languages include Oriya, Tamil, Gujarati, Marathi, Telugu, Kannada, Bengali, Malayalam, Kashmiri, Urdu, Rajasthani and Punjabi.
3. The scheme provides financial support in the form of viability gap funding to eligible companies.
4. The objectives of the scheme include creation of employment opportunities by promoting the IT/ITes industry, particularly by setting up BPO operations in smaller cities.
5. The scheme is planned to ensure substantial investment and is likely to have a multiplier effect on the economy in times to come.
6. Software Technology Parks of India (STPI), an autonomous society of Electronics and IT Ministry, is the nodal agency for implementation of the IBPS.
7. The scheme provides special incentives of up to Rs 100,000 per seat in the form of viability gap funding. About 48,300 seats had been planned across states and UTs based on population percentage and so far 35,160 seats have been allocated after five rounds of bidding.
8. After four rounds of open bidding, 18,160 seats had been allocated to 87 companies in 60 locations in 19 states. Of these, 76 units have begun operations with 13,480 seats distributed across 48 locations and this has resulted in initial employment for 10,297 people.
9. In the fifth round that closed last month, 68 firms submitted bids for 17,000 seats, and these are currently under evaluation.

JUDGEMENT OF FODDER SCAM

RJD chief Lalu Prasad was on 6 January 2018 sentenced to three-and-a-half years in jail by a CBI special court in a fodder scam case relating to fraudulent withdrawal of Rs 8.9 million from the Deoghar Treasury 21 years ago. CBI court judge Shiv Pal Singh, who had convicted Prasad, along with 10 others on December 23, also imposed a fine of Rs one million on him for two cases in the scam. He was fined Rs 500,000 for each case, failing which he would serve another six months in jail.

What

1. The court had convicted Prasad for offences of cheating, along with criminal conspiracy, under the Indian Penal Code (IPC) and the Prevention of Corruption Act.
2. The scam is related to withdrawal of Rs 8.9 million from the Deogarh Treasury between 1990 and 1994 when Prasad was the chief minister of Bihar.
3. The 69-year-old RJD supremo, in a written plea, had sought leniency from the CBI court citing illness and old age, according to his counsel Chittaranjan Prasad.
4. This is the second fodder scam case in which Prasad has been jailed.
5. He was sent to prison for five years on September 30, 2013.
6. Prasad was granted bail by the Supreme Court after having spent over two-and-a-half months in jail.

BENGAL JOINS SWACHH CONTEST

After staying away from participating in the "Swachhta" ranking of cities and towns since the Modi government launched the flagship mission, West Bengal has joined the competition for 2018. But the Mamata Banerjee administration has a caveat. The state has named its own programme as Mission Nirmal Bangla.

What

1. The assessment of cities and towns in West Bengal has started under the Swachh Survekshan (Swachhta ranking of urban areas) along with other states. The assessment will be completed by March 10 and the results will be out later this year.
2. West Bengal had participated in the cleanliness ranking in 2013-2014 during the fag end of UPA-II and Halisahar from the state had found place in the list of top 10 clean cities.
3. Last year, though the Centre had started the assessment of 500 cities for Swachhta ranking, only 434 were put in the list as 63 cities of West Bengal did not take part in the competition.

TEEN MURTI CHOWK RENAMED

Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his Israeli counterpart Benjamin Netanyahu on 14 January 2018 attended a ceremony at the Teen Murti Memorial in Delhi to mark the renaming of Teen Murti Chowk as Teen Murti Haifa Chowk. The two leaders also laid a wreath and signed the visitor's book at the memorial. Netanyahu, who arrived on a six-day visit today, was received by Modi.

