

National Current Affairs

Lok Sabha passes Payment of Gratuity (Amendment) Bill, 2017

The Lok Sabha has passed Payment of Gratuity (Amendment) Bill, 2017 to empower government to fix period of maternity leave and tax-free gratuity amount with an executive order. The Bill seeks to amend the Payment of Gratuity Act, 1972.

- It allows for payment of gratuity to employees in any establishment, factory, mine, oilfield, plantation, port, railways, company, or shop employing 10 or more workers.
- Under it, employees are paid gratuity if they have provided at least 5 years of continuous service at time of termination.
- The Bill empowers central government to notify period of maternity leave eligible for qualifying as continuous service and determine amount of gratuity available to employees.
- The Bill removes the existing ceiling of Rs 10 lakh amount of gratuity payable to an employee and states that the ceiling may be notified by the central government.

Lok Sabha passes Specific Relief (Amendment) Bill, 2017

The Lok Sabha has passed Specific Relief (Amendment) Bill, 2017 to further ease procedures for doing business in the country. The Bill seeks to amend the Specific Relief Act, 1963.

- Specific performance: The Bill seeks to remove conditions of specific performance is limited right, which may be given by court at its discretion and permit specific performance by courts as general rule.
- It adds limited liability partnership (LLP), a new entity formed from amalgamation of two existing LLPs, one of which may have entered into a contract before the amalgamation.
- Substituted performance: The Bill gives affected party (i.e. party whose contract has not been performed by other party) option to arrange for performance of contract by third party or by his own agency (substituted performance).
- Injunctions: It prevent courts from granting injunctions in contracts related to infrastructure projects, if such injunction hinder or delay completion of project in infrastructure sectors and their sub-sectors like transport, energy, water and sanitation, communication and social and commercial infrastructure. The central government may amend list of sectors through notification.
- Special Courts: It allows state government to designate certain civil courts as Special Courts in consultation with Chief Justice of High Court.
- Recovery of possession: It permits person through whom dispossessed got possession of immovable property, to file a suit for recovery.

- Experts: It inserts new provision for engaging technical experts in suits where expert opinion may be needed.

Haryana passes bill for death penalty for child rapists

The Haryana Assembly unanimously passed Criminal Law (Haryana Amendment) Bill, 2018 providing for death penalty for convicts found guilty of raping girls aged 12 years or less. With this, Haryana became third state, after Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan to have provision of capital punishment for such sexual offenders.

- The Bill amends Indian Penal Code (IPC) 1860, the Code of Criminal Procedure (CrPC) 1973 and Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act, 2012.
- It inserts section 376-AA in IPC. It provides punishment of death or rigorous imprisonment of not less than 14 years in case of rape of girl up to 12 years of age. This punishment may extend to imprisonment for life that is for remainder period of person's natural life.
- It also inserts section 376-D in IPC. Under it, if girl upto 12 years of age is raped by one or more persons constituting group, each of those persons shall be deemed to have committed offence of rape and will be punished with death or rigorous imprisonment for term which will not be less than 20 years, but which may extend to life along with fine.
- It also makes existing criminal laws related to other sexual offences more stringent. The punishment under Section 354 of IPC (Assault or criminal force against woman with intent to outrage her modesty) will not be less than 2 years (earlier not less than 1 year) but may extend up to 7 years (earlier up to 5 years).

Arunachal Pradesh Assembly passes bill to have two-tier Panchayati Raj

Arunachal Pradesh Assembly passed Panchayati Raj (Amendment) Bill 2018 to do away with the Anchal Samiti, the intermediate level of the three-tier panchayati raj system and set up a two-tier system in the state.

- This is being done as per 73rd Amendment of Constitution that enables state having less than 20 lakh population not to have intermediate level and Arunachal has population of 13.84 lakh. Three-tier panchayati raj institutions were set up in state in 2003, 2008 and 2013, and elections for next five-year term were due in April-May 2018.
- The purpose of setting up two-tier panchayati raj system in state is to standardise use of financial resources due to poor resource base. Moreover, it also seeks to avoid delay in passing plans and policies as they delayed at Anchal Samiti level (intermediate level).

- In two-tier panchayati raj system, planning and execution of schemes will be faster as there will be direct connection between Gram Panchayats and Zilla Parishads, the village and district levels of panchayati raj system.
- In two-tier system, even strength of elected members will be reduced, thus helping to save money for conducting polls and functional costs on Anchal Samities. The revenue saved can be utilised for developmental activities and strengthening panchayats.

