**Insights Daily Current Affairs, 01 December 2016**

**Trade costs of India remain high: UN body**

 -UNESCAP Asia-Pacific Trade and Investment Report 2016 on trade in Asia-pacific-

* Sluggish growth in trade in Asia-Pacific region in 2016, which is expected to rebound somewhat in 2017;
* The region is seeing a proliferation of preferential trade agreements (PTA), with Asia and the Pacific Rim contributing to almost 63% of world PTAs, curbing a momentum towards region-wide free trade.
* international and intra-regional trade costs of India remained higher compared with the trade costs of best-performing economies in Asia and the Pacific, although a declining trend has been observed since 2009;

**Afghanistan, India hope to corner Pakistan**

In the wake of the brazen Nagrota attack, India and Afghanistan are planning to seek to isolate Pakistan on terror at the upcoming two-day Heart of Asia conference in Amritsar as the two countries have pitched for a regional counter-terror framework to effectively deal with the menace.

* Finance minister Arun Jaitley will lead the Indian delegation at the two-day Sixth Heart of Asia (HoA) conference to be held in Amritsar.
* Afghanistan has been pushing for finalising an effective counter-terror framework to deal with terror at the conference which will be attended by representatives from over 30 countries including China, the US, Russia, Pakistan and Iran.

Background:

Tension over the cross-border terrorism has increased between India and Pakistan in the past few months. This is also seen as the biggest challenge to peace and security in the region.

About the conference:

The Heart of Asia-Istanbul Process presents a new vision of cooperation and confidence building for the region with Afghanistan at its centre.

* The Heart of Asia-Istanbul Process was launched in 2011 and the participating countries include Pakistan, Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, China, India, Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Tajikistan, Turkey, Turkmenistan and the United Arab Emirates.
* The Heart of Asia-Istanbul Process articulates a set of principles, such as respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, and promoting cooperation in the areas of common challenges and shared interests in the region.
* It provides a platform for discussing key regional issues among participating states.
* Since its inception in 2011, the Heart of Asia-Istanbul Process has been lead by two co-chairs: Afghanistan as a permanent co-chair, and one of the Heart of Asia countries hosting the annual ministerial meeting as the co-chair.
* As permanent co-chair of this regional process, Afghanistan has been recognized as the main focal point/ coordinator of the Heart of Asia-Istanbul Process.

The Heart of Asia-Istanbul Process has three main elements:

* Political Consultation involving Afghanistan and its near and extended neighbours.
* A sustained incremental approach to implementation of the Confidence Building Measures (CBMs) identified in the Istanbul Process document.
* Seeking to contribute and bring greater coherence to the work of various regional processes and organisations, particularly as they relate to Afghanistan.

**Airlines seek stay on levy, HC issues notice**

The Delhi High Court has issued notices to the Centre, the Airports Authority of India and the Directorate General of Civil Aviation as the Federation of Indian Airlines (FAI) sought a stay on the government’s notification on levy of Rs.7500 to Rs.8500 per flight operated by Indian airlines to create a regional connectivity fund (RCF).

* The court has sought the Centre’s response on the plea challenging the levy of tax and the UDAN scheme.
* The FAI has sought quashing of the October 21 notification, by which a rule for such a levy was brought into the Aircraft Rules, 1934.

What the opponents say?

* Such a levy mentioned under the scheme is not contemplated in the aircraft rules and cannot be brought in as an obligation.
* Since this levy of tax is also not an amount payable by passengers for provision of any service of facility to them, this levy is nothing but a tax, and therefore cannot be levied without statutory sanction.

About the scheme:

The UDAN scheme is aimed at connecting under-served airports and regions. As per the government, a participating carrier — which would be extended Viability Gap Funding — has to bid for at least nine seats and a maximum of 40 seats. In the case of a helicopter, the operator has to bid for a minimum of five seats and a maximum of 13 seats.

The fund under the scheme will be used to develop regional airports and enhance regional connectivity under its Ude Desh Ka Aam Naagrik (UDAN) scheme.

**National anthem must be played before screening of films: Supreme Court**

The Supreme Court has ordered all cinema halls across the country to play the national anthem before the screening of films and that all present must “stand up in respect” till the anthem ended.

* The court has also asked the Cinema halls to display the national flag on screen when the anthem is played.

Why such move?

According to the court, the practice would “instil a feeling within one a sense of committed patriotism and nationalism.” Also, the protocol of showing respect and honour to the anthem and flag is rooted in “our national identity, integrity and constitutional patriotism.”

The court observed that it is the duty of every person to show respect when the national anthem is played or recited or sung under the Prevention of Insults to National Honour Act of 1951.

What else?

* In its interim order, while awaiting a detailed response from the Centre, the court has issued a complete ban on the commercial exploitation of the national anthem and the flag.
* The court also banned dramatisation of the anthem or it to be used in any part of any variety shows or for entertainment purposes.
* It also banned the display, recitation or use of the abridged version of the national anthem.

**Cabinet approves India’s negotiating position adopted at Kigali conference**

The Union Cabinet has given its ex-post facto approval to the negotiating position adopted by the Government of India at the recent Meeting of Parties (MoP) to the Montreal Protocol of the Vienna Convention for Protection of Ozone Layer that took place in October, 2016, in Kigali, Rwanda.

* The Cabinet has also approved the proposal of the MoEF to argue for adoption of an appropriate baseline years from out of 3 options within a range of 2024 to 2030 with freeze in a subsequent year.
* The flexibility of using any of the options within this range with a combination of the features of the proposed options in consultation with the Government has also been approved.

Key facts:

* It was agreed at Kigali that there would be two set of baselines or peak years for developing countries and India will have baseline years of 2024, 2025, 2026. This decision gives additional HCFC allowance of 65% that will be added to the Indian baseline consumption and production.
* The freeze year for India will be 2028, with a condition that there will be a technology review in 2024/2025 and, if the growth in the sectors using refrigerants is above certain agreed threshold, India can defer its freeze up to 2030. On the other hand, developed countries will reduce production and consumption of HFCs by 70% in 2029.
* As per the decisions taken in Kigali, India will complete its phase down in 4 steps from 2032 onwards with cumulative reduction of 10% in 2032, 20% in 2037, 30% in 2042 and 85% in 2047.

Kigali conference:

* The negotiations at Kigali were aimed at including HFCs in the list of chemicals under the Montreal Protocol with a view to regulate their production and consumption and phase them down over a period of time with financial assistance from the Multilateral Fund created under the Montreal Protocol.
* The Kigali amendments to the Montreal Protocol will, for the first time, incentivise improvement in energy efficiency in case of use of new refrigerant and technology.
* Funding for R&D and servicing sector in developing countries has also been included in the agreed solutions on finance.

Kigali framework**-**

-paris agreement – to control global temp to 2 degree Celsius to pre-IRev level by 2100;

This rqd intervention across various levels – energy, lifestyle, efficiency etc;

-It is in this context that the significance of the agreement reached in Kigali needs to be seen as any one, or even a smaller set of above interventions, will bring only minuscule improvements.

-kigali agreement - to phase out the use of HFCs, short for hydrofluorocarbons, over the next 30 years.

Why imp –

1. A low hanging fruit + most rewarding intervention - This single, relatively easy and painless intervention has the potential to prevent a rise of about 0.5 degrees Celsius in global temperatures by the end of the century. No other intervention comes even close in terms of returns offered, ease of implementation, or cost impacts. The HFC phaseout is not just the lowest hanging fruit on climate action, but also the most rewarding.
2. Potential danger-

HFCs came to replace CFCs, which are ODS(ozone Depleting Substance);

but later realized, HFCs have high global warming potential (GWP), and though at present they form a very small fraction of the total greenhouse gas emissions in the world, less than 5% but it is estimated that if this is not checked, these gases would account for 19% of global emissions by the year 2050.

-Agreement at Kigali-

* It was decided to amend Monteal protocol to phase out HFCs, as it is legally binding on both developed and developing countries(unlike Kyoto);
* There are 3 groups – developed, developing group 1((including China, Brazil and South Africa), and developing group 2(india, iraq, Saudi, pak) ;
* **Baseline year**=  The production or consumption of the harmful substance, like HFC, in the baseline year (or the average of three-year period) serves as the baseline amount against which reductions are assigned in the phasedown schedule.
* **Freeze Year** = is the time from when the use of the harmful chemical must begin to go below the average amounts used in the baseline period.
* **The use of the chemical can grow between the baseline year and the freeze year, but must come down to at least baseline levels in the freeze year.**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | developed countries | developing group 1 | developing group 2 |
| baseline year | 2011-13 | 2020-22 | 2024-26 |
| freeze year | 2015 | 2024 | 2028 |
| eliminate | 2036(85%) | 2045(80%) | 2047(85%) |

-  it is believed that this would be able to achieve about 90% of the objective of preventing 0.5 degree-Celsius temperature rise.

**Facts for Prelims**

**Cuban rumba and Ugandan music now on UNESCO’s heritage list:**

* Cuba’s sensual rumba dance and Belgium’s thriving beer culture have been added to UNESCO’s coveted list of “intangible” heritage.
* The list of “intangible” cultural treasures was created 10 years ago, mainly to increase awareness about them, while UNESCO also sometimes offers financial or technical support to countries struggling to protect them.

**Indologist award:**

* The President of India, Shri Pranab Mukherjee recently presented the second ICCR ‘Distinguished Indologist’ Award to Prof. Yu Long Yu of the People’s Republic of China.
* The annual ‘Distinguished Indologist’ Award has been instituted by ICCR to recognize eminent Indologists working abroad who have made outstanding contribution to the study/teaching/research of India’s philosophy, thought, history, art, culture, languages, literature, civilization, society etc. The Award amount is US$ 20000/-.
* The first ‘Distinguished Indologist’ Award was presented to Prof. Heinrich Freiherr Von Stietencron of Germany last year.

**Insights Daily Current Affairs, 02 December 2016**

*Paper 3 Topic: Awareness in the fields of IT, Space, Computers, robotics, nano-technology, bio-technology and issues relating to intellectual property rights.*

**First ‘water-wave laser’ created by scientists in Israel**

Scientists have created the first ‘water-wave laser’ that emits a beam through the interaction of light and water waves.

How a typical laser is created?

A typical laser can be created when the electrons in atoms become “excited” by energy absorbed from an outside source, causing them to emit radiation in the form of laser light.

How was the new laser created?

Usually, there is a huge difference between the low frequency of water waves on the surface of a liquid and the high frequency of light wave oscillations. This frequency difference reduces the efficiency of the energy transfer between light and water waves, which is needed to produce the laser emission.

* To compensate for this low efficiency, the researchers created a device in which an optical fibre delivers light into a tiny droplet of octane and water.
* Here, light waves and water waves pass through each other many times (about one million times) inside the droplet, generating the energy that leaves the droplet as the emission of the water-wave laser.
* The interaction between the fibre optic light and the miniscule vibrations on the surface of the droplet are like an echo, where the interaction of sound waves and the surface they pass through can make a single scream audible several times.
* In order to increase this echo effect in their device, the researchers used highly transparent, runny liquids, to encourage light and droplet interactions. Furthermore, a drop of water is a million times softer than the materials used in current laser technology.
* The minute pressure applied by light can therefore cause droplet deformation that is a million times greater than in a typical optomechanical device, which may offer greater control of the laser’s emissions and capabilities.

Significance of this discovery:

The study conducted by Technion-Israel Institute of Technology is the first bridge between two areas of research that were previously considered unrelated to one another: nonlinear optics and water waves.

Potential applications:

* For now, the water-wave laser offers a “playground” for scientists studying the interaction of light and fluid at a scale smaller than the width of a human hair.
* In future, the laser could be used in tiny sensors that combine light waves, sound and water waves.
* The laser may also be used in ‘lab-on-a-chip’ devices to study cell biology and test new drug therapies.

Sources: toi.

*Paper 3 Topic: Awareness in the fields of IT, Space, Computers, robotics, nano-technology, bio-technology and issues relating to intellectual property rights.*

**India’s first private moon mission next year**

[TeamIndus](http://teamindus.in/), a Bengaluru-based private aerospace company, is all set to send a spacecraft to the moon in December, 2017, aboard an Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) rocket.

About the mission:

The mission’s aim is to land this spacecraft on the moon, have it travel at least 500 metres and beam high- definition video, images and data back to the earth.

* Except for the launch vehicle, all of the technology that will power the rover and lander is developed in-house by TeamIndus. ISRO’s workhorse Polar Satellite Launch Vehicle (PSLV) would launch the spacecraft in December 2017.
* After completing a rotation around the earth, the satellite will ideally land in 21 days at Mare Imbrium, a region in the North-Western hemisphere of the Moon.
* The mission requires $60 million (approx. Rs. 450 crore) and company officials say they have so far tied in $15 million (approx. Rs. 100 crore) as equity funding. They hope to make up the rest of the money, through 2017, by leasing out spare space in the spacecraft for organisations wanting to conduct experiments and also through crowd-funding.

Background:

TeamIndus has high-profile investors, including Ratan Tata of the Tata Group and is a 100-member team of engineers, space enthusiasts, former Air Force pilots and former ISRO employees.

* It is one of the four international teams — and the only one from India — in the running for the Google Lunar XPRIZE, a $30 million (approx. Rs. 200 crore) competition, to encourage private companies to launch space missions.
* Two U.S.-based companies, Moon Express and Synergy Moon and one Israeli company — SPACE 1 L — have so far announced agreements with space-launch-vehicle companies such as SpaceX. Other than technical requirements, the prize rules also require that companies be 90% privately funded.
* The launch agreements are a prerequisite to be in the reckoning for the prize and also require contenders to launch their vehicles before December 28, 2017. TeamIndus is the only one so far to have announced a firm launch date.

Sources: the hindu.

*Paper 2 Topic: Effect of policies and politics of developed and developing countries on India’s interests, Indian diaspora.*

**U.S. for closer defence ties with India**

The U.S Congress is planning to pass the National Defence Authorisation Act 2017 shortly. The draft in this regard was recently released.

Background:

NDAA seeks executive action to “recognise India’s status as a major defence partner of the United States.” The U.S has already recognised India as a “major defence partner” in June, during Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s visit, but the implications of it remains undefined.

NDAA 2017 on India-US defence ties:

It mandates to “designate an individual within the executive branch who has experience in defense acquisition and technology” to ensure the success of bilateral defence ties and “to help resolve remaining issues impeding” them.

It also calls for “strengthening the effectiveness of the U.S.-India Defence Trade and Technology Initiative and the durability of the Department of Defence’s “India Rapid Reaction Cell,” a special unit that reviews ties with India.

Sources: the hindu.

*Paper 2 Topic: Structure, organization and functioning of the Executive and the Judiciary Ministries and Departments of the Government; pressure groups and formal/informal associations and their role in the Polity.*

**Anthem redux: How it came back in play**

Recently, the Supreme Court ruled that all cinemas in the country must play the national anthem prior to the screening of a film, with all doors closed. The order has become a talking point among millions of cinema-goers who visit thousands of theatres that dot India’s landscape where numerous films are screened every day.

Key facts:

Which are the States that have already made it compulsory for theatres to do so?

* Maharashtra, Chhattisgarh and Goa are among the States that have passed orders to this effect.

Under what law did these States make it mandatory?

The States have done this under the Prevention of Insults to National Honour Act, 1971. The Act got presidential assent on December 23, 1971. It has been amended twice since then.

* The Act, which addresses insults to the Constitution, the national flag and the national anthem, has its genesis in Article 51 (a) of the Constitution, which enjoins a duty on every citizen of India to abide by the Constitution and respect its ideals and institutions, the national flag and the national anthem.
* The Act states that whoever intentionally prevents the singing of the national anthem or causes disturbances to any assembly engaged in such singing, shall be punished with imprisonment for a term, which may extend to three years, or with fine, or with both.

Why was the Act given punitive provisions?

The objects and reasons for this Act said that cases involving deliberate disrespect to these national symbols were discussed in both Houses of Parliament and members urged the government to prevent the recurrence of such incidents.

Can the recent interim order of the Supreme Court be reviewed?

Yes, those aggrieved can file a modification application to address the omissions and contradictions in the recent Supreme Court Order.

Who can file the interventions?

The Cinema Owners Exhibitors’ Association of India can, for instance, plead that the order is in contradiction of an earlier Supreme Court order ordering cinema theatres to keep their doors open, after a fire killed 59 people in Uphaar Theatre in 1997. Organisations of differently abled people can seek exemptions from the order.

Sources: the hindu.

*Paper 2 Topic: Issues relating to development and management of Social Sector/Services relating to Health, Education, Human Resources.*

**Delhi HC quashes government ban on fixed dose combination drugs**

The Delhi high court has scrapped a government ban on popular drugs such as Corex, Saridon and Vicks Action 500 and called it a haphazard decision, underlining the uncertainties that dog India’s large but under-regulated medical sector.

* With this, the banned drugs – including D’Cold, Benadryl and Phensedyl that are widely used to treat headaches and colds – will continue be available freely in the market.

Background:

Many of these drugs went off the market after the health ministry banned 344 fixed-dose combination drugs in March but were back on shop shelves after pharma companies obtained a judicial stay on the order.

Why these drugs were banned?

The health ministry had banned these fixed-dose combination medicines over fears that they cause anti-microbial resistance and might even cause organ-failure because of high toxicity.

How the government defends its move?

The Centre defends its decision saying these medicines are potential health and safety hazards. It said the ban impacting over 6,000-odd brands was aimed at curbing the misuse of medicines.

What the companies say?

The companies contend that no enquiry was made from them or show cause notice issued prior to the notification. They said drug in the same combination is being marketed in other countries also.

Why did the court set aside the ban?

a. The court observed that the decision was taken by the Centre without following procedure prescribed in the Drugs and Cosmetics Act.

* It noted that the government had not consulted the Drugs Technical Advisory Board or the Drugs Consultative Committee but had acted on the advice of a ‘technical committee’, which, they said, violated the provisions of the Drugs and Cosmetics Act.
* Further, it said, that under Section 26A of the Drugs Act, a drug can be banned only after the licence holder of that drug is given a three-month notice.

b. The court also said that the “manner in which the proceedings till the issuance of the Notification have gone, does not suggest any such grave urgency (to ban the drugs)” since most of these FDCs had been available for long.

What are FDC drugs?

Fixed-dose combination drugs, or FDCs, combine two or more drugs in a single pill and are widely used to improve patient compliance as it is easier to get someone to take one drug than several.

What’s the concern?

India is one of the world’s largest markets for fixed dose combination drugs that make up almost half the market share but medical experts say most of them are irrational, that is they haven’t been approved by the national regulator.

Many of them slip through India’s labyrinthine regulation process with agencies at the central and state level, which often don’t coordinate.

What next?

The quashing of the notification does not imply that the drugs will now be available in the market.

The Centre may challenge the judgment in the Supreme Court or take the steps prescribed under the Drugs Act.

Also, the Supreme Court is in the process of hearing a plea filed by the Central government to transfer all cases challenging the March 10 notification before itself — pharma companies had challenged the ban before the Delhi, Chennai and Bangalore high courts.

**Facts for Prelims**

**UNESCO inscribes Yoga in the representative list of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity:**

* Yoga, India’s one of the ancient practices has now been inscribed as an element in the UNESCO’s list of Intangible Cultural Heritage of humanity.
* This decision was taken during the recently held 11th session of the Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.
* During this session, India’s proposal for inscribing Yoga as an Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity was unanimously supported by all the 24 members of the Intergovernmental Committee.
* Yoga has become the 13th intangible cultural heritage that has been listed from India so far with UNESCO.
* Previous ones includes the-
  + Chhau dance (Inscribed in 2010),
  + Buddhist chanting of Ladakh,
  + Sankirtana –the ritual singing, drumming, and dancing of Manipur,
  + traditional brass and copper craft of utensil making among the Thatheras of Jandiala Guru, Punjab
  + Ramlila- the traditional performance of the Ramayana.
* The list of intangible cultural treasures was created 10 years ago, mainly to increase awareness about them, while Unesco also sometimes offers financial or technical support to countries struggling to protect them.

**Asia’s first cycle highway now in Uttar Pradesh:**

* Uttar Pradesh now has Asia’s first cycle highway.
* A first-of-its-kind project, the 207-km-long cycle highway runs between Etawah and Agra.
* Constructed by the UP public works department, the cycle highway runs parallel to the main highway and is about 7-feet-wide. A divider in between ensures the safety of cyclists.
* Along the way from Etawah to Agra, it dots 92 villages.

**Vittiya Saksharata Abhiyan:**

It was recently launched by the government. The Abhiyan aims at making people aware about the cashless economic system.

**Insights Daily Current Affairs, 03 December 2016**

**Chairman of Auroville Foundation**

Dr Karan Singh, an eminent scholar and Rajya Sabha Member has been re-nominated as the Chairperson of the Governing Board of Auroville Foundation. Dr Singh has been re-nominated for a term of four years.

About Auroville Foundation:

The Government of India notified the constitution of Auroville Foundation as a **Statutory** Body on 29th January, 1991 as per the Auroville Foundation Act, 1988.

* The Auroville Foundation, headed by a chairman, is an **autonomous** body under the**Ministry of Human Resource Development**.

 What is Auroville?

Auroville (City of Dawn) is an experimental township in Viluppuram district mostly in the state of Tamil Nadu, India with some parts in the Union Territory of Puducherry.

* It was founded in 1968 by Mirra Alfassa (known as “the Mother”) and designed by architect Roger Anger.
* Auroville was meant to be a universal town where men and women of all countries are able to live in peace and progressive harmony, above all creeds, all politics and all nationalities. The purpose of Auroville is to realize human unity.

**Funds tracking system will trim Centre’s costs**

The Centre is planning to speed up the process of implementation of Public Financial Management System in the country.

* The new system, when implemented, will save a significant amount on interest costs. The system allows the government to monitor and access the more than Rs.1 lakh crore of idle funds lying with it under various heads.

Background:

There are about Rs.1-1.5 lakh crore of idle funds lying with the government. Now, if the government can access these funds through PFMS, it need not borrow that amount. At 7% interest, that works out to a saving in interest costs of at least Rs.7,000 crore.

About Public Financial Management System:

PFMS, administered by the department of expenditure;

It is an end-to-end solution for processing payments, tracking, monitoring, accounting, reconciliation and reporting.

It is a web based application.

* The PFMS platform compiles, collates and makes available in real-time, information regarding all government schemes, and, significantly, provides the government real-time information on resource availability and utilisation across schemes.
* Benefit-
* Provide real-time info on govt schemes resource utilization;
* It will allow government expenditure to adopt a Just-in- Time (JIT) approach, with payments made only when they are needed.
* Cost saving - There are about Rs.1-1.5 lakh crore of idle funds lying with the government. Now, if the government can access these funds through PFMS, it need not borrow that amount. At 7% interest, that works out to a saving in interest costs of at least Rs.7,000 crore

**Centre takes steps to drain excess cash**

The Centre has decided to increase the limit of bonds that can be issued under a [**market stabilisation scheme**](http://indianexpress.com/article/business/banking-and-finance/market-stabilisation-scheme-ceiling-hiked-to-rs-6-lakh-cr-to-tackle-extra-liquidity-rbi-4407747/) to mop up excess liquidity from the banking system arising out of its demonetisation move.

Key facts:

* In this regard, the government has decided to revise the ceiling for issue of securities under the Market Stabilisation Scheme (MSS) to Rs. 6,000 billion (6 lakh crore).
* The move is aimed to facilitate liquidity management operations by the central bank and the liquidity in the banking system was expected to rise further for sometime.

Background:

Following demonetisation, the banks received huge inflows of funds as people started depositing old Rs. 500 and Rs.1,000 notes in bank’s and post offices. Till November 27, Rs. 8.45 lakh crore was deposited and exchanged in the banking system, according to RBI data.

About Market Stabilization Scheme:

* The MSS scheme was launched in April 2004 to strengthen the RBI’s ability to conduct exchange rate and monetary management.
* The bills/bonds issued under MSS have all the attributes of the existing treasury bills and dated securities. These securities will be issued by way of auctions to be conducted by the RBI.
* The timing of issuance, amount and tenure of such securities will be decided by the RBI.
* The securities issued under the MSS scheme are matched by an equivalent cash balance held by the government with the RBI. As a result, their issuance will have a negligible impact on the fiscal deficit of the government.
* MSS (Market Stabilisation Scheme) securities are issued with the objective of providing the RBI with a stock of securities with which it can intervene in the market for managing liquidity. These securities are issued not to meet the government’s expenditure.

**New Delhi nod for Karmapa’s Arunachal visit**

The government has allowed [Urgyen Trinley Dorje](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ogyen_Trinley_Dorje), the 17th Gyalwang Karmapa, to address a public gathering at Mon in Arunachal Pradesh.

* The move comes six months after the Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS), headed by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, allowed the Karmapa to travel abroad.
* The Gyalwang Karmapa is the head of the Karma Kagyu school, one of the four main schools of Tibetan Buddhism. He escaped from Tibet in 2000.

**Four main school of Tibet Buddhism:**

* Nyingmapa: This is the ancient school of Tibetan Buddhism and was founded by Padmasambhāva and Śāntarakṣita.
* Kagyupa: This is an oral tradition concerned with the meditation based on experience.
* Sakyapa: It means “Grey Earth”. It follows the traditions of old times.
* Gelugpa: It means “Path of virtue”. Was originally a reformist movement and is known for its emphasis on logic and debate.

Background:

In 2011, police had recovered Rs 1.2 crore of unaccounted foreign currency, including Chinese currency, from the Gyuto Tantric University and Monastery in Dharamsala in Himachal Pradesh. The monastery is the temporary home of the Karmapa.

The police had registered a case against the Karmapa and the then UPA government placed further restrictions on his travel. After the NDA government came to power in 2014, the CCS reviewed the Karmapa’s case and he was allowed to travel freely within as well as outside India.

About Karma Kagyu school:

The Karma Kagyu lineage belongs to one of the 4 main schools of Tibetan Buddhism.

As a lineage of direct oral transmission it places particular emphasis on meditation and the realization of the direct experience of mind gained through the guidance of a teacher.

* The Karma Kagyu lineage has its roots in the teachings of the historical Buddha and developed into a practical way to enlightenment in India and Tibet.
* For over a 1000 years Buddhist Masters (Mahasiddhas) such as Naropa and Maitripa in India as well as the famous Tibetan Yogis Marpa and Milarepa shaped the lineage as a practical everyday practice for lay people.
* This school belongs to the Vajrayana branch of Mahayana Buddhism.
* Central teaching of the Karma Kagyu is the doctrine of Mahamudra, also known as the "Great Seal".
* This doctrine focuses on 4 principal stages of meditative practice namely:
  + The development of single-pointedness of mind.
  + The transcendence of all conceptual elaboration.
  + The cultivation of the perspective that all phenomena are of a "single taste".
  + The fruition of the path, which is beyond any contrived acts of meditation.

Karmapa:

Since the 12th century the Karmapas have been the heads of the Karma Kaygü lineage and responsible for the continuation of this direct transmission lineage.

The present 17th Gyalwa Karmapa Thaye Dorje was born in 1983 and in 1994 he managed to flee the oppression of Tibet and came to India.

**New way to produce nuclear fuel using electricity**

Scientists in Russia have developed a unique, low-cost method for producing high-quality nuclear fuel using electricity.

Background:

The main type of fuel for nuclear power reactors is the uranium oxide pellet composition. It is produced from a powder by granulation, pressing, and sintering with the subsequent control of the quality and size of the pellets.

About the new method:

The researchers have proposed an alternative mode of production, which forms the basis of powder metallurgy: electric pulse sintering under pressure.

The key idea in this method is heating by an electric current passing through the mold with the powder placed in. Under these circumstances, the uranium oxide fuel is simultaneously influenced by the powerful pulse discharge and mechanical pressure.

Advantages of the new technology:

* The new technology allows one to obtain products of high quality and to reduce the number of production stages without increasing the cost.
* The new method increases the production rate and improves the product quality.
* Using the new method, the fuel pellets may be produced even from uranium dioxide powder, which is not suitable for the conventional technology.
* With its help it is possible to obtain high-quality samples of fuel, including that for fast breeder reactors.

**SC okays Centre’s action plan to tackle air pollution in Delhi-NCR**

The Supreme Court has asked the Centre to put in place a pollution coding mechanism with a graded response system to tackle New Delhi’s growing foul air.

* The court directed the centre to adopt reports submitted by the Environment Pollution Control Authority (EPCA), which list steps to be taken whenever air quality deteriorates beyond a certain level.
* EPCA’s reports categorize four levels of air pollution in the National Capital Region (NCR) centred around Delhi, based on atmospheric particulate matter (PM) levels.
* The graded response also fixes responsibility on the agency that has to enforce the measure ;

The plan sets in motion a series of steps that every authority-central government, Delhi government, municipal corporations and Delhi’s neighbouring states-need to take as pollution levels spike.

* The court also asked the CPCB to install real-time and manual pollution monitoring stations in Delhi, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan to check air quality for the graded response.

Background:

The order came after the top court approved the Central Pollution Control Board’s (CPCB) “graded response action plan” that outlines measures based on air quality —

* moderate to poor- ban on garbage burning, watering of fly ash ponds, closure of brick kilns and polluting industries, and mechanised sweeping of roads;
* very poor - Ban on diesel generators, construction and burning of garbage on landfill sites
* severe,
* severe-plus or emergency – PM2.5> 300 or PM10 > 500; authorities will close schools, stop the entry of diesel trucks into the Capital, halt construction activities, introduce the odd-even scheme for private vehicles, and hike parking fees;

A separate set of action plan has been suggested for each category.

**Insights Daily Current Affairs, 05 December 2016**

**Mercosur suspends Venezuela**

Venezuela has been suspended from the Mercosur trade group over its failure to comply with its commitments when it joined the group in 2012. In this regard, the Foreign Ministers of the four founding members of Mercosur— Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay and Paraguay — notified Venezuela’s government of the decision in a letter.

Background:

Mercosur accepted Venezuela as a member when South America was dominated by Leftist governments in an effort to link the region’s biggest agricultural and energy markets. But, Venezuela had failed to meet a Dec. 1 deadline to adopt certain standards required for membership.

Why Venezuela was suspended?

