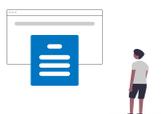


G.K snippets...



Law, Policy and Governance



[Daily snippets](#)

1. [Government renews offer for dialogue for farmers](#)

- A day after farmer unions rejected its offer for talks, the Union government extended a fresh invitation for dialogue and reiterated its commitment to finding a logical solution to all the issues raised by them. In a three page letter to the unions, Vivek Aggarwal, Joint Secretary, Agriculture Ministry, said the government had always been discussing the issues with an open mind and honest intentions.
- The fresh letter said the three laws on agricultural reforms were not related to the minimum support price (MSP) and would not impact it in any manner; therefore, putting forth any new demand on this front was not justified. The government was still ready to discuss all the issues raised by the unions, the letter said.

2. [Delhi government's Fuel stickers, HSRP](#)

- The Delhi High Court told the city government not to create panic among the citizens and give them more time to obtain **color-coded fuel stickers** and **high security registration plates (HSRP)** before it starts imposing ₹5,500 fine for violations. A Bench of Justice Siddharth Mridul and Justice Talwant Singh said even they were clueless about the requirement of the stickers and asked the Delhi government's counsel to come with "detailed instructions".

3. [21-year-old student set to become Mayor](#)

- If the party's seniors approve the nomination, a 21year old woman college student who is a member of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) will **become the youngest Mayor of Thiruvananthapuram**.
- The district committee of the CPI(M) proposed **Arya Rajendran** for the Mayor's post in the city Corporation. The two top contenders from the LDF for the Mayor's post were defeated in the election, leaving 65-year old

Jameela Sreedharan, daughter of veteran Communist leader N. Sreedharan and a former member of the Public Service Commission, in the race.

#### 4. [Varsity for disability studies soon](#)

- The Social Justice and Empowerment Ministry invited comments from the public on a draft Bill for setting up a university for disability studies and rehabilitation sciences. In the public notice inviting comments, the Ministry said the proposed university to be located in Kamrup district, Assam, would be “the first of its kind.” The Ministry’s proposal stated that there was a shortage of rehabilitation professionals in the country.

#### 5. [M.P. Cabinet nod for anti-conversion Bill](#)

- The Madhya Pradesh Freedom of Religion Bill, 2020, which provides for a prison term of up to 10 years and a fine of ₹ 1 lakh for conversion through “marriage or by any other fraudulent means” got the State Cabinet’s approval. The Bill, in some ways, is similar to the Prohibition of **Unlawful Conversion of Religion Ordinance, 2020**, notified by the BJP government in Uttar Pradesh.
- Offences under the proposed law would be cognisable and non-bailable. Those willing to convert would need to apply to the district administration 60 days in advance. The religious leaders facilitating the conversion would also have to inform about it 60 days in advance. Violation of these provisions would attract a jail term of three to five years and a fine of ₹50,000.
- In cases of religious conversion of members of the Scheduled Castes, the Scheduled Tribes and minors, a provision has been made for imprisonment of two to 10 years and ₹50,000 fine. There is provision of three to 10 years of imprisonment and fine of ₹50,000 in cases of marriage carried out by hiding religion, misrepresentation or impersonation.

#### 6. [Case filed against advocate Pracha](#)

- Two days after conducting a search of his premises, Delhi Police registered a case against **advocate Mehmood Pracha** on charges of obstructing a public servant from performing his duty.

#### 7. [Raid on Pracha a very serious matter, lawyers tell Amit Shah](#)

- The Bar Council of Delhi (BCD) wrote to Home Minister Amit Shah terming the raid on the office premises of advocate Mehmood Pracha “very serious”. Mr. Pracha is the legal representative for many of the people accused in cases connected to the north east Delhi riots that broke out in February this year.
- *“We notice anguish and anger in the legal community, primarily because it [the raid] goes to the very root and [disrupts] independent discharge of responsibility by an advocate, as provided under the Constitution of India being integral part of the **Justice Dispensation System, the Advocate Act, 1961, and the Bar Council of India Rules,**”* the letter stated.
- The **Delhi High Court Women Lawyers’ Forum** (DHCWLF) has written to the President of the Delhi High Court Bar Association expressing concerns over the alleged recent trend of intimidation of lawyers who are representing accused persons in the Delhi riot cases. It stated that the larger issue is lawyers who are vocal about defending civil liberties are being systematically targeted.

#### 8. [Telangana withdraws regulated farming](#)

- The Telangana government has withdrawn regulated farming, introduced in the last agricultural season to discourage maize and promote fine varieties of paddy, pulses and oilseeds for reasons of demand in the market. In the ongoing Rabi season, farmers were left to decide for themselves their preferred crops. The meeting felt it was not possible for the government to purchase or sell farmers’ produce as it was not into merchandise.

### 9. Quota cannot be denied by invoking technicalities: HC

- The Delhi High Court has observed that reservations cannot be given with one hand and taken away by another - through invoking technicalities. Bench of **Justices Rajiv Sahai Endlaw** and **Asha Menon** made the remarks while directing the government to allow a Scheduled Tribe man to submit his height relaxation certificate for recruitment as Sub Inspector.
- Mr. Meena was granted five days by the examiners at the Group Centre (CRPF) in Greater Noida to produce his certificate for height relaxation. He, however, took 10 days to submit the certificate, and the examiners declined to accept it. The court directed the government to “permit Mr. Meena to submit the certificate”. It also directed the government to allow Mr. Meena to be considered for recruitment.
- The High Court remarked that “*members of the STs have been granted certain reservations/relaxations, not only legislatively but also constitutionally, and shows the need therefore*”.

### 10. Assam tables Bill to make madrasas regular schools

- The Assam government introduced a Bill in the 126 member Assembly to convert the **State-run madrasas** into general educational institutes from the next fiscal. **The Assam Repealing Bill, 2020** seeks to repeal the Assam Madrasa Education (Provincialisation) Act, 1995 and the Assam Madrasa Education (Provincialisation of Services of Employees and Reorganisation of Madrasa Educational Institutions) Act, 2018.
- The Bill proposed to convert the madrasas into upper primary, high and higher secondary schools with no change of status and pay, allowances and service conditions of the teaching and the non teaching staff. Assam has more than 600 State-run madrasas.

### 11. Karnataka set to ban cow slaughter

- The Karnataka Cabinet decided to promulgate an ordinance for implementing the **anti cow slaughter Bill**. The Karnataka Prevention of Slaughter and Preservation of Cattle Bill, 2020, passed in the Assembly during the winter session, was not cleared by the Legislative Council.
- The new law would prohibit the slaughter of cows, but would not stop the slaughter of buffaloes aged 13 years and above. Slaughterhouses would continue to operate and beef consumption would not be prohibited.

### 12. Delhi government plans to reduce COVID-19 ICU beds

- AAP govt. informs HC after panel’s suggestion to reduce beds from 80% to 60% in private hospitals. The court was hearing a plea by the Association of Healthcare Providers to quash the Delhi government’s September 12 order to **reserve 80% ICU beds for COVID-19 patients in 33 private hospitals**.
- On November 12, the High Court had allowed the city government to reserve 80% ICU beds for COVID-19 patients in 33 private hospitals in view of the spike in the number of cases.

### 13. Utilization of fly ash in cement plants

- The **National Green Tribunal (NGT)** has directed a Faridabad based **thermal power plant** to explore utilisation of fly ash in cement plants and also directed the **Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB)** to monitor whether covering of the ash dump meets scientific environmental norms.
- The directions came when the green panel was hearing a plea moved by petitioner Chetram Choudhary alleging illegal disposal of fly ash by a power plant in Faridabad, which was causing health hazards.
- **What is fly ash?** It is a fine powder that is a byproduct of burning pulverized coal in electric generation power plants. **Fly ash** is a pozzolan, a substance containing aluminous and siliceous material that forms cement in the presence of water. When mixed with lime and water, **fly ash** forms a compound similar to Portland cement.

#### 14. M.P. govt. takes ordinance route on anti-conversion Bill

- The Madhya Pradesh Cabinet gave its nod to an ordinance on the Bill against religious conversion through fraudulent means, including those for the sake of marriage, and sent it to Governor Anandiben Patel for approval. The Cabinet had approved the **Madhya Pradesh Freedom of Religion Bill, 2020**.

#### Profile : Arya Rajendran

1. The newly elected **Corporation councillor of the division, Arya Rajendran**, a 21year old B.Sc. Mathematics student of All Saints College. The CPI(M) is believed to have counted on her performance record as State president of its children's organisation, Balasangham, and in the State committee of its students' wing, the Students' Federation of India (SFI).
2. She refuses to respond to sceptics who wonder whether she'll just remain a mascot, with the party pulling the strings from behind. "It's best answered through actions," she said, promising to discharge her duties in a consultative manner, with an ear to the ground and to the party's counsel.
3. K.R. Meera's Arachar (Hangwoman) is her personal favourite for its firm woman protagonist, but Benjamin's Adujeevitham (Goat days) with its gut wrenching account of a worker in the Gulf moved her to tears. She will be the third woman, all from the CPI(M), to helm the urban local government in the capital and she's proud of the legacy.

#### Opinion : Article 356 and an activist judiciary

1. The recent order of the **Andhra Pradesh High Court** directing the Andhra Pradesh government to come prepared to argue on the 'breakdown of constitutional machinery in the state' is shocking as it opens up the **possibility of use or even misuse of Article 356** by the judiciary.
2. No liberal democratic Constitution in the world has a provision such as Article 356 that gives the central government the power to dismiss a democratically elected State government except the Constitution of Pakistan. **H.V. Kamath** termed it as a surgical operation for a mere cold. He criticised the word 'otherwise' and said only god knows what 'otherwise' means. 'Otherwise' can include anything including a presidential dream of breakdown of constitutional machinery in a state.
3. The Andhra Pradesh High Court could pass such an order due to this very term 'otherwise'. But for this word which negates the ideals of constitutionalism by giving unlimited powers to the Centre, the High Court could not have overstepped the line as it did. Article 356 has been used/misused more than 125 times though B.R. Ambedkar had assured that it would remain a dead letter. Both on Article 356 and the Governor, experience has proven Ambedkar wrong. In almost all cases it was used for political considerations rather than any genuine break-down of constitutional machinery in the States.
4. Today, when many constitutional experts are of the view that the judiciary is increasingly becoming more executive minded than the executive itself, the observations of the Andhra Pradesh High Court are a worrisome sign. Ideally, the word 'otherwise' should be deleted from Article 356 and the provision be used only sparingly and to never remove a majority government.

#### Opinion : Granting bail is the rule : Bail reforms

1. Bail reform must begin by addressing two key facets of the criminal justice system: **Judicial discretion** and **Monetary surety bonds**. The power to grant bail is a **discretionary power vested in judges** and it is meant to be exercised liberally. The refusal to grant bail deprives individuals of liberty by confining them in jails without trial and conviction.

