

My Notes....

NATIONAL

CENTRE DECLARES CORONAVIRUS AS 'NOTIFIED DISASTER'

In the wake of spurt in cases of coronavirus pandemic in the country, the Ministry of Home Affairs on 14 March 2020 decided to treat Covid-19 as a "notified disaster".

The move would enable the states to spend a larger chunk of funds from the State Disaster Response Fund (SDRF) to fight the pandemic.

What

1. The total number of confirmed coronavirus cases in India rose to 83, the Union Ministry of Health and Family Welfare said on 14 March 2020. So far, two deaths due to the lethal infection have been reported in the country.

2. The move would enable the states to spend a larger chunk of funds from the State Disaster Response Fund (SDRF) to fight the pandemic.

3. The Centre said that the cost of hospitalization for managing COVID-19 patients would be at the rates fixed by the state governments.

4. The state government can use SDRF found for providing temporary accommodation, food, clothing and medical care for people affected and sheltered in quarantine camps, other than home quarantine, or for cluster containment operations.

5. The state executive committee will decide the number of quarantine camps, their duration and the number of persons in such camps.

6. Period can be extended by the committee beyond the prescribed limit subject to condition that expenditure on this account should not exceed 25 percent of SDRF allocation for the year.

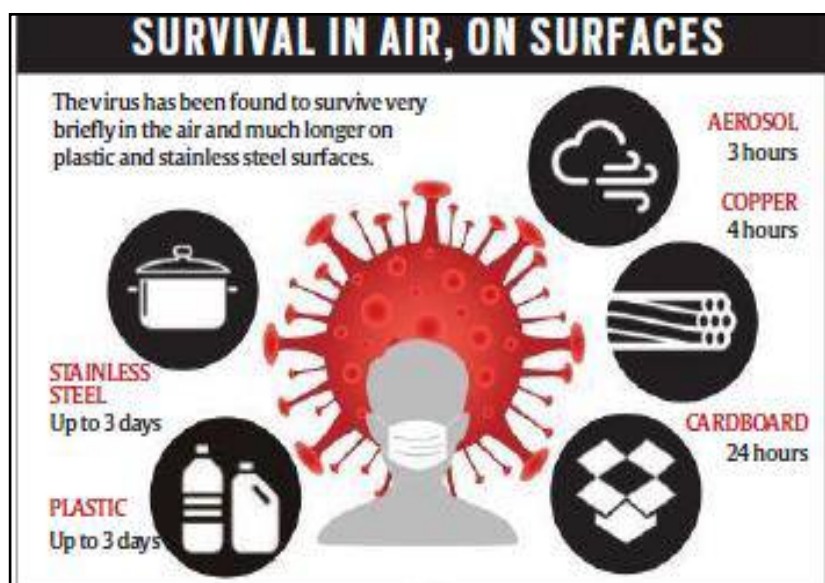
7. The cost of consumables for sample collection would be taken from the funds which can be used to support for checking, screening and contact tracing.

8. Further, funds can also be withdrawn for setting up additional testing laboratories within the government set up.

9. The state has also to bear the cost of personal protection equipment for healthcare, municipal, police and fire authorities. Further SDRF money can also be used for procuring thermal scanners and ventilation and other necessary equipment.

10. The total number of confirmed coronavirus cases in India rose to 84, the Union Ministry of Health and Family Welfare said on Saturday. So far, two deaths due to the lethal infection have been reported in the country.

11. The coronavirus, which originated in China's Wuhan city in December last year,



has so far spread to more than 100 countries, infecting over 1,20,000 people.

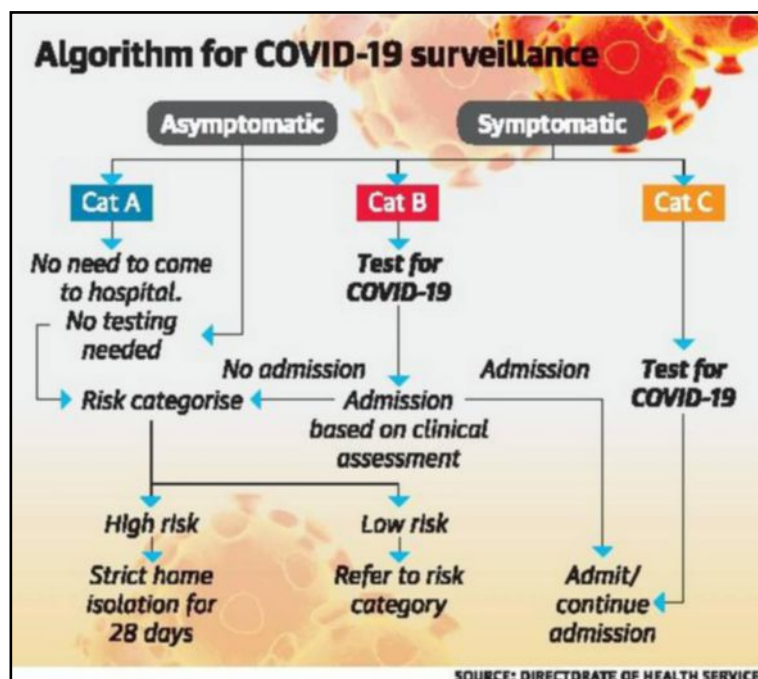
12. The World Health Organisation (WHO) has declared coronavirus a pandemic and Europe as its epicentre with more reported cases and deaths than the rest of the world combined, apart from China.

CORONAVIRUS A GLOBAL PANDEMIC

The World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a global pandemic on 11 March 2020 as the new coronavirus, which was unknown to world health officials just three months ago, has rapidly spread to more than 121,000 people from Asia, to Europe, the Middle East and now parts of the United States. In the past two weeks the number of cases outside China has increased thirteenfold and the number of affected countries has tripled, WHO Director-General Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said at the **organization's headquarters in Geneva. In the days and weeks ahead, we expect to see the number of cases, the number of deaths and the number of affected countries to climb even higher.**

What

- Several countries have demonstrated the ability to suppress and control the outbreak, scolding other world leaders for failing to act quickly enough or drastically enough to contain the spread.
- Declaring a pandemic is charged with major political and economic ramifications, global health experts say. It can further rattle already fragile world markets and lead to more stringent travel and trade restrictions.
- WHO officials have been reluctant up until now to categorize the virus as a global pandemic, which is generally defined as an illness that spreads far and wide throughout the world.
- The number of cases and deaths changes by the hour, topping 121,564 with at least 4,373 deaths across the world as of 11 March 2020 morning, according to data compiled by Johns Hopkins University.
- Outside China, 32,778 cases across at least 109 countries had been confirmed — up from four cases in three countries on Jan. 21, according to the most recent data **confirmed by WHO, which tallies the world's official case count.**
- While the virus is slowing in China where it originated in December, it's picking up pace across other parts of the world.**
- Italy has the most cases outside of China with roughly 10,149 infections, followed closely behind by Iran with 9,000 infections and South Korea with 7,775.
- In the U.S., cases erupted over the last week to more than 1,050 spread across at least 36 states.



What is a pandemic?

1. A pandemic is the worldwide spread of a new infectious disease.
2. It stretches over a larger area, infects more people and causes more deaths than an epidemic.
3. In history there have been a number of devastating pandemics including smallpox, tuberculosis and the black Death, which killed more than 75million people in 1350.
4. In 2009 a pandemic of swine flu killed 14,286 people worldwide.

What is an outbreak?

1. When more cases of a disease than expected are recorded in one area an outbreak is declared.
2. The area could be a small community or extend to several countries.
3. An outbreak could even be a single case of a contagious disease new to a community or not seen for a long time.
4. An outbreak can last for a few days, weeks or even several years.
5. Outbreaks can be transmitted through person-to-person contact, animal-to-person contact, or from the environment.

What is endemic?

1. An endemic is an outbreak that occurs at a predictable rate in a certain area or among a set population.
2. Chickenpox is classed as endemic as it occurs at a high but predictable rate among youngsters.
3. Endemics remain at a steady state, but do not disappear from a population.
4. Outbreaks of disease can be transmitted through person-to-person contact, animal-to-person contact, or from the environment.

What is an epidemic?

1. An epidemic will see a disease rapidly spread among a large number of people in a given population.
2. During an epidemic the disease will normally spread in two weeks or less.
3. Epidemics may be the consequence of disasters of another kind, such as tropical storms, floods, earthquakes and droughts.
4. There have been 14 epidemics since 2010, including the Ebola epidemic in West Africa, which killed 11,300 people between 2013 and 2016.
5. In 2003 the Sars outbreak was classed as an epidemic - it killed nearly 800 people.

GOVT REVOKES PSA

The J&K administration on 13 March 2020 released National Conference (NC) president and Member of Parliament, Srinagar, Dr. Farooq Abdullah, who was in detention over seven months. He was detained immediately after the Centre revoked J&K's special status on August 5 last year. The J&K government has issued orders revoking detention of Dr. Farooq Abdullah. Principal Secretary, Home, Shaleen Kabra, in an order, said the detention of Dr. Abdullah under the Public Safety Act (PSA), issued on September 15, has been withdrawn, ending his detention immediately.

What

1. Dr. Abdullah, 82, remained under house arrest after the government booked him under the stringent PSA and lodged him in his own house on Gupkar Road, which was designated as a sub-jail. The J&K's home department had in December extended his detention by another three months.

