

Abhimanu

Weekly current affairs Series

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Abhimanu's IAS Study Group

Chandigarh

NATIONAL ECONOMIC AFFAIRS

MSME Sambandh

- A Public Procurement Portal 'MSME Sambandh' was launched by Minister of State (Independent Charge) for MSME.
- The objective of the portal is to monitor the implementation of the Public Procurement from MSEs by Central Public Sector Enterprises.
- The Procurement Policy launched in 2012 mandates the Central Government Departments / CPSUs to procure necessarily from MSEs i.e. every Central Ministry / Department / PSU shall set an annual goal for procurement from the MSE sector at the beginning of the year, with the objective of achieving an overall procurement goal of minimum of 20 per cent of the total annual purchases of the products or services produced or rendered by MSEs. By creating an online portal, the Ministries and the CPSEs can assess their performance.

Salient features of the Policy:

- Every Central Ministry /Department / PSUs shall set an annual target for 20% procurement from MSE Sector.
- A sub-target of 4% out of 20% target of annual procurement earmarked for procurement from MSEs owned by SC/ST entrepreneurs.
- Overall procurement goal of minimum 20% has become mandatory from 1st April 2015.
- Tender sets free of cost and exemption from payment of earnest money to registered MSEs.
- 358 items are reserved for exclusive procurement from MSEs.
- Ministry /Department/CPSUs shall prepare their annual procurement plan to be uploaded on their official website.
- For enhancing participation of MSEs in government procurement, Ministry /Department/CPSUs shall conduct Vendor Development Programmes or Buyer Seller Meets for MSEs especially for SC/ST entrepreneur

Analysis:

- MSME sector generates more employment next only to Agriculture sector. 80% of jobs in industry is given by MSME with just 20% of investment.
- There is need that all stakeholders take advantage of the portal thereby fulfilling the mandate given to them.
- This portal would gel with the ease of doing business and 'Make in India' initiatives of the Government of India. He also said that his government is ready to help the MSEs in all possible ways.
- Micro and Small Enterprises would be able to access the information about the products being procured by CPSEs. Thus, it would help the MSEs in participating in the procurement process.

Benami Act

- The Income-Tax Department is scrutinizing all unexplained credits and investments in personal as well as corporate income-tax filings and is looking to invoke the Benami Act in many cases. Unexplained credits, in the books of a company or bank accounts of individuals, have so far been treated as black money, attracting a higher tax of up to 80%.

What is Benami?

- The benami transaction is any transaction in which property is transferred to one person for a consideration paid by another person in other words Benami essentially means property without a name.
- In this kind of transaction the person who pays for the property does not buy it under his/her own name. The person on whose name the property has been purchased is called the benamdar and the property so purchased is called the benami property. The person who finances the deal is the real owner. The property is held for the benefit - direct or indirect - of the person paying the amount.

Highlights of Key Provisions of Benami Transactions (Prohibition) Amendment Act, 2016

- The person found guilty may have to face rigorous imprisonment for a period not less than 1 year & which may be extended to maximum of 7 years. In addition to imprisonment, there would be a penalty of 25 percent which will be calculated on the fair market value of the property.
- Any person who is asked to furnish any information under this act, if intentionally provides false information shall face rigorous imprisonment of not less than 6 months which may extend up to 5 years along with the fine of 10 percent of the fair market value of the property.
- Properties held benami are liable for confiscation by government without compensation.
- Initiating Officer may pass an order to continue holding property and may then refer case to Adjudicating Authority which will then examine evidence and pass an order.
- Appellate Tribunal will hear appeals against orders of Adjudicating Authority.
- High Court can hear appeals against orders of Appellate Tribunal.

SC leaves it to government to regulate ads on pre-natal sex tests

- Supreme Court has left the decision to regulate advertisement on pre-natal sex tests to the government to take care of such issues in consultation with the search engines. The court cited lack of expertise as a reason for this.
- This case had begun in 2008, when an activist filed public interest litigation (PIL) to get the search engines to abide by local law which bans such tests to arrest the falling sex ratio in the country.
- The government had then set up a nodal body to act as the interface with the search engines on such complaints. The court had passed umpteen orders in which the court warned the engines that they should either follow local law or shut shop.

