

National Current Affairs

Maharashtra to set up board for non-English medium schools

The Maharashtra government has decided to form an education board for non-English medium schools

- The government has decided to form an international education board to prepare syllabus for non-English medium schools.
- In the first phase, 100 selected Marathi schools will function according to the new syllabus.
- The government also assured to look into the issue of reducing non-teaching tasks of teachers (such as Census Survey and election duty) in the coming days.

Uttarakhand govt bars media from its offices, cites information leak

Citing leaks of “confidential information”, the Uttarakhand government has barred entry of “unauthorised persons/ reporters” into government offices.

- Any visitor who is visiting a government office for personal work will not be allowed to meet any government official or any member of the office staff in the office premises. In case of “important matters”, the government official can meet the visitor “at the office reception”.
- The order specifically mentions that the agenda of cabinet meetings has been leaked to the media in the past.
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Haryana village to sing national anthem every morning, 20 loudspeakers installed for Rs 2 lakh

- The residents of Jat-dominated Bhanakpur village in Faridabad district will now start their day by listening to the national anthem at 8am. As many as 20 loudspeakers have been installed in Bhanakpur to facilitate over 5,000 villagers sing the national anthem along, thus making the village first in Haryana and second in India to introduce the system.
- Jammikunta is become the first village to do so and now Bhanakpur with a population of more than 5,000 has become second in the country and first in Haryana

HRD Ministry releases All India Higher Education Survey

The Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) in higher education of Indian has registered an increase from 24.5% in 2015-16 to 25.2% in 2016-17 according to latest All India Higher Education Survey (AIHES) released by HRD Ministry.

- The survey findings were based on responses of 795 universities, 34,193 colleges and 7,496 standalone institutions.
- There are total of 864 universities, 40,026 colleges and 11,669 standalone institutions in the country.
- GER is statistical measure for determining number of students enrolled in undergraduate, postgraduate and research-level studies within country and expressed as a percentage of population.
- India is aiming to attain GER of 30% by 2020, but it is still far behind countries like China with GER of 43.39% and US with 85.8%.
- The proportion of students pursuing higher education in India hasn't increased dramatically from 2015-16 to 2016-17.
- It was in range of 23% to 25% since 2013-14. Tamil Nadu has highest GER in India at 46.9%.

Atal Pension Yojana reaches subscriber base of 80 lakh

The Pension Fund Regulatory and Development Authority of India (PFRDA) has announced that Atal Pension Yojana (APY) run by it has reached a subscriber base of 80 lakh and is growing at good pace.

- Uttar Pradesh is the highest contributing state at 11.41 lakh APY subscribers, followed by Bihar (8.87 lakh) and Tamil Nadu (6.60 lakh).
- APY became operational from June 1, 2015 with an aim to provide affordable universal access to essential social security protection to unorganized work force of country, which makes major chunk of labour force (88%). It had replaced Swavalamban scheme.
- It is available to all citizens of India in the age group of 18-40 years (thus minimum period of contribution by subscriber is 20 years).
- Under scheme, subscriber will receive a minimum guaranteed pension of Rs.1000 to Rs.5000 per month, depending on his contribution, from age of 60 years.
- There is no exit to the scheme before the age of 60. In case of death of subscriber, the spouse of the subscriber shall be entitled for the same amount of pension till his or her death.

Income Tax Department launches on-line chat service

Income Tax (IT) Department under the Union Finance Ministry has launched an on-line chat service on its national website www.incometaxindia.gov.in with prominent icon stating 'Live Chat Online- ask your query'.

- The on-line chat service is aimed at facilitating the taxpayers resolve their queries by answering their basic queries and doubts relating to direct tax issues.
- The facility is available on all working days from Monday to Friday between 10 AM and 6 PM.
- The module can also be accessed through a mobile application called 'AayakarSetu' on Android phone.
- Customer support executive having expertise in tax-related matters through this platform helps users in resolving their queries on-line.
- Moreover, it has dedicated team of experts from IT department and independent tax practitioners to answer general queries of a taxpayer.
- This first-time initiative is aimed to enhance taxpayer services in the country.

PM Modi addresses conference on Transformation of Aspirational Districts

Prime Minister Narendra Modi addressed a conference on Transformation of Aspirational Districts at Dr. Ambedkar International Centre in New Delhi.

- While addressing the people, PM Modi lauded BR Ambedkar's contribution to the nation. Giving example of bringing a positive change to the downtrodden, he stated that Jan Dhan Yojana gave the poor, access to banks and corrected the anomalies created by nationalisation of banks.
- The Conference on Transformation of Aspirational Districts was organized by NITI Aayog. The conference focused on Prime Minister Narendra Modi's vision of a New India by 2022.

