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SPORTS

FROM 1 MARCH TO 31 MARCH

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Inventor of 'Email'
(1941-2016)



Rural India and Poor are at the Centre of Union Budget

- Dispelling all notions about the NDA government being a 'Suit boot ki Sarkar' in his third Budget, government dedicated it to farmers, the poor and vulnerable sections of society.
- Union budget also raised taxes on the incomes of the super-rich and introducing new cesses on services and cars to fund farmer welfare projects and infrastructure, respectively.
- Mr. Jaitley's budget for 2016-17 attempted to address the distress in the rural economy that has hit demand creation and new investments, with enhanced outlays of nearly Rs. 2.75 lakh crore for programmes in the social sector, farmer welfare and the rural sector.
- FM said "Our initiatives in the last 21 months have not only placed the economy on a faster growth trajectory but have bridged the trust deficit, created by the previous Government."
- He also said government had to work in an unsupportive global environment, adverse weather conditions and an obstructive political atmosphere.
- Despite higher expenditure owing to the 7th Central Pay Commission and the one rank one pension norm for defence forces, the Finance Minister chose to stick to the fiscal consolidation road map he outlined last year and set a 3.5 per cent of GDP target for 2016-17.
- The government will infuse a capital of Rs.25,000 crore this financial year into state-owned banks, which are reeling under the burden of bad loans.

One time four month compliance window for domestic black money holders

- The government has decided to open a one-time, four-month compliance window for domestic black money-holders.
- This gesture is intended to help them come clean by paying tax and penalty of 45 percent.
- Capability of the tax department to detect evasion had improved because of increased access to information and the availability of technology-driven analytical tools to process such information.
- The compliance window will enable one to declare undisclosed income or income represented in the form of any asset, and clear up past tax transgressions by paying tax at 30 per cent, a surcharge of 7.5 per cent and a penalty of 7.5 per cent.
- The surcharge at 7.5 per cent will be called Krishi Kalyan surcharge, and the money thus raised will be used for agriculture and rural economy.
- There will be no scrutiny of money declared, either under the Income-Tax Act or the Wealth Tax Act.
- And the declarants will have immunity from prosecution. They will also get immunity from the Benami Transaction (Prohibition) Act, 1988, subject to certain terms.
- The compliance window, named Income Disclosure Scheme, will open on June 1. It will be open till September 30.

After revelations by Home Secretary Home ministry to re-look at Ishrat Jahan case

- The Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) has decided to re-examine the Ishrat Jahan files, amid allegations by the former Home Secretary G.K. Pillai that the affidavit citing the Mumbra woman's allegiance to terrorist outfit Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) was changed at the political level.
- Mr. Chidambaram said on Monday that he "accepted responsibility for the affidavit" and "it is disappointing that the Home Secretary who was equally responsible wanted to distance himself today."
- The then UPA government had submitted two affidavits — one claiming that the four who were killed in an alleged fake encounter were terrorists and the second saying there was no conclusive evidence to prove they were — within two months in 2009.

SC wants centre's response to practice of triple talaq

- The Supreme Court on Monday admitted a petition filed by a woman to declare the practice of triple talaq, nikah halala and polygamy under Muslim personal laws as illegal, unconstitutional, and violative of the rights to equality, dignity, life and freedom of religion under the Constitution.
- The petitioner said "Practice of polygamy is not an integral part of Islam, and polygamy has been recognised as injurious to public morals."
- The practices under challenge, which practically treat women like chattel belonging to men, are neither harmonious with the modern principles of human rights and gender equality nor an integral part of Islamic faith.
- Ms. Bano said many Islamic nations, including Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and Iraq, have banned or restricted such practices, while they continue to vex not only Indian Muslim women but also the society at large, notwithstanding that the Muslim community of India has itself been clamouring for reform and ban of oppressive practices that have no basis in Islam or the Holy Quran.

Various provisions to take care of middle class: FM

- Union Finance Minister Arun Jaitley on Monday asserted that the budget will take care of the people's fear of taxation.
- The proposed extension of the simplified presumptive taxation regime to professionals including lawyers, doctors, architects and who report total gross receipts of less than Rs. 50 lakh under which profits will be deemed to be 50%, will further reduce the compliance burden of the middle class.
- The increased rent deduction from Rs. 24,000 to Rs. 60,000 and the higher ceiling for tax rebate under Section 87A from Rs. 2,000 to Rs. 5,000, he said, are all relief and benefits for the middle class.

Budget looks after manufacturing sector

- Finance Minister Arun Jaitley announced several proposals in the Union Budget 2016-17 to boost the government's Make in India (MII) initiative.
- To help start-ups innovate, generate employment, Mr. Jaitley proposed to back them through 100 per cent deduction of profits for three out of five years for start-ups set up during April 2016 to March 2019.

- In another initiative, Mr. Jaitley chose to follow advanced nations and proposed to grant foreign investors 'Residency Status' subject to certain riders.
- Currently, these investors are granted business visa only up to five years at a time.
- To strengthen the MII initiative, there was an allocation of Rs.1,804 crore towards the scheme for Investment Promotion and Amended Technology Upgradation Fund.
- Changes were proposed in Customs and Excise Duty rates on certain inputs, raw materials, intermediaries/components and other goods while several procedures were simplified.
- Finance Minister Arun Jaitley announced a record budgetary allocation of Rs. 2.21 lakh crore for infrastructure sector, in a crucial move to revive investments in the sector with the participation of the private players.
- The roads sector alone has been allocated Rs. 97,000 crore as the government plans to award 10,000 kilometres of new road projects in FY17, including Rs. 19,000 crore earmarked for rural roads under the Pradhanmantri Gram Sadak Yojna.

FDI reforms will improve ease of doing business index

- To facilitate ease of doing business for foreign investors and their domestic recipients, the Union Budget 2016-17 has proposed liberalisation of foreign direct investment (FDI) norms in a host of sectors.
- These include insurance, pension, Asset Reconstruction Companies (ARC), stock exchanges, marketing of food products, listed Central Public Sector Enterprises (CPSE) except banks and areas governed by financial sector regulators, falling beyond the 18 specified NBFC activities.
- This the second time such 'big bang' FDI reforms are being announced by the government under Prime Minister Narendra Modi.
- In November last year, the Centre had similarly eased norms across 15 sectors, including defence, private sector banking, construction, single brand retail, broadcasting and civil aviation to boost investment sentiment and attract more foreign capital into the country.
- Following these reforms and the Make in India initiative, FDI during April-December 2015 in FY'16 was up 40 per cent year-on-year to \$29.5 billion.
- To help banks and financial institutions (FI) address the problem of huge bad loans, the FY'17 Budget has proposed 100 per cent FDI in ARCs through automatic route.
- ARCs play a crucial role in resolution of non-performing assets by acquiring them from banks and FIs.
- The FY'17 Budget also proposed that foreign portfolio investors will be allowed up to 100 per cent of each tranche in securities receipts issued by ARCs subject to sectoral caps.
- The government has also proposed to allow 100 per cent FDI through FIPB route in marketing of food products produced and manufactured in India.

Document for Lalit Modi's extradition submitted

- Enforcement Directorate (ED) officers submitted documents for the extradition of former cricket administrator Lalit Modi to the Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA) court.
- Interpol had asked for certain documents from ED to be sent to the London court, as a requirement for Lalit Modi's extradition. It is part of the procedure followed as per the extradition Act.
- Despite several efforts, Interpol had not issued a Red Corner Notice against Mr Modi.

Supreme Court questions the validity of All-India Bar Examination

- The Supreme Court on Tuesday questioned whether the conduct of the All-India Bar Examination (AIBE) is a violation of the fundamental right to practise a profession, leaving the Bar Council of India in the dock.
- Law graduates are required to clear the AIBE within two years of their enrolment in order to practise law. Its rules notified in 2010, the AIBE was advertised by the BCI as a positive step to improve the quality of the profession.
- “To say that one has to pass an examination for practising as an advocate will negate his or her right to profession.
- “He has a fundamental right to practise. Conditions can’t be put after enrolment. If, at all, it is required, the condition should be put at the enrolment stage,” the Bench said.
- The apex court has called for Law Commission reports on the issue of holding such an examination and posted the case for March 2.

India would ask questions about Pak team to probe Pathankot attack

- As the decks were cleared for the visit of Pakistani investigators to India to probe the attack on the Pathankot airbase, India will ask the neighbouring country about the “composition of the team” and the “contents of the evidence required by them.”
- India has accused the Pakistan-based outfit Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM) of planning and executing the attack on the airbase on the intervening night of January 1-2.
- The decision to let the Pakistani team access the airbase, a highly sensitive defence installation, would be taken by Prime Minister Narendra Modi and National Security Adviser Ajit Doval.
- After India gave evidence, Pakistan registered a First Information Report (FIR) a few days ago. The Counter Terrorism Division (CTD) of the Pakistani Police arrested three suspects.
- The three accused arrested by Pakistan have been identified as Khalid Mahmood, Irshadul Haque and Muhammad Shoaib. They had allegedly facilitated the attack.

Tamil Nadu wants centre’s advice on releasing convicts in Rajiv Gandhi assassination

- In yet another bid to release the seven convicts in the Rajiv Gandhi assassination case, the Tamil Nadu government wrote to the Centre, seeking its views on its decision to free them.
- Under Section 435 of the Cr.PC, the State has to consult the Centre before releasing prisoners prosecuted by the CBI or under a Central law.
- In December last year, the Supreme Court had ruled that the State government had no power to release the convicts without the Centre’s concurrence.
- In 1999, the Supreme Court found the seven guilty of conspiring to assassinate Rajiv Gandhi in May 1991.
- The State government’s earlier attempt in 2014 to release the seven failed, as its communication to the Centre gave only three days’ time for a response.
- The main petition questioning the legality of the government’s order of release is still pending before a three-judge Bench of the SC.

After increasing states share Union government is cutting the funding

- For the second year in a row, the Modi government has reduced fund available to child health interventions, with a massive cut — from Rs. 15,483.77 crore last year to Rs. 14,000 crore in the latest budget.
- The National Family Health Survey (NFHS)-4 data for 15 States shows that 37 per cent of children under the age of five are stunted; 22 per cent are wasted while 34 per cent under the age of 5 are under weight.
- The Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS) has seen a 7 per cent reduction in fund.
- The scheme, implemented by the Women and Child Development (WCD) Ministry, is the country's flagship intervention to improve child nutrition in the country.
- That's not all — the percentage share of the Mid-Day Meal (MDM) scheme in the total Union Budget allocation has gone down from 0.74 per cent in 2014-15 (BE) to 0.49 perCent in 2016-17 (BE).
- The allocation for the MDM scheme for 2016-17 stands at Rs. 9,700 crore (2016-17 BE).
- The budget comes a week after the Economic Survey states that India needed to increase investments on child nutrition programmes if it were to capitalise on the demographic advantage offered by its young population.
- The total amount spend on child health by the government would be Rs. 65,758 crore. Over the last two years, allocations for ICDS has seen a sharp decrease, maintain experts.

Cabinet committee on Security cleared purchase of AWACS from Israel

- Ahead of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Israel later this year, a first by an Indian Prime Minister, the Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS) has cleared the purchase of additional surveillance aircraft from the country.
- The CCS chaired by Mr. Modi cleared the proposal to acquire two more Phalcon Airborne Early Warning and Control Systems (AWACS) at a cost of Rs. 7,500 crore under a tripartite agreement with Israel and Russia.
- The AWACS are advanced radars mounted on an aircraft to give 360 degree coverage to detect incoming aircraft and missiles at long ranges.
- India had procured three Phalcon AWACS, Israeli radars mounted on Russian IL-76 transport aircraft, in 2003 at cost of \$1 billion. Indo-Israel ties got a major boost after Mr. Modi came to power.

Rajiv Gandhi assassination case

- The Centre was examining the Tamil Nadu government's request for freeing the convicts in the Rajiv Gandhi assassination case, but made it clear that the government was constitutionally bound to act by the ruling of the Supreme Court
- This happened a day after the State government wrote to the Centre to seek its opinion necessary under Section 435 of the Code of Criminal Procedure — on its decision to remit the life sentences of all the seven convicts
- On December 2, 2015, the Supreme Court held that the Centre and not the State government would have the "primacy" and that the States could not exercise suo motu the power to decide

whether or not those convicted in the cases investigated by the CBI or another Central agency could be released.

Non-essential plastic to be banned in Karnataka

- The State Cabinet approved the final draft notification on banning the utilisation of non-essential plastics. Officials of the Department of Forest, Environment and Ecology, who drafted the notification, believe that this will spur the use of ecofriendly materials, and reduce the amount of plastics in garbage dumps
- Took the decision to ban the manufacture, storage, sale, distribution, and use of plastic carry bags, irrespective of their thickness
- The decision goes beyond the 2011 notification that banned plastic below 40 microns and aims at banning products for which eco-friendly alternatives are available
- Additions include thermocol, micro-beads and even plastic cutlery — which were suggestions given by activists and citizens.
- The ban is expected to reduce non-degradable plastic content in municipal waste by over a third.

Lodha panel recommendations to be followed without delay

- Giving no quarter, even as BCCI or State cricket associations blamed the Lodha Committee for keeping them in the dark about its recommendations
- SC rejected the statements saying it was international news that SC had formed the Justice Lodha Committee to suggest reforms in cricket. The whole world knew it.
- The court allowed a batch of State cricket associations and former players like Bishan Singh Bedi and Kirti Azad to intervene in the case.
- One of the questions was why the BCCI and State cricketing bodies have ministers as members. The Lodha report had banned government servants and ministers
- To the BCCI's objection to the Lodha panel's recommendation on an age cap of 70 years for cricket administrators, Chief Justice Thakur replied, tongue-in-cheek, "Lawyers like you get better with age, is that so with cricketers also? We feel 70 is a good age for retirement. At 70, they should sit at home and watch cricket on TV."
- The BCCI complained that Justice Lodha had recommended voting rights based on territorial boundaries of States and did not take into account historical demarcation of boundaries among members as per the levels of cricket played. This had led to Maharashtra and Gujarat having multiple existing members in BCCI.

ASEAN-Plus military drill begins in Pune

- Military personnel of adversarial world powers converged upon the Aundh Military Station in Pune to thrall spectators with the largest Multinational Field Training Exercise (FTX) ever conducted on Indian soil
- 'Force 18' (initially labelled 'FTX-2016') is an elaborate and ambitious military training exercise involving Army units from eighteen countries, often locked as adversaries in the arena of global realpolitik.
- They include nine members of the Association of South East Asian Nations and eight observer States: India, Japan, Korea, China, Russia, the United States, Australia, and New

Zealand. Myanmar was compelled to back out owing to elections and security issues pertaining to border infiltration.

- The broad objective of 'Force 18' was to build common understanding and achieve inter-operability among the 18 ASEAN-Plus countries
- The drill also aims at reaffirming India's expertise as the lead agency in Southeast Asia for Peacekeeping Operations and Humanitarian Mine Action
- A unique facet of the exercise is that the Indian Army contingent of 40 soldiers is being led by Lt Col Sophia Qureshi, a woman officer from the Corps of Signals, who now has the rare distinction of becoming the first woman officer to lead an Indian Army training contingent in such a multinational exercise

Four States and one UT to go on poll from April 4

- The Election Commission of India announced the schedule for Assembly elections in four States and one Union Territory which will be conducted in multiple phases from April 4 to May 16.
- Elections in Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Puducherry will be held in a single phase on May 16, said Chief Election Commissioner Nasim Zaidi.
- In West Bengal, owing to security issues, polling will be held in six phases, the first phase on April 4 and 11, and the rest on April 17, 21, 25, 30 and May 5. Assam will go to the polls in two phases on April 4 and 11.
- Asked whether action would be taken if any reference was made on the Tamil Nadu government's decision to remit the life sentence of the Rajiv Gandhi assassination case convicts, Mr. Zaidi said: "As and when the reference comes, the Commission will take an appropriate view to ensure that our voters are not influenced."
- The votes will be counted on May 19. The model code of conduct immediately comes into effect.
- The electronic voting machines, for the first time, will carry a NOTA (none of the above) symbol created by the National School of Design.
- Photographs of the candidates will also be featured alongside the voting buttons. Identification of voters through voter card at polling booths has been made mandatory, but if required, use of additional documents will be allowed.

Supreme Court looking for ways to make legal profession better

- The Supreme Court decided to set up a Constitution Bench to evolve a filtering mechanism to "once and for all" clean up the legal profession.
- It also looks to prevent anti-social elements from becoming lawyers, who resort to "fighting, agitating, stone-throwing and abuse" instead of arguing in court.
- A Bench, led by Chief Justice of India, said it was time to raise the benchmark for the profession.

Former Lok Sabha speaker P.A.Sangma passes away

- Purno Agitok Sangma, a politician from the Northeast, died of a heart attack here on Friday at the age of 68.
- The Lok Sabha, of which he was Speaker two decades ago, was adjourned for the day.

- He was elected to the Lower House nine times. Mr. Sangma, who was born in 1947 at Chapahati in West Garo Hills district of Meghalaya, earned an MA in International Relations from Dibrugarh University in Assam and studied law.

Manoj Kumar will get prestigious Dada Saheb Phalke Award

- Veteran actor Manoj Kumar, who played the patriotic Indian in most of his films, and had the sobriquet 'Bharat Kumar' bestowed on him, has been chosen for the prestigious Dada Saheb Phalke Award.
- The award is the highest official recognition in Indian cinema. The 78-year-old actor became the 47th recipient of the award, which consists of a golden lotus, a cash prize of Rs 10 lakh and a shawl.
- Kumar was born as Harikrishna Giri Goswami in Abbottabad, which was a part of pre-Independent India.
- At the age of 10, his family shifted to Delhi. He graduated from Hindu College and decided to make a career in showbiz.

PM says government is working to improve infrastructure

- Prime Minister Narendra Modi said that the government was putting in all efforts to build infrastructure, especially rural roads, in a comprehensive manner.
- PM Said "Veins give strength to our body. Similarly, infrastructure will give speed and strength to the development of India."
- There will be progress if we focus on building road and railway networks, optical fibre network, water, grid and electricity connectivity, along with electricity supply.
- Rs. 50,000 crore Setu Bharatam project was launched by Prime Minister. The project aims to make all national highways free from railway level-crossings by 2019 to ensure road safety.
- Under the project, 208 rail overbridges and underbridges will be built at a cost of Rs. 20,800 crore. Also, 1,500 decade-old bridges will be reconstructed and revamped, spending Rs. 30,000 crore.
- The country, PM said, needs both highways and i-ways (information ways), referring to digital connect.

After backlash from salaried class EPF proposal likely to be taken back

- All options on the controversial budget proposal to tax EPF savings are on Prime Minister Narendra Modi's table and a decision, even on a complete rollback, is expected at the highest level in the government soon.
- A senior official of the Finance Ministry conceded that the "entire" proposal was under review.
- The Ministry's original intent was to promote the New Pension Scheme that had failed to take off even over 10 years after it was launched, as the EPF offered better tax benefits.
- Finance Ministry has introduced into the debate by saying that: only 60 per cent of the interest income from EPF savings would be taxed or the entire EPF corpus at retirement would be tax-free if an employee buys an annuity with 60 per cent of his EPF account balance.

Pak minister says Pakistan team will play only after security clearance

- Pakistan's Interior Minister said that the Pakistani Cricket team would not take part in the March 19 Dharamshala League match of the ICC T20 World Cup series till "security clearance" was granted by his government.
- His statement comes a day after Home Minister Rajnath Singh offered paramilitary security for the Pakistani cricket team for the Dharamshala match.
- Earlier, Pakistan Cricket Board spokesperson said that a mere verbal assurance would not suffice and strong security measures were needed. We want a guarantee that can be given at the government level.
- Meanwhile, the PCB has stopped the India tour of its women's team until it gets written security assurances.

President wants parties to clear Women's bill

- President Pranab Mukherjee has appealed to all political parties to clear the Constitution (108th) Amendment Bill to set aside one-third of seats in Assemblies and Parliament for women.
- Addressing women lawmakers, he said this would be the natural fulfilment of the ideals of the Panchayati Raj Act.

Madras HC makes it mandatory to include National anthem singing in curriculum

- The Madras High Court has ordered that private schools in the State must follow singing of national anthem as part of their curriculum, keeping in mind the mandate of the Constitution of India, the respect for national anthem and the national flag.
- The Bench passed the order on a Public Interest Litigation (PIL) petition moved by N. Selvathirumal, who claims to be an ex-service.
- The petitioner submitted that most of the schoolchildren were of the opinion that the national anthem was a movie song.
- He brought the court's attention to Article 51A of the Constitution which envisages every citizen of the country to abide by the Constitution and respect the national flag and the national anthem.

Terror alerts across the country

- Gujarat and the national capital were on high alert with several teams of National Security Guard commandos on standby in the wake of intelligence inputs suggesting that a group of 8 to 10 terrorists may have sneaked into India from Pakistan.
- The alert came on the eve of Shivratri festival on Monday.
- National Security Adviser Ajit Doval told the Gujarat police top brass about the input on a team of 10 terrorists sneaking into the State to carry out terror strikes.
- Senior officials in the State claimed that Pakistan's National Security Adviser Naseer Khan Janjua informed his Indian counterpart about the group of fidayeen from the Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e Muhammed on a major mission in the State.

- Gujarat Chief Minister Anandiben Patel told the media in Delhi that the authorities had taken all measures, so there was no need to worry.
- Meanwhile, all public functions to celebrate Shivratri at the historical Somnath temple have been cancelled.
- Police have also heightened security at another historical pilgrimage centre, Dwarka, and Bhavnath in Junagadh where a huge fair is organised on Shivratri.
- The national capital went into alert mode on Sunday, after some inputs suggested that the terrorists could have moved from Gujarat to Delhi.

Rotavirus vaccine will be launched through the national immunisation programme

- The Indian Council of Medical Research will be launching the rotavirus vaccine through the national immunisation programme by the month-end.
- The vaccine will be initially provided to all children in Andhra Pradesh, Haryana, Odisha and Himachal and later expanded across the country.
- ICMR would soon be undertaking the first phase of trial of malaria vaccine.
- The challenges in India were different from the West and hence the Western ideas could not be copied here.
- We need to step up treatment options for malaria, tuberculosis, kala azar – diseases that the West did not have to worry about.
- The University awarded six honorary doctorate degrees on eminent professionals in the field of engineering, science, medicine, social science and theology.

Modi says go beyond women development to women led development

- Prime Minister Narendra Modi stressed the importance of women-led development and said a nation was always empowered by its women.
- Mr. Modi, addressing the valedictory session of the National Conference of Women Legislators in the Central Hall of Parliament here, said: “We must think beyond “women development,” and move towards “women-led development.”
- “A country is always empowered by its women. It is she who in different roles — as a mother, a sister and a wife — nurtures citizens and these empowered citizens then play a role in building up an empowered society and country,” said Mr. Modi.
- Mr. Modi said that multi-tasking, which is considered to be a very important element of modern-day management, comes naturally to women.
- Women representatives from both Houses of Parliament, State Legislative Assemblies and Councils are attending the two-day.
- Mr. Modi urged the women legislators to engage with their constituents using technology.

Government takes action against Vijay Mallya

- In a setback to businessman Vijay Mallya, the Bengaluru Bench of the Debt Recovery Tribunal on Monday temporarily restrained U.K.-based Diageo Plc from paying \$75 million to him as per the reported agreement signed with him

- the sum would stand attached till further orders on the proceedings initiated by the banks to recover money borrowed by the Mallya-owned Kingfisher Airlines Limited
- According to the banks, the total outstanding is now nearly Rs. 10,000 crore
- The tribunal also directed Diageo and Mr. Mallya to provide particulars of their agreement to the banks led by the State Bank of India, which have sought a garnishee order claiming first right over the \$75 million that Mr. Mallya is to get from Diageo.
- It was reported that Diageo had offered to pay \$75 million to Mr. Mallya in a five year period for stepping down from the post of Chairperson of United Spirits Ltd, which Diageo had acquired, and agreeing not to compete in business with it for a certain period
- The ED has received a copy of the CBI case of corruption and criminal conspiracy registered in October 2015 against Mr. Mallya as director of Kingfisher Airlines
- The ED will soon summon Mr. Mallya and the other accused to record their statements
- The Directorate's move to investigate money-laundering charges comes in the backdrop of the Karnataka High Court order to issue notice to Mr. Mallya and nine others based on a petition filed by SBI and 12 other banks.

Reduced dissolved oxygen kills fishes in Karnataka

- Garden city's famed Ulsoor Lake became a graveyard. Thousands of fish were found dead, floating on the lake's waters, all victims of the early summer heat and soaring temperature
- Fish kill in the city's lakes have almost become an annual phenomenon, during the onset of summer. It is usually a direct result of reduced dissolved oxygen level in the water.
- While algae in the lake release oxygen into the water during daytime, it uses up dissolved oxygen during night time along with the fish creating a big drop in the dissolved oxygen levels. So, most fish kills are observed in early mornings.
- Raw sewage let into the lake will be thick during summer compared to the rainy season, leading to a higher concentration of nutrients in the lake, which also causes drop in dissolved oxygen levels.
- The water temperature of the lake will also shoot up, leading to such fish kills

India's first test tube baby born

- Born at Jaslok Hospital to India's first test tube baby Harsha
- Harsha Chawda is India's first test tube baby, a feat that had made IVF specialist Indira Hinduja a household name in the country

Palaeolithic hand-axe found in north Kerala

- Belying 19th century British geo-archaeologist Robert Bruce Foote's argument on prehistoric habitation in the State, north Kerala is fast emerging as the site of fresh discoveries of remnants of Stone Age cultures.
- Findings include the typical Palaeolithic hand-axe from Vanimel river basin (Kozhikode) and pointed choppers and side scrapers from Anakkayam and Cheerakkayam river basin of Chandragiri (Kasaragod) are some of the first-time evidence of Palaeolithic implements in these districts.
- This revealed that handaxe fabrication technique in quartz was also familiar among the prehistoric settlements in the area

- The evidence includes black and red ware pottery, eagle head-like figures made of clay, iron chopper and dagger, black ware, smoke pipe, iron knife, iron sickle and several iron ingots. The well-polished symmetrical shaped Stone Adzes made of quartz showed the high expertise in quartz fabrication of Neolithic people in Kozhikode.

Indians could face a higher risk of diabetes-induced lung ailments

- Diabetes may be impeding the normal functioning of lungs and common medicines that are used to treat insulin resistance may actually be exacerbating conditions such as asthma, report a team of Indian, European and American scientists in a forthcoming edition of the American Physiological Society Selectjournal.
- There is a suspect link between diabetes — a condition characterised by the hormone insulin failing to regulate blood sugar in the body — and impaired lung function that makes Indians particularly vulnerable to respiratory disease
- Recently, there have been a number of studies showing that when adjusted for body size, Indians have among the smallest lungs in the world or nearly a third smaller than a white European of similar size.
- This means a reduced efficiency to filter oxygen from ingested air, an accelerated decline in lung function with age as well as an increased propensity to contract respiratory diseases
- The International Diabetes Federation showed that nearly 6.9 crore people in India were suffering from diabetes in 2015 and their ranks are expected to swell to 12.5 crore by 2040.
- Human lung tissue that were treated with excessive insulin and saw an abundance of two kinds of tissue — primary human airway smooth muscle (ASM) cells and induced collagen — that are known to indicate deteriorating lung quality
- Most medicines to treat diabetes attempt to control the excess blood sugar by pumping in everincreasing quantities of insulin into the body. That only makes matters worse. There's no solution to this other than exercise and a diet that strikes a balance between protein and carbohydrates

Banks seek travel ban on Vijay Mallya

- The Supreme Court agreed to urgently hear a plea by a consortium of banks, led by SBI, for a restraint order to prevent liquor baron Vijay Mallya, who owes them over Rs. 9,000 crore, from leaving the country.
- A Bench, led by Chief Justice of India T.S. Thakur, ordered that the case be listed for hearing on March 9 after Attorney-General Mukul Rohatgi sought an urgent audience. The action followed a Karnataka HC decision refusing to grant them an ex-parte interim order against Mr. Mallya, the U.K.-based Diageo Plc and United Spirits Limited.
- The banks told the Supreme Court that the threat to their financial interests were so immediate and grave that the High Court should have passed the interim order without first hearing the embattled industrialist and others, including the debtor firm Kingfisher Airlines Limited.
- The banks want the Supreme Court to pass an interim order to freeze Mr. Mallya's passport or direct him not to leave the jurisdiction of this country without the court's permission.
- The banks had moved the DRT in the backdrop of Mr. Mallya's recent resignation from the chairmanship of United Spirits. Diageo Plc, the current owner of the liquor company, has agreed to pay Mr. Mallya \$75 million (roughly Rs 515 crore) in severance package.

SC says government should take every measure to provide voting right to soldiers

- The Supreme Court stood up for the constitutional right of soldiers to vote, noting that they risked their lives to protect the borders, from the icy Siachen glacier to the remote and harsh terrains of Jammu and Kashmir and the North-East.
- The Centre should pull all stops to ensure that the soldiers' voices are heard loud and clear during election results, the court said.
- SC directed the Centre to finalise a fool-proof mechanism to ensure that their postal ballots reached authorities in time so that these soldier do not feel left out in the country's democratic process.

IRNSS-1F navigation satellite will be put into orbit on Mar 10

- The countdown for the launch of Polar Satellite Launch Vehicle PSLV-C32 began at the Satish Dhawan Space Centre at Sriharikota in Nellore district.
- The 54-hour countdown will conclude on March 10 at 4 p.m. when the PSLV will be launched to put the 1,425-kg IRNSS-1F navigation satellite into orbit.
- SHAR director P. Kunhikrishnan and other space scientists are closely monitoring the progress of the countdown.
- With this, the ISRO is moving closer to the task of completing the Indian Regional Navigation Satellite System with seven satellites.

Civil society and government will come together on Conference on South-South Cooperation

- Almost all the major civil society organisations of India will participate in the March 10-11 "Conference on South- South Cooperation", being organised by the Research and Information System for Developing Countries (RIS) of the MEA, to showcase the expanding space for civil society organisations in the scheme of the External Affairs Ministry.
- This comes after the Ministry of External Affairs displayed the achievement of the civil society organisations in the field of sustainable development and renewable energy during the Cop21 Paris climate change conference and the India Africa Summit of 2015.
- New South-South cooperation is needed in view of the shrinkage of resources in the developed North and the emergence of South as a new centre of economic activity.
- The conference, to be attended by at least 100 experts from the field of international affairs and development economics, will be a platform for the Government's long term plan to use development assistance as a tool for India's diplomacy.
- The Ministry of External Affairs has been showcasing civil society initiatives at the international level and also used organisations like the Barefoot College of Tilonia to highlight India's commitment to the sustainable development goals (SDGs).
- In addition to the civil society connection, the conference will also launch the Network of Southern Thinktanks (NeST) which will connect think tanks across Africa, Southeast Asia, Central and South Americas.

Art of living event gets go ahead after fine

- Imposing an initial fine of Rs. 5 crore, the National Green Tribunal (NGT) gave the go-ahead to the 'World Culture Festival', a three-day cultural extravaganza being organised by Sri Sri Ravi Shankar's Art of Living Foundation on the flood plains of the Yamuna.
- It also directed the Art of Living to bear the cost of restoring the area into a biodiversity park after the completion of the event, holding it responsible and liable for the damage caused to the environment, ecology, bio-diversity and aquatic life of the river.
- The green watchdog also pulled up the Delhi Pollution Control Committee (DPCC) and the Delhi Development Authority (DDA), stating that they hadn't discharged their statutory functions.
- The Tribunal directed Art of Living to give an undertaking by Thursday that enzymes will not be released into the Yamuna and no further degradation of environment will happen.
- Art of Living said that it would file an appeal in the Supreme Court against the fine. A spokesperson said: "The festival will go on as planned and since we have not violated any rules we will appeal against the NGT order."

T20 World Cup match between India-Pak shifted to Kolkata

- The uncertainty over the India-Pakistan World T20 match in Dharamshala was cleared when ICC CEO Dave Richardson announced that the match, to be played on March 19, would be shifted to Eden Gardens in Kolkata.
- The decision has been taken for security reasons, following consultations with the BCCI, the State associations, the ICC and BCCI security consultants.
- The ICC and the BCCI understand the disappointment that is likely to be felt by many over the decision to move the match.
- But the safety and security of the event is of paramount importance to the ICC and we have taken into consideration the concerns shared with us by our security advisers as well as the Pakistan Cricket Board.
- Chief Minister Virbhadr Singh had opposed any India-Pakistan match as a mark of respect for the two martyrs from Himachal Pradesh killed at the Pathankot airbase in January.

The Enemy Property (Amendment and Validation) Bill, 2016 passed in lower house

- The Lok Sabha passed a Bill to amend a 48-year-old law to guard against claims of succession or transfer of properties left by people who migrated to Pakistan and China after the wars.
- The Enemy Property (Amendment and Validation) Bill, 2016, which amends the Enemy Property Act, 1968, was passed by voice vote amid the government's assertion that the measure should not be seen from the prism of religion or caste.
- It does not pertain to Pakistan alone, but also to those Chinese who left India after the 1962 China-India War. Even their property comes under the ambit of this Bill.
- In the wake of the India-Pakistan war of 1965 and 1971, there was migration of people from India to Pakistan and under the Defence of India Rules framed under the Defence of India Act.
- The government of India took over the properties and companies of such persons who had taken Pakistani nationality. These enemy properties were vested by the Union government in the Custodian of Enemy Property for India.

- The amendments include that once an enemy property is vested in the Custodian, it shall continue to be vested in him as enemy property irrespective of whether the enemy, enemy subject or enemy firm has ceased to be an enemy due to reasons such as death.
- The new Bill ensures that the law of succession does not apply to enemy property; that there cannot be transfer of any property vested in the Custodian by an enemy or enemy subject or enemy firm and that the Custodian shall preserve the enemy property till it is disposed of in accordance with the Act.
- The amendments are aimed at plugging the loopholes in the Act to ensure that the enemy properties that have been vested in the Custodian remain so and do not revert to the enemy subject or firm.

No labour inspection in Start-ups for three years

- Start-ups will be exempted from inspection by labour inspectors for up to three years if they give a self-declaration that they are complying with nine labour laws.
- The nine labour laws include Industrial Disputes Act, 1947, Trade Unions Act, 1926, Building and Other Construction Workers' (Regulation of Employment and Conditions of Service) Act, 1996 and Industrial Employment (Standing Orders) Act, 1946.
- From the second year onwards and up to three year from the time they were set up, such start-ups would be required to furnish self-certified returns.
- They would be inspected only if credible and verifiable complaint of violation was filed in writing and approval was obtained from the higher authorities.

Fire crackers incident killed more than hundred in Kerala

- In the worst-ever pyrotechnics tragedy to strike Kerala, 107 persons were killed and close to 400 injured, many of them grievously.
- Disaster struck the crowded precincts of the Puttingal Devi Temple at Paravur, when an entire dump of fire crackers meant to be burst to mark the conclusion of the Meena-Bharani festival exploded, killing over 40 persons instantly, maiming many more and causing extensive damage to nearby buildings.
- The State government has announced a judicial inquiry and a Crime Branch investigation into the disaster.
- The sparks reached the storehouse, igniting fireworks stored there. The explosion that followed brought down a building and caused damage to several structures in the vicinity.
- The explosion was followed by power disruption, which left the crowd clueless about the magnitude of the tragedy for some time. However, the locals swung into action, extricating bodies from the debris and pulling out the injured, many of whom did not survive the journey to hospitals.
- The Kollam district administration had denied permission for the fireworks display based on reports from the local police that the temple authorities planned to hold a competitive pyrotechnics display.
- However, the temple authorities went ahead with the display after giving much publicity to the event. People from neighbouring districts had converged on the temple to witness the show.
- The Paravur police have registered a case against the temple authorities and the fireworks contractor, who is stated to have suffered 80 per cent burns and is undergoing treatment at the medical college hospital.

- Prime Minister Narendra Modi cancelled all his programmes and rushed to Kollam with a team of medical experts from the All India Institute of Medical Sciences.
- After a visit to the disaster spot and hospitals, accompanied by Union Health Minister J.P. Nadda and discussions with Chief Minister Oommen Chandy, he announced all support for the State.
- At an emergency meeting, the State Cabinet announced ex gratia of Rs. 10 lakh to the kin of the deceased and Rs. 2 lakh to the seriously injured.
- Earlier in the day, the Prime Minister announced that the Centre would pay ex gratia of Rs. 2 lakh to the kin of the deceased.

