

# Weekly Current Affairs

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# NATIONAL



## 2 Wheeler scheme launched by PM

- Prime Minister Narendra Modi kickstarted the subsidised Amma two-wheeler scheme meant for working women.
- This on the occasion of former Chief Minister Jayalalithaa's 70th birth anniversary.
- As part of the scheme, every beneficiary will be given 50% of the cost of a two-wheeler or a grant of Rs. 25,000.
- Each year, one lakh working women would be covered.
- As a mark of the commencement of the scheme, five women were handed over keys to vehicles and registration certificates by the Prime Minister.
- Greening drive
- In the presence of Governor Banwarilal Purohit, Chief Minister Edappadi K Palaniswami, Deputy Chief Minister O. Panneerselvam, Union Minister of State for Shipping Pon. Radhakrishnan and Lok Sabha Deputy Speaker M. Thambidurai, the Prime Minister also inaugurated a programme to plant 70 lakh tree saplings.
- In the last six years, 3.99 crore saplings were planted under a similar programme.

## Stability and ability of leadership at centre and AP state: Vice-Pres

- Vice-President M. Venkaiah Naidu said Andhra Pradesh was emerging as a favourite destination for investments due to the stability and the ability of the leadership at the Centre and in the State.



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- He was speaking after inaugurating the three-day CII Partnership Summit and the Sunrise Andhra Pradesh Investment Meet here at the sprawling APIIC grounds at the Harbour Park.
- This was the third summit being held in a row in the city.
- Lauding the visionary leadership of Chief Minister N. Chandrababu Naidu, the Vice-President said with enormous opportunities for investors with a 974-km long coastline, the second largest after Gujarat.
- There was plenty of scope for investment in agriculture, food processing industries, electronics, seafood and infrastructure.
- Mr. Venkaiah Naidu said India had emerged as a strong economy due to the pro-active policies of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and said as per projections, the country was poised to become \$10-trillion economy with an average income of \$5,000 in 10 to 15 years.
- Describing the demonetisation and the rolling out of the GST regime as revolutionary decisions, he said now the bank lending rates had come down with substantial increase in the filing of the Income-Tax returns.
- "All States including AP have extended their cooperation for implementation of these decisions."
- Mr. Chandrababu Naidu gave details of the steps being taken for real-time governance and ease of doing business to create conducive climate for investors.
- He said AP was poised to emerge among the top three performing States by 2022 and No. 1 State by 2029 and the best investment destination by 2050.
- He said automobiles, textiles, healthcare, engineering, IT, food processing industries, aerospace and defence had been identified as thrust areas.
- In his keynote address, Union Minister for Commerce and Industry Suresh Prabhu said after the difficulties faced due to the bifurcation, AP was performing very well on all fronts.
- It had emerged as the fastest growing State and in the New India campaign launched by the Prime Minister, it would continue to have an important role to play.
- He said the vision adopted by the Prime Minister and the Chief Minister would make AP a "new and vibrant State".
- Saying exports and value addition of various products would generate a lot of revenue and jobs, he advised AP to lay emphasis not only on production but also designing of various products.
- Union Civil Aviation Minister P. Ashok Gajapathi Raju, CII president Shobana Kamineni, Director General Chandrajit Banerjee, Adani Group Chairman Gautam Adani and Department of Industrial Policy and Promotion Secretary Ramesh Abhishek were present.

### **Inadequate supervision: Jaitley on PNB scam**

- Finance Minister Arun Jaitley blamed "inadequate supervision" by auditors and regulators as well as "indifference" and/or ignorance of top management for the banking frauds.
- It including the Letters of Undertaking scam at the state-owned Punjab National Bank.



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- While hinting at a tightening of laws, he cited a lack of political consensus and ruled out privatisation of public sector banks as a response to the scams.
- Mr. Jaitley, without naming any bank or those involved in the fraud, said it was “worrisome” that red flags were not raised and that “top managements were indifferent to what was going on or were unaware of what was going on.”
- Also of concern was that the “multiple layers of auditing system chose to either look the other way or do a casual job,” the Minister said.
- “You had inadequate supervision... who did what, we will eventually find out in the course of investigation.”
- “Regulators have a very important function... [of] deciding the rules of the game. Regulators should have a third eye perpetually open. But unfortunately in the Indian system, we politicians are accountable, the regulators are not.”
- The law would be tightened further, if necessary, to find out where the fraudsters were and what was the action that the law permitted against such delinquent persons.
- Referring to ethical practices, he said it was a significant problem in India.

## Uninterrupted power supply in Telangana

- The power utilities of Telangana met a record peak demand of 10,000 MW power on past two days for the first time since formation of the State.
- The increase in the demand has been attributed mainly to the uninterrupted power supply to the agriculture sector starting from January 1 this year.
- “We are expecting the demand to go up to 10,600 MW to 10,700 MW in the coming weeks but we have tied up to meet the demand even up to 11,500 mw and the transmission and distribution networks are in a position to handle a load over 15,000 MW,” Chairman and Managing Director of the Southern Power Distribution Company G. Raghuma Reddy and CMD of the Northern PDC A. Gopal Rao said, on completion of 50 days of 24×7 power to the farm sector.
- Stating that it was a memorable occasion for the power utilities in the State.
- It is particularly with the background of their inability to meet uninterrupted supply even to the domestic sector when Telangana came into being.
- The top executives of the two distribution companies said support from the government and hard work of the employees for the last three years had been behind the success.
- Several States across the country were enquiring with the power utilities of Telangana how they were providing uninterrupted supply to all categories of consumers without any trouble in the system.
- Some States were planning to replicate “our successful model”.



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- They had fears of system breakdown before introducing 24×7 supply to agriculture but were convinced of the system's efficiency after the trial run conducted in the run-up to the launch of uninterrupted supply to the farm sector, he said.
- Strengthening of T&D network had helped the utilities bring down the failure of distribution transformers by about 50% this January compared to the same period last year, the two CMDs claimed.
- They stated that about Rs. 84,000 crore investment would be made in public sector power generation and further improvement of T&D network in the next five years which included the expected increase of load on the system from the ongoing lift irrigation projects.
- Timely repayment of loans taken from the Rural Electrification Corporation (REC) by the State's power utilities had helped them get the corporation to reduce the interest rate to 9.65% from 12% and 13%. Orders to the effect were expected in a few days.
- This would be a huge relief since the interest burden was expected to come down by almost 25% – 2.5% to 3%, Mr. Raghuma Reddy stated.

## Ceasefire violation in Uri

- Over 1,000 civilians, including women and children, stranded due to the Pakistani shelling and firing, were rescued in guarded ambulances in Baramulla Uri.
- The ceasefire agreement in force in the area since 2003 started to fall apart.
- The Pakistan Army asked locals on the Indian side to "empty the villages on the zero line using loudspeakers of their village mosques".
- Pakistan has widened its firing target in Uri. There were announcements made on speakers.
- Around eight villages with a population of around 5,000 were affected due to the firing and the shelling.
- Pakistan fired from two sides at Uri town, which is surrounded on three sides by Pakistan pickets.
- From Jammu's Pir Panchal valley, "major ceasefire violations" started in the Kashmir valley since February 22, the first since the Kargil war of 1999, and have displaced over 1,500 civilians so far.
- The trigger was the killing of a BSF jawan in Kupwara on February 20.
- The Indian Army in retaliation "destroyed" several pickets of the Pakistan Army in Uri Sector in the past two days.
- The Army said Pakistan resorted to "unprovoked firing at 11:50 a.m. and the fire was retaliated effectively".
- The exchange of fire in Uri stopped by 7 p.m. It remained intense between 12 and 3 p.m. "No casualties were reported".
- Villagers of Uri's Charunda, Tilawari, Thajal, Batgram, Hathinanga, Sahoora and Balkote in the Haji Pir Sector said "they are reliving the pre-ceasefire agreement era again".



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## India from Women Development to Women-led Development

- Prime Minister Narendra Modi has stressed the need to have women as equal partners in the development of the country.
- "Today, the country is moving forward from the path of women development to women-led development," he said in the 41st edition of his Mann Ki Baat radio broadcast.
- Recalling Swami Vivekananda's words that "the idea of perfect womanhood is perfect independence".
- Mr. Modi said: "Today, it is our duty to ensure the participation of women in every field of life, be it social or economic life; it is also our fundamental duty."
- The Prime Minister said a woman's power today underlined inner fortitude and self-confidence, which made her self-reliant.
- "Not only has she herself advanced but has carried forward the country and society to newer heights ... Today the country is moving forward from the path of women development to women-led development," he said.
- Referring to International Women's Day observed every year on March 8, he said, "We are part of a tradition where men were identified because of women. Yashoda-Nandan, Kaushalya-Nandan, Gandhari-Putra, these were identities of a son ..."
- Apart from women's rights, Mr. Modi spoke at length about National Safety Day, National Science Day and issues such as clean energy.
- "If we are not aware of safety in our daily life, if we are not able to attain a certain level, it will get extremely difficult during the time of disasters," he said.
- Mr. Modi regretted that while people read signboards put up on safety issues, they often ignored the messages.
- He urged the people to inculcate safety in their day-to-day lives, stressing that India had to become a "risk-conscious" society.
- He said that till three years ago, thousands of people lost their lives every year because of heat waves.
- Since then, the National Disaster Management Authority had organised workshops on heatwave management to raise awareness among the people, the Prime Minister said.
- "In 2017, the death toll on account of heatwave remarkably came down to around 220 or so. This proves that if we accord priority to safety, we can actually attain safety," he said.
- 'Gobar Dhan' scheme
- Mr. Modi also referred to the newly launched "Gobar Dhan" scheme for converting rural waste into clean energy through biogas under the government's Swachh Bharat campaign.
- 'Gobar Dhan' — Galvanising Organic Bio Agro Resources — would ensure a hygienic environment in villages and monetise cattle dung and solid agricultural waste.



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## Fugitive Economic Offenders Bill soon

- The Union government may consider enacting the Fugitive Economic Offenders Bill to confiscate assets of those who flee the country and refuse to return after committing frauds in excess of Rs. 100 crore.
- Such a law assumes significance as major bank frauds have come to light in quick succession of late.
- Nirav Modi, a diamond merchant accused in the Rs. 11,400-crore Punjab National Bank case, and his family members are currently abroad.
- The passports of Mr. Modi and his uncle Mehul Choksi have been revoked.
- In another case involving Rs. 389 crore of the Oriental Bank of Commerce, a Delhi-based jewellery exporter and his business partners fled the country in 2014.
- Under the existing laws, the bank has failed to recover the dues in the past three years.
- A draft of the Bill, which is in consonance with similar legislation in several countries, was circulated last May seeking comments from all stakeholders.
- The Bill was cleared by the Union Law Ministry with certain recommendations on reconciliation of provisions with the existing laws.
- The draft Bill followed an announcement in the Union Budget for 2017-18 that the government planned to introduce a legal measure to confiscate assets of the economic offenders who flee to foreign jurisdictions to escape the clutches of law.
- The move came after Vijay Mallya, who owed more than Rs. 9,000 crore to the public sector banks, flew out of the country and refused to come back.
- It set off prolonged and multi-pronged legal proceedings, with the government still fighting a legal battle for his extradition from the U.K.
- The draft Bill defines a fugitive economic offender as any individual against whom an arrest warrant has been issued and who has either left the country or refuses to come back to face prosecution.
- As proposed, the Enforcement Directorate will be empowered under the Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA) to initiate the proceedings.
- It has a provision enabling repayment of dues to creditors by disposing of confiscated assets, in case the accused offender continues to evade prosecution.
- As listed in the draft Bill's schedule, it will be applicable to various financial and allied offences as defined under the Indian Penal Code, the Prevention of Corruption Act, the Securities and Exchange Board of India Act, Customs Act and so on.

## Assessing Green cover of the city using Drone in Tirupati

- Keen to assess the precise green cover, the State government has initiated an aerial survey through drones and has successfully completed the study over the Tirupati region.



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- It is set to take it up in the Vijayawada region now, said S. Mustafa, general manager of the Andhra Pradesh Greening and Beautification Corporation.
- The survey would help identify green cover in a specific geographical area.
- "It will take one week to complete (the survey) in the Vijayawada region, which will be followed by Visakhapatnam," he said.
- Emphasising the corporation's efforts to improve green cover in 13 districts, he said gardening workshops were being conducted in the city and already 100 candidates were trained in the nuances of the art.
- Amaravati would need thousands of professional gardeners to improve green cover.
- "We have in-house architects and horticulturists who will visit various municipalities and corporations in the State and give their designs as per the requirements. We are taking up green enhancement in temples and the best example is the Kanaka Durga temple here," Mr. Mustafa said.

## States can relax Highway liquor ban: SC

- The Supreme Court gave the State governments the discretion to decide, on facts, whether areas covered by local self-governing bodies or areas proximate to municipal pockets should be exempted from the court's nationwide prohibition on sale of liquor within 500 metres along the highways.
- On July 11, 2017, the court exempted municipal areas from the prohibition. It said the ban mainly targeted busy national and State highways inter-connecting cities, towns and villages along.
- The purpose of the ban, imposed in a December, 2016 judgment, was to prevent drunken driving along these busy thoroughfares.
- "The order does not prohibit licensed establishments within municipal areas," the court said.
- However, the July 11 order triggered more questions than answers. States, especially Tamil Nadu, came back to the court, asking whether panchayats would also come under the definition of "municipal areas" mentioned in the July 11 order.
- Tamil Nadu said "municipal areas" were not "intended to exclude areas within the jurisdiction of local self-governing bodies."
- The States reasoned that in future, these panchayats might be developed in a manner similar to municipalities, or some of them might be geographically proximate to an urban agglomeration.
- They sought a clarification about the "obvious uncertainties" thrown open by the order.
- Without intervening, a Bench of Chief Justice of India Dipak Misra and Justices Amitava Roy and D.Y. Chandrachud said the court left it to the States to take a decision after examining "whether an area covered by a local self-governing body is proximate to a municipal agglomeration or is sufficiently developed" to apply the exemption granted in the July 11 order.
- "In deciding whether the principle which has been set down in the July order should be extended to a local self-governing body, the State governments would take recourse to all relevant circumstances,



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including the nature and extent of development in the area and the object underlying the direction prohibiting the sale of liquor on highways,” the court said.

## Bihar Budget session

- The budget session of Bihar Assembly, which gets under way, is likely to be a stormy one in view of the by-elections to be held in some constituencies.
- The ruling NDA and the Opposition RJD-Congress alliance have gone into poll-mode in the run-up to the Rajya Sabha biennial polls which is also slated for next month.
- The session would begin with address of the Governor to a joint sitting of the two Houses while the budget for 2018-19 and supplementary demand grant for 2017-18 will be presented the next day.
- In all, there are 24 working days in the session during which the truncated grand alliance of RJD-Congress is likely to make all efforts to put the ruling NDA in the dock over alleged lack of adequate action in Srijan scam, irregularities in construction of toilets, poor law and order and high-handedness in implementation of prohibition.
- By-elections for two Assembly and one parliamentary constituencies besides six Rajya Sabha seats scheduled for next month.
- Both the alliances are also likely to corner each other over the CBI and the ED enquiries into allegations of corruption against RJD supremo Lalu Prasad and his family members as also the Srijan scam and bungling in construction of toilets in which the Opposition has been alleging the involvement of people close to the NDA.
- The bypolls, scheduled for March 11, and the Rajya Sabha by-elections on March 23, will provide the first opportunity for trial of strength of the two sides since the JD(U) broke away from the grand alliance in July last year and rejoined the NDA.

## Rustom-2 UAV test successful

- India's under-development Unmanned Aerial Vehicle Rustom-2 was successfully test-flown by the Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO).
- “This flight assumes significance because of the fact that this is the first flight in user configuration with a higher power engine. All parameters were normal,” the DRDO said in a statement.
- The flight was conducted at the DRDO's Aeronautical Test Range at Chitradurga in Karnataka.
- Rustom-2 belongs to a family of UAVs under development, besides Rustom-1 and Rustom-H. It is a Medium Altitude Long Endurance drone (MALE).
- It can fly up to an altitude of 22,000 feet and has an endurance of over 20 hours. It is capable of carrying payloads for electronic and signal intelligence missions.
- Currently, the three services employ hundreds of Israeli drones and have projected a requirement of hundreds of more UAVs, including armed variants, in the near future.



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- The DRDO is also developing other drones in different categories.

## Record Olive Ridley Nesting

- With 4,28,083 mother olive ridley turtles nesting, the endangered species has created an all-time record of mass nesting at the Rushikulya rookery coast in the Ganjam district of Odisha this year.
- The mass nesting is expected to continue for another two to three days, said Berhampur divisional forest officer Ashis Behera.
- Interestingly, mass nesting of olive ridley turtles has not yet started on the coasts along the Gahirmatha beach and the mouth of the Debi river, two other major nesting sites in Odisha.
- Forest officials say the Gahirmatha beach is the largest mass nesting site for olive ridley turtles along the Indian coastline, followed by the rookery at the mouth of the Rushikulya river.
- With 3,65,000 nests, olive ridley turtles had created a record of mass nesting at Rushikulya in 2017.
- They have already broken the record this year, indicating that the environment of this coast continues to be conducive for their mass nesting.
- In 2016, for some unexplained reason, there was no mass nesting at this coast.
- This year, sea waves and winds have widened a portion of the beach near the Rushikulya rookery.
- A sandbar near the Podampeta village eroded entirely, and its sand was deposited on the coast, widening a stretch of the beach and increasing its height.
- This is the region where a large number of nestings took place this year.
- The turtles have also extended their area of nesting northward till the Bateswar temple, said Mr. Behera.

## Centre at local level

- For sharper delivery of the government's message to the voters, the Ministry of Information & Broadcasting (I&B) approved the hiring of 716 social media executives, one for each district of the country.
- Their primary responsibility will be to analyse local news media and help the government adapt the message according to the responses to it.
- The responsibility of these executives will be to "monitor local editions of newspapers, local cable channels, local audio channels and important local social media handles for important local developments".
- They will also have to analyse the news to assess whether the government's message was received positively or negatively.
- This hiring is part of the Ministry's outreach programme for smaller cities and rural areas.
- The social media executives will be expected to run a structured campaign to highlight the Modi government's achievements.
- The new media wing is being set up by the Broadcast Engineering Consultants India Limited (BECIL).



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- Recently, the Ministry also did real-time monitoring of public online conversations around the word 'Budget'. All online conversations on open forums like Twitter, public Facebook pages, blogs and so on were read closely by a small unit set up by I&B Minister Smriti Irani.
- Based on the analysis of the group, Finance Minister Arun Jaitley was told to change the message.

### Genetic disorder shouldn't be reason for denial of cover: HC

- Most policies have exclusionary clauses that deny clients' claims if they suffer from such disorders.
- The verdict could open up a large number of ailments as claimable under medical insurance.
- "The exclusionary clause of 'genetic disorders,' in the insurance policy, is too broad, ambiguous and discriminatory – hence violative of Article 14 of the Constitution," Justice Singh said.
- The court directed the Insurance Regulatory Development Authority of India to re-look at the exclusionary clauses in insurance contracts and ensure that insurance companies do not reject claims on the basis of exclusions relating to genetic disorders.
- Justice Singh highlighted that there are different types of genetic disorders and even common diseases like diabetes and cardiac diseases could be included in the broad definition.
- "In effect, it would mean that large swathes of population would be excluded from availing health insurance which could have a negative impact on the health of a country," she remarked.
- The High Court's verdict came on a petition filed by United India Insurance Company Limited challenging an order passed by a trial court here directing it to honour the medical claim of a person who was suffering from genetic disorder.
- The court remarked that insurance companies are free to structure their contracts based on reasonable and intelligible factors which should not be arbitrary and cannot be 'exclusionary'.

### Investment of 4.39 lakh crore: A.P

- The third edition of the three-day CII Partnership Summit and the Sunrise Investment Meet held here saw the signing of 734 Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs).
- It envisaged an investment of Rs. 4.39 lakh crore, with a potential for providing employment to 11 lakh people.
- Unlike the previous two editions, the amount of investment proposals fell down drastically.
- But Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister N. Chandrababu Naidu, at the concluding ceremony, said that after a lot of spadework they had inked the agreements only with serious players.
- The MoUs with proposed investment of Rs. 4.67 lakh crore were signed in 2016, the first post-bifurcation year, and it increased to Rs. 10.54 lakh crore in 2017.
- The government rejected 306 MoUs with an investment proposal of nearly Rs. 4 lakh crore as there was no detailed feasibility reports.