2. Dr. Abdullah's release is the first of the three detained former chief ministers of the erstwhile State. NC vice president Omar Abdullah and Peoples Democratic Party president Mehbooba Mufti continue to remain in detention.
3. Dr. Abdullah was arrested in **the wake of Centre's decision to scrap J&K's semi-autonomous status** on August 5 last year.
4. Welcoming Dr. Abdullah's release from detention, Congress leader Shashi Tharoor tweeted "Welcome the belated release of Dr Farooq Abdullah...his detention was a disgrace."
5. Peoples Conference leader Imran Ansari too welcomed the government's decision. He demanded the release of party leader Sajad Lone and party workers.

What is the PSA?

1. The Jammu & Kashmir Public Safety Act, 1978 is a preventive detention law, under which a person is taken into custody to prevent him or her from acting in any manner that is **prejudicial to** "the security of the state or the maintenance of public order".
2. It is very similar to the National Security Act that is used by other state governments for preventive detention.
3. By definition, preventive detention is meant to be preventive, not punitive.
4. This broad definition is the most common ground used by a law-enforcement agency when it slaps the PSA on an individual.
5. It comes into force by an administrative order passed either by Divisional Commissioner or the District Magistrate, or not by a detention order by police based on specific allegations or for specific violation of laws.

SC LAND ACQUISITION CASE

Dealing with two conflicting judgments of the Supreme Court on the interpretation of Section 24 (2) of the Right to Fair Compensation and Transparency in Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Resettlement Act, 2013, a five-judge Constitution Bench on 7 March 2020 ruled that proceedings under the Land Acquisition Act, 1894 will not lapse if the compensation payable to the land owner is tendered by depositing it in the treasury even if the land owner refuses to accept it; Section 24 (2) of the Act states that an acquisition will lapse if physical possession of **the land has not been taken "or" the compensation has not been paid.**

What

1. The Bench, comprising Justices Arun Mishra, Indira Banerjee, Vineet Saran, M R Shah and S Ravindra Bhat, said **the word "or" must be read as "and"**, meaning thereby that the acquisition will lapse only if physical possession has not **been taken "and" compensation not paid.**
2. It also said: "We are of the considered opinion that Section 24 cannot be used to revive dead and stale claims and concluded cases. They cannot be inquired into within the purview of Section 24 of the Act of 2013.
3. The provisions of Section 24 do not invalidate the judgments and orders of the Court, where the rights and claims have been lost and negated.
4. There is no revival of the barred claims by operation of law. Thus, stale and dead claims cannot be permitted to be canvassed on the pretext of enactment of Section 24.
5. In exceptional cases, when in fact, the payment has not been made, but possession has been taken, the remedy lies elsewhere if the case is not covered by the proviso.

6. The Bench ruled that deemed lapse of land acquisition proceedings under Section 24 (2) of the 2013 Act **will take place only** “where due to inaction of authorities for five years or more prior to commencement of the said Act, the possession of land has not been taken nor compensation has been paid.

7. In other words, in case possession has been taken, compensation has not been paid then there is no lapse. Similarly, if compensation has been paid, possession has not been taken then there is no lapse.

8. It said a land owner cannot insist that the compensation must be deposited in court or the acquisition under the 1894 Act would fail. Mere tendering of the compensation, it said, was enough.

9. In case a person has been tendered the compensation as provided under Section

31(1) of the Act of 1894, it is not open to him to claim that acquisition has lapsed under Section 24(2) due to non-payment or non-deposit of compensation in court.

10. The obligation to pay is complete by tendering the amount under Section 31(1). Land owners who had refused to accept compensation or who sought reference for higher compensation, cannot claim that the acquisition proceedings had lapsed under Section 24 (2) of the Act of 2013.

11. **The Bench held that the expression ‘paid’ in the main part of Section 24 (2) of the Act of 2013 does not include a deposit of compensation in court. The consequence of non-deposit is provided in proviso to Section 24 (2), it said, adding that “in case it has not been deposited with respect to majority of land holdings, then all beneficiaries (landowners) as on the date of notification for land acquisition... shall be entitled to compensation in accordance with the provisions of the Act of 2013.**

12. Non-deposit of compensation (in court) does not result in the lapse of land acquisition proceedings, the Bench said. It said the mode of taking possession of the land under the 1894 Act and as contemplated under Section 24(2) of the 2013 Act is by drawing of inquest report/memorandum.

13. Once award has been passed on taking possession under Section 16 of the Act of 1894, the land vests in State” and “there is no divesting provided under Section 24 (2)

Flashback

1. The second ruling was in 2018 by a bench of Justices A K Goel (since retired), Arun Mishra and Mohan M Shantanagoudar in Indore Development Authority vs Shailendra. It held that the 2014 ruling “per incuriam” **(passed without due regard to the law)**.
2. The 2014 ruling had said that merely depositing the compensation in the treasury cannot be treated as compensation paid.
3. On February 8, 2018, the bench of Justices Mishra, Goel and Shantanagoudar, by a 2:1 decision in the Indore Development Authority matter, ruled that compensation not availed of within a stipulated five-year period could not be ground for cancellation of land acquisition — the order by the Constitution Bench reaffirms the view in the 2018 ruling .
4. But days later, on February 21, another bench of Justices Lokur, Joseph and Deepak Gupta took exception to the February 8 order.
5. Raising questions about a three-judge bench overruling another three-judge bench, this new bench requested High Courts and other Supreme Court benches, which were hearing matters likely to be impacted by the February 8 order, to defer hearings till it decided whether to send the matter to a larger bench. Subsequently, it was referred to a five-judge bench.

of the Act of 2013, it ruled.

14. The matter was referred to the five-judge Bench in 2018 as two benches of the court had delivered conflicting judgments on the issue.
15. One decision came from a three-judge bench of Chief Justice of India R M Lodha and Justices Madan B Lokur and Kurian Joseph (all retired since) in 2014 in Pune Municipal Corporation & Anr v Harakchand Misrimal Solanki & Ors matter.

UN AGREES ON CORSIA

The **UN's** aviation agency approved restrictions for a global program designed to help airlines offset their carbon emissions, a move that curbs industry funding for older projects whose environmental benefits have been challenged by climate activists. The International Civil Aviation Organization council approved recommendations to exclude offset projects begun before 2016 while delivering emission reductions through end-2020, ICAO said in a statement.

What

1. ICAO cannot impose rules but sets standards approved by its 193 member countries.
2. Its 36-member council was tasked with weighing which programs would be eligible under the venture for airlines, known as the Carbon Offsetting and Reduction Scheme for International Aviation (CORSIA).
3. **The council's decision to accept credits from six programs for CORSIA's pilot phase** from 2021-2023 came despite protests from Brazil, China and India, which wanted older projects to be eligible, said two sources who discussed the private talks on condition of anonymity.
4. Developing countries had hoped a global push by airlines to offset emissions would mop up a glut of carbon credits awarded under earlier climate initiatives.
5. **One of the six programs is the United Nations' Clean Development Mechanism (CDM), the world's largest offset scheme set up under the 1997 Kyoto Protocol** to help fund emissions reductions in developing countries.
6. The fate of billions of older CDM credits, the majority of which come from China and India, was a thorny and unresolved issue for climate negotiators in Madrid in December, raising the stakes for ICAO.
7. ICAO was under pressure to strike a balance between approving enough credit options for airlines to purchase under the plan without squashing supply, which could push up prices.
8. Some environmentalists feared the council would approve weaker standards to help airlines hard-hit by the global outbreak of a coronavirus called COVID-19 that has led carriers to seek urgent government financial support.
9. **The Council's decision today sends a signal that when we get to the other side of the gut-punch that COVID-19 is delivering to families, communities, and the whole travel sector, nations will move forward to meet the climate challenge.**
10. Aviation accounts for just over 2% of global greenhouse gas emissions, but with air traffic forecast to grow in coming decades, that percentage would rise if left unchecked.

ANCIENT TEMPLE DISCOVERED

A beautiful ancient temple has been discovered near Dhundhiraj Ganesh Ji temple in Varanasi in the ongoing work for the Kashi Vishwanath Dham project. The

announcement about the discovered temple was made by the top official overseeing the work of the project. At proposed gate no 1 of Shri Kashi Vishwanath Dham corridor, a temple has been discovered near Dhundhiraj Ganesh Ji temple.

What

1. More than 30 ancient temples have come to the light of the authorities during the clearing work of the Kashi Vishwanath Dham Project.
2. The temples have been found to have immense religious and historic importance and been traced to the Kashi Khand of the Skand Puran.
3. These temples were hidden amongst the residential and commercial buildings of the city which are being cleared under the project. All the discovered temples will be restored and conserved under the project.
4. Kashi Vishwanath Dham project is the flagship programme of Prime Minister Narendra Modi in his Lok Sabha constituency Varanasi.
5. The project entails easing the traffic and movement of people around the temple and connecting the temple with the nearby ghats in the city. The project which has ushered major transformation in the city was launched by PM Modi in March last year.
6. In December last year, the temple trust had issued an expression of interest listing around 30 discovered temples. The expression of interest invited interested parties to collaborate in the restoration of the discovered temples.
7. The restoration work will include 3-D mapping, reconstruction of some portions of the temples, and strengthening the present structure of the temples.
8. Apart from the latest temple which has been discovered, the other temples include Mata Kali Shri Rani Vijayraj Mahoiba temple, Shri Koneshwar Mahadev temple, Shri Pramod Vinayak temple, Shri Rudreshwar Mahadev temple, Sheetla Mata temple and other significant temples.