A national conference on Kharif campaign to formulate crop strategy

- Realising the gravity of the agrarian situation after two back-to-back droughts, the Union government is all set to formulate a crop production strategy for the coming summer (kharif) season to ensure that the plan to double farmers' income in the next six years gains momentum.
- A national conference on kharif campaign is being held in New Delhi on April 11 and 12 in which senior officials of agriculture and allied sectors from the Centre and States would review the performance of the preceding crop season and formulate a crop production strategy for kharif.
- The Department of Agriculture, Cooperation and Farmers' Welfare, which is organising the conference, said that kharif campaign-2016 assumes great importance in view of the recent crop damage on account of moisture stress due to uneven and untimely rains, hailstorm across various States.
- Notably, the south-west monsoon during the previous kharif season was weak leading to a rain deficit of 14 per cent. Also, the rabi 2015-16 season had experienced less post-monsoon and winter rains.

Committee recommended 1304 crore to UP under NDRF

- A high-level committee headed by Union Home Minister Rajnath Singh has recommended Rs. 1,304 crore as a drought relief to Uttar Pradesh under the National Disaster Relief Fund (NDRF).
- The State would disburse the relief amount directly into the bank accounts of farmers within a week.
- It was decided that the U.P. government will forward a memorandum for Rabi 2016 soon and the Ministry will examine the possibility, if an exemption can be given under SDRF on 25 per cent limit and continuation of distribution of food component beyond 90 days.
- The U.P. government, during the meeting, informed that a comprehensive contingency plan to address the drinking water situation in Bundelkhand region especially Mahoba, Chitrakoot and Banda districts of Chitrakoot division are ready and would be soon implemented, said sources.
- Centre approved a provision of extending man-days from 100 to 150 under Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) in the Bundelkhand for financial year 2016-17.
- It was decided that to provide alternate source of income, National Rural Livelihood Mission would be strengthened and intensified and coverage would be extended to all the blocks.

- The government decided that water tanks, building of dug wells, farm ponds would be taken up on priority under various projects and schemes for Bundelkhand.
- CEO, NITI Aayog, in consultation with State government will explore the possibility of taking up fresh projects for drought proofing from the resources available under the package for Bundelkhand region.

Supreme Court recalled its judgement declaring NEET unconstitutional

- Admitting to have acted too hastily, the Supreme Court recalled its 2013 judgment declaring the National Eligibility-cum-Entrance Test (NEET) unconstitutional.
- Earlier SC disqualified the NEET, a single common entrance test system for MBBS, BDS and post-graduate medical courses.
- SC said in that judgement that NEET is an interference in the right of the State and private medical colleges to administer, the court agreed without elaborating that its decision required re-consideration.
- The NEET was meant to end rampant corruption in medical admissions, especially payment of huge capitation fees or donations in private colleges.

Government discusses possibility of simultaneous elections with EC

- Days after Prime Minister Narendra Modi spoke in favour of holding simultaneous polls for the Lok Sabha and State Assemblies, a group of ministers, headed by Home Minister Rajnath Singh discussed the proposal with Election Commission.
- The GoM included Finance Minister Arun Jaitley, Law Minister Sadananda Gowda and Minister of State (PMO) Jitendra Singh.
- The GoM asked EC officials to explore the possibility of holding simultaneous polls.
- The GoM also wanted the EC's response on modernising the electronic voting machines (EVMs). Since the number of voters has increased in the last decade, the GoM asked EC officials to take stock of the surge in demand.
- The two companies — Bharat Electronics Limited (BEL) and Electronics Corporation of India (ECIL) — have been asked to study and examine the revamping of EVMs before the next general elections in 2019.
- The proposal for initiating e-ballots for NRIs was also discussed.
- During BJP's national office bearers meet, the Prime Minister had spoken in favour of simultaneous polls for Lok Sabha and State Assemblies.
- In that meeting, the Prime Minister also referred to the 78th report of the parliamentary standing committee of Law and Justice that had been asked to go into the issue in detail. The report was submitted in December 2015.

PM says India proves democracy and high growth can go together

- Taking a swipe at China, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said that India's growth rate of over seven per cent was being achieved in a country that is also a vibrant democracy.

- Speaking at the Advancing Asia conference here, he said India dispelled the myth that democracy and rapid economic growth could not go together.
- India's rapid economic growth, he said, was also very distinct in Asia, as the country had never tried to gain in trade at the expense of partners, never undervalued its exchange rate; it rather added to the world and Asian demand by running current account deficits.
- The IMF recently included China's yuan into its reserve currency basket.
- Amid global problems, Mr. Modi said, India was a haven of macro-economic stability.
- In a difficult external environment and despite a second successive year of weak rainfall, India has increased growth rate to 7.6 per cent, the highest among major economies in the world.
- India and the IMF also announced the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding for establishing the South Asia Regional Training and Technical Assistance Centre.
- It is expected to become the focal point for planning, coordinating, and implementing the IMF's capacity-development activities in the region.

Some good news for Indian students applying for US visa

- After all the negativity associated with US education in the recent months, here is some good news for Indian students.
- The US government has made certain changes to non-immigrant visas that will now allow the eligible students to obtain the Optional Practical Training (OPT) for three years.
- However, the facility will be extended only to the Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) students who secure their degrees from accredited institutes and the companies that are part of the E-verify programme.
- Since most Indian students enrol in these courses, the new norms may work to their advantage despite the stringent norms attached to the changes.
- The new rule also says that STEM-OPT students should not replace any American worker, temporary or permanent and the salary offered to the OPT students should be similar to the American workers.
- Students who prefer good institutes in the US will gain while those from non-accredited institutions will not gain from the new rules.
- Another positive note may be that OPT students will get more time to apply for the H1B visas that are capped at 65,000 every year in addition to the 20,000 meant for US-educated students.

Kerala secures top ranking in public affairs index

- Kerala and Tamil Nadu have acquired the first and second rank in the public affairs index (PAI) of governance in States, while Bihar, Jharkhand and Odisha lag behind, a latest survey by a think-tank, Public Affairs Centre (PAC), Bengaluru, has revealed.
- Karnataka secured the top position among all States in the category of providing adequate and effective social protection to its citizens. West Bengal and Kerala secured the second and third positions.
- The survey, which was based on 10 themes, 25 focus subjects and 68 indicators, said Mizoram, Himachal Pradesh and Delhi secured top three ranks among the small States (less than two crore population).
- Karnataka, which ranked ninth in the ease of doing business in the World Bank report released last year, was placed at an overall rank three in the PAC survey.

- 'Education and health are said to be the pillars of development and it is worth mentioning that the State has performed well and has bagged the second rank,' the survey said.
- Punjab, which secured overall 6th rank, bagged top spot on the infrastructure front, followed by Haryana and Gujarat. Among small States, Delhi led, followed by Goa and Himachal Pradesh.
- In maintenance of law and order, Tamil Nadu topped the list followed by Gujarat and Kerala.
- Bihar, Jharkhand and Odisha are ranked low in social protection, economic freedom, delivery of justice, women and child development and essential infrastructure indicators.

RSS think tank wants education and health should be prioritise

- BJP president Amit Shah spoke at the Akhil Bharatiya Pratinidhi Sabha, the RSS's highest decision-making body. The conclave passed resolutions on affordable education and health care.
- The meeting passed resolutions on affordable education, with suggestions for more budgetary allocation for education and a greater community participation.
- "Inadequate allocation for education and lack of priority for education in the government policy during the preceding years have left open this field to institutions aiming for profits," the resolution said.
- The resolution called for value-based, nationalistic, employment-oriented and skill-based education for each child.
- The health resolution called for medical facilities in small towns and villages and made a case for more philanthropic health care efforts. It also called for medicines to be brought within the reach of the people.

Government hopeful to bring big bang reforms

- The National Democratic Alliance government hopes to press the accelerator on reforms and pass the landmark Constitution (122nd Amendment) Bill for a national Goods and Services Tax (GST) and a separate bill for Bankruptcy and Insolvency Code, 2015.
- The current session of Parliament has already seen the passage of one landmark legislation the Aadhaar (Targeted Delivery of Financial and other Subsidies and Services) Bill, 2016.
- The legislation meant to provide statutory backing to the unique identification number.
- FM said "We are trying to have special emphasis now both in terms of legislative changes and resources being put to strengthen the banking system. Next few months, in bringing about structural change, are going to be extremely important."
- Mr. Jaitley said that the constituency within India supporting reforms is much bigger than its opponents. He also said that exhibiting determination to move on the reforms path, India can provide a significant amount of growth to the world.
- The GST Bill was passed by the Lok Sabha but is stuck in the Upper House, where the ruling NDA does not have a majority and is dependent on the support of the Congress for its passage.
- The Constitution amendment Bill needs two-third majority or 162 votes in the 242-member Rajya Sabha. After it clears the Rajya Sabha, the legislation will have to be ratified by at least half of the 29 States.
- Also speaking at the Conference, IMF Managing Director Christine Lagarde said that the world had lots to learn from India's Aadhaar initiative that would affect revenue generation in a big way.

- Ms. Lagarde also told reporters she didn't see much of a downside from the global economy to India's growth rate since the country has a "solid" growth model, a growing population, scale of market and was pursuing reforms.

RSS calls for end of caste based reservation

- At its annual meeting, the RSS's highest decision-making body, Akhil Bharatiya Pratinidhi Sabha, made a pitch for social justice, passing a resolution on the need to end caste discrimination.
- RSS general secretary Suresh (Bhaiyyaji) Joshi said that while Hindu thought was supreme, many discriminatory practices had come up over time for which Hindus should take responsibility.
- He added that harmony was a must and caste discrimination must end.
- Taking a progressive yet cautious line on the recent controversy over temple entry for women in a Maharashtra temple, Mr. Joshi said that regressive thinking of gender segregation needed to be addressed, but through dialogue rather than agitation.

Restrictions lifted from women entry to Para military forces

- After declaring reservation for women in constabulary in paramilitary forces, they can now also be inducted as officers in combat roles in all five Central Armed Police Forces.
- The Union Home Ministry recently published new rules allowing women to apply as direct-entry officers in border guarding force Indo-Tibetan Border Police (ITBP), the only paramilitary which hitherto did not allow women to join in supervisory combat roles owing to its task of guarding the difficult Sino-India border.
- Among five of the Central Armed Police Forces, the Central Reserve Police Force, the Central Industrial Security Force, the Border Security Force and the Sashastra Seema Bal have been allowing women to apply as direct-entry officers.
- Now, by allowing women to apply as direct-entry officers in ITBP, all restrictions have been lifted on women.

UNDP says marital rapes criminalisation is commitment under SDG

- Just days after government said it wouldn't criminalise "marital rape," a top U.N. official said that the issue is one of consent, not culture, suggesting that India would be violating the Sustainable Development Goals if it did not amend the law accordingly.
- UNDP made a significant pitch for all countries that had not made domestic abuse and marital rape criminal offences to do so at the earliest.
- This is significant because the United Nations Development Programme is monitoring the implementation of the SDGs by 2030.
- On March 10, in a written answer to a question by an MP, Government had submitted the government's position in Parliament, saying that the "concept of marital rape, as understood internationally, cannot be applied in the Indian context due to level of education/illiteracy, poverty, customs and values, religious beliefs, mindset of society to treat the marriage as a sacrament, etc.."

Union government will assess loss to the crop

- The Centre has sent teams to Punjab, Haryana and other northern and western States to assess the loss of winter-sown (rabi) crops, including wheat, due to untimely rains and hailstorms in the past few days.
- There are reports of damage to wheat crop in parts of Punjab, Haryana and Western Uttar Pradesh as hail and rain, accompanied with strong winds flattened the standing crop at many places.
- The current spell of rain and hailstorms in parts of Rajasthan has also threatened the mustard crop.
- On a conservative side, the wheat crop might have been damaged in five per cent of the total sown area in these northern States.
- Wheat has been sown on around 29 million hectares this season across the country and out of this, around half the wheat is sown in the northern and western States.
- Agriculture experts say the current spell of rains is detrimental for the early sown varieties. However, the late-sown crops could survive provided there is no wind or hailstorm in the coming days.

Supreme Court says Child's interest should be the focus during adoption

- Noting that the interests should be kept “first and foremost” during adoption, the Supreme Court directed the Centre and the States to frame regulations under the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection) Act, 2015.
- SC also directed Centre and the States to implement the new guidelines for in-country and inter-country adoption to make the process transparent, friendly and fool-proof.
- The new juvenile law defines “adoption” as the process through which the adopted child is permanently separated from his biological parents and becomes the lawful child of his adoptive parents with all the rights, privileges and responsibilities that are attached to a biological child.
- Section 2 of the 2015 Act mandates that adoption regulations should be framed by the authority notified for the purpose by the Centre.
- Terming the new law and its guidelines “comprehensive” and in line with the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child of 1989, the Supreme Court said it “puts in place safeguards against trafficking of children in the name of adoption.”
- In 2011, there were 5,964 in-country adoptions and 589 inter-country adoptions. In 2014-15, there were 3,988 in-country adoptions and 374 inter-country ones.
- The Bench, however, refused the NGO's plea for an omnibus CBI probe into such rackets in the past in various parts of the country.

First payment under OROP sent

- The government said it had credited revised pensionary benefits along with arrears under one-rank one-pension (OROP) scheme to more than 2 lakh pensioners drawing service and disability pensions.
- As to the more than 1.46 lakh family pensioners, the government will credit the new benefits by the end of this month.

- Defence Pension Disbursing Offices [DPDOs] under the Controller General of Defence Accounts have released revised pensionary benefits to 2,21,224 defence pensioners .

New rules for LPG subsidy enforced

- The government seems to have given up on the Give It Up Campaign for LPG cylinders and has begun debarring LPG users who earn more than Rs. 10 lakh a year from the subsidy, starting from their next refill.
- thousands of taxpayers have received such SMSs from their distributors, pointing out their income status and the ineligibility for further subsidies.

Centre reduces power of excise inspectors

- The government has asked the Central Excise Department to keep its inspectors away from the premises of jewellers who will now file quarterly returns and pay excise duty electronically every month through a voluntary disclosure of stocks.
- Any grievance or dispute will be resolved by a commissioner-level officer.
- To counter the jewellers' claim that the imposition of excise duty on jewellery will render lakhs of workers and artisans jobless as they are ill-equipped to deal with the paperwork, the government has clarified that they need not register with Central Excise, pay duty or file returns.
- Only jewellers who have an annual turnover of more than Rs 12 crore will be liable to pay a nominal 1 per cent excise duty if they do not claim inputs tax credit.
- However, the government has categorically said the excise duty will not be withdrawn under any circumstance.

Supreme court pushing for National Court of Appeal

- Noting that equal access to justice for all is a fundamental right under the Constitution, the Supreme Court decided to set up a Constitution Bench to debate the establishment of a National Court of Appeal (NCA) with regional benches to act as final courts of justice in criminal and civil cases.
- Now the apex court would judicially pronounce on whether there is a need to bifurcate the higher judiciary, with the Supreme Court exclusively hearing constitutional and public law cases.
- Secondly, the apex court seems to introspect on its own role as the single, final court situated in the national capital dealing with an increasing load of cases — from criminal and civil appeal to constitutional questions of law.

Prior permission for probe' clause may be challenged

- No anti-corruption probe can be initiated against a public servant in the State without the permission of the "appointing authority". This is one of the most contentious clauses of the Government Order (GO) creating the Anti-Corruption Bureau.
- Effectively, this means that even initiating a probe against a public servant would require the sanction of his or her appointing authority, and experts argue that this could result in "protecting the corrupt" and make it virtually impossible to move forward in the case of politicians who occupy high offices in the State.

- The clause 5 — in the GO creating the ACB — deals with prior permission, and is just a variant of the infamous ‘single directive’ of the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI), which has been repeatedly struck down by the Supreme Court. Activists are now likely to challenge the Government Order legally.

Parliamentary Committee suggests 50 percent pictorial warning

- Before pictorial warnings covering 85 per cent of the principal display area of the front and back sides of all tobacco products can become effective, a Parliamentary Committee on Subordinate Legislation report said that the requirement will be “too harsh” on the tobacco industry.
- The committee has recommended that pictorial warnings be restricted to only 50 per cent on both the sides of the cigarette packets.
- In the case of beedis, chewing tobacco and other tobacco products, the committee recommended that the warning be restricted 50 per cent of the display area and on only one side of the packet.
- In the case of beedis, it said that there would be “virtually no space left for printing the brand name and logo” if 85 per cent of area is earmarked for printing the warning on both sides.
- The committee has not stated the logic for restricting the warning to only one side in the case of chewing tobacco products.

Aadhaar Bill passed

- Even as the Opposition aired its concerns over the possibility of mass surveillance, Parliament passed the controversial Aadhaar Bill, 2016, after acrimonious debates in both Houses. In a day marked by high drama, hours after the Opposition succeeded in pushing through five amendments to the Bill in the Rajya Sabha, they were rejected in the Lok Sabha.
- The amendments were moved by Congress leader Jairam Ramesh, and were passed with a majority vote in favour.
- The amendments to the controversial Aadhaar Bill pushed through by the Opposition in the Rajya Sabha and later rejected in the Lok Sabha included one that sought to prevent disclosure of “biometric or demographic information” in the interests of “national security” which was seen as too sweeping. It was suggested that “national security” be replaced with “public emergency” or in the interests of “public safety.”
- Another amendment related to permitting individuals with Aadhaar numbers to opt out of the system, with the Central Identities Data Repository deleting all information and authentication records, and giving a certificate to that effect within 15 days.
- A third amendment provided for alternative identification for delivery of services, subsidies and benefits to those choosing not to enrol for an Aadhaar number.
- A fourth amendment mandated the inclusion of the Central Vigilance Commissioner or the Comptroller and Auditor-General in the Oversight Committee.
- The fifth amendment sought the deletion of a clause that allows the Aadhaar number to be used for purposes other than those provided in the Bill.
- The government’s contention is that the Aadhaar (Targeted Delivery of Financial and Other Subsidies, Benefits and Services) Bill, 2016, would provide for good governance and efficient, transparent, and targeted delivery of subsidies, benefits and services. The Opposition wanted the legislation to have safeguards to avoid sensitive private information of the individual from being disclosed or accessed “on the whim of the Executive

- Arguing that privacy was not a fundamental right, Union Finance Minister Arun Jaitley told the Lok Sabha that the legislation's primary objective was delivery of benefits, subsidies and services to the people
- The Opposition objected to the presentation of the legislation as a Money Bill as this ensured that it was passed without the approval of the Rajya Sabha.

Govt. admits sedition definition is wide

- The government admitted in the Rajya Sabha that the definition of sedition under the law was "very wide" and agreed to an all-party meeting to discuss the issue after the Law Commission, which is examining the matter, submits its report.
- Anybody who speaks against the government can be booked under sedition law. Amendments have been suggested because the definition is very wide. That is why concerns have been raised
- Mr. Rijiju said the Commission, in its 42nd report, had noted that the sedition law was "defective" but did not favour its deletion.

New civil aviation policy on its way

- The Union government will come out with a new civil aviation policy soon, according to Minister for Civil Aviation P. Ashok Gajapathi Raju
- While the new policy is currently awaiting Cabinet approval, the Minister indicated that it would have several measures that would be helpful in boosting the aircraft Maintenance, Repair and Overhaul (MRO) business and also increase the regional air travel connectivity.
- As every hour counts for an aircraft, the government proposes to simplify the process and procedures to improve the turnaround time in MROs. This apart, fiscal concession would be given on customs duty, VAT and service tax
- With these measures, the government expects that the \$ 700 million MRO business would come back to the country. It also anticipates an additional \$ 200 million business coming from abroad.
- For improving regional connectivity, the government intends to revive all the unused airstrips in the country and develop them as no-frills airports alongside. Towards encouraging airlines, it would waive service tax, excise duty on aviation turbine fuel, VAT and landing and parking charges.
- The Centre would like to add 50 such airports every year for the next three to four years. At present, scheduled aircrafts are being operated to and from 75 airports in the country.
- Out of the 350 million people (middle class) in the country, whose purchasing power is on a par with their European counterparts, only 70 million were travelling by air in view of the high cost of air travel. Hence, the government intends to provide viability gap funding if the fares were reduced.

Gadag to be first city to have pan-city Wi-Fi

- Gadag city took a big step towards becoming the first in the State to offer Free Wi-Fi facility to people with the commissioning of as many as 10 hotspots to begin with.
- In the first phase, 25 hotspot locations have been chosen, including the industrial estate, zoo, major colleges, new and old bus stations, Deputy Commissioner's office, new court complex.

- Under the facility, an individual user will get up to 2 mbps speed and 200 MB each day with each access point supporting up to 300 to 400 users. All social websites such as Facebook and YouTube can be accessed.

Ali Ahmad Hussain Khan passes away

- Eminent Shehnai exponent Ustad Ali Ahmad Hussain Khan, one of the best-known players of the instrument after the legendary Bismillah Khan, passed away in Kolkata
- Ustad Khan was felicitated with the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award in 2009 for his contribution to Hindustani instrumental music.
- He hailed from a family of renowned Shehnai exponents from Benaras and was known for his innovative style and mastery over the classical and semi-classical and folk music repertoire. The musician has also played at the inauguration ceremony of Doordarshan in 1973.
- A top-graded artiste of All India Radio, Ustad Khan also used to teach in the ITC Sangeet Research Academy in Kolkata. In 2012, he was felicitated with the 'Bangabhushan' award by the West Bengal government.

Modi wax statue to be unveiled at Madame Tussauds

- Prime Minister Narendra Modi will join the ranks of prominent global leaders at Madame Tussauds in London, Singapore, Hong Kong and Bangkok next month, the world famous wax museum.
- Madame Tussauds has crafted figures of very distinguished dignitaries from around the world
- The wax figures at each of the museum's locations around Europe and Asia will be dressed in Modi's signature kurta-pyjama along with a jacket and he will be featured in a traditional pose "making a namaste gesture".
- His massive social media presence — he is currently the second most followed politician on Twitter after U.S. President Obama — also confirms the intense interest the public have in him
- A new branch of Madame Tussauds is also set to open in New Delhi as part of the India-U.K. Year of Culture in 2017, as announced during Prime Minister Modi's visit to the U.K. November 2015.

Cheating charges invoked on Vijay Mallya by CBI

- The Central Bureau of Investigation has decided to invoke the charge of cheating against businessman Vijay Mallya, Kingfisher Airlines and others in the alleged Rs.900-crore IDBI Bank loan wilful default case. The agency is also probing over 5 lakh financial transactions of the company since 2004.
- The CBI had in JULY 2015 registered the case under Section 409 (criminal breach of trust) read with Section 120 B (criminal conspiracy) of the Indian Penal Code and other provisions of the Prevention of Corruption Act against unknown IDBI officials pertaining to abuse of office to allegedly extend favours to Mr. Mallya's Kingfisher Airlines.
- Section 409 of the IPC, a stringent provision that prescribes a maximum of life sentence, does not come under the Prevention of Money Laundering Act, the law that empowers the Enforcement Directorate to attach the alleged proceeds of crime. Therefore, the Directorate was concerned that attaching assets in its money laundering case against Mr. Mallya would pose a challenge.

- Apart from corruption, criminal conspiracy and breach of trust, cheating charges are also being pressed against the accused, given that they allegedly defrauded the bank of the loan amount,
- The CBI has through various channels approached the authorities in the four countries seeking access to the details of transactions. The agency is treading cautiously in identifying the transactions pertaining to the IDBI Bank loan funds as the loan had been sanctioned for a wide range of purposes and, therefore, many of the transactions could be legal.

Ford Foundation gets a relief

- The Home Ministry, on the basis of a report sent by the Gujarat government in 2015, had put the international non-governmental organisation on the “watch list”, citing concern to “national security”.
- The Gujarat government report had said that the organisation funded the “anti-India” activities of Citizens for Justice and Peace and Sabrang Trust run by Teesta Setalvad, activist.
- Apart from the diplomatic pressure, Ford Foundation complied with the government’s condition to register itself under the Foreign Exchange Management Act (FEMA), 1999 which enables it to receive foreign funds in its accounts.
- Ford Foundation, which has been operating in India since 1952 was not registered either as an NGO or under any other category like the Indian Society Act till now. It applied under FEMA and got registered as a branch office by the Reserve Bank of India in December 2015.
- Besides Ford Foundation, there are 15 other NGOs/associations, which are under this restricted category.
- The Home Ministry sent a letter to the Reserve Bank of India on March 16 to remove the foundation from the watch list
- The order means that banks will no longer require the Ministry’s clearance to process the foreign funds coming from the foundation to any Indian bank account.

Baig acquitted

- In a reprieve to the lone convict, Himayat Baig (35), in the 2010 Pune German Bakery blast case, the Bombay High Court on Thursday quashed the death sentence awarded to him, citing lack of evidence and the prosecution’s failure to prove its case beyond reasonable doubt.
- Baig was facing the capital punishment for his alleged role in the explosion that rocked the popular German Bakery restaurant in Pune’s Koregaon Park on February 13, 2010 that killed 17 and injured 58, among them college students and several foreign nationals.
- The Bench also quashed other charges including under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act.
- Baig has also been acquitted of the charge of forgery, forgery of valuable security and forgery for purpose of cheating.
- The HC has only convicted him of the charges under Section 5 (b) (Punishment for making or possessing explosives under suspicious circumstances) of The Explosive Substances Act, which results in rigorous imprisonment that can extend up to 10 years and Section 474 (Having possession of document knowing it to be forged and intending to use it as genuine) of the IPC that provided imprisonment of seven years.

TIME’s ‘influential on Internet’ list

- Prime Minister Narendra Modi is among the most influential people on the Internet, TIME magazine said, describing the Indian leader as an “Internet star” who often uses social media to “conduct diplomacy.”
- The list includes U.S. Presidential hopeful Donald Trump, reality TV star Kim Kardashian and her husband Kanye West, author J.K. Rowling, former Olympic athlete Caitlyn Jenner and soccer star Cristiano Ronaldo.
- For its second annual roundup of the most influential people on the Internet, TIME said it looked at the contenders’ global impact on social media and their overall ability to drive news.

Punjab House passes resolution against SYL

- Day after the Supreme Court ordered status quo on land meant for the Sutlej-Yamuna Link Canal, the Punjab Assembly on Friday unanimously adopted a resolution, moved by Chief Minister Parkash Singh Badal, declaring that “the canal will not be allowed to be constructed at any cost and under any circumstances.”

Photos of CMs, Ministers in public ads allowed

- In a major relief to various States including poll-bound West Bengal, Tamil Nadu and Assam, the Supreme Court on Friday modified its earlier order and allowed photographs of Chief Ministers, Governors and Ministers to be carried in public advertisements.
- The court, in its verdict last year, had held that only the President, the Prime Minister and the Chief Justice of India could feature in government advertisements.
- The decision was later challenged by the Centre and seven States. “The exception carved out in paragraph 23 of the judgment dated May 13, 2015 permitting publication of the photographs of the President, the Prime Minister and the Chief Justice of the country, subject to the said authorities themselves deciding the question, is now extended to the Governors and the Chief Ministers of the States

Interest rates on small-saving rates slashed

- The government slashed interest rates on small-saving schemes, including the Public Provident Fund and Kisan Vikas Patra.
- The decision that will hit small savers is aimed at aligning these administered interest rates closer to the market rates. The new rates will come into effect on April 1 and will be valid till June 30. After the decision taken last month to revise the interest rates on small savings every quarter, the interest rate under the Public Provident Fund scheme will be cut to 8.1 per cent for the period from April 1 to June 30, from 8.7 per cent at present
- While the interest rate on the KVP will be cut to 7.8 per cent from 8.7 per cent, that on post office savings is retained at 4 per cent. The rates on term deposits of durations varying from one to five years have been cut.
- The five-year National Savings Certificates will earn interest at the rate of 8.1 per cent as against 8.5 per cent now. A five-year Monthly Income Account will fetch 7.8 per cent as opposed to 8.4 per cent now. The girl-child saving scheme, Sukanya Samriddhi Account, will have an interest rate of 8.6 per cent as against 9.2 per cent. The senior citizen savings scheme of five years will earn 8.6 per cent compared with 9.3 per cent.

- The rate for the five-year time deposit is being reduced to 7.9 per cent from 8.5 per cent. For five-year recurring deposits, the rate has been slashed to 7.4 per cent from 8.4 per cent.
- The rates on the post office term deposits are being cut from 8.4 per cent to 7.1 per cent for one-year time deposits, 7.2 per cent for two-year time deposits and 7.4 per cent for three-year time deposits.

India presses on beef-free pork import

- Buoyed by its victory at the World Trade Organisation (WTO) last year against India's poultry import ban, the U.S. has now trained its guns on the country's pork import regulations — which include a condition that such consignments must be beef-free.
- During recent bilateral discussions, India made it clear to the U.S. that the requirement — that pork import consignments must be beef-free — cannot be done away with due to apprehensions of such a move “hurting religious sentiments and provoking riots,” official sources told The Hindu on the condition of anonymity.
- Pigs are usually fed with food ingredients of animal origin to meet their protein requirements. Such animal feeds — including meat/bone/blood meal and hydrolysed intestinal tissues — are among the most cost-effective methods to hike protein levels in the diet of animals such as pigs. However, many Indian States prevent cow slaughter. Also, beef ban, in states such as Maharashtra, had recently become controversial and the BJP had turned beef into a major political issue.
- The requirement of a veterinary certificate stating among other things that “the consignment(s) of processed and unprocessed pork and pork products destined to India do not contain beef and beef products in any form” will not be removed
- US claims the condition is not based on a scientific risk assessment and the concerned international standard (World Organisation for Animal Health). However, citing the example of Australia fulfilling all the pork import norms of India to increase their exports of the item, the Indian authorities have asked the US to do the same
- the U.S. has restrictions on import of Indian dairy items on fears of foot-and-mouth disease. Pointing out that all dairy product exports from India are tested to ensure quality, the sources said India will shortly take up bilaterally the issue of U.S. restrictions on these items.
- On its part, the U.S. had strengthened its animal feed norms to prevent the spread of diseases such as Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE or the mad cow disease that is transmitted to humans).
- Following the detection of some cases of BSE, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration had tightened animal feed norms in 1997 and in 2008. It had prohibited “the use of high-risk cattle material (including those derived from BSE-positive cattle) in feed for all animal species.
- The U.S. has won cases against India at the WTO, including in the ones related to its poultry import ban and the domestic content requirement in its solar power programme.

Madame Tussauds wax museum in Delhi in 2017

- Madame Tussauds, the hugely popular waxworks attraction headquartered here, is planning to open a branch in New Delhi to coincide with the 70th year of India's independence in 2017.
- The attraction, which has recently decided to add Prime Minister Narendra Modi to its collection of wax celebrities, will spend £50 million in the next 10 years on India

- Tussauds houses 20 such attractions across the world, all different from each other as they are tailored to the local market for a “host city vibe.”
- A wax figure takes four months to create and costs £1,50,000 each. Four wax images of Mr. Modi have been created which are to be installed in London, Singapore, Hong Kong and Bangkok.

For granting bail, court applies ‘principle of parity’

- A sessions court in New Delhi, while granting interim bail for six months to JNU students Umar Khalid and Anirban Bhattacharya, applied the “principle of parity” with co-accused and JNU Students’ Union president Kanhaiya Kumar, who was earlier released on interim bail by the Delhi High Court.
- Umar and Anirban were arrested on sedition charges in connection with a controversial event organised on the university campus on February 9.

Experts unsure if El Nino will fade away

- good number of meteorologists expect the monsoon in 2016 to be normal, though they are unclear whether the El Nino — a weather anomaly blamed for back-to-back droughts over India since 2014 — will completely fade away during the crucial rain months from June to September.
- El Nino refers to an anomalous heating up of the waters in the central-eastern regions of the equatorial Pacific and implies a consistent, average rise in temperature of 0.5 degree Celsius above normal. Historically that translates to the monsoon drying up over India six in 10 years.
- Conversely, the La Nina, or an anti-El Nino, when waters in the same regions dip at least 0.5 degree Celsius and generally considered favourable for the monsoon, is only expected to set in after September
- Nino neutral” conditions were likely to prevail during the crucial months of July and August that accounts for nearly 70 per cent of the monsoon rainfall. “Nino neutral (when sea surface temperatures are close to normal) can be a mixed bag for Indian monsoon but generally an El Nino year is followed by normal monsoon

OCI cards enough to visit India

- The Indian diaspora will no longer have to get a visa affixed on their passports every time they travel to India as the Union government has decided to do away with the process.
- The government has decided that since the categories Overseas Citizen of India (OCI) and Persons of Indian Origin (PIO) were merged last year, the OCI card will suffice to enter the country and hence would require no visa.
- Till now, every OCI card holder also had to get a visa affixed from the Indian High Commission whenever they planned a visit to India. Now, only the OCI card will be needed
- The government is also planning to make arrangements to print OCI cards at a few big missions such as those in the U.K and the U.S., countries where many Indians reside.
- The government amended the Citizenship Act last year and a notification was issued to merge the two cards.
- Keeping in view the promise [made by PM Modi in the USA and Australia in 2014], an ordinance was promulgated on January 6, 2015 whereby the eligibility and additional benefits of the PIO card have been incorporated in the OCI card and certain other relaxation to OCI

card holders have been given by amending the Citizenship Act, 1955. The PIO and the OCI cards used to exist simultaneously, leading to a lot of confusion among the PIOs residing abroad

Mobile malaria detection unit

- A mobile malaria detection unit of the State government of Karnataka providing free services at the doorsteps of people was launched on a pilot basis in Mangaluru
- People can get tested and treated at this vehicle launched by the Department of Health and Family Welfare
- They will test the blood on a rapid testing kit and if it showed positive for malaria, the patient will be given the entire course of medicines.
- If the kit shows a negative result, the health workers will collect the blood smears and get it tested at centres in the Government Wenlock Hospital or the Malaria Testing Centre at the Mangaluru City Corporation.
- If this test showed positive, the team will visit the house of the patient and give medicines. Patient need not pay any fee either for testing or treatment.
- was the first such mobile unit for preventing malaria in the State. It was launched in Mangaluru as it had highest number of cases.

Shrimps will lose ‘voice’ cause of seawater acidification

- Snapping shrimps, the loudest invertebrate in the ocean, may be silenced because of seawater acidification, a new study has warned.
- the levels of carbon dioxide predicted to be found in oceans by the end of the century, the sound of snapping shrimps would be reduced substantially.
- This is expected to have profound consequences for many species that rely on sound cues for information about the location and quality of resources (food, shelter, partners and potential predators).
- Shrimp ‘choruses’ can be heard kilometres offshore and are important because they can aid the navigation of baby fish to their homes. But ocean acidification is jeopardising this process
- They can produce sounds of up to 210 decibels (dB) through the formation of bubbles by the rapid closing action of their snapping claw, used as a warning sign to scare off predators and in their own hunting
- Researchers measured the sound produced by shrimp in field recordings at natural CO₂ volcanic vents at three different ocean locations and under laboratory conditions.
- They found substantial reductions in both the levels of sound produced and in the frequency of snaps.

BJP meet says freedom of expression does not mean call to destroy country

- The Bharatiya Janata Party’s two-day national executive kept its political preoccupations, both with the debate on nationalism and its attempts at making up with the Dalit community.
- On the concluding day of the event, the party announced grand plans for Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s visit to Mhow, the birth place of Constitution framer B.R. Ambedkar.

- Meet also gave political resolution that “freedom of expression and nationalism do necessarily co-exist” but that this fundamental right does not cover calls to destroy the country.
- Mr. Modi also said, in his address to the executive, that the party and the government “was accepting of political criticism of itself, but not of the nation.”
- The resolution highlighted government efforts like building memorials for Ambedkar in Maharashtra and London where he had stayed or how entrepreneurs belonging to weaker sections were being given loans under the Mudra scheme to develop an “institution of Dalit entrepreneurs.”
- Home Minister Rajnath Singh said Mr. Modi told partymen “not to be distracted by attempts by an envious opposition to embroil them in controversies.”

FM said interest rate cut will help economy

- Faced with a fresh outcry over the decision to lower returns on small savings schemes, Finance Minister Arun Jaitley said the economy needs lower interest rates to become more efficient and high deposit rates would keep it “sluggish.”
- Interest rates had risen a lot, so the cost of borrowing for the government and others was high, but now they have come down.
- The way the economy is moving, we cannot have a situation where lending rates are going down but deposit rates remain high,” he said.
- Both rates are linked. To make the economy more efficient rather than sluggish, the country has to move towards lower interest rates in both.
- The government announced new interest rates on small savings instruments on Friday, slashing the returns on Public Provident Fund savings from 8.7 per cent to 8.1 per cent and one year post office deposits from 8.4 per cent to 7.1 per cent.
- These interest rates will be reset every quarter based on a formula linked to the rate of return on government securities.

