

My Notes...

NATIONAL

AB-NHPM APPROVED

The Union Cabinet chaired by the Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi has approved the launch of a new centrally Sponsored Ayushman Bharat -National Health Protection Mission (AB-NHPM) having central sector component under Ayushman Bharat Mission anchored in the MoHFW. The scheme has the benefit cover of Rs. 5 lakh per family per year. The target beneficiaries of the proposed scheme will be more than 10 crore families belonging to poor and vulnerable population based on SECC database. AB-NHPM will subsume the on-going centrally sponsored schemes -RashtriyaSwasthyaBimaYojana (RSBY) and the Senior Citizen Health Insurance Scheme (SCHIS).

Salient Features

1. AB-NHPM will have a defined benefit cover of Rs. 5 lakh per family per year.
2. This cover will take care of almost all secondary care and most of tertiary care procedures. To ensure that nobody is left out (especially women, children and elderly) there will be no cap on family size and age in the scheme.
3. The benefit cover will also include pre and post-hospitalisation expenses. All pre-existing conditions will be covered from day one of the policy. A defined transport allowance per hospitalization will also be paid to the beneficiary.
4. Benefits of the scheme are portable across the country and a beneficiary covered under the scheme will be allowed to take cashless benefits from any public/private empanelled hospitals across the country.
5. For urban areas, 11 defined occupational categories are entitled under the scheme.
6. The beneficiaries can avail benefits in both public and empanelled private facilities.
7. All public hospitals in the States implementing AB-NHPM will be deemed empanelled for the Scheme.
8. Hospitals belonging to Employee State Insurance Corporation (ESIC) may also be empanelled based on the bed occupancy ratio parameter. As for private hospitals, they will be empanelled online based on defined criteria.
9. To control costs, the payments for treatment will be done on package rate (to be defined by the Government in advance) basis.
10. One of the core principles of AB-NHPM is to co-operative federalism and flexibility to states. There is provision to partner the States through co-alliance.

Entitlement criteria in the SECC database

1. The different categories in rural area include families having only one room with kucha walls and kucha roof
2. Families having no adult member between age 16 to 59
3. Female headed households with no adult male member between age 16 to 59
4. Disabled member and no able bodied adult member in the family
5. SC/ST households
6. Landless households deriving major part of their income from manual casual labour

Automatically included families in rural areas having any one of the following

1. Households without shelter
2. Destitute
3. Living on alms
4. Manual scavenger families
5. Primitive tribal groups
6. Legally released bonded labour.

Major Impact

1. In-patient hospitalization expenditure in India has increased nearly 300% during last ten years. (NSSO 2015).

Background

1. RSBY was launched in the year 2008 by the Ministry of Labour and Employment and provides cashless health insurance scheme with benefit coverage of Rs. 30,000/- per annum on a family floater basis [for 5 members], for Below Poverty Line (BPL) families, and 11 other defined categories of unorganised workers.
2. To integrate RSBY into the health system and make it a part of the comprehensive health care vision of Government of India, RSBY was transferred to the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (MoHFW) w.e.f 01.04.2015.
3. During 2016-2017, 3.63 crore families were covered under RSBY in 278 districts of the country and they could avail medical treatment across the network of 8,697 empanelled hospitals.
4. The NHPS comes in the backdrop of the fact that various Central Ministries and State/UT Governments have launched health insurance/ protection schemes for their own defined set of beneficiaries.
5. There is a critical need to converge these schemes, so as to achieve improved efficiency, reach and coverage.

2. More than 80% of the expenditure are met by out of pocket (OOP). Rural households primarily depended on their 'household income / savings' (68%) and on 'borrowings' (25%), the urban households relied much more on their 'income / saving' (75%) for financing expenditure on hospitalizations, and on '(18%) borrowings. (NSSO 2015).

3. Out of pocket (OOP) expenditure in India is over 60% which leads to nearly 6 million families getting into poverty due to catastrophic health expenditures.

AB-NHPM will have major impact on reduction of Out Of Pocket (OOP) expenditure on ground of:

1. Increased benefit cover to nearly 40% of the population, (the poorest & the vulnerable)
2. Covering almost all secondary and many tertiary hospitalizations. (except a negative list)
3. Coverage of 5 lakh for each family, (no restriction of family size)

Strategy on RE Initiated

The First meeting of the inter-departmental group of stakeholders on implementation of strategy on resource efficiency was held at NITI Aayog. After detailed discussion, a road map for implementation of the RE in the country was evolved. The meeting was chaired by Shri Ratan P. Watal, Principal Adviser of NITI Aayog and was attended by nodal officers from the key Ministries/Departments. Following measures related to implementation of strategy

Background

1. In November 2017, the NITI Aayog along with EU Delegation to India released the Strategy paper on Resource Efficiency (RE).
2. The objective of the RE Strategy is to make recommendations for enhancing the resource-use efficiency in the Indian economy and industry, develop indicators for monitoring progress, and create an ecosystem for improving the resource security and minimising environmental impacts.
3. The implementation agenda of the RE Strategy consists of Core Action Agenda (2017-2018) and Medium-term Action Plan (2018-2020) in the thematic areas of institutional development, promotion and regulation.
4. The first action agenda was to constitute an inter-departmental group of stakeholders for steering the strategy.

1. Resource Efficiency is cross-cutting, has implications for all sectors. Synergies need to be established for a robust implementation agenda
2. NITI Aayog will facilitate the RE strategy implementation. Implementation however will be the responsibility of the line ministries/departments
3. A baseline survey on RE could be considered for better targeting
4. A Status paper on RE and Four sectoral strategy papers on RE are to be prepared
5. SWACH Bharat also means a clean production/mining environment, therefore resource efficiency and circular economy are also a part of this initiative
6. One pilot study on Ease of Doing RE Business in collaboration with DIPP could be considered
7. Finally RE is a potential instrument for generating wealth from waste. Measures for promoting effective recycling of scrap generated in the country could be explored

SATH-EDUCATION ROADMAPS RELEASED

The roadmaps for the Sustainable Action for Transforming Human Capital in Education (SATH-E) Project of NITI Aayog, being undertaken in partnership with three participating States of Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh and Odisha, were released on March 17 by Shri Amitabh Kant, CEO, NITI Aayog. The forward-looking roadmaps for SATH-E were released at the conclusion of the first meeting of the National Steering Group (NSG), the governing body for the project, which is chaired by the CEO of NITI Aayog.

What

1. **“SATH-E aspires to be a ‘saathi’, to the educational system with the student and the teacher at its centre”,** underscoring the significance of this project. The aim is to make the entire governmental school education system responsive, aspirational and transformational for every child.
2. These programmes and other initiatives stated in the Roadmap will be further strengthened, customized and executed by the SATH-E States in consultation with knowledge partners - the Boston Consulting Group and Piramal Foundation for Education Leadership – over the next 24 months.
3. **This ‘tripartite arrangement’,** where the NITI Aayog, the three States, chosen through a challenge method, and knowledge partners from the private sector, symbolises the very essence of competitive and cooperative federalism exemplified

About SATH-E

1. In May 2017, the NITI Aayog wrote to all States offering assistance for improving their health and education sectors. 16 States responded favorably.
2. Following presentations and consultations with MHRD, the three States of Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh and Odisha were selected for the programme. The Sustainable Action for Transforming Human Capital-Education (SATH-E) was thus, born.
3. The SATH-E initiative is based on formal agreements with the States and will be funded through a cost-sharing mechanism between NITI Aayog and the participating states. The Boston Consulting Group (BCG) and Piramal Foundation for Education Leadership (PFEL) were chosen as knowledge partners for the project facilitating review, data collection and implementation.
4. SATH-E has been envisaged as a programme which aims to transform elementary and secondary school education across these three states.
5. SATH-E aims to create role model States for **education and mainstream** ‘islands of excellence’ across the country to facilitate qualitative and quantitative transformation of learning outcomes.

by NITI. The process ensured that schemes of the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) and projects under SATH-E are in sync with their respective state schemes.

SMART INDIA HACKATHON 2018

Smart India Hackathon 2018 was held on Mar 30 & 31, 2018 simultaneously at 28 different nodal centers across India. With 27 union Ministries and Departments and 17 State Governments having joined this grand initiative, SIH2018 is much bigger than its previous edition. Hyderabad is the nodal centre for Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology, **which is a 'Premier Partner' in this initiative.** Smart India Hackathon (SIH) 2018 would give an opportunity to students to use their creative skills **in solving some of the country's real life problems and he hoped** that outcome of SIH 2018 will result in innovative solutions which can be commercialized.

What

- Smart India Hackathon 2018 would be the second massive scale hackathon initiative in India following Smart India Hackathon 2017.
- It includes 2 sub-editions – Software edition, which is a 36-hr software product development competition and scheduled to be held on Mar 30 & 31, 2018.
- The Hardware edition, involving building of hardware solutions will be held later this year. During the software edition grand finale, teams of thousands of technology students will build innovative digital solutions for problems posed by different central govt. ministries/ departments.
- A total of 340 software problem statements are proposed for the above event. **Winners stand to get cash prizes and a chance to be part of the NASSCOM's 10,000 Startups program.**

About Smart India Hackathon 2018

- Launched on Oct 16, 2017 in Pune, Smart India Hackathon 2018 harnesses creativity & expertise of students, builds funnel for **'Startup India, Standup India' campaign**, crowd sources solutions for improving governance and quality of life, and provides opportunity to citizens to provide innovative **solutions to India's daunting problems.**
- All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE) under the aegis of Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) and in collaboration with Inter Institutional Inclusive Innovations Center (i4c), MyGov, Persistent Systems, and Rambhau Mhalgi Prabodhini is organizing Smart India Hackathon 2018.

GSAT-6A IN ORBIT

The Indian Space Research Organisation on 29 March 2018 successfully placed communication satellite GSAT-6A in orbit and also set the ball rolling for its bigger missions in the future. The space agency tested certain improved critical systems in the launch vehicle -- GSLV Mk-II -- that may eventually be used in its future missions, including the **country's second lunar mission.** GSLV Mk-II (GSLV-F08), carrying 2,140kg GSAT-6A, took off from the second launch pad at Satish Dhawan Space Centre in Sriharikota, Andhra Pradesh, at 4.56pm. It was the Geosynchronous Satellite Launch **Vehicle's 12th flight** and sixth with indigenous cryogenic upper stage.

What

- The three-stage rocket injected the satellite into a geosynchronous transfer orbit, and Isro scientists watching the monitors at the mission control centre in the spaceport broke into celebrations.
- In the coming days, the scientists will fire the thrusters onboard the satellite to manoeuvre it to a geostationary orbit at an altitude of 36,000km from earth.
- It was the first mission for K Sivan after he took charge as the chairman of the space agency in January, 2018.

