

National Current Affairs

UGC grants full autonomy to 62 higher educational institutes

The University Grants Commission (UGC) approved proposal to grant full autonomy to 62 higher educational institutions which have maintained high standards of excellence under Autonomous Colleges Regulation.

- These 62 higher educational institutions include 5 central universities, 21 state universities, 26 private universities and 10 other colleges.
- The complete autonomy will allow these higher educational institutions to start new courses, new departments, new programmes, skill courses, off campuses, research parks, appoint foreign faculty, take foreign students, offer variable incentive packages and introduce online distance learning.
- They can also get into academic collaboration with top five hundred universities of the world and can also decide their admission procedure, fee structure and curriculum, among others.
- The 10 colleges which have been granted autonomy will have full freedom but not degree awarding powers.
- These colleges will be free to conduct admissions, decide curriculum, conduct exams on their own and evaluate them and declare results. However, degrees awarded will have university name along with theirs.

Government launches Sand Mining Framework to check illegal extraction

The Union Ministry of Mines has launched Sand Mining Framework to help states deal with the sand mining issues, including demand supply deficit and illegal extraction. It was launched at the third National Conclave on Mines & Minerals held in New Delhi.

- The main objective of framework is to assist states in arriving at best possible options before them.
- It also seeks to addresses issues of state objectives, demand-supply assessment and measures to sand availability, allocation model, transportation and monitoring mechanism.
- Besides, it also includes suggestions for faster clearances and approvals and using its interventions in complete process chain of sand mining. It also lays emphasis on alternatives of sand i.e. manufactured sand, import of sand etc.

NITI Aayog, Piramal Foundation ink agreement to improve health, education in Aspirational Districts

NITI Aayog and Piramal Foundation have inked Statement of Intent (SoI) to work closely with District Collectors and key officers of 'Aspirational Districts' to support their transformation in terms of healthcare, education and nutrition. The collaboration is for four years with the option to continue, based on mutual agreement.

- Under the SoI with NITI Aayog, Piramal Foundation will work in close conjunction with district administration, Central Prabhari Officers, State Prabhari Officers, state government and concerned Central ministries to improve identified indicators by strengthening existing public systems specifically in health and nutrition and education sectors.
- Piramal Foundation will also provide support by focusing on leadership development, change management, technology integration and implementing various innovative practices.

National Cultural Audiovisual Archives becomes world's first Trusted Digital Repository

The National Cultural Audiovisual Archives (NCAA) project of Ministry of Culture was certified as world's first Trusted Digital Repository as per ISO 16363:2012 standard. The certification was granted by Primary Trustworthy Digital Repository Authorisation Body Ltd. (PTAB), United Kingdom.

- NCAA is implemented by Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts (IGNCA).
- Its primary objective is to identify and preserve cultural heritage of India available in audiovisual form through process of digitization and make it accessible to the people.
- The digitization and metadata standards followed for NCAA are in parity with international standards within overall framework of OAIS (Open Archival Information System) model.

Government to set up Plastic Park in Jharkhand's Deoghar District

The Union Ministry of Chemicals & Fertilizers has approved proposal of setting up of Plastic Park in Deoghar District, Jharkhand. The project will be set up at cost of Rs.120 crores in an area of 150 acres.

- Moreover, it will also set up Central Institute for Plastic Engineering & Technology (CIPET) and Plastic Recycling unit at Deoghar.
- The plastic park will manufacture range of polymer products including woven sacks, moulded furniture, water tanks, bottles, pipes mosquito nets, etc.
- It will have great potential for attracting investment for setting up ecosystem for plastic industry and generate employment opportunities for the local populace.

- The project is likely to provide direct employment generation to about 6000 people and indirect employment to over 30000 people. Jharkhand Government will facilitate land and building infrastructure for this project and also to set up Central Institute for Plastic Engineering & Technology (CIPET) alongside the park.
- The Plastic Park, CIPET and Plastic Recycling unit at Deoghar will build an ecosystem that will encourage setting up of Plastic Industry, thereby making it 'Plastic Hub' in the future.

Ministry of Agriculture and Ministry of Skill Development ink MoU on skill development at KVKs

The Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers' Welfare and Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship have signed MoU to conduct skill development training programmes for agriculture and allied sector.

- These skill development training programmes will be conducted at Krishi Vigyan Kendra (KVKs).
- The MoU will help to increase cooperation between both ministries and help in fulfilling Government's dream of "Kaushal Bharat-Kushal Bharat".
- It will help to increase agricultural productivity, post-harvest management and fair-prices to the farmers for their produce, lower risk in agriculture and strengthen and develop other aspects of farmers' income such as horticulture, animal husbandry, beekeeping, dairying, fisheries etc.