20 new sites added to UNESCO biosphere nature reserves

- The United Nations’ cultural body UNESCO has added 20 new sites to its network of protected biosphere nature reserves, including two in Canada and two in Portugal.
- The status was conferred during a two-day meeting in Lima, which brought the total number of biosphere reserves to 669 across 120 countries.
- In Canada, the Tsa Tsa area in the country’s Northwest Territories that includes the last pristine arctic lake was added to the list, as was the Beaver Hills region of Alberta, which has a landscape formed by a retreating glacier.
- Britain’s Isle of Man, located in the Irish Sea in a biologically diverse marine environment, and Mexico’s Isla Cozumel were also selected for the network.
- And in Portugal, the entire Island of Sao Jorge, the fourth largest in the Azores Archipelago, was designated a reserve in addition to the Tago River region between Portugal and Spain.
- The list of new UNESCO biosphere reserves also includes sites in Algeria, Ghana, Haiti, India, Indonesia, Iran, Italy, Kazakhstan, Madagascar, Morocco, Peru, the Philippines and Tanzania.
- Of the hundreds of locations on the list, 16 are sites that stretch across more than one country. Spain is the country with the largest number of registered reserves.

- Meanwhile, the Australia ended its push to log World Heritage-listed forests on the island State of Tasmania on Sunday, after UNESCO issued a report calling for the area to remain protected from logging.

Government will not tinker with reservation policy says PM

- Prime Minister Narendra Modi made it clear on Monday that his government had no plans to revisit the reservation policy for Dalits and other communities.
- He accused his opponents of spreading “untruths” over the issue, not just during his tenure, but even when Atal Bihari Vajpayee was the PM.
- Mr. Modi was speaking after laying the foundation stone for a memorial for B.R. Ambedkar in New Delhi.
- Mr. Modi said no one in his government had suggested that such a review would be considered, an enterprise that would be impossible, he said, “even if Ambedkarji were to appear today”.
- The BJP has ruled Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Punjab, and Haryana for many years, and the policy was not altered.

Bedaquiline new drug launched for TB

- On the eve of World Tuberculosis Day, Health Minister launched Bedaquiline — new drug for Drug Resistant TB — as part of the national programme. The drug will be introduced in 104 districts across five States.
- Process of fighting TB is continuous. Hence there can be no dilution and no diversion. Our attention needs to be steadfast and aggressive.
- The new class of drug is a diarylquinoline that specifically targets Mycobacterial ATP synthase, an enzyme essential for the supply of energy to Mycobacterium tuberculosis and most other mycobacteria.
- Bedaquiline is being introduced at six tertiary care centres across India. These sites have advanced facilities for laboratory testing and intensive care for patients.
- Bedaquiline will be given to multi-drug resistant TB patients with resistance to either all fluoroquinolone and/or all second line injectables and extensive drug resistant TB.
- The national programme will also benefit from the introduction of over 500 Cartridge-Based Nucleic Acid Amplification Test (CBNAAT) machines — a revolutionary rapid molecular test which detects Mycobacterium tuberculosis and rifampicin drug resistance, simultaneously.
- This test is fully automated and provides results within two hours. It is a highly sensitive diagnostic tool and can be used in remote and rural areas without sophisticated infrastructure or specialised training.

Drugs used in leukaemia could replace stem cell transplantation

- Two drugs used in the targeted treatment of leukaemia can significantly prolong the survival time of high-risk patients, researchers say, suggesting that in future, these medicines could not only replace chemotherapy but even stem cell transplantation.
- The study found that the drugs ibrutinib and idelalisib used in the targeted treatment of chronic lymphatic leukaemia can significantly prolong the survival time of high-risk patients.

- The average survival time of these patients is between one and two years when they receive standard treatment, whereas 80 per cent of patients receiving the new treatment were still alive after two years, researchers said.
- Both drugs are so-called “small molecules” and belong to the class of substances known as kinase inhibitors.
- They are used in targeted cancer treatment, where they interrupt the signalling pathways of the cancer cells, researchers said.
- This is because targeted treatment acts on specific molecular-biological properties of the cancer cell. Tissue samples have to be taken to determine these properties.

Pak Joint investigation team will probe pathankot attack

- The Indian High Commission in Islamabad has received visa applications from five Pakistani officials, who are part of the Joint Investigation Team (JIT) on the Pathankot airbase attack.
- The Ministry of External Affairs said the “modalities” are yet to be finalised for the joint India-Pakistan investigation into the Pathankot terror attacks, though sources said the team would be visiting the forward airbase on March 29.
- The submission of the visa applications for the JIT’s visit beginning on March 27 before the anticipated meeting between the Prime Ministers of India and Pakistan on the sidelines of the Nuclear Security Summit (NSS) in Washington DC during March 31-April 1 are viewed as connected developments.
- As part of the atmospherics being built up for the meeting between the two PMs, India is also extending a special gesture for the National Day celebration at the Pakistan High Commission in New Delhi on March 23, with the government deciding to send a “senior Minister” to the event.

Security tightened at all airports after Brussels attack

- The airport and metro stations in Delhi were put on high alert after the terror attacks in Brussels. An alert was issued to all airports.
- The Indira Gandhi International Airport, already under heightened vigil after the Pathankot attack, came under even more stringent security measures.
- Security agencies went into a tizzy after calls warning of bomb threats to five Jet Airways flights departing from Delhi were received.
- Apart from the usual security check at entry gates and security points, passengers now have to go through Secondary Ladder Point Checking (SLPC) at the point where they take the ladder to board their flights.

Despite terrorist attack PM will attend EU-India summit in Brussels

- The government announced on Tuesday that Prime Minister Narendra Modi would travel as planned to Brussels on March 30.
- Separately, the Prime Minister tweeted: “The attacks are condemnable. Condolences to families of the deceased. May those injured recover quickly.”
- Mr. Modi is scheduled to travel to Brussels next Wednesday on his way to the U.S. He will attend the EU-India Summit and hold talks with Belgian Prime Minister Charles Michel.

Centre increased dearness allowance by 6 percent

- In a decision described as a Holi gift to over one crore Central government employees and pensioners, the Union Cabinet increased Dearness Allowance by 6 per cent to 125 per cent of their basic pay with effect from January.
- The decision will cost the exchequer Rs. 14,724.74 crore a year.
- Of this, Rs. 6,795.5 crore will go to employees and Rs. 7,929.24 crore to pensioners during 2016-17.

More lower berth seats would be reserved for senior citizens

- The government announced an increase in lower berth quota for senior citizens in trains from April 1.
- There will be 80-90 seats reserved for senior citizens on every train as against 50-60 at present.
- Now, each sleeper class coach will have six lower berth seats reserved for senior citizens, female passengers above 45 years and pregnant women, up from four at present.
- In 3AC and 2AC classes, three lower berths will be kept reserved for senior citizens. In Rajdhani, Duronto and fully AC Express trains, four lower berths in every coach will be reserved in 3AC class, as against three per coach that are reserved in Mail or Express trains.
- Railway Minister Suresh Prabhu had announced the proposal in the Budget 2016-17 presented last month.
- In another move, the government also announced decreasing freight rates on dedicated merry-go-round systems – rail tracks that connect coal mines and power plants.
- The freight rates for transporting goods have been revised down to Rs. 47 per tonne effective April 1 from Rs. 63 per tonne at present, Railway Board member (Traffic).
- This would make transportation of goods by train cheaper than roads where Rs. 72 per tonne was charged for covering 18 km.

Electricity de France and NPCIL signed MOU for Jaitapur

- India and France have signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) for construction of six nuclear reactors at Jaitapur in Maharashtra, two months after the two countries decided to conclude the techno-commercial negotiations for the project by the year end.
- The pact was inked at the end of the two-day visit of a high-level delegation of Electricite de France (EDF) — French public utility — to Mumbai for holding discussions with the Nuclear Power Corporation of India Ltd (NPCIL) on the construction of the plants.
- French Ambassador to India Francois Richier, who was present on the occasion, reiterated his country's commitment to working seamlessly with India through a collaborative approach to enable both sides to contribute collectively to the development of nuclear energy in India in the most economical manner.

Bangladesh will lease 10 GBPS Internet bandwidth to India in return of 100 MW power

- Sheikh Hasina joined a video conference with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, jointly inaugurating the supply of 100 MW power from India and leasing of 10 GBPS Internet bandwidth from Bangladesh.
- Inaugurating the power supply from Tripura, Mr. Modi described it as a “historic occasion”, and “an example to the world” on how Bangladesh and Tripura, which share historic relations as the tiny Indian State had given millions of Bangladeshis shelter during the nation’s liberation war in 1971.
- Bangladesh allowed the transport of over-dimensional cargo through its territory during the construction of the Palatana power plant in Tripura in 2011.
- The power grids of the two countries have been hooked up with the supply of 500 MW of power to Bangladesh through transmission cable.
- The supply of another 500 MW through the same interconnection was also announced during Mr. Modi’s Dhaka visit in 2015.
- Mr. Modi has expressed his ‘earnest desire’ to take the country’s cooperation with Bangladesh to the sphere of space.
- Referring to the Bangladesh-Bhutan-India-Nepal (BBIN) connectivity deal, the Indian PM said, “We have already started working together on road connectivity. Today, we are forging a new bond through electricity sharing. We are also working together on digital connectivity, a must for the 21st century.
- Bangladesh hopes to launch the Bangabandhu-1 Satellite by the end of 2017.

Govt. document refers Pakistan occupied Kashmir as Pakistan occupied Jammu & Kashmir

- For the first time ever, an official document of the NDA government has referred to Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (PoK) as Pakistan Occupied Jammu and Kashmir (PoJK).
- The change is significant as it is in line with the Bharatiya Janata Party’s narrative on unified Kashmir, although it was thus far restricted to party pamphlets and manifestos.
- The reference figures in the 2014-15 annual report of the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA), which was tabled in Parliament.
- Organiser , mouth-piece of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, has on many occasions referred to PoK as PoJK and even called for freeing it from illegal occupation by Pakistan.

1800 year old wall discovered in Telangana

- In a significant discovery, archaeologists excavating the early historic site located between Pazzur-Yarragadda villages of Thipparthi mandal unearthed a huge 16-metre-long brick wall of a house that is believed to have been constructed some 1,800 years ago.
- Assistant Director P. Nagaraju said that the inhabitants of 2nd Century AD habitation had used light-weight bricks made in various sizes to construct their houses.
- The biggest brick was measuring 58 cm long, 28 cm wide and 9 cm high, the longest ever found in excavations in the past in Telangana and Andhra Pradesh.
- An horn of a deer was also unearthed at the site on Wednesday by the archaeologists, which proved that the inhabitants hunted wild animals for a living.
- Apart from it, a huge number of beads and bangles made of various kind of materials, terracotta toys, and pottery were also found at the site.
- Terracotta toys of animals such as dog, ram, pig, besides fossils of human legs and others were found. Ornamental beads made with terracotta, jasper, conch shell, glass, steatite, carnelian and others were also found.

Bacterium with least number of genes created by scientists

- Researchers J. Craig Venter and Clyde Hutchinson and colleagues at the Venter Institute, California, report the making of a living, replicating and stable cell that uses the minimum number of genes — 437 — to be considered biologically ‘alive.’
- In the natural world, no living organism is ever known to possess fewer than 1000 genes. The knowledge gained from this creation may be foundational to understand how organisms can be created from scratch.
- Ever since the human genome — the complete sequence of genes that make up human DNA — was deciphered at the turn of the century, researchers have tried to understand the precise functions of these 25,000 genes and the way they network with other pieces of DNA in the cell to keep it functional.
- In 2010, Mr. Venter and his team built and booted up the first self-replicating, synthetic bacterial cell (called Syn 1.0) through the sole chromosome (the storehouse of a cell’s DNA) of *Mycoplasma mycoides* — a bacterium with a relatively small genome — and transplanted it into *Mycoplasma capricolum*, from which they had previously extracted the DNA.
- The hollowed-out capricolum was re-programmed to behave like a mycoides ; proof that genomes can be designed in the computer, chemically made in the lab, and transplanted into a recipient cell to produce a new, self-replicating cell controlled only by the synthetic genome.
 - Simultaneously, another team — through trial and error — sliced and diced the genome of Syn 1.0 and then identified which of its original 901 genes could be done away with.

India rejects Pakistan’s claim of Indian spy in Balochistan

- India rejected Pakistan’s claims that it had arrested a serving naval officer in Balochistan for what it called “subversive activities”.
- In a statement, the Ministry of External affairs however, admitted that the man believed to be arrested was a former officer of the navy.
- India has now sought consular access to him. The government said that India has no interest in interfering in internal matters of any country and firmly believes that a stable and peaceful Pakistan is in the interest of all in the region.
- According to documents released by Military intelligence sources in Pakistan, the arrested man identified himself as Kulbhushan Yadav, formerly a commander in the navy, who, Pakistan claims, was sent under deputation to the Research and Analysis Wing (RAW) to Iran.
- A passport (No. L9630722), purportedly belonging to the arrested man, showed his assumed name as ‘Hussein Mubarak Patel’, born in Sangli, Maharashtra, and living in Powai, as well as a valid Iranian visa in his name.

Election commission gives its approval for PM’s Mann Ki Baat

- The Election Commission of India has given its approval for PM’s radio broadcast “Mann Ki Baat”, with a condition that his address to the public should not violate the Model Code of Conduct in place for the coming Assembly elections in four States and a Union Territory.
- The Model Code of Conduct came into force on March 4 when the ECI announced the schedule for elections.
- Elections in Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Puducherry will be held on May 16, and beginning April 4 in West Bengal. Assam will go to the polls in two phases on April 4 and 11.

- Owing to the Model Code, it is learnt that the Information and Broadcasting Ministry had approached the ECI seeking clearance for the PM's monthly address.

In order to curb extremism and radicalisation U.S. Wants to work with India

- The U.S. has proposed to work with India to prepare a road map in countering violent extremism and radicalisation.
- The phenomenal rise of the terrorist outfit, the Islamic State (IS), is one of the reasons that prompted the move and the U.S. has proposed that both countries exchange information on this aspect.
- India and the U.S. are to meet for Homeland Security dialogue soon and this is one of the agenda points that will be discussed.
- In a countrywide raid in January this year, the National Investigation Agency (NIA) and the police had cracked down on a pan-India IS network and arrested around 25 young men from various parts of the country.
- The accused had pledged allegiance to the IS and wanted to establish 'Janood-ul-Khalifa-e-Hind' or the Army of Caliph of India by carrying out terror strikes at important installations.
- The United States has also reiterated its proposal that India agree to the Homeland Security Presidential Directive (HSPD-6), a model text agreement for exchange of terrorist screening information between Terrorist Screening Centre (TCS) of the U.S. and any Indian security agency.
- On its part, the U.S has said that in the past one year, "two dozen people with terrorist links" were arrested in Canada and Australia with the help of HSPD-6 as both countries are signatories to it. In all, the U.S. has finalised the agreement with 30 other countries.
- If India signs it, it could get access to the U.S. database of 11,000 terror suspects. Indian security agencies are apprehensive of giving unhindered access to the U.S. on sensitive data related to terrorists and the agreement is stuck for the past several years.

Kerala's reservoir's biodiversity in danger

- Farmed illegally and revered as sacred, the invasive North African catfish is proliferating in water bodies across Kerala, edging out native aquatic species.
- The presence of the fish in large numbers has led to the disappearance of many of the indigenous species, posing a threat to the aquatic biodiversity.
- Generally known as African catfish (*Clarias gariepinus*), the species has been found to thrive well in the Kundala, Mattupetti, Anayirankal, Munnar head works, Shengulam, Ponmudi, Kallarkutty and Lower Periyar dams and in all the tributaries of the Periyar river.
- Juveniles weighing 150 grams and adults weighing 2 kg to 7 kg were caught during the survey, indicating that the fish was breeding continuously in the open waters. Native to Africa and the Middle East, where it inhabits freshwater lakes, rivers, swamps and urban sewage systems, the African catfish was introduced all over the world in the early 1980s for aquaculture purposes.
- The nocturnal predatory fish feeds primarily on living as well as dead animal matter, including fish, invertebrates, and small birds.
- Its ability to survive in shallow mud for long periods of time and its high tolerance for poorly oxygenated water give it an edge over other native species. It is also capable of hybridising with other catfish, though there is no evidence of that in India.

- Steps should be taken to prevent the culture of species like African catfish and Nile tilapia (*Oreochromis niloticus*) that are not formally introduced in the country.

Pak. investigation team to be briefed by NIA

- The Pakistani team, which is expected to travel to Pathankot by a special BSF helicopter, will be shown “the scene of the crime”, and allowed to interrogate non-military witnesses, but would not be allowed to speak to NSG, BSF or military personnel who were present during the attack.
- The Pakistani visitors will be given a “90-minute briefing” by the NIA officials on the evidence collected so far, including the route of infiltration over the India-Pakistan border, identities of the killed militants, and the information that links them to Jaish-e- Mohammad facilitators in Pakistan.
- former Gurdaspur SP Salwinder Singh whose vehicle was snatched by the terrorists to reach the airbase on the intervening night of December 31-January 1 would be presented as a ‘witness.’ It was on Mr. Singh’s complaint that an FIR was registered by the local police.

India’s rotavirus vaccine launched

- Inching a step closer to universal immunisation, the Health Ministry launched the country’s first, indigenous rotavirus vaccine to combat diarrhoeal deaths.
- The launch of Rotovac was “a new milestone towards expanding the coverage of full immunisation in the country aimed at reducing child mortality”.
- Diarrhoea caused by Rotavirus is one of the leading causes of severe diarrhoea and death among children less than five years of age. In India, between 80,000 to one lakh children die due to Rotavirus diarrhoea annually while nearly 9 lakh children are admitted to hospital with severe diarrhoea. Another 32.7 lakh children visit the hospital as out patients due to the disease.
- The vaccine was being introduced initially in four States — Andhra Pradesh, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh and Odisha — and would be expanded to the entire country in a phased manner
- life-saving vaccine to our immunisation programme will not only improve the health of our children but also reduce hospitalisation and other conditions associated with diarrhoea due to Rotavirus such as malnutrition, delayed physical and mental development among children. Reduced hospitalisation lower the economic burden on the family and the health cost burden on the country.
- The Rotavirus vaccine was developed indigenously, under a public-private partnership between the Ministry of Science Technology and the Health Ministry.
- The Rotovac is in addition to three new vaccines that have been introduced in India’s Universal Immunisation Programme (UIP) including Inactivated Polio Vaccine (IPV), Measles, Rubella (MR) vaccine, and Adult Japanese Encephalitis (JE) vaccine.
- India’s UIP will provide free vaccines against 12 life threatening diseases, to 27 million children annually, the largest birth cohort in the world. The IPV was introduced in six States from Nov. 30, 2015 for double protection against polio.

President’s rule imposed in Uttarakhand

- President's Rule was imposed on Uttarakhand, a day before the Harish Rawat government was to face a test of strength in the Assembly, which has been placed under suspended animation.
- Union Finance Minister Arun Jaitley told journalists that the Cabinet took the decision.
- However, the Congress questioned the move, with its spokesperson Manish Tewari citing the Bommai case judgment of 1994, which states that the legitimacy of a government has to be established in the Assembly.
- Mr. Jaitley had gone to meet President Pranab Mukherjee on Saturday night to communicate the Cabinet's decision and address questions that he might have had.
- Governor K.K. Paul's report on the constitutional breakdown was discussed in the aftermath of the sting video that showed CM Rawat allegedly involved in horse-trading. Mr. Mukherjee signed the proclamation on Sunday morning.

JIT of Pak will get DNA samples of attackers

- India will hand over the DNA samples of the four terrorists killed in the Pathankot airstrike to Pakistan's Joint Investigation Team, which arrived to probe the attack.
- The team is expected to track down the families of the terrorists in Pakistan and match the samples.
- The five-member team, including an ISI official, landed at the Palam technical area in a special aircraft of the Pakistan Air Force in the morning. It has a seven-day visa to visit Delhi and Pathankot.
- The proof of role of J-e-M can withstand any international judicial scrutiny. Since Pakistan has not sent any letter rogatory [a judicial request to gather evidence] so far, India has said that the onus of making the evidence count in a court of law in their country is on them.

New method found to save coral reefs

- U.S. researchers have found that blowing tiny bubbles through sea water could help protect coral reefs and oyster farms from oceans, which have increasingly turned acidic through human activities.
- The idea is that tiny bubbles will help cleanse the world's oceans of carbon dioxide (CO₂) by drawing the gas out of the seawater and transferring it to the atmosphere. This may provide a relatively inexpensive solution to one of the biggest threats facing coral reefs today.
- Ocean acidification harms a variety of marine organisms, but especially those that use calcium carbonate to assemble their skeletons and shells, such as coral, mussels, and oysters.
- The study was published online in the journal Environmental Science and Technology.

ICAR will take help of drones for crop study

- The Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR) is keen on deploying sensors and drones in farms, to start with, for assessing the quality of soil as well as crop losses after floods.
- The devices would help speed up the analysis. At present, unless large areas get affected farmers do not get compensation.
- The Indian Agricultural Research Institute, a premier ICAR institution in Delhi, in association with a few other agencies, including ISRO and IIT-Delhi, is working in this area.

Single all emergencies number to come soon

- Indian citizens in distress will soon be able to get help using a single number, '112', for all emergency services in the country, including the police, fire brigade and ambulance.
- At present, such callers need to dial different numbers for different emergencies like 100 for police, 101 for fire, 102 for ambulance and 108 for emergency disaster management.
- The move, recommended by the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India in April 2015, was approved by the Telecom Commission.
- It will be rolled out within months rather than a year.

Global energy flow has been changed by human activity says study

- The impact that human beings have made on the Earth in terms of production and consumption of natural resources has formed a 'striking new pattern' in the planet's global energy flow, finds a new research.
- The results, published in the journal *Earth's Future*, showed definite signs that human beings have permanently changed the planet and have triggered Anthropocene — an era where humans dominated Earth's surface geology.
- Patterns of human production and consumption mainly characterise the era.
- Human beings have seized something like one quarter of the net primary biological production of the planet.
- In addition, by digging phosphorus out of the ground and by fixing nitrogen out of the air to make fertilizers; and by exploiting hundreds of millions of years worth of stored carbon-based energy, humans are increasing productivity well above natural levels.
- The findings revealed that Earth is now characterised by a geologically unprecedented pattern of global energy flow that is pervasively influenced by humans.

Haryana state Govt approves Jat quota

- The Haryana Cabinet approved a Bill to provide reservation to Jats along with four other communities in government jobs and education, official sources said.
- A Cabinet meeting, chaired by Chief Minister Manohar Lal Khattar gave the nod to the draft Bill on reservation to Jats and four other castes including Jat Sikhs, Rors, Bishnois and Tyagis.
- The Bill, likely to be introduced in the Assembly before March 31, proposes reservation for the five communities by creating a new classification in the Backward Classes category.
- Mr. Khattar told reporters that the Bill on reservation for Jats could be brought any day in the ongoing Assembly session, which would continue for three more days.
- He had made it clear that the existing 27 per cent reservation for the Other Backward Classes (OBCs) in the State would not be disturbed.
- The OBC community has been opposing the inclusion of Jats in their category for reservation.
- The government wanted to give reservation to Jats under a new category for backward classes BC-3.
- The existing BC-1 and BC-2 categories already account for 27 per cent reservation in government jobs for backward classes.
- Jat organisations have been demanding 10 per cent quota in jobs and educational institutions under the OBC category.

- In February, the Jat agitation for reservation had left the State paralysed for over ten days during which at least 30 people were killed, over 200 injured and property worth hundreds of crores destroyed as the agitation turned violent.

Uttarakhand HC allows floor test of Harish Rawat government

- Granting the former Uttarakhand Chief Minister, Harish Rawat, a chance to prove his majority in the Assembly, the Uttarakhand High Court ruled that fresh voting must take place on March 31.
- The court ruled that all 70 MLAs, including the nine rebels who were suspended on Sunday by the Speaker, must vote, and the floor test shall decide whether Mr. Rawat would be reinstated.
- However, the rebels would vote separately under the supervision of an observer appointed by the court.
- On March 18, the BJP, the Opposition party, along with nine Congress MLAs, voted against the Appropriation Bill in the House.
- While Mr. Rawat said the Bill was “constitutionally” passed, the BJP’s central leadership accused Speaker Govind Singh Kunjwal of showing the Bill as “passed” when a majority of the 67 MLAs present had voted against it.
- Thereafter, Governor K.K. Paul asked Mr. Rawat to prove his majority on March 28. But President’s Rule was imposed on the State on March 27.

FDI through automatic route allowed in e-commerce

- The government allowed 100 per cent foreign direct investment (FDI) through the automatic route in the marketplace model of e-commerce retailing.
- This brought in long overdue clarity on FDI policy for the sector as well as definition of marketplace format.
- As per the guidelines issued by the Department of Industrial Policy and Promotion (DIPP) on FDI in e-commerce, foreign direct investment has not been permitted in inventory-based model.
- At present, 100 per cent FDI is permitted in B2B (business-to-business) transactions under the automatic route.
- The marketplace model has been defined as providing an “information technology platform by an e-commerce entity on a digital and electronic network to act as a facilitator between buyer and seller.”
- DIPP said that the e-commerce marketplace may provide support services to sellers in warehousing, and logistics., order fulfilment, call centre, payment collection and other services.
- However, such entities will not exercise ownership over the inventory.

Second Batch of Netaji files released

- The second batch of Netaji files reveal that Suresh Chandra Bose, brother of Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose, had, without permission, published secret government documents in his book “Dissentient Report”, violating the Official Secrets Act.
- The government discussed if some action should be taken, but then decided to let the matter rest.

- Among the Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose files is a speech delivered by Japanese Prime Minister Hideki Tojo during World War II, saying Japan supported Indian independence and would hand over to the “Provisional Government of Free India”, headed by Bose, the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, then under Japanese occupation, “soon”.

Division bench of Nainital HC stays earlier order of floor test

- Complicating the legalities around a floor test in the Uttarakhand Assembly a Division Bench of the High Court in Nainital decided to keep the order “in abeyance” till April 6.
- The Centre and the Congress had filed special appeals in the High Court over ambiguities in the March 29 order of the court, where Mr. Rawat was permitted a floor test on March 31.
- While the Central government had approached the court questioning the permission for voting in the Assembly when the State was under President’s Rule.
- The Congress approached it questioning the rights of the nine disqualified MLAs to participate in the ballot.
- Attorney General Mukul Rohtagi and his team represented the Central government in the High Court. He argued that voting could not be allowed since the State was under President’s Rule.
- The decision, given by the double Bench comprising Chief Justice K.M. Joseph and Justice V.K. Bisht, of putting the earlier court order “in abeyance” was taken with the consent of both the parties.
- A single bench of the court postponed to April 1, hearing in the case of the nine rebel Congress MLAs, who had challenged their disqualification.

Labour Bureau data shows job growth is declining

- New jobs in eight labour-intensive industries fell to a six-year low in the first nine months of 2015 — with just 1.55 lakh new jobs being created compared to over three lakh jobs over the same period in 2013 and 2014, according to Labour Bureau data.
- This was not a healthy sign, especially since the July-September quarter usually sees more jobs being added, compared to other quarters in the year as companies conduct recruitment drives.
- The latest quarterly survey conducted by the Labour Bureau showed 1.34 lakh jobs were created in July-September 2015, the lowest in the similar quarters since 2009 when the survey was started.
- In January-March 2015, though the number of jobs increased by 64,000, it declined by 43,000 in the quarter ended June taking the net addition of jobs during 2015 to 1.55 lakh.
- By contrast, 3.04 lakh new jobs were added in January-September 2014 and 3.36 lakh in the same period of 2013, a Labour Bureau survey showed. There was a sharp decline in hiring of contract labour in 2015.
- Contractual jobs declined by 21,000 in January-September 2015 against an increase of 1.20 lakh in the corresponding period of 2014.
- Direct employment rose by 1.76 lakh in 2015 compared to an increase of 1.84 lakh in 2014.
- The Labour Bureau, under the Ministry of Labour and Employment, started conducting this quarterly survey after the 2008-09 global crisis to gauge its impact on employment in eight crucial sectors — textiles, leather, metal, automobiles, gems and jewellery, transport, information technology (IT) and handloom.

SC upheld the SOP and protection of road accident victims helpers

- The Supreme Court upheld a Central notification issuing standard operating procedure (SOP) for the protection and examination of ‘Good Samaritans’ — those who help road accident victims — and make it binding on all State governments and authorities.
- A Bench endorsed the January 21, 2016 notification issued by the Transport Ministry as a positive signal for a concerted effort to change the public’s attitude of turning away from helping a road accident victim reach critical medical care.
- The court said wide publicity should be given by the Centre and the States about the guidelines.
- The SOP was framed by the government on the orders passed by the Supreme Court on a PIL plea filed by NGO SaveLIFE Foundation in 2012, highlighting the fact that more lives of accident victims can be saved if a law can be made to protect Good Samaritans from legal and procedural hassles at the hands of police and hospitals.
- The Centre issued a series of guidelines on May 12, 2015, to protect Good Samaritans.
- These included assuring them anonymity, protecting them from any civil or criminal liability for taking the victim to the nearest hospital and even a suitable reward for the life-saving initiative.

Health ministry Drug and Cosmetics Act to exempt clinical trials

- With the aim to speed up innovation and research in India, the Health Ministry has amended the Drug and Cosmetics Act, exempting clinical trials conducted at academic institutions from taking the hitherto mandatory permission from the Drug Controller General of India (DCGI).
- The once booming clinical trials in India came under the Supreme Court scrutiny in 2013, after at least 370 deaths were attributed to Serious Adverse Events (SEAs) during such trials.
- In September 2013, the apex court ruled that no new clinical trials be permitted until the regulatory mechanism was reformed.
- Meanwhile, the latest amendment to the D&C Act follows recommendations by the Professor Ranjit Roy Choudhury Committee, which had suggested that academic research should be approved by the Institutional Ethics Committees.
- Many students test existing drugs and their study is delayed because of permissions required from the DCGI. Now, their institutions’ ethics committees are authorised to allow them, which should nurture an environment of research in the country.
- Chances of misuse are obviously higher if you give anyone a free hand.
- In 2013, the Supreme Court banned trials after a public interest litigation petition brought to light that trials conducted in various parts of the country had violated patient rights as informed consent was not taken, and the patients subjected to clinical trials included newborns, children, pregnant women and mentally challenged persons.

SC says law officers should be appointed on merit and not whims

- Appointment of law officers, from Advocate Generals to those below, by State governments to fight cases involving crucial public and State interests should not be reduced to an exercise of political aggrandisement, appeasement or personal benevolence by those in power, the Supreme Court said.
- In a judgment dealing with a batch of petitions challenging appointment of law officers, including assistant and additional advocate generals in Punjab and Haryana.
- A Bench of Chief Justice of India T.S. Thakur and Justice Kurian Joseph said it is “high time” fair, transparent and objective criteria based on merit were adopted for the appointment of law officers.
- “Appointments are made not because they are required but because they come in handy for political aggrandisement, appeasement or personal benevolence of those in power towards those appointed.

INTERNATIONAL

Sri Lanka’s Northern Province CM looks for India’s help in Constitution

- Chief Minister of Sri Lanka’s Northern Province C.V. Wigneswaran called upon India to ensure that the spirit behind the 13th Constitutional Amendment be retained in the new Constitution.
- The 13th Amendment, an outcome of the 1987 India-Sri Lanka accord, is the “only document” through which India could function as the “guarantor” of interests and rights of Tamils in Sri Lanka.
- Mr. Wigneswaran had said India alone could get “defect-free federal system.”

WhatsApp to end support for BlackBerry

- Messaging service provider WhatsApp will end its support by the end of this year to BlackBerry phones and those powered by Nokia’s Symbian operating system.
- The Facebook-owned company has over a billion users globally. A major chunk of these users are from emerging markets like India.
- Mobile operating systems offered by Google, Apple and Microsoft, account for 99.5 per cent of sales today.

Oscar awards

- Best Picture: Spotlight
- Direction: The Revenant, Alejandro G. Iñárritu
- Actor: Leonardo DiCaprio, The Revenant
- Actress: Brie Larson, Room
- Supporting Actor: Mark Rylance, Bridge of Spies

- Supporting Actress: Alicia Vikander, The Danish Girl

Fight against Sunni militancy on cards in Iraq

- Recent gains against the Islamic State (IS) in eastern Syria have helped sever critical supply lines to Iraq and set the stage for what will be the biggest fight yet against the Sunni militancy, the battle to retake Mosul.
- U.S.-backed forces had begun laying the groundwork for the fight by moving to isolate Mosul from the IS's de facto headquarters in Raqqa, Syria.
- Kurdish and Arab forces retook the town of Shaddadi in eastern Syria last week, cutting off what Defense Secretary called the last major artery between Raqqa and Mosul.
- Retaking Mosul could also sharply demoralise IS fighters, raising questions about whether the group could still credibly call itself a caliphate.
- The long fight by Iraqi security forces to take back Ramadi from the IS, which concluded in December, offers a preview of the battle to come over Mosul.
- Advancing inch by inch, Iraqi forces, backed by U.S. airstrikes, took more than five months to gain control of the city centre of Ramadi, the capital of Anbar province.

Constitutional restrictions makes it difficult for Suu Kyi to get countries top post

- Myanmar's Parliament will bring forward a vote for the next President to March 10, it was announced on Tuesday, leaving little time for Aung San Suu Kyi to strike a deal to let her take the top office.
- The country's democracy figurehead is currently banned from becoming President under the junta-era Constitution.
- Ms. Suu Kyi has held several rounds of closed-door talks with the powerful military since her National League for Democracy (NLD) party won crushing victory at elections.
- But news that the presidential vote has been brought forward by one week suggests negotiations have failed to reach a deal to clear her path to power.

Trump and Hillary gets massive lead

- Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton won seven States each among the 11 States their respective parties contested in and placed themselves far ahead of their rivals in the race for Republican and Democratic presidential nominations.
- Mr. Trump, whose highly controversial and confrontational campaign has deeply divided the Republican leadership as well as electorate, sought to bridge that gap by declaring himself as the "unifier and the most inclusive candidate in the field"
- Mr. Trump lost four States — three to Texas Senator Ted Cruz and one to Florida Senator Marco Rubio — but these losses only take him closer to the nomination.
- Neither Mr. Cruz nor Mr. Rubio will quit the race, and is certain to go for each other's throat, after a week of coordinated attacks against Mr. Trump
- Ms. Clinton, now confident that she is closer to the nomination than ever before, made a victory speech that for the most part sounded like Mr. Sanders's previous speeches.

Malaysian missing Airplane MH 370 debris suspected near Mozambique

- A piece of debris found along the eastern African coast between Mozambique and Madagascar may be from the tail section of the Malaysia Airlines plane that disappeared two years ago.
- Engineers who have looked at the debris have said there is a good chance it belonged to MH370.
- Reuters could not immediately confirm the report, and Mozambican authorities have no information on the sighting of such an object off the coast of Inhambane province.

China says that US responsible for South China Sea problems

- China has slammed the 'Pivot to Asia' doctrine of the United States, blaming it for the growing tensions in the South China Sea, where a trilateral exercise involving New Delhi, Washington, and Tokyo is scheduled later this year.
- The war of words between China and the U.S. escalated when Fu Ying, the spokesperson for the National People's Conference (NPC), countered the U.S. assertion that China was responsible for the militarisation of the South China Sea.
- The Chinese official stressed, that the "Pivot to Asia was an important decision," which enabled Washington to deploy "as many as 70 per cent of its naval force in the Asia-Pacific".
- China claims sovereignty over most of South China Sea, a position that is contested by several countries including Vietnam, Philippines and Taiwan.
- It has recently accelerated conversion of some of the disputed reefs into artificial islands, and positioned surface-to-air missiles at Woody Island in the Paracel island chain.
- The spokesperson stressed that China was ready to play the role of a regional security provider. Ms. Fu said that China was ready to seek joint development of the Nansha islands, "but that is on the prerequisite of not giving up our sovereignty".
- Ms. Fu's remarks follow assertions by Admiral Harry B. Harris during the course of the Raisina dialogue in New Delhi, where, in a veiled reference to China, he asserted that, "While some countries seek to bully smaller nations through intimidation and coercion, I note with admiration India's example of peaceful resolution of disputes with your neighbours in the waters of the Indian Ocean."
- The U.S. Admiral also revealed that the forthcoming Malabar naval exercise comprising India, U.S. and Japan would be held in the north Philippine Sea, not far from the South China Sea.
- In Beijing, China addressed Admiral Harris' assertions with restraint: "We have no objection to relevant countries' normal cooperation, but we believe that relevant cooperation should not be targeted at a third party."

