

Abhimanu

Weekly current affairs Series

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Abhimanu's IAS Study Group

Chandigarh

Payment of Gratuity (Amendment) Bill, 2017

- The Payment of Gratuity (Amendment) Bill, 2017, has been introduced in the Lok Sabha. The Bill will allow it to notify a higher period of maternity leave and raise gratuity limit for employees.

Highlights of the Payment of Gratuity (Amendment) Bill, 2017:

- The Payment of Gratuity Act, 1972 allows for the payment of gratuity to employees in any establishment, factory, mine, oilfield, plantation, port, railways, company, or shop employing 10 or more workers. Employees are paid gratuity if they have provided at least five years of continuous service at the time of termination.
- Under the Act, the maximum period of maternity leave available to female employees is 12 weeks. The Bill amends the provision to specify that the central government may notify the maximum time period for maternity leave. Maternity Benefit (Amendment) Act, 2017 has enhanced the maximum maternity leave from 12 weeks to 26 weeks.
- Under the Act, the maximum amount of gratuity payable to an employee cannot exceed Rs 10 lakh. This ceiling may be notified by the central government.

Non-Lapsable Central Pool of Resources (NLCPR) scheme

- The Union Cabinet has approved the continuation of the existing Non-Lapsable Central Pool of Resources (NLCPR) scheme with funding pattern of 90:10 till March, 2020 with an outlay of Rs.5300.00 crore.

About NLCPR:

- Non-lapsable Central Pool of Resources was constituted in 1998-99. An amount of Rs. 23,210.50 crores have accrued to the Non-Lapsable Central Pool of Resources (NLCPR) for the North East from 1998-99 to 2012-13.

Objective of the Fund:

- The broad objective of the Non-Lapsable Central Pool of Resources (NLCPR) is to ensure speedy development of infrastructure in the North-Eastern Region and Sikkim by increasing the flow of budgetary financing for specific viable infrastructure projects/schemes in the region.
- Both physical and social infrastructure sectors such as Irrigation and Flood Control, Power, Roads and Bridges, Education, Health, Water Supply and Sanitation – are considered for providing support under the Central Pool, with projects in physical infrastructure sector receiving priority.

Management

- The Ministry for Development of Northeastern Region allocates funds from the NLCPR to various Northeast states for infrastructure projects. Ministry of DoNER allocates funds under two schemes viz. NLCPR (State) and NLCPR-Central for which annual budgetary allocations are provided in the normal budgetary process.

Analysis:

- The North East has essentially depended on Central funding for development works. All the States in the NE are Special Category States whose Development Plans are centrally financed on the basis of 90% Grant and 10% Loan. Further, the Special Category States are allowed to use up to 20% of the Central Assistance for Non-plan expenditure.

- Despite the fact that the per-capita plan outlays of the NE States have, over a period of time, been considerably higher than the national average, the States still rank significantly below the national average in so far as the development of infrastructure is concerned.
- In terms of per-capita State Domestic Product or other development indices, such as Power, Length of Roads or Hospital Beds, the North-East ranks well below the national average. Though the literacy levels are higher than the national average, vocational training and entrepreneurial skills remain weak areas.
- Efforts for the development of region have been initiated through various supportive measures. In October 1996, the then Prime Minister announced "New Initiatives for North Eastern Region" and stipulated that at least 10% of the Budget(s) of the Central Ministries/Department will be earmarked for the development of North Eastern States.
- In 1998-99 central pool of resources was created for the North East India along with Sikkim.