ICFRE and TIFAC ink MoU for supporting Forest Based Communities

The Indian Council of Forestry Research and Education (ICFRE) and Technology Information, Forecasting & Assessment Council (TIFAC) have signed MoU to provide livelihood opportunities and augment income of forest based communities. The MoU will be valid for period of 10 years.

- The MoU will help to open up gate of synergy and collaboration between two organisations in areas of forest technology, extension and commercialization to various stakeholder including farmers, industries and others.
- It will assist industries to optimize utilization of forest based resources with access of technology to different users.
- Through this collaboration, TIFAC will help ICFRE to refine and up-scale the technologies developed, take technologies to end users including farmers, state forest departments, forest based industries and forest dependent communities in more effective manner.
- Features of MoU:
 - Prioritization of technologies developed by ICFRE in consultation with stakeholders.

- Patent searching and filing in field of forestry and allied subjects.
- Identify technology gaps and commercialization of technologies.
- Forest based technologies extension and transfer through stakeholder consultations.
- Create IPR awareness in field of forestry and environment including wood science and allied subjects for ICFRE and its institutes.

Nitin Gadkari inaugurates Inland Ferry Services in Goa

Union Minister of Road Transport and Highways, Shipping and Water Resources, River Development and Ganga Rejuvenation Shri Nitin Gadkari inaugurated the Inland ferry services in the port city of Vasco in Goa.

- The ferry services will be from Baina to Panaji and will reduce the duration of time travel to 20 minutes as compared to 1 hour.
- The inland ferry services will boost the tourism industry of the state by providing an eco friendly mode of transportation to passengers, tourists and also for movement of goods.

India Post releases special cover on Stephen Hawking

India Post paid tribute to theoretical physicist and cosmologist Stephen Hawking by issuing a special cover on him.

- Chief Post Master General (CPMG) of Maharashtra and Goa Circle H C Agrawal and Director of the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research (TIFR) Dr Sandip Trivedi jointly issued the special cover at an event held in the GPO.
- The postal department was paying tribute to the legendary scientist by releasing the special cover in all its 22 Circles.

JK cabinet okays adoption of RWBCIS for horticulture crops

The Jammu and Kashmir cabinet gave its in-principle approval for adopting the Restructured Weather Based Crop Insurance Scheme (RWBCIS) for horticulture crops such as apple and saffron. It would be in addition to the Pradhan Mantri Fasal Bima Yojana as per the guidelines circulated by the Centre with effect from Kharif season 2016,

- The cabinet directed the agriculture production department to concretise the RWBCIS scheme in consultation with the finance and the planning development and monitoring departments before final rollout.
- The RWBCIS uses weather parameters as "proxy" for crop yields in compensating the cultivators for deemed crop losses.

- Pay-out structures are developed to the extent of losses deemed to have been suffered using the weather triggers.
- The objective of RWBCIS is to provide insurance coverage and financial support to farmers in the event of failure of any of the notified crops as a result of adverse weather incidences.

Punjab to ban hookah bars

The Punjab government has decided to impose a permanent ban on hookah bars in the State, instead of issuing temporary orders against them every two months. The move is aimed at reducing the use of tobacco in various forms.

- The State Cabinet, in a meeting, approved an amendment to the Cigarette and Other Tobacco Products (Prohibition of Advertisement and Regulation of Trade and Commerce, Production, Supply and Distribution) Act, 2003 (COTPA 2003), for the prevention and control of diseases caused by the use of tobacco products.
- The amendment would result in a complete ban on the running of hookah bars in the State. The proposed amendment will be placed before the Legislative Assembly and, after being passed by the House, will be reserved for the assent of the President of India
- The Cabinet has also decided to introduce a Bill for regularisation of unauthorised colonies, plots and buildings in the Budget Session that is slated to start from Tuesday (March 20).
- The Cabinet cleared the decks for its members to pay their own income tax beginning March 2018.
- It was also decided that MBBS doctors will now get their full salaries, including all allowances, during probation period.

International Current Affairs

Informal WTO ministerial meeting begins with 52 nations

Delegates from as many as 52 countries, including the US and China, are participating in the informal meeting of the WTO being held amid increasing protectionism in global trade.

- India has called this meeting to explore options to reinvigorate the World Trade Organisation (WTO).
- Informal discussions will continue through the day and the delegates will explore in detail the option for reinvigorating the WTO.

- The meeting assumes significance as the global trade appears fragile with certain developed countries threatening to retaliate the duty hike on steel and aluminium products by the Trump administration.