4. During the launch, Isro tested a next generation high thrust Vikas engine, which **powered the rocket's second stage. The improved engine increased the payload capability** of the vehicle.
5. The second stage also had electromechanical actuation system replacing electrohydraulic actuation system to enhance the reliability of the rocket. Officials **said any improvement done to the vehicle would be incorporated into GSLV's** future missions, including Chandrayaan-2 planned for October 2018.

About GSAT-6A

1. GSAT-6A, similar to its predecessor GSAT-6, is a high power S-band communication satellite with a mission life of around 10 years.
2. The satellite has a six-metre wide antenna that would unfurl once it is in space. The antenna, meant for S-band communication, is three times broader than those generally used in Isro satellite.
3. This feature will enable the satellite to provide mobile communication for the country through handheld ground terminals. The smaller antenna in other communication satellites requires larger ground stations.
4. While GSAT-6A will complement GSAT-6, Isro sources said the satellite would also provide services to the Indian Armed Forces.
5. GSAT-6 has been providing satellite communication services since its launch on August 27, 2015.
6. GSAT-6 is a high power S-band communication satellite configured around I-2K bus.
7. Mission life planned is about 10 years

INDIA'S FIRST INSECT MUSEUM

India's first insect museum with state-of-the-art amenities was unveiled at Tamil Nadu Agricultural University campus in Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu. It was inaugurated by Tamil Nadu Chief Minister K Palaniswamy.

What

1. The museum has been established at an area of 6,691 sqft.
2. It is fully dedicated to insects. It will display insects preserved as specimens as also live ones depicting their different developmental stages.
3. It will provide information about insects through images, videos and models of their unique behaviour, habits and habitats.
4. The lobby of the museum **depicts theme "BUGS ARE KINGS"**.
5. Its exhibiting area comprises seven radial walls (bay) on right side and an undivided wall on the left side.
6. It also has section on social insect exhibiting termite mounds (whole and sectioned) and bee hives of different kinds and forms.
7. It also has souvenir shop and mini auditorium to screen insect movies and documentary films are available.

BRAHMOS TEST FIRED SUCCESSFULLY

In a 'Make in India' achievement, India on 22 March 2018 successfully test fired the Brahmos supersonic cruise missile with an indigenous seeker at Pokhran test range in Rajasthan. Defence Minister Nirmala Sitharaman said the missile hit the target with "pin-point" accuracy and the success will further bolster India's national security.

What

1. The Brahmos cruise missile test was conducted with a made in India indigenous seeker.
2. The test firing comes three months after the Brahmos cruise missile was successfully test fired for the first time from the Indian Air Force's frontline Sukhoi-30 MKI combat jet.

3. The range of the missile, an Indo-Russia joint venture, can be extended up to 400 km as certain technical restrictions were lifted after India became a full member of the Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR) last year.
4. Brahmos is a joint venture between DRDO of India and NPO Mashinostroyeniya (NPOM) of Russia.
5. Brahmos missile is the heaviest weapon to be deployed on India's Su-30 fighter aircraft.
6. Work has already begun to integrate the Brahmos supersonic cruise missile on 40 Sukhoi combat aircraft which is expected to fulfil the critical needs of the Indian Air Force in the wake of evolving security dynamics in the region.

ISA AND INDIA SIGN THE HOST COUNTRY AGREEMENT

The International Solar Alliance (ISA) and the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), signed the Host Country Agreement on 26 March 2018. The Agreement will give ISA a juridical personality and gives it power to contract, to acquire and dispose off movable and immovable properties, to institute and defend legal proceedings. Under this agreement, ISA shall enjoy such privileges, applicable tax concessions and immunities as are necessary for **ISA's** Headquarter to independently discharge its function and programmes. ISA shall be deriving its status, privileges and immunities as per Article 10 of Framework Agreement.

What

1. ISA has potential to change developmental paradigm in the world. Energy will now be available to less developed tropical countries at affordable rates and in an easily deployable manner.

2. Many countries have shown interest to learn **from India's** experience in renewable energy. The need for our industry to go and set up

infrastructure in these countries and talked about doing necessary de-risking in this regard.

3. ISA has an onerous task at hand to mobilise over US \$ 1000 billion of investment into the Solar Sector and deploying over 1000 GW of Solar capacity.
4. ISA need to firm up financial partnership deals with more multilateral and bilateral donor agencies in order to meet its stated objectives.
5. The signing of Host Country Agreement an important milestone and thanked the Government of India for its wholehearted support.

Background

1. The International Solar Alliance is an initiative jointly launched by the Prime Minister of India and President of France on 30th November 2015 at Paris, in the presence of the Secretary General of the UN, on the side lines of COP21 UN Climate Change Conference.
2. The main objective of ISA is to undertake joint efforts required to reduce the cost of finance and the cost of technology, mobilize more than US \$ 1000 billion of investments needed by 2030 for massive deployment of solar energy, and pave the way for future technologies adapted to the needs of 121 countries lying fully or partially between the Tropics.
3. ISA has presently four ongoing programmes: Scaling Solar Applications for Agricultural Use, Affordable Finance at Scale, Scaling Solar Mini Grids and Scaling Solar Rooftop catering to the needs of solar energy in specific areas.
4. The Framework Agreement coming into force on 6th December 2017, the ISA became the first international intergovernmental treaty based organization to be headquartered in India. ISA celebrated its founding day on 11th March, 2018.

KADAKNATH CHICKEN GETS GI TAG

Chennai based Geographical Indication Registry and Intellectual Property India has awarded Geographical Indication (GI) Tag to **Madhya Pradesh's Kadaknath chicken**. The GI tag will ensure that no one else can use name Kadaknath Chicken while selling any other black chicken. It will also translate into higher prices for producers, officials in the animal husbandry department said.

What

1. Kadaknath chicken breed is unique for its black colour due to its black-feathers.
2. Its black colour stems from the deposition of melanin pigment. This breed of chicken is popular for its adaptability and flavourful good-tasting black meat, which is believed to have medicinal properties.
3. It is native tribal districts of Jhabua, Alirajpur and parts of Dhar in Madhya Pradesh.
4. Kadaknath chicken contains 25-27% of protein in comparison with other breeds of chickens that contain 18% protein.
5. It is also known for its high iron content. It has fat and cholesterol content lower compared with other chicken breeds.
6. This chicken breed is very popular among local tribal people mainly due to its adaptability to the local environment, disease resistance, meat quality, texture and flavour.

Geographical Indication (GI)

1. The GI tag is name or sign used on certain products which correspond to specific geographical location or origin.
2. It is used for agricultural, natural and manufactured goods having special quality and established reputation.
3. These goods and products having tag are recognised for their origin, quality and reputation and gives it required edge in the global market.
4. It also ensures that none can use their name, giving them exclusivity.
5. The registration of a GI is valid for 10 years after which it needs to be renewed.
6. GI is covered as element of intellectual property rights (IPRs) under Paris Convention for Protection of Industrial Property.
7. At international level, GI is governed by **WTO's Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS)**.
8. In India, GI tag is governed by Geographical Indications of Goods (Registration and Protection Act), 1999.
9. This Act is administered by Controller General of Patents, Designs and Trade Marks, who is also Registrar of Geographical Indications.

SC PASSES SLEW UNDER SC/ST ACT

A government official cannot be automatically arrested under the provisions of the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989, the Supreme Court said on 20 March 2018. To avoid false implication of an innocent, a preliminary enquiry may be conducted by the deputy superintendent concerned to find out whether the allegations make out a case under the Act and that the allegations are not frivolous or motivated.

What

1. The court was hearing an appeal filed one by Subhash Kashinath Mahajan against a Bombay high court ruling refusing to quash the FIR lodged against him for offences alleged under the Act.
2. The court **further observed** "If the allegation is to be acted upon, the proceedings can result in arrest or prosecution of the person and have serious

consequences on his right to liberty even on a false complaint which may not be intended by law meant for protection of a **bonafide victim.**”

Implementation of Prevention of Atrocities Act

1. An Act of Parliament namely the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) {PoA} Act, 1989, was enacted to prevent atrocities against members of Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs). With an objective to deliver members of SCs and STs a greater justice, the PoA Act has been amended in January, 2016.
2. With a view to prevent atrocities, Rule 3 of the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Rules, 1995, specifies precautionary and preventive measures to be taken by the State Government.
3. State Government/Union Territory Administrations which implement provision of the PoA Act are provided admissible Central assistance towards its effective implementation.
4. A Committee under the Chairpersonship of Union Minister for Social Justice and Empowerment from time to time reviews implementation status of the PoA Act in States and Union Territories. Last meeting of the Committee was held on 30.01.2018.

First district to have 100% solar powered health centres

Surat district in Gujarat become first in country to have 100% solar powered Primary Health Centers (PHCs). All 52 PHCs in the district are now powered by solar system. With this, Surat sets an example for country by developing villages that use sustainable forms of energy at a time when global warming is mounting with each passing day.

What

1. The solarification of all PHCs in Surat district will bring down electricity bill by 40% and also help fight global warming.
2. Other than PHCs, there are 572 gram panchayats in district, out of which 150 are solar powered gram panchayats and soon other 422 panchayats will too be solar powered.
3. 75% of the total expense of making gram panchayat solar powered is borne by state government and remaining 25% by district panchayats.

INS GANGA DECOMMISSIONED

INS Ganga, an indigenously built frigate of the Indian Navy, was decommissioned after rendering more than three decades of glorious service to the Indian Navy and the nation. Commissioned on December 30, 1985, the ship represented a big step forward in the nation's warship building capability.

What

1. The ceremony was attended by several officers and men - many now retired - who had served onboard the ship in the past.
2. This allowed interactions and reminiscences that cut across not just rank and seniority but also time and generations.
3. The poignant and impressive ceremony, which saw the naval ensign hauled down for the last time at sunset, was conducted by the last commanding officer of the ship, Captain NP Pradeep.
4. The chief guest for the ceremony was Vice Admiral AK Bhal, who was a former crew member of the ship from the year 1989 to 1991.
5. The special guest of honour for the ceremony was Vice Admiral (ret'd) KK Kohli, the first commanding officer of INS Ganga.

WORLD'S FIRST TRUSTED DIGITAL REPOSITORY

National Cultural Audiovisual Archives (NCAA) project of the Ministry of Culture, Government of India, implemented by Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts (IGNCA) has been certified as the **world's first** Trusted Digital Repository as per ISO

16363:2012 standard, granted by Primary Trustworthy Digital Repository Authorisation Body Ltd. (PTAB), United Kingdom. <http://www.iso16363.org/iso-certification/certified-clients/indira-gandhi-national-centre-for-the-arts/>. Leveraging this historic achievement, the plan for the next phase is to integrate about three lakh hours of audiovisuals materials, a corpus estimated based on a scoping survey conducted in 25 cities across the country, on this platform over the next five years.

