

National Current Affairs

CCEA approves methodology for auction of commercial coal mines to private sector

The Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs (CCEA) has approved methodology for auction of coal mines/blocks for sale of coal to private sector under Coal Mines (Special Provisions) Act, 2015 and Mines and Minerals (Development and Regulation) Act, 1957.

- This decision opens coal sector to commercial mining by private entities, ending 41 year old monopoly of state owned Coal India Ltd (CIL). It will allow power cement and steel producers to source fuel more efficiently.
- The methodology gives highest priority to transparency, ease of doing business and ensuring that natural resources are used for national development.
- It opens commercial coal mining for private sector and will help in boosting the economy.
- It is most ambitious coal sector reform since the nationalisation of this sector in 1973.
- It will bring efficiency by moving coal mining from era of monopoly to competition and enable use of best possible technology.
- It will also attract higher investments and create more jobs in mining sector.
- It will also lead to the availability of low cost power as 70% of India's electricity is generated from thermal power plants. States in Eastern part of the country will be especially benefited from this new methodology.

CCEA approves Silkyara Bend-Barkot Tunnel in Uttarakhand

The Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs (CCEA) has approved construction of 4.531 km long 2-Lane Bi-Directional Silkyara Bend-Barkot Tunnel in Uttarakhand as part of 'Chardham Mahamarg Pariyojana'.

- The project will come along NH-134 (old NH-94) in Uttarakhand and will be built under Engineering, Procurement and Construction (EPC) Mode.
- The 4.531 km long bidirectional tunnel will have escape passage including approaches on Dharasu-Yamunotri section between Chainage 25.400 km and Chainage 25.400 km and Chainage 51 km in Uttarakhand.
- The construction period of the project is 4 years.
- The construction of this tunnel will provide all weather connectivity to Yamunotri, one of dham on Chardham Yatra.
- It will encourage regional socio-economic development, trade and tourism within country.

- It will reduce travel distance from Dharasu to Yamunotri by about 20 km and travel time by about hour.
- It will save number of trees that would have been required to be removed in road improvement if original alignment had been followed.

Crèche facility to come up at Parliament House

The Parliament House is setting up crèche facility on its premises for establishing inclusive and supportive work environment for its women employees. This is in line with provisions of Maternity Benefit (Amendment) Act, 2017.

- It will be 1500 sq-foot centre and guarded by professionals, ensuring all-round development of children and will also have separate feeding room to mothers.
- This will help to bring in visible impact by pushing other private establishments, central and state owned organizations to set up crèche facility, to aid mothers.
- The Maternity Benefit (Amendment) Act, 2017 makes it mandatory for workplaces with more than 50 employees to provide mandatory crèche facility.

Maharashtra Government to launch Asmita Yojana to provide affordable sanitary pads

Maharashtra government will roll out Asmita Yojana on the International Women's Day (March 8, 2018) to provide affordable (subsidised) sanitary pads to school girls and women.

- Under the scheme, schoolgirls studying in Zilla Parishad schools will get sanitary napkin packet at Rs 5 while rural women can avail it at subsidised rate of Rs.24 and Rs.29.
- The scheme will promote menstrual hygiene and increase awareness among young girls on usage of sanitary pads.
- It will help to reduce school absenteeism i.e. boost school attendance among school girls.
- Similarly, it will help to create employment opportunities for women in rural areas and create awareness about health and education.

Government extends transmission charge waiver to solar, wind power till March 2022

The Union Power Ministry has extended waiver of inter-state power transmission charges and losses for solar and wind power projects commissioned till 31 March 2022 in order to give boost to clean energy sources.

- The waiver will be available to solar and wind projects for 25 years from date of commissioning provided developers sign power purchase agreements with entities,

including power distribution companies (discoms), for sale of power for compliance of their renewable purchase obligation.

- Moreover, the waiver will be available to only those projects which are awarded through competitive bidding process as per guidelines issued by central government. These new conditions for waiver of transmission charges and losses irrespective of purchasing entity will be applicable prospectively.
- The order assumes significance in view of India's ambitious target of having 175GW of renewable energy capacities (100GW of solar, 60GW of wind energy, 10GW energy from Biomass and 5 GW from Hydel).