About The Pre-Conception and Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques (Prohibition of Sex Selection) Act, 2003:

- The Pre-Conception and Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques (Prohibition of Sex Selection) Act, 2003, commonly called PC-PNDT Act, makes it illegal to determine the sex of the unborn child or even use sex-selection technologies.
- The law first came into force in 1996 as the Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques (Regulation and Prevention of Misuse) Act, 1994, in response to the falling sex ratio and fears that ultrasound technologies were being used to determine the sex of the foetus.
- The law was amended in 2003 to bring the technique of preconception sex selection within the ambit of the Act – essentially, banning practices where medical practitioners try to influence the sex of the child before conception by using techniques such as sperm sorting (where a sperm cell is specifically chosen because of its

sex chromosome). The law as it stands not only prohibits determination and disclosure of the sex of the foetus but also bans advertisements related to preconception and prenatal determination of sex

- According to the Act, ultrasound clinics, genetic counselling centres and genetic laboratories cannot be used for conducting pre-natal diagnostic techniques except for detecting abnormalities such as chromosomal abnormalities, genetic metabolic diseases, sex-linked genetic diseases and congenital anomalies. The Act makes it mandatory for all ultrasound facilities to be registered and for medical practitioners to maintain records of every scan done on pregnant women.
- **Why this act was needed:** Since 2000, both high courts and the Supreme Court have delivered a series of judgments, taking a serious view of sex-selective practices by the medical fraternity and the connection it may have with skewed sex ratios. In September 2001, following a public interest litigation – filed by the Centre for the Enquiry of Health and Allied Themes, rights group Mahila Sarvangeen Utkarsh Mandal and Dr Sabu George, who had been pushing for the effective implementation of the PMDT Act – the Supreme Court passed an order for strict implementation of the Act and reiterated it again in September 2003. The rate of conviction has been poor. From 2003 to December 2014, only 206 doctors had been convicted by courts, of which Maharashtra had the highest number at 96, followed by Rajasthan, Punjab and Haryana. At least 15 states and four union territories had zero convictions all these years. The woman and child development minister's proposal is that the gender of the child be compulsorily registered and the birth be tracked. Activists have opposed the idea, saying it will only make female foeticide more rampant.
- **Implementation of this act:** The main problem isn't with the Act but with its implementation. State advisory committees that help in implementing the Act do not meet regularly. Besides, there is poor monitoring of ultrasound clinics. Such clinics are required to maintain records of the scans they conduct but the violators are often let off with a fine.

Adultery laws in India

- Supreme Court has issued a notice to the Centre on a public interest litigation challenging the constitutionality of IPC section 497 dealing with adultery, saying it appeared to be "archaic" and did not appear to be gender-neutral.
- The court was hearing a PIL, challenging the constitutionality of Section 497 IPC along with Section 198(2) of the CrPC. According to petitioner, Section 497 IPC was unconstitutional as it discriminates against men and violates Article 14, 15 and 21.

Section 497:

- Whoever has sexual intercourse with a person who is and whom he knows or has reason to believe to be the wife of another man, without the consent or connivance of that man, such sexual intercourse not amounting to the offence of rape, is guilty of the offence of adultery, and shall be punished with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to five years, or with fine, or with both. In such case the wife shall not be punishable as an abettor.

Section 198(2)

- No person other than the husband of the woman shall be deemed to be aggrieved by any offence punishable under Section 497 or Section 498 of the said Code: Provided that in the absence of the husband, some person who had care of the woman on his behalf at the time when such offence was committed may, with the leave of the Court, make a complaint on his behalf.

Analysis:

- Adultery is at best a violation of the terms of agreement between a married couple.
- The IPC version of criminalising adultery with five years imprisonment is just a more moderate version of the Islamic versions which see it as a grave offence that deserves barbaric punishments like stoning and lashing.
- Such laws serve as encouragement to peep into people's bedrooms though only the husband can make a complaint.

- It is possible that common law jurists conceived an adultery law to prevent duels between the wronged husband and the lover or to give the husband a legal device to hit back at the wife and her lover.
- Most countries in the West have decriminalized adultery. India should follow their example rather than split hairs over making it gender just.