What

1. **The Digital India initiative of the Hon'ble Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi, launched on 1 July 2015, aimed at connecting rural India with high-speed internet networks and improving digital literacy. This will boost the accessibility of the NCAA up to the remotest corner of the country and help preserve India's rich culture throughout its length and breadth."**
2. The primary objective of the NCAA is to identify and preserve the cultural heritage of India available in audiovisual form through a process of digitization and making it accessible to the people.
3. **NCAA digital repository is established with and powered by DIGITALAYA (which is developed by C-DAC Pune in compliance with Open Archival Information System (OAIS) Reference Model ISO 14721:2012.**
4. At present, NCAA has a total of twenty-one (21) Partnering Institutions from across the country, covering 11 governmental and 10 non-governmental cultural organisations. The digitization and metadata standards followed by the Project are in parity with international standards within the overall framework of the OAIS model.
5. Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts has been set up by the Government of India, as a premier research institute dedicated to holistic understanding and expression of Indian arts in their inter and multi-disciplinary nature.

AMENDMENTS IN SURROGACY (REGULATION) BILL, 2016

The Union Cabinet has approved proposal for moving official amendments in Surrogacy (Regulation) Bill, 2016. Once the Bill is enacted by Parliament, National Surrogacy Board (NSB) will be constituted at central level. The States/UTs will constitute State Surrogacy Boards (SSBs) and State Appropriate Authorities within 3 months of notification by Central Government.

What

1. India has emerged as surrogacy hub for couples from different countries and there have been reported incidents concerning unethical practices, abandonment of children born out of surrogacy, exploitation of surrogate mothers and rackets of intermediaries importing human embryos and gametes.
2. The 228th report of Law Commission of India has recommended for prohibiting commercial surrogacy and allowing ethical altruistic surrogacy by enacting suitable legislation.

Surrogacy (Regulation) Bill, 2016

1. The Bill was introduced in Lok Sabha in November 2016 which was referred to the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Health and Family Welfare in January 2017.
2. The committee had held various meetings with various stakeholders for holding discussions and to receive their suggestions.
3. The proposed legislation proposes to regulate surrogacy in India by establishing NSB at central level and, SSBs and Appropriate Authorities in States/UTs.

4. It also seeks to ensure effective regulation of surrogacy, prohibit commercial surrogacy and allow altruistic surrogacy to needy Indian infertile couples. The Bill will apply to whole of India, except Jammu and Kashmir.

CONTINUATION OF RUSA

The Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs chaired by the Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi has given its approval for continuation of Centrally Sponsored Scheme of RashtriyaUchchatarShikshaAbhiyan (RUSA) from 1.04.2017 to 31.03.2020.

Major impact and Targets

1. RUSA seeks to increase the Gross Enrolment Ratio of the country to 30% by 2020,
2. It also seeks to increase the spending on higher education by the State Governments,
3. The scheme, in its 2nd phase, aims at creation of 70 new model degree colleges and 8 new professional colleges; Enhancing quality and Excellence in 10 select State universities and 70 autonomous colleges, providing infrastructural support to 50 universities and 750 colleges etc.
4. Improving access, equity and accessibility of higher education in States through reforms such as academic reforms, governance reforms, affiliation reforms etc.
5. Improve equity in higher education by providing adequate opportunities of higher education to socially deprived communities; promote inclusion of women, minorities, SC/ST/OBCs and differently abled persons,
6. To identify and fill up the existing gaps in higher education, by augmenting and supporting the State Governments' efforts,
7. Promote a spirit of healthy competition amongst states and institutions to excel in quality higher education, research and innovation.

DRAFT OF NEP UNVEILED

India's environment ministry has unveiled a draft of the new National Forest Policy (NFP) that proposes to restrict "schemes and projects which interfere with forests that cover steep slopes, catchments of rivers, lakes, and reservoirs, geologically unstable terrain and such other ecologically sensitive areas". The ecologically sensitive catchment areas shall be stabilized with suitable soil and water conservation measures, and also by planting suitable trees and grass like bamboo, the draft suggests. It also suggests setting up of two national-level bodies—National Community Forest Management (CFM) Mission and National Board of Forestry (NBF)—for better **management of the country's forests.**

What

1. The draft calls for state boards of forestry headed by state ministers in charge of forests to be established for ensuring inter-sectoral convergence, simplification of procedures, conflict resolution, among other things.
2. National Forest Policy will be an overarching policy for forest management, with the aim of bringing a minimum of one-third of India's total geographical area under forest or tree cover.
3. The first National Forest Policy in independent India took effect in 1952, with a second edition in 1988.
4. The environment ministry has sought comments and suggestions from all stakeholders by 14 April. Once finalized, the policy will guide the forest management of the country for the next 25-30 years.
5. The latest draft follows one released in June 2016 which proposed a green tax for facilitating ecologically responsible behaviour, and supplementing financial resources essential to address forestry woes.
6. The latest draft of National Forest Policy has omitted any reference to a green tax or a national stream revival programme. But it continues to speak about private participation in forest management, which was criticized in 2016, while noting that productivity of forest plantations are poor in most states.

7. Public-private participation models will be developed for undertaking afforestation and reforestation activities in degraded forest areas and forest areas available with forest development corporations and outside forests," the draft policy stated.
8. The new draft also says efforts will be made to achieve harmonization between policies and laws like Forest Rights Act (FRA) 2006 . This can certainly once again put environmentalists and bureaucracy at loggerheads as the former may see it as an attempt to weaken role of gram sabhas (village councils).
9. **At present, India's forest and tree cover is estimated to be 802,088 sq. km, which is about 24.39% of the country's total geographical area.**

SPECIAL CATEGORY STATUS AND ANDHRA PRADESH

The Telugu Desam Party (TDP) on 16 March 2018 decided to quit the NDA, days after two of its ministers resigned from the Narendra Modi government following the Centre's refusal to grant Special Category Status to Andhra Pradesh. Jammu & Kashmir was the first state to get Special Category Status and another 10 states were added over the years, with Uttarakhand being the last in 2010.

What is Special Category Status

Special Category Status used to be granted to some regions that have historically been at a disadvantage compared with the rest of the country. This decision was taken by the National Development Council (NDC), a body of the former Planning Commission, and was based on various parameters such as:

1. Hilly and difficult terrain
2. Low population density
3. Low resource base
4. Strategic location along the borders of the country
5. Economic and infrastructure backwardness
6. **Non-viable nature of the state's finances.**
7. Sizable share of tribal population

What benefits does a state get under SCS

1. Preferential treatment in getting central funds assistance
2. Concession on excise duty to attract industries to the state
3. **A significant 30 per cent of the Centre's gross budget goes to the special category states**
4. These states can avail the benefit of debt swapping and debt relief schemes
5. In the case of centrally sponsored schemes and external aid, special category states get it in the ratio of 90 per cent grants and 10 per cent loans, while other states get 30 per cent of their funds as grants.
6. Tax breaks to attract investment

NBS AND CITY COMPOST SCHEME CONTINUE

The Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs, chaired by Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi has approved the proposal of the Department of Fertilizers for continuation of Nutrient Based Subsidy (NBS) and City Compost Scheme beyond 12th Five Year plan till 2019-20. The total expenditure for continuation of both the schemes till 2019-20 will be Rs. 61,972 crore.

What

1. The expenditure for the

Background

1. Government is making available fertilizers, namely Urea and 21 grades of P&K fertilizers to farmers at subsidized prices through fertilizer manufacturers/importers.
2. The subsidy on P&K fertilizers is being governed by NBS Scheme w.e.f 01.04.2010.
3. Similarly, the MDA is being governed by City Compost Scheme w.e.f. 10.02.2016. Accordingly, these schemes have been extended beyond the 12th Five Year Plan till 2019-20.

scheme will be on actual basis since national roll out of DBT entails 100% payment of subsidy to fertilizer companies on sale of fertilizers to farmers at subsidized rates.

2. The subsidy on the P&K fertilizers and Market Development Assistant (MDA) on City Compost will be provided on the subsidy rates approved by the CCEA on annual basis.
3. The continuation of the Nutrient Based Subsidy Scheme and City Compost Scheme will ensure that adequate quantity of P&K is made available to the farmers at statutory controlled price.

NEW INTEGRATED SCHEME FOR SCHOOL EDUCATION

The Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs, chaired by Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi has approved the proposal of Department of School Education and Literacy to formulate a Integrated Scheme on School Education by subsuming SarvaShikshaAbhiyan (SSA), RashtriyaMadhyamikShikshaAbhiyan (RMSA) and Teacher Education (TE) from 1st April, 2018 to 31st March, 2020. An estimated allocation of Rs 75,000 crore over the period has been approved which is a 20% increase over the current allocations. The scheme comes in the **backdrop of PM's vision of SabkoShiksha, AchhiShiksha** and aims to support the States in universalizing access to school education from classes pre-nursery to XII across the country.

Main Features of the Scheme

1. The vision of the Scheme is to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education from nursery to senior secondary stage in accordance with the Sustainable Development Goal for Education.

2. The main emphasis of the Integrated Scheme is on improving quality of school education by focussing on the two T's - Teacher and Technology.

The objectives of the Scheme

1. Provision of quality education and enhancing learning outcomes of students;
2. Bridging Social and Gender Gaps in School Education;
3. Ensuring equity and inclusion at all levels of school education;
4. Ensuring minimum standards in schooling provisions;

Benefits

1. Holistic approach to education
2. Inclusion of senior secondary levels and pre-school levels in support for School education for the first time
3. An integrated administration looking at 'school' as a continuum
4. Focus on Quality of Education- Emphasis on improvement of Learning Outcomes
5. Enhanced Capacity Building of Teachers
6. Focus on strengthening Teacher Education Institutions like SCERTs and DIETs to improve the quality of teacher training
7. Enhanced use of digital technology in education through smart classrooms, digital boards and DTK channels
8. Specific provision for Swachhta activities - support 'SwachhVidyalaya'
9. Improve the Quality of Infrastructure in Government Schools
10. Enhanced Commitment to 'BetiBachaoBetiPadhao'- Upgradation of KGBVs from class VI -VIII to upto class XII
11. Emphasis on 'KaushalVikas' in schools
12. Support 'Khelo India' - provision for sports and physical equipment
13. Preference to Educationally Backward Blocks (EBBs), LWEs, Special Focus Districts (SFDs), Border areas and the 115 aspirational districts

5. Promoting vocationalization of education;
6. Support States in implementation of Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Act, 2009; and
7. Strengthening and up-gradation of State Councils for Educational Research and Training (SCERTs)/State Institutes of Education and District Institutes for Education and Training (DIET) as nodal agencies for teacher training.