Venezuela has not adopted all the membership rules and treaties it had promised. It has failed to meet economic, human rights and immigration accords governing the group.

Implications of this move:

* The suspension would not carry any sanctions against Venezuela, but would sideline its government from bloc meetings and trade negotiations.
* A suspension would also further isolate Venezuela as it struggles with food shortages and social unrest as its oil-dependent economy crumbles.

What is Mercosur?

Mercosur is an economic and political bloc comprising Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay.

* Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Guyana, Peru, and Suriname are associate members.
* Its purpose is to promote free trade and the fluid movement of goods, people, and currency. The official languages are Spanish, Portuguese and Guarani. It is now a full customs union and a trading bloc.

Sources: the hindu.

*Paper 2 Topic: Bilateral, regional and global groupings and agreements involving India and/or affecting India’s interests.*

**India, Qatar ink four pacts on visas, cybersecurity, investments**

India and Qatar have signed four pacts including in the field of visas, cyberspace and investments. These agreements were signed during the recent visit of PM Modi.

Agreements signed:

* Agreement on the exemption from visa requirement for holders of diplomatic, special and official passports.
* Protocol on Technical Cooperation in cyber space and combating cyber crime.
* Letter of Intent regarding negotiations on an Agreement on the grant of e-Visa for businessmen and tourists of the two countries.
* MoU between Supreme Committee for Delivery & Legacy of Qatar and Confederation of Indian Industry.

Background:

India enjoys close and friendly relations with Qatar, which are based on mutually beneficial commercial exchanges and extensive people-to-people contacts.

Qatar is not only an important trading partner for India in the Gulf region but is also the largest supplier of LNG, accounting for 66% of the total imports in 2015-16. Indians form the largest expatriate community in Qatar and their positive contribution in the progress and development of their host country is well recognised. There are over expatriate 630,000 Indians in Qatar.

Sources: the hindu.

*Paper 2 Topic: Bilateral, regional and global groupings and agreements involving India and/or affecting India’s interests.*

**Meet adopts resolution on drug trafficking in region**

The **Amritsar Declaration** was adopted at the concluding day of 6th Ministerial Conference of Heart of Asia (HoA).

Highlights of the declaration:

* The declaration puts focus on the concerned countries to address terrorism and enhancing regional economic cooperation.
* The declaration recognises terrorism as the biggest threat to peace and security. And demands immediate end to all forms of terrorism and all support financial and safe havens providing sanctuary to it.
* The declaration states the urgency to respond to the nexus between drug menace and its financial support for terrorist entities in Afghanistan. The declaration also mentions the Haqqani Network.
* It also calls for early finalisation of the draft comprehensive convention on international terrorism. It also looks at the early meeting of experts to discuss a draft regional counter terrorism framework strategy, recently prepared by Afghanistan for its early finalisation.
* The declaration states the welcoming of the agreements between the international community and Afghanistan for continued financial support to the Afghanistan National Defence and Security Forces (ANDSF) until 2020.
* The declaration welcomes the MOU on Jointly Building the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road between China and Afghanistan.
* The declaration also expressed serious concern about opium, the base material for production of heroin in Afghanistan, a large chunk of which eventually finds its way into India through Indo-Pak international border in Punjab.

Sources: the hindu.

*Paper 2 Topic: Government policies and interventions for development in various sectors and issues arising out of their design and implementation.*

**Environment Ministry postpones forest policy indefinitely**

The Environment Ministry has indefinitely postponed an ambitious plan to update**India’s forest policy**. It has also decided to abstain from committing to a timeframe by which it would have a third of India’s land under forest or tree cover, a key promise of the forest policy.

Background:

The MoEFCC had tasked the Bhopal-based Indian Institute of Forest Management (IIFM), an affiliated organisation, with reviewing and revising the existing forest policy.

This was the first time that the policy was being re-looked since 1988 as it wanted to update the several changes in the forest laws and provide a forward-looking policy that talked about increasing India’s forest cover and tackling the effects of climate change.

The organisation had submitted its report in June this year. However, the report was later rejected by the government.

Highlights of the report:

* It proposed levy of a green tax and called for safeguarding forest land by exercising strict restraint on diversion for non-forestry purposes like mining and industrial projects and practising responsible eco-tourism in forest areas to ensure safety of wildlife.
* On generating resources to manage the forest cover, it said the budget of the forestry sector should be appropriately enhanced so that the objectives enshrined in this policy can be achieved.
* It also proposed to levy environmental cess and carbon tax on certain products and services.
* On the contentious issue of diversion of forests for mining and industrial projects, it said, “Forest land diversion projects related to mining, quarrying, construction of dams, roads and other linear infrastructure needs to adopt special caution. Use of state-of-the-art technology which causes minimum pollution and damage should be promoted.”

Sources: the hindu.

**Facts for Prelims**

**Children’s Peace Prize:**

* Teen environmental activist Kehkashan Basu has been awarded the prestigious International Children’s Peace Prize.
* Basu was born in Dubai to Indian parents.
* Basu is being honoured for the work done by her child-run organisation Green Hope, based in the United Arab Emirates, which now has more than 1,000 volunteers in 10 countries around the world.
* The prize is awarded annually “to a child who fights courageously for children’s rights. It also includes a 100,000 euro ($106,000) investment for projects in the winner’s home country.
* Past winners include Pakistani education campaigner Malala Yousafzai and the prize’s first recipient, Nkosi Johnson, a South African boy who shone a light on the plight of children with HIV/AIDS.

**Ancient site found near Ladakh:**

* An ancient camping site used by pre-historic man and datable to circa 8500 BCE, has been found at an altitude of about 4,200 metres near Saser La in the Nubra Valley, Ladakh. Saser La leads to the Karakoram Pass.
* A camping site is a place where hunter-gatherers stayed temporarily before they moved on to another place.
* Charcoal pieces from hearth activity and remains of bones associated with it were found at the site. The charcoal pieces revealed that the site belonged to circa 8500 BCE.
* Such an early antiquity on the basis of a scientific date is the very first for that region. Only 6th century CE to 7th century CE remains were reported in Ladakh so far.

**Navy Day:**

* 45th Indian Navy Day was celebrated on December 4 to commemorate the launch of Operation Trident against Pakistan.
* On December 4 1971, the Indian Navy carried out Operation Trident, which was a devastating attack on Pakistan Naval Headquarters of Karachi. The attack was successful as it sank a minesweeper, a destroyer and an ammunition supply ship.

**Insights Daily Current Affairs, 06 December 2016**

**Proposal to amend law for cashless wage payments**

The Centre has proposed amending a law to empower States and allow industries to pay wages by cheque or by direct credit into bank accounts.

* In this regard, the Union Labour ministry has proposed changes to the **Section 6 of the Payment of Wages Act** of **1936**.
* The proposal states that State governments may specify the industry through official notifications where the payment of wages shall be made through cheques or direct credit in bank accounts.

Background:

The present law states that all payment of wages should be made in cash, with a provision enabling employers to obtain written permission of the worker to pay either by cheque, or by crediting the wages to his or her bank account.

Significance of this move:

One of the reasons for the ineffective enforcement of payments of wages to workers is the payment of wages in cash. So, the payment of wages only through cheque or through bank transfer in the bank account of employed persons will reduce the complaints regarding non-payment or less payment of minimum wages, besides serving the objectives of digital and less cash economy.

**Amazon rolls out Launchpad in India**

Amazon Inc. has announced the launch of its global programme for start-up products, Launchpad, in India.

What is it?

Launchpad is a destination for start-ups to showcase unique products to millions of consumers world over.

Key facts:

* As part of the Launchpad programme, Amazon globally lists consumer products from start-ups to customers through its online marketplace.
* Amazon provides the marketing, discovery and logistics support for these products, which it claims get access to a global consumer base of over 300 million.
* India is the seventh country where Launchpad has started. Other countries include the US, Germany, China, France and UK, among others.
* Overall, Launchpad lists products from 600 start-ups across these seven markets.
* As minimum criteria, these start-ups are required to have a ready, consumer facing physical product that can be ordered and shipped.

**Panel suggests one-time licensing for drugs**

 - At present, the renewal of licences for each formulation of drug rests with state regulators and is around three years.

-Drugs Technical Advisory Board (DTAB): It is the highest statutory decision-making body under the Union Health ministry on technical matters. It is constituted as per the Drugs and Cosmetics Act, 1940.

-Now, **drugs technical advisory board**has recently made some recommendations in this regard-

* one-time licensing for manufacture and sales of drugs;
* But at least one annual inspection;
* Separate rules for manufacturing, import, sale and distribution of cosmetics. It has suggested the European Union’s model;
* Proposed making influenza drugs Oseltamivir and Zanamvir available widely at all pharmacies, by putting it in the**Schedule H1 list.** The two drugs have been treated as [**Schedule X drugs**](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Schedule_X), available at select pharmacies;
* Retain the four-year approval threshold for ‘new drugs’. The domestic industry felt if the definition of a new drug is extended to 10 years, innovation will take a back seat and wanting the four-year period to be retained;

Significance of the new move:

It will help in ‘ease of doing business’ and the government’s ‘Make in India’ initiative at a time when the country is slipping in the competitiveness index. It will give a boost to industry and give comfort to our customers.

Sources: bs.

**Facts for Prelims**

**Konkan 16:**

* KONKAN 16 is the 2016 edition of the **annual bilateral maritime** exercise between the **Indian Navy and the Royal Navy(UK).** It is being held at Mumbai and Goa.

**NIDHI Aapke Nikat programme:**

* Nidhi Aapke Niakat is a public **outreach** programme. It is held on the 10th of every month in all the 122 field offices of Employees’ Provident Fund Organization (**EPFO**) and is presided over by the officer-in-charge.
* It is an endeavour by the Organization to bring together all its different stakeholders on a common platform.
* Approximately 17,000 grievances were received by EPFO since its inception in July, 2015. Efforts are to resolve these grievances on the spot itself. Out of the total grievances, as on date, only 268 grievances are pending.
* Nidhi Aapke Nikat not only adopts participatory and broad-based approach in dealing with its stakeholders, but also disseminates information regarding the new initiatives taken in their interest..
* The EPFO rechristened Bhavishya Nidhi Adalat as Nidhi Aapke Nikat;
* EPFO-
  + under MoLE;
  + It assists the Central Board of Trustees, a statutory body formed by the Employees’ Provident Fund and Miscellaneous Provisions Act, 1952

**Insights Daily Current Affairs, 07 December 2016**

**Final notification on Eco-Sensitive Zone in Sanjay Gandhi National Park**

-Sanjay Gandhi National Park -It is part of Western Ghat Biodiversity complex

- Final Notification for an Eco-Sensitive Zone (ESZ) area of 59.46 sq kms was notified by the government in Sanjay Gandhi National Park in Mumbai.

-What is Eco-Sensitive Zone?

* It is created to act as a buffer for further protection around Protected Areas (PAs) such as National Parks and Wildlife sanctuaries.
* Activities around such areas are regulated and managed so as to protect the environment.

-ESZ is notified under Section 3 of the EPA, 1986 by the MoEF;

-ESZ Guidelines classify activities under three categories:

* Prohibited: Commercial Mining, Setting of Saw Mill, Setting of industries causing pollution, establishment of major hydroelectric projects etc.
* Regulated: Felling of Trees, Establishment of hotels and resorts, erection of electrical cables, Drastic change of agricultural systems etc.
* Permitted: Ongoing agriculture and horticulture practices by local communities, rain water harvesting, organic farming etc.

-issue-

* Many states are opposed to ESZ because of presence of minerals and resources side by side.
* Local people in many areas are also opposed to ESZ for loss of livelihood due to restriction placed by it on various activities

-Way Forward

* Local communities should be incentivized and their participation should be ensured for successful implementation of ESZ.
* State governments should balance the need for development, aspirations of local people and environmental conservation needs.

**TIFR discovery challenges theory of superconductivity**

- What are superconductors?

Superconductors are materials that conduct electricity with no resistance whatsoever.

-To become superconductors-

* the element should have mobile electrons, and
* these electrons should come together to form pairs, known as Cooper pairs.

-Scientists have been trying to discover superconductivity in bismuth for decades but in vain.

-Scientists in the past have found superconductivity in bismuth in amorphous or crystalline forms.

-The current theory of superconductivity says that superconducting material must be abundant in free flowing mobile electrons.

However, Bismuth has only one mobile electron for every 100,000 atoms. As one electron is shared by 100,000 atoms, the carrier density of bismuth is very small.

-Recently, a team of researchers at the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research have discovered superconductivity in bismuth at a fraction of degree above absolute zero (-273.16° Celsius)

-Significance

* It invalidates the Bardeen-Cooper-Schrieffer Theory of Superconductivity. According to which, bismuth can only achieve superconductivity at a much lower temperature.
* With this discovery, bismuth has broken a 50 year old record of strontium titanate of being the lowest carrier density superconductor.
* This discovery will inspire more research and theoretical work on how low density superconductors work.

**Pradhan moots Asian buyers forum to counter OPEC clout**

Minister of State for Petroleum and Natural Gas Dharmendra Pradhan has mooted the idea of a large Asian LNG buyers forum to negotiate more equitable trade deals and balance the influence of the Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC).

* This assumes significance in light of the ongoing increase in oil prices resulting in an adverse impact on the Indian exchequer and the government’s commitment to move towards a gas-based economy.
* A number of large Asian LNG buyers, including India, could benefit by joining hands and thereby, possibly, bring in more equitable trade deals.

Background:

Today a large number of LNG deals are linked to oil prices.

Only geographies with LNG hubs have prices lower than the oil-linked prices.

The view is that Asian LNG buyers pay higher rates since there is no LNG hub in Asia and there is no unity among consumers.

About OPEC:

The Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) is a group of oil-producing nations that was first established in Baghdad, Iraq, in 1961. OPEC is one of the most powerful international organizations in the world and was a major player in the shift towards state control over natural resources.

* Before OPEC was formed, the oil market was dominated by a group of multinational companies. The formation of OPEC was a major act of sovereignty by the founding nations, and it helped ensure that private companies could not unilaterally cut prices throughout the world.
* Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and Venezuela are the founding Members of the Organization.
* Today, OPEC is comprised of 13 members and still has a massive impact on oil production and price around the world.

**BRICS nations vow to automatic sharing of tax information**

BRICS nations, including India, have pledged to share tax information automatically and adopt global standards on tax transparency to check cross border tax evasion. This was taken during the recently concluded meeting of the heads of Revenue of Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa (BRICS).

**Facts for Prelims**

**Winter Fog Experiment:**

* To better understand the science of fog formation over New Delhi, the **Ministry of Earth Sciences** recently inaugurated the Winter Fog Campaign at the New Delhi Airport.
* This move is aimed at understanding different physical and chemical features of fog and factors responsible for its genesis, intensity and duration.
* The goal of the Winter Fog Experiment (WIFEX) is to develop methods for forecasting winter fog on various temporal and spatial scales, and help reduce its adverse impact on aviation, transportation and economy, and loss of human life due to accidents.
* Recent studies on fog in India during the past 10-15 years have prompted significant socio-economic concern due to increase in frequency, persistence and intensity of fog occurrence over the northern parts of the country.
* It is one of the major weather hazards, impacting aviation, road transportation, economy and public life in the world’s most densely populated region.

**45th All India Police Science Congress:**

* The Bureau of Police Research and Development (BPR&D) and Kerala Police are jointly organizing the 45th All India Police Science Congress at Kovalam, Thiruvananthapuram.
* The main objective of this prestigious national event is to provide a common platform to the various police forces/units, social scientists, forensic experts and other stakeholders to deliberate on selected themes of topical interest to the Indian Police.
* It will also provide an opportunity to learn from each other’s experience by understanding the best practices being followed in other States/UTs.
* The deliberations of All India Police Science Congress will provide a future roadmap for all the police forces/services of the country to provide quality service to the people.
* The First All India Police Science Congress was held in 1960 at Patna.

**Dr. Ambedkar’s birth day to be celebrated as Water Day:**

Lauding the contribution of Dr. [B R Ambedkar in **water resources management**](http://www.cwc.gov.in/main/downloads/Ambedkar's%20Book.pdf) of the country Union Minister for Water Resources, River Development and Ganga Rejuvenation Sushri Uma Bharti has announced that **his birth day 14th April will be celebrated as “Water Day”**.

**Insights Daily Current Affairs, 08 December 2016**

**Expansion of the mandate of Delhi Mumbai Industrial Corridor Project Implementation Trust Fund**

-To accelerate the growth in manufacturing and for ensuring scientifically planned urbanization, Government of India (Gol) has adopted the strategy of developing integrated Industrial Corridors in partnership with State Governments with focus on manufacturing.

-Five Corridors are planned-

* Delhi Mumbai Industrial Corridor (DMIC),
* Chennai-Bengaluru Industrial Corridor (CBIC),
* Amritsar Kolkata Industrial Corridor (AKIG),
* Bengaluru- Mumbai Economic Corridor (BMEC)
* Vizag-Chennai Industrial Corridor (VCIC)

-Cabinet has approved for expansion of the mandate of Delhi Mumbai Industrial Corridor Project Implementation Trust Fund (DMIC-PITF Trust) and its re-designation as National Industrial Corridor Development & Implementation Trust (NICDIT) for integrated development of Industrial Corridors.

-NICDIT-

* NICDIT would be an apex body under the administrative control of DIPP for coordinated and unified development of all the industrial corridors in the country.
* It will channelize Gol funds as well as institutional funds while ensuring that the various corridors are properly planned and implemented keeping in view the broad national perspectives regarding industrial and city development.
* It will support project development activities, appraise, approve and sanction projects.
* It will also coordinate all central efforts for the development of Industrial Corridor projects and will monitor their implementation.
* DMICDC will function as a knowledge partner to NICDIT in respect of all the Industrial Corridors in addition to its present DMIC work, till Knowledge Partner(s) for other Industrial Corridors are in place.
* Apex Monitoring Authority will periodically review performance of NICDIT; its members are –
  + MoF = Chairman
  + Min of Commerce
  + Min of rly
  + Min of road transport and highways
  + Min of shipping
  + VC of Niti ayog
  + CMs of concerned states

-significance of such move-

* It brings 2 simultaneous objectives – manf growth and planned urbanization tgdr;
* Nodal body helps in sharing the learning from development of Industrial Corridors, which will enable innovation in areas such as planning, design development and funding of such projects.

**Centre to review fertilizer subsidy rates after 6 months**

The government has approved the proposal of half-yearly review of nutrient-based subsidy (NBS) rates for phosphatic and potassic (P&K) fertilizers for 2016-17 against the present practice of annual review.

* The government has also decided to ensure that any fall in international prices will be reflected by the fertilizer companies with subsequent reduction in maximum retail prices.
* These moves are expected to result in increase in consumption of P&K fertilizers which will result in balanced fertilization.

Background:

The government has been implementing Nutrient Based Subsidy (NBS) policy for decontrolled phosphate and potash (P&K) fertilisers since April 2010. Under this policy, MRP is fixed by the fertiliser companies as per market dynamics.

**PSLV-C36 Successfully Launches RESOURCESAT-2A Remote Sensing Satellite**

In its thirty eighth flight (PSLV-C36), ISRO’s PSLV has successfully launched the RESOURCESAT-2A Satellite from the Satish Dhawan Space Centre SHAR, Sriharikota. This is the thirty seventh consecutively successful mission of PSLV.

About RESOURCESAT-2A:

* It is a remote sensing satellite which will provide information on water bodies, farm lands, crop extent, forests, mineral deposits, coasts, rural and urban spreads for the next five years.
* The satellite was launched into the Sun Synchronous Orbit at 825 km height.
* Much like its predecessors RESOURCESAT 1 and 2, RESOURCESAT-2A also has a three tier imaging system.
* RESOURCESAT-2A will be useful in crop area and production estimation, drought monitoring, soil mapping, cropping system analysis and farm advisories generation

**SC seeks Parliamentary panel report on Lokpal amendments**

The Supreme Court has asked the Centre to place before it a copy of the report of a Parliamentary standing committee suggesting amendments to the Lokpal law.

What’s the issue?

The court is hearing a petition filed by NGO Common Cause which has sought a direction to the Centre to make the appointment of chairperson and members of Lokpal as per the amended rules framed under Lokpal and Lokayuktas Act, 2013.

* The NGO in its plea has also sought a direction to the Centre to ensure that the procedure for selecting the chairperson and members of Lokpal must be transparent as envisaged under the Act.
* According to the NGO, the inaction of the government in making the appointment of Lokpal is arbitrary and unreasonable and hence violative of Article 14 of the Constitution.

Background:

The appointment of anti-corruption ombudsman is hanging in balance since the Lokpal and Lokayuktas Act, 2013, which received Presidential assent on January 1, 2014 because the legislation provides for the LoP to be on the selection committee, but in the present Lok Sabha the largest opposition party does not have the required number of MPs for its leader to be designated as Leader of Opposition.

* Earlier, the court had said the requirement of LoP on the panel was “dispensable” and can be substituted with the leader of the largest opposition party.
* In Lok Sabha, the largest opposition party Congress has only 45 members and lacks the requisite 10% of total 545 seats, giving rise to the need to amend the present Lokpal Act.

What the law says?

The law provides for selection of chairperson and members of Lokpal by a committee consisting of –

* Prime Minister,
* Lok Sabha Speaker,
* LoP in Lok Sabha,
* Chief Justice of India or a sitting SC judge nominated by the him,
* an eminent jurist - nominated by President of India on the basis of recommendations of first four members of selection panel.

**Facts for Prelims**

**Veterans Outreach Android App:**

* In an attempt to reach out to Army veterans, and create an interactive mechanism, the government has launched a mobile app called “Veterans Outreach App”. This will provide certain specific facilities to Army Veterans & Veer Naris on their android based mobiles.
* The app was prepared under the Directorate of Indian Army Veterans (DIAV), which functions under the Adjutant General Branch and runs a web portal specifically meant for veterans and Veer Naris called ‘Indian Army Veterans Portal” (www. indianarmyveterans.gov.in ).
* The Veterans Outreach App has specific features like “Ask a question” and “Locator Services” that enable locating Ex-Serviceman Cells, ECHS Polyclinics, Station Canteens and Sainik Aram Garh’s all across the country.
* The app also facilitates route guidance on a google map to any chosen service facility.
* The App also facilitates “Findings Coursemates” from amongst veterans who are registered on the Indian Army Veterans Portal and thereby enabling them to reconnect with old mates.
* An additional feature incorporates providing links to various web portals run by Directorate General Recruiting, Directorate General Resettlement, Kendriya Sainik Board. Indian Army. Portal and Principle Controller of Defence Accounts.

**India International Science Festival (IISF-2016) inaugurated in New Delhi:**

* India International Science Festival (IISF-2016) was recently inaugurated.
* It is the largest festival of science in this country with its focus on “Science for the Masses”.
* India International Science Festival (IISF) as a major science event was conceptualized last year. It was a great success and also won the distinction of Guinness Book of World Record for successful conduct of Largest Practical Science Lesson by 2000 school students.
* The success of first IISF in 2015 gave the impetus to launch IISF-2016 with expanded scope, mandate and operation.
* IISF-2016 aims to encourage and develop scientific temper and attitude, promote exchange of knowledge and ideas among young minds including showcasing of recent developments and contributions of India in science and technology involving all our scientific departments.
* IISF-2016 will showcase India’s S&T prowess, technological developments, history of Indian Science and science education involving more than 10000 young researchers, school students, academicians and top level Indian scientists.

**Insights Daily Current Affairs, 09 December 2016**

**Sale of Cotton Stocks by CCI**

According to the latest figures, during cotton season 2015-16 (1st October, 2015 to 30th September, 2016), Cotton Corporation of India (CCI) has purchased seed cotton (kapas) equivalent to 8.44 lakh bales at Minimum Support Price (MSP).

Background:

* During cotton season 2015-16, cotton prices in the country abnormally increased in the month of May/July 2016 due to damage by white fly pests in Northern region & pink boll worm attack in Gujarat region and panic buying by the mills to cover their lean season requirement.
* In such situation, in order to safeguard the interest of the textile Industry including Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs), Government of India, Ministry of Textiles decided in July, 2016 to sell the balance unsold stock available with CCI to MSME units through e-sale so as to provide them some relief from cotton price volatility in the market and stabilize the market prices.
* Accordingly, all the cotton stocks of CCI has been sold.

About CCI:

Cotton Corporation of India or CCI is a Government of India agency, engaged in diverse activities related to trade, procurement, and export of cotton.

* CCI is a public sector agency responsible for –
  + equitable distribution of cotton among the different constituents of the industry
  + aid imports of cotton.
* Under Min of Textiles;
* It was established in 1970 under Companies Act 1956.
* CCI is governed by Textile Policy 1985 issued by Ministry of Textiles Organisation, Government of India.

**DST-Intel Collaborative Research for Real-Time River Water and Air Quality Monitoring**

Recognizing the importance of developing the online River Water and Air Quality Monitoring (WAQM) systems, Department of Science and Technology (DST), Government of India and Intel are collaborating to jointly initiate “DST-Intel Collaborative Research for Real-Time River Water and Air Quality Monitoring” soliciting proposals from Academic/Research Institutions and providing grant-in-aid support to the selected project(s).

Key facts:

* This will be a joint programme of Public-Private Partnership (PPP) mode.
* The aim of this initiative is to develop key technologies for sensing, communication and analysis of large-scale data collected from autonomous networks of perpetual/long-lived sensor nodes, followed by integration and deployment for water and air quality monitoring in real-time.
* The program will be administered by the binational Indo-U.S. Science and Technology Forum (IUSSTF).

**Himachal Pradesh becomes 18th State to join UDAY**

Government of India has signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the State of Himachal Pradesh and the State DISCOM under the Ujwal DISCOM Assurance Yojana (UDAY), for operational and financial turnaround of the DISCOM.

* Himachal Pradesh is the 18th State to sign MoU under UDAY.

How will this move help Himachal Pradesh?

An overall net benefit of approximately Rs. 823 crores would accrue to the State by opting to participate in UDAY, by way of savings in interest cost, reduction in Aggregate Technical and Commercial (AT&C) and transmission losses, interventions in energy efficiency etc. during the period of turnaround.

ABOUT UDAY SCHEME:

UDAY is an effort to make these DISCOMs financially and operationally healthy, to be able to supply adequate power at affordable rates, and enable the Governments to make efforts towards 100% Village electrification and 24X7 Power For All.

* It envisages to reduce interest burden, cost of power and AT&C losses. Consequently, DISCOM would become sustainable to supply adequate and reliable power enabling 24×7 power supply.
* The scheme provides that States would take over 75% debt of Discoms, as on 30th September, 2015 in two years.
* UDAY has inbuilt incentives encouraging State Governments to voluntarily restructure their debts. These incentives include –
  + taking over of DISCOM debt by the States outside the fiscal deficit limits;
  + reduction in the cost of power through various measures such as coal linkage rationalization, liberal coal swaps;
  + priority/additional funding through schemes of MoP & MNRE.
* UDAY is different from earlier restructuring schemes in several ways including –
  + flexibility of keeping debt taken over outside fiscal deficit limit,
  + reduction in cost of power
  + series of time bound interventions for improving operational efficiency.
* UDAY also provides for measures that will reduce the cost of power generation, which would ultimately benefit consumers.

**Triple talaq is ‘cruel’, ‘most demeaning’ to women**

Observing that the judicial conscience is “disturbed”, the Allahabad High Court has held that triple talaq is “cruel” and raised a question whether the Muslim Personal law could be amended to alleviate the sufferings of Muslim women.

Important observations made by the court:

* Coming down heavily on the practice, the court has held that this form of “instant divorce” is “most demeaning” which “impedes and drags India from becoming a nation“.
* The court said the view that “the Muslim husband enjoys an arbitrary, unilateral power to inflict instant divorce” does not tie in with Islamic laws.
* The court observed that “divorce is permissible in Islam only in case of extreme emergency. When all efforts for effecting a reconciliation have failed, the parties may proceed to a dissolution of marriage by Talaq or by Khola“.
* The court also noted that personal laws of any community cannot claim supremacy over the rights granted to the individuals by the Constitution that provides for equality and non-discrimination.

Background:

The constitution allows Muslims, the biggest religious minority group in the country, to regulate matters such as marriage, divorce and inheritance through their own civil code.

Even the Supreme Court has been examining how much it can interfere in Muslim laws governing family-related issues as it hears a plea to end the practice which permits Muslim men to divorce their wives by saying talaq three times.

Besides, the centre had recently informed the Supreme Court that it is opposed to the Muslim practice of triple talaq. It had also described this practice as “misplaced in a secular country.”

Sources: the hindu.

*Paper 3 Topic: Science and Technology- developments and their applications and effects in everyday life Achievements of Indians in science & technology; indigenization of technology and developing new technology.*

**A more muscular rice variety takes on wheat**

A rice variety that packs more protein to match wheat has been released by Karnataka’s University of Agricultural Sciences – Bengaluru.

* The rice strain, which offers an option to those who are not comfortable switching over to wheat for supplementary protein, is now available for commercial cultivation.
* The high-protein variety has been under development at UAS-B for nearly 10 years, with Rs. 92 lakh in funding from the Union Department of Biotechnology.

What’s good about the new strain?

* The new strain has 12 to13% protein content, which is higher than the 6 to 7.5% in normal rice. Wheat has about 14% of protein.
* Using conventional breeding, researchers raised the amount of lysine, an amino acid that helps synthesize proteins, by about 20%. The higher protein leads to a decrease in starch, benefiting diabetics.
* The rice protein is also easier to digest compared to what comes from non-vegetarian sources. It is particularly good for children and the elderly.
* For the farmer, the new entrant is a lucrative option that can be grown like any other cereal, without extra costs.

Sources: the hindu.

*Paper 2 Topic: Bilateral, regional and global groupings and agreements involving India and/or affecting India’s interests.*

**India, U.S. talk defence partnership**

Defence Minister Manohar Parrikar and United States Secretary of Defence Ashton Carter have finalised India’s designation as a Major Defense Partner of the United States. This was announced in the recent India-US joint statement on Carter’s visit to New Delhi. This status puts India on a par with the closest allies and partners of the U.S.