What

1. The three bronze statues at Teen Murti represent the Hyderabad, Jodhpur and Mysore Lancers who were part of the 15 Imperial Service Cavalry Brigade.
2. The brigade carried out the victorious assault on the fortified city of Haifa on September 23, 1918, during World War I.
3. There are various accounts of this battle - all narrate the valour with which the lancers undertook the assault on the garrisoned city protected by a joint force of Ottomans, Germany and Austria-Hungary.
4. The liberation of Haifa cleared a supply route for the Allies to the city through the sea.
5. 44 Indian soldiers made the ultimate sacrifice during the liberation of the city in World War I.
6. Till date, the 61 Cavalry celebrates September 23 as its Raising Day or "Haifa Day."

PM AMONG TOP 3 WORLD LEADERS

Ahead of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Switzerland for Davos summit, an international survey has ranked him among the top three leaders of the world. An annual survey by Gallup International has put Prime Minister Modi at number three among the global leaders.

What

1. The respondents in the survey, which was conducted among the people across 50 countries, had rated Prime Minister Modi ahead of China's Xi Jinping, Russian President Vladimir Putin, British Prime Minister Theresa May, Israel's Benjamin Netanyahu amongst others.
2. The top ranking in the survey went to German Chancellor Angela Merkel, followed by French president Emmanuel Macron.
3. Prime Minister Modi will be on a two-day visit to Davos, Switzerland, to attend the World Economic Forum (WEF) meeting between January 22 and 23.

UIDAI TO INTRODUCE FACIAL AUTHENTICATION

The Unique Identification Authority of India (UIDAI) on 15 January 2018 decided to introduce facial authentication for Aadhaar for people facing issues with other forms of biometric verification like fingerprint and iris scanning.

What

1. UIDAI introduces yet another landmark technology for authentication - Face Authentication. AadhaarFaceAuth will help all elderly or others facing issues with fingerprint authentication. Service to be launched by 1 July 2018.
2. The UIDAI said the new feature will be allowed only when combined with "one more authentication factor", like fingerprint, iris or OTP.
3. This facility is going to help in inclusive authentication of those who are not able to biometrically authenticate due to their worn out fingerprints, old age or hard work conditions.
4. The camera, said the Aadhaar authority, is now available across laptops and mobiles, which made face capture feasible without any additional hardware.
5. Last week, the UIDAI announced a new move to secure Aadhaar, in which a randomly-generated 16-digit temporary number can be shared instead of the biometric ID.

THE FIFTH BIGGEST DIAMOND

One of the biggest diamonds in history has been discovered in the mountainous kingdom of Lesotho in southern Africa. Gem Diamonds Ltd. found the 910-carat stone, **about the size of two golf balls, at its Letseng mine in the country. It's a D color Type IIa diamond**, which means it has very few or no nitrogen atoms and is one of the most expensive stones. The diamond is the fifth-biggest ever found.

What

1. The Letseng mine is famous for the size and quality of the diamonds it produces and has the highest average selling price in the world. Gem sold a 357-carat stone for \$19.3 million in 2015 and in 2006 found the 603-carat Lesotho Promise.
2. This exceptional top-quality diamond is the largest to be mined to date and highlights the unsurpassed quality of the Letseng mine.
3. Gem did not say how it will sell the diamond or what it could be worth. Its value will be determined by the size and quality of the polished stones that can be cut from it. Lucara Diamond Corp. sold a 1,109-carat diamond for \$53 million last year, but got a record \$63 million for a smaller 813-carat stone it found at the same time in 2015.
4. The pricing of diamonds is hugely variable and driven by a multitude of factors. **Gem's mega discovery follows news last week that it had found 117-carat and 110-carat stones.**
5. It will be another boost for the company that dropped to a record low last year after prices for its stones fell and it was forced to close a new mine in Botswana.
6. The biggest diamond discovered is the 3,106-carat Cullinan, found near Pretoria, in South Africa, in 1905. It was cut to form the Great Star of Africa and the Lesser Star of Africa, which are set in the Crown Jewels of Britain.
7. **Lucara's 1,109-carat Lesedi La Rona** is the second-biggest, with the 995-carat Excelsior and 969-carat Star of Sierra Leone the third- and fourth-largest.