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- The summit attracted 2,500 delegates from 15 countries, partnership with South Korea, Japan and Singapore and 55 bilateral meetings.
- Prominent MoUs include investment by Reliance, the LuLu Group, the Adani Special Economic Zone, electronic clusters, renewable energy and tourism.
- The fallout of differences between the BJP and its ally Telugu Desam Party were evident as only Union Commerce and Industry Minister Suresh Prabhu attended the summit besides Civil Aviation Minister P. Ashok Gajapathi Raju, who is from the TDP.
- Mr. Naidu, during a special session with Art of Living founder Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, expressed his dissatisfaction over the failure of the Central government in fulfilling its commitments.
- He said that despite so many difficulties and division of the State in an unscientific manner, he had been working to transform Andhra Pradesh as the most developed State by 2029 and the best destination for living and investment by 2050.

### **Andhra Pradesh ready for safe nesting**

- With large numbers of olive ridley turtles being sighted along the coastline of Andhra Pradesh, wildlife authorities here have intensified measures to ensure a safe nesting season for them.
- Their primary focus is on the sanctuaries along the coastline – the Krishna Wildlife Sanctuary in Krishna district, the Coringa Wildlife Sanctuary in East Godavari district, as well as the strategic beaches (from Baruva and Bhavanapadu on the Andhra Pradesh-Odisha border to the beaches of Nellore on the Andhra Pradesh-Tamil Nadu border).
- As many as six rookeries have been set up in Krishna district and three in Guntur district.
- “Six of the sites can be reached only by boat,” said Ms. Bhavani, ranger in Avanigadda. “Since January 22, 141 turtles have been sighted in the Krishna Sanctuary and 16,240 eggs have been collected,” she said.
- Over 800 nestings of the turtles may take place this year along the Visakhapatnam coast. Five hatcheries have been identified.

### **Singareni mines will not be privatized: CM**

- Chief Minister K. Chandrasekhar Rao rubbished reports of the Singareni coal mines being privatised by the Union government.
- He said there was no scope for it as the State government held the majority share of 51% and, if need be, it would purchase the Centre’s share of 49%.
- The Chief Minister was addressing Singareni workers at Pragati stadium in Srirampur area, after laying the foundation stone for opening six new underground coal mines.
- He had earlier moved in the miners’ residential colony and interacted with their families.



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- Mr. Rao said the imbroglio related to employment to dependants of miners would be solved by changing the name to compassionate appointment.
- He also announced constitution of a new medical board for the benefit of miners.
- The miners would get free electricity and water starting February 28, for which the Chief Minister issued orders.
- This was a demand being made by all trade unions.
- By another order, Mr. Rao directed the Singareni management to sanction Rs. 400 crore for housing for the miners.
- He said 10,000 houses would be built in a phased manner in the Singareni Collieries.
- With regard to waiver of Income Tax for Singareni workers, the Chief Minister said a resolution in this regard would be passed in the State Assembly during the coming budget session and would be sent to the Union government for its approval.

## Vizag metro

- Five infrastructure companies – Adani Enterprises, Tata's TRIL Urban Transport, Shapoorji Pallonji and Company, Essel Infraprojects and IL&FS Rail – have evinced interest in developing the Visakhapatnam Metro Rail project in the public-private partnership (PPP) mode.
- Minister for Municipal Administration and Urban Development P. Narayana in a release said that the Urban Mass Transit Company (UMTC), appointed as transaction adviser for the project by the Amaravati Metro Rail Corporation.
- It opened the proposals submitted by the five companies to the request for proposals called in September last year.
- "Participation of such reputed companies in the bid is a clear indication that the PPP model adopted by the government is a viable one for the project and it will succeed," Mr. Narayana said.
- In another 15 to 20 days, the proposals would be examined to shortlist eligible bidders and with the approval of the A.P. government, shortlisted companies would be announced after a month, the release said.
- It would take another five months for the UMTC to select a suitable developer for the project.
- The rail project, worth Rs. 8,800 crore, is initially designed with three corridors of 42.5 km length.
- Under the PPP, the government proposed to fund civil infrastructure expenditure and the private developer is expected to develop non-civil infrastructure, operate and maintain for 35 years.

## Defence Production Corridor in Tamil Nadu

- The Ministry of Defence has initiated work for preparing a Detailed Project Report (DPR) to set up a defence production corridor in Tamil Nadu.



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- The Department of Defence Production, part of the Defence Ministry, will engage a top consultancy firm to draw up the DPR for the 'Tamil Nadu Defence Quad'.
- The defence quad or quadrilateral is one of the two defence production corridors announced Finance Minister Arun Jaitley in the 2018-19 budget.
- "The corridor, which is organised as a quadrilateral will extend from Chennai, Hosur, Coimbatore, Salem and Trichy," a press release from the Defence Ministry said.
- The release said that the corridor will provide a major opportunity to the manufacturing sector in Tamil Nadu to participate in production for the defence sector.
- To take this forward, the Ministry has initiated an exercise with the industry and MSMEs, at the five nodal points.
- "These interactions will involve senior officers from MoD, representatives of Hindustan Aeronautics Ltd., Bharat Electronics Ltd., Bharat Earth Movers Ltd. and Ordnance Factories," the release said.
- The first interaction was completed at Hosur.
- The other interactions will be held at Coimbatore on March 5, Salem on March 7, and Chennai on March 10. The dates for Tiruchi will be announced separately, the release said.

## Alarming trends of lifestyle diseases in School children

- The world over, surveys have pointed to a prevalence of obesity among children, and Bengaluru is no exception.
- A school-based screening of 1.04 lakh children in 138 private schools in Bengaluru has revealed some alarming trends among students aged between three and 16.
- The survey, conducted by a private provider of health services in schools, found about 10% of the children to be obese and 13.8% at risk of contracting lifestyle diseases in adulthood with waistlines which are more than half their height.
- The survey data — compiled from June 2017 to January 2018 by AddressHealth — revealed a significant degree of malnutrition (both over and under nutrition) among children.
- While 9.2% of children were found to be obese, 13.7% fell in the overweight category (overnutrition). About 8.5% were found to be too thin for their age (undernutrition).
- On the rise
- Corroborating the findings, Asha Benakappa, director of the State-run Indira Gandhi Institute of Child Health, said obesity is seen across income groups but is rising rapidly in schools catering to higher income groups and among primary and secondary students.



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## Annual Science Day

- Satyapal Singh, the junior Union Minister for Education, will be the chief guest at the annual Science Day event.
- It is being organised by two of India's top science academies, the Indian National Science Academy (INSA) and the Indian Academy of Sciences (IAS).
- Last month Mr. Singh said that Charles Darwin's theory of evolution deserved to be binned.
- His remarks sparked considerable concern among the scientist fraternity with suggestions that there were attempts to polarise science along communal lines.
- Some scientists even floated a petition condemning his statement and saying that it "harmed India's reputation."
- Later on his senior in the Ministry, Prakash Javadekar said that he had told Mr. Singh to refrain from such comments.
- A.K. Sood, president, INSA, told The Hindu that Mr. Singh's presence was "an opportunity to interact" and his choice as chief guest was not due to his comments on evolution.
- "We'd issued a statement when he made those comments. As science academies it's our duty to interact with various people and this is going to be just a simple interaction," he added.
- Science Day is annually celebrated to mark the birth anniversary of Sir C.V. Raman and usually has the science academies organise public lectures on science.
- Professor Amitabh Joshi of the Jawaharlal Nehru Centre for Advanced Scientific Research (JNCASR) will lecture on 'Why evolution is central to both biology and our lives.'
- Post-Singh's comments, the Pune-based Indian Institute of Science Education and Research included a question, worth two marks, in an examination asking students to argue why Mr. Singh's statement was wrong.

## Maldives rejects India's Naval exercise invite

- Maldives has declined an invitation to join the MILAN series of multilateral exercises to be hosted by the Indian Navy in March off the Andaman and Nicobar Islands.
- The Maldives Ambassador clarified that it was due to the state of emergency in his country.
- "We have invited Maldives, but they declined it. They did not give any reason, but I think it is due to the current situation," Navy chief Admiral Sunil Lanba said.
- He was speaking on the sidelines of the Indo-Pacific Maritime Dialogue, organised by the Navy and the National Maritime Foundation.



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- MILAN is a congregation of littoral navies conducted biennially by the Navy under the aegis of the Andaman and Nicobar Command, which began in 1995.
- MILAN 2018 will be held from March 6-11. This year 23 countries have been invited, of which 16 have confirmed so far.
- Admiral Lanba dismissed concerns over the presence of Chinese ships near Maldives.
- He said China had been conducting anti-piracy patrols in Indian Ocean since 2008 and India had been monitoring their movements.
- "They have a standard pattern of operating. There has been no change in it," he said.



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## NGT on Bengaluru lakes

- The Karnataka government submitted an action plan before the National Green Tribunal on ways to achieve a “holistic rejuvenation” of the three lakes in Bengaluru.
- This includes the Bellandur lake, in which there had been recurrent cases of fire. This was in pursuance of a previous order of the NGT.
- A bench headed by judicial member Jawad Rahim further directed the State government to file a report on the physical removal of macrophytes (aquatic plants) from the lakes to prevent the fires.
- The authorities have been asked to file the report within a week.
- “The Karnataka government submits that all directions have been complied with. We permit the applicant to file response to the action plan” said the bench, after it was alleged that the action plan was not proper.
- On January 29, the green panel had directed the Indian Institute of Science in Bengaluru to carry out a pilot study on the visible aquatic plants.
- “Considering the role of macrophytes in rendering the quality of water in lakes below acceptable levels, it is necessary that the macrophytes menace is terminated once and for all,” the NGT had said.
- It further directed that a pilot study be carried out on the life cycle of these plants.
- At the same time, physical removal of this vegetation from the lakes should be carried out at regular intervals and compliance report placed before the Tribunal every month.
- Earlier, the green panel came down heavily on the Karnataka government for not taking active measures to prevent the recurring incidents of fires at the severely polluted Bellandur lake.

## No Tax for Pharma Promotions: Tribunal

- A recent decision of the Income Tax Appellate Tribunal Pune bench allowing pharmaceutical companies to account for their spending on doctors as a deductible expenditure has sparked off a fresh debate on ethics.
- Since the companies are out of the purview of the Medical Council of India (MCI), money spent on promotions, which in some cases could be gifts, travel, hospitality and so on for doctors, besides medical conferences and samples, can be claimed as deductible expenditure.
- Doctors accepting such promotions may be violating the code of ethics of the MCI.
- The tribunal's order came in a case involving Emcure Pharmaceuticals Ltd, which filed returns in which expenses of Rs. 2.07 crore were claimed as ‘advertisement sales promotions’.
- Of this, about Rs. 50 lakh was for ‘print and promotion’ and the remaining Rs. 1.57 crore was for ‘sales promotions’.
- The pharma company’s claim was disallowed by the IT department on the ground that it violated the MCI code of ethics.



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- A Central Board of Direct Taxes (CBDT) circular disallows deductions that violate MCI regulations. However, the IT Appellate Tribunal reversed the decision by the assessing officer and ruled in favour of the company.
- Citing observations made in other cases, the bench noted that pharma companies organised seminars and discussions to upgrade the knowledge of doctors, and such activities were undertaken to make doctors aware of products.
- The order noted that only when the companies made doctors or medical practitioners aware of such products and medicines could they be “launched successfully”.
- “This kind of expenditure is definitely in the nature of sales and business promotion, which has to be allowed,” the order said.
- Health activist Dr. Abhijit More of Jan Swasthya Abhiyan said technically, the tribunal was correct.
- The MCI code may not govern pharma companies.
- But there are ethical problems as it directly affects patients.
- The companies should also have a code of ethics.
- Freebies and favours taken by doctors pushed up the cost of healthcare.

### **GDP 7.2% in 3<sup>rd</sup> quarter**

- GDP growth in the third quarter of financial year 2017-18 was 7.2%, the fastest in the year so far, according to official data released.
- The government also marginally increased its estimate for the full year’s growth to 6.6% from its earlier estimate of 6.5%.
- Growth in GDP was at 6.5% in the second quarter of this financial year.
- Growth in the gross value added (GVA) in the third quarter stood at 6.7%, up from the 6.2% seen in the second quarter and the 5.6% in the first quarter of this financial year.
- In the third quarter, the manufacturing sector exhibited a strong recovery, growing at 8.1%, following up on a 6.9% growth in the second quarter.
- The agriculture sector also saw relatively robust growth in the third quarter, growing at 4.1%, up from 2.7% in the first and second quarters.
- “The GDP trends are consistent with the robust growth of the manufacturing Purchasing Managers Index (PMI), Index of Industrial Production (IIP) and consumer demand,” Bibek Debroy, Chairman of the PM’s Economic Advisory Council said in a statement .
- “The fast recovery in the economic indicators like IIP, PMI and consumer demand reflects a positive economic sentiment and that India is on the right path to become one of the fastest major economy in the world surpassing China.”
- Gross fixed capital formation (GFCF), a measure of overall investment activity in the economy, grew at a robust 12% in the third quarter, up from the 6.92% growth seen in the previous quarter.



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## 9.87 lakh tonnes of minerals illegally mined in Rajasthan: CAG

- About 98.87 lakh tonnes of minerals worth Rs. 204.5 crore were illegally excavated in five districts of Rajasthan between 2011-12 and 2016-17.
- The mining not only violated rules and regulations but also flouted the Supreme Court's direction to stop degradation of environment in the State's Aravalli hills.
- In its report on the economic sector for the financial year ended March 31, 2017, tabled in the Rajasthan Assembly, the Comptroller and Auditor General has pulled up the State government for the illegal mining.
- While pointing out that the Mines Department could recover only Rs. 25.57 crore against the total recoverable amount of Rs. 204.50 crore.
- There were inadequacies in preventive measures as well as in the follow-up of the illegal mining cases detected, while the delay in issuing notices for recovery of penal amount removed the scope for deterrence, said the CAG.
- Besides, the policy measures framed in 2011 for curbing illegal mining were not implemented.
- "We noticed serious violations of the Supreme Court's orders, as mining leases falling in the Aravalli mountain range were granted, renewed and extended", report said.
- "Besides, the Ministry of Environment and Forests also granted environment clearance for mining lease despite the area falling in Aravalli hills," said the CAG report.
- The districts where illegal mining took place during the five years are Alwar, Jaipur, Sikar, Rajsamand and Udaipur, according to the report.
- The CAG said though nine mining engineers' offices in these districts had registered 4,072 cases of illegal mining, transportation and storage of minerals, they could make negligible recovery.

## Welfare Schemes not reaching Tribal People: Kerala HC

- A Division Bench of the Kerala High Court orally observed that it was unfortunate that welfare schemes meant for tribal people did not reach them.
- The Bench, headed by Chief Justice Antony Dominic, made the oral observation while directing the State government to file in 15 days an affidavit in suo motu proceedings initiated in connection with the the lynching of Madhu, a tribal youth at Attappady.
- When the case came up for hearing, the court pointed out that the tribal youth was allegedly killed on charges of theft of food.
- The State Attorney then said that the problem was not lack of food and the death was caused not due to scarcity of food.
- In fact, the tribal youth was allegedly beaten to death by an irate mob charging him with stealing food from a shop.



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- The real problem was the status of tribal land and their housing. The takeover of land and shelters given to tribespeople by private parties was the real problem.
- The State government had already taken steps to address these issues.
- The court, meanwhile, appointed lawyer P. Deepak as amicus curiae to assist the court in the case.
- The court on Tuesday initiated the suo motu proceedings on the basis of a letter written by Justice K. Surendra Mohan, a High Court Judge, seeking the intervention of the court.
- The letter said that Madhu was beaten to death by a mob at Agali, Attappady, allegedly for stealing a small quantity of rice.
- The judge pointed out that there were lots of schemes for the welfare of tribal people, besides various poverty alleviation programmes.
- If the victim was forced to steal rice because he had nothing to eat, it revealed that the schemes were not reaching the needy.
- This calls for a revamp of the implementation procedures to ensure that they reached the intended beneficiaries, the letter stated.
- The letter further said the fact that the tribal youth was attacked and lynched by a mob showed that they had scant respect for the law.
- The judge felt that one could not dispute the fact that there had been a serious lapse on the part of the law enforcement machinery.
- The letter, while seeking positive directions, to prevent the recurrence of such incidents said that an effective investigation and wholehearted prosecution of the offenders were the need of the hour.

## Union cabinet approves Fugitive Economic Offenders Bill

- In a bid to deter loan defaulters from fleeing the country, the Union Cabinet approved the introduction of the Fugitive Economic Offenders Bill, 2018, in Parliament which would allow the government to seize all domestic assets of a person deemed to be a fugitive economic offender.
- The Cabinet also approved the creation of a National Financial Reporting Authority (NFRA), the posts of a Chairperson, three full-time members, and one Secretary for the proposed authority.
- "In Budget 2017-18, it was announced that fugitive economic offenders would have their assets seized," Finance Minister Arun Jaitley pointed out at a press conference after the meeting.
- "The Cabinet has approved the draft Bill and it will be introduced in Parliament in the remaining portion of the Budget session," he said. "There will be a list of scheduled offences along with the Bill."
- "If the person commits an offence on the list, and a competent court has issued an arrest warrant, and the person leaves the country to avoid this, the court can deem him a fugitive economic offender."
- According to the Finance Minister, the government would be able to seize all their domestic assets, not just those that were the proceeds of the crime.



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- The Bill also has a provision for the seizure of their foreign assets, but this would require the cooperation of the relevant country, he said.
- "We will try to make sure this Bill is passed as expeditiously as possible because we cannot allow people to make a mockery of the law, that you first indulge in loot, and then refuse to submit to the jurisdiction of our legal system," Mr. Jaitley said.
- The government in a release said that if at any point of time in the course of the proceedings prior to the declaration of the person as a fugitive economic offender, he returns to India and submits to the appropriate court, proceedings under the proposed Act would cease by law.
- The proposed NFRA is to act as an independent regulator for the auditing profession, in line with one of the key changes that has been made in the Companies Act, 2013, Mr. Jaitley said.

## Plans to manage import of Exotic Fishes

- The increase in the import of ornamental fishes to the country, which is posing a threat to India's native fish populations.
- The National Biodiversity Authority (NBA) has urged the government to come up with quarantine facilities at major seaports and airports.
- "The government of India has only approved the import of 92 species of ornamental fish but the number of ornamental fish species being imported and in trade is somewhere between 200-300," Dr. B. Meenakumari, chairperson, NBA, told The Hindu .
- Dr. Meenakumari pointed out that the quarantine facility at the Chennai airport is mainly used for prawns meant for aquaculture and not for ornamental fish.
- She was in Kolkata to attend a workshop on the Economic and Ecological Impacts of Invasive Alien Species organised by the Indian Statistical Institute (ISI) and the Asia-Pacific Forest Invasive Species Network (APFISN) from February 21-23.
- Dr. Meenakumari said the huge market for Invasive Alien Species (IAS) is turning out to be major threat to India's aquatic biodiversity.
- She also stressed on the need for educating and creating awareness among Customs officials at airports and seaports.
- Most of the fish are imported from southeast Asian countries, she said, adding that, sometimes, the cost of only a pair of fish can go up to lakhs of rupees.
- S. Sandilyan, a Fellow on invasive alien species who is associated with the NBA, said that both Kolkata and Chennai have emerged as major hubs for the trade of ornamental fish in the country.
- That an assessment of the online market for ornamental fish and aquariums will establish the presence of over 1,000 exotic fish species being traded in India.