LaQshya program launched to improve quality of maternity care

The Ministry of Health and Family Welfare launched LaQshya program aimed at improving quality of maternity care in labour room and maternity Operation Theatre (OT). It is being implemented to 'fast-track' interventions for achieving tangible results.

- The program aims to improve quality of care for pregnant women in labour room, maternity Operation Theatre and Obstetrics Intensive Care Units (ICUs) and High Dependency Units (HDUs). It is implemented at all Medical College Hospitals, District Hospitals and First Referral Unit (FRU) and Community Health Center (CHCs).
- Under it, multi-pronged strategy has been adopted such as improving infrastructure up-gradation, ensuring availability of essential equipment, providing adequate human resources, capacity building of health care workers and improving quality processes in labour room.
- It will benefit every pregnant woman and new-born delivering in public health institutions.
- It will reduce maternal and newborn morbidity and mortality.
- It will improve quality of care during delivery and immediate post-partum period and enhance satisfaction of beneficiaries.
- It will provide Respectful Maternity Care (RMC) to all pregnant women attending public health facilities.

HRD Ministry to set up 'Innovation Cell'

Union Minister Prakash Javadekar has announced the setting up of an 'Innovation Cell' in the Ministry of Human and Resource Development (HRD) to boost new ideas about promoting innovation in the country.

- The Union Minister announced this after a high-level review meeting on Wednesday which deliberated upon the need for such a cell after India moved six ranks up the Global Innovation Index Ranking.
- Setting up of Innovation Cell in the Ministry will lead to more focused attention on innovation and research efforts

Environment Ministry gives nod to Neutrino project

The Ministry of Environment and Forests (MoEF's) has given environmental clearance to India-based Neutrino Observatory (INO) project to be set up in Bodi West hills in Tamil Nadu. The approval was given by MoEF's Expert Appraisal Committee (EAC) after taking up INO project issue as special cas..

- The project proponents during meeting with EAC have clarified that studies showed there will be no impact of blasting on any habitation in the vicinity due to INO project. It was informed also that there was no scope for radioactivity and leaching of water and these have been explained to courts.
- EAC also stipulated specific conditions after granting clearance of which two are key for project to take off.
- One is consent to establish and operate to be obtained from Tamil Nadu Pollution Control Board (TNPCB).

Petroleum Minister inaugurates Delhi Energy Dialogue 2018

Dharmendra Debendra Pradhan, Minister for Petroleum and Natural Gas, Government of India, inaugurated the first edition of Delhi Energy Dialogue (DED) 2018.

- The event was organised by Ashden India Collective (AIC) in alliance with the Climate Parliament and TERI.
- Delhi Energy Dialogue 2018 brought together all the stakeholders in the field of energy and power, on a common platform to deliberate on key developments and challenges for 'energy for all' in India.
- The industry and energy leaders, along with the policy makers, discussed the current scenario, roadmap to achieve the target for renewable energy generation of 175 Gigawatt by 2022, opportunities and challenges.

International Current Affairs

India ranks 78th on WEF Energy Transition Index

India was ranked at 78th among 114 countries on World Economic Forum's (WEF) Energy Transition Index (ETI) released as part of report titled Fostering Effective Energy Transition.

- The index ranks countries on how well they are able to balance energy security and access with environmental sustainability and affordability.

- Top 10 countries in 2018 ETI: Sweden (1st), Norway (2nd), Switzerland (3rd), Finland (4th), Denmark (5th), Netherlands (6th), the UK (7th), Austria (8th), France (9th) and Iceland (10th). BRICS Countries in ETI: Brazil (38th), Russia (70th) and China (76th). India related facts.
- According to report, India has taken bold measures to improve energy access, energy efficiency and to improve deployment of renewable sources of energy.
- However, energy transition in India will require large investments and enabling environment along with robust regulatory frameworks to support transition.
- In 2018 ETI, India ranks in third performance quartile and third readiness quartile, making it emerging country that is approaching the leapfrog category.
- Interestingly, India has improved its performance score by 5.6 percentage points between 2013 and 2018 period, mainly with improved energy access, reduced subsidies and reduced import costs. India has largest government-mandated renewable energy programme, with target of 175 GW renewable energy capacity by 2022, and it announced plans to shift completely to electric vehicles by 2030.