Impact

1. The Scheme gives flexibility to the States and UTs to plan and prioritize their interventions within the scheme norms and the overall resource envelope available to them.
2. It will help improve the transition rates across the various levels of school education and aid in promoting universal access to children to complete school education.
3. The Scheme, by providing quality education, aims to equip the children with varied skills and knowledge essential for their holistic development and prepare them for the world of work or higher education in the future.
4. It would lead to an optimal utilization of budgetary allocations and effective use of human resources and institutional structures created for the erstwhile Schemes.

105TH INDIAN SCIENCE CONGRESS

Hon'ble Prime Minister, Shri Narendra Modi inaugurated the 105th Indian Science Congress at Manipur University on 16 March 2018. The focal theme of 5-day ISC is "Reaching the Unreached Through Science & Technology".

What

1. The ISC 2018 was organised by the Indian Science Congress Association (ISCA), a premier scientific organisation of India.
2. This is 2nd time the Science Congress is being held in the north east. Earlier it was held at Shillong (Meghalaya) in 2009.
3. Approximately, 5,000 delegates from all over country and 2,000 scientists along with four Nobel Laureates are participating in this year mega event.
4. Under the mentioned theme, scientists from across world will look at bridging social gaps through innovations. Its thrust will be on science disciplines which impact society and sustainable development.

Flashback

1. ISCA was started in the year 1914 at its headquarters in Kolkata.
2. It organises Indian Science Congress annually in the first week of January.
3. The first meeting of the ISCC was held in January 1914 in the Asiatic Society, Kolkata.
4. The 104th edition of ISC was held in Tirupati (Andhra Pradesh) with the theme "**Science and Technology for National Development**".

7TH WOMEN SCIENCE CONGRESS INAUGURATED

7th Women Science Congress was inaugurated at the ongoing 105th session of Indian Science Congress in Imphal on 18 March 2018. The event pointed out that representation of women in science and technology is less than expected.

What

1. Women empowerment may be through innovative scientific activities and integrating action-oriented literacy. 7th Women Science Congress is a significant step towards nation-building.
2. The event was underlined the need to frame guidelines to increase the participation of women.

3. The Governor of West Bengal also released a souvenir of Women Science Congress on the occasion.
4. The first Women Science Congress was held in 2012.

INDIA CLOSE TO SIGNING COMCASA

India may finally end up signing the second defence foundational pact with the US — the Communications, Compatibility, Security Agreement (COMCASA) — which will enable Indian military to obtain critical, secure and encrypted defence technologies **from the other country. Being a 'Major Defence Partner' of the US**, it is imperative for India to sign the mandatory three foundational pacts which allows greater interoperability between critical technologies and smooth facilitation of classified information. So far, India has signed only one of the foundational agreements, called the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA). It had signed the pact with the US in 2016 after decades of negotiation.

What

1. The LEMOA is a modified version of the Logistics Support Agreement (LSA) **focused on India that will enable access to each other's military facilities** for purposes of refuelling and replenishment.
2. The COMCASA is almost ready, with both sides brainstorming all the aspects. It just needs the political will to sign on the dotted lines.
3. Finalising COMCASA was also discussed extensively during a meeting between Navy Chief Sunil Lanba and US Chief of Naval Operations John Richardson that was held last week in the US.
4. Discussions to sign the three foundational pacts began during the previous UPA regime but talks could not progress much due to apprehensions that this will indirectly make India an ally of America in its war strategies.
5. COMCASA creates the conditions for the Indian military to receive modern secure and net-enabled weapons systems such as precision armament, air-to-air missiles, space systems and navigation systems that are critical components in platforms like fighter aircraft and unmanned aerial systems.
6. Hitherto India has had to purchase more expensive commercial communications equipment, raising the overall acquisition price of a platform.
7. COMCASA and Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement for Geo-spatial Cooperation (BECA) are the two remaining pacts that were not signed due to severe criticism from within the government.
8. **It was feared that signing these agreements would mean compromising India's** age-old military ties with Russia and access to their weaponry systems.

INTERNATIONAL

XI JINPING RE-ELECTED

Xi Jinping was unanimously appointed to a second term as China's president, capping a flurry of votes that confirmed his rise as the country's paramount leader and installed a trusted ally as No. 2. **China's rubber-stamp parliament approved Xi's** appointment to a second five-year term on 17 March 2018 in Beijing, days after repealing constitutional provisions barring him from a serving a third

What

1. The votes cap months of Communist Party conclaves and pageantry that **confirmed Xi's status as arguably the world's most powerful leader. Xi, 64, got his** name written into the constitution and party charter — putting him on a status equal to Mao Zedong — and laid the groundwork for breaking the precedent of handing over power after two complete terms.
2. **He helped set up China's first investment bank** with Morgan Stanley in the 1990s and also established enduring ties with prominent Wall Street figures such as Hank Paulson.

3. **Wang, 69, and Xi have known each other since their days as “sent down youths” in China’s countryside during Mao’s Cultural Revolution.**
4. **After Xi came to power in 2012, Wang was charged with overseeing Xi’s campaign against corruption, disciplining more than 1.5 million party cadres, including the country’s retired security chief and another official once seen as a presidential contender.**

457 VISA ABOLISHED

Australia has abolished its popular employer-sponsored 457 visa programme, widely used by Indians, replacing it with new stringent programme that requires higher English-language proficiency and job skills. The 457 visa programme, used by over 95,000 foreign workers, majority of them Indians, was replaced on March 18 by a new Temporary Skills Shortage visa programme. The 457 visa programme allowed businesses to employ foreign workers for a period up to four years in skilled jobs where there was a shortage of Australian workers.

What

1. The new visa programme which came into effect from March 18 after an official notification issued by Department of Home Affairs, comprise two streams — Short Term and Medium Term — and is underpinned by more focused occupation lists that are responsive to genuine skill needs and regional variations across Australia.
2. Short term visas will be issued for two years, while medium term visas will be issued only for more critical skills shortages and for up to four years.
3. Apart from that more than 650 jobs were available for 457 holders, but under the new visa rules it has been reduced by 200.
4. The new visa programme also include a strengthened training obligation for employers sponsoring foreign skilled workers to provide enhanced training outcomes for Australians in high-need industries and occupations.
5. The 457 visa was introduced in the 1990s to quicken the entry of business professionals and highly skilled migrants but over time it was opened up for a broad category of workers.

RUSSIA TESTS NEW IBM

The Russian military says it has successfully tested its latest intercontinental ballistic missile (IBM). The Defense Ministry said on 30 March 2018 launch from Plesetsk in northwestern Russia tested the Sarmat missile's performance in the early stage of its flight.

What

1. Sarmat is intended to replace the Soviet-designed Voyevoda, the world's heaviest ICBM known as "Satan" in the West.
2. President Vladimir Putin said earlier this month that Sarmat weighs 200 metric tons and has a higher range than Satan, allowing it to fly over the North or the South Poles and strike targets anywhere in the world.
3. Sarmat also carries a bigger number of nuclear warheads, which are more powerful than the ones on Satan.
4. Sarmat could carry an array of warheads capable of dodging missile defenses.

FIRST FEMALE UN POLITICAL CHIEF

Long-serving American diplomat Rosemary DiCarlo was appointed to become the first woman to head UN political affairs, one of the most high-profile positions at the world body. DiCarlo will replace Jeffrey Feltman another American who held the post of under-secretary-general for political affairs since 2012, overseeing UN efforts to end conflicts worldwide. A former deputy US ambassador to the United Nations, DiCarlo **“brings more than 35 years of experience in public service and academia,** a UN statement said.

What

1. **The US administration put forward DiCarlo's candidacy even though she is not seen as close to President Donald Trump's foreign policy team.**
2. DiCarlo also served as deputy assistant secretary of state for European and Eurasian affairs and director for United Nations affairs at the national security council in Washington.
3. Since 2015, DiCarlo has been president of the National Committee on American Foreign Policy, an organization dedicated to conflict resolution. Her areas of expertise include Russia and the former Soviet Union as well as the Middle East. DiCarlo speaks Russian and French.

UN APPROVES 'LARGEST-EVER' SET OF SANCTIONS

The United States said it has secured the support of the U.N. Security Council for a new package of sanctions designations that target smuggling at sea by North Korea. Ambassador Nikki Haley said the North Korea Sanctions Committee, which comprises all **members of the U.N.'s most senior decision-making body**, unanimously approved designations of 21 shipping companies, one individual and 27 ships. She said it was the largest-ever set of U.N. designations against the North.

What

1. The approval of this historic sanctions package is a clear sign that the international community is united in our efforts to keep up maximum pressure on the North Korean regime.
2. It comes despite an easing of tensions, as North Korea has halted tests associated with its nuclear and missile programs for four months and embarked on a diplomatic offensive.
3. The new sanctions package aims at countering maritime smuggling by North Korea to obtain oil and sell coal, evading restrictions that have previously been imposed by the Security Council to deprive the North of revenue and resources for its nuclear and ballistic missile programs.
4. A designation by the U.N. requires, for example, member states to deny port entry to ships on the sanctions list, or deny entry to individuals on the list.
5. The identities of the new designees and where they were based was not immediately clear, but Haley said the U.S. had proposed them to coincide with a U.S. Treasury Department sanctions package in late February that barred U.S. persons from dealings with 50 vessels, shipping companies and trade businesses.
6. Most of those targets were based in North Korea, but some were based in China _ **North Korea's main trading partner** _ **Hong Kong, Singapore and Panama.**

PHILIPPINES WITHDRAWS FROM ICC

Philippines has announced to withdraw from International Criminal Court (ICC) citing reason of international bias and held that ICC was being utilised as a political tool against it. It will make Philippines only second country to withdraw from the Rome statute, following Burundi in 2017. South Africa attempted to leave in 2016, but its withdrawal was revoked by UN.

What

1. Philippines had ratified Rome statute related to Hague-based ICC in 2011. Its ratification was seen as big step forward for human rights in Asia. Now its withdrawal is seen as blow for international accountability in the region.
2. The ICC in February 2018 had announced that it was launching preliminary **examination of President Rodrigo Duterte's bloody anti-drug** crackdown that has drawn international concern.
3. It is claimed that nearly 4,000 drug suspects were killed as part of campaign, while human rights groups claim the toll is around three times the numbers given by authorities.