North East Special Infrastructure Development Scheme(NESIDS)

- The Union Cabinet has approved the introduction of new Central Sector Scheme of "North East Special Infrastructure Development Scheme" (NESIDS) from 2017-18 with 100% funding from the Central Government to fill up the gaps in creation of infrastructure in specified sectors till March, 2020.
- Cabinet also approved the continuation of the existing Non-Lapsable Central Pool of Resources (NLCPR) scheme with funding pattern of 90:10 till March, 2020, with an outlay of Rs 5,300 crore to enable completion of ongoing projects.
- Cabinet announced capital investment subsidy amounting to Rs 264.67 crore to four industrial units in the North-Eastern Region, including Sikkim, under the Central Capital Investment Subsidy Scheme (CCISS), 2007 of North East Industrial Investment and Promotion Policy (NEIIPP), 2007.
- The CCEA has revised financial powers for approval of capital investment subsidy claims up to Rs 500 crore which will be now approved by the Minister of Commerce and Industry. This will facilitate expeditious settlement of claims.

The new scheme will broadly cover creation of infrastructure under following sectors:

- Physical infrastructure relating to water supply, power, connectivity and specially the projects promoting tourism;
- Infrastructure of social sectors of education and health.

Analysis:

- The assets to be created under the new scheme of NESIDS will not only strengthen health care and education facilities in the region but will also encourage tourism thereby the employment opportunities for local youth.
- The scheme will act as a catalyst in overall development of the region in the years to come.
- The grant of subsidy to the industrial units will not only provide incentives to the operational units but also boost confidence of existing investors as well as potential investors in the states of NER.
- The central government has been implementing this scheme to promote industrialisation in the Northeastern region.

National Ayush Mission (NAM)

- The Union Cabinet has approved the continuation of Centrally Sponsored Scheme of National Ayush Mission (NAM) from 01.04.2017 to 31.03.2020 with an outlay of Rs. 2400 crore over the 3-year period.

About National AYUSH mission:

- The basic objective of NAM is to promote AYUSH medical systems through cost effective AYUSH services, strengthening of educational systems, facilitate the enforcement of quality control of Ayurveda, Siddha and Unani & Homoeopathy (ASU &H) drugs and sustainable availability of ASU & H raw-materials.
- It envisages flexibility of implementation of the programmes which will lead to substantial participation of the State Governments/UT.
- The NAM contemplates establishment of a National Mission as well as corresponding Missions in the State level.
- NAM is likely to improve significantly the Department's outreach in terms of planning, supervision and monitoring of the schemes.

Vision:

- To provide cost effective and equitable AYUSH health care throughout the country by improving access to the services.
- To revitalize and strengthen the AYUSH systems making them as prominent medical streams in addressing the health care of the society.
- To improve educational institutions capable of imparting quality AYUSH AYUSH education
- To promote the adoption of Quality standards of AYUSH drugs and making available the sustained supply of AYUSH raw-materials.

Objectives:

- To provide cost effective AYUSH Services, with a universal access through upgrading AYUSH Hospitals and Dispensaries, co-location of AYUSH facilities at Primary Health Centres (PHCs), Community Health Centres (CHCs) and District Hospitals (DHs).
- To strengthen institutional capacity at the state level through upgrading AYUSH educational institutions, State Govt. ASU&H Pharmacies, Drug Testing Laboratories and ASU & H enforcement mechanism.
- Support cultivation of medicinal plants by adopting Good Agricultural Practices (GAPs) so as to provide sustained supply of quality raw-materials and support certification mechanism for quality standards, Good Agricultural/Collection/Storage Practices.
- Support setting up of clusters through convergence of cultivation, warehousing, value addition and marketing and development of infrastructure for entrepreneurs.

National Medical Commission Bill

- The Union Cabinet has cleared the National Medical Commission Bill.

Key features of the Bill:

- The bill provides for the constitution of four autonomous boards entrusted with conducting undergraduate and postgraduate education, assessment and accreditation of medical institutions and registration of practitioners under the National Medical Commission.
- The commission will have government nominated chairman and members, and the board members will be selected by a search committee under the Cabinet Secretary. There will five elected and 12 ex-officio members in the commission.

