Culture The Jallianwala Bagh National Memorial (Amendment) Bill, 2018 passed in Lok Sabha Zarka Shabir (zarka@prsindia.org)

- **The Jallianwala Bagh** National Memorial (Amendment) Bill, 2018 was passed in Lok Sabha on February 13, 2019. This Bill will lapse following the end of the 16th Lok Sabha. The Bill amends the Jallianwala Bagh National Memorial Act, 1951. The Act provides for the construction of a National Memorial in tribute to individuals killed or wounded on April 13, 1919 in Jallianwala Bagh, Amritsar. The Act also establishes a Trust to manage the National Memorial.

- **As per the 1951 Act,** the Trustees of the Memorial would include, (i) the Prime Minister, as Chairperson, (ii) the President of the Indian National Congress, (iii) the Minister in-charge of Culture, (iv) the Leader of Opposition in Lok Sabha, (v) the Governor of Punjab, (vi) the Chief Minister of Punjab, and (vii) three eminent persons nominated by the central government. The Bill amends this provision to remove the President of the Indian National Congress as a Trustee. Further, it clarifies that when there is no Leader of Opposition in Lok Sabha, then the leader of the single largest opposition party in the Lok Sabha will be the Trustee.

- **Additionally**, the Act provides that the three eminent persons nominated by the central government will have a term of five years and will be eligible for re-nomination. The Bill adds a proviso to allow the central government to terminate the term of a nominated trustee before the expiry of his term without assigning any reason.

Select Committee on Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Sites and Remains (Amendment) Bill submits report Prachee Mishra (prachee@prsindia.org)

- **The Select Committee** of Rajya Sabha to examine the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Sites and Remains (Amendment) Bill, 2018 (Chairperson: Dr. Vinay P. Sahasrabuddhe) submitted its report.[53] The Bill amends the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Sites and Remains Act, 1958. The Bill was introduced in Lok Sabha on July 18, 2017 and was passed by the House on January 2, 2018. It was referred to the Rajya Sabha Select Committee on July 26, 2018. The Committee recommended that the Bill be passed by Parliament. Key observations and recommendations of the Committee include:

- **Prohibited area:** A protected monument is defined as an ancient monument which is declared to be of national importance under the Act. Construction is not permitted in the prohibited area (area of 100 metre) around a protected monument, except under certain conditions. The Bill seeks to permit construction of public works in prohibited areas for public purposes. The Ministry of Culture stated to the Committee that it has found no specific reasoning behind the 100 metre limit for prohibited areas.

- **The Committee** noted that in case of certain monuments, the 100 metre prohibition may not be required, and in certain other cases, it may not be sufficient to protect the monument. It recommended that a systematic study should be conducted by experts to determine a rational area limit for prohibiting construction around a monument to ensure its preservation. Further, instead of prescribing a blanket limit, construction around a protected monument should be allowed on a case-by-case basis.

- **Public works:** The Bill defines 'public works' as construction of any infrastructure that is financed and carried out by the central government for public purposes. Such infrastructure must be necessary for public safety and security, and must be based on a specific instance of danger to public safety. The Committee noted that this definition does not cover public utility projects that are not critical for public safety and security at large. It also questioned why the definition of public works does not include works that are essential for providing convenience to the public, as long as they do not affect the monument.

Labour Roshni Sinha (roshni@prsindia.org) Expert Committee submits report on determining methodology for fixing national minimum wage

- **An Expert Committee (Chair: Dr. Anoop Satpathy)** submitted its report on recommending a methodology for fixing the national minimum wage. This will become the minimum wage in India covering all workers irrespective of their skills, sectors, occupations and rural-urban locations.[54] Key features of the report include:

- **The Committee** recommended that the national minimum wage should be able to meet a working family's minimum required expenditure on food and non-food (such as clothing, fuel and medical expenses), which should be adequate to preserve the efficiency of workers at their job and the health of their families. The Committee recommended setting the minimum wage at a level that would allow for a minimum recommended intake (per adult per day) of 2,400 calories, 50 grams of protein, and 30 grams of fats.

- **Based on the above,** the Committee recommended a national minimum wage for India at Rs 375 per day (or Rs 9,750 per month) as of July 2018, for a family comprising of 3.6 consumption units. It also recommended introduction of a house rent allowance (city compensatory allowance), averaging up to Rs 55 per day (or Rs 1,430 per month) for urban workers over and above the national minimum wage. This may vary with the type of city and town.

- **As an alternate** to a single national minimum wage, the Committee recommended different national minimum wages for different regions of the country in view of their diverse socio-economic and labour market situations. The Committee grouped all states into five regions based on a composite index and recommended region-specific national minimum wages, varying from Rs 342 per day in one region to Rs 447 per day in another (as of July 2018).

- **Since the level** of minimum wages is linked to the consumption basket, the Committee recommended that an expert committee should review the consumption basket every five years, subject to the availability of NSSO (National Sample Survey Office) data. However, it recommended that during the interim period, the basic minimum wage should be updated in line with the Consumer Price Index every six months, to reflect changes in the cost of living.

- **Pradhan Mantri Shram Yogi Maan-dhan launched** The Ministry of Labour and Employment notified a voluntary pension scheme called the Pradhan Mantri Shram Yogi Maan-dhan, 2019.[55] It intends to provide a minimum assured pension to workers in the unorganized sector. Key features of the scheme include:

- **Eligibility:** The Scheme will apply to unorganised workers between the ages of 18 and 40 years with monthly income of up to Rs 15,000. In order to enrol, the subscriber must have a savings bank account and Aadhar number. Further, the subscriber should not be covered under the National Pension Scheme, Employees' State Insurance Corporation Scheme or Employees' Provident Fund Scheme. Unorganised workers include persons engaged as home-based workers, street vendors, or domestic workers.

- **Minimum assured pension:** Each subscriber under the scheme shall receive a minimum assured pension of Rs 3000 per month after attaining the age of 60 years. The central government will match the contribution made by the beneficiary. The government has notified different monthly contribution amounts depending upon the age of joining. For example, a person entering the scheme at 29 years of age will be required to contribute Rs 100 per month.

- **Family pension:** If the subscriber dies while receiving the pension, his spouse will be entitled to receive 50% of the pension as family pension. If he dies before the pension accrues (i.e. before the age of 60 years), his spouse may either join the scheme by paying the contribution or may exit the scheme. If they choose to exit, the spouse will receive the beneficiary's contribution along with accumulated interest earned by the fund or at the savings bank interest rate, whichever is higher. If both the subscriber and spouse die, the entire corpus will be credited back to the fund.

- **If the beneficiary** becomes disabled prior to completing 60 years of age, his spouse may continue the scheme or exit the scheme. On exiting, the spouse will receive the beneficiary's contribution with interest as actually earned by fund or at the savings bank interest rate, whichever is higher.

- **Exit and withdrawal:** Any person may exit the scheme under the following conditions: (i) if he exits within 10 years, his share of contribution will be returned to him along with savings bank interest, and (ii) if he exits the scheme after 10 years but prior to completing 60 years of age, he will get his share along with the accumulated interest earned by the fund or at savings bank interest rate, whichever is higher.

- **Standing Committee submits report on compliance with provisions on deduction and deposit of PF, ESI and Income Tax** The Standing Committee on Labour (Chair: Mr. Kirit Somaiya) submitted its report on 'Compliance with the prescribed provisions of deduction and deposit of PF, ESI and TDS (of Income Tax, etc) by the Employers'.[56] Key observations and recommendations of the Committee include:

- **Deductions:** The Committee was informed by the Ministry that the employer has been authorised by the Employees' Provident Fund and Miscellaneous Provisions Act, 1952 to deduct contribution from the salary of the employee and deposit it into the fund. However, the Committee noted that there were instances where the employer deducted the contribution amount from the employee's salary but failed to deposit it with the concerned authorities. As a result, the employee was made to suffer, despite the fact that statutory deductions from his/her salary had been made. Therefore, it recommended that the Ministry should consider appropriate amendments to the Act to protect the interest of employees.

- **Notification of default:** The Committee noted that employers file electronic challan-cum-return in respect of PF deducted by them with the EPFO on monthly basis. In turn, EPFO sends an SMS to the employee regarding the amount remitted by his employers. The Committee was informed by the Ministry of Labour and Employment that the EPFO is going to institute a system under which an SMS will also be sent to an employee whose PF has not been remitted by his employer. The Committee stressed that the mechanism be put into place at the earliest.

- **Tax deducted at source (TDS):** The Committee was informed by the Central Board of Direct Taxation (CBDT) that it has taken certain steps to help employees whose tax deductions have not been deposited by the employer. It referred to a circular stating that assessing officers can reduce the tax demand of employees by up to Rs 1,00,000 after verifying the relevant documents and by obtaining an indemnity bond (in some cases). The Committee recommended the Ministry of Finance should consider raising the one lakh rupee limit in the interest of welfare of the workers. It further stated that the condition of indemnity bond may be reviewed to bring relief to employees whose TDS has already been deducted from their salary.

Standing Committee submits report on the guidelines, monitoring and regulation of investment made by EPF and EPFO

- **The Standing Committee** on Labour (Chair: Mr. Kirit Somaiya) submitted its report on 'Guidelines, Monitoring, Rating and Regulatory System, Status of Investment in Bonds and such Instruments - [Example of Infrastructure Leasing and Financial Services (IL&FS) by PF Funds, Pension Funds]'.[57] Key observations and recommendations of the Committee include:

- **The Committee** noted that the inherent principle of EPF is social security for the vulnerable working class of society. As its basic objective is social security rather than returns on investments, the Committee noted that the amounts should not be deployed in risky investments. The Committee observed that the EPF Organisation (EPFO) is the custodian of the EPF and is required to ensure a balance between security of this fund and returns on investment.

- **Monitoring Mechanism:** The Committee stressed on the need to ensure that the employees' PF contributions in the EPF are insulated from any bad investments. Towards this, the Committee recommended strengthening the monitoring mechanisms by exercising tighter control over their designated portfolio managers and ensuring impartial external concurrent audit of the investments.

- **Credit Rating Agencies:** The Committee noted that the EPFO makes investments as per the pattern of investment notified by the Ministry of Labour and Employment. As per the current guidelines, investments in corporate bonds is limited to 'AA' in case of PSU bonds and 'AA+' bonds in case of private sector bonds. These bonds are rated by Credit Rating Agencies (CRAs). CRAs are registered with and regulated by the Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI). Further, the CRAs are accredited by RBI as 'External Credit Assessment Institutions' for rating banks loans.

- **The Committee examined** the process adopted by Credit Rating Agencies (CRAs) for determining the credit rating of any financial institution. The Committee was of the view that CRAs are not discharging their functions adequately and in a transparent manner. It attributed this to a weak monitoring mechanism by the Ministry of Finance, SEBI, and RBI. The Committee emphasised the need for a healthy monitoring mechanism, rating mechanism and a forewarning system in case of falling credit rating.

- **It further** stressed that the Ministry of Labour & Employment voice the concern of the Committee with the Ministry of Finance and other concerned agencies to ensure that credit rating issued by CRAs are transparent. This will ensure that the provident fund of the employee is secure while ensuring an adequate return on investment.

ESIC takes decisions towards improvements in service delivery

- **As per a press release**, the Employees' State Insurance Corporation (ESIC) took decisions at a recent meeting with the aim of improving its service delivery mechanism. The ESIC is a statutory body which administers the ESI Scheme.[58] The ESI scheme is a contributory scheme based on monthly contribution from employers and employees at a fixed percentage of wages paid. Key changes approved include:

- **It has been** reported that the government has approved the reduction in the rate of contribution being paid by employers and employees from 4.75% to 4% and 1.75% to 1% of wages, respectively. Note that a draft notification to reduce the rate of contribution has been issued by the government.[59]

- **The income limit** for availing medical benefit for the dependent parents of an insured person covered under the ESI Scheme has been enhanced from the existing Rs 5000 per month to Rs 9000 per month.

- **Currently**, under the ESI scheme, the state governments also bear 1/8th share of the cost of medical benefit, while the ESIC bears the remaining 7/8thshare of expenses. It has been reported that ESIC will also bear the 1/8thshare of expenditure which was earlier borne by states.

- **ESIC will** acquire additional land of 10.6 acres adjoining the already allotted land of 8.6 acre at Sheelanagar, Visakhapatnam. On this land, a 500 bed ESIC Model Hospital with super specialties will be constructed.

- **Note that** the details of these changes have not been released in the public domain.

Social Justice and Empowerment Zarka Shabir (zarka@prsindia.org) Cabinet approves proposal of Board for De-notified, Nomadic and Semi-Nomadic Communities

- **The Union Cabinet**, chaired by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, approved the constitution of a Development and Welfare Board for De-Notified, Nomadic and Semi-Nomadic Communities on February 19, 2019.[60] This Committee will be chaired by the Vice-Chairman, NITI Aayog and will be responsible for completing the process of identification of De-Notified, Nomadic, and Semi-Nomadic Communities that have not yet been formally classified.

- **Previously**, the National Commission for De-Notified, Nomadic, and Semi-Nomadic Communities had recommended that a Permanent Committee should be established for these communities.

- **Tenure of National Commission for Safai Karmacharis extended for three years** The Union Cabinet approved the extension of the term of the National Commission for Safai Karamcharis for a period of three years starting from March 31, 2019.[61] Safai karamcharis refer to persons who are engaged in manually carrying, cleaning or disposing of human excreta or for any sanitation work. The Commission was set up as a statutory body under the National Commission for Safai Karamcharis Act, 1993.

- **The Act** ceased to have effect from February, 2004. However, the tenure of the Commission has been extended as a non-statutory body under the Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act, 2013.

- **The Commission** seeks to (i) monitor implementation, (ii) enquire into complaints regarding the contravention of the Act, (iii) advise central and state governments on effective implementation of the Act, and (iv) take suo-motu notice of matters related to non-implementation of the Act.

Information and Broadcasting Vinayak Krishnan (vinayak@prsindia.org) The Cinematograph (Amendment) Bill, 2019 introduced in Rajya Sabha

- **The Cinematograph (Amendment) Bill, 2019** was introduced in Rajya Sabha.[62] The Bill amends the Cinematograph Act, 1952. The Bill has been referred to the Standing Committee on Information Technology, which is expected to submit its report within two months. The Act provides for certification of films for exhibition. Further, the Act imposes penalties for various offences such as: (i) exhibition of a film that has not been certified for public exhibition, or (ii) tampering with a film after it has been certified. Key features of the Bill include:

- **The Bill** prohibits a person from using a recording device to make a copy or transmit a film, without written authorisation from the producer of the film. Persons who make copies of a film without authorisation, will be punished with imprisonment of up to three years, or fine up to Rs 10 lakh, or both. A PRS summary of the Bill is available here.

- **Food Processing** Suyash Tiwari (suyash@prsindia.org) The National Institutes of Food Technology, Entrepreneurship and Management Bill, 2019 introduced

- **The National Institutes of Food Technology**, Entrepreneurship and Management Bill, 2019 was introduced in Rajya Sabha and referred to the Standing Committee on Agriculture.[63],[64] The Bill declares certain institutes of food technology, entrepreneurship, and management as institutions of national importance.

- **These institutes** are the National Institute of Food Technology Entrepreneurship and Management Kundli, and the Indian Institute of Food Processing Technology, Thanjavur. The Bill declares these institutes as National Institutes of Food Technology, Entrepreneurship and Management.

Information Technology Vinayak Krishnan (vinayak@prsindia.org) Cabinet approves National Policy on Electronics 2019

- **The Union Cabinet** approved the National Policy on Electronics 2019, proposed by the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY).[65] The Ministry had earlier released a draft policy in October 2018.[66] The policy aims to position India as a global hub for Electronics System Design and Manufacturing (ESDM), by enabling the industry to compete globally. Key features of the approved policy include:

- **Objectives:** Key objectives of the policy include: (i) promoting manufacturing and export in ESDM to achieve a turnover of USD 400 Billion by 2025, (ii) improving ease of doing business for ESDM industry, (iii) encouraging research and innovation in all sub-sectors of electronics, and (iv) facilitating loans to the industry at competitive rates.

- **Promoting competition:** The policy seeks to create a competitive ESDM sector by incentivizing domestic manufacturing and exports. This will be achieved by: (i) providing suitable tax benefits to the ESDM sector, (ii) providing support for micro, small and medium enterprises in the ESDM sector, and (iii) exempting import duty on capital equipment that is not manufactured in India.

- **Standards:** A standards development framework will be set up, based on global benchmarks, for electronics, information technology, and e-governance. Further, an institutional mechanism will be set up for within MEITY for mandating compliance with standards for electronics products.

- **Research and innovation:** The policy aims to promote research and innovation in the electronics sector by: (i) creating an ecosystem for promoting design and Intellectual Property, (ii) providing support for generation of patents, and (iii) promoting research and start-ups in technology areas such as 5G and artificial intelligence.

- **Cyber security:** The policy proposes to: (i) enhance understanding of cyber security issues related to electronics products, (ii) promote use of secure chips, and (iii) promote a start-up ecosystem for the development of cyber security products.

- **Cabinet approves National Policy on Software Products 2019** The Union Cabinet approved the National Policy on Software Products 2019.[67] The policy aims to develop India as the global software product hub, driven by innovation, improved commercialisation, sustainable intellectual property, and promoting technology start-ups.

- **The policy has the following five Missions:** To promote the creation of a sustainable Indian software product industry, driven by intellectual property. To nurture 10,000 technology startups in the software product industry, including 1,000 start-ups in Tier II and III towns. To create a talent pool for software product industry through: (i) up-skilling of 10 lakh IT professionals, (ii) motivating one lakh school and college students, and (iii) generating 10,000 specialised professionals to provide leadership.

- **To build** a cluster-based innovation driven ecosystem by developing 20 sectoral and strategically located software product development clusters. A National Software Products Mission will be set up with participation from government, academia, and industry, to monitor schemes and programmes for the implementation of this policy.

- **An outlay** of Rs 1,500 crore is estimated to implement the programmes and schemes under the policy, over the next seven years. This amount will be divided across two funds- the Software Product Development Fund and the Research and Innovation Fund.

Environment Roshni Sinha (roshni@prsindia.org) Standing Committee submits report on the status of forests in India

- **The Standing Committee** on Science & Technology, Environment & Forests (Chair: Mr. Anand Sharma) submitted its report on the 'Status of Forests in India'. [68] Key observations and recommendations of the Committee include:

- **Definition of Forest:** The Committee examined the Draft National Forest Draft Policy 2018 which was circulated for public feedback during April 2018. The Committee noted that the word 'Forest' is not defined in the Draft Policy. It noted that the Ministry uses the definition of the term as provided by the Supreme Court. The Court defined forests to include all forests statutorily recognised under the Forest (Conservation) Act, 1980. The Committee noted that certain stakeholders had expressed concerns that that this definition did not include ecosystems which don't have forest-like attributes, such as wetlands or grasslands. Therefore, it recommended that Ministry of Environment, Forest & Climate Change (MoEF) come out with a comprehensive and clear definition of the term 'Forest'.

- **Forest cover:** The Committee expressed concern about the decline in the forest cover in the north-eastern states, which constitute 65.3% of its geographical area in comparison to the national forest cover of 21.5%. It recommended that the concerned state governments and MoEF take necessary steps to ensure that the decline in forest cover in these states is curbed at the earliest.

- **Deforestation:** The Committee noted that the budget allocation to National Afforestation Programme has been insufficient. This has affected the achievement of the annual targeted area of afforestation during the last few years. The Committee recommended that the MoEF ensure that adequate allocation is made to the National Afforestation Programme and the targets under the Programme are achieved. Further, the Committee noted that the funding pattern for the Programme changed in 2015-16 from a 100% centrally sponsored scheme to a 60-40 sharing scheme between the centre and state. Therefore, the Committee recommended that the concerned state governments provide their share of the changed funding pattern to ensure the success of the Programme.

Petroleum and Natural Gas

- **Suyash Tiwari (suyash@prsindia.org) Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas issues directions to companies to sell 10% ethanol blended petrol from April 2019** The Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas issued directions to oil marketing companies to sell 10% ethanol blended petrol in all states and union territories (except Andaman and Nicobar Islands and Lakshadweep) from April 1, 2019.[69] The central government may modify the areas and the specified percentage of ethanol blending and specify the period for the same. to promote housing finance institutions in India.

- **The Ethanol Blended Petrol** Programme was launched in 2003 to promote the use of alternative and environment friendly fuels.[70] Blending ethanol with petrol helps reduce vehicle exhaust emissions and reduces the import burden for petroleum.to promote housing finance institutions in India.

- **At present,** subject to commercial viability, oil marketing companies are mandated to sell 5% ethanol blended petrol.[71] The directions increase the blending percentage from the existing 5% to 10%. Further, the mandate of selling ethanol blended petrol is being extended to the north-eastern states and Jammu and Kashmir. to promote housing finance institutions in India.

- **Cabinet approves framework for reforms in the exploration and licensing policy** The Union Cabinet approved a policy framework for reforms in the exploration and licensing policy for oil and gas fields for enhancing domestic exploration and production.[72],[73] The objectives of the approved framework are: (i) attracting new investment in exploration and production sectors, (ii) intensifying exploration activities in unexplored areas, and (iii) liberalising the policy in production basins. The reforms focus on the following areas: Increasing exploration in unexplored or unallocated areas: In basins with no commercial production, exploration blocks will be auctioned, without any revenue or production share to the government. Currently, for such blocks, the contractor is required to share revenue with the government. However, in case of an annual revenue of more than USD 2.5 billion, contractors will be required to share their revenue with the government.to promote housing finance institutions in India.

- **At present,** during bidding of unexplored or unallocated areas of production basins, equal weightage is given to exploration work programme and revenue share of the government. In the approved framework, the weightage to work programme is being increased to 70%, with 30% weightage to revenue share. to promote housing finance institutions in India.

- **The framework** also provides for shorter exploration periods and royalty concessions for early commencement of production. Further, the contractor will be given marketing and pricing freedom for sale of crude oil and natural gas in certain cases.to promote housing finance institutions in India.

- **Enhancing gas production:** Marketing and pricing freedom will be provided to certain new gas discoveries. A 10% reduction in royalty will be provided for additional gas production from domestic fields over and above the normal production.to promote housing finance institutions in India.

- **Enhancing production** from existing nomination fields: In order to enhance production, detailed plans will be prepared by ONGC and Oil India Limited for the blocks granted to them on nomination basis. Also, they will be allowed to collaborate with private sector for bringing capital and new technology, and increasing production. Ease of doing business: Measures will be taken for improving ease of doing business by setting up a coordination mechanism, simplifying approval processes, creating an alternate dispute resolution mechanism, and strengthening DGH, among other measures.to promote housing finance institutions in India.

- **CCEA approves PM JI-VAN Yojana for increasing ethanol supply** The Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs (CCEA) has approved the Pradhan Mantri JI-VAN (Jaiv Indhan - Vatavaran Anukool fasal awashesh Nivaran) Yojana.[74] Under the scheme, financial support in the form of viability gap funding (VGF) will be provided to integrated bioethanol projects which produce ethanol using dry plant biomass and other renewable feedstock. The scheme aims to incentivise the production of ethanol through these sources, and increase the supply of ethanol. to promote housing finance institutions in India.

- **The VGF support** will be provided to 12 commercial projects and 10 demonstration projects in two phases: (i) half of the projects in 2018-19 to 2022-23, and (ii) the other half in 2020-21 to 2023-24. to promote housing finance institutions in India.

- **An outlay of Rs 1,970 crore** has been approved for the scheme for the period 2018-19 to 2023-24. Of this, Rs 1,800 crore has been allocated for supporting the 12 commercial projects, and Rs 150 crore has been allocated for supporting the 10 demonstration projects. to promote housing finance institutions in India.

- **The Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas** seeks to achieve 10% ethanol blending in petrol by 2022 under the Ethanol Blended Petrol (EBP) programme. The ethanol supply in 2017-18, i.e. 150 crore litres, (highest supply ever) was sufficient for 4.2% ethanol blending. The Ministry aims to bridge the supply gap for the EBP programme through the production of ethanol from biomass and other waste. The ethanol produced by the scheme beneficiaries will be mandatorily supplied to oil marketing companies to increase the blending percentage.

Power

- **Prachee Mishra (prachee@prsindia.org) Kisan Urja Suraksha evam Utthaan Mahabhiyan approved** The Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs approved the launch of Kisan Urja Suraksha evam Utthaan Mahabhiyan (KUSUM).[75] The scheme seeks to provide financial and water security to farmers. The scheme aims to add solar capacity of 25,750 MW by 2022. The total central financial support provided under the scheme would be Rs 34,422 crore. to promote housing finance institutions in India.

- **The proposed scheme consists of three components:** Component-A: 10,000 MW of decentralised ground mounted grid connected renewable power plants. Under this component, renewable power plants of capacity 500 kW to 2 MW will be setup by individual farmers/ cooperatives/ panchayats/ farmer producer organisations on their barren or cultivable lands. The power generated will be purchased by the distribution companies. to promote housing finance institutions in India.

- **Component-B:** Installation of 17.5 lakh standalone solar powered agriculture pumps. Under this component, individual farmers will be supported to install standalone solar pumps of up to 7.5 HP capacity. Component-C: Solarisation of 10 lakh grid-connected solar powered agriculture pumps. Under this component, individual farmers will be supported to solarise pumps of up to 7.5 HP capacity.to promote housing finance institutions in India.

- **12,000 MW of solar power projects approved** The Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs approved the setting up of 12,000 MW grid-connected solar photovoltaic (PV) power projects.[76] These projects will be set up by government producers, who will be provided with a viability gap funding (VGF) support of Rs 8,580 crore. The VGF support could also be used by government or government entities at both the central and state levels. The projects will be set up in a time period of four years, from 2019-20 to 2022-23. to promote housing finance institutions in India.

- **Phase-II of Grid Connected Rooftop Solar Programme approved** The Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs approved Phase-II of the Grid Connected Rooftop Solar Programme.[77] This seeks to achieve the cumulative capacity of 40,000 MW from rooftop solar (RTS) projects by 2022. The programme will be implemented with total central financial support of Rs 11,814 crore. to promote housing finance institutions in India.

- **Under Phase-II, central financial assistance will be provided as follows:** Residential sector: 40% assistance will be provided for RTS systems with up to 3 kW capacity, and 20% for capacity between 3 and 20 kW. Group Housing Societies/Residential Welfare Associations: The assistance will be limited to 20% for RTS plants for supply of power to common facilities. No assistance will be provided to other categories such as institutional, educational, social, government, commercial, and industrial sectors. In addition, performance based incentives will be provided to distribution companies based on the RTS capacity achieved in a financial year (over and above the base capacity). to promote housing finance institutions in India.

- **Coal and Mining Suyash Tiwari (suyash@prsindia.org) Cabinet approves the National Mineral Policy, 2019** The Union Cabinet has approved the National Mineral Policy, 2019.[78] It replaces the National Mineral Policy, 2008. The 2019 policy aims to bring in further transparency, better regulation and enforcement, balanced social and economic growth in the sector, and sustainable mining practices. Key features of the policy include: to promote housing finance institutions in India.

- **Encouraging private sector:** The policy aims to encourage the private sector to take up exploration through measures including: (i) long term trade policies, (ii) harmonising taxes, levies, and royalty with global benchmarks, (iii) rationalisation of reserved areas which have been given to public sector companies, and have not been used, (iv) auction of such reserved areas with more opportunities for private sector participation, and (v) transfer of mining leases.to promote housing finance institutions in India.

- **Mining licence:** The policy provides for: (i) auction of unexplored areas with a composite licence (reconnaissance permit cum prospecting licence cum mining licence) on revenue share basis, and (ii) right of first refusal to holders of reconnaissance permit and prospecting licence when granting mining licences.to promote housing finance institutions in India.

- **Transportation:** The new policy focuses on use of coastal waterways and inland shipping for transportation of minerals. It also provides for creation of dedicated mineral corridors to facilitate the transportation of minerals. Sustainable mining: The policy seeks to utilise the District Mineral Fund for equitable development of project affected persons and areas. It also introduces the concept of inter-generational equity and proposes to constitute an inter-ministerial body to institutionalise this mechanism. Inter-generational equity means that future generations should have as much access to natural resources as the current generation.to promote housing finance institutions in India.

- **Industry status:** The policy proposes to grant mining the status of industry. Currently, it is accounted as an economic activity under the primary (agriculture) sector. This would help increase financing for: (i) mining activities for the private sector, and (ii) acquisition of mineral assets in other countries by the private sector. Technology: The policy provides for an online public portal with provision for generating triggers at higher levels in the event of delay of clearances. It also provides for maintenance of a database of mineral resources and licenses granted.to promote housing finance institutions in India.

- **A copy of the policy document is not available in the public domain yet.** CCEA permits allottees of captive mines or mines with specified end use to sell up to 25% of coal production in open market The Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs (CCEA) has permitted the allottees of captive mines or mines with specified end use to sell up to 25% of their coal production in open market.[79] to promote housing finance institutions in India.

- **Currently**, allottees of certain coal mines which had been earmarked for specified end use (i.e. for usage by a particular sector) or for captive use (i.e. their own consumption) were not permitted to sell coal in open market. Any coal produced in excess of the allottee's requirement was mandated to be supplied to Coal India Limited at their notified price, minus handling charges. Such sale was required to be limited to 50% of the annual production from the mine. to promote housing finance institutions in India.

- **The new guidelines** allow allottees to sell up to 25% of their production on ROM basis (run-of-mine production calculated without removing the impurities). The allottees are required to utilise at least 75% of production (ROM basis) of their coal mines for the specified purposes. For open market sale, the allottees are required to pay an additional premium equivalent to 15% of the final price agreed upon during the auction or allotment. This additional premium will be payable over and above the final price. to promote housing finance institutions in India.

- **CCEA approves continuation of central scheme for Exploration of Coal and Lignite for the period 2017-18 to 2019-20** The Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs (CCEA) has approved continuation of the central scheme for 'Exploration of Coal and Lignite' for the period 2017-18 to 2019-20.[80] Rs 1,875 crore of outlay has been approved for the scheme. to promote housing finance institutions in India.

- **The approved** scheme aims to carry out 2,441.5 km of drilling and 3,575 line km of surface geophysical survey during the three-year period. Under the scheme, regional exploration and detailed drilling will be carried out in blocks not owned by the Coal India Limited. In regional exploration, possible deposits are categorised based on the increasing order of their geological feasibility. Subsequently, detailed drilling is carried out for some of them to assess their economic viability and identify reserves.

Housing and Urban Affairs

- **Prachee Mishra (prachee@prsindia.org) Cabinet approves payment of the subscribed share capital in NHB** The Union Cabinet approved payment of the face value of the subscribed share capital of Rs 1,450 crore in the National Housing Bank (NHB) to the Reserve Bank of India (RBI).[81] This is consequent to the amendments made in 2018 to the NHB Act, 1987. Under the Finance Act, 2018, the 1987 Act was amended to transfer the equity shares held by the RBI in the National Housing Bank (of Rs 1,450 crore) to the central government. NHB is the principal agency to promote housing finance institutions in India.

- **Lighthouse projects challenge launched** The Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs has launched a challenge for states and union territories (UTs) to select six sites across the country for the construction of lighthouse projects under Global Housing Technology Challenge-India (GHTC) -India.[82] These selected sites will be used as an 'open laboratory' for live demonstration of housing technology. The winning states/UTs will receive central assistance to construct these lighthouse projects as per guidelines under the Pradhan Manti Awas Yojana - Urban. In addition, a Technology Innovation Grant will be provided to the states/UTs to offset the impact of any additional cost implication due to the use of new technology and to provide for any other issues.

- **Model Building Byelaws, 2016 amended to provide for electric vehicle charging infrastructure** The Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs has amended the Model Building Byelaws, 2016 and the Urban Regional Development Plans Formulation and Implementation Guidelines, 2014 to facilitate the availability of electric vehicle (EV) charging infrastructure.[83] The amended guidelines will act as a guiding document for states and union territories to incorporate the norms and standards of EV charging infrastructure in their respective building byelaws. The central government aims to have 25% of all vehicles on roads to be electric by 2020. Note that in December 2018, the Ministry of Power had released guidelines and standards for charging infrastructure for electric vehicles.[84]

- **Model Building Byelaws:** Based on the occupancy pattern and the total parking provisions in the premises of various building types, charging infrastructure will be provided only for EVs. Currently, the required occupancy is assumed to be 20% of all vehicle holding capacity/ parking capacity at the premises. Urban Regional Development Plans Formulation and Implementation Guidelines: The norms for distribution of public charging stations across a city have been specified. For example, standalone public charging stations must be placed every 25 km on both sides of the highways.

- **Water Resources Zarka Shabir (zarka@prsindia.org) Projects worth Rs 1388 crores approved under Namami Gange** The Ministry of Water Resources, River Development and Ganga Rejuvenation has approved projects worth Rs 1388 crore focusing on towns along river Yamuna.[85] These projects involve the construction and renovation of sewage treatment plants, online monitoring systems, and other infrastructure projects. Thus far, projects have been approved in Etawah, Firozabad, Agra, Meerat, Baghpat, and Chunar.

- **In addition** to projects focused on the development of infrastructure, the Ministry has also approved projects to revive aquatic biodiversity. Thus far, the Committee has approved conservation projects to be undertaken by the Wildlife Institute of India, the Uttar Pradesh Forest Department, and the National Institute of Urban Affairs.

Rural Development

- **Zarka Shabir (zarka@prsindia.org) Cabinet approves continuation of Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana – Gramin** The Union Cabinet has approved the continuation of Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana – Gramin beyond March 2019 upto 2021-22.[86] For Phase II of the scheme, a target 1.95 crore houses are set to be constructed in this period. For 2019-20, the scheme aims to build 60 lakh houses. For this, the Cabinet has allocated Rs 76,500 crore. At the end of this year, further continuation will be based on third-party evaluation. Administrative expenses associated with the scheme have also been reduced from 4% to 2% of programme funds.

- **Industries Prachee Mishra (prachee@prsindia.org) Cabinet approves Phase II of FAME India** The Union Cabinet approved Phase II of the scheme Faster Adoption and Manufacturing of Electric Vehicles in India (FAME India Phase II), for promotion of electric mobility in India.[87] The scheme seeks to encourage faster adoption of electric and hybrid vehicle by: (i) offering upfront incentives on purchase of electric vehicles, and (ii) by establishing the necessary charging infrastructure for electric vehicles.

- **Phase II of the scheme will be implemented from April 1, 2019. It will have a total outlay of Rs 10,000 crore over a period of three years, from 2019 to 2022.** Under this phase, benefits of incentives will be extended to only those vehicles which are fitted with advance batteries such as Lithium Ion batteries and other new technology batteries. Phase II will also focus on electrification of public transport including shared transport. Further, the scheme

proposes the establishment of charging infrastructure such that there is at least one charging station in a grid of 3 km x 3 km. Around 2,700 charging stations will be established in metros, other million plus cities, smart cities and cities of hilly states across the country. Charging stations are also proposed on major highways connecting major city clusters.

- **Transport Prachee Mishra (prachee@prsindia.org)** Cabinet approves setting up of SPV for disinvestment of Air India The Union Cabinet has given ex-post facto approval for the creation of the Special Purpose Vehicle (SPV) and associated activities for the disinvestment of Air India and its subsidiaries.[88] The new SPV, Air India Assets Holding Ltd., was created on January 22, 2018, based on an order issued by the Ministry of Civil Aviation.

- **The following will be transferred to the SPV:** Debt of Air India Ltd. amounting to Rs 29,464 crore; The subsidiaries which are not part of Air India strategic disinvestment such as Air India Air Transport Services Ltd., Airline Allied Services Ltd., and Air India Engineering Services Ltd.; and Non-core assets, paintings and artefacts, and other non-operational assets of Air India.

- **CCEA approves strategic disinvestment of 100% equity shares of government in Kamarajar Port Limited** The Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs has given 'in principle' approval for strategic disinvestment of 100% equity shares of the central government in Kamarajar Port Limited (KPL) to the Chennai Port Trust.[89] Currently, the central government and Chennai Port Trust hold 67% and 33% of shares respectively in KPL. The disinvestment will be done in a single stage process, by following 'arm's length' principles. The disinvestment seeks to avoid duplication of capacity creation in the ports and improve efficiency of both ports by facilitating better human resource management.

- **Cabinet approves new Railway Zone at Vishakhapatnam** The Union Cabinet approved setting up of a new Railway Zone at Vishakhapatnam, Andhra Pradesh and a new division with headquarter at Rayagada, Odisha by reorganizing the existing South Central Railway and East Coast Railway.[90] This increases the number of Railway Zones from 17 to 18.

- **Ministry of Shipping revises guidelines for chartering of ships** The Ministry of Shipping has revised its guidelines for chartering (or hiring) of ships by providing Right of First Refusal to ships built in India.[91] This implies that whenever a chartering tender process is undertaken, a bidder offering a ship built in India will be given the first priority to match the lowest bidder quote. A copy of the revised guidelines is not available in the public domain yet.

Textiles

- **Cabinet approves continuation of the Khadi Vikas Yojana and Gramodyog Vikas Yojanaa from 2017-18 to 2019-20** The Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs approved the continuation of eight schemes launched by the Khadi and Village Industries Commission, from 2017-18 to 2019-20, at a cost of Rs 2800 crore.[92] These schemes include the Khadi Grant, the Village Industries Grant, and the Market Promotion and Development Assistance Scheme. Further, these eight schemes have been merged under two heads. These are the Khadi Vikas Yojana and the Gramodyog Vikas Yojanaa.

- **The Cabinet** also approved the Rozgar Yukta Gaon scheme. The scheme aims to introduce enterprise-based business models in the khadi sector through partnerships among artisans, business partners, and Khadi institutions (receiving assistance under the Khadi Reform and Development Programme). The scheme will be implemented in 50 villages. Another key component includes the creation of incentives in production based on an objective scorecard. While the Khadi institutions would automatically be given financial assistance of 30%, they must strive for efficiency, optimal utilization of resources, and reduction of waste to become eligible for additional assistance.

- **Ministry of Textiles launches scheme for development of knitting and knitwear Roshni Sinha (roshni@prsindia.org)** The Ministry of Textiles launched a new scheme for development of knitting and knitwear sector.[93] The main components of the scheme include: (i) creation of new service centers on Public Private Partnership (PPP) model by industry and associations in the knitting and knitwear clusters, (ii) modernization and upgradation of existing power loom service centres and institution run by Textile Research Associations and Export Promotion Councils Association in knitting and knitwear clusters, and (iii) facilitation, awareness, studies, surveys, market development, and publicity for knitting and knitwear units.

- **Cabinet approves continuation of the Credit Linked Capital Subsidy and Technology Upgradation Scheme for the period of 2017-18 to 2019-20** The Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs, approved the continuation of the Credit Linked Capital Subsidy and Technology Upgradation Scheme for the period of 2017-18 to 2019-20 with an outlay of Rs 2,900 crore.[94] The objective of the scheme is to facilitate technology upgradation in Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) by providing an upfront capital subsidy of 15% (on institutional finance of upto one crore rupees) for induction of well-established and improved technology. In addition, the scheme aims at improving the competitiveness of MSMEs by integrating various ongoing schematic interventions aimed at upgrading technology through: (i) zero defect zero effect manufacturing, and (ii) increasing productivity through waste reduction, design intervention, and cloud computing.

- **Cabinet approves continuation of the Swadesh Darshan Scheme** The Union Cabinet approved the continuation of the Swadesh Darshan Scheme.[95] Launched in 2015, the scheme is a central sector scheme aimed at integrated development of tourism infrastructure in the country. The objectives of the scheme include: (i) developing theme based tourist circuits such as the Buddhist Circuit and the Himalayan Circuit, and (ii) developing public facilities like last mile connectivity and tourist reception centres. The Cabinet has approved Rs 2,056 crore for 60 ongoing projects which are expected to be completed in December 2019. Further Rs 324 crore has been allocated for six projects which are expected to be completed by September 2020. Note that, since 2015, the Ministry of Tourism has sanctioned 77 projects worth Rs 6,122 crore.

- **Cabinet approves setting up of a new company under Department of Space** The Union Cabinet approved the setting up of a company for commercial usage of the research and development work carried out by the Indian Space Research Organization (ISRO) and the Department of Space.[96]

- **Opportunities** for commercial usage of ISRO's work include: (i) transfer of small satellite technology to industries, (ii) manufacturing small satellite launch vehicles (SLV) in collaboration with the private sector, (iii) mass production of polar SLV through industry, (iv) mass production and marketing of space-based products and services, including launch and applications, (v) transfer of technologies developed and marketing of some associated technologies and products, and (vi) any other avenue deemed fit by the central government.

- **Home Affairs** The Standing Committee on Finance (Chairperson: Dr. M. Veerappa Moily) submitted its report on "Central Assistance for Disaster Management and Relief".[97] Under the Disaster Management Act 2005, financial assistance is provided to disaster-affected states from the State Disaster Response Fund (SDRF) and the National Disaster Response Fund (NDRF). Key observations and recommendations made by the Committee include the following:

- **Disaster Mitigation Fund:** The Committee recommended that a separate Disaster Mitigation Fund should be operationalised for undertaking permanent mitigation measures in disaster-prone states. It stated that any investment on mitigation and prevention of disaster risk will go a long way in significantly reducing expenditure on relief and disaster response. Further, the Committee recommended that comprehensive insurance coverage should be provided to all properties located in disaster-prone areas.

- **Funding mechanism:** The Committee made various recommendations related to the funding mechanism for disaster relief. It recommended that an additional 10% of the allocation of the centrally sponsored schemes may be specially earmarked for permanent restoration of damaged structures. Further, in order to bring greater flexibility to the funding mechanism, the Committee recommended that borrowing powers of affected states may be enhanced in the event of a disaster.

- **The Committee** noted that 10% of the annual fund allocation of the SDRF may be used for localized state-specific natural calamities. It recommended that this 10% limit should be done away with and all expenditure towards state-specific disasters should be charged to the SDRF. The Committee recommended a 10% increase to the corpus of the SDRF to accommodate this expenditure.

Strengthening of the Credit Rating Framework in the country Open PDF Standing Committee Report Summary

- **The Standing Committee** on Finance (Chair: Dr. M. Veerappa Moily) submitted its report on 'Strengthening of the Credit Rating Framework in the country' on February 13, 2019. A credit rating agency is a body corporate which is engaged in the business of rating of securities offered through public or rights issue. Key observations and recommendations of the Committee include:

- **Regulatory framework:** The Committee noted that credit rating agencies in India have progressed from rating simple debt products to complex debt structures, covering a wide range of products and services like securities, bank loans, commercial papers, and fixed deposits. In India, the Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI) primarily regulates credit rating agencies and their functioning. However, certain other regulatory agencies, such as the Reserve Bank of India (RBI), Insurance Regulatory and Development Authority, and Pension Fund Regulatory and Development Authority also regulate certain aspects of credit rating agencies under their respective sectoral jurisdiction.

- **The SEBI (Credit Rating Agencies) Regulations, 1999** provide for a disclosure-based regulatory regime, where the agencies are required to disclose their rating criteria, methodology, default recognition policy, and guidelines on dealing with conflict of interest. The Committee noted that SEBI is among the few regulators globally to mandate public disclosure of rating criteria and methodology by the agencies.

- **Change in regulations:** The Committee noted that rating of an instrument or entity is being increasingly relied upon by capital markets, bankers and investors and constitutes a key input for financial decision-making. In the Indian context, the credibility of credit rating has come into question in the crisis involving the Infrastructure Leasing and Financial Services Limited (IL&FS), a major infrastructure development and finance company of systemic importance, with a debt obligation of Rs 91,000 crore. The credit rating agencies ignored the rising debt levels at IL&FS, and continued rating it AAA, indicating the highest level of creditworthiness. In this regard, the Committee recommended that the regulators (such as SEBI and RBI) should review their regulations and suitably modify them to ensure greater objectivity, transparency and credibility in the whole credit rating framework.

- **The Committee** also recommended that the Ministry of Finance should seek a factual report from the concerned regulators regarding the enforcement of the regulations. In particular, the Ministry should assess the action taken by the regulators against the credit rating agencies who had been giving stable ratings to IL&FS prior to the default crisis. Further, it suggested that the disclosures being made by credit rating agencies should also include important determinants such as: (i) extent of promoter support, (ii) linkages with subsidiaries, and (iii) liquidity position for meeting near-term payment obligations.

- **Issuer pays model:** Currently, the credit rating agencies follow the 'issuer pays model', under which the entity issuing the financial instrument pays the agency upfront to rate the underlying securities. However, the Committee observed that such a payment arrangement may lead to a 'conflict of interest' and could result in compromising the quality of analysis or the objectivity of the ratings assigned by the agencies. Therefore, it suggested that the Ministry of Finance or the regulators may consider other options as well, such as 'investor pays model' or 'regulator pays model' after weighing the relevant pros and cons. Alternately, within the existing framework, the appropriate rating fee structure, payable by the issuer may be decided by SEBI, in consultation with RBI and the credit rating agencies.

- **Rotation of credit** rating agencies: Under the current framework, there is no provision for the rotation of credit rating agencies. The Committee recommended that mandatory rotation of rating agencies should be explored. This would aid in avoiding negative consequences of long term associations between the issuer and the credit rating agency. This is particularly significant considering the recent instances of failure of credit rating agencies identifying trouble in their client-entities. Further, the Ministry may also provide for ratings to be compulsorily carried out by more than one agency, particularly in respect of debt instruments or bank credit above Rs 100 crore.

- **Currently**, there are only seven credit rating agencies in the country. To increase competition, the Committee recommended that the existing threshold for registration of such agencies may also be suitably lowered with a view to encouraging more entities, particularly start-ups with the requisite capability and expertise.

- **IL&FS:** The Committee noted that the central government has intervened in the IL&FS crisis and reconstituted the Board (the matter being under National Company Law Tribunal). However, the Committee recommended a comprehensive commission of enquiry into the crisis, which will assess: (i) the role of credit rating agencies that had overrated the entities, and (ii) the role of the Life Insurance Corporation of India, the largest institutional stakeholder in IL&FS.

February 2019

- **46 Bills will lapse with dissolution of the 16th Lok Sabha** 46 Bills will lapse and 33 Bills will carry forward to the next Lok Sabha. Some of the Bills that will carry forward include the 125th Constitutional Amendment Bill, and the Allied and Healthcare Professionals Bill.

- **Interim Union Budget 2019-20 presented in Parliament PM-KISAN and Pradhan Mantri Shram-Yogi Maandhan schemes will be launched. Individuals with annual income up to five lakh rupees will not have to pay any tax. Income tax surcharge has been increased to 4%**

- **GDP grows at 6.6% in third quarter of 2018-19 The growth rate in all sectors, except construction and electricity, decreased between 2017-18 and 2018-19. Electricity growth increased from 7.5% to 8.2%, and construction from 8 to 9.6% Five Bills introduced in Rajya Sabha during the Budget Session 2019 These include the 125th Constitutional Amendment Bill, the Registration of Marriage of Non-Resident Indian Bill, and the International Financial Services Authority Bill.**

- **Four Ordinances issued; Cabinet approves five more Ordinances The Triple Talaq, Companies Amendment, Medical Council of India Amendment, and Banning of Unregulated Deposits Ordinances were issued. The Cabinet approved amendments to the Aadhaar Act and the SEZ Act.**

- **PM-KISAN launched to provide income support of Rs 6,000 per year to farmers Families with total cultivable holding of up to two hectares, are eligible for the income support. The scheme is estimated to incur an annual expenditure of Rs 75,000 crore.**

- **Pradhan Mantri Shram Yogi Maan-dhan launched The scheme intends to provide a minimum assured pension of Rs 3,000 per month to workers in the unorganized sector after attaining the age of 60 years on a monthly contribution of Rs 55 to Rs 200 based on age.**

- **CAG submits report on capital acquisition in the Indian Air Force The CAG made recommendations related to: (i) the planning and tendering process. (ii) solicitation of offers, and (iii) organisational issues in the capital acquisition process Committee submits report on methodology for fixing national minimum wage The Committee recommended a national minimum wage at Rs 375 per day. As an alternative, it also recommended different national minimum wages for five different regions of the country.**

- **Draft National e-Commerce Policy released for consultation The policy addresses six areas: (i) cross-border data, (ii) infrastructure development, (iii) e-commerce marketplaces, (iv) stimulating domestic demand, (v) regulatory issues, and (vi) export promotion.**

- **Cabinet approves National Mineral Policy 2019 Key proposals include: (i) shifting the status of mining from the primary sector (agriculture) to industry, and (ii) providing an institutional framework for sustainable mining. Standing Committees submit reports on various subjects The subjects include status of forests in India, central assistance for disaster management and relief, and provision of all-weather road connectivity under Border Roads Organisation.**

Parliament

- **46 Bills will lapse with the dissolution of the 16th Lok Sabha The Budget Session of Parliament ended on February 13, 2019. This was the last session of the 16th Lok Sabha. The Personal Laws (Amendment) Bill, 2018 was passed by Parliament during the session. Five Bills were introduced in Rajya Sabha. These include the Constitution (One-Hundred and Twenty Fifth Amendment) Bill, 2019, the Registration of Marriage of Non-Resident Indian Bill, 2019, and the International Financial Services Centres Authority Bill, 2019.**

- **With the end of this session, 46 Bills will lapse and 33 Bills, introduced and pending in the Rajya Sabha, will carry forward to the next Lok Sabha. For a full list, see here.**

Interim Union Budget 2019-20

- Interim Union Budget 2019-20 presented The Union Finance Minister, Mr. Piyush Goyal, presented the Interim Union Budget for 2019-20.[1] Key highlights include:

- The government proposes to spend Rs 27,84,200 crore in 2019-20, which is 13.3% above the revised estimate of 2018-19. The receipts (other than net borrowings) are expected to increase by 14.1% to Rs 20,80,201 crore, owing to higher estimated revenue from GST and income tax. The nominal GDP growth rate for 2019-20 is estimated at 11.5% Fiscal deficit and revenue deficit are targeted at 3.4% of GDP and 2.2% of GDP respectively, same as the revised estimates for 2018-19.

- Key policy proposals in the budget speech include: Agriculture: PM-KISAN scheme will be launched under which Rs 6,000 per year will be directly transferred to farmers with cultivable land up to two hectares. This amount will be paid in three instalments. The scheme will start from December 2018. Rs 20,000 crore has been allocated in 2018-19 and Rs 75,000 crore in 2019-20.

- Under the Kisan Credit Card scheme, 2% interest subvention and 3% incentive for prompt repayment, which are available to agriculture, will be extended to animal husbandry and fisheries. Earlier, farmers affected by natural calamities were provided interest subvention of 2% for one year. This will be extended to every year of the loan. Further, a 3% incentive will be provided for timely repayment of the loan.

- Labour: The Pradhan Mantri Shram-Yogi Maandhan scheme will be launched to provide social security coverage to workers in the unorganised sector with a monthly income of up to Rs 15,000. A monthly pension of Rs 3,000 will be provided from the age of 60 years. The monthly contribution of the worker will be matched by the central government.

- The major tax changes announced are: Rates: The surcharge on income tax has been raised from 3% to 4% Deductions: For salaried individuals, standard tax deduction has been increased from Rs 40,000 to Rs 50,000. Individuals earning an annual income of up to five lakh rupees will not have to pay any tax.

- Tax deducted at source: Exemption from TDS on rent has been increased from Rs 1.8 lakh to Rs. 2.4 lakh per year. The threshold for TDS on interest on bank and post office deposits has been increased from Rs 10,000 to Rs 40,000. Housing: Currently, there is no presumptive rent on one self-occupied house. Interest on housing loan is deductible for one house. On sale of a house, capital gains deduction is available if the gains are invested in buying a house. For all these, the limit has been extended to two houses (capital gains benefit limited to two crore rupees).

Macroeconomic Development

- GDP grows at 6.6% in the third quarter of 2018-19 The Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (at constant prices) of the country grew at 6.6% in the third quarter of 2018-19, over the corresponding period a year ago.[2] This was lower than the 7% growth in the second quarter of 2018-19. The quarterly trend is shown in Figure 1.

- The release also provided the second advance estimates of the GDP growth in 2018-19. It is estimated that GDP will grow at 7% in 2018-19. This is estimated to be lower than the 7.2% growth in 2017-18. GDP growth across economic sectors is measured in terms of Gross Value Added (GVA). The growth rate of combined GVA by all sectors decreased from 7.3% in the third quarter of 2017-18 to 6.3% in the third quarter of 2018-19. The growth rate of GVA decreased for all sectors, except electricity and construction. It increased from 7.5% to 8.2% for electricity, and from 8% to 9.6% for construction. Details on sectoral GVA growth are in Table 1.

- Repo and reverse repo rate reduced to 6.25% and 6% respectively The Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) released its sixth Bi-Monthly Monetary Policy Statement of 2018-19.[3] The policy repo rate (the rate at which the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) lends money to banks) was reduced from 6.5% to 6.25% by a majority vote of the members. Two of the six members voted to keep the rate unchanged.3 Other decisions of the MPC include:

- The reverse repo rate (the rate at which the RBI borrows money from banks) was reduced from 6.25% to 6% The marginal standing facility rate (the rate at which banks can borrow additional money) and the bank rate (the rate at which the RBI buys or rediscounts bills of exchange) were reduced from 6.75% to 6.5% Industrial production grew by 3.6% in the third quarter of 2018-19

- The Index of Industrial Production (IIP) grew by 3,6% in the third quarter (Oct-Dec) of 2018-19, as compared to the same period in 2017-18.[4] Electricity production saw the highest increase of 6.8% in this quarter, followed by an increase of 3.4% in manufacturing and 2.8% in mining.4 Figure 1 shows the change in industrial production in the third quarter of 2018-19, and the average for the quarter.

Cabinet

- Union Cabinet approves promulgation of five Ordinances The Union Cabinet has approved the promulgation of five Ordinances.[5],[6],[7],[8],[9] These Ordinances are not available in the public domain. Details of these Ordinances as per a press release, are:

- Aadhaar and Other Laws (Amendment) Ordinance, 2019: The Ordinance seeks to, among other provisions, allow for voluntary use of the Aadhaar number by authentication or offline verification, with the consent of the Aadhaar number holder. Further, it would give an option to children who are Aadhaar number holders to cancel their Aadhaar number on reaching eighteen years of age. As per the press release, the amendments are the same as those contained in the Bill passed by the Lok Sabha on January 4, 2019.

- Homeopathy Central Council (Amendment) Ordinance, 2019: The Homeopathy Central Council Act, 1973, was amended in 2018 to provide for supersession and reconstitution of the Central Council within one year. In the interim period, the central government was to constitute a Board of Governors. The Ordinance seeks to extend the period of reconstitution of the Central Council from one year to two years. This wold extend the tenure of the Board of Governors by one year, with effect from May 2019.

- New Delhi International Arbitration Centre Ordinance, 2019: The Ordinance seeks to establish the New Delhi International Arbitration Centre (NDIAC), to create an independent and autonomous regime for institutionalised arbitration. Special Economic Zones (Amendment) Ordinance, 2019: The Ordinance, among other provisions, seeks to amend the Special Economic Zones Act, 2005, to allow trusts to set up a unit in Special Economic Zones.

- The Jammu and Kashmir Reservation (Amendment) Ordinance, 2019: The Ordinance seeks to amend the Jammu and Kashmir Reservation Act, 2004. The Act provides three per cent reservation in state government jobs for people living within 6 km of the Line of Control in Jammu and Kashmir. The Ordinance seeks to extend this reservation to persons residing in areas adjoining the International Border as well.

- The Union Cabinet also approved the Constitution (Application to Jammu and Kashmir) Amendment Order, 2019 to amend the Constitution (Application to Jammu and Kashmir) Order, 1954.[10] The Order makes various provisions of the Constitution of India applicable to Jammu and Kashmir. The 103rd Constitutional Amendment Act provides for ten percent reservation for economically weaker sections in educational institutions and public employment. The Amendment Order seeks to extend this reservation to Jammu and Kashmir. Further, benefits in promotions to Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes under the Constitution will also be made applicable to the state of Jammu and Kashmir.

Finance

- The International Financial Services Centres Authority Bill, 2019 introduced in Rajya Sabha The International Financial Services Centres Authority Bill, 2019 was introduced in Rajya Sabha.[11] The Bill provides for the establishment of an authority to develop and regulate the financial services market in the International Financial Services Centres set up in Special Economic Zones in India. Note that, the Bill has been referred to the Standing Committee on Finance for examination. The Committee is expected to submit its report within two months. Key features of the Bill include:

- Constitution of the International Financial Services Centres Authority: The Bill provides for the establishment of the International Financial Services Centres Authority. The Authority will consist of nine members, including representation from RBI, SEBI, IRDA, PFRDA, and the Ministry of Finance. Functions of the Authority: The Authority will regulate financial products, financial services, and financial institutions in IFSCs.

- Further, it will exercise all powers relating to regulation of financial products, services, and institutions in IFSCs, which were previously exercised by the respective regulators. All processes and procedures to be followed by the Authority in respect of such regulation (such as, procedures for investigation of offences) will be identical to the provisions for these processes under the respective laws of the regulators.

The Banning of Unregulated Deposit Schemes Ordinance, 2019 promulgated

- Gayatri Mann (gayatri@prsindia.org) The Banning of Unregulated Deposit Schemes Ordinance, 2019 was promulgated.[12] Previously, a similar Bill was passed by Lok Sabha. However, it will lapse with the dissolution of the 16th Lok Sabha. The Ordinance provides for a mechanism to ban unregulated deposit schemes and protect the interests of depositors. It also seeks to amend three laws, i.e., the Reserve Bank of India Act,

1934, the Securities and Exchange Board of India Act, 1992 and the Multi-State Co-operative Societies Act, 2002. Key features of the Bill include:

- Unregulated deposit scheme: The Ordinance defines a deposit as an amount of money received through an advance, a loan, or in any other form, with a promise to be returned with or without interest. Such deposit may be returned either in cash or as a service, and the time of return may or may not be specified. Further, the Ordinance defines certain amounts which shall not be included in the definition of deposits such as amounts received in the form of loans from relatives and contributions towards capital by partners in any partnership firm.

- The Ordinance lists nine regulators including RBI and SEBI, which oversee and regulate various deposit-taking schemes. All deposit-taking schemes are required to be registered with the relevant regulator. A deposit-taking scheme is unregulated if it is taken for a business purpose and is not registered with the regulators that are listed in the Ordinance.

- Offences and penalties: The Ordinance defines three types of offences, and penalties related to them. These offences are: (i) running (advertising, promoting, operating or accepting money for) unregulated deposit schemes, (ii) fraudulently defaulting on regulated deposit schemes, and (iii) wrongfully inducing depositors to invest in unregulated deposit schemes by willingly falsifying facts. For example, accepting unregulated deposits will be punishable with imprisonment between two and seven years, along with a fine ranging from three to 10 lakh rupees.

Standing Committee submits report on strengthening the credit rating framework Gayatri Mann (gayatri@prsindia.org)

- The Standing Committee on Finance (Chair: Dr. M. Veerappa Moily) submitted its report on 'Strengthening of the Credit Rating Framework in the country'.[13] A credit rating agency is a body corporate which is engaged in the business of rating of securities offered through public or rights issue. Key observations and recommendations of the Committee include:

- Regulatory framework: The Committee noted that credit rating agencies in India have progressed from rating simple debt products to complex debt structures, covering a wide range of products and services like securities, bank loans, commercial papers, and fixed deposits. In India, the SEBI primarily regulates credit rating agencies and their functioning. However, certain other regulatory agencies, such as the RBI, IRDA, and PFRDA also regulate certain aspects of credit rating agencies under their sectoral jurisdiction.

- The SEBI (Credit Rating Agencies) Regulations, 1999 provide for a disclosure-based regulatory regime, where the agencies are required to disclose their rating criteria, methodology, default recognition policy, and guidelines on dealing with conflict of interest. The Committee noted that SEBI is among the few regulators globally to mandate public disclosure of rating criteria and methodology by the agencies.

- Change in regulations: The Committee noted that rating of an instrument or entity is being increasingly relied upon by capital markets, bankers and investors and constitutes a key input for financial decision-making. In the Indian context, the credibility of credit rating has come into question in the crisis involving the Infrastructure Leasing and Financial Services Limited (IL&FS), a major infrastructure development and finance company of systemic importance, with a debt obligation of Rs 91,000 crore.

- The credit rating agencies ignored the rising debt levels at IL&FS, and continued rating it AAA, indicating the highest level of creditworthiness. In this regard, the Committee recommended that the regulators should review their regulations and suitably modify them to ensure greater objectivity, transparency and credibility in the whole credit rating framework.

- The Committee also recommended that the Ministry of Finance should seek a factual report from the concerned regulators regarding the enforcement of the regulations. In particular, the Ministry should assess the action taken by the regulators against the credit rating agencies who had been giving stable ratings to IL&FS prior to the default crisis.

Term of the task force set up to draft new direct tax law extended by three months

- Suyash Tiwari (suyash@prsindia.org) The Ministry of Finance has extended the term of the task force set up to draft a new direct tax law by a period of three months.[14] The task force was constituted in November 2017 to review the Income Tax Act, 1961 and draft a new direct tax law keeping in view: (i) direct tax system prevalent in various countries, (ii) international best practices, (iii) economic needs of India, and (iv) any other connected matters.

- The task force was required to submit its report by February 28, 2019. This has now been extended to May 31, 2019. CBIC constitutes three working groups to recommend measures to facilitate trade, promote exports and improve compliance Suyash Tiwari (suyash@prsindia.org)

- The Central Board of Indirect Taxes and Customs has constituted three working groups to recommend measures for facilitating trade, promoting exports, and improving compliance.[15]

- The working groups will focus on: (i) improving the legislative structure of customs tariff, updating it to suit the emerging and future needs of the economy and the industry, and creating a comprehensive export tariff structure to enhance export competitiveness, (ii) promoting and facilitating exports with emphasis on boosting exports through e-commerce, addressing the trade facilitation barriers in export markets, and improving the quality of logistics services for exporters, and (iii) enhancing compliance and plugging loopholes for improving revenue collection on customs and curbing frauds related to refunds of integrated GST. The working groups will submit their reports within a period of two months.

Cabinet approves abolition of income tax ombudsman and indirect tax ombudsman Suyash Tiwari (suyash@prsindia.org)

- The Union Cabinet approved the proposal for abolition of institutions of income tax ombudsman and indirect tax ombudsman.[16] The institutions of tax ombudsman were created to deal with public grievances related to settlement of complaints on income tax and indirect tax matters. The Ombudsman was independent of the jurisdiction of the tax departments.

- The decision to abolish them was taken due to preference of alternative complaint redressal mechanisms by the public, and low effectiveness of the institutions of ombudsman as compared to these parallel channels of grievance redressal.

Cabinet approves procedure for asset monetisation of CPSEs and immovable enemy properties Prachee Mishra (prachee@prsindia.org)

- The Union Cabinet approved the laying down of an institutional framework for monetisation of: (i) identified non-core assets of the Central Public Sector Enterprises (CPSEs) under strategic disinvestment, and (ii) assets relating to immovable enemy property under the custody of the Custodian of Enemy Property for India, Ministry of Home Affairs.[17] The institutional framework can also be used to monetise other CPSEs, PSUs, government organisations, and loss making/sick CPSEs.

- The exact model for monetisation of any asset, and the model contact documents will be approved by the competent authority based on the recommendations of technical consultants, respective Ministries, CPSEs, and NITI Aayog, among others. The independent External Monitor set up for strategic disinvestment will also oversee the process of asset monetisation. The approved framework will be reviewed after two years, to make any necessary changes.

Agriculture Suyash Tiwari (suyash@prsindia.org) PM-KISAN scheme launched

- The central government launched the Pradhan Mantri Kisan Samman Nidhi (PM-KISAN) scheme.[18],[19],[20] Under the scheme, small and marginal landholder farmer families, i.e. families with total cultivable holding of up to two hectares, will be provided income support of Rs 6,000 per year. The scheme seeks to supplement their financial needs in procuring inputs for appropriate crop health and yields.

- The amount is payable in three equal instalments, every four months, through direct benefit transfer to bank accounts. The first instalment is being provided for the four-month period from December 2018 to March 2019.

- Eligibility: Farmer families collectively owning cultivable land of up to two hectares (as per land records of the concerned state or union territory) are eligible for the scheme. However, this excludes certain beneficiaries of higher economic status, including those which are: (i) institutional land holders, (ii) families with one or more members as government employees, and (iii) families with one or more members as income tax payers.

- Identification of beneficiaries: States were required to identify beneficiaries by February 1, 2019 based on their land records. Post this date, no change is allowed in the list of beneficiaries for a period of five years. Changes are permitted only in the case of: (i) transfer of ownership of land through succession, and (ii) inconsistencies in the land records. The list of eligible beneficiaries would be published at the village level to ensure transparency.

- Aadhaar number is mandatory for the release of the second instalment (for the April to July 2019 period).[21] From third instalment (August 2019) onwards, Aadhaar seeding, i.e. biometric authentication, will be compulsory. However, Aadhaar is not mandatory for beneficiaries from Assam, Jammu and Kashmir, and Meghalaya.

- Monitoring and grievance redressal: Grievance redressal monitoring committees are required to be set up at the state and district levels by the state government. Eligible beneficiaries whose names are not included in the list can approach the district level grievance redressal monitoring committee in their districts.

- The scheme also provides for a Project Monitoring Unit at the central level with other monitoring and review mechanisms at the national, state, and district levels.

- Funding: The scheme will be funded by the central government, and is estimated to incur an expenditure of Rs 75,000 crore per year. The same amount has been allocated to the scheme in 2019-20. Rs 20,000 crore has been allocated in 2018-19 for providing the first instalment.

- Second advance estimates of production of major crops for 2018-19 released The Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers Welfare released the second advance estimates of production of major foodgrains and commercial crops for the year 2018-19.[22] Table 3 gives a comparison of the second advance estimates of production for 2018-19 with the fourth advance estimates of production for 2017-18 (the latest available production data for 2017-18). Following are some of the highlights:

- Foodgrain production in 2018-19 is estimated to decrease by 1.2% as compared to the fourth advance estimates for 2017-18. The decrease is due to a 9.4% decline in the production of coarse cereals. The production of cereals and pulses is estimated to decrease by 0.8% and 4.8% respectively.

- Rice production in 2018-19 is estimated to increase by 2.4% as compared to the fourth advance estimates for 2017-18. Wheat production is estimated to decrease by 0.6%.

- The production of oilseeds is estimated to increase by 0.6% as compared to 2017-18. While groundnut production is estimated to decrease by 23.9%, the production of soyabean is estimated to increase by 24.5% Production of cotton is estimated to fall by 13.8%, while production of sugarcane is estimated to increase by 1% to 380.8 million tonnes in 2018-19.

CCEA approves provision of loans to sugar mills for clearing dues of farmers

- The Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs (CCEA) approved the provision of loans to sugar mills for clearing dues of sugarcane farmers.[23] Loans of about Rs 7,900 crore to Rs 10,540 crore have been approved for the 2018-19 sugar season (October 2018 to September 2019). Interest subvention of 7% to 10% will be provided by the central government on these loans for a period of one year. This interest subvention is estimated to cost between Rs 553 crore and Rs 1,054 crore.

- These loans will be provided to mills which have already cleared at least 25% of their outstanding dues to farmers in the 2018-19 sugar season. Banks will be required to obtain the list of farmers, their corresponding dues, and bank account details, from the sugar mills. The funds will be directly transferred to the accounts of the farmers on behalf of the sugar mills. Subsequent balance, if any, will be provided to the mills.

- Minimum Support Price of sugar and raw jute increased for the year 2019-20 Sugar: The Department of Food and Public Distribution increased the Minimum Support Price (MSP) of sugar from Rs 29 per kg to Rs 31 per kg for the year 2019-20.[24] This implies that white sugar or refined sugar will not be sold below the MSP of Rs 31 per kg in the domestic market.

- The MSP has been increased in order to provide more liquidity to sugar mills so that they are able to pay the dues owed to sugarcane farmers. [25] These dues amounted to Rs 20,167 crore as on February 13, 2019.

- Raw jute: The Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs approved an increase in the MSP of raw jute for the 2019-20 season.[26] The MSP for Fair Average Quality of raw jute has been increased from Rs 3,700 per quintal to Rs 3,950 per quintal.

CCEA approves creation of Agri-Market Infrastructure Fund

- The Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs (CCEA) approved the creation of an Agri-Market Infrastructure Fund of Rs 2,000 crore.[27] This Fund has been approved for development and up-gradation of infrastructure in 10,000 gramin agricultural markets and 585 regulated wholesale markets. This corpus fund will be created with the assistance of NABARD.

- The Fund will be used to provide subsidised loans to states and union territories against their proposals for development of infrastructure in gramin agricultural markets and regulated wholesale markets. The Fund may also be used to provide assistance to states and union territories for innovative integrated market infrastructure projects. The National Rural Employment Guarantee scheme and other government schemes will be used to strengthen the physical and basic infrastructure in gramin agricultural markets.

- RBI increases the limit for collateral free agricultural loans to Rs 1.6 lakh The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) increased the limit for collateral free agricultural loans from the existing level of one lakh rupees to Rs 1.6 lakh.[28] Earlier, banks were mandated to extend collateral free agricultural loans up to one lakh rupees. This limit was fixed by the RBI in 2010. It has revised the limit to Rs 1.6 lakh on account of inflation and increase in agricultural input costs over the years.

- Draft National Inland Fisheries and Aquaculture Policy released The Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers Welfare has released the draft National Inland Fisheries and Aquaculture Policy.[29] Aquaculture (or aquafarming) refers to the farming of fish, algae and other aquatic organisms, and aquatic plants. Key features of the draft policy include:

- Objectives: The objectives include: (i) utilising and managing inland fisheries and aquaculture resources in an optimal and sustainable manner, (ii) increasing fish production, productivity, and fishermen's income, (iii) creating employment through trade of globally competitive fish and fish-based value added products, and (iv) ensuring food and nutritional security.

- Inland fisheries: The policy measures recommended for inland fisheries include: (i) conserving indigenous resources, and restoring natural ecosystem of rivers, (ii) transferring management of fisheries in manmade reservoirs to the state fisheries departments for scientific enhancement and efficient governance, (iii) conserving and restoring ecosystem in natural wetlands, and (iv) bringing policies, law, and conservation programmes for development of fisheries in the Himalayan and north-eastern states.

- Aquaculture: Measures recommended for development of aquaculture include: (i) developing state and area-specific action plans, (ii) redefining land use categories to include fisheries and aquaculture as components of agriculture, (iii) developing separate programmes for small farmers, (iv) simplifying requirements for registration and leasing of farms, and (v) developing the required regulatory frameworks.

- Other policy measures include: (i) making registration of all aquaculture inputs compulsory, (ii) regulating exotic species, (iii) improving disease surveillance, (iv) diversifying species, (v) developing post-harvest and marketing infrastructure, and (vi) strengthening fisheries cooperatives.

- Comments on the draft policy are invited till March 13, 2019. Rashtriya Kamdhenu Aayog constituted for conservation and development of cows The Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers Welfare has constituted an apex advisory body, Rashtriya Kamdhenu Aayog for the conservation, protection, and development of cows and their progeny.[30] Other objectives of the Aayog include: (i) proper implementation of laws with respect to prohibition of slaughter and cruelty to cows, and (ii) providing direction to cattle development programmes and schemes.

- The Aayog will develop a policy framework and formulate guidelines with the aim of achieving: (i) sustainable development and upgradation of genetic resources of cows, (ii) enhanced dairy production and productivity, and (iii) protection and promotion of the interest of stakeholders in the dairy industry, among others.

Commerce Gayatri Mann (gayatri@prsindia.org) Draft National e-Commerce Policy released for consultation

- The Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade released the 'Draft National e-Commerce Policy: India's Data for India's Development' for consultation.[31] The policy addresses six broad issues of the e-commerce ecosystem such as: (i) data, (ii) infrastructure development, (iii) e-commerce marketplaces, (iv) regulatory issues, (v) stimulating the domestic digital economy, and (vi) export promotion through e-commerce. Key features of the e-commerce policy include:

- Data: Creating a legal and technological framework for imposing restrictions on cross-border data flow from specified sources, including data generated by users in India on e-commerce platforms, social media, and search engines. Further, the policy lays down certain conditions for businesses regarding collection or processing of sensitive data locally and storing it abroad.

- These are: (i) all data stored abroad shall not be made available to business entities outside India, even with the customer's consent; (ii) such data should also not be made available to a third party, and (iii) such data should not be shared with a foreign government, without the prior permission of Indian authorities.

- **Foreign direct investment: The policy aims at demarcating what constitutes a marketplace model and what comprises an inventory-based model of sale and distribution. It aims at inviting and encouraging foreign investment in the 'marketplace' model alone. This implies that an e-commerce platform, in which foreign investment has been made, cannot exercise ownership or control over the inventory sold on its platform.**

- **Custom duties: On taxation-related issues in the sector, the draft policy said the current practice of not imposing custom duties on electronic transmissions must be reviewed.**

- **Export promotion: The policy states that there is a need to incentivise exports and reduce administrative requirements and costs for outbound shipments. Further, it states that the existing limit of Rs 25,000, above which products are exported through cargo mode should be increased. This would make Indian e-commerce exports attractive even for high-value shipments through courier mode.**

- **The Department is seeking comments on the draft policy till March 9, 2019.**

Law and Justice Personal Laws (Amendment) Bill passed by Parliament Roshni Sinha (roshni@prsindia.org)

- **The Personal Laws (Amendment) Bill, 2018 was passed by Parliament.[32] It seeks to amend five Acts. These are: (i) the Divorce Act, 1869, (ii) the Dissolution of Muslim Marriage Act, 1939, (iii) the Special Marriage Act, 1954, (iv) the Hindu Marriage Act, 1955, and (v) the Hindu Adoptions and Maintenance Act, 1956.**

- **These Acts contain provisions related to marriage, divorce, and separation of Hindu and Muslim couples. Each of these Acts prescribe leprosy as a ground for seeking divorce or separation from the spouse. The Bill seeks to remove this as a ground for divorce or separation. The Registration of Marriage of Non-Resident Indian Bill, 2019 introduced in Rajya Sabha**

- **Vinayak Krishnan (vinayak@prsindia.org) The Registration of Marriage of Non-Resident Indian Bill, 2019 was introduced in Rajya Sabha.[33] The Bill has been referred to the Standing Committee on External Affairs, which is expected to submit its report in two months. Key features of the Bill include:**

- **Registration of marriages: The Bill states that every Non-Resident Indian (NRI) who marries a citizen of India in India must get his marriage registered in India within thirty days. Further, every NRI who marries an Indian citizen or another NRI outside India, must get his marriage registered with the Marriage Officer, within thirty days. The Marriage Officer is appointed from among the diplomatic officers in a foreign country.**

- **Impounding of passport: In case an NRI marries an Indian citizen or another NRI, and fails to register the marriage within thirty days, the passport authority may impound or revoke the passport of the NRI. Issue of summons and warrants: The Bill provides that in case a court cannot serve summons on an individual, it may issue summons by uploading it on a designated website of the Ministry of External Affairs. If the person summoned does not appear before the court, it may issue and upload a warrant for arrest on the website.**

- **Further, in the case the person fails to appear before the court as specified in the warrant, the court may pronounce him as a proclaimed offender and upload a declaration to that effect on the website. If the accused does not appear after the proclamation has been uploaded, the court may issue a written statement that the such a proclamation has been uploaded. This statement will be conclusive evidence that the warrant has been issued.**

Ordinance on triple talaq re-promulgated Roshni Sinha (roshni@prsindia.org)

- **The Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Marriage) Second Ordinance, 2019 was promulgated on February 21, 2019. [34] Note that two similar Ordinances had been promulgated in September 2018 and January 2019.[35],[36] A similar Bill was also passed by Lok Sabha in December 2018 and the government had approved amendments to be moved in Rajya Sabha. All the three Ordinances incorporate these amendments. This Ordinance is effective from the date of the first Ordinance, i.e. September 19, 2018. Key features of the Ordinance include:**

- **The Ordinance makes all declaration of talaq, including in written or electronic form, to be void (i.e. not enforceable in law) and illegal. It defines talaq as talaq-e-biddat or any other similar form of talaq pronounced by a Muslim man resulting in instant and irrevocable divorce. Talaq-e-biddat refers to the practice under Muslim personal laws where pronouncement of the word 'talaq' thrice in one sitting by a Muslim man to his wife results in an instant and irrevocable divorce.**

- **Offence and penalty:** The Ordinance makes declaration of talaq a cognizable offence, attracting up to three years' imprisonment with a fine. (A cognizable offence is one for which a police officer may arrest an accused person without warrant.)

- The offence will be cognizable only if information relating to the offence is given by: (i) the married woman (against whom talaq is declared), or (ii) any person related to her by blood or marriage. The Ordinance provides that the Magistrate may grant bail to the accused. The bail may be granted only after hearing the woman (against whom talaq has been pronounced), and if the Magistrate is satisfied that there are reasonable grounds for granting bail.