Bodhi Parva

- 'Bodhi Parva: BIMSTEC Festival of Buddhist Heritage' was held in New Delhi.
- The Festival had diverse components including an exhibition of international and Indian Buddhist art and architecture, discourses by eminent scholars and practitioners of Buddhism, guided meditation and chanting by Buddhist monks and choir, screening of film on Buddhism, dance and music performances.
- Organizing of the Festival is in keeping with the call of BIMSTEC Leaders to work collectively towards making BIMSTEC stronger, more effective, and result oriented at the BIMSTEC Leaders' Retreat hosted by India in Goa in October 2016.
- Bodhi Parva is an opportunity to re-emphasize and celebrate the strong Buddhist cultural heritage shared by all Member States.

About BIMSTEC:

- Though BIMSTEC is a Bay of Bengal camp, two land-locked states -- Nepal and Bhutan -- are also part of the seven member-group. Five of them are from South Asia -- India, Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan, Sri Lanka -- and two from South East Asia -- Myanmar and Thailand.

What this grouping means in numbers

- The BIMSTEC region is home to around 1.5 billion people which constitute around 22% of the global population. The region has a combined gross domestic product (GDP) of \$2.7 trillion. In the last five years, BIMSTEC member states have been able to sustain an average 6.5% economic growth trajectory despite global financial meltdown.

What are the objectives of BIMSTEC?

- **Economic Development:** To create an enabling environment for rapid economic development through identification and implementation of specific cooperation projects in the sectors of trade, investment and industry, technology, human resource development, tourism, agriculture, energy, and infrastructure and transportation.
- **Growth:** To accelerate the economic growth and social progress in the sub-region through joint endeavours in a spirit of equality and partnership.
- **Collaboration:** To promote active collaboration and mutual assistance on matters of common interest in the economic, social, technical and scientific fields.
- **Assistance:** To provide assistance to each other in the form of training and research facilities in the educational, professional and technical spheres.
- **Co-operation:** To cooperate in projects that can be dealt with most productively on a sub-regional basis and make the best use of available synergies among BIMSTEC member countries.

Supreme Court agrees to examine plea to bar politicians from contesting from two seats

- The Supreme Court agreed to adjudicate on whether politicians could be barred from contesting from more than one seat in an election and sought assistance from the Attorney General (AG) to decide the issue.
- Section 33(7) of the Representation of People's Act permits a candidate to contest any election (Parliamentary, State Assembly, Biennial Council, or bye-elections) from up to two constituencies. The provision was introduced in 1996 prior to which there was no bar on the number of constituencies from which a candidate could contest.

Analysis:

- Election Commission was in favour of not allowing politicians from contesting from multiple seats saying it resulted in wastage of public money as when fresh election was conducted, the candidate had to vacate one seat after winning in both the constituencies.
- In 2004, the Chief Election Commissioner urged the Prime Minister for amendment of Section 33(7) to provide that a person cannot contest from more than one constituency for the same office simultaneously.
- The ECI alternatively suggested that if existing provisions are retained then the candidate contesting from two seats should bear the cost of the bye-election to the seat that the contestant decides to vacate in the event of his/her winning both seats. The amount in such an event could be Rs 5 lakh for assembly election and Rs 10 lakh for parliament election," the petition said.
- Law Commission had also recommended Centre to amend the law but the Centre had not taken any step to implement the suggestion.
- One person, one vote & one candidate, one constituency is the dictum of democracy. However, as per the law, as it stands today, a person can contest the election for the same office from two constituencies simultaneously. When a candidate contests from two seats, it is imperative that he has to vacate one of the two seats if he wins both. This, apart from the consequent unavoidable financial burden on the public exchequer, government manpower and other resources for holding bye-election is also an injustice to the voters of the constituency which the candidate is quitting from.

Laqshya: Labour Room Quality Improvement Initiative

- LaQshya: Labour Room Quality Improvement Initiative, a Safe Delivery Mobile Application for health workers who manage normal and complicated deliveries in the peripheral areas is launched by health ministry.

About Laqshya:

- LaQshya is expected to improve the quality of care that is being provided to the pregnant mother in the Labour Room and Maternity Operation Theatres, thereby preventing the undesirable adverse outcomes associated with childbirth.
- This initiative will be implemented in Government Medical Colleges (MCs) besides District Hospitals (DHs), and high delivery load Sub- District Hospitals (SDHs) and Community Health Centres (CHCs).
- The initiative plans to conduct quality certification of labour rooms and also incentivize facilities achieving the targets outlined.
- The goal of this initiative is to reduce preventable maternal and new-born mortality, morbidity and stillbirths associated with the care around delivery in Labour room and Maternity OT and ensure respectful maternity care.

INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

International Solar Alliance to Offer \$1 Billion Guarantee

- Inter-governmental agency International Solar Alliance (ISA) will create a risk mitigation fund of \$1 billion with the help of the Indian, French governments, banks and the Green Climate Fund.
- The fund will be used to insure solar power projects against possible risks and is likely to be in place by December next year.

- ISA came into effect last week, aims to mobilise \$1 trillion of low-cost financing for solar energy by 2030 through global tenders and cheap financing. It has been ratified by 19 countries and has 46 signatories to its framework agreement.

How will ISA mobilise funds?

- The alliance will develop an insurance scheme called Common Risk Mitigating Mechanism for investors so that more investment can take place in the solar sector. In the next one year, we should create an insurance fund or risk mitigation fund of \$1 billion with the help of India, France, banks and Green Climate Fund. The mechanism will be rolled out by December next year.
- It is expected that the mechanism will help diversify and pool risks to unlock huge investment in the sector which may need more than \$1 trillion to create solar energy capacity of 1,000 GW globally by 2030.

About Solar Alliance

- India's prime minister has launched an international solar alliance of over 120 countries with the French president, François Hollande, at the Paris COP 21 climate summit.
- The Alliance is likely to boost the absorption and deployment of solar power, which has already seen exponential expansion in the last five years — between 2010 and 2014, the installed capacity of solar energy across the world has grown from 23 GW to about 180 GW.
- It is an invitation to 121 countries lying between the Tropic of Cancer and the Tropic of Capricorn, which get the most solar insolation, to make collaborative efforts to harness solar energy to generate electricity. Most of these countries are in Asia, Africa and South America, and many of them are power deficient.
- By coming together to install solar power plants, these countries can drive up the demand for solar technologies manifold, in the process forcing down prices even more. Currently, the growth of solar installed capacity has been coming from very few countries.
- These alliances can bring standardization to manufacturing processes and solar technologies. If every country starts using similar products and processes, costs of manufacturing elements of solar technologies can fall substantially.
- A keenly awaited technology breakthrough is in the area of storage systems. There is currently no way to store the electricity being produced by solar systems, because of which the sun is not the most reliable energy source on many days.
- India will provide money and infrastructure to this alliance. India has committed itself to providing Rs 400 crore over the next five years to building infrastructure and meeting recurring costs. A secretariat is being set up in New Delhi. Till a building is constructed, the secretariat will function from the Delhi-based National Institute of Solar Energy. India is leading world from the front by launching various initiatives regarding solar energy. India has a capacity of 4 GW and has set a target of adding 100 GW of solar power by 2022.

Sri Lanka formally hands over Hambantota port to China

- Sri Lanka has formally handed over the southern sea port of Hambantota to China on a 99-year lease.
- Two Chinese firms, namely Hambantota International Port Group (HIPG) and Hambantota International Port Services (HIPS) managed by the China Merchants Port Holdings Company (CMPort) and the Sri Lanka Ports Authority will own the port and the investment zone around it.
- Sri Lanka, in July 2017, cleared a revised deal for the Chinese-built port in Hambantota. The modified agreement is believed to be more profitable to Sri Lanka and also addresses security concerns raised by other countries. As per the deal, while the Chinese would manage port operations, no naval ship, including Chinese ones, can call at Hambantota without Sri Lanka's permission.

Analysis:

- The Hambantota port is located on the southern tip of Sri Lanka within 10 nautical miles from the world's busiest maritime lanes. It is ideally located at the intersection of the major international shipping routes. Approximately 200 to 300 ships sail through this route daily. The Hambantota port is strategically positioned in terms of domestic trade perspectives also.

- China has long been interested in the commercial and strategic potential of Hambantota. While the Indian Ocean is itself a crucial space, being the bridge between Africa and the Middle East on one side and Southeast Asia on the other, Hambantota is right in the middle of vital energy supply lines in the Indian Ocean, connecting the Middle East and East Asia.
- It is also a strategic link in Xi Jinping's ambitious 21st Century Maritime Silk Road – a grand blueprint based on technical and economic connectivity that spans China, Africa, and Europe, which could very likely change the face of Eurasian geopolitics, should it come to fruition.
- India had expressed concerns regarding Chinese-built projects especially the Colombo Port City and the Hambantota port in the past. In both these cases, the agreements were revised ostensibly to address the concerns of India as well as of some other countries.
- India's main concern has been the long term impact of Chinese state-owned companies acquiring equity in the Sri Lankan economy and the extent to which Chinese influence on Sri Lanka's economy would affect Colombo's ability to practice an independent foreign policy. Chinese influence in Sri Lanka will have serious implications for the latter's relationship with India. India's fear regarding China's intentions in its neighbourhood are not unfounded given the latter's increasing naval presence in the Indian Ocean, decision to acquire its first overseas base in Djibouti and its presence in Gwadar as part of the intensifying Sino-Pakistan axis.