International Criminal Court (ICC)

1. **ICC is the world's first intergovernmental legal body** with permanent international jurisdiction to prosecute individuals for genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes.
2. It is based in The Hague, Netherlands. It began its functioning on 1 July 2002, the date that Rome Statute entered into force.
3. It has 123 member states (India is not its member).
4. The Rome Statute is multilateral treaty which **serves as ICC's foundational and governing document.**
5. India has not signed Rome Statute. The ICC has jurisdiction to prosecute individuals and is independent of United Nations (UN). But it may receive case referrals from UN Security Council and can initiate prosecutions without UN action or referral.
6. US signed the treaty (Rome Statute) in 2000 but never ratified it, citing concerns over sovereignty, similarly with Russia.
7. Israel signed it for a short period but also never ratified it into law. China has not signed it.

VLADIMIR PUTIN RE-ELECTED

Russian President Vladimir Putin won a landslide re-election victory, extending **his rule over the world's largest country for another six years at a time when his ties with the West are on a hostile trajectory. Putin's victory will take his political dominance of Russia to nearly a quarter of a century, until 2024, by which time he will be 71.** Only Soviet dictator Josef Stalin ruled for longer.

What

1. **Western sanctions on Russia imposed over Crimea and Moscow's backing of** a pro-Russian separatist uprising in eastern Ukraine remain in place and have damaged the Russian economy, which only rebounded last year after a prolonged downturn.
2. Britain and Russia are also locked in a diplomatic dispute over the spy poisoning incident, and Washington is eyeing new sanctions on Moscow over allegations it interfered in the 2016 US presidential election, something Russia flatly denies.
3. The constitution limits the president to two successive terms, obliging him to step down at the end of his new mandate—as he did in 2008 after serving two four-year terms. The presidential term was extended from four to six years, starting in 2012.

ECONOMY

GRATUITY ACT, 2018 BROUGHT IN FORCE

The Payment of Gratuity (Amendment) Bill, 2018 has been passed by Lok Sabha on 15th March, 2018 and by the Rajya Sabha on 22nd March, 2018, has been brought in force on 29th March, 2018. The main purpose for enacting this Act is to provide social security to workman after retirement, whether retirement is a result of superannuation, or physical disablement or impairment of vital part of the body.

What

1. The present upper ceiling on gratuity amount under the Act is Rs. 10 Lakh. The provisions for Central Government employees under Central Civil Services (Pension) Rules, 1972 with regard to gratuity are also similar. Before implementation of 7th Central Pay Commission, the ceiling under CCS (Pension) Rules, 1972 was Rs. 10 Lakh. However, with implementation of 7th Central Pay Commission, in case of Government servants, the ceiling has been raised to Rs. 20 Lakhs.

2. Therefore, considering the inflation and wage increase even in case of employees engaged in private sector, this Government decided that the entitlement of gratuity should also be revised in respect of employees who are covered under the Payment of Gratuity Act, 1972.

3. Accordingly, the Government initiated the process for amendment to Payment of Gratuity Act, 1972 to increase the maximum limit of gratuity to such amount as may be notified by the Central Government from time to time. Now, the Government has issued the notification specifying the maximum limit to Rs. 20 Lakh.

4. In addition, the Bill also envisages to amend the provisions relating to calculation of continuous service for the purpose of gratuity in case of female employees

who are on maternity leave from 'twelve weeks' to 'such period as may be notified by the Central Government from time to time'. This period has also been notified as twenty six weeks.

5. The Bill as passed by both the Houses of Parliament, and assented to by the **Hon'ble President and notified by the Government.**
6. This will ensure harmony amongst employees in the private sector and in Public Sector Undertakings/ Autonomous Organizations under Government who are not covered under CCS (Pension) Rules. These employees will be entitled to receive higher amount of gratuity at par with their counterparts in Government sector.

Flashback

1. The Payment of Gratuity Act, 1972 applies to establishments employing 10 or more persons.
2. The main purpose for enacting this Act is to provide social security to workman after retirement, whether retirement is a result of superannuation, or physical disablement or impairment of vital part of the body.
3. The present upper ceiling on gratuity amount under the Act is Rs. 10 Lakh.
4. The provisions for Central Government employees under Central Civil Services (Pension) Rules, 1972 with regard to gratuity are also similar.
5. The Bill also envisages amending the provisions relating to calculation of continuous service for the purpose of gratuity in case of female employees who are on maternity leave from 'twelve weeks' to such period as may be notified by the Central Government from time to time.
6. After enactment of the Act, the power to notify the ceiling of the amount of gratuity under the Payment of Gratuity Act, 1972 shall stand delegated to the Central Government so that the limit can be revised from time to time keeping in view the increase in wage and inflation and future pay commissions.

BILL TO PREVENT SCRUTINY OF FOREIGN POLL FUNDS TO PARTIES

The Lok Sabha has passed a bill that will exempt political parties from scrutiny of funds they have received from abroad since 1976. The Lok Sabha passed amid chaotic protests by the opposition parties, 21 amendments to the Finance Bill 2018. One of them was an amendment to the Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Act, 2010 that bans overseas corporations from funding political parties.

What

1. The Representation of People's Act, which lays down the rules for elections, bars political parties from accepting foreign funds.
2. The Present government had through Finance Bill 2016 amended the FCRA to make it easier for parties to accept foreign funds.
3. Now, it has amended it further to do away with the scope for scrutiny of a political party's funding since 1976.

4. In the Finance Act, 2016, in section 236, in the opening paragraph, for the words, figures and letters 'the 26th September, 2010', the words, figures and letters 'the 5th August, 1976' shall be substituted, the Lok Sabha website said listing amendments to Finance Bill 2018 approved.
5. The retrospective amendment will help BJP and Congress escapes the fallout of a 2014 Delhi High Court judgement that held both guilty of violating the FCRA.
6. The FCRA was passed in 1976. It defined a company -- Indian or foreign -- registered abroad or with subsidiaries abroad as a foreign firm. It was later repealed and replaced with the FCRA, 2010.
7. The Present government through the Finance Act, 2016, changed the definition of a foreign company by saying a firm with less than 50 per cent of share capital held by a foreign entity would no longer be a foreign source any more. This amendment also came into effect retrospectively from September 2010.
8. The Lok Sabha adopted the annual Budget for 2018-19 by passing the Appropriation Bill, which authorises government departments to spend money from the Consolidated Fund of India, and Finance Bill, which contains taxation proposals.
9. This is only the third time since 2000 that Parliament has approved the budget without debate.

WORLD'S FIRST BRASS FUTURES CONTRACTS

India's largest commodities exchange platform, Multi Commodity Exchange of India Limited (MCX) launched world's first brass futures contracts. It will facilitate brass stakeholders to hedge their price risk. MCX Brass futures will be the first non-ferrous contract with compulsory delivery option. Its price will be quoted as per rate at ex-warehouse Jamnagar (delivery centre) inclusive of taxes and duties.

What

1. It will provide its stakeholders with more organised and robust price discovery platform.
2. It will also help them to use national level benchmark price as ready reference.
3. It will enable them to mitigate their price risk.
4. It will lead to best price discovery for brass, which is of key relevance to its stakeholders including importers, exporters, manufacturers, refiners, and processors among others in country, who are looking to hedge their price exposure.
5. Brass is metallic alloy of copper (55-60%) and zinc (40-45%) with small amounts of lead and iron.
6. It is used in industries like electrical appliance, pump parts, marine engines, switch gears, sanitary ware, automobiles and defence.
7. India is largest exporter of finished brass products. India imports huge quantities of brass scrap from US, Middle East, Africa and Europe which is then separated and recycled to make brass.

Multi Commodity Exchange (MCX)

1. **MCX is country's first listed commodity** futures exchange that facilitates online trading, and clearing and settlement of commodity futures transactions, thereby providing platform for risk management.
2. It was launched in November 2003 and operates within regulatory framework of Forward Contracts Regulation Act, 1952 (FCRA, 1952) under SEBI.
3. MCX offers futures trading in bullion, ferrous and non-ferrous metals, energy, and a number of agricultural commodities (mentha oil, cardamom, potatoes, palm oil and others).
4. Globally, MCX ranks no. 1 in silver, no. 2 in natural gas, no. 3 in crude oil and gold in futures trading

FIRST US SHALE GAS REACHES INDIA

India's first liquefied natural gas (LNG) cargo from America landed at the Dabhol regasification terminal in Maharashtra on 30 March 2018. This is part of a \$32-billion supply deal for 20 years that GAIL signed with the Dominion Energy Cove Point project in Maryland and Cheniere Energy Inc's Sabine Pass Project in Louisiana. India's trade with America is expected to see large scale import of LNG and crude oil in the coming years. Total bilateral trade (goods and services) between India and the US increased at a compound annual rate of 11.4% from \$20 billion in 2000 to \$126.1 bn in 2017. GAIL alone would be procuring around \$2 bn worth of LNG per annum from USA from 2018-19.

What

1. GAIL's first charter-hired vessel, MV Meridian Spirit, arrived after a 25-day voyage and docked for unloading in the presence of petroleum minister Dharmendra Pradhan, GAIL chief B C tripathi and US diplomatic officials.
2. GAIL's first Chartered LNG Vessel carrying long term US LNG arrives at Dabhol a shift towards a gas-based economy would require augmenting domestic production and import. Investment in natural gas infrastructure, including pipelines, LNG import terminals and city gas distribution networks was a focus area.
3. GAIL was an early mover to contract for LNG from America. It will get around 90 cargoes annually from the Sabine Pass and Cove Point terminals. It had signed a sale and purchase agreement with Cheniere Energy in December 2011; the latter will sell about 3.5 million tonnes of LNG a year to GAIL.
4. Arrival of this LNG vessel comes soon after the formation of Konkan LNG, a subsidiary of GAIL.
5. Asian markets account for about 70% of global LNG shipment; India is one of the fastest-growing importers.

INTEGRATED SCHEME FOR DEVELOPMENT OF SILK INDUSTRY

The Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs chaired by the Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi, has given its approval for Central Sector Scheme "Integrated Scheme for Development of Silk Industry" for the next three years from 2017-18 to 2019-20. The scheme will be implemented by the Ministry through Central Silk Board (CSB). The core objective of the scheme is to improve the productivity and quality of silk through R&D intervention. The focus of R&D intervention is to promote improved cross breed silk and the import substitute Bivoltine silk so that Bivoltine silk production in India enhances to such a level that raw silk imports become nil by 2022 thereby making India self-sufficient in silk.