Zika virus kills cells that form key brain tissue

- In what may be the first lab evidence of the potency of the Zika virus, researchers in the United States have found that it severely damages a type of neural stem cell that gives rise to the brain's cerebral cortex.
- The findings are significant given that the World Health Organisation (WHO) is set to decide, within the next few months, whether the Zika virus — historically known to be relatively

benign — is indeed wholly responsible for the outbreak of microcephaly, or deformed skulls, in newborns in Brazil and other parts of South America.

- The team of researchers, led by Guoli Ming and Hongjun Song of the Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine and Hengli Tang of Florida State University report in the current edition of the journal *Cell Stem Cell* that they saw the virus' destruction, on neuronal cells derived from human induced pluripotent stem cells.
- Several other questions however remain. For instance, why are the symptoms in adults so mild? How is the virus entering the nervous system of the developing foetus?

India filled complaint in WTO over visa fee issue

- India has filed a complaint to the World Trade Organization (WTO) against the United States over its measures raising fees on some applicants for temporary work visas, mostly involving the tech sector.
- India has notified it has started dispute proceedings alleging the U.S. measures are not consistent with Washington's commitments to accept services from other countries.
- In its request for consultation, India alleges the U.S. had increased fees for temporary visas in December.
- It argues that as a result, some Indians receive unfair treatment compared with Americans in the United States in providing similar services in sectors like computer services.
- India in effect is seeking consultations with the U.S. The WTO will make further information available in coming days.
- The Indian move is unusual at the WTO, where most disputes involve goods, tariffs and restrictions, not services.
- Last summer, the WTO upheld a ruling that India was unfairly blocking imports of U.S. poultry and eggs, which the Obama administration called a major victory that could expand export opportunities for American farmers.

Taliban reject peace talks with govt.

- The Taliban refused to hold direct peace talks with the Afghan government, dealing a blow to international efforts to revive long-stalled negotiations aimed at ending the deadly 14-year insurgency.
- The statement, which comes as face-to-face talks were expected to start in Islamabad this week, stressed longstanding preconditions for dialogue, including the departure of foreign troops from Afghanistan.
- The Taliban's seemingly intractable position follows a string of military victories for the insurgent group after NATO formally ended its combat operations more than a year ago.
- The announcement marks a setback in efforts by Afghanistan, China, Pakistan and the U.S. to restart negotiations aimed at ending the insurgency.
- Delegates from the four countries had met in Kabul late February for a fourth round of talks aimed at reviving the nascent peace process, which stalled last summer.
- The quartet had called for a direct dialogue between the Taliban and Kabul by this week, a deadline that some analysts called "completely unrealistic".
- The group also accused the U.S. of duplicity, saying it had boosted troop numbers, increased air strikes and night raids against the insurgents in tandem with its efforts to revive talks.
- The Taliban have also stepped up attacks on government and foreign targets in Afghanistan — even in the winter months when fighting usually abates — underscoring a worsening security situation.

- Afghan security forces have suffered record casualties since NATO ended its combat mission in December 2014, leaving them to battle the resurgent Taliban largely on their own.
- In recent months the Taliban briefly captured the northern city of Kunduz, the first urban centre to fall to the insurgents, and have seized territory in the opium-growing southern province of Helmand

After Border and maritime issue resolution Bangladesh wants Teesta issue resolved

- After the the resolution of the land boundary and maritime issues, Bangladesh is now looking up to India for an “immediate signing” of the Teesta water-sharing accord, which the two governments had agreed over four years ago.
- Mr. Alam, the State Minister, said Bangladesh had “fully delivered by undertaking specific measures to address India’s security concerns”.
- With more and more dedicated institutional mechanisms being put in place, we are having better, targeted and coordinated action in various sectors of security. And the cooperation will continue.
- BJP spokesperson said New Delhi would like to solve all the pending issues with Dhaka.

Presidential nomination race still open

- The Republican Party establishment’s efforts to stop real estate developer Donald Trump from winning the party’s presidential nomination appears to have an unintended consequence, if at all.
- All anti-Trump voters in the party are now gravitating towards Texas Senator Ted Cruz, who won two of the four States that voted in the nomination race.
- On the Democratic side, front runner Hillary Clinton won only one of the three States that voted but picked up more delegates than Senator Bernie Sanders.
- Mr. Sanders said after the results that his campaign would continue all the way up to the party national convention.
- Nomination is secured by winning a majority among the delegates at the respective national conventions of parties.
- After Saturday, with 27.89 per cent of the total delegates allocated on the Democratic side, Ms. Clinton’s lead appeared unassailable.
- With 37.37 delegates allocated on the Republican side, the contest remains scattered but Mr. Trump’s advantage is apparent.
- He has 378 delegates, still a long distance away from the halfway mark of 1,297 needed to secure the nomination. Mr Cruz has won 295 so far.

1.26 million People seek EU asylum in past year

- The number of people applying for asylum in the European Union (EU) more than doubled in 2015, reaching a record 1.26 million, according to the EU statistics agency.
- Syrians accounted for almost a third of the total, with 362,775 people seeking shelter in Europe, followed by Afghans and Iraqis, Eurostat said.
- The data came as Brussels stepped up warnings to member states to take urgent action to resolve the refugee crisis by agreeing on plans to redistribute asylum seekers around Europe.

- The European Commission also called on countries to lift all internal border controls by November, while stepping up protection of Europe's external frontiers.
- Since September, eight countries have reintroduced border checks, aimed at preventing large numbers of refugees and migrants entering their countries.
- The latest Brussels plan is based on the assumption that Turkey will take decisive steps to reduce the number of people making the perilous crossing across the Aegean Sea.
- EU leaders are meeting the Turkish Prime Minister, at an emergency summit in Brussels, where they hope to get a promise of decisive action to reduce numbers, especially targeted at people who do not qualify for EU asylum.

International Women's day gift by Air-India

- National carrier Air India said it flew the "world's longest" all women operated and supported flight from the national capital to San Francisco
- The flight, which travelled a distance of around 14,500 km in close to 17 hours, was operated as part of International Women's Day celebrations.
- This year for the first time, on the world's longest non-stop flight, entire flight operations from cockpit crew to cabin crew, check-in staff, doctor, customer care staff, ATC [air traffic control] and the entire ground-handling... were handled by women
- The flight was under the command of Kshamta Bajpayee and Shubhangi Singh, along with First Officers Ramya Kirti Gupta and Amrit Namdhari. The carrier has about 3,800 women employees, including pilots, cabin crew, engineers, technicians, doctors, security personnel and executives

Ray Tomlinson, credited with inventing e-mail died

- Ray Tomlinson, the U.S. programmer credited with inventing e-mail in the 1970s and choosing the "@" symbol for the messaging system, died at the age of 74.
- Mr. Tomlinson invented direct electronic messages in 1971. Before his invention, users could only write messages to others on a limited network.
- Peace talks of Syria will start in March 14
- Syria's regime said it had been invited to peace talks in Geneva from March 14 but the opposition said it was still considering whether to attend despite a major lull in fighting.
- The United Nations is hoping to restart peace talks that collapsed last month, building on a ceasefire that has led to the first significant decline in violence in Syria's nearly five-year civil war.
- The UN's Syria envoy Staffan de Mistura has said he hopes the talks can begin from Thursday but officials have indicated it could take several days of preparations for the negotiations to get off the ground.

Peace talks of Syria will start in March 14

- Syria's regime said it had been invited to peace talks in Geneva from March 14 but the opposition said it was still considering whether to attend despite a major lull in fighting.
- The United Nations is hoping to restart peace talks that collapsed last month, building on a ceasefire that has led to the first significant decline in violence in Syria's nearly five-year civil war.

- The UN's Syria envoy Staffan de Mistura has said he hopes the talks can begin from Thursday but officials have indicated it could take several days of preparations for the negotiations to get off the ground.

Plan to reduce refugee crisis tentatively agreed

- EU and Turkish leaders sought to turn into a lasting accord a plan on easing Europe's refugee crisis hailed as a game-changer by Ankara and Brussels but swiftly criticised by the UN's refugee chief.
- The day after agreeing the tentative plan following late night talks in Brussels, Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu was to discuss how it could work in a crucial meeting with his Greek counterpart Alexis Tsipras.
- The EU is wooing Turkey — used by over one million migrants in the last year as a springboard for reaching the bloc — as the key player in helping ease Europe's worst migrant crisis since World War II.
- A key pillar of the mooted deal was the unexpected offer by Ankara to take back every irregular migrant that crosses from Turkey to the islands of EU member Greece.
- In return, the EU would then resettle one Syrian living in Turkey on its territory for every Syrian migrant it takes back from Greece.
- The hope is that the plan will eliminate incentives for migrants to come to Greece by boat, but it ran into swift opposition from the head of the UN refugee agency Filippo Grandi.
- Turkey and Greece signed a protocol over the readmission of migrants in 2002 but it has rarely been activated and its use could transform the refugee crisis.
- German Chancellor Angela Merkel — who has been the strongest proponent of a deal with Turkey — gave cautious support. "It is a breakthrough if it becomes reality," she told reporters.
- European Commission chief Jean-Claude Juncker also called the plan a "real game changer," insisting that it was "legally feasible."
- Turkey is the main launching point migrants making the dangerous crossing over the Aegean Sea to the Greek islands. It hosts 2.7 million refugees from the five-year civil war in neighbouring Syria, more than any other country.
- For Turkey, perhaps the biggest gain was the European Union's agreement to bring forward to June visa-free travel to the bloc's Schengen passport-free area for Turkey's 75 million people, provided that Ankara honours its promises.

China warns of action in Korean region

- An assertive China warned that it would not hesitate to intervene if its fundamental interests on the Korean Peninsula were harmed, and made it plain that its deep-rooted ties with the South China Sea could not be rivalled by any foreign power.
- At an annual press conference, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi set several markers to explain the broad thrust of Beijing's evolving, and increasingly bold, foreign policy, where growing competition with the U.S. was the underlying theme.
- In his detailed response to a query on spiralling tensions in the Koreas, Mr. Wang said China would not "sit by and see" the destabilisation of the peninsula.
- Yet, in order to defuse tensions, Mr. Wang advocated a multi-pronged approach where denuclearisation of the peninsula would be combined with signing of a formal peace treaty.

- That would replace the 1953 Armistice, which was meant to “insure a complete cessation of hostilities and of all acts of armed force in Korea until a final peaceful settlement is achieved”.
- The Korean Peninsula is on edge following the start on Monday of the largest-ever U.S.-South Korea military exercise, which has been fused with North Korea’s threat of a pre-emptive nuclear strike.
- In an obvious reference to the U.S., Mr. Wang asserted: “I want to remind some people that freedom of navigation doesn’t give them the licence to do whatever they want. If someone wants to muddy the waters in the South China Sea and to destabilise Asia, China will not agree to it and I think the overwhelming majority of countries in the region will not allow that to happen.”
- The Chinese foreign minister stressed that China’s emotional and historical bonds with the South China Sea could not be rivalled by any other power.

Sri Lankan Parliament adopted resolution to convert itself into a Constitutional Assembly

- The Sri Lankan Parliament adopted unanimously a resolution to convert itself into a Constitutional Assembly.
- Introduced by Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe in January, the resolution, since then, has undergone a number of changes on the basis of amendments proposed by the Sri Lanka Freedom Party, Joint Opposition and the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna.
- However, the amendments did not affect the essence of the original resolution, asserted Jayampathy Wickramaratne, Member of Parliament and who heads a committee at the Prime Minister’s Office to provide technical support to the Constitution-making process.
- Though the preamble of the original resolution, which talked of providing a Constitutional resolution of the Tamil question, has been removed, Dr. Wickramaratne said “everything would be on the table [for discussion]”.
- The abolition of executive presidency and the introduction of electoral reforms are among the subjects which were likely to be covered during the process.

Frustrated with Pak, US wants larger role for India

- The U.S. is now more open to a larger role for India in Afghanistan, partly due to its frustration over Pakistan’s failure or unwillingness to deliver on the promises it has been making with regard to the peace process.
- U.S. Defence Secretary Ash Carter’s visit to India emphasises the partnership between the countries, U.S. Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan Richard Olson, indicates fresh U.S. thinking on India’s role in Afghanistan.
- However, the caveat is that India can never replace Pakistan in U.S.’s Afghanistan calculus, and the signalling may well be more to Pakistan than to India.
- Mr. Olson and Peter Lavoy, Senior Director for South Asian Affairs at the National Security Council, met with senior Indian officials, including India’s National Security Advisor (NSA) Ajit Doval. They then joined Secretary of State John Kerry in Kabul on an unannounced visit.
- While the U.S. has never opposed or actively discouraged India from playing a significant role in Afghanistan, it has been very sensitive to Pakistan’s objections, particularly on security-related issues.

- The U.S. has welcomed India's efforts in reconstruction, development and institution-building in Afghanistan that take place under the U.S security umbrella, but maintained ambiguity on its security role.
- At the same time, at Pakistan's insistence, it has kept India out of the Afghanistan peace negotiations, which are now a four-nation initiative of the U.S., China, Pakistan and Afghanistan.
- The U.S. is grappling with the increasing complexity of the situation in Afghanistan, even as it is planning to pull its troops out of the country by next year.
- Meanwhile, India under Prime Minister Narendra Modi appears less constrained by Pakistan's views and more willing to enhance cooperation with Afghanistan on security issues.
- India and Afghanistan had signed the Strategic Partnership Agreement in 2011, but security cooperation slowed as both sides sought not to antagonise Pakistan.
- However, Mr. Modi's recent visit to Afghanistan and India's transferring of three Mi-25 attack helicopters to the Afghan Air Force (AAF) recently indicate fresh thinking on the Indian side.
- Pakistan has so far not been able to get Taliban to the process, even as new challenges emerge. Last year demonstrated the vulnerability of the Afghanistan security forces.
- They briefly lost the city of Kunduz to Taliban. Casualties rose to an all-time high of more than 11,000.
- Meanwhile, Mullah Mansoor, who has succeeded Mullah Omar as Taliban chief, is struggling to consolidate power within the group, even as some Taliban factions are transmuting into those of the Islamic State (IS).
- Given this uncertainty, Mr. Kerry's mission in Afghanistan was to demonstrate U.S.'s support for the unity government.
- Dismissing the notion that the current arrangement will be replaced by a new one, Mr. Kerry said the Ashraf Ghani-led government would continue for five years.

A 6.6-magnitude quake struck Afghanistan

- A powerful earthquake rocked large parts of South Asia, with one person killed by falling rocks and tremors felt in at least four countries.
- The 6.6-magnitude quake struck northeast Afghanistan at a depth of 210 km at 2:58 pm (1028 GMT), the U.S. Geological Survey said.
- It was felt for a few seconds in the Afghan capital Kabul, 282 km to the south, and in Pakistan's capital Islamabad, where some residents evacuated apartment blocks after tremors shook ceiling fans and furniture.
- In Dushanbe, capital of Tajikistan which borders northern Afghanistan, tremors were felt but there were no immediate reports of damage. One man was killed in Gilgit-Baltistan when he was hit by falling rocks in the town of Chilas.
- Authorities in Pakistan's northwestern city of Peshawar said 28 people were brought to the government-run Lady Reading Hospital.

US President admits lack of planning after fall of Qadhafi was a big mistake

- Barack Obama says the biggest mistake of his presidency was the lack of planning for the aftermath of the fall of late Libyan leader Muammar Qadhafi, with the country spiralling into chaos and grappling with violent extremists.

- Reflecting on his legacy in an interview aired, Mr. Obama said his “worst mistake” was “probably failing to plan for the day after what I think was the right thing to do in intervening in Libya”.
- Since the downfall of Qadhafi, who was killed in a popular uprising, Libya descended into near-anarchy, ruled by rival militias vying for power.
- Mr. Obama also reflected on some of the best moments of his tenure as President — due to end in January — in the interview.
- “Saving the economy from a great depression” was his biggest accomplishment, he said. As for the best day in the White House? “The day that we passed health care reform,” Mr. Obama said.

Researchers came up with evidence to prove that Zika virus causes brain defect

- Researchers have now produced evidence of how Zika virus causes brain defect in babies. Several cases of microcephaly, a rare birth defect in which the brain fails to grow properly, continue to be reported in Brazil following the outbreak of Zika virus, first detected in the country in May 2015.
- To study how the virus causes birth defects in babies, the researchers used human induced pluripotent stem (iPS) cells to make neural stem cells (NSC), neurospheres and brain organoids.
- How quickly the neural stem cells get infected with Zika virus became clear when the researchers detected it just 24 hours after they were exposed.
- The researchers used the virus-infected neural cells and cultured them as neurospheres (a culture system composed of free-floating clusters of neural stem cells).
- While those cells not infected with the virus generated normal neurospheres, the virus-infected neural cells generated neurospheres with abnormalities. At the end of six days, the virus killed most of the neurospheres.
- To further investigate the impact during neurogenesis, organoids were exposed to the virus and followed for 11 days.
- To check if dengue virus, a flavivirus with similarities to Zika, caused similar effect on neurogenesis, the researchers infected human neural stem cells with dengue virus 2 (DENV2).
- After six days, significant difference in cell viability was seen between dengue-infected cells and Zika-infected neural stem cells.
- The dengue-infected cells were similar to the normal cells and there was no reduction in growth of dengue-infected organoids at the end of 11 days.
- However, further studies are needed to characterise the consequences of Zika infection during different stages of foetal development.

US president wants mobile data to accessible to government

- President Barack Obama has made a passionate case for mobile devices to be built in a way that will allow the government to access personal data if needed to prevent a terror attack or enforce tax laws.
- The President said he could not comment on the legal case in which the FBI is trying to force Apple to allow access to an iPhone linked to San Bernardino, California, shooter Rizwan Farook.

- But he made clear that despite his commitment to Americans' privacy and civil liberties, a balance was needed to allow some government intrusion if necessary.
- Last month, the FBI obtained a court order requiring Apple to write new software and take other measures to disable passcode protection and allow access to Farook's iPhone.

UN to probe South Sudan attack

- A high-level board of inquiry will investigate how United Nations peacekeepers responded to an attack at their camp in South Sudan where tens of thousands of civilians were sheltering.
- Gunmen in army uniforms stormed the camp in the northeastern town of Malakal on February 17 and 18, firing on civilians and torching shelters.
- At least 25 people were killed and 160 were wounded.
- UN said the independent panel will “conduct an in-depth investigation into the UN mission's response to clashes that broke out.”
- The UN mission in South Sudan is also reviewing security at the eight “protection of civilians” sites.

Indian born business man Rajat Gupta released after two years

- India-born former Goldman Sachs Director Rajat Gupta has been released after completing his two-year prison term, weeks after a U.S. court agreed to rehear his appeal to throw out his 2012 insider trading conviction.
- While Gupta's prison term was to end on March 13, but since the date fell on a Sunday, he was released on Friday, four years after he lost his insider trading trial and suffered multiple legal setbacks to overturn his conviction.
- Apart from the two-year prison term, he was fined \$5 million and the Securities and Exchange Commission also slapped a \$13.9 million penalty against him.
- Gupta started out his prison term in 2014 at FMC DEVENS, an administrative security federal medical centre with an adjacent minimum security satellite camp in Ayer, Massachusetts.

Peace talks for Syria started

- Talks to end Syria's civil war opened in Geneva, but hopes for a breakthrough remained remote with the sides locked in a bitter dispute over the future of President Bashar Al-Assad.
- The negotiations, which began a day before the fifth anniversary of the outbreak of the conflict, are the latest effort to end violence that has killed more than 270,000 people and displaced millions.
- As the delegations arrived in Geneva over the weekend, Damascus warned that any discussion about removing Mr. Assad would be a “red line”.
- UN envoy said agreeing on a new Syrian government was the main obstacle to forging a lasting peace.

Myanmar will get new President on 15 march

- Myanmar's Parliament confirmed it will pick the country's new President on Tuesday after the three proposed candidates.
- Nominees include a close aide of Aung San Suu Kyi and others.

- The front runner is Htin Kyaw, a respected writer and close friend of Ms. Suu Kyi.
- He has been put forward by her National League for Democracy party to act as a proxy for democracy veteran Suu Kyi, who is barred from the highest office by a junta-scripted charter.

Htin Kyaw became first civilian president of Myanmar after decades

- Myanmar got its first civilian President in decades after lawmakers elected a close aide of Aung San Suu Kyi, who is expected to hold the real reins of power in the formerly junta-run nation.
- Htin Kyaw (69) hailed his elevation to the top post as “Suu Kyi’s victory”, a clear nod to her plan that he serve as a proxy for the Nobel laureate who is constitutionally barred from becoming President.
- Myanmar is undergoing a dramatic transformation from an isolated and repressed state to a rapidly opening aspiring democracy.
- Ms. Suu Kyi’s National League for Democracy (NLD) won a thumping victory at elections in November, allowing her party to dominate Myanmar’s two legislative houses.
- But the military remains a powerful force and has refused to change a clause in the junta-era Constitution which bars her from the presidency. Her choice of Mr. Htin Kyaw is seen as a testament to her absolute faith in his loyalty.
- Mr. Thein Sein, a former General, led a quasi-civilian reformist government for the last five years that has been praised for moving the nation out of the shadow of outright military rule.
- The NLD is still haunted by its 1990 election victory, which was snatched away by the generals.
- Zin Mar Aung, an NLD MP who was involved in 1988 protests and is herself a former political prisoner, termed the vote “very historic”.
- Ms. Suu Kyi (70), enjoys unrivalled popularity both as the daughter of the country’s independence hero and as a central figure in the decades-long democracy struggle.
- It is not yet clear what role she plans to take or how she will manage her relationship with the new President.

Russian planes starts retreating from Syria

- The first of Russia’s warplanes to leave Syria received a hero’s welcome back home, starting a surprise withdrawal the West hopes could boost peace talks by pressuring Damascus.
- Despite the initial pullout, a monitoring group said Russian helicopters — and likely warplanes — which are still in Syria had pounded Islamic State (IS) group positions as regime troops pressed an advance.
- UN peace envoy Staffan de Mistura described the withdrawal announcement as a “significant development” for negotiations that began in Geneva on Monday in the latest push to end the brutal conflict as it enters its sixth year.
- Russia will, however, keep a contingent at its air and naval bases in Syria and a senior official said strikes against “terrorist targets” would continue.
- Syrian Observatory for Human Rights director Rami Abdel Rahman told AFP that “Russian helicopters and warplanes, that are likely Russian” had struck IS targets around the ancient city of Palmyra.
- Meanwhile, one Al-Qaeda linked group branded the withdrawal a “defeat” and vowed to launch a new offensive.

- The West reacted cautiously to the announcement, since Moscow is yet to specify a time-frame for completing the withdrawal.

Merrick Garland to be nominated to Supreme Court by Obama

- President Barack Obama said he would nominate appeals court judge Merrick Garland to the Supreme Court, challenging Republicans to reject a long-time jurist and former prosecutor known as “one of America’s sharpest legal minds”.
- Mr. Garland, 63, is the chief judge for the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit, a court whose influence over federal policy and national security matters has made it a proving ground for potential Supreme Court justices.
- If confirmed, Mr. Garland would be expected to align with the more liberal members, but he is not viewed as down-the-line liberal.
- Particularly on criminal defence and national security cases, he’s earned a reputation as centrist, and one of the few Democratic-appointed judges Republicans might have fast-tracked to confirmation under other circumstances.

New immigration act of U.K

- New immigration act of U.K. under this rule, skilled workers from non-EU countries who come into the country on Tier-2 visas will face deportation after five years unless they can show minimum annual earnings of £35,000.
- Previously, after five years on a Tier-2 work visa, the individual could apply for Indefinite Leave to Remain (or ILR) in the U.K. The income threshold used to be £20,800 – around £5,000 less than the average U.K. salary. All that will now change.
- A possible 40,000 skilled workers — teachers, IT professionals, health sector workers and charity workers, a majority of them from India and other South Asian nations — who have been living and working in the U.K., paying their taxes and contributing their skills and earnings to the economy, will be affected.
- There has been a major backlash to the rule, with a petition against it to the government quickly gathering over 100,000 signatures, the number needed to ensure a discussion on the issue in the House of Commons.
- About 40,000 workers, many of them from India, will be affected by the new rules

Kurds declare federal region in Syria

- Syria’s Kurds declared a federal region in areas under their control in the north of the conflict-hit country, but both the government and an opposition coalition rejected the move. The announcement is likely to anger neighbouring Turkey and has complicated peace talks in Geneva aimed at ending the five-year civil war.
- The U.S., a key backer of Kurdish fighters in the battle against the Islamic State (IS), has also warned that it would not recognise any self-ruled Kurdish region within Syria.
- More than 150 delegates from Kurdish, Arab, Assyrian and other parties meeting in Syria agreed to create a “federal system” unifying territory run by Kurds across several Syrian provinces.
- Kurdish parties already operate a system of three “autonomous administrations” in Syria’s north, with independent police forces and schools.

- The three cantons stretch along Syria's northern border with Turkey and are known as Afrin and Kobani, both in Aleppo province, and Jazire in Hasakeh province.
- The new "federal system" is expected to centralise governance in the three cantons under elected councils.

Sanctions order against N. Korea

- U.S. President Barack Obama signed an order implementing UN-backed sanctions on North Korea after a nuclear test and missile launch this year, as Pyongyang promised reprisals.
- The White House said Mr. Obama had signed an executive order targeting the volatile hermit state's energy, financial and shipping assets.
- Among the entities targeted are the "Propaganda and Agitation Department" of the Workers' Party of Korea and mining firms that provide the regime with much-needed revenues.

Sir Andrew Wiles wins Abel Prize

- An Oxford University professor has won a £500,000 prize for cracking a 300-year-old mystery mathematical theorem described as an "epochal moment" for academics.
- Sir Andrew Wiles has been awarded the Abel Prize by the Norwegian Academy of Science and Letters for his proof of Fermat's Last Theorem, which he published in 1994.
- The 62-year-old will pick up the award and a cheque for six million Norwegian Krone (£495,000) from Crown Prince Haakon of Norway in Oslo in May.

Ballistic missiles test fired by North Korea

- North Korea test-fired two medium-range ballistic missiles, just days after leader Kim Jong-Un promised a series of nuclear warhead tests and missile launches amid surging military tensions.
- Friction on the divided Korean peninsula has deepened since the North carried out its fourth nuclear test on January 6, followed a month later by a long-range rocket launch that was widely seen as a disguised ballistic missile test.
- U.S. defence officials said they had tracked two launches – both believed to be medium-range Rodong missiles fired from road-mobile launch vehicles.
- The Rodong is a scaled-up Scud variant with a maximum range of around 1,300 km.
- They came a day after U.S. President Barack Obama signed an order implementing tough sanctions adopted earlier this month against North Korea by the UN Security Council, as well as fresh unilateral U.S. measures.

Deal to ease migrant crisis

- After months of acrimony, the European Union and Turkey reached a landmark deal to ease the migrant crisis and give Ankara concessions on better EU relations.
- the 28 EU leaders and Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu sealed an agreement that will allow thousands of migrants to be sent back to Turkey, while Ankara will see fast-track procedures to get billions in aid to deal with Syrian refugees, unprecedented visa concessions for Turks to come to Europe and a re-energising of its EU membership bid.

British government has lifted the ban on the International Sikh Youth Federation (ISYF)

- In a move that is likely to cause consternation in New Delhi, the British government has lifted the ban on the International Sikh Youth Federation (ISYF) after both houses of the British Parliament supported a motion to drop it from the list of proscribed organisations.
- The statutory instrument relating to the Terrorism Act 2000 (Proscribed Organisations) (Amendment) Order 2016 was signed by Minister of State in the Home Office
- The ISYF, a separatist group committed to the creation of Khalistan, was established in the 1984 as the global branch of the All India Sikh Students Federation. It was proscribed as a terrorist organisation in 2001 by the British government for its attacks, which included assassinations, bombings and kidnappings against Indian officials.
- The Sikh Federation will use the British decision to put pressure on the U.S. and Canada to lift the bans in their countries on the organisation.

Indian delegation in a bid to perk up the country's sagging tea exports

- An Indian delegation will be visiting Egypt in a bid to perk up the country's sagging tea exports to the African country.
- The visit, the first since the Arab Spring turmoil, comes at a time when India's overall tea exports have registered a 10-million-kg increase in 2015 over 2014. Exports stood at 217.67 million kg against 207.40 million kg a year ago. This is the most significant rise since 2005.
- Bulk of the increase came from South India which exported 95.2 million kgs against 87.5 million kgs. Exports from North India stood at 122.4 million kgs against 119 million kgs. However, export prices have been singed by the trend of declining tea prices and lower average realisation at Rs.187.7 per kg against Rs.195 per kg in 2014. Total export value rose marginally to Rs. 4,085 crores against Rs. 4,054 crores.
- The countries which helped boost tea exports from India, which faces intense competition from Kenya and Sri Lanka, are Russia, Iran and Pakistan.
- The programme called KRUCIAL includes Kazakhstan, Russia, U.S., China, Iran, Arab Republic of Egypt and Latin America.
- Egypt is a 80-million-kg market in which India's share has slipped to about six million kgs from about 15 million kgs a decade ago. South India is the major exporter. The turmoil in Egypt contributed to India slipping in exports. African exporters like Kenya have location advantages and duty preferences which India is aiming to surmount.

U.S. President to make historical Cuba visit

- U.S. President Barack Obama was due in Cuba on Sunday to bury the hatchet in a more than half-century-long Cold War conflict that turned the communist island and its giant neighbour into bitter enemies.
- Reversing generations of U.S. attempts to cut Cuba from the outside world, Mr. Obama, First Lady Michelle Obama and their two daughters will arrive in Havana for a three-day trip.
- It won't just be the first visit by a sitting U.S. President since Fidel Castro's guerrillas overthrew the U.S.-backed government of Fulgencio Batista in 1959, but the first since President Calvin Coolidge came 88 years ago.

- Mr. Obama, seeking to leave a historic foreign policy mark in his final year in office, was due to see old town Havana, hold talks with Cuban President Raul Castro on Monday, and attend a baseball game.
- For Cubans dreaming of escaping isolation and reinvigorating their threadbare economy, the visit has created huge excitement.
- Although Mr. Obama has already loosened restrictions on U.S. citizens visiting Cuba, the lifting of the decades-old U.S. economic embargo can only be decided by a Republican-dominated Congress that is far less keen on detente with Cuba.
- Republicans and some human rights activists have also criticised Mr. Obama for dealing with Mr. Castro when so many freedoms in Cuba, ranging from the media to politics and economic entrepreneurship, remain highly curtailed.

EU-Turkey refugee deal comes into force

- Flimsy boats packed with migrants continued to land in Greece from Turkey on Sunday despite the start a landmark deal between the European Union and Ankara to stem the massive influx.
- Under the controversial deal, which came into force at midnight, all migrants landing on the Greek islands face being sent back to Turkey.
- And in a grim start to an agreement designed to stop people from making a journey fraught with danger, two little girls were found drowned and two Syrian refugees died of heart attacks on the perilous crossing.
- Greek authorities said 875 migrants landed on the islands overnight, with some 15 boats, each carrying dozens of migrants, arriving on Lesbos alone on Sunday.

Cuban President says recent steps to relax controls by US are positive

- In a history-making meeting, Mr. Castro praised Mr. Obama's recent steps to relax controls on Cuba as "positive," but deemed them insufficient.
- He called anew for the U.S. to return its naval base at Guantanamo Bay to Cuba and to lift the U.S. trade embargo.
- Mr. Obama came to Cuba pledging to press its leaders on human rights and political freedoms, and vowing that the mere fact of a visit by an American leader would promote those values on the island.
- Mr. Castro worked to turn the tables on Mr. Obama by saying Cuba found it "inconceivable" for a government to fail to ensure health care, education, food and social security for its people — a clear reference to the U.S.
- Mr. Obama said he had raised "very serious differences" the U.S. has with Cuba on democracy and human rights, but portrayed those difficult conversations as a prerequisite to closer relations.
- Crediting Cuba for making progress as a nation, he said part of normalising relations between the two countries means "we discuss these differences directly."

Violating UN resolutions North Korea continues firing into sea

- North Korea fired five short-range missiles into the sea off its east coast — the latest in a series of launches ordered by leader Kim Jong-un amid rising military tensions.

- They came just days after the North test fired two medium-range missiles in what the UN Security Council described as an “unacceptable” violation of UN resolutions.
- Tensions have been soaring on the divided Korean peninsula since the North carried out its fourth nuclear test, followed a month later by a long-range rocket launch that was widely seen as a disguised ballistic missile test.
- The Security Council responded earlier this month by imposing its toughest sanctions on North Korea to date.
- In recent weeks Pyongyang has maintained a daily barrage of nuclear strike threats against both Seoul and Washington, ostensibly over continuing large-scale South Korea-U.S. military drills that the North sees as provocative rehearsals for invasion.

Pakistan hands over fishermen

- Pakistan handed over 86 Indian fishermen at the Wagah Border, a day after they were released by the authorities upon their completing a one-year sentence for allegedly trespassing into Pakistan’s territorial waters.
- They were released from Malir Jail in Karachi. It was the second time this month that Pakistan has released Indian fishermen.
- Some 87 fishermen were released on March 6. Monday’s release brings the total to 173.

Belgium on high alert after Brussels attack

- Belgian capital was on locked down on Tuesday following deadly explosions at Brussels airport and on a metro train which killed at least 34 people and wounded over 200.
- Belgium hiked its terror threat to its highest level after the carnage wreaked by the early morning blasts, just days after the capture of key Paris attacks suspect Salah Abdeslam in the heart of the city.
- The transport networks were shut down, with trams, buses and trains brought to a standstill and the European Union quarter completely sealed off by police.
- The European Commission, the EU’s executive arm, said it was urging employees to stay at home or remain indoors.
- About 25,000 European civil servants work in Brussels, many just hundreds of metres from the metro attack where around 20 people were killed and over 100 wounded. Airlines cancelled hundreds of flights and European railways froze links with Brussels.
- U.S. President Barack Obama condemned the “outrageous” attacks and said that the U.S. would do everything in its power to hunt down those responsible.

Despite enthusiasm by Obama’s visit, difference between US and CUBA persists

- U.S. President Barack Obama’s address opened a whirlwind final day on the island that includes a meeting with Cuban dissidents and attendance at a baseball game featuring the country’s beloved national team.
- Despite the enthusiasm in both the U.S. and Cuba about the new relationship, Mr. Obama acknowledged the deep differences that persist, including on human rights and democracy.
- The President was cheered enthusiastically when he reiterated his call for the U.S. Congress to lift the economic embargo on Cuba, calling it an “outdated burden on the Cuban people”. The embargo is loathed on the island.

- During a joint appearance with Mr. Obama on Monday, Mr. Castro called it “the most important obstacle” to Cuba’s economic growth”.
- U.S. hopes that restoring ties with Cuba will benefit its relations with other countries in Latin America, which have long bristled at the freeze with Havana.
- Critics of Mr. Obama’s policy say he’s given up too much with too little in return from Cuba, particularly on the issue of human rights.

Syu Kyi will be foreign Minister of Myanmar

- Aung San Suu Kyi will be Foreign Minister in Myanmar’s first civilian government for decades, her party said, giving the democracy champion a formal post despite being blocked from the presidency.
- The Nobel laureate has already vowed to rule above the man picked as President, Htin Kyaw, in the government which comes to power next week in the former army-ruled nation.
- Ms. Suu Kyi was the sole woman and one of only six members of her National League for Democracy (NLD) party in a Cabinet list read out to lawmakers by the Parliament Speaker Mann Win Khaing Than.
- NLD spokesman Zaw Myint Maung later confirmed she would lead the foreign ministry and hinted that she would also hold other roles, without specifying which ones.

Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump continues to win

- Republican Donald Trump and Democrat Hillary Clinton used the backdrop of the Brussels terror attack to drive home their respective political messages after securing new victories in presidential nomination contests.
- Mr. Trump reiterated his call for a ban on Muslims travelling to the U.S, and waterboarding of terror suspects to extract information from them, while Ms. Clinton said in her victory speech that “the last thing we need are leaders who incite more fear”.
- Mr. Trump and Ms. Clinton won Arizona, the State that had the highest number of delegates.
 - Senator Ted Cruz defeated Mr. Trump in Utah, and on the Democratic side, Senator Bernie Sanders won Utah and Idaho and promised to take the contest all the way to the convention.
- Occasional terror strikes through the campaign season have helped Mr. Trump’s tactics.
- Mr. Trump has effectively used the Paris and California terror strikes to bolster his campaign and Brussels happened just as his rhetoric may have plateaued.
- Meanwhile, in a TV interview, Mr. Trump said Muslim communities are “absolutely not reporting” suspected terrorists and need to “open up to society”.
- Meanwhile, Mr. Cruz won the endorsement of former Florida Governor Jeb Bush who dropped out of the race last month.
- Differentiating between Mr. Cruz and Mr. Trump may be more a question of semantics than substance.
- Mr. Cruz called for higher border security to stop “terrorist infiltration”, and increased surveillance of Muslim neighbourhoods in U.S.
- Ms. Clinton said. “What Donald Trump, Ted Cruz and others are suggesting is not only wrong, it’s dangerous. It will not keep us safe, this is a time for America to lead, not cower.”

Brussels terrorists also linked with Paris terror attack

- The two brothers who blew themselves up in the deadly train and airport attacks in Brussels were known by police for serious crimes and are linked to November's Paris massacre.
- Khalid (27), who blew himself up on Tuesday at the Maalbeek metro station, is a convicted car-jacker. His brother Ibrahim (30), who was one of two suicide bombers at the airport, had been handed a nine-year sentence for firing his gun at police, local media say.
- Belgian media reports said a joint squad of Belgian and French police approached the property because it was rented under a false name used by Khalid to secure a hide-out months earlier for the Paris attackers.
- Khalid is suspected of having rented other properties used to prepare the November tragedy in Paris, including one in the city of Charleroi from where ringleader Abdelhamid Abaaoud set off to lead the assault in the French capital.
- The brothers are not believed to have been present in those events, but their connection to Islamic State jihadism was established.
- Turkish authorities in June 2015 detained and later deported one of the Brussels attackers, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said as a media report named him as Ibrahim El Bakraoui.

Experts blame intelligence failure for Brussels attack

- It took the Belgian security services four months to arrest Paris attacker SalahAbdeslam, who was hiding in plain sight in Brussels. This demonstrates what experts have been calling a massive intelligence failure.
- Experts say that Intelligence agencies often fail to prevent terror attacks as in Brussels on Tuesday "because they ignore some of the more traditional aspects of intelligence work, where you identify persons of interest and then investigate them and their networks."
- Dr. Joseph Downing, Fellow at the London School of Economics said: "There has clearly been some intelligence failing that hasn't enabled security services to track down those who are under significant suspicion."
- The free movement in the Schengen area that allows terrorists to shift base and recoup after each operation is an argument advanced by eurosceptics against the open door policy of the European Union.
- Security experts have also argued that greater intelligence sharing among European allies would have offset this perceived advantage to terrorists of the free movement rule.
- Intelligence sharing is likely to be an issue addressed at a special meeting called of EU Ministers to discuss the fallout of the Brussels blasts.

First PM now Army chief of Nepal to visit China

- Nepal's Army Chief Gen. Rajendra Chhetri is likely to leave for a week-long trip to China to strengthen bilateral military ties between the two countries.
- PM, K.P. Oli returns to Kathmandu after completing his week-long trip to China. During the trip, Nepal signed a landmark Agreement of Transit and Trade with China.
- Military experts have told that the visit of the Army Chief of Nepal immediately after the visit of Mr. Oli follows the pattern of visits to Beijing by Pakistani civilian and military leaders.
- The Nepali Army has grown in international importance due to its involvement in multilateral peacekeeping missions across the world.
- China, which has traditional ties with the Nepali Army, has provided training and military equipment to its forces.
- With the upgrading of political and economic ties, military ties are also expected to undergo transformation.

In a major breakthrough US forces killed IS second-in-command

- U.S. forces killed the Islamic State group's second-in-command this week, dealing a blow to the extremists' ability to conduct operations in Iraq, Syria and abroad, Pentagon chief Ashton Carter said.
- Mr. Carter told reporters, referring also to the killing early in the month of Omar al-Shishani, the man known as "Omar the Chechen", who was effectively IS's defence minister.
- The latest killing "will hamper the ability for them to conduct operations inside and outside of Iraq and Syria," Mr. Carter said of Abdar-Rahman Mustafa al-Qaduli, referring to him as Haji Imam.
- He said al-Qaduli served as the group's finance minister and had been behind some foreign plots.
- The U.S. Justice Department had offered a bounty of up to \$7 million for information leading to al-Qaduli.

After Brussels attack EU leaders look to implement decisions taken after Paris attack

- Calling the Brussels terror attack an "attack on our open, democratic society", an urgent meeting of European Union Ministers for Justice and Home Affairs held in Brussels resolved to swiftly implement decisions taken at a similar meeting held after the Paris blasts in November last year.
- The failure to share intelligence was identified as the lesson not learned following the Paris attacks — a major failure that has had costly consequences.
- Therefore a key outcome of the meeting was the decision by the Ministers to "increase as a matter of urgency the systematic feeding, consistent use and interoperability of European and international databases in the fields of security, travel and migration."
- The attacks were a "shock but unfortunately not a surprise", Dimitris Avramopoulos, member of the European Council in charge of Migration, Home Affairs and Citizenship, told a press conference.
- On the importance of intelligence and data sharing he said the EU Ministers resolved to quickly set up a joint liaison team of national experts that would become the nerve- centre of counter terrorism.
- Mr. Avramopoulos castigated the EU institutions for their failure to implement some of the political decisions taken after the Paris attacks.
- He cited the example of the explosives used in the Paris and Brussels attacks, which were home-made.

Czech Republic could be another country under OBOR

- China is set to unveil another offshoot of its One Belt, One Road (OBOR) connectivity network by investing in a Grand Canal that would link landlocked countries of Central Europe with the sea.
- If everything goes according to plans, Chinese President Xi Jinping will push for the construction of the Danube-Oder- Elbe Canal during his visit next week to the Czech Republic.

- The strategic canal — a pet project of Czech President Milos Zeman — would connect three major European rivers and provide ships an outlet to the sea. The Y-shaped canal would link with the North Sea at Hamburg.
- The Black Sea would be accessed at the Romanian port of Constanta, and Poland's Szczecin port would provide an outreach to the Baltic Sea.
- The construction of the Grand Canal would see the merger of the land and the maritime hubs of OBOR, which is rapidly advancing in Eurasia.
- China has targeted infrastructure development in the CEE countries — its intent evident from its focus on constructing the flagship Belgrade-to-Budapest high-speed railway.
- Once completed, the rail upgrade will dovetail with the Chinese plan to refurbish Greece's main port of Piraeus. Linked with the CEE railway, Piraeus would become the hub of China's trade with Europe, along a land-cum-sea corridor.

Aggressive tone of North Korea continues

- North Korea released a new propaganda video showing a nuclear strike on Washington and then threatened South Korea with a “merciless military strike” for slandering leader Kim Jong-un.
- Pyongyang has been ramping up the bellicose rhetoric and propaganda for weeks, since the launch of annual South Korea-U.S. war games.
- Seoul and Washington made the already large-scale joint drills bigger than ever this year in response to the North's nuclear test in January.
- The four-minute video romps through the history of U.S.-Korean relations and ends with a digitally manipulated sequence showing a missile surging through clouds, swerving back to Earth and slamming down in front of Washington's Lincoln Memorial.
- The North has issued similar videos in the past, including one in 2013 showing the White House in a sniper's crosshairs and the Capitol building exploding in a fireball.

Bernie sanders made impressive comeback

- A buoyant Bernie Sanders said he has the momentum as he attempts to claw back Hillary Clinton's handsome lead in the race for the Democratic presidential nomination, after scoring a trio of big wins.
- The Vermont Senator breathed fresh life into his campaign for the White House with a clean sweep in caucuses on Saturday in the western U.S. States of Alaska, Hawaii and Washington.
- In the wider context of their battle for the Democratic presidential ticket, Mr. Sanders's Saturday success barely dents Ms. Clinton's formidable lead — she now has 1,733 delegates, including super-delegates who are unelected by voters, to Mr. Sanders's 1,039, according to a CNN count.
- To win the Democratic nomination at the July convention in Philadelphia, 2,383 delegates are needed.
- It means that the delegate math still dramatically favours Ms. Clinton, a former first lady and Secretary of State, in large part because Democrats allocate delegates proportionally by State, making it all but impossible for Mr. Sanders to overtake Ms. Clinton.

Former Britain PM said UK and west should send ground troops for IS

- Britain and its Western allies must be prepared to send ground troops to defeat Islamic State forces or risk a terror attack in Europe of “such size and horror” that draconian security measures would have to be introduced, Tony Blair has said.
- In a lengthy article on the Brussels bombings, the former Prime Minister said local forces could be used against the Islamic State (IS) in Iraq, Syria and Libya.
- But he said Western ground forces would eventually be needed to defeat the IS as it sought to create a caliphate.
- The allied countries which are carrying out airstrikes against IS targets, including the U.K. and U.S., have so far not deployed ground forces beyond unannounced special forces to guide the bombers and troops that train Iraqi forces in combating the IS.

With opening of reconciliation village Sri Lanka to improve domestic relations

- With President Maithripala Sirisena set to declare open a ‘reconciliation village’ in Vavuniya in the Northern Province, it seems the reconciliation process in Sri Lanka is picking up pace.
- The government organised a trip of a group of journalists, mostly Sinhalese, working in Sinhala and English media, to the Province.
- The journalists, accompanied by Minister of Mass Media Gayantha Karunathilake and Deputy Minister Karunaratha Paranawithana, visited the offices of Tamil dailies and met C.V. Wigneswaran, the Province’s Chief Minister.
- A few days ago, the Navy handed back 177 acres of land in Sampur village in the Eastern Province — where they had a training centre — to its original owners.
- The ‘reconciliation village’ project, however, has triggered criticism from Northern Province Councillors.

Pakistan arrested terrorist targeting Christians

- Pakistan’s Army launched raids and arrested suspects after a Taliban suicide bomber targeting Christians over Easter killed 72 people including many children in a park crowded with families.
- The Army announced it had carried out raids in Lahore as well as in Faisalabad and Multan, two other major cities in Punjab province. More were planned.
- Hundreds were injured on Sunday when explosives packed with ball bearings ripped through the crowds near a children’s play area in the park in the eastern city of Lahore, where many had gathered to celebrate Easter.

Sri Lanka will build 65000 houses in civil war hit areas

- The Sri Lanka government has decided to go ahead with the plan to build 65,000 houses in the civil war-hit Northern and Eastern Provinces.
- At present, the process of receiving feedback on the project was under way. Two model houses had been set up in Jaffna.
- This year, 11,000 houses had been planned with 18,000 houses annually for the next three years.
- The executing agency of the project, ArcelorMittal Construction, France, would open an office in Jaffna to address the issues.

- The guarantee period of the houses would be 30 years and each house would have lifetime of 60 years to 70 years.

FTA talks to be resumed in Brussels

- India and EU will seek to resume talks on the proposed free trade agreement at the Brussels Summit.
- Talks on the Broadbased Trade and Investment Agreement (BTIA) have become a real casualty of the ongoing diplomatic tensions between the two sides.
- The friction has been caused by various incidents, including India's arrest in 2012 of Italian marines Massimiliano Latorre and Salvatore Girone, charged with killing two fisherman off the coast of Kerala.
- The EU is India's largest trading partner, with bilateral trade amounting to \$126 billion. It is also the largest export destination for India, and a source of \$69 billion in FDI.
- Coincidentally, oral arguments in the Marines case are being heard at the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague.
- In addition to the BTIA, the leaders are expected to endorse an EU-India Agenda for Action 2020, which will set strategic priorities for the next five years.
- There will also be a declaration on clean energy and climate. A Common Agenda on Migration and Mobility (CMM), addressing regular and irregular migration as well as trafficking, and a joint declaration on terrorism are expected to be adopted.
- The counter-terrorism declaration was already on the cards prior to the March 22 terror attack in Brussels, but has come into sharp focus since then.

U.S. said the battlefield deployment of nuclear weapons by Pak has enhanced threat

- As leaders from more than 50 countries are set to discuss measures to prevent nuclear terrorism, the U.S. said the battlefield deployment of nuclear weapons by Pakistan was an enhanced threat though it has taken several other measures to prevent nuclear material from falling into the hands of terrorists.
- Senior U.S. officials, briefing journalists on the agenda and expected outcomes of the fourth Nuclear Security Summit, however, said the risks of nuclear terrorism have been substantially reduced over recent years, thanks to measures taken by various governments and agencies, including Pakistan.
- Prime Minister Narendra Modi will be leading the Indian delegation to the summit. Pakistan Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif cancelled his trip to the U.S. capital following the terrorist attack in Lahore on Easter Sunday.
- Rose Gottemoeller, Under Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security, said forward deployment of nuclear weapons enhances the risks.
- "It's not related particularly to any one country. Wherever battlefield nuclear weapons exist, they represent particular nuclear security problems," the Under Secretary said.
- Pakistan continues to reject repeated U.S. calls to hold back its deployment of tactical nuclear weapons.
- Ms Gottemoeller, however, added that the U.S. has "a very solid cooperation with Pakistan on nuclear security."

HtinKyaw swears as Myanmar President

- Myanmar has sworn in HtinKyaw, a close aide of pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi, as the country's first civilian President in more than 50 years.
- The 69-year-old leader, in a brief address to a joint session of Parliament after the swearing-in ceremony, suggested that the military-drafted Constitution, which barred Ms. Suu Kyi from becoming the President, be changed.
- The President also gave an undertaking that the government will "enhance the living standard of the people."
- Ms. Suu Kyi has been appointed as a minister in Mr. HtinKyaw's government. "This is just the beginning of a road," she said
- Until recently, Mr. HtinKyaw was running a charity founded by Ms. Suu Kyi. His wife, daughter of one of the founders of the National League for Democracy, is an MP.
- The Indian Ambassador in Myanmar, Gautam Mukhopadhyaya, remarked: "With the reforms, peace process, free elections and the new government, we can hope to see greater business interest in India free from residual baggage of the past and a fuller development of relations across the board as democracies under a popularly elected leader and government."
- Even in her moment of conquest, though, she is compelled to walk a tightrope in respect of her ties with the armed forces, if she is to persuade them permanently back to the barracks.
- Apart from controlling the ministries of home, defence and borders affairs, the men in uniform occupy 25 per cent of seats in Parliament. Under the existing Constitution, an 80 per cent majority is required to amend any part of it.
- While on paper she will be Minister for Foreign Affairs, the President's Office, Education and Energy, in practice, the buck will stop with her on all non-security matters in the new administration.
- Despite being the NLD's undisputed leader, she was prevented from becoming the head of government.
- A law enacted by the armed forces debars her from holding this position as her two sons are British nationals.

ADB reduces growth forecast for India due to weak Tax reforms

- With the failure of the government to push through the Goods and Services Tax and the Land and Labour Reforms, the Asian Development Bank has lowered India's growth forecast to 7.4 per cent from an earlier estimate of 7.6 per cent for the financial year ending March 31, 2017.
- The South Asian nation's gross domestic product is forecast to grow to 7.8 per cent for the fiscal year to March 2018, according to the latest Asian Development Outlook 2016 released on Wednesday.
- During the fiscal year ended March 31, 2016, a pickup in manufacturing, private consumption, and capital expenditure by the government helped offset a double-digit decline in exports.
- Imports contracted largely due to a sharply lower oil bill, while inflation remained broadly subdued on the back of lower global commodity prices, although there was a pickup in food prices in the second half.
- Measures to encourage more foreign direct investment resulted in a dramatic surge in investment, according to the report.
- Ongoing efforts to curb spending and increased tax revenues saw the government achieve its budget deficit reduction target.

- After two years of decline, consumer inflation is likely to accelerate, fuelled by the salary hike for civil servants and a mild pickup in global oil prices, with inflation expected to average 5.4 per cent in the fiscal year ending March 31, 2017, rising to 5.8 per cent in next year.
- During the subsequent financial year, a weak global economy will continue to weigh on exports, particularly India's refined petroleum products, offsetting a further pickup in domestic consumption, due in part to an impending salary hike for government employees on the implementation of the seventh pay commission award.
- Strengthened public banks and corporate deleveraging will result in an uptick in bank credit and boost private spending, including on infrastructure.
- India still faces significant challenges to finance the infrastructure it needs to deliver sustainable growth, with funding requirements estimated at around \$200 billion a year through 2017-18.
- Public banks' non-performing assets and an overleveraged corporate sector leave limited scope for more private investment in infrastructure and highlight the need for policy actions, according to ADB.
- In 2017-18, strengthened public banks and corporate de-leveraging are expected to result in an uptick in bank credit and boost private spending, including on infrastructure.

FDI in e-commerce may not be beneficial for consumers

- The government's foreign direct investment norms for e-commerce marketplaces issued may prove to be a dampener for consumers due to the clampdown on pricing freedom for marketplace operators and lack of adequate post-sales safeguards.
- Mr Singhal also said that the new policy will cast a cloud of uncertainty on several Indian start-ups that have raised funding from foreign entities.
- The biggest take away is that now e-commerce players will operate as technology providers and not as retailers.
- Marketplaces should behave like marketplaces and provide technology platforms to sellers by charging a fee rather than getting into an inventory-based model.
- Fees should be their only income; this can put an end to the predatory pricing and provide level playing field for all.
- Consumer electronics and cell phone makers, which are among the hardest hit by e-commerce discounts, are also hopeful that the new guidelines would put an end to predatory pricing.
- While e-commerce companies said they are still evaluating the implications of the FDI policy stance on pricing decision.
- It's not yet clear whether this will mean an end to all discounting practices or specific marquee sales organised by marketplace operators on specific occasions.
- Additionally, the customer might be left in the lurch thanks to two other conditions in the policy. Marketplaces have been allowed to provide services such as warehousing, logistics support, order fulfillment and payment collection to the seller.

INDIA & WORLD

First Raisina Dialogue started in New Delhi

- The Raisina Dialogue conference, attended by speakers from 40 countries, is being seen as the government's attempt to rival conferences around the world that attract global players such as the Shangri-La dialogue in Singapore, and the Munich Conference on national security.
- Speaking at the inauguration, Ms. Swaraj and her Bangladesh counterpart Mahbboob Ali spoke of the importance of building road and rail connectivity through the "BBIN" grouping of Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal.
- Tensions between India and Pakistan have held back South Asian integration, said former Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga, calling for greater South Asian cooperation and economic integration.

Another terrorist attack in Jalalabad consulate

- In the fourth attack since 2007, heavily-armed terrorists, including suicide bombers, struck the Indian consulate in Afghanistan's Jalalabad city, killing nine persons, including an Afghan security person and causing damage to the chancery.
- All Indians in the mission were safe and six terrorists, who carried out the attack, were dead.
- While two terrorists blew themselves up, four militants were killed by the Afghan police. Two civilians were also killed in the crossfire.
- The attack on the Indian consulate was part of a trend of such operations launched from Pakistan.
- They are simply attacking India's presence in Afghanistan, whenever they get the opportunity.
- The whole spectrum of the India- Afghan relations, the relationship itself, is the target of the attacks.

Anti-tank Guided missiles

- Rafael of Israel and Kalyani group are setting up a joint venture (JV), Kalyani Rafael Advanced Systems, to build weapon systems in India. It could start with the production of Spike AntiTank Guided Missile (ATGM) which the Indian Army is in the process of procuring.
- Under a tripartite agreement the JV is expected to manufacture sub-assemblies and Bharat Dynamics Limited (BDL) will do electro optics and do hot integration at its Hyderabad facility which currently manufactures French Milan ATGMs
- Conforming to Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) norms in defence the Kalyani group will hold 51 percent stake with Rafael holding the rest. The initiative is in line with the government's 'Make in India' policy and will enable the development and production of high end technology systems within the country.
- The Rs.3,200 crore deal for the ATGMs was cleared in 2014 by the Defence Acquisition Council chaired by Defence Minister Arun Jaitley which put an end to uncertainty after the U.S. offer of joint production of Javelin missiles.
- The deal includes 8,000 plus missiles, 300 plus launchers and requisite technology transfer to the Indian entity which was initially supposed to be BDL. Spike is a third generation, fire and forget anti-tank missile

Defence Minister says no joint patrol with US right now

- Days after a top U.S. Admiral expressed keenness in co-ordinated patrols between India and U.S., Defence Minister Manohar Parrikar said that there was no scope for such patrols at this point of time.
- “As of now India has not taken part in joint patrols but we do participate in joint exercises. So the issue of joint patrols at this time does not arise,” Mr. Parrikar told a press conference.
- U.S. Defence Secretary Ashton Carter is scheduled to visit India in April during which the agreements are expected to be discussed.
- The Defence Ministry had not returned Rs. 11,000 crore from the budget but had indeed saved the amount by utilising funds locked in the Foreign Military Sales (FMS) account.
- There is an account for paying the U.S. for defence procurements under the FMS route. The amount is paid to the U.S. government which further pays the companies concerned.
- Last year, India paid Rs. 6,000 crore for committed liabilities from this account.

Former Afghanistan President Hamid Karzai wants India to be part of Taliban talks

- India, Iran and Russia should be included in the talks with the Taliban, says former Afghanistan President Hamid Karzai, who said that the current talks among the Quadrilateral Coordination Group (QCG) were Afghanistan’s “only hope for peace” despite the fact that the talks were being held in Pakistan.
- Mr. Karzai’s comments came as there was uncertainty in Islamabad over just when the next round of QCG talks that include representatives from the U.S., China, Pakistan and Afghanistan, would be scheduled.
- The group had met twice, in February in Islamabad and Kabul, expressing the hope that the direct talks between the Afghan government and Taliban representatives would be scheduled in early March, after which the QCG had met.
- However, in a statement on Saturday, the Taliban said it would not attend the talks until all the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) forces had left the country.
- Afghan analysts have also been worried that the presence of the U.S. and China in the QCG would push President Ghani to accept more and more concessions toward the Taliban, even though they have been unable to bring enough pressure to bear on Pakistan to use those “levers”.
- India has stayed disengaged from the process, saying that it would support any initiative that is “Afghan-owned and Afghan-led”.

Security concerns increases on Arabian sea

- Several ageing Pakistani fishing boats have been washing ashore in the Sir Creek area in Gujarat, leading to much speculation in the security establishment.
- Most of the recoveries were made along the 32-km long G-Line, the nearest habitation being 30 km away in Lakhpat, to the south
- “Following the alert by the Intelligence Bureau (IB) and the Gujarat Police, the security along the area has been enhanced.
- The recovery of so many fishing boats has led to several theories. Some officials argued that these were old boats used by drug syndicates for moving drugs from the Pakistani shore to the mid-sea where the cargo was transferred to other boats that take them to various destinations across the globe.
- These boats were possibly abandoned and pushed towards the Indian side because of tidal movement.

- Another group believed these were boats used for illegal fishing, and when those who manned them suspected that the Indian side had detected them, they abandoned the boat
- Credible evidence has emerged that a major global drug smuggling racket is active in the waters of Gujarat. In April 2015, a boat carrying drugs worth over Rs. 600 crore was seized of Gujarat. A few weeks later, an Iranian fishing boat was found floating in the waters of Kerala

PM Modi's visit to US will revive the India-U.S. tie

- Foreign Secretary S. Jaishankar visited the U.S. capital ahead of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit scheduled for later this month.
- "The visit was aimed at reviewing the India-U.S. bilateral relations and preparing for India's participation in the forthcoming Nuclear Security Summit later this month", said a statement by the Indian embassy.
- The visit comes amid India's efforts to stop the U.S. from selling eight F-16 fighter planes to Pakistan.
- Talks between the two countries on three key defence agreements are also progressing ahead of U.S. Defence Secretary Ashton Carter's visit to India in April.
- In a meeting with U.S. National Security Adviser Susan Rice, he discussed bilateral relations and cooperation against terrorist groups such as Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM).

Abdulla Yameen thanked India for protecting from CMAG action

- Maldivian President Abdullah Yameen has thanked India for "protecting" his country from possible punitive actions from the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group (CMAG), which had been asking Maldives to move towards genuine democracy.
- "I am in India today to show my appreciation for the very steadfast way India has protected the Maldives from the CMAG." Abdullah Yamen said.
- The CMAG held an extraordinary meeting in February 24 and asked Maldives to create an "inclusive" country.
- Mr. Yameen said his government was trying to achieve the same goal based on universal human rights and democratic principles, which were essential if his country had to provide employment to youngsters prone to radicalisation.
- Maldives drew international criticism in November, 2015 after he declared national emergency ahead of a big wave of protests against his political opponents. The Emergency was withdrawn later.
- Maldives has undergone a wave of crackdowns since September 28, 2015, when a bomb targeting Mr. Yameen went off in the Presidential yacht, injuring his wife.

BSF and BGB of Bangladesh conducted first ever joint exercise in Sundarbans

- In an attempt to bring in more synergy in coordinated border management, border-guarding forces of Bangladesh and India conducted their first-ever joint exercise in the riverine borders of the Sundarbans.

- The exercise between the Border Security Force (BSF) and the Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB) commenced with troopers, including dog and bomb squads, from both the forces carrying out joint searches of cargo vessels on the Ichamati river.
- Congratulating both the forces on the successful conduct of the drill, senior BSF and BGB officers said the exercise would become a “regular affair” in the future.
- The drill can be a big deterrent to smugglers and criminals who will have to deal with the combined efforts of both the forces.
- The officials said the joint exercise would be extended on land as well to make it part of a coordinated border management plan.
- Speaking about cross-border smuggling, both BSF and BGB officers pointed out that smuggling of cattle has come down by nearly 60 to 70 per cent in the recent times.
- BSF officials also flagged concerns about smuggling of Fake Indian Currency Notes (FICN).
- Regarding concerns about smuggling of Phensedyl from India to Bangladesh, BSF officials said the recent decision to ban on the cough syrup would help the forces to stop smuggling.

Maldives and India to finalise cross border counter terror mechanism

- India and the Maldives are in the process of finalising a “cross-border counter-terror mechanism” to deal with radicalisation, and to tackle the spread of citizens trying to join the terror group, the Islamic State, in particular.
- Maldives, which believes about 40 of its citizens are currently fighting with the terror group in Iraq and Syria, wants to work closely with India and Sri Lanka, two countries that Maldivian citizens most travel to.
- Explaining that the mechanism between India and the Maldives would go beyond “intelligence sharing,” Maldivian High Commissioner to India Ahmed Mohamed said, “There is a discussion between the Indian government and the Maldives on establishing a cross-border mechanism to address this issue and already the Maldives has institutionalised the process.”
- Discussions would be with India and other countries on sharing policies on deradicalisation, as well as working with communities on preventing youth from being recruited for the brutal terror organisation.
- Maldives shot to international attention on the issue after a video, purportedly made by men who claimed to belong to the IS, threatened “bomb attacks” in the tourist-bound islands after the arrest of Islamist leader Sheikh Imran Abdulla last year.

World’s second tallest building shanghai tower to began business soon

- China’s tallest skyscraper, the Shanghai Tower, is expected to be open for business soon.
- The 632-m tall tower is second only to Dubai’s Burj Khalifa (829.8m).

New rules for LPG subsidy enforced

- The government seems to have given up on the Give It Up Campaign for LPG cylinders and has begun debarring LPG users who earn more than Rs. 10 lakh a year from the subsidy, starting from their next refill.

- thousands of taxpayers have received such SMSs from their distributors, pointing out their income status and the ineligibility for further subsidies.

Centre reduces power of excise inspectors

- The government has asked the Central Excise Department to keep its inspectors away from the premises of jewellers who will now file quarterly returns and pay excise duty electronically every month through a voluntary disclosure of stocks.
- Any grievance or dispute will be resolved by a commissioner-level officer.
- To counter the jewellers' claim that the imposition of excise duty on jewellery will render lakhs of workers and artisans jobless as they are ill-equipped to deal with the paperwork, the government has clarified that they need not register with Central Excise, pay duty or file returns.
- Only jewellers who have an annual turnover of more than Rs 12 crore will be liable to pay a nominal 1 per cent excise duty if they do not claim inputs tax credit.
- However, the government has categorically said the excise duty will not be withdrawn under any circumstance.

Supreme court pushing for National Court of Appeal

- Noting that equal access to justice for all is a fundamental right under the Constitution, the Supreme Court decided to set up a Constitution Bench to debate the establishment of a National Court of Appeal (NCA) with regional benches to act as final courts of justice in criminal and civil cases.
- Now the apex court would judicially pronounce on whether there is a need to bifurcate the higher judiciary, with the Supreme Court exclusively hearing constitutional and public law cases.
- Secondly, the apex court seems to introspect on its own role as the single, final court situated in the national capital dealing with an increasing load of cases — from criminal and civil appeal to constitutional questions of law.

Prior permission for probe' clause may be challenged

- No anti-corruption probe can be initiated against a public servant in the State without the permission of the "appointing authority". This is one of the most contentious clauses of the Government Order (GO) creating the Anti-Corruption Bureau.
- Effectively, this means that even initiating a probe against a public servant would require the sanction of his or her appointing authority, and experts argue that this could result in "protecting the corrupt" and make it virtually impossible to move forward in the case of politicians who occupy high offices in the State.
- The clause 5 — in the GO creating the ACB — deals with prior permission, and is just a variant of the infamous 'single directive' of the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI), which has been repeatedly struck down by the Supreme Court. Activists are now likely to challenge the Government Order legally.

Parliamentary Committee suggests 50 percent pictorial warning

- Before pictorial warnings covering 85 per cent of the principal display area of the front and back sides of all tobacco products can become effective, a Parliamentary Committee on Subordinate Legislation report said that the requirement will be “too harsh” on the tobacco industry.
- The committee has recommended that pictorial warnings be restricted to only 50 per cent on both the sides of the cigarette packets.
- In the case of beedis, chewing tobacco and other tobacco products, the committee recommended that the warning be restricted 50 per cent of the display area and on only one side of the packet.
- In the case of beedis, it said that there would be “virtually no space left for printing the brand name and logo” if 85 per cent of area is earmarked for printing the warning on both sides.
- The committee has not stated the logic for restricting the warning to only one side in the case of chewing tobacco products.

Nepal signs agreement for transit rights through China

- Underlining the growing role of China in South Asia, Nepal on Monday secured transit rights through China following an agreement in Beijing between Prime Minister K.P. Sharma Oli and his Chinese counterpart Li Keqiang.
- Earlier, China extended a ceremonial welcome to Mr. Oli who held official talks with the Chinese leadership.
- The future of the agreements depended on the issue of “economic viability” of the transit facilities and train connectivity projects.
- India at present has two rail lines under construction and three more are being planned to increase Nepal’s trade ties.
- During the February visit of Prime Minister Oli to New Delhi, India agreed on giving dedicated access to Nepal to the port of Vizag.

Eighth BRICS summit will be held at GOA

- India will host the eighth annual summit of BRICS from October 15-16 in Goa, in its capacity as chair of the influential bloc comprising five countries — Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa.
- External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj made the announcement during a function where she also unveiled a logo and a website of the summit.
- India assumed chairmanship of BRICS from Russia on February 15 and will hold the position till December 31. The seventh summit was held in Ufa, Russia.
- The External Affairs Minister said India’s core theme during BRICS chairmanship will be building responsive, inclusive and collective solutions for the grouping.
- The logo for the summit is a lotus with colours from all the five member-countries and a traditional ‘namaste’ in the centre.

PM will attend 4th Nuclear Security summit in US

- During the short three-nation visit next week, Prime Minister Narendra Modi will cover two of India's foreign policy priorities by attending the Nuclear Security Summit in Washington DC, India-EU summit in Brussels and then by flying to Saudi Arabia in his first official visit.
- The 4th Nuclear Security Summit to be held from March 31 to April 1, is significant as this is the last summit under President Barack Obama's Presidency when countries, including India, will come out with a communiqué for the future of the nuclear security regime.
- That apart, as per past summits, on April 1, member countries will also submit latest "progress reports" on steps taken to prevent non-state actors from gaining access to nuclear material.
- The summit which comes in the backdrop of the terror attacks in Brussels will highlight India's official concerns on nuclear terrorism and the threat posed by terrorists gaining access to nuclear material.
- The summit will also be unique for the big exhibition of the major nuclear energy producing firms at the venue, targeting the growing civilian nuclear energy market in developing countries.
- The visit to Saudi Arabia comes within a year of his visit to Dubai in August 2015. Mr. Modi will hold talks on bilateral, regional and global issues of mutual interest with the Saudi King Salman bin Abdulaziz bin Saud.
- Experts have pointed out that Iran, the rival of Saudi Arabia in the Gulf region, will be alienated by the visit.

PM to push for global initiative against nuclear terrorism

- India will push for a global initiative against nuclear terrorism at the fourth Nuclear Security Summit (NSS 2016) in Washington this weekend.
- To safeguard the world from nuclear terrorism, India will ask for institutional follow-up through institutions like the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), the United Nations, Interpol, and the Global Initiative to Combat Nuclear Terrorism (GICNT).
- India has often called for measures against Pakistan for proliferation of nuclear materials, especially during the tenure of its former nuclear programme chief A.Q. Khan.
- The Indian delegation at the summit, led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, will also circulate a national plan and progress report covering the measures taken by India to prevent nuclear terrorism on the Indian soil. “
- Mr. Modi will land in Washington after a daylong stopover in Brussels, where he will attend the 13th EU-India Summit and is expected to announce the restart of free trade negotiations which have been suspended for the past four years.
- At meetings with Belgian Prime Minister Charles Michel, Mr. Modi is expected to discuss cooperation against terror in the aftermath of the terror attacks in Brussels last week.
- He will also address a reception for Indian nationals based there.
- At the last leg of the three-nation tour, Mr. Modi's trip to Saudi Arabia will focus on the safety and well being of Indian citizens in Saudi Arabia and the GCC region and on an uninterrupted supply of energy from the GCC region to India.

BUSINESS & ECONOMY

Faced by backlash from salaried class government to look into EPF tax

- Faced with a strong and immediate backlash from the salaried class, political parties and trade unions, the Prime Minister's Office stepped in to take stock of the issue as well as the intent behind the proposal early in the day, holding a fairly long parley with Finance Minister.
- By noon, the revenue secretary had clarified in an interview to All India Radio that the tax would only be applicable on interest income paid on EPF savings and if an employee chose to buy an annuity with 60 per cent of his EPF account balance at retirement, it would be tax-free.
- This position, however, changed further, with the finance ministry issuing a clarification.
- Clarification stated that the idea to tax interest income was only based on some representations received today and will be considered by the FM before passage of the Finance Bill, along with other suggestions on the proposal.
- When NPS (created in 2004) was not there, EPF was given the exempt-exempt-exempt (EEE) tax status mainly for the 3 crore people, not the 70 lakh high-income people who were allowed to join EPF on a voluntary basis.
- An investment instrument with EEE status means that all contributions, the return on them and the withdrawal of the accumulated corpus are tax-free. The NPS so far has an EET regime that taxes only withdrawals on retirement.

RBI unlocked additional capital to Indian banks

- The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) revised norms on capital recognition, making available an additional Rs.40,000 crore to Indian banks.
- The move comes at a time when public sector banks are facing pressure on their profitability due to a sharp rise in non-performing assets, which is eroding their capital base.
- The announcement is a big relief for, mainly, public sector banks, after finance minister Arun Jaitley announced in his budget speech a capital infusion of Rs. 25,000 crore for the fiscal year starting in April.
- RBI said banks can recognise foreign currency reserves arising due to translation of financial statements of foreign operations to the re- porting currency as common equity tier-I (CET1) capital.
- Deferred tax assets arising due to timing differences may be recognised as CET1 capital up to 10 per cent of a bank's CET1 capital, it added.

Agriculture minister believes budget will help in getting 4 percent in agriculture

- Union Agriculture Minister Radha Mohan Singh said the Union Budget would put the agricultural sector towards path of progress and would help in addressing agriculture distress and achieve 4 per cent growth.
- “Budgetary provision of Rs.35,984 crore for Agriculture and Farmers Welfare Ministry – 2016-2017 manifests that NDA government is committed to villages, the poor and farmers,” Mr. Singh said.
- “Governments positive steps coupled with a good monsoon could help agriculture sector grow at 4 per cent in the next fiscal year,” he added.
- He said the government aims to double the in- come of farmers in the next five years.
- “We also intend to multiply yield per unit, a better return of the products related to farmers,” he said.