Implications of this move:

The designation as a Major Defense Partner is a status unique to India and institutionalises the progress made to facilitate defence trade and technology-sharing with India to a level at par with that of the United States’ closest allies and partners, and ensures enduring cooperation into the future.

Background:

During Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s trip to Washington in June, the United States said it recognised India as a Major Defense Partner. The joint statement issued then had acknowledged the US-India defence relationship as a possible “anchor of stability”, with the United States saying it will “continue to work toward facilitating technology sharing with India to a level commensurate with that of its closest allies and partners”.

However, there were differences between the two sides about the level of technology transfer and cooperation permissible under the Major Defense Partner status. Besides, India was seeking benefits granted to the closest allies of the US, such as Australia and the UK which the Pentagon was hesitant to concede.

India Amendment in the National Defense Authorization Act, 2017 (NDAA):

India’s Major Defense Partner status has been made a part of the India Amendment in the National Defense Authorization Act, 2017 (NDAA), approved by the US Congress to allocate funds annually to the US military. This Bill is expected to be passed shortly which will put a formal, official stamp on India’s status.

Under the India Amendment in the NDAA 2017, the US government will, consistent with its conventional arms transfer policy, inform the review of requests to export defence articles, defence services, or related technology to India under the Arms Export Control Act, and inform any regulatory and policy adjustments that may be appropriate.

Besides recognising India’s status as a Major Defense Partner, the India Amendment will designate an American official to ensure the success of the Framework for the United States-India Defense Relationship which was signed last year, to approve and facilitate the transfer of advanced technology, and to strengthen the effectiveness of the US-India Defense Trade and Technology Initiative and the durability of the India Rapid Reaction Cell in Pentagon.

Sources: the hindu.

**Facts for Prelims**

**Shilp Guru Awards:**

-What are Shilp Guru Awards?

* It was first introduced in 2002 on the occasion of “Golden Jubilee Year of Handicrafts Resurgence in India”.
* It is conferred every year to master craftsman for innovating different styles and designs of the traditional craftsmanship.

-Details about few important crafts are mentioned below

**-Kalamkari Painting**

* Kalamkari literally means, Kalam - pen & kari - work, i.e., art work done using a pen.
* It is an ancient style of hand painting done on cotton or silk fabric with a tamarind pen using natural dyes.
* This colourful art dates back to more than 3000 B.C
* The traditional style of Kalamkari flourished in Kalahasti (80 miles north of Chennai) and Masulipatnam (200 miles east of Hyderabad
* The paintings at that time used to depict Hindu Deities and scenes from Hindu mythology.
* Masulipatnam being a Muslim region, the weavers were involved in block printing art.

-**Bidri Craft**

* It is a metal handicraft from Bidar district of Karnataka.
* The craft originated in Persia and came to India in the 14th century. It flourished under the Bahamani dynasty.
* In Bidri work, zinc is the primary metal used.
* Bidriware is characterised by its black shine which comes from the special soil used. This is black soil found in Bidri.

**-Thewa Craft**

* Thewa is a unique art of jewellery making which involves embossing of intricately worked-out sheet of gold
* It originated about 400 years ago in the Pratapgarh district of Rajasthan.
* The word Thewa comes from two words: Tharna meaning hammer and Vada meaning silver wire.
* Its origin is attributed to the goldsmith Nathuji Soni who was conferred the title of Rajasoni by Raja Savant Singh of Pratapgarh.
* The title and the craft have been passed down through generations.

**-Mithila Painting**

* Also known as Madhubani painting, it is characterized by line drawing filled in with bright colours.
* Painting is done with fingers, twigs, brushes, nib-pens and matchsticks.
* Geometrical patterns are a characteristic feature.
* The painting is done with mineral pigments
* Originally this painting was done on freshly plastered or mud wall.
* For commercial purposes, it is now done on paper, cloth and canvas.

**Vardah:**

* It is the season’s third cyclonic storm.
* Vardah has formed in the Southeast Bay of Bengal.
* It has already hit Andaman and Nicobar Islands.
* Cyclone Vardah made a landfall on Chennai on December 10, 2016 uprooting trees, causing heavy rainfall and bringing the metropolitan to a standstill. According to Assocham, Tamil Nadu has to bear a loss of around Rs. 6,749 crore ($1billion) due to the destruction caused by Vardah.
* What is a Landfall?
  + A landfall is the intersection of the center of tropical cyclone with a coastline.
  + A landfall is often accompanied by strong winds, lashing rain and rising sea waves.

**Insights Daily Current Affairs, 10 December 2016**

**SECI to Launch 1000 MW Rooftop Solar PV Scheme for Government Sector**

 - - As a step towards fulfillment of the Government of India’s target for installation of 40 GW rooftop solar power plants by the year 2022, Solar Energy Corporation of India (SECI) has launched a tender of 1GW capacity for development of grid-connected rooftop solar capacity for Central Government Ministries/Departments;

* It is not only SECI’s largest tender but also the single-largest green energy tender in the world in the rooftop category.
* Rooftop solar systems will be installed with the financial assistance from MNRE in the form of Incentives.
* The power generated from the systems shall be used for meeting the captive requirement of the buildings and the surplus power, if any, shall be fed to the grid under the net-metering arrangement of the respective State.

About SECI:

-set up under MoNRE to facilitate the implementation of Jawaharlal Nehru National Solar Mission.

* It is the only Public Sector Undertaking dedicated to the solar energy sector.
* The company’s mandate has recently been broadened to cover the entire renewable energy domain and the company renamed to Renewable Energy Corporation of India (RECI).
* The company is responsible for implementation of a number of government schemes, major ones being the-
  + VGF schemes for large-scale grid-connected projects under JNNSM,
  + solar park scheme
  + grid-connected solar rooftop scheme
  + other specialised schemes such as defence scheme, canal-top scheme, Indo-Pak border scheme etc.
* SECI is the leading PSU in the rooftop solar segment, and has already commissioned over 54 MW capacity of rooftop solar projects under multiple government schemes.

**Government urges public to restrict the use of newspapers as food packaging material**

Expressing concern over the practice of wrapping, covering or processing foods with newspaper and printed recycled paper materials in India, Ministry of Health and Family Welfare has directed The Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) to issue an advisory restricting the use of newspapers as food packaging material.

* The government has also asked the Commissioners of Food Safety of all States/Union Territories to initiate systematic campaigns for generating awareness among all the stakeholders to discourage the use of newspapers for packing, serving and storing food items.

Background:

Use of newspapers for wrapping, packing and serving food is a common practice in India. However, this is a food safety hazard. Wrapping food in newspapers is an unhealthy practice and the consumption of such food is injurious to health, even if the food has been cooked hygienically. Indians are being slowly poisoned due to newspaper being widely used as food packaging material by small hotels, vendors and also in homes in lieu of absorbent paper.

Why restrict the use of newspaper as food packaging material?

Foods contaminated by newspaper ink raise serious health concerns since the ink contains multiple bioactive materials with known negative health effects. Printing inks may also contain harmful colors, pigments, binders, additives, and preservatives. Besides chemical contaminants, presence of pathogenic microorganisms in used newspapers also poses potential risk to human health.

Newspapers and even paper/ cardboard boxes made of recycled paper may be contaminated with metallic contaminants, mineral oils and harmful chemicals like phthalates which can cause digestive problems and also lead to severe toxicity.

Who are vulnerable?

Older people, teenagers, children and people with compromised vital organs and immune systems are at a greater risk of acquiring cancer-related health complications, if they are exposed to food packed in such material.

**India reports fishery subsidies; aims to protect ‘poor’ fisherfolk**

* According to the UN FAO’s ‘State of World Fisheries and Aquaculture’, almost a third of commercial fish stocks are now fished at biologically unsustainable levels.
* So, there have been demands from US-led group of nations for a ban on subsidies given for illegal, unregulated and unreported (IUU) fishing.
* This led India to file subsidies data in WTO which are worth Rs.284 crore in 2014-15. Tamil Nadu had the highest subsidy with Rs.169 crore (of which Rs.148 crore is in fuel category)
* Necessity of subsidies
  + To protect and secure the livelihood of traditional and poor fishing communities.
  + The subsidies were provided to fishermen who were either homeless or poor boat owners, those with registered craft and members of fishermen cooperative societies. They went for vital components such as:

a. Fuel, purchase of inboard machine, purchasing nets, accessories, life-saving jackets etc.,

b. Insurance cover to fishermen for accident due to cyclone/mishap/calamities etc.,

* India’s stand
  + Ban on subsidies for IUU fishing could lead to prohibition even on fishing that could be termed non-IUU.
  + This could, in turn, harm the interests of lakhs of subsistence fisher folk in poor and developing nations.
* Way forward
  + US too gives certain subsidies that benefit several sectors, including fishing industry. All the subsidies must be included.
  + Also, currently there is no unanimity among WTO members on what constitutes IUU fishing. This should be achieved first.
  + ‘Cherry picking’ of topics of interest to developed nations and prioritising negotiations on fisheries subsidies should be stopped.

**Plastic notes will help beat counterfeiting**

The government has decided to print banknotes based on a plastic or polymer substrate in order to make counterfeiting them more difficult.

Background:

The Reserve Bank for long has been planning to launch plastic currency note after field trials. Such notes were first introduced in Australia to safeguard against counterfeiting.

In February 2014, the government had informed Parliament that one billion plastic notes of Rs 10 denomination would be introduced in a field trial in five cities selected for their geographical and climatic diversity. The selected cities were Kochi, Mysore, Jaipur, Shimla and Bhubaneswar.

Advantages of plastic notes:

* Plastic notes have an average life span of about five years
* are difficult to imitate.
* Also, currency notes made of plastic are cleaner than paper ones.

Disadvantages associated with plastic notes:

* Higher production cost.
* Difficult to fold.
* Hard to count as they are slippery.
* Huge cost to recaliberate ATMs as existing machines are not compatible.

**Disabled children miss out due to lack of support services**

-The Council of Social Development recently released India Social Development Report 2016.

-About the report

* The theme of the report is " Disability Rights Perspective " addressing the fundamental elements of non-derogable rights of the differently abled people.
* The report drew on data from the Census, the NSS, India Human Development Survey, and the National Family Health Survey.

-Findings of the report

* Popln of PWDs = 2.2%; distribution –
  + men =56%;
  + rural=70%
  + illiterate=45%; more illiteracy among women;
  + only 2% of the PWDs were enrolled in any vocational course at national level;
* children –
  + 1/3rd of Total out of school children in primary education= disabled
  + Movement disability in children went down by 11% coz of polio immunization program
* ‘Mental illness’ constituted the lowest proportion, this may be a result of under-reporting due to the stigmatising nature of psycho-social disabilities, coupled with poor diagnoses
* Lack of social services and transport = Top obstacles to accessing health care facilities.

**Insights Daily Current Affairs, 12 December 2016**

**Kolkata-Mizoram trade route to open via Myanmar**

A deep water port built in Myanmar’s Sittwe on the Bay of Bengal by India is ready to be commissioned. An inauguration ceremony for this strategically important facility will be held soon.

* Construction of the sea port is the first phase of an integrated $500-million project being funded by a long-term interest-free loan provided by India.

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.

Background:

The link was conceived by the UPA government and work began in 2010. The completion target of 2013 was missed.

**Cancel illegal salt pans in Sambhar Lake: NGT**

The central zonal bench of the National Green Tribunal (NGT) has directed the Rajasthan government to cancel allotments of salt pans in the Sambhar Salt Lake that fall within the wetland and run contrary to the mandate of Wetland Rules, 2010.

* NGT has also directed the State government to not to make any further allotments or permit new salt pans within the wetland areas or in the ‘no construction zone’ identified for the said purpose in accordance with the Wetland Rules, 2010.
* It has further asked the authority to examine the sensitive issue in light of observations and recommendations made by the two expert committees in the year 2010. The bench gave six months’ time to implement the recommendations which should not be later than the 2017 monsoon.

Issues involved

* The illegal business of brine extraction in the Sambhar Lake was first highlighted in the Vinod Kapoor fact-finding report in 2010.
* The report had mentioned that 15-20 borewells were operating in every bigha of land during that period and over exploitation of water resources had lowered the groundwater level by almost 60 metres in the area.
* In the PIL, it was alleged that in and around the Sambhar Lake, commercial and other activities detrimental to the eco-system of the wetland.
* These activities were being carried out contrary to the provisions of the Wetland (Conservation and Management) Rules framed under the Environment Protection Acts of 1986 and 2010.

About the lake:

* The Sambhar Salt Lake is India’s largest inland salt lake.
* It is located in Nagaur and Jaipur districts of Rajasthan. It is surrounded on all sides by the Aravali hills
* It is the source of most of Rajasthan’s salt production. It produces 196,000 tonnes of clean salt every year, which equates to around 9% of India’s salt production.
* Sambhar has been designated as a Ramsar site.
* The wetland is a key wintering area for tens of thousands of flamingos and other birds that migrate from northern Asia.

**Parliamentary panel says SC showing a ‘zeal for primacy’**

A Parliamentary Standing Committee report accusing the Supreme Court of distorting the original constitutional mandate and showing an “unnecessary zeal” for primacy in judicial appointments has been tabled in the parliament.

* The Parliamentary Standing Committee on Personnel, Public Grievance, Law and Justice has directly contradicted the Supreme Court’s judgment on the National Judicial Appointments Committee (NJAC) law, which upheld the concept of judicial primacy.

Background:

The committee had taken suo motu cognisance of the “sad state of affairs” caused by the “inordinate delay in filling the vacancies in the Supreme Court and High Courts”. Nearly 43% of the approved strength of judges in High Courts is vacant. The draft Memorandum of Procedure for judicial appointments has been in limbo for almost a year.

The report may act as a trigger for kick-starting legislative efforts to overcome the impact of the Supreme Court’s October 16, 2015 judgment scrapping the NJAC law.

Key facts:

* The report concludes that the judiciary’s zeal for primacy over the government had led to the “present unfortunate situation”.
* It recommends that the original constitutional position on judicial appointments be brought back. It also notes that the appointment of High Court judges is “essentially” an executive function and a shared responsibility of the government and the judiciary.
* The committee also asked the government to reverse the distortion created in the original mandate of the Constitution arising from the judgments of the apex court in the Second Judges Case and subsequent cases.
* The committee said the Constitution’s makers believed that only an equal involvement of multiple constitutional authorities in judicial appointments would mould an independent judiciary. On this, the committee quotes Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, who said that “after all, the Chief Justice is a man with all the failings, all the sentiments and all the prejudices which we as common people have”.
* It refers to how the Supreme Court itself, in the NJAC judgment, had concluded that the Collegium system lacked transparency.
* The report has also hinted that the NJAC judgment was not heard by a sufficient quorum of judges. It recommended that the Supreme Court ought to set up a Bench of a minimum 11 judges while deciding the validity of a constitutional amendment.

**Japan Launches Magnetic Tether To Clean Up Space Junk**

The Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency launched a spacecraft from the Tanegashima Space Center that carried a magnetic tether designed to move vast amounts of space junk from the Earth’s orbit.

* Japan has launched a cargo ship which will use a half mile long tether to remove some of the debris from Earth's orbit.
* The tether, made of aluminium strands and steel wire, is designed to slow the debris, pulling it out of orbit
* The automated cargo ship - called Stork or Kounotori - which is carrying the junk collector is bound for the International Space Station and blasted off from Tanegashima Space Center in the North Pacific.
* The junk collector is the latest in a series of ideas put forward to tackle the problem, including harpooning, sweeping, lassoing and dragging debris into the atmosphere for burning
* Limitation - Japanese scheme will only work for bigger pieces of junk

- What is space junk?

* Space junk is the term used to describe man-made rubbish floating in space – often litter from space exploration (even natural objects like asteroids are a part of space debris).
* The majority of the debris in space is believed to consist of small particles but some objects are larger
* They all travel at speeds up to 17,500 mph, fast enough for a relatively small piece of orbital debris to damage a satellite or a spacecraft.

- Benefits of removing space junk

* It will help make space safer for astronauts by getting rid of space junk.
* It will also provide better protection for space stations and weather and communications satellites worth billions of dollars.

- Way forward

* Preventing space junk - The space agencies across the world are now shifting towards launching micro and nano satellites for reducing the space junk
* Removing the space junk - by methods like harpooning, using tether, incineration etc
* NASA’s guidelines on orbital debris should be internationalized and multiple countries should form a common standard to deal with space debris as it is a global common.

**Facts for Prelims**

**‘100 Million for 100 Million’ Campaign:**

* ‘100 Million for 100 Million’ Campaign was recently launched by President Pranab Mukherjee.
* It was organized by the Kailash Satyarthi Children’s Foundation.
* The ‘100 Million for 100 Million’ Campaign aims to mobilise 100 million youth and children for 100 million underprivileged children across the world, to end child labour, child slavery, violence against children and promote the right of every child to be safe, free, and educated, over the next 5 years.

**ISRO signs deal for first privately built satellite:**

* The Indian Space Research Organisation has roped in a consortium of six companies to deliver the country’s first industry-built spacecraft by late 2017.
* In this regard, ISRO recently signed an agreement. The contract includes assembly, integration and testing (AIT) of two spare navigation satellites consecutively in around 18 months.
* The contract was signed between SRO Satellite Centre (ISAC) and the consortium lead, Alpha Design Technologies P Ltd.
* Alpha is a defence manufacturing contractor while the others are small and medium-sized vendors that already supply components to ISRO. The others in the consortium are Newtech Solutions, Aidin Technologies and DCX Cables of Bengaluru, Vinyas Technologies of Mysuru and Avantel Systems of Hyderabad.
* The work will start around January and the first spacecraft will be brought out in around nine months.

**Longest rail tunnel opens in Switzerland:**

* The famed 57km Gotthard Base Tunnel (GBT) has been opened for passengers.
* The 57-kilometre (35-mile) Gotthard Base Tunnel (GBT) is longest tunnel now. It runs from Erstfeld in the central canton of Uri, to Bodio in the southern Ticino canton.
* 2md longest - Japan’s Seikan tunnel
* 3rd longest - Channel Tunnel that links England and France;

**Insights Daily Current Affairs, 13 December 2016**

**NDRF teams pre-positioned in Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu for cyclone Vardah**

In view of development of cyclone Vardah over Bay of Bengal, 19 flood rescue teams of NDRF have been prepositioned in coastal areas of Andhra Pradesh & Tamil Nadu as a proactive deployment.

About NDRF:

The Disaster Management Act has made the statutory provisions for constitution of National Disaster Response Force (NDRF) for the purpose of specialized response to natural and man-made disasters.

* Two national calamities in quick succession in the form of Orissa Super Cyclone (1999) and Gujarat Earthquake (2001) brought about the realization of the need of having a specialist response mechanism at National Level to effectively respond to disasters. This realization led to the enactment of the DM Act on 26 Dec 2005.

Role and mandate of NDRF:

* Specialized response during disasters.
* Proactive deployment during impending disaster situations.
* Acquire and continually upgrade its own training and skills.
* Liaison, Reconnaissance, Rehearsals and Mock Drills.
* Impart basic and operational level training to State Response Forces (Police, Civil Defence and Home Guards).
* Community Capacity Building Programme.
* Organize Public Awareness Campaigns.

Why it is said to be UNIQUE?

* It is the only dedicated disaster response force of the world.
* The only agency with comprehensive response capabilities having multi-disciplinary and multi-skilled, high-tech, stand alone nature.
* Experienced paramilitary personnel specially trained and equipped for disaster response.
* Capabilities for undertaking disaster response, prevention, mitigation and capacity building.

**Railways mulls exclusive suburban tracks**

Indian Railways is planning to build exclusive rail tracks for suburban trains in a bid to ease congestion.

Why not use existing rail tracks?

Since running suburban services on existing tracks adversely affects the capacity of freight trains and long-distance trains, it would not be possible for Railways to use existing infrastructure for the purpose of suburban services.

Background:

At present, the Railways is running suburban train services in certain sections on the tracks laid primarily for long-distance trains. The Railways has framed the draft guidelines to address the demand for more suburban trains from the state governments.

Guidelines for suburban railway projects:

* Suburban railway projects are proposed to be implemented and operated through a special purpose vehicle (SPV) with equal equity participation from the respective state governments and the Railways.
* SPV would be empowered to propose a surcharge on passengers for recovering operating losses and capital costs of such projects.
* State governments would set up a dedicated urban transport fund through “levy of dedicated taxes, levies, betterment tax, impact fee”, among others in the “influence zone of proposed railway station” to finance the capital cost of suburban train projects.
* The Indian Railways, on request from the SPV, may restructure fares on suburban trains and impose a surcharge to recover the operating losses and the capital cost “if operating losses are not recovered from the dedicated urban transport fund.”
* The state governments will be required to conduct feasibility studies of the project at their own cost which will be examined by zonal Railways and subsequently sent to Indian Railways.
* States will also have to ensure there is no delay in land acquisition and Indian Railways will only contribute its equity share to the SPV once 70% of the land to be acquired is made available by the state government.
* Additionally, states will have to bear the complete cost of land acquisition, leasing of railway land and resettlement and rehabilitation.

Significance of the Project

* Suburban railway systems will result in economic development of the area they serve and will also lead to re-densification of the area along its alignment.
* It will eliminate the conflict between the suburban trains and the freight trains

**The Indo-Pacific potential**

Indonesian President Joko Widodo, or Jokowi as he is known is on his official visit to India.

Significance of this visit:

Though Prime Minister Narendra Modi and President Jokowi met on the sidelines of the 9th East Asia Summit in Myanmar in 2014, this is the first time in the two years that they have been in power that they will meet substantively.

Why is Indonesia important for India?

* Indonesia is a latent Asian power. It is the world’s largest archipelago, straddling the Indian and Pacific Oceans. It can potentially control virtually all the straits linking the southern Indian Ocean to the South China Sea.
* Indonesia can play a stabilising role in the Indo-Pacific region as China is showing its naval muscle in the South China Sea and its strategic and commercial reach through the One Belt One Road initiative.
* Medan industrial zone in north Sumatra is strategically important for India. A shipping service from Chennai or Krishnapatnam to Medan via the Andaman Islands could be used to export Indian goods to offset, at least partly, the large imbalance in India’s trade with Indonesia.
* India could also learn lessons on tourism promotion from Indonesia — from Bali, for instance, where Indians rank high in the list of nationalities visiting that island. India could also learn from Bali about a more ‘simple’ Hinduism that is relatively free from caste and sectarian divisions.

Why India is important for Indonesia?

* Indonesia is a maritime axis requiring a strong naval force to protect its territorial integrity, fishing waters and energy interests, supported and funded by strong economic growth. India can help Indonesia in this regard.
* India could recognise Indonesia’s centrality in the Indo-Pacific region and help work towards a future where both countries can be partners for security in the region.
* There is, at present, a battle being waged in Indonesia over the role of religion, ethnicity and language that in some ways mirrors India’s own. India has a stake in the diversity of Islam found in Indonesia against exclusive and homogenising influences. Indonesia and India can provide complementary models for the coexistence of religious minorities with majoritarian communities in Asia based on their own traditions of coexistence.
* Without entering into a domestic debate on religion, India can strengthen Indonesia’s democratic credentials by advocating its admission in a revived India-Brazil-South Africa forum as a pluralist democracy that is an alternative to what appears to be a rise of intolerance in many democracies.

Way ahead:

The India-Indonesia relationship has been one of potential rather than realisation. Notwithstanding the efforts made during the tenures of President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, the partnership has not yet gathered traction. Both countries should ensure that this visit is not just another diplomatic formality but is utilised to turn the relationship into one of the defining ones in Asia.

Sources: the hindu.

*Paper 2 Topic: Separation of powers between various organs dispute redressal mechanisms and institutions.*

**Beyond the court’s remit**

The Uttarakhand High Court has crossed its legal remit by extending a government policy of prohibiting liquor outlets in the vicinity of places of worship, to cover Rudraprayag, Chamoli and Uttarkashi from April 2017. This decision is based on a petition filed in the court.

* With this, the Uttarakhand High Court has drifted outside the confines of law and entered the domain of morals and desired behaviour.

Background:

In doing so, the court has cited Article 47 of the Constitution. It says it is the duty of the state to raise the level of nutrition and standard of living of the people and improve public health, and to prohibit the consumption of intoxicating drinks and drugs.

What’s the concern now?

According to some experts, such judgments set a wrong precedent. Earlier this year the Supreme Court also refused to entertain a petition seeking a nation-wide ban on alcohol, observing that this was a matter of policy into which it cannot venture.

* It is one thing to cite constitutional goals to justify state action against liquor or drugs; it is quite another to cite them as a justification for judicial directions.
* The Supreme Court has also cautioned judges against assuming powers based on individual perceptions or notions. Because, howsoever noble an idea may be, courts should be wary of making rules on their own, as it would amount to transgressing into the policy domain.

Sources: the hindu.

*Paper 2 Topic: Effect of policies and politics of developed and developing countries on India’s interests, Indian diaspora.*

**Islamic State retakes ancient city of Palmyra**

Islamic State militants have recaptured the ancient city of Palmyra from Syrian troops. In winning back Palmyra, the extremist group appeared to be taking advantage of the Syrian and Russian preoccupation with Aleppo, timing its attack to coincide with a major government offensive to capture the last remaining opposition-held neighborhoods in the northern city.

Background:

Islamic State militants were expelled by Syrian and Russian forces from the city nine months ago. The militants had spent 10 months in Palmyra, during which they blew up a number of temples and caused other destruction – severing the heads of statues and partially damaging two temples and famous arch.

About Palmyra:

Palmyra contains the monumental ruins of a great city that was one of the most important cultural centres of the ancient world. From the 1st to the 2nd century, the art and architecture of Palmyra, standing at the crossroads of several civilizations, married Graeco-Roman techniques with local traditions and Persian influences.

Palmyra is a UNESCO designated World Heritage site and home to some of the world’s most magnificent ancient ruins. The city is mentioned in the Hebrew Bible and was eventually incorporated into the Roman Empire, before passing to almost all empires to have operated in the region over some 2,000 years.

Sources: toi.

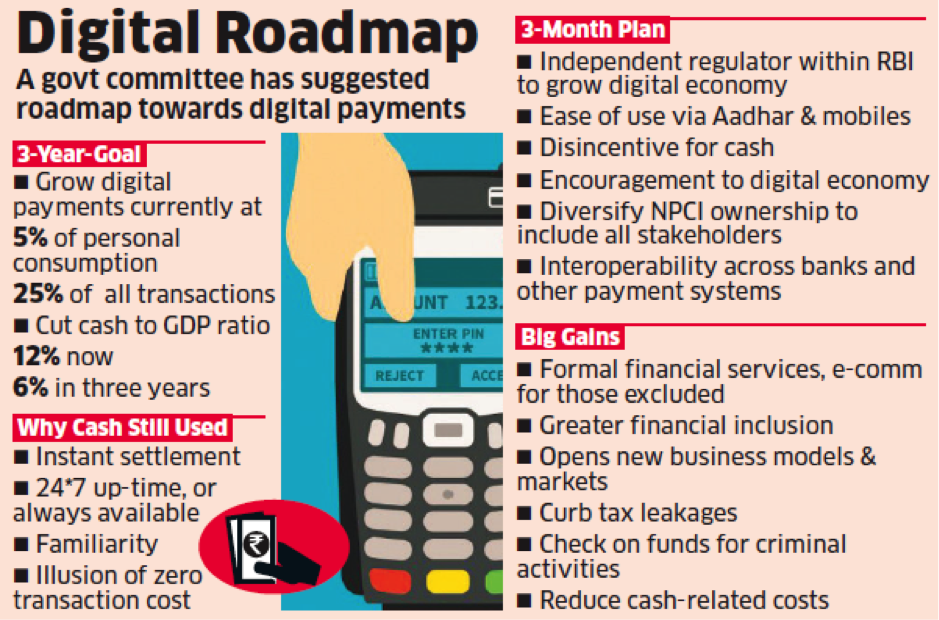
*Paper 2 Topic: Important aspects of governance, transparency and accountability, e-governance- applications, models, successes, limitations, and potential; citizens charters, transparency & accountability and institutional and other measures.*

**Government committee lists digital measures to cut cash usage**

A committee, headed by former finance secretary Ratan Watal, has suggested ways to encourage digital payments.

Background:

The government has been pitching for a less-cash economy after it demonetised old Rs 500 and Rs 1,000 notes on November 8.

[](https://i0.wp.com/www.insightsonindia.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/digital-india-ToI.png)

*SOURCE: Times of India*

Key facts:

* It has asked for a 30-90 days’ timeline for implementing a number of measures that the committee hopes can cut in half India’s cash usage from 12% of GDP in three years.
* The committee has suggested an independent mechanism within the overall central banking structure.
* The committee has pitched for greater use of Aadhaar and mobile numbers for making digital payments as easy as cash.
* It has also called for inter-operable payments between bank and non-banks as well as within non-banks.
* To give the entire digital payments effort a focused boost, in its most significant recommendation it has proposed to make regulation of payments independent from the function of central banking.
* The Board for Regulation and Supervision of Payment and Settlement Systems (BPSS) can be given an independent statutory status within the overall structure of the RBI and called Payments Regulatory Board, the committee has suggested. The BPSS currently functions as a sub-committee of the Central Board of RBI.
* The committee has called for amendments to the Payments and Settlement Systems Act, 2007 to provide for this board apart from giving an explicit mandate for competition and innovation, open access and interoperability, consumer protection, regulations on systemic risks and data protection.
* It has suggested encouragement to digital payments within the government, a suggestion that has already rolled out with government prescribing thresholds and waiving charges. A ‘DIPAYAN’ fund is proposed from savings generated from cashless transactions to expand digital payments along with a ranking of states, government departments, districts and panchayats to encourage digital payments.
* Operations of payment systems like Real Time Gross Settlement (RTGS) and National Electronic Fund Transafer (NEFT) could be outsourced after a cost benefit analysis. These payment systems should be upgraded to 24×7 in due course of time, the committee has suggested.

Sources: toi.

**Facts for Prelims**

**New Italy prime minister:**

Paolo Gentiloni has been named as Italy’s new prime minister following reformist leader Matteo Renzi’s resignation in the wake of a crushing referendum defeat.

**New Zealand’s prime minister:**

New Zealand’s ruling National Party has appointed Bill English as the country’s new prime minister following last week’s shock resignation of his popular predecessor John Key.