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- In a research paper titled 'Occurrence of ornamental fishes: A looming danger for inland fish diversity of India' published in the science journal Current Science, the researcher has pointed out that export of such species has increased at an average annual rate of 14%.
- The paper states that several studies have disclosed the occurrence of exotic ornamental fish in many inland aquatic systems, including biodiversity-sensitive areas such as the Western Ghats.
- The list will be made available on a public platform and will be communicated to different Ministries and stakeholders.
- The announcement by NBA assumes significance as scientists and experts in the country are still divided over the number of IAS and their economic and ecological impact.
- Biodiversity policy
- CEBPOL is a bilateral collaboration between the Indian and Norwegian governments, and focuses on biodiversity policies and laws.
- While the Zoological Survey of India (ZSI) and the Botanical Survey of India (BSI) have come up with some tentative lists for animal and plant IAS, there remains a debate on how to standardise the invasiveness of specific species.
- T.V. Sajeev, coordinator, APFISN, said that while the number of publications on IAS has increased over the past few years, there has been no coordinated effort for the management of IAS. He added that statisticians and biologists need to come together for the distribution mapping and the application of statistical approaches in the management of IAS.

## Sensitive situation along LAC

- There is a possibility of escalation of tensions along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) with China, said Minister of State for Defence Subhash Bhamre.
- "Today we face a difficult neighbourhood with myriad security challenges... On the Line of Actual Control (LAC), the situation is sensitive and incidents of patrolling, transgression and stand-offs have a potential for escalation. While confidence building measures (CBMs) are enhanced, we shall take all actions as deemed necessary to ensure the sanctity of the LAC," Dr. Bhamre said.
- He addressed the annual Army seminar jointly organised by the Army and the Centre for Land Warfare Studies.
- Elaborating on it, he said: "There are so many things going on along all the borders and one of these might trigger an escalation."
- Since the 73-day stand-off near the Doklam tri-junction, China has beefed up its presence closer to the LAC.
- While the situation remains peaceful, as summer sets in, there is possibility of increased transgressions along the LAC.



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- A large part of the defence budget might appear to be a burden on the exchequer but actually it went into nation building, Army chief Gen. Bipin Rawat said at the seminar.
- "There is always a concern amongst the citizenry and people in uniform on the defence budget... In the Army headquarters, we ordered a study on this and our preliminary reports suggest that anything between 35% and 37% of the annual budget contributes to nation building," he said.
- Referring to the United Nations (UN) peacekeeping missions, he said that while the services may be spending to maintain the troops deployed on such missions, the returns from such exercises go into the consolidated fund of India.
- Gen. Rawat said economic development and military modernisation should go hand in hand. "Economic rise will take place if the nation is secure," he added.

## India-Jordan-Defence Framework Agreement

- India and Jordan signed a framework agreement in defence cooperation paving the way for a joint strategy to counter common threats.
- The defence agreement, the first such understanding between the two sides, is the biggest takeaway of the visit by the Jordanian king Abdullah II, officials said.
- The purpose of the MoU is to promote cooperation between India and Jordan in the field of defence by defining the scope of such cooperation and making provisions for implementation of the cooperation in some of the recognised areas.
- They are training, defence industry, counter-terrorism, military studies, cyber security, military medical services, peace-keeping, etc.,
- The defence agreement is the result of broadening security and defence-related dialogue between the two sides since the king's last visit in 2006.
- India and Jordan held the first bilateral security dialogue in July 2016 and, according to officials, this exchange, especially in the field of cyber security, is likely to deepen in the coming years.
- The security cooperation is based on the "tremendous experience that Jordan has in the region [West Asia and North Africa]" said T.S. Tirumurti, Secretary in charge of Economic Relations in the MEA.
- Amman has provided critical support to India during the 1991 evacuation of citizens from Iraq and also during the latest crises in Iraq and Syria.
- King Abdullah II visited the Manesar-based headquarters of the National Security Guards (NSG), where he witnessed a demonstration of the group's skills in the field of counter-terrorism.
- "The Jordanian side has lot of experience in this matter and both sides are resolved to cooperate against terrorism," said Mr. Tirumurti.
- The official said that the second edition of the security dialogue is expected later this year.



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## Special Invitee Invitation rejected by Congress, boycotts Lokpal meeting

- Calling the “special invitee invitation” an effort to exclude the independent voice of the Opposition, leader of the Congress in the Lok Sabha Mallikarjun Kharge boycotted the meeting of the selection panel for the Lokpal.
- He shot off a letter to Prime Minister Narendra Modi, detailing the reasons for his absence.
- There was no reaction from the government to the letter. Government sources confirmed that the selection committee did meet.
- The Congress is upset that the names of short-listed candidates were not shared with it. Mr. Kharge had said that without this information, he could not add value to the discussions.
- Amending Act
- The Congress has been demanding that the government amend the Lokpal Act to state that in the absence of a recognised Leader of the Opposition, the leader of the single largest party in the Opposition will be included in the panel.
- To appoint the Lokpal. Mr Kharge also attached with the letter a proposed amendment to the Act to replace “leader of opposition” to “leader of single largest party in opposition”.
- Hitting out at the government, Mr Kharge in his letter to Prime Minister pointed out that notwithstanding the rhetoric to fight corruption, BJP government has chosen to not appoint a Lokpal for nearly four years.
- The Congress led UPA government had passed the Lokpal Act 2013 which came into force on January 16 2014.



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# INTERNATIONAL



## INTERNATIONAL Current Affairs

### India-China-SCO

- Foreign Secretary Vijay Gokhale has held across-the-board talks with top Chinese officials on advancing ties between India and China, which have encountered several points of friction.
- Mr. Gokhale's visit is also seen as part of preparations for talks between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and President Xi Jinping at the June summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) in the Chinese coastal city of Qingdao.
- The Foreign Secretary met Politburo member and State Councilor Yang Jiechi, China's top foreign policy official, as well as Foreign Minister Wang Yi and Vice-Foreign Minister Mr. Kong Xuanyou.
- Last year, Prime Minister Modi and President Xi met in Xiamen on the sidelines of the BRICS summit in September to revive ties that had been hit by the Doklam border crisis.
- As a follow-up to these talks, Mr. Yi and Mr. Yang visited New Delhi in December.
- During the consultations, the two sides reviewed recent developments in bilateral relations, including high-level exchanges, and discussed the agenda for bilateral engagement in the coming months.
- India's concerns regarding China's growing influence in the Indian Ocean have been rising, and have peaked after the pro-China President of Maldives Abdulla Yameen declared a state of Emergency on February 5 in the island nation.
- Without making any specific reference to the Maldives, the statement said the "two sides also exchanged views on regional and international issues of common interest".
- The statement noted the necessity of building on "convergences" between the two countries.



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- It stressed that Beijing and New Delhi should “address differences on the basis of mutual respect and sensitivity to each other’s concerns, interests and aspirations”.
- In the past, Indian officials have pointed to the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which passes through Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK) as an infringement of India’s sovereignty.
- China’s decision to come in the way of a UN ban on Masood Azhar, head of the Pakistan-based terror group Jaish-e-Mohammad (JEM), and Beijing’s objections to India’s entry into the Nuclear Suppliers Group emerged as additional points of abrasion in ties.

## Paris Accord is unfair: Trump

- U.S. President Donald Trump has again blamed India and China for his decision last year to withdraw from the historic Paris climate accord.
- He said the agreement was unfair as it would have made the U.S. pay for nations which benefited the most from the deal.
- Mr. Trump in June last year announced his decision to withdraw from the Paris deal, saying the accord would have cost America trillions of dollars, killed jobs, and hindered the oil, gas, coal and manufacturing industries.
- But he also, at the time, said he would be open to renegotiating the deal.
- Mr. Trump said, “You have a lot of oil and gas that we found – you know, technology has been amazing. And we found things that we never knew. But we have massive energy reserves.”
- “And basically, they were saying, ‘Don’t use it. You can’t use it’,” he added.
- “And China – their agreement didn’t kick in until 2030. Right? Our agreement kicks in immediately,” Mr. Trump said.
- Commenting on India and other countries, he said, Other countries, big countries – India and others – we had to pay, because they considered them a growing country.

## CPC lifts two term limit for President and Vice Pres.

- China cleared the decks for President Xi Jinping’s third consecutive term in office, ahead of a crucial session of parliament next month.
- China’s Xinhua news agency reported that Communist Party of China (CPC) proposed on Sunday that the President and the Vice-President will not be constitutionally restricted to two consecutive terms in office.
- This, in effect, means that Mr. Xi, who is serving his second consecutive five-year term, can continue beyond 2023.
- Analysts point out that the removal of a two-term restriction on the Vice-President is also significant.
- There is speculation that Wang Qishan, the country’s anti-corruption czar and Mr. Xi’s trusted ally, who officially retired in November, could be reappointed as Vice-President.



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- Alternatively, he could head a new National Supervisory Commission that will be empowered to throw its dragnet beyond the 86 million members of the CPC, including private business houses.
- Xinhua said the CPC had proposed that the expression that the President and the Vice-President “shall serve no more than two consecutive terms” be removed from the Constitution.
- Some observers, however, highlight that the CPC’s move is not confined to Mr. Xi’s term,
- The announcement came after the powerful 25-member Politburo met.
- The Central Committee of the CPC will meet to discuss the proposed changes. The flurry of political activity will culminate in the March 3 session of the National People’s Congress (NPC), China’s parliament.
- The NPC will give final shape to major decisions taken at the National Party Congress held in October 2017.
- Xinhua also reported that the party proposed that Mr. Xi’s political theory — Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era — be written into the Constitution.
- Besides, the formation of the National Supervisory Commission, as a constitutional entity, was planned.

## Humanitarian Pause: Putin

- Meanwhile, Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered a daily “humanitarian pause” to air strikes on Eastern Ghouta, Moscow’s Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu.
- “On the instructions of the Russian President, with the goal of avoiding civilian casualties in Eastern Ghouta, from February 27 – tomorrow – from 9.00 to 14.00 there will be a humanitarian pause,” he said.
- Further, fresh Syrian regime airstrikes on rebel-held Eastern Ghouta killed 10 civilians on Monday as Western powers piled pressure on Russia to make a UN truce deal come into force.
- The world body’s chief demanded the immediate implementation of a resolution calling for a 30-day truce, as another suspected chemical attack left a child dead in the enclave.
- “Eastern Ghouta cannot wait. It is high time to stop this hell on earth,” Antonio Guterres told the opening of the 37th session of the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva.
- Saturday’s UN Security Council resolution had raised hopes that a week-old assault by regime forces that has killed more than 500 civilians might end.
- But while the intensity of the bombardment eased a little over the weekend, warplanes have continued their raids.
- Among the latest victims were nine family members killed when their home in Douma collapsed on their heads.
- “Nine civilians from a same family were killed in regime air strikes in Douma, after midnight,” Rami Abdel Rahman, the head of the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, said.
- On February 18, the Syrian government turned up the heat on the territory.



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- More than 550 civilians, almost a quarter of them children, have since been killed and extensive destruction wrought on the enclave's towns.

## India-Vietnam-South China Sea

- Vietnam will take up South China Sea-related issues during the March 2-4 visit by President Tran Dai Quang.
- The Ambassador of Vietnam said that Hanoi wished to fully utilise the comprehensive strategic partnership with India and was likely to sign a civil nuclear agreement during the visit.
- "South China Sea issue will be discussed between leaders as the situation in the South China Sea is complicated. Some positive developments have taken place but the ground reality remains problematic," said Ambassador Ton Sinh Thanh.
- Beijing's claims over most of the South China Sea is a major issue between the two countries, and Hanoi has been one of the more vocal countries in the 10-member ASEAN grouping to find a solution to China's expansionist policy in the crucial water body.
- The Ambassador however assured that his country remained committed to maintaining cordial ties with Beijing.
- He clarified that Vietnam had not yet firmed up its position on the 'One Belt, One Road' initiative of China and said, "OBOR is a big project, we need to look into it whether it is good for the country or not, will then take a position on this."
- The visit, he said, would provide India and Vietnam an opportunity to build on the areas of convergence in the strategic domain.
- The envoy acknowledged India's support in capacity building by the Vietnamese naval forces and said that the Vietnamese army and the air force are in the process of considering some hardware purchase from India.
- The presidential visit will begin with a stopover at Bodhgaya where Mr. Tran will reach on March 2.
- The delegation will reach New Delhi later on the same day and both sides will hold official talks on March 3.

## Northern Sri Lanka Debt crisis

- Months after Sri Lanka's Central Bank vowed action on mounting household debt in the war-affected north, thousands gathered in Jaffna, protesting against the government's inaction.
- 'Our home and country are indebted, what is the solution?; 'Stop loans, give employment' and 'Strengthen people's organisations', read the banners held by participants, who marched from the iconic Veerasingham Hall.
- Participants included members and employees of cooperative societies across the Northern Province and thousands of women, who are among the worst-affected by the high-interest, unregulated loans.



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- After the civil war ended in 2009, a host of microfinance companies made credit easily available to those struggling to rebuild their lives.
- In its petition to the GA on Tuesday, the Jaffna District Co-operative Council sought a ban on unethical microfinance companies, an interest cap on “predatory loan schemes”, a two-year moratorium and the expansion of low-interest government credit schemes.
- Many families in Jaffna receive financial support from a member earning abroad, it is the economically most vulnerable who are aggressively targeted by the companies.
- The interest rate is 28% on paper, but the actual interest paid adds up to 70.
- With no option of repaying the high-interest loans, many women take multiple loans to survive.
- Amid growing calls for government intervention to address the problem, Sri Lanka’s Central Bank said in October last year that it was considering measures, including a moratorium and an interest rate cap.
- Asked about the progress made, the apex bank’s Governor Indrajit Coomaraswamy said an awareness campaign was being undertaken.
- A six-month moratorium came into effect a couple of months ago, but more people needed to be made aware of the option, he said.
- The central government has made a budgetary allocation of LKR 500 million for debt relief in 2018.

## Pakistan in Grey list of FATF

- After days of ambiguity, Pakistan on Wednesday confirmed that it will be on the ‘grey list’ of the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) in June but disputed claims of being put on a ‘blacklist’.
- “Pakistan will be assigned to the ‘grey list’ in June, once an action plan has been mutually negotiated. The statement that Pakistan will be transferred from the ‘grey’ to the ‘black’ list in June is therefore not true. The FATF website clearly demarcates the countries in the ‘blacklist’ as those who are non-cooperative,” said Mohammed Faisal, spokesman at the Foreign Ministry.
- He added that the FATF has highlighted certain deficiencies in the Anti-Money Laundering and Countering of Terrorist Financing framework of Pakistan.
- “The government of Pakistan, over the last few years, has taken a number of measures to address these issues, including through enactment of legislation, issuance of regulations... to the financial sector, establishment of the Financial Monitoring Unit and implementation of the UNSC 1267 sanctions on the entities of concern (Jamaat-ud-Dawa/Falah-e-Insaniat Foundation, both linked to Hafiz Saeed). We will take further actions for addressing any remaining deficiencies.”
- The Ministry also criticised the Indian Motion Pictures Producers’ Association’s decision to uphold its ban on Pakistani artists.
- “It is unfortunate art and cinema, which bring people together by acting as cultural bridges are being held hostage to hate and xenophobia...,” said Mr. Faisal.



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## Ready for talks with Taliban: Ghani

- Afghan President Ashraf Ghani on Wednesday unveiled a plan to open peace talks with the Taliban, including eventually recognising them as a political party, days after the militants called for direct negotiations with the U.S.
- The apparent openness by both sides to some form of negotiations came as civilian casualties have soared in recent months.
- With the Taliban increasingly targeting towns and cities in response to a new and more aggressive U.S. military policy ordered by President Donald Trump.
- Mr. Ghani disclosed the framework at the Kabul Process, a regional conference focussed on bringing peace to the country.
- He called for a truce, after which the Taliban could become a political party and contest elections.
- "A ceasefire should be held, the Taliban should be recognised as a political party and trust-building process should be initiated," said Mr. Ghani, in remarks similar to past offers.
- "Now the decision is in your hands, accept peace... and let's bring stability to this country."
- In return, Mr. Ghani said the militants should officially recognise the Afghan government and Constitution, a perennial sticking point in past attempts to open talks.
- There was no immediate response to Mr. Ghani's offer from the Taliban.
- However, the group's spokesman Zabiullah Mujahid maligned the Kabul Process, tweeting that the conference sought the Taliban's "surrender" at a time when it is "without a doubt a force that has defeated an international arrogant power like America with all its allies and tools at disposal".
- The Taliban said it was prepared to enter direct talks with the U.S. to find a "peaceful solution".
- That statement, however, made no mention of negotiating with the Afghan government.

## Tariffs on metal imports: US

- U.S. President Donald Trump said he will sign off "next week" on tariffs on cheap steel and aluminum imports, especially from China, which he said are harming U.S. producers.
- Mr. Trump made the announcement during a meeting at the White House with producers of the two metals, who would be among the principal beneficiaries of any new barriers to competing imports.
- He said a 25% tariff would be placed on steel products, and a 10% tariff would be imposed on aluminum.
- Mr. Trump lashed out at "unfair trade" practices followed by other countries.
- "Our Steel and Aluminum industries (and many others) have been decimated by decades of unfair trade and bad policy with countries from around the world," he tweeted.
- "We must not let our country, companies and workers be taken advantage of any longer. We want free, fair and SMART TRADE!"



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- And while Mr. Trump did not mention China in this latest tweet, it came on a day one of his top economic advisers, Gary Cohn, was due to meet with Chinese economic adviser Liu He at the White House.
- Any U.S. action is likely to be challenged by the exporting countries in the World Trade Organization.
- Meanwhile, industries in the U.S. have urged the administration to exercise care since high import tariffs would raise the cost of supplies.

## **We welcome Ghani's Peace offer: Pakistan**

- Pakistan has welcomed Afghan President Ashraf Ghani's offer that sought peace through dialogue and said that it would do its best to facilitate the realisation of the objective.
- Following Mr. Ghani's offer, Afghan Ambassador Omar Zakhilwal called on National Security Adviser Lt. Gen. Nasser Khan Janjua to discuss the ongoing efforts to bring about peace and stability in the region.
- The office of the NSA said after the meeting that Mr. Zakhilwal briefed Lt. Gen. Janjua on the international peace conference in Kabul.
- Mr. Zakhilwal reportedly said that Mr. Ghani had given a message of peace and reconciliation to Taliban, together with a message of closer engagement and cordial relations with Pakistan.
- He hoped that being the closest neighbour of Afghanistan, Pakistan would make its due contribution.
- Lt. Gen. Janjua told Mr. Zakhilwal that Islamabad wanted an early closure to the bloodshed in Afghanistan.
- "Peace in Afghanistan is essential for peace in Pakistan..." he said.
- Meanwhile, U.S. Ambassador John R. Bass hailed Mr. Ghani's "very courageous stand" and his "commitment to pursue a peaceful settlement through talks" after more than 16 years of conflict.



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# BUSINESS AND ECONOMY



## BUSINESS & ECONOMY Current Affairs

### e-way bill to resume from April 1

- A group of State finance ministers (GoM), led by Bihar Deputy Chief Minister Sushil Kumar Modi, mooted the implementation of the provision for electronic-waybill generation for inter-State movement of goods from April 1, under the Goods and Services Tax (GST) regime.
- The e-waybill is generated on the GST-Network – a common and shared information technology (IT) infrastructure between the Centre and States.
- Following a GoM meeting here on issues including IT-related challenges in the GST regime, Mr. Modi said the e-waybill requirement for inter-state movement of goods worth more than Rs. 50,000 would be introduced in phases after looking into the response to the same.
- The GoM's suggestion would be taken up by the GST Council at its meeting on March 10.
- The e-waybill provision – meant to eliminate tax evasion and increase revenues by about 20% – was introduced on February 1, but had to be put on hold following glitches in the system
- The GST Council should ensure that all the States introduced this mechanism from the same date and that the current practice, wherein different systems are followed in different States, was discontinued.

### Commercial coal mining to enhance energy security

- The success of commercial mining will hinge on the size of mines being offered, their reserve price, and the norms pertaining to the auction of mines.
- But the ensuing competition would enhance India's energy security, according to industry insiders.