AERIAL PHOTOGRAPHY RULES

Obtaining defence and regulatory permissions for aerial photography or remote sensing surveys has become simpler, with the government launching a web portal for quicker permissions and transparency. The new paperless system developed by the Ministry of Defence (MoD) came into force from March 1 and hopes to cut down delays, bringing in efficiency. Currently aerial photography and surveys are done for establishing everything from encroachments around the Dal Lake in Srinagar to ensuring reliable power supply to residents in Delhi and mapping of several mineral mines in Maharashtra, Karnataka and Telangana.

What

1. Aerial surveys are being regularly proposed by various government agencies, autonomous bodies for developmental projects and also by private agencies or individuals for private purposes.
2. As per the existing procedure, applications for grant of No Objection Certificate (NoC) for aerial photography/surveys received by the Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA) are forwarded to various stakeholders of Single Point Clearance Committee (SPCC) under the MoD for their recommendations. Based on the inputs of the authorities concerned, the Ministry decides upon grant/refusal of NoC.
3. Done typically using aeroplanes, helicopters and UAVs/drones, aerial surveys help provide information on many things that are not visible from the ground and are much sought after by both the government and private agencies besides individuals.

Geomatics method

1. The aerial survey is a geomatics method of collecting information by using aerial photography, LiDAR (using laser lighting) or from remote sensing imagery using other bands of the electromagnetic spectrum such as infrared, gamma or ultraviolet.
2. It can also refer to the Area of Interest (Aoi) identified on the basis of Latitude /Longitude nodes, chart or map made by analysing a region from the air.
3. An IIT-Kanpur incubated start-up now working with several State governments and several corporate houses, explained that drones were capable of clicking 3D images of mines providing accurate data of excavation in mines and was moving to the areas of industrial inspection and precision agriculture.
4. The newly developed MoD web portal - <https://modnoc.ncog.gov.in/login> -is aimed at facilitating the vendors for submission of applications online for grant of permission for aerial photography or remote- sensing survey.
5. The automated or online system will help in reducing the time, bringing in more transparency, accuracy and speedy disposal of applications for grant of NoC by MoD and permission by DGCA.

CHAMBAL SANCTUARY DECLARED ECO-SENSITIVE ZONE

National Chambal sanctuary has been declared as an eco-sensitive zone by the central government. The decision to declare the area as an eco-sensitive zone will prohibit the construction of hotels or resorts within an area of zero to two kilometres from the sanctuary. The government has notified area to an extent of zero to two kilometre around the Chambal sanctuary as the national chambal sanctuary eco-sensitive zone, according to a notification issued by the government.

What

1. The sanctuary based in the Chambal region is a host of a lot of critically endangered species. Gangetic dolphins, gharial and freshwater turtles are among the major species found in the region.
2. More than 75 per cent of the critically endangered Gharial population is based in the sanctuary.
3. The central government has also asked the Madhya Pradesh government to work on a Zonal master plan for the area.
4. The state government has been tasked with restoring the water bodies in the region, soil conservation and watershed management under the Zonal master plan.
5. The National Chambal Sanctuary is spread in three districts of Madhya Pradesh i.e, Sheopur, Morena and Bhind district- which constitute the Chambal region in the state. The sanctuary is spread over an area of 435 sq km across the three districts.
6. With the declaration of the eco-sensitive zone, the commercial establishments will be forbidden to construct hotels or resorts in the region which will help maintain distance between human settlement and the sanctuary.
7. The development of human settlement in close vicinity of the forests and sanctuaries has proved detrimental to the growth of the wildlife.
8. It has also led to the wildlife entering the human settlement leading to panic among the people.
9. The new establishments will only be allowed in the pre-defined area for eco-tourism as per the Tourism Master Plan beyond the distance of one kilometre from the wildlife sanctuary till the extent of the eco-sensitive zone, the government notification said.

INTERNATIONAL

SAARC FUND FOR COVID 19

Sharing details **of India's preparedness to prevent and contain the spread of** novel coronavirus (COVID-19), Prime Minister Narendra Modi on 15 March 2020 told **leaders of SAARC member countries that India recognised it was** "still in an unknown situation" and "cannot predict how the situation will unfold". At a **teleconference between the leaders of SAARC member nations on 15 March 2020 evening, called at Modi's** initiative, suggested greater cooperation within the grouping, including sharing of experiences and best practices by their respective health experts. Sri Lanka President Gotabaya Rajapaksa, his Maldivian counterpart Ibrahim Mohamed Solih, and Bhutanese PM Lotay Tshering, all three of whose countries depend heavily on tourism sector that is hit the hardest in recent weeks, called for a common fight not just against COVID-19 but also its economic fallout.

What

1. Modi suggested SAARC member nations should set up an emergency fund to combat COVID-19, and **offered \$10 million as India's initial contribution.**
2. SAARC, or South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation, has seven member states, but has mostly been dormant, especially over the past six years, because of differences between India and Pakistan.
3. New Delhi has instead tried to promote BIMSTEC, which does not include Pakistan, to rival SAARC. However, the challenge of COVID-19 spreading in the region seems to have forced South Asian neighbours to think of common strategies.
4. While the heads of state or government of other SAARC member states participated in the teleconference, Pakistan was represented by Zafar Mirza, the special assistant to Prime Minister Imran Khan. Mirza, who is also the state minister of health of Pakistan, said it was a matter of concern that COVID-19 had been reported from Jammu & Kashmir.
5. The Bhutanese PM said when the world was fighting one common disease, it was important to leave behind the differences.
6. **Rajapaksa said Sri Lanka's economy, particularly tourism, had taken a serious blow, which was just about recovering after last year's terrorist attacks in his country. He asked SAARC leaders to formulate mechanism to assist "our economies to tide over the difficult period".**
7. Afghanistan President Ashraf Ghani suggested common frameworks for telemedicine between SAARC countries and flagged how the closing of borders would result in problems of availability of food, medicines and basic goods.
8. Ghani also asked India, since it is a key SAARC member and also a member of China-led Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), to coordinate between SAARC and SCO **and much of China's experience in combating the virus is replicable in South Asia.**
9. Several members, including Bangladesh PM Sheikh Hasina, called for a common research platform to coordinate research on controlling epidemic diseases within the region. She said health ministers, secretaries and others should have similar teleconferences.

AGREEMENT WITH IVORY COAST

The Union Cabinet on 4 March 2020 approved an agreement with Ivory Coast for cooperation in the field of health. The areas of cooperation will include exchange and

training of medical doctors, officials, other health professionals and experts in the field of advanced medical technology, nuclear medicine, renal transplantation, cardiac surgery, hemodialysis and medical research and regulation of drugs and pharmaceutical products.

What

1. It will also include assistance in development of human resources and setting up of health care facilities, management of healthcare sector and public health services including medical evacuations, procurement of generic and essential drugs and assistance in sourcing of drug supplies, collaboration and research in the field of HIV/AIDS and exchange of best practices in the field of primary health care among others.
2. The MoU was signed between India's Health Ministry and the Ministry of Health and Public Hygiene of the West African country, officially called Cote d'Ivoire.
3. A working group will be set up to further elaborate the details of cooperation and to oversee the implementation of this Memorandum of Understanding.

Flashback

1. The Western African country was hailed as a model of stability. But an armed rebellion in 2002 split the nation in two. Since then, peace deals alternated with renewed violence as the country slowly edged its way towards a political resolution of the conflict.
2. Despite the instability, Ivory Coast is the world's largest exporter of cocoa beans, and its citizens enjoy a relatively high level of income compared to other countries in the region.

UNAMA CALLS FOR WOMEN IN PEACE TALKS

The UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) on 8 March 2020 called for inclusion of women in peace talks. **Marking International Women's Day**, the UNAMA said in a statement that with anticipation building that the door for intra—Afghan peace talks will open, women's advocacy groups and activists across Afghanistan have focused on developing strategies to protect and advance the gains they have made in social, political, civic and economic life.

What

1. These strategies, backed by the UN and coupled with the growing recognition that women must be included in any formal peace negotiations, are expected to yield results: country—wide and community—level ownership, along with the full and meaningful participation in political decision—making among all members of society.
2. The UN mission in Afghanistan marked **International Women's Day** under the global theme of **"I Am Generation Equality: Realizing Women's Rights"** to leverage individual and collective efforts to make gender equality and women's rights a living reality.
3. To create a peaceful and inclusive society, it is essential that Afghan women have access to education, healthcare and decent work, and that they are fully represented in all areas of political decision—making, from parliament to the peace table.
4. While we have seen significant progress on **women's rights in Afghanistan**, including formal legislation and national action plans, we continue to see powerful social and political pushback. This situation must change for Afghan women, and for the benefit of Afghanistan as a nation.

5. Recognizing that Afghanistan will be more resilient in the face of conflict when gender equality is prioritized, the UN will continue to support all efforts toward gender equality and all opportunities for women to reclaim their rightful place in all areas of society.