**New ISI chief:**

Pakistan’s new army chief General Qamar Javed Bajwa has appointed Lt Gen Naveed Mukhtar as director-genereal of Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), replacing Lt Gen Rizwan Akhtar.

**New UN secretary general:**

* Former Portuguese Prime Minister Antonio Guterres was recently sworn in as Secretary-General of the United Nations.
* He is the ninth U.N. chief in the body’s 71-year history.
* N. chiefs are charged with promoting sustainable development, working for peace around the globe, protecting human rights and dealing with humanitarian catastrophes.

**Insights Daily Current Affairs, 14 December 2016**

**India Signs Grant Agreement with the IBRD**

An agreement for Global Environment Facility Grant of USD 5.19 Million for “Additional Financing for Financing Energy Efficiency at MSMEs Project- Programmatic Framework for Energy Efficiency” was recently signed between India and IBRD.

Key facts:

* The proposed additional financing (AF) would be used to help further scale up the initiatives taken up under the parent project- India: Financing Energy Efficiency at MSME Project (FEEMP).
* The additional financing will also contribute to bridge the current gap in understanding between different stakeholders, mainly energy professionals/technology suppliers, entrepreneurs, banks and financial institutions.

The project will focus on tapping Energy Efficiency (EE) benefits through a three pronged approach which includes:

* Awareness/capacity building.
* Direct intervention to increase EE investments at MSME level, facilitating active involvement of service providers and Financial Institutions.
* Expanding the EE knowledge base to scale up and replicate the project initiatives, especially through establishing key performance indicators.

Background:

The parent project – India: Financing Energy Efficiency at MSME Project (FEEMP) became effective on September 29, 2010 with an original GEF Grant amount of US$ 11.3 million. The Development Objective of the project was to increase demand for energy efficiency investments in select micro, small and medium enterprise clusters and to build their capacity to access commercial finance.

The parent project currently has a Satisfactory rating towards achievement of Project Development Objective (PDO), and implementation performance.

Sources: the hindu.

*Paper 2 Topic: Bilateral, regional and global groupings and agreements involving India and/or affecting India’s interests.*

**International conference on housing & urban development**

Union Urban Development Minister M Venkaiah Naidu recently inaugurated an international conference on housing and urban development in Asia Pacific region.

Key facts:

* The sixth edition of ‘Asia Pacific Ministerial Conference on Housing & Urban Development (APMCHUD)’ seeks to address issues ranging from crowded city centres to peripheral expansion, metropolitan based urban population growth, megacities and urban corridors, among others.
* During the conference, ministers and senior officials from 68 countries in the region will deliberate on challenges of urban planning and management.
* The conference will come out with a Delhi Declaration and implementation plan for aligning urban development strategies of member countries with the New Urban Agenda adopted at Quito, Eucador for the next 20 years.
* The theme of the declaration will be on ‘Emerging Urban Forms Policy Responses and Government Structures’.

Significance of the conference:

* The APMCHUD is the first such conference after UN Habitat-III global conference on sustainable development held in Quito this September.
* It will help in furthering the new urban agenda adopted at the recent conference of UN Habitat-III.
* The conference assumes significance considering that APAC region accounts for 60% of the world population and 55% of global urban population.

Sources: pib.

*Paper 2 Topic: Welfare schemes for vulnerable sections of the population by the Centre and States and the performance of these schemes; mechanisms, laws, institutions and bodies constituted for the protection and betterment of these vulnerable sections.*

**National Resource Centre for Tribal Livelihood to be launched**

Union Ministry of Tribal Affairs in collaboration with UNDP and National Scheduled Tribes Finance and Development Corporation (NSTFDC) is all set to launch “Vanjeevan” the National Resource Centre for Tribal Livelihood issues at Bhubaneswar, Odisha.

About Vanjeevan:

Vanjeevan will be a programme to identify the problems in livelihood issues in select districts of six states having low HDI of tribal people in the first phase. The states are Assam, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Odisha and Telangana.

* In the second phase the programme will be implemented in the states of Arunachal Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Maharashtra, Meghalaya and Tripura.
* The programme will focus on the identification of local resources, keeping in view the existing skill level.
* The programme will facilitate utilization of funds under various Government programmes for the above purpose.
* The National Resource Centre will serve as a platform for livelihood mapping, skill gap analysis and knowledge hub where consolidation of best livelihood and entrepreneurship models will be accessible for tribal entrepreneurship development.

Sources: pib.

*Paper 2 Topic: Issues relating to development and management of Social Sector/Services relating to Health, Education, Human Resources.*

**‘War against malaria far from over’**

According to the recently released **World Malaria report by the World Health Organization** (WHO), the global fight against malaria is in “urgent need” of more funding.

Highlights of the report:

* There were 212 million new cases of malaria and 4,29,000 deaths worldwide in 2015. Further, nearly 78% of Plasmodium vivax malaria cases in 2015 occurred in just four countries: Ethiopia, India, Indonesia and Pakistan.
* Despite the billions of dollars spent on malaria programmes, too many people are missing out on available resources like medicines and bed nets that protect against mosquitoes that spread the disease.
* Surveillance systems catch fewer than 20% of cases. The vast majority cases are in Africa. About 70% of deaths are in children under the age of five.

Background:

WHO had set a goal of cutting malaria cases to “near zero” by the end of last year. It fell far short, and now is aiming to reduce malaria cases and deaths by at least 90% by 2030.

Sources: the hindu.

*Paper 3 Topic: Challenges to internal security through communication networks, role of media and social networking sites in internal security challenges, basics of cyber security; money-laundering and its prevention.*

**Centre to review IT Act to bolster cybersecurity**

The government is mulling a review of the more than 15-year-old Information Technology (IT), Act to strengthen cybersecurity infrastructure, following the push for digital payments post-demonetisation.

Key facts:

* A closed group, under IT Secretary Aruna Sundarajan, has been set up to look into various aspects of the Act in line with the changing times.
* The Ministry of Electronics and IT (MeitY) has also set up a separate ‘digital payments’ division under Indian Computer Emergency Response Team (CERT-In) — its cyber security arm — to monitor and strengthen cashless transactions.
* All digital payments agencies have also been asked to report to CERT-In any unusual activity that they see on their platforms.

Why review of IT act is necessary?

The IT Act came out in 2000. Since then, it has not been reviewed. However, since we are moving towards a digital economy now, the act should be reviewed to see if there is a need to re-look at the IT Act architecture to make it more of a deterrent for cyber criminals.

Besides, Venezuela, which like India has withdrawn its highest currency note from the market, has also cautioned New Delhi about cybercrimes that target the digital economy.

Sources: the hindu.

*Paper 2 Topic: Important aspects of governance, transparency and accountability, e-governance- applications, models, successes, limitations, and potential; citizens charters, transparency & accountability and institutional and other measures.*

**Centre to finance digital discounts**

The Centre has decided to bear the burden imposed on public sector firms on account of the many discounts and incentives offered to promote digital payments. Public sector insurers, oil-marketing firms and others will thus not take a hit on their books for the Centre’s cashless push.

Background:

The government has offered many discounts on transaction charges and merchant discount rates that accompany payments using cards or online last week.

What’s being done?

* A new expenditure head in the exchequer’s accounts that will absorb the costs of incentives provided will be created.
* A non-tax receipt portal, bharakosh.gov.in, has been developed to enable users to make non-tax payments to the government for 237 categories including spectrum charges, RTI application fees, and purchase forms online, without going to either a bank or a government office.
* Mobile banking through interoperable automatic teller machines (ATM) has been launched, 81,000 ATMs or 12 banks are already live and another 15,000 machines are expected to go live shortly”.
* All 5.5 lakh fair price shops run by the government are being equipped with micro ATMs/PoS terminals, which will enable them to undertake digital payment transactions or even be banking correspondents.
* A standardised, interoperable multi-purpose, multimodal National Common Mobility card is being developed for smart cities and is ready for testing on a pilot basis.

Way ahead:

These measures are being put in place to enable a cashless transactions ecosystem. Going forward, all government organisations, public sector undertakings and authorities have been advised to review rules and regulations to support digital payments, adopt payment-related solutions and absorb transaction fees and activate payments facility through the ‘Pay Gov India’ if they have such a facility.

Sources: the hindu.

**Facts for Prelims**

**EKUVERIN:**

* Seventh edition of Exercise EKUVERIN will shortly be held at Kadhdhoo, Laamu Atoll, Maldives.
* The Exercise is a 14 day platoon level joint military exercise between the Indian Army & the Maldives National Defence Force conducted on a yearly basis.
* The aim of the exercise is to conduct military training with emphasis on amphibious & counter insurgency/ counter terrorism operations with a view to enhance interoperability between the two armies.
* The previous edition of the exercise was held in India at Trivandrum, Kerala.

**Indra Navy – 2016:**

* INDRA NAVY is a bilateral maritime exercise between the **Indian and Russian navies** and epitomizes the strategic relationship between the two countries. Initiated in 2003, the exercise has matured over the years with increase in scope, complexity of operations and level of participation.
* The 9th edition of exercise INDRA NAVY, an annual bilateral maritime exercise between Indian Navy and Russian Navy has begun in the Bay of Bengal.
* The primary aim of exercise INDRA NAVY-16 is to increase inter-operability amongst the two navies and develop common understanding and procedures for maritime security operations.
* The scope of the exercise includes wide-ranging professional interactions in harbor phase and a diverse canvas of operational activities across a spectrum of maritime operations at sea.

**Insights Daily Current Affairs, 15 December 2016**

*Paper 2 Topic: Welfare schemes for vulnerable sections of the population by the Centre and States and the performance of these schemes; mechanisms, laws, institutions and bodies constituted for the protection and betterment of these vulnerable sections.*

**Mahila Police Volunteer Initiative launched in Haryana**

The Mahila Police Volunteer initiative was recently launched in Haryana. By launching the initiative in Karnal and Mahendragarh districts, **Haryana became the first state to adopt this scheme**.

* Haryana has inducted the first batch of 1000 Mahila Police Volunteers. These volunteers have already been trained by the state State Police Authorities on their role and responsibility.

About the scheme:

Originally **conceived by the Union Ministry of Women & Child Development**, Mahila Police Volunteer is a **joint initiative with the Union Ministry of Home Affairs**.

* The Mahila Police Volunteers scheme envisages creation of a link between the police authorities and the local communities in villages through police volunteers who will be women specially trained for this purpose.
* Their primary job will be to keep an eye on situations where women in the village are harassed or their rights and entitlements are denied or their development is prevented.
* In order to provide a link between police and community and facilitate women in distress, one Mahila Police Volunteer (MPV) is envisaged per Gram Panchayat across the country. These will be selected through a laid out procedure from among the empowered, responsible, socially aware women who will facilitate police outreach on gender concerns.

Significance

* It will create a link between the police authorities and local communities at the village level through women volunteers.
* It will give village women the opportunity to voice their grievances without the fear of gender bias

**MoU between India and Kyrgyzstan for strengthening cooperation in the field of Tourism**

The Union Cabinet has given its approval for signing Memorandum of Understanding between the Ministry of Tourism and Ministry of Cultural, Information & Tourism of the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic for strengthening cooperation in the field of Tourism.

The main objectives of the Memorandum of Understanding include:

* To expand bilateral cooperation in the tourism sector.
* To exchange information and data related to tourism.
* To encourage cooperation between tourism stakeholders including Hotels and Tour operators.
* To establish exchange programme for cooperation in Human Resource Development.
* To invest in the Tourism and Hospitality sectors.
* To exchange visits of Tour Operators / Media /Opinion Makers for promotion of two way tourism
* To exchange experiences in the areas of promotion, marketing, destination development and management.
* To promote safe & honourable and sustainable tourism.

Benefits of this MoU:

This would enable both parties to enter into a constructive dialogue for development and promotion of tourism in each other’s country for the economic development of two nations.

**Major Port Trust Authorities Bill, 2016**

The Union Cabinet has approved the proposal of Ministry of Shipping to replace the Major Port Trusts Act, 1963 by the Major Port Authorities Bill, 2016.

* This will empower the Major Ports to perform with greater efficiency on account of full autonomy in decision making and by modernizing the Institutional structure of Major Ports.

-LANDLORD PORT MODEL

Ownership of the port remains with port authority.

Infrastructure is leased to private firms that provide and maintain their own superstructure and install own equipment to handle cargo.

In return, the landlord port gets a share of the revenue from the private entity.

-SERVICE PORT MODEL

Port authority owns the land and all available assets fixed and mobile-and performs all regulatory and port functions.

The port trust is both landlord and the cargo terminal operator.

- **Issues with the ports**

* Port Trusts are not leasing out the land to Private operators in time.
* Multiple agencies are involved in decision making process leading to delay.
* Multiple stakeholders are interpreting the concession agreements in their own way causing differences and litigations.
* Presently there is no independent board to look into disputes between stakeholders.
* Even though 100% FDI is allowed in Port sector, still tendering process inviting bidding from top MNC’s is not usually followed citing security issues.

- **Highlights of the bill**

* **More compact** - no. of sections has been reduced from 134 to 65 by eliminating overlapping and obsolete provisions.
* It proposes to simplify composition of **Board of Port Authority (BPA)** comprising of only 11 members including 3-4 independent directors from present 17-19 members.
* Bill propose to **divest** **Tariff Authority of Major Ports (TAMP)** of its power to regulate tariffs and **delegate** this power to **BPA** to fix tariff which will act as a reference tariff for purpose of bidding PPP projects.
* **BPA** will be empowered to **lease land** for **port related use** for upto 40 years and for **non-port related** **use** upto 20 years and also **fix rates** for other port services and assets like land.
* Bill propose to introduce **internal audit of Central Ports** as mentioned in companies act 2013 including provisions of CSR and development of infrastructure by port authority.
* **Independent Review Board (IRB)** will be setup to –
  + carry out the residual function of TAMP like looking into **disputes between port and PPP** concessionaires, to review stressed PPP projects and suggest measures to cope with stressed PPP projects.
  + Look into **complaints regarding services** rendered **by the private operators**

Implications

* The bill would give more autonomy and flexibility to major ports in the country bringing professional approach in their governance.
* It will help in faster, independent decision making which will be beneficial for the government, stakeholders and country at large.
* A compact Board with professional independent members will strengthen decision making and strategic planning.
* It will significantly improve the project execution capabilities of the ports.
* Bill will help in reorienting the governance model of Central ports to Landlord port model. Presently most major ports in India carry out terminal operations as well, resulting in hybrid model of port governance.

Conclusion

* India has been following hybrid format of long obsolete service port model which is consistent with centralized economy
* While globally landlord port model is followed consistent with market oriented economy this resulted in conflict of interest in India between the port trusts and the private sector, with the former acting both as port regulators and providers of commercial services in many instances.
* So there is urgent need for smooth transition to landlord port model to increase their efficiency.

**MoU between Ministry of Rural Development (MoRD) and Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO)**

The Union Cabinet has approved the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between Ministry of Rural Development (MoRD) and Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) to improve the effectiveness of rural development programmes in India and to facilitate knowledge sharing.

Key facts:

* The MoU will facilitate South-South cooperation mechanisms around Deendayal Antyodaya Yojana – National Rural Livelihoods Mission (DAY-NRLM)’s experience through exchange visits and dialogues, and establishment of a good-practice Learning Centre.
* It will strengthen the vertical upscaling of the livelihoods of rural populations that are supported by DAY-NRLM, help to develop inclusive and sustainable value chains for key crops and agro-industrial products, employment diversification, skills development, especially for rural youth, strengthening of social protection, risk management mechanisms and enhanced resilience building, especially in arid and disaster risk-prone districts.
* The MoU will provide for collaboration on activities of common interest to support an integrated approach to rural poverty reduction through activities aimed to promote the economic empowerment of rural women, access of rural poor to natural resources and their sustainable use and social protection.
* The MoU will also provide for exchange of visits and dialogue for knowledge and experience sharing.

Background:

Deendayal Antyodaya Yojana – National Rural Livelihoods Mission (DAY -NRLM) is a flagship rural poverty reduction program of Ministry of Rural Development launched nationwide with the objective of social mobilization, financial inclusion and sustainable livelihoods promotion.

* DAY – NRLM aims at creating efficient and effective institutional platforms for the rural poor enabling them to increase household income through sustainable livelihood enhancements and improved access to financial services.
* One of the major focus areas of DAY – NRLM is promotion of existing livelihood portfolios of the rural poor in farm and non-farm sectors. Upgradation and sharing of knowledge on agricultural practices for sustainable income is therefore, considered a valuable input for poverty alleviation and higher income generation.
* DAY – NRLM recognizes the importance of achieving the post-2015 agenda and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), as well as other global priorities, that relate to rural poverty reduction, sustainable rural livelihoods, rural employment, social protection, good governance and gender equality.

**NSG waiver has attendant risks, govt. tells Lok Sabha**

The government recently informed the Lok Sabha that it is looking for full membership of the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) as the current arrangement with the elite club carries “attendant risks”.

* The government’s statement is significant as it is the first time that it has declared the waiver in such terms.

Background:

India is currently engaged in nuclear trade with international partners based on a waiver from the NSG in 2008. The waiver is in the form of a concession without according India the status of a full member and therefore has an element of unpredictability and attendant risks in the long run for India’s long-term nuclear power programme.

* The NSG took a consensus decision in September 2008 to permit its members to engage in civil nuclear cooperation with India despite India not being a party to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT).
* Since then, India has been trying to upgrade the “waiver” into a full member status and the government accordingly made two attempts this year to become member of the elite organisation. India has been engaging nuclear energy producing countries in civil nuclear deals since getting the waiver.

Benefits of full membership:

Full membership of the NSG would enable India to have enhanced and predictable global access to nuclear technology, fuel, materials and components required for our expanding civil nuclear programme. It would advance energy security, contribute to India’s growth strategy based on clean energy to combat climate change, and strengthen global nuclear non-proliferation.

Way ahead:

The NSG will take up India’s membership issue at its next plenary session in June 2017.

About NSG:

Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) is a multinational body concerned with reducing nuclear proliferation by controlling the export and re-transfer of materials that may be applicable to nuclear weapon development and by improving safeguards and protection on existing materials. Interestingly, the NSG was set up in 1974 as a reaction to India’s nuclear tests to stop what it called the misuse of nuclear material meant for peaceful purposes.

**RS passes Disabilities Bill with more benefits**

The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Bill 2014, which was introduced in Rajya Sabha in 2014, was recently cleared with 119 amendments.

* The legislation, drafted to make Indian laws compliant with the UN Convention on Rights of Persons with Disabilities, will replace the Persons with Disabilities Act 1995.

Highlights of the Bill:

* The number of disabilities listed rises from seven in the 1995 Act through 19 in the 2014 bill to 21 after the amendments, including acid attack and Parkinson’s disease.
* The Bill has also laid down provisions to allow the central government to notify any other condition as a disability.
* Now individuals with at least 40% of a disability are also entitled to benefits such as reservations in education and employment, preference in government schemes and others.
* The bill sets the government a two-year deadline to ensure persons with disability get barrier-free access in all kinds of physical infrastructure and transport systems.
* It recognises the need for reservation for them in promotion and makes special mention of the rights of disabled women and children.
* It defines many terms vague in previous versions, including what constitutes discrimination.
* According to the bill, the District courts may bestow upon two types of guardianship: limited guardian (who has to take joint decisions with mentally ill person) and plenary guardian (who can take decisions on behalf of mentally ill person, without consulting them).
* A penalty will also be slapped for violating the rules of the Act. The 1995 Act did not have any such penal provision. However, 2014 Bill had made violation of any provision of the Act punishable with a jail term of up to 6 months, and/or a fine of Rs 10,000.

**Insights Daily Current Affairs, 16 December 2016**

**NITI Aayog announces launch of the schemes – Lucky Grahak Yojana and Digi-Dhan Vyapar Yojana – for incentivising digital payment**

NITI Aayog has announced the launch of the schemes Lucky Grahak Yojana and the Digi-Dhan Vyapar Yojana to give cash awards to consumers and merchants who utilize digital payment instruments for personal consumption expenditures.

Key facts:

* The primary aim of these schemes is to incentivize digital transactions so that electronic payments are adopted by all sections of the society, especially the poor and the middle class.
* It has been decided that National Payment Corporation of India (NPCI) shall be the implementing agency for this scheme.
* The schemes have been designed keeping in mind all sections of the society and their usage patterns. For instance, the poorest of poor will be eligible for rewards by using USSD. People in village and rural areas can participate in this scheme through AEPS.
* The scheme will become operational with the first draw on 25th December, 2016 (as a Christmas gift to the nation) leading up to a Mega Draw on Babasaheb Ambedkar Jayanti on 14th April 2017.
* To ensure that the focus of the scheme is on small transactions (entered into by common people), incentives shall be restricted to transactions within the range of Rs 50 and Rs 3000.

The announcement comprises of two major components, one for the Consumers and the other for the Merchants:

1. **Lucky Grahak Yojana [Consumers]:**

* Daily reward of Rs 1000 to be given to 15,000 lucky Consumers for a period of 100 days.
* Weekly prizes worth Rs 1 lakh, Rs 10,000 and Rs. 5000 for Consumers who use the alternate modes of digital Payments.
* This will include all forms of transactions viz. UPI, USSD, AEPS and RuPay Cards but will for the time being exclude transactions through Private Credit Cards and Digital Wallets.

1. **Digi-Dhan Vyapar Yojana[ Merchants]:**

* Prizes for Merchants for all digital transactions conducted at Merchant establishments.
* Weekly prizes worth Rs. 50,000, Rs 5,000 and Rs. 2,500.

**Second Meeting of Interim Board of CEPI**

The Department of Biotechnology (DBT), Ministry of Science & Technology, Government of India is partnering in the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness and Innovations (CEPI), a new global alliance between governments, industries, academia, philanthropy, inter-governmental institutions, the World Health Organization, and civil society.

About CEPI:

CEPI, Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations, is a “public-private coalition that aims to derail epidemics by speeding development of vaccines”.

* CEPI aims to finance and coordinate the development of new vaccines to contain infectious disease epidemics that are usually neglected (like some neglected tropical diseases)
* The coalition will not focus on diseases that already have adequate attention like rotavirus, but will be guided by WHO’s R&D blueprint (2016), which lists eleven illnesses to focus on like Chikungunya, Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) etc
* The concept is to develop early phases of vaccines without knowing the details for the form in which the infection will appear, but will still cut down the time to tailor the eventual vaccine to be effective to the epidemic.
* Recent outbreaks: SARS, Ebola and Zika - reveal gaps that partnerships like CEPI should fill;
* CEPI is currently being steered by five founding partners. They are:
  + Department of Biotechnology, Ministry of Science & Technology, GOI;
  + Government of Norway;
  + Wellcome Trust;
  + Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation;
  + World Economic Forum.

Benefits

* CEPI would provide the opportunity to leverage vaccine development capacities in India
* CEPI will increase access to vaccines. It will also bolster India’s status of pharmacy of the world.
* In the era of antibiotic resistance, this initiative will help finance the development of vaccines for resistant infections

**Shri Rajnath Singh chairs a meeting of Gorkhaland Territorial Administration**

The Union Home Minister Shri Rajnath Singh recently chaired a meeting with the delegation of Gorkhaland Territorial Administration (GTA).

[](https://i2.wp.com/www.insightsonindia.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/Gorkhaland.jpg)

* During the meeting, it was decided to sympathetically examine and appropriately consider the long pending demands of the Gorkhas, the Adivasis and other people of Darjeeling district and the Dooars region.
* In respect of granting ST Status to 11 Gorkha communities, the Minister informed that the committee constituted for preparing a report for this purpose has been recently granted extension for a further period of four months. The Committee will be asked to try to give its report as per the schedule.
* Regarding setting up of a Central University in GTA region, it was discussed that there is a general mandate for having a Central University in each State. However, there can be an exception to this and accordingly it was decided that the demand of setting up the Central University in GTA region would be considered.

About GTA:

Gorkhaland Territorial Administration (GTA) is a semi-autonomous administrative body for the Darjeeling hills in West Bengal.

* GTA replaced the Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council, which was formed in 1988 and administered the Darjeeling hills for 23 years.
* GTA presently has three hill subdivisions Darjeeling, Kalimpong, and Kurseong and some areas of Siliguri subdivision under its authority.
* The GTA has administrative, executive and financial powers but no legislative powers.

Sources: pib.

*Paper 2 Topic: Issues relating to development and management of Social Sector/Services relating to Health, Education, Human Resources.*

**Liquor vends on National, State highways banned**

The Supreme Court has banned States and Union Territories from granting licences for the sale of liquor along National and State highways across the country, noting that drunken driving was the main culprit behind a large number of road accidents in the country.

Key facts:

* The court ordered that the prohibition on sale of liquor alongside highways would extend to stretches of such highways that fall within limits of municipal corporations, city towns and local authorities.
* The court also prohibited signages and advertising of availability of liquor on highways and ordered the existing ones to be removed forthwith from both national and State highways.
* It ordered that no shop for sale of liquor should be visible from the National and State highways. Neither should they be directly accessible from the highways nor should they be situated within a distance of 500 metres from the outer edge of the highways or service lanes.
* With this, the licences of liquor shops across the highways will not be renewed after March 31, 2017.

Background:

The judgment is a result of the deep concern the court had expressed recently on the 1.5 lakh fatalities annually in road accidents. It had blamed the Centre and the States for not doing enough as lives were lost on the roads.

An analysis of road accident data 2015 reveals that around 1,374 accidents and 400 deaths take place every day on Indian roads, resulting in 57 accidents and loss of 17 lives on an average every hour.

Way ahead:

The court ordered all the States and Union Territories to “strictly enforce the directions.” It gave the Chief Secretaries and the State police chiefs a month’s time to chalk out a plan for enforcement of the judgment.

Sources: the hindu.

*Paper 2 Topic: Bilateral, regional and global groupings and agreements involving India and/or affecting India’s interests.*

**Fifth India-Arab partnership forum in Oman**

Fifth India-Arab partnership forum is being held in Oman. Minister of State for External Affairs, M J Akbar is leading the Indian delegation to the fifth India-Arab Partnership Conference.

About the conference:

The conference is being organised by Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry (OCCI) in collaboration with Arab League Secretariat, Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI), General Union of Chambers of Commerce and Industry in the Arab Countries (GUCCIAC) and Federation of the Arab Business (FAB).

* The **theme of the fifth India-Arab Partnership Conference is “Partnership towards Innovation and Information Technology Co-operation**.”
* The conference will hold panel discussions on the topics identified for the conference – technology and innovation, the renewable energy and clean technology, the health and drug industry, the higher education and skill development, food security and safety and tourism.

Sources: the hindu.

**Facts for Prelims**

**Babur:**

* It is an enhanced version of an indigenously-designed cruise missile that can hit targets at 700 kms with all kinds of warheads.
* It was recently test fired by the **Pakistan** Army.
* Called ‘Babur’ after Mughal invader and founder of the dynasty of same name, the missile is part of Babur Weapon System version- 2 and is an enhanced version of the earlier missile.
* It incorporates advanced aerodynamics and avionics that can strike targets both at land and sea with high accuracy.
* It is a low flying, terrain hugging missile, which carries certain stealth features and is capable of carrying various types of warheads.

**Insights Daily Current Affairs, 17 December 2016**

**Sustainable expansion: APAC nations to adopt Urban Plus approach**

The Asia Pacific Ministerial Conference on Housing and Urban Development has adopted the **New Delhi declaration**. The declaration was adopted at the culmination of a three-day dialogue by the member nations of the Asia-Pacific region, which together account for more than half of the global urban population.

Background:

This was the **first such meeting held to discuss ways of realising the New Urban Agenda that was finalised during the United Nations-Habitat III conference in Quito** in October 2016. The declaration that was released at the end of the conference, hosted by India this year, will be reviewed at the next biennial Asia Pacific Ministerial Conference on Housing and Urban Development which will be hosted by Iran two years later.

What is Urban plus approach?

This approach will address ways to make urban expansion sustainable and manageable. This would mean an emphasis on planning for urban and its adjoining peri-urban and rural areas in an integrated manner.

About the New Delhi Declaration:

* The New Delhi Declaration has strongly advocated planning for urban and adjoining rural areas in an integrated manner instead of looking at them as independent entities
* Noting governance as the key to sustainable development, the Declaration stressed on the need for effective governance structures in urban areas

Implementation Plan-

* formulation of National Human Settlement Policies to promote inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable city and human settlements
* Integration of land use and transportation planning across defined boundaries of cities and mixed land use
* Enforcement and incentivasation of timely execution of infrastructure projects
* Formulation of comprehensive urban parking policies and community participation in urban planning and service delivery

**Taxation Laws (Second Amendment) Act, 2016 comes into force**

The **Taxation Laws (Second Amendment) Act, 2016** has come into force on 15th December, 2016. The government has also said that the Taxation and Investment Regime for **Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana, 2016** (the Scheme) introduced vide the said Act will commence on 17th December, 2016 and shall remain open for declarations up to 31st March, 2017.

The salient features of the Scheme are as under:

* Declaration under the Scheme can be made by any person in respect of undisclosed income in the form of cash or deposits in an account with bank or post office or specified entity.
* Tax @30% of the undisclosed income, surcharge @33% of tax and penalty @10% of such income is payable besides mandatory deposit of 25% of the undisclosed income in Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Deposit Scheme, 2016. The deposits are interest free and have a lock-in period of four years.
* The income declared under the Scheme shall not be included in the total income of the declarant under the Income-tax Act for any assessment year.
* The declarations made under the Scheme shall not be admissible as evidence under any Act (eg. Central Excise Act, Wealth-tax Act, Companies Act etc.). However, no immunity will be available under Criminal Acts mentioned in section 199-O of the Scheme.

Way ahead:

Non declaration of undisclosed cash or deposit in accounts under the Scheme will render such undisclosed income liable to tax, surcharge and cess totaling to 77.25% of such income, if declared in the return of income. In case the same is not shown in the return of income a further penalty @10% of tax shall also be levied followed by prosecution.

**Centre Announces Notification of Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (Pet Shop) Rules, 2016**

The Government has issued the notification for the **Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (Pet Shop) Rules, 2016**. This is meant to regulate pet shops. The government has also invited suggestions.