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- Opening up commercial coal mining for Indian and foreign companies in the private sector, the Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs, on February 20, approved the methodology for auction of coal mines/blocks for sale of the commodity.
- A key feature of the proposal is allowing 100% FDI in commercial mining as well as coal export.
- “Coal production is likely to increase in future, transforming into a competitive scenario,” said Subhashri Chaudhuri, secretary general of the Coal Consumers Association of India.
- Mr. Bhattacharyya said proven mining experience and core competence should get more weightage in bidder evaluation rather than mere revenue maximisation.
- Revenue maximisation should not be the only focus of the auction methodology.
- Moreover, it was also important to offer larger coal blocks, say about 50 million tonnes of annual capacity, for about 25 to 30 years.
- Offering smaller mines will not attract either the right type of companies or adequate investment – it may rather defeat the very purpose of this reform if a small mine of 2 to 5 million tonne capacity is to be offered.
- On the competition likely to be faced by CIL, Mr. Bhattacharya, under whose charge CIL’s listing took place in 2010, CIL was unlikely to suffer beyond facing a competitive pressure as its prices had always been at a discount to import prices and it did not utilise its position to raise prices.

## Lending to Corporates should not freeze

- Lending to corporates should not be choked as a fallout of the Rs. 11,400-crore fraud at Punjab National Bank.
- This especially at a time when credit growth is about to recover and the economy is set to grow at a higher pace, India Inc has cautioned.
- The Indian industry had called for better control systems to check financial frauds and had also, earlier, suggested gradual reduction in government holding in public sector banks (PSBs).
- Government, regulators and industry must act fast to address systemic risks in the financial sector.
- The three key solutions for the banking sector are better management and operational efficiencies, use of technology such as blockchain and big data analytics, and lowering government shareholding in public sector banks.
- Assocham cautioned against allowing the alleged fraud in the PNB to halt the entire system of corporate lending as demoralisation would set in among the top functionaries and employees of government-owned banks.
- It was something the country could ill-afford at a time when credit growth was about to recover and the economy was set to grow at a higher pace, Assocham said.
- Meanwhile, lenders are now planning to increase insurance cover against delinquencies by their employees to protect bottom lines.



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- “Frauds of such magnitude and scale... have forced us to consider substantially much higher risk cover than the basic bankers indemnity policy,” a top public sector bank official said.
- PNB had bought a basic bankers indemnity policy covering employee fraud up to Rs. 2 crore, which would not cover even a fraction of the value of the recent fraud.

## Rural Electrification by Lithium ion batteries

- The shift towards lithium ion batteries from the older technology of lead acid batteries has allowed firms like Kaho India Private Limited to help the Centre achieve its rural electrification target even in areas beyond the reach of the grid.
- Kaho India Private Limited, started in 2012, seeks to provide last-mile energy access through compact solar modules to areas that are so far not connected to the grid.
- For instance, in Chhattisgarh, there are various tribal regions with no electricity and the grid cannot reach there maybe for the next 10 years because even roads cannot be built there due to the high intensity of LWE (left wing extremism) activities.
- The device, developed by the company, can power three lights, one fan, one phone charger and has a socket to power a DC-power television.
- The firm provides all the related appliances as well, except for the TV.
- The firm had initially developed a unit using lead acid battery but found that the short lifespan of these batteries rendered the entire product all but useless.
- Subsequently, the firm began looking at other battery options and settled on lithium ion batteries.
- This solved a lot of problems for the customer as well as for a lot of government schemes as well.
- In lead acid batteries, the typical calculation is that you have to put 8 VAh per peak watt of solar panel.
- In lithium ion, you need to do 4.8 VAh per peak watt. So, you have the size benefit.
- In a smaller package, we could put in more storage, so it also became cheaper for the government on a per-energy cost basis.
- However, the introduction of the more efficient battery technology was accompanied by a rise in the price of the product.
- This, though, was not much of a problem for the firm because it decided to sell its products to the government instead of to individual households.
- Now, it priced at Rs. 50,000 per unit. But the government is buying them now under the REC plan and the Saubhagya scheme.
- Another benefit of using lithium ion batteries was that they were much lighter than lead acid batteries, a key issue when delivering these units to remote locations.
- Also, the charging time had reduced by half with the introduction.



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## Coal Shortage in Power plants: Report

- The power sector seems to be facing coal shortage again as 46 coal-fired power plants reported stocks of less than a week, according to official data.
- According to the daily coal stock report of 113 power plants monitored by Central Electricity Authority (CEA), six plants have coal stocks for zero day and eight plants have stocks of just one day to generate electricity as on February 22, 2018.
- Industry sources said coal supplies have not improved since the monsoon season last year when some of the coal-fired power plants had faced acute shortage.
- Power, coal and railway ministries had taken a series of measures to improve coal supplies to power plants after power prices crossed Rs. 11 per unit at energy exchanges in September last.
- The CEA report stated that there are 12 non-pithead power plants facing supercritical coal stock situation, or in other words, have coal stocks for less than four days.
- Besides, there are six such plants that have coal stock of less than seven days.
- Of these 46 plants with stocks of less than a week, Badarpur, Bhatinda and Panki plants are shut down.
- The government, in January-end, had decided on various steps to boost coal supplies to power plants.

## Slow growth in Port traffic for next 5 years: Crisil

- The containerised cargo segment will cushion port traffic growth in the next five years as coal, the mainstay until last fiscal, has been logging a slower pace of growth, Crisil Research said in a report.
- "Port traffic is estimated to log a compound annual growth of 3-5% in the five years through fiscal 2022, a notch down from 4.4% in the last five years," it said.
- The moderation would be mainly due to coal. In the last five years, port traffic growth was led by a surge in coal imports, especially at non-major ports.
- In the next five years, coal traffic is expected to remain flattish as an increase in coastal traffic due to increased production is offset by a corresponding fall in imports, according to the research report.
- The report pegged container traffic growth, in contrast, at 6-8%, riding on improvement in export-import trade in sectors including chemicals and automotives and ancillaries.
- Incremental container traffic from upcoming terminals at the Jawaharlal Nehru Port Trust terminal, Vizhinjam, Ennore and Dhamra are expected to further augment growth.
- "Over the five years through fiscal 2022, as container traffic growth outpaces other segments, its share in total traffic handled at Indian ports is expected to increase to 19%, from 16% now," Prasad Koparkar, senior director, Crisil Research, said.
- "Coal, which accounts for 22% of total traffic, is expected to see a dip in share to about 19%," he said.



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## RBI on KYC norms for e-wallets

- The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) has said that customers can use their electronic wallets, which are not compliant with know your customer (KYC) guidelines.
- This was for payments to merchants after February 28, even as it clarified that reloading the wallet with more funds would need a fully KYC-compliant account.
- In October, RBI had directed all mobile-wallet operators, to make all accounts fully KYC-compliant by December 31, 2017.
- The deadline was later extended to February 28.
- "Sufficient time has already been given to meet the prescribed guidelines," RBI deputy governor B.P. Kanungo said while addressing the media.
- RBI has issued licences to 55 non-bank mobile wallets while another 50 banks have their own wallets.
- According to RBI, requirement of full KYC for PPIs is a step towards interoperability.
- The (PPI) guidelines are designed to strengthen safety and security of transactions and customer protection, a necessary step to pave the way for interoperability between PPIs, bank accounts and cards in a phased manner.
- The regulator is expected to issue guidelines on interoperability shortly.
- In the first phase, wallets will be made interoperable; in the second, wallets and bank accounts would be interoperable; in the final stage, wallets and cards will become interoperable.
- Since many wallet accounts are not fully KYC compliant, banks often do not allow users to transfer funds from their accounts to wallets.

## Current Audit system is working well: ICAI

- The Institute of Chartered Accountants of India (ICAI) has said that it supports efforts to strengthen its existing disciplinary and oversight mechanism through amendments to the CA Act.
- This comes in the backdrop of allegations about the role of Chartered Accountants (CAs) in the Punjab National Bank (PNB) scam and Finance Minister Arun Jaitley pointing fingers at auditors and regulators for failing to detect such frauds.
- However, ICAI has indirectly opposed the setting up of a super regulator National Financial Reporting Authority (NFRA) to regulate the CA profession.
- "ICAI supports every effort of strengthening the existing mechanism. But the model of oversight mechanism on the pattern of overseas regulations like Sarbanes Oxley Act 2002 (or SOX) has been found to be ineffective in so far in back-drop of banking sector mortgage scams in the U.S. [in] 2008-2009," the CA regulator said in a statement.
- The SOX is a U.S. federal legislation that had brought in new or expanded norms for American public accounting firms, public company boards as well as management.



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- The ICAI also said a Parliamentary Standing Committee had recommended that, Consistent with its position on strengthening the oversight of corporate audit, the committee desires that the existing mechanism in this regard under the CA Act should be streamlined and strengthened without needlessly adding to regulatory levels.
- This may be undertaken in consultations with the ICAI, which is the designated elected self regulatory body for professional audit in the country.
- The CA regulator said till the time disciplinary inquiry was concluded in the PNB matter and the role of all those who acted in fiduciary responsibility was established, it would not be prudent to draw any conclusion against the profession.
- The ICAI remained committed to ensure accelerated inquiry and conclusion of the disciplinary proceedings in the PNB matter, it said.
- An ICAI High Powered Group to look into the alleged PNB bank scam had held its first meeting on February 23 in Mumbai, the CA body said, adding that the GM (Western Zone), PNB, appeared and made his statement.
- On strengthening its disciplinary and oversight mechanism, the ICAI said it had already submitted its comments for the recommendation of the Central Government-appointed High Level Committee (HLC), which had also already drafted amendments to the CA Act.
- Even before formation of the HLC, ICAI constituted an internal group to review the disciplinary mechanism and submitted its suggestions to the Centre for suitable amendments in the CA Act.

## GST revenue low in January

- The Centre collected Rs. 86,318 crore in revenue from the Goods and Services Tax in January, according to official data released.
- "The last date for filing of GSTR 3B return for the month of January 2018 was February 20, 2018," the government said in a release.
- "The total revenue received under GST for January (received in January/February up to February 25) [is] Rs. 86,318 crore. About 1.03 crore taxpayers have been registered under GST so far till February 25, 2018."
- The government had collected Rs. 86,703 crore in December from GST.
- While the GST revenues and number of return filers are gradually increasing or are same as compared to the last month, the tax base and revenue numbers have certainly not reached expected levels.
- This could lead to more enquiries and scrutiny from the tax authorities.
- The government added that while 17.65 lakh dealers have so far been registered under the Composition Scheme, 1.23 lakh of these have opted out of the Scheme and have become regular taxpayers.
- Of the total collected, Rs. 14,233 crore came as Central GST, Rs. 19,961 crore as State GST, Rs. 43,794 crore as Integrated GST and Rs. 8,331 crore as compensation cess.



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## Korean companies should invest more: PM

- Assuring Korean firms that their investments in India would be protected, Prime Minister Narendra Modi called upon Korean companies to invest more in India.
- Speaking at the India Korea Business Summit, organised by the DIPP and CII, Mr. Modi said, "India offers a lot of potential for the Korean investors with its huge market and enabling policy environment."
- FDI inflows
- Korea ranks 16th in terms of FDI equity inflows to India with investments of \$2.26 billion between March 2000 and April 2017.
- Mr. Modi added that the bilateral trade between India and Korea crossed \$20 billion last year – for the first time in six years.
- More than 500 Korean companies, including Samsung, LG and Hyundai, have operations in India.
- Speaking at the same summit later in the day, Finance Minister Arun Jaitley said Indian economy had the potential to achieve a growth rate of more than 7-8%.
- Responding to a query, the Minister further said it was not possible to have one GST rate as the country had vast disparities.
- However, he assured investors that the government would undertake further reforms after improvement in tax compliance standards.
- The next stage of reforms would start once India became a significant tax compliant society, he said.
- "For example, we have two standard rates and in the long run I do see them merging into one. For that to happen, it will take some reasonable time that is when the compliance levels start moving up," the Minister said.

## Fiscal Deficit overshoot for Jan

- India's fiscal deficit touched Rs. 6.77 lakh crore at the end of January, 113.7% of the target for the entire fiscal, on account of higher expenditure.
- The fiscal deficit, a reflection of government borrowings to meet revenue-expenditure gap, was 113.7 % in the 10-month period of 2017-18 as compared to 105.7% in the year earlier period.
- Fiscal deficit had been pegged at Rs. 5.33 lakh crore or 3.5% of the GDP, for the current fiscal ending March 31.
- The figure was revised to Rs. 5.95 lakh crore in the Union Budget 2018-19.
- As per data released by the Controller General of Accounts (CGA), the revenue deficit during the April-January period of 2017-18, at Rs. 4.80 lakh crore works out to 109.2% of the revised budget estimate.
- It was 129.9% in the corresponding period of the last financial year. Net tax receipts in the first 10 months of 2017-18 fiscal were Rs. 9.7 lakh crore.



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- Total receipts from revenue and non-debt capital of the government during the period amount to Rs. 11.63 lakh crore or 71.7% of revised estimate.

## Manufacturing Growth Falls

- India's manufacturing sector activity fell to a four-month low in February, as factory output and new business orders rose at a slower pace, according to a monthly survey.
- The Nikkei India Manufacturing Purchasing Managers Index (PMI) fell to 52.1 in February from 52.4 in January, indicating a modest improvement in operating conditions.
- This is for the seventh consecutive month that the index remained above the 50-point-mark, that separates expansion from contraction.
- According to Japanese financial services major Nomura, India's manufacturing PMI remained in the expansion zone, but suggested some consolidation after the rapid ramp up of activity in December.
- In December 2017, the index had touched a 60-month high of 54.7.
- "It was promising to see that India's manufacturing sector remained in growth territory, as the impact of July's Goods and Services Tax continues to dissipate," said Aashna Dodhia, economist at IHS Markit and author of the report.
- In response to greater production requirements, firms raised their staffing levels during February. Although modest, the pace of job creation was slightly faster than January.
- On the prices front, the survey said that cost inflation accelerated to the sharpest since February 2017, adding to expectations that inflationary risks will continue over the coming months.
- IHS Markit upgraded its CPI forecast to 5.2% for financial year 2017-2018 amid a stronger oil price forecast and growing fiscal risks.
- The survey further noted that Indian manufacturers remained optimistic towards the 12-month outlook for output during February.

## Rupee weakens

- A marked increase in demand for dollars has been pushing the rupee lower in recent sessions.
- As banks exercise increased caution over issuing buyer's credit, letter of credit (LC) and similar instruments for trade finance in the wake of the fraud uncovered at Punjab National Bank (PNB).
- The rupee, which closed at 64.89 to a dollar, slid to as low as 65.31 intraday before state-run banks stepped in and sold some dollars helping the Indian currency pare its losses.
- The rupee closed at 65.17 to a dollar, down Rs. 0.28 when compared to the previous close.
- Curbing volatility
- The Reserve Bank of India maintains that it never targets a particular value for the rupee and only intervenes to curb volatility.
- Since the PNB scam broke on February 14, the rupee has depreciated 1.3% against the dollar.



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- It has weakened about 2% this year making it the worst performing currency in Asia in 2018 after the Philippine peso, which has depreciated about 4.2%.
- The country's second-largest lender, which had initially reported that it may suffered about Rs. 11,500 crore worth of fraudulent transactions in one of its branches in Mumbai, recently said that figure could increase by another Rs. 1,300 crore.
- The fraud related to the unauthorised issuance of letters of understanding (LoUs) for securing buyer's credit.
- Other factors that could impact the rupee's fortunes adversely include the recent trend of the dollar strengthening internationally.
- There has been an increase in dollar demand in the wake of the U.S. administration's recent measures to incentivise the nation's companies to repatriate earnings from overseas.
- This is also causing a dollar shortage in the offshore markets.
- Also, any continuation of a sell-off in domestic equity markets would hurt the Indian currency, dealers said.
- Till Tuesday, foreign institutional investors had pulled out almost \$900 million from equity markets since the scam came to light on February 14.
- On Wednesday, the BSE Sensex fell 162.35 points, or 0.47% , to close at 34,184.04.

## Clean and responsible Banking Initiative

- State-owned lenders have started rationalising the overseas operations by consolidating 35 operations and closing down non-viable branches as part of the clean and responsible banking initiative.
- As per the banking sector agenda approved at the PSB Manthan in November last year, public sector banks (PSBs) have to examine all 216 overseas operations.
- The rationalisation of overseas operations of banks is significant as jewellery designer Nirav Modi allegedly cheated Punjab National Bank (PNB) of Rs. 12,700 crore in connivance with PNB staff and officials of overseas branches of other State-owned banks.
- Presently, public sector banks have about 165 overseas branches, besides subsidiaries, joint ventures and representative offices.
- State Bank of India has the largest number of overseas branches (52), followed by Bank of Baroda (50) and Bank of India (29).
- The State-owned banks have largest number of branches in United Kingdom (32), followed by Hong Kong and UAE (13 each) and Singapore (12).
- Expressing the government's commitment to 'clean and responsible banking,' the tweet said the overseas operations of the State-owned banks will be rationalised.



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## No expenditure cut

- The government will not go for an expenditure cut in 2017-18 to meet fiscal deficit target of 3.5% of GDP even as it has breached the level of 113.7% of the target, Expenditure Secretary Ajay Narayan Jha said.
- "There is no expenditure cut. There has been a policy, there will not be any expenditure cut," Mr. Jha said.
- When asked how the government will meet the revised fiscal deficit target of 3.5%, he said indirect tax collections have already been factored into the revised target.
- The government has accounted for only 11 months of GST against 12 months of expenses as March GST numbers would come in April.
- Fiscal deficit has touched Rs. 6.77 lakh crore at the end of January 2018, 113.7% of the target for the year, on account of higher expenditure.
- The government had revised upwards the fiscal deficit at Rs. 5.95 lakh crore or 3.5% of GDP in the Union Budget 2018-19.
- Earlier, the fiscal deficit target was 3.2%. Mr. Jha said the economy is looking up as the key sectors are showing buoyancy and growth.
- He said buoyancy in revenue also comes in the last two months of financial year and the fiscal deficit number will remain well within the revised target.



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## SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY



### SCIENCE & TECH Current Affairs

#### New plant species found in West Bengal

- Scientists from the Botanical Survey of India have identified a new plant species from two protected National Parks in West Bengal.
- Named *Drypetes kalamii*, it is a small shrub found to be shorter version of its close relative *Drypetes ellisii*. This adds to the rich floral wealth of India.
- Standing just 1 metre tall, the newly described plant is unisexual in nature, which means they have separate male and female plants.
- During the survey and documentation of the flora of Buxa National Park, West Bengal (core area of Buxa Tiger Reserve), in 2011, came across these plants, but could not identify them.
- Another author of the paper had collected a new female plant with fruits from Jaldapara National Park, West Bengal.
- The fruiting specimen can be easily identified in *Drypetes*. We later found that both the plants belonged to the same species.
- Further consultations with plant biologists from India and abroad helped us confirm its new identity.
- The researchers compared the new plant with other *Drypetes* species and found differences in the leaf, flower and fruit structures. There are about 220 species of *Drypetes* identified across the globe of which 20 have been reported from India.
- The new species is a close relative of a medicinal plant known in Sanskrit as Putrajivak.
- NASA had recently named a new bacterium after Dr Kalam.



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- The new species is found in wet, shaded areas of subtropical moist semi-evergreen forests, at a height ranging 50-100 metres.
- With pale yellow flowers in clusters and bright orange to red fruits, the plant is exclusive to the two national parks.
- By following the IUCN (International Union for Conservation of Nature) rules, the scientists have provisionally assessed the plant to be "Critically Endangered".
- The report states forest fires and grazing as two plausible threats to the new species.

## Pattern of deforestation explained in Physics theory

- Predicting rising numbers is usually good news in ecology, but not if they refer to forest fragments.
- Current rates of deforestation could cause a 33-fold increase in forest fragments over the next 50 years, shows a study published in Nature.
- Deforestation, fuelled by factors including habitat conversion and timber production, causes fragmentation.
- As large forests are cut into pieces, biodiversity suffers and carbon is also lost.
- To study patterns of tropical forest fragmentation, scientists at the Helmholtz Centre for Environmental Research (Germany) used remotely-sensed images to map more than 130 million forest fragments across 427 million hectares in the Americas, Asia, Africa and Australia.
- They found that fragment sizes in three continents followed similar frequency distributions.
- The number of forest fragments smaller than 10,000 hectares, for instance, is similar in Central and South America (11.2%), Africa (9.9%) and Southeast Asia (9.2%).
- The theory (which has been used to explain phenomena including the trickling of water through soil and patterns of forest fires) states that in a certain phase of deforestation, the forest landscape exhibits structures that can be found repeatedly.
- The scientists found that forest fragmentation is currently close to a critical point beyond which fragment number will strongly increase.
- Using this to predict future patterns of forest fragmentation, the team found that any additional forest loss can decrease fragment size and cause a 33-fold increase in the number of forest fragments over 50 years.
- Though their models show that this could be partly mitigated by reforestation and forest protection, there will be repercussions for countries that fall in these zones, including India.
- More fragments mean more edges which are highly disturbance-prone and decrease habitat quality for wildlife.