- Government, under the National Medical Commission (NMC), can dictate guidelines for fees up to 40% of seats in private medical colleges. This is aimed at giving students relief from the exorbitant fees charged by these colleges and is a standout feature of the bill.
- The bill also has a provision for a common entrance exam and licentiate (exit) exam that medical graduates have to pass before practising or pursuing PG courses. For MBBS, students have to clear NEET, and before they step into practice, they must pass the exit exam.
- Recognised medical institutions don't need the regulator's permission to add more seats or start PG course. This mechanism to reduce the discretionary powers of the regulator. Earlier, medical colleges required the MCI's approval for establishment, recognition, renewal of the yearly permission or recognition of degrees, and even increase the number of students they admitted. Under the new bill, the powers of the regulator are reduced to establishment and recognition. This means less red tape, but also less scrutiny of medical colleges.

Analysis:

- In March 2016, the report of the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Health and Family Welfare, submitted to the Rajya Sabha, severely indicted the MCI for its rampant corrupt practices.
- According to the report, medical education and profession in India was suffering from "total system failure". It recommended an overhaul of the system of regulation of medical education and medical ethics in the country. In May 2016, the Supreme Court too strongly criticised the MCI and had even appointed a three-member expert committee to oversee the MCI's functioning till the government worked out the solutions.
- The MCI, over the years, has become a den of corruption because political patronage provided by some political parties led to the capture of the MCI by corrupt private practitioners. Instead of attracting professionals of high calibre, the MCI came to be run by a coterie that was secure in the belief that they would be protected by politicians and bureaucrats at the highest levels.
- Reform of the MCI could have meant true democratisation of the apex body for regulation of medical ethics and education, by making space for professionals, academics and social activists.
- Also, opening up the medical education sector will lead to significant addition in the number of UG and PG seats and substantial new investment in this infrastructure sector.

UPCOCA bill

- The Uttar Pradesh Cabinet has approved a bill for a new tough law -- UPCOCA (Uttar Pradesh Control of Organised Crime Act) -- to deal with the mafia, land grabbers and goons in the state.
- The state police mooted the proposal that is in line with the Maharashtra Control of Organised Crime Act, 1999.

Main highlights of the bill:

- Organised crime has been defined in detail in the bill. Kidnapping for ransom, illegal mining, manufacturing illicit liquor and its sale, acquiring contracts on the basis of muscle power, organised exploitation of forest produce, trade in wildlife, fake medicines, grabbing of government and private properties, and 'rangdari' (extortion) will come under the ambit of the new law.
- Cases under it would be filed only on the recommendations of the committee of divisional commissioner and range deputy inspector general of police.
- The bill had a provision to take over properties amassed through organised crime, with the permission of the court during the course of investigation, in order to check criminal elements from taking advantage of it, Sharma had said.
- Special courts would be constituted for hearing of cases lodged under the provisions of this bill and that a state-level organised crime control authority was proposed to monitor gangs involved in organised crime.
- Those found involved in organised crime and having security cover would no longer be extended government protection and all white-collar criminals would be treated as such, going by the provisions in the bill.
- The accused booked under the UPCOCA will not be able to secure bail before six months of their arrest

- The proposed bill has a provision for prolonged police remand of 30 days for an accused, apart from his closed-door interrogation. This also won't allow those taken into custody, on the basis of doubts, to get bail early.
- The convicts would face a minimum jail term of three years and a maximum of life imprisonment or even death sentence. It also levies a fine of Rs 5 lakh to 25 lakhs and extends the period of filing a chargesheet from 90 days to 180 days.

Analysis:

- The proposed Bill has shifted the burden of proof from the prosecution to the accused, violating the basic principle of the criminal law that says everyone is innocent until proven guilty. If the person has to prove his or her own innocence, who will conduct the investigation?
- The confessional statements made before the police will be the final. This contradicts CrPC, under which only a statement made before a magistrate will be admissible as confession and only when they are made voluntarily.
- Instead of organising identification parade, the police will get the accused identified through videos and photos that can easily be tampered with.
- However, to address such concerns, Bill has the provisions to check misuse. Here is how: (a) cases under the proposed UPSCA would be filed only after the approval of a two-member committee comprising the Divisional Commissioner and a DIG-rank officer, (b) the permission of the zonal IG will be required before filing the chargesheet, (c) assets would be taken over by the state with the permission of the court and (d) special court would be constituted for hearing cases under the proposed law – which proposes a state-level organised crime control authority.