* The objective of these rules is to make pet shops accountable and to prevent cruelty inflicted on animals kept in such pet shops.

Background:

Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change has the mandate to implement the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (PCA) Act, 1960, to prevent infliction of unnecessary pain, or suffering on animals.  The provisions of the PCA Act are general in nature, and rules dealing with specific situations have to be notified from time to time.

The proposed Rules provide as under:

* It will be mandatory for all pet shop owners to register themselves with the State Animal Welfare Board of the respective State Governments/Union Territories.
* Such shops will be registered only after inspection by the –
  + representatives of State Board,
  + a veterinary practitioner
  + a representative of Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Animals.
* The rules define space requirement for birds, cats, dogs, rabbits, guinea pig, hamster, rats and mice in the pet shops.
* It defines the basic amenities, power back-up, general care, veterinary care and other operational requirement for animals kept in pet shops.
* It is mandatory to maintain proper records of sale, purchase, death of animals in pet shop, sick animals etc.
* Every pet shop owner is required to submit yearly report to the State Board regarding animals, sold, traded, bartered, brokered, given away, boarded or exhibited during previous year, or any other information asked for by the State Board.

Violation of Rules:

Non-compliance of the proposed rules will lead to cancellation of registration of pet shop and pet animals so confiscated, shall be handed over to an Animal Welfare Organisation, or a rescue centre recognised by the Board.

About Animal Welfare Board of India:

The Animal Welfare Board of India is a statutory advisory body advising the Government of India on animal welfare laws, and promotes animal welfare in the country of India.

* The Animal Welfare Board of India was established in 1960 under Section 4 of The **Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act,1960**.
* The Board consists of 28 Members, who serve for a period of 3 years.
* It works to **ensure** that animal welfare **laws** in the country are followed and
* Provides **grants** to Animal Welfare Organisations.
* The Board was initially within the jurisdiction of the Government of **India’s Ministry of Food and Agriculture**. In 1990, the subject of Prevention of Cruelty to Animals was transferred to the **Ministry of Environment** and Forests, where it now resides.

**IAF officers can’t grow beard, uniformity of personal appearance important: SC**

The Supreme Court has ruled that Indian airmen can’t keep a beard as it is against their service rules. With this, the court has upheld the sacking of an Indian Air Force (IAF) man for keeping a long beard, saying military regulations were aimed at ensuring discipline and uniformity.

Background:

The ruling came while dismissing pleas filed by two Muslim personnel of the IAF. The Punjab and Haryana high court had dismissed their petition earlier.

Petitioners had challenged IAF’s “confidential” order of February 25, 2003, prohibiting Muslim personnel from keeping a beard. They contended that the order contravened a citizen’s fundamental rights.

Important observations made by the court:

* Every member of the air force, while on duty, is required to wear the uniform and not display any sign or object which distinguishes one from another. Uniformity of personal appearance is quintessential to a cohesive, disciplined and coordinated functioning of an armed force. Therefore, the decision to prohibit personnel of a particular community from sporting a beard didn’t infringe upon their fundamental right to religion.
* The court also said that as a combat force, the Airforce has to defend the nation and for its effectiveness, members must bond together by the sense of “*espirit-de-corps*”, without distinction of caste, creed or religion.

In the past, the court had observed that “Religion is a fundamental right in India under Article 25 of the Constitution. But it’s subject to public order, health, morality, and all other fundamental rights. Also, what are protected were only the basic tenets of a religion and not all incidental things.”

Sources: the hindu.

*Paper 3 Topic: Indian Economy and issues relating to planning, mobilization of resources, growth, development and employment.*

**RBI opposes proposal to set up separate payments regulator**

The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) has opposed a move to establish a separate entity to regulate payments and settlements, a function that is currently under the central bank’s purview.

Background:

In September, the Centre had set up a 11-member committee on Digital Payments headed by Finance Secretary Ratan Watal. One of the panel’s terms of reference was to study and recommend changes in the regulatory mechanism under various acts such as the Payments and Settlement Act, the RBI Act, and the Information Technology Act among others.

The panel had recommended that the RBI will be the regulator for SIPS (systemically important payment system) and a separate board (Payments Regulatory Board) for retail payments will be created under RBI.

What the RBI says?

The global experience, by and large, has been that both the SIPS and retail payment systems are under the central bank for a variety of reasons including issues of inter-connectivity between the systems and the role of the central bank as the lender of last resort (LOLR). Therefore, a separate entity for this purpose should not be created.

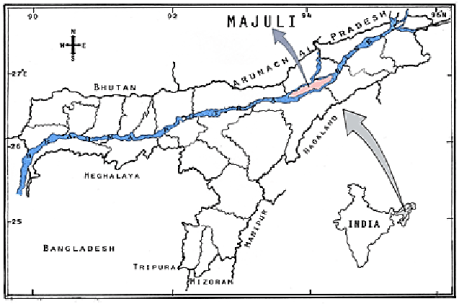
Sources: the hindu.

**Facts for Prelims**

**India’s first Humsafar train:**

* The Indian Railways has launched India’s first AC III tier Humsafar Express. The first Humsafar Express, with 16 AC III tier coaches and two power cars, would run between Anand Vihar in Ghaziabad to Gorakhpur in Uttar Pradesh.
* Humsafar would be fully air-conditioned third AC service with an optional service for meals. The announcement was made in the Railway Budget.
* The train has been facilitated with numerous features meant to provide luxury to middle-class passengers such as CCTV, Global Positioning System (GPS)-based passenger information system, mobile and laptop charging points, integrated braille display for the visually impaired, smoke detection and suppression system and a high quality exterior and interior design among others.
* The fares of the train are set to be higher than the regular AC III tier coaches as the cost of building one Humsafar coach is Rs2.58 crore as compared to Rs 2.39 crore of a regular AC III coach.

**Majuli to be India’s first ever carbon neutral district:**

* Assam government has initiated a project to make river island Majuli the country’s first ever Carbon Neutral district by 2020.
* The project titled ‘Sustainable Action for Climate Resilient Development in Majuli’ (SACReD, Majuli) has been initiated by Assam’s department of Environment.[](https://i0.wp.com/www.insightsonindia.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/Majuli-map.png)
* The project, SACReD, Majuli has been initiated to combat climate change and reduce greenhouse gas emissions.
* Mitigation through forestry activities and biodiversity conservation will be the starting points for the carbon neutral agenda followed by other interventions over the next three years.
* The project will be designed and implemented in partnership with other departments of the district for which a district level committee under the chairmanship of Deputy Commissioner has been constituted.

**Rio gets UNESCO world heritage status:**

* Rio de Janeiro, nicknamed the Marvellous City, has officially entered the UN’s list of world heritage sites in recognition of its soaring granite cliffs, urban rainforest and beaches.
* UNESCO highlighted the “extraordinary fusion” of man-made and natural beauty in certifying Rio on the world heritage list.
* The UNESCO status was announced in 2012, but only became official after the Brazilian authorities were given four years to report on their plans for protecting the likes of Flamengo Park, Sugarloaf Mountain, the Corcovado, and the Copacabana beach.

**Insights Daily Current Affairs, 19 December 2016**

**J&K has no sovereignty: SC + SARFAESI Act**

Snubbing the Jammu and Kashmir High Court for asserting the state’s “sovereignty” and “sovereign powers”, the Supreme Court has said J&K “has no vestige of sovereignty outside the Constitution of India”.

* The court has also rejected the J&K High Court’s view that the J&K Constitution was equal to the Constitution of India.

Background:

The apex court judgement came on the appeal by State Bank of India (SBI) against the high court verdict which had held that the SARFAESI Act would collide with the Transfer of Property Act of Jammu & Kashmir, 1920. The court held that provisions of the Securitisation and Reconstruction of Financial Assets and Enforcement of Security Interest Act, 2002 (SARFAESI Act) are within the legislative competence of Parliament and can be enforced in Jammu and Kashmir.

Previously, Jammu and Kashmir High Court had held that any law made by Parliament, which affects the laws made by state legislature, cannot be extended to Jammu and Kashmir.

Other important observations made by the court:

The court observed, “Section 3 of the Constitution of Jammu & Kashmir, which was framed by a Constituent Assembly elected on the basis of universal adult franchise, makes a ringing declaration that the State of Jammu & Kashmir is and shall be an integral part of the Union of India. And this provision is beyond the pale of amendment. It is therefore wholly incorrect to describe it as being sovereign in the sense of its residents constituting a separate and distinct class in themselves. The residents of Jammu & Kashmir are first and foremost citizens of India and that there is no dual citizenship as is contemplated by some other federal Constitutions in other parts of the world.”

Underlining that the quasi-federal structure of the Constitution of India continues even with respect to J&K, the court said: “Article 1 of the Constitution of India and Section 3 of the Jammu & Kashmir Constitution make it clear that India shall be a Union of States, and that the State of Jammu & Kashmir is and shall be an integral part of the Union of India.” It said the J&K Constitution has been made to further define the existing relationship of the state with the Union of India as an integral part thereof.

SARFAESI Act:

This act allows banks and financial institutions to auction properties (residential and commercial) when borrowers fail to repay their loans. It enables banks to reduce their non-performing assets (NPAs) by adopting measures for recovery or reconstruction.

Key facts:

* Upon loan default, banks can seize the securities (except agricultural land) without intervention of the court.
* SARFAESI is effective only for secured loans where bank can enforce the underlying security. In such cases, court intervention is not necessary, unless the security is invalid or fraudulent. However, if the asset in question is an unsecured asset, the bank would have to move the court to file civil case against the defaulters.
* The SARFAESI Act also provides for the establishment of Asset Reconstruction Companies (ARCs) regulated by RBI to acquire assets from banks and financial institutions.
* The Act provides for sale of financial assets by banks and financial institutions to asset reconstruction companies (ARCs). RBI has issued guidelines to banks on the process to be followed for sales of financial assets to ARCs.
* The provisions of this Act are applicable only for NPA loans with outstanding above Rs. 1lac. NPA loan accounts where the amount is less than 20% of the principal and interest are not eligible to be dealt with under this Act.

The Act provides three alternative methods for recovery of non-performing assets, namely:

* Securitisation
* Asset Reconstruction.
* Enforcement of Security without the intervention of the Court.

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**Single tribunal to arbitrate inter-State water disputes**

The Centre has decided to set up a single, permanent Tribunal to adjudicate all inter-State river water disputes, a step which is aimed at resolving grievances of States in a speedy manner. This body will subsume existing tribunals.

* Besides the tribunal, the government has also proposed to float some Benches by amending the Inter-State Water Disputes Act, 1956 to look into disputes as and when required. Unlike the tribunal, the Benches will cease to exist once the disputes are resolved.

Key facts:

* The permanent tribunal will have retired Supreme Court judge as its chairperson.
* There will be benches formed as and when required. The benches though will be wound up once a dispute is resolve.
* Along with the tribunal, the amendment proposes to set up Dispute Resolution Committee (DRC). The DRC, comprising experts and policy-makers, is proposed to handle disputes prior to the Tribunal.
* In order to give more teeth to the tribunal, it is proposed that whenever it gives order, the verdict gets notified automatically. Until now, the government required to notify the awards, causing delay in its implementation.

Background:

As per the current provisions of the 1956 Act, a tribunal can be formed after a state government approaches Union Government with such request and the Centre is convinced of the need to form the tribunal.

At present, there are eight tribunals, including those on Cauvery, Mahadayi, Ravi and Beas, Vansadhara and Krishna rivers.

Way ahead:

A decision to approve an amendment to the Act was taken at the recently held Union Cabinet’s meeting. The amendment is likely to be introduced in Parliament in its next session.

**EC seeks end to nameless donations**

Seeking to stop financing of election campaigns using black money, the Election Commission has urged the government to amend laws to ban anonymous contributions of Rs. 2,000 and above made to political parties.

Present scenario:

There is no constitutional or statutory prohibition on receipt of anonymous donations by political parties. But there is an indirect partial ban on anonymous donations through the requirement of declaration of donations under Section 29C of the Representation of the People Act, 1951. But, such declarations are mandated only for contributions above Rs. 20,000.

What has the Election Commission proposed?

* As per the proposal, sent by the commission to the government, and made part of its compendium on proposed electoral reforms, “Anonymous contributions above or equal to the amount of Rs. 2,000 should be prohibited.”
* EC has also proposed that exemption of income tax should be extended only to political parties that contest elections and win seats in Lok Sabha or Assembly polls. Section 13A of the Income-Tax Act, 1961 confers tax exemption to political parties for income from house property, voluntary contributions, capital gains and other sources.
* EC has also asked the Law Ministry to ensure that political parties are made to register details of donors for coupons of all amounts on the basis of a Supreme Court order of 1996.

Why this is necessary?

At present, only income under the head ‘salaries and income from business or profession’ are chargeable to tax in the hands of political parties in India. Utilizing this space, political parties are formed merely for availing of provisions of income tax exemption. Hence, to curb such moves EC has proposed these reforms.

Sources: the hindu.

**Facts for Prelims**

**New Army and Navy Chiefs:**

* The government has announced Lt Gen Bipin Rawat as the next Chief of Army Staff. The appointment goes against the long held tradition of appointing the senior most eligible officer to the post.
* Air Marshal B.S. Dhanoa, presently the Vice Chief of Indian Air Force (IAF) has been appointed the next Air Chief.

**World’s first cloned goat with Cashmere:**

* The world’s first cloned goat bearing superfine Cashmere wool was recently born in north China’s Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region. The goat will be raised in a base for animal husbandry research.
* The Cashmere fibre from the goat is less than 13.8 micrometers thick, much finer than the average of 15.8 micrometers grown by the famous Erlang Mountain goats in Inner Mongolia.
* Cashmere wool is obtained from Cashmere goats and other types of goat.

**China opens 1st fully-owned satellite ground station:**

* China has launched its first fully- owned overseas satellite ground station near the North Pole which could enable Beijing to collect satellite data anywhere on the Earth at a speed it said was the fastest in the world.
* The facility, located in Sweden about 200 kms north of the Arctic Circle, would allow China to collect satellite data anywhere on Earth at speeds that were more than twice as fast as before.
* The new facility would play an important role in China’s Gaofen project – a network of observation satellites orbiting the Earth to provide global surveillance capabilities – which was due to be completed in 2020.
* Domestic ground stations have needed up to seven hours to download the data from satellites orbiting the Earth in the past, but with the facility in Sweden, the maximum delay for downloading data would be less than 3.5 hours. The shorter time is because the mapping, weather, reconnaissance and military satellites orbiting the North Pole are able to pass around the Earth about 12 times each day, while those flying over China can orbit the Earth only about five times each day.

**Insights Daily Current Affairs, 20 December 2016**

**Centre plans dedicated fund for infra finance**

The government has decided to set up a dedicated fund of Rs.10,000 crore to provide credit enhancement for commercially viable infrastructure projects.

Key facts:

* The dedicated fund will be in the form of a Special Purpose Vehicle (SPV) and will be categorised an NBFC-Infrastructure Finance Company.
* The SPV will issue an array of credit enhancement products that will initially cover post-Commercial Operations Date (COD) projects (where construction is over and commercial operations have begun, with the project generating cash flows), and subsequently even the pre-COD projects (where the construction process is on).
* Its promoters are likely to include Life Insurance Corporation of India (LIC), General Insurance Corporation of India, State Bank of India, Bank of Baroda, Power Finance Corporation, Indian Renewable Energy Development Agency and India Infrastructure Finance Company Ltd (IIFCL).
* The government is keen on roping in international financial institutions such as Asian Development Bank, Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, New Development Bank (formerly BRICS Development Bank), International Finance Corporation (World Bank Group), and talks are on in this regard.
* Also, other Indian public sector insurance companies, large state-owned banks and the National Investment & Infrastructure Fund (NIIF) are expected to contribute to the fund that will have an authorised capital of Rs.10,000 crore.
* The initial minimum paid-up capital will be Rs.500 crore, which will be quickly scaled up with regular capital infusion to Rs.10,000 crore.
* The public sector insurers, leading state-owned banks and multilateral lending agencies are being made part of the large fund as it needs deep-pocketed promoters with an understanding of the risks involved in investing in the infrastructure sector — where projects have huge capital needs, but with long-gestation periods and returns coming in slowly.

Benefits of this fund:

The fund — through ‘unconditional and irrevocable partial credit guarantee’ — will help enhance the credit rating of bonds issued by infrastructure firms so that they, in turn, can attract long-term investments especially from global insurance, pension and sovereign wealth funds.

Besides, a majority of the around 1,500 infrastructure projects in the country in various stages of development are rated at BBB-level, and the dedicated fund can help enhance this rating and help them raise more funds, especially from overseas investors who invest only in higher-rated (AA) projects.

Background:

The country infrastructure sector requires investments of more than $1.5 trillion in the coming ten years. The development follows the announcement in the Budget 2016-17 on the proposed measures to deepen the corporate bond market.

Way ahead:

Prior to the setting up of the dedicated fund, the Reserve Bank of India is expected to bring out a comprehensive regulatory framework for credit enhancement to infrastructure projects and Non-Banking Finance Companies (NBFC) keen on the business. The central bank’s norms for credit enhancement products will include capital requirement and bad loans or asset classification.

Sources: the hindu.

*Paper 3 Topic: cyber security.*

**Govt mulls merging cyber tribunal with TDSAT**

As part of plans to merge some of the tribunals into larger entities to avoid identical functions, the government is looking to converge the Cyber Appellate Tribunal (**CyAT**) and the Telecom Disputes Settlement and Appellate Tribunal (TDSAT). A Cabinet note to this effect will be moved shortly.

About CyAT:

Cyber Appellate Tribunal has been established under the Information Technology Act under the aegis of Controller of Certifying Authorities (C.C.A.).

* As per the IT Act, any person aggrieved by an order made by the Controller of Certifying Authorities, or by an adjudicating officer under this Act may prefer an appeal before the Cyber Appellate Tribunal.
* This Tribunal is headed by a Chairperson who is appointed by the Central Government by notification as provided under Section 49 of the IT Act 2000.
* It was conceived to adjudicate cyber crimes and disputes such as hacking, sending of offensive or false messages, receiving stolen computer resource, identity theft, cheating by personation, violation of privacy, domain name disputes and other cyber fraud cases.
* The tribunal has been vested with the same powers as a civil court, the cases requiring punishment instead of financial penalty are transferred to the magistrate concerned.
* CyAT, however, has been headless since July 2011.

Significance of this move:

With growing number of internet users and government move to push for digital payments, it is extremely important to have an efficient cyber dispute settlement mechanism. This move is aimed at making the dispute settlement mechanism more efficient.

Background:

Seeking to cut red tape, an inter—ministerial group of secretaries had “unanimously” agreed to reduce the number of tribunals from 36 to 18 as the government feels that most of these bodies are performing “identical functions”.

* A Constitutional bench of the Supreme Court had some years ago suggested bringing tribunals under administrative control of the Law Ministry.
* The Department of Legal Affairs had also recently written to all Union ministries and departments to furnish details of tribunals functioning under their administrative control and explain the “possibility of merging the functions of tribunals with some other tribunals”.
* There are 36 tribunals functioning in the country dealing with subjects such as income tax, electricity, consumer protection, company laws and railway accidents.

Sources: the hindu.

*Paper 2 Topic: Important aspects of governance, transparency and accountability, e-governance- applications, models, successes, limitations, and potential; citizens charters, transparency & accountability and institutional and other measures.*

**In digital push, telecom regulator moots free data for rural users**

The Telecom Authority of India has recommended a scheme under which a reasonable amount of data say 100 MB per month may be made available to rural subscribers for free.

* The cost of implementation of the scheme may be met from Universal Service Obligation Fund (USOF).
* This move is to bridge the affordability gap for persons residing in rural areas and to support the government’s efforts towards a cashless economy by incentivising digital means.

Recommendations made by the TRAI:

* The scheme for free data must be telecom service provider agnostic, and must not involve any arrangement between the service provider and the aggregator/content provider.
* The free scheme should not be designed to circumvent the guidelines on “The Prohibition of Discriminatory Tariffs for Data Services Regulations,” which bans various forms of zero-rating models or schemes that provide free access to data services for subscribers of a particular Internet Service provider for accessing specific content.
* There is a need to introduce third party (aggregator) to facilitate schemes which are telecom service provider (TSP) agnostic and non-discriminatory in their implementation. The aggregators, who should be a company registered under Indian Companies Act, 1956, need to register with the Department of Telecom. The validity of this registration will be for five years.
* The registrant shall not either directly or indirectly, assign or transfer the registration in any manner whatsoever to a third party either in whole or in part.
* The free data scheme should be implemented for a definitive period with a clearly defined time limit for each subscriber — free benefit for a fixed number of months for each subscriber. After the expiry of 100 MB of data in a month on a mobile connection, the free data services should be suspended till the beginning of the following month.

Background:

Of the over 367 million Internet and broadband users in India, only 32.60% are in rural areas.

Sources: the hindu.

*Paper 2 Topic: Issues relating to development and management of Social Sector/Services relating to Health, Education, Human Resources, issues relating to poverty and hunger.*

**Ultrasound devices to be mapped**

In an attempt to identify unauthorised and unregistered diagnostic centres in the country, the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (MoFW) has decided that all ultrasound machines in States will be mapped. The mapping will be carried out by the authorities in States visiting every centre and recording details of the devices.

Significance of this move:

While regularising the diagnostic facilities is the main aim, curbing sex determination tests and female foeticide is another important aspect of the move, which will help reduce the thousands of unregistered sonography centres that have mushroomed over the years.

Key facts:

* The exercise has already been undertaken by some States while others are in process. The idea is to regulate all centres and thus monitor them thoroughly and minimise malpractices.
* Mapping will be carried out through a ground-level survey of all centres and ultrasound machines.

Why this is necessary?

Unregulated machines and centres are misused for carrying out illegal sex determination tests. Since they are not registered, they don’t follow the rules of submitting Form F for every case, which is mandatory under the Pre Conception and Pre Natal Diagnostic Techniques Act. Form F is a document to be filled by radiologists carrying out ultrasound tests on any pregnant woman. While registered centres are mandated to keep all records, the centres running illegally get away with breaking the rules. This is where couples looking for identifying the sex of their baby head to.

Sources: the hindu.

**Facts for Prelims**

**Saanjhi Saanjh:**

* It is a National Newspaper dedicated to Senior Citizen. The first issue of this bilingual newspaper was recently released.
* This Newspaper for Senior Citizen is edited by Ms. J.V Manisha Bajaj, Secretary, Harikrit, an NGO for elderly people.
* This newspaper has got 8 pages which will be published from Delhi by Harikrit publishers.
* This newspaper will carry important and useful news pertaining to elderly persons besides inspirational stories. It will serve as a bridge between old and new generations.

**Country’s first Indian Institute of Skills:**

* Aimed at making India the Skill Capital of the World, Prime Minister Narendra Modi laid foundation stone of the country’s first Indian Institute of Skills (IIS) at Kanpur recently.
* The IIS was conceptualised by Modi during his visit to Singapore’s Institute of Technical Education.
* The institute is being opened by the Skill Development Ministry in partnership with the Institute of Technical Education, Singapore.
* The Ministry has decided to have six such institutes.

**For the first time in nearly 150 years, India’s economy surpasses that of United Kingdom:**

* Owing to Britain’s recent Brexit-related problems and thanks to India’s rapid economic growth, India has managed to overtake its erstwhile colonial master United Kingdom in terms of the size of the economy – the first time after nearly 150 years.
* This dramatic shift has been driven by India’s rapid economic growth over the past 25 years as well downslide in the value of the pound over the last 12 months.

**Vasectomy fortnight:**

* The government observed ‘Vasectomy Fortnight’ between November 21 and December 4 with the hope to create awareness about male sterilisation and, more importantly, to facilitate district administrations reach sterilisation targets through campaigns.
* At the end of the programme, it was concluded that men were unwilling to share the burden of birth control compared to women. This is besides the fact that sterilisation is simpler in men than women — recovery time and surgical risk are smaller, complications are rare and deaths rarer.
* It should be noted here that of the 40 lakh sterilisation procedures done in 2014-15, vasectomies accounted for minuscule 1.9%. Experts maintain that the gap between vasectomy targets and achievements remain unchanged over the years even as country’s fertility and birth rates continue to fall, driven mainly by female sterilisation.

**Insights Daily Current Affairs, 21 December 2016**

**Meeting of Governing Body and General Body of Dr. Ambedkar Foundation held**

The meeting of the Governing Body and General Body of the Dr. Ambedkar Foundation (DAF) was recently held under the Chairmanship of the Chairman DAF & Minister for Social Justice and Empowerment Shri Thaawarchand Gehlot.

* A compendium on various activities organized by the Dr. Ambedkar Foundation during the Nationwide Celebration of 125th Birth Anniversary of Dr. B R Ambedkar was released during the meeting.

About the foundation:

Dr. Ambedkar foundation was set up on 24th March, 1992, as a registered body under the aegis of the Ministry of Welfare to promote Babasaheb’s ideals and also to administer some of the schemes which emanated from the Centenary Celebrations, such as the establishment of Dr. Ambedkar chairs in Universities and Dr. Ambedkar National Award for Social Understanding and up-liftment of Weaker Sections.

Apart from other aims and objects relating to research, development and educational programmes, it had to administer the following three special schemes which emanated from the Centenary Celebrations i.e. Scheme of Dr. Ambedkar National Award; Setting up of Dr. Ambedkar Chairs in Universities; Setting up of Dr. Ambedkar International Centre and Setting up of Dr. Ambedkar National Memorial.

Sources: pib.

*Paper 2 Topic: Important aspects of governance, transparency and accountability, e-governance- applications, models, successes, limitations, and potential; citizens charters, transparency & accountability and institutional and other measures.*

**GARV-II App launched**

The government has launched GARV- II app to track Rural Household Electrification. This is the next step in Government of India’s aim to provide access to electricity to all households in the country.

Key facts:

* Under this module, village-wise and habitation-wise base line data on household electrification for all States, as provided by them, has been incorporated.
* The data in respect of about 6 lakh villages, with more than 15 lakh habitations having 17 crore people, has been mapped for tracking progress on household electrification in each of the habitations of these villages, which is a remarkable progress over the previous GARV App.
* In the earlier version of the ‘GARV’ App, launched in October 2015 for the effective and efficient monitoring of village electrification programme, the data of only 18,452 un-electrified villages had been mapped and a 12-stage milestone-based monitoring mechanism was put in place.
* The status of village-wise works sanctioned under the Deen Dayal Upadhyaya Gram Jyoti Yojana (DDUGJY) and release of funds to the States for these projects has also been mapped in ‘GARV-II’ to monitor progress of works in each village. The progress is required to be updated by the implementing agencies of the States on day to day basis. All data would be made available in public domain to ensure transparency, enhance accountability of various stakeholders and facilitate view of near real time progress.
* This app is an important part of the ‘Digital India Initiative’ of Government of India and will contribute in further development of the villages. In order to bring more transparency, the Minister asked the Power Ministry officials to place more details regarding discoms, tenders and contracts in public domain.
* For places, where internet facilities are not available, information regarding rural electrification projects like contractor’s name, amount sanctioned by the Government, deadline of the project etc. will be put on boards on the working sites in villages. This will help people in better monitoring of Government’s work.

Sources: pib.

*Paper 2 Topic: Important aspects of governance, transparency and accountability, e-governance- applications, models, successes, limitations, and potential; citizens charters, transparency & accountability and institutional and other measures.*

**Digital India Awards 2016 – Healthy Ministry wins gold in the Web Ratna Category**

The Ministry of Health and Family Welfare has won gold in the Web Ratna category in the recently concluded Digital India awards, 2016, conferred by the Ministry of Electronics & IT to promote more innovative e-governance initiatives by the government entities.

Key facts:

* The website of the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare conforms to the UUU trilogy. It is totally bilingual as per the directions of Parliamentary Committee of official languages and is accessible to all. Special features have also been incorporated in the website for visually challenged users.
* The website complies with the mandatory requirements of Guidelines for Indian Government Websites (GIGW).
* All relevant web policies have been implemented with due approvals. Content has been grouped systematically under drop down menus that result in easy navigation.
* The ministry has been awarded for comprehensive web presence in Web ratna awards in 2014 and appreciated by SUGAM Web e-Newsletter as usable, user-centric and universally accessible.

About awards:

Digital India awards, earlier known as the Web Ratna Awards, were instituted under the Ambit of National Portal of India. The award acknowledges exemplary initiatives of various government entities in the realm of e-governance.

Web Ratna award felicitates a Ministry or Department of the Government of India which has a comprehensive web presence and display the level of accountability in terms of quantity, quality, spectrum of coverage, and innovation ascertaining user satisfaction. Level of convenience provided to the citizen for availing the services, usability and accessibility are also assessed.

Sources: pib.

*Paper 2 Topic: Separation of powers between various organs dispute redressal mechanisms and institutions.*

**Can courts make life terms more rigorous, asks SC**

The Supreme Court has agreed to examine the question whether courts are statutorily empowered to make life imprisonments tougher for the convicts by adding ‘rigorous’ (harsh) to life sentence as the law does not provide for this.

* The court would consider whether the Criminal Procedure Code (CrPC) or any other penal law empowered the courts to add the term ‘rigorous’.

Background:

The court has taken up the issue based on a submission which said neither the penal provision dealing with the offence of murder, nor the Code of Criminal Procedure (CrPC) provided that the term ‘rigorous’ can be added by courts while awarding life sentences.

Sources: the hindu.

*Paper 2 Topic: Statutory, regulatory and various quasi-judicial bodies.*

**NCRPB tells States to submit action plan to curb pollution**

With air quality deteriorating on a daily basis, the National Capital Region Planning Board (NCRPB) has asked Delhi and adjoining States to submit action plans to control air pollution in the Capital. The Board will soon file an affidavit before the Delhi High Court regarding the matter.

Background:

Air pollution in Delhi is a matter of serious concern and Delhi, along with Uttar Pradesh, Haryana, Rajasthan and Punjab are acting in unison to mitigate the suffering of the people.

About NCR:

National Capital Region (NCR) is a unique example of inter-state regional planning and development, covering the entire National Capital Territory of Delhi, thirteen districts of State of Haryana, seven districts of State of Uttar Pradesh and two districts of State of Rajasthan, with the Nation Capital as its core.