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### 3D scar tissue model

- Researchers at the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) Delhi have for the first time developed a 3D scar-tissue model through tissue engineering.
- Drugs currently available to reduce scarring in the case of deep wounds that affect all the layers of the skin have limitations owing to poor understanding of scar tissue formation and the signalling pathways responsible for its development.
- This is particularly so as results of scar tissue models created in animals have limitations when extrapolated to humans.
- Also, the European Union directive to find alternatives to animals testing makes Prof. Ghosh's relatively simple in vitro scar-tissue model ideal for drug testing.
- The researchers first encapsulated fibroblasts from healthy human skin within the collagen gel.
- Three days after an optimised cocktail of three cytokines were added to the media, differentiation of dermal fibroblasts into myofibroblasts was triggered.
- Myofibroblasts are bigger in size than fibroblasts and have greater contractile power, something that is essential to close the wound.
- Scar-specific proteins are expressed by myofibroblasts.
- In addition to the differentiation of fibroblasts into myofibroblasts, the researchers witnessed other typical features that cause scar formation.
- For instance, during the wound-healing process, excessive fibrous extracellular matrix is produced.
- While there is excessive production of extracellular matrix proteins, the secretion of matrix metalloproteinase, whose role is to degrade certain proteins such as ECM, is reduced.
- As a result, the tightly regulated balance between synthesis and degradation of matrix components get disturbed, and the skin gets thicker and stiffer.
- There was also increased expression of alpha smooth muscle actin, a cytoskeleton protein, in the in vitro scar model.
- Creating scar tissue in the lab has great implications for the pharmaceutical industry.
- The cosmetic and pharmaceutical industries, which are developing anti-fibrosis or anti-scar medicines, need not have to test them on animals.
- They can use our tissue-engineered model instead.
- The team is now using selective peptide domains and a 3D bioprinting strategy to develop progressively more complex in vitro scar tissue, which would recapitulate more hallmark features that are critical for tissue fibrosis.



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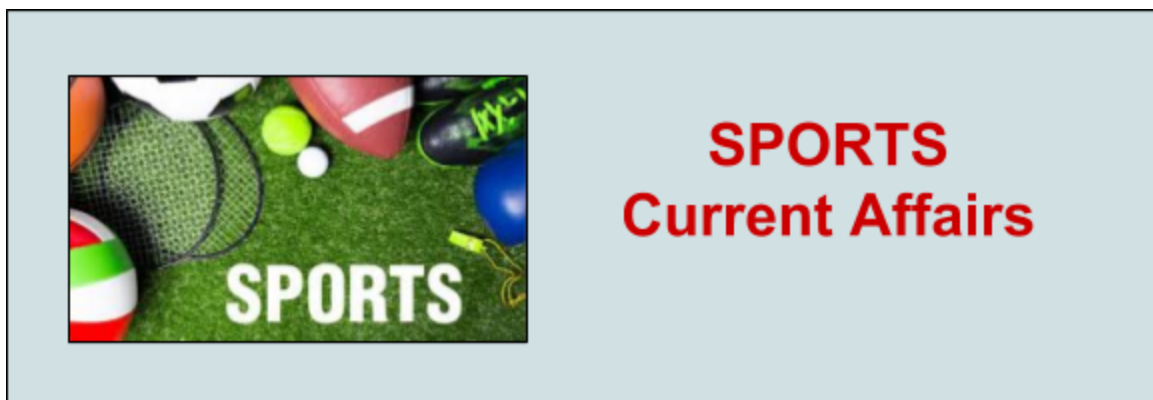
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# SPORTS



- Tennis legend Roger Federer became the most decorated winner in the history of Laureus World Sports Awards, with six statuettes, after he won the Sportsman and Comeback titles at the 18th edition of the prestigious awards ceremony.
- In the Sportsman of the Year category, Federer waved off tough competition from the likes of Rafael Nadal and Cristiano Ronaldo to bag the honours.
- “Everyone knows how highly I value my Laureus Awards, so to win another would have been wonderful, but to win two is a truly unique honour.
- “It was an unforgettable year for me, to come back after a very difficult 2016 and these Awards just make it even more memorable,” said Federer.
- While Federer bagged the title in the men’s category, Serena Williams won the Sportswoman of the Year Award following her Australian Open success, her 23rd Grand Slam title.
- Serena, who gave birth to her first child last year, is now the most decorated female Laureus Award winner with five statuettes.
- Spanish golfer Sergio Garcia received the Breakthrough of the Year award for winning the 2017 Masters, his second Laureus Award, 18 years after winning the Laureus Newcomer accolade at the 2000 Awards.
- Among other winners, Mercedes AMG Petronas beat the likes of Real Madrid and the Golden State Warriors to win the Team of the Year Award, after securing its fourth successive Constructors World Championship title.
- Brazilian football team Chapecoense, whose comeback from a devastating plane crash inspired the sporting world, was honoured with the Laureus Best Sporting Moment of the Year award.



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- Italian football legend Francesco Totti received the Laureus Academy Exceptional Achievement Award for his 22-year contribution to Roma.
- He also joined Wales manager Ryan Giggs as the newest members of the Laureus World Sports Academy.
- American Olympic legend and Laureus Academy member Edwin Moses received the Lifetime Achievement Award.



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## MCQ



1. Rushikulya Beach, famous for Olive Ridley turtles nesting is in?

- a) Andhra Pradesh
- b) Gujarat
- c) Odisha
- d) Kerala

**Answer: c**

2. Which of the following are not members of SCO?

- i) China
  - ii) Kazakhstan.
  - iii) Turkmenistan
  - iv) Mongolia
- a) Only i,ii
  - b) Only iv,iii
  - c) All of the above
  - d) Only iii,iv

**Answer: d**

3. The UNFCCC Climate Change Conference (COP23)'s roadmap for 'Talanoa Dialogue', was established at which city?

- a) Bonn, Germany



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- b) Berlin, Germany
- c) Paris, France
- d) Moscow, Russian

**Answer: a**

**4. Consider the following :**

- a. Chilka Lake
- b. Pulicat lake
- c. Wular Lake
- d. Koneru Lake
- e. Lonar Lake

**How many of them are Lagoons?**

- a) 1
- b) 2
- c) 3
- d) 5

**Answer: c**

**5. Which among the following is the First World Heritage City of India?**

- i. Hyderabad
- ii. Jaipur
- iii. Ahmedabad
- iv. Bengaluru

**Answer: c**

**6. Which of the following is the only UNESCO World Heritage Site, present in Bihar state of India?**

- i. Mahabodhi Vihar
- ii. Buddhist monastery in Nalanda
- iii. Ancient site of Vikramashila Monastery
- iv. Tomb of Sher Shah Suri

**Answer: a**

**7. The Election Commission of India consists of Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) and two election commissioners (EC).**

**With regard to these two officials, which of the following is/are correct?**



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- i) CEC and EC receive equal salary.
- ii) CEC and EC are provided with security of tenure.
- iii) In case of difference of opinion amongst them, the view of CEC prevails.

**Select the correct answer using the codes given below.**

- a) 1 only
- b) 1 and 2 only
- c) 1 and 3 only
- d) 2 and 3 only

**Answer: a**

**8. Which is largest among the following peninsular rivers?**

- a) Krishna
- b) Penna
- c) Mahanadi
- d) Godavari

**Answer: d**

**9. Which of the following is not a function / power of Reserve Bank of India?**

- a) To assume the responsibility of meeting directly or indirectly all reasonable demands for accommodation.
- b) To hold cash reserves of the commercial banks and make available financial accommodation to them
- c) To assume responsibility of all banking operations of the government
- d) To assume the responsibility of statistical analysis of data related to macro economy of India

**Answer: d**

**10. The Financial Action Task Force (FATF) is an initiative of:**

- a) SAARC
- b) IMF
- c) BRICS
- d) G7 countries

**Answer: d**

**11. Consider the following statements:**

- i)  $GNP = GDP + \text{Net factor income from abroad}$
- ii) Net National Product at factor cost is "National Income"



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iii) National Disposable Income=Net National product at market prices + other current transfers from the rest of the world.

**Which of the statements given above is/are correct?**

- a) i and ii only
- b) ii and iii only
- c) i, ii and iii.
- d) i and iii

**Answer: c**

**12. A person cannot be a member of both the parliament and the state legislature at the same time. If a person is so elected, then within how many days he has to resign his seat in state legislature so that his seat in parliament become vacant?**

- a) 30 days
- b) 14 days
- c) 60 days
- d) 28 days

**Answer: b**

**13. Consider the following 3 statements:**

- i) The judiciary is within the purview of Lokpal/Lokayukta in India
- ii) In New Zealand, the judiciary is NOT within the purview of the Parliamentary Commissioner for Investigation.
- iii) In Sweden, the judiciary is NOT within the purview of the Ombudsman system

**Which of the above statement/s is/are true?**

- a) Only i and iii
- b) Only ii and iii
- c) Only ii
- d) All are true

**Answer: c**

**14. With reference to deficit financing, monetized deficit is the part that is financed through?**

- a) borrowings from public sector scheduled commercial banks
- b) external commercial borrowings
- c) borrowings from RBI



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d) none of the above

**Answer: c**

**15. Which among the following statements is / are correct?**

- i) Tides are of great help in navigation and fishing
- ii) High tide enables big ships to enter or leave the harbour safely
- iii) Tide prevents siltation in the harbours
- iv) Kandla and Diamond Harbour are tidal ports
- v) The tidal nature of the mouth of the river Hooghly is of crucial importance to Kolkata as port

Choose the correct option from the codes given below:

- a) i, ii, iii & iv
- b) i, ii, iii, iv & v
- c) i, ii, iii & v
- d) i, ii & iv

**Answer: b**



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# IMPORTANT ARTICLES FROM VARIOUS NEWSPAPERS



(THE HINDU)

## Xi unlimited

- The Chinese Communist Party's proposal to abolish term limits on the presidency, and thereby allow Xi Jinping to stay on in power beyond 2023 when his second term ends, is not completely unexpected. When he was re-elected party chief and President for a second term in October, no one was projected as a potential successor. This was a break with tradition and triggered speculation about him remaining President beyond the second term. Mr. Xi is arguably the most powerful leader of China since Mao Zedong. At the 19th Party Congress in October, "Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era" was written into the party charter, setting him apart from his recent predecessors. He does not just control the main pillars of the Chinese state – the party, the government and the military. In 2016, the party accorded him special stature by making him the "Core Leader". Just as Deng Xiaoping oversaw China's economic rise, Mr. Xi has raised its profile in global geopolitics. He has pursued a more assertive foreign policy in China's neighbourhood and launched massive infrastructure programmes across the world as part of the Belt and Road Initiative. But despite the power amassed, long-term projects launched and his own apparent ambitions, the constitution was seen as a limit to his stint in power. With the latest proposal on removing the term limit, which is certain



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to be endorsed by parliament, Mr. Xi may find greater room for manoeuvre in speeding up the next generation of economic reforms.

- The timing of the announcement itself, however, has taken many by surprise. Mr. Xi was about to begin his second term as President next month, and so has five years to introduce the constitutional changes needed. But with a proposal moved to amend the constitution a week ahead of a People's Congress convention, Mr. Xi has made it clear he does not want to leave anything to chance while consolidating his position. At present there is no rival power centre within the Communist Party to challenge Mr. Xi. But the centralisation of so much power in one individual, which is the antithesis of China's professed commitment to 'collective leadership', may well impact the power dynamics, given the succession battles of the past. The party introduced the term limit in the post-Deng era principally to bring in order and stability at a time when China was becoming an economic powerhouse. Two of Mr. Xi's immediate predecessors stepped down after their second term, having groomed the next generation of leaders, including Mr. Xi. By breaking with this pattern, Mr. Xi risks taking China back to the days of personality cults, internal power struggles and possibly chaotic successions.

## Stemming the tide of agrarian distress

- Similar to the last two Budgets, this year's pro-agriculture intentions are palpable through increased outlays to the agricultural sector and initiation of various programmes. They seem impressive, but closer scrutiny shows that the measures may be of little help to stem the tide of agrarian distress. There are some real challenges confronting three laudable Budget announcements.
- The first is to raise the minimum support price (MSP) by at least 50% above the cost of production. The MSP will also be extended to all crops for which estimates on cost of cultivation and a remunerative price are to be ascertained. There are two pertinent issues here. One is to estimate the cost of production of commodities not covered under the scheme and their procurement procedures, if undertaken. Two, the production cost, as calculated by the Commission for Agricultural Costs and Prices, is based on three different methods, termed as A2, A2+FL, and C2. A2 covers all paid-out expenses, including in cash and in kind, namely, cost on account of seeds, chemicals, hired labour, irrigation, fertilizers and fuel. A2+FL covers actual paid cost and unpaid family labour. C2 includes all actual expenses in cash and kind incurred in production and rent paid for leased land, imputed value of family labour plus interest paid. In the last few years, the government has been giving MSP above 50% based on cost A2+FL, which is to be continued as per this Budget. But farmers, for many years, have been demanding that the raise in MSP be based on C2 instead. Also, little attention has been paid



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towards altering the ongoing 'high input cost and low output price' regime. While a workable formula for fixing MSP in consonance with the States will take time, the government must extend immediate help to farmers from rampant price volatility. The States can implement the 'price deficiency payment scheme' (difference between MSP and price received) as has been started in Haryana for some vegetables, and the Bhavantar Bhugtan Yojana in Madhya Pradesh for select oilseeds. These schemes can also encourage small holders, including tenants, who constitute at least 86% of farmers, to sell in the regulated markets.

- The second measure is to develop and upgrade the existing 22,000 rural haats into Gramin Agricultural Markets. A corpus of Rs. 2,000 crore has been allocated in the name of the Agri-Market Infrastructure Fund for developing and upgrading marketing infrastructure. Despite the promising appearance, the real challenges are to ascertain the priority of the respective States towards it and ways to accelerate its pace. The latter can be taken forward through public-private partnership, which has worked successfully in other sectors. Under market reforms, it will also be important to link production centres with marketing through agri-value chains, which would require farmers to aggregate, form self-help groups, or farmer producer organisations. The hard truth is that farmers, especially small landholders in less developed States, sell their produce mainly through village traders or government-run Primary Agricultural Credit Societies (for wheat and paddy at MSP) and often get exploited. It is a daunting task, particularly in the event of a crash in commodity prices, to have some mechanism in place to avert distress (as mentioned in the case of Haryana and Madhya Pradesh). A hike in MSP should be supplemented with irrigation, and reduction in fertilizer cost. Another interrelated initiative is the launching of 'Operation Green' with an outlay of Rs. 500 crore to address the challenge of price volatility of perishable commodities. This again makes it necessary for State governments to bring various programmes under one roof, perhaps within the Agricultural Produce and Livestock Market Committee 2017, to help farmers.
- The third important step is to increase institutional credit from Rs. 10 lakh crore in 2017-18 to Rs. 11 lakh crore in 2018-19. The share of agricultural credit in gross domestic product in agriculture and allied activities has increased from 10% in 1999-2000 to 41% in 2015-16. The actual flow has considerably exceeded the target. Therefore, targeting of the announced allocation to the poorer farmers and tenants in each State will go a long way in improving their purchasing power and augmenting investment, which is currently low.
- There are certain pressing issues not considered in this Budget that must be given closer attention. Close to 52% of net sown area (73.2 million hectares out of 141.4 million hectares) is still non irrigated and rainfed, in addition to the recurrence of floods and droughts due to climate change. Despite its presence in the Economic Survey 2017-18, the subject has not received due attention in this Budget. The plan is to take up 96 districts deprived of irrigation with an allocation of Rs. 2,600 crore under the



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Prime Minister Krishi Sinchayee Yojana – Har Khet ko Pani. The Centre will work with the State governments to enable farmers to install solar water pumps to irrigate fields. At the same time, the Minor Irrigation Census 2013-14, published in 2017, warns of a tremendous increase in deep tube wells to more than 2.6 million in 2013-14, from 1.45 million in 2006-07, and the resultant decline in the ground water table. It is ironic that the government aims to install more tube wells while being worried about depleting groundwater. A location-specific policy for irrigation with the identification of suitability of medium-major irrigation projects and/or minor or micro irrigation facilities is required to protect farmers from the adverse impacts of climate change. It must be supplemented with timely completion of pending canal irrigation projects, and strengthening of the National Agricultural Insurance Scheme by an increase in compensation and timely advice on weather. Technological interventions that update farmers about sowing and harvesting time and extension services can help prevent misfortunes.

- Another key component missing in the Budget is investment in agricultural research and development (Ag R&D). This is a serious concern in view of the low annual rate of growth in agriculture in the last four years. More drought and pest-resistant crops are needed, along with better irrigation technology. Farmers also require interventions in the seed sector to raise production and diversify to alternate crops to induce higher growth. The most disquieting aspect is that India spends almost Rs. 6,500 crore on Ag R&D, which is not even 0.4 % of GDP from agriculture and allied activities. Dividends from Ag R&D are much higher in the less developed eastern and rainfed States and hence receive adequate funds.
- Rather than enticing farmers with compensation and increased budgetary outlays, the government should assure doable action plans that quickly rescue them from price or crop failure. The long-term measures to increase their income and trigger agricultural growth, as reflected in the Budget, remain to accelerate investments in irrigation, infrastructure, improved extension services and institutions fully backed by a competitive marketing system.

## Directing reforms

- Adding to the growing body of judicially inspired electoral reforms, the Supreme Court has imposed an additional disclosure norm for candidates contesting elections. It has asked the Centre to amend the rules as well as the disclosure form filed by candidates along with their nomination papers, to include the sources of their income, and those of their spouses and dependants. The court has also asked for the establishment of a permanent mechanism to investigate any unexplained or disproportionate increase in the assets of legislators during their tenure. The verdict of the two-judge Bench on a petition from the NGO, Lok Prahari, is one more in a long line of significant verdicts aimed at preserving the purity of the electoral process. These include the direction to provide the 'NOTA' option in voting machines, and another striking down a clause that saved sitting legislators from immediate



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disqualification upon conviction. It has ruled that the act of voting is an expression of free speech, and that it is part of this fundamental right that voters are required to be informed of all relevant details about a contestant. This led to the rule that candidates should furnish details of any criminal antecedents, educational qualifications and assets. If disclosure of assets is mandatory, it is only logical that the sources of income are also revealed. And as it is often seen that there is a dramatic increase in the assets of candidates at every election over what was disclosed in previous affidavits, it stands to reason that any rise should be explained or probed.

- Few will dispute that lawmakers amassing wealth or gaining unusual access to public funds and loans are concerns that need to be addressed through new norms. To give teeth to its order, the court has made it clear that non-disclosure of assets and their sources would amount to a “corrupt practice” under Section 123 of the Representation of the People Act, 1951. Lest a question be raised whether the court’s order to amend the relevant rules amounted to legislation, the Bench has said it sees no “legal or normative impediment”, as the Centre is empowered by the Act to frame rules in consultation with the Election Commission. The idea of a permanent mechanism to collect data about the assets of legislators and periodically examine them is laudable, but it is not clear which authority will run it. The court envisions a body that would make recommendations for prosecution or disqualification based on its own findings. The Centre and the Election Commission will have to jointly address the issue. The larger message from the verdict is that a fully informed electorate and transparent candidature will be key components of future elections in India.