2. At present, the power to grant bail is exercised sparingly. Without grant of bail by the lower courts, the accused persons are required to approach the High Court or the Supreme Court. Consequently, most accused persons remain incarcerated as undertrials for extended periods of time.
3. The pendency of bail applications has particularly increased during the pandemic - due to the shutting down of courts and the exacerbation of arrests for minor offences by the police.
4. The system of bail typically requires sureties to furnish a bond for some property valued at the amount determined by the concerned judge.
  - The bail amount in **subordinate courts**, even for petty offences punishable by less than three years, is a minimum of ₹10,000.
  - In cases of bail before the High Courts and the Supreme Court, this amount usually exceeds ₹30,000.
  - Those without assets, even when granted bail, end up languishing in jails or incur debt by paying others to stand as fake sureties to secure their freedom. A bogey of middlemen has also emerged due to these high bail amounts.
  - The grant of bail on a personal bond without sureties although permissible in law, is rare. In the **1978 Supreme Court case of Moti Ram v. State of Madhya Pradesh**, Justice V. R. Krishna Iyer identified the issue of **unreasonably high sureties** as a human rights problem.
5. During the lockdown, the Gwalior Bench of the M.P. High Court imposed peculiar conditions such as installing a non Chinese LED TV at the District Hospital, registration as a "voluntary COVID-19 warrior" etc. To conclude, Courts introspect little about standards of liberty, reasonableness and proportionality when deciding bail matters.

#### Opinion : The Broken bonds of democracy

1. A recent order by the Central Information Commission (CIC) has again revealed the inherent problems surrounding the Electoral Bond Scheme (scheme) of 2018. This order effectively shut the door to seek any details about donors and donees relating to electoral bonds under the Right to Information (RTI) Act. In effect, the scheme is not transparent, promotes arbitrariness and is therefore illegal.
2. The scheme facilitates undisclosed quid pro quo arrangements between donors, who are likely to be corporates, and political parties. Such an arrangement goes against best practices of electoral democracy and is repugnant to the freedom of speech and expression. In **People's Union for Civil Liberties v. Union of India (2003)**, the Supreme Court held that the freedom of speech and expression also contained the fundamental right of a voter to secure information about the candidates who are contesting the election.
3. The CIC order has upheld the contention of the SBI that it is not required to furnish the details of donors, donees and donations, under the RTI Act. SBI has relied on two grounds provided under Section 8 of the RTI Act, which exempts disclosure of information - that the information sought has been held in fiduciary capacity and that there was no public interest involved in the application.
4. The CIC order effectively shuts the door on any RTI requests with regard to electoral bonds and any concomitant information. There is no other recourse but for the Supreme Court to determine the law with regard to the scheme and the interpretation of the CIC.

#### Opinion : Towards a comprehensive agriculture policy

##### 1. Background

- Successive governments and farm subsidies. How large is India's spending on farm subsidies compared to those of other countries having substantial interests in agriculture?

##### 2. Adverse terms of trade

- In 1950-51, agriculture's share in the country's GDP was 45%, the share of the workforce dependent on the sector was close to 70%. Seven decades later, agriculture's share in GDP is below 16%, but almost 50% of the country's workforce depends on this sector.
- Erosion of farm incomes was triggered by growing inefficiencies, which, in turn, was caused by a lack of meaningful investment in agriculture. The share of this sector in the total investment undertaken in the country consistently fell from about 18% in the 1950s to just above 11% in the 1980s. In the most recent quinquennium for which data are available (2014-15 to 2018-19), the average share of agriculture was 7.6%.

### 3. [How the lack of investment spread out](#)

- Yields of major crops in India. If one ranks countries in terms of their yields in wheat and rice, India's two major crops, the country's ranks were 45 and 59, respectively, in 2019. If the areas recording high yields, such as Punjab and Haryana are excluded then the ranking falls steeply.
- The market has always been the farmers' biggest adversary, making it impossible for them to realise remunerative prices for their produce.

### 4. [Why need for a comprehensive policy](#)

- India needs an agricultural policy that addresses the challenges facing this sector in a comprehensive manner. A comparison with other countries, the United States, with less than 2% of its workforce engaged in agriculture, has been enacting farm legislations every four years since the **Agricultural Adjustment Act was enacted in 1933**, the first piece of legislation of U.S. President Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal. In a similar vein, members of the European Common Market adopted their Common Agricultural Policy in 1962, only a few years after establishing the institution. These policies comprehensively address the different needs of the sector.
- The lack of a coherent policy for agriculture must surely be regarded among the most remarkable failures of the governments in post Independence India.

### 5. [How farm subsidies measure up](#)

- Successive governments have chosen to dole out subsidies in order to ensure domestic food security and protect rural livelihoods. Wanton distribution of subsidies without a proper policy framework has distorted the **structure of production** and, consequently, undesirable outcomes in terms of **excessive food stockpiling**.
- Members of the **World Trade Organization (WTO)** are expected to notify their agricultural subsidies as a part of their commitment under the **Agreement on Agriculture (AoA)**; the subsidy notifications provide a good basis to understand where India stands *vis-à-vis* other countries in this regard.
- India's latest notification, for 2018-19, shows that the subsidies provided were **slightly more than \$56 billion**. In most of the recent years, the largest component of India's subsidies (\$24.2 billion, or 43% of the total) are provided to "**low income or resource poor farmers**", a terminology that the AoA uses.
- India has notified that **99.43% of its farmers are low income or resource poor**. According to the agricultural census conducted in 2015-16, these are the farmers whose holdings are 10 hectares or less. Thus, according to the Government of India, almost the entire farm sector comprises economically weak farmers.

## [Analysis : Facial recognition technology: law yet to catch up](#)

### 1. [Background](#)

- There are currently 16 different **facial recognition tracking (FRT) systems** in active utilization by various Central and State governments across India for surveillance, security or authentication of identity.
- While the FRT system has seen rapid deployment by multiple government departments in recent times, there are no specific laws or guidelines to regulate the use of this potentially invasive technology. This poses a huge

threat to the fundamental rights to privacy and freedom of speech and expression because it does not satisfy the threshold the Supreme Court had set in its landmark privacy judgment in the '**Justice K.S. Puttaswamy Vs Union of India**' case. In 2018, the Delhi police became one of the first law enforcement agencies in the country to start using the technology.

## 2. Possible fallout

- This might lead to an over policing problem or problems where certain minorities are targeted without any legal backing or any oversight as to what is happening. Another problem that may arise is of mass surveillance, wherein the police are using the FRT system during protest.
- 100% accuracy in finding matches has not been achieved under this technology. In case an inaccurate system is installed, two things can happen. There can be a '**false positive**' wherein somebody is recognized as somebody they are not or '**false negative**' wherein the system refuses to recognize the person as themselves.

## 3. Global deployment

- Many cities and states in the U.S. have either completely banned the usage or imposed moratorium on the usage of facial recognition tech. Companies like IBM, Microsoft have decided not to sell these technologies to law enforcement at all. Even Amazon has imposed a moratorium. Facial recognition technology has not only been invasive, inaccurate and unregulated but has also been unapologetically weaponized by law enforcement against people of color.
- To conclude, "*India is facing a facial recognition pandemic - one without any safeguards or remedies for the harms of exclusion, profiling and surveillance. Without urgent action, such systems of mass surveillance will erode democratic liberties and threaten the rights of lakhs of Indians*".

## Opinion : Giving adequate time for probing

1. Taking a cue from the **Andhra Pradesh's Disha Bill of 2019**, the Maharashtra government recently announced that it would enact a law to deal sternly with the cases of sexual assault on women. The proposed **Maharashtra Shakti Act of 2020** will have stern punishment for offences of sexual assault and a provision to complete investigation within 15 days. Disha mandated completion of investigation within seven working days for "heinous offences".
  2. **The Criminal Procedure Code (CrPC)** provides that investigation relating to offences punishable with imprisonment up to 10 years must be completed within 60 days and for offences with higher punishment (including rape), within 90 days of detaining the accused, else he or she shall be released on bail. To speed up the process, the CrPC was amended in 2018 and the period of investigation was reduced from 90 to 60 days for all cases of rape. There is no upper limit to complete investigation when the offenders are at large. Each investigation is guided by its own set of facts and circumstances.
  3. Generally, the time of investigation depends on : the severity of the crime, the number of accused persons and agencies involved. Therefore, to conclude Investigation of sensitive offences should be done expeditiously. However, setting narrow timelines for investigation creates scope for procedural loopholes which may be exploited during trial.
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## National News/ Interventions



### Daily snippets

#### 1. Olympic teams should receive priority for vaccine: House panel

- A parliamentary panel has recommended putting athletes, coaches and support staff going to the **2021 Tokyo Olympics** in the priority group for COVID-19 vaccination. The Standing Committee on Education, Women, Children, Youth and Sports, headed by BJP MP Vinay Sahasrabudde, submitted its report on “**Preparation of Olympic2021**” to **Rajya Sabha Chairman M. Venkaiah Naidu**. It asked the government to reopen training facilities that are still shut. The committee noted that due to the lockdown and the travel restrictions, sportspersons had lost international and even national competition exposure.

#### 2. ‘Objection to new mosque untenable’

- The five acre **land allotted for the construction of a mosque at Dhannipur in Ayodhya** is not in any manner a barter or an exchange, but a relief carved out by the Supreme Court using its special powers, the trust set up to build the structure has said.
- The clarification was issued by the **Indo-Islamic Cultural Foundation** following questions raised by **AIMPLB member Zafaryab Jilani**, who reportedly termed the mosque and other facilities being constructed at Dhannipur “illegal” and impermissible under the Shariah. Mr. Jilani had allegedly told presspersons that the **proposed mosque violated the Waqf Act, arguing that mosques or land for them cannot be bartered**.

#### 3. Navies of India, Vietnam to hold passage exercise

- **Indian Navy ship INS Kiltan**, which arrived in Vietnam on Thursday to deliver relief material under **Mission SagarIII**, will hold a **Passage Exercise (PASSEX) with the Vietnamese Navy in the South China Sea (SCS)** later this week, the Navy said. *“The current visit seeks to enhance maritime cooperation,”* it said.

#### 4. Manipur's Zomi people demand for BTC-like council

- Manipur's Zomi ethnic group has renewed its demand for a self-administered zone on the lines of the **Bodoland Territorial Council** in Assam under the **Sixth Schedule** of the Constitution.
- “With Mr. Amit Shah scheduled to visit Manipur, we are hopeful that an honourable political solution will be expedited for the Zo kindred tribes and the political dialogue with the Zomi political groups for the creation of ZTC will be resumed,” said Zomi Council chairman **John K. Ngahite**.

#### 5. Centre may accept Sumi's ceasefire offer

- The Union government is likely to accept NSCN-K (National Socialist Council of Nagaland - Khaplang) leader Niki Sumi’s offer to revive the ceasefire agreement and the antiterror cases lodged against him would be dealt with appropriately. Security agencies have worked on Sumi’s return to India with an eye on concluding the Naga peace deal. Sumi is wanted by the **National Investigation Agency (NIA)** for allegedly planning the attack on an Army convoy in Manipur’s Chandel district in 2015. The attack preceded the NSCNK’s decision to unilaterally abrogate the ceasefire with the Centre in March 2015.
- The Union Home Ministry had banned the NSCN-K led by S.S Khaplang in 2015 after the Chandel ambush. Khaplang, a Hemi Naga from Myanmar who led the Naga insurgency movement for decades, died in 2017. He formed his own outfit in 1988 after he fell out with **Isak Chisi Swu and Thuingaleng Muivah**, the other two Naga

leaders who went on to form the NSCN-IM, the group that signed a framework agreement with the government in 2015 to find a permanent **solution to the Naga issue**.