Government will take final call on EPF tax

- Finance Minister Arun Jaitley said that the government would take a final decision on his budget proposal to tax 60 per cent of employees’ provident fund (EPF) savings of those earning over Rs.15,000 per month, before it responds on the issue during a debate on the Finance Bill in Parliament.
- The finance ministry had issued a clarification that EPF savings won’t be taxed at retirement, if the retiring employee opts to use 60 per cent of his EPF account balance to buy an annuity product that provides them a monthly pension.
- The Budget had announced that 40 per cent of EPF savings will be tax-free at the time of withdrawal on retirement. Till now, EPF savings are tax-exempt at the time of retirement.
- Mr. Jaitley said that the tax proposal was not aimed at revenue generation, but help everyone get a pension in their old age.
- “The balance 60 per cent (of EPF savings) if converted to annuity and used for a regular pension will not be taxed. The objective is to incentivise people to get pension and disincentivise consumption of savings,” he said.
- Stressing that the proposal would only impact high-income private sector employees, the minister said that nearly three crore active EPF members receive monthly salaries of less than Rs.15,000 and would not be affected by the tax.

Corporate wants Taxation of incomes from corporate dividends to be reviewed

- After protests from middle class against the EPF provisions, the super-rich too have raised demands that the NDA Government reconsider its Budget proposal regarding the taxation of incomes from corporate dividends in excess of Rs.10 lakh.
- Former CII President Rajive Kaul and Salil Singhal of PI Industries both said that the proposal “amounts to triple taxation.”
- The CII will collate the various requests for reconsideration and comments on various budget proposals made at meeting to be submitted to the Finance Ministry.
- Under the existing rules, dividends are taxed at the rate of 15 per cent at the time of distribution in the hands of the company declaring dividends.
- As a result, tax payers even with high dividend income and who fall in higher income tax brackets are subjected to dividend tax only at the rate of 15 per cent.
- It is with the view to eliminate this vertical inequity across dividend income earners that the budget has proposed an additional 10 per cent tax on income in excess of Rs.10 lakh from dividends on corporate profits.

Outrage on taxing EPF

- Following widespread outrage over the Union Budget proposal to tax Employees' Provident Fund (EPF) withdrawals, the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) held a review with top officials
- The Union Labour and Employment Ministry made a strong case for a rollback of the proposal to tax 60 per cent of EPF savings at the time of withdrawal,
- This is the second intervention by the PMO on the issue, the first one being an hour-long discussion with Finance Minister Arun Jaitley and Mr. Adhia
- Initially it was said that only the interest earned on EPF savings would be taxed. Later, the Ministry said taxing interest income was just one among the representations the government had received. It said those who bought an annuity product with 60 per cent of their EPF corpus would not be taxed

EPF tax would cost dearly to low income workers

- Union Budget 2016-17 holds another tax whammy for employees' provident fund savings which will particularly hurt millions of low-income workers earning as little as Rs.5,000 a month.
- Such employees would be taxed at the highest marginal income tax rate of 34.6 per cent if they withdraw EPF savings of Rs 50,000 or more, before completing five years of continuous service.
- The tax, is to be levied at the highest personal tax rate for those members who don't have a PAN card, according to the Finance Ministry. For those with a PAN card, the tax is levied at 10.3 per cent
- Those with a balance of just Rs.50,000 in their EPF account, after, say 59 months of service, are essentially low income workers who are not liable to pay tax to begin with. Yet they will be taxed at the rate applicable for those earning over a crore of rupees a year
- To put that in perspective, banks deduct income tax at 10.3 per cent on interest income of over Rs.10,000 earned from fixed deposits. In cases where a depositor hasn't shared his PAN card details with the bank, such interest income is taxed at 20.6 per cent.
- Separately, a PAN number is mandatory for jewellery purchases over Rs. one lakh. Personal income is tax free in the country for those earning about Rs.21,000 a month or Rs.2.5 lakh a year
- An EPF account is mandatory for all employees earning up to Rs.15,000 per month (raised recently from Rs.6,500 per month) in firms employing over 20 workers. As per the law, 24 per cent of an employee's salary is contributed to EPFO as a social security net for old age – a part of that (8.33 per cent) is diverted to an employees' pension scheme (EPS).
- "This is a very regressive move and would not only lead to taxing those who are not part of the tax net or pushing them to get a PAN card though their income is well below the taxable limit, but also create a huge compliance and paperwork headache for employers as well as the EPFO, who would have to issue tax deduction certificates
- The government has defended its proposal to tax 60 per cent of EPF savings as a tool to push people into the pension habit and said that only high-income workers would be affected, while those earning upto Rs.15,000 a month won't be taxed.

Aadhaar Bill introduced in Lok Sabha

- Union Finance Minister Arun Jaitley introduced the Aadhaar (Targeted Delivery of Financial and Other Subsidies, Benefits and Services) Bill, 2016 in the Lok Sabha. The Bill provides

statutory backing to Aadhaar, the unique identity number through which the government plans to target delivery of subsidy benefits and services. The expenditure for the nationwide Aadhaar exercise is incurred from the Consolidated Fund of India.

- The Bill provides for the establishing of the Unified Identification Authority of India (UIDAI) and the establishment, operation and maintenance of the Central Identity Data Repository. The Authority shall ensure the security, confidentiality and protection of identity information and authentication records of individuals in its possession or control, including the information stored in the repository, according to the Bill. These include biometric information collected, created and stored in electronic form.
- The Supreme Court has restricted the use of the Aadhaar number until a Constitution Bench delivers its verdict on a number of cases concerning privacy and other issues
- Under the provisions of the Bill, the Aadhaar number cannot confer right of or proof of citizenship of domicile
- Mr. Jaitley introduced the measure as a money Bill, which can only be introduced in the Lok Sabha and to which the Rajya Sabha where the NDA government does not enjoy a majority cannot make amendments. The Upper House can only make recommendations to money Bills and must return such legislation to the Lok Sabha within 14 days from the date of their receipt, thus ensuring a time-bound process
- The Opposition also demanded to know if the Bill can be referred to the standing committee on finance. Money Bills cannot be referred to a joint committee of Parliament

Application window for the new Sovereign Gold Bond (SGB) scheme will be March 8-14

- The government announced that the application window for the third tranche of the Sovereign Gold Bond (SGB) scheme will be March 8-14 and the bonds issued on March 29.
- The first tranche of the scheme, unveiled in November 2015, attracted 62,169 applications for 915.9 kg of gold worth Rs. 246.2 crore. This subdued performance prompted the government to tweak the scheme's rules to make it easier to buy the bonds.
- The second tranche, which opened in January 2016, met with greater success, attracting 3.16 lakh applications for 2,790 kg of gold worth Rs.726 crore.
- The Government of India, in consultation with the Reserve Bank of India, has decided to issue third tranche of SGB. Applications for the bond will be accepted from March 8, 2016 to March 14, 2016. The Bonds will be issued on March 29, 2016.
- The Bonds will be sold through banks, Stock Holding Corporation of India Ltd. (SHCIL) and designated Post Offices," according to a statement from the government on Friday.
- The announcement of the third tranche of the scheme comes at a time when gold prices are rallying.
- The government's plan behind the SGB scheme is to encourage those who use gold as a store of value to instead invest in the gold bonds as opposed to the physical yellow metal itself.
- The idea, among others, is to reduce India's substantial gold imports, which were at \$2.9 billion in January 2016, up 85 per cent over the same month of the previous year.
- The bonds, issued by the Reserve Bank of India on behalf of the government, have a tenor of eight years with an exit option from the fifth year onwards.
- The maximum quantity which can be subscribed is 500 grams per person per financial year and the interest rate on the bonds are set at 2.75 per cent per annum, payable on a half-yearly basis.

- The maximum quantity which can be subscribed is 500 grams per person

Tax exemptions for capital gains investment in venture capital

- To help start-ups mobilise capital at affordable rates during the initial stages, the Department of Industrial Policy and Promotion (DIPP) will soon take up with the Finance Ministry a proposal to grant Capital Gains Tax (CGT) exemption for those investing their capital gains in regulated/notified Venture Capital (VC) and angel funds.
- The budget had proposed CGT exemption for persons investing their capital gains only in regulated / notified Fund-of-Funds (FOF).
- FOFs, as per the DIPP's Start-up Action Plan, are professionally managed funds that will not invest directly in start-ups, but contribute to the capital of VCs registered with capital markets regulator SEBI.
- These VCs, in turn, provide the needed early stage funding for start-ups. CGT is the tax-on-profit made by a person through sale of a capital asset (such as an investment or real-estate).
- DIPP would hold a meeting with the Finance Ministry to take up the issue of allowing SEBI-registered VCs and angel funds to also be 'notified' for the purpose of CGT exemption.

Cell formed to study subsidies to industry

- The government has set up a special cell to compile information on subsidies given by other countries to their industry.
- The constitution of the special cell — as well as proposed measures including changes in laws such as Customs Act — is also aimed at indirectly helping India Inc file applications before the government seeking imposition of anti-subsidy duties on subsidised imports of items, such as steel, harming local industries.
- The development comes in the backdrop of slowdown in global trade and measures taken (including against merchandise exports from India) by several countries such as the U.S. to protect their domestic industries from unfairly low-priced imports.
- Under the WTO norms, subsidies refer to financial contribution (loan, loan guarantee, grant, import duty exemption, equity infusion, fiscal incentives and purchase of goods) by the government or state agencies resulting in advantages to those players availing it.
- Action against subsidies is meant to level the playing field.
- The move to create a special cell — with representatives from several ministries including commerce and finance — also comes at a time when the government is keen to boost local manufacturing through initiatives such as Make In India, Start-up India and Digital India.

China continues its effort to change to a self-sustaining economy based on consumption

- China is targeting growth of about 6.5-7 per cent this year, in tune with an effort to transition from a low-end manufacturing and exports nation to a self-sustaining economy based on innovation and consumption.
- While presenting his work report Chinese Prime Minister Li Keqiang said Beijing was taking measures to avoid falling into a “middle income” trap. The term refers to the inability of many countries, starting from a low base, to transition to developed status after experiencing years of high economic growth.

- Fiscal deficit has been calibrated to 3 per cent of the GDP this year, up from last year's 2.3 per cent of the GDP, Mr. Li said. That figure, expected to stand at \$335 billion is the highest since economic reforms began in 1979.
- The fiscal stimulus is expected to focus on tax breaks for small businesses, especially in the fast-growing services sector, seen among the major drivers of the restructured "new normal" economy.
- China is now focusing on electric cars, deep space exploration, aero-engines, robotics and nuclear power, and the services industry, such as healthcare to restructure its economy.
- In a panel discussion with political advisors from the China Democratic National Construction Association and the All-China Federation of Industry and Commerce, President Xi said that China should stick to its basic socialist economic system while strengthening and developing both public and non-public sectors of the economy.
- Mr. Li acknowledged that transforming the Chinese economy would be far from easy, in a world witnessing weak growth in trade, and experiencing fluctuations in financial and commodity markets, whose impact should not be underestimated.
- Over \$15 billion are being earmarked for the next two years as a safety net to tackle unemployment.

Government looking into the proposal of consolidating public sector banks

- The government will soon set up an expert group to look into consolidation of public sector banks as the country needs stronger rather than a large number of banks, Finance Minister Arun Jaitley said.
- He also said the government is considering ESOPs for PSU bank officials besides strengthening the SARFAESI Act and Debt Recovery Tribunals to deal with the problems of stressed assets that are estimated at around Rs.8 lakh crore.
- There could be niche banks and banks which could survive independently and sustain themselves well, he said, observing that the Gyan Sangam strongly supported the idea of consolidation in the banking sector.
- With regard to the rising Non—Performing Assets or bad loans, Jaitley said that besides strengthening the institutional mechanism, the government has been taking sector specific decisions to deal with the problems in segments like power, highways, sugar and steel.
- On the NPA situation in the banking sector, Jaitley said banks are taking steps to recovery bad loans. "As far as recovery is concerned, whatever steps have to be taken with regard to recovery banks have various rights for recovery through DRT, SDR... Neither loan waiver has been given to anyone, nor will be given," he said.
- In the current global environment, Jaitley said, banks have to take all the measures in order to clean up their books by effecting recoveries.
- He also said that there are some sector specific decisions which are required to be taken by the government. These include, power, highways, sugar and steel.

Country heading more towards a cashless economy

- E-payments and mobile wallets are getting more popular among the youth in the country.
- As these are gaining wider acceptance, a major concern of our financial regulator too is getting addressed — the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) has started working towards making India a cashless economy and to bring in accountability and transparency in each financial transaction.

- Last week, the Union Cabinet cleared the implementation of a few short and long term measures to promote digital and card-based payments to curb cash use in the system.
- Some of the measures include withdrawal of surcharge, service charge or convenience fee on card and other digital transactions. With this, digital payment, which is already gaining traction, is expected to gain momentum.
- Foreseeing this big opportunity, a bunch of youngsters has kick-started a movement by launching mobile wallets and is slowly changing the way Indians transact.
- A mobile wallet app is a virtual wallet where a registered customer can pre-load a certain amount of money with any service provider, which can be used for various bill payments and recharges.
- The major reason for this is the smart phone that enables internet penetration in to rural parts of India. Increasing government support is another catalyst.
- According to a recent report from TechSci Research titled 'India Mobile Wallet Market Opportunities and Forecast, 2020', the mobile wallet market in India is projected to reach \$6.6 billion by 2020.
- In April last, e-commerce major Snapdeal had made one of the biggest acquisitions in the Indian e-commerce industry by buying wallet player Freecharge for about \$400 million.
- As the wallets allow a user to load cash from a very small amount to a maximum of Rs 10,000, the risk associated with the loss of money through transaction is minimal. Apart from this, the wallet companies provide high security standards for customers while transacting.
- Recently, the RBI had issued certain guidelines that allow the users to increase their limit to Rs 1,00,000 based on a certain KYC verification.
- The mobile wallet user base in India has even surpassed the total number of credit cards issued in the country.
- The RBI data shows that till November 2015, around 22 million credit cards have been issued by 55 banks, while a rough estimate shows there are more than 100 million wallet users in India.
- In a bid to garner market share, almost all players are offering cash back and discounts, which can be used for another transaction. Some players even provide offline way of wallet balance top up.
- Mobikwik has its 'Cash Pickup' service in select cities that will facilitate cash to be directly added to MobiKwik wallet. There are different types of E-wallets:
- OPEN WALLETS: The ones that allow you to buy good and services, withdraw cash at ATMs or banks and transfer funds; these services can only be jointly launched with a bank. Apart from the usual merchant payments, it also allows you to send money to any mobile number bank account. M-Pesa by Vodafone is an example.
- SEMI-OPEN WALLETS: You can't withdraw cash or get it back. In this scenario, a customer has to spend what he loads. Airtel Money is a semi-open wallet, which allows you to transact with merchants having contract with Airtel.
- CLOSED WALLETS: Quite popular with e-commerce companies, where a certain amount of money is locked with the merchant in case of a cancellation or return of the order, or gift cards.
- SEMI-CLOSED WALLETS: These do not permit cash withdrawals or redemption, but allow you to buy goods and services from listed merchants and perform financial services at listed locations. Paytm is an example.

The Committee appointed to suggest changes in the Companies Act submitted its report

- The Committee appointed by the Government of India to suggest changes in the Companies Act, 2013 and Rules made there under, in the interests of various stakeholders, has submitted its report.
- The Committee has suggested that Section 4 (1)(c) of the Companies Act, 2013 should be amended to allow companies to have a generic object clause to engage in any lawful activity or business as per the law for the time being in force.
- This proposal is based on Section 31 of the Companies Act, 2006 of the U.K. To supplant this English Law on to the Indian sub soil without regard to the ground realities of Indian business is highly misleading.
- The Committee has suggested that the present prohibition against more than two layers of subsidiaries for investments should be done away with.
- While the Committee recognises that numerous layers of subsidiaries are created to hide the source of funds so as to siphon off money, the Committee has sought to omit this provision in the Companies Act, 2013 in order not to impede the efficacy of corporate structuring.
- When it comes to independent directors, Section 149 of the Companies Act, 2013 says that an independent director cannot have any pecuniary relationship with the company in which he is appointed as an independent director or with its satellites during the last two financial years or in the current year.
- A similar provision in SEBI Regulations for listed companies says that an independent director should not have material pecuniary relationship with a company or with its satellites in the last two financial years or in the current year.
- The definition of a managing director under the Companies Act, 2013 is almost identical with the definition under the Companies Act, 1956.
- However, unlike under the Companies Act, 1956, under the Companies Act, 2013, the proviso saying that the managing director should be allowed to exercise his powers subject to the superintendence control and direction of the Board of directors, has been omitted.
- When it comes to the National Financial Reporting Authority (NFRA), the following views of the Committee are quite appropriate:
- As suggested by the Committee, the provisions relating to the constitution of the National Company Law Tribunal and the National Law Appellate Tribunal should be amended to conform to the Supreme Court of India's order of May, 2015. Otherwise, such a tribunal may become a still born baby.
- Law is as good as it is administered. The Companies Act, 2013 is a modern law for a rising India. It is important that the administrators of such a law have a mindset keeping with the spirit of such a law.

Government identifying banks for consolidation

- The government will identify six to ten public sector banks which will drive the consolidation process among the state-owned banks
- Large lenders like State Bank of India (SBI), Bank of Baroda (BoB), Punjab National Bank (PNB) and Canara Bank could become the anchor banks
- The government will set up an expert panel for the consolidation process. The Bank Board Bureau headed by former Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) Vinod Rai, which was recently formed to select chief executives and board members of public sector banks, will also help in the consolidation process.
- Merger between the banks will be based on geographical and technological synergies, human resources and business profile, among others
- Consolidation among public sector banks has been under discussion for about a decade now.

- There are 22 public sector banks in the country apart from five associate banks of State Bank of India. The present National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government has looked at the consolidation process differently and initiated it.
- Interestingly, during Gyan Sangam in Pune, bankers had opposed the idea of consolidation among public sector banks on the ground that the financial health of most of the banks had deteriorated. Hence, no bank was ready to absorb even a weaker institution
- The financial performance of public sector banks reflected a sharp deterioration after the RBI conducted an Asset Quality Review (AQR). During the review, the central bank's inspectors found that many accounts, which ideally should have been treated as nonperforming, were not classified so by the banks.
- The RBI then directed the banks to classify those accounts as non-performing and provide accordingly during the October-December and January-March quarters.
- As a result, as many as 11 public sector banks including Bank of Baroda, IDBI Bank, Bank of India and Indian Overseas Bank reported losses last quarter.

Finance minister says infrastructure projects will not be delayed in the future

- Plans outlined in the Union Budget, along with the enactment of the recently amended arbitration law, could make the spectre of stalled infrastructure projects across the country a thing of the past
- One of the important factors that stalls these projects is that with the passage of time, costs escalate beyond estimates, both because of raw material and labour costs going up and therefore, nobody in government is willing to take the responsibility for such cost escalations
- A statutory mechanism to negotiate cost escalations under an oversight would be put into operation.
- The country's arbitration law now provided a fast-track mechanism to resolve cases within a year and commercial divisions had been created in every High Court

Ahead of Aadhaar Bill's passage, Govt. okays housing subsidy for workers

- Even as the Aadhaar Bill is yet to be passed in the Lok Sabha, the government has begun approving new subsidies to be delivered using the biometrics-backed Unique Identification (UID) number.
- Labour Ministry has approved a scheme to offer higher housing subsidies to about 75 lakh beedi workers and miners working in non-coal mines using Aadhaar
- However, the UID Authority of India (UIDAI) will find it difficult to capture their fingerprints owing to the nature of their work, according to its own biometric authentication standards
- Finance Minister Arun Jaitley tabled the Aadhaar (Target Delivery of Financial and Other Subsidies, Benefits and Services) Bill, 2016 in Lok Sabha.
- The Bill, tabled as a Money Bill (not requiring Rajya Sabha's approval) is aimed at providing legal backing for transferring all government subsidies using Aadhaar.
- Under the Revised Integrated Housing Scheme of 2016, the Labour Ministry will give Rs.1.5 lakh as subsidy through direct benefit transfer, from the current Rs.40,000, to beedi and nonmine workers to build a house on their own land.
- The move comes despite the UIDAI's own suggestion that construction and mining workers be put in the list of exceptions to which the Aadhaar system may not apply.

- In a detailed document titled 'Aadhaar Authentication Framework', the UIDAI had said that people engaged in hard manual labour like construction workers or mining workers may be treated as "exceptions" in the Aadhaar system as they had "all of their fingers in extremely poor condition with respect to fingerprint quality"
- There will always be a set of population who will be temporarily or permanently excluded from a specific biometric system. They are termed as 'outliers, in such cases, alternative biometrics such as iris scan could be used.
- The new Housing Scheme of the Labour Ministry will give assistance to workers having their own land with a carpet area of at least 30 square metres.
- The subsidy amount will be released in three instalments: the first amount of Rs. 37,500 will be given as advance, second Rs.90,000 after the construction of house reaches the lintel level and the third instalment of Rs.22,500 after completion of the construction work. The worker can make an additional contribution at his or her own will.
- Also, for the first time, the government may give Rs.1.5 lakh as an upfront amount to those workers who want to secure a bank loan to build houses.
- The 'Housing for All' project, which provides Rs. 1 lakh as Central grant for a house under the slum rehabilitation programme and Rs. 1.5 lakh to economically weaker section households, aims to build 2 crore houses in five phases till 2021-22.

Banks looking to change strategy to keep talented employees

- State-run lenders like Bank of Baroda and IDBI Bank are planning to offer stock options to staff in a bid to retain top talent.
- This assumes significance in the backdrop of the imminent entry of 21 new niche banks which have been granted licences by the RBI to begin operations, as well as the prospect of a clutch of mid-management professionals reaching retirement age soon.
- The lender, which is planning to increase the employee strength to 21,500 by March 31, 2019 from the 15,500 at present, is not only working out a scheme for career progression but also mulling an employee stock option plan (ESOP) to incentivise them.
- The board had already approved the ESOP. Now, the bank will write to the government for its approval.
- State Bank of India (SBI), the country's largest lender, had floated the idea of ESOP for its employees some time ago. However, the proposal is still awaiting government's approval.
- Most banks plan to offer stock options to their employees in the rank of assistant general manager and above.
- Union Finance Minister Arun Jaitley had said recently that the government was actively discussing the proposal for Employee Stock Ownership Plan (ESOP) for public sector bank employees.
- Public sector banks are facing headwinds on the human resources front as many mid-management officers are retiring over the next five years, prompting the central bank to term it a 'retirement decade.'
- In addition, the 21 new banks, which have received differentiated licences from the Reserve Bank of India (RBI), will try to poach employees from existing banks.
- In August-September last year, RBI has granted licences to 11 payment banks and 10 small finance banks to start operations.
- While these banks were given 18 months' time to roll out services, most of these entities are expected to start operations in 2016.
- At a lower level, public sector institutions pay better than their counterparts. But while progressively going up, there is a gap that really becomes unmanageable.

RBI says banking infrastructure is not good enough

- Growth of card acceptance infrastructure like automated teller machines (ATMs) and point-of-sale (PoS) terminals is not on a par with that of card issuance.
- This was observed by the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) in its concept paper on card acceptance infrastructure released on Tuesday.
- Another disconcerting feature is that the rate of growth in setting up card acceptance infrastructure has also slowed down during these three years.
- Debit cards vastly outnumber the volume of credit cards issued in the country. Further, a high number of debit cards have been issued in recent times under the Prime Minister's Jan Dhan Yojana, especially to customers in rural areas and smaller towns.
- According to the concept paper, the lower growth of ATM and PoS terminals, both in terms of numbers and geographical spread, has impacted card use.
- Cash continues to be the predominant mode of payment as it appears to be "costless" in comparison to the visible costs associated with card/electronic payments.
- Some of the factors that have inhibited growth in the acceptance infrastructure are lack of adequate and low-cost telecom infrastructure and lack of incentive for merchants for acceptance of cards, among others.

Ministry of Shipping expects to sign major pacts in summit

- The government is expected to sign agreements worth over Rs. 72,000 crore with private players on port-related projects at the Indian Maritime Summit to be held in Mumbai next month.
- The Ministry of Shipping has identified 109 projects worth Rs.72,864 crore on which agreements will be signed during the event to be held from April 14-16. South Korea will be the partner country for the Summit.
- The sectors identified for investment include ship-building, ship repair and recycling, port modernisation, new port development and multi-modal logistic hubs among others.
- In addition, more than 150 projects will be showcased for investment under the Sagarmala Project for port modernisation.
- Govt. is planning to create 40 lakh direct employment and 50 lakh indirect employment (opportunities) in five years in the maritime sector.
- The Shipping Minister said logistic cost is hurting India, while logistic cost was 18 per cent in India, it was 8-10 per cent in China and 10-12 per cent in European countries.
- "If development near ports happen and we are able to cut the logistic costs by four per cent, the exports will double," the Minister said.
- Under the Sagarmala Project, the major development programmes identified by the government include port modernisation (Rs. 90,000 crore), port connectivity (Rs.1.20 lakh crore) and port-led industrialisation (Rs.90,000 crore) besides coastal community development.

Give it Up campaign a major success

- More than 80 lakh households have given up LPG subsidy under the 'Give it Up' scheme, as of March 3, 2016. The 'Give it Up' campaign is part of the government's endeavour to reduce its LPG subsidy bill.
- Under the scheme, LPG users who can afford to pay the market rate for the fuel are encouraged to give up their subsidy.

- The government, on its part, has promised to use the savings from this to provide more LPG connections to the unconnected.
- More than 53 lakh consumers have voluntarily surrendered subsidy on LPG in the last six months.
- Oil Marketing Companies (OMCs) are making efforts to target the higher income group (taxable income of more than Rs.10 lakh) using technology and available information.
- Consumers are also provided with on-line facility to declare their income and submit their self-declaration in the prescribed form to distributors if the taxable income of self or his/her spouse exceeds Rs.10 lakh.
- The 'Give it Up' campaign goes hand-in-hand with the government's Direct Benefit Transfer in LPG wherein the subsidy amount is directly transferred to beneficiaries' bank accounts, thereby reducing the scope for leakage.

Government raises fund limits to seed start-ups

- The Department of Science and Technology (DST) may invest up to Rs. 1 crore in every fresh start-up that it will seed from the next financial year.
- The DST's outlay for seeding has been increased four-fold—from Rs. 40 crore to Rs.180 crore—in the coming financial year to help fund the increased investment.
- Currently, the maximum permissible investment is Rs.50 lakh. Promoting start-ups has been among the government's major promises with Prime Minister Narendra Modi frequently asking India's youth to become more entrepreneurial.
- On 16 January, Mr.Modi addressed a massive gathering of entrepreneurs from India and abroad and outlined several initiatives to energise India's start-up ecosystem including making the profits of fledgling units tax-free for three years, Rs.10,000 crore of government funding over four years, no visits by labour inspectors for three years and quicker and subsidised patent clearances.
- As of 2014 — the latest available report — 68 Science Technology and Entrepreneurship Parks (STEPs) and TBIs are located across India.
- According to the latest figures from the science ministry, about 2000 ventures have been incubated of which 950 have "graduated," meaning they have reached a certain size and have a significant support from investors.
- Some of the incubators, said Mr.Sharma, who are known to have a successful track record in incubating companies will be deemed "World Class Incubators" and can annually avail of Rs. 10 crore for five years.

Industry ready to provide greater market access to EU

- Indian industry is ready to grant greater market access to European Union firms in areas such as automobiles, wines and spirits in return for gains in garments, automobiles, automobile components and services sector in a bid to end a deadlock on the proposed EU Free Trade Agreement.
- During last month's 13th India-EU Summit, which was attended by Prime Minister Narendra Modi and EU leaders, both the side failed to reach an agreement on free trade and a specific date to restart talks.
- The leaders welcomed the re-engagement of discussions for furthering the proposed pact.
- India is open to giving greater market access to EU firms by lowering duties for automobiles, wines and spirits under the FTA provided it gets in return what it wants in other sectors.

- The automobile industry body Society of Indian Automobile Manufacturers and the auto-component industry body Automotive Component Manufacturers Association are on the same page with the CII on this issue, he said.
- The talks on the FTA (officially known as the broad-based Bilateral Trade and Investment Agreement) had commenced in 2007 and both the sides had held 16 rounds of negotiations till 2013.
- Though India and the EU had held one stock-taking meeting each in the last three months on the FTA, formal negotiations are yet to re-start.
- The talks have been stalled as the negotiators have so far been unable to come up with a compromise solution to address the key demands of the EU — that India lower or eliminate duties on automobiles and wines & spirits.
- India's main demands on data security status, easier temporary movement of skilled professionals and seamless intra-corporate movement.
- While India looks into reducing or eliminating tariffs in sectors such as auto and liquor, the EU should do away with their non-tariff barriers that seem to have been erected mainly to protect some of their local firms but not as much for better safety or quality.
- The EU is learnt to have asked India to substantially bring down the “high” duties on automobiles as a pre-condition for resumption of the FTA negotiations. India's import duty on cars are between 60 and 120 per cent as against the EU's 10 per cent.
- India has also sought agricultural market access in the EU as well as disciplining of Sanitary and Phyto-sanitary and Technical Barriers to Trade to ensure that the concessions in the FTA that would be given by the EU result in effective market access.
- Since 2013, when the FTA talks were stalled, India has unilaterally undertaken several reforms such as allowing 49 per cent foreign investment in insurance and pension, easing of foreign investments norms in the banking, defence sectors.
- It has also allowed 100 per cent FDI in telecom, single-brand retail and in the market-place model of e-commerce.
- These reforms were cited during the stock-taking meeting and the EU was asked about their internal reforms that would similarly benefit India.
- The FTA negotiations were slated to restart in August 2015, but India deferred them saying it was disappointed and concerned over the EU imposing a ban on sale of around 700 pharmaceutical products clinically tested by GVK Biosciences.

India is ready to invest in Iran’s petrochemical, fertiliser and LNG facilities

- India has offered to invest \$20 billion in Iran’s petrochemical, fertilizer and liquefied natural gas (LNG) facilities and in return sought cheap natural gas and land to set up the units.
- Oil Minister Dharmendra Pradhan, who is in Iran with a delegation of industry executives for two days, discussed with his counterpart several outstanding issues related to the energy sector.
- He also urged Iran for a favourable treatment in the pricing of gas for India. The minister also wanted supply of gas at a competitive price and on a long-term basis for the life of the joint venture projects that Indian companies were interested in setting up.
- India was also keen to set up a gas cracker unit and a liquefied petroleum gas extraction unit in Chabahar and ways of transporting gas to India from Iran including through a planned Iran-Pakistan-India pipeline were discussed.
- The two sides also discussed the award of rights to Indian firms to develop Farzad-B gas fields and the pending payments by Indian refiners towards Iran’s oil purchases.

NITI Aayog is working on sector-based medium term planning framework

- NITI Aayog, the government's policy think tank, is working on a sector-based medium-term planning framework.
- The new planning framework could replace five-year plans, the last of which is set to end in 2016—17.
- It was possible to synchronise with the finance commission cycle, the financial approval of schemes and projects of both the central and state government.
- The current financial year, 2016-17, is the last year of the 12th five-year plan.
- With the Planning Commission scrapped, the process for formulating a 13th five-year plan government has not been initiated, as a consequence of which the era of five-year plans is set to end in India this year.
- While medium-term growth is dependent on past performance, long-term growth, on the other hand, can only be enhanced by structural reforms and improving the productive capacity of the economy, he said.
- Union Finance Minister Arun Jaitley had announced in the Budget Speech that from the next financial year, the plan and non—plan distinction will be done away with for expenditure classification.
- The government had constituted a committee for proposing a new format of budget statements and accounts.
- The committee to be headed by Special Secretary Expenditure will co-opt state secretaries.
- The primary units of appropriation at both central and state levels are being revisited to create a clear distinction between revenue and capital items of expenditure so that accounts can be prepared in a bottoms-up manner.

Bankers hit sweet spot on IPO pricing amid volatility

- Companies and investment bankers seem to be getting the pulse of the market right more frequently when pricing shares meant for public issue.
- Shares of most entities that listed on the stock exchanges in 2015 and 2016 have stayed above the issue price even as the broader market has declined.
- According to stock exchange data, there have been 27 new listings since January 2015, and a little more than half — 15 to be precise — are trading above their respective issue prices.
- While there are still 12 companies that, in 2015 and 2016, dipped below their issue price, the trend is in sharp contrast to the earlier years when almost 65 per cent of the newly-listed companies traded below their issue prices shortly after their debut.
- This, even as the benchmark Sensex has lost 4.2 per cent this year, following a 5 per cent drop in 2015, according to data compiled by Bloomberg.
- The Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI) had also taken a tough stand on the pricing of shares at the time of IPO.
- Specifically, only 42 out of 117 companies that made an IPO between 2008 and 2012 traded above their issue price at the end of that period. With SEBI cracking the whip, prices of shares from IPOs started doing better.
- Investment bankers say that IPO pricing is also a function of broader market direction along with the expected investor sentiment on the sector and the company fundamentals.
- Bankers also say that some amount of polarisation within the investment banking space has also led to this trend as most issues are being managed by leading domestic and foreign names that are typically known to be more cautious in pricing and due diligence.

Government planning to provide PF to contractual labours as well

- The government has decided to get tough with large employers who increasingly rely on contract workers often without paying them their statutory dues such as employees' provident fund contribution.
- As part of the plan, the Employees Provident Fund Organisation (EPFO) has asked all the public sector firms to upload on their websites the details of project contracts awarded to various agencies in a bid to ensure contract workers get provident fund benefits.
- Central PF Commissioner V.P. Joy, who recently took charge of the Rs. 10 lakh crore retirement fund body, is expected to send a similar directive to 4,700 private companies employing over 1,000 workers each.
- The Contract Labour Act requires employers to pay equal pay and benefits for work done by contract employees that is similar to regular employees' role.
- But its implementation has been weak and attempts to bring in a stronger law have been thwarted as government agencies and public sector units also deploy a large number of contract employees and are reluctant to pay them more.
- EPFO is looking to make public as well as private sector companies, which are the principal employers of contract workers, accountable for providing PF benefits.
- The public sector companies will have to register the details of all contract employers of each project on EPFO's website.

Central Bank Governor says exchange rate is at right place

- Reserve Bank of India Governor Raghuram Rajan sought to allay fears about India's weak exchange rate saying that it is broadly in the right place and the country's trade is likely to be muted for some time.
- "Indian trade is likely to be muted for some time. But we are not alone in this. Global trade is weak," said Raghuram Rajan
- Apart from the exchange rate and the weak global economy, Mr. Rajan pointed to several other reasons that could be leading to this decline in global trade.
- The first, he said, is that as countries get more developed, they begin to consume services more, which are not generally traded. The second reason was that the trade in capital goods has seen a decline.
- And the third reason was that countries are increasingly pulling inwards. That is, their supply chains are increasingly being geared towards their own needs rather than the needs of other countries,
- Mr. Rajan said "I believe the monetary reforms of this government will stand out as one of its major achievements."
- The Monetary Policy Committee, the composition of which was laid out in the Finance Bill 2016, will be in charge of keeping inflation within specified targets, failing which it will be answerable to the government.
- While emphasising the need for macroeconomic stability, the Governor lauded the government on its adherence to its fiscal targets and in focussing on structural reforms.
- "Economists will say we need structural reforms. But such moves tend to upset constituencies. The problem is that the costs are immediate and well-defined. But it is an ill-defined group which doesn't know if it will benefit from the changes later on."

- The Governor also pointed out that the cumulative FDI in this financial year till January at \$38.7 billion was just \$3 billion short of the highest FDI ever recorded in India, of \$41.7 billion in 2008-09, and there were two months still to be completed.