Improvement over the earlier scheme

1. The scheme aims to achieve self-sufficiency in silk production by 2022. To achieve this, production of high grade silk in India will reach 20,650 MTs by 2022 from the current level of 11,326 MTs thereby reducing imports to Zero.
2. For the first time, there is clear focus on improving production of highest grade quality of silk. It is proposed to increase 4A grade silk from the current level of 15% to 25 % of mulberry production by 2020.
3. The implementation strategy is clearly based on convergence at the State level with the schemes of other Ministers like MGNREGS of Rural Development, RKVY & PMKSY of Ministry of Agriculture, for maximizing benefits to the sericulturists.
4. The R&D projects pertaining to disease resistant silkworm, host plant improvements, productivity enhancing tools and implements for reeling and waving etc. will be done in cooperation with Ministries i.e. Science and Technology, Agriculture and Human Resource Development (HRD).

The Scheme has four components

1. Research & Development (R&D), Training, Transfer of Technology and IT Initiatives
2. Seed Organizations and farmers extension centres
3. Coordination and Market Development for seed, yarn and silk products and
4. Quality Certification System (QCS) by creating amongst others a chain of Silk Testing facilities, Farm based & post-cocoon Technology Up-gradation, and Export Brand Promotion.

Impact:

1. Production of import substitute bivoltine silk to the tune of 8500 MTs per annum by 2020.
2. Research & Development to improve productivity from the present level of 100 Kgs to 111 kgs of silk per ha. of plantation by the end of 2019-20.
3. Large scale propagation of improved reeling machines (Automatic Reeling Machine for mulberry; improved reeling/spinning machineries and Buniyad reeling machines for Vanya silk) under Make in India programme to produce quality silk to cater to the market demand.
4. The scheme will promote Women Empowerment and livelihood opportunities to SC/ST and other weaker sections of the society.
5. The scheme will help to increase productive employment from 85 lakhs to 1 crore persons by 2020.

E-WAY BILL ROLLOUT FROM APRIL 1

The government has notified April 1 as the implementation date for the electronic way or e-way bill, which will be required for transporting goods valued over Rs 50,000 between states. Besides, the Central Board of Excise and Customs (CBEC) have also notified the requirement of filing summary return GSTR-3B till June. The GSTR-3B for a month is required to be filed by the 20th day of the succeeding month.

What

1. The GST Council, headed by Finance Minister Arun Jaitley and comprising his state counterparts, had in its meeting on March 10 decided on e-way bill roll out and extension of 3B filing facility.
2. Wary of system collapsing like it happened when the e-way bill was first introduced on February 1, the Council decided to rollout the requirement of carrying the permit for intra-state movement in a staggered manner.
3. While inter-state e-way bill being implemented from April 1, there would be a phased roll out for intra-state movement of goods beginning April 15.
4. The e-way bill, which would be required to be presented to a GST inspector if asked for, is being touted as an anti-evasion measure and would help boost tax collections by clamping down on trade that currently happens on cash basis.
5. With e-way bill roll out, from April 1, transporters of goods worth over Rs 50,000 will have to generate an e-way bill.

US DRAGS INDIA TO WTO

The Trump administration has mounted a fresh offensive against India by dragging it to the World Trade Organisation (WTO) for providing what it termed as export subsidies through half-a-dozen schemes, including SEZs and the Merchandise Exports from India Scheme. In its request to hold consultations with India, the first step before legal action, the US has argued that the incentives violate WTO agreements as India is no longer below the economic benchmark of \$1,000 per capita gross national income (GNI).

What

1. While Indian authorities said they would respond to the US request for consultations within the specified 60 days, they argued that like other countries in the past, India should be allowed a transition period of eight years.

2. When the WTO was set up, developing countries that had a GNI of over \$1,000 per capita were allowed eight years to wind up their export promotion schemes.
3. Our presumption is that India also has a similar period of eight years to graduate out of the subsidy regime and this is what we will be placing before the US.
4. Some other countries which achieved the benchmark later, such as Egypt and Sri Lanka, have been allowed the transition period, Indian officials said and accused the Trump administration of targeting India as part of a strategy focused on pleasing its domestic constituency.

CCI APPROVES BRENNTAG-RAJ PETRO DEAL

The Competition Commission of India (CCI) has given its nod to the acquisition of Raj Petro Specialities by Germany-based chemical distribution company Brenntag AG. According to a notice submitted with CCI, the proposed transaction involves the acquisition of 100% of the total issued, paid-up and subscribed equity share capital of Raj Petro by Brenntag in two tranches.

What

1. In first tranche, Brenntag AG, through its indirect subsidiary Brenntag (Holding) BV, will acquire equity shares, representing 65% of the total issued, paid-up and subscribed equity share capital of Raj Petro.
2. The remaining 35% will be picked up in the second tranche. CCI said it has **approved “acquisition of Raj Petro by Brenntag”**.
3. Brenntag (Holding) BV is part of the Brenntag Group, which is active in distribution of industrial and speciality chemicals.
4. Raj Petro Specialities is a manufacturer, distributor and exporter of a range of petroleum speciality products and lubricants, among others.
5. Deals beyond a certain threshold require approval from CCI, which keeps a tab on unfair business practices across sectors.

ANTI-DUMPING DUTY IMPOSED ON OFLOXACIN

India has imposed anti-dumping duty on import of Chinese pharma product, used in the treatment of certain infections, to protect domestic producers from **below-cost shipments. The duty on import of ‘Ofloxacin’ from China will be in the range of \$2.58 to \$9.48 per kg for three years**, said a notification issued by the Revenue Department in the Finance Ministry. The levy has been slapped following the recommendations of the Directorate General of Anti-Dumping and Allied Duties (DGAD).

What

1. Aarti Drugs had approached DGAD for initiation of anti-dumping investigation and imposition of duty on Ofloxacin imports. After a probe into the imports, the Authority concluded that the product has been exported to India **from China below its normal value, “resulting in dumping”**.
2. The domestic industry has suffered material injury due to dumping of the product.
3. Ofloxacin is used to treat certain infections, including bronchitis, pneumonia and infections of the skin, bladder, urinary tract, reproductive organs, and prostate (a male reproductive gland).
4. Countries carry out anti-dumping probe to determine whether their domestic industries have been hurt because of a surge in imports which are below the cost of producing them. As a counter measure, they impose duties under the multilateral regime of WTO.
5. The duty is aimed at ensuring fair trading practices and creating a level-playing field for domestic producers with regard to foreign producers and exporters.

SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

SATELLITES FOR IRIDIUM LAUNCHED

Space Exploration Technologies Corp. launched a rocket carrying 10 Iridium Communications Inc satellites to orbit **early 30 March 2018**, it's fifth in a series of eight launches contracted for the communications company as it builds its NEXT constellation network. The Falcon 9 rocket lifted off from Vandenberg Air Force Base on **California's central coast at around 7:13 AM local time**. SpaceX has signed on to deliver 75 Iridium satellites to orbit in total. SpaceX said on Twitter about an hour after launch that all 10 satellites had been deployed.

What

1. **Iridium NEXT will replace the world's largest commercial satellite network of** low-Earth orbit satellites in what will be one of the largest 'tech upgrades' in history.
2. The process of replacing the satellites one-by-one in a constellation of this size and scale has never been completed before.
3. The launch used the same first-**stage rocket from Iridium's similar mission in** October. SpaceX did not attempt to recover the rocket again for reuse. It did try to catch part of the fairing, or nose cone, though was unsuccessful.
4. **GPS guided parafoil twisted, so fairing impacted water at high speed," he said on Twitter. "Air wake from fairing messing w parafoil steering. Doing helo drop tests in next few weeks to solve."**
5. SpaceX is targeting roughly 30 total missions this year, up from a record 18 in 2017. The Iridium launch brings its 2018 tally to six.
6. A seventh mission, known as CRS-14, is slated for 1 April 2018, during which **SpaceX's Dragon spacecraft will resupply the International Space Station as part of the company's contract with NASA.**

SCIENTISTS DISCOVER NEW ORGAN

Scientists have discovered new organ in human body and have named it as 'interstitium'. It will be the 80th organ in the human body. It might be might be also the biggest organ in human body.

What

1. **It was discovered while doctors were investigating patient's bile duct**, searching for signs of cancer.
2. They had noticed cavities of this organ that did not match any previously known human anatomy.
3. The discovery of interstitium will help to explain how cancer spreads in body and pave way for new ways to detect and treat the disease.

Interstitium

1. The new organ is network of interconnected, fluid-filled spaces all over the body.
2. It is found everywhere in human bodies, acting as shock absorber in all places where tissues are moved or subjected to force.
3. It is made up of both flexible (elastin) and strong (collagen) connective tissue proteins, with interstitial fluid moving throughout.
4. It lies beneath top layer of skin, but is also in tissue layers lining gut, lungs, blood vessels, and muscles.
5. The organ acts like shock absorber in all places where tissues are moved or subjected to force to protect them from damage.
6. **The new organ's interstitial spaces are organized by collagen mesh** which allows it to shrink, expand making it as shock absorbers.
7. **It also acts as fluid 'highway' i.e. thoroughfares to transport critical fluids within organs and around body.**

- It also plays important role in carrying lymph, a fluid that supports immunity and also travels through lymphatic vessels.

ISRO–BHEL TIE UP FOR LI-ION CELLS

ISRO has entered into a Technology Transfer Agreement (TTA) with Bharat Heavy Electricals Limited (BHEL), **which is one of the country's leading PSUs, to transfer the technology for the manufacture of space grade Li-Ion cells.** The TTA was signed at ISRO Headquarters, Bengaluru in the presence of Dr. K. Sivan, Chairman, ISRO and Mr. Atul Sobti, Chairman & Managing Director, BHEL.

What

- ISRO uses Li-Ion batteries as power sources for satellite and launch vehicle applications due to their high energy density, reliability and long cycle life.
- Vikram Sarabhai Space Centre (VSSC) of ISRO at Thiruvananthapuram has successfully developed the technology to produce space grade Li-ion cell, demonstrated the performance of the cell under various testing conditions and established its cycle life characteristics in accelerated mode.
- These cells are currently being used for various satellite and launch vehicle applications.
- This Li-ion cell Technology Transfer will enable BHEL to produce space grade **Li-Ion cells which can meet the country's space programme requirements.**
- This technology can also be adopted to cater to the Li-Ion cell requirement for other national needs.

FIRST INDIAN SIGN LANGUAGE DICTIONARY

First Indian Sign Language Dictionary of 3000 words was launched by Shri Thaawarchand Gehlot, Union Minister for Social Justice and Empowerment at a function in Delhi on 23 March 2018.

The dictionary has been developed by Indian Sign Language Research & Training Centre (ISLR&TC) under Department of Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities (DEPwD), M/o Social Justice & Empowerment. The basic aim of developing the ISL Dictionary is to remove communications barriers between the deaf and hearing communities as it is focused on providing more information in Indian sign language.