26th World Book Fair held in New Delhi with focus on environment

The 26th edition of annual World Book Fair was held in New Delhi. It was organised by National Book Trust (NBT), under Ministry of Human Resource Development in association with India Trade Promotion Organisation. The theme for this year is 'Environment and Climate Change'.

- It focuses on environment issues like climate change, global warming, and water pollution. European Union was Guest of Honour Country for this year's book fair.
- The annual book fair saw participation of around 800 publishers from across the country in different languages.
- The event's Theme Pavillion had international rights exhibition of nearly 500 titles published in English, Hindi, and other Indian languages.

- Apart from EU nations, more than 40 countries including Belgium, Canada, China, Denmark, Egypt, France, Germany, and United Kingdom also participated.
- The fair also witnessed panel discussions, talks, workshops, children's activities, screening of short films, special photo exhibits as well as cultural and musical performances. The discussions, conversation were mainly organised with authors and environmentalists where experts discussed ways through which environment can be saved from further deterioration.

Himachal CM announces 'Gudiya' helpline to fight crime against women

In one of his key decisions after taking over as Himachal Pradesh Chief Minister, Jai Ram Thakur announced setting up of 24x7 'Guddia' helpline for safety of women. The helpline will work directly under the supervision of the Chief Minister's Office (CMO) and action will have to follow mandatorily within 48 hours.

- The day-to-day reporting will be monitored by the CMO and action taken within 48 hours.
- The helpline with requisite infrastructure and necessary facilities would become operational soon.
- He also announced 'Atal Helpline' for dealing with complaints of corruption.
- The BJP, during the election campaign, had also promised Hoshiar Singh help line to report information relating to general crime, including forest felling. This will also be made functional soon
- Thakur also announced to initiative stringent measures to curb drug menace in the state as well as cases of cyber crimes. The CM assured to look into the pensionary and medical facilities to journalists and announced a sum of Rs five lakh for the Shimla Press Club.

BSF Launches 'Operation Alert' Along 200 Km Border To Curb Terrorist Movement

The Border Security Force (BSF) has launched "Operation Alert" along the over 200 kilometre long International Border (IB) in Jammu and Kashmir to curb the increasing movement of infiltrating terrorists from across the border.

- Infiltrators have been making desperate attempts to crossover by taking advantage of the thick cover of winter fog.
- Besides, Pakistan has been frequently resorting to ceasefire violations along the border. On January 4, 2018, BSF Head Constable Radha Pada Hazara was killed in sniper firing by Pakistan rangers in Samba sector.

International Current Affairs

U.S. suspends at least \$900 million in security aid to Pakistan

The United States said on Thursday it was suspending at least \$900 million in security assistance to Pakistan until it takes action against the Afghan Taliban and the Haqqani network militant groups.

- The U.S. State Department announced the decision, saying it reflected the Trump administration's frustration that Pakistan has not done more against the two groups that Washington says use sanctuaries in Pakistan to launch attacks in neighbouring Afghanistan that have killed U.S., Afghan and other forces.
- Prominent among the suspended amount include USD 255 million in Foreign Military Funding (FMF) for the fiscal year 2016 as mandated by the Congress.

Himalayan Hydro Expo began in Kathmandu on Jan 5th

Jointly organised by the Independent Power Producers' Association Nepal (IPPAN) – the umbrella association of private sector developers – and Event Management Services, the three-day expo is being held at the Exhibition Hall, Bhrikutimandap, Kathmandu.

- Hydropower developers, manufacturers and suppliers of the associated state-of-the-art technology equipment, investors, banks and construction companies will be showcasing their products and services through 100 stalls.
- The expo will also turn out to be a 'milestone event' to explore additional opportunities as to how to build hydro projects in Nepal at an affordable cost as per the availability of high volume water, best project sites in the rocky hills, gorges and the millions of youths to be attracted for employment.

India remains Lanka's top source of tourists in 2017

India continued to be Sri Lanka's top source of tourists in 2017 with a near eight per cent growth in arrivals.

- India continued to be the top source market with 384,628 arrivals (up 7.8 per cent) followed by China with 268,952 (down 1 per cent) and UK 201,879 (up 7.3 per cent).
- In 2017, tourist arrivals in Sri Lanka reached an all-time high of 2,116,407.
- The arrivals in December grew over 8 per cent year-on-year from 224,791 in 2016 to 244,536 in 2017.