Government devised three part strategy for stressed loans

- As part of the government's three-part plan to address stressed assets of public sector banks, structural issues would be dealt with to avoid recurrence of these problems, whether wilful or due to policy paralysis or business challenges, in future.
- Last week, Finance Minister Arun Jaitley told Parliament that Rs. 1 lakh crore of stressed assets were added in the first nine months of the current financial year itself.
- In the case of the largest public sector bank, State Bank of India, loans worth Rs. 11,700 crore have been reported to be locked up as non-performing assets with nearly 1,160 defaulters wilfully deciding not to repay.
- The list includes Winsome Diamonds & Jewellery which owes Punjab National Bank (PNB) Rs. 900.37 crore and Zoom Developers (owing Rs. 410.18 crore to PNB).
- The state-owned PNB has declared 904 borrowers who owe it a combined Rs. 10,889.71 crore as wilful defaulters. Of these, 140 companies were added to the PNB's list of wilful defaulters in the December quarter alone.
- Separately, speaking also at the Advancing Asia Conference, International Monetary Fund Managing Director Christine Lagarde said that Reserve Bank Governor Raghuram Rajan's move to address bank balance sheets "head-on" is the right approach.

SEBI debarred over 1000 entities for tax evasion

- In a major clampdown, regulator SEBI has debarred over 1,000 entities from the capital markets after they were found to be misusing stock exchange platforms for tax evasion to the tune of more than Rs 15,000 crore.
- SEBI has also suspended trading in shares of as many as 167 companies, while the regulator has written to the Income Tax Department in nearly 100 cases where more than 1,800 entities are suspected to have traded in shares valued beyond their disclosed income.
- Such activities were mostly happening through shares of shell companies or thinly-traded penny stocks. There has not been any instance of a blue-chip stock being used for generating bogus profits or losses to evade taxes.
- An analysis of the enforcement and surveillance measures taken by Sebi since August 2014 shows that 167 stocks have been completely suspended for trading and trading has been restricted to a lower price band of 2 per cent for 123 others.
- SEBI has also written to Income Tax Department with details of 1,854 entities who have provided exit to preferential allottees for trade value of nearly Rs 3,900 crore.

India Ratings and Research revised its outlook for telecommunications services

- India Ratings and Research revised its outlook for telecommunications services to stable-to-negative from stable for 2016-17 as it expects the introduction of Reliance Jio to intensify competition, squeezing market share and operating profitability.
- Data tariffs will also see a major correction due to the launch of Reliance Jio, it said, adding that the benefits from higher data volumes as well as subscriber growth will be "back-ended."

- Additionally, the operators' debt profile will deteriorate as they are likely to incur high capex on network expansion and acquisition of additional spectrum through trading, largely to compete with Reliance Jio.
- Further, spectrum is expected to drive consolidation in the sector, helped by recent guidelines allowing spectrum sharing and trading transactions within industry participants.
- This will help smaller players to monetise their spectrum assets while bigger players enhance their spectrum holdings, it said.

WPI is in negative again

- Retail inflation slowed to a four-month low in February, while the wholesale price index posted a negative reading for a 16th straight month.
- It prompted industry groups to call on the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) to cut interest rates to spur economic growth.
- Consumer price index-based inflation decelerated to 5.2 per cent from 5.7 per cent in the preceding month.
- Wholesale prices also continued to soften with official numbers for the wholesale price index (WPI) showing a 0.91 per cent contraction in February.
- The data marks the first break in the six-month streak of accelerating retail inflation. Coming soon after official statistics showing industrial output continues to shrink, the figures signal domestic demand is yet to gain significant traction.
- RBI Governor Raghuram Rajan had taken note of the poor industrial performance in January and said while the economy was recovering, this recovery was volatile and that not all economic indicators were moving in the same direction.
- Index for Industrial Production (IIP) in January showed output contracted 1.53 per cent compared with the 1.18 per cent contraction in December 2015.
- Food inflation in the CPI came in at 5.5 per cent in February compared with 6.7 per cent in January.
- In the WPI, the rate of inflation in food articles also decreased to 3.35 per cent in February from 6 per cent in January. Primary article inflation in the WPI slowed down significantly in February to 1.6 per cent compared to 4.6 per cent in January.
- Similarly, the rate of inflation in the 'fuel & power' segment in the WPI was -6.4 per cent in February compared to -9.2 per cent in January.
- The 'fuel & light' segment in the CPI came in at 4.6 per cent in February, down from 5.3 per cent in January.
- Inflation in the housing segment of the CPI accelerated to 5.3 per cent from 5.2 per cent in January.

Cairn India hopeful over recent changes in the natural gas sector

- Cairn India has expressed the hope that recent Cabinet approvals for changes in the natural gas sector will also help resolve some of the long pending issues with the government, such as the fate of its Rajasthan fields and a 'fair price' for its crude oil.
- These changes will also help India take a step closer to energy security.
- A major decision taken by the Cabinet was to approve the Hydrocarbon Exploration and Licensing Policy, a main facet of which involves granting explorers a uniform licence for the exploration and production of all forms of hydrocarbons.

Exports continues to fall for fifteen straight months

- Exports shrunk for the fifteenth consecutive month as shipments in February fell 5.7 per cent year-on-year to \$20.7 billion owing to weak overseas demand, including in large markets such as the European Union.
- Trade deficit narrowed to \$6.5 billion, the lowest since September 2013. Decline in commodity prices and fall in imports of gold and petroleum products contributed to the narrowing of the trade deficit.
- Of the 30 export sectors, 16, including major ones such as engineering (11.2 per cent fall to \$4.5 billion) and petroleum products (28.2 per cent fall to \$1.8 billion) were in negative growth territory.
- The situation in the engineering exports remains worrisome with an over 11 per cent drop in February, 2016, which is on a low base of the same month in the last fiscal.
- Going by the current trend, merchandise exports in FY'16 would be around \$260 billion, a drop of about \$50 billion as compared to FY'15.
- The fall of 5.66 per cent in February has been the slowest pace at which exports have fallen since the contraction began in December 2014 with a 3.77 per cent fall, according to the data.
- In all the intervening months, the contraction in exports has been over 10 per cent with a maximum of 24.43 per cent in November 2015.
- The commerce ministry said the trend of falling exports is in tandem with other major world economies.
- Exports fell in the U.S. (10.35 per cent), European Union (7.62 per cent) and China (1.67 per cent) for December 2015 over the corresponding period of the previous year as per WTO statistics, it said.
- Imports during February, 2016 also contracted 5.03 per cent to \$27.3 billion with 21 of the 30 export sectors recording negative growth. Cumulative imports during April-February FY'16 contracted 14.7 per cent to \$351.8 billion.
- Trade deficit for April-February, FY'16 was at \$113.38 billion, lower than \$126.29 billion in April-February, FY'15 leading to less concerns about the Current Account Deficit (CAD).
- The Commerce Ministry said taking merchandise and services trade together, the overall trade deficit for April-February, FY'16 was \$54 billion as compared to \$64.2 billion in the same period last year, a fall of 15.79 per cent (services data pertains to April-January as January 2016 is the latest data available).
- During April 2015-February 2016 this fiscal so far, exports have shrunk 16.7 per cent to \$238.4 billion. Non-petroleum exports during April-February FY'16, however, fell only by nine per cent to \$211.3 billion.
- Imports during February, 2016 also contracted 5.03 per cent to \$27.3 billion with 21 of the 30 export sectors recording negative growth. Cumulative imports during April-February FY'16 contracted 14.7 per cent to \$351.8 billion.

Multiple global stakeholders were made incharge of ICANN

- At a luxury hideaway in Morocco, two years of talks on Icann's running of the Internet finished with a deal to put multiple global stakeholders in charge.
- Inside, the people who run the Internet's naming and numbering systems have been meeting with some of the governments who would rather be doing the job themselves.
- What they have agreed is a plan for Icann, the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers, to end direct U.S. government oversight control of administering the Internet and commit permanently to a slightly mysterious model of global "multi-stakeholderism".

- Though the French government was still seething over a spat about “dot champagne”, it rallied the naysayers the weekend before the official meeting started. Yet the real worry was the United States.
- When Icann was founded in 1998, the plan was to keep its anchoring contract with the U.S. National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) for a year or two, and for Icann to become independent in 2000.
- But in the meantime, the Internet became just too important for the U.S. to let go of the reins.
- Shielded by the U.S., Icann resisted attempts by the United Nations’ International Telecommunication Union to take over its job.
- Iana (the Internet Assigned Names Authority, the part of Icann that deals with country codes, Internet numbers and protocols) went on being part of Icann, even as other countries felt sure the U.S. must be abusing its power behind the scenes.
- But as the millions of dollars of business transacted over the Internet became trillions, and the first, second and then third billion people came online, it started to look a bit odd that one government had de jure control of a chunk of the Internet.
- The Internet is run by an unaccountable private company. This is a problem.
- Under pressure from the EU and others, Icann and the U.S. government took small steps, spelling out their relationship in a deceptively simple document, the Affirmation of Commitments, in 2009.
- Icann and the U.S. would probably have muddled along together for another decade, with the occasional hand-wave towards global accountability. And then Snowden happened.
- In a prescient flash of political brilliance, Icann’s CEO, Fadi Chehade, made a pact with Brazil’s President Dilma Rousseff. Still smarting over the NSA tapping her smartphone, Rousseff, announced a global meeting to decide the future of the Internet.

NPS can now be totally tax-free

- Retirement savings accumulated under the New Pension Scheme or NPS can now be totally tax-free at the time of withdrawal under certain conditions and the Pension Fund Regulatory and Development Authority (PFRDA) had only urged the government to bring some parity in the tax treatment of different pension products it competes with, such as the employees’ provident fund (EPF)
- The government had introduced a tax on 60 per cent of EPF savings at the time of retirement in the Budget in a bid to make the NPS, savings under which were fully taxable at retirement, more attractive. At the same time, it made 40 per cent of NPS accumulations tax-free. While the EPF tax provision was rolled back last week, the partial tax break for NPS remains.
- Under the NPS framework, 40 per cent (of corpus) is mandatorily annuitised and that is tax free. Now, 40 per cent of the rest that may be withdrawn as a lump sum is also tax free. So if you annuitise 60 per cent of your balance (instead of 40 per cent), technically, yes, it’s tax-free (entirely)
- The pension fund regulator, under the administrative control of the Finance Ministry, conceded that the tax treatment of retirement savings has become a ‘tricky thing’, but asserted that it was not pitching for NPS to be made totally tax-free.
- The NPS which is now also referred to as the National Pension System, has 1.18 crore members, including state and central government employees. It has assets of over Rs.1.15 lakh crore. By contrast, the EPF organization under the Labour Ministry oversees assets over Rs.10 lakh crore.

India looks forward for BRICS meeting

- The government is preparing a list of priority projects for which investments could be sought from other BRICS nations
- The list of big projects, in addition to a proposal to set up a mechanism to expeditiously resolve non-tariff barriers (NTBs) that are hurting goods trade between BRICS member countries, will be taken up for discussion during the next month's meeting of the grouping's Contact Group on Economic and Trade Issues (CGETI).
- Investments would be sought for projects, mostly in infrastructure sector, from other member nations viz. Brazil, Russia, China and South Africa
- India is chairing the influential bloc BRICS for an 11-month term till December 2016. India's list of projects will be similar to what Russia brought out during its term as the chair of the BRICS Group last year.
- India is also likely to put up a proposal at the CGETI meeting to boost services trade through relaxed visa norms. Besides, India will seek cooperation between BRICS countries on standards and technical regulations in goods and services trade.
- Russia and China are pitching for measures easing of norms to boost e-commerce trade. In another initiative, Russia and Brazil are demanding a mechanism to link the single window clearance mechanisms in the BRICS countries for better trade facilitation.
- India's work on a list of projects in the country comes even as the BRICS New Development Bank has begun its process to select priority projects. These include in sectors such as renewable energy and infrastructure.
- India will also hold a trade fair and an investor forum to promote the government's flagship schemes such as 'Make In India', 'Digital India', 'Smart City Mission', 'Start-up India' and the 'National Mission for Clean Ganga'.
- These events -- meant to attract more investments from the BRICS countries into India -- could coincide with the next BRICS Summit (the eighth), slated for October 2016 most likely in New Delhi

Govt. clarifies rules on tax treatment of offshore funds

- A foreign hedge fund with an Indian fund manager working in India will neither be classified as having a business connection in India nor as being located in India.
- Under this regime, the fund management activity carried out through an eligible fund manager in India by an eligible investment fund does not constitute business connection in India of the fund and also does not lead to the residence of the fund in India
- Among the various other changes made, one of the most significant is that "where the investment in the fund has been made directly by an institutional entity, the number of members and the participation interest in the fund shall be determined by looking through the said entity
- The two big issues which are not addressed is that no single investor can invest more than 10 per cent in the fund and that the aggregate participation of 10 or less members has to be less than 50 per cent. In other words, 10 people cannot own more than 50 per cent of the company.
- However, it does not address two important issues, i.e. a single investor cannot own more than 10 per cent in the fund and 10 or less investors should own 50 per cent or less

Monsanto ordeal

- The government expects to develop its own genetically modified (GM) cotton varieties early next year to end Monsanto's dominance; it controls over 90 per cent of cotton seed supply.

- New technologies are critical to lifting India's poor farm productivity, although even if India did develop a home-grown GM cotton variety in 2017, it would struggle to sustain a program that needs to refresh seeds every decade or so, experts warned.
- The introduction of Monsanto's GM cotton seeds in 2002 helped turn India into the biggest producer of the fiber, while other crops like pulses continue to suffer as transgenic food is banned and local research has stalled.
- Despite the gains GM cotton brought for more than 7 million cotton farmers in India, some of them and their associations, including one affiliated to Modi's ruling party that promotes self-reliance, have complained Monsanto overprices its products.
- Under pressure to mollify farmers hit by three straight crop failures due to bad weather, Modi's government has imposed a cut of around 70 per cent in royalties that local firms pay Monsanto for its cotton technology.
- Monsanto has taken the government to court over the royalty.
- Monsanto said it have to re-evaluate its India business, because it was difficult to bring in new technologies in an “environment where such arbitrary and innovation-stifling government interventions make it impossible to recoup research and development investments

MoU between Railways and ISRO

- The Railway Ministry has signed an agreement with the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) to leverage space technology for providing passenger information in all trains, map railway assets and help survey new route alignments.
- At present, Indian Railways uses space technology to provide connectivity to passenger reservation counters, unreserved ticketing system in remote areas, and emergency communication using satellite phones during disaster
- The Memorandum of Understanding, signed aims at developing applications in the field of remote sensing and graphic information system, proposes to provide information such as train stoppages, real-time train tracking, survey of new rail route alignments in hilly and difficult terrain

Tendulkar poverty line backed by Niti Ayog task force

- A panel tasked with devising ways to reduce poverty has backed the controversial ‘Tendulkar poverty line’, which categorised people earning less than Rs. 33 a day as poor, on the ground that the line is primarily meant to be an indicator for tracking progress in combating extreme poverty
- The report of the Niti Aayog’s Task Force on Eliminating Poverty, which was leaked, argues that the poverty line is not the basis of identification of the poor in India. Instead, it is the BPL Census on the basis of which state governments identify the poor. The latest of these is the Socio-Economic Caste Census 2011.
- A Committee chaired by former Chairman of the Prime Minister’s Economic Advisory Council and the National Statistical Commission, the late Suresh Tendulkar, computed poverty lines for 2004-05 at a level that was equivalent, in purchasing power parity (PPP) terms, to one U.S. dollar per person per day, which was the internationally accepted poverty line at that time.
- The PPP model refers to a method used to work out the money that would be needed to purchase the same goods and services in two places. Across countries, this is used to calculate

an implicit foreign exchange rate, the PPP rate, at which a given amount of money has the same purchasing power in different countries.

- Based on the Tendulkar panel norms, the Planning Commission had announced that in absolute terms the number of poor stood reduced from 40.7 crore to 35.5 crore during the period 2004-05 to 2009-10 and to 26.9 crore in 2011-12.
- Following criticism of these estimates, the UPA Government had in May 2012 set up the five-member expert group, headed by the then Chairman of the Prime Minister's Economic Advisory Council C. Rangarajan, to revisit the way poverty is estimated.
- In the report Dr. Rangarajan suggested that persons spending below Rs 47 a day in cities and Rs 32 in villages be considered poor.
- The report has also recommended sweeping changes to the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) for allowing use of the programme's funds to pay for labour on private farms.
- Another of its suggestion for eliminating poverty within 5-7 years is modest cash transfers to the poorest five families in every village to be identified by Gram Panchayats
- It has also said that the Aadhaar accounts will give government an "excellent" database to assess the total volume of benefits accruing to each household, "which can pave the way for replacing myriad schemes with consolidated cash transfers, except where there are compelling reasons to continue with in-kind transfers.

Cisco to invest \$100 mn by 2020 in India

- Technology giant Cisco said it will invest USD 100 million in India by 2020, to support the Government's Digital India initiative.
- Of this, USD 40 million will be used to fund early-stage and growth-stage companies in areas such as Internet of Things (IoT), security and smart cities. The company also plans to train 2.50 lakh students in the country.
- Cisco will collaborate closely with State governments in India on strategic initiatives, including addition of six new innovation labs, three centres of expertise, funded university collaborations and skills investments.
- This investment is part of the networking major's global 'Country Digitization Acceleration' or CDA programme, where select countries receive strategic investments to accelerate existing government goals to drive economic growth through high-tech innovation.

MSEI eyes alternative asset classes to turn around exchange

- Singed by the NSEL-FTIL fiasco, Metropolitan Stock Exchange of India (MSEI), the country's youngest stock exchange, will start implementing from fiscal 2017 a business plan whose cornerstone will be to develop asset classes other than equities.
- MSEI is seeking to raise Rs.105 crore additional capital by July through a mix of equity and debt to fund its growth plans. From being a promoter-driven company, MSEI is now a board-driven company, whose equity is held by eight public sector banks, financial institutions and corporates.

Govt relaxed FDI norms for insurance sector under automatic route

- Seeking to attract more foreign investment, the government has relaxed FDI norms for the insurance sector by permitting overseas companies to buy 49 per cent stake in domestic insurers without prior approval.
- Currently, up to 26 per cent FDI is permitted through the automatic approval route. For FDI up to 49 per cent, the approval of the Foreign Investment Promotion Board is required.
- The foreign investment proposals up to 49 per cent of the total paid up equity of the Indian insurance company shall be allowed on the automatic route subject to verification by the Insurance Regulatory and Development Authority of India

Employee's facing ate cut of PPF and other small savings

- The government has defended its move to cut rates on small savings schemes from April 1, 2016, its own employees are anxious about the prospect of a similar lowering of interest on their retirement savings under the General Provident Fund or GPF.
- Historically, the rate of return credited to all government employees under the GPF has moved in tandem with the returns on public provident fund or PPF investments.
- The government announced that the PPF rate has been lowered from 8.7 per cent this year to 8.1 per cent for the first quarter of 2016-17.
- For 2014-15, the government had notified the interest rate on small savings schemes and GPF on the same day — March 4, 2014.
- Last year, the small savings scheme returns were announced on March 31, 2015, while the rate of return on GPF and other state PFs.
- The 8.7 per cent rate on GPF and other government staff PFs remains in effect till further orders.
- Last April, while notifying the interest rate on all state PFs including the GPF, the government said it had decided to link these rates to the PPF rates for 2015-16.
- However, the PPF rates would now be recalibrated every quarter.
- The PPF is considered an easily accessible long-term investment instrument for millions who are not employed in the formal sector and therefore, have neither GPF nor EPF account.
- EPF accounts are available to all employees earning upto Rs 15,000 a month in firms employing twenty or more workers.
- There are an estimated 3.2 million central government employees in the country, apart from millions of state government employees who are usually paid the same rate of return as the GPF.
- The 8.7 per cent rate for GPF is also paid on nine other provident funds that include funds dedicated to ordnance factories' and naval dockyards' workmen, armed forces personnel, defence services officers.

Banks are likely to reduce interest rates on home and car loans

- Banks are likely to announce revised interest rates, starting April 1, which will lower the amount one earns on deposits and make home and car loans cheaper.
- Lenders may wait till the monetary policy review, due on 5 April, to take a call on rates. The market expects the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) to cut interest rate by at least 25 bps.
- A long standing demand by the banks has finally been met by the government which lowered the interest rate of small savings scheme. The interest reduction is various schemes was anywhere between 60 and 130 bps.
- Banks have been stating that due to competition from small savings scheme they were not able to reduce their deposit rate further.

- As a result, the cost of funds were not coming down and hence lending rates could not be lowered.
- The Reserve Bank of India has been prodding banks to cut lending rates in line with the reduction in policy interest rate.
- While RBI has reduced repo rate by 125 bps since January 2015, which now stands at 6.75 per cent, banks' lending rate reduction was only 70 bps.
- The cut in small savings rate now gives more room to banks to reduce their deposit rates.
- For example, the rate for one-year term deposit under the small savings scheme was reduced to 7.1 per cent from 8.4 per cent.
- The State Bank of India's one-year deposit rate offers 7.25 per cent (1 year to 455 days tenure). The revised small savings rates will be effective from April 1.
- Clearly as banks reduce deposit rates, the cost of funds — a key component that goes into the pricing of loans — will come down.
- The other reason why lending rates will come down is because banks will shift to Marginal Cost of Funds based Lending Rate (MCLR) from 1 April, as directed by RBI. This new regime of loan pricing will replace the existing regime of Base Rate.
- In the base rate regime, most banks considered average cost of funds while calculating the benchmark lending rate or the Base rate.

SEBI finds various irregularities in Vijay Mallya's dealings

- Finding prima facie evidence of non-compliance to various norms, including those on insider trading and corporate governance, the Securities Exchange Board of India (SEBI) has widened its probe into the dealings of Vijay Mallya-headed UB Group.
- The capital markets watchdog may also seek information from other regulators in India and abroad, as also from the stock exchanges, even as it seeks to de-clog the complex transactions Mallya had entered into, including sale of stake and transfer of rights in his various group companies.
- SEBI began looking into Mallya-Diageo transactions last month, soon after the liquor baron inked a Rs. 515-crore 'sweetheart deal' to exit United Spirits, suspecting possible violations of corporate governance and other norms.
- SEBI had found prima-facie evidence of non-compliance to various transactions, while stepping up its cooperation with other regulators and agencies that are separately looking into alleged violations in relation to the massive loans taken by the erstwhile Kingfisher Airlines of UB Group.
- Detailed queries sent to Mallya, including about his possible return to India and the prima-facie evidence found by SEBI, did not elicit any response.

Current account deficit decreased to 1.3 percent of GDP

- The country's current account deficit (CAD) narrowed to \$ 7.1 billion or 1.3 per cent of GDP during the October-December quarter of the financial year, mainly due to lower trade deficit.
- According to latest data released by the Reserve Bank of India (RBI), the current account deficit narrowed from \$7.7 billion or 1.5 per cent of GDP recorded during the same period of last year and from \$8.7 billion or 1.7 per cent of GDP recorded in July-September quarter.
- The contraction in CAD was primarily on account of a lower trade deficit (US\$ 34.0 billion) than in Q3 of last year (US\$ 38.6 billion) and US\$ 37.4 billion in the preceding quarter.
- Private transfer receipts, mainly representing remittances by Indians employed abroad was \$ 15.8 billion, a decline from their level in the preceding quarter as well as from a year ago.

- For the nine month period of April-December, CAD narrowed to 1.4 per cent of GDP from 1.7 per cent in the corresponding period of 2014-15, on the back of the contraction in the trade deficit.

Government committee recommended tax on online services

- High-level government committee has recommended a 6-8 per cent tax on several online services such as online advertising, cloud computing, digital platforms for sale of goods and services or, provided by a company not resident in India.
- Committee on Taxation of E-Commerce, set up by the Central Board of Direct Taxes (CBDT), recommended that payments of over Rs.1 lakh made by a resident individual or company to a non-resident enterprise will be covered by this levy.
- The report was submitted to Finance Minister Arun Jaitley prior to the Budget, based on which he proposed a fee of 6 per cent to be levied only on online advertising and restricted to B2B transactions.
- It is imperative that the government not only lays down clear guidelines around the transaction covered under the levy but equally, the manner of determination as to whether the equalisation levy (EQL) or Income Tax will apply on a transaction.
- The equalisation levy follows the Base Erosion and Profit Shifting (BEPS) report, endorsed by the G20 and OECD, which sought to put forth a global standard for taxing e-commerce.
- The issue with e-commerce is that the services are often provided by companies that have no office space in the country where the service is rendered and so are not subject to tax, providing them an advantage over domestic players.
- The other issue, that experts feel needs to be addressed, is based on whom the onus of payment of the levy will fall.
- Experts feel that the government has to bring in greater clarity on how the levy will be implemented, to whom it will apply and whether it will be distinct from Income Tax.
- The report states that the other countries are free to grant credit for this levy as per their domestic law. In future, if the other countries impose equalisation levy, India may consider granting credit on a reciprocal basis.

Pradhan Mantri fasal Bima yojana will reduce farmers distress says FM

- The Pradhan Mantri Fasal Bima Yojana (PMFBY) will reduce the distress of farmers in the country as it will grant insurance cover to 50 per cent of them , Union Finance Minister Arun Jaitley said.
- If India were to develop and get rid of poverty, the agriculture sector needs to grow at a faster pace.
- The last two crop seasons have been adversely affected on account of inadequate monsoons. We need to put a veil of some security around the farmers.
- Under the scheme, farmers will pay a lower premium for more coverage, while compensation will be higher in the event of any crop failure or damage.
- The scheme will be rolled out on a “mission mode” from April to cover kharif or summer crop from this year itself, according to the government.
- The scheme was drafted after much consultation with all stakeholders. She felt that the scheme should percolate to the ground level and aim at bringing a large number of farmers under insurance.

- The country, which has seen two successive droughts, is hoping for a better monsoon this year. Mr. Jaitley said that the systems would be on test, if there was another drought.

India's outstanding public debt is at 5.5 lakh crore

- India's outstanding public debt rose to Rs.5.5 lakh crore at the end of the third quarter of this financial year, up three per cent over the same period of the corresponding year.
- The total public debt (excluding liabilities under the 'Public Account') of the Government provisionally increased to Rs.5,526,310 crore at end-December 2015 from Rs.5,366,258 crore at end-September 2015.
- This represented a quarter-on-quarter increase of 3.0 per cent (provisional) compared with an increase of 1.2 per cent in the previous quarter (Q2 FY 16).
- Government debt, though high, is not something to worry about. Over the last few years, the debt-GDP ratio has been on a downward trend. Within that, the foreign debt component has been very stable.
- Internal debt stood at Rs.5.01 lakh crore, or 92.2 per cent of total outstanding debt. It amounted to 92 per cent of total debt at the end of the second quarter.
- Marketable securities such as treasury bills, cash management bills and dated securities amounted to Rs.4.7 lakh crore of total debt at the end of December 2015, up from Rs.4.5 lakh crore at the end of September.

Environment ministry tightened rules for e-waste

- The Environment Ministry has tightened rules by putting the onus on manufacturers, dealers, retailers and refurbishers of electronic goods to ensure that electronic or e-waste goods are collected and "scientifically" recycled.
- The new norms include fines, a greater involvement of states in policing and collection as well as bringing exhausted compact fluorescent lamp (CFL) and other mercury-containing lamps in to the purview of electronic waste.
- The actual date of the rules and quantum of fines would be announced later this year after discussions with states.
- With nearly 1.7 million tonnes of e-waste reportedly produced in India in 2014 and increasing annually at between four and five per cent, a variety of experts have warned of its dangers to the environment as well as health.
- This is because defunct laptops, phone and other electronic goods are usually broken down by hand for precious metals and hacked down manually or crudely burnt.
- The residue is frequently thrown in rivers, drains and/or disposed in solid waste dumps that over time can contribute to degraded land and water quality as well neurological and skin diseases, genetic defects and cancer in the workers who deal with them, the ministry added.
- The rules governing electronic, or e-waste, have been in place since 2011. The new rules say that producers will have to ensure 30 per cent e-waste collection, based on their projected sales, by 2018 and 70 per cent by 2023.
- They can do this through a variety of ways such as a deposit refund scheme, an e-waste exchange and they also have to pay for publicity and awareness programmes.
- Later this year, when the rules come into effect, state will have to set up e-waste dismantling and recycling units in industrial park as well as register the workers involved with the e-waste business and finally, take up industrial skill development activities and ensure health and safety of workers.

2.95 crore houses to be constructed in rural area under Housing for All scheme

- The Union Cabinet approved the construction of 2.95 crore houses in rural areas under 'Housing for All' scheme wherein financial assistance of up to Rs.1.30 lakh will be provided for construction of pucca houses to homeless families.
- The target will be achieved by 2022 —the 75th year of India's Independence, he told reporters after a Cabinet Meeting chaired by Prime Minister Narendra Modi.
- The programme will be implemented in two phases. The government proposes to provide assistance for one crore households in the next three years (by 2018-19) at an estimated cost of Rs. 81,975 crore.
- Mr. Prasad said Rs. 60,000 crore will come from Budgetary provisions.
- The additional financial requirement of Rs. 21,975 crore will be met by borrowing through National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (NABARD) to be amortised through budgetary allocations after 2022.
- An eligible family living in plains will get Rs. 1.20 lakh and those living in "hilly and difficult" areas will receive an assistance of Rs. 1.30 lakh under the scheme.
- The identification and prioritisation of beneficiaries will be done using information from Socio Economic and Caste Census (SECC).
- The beneficiary will be entitled to 90 days of unskilled labour from MGNREGA.
- The cost of unit assistance to be shared between Central and State Governments in the ratio 60:40 in plain areas and 90:10 for North Eastern and hilly states," according to an official statement.
- The scheme would be implemented in rural areas throughout India except Delhi and Chandigarh.
- Under the existing rural housing scheme (Indira Awaas Yojana), financial assistance of Rs. 70,000 in plains areas and Rs. 75,000 in hilly/difficult areas is provided.

Govt to decide about Safeguard duty on steel

- The government will soon hold a meeting to decide whether or not to extend the safeguard duty on certain items of steel imports till March 2018.
- The safeguard duty is a trade remedy recognised by the World Trade Organisation.
- It is a temporary measure to counter the adverse impact caused to the domestic industry (local steel producers in this case) due to a sudden and unforeseen surge in (low-priced) imports of the item (largely hot-rolled coils in the case under review).
- The government had on September 14, 2015, imposed a 20 per cent 'provisional' safeguard duty on several hot-rolled products of steel for up to 200 days following an order from the Directorate General (DG) of Safeguards.
- The DG Safeguards had recently recommended the extension of this duty till March 13, 2018.
- It recommended that the 20 per cent safeguard duty (minus any antidumping duty) should be in place till September 13 this year, following which, this duty is to be reduced to 18 per cent in the next six months (till March 2017), and further down to 15 per cent during the six months after that.
- However, industries that are users of these steel items — including the engineering (automobile, industrial machinery and defence components) sector — have sent representations to the government stating that measures including the Minimum Import Price (MIP) as well as the provisional safeguard duty have already increased their raw material costs and are hurting their competitiveness.

- An inter-ministerial panel will shortly take a call on whether or not to accept the decision of DG of Safeguards.
- The panel — comprising representatives from the ministries of commerce, finance, steel and heavy industries — will also consider representations by the user industries, mainly from the engineering sector.
- The market share and profitability of the local industry declined during the period under review (from 2013-14 to 2015-16), whereas market share of imports has increased during the same period, it added.
- The safeguard duty will aid in recovery of the domestic industry and will ensure the end-users get a stable supply of the items from the local producers, it said.
- Imports of flat-rolled products of steel and iron have been falling since December 2015, EEPC India said.
- Pointing out that hot-rolled coil is a basic raw material for engineering products, EEPC India said the continuation of safeguard duty makes engineering exports uncompetitive.
- The MIP was leading to an increase in raw material cost by around six to ten per cent.
- Though the government had said the MIP will not be applicable to imports under the Advance Authorisation Scheme (AAS), EEPC India said the AAS was not used by the small exporters and had sought a price reimbursement mechanism.
- Steel production during April 2015-February 2016 in FY'16 contracted by (-)1.9 per cent (year-on-year) to 82.9 mt. Steel imports during that 11-month period grew 20.5 per cent to 10.2 mt, while exports shrunk 31.9 per cent to 3.4 million tonnes.

Maiden feeder service between India and Bangladesh started

- The maiden coastal feeder service between India and Bangladesh commenced on March 23, after facing a minor hitch, at Chittagong Port in Bangladesh.
- As per the schedule, m.v. Harbour-1, the container vessel owned by NeepaParibahan, was to arrive at Krishnapatnam Port in Andhra Pradesh on March 26.
- However, it failed to depart from Chittagong Port on March 17 due to lack of adequate number of containers and a crane fault.
- In its maiden journey, the vessel was to carry 150 empty containers. Due to the crane fault, only 30 containers were loaded on to the vessel since March 17.
- India and Bangladesh signed a coastal shipping deal during November 2015 to promote coastal shipping, enhance bilateral trade between the two countries and bring down transportation costs for EXIM cargo.
- Bangladesh imports onion, rice, lentils, cotton, industrial raw materials and machinery.
- Currently, container goods are moved from and to Bangladesh either through Colombo or Singapore as Chittagong Port does not have a deep draft and hence smaller feeder vessels are deployed.
- Besides, rapid growth in bilateral trade between India and Bangladesh led to congestion on the road at Indo-Bangladesh border.
- Hence, the importers and exporters urged introduction of feeder service between India and Bangladesh.
- Out of a total of 1.8 million tonnes of cargo moved on Indo-Bangladesh protocol route during 2013-14, fly ash accounted for 98 per cent, which was transported from Kolkata to various river ports in Bangladesh.
- During the current year, India for the first time used the Indo-Bangladesh river protocol to transport food grains via Ashuganj to Tripura.

- However, the quantum of cargo has not picked up because of low draft in the upper reaches of Bangladesh rivers and also because of certain non-trade barriers, says a Shipping Ministry release.

India will appeal WTO's verdict in solar case

- India will appeal against the World Trade Organisation's (WTO) verdict over its policy relating to solar power equipment.
- "The U.S. made it a prestige issue. It is very unfortunate that they pursued the complaint in the WTO. It reflects the hollowness of the U.S.' commitment to clean energy," Power Minister Piyush Goyal said
- India had, as part of its National Solar Mission, imposed a stipulation that solar cells and solar modules be locally sourced.
- The U.S. had filed a case against India at the WTO demanding a level-playing field for Indian and foreign solar component manufacturers. The world body ruled in favour of the U.S.
- India's capacity to produce solar components and solar cells comprises only a portion of the demand in India. This means that the foreign component makers would still have a substantial market to cater to.
- Indian manufacturers had a complaint against the U.S. counterparts for dumping in India, he said. This would have attracted huge anti-dumping penalties and duties for the U.S. manufacturers, had it been pursued.
- The Minister also said he was examining the situation in the U.S. where nine states had similar programmes to protect their domestic manufacturers
- The Indian government was committed to its domestic manufacturers and would find other ways to protect them.

Indian forex reached all time high

- The country's foreign exchange reserves rose to an all time high of \$355.94 billion for the week ended March 18, latest data released by the Reserve Bank of India showed.
- According to the central bank, total reserves grew by \$ 2.54 billion for the week ended March 18 on the back of sustained inflows in the equity market.
- The previous all time high was reached on the week ended 21 August, 2015, when it touched \$355.35 billion.
- According to RBI, foreign currency assets mainly contributed to the rise in total reserves which grew by \$2.5 billion during the week to \$ 322.5 billion.
- The government maintained the fiscal deficit target for 2016-17 at 3.5 per cent while reducing the small savings rate which could create more room for the central bank to lower interest rate.
- RBI, which has reduced interest rate by 125 bps since January 2015, is widely expected to cut it by at least 25 bps when it reviews the monetary policy on April 5.
- In about two and half years since Raghuram Rajan took over as the governor of the central bank, foreign exchange grew by \$122 billion, from a low of \$274.8 billion, reached on the week ended September 6, 2013 when the country was in the middle of a currency crisis.
- The healthy growth in foreign exchange reserves has increased the import cover close to 10 months, which fell to a low of 6-7 months during the currency crisis of 2013.

Non-convertible debentures becoming important source of finance for Indian firms

- Indian firms have raised a staggering over Rs.58,000 crore through issuance of non-convertible debentures (NCDs) in the ongoing fiscal, amid a sluggish equity markets.
- This was much higher than Rs.9,713 crore garnered in the entire last fiscal.]
- Most of the funds have been mobilised for expansion, to support working capital requirements and for other general corporate purposes.
- The debentures are loan-linked bonds that cannot be converted into stock and usually offer higher interest rates than convertible debentures.
- As per the provisional data with Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI), firms raked in a total of Rs.58,533 crore through non-convertible debentures in the current fiscal (2015-16) as on March 14.
- In terms of numbers, 20 issuances have taken the NCD route in the ongoing fiscal as compared to 25 in the entire 2014-15.