#### 6. [E-Commerce sites not to sell mobile signal boosters](#)

- With mobile network boosters becoming a major reason for poor service quality, the **Department of Telecom (DoT)** has asked online sellers to pull down listings of such equipment. The DoT has also carried out raids across multiple locations in over the last two days which led to the removal of 68 illegal boosters (or repeaters).

#### 7. [Dry run for vaccine rollout in 4 States next week: govt.](#)

- The Centre is gearing up for the roll out of the COVID-19 vaccine across the country, with four States to initiate a dry run next week, the Union Health Ministry said on Friday. **Andhra Pradesh, Assam, Gujarat and Punjab** have been selected considering the geographical locations.
- The Ministry said this exercise would enable **end to end mobilisation** and testing of the COVID-19 vaccination process (except the vaccine) and check the usage of CoWIN in the field environment, the linkages between planning, implementation and reporting mechanisms and identify challenges and guide the actual implementation, including improvements in the process.
- Meanwhile the **National Expert Group on Vaccine Administration of COVID19 (NEGVAC)** has recommended three prioritised population groups, including healthcare workers (about one crore), frontline workers (about two crore) and prioritised age group (about 27 crore). The Ministry added that as **vaccines are temperature sensitive and need to be stored in specific temperature**, the present cold chain system consisting of 85,634 equipment for storage of vaccine at about 28,947 cold chain points across the country will be used for the cold chain administration.

#### 8. [Urdu author S.R. Faruqi passes away](#)

- **Legendary Urdu poet and critic Shamsur Rahman Faruqi** passed away on Friday. He was 85. The **Padma Shri** poet was born on September 30, 1935, in Uttar Pradesh and is credited to have revived "**Dastangoi**", a 16th century Urdu oral storytelling art form.
- His books "**Mirror of Beauty**" (translated into English from the Urdu "**Kai Chaand The Sar-e-Aasmaan**" in 2006), "**Ghalib Afsaney Ki Himayat Mein**" (1989) and "**The Sun That Rose From The Earth**" (2014) are among others he wrote in his five-decade-long literary career. He also received **Saraswati Samman** in 1996 for his work "**She'r-e Shor-Angez**", a four-volume study of the eighteenth-century poet Mir Taqi Mir.

#### 9. [Farmer unions to resume talks](#)

- As the farmers' agitation for the repeal of the three farm laws completed a month, the **Samyukt Kisan Morcha (SKM)**, a joint front of farmer unions, **accepted the Centre's offer for talks**, putting forth a **four point agenda** that includes modalities for the **revocation of the laws** and a mechanism for **legal guarantee for the minimum support price (MSP)**. The SKM proposed to hold the talks on December 29 at 11 a.m., **Swaraj India president Yogendra Yadav** announced at a press conference.
- Besides the farm laws and MSP, the agenda includes the amendments to be made and notified in the "**Commission for the Air Quality Management in National Capital Region and Adjoining Areas Ordinance, 2020**" to **exclude farmers from its penal provisions** and changes to be made in the draft **Electricity Amendment Bill, 2020**, to **protect the interests of farmers**.

#### 10. [Energy will be focus of Jaishankar's Qatar visit](#)

- In his second visit to the Gulf region during the coronavirus pandemic, **External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar** will travel to Qatar for a two day visit and talks with **Foreign Minister Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim Al-Thani**.

- Energy trade, investment opportunities, discussions on conditions for Indian expatriate labour and the ongoing Afghanistan dialogue process taking place in Doha will be on top of the agenda. MEA also pointed out that the two countries had maintained strong ties during the pandemic, and that **Prime Minister Narendra Modi** had spoken to the **Qatari Amir, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad AlThani** three times in the past few months.

#### **11. BSF, BGB denies any large-scale Bangladeshi ingress**

- The perception of largescale illegal immigration from Bangladesh into India is not based on fact, the frontier forces of the two countries- Border Security Force and Border Guards Bangladesh have said while deciding to ramp up patrolling to check cross border crimes.
- A factor behind Bangladeshi people not entering India illegally was the GDP growth rate of Bangladesh, said BGB Director-General Shafeenul Islam.

#### **12. Tripura launches scheme for violence victims' kin**

- Tripura government has launched a scheme to provide jobs to next of kin of those who died in political violence over a period of 46 years with 2018 as a cut-off year. Families who lost one or more members in political violence over a time of 46 years since Tripura became a full fledged State will be accepted for consideration. The government might consider relaxation of age and educational qualification of candidates.

#### **13. Chandrayaan-2 data released**

- The **Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO)** said it had released the first set of data from the country's second mission to the Moon, Chandrayaan2, for the general public. Chandrayaan-2 was launched on July 22, 2019 from the **Satish Dhawan Space Centre** at Sriharikota in Andhra Pradesh. *"All experiments have been performing well and the data received suggest excellent capability to deliver on the pre launch promises,"* the ISRO said.
- The **Indian Space Science Data Centre (ISSDC)** is the nodal centre of planetary data archive for the planetary missions of the ISRO. The first set of data from the Chandrayaan-2 mission is now being released for wider public use through the **PRADAN portal** hosted by the ISSDC.
- The ISRO had planned the landing on the South Pole of the lunar surface. However, **the lander Vikram** had landed in September last year. Its orbiter, which is still in the lunar orbit, has a mission life of seven years. ISRO Chairman K. Sivan had recently said the work on the Chandrayaan-3 mission was in progress

#### **14. Jal Jeevan adds 1 lakh water connections daily**

- Since its **launch in August 2019**, the Centre's ambitious flagship scheme **Jal Jeevan Mission (JJM)**, which in partnership with the States seeks to ensure that every rural household of the country gets assured drinking water supply by 2024, has achieved **32.3% coverage of tap connections** in rural India, emerging as a key scheme in the Narendra Modi government's second term.
- *"In almost a year, despite COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown as well as restrictions, more than 3 crore households have been provided with tap water connections,"* said Director of JJM Bharat Lal. *"Almost 1 lakh new connections are getting added on a daily basis. The State governments have taken this very seriously and have focused their efforts on its delivery,"* he added further. Out of a total of 731 districts, 256 districts and 1,592 blocks have been classified as water stressed or drought prone, this brings the scheme at the centre of various development schemes and agendas.
- To ensure its implementation without any funding crunch, in 2020-21, a sum of ₹23,500 crore has been allotted for the implementation of the JJM. Besides this, in 2020-21, 50% of **15th Finance Commission Grants** to Rural Local Bodies, that is, ₹30,375 crore as a tied grant, will be utilised for water supply and sanitation.

#### **15. Dealing with the new COVID variant**

- **The National Task Force** on COVID-19 has concluded that there was no need to change the existing treatment protocol in view of the mutations emerging in the SARS-CoV-2 strain. 5% of the positive cases from all the States and Union Territories would now be sent for **whole genome sequencing (WGS)**. The NTF also recommended the setting up of a '**Genomic Surveillance Consortium**' (INSACOG) to map the various strains circulating in India. It further added that routine genomic surveillance of SARS-CoV-2 from representative samples all across the samples needs to be a continuous and well planned activity.
- The health ministry noted that the variant has 14 non-synonymous (amino acid altering) mutations, six synonymous (non amino acid altering), and three deletions. Eight mutations are present in the Spike (S) gene which carries the binding site (Receptor Binding Domain) of the ACE2 receptors, which are the point of entry of the virus into the human respiratory cells. It added that it is important to understand that like all other RNA viruses, SARS-CoV-2 will continue to mutate.

#### 16. **'No community based autonomy, assured Shah'**

- A conglomerate of civil society organisations in Manipur said Union Home Minister Amit Shah has assured them that the **Centre would not approve community based autonomy in the State**. Non-Naga groups in Manipur are wary of reports that the Centre was contemplating a territorial council each in Manipur and Arunachal Pradesh as a solution to the protracted Naga political issue. Such a council is believed to be an alternative to the idea of a **greater Naga homeland** purportedly pursued by the Isak-Muivah faction of the National Socialist Council of Nagaland, or NSCN(IM). The Zomi has also been seeking a selfrule area in Manipur **modelled on Assam's Bodoland Territorial Council**.

#### 17. **Towards an effective vaccination distribution policy**

- India plans to vaccinate 300 million people against COVID-19 over the next 6-7 months. The government plans to give **priority to healthcare workers and other frontline workers**, followed by everyone who is above 50 years of age. This will mean that roughly 20% of the population will be vaccinated by July or August 2021.
- Since all the vaccines that are currently in the spotlight require two doses, the government will have to acquire 600 million doses. Fortunately, **Pune's Serum Institute of India is the world's largest producer of vaccines**. There are reports that the government has already struck a deal with the Serum Institute to acquire 500 million doses of the **AstraZeneca** vaccine. There are other vaccine front runners including **Bharat Biotech's Covaxin and the Russian Sputnik V** whose clinical trials in India are being conducted by Reddy's Labs.
- **Who gets priority?** The government's strategy of giving priority to frontline workers and elderly people is in line with the **practice being followed in the U.K. and the U.S.** The rationale for this is to protect those who are most likely to be infected in the future as well as those who are most vulnerable to the health consequences of the infection.
- However, a vaccination drive such as this should have two distinct objectives: one, **providing protection to those vaccinated**, and two, **to minimise or at least slow down the speed and spread of the viral transmission**. This suggests that densely populated areas - for instance, the Dharavi slum - should receive far more attention than they are likely to get under the current strategy.
- **Role of private players** : The government's procurement strategy seems to depend entirely on domestic sources. Moreover, the government plans to bear the entire cost of vaccination. It should follow its own distribution policies as if the additional sources of supply do not exist. It has to **ensure that there is no reduction in the availability of the vaccine for the poor**. In fact, there may actually be an increase in supply and hence less waiting time for the less affluent since some of the richer individuals in the target group will opt out of the government distribution system and prefer to get vaccinated at some private outlet.

#### 18. **On Nepal, India prefers to watch from sidelines**

- Within just seven months, the disposition of Nepal's top leadership towards New Delhi has undergone a complete turnaround. On the one hand, **Prime Minister K.P. Sharma Oli**, who was on a collision course with the

government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, accusing it of territorial hegemony, has considerably softened his tone and courted high level visits from India towards the end of 2020.

- On the other, his rival in the unified Nepal Communist Party, **Pushpa Kamal Dahal, or Prachanda**, who was seen as sympathetic to India's cause, is now clearly **seeking China's intervention in the current political crisis in Nepal**, sparked by Mr. **Oli's dissolution of Parliament's lower house**.
- In another turnaround, China, which used to stay aloof from internal politics, has shown its hand in the current crisis, while India, which is often accused of instigating instability in the Himalayan nation, is watching the situation, albeit closely, from the sidelines.