Shri J P Nadda addresses Global Digital Health Partnership Summit at Australia

On February 19, 2018, Union Minister for Health and Family Welfare, J P Nadda addressed Global Digital Health Partnership Summit at Australia.

- The summit was attended by Mr. Greg Hunt – Minister of Health, Australia and delegates from World Health Organisation (WHO) and delegates from several countries including Canada, Italy, Singapore, South Korea, United Kingdom and United States of America
- At the Summit, Mr. Nadda spoke on the topic: Making Digital Health Services a Priority in Healthcare Reform.
- During his address at the Summit, Mr. Nadda informed that Indian Government has implemented Digital Technology in healthcare in four major areas viz. improving health service delivery, improving compliance of people towards healthcare, improving governance and engaging citizens in partnering with government for planning and management of health services delivery.

Telangana sets up task force on urban mobility

The Telangana government has constituted a task force on urban mobility to study the feasibility of the monorail model and other modes of transport for the IT corridor of the city.

- The committee/task force will suggest the corridors for phase II and phase III of the metro-rail project, suggest best and most economical ways of transport, including monorail, tram and e-vehicles on various routes in a synergistic manner.
- The committee will also suggest options for various methods of funding such projects and raising resources including PPPs, joint ventures and annuity funding. It will submit its recommendations to the government.
- The committee comprises government representatives and members from the corporate sector.

Delhi govt to launch 'Mission Buniyaad' to improve learning levels in primary classes

The Delhi administration will launch 'Mission Buniyaad' from April this year to improve learning levels of students attending primary classes in the state government and municipal schools.

- The move comes after the National Achievement Survey (NAS) found that a majority of Class 3 to 5 students in government and aided schools performed abysmally in science, mathematics and languages.
- Under Buniyaad, students will be divided into three categories. Those who perform at par will be taken into the 'Ujjawal' group; those who score medium-level marks will be placed in 'Utkarsh' while those who are behind their peers will be placed in 'Udyam'.
- The entire programme will run from Classes 3 to 5 in MCD schools and in Classes 6 to 8 in government schools.
- The scheme will run for three months from April to June. The students will be assessed on reading abilities and basic mathematics before being divided into groups for focused teaching.

Kerala to get MGNREGS assets geo-tagged

Kerala is racing to get assets generated under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme geo-tagged and perhaps become the first State to achieve this distinction.

- The Rural Development Department under the MGNREGS has been geo-tagging assets, which, on an average has crossed a lakh in the 14 districts in Phase 1, according to sources.
- Geo-tagging is done under the GeoMGNREGA, a software solution, to photo geotag all completed assets under the MGNREGS using space technology and to integrate the details of wage and materials into public domain to ensure transparency and accountability, according to the MGNREGS website.
- The objective of GeoMGNREGA is to create Geographical Information System solution to explore the data of assets created under the MGNREGA. It essentially enables to view such assets across India on a map.

UP unveils new tourism policy, woos investors with sops

The Uttar Pradesh government on Monday announced a new tourism policy to increase footfalls as well as investment in the state.

- Under the new policy, a "Bed and Breakfast" scheme has also been launched, which also includes Ashrams.

- Through various incentives, the state government also aims to log 100,000 tourists annually to its national parks and wildlife sanctuaries other than converting 10 heritage buildings to heritage hotels every year,
- Special focus was being given to create land banks for tourism purposes, J
- The state government is also offering 10 per cent subsidy on sports and cruise, 20 per cent on tentage facilities, 20 per cent on small budget hotels, 15 per cent on new resorts and 15 per cent on wellness centres.
- The maximum subsidy of 25 per cent is being given for light and sound and laser shows.

PM Modi flags off Palace Queen Hamsafar Express in Karnataka

On 19th February 2018, Prime Minister Narendra Modi flagged off the Palace Queen Humsafar Express train at the Mysuru railway station, Karnataka.