## Doctors for rural India

- Nearly 600 million people in India, mostly in the rural areas, have little or no access to health care. A widespread disregard for norms, a perpetual failure to reach targets, and an air of utter helplessness are what mark the state of rural health care today. One can add to this another fact: the country is short of nearly five lakh doctors.
- Among the range of measures that have been suggested in the past decade is a rather promising proposal which has been sidelined. If properly implemented, it may provide rural India with a lasting pool of primary care physicians.
- A few years ago, the Union Health Ministry drew flak when it put forth a proposal to train a new cadre of health professionals. Under this plan, these professionals, after undergoing a short term, 3-3.5 year course in modern medicine, were to serve the health needs of the rural population, with a focus on primary care.
- Such short-term courses aren’t new in the Indian healthcare scenario. In the 1940s, primary care physicians — who were trained under short-term courses, and broadly termed Licentiate Medical



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Practitioners (LMPs) – would deliver quality services in the rural sector until the Bhore Committee (1946) recommended abolishing them in the idea that India would produce enough MBBS doctors.

- The committee made certain laudable recommendations in connection with the public health system. Back then, however, nobody could have anticipated the country's miserable failure in achieving most of the targets prescribed by the committee, even years after Independence. While a profit-driven, private health-care sector continued to denude the public health system of its qualified physicians, its medical education system kept losing touch with the actual health needs of the country.
- Starting a short-term course in modern medicine can provide an opportunity to design a medical curriculum that is much more relevant to the nation's needs. Its entry requirements could be based less on sheer merit and more on an aptitude for medical service and preference should be given to applicants from within the community. Further, a provision for learning in the vernacular languages can be made.
- Short-term courses in modern medicine have been consistently equated with producing "cheaply made, poor quality doctors". However, one begs to differ with this. LMPs cannot be called quacks if they be adequately trained in their field (primary care) and have a well-defined role in health care. The present MBBS curriculum includes a good amount of superfluous detail, including subjects such as forensic medicine, that is of little relevance to primary care physicians. Here, we should also note that even though nurse practitioners and pharmacist medical practitioners may be capable of serving the same functions as LMPs, they cannot be expected to make up a lasting pool of dedicated grass-root level physicians.
- Another concern is that the rural population would be made to feel like second class citizens by appointing a lower tier doctor to treat them. This can be put to rest by not letting LMPs replace MBBS doctors but instead work in a subordinate capacity.
- A few changes in the public health system can be envisioned here: LMPs be employed in sub-centres where they perform both clinical and administrative functions at the sub-centre level. This would also allow easier access to primary and emergency care and keep the post of medical officer for MBBS doctors, thereby deterring any competition between the two cadres of physicians.
- Medical officers (MBBS) could be employed in primary health centres (PHC), and new recruits imparted mandatory further training of a sufficient duration in basic clinical specialties. Also, inpatient facilities at PHCs can be scaled up. PHCs should deal with cases referred to them by sub-centre LMPs and also supervise their work.
- This has many advantages. With LMPs working at the grass-root level, a single PHC would be able to handle a bigger population, allowing for more resources to be concentrated on individual PHCs for manpower and infrastructure development and also for increasing the remuneration of medical officers.



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- Ancillary responsibilities can be taken off an MBBS doctor and their skills put to better use. Quality emergency and inpatient attention can be made available at the PHC-level. Today, less than a handful of PHCs provide inpatient care of significance. Concerns about the clinical and administrative incompetence of fresh MBBS graduates appointed as bonded medical officers can be put to rest.
- LMPs could be allowed to take up a postgraduate course in primary care as an option to study further. Those with a postgraduate qualification could choose to move higher up in the public health system, establish their own practice, find positions in hospitals, or serve as faculty in medical colleges training LMPs.
- Therefore, reviving LMPs can help address the dearth of trained primary care physicians in rural India. The logistical entailments of implementing this idea would require separate deliberation.

### For India, it should be neighbourhood first

- As India's salience in global matters grows – amply demonstrated recently by the presence of 10 leaders from the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) at India's Republic Day celebrations, the visit of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to India, and Prime Minister Narendra Modi's latest forays to the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Oman and Palestine – its leaders also need to contemplate and reflect deeply on what is happening in India's immediate neighbourhood.
- Far more than East, South-east Asia, or West Asia, it is India's immediate neighbourhood that directly impacts it geopolitically, geo-strategically and geo economically. Whatever be the ambit of India's reach elsewhere, India's principal focus, hence, will need to be on this neighbourhood.
- India can afford to live with demands such as the one made at the recently concluded ASEAN-India Commemorative Summit, where it was urged to play a proactive role in the Asia-Pacific region, without needing to take hard decisions. It possibly also does not have to answer questions as to whether ASEAN nations fully back India's membership of the Quadrilateral (Australia, Japan, the United States and India), even as most of them back China's Belt and Road Initiative. India can even afford to skirt the issue as to whether ASEAN-India relations are all embracing in nature or limited only to specific aspects.
- In West Asia, India still possesses enough leeway to engage in skilful manoeuvre around contentious issues without having to take a stand. India could, thus, successfully handle an Israeli Prime Minister's visit to India just prior to Mr. Modi's visit to Palestine, and yet avoid a negative fallout. It could also separate the technological "blush" of Mr. Netanyahu's visit without having to take a clear stand on the issue of Jerusalem. Likewise, Mr. Modi, during his Palestine visit could conclude as many as six agreements and express the hope that Palestine would soon emerge as a sovereign independent country in a peaceful manner without having to specifically refer to a "united" and "viable" Palestine.
- With the UAE and Oman, things have been easier. With the former, trade and economic ties as also counter-terror aspects have been on a growth curve. With the latter, an established friend, the option of



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closer naval co-operation and of reaching an agreement to give the Indian Navy access to Duqm port did not prove difficult.

- It is in South Asia where troubles are mounting, where India cannot succeed without looking at some hard options. For instance, how to deal with a new government in Nepal (comprising the Left Alliance of the CPN-UML led by Oli and the CPN-Maoist Centre led by Prachanda) with few pretensions as to where its sympathies lie. India also needs to now contemplate the prospect of prolonged unrest and possibly violence, both communal and terror-related, in neighbouring Bangladesh, prior to scheduled elections in 2019. This follows the conviction by a special court in Dhaka of Bangladesh Nationalist Party leader and three-time Prime Minister Khaleda Zia on corruption charges. Dealing with both Nepal and Bangladesh will need more than fine gestures; they will need far more closer monitoring.
- Another and a more imminent challenge for India is to sort out the imbroglio in the Maldives which is threatening to spill out of control. No amount of dissimulation will help. India cannot afford not to be directly engaged in finding a proper solution.
- Relations between India and the Maldives have undergone significant changes since the days of former President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom. After the Maldivian Democratic Party, headed by former President Mohamed Nasheed, came to power, for the first time anti-Indian forces within the Maldives (including radical Islamist groups sponsored by Pakistan and Saudi Arabia) could muster some support. It was also Mr. Nasheed's initial overtures to China that set the stage for Maldivian-China relations. Under the current President, Abdulla Yameen Abdul Gayoom, anti-Indian tendencies have steadily increased and there has been a pronounced tilt in favour of China. The free trade agreement that the Maldives signed recently with China has been the proverbial thin end of the wedge, providing China with an excellent opportunity to enhance its influence and retain de facto possession of the Southern Atolls in the Maldivian archipelago.
- Straddling a strategic part of the Western Indian Ocean, the Maldives today occupies a crucial position along the main shipping lanes in the Indian Ocean. The Southern Maldives has long remained an object of interest to the major powers. With the U.S. taking a step back, China has begun to display a great deal of interest in the area; this coincides with its current outreach into the Indian Ocean Region as also its ongoing plans to take control of Gwadar port (Pakistan) and establish a naval base in Djibouti in the Horn of Africa.
- India cannot, hence, afford to remain idle and must come up with an answer soon enough that is consistent with its strategic interests. A muscular reaction would be ill-advised, despite the entreaties of Mr. Nasheed, as the international community is likely to react adversely to any military adventure. China is, meanwhile, playing its cards carefully, calling for "home-grown solutions" and "warning against any military intervention". The critical need is to find a solution early – one that takes into account India's geostrategic and geopolitical interests in the region. Else, it would have far-reaching consequences as far as India's quest for regional power status is concerned.



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- Two other issues, viz., Pakistan and Afghanistan, similarly demand our focussed attention, and that India acts with a sense of responsibility expected of a regional superpower.
- The virtual collapse of a Pakistan policy seems to affect Pakistan less and India more. The latter is facing a daily haemorrhaging of human lives due to cross border firing and terrorist violence from Pakistan. In spite of its internal political crisis, and U.S. President Donald Trump's fusillade threatening Pakistan with dire consequences if it failed to amend its ways, Pakistan shows no sign of altering its anti-India trajectory. Democratic India can hardly afford to remain as blasé and let things slide, without effectively trying to find ways and means to change a situation which is certainly not to our advantage.
- Equally vital for India is to try and find a way out of the Afghan morass. The daily massacre of innocents, men, women and children, civilian officials and military personnel, experts from several countries and diplomats, marks the start of the complete collapse of a system of governance.
- Despite periodic optimistic forecasts of the Taliban being in retreat, terrorists under check, and that the Afghan government is still in charge, Afghanistan's position today is the worst ever since the 1970s. This January, the capital city of Kabul witnessed one of the worst ever incidents of violence anywhere, in which over 100 civilians were killed following a series of terror strikes. This happened despite the presence of foreign troops, elements of the Afghan military and also of the Afghan police. Notwithstanding the omnipresent Pakistan hand in the violence in Afghanistan, this kind of "engineered chaos" over a prolonged period of time effectively demonstrates that the Afghan state has virtually disintegrated.
- The collapse of the Afghan state does have severe consequences for India and nations in the vicinity. As a regional power, India has significant stakes in Afghanistan. Apart from the human cost and the fact that New Delhi has spent over \$2 billion in providing humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan, India's true stake lies in sustaining the future of the Afghan state. Its "shrivelling" or "demise" and any premature end to the attempt to restore peace in Afghanistan will only revive memories of the worst days of the Afghan jihad in the 1980s and 1990s, and India has every reason to feel concerned about the fallout. Of no less consequence is the fact that if Afghanistan were to cease to exist, its civilisational links with India would also evaporate. For a variety of reasons, therefore, India cannot allow Afghanistan to collapse or cease to exist as a state in the modern sense. This is something that demands India's critical attention, and specially for a display of its leadership skills.
- For all these reasons, and apart from those currently at the helm of affairs in India, the leaderships of parties and States across the spectrum must try and achieve a unanimity of purpose in regard to our foreign policy priorities. Today, the focus needs to be on our immediate neighbourhood. The outcome of the Israel-Palestine conflict, the turmoil in the East and South China Seas, or other big-ticket issues across the world are important, but it is South Asia and the neighbourhood that demands our concentrated attention. If India is not seen to be actively involved in ensuring that the region is at peace



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and functions in conformity with its world view, any claims to leadership would amount to little more than treading water.

## E-way bills redux

- The group of ministers assessing technology issues related to the Goods and Services Tax regime has proposed rolling out on April 1 the e-way bill system to track inter-State movement of goods above the value of Rs. 50,000. A final decision on the launch of the system will now be taken by the GST Council at its next meeting. A plan to start it on February 1 had to be abandoned after the IT network to create the bills crashed in its first few hours after generating about five lakh bills. The government decided to defer its roll-out till the technical glitches, like those businesses faced while filing online returns on the GST Network initially after its July 1 roll-out last year, were removed. For intra-State goods movement, the government had said all States must launch their own e-way bill systems by June 1. Now the ministerial group headed by Bihar Finance Minister Sushil Modi has proposed that instead of bringing all States and Union Territories on board together, introducing intra-State e-way Bills in four or five at a time is better. For businesses with operations across the country, this proposal will pose a fresh compliance headache as some States may require e-way Bills for internal movement of goods while others will not. Industry already has several reservations about the e-way bill regime, including the norm that such bills are generated for all goods travelling 10 km from the point of origin.
- The government's haste is understandable, given its fiscal compulsions. After a monthly inflow of over Rs. 90,000 crore in the first three months of the tax regime, revenue collections dipped. From a peak of Rs. 92,283 crore in July 2017 – that the Centre reckoned was adequate to deal with its revenue targets and compensate States for revenue losses – GST collections between October and January averaged Rs. 84,294 crore per month. This may be partly because of the large-scale rationalisation of tax rates carried out recently, but registered taxpayers are also finding ways to avoid tax dues. Data for January bear this out – about 69% of the over one crore registered businesses filed returns, with wide variations across territories. In Punjab, 83% taxpayers filed returns, while industrially developed States, including Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu, didn't fare as well. This disparity must be factored in by the GST Council when it considers proposals for a staggered launch of the intra-State e-way bill system. Boosting compliance is critical for further rationalisation of multiple GST rates, the Finance Minister has said. To achieve that goal, it must be ensured that States and industry are comfortable with the e-way bill regime, and that the IT backbone doesn't crash this time.

## Reducing the carbon footprint

- With hot summers, warm winters, increasing diseases, famines and droughts, and violent acts of nature, we can see how climate change is affecting our daily lives. India, which aims to be a global



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superpower, seems to have approached the subject half-heartedly, hiding behind the veil of protecting its growing economy.

- To join other nations in the war on carbon, India needs to undertake a comprehensive approach, which can be done by establishing an emissions trading scheme (ETS).
- An ETS is a market-based mechanism where a cap is set on the amount of carbon dioxide or other greenhouse gases that can be emitted by covered entities. The emitters can either reduce their emissions to adhere to the cap or buy additional allowances from other entities to compensate for their deficiency. One allowance gives the right to the holder to emit one tonne of carbon. Imagine that 'X' emits 120 tonnes of carbon per annum. The ETS sets a cap of 100 tonnes of carbon per annum (equivalent to 100 allowances) on it. 'X' would have the option to either reduce its emissions to 100 tonnes of carbon or buy 20 allowances to cover the difference.
- A separate and independent regulatory authority must be set up to implement the ETS. This would ensure that the ETS is insulated from the political influence of climate sceptics. The authority must strive to educate emitters about ETS and inform them of cheap methods to reduce their carbon footprint. It must act as a 'technical consultant' when the emitters submit their 'compliance plans' (discussed below). It must also plan for contingencies and be ready to use the tools at hand to prevent market failure.
- Strategic decisions must be taken with respect to inclusion of industries under the ETS. Highly carbon-intensive industries (such as the coal sector) would have to be included under the ETS to maintain its effectiveness. However, with respect to the other industries, State governments must be empowered to add to the list of covered entities after giving due weight to factors such as area-specific emission profiles, financial position of the entities, impact on the economy, and administrative costs. For instance, in Delhi, the commercial sector emits 30% of the city's total carbon emissions, and in Ahmedabad the sector accounts for a mere 4% of total emissions. It would be reasonable to cover the commercial sector in Delhi under the ETS due to its large contribution to emissions, and due to the financial position of the corporations to employ carbon-saving technology. It would not make sense to cover the same sector in Ahmedabad, as the authority would have to bear unreasonable administrative costs to administer the ETS.
- The ETS must obligate the emitters to design a 'compliance plan', setting out its own medium and long-term goals, with an explanation of how it would achieve them. The big emitters must be required to adhere to their compliance plans, and sanctions must be imposed in case of any non-compliance. It is imperative to maintain the price of the allowances within a certain desirable range. If the price of the allowances is too high, it may result in increased non-compliance and force the emitters to reduce output, thereby hurting the economy.

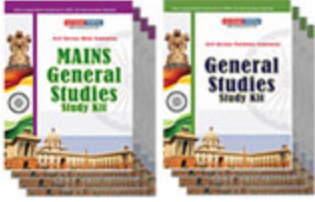


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- There are three suggested measures for controlling price volatility: safety valve trigger, price-based market stability reserve (MSR), and banking.
- A 'safety valve trigger' is a mechanism whereby, if prices touch a predetermined level, actions are initiated to drive them down. For instance, under the U.S. Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative, if the price of the allowances touches \$10 after 14 months from the beginning of the programme, the compliance period is extended by one year. This mechanism allows the emitters to average out their emissions. For instance, say emitter 'X' (with a cap of 100 tonnes of carbon per annum) emitted 110 tonnes of carbon in the first year (due to sudden increase in the demand in the economy) and 90 tonnes of carbon in the second year. If the safety valve is triggered in the first year, X's average annual emissions would be 100 tonnes, and X would not be required to buy any additional allowances.
- Similarly, in the MSR, a certain number of allowances are released in the market if the price of the allowance hits a predetermined level. Once the additional allowances are released in the carbon market, the supply would increase, leading to a reduction in the price of the allowances.
- Banking offers respite to the emitters on an individual basis. An emitter, in anticipation of high prices, would be allowed to 'bank' his unused allowances for the next compliance period. However, such banking must be restricted to consecutive compliance periods and to a certain percentage of total emissions.
- With this skeletal framework, India can be part of the global mission to curb climate change.

## Transition trouble

- The state of emergency reimposed after Hailemariam Desalegn's resignation as Prime Minister in mid-February marks a reversal in Addis Ababa. It was in August last year that the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front government had lifted an emergency clamped in 2016. In January, it released thousands of protesters, including top politicians and journalists. Most of those imprisoned had been accused of treason, terrorism and other criminal acts, charges that drew wide international condemnation. Together, these moves were regarded as an attempt at national reconciliation showing a willingness to usher in a more open and participatory political process after nearly three years of political unrest. But recent events suggest that the state is prepared to unleash further repression when it fails to quell protests. Underlying the discontent is the uneven nature of distribution of the benefits of economic growth in Ethiopia, one of the best-performing economies in Africa in recent years. Besides the simmering popular protests, instability also derives from a jostling within the EPRDF, which has ruled since 1991. There appears to be a pushback against the disproportionate dominance in the ruling coalition of ethnic Tigrayans, who account for a small fraction of the country's population. There is speculation, therefore, that bringing in a Prime Minister from the Oromo community, which makes up more than a third of Ethiopia's population, could calm sentiments in the streets.



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- There is some talk that the new spell of emergency may be aimed to ensure a smooth transition to the next Prime Minister. Besides keeping a check on anti-government mobilisation, a state of emergency empowers the authorities to ensure that public services are not disrupted and businesses don't shut down as a mark of protest. However, the ban on protests and curbs on media freedom will inhibit a frank debate between the government and the opposition. The Zanu-PF in Zimbabwe and the ANC in South Africa have in recent months demonstrated how entrenched political parties can regain public credibility that some of their self-seeking leaders have squandered away, by ensuring political succession in a relatively open and transparent manner. Although of an autocratic bent, the EPRDF should use this opportunity of charting a post-Desalegn future to restore stability after years of political turmoil. The Front, which enjoys absolute control in parliament, could make a modest beginning by respecting the rule of law and giving Ethiopia's diverse ethnic communities a sense of political representation. That may be the lone guarantee to sustain the impressive economic growth the country has registered in recent years. Ethiopia's new Prime Minister has his or her task cut out.

## The Adivasi in the mirror

- Sometimes a photo or a work of art can convey a historical condition better than a treatise. The 'Napalm Girl' photograph of the Vietnam War laid bare the horrors of American hegemony. The sculpture of Madhu points to the fundamental but hidden truth of Indian modernity and development: that it is built on an unprecedented dispossession of, and violence against, the nation's Adivasi communities.
- Sadly, this feature equally marks Kerala, the State with the highest human development indicators (with Adivasis making up 1.1% of the population), and 'backward' States like Odisha, Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand which have substantial tribal populations. Thus, Madhu is not, unfortunately, alone. The Madhus of the world suffer violent deaths not because we failed to modernise them, but because of the intrinsic connections between their terrible fate and well-being — in 70 years after Independence, post-colonial governments have virtually replicated colonial government policies towards the Adivasis.
- Various estimates put the number of development-induced internally displaced people in India over 50 years between 20 and 50 million. Of this, tribals, who are only 8.6% of the population, probably make up more than half the number. They are the sacrificial lambs that the dominant majority society offers at the altar of development. Disposessed, they become a part of the army of cheap, daily wage labour.
- In Kerala too, there has been a systematic expropriation of indigenous lands since the 1940s by settlers from the plains. This, is in a State which has implemented the most comprehensive land reforms in South Asia.
- Behind the (justifiably) much-lauded secular model of development in Kerala lies the hideous reality of racism/casteism in which an Adivasi or a Dalit becomes the other. Adivasis are a constant butt of jokes in commercial cultural productions like the 2002 low-brow Malayalam comedy film, Bamboo Boys.