#### **19. Eminent dance scholar Sunil Kothari dead at 87**

- Eminent **dance scholar and critic Sunil Kothari**, 87, passed away because of COVID-19 related complications. A **Sangeet Natak Akademi fellow**, Kothari blazed a new trail in documenting Indian classical dance forms.
- In the **league of archivists and scholars like T.K. Govind Vidyarthi and Mohan Khokhar**, Kothari researched and recorded the journey of Indian dance forms - how they took shape, blossomed, and survived colonial rule. With 20 odd books to his credit, as a dance historian, Kothari focused on anecdotal accounts.
- The **Padma Shri winner** wrote **extensively on Bharatanatyam, Kathak and Manipuri dance forms**. His scholarly work, *Sattriya: Classical Dance of Assam*, helped in creating a better understanding of the dance form in the national and global circuit. His other notable contributions include *New Directions in Indian Dance* and *Kuchipudi Indian Classical Dance Art*.

#### **20. Inner Line Permit (ILP) in Manipur**

- Implemented under the **British era Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulation**, the ILP is an official document issued to let an Indian citizen enter a protected area for a limited period. Pressure groups in the northeast view this permit as a shield against the entry of illegal immigrants.
- Apart from Manipur, **ILP is needed in Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram and Nagaland**. Several groups in Meghalaya have been demanding the implementation of ILP. The civil society organisations had said the people of Manipur would not accept any ethnic based territorial council within Manipur. They said such an arrangement would create more political and ethnic problems in the State.

#### **21. Mumbai's sexpert Dr. Mahinder Watsa dead**

- Mumbai's **most popular sexpert Dr. Mahinder Watsa** died here on Monday at 96. Through his **Ask the Sexpert column published in Mumbai Mirror for the last 15 years**, Watsa educated and entertained his readers with witty replies. In 1974, the organisation launched a sex education, counselling and therapy centre, the first in India. Watsa left his practice for counselling and education in the early 1980s.

#### **22. Expert panel asks CPWD to submit demolition plans**

- An expert committee of the Union Ministry of Environment and Forest has asked the Central Public Works Department (CPWD) to **submit detailed plans for the demolition of government buildings** for its **proposed redevelopment of the Central Vista**, with a focus on "*instant demolition*" techniques to reduce pollution.
- According to the minutes, the proposed builtup area would be 17,21,500 square metres and the area to be demolished would be 4,58,820 square metres, at a total cost of ₹13,450 crore. The project would need 542 kilolitres per day of water and produce 7.2 tonnes per day of solid waste.
- **Buildings that would be demolished** : the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, Shastri Bhavan, Krishi Bhavan, Vigyan Bhavan, VP Residency, National Museum, Jawahar Bhavan, Nirman Bhavan, Udyog Bhavan, Raksha Bhavan and INS Hutments.

#### **23. Army chief begins visit to South Korea**

- Continuing a string of visits to several countries aimed at strengthening military cooperation, **Army chief Gen Manoj Naravane** arrived in South Korea on Monday on a visit from December 28 to 30. This is the first ever **visit of an Army chief to South Korea**. In recent years, the two countries have significantly expanded their defence cooperation which also saw a number of high level visits.

#### **24. CDS praises Odisha police for tackling Left Wing Extremism**

- **Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) of India** General Bipin Rawat commended the Odisha police by applauding the force's efforts in successfully tackling the challenges of the Left-wing Extremists (LWE) with the help of Central paramilitary forces. General Rawat also extolled the Odisha police in maintaining high standards of law and order in the State.
- On national security, General Rawat said the fallout of events such as climate change, deglobalisation, regionalisation, popular protests, trade wars have raised the risks of destabilisation and disruptions. "Also, asymmetric warfare has brought in greater challenges," he said and pointed out that in this background, the role of police in ensuring internal stability is "critical".

#### **25. Prime Minister flags off India's first driverless train**

- Prime Minister Narendra Modi inaugurated the country's first driverless train on the Delhi Metro's Magenta Line. Stating that unlike previous regimes, his government has taken steps towards urbanisation, Mr. Modi said that by 2025 metro services **will expand to 25 cities across India** from the current 18.
- The Prime Minister said that the expanding metro network was an indication of "ease of living" among the citizens. In cities where passenger numbers are less, work is being done on the **MetroLite** version. Similarly, **MetroNeo** is being planned in cities where the ridership is less. It would be built at 25% cost of the normal metro. For cities where there are large water bodies, a system of Water Metro is being worked upon, he said.

#### **26. Restoration of grave of Naushera ka Sher**

- After it came to light that the grave of **Naushera ka Sher Brigadier Mohammad Usman**, the senior most officer killed in the **first India-Pakistan war** of 1947-48, was damaged, the Indian Army was looking into the issue and the grave will be restored soon. The grave is located on the **Jamia Millia Islamia (JMI) campus**. According to conventions, the responsibility for graves of martyrs is not that of the Army and is usually taken care of by the families.
- Brig. Usman was one of only 18 Brigadiers in the Army at the time of Independence and was posthumously awarded the **Maha Vir Chakra** for his gallant action during the 1947-48 war. According to the portal "heritagetimes.in", which wrote about the damage to the grave, Brig. Usman's funeral was **done with full state honours** and the prayer was led by **Maulana Abul Kalam Azad**.

#### **27. Stop damaging telecom infra, says COAI**

- **The Cellular Operators Association of India (COAI)** on Tuesday strongly condemned the disruption of telecom services in Punjab due to the **damage to telecom infrastructure by protesters**. More than 1,500 telecom towers, largely belonging to Reliance Jio, have been **damaged by farmers protesting against the farm laws**.

#### **28. Pakistan is a pawn in Chinese policy: IAF chief**

- Pakistan had increasingly become a pawn in Chinese policy, and under an increasing **China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)** related debt trap, further military dependencies in the future would happen, according to **Chief of the Air Staff, Air Chief Marshal R.K.S. Bhadauria**.

#### **29. Harsh Vardhan made member of GAVI Board**

- **Union Health Minister Harsh Vardhan** has been nominated by the **Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunisation (GAVI)** as a member of the GAVI Board.

- Dr. Harsh Vardhan will be representing the South East Area Regional Office (SEARO)/ Western Pacific Regional Office (WPRO) constituency on the GAVI Board. The seat is currently held by **Myint Htwe of Myanmar**. Dr. Harsh Vardhan will be representing India from January 1, 2021 till December 31, 2023.
- **What is GAVI Board ?** The GAVI Board is responsible for strategic direction and policymaking, oversees the **operations of the Vaccine Alliance and monitors programme implementation**. With membership drawn from a range of partner organisations, as well as experts from the private sector, the Board provides a forum for balanced strategic decision making, innovation and partner collaboration.

### 30. [INCOIS launches 'Digital Ocean'](#)

- Union Minister for Science and Technology Harsh Vardhan launched the '**Digital Ocean' platform of Indian National Centre for Oceanic Information Services (INCOIS)** here as a one stop solution for all data related needs of a wide range of users, including research institutions, operational agencies, strategic users, academic community, maritime industry, and the public.
- This first of its kind platform for ocean data management has a set of applications that present heterogeneous oceanographic data with geospatial technology. *"It will facilitate an **online interactive web based environment** for data integration, 3D and 4D data visualization, data analysis to assess the evolution of oceanographic features obtained from multiple sources like on site monitoring devices, remote sensing and model data,"* said the Director.
- INCOIS provides **ocean information and advisory services** to various stakeholders in the country, including Potential Fishing Zone (PFZ) advisories, Ocean State Forecast (OSF), high wave alerts, tsunami early warnings, storm surge and oil spill advisories, among others, using state-of-the-art technologies and tools to get real time information on oceanographic and marine meteorological data.

### 31. [Government proposes mandatory front seat airbags](#)

- The government said it had proposed to make airbags mandatory for the passengers in the front seat of a vehicle. The step aims to **improve passenger safety in case of accidents**. The Road Transport Ministry has issued a draft notification in this regard. The proposed timelines for the implementation of the move is April 1 for new models and June 1, 2021, for existing models.

### 32. [U.K. approves Oxford vaccine](#)

- The **COVID-19 vaccine by Oxford University and AstraZeneca** has been approved for emergency supply in the U.K., with the first doses being released on Wednesday so that vaccinations may begin early in the New Year, the company said in a statement on Wednesday.
- **Significance for India:** This is significant for India, as the **Pune based Serum Institute of India (SII)** has tied up with AstraZeneca to deploy the vaccine in the country. *"This is great and encouraging news. We will wait for the final approval from Indian regulators,"* **Adar Poonawala, CEO, SII**, said.
- The applications of **Bharat Biotech, which is testing its "Covaxin"** vaccine candidate; and **Pfizer, with its m-RNA vaccine**, were also reviewed.
- **What is EUA (Emergency Use Authorization):** An EUA allows an organisation to launch a vaccine without putting it through the full range of tests that a new untested vaccine must usually go through. The EUA is for active immunisation of individuals of 18 years or older and recommends two doses with an interval of between four and 12 weeks.

### 33. [Govt. nod for missions in Estonia, Paraguay and Dominican Republic](#)

- The government announced that it would open three **missions in Estonia, Paraguay and the Dominican Republic** in 2021, after a Cabinet meeting chaired by Prime Minister Narendra Modi cleared the proposal from the Ministry of External Affairs.

- The opening of the **missions will help expand India's diplomatic footprint**, deepen political relations, enable growth of bilateral trade, investment and economic engagements, facilitate stronger people to people contacts, bolster political outreach in multilateral fora and **help garner support for the foreign policy objectives**.

#### **34. Cabinet gives approval for Akash missile export**

- As part of efforts to boost defence exports, the Union Cabinet, chaired by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, on Wednesday approved the export of the indigenously developed and manufactured **Akash short range Surface to Air Missile (SAM)** system.
- Besides Akash, there was interest coming in for other major platforms such as the Coastal Surveillance System, radars and air platforms, the Defence Ministry said. For faster approval of export of such platforms, a **committee comprising the Defence Minister, the External Affairs Minister and the National Security Advisor** had been created, it stated.

#### **35. States asked to beware of 'super spreader' events**

- The Union Health Ministry asked the States and the Union Territories to keep a strict vigil on all events that could be potential "super spreaders" of COVID-19 and to curb crowding during the New Year celebrations and various events associated with it and the winter season.
- "The Ministry of Home Affairs has mandated that the States/UTs, based on their assessment of the situation, may impose local restrictions with a view to containing the spread of CO VID19 such as night curfew." The Home Ministry had also stipulated that there should be no restrictions on inter-State and intra-State movement of persons and goods.

#### **36. Boost given to ethanol production**

- The Union Cabinet approved a modified scheme for **interest subvention for ethanol production**, expanding the scheme to include grain based distilleries and not just molasses based ones. Petroleum and Natural Gas Minister Dharmendra Pradhan said the decision would encourage ethanol production from grains like barley, maize, corn and rice. He said the scheme would boost production and distillation capacity to 1,000 crore litres and help in meeting the goal of **20% ethanol blending** with petrol by 2030.