ASEAN-India Connectivity Summit (AICS)

- The ASEAN-India Connectivity Summit (AICS) held in New Delhi from December 11-12.
- The theme of the meeting is 'Powering Digital and Physical Linkages for Asia in the 21st Century'.

About AICS:

- The AICS aims to accelerate existing connectivity prospects, identify issues of concern, evolve suitable policy recommendations and develop strategies to enhance economic, industrial and trade relations between ASEAN and India.
- Its focus areas are infrastructure, roadways, shipping, digital, finance, energy and aviation.
- The AICS would be bringing together policymakers, senior officials from the government, investors, industry leaders, representatives of trade associations and entrepreneurs on the same platform.

About ASEAN:

- The Association of Southeast Asian Nations, or ASEAN, was established on 8 August 1967 in Bangkok, Thailand, with the signing of the ASEAN Declaration (Bangkok Declaration) by the Founding Fathers of ASEAN, namely Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore and Thailand.
- Brunei Darussalam then joined on 7 January 1984, Viet Nam on 28 July 1995, Lao PDR and Myanmar on 23 July 1997, and Cambodia on 30 April 1999, making up what is today the ten Member States of ASEAN.

Aims and purposes of ASEAN are:

- To accelerate the economic growth, social progress and cultural development in the region through joint endeavours in the spirit of equality and partnership in order to strengthen the foundation for a prosperous and peaceful community of Southeast Asian Nations;
- To promote regional peace and stability through abiding respect for justice and the rule of law in the relationship among countries of the region and adherence to the principles of the United Nations Charter;
- To promote active collaboration and mutual assistance on matters of common interest in the economic, social, cultural, technical, scientific and administrative fields;
- To provide assistance to each other in the form of training and research facilities in the educational, professional, technical and administrative spheres;
- To collaborate more effectively for the greater utilisation of their agriculture and industries, the expansion of their trade, including the study of the problems of international commodity trade, the improvement of their transportation and communications facilities and the raising of the living standards of their peoples;

- To promote Southeast Asian studies; and
- To maintain close and beneficial cooperation with existing international and regional organisations with similar aims and purposes, and explore all avenues for even closer cooperation among themselves.

India Signs Loan Agreement with World Bank for SANKALP Project

- A Financing Agreement for IBRD loan of USD 250 million for the “Skills Acquisition and Knowledge Awareness for Livelihood Promotion (SANKALP) Project” was signed with the World Bank.

About SANKALP:

- SANKALP (Skill Acquisition and Knowledge Awareness for Livelihood Promotion Programme) is a Rs 4000 crore programme that is aimed at channelizing the energy of the youth in proper education, skill and jobs.
- It will provide market relevant training to 3.5 crore youth. The objective is to enhance the employability potential of the youth to the maximum extent possible.
- It is indeed a good answer to the situation of unemployment among youths prevailing in our country that is preventing the economic and social development.
- There are two phases to this Scheme-the first is the initial Rs 4000 crore and the second phase starts with Rs 2200 crore. The second stage is termed as STRIVE (Skill Strengthening for Industrial Value Enhancement).

Some of the measures that are being undertaken under this Programme are as follows:

- Forming alienate annual performance measuring system for secondary schools and Colleges.
- Major contributions would be allocated to innovation and regional funds for ensuring better amenities to government schools and colleges.
- Developing more than 100 skill centres, covering all major courses of interest and education in foreign languages.
- Centres for people, for getting connected with e-programs like Swayam and DigiGaon for skill enhancing e-learning courses are being set up.
- Establishing a National Testing Agency for holding entrance exams in future & freeing educational bodies from such responsibility.
- Targeting govt spending on STRIVE (Skill Strengthening for Industrial Value Enhancement) for improving better training method of ITIs and ensuring better apprenticeship programs.
- Extension of Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Kendras (PMKK) to 600 districts which presently constitute to train only in 60 districts.
- Allocating up-to 4500 crore to Deendayal Antyodaya Yojana – National Rural Livelihood Mission helping low income families giving a livelihood sustenance option with skill development.
- The training clubs in several initiatives earlier undertaken by the Government. These include:
- Extension of the Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Kendras to more than 600 districts across the country, from 60 districts at present.
- 100 India International Skill Centres will be established across the country to offer advanced training and also courses in foreign languages, which Jaitley said, “will help those of our youth who seek job opportunities outside the country.