US challenges India's export subsidy programmes at WTO

The US Trade Representative (USTR) has challenged Indian export subsidy schemes at World Trade Organisation (WTO), saying these programmes harm its manufacturing sector and workers by creating an uneven playing field.

- According to USTR, at least half a dozen Indian programmes provide financial benefits to Indian exporters, which allow them to sell their goods more cheaply to detriment of US workers and manufacturers.
- These programs are Merchandise Exports from India Scheme (MEIS), Export Oriented Units Scheme and sector specific schemes, including Electronics Hardware Technology Parks Scheme, Special Economic Zones (SEZs), Export Promotion Capital Goods Scheme (EPCGS) and Duty Free Imports for Exporters Programme.
- It has alleged that through these programmes, India has given exemption from certain duties, taxes, and fees which benefits numerous exporters, including producers of steel products, pharmaceuticals, chemicals, information technology products, textiles, and apparel.
- It also has alleged that earlier India was under limited exception rule under WTO specified for developing countries.
- It allowed specified countries to continue to provide export subsidies temporarily until they reach defined economic benchmark.
- But now it has surpassed benchmark in 2015. India's exemption has expired, but India has not withdrawn its export subsidies and in fact it has increased size and scope of these programs.

Qatar pledges \$50mn funding for UNRWA

Qatar has announced a \$50mn donation to the United Nations agency that helps Palestinian refugees.

- The announcement was made during a donors' conference of the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) held at the headquarters of the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) in Rome.
- Among the other countries that had offered more money were France, Canada, Switzerland, Turkey, New Zealand, Norway, South Korea, Mexico, Slovakia and India, he said.
- UNRWA operates in the Israeli-occupied West Bank, in Gaza, Syria, Lebanon and Jordan.
- It runs 710 schools, its doctors carry out a total 9mn consultancies a year and it feeds some 1.7mn people - mostly in the Gaza Strip.

Sierra Leone just ran the first blockchain-based election

The citizens of Sierra Leone went to the polls on March 7 but this time something was different: the country recorded votes at 70% of the polling to the blockchain using a technology that is the first of its kind in actual practice.

- The tech, created by Leonardo Gammar of Agora, anonymously stored votes in an immutable ledger, thereby offering instant access to the election results.
- Anonymized votes/ballots are being recorded on Agora's blockchain, which will be publicly available for any interested party to review, count and validate. This is the first time a government election is using blockchain technology.

Banking & Finance

Sebi raises currency derivative trade limit to \$100 mn

Capital markets regulator Sebi today raised the exposure limit under exchange-traded currency derivatives trading for residents and FPIs to USD 100 million across all currency pairs involving the Indian rupee.

- The move will help entities engaged in forex transactions to maintain their currency risks in a better manner.

- The decision comes after the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) in February raised these limits, beyond which market participants would be required to establish proof of underlying exposure in the currency derivatives segment.

Appointments & Resigns

Nadda elected unopposed to Rajya Sabha from Himachal Pradesh

Union minister J P Nadda was elected unopposed to the Rajya Sabha from the lone seat in Himachal Pradesh. There was no other candidate in the fray.

- Nadda is fourth leader after C L Verma, Sushil Barongpa and Viplov Thakur to get elected twice to Rajya Sabha from Himachal Pradesh.

Slovenian PM Cerar resigns as pressure mounts ahead of election

Slovenian Prime Minister Miro Cerar resigned hours after a key investment project hit a legal obstacle, saying he had also had enough of obstruction from his coalition partners and pressure from trade unions.

- Cerar said he would step down in the wake of a Supreme Court decision to annul the result of a September referendum that approved a 1-billion-euro railway project, the centre-left government's biggest investment programme.

Awards & Recognition

MDWS Bags Award for best implementation of E-office

The Union Minister of State (Independent Charge) of the Ministry of Personnel, Public Grievances & Pensions, Dr Jitendra Singh, presented a Certificate of Appreciation to Ministry of Drinking Water and Sanitation for implementation of e-office software.

- E-Office is one of the Mission-mode Projects under the Digital India programme. The e-Office solution enables core operations of the Government at all levels to be

performed in a 'paper-less' environment, including the E-leave, E-tour, Knowledge Management, Notice Board, Download Forms, Inventory Control etc.

- The Ministry of Drinking Water and Sanitation has the distinction of making 100 percent use of e-Office.
- In the Ministry of Drinking Water and Sanitation, the entire e-office suite was implemented in the first week of December, 2014 and since then it is being used by all stake holders in the Ministry.
- All the files in the Ministry are e-files and these have been successfully handled through this system for over three years now, when the transition to electronic mode first took place.