#### **37. AFSPA extended in Nagaland for 6 months**

- The Ministry of Home Affairs has declared the entire State of Nagaland as a "disturbed area" for six more months under the **Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act (AFSPA)** that empowers security forces to conduct operations anywhere and arrest anyone without prior notice.
- **What is AFSPA?** Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA), 1958 is an act of the Parliament of India that grants special powers to the Indian Armed Forces to maintain public order in "disturbed areas". According to The Disturbed Areas (Special Courts) Act, 1976 once declared 'disturbed', the area has to maintain status quo for a minimum of 3 months.

#### **38. Farmers, Centre reach agreement on two issues**

- The protesting farmers and the Union Ministers reached an agreement on the **decriminalisation of stubble burning and the safeguarding of power subsidies** - two of the four issues on the negotiating table - during their final round of talks for the year.
- The deadlock continued on the two biggest demands : repeal of the three farm market reform laws & a legal guarantee for minimum support prices (MSPs) for farm produce. Further discussion on these issues will be held at the next meeting on January 4.

1. **Background** : This year, India faced a trifecta of challenges in its neighbourhood from China: the **COVID-19 pandemic**, the growing **competition for influence in South Asia**, and **aggressive actions at the Line of Actual Control (LAC)** by China's People's Liberation Army (PLA).
  2. **How has India helped tackle the regional COVID19 challenge?**
    - India is one of the world's leading producers of pharmaceutical drugs and vaccines. In March, Prime Minister Narendra Modi held a special virtual **summit of eight SAARC nations** and **proposed a COVID-19 package**, for which India provided about half of the \$20 million funding for relief.
    - India's military ran a **series of missions to SAARC countries** and the **Indian Ocean Region (IOR)** with **supplies of food and medicines**, and India's '**Vande Bharat**' mission **flew home nationals from neighbouring countries**, along with lakhs of Indians who had been stranded during the lockdown.
  3. **How China tackled the regional COVID19 challenge?**
    - China, too, stepped up efforts to extend its influence in the South Asian region through COVID-19 relief. Given that all SAARC countries **except India and Bhutan** are part of the **Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)**, and owe different amounts of debts to Chinese banks, Beijing stepped in to provide **partial debt waivers to the Maldives and Sri Lanka**. China also **shipped relief to South Asia**, sending out PPE suits and other medical equipment and promised to **provide the Chinese made Sinovac vaccine**. It also extended a massive **\$1.4 billion Line of Credit to Pakistan**.
  4. **Did the military standoff impact regional ties?**
    - China doubled down on territorial claims and its transgressions along its borders with South Asia: from Ladakh to Arunachal Pradesh, PLA soldiers amassed along various sectors of the LAC, leading to violent clashes. The **deaths of 20 Indian soldiers at the Galwan valley** was the first such casualty in 45 years. China also laid claim to **Bhutan's Sakteng natural reserves** and pushed along the boundary lines with Nepal, all of which changed India's strategic calculations along its Himalayan frontiers.
    - India and Nepal saw their worst tensions in decades over the **construction of a road to Lipulekh**, leading to Nepal amending its constitution and map to claim Indian territory, added to the already fraught situation.
    - A new **defence pact this year between China and Pakistan** vis-à-vis a sharp **rise in ceasefire violations along the Line of Control (LoC) with Pakistan** to the highest levels since 2003, has made it clear that India must factor in among its military challenges at the LAC the possibility of a two front war.
  5. **How has India dealt with a three pronged challenge?**
    - The government's response to the challenges has been to assert its **Neighbourhood First** and **SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region)** strategies as foreign policy priorities. India has also upped its game on infrastructure delivery, particularly for regional connectivity in the past year, including completing railway lines to Bangladesh and Nepal, riverine projects, ferry service to the Maldives, identifying other services to Sri Lanka and IOR islands, while also considering debt waiver requests from its neighbours.
    - Furthermore, as part of its Indo-Pacific policy, New Delhi is also encouraging its **Quad partners - the U.S., Japan and Australia** - to collaborate on security and infrastructure initiatives in the neighbourhood.
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## International NEWS/Events/ Personalities

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### Daily snippets

#### 1. **Britain, EU clinch Brexit trade deal**

- Britain clinched a **Brexit trade deal** with the European Union on Thursday. The deal guarantees **Britain is no longer in the lunar pull of the EU** and will not be bound by EU rules. **Trade worth \$909 billion in 2019 is covered by the deal.**
- Britain formally left the EU in January after a **deeply divisive referendum in 2016**, the first country to split from the political and economic project that was born as the continent rebuilt in the aftermath of the Second World War. London remains bound by the EU's rules during a transition period that runs until midnight on December 31, when **the U.K. will leave the bloc's single market and customs union.**
- With Britain outside the EU single market and customs area, **cross-Channel traders will still face a battery of new regulations** and delays. Economists expect both economies, already weakened by the coronavirus epidemic, to take a hit as supply chains are disrupted and costs mount. **Fishing fleets will have to give up a quarter of their current catch in British waters** over the next five and a half years, officials said. After this transitional period, access to its rich fishing grounds would be negotiated on an annual basis.

#### 2. **Xi Jinping tightens grip on China**

- Beijing, having broadly controlled the coronavirus at home, is now leading a global economic recovery, as well as adopting, as India discovered through this summer's border crisis, an **increasingly muscular posture abroad**. In contrast, the U.S. has struggled with both its response to the pandemic as well as unprecedented political divisions at home, manifested in a closely fought election that ended with the defeat of President Donald Trump, whose term in office marked a deterioration in relations with China triggered by a trade war.
- **Strong handling of Criticism, Pandemic and Economy:**  
Back in February, the **death of the whistle blower doctor Li Wenliang** had led to an outpouring of criticism, which prompted Beijing to fire the Communist Party leaders in charge of Wuhan and Hubei province. In March, a prominent former real estate tycoon with close Party links, **Ren Zhiqiang, penned a searing essay directly criticising Mr. Xi's leadership.**
- China's subsequent recovery from the pandemic helped the leadership mute its critics, with the world's second largest economy likely to be the **only major country to grow in a pandemic hit year**. China in the first quarter contracted by 6.8%, but has since recovered strongly, growing 3.2% in the second quarter and 4.9% in the third.
- A key Party plenum held in October discussed "a new development pattern" for the 14th five-year plan (2021-2025) and also laid out a "**Vision 2035**" blueprint that emphasises more sustainable growth. China is still struggling with rising debt, a problem worsened by this year's economic relief measures, and is also pushing for cleaner growth, with Mr. Xi this year announcing a target to go **carbon neutral by 2060**, which will require a reduction of coal in the energy mix from 58% to less than 50% by 2025.
- **China's muscular approach:**

- China's homegrown aircraft carrier, the Shandong, sailed across the Taiwan Strait and the South China Sea after being inducted into the navy this year and will be combat ready by early 2021. Beijing has made clear to the new administration in Washington it will brook no interference in its "internal affairs", even as it has pursued increasingly **hardline policies in Hong Kong, where a new national security law has tightened its grip**, and in **Xinjiang**, where it has hit out at any **criticism over the internment of more than one million Uighurs** in "re-education" centres.
- In early May, China appeared to disregard three decades of a carefully built consensus with India as it mobilised two **divisions along the Line of Actual Control (LAC)**, in a move that officials in Delhi saw as aimed at unilaterally redrawing the LAC in Ladakh.

### 3. [Pearl killing: Pak. court orders release of accused](#)

- In a surprise move, a Pakistani court ordered the release of British-born **al-Qaeda leader Ahmed Omar Saeed Sheikh** and his three aides, who were convicted and sentenced in the **abduction and murder case of U.S. journalist Daniel Pearl**.
- Pearl's murder took place three years after Sheikh, along with Jaish-e-Mohammad chief Masood Azhar and Mushtaq Ahmed Zargar, was released by India in 1999 and given safe passage to Afghanistan in exchange for the nearly 150 passengers of hijacked **Indian Airlines Flight 814**. He was serving a prison term in India for kidnappings of Western tourists in the country.

### 4. [New coronavirus variant found in Nigeria: Africa CDC](#)

- Another new variant of the novel coronavirus seems to have emerged in Nigeria, the head of Africa's disease control body said on Thursday, cautioning more investigation was needed. The news comes after Britain and South Africa both reported new variants of the SARS-CoV2 virus that appear to be more contagious. The news comes as cases are surging in both Nigeria and South Africa. In the past week, Nigeria reported a 52% increase in cases and South Africa 40% increase.

### 5. [Post-Brexit: Limits of sovereignty](#)

- The tariff free trade accord in goods that the U.K. and the EU signed on Thursday, days before the post-Brexit transition expires, should mitigate somewhat the consequences of Britain's narrow decision, in 2016, to leave one of the largest trading blocs.
- The country now faces a **potential 4% loss of GDP over 15 years**, compared to remaining in the EU. Leaving without any agreement would have led to a potential loss of 6% of GDP, estimates the fiscal watchdog. Brexit's biggest tradeoff for the ordinary citizen is perhaps the **restrictions on the right to free movement and work**.
- Among the more contentious issues in the talks, the arrangement allays apprehensions about the potential economic threat from the "**Singapore on Thames**" growth model the U.K. might pursue outside the EU.
- **Highlights of Brexit Deal:**
  - Under the deal, there will be **no tariffs or quotas on trade between the two sides**, though there will be **more red tape for businesses** because the U.K. is leaving the EU's frictionless single market and customs union.
  - **Firms will have to file forms and customs declarations for the first time in years**. There will also be **different rules on product labelling** as well as **checks on agricultural products**.
  - The **EU will give up a quarter of the quota it catches in U.K. waters**, far less than the 80% Britain initially demanded. The system will be phased in over 5-1/2 years, after which the quotas will be reassessed.
  - Politically, the **post-Brexit partnership could end the rancour that has polarised British society**.

### 6. [U.S. leaders urge Pompeo to raise farmers' protest with Jaishankar](#)

- A group of seven American lawmakers - six Democrats and a Republican - has written to the U.S. **Secretary of State Mike Pompeo** on the farmers' protest, **expressing "serious concern" over the "ongoing civil unrest" in India**. The letter asks Mr. Pompeo to reach out to his counterpart, **External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar**, on the issue. Earlier this month, **Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's** comments in support of the farmers were called "ill informed" and "unwarranted" by Ministry of External Affairs spokesperson Anurag Srivastava.

#### 7. [Russia opens criminal case against Navalny's ally Sobol](#)

- Russian law enforcement agencies opened a criminal case against **Lyubov Sobol, an ally of Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny**, and took her in for questioning, Mr. Navalny and his supporters said.
- **Mr. Navalny, one of President Vladimir Putin's most outspoken critics**, said the authorities' response was disproportionate and confirmed that his allegations were true. He was airlifted to Germany in August for emergency medical treatment after collapsing on a plane in Russia. **Germany has said he was poisoned with a Sovietstyle Novichok nerve agent** in an attempt to murder him, an assertion many Western nations accept.
- The Kremlin has repeatedly denied any suggestion **Russia's authorities were involved in poisoning him**. Mr. Putin has said the incident was part of a U.S.backed plot to try to discredit him.
- **What is Kremlin?** The name "**Kremlin**" means "*fortress inside a city*", and is often also used metonymically to refer to the government of the Russian Federation in a similar sense to how "*White House*" refers to the Executive Office of the President of the United States.