Flashback

1. The United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) is a political UN mission established at the request of the Government of Afghanistan to assist it and the people of Afghanistan in laying the foundations for sustainable peace and development.
2. UNAMA was established on 28 March 2002 by United Nations Security Council Resolution. Its original mandate was to support the Bonn Agreement (December 2001). Reviewed annually, this mandate has been altered over time to reflect the needs of the country and was extended for another year on 17 September 2019, by Resolution (2019).
3. Resolution (2019) calls for UNAMA and the Secretary-General's Special Representative for Afghanistan, within their mandate and in a manner consistent with Afghan sovereignty, leadership and ownership, to continue to lead and coordinate international civilian efforts in full cooperation with the Government of Afghanistan.
4. The Bonn Agreement was signed on December 5, 2001 by representatives of several different anti-Taliban factions and political groups.
5. It established a roadmap and timetable for establishing peace and security, reconstructing the country, reestablishing some key institutions, and protecting human rights.
6. The agreement contains provisions addressing military demobilization and integration, international peacekeeping, and human rights monitoring.

PUTIN APPROVES FOR HIM IN POWER

Russian President Vladimir Putin has signed a law on constitutional changes that could keep him in power for another 16 years, a step that must still be approved in a nationwide vote. Putin signed the measure on 14 March 2020, the Kremlin said, three days after it sailed through the Russian parliament with only one vote against. It must be approved by the country's Constitutional Court and in a referendum set for April 22.

What

1. Under current law, Putin would not be able to run for president again in 2024 because of term limits, but the new measure would reset his term count, allowing him to run for two more six-year terms. He has been in power since 2000.
2. Other constitutional changes further strengthen the presidency and emphasize the priority of Russian law over international norms, a provision reflecting the Kremlin's irritation with the European Court of Human Rights and other international bodies that have often issued verdicts against Russia.
3. The changes also outlaw same-sex marriage and mention "a belief in God" as one of Russia's traditional values.

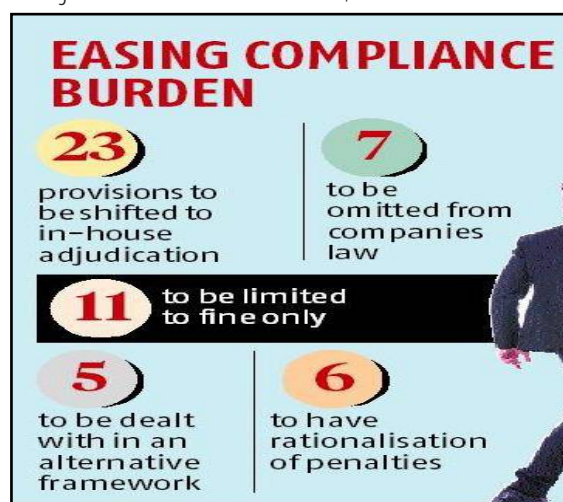
ECONOMY

AMENDMENTS IN THE COMPANIES ACT

The Union Cabinet on 4 March 2020 approved amendments to the Companies Act, to decriminalise various offences. Cabinet has approved 72 changes to 65 sections of the Companies Act, Finance and Corporate Affairs Minister Nirmala Sitharaman said; Claiming that the proposed amendments were aimed at improving the ease of doing business.

What

- Out of 66 compoundable offences under the Act, 23 will get recategorised so that they can be dealt with through in-house adjudication framework, seven have been omitted altogether, 11 will have limited punishment in the form of fines alone by removing imprisonment provision, five will be dealt with under different alternative frameworks, six which had earlier been decriminalised will now have reduced quantum of penalties.
- The proposed amendments will ensure that companies which have an obligation to spend Rs. 50 lakh per annum or less on corporate social responsibility (CSR) are no longer required to have a CSR committee.
- Companies which spend over the obligated 2% on CSR in a particular year can carry it forward as credit for fulfilment of CSR obligations for the next few years as well.
- In November, a government-appointed high level panel proposed decriminalising more than half of the existing compoundable offences under the companies law as well as lower monetary penalties for violations by startups, amid efforts to further improve the ease of doing business in the country.
- This is the second amendment being made to the companies Act in the last one year.
- The Act was amended in July last year to tighten Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) norms and ensure stricter action for non-compliance of the company law regulations.



WTO-COMPLIANT REMISSION OF TAX SCHEME

The Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs on 13 March 2020 approved a World Trade Organisation (WTO)-compliant scheme for reimbursement of taxes and duties to exporters. This would replace the existing scrip-based scheme. The decision is aimed at **giving a boost to the country's dwindling exports**. At present, goods and services tax (GST) and Customs duty on inputs required to manufacture exported products are either exempted or refunded. However, certain taxes are outside GST and are not refunded for exports. These include value-added tax on fuel used in transportation, mandi tax and duty on electricity used during manufacturing. These taxes would be covered for reimbursement under the remission of duties and taxes on export products (RoDTEP) scheme.

What

1. The taxes to be reimbursed under RoDTEP would also include those on the farm sector as well as captive power generation. It would also include stamp duty and central excise duty on fuel used in transportation.
2. The sectors and products, under the scheme, would be notified in a phased manner. Benefits under the existing Merchandise Exports from India Scheme (MEIS) for those sectors and items will be withdrawn.
3. Under the scheme, an inter-ministerial committee will determine the rates and items on which the reimbursement of taxes and duties would be provided.
4. **In line with “Digital India”, refund** under the scheme, in the form of transferable duty credit or electronic scrip, will be issued to exporters. This will be maintained in an electronic ledger. The scheme will be implemented with end-to-end digitisation.
5. Briefing the media about this decision, commerce minister Piyush Goyal said the scheme is going to provide a level-playing field to Indian producers in the international market. This will ensure that domestic taxes are not exported.
6. The scheme would hit the exchequer by Rs 50,000 crore. Refunds, under the RoDTEP scheme, along with refunds, such as drawback rates and integrated GST (IGST), would be a step towards zero-rating of exports. Zero rating refers to zero taxes on inputs of final products.
7. The move assumes significance as a WTO dispute resolution panel had ruled that MEIS was not in compliance with global trade rules.
8. Under WTO rules, certain duties like state taxes on power, oil, water, and education cess are allowed to be refunded. **The country’s exports contracted for a sixth month in a row by 1.66 per cent in January to \$25.97 billion. Exports slipped 1.93 per cent to \$265.26 billion during April-January 2019-20.**

Benefits

1. The scheme for reimbursement of taxes and duties to exporter would replace the existing scrip-based one
2. The decision is aimed at giving a boost to the country’s dwindling exports
3. The taxes to be reimbursed under the scheme will also include those on the farm sector as well as captive power generation
4. It will also include stamp duty and central excise duty on fuel used in transportation

AT1 BONDS FOR YES BANK

The Reserve Bank of India’s (RBI) decided to extinguish Additional Tier 1 (AT1) bonds of Yes Bank. **The RBI’s decision has also increased uncertainty about these bonds**, which are leading to a drop in the prices of these bonds issued by other banks. As prices of these bonds drop, investors will see the value of their investments also go down.

What are AT1 bonds?

1. Additional Tier 1 bonds, also called AT1 in market parlance, are a kind of perpetual bonds without any expiry date that banks are allowed to issue to meet their longterm capital requirement.
2. **That’s why these bonds are treated as quasi-equity instruments** under the law. RBI is the regulator for these bonds.
3. AT1 bonds are like any other bonds issued by banks and companies, which pay a fixed rate of interest at regular interval.

- Usually, these bonds pay a slightly higher rate of interest compared to similar, non-perpetual bonds. However, the issuing bank has no obligation to pay back the principal to These bonds are listed and traded on the exchanges. So if an AT1 bond holder needs money, he can sell it in the market.

How are AT1 bonds redeemed?

- Investors cannot return these bonds to the issuing bank and get the money. This means there is no put option available to its holders.
- However, the issuing banks have the option to recall AT1 bonds issued by them (termed call option).
- They can go for a call option five years after these are issued and then every year at a pre-announced period. This way the issuing banks can give an exit option to AT1 bond holders.
- According to a report by rating agency ICRA, nearly Rs 94,000 crore worth of AT1 bonds are currently issued by various banks.
- Of this, Rs 55,000 crore is from PSU banks, while the balance Rs 39,000 crore is by private lenders.

39TH GST COUNCIL MEET

The 39th GST Council took an array of decisions, including an increase in the tax rate on mobile phones and specified parts to 18 percent from 12 per cent. GST on handmade, machine-made matchsticks has been rationalised to 12% while GST on MRO (maintenance repair overhaul) services of aircraft has been slashed to 5% from 18%. The GST rate on mobile phones was increased from 12% to 18% allowing a full claim of input tax credit; Relief given to domestic service providers of maintenance, repair and operations. Addressing the media after the meeting, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman also said that a better GSTN system should be ensured by Infosys by July 2020.

Major decisions

- GST on mobile phones, specified parts increased to 18% from 12%.
- GST on MRO (maintenance repair overhaul) services of aircraft slashed to 5% from 18%
- GST on handmade, machine-made matchsticks rationalised to 12%.
- Delayed GST payment to attract interest on net tax liability from July 1.

Important change on GSTR-1:

- The GST Council decided to stagger the GSTR-1 filing for taxpayers with:
- Turnover more than Rs 1.5 cr -to file before the 10th of the following month
- Turnover up to Rs 1.5 cr -to file before 13th of the following month
- The GSTR-2A can be generated on 14th of following month
- GSTR-9 and 9C due date pushed to 30th June 2020 for FY 2018-19 from 31 March 2020; Increases the turnover limit from Rs 2 cr to Rs 5 cr for the mandatory annual return filing
- The GST Council defers the proposal on the taxability of economic surplus of brand owners of alcohol for human consumption.