What

- Its aim is to give Deaf people the constitutional right to speech and opportunity of freedom of expression and also bringing them into the main stream of the society.

The ISL dictionary consists of words of five categories:

- Everyday Terms - This category includes terms that are used in everyday communication. The videos contain the sign and the corresponding English term.
- Legal Terms – This category includes videos for 237 legal terms help explain complicated legal **terminology like “Affidavit”, “Acquittal”, etc. That are used in various legal situations.**
- Academic Terms - To help deaf children understand complex academic concepts, the academic dictionary contains explanations for terms **like “Nervous System”, “Rotation” and “Revolution”, etc. The words are from various subjects like Physics, Geography, Biology, Maths, etc. This category contains 229 videos for 212 terms.**
- Medical Terms – This category includes 200 sign videos for 200 medical terms will help the deaf community to better understand medical terminology used in hospitals and in medical situations.
- Technical Terms - This category has 206 videos of sign and explanations in ISL for 204 technical terms that are used in vocational training or in computer courses.

2. The ISL dictionary has focused on providing more information in Indian Sign Language. ISLR&TC has been working on its dream project of developing the Indian Sign Language Dictionary for last one and a half years.
3. As per the census 2011, there are 50, 71,007 Deaf people and 19, 98,535 with speech disability in India. ISLR&TC, New Delhi realized the gravity of the situation and issues being faced by the large number of Deaf people in common communication.
4. Therefore, ISLR&TC has developed an ISL Dictionary for Deaf people and Hearing people, offering them the maximum words to learn and expressing their feelings, ideas etc.
5. ISL dictionary consists of various categories of words for example legal terms, medical terms, academic terms, technical terms and daily use words. The videos are subtitled.
6. The English and Hindi terms for the dictionary will also help deaf children to learn English.

HOT EARTH-SIZED EXOPLANET SPOTED

An international team of astronomers has detected a hot, metallic, Earth-sized planet outside our solar system which has a density similar to Mercury. **“Mercury stands out from the other solar system terrestrial planets, showing a very high fraction of iron and implying it formed in a different way,”** said David Armstrong from University of Warwick in Britain.

What

1. Named K2-229b, the planet is 20 per cent larger than Earth but has a mass 2.6 times greater – and a day side temperature of over 2000 degrees Celsius.
2. Situated at about 340 million light years away from Earth, it finds itself very close to its host star (around a hundredth of the distance between the Earth and the Sun), which itself is a medium-sized active K dwarf in the Virgo Constellation.
3. K2-229b orbits this star every fourteen hours, according to the study published in the journal Nature Astronomy.
4. Interestingly K2-229b is also the innermost planet in a system of at least three planets, though all three orbit much closer to their star than Mercury.
5. The dense, metallic nature of K2-229b has numerous potential origins, and one hypothesis is that its atmosphere might have been eroded by intense stellar wind and flares, as the planet is so close to its star. Another possibility is that K2-229b was formed after a huge impact between two giant astronomical bodies in space billions of years ago – much like the theory that the Moon was formed after Earth collided with a body the size of Mars.

MISCELLANEOUS

RAM SETHU WILL NOT DAMAGED

The Centre on 16 March 2018 informed the Supreme Court that in the "interest of the nation", it will not damage the mythological Ram Sethu for its Sethusamudram Ship Channel project. The Union Ministry of Shipping, in its affidavit, told a bench headed by Chief Justice Dipak Misra that the PIL filed by BJP leader Subramanian Swamy against the Sethusamudram project can now be disposed off by taking note of its stand.

What

1. That the government of India intends to explore an alternative to the earlier alignment of Sethusamudram Ship Channel project without affecting/damaging the Adam's Bridge/Ram Sethu in the interest of the nation.
2. Additional Solicitor General Pinky Anand, appearing for the Centre, said that the Centre has filed the response in pursuance of the earlier directions and the PIL can now be disposed off.

- Swamy had filed a PIL against the ship channel project and had sought direction to the Centre that the mythological Ram Sethu be not touched.

2nd Indian woman to fly fighter solo

Flying officer Bhawana Kanth became the second woman pilot of the Indian Air Force (IAF) to fly a fighter aircraft solo. Kanth flew a MiG-21 "Bison" from Ambala Air Force Station. The "Bison" has virtually the highest landing and take-off speed in the world - 340 kmph. Kanth, who hails from Darbhanga in Bihar, flying "like a free bird" had been a childhood dream, which inspired her to join the IAF.

What

- Getting the opportunity to opt for the fighter stream is the "best and biggest" thing that happened to her, she had said then, adding that she wants to fight for the nation and make her parents proud.
- In February this year, flying officer Avani Chaturvedi made history by becoming the first Indian woman to fly a fighter aircraft solo.
- Chaturvedi achieved the distinction on February 19, also flying a MiG-21 "Bison", from IAF's Jamnagar base.
- Kanth, Chaturvedi and Mohana Singh had already scripted history by becoming the first women to undergo fighter pilot training in the IAF.
- They were commissioned as flying officers into the fighter stream after basic training in June 2016 on "an experimental basis" for five years initially.

MADE-IN-INDIA TRAIN REPLACES SHATABDI

As part of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's flagship Make in India project, the **country's first indigenously manufactured and self-propelled** semi high-speed train, which can travel at 160 km per hour, is all set to begin its services this June. The 16-coach train with the chair-car seating and all modern facilities will cost Rs 100 crore and will initially be deployed in place of one premium Shatabdi Express train. If successful, this train will replace all existing Shatabdi trains.

What

- Like metro trains, this train, which is built by Chennai-based Integral Coach Factory (ICF), does not require a locomotive and will run on electric traction. Each coach will cost nearly Rs six crore and the seating will be more spacious when compared to other trains.
- This will be the first ever semi high-speed train that is being manufactured by Indian Railways on its own. The train set would be able to run at the speed of 160 km per hour, making it the fastest in the country.
- ICF is also considering manufacturing lightweight aluminium trains as per European standards. The aluminium train set is likely to roll out in 2020 and it will be much more energy-efficient and will follow the European standards and will be kind of leapfrog for rail technology in India.
- The ICF is one of the earliest production units which was inaugurated by former Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru on 2nd October in 1955.

NOTICE TO CAMBRIDGE ANALYTICA

The Centre has sent a notice to data-mining firm Cambridge Analytica seeking immediate response on whether the company has been engaged in any assignment to utilise data of Indians. Meanwhile, the Indian Computer Emergency Response Team (CERT-IN) has issued an Advisory Note, CIAD-2018-0012, which lays down security best-practices to be followed by social-media users in order to safeguard personally identifiable information on social networking sites. The Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology issued the notice to Cambridge Analytica, which has been accused of serious breach of propriety information and misuse of data intended to profile and influence voting behaviour.

What

- The government has asked Cambridge Analytica whether consent was taken from individuals; who are the entities that engaged the company; how did the firm

- come to be in possession of such data; how such data was used; and was there any profiling done on the basis of such data?
2. The intermediaries cited above have been given time till March 31, 2018, to submit their responses on the above issues.
 3. The government is deeply concerned about such developments and is committed to ensuring the protection of the fundamental right of privacy, and safety and security of data for every citizen of India.
 4. While the government is cognizant of the positive role played by social media in promoting awareness and acting as a tool for social cohesion and empowerment, breach of privacy cannot be tolerated.
 5. In this regard, it is pertinent to observe that CEO of Facebook, Mark Zuckerberg, has apologised for the mistakes his company had made in handling data belonging to its users, and has promised tougher steps to restrict access to such information.

NATIONAL CONFERENCE ON DOWN SYNDROME

A National Conference on Down Syndrome was organised by the National Trust under Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment on 26 March 2018. A book entitled “Twilights Children” based on the lives of person suffering from Down syndrome was released on the occasion. The conference brought intellectuals from all walks of life on one platform to spur ideas and channelized knowledge on Down syndrome which was very beneficial to enable a positive change in the people with Down syndrome. People with Down syndrome and their parents were invited to share their inspirational stories.

What

1. Down syndrome is a chromosomal condition associated with intellectual and learning disabilities. Delayed development and behavioural problems are often reported in children with it. For seeking commitments of various stakeholders and increasing their awareness about Down syndrome, National Trust organised this National Conference on Down syndrome.
2. On 19th December 2011, the United Nations General Assembly declared to observe 21st March as World Down Syndrome Day (WDSD) and since then every year, this day is officially observed by UN to create awareness about people with Down Syndrome.
3. The objective of this conference was to provide excellent opportunities to the parents to obtain information about latest development in education and skilling and inclusive living of persons with Down syndrome. Moreover, Assessment/Screening sessions were also conducted for the children with Down syndrome.
4. After inaugural session, **the 1st Session on “Down Syndrome-Health issues”** held with the Panel Discussion and Question-Answer Session with the renowned Doctors from AIIMS, Dr. RML Hospital and Safdarjung Hospital.

Flashback

1. The National Trust is a statutory body set up by an Act of Parliament for the Welfare of Persons with Autism, Cerebral Palsy, Mental Retardation and Multiple Disabilities under the Department of Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities (DEPwD), Ministry of Social Justice & Empowerment.
2. Since, the inception, the National Trust has been running various schemes and programmes for the welfare of these persons with disabilities.
3. Amongst these one of the major activities is creating awareness amongst the general public by organizing various workshops, seminars and conferences on these disabilities and the capabilities of such persons.

5. **The 2nd Session on “Down Syndrome- Possibilities and Growth & Development” held with the Panel Discussion and Question-Answer Session** with the renowned Experts working in the field of Down syndrome.
6. **The Concluding 3rd Session on “Down Syndrome-Queries on Disability Certificate” held with the Panel Discussion and Question-Answer Session** with the Senior Doctors of reputed hospitals.

INDIA PLEDGE TO HELP PALESTINE REFUGEES

India is among 20 nations that have pledged a total of about \$100 million to the UN relief agency charged with the well-being of Palestinian refugees across the Middle East. UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres voiced gratitude for the generous pledges of approximately \$100 million made at the Extraordinary Ministerial Conference in Rome on March 15 titled 'Preserving Dignity and Sharing Responsibility Mobilizing Collective Action for UNRWA'.

What

1. Almost 20 donors pledged additional contributions, including Qatar, Norway, Turkey, Canada, India and Switzerland.
2. Giving details of the pledges made by the nations, Guterres's spokesman Stephane Dujarric told reporters that the Emir of Qatar pledged \$50 million in new contributions, while Norway pledged \$13.6 million, Turkey \$10 million and a doubling of their food aid, Canada \$7.7 million, India \$5 million and Switzerland \$4.2 million.
3. The ministerial conference was an "exceptional demonstration" of high-level support for UNRWA's mandate and a recognition for the continued necessity of its work in support of over five million Palestine refugees.
4. The pledges made in Rome represent an important first step, yet a lot of work remains to fully close the critical shortfall.
5. The Secretary-General encourages all Member States and the private sector to provide support to UNRWA in order to close the still critical funding shortfall.
6. The services provided by UNRWA to Palestine refugees are essential and contribute to bring stability to the region.