#### 8. [Israeli jets fly over Beirut, blasts reported in Syria](#)

- **Israeli jets flew very low over parts of Lebanon** early on Friday, terrifying residents on Christmas Eve, some of whom reported seeing missiles in the skies over Beirut. Minutes later, Syria's official news agency reported **explosions in the central Syrian town** of Masyaf.
- The Christmas Eve flights were louder than usual, frightening residents of Beirut who have endured multiple crises in the past year, including the **catastrophic August 4 explosion at the Beirut city's port** that killed over 200 people and destroyed parts of the capital. That **explosion resulted from the detonation of a stockpile of ammonium nitrates** that was improperly stored at the facility.
- In the past few years, **Israel has acknowledged carrying out dozens of airstrikes in Syria**, most of them **aimed at suspected Iranian weapons shipments** believed to be bound for Hezbollah.

#### 9. [Afghan women's rights activist shot dead](#)

- Freshta Kohistani, aged 29, was the second activist to be killed in two days after a prominent pro-democracy advocate was gunned down in Kabul on Wednesday. Their murders follow a similar pattern seen in recent weeks, in which **prominent Afghans have died in targeted killings in broad daylight**, several of them in the capital.

#### 10. [Millions in U.S. lose benefits as Trump refuses to sign aid Bill](#)

- Millions of Americans saw their jobless benefits expire after the **U.S. President Donald Trump refused to sign into law a \$2.3 trillion pandemic aid** and spending package, protesting that it did not do enough to help everyday people. Without Mr. Trump's signature, about **14 million people could lose those extra benefits**. A partial government shutdown will begin on Tuesday unless Congress can agree to a stopgap government funding Bill.
- He feels that one time \$600 stimulus checks to millions of struggling Americans were too small and has **demande d that it be raised to \$2,000**. While the outgoing President's strategy for the Bill remains unclear, he has not vetoed it and could still sign it in coming days.

## 11. [BLACKWATER: Mercenaries from America](#)

- **Blackwater Worldwide**, the Virginia Based private security firm, whose **four convicted contractors were last week granted clemency by President Donald Trump**, is arguably the most high profile embodiment of what is described as the **outsourcing of warfare by successive U.S. administrations**.
- Contracted by the State Department to protect American diplomats, the firm, since renamed Xe Services and more recently as Academi, has seized on the new avenues thrown open by the global war on terror following the September 11, 2001 attacks and snapped up security deals. It has in the process acquired increasing **notoriety for contempt for the rule of law and violations of human rights**. The 2007 Baghdad massacre of 17 civilians for which these former U.S. service members were pardoned by President Donald Trump, is one of many instances that Blackwater has been criminally implicated.
- In 2018, under **former chairman Erik Prince**, Blackwater was manoeuvring hard to privatise Washington's war effort in Afghanistan as a third option between a prolonged U.S. military presence and complete withdrawal of troops. A UN investigation this year revealed that Mr. Prince **equipped Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed, the de facto ruler of the UAE with private militia**. The UN has also linked Blackwater's involvement in another botched mercenary mission in Libya. There have also been reports that Mr. Prince, a close ally of President Trump, was recruiting former spies to **infiltrate the Democratic campaign and politically liberal organisations opposed to the Trump agenda**. The new administration's dealings with Blackwater under Joe Biden is sure to attract closer Congressional scrutiny.

## 12. [EU nations roll out mass vaccination](#)

- Europe launched a massive vaccination drive with pensioners and medics lining up to take the first shots to see off the COVID-19 pandemic that has crippled economies and claimed more than 1.7 million lives worldwide.
- The region of 450 million people has secured contracts with a range of suppliers for more than two billion vaccine doses and has set a goal for all adults to be inoculated during 2021.
- With surveys pointing to high levels of hesitancy towards the vaccine in countries from France to Poland, leaders of the 27 country EU are promoting it.
- The **distribution of the PfizerBioNTech shot** presents tough challenges. The **vaccine uses mRNA technology and must be stored at ultra low temperatures** of about -70 degrees Celsius. Outside the EU, Britain, Switzerland and Serbia have started vaccinating their citizens in recent weeks.

## 13. [Niger votes in legislative, presidential elections](#)

- Niger is voting on Sunday in presidential and legislative elections that could see the **West African country's first democratic transition** of power since independence amid a growing threat from jihadists in the region. Polls opened with a good turnout. Some 7.4 million Nigeriens are voting to elect legislators and the **successor to President Mahamadou Issoufou**. Attacks by Islamic extremists have affected local elections for weeks.

## 14. [Afghan peace talks set to resume in Doha: official](#)

- The next round of **negotiations between the Taliban and the Afghan government will be held in Qatar** from next month, despite President Ashraf Ghani's recent calls for them to be moved home. Peace talks began on September 12 at a luxury hotel in Doha, but negotiations are currently on a break until January 5.
- Earlier in December, negotiators from both sides decided to take a break after months of often frustrating meetings, which were bogged down by disputes on the basic framework of discussions and religious interpretations

### 15. [China defends progress of Pak. corridor](#)

- China on Monday said reports suggesting it was seeking additional guarantees from Pakistan before sanctioning a loan for a key project under the **China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)**, a flagship plan under President Xi Jinping's **Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)**, were "baseless". Beijing also defended the progress of the CPEC plan, following reports in the Pakistani press last week that concerns over Pakistan's ability to pay back loans as it grapples with the impact of the pandemic had emerged in recent negotiations.
- **China Pakistan Economic Corridor:** It is China's most ambitious BRI project that aims to build a network of roads, railway lines and power projects throughout Pakistan with an estimated value of more than \$60 billion. India has voiced concerns about the CPEC plan, **one main reason why India has stayed out of the BRI**, as it includes projects in Pakistan occupied Kashmir (PoK) as part of a corridor connecting Xinjiang with Pakistan.

### 16. [Chinese citizen journalist jailed over Wuhan reports](#)

- A court in **China on Monday jailed a citizen journalist for four years for her non sanctioned reporting from Wuhan** as the COVID-19 outbreak unfolded earlier this year, accusing her of "*provoking trouble*".
- **Zhang Zhan** (37) is a former lawyer who, like several other Chinese citizen journalists, travelled to Wuhan in late January and early February, motivated to tell the story of what was unfolding in the city, which had been locked down on January 23. At the time, **information coming out of Wuhan was sparse**, with authorities only on January 20 confirming the new virus, circulating in the city since early December, could spread between people. Ms. Zhang's live video reports showed a city in full lockdown and the situation in hospitals, and **she was often critical of the government's belated response** during the early stages of the outbreak.

### 17. [U.K. warns of 'bumpy' transition](#)

- Four days after sealing a free trade agreement with the European Union, the British government warned businesses to get ready for disruptions and "*bumpy moments*" when the new rules take effect on Thursday night.
- EU Ambassadors, meanwhile, gave their unanimous approval on Monday to the Brexit trade deal with the U.K. **Germany, which holds the EU presidency**, said the decision came during a meeting to assess the Christmas Eve agreement.
- **Brexit deal:** The U.K. left the EU almost a year ago, but remained within the bloc's economic embrace during a transition period that ends on December 31. The deal will ensure Britain and the **27-nation bloc** can continue to trade in goods without tariffs or quotas. That should help protect the £660 billion in annual trade between the two sides, and the hundreds of thousands of jobs that rely on it. But the end to Britain's membership in the EU's vast single market and customs union will still bring inconvenience and new expenses for both individuals and businesses — from the need for tourists to have travel insurance to the millions of new customs declarations that firms will have to fill out.

### 18. [Dhaka moves refugees to barren island](#)

- Bangladesh started moving a second group of **Rohingya refugees** to a controversial flood prone island in the Bay of Bengal despite **opposition from rights activists**.
- More than 1,600 of the **Muslim minority from Myanmar** were taken to Bhashan Char earlier this month, and Foreign Minister A.K. Abdul Momen said just under 1,000 were in the latest batch heading for what he called a "beautiful resort". Buses took the Rohingya from camps in Cox's Bazar, where nearly one million refugees are packed, to Chittagong port where **they will be taken to the barren island**.

### 19. [Suspended sentence paves way for early release of Saudi activist](#)

- A Saudi court on Monday handed prominent activist **Loujain alHathloul** a prison term of five years and eight months for terrorism related crimes but a suspended sentence will allow her release within months, her family said.
- Ms. Hathloul, 31, was arrested in May 2018 with about a dozen other women activists just weeks before the historic **lifting of a decades long ban on female drivers**, a reform they had long campaigned for, sparking a torrent of international criticism.
- Her potential release next year could help stave off an early confrontation with the incoming U.S. administration of Joe Biden, who has pledged a tough stance on the Kingdom over human rights after it largely got a free pass under President Donald Trump.

#### 20. [WHO calls for expanded measures to find variants](#)

- **WHO Director General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus** said that *“there will be setbacks and new challenges in the year ahead - for example new variants of COVID-19 and helping people who are tired of the pandemic to continue to combat it.”* **New variants detected in Britain and South Africa** that appear to be more infectious have caused concern and triggered new travel restrictions this month.

#### 21. [Trial of 10 of the ‘Hong Kong 12’ begins in China](#)

- The trial in China of a group of Hong Kong pro democracy activists who tried to escape the city by speedboat for sanctuary in Taiwan opened on Monday, as the U.S. urged the immediate release of dissidents it says “fled tyranny”.
- Ten of the so-called **“Hong Kong 12”** were in court in the southern city of Shenzhen facing charges linked to an illegal border crossing. Chinese authorities took them into custody after their boat was intercepted on August 23. Court officials stayed tight lipped about the case and the trial - like many in **China’s opaque legal system** - was not open to foreign reporters or diplomats.

#### 22. [Trump signs COVID19 aid, sparks GOP fight](#)

- Shelving his objections, **President Donald Trump has signed a \$2 trillion plus COVID-19 and annual federal spending package** providing relief for millions of Americans, even as Congress returns to confront the White House on remaining priorities in a rare end of session showdown.
- Mr. Trump appears to have accomplished little, if anything, from the days of drama over his refusal to accept the sweeping bipartisan deal. While the **President’s demands for larger \$2,000 pandemic relief checks** seem destined to fail, his push served up a political opportunity for Democrats, who support the larger stipends and are forcing Trump’s Republican allies into a tough spot

#### 23. [South Africa imposes new virus curbs](#)

- **South Africa banned alcohol sales and made masks mandatory in public** from Tuesday after a surge in coronavirus cases as the World Health Organisation warned that **pandemics far more deadly than COVID-19 may lie ahead**. Nations around the world are struggling with winter spikes in infections that have pushed the global caseload close to 81 million, even as the rollout of vaccines gathers pace in North America and Europe.

#### 24. [COVID-19 patients in British hospitals surpass April peak](#)

- England is “back in the eye” of the coronavirus storm, health chiefs warned on Tuesday, with as many patients in hospital as during the initial peak in April. **A new strain of the virus appears to be behind the upsurge in cases**, heaping further pressure on the National Health Service.

- NHS England figures showed there were 20,426 COVID-19 patients in the country's hospitals on Monday, compared to the 18,974 peak recorded during the first wave.