- The higher number of arrivals has been achieved despite serious setbacks to the tourism industry right throughout 2017.
- The first setback was the partial closure of the country's main airport from January to April as many airlines either scaled down operations or completely halted flights to Colombo.
- The island was also hit by devastating floods that cut off access to many resort areas resulting in adverse international media publicity that had an impact on forward bookings.

Banking & Finance

Forex Reserves scale record high of \$409.366 billion in December 2017

According to Reserve Bank of India (RBI), India's foreign exchange (Forex) reserves have scaled to fresh record high of \$409.366 billion as on December 29, 2017.

- The surge was due to massive spike in foreign currency assets, which is key component of the reserves.
- The forex are reserve assets held by a central bank in foreign currencies. It acts as buffer to be used in challenging times and used to back liabilities on their own issued currency as well as to influence monetary policy.
- Almost all countries in world, regardless of size of their economy, hold significant foreign exchange reserves.
- The components of India's FOREX Reserves include Foreign currency assets (FCAs), Gold, Special Drawing Rights (SDRs) and RBI's Reserve position with International Monetary Fund (IMF). FCAs constitute largest component of Indian Forex Reserves.
- As on 29 December 2017, FCAs which form key component of reserves rose by \$4.42 billion from the previous week to \$385.103 billion.

Gemalto launches the first biometric EMV card for contactless payments

Gemalto has been selected by Bank of Cyprus to supply the world's first EMV biometric dual interface payment card for both chip and contactless payments. Using fingerprint recognition instead of a PIN code to authenticate the cardholder, the card is compatible with existing payment terminals already installed in the country.

- When customers place their fingerprint on the sensor, a comparison is performed between the scanned fingerprint and the reference biometric data securely stored in the card.

- The biometric sensor card is powered by the payment terminal and does not require an embedded battery; this means there is no limit from battery life nor on the number of transactions.
- Gemalto's biometric sensor payment card is based on the principle that biometric data should always remain in the hands of end users.
- The biometric personalization and card activation process is designed to avoid transmission of biometric data over the air to ensure that users' data privacy is protected. The fingerprint template captured during the enrolment process is stored only on the card.

TIHCL gets RBI nod to operate as NBFC

Telangana Industrial Health Clinic Ltd (TIHCL), a State government initiative, has got RBI clearance to register and function as a non-banking finance company (NBFC). It will be the first State promoted and co-financing NBFC.

- Karur Vysya Bank, Vijaya Bank, Canara Bank, Union Bank, SBI (State Bank of India) and SIDBI (Small Industries Development Bank of India) have showed interest to partner with TIHCL.
- TIHCL plans to support 5-10 enterprises per month in each district. TIHCL had won the SKOCH Platinum Award in September 2017 under the smart governance category in the MSME segment.
- TIHCL expects to pursue a multipronged strategy of filling in the credit gap that exists for micro manufacturing enterprises, help small enterprises access equity markets as well as revive and restructure viable manufacturing MSEs.
- On the revival front, TIHCL will provide bridge finance, but not to those entrepreneurs who are wilful defaulters.

Government estimates GDP for 2017-18 at 6.5%, undershoots RBI projection

The Central Statistics Office (CSO) estimated GDP (Gross Domestic Product) growth rate for 2017-18 at 6.5 per cent. The GVA, or Gross Value Added for the current fiscal was projected at 6.1 per cent. GVA is GDP minus net taxes. This has been the slowest growth in past four years as GDP growth was 7.1% in 2016-17, 8% in 2015-16 and 7.5% in 2014-15.

- The figures released undershoot Reserve Bank of India's (RBI) GVA projection+ at 6.7 per cent, thereby deepening concerns of slowdown of the economy. Most private economists had also pared India's growth forecast to 6.2 to 6.5 per cent for the fiscal. The GVA for the previous fiscal was at 6.6 per cent.
- GDP growth in first half of 2017-18 was only 6% owing to lingering effects of demonetisation in November 2016 and disruptions caused due to rollout of goods and services tax (GST) in July 2017.

- Growth for second half (H2) of 2017-18 is expected to be around 7%.
- As per CSO estimates, growth in agriculture, forestry and fishing is likely to slow to 2.1% in 2017-18 as compared to 4.9% in 2016-17.
- Growth in manufacturing sector too is expected to slow down to 4.6% in current fiscal as compared to 7.9% in 2016-17.