- The offence may be compounded by the Magistrate upon the request of the woman (against whom talaq has been declared). Compounding refers to the procedure where the two sides agree to stop legal proceedings, and settle the dispute. The terms and conditions of the compounding of the offence will be determined by the Magistrate.

- **Allowance:** A Muslim woman against whom talaq has been declared, is entitled to seek subsistence allowance from her husband for herself and for her dependent children. The amount of the allowance will be determined by the Magistrate.

- **Custody:** A Muslim woman against whom talaq has been declared, is entitled to seek custody of her minor children. The manner of custody will be determined by the Magistrate.

President notifies new circuit bench of Calcutta High Court Roshni Sinha (roshni@prsindia.org)

- The President of India notified a new circuit bench of the Calcutta High Court at Jalpaiguri (in West Bengal).[37] The bench will comprise of judges of the Calcutta High Court, as decided by the Chief Justice of the High Court. The bench will exercise jurisdiction over cases arising in the districts of Darjeeling, Kalimpong, Jalpaiguri, and Cooch Behar in West Bengal.

- **Defence** Vinayak Krishnan (vinayak@prsindia.org) CAG submits report on Capital Acquisition in the Indian Air Force The Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) released a performance audit of capital acquisition in the Indian Air Force.[38] The audit examined 11 contracts of capital acquisition signed between 2012-13 and 2017-18, with a total value of approximately Rs 95,000 crore including that of Rafale aircraft. However, all the commercial and price data related to this agreement have been redacted in the report. Key observations and recommendations of the CAG include:

- **Planning and tendering process:** The process of acquisition of air assets starts with the formulation of user requirements known as the Air Staff Qualitative Requirements (ASQR). CAG observed that the formulation of ASQR is the most crucial stage in the defence acquisition process as it determines the quality, price, and competition. The CAG had recommended in 2007 that ASQRs should be stated in terms of functional parameters, which are measurable. However, it noted that instead of using functional parameters, the Indian Air Force (IAF) made the ASQRs exhaustive and included technical details. This led to situations where none of the vendors was able to meet the ASQRs. In this context, the CAG repeated its recommendation that ASQRs should be stated in terms of functional parameters.

- **Solicitation of Offers:** Offers are solicited from various vendors by issuing a Request for Proposal (RFP). Vendors respond to the RFP by making technical and commercial bids. CAG noted that there was limited competition during this process. The number of vendors who responded to the RFP were less than those invited to bid. This was because of various reasons including narrowly defined ASQRs. CAG recommended that the Defence Ministry should explore open competitive tendering in case of non-strategic items (such as basic trainer aircraft, and weather radar).

- **Organisational issues:** The CAG noted that delays in acquisition were essentially due to a complex and multi-level approval process. From the initiation of the case to the signing of the contract, each procurement case goes through 11 stages. The CAG stated that the current acquisition system is unlikely to support the operational preparedness of the IAF and recommended that the Defence Ministry may undertake reform of the entire acquisition process.

Standing Committee submits report on provision of all-weather road connectivity under Border Road Organisation

- The Standing Committee on Defence (Chairperson: Mr. Kalraj Mishra) submitted its report on 'Provision of all-weather connectivity under Border Roads Organisation (BRO) and other agencies up to International borders as well as the strategic areas including approach roads- An appraisal'.[39] Key observations and recommendations of the Committee include:

- **Underperformance of BRO:** The Committee observed that since 2007-08, the targets set for various construction works by BRO could not be achieved. However, despite the failure to achieve these targets, higher targets were set in subsequent years which led to further underperformance. The failure to achieve targets was attributed to various issues faced by BRO such as difficult terrain, limited working period, and lack of raw material.

- **Indo-China Border Roads (ICBRs):** The Committee noted that the government had identified 73 roads of length 3,812 km, for development along the Indo-China border. Of these, 61 have been entrusted to the BRO. The initial date for completion of these roads was 2012. Out of the 61 roads, 28 roads have been completed and the remaining are in various stages of completion. The completion schedule has been extended to 2022. The Committee recommended that BRO should explore the possibility of completing all roads by 2020, instead of 2022.

- **Lack of equipment:** The Committee observed that the availability of construction equipment with the BRO was less than the authorised numbers in 2016-17. Equipment such as stone crushers and tippers were 40% and 50% less than the authorised numbers, respectively. Further, the Committee noted that BRO was using indigenous equipment as they operate in remote locations where use of sophisticated equipment is not feasible. It recommended that deploying of sophisticated construction equipment may be explored to ensure quicker completion of construction projects.

Tribal Affairs 125th Constitutional Amendment Bill introduced in Rajya Sabha Vinayak Krishnan (vinayak@prsindia.org)

- The Constitution (One Hundred and Twenty-Fifth Amendment) Bill, 2019 was introduced in Rajya Sabha.[40] The Bill amends provisions related to the Finance Commission and the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution. The Sixth Schedule relates to the administration of tribal areas in the states of Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura and Mizoram. The Bill has been referred to the Standing Committee on Home Affairs and the Committee is expected to submit its report in two months. Key features of the Bill include:

- **Village and Municipal Councils:** The Sixth Schedule states that tribal areas in certain regions of these four states will be 'autonomous districts', each administered by a District Council. Further, the Governor may divide an autonomous district into autonomous regions, each administered by a Regional Council.

- The Bill amends this to provide for Village and Municipal Councils in addition to the District and Regional Councils. Village Councils will be established for villages or groups of villages in rural areas, and Municipal Councils will be established in urban areas of each district. Further, the District Councils may make laws on various issues, including: (i) number of Village and Municipal Councils to be formed, and their composition, (ii) delimitation of constituencies for election to the Village and Municipal Councils, and (iii) powers and functions of these Councils.

- **Finance Commission:** Under the Constitution, the functions of the Finance Commission include making recommendations to the President on: (i) distribution of taxes between the Union and states, and the (ii) provision of grants-in-aid to states. Additionally, the Bill empowers the Commission to make recommendations on measures to augment the Consolidated Fund of a state in order to provide resources to the District Councils, Village Councils, and Municipal Councils in tribal areas in the four states.

Constitution (Scheduled Tribes) Order (Third Amendment) Bill, 2019 passed by Rajya Sabha Roshni Sinha (roshni@prsindia.org)

- The Constitution (Scheduled Tribes) Order (Third Amendment) Bill, 2019 was introduced and passed by Rajya Sabha to amend the Constitution (Scheduled Tribes) Order, 1950, in respect of Arunachal Pradesh.[41] The Bill amends Part 18 of the Order which specifies the Scheduled Tribes in Arunachal Pradesh. It will lapse upon the dissolution of the Lok Sabha.

- The Bill inserts five entries for granting Scheduled Tribe status to these communities. These are: (i) Galo, (ii) Mishmi-Kaman (Miju Mishmi), Idu (Mishmi), Taraon (Digaru, Mishmi), (iii) Monpa, Memba, Sartang, Sajolang (Miji) (iv) Nocte, Tangsa, Tutsa, Wancho, and (v) Tai Khamti.

- The Bill removes reference to six tribes. These are: (i) Abor, (ii) Galong, (iii) Khampti, (iv) Mishmi (Idu, Taroon), (v) any Naga tribes, and and (vi) Momba.

Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs approves continuation of Scheduled Tribes sub-schemes Roshni Sinha (roshni@prsindia.org)

- The Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs gave its approval for the continuation of eleven sub-schemes under the "Umbrella programme for development of Scheduled Tribes" from April 1, 2017 to March 31, 2020 at a cost of Rs 11,900 crore.[42] The sub-schemes include pre-matric and post-matric scholarships, hostels, vocational training, and aids to voluntary organisations working for the welfare of Scheduled Tribes.

- Union Cabinet approves revision in the list of Scheduled Tribes in Chhattisgarh Roshni Sinha (roshni@prsindia.org) The Union Cabinet gave its approval for certain amendments to the list of scheduled tribes in Chhatisgarh in the Constitution (Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes) Order (Amendment) Bill, 2016.[43] The 2016 Bill seeks to amend the Constitution (Scheduled Castes) Order, 1950 and the Constitution (Scheduled Tribes) Order, 1950. The two Orders were issued by the President under the Constitution specifying the Scheduled Castes (SCs) and the Scheduled Tribes (STs) of all states. The 2016 Bill amended the list of STs in five states including Chhatisgarh.

- For Chhatisgarh, the Bill seeks to clarify equivalent names of the following communities that are already mentioned in the list of STs: (i) Bhuinya, Bhuiyan, Bhuyan, (ii) Dhanwar, Dhanuhar, Dhanuwar, (iii) Nagesia, Nagasia, Kisan, and (iii) Sawar, Sawara, Saunra, Saonra. The proposed amendments to the 2016 Bill add 'Binjhia' to the list of STs in Chhattisgarh. Note that the 2016 Bill will lapse with the dissolution of the 16th Lok Sabha.

- Ministry of Tribal Affairs launches various schemes Roshni Sinha (roshni@prsindia.org) The Ministry of Tribal Affairs launched several schemes for the benefit of tribal communities.[44] These include: (i) Minimum Support Price for Minor Forest Produce, (ii) TRIFOOD project, and (iii) the "Friends of TRIBES" initiative.

- Under the Schemes of Minimum Support Price and Value Addition, remunerative MSP will be increased from 30% to 40% for 50 commercially viable items to the tribals. Further, approximately 6000 Van Dan Vikas Kendras are proposed to be set up. Each Kendra will comprise 300 tribal gatherers. These Kendras are intended to provide employment to almost 45 lakh tribals.

- The Ministry also launched the TRIFOOD Scheme. The Scheme is a joint initiative of the Ministry of Food Processing Industries, the Ministry of Tribal Affairs and the Tribal Cooperative Marketing Development Federation of India (TRIFED). Under the Scheme, a tertiary value addition center will be set up in Jagdalpur in Chhattisgarh and Raigad in Maharashtra at a cost of approximately Rs 11 crores.

- The Ministry also launched the "Friends of Tribes" initiative. Under this initiative, TRIFED has tied up CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) funds to promote tribal livelihoods. Under the Companies Act, 2013 companies above a certain specified net worth, turnover or profits are required to spend 2% of their average net profits in the last three financial years, towards activities under its CSR policy.

Corporate Affairs Roshni Sinha (roshni@prsindia.org) Ordinance on amendments to the Companies Act re-promulgated

- The Companies (Second Amendment) Ordinance, 2019 was promulgated on February 21, 2019.[45] It amends several provisions in the Companies Act, 2013 relating to penalties, among others. Note that two similar Ordinances had been promulgated in November 2018 and January 2019.[46],[47] A similar Bill was also passed by Lok Sabha in January 2019. This Ordinance is effective from the date of the first Ordinance, i.e. November 2, 2018.

- Re-categorisation of certain Offences: The 2013 Act contains 81 compoundable offences punishable with fine or fine or imprisonment, or both. These offences are heard by courts. The Ordinance re-categorizes 16 of these offences as civil defaults, where adjudicating officers (appointed by central government) may levy penalties for default. These offences include: (i) issuance of shares at a discount, and, (ii) failure to file annual return.

- Commencement of business: The Ordinance states that a company may not commence business, unless it (i) files a declaration within 180 days of incorporation, confirming that every subscriber to the Memorandum of the company has paid the value of shares and (ii) files a verification of its registered office address with the Registrar of Companies within 30 days of incorporation. If a company fails to comply with these provisions and is found not to be carrying out any business, its name may be removed from the Register of Companies.

- Change in approving authority: Under the Act, change in period of financial year for a company associated with a foreign company, has to be approved by the National Company Law Tribunal. Similarly, any alteration in the incorporation document of a public company which has the effect of converting it to a private company, has to be approved by the Tribunal. Under the Ordinance, these powers have been transferred to the central government.

- Compounding: Under the Act, a regional director can compound (settle) offences with penalty of up to five lakh rupees. The Ordinance increases the limit to Rs 25 lakh.

Health and Family Welfare Gayatri Mann (gayatri@prsindia.org) Indian Medical Council (Amendment) Second Ordinance 2019 promulgated

- The Indian Medical Council (Amendment) Second Ordinance, 2019 was promulgated.[48] The Ordinance amends the Indian Medical Council Act, 1956 which sets up the Medical Council of India (MCI) which regulates medical education and practice. Note that, two similar Ordinance had been promulgated in September 2018 and January 2019. This Ordinance is effective from the date of the first Ordinance, i.e., September 26, 2018.

- Supersession of the MCI: The 1956 Act provides for supersession of the MCI and its reconstitution within a period of three years. The Ordinance amends this provision to provide for the supersession of the MCI for a period of one year. In the interim period, the central government will constitute a Board of Governors, which will exercise the powers of the MCI.

- The Act provides for the Board of Governors to consist of up to seven members including persons of eminence in medical education, appointed by the central government. The Ordinance amends this provision to increase the strength of the Board from seven members to 12 members.

- Further, it allows for persons with proven administrative capacity and experience to be selected in the Board. The Ordinance provides for the Board of Governors to be assisted by a Secretary General appointed by the central government.

- For more information on the Ordinance, see here. Cabinet approves setting up of new AIIMS in Haryana The Union Cabinet approved the establishment of a new All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS) in Manethi, Haryana.[49] The Cabinet has approved an expenditure of Rs 1,299 crore for setting up of the new AIIMS.

- The new AIIMS will consist of: (i) a hospital with a capacity of 750 beds, (ii) trauma center facilities, (iii) a medical college with an intake of 100 MBBS students per year, (iv) a nursing college with an intake of 60 B.Sc. (Nursing) students per year, (v) 15 to 20 super-speciality departments, and (vi) an AYUSH department for providing treatment facilities in traditional system of medicine.

- Cabinet approves financial support for tertiary healthcare programmes The Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs approved the continuation of the Tertiary Care Programes for non-communicable diseases and e-Health upto 2021-22 with an outlay of Rs 2,551 crore. [50] The objective of the program is to provide support for creation of health facilities in the areas of: (i) cancer diagnosis and treatment, (ii) care for the elderly, (iii) prevention and management of trauma and burn injuries, (iv) drug dependence, (v) mental health, and (vi) visual impairment.

Education UGC releases regulations for Institutions Deemed to be Universities Zarka Shabir (zarka@prsindia.org)

- The University Grants Commission (Institutions Deemed to be Universities) Regulations, 2019 were released on February 20, 2019. [51] These regulations outline the processes through which institutes of academic excellence can be deemed to be universities. Key features include:

- Eligibility Criteria: For an institution to be deemed a University, the institution must: (i) have been in existence for not less than 20 years, (ii) have a valid accreditation by National Assessment and Accreditation Council, and (iii) have a student-teacher ratio not less than 1:20, among other criteria. Additionally, an institution not maintained or financed by the government, must have a corpus fund of Rs 10 crore for an existing institution and Rs 25 crore for institutions conducting research in unique areas of knowledge. An institution fulfilling the eligibility criteria may apply online through the Commission's web portal.

- Monitoring: The UGC shall be responsible for monitoring the performance and academic outcomes of all deemed to be universities. The parameters for oversight will include: (i) graduate outcomes, (ii) linkage of students with society or industry, and (iii) training of students in essential professional skills.

- Systems of Governance: In all institutions deemed to be universities, a Board of Management shall act as the highest governing body in all academic, administrative, and financial matters. The Board will include the Vice-Chancellor, two Deans of Faculties, and one representative of the Central government, among others.

- Admission and Fees:As per the regulations, no institution deemed to be a university shall accept payments such as capitation fees, donations, or fees without receipts towards admission fees. Additionally, the institution must implement the policy on reservations in accordance with the Constitution of India and be open to all citizens, regardless of their religion, race, caste, sex, place of birth, or residence.

Cabinet approves revision of norms under the Mid-Day Meal Scheme Gayatri Mann (gayatri@prsindia.org)

- The Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs approved the revision of certain norms under the Mid-Day Meal Scheme (MDMS) with an outlay of Rs 12,054 crore for 2019-20.[52] The MDMS targets children between the age of 6 to 14 years. In addition to promoting enrolment, retention and attendance by incentivising the children to come to school for meals, the scheme also aims to improve nutritional levels among children.

- It covers children in government and government-aided schools. Under the scheme, the average per meal cost borne by the central government is Rs 6.64 and Rs 9.59 for students of primary and upper primary classes, respectively. The revised norms of MDMS include:

- Implementation of the scheme has been delegated to District Level Committees chaired by District Magistrates. Previously, the central or respective state governments were in charge of implementation.

- The cooking cost for 2019-20 has been enhanced to Rs 4.35 and Rs 6.51 per child per school day for students of primary and upper primary classes, respectively.

- The transportation rate has been revised from Rs 75 per quintal to the rate under the Public Distribution System (subject to maximum of Rs 150 per quintal).

'Centre for Disability Sports' to be set up at Gwalior Posted On: 03 MAR 2019 12:49PM by PIB Delhi

- A'**Centre for Disability Sports'** will be set up at Gwalior in Madhya Pradesh. The proposal regarding setting up of it has been approved by the Government. It will be registered under the Societies Registration Act, 1860, which is to function under the name of Centre for Disability Sports, Gwalior.Improved sports infrastructure created by this Centre will ensure effective participation of Persons with Disabilities (PwDs) in sports activities and also enable them to compete at national and international levels. Setting up of the Centre will develop a sense of belonging in Divyangjan to facilitate their integration in society.

- **Taking 1st April, 2019 as the zero date**, the project is expected to be completed in two yeartime, i.e, by 31st March, 2021. Thereafter, it will take another 6 months for the Centre to become operational.Once operational, this Centre will result in employment of 140 personnel. In addition, construction and allied activities will also generate considerable employment opportunities.Setting up of the Centre shall entail an estimated cost of Rs 170.99 crore (Non-recurring Rs.151.16 crore and Recurring Rs 19.83 crore),spread over a period of 5 years.

- **The Centre will have an Outdoor Athletic Stadium**, Indoor Sports Complex, Basement Parking Facility; Aquatic Centre having 2 Swimming Pools, one covered Pool and an Outdoor Pool; High Performance Centre with classrooms; medical facilities; Sports Science Centre; hostel facilities for athletes, support facilities including accessible lockers, dining, recreational amenities and Administrative Block. The facilities so developed would be multi-functional centres with provision for training, selection, sports academics and research, medical support, spectator galleries and suitable for holding national/international events.

Opening Ceremony: India-Bangladesh Joint Military Exercise Sampriti - 2019 Posted On: 03 MAR 2019 6:05PM by PIB Delhi

- **As part of the ongoing** India Bangladesh defence cooperation, a joint military exercise Sampriti-2019 is being conducted at Tangail, Bangladesh from 02 March to 15 March 2019. The eighth edition of Exercise Sampriti, commenced at the Bongobondhu Cantonment, Tangail Bangladesh with an impressive opening ceremony on 03 March 2019. The participating contingents marched in and stood side by side and gave a ceremonial salute to the national flags of both the countries to the strains of "Jana Gana Mana" and the "Amar Shonar Bangla".

- **The Bangladesh contingent** was represented by 36 East Bengal Battalion, while Indian side was represented by 9th Battalion the Rajputana Rifles. Major General Mizanur Rahman Shamim, General Officer Commanding, 19 Infantry Division, Bangladesh Army welcomed the Indian contingent and in his inaugural remarks highlighted the common shared beliefs of democracy, freedom, equality and justice that are precious to both the nations.

- **The aim of the exercise** is to increase mutual cooperation, bonhomie and camaraderie between the two armies through interoperability and joint tactical exercises. A company group from Bangladesh Army and an equal number from Indian Army are taking part in the two-week long exercise that will see them hone their tactical and technical skills in countering insurgency, counter terrorism and aid to civil authorities for disaster management in an UN peace keeping scenario involving a combined deployment at a battalion level.

- **In this eighth edition** of the exercise which started way back in 2009 as a platoon level exercise and graduated to company level exercise in 2015 onwards, both sides will jointly train, plan and execute a series of well developed tactical drills for neutralisation of likely threats that may be encountered during simulated UN peace keeping operations. The experts from both the sides will also hold discussions to share each other's experiences in varied topics for mutual benefits.

Central Assistance for Disaster Management and Relief Standing Committee Report Summary

- **The Standing Committee on Finance (Chairperson: Dr. M. Veerappa Moily) submitted its report on 'Central Assistance for Disaster Management and Relief'** on February 13, 2019. Under the Disaster Management Act 2005, financial assistance is provided to disaster-affected states from the State Disaster Response Fund (SDRF) and the National Disaster Response Fund (NDRF). Where assistance from SDRF is insufficient, additional assistance from the NDRF is provided in case of calamities of severe nature. Key observations and recommendations made by the Committee include the following:

- **Scale of relief:** Some disaster-prone states such as Odisha submitted to the Committee that major items of relief expenditure are not covered under existing SDRF and NDRF norms. Therefore, the Committee recommended that rates and scale of assistance under SDRF and NDRF should be enhanced to cover major heads of expenditure. This includes restoration of all government educational institutions, non-residential government buildings, and transmission power sub-stations. The Committee also recommended that funds for relief should be based on vulnerability of the state rather than past expenditure on the state.

- **Disaster Mitigation Fund:** The Committee recommended that a separate Disaster Mitigation Fund should be operationalised for undertaking permanent mitigation measures in disaster-prone states. It stated that any investment on mitigation and prevention of disaster risk will go a long way in significantly reducing expenditure on relief and disaster response. Further, the Committee recommended that comprehensive insurance coverage should be provided to all properties located in disaster-prone areas.

- **National Calamity Contingency Duty:** The NDRF is funded through the National Calamity Contingency Duty (NCCD) imposed on specified goods under central excise and customs. The Committee noted that with the introduction of GST, the scope of NCCD is shrinking. The revenue collected from NCCD has decreased significantly from Rs 5,690 crore in 2015-16 to Rs 2,500 crore in 2018-19. The Committee stated that the GST Council and Ministry of Finance should take a view on augmenting this fund.

- **Funding mechanism:** The Committee made various recommendations related to the funding mechanism for disaster relief. It recommended that an additional 10% of the allocation of the centrally sponsored schemes may be specially earmarked for permanent restoration of damaged structures. Further, in order to bring greater flexibility to the funding mechanism, the Committee recommended that borrowing powers of affected states may be enhanced in the event of a disaster.

- **The Committee noted** that 10% of the annual fund allocation of the SDRF may be used for localized state-specific natural calamities. It recommended that this 10% limit should be done away with and all expenditure towards state-specific disasters should be charged to the SDRF. The Committee recommended a 10% increase to the corpus of the SDRF to accommodate this expenditure.

- **Given the wide gap** between the funds sought by affected states and those released by the central government, the Committee recommended an annual increase of 15% (from the current 5%) in the total corpus of SDRF, for the period 2020-25. Further, it recommended that there should be a provision for automatic release of advance amounts from the NDRF in case of disasters of rare severity, to enable immediate relief work.

- **In view of the recommendations** made on modifying financial arrangements, the Committee recommended that the Ministries of Finance and Home Affairs submit a revised memorandum to the 15th Finance Commission. It further suggested that suitable changes be made to the Disaster Management Act, 2005, in case required.

Guidelines, Monitoring, Rating and Regulatory System, Status of Investment in Bonds and such Instruments - Example of IL&FS by PF Funds, Pension Funds

- **The Standing Committee** on Labour (Chair: Mr. Kirit Somaiya) submitted its report on 'Guidelines, Monitoring, Rating and Regulatory System, Status of Investment in Bonds and such Instruments - [Example of Infrastructure Leasing and Financial Services (IL&FS) by PF Funds, Pension Funds]' on February 13, 2019. Key observations and recommendations of the Committee include:

- **The Committee** noted that the main principle of the Employees' Provident Fund (EPF) is to cultivate a spirit of regular savings. It noted that the inherent principle of EPF is social security for the vulnerable working class of society. As its basic objective is social security rather than returns on investments, the Committee noted that ideally the amounts should not be deployed in risky investments. The Committee observed that the EPF Organisation (EPFO) is the custodian of the EPF and is required to ensure viable investment of the monies deposited in the fund to ensure a balance between safety and security of this fund and returns on investment.

- **Monitoring Mechanism:** The Committee stressed on the need to ensure that the employees' PF contributions in the EPF are insulated from any bad investments. Towards this, the Committee recommended strengthening the monitoring mechanisms by exercising tighter control over their designated portfolio managers and ensuring impartial external concurrent audit of the investments. It further observed that as per EPF Scheme, any losses on investment are made good from the reserves. However, the Committee were of the view that the need to delve into the reserves would not arise if a stringent monitoring mechanism for making and reviewing the investments are in place. The Committee wished to be apprised of the progress achieved by the Ministry in this regard.

- **Credit Rating Agencies:** The Committee noted that the EPFO makes investments as per the pattern of investment notified by the Ministry of Labour and Employment. As per the current pattern, investments in corporate bonds is limited to 'AA' in case of PSU bonds and 'AA+' bonds in case of private sector bonds. These bonds are rated by Credit Rating Agencies (CRAs). CRAs are registered with and regulated by the Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI). Further, the CRAs are accredited by RBI as 'External Credit Assessment Institutions' for rating banks loans.

- **The Committee** examined the process adopted by Credit Rating Agencies (CRAs) for determining the credit rating of any financial institution. The Committee was of the view that CRAs are not discharging their functions adequately and in a transparent manner. It attributed this to a weak monitoring mechanism by the Ministry of Finance, SEBI, and RBI. The Committee emphasised the need for a healthy monitoring mechanism, rating mechanism and a forewarning system in case of falling credit rating. It further stressed that the Ministry of Labour & Employment voice the concern of the Committee with the Ministry of Finance and other concerned agencies to ensure that credit rating issued by CRAs are transparent. This will ensure that the provident fund of the employee is secure whilst ensuring a decent return on investment.

Status of Forests in India Standing Committee Report Summary

- **The Standing Committee** on Science & Technology, Environment & Forests (Chair: Mr. Anand Sharma) submitted its report on the 'Status of Forests in India' on February 12, 2019. Key observations and recommendations of the Committee include:

- **Definition of Forest:** The Committee examined the Draft National Forest Draft Policy 2018 which was circulated for public feedback during April 2018. The Committee noted that the word 'Forest' is not defined in the Draft Policy. It noted that the Ministry uses the definition of the term as provided by the Supreme Court. The Court defined forests to include all forests statutorily recognised under the Forest (Conservation) Act, 1980. The Committee noted that certain stakeholders had expressed concerns that that this definition did not include ecosystems which don't have forest-like attributes, such as wetlands or grasslands. Therefore, it recommended that Ministry of Environment, Forest & Climate Change (MoEF) come out with a comprehensive and clear definition of the term 'Forest'.

- **Forest cover:** The Committee expressed concern about the decline in the forest cover in the North-Eastern States, which constitute 65.34% of its geographical area in comparison to the national forest cover of 21.54%. It recommended that the concerned state governments and the MoEF take all necessary steps to ensure that the decline in forest cover in these states is stopped at the earliest.

- **The Committee** noted that no action plan has been prepared by the MoEF for controlling the illegal cutting of trees in forests. It stated that MoEF must take cognizance of the illegal felling of trees in different parts of the country and prepare an action plan for tackling this menace, in coordination with state governments.

- **Deforestation:** The Committee noted that the budget allocation to National Afforestation Programme has been insufficient. This has affected the achievement of the annual targeted area of afforestation during the last few years. The Committee recommended that the MoEF ensure that adequate allocation is made to the National Afforestation Programme and the targets under the Programme are achieved. Further, the Committee noted that the funding pattern for the Programme changed in 2015-16 from a 100% centrally sponsored scheme to a 60-40 sharing scheme between the centre and state. Therefore, the Committee recommended that the concerned state governments provide their share of the changed funding pattern to ensure the success of the Programme.

- **Evaluation of afforestation:** The Committee noted that the mid-term evaluation study on National Afforestation Programme conducted by the Indian Council of Forestry Research and Education in 2008 had highlighted the successful implementation of the programme. However, the Committee stated that nearly ten years have passed since the ICFRE evaluation. Therefore, it recommended that the MoEF should undertake a study to assess the impact of National Afforestation Programme and the Green India Mission so that their actual impact on the forest cover is known and further strategies in this regard could be formulated accordingly.

- **The Committee** observed that the MoEF has not undertaken any field survey to determine the total land available in the country for afforestation. It recommended that necessary action in this regard should be taken at the earliest so that state governments can formulate necessary strategies for taking up the afforestation activities in their respective states.

- **Concerns of exploitation:** The Committee observed that the general perception of the public is that the Draft Policy emphasizes the commercialization of forests and curtails the ownership of rights of tribals, tribal communities, and traditional forest-dwellers. Concerns were also expressed that the Draft Policy aims to take away the rights of Gram Sabhas for management of forests and instead hands it over to the proposed centrally controlled Corporations. The Committee felt that if too much emphasis is given to the private partnership model in management of forests in the Draft Policy, forest lands may be lost. It recommended that adequate safeguards be taken after stakeholder consultations to protect the forests from over-exploitation by private parties.

Issues Relating to Migrant Workers including Appropriate Legislative Framework and Skill Development Initiatives for Prospective Emigrants Standing Committee Report Summary

- **The Standing Committee on External Affairs** (Chairperson: Dr Shashi Tharoor) submitted its report on 'Issues Relating to Migrant Workers including Appropriate Legislative Framework and Skill Development Initiatives for Prospective Emigrants' on January 2, 2019.

- **Migration policy and data:** The Committee noted that India does not have a migration policy. This affects India's ability to use the potential offered by Indians in the international labour market. The Committee therefore, recommended that India should frame a coherent migration policy. In addition, the Committee noted that despite the growing scale of migration, statistics and data was not readily available. It recommended that the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) should maintain a database on various aspects of migration such as profile of migrants, their job profile, and country of destination.

- **Unauthorised recruitment agents:** The Committee noted that the problem of unauthorised recruitment agents has increased, and a majority of workers are being sent abroad by them. The MEA responds to complaints against such agents by forwarding their details to the concerned state police. The Committee recommended that MEA should take suo moto actions by engaging Protector of Emigrants offices in states or districts where more complaints are received. Further, these offices should lodge complaints with the local police so that illegal recruitment can be curbed.

- **Skill development:** The Committee noted that the limited skill sets of migrant workers is a major hindrance in finding overseas employment. The MEA highlighted five core elements in preparing the workforce for global mobility including: (i) alignment of qualifications with global standards, (ii) infrastructure development, (iii) credible assessment and certification framework, (iv) pre-departure orientation, and (v) job linkage. While the MEA stated that there has been progress on the first two elements, the Committee recommended that all five elements should be taken into account while framing standards for skill development.

- **Referral wages:** The government has fixed minimum referral wages to regulate wages of Indian workers employed in the Emigration Check Required countries (those that require emigration clearance from the office of the Protector of Emigrants). The Committee noted that these wages have not kept pace with economic changes in the destination countries, which may result in reduced preference for Indian workers. It recommended that MEA should coordinate with the Ministry of Labour and set up a committee for reviewing the referral wages on an annual basis.

- **Gender and migration:** The Committee noted that the government's approach towards female migrant workers focused mostly on ensuring their protection and safety. However, this may be a short-term approach that impacts the opportunities of women migrants. The Committee recommended that there is an urgent need for a gender-sensitive migration policy, which takes into account gender-specific concerns and risks. This policy should be based on the larger objective of not only protecting but also empowering women. Further, the Committee recommended that a 24*7 women helpline should be established in Indian Missions abroad.

- **Emigration Bill:** The Committee noted that in light of significant changes in migration patterns, the current legal provisions are inadequate to deal with issues confronting migrant workers. While the MEA is drafting an Emigration Management Bill, the Committee expressed concerns over delay in the introduction of the Bill. The Committee recommended that the Bill be finalised and presented to Parliament without further delay. Further, the Committee recommended various provisions that should form part of the Bill. These include: (i) providing Migrant Worker Welfare Centres at international airports to provide information, (ii) creation of a digitized database with records of all migrant workers, their recruitment companies, skills, and educational qualifications, and (iii) creation of a separate department under the Protector of Emigrants to investigate complaints of exploitation and abuse by recruiters.

Assessment of the Working of Tribal Sub-Plan Standing Committee Report Summary

- **The Standing Committee** on External Affairs (Chairperson: Sh Ramesh Bais) submitted its report on 'Assessment of the Working of Tribal Sub-Plan' on January 3, 2019. The Tribal Sub-Plan (TSP) aims to bridge the gap between the Schedule Tribes (STs) and the general population with respect to all socio-economic development indicators in a time-bound manner. Key observations and recommendations of the Committee include:

- **Allocation of Funds:** The Committee noted that earlier, earmarking of funds towards TSP was done by the concerned Ministries against their Plan allocation. After the merger of Plan and non-Plan expenditure, the Ministry of Finance revised the rate of allocation of funds towards TSP in December 2017. Currently, there are 41 central Ministries implementing TSP through different schemes. The Committee noted that the allocation of funds towards TSP by various Ministries has been meagre after the merger of expenditure heads.

- **The Committee** recommended that the Ministry of Tribal Affairs (Ministry) should direct all Ministries to earmark funds according to the prescribed percentage allocation of their total scheme outlays. Further, it recommended that the Ministry ask the Department of Rural Development to allocate funds for its flagship Schemes like MGNREGA under TSP to ensure that benefits of these Schemes reach to tribal people. The Committee also recommended that the Ministry direct all Ministries to furnish a bi-annual statement regarding scheme-wise expenditure under TSP.

- **Allocation of funds by states:** The Committee noted that according to the guidelines for earmarking funds to states under TSP, the state governments are required to allocate funds out of their total plan outlays, in proportion to their tribal population. It noted that some States are not adhering to these guidelines. For example, in 2015-16 and 2016-17, Madhya Pradesh did not allocate funds as per the proportion of tribal population of these States. The Committee recommended that the Ministry pursue the matter with all states and ensure that funds towards TSP are earmarked as per the guidelines.

- **Under-utilisation of allocation by states:** The Committee observed that for the years 2015-16 and 2016-17, many state governments are not fully utilizing funds allocated to states under the TSP. The Committee recommended that the Ministry should monitor state-wise expenditure of TSP expenditure, particularly in the tribal dominated States, by holding meetings with secretary level officers of the state governments on quarterly basis.

- **Shortfall in Health Centres:** The Committee observed that there is a shortfall of 1,240 Primary Health Centres (PHCs), 273 Community Health Centres (CHCs) and 6,503 sub-Centres in Tribal areas as on March 31, 2017. The Committee were informed that Ministry has formulated a proposal to ensure adequate health infrastructure in 94 Scheduled Tribes-dominated districts, where tribal population is 50% or more. The Committee noted that 40 of these districts still do not adequate health infrastructure in the form of PHCs. The Committee recommended that the Ministry should ensure availability of facilities and doctors in PHCs and CHCs by giving regular advisories to the state governments and concerned Ministries.

- **Data on beneficiaries:** The Committee noted the Ministry did not have the data of the beneficiaries of various schemes implemented by different Ministries under TSP. It noted that the Ministry stated that the status of implementation of various projects and their outcome is maintained by the concerned Ministries of the state governments. The Committee recommended that the Ministry should develop a mechanism to collect data of performance of various schemes, for assessment of the success of TSP

Setting up of Post Bank of India as a Payments Bank- Scope, Objectives, and Framework Standing Committee Report Summary

- **The Standing Committee** on Information Technology (Chairperson: Mr. Anurag Singh Thakur) submitted its report on 'Setting up of Post Bank of India as a Payments Bank- Scope, Objectives, and Framework' on January 8, 2019. The Indian Post Payment Bank (IPPB) is a financial service provider, launched with the mandate of improving financial inclusion through the postal network in the country. The IPPB is a public sector company under the Department of Posts. Key observations and recommendations of the Committee include:

- **Aadhar-based authentication:** The Committee stated that Aadhar-based authentication is vital for financial inclusion. Therefore, the Committee was concerned about the potential impact of the Supreme Court judgement on the IPPB (the Court struck down Aadhar linkage where no subsidies or benefits were involved). The Committee observed that discontinuation of Aadhar-based authentication had a negative impact on the vision and business model of IPPB. It recommended that IPPB should take up the matter with UIDAI/RBI for suggesting alternative modes of authentication.

- **Recruitment in IPPB:** The Committee noted that IPPB was recruiting staff through direct recruitment, deputation from Public Sector Banks, and professional search firms for specialised resources. However, out of 3,500 banking professionals proposed to be employed, IPPB has only recruited 2,152 employees so far. The Committee recommended that the recruitment process should be expedited, and that it be informed of the steps taken by IPPB in this regard.

- **Service-level agreements:** In order to ensure that the work of Department of Posts (DoP) does not get affected while performing IPPB-related activities, IPPB have built Service-Level Agreements (SLAs) in consultation with DoP. The SLAs specify details related to working hours, transaction limits, and turnaround time for business operations. The Committee recommended that DoP and IPPB should develop a mechanism to monitor that all elements of SLAs are fully practiced to ensure long-term sustenance of IPPB. Further, the IPPB and DoP should periodically review the SLAs.

- **Training of users:** The Committee noted that training of end users was one of the major challenges faced by IPPB. In this context, it recommended that training courses should be conducted periodically for end users to upgrade their skills. Further, it recommended that IPPB should explore the possibility of associating their staff with schemes under the Digital India programme such as National Digital Literacy Mission.

- **Competitiveness:** The Committee noted that IPPB is likely to face stiff competition from private payment banks (such as Airtel, Jio, and Paytm payment banks). It observed that that the 4% interest rate offered by IPPB is lower compared to other payment banks. In order to increase their customer base and compete with private players, the Committee recommended that the current interest rate may be reviewed.

- **Digital literacy:** The Committee observed that IPPB had only 9,000 merchants on the ground, of which 10% were active. Given the low level of merchants enabled on the ground, the Committee recommended that IPPB should focus on digital literacy, consumer education, and hand-holding of merchants in rural and remote areas.

Accelerated Irrigation Benefits Programme CAG Audit Report Summary Accelerated Irrigation Benefits Programme

- **The Comptroller and Auditor General of India** (CAG) released a performance audit of the Accelerated Irrigation Benefits Programme on January 8, 2019. The Accelerated Irrigation Benefits Programme (AIBP) was launched in 1996 as a central assistance programme and is currently implemented by the Ministry of Water Resources, River Development, and Ganga Rejuvenation. AIBP was initiated with the aim of accelerating the implementation of irrigation projects that exceed the resource capabilities of states. Key findings and recommendations include:

- **Irregular inclusion of projects:** AIBP provides eligibility criteria such as the cost of a project, the stipulated time period, and the stage of completion, among others, for the inclusion of projects and schemes under its purview. In its report, the CAG noted that of the 201 Major, Medium Irrigation (MMI) projects undertaken between 2008-17 (the period covered by the audit), 30 projects were in violation of the criteria prescribed. Amongst Minor Irrigation (MI) schemes, the audit found 41 cases of inclusion of schemes that violated criteria. It found that these irregularities in inclusion had led to losses amounting to Rs 3,718 crore.

- **Benefit Cost Ratio:** The Benefit Cost Ratio (BCR), which measures the ratio of annual benefits from irrigation to the annual cost of providing those benefits, is essential for determining the economic feasibility of a project. The CAG observed that in 28 MMI projects in nine states and 82 MI schemes in 10 states, uniform parameters were not used for the calculation of BCR. Inadequate surveys and assessments of water availability, among other deficiencies, contributed to inaccuracies in calculated BCRs. The report observed that actual BCRs were likely lower than those calculated, leading to modifications in design and revision of cost estimates. As a remedy, the CAG recommended that BCRs for projects be reviewed continuously and be based on realistic assumptions.

- **Delay in releasing funds:** Between 2007-17, the Ministry of Water Resources, River Development, and Ganga Rejuvenation released Rs 19,184 crore for 115 MMI projects and Rs 12,809 crore for all MI schemes. As per the CAG report, there was short release of funds in various projects, resulting in non-realisation of revenues amounting to Rs 1,251 crore. The audit attributed this shortfall to delays in the submission of proposals by states and lapses in the release of funds by state governments. Additionally, the report found that Utilisation Certificates for funds amounting to Rs 2,187 crore were not submitted to the Ministry of Water Resources in time. The CAG recommended that state governments be held responsible for conducting adequate checks on work and creating systems of accountability for deficient execution.

- **Diversion of funds:** Test checks of project reports found that funds to grantees had been diverted and utilised for expenditures not permissible under AIBP. The CAG report determined that a total of Rs 1,578 crore were diverted in 13 states, as a result of which projects were deprived of funds necessary for timely completion. The report also highlighted financial irregularities caused by parking of funds in bank accounts and fraudulent expenditures.

- **Lack of deterrents:** As per AIBP guidelines, failure to complete a project on time would result in the grants being treated as loans that would later be recovered from the state government. In its audit, the CAG found that the Ministry of Water Resources had failed to invoke this provision for 105 projects facing delays ranging from one year to 18 years. This had in turn led to a weakening of the provision as a deterrent against slow implementation.

- **Cost overrun:** Delays in the implementation of projects, inefficient work management, combined with changes in the scope of projects resulted in a cost overrun in 84 projects from Rs 40,943 crore to Rs 1,20,772 crore. The CAG found that cost overruns were caused by factors related to: (i) delays in land acquisition, (ii) delays in rehabilitation and resettlement measures mandated by the Land Acquisition Act, and (iii) undue favour given to contractors. The CAG noted that some of these delays could have been avoided and pointed to deficiencies in monitoring by central and state agencies. It recommended that the Ministry of Water Resources, River Development, and Ganga Rejuvenation ensure regular monitoring of performance at state and central levels and intensify efforts towards completion of projects.

Capital Acquisition in Indian Air Force CAG Report Summary

- **The Comptroller and Auditor General of India** (CAG) released a performance audit of Capital Acquisition in the Indian Air Force on February 13, 2019. The audit examined 11 contracts of capital acquisition signed between 2012-13 and 2017-18, with a total value of approximately Rs 95,000 crore. In addition to examining systemic issues in the acquisition process, the CAG also reviewed the procurement process of 36 Medium Multi-Role Combat Aircraft (MMRCA) through an Inter-Governmental Agreement with the Government of France. Key observations and recommendations of the CAG include:

- **Planning and tendering process:** The process of acquisition of air assets starts with the formulation of user requirements known as the Air Staff Qualitative Requirements (ASQR). CAG observed that the formulation of ASQR is the most crucial stage in the defence acquisition process as it determines the quality, price, and competition. The CAG had recommended in 2007 that ASQRs should be stated in terms of functional parameters, which are measurable. However, it noted that instead of using functional parameters, the Indian Air Force (IAF) made the ASQRs exhaustive and included technical details. This led to situations where none of the vendors was able to meet the ASQRs. Further, the ASQRs were repeatedly changed during the procurement process. In this context, the CAG repeated its recommendation that ASQRs should be stated in terms of functional parameters. Further, it recommended that technical experts with knowledge of the systems being considered could be involved in the acquisition process.

- **Solicitation of Offers:** Offers are solicited from various vendors by issuing a Request for Proposal (RFP). Vendors respond to the RFP by making technical and commercial bids. CAG noted that there was limited competition during this process. The number of vendors who responded to the RFP were less than those invited to bid. This was because of various reasons including delays in the acquisition system and narrowly defined ASQRs. CAG recommended that the Defence Ministry should explore open competitive tendering in case of non-strategic items (such as basic trainer aircraft, and weather radar).

- **Technical evaluation:** The CAG noted lack of consistency in technical evaluation across procurement cases. In some cases, such as Doppler Weather Radars and Attack Helicopter, technical bids were rejected when vendors failed to meet all the ASQR parameters. However, in the case of MMRCA and Heavy Lift Helicopters, bids were technically qualified even when they did not meet critical ASQRs.

- **Commercial evaluation:** A Contract Negotiation Committee (CNC) is constituted to evaluate the price bid and negotiate the final contract. Before opening the price bid the CNC is required to estimate the benchmark price, which is used to assess the various bids. The CAG noted that in eight cases, the benchmark price was significantly different from the bid price. It observed that repeated off-the mark pricing reveals inability to estimate the market price.

- **Organisational issues:** The CAG noted that delays in acquisition were essentially due to a complex and multi-level approval process. From the initiation of the case to the signing of the contract, each procurement case goes through 11 stages. The CAG stated that the current acquisition system is unlikely to support the operational preparedness of the IAF and recommended that the Defence Ministry may undertake structural reforms of the entire acquisition process.

- **Acquisition of MMRCA:** The CAG examined the procurement process of the MMRCA. It observed that IAF had proposed in August 2000 to acquire 126 Mirage 2000 II aircraft. This proposal was discarded in 2004, and in 2007 a decision was taken to acquire 126 Rafale aircraft from Dassault Aviation. However, the commercial negotiations with Dassault could not be concluded. In 2015, a decision was made to procure 36 Rafale aircraft through an Inter-Governmental Agreement (IGA) with the French government. While comparing these two deals, the CAG stated that price of the 2015 deal was less than the price of the 2007 deal, by 2.86 per cent. Further, the CAG noted that the 2007 deal included a Bank Guarantee from the French government. This meant that in case of default by the vendor, the French government would provide payment. However, the 2015 deal did not include a Bank Guarantee.

PM Modi launches Pradhan Mantri Shram Yogi Maan-dhan (PM-SYM) Yojana Posted On: 05 MAR 2019 3:19PM by PIB Delhi

- **The Prime Minister**, Shri Narendra Modi, today, launched the Pradhan Mantri Shram Yogi Maan-dhan (PM-SYM) Yojana at Vastral in Gujarat. He also distributed the PM-SYM pension cards to select beneficiaries. Over two crore workers at three lakh Common Service Centers across the country witnessed the launch event through video conference

- **Terming it as a historic day,** the Prime Minister dedicated PM-SYM Yojana to the forty two crore strong unorganized sector workers in the country. He said that the scheme will assure a monthly pension of Rs.3000 for the enrolled unorganized sector workers during their old age. It is for the first time since independence that such a scheme is envisaged for the crores of workers engaged in the informal sector, PM added.

- **The Prime Minister** explained in detail about the benefits of PM-SYM. A contribution of equal amount as that of the beneficiary will be made by the Union Government, PM said. He appealed to the informal sector workers earning less than Rs.15000 per month to enroll as beneficiaries in the nearby Common Service Centre.

- **Assuring that** there would not be any hassles with the enrollment process, Modi told the gathering that only a form needs to be filled with Aadhar number and bank details. The cost incurred by the Common Service Centre for enrolling a beneficiary will be borne by the Union Government. "This is the miracle of Digital India", PM said.

- **The Prime Minister** appealed to citizens to help and enroll in PM-SYM, those working in the unorganized sector, whether it is in one's house or in the neighborhood. He said that such actions by the affluent class will greatly benefit the poor. He added that respecting dignity of labour will take the nation forward.

- **The Prime Minister** said that the various schemes initiated by the Union Government like Ayushman Bharat, Pradhan Mantri Jeevan Jyoti Bima Yojana, Pradhan Mantri Suraksha Bima Yojana, PM Awas Yojana, Ujjwala Yojana, Saubhagya Yojana, and Swacch Bharat specifically target those working in unorganized sector. He also mentioned about the initiatives taken the government for the empowerment of women and girl children in the country.

- **The PM-SYM along** with the health coverage provided under 'Ayushman Bharat' and life & disability coverage provided under 'Pradhan Mantri Jeevan Jyoti Bima Yojana' and 'Pradhan Mantri Suraksha Bima Yojana, will ensure comprehensive social security coverage for the workers in the unorganized sector at their old age.

World's largest pension scheme has begun in India today: Union Minister Shri Piyush Goyal

- **Around 42 crore employees** in unorganized sector covered under Pradhan Mantri Shram Yogi Mandhan Yojana: Shri Piyush Goyal Posted On: 05 MAR 2019 3:15PM by PIB Mumbai

- **Union Minister for Railways and Coal**, Shri Piyush Goyal has said that Pradhan Mantri Shram Yogi Mandhan (PM- SYM) Yojana is the world's largest pension scheme. The Minister said that though the unorganized sector has been contributing in a significant manner towards the national GDP, the sector remained neglected. He said that the Government has understood the woes of the people in the sector and has come out with PM-SYM Yojana to address the same. The Minister was speaking at the launch of the scheme in Mumbai today.

- **The scheme was launched by the Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi in Gandhinagar, Gujarat today.** Shri Goyal said that the promptness with which the scheme has been launched shows the Government's willingness in reaching out to the needy people in the unorganized sector. The scheme was announced in the Interim Budget 2019, on 1st February, 2019; and enrolment into the scheme began on 15th February, 2019, within a very short duration, said the Minister.

- **The Minister informed** that there are around 42 crore people employed in the unorganized sector and that the government's aim is to reach out to the last mile. He also appealed to everyone to reach out to as many citizens as possible so that the beneficiaries are able to reap the benefits of the scheme.

- **The Minister exhorted** the people of the country to step in and enrol those working in our homes and neighbourhood into the scheme, by paying the contribution on their behalf. He said that he will pay the contribution for the employees working under him. In his video message, Chief Minister of Maharashtra, Shri Devendra Fadnavis appreciated the scheme and applauded Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi for the initiative.

- **On the occasion,** Minister for Labour and Skill Development, Government of Maharashtra, Shri Sambhaji Patil Nilangekar said that Maharashtra is at the first position, with 2,86,487 people have registered under this scheme till now. He assured that unorganized sector employees of the state will soon be included under the scheme. Shri Sambhaji said that there was a long-pending demand from the unorganized sector to bring a pension scheme, which is now fulfilled through PM – SYM Yojana. On the occasion, select 25 beneficiaries from various parts of Maharashtra received PM-SYM cards.

- **Backgrounder on the scheme** Following are the salient Features of PM-SYM: Minimum Assured Pension: Each subscriber under the PM-SYM, shall receive minimum assured pension of Rs 3000/- per month after attaining the age of 60 years.

- **Family Pension:** During the receipt of pension, if the subscriber dies, the spouse of the beneficiary shall be entitled to receive 50% of the pension received by the beneficiary as family pension. Family pension is applicable only to spouse.

- **(iii) If a beneficiary** has given regular contribution and died due to any cause (before age of 60 years), his/her spouse will be entitled to join and continue the scheme subsequently by payment of regular contribution or exit the scheme as per provisions of exit and withdrawal.

- **Contribution by the Subscriber:** The subscriber's contributions to PM-SYM shall be made through 'auto-debit' facility from his/ her savings bank account/ Jan- Dhan account. The subscriber is required to contribute the prescribed contribution amount from the age of joining PM-SYM till the age of 60 years.

- **Matching contribution by the Central Government:** PM-SYM is a voluntary and contributory pension scheme on a 50:50 basis where prescribed age-specific contribution shall be made by the beneficiary and the matching contribution by the Central Government as per the chart. For example, if a person enters the scheme at an age of 29 years, he is required to contribute Rs 100/ - per month till the age of 60 years. An equal amount of Rs 100/- will be contributed by the Central Government.

- **The unorganised workers mostly engaged** as home based workers, street vendors, mid-day meal workers, head loaders, brick kiln workers, cobblers, rag pickers, domestic workers, washer men, rickshaw pullers, landless labourers, own account workers, agricultural workers, construction workers, beedi workers, handloom workers, leather workers, audio- visual workers and similar other occupations whose monthly income is Rs 15,000/ per month or less and belong to the entry age group of 18-40 years are eligible for the scheme. They should not be covered under New Pension Scheme (NPS), Employees' State Insurance Corporation (ESIC) scheme or Employees' Provident Fund Organisation (EPFO). Further, he/she should not be an income tax payer.

The first-of-its-kind India Jewellery Park to come up at Navi Mumbai soon

- **India to achieve** gem and jewellery export target of USD 75 billion by 2025: Commerce Minister Shri Suresh Prabhu Posted On: 05 MAR 2019 5:36PM by PIB Mumbai

- **Union Minister** for Commerce & Industry and Civil Aviation Shri Suresh Prabhu has said that the Indian jewellery industry plays an important role in the economy of the country. It accounts for 7% of GDP and 14% of merchandise exports and provides direct employment to 5 million people. To enable it to innovate and cater to the global market, it is essential to provide a suitable ecosystem. He was speaking at the foundation stone laying ceremony of India Jewellery Park, in Navi Mumbai today.

- **The Minister** expressed confidence that the industry will achieve the export target of USD 75 billion by 2025, up from the current figure of USD 42 billion annually. India Jewellery Park is an integrated industrial park with all facilities under one roof. The Park will have manufacturing units, commercial areas, residences for industrial workers, and commercial support services.

- **"Mumbai is the** largest exporter of gem & jewellery, accounting for USD 28,320.94 million (69% of India's total exports of gems and jewellery). India Jewellery Park, the first-of-its-kind Jewellery Park, will transform the jewellery industry in the state of Maharashtra and India", said the Chief Minister of Maharashtra, Shri Devendra Fadnavis.

- **He further** said that Jewellery Park will generate additional 1 lakh jobs in the sector. He also assured to provide a single-window system at the project site. He declared all possible help for Gem and Jewellery University and low-cost housing for artisans under PMAY. The State Government has always supported this labour-intensive sector and will continue to support it, said the CM.

- **India Jewellery Park,** Mumbai is a project of Gem & Jewellery Export Promotion Council (GJEPC). GJEPC will be entrusted to construct the Park as a Special Purpose Vehicle. The project is planned with a total project investment of Rs.14,467 crore including land, building and raw materials, which will generate an annual turnover to the tune of Rs. 41,467.50 crore under current market conditions, a major part of which will be for exports. India Jewellery Park is expected to enhance manufacturing, investment, export growth and overall economic development of Maharashtra and India.

- **Minister for Industries** & Mining, Government of Maharashtra, Shri Subhash Desai; Chairman, GJEPC, Shri Pramod Kumar Agrawal and other dignitaries were present on the occasion.

- **About GJEPC:** The Gem & Jewellery Export Promotion Council (GJEPC) was set up by the Ministry of Commerce and industry, Government of India in 1966. It is the apex body of the gems & jewellery industry. Today, it represents over 6,800 exporters in the sector. With headquarters in Mumbai, the GJEPC has Regional Offices in New Delhi, Kolkata, Chennai, Surat and Jaipur, all of which are major centres for the industry. It thus has a wide reach and is able to have a close interaction with members to serve them in a direct and meaningful manner. Over the past decades, the GJEPC has emerged as one of the most active EPCs, and has continuously strived to expand its reach and depth in its promotional activities as well as widen and increase services to its members

BOLD–QIT project

- **BOLD-QIT** is the project to install technical systems under the Comprehensive Integrated Border Management System (CIBMS), which enables BSF to equip Indo-Bangla borders with different kind of sensors in unfenced riverine area of Brahmaputra and its tributaries.

- **What is CIBMS?** The concept of CIBMS is the integration of manpower, sensors and command and control to improve situational awareness and facilitate quick response to emerging situations. Among major components of CIBMS is the 'virtual fence'. The second component is the command and control, which will help in optimum use of resources for border management. Another component is power management to keep CIBMS running.

- **Need for BOLD- QIT project:** Border Security Force is responsible for safeguarding of 4,096 Km long International Border with Bangladesh. At various places, it is not possible to erect Border Fence due to the geographical barriers. The 61 Kms of Border area in District Dhubri, Assam where River Brahmaputra enters into Bangladesh is consisting of vast char lands and innumerable river channels thus making border guarding in this area, a daunting task especially during rainy season.

- **The implementation** of this project will not only help BSF to curb all type of cross border crimes but also provide respite to the troops from round the clock human surveillance.

- **Significance and the need for smart borders:** Smart borders on one hand allow seamless movement of authorized people and goods, while on the other, minimise cross-border security challenges using innovation and technology enablement. Over the long term, smart border management will also have to incorporate systems that digitally monitor patterns of activity through and around border areas to root out organised crime and anti-national events.

World Wildlife Day

- **Theme: 'Life below Water: for People and Planet'.** The theme aligns with goal 14 of UN Sustainable Development Goals.

- **Relevance of theme:** Significance of oceans: The ocean contains nearly 200,000 identified species, but actual numbers may be in the millions. Globally, the market value of marine and coastal resources and industries is estimated at US$3 trillion per year, about 5% of global GDP. Over three billion people depend on marine and coastal biodiversity for their livelihoods. Marine wildlife has sustained human civilization and development for millennia, from providing food and nourishment, to material for handicraft and construction. It has also enriched our lives culturally, spiritually, and recreationally in different ways.

- **Concerns and the need for conservation:** The capacity of life below water to provide these services is severely impacted, as our planet's oceans and the species that live within it are under assault from an onslaught of threats. As much as 40% of the ocean is now heavily affected by the most significant and direct threat of over exploitation of marine species as well as other threats such as pollution, loss of coastal habitats and climate change.

- **These threats** have a strong impact on the lives and livelihoods of those who depend on marine ecosystem services, particularly women and men in coastal communities.

- **Background:** On 20 December 2013, at its 68th session, the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) proclaimed 3 March, the day of signature of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), as UN World Wildlife Day to celebrate and raise awareness of the world's wild animals and plants.

- **About CITES:** The Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) is an international regulatory treaty between 183 party states. It was formed in 1973 and regulates the international trade in over 35,000 wild species of plants and animals.

- **The focus** of the convention is not solely on the protection of species. It also promotes controlled trade that is not detrimental to the sustainability of wild species.

- **How does CITES work?** The convention works primarily through a system of classification and licensing. Wild species are categorised in Appendices I to III. This often reflects species' threat status on the Red List of the IUCN, the International Union for Conservation of Nature's Red List of Threatened Species first created in 1964.

- **Appendix I** prohibits trade in species classified as highly endangered. Appendix II allows trade under very specific conditions. This requires exporting countries obtain a permit, but not the importing country. Appendix III species require only a certificate of origin to be traded.

- **National CITES management** authorities may issue permits once scientific authorities show non-detriment findings. In other words, scientific evidence must demonstrate that species sustainability will not be adversely affected by trade. Where data is lacking, the precautionary principle applies. CITES is legally binding on state parties to the convention, which are obliged to adopt their own domestic legislation to implement its goals.

PSBloansin59minutes.com

- **About the Portal "PSBLoansin59min":** The portal was launched in November to provide credit of up to Rs 1 crore to micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs) in just 59 minutes.

- **It is one** of its kind platforms in MSME segment which integrates advanced fintech to ensure seamless loan approval and management. The loans are undertaken without human intervention till sanction and or disbursement stage.

- **How it works?** The Portal sets a new benchmark in loan processing and reduces the turnaround time from 20-25 days to 59 minutes. Subsequent to this in principle approval, the loan will be disbursed in 7-8 working days.

- **The solution** uses sophisticated algorithms to read and analyse data points from various sources such as IT returns, GST data, bank statements, MCA21 etc. in less than an hour while capturing the applicant's basic details.

- **The system** simplifies the decision making process for a loan officer as the final output provides a summary of credit, valuation and verification on a user-friendly dashboard in real time.

National Common Mobility Card (NCMC)

- **Key features:** Dubbed as 'One Nation One Card', the inter-operable transport card would allow the holders to pay for their bus travel, toll taxes, parking charges, retail shopping and even withdraw money. This card runs on RuPay card. With the advent of this indigenously-developed and one-of-its-kind card, the country is no longer required to be dependent on foreign technology.

- **The stored value** on card supports offline transaction across all travel needs with minimal financial risk to involved stakeholders. Ministry of housing & urban affairs brought to the fore the National Common Mobility Card (NCMC) to enable seamless travel by different metros and other transport systems across the country besides retail shopping and purchases.

- **Need for and significance of NCMC:** Public transport is extensively used across India as the economical and convenient mode of commuting for all classes of society. Cash continues to be the most preferred mode of fare payments across the public transport.

- **However,** there are multiple challenges associated with the cash payment such as cash handling, revenue leakages, cash reconciliation etc. Various initiatives have been taken by transit operators to automate and digitize the fare collection using Automatic Fare Collection System (AFC).

- **The introduction** of closed loop cards issued by these operators helped to digitize the fare collection to a significant extent. However, the restricted usability of these payment instruments limits the digital adoption by customers.

ISRO's Young Scientist programme

- **Highlights of the programme:** The programme aims at imparting basic knowledge on space technology, space science and space applications to the younger ones with the intent of arousing their interest in the emerging areas of space activities. Under the programme, three students each will be selected to participate in it every year from each state and union territory, covering CBSE, ICSE and state syllabus.

- **The eligibility** for being chosen for the programme includes those students who have finished 8th standard and are currently studying in the 9th standard.

- **The selection** will be based on the academic performance and extracurricular activities of the students, as per the selection criteria already circulated to the chief secretaries of the states and administrators of Union Territories. The students belonging to rural areas have been given special weightage under the selection criteria set by ISRO.

The New Delhi Declaration on Asian Rhinos 2019

- **2nd Asian Rhino** Range Countries meeting was held at New Delhi and organised by the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change of Government of India in collaboration with the IUCN Asian Rhino Specialist Group, WWF- India and Aaranyak.

- **Key facts:** India will collaborate with Bhutan, Nepal, Indonesia and Malaysia to increase the population of three species of Asian rhinos, including the Greater one-horned rhinoceros found in the Indian sub-continent. The declaration was signed to conserve and review the population of the Greater one-horned, Javan and Sumatran rhinos every four years to reassess the need for joint actions to secure their future.

- **The declaration** includes undertaking studies on health issues of the rhinos, their potential diseases and taking necessary steps; collaborating and strengthening wildlife forensics for the purpose of investigation and strengthening of transboundary collaboration among India, Nepal and Bhutan for the conservation and protection of the Greater one-horned rhino.

- **The twelve point strategic actions outlined the following actions:** To collaborate to strengthen protection regimes, strategic information gathering, and real time sharing of actionable information on rhino crime and its horn trade to secure the rhino population within and between range countries. To initiate research on various habitat parameters including invasive species threatening the suitable habitats of Asian rhinos and take appropriate steps to optimally manage the habitats.

- **To explore** possibilities of expanding rhino ranges within country or between rhino range countries for optimal population management. To strengthen transboundary collaboration among India, Nepal, and Bhutan for the greater one-horned rhino conservation and protection. To identify connectivity and corridors across international boundaries and keep them functional, safe and secure for free movement of Asian rhinos and other wildlife.

- **To increase** the engagement of the local communities as stewards to secure the future of rhinos in range countries. To initiate proactive monitoring on potential adverse impacts of climate change on rhino health and their habitats in range countries. To undertake studies on Rhino health issues & potential diseases and take necessary steps for management intervention. To regularly organize exposure visits for managers and frontline staffs of the rhino range countries and to document the best practices for wider dissemination.

- **To collaborate** and strengthen wildlife forensics for the purpose of investigation. To accelerate natural and conservation breeding of critically endangered Sumatran rhino including best use of all available individuals and technologies.

- **To call to the attention** of all countries that possible opening of international trade of rhino horn and other derivatives will have a severe detrimental impact on rhino populations in Asian rhino range countries.

- **Key facts:** The greater one-horned rhinoceros is the largest of the three Asian rhinos and, together with African white rhinos, is the largest of all rhino species. It is listed as Vulnerable on the IUCN Red List. With at least half of the total population, India's Kaziranga National Park remains the key reserve for this species. Two species of rhino in Asia—Javan and Sumatran—are critically endangered.

Crop burning raises risk of respiratory illness threefold, says IFPRI study

- **The findings** were based on a study of the health records of 250,000 people in Haryana (which sees a spike in crop burning episodes in winter), and Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu, which don't see similar burning episodes. The study is to appear in the peer-reviewed International Journal of Epidemiology.

- **Highlights of the study:** In Haryana, 5.4% of surveyed individuals reported suffering from ARI (Acute Respiratory Infection) whereas the reported ARI symptoms in southern States was only 0.1%.

- **Among those** who reported suffering from ARI, 83% also reported receiving treatment for ARI at a private or public medical facility. Whereas high-intensity fire exposure was virtually absent in south India, 17.5% of individuals in Haryana lived in a district where 100 or more fires per day were observed by the satellite.

- **Background:** For about a decade now, Delhi has been complaining about the practice of stubble burning, holding it responsible for the abysmal air quality in the capital in winter. In 2013, the National Green Tribunal (NGT) issued a directive to Punjab, Haryana and Uttar Pradesh, asking them to ban stubble burning.

- **The Environment Ministers** of these States as well as top officials at the Centre declared a "zero tolerance" policy on the burning of stubble, which has been estimated to contribute anywhere from 7% to 78% of the particulate matter-emission load in Delhi during winter.

- **What is stubble burning?** Stubble burning is a common practice followed by farmers to prepare fields for sowing of wheat in November as there is little time left between the harvesting of paddy and sowing of wheat. Stubble burning results in emission of harmful gases such carbon diaoxide, sulphur dioxide, nitrogen dioxide along with particulate matter.

- **Concern of the Farmers: Why stubble burning?** Even though farmers are aware that the burning of straw is harmful to health, they do not have alternatives for utilising them effectively. The farmers are ill-equipped to deal with waste because they cannot afford the new technology that is available to handle the waste material.

- **Experts say** that with less income due to crop damage, farmers are likely to be inclined to light up their fields to cut costs and not spend on scientific ways of stubble management. It costs Rs 1,500-3,000 per acre for stubble management, depending on the equipment and method.

- **Alternative solutions that can avoid Stubble Burning:** There is great potential for making investments in paddy straw-based power plants which can help avoid stubble burning to a large extent and also create employment opportunities.

- **Incorporation** of crop residues in the soil can improve soil moisture and help activate the growth of soil microorganisms for better plant growth. Convert the removed residues into enriched organic manure through composting. New opportunities for industrial use such as extraction of yeast protein can be explored through scientific research.

- **Need of the hour:** Unless Financial assistance is to be provided by the Centre for boosting farm mechanisation, it is difficult to completely stop stubble burning. States needs to make alternative arrangements for consumption of paddy straw into the soil as per the directions of the NGT.

Red Flag 2019:

- **Context: Red Flag 19 military drill is being held in the US.** Exercise Red Flag is an advanced aerial combat training exercise held several times a year by the United States Air Force. The exercise offers realistic air-combat training for military pilots and other flight crew members from the U.S., NATO and other allied countries.

Solar powerhouse:

- **Summary:** The editorial discusses about India's rooftop solar power potential, why the outreach among residential consumers is low and what needs to be done.

- **Context:** In February, the Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs approved phase 2 of the grid-connected rooftop solar programme, with a focus on the residential sector.

- **Its outreach:** India has set an ambitious target of achieving 40 GW of rooftop solar capacity by 2022. However, while there has been progress on rooftop solar installations among industries and commercial consumers, the uptake among residential consumers has been slow.

- **Why uptake among residential consumers has been slow?** They don't have enough information about it. There is no single source to access information, evaluate benefits and disadvantages, and examine if any government support (such as a financial subsidy) is available.

- **Need of the hour:** Devise simple, well-designed and creative ways to disseminate information. Information must be made easily available to the consumers on the amount of shadow-free roof area needed for generating a unit of electricity and pricing; operating the system, after-sales maintenance and support; and reliable rooftop solar vendors.

- **The local electricity** linesmen, electricity inspectors, and other nodal officials in the electricity department also have key roles to play. Building their capacities to disseminate such information and handle consumer queries and concerns, and providing basic training in billing and metering for solar power can go a long way in improving consumers' experience.

- **Objective information** must be put out through various avenues, so that it is accessible to all segments of the population and in local languages. Such awareness drives will reach larger audiences. Information kiosks can be set up in public institutions like banks to offer information on the technology, as well as on practical issues such as guidance on selecting vendors.

- **A robust feedback** mechanism can be put in place for consumers to share their experiences with others.

- **Resident welfare associations (RWAs)** can tie up with vendors to organise demonstration programmes, so that consumers can observe, operate and understand how the system works.

- **Awareness building sessions** need to be socially inclusive and should take place during periods when consumers are likely to be at home.

Implementation of District Mineral Foundation and Pradhan Mantri Khanij Kshetra Kalyan Yojana

- **The Standing Committee** on Coal and Steel (Chair: Prof. Chintamani Malviya) submitted its report on 'Implementation of District Mineral Foundation (DMF) and Pradhan Mantri Khanij Kshetra Kalyan Yojana (PMKKKY)' on December 27, 2018.

- **The Mines and Minerals (Development and Regulation) Act**, 1957 was amended in 2015 to enable the state governments to set up DMFs. The DMFs seek to work for the benefit of persons in districts affected by mining related operations. Under the Act, mining lease holders are required to make contribution to DMF funds. This contribution is equivalent to a certain percentage of the royalty paid by them. PMKKKY was launched in 2015 to implement the projects approved by DMFs in coordination with the ongoing schemes of the central government and state governments.

- **Key observations and recommendations of the Committee include:** Allocation of funds: The Committee observed that under PMKKKY, 60% of the DMF funds are required to be utilised for projects in high priority sectors, such as health, education, drinking water, sanitation and environment, among others. It noted that this is resulting in spending getting prioritised over certain sectors and on people and areas who may not be directly affected by mining activities. The Committee recommended that the requirement to use 60% funds in high priority sectors should be done away with. Instead, 60% of the funds must be spent on the people living in areas directly affected by mining related operations.

- **Implementation:** The Committee observed that till August 2018, Rs 21,235 crore has been collected under DMFs. Of this, projects worth Rs 15,548 crore have been sanctioned. It also observed that out of the 81,624 projects sanctioned, only 22,026 projects worth Rs 4,888 crore have been completed, reflecting non-initiation of projects and slow spending pattern. The Committee recommended that the Ministry of Mines should put a monitoring mechanism in place for timely allocation and utilisation of funds. Further, provisions must be made for fixing accountability in case of unnecessary delays in implementation.

- **Composition of DMF:** The Committee noted that composition of DMFs specified by state governments is dominated by bureaucrats in most states, without much representation of public representatives. The Committee recommended that the local Member(s) of Parliament must be appointed as the Chairman of the Governing Council of the respective DMF, for which the Ministry may urgently notify revised guidelines.

- **Social audit:** The Committee noted that feedback from the people living in the mining affected areas is important in determining the adequacy and efficiency of DMFs in those areas. This will provide these people an opportunity to scrutinise the developmental initiatives being implemented for them. It will also make them aware of their rights and entitlements under the DMF. The Committee recommended that the Ministry may prescribe for social audits of DMFs, which would be conducted by the people living in mining affected areas.

- **Accountability:** The Committee noted that there is a lack of transparency and public accountability in the functioning of DMFs and their projects. It recommended that all relevant information (such as composition of DMF, funds collected, list of directly affected areas, and list of beneficiaries) should be publicly available. The Committee observed that the Ministry has developed national and district level portals with information on DMFs. It recommended that till such information is made available on portals, necessary steps may be taken for the dissemination of such information. This could be done by displaying the information at district and panchayat level offices, through public meetings, and awareness programmes.

- **Review mechanism:** The Committee observed that the Ministry has not taken any specific initiatives for achievement of the objectives of PMKKKY. It also observed that the meeting recently conducted with state governments for deliberation on implementation of PMKKKY was held only after suggestions of the Committee. It recommended that the Ministry should play a proactive role and make efforts to ensure proper implementation of projects by states. Further, the Ministry should hold review meetings at regular intervals, and regular follow up meetings every three months with state governments.

Performance of National Action Plan on Climate Change

- **The Committee on Estimates** (Chair: Dr. Murli Manohar Joshi) submitted its report on the performance of the National Action Plan On Climate Change (NAPCC) on December 10, 2018. The NAPCC was launched in June 2008 to deal with issues related to climate change.

- **Regulation of NAPCC:** The NAPCC comprises eight missions, including: (i) National Solar Mission, (ii) National Water Mission, and (iii) National Mission for a Green India. Each mission is anchored under a Ministry, which is responsible for its implementation, budgetary provisions, and its actionable priorities. The Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEF) is the coordinating Ministry of NAPCC. The broad policy initiatives of the Central Government are supplemented by actions at the level of state governments and Union Territories.

- **National Solar Mission:** The Committee noted that the Mission is expected to generate 1,00,000 MW by 2021-22, at an expected cost of Rs 6,00,000 crore. It noted that the funding requirement for the targeted solar power generation will be met from budgetary support, internal, and international financing. However, it expressed concerns about the lack of funds in relation to the targets under the Mission. It noted that the government's outlay for the 12th Plan period is Rs 13,690 crore, which is a fraction of the required investment. The Committee recommended that an analysis of financial support from each source be undertaken by the government and a revised mission document be brought out indicating the sources of financing.

- **National Mission on Enhanced Energy Efficiency:** The Committee noted that the Mission had under-utilised allocated funds. It noted that between 2010-11 and 2016-17, Rs 914 crore was the budgeted expenditure, which was revised to Rs 259 crore. Of this, only Rs 208 crore was spent. The Committee stated that one of the reasons for reduced allocation was delays in certain approvals. It recommended that the Ministry ensure that the funds are utilised for the schemes for which they have been allocated.

- **National Water Mission:** The Committee noted that the major components of the Mission include development of a comprehensive water database and assessment of impact of climate change on water resources. It was informed of an exercise undertaken to map all the water bodies in India. In this connection, the Committee referred to studies indicating that water availability data is unreliable due to use of outdated collection techniques and methodologies. Siloed information collection and sharing, especially between States, adds to costs and inefficiencies. The Committee recommended reviewing the techniques and methodologies of data collection and preparing a comprehensive database of all water bodies.

- **National Mission on Sustainable Habitat:** The Committee noted that the Mission aims at promoting sustainability of habitats though improvements in energy efficiency in buildings, urban planning, and improved management of solid and liquid waste. The objectives of the mission are being met through four schemes, including the Atal Mission for Rejuvenation and Urban Transformation, and the Swachh Bharat Mission. By 2031, these schemes are expected to reduce Green House Gas emission to the tune of 270 million tonnes.

- **The Committee** observed that the emphasis of the Mission is limited to urban habitats only and does not take into account the requirements of the rural habitats. It recommended that the Mission introduce a comprehensive and integrated plan encompassing the needs of both rural as well as urban habitats.

- **National Mission** for Sustainable Agriculture: The Committee noted that although the Mission focuses on different aspects of agriculture, it does not include income security of farmers. It observed that the crop insurance scheme and the MSP scheme implemented by the government have not made farming remunerative. It recommended that the government consider these elements for the Mission and apprise the Committee of steps taken in this regard.

Assessment of the Working of Tribal Sub-Plan

- **The Standing Committee** on External Affairs (Chairperson: Sh Ramesh Bais) submitted its report on 'Assessment of the Working of Tribal Sub-Plan' on January 3, 2019. The Tribal Sub-Plan (TSP) aims to bridge the gap between the Schedule Tribes (STs) and the general population with respect to all socio-economic development indicators in a time-bound manner. Key observations and recommendations of the Committee include:

- **Allocation of Funds:** The Committee noted that earlier, earmarking of funds towards TSP was done by the concerned Ministries against their Plan allocation. After the merger of Plan and non-Plan expenditure, the Ministry of Finance revised the rate of allocation of funds towards TSP in December 2017. Currently, there are 41 central Ministries implementing TSP through different schemes. The Committee noted that the allocation of funds towards TSP by various Ministries has been meagre after the merger of expenditure heads.

- **The Committee recommended** that the Ministry of Tribal Affairs (Ministry) should direct all Ministries to earmark funds according to the prescribed percentage allocation of their total scheme outlays. Further, it recommended that the Ministry ask the Department of Rural Development to allocate funds for its flagship Schemes like MGNREGA under TSP to ensure that benefits of these Schemes reach to tribal people. The Committee also recommended that the Ministry direct all Ministries to furnish a bi-annual statement regarding scheme-wise expenditure under TSP.

- **Allocation of funds by states:** The Committee noted that according to the guidelines for earmarking funds to states under TSP, the state governments are required to allocate funds out of their total plan outlays, in proportion to their tribal population. It noted that some States are not adhering to these guidelines. For example, in 2015-16 and 2016-17, Madhya Pradesh did not allocate funds as per the proportion of tribal population of these States. The Committee recommended that the Ministry pursue the matter with all states and ensure that funds towards TSP are earmarked as per the guidelines.

- **Under-utilisation of allocation by states:** The Committee observed that for the years 2015-16 and 2016-17, many state governments are not fully utilizing funds allocated to states under the TSP. The Committee recommended that the Ministry should monitor state-wise expenditure of TSP expenditure, particularly in the tribal dominated States, by holding meetings with secretary level officers of the state governments on quarterly basis.

- **Shortfall in Health Centres:** The Committee observed that there is a shortfall of 1,240 Primary Health Centres (PHCs), 273 Community Health Centres (CHCs) and 6,503 sub-Centres in Tribal areas as on March 31, 2017. The Committee were informed that Ministry has formulated a proposal to ensure adequate health infrastructure in 94 Scheduled Tribes-dominated districts, where tribal population is 50% or more. The Committee noted that 40 of these districts still do not adequate health infrastructure in the form of PHCs. The Committee recommended that the Ministry should ensure availability of facilities and doctors in PHCs and CHCs by giving regular advisories to the state governments and concerned Ministries.

- **Data on beneficiaries:** The Committee noted the Ministry did not have the data of the beneficiaries of various schemes implemented by different Ministries under TSP. It noted that the Ministry stated that the status of implementation of various projects and their outcome is maintained by the concerned Ministries of the state governments. The Committee recommended that the Ministry should develop a mechanism to collect data of performance of various schemes, for assessment of the success of TSP.