DARPAN (Digital Advancement of Rural Post Office for A New India)

- Ministry of Communications has launched DARPAN – “Digital Advancement of Rural Post Office for A New India” Project to improve the quality of service, add value to services and achieve “financial inclusion” of un-banked rural population.

About programme:

- This programme aimed at realising financial inclusion of un-banked rural population.
- The project will increase the rural reach of the Department of Posts and enable BOs to increase traffic of all financial remittances, savings accounts, Rural Postal Life Insurance, and Cash Certificates; improve mail operations processes by allowing for automated booking and delivery of accountable article; increase revenue using retail post business; provide third party applications; and make disbursements for social security schemes such as MGNREGS (National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme).
- Till now, department of Posts has established 991 ATMs across the country, which are interoperable with other banks and the common people has directly benefited with the wide network of Department of Posts especially in rural areas.
- Till now, 1,12,85,217 transactions have been carried out on the DOP's ATMs out of which 70,24,214 transactions have been done by the non-DOP customers. Department of Posts is the only Government player in this space.

Analysis:

- For more than 150 years, the Department of Posts (DoP) has been the backbone of the country's communication and has played a crucial role in the country's socio-economic development.
- It touches the lives of Indian citizens in many ways: delivering mails, accepting deposits under Small Savings Schemes, providing life insurance cover under Postal Life Insurance (PLI) and Rural Postal Life Insurance (RPLI) and providing retail services like bill collection, sale of forms, etc.
- The Department of Posts also acts as an agent for Government of India in discharging other services for citizens such as Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) wage disbursement and old age pension payments.

- With 1.5 lakh Post Offices (approximately), the Department of Posts has the most widely distributed postal network in the world.
- Trends such as urbanization, increased demand for financial services, increased funding by the government for the weaker sections and the rural sector, have opened up new opportunities for the Department of Posts, which in turn has necessitated development of new processes and supporting technology.
- The Department of Posts is also faced with twin challenges of increasing competition and continuing advances in communication technology, especially in mobile telephony and the Internet.
- In order to provide the best-in-class customer service, deliver new services and improve operational efficiencies, the Department of Posts has undertaken an end to end IT modernization project to equip itself with requisite modern tools and technologies.

The Representation of the People (Amendment) Bill of 2017

- The Representation of the People (Amendment) Bill of 2017 has been introduced by the government in the Parliament.

Highlights of the Bill:

- The Bill seeks to amend the Representation of People Act, 1950 and the Representation of People Act, 1951 to allow for proxy voting and to make certain provisions of the Acts gender-neutral.
- The 1950 Act provides for allocation of seats and delimitation of constituencies for elections, qualifications of voters, and preparation of electoral rolls. The 1951 Act provides for the conduct of elections and offences and disputes related to elections.
- The 1950 Act permits the registration of persons in electoral rolls who are ordinarily resident in a constituency. These persons include: (i) persons holding a service qualification (such as member of armed forces, member of armed police force of a state, serving outside the state, or central government employees posted outside India); and (ii) persons holding certain offices in India declared by the President in consultation with Election Commission. Under the Act, the wives of such persons are also deemed to be ordinarily residing in India. The Bill replaces the term 'wife' with 'spouse'.
- The 1951 Act permits an overseas voter to vote only in person. An overseas voter is a citizen of India who is absent from his place of ordinary residence in India. The Bill seeks to amend the 1951 Act to permit an overseas voter to cast their vote in person or by proxy in the constituency where the poll is taken. The 1951 Act provides for the wife of a person holding a service qualification to vote. The Bill replaces the term 'wife' with 'spouse'.
- If the Bill is passed, overseas voters can appoint a proxy to cast their votes on their behalf, subject to certain conditions to be laid down in the Conduct of Election Rules, 1961. This would considerably mitigate the difficulties presently faced by overseas electors in exercising their franchise.