The National Capital Region (NCR) in India was constituted under the NCRPB Act, 1985 with the key rationale to promote balanced and harmonized development of the Region, and to avoid any haphazard development.

Sources: the hindu.

*Paper 1 Topic: Indian culture will cover the salient aspects of Art Forms, Literature and Architecture from ancient to modern times.*

**Thiruvalluvar’s statue unveiled in Haridwar**

Uttarakhand Chief minister Harish Rawat has unveiled the statue of renowned Tamil poet and philosopher Thiruvalluvar on the premises of Mela Bhawan in Haridwar. The ceremony was attended by members of the Tamil Sangam, in addition to officials from the Uttarakhand administration.

Key facts:

* Thiruvalluvar is a celebrated Tamil poet and philosopher whose contribution to Tamil literature is the Thirukkural, a work on ethics.
* Thiruvalluvar is thought to have lived sometime between the 4th century BC and the 1st century BC.
* The Tamil poet Mamulanar of the Sangam period mentioned that Thiruvalluvar was the greatest Tamil scholar and Mamulanar also mentioned the Nanda Dynasty of northern which ruled until the 4th century BC.

Sources: the hindu.

**Facts for Prelims**

**National Commission for Protection of Child Rights gets SKOCH Awards for POCSO e-Box:**

* The National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR) of Ministry of Women and Child Development has been conferred the Skoch Silver and Skoch Order-of Merit award.
* The two awards were received by NCPCR for applying technology to develop an electronic drop box, POCSO e-Box for registering complaints on Child Sexual Abuse.
* The competition saw more than 3000 participants and NCPCR’s project, POCSO e-box was considered among the top 30 entries.
* POCSO e-box is a unique endeavour by NCPCR for receiving online complaint of Child Sexual Abuse directly from the victim. The system maintains confidentiality of the victim/ complainant.
* Through a well defined procedure complaints are directly followed up by a team which counsels the victim, providing further guidance for required legal action. Through a short animation film embedded in the e-box it assures the victim not to feel bad, helpless or confused as it’s not her fault. With the e-box, it is easy to register complaint through a step-by-step guided process.

**Khanjar-IV:**

* During the recently held bilateral talks, India and Kyrgyzstan have finalised plans for joint military exercises in the New Year.
* The annual joint military exercises named “Khanjar-IV” will be held in February-March. The “Khanjar-II” exercises were held in March 2015 in Kyrgyzstan and “Khanjar-III” in March-April 2016 in **Gwalior**.

**Insights Daily Current Affairs, 22 December 2016**

**Indian Enterprise Development Services**

- Government approved the creation of IEDS in office of Development Commissioner under Micro Small and Medium Enterprise ministry (MSME)

- Key Features of IEDS

* Will have cadre strength of 617 officers including 6 officers at the joint secretaries level.
* It will be created by absorbing 11 trades in which recruitment had been done through different rules.

- Why IEDS?

1950’s and 1960’s when these 11 trades were created there was a prevalence of regulatory regime in the country as a result development was hindered because every aspect of industries were controlled.

So, to boost the MSME, urgent need was there to have separate cadre for their development.

- How it will help

* It will help in strengthening the organization and also help in fulfilling the vision of “Start up India”, “Stand up India” and “Make in India” by promoting indigenous industries.
* This will not only increase efficiency and capacity of MSME but will also ensure growth in the sector.

**Uttar Pradesh sends first proposal for construction of houses for urban poor under PMAY (Urban)**

Uttar Pradesh has become the 29th State to send proposals for construction of affordable houses for urban poor to the Ministry of Housing & Urban Poverty Alleviation.

* The first such proposal for construction of 11,286 houses for urban poor in 34 towns of Uttar Pradesh was approved by the Ministry of HUPA recently.
* Total investment involved in construction of these houses is Rs.384 cr. The Ministry has approved central assistance of Rs. 160 cr in this regard.

About PMAY-Urban:

The Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (Urban) Programme launched by the Ministry of Housing and Urban Poverty Alleviation (MoHUPA), in Mission mode envisions provision of Housing for All by 2022, when the Nation completes 75 years of its Independence.

The Mission seeks to address the housing requirement of urban poor including slum dwellers through following programme verticals:

* Slum rehabilitation of Slum Dwellers with participation of private developers using land as a resource.
* Promotion of Affordable Housing for weaker section through credit linked subsidy.
* Affordable Housing in Partnership with Public & Private sectors.
* Subsidy for beneficiary-led individual house construction /enhancement.

Key facts:

* The beneficiaries are poor and people living under EWS and LIG categories in the country.
* The scheme is divided into three phases.
  + In the first phase- a total of 100 cities will be covered from April 2015 to March 2017.
  + In phase two, 200 cities will be covered from April 2017 to March 2019.
  + In the third phase, the leftover cities will be covered from April 2019 to March 2022.
* The government is providing an interest subsidy of 6.5% on housing loans which can be availed by beneficiaries for 15 years from start of loan date.
* The government will grant Rs 1 lakh to all the beneficiaries of the scheme.
* In addition, Rs 1.5 lakh will be given to all eligible urban poor who want to construct their houses in urban areas or plan to go for renovation in their existing houses. One can also avail loans under this scheme to build toilets in existing houses.

**SC criticises poor implementation of SC/ST Act**

Criticising the government for its “indifferent attitude” towards the implementation of the Scheduled Castes/Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, the Supreme Court has directed the National Legal Services Authority to frame schemes for spreading legal awareness and free consultations to members of the SC/ST communities nationwide.

* The court has asked the authorities to discharge their duties to protect the SCs/STs to attain the constitutional goal of equality for all citizens.

About NALSA:

-The National Legal Services Authority (NALSA) has been constituted under the Legal Services Authorities Act, 1987 to –

* provide free Legal Services to the weaker sections of the society
* organize Lok Adalats for amicable settlement of disputes.

-The Chief Justice of India is patron-in-chief of NALSA while

- Second seniormost judge of Supreme Court of India is the Executive-Chairman.

There is a provision for similar mechanism at state and district level also headed by Chief Justice of High Courts and Chief Judges of District courts respectively:

* In every State, State Legal Services Authority has been constituted to give effect to the policies and directions of the NALSA and to give free legal services to the people and conduct Lok Adalats in the State. The State Legal Services Authority is headed by Hon’ble the Chief Justice of the respective High Court who is the Patron-in-Chief of the State Legal Services Authority.
* In every District, District Legal Services Authority has been constituted to implement Legal Services Programmes in the District. The District Legal Services Authority is situated in the District Courts Complex in every District and chaired by the District Judge of the respective district.

**Pardon, the gender wage gap is showing**

Global Wage Report 2016-17 was recently released by the International Labour Organisation (ILO).

Highlights of the report:

Performance of India:

* India has among the worst levels of gender wage disparity — men earning more than women in similar jobs — with the gap exceeding 30%.
* In India, women formed 60% of the lowest paid wage labour, but only 15% of the highest wage-earners. This means not only are women poorly represented in the top bracket of wage-earners, the gender pay gap at the bottom is also very wide in India.
* In India, the top one per cent earned 33 times what the bottom 10% did. The top 10% also earned 43% of all wages. Since 2006, average wages rose by 60% in India, while they more than doubled in China.

Global scenario:

* Singapore has the lowest wage disparity, at 3%. Among major economies, only South Korea fared worse than India, with a gap of 37%.
* The share of women among wage earners was among the lowest in South Asia. Compared to a global average of 40%, and an Asia-Pacific average of 38%, in South Asia (whose dominant economy is India), only 20% of wage earners were women.
* The gender pay gap is smallest (8%) in the group of countries where the collective bargaining rate is at least 80%, and widest in countries with weak collective bargaining and no or very low minimum wages.

Reasons for the wage gap:

* The report noted that typically, women’s educational choices produced occupational segregation. For instance, since the majority of those who studied nursing were women, “this profession is over-represented among women”.
* At the same time, care work is undervalued because it may be seen as a natural female attribute rather than a skill to be acquired. Thus, a higher representation of women in sectors where their work is undervalued results in a gender pay gap.

Sources: the hindu.

**Forest Fires: PSC report**

PSC on S&T has submitted its report on forest fires.

-Key observations –

* frequency of forest fires across Central Indian forests and the Himalayan Pine forest have increased by 55% in 2016.
* The States of Odisha, Chhattisgarh, and Madhya Pradesh accounted for 1/3rd of the forest fires.
* The committee observed that Chir pine needles, which are highly inflammable due to its high resin content, are a prominent factor in occurring and spreading of forest fires. In comparison, incidents of fire in broad leaves forests were found to be minimal

-Recommendations-

* national policy on managing forest fires should be prepared;
* A dedicated toll-free number for reporting incidents of forest fire in each state
* Environment ministry should train fire brigade officers of all states and equip them with forest fire equipment so that in the event of forest fires they do not have to depend on outside agencies like NDRF.
* Use of corporate social responsibility funds for creating awareness campaigns on forest fires.
* Creation of ponds and other water harvesting structures within the forest area to not only reduce river bank erosion but also as a handy tool for supply of water to douse forest fires
* Planting of broad tree leaves in forests, and after a period of five years, systematic replacement of chir pine trees in forests by broad leaves
* Procurement of sweeping machines to clear roadsides of chir pine needles and dry leaves in vulnerable areas
* Advocated large-scale incentives and programmes (including under the MGNREGA) to collect pines for use as fuel, and other incineration

**Facts for Prelims**

**National Apprenticeship Promotion Scheme (NAPS):**

* Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi recently launched National Apprenticeship Promotion Scheme (NAPS) at Kanpur.
* The scheme has an outlay of Rs 10000 crore and it involves incentivizing employers in sharing 25% of total cost of stipend paid to the apprentices.
* It is for the first time Govt. of India has come forward to incentivize the employers to participate pro-actively in apprenticeship training.

**Coal Mitra:**

-Facts-Power generation in India

* Thermal – 69.3% in which coal accounts for 60.8%.
* Renewable Source – 14.9%
* Hydro (renewable) – 14.0%
* Nuclear – 1.9%

-Coal Mitra – web portal to facilitate coal swapping among government and private firms.

- Key features

• It will show data on Operational parameters and Financial health of each coal based station.

• It will contain data about quantity and source of coal supply for Power plant and distance of each power plant from coal mine

• Central/state power generating stations can use the portal to display information regarding norms fixed for electricity charges, previous month variable charges of electricity and margin available for additional generation for utilities to identify stations for transfer of coal

- Challenges of power sector

• There is inadequate supply of fuel like coal and gas to power generating station. CIL supply is only 65% of total requirement so most of demand is met through import thus escalating generation cost.

• Financial health of most of the DISCOMS are in bad shape because of under recovery of dues, various populist schemes and transmission and distribution losses.

• Difficulty in obtaining Environmental clearance and land acquisition

• theft of electricity.

- Significance

• It will ensure flexibility in utilization of domestic coal by transferring coal reserves to more cost efficient power generating station thus ensuring optimum utilization of coal reserves.

• Low power generation cost resulting in low charge for end consumers.

• As power becomes cheap it will be beneficial for the industrial and manufacturing sector producing high end goods at lower prices.

**Insights Daily Current Affairs, 23 December 2016**

**NGT bans open waste burning**

The National Green Tribunal (NGT) has imposed a complete ban on burning of waste in open places, including at landfill sites and announced a fine of Rs. 25,000 on each incident of bulk waste burning.

What else has the NGT said?

* All State governments and Union Territories shall prepare an action plan in terms of the Solid Waste Management Rules, 2016 and implement within four weeks. The action plan would relate to the management and disposal of waste in the entire State. The steps are required to be taken in a time-bound manner.
* Plants for processing and disposal of waste and selection and specifications of landfill sites which have to be constructed, be prepared and maintained strictly in accordance with the Rules of 2016.
* Non-biodegradable waste and non-recyclable plastic should be segregated from the landfill sites and should be used for construction of roads and embankments in all road projects.

Background:

The green panel’s judgement came on a petition seeking directions to local bodies in states and the Centre for improving solid waste management methods.

**China launches satellite to monitor global carbon emissions**

 China has launched a global carbon dioxide monitoring satellite to understand climate change.

* The 620-kg satellite TanSat was put into orbit by Long March-2D rocket from Jiuquan Satellite Launch Centre in northwest China’s Gobi Desert.
* This was the 243rd mission of the Long March series rockets. China is the third country after Japan and the US to monitor greenhouse gases through its own satellite.

**Cabinet approves ordinance to pay salaries via cheques**

The Centre recently approved the promulgation of an ordinance to enable industries to pay wages by cheque or by direct credit into bank accounts of workers earning up to Rs. 18,000 a month, without taking their explicit consent as required under the present 1936 law.

Key facts:

* The ordinance proposes changes to Section 6 of the Payment of Wages Act of 1936. The Centre or State governments may specify the industry through official notifications where the payment of wages shall be through cheques or direct credit in bank accounts.
* Wage payment through the banking system would only be optional, until State governments or the Centre come up with a notification for specific industries. The current provisions of payment of wages through cash will remain.

Significance of this move:

The move assumes significance in the context of the government’s efforts to promote cashless transactions after its decision to scrap the old Rs. 500 and Rs. 1,000 currency notes.

Background:

The Payment of Wages (Amendment) Bill, 2016 was introduced in the Lok Sabha on December 15, but it couldn’t be cleared owing to the impasse in Parliament. The present law states that all payment of wages should be in cash, with a provision asking employers to obtain written permission of the worker to pay either by cheque, or by crediting the wages to his or her bank account.

**Centre recasts panel helping Krishna Board**

The Centre has reconstituted a committee that was tasked with assisting the Krishna River Management Board (KRMB).

Key facts:

* The new committee will be headed by A.K. Bajaj, former chairman of the Central Water Commission.
* The committee is tasked with assisting the Krishna River Management Board prepare a manual on how projects, common to Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, ought to be handled.
* It also has to weigh in on how the Godavari waters ought to be transferred to the Krishna Basin in accordance with the Godavari Water Disputes Tribunal Award.

Background:

The committee’s reconstitution comes even as the Board ruled that Krishna water be divided 70:30 between Andhra Pradesh and Telangana for the coming month. The Telangana government has strongly objected to this.

**Digital hurdles**

According to a new SBI report, card transactions have fallen to a nine-month low, posing a new challenge to the government’s demonetisation drive.

* According to the report, the aggregate of debit and card transactions at point of source (PoS) terminals fell to a little more than Rs 35,000 crore in November, the lowest since February.

Concerns:

* That the decline happened even when most banks have reported an increase in the number of transactions involving swipe cards after the announcement of the demonetisation drive throws up issues which the government must address.
* It signifies a fall in consumer sentiment. People seem to be using their debit and credit cards for purchases of relatively inexpensive items, while there has been a sharp fall in big ticket purchases. This does not augur well for the economy.

Challenges to digital push:

* A PoS machine costs between Rs 4,000 and Rs 8,000. There are low cost options but these require the use of smartphones. Given that only about 250 million people in the country have such phones, it’s difficult to imagine that the seemingly low cost options will be adopted without sound incentives.
* The government took more than a month to announce incentives for cashless transactions. But these incentives did not address the problems at the level of digital infrastructure.
* Also, people prefer making their purchases in cash because they are not convinced about data safety in digital transactions. In fact, a security breach a few weeks before the demonetisation drive had forced the SBI to recall more than three lakh debit cards.

What needs to be done?

* The report points to the necessity of bolstering the digital transaction infrastructure. There are about 15 lakh PoS machines in the country. The report points out that the country needs an additional 20 lakh such machines. A vast majority of these should be in tier II and tier III cities, and in rural areas.
* The government should bring in a privacy law with strong liability clauses to allay people’s fears. All this should be accompanied by robust awareness drives, hardly in evidence so far.
* Bank officials have to play a major role in this endeavour. But they have their hands full in the aftermath of demonetisation.

Way ahead:

The SBI report is a warning that the economy needs a push. Sound digital infrastructure and robust privacy laws could be the first steps in that direction.

Sources: ie.

*Paper 2 Topic: Parliament and State Legislatures – structure, functioning, conduct of business, powers & privileges and issues arising out of these.*

**In it for the short haul**

According to a study, the average turnover of the members of the Uttar Pradesh state assembly between 1957 and 2012 was 58.5%. In other words, it means that on an average, nearly 60% of the members of the legislative assembly are first-time MLAs, in every assembly.

* This number is high if one compares UP with most other democracies, where individual incumbency is the norm rather than the exception. In the United States Congress, for instance, individual incumbency can be as high as 90%, the incumbent candidate benefiting from their established reputation and party support.

What’s the main concern now?

In India, the phenomenon of anti-incumbency, or the propensity of voters to reject those they elected in the previous election, is well known. Even if governmental incumbency has increased in India in recent years, UP remains highly volatile: No government there has served two consecutive mandates since 1985.

Reasons behind this volatility:

* The first reason is that less than half of incumbent MLAs re-run after their first election, as parties frequently deny them a ticket for their own re-election. Parties may do so to prevent anti-incumbency, or to punish non-performing representatives. They may also change their local caste alliance and ditch their representatives accordingly.
* The second reason for the high turnover is that in every election, a number of sitting MLAs change party affiliation, hoping to join a stronger party.
* The third reason for high individual anti-incumbency comes from voters themselves, who tend to reject the people they voted for in the previous election.

This state of affairs has three important political consequences:

* The first is that the assembly has to work with a majority of inexperienced MLAs. One can laud the democratic value of alternation or of the rapid renewal of political elites, but a high turnover of representatives means a loss of accumulated experience after every election.
* A second consequence is that, considering the costs incurred and the hardships undergone to enter into politics, a short political life expectancy acts as a powerful inducement for predatory behaviour. In other words, legislators who spent crores of rupees to get elected know that they have a little less than five years to recoup their investment.
* A third consequence is that political power tends to be concentrated within a few hands, as the stable political class, or those who succeed in being elected more than twice, comprises on average about a hundred individuals at any point of time since Independence.

**Facts for Prelims**

**Google Maps Toilet Locator App:**

* It is a mobile app recently launched by the government to enable people to locate the nearest public toilet for use in five cities in National Capital Region and Bhopal and Indore in Madhya Pradesh.
* This facility now available in Delhi, Gurugram, Faridabad, Ghaziabad and Noida and the two cities of Madhya Pradesh would help in addressing open urination and open defecation.
* The App also gives information about the nature of the toilet seat available, free or pay for use, working hours etc. This facility will be extended to other cities in due course. Ministry of Urban Development has partnered with Google to enable this service.

**National Mathematics Day:**

* The National Mathematics Day is observed every year on 22nd December to celebrate birth anniversary of Indian Mathematician Srinivasa Ramanujan.
* 2016 marks the 129th birth anniversary of Srinivasa Ramanujan.
* He compiled more than 3,900 mathematical results and equations. His Ramanujam Prime and Ramanujam theta discoveries had also inspired further research on the subject.
* With almost no formal training in pure mathematics, he made extraordinary contributions to mathematical analysis, number theory, infinite series, and continued fractions.
* The Ramanujan Journal, an international publication, was launched to publish work in all areas of mathematics influenced by his work.
* Ramanujan’s home state of Tamil Nadu celebrates 22 December as ‘State IT Day’, memorialising both the man and his achievements, as a native of Tamil Nadu

**Insights Daily Current Affairs, 24 December 2016**

**NITI Aayog launches the National Index for Performance on Health Outcomes**

-Facts-

* According to Global Burden Disease (GBD) 2013 India alone accounts for 27% of neo natal disease, 23% of infant deaths and 23% of TB cases worldwide.
* Non communicable diseases are emerging as new threat to country’s population contributing to 52% of all disease burden and 60 % deaths in the country as per GBD 2013 report.

-[NITI Aayog](http://niti.gov.in/) has launched the [National Index for Performance on Health Outcomes](http://niti.gov.in/writereaddata/files/document_publication/Guidebook_SHI.pdf). With this, the NITI Aayog aims to nudge States towards transformative action in the Health sector.

About the Index:

This initiative is envisioned to bring about the much required improvements in social sector outcomes, which have not kept pace with the economic growth in this country.

* It is meant to capture the annual incremental improvements by States, rather than focus on historical achievements.
* It includes indicators in the domains of-
  + health outcomes
  + governance and information
  + a few key inputs and processes.
* It will be used to propel action in the States to improve health outcomes and improve data collection systems.
* The index has been developed, with inputs from domestic and international experts, including academicians and development partners.
* Monitorable indicators that form a part of Sustainable Development Goal in Health have been included in order to align these initiatives.
* The exercise involves the participation of several partners including technical assistance from the World Bank, mentor agencies to hand-hold States, where required, during the exercise and third party organizations to validate the data submitted prior to calculation of the index.
* Data will be entered and results published on a dynamic web portal hosted by NITI Aayog.

Way ahead:

The features of the index, measures and methods of data submission will be disseminated to the States through these workshops.

It is anticipated that this health index will assist in State level monitoring of performance, serve as an input for providing performance based incentives and improvement in health outcomes, thereby also meeting the citizens’ expectations.

**First 2G (Second Generation) Ethanol Bio-refinery in India to be set up at Bathinda (Punjab)**

1st second generation ethanol bio-refinery will be set up in Bathinda in Punjab by HPCL.

Generations of Biofuels

First Generation Biofuel

• They are produced directly from food crops.

• Crops such as wheat and sugar are the most widely used feedstock

Second Generation Biofuel

• They are produced from marginal croplands unsuitable for food production or non-food crops such as wood, organic waste, food crop waste and specific biomass crops. For example- Jatropha

• Thus, it overcomes over food vs fuel debate in first generation biofuel.

• It is also aimed at being cost competitive in relation to existing fossil fuels and increasing Net energy gains.

Third Generation Biofuels

• It is based on improvements on the production of biomass by taking advantage of specially engineered energy crops such as algae as its energy source.

• The algae are cultured to act as a low-cost, high-energy and entirely renewable feedstock.

• Algae will have the potential to produce more energy per acre than conventional crops.

Fourth Generation Biofuels

• Fourth Generation Bio-fuels are aimed at producing sustainable energy and also capturing and storing carbon dioxide.

• This process differs from second and third generation production as at all stages of production the carbon dioxide is captured which can be then geo-sequestered.

• This carbon capture makes fourth generation biofuel production carbon negative rather than simply carbon neutral, as it is ‘locks’ away more carbon than it produces.

Benefits of Bio-ethanol Plants

• Provide additional sources of remuneration to farmers

• Reduction in CO2 emissions from the paddy straw which currently is burnt after harvesting

• It will produce about 30,000 tonnes of bio-fertiliser per annum that can be used as soil nutrient.

• It will produce more than 1 lakh kilograms of Bio-CNG per annum which can cater to transport and clean cooking requirements.

• These Bio-refineries shall produce around 35-40 crore litres of ethanol annually, thus contributing significantly towards the EBP programme

Issues

• Issues with first generation

* One of the major drawbacks is that they come from biomass that is also a food source. This has led to increase in the volumes of crops being diverted away from the global food market and is blamed for the global increase in food prices over the last couple of years
* Some biofuels have negative Net energy gain meaning that the energy expended to produce the biofuel is more than the energy gained from that harvest

• 2nd generation biofuels come from non-food biomass, but still compete with food production for land use.

• Finally, 3rd generation biofuels present the best possibility for alternative fuel because they don’t compete with food. However, there are still some challenges in making them economically feasible.

Way Forward

• It needs to be ensured that the production of biofuels does not lead to food shortages, water shortages, high food prices, deforestation and other ecological damages.

• Biofuels are alternative sources to fossil fuels which can help India not only lower its import bill on oil but also help conserve environment.

**The Enemy Property (Amendment and Validation) Fifth Ordinance, 2016**

The President of India has promulgated the Enemy Property (Amendment and Validation) Fifth Ordinance, 2016.

What is it all about?

After the Indo-China aggression in 1962, specific properties of Chinese nationals in India were vested in the Custodian in terms of Defence of India Rules, 1962. Subsequently, after the Indo-Pak conflict in 1965 & 1971, the movable / immovable properties of Pakistani nationals automatically got vested in the Custodian of Enemy Property for India and their vesting was continued in the Custodian by the Enemy Property Act, 1968.

* The Government of Pakistan has disposed of all the properties of Indians impounded by them in Pakistan, including in erstwhile East Pakistan. Taking advantage of the interpretations of various judgments passed by the courts, claims are being made to regain these properties by the legal heirs and successors of the enemy nationals.
* To prevent the vested properties, the Ordinance for the first time was promulgated on 7th January, 2016.
* The amendments in the ordinance are aimed at plugging the loopholes in the principal Act to ensure that the enemy properties worth thousands of crores of rupees vested in the Custodian do not revert to the enemy, enemy subject or enemy firm.

Enemy Properties Bill:

Enemy Properties Bill includes amendments to plug the loopholes of the Enemy Property Act, 1968. The bill is lying in the parliament.

The amendments include:

* Once an enemy property is vested in the Custodian, it shall continue to be vested in him as enemy property irrespective of whether the enemy, enemy subject or enemy firm has ceased to be an enemy due to reasons such as death and others.
* The law of succession does not apply to enemy property. There cannot be transfer of any property vested in the Custodian by an enemy or enemy subject or enemy firm and that the Custodian shall preserve the enemy property till it is disposed of in accordance with the provisions of the Act.
* A new section has been inserted in the Bill to say that “the Custodian, may, after making such inquiry as he deems necessary, by order, declare that the property of the enemy or the enemy subject or the enemy firm described in the order, vests in him under this Act and issue a certificate to this effect and such certificate shall be the evidence of the facts stated therein”.

**Japan drags India to WTO against steps on iron, steel imports**

Japan has dragged India to the World Trade Organisation’s dispute settlement body for imposing safeguard measures on steel products and minimum import price on iron and steel products.

What’s the issue?

India had imposed safeguard measures in steel in September 2015 and minimum import price (MIP) on iron and steel products in February this year.

* Under MIP, products cannot be imported unless their import prices are at or above the imposed minimum.
* Japan, world’s second largest steel producer, found these measures inconsistent with the WTO norms.

What next?

As Japan has filed the case, it will do bilateral consultations with India on the issue.

* As per the WTO’s dispute settlement process, the request for consultations is the first step in a dispute.
* Consultations give the parties an opportunity to discuss the matter and to find a satisfactory solution without proceeding further with litigation.
* After 60 days, if consultations fail to resolve the dispute, the complainant may request adjudication by a panel.

Sources: the hindu.

*Paper 2 Topic: Effect of policies and politics of developed and developing countries on India’s interests, Indian diaspora.*

**China open to India joining economic corridor**

China has said it has an “open attitude” to India joining the $46 billion economic corridor but it wants to know New Delhi’s response to a top Pakistani army general’s offer to participate in the project.

Background:

Pakistan Southern Command Commander Lt Gen Amir Riaz had recently said that India should join the CPEC along with Iran, Afghanistan and other Central Asian countries and enjoy its benefits.

India’s concerns over CPEC being laid through the Pakistan-occupied Kashmir is one of the three major issues bedevilled the relations between the two countries besides China blocking India’s admission to Nuclear Suppliers Group, (NSG) and UN ban on JeM leader Masood Azhar.

About CPEC:

It is a 3,000-km corridor linking China’s far-western region to Pakistan’s south-western Gwadar port on the Arabian Sea through Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK). It is massive project of road, rail, energy schemes, pipelines and investment parks.

* The corridor is also expected to serve as a terminal for China to pump oil procurement from Persian Gulf. It is also being seen as a project to strengthen China’s connectivity with neighbouring countries and an initiative set to aid strategic framework for pragmatic cooperation between the nations.
* The corridor would transform Pakistan into a regional hub and give China a shorter and cheaper route for trade with much of Asia, West Asia and Africa.
* The corridor — expected to be ready in three years and provide about 10,400 MWs of electricity — gives China direct access to the Indian Ocean and beyond.
* The corridor will pass through Pakistan’s poor Baluchistan province, where a long-running separatist insurgency that the army has vowed to crush will raise questions about the feasibility of the plan.

**Facts for Prelims**

**National Consumer Day:**

* The Department of Consumer Affairs, Ministry of Consumer Affairs Food and Public Distribution is celebrating the National Consumer Day this year with the theme “**Alternate Consumer Disputes Redressal**” on 24th December, 2016.
* The National Consumer Day is observed every year on December 24. On this day, the Consumer Protection Act, 1986 had received the assent of the President. The Day is an annual occasion for celebration and solidarity within the national consumer movement and is an opportunity to promote the basic rights of all consumers.

**Insights Daily Current Affairs, 26 December 2016**

**Anti-Airfield Weapon**

The Defence and Research Development Organization (DRDO) recently successfully flight tested the Smart Anti-Airfield Weapon (SAAW), from an Indian Air Force (IAF) aircraft.

Key facts:

* SAAW is an indigenously designed and developed 120 kg. class smart weapon.
* It is developed by DRDO.
* It is capable of engaging ground targets with high precision up to a range of 100 kms.
* The light weight high precision guided bomb is one of the world class weapons systems.

**Land of religious body can be acquired: HC**

Allahabad High Court has ruled that land belonging to religious body can be used for public purpose.

Background:

High Court made its remark while asking the Church of North India Association and NHAI to “work out modality” for “demolition or shifting” of a church for construction of a six-lane road.

* In its plea, the petitioner had argued that acquisition of the land by NHAI violates the Place of Worship (Special Provisions) Act which safeguards “all religious properties”.
* The petitioner had also argued that the move violated the “right to freedom of religion” and the “freedom to manage religious affairs” guaranteed under Articles 25 and 26 of the Constitution.

What else has the court said?

The court noted, “once there is public purpose for which land in question has been acquired, invoking provision of National Highways Act, 1956, then no relief can be accorded to the petitioner”.

The court also said that the Place of Worship (Special Provisions) Act only “bars any person from converting any place of worship of any religious denomination or different religious denomination” and that the “provision had been introduced to see that communal harmony is not disturbed and persons of one religious community may not take on the other”.

**Need to link Aadhaar with details of voters**

Noting that “there is an emergent need to link Aadhaar with the electoral details of voters”, the Election Commission of India has given a mixed response to the Supreme Court on providing absentee voting rights, like electronic voting and proxy voting, to over 300 million domestic migrants in the country, saying there is no foolproof mechanism to verify their identity and block duplicity.