Vienna tops world's most livable cities; Baghdad last

For the ninth year in a row, Vienna, Austria, was ranked as the best city on the planet to live in, according to one of the world's largest human resourcing firms.

- Zurich, Switzerland, was ranked second while Auckland, New Zealand, and Munich, Germany, tied for third. Vancouver, Canada, is fifth.
- The highest ranking city in the United States is San Francisco, in 30th place. Boston, Honolulu, Seattle and New York City followed as U.S. cities on the list.
- In 2018, Mercer provided a separate ranking for City Sanitation. Honolulu took the first sanitation spot, which serves as an important factor in a city's attractiveness.
- Dubai ranked No. 74, topping the list of all cities in the Middle East, and Abu Dhabi, U.A.E., ranked No. 77 as the top city in Africa.
- Cities like Damascus, Syria, Sana'a, Yemen, and Baghdad, Iraq, were the region's three lowest-ranked cities for quality of life -- with the Iraqi capital at the very bottom of the list, at 231.
- Singapore remains the highest ranked city in Asia at No. 25, while Montevideo, Uruguay, was rated highest in South America.

Banking & Finance

Swiggy Partners with ICICI Bank, launches UPI-Based Digital Payment Service

Swiggy, online food ordering and delivery platform has partnered with ICICI Bank to roll out two innovative digital solutions to facilitate a convenient and hassle-free way for its delivery partners to transfer funds.

- This includes a Unified Payment Interface (UPI) based solution for instant fund transfers on-the-go and an option for facilitating cash deposits at automated Cash Deposit Machines (CDM) available at ICICI Bank branches and ATM locations across the country.
- Swiggy's delivery partners will have their own UPI handle (VPA), to which they can link their savings bank account and start transacting by using any UPI-enabled app like ICICI Bank 'Pockets', 'BHIM', 'Google Tez', 'PhonePe', 'Paytm' among others.
- ICICI Bank will credit the beneficiary's (Swiggy's) account instantly as well as send the delivery partner's details to Swiggy, enabling it to update the collection against the

delivery partner instantly. An immediate confirmation of the transfer of money is sent to the delivery partner as well.

Business

Government scraps export duty on sugar

The Central Board of Excise and Customs (CBEC) under Ministry of Finance has scrapped export duty of 20% on raw and refined sugar to boost shipments.

- The removal of export duty will help to export excess sugar output in India for sugar season 2017-18.
This will also prevent further price erosion of the domestic sugar prices.
- In February 2018, Government had doubled import duty on sugar to 100% and restricted sale by mills to keep a checking on falling prices.

Amazon vaults ahead of Google parent Alphabet in market value for the first time

Amazon.com Inc. vaulted ahead of internet rival Alphabet Inc. in market value for the first time, a sign of growing investor optimism about the prospects for the world's largest online retailer as it reaches into new markets such as groceries, health insurance and consumer devices.

- Shares of the Seattle-based e-commerce giant rose 2.7 per cent at the close in New York on Tuesday, giving it a market capitalization of US\$768 billion. That made it the world's second-most valuable publicly traded company behind Apple Inc.
- Google parent Alphabet was little changed, putting its value at US\$762.6 billion.

Indian Oil Corporation starts home delivery service of diesel

IOC is now going to deliver diesel at the doorstep of Pune residents.

- The tanker, fitted with a fuel dispenser is Fuel @ Doorstep.
- However, as of now, this service has been started only for diesel and not for petrol due to its inflammable properties
- According to a report by Financial Express, companies are working with PESO to make home delivery of petrol feasible.
- Although an intriguing initiative, IOC's home delivery of diesel is not the first of its kind. In June 2017, Bengaluru-based startup ANB fuels started a similar service but

were stopped by PESO that cited the dangers of transporting fuel, referring to it as unsafe practice.

Science & Technology

Greece launches its first space agency

Greece launched its first space agency as an effort to rebuild the ailing economy as it exits a severe eight-year debt crisis.

- Entering into the space sector can make Greece stronger and more productive, increasing the country's standing in many ways
- Greece does not intend to start its own space exploration programme, but to fill in a gap and try to make the most of its participation in the European Space Agency (ESA),
- Greece has been a member of ESA since 2005 and has invested millions of euros in ESA's research programmes but was one of the few member states lacking a national institution.

Environment

Sudan, the world's last male northern white rhino, dies aged 45

Sudan, the last male northern white rhino, has died in Kenya at the age of 45, after becoming a symbol of efforts to save his subspecies from extinction, a fate that only science can now prevent.

- When Sudan was born in 1973 in the wild in Shambe, South Sudan, there were about 700 of his kind left in existence.
- At his death, there are only two females remaining alive and the hope that in-vitro fertilisation (IVF) techniques will advance enough to preserve the sub-species.