National Service Scheme

- The President Shri Ram Nath Kovind recently presented the National Service Scheme Awards 2016-17. The objective of NSS Awards is to recognize and reward outstanding contributions towards voluntary community service made by the Universities/ Senior Secondary (Councils, NSS Units/ Programme Officers and NSS Volunteers, with a view to further promote NSS.

About National Service Scheme (NSS):

- NSS is a Centrally Sector Scheme. The Scheme was launched in the year 1969 with the primary objective of developing the personality and character of the student youth through voluntary community service. The ideological orientation of the NSS is inspired by the ideals of Mahatma Gandhi. Very appropriately, the motto of NSS is "NOT ME, BUT YOU".

Aims and objectives of NSS

- To understand the community in which they work;
- To understand themselves in relation to their community;
- To identify the needs and problems of the community and involve them in problem solving process.

- To develop among themselves a sense of social and civic responsibility;
- To utilise their knowledge in finding practical solution to individual and community problems;
- To develop competence required for group-living and sharing of responsibilities;
- To gain skills in mobilising community participation;
- To acquire leadership qualities and democratic attitude;
- To develop capacity to meet emergencies and natural disasters; and
- To practice national integration and social harmony

SAMEEP and SCBTS Scheme

SAMEEP Scheme

- SAMEEP stands for Students and Ministry of External Affairs Students Exchange Program. The program was launched by Ministry of external affairs with twin objectives:
- Firstly, the outreach dimension through which the officials from MEA will familiarise with schools and colleges in India about functioning of MEA.
- Secondly, acquaintance of Indian students with key elements of India's foreign policy and success stories related to it.
- Under the outreach dimension under SAMEEP, the officials in the MEA of the rank under-secretary and above have been asked to reach to their alma maters when they next go on home leave and engage with students there.
- SAMEEP is targeting at making students interested in India's Global Ambitions and also make them considerate of the option that they can have a bright career in diplomacy as well.

SCBTS – Scheme for Capacity Building in Textile Sector

- The third scheme in news was SCBTS that stands for Scheme for Capacity Building in Textile Sector. The scheme intends to bring skill development in the textile sector and covers entire value chain of textile sector. However, pay attention to note that spinning and weaving segments of the organised sector are not covered under the scheme.
- The duration of the scheme is 3 years up to 2019-20 with an outlay of 1300 crore rupees.
- The SCBTS scheme is oriented towards demand driven, placement oriented skilling programmes in textile sectors. The scheme is related to organised sector of the economy and provides training courses compliant with National Skill Qualification Framework. All section of the economy and all regions of the country have been covered under the scheme.

INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

Exercise 'Ekuverin'

- Exercise Ekuverin, the joint military exercise of the Indian Army and Maldives National Defence Force commenced at the Maratha Centre in Belagavi.
- The focus of the eighth annual joint military training event is to enhance interoperability between the two forces for counter-terrorist operations in semi urban environment.

- The 14-day training exercise is being carried out by the Sirmoor Rifles of the Indian Army and Marine troops of Maldives National Defence Force.

Analysis:

- In the domain of international relations, military diplomacy has, in recent years, emerged as a major tool to further diplomatic interests of nations. Participation in international level military exercises is an indication of the highest level of trust and confidence between the member nations. It is a key confidence building measure (CBM) and an indication of the faith reposed by India on another nation or a group of member nations.
- On the operational side, military exercises enable militaries to understand each other's drills and procedures, overcome language barriers, and facilitate familiarisation with equipment capabilities. It also facilitates understanding and familiarisation with new technologies that other countries may be utilising and enables on-the-job training of each other's crews. This is particularly useful in the event of joint operations whether in war or in operations other than war (OOTW) - humanitarian aid, disaster relief, anti-piracy, etc – when nations come together for a common cause. A fine example was the aid assistance provided by a host of nations during the tsunami in South East Asia where a massive land, air and sea rescue effort was successfully executed to provide relief to the affected countries.
- Perhaps, the most important advantage of joint military exercises is 'strategic signalling'. A joint exercise with one or more nations serves the purpose of signalling to a third country of the influence we have in the region and a demonstration of our resolve to further our diplomatic objectives.
- On the intangible side, military exercises promote brotherhood and camaraderie between soldiers and militaries. Besides goodwill, it is a tool for projection of a nation's soft power – culture, language, customs, beliefs, food habits and lifestyle. Soldiers all over the world have almost similar rank and organisational structures, which helps establish a unique spirit of bonding and friendship between their communities irrespective of the country of origin.

BBIN motor pact

- India is planning to operationalise BBIN motor vehicle agreement (MVA) with Bangladesh and Nepal for seamless movement of passenger and cargo vehicles.

About BBIN:

- The BBIN agreement was signed in June 2015 last year in Thimphu, Bhutan to facilitate cross border movement of both passengers and cargo vehicles. Protocols to implement the agreement are being negotiated by the four countries for passengers and cargo vehicles separately.
- This Motor Vehicles Agreement (MVA) is signed for the Regulation of Passenger, Personnel and Cargo Vehicular Traffic among the four South Asian neighbours.
- The pact will allow seamless movement of passenger and cargo vehicles among the four countries.
- Under the agreement, the "contracting parties" will allow cargo vehicles for inter-country cargo, including third country cargo and passenger vehicles or personal vehicles, to ply in the territory of another country "subject to the terms of the agreement". All vehicles, however, will require a permit for plying through the other country.
- India is in a bilateral motor vehicle agreement with Nepal and Bangladesh, but a multilateral pact would go a long way in boosting trade in the region.

Analysis:

- This will pave the way for a seamless movement of people and goods across their borders for the benefit and integration of the region and its economic development.
- This Motor Vehicles Agreement is the "Over arching" frame work to fulfill India's commitment to enhance regional connectivity. This will need to be followed through with formulation of the required protocols and procedures in the shortest time possible to realize the ultimate objective of free movement of people and goods in the region.
- This would further need to be supplemented through building and upgrading roads, railways and waterways infrastructure energy Grids, communications and air links to ensure smooth cross border flow of goods,

services, capital, technology and people. Taken together, this provides enormous opportunity for integration and development of our region.

- This agreement would enable the exchange of traffic rights and ease cross-border movement of goods, vehicles, and people, thereby helping expand people-to-people contact, trade, and economic exchanges between these four countries.
- Transforming transport corridors into economic corridors could potentially increase intraregional trade within South Asia by almost 60% and with the rest of the world by over 30%.

11th World Trade Organization conference

- The eleventh ministerial conference of the World Trade Organization (WTO) ended in a stalemate, without any ministerial declaration as the US reneged on its commitment to give a permanent solution to food stockpiling issues of developing countries.
- The US' refusal to reaffirm multilateralism and the Doha development mandate in the outcome led to a breakdown in talks at the 164-nation WTO as several countries, including India, opposed the US position.

India and WTO:

- The Eleventh Ministerial Conference (MC11) of the WTO was held in Buenos Aires, Argentina. The outcome of the conference was a positive one for India as the country was able to secure the interests of its farmers as well food security for the poor.
- India was successful stopping any of the new issues like investment facilitation and micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs) from entering the ambit of the WTO.
- India became the second largest proponent of issues after the EU as it submitted proposals on six issues — public stock-holding, special safeguards mechanism, domestic regulation, domestic support, trade facilitation in services, and eCommerce.
- Although India was unable to push its agenda on food security forward.
- In fisheries, India was able to push the commitment to 2019, to prohibit certain forms of subsidies that contribute to overcapacity and overfishing, and eliminate subsidies that contribute to illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing.
- In ecommerce, India managed to convince other countries to continue with the old work programme that links a two-year continuation of the moratorium on ecommerce with the continuation of one on TRIPS and non-violation complaints.