Agriculture Marketing and Role of Weekly Gramin Haats

- **The Standing Committee** on Agriculture (Chair: Mr. Hukmdev Narayan Yadav) submitted its report on 'Agriculture Marketing and Role of Weekly Gramin Haats' on January 3, 2019. Agriculture marketing in most states is regulated by the Agriculture Produce Marketing Committees (APMCs) established by state governments. Small and marginal farmers face various issues, such as inadequate marketable surplus, long distance to nearest APMC markets, and lack of transportation facilities, in selling their produce in APMC markets. Gramin Haats are markets in rural areas where such farmers can sell their produce without going to APMC markets. Key observations and recommendations of the Committee include:

- **Issues with APMCs:** The Committee observed that provisions of the APMC Acts are not implemented in their true sense, due to reasons such as: (i) limited number of traders in APMC markets thereby reducing competition, (ii) cartelisation of traders, and (iii) undue deductions in the form of commission charges and market fee. Further, the Committee observed that most farmers lack access to government procurement facilities including APMC markets. It recommended the central government to prioritise the creation of alternative marketing platforms, and hold stakeholder consultations for reforms in agriculture marketing.

- **Reforms in APMC Acts:** The Committee observed that APMC Acts need to be reformed urgently. The Acts are highly restrictive in promotion of multiple channels of marketing and competition in the system. The Committee noted that the central government is continuously pursuing state governments for reform in APMC Acts through model Acts. However, there is lukewarm response of state governments towards reforms in the Acts. It recommended that the central government constitute a Committee of Agriculture Ministers of all states to arrive at a consensus and design a legal framework for agriculture marketing.

- **Fees:** The Committee observed that market fee and commission charges are to be levied on traders, but instead are collected from farmers. In some states, market fee is levied even when it is not applicable. Also, market fee is levied multiple times on the same commodity when traded across multiple APMC markets, even within the state. It recommended that (i) fees and cess levied on agricultural produce should be removed, and (ii) the central government should hold discussions with state governments for the same.

- **Availability of markets:** The Committee observed that the average area served by an APMC market is 496 sq. km., which is much higher than the 80 sq. km. recommended by the National Commission on Farmers (Chair: Dr. M. S. Swaminathan) in 2006. The Committee noted that there is a need of 41,000 markets to meet this requirement. It recommended that the central government (i) initiate consultation with state governments to increase the number of agriculture markets, and (ii) create marketing infrastructure in states which do not have APMCs.

- **Infrastructure:** The Committee observed that infrastructure and other civic facilities in most APMC markets are in a very bad shape. Markets also fare poorly in banking, internet connectivity, and drying facilities. It recommended that the central government (i) initiate consultation with state governments to improve infrastructure, banking facility, digital connectivity and other facilities in these markets, and (ii) devise a centrally sponsored scheme for modernisation of APMC markets.

- **Gramin Haats:** The Committee noted that Gramin Haats can provide farmers direct access to consumers, require less transportation cost, and thus, may emerge as a viable alternative for agriculture marketing. The Committee recommended the central government to hold discussions with state governments to keep Gramin Haats out of the ambit of the APMC Acts.

- **GrAM scheme:** The Committee noted that the aim of the Gramin Agricultural Markets (GrAM) scheme is to improve the infrastructure and civic facilities in Gramin Haats across the country. Under the scheme, 4,600 of the existing 22,000 Haats will be developed and upgraded using MGNREGA and other government schemes. It recommended that the central government (i) increase the number of Haats being targeted under the scheme and ensure presence of a Haat in each panchayat of the country, and (ii) make the scheme a fully funded central scheme.

- **The Committee** noted that since the GrAM scheme requires funds available under various government schemes, inter-ministerial coordination is required at the central and state levels. It recommended that a monitoring committee should be formed for planning and time bound implementation of the scheme.

- **e-NAM scheme:** The Committee noted that 585 markets across 18 states are connected on the portal of the Electronic National Agriculture Market (e-NAM) scheme. The scheme networks the existing APMC markets with the aim to create a unified national market for electronic trading of agricultural commodities. The Committee recommended that the central government should increase the coverage of the scheme to states which do not have APMCs. It also recommended that the government should start a training program on e-NAM portal to enhance digital literacy of farmers and increase their participation.

Setting up of Post Bank of India as a Payments Bank- Scope, Objectives, and Framework

- **The Standing Committee** on Information Technology (Chairperson: Mr. Anurag Singh Thakur) submitted its report on 'Setting up of Post Bank of India as a Payments Bank- Scope, Objectives, and Framework' on January 8, 2019. The Indian Post Payment Bank (IPPB) is a financial service provider, launched with the mandate of improving financial inclusion through the postal network in the country. The IPPB is a public sector company under the Department of Posts. Key observations and recommendations of the Committee include:

- **Aadhar-based authentication:** The Committee stated that Aadhar-based authentication is vital for financial inclusion. Therefore, the Committee was concerned about the potential impact of the Supreme Court judgement on the IPPB (the Court struck down Aadhar linkage where no subsidies or benefits were involved). The Committee observed that discontinuation of Aadhar-based authentication had a negative impact on the vision and business model of IPPB. It recommended that IPPB should take up the matter with UIDAI/RBI for suggesting alternative modes of authentication.

- **Recruitment in IPPB:** The Committee noted that IPPB was recruiting staff through direct recruitment, deputation from Public Sector Banks, and professional search firms for specialised resources. However, out of 3,500 banking professionals proposed to be employed, IPPB has only recruited 2,152 employees so far. The Committee recommended that the recruitment process should be expedited, and that it be informed of the steps taken by IPPB in this regard.

- **Service-level agreements:** In order to ensure that the work of Department of Posts (DoP) does not get affected while performing IPPB-related activities, IPPB have built Service-Level Agreements (SLAs) in consultation with DoP. The SLAs specify details related to working hours, transaction limits, and turnaround time for business operations. The Committee recommended that DoP and IPPB should develop a mechanism to monitor that all elements of SLAs are fully practiced to ensure long-term sustenance of IPPB. Further, the IPPB and DoP should periodically review the SLAs.

- **Training of users:** The Committee noted that training of end users was one of the major challenges faced by IPPB. In this context, it recommended that training courses should be conducted periodically for end users to upgrade their skills. Further, it recommended that IPPB should explore the possibility of associating their staff with schemes under the Digital India programme such as National Digital Literacy Mission.

- **Competitiveness:** The Committee noted that IPPB is likely to face stiff competition from private payment banks (such as Airtel, Jio, and Paytm payment banks). It observed that that the 4% interest rate offered by IPPB is lower compared to other payment banks. In order to increase their customer base and compete with private players, the Committee recommended that the current interest rate may be reviewed.

- **Digital literacy:** The Committee observed that IPPB had only 9,000 merchants on the ground, of which 10% were active. Given the low level of merchants enabled on the ground, the Committee recommended that IPPB should focus on digital literacy, consumer education, and hand-holding of merchants in rural and remote areas.

Accelerated Irrigation Benefits Programme

- **The Comptroller and Auditor General of India** (CAG) released a performance audit of the Accelerated Irrigation Benefits Programme on January 8, 2019. The Accelerated Irrigation Benefits Programme (AIBP) was launched in 1996 as a central assistance programme and is currently implemented by the Ministry of Water Resources, River Development, and Ganga Rejuvenation. AIBP was initiated with the aim of accelerating the implementation of irrigation projects that exceed the resource capabilities of states. Key findings and recommendations include:

- **Irregular inclusion of projects:** AIBP provides eligibility criteria such as the cost of a project, the stipulated time period, and the stage of completion, among others, for the inclusion of projects and schemes under its purview. In its report, the CAG noted that of the 201 Major, Medium Irrigation (MMI) projects undertaken between 2008-17 (the period covered by the audit), 30 projects were in violation of the criteria prescribed. Amongst Minor Irrigation (MI) schemes,

the audit found 41 cases of inclusion of schemes that violated criteria. It found that these irregularities in inclusion had led to losses amounting to Rs 3,718 crore.

- **Benefit Cost Ratio:** The Benefit Cost Ratio (BCR), which measures the ratio of annual benefits from irrigation to the annual cost of providing those benefits, is essential for determining the economic feasibility of a project. The CAG observed that in 28 MMI projects in nine states and 82 MI schemes in 10 states, uniform parameters were not used for the calculation of BCR. Inadequate surveys and assessments of water availability, among other deficiencies, contributed to inaccuracies in calculated BCRs. The report observed that actual BCRs were likely lower than those calculated, leading to modifications in design and revision of cost estimates. As a remedy, the CAG recommended that BCRs for projects be reviewed continuously and be based on realistic assumptions.

- **Delay in releasing funds:** Between 2007-17, the Ministry of Water Resources, River Development, and Ganga Rejuvenation released Rs 19,184 crore for 115 MMI projects and Rs 12,809 crore for all MI schemes. As per the CAG report, there was short release of funds in various projects, resulting in non-realisation of revenues amounting to Rs 1,251 crore. The audit attributed this shortfall to delays in the submission of proposals by states and lapses in the release of funds by state governments. Additionally, the report found that Utilisation Certificates for funds amounting to Rs 2,187 crore were not submitted to the Ministry of Water Resources in time. The CAG recommended that state governments be held responsible for conducting adequate checks on work and creating systems of accountability for deficient execution.

- **Diversion of funds:** Test checks of project reports found that funds to grantees had been diverted and utilised for expenditures not permissible under AIBP. The CAG report determined that a total of Rs 1,578 crore were diverted in 13 states, as a result of which projects were deprived of funds necessary for timely completion. The report also highlighted financial irregularities caused by parking of funds in bank accounts and fraudulent expenditures.

- **Lack of deterrents:** As per AIBP guidelines, failure to complete a project on time would result in the grants being treated as loans that would later be recovered from the state government. In its audit, the CAG found that the Ministry of Water Resources had failed to invoke this provision for 105 projects facing delays ranging from one year to 18 years. This had in turn led to a weakening of the provision as a deterrent against slow implementation.

- **Cost overrun:** Delays in the implementation of projects, inefficient work management, combined with changes in the scope of projects resulted in a cost overrun in 84 projects from Rs 40,943 crore to Rs 1,20,772 crore. The CAG found that cost overruns were caused by factors related to: (i) delays in land acquisition, (ii) delays in rehabilitation and resettlement measures mandated by the Land Acquisition Act, and (iii) undue favour given to contractors. The CAG noted that some of these delays could have been avoided and pointed to deficiencies in monitoring by central and state agencies. It recommended that the Ministry of Water Resources, River Development, and Ganga Rejuvenation ensure regular monitoring of performance at state and central levels and intensify efforts towards completion of projects.

Swachh Bharat Grameen

- **Background:** The survey was conducted between November 2018 and February 2019 and covered 92040 households in 6136 villages across States and UTs of India. The survey used the PPS (Probability Proportion to Size) sampling methodology, which yields results within a confidence interval of 95%.

- **Key findings:** The NARSS confirmed the Open Defecation Free (ODF) status of 90.7% of villages which were previously declared and verified as ODF by various districts/States. 1% of households were found to have access to toilets during the survey period (the corresponding figure as per the SBMG MIS in November 2018 was 96%) 5% of the people who had access to toilets used them.

- **7% of villages** which were previously declared and verified as ODF were confirmed to be ODF. The remaining villages also had sanitation coverage of about 93%. 4% of the villages surveyed found to have minimal litter and minimal stagnant water.

- **Impact and significance of SBM:** Since its launch in October 2014, the SBM, the world's largest sanitation program, has changed the behaviour of hundreds of millions of people with respect to toilet access and usage. 500 million people have stopped defecating in the open since the SBM began, down from 550 million at the beginning of the programme to less than 50 million today.

- **Over 9 crore toilets** have been built across rural India under the Mission. Over 5.5 lakh villages and 615 districts have been declared ODF, along with 30 ODF States and Union Territories.

- **About SBM:** To accelerate the efforts to achieve universal sanitation coverage and to put focus on sanitation, the Prime Minister of India launched the Swachh Bharat Mission on 2nd October, 2014.

- **The Mission** Coordinator for SBM is Secretary, Ministry of Drinking Water and Sanitation (MDWS) with two Sub-Missions, the Swachh Bharat Mission (Gramin) and the Swachh Bharat Mission (Urban). Together, they aim to achieve Swachh Bharat by 2019, as a fitting tribute to Mahatma Gandhi on his 150th Birth Anniversary. The aim of Swachh Bharat Mission (Gramin) is to achieve a clean and Open Defecation Free (ODF) India by 2nd October, 2019.

- **Objectives:** To bring about an improvement in the general quality of life in the rural areas, by promoting cleanliness, hygiene and eliminating open defecation. To motivate communities to adopt sustainable sanitation practices and facilities through awareness creation and health education. To encourage cost effective and appropriate technologies for ecologically safe and sustainable sanitation.

- **To develop** community managed sanitation systems focusing on scientific Solid & Liquid Waste Management systems for overall cleanliness in the rural areas. To create significant positive impact on gender and promote social inclusion by improving sanitation especially in marginalized communities.

"Transport and Marketing Assistance" (TMA) for specified agriculture products scheme

- **Highlights:** The scheme will be available for exports effected from March 1, 2019 to March 31, 2020. Eligibility: All exporters, duly registered with relevant Export Promotion Council as per Foreign Trade Policy, of eligible agriculture products shall be covered under this scheme.

- **Exceptions:** The assistance is available for most agricultural product exports with some exceptions such as live animals, products of animal origin, milk, cream, curd, butter, buttermilk, whey, rice, wheat, tobacco and garlic. The assistance, at notified rates, will be available for export of eligible agriculture products to the permissible countries, as specified from time to time. The assistance shall be admissible only if payments for the exports are received in Free Foreign Exchange through normal banking channels.

- **The scheme** shall be admissible for exports made through EDI (Electronic Data Interchange) ports only. The scheme covers freight and marketing assistance for export by air as well as by sea.

- **Impact of the scheme:** This scheme is likely to mitigate the disadvantage of higher cost of transportation of export of specified agriculture products due to trans-shipment and to promote brand recognition for Indian agricultural products in the specified overseas markets.

Pradhan Mantri Shram Yogi Maan-Dhan Yojana

- **About Pradhan Mantri Shram Yogi Maan-Dhan Yojana:** PM-SYM is a voluntary and contributory pension scheme that will engage as many as 42 crore workers in the unorganised sector.

- **Eligibility:** The unorganised sector workers, with income of less than Rs 15,000 per month and who belong to the entry age group of 18-40 years, will be eligible for the scheme. Those workers should not be covered under New Pension Scheme (NPS), Employees' State Insurance Corporation (ESIC) scheme or Employees' Provident Fund Organisation (EPFO). He or she should not be an income tax payer.

- **Benefits:** Minimum Assured Pension: Each subscriber under the scheme will receive minimum assured pension of Rs 3000 per month after attaining the age of 60 years. In case of death during receipt of pension: If the subscriber dies during the receipt of pension, his or her spouse will be entitled to receive 50 percent of the pension as family pension. This family pension is applicable only to spouse.

- **In case of death** before the age of 60 years: If a beneficiary has given regular contribution and dies before attaining the age of 60 years, his or her spouse will be entitled to continue the scheme subsequently by payment of regular contribution or may even exit the scheme.

- **Contribution to the scheme:** Contribution by the Subscriber: The subscriber is required to contribute the prescribed contribution amount from the age of joining the scheme till the age of 60 years.

- **Medium of contribution:** The subscriber can contribute to the PM-SYM through 'auto-debit' facility from his or her savings bank account or from his or her Jan- Dhan account.

- **Equal contribution** by the Central Government: Under the PM-SYM, the prescribed age-specific contribution by the beneficiary and the matching contribution by the Central Government will be made on a '50:50 basis'.

Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication (SWIFT)

- **What is SWIFT?** It is a messaging network that financial institutions use to securely transmit information and instructions through a standardized system of codes. Under SWIFT, each financial organization has a unique code which is used to send and receive payments.

- **SWIFT** does not facilitate funds transfer: rather, it sends payment orders, which must be settled by correspondent accounts that the institutions have with each other.

- **The SWIFT** is a secure financial message carrier — in other words, it transports messages from one bank to its intended bank recipient. Its core role is to provide a secure transmission channel so that Bank A knows that its message to Bank B goes to Bank B and no one else. Bank B, in turn, knows that Bank A, and no one other than Bank A, sent, read or altered the message en route. Banks, of course, need to have checks in place before actually sending messages.

- **Facts for Prelims:** SWIFT India is a joint venture of top Indian public and private sector banks and SWIFT (Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication). The company was created to deliver high quality domestic financial messaging services to the Indian financial community. It has a huge potential to contribute significantly to the financial community in many domains.

- **Significance of SWIFT:** Messages sent by SWIFT's customers are authenticated using its specialised security and identification technology. Encryption is added as the messages leave the customer environment and enter the SWIFT Environment.

- **Messages** remain in the protected SWIFT environment, subject to all its confidentiality and integrity commitments, throughout the transmission process while they are transmitted to the operating centres (OPCs) where they are processed — until they are safely delivered to the receiver.

UN Security Council

- **About UNSC: What is it?** The United Nations Security Council (UNSC) is one of the organs of the United Nations and is charged with the maintenance of international peace and security. Its powers include the establishment of peacekeeping operations, the establishment of international sanctions, and the authorization of military action through Security Council resolutions; it is the only UN body with the authority to issue binding resolutions to member states.

- **Members:** The Security Council consists of fifteen members. Russia, the United Kingdom, France, China, and the United States—serve as the body's five permanent members. These permanent members can veto any substantive Security Council resolution, including those on the admission of new member states or candidates for Secretary-General.

- **The Security Council** also has 10 non-permanent members, elected on a regional basis to serve two-year terms. The body's presidency rotates monthly among its members.

- **Proposed reforms:** Reform of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) encompasses five key issues: categories of membership, the question of the veto held by the five permanent members, regional representation, the size of an enlarged Council and its working methods, and the Security Council-General Assembly relationship. There is also a proposal to admit more permanent members.

- **India's demands:** India has been calling for the reform of the UN Security Council along with Brazil, Germany and Japan for long, emphasising that it rightly deserves a place at the UN high table as a permanent member.

- **Why India should be given a permanent seat in the council?** India was among the founding members of United Nations. It is the second largest and a one of the largest constant contributor of troops to United Nations Peacekeeping missions. Today, India has over 8,500 peacekeepers in the field, more than twice as many as the UN's five big powers combined.

- **India**, since long time, has been demanding expansion of UNSC and its inclusion as permanent member in it. It has been a member of UNSC for 7 terms and a member of G-77 and G-4, so permanent membership is a logical extension.

World Air Quality Report 2018

- **The main objective** behind the report was to measure the presence of fine particulate matter known as Particulate Matter (PM) 2.5, which has been recorded in real-time in 2018.

- **Highlights of the report:** The report, based on a study of 3000 cities, said that 64 percent of the cities exceeded the World Health Organisation's annual exposure guideline for PM 2.5. In South Asia itself, 99 percent of the cities exceeded the WHO's safe standard exposure of 10 micrograms/cubic metre annually. Of the 10 cities with highest pollution, seven are in India, while one is in China and two are in Pakistan.

- **India's Gurugram** led the list of most polluted cities in the world in 2018, followed by Ghaziabad, Faridabad, Noida, and Bhiwadi in the top six worst-affected cities. Delhi was ranked at number 11 on the pollution chart. Among the top 30 most polluted cities, India makes up for 22 with five in China, two in Pakistan and one in Bangladesh. The only non-Indian city in the top five list is Faisalabad, Pakistan. Delhi was ranked as the most polluted capital in the world, with Dhaka at second and Kabul at third position.

- **China made** a remarkable improvement since 2013 as the country's pollution levels have gone down by 40 percent. In 2013, Beijing topped the pollution charts. Beijing ranks now as the 122nd most polluted city in the world in 2018. In South Asia, out of 20 most polluted cities in the world, 18 are in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. In Southeast Asia, Jakarta and Hanoi are the most polluted cities.

- **Measures to improve air quality:** As suggested by Greenpeace, following measures can be employed to fight air pollution in the country: Improving public transport. Limiting the number of polluting vehicles on the road. Introducing less polluting fuel (Bharat VI). Strict emission regulations. Improved efficiency for thermal power plants and industries. Moving from diesel generators to rooftop solar.

- **Increased use of clean renewable energy.** Electric vehicles. Removing dust from roads. Regulating construction activities. Stopping biomass burning, etc.

All about Form 26

- **What is Form 26?** A candidate in an election is required to file an affidavit called Form 26 that furnishes information on her assets, liabilities, educational qualifications, criminal antecedents (convictions and all pending cases) and public dues, if any. The affidavit has to be filed along with the nomination papers and should be sworn before an Oath Commissioner or Magistrate of the First Class or before a Notary Public.

- **The objective** behind introducing Form 26 was that it would help voters make an informed decision. The affidavit would make them aware of the criminal activities of a candidate, which could help prevent people with questionable backgrounds from being elected to an Assembly or Parliament.

- **When and how was it introduced?** Like most recent electoral reforms in India, Form 26 was introduced following a court order. The genesis of the affidavit can be traced to the 170th Report of the Law Commission, submitted in May 1999, which suggested steps for preventing criminals from entering electoral politics. One of the suggestions was to disclose the criminal antecedents as well as the assets of a candidate before accepting her nomination.

- **What has changed?** Earlier, a candidate had to only declare the last I-T return (for self, spouse and dependents). Details of foreign assets were not sought. Offshore assets, as per the February 26 notification, means "details of all deposits or investments in foreign banks and any other body or institution abroad and details of all assets and liabilities in foreign countries". It is now mandatory for candidates to reveal their own income-tax returns of the last five years rather than only one, and the details of offshore assets, as well as the same details for their spouse, members of the Hindu Undivided Family (if the candidate is a karta or coparcener), and dependents.

AL NAGAH 2019:

- **Context:** Exercise Al Nagah III, third in the series of bilateral joint exercise between India and Oman is scheduled to be held from 12 to 25 March 2019 at Jabel Al Akhdar Mountains in Oman.

- **The exercise** will see both the armies exchanging expertise and experience in tactics, weapon handling and firing, with an aim to enhance interoperability in counterterrorist operations in semi urban mountainous terrain.

About NALSA:

- **NALSA has been** constituted under the Legal Services Authorities Act, 1987, to provide free legal services to weaker sections of society. The aim is to ensure that opportunities for securing justice are not denied to any citizen by reasons of economic or other disabilities.

- **As per section 3(2)** of Legal Service Authorities Act, the Chief Justice of India shall be the Patron-in-Chief. and a serving or retired Judge of the Supreme Court nominated by the President, in consultation with the Chief Justice of India, shall be the Executive Chairman.

- **Important functions performed by NALSA:** NALSA organises Lok Adalats for amicable settlement of disputes. NALSA identifies specific categories of the marginalised and excluded groups and formulates various schemes for the implementation of preventive and strategic legal service programmes.

- **Services provided** by the agency include free legal aid in civil and criminal matters for the poor and marginalised people who cannot afford the services of a lawyer in any court or tribunal.

- **Free legal** services include provision of aid and advice to beneficiaries to access the benefits under the welfare statutes and schemes and to ensure access to justice in any other manner.

Generalised System of Preferences:

- **What made US announce this?** The US observed that India has implemented a wide array of trade barriers that create serious negative effects on United States commerce. Despite intensive engagement, India has failed to take the necessary steps to meet the GSP criterion.

- **Background:** The US had launched an eligibility review of India's compliance with the GSP market access criterion in April 2018, following concerns raised by its medical devices and dairy industry. The Indian government's attempts to arrive at a "balanced" package that would address the US's concerns and protect the Indian public's welfare were not successful.

- **In 2017**, India had capped prices of cardiac stents and knee implants, slashing these over 70% and 60% respectively. The move impacted US giants like Abbott, Medtronic, Boston Scientific and Stryker.

- **Concerns:** This could be a big blow for India's competitiveness in items groups such as garments, engineering, and intermediary goods in the American market. This could impact India's competitiveness in items groups such as raw materials in the organic chemicals sector and intermediary goods in the US market, alongside items such as iron or steel, furniture, aluminum and electrical machinery.

- **How India benefitted from GSP?** India has been the biggest beneficiary of the GSP regime and accounted for over a quarter of the goods that got duty-free access into the US in 2017. Exports to the US from India under GSP — at $5.58 billion — was over 12 per cent of India's total goods exports of $45.2 billion to the US that year. The US goods trade deficit with India was $22.9 billion in 2017.

- **What is GSP?** The GSP, the largest and oldest US trade preference programme, is designed to promote economic development by allowing duty-free entry for thousands of products from designated beneficiary countries. It aims to promote economic growth in the developing world by providing preferential duty-free entry for up to 4,800 products from 129 designated beneficiary countries and territories.

- **It was instituted** on January 1, 1976, and authorised under the US Trade Act of 1974.

- **What is the objective of GSP?** The objective of GSP was to give development support to poor countries by promoting exports from them into the developed countries. GSP promotes sustainable development in beneficiary countries by helping these countries to increase and diversify their trade with the United States. GSP provide opportunities for many of the world's poorest countries to use trade to grow their economies and climb out of poverty.

- **Possible impact:** India's Department of Commerce feels the impact is "minimal", given that Indian exporters were only receiving duty-free benefits of $190 million on the country's overall GSP-related trade of $5.6 billion.

- **Some experts** feel the move will not have a major impact on India also because it has been diversifying its market in the Latin American and the African region and its trade with countries of the Global South has also been expanding at a "very competitive pace".

- **At the same time**, the move could hit Indian exporters if it gives an edge to competitors in its top export categories to the US.

PRIME MINISTER'S SCIENCE, TECHNOLOGY AND INNOVATION ADVISORY COUNCIL (PMSTIAC)

- **The Prime Minister's Science, Technology and Innovation Council is an overarching body** which assesses the status of specific S&T domains, comprehends challenges, formulates immediate, mid and long term interventions and presents a roadmap to the Prime Minister.

- **The Principal Scientific Adviser** co-ordinates to facilitate and ensure implementation of major interventions by concerned Government Departments, Agencies and Ministries. Chairperson: Prof. K Vijay Raghavan, Principal Scientific Adviser to the Government of India

- **Members:** • Dr. V. K. Saraswat, Member, NITI Aayog & former Chairman, DRDO • Dr. A. S. Kiran Kumar, former Chairman, ISRO • Prof. Ajay Kumar Sood, Professor, Indian Institute of Science, Bengaluru • Maj. Gen. Madhuri Kanitkar, Dean, Armed Forces Medical College, Pune • Professor. Sanghamitra Bandyopadhyay, Director, Indian Statistical Institute, Kolkata • Professor Manjul Bhargava, Professor, Princeton University, USA • Professor Subhash Kak, Professor, Oklahoma State University, USA • Shri Baba Kalyani, Chairman and Managing Director, Bharat Forge, Pune

- **Amongst the terms** of reference of the Council are to formulate, converge, collaborate, coordinate and implement multi-stakeholder policy initiatives, mechanisms, reforms and programmes aimed at:

- • **Synergizing** S&T covering fundamental to applied research in collaboration with multiple stake holders both in central and state governments • Enabling future preparedness in emerging domains of science and technology • Formulating and coordinating major inter-ministerial S&T missions • Providing an enabling ecosystem for technology led innovations and technoentrepreneurship

- • **Driving** innovation and technology delivery towards solving socio-economic challenges for sustainable growth • Fostering effective public-private linkages for driving research and innovation

- • **Developing** science, technology and innovation clusters with multiple stakeholders including academia, industry and government • Skilling in current and futuristic technologies.

Performance of National Action Plan on Climate Change

- **The Committee on Estimates** (Chair: Dr. Murli Manohar Joshi) submitted its report on the performance of the National Action Plan On Climate Change (NAPCC) on December 10, 2018. The NAPCC was launched in June 2008 to deal with issues related to climate change.

- **Regulation of NAPCC:** The NAPCC comprises eight missions, including: (i) National Solar Mission, (ii) National Water Mission, and (iii) National Mission for a Green India. Each mission is anchored under a Ministry, which is responsible for its implementation, budgetary provisions, and its actionable priorities. The Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEF) is the coordinating Ministry of NAPCC. The broad policy initiatives of the Central Government are supplemented by actions at the level of state governments and Union Territories.

- **National Solar Mission:** The Committee noted that the Mission is expected to generate 1,00,000 MW by 2021-22, at an expected cost of Rs 6,00,000 crore. It noted that the funding requirement for the targeted solar power generation will be met from budgetary support, internal, and international financing. However, it expressed concerns about the lack of funds in relation to the targets under the Mission. It noted that the government's outlay for the 12th Plan period is Rs 13,690 crore, which is a fraction of the required investment. The Committee recommended that an analysis of financial support from each source be undertaken by the government and a revised mission document be brought out indicating the sources of financing.

- **National Mission on Enhanced Energy Efficiency:** The Committee noted that the Mission had under-utilised allocated funds. It noted that between 2010-11 and 2016-17, Rs 914 crore was the budgeted expenditure, which was revised to Rs 259 crore. Of this, only Rs 208 crore was spent. The Committee stated that one of the reasons for reduced allocation was delays in certain approvals. It recommended that the Ministry ensure that the funds are utilised for the schemes for which they have been allocated.

- **National Water Mission:** The Committee noted that the major components of the Mission include development of a comprehensive water database and assessment of impact of climate change on water resources. It was informed of an exercise undertaken to map all the water bodies in India. In this connection, the Committee referred to studies indicating that water availability data is unreliable due to use of outdated collection techniques and methodologies. Siloed information collection and sharing, especially between States, adds to costs and inefficiencies. The Committee recommended reviewing the techniques and methodologies of data collection and preparing a comprehensive database of all water bodies.

- **National Mission on Sustainable Habitat:** The Committee noted that the Mission aims at promoting sustainability of habitats though improvements in energy efficiency in buildings, urban planning, and improved management of solid and liquid waste. The objectives of the mission are being met through four schemes, including the Atal Mission for Rejuvenation and Urban Transformation, and the Swachh Bharat Mission. By 2031, these schemes are expected to reduce Green House Gas emission to the tune of 270 million tonnes.

- **The Committee observed** that the emphasis of the Mission is limited to urban habitats only and does not take into account the requirements of the rural habitats. It recommended that the Mission introduce a comprehensive and integrated plan encompassing the needs of both rural as well as urban habitats.

- **National Mission** for Sustainable Agriculture: The Committee noted that although the Mission focuses on different aspects of agriculture, it does not include income security of farmers. It observed that the crop insurance scheme and the MSP scheme implemented by the government have not made farming remunerative. It recommended that the government consider these elements for the Mission and apprise the Committee of steps taken in this regard.

Insolvency Law Committee on Cross-border Insolvency

- **The Insolvency Law Committee** (Chair: Mr. Injeti Srinivas) submitted it second report to the Ministry of Corporate Affairs on October 16, 2018 recommending amendments in the Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code, 2016 with respect to cross-border insolvency. The Code provides a time-bound 180-day process to resolve insolvency of companies and in The Committee proposed a draft 'Part Z' in the Code, based on an analysis of the UNCITRAL Model Law on Cross-Border Insolvency, 1997. The Model Law provides a legal framework that states may adopt in their domestic legislation to deal with cross-border insolvency issues. Key recommendations of the Committee include:

- **Applicability:** The Committee recommended that at present, draft Part Z should be extended to corporate debtors only. Duplicity of regimes: The Committee noted that currently the Companies Act, 2013 contains provisions to deal with insolvency of foreign companies. It observed that once Part Z is enacted, it will result in a dual regime to handle insolvency of foreign companies. It recommended that the Ministry of Corporate Affairs undertake a study of such provisions in the 2013 Act to assess whether to retain them. Reciprocity: The Committee recommended that the Model Law may be adopted initially on a reciprocity basis. This may be diluted subsequently upon re-examination. Reciprocity indicates that a domestic court will recognise and enforce a foreign court's judgment only if the foreign country has adopted similar legislation to the domestic country.

- **Access to Foreign Representatives:** The Model Law allows foreign insolvency professionals and foreign creditors access to domestic courts to seek remedies directly. Direct access with regards to foreign creditors is envisaged under the Code even presently. With respect to access by foreign insolvency professionals to Indian courts, the Committee recommended that the Central Government be empowered to devise a mechanism that is practicable in the current Indian legal framework.

- **Centre of Main Interests (COMI):** The Model Law allows recognition of foreign proceedings and provides relief based on this recognition. Relief may be provided if the foreign proceeding is a main proceeding or non-main proceeding. If the domestic courts determine that the debtor has its COMI in a foreign country, such foreign proceedings will be recognised as the main proceedings. This recognition will result in certain automatic relief, such as allowing foreign representatives greater powers in handling the debtor's estate.

- **For non-main proceedings**, such relief is at the discretion of the domestic court. The Committee recommended that a list of indicative factors comprising COMI may be inserted through rule-making powers. Such factors may include location of the debtor's books and records, and location of financing.

- **Cooperation:** The Model Law lays down the basic framework for cooperation between domestic and foreign courts, and domestic and foreign insolvency professionals. Given that the infrastructure of adjudicating authorities under the Code is still evolving, the cooperation between Adjudicating Authorities and foreign courts is proposed to be subject to guidelines to be notified by the Central Government.

- **Concurrent Proceedings:** The Model Law provides a framework for commencement of domestic insolvency proceedings, when a foreign insolvency proceeding has already commenced or vice versa. It also provides for coordination of two or more concurrent insolvency proceedings in different countries by encouraging cooperation between courts. The Committee recommended adopting provisions in relation to these in draft Part Z.

- **Public policy considerations:** Part Z provides that the Adjudicating Authority may refuse to take action under the Code if it is contrary to public policy. The Committee recommended that in proceedings where the Authority is of the opinion that a violation of public policy may be involved, a notice must be issued to the central government. If the Authority does not issue notice, the central government may be empowered to apply to it directly.

Banking Sector in India - Issues, Challenges and the Way Forward

- **The Standing Committee on Finance (Chair: M. Veerappa Moily)** submitted its report on the Banking Sector in India – Issues, Challenges and the Way Forward on August 31, 2018. Credit and deposit growth in banks have recently been slow. High volumes of non-performing assets (NPAs) in banks have eroded their capital base, and restricted their ability to lend. Key observations and recommendations of the Committee include:

- **NPAs of public sector banks**: The Committee noted that the problem of high loan write-offs and NPAs, combined with low asset growth, is more severe for public sector banks (PSBs) than private banks. However, it stated that once most of the larger NPAs get resolved as per the Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code or other mechanisms, the situation will become better for PSBs. In this regard, the Committee observed that the present crisis is transient and should not warrant privatisation of public sector banks.

- **The Committee** expressed concern about limited improvements in the short-term earnings of PSBs as a result of NPAs. To help in pre-empting frauds by structured sharing of credit information and follow-up action among banks, it recommended the formulation of a law to set up a Public Credit Registry.

- **Lowering of Capital to Risk-weighted Assets Ratio (CRAR) requirement:** The Committee noted that RBI's requirement of a minimum CRAR of 9%, to prevent banks from becoming highly leveraged, is 1% higher than the Basel III norms for internationally active banks. This is applicable to all PSBs, even though nine of them do not operate internationally. The Committee observed that such a high CRAR requirement is impractical for these banks, and a relaxation would (i) release capital of approximately Rs 5.34 lakh crore, (ii) grow loans and generate an additional Rs 50,000 crore of income annually, and (iii) avoid the need for capital infusion in these banks.

- **Banks under Prompt Corrective Action (PCA):** The Committee observed that 11 PSBs have been placed under the PCA framework by the RBI based on factors such as capital inadequacy and high NPAs. These banks have restricted lending and deposit-taking capabilities as a result. Despite the imposition of PCA, recoveries in these banks have either been stagnant, or grown marginally. The Committee recommended that the RBI should provide a roadmap to these banks to enable them to come out of PCA and resume normal operations.

- **Further,** it observed that bringing more banks under PCA would affect both the banking sector and the economy at large, by aggravating the problem of credit availability. It recommended that banks under PCA be closely monitored, and restrictions be relaxed and reviewed, especially for banks where even retail banking is prohibited. It also recommended that RBI's knee-jerk reactions to fraud, like discontinuing Letters of Undertaking that provide cheap credit, should be avoided, as they hinder credit growth.

- **Performance of the National Company Law Tribunals (NCLT):** The Committee noted that resolution of larger NPAs under the Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code (IBC) have been taking much longer than the stipulated time period of 270 days. It recommended that NCLTs' resources be increased to enable them to dispose of such cases swiftly.

- **Further**, the Committee observed that several lenders have had to take unduly large 'haircuts' (difference between loan amount and the value of the collateral) for some of their loans. It recommended that a reasonable base price should be fixed for bidding so that large 'haircuts' can be avoided by creditors in the course of the IBC process in NCLT.

- **Powers of the RBI in case of PSBs:** The Committee noted that the RBI had stated that some powers available to the RBI under the Banking Regulation Act, 1949 are not available in the case of PSBs. These include: (i) removing and appointing Chairman and Managing Directors of banks, (ii) superseding the Board of Directors, and (iii) granting licences. The Committee also noted that the RBI can, however, (i) inspect the bank, (ii) consult with the government on appointing senior bank officials, and (iii) have a nominee on a PSB's management committee. In this regard, the Committee recommended that the government should constitute a high powered committee to evaluate the powers of the RBI with respect to PSBs as provided under various statutes.

- **Incentives for PSB employees:** The Committee recommended that higher remuneration be given to senior management of PSBs, as there exists a wide gap with their private sector counterparts. Further, an overlap should be provided between tenures of successive CEOs to facilitate smoother transition. The retirement age of CEOs of PSBs should be increased to 70 years (similar to private banks) to utilise the expertise of senior bankers. Further, criminality of bankers should not be presumed for decisions taken in the normal course of business, and bankers should be afforded a chance of explaining their decision before any actions are taken.

Implementation of Scheme of Multi-Sectoral Development Programme/Pradhan Mantri Jan Vikas Karyakram

- **The Standing Committee on Social Justice and Empowerment (Chair: Mr. Ramesh Bais)** submitted its report on 'Implementation of Scheme of Multi-Sectoral Development Programme/ Pradhan Mantri Jan Vikas Karyakram' on August 9, 2018. The Multi-Sectoral Development Programme (MsDP) (restructured and renamed as Pradhan Mantri Jan Vikas Karyakram) is a centrally sponsored scheme launched in 2008-09. It seeks to improve the development of minority concentration areas through creation of socio-economic infrastructure, provision of basic amenities, and other measures. Minority Concentration Areas are identified areas with at least 25% minority population, i.e. Muslims, Sikhs, Christians, Buddhists, Jains and Zoroastrians.

- **Minority families** living below poverty line: The Committee noted that the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment is responsible for the welfare of minority communities. However, it does not have details of the total number of families living below the poverty line. The Ministry had informed the Committee that the matter has been taken up with NITI Aayog, as the matter of socio-religious census is pending with them. The Committee recommended the Ministry pursue the matter with NITI Aayog to obtain these numbers. This will ensure that the creation of assets for health, education, and skill development is tailored according to their needs.

- **Implementation of Scheme:** Overall implementation: The Committee noted that although the Ministry has revised the scheme, the socio-economic conditions of the minorities remain unchanged. There were significant trends of missing basic amenities/ infrastructure in minority areas. The Committee recommend that the Ministry should co-ordinate with the concerned states/ union territories and other line Ministries to complete these incomplete projects in a timely manner and make efforts for better implementation of the scheme.

- **Data on beneficiaries:** The Committee noted that there is no community-wise data regarding the number of families benefited by the projects under the scheme. In the absence of such data, the Ministry cannot analyse the impact of the scheme on minorities. The Committee requested for updated data starting from 2008-09.

- **Housing:** The Committee observed that provision of pucca housing in rural areas under the Indira Awas Yojana (IAY) was one of the priority sectors of the MsDP during the 11th and 12th Five Year Plan. However, no units were sanctioned under IAY in several states during the Plan periods (including Kerala, Assam, Jammu & Kashmir, and Andaman and Nicobar Islands). The Committee also observed that projects relating to drinking water supply and pucca housing have not been included in the restructured MsDP, despite housing being a basic infrastructure for the people living in minority areas. It recommended that projects under IAY and drinking water supply be included in the list of priority sectors of MsDP.

- **Educational projects:** The Committee noted that several education-related projects were sanctioned during the 11th and 12th Plan, but have not been completed. The Committee stated that the Ministry should make efforts to complete these pending projects without further delay. It also asked for community-wise details of beneficiaries of the education projects to be provided to the Committee.

- **Health-related projects:** With regard to health projects, the Ministry undertakes construction of Primary Health Centres (PHCs), Health Sub-Centres, and labour rooms in PHCs. Out of a total of 4,393 units/projects sanctioned in 11th and 12th Plan Period, only 2,432 projects/units were completed. The Committee emphasised that health of the people is one of the basic indicators of development of an area, and recommended that the Ministry should take steps with the Health Ministry and state governments, to ensure completion of the projects.

- **Low utilisation of funds:** The Committee noted that state-wise utilisation of funds under the scheme was low due to various reasons, including: (i) long gestation period of some projects, (ii) non-availability of land, (iii) cost escalation, and (iv) delay in transfer of funds by the states to the implementing agencies. It recommended that the Ministry should tackle these issues at the various levels with the state governments and other Ministries to ensure full utilisation of funds.

- **Monitoring of scheme:** The Committee noted that despite having several monitoring mechanisms, the impact of MsDP is hardly visible in the minority areas. It stated that the monitoring of projects under the scheme should be done by independent monitors once a year, and across states. Further, their reports should be uploaded on the scheme website.

Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports recognises Kudo International Federation India as National Sport Federation. Posted On: 06 MAR 2019 5:53PM by PIB Delhi

- **Ministry of Youth Affairs** and Sports has granted provisional recognition to Kudo International Federation India(KIFI) as National Sport Federation with immediate effect. The grant of recognition is subject to compliance of the provisions of National Sports Development Code of India, 2011 as modified from time to time, by the federation including displaying information on their website as per the instructions issued by the Ministry. The recognition means granting a major role to KIFI Association for promotion and Development of Kudo sport in India. The Kudo sport is placed in the 'Others' category.

Janaushadhi Diwas

- **About PMBJP:** 'Pradhan Mantri Bhartiya Janaushadhi Pariyojana' is a campaign launched by the Department of Pharmaceuticals, Govt. Of India, to provide quality medicines at affordable prices to the masses through special kendra's known as Pradhan Mantri Bhartiya Jan Aushadhi Kendra.

- **Pradhan Mantri Bhartiya** Jan Aushadhi Kendra (PMBJK) have been set up to provide generic drugs, which are available at lesser prices but are equivalent in quality and efficacy as expensive branded drugs. Bureau of Pharma PSUs of India (BPPI) is the implementing agency of PMBJP. BPPI (Bureau of Pharma Public Sector Undertakings of India) has been established under the Department of Pharmaceuticals, Govt. of India, with the support of all the CPSUs.

- **SALIENT FEATURES OF THE SCHEME:** Ensure access to quality medicines. Extend coverage of quality generic medicines so as to reduce the out of pocket expenditure on medicines and thereby redefine the unit cost of treatment per person.

- **Create awareness** about generic medicines through education and publicity so that quality is not synonymous with only high price. A public programme involving Government, PSUs, Private Sector, NGO, Societies, Co-operative Bodies and other Institutions. Create demand for generic medicines by improving access to better healthcare through low treatment cost and easy availability wherever needed in all therapeutic categories.

- **What is a Generic Medicine?** Generic medicines are unbranded medicines which are equally safe and having the same efficacy as that of branded medicines in terms of their therapeutic value. The prices of generic medicines are much cheaper than their branded equivalent.

- **Outreach of generic medicines:** With developments like more and more doctors prescribing generic medicines and opening of over 5050 Janaushadhi stores across 652 districts, awareness and availability of high quality affordable generic medicines has increased in the country. About 10-15 lakh people benefit from Janaushadhi medicines per day and the market share of generic medicines has grown over three fold from 2% to 7%in last 3 years.

- **The Janaushadhi medicines** have played a big role in bringing down the out of pocket expenditure of patients suffering from life threatening diseases in India. The PMBJP scheme has led to total savings of approximately Rs.1000 crores for common citizens, as these medicines are cheaper by 50% to 90% of average market price. The PMBJP is also providing a good source of self-employment with self-sustainable and regular earnings.

- **Conclusion:** No poor person should die due to non-availability of good quality affordable medicines in the country. Therefore, making quality healthcare affordable for all should be the ultimate objective of the government.

Quality Assurance Scheme

- **Key features of the scheme: It is a voluntary scheme.** The laboratories performing only basic routine tests like blood glucose, blood counts, rapid tests for common infections, liver & kidney function tests and routine tests of urine will be eligible to apply under this scheme.

- **The scheme** requires minimal documentation and a nominal fee has been prescribed for availing the scheme. Components of competence assessment have been added for assuring quality and validity of test results.

- **Successful** laboratories will be issued a certificate of compliance to QAS BC scheme by NABL and they will be allowed to use a distinct symbol on the test reports as a mark of endorsement to the basic standard for a defined time frame before which they will have to transition to full accreditation as per ISO 15189.

- **Through this scheme**, patients availing services of small labs in primary health centers, community health centers, doctor's clinic, standalone small labs, labs in small nursing homes will also have access to quality lab results.

- **Significance of the scheme:** The scheme will help to bring quality at the grass root level of India's health system where laboratories follow the imperatives of quality in all their processes. This will inculcate the habit of quality and facilitate the laboratories to achieve benchmark accreditation of ISO 15189 over a period of time.

- **About National Accreditation Board for Testing and Calibration Laboratories (NABL):** NABL is a constituent board of Quality Council of India (QCI) under the Ministry of Commerce and Industry. NABL is Mutual Recognition Arrangement (MRA) signatory to International bodies like International Laboratory Accreditation Co-operation (ILAC) and Asia Pacific Accreditation Co-operation (APAC) for accreditation of Testing including Medical and Calibration laboratories.

- **NABL** is also having APAC Mutual Recognition Arrangement (MRA) for Proficiency Testing Provider (PTP) & Reference Materials Producers (RMP). MRA are based on evaluation by peer Accreditation Bodies and facilitates acceptance of test/ calibration results between countries which MRA partners represent.

Hazardous Waste (Management& Transboundary Movement) Rules, 2016

- **The amendment** has been done keeping into consideration the "Ease of Doing Business" and boosting "Make in India" initiative by simplifying the procedures under the Rules, while at the same time upholding the principles of sustainable development and ensuring minimal impact on the environment.

- **Some of the salient features of the Hazardous and Other Wastes (Management& Transboundary Movement) Amendment Rules, 2019 are as follows:** Solid plastic waste has been prohibited from import into the country including in Special Economic Zones (SEZ) and by Export Oriented Units (EOU). Exporters of silk waste have now been given exemption from requiring permission from the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change.

- **Electrical and electronic assemblies** and components manufactured in and exported from India, if found defective can now be imported back into the country, within a year of export, without obtaining permission from the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change.

- **Industries** which do not require consent under Water (Prevention and Control of Pollution) Act 1974 and Air (Prevention and Control of Pollution) Act 1981, are now exempted from requiring authorization also under the Hazardous and Other Wastes (Management & Transboundary Movement) Rules, 2016, provided that hazardous and other wastes generated by such industries are handed over to the authorized actual users, waste collectors or disposal facilities.

- **What necessitated this?** In spite of having a significant plastic pollution load of its own, and a ban on plastic waste imports, imported PET bottles from abroad for processing SEZ. The influx of PET bottles was quadrupled from 2017 to 2018. Indian firms are importing plastic scrap from China, Italy, Japan and Malawi for recycling. India consumes about 13 million tonnes of plastic and recycles only about 4 million tonnes.

- **What is hazardous waste and what are the concerns associated with it?** Hazardous waste is the waste that poses substantial or potential threats to public health or the environment.

- **Rapidly** growing industries in the country have contributed in the production of large part of hazardous waste material. The sources of hazardous waste are basically agricultural and agro industries, medical facilities, commercial centres, household and the informal sectors.

- **Therefore**, to reduce environmental hazardous proper attention is required during disposal of such waste, because it cannot be disposed of by common means like other by products of our daily lives.

Web- Wonder Women Campaign

- **About the Campaign:** The Campaign has been launched by the Ministry of Women and Child Development, Government of India in association with the NGO Breakthrough and Twitter India.

- **Through the campaign**, the Ministry aims to recognize the fortitude of Indian women stalwarts from across the globe who have used the power of social media to run positive & niche campaigns to steer a change in society. The Campaign is aimed at encouraging, recognizing and acknowledging the efforts of these meritorious Women.

- **National Sports Federation** Context: Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports has granted provisional recognition to Kudo International Federation India(KIFI) as National Sport Federation with immediate effect. The recognition means granting a major role to KIFI Association for promotion and Development of Kudo sport in India.

- **About NSFs:** National Sports Federations (NSFs) are autonomous bodies registered under the Societies Registration Act 1860. The Government does not interfere in their day to day affairs.

- **However**, Government has issued guidelines imposing age and tenure limits in respect of office bearers of NSFs, including those of the Indian Olympic Association (IOA). These have further been reiterated in the National Sports Development Code of India, 2011, which has been made effective from 31.1.2011. As per the guidelines, the Government has, inter-alia, provided the following age and tenure limits in respect of office bearers of the NSFs:

- **The President** of any recognized National Sports Federation, including the IOA can hold office for a maximum period of twelve years with or without break. The Secretary (or by whatever other designation such as Secretary General or General Secretary by which he is referred to) and the Treasurer of any recognized National Sports Federation, including the IOA, may serve a maximum of two successive terms of four years each after which a minimum cooling off period of four years is required to seek fresh election to either post.

- **The President,** the Secretary and the Treasurer of any recognized NSF, including the IOA, shall cease to hold that post on attaining the age of 70 years.

Swachh Survekshan Awards 2019

- **Swachh Survekshan 2019** covered all urban local bodies in the country, making it the largest such cleanliness survey in the world.

- **Performance of various countries:** Indore was adjudged India's cleanest city for the third straight year. The second and third positions in the category were grabbed by Ambikapur in Chhattisgarh and Mysuru in Karnataka. Bhopal is country's Swachh capital.

- **New Delhi Municipal Council** area was given the 'Cleanest Small City' award. Uttarakhand's Gauchar was adjudged the 'Best Ganga Town'. The 'Cleanest Big City' award has been bagged by Ahmedabad, while Raipur is the 'Fastest Moving Big City'. Ujjain has been the adjudged the 'Cleanest Medium City' and Mathura-Vrindavan bagged the tag of the 'Fastest Moving Medium Cities'.

- **Conclusion:** Cleanliness should be integral to the behaviour of every citizen to make it effective and sustainable. Many people pay attention to personal hygiene but remain apathetic to public and community cleanliness. Change in this mentality is important for achieving the goals of Swachh Bharat.

Guard against misuse, social media platforms told

- **Why there is need for regulation?** With over 460 million internet users, India is the second-largest online market, ranked only behind China. By 2021, there will be 635.8 million internet users in India. The widespread use of social networking in the country has been on a rise, especially among the new generation.

- **We cannot** ignore the fact that politics and media share a complex synergistic relationship; media, politics and elections are knotted together and social media platforms have become the essential ground for discussion on political narratives.

- **Politics** is a favourite topic of discussion among the young and old. The hashtags are famous on Twitter and Twitter users get pulled into it. These platforms may be misused by hatemongers or fake news peddlers. There can also be foreign interference in our election using social medias. Then, there is the issue of cloned and fake accounts.

- **Globally,** some election experts have raised alarm against the recent elections in some countries where social media campaigns influenced election proceedings to such an extent that the democratic process came under threat. There is an alarming worry that outside interests can work to undermine the democratic process in a subtle and sneaky way. In April 2017, Facebook admitted that its platform had been exploited by governments seeking to manipulate public opinion in other countries during the presidential elections in the US and France. Facebook pledged to clamp down on such operations.

- **Recent developments at global level:** Courtiers such as Singapore and the Philippines are actively proposing legislation on fake news, while Germany introduced a new law that compels social media networks to remove hate speech. Indonesia has launched a new cybersecurity agency as part of its efforts to deal with online religious fanaticism, online hate speech, nip terrorist groups and fake news on social media.

UNODC

- **Key findings:** While the global trend of purchasing drugs over the internet, particularly on darknet trading platforms using cryptocurrencies has already spread across South Asia, it is particularly rampant in India.

- **India** is also a transit country for illicitly produced opiates, in particular heroin. The route used by traffickers to smuggle opiates through South Asia is an alternative part of the so-called "southern route", which runs through Pakistan or the Islamic Republic of Iran, via the Gulf countries, continues to East Africa and on to destination countries.

- **Also, India, Australia,** France and Turkey accounted for 83% of global production of morphine-rich opiate raw materials in 2017. The stocks were considered sufficient to cover 19 months of expected global demand by manufacturers at the 2018 level of demand.

- **About UNODC:** Established in 1997 through a merger between the United Nations Drug Control Programme and the Centre for International Crime Prevention, UNODC is a global leader in the fight against illicit drugs and international crime. UNODC relies on voluntary contributions, mainly from Governments, for 90% of its budget.

- **UNODC** is mandated to assist Member States in their struggle against illicit drugs, crime and terrorism.

- **The three pillars of the UNODC work programme are:** Field-based technical cooperation projects to enhance the capacity of Member States to counteract illicit drugs, crime and terrorism. Research and analytical work to increase knowledge and understanding of drugs and crime issues and expand the evidence base for policy and operational decisions.

- **Normative work** to assist States in the ratification and implementation of the relevant international treaties, the development of domestic legislation on drugs, crime and terrorism, and the provision of secretariat and substantive services to the treaty-based and governing bodies.

International Criminal Court (ICC)

- **About ICC:** The International Criminal Court (ICC), located in The Hague, is the court of last resort for prosecution of genocide, war crimes, and crimes against humanity.

- **It is the first permanent**, treaty based, international criminal court established to help end impunity for the perpetrators of the most serious crimes of concern to the international community. Its founding treaty, the Rome Statute, entered into force on July 1, 2002. Funding: Although the Court's expenses are funded primarily by States Parties, it also receives voluntary contributions from governments, international organisations, individuals, corporations and other entities.

- **Composition and voting power:** The Court's management oversight and legislative body, the Assembly of States Parties, consists of one representative from each state party. Each state party has one vote and "every effort" has to be made to reach decisions by consensus. If consensus cannot be reached, decisions are made by vote. The Assembly is presided over by a president and two vice-presidents, who are elected by the members to three-year terms.

- **Jurisdiction:** The ICC has the jurisdiction to prosecute individuals for the international crimes of genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes. The ICC is intended to complement existing national judicial systems and it may therefore only exercise its jurisdiction when certain conditions are met, such as when national courts are unwilling or unable to prosecute criminals or when the United Nations Security Councilor individual states refer situations to the Court.

- **Criticism:** It does not have the capacity to arrest suspects and depends on member states for their cooperation. Critics of the Court argue that there are insufficient checks and balances on the authority of the ICC prosecutor and judges and insufficient protection against politicized prosecutions or other abuses. The ICC has been accused of bias and as being a tool of Western imperialism, only punishing leaders from small, weak states while ignoring crimes committed by richer and more powerful states.

- **ICC cannot** mount successful cases without state cooperation is problematic for several reasons. It means that the ICC acts inconsistently in its selection of cases, is prevented from taking on hard cases and loses legitimacy. It also gives the ICC less deterrent value, as potential perpetrators of war crimes know that they can avoid ICC judgment by taking over government and refusing to cooperate.

National Rural Economic Transformation Project

- **National Rural Economic Transformation project:** The National Rural Economic Transformation project is additional financing to the $500 million National Rural Livelihoods Project (NRLP) approved by the World Bank in July 2011.

- **The project** will support enterprise development programs for rural poor women and youth by creating a platform to access finance including start-up financing options to build their individual or collectively owned and managed enterprises.

- **The project** will involve developing financial products using digital financial services to help small producer collectives scale-up and engage with the market.

- **It will also** support youth skills development, in coordination with the Deen Dayal Upadhyaya Grameen Kaushalya Yojana.

Nitrogen pollution

- **Highlights of the Frontiers Report 2019:** Pollution caused by the reactive forms of nitrogen is now being recognised as a grave environmental concern on a global level.

- **It highlights** that growing demand on the livestock, agriculture, transport, industry and energy sector has led to a sharp growth of the levels of reactive nitrogen — ammonia, nitrate, nitric oxide (NO), nitrous oxide (N2O) — in our ecosystems.

- **The report** claims that the total annual cost of nitrogen pollution to eco system and healthcare services in the world is around $340 billion. The report also warns that the scale of the problem remains largely unknown and unacknowledged outside scientific circles.

- **Nitrogen as an essential nutrient:** Nitrogen, which is a vital macronutrient for most plants, is the most abundant element in the atmosphere. A little over 78% of dry air on Earth is nitrogen. But atmospheric nitrogen, or dinitrogen, is unreactive and cannot be utilised by plants directly.

- **Until the beginning** of the 20th century, farmers depended on a natural process called nitrogen fixation for the conversion of atmospheric nitrogen into reactive nitrogen in the soil: nitrogen-fixing bacteria like rhizobia live symbiotically with leguminous plants, providing nitrogen to the plant and soil in the form of reactive compounds like ammonia and nitrate.

- **But the natural nitrogen** cycle was inadequate to feed the growing population. Scientists Fritz Haber and Carl Bosch solved this problem by producing ammonia by combining atmospheric nitrogen with hydrogen gas at high temperature and pressure—known as the Haber-Bosch process. The Green Revolution, which was instrumental in establishing food security in the developing countries in the 1960s, was driven by artificial nitrogen-fixation. Today, about half of the world's population depends on this process for its nutrition.

- **How Nitrogen turned into pollutant from nutrient how it is affecting health and environment?** Nitrogen is an inert gas that's necessary for life. But we're changing it into forms that are harmful, overloading the environment with it, and throwing the natural nitrogen cycle out of whack.

- **Nitrogen** compounds running off farmland have led to water pollution problems around the world, while nitrogen emissions from industry, agriculture and vehicles make a big contribution to air pollution.

- **Over 80%** of the nitrogen in soil is not utilised by humans. While over four-fifths of the nitrogen is used to feed livestock, only about six per cent reaches humans in case of non-vegetarian diet, as compared to the 20% that reaches the plate of a vegetarian.

- **Nitrogen** becomes a pollutant when it escapes into the environment and reacts with other organic compounds. It is either released into the atmosphere, gets dissolved in water sources such as rivers, lakes or groundwater, or remains in the soil. While it might lead to favourable growth of species that can utilise this nutrient, nitrogen as a pollutant is often detrimental to the environment and health.

- **Effects on health:** According to the World Health Organization, nitrate-contaminated drinking water can cause reduced blood function, cancer and endemic goiters. Surplus inputs of nitrogen compounds have been found to cause soil acidification. The lowering pH, as a result of the acidification, can lead to nutrient disorders and increased toxicity in plants. It may also affect natural soil decomposition.

- **Nitrogen pollution has a significant impact on the environment:** It creates of harmful algal blooms and dead zones in our waterways and oceans; the algae produce toxins which are harmful to human and aquatic organisms (and indirectly affects fisheries and biodiversity in coastal areas).

- **Contamination of drinking water.** 10 million people in Europe are potentially exposed to drinking water with nitrate concentrations above recommended levels. This can have an adverse effect on human health.

- **Food Security:** Excessive nitrogen fertiliser application contributes to soil nutrient depletion. As the world needs to feed an ever growing population loss of arable land is major global problem.

- **The release of Nitrous Oxide** is essentially a greenhouse gas which is harmful to the environment.

Institutions in News- National Centre for Good Governance (NCGG):

- **Context:** National Centre for Good Governance (NCGG) and Indian Institute of Corporate Affairs (IICA) sign an MoU.

- **National Centre for Good Governance (NCGG):** It has been set up by the Government of India (GoI) under the aegis of Department of Administrative Reforms and Public Grievances, Ministry of Personnel, Public Grievances and Pensions. It aims to promote good governance through Capacity Building on Public Policy and Governance both at National and International Level and carrying out studies/ action research on issues relating to governance.

- **CERT-In (the Indian Computer Emergency Response Team):** Context: Indian cyber security agencies are tracking a massive leak of data from at least 16 online platforms — websites as well as apps — several of which are widely used by Indians. The National Computer Emergency Response Team (NCERT), in collaboration with global cyber intelligence agencies, are currently trying to gauge the extent of the damage.

- **About CERT-In:** What is it? CERT-In (the Indian Computer Emergency Response Team) is a government-mandated information technology (IT) security organization. CERT-In was created by the Indian Department of Information Technology in 2004 and operates under the auspices of that department.

- **It's purpose:** The purpose of CERT-In is to respond to computer security incidents, report on vulnerabilities and promote effective IT security practices throughout the country. According to the provisions of the Information Technology Amendment Act 2008, CERT-In is responsible for overseeing administration of the Act.

Progress of Implementation of Bharat Net

- **The Standing Committee** on Information Technology (Chairperson: Mr. Anurag Singh Thakur) submitted its report on "Progress of Implementation of BharatNet" on August 7, 2018. The Committee examined the BharatNet project, which was launched in 2011 to provide connectivity to 2.5 lakh Gram Panchayats (GPs) through optical fibre. Key observations and recommendations made by the Committee include:

- **Implementation of Phase I:** Under Phase-I of BharatNet, a target of connecting one lakh GPs through optical fibre cable was set. However, the Committee noted that inadequate planning and design coupled with lack of preparedness affected the project from 2011 to 2014. Because of deficiencies in various aspects such as planning, design, procurement, and non-participation of states, the implementation could start only after 2014. The Committee observed that the target of completing one lakh GPs had been achieved on December 28, 2017.

- **Last-mile connectivity:** The Committee observed that last-mile connectivity (connectivity to households) was not in the scope of BharatNet till July 2017. Since 1,09,099 GPs were service ready by May 1, 2017, the Committee stated that focus should be on provision of last-mile connectivity in these GPs. Further, the Committee emphasised the need to set up Wi-Fi hotspots under Saansad Adarsh Gram Yojana, It recommended that while setting up Wi-Fi hotspots, emphasis should be given to participation of village level entrepreneurs, so as to generate employment.

- **Implementation of Phase-II:** Under Phase-II of BharatNet, a target of covering the remaining 1,50,000 GPs by March 2019 has been set. The Committee recommended that effort should be made for timely completion of targets for Phase-II. Further, it recommended that in Phase-II emphasis should be given to employment generation, particularly in states like Jammu and Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, and North-eastern states.

- **Participation of states:** The Committee noted that non-involvement of states in Phase-I has resulted in slow progress and non-utilization of infrastructure. To address this issue, a modified strategy was adopted where GPs in eight states were provided connectivity through state-led model. Under this model, states undertake the responsibility of laying of optical fibre cable and radio. The Committee stated that a mechanism should be put in place whereby best practices adopted in one state can be shared with all other states.

- **Central Public Sector Undertakings (CPSUs):** The Committee noted that Phase-I of the project had been allotted to three CPSUs (Bharat Sanchar Nigam Limited, RailTel, and Power Grid Corporation of India Limited). Despite having expertise in optical fibre technology, performance of these CPSUs has not been satisfactory. This included delays in achieving targets under Phase-I. The Committee recommended in this regard that stringent measures, such as penalties for failure to achieve the targets, should be imposed on the CPSUs.

- **Private sector participation:** The Committee noted that there is high private sector is participation in implementation of Phase-II. Two projects will be implemented under private sector-led model in Bihar and Punjab. The Committee recommended that there should not be any scope for laxity by private participants in timely execution of projects. Further, penalty clauses should be included in agreements with them.

- **Right of way (RoW) issues:** The Committee noted that Indian Telegraph Right of Way Rules, 2016 have been framed to ensure grant of RoW permissions in underground and over ground infrastructure. However, as of May 1, 2018, 296 RoW cases are pending with different agencies, which affect 1,241 GPs. In this regard, the Committee recommended that there should be a single window clearance system to ensure smooth implementation.

- **BharatNet Phase-III:** Phase-III of the BharatNet involves upgrading the network to meet future requirements. However, the Committee observed that Phase-III has not been approved by the Union Cabinet. Given the size of Phase-III, the Committee recommended that all necessary planning and implementation strategy should be worked out in advance. Further, it recommended that Department of Telecommunications should take necessary steps for getting approval of the competent authority at the earliest.

National Rural Drinking Water Programme F

- **The Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) of India** submitted its report on 'National Rural Drinking Water Programme' on August 7, 2018. National Rural Drinking Water Programme (NRDWP) was launched in 2009. It aims to provide safe and adequate water for drinking, cooking and other domestic needs to every rural person on a sustainable basis. The audit was conducted for the period 2012-17. Key findings and recommendations of the CAG include:

- **Underperformance of the scheme:** By 2017, NRDWP aimed to achieve certain objectives. However, by December 2017, these objectives were not completely attained. It aimed to provide all rural habitations, government schools, and anganwadis access to safe drinking water. Of this, only 44% of rural households and 85% of government schools and anganwadis were provided access. It also aimed to provide 50% of rural population potable drinking water (55 litres per capita per day) by piped water supply. Of this, only 18% of rural population was provided potable drinking water. It also sought to give household connections to 35% of rural households. Of this, only 17% of rural households were given household connections.

- **Planning and delivery mechanism:** The CAG noted deviations from the programme guidelines in the planning and delivery framework established at the centre and states. 21 states had not framed water security plans. Deficiencies were found in the preparation and scrutiny of annual action plans such as: (i) lack of stakeholder and community participation, (ii) non-inclusion of minimum service level of water in schemes, and (iii) absence of approval of State Level Scheme Sanctioning Committee for schemes included in the plans. The apex level National Drinking Water and Sanitation Council set up to co-ordinate and ensure convergence remained largely non-functional. State level agencies important for planning and execution of the programme, such as the State Water and Sanitation Mission, State Technical Agency, and Block Resources Centres were either not set up or were under-performing.

- **The CAG recommended** that the Ministry of Drinking Water and Sanitation should review the feasibility and practicality of the planning and delivery mechanisms to ensure that they serve the intended purposes. It also suggested that the water security plans and annual action plans must be prepared with community participation. This will ensure that schemes are aligned to community requirements and utilise water resources in an optimum and sustainable manner.

- **Fund management:** Between 2012-17, total allocation of Rs 89,956 crore (central share of 43,691 crore and state share of Rs 46,265 crore) was provided for the programme. Of this, Rs 81,168 crore (90%) was spent during this period. The availability of funds declined during 2013-14 and 2016-17 due to reduced central allocation and inability of states to increase their own financial commitment. The CAG noted delays of over 15 months in release of central share to nodal/implementing agencies in states. It recommended that allocation of resources should be dynamic and based on a clear assessment of requirements and achievements under each component of the scheme.

- **Programme implementation:**NRDWP failed to achieve its targets due to deficiencies in implementation, such as: (i) incomplete, abandoned and non-operational works, (ii) unproductive expenditure on equipment, (iii) non-functional sustainability structures, and (iv) gaps in contractual management, with a total financial implication of Rs 2,212 crore.

- **There was inadequate focus** on surface water based schemes and 98% of the schemes, including piped water schemes continued to be based on ground water resources. The CAG also noted that operation and maintenance plans were either not prepared in most states or they had deficiencies in them. This led to schemes becoming non-functional. The CAG recommended that focus should be placed on effective works and contract management to ensure that works are completed in time as per the contractual terms. Delays attributable to contractors should be penalised and accountability should be enforced.

Wrongful Prosecution (Miscarriage of Justice): Legal Remedies

- **The Law Commission of India** (Chair: Justice B.S. Chauhan) submitted its report on 'Wrongful Prosecution (Miscarriage of Justice): Legal Remedies' on August 30, 2018. The report follows a Delhi High Court directive in 2016 where the Commission was asked to examine the remedies for wrongful detention. The Commission noted that currently there is no legislative framework to provide relief to those who are wrongfully prosecuted. Key recommendations of the Commission include:

- **Legal framework:** The Commission recommended amendments to the Code of Criminal Procedure, 1973 (CrPC), to give compensation in cases of miscarriage of justice resulting in wrongful prosecution of persons. Miscarriage of justice refers to wrongful or malicious prosecution, regardless of whether it leads to conviction or detention.

- **Cause of action:** The cause of action (reason) for the claimant to file a compensation claim would be that he was wrongfully prosecuted in a case which ended in his acquittal. Wrongful prosecution would include: (i) malicious prosecution, i.e. where one files a case against the claimant without belief in his guilt for the crime, and (ii) prosecution without good faith, i.e. where one files a case against the claimant negligently without due care and attention.

- **Who can apply:** A claim for compensation may be sought for harm caused to body, mind, reputation, or property because of the wrongful prosecution. Such a claim can be filed by the accused person, or his authorised agent, or his heirs or legal representatives (upon his death).

- **Special Courts:** The Commission observed that claims in relation to wrongful compensation should be settled speedily, keeping in mind the interest of the claimant. Therefore, it recommended setting up of special courts in each district for deciding compensation claims.

- **Nature of proceedings:** The proceedings in the special court will follow summary procedures for speedier disposal of the case. Further, the accused will be required to prove misconduct which lead to his wrongful prosecution. The claim will be decided by weighing the "balance of probabilities", i.e., the claim will be decided in favour of the party whose claims appear more likely to be true.

- **Compensation:** The Commission observed that it may not be possible at present to lay down a fixed amount of monetary compensation to be paid. It recommended amendments to the CrPC to include guiding principles to be followed by the court while deciding the amount of compensation. These include seriousness of the offence, severity of punishment, length of detention, damage to health, harm to reputation, and loss of opportunities.

- **Further, the Commission** recommended that compensation under the law should include both pecuniary (monetary) assistance and non-pecuniary assistance (such, as counselling services and vocational skill development). It further emphasised that non-pecuniary assistance should include provisions to remove disqualifications attached to wrongful prosecution. These include disqualifications which affect the person's chances of finding employment and getting admission in educational institutions.

- **The Commission** also recommended that a provision for payment of interim compensation be included in the law, for cases where the claimant may require immediate assistance.

Functioning of Food Safety And Standards Authority of India

- **The Standing Committee on Health and Family Welfare** (Chair: Prof. Ram Gopal Yadav) submitted its report on 'Functioning of Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI)' on August 7, 2018. FSSAI is responsible for formulating science based food standards and regulating the manufacture, storage, distribution, and sale of food to ensure consumer safety. Key observations and recommendations of the Committee include:

- **Regulatory framework:** The Committee noted that even after more than a decade of the enactment of the Food Safety and Standards Act, 2006, FSSAI is yet to frame regulations governing various procedures relating to accreditation of food testing laboratories, food labelling standards, and genetically engineered food, among others. Further, the FSSAI has been unable to identify areas for which standards are yet to be formulated or amended. It was observed that most states do not have a separate food safety department to efficiently implement food safety and standards. This has resulted in: (i) lack of quality checks, (ii) food adulteration, (iii) misleading labelling, and (iv) sale of defective food products.

- **The Committee recommended** that the FSSAI must frame and notify regulations on all areas that have been specified in the Act within a period of one year. Further, it recommends the establishment of a separate food safety department in all states for enforcing a robust food safety mechanism.

- **Licensing and registration:** Under the Act, no person can commence or carry on any food business without obtaining a license. The Committee noted that several food businesses were operating either without a license or with expired licenses. Further, licenses were being issued on the basis of incomplete documents by central and state licensing authorities. It also noted that that the rejection rate of licenses for renewal is very low. The Committee recommended that FSSAI ensure all licenses issued under the earlier system of product approvals are reviewed, and licenses are cancelled and reissued as required under the present procedure of product approvals.

- **Food safety surveys:** The Committee observed that FSSAI has left the task of undertaking surveys to states, but states are not equipped to undertake surveys. However, no survey has been conducted for the enforcement of the Act. FSSAI also does not have any database on food businesses. Therefore, it recommended that FSSAI and state food authorities must conduct surveys of food businesses in their jurisdiction.

- **Food recall plans:** The Committee recommended that FSSAI ensure that every food business has a food recall plan, in case of ban on any food items. Further, it recommended that FSSAI provide recall reports on a fortnightly basis to make consumers aware of adulterated and misbranded products.

- **Food testing laboratories:** The Committee noted that there is a shortage of laboratories, manpower and functional food testing equipment in most food laboratories (used for testing food samples by FSSAI and state food safety authorities), resulting in deficient testing of food samples. It noted that there are 266 laboratories in the country, many of which lack facilities to test essential parameters like heavy metal, pesticide and bacterial contamination. The Committee recommended a uniform procedure of testing across the country to obtain accurate results. In addition, it recommended each state to frame its recruitment regulations and conduct regular exams to fill up vacancies in laboratories.

- **The Committee also observed** that only 13 out of the 62 functional state food laboratories possess National Accreditation Board for Testing and Calibration Laboratories accreditation. In this context, the Committee recommended making accreditation of all laboratories mandatory for efficient food quality management.

- **Amendments to the Act:** The Committee recommended several amendments to the existing Food Safety and Standards Act, 2006 to establish a uniform food safety regulatory regime in the country. These recommendations relate to: (i) regulating use of food dye, (ii) regulating primary production i.e., the use of pesticides by farmers and fishermen, and (iii) modifying the process of selection of the Chairman and CEO of FSSAI to include experts and scientists in the food sector.

- **Shortage of manpower:** The Committee observed that there is acute shortage of staff at FSSAI and state safety authorities which affects food safety measures across the states. It recommended that the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare draw an action plan in coordination with states for overcoming the shortage of manpower.

International Women's Day 2019

- **History:** Earlier, it was called National woman's day and was acknowledged by the U.S. on February 28, 1909. This was done because of the labour movement which was started in 1908 where 15000 female employees went on strike in New York City to protest against poor working conditions.

- **National Women's Day** was recognised as International Women's Day only in 1910 after German women's rights activist Clara Zetkin suggested at an International Conference.

- **Themes:** This year the themes for International Women's Day are #BalanceforBetter, which is described as a "call-to-action for driving gender balance across the world" and "More Powerful Together". The themes stress upon the need for more men to get involved in the fight against gender equality and feminism.

- **Why March 8?** It was on this day that women in Soviet Russia gained the right the vote in 1917, hence March 8 was declared a national holiday for them. The United Nations General Assembly invited member states to proclaim March 8 as the UN Day for women's rights and world peace in 1977.

"Dictionary of Martyrs"

- **The aim** is to nurture and recall the brave deeds of the heroes of our freedom struggle.

- **Key facts:** The project for compilation of "Dictionary of Martyrs" of India's Freedom Struggle was commissioned by the Ministry of Culture, to the Indian Council of Historical Research (ICHR) to commemorate the 150th anniversary of uprising of 1857.

- **Definition:** In this dictionary a martyr has been defined as a person who died or who was killed in action or in detention, or was awarded capital punishment while participating in the national movement for emancipation of India.

- **It includes ex-INA** or ex-military personnel who died fighting the British. It includes the martyrs of 1857 Uprising, Jallianwala Bagh Massacre (1919), Non-Cooperation Movement (1920-22), Civil Disobedience Movement (1930-34), Quit India Movement (1942-44), Revolutionary Movements (1915-34), Kissan Movements, Tribal Movements, Agitation for Responsible Government in the Princely States (Prajamandal), Indian National Army (INA, 1943-45), Royal Indian Navy Upsurge (RIN, 1946), etc. Information of about 13,500 martyrs has been recorded in these volumes.

- **Significance:** A nation that does not honour and remember those who created, or are an important part, of its history, often does not have a secure future. In that sense, this effort is not just a way to cherish the past, but is also a way to secure the future. This was the first attempt at compiling the names of martyrs on this scale. This shall have a positive influence on the future generations, and inspires them to think of "India First."

Measures to promote Hydro Power Sector

- **These measures include:** Large Hydropower Projects to be declared as Renewable Energy source (as per existing practice, only hydropower projects less than 25MW are categorized as Renewable Energy).

- **Hydropower Projects (HPO)** as a separate entity within non-solar Renewable Purchase Obligation to cover LHPs commissioned after notification of these measures (SHPs are already covered under Non-Solar Renewable Purchase Obligation).

- **The trajectory** of annual HPO targets will be notified by Ministry of Power based on the projected capacity addition plans in hydropower sector. Necessary amendments will be introduced in the Tariff Policy and Tariff Regulations to operationalize HPO.

- **Tariff rationalization** measures including providing flexibility to the developers to determine tariff by back loading of tariff after increasing project life to 40 years, increasing debt repayment period to 18 years and introducing escalating tariff of 2%; Budgetary support for funding flood moderation component of hydropower projects on case to case basis.

- **Budgetary** support for funding cost of enabling infrastructure i.e. roads and bridges on case to case basis as per actual, limited to Rs. 1.5 crore per MW for upto 200 MW projects and Rs. 1.0 crore per MW for above 200 MW projects.