Appointments & Resigns

Professor Gopal Guru appointed Editor of EPW

Political scientist Gopal Guru has been appointed as the Editor of the Economic and Political Weekly (EPW).

- Professor Guru currently teaches Political Science at the Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) in New Delhi. Earlier, he taught at the University of Delhi and the University of Pune. He is the author of several acclaimed books.

Diplomat T S Tirumurti Appointed Economic Relations Secretary

India's High Commissioner to Kuala Lumpur T S Tirumurti was appointed the Secretary (Economic Relations) in the External Affairs Ministry.

- The Appointments Committee of the Cabinet has approved his appointment to the post, in place of Vijay Keshav Gokhale, who was recently named as the Foreign Secretary.
- Tirumurti assumed his current assignment as the High Commissioner of India to Malaysia on December 20, 2013.
- His previous diplomatic assignments include postings in Cairo, permanent mission of India in Geneva, representative of India in Gaza, Washington DC and deputy chief of mission in Jakarta.
- Tirumurti has also served as Under Secretary (Bhutan), Director (Foreign Secretary's Office), Joint Secretary (Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Myanmar and Maldives) and Joint Secretary (United Nations Economic and Social) during his stints at the Ministry of External Affairs here.

Science & Technology

Indian Coast Guard Ship C-161 commissioned in Porbandar

Indian Coast Guard Ship C-161 was commissioned on Friday at Porbandar in Gujarat. The induction is a part of ongoing efforts by the Coast Guard to strengthen coastal security.

- It will strengthen the security umbrella of west coast and also help augment patrolling to prevent illicit activities such as infiltration, smuggling and illegal fishing.
- The ICGS C-161 shall be based at Vadinar under the administrative and operational control of the Commander Coast Guard Region (North West) Air Marshal RK Dhir PVSM AVSM VM ADC.
- ICGS C – 161 has been built by Bharati Defence and Infrastructure Limited. ii. It is 27.64m long, has displacement of 107 tons and can achieve maximum speed of 35 knots.
- It is capable of operating in shallow water as well as deep seas. It can be used for surveillance, interdiction, search and rescue operations and can render assistance to boats and craft in distress at sea.

CSIR scientists join hands to develop eco-friendly e-crackers

Different labs of the Council of Scientific & Industrial Research (CSIR) - India's key scientific research body - have joined hands for developing eco-friendly firecrackers and arriving at a cost-effective technology to make e-crackers (electronic-crackers) available to Indian consumers across the country.

- These labs took this initiative in the backdrop of the strong concerns raised on effects of highly polluting firecrackers on human health.
- The first phase would cover reduction of pollutants while future strategies would cover removal of pollutants from the compositions (of firecrackers).
- The CSIR has constituted an inter-ministerial expert committee to guide and mentor different labs in the unique R&D endeavour to come out with less polluting firecrackers.
- This research and development endeavour will initially focus on reduction of pollutants and in future will develop a solution which would remove the pollutants altogether from the compositions of firecrackers.
- e-crackers mainly contain high-voltage micro generators which spark at random intervals and create cracking sound just like firecrackers. For e-crackers, efforts will focus on developing low-cost technology in order to make it affordable for all consumers. Foreign-made e-crackers that are currently available in Indian market are bit expensive for average Indian consumer.

Sports

Elite Women's National Boxing Championship begins in Haryana

On 6th January 2018, the 2nd edition of the Elite Women's National Boxing Championship, began in Haryana.

- The Elite Women's National Boxing Championship is considered as selection trials for the upcoming Common Wealth Games and the Asian Games.
- Boxers like Sarita Devi, Sarjubala, Sonia Lather are participating in the tournament. Around 300 top boxers participate in the tournament.
- Performance director for the Elite women's team Raffael Bergamasco and women's team head coach Shiv Singh are also present in the tournament.

Obituary

First PAF (Pakistan Air Force) chief Air Marshal Asghar Khan dies at 96

On 5th January 2018, Air Marshal Asghar Khan died due to cardiac arrest in Rawalpindi, Pakistan.

- Asghar Khan is the first native commander-in-chief of Pakistan Air Force.
- He became the youngest head of Pakistan Air Force (PAF) at the age of 35. He was also a politician. He founded a political party named Tehreek-i-Istaqlal. Later the party was merged with the Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf.

Actor and comedian Jerry Van Dyke dies at 86

On 5th January 2018, Jerry Van Dyke, comedian and actor died at his home in Arkansas, US.

- Jerry Van Dyke was a famous comedian. He performed at military bases and in television programs. His first show was "The Dick Van Dyke Show".