Union Cabinet approved a Bill on instant triple talaq or talaq-e-biddat

- The Union Cabinet on Friday cleared a bill that criminalises the Islamic practice of instant triple talaq, ahead of it being taken up in the Winter Session of Parliament

Important points of the Muslim Women Protection of Rights on Marriage Bill:

- This bill makes instant triple talaq or talaq-e-biddat a criminal offence and a Muslim husband resorting to instant talaq can be jailed for up to three years.
- This bill will deal with complaints against instant triple talaq across the country, except Jammu and Kashmir.
- The Bill also provides for a subsistence allowance of a harassed Muslim woman and her dependent children and the custodial rights of minor children.
- In August last, the Supreme Court passed a landmark judgement calling instant triple talaq as illegal and unconstitutional.

Arguments in favour of this law

- Muslim Women can now seek justice and remedies if they have been wrongly divorced.
- It is a positive step towards the Uniform civil code and formalisation of laws.

- It deters husbands who have been historically divorcing their wives on whims and trivial issues.
- It encourages more dialogue and settling issues rather than just outright divorce.
- Maintenance for wife and children will be a relief for women because willful non payment will be punished.

Arguments against proposed law

- The practice is termed a criminal offence although the issue is of civil nature. The punishment has been termed too rigorous.
- It can offset family life as it makes the institution of family very vulnerable.
- Just like IPC 498A, it can be a law exploited to tarnish and punish innocent men.
- There is no need for a fresh criminal provision when existing laws, under Section 498A of the Indian Penal Code or provisions of the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005, already allow the prosecution of a husband for inflicting physical or mental cruelty,
- Irrespective of the government's intent three years in prison of the convicted husband will end up penalising the already aggrieved wife and children too.

NHAI incentivises its officials for timely implementation of Bharatmala

- In order to expedite implementation of the Bharatmala Pariyojna, the project launched by the Government of India with prime focus on optimizing efficiency of the movement of goods and people across the country, NHAI has decided to start an incentive scheme for its officials.
- The scheme not only envisages completing the projects earlier than the scheduled time, but also aims at savings on account of cost overruns due to time delays. The scheme will reward hardworking, meritorious officials and will act as a catalyst to motivate other officials to work more efficiently.
- Under this scheme, cash incentives and other rewards such as Certificates, Trophy, Appreciation letters, etc., would be given to the NHAI officials to complete the assigned task in a time bound manner.

About Bharatmala:

- Bharatmala will look to improve connectivity particularly on economic corridors, border areas and far flung areas with an aim of quicker movement of cargo and boosting exports.
- The project is expected to create nearly 100 million man days of jobs during the road construction and subsequently 22 million jobs as a result of the increased economic activity across the country.
- The construction will be billed via several routes including debt funds, budgetary allocation, private investment, toll operator transfer model etc.
- Bharatmala includes economic corridors of around 9,000 km, inter-corridor and feeder routes of around 6,000 km, 5,000 km roads under the National Corridors Efficiency Program, border and international connectivity roads of around 2,000 km, coastal and port connectivity roads of around 2,000 km, expressways of around 800 km and 10,000 km of NHDP roads. The total length in phase 1 comes to around 34,800 km.
- Bharatmala project will start in Gujarat and Rajasthan, followed by Punjab and subsequently traversing the Himalayan belt through Jammu and Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, parts of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, West Bengal, Sikkim, Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur (next to the Indo-Burmese border) and then to Mizoram. Northeastern states have been given special focus in the project and international trade is a key aspect as well.
- The newer roads are expected to increase the speed of vehicles and decrease supply chain costs from the current average 18 per cent to six per cent. The Union Cabinet gave the nod to two big ticket infra projects on Tuesday with an outlay of Rs 6.92 lakh crore out of which Bharatmala Pariyojana shared Rs 5.35 lakh crore. It will also subsume 10,000 km roads under the National Highway Development Project (NHDP) program.
- While the country reels under the impact of GST and demonetisation, Gadkari presented a meticulous plan to cut down costs and create jobs.