- **Major Impact including employment generation potential:** As most of the hydro power potential is located in the higher reaches of Himalayas and North-East Region, it will result in overall socio-economic development of the region by providing direct employment in the power sector.

- **Provide indirect employment/ entrepreneurial** opportunities in the field of transportation, tourism and other small scale businesses. It provides a stable grid considering 160 GW capacity addition by 2022 from infirm sources of power like solar and wind.

- **India's hydropower potential:** India is blessed with immense amount of hydro-electric potential and ranks 5th in terms of exploitable hydro-potential on global scenario. India is endowed with large hydropower potential of 1,45,320 MW of which only about 45,400 MW has been utilized so far. Only about 10,000 MW of hydropower has been added in the last 10 years.

- **The hydropower** sector is currently going through a challenging phase and the share of hydropower in the total capacity has declined from 50.36% in the 1960s to around 13% in 2018-19.

- **Why hydropower?** Besides being environment friendly, hydropower has several other unique features like ability for quick ramping, black start, reactive absorption etc. which make it ideal for peaking power, spinning reserve and grid balancing/ stability. Further, hydropower also provides water security, irrigation and flood moderation benefits, apart from socio-economic development of the entire region by providing employment opportunities and boosting tourism etc.

- **The importance** of hydropower is increasing even more as the country has targeted to add 160 GW of intermittent Solar and Wind power by 2022 and 40% of the total capacity from non-fossil fuel sources by 2030 to honour its Nationally Determined Contribution for Climate Change.

- **Challenges ahead:** DISCOMS are reluctant sign Power Purchase Agreements (PPAs) Hydro Power due to higher tariff, particularly, in the initial years. One of the reasons for high tariff of hydropower is the loading of cost of flood moderation and enabling infrastructure in the project cost.

- **Due to inherent** risks associated with the sector, such as geological surprises, natural calamities, environmental & forest issues, and rehabilitation and resettlement issues apart from commercial risks and change of river basin during operation, many developers are averse to enter into the sector. The major commercial deterrents for the private developers are high capital cost and long payback period due to high gestation period which may also create issues in financing.

- **The other** issue related to Hydropower projects is financing and evacuation. Hydro Power projects are capital-intensive and financing them for long such as 20 years is really a challenge. Further, a number of hydropower projects are located in remote sites in states which do not have enough demand for electricity that presents geographical constraints in developing requisite transmission infrastructure for evacuation.

- **How much is the world's electricity supplied by Hydroelectric Power Plants?** 2700 TWH is generated every year. Hydropower supplies at least 50% of electricity production in 66 countries and at least 90% in 24 countries.

- **What is the classification of Hydro Projects based on Installed Capacity?** Micro: upto 100 KW. Mini: 101KW to 2 MW. Small: 2 MW to 25 MW. Mega: Hydro projects with installed capacity >= 500 MW. Thermal Projects with installed capacity >=1500 MW.

Atal Innovation Mission (AIM)

- **About Atal Innovation Mission (AIM):** Atal Innovation Mission (AIM) including Self-Employment and Talent Utilization (SETU) is Government of India's endeavour to promote a culture of innovation and entrepreneurship.

- **Its objective** is to serve as a platform for promotion of world-class Innovation Hubs, Grand Challenges, Start-up businesses and other self-employment activities, particularly in technology driven areas.

- **The Atal Innovation Mission shall have two core functions:** Entrepreneurship promotion through Self-Employment and Talent Utilization, wherein innovators would be supported and mentored to become successful entrepreneurs. Innovation promotion: to provide a platform where innovative ideas are generated.

- **Impact:** The Mission has undertaken many bold and forward-looking initiatives such as Atal Tinkering Labs (ATL) and Atal Incubation Centres (AIC), which have received great traction; Many Ministries/Departments of Government of India have initiated innovation related activities with the help and technical support of AIM. Under the ATL program, more than 10,000 schools are expected to establish these labs by 2020.

- **More than 100** Atal Incubation Centres (AICs) are likely to established around the country, supporting at least 50-60 startups each over the first five years. More than 100 innovators/startups are expected to receive some support for productizing their innovations. Each incubator is expected to foster 50-60 technology driven innovative Startups every four years.

- **The potential** for employment generation from these innovations driven Startups is quite high.

Flood Management and Border Areas Programme (FMBAP)

- **Salient features:** The Scheme "FMBAP" has been framed by merging the components of two continuing XII Plan schemes titled "Flood Management Programme (FMP)" and "River Management Activities and Works related to Border Areas (RMBA)".

- **The aim of the Scheme** is to assist the State Governments to provide reasonable degree of protection against floods in critical areas by adopting optimum combination of structural and non-structural measures and enhancing capabilities of State/ Central Government officials in related fields. The works under the scheme will protect valuable land from erosion and flooding and help in maintaining peace along the border.

- **The Scheme** aims at completion of the on-going projects already approved under FMP. Further, the scheme also caters to Hydro-meteorological observations and Flood Forecasting on common rivers with the neighbouring countries.

- **The Scheme** also includes survey and investigations, preparation of DPR etc. of water resources projects on the common rivers with neighbouring countries like Pancheshwar Multipurpose Project, Sapta Kosi-Sun Kosi Projects in Nepal which would benefit both countries.

- **Benefits:** The FMBAP Scheme will be implemented throughout the country for effective flood management, erosion control and anti-sea erosion. The proposal will benefit towns, villages, industrial establishments, communication links, agricultural fields, infrastructure etc. from floods and erosion in the country. The catchment area treatment works will help in reduction of sediment load into rivers.

- **Funding pattern:** The funding pattern for FM Component for works in general category States will continue to be 50% (Centre): 50% (State) and for projects of North Eastern States, Sikkim, J&K, Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand, the funding pattern will continue to be 70% (Centre): 30% (State). RMBA component being specific to activities in border areas with neighbouring countries and in accordance with bilateral mechanisms, the projects / works will continue to be funded as 100% grant-in-aid / central assistance.

International Finance Corporation (IFC)

- **About the International Finance Corporation (IFC):** The International Finance Corporation (IFC) is an international financial institution that offers investment, advisory, and asset management services to encourage private sector development in developing countries.

- **It is a member** of the World Bank Group and is headquartered in Washington, D.C., United States. It was established in 1956 as the private sector arm of the World Bank Group to advance economic development by investing in strictly for-profit and commercial projects that purport to reduce poverty and promote development.

- **The IFC is** owned and governed by its member countries, but has its own executive leadership and staff that conduct its normal business operations. It is a corporation whose shareholders are member governments that provide paid-in capital and which have the right to vote on its matters.

- **Functions:** It offers an array of debt and equity financing services and helps companies face their risk exposures, while refraining from participating in a management capacity.

- **The corporation** also offers advice to companies on making decisions, evaluating their impact on the environment and society, and being responsible. It advises governments on building infrastructure and partnerships to further support private sector development.

Ethanol production gets a leg-up

- **The CCEA** has approved ₹2,790 crore for bank loan interest subvention to mills, and ₹565 crore for loan interest subvention to the molasses-based standalone distilleries.

- **Impact:** Banks will be able to extend soft loans worth ₹15,500 crore to mills and distilleries under the scheme. This is likely to benefit 268 mills and create an additional 300-400 crore litres of ethanol capacity, according to industry estimates.

- **The decision** to encourage ethanol production would have a longer term impact, with the creation of 300-400 crore litres of ethanol capacity in addition to the existing 355 crore litres. This will help the sugar industry reduce surplus production by diverting the surplus sugarcane for ethanol.

- **Benefits of ethanol blending:** Increased ethanol blending in petrol has many benefits including reduction in import dependency, support to agricultural sector, more environmental friendly fuel, lesser pollution and additional income to farmers.

- **Ethanol Blended Petrol (EBP) Programme:** It was launched by the Government in 2003 on pilot basis which has been subsequently extended to the Notified 21 States and 4 Union Territories to promote the use of alternative and environmental friendly fuels. It aims at blending ethanol with petrol, thereby bringing it under the category of biofuels and saving millions of dollars by cutting fuel imports.

- **Ethanol Blended Petrol Programme** is being implemented by the Ministry or Oil Marketing Companies (OMCs). This intervention also seeks to reduce import dependency for energy requirements and give boost to agriculture sector.

- **Demand:** India is the third largest consumer of energy in the world after China and the US. Currently, the country is dependent on imports for about 82.1% of its crude oil requirement and to the extent of about 44.4% in case of natural gas.

- **India** is expected to need 10 billion litres of ethanol annually to meet the 20% blending target in 2030 if petrol consumption continues to grow at the current pace. At present, the capacity stands at 1.55 billion litres a year.

- **Concerns and challenges:** There has been a consistent shortfall in supply of ethanol in the past, mainly on account of the cyclical nature of the sugarcane harvests in the country. There is "lack of an integrated approach in the EBP across its value chain."

- **Way ahead:** The National Policy on Bio-fuels has set a target of 20% blending of biofuels, both for bio-diesel and bio-ethanol. This will require an integrated approach in the Ethanol Blending Programme (EBP). The time is ripe for a cogent and consistent policy and administrative framework in the program implementation for the success of EBP.

Regional Air Connectivity- UDAN

- **Background:** The AAI has developed 38 unfrequented and less frequented airports since the launch of the scheme in March 2017. As many as 750 routes have been awarded for connecting 77 un-served airports, 21 under-served airports, ten waterdromes and 31 helipads.

- **About UDAN:** UDAN, launched in April 2017, is a flagship scheme of the Union Government to enable air operations on unserved routes, connecting regional areas, to promote balanced regional growth and to make flying affordable for masses. The UDAN Scheme is a key component of the National Civil Aviation Policy (NCAP) which was launched in June 2016.

- **Objectives of the scheme:** The primary objective of RCS is to facilitate / stimulate regional air connectivity by making it cheap and affordable. Promoting affordability of regional air connectivity is envisioned under RCS by supporting airline operators through: Concessions and Financial (viability gap funding or VGF) support.

- **Significance:** The scheme gives India's aviation sector a boost by giving a chance to small and first-time operators to be a part of the rapid growth in passenger traffic.

Institutions in News- Securities Appellate Tribunal:

- **SAT** is a statutory body established under the provisions of Section 15K of the Securities and Exchange Board of India Act, 1992.

- **To hear** and dispose of appeals against orders passed by the Securities and Exchange Board of India or by an adjudicating officer under the Act and to exercise jurisdiction, powers and authority conferred on the Tribunal by or under this Act or any other law for the time being in force. It covers the whole of India.

- **In PIB News- Important for Prelims:** Khurja Super Thermal Power Project- Uttar Pradesh. Buxar Thermal Power Project- Bihar. Teesta Hydro Power project- Sikkim. Kiru Hydro Electric (HE) Project- Jammu and Kashmir.

- **In News- Nari Shakti Puraskar:** To acknowledge Women's achievements, the Government of India confers Nari Shakti Puraskars on eminent women and institutions in recognition of their service towards the cause of women empowerment. The Nari Shakti Awards were initiated in the year 1999.

- **The Ministry of Women and Child Development** announces these national level awards for eminent women, organisations and institutions. The Nari Shakti Puraskar carries a cash award of Rs.1 Lakh and a certificate for individuals and institutions.

'Bolo' app:

- **Context:** Google has launched a new application called 'Bolo' that aims to help children in primary school to read in Hindi and English. The app, which is being launched in India first, uses Google's speech recognition and text-to-speech technology.

- **It comes** with a built-in fun and helpful reading buddy, an animated character called 'Diya'. The reading material available on the app will be completely free of cost.

- **The app aims** to help improve the reading ability of children, as the lack of it can significantly impact further education and ultimately children's ability to realise their full potential.

India, Russia sign deal on nuclear submarine:

- **Context:** India has sealed a $3-billion deal with Russia for leasing a nuclear-powered attack submarine for the Indian Navy for a period of 10 years.

- **Under the pact,** Russia will have to deliver the Akula class submarine, to be known as Chakra III, to the Indian Navy by 2025. It will be the third Russian submarine to be leased to the Navy. India Navy has taken two more submarines from Russia on lease. The first Russian nuclear-powered submarine — christened INS Chakra — was taken in 1988 under a three year lease. A second INS Chakra was taken on lease in 2012 for a period of 10 years.

- **Odisha govt launches boat ambulance for remote villages:** The Odisha government has launched boat ambulance service for those living in the remote villages near Bhitarkanika National Park in Kendrapara district. It is meant to ferry people to hospitals and clinics in case of emergency.

India Urban Observatory & Video Wall Inaugurated in MOHUA

- **Observatory** to enhance engagement among government, citizens, academia, & industry, along with improvement in decision-making processes: Hardeep S Puri

- **To Provide** Scientific Response to Complex Challenges in Urbanization through Use of State-of-The-Art Technologies & Collaborations Video Wall Showcases Insights Gained from Observatory & Various Missions/ Offices Aiming To Proactively Engage with Citizens/ Visitors in Spreading Awareness

- **Shri Hardeep S Puri,** Minister of State (I/C) for Housing and Urban Affairs, has stated that as cities begin to implement 'smart' solutions, data becomes a significant asset and enabler for data driven Governance, leading to urban transformation. While inaugurating state-of-the-art India Urban Observatory here today, he said that it will plug into the myriad sources of data from cities, both from real-time and archival sources. While inaugurating the Video Wall, he said that it will showcase the insights gained from the Observatory and the various Missions/ offices with the idea to proactively engage with citizens/ visitors in spreading awareness about the various initiatives of the Ministry. Sh Durga Shanker Mishra, Secretary, MOHUA, Sh Kunal Kumar, JS/Mission Director, Smart Cities Mission and senior officers of the ministry were also present on the occasion.

- **Speaking on the occasion,** Shri Hardeep Puri said that it is imperative for the empowerment of communities that cities work on using information available through various sources to improve their functioning, public services, governance systems, achievements and failures in the public domain, thereby, empowering their citizens through the access to information. He said, the future of Governance is data-driven and Indian cities are beginning to adopt this change in their functioning. He said, bringing PEOPLE in 'focus' needs a move towards outcome-based planning in governance. "The Observatory will help in getting reliable, up-to-date information on a meaningful set of indicators over various domains such as transport, health, environment, water, finance and so on, which will further assist in developing best practices, future strategies and policy interventions as and when required", he added.

- **Shri Puri** pointed out that the conceptualisation of this Observatory recognizes the value of enhancing engagement among all four stakeholders of the 'quadruple-helix' model— Government, citizens, academia, and industry, along with improvements in the internal workflow and decision-making processes of city Governments. He further elaborated that the India Urban Observatory would progressively become the chief data analysis and Management Hub of the Ministry and would enable evidence-based policy formulation, capacity building of ecosystem partners on data-driven governance, foster innovation through development of newer and better use cases thereby enabling solutions at scale and speed. "It will provide scientific response to the complex challenges to urbanization through use of state-of-the-art technologies and collaborations", he said.

- **The India Urban Observatory** is an important component of the recently launched DataSmart Cities strategy that envisions to create a 'Culture of Data' in cities, for intelligent use of data in addressing complex urban challenges. The strategy aims to lay down the basic premise, three foundational pillars vis. People, Process, Platform, and a suggested roadmap for cities to improve their readiness for intelligent use of data. Making cities 'DataSmart' is key to realizing the full potential of technology interventions and innovation ecosystems in cities.

- **(https://smartnet.niua.org/dsc/datasmartcity-stratergy.php). The DataSmart Cities Strategy also presents a Data Maturity Assessment Framework (DMAF),** that measures the readiness and evolution of cities in their efforts to implementing the Data strategy. The assessment of cities as per the DMAF will foster a culture of data and drive innovation in India's Smart Cities through a spirit of collaboration and healthy competition. (https://smartnet.niua.org/dsc/dmaf.php)

Pradhan Mantri Swasthya Suraksha Yojana

- **The Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG)** submitted a report on 'Performance of the Pradhan Mantri Swasthya Suraksha Yojana (PMSSY)' on August 7, 2018. PMSSY was introduced in 2003 to correct imbalances in the availability of tertiary healthcare services and improve the quality of medical education. The scheme has two components: (i) setting up of new AIIMS, and (ii) upgradation of selected Government Medical College Institutions (GMCIs). Over the years, the scheme has been expanded to cover 20 new AIIMS and 71 GMCIs. The audit covers the period from 2003 to 17. Key observations and recommendations of the audit include:

- **Planning and implementation:** The CAG observed that no operational guidelines had been formulated for PMSSY since its inception. This resulted in several ad hoc decisions being taken with respect to key aspects of the scheme. In case of setting up new AIIMS, initial approval was not based on a comprehensive assessment of the scope of work. This led to an increase in costs and delays of up to five years. In case of GMCIs, the criteria for selection of institutes was not formulated resulting in arbitrary selection.

- **In this context,** the CAG recommended that the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare must expedite the formulation of operational guidelines to regulate the implementation of the scheme. It also recommended that evaluation studies could be taken up for status check and to identify weaknesses in planning and implementation.

- **Financial management:** During 2004-17, the government allocated Rs 14,971 crore for the scheme. However, only 61% (Rs 9,207 crore) of these funds were released. Further, a significant portion of the funds remained underutilised due to: (i) delays in obtaining approval, (ii) slow pace of procurement of equipment, (iii) non-filling up of posts, and (iv) pending utilisation certificates. The CAG noted that there was no mechanism in place for monitoring actual expenditure which led to accumulation of unspent funds.

- **It was found that the Ministry** had estimated the capital cost for setting up six new AIIMS to be Rs 332 crore per institute. After four years, this cost was revised to Rs 820 crore per institute, on account of shortcomings in planning and assessment of requirements. The CAG recommended that the Ministry should ensure adherence to contract provisions in the execution of works. In addition, accountability should be fixed where there is additional expenditure without adequate justification.

- **Delays in execution:** The CAG observed that all new AIIMS overshot their completion time by almost five years. There were similar delays observed in the upgradation of GMCIs, as only eight of the 16 GMCIs selected for the audit were completed. These delays were attributed to poor contract management and weak monitoring. Further, there were deficiencies in the execution of works, such as: (i) improper estimation of scope and quantities, (ii) delay in procurement and installation of equipment, and (iii) extra payment to contractors. In this context, the CAG recommended that steps should be taken to expedite the completion of leftover work by better monitoring of projects.

- **Human resources:** The CAG observed that there is acute shortage of faculty and non-faculty posts at AIIMS. These shortages restricted the functioning of several departments and led to reliance on outsourced employees on a contractual basis. Further, delays in filling up sanctioned posts were attributed to delay in finalising recruitment rules, court cases and non-availability of eligible candidates. In case of GMCIs, the institutes faced shortage of manpower to run super speciality departments. The CAG recommended that the Ministry take effective steps to minimise the shortage of faculty, non faculty and technical manpower in the new AIIMS and GMCIs.

- **Monitoring committees:** The audit noted that the committees constituted at national, state, and institute levels to review project implementation remained non-functional. Further, monitoring of upgradation of GMCIs was left entirely to concerned institutes, without any involvement of the Ministry or state governments. The CAG recommended that effective monitoring by the committees was necessary for synchronisation of activities related to completion of works and procurement of equipment.

National Projects of the Ministry of Water Resources

- **The Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG)** of India submitted its report on 'National Projects of the Ministry of Water Resources, River Development and Ganga Rejuvenation' on July 20, 2018. The audit was conducted for the period 2008-17. Key findings and recommendations of the CAG include:

- **Underperformance of the scheme:** In February 2008, the government approved a scheme of national projects, under which it identified 16 major water resource development and irrigation projects. These projects were previously under the Accelerated Irrigation Benefits Programme. However, the progress of these projects had declined due to various factors. These include land acquisition, inter-state coordination, financial constraints, and issues relating to

rehabilitation and re-settlement of the affected population. The scheme was aimed to ensure coordinated and focussed action to expedite the execution and completion of these 16 projects. The performance audit of the scheme has revealed that this objective of the scheme remains unachieved.

- **Of the 16 national projects,** only five projects with an estimated irrigation potential of 25 lakh hectare are under implementation. Of this, 14.5 lakh hectare irrigation potential has been created, but only 5.3 lakh hectare (36.5%) is being utilised. The remaining 11 projects with an estimated irrigation potential of 10.4 lakh hectare are yet to commence.

- **Delays in execution:** Execution of projects has been delayed due to administrative delays, non-adherence to rules, poor contract management, and lack of effective and timely monitoring.

- **To expedite the implementation of the scheme,** the CAG has recommended that these projects may be taken up in a mission mode. Nodal officers may be designated at the central level to effectively monitor the progress of the projects under implementation. This would also remove bottlenecks in coordinating with state authorities.

- **Financial over-runs:** The cost escalation in the five projects before their inclusion in the scheme was Rs 32,802 crore. However, since their inclusion under the scheme of national projects, two of these projects, Indira Sagar Polavaram project and Gosikhurd project, have together registered a cost escalation of Rs 49,840 crore over the previous escalation. The remaining three projects have already overshot their approved completion time and none of them is near completion. The overall cost of the five projects has been escalated by 2,341%.

- **To address the issue of cost escalation**, the CAG has recommended that contract management should be streamlined. In addition, accountability should be fixed on project authorities for deficient contract management.

- **Physical progress:** The shortfall in terms of physical progress in different components of the projects has ranged from 8% to 99%. Slow implementation has been attributed to: (i) management failures, (ii) non-adherence to provisions relating to surveys and investigations, (iii) obtaining statutory clearances for project sites, and (iv) administrative delays in land acquisitions.

- **Command Area Development (CAD):** As of March 2017, none of the five projects under implementation had sent any proposal for CAD works to Central Water Commission (CWC) for approval. CAD works provide last mile connectivity through distributaries, and in the absence of their implementation, irrigation potential created through these projects cannot be utilised. In this regard, the CAG has recommended that the Ministry of Water Resources should ensure simultaneous implementation of CAD works with these projects. The Ministry may also ask the concerned states to submit their CAD proposals to the CWC at the earliest.

- **Monitoring mechanisms:** Lack of adequate and effective monitoring has contributed to the poor progress of the completion of projects. The lack of timely action to deal with breaches and damages to created infrastructure has contributed to inadequate maintenance of created assets. The CAG has recommended strengthening the monitoring mechanisms with regular meetings between the Ministry and the state departments to identify obstructions in completing projects.

High Level Task Force Report Summary Public Credit Registry for India

- **The Reserve Bank of India (RBI)** had constituted a High Level Task Force (Chair: Mr. Y. M. Deosthalee) to assess the need and scope of setting up a Public Credit Registry in India. The task force submitted its report on April 4, 2018.

- **A public credit registry** refers to an extensive database of credit information of borrowers that is accessible to all lending and credit decision-making institutions. Typically, the registry is managed by a public authority like the central bank of the country, and reporting of loan details to the registry by lenders and/or borrowers is mandated by the law. 2018.

- **The terms of reference** of the task force included: (i) reviewing the current availability of credit information in India and assessing its gaps, (ii) studying the best international practices on credit registries, and (iii) determining the scope and structure of a comprehensive credit registry, if any.2018.

- **Current Indian context:** Presently, India has both public and private sector entities storing credit data: (i) There are four private Credit Information Companies (CICs) – TransUnion Credit Information Bureau (India) Limited (TransUnion CIBIL), Equifax, Experian and CRIF High Mark. RBI has mandated all regulated credit institutions to report borrower credit information to all CICs. 2018.

- **(ii) Entities within RBI are:** (i) Central Repository of Information on Large Credits (CRILC), and (ii) Basic Statistical Return-1 (BSR-1). CRILC contains credit information on all borrowers having exposure greater than five crore rupees. BSR-1 provides sectoral distribution of credit for all borrowings regardless of amount; and hence it does not have individual borrower identification. 2018.

- **(iii) There are also institutions** that capture specific credit information – for example, Information Utilities, registered under the Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code 2016, store financial information such as debt, liabilities, and balance sheet details that helps establish defaults. 2018.

- **Challenges with current scenario:** The task force identified various shortcomings of the current credit information infrastructure in India, such as: (i) the data stored is not comprehensive, and is fragmented across different entities, for example, data on borrowings from banks, inter-corporate borrowings, overseas borrowings etc., are not available in a single repository; (ii) it is reliant on self-disclosure, for example, income details, assets and liabilities are disclosed by the

borrower; (iii) the data has to be cross-validated, for example, income tax websites have to be checked for listed companies; (iv) there are time lags and discrepancies between multiple sources of information; (v) there is increased reporting burden on credit institutions from having to report to multiple entities; and (vi) portals like CIBIL are paid portals and the lender has to bear the cost of extracting data. 2018.

- **Consequences of the current Indian structure:** The information asymmetry and fragmented nature of credit reporting leads to the following inefficiencies in the credit market: (i) since lending institutions do not have complete credit information on all borrowers, all borrowers pay similar interests irrespective of their risk or credit ratings; (ii) lenders may pick up clients who have a history of delinquency that is unknown to all lenders, and thereby face greater overall credit risk; (iii) it prevents credit supply to some subsections of the market, for example, small and medium industries are perceived as risky by default, and often denied timely credit due to lack of adequate credit history. 2018.

- **Public credit registry:** The task force noted that transparency in credit markets helps creditors and borrowers alike by removing information asymmetry and improving access to credit. To bring about such transparency, it recommended setting up a public credit registry. The credit registry should: (i) be backed by a suitable legal framework, (ii) store information on all loans regardless of the amount, (iii) capture information currently not recorded in the credit information system, for example, data on external borrowings, (iv) store supplementary credit data, like utility bill payments history, for the benefit of individuals with no credit history, and (vi) ensure security and privacy of the stored information. Borrowers may access their own credit report, and access to all stakeholders should be on a need-to-know basis and be used only for the authorised purpose. Additionally, the reporting entities should ensure the quality of data reported to the registry. 2018.

- **International practice:** Several countries, such as most members of the European Union, have a central credit registry usually managed by the central bank of the country. Reporting to the registry is mandatory by law. It provides credit reports to lenders and borrowers (on their own situation). Along with the public registry, there also exist multiple private credit bureaus, reporting to which tend to be voluntary in nature. Private bureaus augment their credit information with data from other sources like public registries, tax authorities, utility bill payments databases and legal proceedings database, and provide such data to lenders. They also provide services like credit assessment and scoring.

A Free and Fair Digital Economy

- **The Committee of Experts** on a Data Protection Framework for India (Chair: Justice B. N. Srikrishna) submitted its report and draft Bill to the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology on July 27, 2018. The Committee was constituted in August, 2017 to examine issues related to data protection, recommend methods to address them, and draft a data protection Bill. 2018.

- **Fiduciary relationship:** The Committee observed that the regulatory framework has to balance the interests of the individual with regard to his personal data and the interests of the entity such as a service provider who has access to this data. It noted that the relationship between the individual and the service provider must be viewed as a fiduciary relationship. This is due to the dependence of the individual on the service provider to obtain a service. Therefore, the service provider processing the data is under an obligation to deal fairly with the individual's personal data, and use it for the authorised purposes only.

- **Obligations of fiduciaries:** To prevent abuse of power by service providers, the law should establish their basic obligations, including: (i) the obligation to process data fairly and reasonably, and (ii) the obligation to give notice to the individual at the time of collecting data to various points in the interim.

- **Definition of personal data:** The Committee noted that it is important to define what constitutes personal information. It defined personal data to include data from which an individual may be identified or identifiable, either directly or indirectly. The Committee sought to distinguish personal data protection from the protection of sensitive personal data, since its processing could result in greater harm to the individual. Sensitive data is related to intimate matters where there is a higher expectation of privacy (e.g., caste, religion, and sexual orientation of the individual).

- **Consent-based processing:** The Committee noted that consent must be treated as a pre-condition for processing personal data. Such consent should be informed or meaningful. Further, for certain vulnerable groups, such as children, and for sensitive personal data, a data protection law must sufficiently protect their interests, while considering their vulnerability, and exposure to risks online. Further, sensitive personal information should require explicit consent of the individual.

- **Non-consensual processing:** The Committee noted that it is not possible to obtain consent of the individual in all circumstances. Therefore, separate grounds may be established for processing data without consent. The Committee identified four bases for non-consensual processing: (i) where processing is relevant for the state to discharge its welfare functions, (ii) to comply with the law or with court orders in India, (iii) when necessitated by the requirement to act promptly (to save a life, for instance), and (iv) in employment contracts, in limited situations (such, as where giving the consent requires an unreasonable effort for the employer).

- **Participation rights:** The rights of the individual are based on the principles of autonomy, self-determination, transparency and accountability to give individuals control over their data. The Committee categorised these rights in three categories: (i) the right to access, confirmation and correction of data, (ii) the right to object to data processing, automated decision-making, direct marketing and the right to data portability, and (iii) the right to be forgotten.

- **Enforcement models:** The Committee also recommended setting up a regulator to enforce the regulatory framework. The Authority will have the power to inquire into any violations of the data protection regime, and can take action against any data fiduciary responsible for the same. The Authority may also categorise certain fiduciaries as significant data fiduciaries based on their ability to cause greater harm to individuals. Such fiduciaries will be required to undertake additional obligations.

- **Amendments to Other Laws:** The Committee noted that various allied laws are relevant in the context of data protection because they either require or authorise the processing of personal data. These laws include the Information Technology Act, 2000, and the Census Act, 1948. It stated that the Bill provides minimum data protection standards for all data processing in the country. In the event of inconsistency, the standards set in the data privacy law will apply to the processing of data. The Committee also recommended amendments to the Aadhaar Act, 2016 to bolster its data protection framework.

Bill Summary on The Draft Personal Data Protection Bill, 2018

- **Rights of the individual:** The Bill sets out certain rights of the individual. These include: (i) right to obtain confirmation from the fiduciary on whether its personal data has been processed, (ii) right to seek correction of inaccurate, incomplete, or out-of-date personal data, and (iii) right to have personal data transferred to any other data fiduciary in certain circumstances.

- **Obligations of the data fiduciary:** The Bill sets out obligations of the entity who has access to the personal data (data fiduciary). These include: (i) implementation of policies with regard to processing of data, (ii) maintaining transparency with regard to its practices on processing data, (iii) implementing security safeguards (such, as encryption of data), and (iv) instituting grievance redressal mechanisms to address complaints of individuals.

- **Data Protection Authority:** The Bill provides for the establishment of a Data Protection Authority. The Authority is empowered to: (i) take steps to protect interests of individuals, (ii) prevent misuse of personal data, and (iii) ensure compliance with the Bill. It will consist of a chairperson and six members, with knowledge of at least 10 years in the field of data protection and information technology. Orders of the Authority can be appealed to an Appellate Tribunal established by the central government and appeals from the Tribunal will go to the Supreme Court.

- **Grounds for processing personal data:** The Bill allows processing of data by fiduciaries if consent is provided. However, in certain circumstances, processing of data may be permitted without consent of the individual. These grounds include: (ii) if necessary for any function of Parliament or state legislature, or if required by the state for providing benefits to the individual, (iii) if required under law or for the compliance of any court judgement, (iv) to respond to a medical emergency, threat to public health or breakdown of public order, or, (v) for reasonable purposes specified by the Authority, related to activities such as fraud detection, debt recovery, and whistle blowing.

- **Grounds for processing sensitive personal data:** Processing of sensitive personal data is allowed on certain grounds, including: (i) based on explicit consent of the individual, (ii) if necessary for any function of Parliament or state legislature, or, if required by the state for providing benefits to the individual, or (iii) if required under law or for the compliance of any court judgement.

- **Sensitive personal data** includes passwords, financial data, biometric data, genetic data, caste, religious or political beliefs, or any other category of data specified by the Authority. Additionally, fiduciaries are required to institute appropriate mechanisms for age verification and parental consent when processing sensitive personal data of children.

- **Transfer of data outside India:** Personal data (except sensitive personal data) may be transferred outside India under certain conditions. These include: (i) where the central government has prescribed that transfers to a particular country are permissible, or (ii) where the Authority approves the transfer in a situation of necessity.

- **Exemptions: The Bill provides** exemptions from compliance with its provisions, for certain reasons including: (i) state security, (ii) prevention, investigation, or prosecution of any offence, or (iii) personal, domestic, or journalistic purposes.

- **Offences and Penalties:** Under the Bill, the Authority may levy penalties for various offences by the fiduciary including (i) failure to perform its duties, (ii) data processing in violation of the Bill, and (iii) failure to comply with directions issued by the Authority. For example, under the Bill, the fiduciary is required to notify the Authority of any personal data breach which is likely to cause harm to the individual. Failure to promptly notify the Authority can attract a penalty of the higher of Rs 5 crore or 2% of the worldwide turnover of the fiduciary.

- **Amendments to other laws:** The Bill makes consequential amendments to the Information Technology Act, 2000. It also amends the Right to Information Act, 2005, and to permit non-disclosure of personal information where harm to the individual outweighs public good.

Development of Inland Fisheries and Aquaculture

- **submitted a report on** 'Scheme on Development of Inland Fisheries and Aquaculture – An Analysis' on July 25, 2018. The scheme focuses on increasing fish productivity, species diversification, and expansion of aquaculture area.

- **The key recommendations of the Standing Committee include: Diversification:** The Committee observed that the scheme, since its inception in 1973-74, has seen under-achievement of targets due to improper implementation, which has restricted the growth of inland fisheries. It also observed that the share of freshwater aquaculture in inland fisheries has increased from 34% in mid-1980s to 80% in recent years. Therefore, the Committee recommended diversification of fish production in other areas like integrated fish farming, cold water fisheries, riverine fisheries, capture fisheries, and brackish water fisheries, among others. It also recommended that quality inputs in terms of seed, feed, and health management, should be provided, with emphasis on timely implementation for enhancing productivity.

- **Funding:** The Committee observed that only Rs 400 crore was allocated out of the approved central outlay of Rs 598 crore in 2017-18. Given that only a portion of this would be allocated to inland fisheries and aquaculture, it noted that this allocation is insufficient and should be increased. It also observed that utilisation certificates (UCs) amounting to Rs 290 crore were pending as on March 31, 2017. It noted that under-utilisation of funds leads to the vicious cycle of lower allocation and downsized targets. It recommended corrective measures for liquidation of outstanding UCs in a time bound manner.

- **Scientific and Sustainable Methods:** The Committee noted that Recirculatory Aquaculture System (RAS) is a scientific and sustainable method of fish farming which can be used to exponentially increase production. RAS is a production system that continuously filters and recycles water, enabling large-scale fish farming that requires a small amount of water without causing pollution. The Committee recommended that fish farmers should be encouraged to take up RAS practices, aided with easy availability of required funds and infrastructure.

- **Training:** The Committee stressed on the need for inclusiveness in skill development programmes, with emphasis on the north-eastern and hilly states. It recommended special attention towards inclusion of fishermen from these areas in such programmes, so as to bring them at par with other fishermen. It also recommended special training for some fishermen, who can act as master trainers. They, in turn, would train other fishermen in better reception and retention of the skills and techniques provided during training.

- **Assessment:** The Committee observed that no evaluation has been done to assess the actual number of ponds, wetlands, water logged areas, and other water bodies in the country, where fish cultivation is possible. It recommended that an evaluation should be undertaken to assess the actual number of water bodies with fishing potential within each state. It recommended that action plans should be prepared for each state, so that water bodies can be utilised optimally and their potential can be explored fully.

- **Availability of resources:** The Committee stressed that fisheries should be treated at par with agriculture so that fish farmers get easier access to institutional credit and insurance. It recommended states to make policies regarding leasing out of water bodies by the Panchayats and to ensure deserving prices to fishers.

- **Cooperatives:** The Committee noted that there is no proper mechanism in place to ensure that fish cooperatives function in an optimal way and to hold them accountable. It recommended the states to come up with a mechanism to measure the performance of the cooperatives and to ensure their accountability. It also recommended the states to formulate proper guidelines for leasing out the state resources to the cooperatives and guidelines for their maintenance

Tribal Sub-Plan

- **The Public Accounts Committee** (Chair: Mr. Mallikarjun Kharge) submitted its report on 'Tribal Sub-Plan' on December 18, 2017. The Tribal Sub-Plan (TSP) aims to bridge the gap between the Schedule Tribes (STs) and the general population with respect to all socio-economic development indicators in a time-bound manner. TSP is not applicable to states where tribals represent more than 60% of the population. The Committee looked at the implementation of TSP in three ministries: (i) Human Resource Development; (ii) Health and Family Welfare; and (iii) Ayush.

- **The Committee noted several discrepancies in the implementation of the TSP, including:** (i) non-adoption of specific norms for release of funds, (ii) weak programme management, (iii) deficient monitoring system, (iv) and non-implementation of information programmes.

- **Key observations and recommendations** of the Committee include: Financial management: The Committee noted that there has been no segregation of TSP funds under a separate head at the state, district or block level. Funds under TSP are required to be put into a separate head of account, to strengthen administrative arrangements for proper utilisation and monitoring of TSP funds.

- **The Committee** recommended that strict adherence to earmarking of funds into a separate head at every level should be made mandatory for release of funds. It also suggested that a more proactive approach should be taken to keep track of monitoring, fund utilisation, and implementation of schemes.

- **Non-lapsable pool for TSP fund:** The Committee observed that presently, funds at the end of the financial year were not being transferred into a non-lapsable pool of TSP fund, that could be utilised later. It recommended that: (i) efforts should be made towards optimal utilisation of allocated TSP funds for a given financial year; and (ii) a non-lapsable fund should be created to pool funds that could not be utilised in a financial year.

- **Central nodal unit for overview:** The Committee noted that guidelines detailing the process for an oversight had not been put out by the Ministry of Tribal Affairs. The basic objective of TSP is to channelize the flow of outlays from central ministries by earmarking funds for the development of STs in states (in proportion to their population). The Committee reasoned that to oversee this implementation of fund flow, a central unit of oversight should be set up. It recommended that the Ministry of Tribal Affairs should create a central nodal unit for oversight which will facilitate better co-ordination and efficient implementation of TSP through an online monitoring system.

- **Nodal units at state/district level:** The Committee noted that NITI Aayog had suggested that TSP ministries or departments should set up nodal units for programme monitoring. These units should also indicate state-specific allocation and release for STs separately under centrally sponsored schemes and central sector schemes. The Committee stated that presently, the Departments of School Education and Literacy and Higher Education have a dedicated unit to formulate and implement TSP under the Ministry of Human Resource Development. It recommended that all TSP ministries or departments should set up their own dedicated nodal units for effective monitoring of TSP at the implementation stage.

- **Involvement of local community** in the planning process: A Comptroller and Auditor General audit report in 2015 had highlighted that plans for schemes were being formulated without specific consideration of tribal beneficiaries as required under TSP. The Committee noted that the planning process could be strengthened with the involvement of the community in tribal dominant blocks. It recommended that inputs/ suggestions of local tribal community should be sought before finalising the plan for implementation of any programme under TSP.

Improvement in the functioning of Panchayats

- **its report on 'Improvement in the functioning of Panchayats'** on July 19, 2018. The participation of local people for development of rural areas through the Panchayati Raj System was provided in the Indian Constitution through the 73rd amendment. Key findings and recommendations of the Committee with regard to the functioning of panchayats include:

- **Devolution of powers: Local government, including panchayats**, is a state subject in the Constitution, and consequently, the devolution of power and authority to panchayats has been left to the discretion of states. The Ministry of Panchayati Raj has issued comprehensive guidelines for the effective functioning of panchayats. However, the Committee noted that the mandatory meetings of panchayats were not taking place and had poor attendance, especially from women representatives. The Committee recommended that state governments should put a quorum in gram sabha meetings for participation of panchayat representatives, including women.

- **In addition,** subjects like fuel and fodder, non-conventional energy sources, rural electrification including distribution of electricity, non-formal education, small scale industries including food processing industries, technical training, and vocational education have not been devolved to certain states. The Committee recommended that the Ministry should pursue states to devolve these subjects for giving panchayats more power in these areas. State governments should make adequate efforts to devolve funds, functions, and functionaries to panchayats for them to effectively plan economic development and social justice schemes.

- **Funding of panchayats:** Grants from Finance Commission play an important role in the implementation of schemes by panchayats. These grants are intended to be used to support and strengthen the delivery of basic services including water supply, sanitation, sewerage and solid waste management and any other basic service within the functions assigned to panchayats under relevant legislations. The Committee noted that some state governments have delayed releasing funds to panchayats. They subsequently had to pay interest to panchayats and wherever panchayat accounts were not audited, the grants were not released.

- **The Committee** recommended that the Ministry should monitor the release and expenditure of Finance Commission grants to ensure that there is no delay in their release. It should also be ensured that grants are utilised in a proper and effective manner. Panchayats should also be encouraged to carry out local audits regularly so that Finance Commission grants are not delayed.

- **Capacity building:** The Rajiv Gandhi Panchayat Sashaktikaran Abhiyan was implemented from 2012-13 to 2015-16 to address issues such as inadequate infrastructure, manpower training, and advocacy of devolution of power to panchayats. Since 2015-16, the state component of the scheme was delinked from central support due to larger devolution of funds from the 14th Finance Commission. The Committee recommended that strengthening of panchayats through capacity building and training should be given more encouragement from the centre and state governments. This would enable them to prepare better Gram Panchayat Development Plans, as well as become more responsive towards citizens' needs.

- **Support staff:** The Committee observed that there is severe lack of support staff and personnel in panchayats, such as secretary, junior engineers, computer operators, and data entry operators. This affects their functioning and delivery of services by them. The Committee recommended that the Ministry should make serious efforts towards recruitment and appointment of support and technical staff to ensure the smooth functioning of panchayats.

Swachh Bharat Mission- Gramin in States/ UTs

- **its report** on the 'Swachh Bharat Mission- Gramin in States/ UTs' on July 19, 2018. The Swachh Bharat Mission- Gramin (SBM-G) was launched on October 2, 2014 to accelerate efforts to achieve universal sanitation coverage, improve cleanliness, and eliminate open defecation in India by October 2, 2019. Key findings and recommendations of the Committee include:

- **Sanitation coverage and behavioural change:** The Committee is of the view that sanitation coverage figures may not reflect the actual progress of the Mission on ground. It stated that even a village with 100% household toilets cannot be declared Open Defecation Free (ODF) till all the inhabitants start using them. It recommended that the government needs to take adequate steps to bring about behavioural change in rural India and inculcate a sense of hygiene among the inhabitants. This should be done through mechanisms such as extensive awareness campaigns.

- **Quality of toilets:** The Committee stated that it is aware of the low quality of raw materials being used in the construction of toilets under SBM-G. It raised serious concerns over this issue and urged the Ministry of Drinking Water and Sanitation to ensure that the standard quality raw materials are used for construction of toilets.

- **Availability of water:** Construction of toilets without adequate availability of water will be an impediment to achieving 100% sanitation coverage in rural areas. The Committee recommended that provision of water availability should be prioritised along with construction of toilets to attain ODF status across all villages.

- **Data accuracy:** 77% of households in rural India have access to toilets, and about 93% of them use toilets regularly. However, the Committee noted that in the past, the fall back rate of ODF declared villages was very high, either due to: (i) filing of wrong information regarding attaining of ODF status, or (ii) non-sustainability of toilets. This has led to ODF villages going back to open defecation, while as per records, they remain ODF. The Committee recommended that information on ODF declared villages must be collected accurately on a continuous basis, either through an institutional mechanism or through resurveys.

- **Unspent balances:** In 2017-18 and 2018-19 (as of May 2018), Rs 4,197 and Rs 9,890 crore is the unspent balance under SBM-G. Several states, including Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, and Uttar Pradesh have large unspent balances. The reasons responsible for unspent balances include: (i) inadequate capacity building at grass root level, and (ii) existence of revolving funds and leveraging other sources of credit, among others. The Committee recommended that unspent balances be liquidated by strengthening the implementation constraints and through strict monitoring. In case the State Implementing Agencies are not utilising the normal allocation, the government may frame state specific action plans to liquidate the unspent balances.

- **Release of central share:** The Committee advised that installments of central share should be strictly released in accordance with the guidelines of SBM-G, only after: (i) ascertaining the veracity of Utilisation Certificates (UCs) received by the central government from states, and (ii) use of unspent balances within stipulated time frame by states.

- **Solid and Liquid Waste Management (SLWM):** SLWM has traditionally represented unique challenges in rural areas, due to the practice of open defecation and indiscriminate dumping of solid and liquid waste. The lack of waste segregation and dispersed population further creates roadblocks in bringing economically viable market-based solutions.

- **To create clean villages,** it is essential that Information, Education, and Communication (IEC) interventions under the Mission focus on creating awareness about SLWM. The Committee recommended that the Ministry of Drinking Water and Sanitation should devise new and effective strategies for yielding better results for SLWM under SBM-G.

Legal Framework: Gambling and Sports Betting Including Cricket in India

- **The Law Commission of India** (Chair: Justice B.S. Chauhan) submitted its report on July 5, 2018, examining whether betting may be legalised in India. The report follows a Supreme Court directive in 2016 where the Court asked the Commission to examine the possibility of a law to regulate betting. The Commission noted that while it is desirable to ban betting and gambling, it is difficult to prevent these activities altogether. Therefore, it recommended regulation of gambling and betting.

- **Regulating gambling and betting:** Betting and gambling is a state subject under the Constitution. Therefore, the Commission noted that state legislatures may enact a law to regulate betting and gambling. However, it stated that Parliament may enact a model law to regulate betting and gambling, which states may adopt. Parliament may also enact laws under Article 249 (in national interest) or Article 252 (if two or more states consent). With regard to online gambling and betting, it observed that Parliament has the competence to enact a law.

- **Regulations governing gambling and betting:** The Commission recommended that gambling and betting should only be permitted by licensed operators from India. For participants, it recommended that there should be a cap on the number of such transactions for a specific time period, i.e., monthly, half-yearly or yearly. It further recommended that transactions between operators and participants should be made cashless and penalties should be imposed for cash transactions.

- **In order to protect the public** from the ill-effects of these activities and to increase transparency and state supervision, the Commission recommended that all betting and gambling transactions should be linked to the Aadhaar/PAN Card of the operator and the participants. Further, any income derived from betting or gambling should be made taxable under the Income Tax Act (IT Act), 1961, the Goods and Services Tax Act (GST), 2017, and other relevant laws.

- **Classification of gambling:** The Commission recommended classifying gambling activities into two categories, namely 'proper gambling' and 'small gambling'. "Proper gambling" would be characterised by higher stakes. Only individuals belonging to higher income groups will be permitted to indulge in "proper gambling". Individuals belonging to the lower income groups will only be permitted to indulge in "small gambling". The stakes for "small gambling" will fall below the bracket of of stakes permitted in "proper gambling".

- **Prohibited persons:** The Commission recommended that certain classes of persons should be barred from participating in online or offline gambling platforms. These persons include: (i) minors, (ii) those who receive subsidies from the government, or (iii) those who do not fall within the purview of the Income Tax Act, 1961, or the Goods and Services Tax Act, 2017.

- **Amendments to FEMA:** The Commission recommended that the Foreign Exchange Management Act, 1999 and the Foreign Direct Investment Policy be amended to encourage Foreign Direct Investment in the casino/online gaming industry, and for other purposes. It felt that this would propel the growth of tourism and hospitality industry in such states, and would also lead to higher revenue and an increase in employment opportunities.

- **Amendment to IT Rules:** Under the Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines) Rules, 2011, intermediaries are barred from hosting or transmitting content relating to or encouraging gambling. The Commission recommended barring only those intermediaries which illegally transmit or host content related to gambling. This will ensure that intermediaries are not held liable in states which license gambling.

- **Match-fixing and sports fraud:** The Commission recommended that match-fixing and sports fraud should be made criminal offences with severe punishments.

Reproductive and Child Health under National Rural Health Mission

- **The Comptroller and Auditor General** of India (CAG) released an audit report on the Reproductive and Child Health (RCH) programme under the National Rural Health Mission (NRHM) on July 21, 2017. The Report is for the period between 2011-12 and 2015-16. The NRHM was launched in April 2005 to provide accessible, affordable and quality health care to the rural population. The RCH programme is a sub component of NRHM which focuses on maternal and child health, immunisation, and family planning. The key findings of the audit Report are as follows:

- **Financial management:** Unsatisfactory financial management of the RCH programme has been observed at both central and state levels. The Report highlights substantial unspent balances with the State Health Societies every year. In 27 states, the unspent amount increased from Rs 7,375 crore in 2011-12 to Rs 9,509 crore in 2015-16. Delays were also noted in the transfer of funds from state treasuries to State Health Societies, with delays ranging from 50 to 271 days. Diversion of funds (about Rs 36 crore) to other schemes was also noted. In light of these observations, the CAG recommended proper fund flow management keeping in view the absorptive capacity of State Health Societies.

- **Physical infrastructure:** A shortfall ranging between 24%-38% was observed in the availability of Sub-Centres (SCs), Primary Health Centres (PHCs) and Community Health Centres (CHCs) in 28 states/UTs. The shortfall was more than 50% in five states (Bihar, Jharkhand, Sikkim, Uttarakhand and West Bengal).

- **Other issues** which were observed regarding the existing infrastructure include: (i) unhygienic environment; (ii) inaccessibility by public transport; (iii) non-availability of electricity and water supply; (iv) non-availability of separate wards for male and female beneficiaries. Further, in 20 states, 1,285 works, though completed, were not made functional. The CAG recommended a review of civil works by the concerned authorities in all states to remove the delays and to ensure faster completion and commissioning of buildings.

- **Availability of human resources:** A shortage of doctors and paramedical staff was observed in almost all selected facilities. In the selected CHCs of 27 states, the average shortfall of specialists ranged between 77% - 87%. Further, only 1,303 nurses were posted against the required 2,360. It was also noted that medical equipment in some states was lying unutilised due to non-availability of doctors and manpower to operate them. The CAG recommended that the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare must follow up with states to ensure that sanctioned posts of health care professionals are filled up.

- **Availability of medical equipment and medicines:** It was noted that selected health facilities across 29 states/UTs lack the basic equipment required for RCH services such as labour tables, normal delivery kits, emergency obstetric care equipment, and X-ray facilities. In 8 states, essential drugs were not available. Further, in 14 states, medicines were being issued to patients without ensuring their prescribed quality checks.

- **Quality of healthcare:** The National Quality Assurance Programme (NQAP) was set up in 2013 for improving the quality of care in the District Hospitals, CHCs and PHCs across the country. The audit results revealed that the institutional framework for implementation of NQAP was either not in place or was not effective. Further, the Report noted low number of internal and external assessments of health facilities, inadequate reporting, and non-evaluation of key performance indicators.

- **Reproductive and child health services and outcomes:** Janani Suraksha Yojana (JSY) is a safe motherhood intervention to promote institutional delivery among the poor pregnant women. The CAG noted deficiencies in the implementation of JSY, in terms of non-payment of incentive amounts or delayed payment to beneficiaries.

- **The RCH programme** also aims to achieve certain Millennium Development Goal (MDG) targets (for 2015). Under the MDGs, the target for Infant Mortality Rate (IMR) is 27 (per 1,000 live births). India's IMR is 39. As for the target of Maternal Mortality Ratio (109 per 1,00,000 live births), the corresponding achievement was 167 by India.

Indigenous and Modern Forms of Water Conservation

- **The Standing Committee on Water Resources** (Chair: Mr. Hukum Singh) submitted its report on the 'Indigenous and Modern Forms of Water Conservation-Techniques and Practices' on March 16, 2017. The Committee looked into the following aspects in relation to conservation of water: (i) need for water conservation, (ii) techniques and practices of water conservation, (iii) factors influencing water conservation, and (iv) the National Water Mission.

- **The salient observations and recommendations of the Committee include:** Low Per Capita Water Storage and Availability: Water storage in India is about 209 cubic meters (Cu. M) per person, far below the minimum threshold (1,000 Cu. M) per person for identifying water scarcity in a country. In addition, the per capita availability of water has reduced due to an increase in population, from 2,209 Cu. M per year in 1991, to 1,545 Cu. M per year in 2011.

- **In this regard,** the Committee recommended that certain measures should be undertaken by the central government. These measures include: (i) compiling data regarding large and medium dams presently under implementation, (ii) reviewing the status of execution of these dams, and (iii) making a plan for the timely completion of such dams.

- **Decline in ground water levels:** In certain states, the Committee noted: (i) increase in pumping depths of wells and tube wells, (ii) rise in the cost of pumping ground water, (iii) scarcity of ground water in summer months (for irrigation and drinking uses), and (iv) increase in fluoride content in the water and increase in salinity (in coastal areas). For example, it noted that in Punjab, cultivation of water intensive crops has resulted in depletion of the ground water table due to over-exploitation.

- **The Committee recommended** that the government should create a well-defined policy on ground water extraction. The practice of free supply of electricity to farmers for extraction of ground water for cultivation should be regulated. In addition, a scientific study of the impact of excessive withdrawal of water in Punjab should also be undertaken.

- **Traditional water recharge** and harvesting practices: Traditional water harvesting structures in the country are no longer being used to store water with dependence on piped water supply system. The Committee recommended that the Ministry of Water Resources should constitute a panel of experts to undertake a study on the merits and viability of traditional water recharge and harvesting techniques in the country. Further, consultations should be held with various state governments to develop ways to preserve and improve indigenous water harvesting methods.

- **Aquifer Mapping: The CGWB in 2012** started the National Project on Aquifer Management (NAQUIM) to identify and map aquifers, and quantify the available ground water potential. Since the inception of NAQUIM, only 5.5 lakh sq. km. has been mapped, and an additional areas of 23 lakh sq. km. still remains to be mapped. Further, out of a total outlay of Rs 3,319 crore for five years (2012-2017), an expenditure of only Rs 146 crore has been made on the scheme till June 2016.

- **The Committee recommended** that the government should devise effective measures for timely and optimum utilisation of budgetary allocations for the scheme.

- **Water Budgeting:** Water budgeting is accounting of all water that flows in and out of a project area. It also helps to conserve water from rainfall and surface runoff.

- **The Committee** recommended that appropriate guidelines for water budgeting should be issued to all state governments by the Ministry of Water Resources. The Ministry should also ensure that all state governments prepare State-Specific Action Plan for the water sector, and link it to State Action Plans for Climate Change, within a specified time period. In addition, Water Regulatory Authorities for regulating the use of water and its conservation should also be set up in every state, as already established in the states of Maharashtra and Gujarat.

- **Water use efficiency** under National Water Mission: To increase water use efficiency by 20% under the National Water Mission, a national framework directive on water use efficiency should be framed by the Ministry of Water Resources and circulated to all the states.

Performance Based Payments For Better Outcomes in Rural Development Programmes

- **The Expert Committee (Chair: Mr. Sumit Bose)** submitted its report on 'Performance Based Payments for Better Outcomes in Rural Development Programmes' in January 2017. The Committee was constituted in December 2016 to look into human resources available with panchayats and suggest means by which these resources could be augmented and organised for better delivery of programmes. Key observations and recommendations of the Committee include:

- **Human resources in panchayats:** At the gram panchayat level, the Committee noted several deficiencies such as: (i) insufficiency of staff; (ii) inadequacy of qualifications; (iii) lack of rigor in recruitment; (iv) poor terms and conditions of service; (v) low incentives for performance; (vi) and lack of adequate training. Majority of the manpower in panchayats function in silos related to schemes and are mostly accountable to the programme supervisors, not to the panchayats.

- **The Committee recommended** that every panchayat should have a full time secretary, who will perform both general administration and development functions. It should also have a technical assistant, who will carry out engineering functions. The existing Gram Rozgar Sevaks should be formally trained to carry out essential engineering functions, such as those related to water supply and sanitation.

- **Social accountability:** To increase the social accountability of gram panchayats, the Committee suggested holding regular gram sabha meetings, as per the provisions in the State Panchayat Raj Act (such as minimum of four meetings in a year) and on the request of voters under special circumstances. To enable a serious, effective, and an all-inclusive meeting, the meeting notice must reach the people at least seven days in advance.

- **The Committee also recommended** implementing measures, such as: (i) participatory planning and budgeting; (ii) preparation of status studies for effective utilisation of earmarked budget; (iii) participatory expenditure tracking; (iv) social audit of panchayats, among others.

- **Information and Communication Technology (ICT):** The Committee noted that many states have passed legislation conferring guarantee of time-bound delivery of public services to the citizens, which also includes services to be delivered by panchayats. Providing guarantee in delivering services on time and tracking reasons for failure, if any, will require application of ICT in the functioning of panchayats.

- **To enable greater use of ICT**, the Committee recommended that panchayats should be encouraged to use only transaction based software for: (i) carrying out their functions in delivering local services; (ii) maintaining database related to local planning and monitoring progress; (iii) financial management including e-procurement; and (iv) estimation and management of work undertaken by them. It also suggested adoption of double entry system of accounting and amendment of rules for electronic maintenance of cashbook.

- **Monitoring performance and quality of works:** The Committee noted that there is considerable room for improvement in capturing performance of panchayats, intermediates and their officials. It also stated that data on revenue and expenditure by panchayats, panchayat staff and infrastructure was not available.

- **The Committee recommended** that a system of quality monitoring should be put in place for all programmes being monitored by panchayats. Standards should also be developed for all assets being created through rural development programmes. In addition, the Ministry of Panchayati Raj should compile essential data, including, area, population, staff, and availability of essential infrastructure for panchayat office, among others.

- **The Committee suggested** that in case of shortage of funds to operationalise the Committee recommendations, support for a period of five years to incentivise states could be included in the revised Rashtriya Gram Swaraj Abhiyan. This program aims to enhance capacities and effectiveness of panchayats.

Review of National Statistical Survey Office (NSSO) and Central Statistics Office (CSO)

- **The Standing Committee on Finance** (Chair: Dr. Veerappa Moily) submitted a report on the 'Review of NSSO and CSO and streamlining of statistics collection machinery in the country including Management Information System for project monitoring/appraisal' on December 18, 2017. The Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation comprises of: (i) the Statistics wing (National Statistical Organisation), and (ii) the Programme Implementation wing. The National Statistical Organisation consists of Central Statistics Office (CSO), and National Sample Survey Office (NSSO).

- **Vacancies: As of December 2016**, 22% (861) of the sanctioned posts of junior and senior officers (statistical cadre) (3,977) were vacant in the Ministry (see Table 1). The Committee recommended that vacancies in the statistical cadre should be filled immediately. It also recommended that a study be conducted to find out reasons of the high level of shortfall in manpower, and the inability to attract talent. In this regard, the Committee stated that enumerators used for data collection should be appointed on a contractual basis, instead of out-sourcing data collection.

- **The Committee recommended** that teaching methodologies and curriculum at the university-level should be changed to reflect the changing industry requirements. Further, an incentive structure should be devised to attract expertise and quality statisticians for government duties. The Committee recommended that the field level statistical machinery should be strengthened, and the field staff should be trained to use modern methods of data collection.

- **Variations in data standards** and methodologies: The Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation is the nodal agency for coordination with central Ministries and states for collection and standardisation of statistics. The Committee observed that there are variations between the sample survey data collected by the NSSO and the states governments. Further, it noted that different standards are used by the NSSO and the CSO. The Committee recommended that such variations should be addressed to ensure uniformity of statistics. It noted that collection of data and compilation of various indices are spread across different government agencies. The Committee suggested that all statistical work including publication of various indices by the Ministry should be integrated.

- **Consumer Price Index (CPI):** The Committee noted that the CPI does not capture the increasing cost of services such as education, healthcare, and transport. It recommended that there should be an exclusive Service Price Index for essential services. Further, the Committee stated that indices compiled and published by the government should reflect current market conditions at the consumer level.

- **Employment data:** The Committee stated that absence of regular employment and unemployment data is a major gap. It observed that the official unemployment figures are out-of-date and unrealistic. The Committee noted that accurate and reliable data on employment should be available to assess the employment situation, and formulate appropriate policy responses.

- **Programme implementation:** The Ministry monitors the implementation of central sector projects, schemes, and the Sustainable Development Goals. In this regard, the Committee suggested that the Ministry should develop methodologies and tools to play a pro-active role for real-time monitoring instead of just being a compilation agency.

- **Commercial/Marketing unit:** The Committee recommended that the Ministry should modernise data collection, compilation, and presentation. Further, it should aid and advise both the governments, and corporations and organisations in the private and public sectors. In this context, the Committee suggested that the Ministry can set up an internal Commercial or Marketing Unit, which can share relevant data with users on a commercial basis. Further, free access to data can be provided to universities, researchers, and students.

Tourism Promotion and Pilgrimage Circuit

- **Railways' role in tourism** The Committee observed that the foreign exchange earnings from tourism were around USD 21.07 billion during 2015 and contributed to about 6-7% of the GDP. However, much of the potential for tourism in India remains unexplored. The Committee noted that Railways can play a crucial role in promoting tourism in the country because of its wide reach. It also provides an economic and eco-friendly means of transport across the country. Further, Railways can also tap into the numerous pilgrimage centers across the country. It recommended that there should be representation for tourism in the Railway Board which would help them frame tourism related policies.

- **Financial overview:** The Committee observed that the budget earmarked by the Indian Railway Catering and Tourism Corporation (IRCTC) for tourism promotion during the years 2013-14, 2014-15, 2015-16 and 2016-17 was Rs 6 crore, Rs 4.2 crore, Rs 4 crore and Rs 3.7 crore respectively. It noted that such budget allocation for a major head is grossly inadequate and shows a declining trend. Further, IRCTC's utilisation of these funds has ranged between 55% to 90%. No funds for promotion of pilgrim places are provided separately. It recommended that the budget allocation to IRCTC for tourism should be increased immediately, and a separate fund be created for the promotion of tourism and pilgrimage in India.

- **Tourism promotion:** The Committee noted that Indian Railways promotes tourism by connecting various tourist places. However, states with a high potential for tourism such as Jammu and Kashmir, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Uttarakhand, northern part of Kerala and north eastern states witness minimal presence of Railways. It suggested that if Railways have to increase their revenue, they will have to focus on those areas which possess touristic/ historic/ religious importance, and are not connected by rail.

- **Pilgrimage circuit:** IRCTC runs various tourist and pilgrimage special trains like Bharat Darshan Train, Pilgrim special tourist train, and Buddhist special train. Between 2011 and 2016, Railways have introduced around 600 trains of which only seven trains have been dedicated for promotion of tourism and pilgrimage. The Committee noted that frequent changes in the train trips and introducing new train circuits without analysing the reasons for closing the previous ones reveals the unpreparedness and poor decision making on the part of Railways. It recommended that the Ministry should prepare a comprehensive long term plan to cater to the emerging needs of the tourism sector in India.

- **The Committee noted** that Ministry does not have any specific guidelines for categorising a particular station as a touristic and pilgrimage place. This is despite the concerned Zonal Railway Manager having powers to do so. It noted that the Railways should not take the tourism and pilgrimage sector lightly as it may be a source of revenue. It recommended that the Ministry of Railways should collaborate with the Ministry of Tourism to share data and conduct surveys. Further the Ministry should form a Committee at the zonal level to explore and identify the places of touristic and pilgrimage importance where Railways' contribution will be required.

- **Luxury tourist trains:** Luxury tourist trains are premier luxury services being offered by Indian Railways (or IRCTC) in collaboration with the State Tourism Development Corporations. Between 2012 and 2016, all the five luxury trains earned a revenue of Rs 497 crore. Of this Railways' share has been Rs 260 crore (52%). The Committee observed that the revenue generation by these trains is on the lower side, and has stagnated in the last few years. Further, for certain trains, such as the Deccan Odyssey, the cost of running them are higher than the total revenue generated by them. However, Railways does not incur any losses on these luxury trains, as it is only concerned with the transportation costs, and not the operations of such trains.

- **The Committee recommended** that the Ministry of Railways should look at proactive advertisement and publicity with respect to these luxury trains along with the concerned State Tourism Departments. Further, the Ministry should maintain records of all the expenditure incurred on these luxury trains along with the revenue earned so that the actual profit and loss is known.

Pulse Polio Program 2019

- **The programme aims** to protect children from the polio disease by conducting two nationwide mass polio vaccination campaigns and two to three sub-national campaigns each year.

- **More than 17 crore** children of less than five years across the country will be given polio drops as part of the drive. To provide additional protection to children Government has also introduced the injectable Inactivated Polio Vaccine into its routine immunization program.

- **About IPV:** IPV is produced from wild-type poliovirus strains of each serotype that have been inactivated (killed) with formalin. As an injectable vaccine, it can be administered alone or in combination with other vaccines.

- **Significance:** IPV is an evidence-based intervention that not only ensures continued protection of children against all types of polio viruses, but also helps save vaccine — a move bound to positively impact global vaccine supply in the coming years. IPV provides serum immunity to all three types of poliovirus, resulting in protection against paralytic poliomyelitis. India became the first country globally to introduce fractional doses of IPV in childhood immunisation programme in eight states and Union territories in early 2016.

- **Facts for Prelims:** India was declared polio-free country in the year 2014. India's last reported cases of wild polio were in West Bengal and Gujarat on 13 January 2011.

- **About POLIO:** Polio (also called poliomyelitis) is a contagious, historically devastating disease that was virtually eliminated from the Western hemisphere in the second half of the 20th century. Although polio has been around since ancient times, its most extensive outbreak occurred in the first half of the 1900s until the polio vaccine was introduced in 1955.

- **It is a highly** infectious viral disease, which mainly affects young children. The virus is transmitted by person-to-person spread mainly through the faecal-oral route or, less frequently, by a common vehicle (e.g. contaminated water or food) and multiplies in the intestine, from where it can invade the nervous system and can cause paralysis.

- **Symptoms and Cure:** Although approximately 90% of polio infections cause no symptoms at all, affected individuals can exhibit a range of symptoms if the virus enters the blood stream. In about 1% of cases, the virus enters the central nervous system, preferentially infecting and destroying motor neurons, leading to muscle weakness and acute flaccid paralysis.

- **Initial symptoms** of polio include fever, fatigue, headache, vomiting, stiffness in the neck, and pain in the limbs. In a small proportion of cases, the disease causes paralysis, which is often permanent. There is no cure for polio, it can only be prevented by immunization.

- **The focus of modern** treatment has been on providing relief of symptoms, speeding recovery and preventing complications. Supportive measures include antibiotics to prevent infections in weakened muscles, analgesics for pain, moderate exercise and a nutritious diet. Treatment of polio often requires long-term rehabilitation, including occupational therapy, physical therapy, braces, corrective shoes and, in some cases, orthopedic surgery.

PMUY

- **About Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana:** Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana aims to provide LPG (liquefied petroleum gas) connections to poor households.

- **Who is eligible?** Under the scheme, an adult woman member of a below poverty line family identified through the Socio-Economic Caste Census (SECC) is given a deposit-free LPG connection with financial assistance of Rs 1,600 per connection by the Centre.

- **Identification of households:** Eligible households will be identified in consultation with state governments and Union territories. The scheme is being implemented by the Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas.

- **Key objectives of the scheme are:** Empowering women and protecting their health. Reducing the serious health hazards associated with cooking based on fossil fuel. Reducing the number of deaths in India due to unclean cooking fuel. Preventing young children from significant number of acute respiratory illnesses caused due to indoor air pollution by burning the fossil fuel.

- **What makes LPG adoption necessary?** A large section of Indians, especially women and girls, are exposed to severe household air pollution (HAP) from the use of solid fuels such as biomass, dung cakes and coal for cooking. A report from the Ministry of Health & Family Welfare places HAP as the second leading risk factor contributing to India's disease burden.

- **According to** the World Health Organization, solid fuel use is responsible for about 13% of all mortality and morbidity in India (measured as Disability-Adjusted Life Years), and causes about 40% of all pulmonary disorders, nearly 30% of cataract incidences, and over 20% each of ischemic heart disease, lung cancer and lower respiratory infection.

- **Way ahead:** The PMUY is a bold and much-needed initiative, but it should be recognised that this is just a first step. The real test of the PMUY and its successor programmes will be in how they translate the provision of connections to sustained use of LPG or other clean fuels such as electricity or biogas.

- **Truly smokeless** kitchens can be realized only if the government follows up with measures that go beyond connections to actual usage of LPG. This may require concerted efforts cutting across Ministries beyond petroleum and natural gas and including those of health, rural development and women and child welfare.

Dam Rehabilitation and Improvement Project (DRIP)

- **This additional** funding of $137 million will be used for the construction of an additional spillway for Hirakud Dam in Odisha and in rehabilitation and improvement of other dams including strengthening the institutional, legal and technical framework for dam safety assurance within the Government of India and in the participating States.

- **Why ensure safety of dams in the country?** About 80% of our large dams are over twenty-five years old. About 209 dams are over 100 years old and were built in an era when design practices and safety considerations were much below the current design and safety norms. Several of these dams may be experiencing distress and are in need of attention for ensuring their structural safety and operational efficiency.

- **About DRIP:** The Ministry of Water Resources (MoWR), Government of India, with assistance from the World Bank, is implementing the DAM REHABILITATION AND IMPROVEMENT PROJECT (DRIP), which would be a six-year project. The Central Dam Safety Organisation of Central Water Commission, assisted by a Consulting firm, is coordinating and supervising the Project implementation.

- **Goals:** The project originally envisaged the rehabilitation and improvement of about 223 dams within four states namely, Kerala, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha, and Tamil Nadu and later Karnataka, Uttarakhand (UNVNL) and Jharkhand (DVC) joined DRIP and total number of dams covered under DRIP increased to 250. The project will also promote new technologies and improve Institutional capacities for dam safety evaluation and implementation at the Central and State levels and in some identified premier academic and research institutes of the country.

- **The project development** objectives of DRIP are: (i) to improve the safety and performance of selected existing dams and associated appurtenances in a sustainable manner, and (ii) to strengthen the dam safety institutional setup in participating states as well as at central level.

- **Background:** Globally India ranks third after China and the USA in terms of the number of large dams with 5264 large dams in operation and 437 large dams under construction. The total storage capacity of the impounded water by these dams is about 283 billion cubic meters (BCM).

Kashi Vishwanath Corridor

- **Key facts:** The project envisions a massive makeover of the holy shrine and its surrounding areas. This massive makeover is the first after the 1780 AD when the Maratha queen Ahilyabai Holkar of Indore renovated the temple and the area surrounding it.

- **The proposed 50-feet** corridor will directly connect Ganga's Manikarnika and Lalita Ghat to the Kashi Vishwanath Jyotirlinga Temple. Along the corridor, pilgrims and travellers will see a newly built museum and depicting Varanasi's ancient history and culture.

- **Background:** Kashi Vishvanath Temple is one of the most famous Hindu temples dedicated to Lord Shiva. It is located in Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh, India. The temple stands on the western bank of the holy river Ganga, and is one of the twelve Jyotirlingas, the holiest of Shiva temples.

Return Policy for militants in Jammu and Kashmir

- **The proposed scheme** is a revised version of earlier initiatives, but with a fresh focus on socio-economic re-integration.

- **Highlights of the new policy:** In order to encourage militants to join the mainstream, the policy provides for a monthly stipend of Rs 6,000 for those who surrender. However, this initiative will not cover militants found to have been involved in "heinous crimes". Jobs and reformative measures are also part of the new reintegration policy draft.

- **Significance:** There is need for rehabilitation through a two-pronged approach including reformative measures and opportunities of livelihood. It is essential for the government to show its will to reach out to alienated youth.

- **The successful** implementation of a surrender policy is of utmost importance in Jammu and Kashmir as there are a large number of surrendered or released militants. The successful rehabilitation of one hardcore surrendered or released militant will motivate others to follow suit.

- **Previous approaches:** An earlier policy from 2010 focused on ensuring the return of former militants from the state who had taken up arms between January 1989 and December 2009 but later gave up insurgent activities "due to a change of heart and are willing, to return to the state".

- **In 2004,** a "rehabilitation policy" implemented by the then Peoples Democratic Party government sought to provide "facility to those terrorists who undergo a change of heart and eschew the path of violence and who also accept the integrity of India and Indian Constitution to encourage them to join the mainstream and lead a normal life". This policy had laid out provisions to provide vocational training for surrendered militants who wished to pursue a trade, and a monthly stipend of Rs 2,000 for the first three years.

India launches third IT corridor in China

- **The National Association** of Software and Services Companies (NASSCOM) entered into a partnership with China's Xuzhou city from Jiangsu Province in China to help develop the IT corridor. The primary aim of this IT corridor will be to facilitate partnerships between Indian and Chinese companies.

- **Background:** The IT industry body has already launched such corridors at Dalian and Guiyang cities to cash in on the burgeoning Chinese IT industry market. Through its previous similar initiatives in China, NASSCOM has brought to the fore opportunities with over 300 companies where more than 10 Indian SME companies have signed deals worth 31 Million RMB (USD 4.5 million).

- **Outcomes:** Through this partnership, the platform will be launched that will facilitate match-making between Indian companies wanting to collaborate with companies in Huai Hai economic zone looking to adopt digital transformation from verticals such as manufacturing, retail, automotive, healthcare and utilities and help them create innovative product and solutions in the co-create mode.

- **Way ahead:** India is a world leader in the area of Information Technology and IT-enabled services with annual revenue of over $164 billion and exports of over $120 billion. The country has been demanding China to provide market access to Indian IT and pharmaceutical firms for several years to reduce bilateral trade deficit.

- **For India,** getting access to China's IT market, valued at over $493 billion in 2013 by the ministry of industry and information technology of China, is important to address the massive trade deficit which has now spiralled to over $51 billion. The Chinese IT market grew exponentially since then.

BEE Star Ratings

- **The programme** of star rating of Microwave Ovens and Washing Machines will be implemented on a voluntary basis and will be valid up to December 31, 2020.

- **What is BEE Star Rating?** Star ratings are provided to all the major kind of appliances in the form of labels. These star ratings are given out of 5 and they provide a basic sense of how energy efficient each product is, just in a single glance. The manufacturers are officially required to put these labels as per the Standards and Labelling Program introduced in 2006.

- **Why do they put these BEE Star Rating labels?** The prime importance of these Star Ratings is to educate and inform consumers about how energy efficient each product is. This also makes the manufacturer responsible for creating products which are highly energy efficient as consumers may eventually prefer better rated products.

- **How do they decide the BEE Star Ratings?** One of the most common myths about the BEE Star Rating is that it is solely based on the appliance's power consumption. A lot of factors contribute into formulating the final star rating on the product.

- **Although** the manufacturers rate and label the product, BEE sets all the standards and norms which need to be followed while rating an appliance. While some category of appliances necessarily have to be given a star rating, for others it's optional.

- **Appliances** which need to have an energy rating label mandatorily: Frost-free refrigerator, Tubular Fluorescent Lamps, Room Air-Conditioners, Distribution Transformer, Colour TV, CST AC, Direct Cool Refrigerator and Electric Geyser.

- **The appliances** with the lowest energy consumption in a product category are given the most stars and those with the highest energy consumption are given the least.

- **There are two variants of these labels, a big one and a smaller version:** Big label: The big energy rating label is aimed at appliances which have a constant usage and consume more electricity. These labels show additional information such as the yearly energy consumption of the product, brand name, product category and much more. For consumers, this big label is helpful as it allows you to calculate the actual money you would spend in electricity bills for that particular product.

- **Products with a big label:** Refrigerators, air-conditioners, geysers and washing machines.

- **Small Label:** Small labels can be found in appliances which usually don't consume more energy. These labels just give you a visual representation of the energy consumption levels by showing star ratings. Products with a small label: Ceiling fans, tube lights, computers/laptops and televisions.

- **Facts for Prelims:** Bureau of Energy Efficiency is a statutory body set up under the Energy Conservation Act, 2001. The Bureau of Energy Efficiency assists the government in developing policies and strategies with a thrust on self-regulation and market principles with the primary objective of reducing the energy intensity of the Indian economy within the overall framework of the Energy Conservation Act, 2001.

India Urban Observatory & Video Wall

- **What is Urban Observatory?** It is a platform that uses data from different sources to enable analysis and visualization over a geospatial platform. Such platforms churn out interesting analyses and visualizations by collating massive datasets.

- **The concept** of Urban Observatories was formally initiated at the UN Habitat-II Conference in 1997 in Istanbul.

- **India Urban Observatory: It is an important** component of the recently launched DataSmart Cities strategy that envisions creating a 'Culture of Data' in cities, for intelligent use of data in addressing complex urban challenges.

- **It will showcase** the insights gained from the Observatory and the various Missions/ offices with the idea to proactively engage with citizens/ visitors in spreading awareness about the various initiatives of the Ministry.

- **It would** progressively become the chief data analysis and Management Hub of the Ministry and would enable evidence-based policy formulation, capacity building of ecosystem partners on data-driven governance, foster innovation through development of newer and better use cases thereby enabling solutions at scale and speed.

- **Background:** The Data Smart Cities Policy allows cities to open their data to public view, such as number of hospitals, gardens, people, public toilets and other city management. Making cities 'DataSmart' is key to realizing the full potential of technology interventions and innovation ecosystems in cities.

- **The Data Smart** Cities Strategy also presents a Data Maturity Assessment Framework (DMAF), that measures the readiness and evolution of cities in their efforts to implementing the Data strategy.

- **Significance:** It is imperative for the empowerment of communities that cities work on using information available through various sources to improve their functioning, public services, governance systems, achievements and failures in the public domain, thereby, empowering their citizens through the access to information. The future of Governance is data-driven and Indian cities are beginning to adopt this change in their functioning.