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- Again, this is something that has national resonance. Adivasis are not full persons, but mere exotic props in mainstream films. The contact with mainstream society is absolutely damaging for the cultural self of the Adivasis. Their children are often traumatised because of persistent discrimination in schools.
- Is it surprising that Madhu lived as a recluse in a cave in the forests? Reports indicate that a few years ago he worked as job trainer in a tribal development centre until he was attacked, suffering a head injury in the process. Crimes against Scheduled Tribes in Kerala increased substantially between 2014 and 2016.
- There cannot be a mere developmental/economistic solution to the Adivasi 'problem'. But that has been the dominant approach to mitigating their condition. Nearly Rs. 5,000 crore has been allocated in the Kerala State Budgets alone (excluding Central government and other project funds) in the last 10 years but with hardly any demonstrable results.
- Adivasis cannot be equal citizens until they are considered holistically as a part of cultural and ecospheres with unique customs and practices, and not just as welfare recipients receiving doles. Further, there cannot be the liberation of the Adivasi until the fundamental material issue of land alienation is addressed. But that is precisely what is being hidden.
- Capitalism, especially its neoliberal versions now, will not allow the resolution of such a question, for accumulation of capital and land is built on such expropriation. And the state is an active accomplice in this predatory capitalism unleashing extraordinary levels of 'legal' violence against the Adivasis. If we hear regular stories of tribal resistances against corporations mining minerals in Odisha, Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand, it is because these States alone account for most of India's bauxite, coal, iron ore, and chromite reserves. Scholars Rajesh Bhattacharya, Snehashish Bhattacharya and Kaveri Gill have shown how these movements have forced the Indian state to finally make radical legislations which accept the cultural and forest rights of the Adivasis, and grant self-governance to them. But as they argue, these have either been poorly implemented or completely diluted in practice.

## Voting against alcohol

- On February 22, the Phoga Bharthari village panchayat in Churu district of Rajasthan, located 270 km north of Jaipur, voted overwhelmingly in favour of shutting Ganpati Wines, a licensed liquor shop, and its branches. In doing so, it became the State's fourth liquor-free (or technically, liquor shop-free) village panchayat.
- The shop will down its shutters on April 1. The villagers did this by invoking a 42-year-old law – the Rajasthan Excise (Closure of Country Liquor Shop by Local Option) Rules, 1975, published in the State Gazette on January 8, 1976 – which has a provision that makes such a move for closure possible. Simply put, the statutory rules lay down that if 51% of the registered voters in the village panchayat opt for the closure of a liquor shop, it has to shut down. In Phoga Bharthari, 97% voted for closure.



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- The Phoga Bharthari panchayat comprises a cluster of five villages, the other settlements being Phoga Jalpa Sarki, Phoga Asalwas, Phogat Hogan and Phoga Hemran. The village panchayat has a population of 9,000. The region was a part of the Bikaner princely state before Independence, and is reported to have been inhabited for the last 500 years.
- The licence for a liquor shop and its half-a-dozen outlets in the panchayat was issued 10 years ago and renewed annually, the latest one being in the name of Suresh Kumar, a businessman from Churu. The movement against alcoholism had been gaining ground even before the villagers discovered the legal route to get what they wanted. The women of the village had been periodically organising rallies, and held at least three massive demonstrations in front of the licensed shop. But not only did the owner refuse to budge, he sought protection from the panchayat itself, citing his right to use his licence.
- Two years ago, at a Republic Day function, Satyanarayan Jhajharia, a retired section officer in the Union Home Ministry who hails from Phoga Bharthari, told the villagers about the rules under the Excise Act that could be used to seek a referendum on the liquor shop. He urged the villagers to carry their struggle to its logical conclusion and ensure the shop's permanent closure.
- After the villagers filed an application to the Sub-Divisional Officer (SDO) in April 2016, the Excise Department officials raised objections at every stage of approval. The application was kept pending for several months, and the excise officials kept offering new explanations for the delay. "Either the summary of the plea was not in order or the voters' names and signatures were not given in the required pro forma or it was something else," Jhajharia said. He then filed applications under the Right to Information (RTI) Act to find out the reason for the delay, and even moved an appeal before the Appellate Authority to force the authorities to respond.
- Meanwhile, Pooja Chhabra, the national president of Sharab Bandi Andolan, visited the village several times to extend her support to the campaign and encourage the villagers to keep up the fight. Chhabra is the daughter-in-law of former Janata Dal MLA and social activist Gurcharan Chhabra, who died in Jaipur in November 2015 after a month-long hunger strike demanding prohibition in the State.
- Following the sustained pressure on the authorities, the District Collector announced that the referendum would take place on February 22. The voting took place under the watch of a presiding officer appointed by the Collector. A large number of villagers who had temporarily migrated for work to towns in Maharashtra and Telangana came back just to cast their vote. Around 20 residents, who were in government service elsewhere, took leave and returned to the village to take part in the voting. The enthusiastic "voters" proudly showed off their inked fingers after stamping the ballot papers. Chhabra, along with her team, was in Phoga Bharthari to provide moral support to the villagers.
- Of the 2,556 votes cast in the referendum, 2,480 (97%) favoured closure. Only 46 votes opposed the demand for the shop's closure; 30 were held invalid. Of the village's registered electorate of 4,071 (62.7%) exercised their franchise.



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- The panchayat referendum has become the new mantra of sorts in the desert State, as a hitherto dormant provision in the excise law is being used in village after village keen to declare itself 'liquor-free'. The campaign against alcohol through the legal route has triggered a quiet revolution, enabling women, social activists, and panchayat bodies to have liquor vends shut down.
- Since 2016, four villages in three districts in the State have voted in favour of closing liquor shops licensed by the Excise Department. Their referendums had been organised under the Rajasthan Excise Act, 1950, through a provision introduced when new rules were framed in 1975. Ironically, the provision had remained buried in the rule books for 40 years despite its immense potential to bring about rural transformation.
- The awareness about the rules began to spread in 2014, when they were extended to urban local bodies. Under the Closure of Liquor Shop Rules, 1975, an application to the SDO of the area is submitted with signatures or thumb impressions of 20% of the registered voters. The SDO conducts an inquiry to find out whether the applicants have actually signed, and then forwards the petition to the Excise Commissioner.
- The Excise Commissioner asks the District Collector to ascertain, through a poll, the public opinion in the panchayat on the question of closure of the liquor shop. The Collector issues a public notice and gives a date for the referendum, which is held after at least 15 days. A presiding officer is appointed to conduct the poll. If 51% of the electorate vote in favour of closure, the liquor vend is closed from the commencement of the next financial year. The outcome of the referendum then becomes the basis for a notification ordering the closing of the liquor vend from the following financial year.
- As per the law, Ganpati Wines and its outlets will be permanently closed and the excise licence withdrawn from the next financial year, beginning April 1. The village eagerly awaits the closure of the shop and kiosks, while the womenfolk in particular expect that it would restore peace in countless families and curb domestic violence.
- While men like Shankar Lal, 50, and Bhagwan Ram, 43, claimed that the shop's closure would automatically help the villagers shun the drinking habit, most women said that they need to be vigilant to ensure that the men do not buy alcohol from neighbouring towns such as Sardarshahar and Taranagar.
- Women at a work site of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) on the outskirts of the village panchayat narrated what they had to endure as a result of their husbands' addiction to liquor. Kesar (40) said that two of her four children had to leave school because the household income was being frittered away on alcohol. "We have no money to spend on children's education. If I don't work here, we cannot even have two square meals a day. My husband wastes the money he earns on liquor," she said.



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- Pointing to the bruises on her arms and stomach, Santosh said that no one in her family could stop her inebriated husband once he started beating her. "I spend some hours at the work site just to escape my husband's blows."
- Bhanwari Devi, 70, is forced to work as a labourer because four of her five sons are addicted to alcohol and do not earn anything. "Why would I work here if my sons took care of me? My family has been ruined by liquor. We have lost all our savings and there is no money now. Only my youngest son and I manage to earn something," she said.
- In Rojda village panchayat, in Amber tehsil of Jaipur district, the shutting of the liquor shop following a referendum held on March 19, 2017, the villagers said, has put an end to several problems, such as girls being leered at, drunken men mistreating women at home, and the general nuisance created on the streets by inebriated villagers.
- The shop, which used to be on the main road, was permanently shut down on April 1, 2017. Interestingly, the licensee was a village panchayat member, Bhanwar Singh. A farmer who also rears cattle, he now uses the erstwhile liquor shop to store fodder.
- Sarpanch Jairam Kumawat said that women and children were the worst victims of liquor sale in the cluster of Rojda, Sindolai, Harchandpura, Jaitpura and Sardarpura villages, all of which fall under the Rojda panchayat. "Even the children who were sent to fetch liquor from shops became addicts," he said.
- The turn of events in Rojda, which was the second village in the State to make use of the provision for a referendum, was unique in many respects. The villagers formed a Sangharsh Samiti (action committee) which led an anti-liquor agitation for 363 days through demonstrations and dharnas. After a resolution was passed in the village panchayat, an application under the 1975 Rules was submitted to the government in March 2016 and followed up at every stage.
- Despite sustained efforts by the Sarpanch and the villagers, the State government did not take a decision on holding a referendum in Rojda. The Sangharsh Samiti then filed a public interest litigation in the Rajasthan High Court and obtained orders for a referendum. Only then did the District Collector give a voting date, in compliance with the court's directive.
- Residents of the five villages voted in favour of closing the liquor shop and its outlets. Of the 2,581 votes polled, 2,270 (nearly 88%) rejected the main liquor shop and its four branches that had been operating in the area for some time. Only 170 votes were in favour of the shop, while 141 were held invalid.
- Welcoming the outcome of the referendum, Gandhian leader and Nashamukt Bharat Andolan's State convener Sawai Singh had said that the villagers had set an example for others. Singh, who later travelled to the villages in Bhim tehsil of Rajsamand district to support their proposals for holding a referendum, said it was strange that a State government unable to supply clean drinking water to the villages was allowing liquor shops to thrive.



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- The support for the anti-liquor agitation came from across the political spectrum. Bharatiya Janata Yuva Morcha leader Raju Lal Prajapati worked hard to mobilise youths, while members of the Congress party led by the Sarpanch and a 62-year-old farmer, Birdha Ram, generated awareness among farmers and traders in the Kumawat and Jat-dominated panchayat that has a population of 13,000. Rojda has proudly installed boards on its borders declaring itself a liquor-free village.
- Rajsamand district Kachabali village panchayat was the first in the State to shut down a liquor shop by voting against it. Over 67% of the villagers had voted against the liquor shop in the referendum held on March 29, 2016. Another village panchayat, Mandawar, in the same district held the liquor vend to be an illegitimate entity in the referendum held on January 20 this year, with 59% of the voters giving their verdict against it. The village will get rid of the liquor shop on April 1.
- Taking their cue from the village panchayats where liquor shops have been declared illegal, sarpanches, political leaders, and social activists of a large number of villages in the State have launched anti-liquor campaigns and are approaching the government authorities with requests for holding a referendum. However, the signatures of the applicants could not be verified in the cases of at least two village panchayats, Thaneta and Thikarwas, while in another village panchayat, Barjaal, the proposal was voted down in the referendum by a margin of 130 votes in August, 2017.
- Persistent protests by villagers have forced the State government to make changes in the annual liquor policy, as a result of which the number of liquor shops in the rural areas has come down. But a Statewide prohibition is nowhere in sight in Rajasthan. Licensing, processing, and sale of liquor are under the State government's control, while the Panchayati Raj institutions function under the government's guidance.
- Immediately after coming to power in December 2013, the Vasundhara Raje government had increased licence fees for liquor shops and introduced tougher liquor-control regulations in its excise policy for 2014-15. Contrary to speculation that it would relax the number of hours that liquor shops could stay open, the government decided to stick to the 10-hour duration announced by the previous Congress regime, mandating the closure of liquor shops by 8pm.
- Another significant step taken in Rajasthan is the closure of Ahaatas or in-house drinking enclosures in domestic liquor shops. The State government has amended the excise rules and discontinued the practice of setting up Ahaatas.
- As in several other States, excise from liquor sales is a big source of revenue in Rajasthan, which probably explains why the authorities are reluctant to hold the panchayat referendums despite strong demands. The State earned Rs. 7,053.68 crore in 2016-17 from 7,640 liquor shops, which makes excise revenue from liquor the second biggest source of funds after value-added tax, which has been replaced now with the Goods and Services Tax. In the current financial year, the State had earned excise revenue of Rs. 4,537.26 crore till December. The growth in revenue collection from liquor during the last three years was 5.08% in 2016-17, 20.18% in 2015-16, and 12.12% in 2014-15.



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## INDIAN EXPRESS

### Forest rights and wrongs

- Delhi-based think-tank TERI cautioned that the wrong recognition of rights under the Scheduled Tribe and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights Act, 2006 (FRA) would leave forest-dependent people vulnerable to adverse impacts of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. Indeed, the wrong recognition of individual forest rights (IFR) under the FRA has made a large chunk of the country's tribal population participants in a climate change disaster. Forests conserve and provide water for humans, cattle, agriculture and industry. The loss of forest cover to encroachment is also a lost opportunity for carbon sequestration.
- TERI's report provided satellite images of land patches where forest cover existed before 2005 but was flattened later – the report covered claims made up to 2011 on 14,668 hectares (ha). The analysis was based on a scrutiny of 66,300 FRA rights on 10,7897 ha spread across 19 Maharashtra districts.
- The report is in the public domain now. It shows that till 2012, Maharashtra has emitted 5,70881.6 tonnes of GHG due to deforestation as a result of recognition of rights under the FRA. An opportunity for carbon sequestration has been lost in 14,668.96 ha of forests. Can we afford this in times of the climate change crisis?
- An article in this paper, ('A path through the forest', IE, March 19) creates the wrong impression that forest departments (FDs) have conspired to reject claims of forest dwellers. Most such claims have been rejected by committees that comprise villagers and revenue/tribal department officers – not the FD. The department has no say in the implementation of the FRA – the nodal ministry is the Ministry of Tribal Affairs (MoTA).
- A large number of encroachments happened after December 13, 2005 –the cut-off date for filing claims under FDA. They continue even now. It is, therefore, not surprising that claims have been rejected by the various committees constituted under the FRA. Such rejection has happened despite several advisories issued by the MoTA from 2006 onwards asking for effective and lenient (pro-tribal) implementation of the FRA. However, three-tier scrutiny committees at the state-level – gram sabha (GSLC), sub-divisional level (SDLC) and district level committee (DLC) – continue to reconsider the rejected cases despite the lack of any credible evidence from the claimant to fulfill the pre-2005 criterion.
- The TERI report reveals an increasing tendency at the village-level to claim as much forestland as possible. The maximum limit of the forest area to be recognised as IFR is 4 ha. The report identifies 1,466 cases where the area recognised was more than this limit. The SDLCs and DLCs failed to scrutinise ineligible cases despite the availability of a system created, and made available, by the Tribal Research and Training Institute, Pune.



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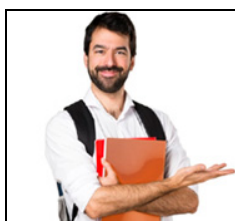


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- The situation is no different in other states. According to a Gujarat government document, the Bhaskaracharya Institute for Space Application and Geo-Informatics in Gandhinagar, came out with data based on high resolution time series satellite imagery (which provides accurate images of forestland on December 13, 2005 – the cut-off date – and subsequently opened up/occupied to claim forest rights) in 2012 that revealed that 80 percent of IFR claims in the state were bogus. Strangely, while stressing on the use of technological evidence such as geographical information system and satellite imagery, MoTA, in a letter dated July 27, 2015, to the chief secretaries of all states, said that such evidence should not be used to replace other evidence. Even authentic time series satellite imagery of forestlands in the possession of the FD was rejected.
- The FRA 2006 was ostensibly designed to undo “historical injustice” by offering a one-time settlement of individual and community claims over forest land. But 11 years later, forests and wildlife sanctuaries face severe encroachment threats. The FRA is not an open-ended act. But since there is no cut off date for the receipt of new claims and gram sabhas are empowered to extend the 90-day window for such pleas, this process has become a never ending one. The result: Those indulging in fresh encroachments can get away because as per the Act, no action can be taken against them while their claims are being assessed. Encroachers are not being evicted even after their claims have been rejected. On March 7, the Supreme Court passed an interim order asking the states to file an affidavit on the action taken on rejected claims.
- The Forest Survey of India’s (FSI) State of the Forest Report has documented that 67,900 ha of forest cover has been lost in 188 tribal districts between 2009 and 2011, mainly due to encroachments. As per the MoTA website, till November 30, 2017, 17,60,869 IFR claims were granted covering 41,22,590 acres (16,68,352 ha) of forestland – equivalent to several times the area of the Tadoba National Park in Maharashtra. If this rate of forest destruction continues, we can safely say that there will be no forests left in India after 20 years.
- IFR claims are being made and approved without the wildlife claims being decided – in contravention of the FRA .In fact, IFRs have been granted even in the core of Melghat Tiger Reserve in Maharashtra.
- Statistics on the MoTA website show that forest dwellers are more interested in claiming IFR than CFR. If the entire community gets the rights over forest lands around the village, where is the need to grant any IFR? Even granting a single IFR claim reduces the share of every family in a village. IFR ultimately reduces the interests of villagers in forest conservation.
- Is there any alternative? No new claims should be entertained. Gram Sabhas should be told to end the practice of indefinitely extending the 90 day window. CFRs should be settled before settling IFRs.



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- Thousands of farmers are committing suicide every year because they cannot make ends meet on agricultural land that is irrigated and despite the fact that they have access to fertilisers and markets. How does the government expect tribals and other forest dwellers to survive on forestlands that are non-fertile, un-irrigated and subject to animal depredation and the vagaries of the monsoons?
- The FRA was intended only for tribal communities, but the rights provided in the act were later extended to all forest “dwellers”. There are about four non-tribals for every tribal. This means that IFRs have trumped CFRs. Once individual claims are settled, it becomes difficult to settle community rights since these overlap lands that have already been allotted to individual encroachers.
- The TERI report recommended that the Maharashtra government write to the MoTA to revisit the process for the recognition of FRA in 1,4668 hectares. The report had recommended that mitigation activities be implemented to combat the GHG emission due to the recognition of FRA, 2006. There has been no progress in this respect.

### One misstep too many

- Mark Zuckerberg must find a “Goldilocks zone” where the privacy protections are calibrated by the state of digital maturity and levels of digital trust – and are “just right.” “If you had asked me, when I got started with [Facebook](#), if one of the central things I’d need to work on now is preventing governments from interfering in each other’s elections, there’s no way I thought that’s what I’d be doing if we talked in 2004 in my dorm room.”
- His sentence construction may be unwieldy, but Facebook’s founder and CEO, Mark Zuckerberg, has been doing a lot of – belated – apologising for the latest instance of an egg on his face. Data on 50 million users had found their way from Facebook to a shadowy research outfit, Global Science Research, and then on to Cambridge Analytica, a data-mining and political consulting firm launched by Steve Bannon, the former White House advisor. Cambridge Analytica is a player of some consequence; it claims credit for tilting the field in favour of the winners in a wide swath of elections – from Donald Trump in the US in 2016 to [Nitish Kumar](#) in his landslide win in Bihar over Lalu Prasad Yadav back in 2010.
- Zuckerberg has confidently promised to fix Facebook, but it will be far from easy. The ultimate social network is a victim of its own success and eye-watering revenues. When Facebook’s 2 billion users around the planet login every month and share or swipe past some slice of the human condition as offered up by friends, family and others, the users and their contexts are bound to vary widely. To get a sense of the spread of contexts that Facebook must straddle, consider the two most important markets for the company: India, which has the largest number of Facebook users and is among its fastest-growing markets; the home market of the US. Now, add Brazil and Indonesia as the next two markets behind these two dominant ones. To manage a social network spanning this much disparity of



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socio-political contexts and levels of digital trust would call for Zuckerberg to re-enroll at Harvard and get a degree in what I might call “digital anthropology”.