Obituary

Les Payne, Pulitzer Prize-Winner And NABJ Founder, Dies At 76

Les Payne, a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist who spent his career at Newsday expanding coverage beyond local issues to include international stories first as a reporter, then as a columnist and editor — all while vehemently crusading for racial equality — has died at his home in Harlem, N.Y.

- Over nearly four decades, Payne, who was born in the Jim Crow South, proudly talked about his career in journalism as a calling — and a mandate to bring about social change.

Senior journalist Sunil Sharma dies

- Senior journalist Sunil Sharma today succumbed to a heart attack. Sharma was working as the bureau chief of Hindi daily 'Divya Himachal'.

Social activist Chandranath passes away

Social activist C R Chandradath passed away.

- Known as Dathu Mash, Chandradath was director of Thrissur-based Centre of Science and Technology for Rural Development (COSTFORD), an institute, founded by late Chief Minister C Achutha Menon to provide technological assistance to people in alternative building technology.

Important Days

BIRAC celebrates its 6th Foundation Day

The Biotechnology Industry Research Assistance Council (BIRAC) celebrated its sixth Foundation Day.

- The observance of the day was themed around 'Sustaining Innovation – A Market Driven Pathway'. The event was attended by large number of dignitaries from scientific and industry sectors both from within country and overseas.
- Since its inception, BIRAC has supported over 650 projects, more than 500 start-ups and entrepreneurs and 30 incubators across the country.
- It has resulted in development of over 100 products and technologies and 150 Intellectual property (IP) rights being generated.

- It has launched over 10 flagship schemes that are supported by funding from Department of Biotechnology (DBT), and manages 7 collaboratively funded programs with international partners. It tries to galvanize social impact by piloting research and extension services within series of thematic calls and other global definite initiatives to improve public health and beyond.

World Sparrow Day celebrated in Khammam - 21 March

To create awareness about importance of sparrows in the ecosystem, the management and students of the Resonance High School celebrated 'World Sparrow Day' on school premises in Khammam.

- Nature Forever Society, an NGO, started a worldwide campaign from 2009 and has been celebrating 'World Sparrow Day' every year on March 21.

International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination - 21 March

The International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination is observed annually on 21 March.

- On that day, in 1960, police opened fire and killed 69 people at a peaceful demonstration in Sharpeville, South Africa, against the apartheid pass laws. Proclaiming the day in 1966, the United Nations General Assembly called on the international community to redouble its efforts to eliminate all forms of racial discrimination.
- 2018 Theme: Promoting tolerance, inclusion, unity and respect for diversity in the context of combating racial discrimination

International Day of Forests - 21 March

The International Day of Forests was established on the 21st day of March, by resolution of the United Nations General Assembly on November 28, 2012

- This global celebration of forests provides a platform to raise awareness of the importance of all types of woodlands and trees, and celebrate the ways in which they sustain and protect us.
- 2018 Theme: Forests and Sustainable Cities

World Down Syndrome Day - 21 March

World Down Syndrome Day (WDSD) is observed on March 21.

- On this day, people with Down syndrome and those who live and work with them throughout the world organize and participate in activities and events to raise public awareness and create a single global voice for advocating for the rights, inclusion and well being of people with Down syndrome.

World Poetry Day - 21 March

In celebrating World Poetry Day, March 21, UNESCO recognizes the unique ability of poetry to capture the creative spirit of the human mind.

- A decision to proclaim 21 March as World Poetry Day was adopted during UNESCO's 30th session held in Paris in 1999.
- One of the main objectives of the Day is to support linguistic diversity through poetic expression and to offer endangered languages the opportunity to be heard within their communities.
- The observance of World Poetry Day is also meant to encourage a return to the oral tradition of poetry recitals, to promote the teaching of poetry, to restore a dialogue between poetry and the other arts such as theatre, dance, music and painting, and to support small publishers and create an attractive image of poetry in the media, so that the art of poetry will no longer be considered an outdated form of art, but one which enables society as a whole to regain and assert its identity.

Books & Authors

Indian Army releases book on Paramveer Chakra Awardees : Paramveer Parwane

General Bipin Rawat, Chief of the Army Staff released a book on Paramveer Chakra Awardees - 'Paramveer Parwane' on 20 March 2018.

- The book illustrates the bravery of Paramveer Chakra Awardees from 1947 to 1965 and is written by Dr Prabhakaran Jain published by Medha Books.
- The book has eleven short stories, poems, and songs highlighting the history of the battles in which the brave soldiers sacrificed their lives and have shown the utmost courage & leadership while facing the enemy during War to protect the motherland