Protecting the Sundarban wetlands

- **Key facts:** The Sundarbans comprises hundreds of islands and a network of rivers, tributaries and creeks in the delta of the Ganga and the Brahmaputra at the mouth of the Bay of Bengal in India and Bangladesh.

- **Located on the southwestern** part of the delta, the Indian Sundarban constitutes over 60% of the country's total mangrove forest area. It is the 27th Ramsar Site in India, and with an area of 4,23,000 hectares is now the largest protected wetland in the country.

- **The Indian Sundarban**, also a UNESCO world heritage site, is home to the Royal Bengal Tiger. It is also home to a large number of "rare and globally threatened species, such as the critically endangered northern river terrapin (Batagur baska), the endangered Irrawaddy dolphin (Orcaella brevirostris), and the vulnerable fishing cat (Prionailurus viverrinus)."

- **Two of the world's** four horseshoe crab species, and eight of India's 12 species of kingfisher are also found here. Recent studies claim that the Indian Sundarban is home to 2,626 faunal species and 90% of the country's mangrove varieties.

Ramsar convention:

- **The Convention** on Wetlands of International Importance, better known as the Ramsar Convention, is an international agreement promoting the conservation and wise use of wetlands. It is the only global treaty to focus on a single ecosystem.

- **The convention** was adopted in the Iranian city of Ramsar in 1971 and came into force in 1975.

- **Why wetlands are important? Traditionally** viewed as a wasteland or breeding ground of disease, wetlands actually provide freshwater and food, and serve as nature's shock absorber. Wetlands, critical for biodiversity, are disappearing rapidly, with recent estimates showing that 64% or more of the world's wetlands have vanished since 1900.

- **Major changes** in land use for agriculture and grazing, water diversion for dams and canals and infrastructure development are considered to be some of the main causes of loss and degradation of wetlands.

- **How did Sundarban qualify?** The Indian Sundarban met four of the nine criteria required for the status of 'Wetland of International Importance' — presence of rare species and threatened ecological communities, biological diversity, significant and representative fish and fish spawning ground and migration path.

- **Will the status help?** Environmentalists and forest officials say the Ramsar status will help to highlight conservation issues of the Sundarbans at the international level. The part of the Sundarban delta, which lies in Bangladesh, was accorded the status of a Ramsar site in 1992, and with Indian Sundarban getting it too, international cooperation between the two countries for the protection of this unique ecosystem will increase. This could lead to a better conservation strategy for flagship species such as the tiger and the northern river terrapin.

- **What are the threats?** While the Indian Sundarban is a biodiverse preserve, over four million people live on its northern and northwestern periphery, putting pressure on the ecosystem. Concerns have been raised about natural ecosystems being changed for cultivation of shrimp, crab, molluscs and fish.

- **Fishing** and harvesting of aquatic resources have also a "high impact" on the wetland. The other threats are from dredging, oil and gas drilling, logging and wood harvesting, hunting and collecting terrestrial animals. Salinity has been categorised as a medium and tourism as a low impact actual threat in the region.

- **Experts** believe that while the Ramsar status may bring in international recognition to the Indian Sundarban, the wetland, which along with anthropogenic pressures, is also vulnerable to climate change and requires better management and conservation practices.

Functioning of Medical Council of India

- **The Standing Committee on Health and Family Welfare** (Chair: Mr. Ram Gopal Yadav) submitted its report on the Medical Council of India (MCI) on March 8, 2016. Key observations and recommendations of the Committee include:

- **Composition: Presently,** the MCI is largely an elected body and contains only medical doctors. In light of issues arising due to the its elected nature (disproportionate private representation, etc.), the Committee recommended that a regulatory framework must be set up under which regulators are appointed through an independent selection process.

- **Also,** diversity in the composition of the MCI must be brought in, to include professionals other than medical doctors (such as public health experts, etc.). Presently, the Indian Medical Council Act, 1956 does not limit the reappointment of members of the council. The Committee suggested that the reappointment of members should be limited to two terms.

- **Establishment of colleges:** The Committee observed that the present requirements for establishing a medical college are based only on physical space, infrastructure and rigid faculty requirement. The land requirement leads to high initial investment due to which the government and genuine parties (interested in providing medical education) cannot open colleges. The existing minimum standards are causing impediments in the establishment and expansion of medical colleges. It recommended that the requirements for physical infrastructure must be reduced accordingly.

- **Medical education:** As the two stages of medical education (undergraduate and postgraduate) require different kinds of expertise, they should be regulated separately (through setting up of separate boards). Further, the Committee recommended that in order to tackle the issue of high capitation fees and to bring transparency, etc., the central government must introduce a common entrance exam for undergraduate, postgraduate and super speciality courses. To standardise the competencies etc. of graduating doctors, an exit test must be introduced for under and postgraduates.

- **Presently,** there are two systems of post graduate certification, namely DNB (diploma) and MD/MS (master's degree). The Committee recommended that the current system of postgraduate admission must be restructured. One common entrance and exit test must be introduced for all candidates. The training and evaluation must be integrated into one national qualification. Till such time, DNB students should be given equal status as MD/MS, once they complete two years of teaching experience in a medical college.

- **Accreditation:** The Committee observed that the functioning of the MCI leads to conflict of interest as it gives permission to establish medical colleges and also ensures quality of education. Therefore, an independent and autonomous accreditation body must be set up which will be responsible for ensuring the quality of education.

- **Professional conduct:** The Committee observed that the present focus of the MCI is only on licensing of medical colleges. There is no emphasis given to the regulation of medical ethics. In light of this, the Committee recommended that the areas of medical education and medical practice should be separated. A separate board of medical ethics should be set up which will be responsible for developing mechanisms for the promotion of medical ethics. Further, the government must establish a system of auditing medical practice.

- **Indian Medical Register:** According to the Ministry the doctor-population ratio in India is 1:1674 as against the WHO norm of 1:1000. The Committee was of the view that this number may not be the correct estimate. Presently, the Indian Medical Register also contains the names of registered medical practitioners who are dead or retired from active practice. This hinders healthcare human resource planning. Therefore, the Committee recommended that the register should be maintained as a live database to provide a realistic assessment of number of practitioners.

- **Corruption:** The Committee observed issues related to corruption in the MCI. Further, it noted that autonomy should be balanced with accountability. As MCI is funded by the government, therefore it should enforce accountability on the MCI. The Ministry should take measures to amend the present statute or enact a new legislation which allows the government to intervene in matters of corruption.

National Auto Fuel Policy

- **The Standing Committee on Petroleum & Natural Gas** (Chair: Mr. Pralhad Joshi) submitted its report on the National Auto Fuel Policy on May 7, 2015. The Auto Fuel Policy, 2003 aims at addressing issues of vehicular emissions and vehicular technologies by applying fuel quality standards.

- **An Expert Committee** under the chairmanship of Mr. Saumitra Chaudhari was set up to review the Auto Fuel Policy, 2003. Further, the objective of the Expert Committee was to draw a roadmap for the auto fuel quality till 2025. The Standing Committee made observations and recommendations on the Expert Committee report and the Auto Fuel Policy, 2003.

- **The Standing Committee recommends** that the Ministry needs to create an action plan to implement the recommendations of the Expert Committee. Further, an assessment of the benefits of implementing the Expert Committee recommendations against the expenditure that will be incurred must be undertaken.

- **In order to achieve the unified fuel norm,** the Ministry should implement the less polluting Bharat Stage (BS)-IV quality of fuel standard across the country by 2017. Further, the Standing Committee recommends the implementation of the BS-VI quality of fuel standard by 2020.

- **Some public sector** refineries do not produce BS-IV quality of fuel. Hence, the Standing Committee recommends all refineries be upgraded in a phase wise manner to produce BS-IV quality of fuel.

- **The Expert Committee recommended levying** a high sulphur cess on high polluting BS-III automotive fuels. The Expert Committee also recommended a special fuel up-gradation Cess on all gasoline and diesel sold. The Standing Committee recommends the Ministry to decide on the levy of cess at the earliest. The sum generated must be utilised for fuel up-gradation projects.

- **As fossil fuel reserves are depleting,** the Ministry must assess the commercial viability of non-conventional fuels. In terms of usage, the share of Compressed Natural Gas (CNG) is low. Therefore, the Standing Committee recommends the Ministry to give high priority to coverage of more areas under CNG.

- **The establishment of a centralised national data** centre for collecting information regarding polluting vehicles is recommended. In order to achieve this objective, if required, formulating a plan scheme and specific fund allocation has been recommended by the Standing Committee.

- **The constitution of an inter-ministerial committee** of secretaries of the concerned Ministries is required. The objective is to attain better coordination between the Ministry of Petroleum & Natural Gas, the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change, the Ministry of Urban Development, state governments etc. The Ministry of Petroleum & Natural Gas is the nodal agency and is expected to constitute the same.

- **The Inspection and Maintenance System** that enhances the safety and emission performance of vehicles has not been implemented. Therefore, it is recommended that the Ministry of Petroleum & Natural Gas impresses upon the Ministry of Road Transport and Highways to implement the same.

- **Formulation of a vehicle retirement policy** will improve air quality. The Ministry should apply the provisions under the Motor Vehicles Act, 1988 to formulate an age limit for retirement of vehicles.

An Evaluation of the National Agricultural Research System

- **The Standing Committee on Agriculture (Chairperson: Mr. Basudeb Acharia)** presented its report on the National Agricultural Research System on February 18, 2014. The National Agricultural Research System comprises the Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR), other central research institutes, and national research centres set up by ICAR. The Committee's recommendations are:

- **Representation of states in Regional Committees:** The Committee noted that the Governing Body of ICAR has constituted eight Regional Committees for the eight different agro-ecological regions of the country. These committees analyse and recommend solutions for problems of agriculture, animal husbandry, fisheries and forestry that are particular to the region. The Committee recommended that these committees meet annually instead of biennially and have adequate representation of states.

- **AICRP/Network Projects:** All India Coordinated Research Projects provide opportunities for scientists working on similar problems in different institutions to come together to exchange their ideas and solutions to similar problems. These projects are typically sanctioned for five years. The Committee felt that since the projects provide for effective coordination across institutions and disciplines, it is important that regular interaction take place and the projects be completed within the stipulated time frame.

- **Strengthening of ICAR:** The Committee recommended that the Department of Agricultural Research and Education strengthen the ICAR network to meet new challenges with respect to food security. The Department should study the methods and technologies adopted by countries such as China, Brazil and Malaysia and adapt them to India's given conditions so as to enhance productivity in the agriculture sector. The Ministry of Agriculture should also lay more emphasis on agriculture research in the Twelfth Five Year Plan and provide adequate financial support.

- **Twelfth Plan allocations:** The Committee noted that the Planning Commission had allocated less than 50% of the funds sought by the Department of Agriculture for the Twelfth Five Year Plan. It had also allocated only 23% of the total amount for the first two years of the Plan. The Committee recommended that the Department request the Planning Commission to grant more funds, i.e., at least 1% of the GDP and grant them evenly over the years so the Department can achieve its targets on conservation agriculture, higher agricultural education, etc.

- **Investment in agricultural research:** The Committee noted the significance of agricultural research and development. It recommended that the Department prepare an action plan to attract investment in agricultural research. This would help reduce dependency on imports and add to the export capacity of the country. The Department should also approach the Ministry of Finance to provide monetary and fiscal incentives for such investment.

- **Policy framework for agricultural research:** ICAR has prepared a policy framework for research and development (R&D) in agriculture and allied areas. The Committee urged the Ministry to ensure the implementation of the policy, as well as ensure it is integrated with the national R&D system and Science and Technology Innovation Policy 2013.

- **Farm mechanisation:** The Committee urged the Department to call for research in developing low cost, light weight, multi-purpose farm equipment and tools for the benefit of small and marginal farmers and those with fragmented land holdings. The Department should also probe the possibility of encouraging youth to create stocks of machines and rent them out to small land holders to utilise mechanisation for enhancing productivity.

Model Code of Conduct and the 2019 General Elections

- **Yesterday**, the Election Commission announced the dates for the 2019 Lok Sabha elections. The voting will take place in seven phases between April 11, 2019 to May 19, 2019. With this announcement, the Model Code of Conduct (MCC) has comes into force. In this blog, we outline the key features of the MCC.

- **What is the Model Code of Conduct and who does it apply to?** The MCC is a set of guidelines issued by the Election Commission to regulate political parties and candidates prior to elections, to ensure free and fair elections. This is in keeping with Article 324 of the Constitution, which gives the Election Commission the power to supervise elections to the Parliament and state legislatures.

- **The MCC** is operational from the date that the election schedule is announced till the date that results are announced. Thus, for the general elections this year, the MCC came into force on March 10, 2019, when the election schedule was announced, and will operate till May 23, 2019, when the final results will be announced.

- **How has the Model Code of Conduct evolved over time?** According to a Press Information Bureau release, a form of the MCC was first introduced in the state assembly elections in Kerala in 1960. It was a set of instructions to political parties regarding election meetings, speeches, slogans, etc. In the 1962 general elections to the Lok Sabha, the MCC was circulated to recognised parties, and state governments sought feedback from the parties. The MCC was largely followed by all parties in the 1962 elections and continued to be followed in subsequent general elections.

- **In 1979,** the Election Commission added a section to regulate the 'party in power' and prevent it from gaining an unfair advantage at the time of elections. In 2013, the Supreme Court directed the Election Commission to include guidelines regarding election manifestos, which it had included in the MCC for the 2014 general elections.

- **What are the key provisions of the Model Code of Conduct?** The MCC contains eight provisions dealing with general conduct, meetings, processions, polling day, polling booths, observers, party in power, and election manifestos. Major provisions of the MCC are outlined below.

- **General Conduct:** Criticism of political parties must be limited to their policies and programmes, past record and work. Activities such as: (a) using caste and communal feelings to secure votes, (b) criticising candidates on the basis of unverified reports, (c) bribing or intimidation of voters, and (d) organising demonstrations or picketing outside houses of persons to protest against their opinions, are prohibited.

- **Meetings:** Parties must inform the local police authorities of the venue and time of any meeting in time to enable the police to make adequate security arrangements.

- **Processions:** If two or more candidates plan processions along the same route, organisers must establish contact in advance to ensure that the processions do not clash. Carrying and burning effigies representing members of other political parties is not allowed.

- **Polling day:** All authorised party workers at polling booths should be given identity badges. These should not contain the party name, symbol or name of the candidate.

- **Polling booths:** Only voters, and those with a valid pass from the Election Commission, will be allowed to enter polling booths. Observers: The Election Commission will appoint observers to whom any candidates may report problems regarding the conduct of the election. Party in power: The MCC incorporated certain restrictions in 1979, regulating the conduct of the party in power. Ministers must not combine official visits with election work or use official machinery for the same.

- **The party** must avoid advertising at the cost of the public exchequer or using official mass media for publicity on achievements to improve chances of victory in the elections. Ministers and other authorities must not announce any financial grants, or promise any construction of roads, provision of drinking water, etc. Other parties must be allowed to use public spaces and rest houses and these must not be monopolised by the party in power.

- **Election manifestos:** Added in 2013, these guidelines prohibit parties from making promises that exert an undue influence on voters, and suggest that manifestos also indicate the means to achieve promises.

- **What changes have been recommended in relation to the MCC since the last general elections?** In 2015, the Law Commission in its report on Electoral Reforms, noted that the MCC prohibits the issue of advertisement at the cost of public exchequer in newspapers/media during the election period. However, it observed that since the MCC comes into operation only from the date on which the Commission announces elections, the government can release advertisements prior to the announcement of elections. It noted that this gives an advantage to the ruling party to issue government sponsored advertisements that highlights its achievements, which gives it an undue advantage over other parties and candidates. Therefore, the Commission recommended that a restriction should be imposed on government-sponsored advertisements for up to six months prior to the date of expiry of the House/Assembly. However, it stated that an exception may be carved out for advertisements highlighting the government's poverty alleviation programmes or any health related schemes.

- **Is the Model Code of Conduct legally binding?** The MCC is not enforceable by law. However, certain provisions of the MCC may be enforced through invoking corresponding provisions in other statutes such as the Indian Penal Code, 1860, Code of Criminal Procedure, 1973, and Representation of the People Act, 1951. The Election Commission has argued against making the MCC legally binding; stating that elections must be completed within a relatively short time (close to 45 days), and judicial proceedings typically take longer, therefore it is not feasible to make it enforceable by law. On the other hand, in 2013, the Standing Committee on Personnel, Public Grievances, Law and Justice, recommended making the MCC legally binding. In a report on electoral reforms, the Standing Committee observed that most provisions of the MCC are already enforceable through corresponding provisions in other statutes, mentioned above. It recommended that the MCC be made a part of the Representation of the People Act, 1951.

National Knowledge Network

- **About NKK: What is it?** NKN is a multi-gigabit pan-India network which facilitates the development of India's communications infrastructure, stimulates research and creates next generation applications and services.

- **Aim:** With its multi-gigabit capability, NKN aims to connect all universities, research institutions, libraries, laboratories, healthcare and agricultural institutions across the country to address such paradigm shift.

- **What it does?** It enables collaboration among researchers from different educational networks such as TEIN4, GARUDA, CERN and Internet2. It also enables sharing of scientific databases and remote access to advanced research facilities. The leading mission oriented agencies in the fields of nuclear, space and defence research are also part of NKN.

- **Role of NKN:** Establishing a high-speed backbone connectivity which will enable knowledge and information sharing amongst NKN connected institutes. Enabling collaborative research, development and innovation amongst NKN connected institutes.

- **Facilitating** advanced distance education in specialized fields like engineering, science, medicine etc. Facilitating an ultra-high speed e-governance backbone. Facilitating connection between different sectoral networks in the field of research

Home Min allows States to use 9,400 enemy properties

- **What are enemy properties?** When wars broke out between India and China in 1962, and India and Pakistan in 1965 and 1971, the central government took over properties of citizens of China and Pakistan in India under the Defence of India Acts. These Acts defined an 'enemy' as a country that committed an act of aggression against India, and its citizens.

- **The properties** of enemies in India were classified as enemy property. The properties included land, buildings, shares held in companies, gold and jewellery of the citizens of enemy countries. The responsibility of the administration of enemy properties was handed over to the Custodian of Enemy Property, an office under the central government.

- **Of the total properties** left behind by those who took Pakistani citizenship, 4,991 are located in Uttar Pradesh, the highest in the country. West Bengal has 2,735 such estates and Delhi 487.

- **The highest number** of properties left by Chinese nationals is in Meghalaya (57).West Bengal has 29 such properties and Assam seven. The estimated value of all enemy properties is approximately Rs 1 lakh crore.

- **Enemy properties Act:** After the Indo-Pakistan War of 1965, the Enemy Property Act was enacted in 1968, which regulates such properties and lists the custodian's powers. The government amended the Act in the wake of a claim laid by the heirs of Raja Mohammad Amir Mohammad Khan, known as Raja of Mahmudabad, on his properties spread across Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand.

- **The government** has vested these properties in the Custodian of Enemy Property for India, an office instituted under the Central government.

'Trends in International Arms Transfers-2018'

- **Highlights of the report:** India was the world's second largest importer of major arms in 2014-18 and accounted for 9.5% of the global total.

- **After eight years** of holding the position of the largest importer of weapons, India has been superseded by Saudi Arabia and dropped down to become the second largest importer of weapons in the world. Last year (for the period 2013-17), India accounted for 13% of all imports and was the world's largest importer.

- **Reasons for gradual** lowering of imports by India: Imports decreased by 24% between 2009-13 and 2014-18 (two five-year blocks), partly due to delays in deliveries of arms produced under licence from foreign suppliers, such as combat aircraft ordered from Russia in 2001 and submarines ordered from France in 2008.

- **The five biggest exporters** in five-year block period 2011-2015 were the US, Russia, France, Germany and China. The US and Russia remain by far the largest exporters, accounting for 36% and 21%, respectively, of the total global trade.

- **China, which** is now the fifth largest exporter of weapons, has been aiding Pakistan and Bangladesh in stepping up their military prowess in the region. The two countries accounted for 53% of Beijing's exports from 2014-2018. On the other hand, Beijing is also an importer. China is the world's sixth largest arms importer in 2014-18 and accounted for 4.2% of the global total.

- **Pakistan recorded** a 39% dip in arms imports in 2014-18 compared to 2009-13, with the US becoming "increasingly reluctant" to provide military aid or sell arms to Pakistan. US arms exports to Pakistan fell 81% between 2009-13 and 2014-18. Pakistan has instead turned to other suppliers. For example, in 2018 it ordered four frigates and 30 combat helicopters from Turkey.

- **Stockholm International Peace Research Institute:** Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) established in 1966 is an independent international institute dedicated to research into conflict, armaments, arms control and disarmament.

- **Based in Stockholm** the Institute provides data, analysis and recommendations, based on open sources, to policymakers, researchers, media and the interested public.

World Gold Council (WGC)

- **Key facts:** India, which is the world's largest consumer of gold, has the 11th largest gold reserve, with the current holding pegged at 607 tonnes. International Monetary Fund (IMF) is third on the list with total gold reserves of 2,814 tonnes.

- **Top slot** is occupied by the U.S., which boasts of gold reserves of 8,133.5 tonnes, followed by Germany with 3,369.7 tonnes. Among Asian countries, China and Japan have more reserves of the precious metal when compared to India. Pakistan, with its gold reserves of 64.6 tonnes, occupies the 45th position.

- **About World Gold Council:** The World Gold Council is the market development organisation for the gold industry. It works across all parts of the industry, from gold mining to investment, and their aim is to stimulate and sustain demand for gold.

- **The World Gold Council** is an association whose members comprise the world's leading gold mining companies. It helps to support its members to mine in a responsible way and developed the Conflict Free Gold Standard.

- **Headquartered** in the UK, they have offices in India, China, Singapore, Japan and the United States.

ISRO's AstroSat

- **What are globular clusters?** Globular clusters are collections of thousands to millions of stars, moving as one unit. These stars are tightly held together by gravity of the cluster itself, and are believed to have formed together at roughly the same time. Some globular clusters could be among the oldest objects in our Milky Way, which hosts over 150 of them.

- **About ASTROSAT:** ASTROSAT is India's first dedicated multi wavelength space observatory. This scientific satellite mission endeavours for a more detailed understanding of our universe.

- **ASTROSAT** is designed to observe the universe in the Visible, Ultraviolet, low and high energy X-ray regions of the electromagnetic spectrum simultaneously with the help of its five payloads.

- **Astrosat aims** at understanding the high energy processes in binary star systems containing neutron stars and black holes, to estimate magnetic fields of neutron stars, to study star birth regions and high energy processes in star systems lying beyond the Milky Way galaxy.

- **This mission** has put ISRO in a very exclusive club of nations that have space-based observatories. Only the United States, European Space Agency, Japan and Russia have such observatories in space.

Pinaka Guided Weapons:

- **Context:** The indigenously developed Pinaka Guided Weapons System was successfully test fired at Pokhran desert in Rajasthan.

- **Pinaka rocket systems** are developed by Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO). The rocket system was named after Pinaka, the bow of Lord Shiva. It was initially a 30 to 40 km range rocket. Its range was increased 70 to 80 km with Pinaka Mark II.

30th birthday of World Wide Web:

- **Context:** Google Doodle marked the 30 years of the innovation of World Wide Web on March 12, 2019 with a GIF doodle, which featured an old, plugged-in computer with a rotating globe.

- **What is WWW?** The inventor of WWW, Sir Tim Berners-Lee, was 33 when he first submitted the 'Information Management: A Proposal' for World Wide Web while working at Europe's CERN lab. He submitted his proposal on March 12, 1989, which led to the invention of World Wide Web. Today, it nearly has 2 billion websites online.

- **Berners started** out with his invention by typing out the basic HTML language, the HTTP application, and WorldWideWeb.app, which became the first web browser and page editor. And by 1991, the external Web servers were up and running.

- **The web was made public** in April 1993, after which the first search engine was launched called Mosaic. The World Wide Web has been central to the development of the Information Age and is the primary tool billions of people use to interact on the Internet.

- **Wood snake:** Context: A species of wood snake that wasn't seen for 140 years has resurfaced in a survey conducted by scientists in the Meghamalai Wildlife Sanctuary. The species is endemic to the Meghamalai forests and the Periyar Tiger Reserve landscape.

- **In News- National Pharmaceutical Pricing Authority (NPPA):** NPPA is an organization of the Government of India which was established, inter alia, to fix/ revise the prices of controlled bulk drugs and formulations and to enforce prices and availability of the medicines in the country, under the Drugs (Prices Control) Order, 1995.

- **The organization** is also entrusted with the task of recovering amounts overcharged by manufacturers for the controlled drugs from the consumers. It also monitors the prices of decontrolled drugs in order to keep them at reasonable levels.

- **Functions of National Pharmaceutical Pricing Authority:** To implement and enforce the provisions of the Drugs (Prices Control) Order in accordance with the powers delegated to it. To deal with all legal matters arising out of the decisions of the Authority. To monitor the availability of drugs, identify shortages, if any, and to take remedial steps.

- **To collect/ maintain** data on production, exports and imports, market share of individual companies, profitability of companies etc, for bulk drugs and formulations. To undertake and/ or sponsor relevant studies in respect of pricing of drugs/ pharmaceuticals.

- **To recruit/ appoint** the officers and other staff members of the Authority, as per rules and procedures laid down by the Government. To render advice to the Central Government on changes/ revisions in the drug policy.

- **To render assistance** to the Central Government in the parliamentary matters relating to the drug pricing.

Model Code of Conduct

- **Model Code of Conduct(MCC):** What is MCC? These are the guidelines issued by the Election Commission of India for conduct of political parties and candidates during elections mainly with respect to speeches, polling day, polling booths, election manifestos, processions and general conduct.

- **Aim: To ensure free and fair elections.** When it comes into force? So far, the Model Code of Conduct came into force immediately on announcement of the election schedule by the commission. The Code remains in force till the end of the electoral process.

- **Status:** The need for such code is in the interest of free and fair elections. However, the code does not have any specific statutory basis. It has only a persuasive effect. It contains what is known as "rules of electoral morality". But this lack of statutory backing does not prevent the Commission from enforcing it.

- **Evolution:** The Commission issued the code for the first time in 1971 (5th Election) and revised it from time to time. This set of norms has been evolved with the consensus of political parties who have consented to abide by the principles embodied in the said code and also binds them to respect and observe it in its letter and spirit.

- **What it contains?** The salient features of the Model Code of Conduct lay down how political parties, contesting candidates and party(s) in power should conduct themselves during the process of elections i.e. on their general conduct during electioneering, holding meetings and processions, poll day activities and functioning of the party in power etc.

- **Drawbacks:** The biggest drawback of the MCC is lack of statutory backing. This imposes limitations on Election Commission to proceed against those violating the norms of MCC. Hence Election Commission is bound to use moral sanction or censure for its enforcement.

- **What restrictions does the Model Code of Conduct impose?** The MCC contains eight provisions dealing with general conduct, meetings, processions, polling day, polling booths, observers, the party in power, and election manifestos.

- **As soon as the code kicks in**, the party in power — whether at the Centre or in the States — should ensure that it does not use its official position for campaigning. Hence, no policy, project or scheme can be announced that can influence the voting behaviour. The party must also avoid advertising at the cost of the public exchequer or using official mass media for publicity on achievements to improve chances of victory in the elections.

- **The code also states** that the ministers must not combine official visits with election work or use official machinery for the same. The ruling party also cannot use government transport or machinery for campaigning. It should also ensure that public places such as maidans etc., for holding election meetings, and facilities like the use of helipads are provided to the opposition parties on the same terms and conditions on which they are used by the party in power.

- **The issue of advertisement** at the cost of public exchequer in the newspapers and other media is also considered an offence. The ruling government cannot make any ad-hoc appointments in Government, Public Undertakings etc. which may influence the voters.

- **Political parties or candidates** can be criticised based only on their work record and no caste and communal sentiments can be used to lure voters. Mosques, Churches, Temples or any other places of worship should not be used for election propaganda. Bribing, intimidating or impersonation of voters is also barred.

- **Holding public meetings** during the 48-hour period before the hour fixed for the closing of the poll is also prohibited. The 48-hour period is known as "election silence". The idea is to allow a voter a campaign-free environment to reflect on events before casting her vote.

Implementation of PM's New 15 Point Programme

- **The Standing Committee on Social Justice and Empowerment** (Chairperson: Mr. Hemanand Biswal) submitted its report on the implementation of the Prime Minister's New 15 Point Programme for the welfare of religious minorities on February 15, 2014.

- **The Programme, launched in 2005,** seeks to ensure the welfare of religious minorities through: (a) increasing educational and employment opportunities, (b) improving living conditions, and (c) preventing and controlling communal riots.

- **Currently,** Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, Buddhists, Parsis and Jains are identified as religious minorities. Jains were notified as a religious minority community in January 2014. Major observations and recommendations of the Committee are: Increasing educational opportunities: The Committee recommended that the literacy rate of Muslims be improved, with a special focus on the educational and social development of Muslim women. Measures must be taken to promote Urdu.

- **The number of educational scholarships** for minorities must be increased such that every minority student has access to scholarships till the university level. Coaching academies to prepare students from minority communities for competitive examinations must be established.

- **The Ministry of Human Resource Development** should collected data on children dropping out of school, and the number of children finally completing school, in addition to the number of children enrolled.

- **The Committee pointed out that while** there has been an increase in the allocation of funds for improving the quality of education in madrasas, data on the output from these madrasas has not been collected. Increasing employment opportunities: Large and medium scale industries must be developed in notified minority concentration districts by members of minority communities as well as others.

- **The Committee noted that the government** employed close to 10% of people from minority communities in 2010-11 and public sector undertakings employed approximately 7%. It recommended that both recruit at least 15% of people from minority communities. Data on schemes such as the Seekho and Kamao scheme must be collected to determine their impact.

- **Improving living conditions:** The Committee noted that the poverty ratio is highest for Muslims in urban areas at 34%. Additionally, the ratio of workers in the total population (worker population ratio) is much higher for males than for females in all religious groups, especially in urban areas. While there has been a decline in unemployment and an increase in the worker population ratio among Muslims, the worker population ratio remains much lower that all India figures.

- **The Committee recommended** that planning, sanctioning of projects, and allocation of funds be done at the block level and not the district level. A list of persons below the poverty line belonging to minority communities must be prepared.

- **Each minority concentration block** should have a nodal officer to liaison with various government agencies. The Programme must provide for primary health care to minority communities with special facilities for women and children.

- **Preventing and controlling** communal riots: The Committee noted that 668 incidents of communal violence were reported in the country in 2012 in which 703 persons were killed and 1,506 persons were injured.

- **The Committee recommended** that an elaborate block-wise programme involving various stakeholders should be evolved to address communalism. This should involve confidence building measures, speedy rehabilitation of riot victims, and mobilisation of human resources and investment. Police forces must be sensitised on communal issues.

Combat Casualty Drugs

- **It has been** developed at the Institute of Nuclear Medicine and Allied Sciences, a laboratory of the Defence Research and Development Organisation.

- **Combat Casualty Drugs:** The spectrum includes bleeding wound sealants, super absorptive dressings and glycerated salines, all of which can save lives in the event of warfare in jungle and high altitude areas as well as in terror attacks.

- **Glycerated saline** is a battlefield intravenous fluid that does not freeze till -18 degrees Celsius and is useful in handling trauma cases in high altitude areas. Glycerated saline, unlike normal saline, reduces inflammation. The drug can be lifesaving, particularly if the traumatic edema, collection of fluid in tissues and cavities of the body, is in the brain or lungs.

- **A special** medicated dressing material, in the kit, is 200 times more absorptive than normal dressings during bleeding wounds. These cellulose fibre-based dressings are more effective in stopping bleeding and keeping the wound clean. Additionally, antiseptics, antibiotics and curcumin can be impregnated in the dressing which acts as a slow drug release system.

- **Chitosan gel helps** in preventing blood loss by forming a film over the wound. Coupled with platelets and red blood cells aggregation, it stops the bleeding. Its antibacterial and wound health properties are of added benefit. Chitosan gel is suitable for sealing wounds by twin action: haemostasis by chemical action and filing action. It can be used for wounds on the limbs and also cavities such as abdomen and thorax.

- **Part of the range** is hypocholorous acid (HOCL), a disinfectant for troopers involved in jungle warfare. It is helpful in treating necrotising fascitis, a rapidly progressing bacterial infection of soft tissues. Bacterial toxins cause local tissue damage and necrosis, as well as blunt immune system responses.

- **Why do we need such kits?** The challenges are many. There is only one medical person and limited equipment to take care of soldiers during combat in most cases. This is compounded by battlefield conditions such as forests, hilly terrain and inaccessibility of vehicles.

- **Significance and the need:** 90% of gravely wounded security personnel succumb to injuries within a few hours. And the availability of proper medical facilities can extend this golden period and help save lives. Chances of survival and minimum disability are highest when effective first aid care is given within the golden hour.

- **The main** battlefield emergencies are excess bleeding, sepsis, shock, hypovolemia (decreased blood volume) and pain. DRDO's indigenously made medicines will be a boon for paramilitary and defence personnel during warfare.

BARC

- **About BARC:** The Bhabha Atomic Research Centre (BARC) is India's premier nuclear research facility headquartered in Trombay, Mumbai, Maharashtra. It is a multi-disciplinary research centre with extensive infrastructure for advanced research and development covering the entire spectrum of nuclear science, engineering and related areas.

- **BARC has** designed and built India's first Pressurised water reactor at Kalpakkam, a 80MW land based prototype of INS Arihant's nuclear power unit, as well as the Arihant's propulsion reactor.

- **Historical background:** Dr. Homi Jehangir Bhabha conceived the Nuclear Program in India. Dr Bhabha established the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research (TIFR) for carrying out nuclear science research in 1945. To intensify the effort to exploit nuclear energy for the benefit of the nation, Dr Bhabha established the Atomic Energy Establishment, Trombay (AEET) in January 1954 for multidisciplinary research program essential for the ambitious nuclear program of India. AEET was later renamed Bhabha Atomic Research Centre (BARC).

- **Functions:** BARC's core mandate is to sustain peaceful applications of nuclear energy, primarily for power generation. It manages all facts of nuclear power generation, from theoretical design of reactors to, computerised modelling and simulation, risk analysis, development and testing of new reactor fuel materials, etc. It also conducts research in spent fuel processing, and safe disposal of nuclear waste.

- **Its other** research focus areas are applications for isotopes in industries, medicine, agriculture, etc. BARC operates a number of research reactors across the country.

- **Significance and potential of atomic energy:** Atomic Energy has a key role in reducing the carbon intensity of the overall Power sector of India. Coal based thermal power contributes 186,293 MW (July 2016), 61% of the total installed power while renewables and nuclear contribute 44,237 MW (14.5%) and 5,780 MW (1.9%) respectively.

- **While renewable** sources of energy are environment friendly, they are intermittent sources of power. Nuclear power, being a non-intermittent and concentrated source of power with negligible carbon footprint, is an essential component of the Indian power-mix to meet the International environmental commitments of India.

Lunar Reconnaissance Orbiter (LRO)

- **Lyman Alpha Mapping Project (LAMP)** — the instrument aboard LRO — measured sparse layer of molecules temporarily stuck to the Moon's surface, which helped characterise lunar hydration changes over the course of a day.

- **Uses of lunar water:** Lunar water can potentially be used by humans to make fuel or to use for radiation shielding or thermal management; if these materials do not need to be launched from Earth, that makes these future missions more affordable.

- **Source of Moon's surface water:** Scientists had hypothesised that hydrogen ions in the solar wind may be the source of most of the moon's surface water. As a result, when the moon passes behind the earth and is shielded from the solar wind, the 'water spigot' should essentially turn off.

- **However**, the water observed by LAMP does not decrease when the moon is shielded by the earth and the region influenced by its magnetic field, suggesting water builds up over time, rather than 'raining' down directly from the solar wind.

- **How is lunar water bound to surface materials?** Water molecules remain tightly bound to the regolith until surface temperatures peak near lunar noon. Molecules thermally desorb and can bounce to a nearby location that is cold enough for the molecule to stick or populate the moon's extremely tenuous atmosphere or exosphere, until temperatures drop and the molecules return to the surface.

- **About Lunar Reconnaissance Orbiter (LRO):** LRO is a NASA mission to the moon within the Lunar Precursor and Robotic Program (LPRP) in preparation for future manned missions to the moon and beyond (Mars).

- **LRO is the** first mission of NASA's `New Vision for Space Exploration', which President Bush announced on January 14, 2004, in sending more robot and human explorers beyond Earth orbit.

- **The objectives of LRO are to:** Identify potential lunar resources. Gather detailed maps of the lunar surface. Collect data on the moon's radiation levels. Study the moons polar regions for resources that could be used in future manned missions or robotic sample return missions.

- **Provide measurements** to characterize future robotic explorers, human lunar landing sites and to derive measurements that can be used directly in support of future Lunar Human Exploration Systems.

WHO strategy to fight flu pandemics

- **The strategy** meets one of WHO's mandates to improve core capacities for public health, and increase global preparedness and was developed through a consultative process with input from Member States, academia, civil society, industry, and internal and external experts.

- **Need:** Influenza epidemics, largely seasonal, affect around one billion people and kill hundreds of thousands annually. WHO describes it as one of the world's greatest public health challenges.

- **Through the implementation** of the new WHO global influenza strategy, the world will be closer to reducing the impact of influenza every year and be more prepared for an influenza pandemic and other public health emergencies.

- **The strategy:** WHO's new strategy, for 2019 through 2030, aims to prevent seasonal influenza, control the virus's spread from animals to humans and prepare for the next pandemic. It calls for every country to strengthen routine health programmes and to develop tailor-made influenza programmes that strengthen disease surveillance, response, prevention, control, and preparedness.

- **It recommends** annual flu vaccines as the most effective way to prevent the spread of the disease, especially for healthcare workers and people at higher risk of influenza complications. It also calls for the development of more effective and more accessible vaccines and antiviral treatments.

- **Significance:** The new strategy is the most comprehensive and far-reaching that WHO has ever developed for influenza. It outlines a path to protect populations every year and helps prepare for a pandemic through strengthening routine programmes. It has two overarching goals:

- **Build stronger** country capacities for disease surveillance and response, prevention and control, and preparedness. To achieve this, it calls for every country to have a tailored influenza programme that contributes to national and global preparedness and health security.

- **Develop** better tools to prevent, detect, control and treat influenza, such as more effective vaccines, antivirals and treatments, with the goal of making these accessible for all countries.

- **Way ahead:** The on-going risk of a new influenza virus transmitting from animals to humans and potentially causing a pandemic is real. The question is not if we will have another pandemic, but when. We must be vigilant and prepared – the cost of a major influenza outbreak will far outweigh the price of prevention.

- **Pandemic influenza:** An influenza pandemic is a global epidemic caused by a new influenza virus to which there is little or no pre-existing immunity in the human population. Influenza pandemics are impossible to predict; and they may be mild, or cause severe disease or death. Severe disease may occur in certain risk groups, which may correspond to those at risk of severe disease due to seasonal influenza. However, healthy persons are also likely to experience more serious disease than that caused by seasonal influenza.

- **The most recent** pandemic occurred in 2009 and was caused by an influenza A (H1N1) virus. It is estimated to have caused between 100 000 and 400 000 deaths globally in the first year alone.

- **Preparedness and response:** Influenza pandemics, whether mild, moderate or severe, affect a large proportion of the population, which puts significant strains on health and other essential services and may result in significant economic losses. As an influenza pandemic may last months or even years, this requires a sustained response in the health sector but also in other sectors providing essential services, such as energy and food production. For this reason, countries develop multi-sectoral preparedness plans describing their strategies and operational plans for responding to a pandemic.

National Register of Citizens (NRC)

- **What's the issue?** A petition has been filed in the Supreme Court alleging that that several categories of persons were deprived of voting rights ahead of the Lok Sabha polls.

- **One category** included persons whose names figured in the draft NRC but not in the voter list. Second category included persons whose names were deleted from the voter list appeared in the draft NRC published on July 30, 2018. The petition claimed these people had voted in the last Lok Sabha election in 2014. The third category of people were those declared foreigners by the foreigners' tribunal as well as by the Guwahati High Court; the court order was stayed by the Supreme Court.

- **The fourth category** comprised those already declared foreigners by the tribunal; this was set aside by the Supreme Court. However, their names had been deleted from the voters list pursuant to the order of the tribunal. In the fifth category were those whose names had not been included in the draft NRC, but their family members were included; these had filed a claim for the inclusion of their names.

- **About National Register of Citizens (NRC) of Assam:** The National Register of Citizens (NRC) is the list of Indian citizens of Assam. It was prepared in 1951, following the census of 1951.

- **For a person's** name to be included in the updated NRC list of 2018, he/ she will have to furnish: Existence of name in the legacy data: The legacy data is the collective list of the NRC data of 1951 and the electoral rolls up to midnight of 24 March 1971. Proving linkage with the person whose name appears in the legacy data.

- **Why was it updated?** The process of NRC update was taken up in Assam as per a Supreme Court order in 2013. In order to wean out cases of illegal migration from Bangladesh and other adjoining areas, NRC updation was carried out under The Citizenship Act, 1955, and according to rules framed in the Assam Accord.

- **Why is March 24, 1971 the cut-off date?** There have been several waves of migration to Assam from Bangladesh, but the biggest was in March 1971 when the Pakistan army crackdown forced many to flee to India. The Assam Accord of 1985 that ended the six-year anti-foreigners' agitation decided upon the midnight of March 24, 1971 as the cut-off date.

- **Who is a citizen in Assam?** The Citizenship Act of 1955 was amended after the Assam Accord for all Indian-origin people who came from Bangladesh before January 1, 1966 to be deemed as citizens. Those who came between January 1, 1966 and March 25, 1971 were eligible for citizenship after registering and living in the State for 10 years while those entering after March 25, 1971, were to be deported.

Arecanut gets its first GI tag for 'Sirsi Supari':

- **Context:** For the first time in the arecanut sector, 'Sirsi Supari' grown in Uttara Kannada has received the Geographic Indication (GI) tag. It is cultivated in Yellapura, Siddapura and Sirsi taluks. Totgars' Cooperative Sale Society Ltd., Sirsi, is the registered proprietor of the GI.

- **The arecanut** grown in these taluks have unique features such as a round and flattened coin shape, particular texture, size, cross-sectional views, taste, etc. These features are not seen in arecanut grown in any other regions. Its average dry weight is 7.5 g and average thickness is 16 mm. This particular variety has a unique taste due to differences in chemical composition.

What is a constitution bench?

- **Context:** Constitution benches of India's Supreme Court have delivered landmark judgments, especially in recent months.

- **What is it?** Constitution benches normally have five judges, but there have been benches with seven, nine and even 13 judges.

- **Article 145(3)** says at least five judges need to hear cases that involve "a substantial question of law as to the interpretation" of the Constitution, or any reference under Article 143, which deals with the power of the President of India to consult the Supreme Court.

Orange-bellied 'starry dwarf frog' discovered in Indian mountains:

- **Context:** Starry dwarf frog- a thumbnail-sized species was recently discovered in India's Western Ghats, one of the world's "hottest" biodiversity hotspots.

- **Scientists** have named the frog Astrobatrachus kurichiyana for its constellation-like markings and the indigenous people of Kurichiyarmala, the hill range where it was found.

- **kurichiyana** is not only a new species to science. It's the sole member of an ancient lineage, a long branch on the frog tree of life that researchers have classified as a new subfamily, Astrobatrachinae. Dark brown with a bright orange underbelly and speckled with pale blue dots, the frog camouflages well in wet leaf litter, and only a few individuals have been found.

- **What are 'cool-spots'?** 'Cool-spots' are the world's last refuges where high numbers of threatened species still persist. Cool-spots could be the result of protection or because of intact habitat that has not been cleared yet.

What is First-past-the-post system?

- **What is FPTP system?** The first-past-the-post (FPTP) system is also known as the simple majority system. In this voting method, the candidate with the highest number of votes in a constituency is declared the winner. This system is used in India in direct elections to the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies.

- **Problems with FPTP:** While FPTP is relatively simple, it does not always allow for a truly representative mandate, as the candidate could win despite securing less than half the votes in a contest. Also, smaller parties representing specific groups have a lower chance of being elected in FPTP.

- **Under the existing system,** representatives may be elected by a minority of votes, but their party grabs the majority of seats in the legislature. Also the existing system also encourages parties to target vote-banks, enter divisive electoral strategies and field tainted candidates.

- **How Proportional Representation (PR) is better than FPTP?** PR system will allow parties to have their presence in the legislatures according to their vote share instead of being wiped out completely even after getting a sizeable vote share.

- **PR systems would allow** for representation of minorities and smaller parties in the legislatures which are not represented adequately now. PR would also bring the nation closer and will complete the total integration of India. It will put an end to extreme regionalism and divisive caste and communal politics.

- **PR would also put a stop** to the exaggeration of regional differences as it allows all of the parties with significant levels of support to gain seats across the country.

- **It would also put a stop** to the inflated seat count of the Blocs controlled by smaller parties who generally receive even less than 10% the total votes polled across India, but a much greater percentage of the seats and a disproportionate bargaining power at the Centre.

Problems with PR system:

- **PR system carries the threat** of further dividing society on caste, religious and other lines. When parties are promised seats in proportion to their votes, politicians will find innovative ways means of forming newer parties. It would make our MPs and MLAs even less responsive to people's needs.

- **PR would place India's** democracy squarely in the hands of party bosses. When candidates win by being on the party's list, they must woo their bosses and represent their parties, not the people. This can only intensify partisanship in India's Parliament and state legislatures.

- **PR would revive** India's problem with unstable governments. When parties are guaranteed representation on the basis of percentage of votes received, they would have little interest in forming or sustaining coalitions. Their ideological or other vote-bank would be present even if a government falls.

- **The constant** politicking caused by PR would make it impossible for governments to take bold or transformative decisions. Corruption would grow, for people wouldn't be able to oust a dishonest representative individually.

- **PR is a recipe** for instability as exemplified by the current political deadlock in Nepal, which has adopted the PR system.

Representation of the People Act, 1951 – Public Notice Period Posted On: 15 MAR 2019 6:06PM by PIB Delhi

- **Registration of Political parties** is governed by the provisions of Section 29A of the Representation of the People Act, 1951.

- **A party** seeking registration under the said Section with the Commission has to submit an application to the Commission within a period of 30 days following the date of its formation as per guidelines prescribed by the Election Commission of India in exercise of the powers conferred by Article 324 of the Commission of India and Section 29A of the Representation of the People Act, 1951.

- **As per existing guidelines**, the applicant association is inter-alia asked to publish proposed Name of the party in two national daily news papers and two local daily newspapers, on two days in same news papers, for inviting objections, if any, with regard to the proposed registration of the party before the Commission within a 30 days from such publication.

- **The commission** has announced the elections for the Lok Sabha and Assemblies to Andhra Pradesh, Orissa, Arunachal Pradesh on 10th March, 2019. Therefore, in view of the current elections, the Commission has given one time relaxation and has reduced the notice period from 30 days to 7 days for the parties who have published their public notice by 10th March, 2019 i.e. date of announcement of election.

Cabinet Approves Proposal to Align with Global Trademark System

- **The Nice Agreement** on the International classification of goods and services for the purposes of registration of marks. The Vienna Agreement for setting up an International classification of the figurative elements of marks. The Locarno Agreement for establishing an International classification for industrial designs.

- **Significance and benefits for India:** Accession to the Nice, Vienna and Locarno Agreements will help the Intellectual Property Office in India to harmonise the classification systems for examinational of trademark and design applications, in line with the classification systems followed globally.

- **It would give an opportunity** to include Indian designs, figurative elements and goods in the international classification systems. The accession is expected to instil confidence in foreign investors in relation to protection of IPs in India.

- **The accession would also** facilitate in exercising rights in decision making processes regarding review and revision of the classifications under the agreement.

- **The following agreements** are open to States party to the Paris Convention for the Protection of Industrial Property (1883). Instruments of ratification or accession must be deposited with the Director General of WIPO.

- **Nice Agreement:** The Nice Agreement, concluded at Nice in 1957, revised at Stockholm in 1967 and at Geneva in 1977, and amended in 1979, establishes a classification of goods and services for the purposes of registering trademarks and service marks (the Nice Classification).

- **The Vienna Agreement** for setting up an International classification of the figurative elements of marks: The Vienna Agreement, concluded in Vienna in 1973 and amended in 1985, establishes a classification (the Vienna Classification) for marks that consist of, or contain, figurative elements.

- **The Locarno Agreement** for establishing an International classification for industrial designs: The Locarno Agreement, concluded at Locarno in 1968 and amended in 1979, establishes a classification for industrial designs (the Locarno Classification).

- **Key facts- the three agreements:** Create a Union, which has an Assembly. Every State that is a member of the Union is a member of the Assembly. Among the most important tasks of the Assembly is the adoption of the biennial program and budget of the Union.

- **Set up a Committee** of Experts in which all members of the Union are represented. The main task of the Committee is the periodical revision of the Classification.

- **INDO-OMAN Joint Ex Al Nagah 2019** Context: Indo Oman Joint Exercise Al Nagah III 2019, a joint military exercise between Indian and Royal Army of Oman (RAO), commenced at HQ Jabel Regiment, Nizwa, Oman. Ex Al Nagah 2019 will contribute immensely in developing mutual understanding and respect for each other's military as also facilitate in tackling the worldwide phenomenon of terrorism.

IPU-UN Women map of Women in Politics

- **The map was launched** at a press conference during the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW 63) at the United Nations headquarters in New York.

- **Key Highlights of the report:** The map, which presents global rankings for women in the executive and parliamentary government branches as of 1 January 2019, shows the proportion of women ministers is at an all-time high at 20.7 per cent, 2.4 percentage points higher compared to 2017. It also shows that the types of portfolios women ministers hold are diversifying.

- **The global share of women** Members of Parliament (MPs)—24.3 per cent—has increased by nearly one point compared with 2017. The share of women parliamentary speakers also increased by 0.6 percentage points to 19.7 per cent, and the share of women deputy speakers increased by 1.6 percentage points to 28.2 per cent.

- **However, women's representation** in top-level leadership has decreased from 7.2 per cent of elected Heads of State to 6.6 per cent (10 out of 153), and from 5.7 per cent of Heads of Government to 5.2 per cent (10 out of 193). Among countries in Asia, Pakistan progressed from having no women ministers since 2012 to reaching its highest-ever share of women ministers at 12 per cent.

- **In Europe, Slovenia** dropped the most percentage points since 2017 from 50 per cent to 25 per cent women ministers. Lithuania no longer has women in ministerial positions, compared to 2017 when there were three out of 14, or 21.4 per cent.

- **The number of countries** with no women ministers decreased from 13 in 2017 to 11: Azerbaijan, Belize, Brunei Darussalam, Iraq, Kiribati, Lithuania, Papua New Guinea, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Saudi Arabia, Thailand and Vanuatu.

- **The types of portfolios held by women ministers are shifting.** Strikingly, more women are in charge of portfolios traditionally occupied by men compared to 2017: 30 per cent more women ministers cover Defence, 52.9 per cent more women cover Finance, and 13.6 per cent more women cover Foreign Affairs.

- **Nine countries, up from six in 2017, have 50 per cent or more women in ministerial positions:** 7%: Spain. 6%: Nicaragua. 4%: Sweden. 3%: Albania. 9%: Colombia. 9%: Costa Rica. 9%: Rwanda. 50%: Canada. 50%: France.

- **Way ahead:** Equal representation in government positions is fundamental for a democracy to be truly representative and effective. Despite some positive movement, the overwhelming majority of government leaders remain male. It is a shared responsibility between men and women to change this and ensure gender equality at all political levels. It is important to identify the main barriers that are stopping women from accessing decision-making positions.

- **More women in politics** leads to more inclusive decisions and can change people's image of what a leader looks like.

Global Chemical Outlook II

- **The Global Chemicals Outlook II** – From Legacies to Innovative Solutions: Implementing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, mandated by the UN Environment Assembly in 2016, seeks to alert policymakers and other stakeholders to the critical role of the sound management of chemicals and waste in sustainable development.

- **It takes stock of** global trends as well as progress made and gaps in achieving the global goal to minimize the adverse impacts from chemicals and waste by 2020.

- **Important findings:** Countries will not meet the internationally agreed goal to minimize the adverse impacts of chemicals and waste by 2020, meaning that urgent action is required to reduce further damage to human health and economies. The current chemical production capacity of 2.3 billion tonnes, valued at US$5 trillion annually, is projected to double by 2030.

- **Despite commitments to maximize** the benefits and minimize the impacts of this industry, hazardous chemicals continue to be released to the environment in large quantities. They are ubiquitous in air, water and soil, food and humans. The world must take advantage of the many solutions that already exist and are highlighted in the report.

- **While international treaties** and voluntary instruments have reduced the risks of some chemicals and wastes, progress has been uneven and implementation gaps remain. For example, as of 2018, more than 120 countries had not implemented the Globally Harmonized System of Classification and Labelling of Chemicals.

- **The World Health Organization** estimated the burden of disease from selected chemicals at 1.6 million lives in 2016, which is likely an underestimate. Chemical pollution also threatens a range of ecosystem services.

- **From pharmaceuticals** to plant protection, chemicals play an important role in modern society and in achieving the goals of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

- **Driven by economic** development, population dynamics and other global megatrends, the chemicals market across a range of industry sectors is growing. For example, the chemicals market in the construction sector is expected to grow by 6.2 per cent annually, between 2018 and 2023.

- **Meanwhile, chemical** production and consumption is shifting to emerging economies, in particular China.

- **Pesticides** have been found to negatively impact pollinators, excess use of phosphorous and nitrogen in agriculture continues to contribute to ocean dead zone and chemicals used in sunscreens put pressure on coral reef ecosystems. Studies also indicate that releases of some antimicrobials, heavy metals and disinfectants contribute to antimicrobial resistance.

- **What next?** Solutions exist, however. Governments are taking regulatory action on many chemicals. Frontrunner companies are advancing standards beyond compliance and sustainable supply chain management. Consumers are driving demand for safer products and production.

- **Industry and** entrepreneurs are developing green and sustainable chemistry innovations. Scientists are filling data gaps. Universities are reforming the way chemistry is taught. Management approaches – from chemical hazard assessment to risk management and life cycle analysis – are advancing.

- **Opportunities** exist for key influencers such as investors, producers, retailers, academics and ministers to scale up these initiatives. This would not only protect human health and the environment, but also deliver economic benefits in the high tens of billions of United States dollars annually.

- **The development** of a future global platform for the sound management of chemicals and waste beyond 2020 provides a window of opportunity. As the report highlights, this framework needs to bring together all relevant sectors and stakeholders and foster collaborative, ambitious action.

- **Given the** critical role of the sound management of chemicals and waste in halting biodiversity loss, facilitating access to clean energy and achieving other Sustainable Development Goals and targets, opportunities exist to create synergies with these and other international policy agendas.

Global Environment Outlook report

- **Context:** Global Environment Outlook report has been released. The report is the sixth and is the UN's most comprehensive report on the state of the global environment since the fifth edition in 2012.

- **About GEO report:** The GEO is often referred to as UN Environment's flagship environmental assessment. The first publication was in 1997 and was originally requested by Member States. It is a flagship report because it fulfills the core functions of the organization, which date back to the UN General Assembly resolution that established the UNEP in 1972.

- **Key observations: Pollution related risks:** A quarter of all premature deaths and diseases worldwide are due to manmade pollution and environmental damage. Deadly emissions, chemicals polluting drinking water, and the accelerating destruction of ecosystems crucial to the livelihoods of billions of people are driving a worldwide epidemic that hampers the global economy.

- **There is a** growing chasm between rich and poor countries as rampant overconsumption, pollution and food waste in the developed world leads to hunger, poverty and disease elsewhere.

- **Impact:** As greenhouse gas emissions continue to rise amid a preponderance of droughts, floods and super storms made worse by climbing sea levels, there is a growing political consensus that climate change poses a future risk to billions.

- **But the health** impacts of pollution, deforestation and the mechanised food-chain are less well understood. Nor is there any international agreement for the environment close to covering what the 2015 Paris accord does for climate. Poor environmental conditions "cause approximately 25% of global disease and mortality" — around 9 million deaths in 2015 alone.

- **Lacking access** to clean drinking supplies, 1.4 million people die each year from preventable diseases such as diarrhoea and parasites linked to pathogen-riddled water and poor sanitation.

- **Chemicals pumped** into the seas cause "potentially multi-generational" adverse health effects, and land degradation through mega-farming and deforestation occurs in areas of Earth home to 3.2 billion people.

- **Species extinction** rates also continue to increase at a pace that could compromise Earth's ability to meet human needs, the report says.

- **What needs to be done?** The report called for a root-and-branch detoxifying of human behaviour while insisting that the situation is not unassailable. Food waste for instance, which accounts for 9% of global greenhouse gas emissions, could be slashed. The world currently throws away a third of all food produced. In richer nations, 56% goes to waste.

- **It also called** for a rapid drawdown in greenhouse gas emissions and pesticide use to improve air and water quality.

TIR convention

- **What you need to know about the TIR convention?** The Customs Convention on International Transport of Goods under cover of TIR Carnets, 1975 (TIR Convention), is an international transit system under the auspices of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) to facilitate the seamless movement of goods within and amongst the Parties to the Convention.

- **The 1975 convention** replaced the TIR Convention of 1959, which itself replaced the 1949 TIR Agreement between a number of European countries.

- **The TIR system** not only covers customs transit by road but a combination is possible with other modes of transport (e.g., rail, inland waterway, and even maritime transport), as long as at least one part of the total transport is made by road.

- **Benefits of TIR convention for India:** It has far reaching benefits for trade and will save significant time and money by streamlining procedures at borders, reducing administration and cutting border waiting times.

- **The TIR Convention** will also facilitate India's current national and multilateral connectivity-related initiatives to improve cross border road transport, facilitating overland trade integration with both eastern and western neighbours.

- **It will also help** India in implementing the World Trade Organization's Trade Facilitation Agreement, which entered into force this year.

- **The Convention** will help Indian traders to have access to fast, easy, reliable and hassle free international system for movement of goods by road or multi-modal means across the territories of other contracting parties.

- **With this convention**, the need for inspection of goods at intermediate borders as well as physical escorts en route shall be obviated due to reciprocal recognition of Customs controls.

UK Issues New Black Hole Coin in Honour of Stephen Hawking:

- **Context:** The British Royal Mint has commemorated professor Stephen Hawking in a new 50p coin, which references the late physicist's pioneering work on black holes.

- **The honorary coin,** which is available in three metal finishes, aims to celebrate the life and "ground-breaking" achievements of Hawking, who passed away in 2018.

- **It features Hawking's** name in capital letters above a rippling drawing of concentric circles, intended to represent a black hole.

- **Also on the coin** is the formula for arguably Hawking's most important scientific contribution. It references his discovery that black holes are not completely black, and instead emit radiation, meaning they eventually evaporate and disappear.

Project Varshadhare:

- **What is it?** It is a cloud seeding project flagged off by the Karnataka government to enhance the amount of precipitation from the clouds to generate more rain. Special aircraft will disperse the chemical silver iodide as they fly through rain-bearing clouds that will trigger and enhance the precipitation.

World Kidney Day:

- **Context:** World Kidney Day is observed annually on the 2nd Thursday in March.

- **WKD is a** joint initiative of the International Society of Nephrology (ISN) and the International Federation of Kidney Foundations (IFKF). World Kidney Day started in 2006.

- **Theme for 2019:** Kidney Health for Everyone Everywhere.

A model policy for women in the police:

- **What's the issue?** Women constitute about 7% of the police strength in India. This number is expected to rise, with many States and Union Territories providing for 30% (and more) reservation for women in the police in specific ranks. However, this is not enough. The discourse on mainstreaming women in the police by making policing inclusive, non-discriminatory and efficient in India is missing in policy circles.

- **What needs to be done?** Develop a model policy that will challenge the deep-rooted patriarchy in the institution. A model policy, while laying the foundation for equal opportunities for women in every aspect of policing, should also strive to create a safe and enabling work environment.

- **Merely providing** reservation is not enough; police departments should develop an action plan to achieve the target of 30% or more in a time-bound manner. This also applies to States that have not provided a quota as yet.

- **Departments should** also undertake special recruitment drives in every district to ensure geographical diversity. To achieve the target, the police should reach out to the media and educational institutions to spread awareness about opportunities for women in the police.

- **Current data reveal** that most women in the police are concentrated in the lower ranks. Efforts should be made to change this. The impulse to create women-only battalions for the sake of augmenting numbers should be eliminated.

- **The model policy should** strive to ensure that decisions on deployment of women are free of gender stereotyping to facilitate bringing women into leading operational positions. Women police officers should be encouraged to take on public order and investigative crimes of all types, and should be given duties beyond the minimum mandated by special laws. Desk work too must be allocated evenly among men and women.

- **Departments need to be mindful** various needs of working police-women and exercise sensitivity in making decisions on transfers and posting of women personnel. As far as possible, women should be posted in their home districts in consultation with supervising officers.

- **Most State police departments** have received funds under the Modernisation of State Police Forces Scheme for providing separate toilets and changing rooms for women, and for constructing separate accommodation for women with attached toilets in all police stations and units. Police departments must ensure the best use of this fund.

- **Police departments must also** ensure safe working spaces for women and adopt a zero-tolerance policy towards discrimination and harassment, in order to make policing a viable career option for women.

- **Departments are legally bound** to set up Internal Complaints Committees to prevent sexual harassment at the workplace. Departments must operationalise the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act of 2013.

Educational Schemes for Tribals

- **The Standing Committee on Social Justice and Empowerment** (Chairperson: Ramesh Bais) submitted its report on 'Educational Schemes for Tribals' on January 3, 2018.

- **Performance of existing schemes:** The Committee noted that despite many educational schemes for tribals in the country, the literacy rate of tribals (59%) is far below the national literacy rate (74%). Reasons highlighted for it include: (i) poor economic conditions of Scheduled Tribes (ST), (ii) considerable distance between home and school (especially for secondary education and above), and (iii) lack of awareness about the long-term value of formal education.

- **The Committee observed** that efforts made by the Ministry of Tribal Affairs through Ashram Schools, Pre-Matric Scholarships, and Post-Matric Scholarships for ST students have not yielded the desired results in improving their education status. It noted that the schemes being implemented lack conviction and supervision. The Committee recommended a more committed approach by the Ministry for the implementation of the schemes.

- **Development of bilingual primers:** Bilingual primers are meant to contain text in regional and tribal languages to facilitate learning (reading and writing) in schools in tribal areas. The Committee observed the slow development of bilingual primers and recommended that the Ministry must pursue the matter with the states.

- **Status of hostels:** The Committee observed that there are 1,470 functional hostels in the country for ST students. Such hostels seek to provide accommodation to ST students who would otherwise have been unable to continue their education due to economic reasons. The Committee noted that hostels have poor building structure and sub-standard quality of food. The Committee also noted that since substantial amount of Ministry's money has gone into building these hostels and other infrastructure, they must be properly monitored for them to run well.

- **Performance of specific schemes (i) Scheme for the establishment of Ashram schools:** The Scheme for the establishment of Ashram schools in tribal sub-plan areas is a centrally sponsored scheme for construction of all girls' Ashram Schools and boys' Ashram Schools in certain extremism affected areas. States are responsible for the operation and maintenance of these schools. According to the Committee, this delegation of maintenance of ashram schools to state governments has resulted in the poor condition of these schools. The Committee recommended putting in place a mechanism to ensure that the schools adhere to the laid down parameters and have regular monitoring by the states.

- **(ii) The Post-Matric Scholarship Scheme:** The Post-Matric Scholarship Scheme provides financial assistance to ST students pursuing post-matric courses in recognised institutions. The Committee noted that most of the state governments are reluctant to bear their share of liabilities related to the funds of the scheme. This leads to difficulties for ST students in continuing their education.

- **(iii) The Pre-Matric Scholarship Scheme:** The Pre-Matric Scholarship Scheme is for tribal students studying in classes 9 and 10. The Committee noted that from 2014-15 to 2017-18, funds have not been released to certain states under the scheme. The Committee observed that the lack of determination on the part of the Ministry has led to such negligence in disbursal of grants.

- **(iv) Eklavya Model Residential Schools (EMRS):** EMRS are set up with a capacity of 480 students per school to provide quality middle and high level education to ST students. Establishment of EMRS is demand driven based on the proposals received from states. The funding of such schools is from the state governments. The Committee noted that most of the EMRS are not running well, have poor infrastructure, and inadequate teaching staff. The Committee recommended that the Ministry must devise a mechanism that will help uplift the standard of these schools and make them properly functional.

- **(v) National Overseas Scholarship Scheme:** The National Overseas Scholarship Scheme provides financial assistance to 20 students selected for pursuing higher studies abroad for Ph.D. and post-doctoral studies. The Committee observed that over the years, the number of students receiving this scholarship has been declining. It stated that this might be due to the lack of awareness about the scheme among students. In this context, the Committee stated that proper

guidance and publicity are key for any scheme to be successful.

India Energy Modelling Forum

- **Organized by:** NITI Aayog and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) with the support of the Pacific Northwest National Laboratory (PNNL). Organized under the Sustainable Growth Pillar of the India-U.S. Strategic Energy Partnership.

- **About IEMF:** IEMF has been envisaged as a pan-stakeholder platform for debating ideas, scenario-planning & discussing the India's energy future. It seeks to provide a platform for leading experts and policy makers to study important energy and environmental issues and ensure induction of modelling and analysis in informed decision making process.

- **The Forum aims** to improve cooperation and coordination between modeling teams, the Government of India, knowledge partners and think-tanks, build capacity of Indian institutions, and identify issues for joint modeling activities and future areas of research.

West Nile virus (WNV)

- **About WNW:** West Nile Virus (WNV) is a member of the flavivirus genus and belongs to the Japanese encephalitis antigenic complex of the family Flaviviridae. West Nile Virus (WNV) can cause neurological disease and death in people. WNV is commonly found in Africa, Europe, the Middle East, North America and West Asia.

- **WNV is maintained** in nature in a cycle involving transmission between birds and mosquitoes. Humans, horses and other mammals can be infected.

- **Transmission:** Human infection is most often the result of bites from infected mosquitoes. Mosquitoes become infected when they feed on infected birds, which circulate the virus in their blood for a few days. The virus eventually gets into the mosquito's salivary glands. During later blood meals (when mosquitoes bite), the virus may be injected into humans and animals, where it can multiply and possibly cause illness.

- **The virus may** also be transmitted through contact with other infected animals, their blood, or other tissues. A very small proportion of human infections have occurred through organ transplant, blood transfusions and breast milk. There is one reported case of transplacental (mother-to-child) WNV transmission.

- **Horses, just like humans**, are "dead-end" hosts, meaning that while they become infected, they do not spread the infection. Symptomatic infections in horses are also rare and generally mild, but can cause neurologic disease, including fatal encephalomyelitis.

- **Signs and symptoms:** Infection with WNV is either asymptomatic (no symptoms) in around 80% of infected people, or can lead to West Nile fever or severe West Nile disease.

- **About 20% of people** who become infected with WNV will develop West Nile fever. Symptoms include fever, headache, tiredness, and body aches, nausea, vomiting, occasionally with a skin rash (on the trunk of the body) and swollen lymph glands.

- **The symptoms of severe disease** (also called neuroinvasive disease, such as West Nile encephalitis or meningitis or West Nile poliomyelitis) include headache, high fever, neck stiffness, stupor, disorientation, coma, tremors, convulsions, muscle weakness, and paralysis.

- **Treatment and vaccine:** Treatment is supportive for patients with neuro-invasive West Nile virus, often involving hospitalization, intravenous fluids, respiratory support, and prevention of secondary infections. No vaccine is available for humans.

Man Portable Anti-Tank Guided Missile (MPATGM)

- **About MPATGM:** MPATGM is third-generation anti-tank guided missile (ATGM) indigenously developed by DRDO.

- **It has strike** range of 2.5 km. It weighs around 14.5 kg to maintain man portability. It is capable of being fired from shoulder and can be used during day and night. It has minimum lateral centre and gravity offset.

- **It works on fire** and forget principle and is known for its top attack capabilities. It is effective against both stationary and moving targets. It will be deployed in infantry and parachute battalions of Indian Army.

World Consumers Day

- **Significance of the day:** It is an opportunity to promote the basic rights of all consumers, for demanding that those rights are respected and protected, and for protesting the market abuses and social injustices which undermine them. Theme: Trusted Smart Products.

- **Key facts:** WCRD was first observed on 15 March 1983, and has since become an important occasion for mobilising citizen action.

- **Consumers International (CI),** which was founded in 1960 organises WCRD. It is the only independent and authoritative global voice for consumers and has over 220 member organisations in 115 countries around the world. Consumer Rights Day — India December 24th. On this day the Consumer Protection Act, 1986 had received the assent of the President.

- **Consumer protection act:** India adopted the Consumer Protection Act, later in 1986, thus providing a legal face to the Indian consumers. One of the strongest campaigns for protection of consumer rights in India, is "Jago Grahak Jago" which literally translates into, "wake up consumers"! This multimedia campaign from Ministry of Consumer Affairs, Government of India is aimed at creating an aware consumer.

UNNATEE (UNlocking NATional Energy Efficiency Potential)

- **Significance:** The strategy document describes a plain framework and implementation strategy to establish a clear linkage between energy supply-demand scenarios and energy efficiency opportunities. The document offers a comprehensive roadmap to address India's environmental and climate change mitigation action through energy efficiency measures.

- **About BEE:** The BEE is a statutory body under the Ministry of Power, Government of India.

- **Functions:** It assists in developing policies and strategies with the primary objective of reducing the energy intensity of the Indian economy. It coordinates with designated consumers, designated agencies, and other organizations to identify and utilize the existing resources and infrastructure, in performing the functions assigned to it under the Energy Conservation Act.

Festival of Innovation and Entrepreneurship 2019

- **About Festival of Innovation & Entrepreneurship (FINE):** FINE is an initiative being organised by Rashtrapati Bhavan in association with the Department of Science and Technology, Government of India and the National Innovation Foundation-India.

- **It will recognise**, respect, showcase, reward innovations and to foster a supportive ecosystem for innovators. FINE will provide a platform for innovators for building linkages with potential stakeholders to develop their ideas into implementable projects for the larger social good.

- **It will provide a window** to showcase creative and innovative solutions for social development through innovation emerging from grassroots, student ideas and other technologies.

Mercer Quality of Living Ranking 2019

- **What Factors Determine Quality of Living?** These factors are evaluated in Mercer's Quality of Living Reports, which offer city-to-city comparisons for nearly 500 global assignment destinations.

- **Recreation Public services and transport.** Socio-cultural environment. School and education. Medical and health considerations. Political and social environment. Natural environment. Housing Economic environment. Consumer goods availability.

- **Highlights of the report:** Globally, Vienna tops the ranking for the 10th year running, closely followed by Zurich, the runner-up. This year, Mercer provides a separate ranking on personal safety. Western Europe dominates the ranking, with Luxembourg named as the safest city in the world.

- **London has been named the UK's best city to live in.** Indian cities: Chennai, the capital of Tamil Nadu is ranked at 105 in Mercer's Quality Of Living Index and is the number one city from India. Bengaluru was the second best with the ranking of 149.

- **Key observations:** Trade tensions and populist undercurrents continue to dominate the global economic climate. Combined with the spectre of monetary policy tightening and volatility looming over markets, international businesses are under more pressure than ever to get their overseas operations right.

- **The survey shows** that many cities around the world still offer attractive environments in which to do business, and the best understand that the quality of living is an essential component of a city's attractiveness for businesses and mobile talent.

- **Many cities** had seen an improvement, but terror attacks in the last ten years have caused cities including Athens, Madrid and Paris to slide down the table.

Climate Vulnerability Index

- **The assessment** has been done jointly by experts from Indian Institutes of Technology (IIT) at Guwahati and Mandi, in collaboration with Indian Institute of Science, Bangalore with support from the Department of Science and Technology and the Swiss Development Corporation (SDC) which is implementing the Indian Himalayas Climate Adaptation Program (IHCAP).

- **Key findings:** The assessment shows that the vulnerability index is the highest for Assam (0.72) and Mizoram (0.71). Sikkim is the least vulnerable state with the index being 0.42. Districts within a state face different degrees of vulnerability based on difference in geographic, climatic, socio-economic and demographic conditions.

- **Assam is highly** vulnerable to climate change because of factors like low per capita income, deforestation, large number of marginal farmers, least area under irrigation, lack of alternative sources of income and high rates of poverty.

- **Significance and the need for vulnerability map:** Receding apple lines, changing cropping patterns, more disasters like landslides and floods, drying springs in hills, spread of vector-borne diseases etc — are being felt all over the Himalayan region, which is one of the most sensitive climate zones globally. However, the vulnerability to climate change varies from state to state and even district to district within a state. It also depends on various socio-economic factors.

- **Climate adaptation is a collaborative effort between appropriate use of technology, vision that produces policies, change at ground level and engagement of local communities. These vulnerability maps will play a crucial role in this effort.**

- **The vulnerability assessments will be useful for officials, decision makers, funding agencies and experts to have a common understanding on vulnerability and enable them to plan for adaptation.**

Electoral bond scheme

- **What's the issue? A petition has been filed in the Supreme Court seeking to strike down the 'Electoral Bond Scheme 2018' and amendments in the Finance Act, 2017, which allow for "unlimited donations from individuals and foreign companies to political parties without any record of the sources of funding."**

- How govt defends its move? Electoral bonds have been introduced to promote transparency in funding and donation received by political parties. The scheme envisages building a transparent system of acquiring bonds with validated KYC and an audit trail. A limited window and a very short maturity period would make misuse improbable.

- The electoral bonds will prompt donors to take the banking route to donate, with their identity captured by the issuing authority. This will ensure transparency and accountability and is a big step towards electoral reform.

- About Electoral bonds: What are electoral bonds? Electoral bonds will allow donors to pay political parties using banks as an intermediary.

- Key features: Although called a bond, the banking instrument resembling promissory notes will not carry any interest. The electoral bond, which will be a bearer instrument, will not carry the name of the payee and can be bought for any value, in multiples of Rs 1,000, Rs 10,000, Rs 1 lakh, Rs 10 lakh or Rs 1 crore.

- Eligibility: As per provisions of the Scheme, electoral bonds may be purchased by a citizen of India, or entities incorporated or established in India. A person being an individual can buy electoral bonds, either singly or jointly with other individuals. Only the registered Political Parties which have secured not less than one per cent of the votes polled in the last Lok Sabha elections or the State Legislative Assembly are eligible to receive the Electoral Bonds.

- Need: The electoral bonds are aimed at rooting out the current system of largely anonymous cash donations made to political parties which lead to the generation of black money in the economy.

- How will the Bonds help? The previous system of cash donations from anonymous sources is wholly non-transparent. The donor, the donee, the quantum of donations and the nature of expenditure are all undisclosed.

- According to government the system of Bonds will encourage political donations of clean money from individuals, companies, HUF, religious groups, charities, etc. After purchasing the bonds, these entities can hand them to political parties of their choice, which must redeem them within the prescribed time.

- Some element of transparency would be introduced in as much as all donors declare in their accounts the amount of bonds that they have purchased and all parties declare the quantum of bonds that they have received.

- Concerns expressed: The move could be misused, given the lack of disclosure requirements for individuals purchasing electoral bonds. Electoral bonds make electoral funding even more opaque. It will bring more and more black money into the political system.

- With electoral bonds there can be a legal channel for companies to round-trip their tax haven cash to a political party. If this could be arranged, then a businessman could lobby for a change in policy, and legally funnel a part of the profits accruing from this policy change to the politician or party that brought it about.

- Electoral bonds eliminate the 7.5% cap on company donations which means even loss-making companies can make unlimited donations. Companies no longer need to declare the names of the parties to which they have donated so shareholders won't know where their money has gone.

- They have potential to load the dice heavily in favour of the ruling party as the donor bank and the receiver bank know the identity of the person. But both the banks report to the RBI which, in turn, is subject to the Central government's will to know.

AFINDEX-19:

- What is it? It is a Joint Field Training Exercise between the Indian Army and 16 African nations. The 2019 edition will be conducted in Pune from March 18 to 27.

- AFINDEX-19 aims to train the participating contingents in Humanitarian Mine Assistance (HMA) and Peace Keeping Operations (PKO) under the United Nations Charter through practical and comprehensive discussions and tactical exercises.

- Contingents from Egypt, Ghana, Nigeria, Senegal, Sudan, South Africa, Tanzania, Namibia, Mozambique, Uganda, Niger & Zambia are part of the joint exercise together with officers from Rwanda, Democratic Republic of Congo and Madagascar as Observers.