Why it is difficult to provide absentee voting rights?

“Domestic migrants” do not constitute a “uniquely identifiable and countable class.” There is also no reliable information or documentation on the number of domestic migrants in the country. The last one on them is the 15-year-old 2001 Census data of 314.5 million.

Therefore, any provision of absentee voting rights to the “loosely defined term domestic migrants” would become a logistical nightmare for the Commission, that is, for example, they are so spread out that an election in one Assembly constituency would mean electoral arrangements in 4,120 Assembly constituencies.

Besides, multiple vernacular data and “varying patterns of spelling” and difficulty in ascertaining the date of birth of voters have given rise to multiple entries of voters.

Background:

The Supreme Court had asked the Election Commission to study the possibility for electoral reforms to allow inter-State migrants voting privileges like postal ballot available to government servants.

In this regard, EC had last year set up a committee to study the possibility of amending the electoral law to empower voters who have migrated to other States within the country.

Way ahead:

EC has not totally negated the idea of providing domestic migrants with absentee voting rights. It is in favour of extending these rights only to a small subset of migrants who formed an identifiable and countable class of electors not delinked from their present place of registration and only “temporarily absent” from their place of ordinary residence.

**Kuchipudi performers dance their way into Guinness Records[DO]**

Andhra Pradesh’s own classical dance ‘Kuchipudi’ has found a place in the Guinness World Records yet again when a record 6,117 dancers came together to present a show at the IGMC Stadium in Vijaywada recently. In 2012, a similar feat was achieved when 5,900 dancers performed ‘Kuchipudi’ in Hyderabad.

* The “Maha Brunda Natyam” (grand group dance) was organised as part of the ‘5th International Kuchipudi Dance Convention’ organised by the state Department of Language and Culture.
* “Jayamu Jayamu” is one of the glorious items of ‘Kuchipudi’ dance choreographed by the legend Vempati China Satyam.

Kuchipudi:

Kuchipudi is one of the classical dance forms of the South India. Kuchipudi derives its name from the Kuchipudi village of Andhra Pradesh.

* Kuchipudi exhibits scenes from the Hindu Epics, legends and mythological tales through a combination of music, dance and acting.
* Like other classical dances, Kuchipudi also comprises pure dance, mime and histrionics but it is the use of speech that distinguishes Kuchipudi’s presentation as dance drama.
* In its early form, the female roles were played by boys and young men of beautiful looks. The director (called Sutradhar) played the most important role. He combined the role of conductor, dancer, singer, musician, comedian, all in one. In modern times the Kuchipudi dance is considerably different than it originally used to be. Most of the performances are solo, done by female dancers.

Origin:

* In 17th century Kuchipudi style of Yakshagaana was conceived by Siddhendra Yogi a Vaishnava poet and visionary who had the capacity to give concrete shape to some of his visions. He was steeped in the literary Yakshagaana tradition being guided by his guru Teerthanaaraayana Yogi who composed the Krishna-Leelatarangini in Sanskrit.
* It was Lakshminarayan Shastry (1886-1956) who introduced many new elements including solo dancing and training of female dancers in this dance style.

Important features:

* Kuchipudi carries the sensuousness and fluidity of Odissi with the geometric line of today’s Bharata Natyam.
* As in all other classical dance forms of India, the Kuchipudi dance is both interpretive and lyrical, making use of abstract dance sequences as well.
* Kuchipudi dance retains its devotional character with stress on dramatic outlook.

Accompanying music:

The music that accompanies the dance is according to the classical school of Carnatic music and is delightfully syncopatic. The accompanying musicians, besides the vocalist are: a mridangam player to provide percussion music, a violin or veena player or both for providing instrumental melodic music, and a cymbal player who usually conducts the orchestra.

Sources: the hindu.

*Paper 2 Topic: Effect of policies and politics of developed and developing countries on India’s interests, Indian diaspora.*

**Pakistan urges World Bank to fulfil commitment under Indus treaty**

Pakistan has urged the World Bank to fulfil its commitment in accordance with the Indus Waters Treaty (IWT) under which no party can pause the performance of its role.

* The demand was made by Pakistan in response to the World Bank’s decision to pause the process of empanelment of the Court of Arbitration.

Background:

Recently, the World Bank had announced a pause in the separate processes initiated by India and Pakistan under the Indus Waters Treaty to allow the two countries to consider alternative ways to resolve their disagreements.

The decision halted the appointment of a neutral expert as requested by India and the Chairman of the Court of Arbitration as requested by Pakistan to resolve issues regarding two hydro-electric power plants under construction by India along the Indus Rivers system.

**‘Google Tax’ detrimental to startup ecosystem: Experts**

The equalisation levy, also known as Google Tax’ which the government is imposing on online advertising revenue by non-resident e-commerce companies earned in India, is expected to adversely affect the startup ecosystem going forward, according to tax experts.

Why this tax is detrimental to startup ecosystem?

The levy which is at 6% presently became effective on June 1. If passed on to startups, the applicable tax is expected to be in excess of 22%, including the 15% service tax and could further increase if GST comes into effect.

* Besides, the fact that the levy has been notified in addition to taxes payable by a businessman on imported online services unduly increases the cost of doing business for startups which in turn stifles innovation.
* Usually, small scale technology driven companies generally do not have enough capital to engage employees inhouse for all necessary business activities. Google tax adds to this problem.
* Also, emerging startups burn a lot of cash in the first few years before becoming profitable and when the levy is expanded to include a vast number of other digital services the burden is set to multiply exponentially, hampering even more serious cost to innovation.

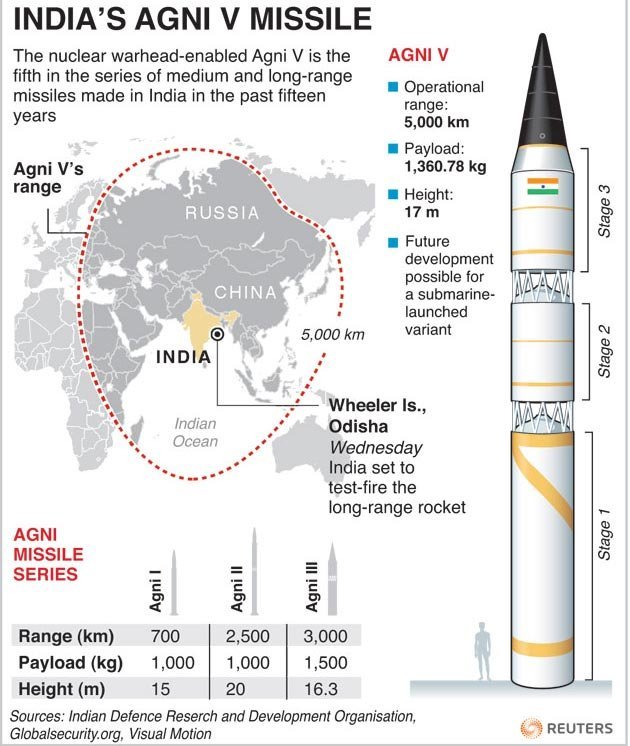
What needs to be done?

A cap should be placed on the rate of taxation at the very least, and the number of notified services subject to the levy should not be expanded until there is an impact study undertaken by the government.

**Agni 5, India’s Longest Range Nuclear Capable Missile, Successfully Test Fired**

Agni-5, India’s longest range nuclear capable missile, was recently successfully test fired from the Kalam Island off Odisha coast by the Defence Research and Development Organisation or DRDO.

* The intercontinental surface-to-surface nuclear capable ballistic missile, the latest in India’s “Agni” family of medium to intercontinental range missiles, has been through four trials now.

[](https://i1.wp.com/www.insightsonindia.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/Agni-5.jpg)

*Source: Reuters*

* The Agni 5 missile, with new technology for navigation and guidance, gives India the strategic depth it needs to contain its enemies, say scientists. After a few more trials, it will soon join India’s military arsenal.
* This was the first test of the Agni-5 missile after India became a member of the Missile Technology Control Regime, a 35-nation group to check the spread of unmanned delivery systems for nuclear weapons.

Key facts:

* Agni-5 has a range of over 5,000 km and can carry about a 1,000-kg warhead. It can target almost all of Asia including Pakistan and China and Europe.
* The solid propellant driven missile will be tested from a canister which gives it all-weather and any terrain mobile launch capability.
* The 17-metre long Agni-5 Missile weighs about 50 tonnes and is a very agile and modern weapon system.
* The surface-to-surface missile is a fire-and-forget system that cannot be easily detected as it follows a ballistic trajectory.
* India describes the Agni – 5 missile system as a ‘weapon of peace’.
* The first missile of the series, Agni-I was developed under the Integrated Guided Missile Development Program and tested in 1989.

Sources: the hindu.

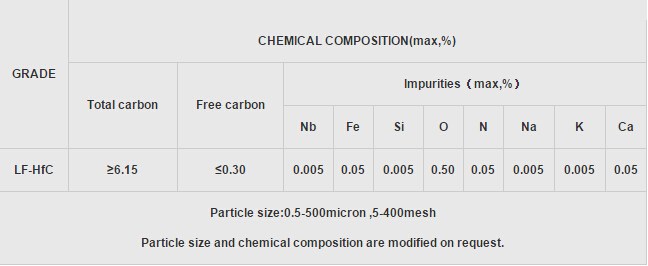
*Paper 3 Topic: Science and Technology- developments and their applications and effects in everyday life Achievements of Indians in science & technology; indigenization of technology and developing new technology.*

**World’s most heat resistant material found**

Scientists have identified materials that can withstand temperatures of nearly 4,000 degrees Celsius, an advance that may pave the way for improved heat resistant shielding for the faster-than-ever hypersonic space vehicles.

Key facts:

* Researchers from Imperial College London in the UK discovered that the melting point of **hafnium carbide i**s the highest ever recorded for a material.
* Tantalum carbide (TaC) and hafnium carbide (HfC) are refractory ceramics, meaning they are extraordinarily resistant to heat.
* Their ability to withstand extremely harsh environments means that refractory ceramics could be used in thermal protection systems on high-speed vehicles and as fuel cladding in the super-heated environments of nuclear reactors.

[](https://i1.wp.com/www.insightsonindia.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/hafnium-carbide-.jpg)

How the materials were tested?

There is no technology available to test the melting point of TaC and HfC in the lab to determine how truly extreme an environment they could function in. Therefore, the researchers developed a new extreme heating technique using lasers to test the heat tolerance of TaC and HfC.

* They used the laser-heating techniques to find the point at which TaC and HfC melted, both separately and as mixed compositions of both.
* They found that the mixed compound was consistent with previous research, melting at 3,905 degrees Celsius, but the two compounds on their own exceeded previous recorded melting points. The compound TaC melted at 3,768 degrees Celsius, and HfC melted at 3,958 degrees Celsius.

Sources: the hindu.

**Facts for Prelims**

**Online safety campaign by Google:**

* Google has teamed up with the Ministry of Consumer Affairs in India to launch a country-wide ‘Digitally Safe Consumer’ campaign in order to raise awareness and protect consumer interest on the internet.
* As part of the campaign, Google will work on educating consumer organisations in India, help in training members of the Consumer Affairs department, and also work with officials in the National Consumer Helpline.
* Google will start rolling out this year-long campaign in January 2017, and it will work towards organising ‘Digital Literacy, Safety & Security’ workshops. Google will rely on the ‘Train the Trainer’ model for this exercise, and plans to train around 500 people, including 250 consumer organisations across the country.
* The educational campaign will also feature write ups, posters, interactive quizzes and audio-visuals that will help educate users about the challenges of Internet safety and security.

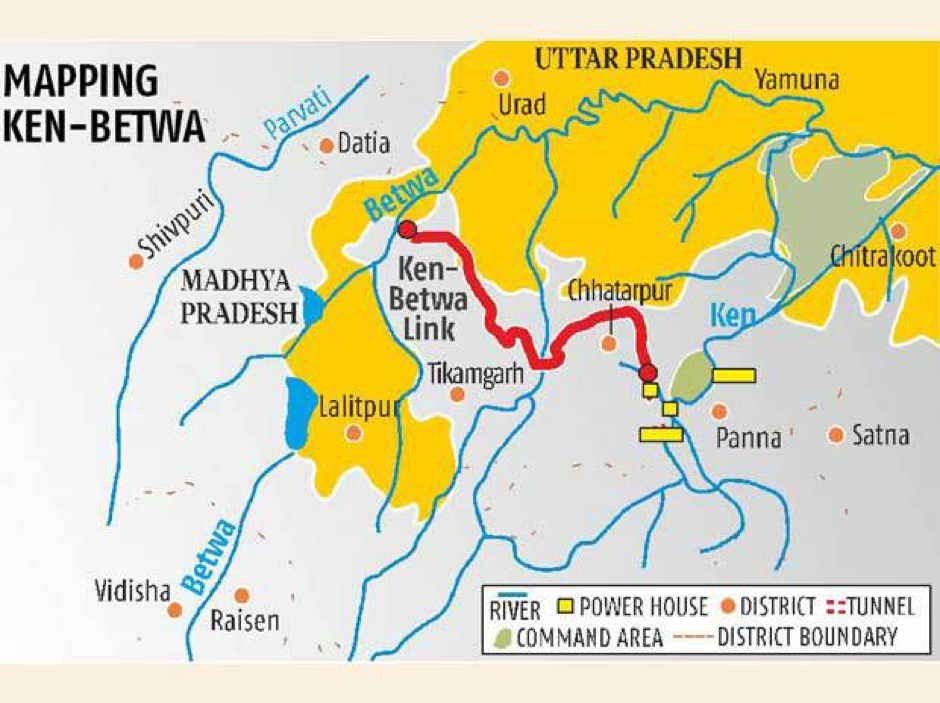
**Insights Daily Current Affairs, 27 December 2016**

**Last Hurdle for Ken Betwa link over**

Wild life board has cleared the Ken Betwa river link project. Now, the government is all set to start the work once the funding pattern is decided.

About the project:

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

* The project envisages construction of a dam across river Ken in Chhatarpur district in Madhya Pradesh to irrigate 6.35 lakh hectare area of land, drinking water purposes and generation of 78 MW hydropower.[](https://i0.wp.com/www.insightsonindia.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/Ken-Betwa.png)
* The project comprises two powerhouse of 2×30 MW and 3×6 MW each, two tunnels of 1.9 km long upper level, 1.1 km long tunnel lower level and a 221 km long Ken-Betwa link canal, proposed on the left bank of the river.
* The project will provide irrigation facilities for 6,35,661 hectares of land in Panna, Chhattarpur, Tikamgarh districts in Madhya Pradesh, and Banda, Mahoba and Jhansi districts in Uttar Pradesh.
* The project was first mooted in the early 1980s but was actively taken up by the NDA government under Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee. It was then challenged in the Supreme Court, which finally gave the nod in 2013.

Sources: pib.

*Paper 3 Topic: Infrastructure: Energy, Ports, Roads, Airports, Railways etc.*

**Sagarmala Development Company**

The government recently inaugurated the Sagarmala Development Company (SDC). The Cabinet had approved the formation of the SDC under the administrative control of the Ministry of Shipping in July 2016.

Key facts:

* The Sagarmala Development Company (SDC) has been incorporated under the Companies Act, 2013.
* The company has an initial Authorized Share Capital of Rs. 1,000 Crore and a subscribed share capital of Rs. 90 Crore.
* The main objective of the company is to identify port-led development projects under the Sagarmala Programme and provide equity support for the project Special Purpose Vehicles (SPVs) set up by the Ports / State / Central Ministries and funding window and /or implement only those residual projects which cannot be funded by any other means / mode.
* SDC would be raising funds as debt/equity (as long term capital), as per the project requirements, by leveraging resources provided by the Government of India and from multi-lateral and bilateral funding agencies. It would also aim to increase the scope of private sector participation in project development.

Important functions to be performed by the company:

* The company would help in structuring activities, bidding out projects for private sector participation, identifying suitable risk management measures for strategic projects across multiple States / Regions and obtaining requisite approvals and clearances.
* The Company would act as the nodal agency for coordination and monitoring of all the currently identified projects under Sagarmala as well as other projects emerging from the master plans or other sources.
* It would also undertake the preparation of the detailed master plans for the Coastal Economic Zones (CEZs) identified as part of the National Perspective Plan (NPP).

Background:

The incorporation of SDC is part of the ambitious Sagarmala Programme by the Government of India which aims to harness India’s 7,500 km long coastline, 14,500 km of potentially navigable waterways and strategic location on key international maritime trade routes. The concept of the Sagarmala Programme was approved by the Cabinet in March 2015.

Sources: pib.

*Paper 1 Topic: Modern Indian history from about the middle of the eighteenth century until the present- significant events, personalities, issues.*

**Centre releases special stamp on freedom fighter “Shri Gaya Prasad Katiyar”**

Department of Posts, Ministry of Communications has brought out a Special Cover on freedom fighter “Shri Gaya Prasad Katiyar”.

About Gaya Prasad Katiyar:

* He was one of the most dedicated soldiers of India’s freedom struggle.
* He was born at Jagadishpur (UP). He joined Hindustan Socialist Republican Association in 1925 and got connected with Chandra Shekhar Azad and Bhagat Singh.
* Later he participated on Lahore Conspiracy Case and was arrested from Saharanpur in 1929. He joined the hunger strike at Lahore Jail with his co prisoners. Later he was transported to Cellular jail in Andaman and again he participated on hunger strike there.
* He was repatriated in 1937 but again arrested and transported to cellular jail from where he was released in 1946.

Sources: pib.

*Paper 2 Topic: Separation of powers between various organs dispute redressal mechanisms and institutions.*

**Remission power lies with State: SC**

Noting that the power to grant remission is exclusively that of the State government and not the judiciary, the Supreme Court refrained itself from allowing any reprieve to four convicts who have served 25 years of their life sentence in Kolkata.

* The court has declined to intervene, simply observing that “this is a power which can be exercised by the State.”

Background:

The judgment is in sync with the Tamil Nadu government’s review petition on the question of who has the actual authority — the Centre or the State — in granting remission for life convicts in the Rajiv Gandhi assassination case. Tamil Nadu has sought a review of the Constitution Bench verdict in the high-profile case.

Constitutional provisions:

A pardon or remission can be given under Article 72 (by President) or 161 (by Governor) of the Constitution by the constitutional authority.

Sources: the hindu.

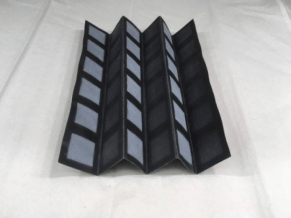
*Paper 3 Topic: Science and Technology- developments and their applications and effects in everyday life Achievements of Indians in science & technology; indigenization of technology and developing new technology.*

**Researchers create bacteria-powered battery on a single sheet of paper**

Scientists have developed a bacteria-powered battery on a single piece of paper, which they say could be a cheap and easily manufactured power source for medical sensors in remote and developing areas.

Key facts:

* The paper battery, which is foldable, is the latest example of what are known as bio-batteries, which store power generated by organic compounds. In this case, the power is generated by common bacteria found in wastewater.
* The paper-based design is part of a new field of research called papertronics, which like the name suggests, is a fusion of paper and electronics.

[](https://i1.wp.com/www.insightsonindia.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/paper-batteries.png)

How was it created?

To make their battery, the researchers laid a ribbon of silver nitrate on a piece of chromatography paper. On top of this, they placed a thin layer of wax to create a cathode – the battery’s positive electrode.

* On the other side of the paper, the team made a reservoir out of a conductive polymer, which acts an anode (negative electrode), once filled with a few drops of the bacteria-containing wastewater liquid.
* When the paper is folded so that the cathode and anode come into contact, the battery is powered by the bacterial metabolism, also known as cellular respiration.
* The amount of power output depends on how much paper you have and how it’s stacked and folded.

Potential applications of the new battery:

* The battery is powerful enough to run simple biosensors for things like monitoring glucose levels in diabetes patients or detecting pathogens in patients, which could help bring urgent medical aid to people who need assistance in places without electric power.
* The simple components needed to make these kinds of paper-based electronics should be easy to come by in remote parts of the world, which could make them a reliable backup in places where grid electricity or conventional batteries aren’t available.

Way ahead:

Right now, it would take millions of the paper batteries to generate enough power for a 40-watt light bulb, so this kind of technology probably isn’t going to be a solution for powering conventional electronics any time soon. A lot more work needs to be done to get more current out of the device.

Sources: toi.

*Paper 3 Topic: Science and Technology- developments and their applications and effects in everyday life Achievements of Indians in science & technology; indigenization of technology and developing new technology.*

**First functional biological pacemaker developed**

Scientists have developed the first functional pacemaker cells from human pluripotent stem cells which can regulate heart beats with electrical impulses, paving the way for an alternate, biological pacemaker therapy.

How they were developed?

Pluripotent stem cells have the potential to differentiate into more than 200 different cell types that make up every tissue and organ in the body. These cells were coaxed in 21 days to develop into pacemaker cells by the researchers.

Background:

Sinoatrial node pacemaker cells are the heart’s primary pacemaker, controlling the heartbeat throughout life. Defects in the pacemaker can lead to heart rhythm disorders that are commonly treated by implantation of electronic pacemaker devices.

Significance of these findings:

* Biological pacemakers represent a promising alternative to electronic pacemakers, overcoming such drawbacks as a lack of hormonal responsiveness and the inability to adapt to changes in heart size in pediatric patients.
* Learning how to generate pacemaker cells could also help in understanding disorders in pacemaker cells, and provide a cell source for developing a biological pacemaker.

Sources: toi.

**Facts for Prelims**

**New Regional Institute of Education at Nellore:**

* Ministry of Human Resource Development is opening a new Regional Institute of Education at Nellore (Andhra Pradesh). Presently NCERT, an apex body of Government of India on School Education, has five RIEs in the country at Ajmer, Bhopal, Bhubaneswar, Mysore and Shillong.
* The opening of the new RIE at Nellore will be give an impetus to the strengthening of School Education and Teacher Education in the region and benefit not only Andhra Pradesh but also the adjoining States of Telegana, Tamil Nadu, Pudduchery etc.
* The opening of the RIE fulfills the long-standing demand of the region. The new institution at Nellore shall offer teacher education programmes like B.Sc/BA B.Ed, M.Ed, Ph.D etc.
* It will undertake research and development of Resource Materials on school and teacher education, help capacity building of Teachers and Teacher Educators, strengthen implementation of Government of India Schemes like SSA, RMSA, ICT in schools, and strengthen linkages among State Education Agencies besides addressing educational needs of the States.

**Insights Daily Current Affairs, 28 December 2016**

**Antlers could end up in medicines**

Kerala State Board for Wildlife (SBWL) has recommended the use of antlers of**spotted deer and sambar** in Ayurveda medicines. A proposal in this regard is pending with the National Board for Wildlife and the Ministry of Environment and Forests.

[](https://i0.wp.com/www.insightsonindia.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/antler-medicine-china.jpg)

Key facts:

* Antlers are the extensions of the skull of the deer. All the three deer varieties found in Kerala, including spotted deer, sambar, and barking deer, shed their antlers annually.
* Suitable amendments have to be made to the Wildlife Protection Act for using the antlers for medicinal purposes.
* The proposal, which was originally mooted a few years ago, was to collect the antlers annually shed by the ungulates after the breeding season.

Concerns associated:

In the long run, experts believe, the recommendation on antlers would lead to hunting of animals.

What the law says?

The Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972, has included antler in the definition of wildlife trophy. A wildlife trophy is defined as the “whole or any part of any captive animal or wild animal”.

* Section 39 of the Act also states that “no person shall, without the previous permission in writing of the Chief Wildlife Warden or the authorised officer acquire or keep in his possession, custody or control or transfer to any person, whether by way of gift, sale or otherwise or destroy or damage such property.”
* Wildlife and wildlife trophies are considered as owned by the government. The Act also prescribes imprisonment up to three years and fine of RS. 25,000 for offences involving wildlife trophies.

Sources: the hindu.

*Paper 2 Topic: Welfare schemes for vulnerable sections of the population by the Centre and States and the performance of these schemes; mechanisms, laws, institutions and bodies constituted for the protection and betterment of these vulnerable sections.*

**Status of tribal development remains poor: Ministry report**

According to the latest annual report of the Ministry of Tribal Affairs, the tribal population In India lags behind other social groups on various social parameters, such as child mortality, infant mortality, number of anaemic women.

Highlights of the report:

* Tribal population, with a vast majority engaged in agricultural labour, has the largest number of anaemic women.
* The community also registered the highest child mortality and infant mortality rates, when compared to other social groups.
* While educational achievements on the whole has improved, the gross enrolment ratio among tribal students in the primary school level has declined from 113.2 in 2013-14 to 109.4 in 2015-16. Besides, the dropout rate among tribal students has been at an alarming level.
* While the overall poverty rates among the tribal population have fallen compared to previous years, they remain relatively poorer when weighed against other social groups.
* Health infrastructure has also been found wanting in tribal areas. At an all-India level, there is a shortfall of 6,796 Sub Centres, 1267 Primary Health Centres and 309 Community Health Centres in tribal areas as on March 31, 2015.
* Gap in rehabilitation of tribal community members displaced by various development projects is also high. Out of an estimated 85 lakh persons displaced due to development projects and natural calamities, only 21 lakh were shown to have been rehabilitated so far.
* In 2014, the Central government initiated the Vanbandhu Kalyan Yojana for the holistic development and welfare of tribal population on a pilot basis. However, budgetary provisions made under the scheme is minuscule and barely sufficient to meet the purpose of the Scheme given that it intends to cover 27 States across the country.

Sources: the hindu.

*Paper 2 Topic: India and its neighbourhood- relations.*

**Nepal rejects India’s ‘open sky’ offer**

Nepal has rejected India’s ‘open sky’ offer to allow unlimited flights between the two countries at a recently held meeting. Nepal said it was not yet ready for the agreement.

* However, India and Nepal signed a memorandum of understanding to set up a joint technical committee to examine Nepal’s request for developing new air routes and air entry points at Janakpur, Bhairahawa and Nepalgunj. The committee will shortly meet to examine the feasibility of the proposed routes.

Background:

Nepal has long been pushing for new airspaces to ease congestion on the existing routes and to save time and cost for air passengers.

What is open sky agreement?

Under the National Civil Aviation Policy, approved by the Union Cabinet earlier this year, India intends to enter into ‘open-sky’ agreements with SAARC countries and with those beyond the 5,000-km radius from Delhi.

* Countries sign air services agreements (ASAs) through bilateral negotiations to decide the number of flights airlines can fly. Under the ‘open-sky’ agreement, there is no restriction on flights or seats.
* Among SAARC countries, India doesn’t have any ‘open sky’ agreement with Pakistan, Nepal and Afghanistan. It allows unlimited flights from Bangladesh and Maldives at 18 domestic airports, from Sri Lanka at 23 airports, and from Bhutan at all its airports.

Sources: the hindu.

*Paper 2 Topic: Important aspects of governance, transparency and accountability, e-governance- applications, models, successes, limitations, and potential; citizens charters, transparency & accountability and institutional and other measures.*

**Panel moots ‘handling’ levy on cash payments**

The Committee on Digital Payments recently submitted its report to the finance ministry.

Important recommendations made by the committee:

* Union Budget 2017-18 should allow merchants as well as government departments to levy a handling charge for cash payments above a certain limit. The cash handling charge so collected should be exclusively used to fund new infrastructure for acceptance of digital payments (like PoS devices).
* Mandatory threshold for quoting PAN card numbers for cash transactions from Rs. 50,000 and Rs. 2,00,000 should be reduced. Aadhaar should be used as an alternate for KYC for people who don’t have a PAN.
* To create parity between cash and digital payments, eKYC requirements in digital payments should be in consonance with KYC norms for transacting in cash. Transactions which are permitted in cash without KYC should also be permitted on prepaid wallets without KYC.
* Tax payments by debit cards and e-wallets should be allowed, against the current option of net banking only. CBDT and CBEC should develop an e-commerce based model where their web portals generate the tax challans and accept payments from all electronic modes.
* A recommendation has also been made to make Aadhaar numbers compulsory in Income Tax returns, although the committee has stressed such an amendment must only be made after seeking the Attorney General’s opinion. Income tax payers already have PAN cards.
* The panel also recommended that when government acts as a merchant, it should bear the cost of electronic payments and not pass them on to consumers. Digital payments for low value transactions, such as parking charges, toll charges or health services at government hospitals and health centres, also need to be promoted.
* Pushing for adoption of digital payments for all government transactions, it has also proposed that utility bills and payments to government above a certain threshold be made only in digital mode. Also, convenience or service charge levied by utility service providers, petrol pumps, railways, airlines on electronic payments should be withdrawn.
* Customs and excise duties on import of equipment which form a part of retail payment system infrastructure must be cut in the Budget. The list includes micro ATMs used by business correspondents; fingerprint readers and biometric readers either as spare parts or as integrated electronic data capture machines and point- of-sale (PoS) terminals.

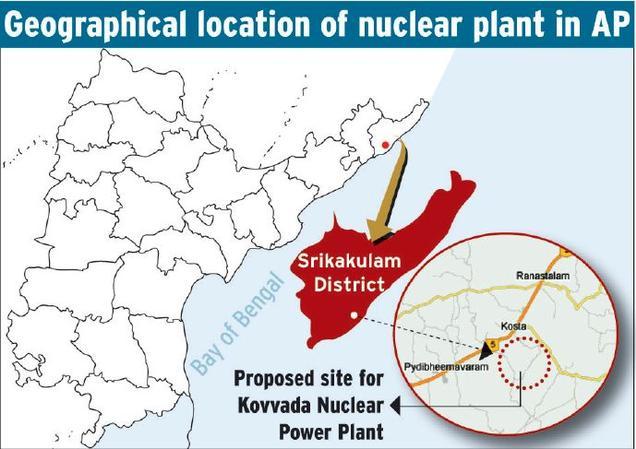
Need for digital payments:

India is a cash heavy economy, with almost 78% of all consumer payments being effected in cash. This imposes an estimated cost of Rs. 21,000 crore, without factoring in other effects of cash reliance, such as counterfeit currency and black money. Therefore, transitioning to digital payments will bring about a significant reduction in costs incurred on account of inefficiencies associated with cash and other paper based payments.