- Palace Queen Hamsafar Express train will run from Mysuru in Karnataka to Udaipur in Rajasthan.
- This train will link the following western states: Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat, Maharashtra and Karnataka.
- It covers 30 parliamentary constituencies on its way. It covers a total distance of 2000 km.
- Narendra Modi also dedicated a fully electrified railway line of length 140 km from Mysuru to KSR Bengaluru to improve energy efficiency of Indian Railways.
- The electrification of Mysuru to KSR Bengaluru railway line will cover 4 Karnataka districts: Bengaluru, Ramanagaram, Mandya and Mysuru.
- This project costs Rs 220 crore. It will benefit nearly 25,000 passengers daily.

International Current Affairs

Cabinet approves India-Morocco Cooperation Agreement in Railway Sector

The Union Cabinet has approved Cooperation Agreement between India and Moroccan National Railways Office (ONCF) to develop long-term cooperation and partnership in different areas of railway sector.

- The Cooperation Agreement was signed in December 2017 to enable technical cooperation in training and staff development; expert missions, exchange of experience and personnel and mutual technical assistance, including exchanging of experts.

- The identified areas of cooperation include high-speed corridors, raising speed of existing routes, heavy haul operations, development of world class stations and modernization of rail infrastructure, etc.
- The cooperation is achieved through exchange of information on developments in areas of railways technology and operations, technical visits, knowledge sharing, training & seminars and workshops in areas of mutual interest.

UK and India upgrade joint research on clean water and clean energy

United Kingdom and India have launched joint research projects on ‘Water Quality Research’ and ‘Energy Demand Reduction in Built Environment’.

- The ‘Water Quality Research’ programme has 8 projects and ‘Energy Demand Reduction in Built Environment’ programme has 4 projects, with total joint investment of up to £15 million.
- These projects aim to deliver mutual benefits and research solutions not only to UK and India but also to address shared global sustainable development goals – clean water and clean energy.
- These eight collaborative research projects should bring benefits to both people and the environment, and we are delighted that the programme is being launched today.
- This India-UK water quality programme aims to equip local communities, policymakers, regulators and businesses with information and solutions they need to secure provision of clean water, rejuvenate rivers and restore ecosystems.

Singapore to impose carbon tax from 2019

On February 19, 2018, Singapore Government announced that it would impose a carbon tax from 2019 to cut its greenhouse gas emissions.

- All facilities in all business sectors producing 25000 tonnes or more of greenhouse gas emissions a year will be subjected to Carbon Tax.
- For the period 2019 – 2023, Carbon Tax will be levied at the rate of 5 Singapore Dollar per tonne of greenhouse gas emissions. Post 2023, the tax is likely to be raised and will possibly be in the range of 10 – 15 Singapore Dollar per tonne by 2030.
- Levy of Carbon Tax would primarily affect about 30-40 companies, mainly from the petroleum refining, chemicals and semiconductor sectors.

India, Indonesia joint military drill “Garuda Shakti” begins in Bandung

On February 19, 2018, Indian and Indonesian armies began the sixth edition of ‘Garuda Shakti’ military drill in Bandung, the capital of West Java province of Indonesia.

- This joint exercise between Indian and Indonesian Special Forces will continue till March 4, 2018.
- Objective of Garuda Shakti exercise is to strengthen relations between the two Armies of India and Indonesia and to enhance their ability to undertake joint tactical level operations.
- During the course of this exercise, Indian and Indonesian Special Forces will engage in counter-terrorism operations, close quarter combat, experience sharing and other areas of special operations.

USIBC forms India Advisory Council to enhance bilateral ties

US India Business Council (USIBC), a top American business advocacy group has announced the formation of an India Advisory Council to enhance bilateral strategic and economic partnership.