PARLIAMENT PASSES AMENDMENTS TO IBC

Parliament on 12 March 2020 passed amendments to the insolvency law that will help ring-fence successful bidders of insolvent companies from risk of criminal proceedings for offences committed by previous promoters. The Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code (Amendment) Bill, 2020 was passed by voice vote in Rajya Sabha. It was approved by the Lok Sabha on March 6. The Bill replaces an ordinance.

What

1. Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman said amendments are sync with time and also adhere to a Supreme Court order in “letter and spirit”
2. **The Minister said need for amendment in the IBC arose because of “changing requirement” and “requirement of fine tuning” the law as several MPs wanted to know why the government was bringing in so many amendments to a new law.**
3. **Stressing that the government is “very responsive” and has been talking to the industry,** she assured the House that amendments to the IBC are not being “unthinkingly done.” The IBC, which came into force in 2016, has already been amended thrice.
4. Ms. Sitharaman said the government was taking care of the interest of home buyers and the requirement of minimum number of home buyers in the IBC has been **included to avoid “frivolous litigations.”**
5. The Bill seeks to remove bottlenecks and streamline the corporate insolvency resolution process. It aims to provide protection to new owners of a loan defaulter company against prosecution for misdeeds of previous owners.
6. The latest changes pertain to various sections of the IBC as well as introduction of a new section.
7. Among other things, the Bill seeks to ensure timely admission of insolvency cases and completion within the newly set deadline of 330 days (it was 270 days earlier).
8. The resolution plan under the corporate insolvency resolution process will also be binding on the Centre, State and local authorities.
9. As for the large pendency before the NCLT, Sitharaman highlighted that as much as 73 per cent of the cases waiting for resolution are actually from the BIFR stable and these are not a result of the last few years.
10. She highlighted that the government has been taking steps to increase the capacity of National Company Law Tribunal (NCLT) and increased its benches from 10 to 15. Also 26 new members have been added taking the total strength to 52.

Focus on revival

1. Sitharaman also made it clear that the IBC was not looking to force companies into liquidation, but focused on their revival and continuing as going concerns.
2. **“Not allowing companies to die is the spirit behind IBC. If there is any prospect of company getting revived, the solution is not to go to liquidation. but ensure it is going concern.**
3. It is not the intent here that every problematic issue related to companies are taken only with liquidation as an agenda. **IBC doesn’t keep only liquidation as an agenda.**

Haircuts

1. The government does not play a role on haircuts — the extent of write off that banks undertake as part of resolution plan to get the company back on track.
2. It is Committee of creditors that decided the haircuts. So far financial creditors have got 43 per cent of their claims and 188 percent of the liquidation value, she said.

RODTEP SCHEME APPROVED

The Union Cabinet on 13 March 2020 approved the Remission of Duties or Taxes on Export Products (RoDTEP), a scheme for exporters to reimburse taxes and duties paid by them such as value added tax, coal cess, mandi tax, electricity duties and fuel

used for transportation, which are not getting exempted or refunded under any other existing mechanism. This RoDTEP scheme is very important for our exports to get a level playing field at the international level, said commerce and industry minister Piyush Goyal.

What

1. **The scheme comes at a time when India's exports declined for the sixth month in a row in January and face uncertainty due to the spread of the novel Coronavirus.**
2. **India's exports were \$265.26 billion** in the April-January period, a 1.93% decline on-year. The country had clocked \$331 billion of exports in 2018-19. The commerce and industry ministry will release the data for February later this evening.
3. Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman had announced the RoDTEP last year to incentivise exporters at an estimated cost of Rs 50,000 crore.
4. The RoDTEP rates will be decided after industry consultations and that would take 6-8 months.
5. It will replace the Merchandise Export from India Scheme (MEIS) that was found to violate the World Trade Organization rules as it was export focused. MEIS will be phased out.

DTVSV BILL APPROVED

Parliament on 13 March 2020 approved a bill that will provide an opportunity to taxpayers to settle their tax disputes by paying just due taxes with complete waiver of interest and penalty by March 31. The Direct Tax Vivad Se Vishwas (DTVSV) Bill was passed by voice vote and returned by Rajya Sabha as it was a money bill. It was approved by the Lok Sabha on March 4. The finance minister pointed out that some members had raised issues on the bill and asked how can the Central Board of Direct Taxes issued a circular on the scheme before passage of the bill in Parliament.

What

1. The minister also told the House the end of the scheme date would be notified by the government and there is no confusion over that. She told the House that the scheme is to give an option to taxpayers for settling disputes.
2. The government would send a circular to states in all languages for providing detailed information about the bill.
3. The Direct Tax Vivad Se Vishwas Bill, 2020, which was introduced by the Finance Minister in Lok Sabha on March 2.
4. As many as 4.83 lakh direct tax cases worth Rs 9.32 lakh crore are locked up in various appellate forums such as Commissioner (Appeals), ITAT, High Courts, Supreme Court and Debt Recovery Tribunals.
5. Also in search and seizure operations where the recovery is up to Rs 5 crore, this scheme can be availed once the Bill is passed by Parliament.
6. Under the proposed scheme, taxpayers willing to settle disputes shall be allowed a complete waiver of interest and penalty if they pay the entire amount of tax in dispute by March 31 this year, following which a 10 per cent additional disputed tax shall have to be paid over and above the tax liability.
7. Further, where arrears relate to disputed interest or penalty only, then 25 per cent of disputed penalty or interest shall have to be paid if the payment is made by March 31, beyond which the same shall be enhanced to 30 per cent. The scheme would remain open till June 30, 2020.
8. The bill will provide amnesty to those who are covered under demonetisation related cases, This scheme is "not an amnesty scheme at all" but the taxpayer has

- to pay a certain amount and that tax amount, the undisclosed cash deposit during demonetisation is liable to suffer a tax of 75 per cent.
9. Hence the taxpayer has to pay 75 per cent for settling the dispute regarding the cash deposits which have been made during the period of demonetisation. So it is not an amnesty for anybody.
 10. The cases above Rs 5 crore have been excluded from the scheme so that large evasion related cases and fraud cases do not come into the scheme and take advantage of it.

GUIDELINES FOR IND AS

The Reserve Bank on 13 March 2020 came out with regulatory guidelines for implementation of Indian Accounting Standards (Ind AS) by non-banking financial companies (NBFCs) and asset reconstruction companies (ARCs) while preparing their financial results. The guidelines, which are aimed at promoting high quality and consistent implementation of Ind AS as well as facilitate comparison and better supervision, will be applicable to NBFCs and ARCs for preparations of their financial results from FY20 onwards, RBI said in a notification.

What

1. The guidelines mandate NBFCs/ARCs to put in place board-approved policies that clearly articulate and document their business models and portfolios.
2. NBFCs/ARCs shall frame their policy for sales out of amortised cost business model portfolios and disclose the same in their notes to financial statements.
3. The RBI expects the board of directors to approve sound methodologies for computation of expected credit losses (ECL) that address policies, procedures and controls for assessing and measuring credit risk on all lending exposures, commensurate with the size, complexity and risk profile specific to the NBFC/ARC.
4. The audit committee of the board (ACB) will have to approve the classification of accounts that are due beyond 90 days but not treated as impaired, with the rationale for the same clearly documented.
5. The number of such accounts and the total amount outstanding and the overdue amounts should be disclosed in the notes to the financial statements.
6. NBFCs/ ARCs shall hold impairment allowances as required by Ind AS, RBI said. NBFCs/ARCs shall also maintain the asset classification and compute provisions as per extant prudential norms on Income Recognition, Asset Classification and Provisioning (IRACP) including borrower/beneficiary wise classification, provisioning for standard as well as restructured assets and NPA ageing.
7. Where impairment allowance under Ind AS is lower than the provisioning required under IRACP, NBFCs/ARCs shall appropriate the difference from their net profit or loss after tax to a separate impairment reserve.
8. It said 12 month ECL allowances for financial instruments, that is where the credit risk has not increased significantly since initial recognition, will have to be included under general provisions and loss reserves in tier II capital within the limits specified by extant regulations.
9. The guidelines also asked NBFCs/ARCs to educate their customers on the need to make payments in a timely manner.
10. Ind AS stands for Indian Accounting Standard and are converged standards for IFRS (International Financial Reporting Standards).
11. To ensure that India converge globally accepted standards, IFRS, Ind AS were adopted by the country and was made mandatory for selected companies.

INTELLIGENCE CELL FOR MSMES

A parliamentary panel on 3 March 2020 recommended setting up of market intelligence cell for MSMEs, and made a case for a cut in tax rates for proprietary as well as partnership firms from 30 per cent to 22 per cent on the lines of reduction in corporate tax. The committee in its Report on Demand for Grants (2020-21) of Ministry of MSME to the Rajya Sabha expressed concern over under-utilisation of funds by the ministry and bulk of expenditure being used in the later quarters of the year. It also suggested that MSMEs should be allowed to have one unified GST registration, which is applicable to all states.