#### 25. [EU seeks release of citizen journalist in China prison](#)

- The European Union on Tuesday demanded that China release citizen journalist **Zhang Zhan** and several other jailed reporters, lawyers and human rights champions. Ms. Zhang was jailed on Monday for four years over allegations of "**picking quarrels and provoking trouble**" during her coverage of the early stages of the COVID-19 outbreak in epicentre Wuhan, her lawyer said.

#### 26. [Islamist groups from Gaza fire rockets into sea](#)

- Palestinian armed groups staged military exercises in Gaza on Tuesday, including firing rockets into the sea, to mark the anniversary of the start of the 2008 conflict with Israel. The demonstrations were scheduled to last several hours and involve about 10 groups in the Israeli-blockaded Palestinian enclave, said a spokesman for the **Al-Quds Brigade forces**, the armed wing of Islamic Jihad.
- **Hamas**, the Islamist group that has controlled Gaza since 2007, was also taking part. Hamas's Al-Aqsa TV showed rockets being fired from the strip on Tuesday into the Mediterranean Sea. Israel did not immediately retaliate to that launch with airstrikes, as it typically does when rockets fired from Gaza enter Israel.

#### 27. [Bangladesh sends 1,804 refugees to remote island](#)

- Seven Bangladesh Navy **ships carrying 1,804 Rohingya refugees arrived on Tuesday at an isolated island** where they will be relocated despite **concerns among human rights groups about their safety**. They reached **Bhashan Char island**, 34 km from the mainland, after a four hour naval journey from the port city of Chittagong.
- It was the second group of Rohingya refugees transferred from crowded, squalid camps in Cox's Bazar district to the island. Authorities sent a first group of 1,642 on December 4 despite calls for a halt by human rights groups.
- **The island surfaced only 20 years ago and was not previously inhabited**. It was regularly submerged by monsoon rains but now has flood protection embankments, houses, hospitals and mosques built at a cost of more than \$112 million by the Bangladesh Navy. The island's facilities are designed to accommodate 1,00,000 people, just a fraction of the **million Rohingya Muslims living in the camps in Cox's Bazar**.

#### 28. [50 journalists killed in 2020: Reporters Without Borders](#)

- Fifty journalists and media workers were killed in connection with their work in 2020, the majority in countries that are not at war, **Reporters Without Borders (RSF)** said on Tuesday. The figure shows an increase in the targeting of reporters investigating organised crime, corruption . It highlighted murders in Mexico, India and Pakistan.

#### 29. [China set to launch third aircraft carrier in 2021](#)

- The **launching of China's third and largest aircraft carrier** is likely to take place next year, State media in China reported on Wednesday, with a renewed push to take forward military modernisation plans amid a number of territorial and maritime disputes.
- **China's aircraft carriers**: China one year ago launched its **second aircraft carrier, the Shandong**, which was the first to be built at home. It joined the **Liaoning**, which was developed by retrofitting a Soviet-era cruiser and commissioned in 2012. The Shandong, which has already been deployed in the Taiwan Straits and in the South China Sea, is likely to be combat ready next year. Two larger aircraft carriers are being built at the Jiangnan Shipyard near Shanghai, the first of which is likely to be launched in 2021, the Global Times reported on Wednesday. This means it could be commissioned into service and be combat ready by 2023. This will be **China's**

**first that has an integrated electric propulsion system**, an upgrade from its Soviet modelled carriers, as well as an electromagnetic launch system for aircraft.

- **Strategic deployment of aircraft carriers:** Chinese strategic experts have previously said the PLA Navy is working towards six aircraft carriers, with two likely to be deployed in China's near seas, including for **the Taiwan Straits and the South China Sea**, two for **the western Pacific** and two for **the Indian Ocean**.
- **Inclusion of Stealth Fighters:** Next year will also see the maiden flight of a new "aircraft carrier based" stealth fighter, developed from the **fifth generation FC31, Fu Qianshao**, while the **J20 stealth fighter jet** with domestically developed engines would also make its debut next year.
- **CCP's centenary in 2021:** The launch of the carrier would be one of the highlights for the People's Liberation Army in 2021, a politically important year in China when the ruling **Communist Party will mark its centenary in July 2021**.

## China's internet giant Alibaba

### **1. Stunning success of Alibaba/Jack Ma:**

- Founded in 1999 in Hangzhou by Jack Ma, **Alibaba** rose to fame as a business to business portal. It expanded into direct sales with consumers just as China's Internet boom took off. The **stunning success of Alipay and WeChat** has certainly made China's fintech ecosystem reliant on two apps without which digital finance in China would come crashing down.
- Alibaba was more than a business. It became a cultural and social phenomenon. It even birthed its own festivals - "**Singles Day**", celebrated every year on November 11, has become China's biggest celebration of consumption. Alibaba recorded \$74 billion in sales this year when the daily festival was extended to an 11 day extravaganza in November, which is **more than India's estimated online sales in an entire year**.

### **2. Govt. takedown on big giants:**

- The success of both Alipay and Yuebao underlined the **limitations of China's own State Controlled banking sector**, which offered lower interest rates for its customers. Jack Ma has repeatedly criticised **the state of China's financial ecosystem** and described not so tactfully China's powerful State Run banks as 'pawn shops'.
- Authorities and Regulators promptly suspended the \$35 billion IPO for Alibaba's Ant Group (the financial arm of the Alibaba empire which is behind China's biggest digital payments company **Alipay**). On December 24, authorities said they would launch an **antitrust investigation into alleged monopolistic practices of the Alibaba Group and Tencent Holdings**, the other Internet giant and Alibaba rival behind WeChat.
- The **Dalian Wanda Group**, started by the industrialist who was previously China's richest man, **Wang Jianlin**, was reined in by regulators in 2017 and forced to curb its rapid overseas expansion because of concerns over its debt.
- The following year, the **Anbang Insurance Group** which had gone on an overseas expansion spree, came under the lens of regulators, and its billionaire chairman, **Wu Xiaohui**, was sentenced to 18 years in prison for corruption.

### **3. China's Patriotic Priorities**

- The recent moves certainly suggest a warning shot that underlines the **communist Party's discomfort with companies that have grown too powerful**, and in their own ways, have begun to challenge a system it prefers to tightly control.
- **Compliance is precisely what President Xi Jinping has made clear he expects from China's private sector**. Under Mr. Xi's watch, the **Party has robustly defended State-owned enterprises (SOEs)**. The post COVID-19

situation has only deepened that impression, with Chinese officials praising State Run firms for their role in China's economic recovery this summer.

### Opinion : A costly deal for Sudan

1. **Israel- Sudan deal:** The recent U.S. move to remove Sudan's designation, which had been in place since 1993, as a state that sponsors terrorism could potentially come at a huge price. The **Sudanese government's recognition of the state of Israel** - which looms as **Khartoum's tradeoff for the terror delisting** - should be the sole prerogative of the people of that country, not of a superpower such as Washington or any other to arbitrarily impose its will. The terror delisting has been treated as an outcome in exchange for a **compensation payment of \$335 million** for the victims of the **1998 Al Qaeda attacks on U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania**.
2. **Sensitive historical background:** Khartoum played host to the Arab League gathering, which adopted the so called "three nos" resolution to deny recognition, initiate negotiations and seek peace with Israel, in the wake of the **1967 Six-Day war**.
3. **Sudan - a sponsor of terrorism:** They relate to the former military regime's backing for the Palestine Liberation Organization, Hamas and Hezbollah, besides the harbouring of Osama bin Laden until 1996.
4. **Transition from dictatorship to democracy :** Sudan is a rather different country now since the overthrow of the 30 year long **dictatorship of Omar Hassan al-Bashir** in the popular uprising in 2019. The democratic transition that has been underway in the North African country since August 2019 is expected to lead to general elections in 2022.
5. **How Sudan is benefitted from the deal ?** The country has suffered a crippling impact from the loss of vast oil reserves to South Sudan, which seceded in 2011. The COVID-19 pandemic and the worst floods in a century have compounded the problems of food shortages, skyrocketing inflation, and severe unemployment. The deal struck with the United States will provide Sudan crucial access to global financial institutions, resume dollar denominated transactions, and revive foreign investment after nearly three decades.





## Science & Technology and Environment

### Daily snippets

#### 1. **Nano micelles : Using nanoparticles for cancer treatment**

- With the advance in nanotechnology, it is now being explored how to use them for efficient drug delivery. Similar to Nano shells and nanovesicles, Nano micelles are extremely small structures and have been noted as an emerging platform in targeted therapy. Nano micelles are globelike structures with a **hydrophilic outer shell** and a **hydrophobic interior**. This dual property makes them the perfect carrier for delivering drug molecules. The Nano micelles are less than 100 nm in size and are stable at room temperature.
- The ideal goal for cancer therapy is destroying the cancer cells without harming healthy cells of the body, and chemotherapeutics approved for treatment of cancer are highly toxic, thus there was an urgent and unmet need to develop effective drug delivery vehicle.
- Once injected intravenously these Nano micelles can easily escape the circulation and enter the solid tumours where the blood vessels are found to be leaky. These leaky blood vessels are absent in the healthy organs. They also work by enhancing the expression of tumour suppressor genes. Nano micelles are extremely cost effective and can prove to be next generation chemotherapeutic.

#### 2. **New species of sun rose found in the Eastern Ghats**

- Botanists have discovered a new species of wild sun rose from the Eastern Ghats in India. The new species, named *Portulaca laljii*, discovered from **Prakasam district of Andhra Pradesh** has unique features such as a tuberous root, no hair in its leaf axils, a reddish pink flower, prolate shaped fruits, and copper brown seeds without lustre. The plant has a rich horticulture value. *Portulaca laljii* has been named to honour the contribution of **Lal Ji Singh**, an eminent botanist of the **Botanical Survey of India** associated with its Andaman and Nicobar Centre.

### Understanding the new COVID-19 variant

#### 1. **Background:**

- The emergence of a new strain of the virus, caused by mutations, that seemed to be 70% more transmissible. World Health Organization (WHO) chief **Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus** cited a basic fact of virology, that viruses mutate over time and it is natural and is to be expected. He said the U.K. had reported that the transmission was higher, but there was no evidence that it causes a more severe disease.

#### 2. **Why do viruses mutate**

- Mutation is part of the life cycle of a virus. Once the virus latches on to a host, it begins to replicate and make copies of itself. During the process of virus replication, random errors arise, one or two protein molecules change, possibly induced by the immune response mounted within infected people. These changes in the genomic structure of the virus can be considered mutations. Not all mutations are significant.

### 3. How the mutations were identified

- The variant is the result of multiple mutations in the spike protein (the point of viral entry into the host) of SARS-CoV-2, as well as mutations in other genomic regions of the RNA virus. COG-UK (a consortium that analyses genome sequencing data from the U.K.) reportedly identified one of these mutations as '**N501Y**', in an area of the spike protein that binds to a key protein in the human cell, the **ACE2 receptor**. This was an indication that the alterations may, theoretically, result in the virus becoming more infectious. The increase in cases linked to the new variant first came to light in late November.