SC VERDICT ON KHAP PANCHAYATS

The Supreme Court on 27 March 2018 ruled the interference by illegal assemblies like 'khap' panchayats, in marriages of two consenting adults as "absolutely illegal" and laid down guidelines to prevent such intrusions. The apex court's judgment came on a plea by an NGO called Shakti Vahini. The plea urged the apex court to address the issue of bodies like Khap panchayats issuing diktats and interfering in marriages that did not meet their approval. The Supreme Court had in February cracked the whip against them and told them to "not become conscience keepers" as the "law will take its own course".

What

1. Khap interference in marriages 'absolutely illegal': The Supreme Court ruled as "absolutely illegal" the interference of any illegal assemblies, like khap panchayats, in a marriage between two consenting adults. The apex court laid down guidelines to prevent such intrusions.
2. Supreme Court's norms to stay in force till Parliament brings a law: A Bench said that the norms laid down by the Supreme Court would remain in force until Parliament enacted a suitable legislation. The Bench laid down remedial and preventive measures that would operate until a statutory framework to deal with such instances was put in place.
3. Order comes on NGO Shakti Vahini's plea: The Apex court disposed of a petition filed by the NGO Shakti Vahini against Khap Panchayats seeking directions to the Centre and state governments for preventing honour killings. The judgement came

- on Shakti Vahini's plea urging the apex court to address the issue of bodies like the Khap panchayats issuing dictates and interfering in marriages.
4. 'States must provide protection to couples': The Centre on March 7, 2018, had told the Supreme Court that the states must provide police protection to couples who feared for their lives because they had entered an inter-caste or inter-gotra marriage.
 5. 'Do not become conscience keepers of society': Supreme Court ruling comes after the apex court in February had cracked the whip against Khap Panchayats and told them to "not become conscience keepers" of society as the "law will take its own course". The apex court had further stated that it is in the jurisdiction of the courts to decide if marriages are legally valid or not, and pulled up Khap Panchayats for taking the law into their own hands.
 6. 'Nobody should interfere in a marriage between two adults': In February this year, the Supreme Court had said that when two adults marry, no one can interfere with or disturb them. "Nobody should disturb them. Nobody should try to create any kind of fear.
 7. Khaps' arguments fail in court: The strong observation from the apex court had come as the counsel defending the role of Khap Panchayats had told the court that they were not opposed to inter-caste or inter-religious marriages. Instead, the counsel had said that they were advancing the centuries-old tradition of prohibiting marriages within the 'sapinda' or 'gotra' (lineage).
 8. Khap panchayats explained: Khaps are caste or community organisations, particularly in the rural areas of north India, which at times act as quasi-judicial bodies and pronounce harsh punishments based on regressive and age-old customs and traditions.

WORLD WATER DAY

The World Water Day (WWD) is observed every year on 22 March to spread message of preservation and rational consumption of water. The day puts emphasis on the importance of freshwater and to advocate for the sustainable management of freshwater resources. It focuses attention on importance of universal access to clean water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) facilities in developing countries. **The theme this year is 'Nature for Water'. It explores how nature can be used to overcome the water challenges of the 21st century.**

What

1. The WWD was first formally proposed in Agenda 21 of United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil in 1992.
2. Later, UN General Assembly (UNGA) accepted recommendation of UNCED and instituted this day by adopting a resolution in December 1992.
3. The first World Water Day was celebrated on 22 March 1993. Since then, it is observed annually to draw attention on the importance of freshwater and advocating for the sustainable management of fresh water resources.

NATIONAL WATER DIGEST AWARD

Chhattisgarh was awarded National Water Digest Award for Water Conservation-Diversion and increasing the irrigation capacity in the state. The award was presented to **Chhattisgarh Water Resources Department (CWRD) on the occasion 'World Forestry Day'** (observed on March 21) in New Delhi.

What

1. This is first time that CWRD was given national Award during the past 17 years. Chhattisgarh bagged this award for increasing irrigation capacity, water management -water diversion, water conservation, community participation and efforts towards inter-linking of rivers, better techniques utilized in irrigation facilities.

National Water Digest Award

1. The Award is presented every year by globally **renowned magazine 'Water Digest'** which focuses mainly on water resources.
2. The award is given in association with Central Water Resources River Development (CWRD) and Ganga Cleaning Ministry, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), Central Water Board (CWB), Central Water Commission (CWC) and Ganga Purification National Mission. The award is recognised by UNESCO.

INDIA RANKS 109TH GLOBALLY IN DOWNLOAD SPEEDS

India, the largest consumer of mobile data in the world, ranks 109th when it comes to mobile Internet download speeds, a report said on 26 March 2018. The average download speed over the mobile increased to 9.01 mbps in February from the 8.80 mbps in November last year, but the country's rank continued to stay at 109th, Ookla's Speedtest index said. Norway is positioned at the top with an average download speed of 62.07 mbps.

What

1. The findings of the report come amid a massive increase in data connections by the over one billion mobile phone customers in the country and an increased thrust on connectivity by policymakers.
2. The country, however, fared better on the fixed broadband front, according to Ookla, with its rank improving to 67 at the end of February, against 76 last year.
3. The fixed broadband download speeds went up to 20.72 mbps in February, compared with 18.82 mbps in November 2017. Singapore leads in the fixed broadband front, with a download speed of 161.53 mbps.

As per the baseline ranking

1. Vizianagaram in Andhra Pradesh is ranked highest with score of 48.13 per cent while Mewat in Haryana tails at the end with 26.02 per cent.
2. Among others, Asifabad (Telengana), Singrauli (Madhya Pradesh), Kiphire (Nagaland), Shrawasti, Siddarthnagar and Balrampur (Uttar Pradesh), Namsai (Arunachal Pradesh), Sukma (Chattisgarh) are ranked at bottom of the list.
3. While on top of the list among others include Rajnandgaon (Chhattisgarh), Osmanabad (Maharashtra), Cuddapah (Andhra Pradesh), Ramanathapuram (Tamil Nadu), Udham Singh Nagar (Uttarakhand), Mahasamund (Chhattisgarh), Khammam (Telangana), Visakhapatnam (Andhra Pradesh).
4. NITI Aayog and the Andhra Pradesh government have created a dashboard for monitoring the real-time progress of the districts.
5. From April 1, these 101 districts will start entering data and from May onwards, they will be ranked based on progress made (delta ranking) on a real-time basis.

4. India last year had reported the biggest increase in fixed broadband download speeds among the world's most populous countries.

RANKING OF 'ASPIRATIONAL' DISTRICTS

NITI Aayog has come up with a mechanism under which 101 most underdeveloped districts of the country termed as 'aspirational' would be competing with each other in terms of performance and they will be ranked on 49 indicators based on various data points. The 49 indicators on 81 data points will cover five development areas of health and nutrition, education, agriculture and water resources, financial inclusion and skill development and basic infrastructure. From the beginning of next fiscal year from April 1, this real-time data collection and monitoring will be open for public viewing.

What

1. India cannot grow at a high rate on a long run until these districts catch up, whatever high are the GDP number, it has no meaning until the benefit of growth percolates down to very basic level, NITI Aayog CEO Amitabh Kant said while announcing the launch of ranking for the "Aspirational Districts'.
2. The ranking of districts follows the launch of 'Transformation of Aspirational Districts' by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in January with an aim to quickly and effectively transform some of the most underdeveloped districts in the country.
3. This will converge the central and state schemes, collaborate central, state and district collectors to strengthen these districts by identifying the low-hanging fruits for immediate improvement, measure progress and then rank the district by getting the data on a real-time basis.
4. All the states -- except West Bengal and Kerala -- are on board in this ranking initiative; however, these states are expected to join soon.

REMOVE 'BRIDGE COURSE' GET NOD

The Union Cabinet dropped a controversial provision of "bridge course" which would have allowed practitioners of alternative medicines to pursue allopathy, from the National Medical Commission Bill. Observing the need to act strictly against unqualified practitioners, the cabinet also approved an amendment to make the punishment for any unauthorised practice of medicine "severe" by including a provision for imprisonment of up to one year along with a fine extending to up to Rs 5 lakh. Chaired by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the cabinet also approved that the final MBBS examination would be held as a common examination throughout the country and would serve as an exit test, to be called the National Exit Test (NEXT).

What

1. Students would not have to appear in a separate exam after MBBS to get a licence to practice. NEXT would also serve as the screening test for doctors with foreign medical qualifications in order to practice in India.
2. If approved, NEXT would become the common exit examination on lines of National Eligibility cum Entrance Test, which is a common entrance examination for students who wish to study any graduate medical course (MBBS), dental course (BDS) or postgraduate course (MD / MS) in government or private medical colleges in India.
3. The amendments are in line with the recommendations of a parliamentary standing committee of Health and Family Welfare that scrutinised the Bill and submitted a report last week.
4. The Bill also proposes to replace the Medical Council of India (MCI) with National Medical Commission (NMC) as the apex medical education regulator in the country.
5. **The "bridge course" for AYUSH practitioners to practice modern medicine**, which has been removed after the amendments, was the most controversial aspect of the Bill.

6. The government has now left it to the state governments to take necessary measures for addressing and promoting primary health care in rural areas.

WORLD TUBERCULOSIS DAY

The World Tuberculosis Day (WTD) is observed every year on March 24 to raise public awareness about the global epidemic of Tuberculosis (TB) and efforts to eliminate the disease.

What

1. WTD is observed to commemorate discovery of *Mycobacterium tuberculosis*, bacillus (bacteria) causing TB on 24th March, 1882 by German microbiologist Robert Koch.
2. This discovery had opened the way towards diagnosing and curing TB.
3. **The theme of World TB Day 2018 is “Wanted: Leaders for a TB-free world”.**

Tuberculosis (TB)

1. **TB is disease caused by bacteria “*Mycobacterium tuberculosis*”** that most often affect the lungs.
2. The disease is spread from person to person through the air. It commonly affects the lungs but can also affect other parts of the body.
3. It is the second biggest killer disease worldwide next only to HIV/AIDS.
4. World Tuberculosis Day (WTD) is one of eight official global public health campaigns observed by the World Health Organization (WHO).
5. Observance of the day provides opportunity to shine the spotlight on disease and mobilize political and social commitment for accelerate progress to end TB.