Sources: the hindu.

**Facts for Prelims**

**N-plant: Villagers ‘settle’ for package:**

* A majority of people residing in Kovvada and surrounding areas are said to have agreed to accept the package proposed to be finalised soon by the Nuclear Power Corporation of India Limited (NPCIL) and the State government, and part with their lands for the establishment of India’s biggest atomic power plant that would attract Rs.1 lakh-crore worth investments.[](https://i0.wp.com/www.insightsonindia.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/Kovvada-nuclear-plant.jpg)
* Officials had recently conducted a crucial meeting with Kovvada villagers to win their consent for the Social Impact Survey, which was mandatory to obtain permission from the Union Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change.
* Kovvada Atomic Power Project is a proposed 6,600 MW nuclear power station in the state of Andhra Pradesh, India.

**Bihar government announces 50 % reservation in judicial services:**

* The Bihar Cabinet has declared 50% reservation in all judicial services for aspirants belonging to the Extremely Backward Classes, Other Backward Classes, Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes.
* Aspirants belonging to EBCs will get 21% reservation, OBCs will have 12% reservations, Scheduled Castes will have 16% reservation and Scheduled Tribes will be provided 1% reservation in all judicial services of the State.
* Also, there will be 35% ‘horizontal reservation’ for women and 1 per% reservation for disabled persons.
* The reservation will be in both Superior Judicial Services and Subordinate Judicial Services.

**Supercluster of galaxies near Milky Way found:**

* An international team of astronomers has found one of the universe’s biggest superclusters of galaxies near the Milky Way- the Vela supercluster.
* It had previously gone undetected as it was hidden by stars and dust in the Milky Way.
* This is one of the biggest concentrations of galaxies in the universe – possibly the biggest in the neighbourhood of our galaxy, but that will need to be confirmed by further study.
* The gravity of the Vela supercluster may explain the difference between the measured motion of the Milky Way through space and the motion predicted from the distribution of previously mapped galaxies.

**Char Dham Highway Project:**

* Prime Minister Narendra Modi recently laid the foundation stone for the 900km Char Dham highway project in Dehradun, Uttarakhand. The project’s main objective is to develop around 900 km of national highways.
* The Char Dham highway project involves building tunnels, viaducts, bridges and bypasses in the entire state, along with way-side amenities that will include helipad for emergency evacuation and parking facilities, among others.
* The Char Dham Highway will cost the exchequer Rs. 12,000 crore and the all-weather road will improve connectivity between Kedarnath, Badrinath, Gangotri and Yamunotri.

**Insights Daily Current Affairs, 29 December 2016**

**DoPT’s fresh guidelines on sexual harassment at workplace**

The Department of Personnel and Training has issued fresh guidelines regarding sexual harassment of women at workplace.

Key facts:

* It has been asserted in the guidelines that the enquiry of cases must be completed within 30 days and under any circumstances within 90 days from the date of the complaint.
* The ministries and departments have to keep a watch on the complainant so as to ensure that she is not victimised in any manner because of her having filed the complaint.
* All ministries have to submit a monthly progress report to the Ministry of Women and Child Development so that the progress can be monitored.
* As per the guidelines the aggrieved woman has been given further option to send representation to the Secretary or head of the organisation in case she feels that she is being victimised because of her complaint. The concerned authority will be required to dispose of this complaint within 15 days.
* Brief details of the implementation of the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace Act including the number of cases received and disposed shall form a part of the Annual Report of all ministries and departments.

THE SEXUAL HARASSMENT OF WOMEN AT WORKPLACE (PREVENTION, PROHIBITION AND REDRESSAL) ACT 2013:

The Act seeks to cover all women, irrespective of their age or employment status and protect them against sexual harassment at all workplaces both in public and private sector, whether organized or unorganized.

* Building on the Vishakha guidelines, the Act calls for the formation of an internal complaints committee and a local complaints committee at the district level. It came into force on December 9, 2013.

Some important provisions of the Act:

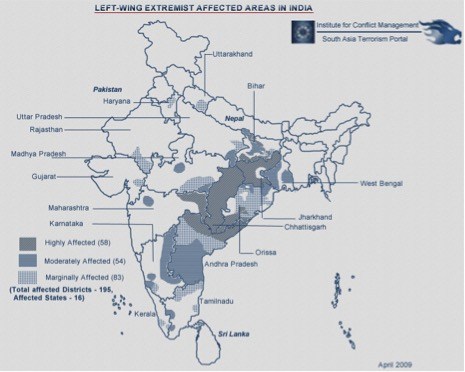
* The Act defines sexual harassment at the work place and creates a mechanism for redressal of complaints. It also provides safeguards against false or malicious charges.
* The definition of “aggrieved woman”, who will get protection under the Act is extremely wide to cover all women, irrespective of her age or employment status, whether in the organized or unorganized sectors, public or private and covers clients, customers and domestic workers as well.
* While the “workplace” in the Vishaka Guidelines is confined to the traditional office set-up where there is a clear employer-employee relationship, the Act goes much further to include organisations, department, office, branch unit etc. in the public and private sector, organized and unorganized, hospitals, nursing homes, educational institutions, sports institutes, stadiums, sports complex and any place visited by the employee during the course of employment including the transportation.
* Every employer is required to constitute an Internal Complaints Committee at each office or branch with 10 or more employees. The District Officer is required to constitute a Local Complaints Committee at each district, and if required at the block level.
* The Committee is required to complete the inquiry within a time period of 90 days. On completion of the inquiry, the report will be sent to the employer or the District Officer, as the case may be, they are mandated to take action on the report within 60 days.
* The Complaints Committees have the powers of civil courts for gathering evidence.
* The Complaints Committees are required to provide for conciliation before initiating an inquiry, if requested by the complainant.
* Penalties have been prescribed for employers. Non-compliance with the provisions of the Act shall be punishable with a fine of up to 50,000. Repeated violations may lead to higher penalties and cancellation of licence or registration to conduct business.

Sources: pib.

*Paper 3 Topic: Challenges to internal security through communication networks, role of media and social networking sites in internal security challenges, basics of cyber security; money-laundering and its prevention.*

**Cabinet approves Road Connectivity Project for Left Wing Extremism Affected Areas**

The Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs has approved a Centrally Sponsored Scheme namely “Road Connectivity Project for Left Wing Extremism (LWE) Affected Areas” to improve the rural road connectivity in the worst LWE affected districts from security angle.

[](https://i2.wp.com/www.insightsonindia.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/Left-Wing-Extremism-Affected-Areas.jpg)

Key facts:

* The project will be implemented as a vertical under Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana (PMGSY) to provide connectivity with necessary culverts and cross-drainage structures in 44 worst affected LWE districts and adjoining districts, critical from security and communication point of view. The roads will be operable throughout the year irrespective of all weather conditions.
* Under the project, construction/upgradation of 5,411.81 km road and 126 bridges/Cross Drainage works will be taken up at an estimated cost of Rs.11,724.53 crore.
* The fund sharing pattern of LWE road project will be same as that of PMGSY i.e. in the ratio of 60:40 between the Centre and States for all States except for eight North Eastern and three Himalayan States (Jammu & Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh & Uttarakhand) for which it is 90:10.
* Ministry of Finance will have to allocate to Ministry of Rural Development Rs.7,034.72 crore for this project during the period of implementation 2016-17 to 2019-20. Ministry of Rural Development will be implementing Ministry of this project.

About PMGSY:

Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana (PMGSY) was launched on 25th December, 2000 as a Centrally Sponsored Scheme with the objective to provide all-weather road connectivity to all eligible unconnected habitations in rural areas of the country.

* The programme envisages connecting all eligible unconnected habitations with a population of 500 persons and above (as per 2001 Census) in plain areas and 250 persons and above (as per 2001 Census) in Special Category States and in Select Tribal and Backward Districts (as identified by the Ministry of Home Affairs/Planning Commission).
* For most intensive Integrated Action Plan (IAP) blocks as identified by Ministry of Home Affairs the unconnected habitations with population of100 and above (as per 2001 Census) are eligible to be covered under PMGSY.

Sources: pib.

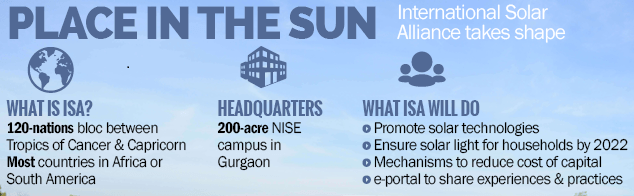
*Paper 2 Topic: Bilateral, regional and global groupings and agreements involving India and/or affecting India’s interests.*

**Cabinet approves International Solar Alliance (ISA)**

The Union Cabinet has given its ex-post facto approval to the proposal of Ministry of New & Renewable Energy (MNRE) for ratification of ISA’s Framework Agreement by India.

Key facts:

* ISA was launched jointly by the Prime Minister of India and the President of France on 30th November, 2015 at Paris on the side-lines of the 21st CoP meeting of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change.
* The ISA aims to bring together more than 121 solar resource rich nations for coordinated research, low cost financing and rapid deployment.
* The foundation stone of the ISA Headquarters was laid at Gwal Pahari, Guragaon in Haryana.
* India has already committed the required support of operationalization of ISA. ISA will put India globally in a leadership role in climate and renewable energy issues. It will also give a platform to showcase its solar programmes.

[](https://i2.wp.com/www.insightsonindia.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/International-Solar-Alliance-ISA.png)

Background:

The Agreement was opened for signature on the sidelines of 22nd CoP meeting at Marrakesh, Morocco. The Agreement invokes the Paris Declaration on ISA and encapsulates the vision of the prospective member nations. UNDP and World Bank have already announced their partnership with the ISA. Till now, 25 nations have signed the Framework Agreement.

Sources: pib.

*Paper 2 Topic: Statutory, regulatory and various quasi-judicial bodies.*

**Union Home Minister chairs Southern Zonal Council meeting**

The Union Home Minister Shri Rajnath Singh chaired the 27th meeting of the Southern Zonal Council at Thiruvananthapuram recently.

Key facts:

* The Council reviewed progress of implementation of various recommendations made in the last meeting relating to issues of fishermen, Peninsular Region Industrial Development Corridor, Extension of High Speed Rail Corridor and Amendments to the New Road Transport & Road Safety Bill.
* The Council also took up issues which relate to uniformity in allocation of funds for scholarships in proportion of population of SC/ST for all courses, revision of ceiling on profession tax by Government of India, prevention of communicable diseases, Naxalism, promotion of oilseeds and oil palm cultivation and development of Puducherry Airport.

Background:

The five Zonal Councils were set up under the States’ Reorganization Act, 1956 to foster Inter-State cooperation and coordination among the States.

* The Zonal Councils are mandated to discuss and make recommendations on the matters of common interest in the field of economic and social planning, border disputes, linguistic minorities and inter-State transport etc.
* They are regional fora of cooperative endeavour for States linked with each other geographically, economically and culturally.
* Being compact high level bodies, especially meant for looking after the interests of respective Zones, they are capable of focusing attention on specific issues taking into account regional factors, while keeping the national perspective in view.

Sources: pib.

*Paper 3 Topic: Infrastructure: Energy, Ports, Roads, Airports, Railways etc.*

**Centre’s nod for apex corridor development body**

The Centre has approved the re-designation of the Delhi-Mumbai Industrial Corridor Project Implementation Trust Fund as National Industrial Corridor Development & Implementation Trust (NICDIT) — the apex body to oversee development of all industrial corridors across the country.

* Alkesh Kumar Sharma, the current chief executive of the Delhi Mumbai Industrial Corridor Development Corporation, will have additional charge as the member secretary and the chief executive of the NICDIT.
* The body assumes importance as central government funds, meant for the development of all industrial corridors, will be routed through it.

Key facts:

* As an apex body, the NICDIT will help streamline activities and better coordination of the industrial corridor projects.
* The DMICDC, which is currently developing the western corridor, will serve as the Knowledge Partner (KP) to the NICDIT for all the industrial corridors until the KPs for them are in place.
* The NICDIT has also been sanctioned an additional ₹ 1,584 crore besides the balance available from ₹ 18,500 crore already sanctioned to the DMIC-Project Implementation Trust Fund for project activities.
* NICDIT will implement all the five proposed industrial corridors, together covering 15 States. The Delhi-Mumbai Industrial Corridor, the first of the planned corridors, is under development. The Chennai-Bengaluru Industrial Corridor, Bengaluru-Mumbai Economic Corridor, Amritsar-Kolkata Industrial Corridor and the Vizag-Chennai Industrial Corridor are in various stages of planning.
* The NICDIT’s board of trustees will be chaired by the secretary of the Department of Industrial Policy and Promotion. The board also includes secretaries of the departments of expenditure, economic affairs, road transport & highways and shipping, apart from the chairman of the Railway Board and the chief executive of the NITI Aayog as members.

Sources: the hindu.

*Paper 3 Topic: Indian Economy and issues relating to planning, mobilization of resources, growth, development and employment.*

**Its illegal to hold old notes post March 31**

The Cabinet has approved the promulgation of an ordinance extinguishing the Reserve Bank of India’s liability for cancelled`500 and `1,000 notes as the logical conclusion to the government’s demonetisation initiative.

Key facts:

* The move will give the finance ministry enough time to factor into the budget the amount of cash that hasn’t been returned to the system if required.
* It will provide a limited window for depositing the cancelled notes at select RBI branches until March 31and also prescribes a monetary penalty for anyone holding such currency in large quantities after the deadline.
* The ordinance will end the central bank’s liability with regard to the notes that are not returned to the system as also those that were deposited. The amount of extinguished currency that is not deposited is expected to flow to the government or be used by the central bank for any other purpose approved by its board.
* The ordinance also seeks to make possession of more than ten `500 or `1,000 notes after deadline a penal offence attracting monetary fine of `10,000 or five times the cash held, whichever is higher.

Sources: the hindu.

*Paper 2 Topic: Government policies and interventions for development in various sectors and issues arising out of their design and implementation.*

**Centre okays Rs 266 crore for AMRUT work**

The Centre has approved Rs 266 crore for augmenting water supply and sewerage networks in Delhi under Atal Mission for Rejuvenation and Urban Transformation (AMRUT) in 2016-17.

Key facts:

* The entire cost is being provided as central assistance to the Delhi government under AMRUT.
* Out of this, Rs 215 crore will be invested in improving water supply, and Rs 254 crore for augmenting sewerage networks and septage management. Another Rs 8 crore will be utilised for drainage networks and Rs 12 crore for developing open and green spaces.
* Delhi government is now required to submit AMRUT action plan for the remaining three years in one go for advance approval.

About AMRUT:

AMRUT is the new avatar of the Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission (JNNURM). It adopts a project approach to ensure basic infrastructure services relating to water supply, sewerage, storm-water drains, transportation and development of green spaces and parks with special provision for meeting the needs of children.

* Under this mission, 10% of the budget allocation will be given to states and union territories as incentive based on the achievement of reforms during the previous year.
* AMRUT will be implemented in 500 locations with a population of one lakh and above. It would cover some cities situated on stems of main rivers, a few state capitals and important cities located in hilly areas, islands and tourist areas.
* Under this mission, states get the flexibility of designing schemes based on the needs of identified cities and in their execution and monitoring. States will only submit state annual action Plans to the centre for broad concurrence based on which funds will be released. But, in a significant departure from JNNURM, the central government will not appraise individual projects.
* Central assistance will be to the extent of 50% of project cost for cities and towns with a population of up to 10 lakhs and one-third of the project cost for those with a population of above 10 lakhs.
* Under the mission, states will transfer funds to urban local bodies within 7 days of transfer by central government and no diversion of funds to be made failing which penal interest would be charged besides taking other adverse action by the centre.

Sources: pib.

*Paper 3 Topic: Major crops cropping patterns in various parts of the country, different types of irrigation and irrigation systems storage, transport and marketing of agricultural produce and issues and related constraints; e-technology in the aid of farmers.*

**AIRIA ties up with Tripura University for imparting rubber technology programmes**

The All Indian Rubber Industries Association (AIRIA), the apex body of Rs 75000 crore rubber industry in India, has joined hands with Tripura University for imparting programmes in rubber technology.

Key facts:

* The purpose of the collaboration is to facilitate rubber education, rubber skills training and research co-operation between the two organizations in rubber technology and polymer science.
* The collaboration is a win-win industry-academia venture. It will make available trained personnel at various levels to meet the demand for manpower and accelerate the development of the industry. At the same time, the courses would enhance the employability of students of TU by equipping them with industry/ business relevant skills.
* The MoU will also provide the university access to industrial environments for applied and problem based research activities.
* The agreement will also help existing work force in rubber in getting certified in the skills through RSDC making them readily employable.

**Insights Daily Current Affairs, 30 December 2016**

**Govt meets PMUY target of 1.5 crore LPG connection additions this financial year**

The government has met the 1.5 crore target for LPG connections to be added in this financial year under the Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana (PMUY). With this, LPG coverage across the country has been increased to 70% as of December 1.

Key facts:

* Target of 1.5 crore connections fixed for the current financial year for Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana (PMUY) has been achieved within a span of less than eight months and the scheme is being implemented now across 35 States/UTs.
* The top five states with the highest number of connections are Uttar Pradesh (46 lakh), West Bengal (19 lakh), Bihar (19 lakh), Madhya Pradesh (17 lakh) and Rajasthan (14 lakh).[](https://i2.wp.com/www.insightsonindia.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/e-Pradhan-Mantri-Ujjwala-Yojana-PMUY..jpg)
* The households belonging to SC/ST constitute large chunk of beneficiaries with 35% of the connections being released to them.
* 14 States/UTs with LPG coverage less than the national average, such as the hilly states of Jammu & Kashmir, Uttarakhand, Himachal Pradesh and all North-East states have been identified as priority states for implementing PMUY.

About the Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana:

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

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

Sources: the hindu.

*Paper 2 Topic: Statutory, regulatory and various quasi-judicial bodies.*

**Financial data management body mooted**

The Committee, headed by Ajay Tyagi, has submitted its report and a draft bill titled ‘The financial data management centre bill 2016’.

* The panel has suggested setting up a financial data management centre (FDMC) for managing the repository of financial regulatory data to ensure stability in the economy.

Key facts:

* The powers of the Financial Data Management Centre (FDMC) will include the establishment, operation and maintenance of the financial system database along with collecting financial regulatory data and providing access to it.
* The body will also provide analytical support to the Financial Stability and Development Council (FSDC) on issues relating to financial stability.

Important recommendations made by the committee:

* Efforts should be concentrated on framing the law, setting up of centre and standardizing processes around collection of data from central level regulators and entities.
* As the system matures and if it is decided to integrate data of state level financial sector regulators, the same has to be done with wide consultation with the states, which is a long drawn process.
* Centre should establish an electronic database for financial regulatory information. It should be in-charge of the day to day operations, maintenance and updating the electronic database, analyse the data submitted in the database and provide analytical support to FMDC.
* To ensure secrecy and avoid conflict of interest, member, employee or officer of the centre having access to confidential data should not be allowed to render advice or accept any employment with a financial service provider for a period specified in the act until the person has taken approval of the centre.
* The committee has also asked the government to grant the status of “public servants” to the members, officers and employees of the centre.

Sources: the hindu.

*Paper 2 Topic: Statutory, regulatory and various quasi-judicial bodies.*

**FIPB clears 6 FDI proposals worth Rs 1,200 crore**

Inter-ministerial body Foreign Investment Promotion Board (FIPB) has approved six investment proposals envisaging foreign investment of Rs 1,200 crore.

Background:

India allows FDI in most sectors through the automatic route, but in certain segments considered sensitive for the economy and security, the proposals have to be first cleared by FIPB.

About FIPB:

The Foreign Investment Promotion Board (FIPB), housed in the Department of Economic Affairs, Ministry of Finance, is an inter-ministerial body, responsible for processing of FDI proposals and making recommendations for Government approval.

Main tasks:

* It considers and recommends foreign direct investment (FDI) which does not come under the automatic route.
* It provides a single window clearance for proposals on FDI in India.

FIPB comprises of the following Secretaries to the Government of India:

* Secretary to Government, Department of Economic Affairs, Ministry of Finance – Chairperson
* Secretary to Government, Department of Industrial Policy & Promotion, Ministry of Commerce & Industry
* Secretary to Government, Department of Commerce, Ministry of Commerce & Industry
* Secretary to Government, Economic Relations, Ministry of External Affairs
* Secretary to Government, Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs.

On what basis decisions on FDI are taken by the FIPB?

The extant FDI Policy, Press Notes and other related notified guidelines formulated by Department of Industrial Policy and Promotion (DIPP) in the Ministry of Commerce and Industry are the bases of the FIPB decisions.

Sources: the hindu.

*Paper 2 Topic: Government policies and interventions for development in various sectors and issues arising out of their design and implementation.*

**Swachh Swasth Sarvatra initiative**

The government has launched Swachh Swasth Sarvatra initiative. It was launched by the Union Health Ministry in collaboration with the Ministry of Drinking Water and Sanitation and Human Resource Development.

Key facts:

* The initiative is aimed at strengthening health centres in open defecation-free blocks.
* The objective is to strengthen community health centres in 708 open defecation-free blocks across the country to enable them to achieve higher levels of cleanliness and hygiene.
* Under it, 10 lakh rupees of financial assistance will be given to the community health centres so that they can be strengthened to meet the standards of sanitation, hygiene and infection control.
* The initiative is a part of the Swachh Bharat Mission, under the National Health Mission. It is focused on the twin objectives of constructing toilets and enabling behavioural change, with the goal of making India free of open defecation by October 2, 2019.

Sources: the hindu.

*Paper 2 Topic: Important aspects of governance, transparency and accountability, e-governance- applications, models, successes, limitations, and potential; citizens charters, transparency & accountability and institutional and other measures.*

**Wage payment through banks ordinance gets President’s nod**

President Pranab Mukherjee has approved the Payment of Wages (Amendment) Ordinance, 2016, to enable industries to pay wages through cheque or by direct credit into bank accounts of workers earning up to Rs. 18,000 a month without their permission.

Key facts:

* The ordinance empowers the Centre or State governments to specify industries or establishments where wage payment can be made mandatory through the banking system.
* The ordinance doesn’t make payment of wages mandatory through the banking system and employers can still pay salaries through cash. The Payment of Wages Act of 1936 required employers to take permission from employees before paying salaries through cheque or bank credit.

Background:

The government introduced the Payment of Wages (Amendment) Bill, 2016 in the Lok Sabha on December 15, but it couldn’t be cleared, owing to the impasse in Parliament.

Way ahead:

An ordinance is valid for six months and the Centre needs to get it passed in Parliament within that period.

**Insights Daily Current Affairs, 31 December 2016**

**‘Mobile App and Facebook Page’ of ‘National Trust’**

The government has launched the ‘Mobile App and Facebook Page’ of the National Trust to mark the ‘National Trust Foundation Day’ on the theme “Celebrating Inclusion”.

Background:

The National Trust Act for the welfare of persons with Autism, Cerebral Palsy, Mental Retardation and Multiple Disabilities was passed in the Parliament on 30th December 1999. Thus-**30th December- the Foundation Day of National Trust**– is a day on which National Trust re-commits itself to the objectives set before it for the welfare of persons with Autism, Cerebral Palsy, Mental Retardation and Multiple Disabilities.

About National Trust:

The National Trust is a **Statutory Body** under Department of Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities (Divyangjan), Ministry of Social Justice & Empowerment.

* The National Trust has been set up to discharge two basic duties – legal and welfare. Legal duties are discharged through Local Level Committee (LLC) set up at district level under the chairmanship of the District Collector / District Magistrate and providing legal guardianship. Welfare duty is discharged through the schemes and activities.
* The schemes and activities of the National Trust inter-alia include training, awareness and capacity building programmes and shelter, care giving and empowerment.
* The National Trust is implementing 10 schemes for overall development of persons with disabilities which have been revised and launched last year.

Sources: pib.

*Paper 1 Topic: Important Geophysical phenomena such as earthquakes, Tsunami, Volcanic activity, cyclone etc., geographical features and their location- changes in critical geographical features (including water-bodies and ice-caps) and in flora and fauna and the effects of such changes.*

**Insertion of LEAP SECOND in the Indian Standard Time**

This year will have an extra leap second added to the end of it, making it slightly longer than 2015.

Why is it added?

The Earth’s rotation around its own axis is not regular, as sometimes it speeds up and sometimes it slows down, due to various factors including the moon’s gravitational Earth-braking forces that often results in ocean tides. As a result, Astronomical Time (UT1) gradually falls out of synch with Atomic time (UTC), and as and when the difference between UTC and UT1 approaches 0.9 seconds, a “Leap Second” is added to UTC through Atomic clocks worldwide.

Leap seconds are needed to prevent civil time drifting away from Earth time. Although the drift is small — taking around a thousand years to accumulate a one-hour difference — if not corrected, it would eventually result in clocks showing midday before sunrise. Therefore, a “Leap Second” is added every now and then to Coordinated Universal Time (UTC) in order to synchronize clocks worldwide with the Earth’s ever slowing rotation.

Key facts:

* Since 1972, 36 “Leap Seconds” have been added at intervals varying from six months to seven years. **37th “Leap Second”** will be added to UTC at the midnight of December 31, 2016 in the countries within this time zone. However, countries in other time zones will have “Leap Second” inserted according to their longitude.
* As the “Leap Second” is added simultaneously all over the world at UTC 23:59:59 on December 31, 2016, implying that in India the “Leap Second” will be inserted at IST 05:29:59 on January 1, 2017 (IST being five hours and thirty minutes ahead of UTC).
* The “Leap Second” adjustment is not so relevant for normal everyday life; however this shift is critical for applications requiring of time accuracies in the nanosecond e.g. astronomy, satellite navigation, communication networks etc.

Sources: pib.

*Paper 2 Topic: Bilateral, regional and global groupings and agreements involving India and/or affecting India’s interests.*

**India and Singapore Sign a Third Protocol for Amending DTAA**

India and Singapore have amended the *double taxation avoidance agreement (*DTAA) for the avoidance of double taxation and prevention of fiscal evasion with respect to taxes on income, by signing a Third Protocol.

* This is in line with India’s treaty policy to prevent double non-taxation, curb revenue loss and check the menace of black money through automatic exchange of information, as reflected in India’s recently revised treaties with Mauritius and Cyprus and the joint declaration signed with Switzerland.

[](https://i2.wp.com/www.insightsonindia.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/double-taxation-avoidance-agreement.jpg)

Key facts:

* The India-Singapore DTAA at present provides for residence based taxation of capital gains of shares in a company. The Third Protocol amends the DTAA with effect from 1st April, 2017 to provide for source based taxation of capital gains arising on transfer of shares in a company. This will curb revenue loss, prevent double non-taxation and streamline the flow of investments.
* In order to provide certainty to investors, investments in shares made before 1st April, 2017 have been grandfathered subject to fulfillment of conditions in Limitation of Benefits clause as per 2005 Protocol.
* Also, a two year transition period from 1st April, 2017 to 31st March, 2019 has been provided during which capital gains on shares will be taxed in source country at half of normal tax rate, subject to fulfillment of conditions in Limitation of Benefits clause.
* The Third Protocol also inserts provisions to facilitate relieving of economic double taxation in transfer pricing cases. This is a taxpayer friendly measure and is in line with India’s commitments under Base Erosion and Profit Shifting (BEPS) Action Plan to meet the minimum standard of providing Mutual Agreement Procedure (MAP) access in transfer pricing cases.
* The Third Protocol also enables application of domestic law and measures concerning prevention of tax avoidance or tax evasion.

Sources: pib.

*Paper 3 Topic: Infrastructure: Energy, Ports, Roads, Airports, Railways etc.*

**Railways may bring in cess on tickets again**

The Railways is planning to bring back a cess on tickets to finance its proposed Rs.1 lakh crore Rail Safety Fund after a rise in derailments this year.

Background:

The Railways had asked the Finance Ministry to sponsor almost 93% of the fund. However, the Finance Ministry agreed to contribute only 25% and asked it to raise the rest.

About the fund:

Recently, the Railway Ministry requested the Finance Ministry to create a non-lapsable safety fund named ‘Rashtriya Rail Sanraksha Kosh’ worth Rs.1,19,183 crore.

* It asked the Finance Ministry to provide Rs.1,11,683 crore for safety improvement. However, despite multiple requests, it only agreed to give 25% of the amount.
* The fund is proposed to be utilised for track improvement, bridge rehabilitation, rolling stock replacement, human resource development, improved inspection system, and safety work at level crossing, among other things.

Sources: the hindu.

*Paper 2 Topic: Important aspects of governance, transparency and accountability, e-governance- applications, models, successes, limitations, and potential; citizens charters, transparency & accountability and institutional and other measures.*

**Govt sets up high-level committee to review arbitration system in India**

The law ministry has formed a 10-member panel led by former Supreme Court judge B.N. Srikrishna to review and create an institutional framework for the arbitration mechanism in India. The committee will submit its report within 90 days.

* The committee includes judges, senior lawyers familiar with commercial laws, industry representatives and a member from a think-tank.

Key facts:

* The committee will make recommendations on various aspects of improving arbitration in the country, including encouraging use of arbitration for international commercial disputes, implementing the law to ensure speedier arbitrations, revision in institutional rules, role of arbitration in disputes where the central government is involved and evolving an efficient arbitration system for India.
* The committee has been asked to suggest road map for further strengthening of research and development impacting the domain and focus on the role of arbitrations in matters involving government of India including bilateral investment treaties (BIT) arbitrations.

Significance of this move:

With this, the government aims to make arbitration a preferred mode for settlement of commercial disputes. The move could also help improve India’s score in the World Bank’s doing business rankings. In the 2016 rankings, India stood at 130 out of 190 countries.

Sources: the hindu.

**Facts for Prelims**

**Power supply to Nepal:**

* India is all set to Supply Additional 80 MW to Nepal from 1st January 2017. With this, the total supply of electricity to Nepal from India will be about 400 MW
* The power will be supplied to Nepal through the Muzaffarpur (India) – Dhalkebar (Nepal) transmission line.