Employment report and other economic data to come for US

- The March U.S. employment report and other key economic numbers next week could help U.S. stocks resume their recent winning path as long as that data hits the sweet spot: Not strong enough to add to worries about further interest rate hikes, yet not weak enough to cause concern about a recession.
- Reports on the housing market could also draw investors' attention given recent sharp gains in homebuilder stocks.
- Major indexes remain well above their 2016 lows, thanks to evidence of a reviving U.S. economy and a sharp rebound in oil prices, even as stocks broke a five-week streak of gains, their last trading day.
- While the volatility that marked the start of the year has diminished and many strategists have adopted a cautiously optimistic outlook, the market seems to have paused.
- The Friday U.S. data showed that even as gross domestic product increased at a 1.4 per cent annual rate instead of the previously reported 1.0 per cent pace, corporate profits from current production fell \$159.6 billion in the fourth quarter.
- A catalyst for stocks could come from a rebound in corporate earnings.
- U.S. earnings are expected to be down for a third consecutive reporting period, Thomson Reuters data show.
- Analysts now expect a first- quarter earnings decline of 6.9 percent - which would be the biggest drop since the third quarter of 2009 - sharply below the 2.3 percent gain they had been projecting as recently as Jan. 1.
- Stabilizing oil prices could at least slow the rate at which future earnings estimates fall.

Starboard's bid to remove Yahoo board

- Activist hedge fund Starboard Value LP moved to overthrow the entire board of Yahoo Inc including Chief Executive Marissa Mayer, who has struggled to turn around the company in her nearly four years at the helm.
- Starboard, which has been pushing for changes at Yahoo since 2014 and owns about 1.7 percent of the company, said it would nominate nine candidates for the board.

- The proxy fight comes as Yahoo is pressing ahead with an auction of its core Internet business, which includes search, mail and news sites.
- The faded Internet pioneer has been struggling to keep up with Alphabet Inc's Google and Facebook Inc in the battle for online advertisers.
- Yahoo co-founder David Filo — one of the board members Starboard wants to remove — is the company's largest shareholder with a 7.5-per- cent stake.
- Yahoo and Starboard representatives met on March 10 to discuss ways the two sides could avoid a proxy fight, according to people familiar with the matter.
- But those talks broke down, in part because Starboard was upset by Yahoo's announcement that same day that it appointed two new board directors, these people say.

Dept of Telecom will auction spectrum which may fetch Rs. 5.36 lakh crore

- Department of Telecom is looking to commence the auction for spectrum, including in 700 Mhz band, around mid-July, which may fetch the government a whopping Rs.5.36 lakh crore.
- The DoT is expecting Cabinet approval on spectrum price by mid-May and issue notice for auction in June. Taking into account various processes, spectrum auction should begin around July 15.
- The Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (Trai) has suggested a plan for spectrum sale, expected to be held in July, with a potential to fetch Rs.5.36 lakh crore.
- It will be the biggest-ever auction in terms of value and is more than double the gross revenue of telecom services industry.
- Trai had recommended a record high base price of Rs.11,485 crore per Mhz for the 700 Mhz band. If all available radiowaves under this get sold at the Trai-suggested price, it alone will yield a whopping Rs.4 lakh crore.
- According to the Trai paper, the cost of delivering mobile services in 700 Mhz band is approximately 70 per cent lower than 2100 Mhz frequency, which is widely used for 3G services.
- Spectrum is priced on the basis of its efficiency to carry mobile signals and ecosystem of device and equipment available for its usage.
- The government expects a revenue of Rs.98,995 crore from communication services in 2016-17, which includes proceeds from spectrum auction and other fees levied by the DoT.

Financial technology is on cards for Japan

- A laggard in embracing the 'fintech', or financial technology, revolution, Japan is set to ease investment restrictions that could free up the flow of capital in an economy sitting on an estimated \$9 trillion in individuals' cash deposits.
- Strict regulation, easy access to credit due to rock-bottom interest rates, and weak demand for innovative financial services from a risk-averse population that still prefers cash to credit cards, have strangled fintech's advance in Japan.

Virtual Network Operators to start working in India

- The Telecom Commission on Monday accepted the telecom regulator's recommendation to permit Virtual Network Operators (VNOs) in the country.

- VNOs do not own telecom infrastructure but can offer various services to users by entering into an agreement with existing service providers.
- It will need the Telecom Minister's approval.

Reduction in small savings rate does not give relief to short-term money market rates

- The reduction in the small savings rate has failed to provide any relief to short-term money market rates as banks rush to meet their business targets for the financial year end.
- As a result, the rates have increased by 25 to 35 basis points in March.
- On Monday, the overnight rate climbed as high as 8.3 per cent, intraday, before easing to 6 per cent at the close.
- There was advance tax outflow in the middle of the month. During quarter-end, banks also try to get more business to increase their balance sheet.
- Mutual funds also face redemption pressure during this period. In addition, the government goes slow on spending.
- According to bankers, the shortfall in liquidity in the system is estimated at more than Rs 2 lakh crore.
- According to dealers, the rate on three-month certificates of deposit, which were issued at 7.9 per cent at the start of the month, has moved up to the 8.20-8.25 per cent range.
- Short term rates typically rise at the end of a quarter as banks push to grow their balance sheet. Bankers said the liquidity scenario will improve once the new financial year starts.

Crisil report says subsidy to further reduce next year

- The next financial year will see the government's subsidy bill shrink by about Rs.10,000 crore thanks to the cut in nutrient-based subsidy rates and the lower price of gas, the key feedstock in urea production, according to Crisil.
- "The reduction in nutrient-based subsidy (NBS) rates announced last week could trim the government's subsidy bill for phosphatic fertilisers by Rs. 5,000 crore next fiscal," Crisil said in a report.
- The cut, which follows declining international prices of di-ammonium phosphate and ammonia, would influence the contracted price for phosphoric acid, the key raw material, for fiscal 2017.
- The Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs, on March 23, announced that the subsidy rates for nitrogen and phosphatic nutrients would be cut by Rs.5 a kg and Rs.5.4 a kg, respectively, amounting to a 25-30 per cent reduction.
- The subsidy rate for potassic nutrients was kept largely unchanged.
- The current price of gas in India, which is set to be reviewed in April, is \$3.82 per million British thermal units (mBtu). The consensus view is that the April review will see a further decline in gas prices.
- The reduction in the subsidy bill could help the government narrow its fertiliser subsidy arrears of about Rs.35,000 crore, which have been carried forward since 2012, Mr. Sural added.
- The fertiliser subsidy has been estimated at Rs.70,000 crore for 2016-17, lower than the Rs.72,437.58 crore estimated for the ongoing financial year.
- Crisil finds that the poor monsoon over the last two years has created a vicious cycle in the fertiliser sector. Two consecutive years of deficient monsoon have burdened the fertiliser industry with excess inventory, estimated at around 5 million tonnes.

Government changed the policy related to inoperative provident funds

- The government has scrapped a decision taken by the previous United Progressive Alliance government to suspend interest credits on inoperative Employees' Provident Fund (EPF) accounts, in the absence of any fresh contributions in these accounts for three years.
- Interest income was not credited to such accounts since April 1, 2011.
- At present, 9.23 crore out of total 15 crore EPF accounts are inoperative with around Rs.44,000 crore deposits in them.
- The government has not taken a decision on crediting interest on these inoperative accounts between April 2011 and April 2016.
- The decision could also scuttle the finance ministry's attempts to use the funds in such dormant accounts for creating a new Senior Citizens Welfare Fund as announced by Finance Minister Arun Jaitley in Union Budget 2015-16.
- Under the new rules, EPF accounts will also continue to get interest credits for three years after members reach the age of 58 years.
- This provision will ensure that EPF members, who choose not to withdraw their deposits immediately at retirement, would continue to earn interest till the age of 61.
- A similar provision exists under the General Provident Fund (GPF) for government employees allowing them to earn interest for 12 months after they retire at the age of 60.
- Accounts will become inoperative only in cases where employees settle abroad permanently and fail to withdraw their account balance within 36 months.
- Similarly, in the case of an EPF member's death, the interest on their savings will be credited for a period of three years after his or her death.

Vodafone moves ICJ against India

- British telecom giant Vodafone is believed to have moved the Hague-based International Court of Justice (ICJ) seeking appointment of a judge to preside over an arbitration over its Rs.14,200-crore tax case.
- Vodafone this month moved ICJ after arbitrators appointed by it and the government of India failed to reach a consensus on selection of a neutral/presiding judge of the three-member panel.
- Vodafone in 2013 had invoked India-Netherlands bilateral investment treaty seeking resolution to the tax demand imposed on it by enacting a tax law with retrospective effect to sidestep a Supreme Court judgement that went in the company's favour.
- The government had in June 2014 appointed former Chief Justice of India R.C. Lahoti as arbitrator while Vodafone named Canadian trial lawyer Yves Fortier as its choice.
- The two had zeroed in on Abdulqawi Ahmed Yusuf of the ICJ as the presiding arbitrator.
- Lahoti recused himself from the case in May 2015 and a month later Yusuf too declined to be part of the panel.
- Thereafter, India in July last year named Costa Rica based lawyer Rodrigo Oreanuno to arbitrate on its behalf.
- But Oreanuno and Fortier have not been able to decide on a presiding arbitrator forcing Vodafone to move ICJ.
- The government had initially slapped a tax demand of Rs.7,990 crore on Vodafone for failing to deduct tax on capital gains made over its \$11-billion acquisition of 67 per cent stake in the mobile phone business owned by Hutchison Whampoa in 2007.

- Last month the IT department sent a reminder notice to Vodafone seeking Rs.14,200 crore in tax and interest.
- Cairn Energy of UK, which faces a total tax liability of over Rs 29,000 crore owing to the same retrospective legislation, had resorted to ICJ to force the government to join the arbitration.

U.S security agencies breached the encryption of an iPhone used by a terrorists

- U.S security agencies breached the encryption of an iPhone used by a terrorist involved in the December 2, 2015 San Bernardino shooting, bringing a legal tussle between the government and the technology giant Apple to a close but prompting more questions related to privacy, surveillance and security.
- The U.S. government and Apple were in a court battle after the company challenged a judicial order to assist the Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI) to access the data stored in an iPhone 5 C used by Syed Farook, who, with his wife Tashfeen Malik shot 14 people dead.
- Apple CEO Tim Cook had termed the February court order “dangerous,” and the government demand “chilling,” and had vowed to fight it as it threatened the “security of our customers.”
- The U.S Department of Justice told a California court on Monday that it “no longer required the assistance from Apple Inc.” as the FBI could access the phone with assistance from a third party.
- Mr. Cook had said the government move would not be restricted to one phone, and companies would be forced to make digital master keys that would be used for mass surveillance by security agencies.
- Apple took a risk by refusing to cooperate with the FBI. It reassured its global customers, but in the end it seems to have backfired a bit, because it turns out that its encryption is not as unbreakable as thought.
- But the larger questions regarding an individual’s right to privacy and the requirements of law enforcement will continue.

SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY

Evidence of element, curium, related to solar system formation found

- Scientists from University of Chicago have discovered evidence of a rare element named curium that was present during the formation of the solar system.
- The team found evidence of curium in an unusual ceramic inclusion they called “Curious Marie”, taken from a carbonaceous meteorite.
- “Curious Marie” and curium are both named after Marie Curie whose pioneering work laid the foundation of the theory of radioactivity.
- This finding ends a 35-year-old debate on the possible presence of curium in the early solar system and plays a crucial role in reassessing models of stellar evolution and synthesis of elements in stars.
- Curium became incorporated into the inclusion when it condensed from the gaseous cloud that formed the sun early in the history of the solar system.

- On Earth, curium exists only when manufactured in laboratories or as a by-product of nuclear explosions.
- Thanks to this sample, the research team was able to calculate the amount of curium present in the early solar system and to compare it to the amount of other heavy radioactive elements such as iodine-129 and plutonium-244.
- Scientists find evidence of curium in a ceramic inclusion taken from a meteorite

Indian Institute of Science have developed a eco-friendly lamp

- Barely half a litre of water and two spoons of salt is the recipe for light.
- In a country where electricity is yet to reach millions and where dim kerosene lamps overlook the life of many in villages, researchers from Indian Institute of Science (IISc.) have developed an eco-friendly lamp that runs entirely on salt water.
- The salt water-run battery is as powerful as four AA batteries, and can power an LED lamp for 1,500 hours (or a little more than two months) at a stretch.
- The concept is one that most are familiar with in high school chemistry. Electricity can be produced when two electrodes (one that can readily give away its electrons, and another to accept them as easily) are dipped in an electrolyte.
- Salt water or seawater, which is nearly free, has to be replaced every 100 hours or so; while, after nearly 1,500 hours of use, the magnesium electrode has to be changed.
- Currently, each electrode costs Rs. 50. It is this kind of conversion of simple technology, using renewable resources, that the fledgling company and the IISc.

Artificial fingertip for texture

- A team of Swiss scientists has enabled an amputee feel smoothness and roughness in real-time with an artificial fingertip that was surgically connected to nerves in his upper arm.
- The nerves of non-amputees were also stimulated to feel roughness, meaning that prosthetic touch for amputees can now be developed and safely tested on anyone, said the team from the Swiss Federal Institutes of Technology (EPFL).
- Mr. Sorensen is the first person in the world to recognise texture using a bionic fingertip connected to electrodes that were surgically implanted above his stump.
- Nerves in his arm were wired to an artificial fingertip equipped with sensors.
- As the fingertip moved across textured plastic, the sensors generated an electrical signal. This signal was translated into a series of electrical spikes, imitating the language of the nervous system, then delivered to the nerves.

SpaceX's Dragon cargo ship arrived at International Space station

- SpaceX's unmanned Dragon cargo ship, carrying lettuce seeds, laboratory mice and an inflatable pop-up room, arrived at a crowded International Space Station where six spacecraft are now docked.

- British astronaut Tim Peake reached out with the station's robotic arm and grappled the Dragon, packed with 3,175 kilograms of supplies.
- Four Russian spaceships — two Progress cargo carriers and two Soyuz capsules which ferry astronauts — are docked at the space station, along with Orbital ATK's Cygnus cargo ship and SpaceX's Dragon.
- Not since 2011, during the final flight of the space shuttle Discovery, have there been six vehicles parked at the ISS at the same time, NASA said.
- Included in the Dragon's cargo is an expandable room that will be attached to the orbiting outpost.
- The cargo also contains Chinese cabbage seeds which astronauts will grow in space, and lab mice that will test whether certain drugs can help prevent muscle and bone loss in microgravity.
- The Dragon will remain at the station for a month before returning to Earth with science samples.

Research shows ribose may have formed on comets

- In a first, researchers have shown that ribose — a sugar that is one of the building blocks of genetic material in living organisms — may have formed in ice on comets.
- The genetic material of all living organisms on Earth, as well as of viruses, is made up of nucleic acids, DNA and RNA.
- Scientists have long wondered about the origin of these biological compounds.
- Now, by simulating the evolution of the interstellar ice making up comets in the laboratory, French research teams have successfully obtained ribose — a key step in understanding the origin of RNA and of life.

New findings will reduce power consumption by computers'

- In a breakthrough for energy-efficient computing, engineers at the University of California-Berkeley have shown for the first time that magnetic chips can operate with the lowest fundamental level of energy dissipation possible under the laws of thermodynamics.
- The findings mean that dramatic reductions in power consumption are possible — as much as one-millionth the amount of energy per operation used by transistors in modern computers.
- This is critical for mobile devices, which demand powerful processors that can run for a day or more on small, lightweight batteries.
- On a larger industrial scale, as computing increasingly moves into 'the cloud', the electricity demands of the giant cloud data centres are multiplying, collectively taking an increasing share of the country's — and world's — electrical grid.
- Magnetic computing emerged as a promising candidate because the magnetic bits can be differentiated by direction, and it takes just as much energy to get the magnet to point left as it does to point right.

The global surface temperatures in February were 1.35 degree Celsius warmer

- Global temperatures in February smashed previous monthly records by an unprecedented amount, according to NASA data, sparking warnings of a climate emergency.

- It confirms preliminary analysis from earlier in March, indicating the record-breaking temperatures.
- The global surface temperatures across land and ocean in February were 1.35 degree Celsius warmer than the average temperature for the month, from the baseline period of 1951-1980.
- The global record was set just one month earlier, with January already beating the average for that month by 1.15 degree Celsius above the average for the baseline period.
- Although the temperatures have been spurred on by a very large El Nino in the Pacific Ocean, the temperature smashed records set during the last large El Nino from 1998, which was at least as strong as the current one.
- The month did not break the record for hottest month, since that is only likely to happen during a northern hemisphere summer, when most of the world's land mass heats up.

IRNSS-1G to be delayed

- The spacecraft, IRNSS-1G, was planned for March 31. It is now planned to be launched towards the end of April, a delay that is not unusual in the Space arena.
- Indian Space Research Organisation sources said the satellite was getting readied at the ISRO Satellite Centre in Bengaluru. The sixth one, 1F, was flown as recently as on March 10 from the Sriharikota launch site.
- Much is anticipated of the uses of the Rs. 1400-crore IRNSS (Indian Regional Navigation Satellite System), which is aimed at improving positional and navigational accuracy on land, sea and in air within the country; and for everyday civil uses as well as defence and security affairs.
- The first in the series, IRNSS-1A, was put in orbit in July 2013; each of the spacecraft is built to last for at least ten years.
- ISRO plans to double its launch rate in a year by doing a flight a month.

India Aviation 2016

- India Aviation 2016, fifth in the biennial series of international exhibition and conference on civil aviation is happening in Hyderabad
- Several Tier II and III cities “remain unconnected or inadequately connected” and the northeast faced a paucity of civil aviation infrastructure despite the aviation industry growing rapidly
- On the growth potential, the passenger traffic in India was likely to touch 421 million by 2020 — it was 190 million in 2015. India is one of the least penetrated air-markets in the world with 0.04 trips per capita per annum as compared to 0.3 of China and over 2 in the U.S.
- India would require at least 800 aircraft by 2020 to cater to the phenomenal increase of passenger and freight traffic.
- Supporting infrastructure, it has to be suitably upgraded by building new Greenfield airports, expanding the existing airports and upgrading facilities for maintenance, repair and operations.

Solar energy can power air conditioner, refrigerator

- Making a marked departure from the conventional system, a Chennai-based company provides a comprehensive system that ensures that a 2 kW solar panel can power a 1.5 tonne

air conditioner, one 300 litre refrigerator, five fans, five LED tube lights (4 feet in length and 16 watts each) and eight LED bulbs (6 watts each) during the day.

- In lieu of silicon crystalline panels that are routinely used, Basil Energetics Pvt Ltd uses thin film solar panels. Though efficiency of thin film panel is the same as silicon panel at 25 degree C, the energy yield of thin film is higher than silicon panel.
- And for every 1 degree C increase in temperature, the loss in power rating is 0.5 per cent in the case of silicon panels; it is only 0.25 per cent with thin films.
- Another advantage with the thin film panel is that unlike silicon panels where power production gets completely cut off even if a small part of the panel is covered by shade, only that part of the thin film panel that is not exposed to sunlight stops producing power.
- the brain of the whole system is a smart grid (iGrid) that manages the load by monitoring the power availability in the panel on one hand and load demand on the other to ensure smooth functioning in four different scenarios.

Ideonella sakaiensis bacteria can degrade plastic

- It is hardly a hundred years since chemists learnt to make long molecules called polymers and plastics in the lab. Polymers have since been hailed on one hand as the greatest boon to mankind for their manifold uses, and the greatest bane - thanks to the way that they have cluttered the environment.
- The most common synthetic polymer or plastic used in everyday life is polyethylene terephthalate or PET (also known as Terylene or Dacron). An estimated 311 million tonnes of plastics are produced every year (and 50 million tons of PET alone)
- Unfortunately many of them, such as PET, are not degraded, digested or broken down like naturally occurring polymers (such as proteins, carbohydrates and fats).
- the best agents to degrade would be biological life forms such as bacteria which multiply by the millions in days and are themselves completely biodegradable.
- On looking for and identifying bacteria from the PET bottle recycling sites, and found one such microbe that they have named *Ideonella sakaiensis* (the first name identifies the family and the second honours the geographic location where they found the bacterium).
- *I. sakaiensis* sticks to the surface of the PET bottle, secretes one molecule named which they named PET-ase (the suffix “-ase” denotes an enzyme molecule), which breaks down PET into a smaller building block abbreviated as MHET. MHET is now taken up and broken down by another enzyme in the microbe’s cell (called MHET hydrolase) and hydrolysed to produce ethylene glycol and terephthalic acid - the two small molecules (called monomers) using which the polymer PET is made in the first place
- Even more challenging is the issue of how to clear the millions of tons of plastics fouling the oceans beds. Even if bugs are found that can biodegrade them, will they be safe for the oceans and their life forms?

New shark and ray species found

- From the Indian waters, a unique and pleasant challenge has suddenly surfaced — 13 new species of sharks and rays.
- The DNA bar coding was successfully used for accurate identification of chondrichthyans which included the chimaeras, sharks, rays, and skates in the Indian waters
- The chondrichthyans are exploited in commercial, artisanal, and recreational fishing activities but the major catch occurs in commercial fishery. They are highly vulnerable to over exploitation and habitat degradation due to their life history.

- With an estimated landing of 46,471 tonnes, India is one of the leading chondrichthyan fishing nations for the past several years. Despite the rich diversity and long history of the elasmobranch fishery, only a few detailed studies have been undertaken on the taxonomy and diversity of this group in India, pointed out the paper.
- Recently, the government had imposed a ban on the export of shark fins. Five species of sharks and two manta ray species found in Indian waters have been included in Appendix II of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora for monitoring its international trade.
- The protected species have to be accurately identified in the field or at the export/trade levels to ensure their effective protection and prevention of illegal trade.

Space probe New Horizons result revealed by NASA

- NASA scientists associated with interplanetary space probe New Horizons have revealed the former “astronomer’s planet” and its “intriguing system of small moons” in a comprehensive set of papers describing results from last summer’s Pluto system flyby.
- After a 9.5-year, three-billion-mile journey — launching faster and travelling farther than any spacecraft to reach its primary target — New Horizons zipped by Pluto on July 14 last year.
- New Horizons’ seven science instruments collected about 50 gigabits of data on the spacecraft’s digital recorders, most of it coming over nine busy days surrounding the encounter.
- Observing Pluto and Charon up close has caused us to completely reassess thinking on what sort of geological activity can be sustained on isolated planetary bodies in this distant region of the solar system.

BIRAC to start an seed fund to tackle anti-microbial resistance

- In a move to encourage biotechnology start-ups as well as tackle the threat faced by India from resistance to antimicrobial drugs.
- The Department of Biotechnology (DBT) — through the Biotechnology Industry Research Assistance Council (BIRAC) — has invested an initial \$1,00,000 to start an India-focussed seed fund to help groups in India compete for the Longitude Prize.
- This is a £ 10 million prize offered by Nesta, a U.K. charity, to any individual group anywhere in the world that develops an affordable, effective diagnostic test to detect resistance to microbes.
- BIRAC, since its inception, has supported several social entrepreneurs, BIRAC is supported by the DBT.
- India faces increasing instances of tuberculosis patients being resistant to front line drugs. Experts say this is due to lax monitoring and profligate prescription by medical authorities that allow these drugs to be easily available.
- The World Health Organisation statistics for 2014 give an estimated incidence figure of 2.2 million cases of TB for India out of a global incidence of 9 million, with instances of drug-resistant TB rapidly rising.
- Last December, the DBT laid out a strategy whereby biotechnology would be at the foundation of a \$100-billion industry by 2025, rising from the current \$7-\$10 billion.
- The National Biotechnology Development Strategy, as it is called, expects to launch four missions in healthcare, food and nutrition, clean energy and education; create a technology development and translation network across India with global partnership.

Defence Minister inaugurated first indigenous bow mounted sonar dome

- Defence Minister Manohar Parrikar flagged off the first indigenous bow-mounted sonar dome for naval warships at Defexpo.
- It was designed by engineers at a DRDO laboratory based in Pune and manufactured by Kineco Ltd., a Goan company.
- Only a couple of companies in the world have the capability to make such a structurally demanding structure in composites.
- The sonar functions as the ship's underwater eyes and ears.
- The dome is a structure fitted over the sonar array so that its electronics and sensors are not exposed to surrounding hostile environment.
- The sonar dome has to be structurally sound as well as acoustically transparent.
- Kineco has a joint venture with Kaman Aerospace group of the U.S., which has also become a significant player in the field of aerospace composites.

NASA plans for new probe in Mars in 2018

- National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) is looking at putting people on planet Mars by 2030 even as plans are afoot to put the next 'lander' on the red planet in 2018.
- NASA seeks to know the interior of the planet, penetrate the ground for up to 10 metres or more. Do a follow-up on the next rover in 2020 and check the samples on the surface
- In the city en route to the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) headquarters in Bangalore, Mr. James gave an exciting insight into the research at NASA and the collaborative efforts going on with India and Israel on the planetary missions to Mars.
- The heightened interest about Mars is because "it has more to offer, it is closer, more earth-like than the moon, has atmosphere to make oxygen and lots of potential.
- Propulsion systems, spacecraft, radars, satellite components, payload developments, et al are being jointly taken up with the help of firms in Spain, Israel and India.
- While NASA was technological leader, ISRO too has great technical expertise with its radar systems, launch vehicles of PSLV/GSLV and so on. Apart from research collaboration, there has been an exchange of scholars between both the institutions of JPL and Indian Institute of Space Technology (IIST).
- The US space institute has also been doing lot of research in earth sciences by having an orbiting lab from space to look into the Earth's atmosphere, soil moisture, study the water cycles, glacial movements and so on.
- Imagine a planetary body with water holding capacity of three times the size of Earth.
- NASA will be keenly studying the "Icy moons" of Jupiter and Saturn and will be the forthcoming planetary missions after the next 'lander' is put on Mars.
- The mission towards moons like Titan or the largest moon of Saturn and will look for the icy water as was shown by unmanned spacecraft Galileo and the Hubble telescope in search for habitable world other than earth.
- The next generation James Webb space telescope as well as new propulsion systems will help reach Jupiter and Saturn within a year and also study the 'exoplanets' – planets orbiting around stars other than the Sun.

SPORTS

Asia cup final would be between India and Bangladesh

- Bangladesh quelled the demons within to surpass Pakistan's modest total and ensure its first T20I final entry, at the Sher-e-Bangla National Cricket Stadium.
- The hosts returned from the edge of the precipice playing out a dramatic 19th over, where fortunes swung like a pendulum, to overhaul the target of 130 with five wickets and as many balls to spare.
- Rendering the rest of the league phase inconsequential, Bangladesh will now play India in the final on Sunday.

Martin Crowe passes away

- New Zealand's greatest batsman Martin Crowe died at the age of 53 after a long battle with cancer
- Crowe enjoyed a 13-year international career from 1982-95, including four years as captain.
- In his retirement, Crowe devised a new ultra-short form of the game called Cricket Max for his new employer Sky Television, which was pitched to British officials and helped lay the foundation for the modern Twenty20 revolution.

Patna Pirates reached finals of pro kabaddi league

- Patna Pirates was third time lucky, thrashing Puneri Paltan 40-21 in the semifinals and reaching the title clash of the third edition of the ProKabaddi League.
- Its reward would be a face-off against defending champion U Mumba, which crushed Bengal Warriors 41-29 to complete its own hat-trick — this one of reaching the final in every edition so far.

Patna pirates are the winner of Pro Kabaddi league

- Patna Pirates had struggled to break the semifinal jinx in the previous two editions of the ProKabaddi League (PKL).
- Having got past that hurdle, the side went all the way on Saturday, defeating defending champion U Mumba 31-28 in the dying seconds of the game to win the title but not before Mumba gave it a scare till the last few seconds of the game.
- Tied 28-28 till the last 45 seconds, it was more a case of holding nerves than anything else and Patna, with the monkey off its back, was the one that gave it the final push.
- Mumba skipper Anup Kumar — its key raider and, on this day, someone who almost took his team to the title single-handedly — had kept his calm and pushed his team to fight back from an eight-point deficit at half time.
- But his final raid, that saw him slip and go out of the play area to concede a point, saw the trophy slip away.

India beat Bangladesh in Asia cup final

- India demonstrated its dominance in Twenty20 cricket and regained continental supremacy, downing host Bangladesh by eight wickets in the final of the Asia Cup at the Sher-e-Bangla National Cricket Stadium.
- Bangladesh found its total of 120, after having been asked to bat, too meagre to challenge the efficiency of the Indians who completed the run chase with seven balls to spare.
- The match was reduced to a 15-over affair after a thundershower delayed the start by two hours.
- Shikhar Dhawan played the lead with a chanceless 60 (44b, 9x4, 1x6) while Virat Kohli (41 not out) supported him ably in a 94-run stand for the second wicket.
- Captain Mahendra Singh Dhoni produced late fireworks, scoring 20 off just six balls (two sixes and a four), to ensure India's sixth Asia Cup title. This was the 10th win in 11 matches for India — an encouraging statistic ahead of the ICC World T20.

BCCI says despite problems India-Pak match will happen

- The Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) has said the India-Pakistan World Twenty20 Cricket match at Dharamsala will be held as per schedule (on March 19) and that “the State government was on board.”
- After an hour-long meeting with senior officials of the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) at North Block, Tournament Director M.V. Sridhar said the Himachal Pradesh government was on board for the cricket match.
- The statement assumes significance as Himachal Pradesh Chief Minister Virbhadra Singh had opposed the match and even told a visiting Pakistani team a day ago that the State government would not provide any security to the cricket team.

IPL chief says it's difficult to move matches in the eleventh hour

- Indian Premier League (IPL) chairman Rajeev Shukla is confident the controversy over the usage of water for the matches scheduled in Maharashtra will be resolved soon.
- Mr Shukla said, “We will try to convince the court that it's very difficult to move the matches outside the State in the eleventh hour, and that we will try all other options to make sure that water is not wasted and only non-potable water is used.
- The former Union Cabinet Minister is surprised that no one raised the issue during the ICC World Twenty20.
- Meanwhile, Rising Pune Supergiants skipper MS Dhoni felt one should look at long-term solutions to address the water scarcity in the State rather than finding a quick-fix solution for the duration of the IPL.

Vijender singh beats Hungary's Alexander Horwath

- There was no stopping Indian boxing star Vijender Singh as he notched up his fourth successive knockout professional win by pummelling Hungary's Alexander Horwath in under three rounds here.

- Vijender had little trouble outpunching his opponent, who failed to get up after being thrown off balance by his body blows in the third round of the six-round contest of the middleweight (75kg) category late on Saturday night.
- The 30-year-old Indian, who went into the contest on the back of three successive knockout triumphs, continued to be a cut above his rivals, who talk big but deliver little inside the ring.
- The 20-year-old Horvath, with an experience of seven pro fights, had been drinking snake blood to prepare himself but it seemed the bizarre routine helped little in countering the ferocity of India's first Olympic and World Championships bronze medallist.
- Vijender will next be seen in action on April 2, the opponent and venue for which would be decided later.

India lost first match against New Zealand in T20 World Cup

- The game of cricket is a glorious gamble and New Zealand's decision to pick three spinners of all variety — off-spinner Nathan McCullum, left-armers Mitchell Santner and leg-spinner Ish Sodhi — enabled it to outwit the home team batsmen on a surface that helped them to a prodigious extent.
- Defending a small total of 126, which reflected the sub-standard quality of the pitch, New Zealand chipped away relentlessly to deal a shock 47-run defeat to the host in the opening match of the ICC World T20.
- The star-studded Indian batting line-up did not have the resources to quell the challenge posed by the vicious turning ball. It was New Zealand's fifth consecutive win against India in the shortest form of the game.

GAYLE BEAT HIS OWN RECORD

- The onset of monsoon is still some months away, but Chris Gayle provided Mumbai with a 'burst' of a different kind
- Quite fittingly, his 48-ball 100 — the century brought up in 47 — ensured the West Indies won its Group 1 opener in emphatic fashion, by six wickets and with 11 deliveries to spare.

World's first Pele shrine in Ukraine

- In the heart of an eastern Ukrainian city shaken by echoes of guns stands the world's first shrine to football legend Pele that miraculously survived nearly two years of war
- Football's governing body FIFA recognised Khudobin's creation as the world's first museum dedicated to the man widely regarded as the 20th century's greatest player.
- It opened during Ukraine's co-hosting of the European Championship in 2012 but has been closed for the past two years owing to conflict between Ukraine and pro-Russian separatists.

India wins match against Pakistan in World T20s

- India wins by six wickets on a difficult surface to make it 5-0 against Pakistan in WT20s
- With India under immense pressure at the Eden Gardens on Saturday, Kohli's equanimity complemented his stroke-making ability. On a surface that tested a batsman's technique and footwork, Kohli's classical batting in a slam-bang format nailed the chase for India.
- After the disastrous outing against New Zealand at Nagpur, India's campaign in the ICC World Twenty20 is now back on track.

Indian team for Rio finalised

- The selection committee of the National Rifle Association of India (NRAI), opted for an additional entry in men's trap in place of the quota won by rifle shooter Sanjeev Rajput for the Rio Olympics.
- The Indian shooters had won 12 quota places for the Olympics, one more than the last edition in London. With Olympic and World Championship medallist Gagan Narang being among the top two places in all the three rifle events, it was apparently easy for the NRAI to have an added entry in shotgun
- The team: Abhinav Bindra, Gagan Narang, Chain Singh, Jitu Rai, Gurpreet Singh, Prakash Nanjappa, Manavjit Singh Sandhu, Kynan Chenai, Mairaj Ahmad Khan, Apurvi Chandela, Ayonika Paul and Heena Sidhu.

India beats Bangladesh in a nail-biting match

- Nerves were shredded, nails got chewed and throats turned hoarse as a rousing Wednesday night witnessed India effect a remarkable turnaround and snatch a one-run victory over Bangladesh in the ICC World Twenty20 Super 10 Group 2 match.
- Pursuing India's 146 for seven, Bangladesh needed 11 from the last over with four wickets in hand.
- Hardik Pandya conceded a single to Mahmudullah, suffered two fours at the hands of Mushfiquur Rahim and when it boiled down to two from three deliveries, M.S. Dhoni's men set a miracle in motion, helped largely by the visitors' desire to go for glory instead of a humble single or two.
- Rahim and Mahmudullah perished to wild hoicks and a nervous Mustafizur Rahman was no match for a sprinting Dhoni, who knocked down the stumps to leave the batsman and Bangladesh stranded.
- The visitor finished with 145 for nine and crashed out of the tournament.

Johan Cruyff one of the greatest footballer died

- Johan Cruyff, one of the greatest footballers in history, died at the age of 68 from lung cancer.
- Cruyff won three European Cups as a player with Ajax Amsterdam and Ballon d'Or titles in 1971 with Ajax and 1973 and 1974 with Barcelona, where he starred from 1973 to 1978.
- He is considered one of the best four players in history, alongside Pele of Brazil, Diego Maradona of Argentina and France's Michel Platini.
- With his precision passes, speed, technique and goal-scoring ability, Cruyff set new standards as a player.

P.R. Sreejesh and Deepika gets player of the year honours

- P.R. Sreejesh and Deepika walked away with the Player of the Year honours at the second Hockey India Annual Awards ceremony for 2015.
- Sreejesh had a memorable time under the bar last year, notably playing a starring role in India's shoot-out victory over Holland in the bronze-medal match at the HWL Final.
- The veteran Deepika was recognised for her work in defence as the Indian women's team qualified for the Olympic Games after a gap of 36 years.
- Both Sreejesh and she were given a cash prize of Rs. 25 lakh.

India beats Australia to reach semifinals

- Kohli's extraordinary batsmanship, which produced an unbeaten 51-ball 82, carried India to a memorable six-wicket win over Australia and earned the host a place in the World T20 semifinals.
- The class of Kohli's knock, which came amidst extremely difficult circumstances and in a do-or-die match, reminded one of Sachin Tendulkar's unforgettable assault on the Australian attack in the summer of 1998 in Sharjah.
- India staged a tremendous fightback to restrict Australia to 160 for six even though the Aussies were off to a flying start thanks to the pyrotechnics of its combative openers.
- India's resilience was put through another tough test when Australia relied on an astounding onslaught from its openers Usman Khawaja and Aaron Finch to amass 50 runs in less than four overs.
- Finch stunned the Indians by hitting Nehra on the off-side and hoisting Ashwin over long on for two successive sixes.