Speedtest Global Index, 2017

- The popular internet speed testing service Ookla has released its November edition of the Speedtest Global Index, ranking average internet speeds in different countries, on mobile and home broadband.

Highlights of the index:

- India is ranked 109th in mobile internet speeds and 76th for fixed broadband speed globally, which is a 15 percent increase.
- At the start of 2017, the average mobile download speed in India was 7.65 Mbps. Heading into the end of the year, average mobile download speed is 8.80 Mbps which is a 15 percent increase.

- While mobile speeds increased modestly, fixed broadband speeds increased dramatically. Average fixed broadband download speed in January was 12.12 Mbps. As of November, it's at 18.82 Mbps, a close to 50 percent jump.
- Norway ranks first in the world for mobile internet with an average download speed of 62.66 Mbps.
- Singapore takes the top spot for fixed broadband with a 153.85 Mbps average download.

Analysis:

- Both mobile and fixed broadband internet in India are getting faster, that's good news for all Indian consumers no matter which operator or plan they use to access the internet.
- India still has a long way to go to catch up with countries that have top speeds around the world.
- First and foremost factor for internet is sufficient infrastructure. The strength and quality of networks is the baseline foundation required for faster speeds. Another key element in growth is competition. When operators compete to provide the fastest speeds and the best plans for consumers, they incentivise each other to offer progressively better options.
- And a third factor in improving speeds is the consideration of new technologies that may boost network performance.

Buenos Aires Declaration on Women and Trade

- World Trade Organization, WTO members and observers have endorsed a collective initiative to increase the participation of women in trade.
- In order to help women reach their full potential in the world economy, 118 WTO members and observers agreed to support the Buenos Aires Declaration on Women and Trade, which seeks to remove barriers to, and foster, women's economic empowerment.
- Buenos Aires declaration on women and trade was spearheaded by the governments of Iceland and Sierra Leone, as well as the International Trade Centre. It stemmed from efforts made by the Trade Impact Group of the International Gender Champions, a leadership network that brings female and male decision-makers together to break down gender barriers. The declaration seeks women's economic empowerment by expeditiously removing barriers to trade.
- India was among the minority group that chose not to endorse the move saying while it stoutly supports gender equality, it cannot concur with the view that gender is a trade-related issue.

Analysis:

- This declaration will seek to promote a more inclusive trade agenda by enabling more women to participate in international trade.
- According to research by the International Trade Centre (ITC), women-owned businesses that export employ an average of 42 people, compared with an average of only eight people employed by non-exporting women-owned businesses. Despite this, woman exporters face more trade obstacles than men, with 74% of woman-owned firms reporting challenging non-tariff measures compared to 54% of businesses owned by men.
- So, WTO Action is needed to better integrate women into the international trading system. All the evidence suggests that giving an equal economic chance to women is not only economically important; it results in beneficial outcomes for society as a whole
- Women-owned businesses that export are 3.5 times more productive than those which do not export. But while women own up to 40% of all small- and medium-sized enterprises globally, they lead only one in five exporting firms.
- According to research by McKinsey, advancing women's equality could add \$28 trillion to global GDP by 2025 and mean better development outcomes for families and communities worldwide.

UN report on electronic/electrical waste in India

- The UN has warned about the health and environmental dangers from the processing of e-waste -- the discarded electronic and electrical material -- by the informal sector in India without proper safeguards.
- This report is released by International Telecommunications Union and the UN University.