What

1. The panel also proposed multiple registrations with several government agencies for various purposes should be done away with for MSMEs.
2. Inter-ministerial coordination should be improved to bring out one registration to carry out all business activities - including exports, tax and day-to-day business activities - to improve ease of doing business for MSMEs, said the panel in the report.
3. It has also suggested that initiatives should be taken to encourage production of honey pouches for ready consumption especially in organizations like Indian Railways, Air India, hospitals, hotels and other organisations in view of its health benefits.
4. Production of honey pouches should also be encouraged in order to benefit village industries artisans and generate employment in the urban areas under the Honey Bee Mission in the country.
5. The committee said that the target of becoming USD 5 trillion economy by 2024 can be achieved by exponential growth of MSME sector as this segment has the capacity of building up at a low cost and utilising the modern innovative technology.
6. It also noted that the constraints faced by Khadi and Village Industries Commission (KVIC)/Khadi and Village Industries Board (KVIB) were mainly due to procedural delays, inadequate technology up-gradation, under utilisation of funds etc.
7. Despite providing technical guidance to the units in KVI, the problems of the units remain inadequately addressed as a result of which there is sub-optimal functioning of institutions/units and high drop outs among new entrants and low employment generation.
8. The committee said that KVIC should come forward with a more holistic and unified policy in coordination with all the stakeholders.

SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

SC REMOVES BAN ON CRYPTOCURRENCY

The Supreme Court has struck down a ban on the trading of virtual currencies (VC) in India, which was in place after **the Reserve Bank of India's order from April 2018**. The court in its 180-page judgment said that the ban was not proportionate. The top court allowed a batch of plea challenging the 2018 circular of the Reserve Bank of India, which had prohibited banks and financial institutions from providing trading services with relation to virtual currencies, which includes cryptocurrencies. Popular forms of cryptocurrencies such as Bitcoin, Ethereum use blockchain technology and operate independent of a central bank. The Internet and Mobile Association of India (IAMAI) was the petitioner in this case on behalf of all the virtual currency trading companies.

What does Supreme Court judgment on virtual currencies say?

1. We have allowed the writ petitions, a bench headed by Justice R F Nariman said while pronouncing the verdict.
2. **In the judgment, the bench noted, “While we have recognised elsewhere in this order, the power of RBI to take a pre-emptive action, we are testing in this part of the order the proportionality of such a measure, for the determination of which RBI needs to show at least some semblance of any damage suffered by its regulated entities.**
3. According to the judgment, **RBI’s circular** was not proportionate. It also pointed out the contradiction in the RBI stand where it insisted that virtual currencies are not banned in India, but the circular had then gone on to ban all trading around them.
4. The judgment also refers to the differing position from the government of India, and notes how the same inter-ministerial committee has come to two completely different conclusions in 2018 and 2019.
5. In the 2018 version of the Crypto-token Regulation Bill, the Inter-Ministerial Committee approved the sale and purchase of digital crypto asset at recognised exchanges.
6. But this position completely changed in 2019. The same committee called for a **complete ban on “private cryptocurrencies,”** while also calling for the creation of a digital rupee as a legal tender. This inherent confusion in the stance of the government is noted in the judgment.
7. The bench said that by banning trading and the VC exchanges, the virtual currencies have been disconnected from their lifeline.



APEX COURT SETS ASIDE RBI CIRCULAR

What did RBI do

- RBI had imposed curbs that prevented banks from dealing in virtual currencies (VCs) through a circular in April 2018
- Inter-ministerial panel felt a ban might be an extreme tool
- VCs not banned but trading in them 'are sent to comatose by the impugned circular'

Why did SC squash the circular?

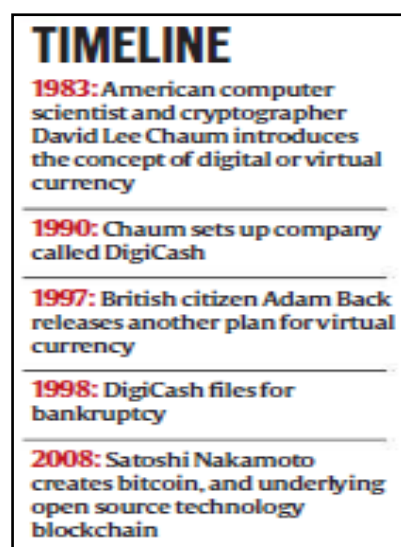
- RBI has so far not found banks being affected by virtual currencies
- RBI has not prohibited VCs in the country
- RBI has not come out with a stand that banks have been affected by VCs
- RBI cannot also show banks have suffered some damage on account of VCs

What did RBI order of April 2018 say?

1. In its 2018 order, **the RBI said,** “entities regulated by the Reserve Bank shall not deal in VCs or provide services for facilitating any person or entity in dealing with or settling VCs.
2. Such services include maintaining accounts, registering, trading, settling, clearing, giving loans against virtual tokens, accepting them as collateral, opening accounts of exchanges dealing with them and transfer / receipt of money in accounts relating to purchase/ sale of VCs.
3. All regulated entities involved in trading of virtual currencies had to exit the relationship within three months from the date of the circular.

What are virtual currencies and blockchain?

1. A virtual currency in simple terms is a digital currency, which is not a legal tender, meaning it does not have the backing of a central bank like say the



TIMELINE

- 1983:** American computer scientist and cryptographer David Lee Chaum introduces the concept of digital or virtual currency
- 1990:** Chaum sets up company called DigiCash
- 1997:** British citizen Adam Back releases another plan for virtual currency
- 1998:** DigiCash files for bankruptcy
- 2008:** Satoshi Nakamoto creates bitcoin, and underlying open source technology blockchain

- Reserve Bank of India.
2. A virtual currency is used by the community of developers who create it. Cryptocurrency is a form of virtual currency is one which is protected by cryptography.
 3. Bitcoin, Ethereum, etc rely on the blockchain ledger technology to protect the currency.
 4. A Blockchain is best defined as an open ledger, updated in real-time and the records are permanent, meaning they cannot be changed.
 5. Every time a transaction is done, a new block is added and each node or computer part of the network helps to maintain this blockchain.
 6. There is no central network or computer, which is keeping the records in one place.
 7. For example, all Bitcoin transactions which have taken place since 2009 are part of the blockchain.
 8. One cannot go and change them or modify these records, because they are protected by complex cryptography.
 9. One would technically have to control a majority of the blockchain or 51 per cent in order to tweak these records.

NASA'S MARS ROVER NAMED

NASA's Mars rover for the 2020 mission finally has an official name: Perseverance. Alexander Mather, a seventh-standard student, submitted the winning entry to NASA's "**Name the Rover**" essay contest. A total of 28,000 entries were received from students across the United States as part of the contest. This Mars rover will help pave the way for human presence there.

What

1. **NASA's last rover sent to Mars was Curiosity, back in 2012.** Other Mars rovers have also been named by school children, which include Sojourner in 1997 and Spirit and Opportunity rovers (landed in 2004).
2. The rover has a robotic scientist and weighs just under 1,043 kilograms. The **Perseverance rover will be managed by NASA's Jet Propulsion Labs (JPL)** and will hunt for signs of past microbial life on Mars.
3. Perseverance will also **characterise the planet's climate and geology**, and collect samples of Martian rocks and dust. NASA has plans for a future mission which could bring these samples back to Earth.
4. **The rover is currently undergoing final assembly and checkout at NASA's Kennedy Space Center in Florida.** The rover is targeted to land on Mars' Jezero Crater a little February 18, 2021.
5. The Mars 2020 is part of a larger program that includes missions to the Moon as a way to prepare for human exploration of the planet.
6. NASA plans to put the next man and the first woman on the moon by 2024 and wants a sustained human presence on the Moon by 2028 with its Artemis program.

INCLUSIVE INTERNET INDEX 2020

India has been ranked 40th out of 100 countries on the inclusive internet index 2020 released by the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU). In South Asia, Pakistan ranked the lowest (76th), India at 40th, Sri Lanka at 56 and Bangladesh on the 70th spot. According to the EIU, in 2020, Pakistan falls into the last quartile of the global internet index countries overall, and it ranks 24th out of 26 Asian countries.

What

1. The 'Inclusive Internet Index' benchmarks countries on the internet's availability, affordability, relevance and the readiness of people to use it.
2. In its fourth year, the index covered 100 countries, representing 91pc of the world's population and 96pc of global GDP.
3. On a scale of one (best) to 100 (worst), Pakistan stood at the 76th place out of the total countries surveyed.
4. Notable among its weaknesses is by far the largest gender gaps in the index, in both mobile and internet access. Low levels of digital literacy and relatively poor network quality are major impediments to internet inclusion, the EIU said.
5. Among the four dimensions considered for the ranking -- availability, affordability, relevance and readiness -- Pakistan showed poor performance in all areas, the worst being in the availability category.
6. In terms of availability -- a category that examines the quality and breadth of available infrastructure required for access and levels of internet usage.
7. In terms of readiness -- measured on the basis of access to internet, including skills, cultural acceptance, and supporting policy.
8. The first country ranked in this year's index is Sweden, followed by New Zealand and the US. Australia and Denmark both ranked fourth, followed by South Korea, Canada, the United Kingdom, France and Spain.
9. Among the global worst are Burundi at 100th, Liberia, Madagascar, Malawi and Burkina Faso.