Veteran actress Simi Garewal wins UK film festival award

Veteran actress and talk show host Simi Garewal has been felicitated with a "UK Golden Flame Award" for her contribution to Indian cinema.

- The 70-year-old actress received the award at the opening ceremony of the annual Tongues of Fire UK Asian Film Festival in London
- Marking 100 years of women winning the right to vote in the UK, the theme of the 2018 film festival has been classified as "F-Rated" a special rating assigned to films that have been recognised for their progressive representation of women, or those with women behind the camera.

Science & Technology

Sach-Gaurav: India's first cloned Assamese buffalo born

The Central Institute for Research on Buffaloes (CIRB) has claimed that India's first cloned Assamese buffalo male calf named Sach-Gaurav was born in Hisar, Haryana. It was born to Murrah buffalo, at Hi Tech Sach Dairy Farm, 100 kms from cloning laboratory, making it first buffalo calf to be born in.

- This is second cloned male buffalo produced by ICAR-CIRB after Hisar-Gaurav, born in December 2015.
- The Sach-Gaurav calf was produced using unique methods and was delivered through normal delivery.
- The genotype of calf was confirmed by microsatellite analysis (parentage verification) and chromosome analysis.

China develops artificial heart with rocket technology

Chinese scientists have developed artificial heart using rocket technology and it is currently undergoing thorough testing experiments on animals.

- The heart was developed jointly by China Academy of Launch Vehicle Technology (CALT) and Teda International Cardiovascular Hospital in North China's Tianjin.
- The artificial heart uses magnetic and fluid levitation from rocket system.
- This technology can reduce friction in device to increase working efficiency and extend life span of power generator.
- This technology used can reduce damage to the blood and enable blood pump to work longer.

Sports

KL Rahul named Wisden India Almanack's Cricketer of the Year

KL Rahul is the 'Cricketer of the Year' in the sixth edition of Wisden India Almanack, which has just been released.

- The Almanack pays a tribute to India's women cricketers, with a wonderful cover picture of celebration at the World Cup.
- Deepti Sharma, a star at the World Cup is one of the 'Cricketers of the Year' while Shantha Rangaswamy, India's first woman superstar, has been inducted into the Wisden India Hall of Fame alongside Erapalli Prasanna.
- Priyank Panchal, Hasan Ali and Tamim Iqbal are the other Cricketers of the Year.

Tommy Haas announces his retirement from tennis

Former world number two tennis player Tommy Haas officially announced his retirement from tennis, at the BNP Paribas Open in Indian Wells on Thursday, ending a career that spanned more than two decades.

- The German won 15 titles on the ATP Tour, the last two coming in 2013 when he triumphed in Munich and Vienna. He reached a career-high ranking of number two in 2002 and made a total of 28 final appearances.
- Haas, who turned professional in 1996, reached the Australian Open semi-finals three times - in 1999, 2002 and 2007 - as well as the last-four at Wimbledon in 2009.

- Haas, who won the silver medal for Germany at the 2000 Sydney Olympics, finishes his career with 569 wins - the last of which was a memorable victory over Federer at Stuttgart last year.

Sanjivani Jadhav wins bronze in Asian Cross Country Championship

India's promising long distance runner Sanjivani Jadhav clinched a bronze in women's 8km cross country race while the country also collected another medal of same colour in the team event.

- The 20-year-old Sanjivani clocked 28 minute 19 seconds to cover the 8km distance, behind Li Dan (28:03) of China and Abe Yukari (28:06) of Japan in the 14th Asian Cross Country Championship.
- The Indian women's team of Sanjivani, Swati Gadhave, Jhuma Khatun and Lalita Babar also won a bronze. The performance of three best finishers of a country in the individual race is considered for the team medal.

Important Days

World Sleep Day is March 16, 2018

World Sleep Day is an annual event, intended to be a celebration of sleep and a call to action on important issues related to sleep, including medicine, education, social aspects and driving.

- It is organized by the World Sleep Day Committee of World Sleep Society (founded by WASM and WSF) and aims to lessen the burden of sleep problems on society through better prevention and management of sleep disorders.
- World Sleep Day is held the Friday before Spring Vernal Equinox of each year. Future dates will be: March 16, 2018, March 15, 2019 and March 14, 2020.