Main highlights of the report:

- Over 1 million poor people in India are involved in manual recycling operations, but "most of these people have very low literacy levels with little awareness of the dangers of the operations.
- The dangers come from improper and unsafe treatment and disposal through open burning or in dumpsites.
- Domestically India produced 1.95 million tonnes of e-waste last year -- or about 1.5 kg per person -- and it also imports it from developed countries.
- E-waste includes a whole variety of small and large appliances, and electronic equipment including cell phones, TVs, refrigerators, air conditioners, computers and lamps, small appliance and large appliances, lamps.
- Last year, the world produced 44.7 million tonnes of e-waste or 6.1 kg per person, which is four times more than the e-waste produced by each Indian. Only 8.9 million tonnes -- or 20 per cent -- per cent of total global e-waste was recycled.
- The report estimated that the value of recoverable precious materials like gold, silver, copper, platinum and palladium contained in last year's e-waste was \$55 billion and much of it was going to waste.
- A formal e-waste recycling sector is now being developed in major Indian cities and under the country's rules producers have extended responsibility for the handling the waste that ultimately results from their products, the report said.

Analysis:

- India is the fastest-growing market in the world for smartphones with 27 million units shipped in the second quarter of 2016 alone, and though the lifespan of a mobile phone is higher in India than in the West, one can imagine the number of "obsolete" phones contributing to electronic waste (e-waste). Such phones and other electronics contributed to 1.5 million tonnes of e-waste produced in India in 2015, 90% of which was managed by the informal sector using unscientific methods that cause harm to human health and the environment.
- To streamline e-waste management, the government notified Electronic Waste (Management and Handling) Rules, 2011 that became effective in May 2012. These rules are based on extended producer responsibility (EPR), a popular framework across the world for e-waste management. EPR makes manufacturers of electronic products responsible for the end-of-life management of their products. They have to set up collection centres and ensure that waste is recycled and disposed of in an environment-friendly manner. All collection centres, dismantling units and recyclers must register with state pollution control boards and comply with their norms.

SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

VoLTE services

- Telecom major Bharti Airtel, as part of expanding its services, has launched Voice over Long Term Evolution (VoLTE) facility. Airtel VoLTE works over 4G services that will enable customers across the city to enjoy HD quality voice calls with faster call set up time.

About VoLTE:

- VoLTE is a technology update to the LTE protocol used by mobile phone networks. Under LTE, the infrastructure of telecom players only allows transmission of data while voice calls are routed to their older 2G or 3G networks. This is why, under LTE, you cannot access your 4G data services while on a call. This leads to problems such as slow internet speeds and poor voice clarity.
- VoLTE allows voice calls to be 'packaged' and carried through LTE networks. This would mean 4G data accessibility even during calls.
- VoLTE is an Internet Protocol Multimedia Subsystem (IMS) specification which enables a variety of services to operate seamlessly on the network rather than having to switch to different applications for voice or video.
- In India, mobile phones and telecom operators have adapted to LTE networks, faster than to 3G and are preparing to launch VoLTE services. But not all players may be able to immediately implement this mainly due to costs and complexity in infrastructure.

Analysis:

- If VoLTE becomes a reality, it could enable call quality that is much superior to the previous networks.
- Apart from high definition voice quality, it can also provide improved coverage. Your network would pick up 2G or 3G signals when VoLTE is unavailable, ensuring you are always connected with both voice and data. We may also be able to place video calls directly from your number which may render applications such as Skype or Viber redundant. Since VoLTE counts voice calls as data usage, your billing will be in terms of data consumption rather than minutes of usage.
- VoLTE can also extend or save your battery life. In the present scenario, your network has to switch from 4G to 3G every time you place a call. This constant switching and searching for a network takes a toll on your mobile battery.
- On the downside, this service might be limited to mobile phones that are equipped with software to allow VoLTE function. There might be call drops in the initial stages of implementation.
- In India, Jio was the first player to offer VoLTE services, followed by Airtel. Others are likely to roll out VoLTE services soon. However, it would take few years before the full benefits of VoLTE are reflected, as India is in the nascent stages of VoLTE penetration and incumbents are still dependent on revenue from voice. If you're just rejoicing at the free voice calls, be aware that VoLTE could put an end to this trend as operators may have to tweak their pricing plans accordingly.

QUICK FACTS

- International Human Rights Day is observed on: **10 December**
- International Anti-Corruption Day is observed on: **9 December**
- In global prosperity Index 2017, Rank of India is: **100**
- India's first energy-efficient railway station: **Kacheguda**
- 14th Inclusive Finance India Summit held in: **New Delhi**
- First state in country to offer e-mail IDs in Hindi: **Rajasthan**
- Ambassador of India to Turkmenistan: **Azar A.H.Khan**