COMMUNITY TRANSMISSION OF COVID-19

To rule out community transmission of Covid-19, over a thousand samples of influenza- or pneumonia-like illnesses, taken from patients without any travel history or contact with infected persons, would now also be tested for coronavirus every week. Community transmission is when people begin to catch a disease from those who do not know they have the infection. A network of 65 laboratories of the Department of Health Research and the Indian Council of Medical Research (DHR-ICMR) will now test 20 samples each week — 10 of influenza-like illnesses and 10 of severe acute respiratory infection — for Covid-19.

What

1. Community transmission of Covid-19 is inevitable, **experts at India's top health research body** has said.
2. Having isolated the virus which is a 'Wuhan-like strain', they believe the virus would follow the same pattern as it did in China. The virus will behave the same way it has behaved in China. It will follow the same pattern, Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) said.
3. India has a 30-day window to halt the beginning of community transmission. If we manage **30 days, if community transmission doesn't happen in the next 30 days**, we may be at a good wicket.
4. Community transmission happens when a patient who is not exposed to anyone known to be infected and has not travelled to countries in which the virus is circulating tests positive for infection.
5. Experts at the ICMR said there were four states of the disease. Stage 1 is getting imported cases, stage 2 is local transmission, stage 3 is community transmission and stage 4 is when it turns into an epidemic. While, India is at stage 2 now, experts said stern precautions were being taken so that going to stage 3

- could be halted. Taking these precautions will help so we don't go into stage 3 which has happened in all other countries including Italy, China, the US and Europe. Going to that stage is inevitable, but if we can prevent, that window of opportunity is now.
- India has already demonstrated local transmission which scientists have seen in the Covid-19 case of Agra, where five to six family members of an infected person got infected too. The same is true of Kerala.
 - We are not much worried up until stage 2. Stage 3 where the communities will be affected and in large areas, that is worrisome.
 - There is a possibility that if community transmission happens, it could be a localised transmission which can be immediately contained like it happened during the Zika virus. It is not essential that the entire country will be swept off.

MISCELLANEOUS

QS WORLD UNIVERSITY RANKING

For the first time, Indian technical institutions have found place among the top 50 in QS World University Ranking by subject, with IIT-Bombay and IIT-Delhi occupying the 44th and 47th rank, respectively, this year in engineering & technology. India also improved its presence in the top 100 list with five institutions **featuring this year as against three in last year's rankings**. In the arts and humanities category, Jawaharlal Nehru University improved its ranking from 166 to 164 among the top 500 universities with the University of Delhi too featuring among the top 250 in this category.

What

- Massachusetts Institute of Technology is at pole position for the eighth year in a row. In the second and third positions are Stanford and Cambridge, respectively.
- Delhi has the most number of institutions from India among the top 200 with IIT-Delhi and DU again featuring in the social science & management category.
- AIIMS has been ranked 231 in life science & medicine category, improving its rank from 338 in 2019.
- IIM-Ahmedabad and IIM-Bangalore rank in the 51-100 band for business & management studies.
- Globally, Harvard, INSEAD and London Business School occupy the top three places. With design technology picking up pace, the National Institute of Design ranked in the 101-150 band. The Royal College of Art, UK, topped the charts in this category.
- In terms of overall ranks, IIT-B occupies the 152nd position, 10 spots higher as compared to last year. IIT-Delhi comes next at the 182nd (172 in 2019) place, followed closely by the Indian Institute of Science at 184th.
- Among traditional universities, DU is ranked 474, followed by Hyderabad and Jadavpur. The Universities of Mumbai and Pune remain in the 801-1001 band of rankings.
- Quacquarelli Symonds Limited subject rankings are based on research

JNU, DU IMPROVE, AIIMS AT NO. 231					
Institute	2020	2019	Institute	2020	2019
Engineering & Tech			Social Science & Mgmt		
IIT-Bombay	44	53	DU	160	237
IIT-Delhi	47	61	IIT-D	183	231
Arts & Humanities			Life Science & Medicine		
JNU	162	164	AIIMS	231	338
DU	231	233	QS rankings are based on research quality, academic reputation & accomplishments besides graduate employment		

quality, academic reputation and accomplishments besides graduate employment.

9. **The list did not have any Indian institutions in the world's top 200 when it came to the life sciences and medicine categories.**

CIC APPOINTED

Information Commissioner Bimal Julka was appointed as the Chief Information Commissioner (CIC) on 6 March 2020, according to a Rashtrapati Bhavan communique.

President Ram Nath Kovind administered the oath of office to Julka as the CIC in the Central Information Commission at a ceremony held at the Rashtrapati Bhavan.

What

1. The transparency watchdog has been functioning without a chief after Sudhir Bhargava retired on January 11 and is at a reduced strength of six information commissioners, against the sanctioned strength of 11 (including the CIC).
2. There is a vacancy of five more information commissioners at the commission after **Julka's appointment as the CIC.**
3. The Central Information Commission has been constituted with effect from 12-10-2005 under the Right to Information Act, 2005.
4. The jurisdiction of the Commission extends over all Central Public Authorities.

GENDER SOCIAL NORMS INDEX

Nine in 10 people are prejudiced against women, such as thinking university education is more important for men or that men deserve jobs more if work is scarce, the United Nations said on 5 March 2020. More than a quarter of men and women also think it is justified for a husband to beat his wife, found the Gender Social Norms Index by the U.N. Development Programme (UNDP), designed to measure how social beliefs obstruct gender equality.

What

1. Today the fight about gender equality is a story of bias and prejudices, Pedro Conceicao, head of UNDP's Human Development Report Office, said in a statement ahead of International Women's Day on 8 March 2020.
2. Using data from more than 80% of the global population, the index found some progress, including an increase in girls enrolled in primary school and a drop in maternal deaths, but also deeply ingrained prejudices.
3. It said 91% of men and 86% of women held at least one clear bias, such as thinking men make better political leaders or better business executives.
4. The work that has been so effective in ensuring an end to gaps in health or education must now evolve to address something far more challenging: a deeply ingrained bias among both men and women - against genuine equality.
5. The report was released ahead of meeting of the U.N.'s Commission on the Status of Women, which has been shortened to one day due to the spread of coronavirus.
6. Deeply-held biases could be addressed through education, raised awareness and incentives such as tax structures that encourage equally shared childcare or by encouraging women to enter male-dominated job sectors, the UNDP said.
7. In Sweden, bias against women has grown the most. India saw the second-largest growth in prejudice against women, but much more so among women than men.

Women in political roles

1. According to the report, about half of the world's men and women feel that men make better political leaders.
2. In China, 55% of people thought that men were better suited to be political leaders.
3. Around 39% of people in the US, which is yet to have a female president, thought men made better leaders?
4. However in New Zealand, a country that currently has a female leader, only 27% of people thought that.
5. In New Zealand, a country which has a female leader, 27% of people think men would be better leaders than women
6. The number of female heads of government is lower today than five years ago with only 10 women in such positions in 193 countries, down from 15 in 2014.
7. Latin America and the Caribbean had the highest share of seats in parliament held by women with 31%. South Asian countries had the lowest percentage at just 17%.

INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY 2020

The **International Women's Day is celebrated on March 8 every year** to remind ourselves of the sacrifices they have made as well as the efforts they have put in to shape our lives for the better. This year though, we will not only honour the efforts of women and made us better human beings but also take a pledge to make their life better and in that way, thank them for their importance in our lives. We will challenge the societal norms **and help every woman in our and other's life to brave their challenges** such as patriarchy, inequality and sexism.

What

1. The theme for **International Women's Day (8 March) 2020** is, **I am Generation Equality: Realizing Women's Rights**.
2. The **theme is aligned with UN Women's new multigenerational campaign**, Generation Equality, which marks the 25th anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action.
3. Adopted in 1995 at the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, China, the Beijing Platform for Action is recognized as the most progressive roadmap for the empowerment of women and girls, everywhere.
4. The year 2020 is a pivotal year for advancing gender equality worldwide, as the global **community takes stock of progress made for women's rights since the adoption of the Beijing Platform for Action**.
5. It will also mark several other galvanizing moments in the gender equality movement: a five-year milestone towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals; the 20th anniversary of UN Security Council resolution on women, peace and security; and the **10th anniversary of UN Women's establishment**.
6. The emerging global consensus is that despite some progress, real change has been agonizingly slow for the majority of women and girls in the world.
7. The year 2020 represents an unmissable opportunity to mobilize global action to achieve gender equality and human rights of all women and girls.

How came IWD

1. In 1908, the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union organised two mass strikes in New York to protest against long working hours, low wages and dilapidated working conditions under which women worked in the garment industry

- in the United States.
- In 1909, the Socialist Party of America later observed February 28 as Women's Day to commemorate the ILG strike.
 - In 1910, the socialists organised an International Conference of Working Women in Copenhagen. German Communist leader Clara Zetkin proposed the idea of an annual day of working women.
 - International Women's Day was celebrated in Austria, Denmark, Germany and Switzerland on March 19, 1911. This date was to commemorate the 1848 French Revolution and the Paris Commune.
 - Russian women started observing the International Women's Day on the last Sunday in February 1913.
 - In 1917, demonstrations on International Women's Day at St. Petersburg, Russia, where women demanded "bread and peace" gave birth to the February Revolution. This eventually brought the First World War to an end and decline of Tsar regime.
 - This key date, the last Sunday of February 1917, becomes March 8 on the Gregorian calendar, which is now used across the world but had not been adopted in Russia at that time.
 - 60 years later, in 1977, the United Nations proclaimed March 8 as the UN Day for women's rights and world peace. In January 2011, United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women also known as UN Women was formed.