- India Advisory Council of the US India Business Council is a group of India-based leaders of American and Indian companies that "play an important role in helping create that strategic lens to the economic partnership
- India Advisory Council has 11 members including Arun Kumar – Chairman and CEO of KPMG India, Pramath Raj Sinha – Founder and Managing Director of 9.9 media, Krish Iyer from Walmart India, Manoj Adlakha from American Express banking Corporation, Vanitha Narayan from IBM India, Nishith Desai from Nishith Desai and Associates and Prabal Chakraborty from Boston Scientific.
- Udayant Malhotra from Dynamatic Technologies Limited, Rekha Menon from Accenture and Nivruti Rai – Head of Intel India are other members of the India Advisory Council.

Pakistan approves Mandarin as one of its three official languages

On 19th February 2018, the Pakistani Senate declared Mandarin as one of the official languages of Pakistan.

- This move has been made to improve ties between Pakistan and China. It is said that, the people related to the China Pakistan Economic Corridor could communicate easily by making Mandarin as one of the official languages of Pakistan.
- In recent times, Pakistanis are showing more interest in learning Mandarin, expecting to grab job opportunities easily in Pakistan and China.

Banking & Finance

Axis Bank opens offshore banking branch at GIFT City

Private sector lender, Axis Bank announced opening of off-shore banking unit at the International Financial Services Centre (IFSC) at Gujarat International Finance Tec-City (GIFT City).

- With opening of this unit, Axis Bank will be able to provide a more comprehensive range of products to its customers with access to International financial markets.
- The offshore Banking unit is capable to trade in foreign currency in overseas markets and also with Indian Banks, raise funds in foreign currency in deposits & borrowings from non-residential sources and provide loans and liabilities products for clients.

Business

Amazon debuts food retailing in India, becomes first foreign ecommerce firm to do so

Global ecommerce major Amazon's food-retail business India Amazon Retail India will be the first overseas ecommerce food retail venture in India, having picked up the government's offer to allow 100% foreign investment in the food sector. And this company would be a seller on the Amazon India website and the backend operations would be based out of Pune.

- Amazon could take 2-3 months before rolling out its products and begin selling them online.
- The business envisages an investment of \$500 million and Amazon can sell packaged foods and also locally produced products and it many sell through both online and offline channels.
- Other online grocery players such as BigBasket, Grofers and Supr Daily have also received an approval for food retailing.

Appointments & Resigns

Vice-Admiral Pandit takes over as Commandant of INA

Vice Admiral R B Pandit, Flag-Officer-Commanding, Western Fleet at Mumbai, today took over as the Commandant of Indian Naval Academy (INA) at Ezhimala in nearby Kannur district. H

- He replaces Vice Admiral S V Bhokare who handed over responsibilities as the Commandant of the academy to Vice Admiral Pandit, after a successful tenure of over 15 months.
- He has specialised in Anti Submarine Warfare and has commanded INS Nirghat, INS Vindhyagiri, INS Jalashwa and the 22nd Missile Vessel Squadron at Mumbai.

Government appoints new EDs in Canara Bank and Vijaya Bank

On 19th February 2018, Debashish Mukherjee and Murali Ramaswami were appointed Executive Directors of Canara Bank and Vijaya Bank respectively.

- Debashish Mukherjee is currently the general manager of United Bank of India and Murali Ramaswami is the general manager of Vijaya Bank.
- As per personnel ministry's order, Debashish Mukherjee's appointment is for 3 years initially. It can be extended by 2 years after reviewing his performance.
- Murali Ramaswami's tenure is till 31st December 2020 i.e. the date of his superannuation.

Awards & Recognition

BAFTA Awards 2018 – Gary Oldman bags Leading Actor Award

71st British Academy Film Awards ceremony, popularly referred to as BAFTA Awards 2018 was held on February 18, 2018 in London, United Kingdom. The ceremony was hosted by English actress Joanna Lumley.

- Drama film, 'Three Billboards Outside Ebbing Missouri' got the most awards (in 5 categories), while 'The Shape of Water' was credited with most nominations (in 12 categories).
- English Actor, Gary Oldman won the Leading Actor Award for playing British Prime Minister Winston Churchill in the film "Darkest Hour."

Science & Technology

Robots to soon clean up manholes in Kerala

In a first in Kerala, the state government will soon be utilising the services of Robots to clean sewer holes.