- The joint exercise will also focus on achieving interoperability, learning each other's methodologies and tactics through synchronised operational level planning and tactical level training.
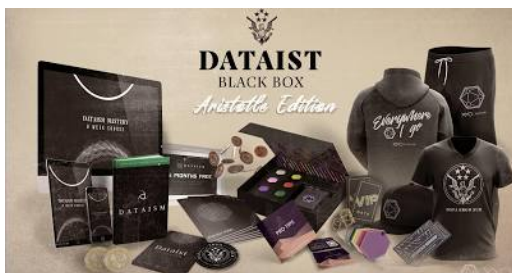
Disinvestment target within reach: Centre

- **Context:** The government expects to meet its disinvestment target of Rs. 80,000 crore even though it has achieved only Rs. 56,473.42 crore so far with only 15 days left for the end of the financial year.

- **Background:** So far, the government has collected a total of Rs. 56,473.42 crore from disinvestments and stake sales. It retained the target of Rs. 80,000 crore for the current financial year and set a target of Rs. 90,000 crore for the next year. In 2017-18, the government earned Rs. 1,00,056.91 crore from disinvestment against a target of Rs. 72,500 crore.

- **What is Disinvestment?** Disinvestment, or divestment, refers to the act of a business or government selling or liquidating an asset or subsidiary or the process of dilution of a government's stake in a PSU (Public Sector Undertaking).

- **Disinvestment policy in India- salient features of the Policy:** Public Sector Undertakings are the wealth of the Nation and to ensure this wealth rests in the hands of the people, promote public ownership of CPSEs While pursuing disinvestment through minority stake sale in listed CPSEs, the Government will retain majority shareholding, i.e. at least 51 per cent of the shareholding and management control of the Public Sector Undertakings

- **Strategic disinvestment** by way of sale of substantial portion of Government shareholding in identified CPSEs upto 50 per cent or more, along with transfer of management control.

- **Why disinvestment is necessary ?** Allows the transferring of the Indian government's enormous public debt of its PSU's to the Indian private sector. By transferring the debt the Indian government's overall debt becomes greatly reduced. Eliminates the taxpayer's exposure to the monetary risk of PSU's by transferring the exposure to the private sector where private stakeholders are willing step in and assume the monetary risk.

- Enables the Indian government to raise funds for so that the government can invest in improving its current physical and social infrastructure. Allows the reallocation of PSU resources such as manpower, real estate, technological, and operational infrastructure to critical governmental sectors that require urgent assistance.

- Forces financially sick PSU companies, through privatization, to either become healthy (profitable) enterprises or close down as a unhealthy business due to pressure from competing companies in the private sector. It would bring more competition into various private sectors thus dramatically improving the quality of service for the customer through the PSU having to compete in a competitive private market.

- Helps to promote broader share ownership for the citizens of India and also helps in the development of the capital market in India.. Allows government assets allocated for profit-making ventures to instead be reallocated for use in non profit activities or social causes thus helping to strengthen both the non profit activities and social causes. Reduces financial burden on the Government. Improves public finances.

- **Why there is a need to relook at the policy of disinvestment?** Government has mostly used disinvestment for fiscal reasons rather than growth objectives. Process of disinvestment is not favoured socially as it is against the interests of socially disadvantaged people.

- Loss making units don't attract investment so easily. Over the years the policy of divestment has increasingly become a tool to raise resources to cover the fiscal deficit with little focus on market discipline or strategic objective. Sometimes with the emergence of private monopolies consumer welfare will be reduced.

- Mere change of ownership from public to private does not ensure higher efficiency and productivity. It may lead to retrenchment of workers who will be deprived of the means of their livelihood. Private sector governed as they are by profit motive has a tendency to use capital intensive techniques which will worsen unemployment problem in India.

Indigenous and Modern Forms of Water Conservation

- **The Standing Committee on Water Resources (Chair: Mr. Hukum Singh)** submitted its report on the 'Indigenous and Modern Forms of Water Conservation-Techniques and Practices' on March 16, 2017. The Committee looked into the following aspects in relation to conservation of water: (i) need for water conservation, (ii) techniques and practices of water conservation, (iii) factors influencing water conservation, and (iv) the National Water Mission.

- **The salient observations and recommendations of the Committee include:** Low Per Capita Water Storage and Availability: Water storage in India is about 209 cubic meters (Cu. M) per person, far below the minimum threshold (1,000 Cu. M) per person for identifying water scarcity in a country. In addition, the per capita availability of water has reduced due to an increase in population, from 2,209 Cu. M per year in 1991, to 1,545 Cu. M per year in 2011.

- **In this regard, the Committee recommended that certain measures should be undertaken by the central government.** These measures include: (i) compiling data regarding large and medium dams presently under implementation, (ii) reviewing the status of execution of these dams, and (iii) making a plan for the timely completion of such dams.

- **Decline in ground water levels:** In certain states, the Committee noted: (i) increase in pumping depths of wells and tube wells, (ii) rise in the cost of pumping ground water, (iii) scarcity of ground water in summer months (for irrigation and drinking uses), and (iv) increase in fluoride content in the water and increase in salinity (in coastal areas). For example, it noted that in Punjab, cultivation of water intensive crops has resulted in depletion of the ground water table due to over-exploitation.

- **The Committee recommended** that the government should create a well-defined policy on ground water extraction. The practice of free supply of electricity to farmers for extraction of ground water for cultivation should be regulated. In addition, a scientific study of the impact of excessive withdrawal of water in Punjab should also be undertaken.

- **Traditional water recharge and harvesting practices:** Traditional water harvesting structures in the country are no longer being used to store water with dependence on piped water supply system. The Committee recommended that the Ministry of Water Resources should constitute a panel of experts to undertake a study on the merits and viability of traditional water recharge and harvesting techniques in the country. Further, consultations should be held with various state governments to develop ways to preserve and improve indigenous water harvesting methods.

- **Aquifer Mapping:** The CGWB in 2012 started the National Project on Aquifer Management (NAQUIM) to identify and map aquifers, and quantify the available ground water potential. Since the inception of NAQUIM, only 5.5 lakh sq. km. has been mapped, and an additional areas of 23 lakh sq. km. still remains to be mapped. Further, out of a total outlay of Rs 3,319 crore for five years (20122017), an expenditure of only Rs 146 crore has been made on the scheme till June 2016.

- **The Committee recommended** that the government should devise effective measures for timely and optimum utilisation of budgetary allocations for the scheme.

- **Water Budgeting:** Water budgeting is accounting of all water that flows in and out of a project area. It also helps to conserve water from rainfall and surface runoff.

- **The Committee recommended** that appropriate guidelines for water budgeting should be issued to all state governments by the Ministry of Water Resources. The Ministry should also ensure that all state governments prepare State-Specific Action Plan for the water sector, and link it to State Action Plans for Climate Change, within a specified time period. In addition, Water Regulatory Authorities for regulating the use of water and its conservation should also be set up in every state, as already established in the states of Maharashtra and Gujarat.

- **Water use efficiency under National Water Mission:** To increase water use efficiency by 20% under the National Water Mission, a national framework directive on water use efficiency should be framed by the Ministry of Water Resources and circulated to all the states.

National Supercomputing Mission (NSM)

- **The new supercomputing** system would be used for specific challenge domains like cryptography, chemistry, molecular dynamics, drug discovery, artificial intelligence and data sciences where the new system would be utilized.

- **National Supercomputing Mission (NSM): National Supercomputing Mission,** approved in 2016, is being implemented and steered jointly by the Department of Science and Technology (DST) and Department of Electronics and Information Technology (DeitY). The Mission envisages empowering national academic and R&D institutions spread over the country by installing a vast supercomputing grid comprising of more than 70 high-performance computing facilities.

- **These supercomputers** will also be networked on the National Supercomputing grid over the National Knowledge Network (NKN). The NKN is another programme of the government which connects academic institutions and R&D labs over a high speed network.

- **The Mission** includes development of highly professional High Performance Computing (HPC) aware human resource for meeting challenges of development of these applications.

- **Significance:** World-wide supercomputing facilities have enabled countries in their S&T capabilities in areas such as designing vehicles, aeroplanes, massive structures like high rise buildings and bridges, infrastructure, discovery of new life saving drugs, discovery and extraction of new energy sources including oil, natural gas etc.

- **Over the years**, supercomputers have benefitted mankind in several ways. Weather prediction has reached accuracy of forecast as well as real time tracking of natural phenomenon. Timely warning of cyclones in the recent past have saved many lives and property. The Mission aims to further such capabilities beyond current levels.

Domestic systemically important bank

- **What is a domestic systemically important bank and why is it important?** D-SIB means that the bank is too big to fail. According to the RBI, some banks become systemically important due to their size, cross-jurisdictional activities, complexity and lack of substitute and interconnection. Banks whose assets exceed 2% of GDP are considered part of this group.

- **Significance:** Should such a bank fail, there would be significant disruption to the essential services they provide to the banking system and the overall economy.

- **The too-big-to-fail** tag also indicates that in case of distress, the government is expected to support these banks. Due to this perception, these banks enjoy certain advantages in funding. It also means that these banks have a different set of policy measures regarding systemic risks and moral hazard issues.

- **Classification:** RBI has to disclose names of banks designated as D-SIB. It classifies the banks under five buckets depending on order of importance. Based on the bucket in which a D-SIB is, an additional common equity requirement applies. Banks in bucket one need to maintain a 0.15% incremental tier-I capital from April 2018. Banks in bucket three have to maintain an additional 0.45%.

- **All the banks** under D-SIB are required to maintain higher share of risk-weighted assets as tier-I equity.

- **Need:** It was observed during the global financial crisis that problems faced by certain large and highly interconnected financial institutions hampered the orderly functioning of the financial system, which in turn, negatively impacted the real economy.

- **Government** intervention was considered necessary to ensure financial stability in many jurisdictions. Cost of public sector intervention and consequential increase in moral hazard required that future regulatory policies should aim at reducing the probability of failure of SIBs and the impact of the failure of these banks.

Who are the Gurkhas of the British Army?

- **Who are they? Brief background:** Currently, the Gurkhas comprise up to 3% of the British Army, and in 2015 completed 200 years of service there.

- **Impressed by their** discipline and ferocity in Anglo-Nepalese War of 1814-16, the British decided to recruit Gurkha soldiers starting in 1815. Since then, the Gurkhas have fought on the side of the British Empire in almost every war, including both World Wars.

- **Upon Independence in 1947**, the question of allotting the 10 regiments of Gurkha soldiers arose. This was settled by the Britain-India-Nepal Tripartite Agreement. In 1948, India created an 11th Gurkha Rifles regiment to accommodate the Gurkhas who refused to depart with the now-British regiments.

- **Later,** the British Army amalgamated their four regiments into a combined Royal Gurkha Rifles (RGR) regiment consisting of three battalions. The RGR was subsequently deployed in Britain's remaining colonies in Asia, including Malaysia, Singapore, and Hong Kong, to fill the vacuum created by departing Indian regiments such as the Sikhs, which were stationed there earlier.

- **Recruitment of Gurkhas:** The Gurkhas are recruited every year at the British Gurkha camp at Pokhara in Nepal. The camp enlists fresh recruits not only for the British Army, but also for the counter-terror arm of the Singapore Police Force. British Army scouts roam the Nepalese countryside to identify potential recruits, who then undergo a rigorous training process before joining.

- **Service:** Regarded as fierce and loyal, the Gurkhas are held in high esteem in the British Army. They are enlisted not only in the infantry, but also in the engineering corps and as logisticians. Their signature weapon, the khukri, famous for the inwardly curved shape of its blade and its legendary utility, forms part of the Gurkha regimental insignia in Britain as well as in India.

- **Queen Elizabeth II** of Britain is guarded by two personal Gurkha officers. Former Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew is known to have preferred Gurkha police officers for his protection.

How the 2015-16 El Nino affected disease outbreaks

- **The scientists** analysed certain disease outbreaks in the 2015-16 period and tried to correlate them with higher temperatures and erratic rainfall patterns characteristic of the El Nino.

- **Key findings:** Major diseases like chikungunya, dengue, malaria, hantavirus, rift valley fever, cholera, plague and zika are affected by the weather events induced by El Nino.

- **They found that** in regions like Southeast Asia, Tanzania, western United States and Brazil — which are generally affected by the El Nino — the spread of diseases came after shifts in rainfall, temperature and vegetation. There was either excess of droughts or floods in this period which created the environmental conditions that favoured the growth and propagation of disease causing micro organisms and their carriers.

- **The study's analysis** indicates that the intensity of disease activity increased by 2.5-28 per cent during El Nino events than in other periods in the affected regions. Similarly, excess land surface temperatures in Brazil and Southeast Asia aided the spread of dengue. El Nino, in itself, is a difficult phenomenon to track and study, which makes its consequences even more difficult to understand.

- **What is ENSO?** ENSO is nothing but El Nino Southern Oscillation. As the name suggests, it is an irregular periodic variation of wind and sea surface temperature that occurs over the tropical eastern Pacific Ocean. ENSO affects the tropics (the regions surrounding the equator) and the subtropics (the regions adjacent to or bordering the tropics). The warming phase of ENSO is called El Nino, while the cooling phase is known as La Nina.

- **What is El Nino?** El Nino is a climatic cycle characterised by high air pressure in the Western Pacific and low air pressure in the eastern. In normal conditions, strong trade winds travel from east to west across the tropical Pacific, pushing the warm surface waters towards the western Pacific. The surface temperature could witness an increase of 8 degrees Celsius in Asian waters. At the same time, cooler waters rise up towards the surface in the eastern Pacific on the coasts of Ecuador, Peru, and Chile. This process called upwelling aids in the development of a rich ecosystem.

- **What causes El Nino?** El Nino sets in when there is anomaly in the pattern. The westward-blowing trade winds weaken along the Equator and due to changes in air pressure, the surface water moves eastwards to the coast of northern South America. The central and eastern Pacific regions warm up for over six months and result in an El Nino condition. The temperature of the water could rise up to 10 degrees Fahrenheit above normal. Warmer surface waters increase precipitation and bring above-normal rainfall in South America, and droughts to Indonesia and Australia.

- **What are El Nino's effects?** El Nino affects global weather. It favours eastern Pacific hurricanes and tropical storms. Record and unusual rainfall in Peru, Chile and Ecuador are linked to the climate pattern. El Nino reduces upwelling of cold water, decreasing the uplift of nutrients from the bottom of the ocean. This affects marine life and sea birds. The fishing industry is also affected.

- **Drought caused** by El Nino can be widespread, affecting southern Africa, India, Southeast Asia, Australia, and the Pacific Islands. Countries dependent on agriculture are affected. Australia and Southeast Asia get hotter.

- **A recent WHO** report on the health consequences of El Nino forecasts a rise in vector-borne diseases, including those spread by mosquitoes, in Central and South America. Cycles of malaria in India are also linked to El Nino.

District mineral foundations

- **The change** has been brought about by introducing amendments to the Chhattisgarh District Mineral Foundation Trust Rules (2015), through a notification.

- **Need:** The move follows the Chhattisgarh government's observation that DMFTs have not been functioning optimally to benefit mining-affected people and the worst affected areas. The decision has been taken to improve participation of people through the representatives selected by them. This is to ensure that the needs of mining-affected areas are reflected well. The effort is to ensure that DMFs work in an accountable manner.

- **DMFTs which have** been set up in various mining districts, including all districts of Chhattisgarh, have a two-tier administrative structure, a Governing Council (GC) and a Managing Committee (MC) with differential responsibilities. The idea of a two-tier structure was to have appropriate checks and balances in decision-making.

- **Both the GC and the MC** were being headed by the DC. The other members of these bodies predominantly comprise officials and elected representatives. There is practically no representation of mining-affected people in the body to have their voice and representation in decision-making.

- **In order** to have a more balanced structure, the Chhattisgarh government has now removed the DC as chairperson of the GC. Also, all members of legislative assembly (MLA) of the concerned mining district have been made GC members.

- **About DMFs:** DMFs were instituted under the Mines and Minerals (Development and Regulation) (MMDR) Amendment Act 2015 as non-profit trusts to work for the interest and benefit of persons and areas affected by mining-related operations.

- **The objective** of District Mineral Foundation is to work for the interest of the benefit of the persons and areas affected mining related operations in such manner as may be prescribed by the State Government.

- **Jurisdiction:** Its manner of operation comes under the jurisdiction of the relevant State Government.

- **The various state DMF rules and the Pradhan Mantri Khanij Khestra Kalyan Yojana (PMKKKY) guidelines stipulate some "high priority" issues for DMFs, including:** Drinking water. Health Women and child welfare. Education Livelihood and skill development. Welfare of aged and disabled. Sanitation

- **Pradhan Mantri Khanij Kshetra Kalyan Yojana (PMKKKY):** The programme is meant to provide for the welfare of areas and people affected by mining related operations, using the funds generated by District Mineral Foundations (DMFs).

- **Objectives of the scheme:** To implement various developmental and welfare projects/programs in mining affected areas that complement the existing ongoing schemes/projects of State and Central Government.

- **To minimize/mitigate** the adverse impacts, during and after mining, on the environment, health and socio-economics of people in mining districts. To ensure long-term sustainable livelihoods for the affected people in mining areas.

'Bomb Cyclone'

- **What is a Bomb cyclone?** The term is used by meteorologists to indicate a mid-latitude cyclone that intensifies rapidly.

- **A bomb cyclone** happens when atmospheric pressure in the middle of the storm drops at least 24 millibars over 24 hours, quickly increasing in intensity. The lower the pressure, the stronger the storm.

- **How it works?** Deep drops in barometric pressure occur when a region of warm air meets one of cold air. The air starts to move and the rotation of the earth creates a cyclonic effect. The direction is counterclockwise in the Northern hemisphere leading to winds that come out of the northeast.

- **What's the difference between hurricanes, cyclones and typhoons?** Hurricanes, cyclones and typhoons are all tropical storms. They are all the same thing but are given different names depending on where they appear. When they reach populated areas they usually bring very strong wind and rain which can cause a lot of damage.

- **Hurricanes** are tropical storms that form over the North Atlantic Ocean and Northeast Pacific. Cyclones are formed over the South Pacific and Indian Ocean. Typhoons are formed over the Northwest Pacific Ocean.

Financial Stability and Development Council (FSDC)

- **About FSDC:** The Financial Stability and Development Council (FSDC) was constituted in December, 2010. The FSDC was set up to strengthen and institutionalise the mechanism for maintaining financial stability, enhancing inter-regulatory coordination and promoting financial sector development. An apex-level FSDC is not a statutory body.

- **Composition:** The Council is chaired by the Union Finance Minister and its members are Governor, Reserve Bank of India; Finance Secretary and/or Secretary, Department of Economic Affairs; Secretary, Department of Financial Services; Chief Economic Adviser, Ministry of Finance; Chairman, Securities and Exchange Board of India; Chairman, Insurance Regulatory and Development Authority and Chairman, Pension Fund Regulatory and Development Authority. It also includes the chairman of the Insolvency and Bankruptcy Board (IBBI).

- **Recently,** the government through a gazette notification, had included ministry of electronics and information technology (MeitY) secretary in the FSDC in view of the increased focus of the government on digital economy.

- **What it does?** The Council deals, inter-alia, with issues relating to financial stability, financial sector development, inter–regulatory coordination, financial literacy, financial inclusion and macro prudential supervision of the economy including the functioning of large financial conglomerates. No funds are separately allocated to the Council for undertaking its activities.

Registration of political parties under Section 29A of the RP Act, 1951

- **What the rules say?** As per existing guidelines, the applicant association is inter-alia asked to publish proposed Name of the party in two national daily news papers and two local daily newspapers, on two days in same news papers, for inviting objections, if any, with regard to the proposed registration of the party before the Commission within a 30 days from such publication.

- **Registration of political parties:** Registration of Political parties is governed by the provisions of Section 29A of the Representation of the People Act, 1951. A party seeking registration under the said Section with the Commission has to submit an application to the Commission within a period of 30 days following the date of its formation as per guidelines prescribed by the Election Commission of India in exercise of the powers conferred by Article 324 of the Commission of India and Section 29A of the Representation of the People Act, 1951.

- **To be eligible for a 'National Political Party of India,' the Election Commission has set the following criteria:** It secures at least six percent of the valid votes polled in any four or more states, at a general election to the House of the People or, to the State Legislative Assembly; and In addition, it wins at least four seats in the House of the People from any State or States. OR

- **It wins at least** two percent seats in the House of the People (i.e., 11 seats in the existing House having 543 members), and these members are elected from at least three different States.

- **To be eligible for a 'State Political Party,' the Election Commission has set the following criteria:** It secures at least six percent of the valid votes polled in the State at a general election, either to the House of the People or to the Legislative Assembly of the State concerned; and In addition, it wins at least two seats in the Legislative Assembly of the State concerned. OR

- **It wins at least** three percent (3%) of the total number of seats in the Legislative Assembly of the State, or at least three seats in the Assembly, whichever is more.

- **Benefits:** If a party is recognised as a State Party', it is entitled for exclusive allotment of its reserved symbol to the candidates set up by it in the State in which it is so recognised, and if a party is recognised as a `National Party' it is entitled for exclusive allotment of its reserved symbol to the candidates set up by it throughout India.

- **Recognised `State'** and `National' parties need only one proposer for filing the nomination and are also entitled for two sets of electoral rolls free of cost at the time of revision of rolls and their candidates get one copy of electoral roll free of cost during General Elections. They also get broadcast/telecast facilities over Akashvani/Doordarshan during general elections.

- **Political parties** are entitled to nominate "Star Campaigners" during General Elections. A recognized National or State party can have a maximum of 40 "Star campaigners" and a registered un-recognised party can nominate a maximum of 20 'Star Campaigners".

- **The travel expenses** of star campaigners are not to be accounted for in the election expense accounts of candidates of their party.

Otter census and Pilibhit Tiger Reserve (PTR):

- **Context:** In a first, Uttar Pradesh begins otter census. Beginning in the Pilibhit Tiger Reserve, the exercise will end by the end of March, 2019.

- **About Pilibhit Tiger Reserve (PTR):** PTR is in the foothills of the Himalayas, south of Nepal. Covering an area of approximately 800 square kilometres, the reserve sprawls across parts of Pilibhit, Lakhimpur Kheri and Bahraich districts. With the Sharda and Ghaghara rivers encircling a considerable part of the reserve, it is rich in water bodies.

- **The forests of PTR** are to home to tigers, leopards, elephants, different species of deer and monkeys and reptiles like snakes, mugger crocodiles and gharials.

- **Otters:** Otters are an important part of the forest ecosystem. A thriving population of otters means a healthy ecosystem. A mammal, an otter spends much of its time in or close to water bodies. Otters live on fish. They are classified as vulnerable.

- **Grey hypocolius:** Context: The Grey Hypocolius (Hypocolius ampelinus), a small migratory bird that usually makes its home in West Asia and North Africa and is a regular visitor to Kutch, has been sighted in Western Rajasthan for the first time on March 4, 2019.

- **Key facts:** The grey hypocolius (Hypocolius ampelinus) is a small passerine bird species. It is the sole member of the genus Hypocolius and it is placed in a family of its own, the Hypocoliidae. This slender and long tailed bird is found in the dry semi-desert region of northern Africa, Arabia, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and western India.

- **They fly in flocks** and forage mainly on fruits, migrating south in winter. Because the species has a large range, and because it does not meet the population size and decline criteria of the IUCN Red List, the conservation status is evaluated as being of "least concern".

Model Code of Conduct and the 2019 General Elections

- **Yesterday**, the Election Commission announced the dates for the 2019 Lok Sabha elections. The voting will take place in seven phases between April 11, 2019 to May 19, 2019. With this announcement, the Model Code of Conduct (MCC) has comes into force. In this blog, we outline the key features of the MCC.

- **What is the Model Code of Conduct and who does it apply to?** The MCC is a set of guidelines issued by the Election Commission to regulate political parties and candidates prior to elections, to ensure free and fair elections. This is in keeping with Article 324 of the Constitution, which gives the Election Commission the power to supervise elections to the Parliament and state legislatures. The MCC is operational from the date that the election schedule is announced till the date that results are announced. Thus, for the general elections this year, the MCC came into force on March 10, 2019, when the election schedule was announced, and will operate till May 23, 2019, when the final results will be announced.

- **How has the Model Code of Conduct evolved over time?** According to a Press Information Bureau release, a form of the MCC was first introduced in the state assembly elections in Kerala in 1960. It was a set of instructions to political parties regarding election meetings, speeches, slogans, etc. In the 1962 general elections to the Lok Sabha, the MCC was circulated to recognised parties, and state governments sought feedback from the parties. The MCC was largely followed by all parties in the 1962 elections and continued to be followed in subsequent general elections. In 1979, the Election Commission added a section to regulate the 'party in power' and prevent it from gaining an unfair advantage at the time of elections. In 2013, the Supreme Court directed the Election Commission to include guidelines regarding election manifestos, which it had included in the MCC for the 2014 general elections.

- **What are the key provisions of the Model Code of Conduct?** The MCC contains eight provisions dealing with general conduct, meetings, processions, polling day, polling booths, observers, party in power, and election manifestos. Major provisions of the MCC are outlined below.

- **General Conduct:** Criticism of political parties must be limited to their policies and programmes, past record and work. Activities such as: (a) using caste and communal feelings to secure votes, (b) criticising candidates on the basis of unverified reports, (c) bribing or intimidation of voters, and (d) organising demonstrations or picketing outside houses of persons to protest against their opinions, are prohibited.

- **Meetings:** Parties must inform the local police authorities of the venue and time of any meeting in time to enable the police to make adequate security arrangements.

- **Processions:** If two or more candidates plan processions along the same route, organisers must establish contact in advance to ensure that the processions do not clash. Carrying and burning effigies representing members of other political parties is not allowed.

- **Polling day:** All authorised party workers at polling booths should be given identity badges. These should not contain the party name, symbol or name of the candidate.

- **Polling booths:** Only voters, and those with a valid pass from the Election Commission, will be allowed to enter polling booths. Observers: The Election Commission will appoint observers to whom any candidates may report problems regarding the conduct of the election.

- **Party in power:** The MCC incorporated certain restrictions in 1979, regulating the conduct of the party in power. Ministers must not combine official visits with election work or use official machinery for the same. The party must avoid advertising at the cost of the public exchequer or using official mass media for publicity on achievements to improve chances of victory in the elections. Ministers and other authorities must not announce any financial grants, or p

- **Promise** any construction of roads, provision of drinking water, etc. Other parties must be allowed to use public spaces and rest houses and these must not be monopolised by the party in power. Election manifestos: Added in 2013, these guidelines prohibit parties from making promises that exert an undue influence on voters, and suggest that manifestos also indicate the means to achieve promises.

- **What changes have been recommended in relation to the MCC since the last general elections?** In 2015, the Law Commission in its report on Electoral Reforms, noted that the MCC prohibits the issue of advertisement at the cost of public exchequer in newspapers/media during the election period. However, it observed that since the MCC comes into operation only from the date on which the Commission announces elections, the government can release advertisements prior to the announcement of elections. It noted that this gives an advantage to the ruling party to issue government sponsored advertisements

that highlights its achievements, which gives it an undue advantage over other parties and candidates. Therefore, the Commission recommended that a restriction should be imposed on government-sponsored advertisements for up to six months prior to the date of expiry of the House/Assembly. However, it stated that an exception may be carved out for advertisements highlighting the government's poverty alleviation programmes or any health related schemes.

- **Is the Model Code of Conduct legally binding?** The MCC is not enforceable by law. However, certain provisions of the MCC may be enforced through invoking corresponding provisions in other statutes such as the Indian Penal Code, 1860, Code of Criminal Procedure, 1973, and Representation of the People Act, 1951. The Election Commission has argued against making the MCC legally binding; stating that elections must be completed within a relatively short time (close to 45 days), and judicial proceedings typically take longer, therefore it is not feasible to make it enforceable by law. On the other hand, in 2013, the Standing Committee on Personnel, Public Grievances, Law and Justice, recommended making the MCC legally binding. In a report on electoral reforms, the Standing Committee observed that most provisions of the MCC are already enforceable through corresponding provisions in other statutes, mentioned above. It recommended that the MCC be made a part of the Representation of the People Act, 1951. Note that this is an updated version of a previous blog published in 2014.

Kaladan Project

- **About Kaladan project:** The Kaladan project connects Sittwe Port in Myanmar to the India-Myanmar border. The project was jointly initiated by India and Myanmar to create a multi-modal platform for cargo shipments from the eastern ports to Myanmar and to the North-eastern parts of the country through Myanmar.

- **Significance:** It is expected to open up sea routes and promote economic development in the North-eastern states, and also add value to the economic, commercial and strategic ties between India and Myanmar. This project will reduce distance from Kolkata to Sittwe by approximately 1328 km and will reduce the need to transport good through the narrow Siliguri corridor, also known as Chicken's Neck.

- **Where is Sittwe located?** Sittwe is the capital of Rakhine State (which has been in the news for the plight of Rohingya Muslims) in south-western Myanmar. It is located at the mouth of the Kaladan river, which flows into Mizoram in north-eastern India.

- **Significance of this port for India:** India has for years sought transit access through Bangladesh to ship goods to the landlocked north-eastern States. At present, the only route to this region from the rest of India is a rather circuitous one through a narrow strip of Indian territory nicknamed the Chicken's Neck in West Bengal, sandwiched between Bhutan and Bangladesh. The new route through Sittwe would significantly lower the cost and distance of movement from Kolkata to Mizoram and beyond.

YONO Cash:

- **Context:** The State Bank of India has launched the YONO Cash service for its customers which will allow them to withdraw cash from ATMs without their debit cards.

- **You Only Need One** (YONO) is the cardless cash withdrawal service. The initiative will address concern of using debit card at the ATMs for cash withdrawals by eliminating possible risk associated with it.

- **How it works?** SBI customers can use the YONO app on their smartphones to withdraw cash from SBI ATMs, or YONO Cash Points, without using their debit and credit cards. Once a request for withdrawing cash is placed, a 6-digit code will be sent to the user's phone via SMS, which will then have to be entered into a YONO Cash Point.

Submarine Khanderi:

- **Context:** The Navy is set to induct the second Scorpene submarine Khanderi by early May. Khanderi was launched in January 2017 and has since been undergoing a series of trials.

- **The first** submarine of the class Kalvari joined service in December 2017. The third in the Scorpene series Karanj which was launched in January last year is in advanced stage of trials and could be ready for induction by year end. The last two submarines Vagir and Vagsheer are in advanced stages of manufacturing on the assembly line.

- **Mazagon Dock Limited (MDL)**, Mumbai, is manufacturing six Scorpene submarines under technology transfer from Naval Group of France under a 2005 contract worth $3.75 bn. The entire project is expected to be completed by 2020.

TROPEX 19:

- **What is it?** Theatre Level Readiness and Operational Exercise (TROPEX) is an inter-service military exercise involving the participation of the Indian Army, Air Force, Navy and the Coast Guard.

- **The exercise generally commences at the beginning of each year and lasts a month.** The exercise is designed to test the combat readiness of the Indian naval units, as well as the Indian Air Force, Indian Army and the Indian Coast Guard.

Should India have two time zones? National timekeeper adds new arguments

- **Need for two time zones- arguments by CSIR- NPL:** The researchers estimated energy savings at 20 million kWh a year. They also analysed the importance of synchronising office hours — as well as biological activities — to sunrise and sunset timings.

- **How is energy saved?** Energy is saved by longer use of sunlight and consequently less use of energy for lighting. The demand for electricity goes up in the morning for water heating and increases again in the evening for five to six hours, mainly for lighting, declining as people turn off lights and go to bed.

- **Why there is Necessity of Two time zones?** Over the years, various citizens and political leaders have debated whether India should have two separate time zones. The demand is based on the huge difference in daylight times between the country's longitudinal extremes, and the costs associated with following the same time zone.

- **Those arguing** against the idea, on the other hand, cite impracticability particularly the risk of railway accidents, given the need to reset times at every crossing from one time zone into another.

- **Possible Impact of change in time zones:** Northeast India would move an hour ahead, increasing the region's productive, daylight hours and the country's potential energy savings could amount to a whopping 20 million kWh a year. Offices could open sooner after sunrise, and perhaps workers could even savour the last dregs of dusk as they trudge towards home or their desired form of recreation.

- **Biomedical** research has consistently pointed to the physical and psychological benefits of aligning circadian (sleep) rhythms to the sun's rising and setting.

- **Concerns:** India has a huge population: if the country were divided into two time zones, there would be chaos at the border between the two zones. It would mean resetting clocks with each crossing of the time zone. There is scope for more dangerous kinds of confusion. Railway signals are not fully automated and many routes have single tracks. Trains may meet with major accidents owing to human errors. Just one such accident would wipe out any benefits resulting from different time zones in the country.

- **Partitioning** the already divided country further into time zones may also have undesirable political consequences. Moreover, our research shows that the energy saving from creating two time zones is not particularly large.

- **With a time** difference of one hour in the mornings and in the evenings, there would be nearly 25% less overlap between office timings in the two zones. This could be important for banks, offices, industries and multinational companies which need to be constantly interconnected. This will be further detrimental to productivity and to the interests of the eastern region.

- **There is already** a sense of alienation between the relatively prosperous and industrialised western zone and the less developed eastern zone. The people in the Northeast sense a distance from the mainland and a separateness in clock time may accentuate it.

- **Having a separate** time zone for the eastern region will provide no energy or other benefits to the rest of the country. Moreover, India will continue to be in off-set time zones, five and a half hours in the west and six and a half in the eastern region ahead of.

Opening ceremony: Africa-India Field Training Exercise-2019 Posted On: 18 MAR 2019 5:38PM by PIB Delhi

- **The inaugural Africa-India** Field Training Exercise-2019 for India and African nations called AFINDEX-19 scheduled from 18 March to 27 March 2019 started with a grand opening ceremony on 18 March 2019 at Aundh Military Station, Pune. Contingents of the 17 African Nations i.e. Benin, Botswana, Egypt, Ghana, Kenya, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, South Africa, Sudan, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe came together for the opening ceremony alongwith a contingent of Maratha Light Infantry representing India.

- **Major General** Sanjeev Sharma, General Officer Commanding, Golden Katar Division, who was the Chief Guest for the opening ceremony, reviewed the parade, in presence of a large number of Defence Attaches and other officials of participating nations. A fly past by a set of Advanced Light Helicopters and Cheetah Helicopter of the Indian Army carrying the flags of United Nations, India and the AFINDEX was the highlight of the opening ceremony. The Chief Guest and Defence Attaches from various nations interacted with the contingents after the completion of the parade.

- **The aim of the exercise** is to practice the participating nations in planning and conduct of Humanitarian Mine Assistance and Peace Keeping Operations under Chapter VII of United Nations Peace Keeping Operations. The exercise will focus on exchange of best practices between the participating nations, team building and tactical level operations in conduct of United Nations mandated tasks to include establishment of a new mission, siting of a United Nations Headquarters for Peace Keeping operations, siting of Military Observer sites during the peace keeping missions, protection of civilians, nuances of standing combat deployment, convoy protection, patrolling aspects and aspects related to Humanitarian Mine Assistance.

UN Environment Assembly

- **About UN Environment Assembly:** The United Nations Environment Assembly is the world's highest-level decision-making body on the environment. It addresses the critical environmental challenges facing the world today.

- **The Environment Assembly** meets biennially to set priorities for global environmental policies and develop international environmental law. The Assembly is the governing body of the UN Environment Programme (UN Environment) and the successor of its Governing Council, which was composed of 58 member States. The UN Environment Assembly, with a universal membership, is now composed of 193 Member States.

- **History of the United Nations Environment Assembly:** The United Nations Environment Assembly was created in June 2012, when world leaders called for UN Environment to be strengthened and upgraded during the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, also referred to as RIO+20.

- **Previous sessions and outcomes:** The first and second sessions of the UN Environment Assembly tackled and adopted resolutions on major issues of illegal trade in wildlife, air quality, environmental rule of law, financing the Green Economy, the Sustainable Development Goals, and "delivering on the environmental dimension of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development". The Third Environment Assembly took place in Nairobi in December 2017 under the overarching theme "Towards a pollution-free planet".

India pilots resolutions on single-use plastics, sustainable nitrogen management

- **Analysis: Nitrogen as an essential nutrient:** Nitrogen, which is a vital macronutrient for most plants, is the most abundant element in the atmosphere. A little over 78% of dry air on Earth is nitrogen. But atmospheric nitrogen, or dinitrogen, is unreactive and cannot be utilised by plants directly.

- **Until the beginning** of the 20th century, farmers depended on a natural process called nitrogen fixation for the conversion of atmospheric nitrogen into reactive nitrogen in the soil: nitrogen-fixing bacteria like rhizobia live symbiotically with leguminous plants, providing nitrogen to the plant and soil in the form of reactive compounds like ammonia and nitrate.

- **But the natural nitrogen** cycle was inadequate to feed the growing population. Scientists Fritz Haber and Carl Bosch solved this problem by producing ammonia by combining atmospheric nitrogen with hydrogen gas at high temperature and pressure—known as the Haber-Bosch process. The Green Revolution, which was instrumental in establishing food security in the developing countries in the 1960s, was driven by artificial nitrogen-fixation. Today, about half of the world's population depends on this process for its nutrition.

- **How Nitrogen turned into pollutant from nutrient how it is affecting health and environment?** Nitrogen is an inert gas that's necessary for life. But we're changing it into forms that are harmful, overloading the environment with it, and throwing the natural nitrogen cycle out of whack. Nitrogen compounds running off farmland have led to water pollution problems around the world, while nitrogen emissions from industry, agriculture and vehicles make a big contribution to air pollution.

- **Over 80% of the nitrogen** in soil is not utilised by humans. While over four-fifths of the nitrogen is used to feed livestock, only about six per cent reaches humans in case of non-vegetarian diet, as compared to the 20% that reaches the plate of a vegetarian.

- **Nitrogen becomes a pollutant** when it escapes into the environment and reacts with other organic compounds. It is either released into the atmosphere, gets dissolved in water sources such as rivers, lakes or groundwater, or remains in the soil. While it might lead to favourable growth of species that can utilise this nutrient, nitrogen as a pollutant is often detrimental to the environment and health.

- **Effects on health:** According to the World Health Organization, nitrate-contaminated drinking water can cause reduced blood function, cancer and endemic goiters. Surplus inputs of nitrogen compounds have been found to cause soil acidification. The lowering pH, as a result of the acidification, can lead to nutrient disorders and increased toxicity in plants. It may also affect natural soil decomposition.

- **Nitrogen pollution has a significant impact on the environment:** It creates harmful algal blooms and dead zones in our waterways and oceans; the algae produce toxins which are harmful to human and aquatic organisms (and indirectly affects fisheries and biodiversity in coastal areas).

- **Contamination** of drinking water. 10 million people in Europe are potentially exposed to drinking water with nitrate concentrations above recommended levels. This can have an adverse effect on human health.

- **Food Security:** Excessive nitrogen fertiliser application contributes to soil nutrient depletion. As the world needs to feed an ever growing population, loss of arable land is major global problem. The release of Nitrous Oxide is essentially a greenhouse gas which is harmful to the environment.

- **India's efforts to beat plastic pollution:** So far, 22 States and Union Territories have joined the fight to beat the plastic pollution, announcing a ban on single-use plastics such as carry bags, cups, plates, cutlery, straws and thermocol products. Puducherry is implementing a ban from March 1.

- **India has also won global acclaim** for its "Beat Plastic Pollution" resolve declared on World Environment Day last year, under which it pledged to eliminate single-use plastic by 2022.

- **All such efforts** have yielded positive results: Voluntary initiatives are having an impact in many States, as citizens reduce, reuse and sort their waste. A Bengaluru waste collective estimates that the volume of plastic waste that they collect dropped from about two tonnes a day to less than 100 kg.

Country-by-country (CbC) reports

- **Significance and impact:** This will reduce the compliance burden on their subsidiaries operating out of these countries.

- **The agreement** would enable both the countries to exchange CbC reports filed by the ultimate parent entities of international groups in the respective jurisdictions, pertaining to the financial years commencing on or after January 1, 2016.

- **Provisions wrt CbC reports:** The Income Tax Act requires Indian subsidiaries of multinational companies to provide details of key financial statements from other jurisdictions where they operate. This provides the IT department with better operational view of such companies, primarily with regards to revenue and income tax paid.

- **The provision** was a part of the base erosion and profit shifting action plan, and later incorporated in IT Act also.

- **BEPS Action 13 report:** The BEPS Action 13 report (Transfer Pricing Documentation and Country-by-Country Reporting) provides a template for multinational enterprises (MNEs) to report annually and for each tax jurisdiction in which they do business the information set out therein. This report is called the Country-by-Country (CbC) Report.

Ramakrishna Dev

- **Ramakrishna Paramhansa:** Ramakrishna Paramhansa was one of the leading Hindu spiritual leaders in 19th century.

- **He was born** as Gadadhar Chattopadhyay on February 18, 1836, in Kamarpukur, in Hooghly district of West Bengal. He emphasised that the realization of the existence of God is the supreme goal of all living beings. For him, various religions were only a means to reach the Absolute.

- **Among his most** famous disciples was Swami Vivekananda, who became famous across the world in his own right. Reverence and admiration for him among Bengali elites led to the formation of the Ramakrishna Mission by his chief disciple Swami Vivekananda.

Contempt of Court

- **What is contempt under the Indian law?** In India, the Contempt of Courts Act, 1971, divides contempt into civil contempt and criminal contempt.

- **'Civil contempt'** is a 'wilful disobedience to any judgment, decree, direction, order, writ or other processes of a Court or wilful breach of an undertaking given to the court'. 'Criminal contempt' is 'the publication (whether by words, spoken or written, or by signs, or by visible representation, or otherwise) of any matter or the doing of any other act whatsoever which:

- **Scandalises or tends to scandalise, or lowers or tends to lower the authority of, any court.** Prejudices, or interferes or tends to interfere with the due course of any judicial proceeding. Interferes or tends to interfere with, or obstructs or tends to obstruct, the administration of justice in any other manner.'

- **Need:** Judiciary ensures justice and equality to every individual and institutions, therefore, the makers of the constitution upheld the sanctity and prestige of the revered institution by placing provisions under articles 129 and 215 of the constitution, which enables the courts to hold individuals in contempt if they attempt to demean or belittle their authority.

- **Is criticism allowed?** Yes. The Contempt of Courts Act, 1971, very clearly states that fair criticism of any case which has been heard and decided is not contempt.

- **Contempt of Courts (Amendment) Act, 2006:** The statute of 1971 has been amended by the Contempt of Courts (Amendment) Act, 2006 to include the defence of truth under Section 13 of the original legislation.

- **Section 13** that already served to restrict the powers of the court in that they were not to hold anyone in contempt unless it would substantially interfere with the due process of justice, the amendment further states that the court must permit 'justification by truth as a valid defence if it is satisfied that it is in public interest and the request for invoking the said defence is bona fide.'

Agriculture Crop Insurance Schemes

- **TheComptroller and Auditor General (CAG)** submitted a reporton the 'Performance of Agriculture Crop Insurance Schemes' onJuly21, 2017.The reportexamines the performances of crop insurance schemes in nine states, between the period 2011-12 and 2015-16.

- **These schemes** include the National Agriculture Insurance Scheme(NAIS), the Modified National Agriculture Insurance Scheme(MNAIS), andthe Weather Based Crop Insurance Programme(WBCIP).

- **Crop insurance schemes** aim to provide insurance cover to farmers against yield losses. The Department of Agriculture, Cooperation and Farmers' Welfare is responsible for implementing the schemes. The Agriculture Insurance Company of India (AIC) and private insurance companies are the implementing agencies of the schemes. Key findings and recommendations of the auditreport include:

- **Coverage of farmers:** The CAG noted that the number of farmers covered under the scheme was low when compared to the population of farmers as per Census 2011. Share of farmers covered under all schemes ranged between 8% to 22% of the total farmers, between Kharifand Rabicrop from 2011 to 2016. The CAG noted that under NAIS, which provides subsidy for small and marginal farmers, coverage ranged between 2% to 13%.The CAG recommended that effective measures need to be taken by the Department of Agriculture Cooperation and Farmers' Welfare to ensure coverage of a larger number of farmers, including both with and without loans.

- **Data on beneficiary farmers:** The CAG noted that data on beneficiary farmers was not maintained by the AIC, and the central and state governments. Further, schemes like MNAIS and WBCIS, do not require the central and state government to maintain databases of insured farmers. The CAG recommended that the central and state governments should maintain databases of beneficiary farmers for monitoring and implementation purposes.

- **Delays in processes:** The CAG noted that while the Department of Agriculture Cooperation and Farmers' Welfare released their share of funds on time, delays in were observed in release of share from state governments. Further, CAG observed delays in: (i) the issue of notificationsof crops and area coveredand receipt of yield data by the states, (ii) processing of claims by the implementing agencies and (iii) receipt of declarationand disbursements of claims from banks. The CAG recommended that effective measures needto be taken by the Department to ensure that timelines are met by state governments, implementing agencies and banks.

- **Verification of claims** by private insurance companies:The CAG noted that the AIC failed to verify the claims submitted by the private insurance companies before releasing funds under the MNAIS and the WBCIS. The guidelines released by the Department of Agriculture and Farmers' Welfare specify that funds can be released to private insurance companieson submission of: (i) statistics of claims covered with a certificate from the respective state government, and (ii) a random verification of scheme coverage.

- **The CAG recommended** that the Department should ensure that payments to private insurance companies are made only after verification of claims.Noting that private insurance companies receive large amount of funds under these schemes, the CAG also recommended that there needs to be a provision for audit of such companies by the CAG.

- **Savings under NAIS:** Savings under NAIS may arise due to difference between premium collected and claims payable by the AIC. The CAGnoted that theguidelines of NAIS donotaddress utilisation of such savings under the scheme. Savings of Rs2,519 crore (18% of the premium collected) were retained by the AIC, between 1999-2000 Rabi crop season and 2015-16 Rabi crop season.

- **In this context,** the CAGrecommended that themanner in which such savingswill be dealt with, should be taken up by theDepartment of Agriculture Cooperation and Farmers' Welfare, Ministry of Finance and the AIC. ▪ Monitoringof the schemes:The CAG noted that the monitoring of schemes by the implementing agencies and the central and state governments, was poor.

- **The CAG observed that** a technical support unit to monitor the scheme was not set up. Further, periodic appraisal reports of the schemes were not prepared by the Department of Agriculture Cooperation and Farmers' Welfare. The CAGrecommended that the central and state governments need to ensure that the schemes are monitored at all level

United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNISDR)

- **The workshop aims to** i) identify good practices of disaster risk management in key infrastructure sectors, ii) identify specific areas and pathways for collaborative research on DRI (Transport, Energy, Telecom and Water), iii) discuss and co-create the broad contours of the Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure (CDRI) as well as a notional roll-out plan for the next three years, and iv) build a forum for members to work on areas of common interest and make specific commitments.

- **About UNISDR:** The United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNISDR), created in December 1999, is the successor to the secretariat of the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction. It was established to ensure the implementation of the International Strategy for Disaster Reduction.

- **It is part of the United Nations** Secretariat and its functions span the social, economic, environmental as well as humanitarian fields. Functions: UNISDR supports the implementation, follow-up and review of the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction adopted by the Third UN World Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction on 18 March 2015 in Sendai, Japan.

- **UNISDR's vision is anchored on the four priorities for action set out in the Sendai Framework:** Understanding disaster risk. Strengthening disaster risk governance to manage disaster risk. Investing in disaster risk reduction for resilience. Enhancing disaster preparedness for effective response and to "Build Back Better" in recovery, rehabilitation and reconstruction.

- **About Sendai Framework:** The "Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030" was adopted during the Third UN World Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction held in Sendai, Japan in March, 2015.

- **Key features of the Sendai framework:** It is the first major agreement of the post-2015 development agenda, with seven targets and four priorities for action. It was endorsed by the UN General Assembly following the 2015 Third UN World Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction (WCDRR).

- **The Framework** is for 15-year. It is a voluntary and non-binding agreement which recognizes that the State has the primary role to reduce disaster risk but that responsibility should be shared with other stakeholders including local government, the private sector and other stakeholders.

- **The new Framework** is the successor instrument to the Hyogo Framework for Action (HFA) 2005-2015: Building the Resilience of Nations and Communities to Disasters.

Kisan Urja Suraksha evam Utthaan Mahaabhiyan or KUSUM scheme

- **About KUSUM scheme:** What is it? It is a ☐1.4 lakh-crore scheme for promoting decentralised solar power production of up to 28,250 MW to help farmers. Benefits: It would provide extra income to farmers, by giving them an option to sell additional power to the grid through solar power projects set up on their barren lands. It would help in de-dieselising the sector as also the DISCOMS.

- **Components of the scheme:** The components of the scheme include building 10,000 MW solar plants on barren lands and providing sops to DISCOMS to purchase the electricity produced, 'solarising' existing pumps of 7250 MW as well as government tube wells with a capacity of 8250 MW and distributing 17.5 lakh solar pumps. The 60% subsidy on the solar pumps provided to farmers will be shared between the Centre and the States while 30% would be provided through bank loans. The balance cost has to be borne by the farmers.

- **Significance of the scheme:** Expected positive outcomes of the scheme include promotion of decentralised solar power production, reduction of transmission losses as well as providing support to the financial health of DISCOMs by reducing the subsidy burden to the agriculture sector. The scheme would also promote energy efficiency and water conservation and provide water security to farmers.

- **The proposed scheme provides for:** Setting up of grid-connected renewable power plants each of 500KW to 2 MW in the rural area. Installation of standalone off-grid solar water pumps to fulfil irrigation needs of farmers not connected to grid. Solarization of existing grid-connected agriculture pumps to make farmers independent of grid supply and also sell surplus solar power generated to Discom and get extra income.

Appointment of Lokpal

- **Highlights of the Lokpal Act of 2013:** The Act allows setting up of anti-corruption ombudsman called Lokpal at the Centre and Lokayukta at the State-level. Composition: The Lokpal will consist of a chairperson and a maximum of eight members. Applicability: The Lokpal will cover all categories of public servants, including the Prime Minister. But the armed forces do not come under the ambit of Lokpal.

- **The Act also** incorporates provisions for attachment and confiscation of property acquired by corrupt means, even while the prosecution is pending. The States will have to institute Lokayukta within one year of the commencement of the Act. The Act also ensures that public servants who act as whistleblowers are protected.

- **Who can become the Chairperson?** The person who is to be appointed as the chairperson of the Lokpal should be either of the following: Either the former Chief Justice of India Or the former Judge of Supreme Court Or an eminent person with impeccable integrity and outstanding ability, having special knowledge and expertise of minimum 25 years in the matters relating to anti-corruption policy, public administration, vigilance, finance including insurance and banking, law and management.

- **Who can become a member?** Out of the maximum eight members, half will be judicial members. Minimum fifty per cent of the Members will be from SC / ST / OBC / Minorities and women. The judicial member of the Lokpal should be either a former Judge of the Supreme Court or a former Chief Justice of a High Court. The non-judicial member should be an eminent person with impeccable integrity and outstanding ability, having special knowledge and expertise of minimum 25 years in the matters relating to anti-corruption policy, public administration, vigilance, finance including insurance and banking, law and management.

- **Who cannot become the chairperson?** The following persons cannot become chairperson of Lokpal: MPs and MLAs Persons convicted of any offense involving moral turpitude Less than 45 years of age, Members of Panchayats or Municipality, A person who was removed or dismissed from the public service, A person who holds any office of trust / profit; if so, he would need to resign from Lokpal. A person who is affiliated to a political party Carries on some business / profession; if so, he would need to quit some business.

- **Term of Office:** The term of office for Lokpal Chairman and Members is 5 years or till attaining age of 70 years. The salary, allowances and other conditions of service of chairperson are equivalent to Chief Justice of India and members is equivalent to Judge of Supreme Court. If the person is already getting the pension (for being a former judge), the equivalent pension amount will be deducted from the salary.

- **The source of salary** for Lokpal and Members is Consolidated Fund of India. If the chairperson dies in office or has resigned from the post, President can authorise the senior-most Member to act as the Chairperson until new chairperson is appointed. If chairperson is not available for certain functions due to leave, his job will be done by senior most member.

- **Powers:** The Lokpal will have the power of superintendence and direction over any investigation agency including CBI for cases referred to them by the ombudsman.

- **As per the Act,** the Lokpal can summon or question any public servant if there exists a prima facie case against the person, even before an investigation agency (such as vigilance or CBI) has begun the probe. Any officer of the CBI investigating a case referred to it by the Lokpal, shall not be transferred without the approval of the Lokpal.

- **An investigation** must be completed within six months. However, the Lokpal or Lokayukta may allow extensions of six months at a time provided the reasons for the need of such extensions are given in writing. Special courts will be instituted to conduct trials on cases referred by Lokpal.

- **Ambit of the Lokpal:** For a wide range of public servants from the PM, ministers and MPs, to groups A, B, C and D employees of the central government various rules are in place. If a complaint is filed against the PM, the Act says, "Lokpal shall inquire or cause an inquiry to be conducted into any matter involved in, or arising from, or connected with, any allegation of corruption made in a complaint".

- **However**, certain conditions will apply. The Act does not allow a Lokpal inquiry if the allegation against the PM relates to international relations, external and internal security, public order, atomic energy and space. Also, complaints against the PM are not to be probed unless the full Lokpal bench considers the initiation of an inquiry and at least two-thirds of the members approve it.

- **Such an inquiry** against the Prime Minister (if conducted) is to be held in camera and if the Lokpal comes to the conclusion that the complaint deserves to be dismissed, the records of the inquiry are not to be published or made available to anyone.

- **Lokpal itself is also subjected to the Law:** The Act also includes the Lokpal's own members under the definition of "public servant". The Chairperson, Members, officers and other employees of the Lokpal shall be deemed, when acting or purporting to act in pursuance of any of the provisions of this Act to be public servants. It shall apply to public servants in and outside India. It clarifies that a complaint under this Act shall only relate to a period during which the public servant was holding or serving in that capacity.

Sary-Arka-Antiterror 2019- SCO joint anti- terrorism exercise

- **Other outcomes of RATS council meeting:** Chaired by Russia, the meeting also declared plans to hold the first stage of the joint border operation "Solidarity 2019-2021," the 7th meeting of the heads of the border services, and training workshops on identifying and preventing the use of the Internet for terrorist, separatist and extremist purposes.

- **What is RATS?** RATS, established in 2004, is a permanent organ of the SCO which serves to promote cooperation of member states against the three evils of terrorism, separatism and extremism. It is headquartered in Tashkent.

- **About SCO:** What is it? The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, also known as the Shanghai Pact, is a Eurasian political, economic, and military organisation which was founded in 2001 in Shanghai by the leaders of China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. Apart from Uzbekistan, the other five countries have been a part of the Shanghai 5 since 1996. The cooperation was renamed to Shanghai Cooperation Organisation after Uzbekistan joined the organisation in 2001.

- **New members: India and Pakistan joined SCO as full members in June 2017 in Astana, Kazakhstan.** The SCO's main goals are: strengthening mutual trust and neighbourliness among the member states; promoting their effective cooperation in politics, trade, the economy, research, technology and culture, as well as in education, energy, transport, tourism, environmental protection, and other areas; making joint efforts to maintain and ensure peace, security and stability in the region; and moving towards the establishment of a democratic, fair and rational new international political and economic order.

Govt.'s prerogative to frame schemes: SC

- **Background**: SC has criticised the Uttarakhand High Court for framing a scheme to regularize hundreds of casual workers engaged by the Border Roads Organisation (BRO) in the construction of roads for Char Dham Yatra pilgrimage.

- **Important observations made by SC:** It is not the function of the courts to frame any scheme but it is the sole prerogative of the government to do it. All that the High Court, in exercise of its extraordinary power under Article 226 of the Constitution, can do is to direct the government to consider framing an appropriate scheme.

- **Such directions** to the government to consider framing a scheme should be with regard to the facts and circumstances of each case. It is only in exceptional cases when the court considers it proper, should it issue appropriate mandatory directions, the Supreme Court held.

- **Need of the hour:** The line between Judicial activism and Judicial Overreach is very narrow. In simple terms, when Judicial activism crosses its limits and becomes Judicial adventurism it is known as Judicial Overreach. When the judiciary oversteps the powers given to it, it may interfere with the proper functioning of the legislative or executive organs of government. Judicial Overreach destroys the spirit of separation of powers.

Hayabusa2

- **Hayabusa:** In mid-September 2005, Hayabusa landed on the asteroid Itokawa, and managed to collect samples in the form of grains of asteroidal material. It returned to Earth with the samples in June 2010, thereby becoming the first spacecraft to return asteroid samples to Earth for analysis.

- **Hayabusa2:** It is an asteroid sample-return mission operated by the Japanese space agency, JAXA. It was launched on 3 December 2014 and rendezvoused with near-Earth asteroid 162173 Ryugu on 27 June 2018.

- **It is in the** process of surveying the asteroid for a year and a half, departing in December 2019, and returning to Earth in December 2020. Hayabusa2 carries multiple science payloads for remote sensing, sampling, and four small rovers that will investigate the asteroid surface to inform the environmental and geological context of the samples collected.

- **The scientific objectives of Hayabusa2 mission are twofold:** To characterize the asteroid from remote sensing observations (with multispectral cameras, near-infrared spectrometer, thermal infrared imager, laser altimeter) on a macroscopic scale To analyse the samples returned from the asteroid on a microscopic scale.

- **What is the significance of the mission?** Ryugu is a C-type asteroid – a relic from the early days of the Solar System. Scientists think that C-type asteroids contain both organic matter, and trapped water, and might have been responsible for bringing both to Earth, thereby providing the planet with the materials necessary for life to originate.

Africa-India Field Training Exercise-2019:

- **Context:** The inaugural Africa-India Field Training Exercise-2019 for India and African nations called AFINDEX-19 is being held at Aundh Military Station, Pune.

- **The aim of** the exercise is to practice the participating nations in planning and conduct of Humanitarian Mine Assistance and Peace Keeping Operations under Chapter VII of United Nations Peace Keeping Operations.

Parrotfish in Andaman:

- **Context:** Fishing and coral reef degradation threaten parrotfish in Andaman. New study says presence of a protected area, live coral and algal cover, significantly influences distribution and abundance of the specie.

- **Bumphead parrotfish** (Bolbometopon muricatum), is an important component of coral reef ecosystem, but is highly endangered globally. It is categorized as 'vulnerable' in the Red List of the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN).

- **Threats:** This fish is a highly prized resource, but is threatened due to limited knowledge about its distribution and abundance in Indian waters.

- **Need of the hour:** Ban night fishing for the species and implement regulations regarding reef fishing. Considering the vulnerable status of Bumphead parrotfish globally, the species could be a flagship for educational campaigns focusing on the importance of conserving similar fish groups and protecting the coral reefs.

The death penalty: a fatal margin of error:

- **Context:** SC found Khushwinder Singh guilty and befitting of the death sentence (Khushwinder Singh v. State of Punjab). The last time the death penalty was upheld by the Supreme Court was in July 2018 in the Delhi gang rape case. Since then, the court has acquitted 10 death row prisoners and reduced the sentence to life imprisonment of 23 others.

- **What's the issue?** The judgment highlights the processes that cause cases to slip through the cracks of the 'rarest of the rare' doctrine, which mandates a consideration of both the crime and the criminal. The judgment exemplifies the varied standards of legal representation that impacts the imposition of the death penalty.

- **Things to be considered while awarding death sentence:** Factors such as good conduct in custody, education, age, social, emotional and mental condition of the offender, and the possibility of reform need to be highlighted as relevant considerations in the sentencing scheme. Besides, other things such as grounds relating to the criminal such as his conduct in prison, his socio-economic and educational backgrounds, or the probability of reformation may be considered.

- **The need to abolish Death Penalty:** It unfairly targets poor and marginalised, that means, those without money & power. Executions occurred in around five cases for every 1 lakh murders and it looks quite arbitrary. It depends on judges personal beliefs. India's murder rate has declined continuously since 1991 and at present the lowest, except for 1963. Punishment should not imitate crime.

- **As per the** recent Death Penalty India Report by the National Law University, Delhi, the structural flaws in our criminal procedure and criminal justice system are most pronounced in death penalty cases. Most of the civilised world abolished it. Death penalty has not deterred terrorism, murder or even theft.

- **From 2000-2015**, Supreme Court imposed 60 death sentences and subsequently admitted that it had erred in 15 of them. So, it clearly admitted that it has arbitrarily imposed the most extreme punishment. The Police is not known for its probity or efficiency in our Country. Delays in the Criminal Justice System disproportionately affects those, who suffer the tyranny of the uncertainty of their life.

- **Need for review:** The inconsistent and arbitrary application of the death penalty remains a matter of great concern to the judiciary. The irreversibility of the death penalty has fundamentally affected the jurisprudence around it. It is commonly accepted that a judge in adversarial proceedings cannot go on a 'truth searching exploration' beyond what is presented. Yet, death penalty jurisprudence is rife with examples where duty has been placed upon the courts to elicit information relating to the question of sentence, even if none is adduced before it.

- **Way ahead:** Gradual abolition of the death penalty requires serious introspection from the court and the body politic. Our institutions may persist with attempts to 'tinker with the machinery of death' until there is a collective realisation that the death penalty is untenable in a fair criminal justice system. Till such time, the setting of established benchmarks for practice, and a system of oversight are necessary to ensure that the quality of legal representation does not become the difference between a sentence of life and death.

The International Financial Services Centres Authority Bill, 2019

- **The International Financial Services Centres Authority Bill, 2019** was introduced in Rajya Sabha by the Minister of Finance, Mr. Piyush Goyal, on February 12, 2019. The Bill provides for the establishment of an authority to develop and regulate the financial services market in the International Financial Services Centres set up in Special Economic Zones in India. Key features of the Bill include:

- **Coverage:** The Bill will apply to all International Financial Services Centres (IFSC) set up under the Special Economic Zones Act, 2005.

- **Constitution of the International Financial Services Centres Authority:** The Bill provides for the establishment of the International Financial Services Centres Authority. The Authority will consist of nine members, appointed by the central government. These posts will have a term of three years, subject to reappointment. Members of the Authority will include: (i) the Chairperson, (ii) four members to be nominated from the Reserve Bank of India, the Securities Exchange Board of India, the Insurance Regulatory and Development Authority of India, and the Pension Fund Regulatory and Development Authority, (iii) two members from amongst officials of the Ministry of Finance, and (iv) two members to be appointed on the recommendation of a Selection Committee.

- **Functions of the Authority:** Functions of the Authority include: (i) regulating financial products, financial services, and financial institutions in an IFSC which have been approved by any regulator (such as the RBI or SEBI), before the enactment of the Bill, (ii) regulating any other financial products, services, or institutions in an IFSC, which may be notified by the central government, and (iii) recommending to the central government, any other financial services, products, or institutions which may be permitted in an IFSC.

- **Further, all powers relating** to regulation of financial products, services, and institutions in IFSCs, which were previously exercised by the respective regulators will be exercised by the Authority. All processes and procedures to be followed by the Authority in respect of such regulation (such as, procedures for investigation of offences) will be identical to the provisions for these processes under the respective laws of the regulators.

- **Performance Review Committee:** Under the Bill, the Authority will constitute a Performance Review Committee to review the functioning of the Authority. The Committee will consist of at least two members of the Authority. The Committee will review whether: (i) the Authority has complied with the provisions of the applicable laws while exercising powers or performing functions, (ii) the regulations made by the Authority to promote transparency and best practices of governance, and (iii) the Authority is managing risks to its functioning in a reasonable manner.

- **Transaction in foreign currency:** As per the Bill, all transactions of financial services in IFSCs will be in such foreign currency as specified by the Authority, in consultation with the central government.

- **International Financial Services** Centres Authority Fund: The Bill sets up the International Financial Services Centres Authority Fund. The following amounts will be credited to the Fund: (i) all grants, fees and charges received by the Authority, and (ii) all sums received by the Authority from various sources, as decided by the central government.

GST Council

- **Why do we need a GST Council?** The GST council is the key decision-making body that will take all important decisions regarding the GST. The GST Council dictates tax rate, tax exemption, the due date of forms, tax laws, and tax deadlines, keeping in mind special rates and provisions for some states. The predominant responsibility of the GST Council is to ensure to have one uniform tax rate for goods and services across the nation.

- **How is the GST Council structured?** The Goods and Services Tax (GST) is governed by the GST Council. Article 279 (1) of the amended Indian Constitution states that the GST Council has to be constituted by the President within 60 days of the commencement of the Article 279A.

- **According** to the article, GST Council will be a joint forum for the Centre and the States. It consists of the following members: The Union Finance Minister will be the Chairperson. Member – the Union Minister of State in charge of Revenue or Finance. The Minister in charge of finance or taxation or any other Minister nominated by each State government, as members.

- **GST Council recommendations:** Article 279A (4) specifies that the Council will make recommendations to the Union and the States on the important issues related to GST, like the goods and services that may be subjected or exempted from GST, model GST Laws, principles that govern Place of Supply, threshold limits etc.

Special Stamp on Ice Stupa released

- **The special** stamps aim to create awareness about depleting glaciers and affect the ecology around the Himalayas.

- **Why are Ice stupas being built?** The idea behind artificial glaciers is to freeze and hold the water that keeps flowing and wasting away down the streams and into the rivers throughout the winter. Instead, this ice will melt in the springtime, just when the fields need watering.

- **The idea of the Ice** Stupa project was conceptualised by HIAL founder Sonam Wangchuk to reduce problems of Ladakhi farmers in spring.

- **How does it look?** This is achieved by freezing the stream water vertically in the form of huge ice towers or cones of 30 to 50m height that look very similar to the local sacred mud structures called Stupa or Chorten. These ice mountains can be built right next to the village itself where the water is needed. Very little effort or investment would be needed except for laying one underground pipeline from a higher point on the stream to the outskirts of the village.

- **How it works?** Water always maintains its level. Therefore, water piped from 60m upstream would easily rise close to 60m up from ground when it reaches the village. Water is made to fall from that height in cold Ladakhi winter nights when it is -30 to -50°C outside (with wind chill factor). The water would freeze by the time it reaches the ground and slowly form a huge cone or Ice Stupa roughly 30 to 50m high.

- **Since these** ice cones extend vertically upwards towards the sun, they receive fewer of the sun's rays per the volume of water stored; hence, they will take much longer to melt compared to an artificial glacier of the same volume formed horizontally on a flat surface.

- **Significance:** The Ice Stupa is a survival technique that has been developed over a period. Each stupa has the capacity to store at least 30-50 lakh litres of water. This is apart from the naturally saved water in the slopes of mountains.

The Mizoram Maintenance of Household Registers Bill, 2019

- **Key features:** It aims to create registers containing the names, details and photographs of every resident of the state, on a household basis, in an effort to detect illegal foreigners staying and "eating away" benefits of development schemes.

- **As per the Bill**, it shall be the responsibility of every householder as well as every member of household in the state to furnish all such information, particulars and passport-size photographs of the members of the household as may be required by the registering authorities,"

- **Once the information** prescribed by the state government is received, the concerned registering authority will compile the details in two distinct registers- one for the citizen residents and another for non-citizen residents of a village/area/town.

- **Information** furnished by individuals for the registers would be "verified and counter-signed by the president of the local branch of the state-level NGOs as may be designated by the state government from time to time".

- **The Bill** says that all government departments and police may use the household registers for administrative purposes, during implementation of development schemes and law enforcement.

- **It defines** "citizens" as a person registered as such, or having requisite qualification as prescribed under the Citizenship Act, 1955.

- **What necessitated this?** Influx of foreigners into Mizoram through its porous borders has remained a serious concern for several decades. In many cases the benefit of development and welfare programmes are found eaten away to a large extent by such foreigners who clandestinely stayed back and got assimilated in the people of the state by taking advantage of the mistaken identity and of difficulties in detecting them.

- **Large scale** influx of foreigners and their malafide assimilation with the permanent residents in the villages of Mizoram has led to an "abnormal increase in the population" and poses a law and order threat.

Salient features of the Representation of People's Act.

- **Section 33(7) of the Representation of People's Act Provisions in this regard- Section 33(7) of RPA:** Section 33(7) of the Representation of People's Act permits a candidate to contest any election (Parliamentary, State Assembly, Biennial Council, or bye-elections) from up to two constituencies. The provision was introduced in 1996 prior to which there was no bar on the number of constituencies from which a candidate could contest.

- **Why candidates should be barred from contesting from more than one seat?** One person, one vote & one candidate, one constituency is the dictum of democracy. However, as per the law, as it stands today, a person can contest the election for the same office from two constituencies simultaneously.

- **When a candidate** contests from two seats, it is imperative that he has to vacate one of the two seats if he wins both. This, apart from the consequent unavoidable financial burden on the public exchequer, government manpower and other resources for holding bye-election is also an injustice to the voters of the constituency which the candidate is quitting from.

- **Alternative suggested by the Election commission:** The ECI has alternatively suggested that if existing provisions are retained then the candidate contesting from two seats should bear the cost of the bye-election to the seat that the contestant decides to vacate in the event of his/her winning both seats. The amount in such an event could be Rs 5 lakh for assembly election and Rs 10 lakh for parliament election.

- **SC's views:** The Supreme Court had in December 2017 issued notices seeking replies from the Election Commission and the Centre on the issue. At the time, the Supreme Court had said the practice of one candidate contesting multiple seats was a drain on the exchequer since it necessitated bypolls. A petition has also been filed in the Supreme Court challenging Section 33(7).

Indian Forest Act amendment

- **Highlights of the draft:** The amendment defines community as "a group of persons specified on the basis of government records living in a specific locality and in joint possession and enjoyment of common property resources, without regard to race, religion, caste, language and culture".

- **Forest is defined to include** "any government or private or institutional land recorded or notified as forest/forest land in any government record and the lands managed by government/community as forest and mangroves, and also any land which the central or state government may by notification declare to be forest for the purpose of this Act."

- **While the preamble of IFA**, 1927, said the Act was focused on laws related to transport of forest produce and the tax on it, the amendment has increased the focus to "conservation, enrichment and sustainable management of forest resources and matters connected therewith to safeguard ecological stability to ensure provision of ecosystem services in perpetuity and to address the concerns related to climate change and international commitments".

- **Increased role of states:** The amendments say if the state government, after consultation with the central government, feels that the rights under FRA will hamper conservation efforts, then the state "may commute such rights by paying such persons a sum of money in lieu thereof, or grant of land, or in such other manner as it thinks fit, to maintain the social organisation of the forest dwelling communities or alternatively set out some other forest tract of sufficient extent, and in a locality reasonably convenient, for the purpose of such forest dwellers".

- **The amendment** also introduces a new category of forests — production forest. These will be forests with specific objectives for production of timber, pulp, pulpwood, firewood, non-timber forest produce, medicinal plants or any forest species to increase production in the country for a specified period.

- **Indian Forest Act, 1927:** The Indian Forest Act, 1927 was largely based on previous Indian Forest Acts implemented under the British. The most famous one was the Indian Forest Act of 1878.

- **Both the 1878 act** and the 1927 one sought to consolidate and reserve the areas having forest cover, or significant wildlife, to regulate movement and transit of forest produce, and duty leviable on timber and other forest produce.

- **It also defines** the procedure to be followed for declaring an area to be a Reserved Forest, a Protected Forest or a Village Forest. It defines what a forest offence is, what are the acts prohibited inside a Reserved Forest, and penalties leviable on violation of the provisions of the Act.

- **The need for review:** Many reports like the MB Shah report of 2010 and the TSR Subramanian report of 2015, have talked about amending the IFA.

Permanent status to Finance Commission

- **Need for permanent status:** Finance commissions have over the past several decades adopted different approaches with regard to principles of tax devolution, grants to be given to states and fiscal consolidation issues. In other words, there has to be continuity and change between finance commissions.

- **There is a need to** ensure broad consistency between Finance Commissions so that there is some degree of certainty in the flow of funds, especially to the states. This has become even more critical in the post GST scenario.

- **If it is given permanent status**, the Commission can function as a leaner entity in the intervening period till the next Finance Commission is set up in a full-fledged manner. During the intervening period, it can also address issues arising from implementation of the recommendations of the finance commission.

India-Indonesia Coordinated Patrol (Ind-Indo Corpat):

- **Context:** 33rd Edition of India-Indonesia Coordinated Patrol (Ind-Indo Corpat) Commences at Port Blair.

- **The 33rd IND-INDO CORPAT**, also coinciding with 70 years of India-Indonesia diplomatic ties, will contribute towards the Indian Navy's efforts to consolidate inter-operability and forge strong bonds of friendship across the seas.

- **Significance: The IND-INDO** CORPAT Series of bilaterals seek to underscore India's peaceful presence and solidarity with friendly Maritime neighbouring countries to ensure good order in the maritime domain, consolidate interoperability and strengthen existing bonds of friendship between India and Indonesia.

Indo-Sri Lanka joint Exercise Mitra shakti-VI:

- **Exercise MITRA SHAKTI** is conducted annually as part of military diplomacy and interaction between armies of India & Sri Lanka.

- **The aim of the exercise** is to build and promote close relations between armies of both the countries and to enhance ability of joint exercise commander to take military contingents of both nations under command.

G.B. Pant National Institute of Himalayan Environment & Sustainable Development:

- **It was established** in 1988-89, during the birth centenary year of Bharat Ratna Pt. Govind Ballabh Pant.

- **It is an autonomous** Institute of the Ministry of Environment, Forest & Climate Change (MoEF&CC), Govt. of India.

- **It has been** identified as a focal agency to advance scientific knowledge, to evolve integrated management strategies, demonstrate their efficacy for conservation of natural resources, and to ensure environmentally sound development in the entire Indian Himalayan Region (IHR).

U.S. Mathematician Becomes First Woman To Win Abel Prize, 'Math's Nobel':

- **Context:** The Abel Prize in mathematics was awarded to Karen Uhlenbeck of the U.S. for her work on partial differential equations, the first woman to win the award.

- **About Abel Prize:** It is a Norwegian prize awarded annually by the King of Norway to one or more outstanding mathematicians. The prize is named after the 19th century Norwegian mathematician Niels Henrik Abel.

- **It was established** by the Norwegian government in 2002 on the occasion of the 200th anniversary of Niels Henrik Abel's birth.

- **The main objective** of the Abel Prize is to recognize pioneering scientific achievements in mathematics. The prize comes with a cheque for $7,03,000.

How J&K Presidential Orders have worked?

- **Context:** Weeks after President Ram Nath Kovind has issued an executive order amending The Constitution (Application to Jammu and Kashmir) Order, 1954 to extend the provisions of the 77th and 103rd Amendments to the state, the Centre's move has been challenged in the Jammu & Kashmir High Court.

- **What's the issue?** The executive order was issued on March 1, the day after the Union Cabinet approved the proposal of the J&K Governor's administration to amend the 1954 Order. The Centre said the amendment "will give benefit of promotion in service to the Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and also extend the 10 per cent reservation for economically weaker sections in educational institutions and public employment".

- **The latest order** has the consent of the Governor without the requisite aid and advice of the Council of Ministers. In a situation of Central rule, the Governor acts only as a nominee of the Union government and does not meet the definition of state government as laid down by Article 370 and the Supreme Court.

- **Major J&K parties** have always opposed the amendments to the 1954 Order without ratification by the Constituent Assembly of the state. The Centre could do it because the SC allowed it. The opposition in J&K has been to the route taken by the Centre, and not to the laws themselves.

- **How is J&K governed?** J&K negotiated the terms of its entry into the Indian Union. When Maharaja Hari Singh signed the Instrument of Accession on October 26, 1947, J&K gave up control over only three subjects: Defence, Foreign Affairs, Communications. A separate Constituent Assembly of J&K was planned to frame the J&K Constitution, and to work out J&K's constitutional relationship with New Delhi.

- **Under Article 370**, which was part of the Indian Constitution at its commencement on January 26, 1950, only two articles apply to J&K: Article 1, which defines India, and Article 370 itself. Article 370 provides that other provisions of the Indian Constitution can apply to J&K "subject to such exceptions and modifications as the President may by order specify", and with the concurrence of the state government.

- **Role of state government:** State government was defined as "the person for the time being recognised by the President as the Maharaja of Jammu and Kashmir acting on the advice of the Council of Ministers for the time being in office". The decisions to extend the provisions of the Indian Constitution other than those specified in the Instrument of Accession, however, had to be ratified by the J&K Constituent Assembly.

- **The 1954 Presidential Order:** But the J&K Constituent Assembly was yet to be set up, and the Centre wanted to extend a few provisions of the Constitution to streamline J&K's relationship with the Union. Thus, a Presidential Order was issued on January 26, 1950 itself, with the state government's concurrence. On November 5, 1951, J&K's Constituent Assembly was convened.

- **The 1950 Order** was replaced by The Constitution (Application to Jammu and Kashmir) Order, 1954. This Order, while applying to J&K provisions of Part-III of the Indian Constitution that relates to fundamental rights, introduced Article 35A — which protected laws passed by the state legislature of J&K in respect of permanent residents from any challenge on the ground that they violated any of the fundamental rights.

- **This order** was ratified by the Constituent Assembly that also framed the J&K Constitution, before dispersing on November 17, 1956.