FIRST EVER INDIA FIGURES ON ARMS EXPORTERS

In a first, India has figured on a list of global arms exporters, making a modest entry at number 23 but the ranking is likely to rise sharply over the coming years with the **government's focus on encouraging weapons sales abroad**. The latest data on global arms transfer by SIPRI shows that Indian arms imports have come down significantly (by 32%) since 2015, **indicating that the 'Make in India' initiative** is gaining ground but the country is still ranked as the **world's second biggest weapons buyers**, just behind Saudi Arabia.

What

- Interestingly, imports from the US have taken a huge dip in the past five years, with the data showing that Russia now accounts for 56% of arms supplies.
- In fact, the US no longer figures among the top three suppliers of arms to India. After Russia, Israel at 14% and France at 12% are the major sources of weapons for India.
- Even though India has ordered systems like the Apache and Chinook helicopters and additional P8I maritime aircraft from the US, orders to Russia – from the S 400 anti-air system to additional T 90 Tanks & helicopters have been significantly higher.
- The recent \$3 billion deal for Apache and MH 60 'Romeo' choppers has not been taken into account in the data set.
- The USA became the second-largest arms supplier to India in 2010–14 as the



security relationship between the two countries developed into a strategic partnership. However, in 2015–19 India continued with its policy of supplier diversification, and imports of arms from the USA were 51% lower than in 2010–14, the report says.

6. The silver lining for India, along with the 32% dip in imports has been the entry into the exporters list. At present, the exports shown are modest – they account for only 0.2% of the global arms market – **but the start is significant. India's biggest clients** are Myanmar, which accounts for 46% of exports, Sri Lanka at 25% and Mauritius at 14%.
7. India has a target to increase its defence exports to \$ 5 billion within five years. The SIPRI data also shows the Pakistan has not become completely dependent on China for its weapon systems. Since 2015, China accounts for 73% of arms imports by Pakistan.

Other notable developments

1. **Germany's arms exports were 17 per cent higher** in 2015–19 than in 2010–14.
2. China was the fifth-largest arms exporter in 2015–19 and significantly increased the number of recipients of its major arms: from 40 in 2010–14 to 53 in 2015–19.
3. **South Korea's arms exports rose by 143 per cent** between 2010–14 and 2015–19 and it entered the list of the top 10 largest exporters for the first time.
4. Israeli arms exports increased by 77 per cent between 2010–14 and 2015–19 to their highest-ever level.
5. West and Central European states had outstanding orders at the end of 2019 for imports of 380 new combat aircraft from the USA.
6. **Egypt's arms imports tripled** between 2010–14 and 2015–19, making it the world's third-largest arms importer.
7. **Brazil's arms imports in 2015–19** were the highest in South America, accounting for **31 per cent of the subregion's arms imports, despite a 37 per cent decrease** compared with 2010–14.
8. South Africa, the largest arms importer in sub-Saharan Africa in 2005–2009, imported almost no major arms in 2015–19.

WEF'S YGL LIST

Byju Classes' founder Byju Raveendran and **Zomato's co-founder Gaurav Gupta** are among the five Indians named by the World Economic Forum (WEF) in its new list of 115 Young Global Leaders (YGL) on 11 March 2020. Announcing the list, Geneva-based WEF **said these 'change-makers' from as many as 52 countries** are working in areas ranging from revamping of health systems to investigating corruption while using their power of the under 40s to change the world. The other three Indians on the list are Tara Singh Vachani (CEO of Antara Senior Living), Vinati Mutreja (Managing Director and CEO, Vinati Organics Limited), and Swapan Mehra (CEO, Iora Ecological Solutions).

What

1. Vachani-led Antara Senior Living is focused on improving the lives of seniors and is billed as the first Indian venture creating vibrant residential communities that offer lifestyle with lifecare.
2. Mutreja-led Vinati Organics a specialty chemical company where she has applied innovative methods for selecting chemical processes and products that are environmentally attractive.
3. **Raveendran, who launched Byju's as a learning app in 2015**, calls himself a teacher by choice and an entrepreneur by chance.
4. **Gupta's Zomato has been a pioneering food technology start-up**, which he launched as a table reservation business and then scaled it up across India, the UAE and Australia.
5. Mehra-led Iora Ecological Solutions is into climate action and ecosystem conservation in India.

6. **These five Indians are joined on the 2020 list of YGLs by US women's football team co-captain Megan Rapinoe, world-renowned street artist JR, New Zealand's first refugee parliamentarian Golriz Gharhaman, Finland's youngest prime minister Sanna Marin, BBC News's Africa Business Editor Larry Madowo and Xiaomi's international business president Chew Shou Zi.**
7. The list also includes Muhammad Hammad Azhar (Federal Minister for Economic Affairs in Pakistan), Ugyen Dorji (Minister of Labour and Human Resources, Bhutan) and Atika Rehman (UK Correspondent for Dawn.com, Pakistan)

WEF'S COVID ACTION PLATFORM

With the coronavirus epidemic hurting economic activities globally, the World Economic Forum on 11 March 2020 launched a new platform with the support of the World Health Organisation (WHO) to convene the global business community for a collective action on the COVID-19 response. This is the first initiative of its kind that aims to convene the business community for collective action, protect people's livelihoods and facilitate business continuity, and mobilise support for the COVID-19 response, the Geneva-based international organisation for public-private cooperation said in a statement.

What

1. The "COVID Action Platform" has been created with the support of the WHO and is open to all businesses and industry groups, as well as other stakeholders including governments, aiming to integrate their efforts for a joint action.
2. The dramatic spread of COVID-19 has disrupted lives, livelihoods, communities and businesses worldwide, but the sum of many individual actions by stakeholders around the world will not add up to a sufficient response, the WEF said.
3. Only coordinated action by business, combined with global, multi-stakeholder cooperation can mitigate the risk and impact of this unprecedented global health emergency.
4. The new platform is intended to catalyse private-sector support for the global public health response to COVID-19, and to do so at the scale and speed required to protect lives and livelihoods, aiming to find ways to help end the global emergency as soon as possible.
5. The three priorities for this platform would be to galvanise the global business community for collective action; protect people's livelihoods and facilitate business continuity; and mobilise cooperation and business support for the COVID-19 response.
6. The platform will operate a network where CEOs, organisational leaders and designated COVID-19 corporate responders can offer their help and team up on specific projects, launch actions and keep each other informed of best practices.
7. COVID-19 is causing health emergencies and economic disruptions that no single stakeholder can address, WEF's Founder and Executive Chairman Klaus Schwab said.
8. Our best and only response to it should be to take concerted action. The COVID Action Platform is at the centre of our mission and we draw upon all our members and partners, communities and capabilities to make it a success.
9. WHO's Director-General Adhanom Ghebreyesus said the private sector has an essential role to play in combating this public health crisis through their expertise, innovation and resources.
10. It is supported by the WHO and the Wellcome Trust and is the first initiative of its kind, operating globally. The WEF has established a special team to support the platform's work.
11. Other actions will include supporting mechanisms for business donations to the public health response and the development of available and accessible vaccines, diagnostics, treatments and protective equipment, as well as tracking the economic impact of the virus, while pursuing collaboration to address disruptions.
12. The WEF said companies can register online for this new platform.

NEW POCSO RULES NOTIFIED

The Union government has notified the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Rules, 2020 which enables implementation of recent amendments to the Act under which provisions of punishment for child abuse has been made more stringent. Some of the significant additions in the new rules include provision of mandatory police verification of staff in schools and care homes, procedures to report sexual abuse material (pornography), imparting age-appropriate child rights education among others.

What

1. For crackdown on child pornography, the rules state that "any person who has received any pornographic material involving a child or any information regarding such pornographic material being stored, possessed, distributed, circulated, transmitted, facilitated, propagated or displayed, or is likely to be distributed, facilitated or transmitted in any manner shall report the contents to the special juvenile police unit (SJPU) or police, or the cybercrime portal".
2. The report shall include the details of the device in which such pornographic content was noticed and the suspected device from which such content was received including the platform on which the content was displayed.
3. Under the rules, the state governments have been asked to formulate a child protection policy based on the principle of "zero-tolerance" to violence against children, which shall be adopted by all institutions, organisations, or any other agency working with, or coming in contact with children.
4. The central government and every state government shall provide periodic training including orientation programmes, sensitisation workshops and refresher courses to all persons, whether regular or contractual, coming in contact with the children, to sensitise them about child safety and protection and educate them regarding their responsibility under the Act, the rules said.
5. The Centre and state governments have been asked to prepare age-appropriate educational material and curriculum for children, informing them about various aspects of personal safety, including measures to protect their physical and virtual identity; and to safeguard their emotional and mental wellbeing, prevention and protection from sexual offences and reporting mechanisms, including Childline helpline services through toll free number - 1098.
6. Orientation programme and intensive courses may also be organised for police personnel and forensic experts for building their capacities in their respective roles on a regular basis.
7. Under the new rules, any institution housing children or coming in regular contact with children, including schools, creches, sports academies or any other facility for children must ensure a police verification and background check on periodic basis of every staff. The new POCSO rules became effective from March 9.
8. The POCSO Act was enacted in 2012 to provide a robust legal framework for the protection of children from offences of sexual assault, sexual harassment and pornography, while safeguarding the interests of children at every stage of the judicial process.