### 4. How will the vaccine react to this

- The worry is whether the vaccine will have an impact on the new variant strain because the amino acid sequence in the spike is altered, studies are still underway, though, the scientists have advocated the continued pursuit of vaccines. Vaccines will reduce the number of people who get infected, reduce the number of people spreading the infections, lower the number of hosts, lower the chances of further mutations, and allow us to get things under control. Vaccines will offer protection even from a mutant virus. By their very nature, they will make a variety of different antibodies and memory cells that will help fight off the infection.





## Economics and Finance

### Daily snippets

#### 1. Economic revival beating predictions

- *“Economic conditions continued to improve through November on the back of the uptick in agriculture and manufacturing. Financial conditions embodied in interest rates are perhaps at their easiest in decades,”* said the article titled “State of the Economy” from the Reserve Bank of India. In another article from officials of the Fiscal Division of RBI’s Department of Economic and Policy Research it was stated that, it was imperative for the Centre and States to continue with the countercyclical fiscal measures to sustain the momentum of the recovery.
- *“**Revenue expenditure measures** undertaken to enhance social protections to the underprivileged and to address labour market dislocations might need to continue as the recovery is likely to be uneven across sectors,”* the article stated.
- *“**Capital expenditure**, which collapsed in the first half of this fiscal, will need to be scaled up as a priority. Public investment in health care, social housing, education and environmental protection is the need of the hour to build a more resilient and inclusive economy,”* it stressed.
- The authors said an analysis of 12 months ahead forward earnings reveals an improvement in the outlook for many companies. Sectors such as auto and capital goods that were severely impacted in lockdown are expecting a turnaround in forward earnings. Healthcare, information technology and fast moving consumer goods firms were sighting stronger earnings outlook.

#### 2. India files appeal against Vodafone case verdict

- India has challenged in a Singapore court the international arbitration tribunal verdict that overturned its demand for ₹22,100 crore in back taxes from Vodafone Group. An international arbitration court had in September rejected tax authorities’ demand for ₹22,100 crore in back taxes and penalties relating to Vodafone's 2007 acquisition of Essar. India had 90 days to file an appeal.

#### 3. Russia backs increase in oil output by OPEC+

- Russia expects to support an increase in oil production by the group, known as OPEC+, of another 500,000 barrels per day (bpd) from February. Oil prices are trading above \$50 per barrel, after coming under pressure this week from concerns that new fast spreading variants of the coronavirus will lead to reduced fuel demand. Earlier the OPEC+ agreed to reduce output to support the global oil market as the COVID-19 pandemic has weakened fuel demand. Since the agreement on a record global supply cut in April, OPEC+ has progressively reduced the cuts and is expected in January to release an extra 5,00,000 bpd into the market.
- **What is OPEC+ ?** Russia, other leading oil producers and the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries, a group known as OPEC+.

#### 4. On independent directors in companies

- A significant percentage of individual shareholders believe the constitution of the board of directors of most Indian companies is tilted towards promoters as many independent directors are not really independent. According to the **Corporate Governance Survey 2020** by online platform **Local Circles**, 79% individual shareholders have expressed concern about the independence of independent directors.
- The survey received more than 48,000 responses from 21,000 unique shareholders located across 272 districts of India. As many as 65% of individual shareholders said that independent directors in publicly traded Indian companies are not acting to protect the interest of minority shareholders, the survey said. The top-three concerns for such shareholders are accounting fraud, selling of company assets without shareholder knowledge and insider trading.

#### 5. [SEBI plans to rope in agency to trace entities](#)

- Markets regulator SEBI is looking to rope in an independent agency to trace accused entities against whom notices have been issued by the authorities, and serve summons to them. The work is expected to be carried out through competent manpower such as ex-servicemen. The scope of the work includes tracing the entity based on records and addresses provided by the regulator

#### 6. [More norms for virtual assets](#)

- The use of crowdfunding websites create additional risk and the year 2021 will see a lot of regulatory effort channelled towards virtual assets. Trade based money laundering remains a significant risk. The use of crowdfunding websites, although not entirely new, create an additional risk as these can be misused for terror financing.

#### 7. [Maintaining inflation target at 4% is appropriate : RBI Paper](#)

- Maintaining the inflation target at 4% is appropriate for India, according to a working paper titled “**Measuring Trend Inflation in India**”. The paper seeks to estimate trend inflation in India to find the answer to a question that goes to the root of **flexible inflation targeting (FIT)** – is the choice of the target for inflation consistent with its trend?
- The 4% target for inflation - with an upper tolerance limit of 6% and a lower limit of 2% was set by the Centre in consultation with the RBI in 2016 and its **validity expires on March 31, 2021**.
- *“A target set too [significantly] below the trend (trend inflation is steady between 4.1%-4.3%) imparts a deflationary bias to monetary policy because it will go into overkill relative to what the economy can intrinsically bear in order to achieve the target,”* the paper said. *“Analogously, a target that is fixed above the trend renders monetary policy too expansionary and prone to inflationary shocks and unanchored expectations. Hence, maintaining the inflation target at 4% is appropriate for India,”* it added.
- Central to the **design and conduct of monetary policy** is the concept of **trend inflation**, the level to which actual inflation outcomes are expected to converge after short run fluctuations die out, the authors said.

#### 8. [Money Laundering and differential treatment](#)

- Banks’ deferential treatment towards powerful and influential people is one of the reasons money laundering has risen in the country in recent years, India’s largest bank- SBI’s compliance chief said on Tuesday. He also stressed that India ‘unfortunately’ had no distinct norms in place for **‘politically exposed persons’** opening bank accounts.
- Several countries impose tougher monitoring norms on bank accounts operated by politically exposed persons, defined as those holding an important position in government, bureaucracy or is a relative of someone holding such a position.

- The surge in digitisation, increasing complexity of banking transactions and fierce competition among banks has also created money laundering opportunities. A 'misplaced sense of loyalty' towards customers and their interests also affects full disclosure at the time of opening accounts.

#### **9. India can build on rural push, federalism, consumer base : D. Subbarao**

- Though COVID-19 and the subsequent lockdown left a trail of economic devastation in most countries, India can potentially build upon three positive aspects - a push in the rural economy, stronger federalism and a huge consumption base, **former RBI Governor Duvvuri Subbarao** has said.
- Stating that the Indian economy was already in a troubled shape even before the COVID-19 crisis, he said a 'V' shaped recovery in growth rate **did not mean a 'V' shaped recovery in absolute output** and that the level of output in FY22 will be lower than that seen in FY20.

#### **10. Relax tax slabs to boost retail : CII**

- Stating that the pandemic had badly impacted the financial position of individuals, the retail industry has sought relaxation in tax slabs for individual taxpayers to spur spending, while recommending that the single system of taxation be reintroduced. For economic revival of the sector, the CII has proposed that customs duty on furniture products and raw materials to make them be reduced.
- **The Confederation of Indian Industry (CII)** has also sought the inclusion of tourism in the concurrent list to enable the Centre and States to effectively regulate the sector as well as frame policies for growth. In its Budget recommendations, submitted to the Finance Ministry, CII suggested tourism exports be treated on par with other exports and services and such transactions may be zero rated for GST without stopping the flow of input credits.

#### **11. Exports worth \$290 billion by fiscal-end**

- The country's exports may reach \$290 billion by the end of this fiscal in the wake of outbound shipments being hit hard by the COVID-19 pandemic during the first half of the year, FIEO said on Wednesday. Exports had dipped 4.78% to \$314.31 billion in FY20.

#### **12. Government may go for asset sales to fund higher spending**

- India is likely to spend more next fiscal year than this year's budgeted \$415 billion and **prioritise infrastructure projects**, relying on asset sales of about \$40 billion for some of the funding. Actual spending in the current fiscal year ending March 31 could be lower than the original target of ₹30.4 trillion (₹1 lakh crore = ₹1 trillion), but will be higher than last year's ₹26.86 trillion.
  - India had aimed to raise more than \$28 billion this fiscal by selling stakes in companies such as Bharat Petroleum, Container Corp. of India, Shipping Corp. of India and Air India, and by listing the Life Insurance Corp., but the pandemic delayed the process.
  - For the current fiscal year, India's deficit is likely to rise to ₹12 trillion to ₹13 trillion, much higher than the budgeted ₹7.9 trillion, mainly due to a revenue shortfall of ₹5 trillion to ₹6 trillion.
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## Sports

### Daily snippets

#### 1. Kohli, Perry best in the last decade

- India captain Virat Kohli headlined the ICC top honours for the decade, winning the Sir Garfield Sobers award for the **best male cricketer of the past 10 years**. Kohli was also picked for the **ODI Cricketer of the Decade** award. Former India skipper M.S. Dhoni won the ICC Spirit of Cricket award.
- **Australia's Ellyse Perry** swept the women's awards, securing the **Female Cricketer of the Decade** along with **ODI and T20 Cricketer of the Decade** awards.

#### 2. Naomi Osaka - Champion on and off the field

- While she won the U.S. Open for her third Grand Slam title, she also stood out for speaking out about racial injustice and police brutality. As noteworthy in 2020 for her activism away from the tennis court as her success on it, Osaka was selected by The **Associated Press as the Female Athlete of the Year**.

#### 3. India wins big at the Melbourne cricket Ground

- A rejuvenated India, turned the tables on Australia to claim the second Test at the MCG with a rousing eight wicket win within four days and breathe life into the series.
- What is Boxing Day? The Boxing Day Test match is a cricket Test match held in Melbourne, Victoria, Australia **involving the Australian cricket team and an opposing national team** that is touring Australia during the southern summer. It begins annually on Boxing Day (26th December) and is played at the Melbourne Cricket Ground.



## Suggested Readings

1. The farmers' protest : Dipankar Gupta, [Link to article](#)
2. Electoral Bonds, [Link to article](#)
3. The making of a tinderbox, [Link to article](#)
4. COVID-19 SC orders, [Link to article](#)
5. Criminal Law and Human Rights, [Link to article](#)
6. How much of a democracy is India, [Link to article](#)
7. Failure of Constitutional Machinery and Judiciary, [Link to article](#)
8. Political Funding and RTI Act, [Link to article](#)
9. National Mathematics Day, [Link to article](#)
10. Commentary on Mid-Day Meal, [Link to article](#)
11. Life of KG Kannabiran, [Link to article](#)
12. Making Legal Ecosystem more accessible to the disabled, [Link to article](#)
13. Notes from a year of unease, [Link to article](#)
14. Reforms with the future and farming needs in mind, [Link to article](#)
15. Rights for 'Human Beings' : The amazing life of Hansa Mehta, [Link to article](#)
16. India's new Data Protection Bill, [Link to article](#)
17. Policy rollback and its impact on banking sector, [Link to article](#)
18. Argentina and crimes against Rohingyas, [Link to article](#)
19. The Police (Incitement to Disaffection) Act, 1922, [Link to article](#)
20. A virus that changes stripes, [Link to article](#)
21. Love Jihad and the Anti-Miscegenation laws, [Link to article](#)
22. 160 years of policing in India, [Link to article](#)

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Sources referred to : [The Hindu](#), [The Indian Express](#), [Live Law](#), [Bar & Bench](#)

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