- Unfortunately, the education of Mark Zuckerberg – who famously dropped out of Harvard to give the world Facebook – is happening in real time. The data on users is valuable to those who wish to tailor messages for advertising, for political messaging or propaganda. It is tempting to keep the engine that delivered \$40 billion in revenue last year humming – keep the eyeballs coming, keep the app developers and partners motivated and keep analysing the data to generate more advertising and affiliated revenue. However, as the Cambridge Analytica breach of trust, coming on the heels of Russian interference and “fake news” reveal, it is easy for the temptation to get out of hand. Where should Facebook draw the line? Which market norms should it use to decide on how much data privacy rules to maintain? How does it restrain its harvesting of user data to put an end to this extended backlash, without sacrificing its revenue model? These questions may not be that easy to answer. By applying the same standards across all markets its revenue engine would stall. Privacy expectations, reliance on news delivered by social media and levels of vulnerability are different across Facebook’s important markets. Let’s consider each in turn.
- To get a sense of these differences, consider the reality that levels of digital trust vary around the world, particularly as one looks across Facebook’s top 10 markets. In a recent survey by the Pew Research Center, only 11 percent of Americans said they were “very or somewhat confident” that social media or digital video sites were capable of keeping their data secure and private. The US is one of the countries that we identified in our Digital Planet research at The Fletcher School as having a “digital trust deficit”, where users are less trusting even while the digital environment is relatively trustworthy. We also found that for the Asian countries in Facebook’s global top 10, India, Indonesia, Philippines, Vietnam, Thailand, along with Turkey, have a “digital trust surplus” – users are more trusting even while their digital environments are relatively less trustworthy. Users in these latter countries will be more forgiving.
- Before the Cambridge Analytica crisis erupted, calls had already gone out for Facebook to take responsibility for the credibility of news shared on its platform. Here, again, is a dilemma. How far should Facebook go to certify or gauge credentials? A uniform standard may be hard for Facebook to stomach, since the way in which people get their news varies widely across demographic strata and across geographies. Data from the Pew Spring 2017 Global Attitudes Survey suggests that in Facebook’s top 10 markets, some important countries, such as India and Indonesia, have less than 20 percent of users relying on social media for news, whereas in countries such as Brazil, Turkey, US and Vietnam, that percentage is almost 40 or over. This suggests that it is far more essential to address the fake news problem in the latter group of countries and less so in the former.
- Our Digital Planet research initiative reveals that countries that are digitally less advanced, but moving up the curve quickly, are also those where users behave in a more trusting manner. Many of these countries, India included, are the biggest growth opportunities for Facebook. They are experiencing the fastest growth, digital growth is primarily on mobile devices and many have large populations – all of



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which are critical for a company predicated on an advertising-based business model. Facebook's Free Basics programme was booted out of India, but is in 63 developing countries and municipalities, each with citizens new to the digital economy and potentially vulnerable to manipulation. The incentive for Facebook would be to keep data privacy rules as lax as possible to give these growing markets the greatest chance of delivering revenues.

- On balance, Zuckerberg is caught between two hard realities. Too few constraints will lead to new Cambridge Analytics to come tumbling out of the closet. Too many could kill Facebook's business model since every constraint on how data is used means lost revenue. Mark Zuckerberg must find a "Goldilocks zone" where the privacy protections are calibrated by the state of digital maturity and levels of digital trust – and are "just right." This will be hard to do. This time, the egg on Facebook's face may stick.

## Cease fire, commence dialogue

- The Concerned Citizens Group, which came into being during the 2016 crisis in Kashmir to reach out to Kashmiris, made three visits to the Valley from October 2016 to December 2017. Late last month, from February 23-27, we visited Jammu and areas along the LoC and International Border (IB) areas to reach out to people suffering on account of the ceasefire violations. The group visited the affected villages of Bera, Jeora Farm, Kapurpur on the IB; Suchetgarh Border Post on the Jammu-Sialkot highway under R S Pura sector; Ganiah, a village on the LoC in Nowshera sub-division of Rajouri, which had witnessed frequent cross-border shelling; met villagers evacuated from some other villages adjoining the LoC – Khamba (Jhanjhar), Sair Makri, Kanet, Sarya and Anwas-Bhandar.
- That sense of optimism has evaporated. We found villagers filled with insecurity, hopelessness, and uncertainty about their future and resentful about the violence. They repeatedly asked how long they were expected to suffer like this. The anger and the resentment could hardly be missed.
- A woman resident of Bera village, in the RS Pura sector, whose brother-in-law was killed in the January shelling, told us: "We cannot face this any longer. How long are we expected to bear this suffering? There are only two ways – either the two governments sit down and settle this issue or have 'aar par ki jung' and settle it once for all. But settle they must now. We cannot continue to live with this sense of fear, uncertainty and disruption."
- Rajouri's Ganiah village, where nearly 95 per cent of the population are refugees of 1947, from Mirpur in PoK, has often found itself targeted in cross-LoC firing. Several people of this village met us at the village panchayat house. "We watch television and hear the home minister and other ministers in Delhi giving statements – 'Hum Pakistan ko karara jawab de rahe hai.' Lekin unka karara jawab to hum jhel rahe hai. Ye karara jawab Delhi ya Mumbai se kyun nahi dey rahe hain? We are the people getting crushed between the two nations."



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- For the first time I sensed these border communities from Jammu to Poonch on the IB/LoC and even Uri, not supportive of the government's tough policy of using strong military response to teach Pakistan a lesson. "Stop tough talk with mortar shelling, talk to each other," was a common refrain, as people showed us the destruction, and spoke about who got killed and who was injured.
- In Uri, people wanted the two governments to talk and settle the issues once and for all so that this repeated suffering would end and they could live normal lives. In Jammu, the predominant sentiment was that the exchange of fire on the IB and the LoC may even sharpen the internal divide in the state. There is a growing perception in Jammu of a worsening communal divide being promoted by politically ambitious leaders. The attack on the Sunjuwan army camp, and the rape and murder of a Bakharwal girl have given rise to the feeling that there is a "Hindu Jammu" ruled by the BJP and a "Muslim Kashmir" ruled by the PDP. Utterances by political leaders are perceived as dividing and alienating people.
- There had always been a communal divide in Jammu, but earlier, there also used to be frank dialogue and discussions between communities, involving many civil society groups. Today, inter-community dialogue is absent.
- There are several conclusions we drew from this visit. The heating up of the border — whether on the LoC or the IB — has not curbed terrorism and does not address the issue of growing militancy in J&K. The repeated ceasefire violations have endangered the lives of people living on the border. While we have no idea of the collateral civilian damage on the other side, the scenes of devastation and the stories of lives and livelihoods destroyed on the Indian side are heart-rending. No citizen of India should have to live in perpetual fear and in a traumatic environment.
- Both India and Pakistan need to get back to the table. It is surprising that the two governments are stubborn about not holding public talks, but their respective National Security Advisors are secretly in touch, meeting in other countries. It is even more surprising that even these two officials are unable to stop the guns on the LoC. It is better that the dialogue is formalised, structured and taken to a political level to make it accountable. The future of India-Pakistan relations must not be made hostage to the political fortunes of any individual or political party.
- The most immediate objective of any contact between the two sides should be to stop the shelling on the LoC and the IB. The ceasefire proclamation of November 26, 2003, should be resuscitated to make the LoC a line of peace, which is what it was meant to be. The Directors General of Military Operations (DGMOs) of the two countries are in regular telephonic contact, but this is not sufficient. The last time they met was in 2013. They must meet again.
- Restoring the ceasefire alone can demonstrate the wisdom of the two countries, prevent loss of lives of both soldiers and civilians and create the conditions for a dialogue for resolving all bilateral issues amicably.



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- Jammu and Kashmir also needs an internal dialogue between people across the communities, political viewpoints and regions. It is imperative for the state and Central governments to play a constructive role and prevent a downward spiral.

## A Law Without Parliament

- Euthanasia (the passive killing of a suffering person) is prohibited in the US, England and France. Bills which were introduced in their legislatures were defeated. In the US, courts upheld the ban on medical-aided killing. In 1972, a bill was introduced in Parliament to amend the Indian Penal Code by deleting Section 309 (attempt to suicide) but it lapsed and no one has dared since then to introduce another. Also, no one has contemplated to implement the 42nd Report of the Law Commission, which suggested that attempt to suicide not be treated as a crime under Section 309.
- A five-member Constitution Bench in the Gian Kaur case (1996) held that the right to life did not include the right to die. Thus, it overruled the two-judge decision in the Ratinam case, that an attempt to suicide would be treated as a crime under the penal code. The judges presided over by Justice Verma, after perusing the UK's Airedale case, had held that "the desirability of bringing about such a change was considered to be the function of the legislature by enacting a suitable law providing therein adequate safeguards to prevent any possible abuse". The bench unanimously held that even physician-assisted suicide had no rational basis to claim exclusion from the fundamental principles of sanction of life. It quoted, with approval, the English courts' rationale that euthanasia was not lawful under common law and Parliament was the supreme authority to deal with it.
- However, earlier this month, another five-judge bench has ruled for passive killing in cases of terminally ill patients. Why should suffering be "carried forward" when there is no cure? A person should, in advance, make a testamentary declaration, which is to be endorsed by a judicial magistrate (who are otherwise heavily loaded in their judicial work), wherein the person will unambiguously state that in case she/he becomes incurably ill, she/he would not like to be in a "vegetative state" and should be allowed to die with dignity.
- This five-judge bench followed the two-judge bench direction in Aruna Shanbaug case, delivered by Justice Markandey Katju, which promoted the concept of euthanasia by carving out a novel path for medically-aided killing. This was fervently opposed by the then Attorney General of India, who argued for the government that euthanasia had not been accepted by Indians.
- The SC was bound to follow judicial precedent from the Gian Kaur case – delivered by Justice Verma for five judges – which categorically held that Article 21 does not include the right to die. Unnatural termination of life is incompatible and incongruous with the concept of right to life. Thus, Article 21 guarantees protection of life "which cannot be construed so as to read therein right to die". The right to life under Article 21 has to be construed as life with human dignity. This aspect – what makes life



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dignified — has to be read into and explored, but not to the degree of including that which extinguishes life, effacing the right itself.

- Interestingly, the smaller bench in the Shanbaug case, taking note of the low ethical standards, raw and widespread commercialisation and the rampant corruption in the country, said courts needed to be cautious while deciding such matters. The SC judges have expressed, many times, that they are not experts in various fields, including medicine and healthcare. The guidelines in the current verdict pertain to how doctors will be assessed. But there is no mechanism to certify the reputation of the doctor nor has Union health ministry made any regulations regarding such a practice.
- The Supreme Court took over the functions of Parliament and has made this a judicial legislation, which will prevail till Parliament legislates. Laws have to be made by Parliament and the courts strictly have to interpret the law, and not legislate. Should the apex court have sailed into uncharted waters and ruled where there is no Parliament-made legislation?

## A southern discontent

- How worried should India be about the latest expressions of southern discontent? Ostensibly the terms of reference of the 15th Finance Commission has triggered of a new wave of anxiety amongst South Indian states. Two related claims undergird this anxiety. First, that giving greater weight to the 2011 census in funds allocation will penalise the southern states for better performance and second, the growing public articulation of claims that somehow a dynamic and progressive South is subsidising a laggard and reactionary North. Taken on their own, both of these claims are par for the course. Post GST, India's fiscal federalism is up for renegotiation. As Pranay Kotasthane from Takshshila Institute pointed out, the real challenge for the Finance Commission will less be the North-South disparity, but fiscal federalism and the power of the states more generally, where the balance is again tilting towards the Centre.
- The second argument is worrying, not because it is an accurate description of the complex economic relationship between the North and the South. It is worrying because it reflects an increasing alienation between North and South in political discourse. When there is underlying trust, even big practical differences can be resolved. On the other hand, when distrust is growing, all facts will be magnified to fuel discontent. There is a diffuse, somewhat inchoate, sense that the politically-articulated cultural rift between the North and South is growing. It is anxieties about identity that will shape the factual narratives, not the other way round. The "South" is, of course, hardly a unified political category. And the



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discontent may not seem significant now. But it could snowball into something bigger if not handled with good judgment.

- Renegotiations of regional identities are routine in any culturally complex society. But there is reason to think that this moment poses special risks that might provide fertile ground for exacerbating North-South divisions. First, the rise of Hindutva and the BJP's attempt at political dominance will generate its own counter pressures. There is no question that the BJP's formidable political machine has great capabilities and can expand its base even in the South. But the dominant cultural idiom of BJP politics is still identified with the politics of the BJP in the Hindi heartland: A faux Sanskritisation, combined with a lumpen-ness and a coarse patriotism. The issue is hardly Hinduism: Hinduism has never been under threat in most of India. The issue is a cultural repertoire in which the confluence of Hindutva and Nationalism is imagined, and one that is deeply unsettling. Resistance to this will take the form of greater regional assertion. You cannot raise the temperature on cultural issues nationally without everyone else catching a fever as well.
- Second, southern politics has itself been stuck in a rut. Contrary to claims of southern progressivism, caste politics is perhaps even more deeply pronounced and entrenched in South. There is deep violence associated with caste all over India. But, even at the risk of generalisation, one can say that in the North, caste identities are more cynical. But in states like Tamil Nadu, despite, impressive development indicators, the grip of the cultural politics of caste is still strong and vice-like. What papered it over was the creation of subnationalism that needed its own "other", and party systems like the DMK and AIADMK that could channel caste politics in organised forms, and use that for bargaining at the national level. But just like the BJP thinks nationalism needs renewal, it is inevitable that the regions will think subnationalism needs renewal – where these go from being lightly worn facts to passionate axes of mobilisation. Even in Kerala, which probably had the strongest form of subnational identity, internal divisions are beginning to wreck the state. So subnationalism will respond to two dynamics: Northern hegemony as a possible trope, and internal social division within these states as a possible threat. Subnationalism will be an answer to both. But more importantly, as the older party systems weaken, the temptation of new groups or older parties to cement their political place by radicalising subnationalism also grows. New leaders will carve out their identities by becoming regional icons. So the risk is that at this moment you have a national political formation which is not the most adept at managing cultural difference, and party structures in states that are more fragile. Under such conditions, a more anxiety-ridden subnationalism can be more tempting.
- Third, there is the fact of political centralisation. The BJP by ideology and practice is a centralising party. No matter how much fiscal or administrative decentralisation a government attempts, if different states are locked into the same party structure the net effect will be to concentrate more power at the Centre. It is also the case that this government's penchant for thinking that India cannot be made, unless the Centre gets credit for it, is now also administrative practice. The entire gamut of practices, from monitoring district-level projects from the Centre to creating more and more central schemes, is a



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testament to the fact that cooperative federalism, in a centralised dominant system will always mean cooperation on the Centre's terms (this is irrespective of party). Even the fears that Finance Commission might tilt the balance more towards the Centre is borne out of this experience.

- Managing federal differences was easier in coalition governments because there was a sense in which all the state did genuinely became a part of the Centre. From the late Nineties till 2009, there was also immense optimism about the broader India story. India's actual story was very messy. But a hopeful politics, with lots of institutions providing checks and balances, with genuine power-sharing, could accommodate differences. But a resentful politics will, in the long run, generate deep anxieties. The southern gauntlet is just an opening salvo.
- Renegotiating balance of power and new forms of cultural identity are all routine activities in politics. But they acquire more explosive potential when this negotiation takes place under three conditions: The political existence of a project of cultural hegemony, a fluid party system at the state level, and greater state centralisation. Right now this discontent seems only fleeting. But it would be a mistake to reduce it to the mere technicalities of a Finance Commission mandate. There is more psychological and cultural anxiety fuelling it. And it would be a mistake to underestimate how quickly cultural anxieties can snowball into a potent political force, in an age marked by fragile and uncertain identities on the one hand, and mean and ungenerous leaders on the other.

## At stake in Shopian

- The killing of three civilians in army firing in Shopian on January 27 was not the first incident of its kind in Kashmir in which the state police registered an FIR against the Army. From 2001 to 2016, the Jammu and Kashmir government sent 50 requests to the Ministry of Defence for prosecution of soldiers in various cases – custodial deaths, killing of civilians, disappearances, rape and molestation.
- The government told the Rajya Sabha earlier this year that the MoD refused sanction in 47 cases, three are awaiting a decision. What this means is that in Kashmir, the filing of an FIR is not unusual, and the dead-end every FIR runs into a certainty. This is because the Army and paramilitary forces are protected by the immunity provisions of the Armed Forces Special Powers Act. The protection has been invoked even in rape cases. In a rare case or two, the Army has conducted court-martial proceedings against errant soldiers. The Shopian FIR would have run the same course as its predecessors, hit the same dead-end.
- Now the Supreme Court, acting on a petition by the officer's father, has stayed the investigation until final orders on April 24. As a report in this newspaper has detailed, every request by the J&K police to the Army to co-operate in the investigation so far has been stonewalled. In Kashmir, it is an open secret that soldiers will never be prosecuted.



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- But in a general climate of alienation, an FIR and an investigation against a soldier involved in an episode of questionable civilian deaths hold the symbolic promise of due process, if nothing else. In Kashmir, as Chief Minister Mehbooba Mufti rightly pointed out, peace and justice are two sides of the same coin. In this sense, the SC's stay seems both unnecessary and unfortunate.
- The petition clearly has purchase among those who seek to conflate an individual soldier's actions with the interests of the nation, as in the case of the incident in which another major tied a civilian to an army vehicle and used him as a human shield in April 2017. The opposition by the BJP, a partner in the J&K ruling coalition, to the registration of the FIR, gave just one indication of the way in which it seeks to project the Army's role in Kashmir.
- Unwittingly, though, the petition has also brought to the attention of the highest court in the country, the question of due process, and the accountability of soldiers deployed in restive territory. These go to the heart of the debate on AFSPA and the calls to amend the law, if not do away with it altogether. In a judgment in July 2016, the SC criticised AFSPA as "symbolising a failure of the civil administration and the armed forces".
- The case before the SC will be watched for any implication it might have for this law, which is in force not just in Kashmir, but also in the Northeast, especially in Manipur, where military impunity for excesses against civilians has created a huge reservoir of resentment.

## Borrowing terms

- The State Bank of India (SBI) has raised its one-year MCLR or marginal cost of funds-based lending rate from 7.95 per cent to 8.15 per cent, while hiking similarly for two- and three-year loans. So have the ICICI Bank and Punjab National Bank, even if not by as much. The increase in MCLR, below which banks cannot lend, was preceded by a rise in deposit rates. SBI alone, last week, revised upwards its retail term deposit rates by 0.15-50 percentage points. But it isn't only banks. Since September, yields on 10-year Indian government bonds – effectively the interest on the sovereign's borrowings – have gone up from around 6.5 per cent to 7.75 per cent. And all this without the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) resorting to any monetary tightening; its key repo or overnight lending rate has been unchanged at 6 per cent.
- The above trends point to a simple fact: The interest rate cycle has turned. This is true not just for India, but also globally. Since September, 10-year US Treasury yields, too, have hardened from 2.1 per cent to almost 2.9 per cent, while way above the 1.4 per cent lows of July 2016 just after the UK's "Brexit" vote to exit the European Union. What we are seeing is an end to the party of ultra-low interest rates, resulting from the monetary stimulus measures unveiled by major central banks in response to the 2008 global financial crisis.



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- In India, we had a similar situation after demonetisation, when banks were flooded by deposits of the suddenly invalidated Rs 500 and Rs 1,000 denomination notes. The surge in liquidity led the SBI to lower its one-year MCLR from 8.90 per cent to 7.95 per cent between November 1, 2016 and November 1, 2017. Even the SBI's current MCLR, across all tenors, are 0.7-0.75 percentage points below what they were till December 2016. Such low rates for borrowers were neither sustainable nor fair to savers, especially fixed income earners.
- One can, of course, argue that higher interest rates aren't the best thing for the economy, just when it seems to be on the recovery path. Together with rising oil prices, they could potentially squeeze profit margins and dent consumer sentiment. Also, there is clear evidence of a revival in bank credit demand. This is where fiscal slippages and election-time populism on minimum support prices can really hurt. By crowding out private sector borrowings and forcing the RBI to counter food inflation by tightening monetary policy, there is the danger of interest rates increasing more than what's warranted.



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