- **Through these** Presidential orders, successive central governments have extended 94 out of the 97 entries in the Union List, and 26 out of the 47 in the Concurrent List to J&K, and made 260 out of the 395 Articles of the Indian Constitution applicable to J&K. This list does not include The Securitisation and Reconstruction of Financial Assets and Enforcement of Securities Interest (SARFAESI) Act, 2002, the GST Acts, and the two constitutional provisions that were extended on March 1.

- **Views of the Supreme Court in various cases:** Prem Nath Kaul vs The State Of Jammu & Kashmir (1959)- relationship should be finally determined by the Constituent Assembly of the State itself.

- **Sampat Prakash** vs State Of Jammu & Kashmir, 1969- Presidential orders could still be made through Article 370.

- **Mohd Maqbool Damnoo** vs State Of Jammu And Kashmir, 1972- upheld and highlighted the importance of state government.

Women's Healthcare: Policy Options- The Committee on Empowerment of Women (Chairperson: Bijoya Chakravarty)

- **Synergy between the central and state policies:** The Committee noted that synergy between the central and state policies will bring changes in women's healthcare. For example, the Committee observed that transportation of expectant mothers to the nearest delivery points still remains a hard task in view of (i) difficult geographical terrains, (ii) lack of transportation facilities, (iii) natural calamities, (iv) security threats, curfews, hartals, among others. In this regard, the Committee recommended that the central government must discuss with states to build 'pre-delivery hubs', preferably close to the delivery points to take care of such transportation issues. Further, it observed that such hubs would help reduce the out-of-pocket expenses of poor and marginalised families and also reduce maternal deaths.

- **Functioning of Rastriya Swasthya Bima Yojana:** Rastriya Swasthya Bima Yojana (RSBY) is an insurance scheme for the below poverty line families as well as certain categories of unorganised workers. It aims to reduce their out-of-pocket expenditures on health and increase their access to healthcare facilities. The Committee noted the following issues with RSBY's implementation: (i) exploitation of poor beneficiaries at the hands of private hospitals empanelled under RSBY (in the form of avoidable surgeries, wrong diagnosis, etc.), (ii) low enrolment percentage of households under RSBY indicating lack of awareness among the targeted population, and (iii) varied feedback with regard to quality and accessibility of hospitals. The Committee recommended a mechanism for oversight across all the districts in the country where RSBY is implemented. Further, the Committee also recommended that data pertaining to RSBY be made freely available on public platforms.

- **Demand for Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHA):** ASHA workers provide support in tracking the health of pregnant women, help them avail benefits (such as Janani Suraksha Yojana entitlements), and aid the grassroot implementation of health programmes. The Committee noted that ASHA workers across the country do not have fixed wages and that they have demanded a fixed wage component within their remuneration in many states. In this context, the Committee recommended a proposal for assured monthly wages not less than Rs 3,000. Further, the Committee also highlighted other issues regarding the training of ASHAs such as dearth of competent trainers, infrastructure, and equipment.

- **Need for food fortification:** The Committee noted prevalence of anaemia among women in rural areas to be worse than in urban areas. This is despite the implementation of National Food Security Act, 2013, Mid-Day Meal scheme, and the Public Distribution System. In this context, the Committee observed that the government priority has been on the issue of increasing the availability of food alone, rather than ensuring nutritional aspects of it, through approaches like food fortification. The Committee recommended that fortification of cereals with iron must be taken up with priority since (i) it does not alter the quality and nature of foods, (ii) can be introduced quickly, and (iii) can produce nutritional benefits for populations in a short period of time.

- **Unsafe abortions:** The Committee stated that unsafe abortion is a leading reason for the high percentage of abortion related deaths in the country (eight percent of all maternal deaths per year). It observed that the reasons for it could be the following: (i) awareness about abortion being low, and (ii) women must seek legal recourse if the pregnancy has gone over 20 weeks to terminate the pregnancy; however, a slow judicial process ensures that the pregnancy crosses the legal limit and the woman is unable to get the abortion done, thus, pushing her to the quacks in both rural and urban areas. The Committee recommended amending the Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act, 1971 to raise the permissible period of abortions to 24 weeks with this bar not applying to unborn babies having serious abnormalities. Further, it recommended removing the provision where only married women can get an abortion thereby allowing anyone to get an abortion.

- **Mental health of women:** The Committee noted that due to societal stigma and ignorance, mental illnesses suffered by women fail to get recognised. In this regard, the Committee recommended creating awareness and providing possible remedies to help de-stigmatise mental health issues.

Worldwide Cost of Living 2019

- **The Survey** compares more than 400 individual prices across 160 products and services in cities around the world.

- **Key findings:** For the first time three cities share the title of the world's most expensive city – Singapore, Hong Kong and Paris. Living costs in all three cities are 7% higher than in New York, the benchmark city.

- **In this year's top 10**, Singapore represents the only city that has maintained its ranking from the previous year. Singapore marks its sixth straight year at the top of the rankings.

- **Unsurprisingly,** the cheapest cities to live in were largely made up of those experiencing well-documented political or economic disruption (or both in same cases).

- **Caracas, Venezuela's** capital was at the very bottom of the list this year, a position previously occupied by war-torn Syria in Damascus for obvious reasons.

- **Deteriorating** economic conditions in Venezuela and hyperinflation are at the root of its downward-trending position down the list.

International Air Transport Association

- **Significance:** The membership will allow SpiceJet to explore and grow its collaborations with international member airlines of the IATA grouping through interlining and code shares. It will also enable the low cost carrier in seamlessly expanding its network options for its passengers in future.

- **About IATA:** What is it? The International Air Transport Association (IATA) is the trade association for the world's airlines, representing some 280 airlines or 83% of total air traffic. Formed in April 1945, it is the successor to the International Air Traffic Association, which was formed in 1919.

- **What it does?** IATA supports airline activity and helps formulate industry policy and standards. It also provides consulting and training services in many areas crucial to aviation.

- **Headquarters:** It is headquartered in Montreal, Quebec, Canada with Executive Offices in Geneva, Switzerland.

World Happiness Report

- **Key findings:** The list is topped by Finland for the second year in a row. The US ranks at 19th place despite being one of the richest countries in the world.

- **India figures** at 140th place, seven spots down from last year. People in war-torn South Sudan are the most unhappy with their lives.

- **About World Happiness Report:** The World Happiness Report is a landmark survey of the state of global happiness that ranks 156 countries by how happy their citizens perceive themselves to be.

- **It is released** by the Sustainable Development Solutions Network for the United Nations by the UN General Assembly. It ranks the countries of the world on the basis of questions primarily from the Gallup World Poll.

- **How is it measured?** It is based on a questionnaire which measures 14 areas within its core questions: (1) business & economic, (2) citizen engagement, (3) communications & technology, (4) diversity (social issues), (5) education & families, (6) emotions (well-being), (7) environment & energy, (8) food & shelter, (9) government and politics, (10) law & order (safety), (11) health, (12) religion and ethics, (13) transportation, and (14) work. The results are then correlated with other factors, including GDP and social security.

- **Significance:** Happiness has come to be accepted as a goal of public policy. And this discourse has given a fillip to a new narrative where the interconnections between law, governance and happiness are being searched.

- **Experiences** from several nations confirm that the countries with higher GDP and higher per capita income are not necessarily the happiest countries and there exists a link between the state of happiness and rule of law.

Real Estate Investment Trust

- **What are REITs?** REITs are similar to mutual funds. While mutual funds provide for an opportunity to invest in equity stocks, REITs allow one to invest in income-generating real estate assets.

- **They are collective investment** vehicles that operate and manage property portfolios and give returns to investors. Securities and Exchange Board of India (Sebi) mandated that all REITS be listed on exchanges and make an initial public offer to raise money.

- **There are three types of REIT available:** equity REITs which purchase, own and manage income-generating properties; mortgage REITs which lend money directly or indirectly to real estate owners; and hybrid REITs which are a combination of the first two.

- **How does an REIT work?** REITs raise funds from a large number of investors and directly invest that sum in income-generating real estate properties (which could be offices, residential apartments, shopping centres, hotels and warehouses). The trusts are listed in stock exchanges so that investors can buy units in the trust. REITs are structured as trusts. Thus, the assets of an REIT are held by an independent trustee on behalf of unit holders.

- **Why is it important?** The Indian real estate sector has been facing a liquidity crunch on account of unsold inventory and low demand. REITs can help cash-strapped developers to monetise their existing property.

- **In real estate sector**, both rent and capital appreciation from property depend on the location, infrastructure and industrial development around that area. REITs juggle these risks through a diversified portfolio of properties.

- **REITs can** reduce the risk related to your property investments as 80 per cent of the value of the REIT should be in completed and rent-generating assets. They are required to be run by professional managements with specified years of experience notified by SEBI.

Pulsars

- **This pulsar** is dubbed PSR J0002+6216 (J0002 for short) and sports a radio-emitting tail pointing directly towards the expanding debris of a recent supernova explosion.

- **The Nasa** found the pulsar hurtling through space at nearly four million kilometres an hour. The speed of the pulsar in the space is so fast that it could travel the distance between the Earth and the Moon in just six minutes.

- **The discovery:** Pulsar J0002 was discovered in 2017 by a citizen-science project called Einstein@Home, which uses time on the computers of volunteers to process Fermi gamma-ray data.

- **Where is it located?** Located about 6,500 light years away in the constellation Cassiopeia, J0002 spins 8.7 times a second, producing a pulse of gamma rays with each rotation. The pulsar lies about 53 light years from the centre of a supernova remnant called CTB 1.

- **Its rapid motion** through interstellar gas results in shock waves that produce the tail of magnetic energy and accelerated particles detected at radio wavelengths using the Very Large Array (VLA).

- **What is a pulsar?** Pulsar is a celestial object that emits regular pulses of radio waves and other electromagnetic radiation at rates of up to one thousand pulses per second. Pulsars are superdense, rapidly spinning neutron stars left behind when a massive star explodes.

NASA's OSIRIS-Rex

- **Context:** NASA's OSIRIS-REx spacecraft has detected particle plumes ejecting off of the surface of asteroid Bennu. That makes Bennu an active asteroid that is regularly ejecting material into space, which is rare. This is the first time scientists have had close-up observations of particle plumes erupting from an asteroid's surface.

- **The particles** range from centimeters to 10s of centimeters, and some of them are slow-moving while others are quickly making their way through interstellar space. Some fall back onto the surface, while others go into orbit around it, like small satellites. The researchers don't currently understand why this is happening, but it poses no risk to the spacecraft.

- **Other findings:** OSIRIS-REx's instruments have confirmed that hydrated minerals, including magnetite, are abundant and widespread on the asteroid. The asteroid is full of valuable materials that may even contain clues about how life began. Bennu is essentially a leftover from the formation of our solar system billions of years ago, although some of the minerals inside it could be even older.

- **Significance:** OSIRIS-Rex is the first-ever US mission designed to visit an asteroid and return a sample of its dust back to Earth. The $800 million (roughly Rs. 5,600 crores) unmanned spaceship launched two years ago from Cape Canaveral, Florida and arrived December 3 at its destination, some 70 million miles (110 million kilometres) away.

- **What next?** The plan is for OSIRIS-REx to orbit Bennu, using a suite of five scientific instruments to map the asteroid in high resolution to help scientists decide precisely where to sample from.

- **Then, in 2020**, it will reach out with its robotic arm and touch the asteroid in a maneuver Rich Kuhns, OSIRIS-REx program manager with Lockheed Martin Space Systems in Denver, described as a "gentle high-five."

- **Using a circular device** much like a car's air filter, and a reverse vacuum to stir up and collect dust, the device aims to grab about two ounces (60 grams) of material from the asteroid's surface, and return it to Earth in 2023.

- **About the mission:** OSIRIS-Rex stands for Origins, Spectral Interpretation, Resource Identification, Security-Regolith Explorer.

- **OSIRIS-REx** is the third mission in NASA's New Frontiers program, which previously sent the New Horizons spacecraft zooming by Pluto and the Juno spacecraft into orbit around Jupiter.

- **Why was Bennu chosen?** Bennu was selected for a the OSIRIS-REx mission from over 500,000 known asteroids, due to it fitting a number of key criteria. These include:

- **Proximity to Earth:** In order for OSIRIS-REx to reach its destination in a reasonable timeframe, NASA needed to find an asteroid which had a similar orbit to Earth.

- **Size:** Small asteroids, those less than 200m in diameter, typically spin much faster than larger asteroids, meaning the regolith material can be ejected into space. Bennu is around 500m in diameter, so rotates slowly enough to ensure that the regolith stays on its surface.

- **Composition:** Bennu is a primitive asteroid, meaning it hasn't significantly changed since the beginning of the Solar System (over 4 billion years ago). It is also very carbon-rich, meaning it may contain organic molecules, which could have been precursors to life on Earth.

- **Additionally**, Bennu is of interest as it is a Potentially Hazardous Asteroid (PHA). Every 6 years, Bennu's orbit brings it within 200,000 miles of the Earth, which means it has a high probability of impacting Earth in the late 22nd Century.

Vernal Equinox

- **What is it?** The Vernal Equinox is a solar term with great balance. At the equinox, earth's two hemispheres are receiving the sun's rays equally. On the day of the vernal equinox, night and day are often said to be equal in length.

- **The equinox** is the moment in Earth's orbit when the sun appears to cross the celestial equator. It means longer and warmer days as the northern hemisphere begins to tilt towards the sun.

- **How do people celebrate it?** The vernal equinox also is the Persian New Year, known as Nowruz. For more than 300 million people worldwide it's the start of a monthlong celebration of new beginnings.

- **In Chichen Itza**, Mexico, thousands gather at the Kulkulkan pyramid. In the late afternoon, the sun creates a shadow that looks like a snake sliding down the northern staircase.

- **Holi**, a major festival in India that marks the start of spring, also begins on March 20 this year.

Nowruz

- **What is it?** Nowruz, also spelled as Navroz, is the Iranian New Year celebrated by ethnic Iranian people. Several ethno-linguistic communities around the world irrespective of their religious background observe it as the start of the New Year. In India, the Parsi community, who follow Zoroastrianism, celebrate Navroz with full fervour.

- **What are the origins of Navroz? Which communities celebrate Navroz?** Navroz is the beginning of the New Year for several communities. It dates back as far as the 6th Century BC, back when the Iranian community were homogeneously Zoroastrians. Once the community divided over the course of history, people of Iranian origin worldwide continued following Zoroastrian traditions and with that the Iranian New Year as well.

- **What is the significance of Navroz?** Apart from the difference of one or two days, the Iranian community celebrates Navroz on March 21. March 21 is the first day of the Iranian calendar. It is also marked as the day King Jamshid was crowned as the King of Persia. King Jamshid holds a great significance in Zoroastrianism and the day of his coronation is generally considered to be the beginning of the New Year among Iranian people. It is interestingly the first day of the Aries constellation. Navroz is also the day of the Spring equinox and the rituals are performed based on the movements of the sun during the course of the day.

- **How is it celebrated in India?** In India, the Parsi community celebrate the Iranian New Year in a similar fashion as is around the world. A visit to the Fire Temple, the place of worship of the Parsi community, is a ritual followed on Navroz every morning. In India, prominent numbers of the Parsi community still remain in Mumbai and Gujarat, who celebrate Navroz with ardour.

Kazakhstan renames capital Astana after ex-president:

- **Kazakhstan** has renamed its capital Astana to Nursultan to honour outgoing leader Nursultan Nazarbayev. Mr Nazarbayev served nearly 30 years as leader of the oil-rich nation.

Schemes for Flood Control and Flood Forecasting

- **The Comptroller and Auditor General** (CAG) of India submitted a report on 'Schemes for Flood Control and Flood Forecasting' on July 21, 2017. The performance audit conducted by CAG examined: (i) whether schemes for flood control and flood forecasting were effective, and (ii) whether the review and oversight mechanisms were effective. The audit covered flood management projects, and river management activities, including dams in 17 states and union territories from 2007-08 to 2015-16.

- **The salient observations** and recommendations of the CAG include: Financial management of flood management programmes: Delays in release of first instalment of central assistance to state governments was observed in 48 projects. The central government was unable to recover a loan of Rs 600 crore, with an interest of Rs 18 crore from state governments.

- **This was on account** of not releasing the central assistance received by state governments to the programme implementing agencies in the first 15 days. Rs 171 crore of funds were not utilised, and Rs 37 crore were diverted by implementing agencies towards unapproved projects.

- **The CAG** recommended that funds should be released by the Ministry of Water Resources in a timely manner as per the programme guidelines. The Ministry should also ensure that state governments release funds to implementing agencies in a time bound manner. Proper utilisation of funds should be ensured through strict vigilance.

- **In addition**, funds should be released by the Ministry only after receiving receipts of audited statements of expenditure, utilization certificates and other requisite documents. Execution of flood management programmes: Flood management was not taken up in an integrated manner, i.e., covering the entire river or a tributary or a major segment of it and Detailed Project Reports (DPRs) were not prepared in eight states.

- **Delay in approval** of DPRs leads to delays in completion of projects. This in turn results in technical designs becoming irrelevant at the time of actual funding of the project.

- **CAG recommended** that the Ministry of Water Resources should ensure that all projects approved by it are formulated in an integrated manner. The benefit-cost ratio for such projects should be correctly worked out as per the scheme guidelines. Monitoring and evaluation: CAG recommended that the Ministry should conduct performance evaluation of all flood management programmes. Additionally, CWC should conduct quality tests to ensure quality construction materials are used.

- **Flood forecasting:** Against a target of installing 219 telemetry stations (recording and transmitting readings of the flood forecasting instrument) between 2012 and 2017, only 56 had been installed as of August 2016. 59% of the existing telemetry stations were non-functional, resulting in non-availability of real-time data for the corresponding periods.

- **CAG recommended** that the Central Water Commission (CWC) should devise a time bound action plan to forecast floods on real time data by: (i) making all telemetry stations operational, and (ii) installing the targeted number of telemetry stations.

- **The CWC should** also ensure that the warning and danger levels are fixed at the appropriate level. This will help to ensure that forecasting for floods is undertaken in a correct and timely manner. Other schemes for flood control: Discrepancies in execution of projects, like irregular award of work, splitting of tenders, and payment at higher rates were noted in border areas projects of Assam, North-Bihar and Eastern Uttar Pradesh.

- **Disaster management** plans for only 7% of states have been prepared. Only two out of the seventeen states have carried out a pre and post monsoon inspection of dams.

- **CAG recommended** that projects to facilitate long term solution to the flood problem of Assam, North-Bihar and Eastern Uttar Pradesh from annual floods should be accelerated. The Ministry should devise a time bound action plan for preparation and implementation of disaster management plans for all the large dams

Social Media Platforms Present Voluntary Code of Ethics

- **Participants including BIGO**, ByteDance, Facebook, Google, Sharechat and Twitter have agreed to take action on the content reported by the nodal officer, expeditiously, in accordance with the law.

- **Key highlights:** The code aims to identify measures that the platforms can take to increase confidence in the electoral process to safeguard against misuse that vitiates the free and fair character.

- **The Social media platforms** will deploy appropriate policies and processes to facilitate access to information on electoral matters where appropriate and keeping in mind the principle of freedom of expression.

- **The platforms** have voluntarily undertaken to establish a high-priority communication channel with the nodal officers designated by the ECI.

- **The Election commission** together with platforms has developed a notification mechanism by which the electoral body can notify them of potential violations under Section 126 of the Representation of the People Act and on other matters.

- **As per the code,** the platforms will acknowledge these notifications within three hours of receipt and will act upon expeditiously based on the nature of the reported violation. Platforms will ensure that political advertisements by parties or their candidates are pre-certified.

- **Need of the hour:** Fake news affects voting behaviour in a big way and right now, the only mechanism is Section 126 and EC instructions on paid news. We have to bring in a robust mechanism for conduct on social media platforms.

- **What is fake news?** Fake news is a type of yellow journalism that consists of deliberate misinformation or hoaxes spread via the traditional print, broadcasting news media, or via Internet-based social media. Fake news is written and published with the intent to mislead in order to gain financially or politically, often with sensationalist, exaggerated, or patently false headlines that grab attention.

- **The main driving force behind fake news remains:** Getting easy viewership through sensational news-e.g. dubbing foreign prisoners as spies or terrorists without any proof Directed towards a particular organization or person with an intention to either glorify it or to bring malice.eg. a news channel was established to defend the accused in Jessica Lal murder case.

- **Nature of fake news: Social media in campaign-** used to promote electoral programme and encourage anti-liberal sentiments as seen in Trump campaign. They offer a quick way to convey one-sided information or opinion, without the option or capability to verify the authenticity of this information or to present the opposite opinion for the sake of balance.

- **Fake news creating Bubble phenomenon**- users with matching political views exchange one-sided information and opinions that suit their own convictions, reinforcing them even further, even if those were based on false information.

- **Social media distancing people** – It deprives people of human contact and the accompanying intimacy and exchange of opinions, which could lead to changing a wrong impression or correcting an inaccurate belief.

- **Evergreening of fake news websites** – tens of thousands of "fake news" websites have emerged, offering false information to an audience that is used to traditional media doing the fact-checking for it and that believes anything that appears on a presentable webpage.

- **Igniting extremist sentiments** – 'fake news' perputuates, previously locally found, extremist ideas and groups together dangerously minded people eg- Neo-nazis in Germany, Separatists in Kashmir.

- **Dangers of fake news:** Political: Swaying or polarising public opinion. Example Recent American election,UP elections where certain facts are quoted out of context/partially. Significant impact on the nature of polity.

- **Religious:** Promoting religious ideologies. Glorifying one religion while despising others Ex. Right wing violence meted out by Gau rakshaks leads to religious polarisation and communal unrests. Criminal: Sensationalising crimes by blowing them out of proportion. Misleads people rather than making them aware. Instils irrational fears.

- **Fake news** has also been used to dupe gullible people financially. The reach of news has given chit fund schemes an altogether new arena as well as has introduced the concept of online fraud through spam mails. It hampers spirit of common brotherhood and raises intolerance. Eg. 2012 mass exodus of North-Eastern people from Bangalore on false online threats.

- **Over the time** it shapes the thinking of society at large. Portrayal of India as an unsafe destination for women by international media has created a false image of a nation.

- **What is needed?** Independent, trusted and effective press regulation. Mainstream media must use social media tools intensively in order to defend the truth, present the correct information and balance opinions.

- **Curb media ownership.** We need an open debate on the impact of media concentration on our democracy and wider culture. There should be clear limits on media ownership so that powerful proprietors with vested interests are not allowed to dominate the news agenda. Define fake news legally. Heavy punitive measures for whosoever violates the said definition.

- **There should** be grievance redressal mechanisms and arbitration spaces to resolve issues. Digital media literacy among people to increase scrutiny and feedbacks of the content. Technical solutions that assess the credibility of information circulating online are also needed.

World Water Day- 22 March

- **The theme for World Water Day 2019** is 'Leaving no one behind,' which is the central promise of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development: as sustainable development progresses, everyone must benefit.

- **Sustainable Development Goal** 6 (SDG 6) aims to ensure availability and sustainable management of water for all by 2030. By definition, this means leaving no one behind.

- **World Water Day is coordinated** by UN-Water – the UN's inter-agency collaboration mechanism for all freshwater related issues – in collaboration with governments and partners.

- **About World Water Day:** In the year 1992, March 22 was first officially added in the schedule 21 of United Nations Conference on Environment and Development as World Water Day in the Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

- **The celebrations** to mark world water day started from the year 1993. The aim of the day is to increase awareness among people about the importance, need and conservation of water. The World Water Development Report is also released by the UN every year around World Water Day.

- **Water, a human right: In 2010, the UN** recognized "the right to safe and clean drinking water and sanitation as a human right that is essential for the full enjoyment of life and all human rights."

- **The human right** to water entitles everyone, without discrimination, to sufficient, safe, acceptable, physically accessible and affordable water for personal and domestic use; which includes water for drinking, personal sanitation, washing of clothes, food preparation, and personal and household hygiene.

- **People are left** behind without safe water for many different reasons. The following are some of the 'grounds for discrimination' that cause certain people to be particularly disadvantaged when it comes to accessing water:

- **Sex and gender.** Race, ethnicity, religion, birth, caste, language, and nationality. Disability, age and health status. Property, tenure, residence, economic and social status. Other factors, such as environmental degradation, climate change, population growth, conflict, forced displacement and migration flows can also disproportionately affect marginalized groups through impacts on water.

- **Way ahead: To 'leave no one behind',** we must focus our efforts towards including people who have been marginalized or ignored. Water services must meet the needs of marginalized groups and their voices must be heard in decision-making processes. Regulatory and legal frameworks must recognise the right to water for all people, and sufficient funding must be fairly and effectively targeted at those who need it most.

International Day of Forests- 21 March

- **On each International Day of Forests**, countries are encouraged to undertake local, national and international efforts to organize activities involving forests and trees, such as tree planting campaigns.

- **The theme for 2019: 'Forests and Education: Learn to Love Forests'.** Significance of forests: Forests cover one third of the Earth's land mass, performing vital functions around the world. Around 1.6 billion people including more than 2,000 indigenous cultures depend on forests for their livelihoods, medicines, fuel, food and shelter.

- **Forests are** the most biologically-diverse ecosystems on land, home to more than 80 per cent of the terrestrial species of animals, plants and insects. Despite all these ecological, economic, social and health benefits, global deforestation continues at an alarming rate with 13 million hectares of forest destroyed annually. Deforestation accounts for 12 to 20 percent of the global greenhouse gas emissions that contribute to climate change.

- **Need for sustainable management of forests:** Forests, their sustainable management and use of resources, including in fragile ecosystems, are key to combating climate change and to contributing to the prosperity and well-being of current and future generations. Forests also play a crucial role in poverty alleviation and in the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

- **Hence, sustainable management** of all types of forests are at the heart of unlocking challenges of conflict-affected, developing and developed countries, for the benefit of current and future generations.

Integrate TB services with primary health system: Lancet

- **Key findings:** Compared with 2015 data, 57% reduction in incidence and 72% reduction in mortality will been seen only by 2035 in three countries including India. Strengthening the care cascade could reduce cumulative TB incidence by 38% in the case of India.

- **India has** to adopt measures to prevent TB on a population level to eliminate the disease in the coming decades. Diagnosis and treatment for drug-sensitive and drug-resistant TB need improvement.

- **Modelling** suggests that lives of eight million (28%) people with TB can be saved over the next 30 years if tests are subsidised and patients are supported to complete the treatment. India should scale up access to TB services for all those seeking them, optimise engagement of private sector providers and guarantee universal access to drug susceptibility testing and second line TB drugs.

- **Background:** Of the 10 million new tuberculosis (TB) cases reported globally in 2017 by the World Health Organisation, 74 million were from India, showing a marginal reduction from 2.79 million in 2016.

- **Despite TB** incidence in the country being 204 cases per 1,00,000 in 2017, the government has set a highly ambitious target of "eliminating TB by 2025", five years ahead of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) target.

- **Challenges:** India has set an ambitious goal of eliminating TB by 2025, but integration of TB services with the primary health system to reduce diagnostic delays is not happening.

- **Patients** are not diagnosed and treated at the primary level, which is the first point of contact. Only this will lead to early diagnosis and help cut the transmission cycle.

- **Why is Tuberculosis a major cause of concern?** TB is one of the leading causes of death worldwide and the leading cause from a single infectious agent, ranking above HIV/AIDS. TB is an infectious disease caused by the bacillus Mycobacterium tuberculosis. It typically affects the lungs (pulmonary TB) but can also affect other sites. The disease is spread when people who are sick with pulmonary TB expel bacteria into the air, for example by coughing.

- **Broader influences** on the TB epidemic include levels of poverty, HIV infection, under nutrition and smoking. Diagnostic tests for TB disease include – Rapid molecular test, Sputum smear microscopy, Culture-based methods Without treatment, the mortality rate from TB is high.

- **SDG:** The consolidated goal on health is SDG 3. One of these targets, (Target 3.3), explicitly mentions TB.

- **SDG 3 also includes** a target (Target 3.8) related to universal health coverage (UHC) in which TB is explicitly mentioned. This includes an indicator on the coverage of essential prevention, treatment and care interventions.

Issues related to stubble burning

- **Key observations:** According to the team, the government's efforts — earmarking funds for specialised farming equipment (for straw management) or enforcing the state-led ban on the practice — are unlikely to solve the problem.

- **Farmer cooperative groups** — a key link between government and farmers — ought to be playing a more active role in educating farmers.

- **What is stubble burning?** Stubble burning is a common practice followed by farmers in the neighboring states Haryana and Punjab to prepare fields for sowing of wheat in November as there is little time left between the harvesting of paddy and sowing of wheat.

- **Stubble burning** results in emission of harmful gases such carbon diaoxide, sulphur dioxide, nitrogen dioxide along with particulate matter.

- **Advantages of stubble burning:** It quickly clears the field and is the cheapest alternative. Kills weeds, including those resistant to herbicide. Kills slugs and other pests. Can reduce nitrogen tie-up.

- **What's the issue?** Stubble burning is adversely affecting environment and public health. The problem has not been fully tackled and the adverse impacts on the air quality and consequent impacts on the citizens' health and lives are undisputed.

- **What needs to be done- Supreme Court's observations?** The problem is required to be resolved by taking all such measures as are possible in the interest of public health and environment protection. Incentives could be provided to those who are not burning the stubble and disincentives for those who continue the practice.

- **The existing** Minimum Support Price (MSP) Scheme must be so interpreted as to enable the States concerned to wholly or partly deny the benefit of MSP to those who continue to burn the crop residue.

- **Secretary,** Union Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers' Welfare has also been directed to be present to "find a lasting solution." The Central government should convene a meeting with the States.

Voluntary retention route for foreign portfolio investors

- **What is VRR?** It is a new channel of investment available to FPIs to encourage them to invest in debt markets in India over and above their investments through the regular route. The objective is to attract long-term and stable FPI investments into debt markets while providing FPIs with operational flexibility to manage their investments.

- **When was this route proposed?** This new investment route was proposed by the central bank in October 2018 at a time the rupee was weakening against the dollar very sharply. There were also talks of a special NRI bond scheme to attract more dollar funds into the economy and stabilise the rupee.

- **How are they different from the regular FPI investments?** Guidelines say that investments through VRR will be free of the macro-prudential and other regulatory prescriptions applicable to FPI investments in debt markets, provided FPIs voluntarily commit to retain a required minimum percentage of their investments in India for a period of their choice. But the minimum retention period shall be three years, or as decided by RBI.

- **How much money can an FPI invest through this route?** Investments under this route as of now shall be capped at Rs 40,000 crore for VRR-GOVT and 35,000 crore per annum for VRR-COPR. But the limit could be changed from time to time based on macro-prudential considerations and assessment of investment demand. There will be separate limits for investment in government securities and investment in corporate debt.

- **Are there any other facilities for investors through VRR?** FPIs investing through this route will be eligible to participate in repos for their cash management, provided that the amount borrowed or lent under repo were not to exceed 10 per cent of the investment under VRR. They will also be eligible to participate in any currency or interest rate derivative instrument, OTC or exchange-traded instrument to manage their interest rate risk or currency risk.

India's first forest-certification scheme gets global recognition

- **PEFC provides** independent third-party certification for sustainable forest management.

- **Key facts:** The NCCF was set up in 2015 by representatives of forest-based industries, non-profits, forest auditors and government forest departments with an aim to set standards for certifying India's forests, their products and their sustainable management.

- **The NCCF's** forest certification scheme is aimed to improve India's forest management regime that is often criticised for various issues ailing the sector such as forest rights, forest degradation, biodiversity losses, encroachments, lack of manpower etc.

- **Significance and the need for forest certification:** Forest certification has been accepted as an efficient tool for forest management world over. Given that forests of India serve important ecological, economic and social functions that also provide livelihood to over 275 million forest dependent people of this country, there is need for certification for sustaining and enhancing these roles of forests.

- **What is forest certification?** Forest certification, a global movement initiated in 1990s after Rio Earth Summit, is a market-based non-regulatory conservation tool designed to promote sustainable management of forests and trees outside forests by an independent third party.

- **As several** developed countries have put trade restrictions on import of non-certified timber, non-timber forest products and wood-based goods into their countries, getting sustainable forest management certificates has become mandatory for exports.

What is the significance of the Golan Heights?

- **Why is this area contentious?** The Golan Heights were part of Syria until 1967, when Israel captured most of the area in the Six Day War, occupying it and annexing it in 1981. That unilateral annexation was not recognised internationally, and Syria demands the return of the territory.

- **Syria tried** to regain the Heights in the 1973 Middle East war, but was thwarted. Israel and Syria signed an armistice in 1974 and the Golan had been relatively quiet since.

- **In 2000, Israel** and Syria held their highest-level talks over a possible return of the Golan and a peace agreement. But the negotiations collapsed and subsequent talks also failed.

- **Why does Israel want the Golan?** Security: Israel says that the civil war in Syria demonstrates the need to keep the plateau as a buffer zone between Israeli towns and the instability of its neighbour.

- **Israel's government** says it also fears that Iran, an ally of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, is seeking to establish itself permanently on the Syrian side of the border in order to launch attacks on Israel. Both sides covet the Golan's water resources and naturally fertile soil. Syria insists that the part of the Golan held by Israel remains occupied territory and has demanded its return.

- **Who lives there?** More than 40,000 people live on the Israeli-occupied Golan, more than half of them Druze residents. The Druze are an Arab minority who practice an offshoot of Islam and many of its adherents in Syria have long been loyal to the Assad regime. After annexing the Golan, Israel gave the Druze the option of citizenship, but most rejected it and still identify as Syrian. About another 20,000 Israeli settlers also live there, many of them working in farming and tourism.

- **What separates the two sides on the Golan?** A United Nations Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF) is stationed in camps and observation posts along the Golan, supported by military observers of the United Nations Truce Supervision Organization (UNTSO).

- **Between the Israeli and Syrian** armies is a 400-square-km "Area of Separation" – often called a demilitarized zone – in which the two countries' military forces are not permitted under the ceasefire arrangement.

- **The Separation of Forces** Agreement of May 31, 1974 created an Alpha Line to the west of the area of separation, behind which Israeli military forces must remain, and a Bravo Line to the east behind which Syrian military forces must remain.

- **Extending 25 km** beyond the "Area of Separation" on both sides is an "Area of Limitation" in which there are restrictions on the number of troops and number and kinds of weapons that both sides can have there.

- **There is one crossing point** between the Israeli and Syrian sides, which until the Syrian civil war broke out in 2011 was used mainly by United Nations forces, a limited number of Druze civilians and for the transportation of agricultural produce.

The Dam Safety Bill, 2018

- **The Dam Safety Bill**, 2018 was introduced in Lok Sabha by the Minister of Water Resources, River Development and Ganga Rejuvenation, Mr. Nitin Jairam Gadkari, on December 12, 2018. The Bill provides for the surveillance, inspection, operation, and maintenance of specified dams across the country. The Bill also provides for the institutional mechanism to ensure the safety of such dams.

- **Applicability of the Bill:** The Bill applies to all specified dams in the country. These are dams with: (i) height more than 15 metres, or (ii) height between 10 metres to 15 metres and subject to certain additional design and structural conditions.

- **National Committee on Dam Safety:** The Bill provides for the constitution of a National Committee on Dam Safety. The Committee will be chaired by the Chairperson, Central Water Commission. All other members will be nominated by the central government, and include: (ii) up to 10 representatives of the central government, (iii) up to seven representatives of the state governments (by rotation), and (iv) up to three dam safety experts.

- **Functions of the Committee include:** (i) formulating policies and regulations regarding dam safety standards and prevention of dam failures, and (ii) analysing causes of major dam failures and suggesting changes in dam safety practices.

- **National Dam Safety Authority:** The Bill provides for a National Dam Safety Authority. The Authority will be headed by an officer not below the rank of an Additional Secretary who will be appointed by the central government. Functions of the Authority include: (i) implementing the policies formulated by the National Committee on Dam Safety, (ii) resolving issues between State Dam Safety Organisations (SDSOs), or between a SDSO and any dam owner in that state, (iii) specifying regulations for inspection and investigation of dams, and (iv) providing accreditation to agencies working on construction, design, and alteration of dams.

- **State Dam Safety Organisation:** The Bill provides for the establishment of State Dam Safety Organisations (SDSOs) by the state governments. All specified dams situated in a state will fall under the jurisdiction of that state's SDSO. However, in certain cases the National Dam Safety Authority will act as the SDSO. These include cases where a dam: (i) is owned by one state but situated in another state, (ii) extends over multiple states, or (iii) is owned by a central public sector undertaking.

- **Functions of the SDSOs include:** (i) keeping perpetual surveillance, inspecting, and monitoring the operation and maintenance of dams, (ii) keeping a database of all dams, and (iii) recommending safety measures to owners of dams.

- **State Committee on Dam Safety:** The Bill provides for the constitution of State Committees on Dam Safety by the state governments. Functions of the Committee include: (i) reviewing the work of the SDSO, (ii) ordering dam safety investigations, (iii) recommending dam safety measures and reviewing the progress on such measures, and (iv) assessing the potential impact on upstream and downstream states. These states will also have their representatives on the State Committee.

- **Change in functions of the bodies:** Functions of: (i) the National Committee on Dam Safety, (ii) the National Dam Safety Authority, and (iii) the State Committees on Dam Safety have been provided in Schedules to the Bill. The Bill specifies that the central government can amend these Schedules through a notification, if deemed necessary.

- **Obligations of dam owners:** The Bill requires the owners of specified dams to provide a dam safety unit in each dam. This unit will inspect the dams: (i) before and after the monsoon season, and (ii) during and after every earthquake, flood, or any other calamity or sign of distress. Dam owners will be required to prepare an emergency action plan, and carry out risk assessment studies for each dam at specified regular intervals. Dam owners will also be required to

prepare a comprehensive dam safety evaluation of each dam, at regular intervals, through a panel of experts. The evaluation will be mandatory in certain cases such as major modification of the original structure, or an extreme hydrological or seismic event.

- **Offences and penalties:** The Bill provides for two types of offences. These are: (i) obstructing a person in the discharge of his functions, and (ii) refusing to comply with directions issued under the Bill. Offenders will be punishable with imprisonment of up to one year or a fine, or both. If the offence leads to loss of lives, the term of imprisonment may be extended up to two years. Offences will be cognizable only when the complaint is made by the government, or any authority constituted under the Bill.

Indian Forest Act amendment

- **Highlights of the draft:** The amendment accords significant powers to India's forest officers — including the power issue search warrants, enter and investigate lands within their jurisdictions, and to provide indemnity to forest officers using arms to prevent forest-related offences.

- **Forest-officer not below the rank** of a Ranger shall have power to hold an inquiry into forest offences and shall have the powers to search or issue a search warrant under the Code of Criminal Procedure, 1973.

- **The amendment defines community** as "a group of persons specified on the basis of government records living in a specific locality and in joint possession and enjoyment of common property resources, without regard to race, religion, caste, language and culture".

- **Forest is defined to include** "any government or private or institutional land recorded or notified as forest/forest land in any government record and the lands managed by government/community as forest and mangroves, and also any land which the central or state government may by notification declare to be forest for the purpose of this Act."

- **"Village forests", according** to the proposed Act, may be forestland or wasteland, which is the property of the government and would be jointly managed by the community through the Joint Forest Management Committee or Gram Sabha.

- **The legislation also proposes** a forest development cess of up to 10% of the assessed value of mining products removed from forests, and water used for irrigation or in industries. This amount would be deposited in a special fund and used "exclusively for reforestation; forest protection and other ancillary purposes connected with tree planting, forest development and conservation," the draft document noted.

- **While the preamble of IFA,** 1927, said the Act was focused on laws related to transport of forest produce and the tax on it, the amendment has increased the focus to "conservation, enrichment and sustainable management of forest resources and matters connected therewith to safeguard ecological stability to ensure provision of ecosystem services in perpetuity and to address the concerns related to climate change and international commitments".

- **Increased role of states:** The amendments say if the state government, after consultation with the central government, feels that the rights under FRA will hamper conservation efforts, then the state "may commute such rights by paying such persons a sum of money in lieu thereof, or grant of land, or in such other manner as it thinks fit, to maintain the social organisation of the forest dwelling communities or alternatively set out some other forest tract of sufficient extent, and in a locality reasonably convenient, for the purpose of such forest dwellers".

- **The amendment also** introduces a new category of forests — production forest. These will be forests with specific objectives for production of timber, pulp, pulpwood, firewood, non-timber forest produce, medicinal plants or any forest species to increase production in the country for a specified period.

- **Indian Forest Act, 1927:** The Indian Forest Act, 1927 was largely based on previous Indian Forest Acts implemented under the British. The most famous one was the Indian Forest Act of 1878.

- **Both the 1878 act** and the 1927 one sought to consolidate and reserve the areas having forest cover, or significant wildlife, to regulate movement and transit of forest produce, and duty leviable on timber and other forest produce.

- **It also defines** the procedure to be followed for declaring an area to be a Reserved Forest, a Protected Forest or a Village Forest. It defines what a forest offence is, what are the acts prohibited inside a Reserved Forest, and penalties leviable on violation of the provisions of the Act.

- **The need for review:** Many reports like the MB Shah report of 2010 and the TSR Subramanian report of 2015, have talked about amending the IFA.

'Belt and Road' initiative

- **Outcomes:** Italy's decision to get closer to Beijing has caused concern amongst its Western allies — notably in Washington, where the White House National Security Council urged Rome not to give" legitimacy to China's infrastructure vanity project".

- **Critics of the BRI** say it is designed to bolster China's political and military influence, bringing little reward to other nations, and warn that it could be used to spread technologies capable of spying on Western interests.

- **BRI:** BRI consisting of the land-based belt, 'Silk Road Economic Belt', and 'Maritime Silk Road', aims to connect the East Asian economic region with the European economic circle and runs across the continents of Asia, Europe and Africa.

- **BRI is China's** ambitious project announced in 2013. It covers about 65% of the world population, 60% of the world GDP and over 70 countries in six economic corridors.

- **China is spending** almost $1 trillion to revive and renew the overland and maritime trade links between China, Europe, West Asia, and East Africa through construction of modern ports linked to high-speed road and rail corridors.

- **India's concerns with BRI:** India argues that the BRI and China-Pakistan Economic Corridor project violates its sovereignty because it passes through the part of the Pakistan-occupied Kashmir that belongs to India.

- **Debt trap:** BRI projects are pushing recipient countries into indebtedness, do not transfer skills or technology and are environmentally unsustainable. China is planning to extend the CPEC to Afghanistan. Meanwhile, Maldives, Nepal, Myanmar and Sri Lanka are eagerly pursuing potential BRI projects.

- **Through OBOR, China** is countering the strategies of India in North East region and is promoting its greater presence in North East India, part of which China claims as its own territory. This may have a security impact on India.

- **Tense bilateral** relations with China, deep mistrusts and India's growing concerns over Chinese hegemonic intentions in South Asia and Indo-Pacific region make it practically unlikely that India will ever consider joining this project.

- **Military deployment:** The fact that the Chinese have begun to deploy 30,000 security personnel to protect the projects along the CPEC route makes it an active player in the politics of the Indian sub-continent. Clearly, this is a case of double standards.

Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA)

- **About the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA):** This law is aimed at effective prevention of unlawful activities associations in India. Its main objective is to make powers available for dealing with activities directed against the integrity and sovereignty of India.

- **The Act makes** it a crime to support any secessionist movement or to support claims by a foreign power to what India claims as its territory. The UAPA, framed in 1967, has been amended twice since: first in 2008 and then in 2012.

- **The law is contested for few draconian provisions: The Act introduces** a vague definition of terrorism to encompass a wide range of non-violent political activity, including political protest. It empowers the government to declare an organisation as 'terrorist' and ban it. Mere membership of such a proscribed organisation itself becomes a criminal offence.

- **It allows detention** without a chargesheet for up to 180 days and police custody can be up to 30 days. It creates a strong presumption against bail and anticipatory bail is out of the question. It creates a presumption of guilt for terrorism offences merely based on the evidence allegedly seized.

- **It authorises the** creation of special courts, with wide discretion to hold in-camera proceedings (closed-door hearings) and use secret witnesses but contains no sunset clause and provisions for mandatory periodic review.

Matter-Antimatter

- **What is charge parity and cp violation?** The term CP refers to the transformation that swaps a particle with the mirror image of its antiparticle.

- **The weak interactions** of the Standard Model of particle physics are known to induce a difference in the behavior of some particles and of their CP counterparts, an asymmetry known as CP violation. This asymmetry is one of the key ingredients required to explain why today's Universe is only composed of matter particles, with essentially no residual presence of antimatter.

- **What you need to know about matter and antimatter?** The universe consists of a massive imbalance between matter and antimatter. Antimatter and matter are actually the same, but have opposite charges, but there's hardly any antimatter in the observable universe, including the stars and other galaxies. In theory, there should be large amounts of antimatter, but the observable universe is mostly matter.

- **This great imbalance** between matter and antimatter is all tangible matter, including life forms, exists, but scientists don't understand why.

- **What happens when matter and antimatter meet?** When antimatter and matter meet, they annihilate, and the result is light and nothing else. Given equal amounts of matter and antimatter, nothing would remain once the reaction was completed. As long as we don't know why more matter exists, we can't know why the building blocks of anything else exist, either.

- **This is one of the biggest** unsolved problems in physics. Researchers call this the "baryon asymmetry" problem. Baryons are subatomic particles, including protons and neutrons. All baryons have a corresponding antibaryon, which is mysteriously rare. The standard model of physics explains several aspects of the forces of nature. It explains how atoms become molecules, and it explains the particles that make up atoms.

State of State Finances: 2018-19 KEY INSIGHTS

- **In 2018-19,** states are expected to spend 72% more than the central government, a significant change from 46% in 2014-15 (last year of the 13th Finance Commission). Thus, much of the expenditure that affects citizens is decided at the level of the state. Meanwhile, decisions on receipts are getting centralised at the level of the centre with the implementation of the GST. In this report, we discuss recent developments that affect finances of the states as well as the trends in the last eight years.

- **GST reduces states** flexibility on their receipts: In 2018-19, transfers from the centre are estimated to make 48% of states' revenue. With implementation of GST (tax rates decided by the GST Council), the autonomy of states is expected to reduce on an additional 17% of their revenue. That is, the decision-making power of states will be limited to 35% of their revenue (page 2). However, several states have seen a boost in revenue as the centre has guaranteed 14% annual growth on the taxes subsumed by GST for a period of five years.

- **Loss of revenue** with GST on petroleum products: The GST Council has the mandate to decide when to include petroleum products within the purview of GST. Given the possibility of reduction in tax rates from the existing higher rates (over 20% sales tax in 25 states and about 24% excise duty on petrol), combined with the availability of input tax credit, there could be significant revenue loss for many states when these products are included under GST (page 3).

- **15th Finance Commission:** When recommending the criteria for devolution of central taxes to states for the period 2020-25, the 15th Finance Commission will use population data of 2011, instead of 1971 data. This could reduce the share of some states that have made efforts for population control. However, such reductions could be mitigated through incentives for reducing population growth. The Commission will also examine the necessity of revenue deficit grants, impacting states that depend on them to finance their revenue expenditure (pages 4 and 5).

- **Implications of the 7th Pay Commission:** Some states have implemented pay hikes after the 7th Pay Commission increased pay and allowances for central government employees. This has increased their revenue expenditure by 25% in 2017-18, therefore impacting the fiscal balance of these states. Other states may also see a spike in their expenditure if they follow suit (page 6).

- **Impact of agricultural distress:** Farm distress has led to declaration of farm loan waivers by eight states, amounting to Rs 1,77,241 crore. Borrowings of such states can increase due to these waivers. Further, the sugar sector is under stress with dues of sugarcane farmers pending with many mills; if states prepare a rescue package, it will increase fiscal pressure on states

DEVELOPING THEMES IN FINANCES OF STATES

- **States to have** limited flexibility on 65% of their revenue with the implementation of GST

- **States primarily** depend on two sources for their revenue – their own revenue and central transfers. The former indicates revenue generated by states on their own, while the latter consists of receipts from devolution of union taxes and grants-in-aid from the centre. In 2018-19, 52% of the revenue receipts of states is estimated to come from their own revenue, and the remaining 48% of the revenue in the form of transfers from the centre. Since central transfers are outside the jurisdiction of the states, they do not have the authority to make decisions regarding a significant part of their revenue.

- **With the introduction of GST,** many indirect taxes levied by the states have been replaced. While these taxes were completely under the control of each state, GST rates are now decided by the GST Council. This implies that states have limited flexibility in making decisions regarding tax rates on goods and services. Therefore, higher reliance on GST receipts for revenue reduces states' autonomy, as these receipts depend on tax rates decided by the GST Council. Though GST limits the flexibility of states, the centre's guarantee of 14% annual growth in this tax revenue, for a period of five years, has boosted states' revenue. In case of less than 14% growth, states will receive compensation from the centre. In 2018-19, 15 states expect to receive such compensation grants (see Box 1 on page 16).

- **GST revenue of a state** can be categorized into three components: (i) state's own GST revenue, (ii) devolution of centre's GST revenue, and (iii) compensation, if any. While the first component comes under state's own revenue, the other two components form a part of central transfers. In 2018-19, central transfers are estimated to make 48% of states' revenue. With the implementation of GST, the autonomy of states is expected to reduce on an additional 17% of their revenue. This revenue is estimated to come from their own GST revenue (with rates being decided by the GST Council). Thus, effectively, states' have limited decision-making powers on generation of 65% of their revenue.

- **Across states, the figures vary.** The dependence on these sources is more than 85% of the revenue in the case of Bihar, Jammu and Kashmir, and the north-eastern states (except Assam). However, this is more so because of their significantly higher reliance on central transfers. States which have witnessed comparatively larger limitations on their flexibility because of more reliance on GST for their own revenue include Delhi, Haryana, Maharashtra, and Punjab. For instance, Maharashtra has limited control over 26% of its revenue, which comes from central transfers. Further with GST, the state's control will get limited on an additional 32% of its revenue, stretching it to 58%.

- **Note:** State's own GST revenue comes from the levy of SGST, and its 50% share of the IGST revenue. Rest of the IGST revenue and the revenue generated by levying CGST is devolved by the central government, as per the recommendations of the 14th Finance Commission.

- **Since the 2018-19** budgets are the first to be presented after the introduction of GST in July 2017, there is lack of uniformity in budget documents across states on reporting individual GST components, especially compensation. For instance, some states have included compensation in their tax revenue, such as Andhra Pradesh and Gujarat, where as some have shown it as central grants, such as Bihar and Karnataka. For uniformity, we have considered compensation as a part of central grants, and thus have adjusted own tax revenue and central grants of some states.

Levying GST on petroleum products at current structure may lead to significant loss in revenue

- **At present, petrol and diesel** are not within the GST structure. Instead, they are subjected to excise duty, levied by the centre, and sales tax/value added tax (VAT), levied by the states. In addition, some states also levy additional surcharge/cess. Petroleum products are used as inputs for production or supply of other goods and services. Excluding them from GST results in cascading of taxes.

- **The GST Council** is mandated to recommend the date from which GST will subsume the existing taxes on these products. While this could resolve the issue of cascading of taxes, it may have an adverse impact on the revenue of states. Assuming petrol and diesel are taxed at the highest slab of 28% plus cess, with no additional levies, SGST and CGST would be levied at 14% each, with additional cess.

- **In the current scenario,** 25 out of 27 states levy effective sales tax/VAT of 20% or more on petrol (Figure 4). With levy of SGST at 14%, the state tax rate on petrol will reduce to half or more of the currently effective rate for seven states, reducing the resulting revenue earned from it.

- **For example,** currently, Maharashtra effectively levies 36% VAT on a litre of petrol. In comparison, with levy of GST at present rates, it would generate revenue by levying 14% SGST, which is 22 percentage points lower than the present rate. In the case of diesel, this reduction would range from 5%-12% for 11 states. As a result, states could witness large reductions in their own tax revenue.

- **Note:** The rates shown for Maharashtra are averages of the rates levied in Mumbai-Thane region and the rest of the state.

- **In addition to sales tax revenue,** states also receive excise duty revenue from taxation of petroleum products. 42% of the excise duty revenue generated by the centre is devolved to the states as per the recommendations of the Finance Commission. At present, excise duty is levied on petrol and diesel at Rs 9.98/ litre and Rs 5.83/ litre, respectively.[1] Note that this excludes the road and infrastructure cess[*] of Rs 8/ litre, whose revenue is not shared with the states.

- **These excise duty rates,** calculated on the base price paid by oil companies for petrol and diesel[†], are about 24% and 12%, respectively. Thus, if GST is levied on petrol and diesel, centre's revenue would come from a levy of 14% CGST, which is ten percentage points lower than the present rate in case of petrol. In the case of diesel, there would be an increase of two percentage points. This will reduce the overall divisible pool of centre's tax revenue generated from petroleum products, and thus, will affect each state's devolution receipts.

- **Also, when petroleum** products are brought under GST, input tax credit will be allowed on the supply of these products. Input tax credit is given to suppliers for the taxes paid by them on the inputs that they have used in the course of their business (and not for self-consumption).

- **At present,** suppliers (such as transport operators or industries that use diesel to generate electricity), who pay taxes on the petroleum products that they use as inputs, are unable to claim the benefits of input tax credit on these products. As a result, the government need not refund the taxes that suppliers have paid on petroleum products used in the course of their business. When GST is levied on these products, taxpayers will be eligible to receive input tax credit, which might increase the loss to the exchequer.

Aurora

- **What is Aurora?** An Aurora is a display of light in the sky predominantly seen in the high latitude regions (Arctic and Antarctic). It is also known as a Polar light.

- **Types:** There are two types- the aurora borealis and aurora australis – often called the northern lights and southern lights.

- **Where do they occur?** They commonly occur at high northern and southern latitudes, less frequent at mid-latitudes, and seldom seen near the equator.

- **Colors:** While usually a milky greenish color, auroras can also show red, blue, violet, pink, and white. These colors appear in a variety of continuously changing shapes. Science behind their occurrence: Auroras are a spectacular sign that our planet is electrically connected to the Sun. These light shows are provoked by energy from the Sun and fueled by electrically charged particles trapped in Earth's magnetic field. The typical aurora is caused by collisions between fast-moving electrons from space with the oxygen and nitrogen in Earth's upper atmosphere.

- **The electrons—which** come from the Earth's magnetosphere, the region of space controlled by Earth's magnetic field —transfer their energy to the oxygen and nitrogen atoms and molecules, making them "excited". As the gases return to their normal state, they emit photons, small bursts of energy in the form of light.

- **When a large number** of electrons come from the magnetosphere to bombard the atmosphere, the oxygen and nitrogen can emit enough light for the eye to detect, giving us beautiful auroral displays.

- **Where do they origin? They origin at altitudes of 100 to more than 400 km. Why do auroras come in different colors and shapes?** The color of the aurora depends on which gas — oxygen or nitrogen — is being excited by the electrons, and on how excited it becomes. The color also depends upon how fast the electrons are moving, or how much energy they have at the time of their collisions.

- **High energy** electrons cause oxygen to emit green light (the most familiar color of the aurora), while low energy electrons cause a red light. Nitrogen generally gives off a blue light.

- **The blending** of these colors can also lead to purples, pinks, and whites. The oxygen and nitrogen also emit ultraviolet light, which can be detected by special cameras on satellites.

- **Effects:** Auroras affect communication lines, radio lines and power lines. It should also be noted here that Sun's energy, in the form of solar wind, is behind the whole process.

PRISMA Earth observation satellite

- **About PRISMA:** PRISMA (an Italian acronym for Hyperspectral Precursor of the Application Mission) is designed to provide information about environmental monitoring, resources management, pollution and crop health.

- **The satellite** includes a medium resolution camera that can view across all visual wavelengths, as well as a hyperspectral imager that can capture a wider range of wavelengths between 400 and 2500 nanometers.

- **The satellite** will operate in a sun-synchronous orbit, meaning that it circles the Earth in such a way that the sun is always in the same position as the satellite takes pictures of the planet below.

- **The mission** can provide a unique contribution to the observations of natural resources and in the study of key environmental processes, such as interaction between atmosphere, biosphere and hydrosphere, observation of global climate change and effects of human activities ecosystems.

Langkawi International Maritime Aero Expo (LIMA) 2019

- **What is it?** Langkawi International Maritime Aero Expo (LIMA-2019) is being held in Langkawi, Malaysia. Indian Air Force is participating in the Maritime Aero Expo for the first time, during which it will showcase its indigenously developed LCA fighter aircraft.

United Nations Calls for Registry of Human Gene-Editing Projects:

- **Context:** An advisory panel to the World Health Organization has called for the creation of a global registry to monitor gene-editing research in humans.

- **What necessitated this?** Gene editing holds incredible promise for health, but it also poses some risks, both ethically and medically.

- **The World Health Organization (WHO)**, an agency of the United Nations, is trying to sort out how scientists could responsibly alter human genomes in their labs — an effort to prevent the next He Jiankui from performing unpublicized genetic experiments on human subjects.

- **The recommendations** of the 18-person committee, which was established following news late last year that Chinese scientist He Jiankui had carried out human gene editing in secret, are aimed at improving transparency and responsibility in the field.

- **What are Genes and what is gene- editing?** Genes contain the bio-information that defines any individual. Physical attributes like height, skin or hair colour, more subtle features and even behavioural traits can be attributed to information encoded in the genetic material.

- **An ability to** alter this information gives scientists the power to control some of these features. Gene "editing" — sometimes expressed in related, but not always equivalent, terms like genetic modification, genetic manipulation or genetic engineering — is not new.

- **What is CRISPR-Cas9?** The clustered, regularly interspaced, short palindromic repeats, or CRISPR/CRISPR-associated protein 9 (Cas9) (CRISPR-Cas9) system has revolutionised genetic manipulations and made gene editing simpler, faster and easily accessible to most laboratories.

- **CRISPR technology** is basically a gene-editing technology that can be used for the purpose of altering genetic expression or changing the genome of an organism.

- **The technology** can be used for targeting specific stretches of an entire genetic code or editing the DNA at particular locations. CRISPR technology is a simple yet powerful tool for editing genomes. It allows researchers to easily alter DNA sequences and modify gene function.

- **Its many potential** applications include correcting genetic defects, treating and preventing the spread of diseases and improving crops. However, its promise also raises ethical concerns.

- **How it works?** CRISPR-Cas9 technology behaves like a cut-and-paste mechanism on DNA strands that contain genetic information.

- **The specific** location of the genetic codes that need to be changed, or "edited", is identified on the DNA strand, and then, using the Cas9 protein, which acts like a pair of scissors, that location is cut off from the strand. A DNA strand, when broken, has a natural tendency to repair itself.

- **Scientists** intervene during this auto-repair process, supplying the desired sequence of genetic codes that binds itself with the broken DNA strand.

- **Concerns:** Tampering with the genetic code in human beings is more contentious. Leading scientists in the field have for long been calling for a "global pause" on clinical applications of the technology in human beings, until internationally accepted protocols are developed.

- **Ethical challenges:** Bioethicists expressed concern over the clinical application of such research. These are still early days in a new frontier of genome engineering. Bioethicists fear abuse of gene editing, not just by misguided governments but also by the private sector preying on a parent's desire to create a perfect child.

- **It can create** unforeseen changes in the genome which are undesirable. It has also been ethically questioned whether editing gene to create babies that parents desires would make them more like commodities. Safety: Due to the possibility of off-target effects (edits in the wrong place) and mosaicism (when some cells carry the edit but others do not), safety is of primary concern.

- **Informed Consent:** Some people worry that it is impossible to obtain informed consent for germline therapy because the patients affected by the edits are the embryo and future generations. Researchers and bioethicists also worry about the possibility of obtaining truly informed consent from prospective parents as long as the risks of germline therapy are unknown.

- **Justice and Equity:** As with many new technologies, there is concern that genome editing will only be accessible to the wealthy and will increase existing disparities in access to health care and other interventions. Some worry that taken to its extreme, germline editing could create classes of individuals defined by the quality of their engineered genome.

- **Way ahead:** This CRISPR technology is indeed a path-breaking technology, to alter genes in order to tackle a number of conventional and unconventional problems, especially in the health sector. However, experiments and tests to validate its use must be subjected to appropriate scrutiny by the regulators, and their use must be controlled to prevent commercial misuse.

Exercise Al Nagah – III 2019 Validation and Closing Ceremony Posted On: 25 MAR 2019 6:05PM by PIB Delhi

- **The third edition** of joint military training exercise between Indian Army and Royal Oman Army, Exercise AL NAGAH 2019 concluded at Jabel Al Akhdar training camp, Oman on 25 March 2019.

- **Closing ceremony** witnessed final validation by observer delegation group of both the nations. Indian side was represented by HE Mr Munu Mahawar, Indian Ambassador to Oman and Major General A K Samantara. Royal Oman Army was represented by Major General Matar Bin Salim Bin Rashid Al Balushi and many senior officials. Contingent commanders of both the contingent briefed the delegation on the progress of the exercise. The two-week long exercise had commenced on 12 March 2019. 60 Soldiers of Indian Army took part in the exercise alongwith similar strength of pers from Royal Army of Oman.

- **Both sides jointly planned** and executed a series of well-developed tactical operations based on scenarios that are likely to be encountered in semi-urban and mountainous terrain. Commanders at various levels from both sides were exercised to work in close coordination to receive and collate information, jointly plan operations and issue suitable order to respective components. Subject experts from both the contingents also held in-depth discussions on various facets of counter insurgency and counter terrorist operations.

- **Exercise AL NAGAH will** go a long way in further cementing relationship between the nations and will act as a catalyst in bringing synergy and cooperation while undertaking such operations under the United Nations mandate.

Superstats- a new metrics to analyse the game of cricket

- **What is Superstats?** Superstats is a combination of stats metrics – Luck Index, Forecaster and Smart Stats that uses Data Science for the first time to give a context to every event in a game and also venture into new territories such as luck and forecasting.

- **These metrics** have been derived from ESPNcricinfo's rich ball-by-ball database, and from complex algorithms developed by IIT Madras and Gyan Data, an IIT-M incubated company.

- **Components of Superstats:** Smart Stats: Smart Stats, launched at first as a standalone tool in 2018, is a suite of metrics that help fans judge performances in limited-overs cricket, especially the T20s, in a far more nuanced manner than conventional metrics do. It takes into account the context to every performance, batting and bowling. Context includes pitch conditions, quality of opposition, and match situation – in terms of the pressure on the player. In its new avatar, Smart Stats has added metrics such as Smart Wickets, Player Quality Index and Pressure Indices, to cover all facets of the game.

Luck Index:

- **What is Luck Index?** Luck Index is a metric that quantifies luck. This is done by identifying every lucky event that happens in a match, and then calculating, through a complex algorithm, the run value of that event.

- **How does the Forecaster work?** The following factors are taken into account when calculating the predicted score: Batting strength of the team (including batsmen to follow, at every stage of the innings). Bowling strength of opposition. Batsman v bowler head-to-head numbers.

- **Phase-wise strike** rates and economy rates for batsmen and bowlers. Based on these factors, there is an expected score for the batting team at every stage. The win percentage for the chasing team also takes into account the team momentum (runs and wickets off the last six balls), and the historical probability of teams winning from that position. Apart from the win probability and expected score, the Forecaster also predicts the runs and wicket probability in the next over for each bowler in the opposition attack.

- **Significance:** In the era of multiple formats and leagues, game of cricket needs to move beyond conventional measurement system such as economy rate, average and strike rate. The development of these new metrics filled a long-felt gap in evaluating cricket performances.

Indian Accounting Standards (Ind AS)

- **The new rules** — based on the IFRS9 standards created in the aftermath of the financial crisis — were supposed to kick in at the start of the new fiscal year that starts on April 1, after being delayed last year. According to Fitch Ratings' local unit, India's state-run lenders would have had to increase provisions by as much as 1.1 trillion rupees ($16 billion) in the fiscal first quarter ending June 30 if the rules had gone ahead.

- **That would** have forced public sector lenders to raise "substantial" amounts of extra capital, beyond the estimated 1.9 trillion rupee infusion already committed by the government.

- **What is it?** Ind AS or Indian Accounting Standards govern the accounting and recording of financial transactions as well as the presentation of statements such as profit and loss account and balance sheet of a company. Ind AS has been evolved as a compromise formula that tries to harmonise Indian accounting rules with the IFRS.

- **Facts for Prelims:** The implementation of IndAS for public sector banks requires an amendment to the Banking Regulation Act. The schedule in BR Act relating to financial statement disclosures needs to be changed to the IndAS format. Section 29 of the BR Act deals with the accounts and balance sheets of public sector banks. Private sector banks are covered by the Companies Act, which is based on the new accounting standards.

World Food Programme

- **About WFP:** The World Food Programme (WFP) is the food assistance branch of the United Nations and the world's largest humanitarian organization addressing hunger and promoting food security.

- **The WFP strives** to eradicate hunger and malnutrition, with the ultimate goal in mind of eliminating the need for food aid itself. It is a member of the United Nations Development Group and part of its Executive Committee.

- **Born in 1961,** WFP pursues a vision of the world in which every man, woman and child has access at all times to the food needed for an active and healthy life. The WFP is governed by an Executive Board which consists of representatives from member states.

- **The WFP operations** are funded by voluntary donations from world governments, corporations and private donors. WFP food aid is also directed to fight micronutrient deficiencies, reduce child mortality, improve maternal health, and combat disease, including HIV and AIDS.

- **The objectives of the World Food Programme are:** Save lives and protect livelihoods in emergencies. Support food security and nutrition and (re)build livelihoods in fragile settings and following emergencies.

- **Reduce risk and enable people**, communities and countries to meet their own food and nutrition needs. Reduce under-nutrition and break the inter-generational cycle of hunger. Zero Hunger in 2030.

Bihar Diwas

- **Historical background:** On October 22, 1764, the Battle of Buxar was fought between the forces of the East India Company led by Hector Munro and the joint army of the Nawab of Bengal, the Nawab of Awadh and the Mughal King Shah Alam II. The battle was fought at Buxar and was a massive victory for the East India Company.

- **The defeat resulted** in the Mughals and Nawabs of Bengal losing control over the territories and the East India Company according to the Diwani rights – the right to administer the collection and management of revenues. The territories consisted of the current state of West Bengal, Bihar, Jharkhand, Orissa, and Bangladesh.

- **In 1911, King George V** was coronated in Delhi and the capital of British India was shifted to Delhi. On March 21, 1912, Thomas Gibson Carmichael, the new governor of Bengal took charge and announced that from the next day, March 22, the Bengal Presidency will be split into four subhas of Bengal, Orissa, Bihar, and Assam.

Border Area Development Programme (BADP)

- **About Border Area Development Programme (BADP):** The Border Area Development Programme (BADP) has been implemented through 17 States (viz. Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Bihar, Gujarat, Himachal Pradesh, Jammu & Kashmir, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Punjab, Rajasthan, Sikkim, Tripura, Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand and West Bengal) which constitute the International Land Borders.

- **The main objective** of the BADP is to meet the special developmental needs and wellbeing of the people living in remote and inaccessible areas situated near the international border and to saturate the border areas with the entire essential infrastructure through convergence of Central/ State/ BADP/ Local schemes and participatory approach.

- **Funding and schemes covered:** The funds under BADP are provided to the States as a 100% non-lapsable Special Central Assistance. The programme is supplemental in nature and the budget allocation for the financial year 2015-16 is Rs.990 crore.

- **The BADP schemes** include construction of primary health centres, schools, supply of drinking water, community centres, connectivity, drainage to enable sustainable living in border areas.

- **It also covers** schemes or activities relating to Swachhta Abhiyan, skill development programmes, promotion of sports activities in border areas, promotion of rural tourism, border tourism, protection of heritage sites, construction of helipads in remote and inaccessible hilly areas, which do not have road connectivity.

Rising sea levels to affect water table along Chennai's shoreline

- **Concerns:** There is a rise in sea level by 2mm every year based on a report by the Indian Network for Climate Change Assessment under the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change.

- **The increasing sea** level would also force the water table along the coastline to move upwards. But it would slowly replace the freshwater at the bottom of the aquifer.

- **The study has forecast** the impact of sea level rise on the coastal aquifer in the coming years, till 2100. Given the rate of increase in sea level, the water table would witness an incursion of sea water to the extent of 2-3mm every year. The volume of fresh water would gradually reduce in the coastal areas due to climate change-induced sea level rise.

- **Need of the hour:** It is imperative to change the land-use pattern along the shoreline to tackle the impact of climate change. Areas closer to the coast must also adopt water conservation measures to sustain groundwater.

- **Only minimal** groundwater extraction through open wells must be allowed and water pumped in localities along the shoreline must be replenished through rainwater harvesting. Large residential complexes must adopt other measures like permeable pavements.

GRAPES- 3

- **Why study properties of thunder clouds?** Learning about the properties of thunderclouds can be useful in navigation of aircraft and preventing short circuits.

- **How muons were used?** Muons and other particles are produced when cosmic rays bombard air particles surrounding the earth. The muons produced can have positive or negative charge. When a positively charged muon falls through a cloud, it loses energy. If its energy falls below 1 giga electron volt (GeV), which is the threshold of detection of the GRAPES-3 muon telescope, it goes undetected.

- **On the contrary**, a negatively charged muon gains energy when falling through the cloud and gets detected. Since there are more positive than negative muons produced in nature, the two effects don't cancel out, and a net change in intensity is detected.

- **About GRAPES 3:** The GRAPES-3 experiment (or Gamma Ray Astronomy PeV EnergieS phase-3) located at Ooty in India started as a collaboration of the Indian Tata Institute of Fundamental Research and the Japanese Osaka City University, and now also includes the Japanese Nagoya Women's University. GRAPES-3 is designed to study cosmic rays with an array of air shower detectors and a large area muon detector.

- **It aims to probe** acceleration of cosmic rays in the following four astrophysical settings. These include acceleration of particles to, (i) ~100 MeV in atmospheric electric fields through muons, (ii) ~10 GeV in the Solar System through muons, (iii) ~1 PeV in our galaxy, (iv) ~100 EeV in the nearby universe through measurement of diffuse gamma ray flux.

In News- Kyasanur Forest Disease

- **About the Disease:** KFD is caused by the Kyasanur Forest Disease Virus (KFDV). The virus was identified in 1957 when it was isolated from a sick monkey from the Kyasanur Forest. Since then, between 400-500 humans cases per year have been reported.

- **Hard ticks** (Hemaphysalis spinigera) are the reservoir of the KFD virus and once infected, remain so for life. Rodents, shrews, and monkeys are common hosts for KFDV after being bitten by an infected tick. KFDV can cause epizootics with high fatality in primates.

- **Transmission:** Transmission to humans may occur after a tick bite or contact with an infected animal, most importantly a sick or recently dead monkey. No person-to-person transmission has been described. The disease as of now is stated to be transmitted through monkeys. Large animals such as goats, cows, and sheep may become infected with KFD but play a limited role in the transmission of the disease.

- **These animals** provide the blood meals for ticks and it is possible for infected animals with viremia to infect other ticks, but transmission of KFDV to humans from these larger animals is extremely rare. Furthermore, there is no evidence of disease transmission via the unpasteurised milk of any of these animals.

- **Symptoms:** After an incubation period of 3-8 days, the symptoms of KFD begin suddenly with chills, fever, and headache. Severe muscle pain with vomiting, gastrointestinal symptoms and bleeding problems may occur 3-4 days after initial symptom onset. Patients may experience abnormally low blood pressure, and low platelet, red blood cell, and white blood cell counts.

- **After 1-2 weeks** of symptoms, some patients recover without complication. However, the illness is biphasic for a subset of patients (10-20 %) who experience a second wave of symptoms at the beginning of the third week. These symptoms include fever and signs of neurological manifestations, such as severe headache, mental disturbances, tremors, and vision deficits.

- **Vulnerable Group:** People with recreational or occupational exposure to rural or outdoor settings (e.g., hunters, herders, forest workers, farmers) are potentially at risk for infection by contact with infected ticks. Seasonality is another important risk factor as more cases are reported during the dry season, from November through June.

- **Diagnosis:** Diagnosis can be made in the early stage of illness by molecular detection by PCR or virus isolation from blood. Later, serologic testing using enzyme-linked immunosorbent serologic assay (ELISA) can be performed.

- **Prevention:** Doctors say there is no specific treatment for KFD, but early hospitalisation and supportive therapy is important. Supportive therapy includes the maintenance of hydration and the usual precautions for patients with bleeding disorders.

- **A vaccine does** exist for KFD and is used in endemic areas of India. Additional preventative measures include insect repellents and wearing protective clothing in areas where ticks are endemic.

Basant Utsav:

- **What is it?** The famous Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore introduced Basant Utsav or Spring festival in Santiniketan, Birbhum to recreate the magic of Holi. The joyous festival is now an integral part of the Bengali culture.

- **Also known** as 'Dol Jatra' or the 'Dol Utsav', the fiesta enjoys the repute as the "Rabindrik Basanta Utsav".

'Centre must not look upon the Reserve Bank as a cash cow'

- **Context:** A former member of RBI's central board has cautioned the Centre on being fully dependent fiscally on RBI.

- **Why it is undesirable?** The RBI has paid Rs □68,000 crore to the government in the form of dividend or interim dividend since July 2018. It forms 92% of the Centre's entire income from dividends from all public sector financial institutions. This is very bad, as it makes the government fiscally dependent on the RBI. It means the Centre would then look upon the RBI as a cash cow and start questioning every rupee that the central bank spends.

- **Why RBI should be given freedom to spend?** What the central bank does is foundational for the nation, and hence it must have the freedom to choose its areas of expenditure, including choice of employees. They need good training, remuneration, pension and housing. If the government constrains this, it is the people of India who will suffer.

- **The RBI** cannot be treated on par with a department of the Government of India. It is very separate, special. RBI is among the leanest and most efficient organisations in the country, with a headcount of about 15,000 executing myriad functions.

- **The RBI's** monetary policy is formulated keeping in mind the fiscal policy of the government. So, the RBI should be free to be critical of the government's fiscal policy.

Young Scientist Programme (Yuvika) – Online Registration Posted On: 25 MAR 2019 7:59PM by PIB Delhi

- **The Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO)** has launched a special programme for School Children called "Young Scientist Programme" "YUva VIgyani KAryakram" (युविका) from this year.

- **The Program** is primarily aimed at imparting basic knowledge on Space Technology, Space Science and Space Applications to the younger ones with the intent of arousing their interest in the emerging areas of Space activities. ISRO has chalked out this programme to "Catch them young". The residential training programme will be of around two weeks duration during summer holidays and it is proposed to select 3 students each from each State/ Union Territory to participate in this programme covering state, CBSE, and ICSE syllabus. Those who have just finished 9th standard (in the academic year 2018-19) and waiting to join 10th standard (or those who have started 10th Std just now) will be eligible for the programme.

- **The selection** will be based on the 8th Std marks. A few seats are left for the programme from various states. The interested students can register online from 25th March 2019 (1800 hrs) to 03rd April 2019 (1800 hrs). The selection is based on the academic performance and extracurricular activities. Students belonging to the rural area have been given special weightage in the selection criteria. The list of the provisionally selected candidates from each state will be announced on 06th April 2019. The provisionally selected candidates will be requested to send the supporting documents through E-mail to ISRO.

- **This Email ID** will be intimated to selected candidates. After verifying the relevant certificates the final list will be published on 13th April 2019. The progamme is planned at 4 centres of ISRO during the second half of May 2019. For more information log on to www.isro.gov.in

In News- Young Scientist Programme (YUVIKA)

- **What is it?** ISRO has launched a special programme for school children called Yuva Vigyani Karyakram or Young Scientist Programme.

- **Highlights of the programme:** The programme aims at imparting basic knowledge on space technology, space science and space applications to the younger ones with the intent of arousing their interest in the emerging areas of space activities. Under the programme, three students each will be selected to participate in it every year from each state and union territory, covering CBSE, ICSE and state syllabus.

- **The eligibility** for being chosen for the programme includes those students who have finished 8th standard and are currently studying in the 9th standard. The selection will be based on the academic performance and extracurricular activities of the students, as per the selection criteria already circulated to the chief secretaries of the states and administrators of Union Territories. The students belonging to rural areas have been given special weightage under the selection criteria set by ISRO.

PSLV-C45/ Emisat Mission

- **This mission** will be ISRO's first attempt at placing payloads in three different orbits.

- **EMISAT mission and its significance:** EMISAT is meant for electromagnetic spectrum measurements. It will be released into an orbit at 749 km. EMISAT is primarily based on the famous Israeli spy satellite called SARAL or (Satellite with ARgos and ALtika), and inherits its SSB-2 bus protocol for conducting sharp electronic surveillance across the length and breadth of India.

- **The satellite** would serve as the country's roving device for detecting and gathering electronic intelligence from enemy radars across the borders as it circles the globe roughly pole to pole every 90 minutes or so.

- **Foreign satellites on-board:** As many as 28 small foreign co-passenger satellites will also travel to space with it, but to a lower orbit at 504 km. They include 24 small satellites from the U.S., the other four customers are from Lithuania, Spain and Switzerland.

Sharda Peeth Corridor

- **Background:** The temple has been completely deserted since Partition in 1947. Travel restrictions on Indians also discouraged the devotees from visiting the shrine.