The main agencies tasked with the construction are the National Highways Authority of India, National Highway and Industrial Development Corporation and state public works departments.

The International Migration Report 2017

- The international migration report is released by United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs.

Highlights of the report:

- There are now an estimated 258 million people living in a country other than their country of birth — an increase of 49% since 2000.
- 3.4% of the world's inhabitants today are international migrants. This reflects a modest increase from a value of 2.8% in 2000. By contrast, the number of migrants as a fraction of the population residing in high-income countries rose from 9.6% in 2000 to 14% in 2017.
- Between 2000 and 2015, migration contributed 42% of the population growth in Northern America and 31% in Oceania. In Europe, the size of the total population would have declined during the period 2000-2015 in the absence of migration.
- In 2017, around three quarters (74%) of all international migrants were of working age, or between 20 and 64 years of age, compared to 57% of the global population.
- Because international migrants comprise a larger proportion of working-age persons compared to the overall population, a net inflow of migrants lowers the dependency ratio, that is, the number of children and older persons compared to those of working age.
- In Africa, Asia, and Latin America and the Caribbean, the net impact of migration on population growth is negative in most countries but typically small compared to other population changes. In some small developing countries, however, the negative impact of outmigration on the size of the population can be substantial, especially among adults of working age.

Trends in international migration

- The number of international migrants includes 26 million refugees or asylum seekers, or about 10% of the total. Although a majority of the world's international migrants live in high-income countries, low- and middle-income countries host nearly 22 million, or 84%, of all refugees and asylum seekers.
- There has been a global increase in the median age of migrants, from 38.0 years in 2000 to 39.2 years in 2017. However, in some regions, such as Asia, Oceania and especially Latin America and the Caribbean, the median age of migrants has decreased by about three years.
- In 2017, 48.4% of international migrants were women. Female migrants outnumber males in all regions except Africa and Asia; in some countries of Asia, male migrants outnumber females by about three to one.
- The largest number of international migrants (49.8 million, or 19% of the global total) reside in the United States.
- Saudi Arabia, Germany and the Russian Federation host the second, third and fourth largest numbers of migrants worldwide (around 12 million each), followed by the United Kingdom (nearly 9 million).

Destination and origin of international migrants

- More than six of every ten international migrants reside in Asia or Europe (80 and 78 million, respectively). Northern America hosts the third largest number (58 million), followed by Africa (25 million), Latin America and the Caribbean (9.5 million) and Oceania (8.4 million).
- These migration patterns are consistent with the growth seen during the period 2000 – 2017, when Asia added some 30 million migrants, followed by Europe, which added 22 million, Northern America, 17 million, and Africa, 10 million.
- In most countries of Europe, Northern America and Oceania, international migrants comprised more than 10% of the total population in 2017.
- In 2017, Asia and Europe were the regions of origin for the largest numbers of international migrants — 106 million and 61 million, respectively. Latin America and the Caribbean followed with 38 million and Africa with 36 million.

- India has the largest number of persons born in the country who are now living outside its borders. The number of Indian-born persons residing abroad numbered 17 million in 2017, ahead of the number of Mexican-born persons living outside Mexico (13 million).

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.

- The Eleventh World Trade Organization (WTO) Ministerial Conference (MC11) was held in : **Buenos Aires, Argentina.**
- International Migrants Day is observed on: **18 December**
- State which launched India's first social audit law: **Meghalaya**
- 'Hamesha Vijayee' exercise was held in: **Rajasthan**
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- New Prime minister of Czech Republic: **Andrej Babis**
- New Ambassador of India to Sudan: **Ravindra Jaiswal**
- New Ambassador of India to the Republic of Mali: **PK Gupta**