- The trial runs of the robot, developed by a startup company, Genrobotics, have been successfully held recently and the product will be launched next week
- The robot, equipped with Wi-Fi, Blue Tooth and control panels has four limbs and a bucket system attached to a spider web looking extension to scoop out the waste from sewers.
- The project is supported by KWA, which has joined hands with Kerala start up mission to transform new ideas into practical technologies for addressing issues relating to pipe leakage and sanitation.
- Initially, the services of the robot, christened 'Bandicoot' will be utilised in Thiruvananthapuram, which has over 5,000 manholes.

Isro plans to launch AstroSat-2

To conduct further studies on astronomy and astrophysics, Indian Space Research Organisation (Isro) is planning to launch India's second AstroSat-2.

- Isro had sought proposals from institutions in astronomy for the development of scientific instruments on February 3.
- Through Astrosat, one can conduct studies on astrophysical objects from nearby solar system to distant stars, timing studies of pulsations of hot white dwarfs and active galactic nuclei.
- Astrosat is generally described as India's version of the Hubble telescope that Nasa had put in space in 1990.

Israel successfully tests Arrow-3 advanced missile defence system

On 19th February 2018, Israel announced that it has successfully tested Arrow-3 advanced missile defence system.

- Arrow-3 is an advanced missile defence system having the ability to defend against ballistic missile threats outside the atmosphere.
- Arrow-3 is a part of Israel's multi-layered system that is being developed to defend against short and mid-range rockets fired from Gaza Strip, Lebanon and long-range missiles from Iran. Iron Dome, David's Sling, and the Arrow-2 systems are a part of it.

- It has been developed by Israel Aerospace Industries and Boeing. It started operations in January 2017.

Sports

Bhuvneshwar Kumar first Indian to take a 5-wicket haul in all three formats in international cricket

Bhuvneshwar Kumar, a fast bowler, has become the first Indian bowler to take a five-wicket haul in all three formats in international cricket.

- Bhuvneshwar Kumar made this record by taking his first T20I five-wicket haul at the first T20I against South Africa at the Wanderers Stadium, Johannesburg, on 18th February 2018.
- India won the match by 28 runs. Bhuvneshwar Kumar was awarded the man-of-the-match award.
- He has also become the second Indian to take a five-wicket haul in T20Is after Yuzvendra Chahal.

Obituary

Renowned violinist MS Anantharaman passes away

On 19th February 2018, M S Anantharaman, a popular violinist, passed away

- He was associated with the Parur School of Music.
- His father was Sundaram Iyer, a great violinist. His brother M S Gopalakrishnan was also a violinist.
- He familiarised the Parur bani along with his brother.

Important Days

India is Global Host for World Environment Day 2018

India will be the Global Host for World Environment Day (WED) 2018 which is observed annually on 5 June. The central theme for this year is 'Plastic Pollution'. In this regard, Letter of Intent (LoI) was signed between India and UN Environment in New Delhi.

- WED 2018 will be celebrated across the length and breadth of the country.
- It will involve all States and Union Territories, districts, local bodies and organizations.
- Moreover, a week-long environmental awareness campaign and pollution mitigation activities will be planned in Delhi and other parts of the country.
- World Environment Day (WED) observed annually on 5 June for encouraging worldwide awareness and action for the protection of our environment.
- It was established by United Nations General Assembly to mark opening of United Nations Conference on the Human Environment in 1972.
- WED serves as a flagship campaign for raising awareness on emerging environmental issues from marine pollution, human overpopulation, and global warming, to sustainable consumption and wildlife crime.

World Day of Social Justice – February 20

On 20th February 2018, World Day of Social Justice was observed all over the world.

- On 26th November 2007, the UN General Assembly declared 20 February as the World Day of Social Justice. The World Day of Social Justice is an annual observance.
- This day is celebrated to improve efforts to manage issues like poverty, exclusion and unemployment.
- The theme for World Day of Social Justice 2018 is: Workers on the Move: the Quest for Social Justice.