- **About Sharada Peeth:** The temple is revered by Kashmiri Pandits among other Hindus across the globe. It was once regarded as a major centre of higher learning of Vedic works, scriptures and commentaries.

- **The temple** is also one of the 18 Maha Shakti Peethas, or a "Grand Shakti Peethas". It is considered to be the abode of Hindu Goddess Saraswati. The temple has close resemblance with the Martand temple (another religious site in Anantnag) in architecture, design and construction style.

- **When was it built?** One of the accounts of construction of the temple says that it was built during the rule of Kushans (early 1st century). While many other accounts say that Buddhists had a strong involvement in the Sharda region, the researchers have not been able to find evidence to support the claim. Academics also believe that Raja Lalitaditya had built the Sharada Peeth for containing the religious and political influence of the Buddhism. The claim is supported by the fact that Lalitaditya was a master of building massive temples.

- **Where is it located?** Since partition, the temple has been out of bounds for Indian pilgrims. The ancient Sharada temple, as well as the adjacent ruins of Sharada University, are situated in Neelam Valley, which is 160 km from Muzaffarabad, and close to the Line of Control. It is in a small village Shardi where the river Neelam joins Madhumati and Sargun streams.

Hambantota oil refinery project

- **Significance of Hambantota:** Hambantota is right in the middle of vital energy supply lines in the Indian Ocean, connecting the Middle East and East Asia

- **Hambantota** is the main town in Hambantota District, Southern Province, Sri Lanka. This underdeveloped area was hit hard by the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami and is underwent a number of major development projects including the construction of a new sea port and international airport.

- **Why is India worried?** India's apprehensions about the apparently growing Chinese presence in the island are well known, given the two countries' competing strategic interests in the island. The Hambantota port is part of China's Belt and Road Initiative.

- **Chinese control of Hambantota**, which is part of its modern-day "Silk Route" across Asia and beyond, as well as a plan to acquire 15,000 acres (23 sq miles) to develop an industrial zone next door, had raised fears that it could also be used for Chinese naval vessels.

WEF Energy Transition Index

- **The index considers** both the current state of the countries' energy system and their structural readiness to adapt to future energy needs.

- **Performance of various countries:** Sweden retained its top spot on the list, followed by Switzerland and Norway in the second and third positions respectively. The United States, which is placed at the 27th position, was found to have made progress in reducing the use of coal in power generation.

- **It slipped** in the rankings by two places due to concerns surrounding affordability of energy to households and regulatory uncertainty on environmental sustainability The developing countries in Asia, on the other hand, showed significant improvements towards universal access to electricity led by India (76), Indonesia (63) and Bangladesh (90).

- **Key observations on India's performance:** India was found to be amongst the countries with high pollution levels and relatively high CO_2 intensity in its energy system. Despite this, the report found that India has made significant strides to improve energy access in recent years and currently scores well in the area of regulation and political commitment towards energy transition.

- **While India** scored low in terms of system performance, it ranks considerably higher when it comes to readiness to adapt to future energy needs. Overall, India has moved up two places from its 78th position in 2018. India is among the five economies that have managed to improve their rank since last year. In the BRICS bloc of emerging economies, India was ranked second best, only after Brazil.

World Meteorological Organisation (WMO)

- **Theme:** "The Sun, the Earth and the weather". This year's theme also sits in perfectly with the next cycle of the Sun's activity starting in 2020, also known as the Solar Cycle 25.

- **About WMO:** What is it? The World Meteorological Organization (WMO) is a specialized agency of the United Nations dedicated to meteorology (weather), climatology (climate), operational hydrology (water) and other related geophysical sciences such as oceanography and atmospheric chemistry. Predessor organization — International Meteorological Organization (IMO) — founded in 1873. Reports: Greenhouse Gas Bulletin. Status of the World Climate.

- **What does WMO do?** WMO coordinates the activities of National Meteorological and Hydrological Services in 191 States and Territories so that basic weather, climate and water services are made available to anyone who needs them, when they need them.

- **WMO guarantees** the publication of observations and statistics and furthers the application of meteorology and hydrology (including the monitoring and predictions of climate change and ozone) to all aspects of human activities such as aviation, shipping, water management and agriculture.

- **WMO also encourages** research and training in meteorology and hydrology and their related applications and contributes towards reducing the impact of weather- and climate-related hazards. This is accomplished through regular, reliable forecasts and early warnings on flooding, drought, tropical cyclones, tornadoes and other extreme events.

- **Predictions** concerning locust swarms and the transport of pollutants (nuclear and toxic substances, volcanic ash) are also provided by WMO Members.

Chinook Helicopters:

- **Context:** The first batch of four Boeing heavy-lift Chinook Helicopters, CH-47F (I) were recently inducted in Indian Air Force (IAF). Significance: Procured from the United States, the Chinook Helicopters are expected to provide impetus to the heavy-lift capabilities of Indian Air Force (IAF) and strengthen the defence ties with the United States.

- **Key facts:** The CH-47F (I) Chinook is an advanced multi-mission helicopter that will provide unmatched strategic airlift capability to the Indian armed forces across the full spectrum of combat missions. With capability of carrying around 10 tonnes of load, these helicopters will be used for lifting artillery, vehicles, battlefield resupply, road construction and engineer equipment as well as transportation of troops and supplies to mountainous sectors in North and North-East.

- **These are also used** for humanitarian and disaster relief operations such as transportation of relief supplies and mass evacuation of refugees. Chinooks have a unique twin engine and tandem rotor design, one of the most visibly recognised symbols of the American armed forces.

- **ABHEDYA:** What is it? It is Indian Navy's state of the art Nuclear, Biological and Chemical Training Facility (NBCTF) which was inaugurated recently at INS Shivaji, Lonavala.

- **The new facility** is expected to help train personnel of naval ships fitted with nuclear, biological and chemical detection and protection systems. The nuclear training facility will help Indian Navy in providing realistic simulation of Nuclear, Chemical and Biological warfare to its personnel during their NBC damage control training, which was till now largely limited to theoretical training.

- **Lose to Wim programme:** Context: The government of UAE has launched the Lose to Win Programme to assist the overweight employees in shedding extra kilos and adopt a healthy lifestyle. The programme encourages those struggling with weight issues to learn how to induce positive changes in their lifestyle. The programme involves adopting a healthy diet and engaging in physical activity. It aims to help employees to lose excessive weight within eight weeks.

- **India pride project:** What is it? India Pride Project (IPP) is a group of art enthusiasts who uses social media to identify stolen religious artefacts from Indian temples and secure their return.

What is Rahul Gandhi's minimum income scheme? Who will benefit?

- **What is minimum guaranteed income scheme?** A minimum guaranteed income scheme is one where a set of the population get an assured amount in their bank accounts, which could help them meet their basic needs. Such schemes can be unconditional, meaning that the beneficiary is free to spend the cash without any strings attached.

- **Fiscal burden on exchequer if this is implemented:** According to the Central Statistics Office, there were 24.95 crore households in India in 2011. Rural India accounted for a total of 16.87 crore households in 2011. There were 8.08 crore total urban households.

- **Assuming** every household in the bottom 20% is eligible for the income, it would translate into a total expenditure of Rs 3,60,000 crore (five crore multiplied by Rs 72,000) a year. This is more than six times the outlay of Rs 55,000 crore under the NREGA in 2018-19. This scheme alone would add 1.9% of GDP to the fiscal deficit. In fact, the outlay could be higher than India's health budget, which is estimated at about 1.4% of GDP.

- **The macro-economic impact of such spending would be three-fold:** On growth – such spending would give a mini-boost to consumption expenditure, because the poorest will spend the money on basic needs. On inflation – prices may tend to go up with higher consumption demand. On the fisc – it could result in higher cost of government borrowing and lead to higher fiscal deficit if subsidies are not rationalised.

- **Benefits:** It address the issue of income inequality or poverty. These are the best form of social justice for those left behind in an economy, as they offer a safety net to the poor against shocks such as income fluctuations, lack of employment and health issues.

- **It seeks** to ease the burden on the government, which implements multiple social welfare schemes that have not quite helped in reducing poverty. What that means is that if the government were to eliminate some of the current subsidised schemes (for food, fertiliser and fuel) and allow the beneficiaries to exercise their own choices on how to spend the minimum guaranteed income, then it would be able to focus on providing other public goods and better delivery.

- **Other benefits** being cited are greater financial inclusion, with more among the poor accessing banking services, which can lead to greater penetration of financial services.

- **Challenges:** The primary resistance to such schemes is about the costs involved. There is concern about whether the government has the capacity to implement these programmes. There is also the challenge of identifying the beneficiaries, targeting, leakages or misallocation.

Closing ceremony: inaugural edition of AFINDEX-19 Culminates with an impressive

- **The inaugural edition** of the Africa-India Field Training Exercise-2019 (AFINDEX-19) culminated on 27 March 2019 after a validation exercise and an impressive closing ceremony at Foreign Training Node, Aundh Military Station, Pune. General Bipin Rawat, Chief of the Army Staff witnessed the closing ceremony alongwith other dignitaries included senior military officers of the Indian Army and representatives of 17 African nations namely Benin, Botswana, Egypt, Ghana, Kenya, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, South Africa, Sudan, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

- **The Indian contingent** was represented by MARATHA Light Infantry (Jangi Paltan). The validation exercise showcased various tactical drills which included protection of civilians, establishment of standing combat deployment, convoy protection, patrolling aspects and neutralisation of improvised explosive devices which were practiced as part of joint exercise for the past 10 days. AFINDEX-19 demonstrated the commitment and capabilities of the participating nations in working closely with each other in Humanitarian Mine Assistance and Peace Keeping Operations under the United Nations mandate. The exercise was also attended by observers from three African nations i.e. Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda and Mozambique.

- **The validation exercise** was followed by equipment display organised under the aegis of the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce & Industry (FICCI) at Aundh Military Station. General Bipin Rawat and other senior army officers witnessed more than 11 categories of indigenously developed defence related equipment displayed by various agencies to include Ordnance Factories, Defence and Research Development Organisation (DRDO), leading private sector companies and startups to showcase some of the latest weapon systems and vehicles produced indigenously.

- **During the closing address,** General Bipin Rawat brought out that the exercise has been a grand success with the troops of all participating nations showing impeccable training standards and mutual cooperation. He congratulated the participating nations for showing great enthusiasm and zeal during the entire duration of AFINDEX-19. He also interacted with the contingents and Defence Attaches of the participating nations after the closing ceremony.

- **The social interactions** between the contingents have also contributed towards developing better interpersonal relations and bonds of friendship across geographical boundaries and the exercise has been a landmark event to promote values of Peace, Prosperity, International Brotherhood and Trust amongst the participating nations.

Global MPI 2018

- **Definition of MPI poor:** The report measures multidimensional poverty index, which it says can be broken down to show "who is poor" and "how they are poor". This factors in two measures, poverty rate as a percentage of the population, and intensity as the average share of deprivations that poor people experience. The product of these two is MPI. If someone is deprived in a third or more of 10 weighted indicators, the global index identifies them as "MPI poor".

- **Context:** The report, covering 105 countries, dedicates a chapter to India because of this remarkable progress. However, India still had 364 million poor in 2015-16, the largest for any country, although it is down from 635 million in 2005-06.

- **Key observations:** In India, poverty reduction among children, the poorest states, Scheduled Tribes, and Muslims was fastest. Although Muslims and STs reduced poverty the most over the 10 years, these two groups still had the highest rates of poverty.

- **Bihar was the poorest state** in 2015-16, with more than half its population in poverty. The four poorest states —Bihar, Jharkhand, Uttar Pradesh, and Madhya Pradesh — were still home to 196 million MPI poor people, which was over half of all the MPI poor people in India. Jharkhand had the greatest improvement, followed by Arunachal Pradesh, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, and Nagaland.

Note verbale

- **What is it?** A note verbale is a diplomatic communication from one government to another, delivered through each other's diplomatic representatives. Like many other diplomatic terms, note verbale is French, and literally means a verbal note, because it was meant to be delivered orally to the recipient. In modern times, it is a written note.

- **Notes verbale** are the commonest method of formal diplomatic communication. They are used to convey information or requests of all kinds.

- **Features of Note Verbale:** A note verbale is written on the sending entity's letterhead, and stamped with that entity's seal, but not signed. It is written in the third person.

- **Other formal types of diplomatic communication:** A demarche is a more formal type of communication of one government's official position, views, or wishes on a given subject to an appropriate official in another government. Demarches generally seek to persuade, inform, or gather information from a foreign government. Governments may also use a demarche to protest or object to actions by a foreign government.

- **A demi official** (DO) is a first person communication that begins with a "Dear…" and is signed by the writer, usually a high representative of the sending entity. DOs are used only when the addressee and the representative know each other extremely well and occupy high office.

- **less formal kinds of communication between governments:** Non-papers and aide-memoires, which are summaries of discussions between two countries. A non-paper is written on a blank sheet of paper with no signatures and is addressed to no one, giving those party to the discussions deniability; an aide-memoire has to have an addressee, and indicates the sender's identity, usually with an initial.

IEA status report on CO2

- **Key findings:** India emitted 2,299 million tonnes of carbon dioxide in 2018, a 8% rise from last year. India's emissions growth this year was higher than that of the United States and China — the two biggest emitters in the world — and this was primarily due to a rise in coal consumption.

- **China, the United States,** and India together accounted for nearly 70% of the rise in energy demand. India's per capita emissions were about 40% of the global average and contributed 7% to the global carbon dioxide burden. The United States, the largest emitter, was responsible for 14%.

- **Concerns raised:** As per its commitments to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, India has promised to reduce the emissions intensity of its economy by 2030, compared to 2005 levels. It has also committed to having 40% of its energy from renewable sources by 2030 and, as part of this, install 100 GW of solar power by 2022.

- **However**, the IEA report showed that India's energy intensity improvement declined 3% from last year even as its renewable energy installations increased 10.6% from last year.

- **Global scenario:** Global energy consumption in 2018 increased at nearly twice the average rate of growth since 2010, driven by a robust global economy and higher heating and cooling needs in some parts of the world. Demand for all fuels increased, led by natural gas, even as solar and wind posted double digit growth. Higher electricity demand was responsible for over half of the growth in energy needs.

- **Energy efficiency** saw lacklustre improvement. As a result of higher energy consumption, carbon dioxide emissions rose 1.7% last year and hit a new record, the authors of the report said in a press statement. The United States had the largest increase in oil and gas demand worldwide. Gas consumption jumped 10% from the previous year, the fastest increase since the beginning of IEA records in 1971.

- **About IEA:** Established in 1974 as per framework of the OECD. MISSION – The IEA works to ensure reliable, affordable and clean energy for its 30 member countries and beyond. Our mission is guided by four main areas of focus: energy security, economic development, environmental awareness and engagement worldwide.

- **Headquarters (Secretariat): Paris, France.** A candidate country must be a member country of the OECD. But all OECD members are not IEA members (Ex:Chile, Iceland, Israel, Latvia and Slovenia).

- **To become member a candidate country must demonstrate that it has:** crude oil and/or product reserves equivalent to 90 days of the previous year's net imports, to which the government has immediate access (even if it does not own them directly) and could be used to address disruptions to global oil supply

- **a demand restraint** programme to reduce national oil consumption by up to 10% legislation and organisation to operate the Co-ordinated Emergency Response Measures (CERM) on a national basis legislation and measures to ensure that all oil companies under its jurisdiction report information upon request; measures in place to ensure the capability of contributing its share of an IEA collective action.

- **IEA mandate:** To focus on the "3Es" of effectual energy policy: Energy security. Economic development. Environmental protection.

- **Reports:** Global Energy & CO2 Status Report 2017. World Energy Outlook. World Energy Statistics 2017. World Energy Balances 2017. Energy Technology Perspectives.

In News- The Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria

- **What is it?** The Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria (or simply the Global Fund) is an international financing organization that aims to "attract, leverage and invest additional resources to end the epidemics of HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria to support attainment of the Sustainable Development Goals established by the United Nations."

- **Founded in 2002,** the Global Fund is a partnership between governments, civil society, the private sector and people affected by the diseases. The organization maintains its secretariat in Geneva, Switzerland.

- **Historical background:** The Global Fund was formed as an independent, non-profit foundation under Swiss law and hosted by the World Health Organization in January 2002. In January 2009, the organization became an administratively autonomous organization, terminating its administrative services agreement with the World Health Organization.

Swine Flu:

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

- **Transmission** from Pigs to Humans: The H1N1 virus is currently a seasonal flu virus found in humans. Although it also circulates in pigs, one cannot get it by eating properly handled and cooked pork or pork products.

- **Pandemic:** In 2009, H1N1 was spreading fast around the world, so the World Health Organization called it a pandemic. Spread: Swine flu is contagious, and it spreads in the same way as the seasonal flu. When people who have it cough or sneeze, they spray tiny drops of the virus into the air. If a person comes in contact with these drops or touch a surface that an infected person has recently touched, the person can catch H1N1 swine flu.

- **Pregnant women** who contract the H1N1 infection are at a greater risk of developing complications because of hormonal changes, physical changes and changes to their immune system to accommodate the growing foetus.

What is SWIFT?

- **It is a messaging** network that financial institutions use to securely transmit information and instructions through a standardized system of codes. Under SWIFT, each financial organization has a unique code which is used to send and receive payments.

- **SWIFT does not** facilitate funds transfer: rather, it sends payment orders, which must be settled by correspondent accounts that the institutions have with each other.

- **The SWIFT is a** secure financial message carrier — in other words, it transports messages from one bank to its intended bank recipient.

- **SWIFT India is a** joint venture of top Indian public and private sector banks and SWIFT (Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication). The company was created to deliver high quality domestic financial messaging services to the Indian financial community. It has a huge potential to contribute significantly to the financial community in many domains.

Mt Makalu:

- **Why in News?** First Indian Army Mountaineering Expedition to Mt Makalu (8485m) flagged off.

- **About Mt Makalu:** Among the eight mountains in Nepal above 8000m, Mt. Makalu is the fourth tallest in Nepal and fifth highest Peak on the Earth with its height 8,463m. Mt. Makalu resides in the eastern Himalayas range just 19Km southeast of the giant Mt. Everest in the border of Nepal and China. At the base of Mt. Makalu, there lies a natural wonder: The Barun Valley.

Langkawi International Maritime & Aerospace Exhibition (LIMA):

- **Context:** INS Kadmatt at Langkawi, Malaysia to Participate in LIMA-19.

- **About LIMA:** The Langkawi International Maritime & Aerospace Exhibition (LIMA) is the largest show of its kind within the Asia Pacific region. Its impressive list of international exhibitors and suppliers is more than matched by the supportive presence of industry elites, which range from senior Government officials, and military and civil delegates, to industry movers and shakers and more.

- **Held biennially** since its debut in 1991, LIMA is an ideal platform where industry stakeholders could engage and expand their networks towards forging new partnerships and business agreements.

- **INS Kadmatt (P 29)** is an indigenous stealth anti-submarine warfare corvette and was commissioned into the Indian Navy in January 2016. The ship is fitted with state-of-the-art weapons, sensors and machinery and is also designed to embark the Seaking anti-submarine helicopter.

Govt. notifies new rules for drugs, clinical trials

- **Context:** The Union Health Ministry has notified the Drugs and Clinical Trials Rules, 2019. The move is aimed at promoting clinical research in the country.

- **The rules** will apply to all new drugs, investigational new drugs for human use, clinical trials, bio-equivalence studies and ethics committees. The aim is to promote clinical research in India, have predictable, transparent and effective regulations for such trials and also make faster accessibility of new drugs to Indian population.

- **The rules include:** Reduction in time for approving applications, which has now come down to 30 days for drugs manufactured in India and 90 days for those developed outside the country.

- **Compensation** in cases of death and permanent disability or other injury to a trial subject will be decided by the Drug Controller General As per the new rule, the requirement of a local clinical trial may be waived for approval of a new drug if it is approved and marketed in any of the countries (EU, U.K., Australia, Japan and U.S.) specified by the Drugs Controller General with the approval of the government.

- **The new rules** will ensure patient safety and an ethics committee will monitor the trials and decide on the amount of compensation in cases of adverse events. Also, in case of no communication from Drugs Controller General of India, the application will be deemed to have been approved.

- **What are Clinical Trials?** Clinical trials are research studies that explore whether a medical strategy, treatment, or device is safe and effective for humans. Before a drug is launched in market, it has to be tested for its safety and efficacy. This is done in stages, with a large pool of patients after which the data from the trials is assessed.

- **In India,** Central drug Standard Control Organisation (CDSCO) regulates under Drugs and cosmetics Act.

- **Ethical considerations to be followed while conducting clinical trials:** Informed consent and Voluntary Agreement of the participant. Maintain privacy of the participant. Accountability and transparency while conducting trials. Research and trial details should be in public domain.

- **Prevailing Issue in India:** The major issues w.r.t Clinical trials in India are Regulatory failures, Unethical clinical trials, spurious drugs, Collusion between drug companies and doctors.

- **Landmark amendments** to the Drugs and Cosmetics Act in 2013 led to better protection of vulnerable groups such as illiterate people, but more regulation is needed to ensure truly ethical research. Clinical research organisations (CROs) have argued that more rules will stifle the industry; the truth is that ethical science is often better science. The big problem plaguing clinical research is an over-representation of low-income groups among trial subjects.

- **Sometimes CROs recruit** them selectively, exploiting financial need and medical ignorance; at other times people over-volunteer for the money. Because these subjects are well-paid, and get no therapeutic benefit, their only reward from the trial is financial. This results in an incentive to lie about one's medical history or enrol in multiple trials to maximise one's income.

- **Phases of Clinical Trials:** Need for local clinical trials: Epidemiological transition, in recent decades, compounded with the burgeoning population as well as widespread malnutrition and poverty, have resulted in the steep rise in both communicable and non-communicable diseases in the country, across all age groups. To counter this rising burden of disease, there is a compelling need for local clinical trials.

- **After a peak** in 2009-2010, the clinical research sector in India is continually contracting. India represents 17.5% of the world's population but conducts only 1.4% of global clinical research. This is unfortunate, considering we have all the requisite factors, such as English-speaking health-care professionals, a large number of experts, steady economic growth, access to world-class technologies, strong IT- and data-management infrastructure, access to ethnically diverse patient populations and competitive operational costs. All these factors present clear advantages for clinical research.

- **Need of the hour:** To reap the benefits of clinical trials, our objective should be to bring about more clinical research in the country while maintaining high standards to ensure patient safety and accuracy of data.

Coffee Board Activates Blockchain Based Marketplace in India Posted On: 28 MAR 2019 6:21PM by PIB Delhi

- **Commerce Secretary,Dr.AnupWadhawan activating coffee e-marketplace in New Delhi** Commerce Secretary,Dr.AnupWadhawan, launched blockchain based coffee e-marketplace through video conferencing in New Delhi today. Speaking on the occasion he said that this pilot project will help integrate the farmers with markets in a transparent manner and lead to realisation of fair price for the coffee producer. Dr.Wadhawan said that the blockchain will also reduce the number of layers between coffee growers and buyers and help farmers double their income.

- **The project** was activated simultaneously by Mr. Jose DausterSette, Executive Director,International Coffee Organisation's (ICO) from Nairobi, Kenya. Rahul Chhabra, India's High Commissioner to Kenya was also present.

- **India is the only country** in the world where entire coffee is grown under shade, handpicked and sun dried. It produces one of the best coffees in the world, produced by small coffee growers, tribal farmers adjacent to National Parks and Wild Life Sanctuaries in the Western and Eastern Ghats, which are two of the major bio-diversity hot spots in the world. Indian coffee is highly valued in the world market and sold as premium coffees. The share of farmers in the final returns from coffee is very meagre.

- **Blockchain based market** place app for trading of Indian coffees is intended to bring in transparency in the trade of Indian coffee, maintain the traceability of Indian coffee from bean to cup so as the consumer tastes real Indian coffee and the grower is paid fairly for his coffee produced. This initiative will help in creating a brand image for Indian Coffee throughtraceability in reducing growers dependency an intermediaries by having a direct access to buyers for a fair price for their produce, in finding right coffee suppliers for exporters and within the stipulated time to meet the growing demands and in building a better trust and long term relationship due to increased visibility towards the traceability and transparency of the produce.

- **Coffee Board is collaborating** with M/s Eka Plus, one of the global leaders in Digital Commodity Management platforms for Agriculture for development of Blockchain based marketplace application.Eka Plus have developed the application and a group of 15-20 coffee farmers, exporters, roasters, importers and retailers are already registered on the platform from India and abroad. It is one of the few coffee block chain processor for coffee after France and Ethiopia in the world.

- **The stakeholder like** coffee farmers, traders, coffee curers, exporters, rosters, importers and retailers register on the platform to make trade transactions. The coffee farmer registers credentials like place where coffee is grown, details of the crop, elevation, certificates if any and any relevant information. A block is created for each of the lot the farmer sells on the Blockchain. The credentials of the block/ lot will be stored on the Blockchain throughout its journey and are immutable.

What is Mission Shakti?

- **What is it?** Mission Shakti is a joint programme of the Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) and the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO). As part of the mission, an anti-satellite (A-SAT) weapon was launched and targeted an Indian satellite which had been decommissioned. Mission Shakti was carried out from DRDO's testing range in Odisha's Balasore.

- **Significance:** India is only the 4th country to acquire such a specialised and modern capability, and Entire effort is indigenous. Till now, only the US, Russia and China had the capability to hit a live target in space.

- **Does the test create space debris?** The test was done in the lower atmosphere to ensure that there is no space debris. Whatever debris that is generated will decay and fall back onto the earth within weeks.

- **What is low earth orbit (LEO) and why worry about satellites in the region?** Low earth orbit refers to an altitude up to 2,000 km. A satellite in the LEO can monitor activities on the ground and water surfaces. Such a satellite can be used for espionage and pose serious threat to the country's security in the instances of war.

- **Background:** Space is being turned into a battlefront, making counter-space capabilities critical. In this light, India's successful 'kill' with an A-SAT weapon is significant.

- **However,** no country has used an A-SAT against another nation till date. In all the instances, the nations testing anti-satellite missiles have targeted one of their defunct satellites to showcase their space warfare capabilities. A-SAT weapon is likely to be the most potent military tool for the armed forces over the next few decades, notwithstanding a revolutionary technological breakthrough.

- **Why do we need such capabilities?** India has a long standing and rapidly growing space programme. It has expanded rapidly in the last five years. The Mangalyaan Mission to Mars was successfully launched. Thereafter, the government has sanctioned the Gaganyaan Mission which will take Indians to outer space.

- **India has** undertaken 102 spacecraft missions consisting of communication satellites, earth observation satellites, experimental satellites, navigation satellites, apart from satellites meant for scientific research and exploration, academic studies and other small satellites. India's space programme is a critical backbone of India's security, economic and social infrastructure.

- **The test was** done to verify that India has the capability to safeguard our space assets. It is the Government of India's responsibility to defend the country's interests in outer space.

- **Implications:** Mission Shakti will not have any effect on India's status in the MTCR (Missile Technology Control Regime) or other such treaties. The acquisition of this A-SAT technology is also expected to have spinoffs that India can exploit for domestic and international commercial use. Mission Shakti's success will help in strengthening India's defence capabilities.

- **Way ahead:** Arms race in outer space should not be encouraged. India has always maintained that space must be used only for peaceful purposes. It is against the weaponisation of Outer Space and supports international efforts to reinforce the safety and security of space based assets.

- **India believes** that Outer space is the common heritage of humankind and it is the responsibility of all space-faring nations to preserve and promote the benefits flowing from advances made in space technology and its applications for all.

- **What is the international law on weapons in outer space?** The principal international Treaty on space is the 1967 Outer Space Treaty. India is a signatory to this treaty, and ratified it in 1982. The Outer Space Treaty prohibits only weapons of mass destruction in outer space, not ordinary weapons.

Country-by-country (CbC) reports

- **The objective** is to ensure that all tax authorities have access to the same information about an MNC's value chain and the resulting tax consequences.

- **Significance:** This Agreement for Exchange of CbC Reports, along with the Bilateral Competent Authority Arrangement, will enable the countries to automatically exchange CbC Reports filed by the parent entities of Multinational Enterprises (MNEs) in the respective jurisdictions with effect from January 1, 2016.

- **It would also** obviate the need for Indian subsidiary companies of US MNEs to do local filing of the CbC Reports, thereby reducing the compliance burden. India has already signed the Multilateral Competent Authority Agreement (MCAA) for Exchange of CbC Reports, which has enabled exchange of CbC Reports with 62 jurisdictions.

- **Provisions wrt CbC reports:** The Income Tax Act requires Indian subsidiaries of multinational companies to provide details of key financial statements from other jurisdictions where they operate. This provides the IT department with better operational view of such companies, primarily with regards to revenue and income tax paid. The provision was a part of the base erosion and profit shifting action plan, and later incorporated in IT Act also.

- **What is a Country-by-Country (CbC) Report?** The Base Erosion and Profit Shifting (BEPS) Action 13 report (Transfer Pricing Documentation and Country-by-Country Reporting) provides a template for multinational enterprises (MNEs) to report annually and for each tax jurisdiction in which they do business the information set out therein. This report is called the Country-by-Country (CbC) Report.

- **A Country-by-Country** (CbC) Report contains aggregated country-by-country information relating to the global allocation of income, the taxes paid, and certain other indicators of a multi-national company.

- **It also contains a** list of all the constituent entities of the multi-national company operating in a particular jurisdiction and the nature of the main business activity of each constituent entity. This information enables an enhanced level of assessment of tax risk by both tax administrations.

RBI plans a regulatory sandbox

- **What is a regulatory sandbox?** A regulatory sandbox is a safe harbour, where businesses can test innovative products under relaxed regulatory conditions. Typically, participating companies release new products in a controlled environment to a limited number of customers for a limited period of time.

- **Significance and benefits of a regulatory sandbox:** The "regulatory sandbox" will help fintech companies launch innovative products at a lower cost and in less time. The sandbox will enable fintech companies to conduct live or virtual testing of their new products and services. These companies will also be able to test the viability of the product without a wider and expensive rollout. It will help companies to experiment with fintech solutions, where the consequences of failure can be contained and reasons for failure analysed.

- **Need:** According to NITI Aayog, India is one of the fastest growing fintech markets globally, and industry research has projected that $1 trillion, or 60% of retail and SME (small and medium sized enterprises) credit, will be digitally disbursed by 2029.

- **The Indian** fintech ecosystem is the third largest in the world, attracting nearly $6 billion in investments since 2014. Fintech or financial technology companies use technology to provide financial services such as payments, peer-to-peer lending and crowdfunding, among others.

- **Therefore**, in order to protect customers and safeguard the interests of all stakeholders, and streamline their influence on the financial system, there is need for a regulatory and supervisory framework for fintech firms.

- **Way ahead:** Regardless of their specific terms, structures or mandates, regulatory sandboxes clearly work. They act as an impetus to innovation, build trust among stakeholders, protect consumers and result in sensible and forward-looking regulations. By introducing a sandbox for payments, the RBI could achieve the much-needed balance between innovation and regulation and help the Indian fintech industry achieve its full potential.

Banning of Unregulated Deposit Schemes Ordinance, 2019

- **Background:** The Union Cabinet, last month, approved promulgating an ordinance with regard to the Banning of Unregulated Deposit Schemes Bill, to protect gullible investors from Ponzi schemes.

- **The lower House**, or the Lok Sabha, had passed the Bill on the last day of the budget session by a voice-vote, but could not get the approval of the Rajya Sabha.

- **Significance and impact:** The Ordinance will immediately tackle the menace of illicit deposit-taking activities in the country launched by rapacious operators, which at present are exploiting regulatory gaps and lack of strict administrative measures to dupe poor and gullible people of their hard-earned savings, an official statement said.

- **It will altogether** ban unregulated deposit taking schemes, and the law has adequate provisions for punishment and disgorgement or repayment of deposits in cases where such schemes nonetheless manage to raise deposits illegally.

- **Key provisions of the Bill:** Substantive banning clause which bans Deposit Takers from promoting, operating, issuing advertisements or accepting deposits in any Unregulated Deposit Scheme. The Bill bans unregulated deposit taking activities altogether, by making them an offence ex-ante rather than the existing legislative-cum-regulatory framework which only comes into effect ex-post with considerable time lags.

- **Creation of three** different types of offences, namely, running of Unregulated Deposit Schemes, fraudulent default in Regulated Deposit Schemes, and wrongful inducement in relation to Unregulated Deposit Schemes.

- **Severe punishment and heavy pecuniary fines to act as deterrent.** Provisions for disgorgement or repayment of deposits in cases where such schemes nonetheless manage to raise deposits illegally. Attachment of properties / assets by the Competent Authority, and subsequent realization of assets for repayment to depositors.

- **Clear-cut time** lines have been provided for attachment of property and restitution to depositors. Creation of an online central database, for collection and sharing of information on deposit-taking activities in the country.

- **The Bill defines "Deposit Taker" and "Deposit" comprehensively:** "Deposit Takers" include all possible entities (including individuals) receiving or soliciting deposits, except specific entities such as those incorporated by legislation. "Deposit" is defined in such a manner that deposit-takers are restricted from camouflaging public deposits as receipts, and at the same time, not to curb or hinder acceptance of money by an establishment in the ordinary course of its business.

- **Why do we need a comprehensive law on this?** To deal with the menace of illicit deposit taking schemes, as in the recent past, there have been rising instances of people in various parts of the country being defrauded by illicit deposit taking schemes. The worst victims of these schemes are the poor and the financially illiterate, and the operations of such schemes are often spread over many States.

Electoral bond scheme

- **EC's observations:** Coupled with the removal of cap on foreign funding, electoral bonds invite foreign corporate powers to impact Indian politics. Donations received through electoral bonds would cause a "serious impact" on transparency in funding of political parties.

- **Amendments** would pump in black money for political funding through shell companies and allow unchecked foreign funding of political parties in India which could lead to Indian politics being influenced by foreign companies.

- **Background:** The Election Commission of India has time and again voiced the importance of declaration of donations received by political parties and also about the manner in which those funds are expended by them for better transparency and accountability in the election process.

- **How govt defends its move?** Electoral bonds have been introduced to promote transparency in funding and donation received by political parties. The scheme envisages building a transparent system of acquiring bonds with validated KYC and an audit trail. A limited window and a very short maturity period would make misuse improbable.

- **The electoral bonds** will prompt donors to take the banking route to donate, with their identity captured by the issuing authority. This will ensure transparency and accountability and is a big step towards electoral reform.

- **About Electoral bonds:** What are electoral bonds? Electoral bonds will allow donors to pay political parties using banks as an intermediary.

- **Key features:** Although called a bond, the banking instrument resembling promissory notes will not carry any interest. The electoral bond, which will be a bearer instrument, will not carry the name of the payee and can be bought for any value, in multiples of Rs 1,000, Rs 10,000, Rs 1 lakh, Rs 10 lakh or Rs 1 crore.

- **Eligibility:** As per provisions of the Scheme, electoral bonds may be purchased by a citizen of India, or entities incorporated or established in India. A person being an individual can buy electoral bonds, either singly or jointly with other individuals. Only the registered Political Parties which have secured not less than one per cent of the votes polled in the last Lok Sabha elections or the State Legislative Assembly are eligible to receive the Electoral Bonds.

- **Need:** The electoral bonds are aimed at rooting out the current system of largely anonymous cash donations made to political parties which lead to the generation of black money in the economy.

- **How will the Bonds help?** The previous system of cash donations from anonymous sources is wholly non-transparent. The donor, the donee, the quantum of donations and the nature of expenditure are all undisclosed

- **According** to government the system of Bonds will encourage political donations of clean money from individuals, companies, HUF, religious groups, charities, etc. After purchasing the bonds, these entities can hand them to political parties of their choice, which must redeem them within the prescribed time. Some element of transparency would be introduced in as much as all donors declare in their accounts the amount of bonds that they have purchased and all parties declare the quantum of bonds that they have received.

- **Concerns expressed:** The move could be misused, given the lack of disclosure requirements for individuals purchasing electoral bonds. Electoral bonds make electoral funding even more opaque. It will bring more and more black money into the political system.

- **With electoral** bonds there can be a legal channel for companies to round-trip their tax haven cash to a political party. If this could be arranged, then a businessman could lobby for a change in policy, and legally funnel a part of the profits accruing from this policy change to the politician or party that brought it about. Electoral bonds eliminate the 7.5% cap on company donations which means even loss-making companies can make unlimited donations.

- **Companies no longer** need to declare the names of the parties to which they have donated so shareholders won't know where their money has gone. They have potential to load the dice heavily in favour of the ruling party as the donor bank and the receiver bank know the identity of the person. But both the banks report to the RBI which, in turn, is subject to the Central government's will to know.

India's Official Secrets Act

- **About Official Secrets Act:** The law meant for ensuring secrecy and confidentiality in governance, mostly on national security and espionage issues. The Indian Official Secrets Act, 1904 was enacted during the time of Lord Curzon, Viceroy of India from 1899 to 1905.

- **One of the main** purposes of the Act was to muzzle the voice of nationalist publications. The Indian Official Secrets Act (Act No XIX of 1923) replaced the earlier Act, and was extended to all matters of secrecy and confidentiality in governance in the country.

- **Ambit of the Act:** The secrecy law broadly deals with two aspects — spying or espionage, which is dealt with in Section 3 of the Act, and disclosure of other secret information of the government, which is dealt with in Section 5. The secret information can be any official code, password, sketch, plan, model, article, note, document or information.

- **Need for review:** Since the classification of secret information is so broad, it is argued that the colonial law is in direct conflict with the Right to Information Act. Under Section 5, both the person communicating the information, and the person receiving the information, can be punished by the prosecuting agency. The SARC report states that as the OSA's background is the colonial climate of mistrust of people and the primacy of public officials in dealing with the citizens, it created a culture of secrecy.

- **Another contentious** issue with the law is that its Section 5, which deals with potential breaches of national security, is often misinterpreted. The Section makes it a punishable offence to share information that may help an enemy state. The Section comes in handy to book journalists when they publicise information that may cause embarrassment to the government or the armed forces.

In News- NCLAT:

- **About NCLAT:** National Company Law Appellate Tribunal (NCLAT) was constituted under Section 410 of the Companies Act, 2013 for hearing appeals against the orders of National Company Law Tribunal(s) (NCLT), with effect from 1st June, 2016. NCLAT is also the Appellate Tribunal for hearing appeals against the orders passed by NCLT(s) under Section 61 of the Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code, 2016 (IBC).

- **NCLAT is also** the Appellate Tribunal for hearing appeals against the orders passed by Insolvency and Bankruptcy Board of India under Section 202 and Section 211 of IBC. NCLAT is also the Appellate Tribunal to hear and dispose of appeals against any direction issued or decision made or order passed by the Competition Commission of India (CCI).

- **Composition:** The President of the Tribunal and the chairperson and Judicial Members of the Appellate Tribunal shall be appointed after consultation with the Chief Justice of India.

- **The Members** of the Tribunal and the Technical Members of the Appellate Tribunal shall be appointed on the recommendation of a Selection Committee consisting of: Chief Justice of India or his nominee—Chairperson. A senior Judge of the Supreme Court or a Chief Justice of High Court— Member. Secretary in the Ministry of Corporate Affairs—Member. Secretary in the Ministry of Law and Justice—Member. Secretary in the Department of Financial Services in the Ministry of Finance— Member.

In News- Central Water Commission (CWC):

- **About CWC:** Central Water Commission is a premier Technical Organization of India in the field of Water Resources and is presently functioning as an attached office of the Ministry of Water Resources, River Development and Ganga Rejuvenation, Government of India.

- **Functions:** The Commission is entrusted with the general responsibilities of initiating, coordinating and furthering in consultation of the State Governments concerned, schemes for control, conservation and utilization of water resources throughout the country, for purpose of Flood Control, Irrigation, Navigation, Drinking Water Supply and Water Power Development. It also undertakes the investigations, construction and execution of any such schemes as required.

- **President Kovind honoured with Croatia's highest civilian order:** Context: President Ram Nath Kovind was recently honoured with Croatia's highest civilian order – The Grand Order of the King of Tomislav.

- **Key facts:** Croatian state order is awarded to heads of state for their important contribution towards the development of state relations between Croatia and their respective countries. The Grand Order of King Tomislav is the highest civilian order of Croatia. It is named after King Tomislav of Croatia.

Wrongful Prosecution (Miscarriage of Justice): Legal Remedies

- **The Law Commission of India** (Chair: Justice B.S. Chauhan) submitted its report on 'Wrongful Prosecution (Miscarriage of Justice): Legal Remedies' on August 30, 2018. The report follows a Delhi High Court directive in 2016 where the Commission was asked to examine the remedies for wrongful detention. The Commission noted that currently there is no legislative framework to provide relief to those who are wrongfully prosecuted. Key recommendations of the Commission include:

- **Legal framework:** The Commission recommended amendments to the Code of Criminal Procedure, 1973 (CrPC), to give compensation in cases of miscarriage of justice resulting in wrongful prosecution of persons. Miscarriage of justice refers to wrongful or malicious prosecution, regardless of whether it leads to conviction or detention.

- **Cause of action:** The cause of action (reason) for the claimant to file a compensation claim would be that he was wrongfully prosecuted in a case which ended in his acquittal. Wrongful prosecution would include: (i) malicious prosecution, i.e. where one files a case against the claimant without belief in his guilt for the crime, and (ii) prosecution without good faith, i.e. where one files a case against the claimant negligently without due care and attention.

- **Who can apply:** A claim for compensation may be sought for harm caused to body, mind, reputation, or property because of the wrongful prosecution. Such a claim can be filed by the accused person, or his authorised agent, or his heirs or legal representatives (upon his death).

- **Special Courts:** The Commission observed that claims in relation to wrongful compensation should be settled speedily, keeping in mind the interest of the claimant. Therefore, it recommended setting up of special courts in each district for deciding compensation claims.

- **Nature of proceedings:** The proceedings in the special court will follow summary procedures for speedier disposal of the case. Further, the accused will be required to prove misconduct which lead to his wrongful prosecution. The claim will be decided by weighing the "balance of probabilities", i.e., the claim will be decided in favour of the party whose claims appear more likely to be true.

- **Compensation:** The Commission observed that it may not be possible at present to lay down a fixed amount of monetary compensation to be paid. It recommended amendments to the CrPC to include guiding principles to be followed by the court while deciding the amount of compensation. These include seriousness of the offence, severity of punishment, length of detention, damage to health, harm to reputation, and loss of opportunities.

- **Further,** the Commission recommended that compensation under the law should include both pecuniary (monetary) assistance and non-pecuniary assistance (such, as counselling services and vocational skill development). It further emphasised that non-pecuniary assistance should include provisions to remove disqualifications attached to wrongful prosecution. These include disqualifications which affect the person's chances of finding employment and getting admission in educational institutions.

- **The Commission** also recommended that a provision for payment of interim compensation be included in the law, for cases where the claimant may require immediate assistance.

Island protection zone (IPZ) 2019 for Andaman and Nicobar

- **The legal changes** in the IPZ are aligned with the Niti Ayog's proposal for holistic development in the Islands which is being taken forward under the guidance of the Island Development Agency.

- **Key highlights:** It allows eco-tourism projects 20 metres from the high tide line (HTL) in smaller islands like Baratang, Havelock and Car Nicobar, and at 50 metres in larger ones. It allows for eco-tourism activities like mangrove walks, tree huts and nature trails in island coastal regulation zone IA (classified as the most eco-sensitive region of the islands which includes turtle nesting grounds, marshes, coral reefs etc).

- **The notification** also allows for construction of roads, roads on stilts by reclaiming land in exceptional cases for defence installations, public utilities or strategic purposes in eco-sensitive zones. It states that in case construction of such roads pass through mangroves, a minimum three times the mangrove area destroyed during the construction process shall be taken up for compensatory plantation of mangroves elsewhere.

- **It also allows a** number of new activities in the inter-tidal zone between low tide line and HTL. This includes land reclamation and bunding for foreshore facilities like ports, harbours, jetties, wharves, quays, sea links etc, transfer of hazardous substances from ships to ports, manual mining of atomic minerals, and mining of sand for construction purposes with permission from local authorities in non-eco-sensitive sites.

- **Concerns:** The notification relaxes development norms in the islands compared to the IPZ notification of 2011, which stipulated a no-development zone (NDZ) of 200 metres from the HTL for all islands.

- **This brings the norms** for Andaman and Nicobar at par with coastal regulation zone (CRZ) norms for other islands close to the mainland and backwater islands where an NDZ only 20 metres from HTL has been stipulated.

- **Background:** The Union cabinet had approved the CRZ notification 2018 in December, which relaxed a number of provisions in the CRZ 2011 to facilitate infrastructure development and construction on the coast, including easing floor area ratio (FAR) in coastal urban areas and slashing the NDZ in densely populated coastal rural areas to 50 metres from HTL as compared to 200 metres earlier.

Explained: Is the Indian economy slowing down?

- **Sales of Maruti Suzuki**, the largest carmaker, and Tractor sales for Mahindra have declined in December 2018. Two-wheeler sales too started crawling since December.

- **There are signs of a** consumption slowdown spreading to non-discretionary items such as food items. Thus far, it was feared to have impacted only discretionary expenditure – in products such as cars and consumer durables. Macro indicators too aren't presenting any encouraging signs either.

- **First,** eight core segments — steel, cement, fertilisers, coal, electricity, crude oil, natural gas and refinery products, which together make up about 40% of industrial production – grew at 1.8 per cent in January this year, compared with 2.8 per cent in the previous month.

- **The growth in industrial output** itself dropped to 1.7% in January 2019 against a growth of 2.6% in December 2018. In the corresponding month i.e. January 2018, it had grown 7.5%.

- **The GDP growth rate in the** first three quarters (April-June 2018, July-September 2018 and October-December 2018) of the current financial year ending March 2019, the Central Statistics Office estimates, was 8 per cent, 7 per cent and 6.6 per cent, respectively. This clearly shows a trend of sequential slowing down and these numbers corroborate the signals that have been visible on the ground.

- **Why is it slowing down?** The demand for passenger vehicles slowed down during the second half (beginning September 2018) of this financial year because of many reasons — high interest rates, higher fuel prices and lack of credit. However, many in the industry say consumers have only postponed the decision to purchase vehicles, suggesting that there is no permanent destruction of this demand. At a very broad level, demonetisation — a radical policy decision — and introduction of Goods and Services Tax — a structural reform — naturally had an adverse impact on the economy.

- **Over the last two years**, bank credit slowed down dramatically because banks had to make higher provisions for bad loans. With six public sector banks under the central bank's prompt corrective action framework, and some others voluntarily having pressed the pause button on lending, retail and businesses found it quite difficult to access credit. Poor bank credit, liquidity crisis and high interest rates all created a huge drag on the economy.

- **Concerns:** A slowing economy always hurts. It affects income of people, and does not create jobs.

Oxfam report on Women's labour force participation

- **The report based** its estimates on employment unemployment survey (EUS) 2011-12, done by the National Sample Survey Oganisation (NSSO), International Labour Organization (ILO) studies, and also builds on the first inequality report launched by Oxfam in 2018.

- **Key observations:** Irrespective of employment category (casual and regular/salaried), organised or unorganised sector, and location (urban and rural), women workers in India are paid a lower wage rate.

- **The gender pay gap** was 34 per cent in India, that is, women get 34 per cent less compared to men for performing the same job with same qualifications. In the organised sector, women professionals even in the highest ranks of labour (legislators, senior officials, and managers) are also paid less compared to their male counterparts. However, these women constitute only one per cent of the total female work force and the gap is lowest as they are aware of their rights.

- **The wage difference** is lesser for more skilled workers and more for semi-skilled or unskilled workers. Across enterprise type, wage difference is less for government/public sector and public/private limited company. Large pay gaps in terms of average daily wages exist in male and female wage rates of casual and regular workers in rural and urban areas and the gap is narrower for regular workers in urban areas. On the other hand, for casual workers, wage gap is narrower in rural areas.

- **While inequality** in jobs has increased, inequality in education has decreased between boys and girls. But this situation further exacerbates the crisis in jobs when it comes to women. Even as girls frequently outperform boys in school examinations, they are not finding suitable jobs for the skills that they have.

- **While both men** and women are diversifying out of agriculture, almost 75 per cent of rural women are still engaged in it. A patriarchal ideology and local socio-cultural traditions confine women to the village where agriculture continues to be their most important (but insufficient) source of food and income. Male outmigration has also pushed women into taking on more responsibility of own cultivation and to perform wage labour to ensure households' daily survival.

- **Concerns:** Women's labour force participation in India is one of the lowest in the world. Women comprise half of the Indian population but make up less than a quarter of the labour force. Three in four Indian women do not work in the country. Looking at the extremely low levels of participation of women in the labour market makes one wonder whether the phenomenal success of India's economic transition forgot about its women and left them behind.

African Union (AU)

- **Key facts:** The ICMR had taken up the mandate to initiate and strengthen the cooperation in the health sector in a structured and organised manner by establishing an India-Africa Health Sciences Collaborative Platform.

- **The agreement** aims to formalise this partnership by establishing a framework. It will pave the way for cooperation in research and development, capacity building, health services, pharmaceutical trade and manufacturing capabilities for drugs and diagnostics.

- **The programme** would focus on training and strengthening capacity of health professionals, researchers, regulators and industry staff, support research collaborations for developing preventive tools and improved diagnostics for diseases which are regional priorities in India and Africa.

- **About AU:** .. The African Union (AU) is a continental union consisting of 55 countries of the continent of Africa, with exception of various territories of European possessions located in Africa.

- **The bloc** was founded on 26 May 2001 in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia and launched on 9 July 2002 in South Africa. The intention of the AU is to replace the Organisation of African Unity (OAU), established on 25 May 1963 in Addis Ababa by 32 signatory governments. The most important decisions of the AU are made by the Assembly of the African Union, a semi-annual meeting of the heads of state and government of its member states.

- **The AU's secretariat, the African Union Commission, is based in Addis Ababa.** Key objectives: To achieve greater unity and solidarity between the African countries and Africans. To defend the sovereignty, territorial integrity and independence of its Member States. To accelerate the political and social-economic integration of the continent.

Biomedical Research Career Programme

- **Key facts:** It is an Alliance between the Department of Biotechnology (DBT) and Wellcome Trust (WT). The Programme will fulfil the objectives of building and nurturing talent of highest global standards in cutting-edge biomedical research in India, which has led to important scientific breakthroughs and applications to meet societal needs.

- **BRCP will make** it attractive for high quality Indian scientists working abroad to return to India, and has increased the number of locations geographically within India where world-class biomedical research is undertaken. The Programme would continue to build this capacity as also strengthen clinical research and work towards addressing important health challenges for India.

- **Background:** The Wellcome Trust is an independent charity funding research to improve human and animal health. Established in 1936 and with an endowment of around £15 billion, it is the largest non-governmental source of funds for biomedical research in the United Kingdom.

Block Chain Technology

- **Blockchain** based market place app for trading of Indian coffees is intended to bring in transparency in the trade of Indian coffee, maintain the traceability of Indian coffee from bean to cup so as the consumer tastes real Indian coffee and the grower is paid fairly for his coffee produced.

- **What are Blockchains?** Blockchains are a new data structure that is secure, cryptography-based, and distributed across a network. The technology supports cryptocurrencies such as Bitcoin, and the transfer of any data or digital asset.

- **Spearheaded by Bitcoin**, blockchains achieve consensus among distributed nodes, allowing the transfer of digital goods without the need for centralized authorisation of transactions. The present blockchain ecosystem is like the early Internet, a permissionless innovation environment in which email, the World Wide Web, Napster, Skype, and Uber were built.

- **How it operates?** The technology allows transactions to be simultaneously anonymous and secure, peer-to-peer, instant and frictionless. It does this by distributing trust from powerful intermediaries to a large global network, which through mass collaboration, clever code and cryptography, enables a tamper-proof public ledger of every transaction that's ever happened on the network.

- **A block is the "current"** part of a blockchain which records some or all of the recent transactions, and once completed, goes into the blockchain as permanent database. Each time a block gets completed, a new block is generated. Blocks are linked to each other (like a chain) in proper linear, chronological order with every block containing a hash of the previous block.

- **Benefits of blockchain technology:** As a public ledger system, blockchain records and validate each and every transaction made, which makes it secure and reliable. All the transactions made are authorized by miners, which makes the transactions immutable and prevent it from the threat of hacking. Blockchain technology discards the need of any third-party or central authority for peer-to-peer transactions. It allows decentralization of the technology.

PFC becomes India's second largest state-owned Financial Firm:

- **With the acquisition** of majority stake in REC Ltd, State-owned Power Finance Corporation (PFC) has become the second-largest government-owned financial player in the country based on the current market capital after State Bank of India (SBI) and also PFC will be the third-highest profit-making financial player in India.

Dhanush Howitzers Inducted Into Indian Army:

- **Context:** Four indigenous Dhanush Howitzer guns were inducted to the Indian Army.

- **Key facts:** Dhanush Long Range Artillery Guns are the first ever indigenous 155 mm x 45 calibre long-range artillery guns. They are equipped with inertial navigation-based sighting system, auto-laying facility, on-board ballistic computation and an advanced day and night direct firing system.

- **They are improved** version of Bofors guns acquired by India between 1987 and 1991. It has a new maximum effective range of 38 kilometers in salvo mode.

GI Certification for five varieties of Indian coffee

- **Coffee varieties that have received the GI recognition:** Coorg Arabica coffee: grown specifically in the region of Kodagu district in Karnataka.

- **Wayanaad Robusta coffee:** grown specifically in the region of Wayanad district which is situated on the eastern portion of Kerala. Chikmagalur Arabica coffee: grown specifically in the region of Chikmagalur district and it is situated in the Deccan plateau, belongs to the Malnad region of Karnataka.

- **Araku Valley Arabica coffee:** grown in hilly tracks of Visakhapatnam district of Andhra Pradesh and Odisha region. The coffee produce of Araku, by the tribals, follows an organic approach in which they emphasise management practices involving substantial use of organic manures, green manuring and organic pest management practices.

- **Bababudangiris** Arabica coffee: grown specifically in the birthplace of coffee in India and the region is situated in the central portion of Chikmagalur district. This coffee is also called high grown coffee which slowly ripens in the mild climate and thereby the bean acquires a special taste and aroma.

- **Significance:** The recognition and protection that comes with GI certification will allow the coffee producers of India to invest in maintaining the specific qualities of the coffee grown in that particular region. It will also enhance the visibility of Indian coffee in the world and allow growers to get maximum price for their premium coffee.

- **Some key facts related:** In India, coffee is cultivated in about 4.54 lakh hectares by 3.66 lakh coffee farmers of which 98% are small farmers. Coffee cultivation is mainly done in the Southern States of India: Karnataka – 54%, Kerala – 19% and Tamil Nadu – 8%. India is the only country in the world where the entire coffee cultivation is grown under shade, hand-picked and sun dried.

- **About GI tag:** What is it? A GI is primarily an agricultural, natural or a manufactured product (handicrafts and industrial goods) originating from a definite geographical territory. Significance of a GI tag: Typically, such a name conveys an assurance of quality and distinctiveness, which is essentially attributable to the place of its origin.

- **Security:** Once the GI protection is granted, no other producer can misuse the name to market similar products. It also provides comfort to customers about the authenticity of that product. Provisions in this regard: GI is covered as element of intellectual property rights (IPRs) under Paris Convention for Protection of Industrial Property.

- **At international level**, GI is governed by WTO's Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS). In India, Geographical Indications of Goods (Registration and Protection Act), 1999 governs it.

IUCN Red List of Threatened Species

- **The hump-backed mahseer** is a large freshwater fish also called the tiger of the water and found only in the Cauvery river basin including Kerala's Pambar, Kabini and Bhavani rivers. Five other species have also made it to threatened categories: two wild orchids, the Arabian scad (a marine fish) and two wild coffee species found only in a few localities in the Western Ghats.

- **About IUCN red list of threatened species:** The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species is the world's most comprehensive inventory of the global conservation status of plant and animal species. It uses a set of quantitative criteria to evaluate the extinction risk of thousands of species. These criteria are relevant to most species and all regions of the world. With its strong scientific base, The IUCN Red List is recognized as the most authoritative guide to the status of biological diversity.

- **The IUCN Red List Categories:** The IUCN Red List Categories define the extinction risk of species assessed. Nine categories extend from NE (Not Evaluated) to EX (Extinct). Critically Endangered (CR), Endangered (EN) and Vulnerable (VU) species are considered to be threatened with extinction. The IUCN system uses a set of five quantitative criteria to assess the extinction risk of a given species. In general, these criteria consider:

- **The rate of population decline.** The geographic range. Whether the species already possesses a small population size. Whether the species is very small or lives in a restricted area. Whether the results of a quantitative analysis indicate a high probability of extinction in the wild.

- **Significance:** The IUCN Red List brings into focus the ongoing decline of Earth's biodiversity and the influence humans have on life on the planet. It provides a globally accepted standard with which to measure the conservation status of species over time.

- **Scientists** can analyze the percentage of species in a given category and how these percentages change over time; they can also analyze the threats and conservation measures that underpin the observed trends.

Government sets up group to monitor terror sympathizers

- **The group** will meet on a weekly basis and submit its action taken report regularly.

- **Composition:** The members of TMG will comprise additional DGP, CID, in J&K police, who would also be its chairman, IGP in J&K police, additional director of Intelligence Bureau in J&K and representatives of CBI, NIA, ED, CBDT and CBIC.

- **Functions:** The body will take coordinated action in all registered cases relating to terror and terror financing and bring them to logical conclusion. It will identify key persons including leaders of organisations involved in supporting terrorism in any form and take concerted action against them. The TMG will investigate the networks of various channels used to fund terror and terror-related activities and take coordinated action to stop the flow of such funds.

- **The group** will also take action against hardcore sympathisers amongst government employees including teachers who provide covert or overt support to terror-related activities in J&K.

- **Need:** According to an estimate of the NIA, Pakistan-based terror groups finance terrorism in Jammu and Kashmir by generating millions in donations through their charity organisations. They have been supporting militants and funding terrorism in Kashmir.

- **These outfits** collect donations from people in Pakistan and then pass on the money to finance terrorism in Kashmir through their overground workers. The groups collect millions of dollars in donations through crowd funding in the name of social service.

Rationalisation of Creamy Layer in Employment for OBCs

- **The Standing** Committee on Welfare of Other Backward Classes (Chair: Mr. Ganesh Singh) submitted its report on the 'Rationalisation of Creamy Layer in Employment for OBCs in Services and Posts under the control of Government of India, including Union Territories, PSUs etc.' The "creamy layer" refers to the socially and economically advanced members of the Other Backward Classes (OBCs). At present, an Office Memorandum (revised in 2017) released by the Department of Personnel Training (DoPT) includes the criteria based on which OBC government employees can be excluded from reservations and be considered a part of the creamy layer. In its report, the Committee examined various issues related to the implementation of reservation for OBCs in government positions. Key findings and recommendations include:

- **Application** of the rule of exclusion to Class I Services: Category IIA of the DoPT Office Memorandum (OM) provides that the children of parents, either or both of whom are appointed as Class I officers of the All India Central and State Services, shall be excluded from reservations. Category IIB(b) extends this rule of exclusion to children whose father is a Class II Officer of the All India Central and State Services and gets into Class I before or at the age of 40 years. The Committee sought to clarify whether the latter rule of exclusion would apply if a Class II Officer were to enter Class I after the age of 40 years. In response, the DoPT stated that the prescribed age limit would only apply in cases where an individual is promoted from Class II to Class I services, and would not apply to direct recruits.

- **The Committee** noted that the rationale behind excluding an individual whose parent is a Class I Officer is that they would not have suffered the consequences of poverty or other economic constraints. However, an OBC candidate who may not have had the same privileges, would not stand to benefit from the elevated rank of a parent who begins Class I service after the age of 40 years. The Committee recommended that the rule of exclusion not be applied to children whose parents enter Class I service after the age of 40 years.

- **Application** of the rule of exclusion to Class III and Class IV services: In 2017, the Department of Financial Services established that clerks and peons in public sector banks, financial institutions, and public sector insurance corporations, will be treated as being at par with Class III services employees. The Committee was informed by a representative of the Ministry of Social Justice that the children of clerks and peons who enter into junior management posts at or before the age of 40 years will be excluded and fall under the creamy layer.

- **The Committee** noted that this provision would go against a judgment passed by the Supreme Court as well as the DoPT OM which sought to exclude such employees from the creamy layer. The Committee recommended that all Class III employees be exempted from the creamy layer.

- **Establishment** of equivalence of posts: Category IIC of the Schedule to the DoPT OM states that the criteria for exclusion of government employees from reservations will also apply to officers holding equivalent posts in public sector undertakings, banks, insurance organisations, universities, and the private sector. The Committee noted that, till now, the Ministry of Social Justice has not shown initiative in identifying equivalent posts in these institutions. This inaction has led OBC candidates to seek judicial intervention. The Committee recommended that necessary steps be taken to identify equivalent posts in autonomous organisations, in co-ordination with the appropriate Ministries and departments.

- **Applicability** of the Income/Wealth Test: The Income/Wealth Test is used to determine whether an OBC individual may be deemed as part of the creamy layer or excluded from it. In its revised 2017 OM, the DoPT stated that children of individuals with a Gross Annual Income of Rs 8 lakh or above shall be excluded from reservations. The Committee noted that the Supreme Court has held that income from salaries or agriculture alone cannot be used as a criterion for determining the creamy layer among OBC individuals. The Committee also observed that individuals falling under Category IIC of the DoPT OM (employees in equivalent posts) should not be disentitled to the benefit of reservation. Hence, the Committee recommended that while applying the Income/Wealth Test, only income only from sources other than salaries and agriculture should be taken into account.

Fiscal Council to enforce rules

- **Why do we need a fiscal council?** Various cesses and surcharges are becoming disproportionate proportion of overall divisible revenue. There should be some mechanism to ensure that the basic spirit of the devolution process should not be undercut by clever financial engineering or taking recourse to traditions. There is a need for coordination between the finance commission as well as the GST Council. GST Council has no clue of what the Finance Commission is doing and Finance Commission has even lesser clue of what the GST Council is doing.

- **Also, for** state government liabilities, Article 293 (3) provides a constitutional check over borrowings. But there is no such restriction on the Centre. Therefore, it is time to have an alternative institutional mechanism like Fiscal Council to enforce fiscal rules and keep a check on Centre's fiscal consolidation.

- **Expert committee recommendations:** In India, two expert committees have advocated the institution of such a council in recent years. In 2017, the N.K. Singh committee on the review of fiscal rules set up by the finance ministry suggested the creation of an independent fiscal council that would provide forecasts and advise the government on whether conditions exist for deviation from the mandated fiscal rules.

- **In 2018,** the D.K. Srivastava committee on fiscal statistics established by the National Statistical Commission (NSC) also suggested the establishment of a fiscal council that could co-ordinate with all levels of government to provide harmonized fiscal statistics across governmental levels and provide an annual assessment of overall public sector borrowing requirements.

- **These recommendations** follow similar recommendations from the 13th and 14th finance commissions, which also advocated the establishment of independent fiscal agencies to review the government's adherence to fiscal rules, and to provide independent assessments of budget proposals.

- **Way ahead:** With a complex polity and manifold development challenges, India need institutional mechanisms for prudent fiscal practices. An independent fiscal council can bring about much needed transparency and accountability in fiscal processes across the federal polity. International experience suggests that a fiscal council improves the quality of debate on public finance, and that, in turn, helps build public opinion favourable to fiscal discipline.

Interest Rate Derivatives

- **With this** decision, non-residents of India can undertake rupee interest rate derivative transactions on recognised stock exchanges, electronic trading platforms and over the counter markets (OTCs).

- **What is an Interest-Rate Derivative?** An interest-rate derivative is a financial instrument with a value that increases and decreases based on movements in interest rates. Interest-rate derivatives are often used as hedges by institutional investors, banks, companies and individuals to protect themselves against changes in market interest rates, but they can also be used to increase or refine the holder's risk profile.

- **What is an Interest Rate Swap?** An interest rate swap is a forward contract in which one stream of future interest payments is exchanged for another based on a specified principal amount. Interest rate swaps usually involve the exchange of a fixed interest rate for a floating rate, or vice versa, to reduce or increase exposure to fluctuations in interest rates or to obtain a marginally lower interest rate than would have been possible without the swap.

Skytrax World Airport Awards 2019:

- **What is it?** Skytrax World Airport Awards lists the Best 100 Airports of the World. It has been released by the UK-based Skytrax, a consultancy firm which runs an airline and airport review and ranking site.

- **The Awards** are based on votes of customers in a global airport customer satisfaction survey.

- **Top performers:** Singapore's Changi Airport has been crowned the world's best aviation hub for the seventh time in a row. Indira Gandhi International Airport of New Delhi is at rank 59.

World's highest polling station:

- **Tashigang**, a small Himachal Pradesh village has got the distinction of the highest polling station in the world. Tashigang is located at an altitude of 15,256 feet. It is located in Lahaul-Spiti and forms part of the Mandi Lok Sabha seat, the second largest constituency in India.

Punjab & Haryana HC bars stating of caste in proceedings:

- **The Punjab and Haryana High Court** has instructed Punjab, Haryana and Chandigarh not to mention the caste of the accused, victims or witnesses in proceedings before the court.

- **Why?** It was noted that the caste system was profoundly illogical and was also against the basic tenets of the Constitution.

- **What is Hikikomori?** Hikikomori is a psychological condition which makes people shut themselves off from society, often staying in their houses for months on end. There are at least half a million of them in Japan. It was once thought of as a young person's condition, but sufferers are getting older and staying locked away for longer.

Space Debris:

- **What's the concern?** Unless the broken satellite pieces fall down into the atmosphere, and burn up, these can produce a chain reaction of damaging and blowing up other satellites in the orbit, each adding to the shrapnel-like mass that hurtles towards other satellites. It is called the Kessler effect, after a NASA scientist who put foresaw this possibility.

- **Background:** Space junk is an ever-growing problem with more than 7,500 tonnes of redundant hardware now thought to be circling the Earth. Ranging from old rocket bodies and defunct spacecraft through to screws and even flecks of paint – this material poses a collision hazard to operational missions.

- **The rising** population of space debris increases the potential danger to all space vehicles, but especially to the International Space Station (ISS), space shuttles, satellites and other spacecraft.

- **Technologies that can tackle the problem in future are:** Moving an object out of the way by altering its orbit is one method of diverting a potential crash, but the sheer amount of debris requires constant observation and prediction – by any means necessary. Nasa's Space Debris Sensor orbits the Earth on the International Space Station. The sensor was attached to the outside of the space station's European Columbus module in December 2017. It will detect millimetre-sized pieces of debris for at least two years, providing information on whatever hits it such as size, density, velocity, orbit and will determine whether the impacting object is from space or a man-made piece of space debris.

- **REMOVEdebris,** satellite contain two cubesats that will release simulated space debris so that it can then demonstrate several ways of retrieving them. deorbit mission: There are two emerging technologies being developed under what's known as the e.Deorbit mission to grasp the wayward space junk, or to catch it.

- **Other technologies** include moving objects with a powerful laser beam. It is important to start doing that soon, current scientific estimates predict that without active debris removal, certain orbits will become unusable over the coming decades.

- **Need of the hour:** There is a need to ensure the long-term accessibility of orbits and to adjust current behaviour in space in order to minimize the creation of new debris. People need to be more careful with existing operational satellites and new missions.

Socio-Economic Impact of Commercial Exploitation of Water by Industries

- **The Standing Committee** on Water Resources, River Development and Ganga Rejuvenation (Chair: Mr. Rajiv Pratap Rudy) submitted its report on the 'Socio-economic impact of commercial exploitation of water by industries' on August 9, 2018. Major findings and recommendations made by the Committee include:

- **Exploitation** of ground water by packaged drinking water industries: Of the annual available ground water, 6% (25 Billion Cubic Meter) is utilised for domestic, drinking, and industrial purposes. Of this, packaged drinking water units/ plants extract 0.1% (13.3 Million Cubic Meter) annually. The Central Ground Water Authority grants permission to these bottling plants to extract ground water subject to specific recharge obligations. The Committee noted that a large number of licenses have been given in states that already have significant number of 'over-exploited' ground water units (areas where ground water extraction is prohibited). 374 units in Tamil Nadu and 111 units in Uttar Pradesh, withdrawing 895 m3/day and 941 m3/day, respectively.

- **Over-dependence on ground water:** The Committee noted that the Ministry of Water Resources has not estimated the total quantum of ground water being utilised by the packaged drinking water industries and its consequent effect on the ground water level in the country. In addition to ground water being extracted by these industries, 85% of drinking water schemes in rural areas are dependent on ground water. 27% of urban households use ground water to meet their water needs. It observed that packaged drinking water units supplement the efforts of government in providing safe drinking water to public.

- **However,** it opined that the demand between demand and supply should primarily be bridged by the government. It reasoned that providing water for consumption is the social responsibility of the government and industries should not be allowed to exploit this sector. It recommended that packaged water industries should be set up on Public Private Partnership basis to ensure government's role in utilisation of water in a rational manner and provision of safe water in a cost effective manner.

- **Ownership** status of ground water: The Committee noted that ground water has emerged as a major source to meet the requirements of packaged drinking water industries because of its private ownership. It recommended that the Indian Easement Act, 1882, which provides for right to extract ground water should be amended to meet the present and future demand for water.

- **Licensing conditions** of packaged drinking water industries: The Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) grants licenses to all package drinking water plants based on a set of criteria. However, FSSAI does not check the source of water that will be used by the plant. The Committee recommended that to check the over-utilisation of ground water by such industries, the sources of water should be added as an additional criterion for issuing licenses. This will ensure that new industries primarily rely on surface water sources and ground water is used only in areas where its supply is in plenty.

- **Levying taxes on** packaged drinking water industries: The Committee noted that so far, no charges have been imposed on the usage of ground water. It opined that while water should be available for free, its commercial use should be appropriately charged. It suggested that imposing higher tax rates on ground water can be an effective deterrent against its indiscriminate use by industries. It also recommended amending the Water (Prevention and Control of Pollution) Cess Act, 1977 to discourage wastage of water by industries.

- **Pricing of packaged drinking water:** The Committee observed that no assessment has been undertaken with regard to the income and profits of packaged drinking water industries. It recommended that such an exercise should be undertaken by the Ministry of Water Resources along with the Ministries of Finance and Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises as it will help adopt an appropriate pricing policy with regard to packaged drinking water.

- **National policy on commercial use of water:** So far, no specific policy has been framed with regard to commercial utilisation of water. The National Water Policy, 2012 also does not state specific measures for regulating commercial use of water. The Committee suggested that a robust national policy needs to be formulated to regulate the commercial use of water. It should cover aspects such as sources and quantum of water to be used, appropriate pricing, taxation of commercial gains made by using water, and social and environmental obligations of industries.

Turing Award:

- **Context:** Three pioneers in artificial intelligence — a senior Google executive, Facebook's chief AI scientist, and an academic — were announced as the winners for this year's A M Turing Award.

- **About Turing award:** It is often described as the "Nobel Prize for computing". Given by the Association for Computing Machinery (ACM), the A M Turing Award carries $1 million as prize money. It is for major contributions of lasting importance to computing. First awarded in 1966, it has been awarded annually for 53 years so far to 70 recipients.

- **Background:** The award is named after British mathematician and computer scientist Alan Mathison Turing, whose work in codebreaking is credited with having played a decisive role in World War II. He led a British team that worked out a way to decrypt intercepted messages, which had been encrypted on Enigma machines developed by the Germans. Apart from the award, the Turing machine, used in computing, is named after the pioneer who is considered the father of theoretical computer science and artificial intelligence.

Dhole (Asiatic wild dog):

- **Why in News?** A new study has found that expansion of protected areas in the Western Ghats has not helped the lot of Dhole, commonly known as the Asiatic wild dog, even while enabling the recovery of populations of tigers and other big carnivores.

- **Key facts:** Dhole is an apex social carnivore in the tropical forests of South and South East Asia. Endangered –IUCN. CITES – Appendix II. Shedule II of wildlife act. The dhole is a highly social animal, living in large clans without rigid dominance hierarchies and containing multiple breeding females.

- **Habitat:** Dhole is a habitat generalist, and can occur in a wide variety of vegetation types, including: primary, secondary and degraded forms of tropical dry and moist deciduous forests; evergreen and semi-evergreen forests; temperate deciduous forests; boreal forests; dry thorn forests; grassland–scrub–forest mosaics; temperate steppe; and alpine steppe Disease and pathogens: Dholes are susceptible to rabies, canine distemper, canine parvovirus and sarcoptic mange among others which are usually contracted from domestic village dogs that act as reservoirs.

Longest salt cave in Israel:

- **Context:** An area near the Dead Sea is home to the world's longest salt cave, a title previously held by Iran for the Cave of the Three Nudes on Qeshm Island.

- **The Malham** salt cave in Mount Sedom sits 170 meters below sea level at the southwestern tip of the Dead Sea. At 10 kilometers long, the Malham salt cave is now the world's longest salt cave, besting Iran's 6.4 km cave, and the first to reach a length in the double-digits.

- **The Malham** Salt Cave is a river cave. Water from a surface stream flowed underground and dissolved the salt, creating caves – a process that is still going on when there is strong rain over Mount Sedom about once a year.

The shape of an urban employment guarantee:

- **Need for an urban employment programme:** According to the PLFS report, the unemployment problem is especially aggravated in India's cities and towns. In urban India the majority of the population continues to work in the informal sector. Hence, India cannot ignore the crisis of urban employment.

- **India's small** and medium towns are particularly ignored in the State's urban imagination. National-level urban programmes such as the Smart Cities Mission and the Atal Mission for Rejuvenation and Urban Transformation (AMRUT) only benefit a fraction of them.

- **Most ULBs** are struggling to carry out basic functions because of a lack of financial and human capacity. Further, with untrammelled urbanisation, they are facing more challenges due to the degradation of urban ecological commons. In the context of the present employment crises, it is worthwhile considering to introduce an employment guarantee programme in urban areas.

- **Significance:** Along with addressing the concerns of underemployment and unemployment, such a programme can bring in much-needed public investment in towns to improve the quality of urban infrastructure and services, restoring urban commons, skilling urban youth and increasing the capacity of ULBs. Such a programme would give urban residents a statutory right to work and thereby ensure the right to life guaranteed under Article 21 of the Constitution.

- **Things to be considered:** To make it truly demand-driven, we have proposed that the ULB receives funds from the Centre and the State at the beginning of each financial year so that funds are available locally. Wages would be disbursed in a decentralised manner at the local ULB. Given the State's relative neglect of small and medium towns and to avoid migration to big cities, such a programme can cover all ULBs with a population less than 1 million.

- **Since it is an urban programme**, it should have a wider scope than the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA); this would provide employment for a variety of works for people with a range of skills and education levels It can have a new set of "green jobs" which include the creation, restoration/rejuvenation, and maintenance of urban commons such as green spaces and parks, forested or woody areas, degraded or waste land, and water bodies.

- **Conclusion:** An urban employment guarantee programme not only improves incomes of workers but also has multiplier effects on the economy. It will also boost local demand in small towns, improve public infrastructure and services, spur entrepreneurship, build skills of workers and create a shared sense of public goods. Hence, the time is ripe for an employment guarantee programme in urban India.

Anti- defection law:

- **Why in News?** Two of the three Maharashtrawadi Gomantak Party MLAs in Goa have joined the BJP and merged the party's legislative wing with BJP, which now has 14 legislators in the 36-member state assembly. The MGP has been an alliance partner of the BJP in Goa since 2012. Now, as two out of the three MLAs have merged the legislative wing, they are saved from inviting the anti-defection law.

- **What is the anti-defection law?** The Tenth Schedule was inserted in the Constitution in 1985 by the 52nd Amendment Act. It lays down the process by which legislators may be disqualified on grounds of defection by the Presiding Officer of a legislature based on a petition by any other member of the House. The decision on question as to disqualification on ground of defection is referred to the Chairman or the Speaker of such House, and his decision is final. The law applies to both Parliament and state assemblies.

- **Disqualification:** If a member of a house belonging to a political party: Voluntarily gives up the membership of his political party, or Votes, or does not vote in the legislature, contrary to the directions of his political party. However, if the member has taken prior permission, or is condoned by the party within 15 days from such voting or abstention, the member shall not be disqualified. If an independent candidate joins a political party after the election. If a nominated member joins a party six months after he becomes a member of the legislature.

- **Exceptions under the law:** Legislators may change their party without the risk of disqualification in certain circumstances. The law allows a party to merge with or into another party provided that at least two-thirds of its legislators are in favour of the merger. In such a scenario, neither the members who decide to merge, nor the ones who stay with the original party will face disqualification.

- **Decision of the Presiding Officer is subject to judicial review:** The law initially stated that the decision of the Presiding Officer is not subject to judicial review. This condition was struck down by the Supreme Court in 1992, thereby allowing appeals against the Presiding Officer's decision in the High Court and Supreme Court. However, it held that there may not be any judicial intervention until the Presiding Officer gives his order.